



DOMINION

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Chapter One

Flames painted the night in the colors of blood and ruin as the homes of the slave race burned. Shadows twisted, writhing the way souls bound for the Pit would.

Prince Lucien stalked through the destruction, gaze taking in the wreckage, the waste of both materials and lives. Not a living creature did he see as he made his way through the devastation.

The weight of his armor did little to slow his steps, nor did the assortment of weaponry that hung from the belts and baldric he wore. In time of war such things were a necessity. Lucien couldn't recall a part of his existence when they hadn't been at war with the shifters. Nor could he remember a time when he hadn't carried a weapon. Even in the bath or in his bedchamber, he kept weapons close. Shifters were his enemies, but they were hardly his *only* enemies.

"Damned shifters," he swore, speaking to his second in command, who strode up to join him as Lucien walked through the burning dwellings. Agitated, he added, "They've left nothing alive. The entire population has been slaughtered."

"No, my Liege. The signs point to many of the slaves being taken alive."

He stopped walking and turned to his second, a scowl twisting his face as he gazed down at the smaller male. He had the look of his Asian bloodline, sleek and graceful. His skin glowed like polished ivory in the dancing firelight, while his long braided hair shone a deep red that spoke of an unholy union of vampire and demon in his family history. "And the difference is what, Kinji? We *all* know what they do to humans."

His second's unusual violet eyes narrowed, a frown twisting the lips he'd often kissed and as often bitten until he could savor the taste of Kinji's sweet blood. "Yes, they keep them as slaves."

Need flooded through Lucien, but he willed it away. He had other things to concern himself with besides drinking his fill of blood, no matter the temptation of Kinji's lips. "They keep them as *food*," Lucien countered.

"As do we, my Prince."

"Yes, but we don't kill them; the furbaces do." Gaze resting on his second, a puzzled frown tugging at his mouth, he regarded Kinji, wondering what might be taking place in the brain behind those cool violet eyes. "And since when have *you* chosen to argue the case of the shifters? We're at war, or have you forgotten that small fact?"

"No more than you have, my Liege. I've not forgotten, nor do I seek to plead the case of our enemies," Kinji told him, his black-lacquered armor gleaming dully in the tortured shadows.

"Then what *are* you saying?"

"Hear me out, my Liege."

He motioned Kinji to speak, watching his lover's lips, resisting the continuing urge to pull Kinji into his embrace and have a taste. He forced himself instead to look into the cool almond-shaped eyes of his second.

"The signs show the shifters took every female over sixteen years of age. Everyone else they killed."

Brows drawing together, his eyes narrowing in consternation, Lucien scowled. "I don't care for the sound of that."

"Beltram pointed it out to me, my Liege. He braved the flames and entered several houses to see what remained of the people who lived inside. Old people, young ones, and men were what he discovered. No adult females of childbearing age are left here. And if they've taken only females, then there's but a single use they'd be put to."

"They intend to infect them with their accursed blood and turn them into breeding females after they've matured into their own damned kind in two or three years," Lucien stated, his anger rising. "We've lost too many of our humans to their raids." He noticed his second's sharp-fanged grin. "What devious plan lies in that clever mind of yours, Kinji?"

"Just this, my Liege. Slaves who still draw breath may be reclaimed from the thieves who took them."

Lucien bared his own fangs in a pleased smile and stroked Kinji's cheek in a show of approval. "Yes, very clever. See that it's done. The village is gone, and I'll not rebuild it. Bring any living slaves you recover from the furbaces to my fortress. We'll decide what's to be done with them when you've returned."

"As you order, my Liege." Kinji bowed and took his leave, striding into the ravaged village to gather up his men and the hounds they would need to track the shifters.

Lucien surveyed the remnants of the village, taking in the destruction, contemplating what sort of retaliation he should make to punish his enemies. *Such an audacious attack. They've come this deep into my territory, and for that I must make some type of counterstrike.* If he turned his face north, he would be able to see his fortress a scant few miles away. His own grandsire had carved it out of the mountainside, the entire structure formed of solid stone.

Bloodfather, what would you think of us now? Would you call us pathetic or praise us for our courage in battling the shifters? They've always had greater numbers because they breed so much faster than we do, and with the war, every death on our side further weakens us.

He felt the touch of a presence he didn't know, the sensation of being watched, and turned at the sound of something approaching him on fast-moving, stealthy feet.

Amber eyes burned from the shadows. Cat's eyes gone wide stared at him for a heartbeat. Then the furface rushed him. Lucien leaped aside, vampire reflexes saving him. He narrowly evaded the shifter's following attack. *Time to show this beast who is master here.* He drew his sword and met the shifter's next raking efforts to kill him. The beast's claws, dark as midnight, swiped for him, trying to gut him. *Foolish animal. You might kill slaves that way, but they're not well armed or armored.* He swept the sword between those deadly claws and his body, deflecting the attack. Armored or not, Lucien found himself retreating from the fury of the shifter's attacks. Fast and dangerous, the shifter was some sort of cat breed with a thick mane of fur and hide the shade of burnished gold. It wore no garments, so he could see the beast trying to kill him was undeniably male. Either the shifter had gotten excited over its efforts to kill Lucien, or his own vampiric nature had some effect on the creature because its cock was semihard.

Lucien realized his sword would not be sufficient protection and drew a dagger. He used the dagger to stop another effort to kill him, his sword slashing the shifter, drawing blood. The beast screamed in agony as the concoction coating the blade poisoned the wound he'd given it. A mix of wolfsbane, silver dust, and some rather vile toxins, it would kill the shifter no matter what its breed. To those of his own kind, it would have little, if any, effect.

The sounds of their fight and the beast's pained cry alerted some of his soldiers, and they hurried to Lucien's defense. In a moment the shifter was down, clawing and biting at the half dozen silver-tipped crossbow quarrels that punctured its hide. Within a moment it lost form, changing to a well-muscled warrior with thick blond hair and pale gold eyes.

Lucien leaned down, grabbed it by the hair. "Who commands you?" he demanded, giving the shifter a shake.

It moaned from the pain of its wounds but gave no other answer.

"Tell me, and perhaps we'll spare your pitiful life."

The shifter grimaced. "Fuck yourself," he growled.

Lucien smiled. "So that's how you intend to play the game, is it? Very well, we'll play it your way...*kitten*." He noted how the shifter's eyes narrowed in anger over the word *kitten*.

"Give it the antidote to the toxin and make sure it lives," he instructed the nearest officer. "Take the *kitten* to the dungeon, and see that it's well secured. I'll deal with it later." He strode toward his chariot, intending to return to his home, a few of the guards falling in behind him as escort, his men unwilling to leave him alone.

There would be more than enough time to deal with his captive later. Right now he needed to find sustenance before his own nature got the better of him. The scent of so much slave blood had awakened the need. He could have blooded the shifter, but the toxins polluting the beast's blood would have left his belly in turmoil, and he would rather spend the night considering his next move than lying in bed hurting.

He smiled as he climbed into his ground chariot, sat down at the control console, and turned on the motor. One of the guards stepped into the vehicle and stood behind him as the wind screen closed. Had it been a slave he'd chosen to permit in the chariot, he would have knelt behind Lucien. Had it been Kinji, his second would have waited until they were en route, then climbed in his lap to keep him amused during the trip to the Fortress.

He keyed in his destination and let the autopilot in the chariot take him home.

* * * * *

Sahak couldn't move. The poison coursing through his body had left him numb, weak. His senses dulled. Worse than the poison was the knowledge that, instead of accomplishing his mission, he'd been captured and now awaited torture by the very bloodsucker he'd been sent to kill.

Prince Lucien, ruler of the Black Fortress Dominion, Keeper of the Southern March.

The same arrogant prick who had killed his father, Jazan, the Lord of the Northern Pride, two years ago. For two years he had trained for the day he would kill Lucien.

Instead of accomplishing that goal, he'd failed, defeated as easily as the greenest cub.

He defeated my own sire, yet I underestimated his abilities as a warrior. Damn suckers, they win too many battles, take too many of our lives.

He gave in and opened his eyes to a nightmare.

He'd expected to be in the vampire's dungeon; he'd heard the order given for him to be taken there. Sahak had known he would awaken in a terrible place, but the knowledge hadn't prepared him for the reality.

There were chains and hooks hanging from the walls, horrible instruments the use of which he couldn't begin to guess lay on a nearby table. He didn't want to think on any of them too much. Animal skulls that might well be those of fellow shifters hung on

the walls. A lion skin lay on the floor beneath a throne of shiny and red bloodtree wood, inset with a wealth of glittering, smoky stones that had to be the famous black diamonds from the mountainous northern Dominions held by the bloodsuckers.

Bound by manacles and chains to a bar that hung from the ceiling, he discovered he couldn't move. His feet were also chained by manacles and short lengths of chain that were locked to a set of bolts affixed in the stone floor.

A sound, almost too soft for Sahak to hear with his toxin-impaired senses, alerted him that he wasn't alone in the room.

"You're awake," a deep voice stated from behind him. The sound of the voice chilled him because he recognized it as Prince Lucien's voice.

He closed his eyes, preparing for the pain of torture. Mentally steeling himself for the price of his failure, which would be terrible pain and slow death.

A hand, warmed by the stolen life of some innocent human, touched his bound arm and slid along it in what could have been a caress had he not known it to be a prelude to the horrors awaiting him.

Warm breath scented with some spicy fragrance flowed over his cheek, tickling his ear. "I can smell your fear." A soft whisper in his ear as the hand moved down his ribs in a caress as sensual as the breath on the side of his face.

Sahak wanted to scream. Instead he tugged at the chains holding him. Pointless. The chains wouldn't budge. He doubted that his shifted form would have the strength to overcome the dull metal from which they were formed either.

Growling, his next instinctual reaction, would also be pointless, or it might prove amusing to the bloodsucker. Vampires were, as a breed, noted for indulging in twisted, unnatural pleasures.

They were also noted for their intense beauty, their appearance enough to enthrall most of the poor humans they fed from. Humans they killed without care or regard for the lives they took. Though lately the wolfshifters were as guilty of that as the bloodsuckers themselves.

The destruction they'd wrought in the village was inexcusable, as was the stealing of the human females. But done was done. He hadn't been in a position to stop the wolfshifters then, and he certainly wasn't in a position to do anything about what had occurred now.

Captive of the vampire he hated, he was in the position to do only one thing: die.

"Tell me., why did you try to kill me?" Prince Lucien asked.

Sahak didn't answer.

"Surely there must be a reason," the vampire prince murmured. That damned hand of his traveled along Sahak's body, gliding up his side to his chest.

Sahak didn't want *it* touching him, but there wasn't anything he could do to stop it, and any protest might bring even more unwanted attention.

He could feel the vampire's warmth behind him, a brush of some soft fabric along his shoulders as the bloodsucker leaned closer, the thing no longer in the armor that had protected it.

If only I could get loose.

He shuddered in disgust as the *thing* touched him again. Undead horror, a loathsome being that should have died and decayed to moldering bones centuries ago. He'd heard it said that Lucien had been born on the colony ship that had brought shifters, suckers, and humans to the planet that the combined council of the time had named Hopehaven.

At first they'd lived in peace. But peace never lasted long between the supernatural breeds or humankind.

They'd been on the planet for five centuries. They'd also been at war that long.

"I don't think you're paying attention to me, kitten." Strong fingers pinched his left nipple, and he clenched his jaw to keep from gasping from the shock. It hadn't really hurt, but it did startle him. He expected pain, not a sexual assault.

Though from the depraved bloodsuckers he should have expected that too.

"Do I have your attention?"

Sahak kept his mouth shut. The bloodsucker could torture him, but he wouldn't talk. Not even to answer simple questions like that.

"So brave, but there's no need for such stoicism. I'll find out what I want whether you give me the information willingly or not."

Lips brushed across the side of his neck. "Coercion can take many forms," the thing informed him, his voice a murmur of sound that slipped into his awareness the way velvet slid over skin, soft and sensual.

The accursed hand was moving again, gliding along his chest and down over the flatness of his belly, changing direction to run along the ridge of his pelvis.

"You can at least tell me why you want me dead, can't you?"

Sahak gritted his teeth as the caress moved up his body, coming to a stop at his nipple, the tip of one finger playing back and forth over the nubbin of flesh. It was wrong because the sensation felt good, his body trying to betray him.

The hand moved away, as did the vampire. Relief filled Sahak, until Lucien stepped in front of him to regard him with his wine red eyes. Eyes set in a face so breathtakingly beautiful it made Sahak turn his glance aside.

He'd made a dire mistake trying to kill Lucien alone. His gut reaction to the vampire's beauty had cost him the advantage in the fight, he was sure of it.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but Duke Kinji bade me to inform you that he has returned from his mission," a resonant female voice spoke from somewhere in the darkness.

"Thank you. Tell Kinji I'll be along shortly," Lucien replied, his attention never leaving Sahak, the hand reaching out to brush down the center of his chest, along his

belly, until it reached the point where his pubic hair began. It stopped, hovering there, the vampire's expression unreadable.

"Such a fine-looking male of your kind," Lucien remarked. "Unfortunately, I have duties elsewhere. I'll leave you to consider the questions I've asked. Your name, the name of your leader. Really, what harm is there in answering?"

Sahak kept his mouth shut, his hate of all things bloodsucker and of this *thing* in particular fueling his defiance.

The vampire gave him one final, appraising look, wine red gaze going from Sahak's face down his body in a visual caress that left Sahak feeling as if a slug had traveled over his body.

Nothing Lucien the Destroyer did would break him. Nothing.

He hoped his resolve would hold out once the torture started.

Chapter Two

True to his word, Kinji had returned with the survivors of the raid on the village. He'd taken them to a barren chamber near the kitchen where food for the servants and slaves was prepared. There were pitifully few survivors. Four females, all of them dirty, stinking of filthy wolves and fear, naked as the day they'd been born into their world of pain and fear. They knelt on the bare stone of the floor, heads bowed, cringing.

For the most part, they were unremarkable specimens of their race, with only one notable exception. A delicately built beauty with skin pallid as moonlight and hair dark as Mother Night. She knelt, head lowered, arms wrapped around herself, shivering from the cold.

"I expected more alive than this," Lucien remarked as he studied the small beauty. Something about her drew him as few females did, and he decided he wanted her for his own.

"The others were already tainted with the blood of the wolves. They could not be saved. Many of them were already dead or dying when we caught up with the furs," Kinji informed him, his deep voice solemn, and his face twisted in an angry glare.

"So these are the only survivors from an entire village of one hundred humans?"

"Yes, my Liege."

"What a terrible waste." He frowned. "These three"—he motioned to the less attractive females—"should be taken to the nearest village and given a home together. See that it's taken care of, Kinji."

His second bowed. "As my Liege commands. What of the other female?"

"Have her cleaned up and add her to my bloodharem."

The girl looked up at him, her wide brown eyes full of terror, mouth open in an O of shock.

A knowing smile curled Kinji's mouth. "As my Prince orders, it shall be done." The look his liegeman turned on him smoldered with an unspoken invitation. "Does my Lord require anything else of me?"

"Yes. We need to form a strategy to make the wolves pay for their audacity in destroying the village. My village. I'll expect you to join me in my quarters when you've finished taking care of the females."

Kinji bowed low. Lucien saw his pleased smile before the fall of dark red hair hid his second's face. "As my Liege commands."

"I'll be waiting for you," he stated and left. Passing through the kitchen, he paused, selected a small, tart apple, and put it in his pocket for later. Kindness to his girls often overcame their fear and reluctance, and he wanted this new female of his to neither fear nor resist his desires.

After the terror she's gone through, I'll have to go gently with her or ruin any chance I have of making her mine.

Which led his mind to a new thought. He smiled. *Yes, that's exactly it. Kindness rather than pain and fear. Perhaps that tactic would work with the surface too.*

But that was an idea for later. Much later.

He left the kitchen, passed through the long halls and large gathering chambers, acknowledging the greetings of his people, lords, ladies, and some higher nobles who were dependent on his good grace. Some overly so, yet he had an obligation to protect and care for them as their prince.

He climbed a set of stairs and reached the central garden that grew on the rooftop of the Grand Audience chamber where he held his Grand Court twice a year. Lucien was thankful his own people were not quarrelling. If they had been, he would be forced to sit in judgment more often, as did some of the other princes and princesses whose Dominions were torn by internecine strife.

Reaching the Heart Tower, the very center of his entire Dominion, Lucien passed the first set of guards who stood outside the entrance. They knelt as he approached, showing respect to their Prince. Lucien passed through the Heart's foyer and went to the stairs at the rear. Walking past the barracks of his guards. He climbed the spiraling stairway up to the fourth floor and went through a room filled with guards who also knelt to him. He entered another set of twisting stairs, climbed to the next level, then onward up to his chambers at the top. Guards at the doorway sank gracefully to their knees at his approach. As with the others, he passed them without the slightest acknowledgment. They were a constant presence he'd known since childhood. Their duty lay in protecting him from hostile forces that might somehow make their way into his Fortress. Which was about as likely as swine gaining the power of flight.

No enemy had ever managed to gain entry to the Fortress. No spy could slip past his magical defenses. But precautions were taken, and the guards maintained a high level of vigilance.

Short of internal betrayal, Lucien didn't worry.

The guards were hardly needed. Not when Kinji so often remained at his side. Kinji of the stormy violet eyes and cool disposition. Cool until he lay writhing in the grip of passion beneath Lucien. Then his second became an insatiable creature of need, of unbound lust and wicked desires.

Desires Lucien quite happily indulged his Kinji in fulfilling.

His cock stiffened at the thought of taking Kinji, of sating his needs with the younger vampire. His Kinji, bound willingly to him by oaths, magic, and blood in an unbreakable bond so powerful Lucien's demise would bring about the end of Kinji.

He motioned, and the doors to his private chambers swung open at his gesture, the age-old magic working wherever vampirekind made their home. The open doors revealed a carpeted floor covered in the delicate petals of red and yellow wild roses. The black and red of his bed had been dusted with yellow and white petals. Antiquated candlelight filled the room, bathing it in soft pools of light and deep, concealing shadows.

In the center of the room stood his beautiful Kinji. Kinji of the pale flesh and twilight eyes. His lover wore nothing but a veil of black lace that covered him from head to foot. The delicate ornamentation gave Lucien enticing glimpses of the pale skin beneath. The lace flickered as Kinji knelt, smoky black diamonds glittering in the glow of the candles placed around the room. Beneath the veil, Kinji had freed his hair of the tight braid he wore it in at all times. The beauty of his hair, which he shared with no one but Lucien, his prince and master, served as another aspect of Kinji's sexual appeal.

Lucien motioned the doors closed, crossed the room to where Kinji knelt in supplication. The lacy veil covering him added to his exotic beauty and lent an added mysterious aura to the other vampire.

"I see you wasted no time arriving here and making me welcome."

"I wish to please my Prince."

Lucien chuckled. "You always do, Kinji."

"Do I, Master?"

Lucien gently moved the veil aside, the pins holding it in place in Kinji's hair keeping it draped over his back, acting as a frame to an exquisite work of living art. He recognized the veil as a costume from the closets of his bloodharem.

"You are breathtaking, Kinji." He took Kinji's hand and led him toward the bed as a prince might lead his consort to their first night of pleasure, the younger vampire gliding along soundlessly at his side. They reached the bed, the scent of roses, the heady spice fragrance of Kinji himself filling Lucien's nostrils, making his blood pound through his veins. He turned Kinji to face him, taking the smaller male's biceps in his hands and holding him still as he bent to kiss the lips he craved.

Honey and the flavor of spices unknown to Lucien filled his mouth, the taste of Kinji never palling, never losing its allure. He sucked on the sweet treat of Kinji's tongue, let his fangs graze the delicate, petal-soft surface, tasting blood, swallowing.

Brazen as a conqueror, Lucien's tongue invaded Kinji's mouth, claiming the other vampire.

Kinji moaned and leaned closer, his tongue flicking and sparring with Lucien's, not for supremacy, but in suppliant accord.

Lucien broke the kiss. "My Kinji."

"Yes, my Master, Kinji is yours. Always yours. *Ai shiteru*," he murmured at the last, lapsing into the Old Earth language spoken only by those of his bloodline. He'd explained to Lucien that the words meant love forever, without end. And Lucien believed it of his bonded man, because nothing could break the magic that tied them together. Nothing except Lucien's death, for the bond had such power should Kinji die, he would be resurrected as a full demonic entity that no one but Lucien could dismiss.

"Do you love me, Kinji?"

"Kinji loves his master. Kinji belongs to Prince Lucien," his lover murmured and pressed his lips to Lucien's chest directly over his heart. He called it sealing his promise to his master's heart, that kiss. It brought a smile to Lucien's lips.

"Does Kinji truly love me?" he asked because he liked hearing the answer. Loved everything about his graceful beauty, his lover.

"Yes, Kinji loves his Master. His Prince."

Lucien laughed. "I made you a duke; you *should* love me," he teased, knowing the answer he'd get to that comment.

Stormy violet eyes lifted to gaze at his face. "If you took that word from before my name, stripped me of everything and made me part of your bloodharem, I would love you no less than I do now, Lucien. Nothing could make me stop loving you."

Lucien smiled. "Nothing?"

"Nothing, my Prince," Kinji replied. He pulled free of Lucien's grip to abase himself at Lucien's feet, head bowed to the floor, spine bent into an arch hidden artfully by the lace. He knew his master's sexual triggers well enough to know the reaction the display would elicit, the lust it would arouse.

"You are my Master, and I am your bondsman, your samurai, your dutiful guard and servant. Your eternal slave. I belong to you, my Prince."

His master bent down, gripped his arms, and pulled him to his feet. "You make me crazy with the need to taste your blood and have your body. You make me want to throw you down on my bed and drive my cock into you until the entire Fortress can hear your screams for merciful release."

Kinji gave Lucien a cool smile, his gaze hooded by partly closed eyelids, the expression one he'd practiced until it perfectly conveyed submission with a touch of defiance. He met Lucien's gaze, giving him a small challenge, urging him to exercise desires they both had: Lucien's to dominate, his to submit.

"Master may do anything he wishes with Kinji. Master knows this."

Lucien gave him a hard-edged smile. "Yes, I suppose Master does know that."

Prince Lucien picked him up and threw him bodily on the bed, rose petals flying into the air to shower him. He lay where he fell, motionless, dusted with rose petals. He knew what he looked like, sprawled there, his lower body exposed, cock rising from his body hard and needy, the veil trapping his left arm, hair across his face so that he watched Lucien stalk toward him through the curtain of his hair. The Prince's eyes were alight with an inner flame. Lust burned in their depths.

Power beat at him with the force of tall ocean waves battering the rocky coastline of his own power. The vampire's presence washed over him, made his mouth go dry, sent a tremor of lust through him. His hard cock twitched with the desire to be subjugated by the vampire he'd chosen as his master.

Lucien grabbed his ankle and dragged him to the foot of the bed. Smiling slyly behind his hair, Kinji kicked and struggled, clawing at the bedcovers, pretending to desire freedom, escape.

His master's hand tightened. The grip, strong enough to shatter a mortal's bones, wouldn't leave a bruise on Kinji's preternatural flesh. Very little could harm him; even the touch of the sun held no threat, for he was more than vampire, his demonic blood making him nearly impervious to harm.

Lucien pulled him to the foot of the bed. "So pitiful, Kinji. If you're going to fight me, make it real, not this little game."

He gave a soft, steely laugh. "Is that *really* what you want, my Prince?"

"You've not truly fought me in ages."

Kinji smiled at the reply. "If that's what you wish...*Lucien*, then that is what you will have." He came up off the bed, hair and veil flying behind him with the speed of his motion, his fist impacting with Lucien's mouth, drawing a spill of blood from lips split from the impact. Kinji leaped, the jump carrying him to the center of the room where he turned to face Lucien, his pose one of arrogant defiance.

Licking blood from his lips, Lucien followed him, eyes gleaming with excitement.

His master fought well, but Lucien couldn't match Kinji. He had the measure of his master's skill, and it fell far short of his own abilities. Not that Kinji would ever let Lucien know that. Beating his prince in combat, even during the lover's games they played, would be poor form, and he made sure Lucien won their fights.

It also meant that no one in the Fortress, not even Lucien, knew what he could really do in battle. And he wanted it kept that way. He held his hand out to Lucien, wiggling his fingers in a "come and get me" motion.

"Brat. I'll set you over my knee and spank you."

"Is that a promise, Lucien?" He only called his master by his name during their rougher games. In public, it was always "my Liege" or "my Prince." But when they were alone, he addressed his lover as Master, my Prince, or by his given name.

"Audacious little bit of meat, aren't you?"

Kinji gripped his cock, stroked it, and smirked as Lucien's gaze dropped to watch what he was doing. "I'd not call this little. As for the rest of me" —he grinned— "I'll grant I'm smaller than you, Lucien, but size *isn't* everything."

"Arrogant pup," Lucien remarked. Lucien grabbed for Kinji, but he evaded his master's hand, smacking it away and darting in to slap Lucien's hip.

"Boy, I'll punish you for that," Lucien growled, rubbing his stinging skin.

He suspected his hand had left a bright red imprint. "Will you...*Lucien?*" he taunted.

"Oh yes!"

The larger vampire put on a burst of speed, his fingers closing in Kinji's hair. Kinji retaliated, punching Lucien hard enough to hurt his lover somewhat, but not hard enough to really damage the other vampire. Lucien yanked Kinji's hair and pulled him closer, then grabbed Kinji's right arm with his free hand.

A hard, punishing mouth closed on Kinji's, tongue thrusting through his teeth, and Lucien's blood filled his mouth, the firm muscle slashed by Kinji's fangs. He shuddered, resistance evaporating at the taste of Lucien's blood. The bond reasserted itself, forcing him to yield, which he did eagerly, pressing himself to Lucien. He moaned into the kiss, wordlessly begging for his master's hard shaft.

Lucien broke the kiss. "You've been bad."

He lowered his gaze but not his face, leaving Lucien the option of kissing him again if that was what he wanted. "Yes, Master."

"Now be wicked."

Lucien released him, and Kinji struck his prince, sending the taller vampire stumbling backward onto the bed. Shocked, wine red eyes regarded him from a flushed face. Lucien's breath came in harsh gasps as he lay there, rose petals clinging to his hair.

By Mother Night, he's beautiful. Kinji's cock throbbed, aching to be touched, to be held in Lucien's firm grip as the taller vampire pounded his stiff rod into his entrance.

Kinji strode slowly toward Lucien, each step a deliberate show of arrogant confidence. "Are you sure this is what you want...*Lucien?* Do you *really* want me to be a *bad boy*? Should I show you the wickedness that fills my heart?"

Lucien licked his bloody lips. "I'd worried you'd changed, Kinji. That you were getting soft, weakening from being under me, but you've not changed one bit, have you?"

"No, Lucien. I haven't changed." He reached the bed, gazed hungrily at the firm body he knew lay beneath the floor-length velvet coat Lucien wore as his chosen signifier of rank. The way Lucien looked in the coat, powerful, masculine, reminded Kinji why he'd chosen to belong to Lucien. The vampire exuded power, and the severe lines of the velvet coat—and the carefully placed gold braid that adorned it—added to Lucien's authority, making it visible. He'd been drawn to Lucien the way a bee sought

nectar. And he'd found honey in Lucien's kisses. In the feel of Lucien's cock as it pounded into him.

He opened the coat with hands that shook, excited by Lucien's powerful presence and by his own need to be dominated. It took strength to hold strength, and he'd found his match in the stark handsomeness of Lucien, Prince of the Black Fortress. He shoved the coat aside and unbuttoned Lucien's trousers. The soft, musky scent of Lucien's arousal rising from his lover's most intimate flesh drove him half mad with lust, and he came close to ripping his master's trousers to get at the treat they concealed. He freed Lucien's erection, licked his lips, and swept his tongue over the head.

He moaned, the taste of the intoxicating fluid added to the scents combining to reinforce what he was to Lucien. His bondsman. His sex toy by choice.

And he wanted it no other way.

Kinji braced his hands on each side of Lucien's hips and leaned down to repeat what he'd done, lapping at the head of his lover's cock.

Lucien sighed as Kinji licked away the beads of precum leaking from his erection. Kinji took the head in his mouth and sucked, careful of his sharp fangs, not wanting to blood Lucien.

He smiled around the tasty flesh in his mouth. *Not yet anyway.*

Lucien's fist closed in Kinji's hair, pulling him down lower, demanding he service his master. A wordless order to give Lucien pleasure. Kinji let more of Lucien's hardness fill his mouth, relaxed his jaw as Lucien's hips pumped his cock in and out of his mouth. The head struck the back of his throat, and he changed the angle of his body to give Lucien better access. Lucien moaned, crying out in pleasure. With his mouth giving Lucien what he wanted, Kinji moved his hands from the bed to Lucien's hips, pushing them down. They stilled, and he began to suck, his head moving up and down, tongue working the shaft, lapping up the sweet taste of Lucien's precum.

"Enough!" Lucien roared and threw him backward.

Kinji grinned as he fell to the floor, making sure to land facedown, his butt exposed to Lucien's gaze. *He wants wicked. I'll give him what he desires.*

He heard Lucien leave the bed, heard his soft footfalls as he approached. He let Lucien yank him bodily from the floor, turning into the motion so he came to rest against Lucien, his palms pressed to Lucien's chest. The feel of Lucien's rock-hard body, the pressure of the hard cock against him brought a pleased smile to Kinji's lips. He'd done this to Lucien. Made him want. Made him need.

Chapter Three

Lucien gripped Kinji's wrists, squeezing hard enough to bruise the pale flesh. The only thing more beautiful than Kinji was Kinji bearing the marks of their often violent lovemaking. As he was a vampire, the marks on Kinji never lasted long enough to suit Lucien.

He forced Kinji's arms down and moved forward so that Kinji had no choice but to back away until he ended up pressed firmly to the wall.

"You're mine, Kinji."

"Am I?"

The question came out as cool defiance. Lucien remembered the tone and the expression on Kinji's face from the days before the other vampire had become his. It sent a particularly sensual thrill through him, seeing that old defiance, the cool, aloof expression on Kinji's face.

Still holding Kinji's wrists, he pinned his violet-eyed beauty to the wall, yanked both of Kinji's arms over his head, and held him there, helpless to his will.

He felt the hardness of Kinji's cock pressing his thigh, the heat of the flesh reaching him through the fabric of the trousers he wore.

"Who is your master, Kinji?"

"You are, my Prince."

He bent lower to claim Kinji's lips, kissing him, tearing Kinji's mouth with his teeth, listening to his lover's cries. Pain, pleasure, they were one and the same to his wicked little toy. Lucien enjoyed the feel of Kinji writhing in helpless passion as he drank Kinji's blood, his lover's cock pressed tight to his thigh. He could feel the beat of the younger vampire's heart in the hardened flesh. Kinji shuddered, gasping beneath his mouth, the younger vampire coming from the pain of being fed from so roughly.

The fluid soaked into the leg of Lucien's trousers, dampening his skin through the fabric.

Lucien ended the kiss, his tongue sweeping the blood from his own lips. "I really think I *must* punish you, Kinji. You've made a mess of my clothes, and you weren't given permission to come, were you?"

Kinji lowered his head, his torn lips oozing blood though the wounds were already healing. "No, Master."

Lucien snapped his fingers and pointed to his large four-poster bed.

Kinji ran to the bed and got onto it, obedient, awaiting Lucien's arrival to mete out his punishment. Kinji had gotten so excited, his spent cock stood rigid, ready for more.

"My wicked Kinji. No matter how many times you expend yourself, you're always ready for more. I like that about you."

A tiny smirk graced Kinji's mouth, pride glittering in his violet gaze.

Mother Night, I don't know why you sent him to me, but I thank you for such a blessing. He's everything I could want in a lover.

"Now where was I before you decided to misbehave?" Lucien asked rhetorically. "Ah, yes, I recall what I was doing." He grabbed Kinji's ankle and pulled him to the foot of the bed. Reaching between the mattress and the post, he found what he sought, a heavy iron manacle. He threw Kinji over on his belly and locked the circle of metal around Kinji's ankle.

Kinji turned over and lay there resting on his elbows, smirking, his cock jutting upward.

Lucien turned a fierce grin on Kinji, flipped him back onto his belly, and locked his other ankle in the opposite manacle. Swooping down on Kinji, he took Kinji's wrists and locked them into iron cuffs at the head of the bed. Lucien stayed where he was a moment, his weight pressing Kinji to the bed, holding him there.

"You've been very wicked, Kinji."

"Yes, Master. I have."

He slipped his finger into the crack of Kinji's ass and felt his lover squirm. Slick oil filled the crack, and Lucien nudged Kinji's anus. He smiled. *Always prepared and willing to be fucked.* "Now you'll be punished," he warned.

"Punish me, my Prince."

"Be silent!" he commanded.

Kinji rested his head on the bed, falling silent as ordered.

Lucien crossed to the armoire where he kept a selection of equipment chosen for punishing his toys. His bloodharem and Kinji. Especially Kinji, who derived so much pleasure from pain.

He unlocked the doors, pulled them open. Whips, crops, paddles, and cat-o'-nine-tails hung neatly in their places. Glass and finely polished stone dildos sat in their

places on the shelf. He opened the top drawer and considered the array of items inside. Butt plugs in gleaming stone and glass, sleek steel, and softer substances created in the techlabs on the western side of the dungeon.

He chose a narrow paddle of lustrous bloodwood, one of the softer butt plugs, along with a red glass dildo and a cat-o'-nine-tails. He closed the armoire and carried his choices to the bed, setting them down one at a time in Kinji's line of sight.

His lover gazed eagerly at the things Lucien brought, eyes moving from one item to the other, lingering the longest on the paddle and cat-o'-nine.

Lucien picked up the paddle, met Kinji's gaze, held it out to him.

Kinji kissed the paddle, putting as much effort into it as he would have if he'd been kissing Lucien himself. Lucien took the paddle away and set his hand to Kinji's firm ass, caressing it, admiring the softness of Kinji's ivory-tinted skin. Kinji squirmed, a quiet whimper coming from him. Wordless begging, wanting the punishment.

Fingers spread, Lucien brought his hand down in a stinging smack and heard Kinji's breath catch. A second and third slap on Kinji's ass reddened the skin, preparing Kinji for the next step. He struck Kinji with the paddle, heard his gasping cry of, "Master!"

Lucien smiled, cock aching to sink into the heated flesh of Kinji's ass, but that would wait. Lucien, far from done with his punishment of Kinji, used the paddle, smacking Kinji's butt. Each beat of the paddle timed to the thrum of Kinji's quickened heartbeat until his lover lay moaning, shuddering with every impact.

Lucien got onto the bed, crawled up until he could see Kinji's face. Flushed with the combined sensations of pleasure and pain, eyes closed, hands gripping the chains holding his hands to the bed, Kinji lay there, body writhing, hips bucking into the bed.

"Open your eyes, Kinji."

Smoldering violet eyes were revealed to Lucien's gaze as Kinji obeyed.

"You've been very bad," Lucien remarked.

"Yes...Master," Kinji gasped in agreement.

"Do *not* come," Lucien ordered.

"N-no, Master."

"If you come, this ends and I send you away for the night."

Kinji's eyes widened. "I won't come. I swear it, Master."

Lucien nodded. "See that you don't!"

Lucien picked up the butt plug, pressed it to Kinji's ass, the Japanese vampire groaning as it slid into his entrance. Lucien patted one firm globe of his lover's bottom, feeling the stone-hard muscle beneath the soft skin. Kinji arched his butt into the touch.

"Remember what I told you, Kinji. Come and this ends."

"I remember, Master."

He picked up the paddle and brought it down with punishing force on Kinji's butt, nodding in satisfaction at Kinji's sharp cry. He leaned down, the tip of his tongue gliding over the heated skin, dampening the burning flesh. He blew over the dampness, Kinji's groan eliciting a satisfied smirk from Lucien. Precum dripped from his own needing cock, and he swept it up with his fingers and offered them to Kinji.

"Master...please let me suck your cock," Kinji begged. His lover's pink tongue reached out, licking his fingers. Whimpering with desire, Kinji sucked and worked his fingers as if they were Lucien's cock.

"You haven't been properly punished yet," Lucien informed Kinji as he pulled his wet fingers from his mouth. He set the paddle between the cat-o'-nine and the glass dildo where they lay on the bedcovers. Kinji's eyes followed Lucien's hand as he reached for the cat, picked it up, and extended it to Kinji for the requisite adoring kiss.

Lucien took it from Kinji's lips, ran the supple tails through his fingers, his gaze on Kinji, Kinji's gaze on the cat-o'-nine in his hands. He knelt on the bed, letting Kinji's anticipation build as he ran the fragrant leather through his hands.

When Kinji began to squirm, Lucien brought the cat up in a swift motion, the whip descending to brush lightly across Kinji's shoulders.

Ready for the pain, Kinji whimpered when it failed to occur. "Master is cruel."

Lucien smiled. "Of course, Kinji. But you already know that, don't you?"

"Yes, my Prince. Kinji knows."

Lucien laughed, the tone kept to a low, sexy murmur of sound because that too would excite Kinji, make him want.

Lucien dragged the very tips of the cat along Kinji's spine, over his butt, which had lost the redness, fading out to a pallid pink as the minor damage he'd done with the paddle faded.

"Please, Master, please," Kinji begged in a tormented whisper.

Of course, Lucien knew exactly what Kinji wanted, but until Kinji named what he begged for, he wouldn't give it. That was the way their games of dominance and submission were played. The rules Lucien had set down were ingrained in his lover.

Being vampires, they needed no safe word. Nothing he did to Kinji would kill him, and no pain Lucien inflicted ever forced a cry for mercy from Kinji. And that was why Kinji was his favorite.

He dragged the tips of the cat's tails down Kinji's butt, let the tips dangle and tease on his ass, watching his lover squirm and arch as he tried to get more meaningful contact out of the teasing leather.

"Please punish Kinji, Master. Punish Kinji."

"How should I punish Kinji?" Lucien pressed, wanting to hear the exact words.

"Beat Kinji with the cat-of-nine-tails! Beat Kinji, Master!"

Lucien lifted the cat, the leather hissing through the air as it fell.

The leather struck his shoulders with a sharp *crack* of sound, and Kinji cried out with the sting. It didn't hurt very much. Not really. And his body made short work of the damage inflicted, the kiss of pain fading to nothingness in an instant. Yet, because the blow came from Lucien, he couldn't help his reaction. His cock throbbed, and the plug in his ass rocked inside him as he tensed, adding to the sensation as it pushed on his prostate.

"Master," he groaned when the cat struck his shoulders a second time. He got no reprieve from the lashes of the cat. The leather came down in a rapid series of strikes that blazed through him, igniting bright as holiday fireworks through his mind. The pain cleansed him, took away the cares of the world, and left him drained, ready for the absolution of his master's touch, the blessing of his cock.

The cat's leather tips brushed down his spine, tickled his ass.

Lucien hadn't finished with him, wasn't done with the punishments he'd earned by actually hitting his master hard enough to draw blood.

The thought of those bright red drops awoke the blood hunger within Kinji, and he whimpered, clawing at the chains holding him captive to the headboard. Had he wished to escape, the chains could not hold him. What kept him there were the desires to please his master and to gain the punishment he wanted.

Leather smacked across his ass, and the muscles of his butt tightened again, the butt plug inside him stroking across his prostate. He groaned, the sound wrested from his parted lips by the dual sensations. If Lucien kept flogging him, he'd lose control and come, regardless of the order he'd been given.

"Master, please! Please fuck Kinji!" he cried out, letting Lucien know the state of his mind and body. "Please, my Prince, please."

Instead of relenting, Lucien brought the tails of the cat down on his ass even harder, tearing a gasp from Kinji. It had hurt. The second one hurt even more, the pain rocketing through him, taking him deeper into that quiet place where the pain became a live thing. An entity of dark fire, a fury of sound, the roaring of his own blood in his ears.

He could feel his body building, nearing completion through the insistent stroking of the butt plug and the black diamond brilliance of the hurt Lucien imposed on his helpless flesh.

The lash fell, over and over, Lucien relentless in the punishment until Kinji, lost amid the blinding torment, felt something stroking his battered ass.

Damp. Firm.

Lucien's tongue lapped at his abused behind with long, loving strokes that soothed the fiery burn. Kinji smelled blood, saw drops of it scattered across the sheets, mingling with the rose petals, darkening a few. He drew a sobbing breath, felt Lucien's hand as it caressed the inside of his thigh, touched his balls.

Kinji gave a shuddering scream at the pleasure the light brush of fingertips across his scrotum caused. He whimpered in loss when the fingers retreated.

"Shhh..." Lucien soothed, his tongue and lips sliding over Kinji's ass.

Drinking my blood. He's feeding from the cuts he made with the cat.

"Master, please, my Master. I need you."

"Shhh...Kinji. Shhhh," Lucien murmured.

Fingers touched his butt, and the plug was pulled free.

Cold and hard, the glass dildo slid into him, the sensation one Kinji knew, enjoyed most of the time, but not this time. He wanted hot flesh, a stiff cock pounding into him relentlessly and demanding that he give everything he was to Lucien. The dildo inside him stayed where it had been put.

"Master." The plea had barely left his mouth when a hand slapped his butt, forcing his silence.

The ache of his cock, the pressure in need of release that coiled within his balls, was reaching the point where his resolve would crumble, and he would come. He took deep, slow breaths, fighting the demands of his body.

The dildo moved, sliding deep inside, slipping free, stroking his prostate, the leather of the cat striking his shoulder, leaving him fighting the urge to come.

He gritted his teeth, the smooth torment of the dildo far worse than the paddle or the cat-o'-nine-tails were, because he'd suffered their darker pleasures without coming many times in the past. But he'd never been asked to resist the feeling of the dildo coupled with the feel of the cat cracking across his shoulders.

Tears trickled from his tightly shut eyelids, and he forced himself to keep breathing, doing his best to obey Lucien's order not to come, but with each thrust of the dildo, every stinging contact of the cat-o'-nine-tails, it got more and more difficult, the friction of the bedclothes on his cock adding to the conspiracy to make him fail. To cause his body to betray him, to make him disobey.

"Master! Master, please! Please, Kinji is sorry he hurt you. Please, Master!" He began to sob, helpless, the sensations, the emotional drain of the mingled pleasure and pain, the stricture of his master's order leaving him in too much conflict.

The pain, the pressure of the dildo stopped, the chains holding him falling away at a whisper from his master.

