

# Missing Pieces Willa Okati

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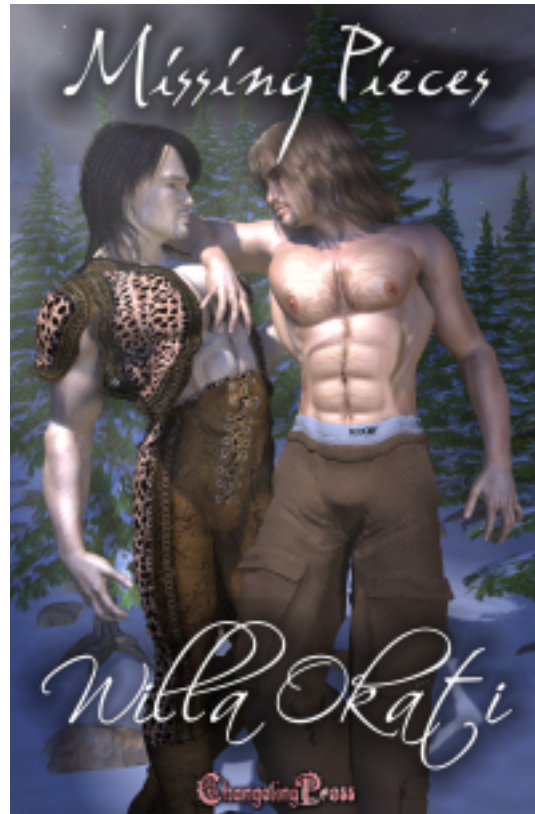
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## Chapter One

A sheet of fire rolled over his vision, red and gold and blue, and then there was an utter blackness. All fell quiet and still.

He was alone.

A long stretch of time passed in which nothing happened at all, and then, with what felt like a blink and a gasp for air -- although he didn't seem to have a body to do either with -- he found himself awake again, standing at the window of a dugout house, gazing in. There were two men inside, laughing and joking, seemingly playing games with one another. Not children's games, though, oh no. The two of them were engaging in adult play, make no mistake about it.

He recognized one of the men. Himself.

"I know that person. It's me," he said, a little dumfounded, because how could one *not* be surprised when seeing oneself across a room, bare of any clothes? He wasn't sure who he was talking to -- physically he seemed to be alone.

He could, however, feel a sort of force pressing against his incorporeal back, and sensed that someone or something stood out there with him, waiting to hear what he'd say and see what he would do. "Who are you?" he asked, his voice meant to be steady but coming out as a thready whisper on the wind. Insubstantial as he was himself.

He wanted to grasp the window ledge for more security, but feared to see his fingers, if he had fingers in that state, passing directly through the molded sod. "Am I dead?"

There came a definite sense of amusement from whatever was watching. It wasn't malicious. Rather, the feeling made him think of being a child again and listening to an indulgent grandmother watching him play with a new toy.

"Not dead, then?"

Patient silence.

"Very well, I'm alive. Why am I here, then? What am I doing, watching myself?"

A thought occurred to him. "Who is that in there with me?"

He felt a mild curiosity from the presence.

"I think I ought to have some idea, given that we're both naked and he appears to be ready to suck my -- er --" He had no idea if he should be crude or polite to the entity behind him. He felt a wispy nudge, so he swallowed his doubts and went on as he'd started. "He's going to suck my cock. My legs are spread wide for him. I should at least know his name."

The presence pressed against him, molding against his body like a lover draping themselves over his back. "It's clear to me that we're sexual partners," he snapped. "Why don't I know who he is?"

As he watched, the man -- dark of hair and chiseled of jaw -- knelt between his corporeal legs and began to suck. He tried to gasp again, because the sight was, frankly, hotter than the fires of all the hells, and also because he thought he should *feel* something in his own present state of being.

He didn't, though. "Tell me," he asked -- no, demanded. "I want to know what's going on."

In answer, he felt a ripple of amusement from the presence, and then a hard blow between his shoulder blades. It hurt, as if an unseen hand had penetrated his skin and gone directly to his heart, and he opened his mouth to cry out in protest.

But what came out was, "Fuck! Oh, gods, fuck, yes!"

He opened his eyes in shock. He was back in his own body, feeling wet suction on his cock and two chilly hands on either of his legs, holding them in place. His own voice urged on the man between his legs. A man who he didn't know, or at least didn't recognize, with a thick mane of sable hair and pale skin.

"Wait," he choked, trying to sit up. "Stop. Just for a moment."

The man sucking him off chuckled around his cock. The thrill of sensation that shot through him was enough to drive him wild and he leaned back, unable to help

himself. He'd worry about questions later. Right then, there was only the pleasure of the moment. And oh, gods, what bliss!

"Be still, now," the man pulled off long enough to say. "You like this, don't you? I know you do; you've always been a slut for having your cock sucked." He felt the skin of his inner thighs being caressed. "You're as bad as I am when it comes to *wanting* to suck you off. Gods, you're so irresistible, lying on your back with your legs wide for me."

*Shut up, he thought. Go back to what you were doing.*

As if the man could read his thoughts he obeyed, plunging his mouth down over the cock in question and applying suction, his cheeks hollowing out. The feeling was indescribable, even though he found himself struggling for words inside his head.

Tight. Wet. Rough, with the light scrape of strong, sharp teeth and the hard pulls up and down. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Whoever he was, apparently he liked his sex with a little pain because those teeth were about to drive him completely out of his mind.

He felt his orgasm building as a quick rush, like waves crashing into the shore -- and beaches, yes, he remembered those, a stretch of white sands and clear purple-tinged water. But then he was about to come, so he pushed those thoughts aside and focused, as if he could do anything else, on the intense sensations building at the head of his cock. The organ felt swollen and hard as an unripe plum. Drops of pre-come welled from him, swiped away by an eager tongue on each down stroke, the play of that tongue sending him thrashing against the rough bed he lay on.

"Can't wait -- going to come --" he managed to get out. He saw the man nod briefly, then felt the suction double. It was all too much, and his body gave itself up to the pleasure. Arching his back, nearly clearing the bed, he seized as if he were having a convulsion and poured his seed out into the eager receptacle of the man's mouth. Hot jets spurted from him, more than he would have thought possible, if he could think.

Then the moment was over and he collapsed back against the bed, his breathing rough and ragged. He managed to drag a hand up to his head and wiped his forearm across his face, clearing off some of the sweat.

"Let me do that for you," the man who'd been sucking him said, licking his lips and swarming upward.

Reality pushed back in on him and he kicked out, scrambling upright into the center of the bed, protecting his body with both his arms and his legs drawn up tight. "Stop! Who -- who in the hells are you? What are we doing here? Where is this place?"

The man gave him a strange look -- then paused. He withdrew, slowly, as if he wasn't sure what he was doing. When the man reached his feet, he shook his head and lowered himself into a kneeling position at the foot of the bed. "I -- I don't know," he said, sounding confused as a child who'd lost his way. "I can't seem to remember my name." Amber-colored eyes, just the shade of good whiskey, flickered up to meet his own. "Who are you?"

There was a pause as they tried to collect themselves. "Neither of us knows anything?" he himself asked at last, trying to make sense of the situation. "I had thought... what you said when you were..."

"Aye." The man looked perplexed. "It seems as if I knew you, but now everything's slipped away like sand in a glass. Things are there, but I can't reach them." The look on the man's face turned pleading. "What's happening here?"

He shook his head. "I've no idea. I'm not even sure what to call you. Or have you call me, for that matter." Sitting up a little, he gazed at the man, searching for any sort of clue. Anything that would spark his memory.

Oh, but the man did have a handsome face on him, square-jawed and high in the cheekbones. His nose looked a little crooked, as if it had once been broken and not set properly. His mouth quirked higher on one side than the other, so he appeared to have a permanent half-smile. Not a perfect arrangement of features, but he decided it was the small imperfections that made a face interesting enough to fuck the body that came along with it.

At that thought he paused, feeling something tickle at his memory -- but no, no good. It slipped away. He resumed his visual inventory, feeling his own recently-spent cock stir at the sight. Evidently his body had set an agenda without consulting his brain.

The man obviously looking to him for answers... what else could be said? For one, he was well-muscled, his chest broad and his arms thick, legs long and hard. And while the man might be confused, his cock was definitely not; the organ hung ready between his thighs, obscenely dark with blood and wet at the tip.

Looking at the rod, he felt his mouth begin to water. A brief sense memory of salty musk tickled his brain. That time, he managed to grab the thought and hold on.

Yes... he *had* been on his knees in front of this man before. But when? Where? And why couldn't they remember who they were?

There must be some sort of clue.

Both were naked of any identification badges. "Search the clothes," he said in a sudden fit of inspiration. "Perhaps we've got something in there to identify ourselves with."

"Clothes?"

"Just over there. And there. And there, too." They must have undressed in a hurry. Garments lay strewn everywhere, from one end of the room to the other. They started at the door, though, with what looked like a coat flung down and left to lie in a puddle of -- what? Water? Melting snow?

"Aye, could be." The man, seemingly heedless of his hard-on that refused to go down, got up and strode toward the door. Admirable scenery as seen from behind. His mouth began to water again. He snatched at another sense memory, one of parting those tightly rounded cheeks to lick at the puckered hole hidden between them.

Yes. He knew this man. Intimately. So why couldn't he...

The man apparently remembered how to do a search. Posture casual but hands efficient, he busily pushed his fingers into pockets, running them across the linings where something might be sewn in, and checking for labels. He repeated the process with thick over-shirts, thinner thermal under-shirts, and then the two pairs of pants, one made of black leather. Those had no pockets at all, but they looked well-worn, and in the man's hand made a slithery sound, almost as if it were still alive.

Dropping the pants, the man shook his head. "Nothing. No necklaces, pendants, or badges." He wrinkled his forehead and put a hand around his neck. "There ought to be something here," he said, rubbing his throat. "I can feel a little groove where it's worn in. Why don't I have whatever it was anymore?"

A dash of sympathy tempered the fear. "We're in this together," he soothed. "All right, so we've no identification in our clothing. I see some packs... no, wait on those for a minute. Come a little closer and let me take a better look at you." He'd noticed that the man was tattooed, and that was one thing. Pointing at the stylized design wound around one thick bicep, he asked, "Let me see?"

The man bent to crawl on the bed with him as he looked. He felt his heart sink as he gazed at the design, because while it ought to mean something, it didn't. The pattern was just a series of spikes and whorls banding the muscle. It looked almost new, the inks still dark and crisp beneath pale white skin. He touched the man's arm lightly, feeling the play of muscles as the man flinched in surprise. "Since we don't know who we are, I'll call you Thorn -- for now. Will that do?"

The man blinked. "Aye. Thorn. That'll be all right." He reached out and splayed his fingers wide over his chest. "And you, I'll call Knot."

"Knot?"

"Aye. Can't you see? There's a great tangled knot on your chest. Tattooed in, like my design. Go ahead and look," Thorn encouraged.

Knot -- as he supposed he must call himself then, because turnabout was fair play -- looked down to see that he did have a tattoo of his own, placed directly between his nipples. Looked like a stylized design with lines interweaving round and round about in a circle, each one seeming to have no beginning and no end.

"Knot it is," he said, feeling something relax in his chest. This was all still confusing as the hells, but at least he had something to call the man. Thorn. And himself. Knot.

Not much to go on, but at least they had a start.



Gazing at Thorn, Knot felt that neither of them knew exactly what to do next. He glanced around the small room, which appeared to be all there was of the place. A dugout house, if the earthen walls and small cut-out window were anything to go by. Snow was blowing hard past the translucent covering of waxed paper at that same window. He could hear the sound of the wind as well as see the flakes gusting down.

The room's fireplace held the remnant of a dying blaze, the sight reminding him of how cold he was. Shivering, he searched for blankets on this bed, then realized he was lying on top of them.

"Get off," he told Thorn. "I'm about to freeze. I want to get under the covers."

Thorn was shaking a bit, too, although whether it was from shock or the temperature of the air, Knot couldn't say. "Getting warm, now there's a good idea. That is... if you don't mind the sharing."

"No. Two's better than one for regaining body heat." Although how he was going to handle being pressed up against Thorn's erection, which amazingly showed no sign of flagging, Knot didn't know. All the same, he eased his way off the bed -- his legs were sore from being spread wide -- and tugged down the thick blankets. Teeth chattering, he slid beneath them and let out a sigh. The bed was still cold and he knew they should build up the fire, but just being covered would do for now.

Thorn joined him, and as the larger of the two, or perhaps out of some familiarity they didn't recognize anymore, spooned up against Knot from behind. Thorn's erection pressed hard and insistent against the crease of Knot's ass, making him bite his lip and struggle against the urge to push back, grinding into the man's groin and egging him on. Sex should have been the last thing they needed to think about at a time like this...

...except he couldn't seem to help himself. At the memory of Thorn's dark hair buried between his legs, and the tight, wet pressure of his mouth, Knot had to hold back a shudder of pleasure. *There are more important things to concern myself with*, he insisted to the voice in his head that begged him for more sex.

*Like what?* it answered back, saucy as a village maiden with her skirts kilted up to her knees.

"Knot?" Thorn asked tentatively, pressing in a little closer. "The clothes leading in a trail from the doorway... how we came to ourselves... am I wrong in guessing that perhaps we're lovers?"

Knot had to shake his head. "I don't think you're wrong."

"Then where's the harm in finishing this game?" Thorn pushed his cock against Knot's ass. "I've seen to your pleasure. And I'm guessing we'd both enjoy a bit of what would naturally come next, as I recall. Huh." He gave a short laugh. He pressed again, starting up a slow, rocking rhythm. "Will you let me?"

This was the definition of insanity. But as the delicious hardness rubbed against him, Knot couldn't help moaning like a wanton and giving in to the urge to let Thorn do what he wanted. "We still have to -- have to figure out who we are," he managed, turning his head a little.

Thorn captured his mouth in a kiss, a long press of lips against lips, not going so far as to tease with his tongue, but still proving his urgency with hardness and what seemed like desperation. "Aye, that we do. But first, please let me in. I've got this memory tickling at the back of my head of how good you feel around me, all tight and hot, and I don't think I can hold out much longer without spending myself all over your amazing backside."

His voice sounded rougher than Knot's, with a lilting accent that reminded him of country folk. Knot recognized his own cadence as that of a man who lived in Capitol, the capital city of Dante's World.

Dante's World! He knew where he was, at least in part, if not in specifics.

Knowledge plus relief plus eagerness fueled his response. "Take me," he whispered, pressing for one more kiss. Thorn tasted sharp and metallic to him, but it seemed like a familiar tang across his tongue. "Quickly. I'm aching to feel you inside me."

"Oil. Have we any oil, or something to ease the way?" Thorn sat up, disarranging the covers. He looked to and fro, then shook his head. "I don't see

anything, Knot. And I'd not hurt you." Tentative fingers massaged his shoulder. "How can we..."

"Use your saliva," Knot suggested, because if they were going to do this, they weren't waiting all night. "If there's anything else to be found, we'll use it later. I have a memory..." and there he paused "... of you doing this before. Saliva is enough. Just hurry, will you?"

"Oh, aye, that I will." Thorn kissed Knot's temple, hard, then drew back. Knot could hear a dry mouth trying to produce enough lubrication, then sensed Thorn's hand going down to his cock. He felt the fat head bump against his ass as Thorn made himself slick. "But what about you?"

"I can take you." Knot felt somehow sure that he could. "Go slowly, and we'll be fine."

"You can say go slow. I'll burst if I'm not buried up to the balls, and soon."

Knot lifted one leg. "Then what are you waiting for?" he asked, wiggling his hips. "You've been invited. Come in."

"By the gods," Thorn swore. But he was quick on the draw, and almost before the words had faded from hearing, Knot felt the hardness of Thorn's cock pushing through his dry cheeks and lining up against his hole. Sense memories came back to him again and he bore down, opening up as much as he could.

Thorn let out a bone-rattling groan as he slowly pushed in. The blankets were rough and scratchy, the air felt freezing and had the iron-like taste of pure *cold*, but Thorn was the only thing that mattered right then. His intrusion burned a little at first, but then Knot heard Thorn hiss and felt more lubrication, the natural sort, being added to their coupling, and the pain blossomed out into a spasm of pure pleasure.

"Better?" Thorn asked in a rough whisper. Knot nodded, the only thing he thought himself capable of doing, which Thorn took as a sign to keep on going. He began pushing his way in one inch at a time, stopping for brief rests between thrusts. The shallow penetration made Knot gasp raggedly, scrabbling at the blankets for

something to grip until Thorn wrapped one arm around Knot's ribs, giving him a big, broad hand to hold.

Someone was making low, needy, desperate noises, and Knot realized that it was himself. He moaned again, louder now that he recognized his own voice, and tried to push back and deepen the penetration. Thorn held him still, hand shaking. "No," he rasped. His voice, smooth as the whiskey that his eyes were colored with, was rough and raw. "Hold still or this'll be over in a blink, and I don't think either of us wants to finish so soon. Aye?"

Knot shook his head, feeling hair that must have been overlong toss on the thin pillow they shared. His own cock had risen to the occasion a second time, and pounded hotly against the rough bed sheet covering what felt like a straw mattress. "I could lie with you buried in me forever," he whispered with an odd sense of *déjà vu*. "But move. Please? Move."

"With a right good will," Thorn managed, slowly easing his way back out. He thrust back in, making Knot shout aloud. He moved slowly, though, so slowly, too slowly, all when Knot wanted it hard and rough and fast.

"Is this too much?"

"Not enough!" Knot burst in frustration. "Give it to me like a man. I told you, I can do this."

"Aye." Thorn's hand stilled around Knot's. "You can. I recall as much. But my control -- I can't hold on --"

"Then don't. There'll be another time. Give me what I need." Knot found himself desperate for the feeling by then, needing the harsh ecstasy of a cock plundering his ass. "Another time. I swear it."

He felt Thorn shake his head, as if in desperation. "Remember, this is what you asked for," he warned, before thrusting so hard and deep that it rattled Knot's teeth.

*Oh, yes. Gods, yes.* Knot hung desperately onto Thorn's hand, riding the up-and-down swoop of bliss as Thorn pounded in and out, skin abrading skin with the best of

all possible burns. Thorn moved his legs, changing the angle, and hit a spot deep inside Knot that had him letting out a ragged scream, babbling for Thorn to repeat his actions.

His second orgasm rose up so quick and fast that it came as a surprise, for he hadn't laid a hand on himself. All the same, he felt a dull explosion in his stomach as his balls drew up tight, and then more hot jism was spurting from his cock. "Oh, gods! Gods! Thorn!"

"Ahhhhh!" Thorn moaned into the back of Knot's neck. "The muscles inside you -- I can't --"

Knot was too busy thrashing, fucking himself on Thorn's cock and riding out his climax, to answer. He felt Thorn stiffen behind him, and, with a deep roar of triumph, the man spilled his seed high within Knot's own ass, the jets feeling cool against his burning insides.

"Gods," Thorn chanted, over and over and over again. "Mercy, have mercy on me."

There was an odd, desperate note to his voice that had Knot, even in his hazy state of post-orgasmic bliss, trying to turn his face to see what could be wrong. He arched his neck as he tried to get a look at Thorn. "What is it?"

"Lie still, would you? Please, lie still." Thorn's voice was shaking, the words coming out in rough chops.

Knot lay back down, his mind full of worry. Thorn nuzzled in to the crook of his neck, and pressed a hard kiss against the thin skin there. His tongue darted out to trace patterns, ones that sent a heated thrill through Knot's belly. They'd done this before, he was sure of the knowledge.

It could be a hard life on Dante's World, but far better when one shared it with a partner. Even when something so strange as this had happened to them.

Knot would have opened his mouth to say so, but then he felt the prick and press of something sharp against his neck. There followed after a pain so intense he couldn't help screaming while two vicious fangs penetrated his throat.

He heard a gulping sound, and knew it was his own blood being drunk. As the room grew hazy and dim around him, he breathed “Thorn,” and cursed himself for being a fool.

He should have remembered one other thing about Dante’s World.

*Vampires.*

## Chapter Two

At first there was nothing else for Thorn, as he guessed he had to call himself, but the primal need to sink his fangs into flesh and gulp the welling blood down in hungry swallows. The red fluid satisfied something wild inside him, calming his turbulent emotions and flooding him with a sense of peace.

The realization of what he was doing came back to him with the force of a sudden slap. Knot sagged in his arms, and he could feel the man go slack in a faint. Thorn tore his mouth away, licking his lips automatically, and stared down in horror at what he'd done. "By the gods, no," he exclaimed, all in a panic. "Knot, no. Don't do this. You're not going to die, not at my hands. Damn it!"

He quickly moved over and rolled the human onto his back. He bled freely from two deep punctures on his neck, the red fluid soaking into their thin pillow and turning it crimson. *Bandages*, Thorn thought frantically. *There must be something in here to stanch the flow.*

But no, there wasn't a single thing he could see, not unless he ripped up one of their shirts, and it'd grown cold enough that even he felt the chill.

*Vampire. By the gods, how did I not know what I was?*

Knot felt cool and was growing colder. Thorn knew he'd probably need everything, including the coat, to warm him back up. He could spare his own clothes, couldn't he? Since he himself was a vampire -- *gods damn it!* -- the temperature probably wouldn't affect him, and --

*Vampire.* The thought rattled him to his core. How could he not have known? Of all the things to forget, being a blood-drinker was one of the most important. The mark around his neck had likely come from a collar, one of those often put on those who claimed to have stopped drinking from the vein. They used to be flat discs on a chain,

but the collars replaced those. But was then really the time to be babbling on about what he *was* after what he'd *done*?

"Bandages," he muttered to himself, sitting up and searching the room a second time with his eyes. It was a bare little space, that dugout, with nothing but the bed they lay on, two heavy bags, and their clothes. The bags! Perhaps in there...

But no, he felt something else pulling at him first, something he found he couldn't resist doing. An urge that yanked at his belly, demanding that he do as he'd been biologically ordered. "I won't," he protested, "I can't." Yet he sensed somehow that if he didn't, Knot would die. The thought and images his mind brought up were repugnant to him, but in the end instinct won out.

Uncertain of himself, Thorn lowered his mouth to the wound on Knot's neck. He formed a seal over the bite marks and sucked, taking in a mouthful of spilling blood and mixing it with his own saliva. The movements felt so odd, as if he'd never done this before, but carefully, ever so carefully, he began to lick at Knot's neck, willing the punctures to close.

Beneath the slick slide of his tongue, he felt both holes begin to heal over. His shoulders relaxing in relief, he added more of the blood/saliva mix, lavishing it on as often as he dared. When the punctures were completely closed Thorn swallowed, tasting the last bit of Knot's flavor as it went down his throat.

He felt sick.

Using a corner of the blanket, he wiped Knot's neck off. He wasn't bleeding anymore, but he did happen to be lying in a pool of red, and while that made Thorn's stomach rumble, it also turned him green around the gills, so to speak, as if he'd been a mortal on a drinking binge in the city.

The city!

Thorn remembered being there, right in the capital of Dante's World. Something about going to the moneychangers and withdrawing all the coin he had left to his name... wait, he had funds? A vampire with money? His memory had to be playing him false.



*Think about that later. Right now, make Knot comfortable. Even if you don't remember, your body does, and this is your lover. However unlikely the situation seems to be.*

Right. Right. He could do this. Thorn lifted Knot's head carefully, watching that the bite marks didn't reopen, and flipped the pillow over to its clean side. It wasn't the ideal solution, but at least Knot's blood hadn't seeped all the way through. Now, should getting him warm be the best idea? Thorn ran his hands over his own body and realized in despair that he felt almost cool as the room itself, and he'd be of no help as a mortal man might be, curling up behind Knot to lend his body heat.

He had to do something, though. Knot had begun to look ashy gray, as if the blood loss and cold were ready to snatch him away from the mortal coil.

"Don't you dare to do this," Thorn threatened, tugging the blankets up underneath Knot's chin and thumping them down around his body. "Don't you go and leave me when there's still so much unanswered. I must love you, and you me, for us to be together -- human and vampire. I need to know the whole story, and I won't have you dying without the missing pieces filled in."

It was just talk, he knew as much, designed to keep his fears at bay. Right. The blankets were in place, and that was good, but what of extra layers?

Thorn got up from the bed, heedless of his nakedness, and set to gathering up the scattered clothes from around the room. Taken all together they were a motley assemblage that he returned with -- the fine garments of a city man, and the poorer outfit of a country person, but for all their mismatchery he piled them on top of Knot, even wrapping his head in a shirt so that only his nose peeked out.

It happened to be a fine nose, too, bent just a little, like a hawk's. Thorn thought, oddly, that he wouldn't like Knot's looks half so much if they were absolutely perfect. He resembled one of the gods, and Thorn wasn't exaggerating when he thought that, but the nose made him just human enough to be real. Hopefully, when he'd gotten warm and come back to life in Thorn's arms again, he'd have a chance to look for other small flaws that'd make Knot seem more real and less ethereal.

And he *would* be warm soon, waking up in Thorn's embrace. *If I can stop myself from biting him. Gods, gods, why did I do such a thing? It doesn't matter that I've lost my memory. I knew him well enough to fuck him, knowing how he liked it, but I forgot myself so far as to bite and drink? Hells!*

Feeling helpless, Thorn retreated to a corner of the room and folded himself up into a huddled crouch, watching Knot's chest rise and fall. The rhythm was steady enough, and that was something to be grateful for at least.

Thorn racked his brain for anything else that might be needed to restore Knot's health. Food, perhaps? Should he not have some food, to replace what was lost? Perhaps the packs...

Thorn reached out for the one bag within arm's reach and tugged at the clasps, nearly losing his patience when they didn't open right away. He forced himself to be patient and endure the wait, working away at the fiddly fastening until the laces finally came loose from their tight knots and the pack gaped open wide.

It was a heavy bastard of a sack, and Thorn saw why as soon as it fell open. It'd been stuffed with sacks that had the moneylenders' stamp on them, corroborating his earlier flash of memory about withdrawing all his funds. Had they been running away, then? Leaving the main city for a place that... that... no, it was no good, the memory had fled him.

Impatiently pulling out the sacks of coins that *chink, chink, chinked* at him, almost mockingly, Thorn dug for anything that might be useful. He found some spare clothes, a couple sets of them -- leather, well worn, but soft. He put those aside in case more bandages were required. He didn't feel any too sure about how well leather would work for binding up a wound, but he could give them a try, and this was clearly his own pack.

He didn't find any food. Not so much as a can of tinned blood. Folding the empty bag in his hands, Thorn stared at it for a long moment, then hurled the thing against one wall of the dugout in a fit of temper.

If he was a vampire, with himself and Knot going on a journey, shouldn't he have packed some sort of provisions for his own sustenance? He remembered such things from the city. The precious red blood was drained from animals at the slaughterhouses, and by some arcane process turned into a powder that only needed a bit of water to make it almost fresh again. He winced at the memory of how bad it tasted, but even the bitterness at the back of his throat didn't answer his questions.

Why go on a journey without supplies? Had he been planning to feed from... no, no, he wouldn't even consider the question.

Unfolding a little, he reached for the other sack next. He felt even more impatient and twitchy the second time, making the knots an ordeal to almost defeat his large fingers, but in the end he jerked them loose and looked inside. With the bag open, he sagged in relief. He saw food in here, at least a few cans. Soup, looked like, and a small sack of dried beans.

Soup was nourishing, right? Thorn racked his memory, but couldn't be sure.

Well, the liquid food would have to suffice. The beans felt hard as little pebbles, and he had the idea that they would need to soak before eating. But how did he open the cans? Hunting deeper in the pack, praying he didn't need to try and use his fangs -- and oh, gods, he'd think about those later -- he finally came up with a strange implement that he suspected was meant to be an opener.

He tested the device out on one can labeled "TOMATO." To his immense relief it worked, puncturing the thin metal. Working it around in a circle, he managed to get the lid off, and tossed it aside. The stuff inside looked thin and watery, but it was a bright enough red to remind him of the blood he'd spilled, making his stomach flop over again with equal parts hunger and nausea.

Dipping a finger in, he took a taste. Then, he made a face. The food didn't taste right to him -- but then again, it wouldn't to a vampire, would it? Perhaps it'd be all right for a human. But the temperature of Knot's soup wouldn't do. It was stone cold, nearly frozen. He needed some way or something to heat it up with.

Fire! Thorn put the can down carefully and jumped to his feet. He crossed hastily to the dug-out pit near the bed they'd shared and hunkered down, praying to all the gods -- if gods listened to vampires, which he doubted -- that he'd find some kind of fuel to rebuild the flames. Perhaps the gods did hear him, for he found a neat stack of wood and some tinder laid out, with a flint and striker close at hand, ready to start the dying embers going again.

As he worked, trying to get the flames to catch, Thorn stole a glance over at Knot. "Don't you leave me yet," he ordered in a low voice. "I'll not have you passing over before we've had a chance to talk. I must... I must love you, mustn't I? And I'll not let you die. Not through any fault of my own, if I can help to mend the error."

The fire finally started to crackle, the tinder catching one of the small logs alight. Whether there was more wood or not, Thorn didn't know, but he prayed that perhaps some was stacked outside. It was often so in these dugout homes. And why the *hells* could he remember such trivia when he still didn't even know his own name?

No matter. The fire had caught and was burning brightly by then, sending out tendrils of heat. With the walls made out of sod, the room should warm quickly, and that'd be a relief. To him as well, Thorn realized, flexing his fingers and finding that they were nearly stiff with cold. He felt tempted to put the wet jacket on as he huddled over the fire, but something instinctive inside him warned him away from the blaze. Why? The sensation of danger puzzled him for a second until he remembered that fire could be deadly to his kind.