Powerful arms caught him up, and firm lips kissed his tears away, claimed his gasping mouth, savage fangs tearing his lips, his tongue, the invading tongue impaling itself on his fangs so that their blood mingled as they fed from one another.

Kinji clung to his master, held him tight, savoring the closeness, the feel of being taken, of being given the precious gift of his master's blood.

The kiss went on and on, as if time had stopped for them, as if the rest of their world had slipped away. Lucien's blood screamed through his veins, through every

molecule of his being. Kinji held tighter, groaning, his cock throbbing to the matched beat of his heart and Lucien's.

Trembling, shaking with the magnitude of the experience, Kinji couldn't help the whimper of loss that escaped him when Lucien pushed him down on the bed, ending their kiss.

Lucien looked down at him, his deep red eyes full of love, mouth smeared with their mingled blood. With slow deliberation, he licked it from his lips, eyes intently watching Kinji.

"Tell me what you want," Lucien demanded.

"Fuck me," he replied.

Lucien grabbed him, turned him over, and gripped his hips, lifting them to the right angle. Kinji gasped as Lucien's big cock slammed into him, sending flashes of white lightning through his vision. He gripped the bedclothes, held on as Lucien thrust deep into his body, pulling out and driving into him. The pace steady, hard in, slow out, Kinji moving with Lucien, eager for the release he needed so badly.

"Tell me," Lucien began, grunting the words out as he thrust. "Is this what Kinji wanted?"

"Yes, Master. Yes," he agreed.

"Would Kinji like anything else?"

"Kinji wants his cock stroked. Please, Master."

Lucien's lust-roughened laugh preceded his hand wrapping around Kinji's cock and holding it, the grip firm, the strokes in counterpoint to the thrusting.

Kinji cried out, bucking into the hand, struggling with the instinctual urge to take his release. He stopped himself, let Lucien do the work.

"Good boy, Kinji. Good boy," Lucien murmured as he bent over Kinji's back to sink his teeth into the spot between Kinji's shoulder and neck, the bite hard and rough, tearing his flesh.

Kinji moaned, tipping his head to the side to let Lucien do as he would.

He felt his body weakening as Lucien fed from him, drank him. The pain intensified as his vampiric flesh cried out against the theft of his vitality. Kinji shook as his body became drier, his fluids passing into Lucien's needy flesh.

His master's greedy sucking hurt far worse than the paddle or the kiss of the cat-o'-nine-tails, but the cock inside him continued to thrust, driving into him, the hand on his erection pushed him closer and closer to orgasm as the depletion of his own blood took him closer and closer to the edge of vampiric blood death.

The drain stopped while his heart fluttered as fast as a trapped moth.

"Come for me, Kinji," his master whispered in his ear.

Lost in the powerful conflict of intense pleasure and pure agony, he screamed as his body yielded to his master's demand, his cock swelling for an instant, balls tight against his body as semen spattered the bed and poured over Lucien's hand.

Lucien groaned, his cock throbbing inside Kinji as his arms gave out, dropping Kinji to the bed where he lay pinned under the delicious weight of his master's body, both of them gasping for breath, their hearts hammering in unison.

Kinji closed his eyes, a pleased smile on his lips. "Is Kinji forgiven?"

Arms enfolded him, pulling him close and holding him pressed to Lucien's body as his master rolled them onto their sides.

"Yes, Kinji, Master forgives you."

Kinji sighed in contentment as the first light of dawn painted the windows and the black screens that kept his master safe from the killing rays of the sun slid into place.

Chapter Four

The relentless grip of sleep relinquished its hold on Lucien. He felt good. Strong. No trace of hunger gnawed at his belly. And why would it? He'd fed from Kinji, draining him to the point where many weaker vampires would have succumbed to blood death. But only two things could kill Kinji: Lucien's own death or Lucien releasing their bond and then draining Kinji of both his blood and demon-tainted soul.

And he would never do anything to hurt Kinji. He smiled. *At least not anything permanent.*

He opened his eyes to the gleam of black diamonds, a cloud of lace across his face. Kinji lay atop him, the smaller vampire's head pillowed on his chest, legs spread across his hips. Lucien went hard at the feel of Kinji's balls resting at the base of his cock, at the sensation of Kinji's semihard cock pressed to him.

Enfolding Kinji in his embrace and rolling his lover off him, Lucien gazed at the too-young face, the softness of red lashes lying against the curve of Kinji's cheeks. Asleep, Kinji lost half a decade from his apparent age. Kinji sighed and snuggled close, his arms lazily wrapping around Lucien as he murmured something incomprehensible.

Lucien lowered his head, lips touching the spot on Kinji's throat where the graceful curve of his neck met shoulder. Nuzzling the spot, teeth nipping, the bite bloodless, Lucien teased Kinji, who squirmed beneath him, the cock against Lucien's thigh going hard.

"Master," his second breathed, head turning, neck becoming an offering to Lucien.

"No, Kinji," he murmured. Putting a hand behind Kinji's nape, he guided his lover's mouth to his own throat, urging Kinji to blood him, to feed.

Kinji kissed him, the tip of a moist tongue tickling across the vein. Cool breath drifting across the dampened skin sent a shiver of delicious lust through Lucien. Teeth grazed his skin without drawing blood.

"Blood me," Lucien ordered.

Disobedient, Kinji turn his head so that his cheek rested on Lucien's neck rather than his lips.

"Stubborn creature," he muttered, releasing Kinji and getting out of bed. "I won't have you weak and staggering around the Fortress behind me like some half-starved pup. You need to feed from someone."

Kinji gave a grunt to acknowledge Lucien's comment, but Lucien didn't know if Kinji would do as he'd ordered or not. He crossed the room, heading for the chamber where his bloodharem bathed and dressed him. Pausing at the door, he turned to regard Kinji, who hadn't moved from the comfort of their bed.

"I mean it, Kinji. Go feed, or you'll not be in my bed tonight."

Amid a swirl of diamond-studded lace, Kinji left the bed, the fall of his deep red hair cloaking most of his body from Lucien's appreciative gaze. Cool violet eyes stared at Lucien from a face as blank and emotionless as an ivory mask.

"Are you obeying me or being a brat, Kinji?"

Another grunted nonanswer.

Lucien swept across the room. Grabbing Kinji by the left bicep, he hauled him to the bed. He sat and dragged Kinji over his thighs.

Kinji snarled, struggling until Lucien brought his hand down on Kinji's ass, the report of the slap echoing off the stone walls. Kinji stilled beneath the second swat and went limp with the third.

Lucien shoved Kinji to the floor, stood, and stared down at Kinji's pain-warmed gaze. "If I see Kinji the Brat once more this day, he'll be spending the rest of the day chained in a cell of the dungeon."

Kinji favored him with a cool smile before going to his knees at Lucien's feet. "Kinji is sorry he's misbehaved, Master."

Lucien grabbed a handful of Kinji's hair and pulled Kinji to his feet until he stood in front of Lucien. He let go of Kinji's hair, grabbed him by both arms, and savaged Kinji's mouth, his cock hard and aching for the younger vampire, who knew exactly how to get what he wanted from Lucien.

"You've been asking for my cock," he stated when he ended the kiss. "I suspect you climbed atop me while I still slept with that in mind."

Kinji neither admitted nor denied the accusation.

He wants to feed, but he's in one of his moods. It's that demonic blood of his. He can't help how he gets when his hunger grows too strong. And this is my fault, not his. I shouldn't have blooded him so deeply, then left him drained for so long. It brings out his demonic nature.

And Lucien knew of only one *cure* for Kinji's current mood.

Lucien let go of Kinji's arms, reached instead for his hips, lifting him. The sleek male wrapped his legs around Lucien's waist, angling his pelvis to present his ass for

fucking. Lucien didn't concern himself with lubricant. This was Kinji, and Kinji would be ready for him, the needed slickness already applied inside and out.

He drove his cock into Kinji's tight hole, felt the slickness inside the eager butt. He turned and went to the nearest wall, and pressing Kinji to it, he thrust hard and fast, his need overtaking any desire to make it last. Slamming himself into Kinji, hands holding the narrow hips, Lucien fucked his lover hard and rough. Kinji's sharp cries reverberated through the room as Lucien slammed his cock into him.

Kinji shrieked as cum spattered Lucien's stomach, his lover's fingers gripping his shoulders, short nails tearing his skin. Gasping, moaning, Kinji clung to Lucien as he hammered his stiffness into the exquisite perfection of his lover's body.

"Master," Kinji groaned, his entire body shuddering as another spatter of heat spilled over Lucien's belly. "Harder, Master, harder."

Lucien dug his fingers into Kinji's hips, turned away from the wall, and fell onto the bed, their bodies connected at cock and ass, Kinji's body bending beneath him as Lucien slammed his erection into Kinji's hole.

"Master!" Kinji screamed as he came for the third time. Lucien felt the orgasm reaching out to drag him over the precipice, but he resisted, his cock beating another gasping cry of helplessness out of Kinji as the younger vampire came for the fourth time. Fingernails tore the skin of Lucien's biceps, and blood trickled down his arms.

"Ah, Master. Master!" Kinji shouted, his body bucking hard, eyes tightly shut, tears streaming from the corners of his eyes.

Lucien couldn't hold off. The pressure, the need to come, overwhelmed him, the pleasure flooding his senses until his awareness narrowed to his driving cock and the hot flesh around it. Groaning, he thrust roughly into Kinji's tightness and gasped as his body released in a flare of blinding crimson light that blanked out his vision. Kinji screamed with him as they both came.

Shaking, gasping from the intensity of the passion that had ruled his body and mind, Lucien sank to his knees, sated and numbed by the inferno of passion Kinji had set free.

He sat back on his heels, Kinji sliding from the bed to join him on the floor, his lover leaning down to lick his own cum from Lucien's belly. Lucien fisted a handful of hair and veil, holding Kinji there, grinding Kinji's face into his crotch. Lips fastened on Lucien's cock, Kinji's teeth grazed it, and Lucien groaned in an agony of pleasure and hurt as Kinji fed from his half-hard cock.

He forced Kinji to stay, to drink the blood from his cock, the feeding adding to the binding that locked Kinji to him body and soul.

When he felt Kinji had taken enough, he shoved him away, and Kinji hit the side of the bed hard enough to shake the heavy structure.

Eyes alight with feral intensity, Kinji crouched between Lucien and the side of the bed, lips flecked with blood from Lucien's cock.

"It's all right, Kinji." He reached out and caressed his mercurial lover's cheek. Lucien smiled as Kinji calmed under his touch. He gave Kinji a few moments to fully return to himself; then he gave Kinji a quick kiss.

"Are you all right?"

Kinji nodded, got to his feet, swayed unsteadily, and would have fallen if Lucien hadn't leaped to his feet and pulled Kinji against his chest.

Slim arms wound around him, soft lips pressed to his chest right above his heart. "Kinji loves Master."

"And I love Kinji."

They stood in one another's embrace until a timid knock came from the door of Lucien's bathing chamber. "Master," an equally timid voice called.

"Make sure the water is hot," he ordered.

"Yes, Master!" the voice replied a bit louder, with a trace of confidence.

He took hold of Kinji's upper arm and headed for the bath. "If you're good, I might let you help them bathe me."

"They may bathe any part of you but this one," Kinji replied, his hand wrapping around Lucien's cock.

"Insatiable brat," Lucien accused.

"And you like me that way too, don't you, my Prince?"

"I admit nothing of the sort," he answered, giving Kinji a playful swat on the ass.

Following his master into the bath, Kinji gave little attention to three females in the room. They were part of Lucien's bloodharem, totally devoted to caring for their master, who they led into the tub. Every evening the routine remained the same, though the girls and minor details changed.

The water tonight had been liberally sprinkled with bloodred rose petals. The liquid carried the scent of roses and something else Kinji identified after a moment as spicewood. An odd but not unappealing combination.

He stood waiting, gaze hooded, his attention on Lucien as the women, none of them wearing anything beyond a few pieces of jewelry, began to bathe his master.

Kinji waited for Lucien's signal that he should join him in the inviting water. He wanted to touch Lucien, to kiss Lucien and ride his cock to bliss as he often did when Lucien bathed. But until he had permission to enter the tub, he had to remain where he was, beside the door, as an observer.

Dark eyes regarded him over the bright blonde head of a harem girl. Kinji thought her name might be Lillianne, though such details hardly mattered to him. Lucien kissed her, fondling her breasts, teasing her and tormenting him, because he wanted to be the one Lucien touched. The girl sighed as she helped bathe Lucien, but until their master gave her permission, she would make no effort to do more than get him clean. Unlike

Kinji, who often defied Lucien to gain his ire and the punishment he craved, the girls did nothing without being given instructions by their master.

Lucien reached for another girl, also a blonde, and pulled her into the tub with him, but his gaze stayed on Kinji, who kept his face blank, hiding the tiny sparks of jealousy he felt at not being the one in the tub with Lucien. His prince was playing a game with him, attempting to get him upset. It worked, but Kinji wasn't about to let Lucien know he'd accomplished anything.

Let him wonder. There's little reason for me to be jealous of those little creatures. They'll be dust and vague memories in a few short decades, and I'll still be at Lucien's side.

Or more to the point, I'll still be in his bed.

The girls were bathing Lucien, the one his master pulled into the tub rubbing Lucien's chest with fragrant soap, her hands sweeping across the broad expanse, down to abs that were partially concealed from Kinji's hungry gaze by the soft curves of a female.

Kinji didn't exactly dislike females. They had a certain charm and appeal. His master simply held greater interest for him by dint of the fact that Lucien *was* his master. Had he chosen a female for his mistress, then he would have been far more interested in *her* than any other female. It was his nature, and the nature of the bond, to be drawn to the one who held his leash, magical and otherwise.

And Lucien held more than the bond of his soul, he held Kinji's heart.

Lucien leaned back in the steaming water and closed his eyes as the third female started washing his hair.

Kinji's fingers twitched at the thought of running his fingers through Lucien's hair, of washing his master, slick, soapy hands moving over slick, wet skin. Until Lucien chuckled, he hadn't realized he'd moaned out his desire. Had he remained silent, it wouldn't have mattered. Not with his cock standing out stiff as a tree limb.

Lucien motioned him over, swatting the girl in the tub with him to send her scurrying out of the bath. Kinji obediently joined Lucien in the tub, kneeling in the gentle lapping of the tiny waves that sent the rose petals bobbing and swirling like little ships in a stormy sea.

He waited for Lucien to take him into his arms or simply bend him over the side of the tub. It hadn't been more than a few minutes since Lucien had fucked him, but Kinji wanted his master's cock inside him all the same. He never got enough of Lucien or the feel of his big erection hammering away as he yielded himself.

A tiny smile twitched the corners of his lips upward.

Instead of reaching for him or ordering him to present himself for use, Lucien motioned to one of the three girls. "Bathe him."

This one, last of the three, had dark brown hair and large, well-shaped breasts. Kinji's smile vanished.

"I've been thinking," Lucien stated.

"About what, my Liege?"

"Wolves, Kinji."

"Ah. Yes, the wolves who decimated the village." Kinji sat back on his heels, mentally preparing himself for business rather than the pleasure his body craved the way other vampires craved blood. *I would gladly forgo feeding ever again if I could have Lucien's cock in me more often.*

"Something has to be done about them."

"Agreed, my Liege."

"The question now is, what do we do?"

Kinji shrugged as the female began to wash his shoulders with the soap. The smell tickled his nose, a faint trace of bitterness making him feel as if he should sneeze. *Absurd, vampires and demons don't have allergies as humans do.*

But the tickle wouldn't be denied. He sniffed, rubbed his nose.

"What is it, Kinji? Are you all right?" Lucien questioned.

Kinji twisted to grab the soap from the girl's hand, bringing it to his nose, sniffing, the urge to sneeze growing more urgent until he actually gave a tiny *whuff* of breath exhaled through his nose.

A dark eyebrow arched upward over Lucien's left eye. "Kinji, what in hell is wrong with you?"

Kinji tossed the soap aside and grabbed the bar from the girl washing Lucien. He sniffed it, noticed the same foul undercurrent of scent, and hurled it against the wall where it shattered into fragments.

Lucien sat up. "Kinji, what is it?"

He grabbed the girl who'd been washing his lover. "From whence came this soap?" he asked, voice a harsh snarl of rage.

"I...I..." she stammered, eyes filled with sudden terror.

Demon and vampire both, Kinji well knew the terror he could inspire in a human. He eased off the level of intimidation he'd psychically thrown at the girl.

"Where?" Kinji demanded.

"If it pleases Duke Kinji," Lillianne said, "I can tell him."

Kinji let the girl go, rose to his feet, and grabbed Lillianne, the senior member of Lucien's bloodharem. *Yes, if any of them knew the answer, it would be her.* "Where?" he demanded, shaking her, unable to fully control his anger.

"Please, Master Kinji! It came from Prince Herrick. It was a gift to Prince Lucien after his father died!"

Lucien's hand closed on Kinji's wrist. "Let her go, Kinji. Let her go and tell me what's wrong."

Kinji turned to his master, easing his grip on the female but not letting her go. "There's something magicked into the soap, my Prince. What, I cannot say without subjecting it to extensive tests, but it makes my nose tickle."

A scowl darkened Lucien's face. "Are you sure of this?"

"As sure as I may be before my theory is tested," Kinji told him truthfully, finally letting Lillianne go. Her arm already showed the discoloration of a hand-shaped bruise.

Lucien turned to the girl. "I want every gift that's come from Herrick sent to the magic lab. I want it done immediately."

The girl nodded. "Yes, my Prince. I'll see it's done."

Lucien got out of the bath. "Dress me. It would seem you and I will have more than the wolves to discuss today, Kinji."

Kinji bowed his head. "Yes, my Prince. So it would seem."

Kinji considered what Herrick might have to gain by harming, killing, or binding Lucien to him. *The Black Fortress and all the lands attached. That's what he'd gain if he could control Lucien or kill him.*

Kinji frowned. *Is this how Lucien's grandsire and father were killed? Were they murdered by some tainted gift that went undetected?*

Kinji didn't know, but he'd be damned and burning in the Fire King's realm before he'd let Lucien die.

Chapter Five

"When did Herrick send those gifts to me, Kinji?" Lucien asked. They were heading toward the lab on the west side of the Dungeon, Kinji following him down the narrow passage. The lamps were few and far between, creating far-spaced oases of brightness and barrens of deep shadow.

He remembered a steady stream of gifts right after he'd become prince in the wake of his grandsire and father's deaths. But what came when, or from whom, he couldn't remember. He'd been too lost in the mire of grief and the depths of black despair. The loss of his grandsire—to whom he'd been bonded—and his father, whom he'd loved with pure devotion as a son should, had almost taken him into the oblivion of the Last Sleep and the awaiting arms of Mother Night.

If Kinji of the twilight eyes and the beautiful face hadn't awakened the spark of life in him with his exquisite grace and form, he would have succumbed to the melancholy and passed into death.

Or become an unquiet spirit the way my granddame did. They'd closed the Hall of Princes because his granddame haunted the place as a screaming ghost. A creature his grandsire had called a *banshee*. Any human who heard her died within a day. Fortunately, his grandsire, Prince Luc, had agreed to seal her into the Hall with magic, or the deaths would have continued. She couldn't kill vampires, but his grandsire hadn't wanted her to kill the mortal servants. Good help was too hard to find and took years to properly train.

As to why his granddame became a banshee, Lucien had no idea. Prince Luc had never explained her transformation, and his father had refused to talk about it. With them both dead, Lucien would never discover what had transpired, and he didn't dare break the seal on the Hall, because he didn't have any power over her. Her flesh had given his father life, and through his father, she'd given him life. No magic he knew of would give him power over a ghost to whom he was related by blood.

They should have told me what to do. They should have done something to either save her or banish her from the Fortress. It's not right to keep her locked up in there, and I don't dare free her. Mother Night alone knows what she'd do.

"I believe they arrived not long after the death of your grandsire and father, my Prince. I cannot be certain, as they were delivered before I myself arrived."

"We should find someone who knows," Lucien remarked as they arrived at the wide doorway that gave entry into the magical laboratory. He shoved the doors open, noting the numerous workers going about their duties. They bowed as he passed, on his way to his personal lab where the "gifts" from Herrick had been brought.

When he got inside, he frowned at the stack of crates, all of which showed signs of having been opened and their contents used at least in part.

"I don't understand why the alarms at the gates didn't activate if even one piece of this contains hostile emanations," Lucien remarked to the too-silent Kinji. He glanced at his lover and saw the usual blankness on Kinji's face. About the only time the bland expression changed was when he fucked Kinji or when his lover became angry. Which meant about the only time Kinji had anything readable on his face was when they were alone.

Kinji stepped closer to the stack of boxes and peered into the one on the top. "My Prince, I know you would like to investigate whatever has been done to these *gifts* of dubious intention. But I really believe, for your own safety, someone else should do it. We don't know what the intention of the magic laid on these things is, and you dare not fall under the power of the spell, whatever it might be."

Lucien's mouth tightened into a frown. "Kinji, I'm not going to use any of the things. I'm simply going to test them."

Kinji crossed the room in a blinding flash of vampiric speed to grip Lucien's shoulders.

His violet eyes flashed with a seldom seen emotion, which, to Lucien's amazement, was fear.

"Don't be a damned fool, my Liege. We don't know what the intent or effect of the spell or spells contained in that stuff might be."

Annoyed at being manhandled and called a fool by his lover, Lucien pulled himself out of Kinji's hold.

"Lucien, listen to me!" Kinji said, grabbing him a second time.

Annoyance flashed over to anger, and Lucien shoved Kinji backward hard enough to make him slide several feet across the stone floor. It irritated him that Kinji remained on his feet rather than falling as he'd intended. "And you, Kinji, are overstepping the boundaries of our relationship."

Kinji folded his arms over his chest and stared at Lucien impassively. "I would like to point out that I am sworn by blood and magic to you, *my Liege*. Part of the oath I swore was to protect you. Or have you forgotten that small detail?"

"No, Kinji, I haven't. I also haven't forgotten you kneeling at my feet in subjugation." Anger boiled up inside Lucien, and he stalked closer to Kinji and grabbed the other male's tightly bound braid, yanking it in an effort to make Kinji kneel.

Solid as the walls of the Black Fortress itself, Kinji didn't drop. Instead he reached up and gripped Lucien's face between the palms of his hands. "Lucien, stop!"

Instead of listening, Lucien let Kinji's hair go, broke free of his hold, and backhanded his second hard enough to send him to the hard stone floor.

Blood poured from Kinji's torn mouth, the sight drawing Lucien's gaze.

So beautiful. On his knees at my feet. Making an offering of his body and his blood.

Kinji got to his feet and Lucien struck him again, hitting him in the face, blood spattering the floor as his lover staggered.

"Lucien! Stop! What you are doing to me?"

Lucien took Kinji in his arms, crushing him to his body. His cock was hard, and he wanted it inside Kinji. His lips claimed Kinji's bleeding mouth, tasting the blood, enjoying the way Kinji whimpered when Lucien bit down on his lower lip.

I am his Master, and he is mine to do with as I please... Yet...

He pushed Kinji from him, shaking himself and stepping back because something felt...*wrong*. Yes, Kinji was his and enjoyed pain, but something in his own actions had triggered a vague warning in his mind. He glanced toward the stack of crates. Crates that emitted various fragrances, none of them unpleasant or alarming, but he could now sense something was definitely *off* not only in the smell but in his own behavior.

"Lucien?"

Kinji had taken a step closer, but Lucien stopped him with a gesture.

"Stay there for a moment, Kinji. I'm not myself."

His lover snorted. "A true understatement, wouldn't you agree?" he asked as he licked the blood from his torn lower lip, which still bled, though it had started to heal.

"Forgive me, Kinji."

His lover grunted.

"I should go bathe to get the residue of the soap off me, shouldn't I?"

Violet eyes stared at him from the ivory mask of Kinji's face. "Yes."

"So should you," Lucien remarked.

"Whatever spell is within these things, it's not intended for me, but if it being on me acts upon you, the effect is the same." Kinji turned and studied the vials and bottles on the shelves behind them.

"What are you looking for?" Lucien questioned.

"Something capable of washing away the magical emanations of the spell that you are under."

"I don't think I'm under one."

Kinji offered him a sour glare. "After what just happened, you feel there isn't any spell acting upon you?"

"I think it's the combination of all the false gifts here in the room."

"Possibly," Kinji replied, taking a bottle down and returning to Lucien. He pressed the dark glass into Lucien's hand. "Go and wash with that."

Lucien glanced at the bottle to discover he held a bottle of distilled wolfsbane. "This stuff? What good will it be?"

"Call it a very well-educated supposition."

"Very well, but" — Lucien shrugged — "I can't see what possible good this will do against a spell."

"I'd drink a few swallows of it for good measure," Kinji added. "To be safe."

"Drink it? The stuff is foul!"

"Please, my Prince, humor me."

Lucien sighed. "Very well. I'll bathe and drink some of this horrid stuff to make you happy, Kinji."

"Thank you, my Liege."

* * * * *

Lucien made the very long return trip to his chambers by using a couple of the secret corridors that ran through the Fortress in a rat's warren of tunnels, stairs, and passages, some so narrow they were difficult for someone of his size to traverse.

He arrived in the airy chambers that housed his bloodharem. Twenty-three perfect gems, each girl a rare beauty in her own right, though, in his opinion, none of them were the equal of his Kinji. The girls were lounging about playing games, reading books, or otherwise amusing themselves. The instant they saw him, they hurried to make obeisance, lining up in a neat pair of rows.

All but one girl. His newest acquisition, who'd dropped to her knees behind the rest of the girls.

Yes, I need to see to the start of her training. But for the moment that has to wait. I've other things to think about. Wolves, spells, and an evident plot against me by Herrick.

"You three," he said, pointing out the girls who'd bathed him before. "Go and bathe yourselves. Scrub until your skin is pink from the effort. We've been exposed to an unknown spell."

He pointed to another girl. "You get two goblets. I've a potion they will need to drink, as will I."

The four girls hurried about their appointed tasks.

"You find a change of clothing for me," he said to a fifth girl.

"You two come with me," he said to the first two girls in the second row. "The rest of you return to your amusements."

The remaining girls expressed their sorrow at not being chosen with soft cries of disappointment.

Lucien went into the bath, leading his chosen pair, a brunette with small, high breasts and a redhead with large breasts and wide hips. They both looked at him expectantly.

"Bathe me."

"Yes, Master!" they said in perfect unison as one hurried to start the water and the other began to undress him.

He would bathe and then return to the lab to discover what Kinji had learned about the *gifts* he'd gotten from Herrick. While he fully trusted Kinji's belief that the things were tainted in some way, he found it disconcerting that Herrick, his grandsire's oldest friend, might have tried to harm him. Worse, it disturbed him that the other prince might be the cause of Prince Luc's and Prince Laurent's deaths.

* * * * *

Kinji glanced over the other vampire's shoulder into the magoscope lens, watching tiny particles dance. The bits shown were too small to be seen even with a vampire's keen gaze, but the lens of the magoscope enlarged details through a magical process. It also helped to detect traces of magical energies the unaided senses could not.

He frowned and glanced at the head of the research department. "And that sample came from which gift, Dr. Sigismond?"

"The soap, Your Grace. You did say you wished it analyzed first, did you not?"

"That is correct, Doctor."

"And your findings?"

"Well, we're not done completely. We've yet to run the samples through the full gamut of magical analysis."

"What are your initial findings?"

"There's undoubtedly some type of enchantment on every item we've tested. What type of enchantment, we're uncertain. Nothing bears the power of a true curse, or even an ensorcellment of a magnitude capable of causing any immediate harm, and yet..." Dr. Sigismond motioned Kinji to another device. "Look in here, Your Grace."

Kinji set his eyes to the oval viewing lens and saw a twisting, swirling mass of blackness mingled with a sprinkling of red and angry violet. "And this is from what item?"

"Again we're looking at the bath soap you were so suspicious of, Your Grace."

"What does this mean?"

"Forgive us, but we're not sure, Your Grace. Whatever manner of magic is residing in that soap is far from innocent. The colors of the aural analysis are clearly malevolent in nature."

"But you have no idea in what manner they are harmful?" Kinji asked, a frown compressing his lips into a severe line.

"Again, no, Your Grace. We'll require considerable time to fully research the components of the spell, along with the purpose."

"But all the items you've tested have shown some odd magical emanations, yes?"

"Oh, most assuredly, Your Grace. Of course, we've not tested every item, but those we've begun working with are marked by trace patterns of magical energy."

"Continue testing, Doctor. Let me know any conclusions you reach as quickly as you've gotten them."

"Of course, Your Grace. The second I have any information regarding the nature of the magic, I'll let you know right away."

Kinji nodded and started to leave the lab, but he turned around and went back before he got fully into the hallway.

Dr. Sigismond, bent over another of his instruments, looked up. "Is there something else, Your Grace?"

Kinji nodded. "I want you to test everything for any trace blood."

The doctor sat up straighter, frowning at Kinji. "Blood?"

"Yes."

"What sort of blood?"

"Shifter, vampire, or mage blood, Dr. Sigismond. Especially the first and second ones."

The man inclined his head. "As you wish, Your Grace."

"No matter the time of night or day you discover anything, Doctor, I want to know about it."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Kinji spun from the room and hurried his steps to Lucien's Tower. He had few answers, but a great many suspicions regarding the strange attack on Lucien.

Perhaps whoever caused Prince Luc and Prince Laurent to perish expected their deaths to be the end of Lucien. My arrival thwarted those plans so other means had to be tried.

Only the fact that Lucien received a great many gifts after the passing of the former prince caused these to be stored such a long time awaiting use.

And who knows what terrible outcome would have occurred had I not been in the bath with Lucien?

He thought of what would have happened had Lucien struck a member of his bloodharem blows as powerful as those he'd been dealt. Even the first backhand would have shattered bones or snapped the delicate neck of a human female.

But that didn't happen until we were in proximity to everything sent to Lucien from Herrick. Perhaps in combination...

He stopped in his tracks as an idea came to him. *In combination, is that the answer?*

Kinji spun around and ran at vampire speed to the lab.

He entered, startling Dr. Sigismond when he took the researcher by the shoulder and turned his chair around to face him. "Could a spell be spread across multiple things, rather than being contained in a single one?"

The doctor's expression became thoughtful. "It could be done, I suppose, though the complexity of such a linked spell is beyond the capabilities of any but a true master of the magical arts."

"Is Herrick good enough?"

Sigismond frowned. "No, I don't think he is."

"Who might be?"

"Hmm...offhand, let me think a moment." Dr. Sigismond scratched his rather sharply pointed chin as he pondered the question. Kinji let his thoughts drift, going over the same question in his own mind.

The gifts are from Herrick, so he must have commissioned the spell from someone, but who? And at what price?

"Any of the Great Mages among the humans could have done it, of course. But they don't leave their island. What reason would they have to come after Prince Lucien? They're on the island, and we're hundreds of miles from the coast, Your Grace."

"No reason that *we* know of, Doctor, but continue. Who else?"

"Queen Leyla is a powerful witch."

"Isn't she Queen of the Wolves?"

"Queen of *one* tribe of wolves, Your Grace. While it's true Leyla has no love of vampires, what reason would she have? Leyla took her tribe to the deep southern forests four decades ago. To my knowledge, they've not been heard from or seen since. For all anyone knows, they might well be dead."

"A wolf pack destroyed one of Lucien's villages, Dr. Sigismond. Just yesterday."

"I'd heard that, but there are many more tribes of the howling furbaces, Your Grace. They breed rapidly compared to most shifters. Besides, even when she lived nearby, Leyla never involved herself in things that would endanger her people. I know that as a fact. She and I used to converse now and again before Lucien's grandsire, Prince Luc, banned any and all contact with every shifter species regardless whether they'd been friendly or not."

"When did he issue the edict?"

"Oh, I'd say about a decade or so ago."

Kinji nodded. "As to the part about Leyla, I'll take your word for it, Doctor. I have no knowledge about the Wolf Queen one way or another," Kinji stated, while mentally making a note to check into that information in greater detail. *I'll have to enlist the aid of the Shadows. I hate doing it because there are so few of them, but the Prince's life is at stake, and I'd see every one of our spies dead before I'll let anything happen to Lucien.*

"Anyone else?"

"Old Prince Malachai. But I've heard it said he's barricaded himself and his bloodharem in his own tower and refuses to let anyone else in, even his family. They pass food to the harem through a grate in a door."

"I've heard the same thing. How true it might be, I don't know," Kinji replied. "Anyone else?"

"Lucien himself is considerably skilled in the arts, but he's not likely to have done anything to himself," Dr. Sigismond remarked as he continued working his way through the list of magically talented supernaturals.

Kinji had a great deal of patience, but the doctor's slow memory put it to the test.

With a snap of his fingers, the doctor's eyes widened and he smiled at Kinji. "I just remembered her name! Isn't that wonderful?"

"Whose name?"

"Princess Amalinda. She's a consummate sorceress."

"Amalinda of Talonguard? You're sure?"

"Yes. I haven't thought of her in many years. In fact, she hasn't been here in almost a century. Not since she and Lucien were adolescents."

Kinji frowned. "She knows Lucien?"

"Oh yes, Your Grace. She's such a pretty one. Hair black as Mother Night's cloak, skin pale as moon-kissed snow." Dr. Sigismond sighed like a lovesick boy. "She spent a winter here. A rumor went around that Prince Luc wanted to ensure his bloodline continued by matching her with Lucien, but nothing came of it. They weren't compatible as lovers, and all my tests proved the bloodlines wouldn't mix between them. They're both born vampires, so there wasn't much chance of a successful mating anyway. It's a pity really, but probably for the best in the long run."

Kinji felt a stab of jealous fury, but he quelled it. The *female* vampire was in the distant past.

"She's got the most beautiful eyes." He glanced at Kinji. "They're paler than yours, but quite lovely, Your Grace."

Kinji's eyes narrowed. "What is it you've said? What color are they?"

"Why, they're violet, Your Grace."

Chapter Six

Lucien, bathed and fully dressed, sat at the gleaming bloodwood desk in his private library. A map of the region covered the majority of the desktop. He leaned over it, contemplating who among his neighbors might want his territory enough to kill his entire line.

Unfortunately, the map offered no clues, nor did it offer him any idea why the wolves were terrorizing his Dominion rather than that of any other prince on the border with their territories.

A soft knock on the door drew his gaze from the map. "Enter, Kinji."

His slender second glided into the room and went to his knees before Lucien, his head bowed.

"And what have you discovered about those poisonous gifts?"

"Nothing conclusive, my Liege. However the good doctor has discovered some malefic taint in the soap. What exactly it might be, he is uncertain."

"And your conclusion, my dear protector?"

"My suspicion is that individually the items are dangerous but do not carry the full power of a spell. Only in tandem would the full power of the magic be unleashed."

"And you think this because...?"

"Because until you were in the room with the assembled items, you exhibited no adverse behavior or reaction."

Lucien nodded. *My clever Kinji. He would have made an excellent spy.* A tiny fang of doubt bit at Lucien's trust. But for whom? he asked himself. Could he have bonded himself to me and yet be doing the dirty work of an unknown enemy?

"Are you unwell, my Liege?"

He shook his head. "Thinking, that's all."

"Might I ask what troubles you?"

He chuckled. "Wolves, magically tainted gifts, lost villagers, and you, of course."

Kinji lifted his head, a tiny hint of surprise in his gaze. "Me, my Prince?"

"Always. You're quite the distraction. You and that body of yours."

"Is that truly what you were thinking, my Master?"

Lust warmed Lucien's blood at Kinji's use of *master*, rather than any of the usual appellations he used when they were discussing matters of the Dominion. His cock stiffened and his heart beat at the primal speed dictated by desire.

He squelched the lust and returned his gaze to the map rather than look at the siren whose song lured his mind away from business far too easily and often. "While I'd like nothing better than to bend you over my desk and take you until you scream in pleasure, it will have to wait. We have matters of importance to my realm to consider, Kinji."

"Of course, my Liege."

Lucien heard the disappointment in Kinji's tone.

"Tell me, who do you feel stands to gain the most if I pass through Mother Night's Veil?"

Kinji's face took on an expression of deep thought. "On the face of it, Herrick, my Prince."

Lucien looked up from the map. "On the face of it? Then, despite the fact the gifts came from him, you don't think he's behind it?"

Kinji shook his head. "No, Lucien, I don't."

"Why?"

"From Herrick's Castle of Clouds to his border with your Dominion is five days, by freight wagon. It takes a freight wagon six additional days to get from the border of Herrick's Dominion to the gate of the Black Fortress."

"Meaning?"

"Eleven days is more than ample time to take the cargo and tamper with it, or replace the actual gifts Prince Herrick sent with entirely different things. Ones prepared well in advance of need," Kinji stated.

"All right. Say this hypothetical event occurred. The gifts Herrick sent me were waylaid and either tampered with magically or replaced by the tainted things that arrived here." Lucien leaned back in the softness of the well-upholstered chair, his elbows resting on the arms, index fingers steepled against his lips. *He seems to have thought this through carefully, my Kinji. But is he truly mine or is he the dog of my enemy or enemies? He's made himself irreplaceable in my Dominion and my bedchamber. He's bound to me in ways nothing can break, and yet...*

Nonsense. Kinji would never hurt or betray me.

And it was Kinji who noticed the problem with the soap. Which reminds me...

"Why did you have me bathe in and drink the wolfsbane, Kinji?"

"Because if the magic is shifter magic, wolfsbane can often negate their minor baneful charms."

"Yes, this is true. But why do you suspect the shifters have a hand in this? Machinations of this sort are more often the purview of our own kind."

"I suspect everyone, my Liege. Everyone *but* Herrick."

Lucien sat forward and studied Kinji. "Why not him?"

"Because if the magic failed, it would be discovered, as it has been. Everyone knows that the ire of your line is not to be raised without due caution," Kinji remarked. "Herrick's army is half the size of yours, my Liege. In addition, you've sorcery and other means at your disposal. Means that other princes are cautious of in these days of strife."

"You mean my Shadows?"

"Yes, my Liege, they are one of the things many of your peers fear."

"What else do they fear, Kinji?"

His lover gave a sly, amused smile. "Me."

Lucien couldn't help but laugh over the remark. "Yes, I suppose they might fear harming me, considering what you did to that fool Baron Enbert."

Kinji snorted. "I'd have done worse, if you'd not told me to stop."

"What you would have done, Kinji, was kill him. Since he was, technically, a guest of mine, I could hardly let you murder him in front of the entire court."

Kinji gave another derisive snort. "He deserved it. He had no right to try that with you."

"He wanted to swear bloodoath."

"He *wanted* in your pants!" Kinji retorted, anger seeping into his tone.

"Yes, and what of it? I do have a right to choose whatever lovers I please, Kinji."

A glare darkened Kinji's eyes to a stormy shade more gray than violet.

Lucien felt his blood heat, his cock going stiff and aching in an instant. *He's even more alluring when he's furious. By Mother Night, what a magnificent creature he is. And he's mine, which makes it even more extraordinary.*

"His kind aren't worthy of your time, much less your touch," Kinji replied, voice gone to velvet. Velvet that hid razor-sharp steel.

"Made vampires, you mean?"

Kinji didn't give a reply, but the look in his eyes gave him away.

"You really do believe born vampires are superior, don't you?"

"Yes," came the simple reply.

"Why?"

"Because no made vampire can do the things born vampires can," Kinji stated.

"You weren't born a vampire, were you?"

"No."

"And this is why you wanted a master?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't he have been given the same option?"

Kinji met Lucien's gaze straight on. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I would have had to kill him."

"You *did* try to kill him," Lucien reminded.

"Yes, but you stopped me."

"Tell me your *real* reason for your attempt on his life, Kinji."

"He was a spy."

Well, now it's finally out. "How do you know?"

"Because the walls sometimes have ears in your Fortress, Master, and sometimes those ears are mine."

"Ah, so you were spying on the spy." Lucien nodded his understanding. He leaned into the softness of his chair and thought about the things he'd learned from Kinji since their conversation began.

"Do you think he might have been here to check on the progress of the tainted gifts?"

"In retrospect?"

"Yes."

"Hindsight, as they say, Master, is the clearest type of sight. Yes, I think he might have come here to either make sure the things did their nefarious job or to help them along in some manner."

"You've an alacrity of thought that amazes me sometimes, my beloved Kinji."

"Thank you...Master." A tiny smile, a glimmer of awakened lust glittered in the violet eyes.

Kinji sought his reward for being *good* and helping Lucien, and for Kinji only a certain type of reward for a job well done was acceptable.

Lucien held his hand out to Kinji. "Come."

Kinji did as he ordered, coming to Lucien, who pulled him into his lap and kissed him deeply.

I do not know how fully I can trust him, yet he's never proven himself false to me or done anything that was not in the best interest of my well-being and the welfare of my Dominion.

And I do love him, fool that I may be for such emotional attachment.

He gazed into his second's eyes. "I love you, Kinji."

"Kinji loves Master." The reply, as always, came without any trace of hesitation or reservation.

Lucien pulled Kinji closer and kissed him. His tongue invaded Kinji's sweet mouth. Lucien held him tighter, feeling the solid power of Kinji's body. As vampirekind went, Kinji was on the small side, yet the power within the slim body was undeniable, and it made Lucien want him all the more, knowing something as powerful and beautiful as Kinji belonged to him and him alone.

Kinji wrapped his arms around Lucien's neck, closing his eyes, sinking into the pleasure of the kiss. He wanted this, needed it, his body craving the touch of his master, the hard flesh of his master's cock.

Lucien broke the kiss, pushed him off his lap. Kinji knelt at Lucien's feet, within the confines of his master's knees, between Lucien in his chair and the solid mass of the desk.

A sound reached him, and he tipped his head to try and figure out what he'd heard, waiting for the noise to repeat itself.

Scratching fingernails on the door to Lucien's study.

"Who comes?" Lucien asked, but a knowing curl of his master's mouth said Lucien knew who had arrived, amusement glimmering in his eyes.

"Lillianne with the new girl, Master," the senior member of Lucien's bloodharem replied from outside.

Kinji felt disappointment. *I did not want to share him with any female.*

He also had to accept Lucien's wishes. Lucien was master to his entire bloodharem, and Kinji—a Duke and Lucien's second in command—was still part of that harem. Like it or not, Kinji had to accept that Lucien enjoyed exercising his right to do as he pleased with anyone in his harem.

He sat back on his heels and sighed. *I wanted my reward for what I've done to protect him and his Dominion. Now I have to share him with her, it's not...right. But it is Lucien's right to do as he wills.*

"Take her to the Room and leave her there. Kinji and I will be along shortly," Lucien instructed.