"Fuck!" Thorn backed away, but only just far enough that he could still wave the heat over to Knot, lying prone on the bed. It was a fool's errand, though, he realized, as the room began to warm.

Knot shifted in his -- was it sleep? -- and made a low, murmuring sound. Thorn's knees almost gave out in relief. He hadn't killed the man, his lover, then. Perhaps he'd come around soon, and Thorn could feed him the can of soup.

The soup!

Jumping around to fetch the tin, Thorn laid it by the side of the fire pit, hoping the near warmth would be enough to make tomato soup drinkable. With that done he settled back, with the uneasy feeling that he'd done all he could. While the realization left him uncomfortable, it couldn't be denied that it was still a fact. He had nothing left to do now except back away and hope for the best, chanting a half-remembered prayer under his breath for Knot's quick awakening.

Thorn abandoned his silent entreaties when he remembered that his kind were supposed to be damned according to the gods' way of thinking. They'd not listen to his supplications, so why bother? He focused instead on Knot, willing him to move his arms or legs, to turn a bit, for the pale gray shade of his skin to warm into pinkness.

But it was a long wait. Thorn grew restless right away, remembering that this had always been his way. He'd never been able to sit still for very long, always having to be up and around and doing something. Trouble was, he had nothing at all to do, not unless he drew a grid in the hard earth and started playing tit-tat-x against himself.

No, no, that was a child's game. Surely he could stay put long enough to watch over Knot, who he felt ever more attached to. Must have been some of the love they shared before washing through his heart, because he felt almost as if they were joined by a string. Prick one, and the other bled.

He winced. Perhaps that wasn't such a good analogy, aye?

How could it be that a vampire and a human got together in the first place, anyway? Thorn shook his head as he sat down, carefully away from the fire but still close enough to pick up any movement from Knot. Damn the false names! Just as if he'd plunged his hand in the flames, he burned to know what to really call the man. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of a single syllable.

What *was* going on there, anyway? Was someone playing a game on the both of them? Drugged them with a spice or a powder, or perhaps an unguent dabbed onto their skin? Were they close enough to civilization to have run into someone shortly before they stumbled into this dugout and began making love?

Finding out was, at least, something to do. Thorn unfolded his legs beneath him and got to his feet, fumbling his way toward the door. He must have been too cold, even for a vampire, because he felt clumsy and stiff in the legs, and when he reached for the handle, his fingers grasped it awkwardly.

He opened the door, only to be promptly hit in the face with a gust of snow.

Swearing, Thorn peered out into the blizzard. It was dark as the pits of hells out here, without a single light anywhere in the distance. There might have been other dugouts, for there were plenty of hills and hillocks, but if anyone lived close no one was awake or at home. Somehow he had a feeling that this was an abandoned place. It only made sense. If a vampire and human were running away together, would they stop for the night in a busy village? Not too likely.

All the same, he felt a pang of regret. There'd be no one else but him to take care of Knot, then, and what was he to do? He couldn't remember anything of human medicine except warmth, and the knowledge of how to close a vampire bite. He swallowed, still tasting the coppery tang of Knot's blood on his tongue, and hated himself for how good it seemed.

He was hungry. No, not hungry, *starving*. But be damned if he'd drink again.

Fighting against the snow, Thorn shouldered his way back into the small room and was rewarded by a blast of heat. Ah, good, then. The fire seemed to be making its presence known. He almost fancied he could feel icicles melting from his earlobes, and for a surety the snow that landed on him turned to water straightaway, dripping down his body. He shook himself like a dog to get free of the icy-cold drops, stopping only when he realized he must have been splattering Knot.

Knot shifted in the bed and murmured something underneath his breath. He lifted one hand and brushed at the wrapping around his face. Thorn crossed to his side in an instant, pulling the makeshift coverlet away.

"Could you not breathe?" he asked, afraid he'd half-smothered the man. "Gods, I didn't mean to. All I wanted was to get you warm."

"Plenty warm..." Knot mumbled. "Get in bed. Me. With me."

"I'm too cold for that, Knot. I'll freeze you all over again."

"In!" Knot's order left no doubt that this was what he wanted. "Jadoc... in... lie with me."

If Thorn's heart still beat, he knew it would have started thumping like a rabbit's just about then. "Jadoc?" he asked carefully. "Is that my name, then? Am I Jadoc?"

"Mmm." Knot shifted again, sounding irritable. "Thorn. You're Thorn. Lie down." He thumped the bed beneath the blankets. "Want you next to me. Please."

Thorn -- or was it Jadoc? -- hesitated. "After what I did to you... you can't mean for me to..."

"S'okay... was just a bite... no problem, Jadoc. Not like you haven't done it before. Come lie with me." Knot's eyes were wide open, fever-bright, as if he'd taken some sort of drug. Not for the first time, Thorn wondered if someone had slipped either or both of them a potion or a powder. Could have been a person who was helping them get away.

And... Jadoc?

He'd done this before?

Thorn shook his head, but he couldn't deny Knot anything. He knew that much already. Carefully drying himself on one of the spare shirts he'd found in the packs, he approached the bed on light cat feet, hesitating at the end. Knot shot him a glare, diamond-hard, so he swallowed hard and got in, slipping beneath the covers and feeling awkwardly as if he didn't know where to put his arms and legs.

Knot knew, though. Mumbling to himself, things that even Thorn's vampire hearing couldn't interpret, the man turned to him and latched on, limbs tangling around his own, pushing and tugging at his body with surprising strength until Thorn lay on his side and they were wound together like the tangled threads on Knot's chest.

"Mmm... that's better," Knot muttered, butting his head up beneath Thorn's chin. "What's wound around my face?"

"Nothing but a wrap to keep your body heat in," Thorn soothed. "Shake it off, there's a good man." He shifted uneasily. "I don't want to chill you. You need warmth and food -- oh, damn, the food -- I was heating you some soup --"

"Don't wan' soup. Wan' you." Knot's voice slurred. "Lie here and rest a bit. Just a few more minutes. Please?"

Thorn couldn't say no. He sighed as Knot fit his head under his own chin again. The rightness of the feeling was undeniable, and he couldn't seem to find the strength to push Knot away for his own good. As they huddled together, he had another flash of sense memory, one of holding each other just like this after collapsing, sweaty and sated, on top of one another, after sex.

His cock stirred, and he told it silently to behave. He was lying with an injured man, and while they might obviously have been lovers, he'd not play the lech to such a degree that he tried going after Knot while he lay recuperating. Besides, he felt tired himself. A sudden, bone-deep weariness. Not the sort of tiredness he recalled feeling when the sun rose, but almost as hard to fight.

With a deep sigh he closed his eyes, and fell almost instantly asleep. Dreaming.

In his dreams, he was lazing in a small stone room, not unlike the dugout, but with the windows covered by thick shades firmly fastened to the walls. He occupied himself by drinking a sup of the tinned blood that he hated so much, but not minding the taste too terribly, as he had good company. Knot was with him, sitting back and laughing at the faces Thorn made as he drank. As for himself, he ate from a heel of bread and a wedge of cheese.

Neither one wore any clothes.

"So, do you like our new adornments, Jadoc?" Knot asked with a raised eyebrow. "You might have told me how badly a decoration such as this stings."

"Ach, don't be a baby." Thorn -- Jadoc -- flicked a drop of the blood in Knot's direction. "Tattoos don't hurt so much, Kiether. Buck up and take the pain like a man."



"I'll have you know I didn't make so much as a single sound when I lay on the table, with the artist hammering away on my chest. Dear gods, when I think of how close he came to my heart... why did I let you talk me into this, anyway?"

"That's a simple enough answer. You love me, Kiether. And I love you." Jadoc gestured to his arm, done up in bandages. "I wouldn't have gotten this band if not to prove I love you just as well."

"You needn't prove yourself." Knot -- Kiether? -- put his food aside and came walking toward Thorn, his hips swaying as if he had bells attached to them. Thorn could almost hear them chime, what with the way Kiether moved, so seductively. The sight made his mouth water for more than blood, and he put his thick pottery mug aside.

"Come here, you," he growled, making a grab for Kiether. "Insatiable beast. You'll be wanting to go again, will you?"

"You're as bad as I," Kiether informed him, straddling Jadoc's lap. "Jadoc... you smell so good... kiss me."

"I've blood on my tongue."

"Do you think I care? It's part and parcel of what -- who you are, Jadoc. Now kiss me, or I'll think you don't love me anymore. And then what will I have to do except get up and walk out of this room, stark naked but trying to preserve my dignity?"

Kiether's eyes were twinkling. Thorn gave him a playful shove. "If I must, then I must," he said with a sigh of mock impatience. "Come to me, then, and put your mouth on mine." His hands slid down to grasp Kiether's hips and pull him closer, letting him feel a quickly hardening erection. Kiether's own cock had grown stiff, and when the two brushed against one another, both gasped with how good even the small bit of friction felt.

With a grin, Kiether tossed his head back and began to rub against Thorn, bashing their cocks against one another. "Is this the prelude, or the main event?" Thorn asked, reaching down to grasp both cocks with his hands. He began to pump them, pressed tight against one another, all for the pleasure of seeing Kiether writhe. "Gods, I

could watch you all day. You are amazing, my Kiether, damned amazing, and I'll never tire of you. We'll keep going all night, won't we?"

"Yes. Oh, yes." Kiether was panting for air. "Harder. I won't break, no matter what you think. And you'll take a sip or two when we're done? I need the bite. Much as you crave the blood, I crave the... fuck, yes, do that again..."

"You're addicted," Thorn protested. "I'll not hurt you unless I must. This is good enough for me."

"Spoil my fun."

"Kiether..."

"Jadoc..."

Thorn woke with a bump and a thump, and a hard blow to his chest. His eyes flew open to see Knot lying some distance away from him. One hand was at his throat, as if the wound still pained him, and the other drew back from having hit Thorn hard as he possibly could.

"I didn't..." Thorn began, afraid of the answer. "Not again, did I?"

"No." Knot's eyes were frightened. "But you were talking in your sleep. You said some names, yet they slipped away as soon as I heard them. I was on the edge of remembering. What were they? Do you remember? Did you dream about -- about us?"

Thorn struggled to recall, but the dream was slipping away. "Kh. Kh-something. And J. You called me... damn! I don't recall. I'm that sorry, love, but it's gone now." He *was* sorry. If they only had their true names, perhaps that would be the key. "Forgive me?"

"Forgive you, yes," Knot said hesitantly, his hand rising to the closed punctures on his neck. "You bit me. You're a vampire. Why did you... if we're meant to be together... what happened?"

All Thorn could do was shake his head. "I've no idea. But in my dream, you -- you -- damn!"

Knot pulled back to his side of the bed, staring at Thorn. "Just you keep your distance, are we clear? Give me a moment to think."

"Knot, please," Thorn begged, reaching for him. He got slapped away for his pains.

"No. I need to think. If you love me, and I think you do, you'll leave me alone." Knot shook his head. "Let me go over all of this before I speak to you again. Please?"

Thorn could do nothing but nod. He burned to sweep Knot into his arms, but those limbs were effectively tied with the thick ropes of suspicion.

He found himself praying, even though he knew his entreaties wouldn't be heard, that Knot didn't decide to hate him.

Although, were the truth to be told, Knot couldn't hate Thorn as much as he hated himself for what he'd done.

## Chapter Three

Knot lay very still, trying to figure things out. He remembered the tearing pain of the bite, and then the darkness that came afterwards. The knowledge that in Dante's World some vampires still roamed free, and he had apparently gotten himself tucked away in one's bolt-hole.

That he was a vampire's... lover.

He would have expected himself to wake up disgusted, either ready to fight or flee, but instead he found himself inclined to do neither. He didn't understand this way of thinking, so he'd withdrawn into himself, trying to figure out what was going on outside and in his own mind.

Thorn was looking at him with such concern, as if the vampire truly cared for him. How could he, with a heart that didn't beat? Knot closed his eyes so he didn't have to see the amber gaze pleading silently with him for an understanding, an acceptance and forgiveness he couldn't give quite yet.

How was any of this possible? Humans and vampires were kept separate as much as possible, with certain parts of town strictly off-limits to those who were wise, and some roads perfectly safe to travel. The capital city was large, though, and there were a fair amount of accidents happening almost every week. Someone got hungry, another body wandered down the wrong path, and the next day the Guard was summoned out to hunt for the bloodsucker who'd done in a respectable citizen.

With that in mind, how was it possible that a human and a vampire had grown close enough to become lovers?

*Am I in love with Thorn?* Knot wondered wildly. *He's a handsome devil and no mistake, but he is a devil, or close enough. They're as bad as the demons, these vampires -- no, worse. The demons are harmless enough, even if they are tricky and side with whoever can give*

*them the biggest slice of whatever pie they want. Vampires are out for whatever they can take, blood and bone, and it's a wise man who steers well clear.*

*Except it appears that I haven't. Why else would I be here, making love in what must be a secret hideaway? And the pull I feel every time I look at Thorn... we must have meant something to one another, when we knew ourselves. But what? And why are we here? Were we leaving the capital? Where are we, anyway?*

"What is this place?" he asked, his throat a little sore as he worked it in speaking. "And don't -- please, don't come any closer. Just tell me what I need to know."

"Aye." Thorn's voice sounded whiskey-smooth as ever, though tense, as if he'd become a stiff drink instead of one that glided down like sweet, lazy fire. "We're in a dugout house."

"I knew that much," Knot snapped.

"Right. Of course you did. And you'll also know that we're alone. No other lights to be seen for miles and miles, so far as I can tell."

Knot's eyes flew open wide. He saw nothing but honesty written across Thorn's features, although you never could tell with vampires, could you? He remembered all too well being taught from youth about what to watch out for.

Yet he didn't want to back any further away.

*This is madness! The creature bit you. Why aren't you armed against him? Did you love him enough to take the chances?*

"No one?" he croaked, reaching up to rub his neck. He could feel a slight dampness over the two sore, closed-over holes, and wondered if it was blood or saliva. "Not a single soul out here but you and me?" This would be the time to panic -- so why wasn't he? Every fiber of his being told him to calm down and rest easy, that Thorn would take care of him.

Madness.

Thorn shook his head on the pillow. "It's just you and me. I, eh... I went through some bags that we must have brought with us. I didn't note anything in the way of identification, before you ask, but I think we were on a trip somewhere. There's too

little for us to have planned to stay here permanently, and enough to make me think we'd be moving on after a brief stop." Thorn extended his hand tentatively. "I'm thinking we were running away together, you and I."

Knot's throat tingled where he was bitten. It was an odd sort of feeling, as if someone had struck a match to the site of his injury and a magical fire was beginning to flood out, spreading through his veins. To distract himself, he asked, "Was there any food?"