"As you command, Master."

Lucien waited a moment, his gaze on the door, listening to the women depart. When they were gone, he looked down at Kinji. "Well, what are you waiting for, Kinji? You know there's only one reason for you to be where you are."

Yes, he was quite familiar with what his master desired of him when he knelt between his spread thighs. The scent of Lucien's arousal wrapped around him, a cloud of spicy lust-borne fragrance, the perfumed lure of vampire flesh. He could resist such an attractant, his own heritage lending him the ability to ignore such an enticement. But

he had no desire to resist, no driving need to escape what he'd freely accepted: Lucien as his master.

He leaned closer, inhaling the heady aroma of Lucien's arousal, pressing his face to the hardness beneath his lover's clothes.

A rumble of amusement vibrated through Lucien, and he glanced up to see his master's indulgent smile. Lucien's hand slipped into the flow of his hair, pulling the tie loose so it fell free around him, a blood-tide spilling on the shores of his master's body.

He shuddered at the touch, the feel of Lucien's fingers sliding through the heavy mass of hair, thumb brushing his cheek, tracing the arch of the bone beneath his skin.

"My beautiful one," Lucien murmured as he leaned down. Lucien's hand moved to the nape of his neck, holding him still for a kiss.

Lucien's tongue explored his mouth, teasing fangs brushing his bottom lip and the tip of his tongue as Lucien proved his ownership. Kinji, claimed by the kiss, whimpered as Lucien's left hand gripped his crotch, teasing him through the intervening cloth. Kinji closed his eyes, gasping and trembling with need as fangs sank gently into his bottom lip, drawing blood.

Lucien let him go, shoved him backward so his shoulders struck the edge of the desk.

Eyes alight, his master licked blood from his lips, his gaze never leaving Kinji's face. He snapped his fingers, and Kinji scooted closer, head bowed, hair a concealment he used to peer at Lucien while gauging his mood, reading the lust in his master's burning stare.

"Master should tell his boy exactly what he wants from Kinji."

Fingers closed in his hair, forcing his head down. "Suck me!" Lucien snarled the order, the snap of command lashing Kinji audibly as the thrum of a vampire's power backed the words.

He shuddered at the onslaught of Lucien's vampiric power, the primal vastness of unleashed energy beating against his own darkness. Obedient, Kinji reached for the fastenings of Lucien's pants, undoing the glittering silver buttons before reaching in to free the throbbing flesh. He held it, watched the glistening droplet of precum slide over the head. He licked his lips and rose to his knees, bowing over his master's lap to take the head of Lucien's cock into his mouth.

Sweetness and power, the droplet of fluid as binding to him as his master's blood. Perhaps more so, as he craved the taste of the vampire's semen more than he ever craved his master's blood.

"Suck my cock," Lucien commanded, twisting the hair he gripped, the taste of pain sweeping through him, adding to the ache of his own cock.

Kinji wanted Lucien to fuck him, to give him pleasure, but he wouldn't get anything until later.

The silken feel of Lucien's erection on his lips, the powerful scent of his lover's need, and the desire to please Lucien drew a soft whimper from him. He engulfed Lucien's cock in his mouth, taking it down his throat until his nose bumped into one of the silver buttons on his master's pants.

He sucked, bobbing his head, tongue sweeping along the length of his master's arousal, lapping beads of heady sweetness from the wanting flesh. Up and down, over and over, he repeated the motion, his master's fingers moving to the nape of his neck, urging him to go faster, take him deeper. Kinji obeyed and did what the hand ordered, his motions speeding up, his master's hips pushing his cock deep into Kinji's mouth.

Lucien tensed at the edge of release, body arching, driving his cock hard into Kinji's mouth.

Kinji's teeth cut foreskin, and Lucien gasped as blood and semen spilled into Kinji's mouth. Kinji swallowed greedily, lapping away every trace of precious fluid.

He was pulled into Lucien's lap, his lover's mouth closing over his, fangs finding his lips, his tongue, savaging them, leaving him gasping and shaken by his master's possessiveness, his passion.

Lucien lifted him from his lap and tossed him to the floor. Kinji lay where he fell, legs spread, braced on his hands. His cock formed a hard line of need under the tight-fitting trousers he wore.

His master smiled. "Such a pretty picture you would make, Kinji. Tumbled at my feet, hair spread around you, your body aching for my touch." Lucien crouched down beside him, ran a hand through his hair. "I should have a portrait made. One with you naked and wanting, wearing nothing but this," he whispered into Kinji's ear as he continued to run his hand through the length of Kinji's hair.

"I will do anything Master wishes."

"Anything?"

Kinji nodded.

"Ah, well then," Lucien murmured. His lips brushed the edge of Kinji's ear, the tip of his tongue teasing, warm breath sending a chill shiver of excitement through Kinji. "If you'll do anything for me, I'm going to hold you to that promise, Kinji."

He met Lucien's gaze. "What do you have in mind?"

Lucien smiled, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Too late, you've promised me you'd do anything."

"Yes, I did," Kinji agreed. "Now tell me what you expect of me."

Lucien stood up, chuckling as he returned his cock to his pants and buttoned them. "In due time, my sweet one."

Kinji let it go. *Lucien has something in mind. Something he will find enjoyable, but I suspect I won't like.*

"Come along, Kinji. I have other pleasantries in mind for both of us. The business we were discussing can wait until I've had more time to consider it."

"As you wish, my Prince."

Lucien smiled at him, fangs glimmering in the dim light. "Yes, Kinji, as *I* wish."

Kinji followed Lucien from the study, knowing where they were going the instant his lover turned left down the corridor toward the harem and the Room.

Chapter Seven

Fear chewed deeper and deeper into her psyche, the minutes passing with the weight of hours as Nina knelt where Lillianne had instructed her to wait.

The tiny pool of light surrounding her left the rest of the room wrapped in blackness. Bound by shadows so dark she couldn't tell what the large forms scattered through the room might be or what they might mean.

Lillianne referred to this place as *the Room*, but she would say nothing regarding why it was called that or what might take place here.

Trepidation kept her curiosity at bay. She wanted to see the things that filled the Room, yet their very forms looming in the shadows kept her from truly wanting to know what they were or what their functions might be. The admonition to remain where she was until their master gave her permission to leave the spot added to her reluctance to venture from the light.

She didn't know what the Prince of the Black Fortress might do to her if she disobeyed the order to remain kneeling in the light. She didn't want to find out either.

Vampires were not notoriously tolerant of disobedience from mere slaves. Stories of Prince Lucien's father riding into their village and taking whatever women he chose to have were well-known. None of the women he took ever returned. She didn't think this Prince Lucien would be any different.

Vampires took what they wanted. Resistance equaled swift death.

The shifters were even worse. They killed everyone, even if you did as they asked. Even if you begged for mercy, they ignored your pleas. She'd seen a lot of people beg for their lives, and the shifters, horrid werewolves, had howled their amusement and ignored the cries for mercy, killing and burning or taking captives.

Those they hadn't killed, they'd tried to change with their accursed blood.

She shuddered, remembering how close to such a horrible fate she'd gotten, the Prince's men arriving a few moments before she would have been bitten and forced to taste the blood of the leader of the wolf shifters.

Has it only been a single day since the raid on the village? Have my friends and family only been dead a single day?

One day, yet it felt as if an entire lifetime had passed in the last few hours. Her life had become so different, so strange; it was difficult to resolve the here and now with the bland life she'd lived in the village. She had yet to reconcile the loss in her mind, and she hadn't come to terms with the fact she would never return home because the village, her home, and everyone who'd lived there were gone. Gone forever.

Her eyes burned with bitter tears.

Nina wiped the tears away. Almost everyone she'd known had died, and the few people who'd survived were on their way to another village.

She'd never felt so alone in her entire life.

Alone in a dark room at the mercy of a vampire prince.

She'd gone from the proverbial frying pan right into the fire, first the furies, now Lucien, a born vampire and Prince of the Dominion where she'd been born.

Crying won't help. Nothing's going to help me, and Prince Lucien won't like it if my eyes are swollen from crying. Lillianne had warned her against tears, and as she put it, female antics, whatever she meant by that. Apparently, Prince Lucien didn't tolerate crying or certain behavior from his harem, but what behavior he did allow, none of the others would tell her.

Cold and scared, she wrapped her arms around herself and struggled to regain some quantity of calm.

Bad as vampires were, they weren't as evil as the furies. All her short life she'd heard horror tales about what the shifters did to the humans they caught, and her recent firsthand experience bore those stories out with horrifying clarity.

She shivered and stared into the darkness in the direction of the door she'd come through with Lillianne.

When will he come?

What will he do with me when he does come?

Is he going to drink my blood? Does he mean to kill me?

I wish they would have at least answered a few questions for me instead of smirking or laughing at me.

All they'd say is that it's an honor to be part of a prince's bloodharem, but I don't feel honored. I'm scared. And cold.

She hadn't been allowed more than a few scraps of gauze for clothing. In the harem room it hadn't mattered, the room full of warmth from a fireplace and the many candles lighting it.

But here in the chill darkness, the thin material offered no protection, and the cold stone under her legs left her shivering and numb from her knees to her toes.

Have they forgotten about me?

If they did, would it be a bad thing?

Which brought her to *why* he'd wanted her in the first place. She wasn't anyone special. Her parents weren't even village elders or anyone important. They'd been tailors, common people doing a common, boring job day after day. She didn't understand why a vampire prince, or any vampire for that matter, would be interested in *her*.

The sounds of someone approaching, footsteps and the deep rumble of male voices, made her tremble, and her heart beat so hard it felt as if it would burst through her ribs.

When the door swung open, she let out a little squeak. Her mind urged her legs to run, but her body refused the order, paralyzed by a terror so great she couldn't move, could barely breathe.

The power of the vampires hammered at her psyche with the force of storm-driven waves, the pressure pounding at her until she sagged in helpless subjugation, weeping and shivering.

Gentle hands gripped her, pulled her upright, dark eyes set in a perfect, too-handsome face gazing into her eyes, laying her bare, exposing her soul.

She turned her head aside, chin lowered to show her submission.

"Kinji, I do believe this girl is bloodkin to me."

"It could be," a deep, melodic voice said, reaching her through the haze clouding her mind. "Though she showed no sign of it when she was rescued or when you first saw her."

"It could be she was in shock, and now that the terror of her captivity with the fuzzmuzzles is over, she's regained her senses enough to be aware of a link."

"Perhaps, my Prince."

"They may have realized what she was and drugged her too."

"You may be correct, my Liege. She did appear confused and lethargic when we rescued her, though I'd put that down to shock. It might also explain why they'd not infected her with their tainted blood yet."

"Yes, very true. She'd be more valuable to them as a hostage than as a breeding female."

They spoke of her as though she were not present. As though she were nothing but an animal they were discussing, weighing the merits and flaws of a beast in their care.

She should have felt anger, but the sheer power, the weight of the energies bleeding off the two immortal creatures in the room, threatened to overwhelm her and drag her down into the arms of madness.

The one holding her oozed power, an energy that tingled through every cell of her body, like bubbles in champagne. But the other one bled off a sort of fog that felt unlike anything she'd ever encountered from shifter *or* vampire. She looked at him and saw a pall of darkness, of barely contained power that reached for her, tried to clasp her in unseen talons. If the other vampire could, he would have taken her, reshaped her into something else. She didn't fully understand what she felt coming from him, but she somehow knew the violet-eyed creature watching her was no vampire. Something else, something wholly different than a vampire stared at her through those startling violet eyes. Whatever this creature might be, it was something far more terrible than vampire or shifter.

Nina fought the urge to scream, to fight her way free and run shrieking through the corridors. Her brain felt as if it were twisting around inside her head, as if it sought to tear free of her spine and break out of her skull to escape the strange being standing so still by the door.

"Shhh..." the vampire that held her murmured, a hand stroking along her back, seeking to calm her, to soothe her. She didn't want to be calmed, to be lulled into a false sense of safety, to be enspelled by the vampire's mind-bending abilities.

She wanted to run, to flee from the other, to keep running until entire Dominions lay between her and the other being.

But try as hard as she could, Nina couldn't resist, her efforts crumbling the way a neglected, mud-walled house eroded bit by bit. She turned into the vampire's embrace, seeking his protection from the *other* in the room with them.

Vampire power flowed over her, sank in the way oil sank into parched skin. A tingling sensation flittered through her, the vampire's power invading her body, setting her flesh alight with motes of pleasure that danced through her mind like the lights of a festival. Panic seized her, and she struggled, trying in vain to escape the hands gripping her, the power sapping her will from her.

"No...no..." she begged, gasping out the words. If she gave in to the power of the vampire, she would lose her awareness of the other *thing* in the room with them, and she didn't want that to happen.

"I'll not hurt you, sweet one. But you must calm down, or your heart may burst." The words were whispered to her in a voice that oozed command, filled her lower body with strange heat, and slowed her caged-bird heartbeat.

Fear drained away with the suddenness of a summer storm come to an abrupt end. She shivered, felt the strong arms encircling her, comforting her, and Nina sighed, relaxing. Yet, for all the reassurance of the vampire's comforting embrace, Nina wanted nothing more than to pull away and flee. To run home and never look back.

Except her home was no more, everything burned to ashes and bitter memories.

"Easy, sweet one. You need fear no danger from either of us." The vampire caressed her face, kissed her forehead, his lips soft as the petals of a rose. A spicy scent

clung to his skin, and she inhaled it, finding additional comfort within the fragrance, though why that should be she didn't know.

"Once you are calm, we can begin your training. Now rest. Close your eyes a moment and awaken without the fear. No one means to harm you. This I promise, sweetling."

Nina's eyes drifted shut despite her struggle to remain awake. She could hear the vampire speaking, this time not to her but to the *other* in the room with them.

"I see her training will need to be slightly different than I anticipated, Kinji."

"So it would seem, my Prince."

She sank toward the darkness of sleep, wondering what the vampire prince meant by "her training," a vague sense of worry tugging her mouth into a frown.

Lucien studied the female in his arms, wondering how she could be his bloodkin when every bloodkin his family had brought with them to this world had—supposedly—died in a war between their family and the Gilroy Prince, Leith, while they were still on Old Earth.

He stroked a hand through her ink black hair, feeling the silken strands slide between his fingers. He liked the feel of her hair under his hand, the feel of her lush little body in his arms. The faint tingle of blood speaking to blood aroused him, made him want to sink his cock into her tight little pussy and fuck her until her breathing came in ragged gasps as she begged for his mercy.

"Is she really bloodkin to you?"

He glanced over his shoulder to find Kinji peering at her, his curiosity apparent in the bright glitter of his gaze.

"Yes, and don't be jealous of her, Kinji. I'll love her, but that's a matter of the blood, not the heart."

His lover folded his arms across his chest, regarding Lucien with the same emotionless expression he wore when he wanted to hide his feelings. "And what do I care how you feel for a female, Lucien? I share your bed at night, not any of them."

Lucien sighed. *Jealousy, thy name is Kinji. I've not even fucked her, yet he's already getting defensive.* He gazed at the female in his arms and decided a small display of his devotion to Kinji might be advised before the temperamental redhead decided to take his displeasure out on the girl in some way.

"I will warn you only once regarding her, Kinji. Do not hurt her, do not seek to make her so afraid of you that she tries to avoid being near me. She is bloodkin, and she is my only hope to sire an heir. Without her, I have no such hope. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," was the somewhat sullen reply.

"Good. And now that there is nothing between you and me to create a misunderstanding regarding her, I want you to strip."

"Master?" Kinji was watching him, the glitter of defiance lighting his eyes.

Lucien's eyes narrowed, recognizing the signs that Kinji intended to give him some defiance to show his displeasure over the girl. Lucien snapped his fingers, his voice full of disapproval. "Do as I say, Kinji. Take your clothes off, now."

Kinji removed his clothing slowly, his gaze never leaving Lucien. He set each item down as if it were made of glass and could break.

Lucien picked the girl up and lay her down on a settee, then pulled a coverlet over her chilled body.

Sure the girl would be all right for the moment, he stalked to Kinji, grasped him by the shoulders, gave him a rough shaking, and then set his mouth to Kinji's, crushing his lover's lips against his teeth until they oozed blood. Lucien sucked Kinji's lips, and his lover trembled, the hard rod of his cock rubbed against the thigh Lucien pressed between Kinji's legs.

He released Kinji, shoved him toward the middle of the room. "On your knees in the light. Remain there until I say you may move."

Kinji bowed his head and hurried to the pool of light where he knelt, head down.

Lucien turned to the female on the settee, gazing on her. She was delicate, fine-boned, and neatly formed, but small.

What sort of heir can I make with a creature of such delicacy? Surely any son born of her womb will be as finely wrought as she.

His own mother had been a statuesque beauty, fully as tall as his sire, and his grandsire's mate had been something of a virago, drinking and shooting her way across Europe, robbing carriages to bolster the family's fortunes after the Reformation.

He knelt by the settee, touched her cheek, leaned down, and tasted her lips.

Sweet enticement, his heartbeat stepping up to a faster pace, his blood answering the call of hers.

The pull was there, but it lacked the intensity that should have existed. She was bloodkin, but she would not have been the mate his soul chose had there been another possibility. He could mate her, create an heir, but she might never be his True Mate.

And perhaps the reason really lay in his love for Kinji. Kinji held his heart, and he always would.

He set his lips to hers again, letting himself explore the sweet flavor of bloodkin after being told for so long none survived.

Father, if you were wrong about this, could you have been wrong about other things? Did you lie to me, or did you truly not know we had surviving kin among our slaves?

He found that to be ludicrous. How could his father not have known they had surviving kin, unless she was not direct kin but part of the original clan their own line of vampiric blood had sprung from?

That could explain so much. Father would not have looked for an older line among our slaves. Why should he, when all such bloodkin should be with the originating house?

He sat back on his haunches and gazed down at her, wondering if he'd discovered the truth of the matter. Slaves were sometimes traded back and forth between the rulers of the Dominions to keep them from becoming too inbred. It was quite possible she was the progeny of a stray, a bloodkin who had somehow become separated from her vampiric family.

Chance brought her to me, or perhaps luck. Without bloodkin, I could have no heir, and without an heir, the line would die with me if I were killed as my father was.

The thought returned him to the question of how his sire and grandsire had really died. It also returned his thoughts to the magically tainted items and the spy whom Kinji had sniffed out those long weeks ago.

The deaths of the older princes of his house and the tainted items had to be related.

He put the puzzle aside. This wasn't the time to worry about things for which they had yet to find an answer. He needed a diversion, and this pretty little female, along with his beautiful Kinji, were just the things he needed to take his mind off problems without solutions.

He kissed her forehead and murmured, "Awaken, my adorable flower."

Dark eyes opened, blinked as she returned to full awareness of the situation, her surroundings. He stroked her hair, smiled at her, careful to keep the tips of his fangs veiled by his bottom lip. She already felt fear, but that emotion seemed confined to Kinji.

Perhaps she has a greater level of psychic awareness than even most bloodkin possess, and if that's the case, she knows he's more than a vampire.

"Don't be afraid, pretty flower. Neither I nor Duke Kinji will hurt you. You have my promise on that."

"I..." Her head turned, dark gaze finding and coming to rest on Kinji. "He's not a vampire, is he?"

"In part, yes."

"In part?" She showed her confusion, a tiny frown forming on her lips. "You mean he's half vampire?"

"Yes, half vampire and half demon."

"He...scares me," she explained in a hushed whisper.

"Don't be afraid of him. He won't hurt you."

"You're sure?"

"He is bonded by blood to me. He obeys my commands."

She turned her gaze upon him with a glimmer of hero worship. "He does?"

Lucien nodded. "Yes, he does." He touched her cheek. "Let me prove it to you, since you are filled with doubt."

Kinji knelt in the circle of light as his master had ordered, but inside he fumed, upset and angry that this new *female* had turned out to be some sort of bloodkin to Lucien. Yes, they were lovers. Yes, they were bonded by blood, but it meant Lucien *owned* him, not the other way around.

A tight knot of uncertainty formed inside Kinji's chest, and a lump of lead filled his belly.

Don't be a fool. Lucien loves me. He's not going to put me aside for a tiny chit of a female. I protect him; she cannot.

But the nagging worry that Lucien would send him to live with the rest of his bloodharem – a flock of cackling hens he had no real use for – unnerved him.

He *needed* to be with Lucien. Couldn't imagine sleeping in some distant, lonely room surrounded by the musky scent of human females rather than the spicy perfume of a male vampire's flesh.

He clenched his teeth against the mournful sound trying to escape from him.

I'm overreacting. She's not going to replace me in his bed.

But she's bloodkin. She can give him something I cannot.

He noticed motion and lifted his head to find Lucien standing over him. "Master?"

Lucien's hand closed in his hair, forced his head backward until his neck felt the strain.

Pain, sweet, glorious pain, hardened his cock, and he let a soft whimper escape his lips, knowing Lucien couldn't resist the sound.

"My beautiful Kinji," his master whispered. "Do you want me?"

"Yes, Master. Your boy wants you."

"You cannot have me. Not until you earn the favor of my cock."

Kinji shuddered. *He is going to put me through my paces for this female of his to prove I belong to him.* It annoyed him that Lucien would do this, yet at the same time it also excited him. Lucien was going to command him for his pleasure, for a silly chit of a mortal girl, and on some deeply perverse level, Kinji thought he was going to enjoy it.

"Go to the cross."

Kinji got up and hurried to the darkened corner where the heavy wooden X stood. The saltire cross had been bolted to the floor and reinforced so it could withstand the struggles of preternatural beings, or more to the point, Lucien had it reinforced to hold Kinji.

Kinji stood before it, waiting for Lucien to tell him if he should face the cross or set his back to it.

Instead of giving him the command, Lucien looked at the girl beside him and said, "Guide him so he's facing the cross."

Kinji could smell her fear of him, but she did as Lucien asked, taking Kinji's wrist and urging him to turn so he faced the cross.

"Strap him in."

Her pretty little hands strapped him facing the cross, his cheek pressed to the cool wood. He put his arms above his head, forcing the girl to stand on a stool in order to reach. Then his legs were bound so he was in a spread-eagle position against the smooth wood.

Despite the presence of the girl, Kinji shivered with anticipation. Lucien seldom brought him to the Room, and even less frequently put him thorough his paces with the various things it held.

"See? He's docile as a lamb, perfectly obedient to my commands," he heard Lucien tell the girl. His master's hand stroked down the line of his spine from the nape of his neck to the crack of his ass. Kinji trembled, his mind going over the things his master could do to him.

So many possibilities. But which ones would his master employ?

He could hear Lucien moving around, heard him take something from the wall where all the implements of discipline hung.

"Touch him," Lucien urged, and Kinji felt a slim little hand touch his shoulder.

"Go on, don't be afraid."

The hand moved, shaking with the terror gripping her.

"His skin is so soft."

"Yes, it is," Lucien agreed. "Now step back. I don't want to hit you by accident."

"Yes...Master," she said, and Kinji heard the nervous excitement in her voice.

"Now you'll see how much control I have of my half demon."

He felt the cool touch of wood on his behind and recognized what touched him. His master held a bloodwood paddle, the shape and feel of the thing on his ass telling him what rested against his butt.

Kinji smiled and closed his eyes, waiting for the first blow.

When it came, it jolted the breath out of him, pain stars dancing in his vision. "Master," he cried out as the second punishing application of the paddle impacted on his behind.

Three more smacks of the paddle on his ass followed in rapid succession, each one wrenching a cry of agonized desire from his gasping mouth.

His butt burned, hot and wanting something else now. His erection ached to be touched, his ass clenched wanting something to grip, the hard thrusting of a cock inside it.

"Set him free, pretty flower."

"My name is Nina, Master," the girl replied.

"No, your name is whatever I decide to call you," Lucien corrected, his voice gentle but carrying an underlying sternness.

"I...I'm sorry, I didn't know," the girl said.

Lucien's hand caressed Kinji's heated bottom, and he groaned, pressing his behind into the cool hand, enjoying the contrast between his abused flesh and the touch of his lover.

The hand retreated up his back, pressing against his shoulder, holding him as the paddle came down with a loud *smack* that echoed through the room.

Sparkles of pain danced behind his eyes. Lucien wielded the paddle again, smacking Kinji's butt hard enough to tear a gasp from him.

It hurt like hell, and at the same time, it felt so good a few more of those punishing blows would tip him right over the edge into orgasm. His legs were going weak, his mind slipping away into a haze where pain and pleasure merged into a single thing, a beast of sensation, a thing that stole his willpower, his sense of self, and transformed him to a creature of helpless passion. A beast with no conscious volition, everything focused on the one shining instant where the body transcended physical limitations and slipped into pleasure so intense it was like tasting death.

Kinji screamed as he slid over the precipice into the point where he could stare into the heart of the Dark Lady's embrace, a place Lucien seldom let him go. Shuddering, he crumpled, dangling from the arm restraints, his legs too weak to hold him upright.

Lucien supported him while the girl undid the buckles holding him to the cross.

He sagged into Lucien's arms, spent, relaxed. He gave his lover a smile that came from deep in his soul. "I love you." He choked on the words, so much emotion right at the surface, he felt embarrassed letting the girl see him vulnerable and weak in the aftermath of what Lucien had given him.

"Do I own you, Kinji?"

"Heart and soul, Master. I belong to you, and I always will."

Chapter Eight

Because the girl—whom Lucien had decided to name Fleur—had so much fear of Kinji, he'd decided to let her training wait a bit longer, until the pull of blood that existed between them had a chance to grow and intensify. With the decision to wait made, Lucien moved on to another task: finding out *why* the shifter had chosen to attack him.

Lucien swept into the dungeon cell that held the shifter, the dim lights hindering his vision not in the least. He was a born vampire, and even the faintest starlight meant he could see better than any shifter ever birthed.

Kinji entered behind him, his second stopping beside the door that he closed but did not lock. A precaution should the shifter somehow manage to gain his freedom. His beautiful Kinji made no mistakes when it came to protecting him. Should the shifter manage to break free, Lucien could escape, and Kinji would step into the shifter's path to protect him from the beast.

He'll cut the shifter in two is what he'll do, Lucien thought as he moved closer to the captive beast. Not that I'm reliant on his protection, but he would be vexed with me if I decided to battle a beast without any armor to protect me.

His captive hung limp in the restraints, head hanging, body lax in deep sleep. The toxin, its antidote, and two days with no food or water were wearing the shifter's endurance down, which was what the situation required. If he was going to question the beast and get answers, having it in a state of good health wouldn't aid him in his desire for information.

Lucien let his eyes take in the shifter's undeniably masculine form, the powerful muscles that sheathed a solid frame of bone and sinew. His cock stiffened beneath the brocade trousers, the bite of the buttons a discomfort that added a piquancy to his state of arousal. He recalled the fury of the shifter's attack, the sheer primal force of it, and smiled to himself as a vague notion at the back of his mind became an idea.

If I can turn him, make him mine, he'll be a fine addition to my bloodharem.

Lucien brought Kinji to him with a wiggle of his fingers, his lover's gaze not giving the shifter even the most cursory glance. Kinji had interest in no one but Lucien.

"My Prince?" Kinji questioned in a hushed voice.

Lucien appreciated that Kinji was trying not to awaken the shifter, and he showed his approval by leaning close and kissing Kinji's cheek. Lips brushing Kinji's ear, Lucien whispered, "Do you think he's attractive, Kinji?"

His lover pulled away, narrowed violet eyes regarding Lucien rather than the shifter.

Lucien gripped Kinji's face, forced him to look at the naked blond.

Kinji glared at helpless shifter, pulled out of Lucien's hold, turned his icy stare on Lucien.

He's never been jealous before today. First the girl, and now a shifter. He can't be worried I'll replace him with a female or a furface, can he? But Lucien couldn't think of another reason for Kinji's blizzard-cold stare.

Lucien bent closer to Kinji. "Will you help me turn him?"

Kinji didn't answer.

Lucien moved to look at Kinji's face, saw his lover's jaw working, the muscles bunching as he ground his teeth.

Damn, I've never seen him act this way before. He must be angry over the prospect of a shifter becoming part of my bloodharem. He's never objected over anyone I wanted, except the vampire he told me was a spy. Kinji hadn't even objected when he'd added a masterless vampire they'd caught stealing a human from one of Lucien's villages. As short-term punishment, he'd set his bond on the vampire, and now Hugh supervised the servants who kept the Fortress clean. He couldn't recall the last time he'd even spoken to Hugh.

But this would be different, just as Fleur was different. She represented something Kinji couldn't give him, the hope of an heir. The shifter too would represent a threat to Kinji's position in the bloodharem. A shifter tainted with the blood of a powerful vampire was terribly dangerous to anyone who sought to harm the vampire who'd turned it. Once turned, the shifter—at that point a bloodbeast—would be a permanent part of Lucien's harem. He couldn't put such a creature in charge of a portion of his household; too many of his human servants would be terrified of the thing he'd made.

He met Kinji's gaze, his expression a stern glower. "Behave."

Kinji lowered his head, but Lucien had seen the cold rage burning in Kinji's eyes. He might pretend obedience, but Lucien saw signs of future trouble with Kinji if he chose to make this beast *his* beast. He also knew how to deal with Kinji. Fucked often and hard enough, Kinji would agree to almost anything.

Every supernatural has a weakness. I wonder what weakness this beast has?

The memory of his encounter with shifter at the village replayed in Lucien's mind.

He'd seen me, and instead of attacking, he hesitated. Was it my vampiric presence that gave him pause, or was it something else?

"Tell me something," Kinji requested, still whispering.

"What?"

"Why do you want it?"

Lucien frowned. *Yes, why do I want it? It's not as if the furies have ever been something that interested me before. And I'm not one of the kind that enjoys bloodying shifters until they die. Nor does turning it into a mindless creature of servitude fit to do nothing but follow me around like a dog hold any appeal. What is it that I truly want from this animal?*

"I don't know," he admitted.

Kinji did nothing but stare at him, as if he hadn't heard his reply.

"I *really* don't know, Kinji. I just" — he sighed — "I just want it."

Kinji broke eye contact with him, turned to regard the shifter with the same, angry stare.

"You want it because it's got a big cock," Kinji pronounced in a tone sharp as the sword he carried. "That's why you want it."

"No, I..." Lucien glanced between the shifter's thighs, felt his own cock stir at the sight of what lay there. "All right, maybe that *does* have something to do with it," he admitted.

Kinji tipped his head, gazing at him with an expression gone blank, as if a switch had been thrown to shut the anger off. It bothered Lucien. Kinji was a master of revealing nothing when he chose to be, or he could express emotions so clearly he need not speak.

This time the cold stare, the lack of visible emotion, told Lucien more than screaming or anger would have conveyed. Kinji didn't like the idea. He didn't want the shifter anywhere near Lucien.

Which is a valid point, as he did try to kill me.

Yet, looking at the outward human appearance of the shifter, he found himself powerfully attracted to the bold masculinity, the sheer power that he could see in every line of the creature's body.

Oh Mother Night... Realization flowed through Lucien. The only time he'd felt a similar attraction to a stranger, a creature not of his own Dominion, had been when Kinji came and asked to serve him.

Instinct guides when the mind fails to understand. For some reason I do not yet comprehend, I have to keep this shifter, and I have to make him my creature the same way Kinji is mine. I must have this shifter.

"Kinji?"

Kinji gave Lucien an attentive look, one deep red eyebrow rising in query.

"I want him given enough water to sustain him, but no food. Not yet."

Kinji bowed in acknowledgment of the order.

"See to it," he added as he headed for the exit.

"Yes, my Prince, I'll make sure the servants —"

He turned. "No, Kinji. Not the servants. You. I want you to care for him. Personally."

Kinji's jaw tensed, hands curling into fists.

And there's his anger again. If he keeps this up, I will punish him and not in a way he will enjoy.

"Do it!"

Kinji bowed low. "Yes, my Prince."

Lucien left the room, heading for his private study. He had some reading to do. If he was going to turn the shifter, he had to know the right way to do it. He knew where to find the information on the proper way to bind a shifter to his service. He'd seen a book on the subject in his magical library. He doubted he could do it the same way he'd bound Kinji, with blood and sex.

But if that will work, think of the fun we'll have, Kinji and I.

* * * * *

Kinji stared at the shifter, his lips compressed so tightly the tips of his fangs were exposed. Anger blazed like an inferno within him, but not for the reason Lucien believed.

Lucien, his beloved Prince, hadn't noticed. He hadn't seen anything, but Kinji knew, and he'd barely contained his anger. He hadn't revealed the truth to Lucien, because he didn't want to embarrass his master.

Perhaps whatever was in that accursed soap is affecting him. I'll have to look into this, try and discover what the nature of that charm is and find a way to negate it. Apparently, my remedy had no effect, which could mean it wasn't a shifter's spell or it was more complex than I initially guessed.

I will deal with that later. For now, I have a furface to bend to my master's will. Failing that, the shifter will have to die.

Kinji leaned close to the shifter until his lips were almost touching the creature's ear and his breath ruffled the creature's blond hair. "You think you're terribly clever, don't you? But unlike my master, I'm not deceived," Kinji whispered into the shifter's ear.

Golden eyes opened, hate shining in their depths.

"Yes, you hate us. I'm not overly fond of your kind either," Kinji remarked. He leaned even closer to the bound beast, rising onto his toes to meet its eyes. "I warn you now, whatever you *may* do, you will *not* attempt to harm Prince Lucien."

The shifter showed his fangs in a mirthless grin. "And if I tear him limb from limb, what will *you* do?"

Kinji gave the shifter his iciest smile. "I'll tear your living heart from your chest and make you eat it in the couple of seconds you'll live afterward."

"You?" The shifter snorted in derision, looking down at Kinji in a dismissive fashion.

Time to show him how deceptive size can be.

Kinji's smile didn't waver as he turned and walked to the wall directly across from the chained shifter. Making sure he had the beast's full attention, he slammed his fist into the stone. Chips flew, and the stone directly under the impact of his hand turned to powder and fell in a gritty heap to the floor. The hole he'd made hid his hand and half his forearm. He pulled it out, shook off the bits of stone, brushed at the dust with his other hand.

The beast stared slack-jawed at him. Bits of stone continued to patter the ground behind Kinji as the hole he made grew wider, a series of cracks spreading outward from the point of impact. Kinji didn't worry about the damage he'd done. The spells protecting the Fortress would mend the wall, and it would be solid soon enough. No one would believe anything the shifter said either, which meant he didn't need to kill it to hide his secret...yet.

Not even Lucien knew the full extent of his abilities, and he planned to keep it that way.

He strolled over to the beast, still brushing stone dust from his sleeve and hand.

The creature watched him, warily, as well he should. He lived at Kinji's whim – regardless of what Lucien might want – whether the shifter knew it or not.

"I'm sure you overheard our conversation, so there's no need for me to explain my master's ill-advised choice to keep you."

The beast glared.

"You do have a choice in this, albeit a small one. You can be whatever my master decides you will be, or you can die."

"I'd rather die!"

"Of course," Kinji replied curtly. "But that isn't what my master thinks he wants, so this is what you *will* do.

"When my master touches you, you will like it. If you do not like it, I will show you pain that makes anything you've ever known seem like the smallest of hurts."

"Go to hell!"

Kinji grabbed a handful of the blond hair, pulled the male's head down until their noses were almost touching. "Yes, be defiant, be as arrogant and stupid as you like. But understand this: you *will* become my master's plaything to do with as he likes, because the alternative is that I shall become the architect of your own *personal* hell!"

The shifter struggled, but restrained as he was, he could give no effective resistance. His face twisted into a snarl, and he spit full in Kinji's face.

Kinji went still, the spittle sliding down his cheek as his eyes narrowed. His lips drew back in a snarl that bared his fangs. Instead of wiping the spittle off with his hand, he rubbed his face down the shifter's chest, leaving the spit smeared across the shifter's skin.

He froze a second time, eyes focused on something that surprised even him.

The touch of his cheek against the shifter's body had hardened the shifter's cock. A smile of amusement curled Kinji's lips.

Perhaps my master isn't being as foolish as I thought. The beast seems very receptive to the touch of a vampire.

Kinji stepped away to gaze at the shifter. "It would appear you've come to a decision," he remarked.

Laughing, Kinji crossed the room so he stood before the sink behind the shifter, who, bound as he was, couldn't see what he might be doing. He picked up a bowl, rinsed out the dust, and filled it with water from the tap. He returned to the shifter, who would not meet his gaze.

"Drink," he commanded, an amused smile clinging to his lips.

"And if I refuse?"

Kinji reached up, gripped the shifter's jaw in one deceptively slender hand, and pulled.

A startled gasp of pain came from the shifter as Kinji forced its mouth open. He poured the water in, and the shifter could choke or swallow as he saw fit.

Wisely, the shifter swallowed.

"Good boy." Kinji patted him on the flank, gaze on the semihard length of the shifter's cock. It is a rather impressive bit of meat, he decided. Smirking, he leaned down, nipped the head lightly, and watched the shifter's cock go rigid.

"Damn you!" the shifter growled.

Kinji chuckled. "Poor little fly, you've stepped right into the spider's web. And sadly, as with all such encounters, the little fly will lose."

"I'm no fly!"

Kinji gave the shifter a feral smile. "No, you aren't. You're much more dangerous than a fly, I'll grant you that much. You'll find it hardly matters how dangerous you might have been out there among your own kind. Here, you're a kitten we've brought home for our amusement. And you are, to my surprise, proving to be much more entertaining than I expected."

He walked from the shifter's sight, put the bowl in the sink, and headed for the door. He had some research to do regarding enchantments, charms...and shifters.

"You bastard! I'm going to rip you limb from limb! I'm going to —"

The door closing cut off the shifter's angry threats.

Chapter Nine

Lucien glanced at the clock on the wall and frowned. He'd left Kinji with the shifter almost three hours ago, and still his second hadn't made an appearance.

It's not like him to be gone from me so long.

Lucien sighed and closed the book he'd been studying. He had a much better grasp on how to turn the shifter and bend him to his will, but without knowing the shifter's weakness, he was no closer to tying the shifter to himself than he was to discovering the method behind the murders of his father and grandsire.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He felt a slight pang of hunger, but mostly what he felt was tired. He wanted to go to his bed, but he wouldn't retire until he knew where Kinji might be and what he was doing. He found it odd that he couldn't sense where the other vampire was, but there were many reasons something like that could happen. Places existed in the Fortress that were shielded to protect everyone from emanations that could be harmful to humans. Such places could hide Kinji's location from him.

Most of the dungeon was shielded to protect the human servants from the psychic impact of a captive shifter's rage, or experiments conducted in the labs that might create fear or panic in the servants.

I hope he's not terrorizing the shifter. If he gets him mad, I might never be able to find the buttons to push that will make him to yield to me.

He got up, turned off the lamp on his desk, and headed down to check on the shifter. If he found Kinji tormenting the beast, he'd have a few choice things to say to his second, right before he showed him that all pain did not change to pleasure.

I'm not about to let him ruin this opportunity.

He took the secret corridor and stairs within the walls of the Fortress, pausing as he sensed Kinji coming up from the dungeon, but whether his lover had been in the dungeon proper or working in the labs, Lucien couldn't tell.

He turned around and headed for his private chambers, knowing that Kinji would be heading there to wait for him.

Or more to the point, he'd be there posed to entice me with his beautiful little body, hot and eager for sex.

Lucien smiled and continued on his way. Kinji had gotten well ahead of him. He could sense his lover inside his bedroom, but what he might be doing in there, or what surprise he had in store, Lucien didn't know.

He entered to find no sign of Kinji. Lucien frowned until he heard the sound of running water in the bath chamber. He crossed the room to the door of the bath. Steam billowed out, the scent of woodsy spices carried by the steam.

Lucien smiled. He hadn't given Kinji any bathtub sex that morning. *Perhaps he's been out of sorts all day because I failed to pay proper attention to him this morning. But I hardly got the chance, considering he discovered the charmed soap.*

He stepped into the bath chamber and paused, seeing Kinji amid the steam. He was kneeling beside the tub, head bowed, clothed in nothing but his outrageous red hair. Or at least that's what Lucien thought until he got closer to his lover and discovered the thin platinum chains binding his wrists together.

He smiled, amused. *He wants to be my captive, so he can compete with the shifter. Very well, I'll play his little game.*

Lucien's hand shot out to grasp a handful of Kinji's hair, forcing his head back, making his "captive" look at him. He leaned down. "Who do you belong to?" he asked, his tone harsh, commanding a response.

Kinji resisted, showing Lucien how he wanted the game played. He had to force the smile from his lips, as always finding amusement in Kinji's sexual games.

"You'll never break me, no matter what you do," Kinji said, his silken voice and pose showing defiance.

"Won't I?" Lucien asked, twisting his hand harder in Kinji's hair, smirking at the instant hardening of Kinji's cock.

Kinji turned aside as if angry with himself for the betrayal of his body. "My body you may have, but you'll never break my spirit."

"I'll happily settle for your body," Lucien replied, running his other hand over Kinji's shoulders and down his chest. Using the grip in his lover's hair, he forced Kinji to his feet, clasped the stiff rod of his lover's cock in his fist, and watched Kinji shudder, his body leaning into the touch on his erection.

"You're mine. Admit it."

Kinji shook his head. "Never."

Lucien stroked Kinji's cock, thumbing the weeping head, smearing the slick wetness of precum across the sensitive flesh.

Kinji moaned, lips parting.

Lucien kissed him, his tongue an invader conquering the territory of his lover's mouth. He relinquished his hold on Kinji's cock and hair to embrace the smaller vampire, holding him tight. He broke the kiss, Kinji struggling slightly as if he wanted to escape. He lowered his head, sank his fangs into his lover's throat, swallowing the blood as Kinji stilled in his grasp.

He fed, savoring each swallow of the powerful blood, his own cock hard, body wanting the pleasures he found as he dominated and fucked his half-demon lover.

Kinji arched against him, moaning, reacting to the drain of vitality the taking of blood caused, crying out with the pleasure it gave. The sounds Kinji made were as much an enticement to Lucien as the sight of Kinji's body. The perfection of the demon/vampire hybrid awakened the lust that always simmered right below the surface of Lucien's thoughts.

When he'd fed enough, Lucien shoved Kinji away from him, sending Kinji to the floor, enjoying the way his lover looked at his feet.

Kinji lay on his right side, hair a wild tangle around him, eyes glimmering from behind a fall of red. Steam curled around Kinji as if forming a veil to conceal him.