"Food! Gods, yes. I nearly forgot." Thorn scrambled out of bed and ran to the fire pit which was -- thank mercies -- blazing away. He picked something up, wincing out loud, then returned to the bed where he held a tinned can of something out to Knot. "Hold it carefully. I left the thing too long by the flames and the metal's grown hot. Use the blanket as a glove." Thorn regarded the can dubiously. "It says 'tomato.' I should remember if that's one of your favorite flavors, shouldn't I?"

Knot ignored him. The scent of the rich, salty soup had reached his nose, and his stomach had decided to weigh in with a vote of severe hunger. He grasped the can, using a piece of blanket to protect his hand, and sat up. The soup went down like nectar, the best thing he'd ever tasted. *That I can recall.* Half-shutting his eyes, he hummed in contentment. "Oh, this is wonderful." He blushed. "Thank you. I mean, you could have -- thank you."

"Go on and say it," Thorn challenged. "I could have drained you dry, aye? That's what you were thinking, isn't it? And wondering why I didn't. Why not? It's what any sane man would do when he's faced with a vampire in his bed, his arms. But you've no weapons close to hand, and none in your pack. I'm believing you meant me no harm when we set out together. Now why is that, if I can ask you?"

"I don't know," Knot mumbled, hiding his face in the soup. "None of this makes sense to me, Thorn."

*He's a little angry now, but he'll soon calm down. Why do I remember as much?*

The tingling in Knot's neck was becoming too strong to ignore. He felt as if he were on fire from the throat down, and that the heat was spreading up to his mind, a

buzzing warmth that couldn't be coming from the soup alone. Putting up his free hand to rub the bite, Knot shook his head. Yes, it hurt, but by all the gods, it felt so good at the same time.

He didn't understand this at all.

"Thorn, do you suppose we were drugged?" he asked. "It would go a long way toward explaining things."

"Our memories, aye. But I've a feeling that's not all you meant, is it?"

"This bite," Knot complained, putting his half-empty soup tin down on the floor. He'd lost his appetite for food at the moment, but it wouldn't go to waste. He could heat the stuff again later. "What's in your mouth? I feel as if I'm scorching from the inside out."

"I hurt you?" Thorn's big hand came out automatically, aiming for the wound. Knot almost flinched, but then, for some reason he didn't understand, sat still and let Thorn touch him. The vampire's hand was still a bit cool, but less so than before. *Probably the heat of the room, and a sup of fresh blood.* "This still causes you some pain? I -- I did my best, but using my mouth is the only way I remember of healing a bite."

"The hair of the dog," Knot cracked, surprising both of them into a chuckle. He shifted, feeling suddenly tense, although not angry. There was an undercurrent running through the room that bewildered him, until he felt his cock stir and understood. His mind might not remember, but his body made itself very clear. Thorn was near, and Knot wanted more than the vampire's hand on his neck. He craved the feeling of it on his cock, and roaming over the rest of his body.

"I can't," he said, mostly to himself, but Thorn jumped on the statement.

"What is it you can't do?" he asked, drawing back. "Can't bear to have me touch you?"

"No, that's not it at all." Knot groaned as he felt his cock lengthen, developing into a healthy erection despite his recent blood loss. "I want your touch far too much for both of our safeties." He turned his gaze to Thorn, knowing that the fire within must

have been blazing in his eyes. "I'm craving your hands on me the way I know you must want blood. It's like an addiction that wants feeding."

He saw Thorn swallow, and the vampire nodded. "It's the same for me. I don't want your blood -- I'll not let myself slip again -- but I'm desperate to have your body close to mine. Wanting you is all that I can think of right now, and while I don't know why, the feel of you is flooding me with little snips of memory." His hand came out again, under the blankets, resting tentatively on Knot's hip. "This makes no sense, none of it."

"No." Knot took a deep breath. "But I'll die of wanting you if I don't have you. Now."

"Ah, gods. You'd let me touch you again?"

Thorn's voice sounded so hungry that Knot's cock jumped in response. To answer the vampire's question, Knot forced down his own trepidations and put his hand on Thorn's, guiding it to his cock. "What do you think?" he asked hoarsely, knowing this was a question which needed no answer.

"Fuck me," Thorn whispered. "Knot -- by the gods, Knot, come here --"

Knot knew he shouldn't, but it felt natural as breathing to fling himself into Thorn's arms. The tingling and burning had turned into an inferno, driving him half out of what little mind he had left. Lying on top of Thorn, he pushed down with his hips, letting the vampire know beyond any shadow of a doubt that he was desired. "I'm here," he murmured, bending his head for a kiss.

Oh, and what a kiss it was. It began hungrily, softened into sweetness, then developed a ferocity that stole the air from Knot's lungs. Thorn's mouth on his drove him wild, urging him on to crave more and still more contact.

Not content to just lie there, Knot let his own hands roam over Thorn's broad, hard chest, finding the nipples and pinching them with both hands. The sounds Thorn made, as well as the way the vampire writhed, left Knot in no doubt that he loved this. Shameless and wonderful.



When they parted, Knot breathing raggedly, the wound at his throat throbbed in time with the pulse in his painfully erect cock. "Why does it feel this way?" he asked, desperate for answers. "By the gods, I feel as if I want you to bite me again, but I don't know why."

"I won't -- I gave my word that I wouldn't." Thorn brushed his fingers across the wound, causing Knot to take in a hissing gasp. Just the lightest touch was enough to make him lose his senses, almost, and he couldn't help diving down for another ravaging kiss, plundering the vampire's cool mouth with his tongue.

Thorn made a noise low in his throat and wrapped his arms around Knot, turning them around and around until Knot lay on his back and Thorn rested above him, braced on his arms, neither of their lips separating for long. Knot found he didn't mind being pinned down by the vampire's bulk -- wondered for a brief, crazed second if he should panic -- then decided against the idea and moved on, deeper and deeper into the heady ecstasy of touching and being touched.

His own nipples were just as sensitive as Thorn's, or so he discovered when Thorn used one hand to hold all his weight and explored Knot's chest. Perhaps more so, or Thorn simply had a talent for this. His hands were rough, as if he'd worked hard, but how odd was that? Vampires lived soft and easy lives, and robbing was the toughest work that most did. Perhaps before he was changed, he had been a country farmer. He certainly couldn't have originally come from Capitol, and oh, who had *time* to waste thinking when Thorn's mouth rained kisses over his chest, never using his teeth but not shy about sucking up purple marks in a random pattern.

Knot bucked up against Thorn, desperate for more and still yet more. The vampire obliged, sliding down to scatter kisses over his lower belly, coming dangerously close to his cock.

*Why dangerously? He seems to want this as much as I do. I doubt he'll bite it off.*

But if he began to suck, as he had before...

To Knot's distress, Thorn bypassed his cock and went skimming down the inside of his thighs, with barely more than a brief grasp of his balls to mark where he had

been. The dismay passed soon, though, as the burning inside grew to unspeakable levels with the touch of Thorn's mouth against his inner leg. "How are you doing this?" he groaned, spreading his legs in wanton eagerness. Thorn's hair tickled at his sac, making him want to grab the vampire's head and force it up to his cock. "Your mouth on me... I can't describe..."

Thorn stilled. "Then don't," he said, his voice odd. "Look here, I'd better not stay down here. Let me come up and lie beside you, and we'll do something like this." He slithered up the length of Knot's body, bracing his arms by Knot's shoulders and rolling their hips together.

Knot let out a yell and clutched at Thorn's shoulders. The friction of their two cocks bumping together proved almost more than he could bear. Memories came flooding back of other beds and other times when they'd done this, both too hungry to wait for preparation or penetration. He rocked back against Thorn, humping and bucking, desperate for more of the sensation.

Thorn obliged. He bore down, each stroke of his cock leaving a wet trail in its wake. Knot knew that he, too, was growing wet at the tip, marking his own path on Thorn's skin. A wet spot began to grow between their bodies as they thrust, desperate for the release that was slowly beginning to build.

Knot almost cried in relief when Thorn's mouth slowly descended toward his neck. Insanity, but he felt near to dying for want of the bite, and he thrust even harder as if to goad Thorn on.

"No," Thorn choked. "I don't care, d'you hear? I'll not drink your blood."

"You have to." Knot panted for air. He pressed his cock against Thorn's groin, grinding his hips upward. "Please. Must I beg for what I need?"

"No," Thorn said, his voice odd once again. "But may the gods help me, for I cannot help myself."

He placed his mouth on Knot's neck and sucked hard, not using his teeth, but it was enough to send Knot over the edge. He cried out, thrusting up hard, and felt stripes of wetness flood between the two of them. Thorn shuddered, the wet spot growing

larger. He sucked harder, still not breaking the skin, but driving Knot into a second, smaller orgasm that felt just as good as the first.

Thorn collapsed against Knot, then, taking his mouth away from Knot's neck and fisting his hands in the pillow. "I stopped myself," he said roughly, and although he didn't need to breathe, he took in harsh gasps of air. "I didn't do it again."

Knot could not for the life of him figure out why he felt so disappointed, but the tingling had ebbed down into a low-simmering warmth and a feeling that all was right with the world. It surprised him a little to find out that vampires sweated, although he should have known as much, shouldn't he? All the same, Thorn's back was startlingly slick with moisture as he skated his hands up and down the strong play of muscles, murmuring nonsense words as Thorn shook hard, like a leaf in a gale.

"Why are you upset?" Knot asked at last. "Surely you enjoyed what we did as much as I. I know you must have. There's a puddle gluing our bellies together which tells me at least part of you loved this." He laughed, feeling suddenly carefree. "I've lost my mind, but I cannot seem to care. Tell me, Thorn. What's troubling you? Is it anything I can help with?"

"Oh, aye, you can help," Thorn said, using his arms to push himself up. He sat back on his knees, pulling Knot along with him. "Spread your legs for me -- wide -- aye, that's the way. Now look at your legs, the inner thighs. Tell me what you see."

Knot's vision wasn't so keen as Thorn's, and in the firelight it was hard to tell exactly what Thorn wanted him to look at. When he recognized them, though, he had to restrain himself from jumping back.

His legs were a welter of healed vampire bites, most of them high next to his groin. The healed white tissue formed a random pattern that swam before his eyes as he stared. Slowly, he reached down to touch one, and felt the same sort of thrill as he did when caressing his neck wound. His cock, even so recently spent, gave a twitch as if he'd touched the organ instead of his leg.

"I think this answers one question for certain," he said slowly. "You and I, we've been doing this for a long time. You've drunk from me before, and often. Either that, or I'm very lucky. Which do you think?"

Thorn shook his head. "I measured my fangs against several of the scars. They match, Knot, they match. I've been feeding off you for gods know how long, and yet you're still with me. Were running away with me, if those packs are anything to go by. Why, Knot? We both know what I am and what I'm capable of. I'm likely wanted by the law for drinking from a human. Why would you do such a thing as stay by my side?"

Knot found that he had no answer, but could not help staring at the marks of old bites and thinking that they held the key to this riddle.

Why, indeed?

## Chapter Four

"Where are you going?" Knot wanted to know, kicking the covers aside in an attempt to get out of bed. He couldn't quite make it, though, going gray and sitting heavily back down. "Thorn, don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere far," Thorn lied. "Just out for a walk. I need to clear my head." *Aye, of these thoughts about how many times I must have bitten you and supped your hot, rich blood... no, no, I won't let myself linger there.*

"You're going to run away." Knot sounded miserable and far too certain of himself. *Is this another memory?* "You're going to abandon me here, all by myself."

"No. Ach, I promise, no." Thorn couldn't resist bending down to kiss Knot on the lips, lingering for just a brief moment, all he'd allow himself, before the tang of human flesh got to him. He pulled away, heading for the clothes he reckoned were his own. "I'll just get dressed, and see? I'm leaving my pack here. There's money in there, lots of coins. Should anything happen to me, once the snow's cleared you'll have plenty to take care of yourself with."

"Thorn, no." Knot shook his head emphatically, even though he winced a little at the movement. "Where would I go? I can't return to the city with a bite on my neck, not without pointing a finger, and I won't. Do you hear me? I won't."

"Then don't!" Thorn began pulling on the pair of leather pants. He was right; they fit like a glove, molding themselves over his legs. A soft undershirt that was tight enough to make him think it belonged to Knot, but too late to take it off, came next. Boots after that, sturdy things meant for hard travel, but covered with useless bits of decoration -- a tooth made of gold, a feather, and some bells. Then a leather tunic/coat, one that fit just right. *What a prancing dandy I must be,* he thought in despair.

"Thorn don't. Just -- don't. Stay here."

"No more words." Thorn ached to go and kiss Knot again, but didn't trust himself so far as getting near the man. He could see the blue tracery of veins on the man's forearms, and they called to him all too sharply. "Just for a walk, I said. The snow's stopped, at least for the moment, and I want to get our bearings. I'll be back, I promise."

*Lies, lies, lies.*

"Now rest easy, and drink the rest of your soup. Aye, don't be afraid to sup it all. There's more in your pack if you want some. And beans, if you can find a way to soak them." He pulled a leather hood over his head, tucking his hair back. "I'm off."

Knot said nothing, but the look in his eyes was all the accusation he needed. Thorn mumbled something under his breath, opened the dugout door, and darted out into the night quickly as a vampire could.

Once the door had shut behind him, he took a deep breath of the crystal clean air, free of any smells but clear sharp ice and snow. No more odors of sex and human skin and blood to tempt him. The temperature was freezing, but Thorn knew it'd be unlikely for him to die of the chill, aye? He knew of precious little that could kill a vampire save for fire, a stake through the heart, or the cutting off of their head.

Barring any unfortunate accidents with trees or a sudden horde of Guardsmen rushing through the hills, he figured he should be safe enough.

Determined to make good on his plan, knowing Knot would be far safer by himself, Thorn strode off away from the hills, in a direction which he sensed was further away from the city than closer to it. He wasn't yet sure how he could tell, just that he knew.

*Yet another thing I don't remember about myself. I know what I am, but precious little of what I can do. What if I can freeze, after all? What if Knot comes looking for me and finds my body lying icy in the snow? Still alive, but frozen solid?*

Thorn shivered, and not entirely from the cold. All the same, he wrapped the coat tighter around himself and shoved his gloveless hands in the pockets. The snow was deep and he realized he'd be leaving a clearly marked trail, but for all that he

stamped resolutely on, determined to leave Knot behind. It pained him to think of doing what he planned on doing, but it was for Knot's own good. It had to be done.

What were they thinking, to run away together? Thorn shook his head. There were remnants of this and that clinging to the edges of his mind, but nothing he could put his finger on. Everything fled when he tried to access the memories directly, except for bits of trivia that didn't matter one whit.

He had money. He'd always had money. And he'd lived a long time, mostly in the city. He used to feed freely, before the new laws went into effect and he had the sense to reform instead of being hunted down. The groove around his neck -- he felt for the long-gone collar with his fingers -- was well worn-in. He'd lived with a Keeper, and he could remember that man's name. Rafe.