"You are mine," he stated, watching Kinji for any sign he planned to add a bit of conflict to their game.

"I belong to no one," Kinji murmured.

"That's not what your cock tells me. It shows the truth even when your words lie."

Kinji shook his head to uncover his face, the long flood of his hair falling away as he gazed on Lucien. He rose to his feet, came closer to Lucien, giving no answer to the question.

Lucien caressed Kinji's cheek, thumb brushing along the arch of his cheekbone. "Who is your master, Kinji?"

His lover's lips twitched into a tiny smirk, and his twilight-colored gaze glittered with amusement. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Something cold filled Lucien's heart. Kinji's game sounded too convincing tonight. Too real.

But he does belong to me. He cannot betray me. It's impossible.

Another thought crept into his mind. *But what do you really know about Kinji? He came to you, entered your service not long after your grandsire and father were murdered.*

He frowned. And their killer has yet to be found.

No, I won't believe that. I won't let myself think that Kinji murdered them, or that he had anything to do with their deaths. What would be his motive for that?

Another dark possibility slithered into his mind. *Assassinated, but why? And how insane must a killer be to then enter the service of the bloodchild of the vampires he's just killed?*

He let Kinji go, turned from him, ignoring the ache of his balls, the insistent throbbing of his cock.

In a swirl of deep red hair, streamers of steam following him, Kinji hurried ahead, dropping to his knees, bowing to the floor, blocking the way out of the bath chamber. Kinji gave Lucien the beautiful curve of his back, the supplication of his entire being conveyed in the fully submissive posture.

Doubt retreated like a deer fleeing a pack of wolves.

Kinji would never betray me. He didn't kill them. He didn't make his appearance in my Dominion until almost two weeks after they were murdered, and by then everyone knew they were dead.

What had Kinji told him when he'd come seeking service with him? That as the last of his bloodline he needed protecting? He couldn't recall exactly what Kinji had said, but the offer of a bloodbond, to be tied to Lucien as long as he existed, coupled with Kinji's breathtaking beauty, had been an offer Lucien could not casually ignore.

He sighed, removed his coat, and let it drop to a heap on the polished stone floor. He pulled off his shirt and let it fall.

He wanted Kinji, and there was no reason he couldn't have him. Lucien snapped his fingers, and Kinji sat up, eyes lifted, awaiting his command.

"I've upset you, haven't I?" Kinji asked, voice lowered to a respectful murmur.

He didn't bother to lie. "Yes."

Kinji stood, came to him, wrapped slender arms around Lucien's waist, and laid his head on Lucien's chest. "Forgive me, my Prince," he whispered. He pressed his lips to the bare skin of Lucien's chest, right over his heart.

"For what? I was the one that started this foolishness. I made you jealous over that shifter, didn't I?" He didn't give Kinji time to answer his question. He already knew the answer anyway. He cupped Kinji's chin in one hand, lowered his head, and kissed the sweet lips that he savaged on a whim, swallowing the blood, feeling Kinji shudder at the pain. He shifted his hold from Kinji's chin, gripping both arms, deepening the kiss, thrusting his tongue roughly into the sweet mouth, sucking Kinji's tongue, his fangs tearing it until a torrent of blood filled Lucien's mouth.

Kinji groaned, pressing tighter to him, the hard shaft of his cock bucking against Lucien's thigh, the smaller vampire trembling as he orgasmed from the combined pain and the taking of his blood.

Lucien gripped Kinji tighter, his own cock aching to be wrapped in the warm heat of Kinji's perfect body.

None of his bloodharem could give him what Kinji gave him. They wouldn't survive the pain and damage that he could inflict on Kinji. And even had they been able to survive, they wouldn't have enjoyed the torment as Kinji did.

Lucien picked Kinji up, threw him into the tub of steaming water, a wave of scented liquid splashing the floor.

Lucien stripped off his boots and pants, stalked toward him, his cock stiff, dripping precum.

Kinji sat up in the tub, heart beating faster, his cock hardening at the sight of his master coming toward him. Lucien's eyes blazed, the inner glow bright with lust.

Lust for him.

Lucien climbed into the tub, grabbed him by the hair, and pressed Kinji's face close to his groin, the wordless command obvious.

Kinji opened his mouth, and the thought of the shifter sucking Lucien's cock both annoyed and somehow thrilled him.

He enjoyed being dominated by Lucien, but an even greater—and by far a more rare pleasure—was having the chance to see Lucien dominate others. Especially other supernaturals, though so far he'd only had the opportunity to see Lucien dominate Hugh. And Hugh hadn't amounted to much. He'd whimpered at the slightest kiss of pain.

Kinji reached up, pulled the foreskin of Lucien's cock down, and lapped at the droplets of precum, savoring the spicy tang. Every vampire tasted different, of course, but none he'd been with had ever tasted as good as Lucien did. From the very first time he'd sucked his master's cock, Kinji had enjoyed the taste almost as much as he enjoyed listening to Lucien's gasping cries as he'd pleased him.

"My Kinji. I love you. I'd never replace you with anyone. Not a bloodkin female or a furface bloodslave."

Kinji heard the word *bloodslave* and wondered exactly what Lucien had in mind for the fuzzmuzzle. Whatever it might be, Kinji already knew the key to attaining what Lucien wanted. But he hadn't decided if he'd give Lucien the key or make him find it on his own.

Lucien smacked his shoulder. "You're not paying attention to what you're doing!" he snapped, his palm coming down a second time on Kinji's shoulder, hard enough to sting.

He shuddered and tongued Lucien's cock. It still hurt a bit, the thick muscle still healing from Lucien's bites. He pressed the tip to the tiny slit and thrust at it, and Lucien groaned and pressed his hand to the back of Kinji's head. He took Lucien's cock deeper, sucking, his tongue stroking along the bottom.

Wanting a taste of Lucien's blood, he grazed the top of Lucien's cock with the tip of one fang. He swallowed, the flavor of Lucien's blood, the feel of it coursing through his body strong as the drugs some mortals used to give them pleasure.

Lucien pulled away and Kinji had to relinquish his cock, sighing at the loss of his treat. "What's wrong, Lucien?"

"Nothing." Lucien took hold of his arm and pulled him toward the back of the tub, more water sloshing out to soak the floor. Lucien shoved him down over the end of the tub and knelt behind him.

"You've been acting up a lot lately, Kinji. To a degree, I enjoy some of the games we've been playing, but I'm not enjoying the jealousy you've displayed.

Kinji sighed. "I'm not jealous."

A hand came down on his ass, stinging, making him jump.

"I'm talking, boy, so you listen. Understood?"

A flicker of anger came to life in Kinji, but he suppressed it, managing to answer in a calm, subservient tone. "Yes, Master, I understand."

"Good. I love you, Kinji. You. I do not love anyone else, even if I might fuck them. I'm very tired of your jealous tantrums. I'll have no more outbursts or displays of temper regarding Fleur, the shifter, or anyone else I might decide to amuse myself with. Is this also understood?"

"Yes, Master." And I don't understand what's happening with you, Lucien. You didn't notice the shifter was awake the entire time you were there talking to me about him. You're also under the odd impression that the girl is bloodkin to you. Maybe she is, but the blood is so thinned by intervening branching of the bloodlines that I can't even sense a faint degree of connection.

It's got to be something to do with the odd charm on that soap. It has to be connected to that or something else he's come in contact with that I'm unaware of. But what?

I have to get answers to this and soon. Very soon, before something else happens of a more drastic nature. I cannot let him die. I won't let him die.

"I'm going to fuck you, Kinji, to remind you who your master is."

Kinji lowered his head, resting it on the cool marble. "Lucien, there's something wrong with you. I don't think you realize it, but...you're acting different."

"Am I?" A hand landed on his ass with brutal force. Kinji couldn't help it; he moaned and shuddered from the pain. The hand came down again, and he gripped the sides of the tub and hung on, unable to object or move, the need to submit to Lucien overriding his common sense.

"Still think I'm acting differently?"

"Yessss..." he hissed out as Lucien's palm made contact with his left butt cheek.

"I think it's you, Kinji. You've been acting oddly since this morning."

Lucien's cool hand caressed the heated flesh of Kinji's bottom, and he shivered with the contrast. "Master," he moaned, his body quivering at the contrast of Lucien's cool touch over abused skin.

"I want you to go down to the labs first thing in the morning. I want you checked out to make sure that whatever charm was set into the soap had no effect on you. That's not a suggestion, Kinji. It's an order. Am I understood?"

Lucien emphasized the question with another exquisite kiss of pain delivered on Kinji's right butt cheek. He hadn't gotten a chance to reply before his left butt cheek felt the stinging bite of his master's hand.

He's angry with me. But...the charms on that soap couldn't have affected me. It's not possible. Is it?

Kinji opened his mouth to answer Lucien, but the punishing slap of Lucien's hand turned his reply into a gasping cry sharpened by pleasure birthed in the torment of Lucien's powerful blows on his ass. The pounding on his butt hurt, yet at the same time it sent jolts of intense pleasure rocketing along Kinji's nerves. Pleasure that exploded in Kinji's mind bright as the flare of lightning before a storm.

"Maasterrr," he groaned.

"You haven't answered, Kinji," Lucien said as he knelt behind Kinji. Hands gripped his hips to hold him still, the fingers digging into his hip bones with bruising force.

"I'll go." He whimpered the words as Lucien's tongue slid over the burning skin of his ass. Teeth grazed his bottom, cutting his skin. Etching twin lines of stinging hurt across his ass. He shivered as Lucien's tongue slid over the cuts, lapping up the blood, healing the shallow wounds.

"You've been bad, Kinji. Bad in ways I don't care for," Lucien informed him.

"Forgive me, Master. I don't mean to upset you." He said the words for Lucien's benefit, but he didn't mean them. Not this time. He hadn't been jealous of the shifter, he'd been angry over the shifter's ruse of being unconscious. He'd been upset over Lucien's failure to notice. But jealous? No. He was worried about Lucien and uneasy about his strange decision to bind a furface to him.

Teeth sank into his butt, and Kinji yelped at the hurt. *He's punishing me by taking blood and hurting me with his bites.* He accepted it without resisting or commenting beyond a soft cry to show Lucien it hurt, and not in a way he particularly cared for. He didn't mind his tongue being torn and bitten—he was used to that—but this new game of biting his ass wasn't one Kinji liked.

"I think you've been punished enough. But don't ever show me the kind of temper you showed today. Do you understand me, Kinji?"

"Yes, Master."

Lucien's cock nudged at the tight anal muscles, and Kinji relaxed. Lucien must have noticed the small bottle of oil floating in the tub, because Kinji felt it being poured into the crack of his ass. Kinji closed his eyes and waited for the pleasure he needed so desperately to begin. He loved the feel of Lucien's big cock inside him, the way it filled him, ruled his mind with pleasure, and dominated his senses until he lost awareness of anything else.

He groaned as the head pressed inside, Lucien pausing to let him feel it, to let anticipation build. He swallowed, gripped the sides of the tub harder, and tried to rock backward to get more of the hard flesh inside him.

Lucien pulled out and swatted him painfully on the thigh. "I set the pace. Behave or go without."

"Yes, Master," he whispered. This was Lucien, his lover, and yet he couldn't help notice the subtle change his master seemed to be undergoing. Lucien had always had a dominating, cruel streak, which Kinji had never minded, but he sensed something *off* in his lover's behavior. Something strange he couldn't pinpoint.

"Good boy."

The rest of Lucien's cock slipped through the tight ring of muscle, and his master paused again, teasing Kinji with denial of the hard thrusting Kinji wanted. Kinji relaxed, resisting the powerful urge to press his ass against Lucien's groin, to get more of the hard cock inside him where he needed it so badly.

A hand caressed down his rib cage. "Good, very good, Kinji."

"Please, I need you, Lucien."

"Shhhh... You'll have me soon enough. And don't use my name. You've been bad, and I'm revoking your privilege to call me anything but master."

"Yes, Master." *He's never done that before either. Is he just being particularly stern and dominating, or is something else really happening with him?*

His master's cock moved inward, the motion slow torment for Kinji. *Mother Night, why won't he fuck me?* He wanted it hard, fast, rough. But Lucien evidently had other ideas. Kinji groaned his desire as Lucien's crotch pressed against his ass. He almost bucked his hips to urge Lucien to thrust, to fuck him, but he recalled his master's warning and held himself perfectly still. The last thing he wanted was for Lucien to pull out and not fuck him. And that would be exactly what he got if he didn't behave this time.

Lucien caressed his shoulders, his ribs, and the feeling of Lucien's hands incited Kinji's desire for the hard fuck he wanted. He groaned, wordlessly pleading, something warning him against anything more specific tonight.

Abrupt as a mountain storm, Lucien drove his erection into Kinji, the thrusts fast, hard, deep. Kinji arched his back, crying out with the intensity of the pleasure as Lucien rammed his big cock into him. Twinges of pain accompanied each thrust, and Kinji didn't care. He reveled in each powerful fulfillment, every slap of Lucien's balls against him. Screaming his release, Kinji sagged against the marble, but Lucien kept thrusting, pounding his cock into Kinji until he shuddered under the lash of another powerful orgasm, and still Lucien hammered away. Kinji, body rocked by climax after climax, shouted himself hoarse. His screams of "Master" echoed through the bathroom and seeped into the chambers belonging to the bloodharem.

Chapter Ten

Lucien wasn't accustomed to waking up alone, but when he opened his eyes at sunset it was to find Kinji gone. The other side of the bed was cold to the touch. For some reason he couldn't even explain to himself, Kinji's absence left Lucien feeling abandoned.

Well, I did order him to go to the lab this morning, but I didn't expect him to be gone before I even woke up.

He shoved the covers aside and sat up on the edge of the bed. He felt...peculiar. An unusual ache in the back of his head brought a frown to his lips.

Instead of going to the bathing chamber, he got dressed and took the secret passages through the bowels of the Fortress down to the dungeon, where he paused. He should go to the labs to see what they'd discovered regarding the charms on the purported gifts from Herrick, but he decided to check on the condition of *his* shifter first.

He opened the door and stood there for a moment, taking in the exquisite form of the male creature. The powerful body was an enticement to Lucien, who had a keen appreciation of the masculine form. The shifter's rippling muscles were at odds with the leaner, sleeker forms of vampirekind, and Lucien felt a powerful attraction to this particular shifter. His bright golden mane of hair called attention to the breadth of his shoulders and the depth of his chest, which tapered to a trim waist and lean hips. Lucien's gaze swept lower, to powerful thighs and the thick cock nestled in a bed of golden curls. He wanted to grasp the shifter's cock, bring it to hardness, and fondle the large balls hanging below it until the shifter begged to be fucked.

Lucien smirked, thinking of what fun he'd have watching the shifter fuck Kinji into a gasping, trembling mess.

That, I think, is going to be an unrealized dream. Kinji would never let a shifter's cock into that tight little ass of his.

He stepped into the room, closed the door, and made his way to the chair that only he used. He sat down, poured himself a glass of wine, and regarded the shifter while the shifter regarded him.

So much contempt in those beautiful gold eyes, yet I do believe I see traces of fear. We vampires must frighten him. Or perhaps he fears us only because I have him as a helpless captive. Lucien's lips curved into an amused smirk. *Or perhaps he fears I'll accomplish turning him and making him mine.*

"Let's get down to business, shall we?"

The fuzzmuzzle didn't reply.

"Ah, yes, you're determined not to speak to me. But eventually you will."

The contemptuous glare didn't change. The expression on the shifter's face did, his lips curling into snarl that would have been impressive if he were in half-shifted form. The flat, human-looking teeth of his neutral form failed to impress Lucien.

"The question I have is a simple enough one, really. I want to know why you tried to kill me. It's not as if I'm requesting the numbers of your kind or where in the forest you make your dens."

The shifter said nothing. Lucien took a sip of wine, the taste a bit too sweet for so early in the morning. *I should have gone to the labs and found Kinji. A sip of his blood is so much finer than any wine.*

Sighing, Lucien set the goblet aside. Leaning back in his seat, he crossed his legs at the ankles and turned a displeased frown on the shifter. "Really, you're being stubborn for no good reason."

"I have nothing to say to you," he was told in a clipped, angry voice.

We've got a start. All I have to do is keep him talking.

"No? Pity. It would be a more pleasant way for you to pass the time. It must be terribly boring alone down here, strapped to a restraining framework with no one to talk to."

"Better alone than listening to the babbling of something that should be dust."

"That's the best insult you could find after two days of captivity?"

The golden eyes met his gaze, the *hate* burning in them, the anger simmering in the shifter's thoughts sending a little shiver through Lucien. *Such power. He's a lot stronger mentally than most shifters.*

Lucien stood. Exerting the full extent of both his grace and speed, he crossed the room and came to a stop inches from the shifter. He could feel the animal heat of the bigger male's body, and he breathed in the sharp feline muskiness of the beast, leaning in close to do it, his breath flowing over the shifter's chest as he exhaled.

As had happened during his prior encounters with the beast, Lucien noticed the thick cock shifting, going partially hard as if fear of him caused a counterintuitive reaction in the shifter's flesh.

I may have found the key to gaining him as my own creature. He leaned in even closer, until he was forced to put his hands on the shifter's chest or fall against him.

The shifter drew in a sharp breath, the contempt in his gaze transforming to a guarded wariness. The mingled scents of arousal and fear bled off the surface like an exotic perfume. Lucien discovered he couldn't resist.

He slid his hands over the shifter's shoulders, up his arms in a light, teasing caress.

The muscles in the shifter's jaw tightened, bunching and relaxing as he gritted his teeth. Something poked Lucien in the groin, and he smirked. "I see you're enjoying this as much as I am," Lucien remarked.

The shifter growled and turned his head aside, which left him open to Lucien. Not one to waste an opportunity, Lucien pressed himself to the shifter, and lifting himself on his toes slightly so he could reach, he brushed his tongue across the juncture of the surface's throat and shoulder.

The shifter's chin hit Lucien in the side of the neck and he recoiled, but the smirk on his face didn't waver. He met the shifter's gold-fire gaze, the beast trying with all his might to shift and unable to do so because of the magical restraints set on him.

Lucien watched as a ripple spread across the shifter's body, fur alternately appearing and vanishing as he battled the magic.

"Impressive, but pointless," he remarked. He walked behind the shifter in time to see a tail momentarily erupt from the base of the shifter's spine and then vanish as if it had never appeared. He moved in close to the shifter, stroked a hand down his flank. "Such power. I have to wonder why it was you failed to kill me." He got closer, whispering into the shifter's ear, "Perhaps you really didn't want to kill me. Perhaps you'd rather try to pin me down and fuck me. Savage me with your fangs while you're in half-shifted form, your big cock thrusting into my helpless body. Is that why you didn't kill me?"

The shifter snarled in wordless menace and struggled to break free of the framework, the muscles in his entire body bunching and straining.

"It's no use. You have to realize you can't break free," Lucien taunted. "But if you tell me why you wanted to kill me and speak as if you've got a jot of brain in all that muscle, I might deign to free you."

"You bastard!"

Lucien chuckled. "Oh yes, I'm very much a bastard. Ask Kinji. He'll be the first one to tell you I'm a bastard of the first order. I'm also, as your kind would say, an alpha among alphas. I don't submit to anyone or anything, whether it be shifter, vampire, or demon." He trailed his fingertips along the beast's back, noting the way his captive tensed.

"Take your hands off of me!" the big feline growled.

"Tell me why you tried to kill me and I'll consider it."

"You killed my father!"

The vampire's hands stopped moving, coming to rest on his shoulders. They were cool, as was to be expected from one of the living dead. Cold, yes, but not the icy chill he'd been led to believe always gave any vampire away.

Then there was the faint odor of something spicy rising from the vampire's skin, the scent at odds with the rotting-corpse stink he'd been told clung to their kind.

The vampire whispered, "Now why would I have done such a thing?"

"Isn't that what vampires do? They kill for pleasure."

"Some do, yes. But isn't that also true of your kind?"

"Not for pleasure. We kill to defend ourselves."

"Reeeeaally?" The vampire made a mocking sound of the word the way he said it, drawing the word out on a sharp note. "Well, then you'll understand me when I say I've never killed a shifter that didn't try to kill me first."

"I don't believe you! You killed him; I know you did!" Sahak accused. He struggled to free himself, his effort a vain one as the chains holding him would not yield. He suspected they wouldn't have broken even if he'd had the full strength of his half-shifted form. The vampire, whatever else he might be, certainly wasn't a fool.

He's anything but a fool. I wish I could say the same thing in regard to myself. I've got to be the biggest fool ever born. Accursed thing that I am, I see a handsome male and I want to fuck him. How could I know that weakness extended to vampires?

The vampire walked away from him, returning to his seat in the shadows. The room was rather dark, but that didn't keep Sahak from seeing the parts of the room that lay within his sight.

"That's your choice. But I assure you I had nothing to do with your sire's death. I've never beheld one of your type until I saw you. The shifters I've killed have always been of the accursed wolf breed. They torment my slaves, steal from them, burn their villages, and kill them. For that, I kill any and all of the wolves I see on sight."

"And what of that pelt there on the floor?"

"That old thing? It's been in the family for centuries. It came with us from Old Earth."

"It would be decayed shreds!"

The vampire prince chuckled, staring at Sahak over the rim of the goblet he was drinking from. "You forget we have magic, little kitten. It's been preserved with numerous spells to keep it from decay."

Sahak stared at the fur under the vampire's feet, trying to inspect it for the well-known battle scars his sire's body carried. But the light and the angle weren't good for him to determine whether his father's skin lay on the floor.

The vampire leaned against the back of the chair, the thing closer to a throne in appearance than a normal chair, and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankles. Perfectly at ease, as if he had no cares – or enemies – in the world.

Sahak knew the pose for what it was: a ruse. Prince Lucien had many enemies. All vampires did, but with his Southern March abutting the territory of the werewolves, wars and efforts to kill him had to be a constant thing.

Maybe that's really why he wants me. Though, since I was so easily captured by them, what use I could be to him is beyond my understanding.

And I don't know shit about what the wolves are doing. I just came with them for a chance to kill him.

He understood now how stupid he'd been and why the werewolves had smiled and nodded and seemed so helpful when he'd told them his goal. They knew how impossible the task would be, that he'd likely be killed or – well, being captured was certainly worse than being dead. If he were dead, the vampire couldn't have used his weakness, his lust for other males, against him.

He closed his eyes. Not only had he failed to avenge his father, he'd failed to keep himself from an even worse fate than death.

Tainted with vampire blood, turned into a mindless creature with no will of my own, forced to serve the very prince who killed my father. So much for vengeance.

"We're not the terrible creatures you think us," the vampire said, voice so soft Sahak barely heard him.

He opened his eyes. "Of course not. You're perfect lambs, sweet and gentle. You'd never hurt anyone."

The vampire swirled the wine in his goblet, regarding it with eyes nearly the same red shade. *Born vampire. Much more dangerous than the made kind. He'll manipulate my feelings, my thoughts, until I no longer know truth from lies or illusion from reality.*

"You're afraid of me. Were I in your position, I would probably be afraid too."

"But you're not in my position," Sahak retorted, letting some anger fortify him. Soon that too would fail, just as his body would weaken without food.

How long have I been down here? Time ceases to have meaning in such a place as this, where no sun rises, no moon sets.

"True." The vampire drank from the goblet, and Sahak found he couldn't take his gaze away from the sight of pale lips on glass, or the slow bobbing of the vampire's Adam's apple as he swallowed. His mouth was dry. He hadn't noticed it until just then, as the vampire drank.

Fighting with the vampire's power, his ability to mesmerize, Sahak made himself look away, but the thirst remained.

So did the hardness of his cock.

When he did glance at the vampire, he found the dead thing regarding him with a smug gleam in his hellfire red gaze.

"Of course, you must realize I've noticed your" – the vampire gave him a knowing smile – "proclivities."

He felt a very human blush rise to turn his face an intense red. He had to turn away again, but he might as well not have done so. A cool hand touched his face, gripped tight, and made him turn to look at the vampire.

The bastard's one of the most handsome men I've ever seen, and he's a fucking bloodsucker! How can I be reacting to him this way? Why would I? I hate all walking corpses; yet, when I look at him, I can't help it. I...want him. Damn it! I want him. I want to pin him to the ground and –

Lips found his, kissing him, plundering his mouth as if he were treasure for the taking. A tongue invaded his mouth, and instead of the rotting blood taste he expected, he got a mouthful of spice, of honeyed sweetness so startling he discovered he was kissing the vampire as fervently as he was being kissed.

He tried to turn his head in an effort to break the kiss, but the hand on his jaw prevented it. Vampire teeth grazed his tongue, drawing blood, and he recoiled, going nowhere because the restraints on him, not the least of which was the vampire's hand, kept him from moving enough to escape.

The vampire swallowed the stolen life force, more of his vitality flowing from him with the blood. Weakened enough, his resistance to the vampire's mental tricks would erode rapidly until the vampire could do with him as he chose.

Breaking the kiss, his adversary stepped away, a bit of Sahak's blood clinging to his lips. "Do you know how beautiful you are?" the vampire asked, and that too took Sahak completely off guard, leaving his mind reeling from the shock of hearing a bloodsucker call him *beautiful*.

He lunged, trying to break free. Forcing menace into his voice, he said, "Not nearly as beautiful as you'd be with your guts spread across this room."

Prince Lucien stood there a moment, then, to Sahak's amazement, he began to laugh. "What an amusing creature you are," the vampire told him. "I do hope you retain your sense of humor once you're mine."

"I'll never be yours!" he growled out his refutation.

"Oh, but pretty shifter, you're already mine. You just haven't admitted it to yourself. Not yet, at least. But you *will*."

The vampire continued to laugh as he left the room.

Sahak, helpless in his chains, closed his eyes and refused to weep, because, to his own horror, he knew the vampire was right.

Chapter Eleven

Because his master had ordered it, Kinji spent the entire morning being poked, scanned, prodded, and bled. Alternately being doused in magical agents and examined for reactions before being poked and prodded some more. The process was nothing short of exhausting for the magetechs, and Dr. Sigismond had urged Kinji into a lounge chair more than once during the process while results were analyzed.

Morning had become early afternoon, and the last of the tests was under way, Kinji standing in a large cylinder of thick glass while an odd golden mist drifted over him from above, the stuff swirling lazily around him. His nose tickled, detecting magic in the golden fog, but he didn't sneeze.

After a few moments, the door of the chamber opened, and the doctor waved him out.

"I can find no traces of enchantments or charms anywhere on you or inside you," the doctor told Kinji as he stepped out of the analysis chamber. Kinji reached for his clothes, which were lying folded on a nearby table. They too had been checked, as had his katana. Of everything they'd done, allowing them to touch the ancient blade had proved the most difficult for him. Old traditions were hard to break, and letting someone else touch the katana was quite disturbing. Add to that the fact that he was trying to ignore the way the lab assistants were turning surreptitious glances on him, and his morning hadn't been a pleasant one.

The doctor frowned. "Well, let me rephrase that. I did see the power of the bloodbond Lucien has on you, and to be perfectly honest—which I always am, you understand—I don't think any enchantment or charm would have an effect of any sort on you. That bond is very strong."

Kinji nodded. "So you're saying I'm perfectly fine. Would you put that in writing for our Prince?"

"Of course."

Kinji dressed while the doctor wrote his findings out for Lucien. *I wonder if I can get him down here to subject himself to the same sort of examination. I'm unsure if he's suffering some type of baneful effect from the things he's been exposed to or if he was in a foul mood because he dislikes me being, as he puts it, jealous of his other lovers.*

And if I am, what of it? Do they take care of him the way I do? No. Do they love him the way I do? No, they don't. And if someone attacks him, are any of those flighty females going to risk their lives to protect him? No. They'll do what all such creatures do: They'll scream and try to hide, or run away.

He sighed and shoved his katana through the belt at his waist. His hand looked totally white, like bleached bone, and he frowned. Lucien had taken quite a bit of blood the night before, and the processes used to determine if he was magically compromised had drained him of an even greater amount. Being part demon, he didn't feel the same detrimental side effects a true vampire would experience, such as dizziness and an overwhelming need to sate the bloodlust at any cost, but he did feel chilled inside and out.

"Here you are, Your Grace," the doctor said, offering him the paper. Kinji frowned when he noticed it had been sealed. *The doctor simply decided to make his findings into an official document. There's no reason to suspect he discovered something he didn't want to tell me. What could he discover?*

But the entire thing left Kinji feeling uneasy, uncertain about the findings, and he didn't like not knowing what the doctor had put in his report.

"Have a pleasant day, Your Grace," the doctor said, offering him a stiff smile.

"Thank you," he replied, even more concerned over the contents of the document after seeing the doctor's attempt at a smile.

He departed, reaching out with his demonic senses to locate Lucien. The sooner he delivered the paper, the sooner he'd know what the doctor had actually found and what Lucien's reaction might be.

His lover was in the secret corridor heading for his Tower. Kinji took a different route, stepping through the space between reality and dream, arriving ahead of Lucien. He put the paper down on the desk in Lucien's study and went into the bedchamber and stripped out of his clothing. He stepped into the dressing room and opened one of the jewel boxes, glancing inside to see how he wanted to dress for his lover.

He picked up a six-foot-long strand of black pearls and draped it across his bare chest, studying himself in the mirror. No, not black, he decided and put them back in their compartment. He scanned the contents of the drawer, closed it, and peered into another one, deciding on a group of delicate chains fashioned from pale gold and studded with amethysts. Every gem was a perfect match to the color of his eyes.

He put the first chain around his waist. The second chain went low on his hips, the curve of his butt keeping it from slipping off. The last chain he wrapped around his wrists, making of himself a slave to Lucien.

I have been a slave bound by love for him since we first met.

He sensed how close Lucien had gotten to his chambers. Kinji hurried out, reaching Lucien's study a few heartbeats before his master. He knelt before the desk, facing the door, bowed his head, and waited.

The chamber door swung open, and he couldn't help but smile as he heard Lucien take a sharp breath. He'd made sure the arch of his back formed a graceful curve, because he knew how such a sight excited and enticed Lucien.

His lover walked past him, and the smile vanished. "Did you go to the doctor as I requested?"

"Yes, Master, I did."

He heard the chair behind Lucien's desk creak as his lover seated himself. He turned to face the desk but kept his head down as he heard the seal on the document being broken, the paper rustling as Lucien read whatever the doctor had written.

For a very long time he heard nothing. Vampire-still, Lucien made no sound. *What did the doctor put in there that he failed to tell me?*

"Tell me, Kinji, exactly how old are you?"

Kinji felt his heart contract sharply, his breath trapped in his chest as he found out what Dr. Sigismond had discovered.

"Really, I want to know."

"As a vampire, Master?" he asked, despite the fact that wasn't what Lucien wanted from him.

"No, I want to know how long you've been alive, Kinji."

I should have realized an examination that thorough would reveal the one secret I've kept from Lucien. I should have told him myself before this, but... He sighed. "I was born of a human woman and a demon, Lucien. But I wasn't a vampire."

"I know that, Kinji. What I want to know..." He heard his master leave the chair, vampire speed bringing him to where he knelt to grab him by the hair and yank him to his feet. Vampire speed took him across the room to impact the wall, Lucien's hand around his throat, squeezing.

"I trusted you! I loved you! And you betray me!"

Kinji shook his head vehemently, denying the accusation. "Never, my Prince!" He got the words out, but the compression on his throat didn't let up, and he soon lost the ability to speak.

Lucien's face was close to his, so close they could have easily kissed if either of them moved. Kinji would have pressed his mouth to Lucien's, but the hold on his throat was unyielding.

"How old *are* you?" Lucien asked.

Kinji no longer possessed the ability to answer. The choke hold couldn't kill him, of course, but it did keep him from speaking, and it hurt. It hurt him worse than any physical pain, because it proved that Lucien had never completely trusted him.

Tears burned in his eyes, and he closed them. He turned his head upward slightly, yielding his throat completely to Lucien.

The hand eased up. "Tell me, Kinji! Tell me or I'll kill you!"

"I was born during the Muromachi period of Old Earth Japan."

Lucien shook his head. "Tell me in years!"

"I was born in the Old Earth year of 1458."

Lucien's lips parted on a soundless curse, registering the shock as his mind calculated Kinji's age.

Kinji's throat hurt from the crushing pressure Lucien had exerted. His voice was a raw whisper when he spoke. "Master, do you doubt my love? Do you doubt the bond you made between us? Do you doubt that you are my master?"

Lucien let him go, his expression confused, uncertain. "Kinji, you're older than Malachai. You're older than any living vampire on our world."

He nodded. "Yes, Master, but I am not the oldest of my kind here. There are few of us, granted, but of those of my kin who live on this world, I am the youngest."

Lucien turned away from Kinji. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Kinji followed his lover, stepped in front of him, looked up at the tormented, unhappy expression on Lucien's face, and felt as if the world had shattered, because, for them, it had. He touched Lucien's cheek. Lucien didn't pull away, which gave Kinji a trace of hope the love between them could be salvaged.

"Before you make me leave, tell me one thing. Does it matter?"

Lucien gave him a blank stare, and Kinji could tell his prince hadn't even thought beyond the omission, the fact he'd neglected to mention his age. Lucien hadn't asked, and he hadn't felt the need to tell him.

"Does it matter?" Lucien repeated, his mouth drawing into a harsh frown.

"Yes. Does it *really* matter? I'm bound by blood to you, Lucien. I love you. I've given everything I am to you. So tell me, does my age matter?"

Lucien stood there, motionless as a thing carved of marble. The shock had left the vampire's mind reeling, lost in confusion, and that most certainly wasn't like Lucien. Not at all. Lucien was a creature with a decisive, dominant nature, and he seldom vacillated or showed hesitation.

"Lucien?"

His lover blinked as if coming awake from a dream. "I...don't know."

Frowning, Kinji slapped Lucien's cheek. His lover snarled, the back of his fist hitting Kinji across the cheek, taking him off his feet and sending him flying halfway across the room. He managed to keep his feet, wary of Lucien's strange turn of temper.

Lucien couldn't believe it. Couldn't accept that the vampire he'd come to love – to trust more than he'd trusted anyone in his years of existence – had lied to him. *If he didn't tell me this, what else has he simply failed to tell me? What other secrets does he have?*

And how can I trust him now? How can I?

"I want you out of my home by sunrise."

Amethysts glittered against the pallor of Kinji's skin.

He's so beautiful. Mother Night, why has he done this to me? He made me love him, and he's been lying to me all this time. My bloodbond may as well not exist. He's more powerful than I am. He can break my bond at any time, snap it like a thread hanging from his clothes.

Kinji took a step toward him, hands out in supplication, eyes full of pain the equal of what Lucien felt. Pain he couldn't trust, couldn't believe was anything but the false emotions of a consummate actor. *The old ones can never be trusted or believed. That's what my grandsire always told me as a boy. Never trust the oldest vampires, because they were too good at the game of lies.*

And Kinji was older by three centuries than Malachai, the oldest vampire of their world.

Kinji came closer, and Lucien shook his head. "Don't. I...I want you gone, Kinji."

Kinji gave him a tear-filled gaze, then turned and went into the bedchamber without saying a thing. Lucien felt numb, his heartbeats slow, the blood moving sluggishly through his veins. He wanted to lie down and sleep, to dream away his pain for a decade or two, but he couldn't. He had no one he trusted to watch over him during a long sleep.

No one to trust now that he was sending Kinji away.

His former lover came out of the bedchamber carrying his sword, his body clothed in the strands of glittering amethysts.

"I said I want you gone."

"I heard you, Master." He dropped to his knees before Lucien, the sword held up in his right hand. He bowed his head, and with his free hand he pulled his hair aside so the nape of his neck was bared.

"What are you doing?"

"If you no longer love me, if you no longer trust or want me, then take my sword and do what you must, Master."

Lucien frowned. "What *are* you talking about?"

Tear-filled violet eyes peered up at him through the fall of long red hair. He fought the urge to reach out, to close his hand in the fall of red, to feel the silken locks slip through his fingers.

"I am yours, Master. If you no longer want me, then kill me. I will have no life that is not lived with you."

Lucien's gaze moved from the stark pain on Kinji's face to the sheathed blade in his hand. Numb, unable to cry or feel, he took the offered katana, pulled it from the scabbard, and stared at the gleaming blade. Tiny nicks in the edge showed where it had hit bone, killed enemies of Kinji's family, and more recently, those of Lucien as well.

He swallowed, chest gone tight, eyes burning as he stepped to one side, forcing himself to destroy a creature he'd loved more than he'd ever loved anyone.

He lifted the blade high and stood there gazing on the graceful curve of Kinji's spine, the bowed head, hair pooling around him red as the blood Lucien was about to spill.

I can't do this. I...

He let the blade clatter to the floor, swept Kinji into his arms, and kissed him.

I'm a fool. I should kill him, I should and I can't. I love him. Mother Night help me, I love him too much to destroy him.

Kinji's arms went around his neck, and he could taste the salty sweetness of his lover's tears. He kissed Kinji's eyelids, his cheeks, his mouth. Kinji's answering kisses were frantic, urgent, and needy. Both their cocks were hard, Kinji's pressed to him through the fabric of his coat and trousers.

He's fifteen hundred years old, and he wants me. I don't understand why. And maybe this is part of some elaborate trap to bring me down to ruin or death, but I can't let him go. I want him too much. I need him too much to let him go or kill him.

Lucien picked his lover up and carried him to their bed. He lay on top of the smaller vampire, kissing him, caressing him with his hands and his mouth until Kinji was crying out, moaning from desire. He lowered his head and sank his fangs into Kinji's neck, drinking deeply, savoring the taste of Kinji's blood.

Fifteen-hundred-year-old blood and he craved it the way he craved Kinji's sweet body. A body that felt much too cold. *He must not have fed this morning, and I took a lot from him last night and more just now.*

"You need to feed, don't you, Kinji?"

Kinji didn't answer. He lay unmoving beneath Lucien, unresponsive. He touched Kinji's cheek, patted it. Dull violet eyes opened, staring blankly at him.

I've drained him. Now I must feed him, and that will strengthen his bond to me.

Lucien rolled onto his back, pulling Kinji on top of him. He pressed Kinji's mouth to his throat. "Feed from me, Kinji."

"No." The word was spoken so quietly, Lucien had trouble hearing him.

"Yes," he countered.

"You want me to leave."

"I want you to stay," Lucien said, his hand stroking along Kinji's back, hand touching nothing but silk. Skin, hair, all of it soft as the finest silk.

Teeth sank through his skin, and Kinji fed, the feel of it painful ecstasy, pleasurable agony. He turned his head make it easier for Kinji. He closed his eyes, his

arms around Kinji, his body reacting to the duality of being fed upon. Kinji stopped to remove his coat and shirt. Lucien took them from him and tossed them aside where they landed in a heap on the floor. The spicy tang of Lucien's blood filled the air, and Kinji bent to feed again. He took a few swallows before he stopped, sitting up to gaze at Lucien, his expression one of adoration. Of love without question.

He touched Kinji's cheek, brushed his thumb across his lover's bloodstained lips. Kinji's lips parted to take his thumb into his mouth, his fangs grazing across the pad, drawing a taste of blood.

Lucien smiled. "Tell me what you want, Kinji."

He'd thought Kinji would voice his usual request to be fucked. Instead his lover said, "I want to stay with you and love you forever." The answer wasn't the one Lucien expected, and it left him surprised, his own feelings for Kinji rescued from the mistake he'd almost made.

"And I want you to stay with me," Lucien admitted.

Kinji's smile could have melted a heart made of granite. "I love you, Lucien. Please never doubt it. I swear to you I am yours, body, heart, and soul."

Lucien nodded. "I'll keep it in mind."

Kinji leaned closer to him, kissed his chest right above his heart. "I live to love and serve you, Master."

Lucien pulled Kinji down and kissed him until his lover started to whimper with desire. "Tell me what it is you want now, Kinji."

"I want your cock, Master."

Lucien smiled. "I seem to be a little overdressed, then, don't you think?"

Kinji grinned. "Yes, Master, you are."

"Don't you think you should do something about that, then?"

His boots and pants were off, and Kinji straddled his hips in the space of a human's eyeblink. Lucien chuckled. "My Kinji, ever eager to have a cock up his ass."

"Only your cock, Master."

"Should I be flattered?"

Kinji smirked. "You fuck better than anyone I've been with, Lucien. For me, that's important."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said and pulled the lube out of the nightstand drawer. He handed it to Kinji. "I think you can figure out what to do, can't you?"

Chapter Twelve

Kinji grinned. "I think I remember, but it's been an awfully long time. I might have to think about it for a couple of milliseconds."

His lover laughed over his joke as he poured the lube into his palm and stroked his hand over Lucien's erection. He'd come very close to losing everything over a tiny omission, and it felt good to hear Lucien laughing as if nothing had happened between them.

I almost lost him today. He almost killed me simply because I didn't tell him my age. Now he's under the impression the bloodbond making me his isn't a true one. But it is. I have to convince him of the fact, and I don't have a clue how to do it.

He moved to straddle Lucien's erection, his lover gripping it at the root to steady it.

"Do you know how much I love you, Kinji?"

"As much as I love you?" he countered the question with a question.

"At least, yes," Lucien replied as Kinji sank down on his cock.

"No more fights?" Kinji moaned the question as Lucien's big cock slid inward to fill him.

"Not like this one, no." Lucien's face turned serious. "You aren't hiding any other secrets from me are you?"

How do I answer that? Of course I have secrets. So does he.

"Yes, of course, but they aren't anything pertaining to you. They're part of my old family's business, and I'm not part of that anymore. I belong to you," Kinji stated quietly. "But those are secrets that are not mine to tell you."

"You promise me there's nothing else you're hiding from me?"

I can't promise him that, when it would be a lie.

"Lucien, please stop. I've told you I can't tell you anything else."

Lucien caressed his cheek. "All right, Kinji. You're right; we've gone on over this long enough. I love you and you love me, and that's all that matters right now."

Kinji closed his eyes, trying to think only of the cock inside him and not the ominous "right now" Lucien had tagged on at the end of his words.

Lucien gripped his hips, urging him to move with the pressure of his hands. "Do you want this or not?" Lucien asked, sounding a bit impatient, as if he didn't want to be in bed with him.

"Do you?"

"Would I be inside you if I didn't want to fuck you?"

Kinji shrugged. "I don't know anymore, Lucien. You're not yourself."

Lucien shoved and Kinji got off him, turning away from Lucien, confused and uncertain. His lover was acting very strange, not like himself, and there was no way to make Lucien see it.

But I've taken a lot of blood from him. I wonder if Sigismond could detect a taint in him through the blood I drank?

He stood, intending to go to the labs, but a hand closed on his arm and yanked him roughly into bed. Lucien, dark gaze alight, pinned him to the bed.

"Enough of these games of yours, Kinji. I'm sick of them."

"Are you sick of me?"

The question took Lucien by surprise, his lover staring at him as if he'd been slapped.

Lucien shook his head. "No. I just don't know what to think of you anymore. You've always been an enigma to me, but lately..." Lucien sighed, sat down on the bed beside Kinji. "Maybe you're right. Maybe there *is* something wrong with me. I feel all right and yet..." He shook his head again. "We've been quarreling a lot the last few days, haven't we?"

Kinji nodded but didn't speak. *Let him work this out on his own.*

"Do you think I've been exposed to *gifts* from Herrick that we missed?"

Kinji shrugged. "I don't know, but it is possible. I don't spend every single second of the day with you."

Lucien ran a hand through his hair and sat staring into the darkness as if he could find answers amid the shadows. Kinji put his arm around Lucien and leaned against him. Lucien's arm slipped around his waist, and they sat together on the edge of the bed, neither of them speaking. The night continued to slip away; minute by minute, dawn grew closer.

"You're tired," Kinji finally said, breaking the silence.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter."

His lover turned toward him, kissed him. "I love you, Kinji."

"Do you?" He knew he shouldn't question Lucien, but the words got out before he thought about them.

Lucien caressed his cheek, stroked his fingers through his hair. "Oh, yes, Kinji. I love you. Stupid as such an attachment is for a born vampire, I do love you. I love you very much." Lucien kissed him again, and Kinji smiled, though the expression was tinged with bitterness.

"I couldn't kill you though prudence said I should. But I've never loved anyone the way I love you, Kinji. I'd rather take my chances and trust you than end your life."

"The bond between us is real, Lucien. I'm a demon first and foremost, and that's the part of me bound to you. I've only been vampire since we arrived here on this world."

The revelation apparently startled Lucien, because he sat and stared at Kinji for a while as if he weren't certain what that might mean, or if it even meant anything.

"Demons can be bound regardless of their age by anyone who knows how to do it, even a human," Kinji explained.

Lucien nodded and they remained in companionable if uneasy silence for a while.

This time Lucien broke the silence. "I want to fuck you, Kinji."

Kinji nodded his acceptance. He crawled into the middle of their big bed and lay down, holding his arms out to Lucien. "Come fuck me, Lucien."

His lover, his master, came to him, pushing his legs up until they were over Lucien's shoulders. Lucien's cock slipped inside.

Kinji sighed at the feel of his lover's cock deep within him. "It feels good, Lucien."

"Shhh... Don't talk. Just feel," Lucien instructed. At first he moved slowly and gently inside Kinji, and Kinji relaxed, watching Lucien, who watched him.

He draped his arms around Lucien's neck and smiled. "Fuck me, Master. Fuck me and make me scream your name so that everyone who hears my cries knows who my Master is."

Lucien's thrusts sped up, his powerful body driving his cock harder, faster into Kinji until he was gasping and whimpering with every stroke.

Kinji's body tensed as the first orgasm ripped a scream of ecstasy from him. Lucien showed no mercy, his cock pounding into Kinji, driving him into orgasm after orgasm, the half demon screaming himself hoarse through climax after climax. Lucien came as the first rays of dawn tinged the horizon. He collapsed onto the bed beside Kinji, who was pulled into Lucien's arms and held as if he were something beyond price to Lucien. Kinji sighed as the pair of them sank exhausted into the embrace of Mother Night's little sister, who was called Sleep.

* * * * *

For the second day in a row Lucien awoke alone. The cold ache in his belly told him of hunger. Sighing, he left the bed and went to his bathing chamber, where three of his bloodharem awaited his pleasure.

The instant he entered the room, the three feminine beauties knelt, bowing gracefully, giving him the pleasing arch of their backs.

Beautiful, but not so beautiful as my dear Kinji. What is wrong with me? I nearly killed him over what amounts to nothing. I knew he was a demon, and it's not as if this world has a plethora of them. He would have to be from Old Earth, and since I was born on the colony ship that brought us here, he would, of course, be older than I am.

He snapped his fingers as he stepped into the tub, and the three females hurried to attend him, washing his body and hair, their slender hands caressing his body, seeking to please him as best they could with an offer of their bodies.

Offers he'd taken them up on less and less because he had Kinji.

"Does Master still love his Heather?" a dark-haired girl questioned, her bottom lip poked out in a little pout he still found to be charming, but no longer felt compelled to kiss away.

"Have we done something to displease our Master?" a full-bodied blonde asked, her round face showing deep concern.

"No, my sweet Magnolia, you've done nothing wrong. I'm simply out of sorts," Lucien replied.

Heather ran her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. "Poor Master has so many cares and things to worry about. Maybe the three of us can help Master forget them for a while?" she suggested.

The last girl, a willowy redhead he'd named Rosa, knelt beside the tub. "We love our Master," she murmured, her blue eyes lowered.

"You love living here, Rosa. You don't love me," he countered and pulled Magnolia into the tub with him, splashing Rosa, who recoiled from the water as if she feared getting wet.

Magnolia giggled and wiggled her plump bottom against his cock, which went stiff beneath her. "I think Master wants to have fun," she remarked.

"Do you?" he asked, one eyebrow lifting.

She nodded. "Either that or you've brought us some sausage to eat."

"Ooohh...sausage," Heather cooed, her hands moving lower to caress over his chest. "I love a firm piece of man sausage."

Lucien chuckled and turned his head to kiss Heather while Magnolia guided his cock into her soft interior.

I've been neglecting my girls in favor of Kinji, and it's hardly fair. They've all been with me longer than he has, and most of them do care about me. He glanced past the girls who were eager to make him happy to find Rosa staring at them in evident distaste.

Perhaps it's time she left the harem and found better employment as part of the household staff. She doesn't appear interested in me anymore. And that makes me wonder if she's sneaking out and meeting a lover. If so, then she can be removed and replaced.

Lucien pulled Heather closer, nuzzling her throat as Magnolia rode his erection, the embrace of her warm woman flesh a sharp contrast to the tight clench of Kinji's anal muscles.

Magnolia gripped the sides of the tub and rolled her internal muscles, stroking his erection, the girl's talent one he found very enjoyable. He moaned in pleasure and gently bit Heather, the girl whimpering at the tiny pain. He sucked, swallowing, eyes half-closed as Magnolia rode him slowly and Heather clung to him, her fingers twisting in his hair.

"Master, I love you," Heather murmured.

Magnolia's pussy clapsed and released, working his cock as only she could do. Lucien was quickly lost in the pleasure, his eyes closing as he fed slowly from the shallow bite in Heather's neck.

"I love you," Heather whispered, and he knew she meant it, unlike Rosa, who'd spoken hollow words to him.

He could see her standing by the tub, watching, disgust evident in the twist of her lips. He wrapped one arm around Heather, reached out to caress Magnolia's soft cheek with the other, the girl pressing her face into his hand. *She loves me too, like Kinji, or she'd not do that. I don't love her the way I love Kinji, but I care about my girls.*

Magnolia's internal muscles rolled and rippled, and Lucien stopped concerning himself about Rosa's behavior. The two girls who loved him were doing their best to make him happy, and he owed them his undivided attention.

Heather began to squirm in his grip, her body lost in the pleasure the feeding gave her. An adaptation of the entire breed, a feeding vampire's power reached into the prey's mind and triggered sexual responses in its victims.

Gasping, Heather held him tighter as her body crossed the threshold into climax, which was the warning for him to stop feeding. He licked the bite and continued to hold her while she recovered.

Magnolia shuddered as she came, but she didn't stop riding him, her plump little body working him higher on the soaring road to climax. Her pussy tugged at him hard as she rose up on his cock before sliding down and clapping him.

"My beautiful girls," he murmured, shuddering as the bright stars of climax danced through his vision. Heather's mouth closed over his, the girl's tongue pressed to his lips. He opened to her, let her cut her tongue on his fangs. Smiling in the kiss, he sucked her tongue until she shuddered under the lash of a second orgasm.

Motion in the corner of his eye drew his attention too late. Something hard struck the back of his head, and he threw Heather aside to protect her from the second blow, which was aimed for her.

Rosa, hate contorting her features, lifted the marble statue to bring it down on his head a second time.

"No!" Magnolia screamed, trying to throw herself over Lucien to protect him from Rosa's attack.

Lucien pushed Magnolia aside as gently as he could. Moving with vampire speed, his hand intercepted the statue and stopped it from hitting him. He grabbed the statue from Rosa's hand, catching hold of her, shocked by the pure malice in her gaze.

"Rosa, stop!" he shouted as she fought to get free of his hold.

A swirl of black and red and Rosa was torn from his grasp and thrown to the floor. The blur of motion that had taken her from his hands resolved itself into Kinji. His lover stood over the girl, his katana raised high, his lips twisted in a snarl of rage so dire, Rosa cringed away from him, her arms covering her face as if they would protect her from the razor-edged steel.

"I hate them! I hate all of them!" she sobbed. "Why doesn't he ever pay attention to me? Why?"

Lucien frowned and touched the back of his head, flinching at the pain. Blood oozed sluggishly from his torn scalp, but the wound had begun healing.

"You bitch!" Kinji snarled. "You hurt Lucien! You hurt our Master over petty rivalry?"

The girl paled. Cringing from the anger swirling around Kinji like a malefic fog, she went to her hands and knees. "Master, I didn't mean to hit you! I swear I didn't!"

"No, you meant to hit Heather in the face, didn't you?" Lucien asked.

Rosa didn't answer.

He crossed the room to where Heather lay. Her eyes, wide with shock, were focused on Rosa. "She...tried to kill me," the girl whispered, her voice full of disbelief.

He glanced at Magnolia, who sat in the tub, tears filling her eyes. "She would have killed me too," she stated in a voice that quavered with fear.

Anger suffused Lucien, simmering in his blood, ready to burst forth in a fury of destruction. *This is supposed to be a safe haven for them and for me. Yet I've had to protect the two of them from one of their own harem sisters, and I've got a bloody gash on the back of my head that would have killed either of them.* He reined in his temper and helped Heather to her feet as the rest of his bloodharem came into the room crying out questions, all of them scared.

Lucien turned to find Lillianne at the forefront of the crowd. He held his hand out to her, and she came to him.

"I want you to take Magnolia and Heather to their rooms and give them something to calm them. They've both had bad shocks."

"Yes, Master," Lillianne said.

"They should rest and be kept amused for the day. The other girls and you are to report to the doctor in the labs. I want all of you checked for traces of malevolent magics."

Lillianne put a hand over her mouth. "You mean...that soap could have done something to us too?"

"I don't know, but..." He turned his gaze on Rosa. "After what just happened, I think it prudent to be certain it hasn't."

"What happened?"

"Rosa just tried to kill Heather, and she would have struck me a second time. Brave little Magnolia tried to protect me," he answered, voice lowered so only she – and probably Kinji – could hear. "Let Heather and Magnolia wait until tomorrow. You also, but the rest should go down to the doctor today. Understood?"

"Yes, Master, I understand." She glanced at him, touched the back of his head. "You're bleeding."

"It's almost healed."

"What will happen to Rosa?"

"We'll see once the doctor has finished testing her."

She nodded. "Let me get these poor dears to bed. They've had quite an upset."

"Yes, Lillianne, they have."

She took Heather's hand. "Come along, dear. We'll get you fixed up with a cup of tea."

"What about Rosa?"

"You let Lucien and Kinji worry about Rosa," Lillianne said, patting the girl's hand.

Two of the other girls were helping Magnolia out of the tub, and Lucien frowned when he noticed a hand-shaped bruise forming on her chest right above her ample left breast. He'd struck her too hard.

He crossed to where Magnolia stood in a puddle of water on the floor while a girl got a towel for her.

Lucien touched her cheek. "I didn't mean to hurt you, sweet," he said and gave her a gentle kiss. Humans were so fragile, and he'd been in a hurry to keep both of his girls from being hurt.

"Is Master all right?"

"Yes, Magnolia, I am. What about you?"

She nodded, offered him a wan smile. "I didn't want Rosa to hurt you. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

He kissed her gently. "You were quite brave, Magnolia. Thank you for wanting to keep me from being hurt. I appreciate your action more than you know."

She blushed and lowered her head. "Thank you, Master."

He hugged her, his gaze going to Kinji and Rosa. His lover's violet eyes were focused on Rosa, who lay on the floor weeping. If Kinji felt any jealousy over the attention Lucien was paying to Magnolia, he couldn't see it in Kinji's expression. All his lover's attention remained focused on the girl and the threat she might pose.

Chapter Thirteen

Kinji stared at the female who'd hurt Lucien. The sound of her crying had no effect on him. She'd hurt Lucien, tried to murder two girls from his master's bloodharem. The scent of her terror hung like a pall around her. Underlying the acrid fear odor, he detected something else, something odd, seeping from her skin. He sniffed, catching a whiff of something unknown clinging to her. He took a step back, watching the girl carefully.

"This female needs to be taken to the doctor right away," Kinji stated.

"Can you handle her alone, Kinji?" Lucien asked.

"Yes." He sheathed his katana and reached for the girl.

Screaming like a wild beast, Rosa lunged upward, her face contorted with hate, fingernails outstretched in an effort to claw his face.

Kinji slapped her, barely exerting any force. The female crumpled to the ground.

"Help me," she sobbed. Blood pattered to the marble from her torn mouth. She turned stricken eyes on Kinji. "Help me, please."

For a moment, Rosa seemed like herself, but in the next instant she began to scream and thrash on the floor, kicking and flailing with her arms as if suffering from a convulsion. After a short time, she quieted and lay there, eyes open, mouth slack. She still drew breath, but beyond that, she could have been dead.

Kinji watched her, his eyes narrowed, uneasy because he didn't know what had happened to the girl. "Lillianne, find out what she's eaten and drank, what she bathed with, the perfumes and cosmetics she used. All of it."

"Of course, Duke Kinji," she replied but glanced at Lucien for confirmation.

Prince Lucien nodded.

"I want everyone to clear out of here. I may have to carry her out, and I don't want to bring her in reach of anyone."

"Good idea," Lucien agreed. He ushered his bloodharem out with assistance from Lillianne. Once the room had emptied, Kinji reached down and took Rosa by the wrists. He urged her to stand, and she did, showing little awareness of what she was doing. Kinji led the girl out, through the empty main room of the harem into the hallway.

She followed him like one entranced, her eyes as blank as those of a doll. He took her to the lab and not once did she speak or even try to wipe the blood from her face.

The instant he entered, the doctor hurried up to him. "My goodness, what's happened to her?"

"She went out of her head, attacked Lucien and some of his girls. I wasn't there when it started. I arrived, and a few moments later she attacked me. I hit her, and since then she's been as you see her."

"She certainly doesn't seem herself, does she?" the doctor remarked as he motioned Kinji to bring the girl over to the analysis chamber.

Kinji led her over, and the doctor picked up a spray bottle and squirted Rosa.

The instant the cool liquid touched her skin, Rosa screamed and lunged for the researcher. Kinji threw his arms around her, preventing her from carrying out her assault. Not that it would have done her much good. Dr. Sigismond was a vampire, and nothing a human could do with their bare hands would prove even remotely injurious to him.

"Please get her in the chamber. I can see quite clearly there's something gone quite amiss with this girl, but without the chamber to analyze the exact cause of this change, I can't make a specific diagnosis."

Kinji put Rosa in the chamber and closed the door. The doctor closed the latch and pushed the button to activate the machine.

Rosa sagged to the floor, whimpering, muttering incomprehensible sounds.

"How long has Lucien had this girl?" the doctor questioned, his gaze on the wildly gyrating lines in the results screen on the machine.

"She's been here much longer than I have," Kinji replied, peering over Sigismond's shoulder to watch the odd patterns on the screen.

"Very peculiar," the doctor muttered.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's been tainted with shifter blood. Or more to the point, werewolf blood." He pointed to a particular set of lines that looked like a DNA helix. As it spun on the monitor, it changed, altering from the plain double DNA helix of a human being to the spike-edged double helix of the shifter breeds. After a moment it returned to a human's normal helix.

Kinji frowned. "How is this possible?"

"Without being bitten by a werewolf, it's not possible."

"Then how do you explain it?" Kinji asked.

"I can't. Not yet anyway."

Inside the chamber, Rosa whimpered. "Someone help me. I...I don't feel very good."

"We'll have to sedate her and put her in one of the cells. I can't have her getting loose in here and tearing the place apart," Sigismond explained.

Kinji nodded. "Understood."

Lucien entered the lab and everyone present bowed to him.

"What have you found out?"

"This is only a preliminary finding, Your Highness –" Dr. Sigismond began.

It was as far as he got. Howling like a dog gone mad, Rosa slammed against the door of the chamber as her entire body erupted, producing a coat of thick black fur. Her whole body changed, becoming that of a werewolf. She broke free of the chamber and lunged for Lucien, her jaws snapping, claws reaching out for the kill.

She never made it.

Lucien's horrified expression met Kinji's as Kinji wiped the blood from his katana. "You didn't have to kill Rosa, Kinji."

"That wasn't Rosa anymore, Lucien. It was a werewolf, and she would have done her best to kill you."

Lucien knelt on the floor beside the dead girl. She'd reverted to her human form, and no trace of the werewolf she'd become for a brief instant remained. Despite the blood, he pulled her close, cradling her in his arms, rocking her as if she could feel it, take comfort from it.

When he spoke, his voice was as cold as winter. "I want to find out how this was done. Then I want to find out who did this and tear them apart with my bare hands."

"We'll do our best to find out the method used to accomplish this. Finding out who did it will be even more complicated, but we'll do our best, Highness."

The rest of the girls and everything in their rooms would have to be checked immediately, Kinji realized.

Lucien stood, the girl in his arms. "From now on, everything that enters my private rooms, food, drink, clothing, anything and anyone is to be scanned for magical taints and residues of malevolent magic before it can be brought into the Tower."

"Yes, Your Highness, of course. But, if I might be so bold, before you take her from here, I really should run tests on her body. The clues to her transformation are within her blood, and in order to stop it from happening again, I'll need her."

"Yes, how foolish of me."

Kinji prevented him from giving Rosa a farewell kiss, his hand covering the girl's bloody mouth. "Highness, I know your girls mean a great deal to you, but we don't

know how powerful the magic that turned her might be, and I won't let you risk your own life with a taste of her tainted blood or saliva."

Lucien sighed. "You're quite right. And since I'm down here, I might as well be checked myself. Mother Night alone knows what's been done to us."

"Or exactly how," Kinji remarked.

"Come with me, Highness," Dr. Sigismond said to Kinji's lover. "I believe the sooner we get these tests done, the better. I'd like to get to the bottom of these mysteries, especially the most recent one. I cannot think of one way a girl secluded in your bloodharem could have been tainted without direct contact with a werewolf."

Lucien went with Sigismond to start the same battery of tests Kinji had already undergone, while Kinji himself crouched down to look at Rosa.

How is this possible? She's had no contact with werewolves. None of Lucien's girls have...except Fleur.

"You'll be safe enough here, Lucien. I'm going to go get Fleur. I want her tested," he said.

"Fleur? Why her specifically?"

"Because she was in the hands of the furfaces. Werewolf furfaces."

Lucien's face twisted in an angry scowl. "Get her. I want that little bitch tested right now!"

Kinji left the lab and hurried down the hall. When he was certain no one could see him, he stepped into the space between, returning to reality before the doors of Lucien's bloodharem.

He shoved the doors open, some of the girls squeaking in startlement.

"Where is Fleur?"

A too-skinny blonde pointed toward one of the bedchambers, and Kinji followed her directions, shoving the door to the bedroom open to find three girls in the room playing a game of cards.

He strode to the tiny brunette and motioned her to her feet. Instead of standing, she looked at him with an uncomprehending stare.

"Go with him, Fleur," one of the other girls in the room said.

Fleur stood. "Have I done something wrong?" she asked, her voice breaking under the lash of fear.

"Our master wishes you to come for testing, the same as all the other girls."

"Lillianne says I'm going this afternoon," Fleur replied.

"No, you're going now. Come with me," Kinji ordered.

"It's all right, Fleur. Duke Kinji isn't going to hurt you," the other girl said. "He's our master's second in command. He's just doing what Prince Lucien asked him to do."

She nodded and came around the small card table to stand, head bowed, before Kinji. She should have knelt, but Lucien hadn't begun to train her, so Kinji forgave her

the slight. He took her arm and hurried her out of the bloodharem. He walked her the long way down, through the public areas.

Dr. Sigismond greeted Kinji and took control of the girl.

"How is Lucien?"

"His Highness is undergoing the tests. He's irritated, much as you were."

Kinji nodded and took a seat by the door.

None of this madness makes sense. I noticed no shifter taint on this girl, and yet Rosa transformed into a werewolf without ever being in contact with one. We must find out what is happening and how. We've got to stop it before something happens to Lucien!

* * * * *

Sahak tried to flex stiffening muscles, tried to restore circulation to his numbed arms and aching legs. His body had weakened dramatically since his capture; the things the vampires were doing had begun to work. He could feel the changes in his body, the weakness setting in, sapping him of physical and mental strength. Soon he'd be weak as a kitten, clay the vampire could mold as he saw fit.

It's a simple matter of time, and that's on their side. Fucking corpses, they don't die unless you rip them apart and burn the pieces.

Not that I'll ever get a chance to do that to any of them, least of all this Prince Lucien. I wanted to kill him for murdering my father, but now I wonder if he's lying about it or telling the truth. Those werewolves have no love for any corpse, but they seem to resent other shifters and weres as much as they do the bloodsuckers.

The door swung open, his smaller vampire tormentor entering.

Sahak watched him through narrowed eyes. He didn't bother to feign sleep; he'd already failed that ploy with this bloodsucker.

The vampire paused before him, looking up at him. Sahak could see no emotion on the vampire's face or in his odd violet eyes. A chill slid over his body, and if he'd been furred, a ridge would have formed along his spine.

This vampire was possibly the most dangerous one he'd ever seen. Starkly beautiful with pale ivory skin, hair the deep red color of drying blood, and faintly slanted eyes at once exotic and terrifying. The prince of this place frightened him with the implications of what he planned, but this *creature* made him want to crawl into a hole and pull the dirt in over him.

He studied Sahak with the same intensity one would use to study a bug never seen before, the fascinated disgust evident in the slight twist of his lips.

The vampire put his cool hands on Sahak's left arm and rubbed vigorously, the blood in his veins responding, painful tingling shooting through the muscles. After a moment of inflicting pure torment on that arm, the vampire repeated the process with his other arm.

The vampire gave him a perfectly snide glance and moved on to begin the process with his left leg.

A breath rippled the hair of his groin, and Sahak gritted his teeth, willing his cock to stay still, hoping the pain in his arms and legs would keep him from going hard and embarrassing himself with the reaction he couldn't control.

He wasn't so lucky. His cock stirred, coming awake as the vampire's hands moved along his left thigh.

A jolt like an electric shock ripped through him as the vampire's fingers brushed across the side of his scrotum. Those cool hands kept moving in the rough caress that sought to restore circulation, not arouse.

Damn it! I don't want this bastard corpse. I don't, and yet I'm getting hard. What the fuck is wrong with me!

But he knew the answer. Both these vampires were incredibly beautiful; even among their kind they stood out. Lucien with his thick dark hair and sleekly muscled body was one of the most beautiful vampires Sahak had ever seen. And the creature crouching at his feet was as intensely beautiful as Prince Lucien. Sahak had never heard of a vampire with such flawless ivory skin or red hair. And those eyes. Cold as a windswept peak, yet he wanted to gaze into them, to see what they would look like filled with passion. He wanted to know what this cold ice prince of a vampire would look like with Sahak's cock in his mouth.

He'd bite it off or bleed me to death through it.

Sahak's cock had gone fully hard by the time the vampire started to work on his right leg. Sahak could hardly stand the touch of his cool hands, his body hard and wanting, betraying his attraction to a walking corpse.

The vampire stood, his body sliding up Sahak's leg, and he gritted his teeth to keep from moaning at the sensation of the graceful, seductive move.

A hand brushed along the inside of his thigh, just inches away from his balls, his cock. He shuddered.

"Well, aren't we the eager one?" the vampire whispered into his ear. Like the prince, this one's breath smelled of spices. Ginger and something Sahak couldn't name, something sharp yet pleasing. The scent was a sweet invitation to kiss the vampire's lips. Lips that were moist, inviting, parted to show the end of a pale pink tongue, the tips of frost white fangs.

Sahak turned his head to stare the vampire right in the eyes. It returned his regard, eyes hooded by ruby-tinged eyelashes. The vampire's lips opened wider, and Sahak could feel his blood pounding through his veins, his heartbeat throbbing through his aching cock.

What the hell.

He lowered his head and pressed his mouth to the vampire's, kissing him, slipping his tongue into the sweetly fragrant mouth. The tips of the vampire's fangs

grazed his tongue, but the vampire didn't bite. A hand wrapped around the nape of his neck, the vampire pressing himself to Sahak.

Shuddering, Sahak moaned into the kiss as the vampire's hand wrapped around his erection and stroked the hard flesh with the skill of someone accustomed to pleasuring other males.

I'm kissing a bloodsucker. I'm letting a corpse touch my cock.

And damn it but I'm enjoying it too much!

The vampire broke the kiss and pulled away, but his hand continued to stroke Sahak's erection, the pad of his thumb tormenting him as it swept across the head, smearing precum over it in a slick enticement for him to yield his body to the vampire's touch.

Violet eyes gazed up at him, passion smoldering in their depths. A bonfire of lust released, though the face remained impassive. Sahak's cock was released, the vampire moving away. Those slender hands that had inflamed his lust slowly unbuttoned the long coat the vampire wore, the garment falling around the violet eyed creature's feet.

Sahak watched, his cock twitching, aching to be touched as the vampire stripped off his clothing to reveal a slender body sheathed in sleek muscle. Sahak took in the vampire's form, his mouth gone dry, heart thudding in his chest. The vampire moved with the controlled grace of a predator as he came toward Sahak. His cock jutted out from a patch of curls as red as his hair.

"Why are you doing this?" Sahak asked.

A sly smile curved the sweet lips he'd kissed. "Because my master wants you, and I'd hate for him to find out you're no good as a lover." The vampire's hand curled around Sahak's cock, stroking sensitive flesh, sending a blaze of lust through Sahak.

He opened his mouth to demand the vampire let go of his cock, and realized the futility of any demand. His body had already betrayed him, as had his mind, or he wouldn't have kissed the vampire in the first place.

The realization that he'd doomed himself beyond redemption sank in, and Sahak closed his eyes, giving himself over to the pleasure of the vampire's skillful touch on his prick. He groaned, body tensing. Wet, soft, and warm, the vampire's mouth closed around the head of his cock. "Shit!" Sahak gasped as his hips bucked from the unexpected feel of the vampire sucking him, deep throating him.

He groaned, head thrown back, banging into the restraining bars holding him as he came, his entire body shaking from the intensity. He didn't know why it was so good, perhaps it was being captive to the vampires, or the fact that it *was* a vampire sucking him off. He didn't know, and with so much pleasure coursing through him, he didn't care.

The vampire licked his cock, languidly cleaning it of semen.

Sahak glanced down to find the vampire on his knees at his feet.

A vampire.

On his knees.

At his feet.

Something happened in Sahak's mind. Something profound. Life changing.

He *liked* seeing the intensely beautiful thing kneeling at his feet.

And he realized to his horror that he would do *anything* to keep the astonishing thing right where it was: submitting to him on his knees.

Eyes smoldering with lust, the vampire stood with heartbreaking grace, his hands moving along Sahak's body in caresses meant to entice, because Sahak felt his expended cock twitch and try to go hard.

"If you want me, if you want my body, then you'll have to submit to my master."

"I want you," he admitted. "I want you on your knees with my cock in your mouth. I want you ass-up on the floor with my cock inside you."

The vampire smiled. "You know what you want. I know what my master wants. Make the compromise of your freedom, and you get everything you desire."

Gazing at the vampire, Sahak came to an understanding with himself. If he had to become a vampire's bitch to have the vampire at his feet become his bitch, he would do it. Do it and never look back, because he *wanted* the icy little creature. This violet-eyed bloodsucker was beautiful, but it wasn't the only reason he wanted it. Nor was it because the walking corpse was a master at sucking. No, it went deeper than that. He'd seen what the thing had done to the wall, and the thought of such power submitting to him, of fucking the creature until it yielded to his cock and came... Well, he couldn't pass up the chance to have what he now wanted more than he wanted his freedom.

Sahak watched the vampire dress. *What the hell have I gotten myself into this time? First, I work with the werewolves to get to my father's alleged killer. Now, for the sake of sex with a violet-eyed walking corpse, I'm going to become a bloodsucker's bitch.*

I've got to be out of my fucking mind.

Chapter Fourteen

Lucien reclined on the chaise longue and enjoyed a moment of pain-free peace. He'd sent Kinji away more than two hours ago so they could both retain their sanity – and Dr. Sigismond and his staff could retain their lives – while the baleful magic clinging to him had been removed. The process had been so close to torture, Lucien had no option but to send Kinji away, because every time he'd cursed or shouted from the agony, Kinji had displayed a great deal of agitation. After Kinji had thrown one of the magetechs across the room and broken some delicate equipment, Lucien saw no choice. He could keep Kinji there to guard him and let the temperamental redhead maim or kill the laboratory staff, or he could save their lives and the rest of the hard-to-replace equipment.

"Here, this may help," Dr. Sigismond said.

Lucien opened his eyes and took the goblet the doctor offered him in a hand that still shook from the aftermath of his ordeal. The liquid resembled a slightly too-pale rosé, and tiny bubbles sparkled within it.

"Wine?" he asked, dubious of any positive qualities it could hold.

"No, a magical distillation mixed with a bit of champagne to make it taste better."

Lucien nodded and took a sip. It tasted of champagne with an unknown fruity aftertaste and a faint burn at the back of his throat.

Sigismond pulled up a chair and sat down. "All the test results aren't completed, but it appears we've removed the magical taint we found."

"Appears?" Lucien questioned, a bit alarmed. He certainly didn't want to go through the removal process a second time.

"I don't want to conclusively state we've gotten rid of it until all the results are finalized. This way I haven't told you anything that later proves untrue." He gave

Lucien a tight smile. "I don't mean to offend you, Highness, but Duke Kinji might be upset with us if I say you're fine, then later have to rescind that diagnosis."

"Uh...yes, I do see your point." Lucien took another sip of the potion and noticed his hands were shaking far less than they had been when he'd taken the goblet from the doctor. "You were right; this is helping."

"Good."

"Do you have a better idea of what we're dealing with now?"

Dr. Sigismond shrugged. "Baneful magic, but exactly what it is or how it works we've yet to determine."

One of the doctor's staff joined them long enough to hand a few sheets of paper to Sigismond. "Good, this is a preliminary report on the magic itself. You understand, of course, this is a preliminary report, and it won't be terribly detailed."

"Yes, of course. Please tell me what your initial findings are."

Sigismond glanced at the papers, nodding to himself as he read them.

Lucien finished the contents of the goblet while he waited to find out what they'd learned about the magical attack that had been launched on him and his bloodharem.

"The magic is a multipart attack," Dr. Sigismond finally said, his gaze remaining on the documents he was reading. "But we knew that much, didn't we, Highness?" he added.

"Yes," Lucien agreed.

"The magic itself is intended to do harm; also no revelation."

"Yes, I think we'd arrived at that conclusion also."

"The spells themselves – and yes, we *are* dealing with more than a single spell – are very complex. More than being spread across several things to create one effect, there are multiple effects spread through each thing, so that no matter what items or foods are touched, used, or consumed, some effect will be incurred."

Mother Night...if we don't find everything containing the taint...

"Have you begun searching the Tower for more of the magically tainted material?"

"We have. And we've discovered a few things scattered through the place. Mostly cosmetics and soap. Apparently, every cosmetic that's been checked is tainted."

Lucien frowned. "But those wouldn't have come from Herrick."

"No, Highness, they would not be gifts from him."

"Then Kinji's correct. Herrick isn't involved."

"As to that, I'm not willing to say one way or another," the doctor replied. "What I can tell you is that the cosmetics have all come from one source."

Lucien frowned. "Where?"

"A small village on the border between your lands and Talonguard to the east."

Lucien's frown turned to a scowl. "Amalinda's Dominion."

"Yes, Highness, and the village has been disputed since the beginning of your father's rule as prince."

Lucien nodded. *She's a powerful sorceress. She could have accomplished spells of this complexity, but for what purpose? What is her motive? Is she after my Dominion or does she want something else from me, and if so, what?*

He had no idea what she might want from him. Or rather, he could think of several things she might want.

If she wanted an alliance, she could have asked me, so that's not it. Her army is powerful, but small, so she wouldn't want to attack my Dominion. Which leaves her one option: taking my Dominion through magical force, possibly gaining me as a puppet in the bargain.

"Anything else?" he asked Dr. Sigismond.

"These are only preliminary reports. I'm sure in the course of the next few days we'll be able to tell you more."

"I want the entire Fortress checked top to bottom. Confiscate all cosmetics from everyone. I want them destroyed after you've checked them."

"As you order, Highness."

Lucien studied the tiny bit of potion in the bottom of the goblet. "I want everything in the Fortress from weapons and clothing to every morsel of food in the kitchens checked, Dr. Sigismond."

"Of course, Highness. As I recall, those were your orders right after the unfortunate demise of your harem girl."

Lucien winced at the mention of Rosa. "And what have you learned regarding her transformation?"

The doctor shook his head. "As yet, nothing. We've had your situation to take care of, and we thought it more urgent."

Lucien sighed. "Yes, I understand, but my girls may be in danger from whatever affected Rosa."

"Two of my technicians are going over every inch of the harem's chambers right this minute, Highness."

"And what of my little Fleur?"

"As yet, we can find nothing to indicate she had anything to do with the incident this morning. The preliminary tests I ran on her while you were undergoing the cleansing processes show no taint on or within her."

So she's not the source of the werewolf taint that took my Rosa from me. Which leaves me no closer to understanding how that happened.

"There is something else disturbing me about Rosa's change," Lucien remarked. "Doesn't it take several days for a werewolf's bite to change a person?"

Sigismond nodded. "Yes, my Prince, which is one of many puzzling things I don't understand regarding the girl's abrupt change. First, she'd have to be bitten by a werewolf, which we know is not possible. She had no contact with anyone outside of the harem. Second, she had no bite mark or any scarring from a bite mark. Third, you or Duke Kinji should have noticed the werewolf taint on her not long after it happened. Fourth, it takes seven to thirty days for the werewolf's bite to create a transformation."

"Very true," Lucien agreed.

"Fifth, she transformed only after I sprayed her with a potion to detect what sort of taint her body carried, and one of the minor ingredients of that infusion is wolfsbane."

"Really?"

Dr. Sigismond nodded. "Yes, Highness."

Lucien set the goblet aside and rubbed his temples. He did feel better than he had before the potion, but he felt far from himself.

"Keep me apprised of the situation, Doctor. I think I'm going to my study to try and think out a way this spell layering can be accomplished."

"Of course, Highness. Would you like me to summon some guards to accompany you?"

"No, I'm sure Kinji will be along shortly. He has a way of turning up when I need him."

Sigismond gave a rueful glance at the damaged equipment in the lab. "Yes, I've noticed," he replied dryly.

Lucien offered the man a wry smile. "I'll have a talk with him about not ruining things we need."

"I would appreciate it, Highness. That equipment is difficult to build, and I'm afraid a few items are a total loss."

Lucien stood. "I'll be going, Doctor. Take care of Fleur, and let me know what your findings are concerning all that we've discussed."

"Of course, Highness." Dr. Sigismond walked him to the door. "As soon as we have anything conclusive to tell you, I'll come up and speak with you."

"Good. I'll be waiting for your visit."

Lucien left the lab and returned to his rooms via the hidden passageways, opting to take that route to save time. He hadn't gone far before a slender vampire sheathed in tight-fitting black garments stepped into view from a thick shadow.

"Gideon! What are you doing here?"

The vampire knelt, bowing his head. "My Prince, I've returned from a scouting mission which Duke Kinji sent me on." He spoke the words in a whisper, as if he feared the walls could truly hear what he said.

"You followed the wolves?"

"Yes, my Prince."

"And what did you learn?"

"They went deep into shifter territory, then swung wide to cross back into the Southern March. They followed the Brightwater River north until it reaches the Cascade. From there, they went east into Talonguard. I stopped following them at the border, as I hadn't been given instructions to invade another vampire's territory."

"You've done well, Gideon," Lucien told him. "You've confirmed something for me, or at least added to my suspicions." He held his wrist out to the other vampire. Gideon gripped Lucien's forearm gently and bit, and Lucien let out a soft gasp at the tiny hurt that was masked by the pleasure of a vampire feeding.

Lucien's Shadow took a few swallows, licked the wound, and voluntarily relinquished his hold on Lucien.

"Thank you, my Prince. I've not fed since I left."

"Report to Kinji when you see him. It's likely he's in my chambers waiting for me, but I need to speak with him first."

"Yes, my Prince. If you could tell him I've returned, I'm sure he'll come searching for me when an opportunity presents itself," Gideon replied.

"I'll tell him." He touched Gideon's shoulder. "Well done. I thank you for your devoted service, Shadow Gideon."

"I am yours to command, my Prince."

He squeezed Gideon's shoulder. "Be careful of things inside the Fortress also, Gideon. We're under a magical attack sent to us mixed into the most common things. Gather your brothers in Shadow and go speak to Sigismund. He'll tell you what's going on."

"As you command, my Prince."

Lucien brushed his hand across Gideon's cheek in a gentle caress.

The Shadow lifted his gaze to look at Lucien, his expression puzzled. "My Prince?"

"I may have need of you and your brothers. I suspect Talonguard is the source of our troubles, and if that is the case, I want it dealt with in the most expedient manner possible."

Gideon's lips twisted into a macabre smile. "It is what we excel at, Highness, expediency in delicate matters of diplomacy."

"Yes, and you've served my family well over the years in such matters. Now I need to mull over the situation and discuss it with Kinji. I'll call for you when the time has come to act on this."

"Of course, my Prince. I assure you my brothers and I will be looking forward to carrying out your mission of diplomacy to Talonguard."

"Good."

Lucien hurried up the stairs toward his room, certain he would find Kinji there waiting for him.

* * * * *

Kinji lay on top of Lucien's desk fully clothed, staring at the ceiling.

There has to be someone intercepting the goods coming here; that's the only way to explain what's happening. Either that, or the goods are being tainted at their source of manufacture.

The door swung open, and Lucien entered. His lover's expression showed intense worry.

"Well, apparently you've gotten some unpleasant news. Is it about Rosa or something else?" Kinji asked.

"No, the doctor's made the removal of the taint and identifying the tainted items in the Fortress his top priorities right now," Lucien replied. The door to the study closed and locked.

"All the cosmetics in the Fortress are apparently contaminated with a magical taint, and the cosmetics have but one source, a village bordering Talonguard. He hasn't identified how Rosa changed. He doesn't know exactly how the baleful magic works, but there appears to be more than one type of spell on each item, which makes the task even more complex." Lucien stood where he was, looking frustrated and ill at ease.

"And the news gets no better," Kinji remarked. "This place is a rat's warren of hidden tunnels, Lucien. How can we be sure no one has gotten inside somehow?"

"The magic of the Fortress would alert us," Lucien countered as he pulled a book from the shelf.

"Are you sure of that? So sure you're willing to stake your life and those of everyone living here on a magical defense?"

Lucien sat down in the chair at his desk. "My grandsire set that spell, Kinji, and in five hundred years it's never been breached."

"That you are aware of," Kinji argued.

"It has *never* been breached."

Turning on his side and propping his head up on his left hand, Kinji regarded Lucien. "You've told me this spell is supposed to somehow detect and prevent anything dangerous or anyone with hostile intent from entering the Fortress. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"It didn't keep Baron Enbert out, did it?" Kinji asked, watching Lucien's face, waiting for him to start putting some key pieces of the mystery together.

Lucien's deep red eyes narrowed, anger and worry surfacing. "And it didn't stop any of the tainted items from coming through the gates either."

Kinji let Lucien think it out, working through the revelation that the vaunted magical protection of the Black Fortress his family had relied on for centuries had failed.

He waited for Lucien to fit more of the recent events together. The deaths of his grandsire and father. The transformation of Rosa to a werewolf, the magical taint that Dr. Sigismond and his staff had to remove from Lucien. The burning of the village, the kidnapped girls.

Lucien sagged in his chair, closed his eyes. "Someone has found a way through the barrier protecting the Fortress, and in my arrogance, I never considered it to be possible. Not even after my grandsire and father died. For my family, the thought of anyone being able to get through that spell was..." Lucien opened haunted eyes and shook his head. "The idea is inconceivable. Even now, looking at it and realizing it has to be part of the answer, I find the concept of the barrier being penetrated ludicrous."

"And that's what your enemy has counted on, Lucien. Their plot, whatever it may be, must be well under way. Whoever it is has begun to undermine your power. They've sown doubt among your vampire retainers and managed to terrorize your human servants. Even your own bloodharem isn't safe."

A fierce light burned in Lucien's gaze. "Gideon returned from tracking the werewolves."

Kinji swung himself into a sitting position on top of the desk. "What did he find out?"

"He brought further evidence to me of my enemy," Lucien told him.

Further evidence? I wonder what Dr. Sigismond discovered. "What did Gideon tell you?"

"He informed me that the furs ran deep into shifter territory and then swung back into the Southern March where they followed Brightwater to the Cascade. They crossed into Amalinda's Dominion, and not having orders to follow them into her territory, he returned."

"Amalinda? Malachai's daughter?"

"Yes." Lucien touched the book on his desk. "I came up here to research the type of spell she must have formulated in order to create a baneful spell that could pass through the barrier. In view of what we've discussed, I don't think I need investigate that particular piece of sorcery."

"You need to discover how they've managed to circumvent the spell."

"Precisely," Lucien agreed, opening the book. "Perhaps you should find my Shadows and discuss a thorough search of the hidden corridors and less-used areas of the Fortress. If they have found a way to circumvent the magical protections of the Fortress, then someone could, conceivably, be inside waiting to take action against us."

Kinji nodded. "Do you want me to do that now?"

"I'll be here working. I think I'm relatively safe."

Kinji frowned. "All things considered, I'm not sure that's true anymore, Lucien."