What happened to Rafe, he couldn't recall. *Did I eat him? Surely not. The Guard would have been after me quicker than I could blink.*

Memories tugged at him. No... no. He hadn't drunk Rafe's blood. A natural end had come to the old man. He could see Rafe in his mind's eye, well-aged but still strong until the day when he clutched at his chest and fell to the ground. Thorn remembered the terror of thinking he'd be blamed for his Keeper's death, and then the tribunal which declared he would be allowed to live alone until another Guardian could be assigned -- at his own expense, of course. But he hadn't cared about money.

He'd just met Knot...

And there, his memories stopped. Swearing, Thorn punched his fist against a tree. The branches shuddered and dropped a load of snow on him, the crystals working their way in under his collar and down his chest. He made a sound of disgust. *Fucking wonderful. Just great.*

Why had this happened to them?

*Stop. Stop a moment and just think.* Thorn was all too well aware that he and Knot were lovers, and their liaisons were dangerous indeed. No one gained such a collection of bite scars near their cock unless they trusted the vampire doing the marking. They would have had to hide the evidence, so it made sense to have the wounds in a place

easy to hide, if one could avoid walking too carefully. They'd have had to conceal what they were doing, back in Capitol.

And what had they been doing? Secret meetings, rendezvous in the middle of the night, or had Knot dared to come by during the day? Thorn couldn't recall if he was strong enough to be awake after the sun rose.

*Oh gods, the sun.* He'd have to find someplace to tunnel in before the morning light dawned. Casting a glance around, Thorn saw nothing but solid hills, snow, and trees. There were trees fucking well everywhere. Perhaps if he could find a copse thick enough he might be able to dig through the snow and bury himself under a thin layer of topsoil. Aye, that'd have to do.

With at least some direction in his wanderings, then, Thorn strode off into the trees. He got a decent way in, and suddenly there were sounds. He paused, thrown, then tilted his head to listen. What were those things... well, for one, an owl, sitting high overhead on a branch, looking down at him through eyes that seemed all too wise.

"Who? Who?" it chorused. "Who? Who?"

"I don't know," Thorn said through lips that were growing numb. Perhaps a vampire *could* freeze after all, and wouldn't that be a hell of a way to get stuck? He could end up frozen fast in the topsoil until spring arrived, and who knew what would decide to make a snack of him before then? How long until he went mad with the waiting?

Besides the owl, he heard other noises, too. Moths, flittering through the branches. He turned his ear to their low whistlings to one another, a language that no man or vampire could understand. He heard flies, buzzing over the carcass of something that had given in to the cold. Those he followed, until he found them clustered on the body of a rabbit. He had half a mind to brush them off and allow the creature some dignity in his death, but common sense told him they'd just be back.

He closed his eyes, listening to see if there was anything else out there besides him. Yes... yes... he heard something...



A heartbeat. Slow and steady, but definitely there. "Knot," he spit, turning around. "I told you, don't --" and then he stopped, because he found himself almost face to face with a doe pinning him down in a wide and curious, completely fearless stare.

She should have feared him. Thorn was hungry, so hungry, and he could hear the blood rushing through her veins. "That's right," he crooned, holding out his hand as if he had a treat clasped inside his palm. "Good girl. Come a little closer, aye? See what I've got for you."

The deer made a tentative step toward him, snuffing the air. Thorn inched forward, careful not to give her a fright, his mouth watering at the thought of the blood. If he could just get himself a good belly full...

A branch cracked beneath his foot. Thorn swore loudly -- too loudly. Both noises combined were enough to frighten the deer and she bounded away, leaving a clear path of hoof prints in the snow. "Oh no, you don't!" Thorn snarled, running after her. It wasn't easy in his leather, with the jingling on his boots giving her even more of a scare and greater speed, but Thorn was bent on the hunt by then, and he never -- he remembered -- let his prey escape.

They passed by several verges, which gave Thorn an idea. Putting on an extra burst of speed, he raced up one, just beating the deer. As she thundered underneath, he flung himself on top of her solid back, his own heavy weight bringing her down to the earth. She struggled, but instinct told Thorn what to do and with a little wrestling he found himself in the right position to jerk *hard*, right *there* --

The deer's neck snapped. Her eyes went wide with terror, then dull in death. Thorn gave a deep, ravenous growl and sank his teeth in at her neck, right where a big vein would be. With something like a feeling of utter relief, he tasted the rich red blood flowing over his tongue. He was well aware of what a fool he must look, sprawled over a doe in the middle of the woods, but he didn't *care* because he was so *fucking* hungry.

Mouthful after mouthful of the fresh, steaming blood went pouring down his throat. Thorn could feel his belly beginning to swell and fill. This didn't taste near as

good as human -- at which thought he winced -- but it wasn't half so bad as the tinned powder he recalled from the city.

Why didn't they let the vampires into the slaughterhouses, to suck the blood afresh? Many could pay for the opportunity, and it would drain the carcasses better than any human blood-letter. But then, foolishness like that was exactly what the laws and the Guards were good for. If a vampire was allowed to feed on one sort of creature, perhaps they'd turn their attention to the humans next, no matter how "tame" they claimed to be. Aye, that'd be just the sort of thing the Guards would think of. Thorn considered himself clever enough to match their likely line of reasoning.

Thoughts aside, nothing stopped him from drinking his fill. He swallowed more and still more, his stomach already aching but the craving still there. Despite the slight pain, drinking filled him with the zing and zest of something close to life, so he closed his eyes and nursed blissfully on.

Finally, there was no more to drink, not that he could get from the vein. There would likely be more to be found in the meat and organs, but he was too full to think about gutting the animal just for the sake of gorging himself to an even greater degree. He raised his head, knowing his mouth and chin and cheeks were smeared with crimson, that he must have looked like a ravening animal himself, but not caring for the moment.

Gods, but he was full, and it felt so very good that he thought he could burst into song. He stood, wiping his face with his arm, then scooped up a handful of snow to clean himself completely. When he felt fresh and unblemished, he was still so warm and brimming with the buzz of *life* that even the cold didn't cut anymore.

He looked thoughtfully down at the deer. There was plenty of meat on the beast, and it seemed a shame to let it go to waste. Some fatty rich liver would do Knot a world of good, so it would, but -- Thorn stopped. He wasn't going back, right?

No. He wasn't.

But the deer -- it'd just go to waste. Thriftiness. That'd be the only reason he even stopped to consider the notion. Aye?

*Damn it.*

Thorn sank down in the snow next to the cooling carcass, crossing his legs and kicking one foot impatiently when it jingled. He put his hands on his knees, staring at the animal he'd just drowned himself in, shaking his head.

It'd be insanity to return to Knot. Lovers or no, he knew it wasn't safe for them to be together. The Guards wouldn't be any too keen on a vampire escaping or leaving of their own free will -- they liked to keep tabs on all of the blood drinkers in Capitol. And one going somewhere with a sizeable amount of coin? Hells, he was surprised a hunting party hadn't come after him already.

But the meat... he couldn't just let it go to waste. It'd be food for Knot, enough to keep him going until the weather cleared. He'd have to take it back, just drop it off... perhaps chop down a tree and hack up some more firewood... *oh, balls*. Thorn dropped his head into his hands. If he went back he'd end up staying, he just knew it.

No. He had to be strong. He'd take the deer back, and then he'd go for another "walk." His belly was full this time, and there'd be no hunting. He wouldn't need to return. Yes. That was what he'd do.

This would be for Knot's sake, so he'd have something to eat besides tinned soup. Thorn could give him the means to survive as a goodbye present.

With a sigh of mixed relief and regret, Thorn stood up and then hauled the carcass of the deer over his shoulders, hanging on by the legs. Gods, but it was a heavy beast, but he found that after a little adjustment he could carry the body with only a small effort. The fact depressed him, reminding him of what he was without the blood to give him a high, but he pushed on, following his own footprints back toward the dugout.

When he'd got the small door in his sights, he was startled to see the door flying open and Knot himself standing there, still naked, but nearly glowing. "You came back!" he shouted, and almost threw himself out in the snow to greet Thorn. "I had a -- Thorn, I slept, and I dreamed --"

"You did what? And get back inside, man, before you freeze!" Thorn tried to look as menacing as he could, hefting the deer higher on his back. "I've come to bring you some food. Do you know how to dress down an animal?"

Knot looked doubtful. "I don't think so. At least, I can't recall ever doing so before. But I remember other things." He almost bounced. "Come inside, Thorn. I've found more firewood, tucked toward the back of the dugout, and I've re-made the hearth. Come inside and get warm. I suppose it doesn't so much matter -- you'll be almost hot from drinking the blood from that creature -- but I'm aching to hold you again."

Thorn's heart sank as he saw the fever-brightness in Knot's eyes again, once he got close enough. "Stand aside," he grumbled, pushing his way forward to the dugout. The deer he left outside -- from what he recalled, in a dim and vague sort of way, cleaning was a messy business and there'd already been enough blood shed inside the small earthen home.

Thorn scrambled for a plan, and decided in desperation on a course of action. He'd fend off Knot's embraces, cut up the deer -- tear it apart with his bare hands if he must, if they'd no knives -- and then he'd be off again.

He didn't count on the power of Knot's fervent eagerness, though, which caused the man to swarm over Thorn with hot kisses the moment he entered the dugout. Eager hands tugged at his tunic, trying to lift it over his head. "Please, please, please," Knot chanted. "I've been sitting here waiting, and thinking. I need to feel your skin on mine. I burn for you. Come, Thorn, please come."

Faced with a naked and obviously horny man, Thorn felt his resolve wavering. He was only human once, and he was still every inch a man. "I can't," he tried to protest, only to find himself silenced by an eager kiss. Knot's mouth was so hungry on his, demanding so much, that he couldn't help taking the man in his arms and kissing back, weakening enough to press forward until he realized he'd backed Knot into a wall.

Knot didn't seem unhappy with the situation, though. "You came back," he said, when Thorn let him up for air. "I thought for sure I'd never see you again, but I couldn't follow you out into the freezing night. I'd have died. And likely would have perished twice over if you hadn't brought back some food. You've saved me."

Knot made to kiss Thorn again, but Thorn pushed him away. "Aye, I've brought you something to eat. You don't need to swarm a man like he's a fine jam and you're the horde of ants." His words were gruff, but he couldn't help keeping his voice kind. "Not a man, though. A vampire, I mean. You should know better, Knot. I can't be trusted. You need to keep your distance."

"Oh, I know, but don't you see? I can't. You're a fever inside of me, one that no medicine will cure, and I'm wanting you again." Knot's expression was glassy with lust. "I had a dream. I was telling you this, wasn't I? I saw you and I, in a dozen different places, making love in the setting sun and the rising moonlight. We were on a lake's edge, in a small set of rooms, on a terrace and a rooftop. You and I picked out the constellations, then we traced them on one another's bodies before we made love." He let go of Thorn and turned in a lazy circle. "Not just making love, though. This was fucking, wild and fiery, tearing at one another as if we couldn't get enough."

"Knot, don't." The images he brought up were too much for Thorn to bear. Just being close to Knot roused Thorn's cock, making him want far more than was wise. He ached to kiss the man again, but knew he shouldn't, for the safety of them both. He had to flee, to keep them both from being waist-deep in trouble.

It was just... with Knot's hands on him... it was so hard to let go...

"I remembered our names in the dream, but they're gone now." Knot shook his head. "Even the images are fading, though I'm clinging to them with all of my strength. Why is it that we recall when we dream? We can't have been potioned to lose our memories, can we? What's happened, then?"

"I don't know," Thorn had to admit.

"No, and neither do I. But you can't go anywhere until we've figured this out. And I swear I'll die if I don't have another taste of you." Knot's hands clutched

feverishly at Thorn's arms. "Off. Please, I want this off. I need to feel you, your bare skin. It's warm enough in here that we can fuck by the fire and feel the warmth on our bare backs."

"The bites!" Thorn pushed Knot away, though it pained him to do so. "I've *fed* from you, Knot, and more than once. How do we know I'll be able to restrain myself again?"

"We don't. But isn't that half the fun?" Knot loosed a wild laugh. "Come to bed with me, Thorn. Come and love me once again."

The words stirred a memory within Thorn, making him certain he'd heard them before. "I just wanted to make sure you were safe," he said roughly, unable to stop himself from seizing Knot by the arms. "Don't you see that? I have to be certain that you're not in any danger."

"What danger could I be in, with a vampire to protect me?" Knot laughed and pulled Thorn around, somehow strong enough to manipulate a vampire in the force of his lust.

"It's *because* I'm a vampire that you might be in trouble, do you not understand as much?"

"You think they'll come after us." Knot steadied for a moment. His face was unbearably trusting. "No one will. They'd have already been here if they were going to come. I had a look through your pack. No one takes that much money and gets away without being questioned unless they know of a secret way out. And we must have. There'll be no Guard knocking down our door."

"A secret passage?"

"Yes. I've heard of them before. I'm remembering more and more now." Knot had grown eager once again, tugging Thorn back toward the bed. "Please say you'll stay with me. That you'll fuck me. I need to feel you deep inside. I ache to have your mouth around my cock. Please, Thorn, please. I'm not afraid to beg."

Thorn loosed a ragged groan. "Gods help me, but you don't need to plead with me," he said before seizing Knot's mouth in a hard, punishing kiss. "Even if I die for

this, which I'm not saying I won't -- you may be wrong about the Guards -- this'll be the best way I can think of going. With you in my arms. And perhaps they'll let you live."

"No one's coming. How many more times do I have to say it?" Knot gleamed fever-bright. "Come and lie with me, Thorn. Come. Come. Come."

"I can't stop myself," Thorn whispered.

"Then don't."

With a shudder, Thorn gave in. He couldn't do otherwise, not with Knot standing in front of him, so eager and anxious.

This might indeed be the death of them... but he was going to fuck Knot through the mattress anyhow, come what may.

## Chapter Five

Hands, hands, there were hands everywhere and Knot had forgotten which were his and which belonged to Thorn. Did it matter? All he could think of was stripping off Thorn's fitted tunic, and getting him out of those tight leather pants that clung so... very... temptingly...

He was in the middle of fumbling his way through the process, desperate to feel skin underneath his palms, when Thorn stopped him with an unsteady laugh. "We'd do better going slowly, aye? Otherwise this'll all be over before it begins, you'll want more, and we'll see if there's an entirely new way for a vampire to die."

Knot made a noise of frustration deep in his throat. He didn't have time for talking! He wanted sex, and he wanted it *now*. No waiting. "Let me touch you," he begged, struggling against the steely hold of Thorn's arms. "I want to bite your nipples until they're red and swollen. Suck your cock until you spout a river over my tongue. *Bite* you." He didn't know why he had that urge, or where it came from, but once spoken of the hunger fastened hard.

"No!" Thorn's hands tightened on Knot's upper arms. "You'll not be biting me, love. There's all sorts of magic in a vampire's blood. What if you died, and turned into a creature like me?"