Deep red eyes lifted to regard him. "I'm not a mouse, Kinji. I'm not going to cower in my hole for fear a cat may come around."

Getting to his knees, Kinji leaned across the desk and gave Lucien a kiss. "Lock the doors, Lucien. Including the secret ones, as well as the door going into the chambers of your harem. I want to know you're safe once I leave. Use magic to make sure of them, please?"

Lucien caressed his cheek. "Yes, Mother."

Kinji's eyes narrowed. "And who was it who told you not to count on a single defense to protect this place?"

"There are guards, Kinji." Lucien's tone was harsh, a bit sullen. Lucien took his hand from Kinji's face as if he had burned his fingers on Kinji's cheek.

He doesn't like being reminded that I warned him not to trust the magic of the barrier to defend this place weeks ago. "I'll put the guards on alert, if you don't mind, Lucien."

His lover waved his hand at him, dismissing him to do the things Kinji, as his second in command, felt should be done, regardless of how Lucien might feel.

* * * * *

He found the Shadows in Dr. Sigismond's lab, all of them undergoing the preliminary tests both he and Lucien had been put through, and that several of Lucien's girls were also being subjected to. The lab was more crowded than Kinji had ever seen it, and he found himself standing by the door to keep out of the way.

Gideon joined him there and made his report, repeating what Kinji had already learned from Lucien.

"His Highness is planning a special diplomatic envoy to Talonguard. I believe we'll be discussing matters with Amalinda," Gideon informed him.

Kinji frowned. "Before you and your men perform any other duties, I want the interior of the Fortress searched from top to bottom. Every nook and cranny should be thoroughly searched."

"What of the Hall of Princes?" Gideon asked.

Kinji tapped a fang with the tip of his index finger as he mulled over what to do regarding the sealed room where Lucien's granddame pursued her restless wandering. "I think that task is best left to me, perhaps in the company of Lucien. Perhaps not."

Gideon lowered his voice to the barest hint of sound. "Do you really believe the barrier has been compromised?"

Kinji nodded. "I don't just believe it, I am certain of it."

Gideon folded his arms over his chest. "Considering what I've learned since my return, I have to admit it does provide the only explanation for the deaths of Prince Luc and Prince Laurent. We were never able to find an answer on how they were killed."

Kinji nodded. Both Lucien's grandsire, Luc, and his sire, Laurent, were found dead in their war room, where they'd been discussing the purchase of additional

military equipment. No one else had been in the room. The door had been locked, and guards were posted outside.

"Many of the servants and retainers believe that Lucien got tired of waiting to be prince and did them in himself."

Kinji leaned his back on the cool stone wall, his shoulder across the entryway forming an intentional bar against anyone coming inside the lab. "I've heard the rumors, but I don't believe them. Do you?" he questioned, asking because he hadn't done so in the past. The Shadows were actually Prince Luc's men, and loyal to his bloodline, but not bonded in the way Kinji was bonded to Lucien.

Gideon shrugged. "Lucien was always more interested in his magical studies than the running of the Fortress, and Prince Luc encouraged it. He felt Lucien had a rare gift for magic, a gift his father did not possess. Lucien always preferred his books and his lovers to being involved in the running of the Fortress."

"He still is more interested in his lovers and books," Kinji confided. "But he does what is needed...with some guidance."

Gideon nodded his understanding. "It would have been centuries before he came to rule the Black Fortress had his grandsire and sire not been slain."

"The method remains a mystery. Have you come across anything that might be a clue?"

Gideon frowned. "Until now, no. But I have my suspicions."

Kinji's eyebrow arched in a silent prompt.

"They were drinking wine imported from outside our Dominion."

"Let me make an educated guess. It came from Talonguard."

"Yes, it did. A shipment received a few days before they died. No one here would have suspected Malachai and his daughter Amalinda of foul play. They'd come very close to making an alliance and marrying Amalinda and Lucien, but it was decided the two were—" Gideon paused, as if looking for a way to phrase something.

"Incompatible?" Kinji asked.

"Amalinda has very strong opinions. Even as a child she would set her mind on the way something would be, and she would either get her way, or there were...problems," Gideon explained. "She wanted Lucien as her consort, a vampire bound to her by the bloodbond. She's never felt he was her equal."

"That explains a few things. She'd hoped to eventually rule both Dominions, which gives her a motive to want the older princes dead. She hoped to get her claws into Lucien through the baneful magic, force him into a subservient bond with her, and rule both Dominions."

Gideon's face twisted into an angry scowl. "Then she's the one who murdered my prince and his son." He frowned. "But Malachai technically still rules in Talonguard."

"Technically, yes, but how long has it been since anyone has seen him? A year at least."

"Thirteen months," Gideon supplied a more exact time frame. "What about the wolfheads? Where do they fit into this?"

Kinji thought it over. "My guess would be she's offered to grant them the Southern March, which was originally their land right after Planetfall."

"This too makes sense," Gideon agreed. "But knowing Amalinda as I do—admittedly by reputation and some judicious spying—she won't keep the bargain."

"No, she won't." *How much do I dare tell him about Amalinda? She's half-demon as am I, the only one who isn't part of my own family, in fact. But where my family is the progeny of a demon of lust, she is the child of a demon of domination. As such, she's a dangerous opponent, and it is in her nature to stop at nothing to gain what she wants. Malachai must have kept her on a tight leash, but now she seems free of his control, and that can only mean he's incapacitated or dead.*

"We have to protect Lucien at all costs," Gideon whispered. "Tell me what to do about Amalinda."

"She's dangerous, and she needs to be stopped."

Gideon's port red eyes met Kinji's gaze. "Then that's what we'll do, Duke Kinji."

"I'll discuss it with Lucien. We need his approval before we can strike."

Gideon grinned. "But he already gave it, Your Grace. He said I and the rest of the Shadows are to engage in a diplomatic mission to Talonguard. He left the execution of the mission up to me, though he hadn't approved it yet."

Kinji's return grin was as fierce. "Why, yes, you did mention that. I'll see to it that the secret areas of the Fortress are clear of spies and hostile forces. You carry out your mission as soon as Dr. Sigismond has finished the tests and said you're all free of taint. The sooner we act on this, the better."

"Prince Lucien hasn't ordered us to carry it out."

"I'm ordering you to undertake it."

"As you order, Your Grace." The Shadow bowed, and Kinji left the lab.

I'll make a sweep of the corridors and sealed rooms, and then I'll make my report to Lucien.

He hurried into the first of the secret passages, determined to assure Lucien's safety.

Chapter Fifteen

Lucien stretched, glanced at the time, and sighed. Four hours of the night gone, and Kinji had yet to return with any information. He leaned into the softness of the chair and closed his eyes. Four hours and despite his intense search through the books piled in stacks on his desk he was no closer to working out how Amalinda had bypassed the barrier protecting the Fortress.

He stretched a second time and debated visiting his bloodharem for some pleasant diversion, but decided against it. The girls were probably too upset over the incident with Rosa to be in the mood to entertain him, and he wasn't in the mood to comfort a bunch of frightened and sorrowful females.

Kinji wanted me to stay here, but I'm tired of trying to solve a problem for which my books don't seem to have an answer.

He debated going in search of Kinji but opted to visit his captive instead.

He took the public hallways because he would be passing guards and servants, which made the halls potentially safer. *Unless I encounter someone tainted who tries to do me in the way Rosa did.*

He arrived at the dungeon and headed for the shifter's cell and opened the door.

The room smelled of blood and pain.

The captive shifter showed signs of torture. He hung limp in the chains. Blood covered his chest from dozens of lacerations, a mix of shallow wounds and deep cuts. The pits of burns were etched into his biceps and forearms and across the expanse of his powerful chest.

Lucien frowned. He couldn't sense Kinji, and his lover would not have tortured the shifter without Lucien's permission.

"What in the Realm of Night is going on here?" he demanded, stepping into the room and looking around for any sign that someone other than the tortured shifter was present.

He saw motion. A shadowy form in the far corner of the room. Lucien took another step inside, trying to get a clear look at who it was creeping around back there.

"What is the meaning of this? Who ordered you to torture my captive in this manner?"

A rustle of fabric, a shifting in the depths of the shadows, gave Lucien the point where the figure stood, though he couldn't see anyone or anything clearly at that point in the room. And that bothered him. He could see everywhere else, every nook and cranny inside the dark cell but that one. The hair on the nape of his neck rose as if his body knew danger when his mind failed to sense any threat.

The unseen being changed position, and whatever had prevented Lucien from seeing the unknown individual fell away like a blindfold taken from his face.

Eyes like coals from the fires of hell regarded Lucien from a gaunt, almost skeletonized face, and Lucien recoiled, shocked to realize that he didn't know the vampire facing him.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?"

A laugh like the sound of cawing ravens grated across Lucien's nerves. "Don't you recognize me, Prince Lucien?"

He frowned. "If I did, I'd not be asking who you are. Now answer me!"

The vampire grinned, showing the double set of fangs that marked all born vampires. "I'm the son of Mother Night, and I've come to take you home, *Prince Lucien*."

Lucien put on a burst of speed, heading for the door. It slammed closed, bolted from the outside. His unknown assailant moved fast, faster than all but the oldest of vampires, and Lucien, younger than most vampires on their world, couldn't keep up.

A hard fist struck Lucien and sent him flying to impact with the far wall. He felt bones crack under the impact.

"*Kinji!*" he screamed his lover's name.

"Scream for him. Go on. He won't come. How do you think I got in?" The raven laughter mocked him.

That's not possible. Kinji would never betray me.

"Did you think a puling whelp like you was capable of binding a demon?" The vampire stalked closer. "Fool."

Yes, he thought as he got to his feet, I am a fool for coming here unarmed. How could I have made such a terrible mistake? I never go anywhere unarmed, and if I do it's because I've got Kinji with me or he's close by. I don't even know where he is, and I've left my sword in my room.

A blur of motion, and he felt himself flying, spinning through the air, helpless to do anything. He slammed into another wall and more bones cracked under the strain of the impact. He struggled to rise, his body slow to respond to the demand of his mind. He saw the vampire coming for him and knew he was going to join his father and grandsire in the embrace of Mother Night, because whoever this vampire might be, Lucien knew he stood no chance of fighting him.

The door shattered inward, and Kinji entered amid the shower of flying splinters. His katana gleamed bright as lightning in the dim light, his violet eyes ablaze with fury. The sight of his lover, a cloud of demonic power wreathing him in swirling blackness, set Lucien's heart racing, his body responding to the intense, inhuman beauty that was his Kinji. His love.

The unknown vampire spun around to attack Kinji, which gave Lucien the opportunity to regain his feet.

"Get out!" Kinji shouted at Lucien as he slashed the gaunt creature. Black blood splashed the floor.

The vampire's raven laughter shredded at Lucien's nerves. He didn't want to turn tail and run like a coward, but without a weapon and faced with the older vampire's speed and power, he had little chance of being anything but a hindrance to Kinji.

Kinji slammed into a wall, driven there by the other vampire, who pinned Lucien's lover by the throat. Lucien ran for the door, but he didn't make it. Hands grabbed him and hurled him across the room. The impact with the framework holding the captive shifter shattered his left arm and broke a few vertebrae. Lucien crumpled to the floor, dazed and hurting. Groaning, he tried to stand and found his legs were unresponsive.

Metal groaned, shrieked as the shifter struggled in the chains holding him.

Lucien forced himself to move, turning to see Kinji and the old vampire tearing at one another with their bare hands. Kinji's clothing was in tatters, and the marks of the vampire's fingernails reddened his chest, arms, and right cheek. If Kinji felt the pain of his injuries, Lucien couldn't see any trace of it. Hate and killing fury burned from Kinji's eyes, and the black mist of his demonic heritage twisted around them. The vampire screamed and slammed his fist into Kinji's chest. His lover staggered and went to his knees. The vampire grinned, his insane laughter filling the room as he drew a bloodred dagger from inside his clothes and lifted it to strike at Kinji.

"No!" Lucien screamed, trying to regain his feet. He got up, shaking, barely able to walk.

A roar of fury erupted from the shifter as he broke free of his bonds. Within the blink of an eye, he'd changed to his half-shifted form. Roaring a challenge, the shifter launched himself at the vampire, taking him off his feet, the pair of them colliding with bone-shaking force against the nearest wall.

Lucien managed to stagger a couple of steps, unsure what he should do.

"Get out of here!" Kinji screamed at him as he joined the fight against the older vampire.

Lucien staggered toward the door as a troop of his guards came pelting into the room. They didn't take a half second to sort out the trouble, two of them grabbing him by the arms and rushing him out, the rest forming a protective square around him as they hurried him away from the battle.

It wasn't until they were almost to Dr. Sigismond's labs that realization of who the gaunt vampire had to be surfaced in Lucien's mind.

Mother Night, it has to be Malachai! No other vampire could move with that speed or wrap himself in a magical spell strong enough to keep me from being able to see him.

Malachai. So he must be working in conjunction with Amalinda to undermine my position and destroy my family. But why? Why? Malachai was my grandsire's friend.

Lucien knew the answer. The politics of power. Vampire friendships lasted so long as both vampires had something to gain from the relationship. Once the advantage of such an alliance came to an end, so too did the friendship.

With Prince Luc and Prince Laurent dead, the alliance would have ended. Since the vampires of Talonguard were the architects behind the deaths of his sire and grandsire, they'd ended the terms of whatever agreement had been formed with murder.

His guards got him inside the lab. He grabbed the arm of the leader of the squad. "If Kinji and the shifter take Malachai alive, I want him subdued by magical restraints. Tell me when it's accomplished or when he's dead. Either way, I want to know what happens."

The sergeant in charge nodded before addressing the rest of the guard. "You men remain here to guard the Prince. If anyone comes near, order them away. If they won't back off, kill them," he ordered, then ran to do Lucien's bidding.

Lucien waited, anxious to find out how Kinji and the shifter had fared. Considering how poorly the shifter had fought in the village, he didn't hold out any hope of the beast surviving.

He frowned. *Why did the shifter help us instead of running for his life?*

Perhaps he realized even if he ran he wouldn't be able to escape. But why help?

Dr. Sigismond hurried up to Lucien. "Highness, you're injured. Come with me. We can help get you fixed up and restored to your normal self in no time."

Lucien followed the doctor, his thoughts on whether Kinji and the shifter could survive a fight against the oldest vampire in the world.

* * * * *

Kinji stood over the old vampire, panting, blood running from numerous injuries. His katana was black with the creature's blood, and the shifter lay unmoving in a spreading pool.

The shifter groaned and sat up. The red-bladed dagger buried in his forearm dripped blood, a writhing mass of violent energy surrounded the blade, and Kinji suspected it was meant for the sole purpose of killing him. The shifter had a broken collarbone sticking out through his skin, and his whole arm was askew, broken in numerous places. The broken bones were visibly healing, but the wound in his forearm wouldn't close until the dagger was pulled free. And Kinji wasn't about to touch the damned thing.

"Are you going to live, pretty little dead thing?" the shifter asked him.

Kinji snorted at the *dead thing* remark. "Yes. What about you, fuzzmuzzle? Are you going to survive, or can I use your pelt as a rug?"

"I'll live."

"Pity," Kinji remarked, his gaze fixed on the old vampire.

"Where are those corpse guards? They're taking a long time getting chains to truss up this old bastard."

The old vampire's fingers twitched, and Kinji slashed through the back of his neck, deep enough to sever his spine but not to wholly behead him. He could hear the guards returning with the strongest magical bindings they had.

I wonder if they'll be able to hold him. He's powerful and a sorcerer in his own right. He might know a way of escaping them just as he knew a way of entering the Fortress undetected.

"Fools! Fools!" the vampire whispered, his voice harsh as the caw of a raven.

"Shut up, old fossil," the shifter growled and kicked the old vampire. Kinji couldn't help the smile curling his lips. The shifter had actually saved his ass. If the dagger had gone into his flesh, he would have died.

"So, furball, do you have a name?"

"Yes."

Kinji waited, but the shifter didn't tell him. "Fine, I'll call you hairball."

"It's Sahak, and you're called Kinji."

"You were paying attention, then," Kinji remarked as the guards arrived with enough lengths of chain to bind a dozen shifters, or one ancient vampire.

"You'll never hold me!"

Kinji flicked his wrist in a casual gesture that cut the vampire's neck deep enough to silence him along with rendering him incapable of movement.

"Do you remember our earlier discussion, Sahak?" he asked as the guards quickly wrapped and locked the chains around the enemy vampire.

"I do."

"Do you plan to go through with it, or are you planning to attack my prince?"

The shifter looked at the vampire on the floor. "Attack Prince Lucien? No? I've no such plans," he replied.

"Good, because I don't want to be forced to cut your head off." Kinji turned a smirk on the shifter. "At least not until Lucien's gotten to fuck you, or watch you fuck me."

"And you're sure he wants either of those things?" Sahak asked.

Kinji offered the shifter the hand not gripping his katana to help him stand. "Lucien is my Master, and I well know his" – Kinji glanced at Sahak's crotch – "proclivities."

"Ah, yes, I get your point." Sahak held his arm out to one of the guards. "Would you mind ripping this out of my arm?"

The guard glanced at Kinji, who nodded permission.

The guard grabbed the blade and pulled. The shifter gave a yelp as it came free in a welter of blood.

"You're not healing all that fast," Kinji remarked as the blood continued flowing from the wound.

"Well, let's see. I've been locked in a vampire's dungeon with no food and not much water for, hell, I don't know, four or five days?"

"Good point," Kinji agreed. "Let's find my master and see about getting you some food."

"Clothes might be nice," Sahak stated.

Kinji noticed one of the guards giving the shifter a very appraising inspection. "Second point made." He motioned to one of the guards. "Make sure Malachai is set in a guillotine restraint. One set on a sensitive trigger. That way if he so much as moves it will take his head."

"As you command, Duke Kinji," the guard replied as he slashed the old bloodsucker's neck to prevent him from healing. The men lifted the old vampire and carried him from the room.

Kinji looked the shifter up and down. *He's a mess, but I can understand why Lucien wants him. He's quite masculine and very attractive.*

And I also owe him my life. Strange. Had he not been here, Lucien wouldn't have come down to the dungeon. And had he not done that, the vampire – can it be Malachai? – would have attacked Lucien in his chambers without a doubt. And without a doubt Lucien and I would both have died.

The shifter saved us both. How strange. It does make one wonder about Fate and Destiny and whether they exist. He glanced at the shifter again. *Right now, I find myself inclined to believe they actually do.*

He led the big shifter down the hallway to another corridor where the labs were located. A group of guards stood outside, every one of them casting unfriendly glares toward the shifter as they approached.

"Is Prince Lucien in there?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Grace, he is, but we're under strict orders to let no one pass," a rather young vampire said.

"You can stand aside for me, or discover why young vampires have such a high mortality rate," Kinji warned.

"You don't play nice with anyone, do you, Kinji?"

He turned to glare at the shifter. "Be quiet, furball."

Sahak muttered something nasty under his breath which Kinji chose to ignore. He was about to knock the guards out of his way when the door opened and a sergeant of the guard stepped into the hallway.

"Idiots! His Highness said anyone you didn't know, not the second in command of the entire Black Fortress. Now let Duke Kinji pass."

"Sir," the young idiot said. "But what about the furball? We don't know him, sir."

The sergeant looked at him, and Kinji smiled. "He belongs to the Prince, and you know how Lucien hates to have his property damaged."

"Ah, yes. You've brought the creature here for the doctor to tend."

"Yes, now please stand aside."

They got out of the way, and Kinji led Sahak into the lab.

If he'd brought a legendary hydra into the room, it couldn't have gone any more silent than it did when the tall, golden-haired shifter entered the outer room.

Kinji almost laughed when he saw the stunned expression on Lucien's face. Even his own lover couldn't believe the docile manner in which the shifter followed him.

"Can I ask you why he's here, Kinji?"

Kinji, who still carried his katana, bowed to Lucien. "He helped me defeat the vampire, and he was injured in the process. As he's been our captive for a time, he isn't healing, and knowing you desire him for yourself, I thought it a good idea to bring him here. Or have you changed your mind, Highness? If so, I can make short work of him."

Lucien held his hand out. "No, I haven't changed my mind about keeping him, Kinji. But don't you think chaining him to prevent him from attacking anyone might have been a good idea?"

"I have no interest in attacking anyone," the shifter stated.

"Oh, yes, Highness, he has a name."

Lucien frowned. "A name?"

"I'm called Sahak."

Kinji smiled. "It's an ancient name, much like yours, Highness. It means *ancient hero* in Persian."

The shifter stared at Kinji, his golden gaze filled with surprise. "You know the meaning of my name?"

"Didn't you?"

"Well, of course. I didn't expect a vampire to know."

Kinji shrugged.

"Did you capture Malachai alive?"

So I was right, it is Malachai. "Yes, my Liege, we did. I've ordered him put in a guillotine restraint."

"Very good, Kinji. If he wants to continue living, he'll be wary of trying to escape."

"He might try anyway. I think he's gone quite mad, my Prince," Kinji warned.

"Yes, he told me he was the son of Mother Night and that he'd come to take me home to her."

Kinji frowned. Madness among ancient vampires wasn't unknown. In truth, it was the only way most of the truly old vampires *could* die. But Malachai, at a century less than two thousand years old was hardly of an age to go stark-raving insane. Unless something had happened to him to drive his mind across the edge.

Something like a half-demon daughter who wanted him out of her way. One willing to turn her own powers on him and send him to kill his former allies.

"Perhaps we've found a piece of the puzzle," Kinji suggested. "Your father and grandsire were supposedly alone in the war room. What if, in point of fact, Malachai attended the discussion and has been roaming around in the secret passages of the fortress this entire time?"

Lucien's eyes narrowed. "Wouldn't we have seen...?" He stopped speaking and muttered something vile sounding in Old Earth French that Kinji didn't understand.

"He can make himself as invisible to a vampire as any of my Shadows can. That's how he managed to take me by surprise. I caught a glimpse of him, but he hid himself, and fool that I am, instead of fleeing I stayed there trying to figure out what I'd seen."

"So he's been here, right under your noses for months, creeping around in dark corners like a rat," Sahak remarked.

"He's skeletal, so he's gone a long time without feeding," Lucien commented.

"Or he's been feeding on animals, which has the same general effect," the doctor said.

"Do you think there could be anyone else hiding down here or elsewhere?" Lucien questioned.

"I don't know," Kinji stated. "But I'm going to make sure."

He smiled at Sahak. "Doctor, please lock our furry friend up for the time being." To the guard sergeant, he said, "I want Lucien protected. Send for more men. Older born vampires, not those recently made children out there."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Kinji, behave," Lucien ordered in a voice that sounded more tired than irritated.

"Yes, my Liege," he replied, bowing his head respectfully to Lucien.

Sahak went with one of the doctor's assistants without any arguments, and once they were positive Lucien was fully healed and strong enough to return to his private rooms, Kinji and a contingent of guards twenty strong walked Lucien through the Fortress and up the tower to his rooms.

Kinji and two sergeants of the guard searched Lucien's rooms; then Kinji sent the two guards out and checked the secret ways into and out of Lucien's room, dressing room, and bathing chambers. He locked them, though a determined effort of any vampire over three centuries in age could easily burst such mechanical devices.

When he was certain the doors were as secure as they would get by normal means, he brought Lucien in and had him lock them with magic only Lucien could—at least in theory—break.

Lucien crawled into bed, and for once Kinji didn't try to wheedle Lucien into having sex. Exhausted from the battle with Malachai, Kinji fell asleep with his head pillowed on Lucien's chest.

Chapter Sixteen

Lucien sat in bed, shoulders propped up by a mound of pillows, and stared at the magical formula inscribed in his grandsire's grimoire. The basis for the barrier protecting the Black Fortress, the lines of complex math and ancient Latin intertwined on the page like something written by a drunken serpent dipped in ink. Try as he might, he could see no way to bypass the magical architecture of the spell.

That's the problem with being on the inside of a problem and trying to work your way out of it. You can see what you have, and how it's made, but not the manner in which the design can be altered or bypassed.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He'd wanted to go out among his people today, to let them see the attempted assassination had failed, but Kinji had refused to let him leave his private rooms for any reason.

I wish he would come back. I'm bored and hungry.

He wasn't even allowed to visit his bloodharem or feed, also by *Kinji's order*, which rankled, though he did comprehend the need for caution.

Two attempts on his life were far too many in a year, much less a single day.

He set the book aside and got up. He didn't mind spending time in bed when he had company to make it interesting. When his grandsire ruled the Dominion, he'd often spent a week whiling away the time with his bloodharem or a few select lovers. How long had it been since he'd last had Gideon under him? Or any of the guardsmen?

Since he'd become prince and taken Kinji to his bed, there'd been few others inside his private rooms. Even the rooms had changed since the last time he'd bedded a guard or one of his grandsire's Shadows. Shadows who were now his to command.

I enjoyed taking them, but Kinji means so much more to me. It's not simple sex with him; it's his capacity to endure the punishments I want to inflict. He enjoys being hurt, which makes dominating so much more satisfying.

Lucien began pacing, restless and tired of being cooped up in his rooms. He was also getting irritable from hunger, his body demanding blood to compensate for the pain and hurts of the prior day.

A knock on his study door brought him out of his bedroom, but he refrained from going to the door. Kinji had ordered him to stay away from windows and doors until he was certain no other assassins or dangers would crop up intent on killing him.

"Who is it?"

"Highness, Dr. Sigismond is here. He has some documents for you."

"Slide them under the door, one sheet at a time if you must."

"Yes, Highness."

Page after page was slipped under the door, piling up rather close, but Lucien didn't care. He swooped down on them, scooping the papers up and retreating to his desk to sort them out. Fortunately, Dr. Sigismond had seen fit to number them, or the task might have proven another study in frustration for Lucien.

The first pages were the final report on Fleur. She was clean of any taint—and therefore any guilt in Rosa's unexpected transformation. Sigismond's report on her ended with a notation that she was very distant bloodkin to him. So distant that the likelihood of a True Mate bond forming was quite low. The doctor did, however, wish him the best of luck in that regard.

Lucien's lips twitched into a faint smile. I wish myself some luck in that regard too, he thought in response and moved on to the next segment of the report, which detailed some more concrete findings about the types of spells contained in the tainted items.

Lucien frowned as he read, the frown gradually changing to an angry scowl.

Part of the magic was geared to dominate other vampires; another part was to bend human servants to the will of the caster. The bulk of the magic, according to the testing, focused on Lucien. What he read left him filled with fury. Whoever cast the spell—and he was very sure it had to be Amalinda—had intended for the magic to bend his emotions and leave him open to the domination of the spell's creator.

And that left him little doubt about who the person was behind the spell.

But was it she who found a way through the barrier or had Malachai given her the key to my downfall? Of all his children, he's always loved Amalinda the best. The others had to carve out their own places here, but he helped Amalinda create Talonguard with his own magic and wealth.

Lucien set that section of the report aside and went on to read what Dr. Sigismond had discovered concerning his harem girls. Most of them carried some traces of taint from the sorcery, the bulk of it coming from the cosmetics and perfumes used to enhance their beauty. Only Magnolia and Fleur were without any traces of the taint. Neither apparently used the cosmetics or perfumes shared by the entire harem.

Magnolia and Fleur are both very sweet. And I owe Magnolia a special favor for her bravery. She must truly love me to risk her own life in an effort to protect me. Which brings up the point that Kinji isn't the only member of my bloodharem who will protect me.

He mulled it over for a bit, considering a suitable reward for the plump little blonde, and the same thing kept surfacing. He could give her the one gift that would last forever. He could turn her into a vampire. She would never age, never get old, and it would elevate her a step above the rest of his harem, placing her somewhere between Lillianne, the senior member of his harem, and Kinji in his favor.

The lock on his study door clicked, and he heard Kinji's almost soundless tread as his lover entered the outer room.

He glanced up from the report as Kinji swept in, a sheaf of papers tucked under his arm. He came to the desk, knelt beside Lucien's seat, and bowed his head.

"It's about time you came back. I was beginning to think you were planning to let me starve or die of loneliness up here."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Lucien," his lover said.

"What are these?" Lucien asked, taking the papers from Kinji.

"I've sent teams out to patrol the border between here and Talonguard. They're making reports to us via magicomm."

Lucien frowned. "You actually got those devices out and issued them?"

"Forgive me, Highness, but at this juncture, Gideon and I thought it prudent."

Lucien rubbed his forehead. "How many are in use?"

"Twelve and the reception tower, of course."

His grandsire had developed the magicomm when the last of the Old Earth-style communication towers stopped working during a particularly violent winter storm. While the magical communication devices worked much better than Old Earth technology did on this world, the devices had associated costs that made them impractical because they ran on the life energy of the user. Five days of use had killed a few human retainers before they'd discovered the flaw in the devices. And made vampires couldn't use them more than a week before they began to actually age.

"Master, Gideon and I discussed the issue for quite some time, and we both felt the benefit far outweighed the risks involved."

"So all the Shadows are carrying them?"

"No. Gideon has one, as does Aldon."

"You said twelve are in use."

"We gave others to the captains of the border patrols so they can contact us with information on any werewolves entering or leaving Talonguard, or the movements of Talonguard troops."

Lucien nodded and leaned into the softness of his chair. He propped his elbows on the arms of the chair and clasped his hands. "What do we do now, Kinji?"

"We stop her."

He glanced at his lover. "You make it sound so easy."

"It is."

Lucien lowered his hands and turned to stare at Kinji. "How can stopping her be an easy thing?"

"You have your Shadows, Lucien. There isn't anywhere they cannot go, no castle they cannot gain entry to. This is why your grandsire, Prince Luc, was feared, and it is why you are feared as Prince of the Black Fortress."

"If I'm so feared, why has Amalinda done this, and why did Malachai come here?"

"He came here to kill you because he fears her scheme will rebound on her."

"He's spoken to you?"

Kinji shrugged.

"Tell me, Kinji. Did he speak to you, or is this conjecture on your part?"

"A bit of conjecture between Gideon and I, and some raving from the old one. He's starving and going quite mad from the need to feed."

"Why didn't he feed on my people?"

"I suspect he worried that missing servants would be noticed. He's apparently never learned the art of feeding on humans without killing them. It's why his harem is made up of made and weaker born vampires from his Dominion."

Lucien nodded. "I recall hearing something to that effect. But he couldn't feed from made vampires so easily here, as they are primarily guards and body servants to my nobles."

They lapsed into silence for a short time, until Kinji spoke. "There is a way to bind an elder vampire to an oath, one that would prevent it from raising hand against you."

"Yes, I know of it. But..." Lucien sighed and shook his head. "I don't think it wise to employ it. Not with Malachai. He has two sons and another daughter with their own Dominions, and they might rise up against me if I tried to bind him to any sort of oath."

"Then what will you do with him, Lucien? He's far too dangerous to let go, and he is also too dangerous to keep as a captive."

"I know. I haven't worked out what to do with him. Not yet."

"For the time being we're leaving him in the restraint, and we're leaving him hungry."

"That's fine. Now what is it that you and Gideon have planned regarding Amalinda?"

"Us? Nothing, my Liege. Gideon is going to act on your plan and perform a diplomatic mission to Talonguard. If all goes well, he and your Shadows should return in three days' time."

"Have they left, then?"

"Yes, Highness, they left an hour before sunset."

"So now we wait?"

"Yes, my Prince."

"Go change into something more"—Lucien ran his gaze over Kinji—"entertaining."

"Yes, Master," Kinji replied and left the room in a blur of vampire speed.

Lucien smiled.

Time to have a bit of fun to distract me from this mess. I think Fleur should be put to leash and her training begun. And later, when I'm less hungry for blood and the feel of flesh around my cock, I'll see about putting my shifter to leash. I'm certainly looking forward to making such a glorious beast my own.

* * * * *

"You're sure this is all safe for us to use?" Nina questioned. The vampire prince had told her she would be called Fleur, but she had trouble thinking of herself by that name.

Lillianne held up a gauzy bit of pink in front of her, the garment so skimpy Nina wondered what the point of it might be. She tried to keep her gaze on Lilli, rather than the violet-eyed vampire by her door. Despite Lucien's assurances, she found the vampire's cool gaze to be very disconcerting.

Lilli smiled at her, touched her cheek. "Fleur, pay attention to what we're doing, not to Duke Kinji. I know he's quite stunning, but Lucien is waiting, and you must never keep our master waiting for you."

She nodded, not bothering to tell Lillianne she didn't find Duke Kinji to be *anything* but frightening.

His deep voice sent a shiver through her as he said, "Not that color. It doesn't suit her. Something green will work better."

"Of course, Your Grace," Lillianne agreed, though Fleur saw the woman roll her eyes in annoyance.

Another equally pointless bit of cloth, this time in a rich emerald shade was held up to her.

"Yes," Kinji said.

"Put it on," Lillianne told her.

Fleur looked from Lillianne to Kinji, then turned to go to her room to change.

"Do it here, sweet," Lillianne told her.

"In front of him?" she asked, aghast.

"Yes. You're going to have to get used to the idea that Kinji is with His Highness almost constantly. You're also going to have to accept the fact that you belong to Lucien

and he can do with you as he pleases, which includes having Kinji teach you how to be a proper submissive harem girl."

I don't like this; I don't want this. And I've got no choice in the matter. I belong to Prince Lucien and have since the day I was born. I just haven't had that fact shoved in my face until now.

She turned away from the vampire at the door and took the flimsy bits of cloth from Lillianne. With her back to him, she slipped out of her lounging pajamas and put the sheer garments on. Odd as it might be, she felt twice as naked in the gauzy pants and the flimsy top as she did with nothing on.

She turned around. Lillianne shrugged, but Kinji nodded his approval.

"Come, girl, Lucien is waiting for us."

She cast a nervous glance at Lillianne, who patted her arm. "I promise it's not going to be something terrible. Perhaps a bit strange, but once you get used to it" — she smiled — "it can be quite enjoyable. I promise."

Fleur forced a smile. "I hope you're right."

A hand closed around her wrist, and she jumped, a startled squeak coming from her. She looked up at him, then lowered her gaze. His strangely colored eyes, the emotionlessness of his face, were too frightening. Worse was the sense of power, of barely contained hostility she could feel emanating from him.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Fleur," he said in the deceptively calm voice in which he always seemed to speak. Even when Rosa had gone crazy he hadn't been screaming or shouting.

He stopped and stepped in front of her so she had no choice but to look at him.

"Will you listen to me, please?"

She nodded.

"I will not hurt you, but you must understand something. I belong to Lucien just as you do, and Lucien has certain...appetites."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He enjoys dominating his harem. He likes to see us kneeling; he finds the arch of a properly kneeling submissive quite arousing. He enjoys spanking his harem, tying us up, paddling us, or watching us pleasure each other."

Fleur's mouth fell open. "He... You mean he might make us...?" She covered her mouth with her hand as her heart began to pound in her chest with the urgency of a bird fleeing a cat.

"Yes, he usually does have me help train newer girls. I find it diverting, but females do not interest me the way other males do, and above all, I prefer Lucien. He is my master, and I love him, so I do anything he asks of me. He will expect you to do anything he asks you to do."

She swallowed, trembling at the prospect of being asked to have sex with Kinji.

"You terrify me."

"I know," he replied simply. "You are vampire bloodkin and that makes you aware of other vampires in ways most humans are not. You sense I am from a family not related to your own, and so you instinctively fear me and what I might do. Long ago it was a matter of self-preservation for one bloodkin to sense vampires of a different line so they could flee rather than lose their lives. Now it serves little purpose."

"So that's why I'm afraid of you?"

The fire-haired vampire nodded.

"All right, I'll try not to be scared. But it's not going to be easy."

"No, it won't."

He let her go and started down the hallway. Fleur followed him because she had no other option.

The place was as dark as it had been on her first visit. A visit she recalled through a sort of haze, as if she'd dreamed it instead of experiencing it in her real waking life.

I wonder if this time will take on the same dreamlike quality, or will I remember it clearly?

She entered the room behind Kinji. There were two pools of light not very far inside the door. The rest of the room was dark. So dark Fleur couldn't see any of it. Kinji went to one of the puddles of light and dropped to his knees, his spine in a graceful curve she couldn't hope to manage.

She went to the remaining patch of light and knelt, bowing her head toward her knees.

"I thought you said Lucien—"

"Shhhh," Kinji hissed. "We do not talk unless spoken to by our master."

She frowned and lifted her head, trying to see if Lucien was even in the room. She couldn't see anything but blackness; the glare of light where she knelt obscured everything lying beyond the brightness.

"Kinji, please stand," Prince Lucien's voice said from somewhere in the blackness.

From the corner of her eye, Fleur saw the vampire stand. Under the intense glow of the spotlight, his skin looked like newly carved ivory, flawless perfection. The strands of black pearls wound around his waist and draping his hips shone in rich contrast against his skin.

Despite her terror, she could see his beauty and understand why the girls in the harem spoke as much of him as they did Lucien.

"Fleur, stand also."

She got to her feet, feeling awkward and self-conscious.

"I have a pair of beauties, each one unique and lovely in their own way," the voice from the darkness stated. "Fleur, we are going to begin your training with a few simple exercises. You will follow the orders given by me. Do as you are told. Only as you are told. Do not speak. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"When you speak to me, address me as Master. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," she replied, her heart racing; fear etched her heart with sharp claws.

"You aren't going to be hurt, Fleur. There's no reason for you to be afraid. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master."

"Do not be afraid," his voice said from the dark.

The lights went out, and Fleur had to put a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. She didn't like the dark, but knowing she was alone in the room with two vampires scared her.

A light far across the room came on.

"Go stand in the light, Fleur."

She took a step toward it, and the prince's voice cracked out, "Run."

She ran, afraid of falling over something, worried over what might happen if she didn't follow the command properly. *Will there be some type of punishment? Will it hurt?*

She reached the spot of light and stood there.

"Kinji, go."

The violet-eyed vampire joined her in the same pool of light, the area so small that they couldn't help but touch.

For a few heartbeats, Fleur and the vampire stood together in the silent darkness.

"Fleur, put your arms around his neck."

She did as ordered, shaking with nervous energy, scared, yet a tingle of excitement trickled through the fear.

"Kinji, kiss her."

The vampire bent his neck, his lips touching hers. He tasted of spice. Cinnamon or something else aromatic. She wasn't sure. Her fear melted away fast as wax in the hot summer sun. She parted her lips, amazed at his gentleness after all the stories she'd heard of the rough cruelty of vampirekind.

"Stop."

The kiss ended, leaving Fleur wanting the feel of those lips on hers. The lights went out, and Fleur waited to be told where to go this time.

Kinji knew this game. He'd played it once before with Magnolia. In some ways this girl who Lucien had named Fleur reminded him of Magnolia. Of all Lucien's harem girls, he liked Magnolia the best because she was small and soft, so different from the rest of Lucien's girls. Fleur too was small, though her body was leaner than Magnolia's.

Magnolia tried to protect Lucien. I hope he plans to do something nice for her. Most harem girls aren't so brave.

A light came on and he felt Fleur tremble.

She's bloodkin. She's bred to do what a vampire wants if he's related, and Lucien apparently is, though the connection is quite distant.

"Fleur, go."

She ran this time without being told, stopping in the pool of light.

"Take off your top."

The girl obeyed, standing there, the gauzy fabric clutched in her hands, long raven hair draped over her finely shaped breasts.

"Fleur, kneel."

She dropped, bowing her head.

"No, sit up straight."

She shifted position.

Admirable. She's moving through this as if she's been doing it her entire life. She must be a natural submissive. Kinji kept the smile from reaching any part of his face. If she is, Lucien will be very pleased, because that will give him a perfect set. One raven-haired Fleur and one blonde Magnolia.

"Kinji."

He ran to stand beside Fleur.

They were left in their places. Fleur on her knees, Kinji standing before her.

Predictable, Lucien.

"Fleur, take his cock in your mouth and give him pleasure until I tell you to stop."

The girl's eyes widened and she stared up at Kinji. He gave her a reassuring smile. His cock was hard and ready for the continuation of Lucien's game. She appeared uncertain, but opened her mouth and wrapped her lips around his cock.

She's a virgin? Is that possible? Or does she have no experience of this?

"Fleur, suck on it as if you've put a candy in your mouth," Lucien urged from the darkness.

His lover's command did the trick, because she began to suck and work her tongue over his cock, the sensation becoming enjoyable. Kinji gazed down at her as she worked his flesh with her hot mouth, a groan coming from him as she gained confidence.

"See what you do to him, Fleur? You are pleasuring him, making him weak with need for you. This is the power you have over him. Now do you see that you don't need to fear him? You can stop to answer me."

"Yes, Master," she replied to Lucien, then opened her mouth, intending to suck his cock again.

"Stop."

Kinji sighed, his balls aching to be sunk in the wet heat of Fleur's mouth once more, or for Lucien to order him to fuck her sweet little pussy.

"Put down your top," Lucien ordered the girl.

Fleur dropped it and the light went out.

They waited in the dark longer than was usual, Kinji wondering what Lucien might be doing.

The spotlight came on, the pool of light illuminating one of the many items in the room. This one was a chair with leather restraints fastened into the wood. He heard the girl give a little gasp.

"Fleur, come have a seat."

She hurried to the chair and sat down gingerly, her eyes wide and staring across the darkened room toward Kinji.

"Bind her to the chair, Kinji," Lucien ordered from nearby. Kinji turned his head to see his lover leaning against one of the X-frames, his gaze on the girl. Lucien wasn't wearing his usual clothing; he'd taken it off in favor of black leather. A harness over his torso, black leather pants hiding who knew what sort of fun beneath them.

Kinji's mouth went dry and his cock twitched. He suddenly didn't want the girl; he wanted to feel Lucien's cock deep inside him. Lucien caught him staring, and he turned a stern expression on Kinji, who immediately lowered his gaze.

He raced to Fleur. *Lucien's about ready to join us. That's something.* He bound the girl to the chair, the design forcing her legs apart and her body into a tense, upright position. It was possible to alter the angle of the chair to allow the girl in it to be fucked with a dildo, cock, or tongue, whatever her master chose.

"Step aside, Kinji. Let her feel the chair. Let her gain an understanding of what it is for and how she can be used while she is captive in the unfeeling embrace of leather and wood."

Kinji did as Lucien asked, watching Fleur's gaze as she squirmed in the seat. He could smell feminine arousal, see the wet dew of need dampening the lips of her sex through the bare suggestion of pants she wore.

Lucien had moved closer while Kinji had buckled her into the chair, his lover standing less than ten feet away from them, the brilliant light hiding him from the girl. Kinji drew in a deep breath, the scent of Lucien, spicy musk, and leather reaching him.

"Kinji."

"Yes, Master?"

"I want you to get between Fleur's creamy thighs, rip her pants open, and mouth fuck her."

"Yes, Master," he replied, turning to slide himself under the chair. He lifted his head slightly and caught the cloth with his fangs, ripping the seam apart. He touched her folds with the tip of his tongue, fangs brushing through the dark curls of her sex as he nuzzled her mons with his nose.

The sweet flavor of a bloodkin danced on his tongue with the piquancy of fine wine. She was not his bloodkin, and he felt a vague urge to rend and destroy, the desire easily shaken off. Fleur jumped as if he'd scalded her, and he smiled, enjoying the game as much as Lucien.

His lover had many quirks, one of them being an enjoyment of watching Kinji play with his harem girls.

Kinji braced his arm against the side of the chair and used it to steady himself as he slipped his tongue between the tender folds of her pussy until he found the tight bud of her clit.

"Ahhh!" The cry came out sharp and startled from Fleur. He felt her thighs tremble as she reacted to the quick stroke of his tongue across the sensitive flesh.

His cock had jumped at her cry. He grinned and thrust at her clit, drawing another cry of pleasure from Fleur. He shoved his tongue into her sweetness and rubbed the tip of his tongue over her clit as she cried out and began to squirm, although she was unable to move much because of the restraints of the chair. Sweet cream came from her pussy, and he lapped at it, enjoying the taste of her more than usual. *Bloodkin, even ones that aren't related, always taste better than normal humans.*

He felt Lucien's arrival, and he looked up as best he could to find Lucien kissing the girl, her cries of pleasure muffled.

Thrusting his tongue faster, working it up and down from her clit to the entrance of her tight pussy, Kinji teased and kissed her needy flesh until she shuddered within the restraints, her cries of bliss softened by the conquering mouth of their master as he swallowed the sound of her release.

Lucien pulled Kinji from beneath Fleur and locked his mouth over Kinji's, savoring the taste of Fleur on his lips, inside his mouth, while his tongue invaded, claiming Kinji. Powerful arms wrapped around him, Lucien holding him tight. So tight he would have broken the spine or crushed the ribs of a harem girl.

Kinji groaned and entwined his arms around Lucien's neck, his mouth opening wider. Lucien's fangs ripped into his tongue, his lover feeding hungrily, the kiss demanding, dominating.

He whimpered, submitting to Lucien by sound, going limp in his lover's arms. Lucien ended the kiss and, lowering his head to Kinji's neck, bit Kinji hard. Kinji shuddered and would have crumpled to the floor under the combined onslaught of pain and pleasure from the feeding if not for Lucien's support.

Lucien shoved him to the floor when he was done, and Kinji sank down beside Fleur in the chair.

Lucien stood over them, his red eyes glowing. "Who is your master, Fleur?"

"You are, Master," the girl whispered.

"Who is your master, Kinji?"

"You are," he replied, his breathing rough, heart hammering in his chest. He gazed up at Lucien, the vampire a study of black and white. Black hair, white skin crossed and hidden by black leather. Only the red glow of his eyes relieved the monochromatic palette Lucien had chosen for the night.

Lucien reached out, grasped a handful of Kinji's hair, and pulled him upright. He pressed Kinji's face to his crotch, and Kinji inhaled deeply, the scent of Lucien and leather making him shudder with desire.

"Take it out and suck it," Lucien ordered.

Kinji unzipped Lucien's leather pants and pulled his lover's big cock out. From the corner of his eye, he could see Fleur watching them wide-eyed, her moist lips parted. Lucien's grip in his hair tightened, and he groaned, his lips parting. Lucien thrust his cock in, groaning as Kinji's fangs grazed over the head, drawing blood. Kinji shivered as he sucked Lucien's cock, feeding from it at the same time.

"Suck it!" Lucien growled.

Kinji slid his tongue over the head of Lucien's cock, taking the whole thing down his throat until his nose bumped into the dark curls at the base. He inhaled the leather and musky spice of Lucien and sucked as he rocked his head back, stopping when only the head of Lucien's cock was still in his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the head, heard Lucien's appreciative groan, and repeated what he'd just done.

Lucien stopped him. "Enough. Release Fleur from the chair."

Kinji stopped, licking his lips, savoring Lucien's flavor. He let the girl go, unbuckling the straps holding her.

"On your hands and knees," Lucien instructed, pointing at Kinji, who did as Lucien ordered.

A short-armed, suede cat-o'-nine-tails appeared in Lucien's hand. He held it out to Fleur. "Whip him."

The girl's fearful gaze rested first on Lucien, then on Kinji, who gave the barest hint of a reassuring smile.

"Do it; you can't hurt him."

"Yes, Master," Fleur whispered and brought the cat down on Kinji's ass in a blow closer to a caress than a punishment.

It didn't hurt, but the feel of the leather caressing across his ass had an effect on Kinji. He shivered, the anticipation of the cat-o'-nine painting lines of hot pain across his butt almost as good as the pain itself.

"Here," Lucien said, taking the suede cat from her. "Let me show you."

The soft lashes struck with stinging power, and Kinji cried out, his cock jumping at the increased pleasure the tiny kiss of pain granted.

Chapter Seventeen

Lust burned in Lucien's veins, Kinji's soft cry and the flush of pleasure warming his face, the bright marks across his butt adding to Lucien's heightened state of arousal. Putting Fleur through a few simple commands had proven her nature. Like many female bloodkin, she was a natural submissive. Her greatest desire was to form a bond and serve a master. Whether as a True Mate able to give her master born-vampire children, or as nothing more than a part of some vampire's bloodharem, the need had been bred into her over centuries.

But Fleur, direct though distant bloodkin, might never form any bond with him. The bloodlines were far removed.

And yet when he touched her, he felt the barest hint of something, a vague tingle flowing from the point of contact through his body right to his groin. The bond *might* form, but it could take years.

He trailed the suede tips of the cat along Kinji's spine, enjoying the way Kinji wiggled and shivered, begging for another taste of the whip, another kiss of pain to sweeten the pleasure.

"Kinji likes the pain," he explained to her. "He craves it the way a starving human craves food."

She watched Kinji with wide, guileless eyes. Fleur, in many ways, was an innocent. Ignorant of vampire ways and vampire needs, which were both like and unlike those of humans. Both mortals and vampires had needs. Appetites. But those of vampires ran deeper, were stronger, more primal than the needs of a human.

He held out the hilt of the whip to Fleur. "Take it, strike him, and don't be afraid of hurting him. You really can't do Kinji any damage that won't heal in an instant. Not with that little toy anyway."

He could see her reluctance to touch the whip. *Yes, a submissive by nature, she doesn't want to touch it, much less play at being a master and whipping someone with it. Just as well, she won't hit him hard enough to do more than tease him.*

"Very well, my sweet, I'll take care of Kinji."

Lucien lashed the cat across Kinji's buttocks, his own cock twitching at the way Kinji jumped, the gasp of pain-borne pleasure that slipped through Kinji's moist lips. He dragged the soft leather across Kinji's striped butt. His lover's behind wiggled.

"Get on your knees beside him, Fleur."

The girl turned terrified eyes on him, and the scent of her fear surrounded her, but she did as she was told, kneeling beside Kinji.

He swatted Kinji, the *crack* of the leather loud in the room, the supple leather of the cat's tails striking over and over. Kinji gasped with each touch of the leather.

Fleur watched Kinji's reaction, her gaze fixed on Kinji, and Lucien could see the fear in her eyes being replaced first by curiosity, then by the stirrings of desire. He hid his smile and redirected the cat to Fleur's nicely padded bottom, giving her a gentler taste of the same thing he'd been giving to Kinji.

Fleur squeaked, startled by the sting.

Lucien resumed swatting Kinji's ass fast and hard, listening to sounds his lover made, the tempo and urgency of the cries changing as Kinji neared an orgasm.

"Don't come, Kinji, or I'll punish you by making you watch but not touch."

"Yessss... Mahhh..." Kinji couldn't finish the word, the slap of the cat on his ass changing speech to mindless groans of pleasure.

He redirected the cat, swatting Fleur with less than half the force he used on Kinji. The girl jumped and gave a little cry that wrapped around Lucien's mind and sent a bolt of pure lust driving into Lucien's groin. His cock thrummed with the desire to be in yielding flesh. Kinji's or Fleur's, he didn't care.

He considered what he wanted to do with the pair of them. He could let Kinji fuck Fleur, or he could fuck Kinji while Fleur watched. He considered binding Fleur to the chair, considered having Kinji tongue fuck her while he fucked Kinji's tight little ass.

So many possibilities.

He had to make a decision and soon or, order or no order, Kinji would come from the pain of being whipped.

Lucien rotated his wrist and brought the cat down across Kinji's shoulders, giving his lover a harsh taste of pain not so closely linked to the nerve clusters near his cock.

Kinji cried out, his arms shaking, welts rising across his shoulders to vanish as if they'd never existed. Lucien hit him three more times, rotated his wrist, and brought the cat down on Fleur's bottom in a gentle stroke. She whimpered and squirmed this time, and Lucien smiled. The girl was performing well for her first time under the command of a master, which pleased Lucien. But girls seemed to perform better in Kinji's company for some reason. At least once they were over the initial fear of him.

"Master, please fuck me," Kinji begged.

Lucien laid the cat down across his shoulders with a loud *pop* of leather meeting flesh, and Kinji gasped, his arms shaking so hard this time Lucien thought he'd drop facedown on the floor.

He swatted Fleur, the leather landing harder this time, bringing a few tears to her eyes, drawing a whimper from her. She squirmed, gasping out, "Master, please fuck me too."

Lucien nodded in satisfaction. Fleur could handle a bit more pain than most of his girls, but she wasn't yet broken to the leash, so she might prove able to accept more when she'd learned how to fully submit.

For now he found pleasure in her willingness to please and her ready acceptance of what they'd shown her so far. Unlike some of his girls, she had yet to beg him to stop, had yet to break down weeping from the touch of pain he'd inflicted.

I think my true favorites are Fleur and Magnolia. Perhaps it's time to retire Lillianne as my senior harem member in favor of Magnolia. I've made few changes in the last decade, and it might be time to retire a few girls and find ones more in keeping with my needs beyond blood. I can mull it over at a later date. Right now it's time to have some fun with my pretty ones.

He snapped his fingers and Kinji lifted his head to look at him. Fleur copied Kinji and lifted her head to focus her attention on Lucien as well.

"Sit. Stay," he ordered.

Kinji shifted position so he was kneeling, head bowed, back arched. Fleur again copied Kinji's example, her own pose almost as pretty as Kinji's.

Lucien turned off the light with the small controller in his pocket and crossed the room to a grouping of chains and leather straps hung from the ceiling. It didn't look like much really, but Lucien had a particular fondness for this piece of bondage equipment. He checked the harness to make sure the straps and buckles were in good condition, then stepped out of the range of the light and pushed the button.

"Fleur, Kinji, come."

They hurried through the darkness to the point of light, both of them kneeling in the lit area. Kinji's eyes were bright and eager as he gazed at Lucien. Fleur, not knowing where he was, glanced around, her expression apprehensive, though the scent of feminine arousal hung in the air around her, a perfume Lucien sniffed, appreciating the undercurrent of sweetness that signaled bloodkin.

He snapped his fingers, and Kinji's gaze focused on him. Fleur again copied Kinji.

"Help me get her into the harness."

Kinji stood, offered his hand to Fleur, who took it. Kinji pulled the girl to her feet, and he guided her to the hanging straps. Kinji picked Fleur up and slung her over his shoulder. She squeaked, startled at being hoisted up onto his lover's shoulder. Lucien smiled as Kinji moved to the harness and knelt beneath it, facing Lucien. It gave Lucien

a lovely view of Fleur's round little bottom. Kinji patted her ass and reached for the chest straps of the harness.

Since this was her first experience of this particular piece of sexual hardware, Lucien thought he should explain what it was for. "Fleur, don't be scared. This is a sort of swing that will make things more fun for all three of us. Relax and let me put the harness around you. It doesn't hurt, I promise."

"All right, Master," she replied, her voice rife with apprehension. He would have to put her at ease, show the girl she need have no fear of him. At least not so long as she obeyed with such willingness.

Fleur shivered at Lucien's touch as he began to strap her into the harness. Fleur's heart raced as her *master* buckled the straps around her. The first one fitted around her upper chest right below her armpits. The second strap was fastened around her chest below her breasts. The pair of straps joined between her shoulder blades, part of a single piece suspended from a pair of chains by heavy steel rings. Her master took time to stroke her skin as he brought a wide belt of leather around her hips, fastening the buckles, which left her suspended by the chains that took all her weight off Kinji. Lucien snapped his fingers, and Kinji crawled out of the way to kneel nearby. Her master fastened another belt around her hips and finished with a pair of narrower straps, which he fastened around Fleur's thighs.

She hung in the harness, her body swinging from the harness and chains.

Fleur shivered, goose bumps rising on her skin. *I'm scared and excited. I've been mostly naked or completely naked since I came here, and yet, for some reason, I feel far more exposed now than I ever have in my life.*

It might have been the fact she was helpless and hanging, several feet off the floor, her legs held open by the straps. Or it might have been the fact she *knew* both vampires were watching her, their eyes glowing with lust.

She squeaked when a hand—it had to be the prince's—touched the curve of her behind and stroked along her bottom.

His hand moved upward along her body, passing over leather then skin as he walked toward her head. He stepped in front of her, and she lifted her head to look at him, the angle awkward. Prince Lucien slipped his hands beneath her arms and lifted, swinging her in the harness until they were face-to-face.

"Are you afraid?"

She thought about it for a moment. *No. I'm not really scared of him or Kinji anymore, which is probably stupid since they're vampires and could kill me with the casual ease of smashing a bug. Kinji belongs to our master the same way I do, and I don't think Prince Lucien intends to hurt me either, since I'm apparently very distant bloodkin. The only bloodkin he has. I guess that makes me valuable.*

"No, Master, I'm not afraid."

He smiled at her. "Good." His hands keeping her where she was, he kissed her. She returned the kiss, actually surprised at the spicy flavor of him, and the way his tongue slid and twined with hers made her nipples ache to be touched. The walls of her pussy clenched, aching to be filled, wanting a hard cock inside.

She whimpered as the prince ended their kiss.

"Put your arms around my neck."

"Yes, Master." She did as he asked, holding on to him, though the position was somewhat awkward and difficult to maintain.

He kissed her again, his mouth locking over hers, tongue delving inward to explore. His hands gripped her breasts, and Fleur gasped at the touch, wishing she could wrap her legs around his waist and feel the hardness of his cock against the throbbing nub of her clit. He tweaked her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, pinching them, rolling them, drawing a gasp of desire from her.

The vampire ended their second kiss, his teeth brushing her lips, letting her feel the sharp edges of his fangs, not quite biting, but giving her a reminder she wasn't with a human male.

It's not as if I'd forgotten he's a vampire. Maybe he likes the fear smell. But he keeps telling me I don't need to be afraid, so maybe that's not it. I wish I understood what he wants from me the way Kinji does, but I've only gotten here.

What if he doesn't enjoy himself with me? What happens to me then? Will he get rid of me? Kill me?

The thought of displeasing him and winding up dead scared her, distracting her from the feel of his hands as he caressed her breasts. Fleur worried more when he let her go, easing her level, her body swinging slightly in the harness.

Prince Lucien snapped his fingers, and Kinji appeared in her field of vision quick as a thought. The pair exchanged a look, though neither spoke. *Can they mind speak to each other? I've heard some vampires can, but I don't know if Prince Lucien has the ability.*

Whether he did or did not, Kinji remained where he was, and her master stepped away, walking out of her sight.

She tried to see where he'd gone, but her limited range of motion prevented it.

Fleur lifted her head and opened her mouth to ask Kinji where their master had gone, but he touched her lips and shook his head, which silenced her.

A hand touched her between the legs, and her whole body twitched at the contact, startled by the intimacy and the lack of warning.

"Open your mouth, Fleur," Prince Lucien commanded. She did as she was told, and Kinji put a hand under her chin, moving so the tip of his cock touched her open mouth.

Either he's telling Kinji what to do mind to mind, or they've done this before. Or both. Probably both.

Hands brushed along her thighs, gripping them, pushing them farther apart. Kinji slid the head of his cock into her mouth, and another cock nudged the opening to her pussy. She moaned, and Kinji's cock slid deeper into her mouth. She groaned as the prince's cock slid home, his balls bumping into her mound of Venus, sending a wave of pleasure through her lower belly. A fingertip found her clit and stroked it, and Kinji's hands closed on her breasts.

Her master thrust into her aching pussy, the action pushing Kinji's cock down her throat, which taught her the reason behind the swing. She was servicing both vampires, Prince Lucien setting the pace with his thrusts.

Hard flesh filled her mouth, Kinji moaning. He let go of her breasts to grip the chains supporting her, his eyes half-closed with pleasure as her mouth worked his cock. She tongued the head on the backstroke, as their master withdrew his cock, her body swinging between them. She whimpered as the big cock slid out of her throbbing pussy, internal muscles clenching around the hardness that gave her so much pleasure. She closed her eyes and let the pleasure of Prince Lucien's cock thrusting into her destroy the final traces of worry and doubt clinging like cobwebs in her mind. She licked precum from the head of Kinji's cock, tasted the spicy sweetness of the fluid seeping from him. The feel of Lucien's cock in her pussy, the wonderful sensation of being fucked, made her moan, and the vibration flowing through Kinji's erection made him groan.

Prince Lucien, her master, was fucking her. Driving her closer to orgasm with every thrust, her body helplessly swinging between two very handsome male vampires.

The pace increased and Fleur convulsed, crying out as an orgasm ignited in her lower body, her cry muffled by the cock in her mouth.

Her master picked up the pace, his cock driving into her fast and deep, his hand finding her clit and stroking it with a sure, steady pressure. Her pussy was flowing with juice, his hand wet with it as he sent her over the edge into another orgasm.

"You may come now, Kinji," their master said, and she felt the cock in her mouth spasm, filling her with vampire essence, the flavor like spice mixed with honey. She swallowed, savoring the taste. *Does every vampire taste like this, or are they all different?* She didn't have much time to think about it. Her master continued to slam his cock into her, fucking her hard and fast. To her shock, Kinji's erection didn't soften the way a human male's would after reaching orgasm. He stayed hard, and from his cries, eager for more.

Fleur moaned, her own body close to a third orgasm as the prince continued to drive himself into her with powerful thrusts of his hips, his hand working her clit without mercy. Her body was tingling, tiny jolts like an electrical current running from her pussy up her spine to her brain. She screamed, flying over the edge and falling into a pleasure so intense she knew no matter what happened, she would never find satisfaction in the arms of a mortal man again.

* * * * *

Gasping, Kinji came a second time, his hands closing on the chains holding Fleur, making a conscious effort not to crush the links in his fists as his body shook.

"Master," he groaned, wondering when Lucien would come, when his lover's body would yield to the pleasure. He took his eyes off Fleur's mouth around his cock to look at Lucien. He could tell his lover was getting close, the bright flush of blood coloring Lucien's cheeks a sure sign of impending orgasm.

"Come, Fleur," Lucien told the girl, and she cried out around Kinji's cock for the third time, her responsiveness quite amazing in a girl new to Lucien's games.

She's bloodkin, which might explain it.

Her mouth clamped tighter around his cock, teeth grazing the head. The pain sang in Kinji's nerves, another climax tearing a cry from him. "Master, please!"

The pace of the girl's mouth on him increased, faster and harder as Lucien pounded his cock into her. The sound of the girl's cries excited Kinji, as did Lucien's near silence.

Burning red eyes met his gaze over the length of the girl between them. Lucien whispered, "Come for me." Kinji, obedient to Lucien's command, moved his hips in time with the swing of the girl's body and cried out with the orgasm, his legs shaking, going weak from the number of releases his body had experienced.

He heard Lucien cry out with the girl as he came, which meant Lucien's merciless demands that Kinji come were over. *Finally. Now maybe we can discuss business and go to bed.*

Lucien put his cock into his pants and smiled at Kinji, the girl's body between them. "Let's get her out before her legs cramp."

Kinji nodded and got a good hold on Fleur. Lucien undid the straps and freed her, the girl sagging into Kinji's embrace, her body trembling.

Lucien took her from Kinji and scooped her up in his arms.

"I'll be along soon. I want to take her back to the harem."

"Yes, Master," Kinji replied. Dismissed, he left, heading for Lucien's rooms clothed in nothing more than the strings of black pearls and the fall of his red hair. He didn't care who saw him. Everyone knew he belonged to Lucien, but the knowledge didn't prevent the guards from admiring him as he went past the group who now stood at the door of Lucien's rooms.

He passed through them and shut the door to Lucien's study behind him. Lucien would come in through the adjoining bath chamber between the harem rooms and his rooms.

Kinji went to the dressing room and stripped out of the pearls, which he put away. He remained in the dressing room, mulling over what, if anything to wear.

Lucien won't have sex again tonight, but he might want to plan what he wants to do regarding Amalinda and her machinations. And we've got the matter of Malachai to discuss also. Something has to be done with him soon, before he works out a way to escape.

He pulled out a pair of pale lavender lounging pajamas and dressed. He stepped out of the dressing room as Lucien entered their shared bedroom through the bath chamber.

Lucien appeared relaxed for a change, but Kinji could see he was tired.

"Were you planning on seeking your bed?" he asked as Lucien reached him and pulled him into a tight embrace.

"No. Not yet. We have work that needs doing."

Lucien's mouth closed over his, and he leaned into the embrace, wrapping his own arms around Lucien and holding tight.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," Lucien replied, but from his tone Kinji knew Lucien hadn't been truthful. The reply had been automatic rather than an actual answer.

"I don't know," Lucien amended after a few moments. "I keep wondering how my father and grandsire were killed."

"Dr. Sigismond is looking into it," Kinji told him.

"I imagine he'll find the same sort of baneful magic is connected to their deaths."

"Yes, I expect he will too," Kinji admitted.

Lucien let him go and Kinji released his lover, stepping back to regard Lucien. "You look tired."

Lucien shrugged. "Not tired enough to sleep."

"Did you want to discuss the disposition of Malachai?"

"Not really, but I do need to make a decision regarding him, don't I?"

"Yes. He's dangerous, Lucien. Too dangerous to keep in your dungeon for any length of time."

Lucien nodded. "Come, then. Let's go into my study and mull the problem over, along with the problem of Amalinda."

Kinji followed Lucien into his office. Lucien took a seat behind his desk, while Kinji went to the liquor cabinet and poured both of them some whiskey. He gave Lucien one of the glasses before he pulled up one of the other chairs in the room close to Lucien's desk.

For a while they sat in silence, sipping whiskey. Lucien sighed and spoke. "There's only one thing that can really be done with Malachai."

"You are right, Lucien. There's only one thing that can be done."

His lover swirled the remainder of his whiskey in his glass, watching the golden liquid swirl around. "I hate the idea, but the repercussions through the Dominions don't bear discussing."

Kinji frowned. *Somehow I think we're not discussing the same outcome.* "What were you thinking of doing, Lucien?"

Deep red eyes regarded him over the edge of the whiskey glass. "Letting him go, Kinji. That's the only choice we have."

Kinji's brows drew together in a scowl. "You do have another, perfectly understandable option."

Lucien took a sip of the whiskey, then lowered the glass to hold it between his palms. "What option might that be, Kinji? He's the oldest vampire on this world. Do you know the political leverage he has?"

"He has zero leverage once his head is in a box and his body's burned to ash."

Lucien shook his head. "I can't do that, Kinji."

"Lucien, in case you've managed to forget, he tried to *kill you*! That being the case, who in the Dominions is going to blame you for destroying him?"

"Everyone," Lucien replied. "It would be my word justifying his death. None of them will believe it."

"Why? Because he's the oldest? The fact you had him in your power to be able to kill him is a point in your favor."

"No, Kinji, it's not. Everyone knows my grandsire and Malachai were friends."

"Friends." Kinji snorted. "That friend of his likely helped plan Prince Luc's murder along with the death of your father. How you missed being killed is probably a matter of luck only."

"Or careful planning on Amalinda's part. She needs an heir as much as I do. Our bloodlines are incompatible, however, so not even Dr. Sigismond's skill could have solved the inherent problems of born vampires trying to create children."

"But she wasn't willing to submit to you, and you, of course, will never submit to her," Kinji remarked.

"My need for an heir may be solved. I believe the True Mate bond will form with Fleur given enough time," Lucien admitted. "And before you start worrying I'll give you up for her, it won't happen. I love you, Kinji." Lucien finished his whiskey and set the glass aside. "I've also developed a greater fondness for Magnolia, and I plan to turn her."

Kinji sighed. "Because she tried to protect you." It wasn't a question, he *knew* Lucien's motivation for granting Magnolia the one thing all harem girls aspired to: the status of made vampire.

"Yes, because she tried to protect me from Rosa. Don't you think it's about time I had a made vampire or two within my harem? Ones that I can trust to protect me?"

Kinji shrugged and finished off the whiskey he had left.

"You don't approve."

"It's your decision. Magnolia, yes, I think she deserves your favor. But what of the older girls in your harem? Don't you think it might add to the petty jealousies which already exist in the harem?"

"It could, if I allowed it to happen."

Kinji frowned at Lucien. *He changed the subject in an effort not to discuss the problem of Malachai and Amalinda. He's got to stop putting off important decisions. He's the prince now, and he has to take up his duties.*

"While the situation with the girls is closer to your heart, Lucien, the problems of Malachai and Amalinda aren't solved."

Lucien sank backward into his seat and sat there regarding him with weary eyes. "I know, Kinji. And I'm aware they aren't going to simply go away. I need some time to come to terms with the repercussions of the situation. I could kill Malachai, but I have to consider the political backlash I'll have to weather. We could lose our trade agreements with the other vampire Dominions from something so drastic."

"Drastic?" Kinji repeated the word with a bit of angry heat. "What about the repercussions to your family? Your grandsire and father are both dead because of Malachai and Amalinda."

Lucien stood up. "I refuse to discuss this anymore tonight."

Kinji's lips pulled up in a snarl. Anger heated his blood. "Lucien, you can't keep delaying this discussion. You have to make a decision before Malachai can escape and before Gideon and the Shadows return with Amalinda."

"No more tonight, Kinji! I mean it! Speak to me about this again before I open the discussion with you, and you'll be spending a few nights in the dungeon. Do you understand?"

Anger burned in Kinji's veins, made his temples pound, but he bowed low to Lucien, keeping his temper under control. He blanked his face, forced his voice to a calm tone, though he wanted to scream at Lucien. Getting in an argument would serve no purpose. Lucien had his mind made up, and nothing Kinji said or did could change it.

He bowed his head. "Yes, my Prince. I understand."

"In fact, when there is any decision to be made from now on, I'll be the one to broach the subject, should I decide to discuss it with you at all. Is that clear?"

Kinji opened his mouth to argue, but Lucien held his hand up, silencing him with the well-known gesture. "This is not a request, Kinji. It's an order."

"As you wish, Highness."

"Good. I'm going to bed now. *Without you.*"

It stung Kinji, but he accepted it without contention. *He needs time to think, and he wants to do it alone.* "As you wish, my Liege."

"You may sleep with the rest of my bloodharem." *So I'm exiled from his bed, but he's letting me stay near as a protection. At least he recognizes he needs me close in case of another attempt on his life.*

"May I stay in your room? I'll sleep on the floor."

"No. I'll sleep with my sword. Now get out of my sight until I call for you."

Kinji bowed. "As you wish, Master." He left the room, passing through Lucien's bedchamber and into the bathing room. He closed the door and stood there with his forehead resting on the cool wood.

Lucien, you cannot let Malachai live.

Chapter Eighteen

Lucien stood at a safe distance from the captive vampire. The restraints around him were adequate to contain most of their kind, but whether the guillotine bench could continue to hold the ancient vampire was anyone's guess.

Lucien suspected Malachai remained where he was simply because he was weakened from long weeks without feeding, or he stayed because he chose to be there for whatever reason.

If he's weakened and unable to escape, he will get no stronger as my captive. I will not allow anyone to feed him. But if he remains here simply because it suits him to do so, then he is a great danger and has to be dealt with.

And I have to deal with him regardless. But what should I do? Kinji wants me to kill him, and I suppose that's the best option, except it will make enemies out of an unknown number of other princes. Enemies I cannot afford to have.

He turned away from the spy hole in the door and leaned against the wall. *I have to decide, but I don't know which course to take.*

Across the hall from him, Kinji stood, arms folded over his chest, watching him from the impassive mask of his face.

He hasn't said a single word to me all morning, not even in greeting, and he hasn't let me get close enough to kiss him either. I brought this on myself. I shouldn't have treated him the way I did last night. I was angry with him for speaking to me as my second, and that's his job, to talk to me and help me make decisions.

"Kinji?"

Cold violet eyes regarded him, but his lover didn't speak.

"Don't do this, Kinji."

A red eyebrow arched. "I do believe I was *commanded* not to speak unless spoken to about matters regarding this Dominion. That being the case, I shall remain silent in

all things rather than slip and offer His Highness any suggestions. I'm sure His Highness recognizes the fact that I don't wish to be locked in his dungeon. Especially when *his life* may depend on my presence at his side."

Lucien sighed. *Oh yes, I've stuck my foot into it this time. Into the shit and into my mouth as well.* "That's not what I meant."

The red eyebrows drew together. "Isn't it? You seemed perfectly clear on the subject last night, my Liege."

"You can be such a bitch sometimes, Kinji."

"And you, Your Highness, can be quite the pigheaded fool."

Lucien gritted his teeth at the remark, which angered him because, deep down, he knew it was perfectly true. He did make decisions from time to time that he came to regret later. Kinji was doing his best to prevent him from making the same kind of mistake with Malachai. But he wasn't convinced killing Malachai was the best option.

"I would try to bind him to my will, but he's far too old," Lucien commented.

Kinji didn't reply.

"I brought it up, Kinji. I said you could discuss things with me if I spoke to you about them first."

"Yes."

Lucien turned a sour look on Kinji. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, you said that, and yes, Malachai is too old to be bound by you."

Lucien pushed away from the wall and began to pace along the corridor, back and forth in front of the cell holding Malachai.

"I can't kill him, Kinji. I cannot bring myself to destroy him despite what you think I should do."

"Very well, you cannot bring *yourself* to kill him."

Lucien paused to stare at Kinji. He'd noted the emphasis Kinji had put on the word "yourself" and realized Kinji had no compunction about killing Malachai because he posed a threat to Lucien, and because, as a half demon, Kinji felt no remorse over killing an ancient vampire.

But there might be another solution.

"Kinji, tell me this, can you bind Malachai?"

"Possibly."

"Are you willing to try?"

"Lucien, this isn't something I've even considered. I have no desire to bind any vampire to me, especially not one as old and dangerous as Malachai."

"It was a thought."

Kinji shrugged.

"So you'll kill him?"

"If that is what you want, yes. It would be better for you to do it."

"Why?"

"He's an ancient, Lucien. You'd inherit at least some of his power if you drained the blood from him."

"Have you looked at him, Kinji? Do you think he has any blood left?"

"Yes, or he'd be dormant."

"Good point, I suppose." *I could do as Kinji suggests. I could drain the life from Malachai, and that will certainly turn the other vampires against me. Perhaps every prince in all Dominions would turn on me, and my people will have to live with the repercussions. We won't have trade anymore, and many of our luxury goods come from other Dominions.*

"It's not wise for me to take on his power. It will alienate me from the other princes."

"Will it? Or will they gain some respect for you?"

"Kinji, I'm the youngest prince of a Dominion."

"Yes, and you have Malachai and Amalinda to thank for that, don't you?"

"To all appearances, yes," Lucien agreed.

"Don't you think taking revenge for the deaths of Prince Luc and Prince Laurent would be considered more than justified?"

"If it were anyone but me, then yes, I'd agree with you."

"Lucien, stop talking and think."

Lucien frowned at his lover. He hadn't liked the implication that he wasn't thinking, but he had asked Kinji for advice, and since he'd gotten Kinji to express an opinion, he wasn't going to shut him up the way he'd done last night.

I try to teach Kinji a lesson about not overstepping his bounds, and he winds up teaching me a lesson. I'm learning that being an asshole to him doesn't help me at all.

And he's right about this situation. If Malachai and Amalinda had done this to any other prince, they'd be involved in a full-scale war. If any other prince captured Malachai, they wouldn't hesitate to destroy him if he'd turned on them the way he turned on my grandsire.

Yes, Kinji's right. I really don't have a choice. I destroy him or he returns to destroy me.

"So do we simply cut his head off, or do you know a better way?"

"Yes. You drain his blood, and I cut his head off by triggering the guillotine when he's almost dead from blood loss."

"Let's get it done, then."

Kinji smiled. "I'm glad you've come to your senses, Lucien."

"We'll see how this works out, then we'll decide if I've come to my senses or lost my mind."

Kinji went to the door and threw the lock open and stepped in ahead of Lucien.

Malachai's raven screech voice greeted them. "So you've finally come to speak with me, have you, boy?"

"No, Malachai, I haven't," Lucien replied.

"Torturing me will gain you no answers. Even a wet-bottomed whelp like you should know I won't speak."

"I'm not here to torture you, Malachai. We already know what you've done."

Malachai laughed. "Do you now?"

"Yes," Lucien stated as Kinji went to the triggering mechanism for the device holding Malachai. Lucien knelt at the side of the bench and turned Malachai's arm enough to find a vein.

"What are you doing, pup?"

"You owe me a debt of blood, Malachai. I'm going to see that you pay it in the coin of my choice."

"And what might that be?"

"I plan to have your blood and your life."

"You wouldn't dare!" Malachai shouted.

Lucien bit into the desiccated flesh, his mouth filling with cold, thick blood. It flowed over his tongue and burned its way into his belly, where it bloomed into warmth that surged through Lucien's flesh, his veins feeling as if they were filled with the buzzing of a million bees. He kept swallowing as Malachai screamed denials, begged for his life, blamed his daughter for the plot to kill both his father, grandsire, and in the end, Lucien as well.

He drank until the vein under his mouth cracked, the flesh gone dry as dust. Lucien pulled away and stared at Malachai, anger and the power of stolen vitality turning his blood to fire. "You killed them; now you die."

He nodded to Kinji, and his second pulled the lever. The bright blade of the guillotine came down and ended the life of the oldest vampire in the Dominions.

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Kinji personally disposed of Malachai's body, carrying it outside and burning it himself. The dry flesh ignited faster than wood in the fire he built in the courtyard of the Black Fortress. Done with the body, Kinji stuffed Malachai's mouth with garlic and rode out of the Fortress. He rode to the second crossroad beyond the Fortress, where he buried Malachai's head, facedown in a hole he dug himself. He covered the head with lentils and millet, then filled the hole with dirt and stones.

After taking those precautions, Kinji could be sure Malachai was truly dead. With his body burned and his head buried at a crossroad, Malachai could not be resurrected by any means. Kinji's burial had assured no means could return the ancient vampire to existence.

Kinji returned to the Fortress, joining Lucien in his office. His lover barely glanced up as he entered before immediately closing his eyes. Lucien rested in his chair while his body absorbed the power he'd taken from Malachai.

Sitting in a chair across the room, Kinji could feel the change in Lucien. Waves of power beat across Kinji's awareness as if he were the shore and Lucien were a deep, mysterious sea.

After a while Lucien got up, took one of his many books of magic from the shelves, and returned to his seat. He began studying the book's pages, silent, paying no attention to Kinji whatsoever. Minutes slid into hours, and hours passed as Lucien read. Bored, Kinji closed his eyes and let Lucien read in peace, his mind drifting from wakefulness into a light, semiaware doze.

Lucien's voice snapped him to full wakefulness. "I see how it was done."

Kinji opened his eyes. "How what was done, my Liege?"

"I see how they got through the barrier guarding the Fortress. I thought the method must be complex, but that isn't the case. The barrier was created to detect entire spells, not fragments of spells. Even then, the barrier could have alerted us that something was not quite right, but our enemies were clever. Malachai used the same method to conceal the spells as he used to conceal his own presence. The addition of a minor benign spell attached to the baneful charms diverted the barrier's ability to warn us, allowing harmful things, including Malachai himself, to enter."

Kinji frowned but gave a nod that he understood what Lucien had told him.

"Malachai used his own blood to make sure the benign trace of magic was more powerful than the fragment of baneful magic. Having his blood in my veins, I can actually *feel* how the spells were done."

"Can you render them harmless?"

Lucien smiled. "Yes. I can also alter the barrier to prevent anyone from duplicating what they accomplished."

"I don't advise placing your trust in the barrier, Lucien. Granted, it took them centuries to work out a way to get through, but they may not be the only ones working on a way to bypass your grandsire's spell."

"I won't ever fully trust the protection of the barrier again, Kinji. I'm going to talk to the doctor about installing magoscopes or other detection devices at the gates and throughout the Fortress. The devices can detect things the barrier failed to find, and that makes them a good precautionary addition to our defenses."

"Good." Kinji waited for Lucien to say more, but his lover returned his attention to the book, and Kinji went back to watching the insides of his eyelids.

At least he's realized trusting in a single defense, no matter how powerful it appears to be, is not the best way to safeguard the Fortress. Unfortunately, that revelation came too late for his grandsire and father.

His thoughts drifted to their deaths. He hadn't been present when Luc and Laurent met their horrible ends, and he had only the rumors of servants and made vampires as information on how they died.

Is it possible they aren't truly dead? Should I suggest to Lucien that we remove them from their tombs and check for signs they yet live?

No, where's the point in that? Lucien is prince of this Dominion. Let things remain as they are, with him as ruler.

Kinji had drifted into a doze for the second time, when Lucien getting up brought him awake.

"I believe it's time to get the shifter from Dr. Sigismond and return him to the dungeon until I have the time to make him mine."

Kinji followed Lucien the long way to the lab, going through the well-guarded public areas of the Fortress. The entire way, he had to struggle with himself not to let Lucien see his amused smirk. He also fought to keep from telling Lucien he'd already taken care of the last vestige of resistance the poor, sexually beleaguered shifter had retained. Their combined assault had done the poor beast in, his libido throwing up the flag of surrender the instant Kinji's mouth touched his cock.

Dr. Sigismond greeted them as they entered, then showed them where he had the shifter restrained face up on an exam table, his body bound to it by chain, spells, and thick bands of steel-reinforced leather.

Lucien ran his hands over the big beast, feeling the heavy muscles of shoulders and thighs, a possessive, claiming gleam in his gaze.

"Such a fine specimen," the doctor commented. "When you tire of him, I'd like to have the opportunity to study him further. I've never had the chance to dissect one of his type before. I'm sure there's a lot to learn from such a creature."

The shifter paled. "Dis...sect?"

"Unfortunately, Doctor, I'm planning to keep this creature," Lucien explained and motioned Kinji to let the shifter go.

Kinji bowed his head and started with the chains holding Sahak to the table. The shifter's golden eyes remained on the doctor, as if he didn't fully trust Lucien not to turn him over to the researcher.

Leaning very close to the shifter's ear, Kinji whispered, "Do not concern yourself over the doctor's crass words. To him, you are a test subject, nothing more. Fortunately for you, Lucien sees you as a potential addition to his bloodharem. He will continue to see you in that light so long as you can be obedient and agree to be part of his harem. Should you try to harm him or displease him in any way, not only will I personally see to it that the good doctor carves you up like the meat course of a human's holiday meal, I'll also make sure you survive such treatment for years. Understood?"

"Perfectly clear," the shifter replied.

Kinji tweaked one of the shifter's nipples, smirked when the beast's cock hardened in response, and moved to the next set of chains.

Lucien had walked away to speak to Dr. Sigismond, probably about their various findings regarding the harmful magic being used by their enemies.

Kinji got the shifter out of the restraints and helped the golden-haired male off the exam table. The creature was stiff from long periods of immobility and leaned on him, a big hand cupped over his shoulder as the beast slipped from the table to his feet.

Kinji set a steadying hand on the shifter's chest. "Are you fit to walk a fair distance or will you fall down, kitten?" Kinji smirked when the shifter scowled at his use of the word "kitten" for him.

The shifter lifted his lips in a snarl and then opened his mouth to say something, probably an insult, but Lucien returned and instead of saying anything, the shifter bowed his head.

Well, I'm impressed. I didn't expect him to be this respectful of Lucien. He's much smarter than I gave him credit for.

"Bring him along, Kinji."

Kinji bowed his head. "As you wish, my Prince."

Kinji motioned to the shifter, and they followed Lucien out of the labs. The beast came along peacefully enough until he realized they were heading toward the dungeon.

The tall blond stopped. "I really don't want to be put in a prison cell. Is there some way I can avoid being chained and left in the dark? I'm no longer interested in killing you, Prince Lucien. I've realized the wolves lied to me about who killed my father."

Lucien regarded the shifter, his look appraising. "As I said, what reason would I have to kill your father? The wolves, on the other hand, I exterminate out of general principle. But this is what two centuries of warfare does."

"The werewolves never have the best interest of anyone but themselves in mind. They've betrayed the leopards and the cougars several times, and the tigers, well, they're at war with the wolves. I think even you blood—err..." He coughed. "You vampires know the wolves do as they please and to hell with peace accords and treaties."

The shifter glanced from Lucien to Kinji as if he expected Kinji to say something or help him convince Lucien he didn't need to be restrained. Kinji said nothing. He wanted Lucien to make the decision on his own.

Lucien grabbed a handful of the shifter's golden hair and pulled, yanking the big beast to his knees at the prince's feet. The shifter gasped, flinching at the pain. Kinji smirked at the other reaction of the shifter's body. His cock had gone hard, which was very easy to notice since the shifter was stark naked.

Lucien smiled, the grin predatory, possessive, and rife with lustful heat. His lover let the shifter go and turned, heading down the corridor. Instead of continuing toward

the dungeon, they took the stairs up, away from the lower levels, the shifter padding along with them.

Kinji hid his own smile. *The shifter wants me, and Lucien wants the shifter. At least something good has befallen Lucien amid these disasters. He's gained a girl who's bloodkin, and he's acquired a shifter who, if bent to Lucien's will properly, will prove a loyal and useful guard.*

And I intend to make sure the shifter bends properly.

Sahak trailed the vampire prince through corridor after corridor, then across a courtyard and into a tall tower set at the center of the massive structure. The stories he'd heard of how huge the Black Fortress was hadn't prepared him for the truth. The place towered above them, formed of the very mountains in which it rested. The tower they were approaching was three times the height of the tallest tree he'd ever beheld.