"You'd have to drain me first." Knot swayed in Thorn's arms. "And you won't do that, even if I said I wanted it. You're too good and noble to taste the likes of me, aren't you?" He was mocking the vampire then, trying to goad him on. He remembered the first rush of panic when he was bitten, yes, but he also recalled the fire that spread through him afterwards. He felt some of that heat still, driving him onward to getting what he wanted, even if it made no sense.



"No biting," Thorn ordered before crushing his mouth to Knot's in a bruising kiss. Knot groaned into the vampire's parting lips and snaked his tongue in between the wicked, long fangs, careful not to cut himself. He touched one tentatively, just to see what would happen, and was both pleased and rewarded by the sound Thorn made, just as desperate as if he were having his cock stroked.

Deliberately, Knot flicked his tongue harder against the fang, feeling the sharp sting as it cut a shallow slice. Blood milked instantly out of the scratch, but instead of drinking Thorn jerked his mouth away, cursing.

He spat on the earthen floor, a mix of red blood and saliva, then looked up at Knot with fire in his eyes. "Don't you ever do that again! Do you know what sort of fire you're playing with, tempting me with blood in my mouth?"

"I said you thought you were too good for me," Knot taunted. "I suppose you don't even want to take me to bed now."

"You're a devil," Thorn protested hoarsely.

"There's no demon in me. I'm human through and through. Besides which, I'm a grown man, with a man's hungers and needs. I want to do this with you, to give myself to you. I know what I want."

"Aye, and I'm beginning to wonder if you do, at that," Thorn muttered before lightly laying his lips over Knot's again. Before Knot could snake his tongue in again, Thorn used his own in a broad sweep over the cut, sealing it closed. "There'll be no more games," he warned Knot. "Now kiss me again, without any of your tricks."

Knot moaned in complaint -- the fire demanded that he share his veins with Thorn -- after all, hadn't he done it dozens of times, according to his bite scars? -- but he kissed Thorn like a good boy instead, careful of his tongue as he plundered the vampire's mouth. And while the kiss could have been wild and desperate, Thorn kept the heat on a low, simmering boil.

Knot wanted more. There was a perfectly good bed close by, and he intended to make use of the mattress. With his newly found strength, he maneuvered Thorn close to the low-lying resting place, little more than a straw mattress set on a woven mat with

four pegs, but enough for their needs. He accidentally kicked over his half-empty soup can, feeling the cooled liquid splashing over his foot, but found that he couldn't have cared less. Thorn was going to take care of him, in more senses than one.

What more could he require?

"Slowly, slowly," Thorn was saying, trying to separate their mouths long enough to get his words in edgewise. He had to grip Knot by the shoulders and push him back to speak. "You've got the advantage on me, seeing as you're naked."

"Yes, completely," Knot said without shame, pushing his stiffened cock up against Thorn's groin. He laughed as Thorn hissed. "Touching like this feels wonderful, doesn't it? And it can only get so much better. You'll see."

"You *will* be the death of me, I swear it. If the Guards don't come after my head, you'll destroy me between the sheets."

"I don't plan on climbing beneath any covers like a tame little cat." Knot edged his way closer, rolling his hips against Thorn's. "I want you on top of the covers, on your back. I can't wait much longer. I need you, and I need you now."

"So you keep saying. But what's the hurry?" Thorn rubbed his thumbs against Knot's shoulders. "Now that I'm here, I may as well stay. I should have thought before that anyone could track me by the marks I made in the snow, while it had stopped falling."

Those words hit Knot like a brick in the chest. "So you *were* leaving me!" He jerked back and away from Thorn, still burning, but also feeling the hot flame of betrayal. "You lied and said you wouldn't leave."

"For your own good."

"You're still a filthy liar. How am I supposed to trust you now? And yet -- and yet I can't seem to -- oh, gods, Thorn --" Knot rushed in and kissed Thorn again, pushing hard at his lips to try and make them open. Thorn kept his mouth stubbornly shut and pushed Knot back.

"You're not yourself. I still don't remember anything of you, nor how we spent our time before waking up in this place, but you're acting like a mad thing, yes, you

are.” Thorn shook his great mane of hair, acting wary. “You speak of biting me as if you’ve done this before. Have you? Do you recall?”

Knot bit his healed tongue to keep from whimpering in frustration. “No. I only know that I’m aching to have you inside me, and that my cock is too hard for anything but the lightest touch. I’ll burst if you touch me.”

“Then perhaps I should, to take the edge off.”

“No, don’t!”

Knot tried to seize Thorn’s hand, but while he might be stronger, he wasn’t fast enough just yet. Thorn reached down between them and seized Knot’s cock in his hand, moving his fingers up and down the shaft in a hard grip. Knot couldn’t help throwing his head back and keening as the pleasure, so intense that it was almost pain, raced from his cock, down his legs, and up through his stomach. Just as he had predicted, an orgasm crashed over him, heated jets of come spurting from his slit all over Thorn’s worn black leathers.

Thorn held him while he panted, coming down from the spiraling high. “Is it better?” he asked as Knot struggled to reclaim a clear head. “Tell me, are you able to wait now? Have a bit more patience? Yes?”

Knot shook his head hard to clear it, then shouted a wordless denial. He launched himself at Thorn, knocking the vampire down on the bed they’d been sharing. They landed with Thorn on his back, Knot straddling him, and while the mattress gave an ominous creak of warning it held, which was good enough for Knot.

“Off,” he muttered, pulling at Thorn’s clothing again. “I want these off. Skin against skin. It’s the only way that we can be together, Jadoc.”

“What did you call me?” Thorn raised his head, gaze narrow and sharp. “You said a name.”

“Jadoc.” Knot tested it out on his tongue, and it felt right somehow. “That must be your name.”

"Aye, I think you're right. Do you know anything more about me? Who I am, what I do, where we've come from? Your accent is of Capitol, but where did I wander from?"

There were too many questions, making Knot grit his teeth in frustration. "We'll talk later." His cock, which never had gone soft, throbbed with the need of more attention. His balls ached, but they hurt so well that he never wanted the pleasure/pain to go away.

He knew that he could fuck for hours and never be satisfied.

Bending down, he kissed Thorn yet again, pushing his mouth against the vampire's, trying to get his message across. He was desperate for a fucking, a good hard coring, and they couldn't wait much longer. He'd come and come until there was nothing left if Thorn -- no, it was Jadoc now -- didn't hurry.

He rolled off Jadoc and lay on his back. "Please," he begged, voice raw. "I *need* you." Reaching down, he touched his own cock, stroking it lightly so he wouldn't go off again. He couldn't bear not to have at least a little friction. "Stand up and take your clothes off. I don't trust myself not to rend them apart."

"Rending, aye. Just as you'd have me do. I won't take you again without some sort of oil."

Knot rolled his eyes. *A time like this, and he's thinking about the niceties of sex? For the sake of the gods!* "In my pack," he said impatiently. "There's a small flask at the bottom, beneath what you found earlier. It smells of olives, and it should be slick enough to satisfy even you. Are you happy now? *Please*, come and fuck me!"

"With a right good will." Knot had only a moment to register that yes, beneath his restraint Jadoc was desperate as himself, before Jadoc was standing, looming over him. "I'll get out of these, and we'll have a go. But I warn you it may be the last time."

"You won't leave me again." Knot raised up, seizing Jadoc by the leg. "I don't care who might be hunting us. This storm will throw them off, and when the snow starts again there won't be any tracks to follow. I don't care what sort of hell we have to go through, but I won't leave your side."

This was madness, he knew it was, but he *burned*, and there was nothing that would salve him but having Jadoc buried balls-deep inside. He clutched Jadoc's leg in a tighter grip. "Swear it to me," he demanded. "Swear you won't leave me, come what may."

"Ah, no, Knot, don't..."

"Please. I'm begging you, and you said I'd not have to beg again. You have to be by my side." Knot licked his lips. "And you must bite me one more time."

"Not while I have any control over myself," Thorn vowed viciously, but at the same time Knot could see him shaking with an effort to maintain his reserve. Knot chuckled to himself, thinking: *we'll just have to fuck the good sense right out of you, won't we?* And he could make Thorn lose his mind, he knew he could.

"Will nothing satisfy you but a promise that I won't leave?"

"No. And I'll be able to tell if you're lying."

"Gods!" Thorn ran his hands through his mane of thick black hair, making it stand on end. "Fine, then, I swear. For your sake, although it may be the death of us both. And now, will you let go of me? I'm as hungry for you as you are for me, and I'll need to at least have my trousers off to do as you demand." He pushed at Knot's hand. "Let go, and I'll give you what you want. But you must let me call the rules of this game."

Knot growled in frustration.

"No, no, none of your noise. No biting. That's the only thing we'll hold to. You made me swear. Will you say the same? I'll not take off a single stitch, and leave you to suffer while I sit across the room and watch you writhe. Do you know me well enough to know I'm speaking the truth?"

With a deep sigh of aggravation, Knot nodded his head. "No biting," he promised. But to himself he thought, *we'll just see*.

*If this is madness, then I don't want to be sane. Nothing that feels this good should be wrong. And I'm not a bad person for craving it, nor will Thorn be when he loses his head and sinks in his fangs.*

*Vampires thrive on Dante's World, and perhaps there's more than one reason why there are still so many. Their bite is better than any drug...*

He lay still, gazing hungrily up at Thorn, but behaving himself for the time being. Thorn stared down at him, hands hovering at the waist of his pants. He seemed to be struggling with a decision, but gave up the fight soon enough.

"You've bewitched me," he accused, sliding the leather down his legs. He kicked off his boots, which jingled oddly -- and how strange to notice that at the moment -- and stepped out of the trousers.

His cock was hard, beautifully hard, so much so that Knot ached to reach up and touch the marble column of flesh with its dark rosy head. He could all but feel the hardness of the organ between his hands, the silk over steel, and rippled with a shiver at the sharp sense memory of how Jadoc would taste on his tongue. Salty, coppery, tangy, musky.

"Let me suck you," he begged, raising up to reach out for Jadoc's hand. "I want to taste and see how good you are."

"No. I've had no chance to clean myself, and I've been inside you. You lie there, do you hear? Lie still, and behave like a gentleman."

Knot ran his tongue over his lips. "A gentleman who's about to be fucked within an inch of his life?"

Jadoc hesitated, almost grinning. "Aye," he said, shrugging out of his tunic. It hit the floor in a puddle of fluid black leather, leaving him gloriously naked. Knot couldn't help but stare at all the gorgeous flesh laid out for his viewing pleasure, from the broad muscles of the vampire's chest to the bulk of his arms, one banded by the thorny tattoo, and down to his cock -- inevitably to his cock -- jutting out from a nest of black curls.

"Please." He was a wild thing by then, desperate to feel the blissful sting and burn of hard penetration. Only the coolness of Jadoc's erection would tamp down those fires, and make him feel like himself again. He was frantic, and didn't care if the vampire knew as much. "Fuck me."

"With a right good will. But no biting." Thorn lowered himself onto the bed, draping his body over Knot's so that their cocks bumped against one another. He buried his hands in Knot's own hair, and kissed him as if he were drawing life from the embrace.

"No biting," Knot mumbled against Jadoc's mouth. "I'll do as I'm told."

"You'd damn well better. Now hush, and let me love you. I don't want to hear anything but sounds of pleasure, do you understand?"

Knot moaned, thrusting his hips upward, and nodded.

"Good," Thorn said, fast and rushed, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Good. I'll be careful of my fangs, I swear."

*Gods, but you don't have to. Still, I understand why you think you must. I won't break. And I trust you not to drain me. But you must bite. There has to be blood. I don't know why, but it's essential. Crimson droplets landing on a tongue... I can see them so clearly in my mind's eye. Memory or wishful thinking? I don't know. But oh, what he's doing now feels so good...*

While he was thinking, lost in the tangle of his mind, Jadoc had rolled Knot over and over, so that he was sitting upright and straddling Jadoc's thighs. "I thought we might try it this way around, seeing as you've such an appetite for me," the vampire said hoarsely. "If you've a mind, ride me. But first, fetch the oil. Go on. I'll be here when you get back."

Knot cursed, but he knew now wasn't the time to press his luck. He had to wait. Scrambling off Jadoc's body, he ran to the opened packs and dug for the flask he'd found earlier. Grabbing it and running back, he jumped and landed with his knees to either side of Jadoc's hips, his ass braced above the hard length of cock that he yearned to have inside him.

"Let me," he said, popping open the cork. "I'll make you ready."

The oil still smelled of olives to him, and for a brief second Knot felt hungry, but the urge to eat passed in lieu of the fire burning through his veins. He poured a small portion out in his palm and then ran his slick hand up and down the length of Jadoc's cock. "Is this good enough for you?"

Jadoc shook his head, hair tangling wildly on the pillow. "Yourself too," he rasped. "I won't take you all but dry a second time. And I want to watch you touch the place where I'll go in. I have a craving on me to see you fuck your fingers. Go on, or I won't move an inch."

"I could impale myself on you right now."

"But you won't, will you? Because I've asked you not to. Say it, Knot. You'll have a care for your own well-being, or this goes no further."

It was an irritation beyond words, but Knot sullenly obeyed, hastily dashing more oil onto his fingers and reaching between his legs, and... *oh*. All his pique melted away at the feeling of something breaching his hole, even if it was only his own finger. He moaned, pumping in and out, adding another and then another, until he was speared on three, scissoring his fingers wide.

"More oil," Jadoc insisted, nudging the flask with his knee.

Knot snatched it up and applied more of the cooling balm, tossing his head at the wild sensation of something filling him up. He was so slippery, though, that he kept falling out.

"Are you opened for me? Opened up wide?"

"Yes," Knot breathed, positioning himself. "Please?"

Jadoc fisted his hands in the blankets, then raised them to either side of Knot's legs. "Aye, but I'll guide you. And you follow my rhythm, do you hear?"

Knot thought that Jadoc might be talking big, but he was shaking so that Knot could tell his control was about to snap like a fine wire. With a grin he knew was wicked, he positioned himself over Jadoc's cock and sank down, no hesitating or taking the journey by inches, just a long smooth slide until his ass was flush with Jadoc's groin. He cried out at the feeling of being filled so completely as he'd been wanting and bore down, pressing on Jadoc's cock from within.

Just as he'd been hoping, Jadoc snapped. "You'll drive me mad, you will!" he growled, grabbing Knot's hips and thrusting up, although he could have lain still for all that Knot cared. Knot was too busy raising and lowering himself, fucking his hole on



the cock that was there for his pleasure, lost to the sensation of someone stretching and burning and cooling and *oh...*

"This isn't a game for just one," Jadoc said sharply, grabbing Knot's hips to keep him still. "We go together, like this." He rolled his hips upward as Knot slid down. "Aye, aye, in a rhythm. I won't lie here and be fucked like a toy. I'm part of this, and you'd best remember it."

Knot felt embarrassed for a second, but then swallowed his pride, because now that he was letting Jadoc participate, it felt even better than before. Mischievous, he used his internal muscles again, squeezing as hard as he could, just for the pleasure of seeing Jadoc writhe and hearing him groan. He was babbling, speaking in a dialect so broad that Knot could hardly understand him -- perhaps a vampire corruption of the language. Either way, he was poised at the ragged edge, which was just where Knot wanted him.

Jadoc pushed up hard into Knot's hole, then grasped him hard. He opened his mouth, baring his fangs. They were frightening -- long, sharp, dangerous -- but at the same time they filled Knot with a feeling of absolute thrill. Surely Jadoc *would* bite him, then. When he came, he'd surge up and plunge in his teeth --

But no. Jadoc roared, tilting his head backwards so that he resembled a cross between a snake and a lion, and gripped Knot's hips tightly enough to leave bruises. Knot could feel the cool jism coating his inner walls, and the feeling was enough to tip him over the edge a second time, stripes of his own come painting broad splashes over Jadoc's chest.

He saw, as if through a haze, Jadoc turn his head desperately to a side and gash at his own shoulder, the fangs scoring deep lines across his flesh.

The red he'd been aching for welled up around the teeth marks, and Knot made his move. Slipping off Jadoc's cock as quickly as he could, he plunged downward and fastened his mouth over the wound, sucking the precious red droplets into his mouth, tasting the rich copper and... *oh. Oh.*

*Oh, gods.*

Throwing himself backwards, Knot managed to get off Jadoc's body and into a corner. He could still taste the blood on his tongue as all his memories came rushing back in a tidal wave of thought. "I won't be like you!" he cried out, warding Jadoc off with two hands. "I'm mortal, and I'll stay that way!"

"Knot." Jadoc struggled to sit up. His hair was tangled in elf-knots and he had a look of confusion on his face. His cock was softening, but still glistened with the oil. "You're making no sense, man. I broke my own rule, aye, but it's myself that I bit, not you." Realization dawned. "I thought you were kissing me, but you drank, didn't you? Damn it, Knot!"

"No. You're the one who's damned. And my name isn't Knot. It's Kiether. Kiether, who ran away from you because you were determined to turn me into one of your kind. Stay back," Kiether warned. "Stay back, or I swear that I'll have at you myself. I don't care if it kills me. I won't become a vampire."

"Knot -- Kiether -- love, hold a moment and think --"

"I'd thought enough when I ran away." Kiether spat on the ground, the heated blood pulsing through his body gone ice cold with shock. "But you followed me, and you surprised me here in my hideaway. You said we could run away together, to a place where we could live free. There was a moment when I didn't know what to think or say, and then I was Knot. Now I'm me again, and I want you to stay away."

He trembled and shook, lowering his head into his arms. "Just stay away."

## Chapter Six

A long stretch of silence passed between them, Thorn -- no, Jadoc -- on the bed, still naked and striped with come, and Knot -- no, Kiether -- crouched in a corner. He'd huddled in on himself, knees drawn up to his chin, and seemingly withdrawn away to a corner of his mind where all he could do was think about the same thing over and over again, shaking his head every few seconds. The movement came regularly as the tick of a metronome, and was fit to drive Jadoc out of his mind.

"Kiether," he tried. "Kiether, can you hear me? It's Jadoc speaking to you. Thorn, if you like, the one you wanted so desperately that you nearly ripped the clothes from my back. And wouldn't that have been a display of strength, considering they were leather? Come back to me, Kiether. Knot. Whoever you might be, open your eyes and let's have us a reasonable talk."

Kiether flinched. His hands came up in a defensive position, as if he'd protect himself against Jadoc. "Don't -- don't come any closer," he warned. "I'll stake you."

"You've no stakes on you." Jadoc chanced standing up, then sat down immediately as this was an obvious mistake. Kiether made a panicked sound and tried to hunch further back in his corner, even though his back was pressed to the wall already. "No stakes. I've been through both our baggage."

"I don't... nothing to kill you with..." Kiether mumbled. "Night-time. No garlic, no blessed water. No holy symbols."

"Those are all myths, Kiether, as well you should know. If you've been with me as long as I think you have, you'd be aware of the fact." Jadoc tried sinking down on his knees facing Kiether, so they'd be on an equal footing. "Something must have happened in the city, right before we -- you -- fled. I can't remember what it was myself, no, but

you must. Will you not tell me? Have I not the right to know what I did wrong, so I can try to put it right?"

Kiether shuddered, a full-body spasm that finished with his teeth chattering. "You don't want to know. Stake... I need something sharp and wooden..."

"We'll have no more talk of killing." All the same, Jadoc tensed, preparing for an attack. From the way Kiether spoke he was ready to go off in an instant, taking Jadoc down to the ground and ripping his throat open with bare hands and fingernails. He didn't think Kiether could take off his head in such a fashion, but it would hurt like hell and he'd have to stop the man. More reason for Kiether to hate him, he didn't want.

He still couldn't remember, but he had a sense that the two of them were very special to one another, once upon a time. "What's come between us?" he pressed. "It must have been something big, for you to be this alarmed. To have run away and left me all alone in Capitol, a 'tame' vampire with a taste for human blood -- your blood -- and a collar around his neck."

Kiether shook his head, giving a strangled laugh. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Give me a try," Jadoc pushed. "I'm a vampire, as you well know. I've no idea how old I am, but I must have seen many a thing in my day and age. I doubt you can surprise me, given my years and what I'm thinking must have happened."

Kiether laughed again. "You're probably right. We were lovers, you and I. I used to sneak into your cubby of an apartment after the sun went down and you were awake. We'd spend night after night making love. Until..."

"But before that. Think back. How did we meet? Can you tell me the story?" He spoke the words in a soothing lilt, trying to calm Kiether down and praying that his gamble would work.

The thought struck him that he happened to be awfully religious for a vampire, especially one who knew for certain that the gods never listened to him or his kind. Why was that, he wondered?

Kiether shivered. "Your old Keeper died. He'd grown old taking care of you, and you'd been an exemplary model of what a tame vampire could reform himself into. The city even trusted you with a job doing what you loved best, painting portraits and landscapes to sell. It was enough to keep you in tinned blood and pay the rent on your little hole of an apartment. Even enough to move you to more spacious quarters, two whole rooms, one for show and posing your subjects, and one just a bed with some nails in the wall for your clothing."

He swallowed hard, then went on. "I'm of a rich family, but not the inheriting son. They had their heir and spare, and I came third. There were thoughts of sending me into the priesthood, but I balked. Then I heard the rumors that you had been a holy man before you were attacked and changed. I also heard that once you woke as a vampire, you savaged half the monastery in your madness for the feed. I was afraid. But I went."

Kiether closed his eyes. "I think it was love at first sight between us, or at least lust. I'd come wanting no more than to get an eyeful of you, to look at a legend, and to have my picture painted. They -- members of my family -- said I was a fool, that there were plenty of human artists, but no, I wouldn't listen. I'd go to Jadoc or no one. So, in the end, they gave up and let me do as I wished. They hadn't the time to spare on arguing with me, and really, what did they need a third son for?"

"Ah, Kiether..." Jadoc ached to reach for him, but sensed that then of all times was not the right moment. "Keep going, if you will. Tell me what happened. You came to me to have your picture painted." He flexed his fingers, long and thick, wondering how it could be possible for them to have the delicacy to draw and wield a brush. "I'm taking it as a given that I agreed to the task?"

"We'd set up an appointment. Ugly or handsome, you painted them all, eager to put away as much coin as you could. I think you knew they'd assign you another Keeper eventually, and you wanted as much financial freedom as you could have when the inevitable happened."

"And then?"

Kiether began to lower his hands. "It was late at night when I came. The family didn't see fit to bestow a car on me, so I came by the common trolley, and the passengers all laughed at me when I got out at the building that housed your rooms. They teased me about your fondness for young men, and I tell you I went red with anger. Of recent days, I'd had to deal with the realization that I preferred men, myself, and my family's reaction."

"You keep making mention of your family," Jadoc prodded gently. "They're important, are they?"

Kiether shrugged. "Somewhat. Not as much as they'd like to think. But they have plenty of money. Enough to spare their third son what he needed and even a few of the things he wanted, like a picture of himself in his youth hanging on the walls in the portrait gallery."

"Portrait gallery. They sound rich, aye."

"I suppose." Kiether had begun picking at a slightly rough patch on his knee. Jadoc wanted to tell him to stop, to tell him that it was likely a skinned patch and he might draw some tempting blood, but he kept his peace. Kiether had finally opened up to talking freely, and he didn't want to interrupt the flow of words.

"Go on," Jadoc prompted, keeping his demeanor almost casual. "What happened after you got off the trolley?"

"Ha. Ah, that, yes. I stood for a long moment in the street, staring up at the square of light in your window, wondering if I should do this after all. You were the infamous vampire who'd slaughtered enough men that your fangs were long and wicked -- you may not remember, but the fangs grow depending on how much you kill. A vampire who claimed to be reformed, who drank only tinned blood. But, I'd wondered, what would stop you from having a snack off a third son who few people would miss, even his family? For all I knew, my parents might have provided me with the necessary funds in order to try and finish me off quickly; that, and rid the world of another vampire. They hated vampires." Kiether left off the rubbing at his leg.

“So there you were, with a head full of questions and no one to answer them?” Jadoc asked after a long pause when Kiether fell silent.

Kiether sat quiet for another moment, one that seemed to stretch on and on, then finally nodded. “I was desperate, you see. Even if I was only third in line, I might have provided the family with honor by taking vows, or there was always the possibility that I could provide them with more grandchildren. My mother, she...” Kiether’s voice faded briefly. “I knew they likely wanted me to die, and I wasn’t sure that I didn’t. So I gathered my courage and went inside, up to your rooms.”

He closed his eyes. “And then there you were, with your long black hair and your eyes the color of good whiskey, a smile on your face as you welcomed me in and reassured me, showing off your collar. I couldn’t help but see a glimpse of fang as you smiled, though, and it sent a thrill through my body that surprised me. I suppose that moment was the beginning.”

Jadoc nodded. “And I don’t suppose it could have been much different for me. You, with a mane like a lion, tousled wildly from your ride, reminding me of a wild animal who’d been locked in a cage all its life. I’m remembering now how the rich of Capitol often treated their sons, twisting and molding them into what their parents or guardians wanted. I think I must have seen in you the same urge I would have been feeling -- the need to be free.”

“You’re not wrong. We sat down, and you paid me compliment after compliment on my hair, my eyes, and then, when I posed, my body. You kept coming up with excuses for me to pose in different ways, even though this was to have been a head-and-shoulders sketch.” Kiether half-choked out a laugh. “We were between the sheets together before the night was over. I’d been flattered, you see, and I wanted to take the chance of bedding one of the most dangerous creatures to ever live. I thought you’d bite me and have done with the whole affair, but no, you were gentle, especially when I told you this was my first time.” He sighed. “I think that’s when I fell in love.”

"So you loved me, aye. And I can't imagine I felt any differently." Jadoc edged forward a little bit. "So what was it that came between us? Can you recall so much as the reason?"

"I can." Kiether looked up. Jadoc almost recoiled at the sight of his eyes, so full of bleak despair. "You and I, we'd spent every moment together that I could steal away from my family. They didn't care -- they put it down to sowing my wild oats, and were only glad that there were no rumors. We were discreet, you and I. I stopped taking the trolley in favor of walking, always a different route each time, occasionally stopping off in a club that catered to my particular tastes. I never took more than a meal there, though. I was faithful to you."

"But then something happened." Jadoc shifted position, ever so carefully. "What?"

"Ah. Yes. Something did happen. I'd let you bite me. There were too many times when you sucked my cock and lost your control, and finally I told you to bite and have a sup. It was a thrill for me, you see? Dancing so carefully a measure with death. And I trusted you not to take too much. You always saw that I was fed with a good rich steak or a piece of liver before I set back off home, to replenish what you had taken. I don't remember how long this went on. Weeks, perhaps months. It all blurs together."

He took a deep breath, lacing his fingers together. "But then you began to push me to make our arrangement permanent. I laughed you off at first, thinking of what my family would say, then deciding I didn't care, but still fretting -- no, that's not the right word -- thinking about your request that we make a lasting pair. You even wanted me to put in for the position of your Keeper, at one point."

"There'd have been no harm in such a job. Keeper is a noble job, one that brings honor to anyone brave enough to take it on."

"Yes, but you see I didn't want to 'keep' you. That would have driven a wedge between us, and I couldn't have borne the thought of reporting in day and night, telling lies about your consumption of human blood. Perhaps being examined and their



finding the bite marks on my thighs. Killing you." Kiether frowned. "So you came up with another idea."

"And what would that idea have been, aye?"

"Leaving Capitol, for one." Kiether lifted one hand and ran it through his hair so that the locks stood up on end. "You'd a plan all mapped out. Been withdrawing money one bag at a time, so no one would suspect you needed more than a bit of extra to cover your daily expenses, and there was a great sack full of coins in your quarters. It's a hard life for vampires in the big city, and you'd come from the country in your younger days, when you were still alive. There were supposed to be safe havens for vampires, and many were flocking to those lands. You wanted to join them, you and I, so we could be together forever."

Jadoc lifted one eyebrow. "It sounds as if we loved each other a great deal. And even though I can't remember the past yet, myself, I've grown so very attached to you during our time together in this dugout. I can understand why I would have loved you. You're a wild thing underneath a shell the city must have made you wear. Everything a beast could want -- another beast to match and occasionally best them. So where did things go sour?"

Kiether began to chuckle. It was not, however, a sound of amusement. The noise had an edge of hysteria. "You decided -- you had your mind set -- that I should become like you, so we could be young together always. You wanted to drain me and pour some of your own blood down my throat, so that I'd die and wake up a vampire. You pushed at me and pushed at me until I was at my wits' end, and afraid that I would stop loving you altogether." He spread his hands. "I knew of another city, one not populated by vampires, and thought to run away. My sack, there, I packed with a few essentials, and I crept out at the dead of night."

"I suppose a night-time run was your mistake."

"Oh, yes." Kiether nodded. "I expect that once I didn't show up at our regular time, you figured out what I'd done. Threw a few things into your sack of money, and

came racing after me. Tracing me by smell. I've heard vampires can do as much, if they know their prey well enough."

"And we met here?"

"I'd told you about this place, but forgotten the conversation." Kiether leaned forward a little on his haunches. "You were fleeter of foot than I, and waited for me here at the dugout. You'd gone to some trouble, building up a fire and then banking it, counting on my being surprised."

Jadoc was having a hard time believing this of himself, but then again, what reason would Kiether have to lie? Yet... he had felt so determined not to take "Knot's" blood, almost as if the denial of his needs were instinctual. He couldn't understand what happened to change him so.

And what a selfish bastard he had been before, aye! To think of forcing a human to change into what he was -- a dead thing, animated only by blood and forces no one could understand.

He cleared his throat. "And then?"