Shifters didn't build. Most of them chose to live in cavern systems or simple dens dug into a hillside or made in the deadfall of one of the fallen giant trees.

The bloodsuckers were different. They were and had always been — as far as Sahak knew — builders since the dim misty past of Old Earth. Many things they built were on a grand scale, like the Black Fortress, or Talonguard to the east.

He couldn't help but gape as they reached the central tower and started up the stairs to the upper levels.

There are guards everywhere. Even if I wanted to kill Lucien and escape, I wouldn't make it out of this place, much less out of the Fortress.

They arrived at the topmost portion of the tower, and the vampire prince turned down a corridor.

This place is silent as a grave. I don't hear anything. Even the guards are silent. It's eerie to realize I'm probably surrounded by vampires, yet I hear nothing.

A faint sound, the barest trace of a melody reached him as they progressed farther down the corridor. Then came the faint sound of feminine voices. Sahak strained, trying to make out words, but soon gave up.

They reached a door and both vampires stopped.

"This is the Room," the vampire prince said. "Inside, you will do anything I require of you. Anything I order you to do is to be done, or you will be punished. Do you understand?"

Sahak glanced in the direction of the flame-haired vampire. He was standing with his head bowed, motionless as something carved of stone.

Creepy damn things, vampires. They don't even have to breathe.

A hand smacked his cheek, not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough it got his attention.

"You will answer me when I speak to you. Understood?"

Sahak nodded. He heard the red-haired vampire sigh, the sound somewhat exasperated.

"Uhh...sure."

"I see I need to explain things to you with greater clarity," the prince remarked. "Listen carefully. You will address me as 'Master' or 'my Prince,' and only by those terms. When I ask if you understand something, you will say yes, or no, and address me as either 'Master' or 'my Prince.' Understood?"

Sahak frowned. He didn't like the sound of what he'd gotten himself into. *Too late to back out now, I imagine. Unless I want to wind up being carved apart for research purposes by their doctor. That scares me more than this whole Master or my Prince bit anyway.*

"Do you understand me?" the prince asked, his voice and expression none too friendly.

"Yes, my Prince." At least "my Prince" didn't sound as subservient as "Master."

"Good." The vampire was watching him with a critical eye. "You will do as I tell you, without hesitation. Is this understood?"

"Look, I'm willing to have sex with you, but I've got no intention of being treated like a dog," he explained.

The vampire prince snapped his fingers.

Sahak grunted in pain as he was slammed into a stone wall. Stars burst across his vision from the impact of his skull on the unyielding surface. Regardless of the pain, the slim body pinning him to the wall had his cock hard and aching. Aching to be sunk into cool vampire flesh.

"Listen carefully," the red-haired vampire said, his face so close to Sahak's that their noses were almost touching. "You will obey Prince Lucien, or you will be returned to Dr. Sigismond for his studies. Do you understand?" The vampire lowered his voice to the barest hint of sound. "Remember our bargain. Lucien has you to do with as he pleases, and you get to fuck me."

Sahak remembered the beauty of the violet-eyed vampire's body, the way his lips had fitted around his cock. The way the vampire had taken in his entire length. Mouth gone dry, Sahak swallowed, aroused and wanting the creature pressed to him. "All right."

"Don't forget again!"

The slender vampire let him go, stepping away. A warning frosted the violet eyes, the threat of violence lying within their chill depths.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" the prince said, his gaze flicking down to Sahak's groin, then to the other vampire, an eyebrow lifting curiously. Prince Lucien stepped closer to Sahak, ran the tip of his finger down Sahak's chest. "If you want him, learn to obey me. He will be your reward for good behavior. The whip will be your punishment. Understood?"

"Yes, my Prince."

The finger moved lower, sliding along his belly. "Good. You will be mine by the time this day is over, or you will be dead. Do you understand this?"

"Yes, my Prince."

"Good." The finger moved to the base of his erection and stopped. His heart pounded, his whole body tense, wanting, and yet scared.

Will I be who I am now when this is over? Will I be a mindless thing? He shivered, his soul chilled by the terror of losing himself, of becoming a creature without will or thought. Without a sense of self.

The finger brushed across the top of his cock, touching the head. Sahak made no effort to stop the moan of pleasure, the soft cry of desire that slid from his parted lips.

Prince Lucien turned away and shoved the door open. He stepped aside. "Kinji, take him to the Chair. Bind him to it."

"Yes, Master," the other vampire said. He motioned to Sahak. "Come with me."

Since he had no other option—except death or being a lab experiment—Sahak followed the vampire into the dark room.

He was led to a peculiar chair with leather buckles fastened into the wood.

"Sit."

He positioned himself on the odd seat, which barely gave his bottom anything to rest on, though his thighs were well supported by the cool wood. The vampire fastened him to the seat with buckles around his thighs, belly, and chest.

Soft lips brushed over the edge of his ear. "He plans to turn you. You'll be part shifter and part vampire. A bloodbeast. It might kill you. It might not. While the wood and leather looks as if you can break it, believe me when I say it won't break. All of the furnishings of this room have been rendered unbreakable by vampire magic. Even I cannot break free from the bindings."

"Does he have to change me?" Sahak asked, voice tight with the fear. He didn't want to become a half-dead, half-living *thing*. Neither shifter nor vampire, he would be hated by both bloodsuckers and shifters alike.

"He wants your loyalty, so, yes."

Sahak closed his eyes, sagging in the restraints. *I wanted to fuck this Kinji, but the price... I don't want this! I don't. And I've got no choice. It's this, sure death, or being returned to the lab.*

Shit, shit, shit. What the fuck did I get myself into!

Chapter Nineteen

Lucien knew Kinji had spoken to the shifter in the hallway, but he'd been unable to hear what Kinji had said to the beast. Kinji was speaking to the shifter, while he bound the blond to the Chair.

Lucien watched them from where he stood at the door. The shifter was magnificent. Slightly taller than Lucien, broad shouldered, his entire body sheathed in an exquisite layer of powerful muscle. His cock ached to be sheathed inside the beast's masculine flesh.

Beside him, Kinji looked like a beautiful doll. Delicate porcelain. Lucien was also quite certain that Kinji could easily render the shifter helpless with a few well-placed blows of his hands or feet.

Lucien made his way across the room, moving slowly and silently, trying to get close enough to find out what Kinji was saying to the shifter. He arrived too late, Kinji stepping away from the bound beast, going to his knees and bowing to him.

"Kinji, I believe you are wearing too many clothes."

His lover stripped in a blur of vampire speed, his clothing falling to the floor in a flurry of rustling cloth and leather. His lover's sheathed sword landed atop the pile, which was within easy reach.

Lucien stood and regarded the shifter. If the change worked, he would have two loyal guards bound into his service. If not, he'd have a dead shifter to dispose of.

That would be a pity. I do want him for my harem.

Lucien touched the shifter's cheek and considered the best way to accomplish the changing. "Kinji."

His lover looked at him expectantly.

"I think perhaps a distraction is in order."

"What does Master have in mind?"

"I'll leave it up to you."

Kinji smiled and crawled to the shifter, kneeling in front of the beast. He turned a wicked smile on Lucien, then swooped down as fast as a striking falcon, his mouth wrapping around the shifter's hard cock.

The beast gasped, hips bucking but unable to move because of the restraints.

"Kinji, you are made of pure wickedness. Have I mentioned how much I love you?"

His lover stopped sucking the shifter's cock long enough to reply, "Not recently, Master."

Lucien laughed, and the shifter moaned as Kinji's mouth closed over the head of his cock again. Lust pulsed through Lucien's body as he watched Kinji work the shifter's flesh. Standing behind Kinji as he was, he had a wonderful view of his lover's bottom. Kinji's head bobbed up and down along the shifter's big cock, Lucien's blood heating as he watched his lover servicing the beast.

I want him. I want to fuck his ass while he sucks the shifter.

But that has to wait. I need to make the shifter mine first.

I hope to Mother Night he doesn't die.

Lucien moved around the Chair. He set his hands on the shifter's shoulders, smiling at the soft cries of pleasure Kinji was reaping from the beast.

Kinji's sire must have been a demon of lust. What other creature could do the things he can do with his mouth and body?

He knelt behind the Chair and bent his head to kiss the spot where shoulder and neck met. The shifter gasped, trying to fuck Kinji's mouth, his mind wholly focused on what Kinji was doing to him.

Good. Perhaps he won't notice anything else. Lucien sank his fangs into the shifter's throat. Hot blood filled his mouth. It tingled, sang of primal energy, of ancient forests and a long-gone yellow sun. Lucien swallowed, greedily gulping down the blood, hungry for the feel of it inside him.

The shifter gasped and struggled in the bindings, his body reacting to the drain, the mesmerizing power of a vampire bite. He moaned, fur rippling along his body, the transformation taking him from human appearance to the half-shifted form. A thick mane of hair spilled over Lucien's head and neck, the scent sharp and feline. Lucien's erection pressed painfully inside the constraints of his pants, his body filled with a glow like the sunlight he'd never seen, and he held on to the shifter and drank until the beast shuddered with climax, his body at the verge of death.

He licked the wound to close it, brought his wrist to his mouth, and tore it open before pressing it to the dying shifter's mouth. "Drink," he whispered into the beast's ear.

Lips parted, a rough tongue lapping at the flow of dark blood from Lucien's wrist. The shifter gasped, body arching, the magical bonds straining to hold him as Lucien's blood – aged with the power of Malachai – battled with the essence of a shifter.

An agonized scream came from the shifter, and his teeth latched onto Lucien's flesh, sinking deep, tearing tendons, cracking bones. Lucien gasped, eyes closed against the pain.

He could smell the sharp odor of death on the shifter, the beast dying.

But will he be reborn as a hybrid or will he die?

The shifter screamed, and Lucien pulled his mangled arm out of the beast's mouth, cradling it to him, the wound healing, dark, sluggish blood welling in the wound.

Kinji came to him, still licking shifter cum from his lips. He bowed to Lucien, but his eyes were on the wound on Lucien's arm. Lucien held his arm out to Kinji, flinching as his lover gently clasped his hand and forearm. Kinji bent to lick the wound, his tongue laving the torn flesh, the touch taking the pain away. Lucien smiled. He could feel Kinji's blood on the injury.

He must have bitten his own tongue.

The shifter continued to bellow his pain as vampire blood and shifter essence battled within his flesh. Lucien caressed the suffering male, his hand running through the thick mane, along the angry bite wound in his neck, down his shoulder.

"Kill me! Please kill me!" the shifter screamed.

Kinji's cool violet gaze met Lucien's, the eyes questioning. Offering to put the beast out of his misery if Lucien wished it.

He shook his head. "Give it time."

Kinji bowed and released Lucien's arm, which had completely healed, though it felt tender, and he pulled it close to his body as an instinctive protection.

The shifter's screams changed to agonized sobbing, and Lucien put his arm around the beast, whispering to the creature, "It's almost over."

"As I've said his name is Sahak, Master. Of course you could choose to give him a new name."

Lucien glanced at Kinji. "It is an odd name."

Kinji shrugged.

"Shhh...Sahak," Lucien murmured, stroking the shifter's mane. He could still detect the death odor on the beast, but another scent had joined it. The faint spice fragrance of a vampire.

The shifter was sobbing, weeping and trembling in the constraints. His body changed to that of a human, then reverted to the half form of his shifted beast.

Kinji joined Lucien, caressing the beast, running his hands over the shifter's chest and belly, stroking his thighs, his fingers venturing to his cock and balls. He grinned at Lucien in triumph when the shifter's cock stiffened. Lucien returned the smile.

"I think he may live," Lucien remarked.

"I think you're right, Master." Kinji bent down and took the hard flesh into his mouth.

The shifter groaned, fighting the restraints. "I want to fuck you!" the shifter growled out, the spicy scent coming from him strengthening as Lucien bent to kiss his throat. The wound had healed, further proof that the shifter's essence had accepted the vampire's blood, merging the two things into one.

Lucien had one thing left to do. He had to bind the newly created creature to him. He put his hand over Sahak's chest and whispered the words of binding into his ear. "Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, I so make thee mine."

Instead of the scream Lucien expected, Sahak groaned and came, his semen spattering Kinji's hands.

Smirking, Kinji licked the fluid away with evident relish.

"Who do you belong to, Sahak?"

The shifter sighed and replied, "You, Master."

* * * * *

Sahak closed his eyes, his body exhausted, his mind numb in the aftermath of the transformation from living shifter to quasi-living bloodbeast. He'd known it would hurt, but the reality had greatly surpassed his expectations.

The pair of vampires were touching him, his *master* caressing his shoulders and head, the other vampire playing with his stiff cock.

I'm so tired, and yet I want to fuck his sweet little ass.

"I think we can let him go now," Prince Lucien said.

Those wonderful little hands on his cock left it to begin releasing him from the restraints as his body drifted lazily from human form to half-shifted form and back.

I wonder if I can change to full animal form now or if that's been lost to me?

When the last strap fell away, he tried to get out of the Chair, but hands stopped him, his master's and those of the smaller vampire. The one with the amazing mouth that gave such pleasure.

"Rest. You aren't ready to try and move yet," he was told by the vampire prince to whom he belonged.

He sighed and tried to get comfortable, but the pressure of the seat on his tailbone—and his tail while he was in half form—hurt.

"I have decided to permit you to retain your own name," his master said.

"Thank you, my Prince," he replied automatically. He considered his predicament a moment, trying to determine if he had free will or not, but he couldn't really tell. He tried standing again and found himself held down.

"Sahak, please listen. You aren't physically stable yet," the prince told him. "You need to let your body recover or you could still slip away from me, and I want you too much to lose you after you've become a bloodbeast."

"All right," he replied and discovered he didn't have to say *Master* or *my Prince*. He retained at least some free will and that eased his anxiety a great deal. "I'd really like to move, though, because this chair is killing my tail."

"Help me, Kinji," the prince said.

Together the vampires lifted him out of the chair and carried him to a chaise longue. They lay him down and turned him onto his side.

"Is that better?" his master asked. He gazed at the vampire's handsome face, seeing a shocking display of actual concern. *Of course he's concerned. He just made me a bloodbeast and bound me to him. I belong to him.*

"Yes."

The prince sat down beside him and caressed his hair as he changed from half form to human appearance. The changes were slowing down. *Will I be able to shift at will when they're over with?*

"I feel so strange," he admitted.

"Of course you do," Prince Lucien remarked. "You died for a moment before my blood began the transformation. It's the only way the change from shifter to bloodbeast has a chance of working."

"Oh." He sighed. "I want to get my reward for going along with this."

"In due time," his master said. "You need to rest first."

Sahak snorted. "I'm trying to rest, but my cock has other ideas."

His master rolled him onto his back. "I see," he commented and stood. He took a step away from the chaise longue, taking a seat on a nearby chair that Sahak hadn't noticed. "Kinji, see what you can do to take care of that, will you?"

"Yes, Master." The red-haired vampire moved into Sahak's field of vision. Cool violet eyes focused on Sahak's face as the vampire straddled Sahak, his behind hovering over the tip of Sahak's erection.

Their master held out a bottle, and the vampire Sahak was about to fuck took it. He uncapped it and poured a cool, slick substance over Sahak's erection, his gaze never leaving Sahak's face.

"You'd better be a good fuck, furface."

"You'd better make this worth what I've done," Sahak countered.

The vampire's lips curled into a smug hint of a smile. The bottle was set aside, and the vampire sank down on his cock, taking him in as if his cock were far smaller. Tight

vampire flesh clasped his erection, and Sahak groaned. He turned his head to see their master watching them. At some point while he'd been distracted the prince had stripped and he sat sprawled in the chair, his cock hard and seeping droplets of precum that smelled of spice. The vampire's eyes were bright with desire as he watched them. He gave Sahak a wicked grin, scooted his chair closer, and took Sahak's hand into his own, guiding it to his stiff flesh.

"Do you think you can pleasure me?" the prince asked.

"I think I can manage," Sahak replied as he tugged gently on his master's cock.

The vampire lifted an eyebrow.

"Master," Sahak belatedly added, giving the prince a slight smile.

The sensations coming from his cock drew his attention to the other vampire. Lucien touched the silken hair tickling his thighs and belly and got his hand smacked for his temerity.

"No touching," the redhead told him.

"Really?" he drawled. "And what if I want to touch you?"

"I'll break your arms."

The prince coughed. "I believe that might limit my enjoyment, Kinji. I'm enjoying this, so don't spoil it. Now behave and let him touch you."

Kinji bowed his head. "As you wish, my Prince."

"Damn right this is *as I wish*, Kinji."

"Forgive me, Master."

Well, this Kinji's as much Prince Lucien's dog as I am, it would seem. I didn't know that, though he has shown Lucien a great deal of deference. I just thought it was a matter of rank; now I see he's as much owned as I am.

He slipped the fingers of the hand not busily stroking their master's erection through the silken steamers of Kinji's hair. *Every bit as soft as I expected.*

The feel of the vampire moving up and down his erection was slow and easy, the glide of the flesh pleasant, but not doing a lot to push him toward orgasm. His hand on the vampire prince's cock was moving faster, and every time the pad of his thumb swept over the sensitive head, their master let out a soft, appreciative sound.

Sahak discovered he liked the pleased sound Lucien made, and that got him to wondering what sort of sound the vampire might make if it were his mouth, not his hand on him. *I think I'll just find out what difference, if any, it makes.*

Letting go of Lucien's cock, he took the vampire by the wrist and yanked him over the lounge chair. He managed to get the vampire close enough to capture the hefty cock between his lips, keeping his teeth away from the tender flesh.

He couldn't help laughing at the startled cry his master let loose at the abrupt change of situation, or perhaps it was the shock of his mouth on the vampire's cock. Either way Sahak found amusement in the ability to surprise a vampire.

His master braced his hands on the side of the chaise longue as he sucked on the flesh he'd captured with his mouth. The few droplets of precum tasted sweet, like honey mixed with a sweet spice, and he lapped the head with his tongue.

I wonder how he'll react to a cat tongue on his cock? Let's find out.

Sahak made the conscious effort to shift and found that, while it took a bit more concentration, he was able to control the shift just as he had before this change to bloodbeast.

He lapped at the head of the prince's cock and heard him groan as his master's hands moved from the side of the chair to Sahak's body. One hand gripped his hair, pulling a bit roughly, the other pinched a nipple between finger and thumb and twisted.

Sahak groaned and bucked his hips, wanting more from the vampire straddling him. He worked the flesh in his mouth eagerly, finding the taste of his master's cock something worth savoring.

A hand swatted his thigh, and he yanked on the handful of hair he'd kept playing with, surprised at the sharp gasp that came from Kinji.

He likes it rough, does he? Good, then I don't have to worry about making him mad. He slid his hand upward through the vampire's hair and located the nape of his neck, twisting his fingers into the soft hair until he heard the vampire cry out. The sound sent a thrill of power through him, a sense of strength that added to his own growing pleasure.

Beneath two vampires, his body consumed by passion with a need for fulfillment, Sahak clutched at his lovers and rode the wild beast of need. Or perhaps the beast rode him. Sahak didn't know, didn't care. He belonged to this vampire prince, belonged to him to the very roots of his soul. Nothing else mattered to him now. Lucien. Kinji. They were his world, and in the bright flash of orgasm, he knew this was where he had always belonged.

Lucien came in his mouth, and he swallowed every drop, relishing the wonderful taste. His master pulled away, and Sahak's spent cock slipped from Kinji's heat. Drifting toward an exhausted sleep, he heard a sound and turned to find Kinji bent over the chair their master had been in earlier, Lucien's cock deep inside him, their master's hand wrapped around Kinji's dripping cock.

Sounds of flesh striking flesh and Kinji's cries grew louder and louder. Sahak smiled and let sleep take him into the darkness of dreams where honey-and-spice-flavored vampires made love to him and the beast he'd become roared into the night.

Chapter Twenty

Lucien awakened, a groan coming from him as he opened his eyes to a view of thick golden hair. His body told him the sun yet graced the sky outside, though this bedchamber lay bound by darkness, the heavy shutters closed against the day.

Thunder rumbled, the stones of the Tower vibrating from the onslaught of a powerful storm that raged around the Black Fortress.

Beside him, his bloodbeast muttered in his sleep and turned over, reaching for him. He diverted the arm around a pillow and slipped from bed, padding barefoot to the door leading to his study. He listened for any sound to tell him where Kinji might be, but he heard nothing.

Frowning, he checked the dressing room and bathing chamber, but he found no trace of Kinji.

Where in hell is he? He left me alone with Sahak, a newly made bloodbeast, as if he trusts the shifter to protect me as he does. And such trust was unlike his Kinji.

He returned to his bedroom and the warmth of the shifter's body, letting the beast wrap him in powerful arms as he mulled over the question of where Kinji might have gone.

Howling wind and the terrible blasts of thunder vibrated through the walls as he waited for Kinji to return. Tired, he drifted into an uneasy sleep fragmented by the storm into fitful dozes interposed with moments of wakefulness.

A slim, cool hand touched his cheek, and Lucien opened his eyes to find Kinji standing beside the bed, his garments damp, hair darkened by the rain dripping from the end of his braid.

He sat up. "What is it that's had you out on a night like this?"

"Gideon and the Shadows have returned."

Lucien shoved the bedcovers aside and headed for the dressing room, Kinji at his heels. "They've brought her, then?"

"Yes."

"Wake the shifter," he said, motioning Kinji out. Lucien dressed quickly, returning to his bedchamber to find his bloodbeast dressed in a simple tunic and trousers, a pair of boots on his feet. Seeing Sahak standing beside Kinji drove home two facts to Lucien. First came the fact that the shifter was *his*. Second, he realized Sahak was one of the biggest shifters he'd seen. Much bigger than any werewolf, Sahak towered over Kinji.

Seeing Lucien, Kinji went to his knees, bowing his head.

Sahak surveyed Lucien from head to toe, then knelt.

Lucien smiled. *Bound and mine, but no more broken than Kinji is. I suspect he will prove as entertaining and useful as Kinji in time. But will I grow to love him? Or will he learn to love me?*

Those were questions only time could answer. Like the question of Fleur and the pull of bloodkin between them. Only time could say whether the bond of True Mates would form between them.

I hope it will. I need an heir. I'm the last survivor of my line now that my grandsire and father are gone.

Which brought his thoughts back to where they were going.

He snapped his fingers and headed out of his private rooms, Kinji and Sahak following along in his wake the way a pair of well-trained dogs would follow their master.

"Where have they taken her?" Lucien asked.

"To the dungeon. They thought it the safest place."

They reached the bottom level of the Tower, Lucien pausing to regard the blasts of wind-driven rain sweeping the courtyard between the Tower and the distant entry to the rest of the Fortress. "Perhaps we should take the inner ways," he suggested.

"As His Highness wishes," Kinji replied.

Lucien noticed his lover's smirk. "I hate getting my clothes wet."

The smirk didn't waver. "Of course, Highness."

Lucien went into the armory room of the Tower and led the way into the secret passages of the Fortress. "I'm going to go to the Grand Audience chamber, Kinji. Have the *princess* brought to me there."

Kinji bowed, gave the shifter a look of such menace, Lucien had to stop himself from laughing. *So that's how he's done it. He's got the shifter firmly under his thumb. I wonder how he managed it?* Lucien stifled a chuckle when he figured out how Kinji had done it by the way the shifter watched his lover hurry away. Sahak's gaze never left Kinji's behind.

Sex. He found the shifter's weakness and exploited it. Naughty Kinji, I should punish you, but this is all too amusing.

He went to the Grand Audience Hall, the guards stationed there sending messengers to the nobles who resided in the Fortress, summoning them to the Hall. Lucien waited in the area behind his throne, concealed from view by anyone in the Great Hall by an intervening wall. He watched the room through a spy hole and waited for the nobles and their retinues to arrive.

Early as it was, the Hall began to fill quickly while Lucien watched the arrival of his people, clusters of nobles talking, curious about why they'd been summoned. He'd given the order but not the reason.

Let them assemble; then I can make my charges against Amalinda in front of them and present the evidence of her guilt. I will let them decide her fate, rather than doing it myself. This way none of the princes can accuse me of rendering a biased judgment.

He signaled the court herald, an older vampire named Cedric whom his grandsire had appointed to the position centuries ago, long before Lucien himself had been born.

"Please take your seats!" the herald ordered. "His Highness will be here soon."

The assembled nobles and their retinues of lesser vampires and a few humans found their seats, filling them to capacity, overflowing into the aisles along the walls.

Gideon stepped out of the shadows and bowed low. "We're ready, Highness."

"Would you please summon Dr. Sigismond for me?"

"Already done, Highness. His Grace gave the order. Dr. Sigismond is waiting to make his appearance in one of the waiting rooms."

"Very good. Tell Kinji to bring her in after I'm seated."

"Yes, Highness."

Something in Gideon's expression kept him from leaving. He frowned. "What is it?"

"We encountered the wolves, Highness."

"What happened?"

"I believe they were a renegade pack, my Liege. A pack working with Princess Amalinda and her father to bring about the downfall of your family."

Lucien nodded. "As I had begun to suspect from the information we've had on the situation. Is that all?"

"Yes, Highness."

"Good. Return to Kinji. I'm sure he'll need your assistance to keep Amalinda in check."

A perfectly nasty smile curled Gideon's mouth. "Not so, my Liege. Duke Kinji is more than capable of handling the wench, as we've got her bound in enough bespelled chain to hold Duke Kinji himself."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Highness. Duke Kinji insisted."

Lucien grinned. "Yes, I suppose he would want to ensure she couldn't escape."

"Naturally, Highness."

"Well, go along and make a show of it with him. You know how he enjoys making grand entrances."

"Very true, my Prince." Gideon bowed and vanished into the shadows.

Lucien glanced at Sahak. "You follow me out there and sit on the floor to the left of the throne. Kinji will sit on the right side."

"Yes, Highness," Sahak murmured.

Lucien signaled to the herald, and Cedric's voice rose above the murmur of the assembled vampires. "His Highness, our sworn Liege, Prince Lucien of the Black Fortress."

A respectful silence fell as Lucien walked to the tall bloodwood throne where Prince Luc had formerly held audience. He took his seat, watching the crowd, seeing the expressions of shock and surprise as the vampire lords and ladies realized the blond man with him was a surface.

Or, more to the point, a bloodbeast.

To them, such a creature would serve to prove his abilities as a sorcerer and enhance his status among the other rulers of the Dominions. Few vampires of any age could successfully make a bloodbeast, much less bind one to their will.

He stood for a moment, regarding his gathered subjects, then took his seat and nodded to Herald Cedric.

"You may be seated!" Cedric told the assembly.

Lucien let the crowd settle, and then he spoke. "My people, I have summoned you here at this hour to act as judges in a matter of importance to us all. Namely, the deaths of my grandsire and father."

Murmuring filled the hall, but at his gesture for silence, the whispering ceased.

"Yes, the culprits have been identified. One has already met his deserved fate at the hands of Duke Kinji, who saved me from death."

This time there were outcries, anger voiced against anyone who would try to strike Lucien down. A few of the nobles demanded to know who had sent the killer, who the killer was, and what was to be done about the assassin's master.

"Please, listen!" Lucien said, his voice carrying over the shouts.

Silence fell.

"Duke Kinji, bring forth the prisoner."

Kinji, clothed in black leather, along with the full contingent of Shadows, stepped into the room. Gideon, along with his second in command, brought Amalinda into the room, the rest of the Shadows forming a guard squad around them. A contingent of the regular Fortress guards brought up the rear.

The murmurs and shocked whispers filled the room.

"You bastards!" Amalinda shouted as the Shadows brought her forward. "Let me go! My father will decorate Talonguard with your heads!"

Lucien frowned. *So she doesn't know he's dead. I knew it the instant my grandsire and father met their ends. Perhaps that power does not lie within their line, though I'd thought such a connection was a given between parent and offspring.*

Kinji brought the Shadows to a stop ten feet from the bottom of the dais where Lucien and his bloodbeast sat, Lucien on his throne, the beast crouching on the floor to Lucien's left.

I'd not thought of the political implications such a creature gives Lucien. No one can doubt his power, and this day will see his reputation among the other princes increased. They'll have no choice but to respect him once this business with the murders is taken care of.

He glanced at Amalinda. Her clothes were torn, her hair disheveled, twigs and bits of leaves and pine needles clinging in the dark tresses.

He bowed low to Lucien. "My Prince, we have brought before you the originator of the plot that ended the lives of your grandsire, Prince Luc, and also your father, Prince Laurent, as you have requested."

"Highness, please, how can you have the ruler of a Dominion, the Princess Amalinda, brought here under such appalling pretense?" Earl Odel – who lived under Lucien's rule but was not formally one of Lucien's liegemen – demanded.

"Earl Odel, evidence will be presented that will prove the Princess Amalinda's guilt in the matter of Prince Luc's and Prince Laurent's deaths. We will also present evidence that she made an attempt on the life of His Highness, Prince Lucien, through an agent of her Dominion," Kinji told him, which also explained why every vampire household within the Fortress had been summoned.

"I don't doubt you believe such accusations to be true, Duke Kinji, but –"

Kinji's glare silenced the earl. "I believe you are here on the sufferance of Prince Lucien, Earl Odel. It might be wise to keep silent on matters which don't concern you."

The vampire earl's expression turned sullen, but he sat down without further comment.

Amalinda was forced to her knees at the foot of the dais, Gideon and one of the other Shadows holding her there.

"How dare you do this to me!" she raged.

"How dare you turn on my grandsire as you did! How dare you cause the deaths of my grandsire and father. How dare you try and kill me! How dare you use magic against my family!" Lucien's red eyes burned with fury. "How dare you work with the wolves and destroy one of my villages?"

"Lies!" Amalinda spat. "All lies! I demand you release me!"

"Your demands have no meaning here. This is my Dominion, not yours.

"You have no right to do this, Lucien. None!"

"Don't I, Amalinda? You must realize I have proof, or I wouldn't have had you brought here."

"Proof of what!" she demanded.

"I believe the charges against you were clearly stated."

"And you, Lucien, are a liar!" She struggled to rise, to break free, but old as she was, Gideon and his companion were more than capable of restraining her. Unable to get loose, she subsided, sinking to her knees.

"We both know I'm not lying, Amalinda. Malachai came here to kill me, whether to suit you or himself I don't know, but the fact remains he made an attempt on my life. An attempt that, as you can clearly see, failed."

A murmur passed through the assembled vampires. None of the nobles in the Fortress had been told of Malachai's attempt to kill Lucien, and the few guards who'd known about it had been ordered to keep silent.

"What have you done to my father?" Amalinda asked. "I demand to see him right now!"

"What do you think happened to him?" Lucien questioned. "He tried to kill me. Did you think I would allow him to walk out of here?"

Amalinda's pale violet eyes lifted to glare hate at Lucien. "Let him go!"

"You misunderstand, what Prince Lucien means," Kinji said. "He was a danger to Lucien. He is no longer a danger to anyone."

She stared at Kinji. "What have you done to him?"

"I cut his head off and burned his body. I have disposed of his head in such a way that he cannot be returned from the Last Sleep."

"You bastard!" Amalinda shrieked. "You murdering son of a human whore!" She surged to her feet, but didn't remain there, the pair of Shadows shoved her back to the floor.

Kinji offered her a tight, humorless smile. "My mother was the daughter of a respected samurai house, while your mother, as I recall, plied her trade in a Texas cathouse.

"Not that any of this matters. You and your father worked in conjunction to kill Prince Luc and Prince Laurent, and you would also have destroyed Prince Lucien. Unfortunately for you and your own sire, your plot against Prince Lucien didn't have the same outcome. I suspect Malachai came here to make sure Lucien died."

"I had nothing to do with this!" she argued.

"Now who's the liar, Amalinda?" Lucien asked. "Dr. Sigismond, please present the evidence."

The doctor came into the room from a door to one side of the dais. Two of his lab assistants followed, pulling along a device they had mounted on wheels.

Sigismond coughed and glanced toward Kinji. "I will do my best to explain my findings, but to laymen unused to dealing with magic or the technology used to detect it, some things may be hard to understand."

"Do your best to explain it," Lucien requested.

"Of course, Highness." Sigismond cleared his throat again. "Duke Kinji noticed something odd, a strange odor about some of the soap that Prince Lucien was being bathed with," he began and then went on to explain the events of the last few days. He further explained tests had been done on some of the things that had been in use by Princes Luc and Laurent before their deaths and that those things too had tested positive for the baneful charms.

"During testing I determined the source of these baneful charms had to be cast by a person very skilled in the magical arts. Being the case, it left us with few parties able to create such complex spells. Both Malachai and his daughter Amalinda were suspects. When Malachai tried to kill Prince Lucien, it eliminated all other suspects. Other clues within the magic pointed to Amalinda also being involved."

"Thank you, Dr. Sigismond," Lucien said. "Would you please verify our suspicions?"

"Of course, Your Highness." The doctor crossed the short distance between himself and Amalinda. He reached out and plucked a hair from her head.

"I did nothing!" she argued.

"We shall see," Lucien replied as the doctor placed the hair into the magoscope and turned it on.

"I have set it to determine if the source of the malefic charms came from the person who provided the hair. If this is the case, we should see the gray disk here" — he indicated a point on the machine — "turn green."

A few moments passed and the indicator remained gray.

"See? I didn't do it!" Amalinda cried out. "Your prince is a fool! A madman! He has no right to —"

"Silence!" Kinji hissed as the indicator changed color to a brilliant shade of emerald green.

The assembly's whispering turned to shouts of anger, cries for justice.

Prince Lucien stood, hands lifted to request silence. The enraged shouting subsided.

Kinji glanced at the back of the hall, wondering if *she* would come. Wondering if *she* knew what was happening or if her mind was too far gone to comprehend what was happening in her own home.

I think she knew what was happening, but locked up she couldn't bring a warning to anyone. I should have freed her before now; maybe she could have helped Lucien.

"I know you're all angry and with good reason," his lover began and had to stop as more shouts followed his words. "They were my grandsire and father, taken from us

by the machinations of vampires we thought our friends. One has already met the fate deserved for such a crime. But Princess Amalinda has been brought here to be sentenced as you feel is deserved. She murdered our Prince Luc and my father, Prince Laurent. What justice do you want carried out for these crimes?"

The Shadows dragged Amalinda to her feet for sentencing as a voice rose above the angered shouts. A scream of shrill hate, of barely contained rage, filled the room.

A tiny smile curled Kinji's lips as Lucien's granddame floated into the room. The banshee hovered near Amalinda, her withered arm pointing at the cowering female vampire held in the grip of the Shadows and the magical chains preventing Amalinda from turning her spells on them. "Death!" the banshee screamed. "Death!"

The word was taken up by the assembly, becoming a chant.

"You wouldn't dare!" Amalinda shouted.

The banshee screamed, the ghostly face inches from Amalinda's. "You killed my Luc, you killed my boy, Laurent. Now you'll die! Die, but never find the rest of Final Sleep."

The banshee grabbed for her, the phantom hand passing through her flesh, reaching inside and pulling out a ghostly *something*. Amalinda shrieked, her cry echoing off the stone walls as the banshee pulled her soul from her body, which crumpled like a pile of old laundry to the floor.

"You're mine, little witch. Mine to torment for all of eternity!"

Still screaming, Amalinda's ghost and the banshee vanished from the hall.

Kinji covered his smile with his hand as several made vampires scurried in to take the withered body of Amalinda away.

Cedric's voice rose over the astonished voices of the vampires in the hall. "Princess Amalinda and Prince Malachai of Talonguard have been duly executed under the law. Long live Prince Lucien of Black Fortress Dominion, Keeper of the Southern March, Prince of Talonguard."

Epilogue

Three months later

Lucien stretched and glanced to where Kinji and Sahak lay sprawled on the carpet near the fireplace. They'd spent the last few weeks putting things in order at Talonguard. Tomorrow they would return home to the Black Fortress.

Magnolia, newly made vampire, ghosted in from the side room where a few girls from his bloodharem were staying. She came to him and draped a soft arm around his shoulder, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Come to bed, Master."

"Soon," he promised, slipping an arm around her waist.

"That's what you told me an hour ago." She ran her hand through his hair. "Aren't you tired of looking at these books yet?"

"He never gets tired of reading those musty things," Sahak remarked.

"There's nothing wrong with studying magic," Lucien said.

"No, there isn't," Kinji agreed, propping his chin on his hand. He regarded Lucien for a moment, then added, "Except when those studies mean he's neglecting his bloodharem, of course."

"I fucked all three of you this morning," Lucien reminded.

"You fucked them, Master, but you left poor little Fleur out of it," the girl said from the doorway.

Lucien sighed. "I'm in hell."

Fleur, Sahak, and Magnolia laughed.

"Well, I *am* a demon," Kinji remarked. "So yes, this could be your own personal touch of hell."

His violet-eyed lover got up and crossed the room, coming to a stop atop his desk. He took the book from Lucien's hand and set it aside. "Books later, fucking now."

Lucien smiled and stood, grabbing a handful of Kinji's hair. "Fair enough. Let's go," he said and led them toward his bedchamber.

When they were inside, he pulled Magnolia close and kissed her. "Get to the bed, girl."

She hurried over, her soft bottom and large breasts jiggling in a way he found pleasing. Next, he kissed Fleur, feeling the tug of bloodkin, a tingle that grew stronger with each passing day. Soon, very soon, the True Mate bond would form, and then he could think about making an heir. The thought both excited and terrified him. *Me, a father? I never even considered it, and yet I find the idea appealing.*

He swatted her on the bottom and snapped his fingers. Fleur hurried to the bed, where she joined Magnolia, both of them giggling and fondling one another.

Lucien grabbed Sahak's golden mane and forced him to his knees, the bloodbeast looking up at him, a minor defiance that he loved to punish. He leaned down and kissed Sahak, tearing his lips, listening to the bloodbeast moan.

He sent Sahak to the bed with a snap of his fingers.

Kinji stood by the door, his violet eyes dark with lust, his lips curled in an arrogant smirk. A challenge.

Lucien backhanded Kinji hard enough to send him to the floor. A whimper of pain-desire came from his lover, the violet eyes lifting to gaze on him with a mix of burning lust and adoration.

"Bed!" he ordered.

Kinji didn't move. Lucien grabbed his lover by the arm and shoved him toward the bed. Kinji stumbled and fell beside the bed in a sprawl of pale limbs and deep red hair.

"Sahak, get a paddle and some restraints from the drawer."

"Yes, Master," his bloodbeast replied and hurried to follow his orders. He came back with a bloodwood paddle and heavy leather and steel restraints.

Lucien hauled Kinji to his feet and secured him between the posts at the foot of the canopy bed. He motioned Magnolia to the foot of the bed and had her lay down. He bent Kinji over her and applied the paddle to his lover's behind.

Kinji gasped with the first stinging swat. Magnolia shivered at the feel of Kinji's punishment as he bumped into her.

Sahak and Fleur knelt in the middle of the bed, watching Kinji's punishment with bright, eager eyes.

Lucien looked at his lovers, his favorites from his bloodharem, and decided he no longer required the rest of his harem. He had these four, the ones he loved most, and they were, he realized, enough to satisfy him. He loved them, each in a different way, for different reasons.

He motioned Sahak to come closer and kissed the bloodbeast, then swatted Kinji's butt hard enough to make the half demon grunt in pain. Beneath him Magnolia giggled and said, "Someone wants to be fucked, or do some fucking. Either that or there's a sausage in bed with us."

"I bet it's a blood sausage." Fleur giggled. "Maybe you should taste it, Magnolia."

"Well, Master hasn't said I can yet, otherwise I would."

Lucien broke the kiss with Sahak. "I think I want this vicious bloodbeast of mine to give it a try."

Magnolia moved out from under Kinji, who turned to glare at Lucien. Lucien frowned and gave Kinji a smack on the ass. Kinji moaned from the swat, then gasped as Sahak's mouth closed around his cock.

Smirking, Lucien patted Kinji's reddened ass. "Be a good boy and I might fuck you later." He leaned closer to Kinji and whispered, "Or I might have Sahak fuck you into submission."

Kinji's lip curled upward in a sneer of contempt. "As if he could."

Lucien chuckled. "As if he hasn't," he countered.

Sahak grinned. "I seem to remember someone begging me to let him come."

Kinji glared at him. "Shut. Up."

Lucien laughed and smacked Kinji on the ass, which made him whimper and jump. Lucien moved to the bed, sat down on the edge. He pulled Fleur over his lap and gave her a swat from his bare hand.

"Oooh, Master!" she cried out, squirming as he spanked her. Her movements excited him, and he rolled her off his lap and onto her back as the True Mate tingle danced along his nerves. A thrill of excitement went through Lucien, and he gripped her hips, lifting her to him. He plunged inside her wet and wanting pussy, and Fleur cried out as his cock filled her. He rolled over onto his back, bringing Fleur with him, and motioned Magnolia to straddle his face so his tongue could delve into her and taste the sweetness of her cunt.

Magnolia moved into place, her slit over his mouth, face-to-face with Fleur. The girls started kissing as Lucien sucked Magnolia's cunt, Fleur riding his cock. He caressed the girls and smiled at the sounds coming from Kinji, whom he'd left bound to the bed, in a perfect position to watch what he was doing with Fleur and Magnolia.

He's always eager to please if he's the last one I fuck.

He could hear Kinji moaning, hear the sounds of Sahak sucking his red-haired lover's cock, a sharp cry from Kinji telling him when Sahak scored his flesh with sharp fangs.

Fleur rode him hard, Magnolia's sweetness spilling into his eager mouth, his body tensing, then shattering into orgasm. Warmth flooded through his veins, filled his body with something that burned like fire, and tingled like an electrical current.

The True Mate bond came alive between him and Fleur.

Kinji, Sahak, Magnolia, and Fleur. I love them all.

This is the real magic. The strongest spell known to anyone. The magic of love shared.

And it was a spell he wanted to be trapped in for the rest of his existence.

 THE END 

Michael Barnette

Michael Barnette has been nominated three times for the Gaylactic Spectrum Award, the first time in 2003 for his short story *Zoner*, which was the first piece of erotica he ever wrote. *Zoner* was featured in the Lambda Award Finalist anthology *Wired Hard #3* from Circlet Press.

Once a resident of Coconut Grove and South Beach in Florida, Michael relocated to Georgia, where there were fewer gunshots and yard-to-yard searches for suspects to disturb the writing muses. He has since moved on and now lives in a very small town in the Midwest.