"You were waiting for me, just inside the door here. When I opened it up, you were on me with hungry kisses, sweeping me back to the way I felt when I was in your rooms. You swore that you'd let me go but claimed you wanted a proper goodbye, not an abandonment by night. I was weak. I gave in. We shed our clothes and made our way toward the bed. Then, I don't know what happened. I remember feeling something like a fire engulfing me, and then my memory was gone." Kiether raised his shoulders. "Yours too. And what will we do now, Jadoc? Your recall is still gone, but mine is crystal clear. I know more about you than you do yourself."

"You've no idea how sorry I am." Jadoc bit the inside of his cheek, not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to feel the nip. "You say we were in love, and that we spent every night together. No doubt you've memory after memory of making love, of spending hours wrapped up in one another's arms."

"I do. You were always gentle, so gentle, even when I grew wild. I think you truly were tamed, as they like to call it, before you got the notion in your head to make

me one of your kind. Perhaps it was drinking my blood and getting a taste for the stuff that made you think along those lines. I don't know." Kiether had relaxed a little by then; he wasn't hunched up as if afraid that Jadoc would hurl himself at his body. "The blood. I don't know why tasting you sparked my memory. You never went so far as to make me drink; you only suggested the idea." He ran his tongue over his lips. "Why would a taste bring me back to myself?"

"I don't know." And Jadoc didn't. But he had an idea. "A sup of your blood, taken in the heat of the moment, didn't bring me back to myself. Perhaps the magic's in my own veins." He raised a wrist to his mouth. "We'll see if we're second time lucky."

"Jadoc, no!" Kiether exclaimed, but it was too late. Razor-sharp fangs first, Jadoc had bitten down on his wrist and let the blood flow into his mouth. It tasted weak and watery, as if it weren't proper blood at all, but as it trickled down his throat he felt a seizure in his head, something like his brain sneezing, and he too *remembered*...

*"This is for both of us, love. You and I. You're willing enough to run off with me, but I can't bear the thought of you growing old while I'm young forever. Will you not even consider the idea?"*

*"I've had a thought, Kiether, and it's not something you'll be expecting. No, no, no kisses until you've heard me out. Sit down on the posing stool, across from me, and let me tell you my gist."*

*"Love you... ah God, Kiether, love you... yes, do it again... harder... fuck, Kiether, the way you move... there's never been anyone like you. Never will be."*

*"Kiether, what are you -- oh-hoh, you're in a feisty mood tonight, aren't you? Mmm, I can smell it on you. You've been to the club again, and watched the handsome men strut themselves around to display their goods. But I can't smell another on you, so I know you've kept*

*yourself pure for me, a sullied thing, a dirty vampire. Not a day goes by that my luck in having you doesn't amaze me..."*

*"Welcome to my home. Kiether, is it? And your family name, it's Seldon, yes? Good. You're a very... no, never mind. Sit down on the posing stool -- yes, just there -- and let me get my canvas ready. We'll paint you a picture worthy of hanging in any fine mansion. It'll be a masterwork, with such a subject. Why, have I made you blush? You don't need to be afraid, now. I can hear your heart beating faster. I'm tamed. Do you see my collar? There's no Keeper, to be sure, but I won't do you any harm. You can trust in me, aye..."*

Jadoc shook his head vigorously, as if shedding water. He remembered it all, and he didn't think he could loathe himself more than if he were the monster he recalled being before he reformed. "Kiether, I'm sorry," was all he could say. "I was madly in love with you, but I could feel you slipping away. In my foolishness, I thought to try and bind you to me for good and all. But I see now how wrong I was." He sat down hard on his ass, chest exposed, a helpless position. "If you'd a stake on you, I'd lie still for you to plunge it in my heart. This is my fault, love, all my fault."

Kiether nodded, drawing his knees up underneath his chin. "I was afraid. Perhaps I'm a coward."

"No, no, never. You're the bravest man I've ever met, coming into a vampire's home and trusting him so far as to let him feed. You ran because you thought I would kill you. That's not cowardice, that's sanity. And I ran because I was *insane* with the need of your body, your heart, and your mind, but you were slipping away. That's the way of it, and I can think of nothing else to say."

The silence returned, stretching on and on between them.

"Which brings us to where we are now, in a dugout," Kiether said suddenly. "And it gives us a choice. Where do we go from here, Jadoc? Do we head for the city of the humans, the lands of the vampires, or back to Capitol? Will you make me drink?"

“Never,” Jadoc swore, meaning the words. “Not while you’re unwilling, and in your right mind. While both of us are sane,” he amended. “But aye, you’re right. We have a choice. Where do we go from here?”

Kiether leaned back against the wall, looking unbearably tired. “Things were so good between us, once upon a time. I think our time here proves that, even when we don’t know one another, we’re drawn together. I felt the fire for you the same as I remember it. I’d like to get what we once had back, if there’s any possible way.”

“But where, that’s the question.” Jadoc sighed, letting his hands rest at his sides. He felt the cold dirt beneath his fingers, the sting of his already-healing wrist, and the ache in his heart. “I’ll leave it up to you, Kiether. It’s your choice as to what we do or don’t. You tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

Kiether looked stunned. He opened his mouth, then closed it. Lowering his head, he muttered to himself, things that even Jadoc’s vampire hearing couldn’t quite make out. Jadoc waited on tenterhooks, desperate to know what was running through Kiether’s mind. But he could wait. He owed the man that much.

Finally, Kiether looked up, his blue eyes clear. He nodded once, a short jerk of the head. “I’ve decided what I want, Jadoc. Will you listen to me, and make no interruptions?”

Jadoc nodded. “I swear.” And whatever it took, he’d hold himself steady, making no demands.

Kiether gathered his strength, and Jadoc waited to see what would happen.

Waited.

And waited.

## Chapter Seven

Kiether's throat felt dry, as if he'd not had a drink of water for a full day and night, although there was the spilled tin of soup by the fire and the lingering taste of blood in his mouth to tell him he'd had liquids. Perhaps it was what he had planned to say which made him so nervous that he'd grown parched.

He'd been rolling things over and over in his mind, and he knew one thing for certain -- he loved Jadoc. There could be no doubt about it. He loved Jadoc even when the vampire was insane with plans for fleeing the city and turning him to the dark side. It was because he loved Jadoc so that he left him.

But what should happen next? Should he forgive Jadoc, welcome him back into his arms, and forget the history that had passed between them? Or should he keep his distance? Jadoc was humbled enough that he'd likely let Kiether go. Kiether knew it would be less than a day's journey on foot for a human to the edges of Capitol. He could go back to his family with a story about being attacked but not killed by a vampire he didn't recognize.

Ah, no, that wouldn't do. Kiether was canny enough to know his parents weren't altogether ignorant, and would likely put two and two together about the vampire portrait painter's disappearance and his own bite. His mother never had stopped going about with a lacy white handkerchief to dab at her eyes with whenever she saw him, murmuring things about grandchildren, pity, and shame.

He wouldn't go back to them. They were part of a life he found himself glad to be done with. And he wouldn't, in essence, toss Jadoc to the wolves. The vampire was a dangerous creature, to be sure, but tender as well. Kiether could not help believing Jadoc wouldn't take his blood now. Truth to tell, he remembered all too clearly that

after the first time Jadoc slipped when sucking his cock, Kiether was the one to goad him into biting harder and deeper.

The monk turned vampire turned tame. His Jadoc in a nut's shell. Yes. *His* Jadoc.

He couldn't let the vampire go, not after what had happened to bring them back together. Although he didn't call himself a particularly religious man, he believed that all things happened for a reason.

Perhaps the gods themselves intervened, to keep them from parting their ways forever. One or both might have died. Kiether knew he'd been a fool to run away -- he was city born and bred, with all the conveniences of a rich life, and knew nothing of traveling hard or living rough. If he hadn't been aware of this dugout, once the home of a family huntsman, he'd likely have frozen to death in the snow.

No, no. Jadoc would have found him. Saved him. But how? By taking him, at the edge of death, and forcing him to drink? He would still have been of a mind to change him when they met.

Everything, each drop of evidence and scrap of proof, it was all so confusing. Thoughts whirled around and around in Kiether's mind, making him want to thump his head against the wall. But no, he couldn't be a child about this, could he? Although he was still a young man, he was fully grown, and he had to take responsibility for his actions.

Perhaps it had been the greatest foolishness of his life to fall in love with a vampire.

But in point of fact, loving Jadoc had also been his greatest blessing.

He couldn't let the love of his life pass him by.

"Jadoc," he said at last, holding out this hand. "Will you come and sit by me? I promise I'm calm now. You needn't fear me, or anything I might do to you. The wildness has died down, and I'm not going to attack." How odd, that he should be coaxing a killer, as if he were a frightened animal! "Please. Bring yourself over here and be at my side."

Jadoc looked at Kiether as if he wasn't certain that Kiether was in his right mind, which made him want to laugh, but the vampire did nod. He crawled over rather than getting up, and when he reached Kiether's feet bent his head to kiss the tops, his lips chilly but the meaning of his gesture clear.

*I am your servant. Do with me what you will.*

"Don't." Kiether pulled his feet away. "There can't be any... just do as I asked, and no more. Having you at my side is all I want. Yes, sit up, exactly what I'm asking for. At my side, where there's plenty of room. Put your arm around my shoulder and hold me. Just hold me."

The fire had gone down, and he was cold. Jadoc himself was cooled to the temperature of the room, so he wasn't much help in warming Kiether up, but it felt like a comfort to slip into an embrace that he remembered growing used to. Deliberately taking a chance that Jadoc wouldn't pull away, Kiether nudged his head beneath Jadoc's chin, resting against his chest. No heart beat within him, but the silence was one he'd grown used to.

Jadoc sat stiffly, as if expecting some sort of attack to come out of nowhere. "Don't be afraid," Kiether said, rubbing his cheek across the muscles of Jadoc's chest. "I'm not."

"And how is that possible? You're not afraid, when we both know what I am and what I've been capable of?"

"I also remember the things we did together," Kiether made soft rejoinder. "Nights when we'd launch ourselves at one another the instant I walked through your door, and we'd spend the hours fucking ourselves into utter exhaustion. Evenings when I came with a basket of food for myself, some fresh tins of blood for you, and we'd sit and talk. You never hurt me, even when you were crazed with plans for leaving. I don't think you'll hurt me now."

"How can you be sure?"



"I can't. But I'm choosing to trust you. Do you understand? I'm making a conscious decision. Will you put your other arm around me and let me rest against your lap? I'm tired, Jadoc, so tired."

Jadoc heaved a sigh, but obeyed. As Kiether settled into the vampire's lap, a breath escaped him as well. The move felt so natural and right. He'd been there before, many a time, and felt as secure as a dog at its genial master's side. "Do you remember," he said suddenly, "the night when I came to you in the tear-away outfit?"

That earned him a startled laugh. "I do. Clear as life. You teased and toyed with me, dodging out of reach, until I thought I'd lose my mind. Then you stood back and *rip!*"

Kiether began to smile. "I stayed up half-a-dozen nights unpicking stitches from the clothes, and basting them back together so I could rip them easily apart. I'm not handy with a needle, and a prick from a pin hurts far more than one might think."

"More than the bite from a vampire?"

"Yes." Kiether turned a little, looking up into Jadoc's face. "You know yourself that a vampire's bite can bring infinite pleasure, or endless pain, to the one who's on the receiving end. It's all in what the vampire desires. You never wanted anything for me but bliss, so of course you never hurt me, even when you drank. Perhaps I was a fool. I may have tempted you too far. But I never regretted it, and now that I've had a chance to calm down, I still don't regret anything. We had some fine times together, you and I."

Jadoc slowly began to stroke Kiether's head, running his fingers through the thick hair. "Aye. And I'm remembering another night, one when I showed you both portraits I had painted, with these clumsy hands that were once used for no more than digging potatoes but ached to work at copying the holy books with their bright and glorious pictures. Ha. Perhaps that's why I still call on the gods. The past is hard to overcome."

"It can be, and other times it's the easiest thing in the world." Kiether nudged Jadoc with his cheek. He remembered the night in question, but wanted to hear the rest of the story.

"Aye, for some. I recall showing you the portrait you'd commissioned, and the pretty blush on your cheeks when I told you it wasn't half so nice as what I saw every night. Then I pulled the sheet off my second painting, and watched you go from pink to white to scarlet."

"I was nude, lying in the middle of your bed. One leg drawn up. A sheet half over the other leg. I was asleep, and realized you must have sketched me when I collapsed one time. Gods, but I was so embarrassed -- for a moment. Then I whirled you around into a kiss because I was delighted beyond words."

"My favorite painting ever. A shame we had to burn the thing for our own safety."

"Safety." Kiether shook his head. "There's no such thing as safety for your kind in the city these days. But to have such a risqué painting of a human, one linked to a moneyed family -- well, it would have been the end for both of us. Examinations, trials, facing down those who could never understand... but I still wish we had the canvas."

"Aye. I'm wishing for the same thing, myself."

Kiether lay very still for a moment. He knew what he wanted to do, just as he knew it was madness -- but hadn't he proved to himself that night that insanity could sometimes make more sense than cold logic? The heart could be right where the mind was wrong.

"You can paint me again," he whispered against Jadoc's leg. "When we get where we're going, you can start up your business, and I'll be your first client."

Jadoc stiffened. "When we... Kiether, do you know what you're saying, man?"

"I do." Kiether lifted off Jadoc's lap and sat up, raising one hand to brush his vampire's cheek. "I can't go back to the city now, even if I wanted to, which I don't. Neither can you. You were right about the Guards. They won't be sniffing around yet, but when they put two and two together about our simultaneous disappearances, there'll be a hunt. We'd best get far away before then."

"Kiether, you cannot be serious."

"Why not?"

"Because!" Jadoc burst out. "You're putting your life into my hands. Do you not ken what a precious gift that is? And me, I'm no worthy recipient of such. I can see you safely to the smaller city where it's only humans, but then --"

"No. We'll both go to the city of vampires, and you'll take care of me once we've arrived. You can take care of yourself, and you know I can be a hellcat. I'm not saying anything will be easy, but we can make a home for ourselves there." Kiether inhaled a deep breath. "And perhaps, if I'm ever ready, I can give myself up completely."

"Kiether, you don't know what you're saying. You mustn't tempt me so."

"I'm not saying anything that isn't true." Kiether cupped Jadoc's cheek. "I was afraid, yes, and I'm still full of nerves over this venture. But we belong together, you and I, and I'll be damned if I let you go. There. Am I clear enough for you now?"

Jadoc sat very still. Then slowly, solemnly, he leaned down for a kiss. It was a sweet embrace, but Kiether still felt Jadoc's fangs drag along his lip. When Jadoc pulled back -- for it was him who moved first, not Kiether -- his eyes were wide. "You trust me this far?" he asked, his voice rasping. "You'll swear to stand by my side, come what may? No more leaving me?"

"Not if I can possibly help myself. I give you my word and myself, Jadoc. What we have may make no sense to the rest of the world, but it works for us, and that's good enough for me. Now kiss me again." Kiether could feel his blood starting to heat, but he welcomed the burn this time. He recognized it as the sheer hunger for Jadoc that the vampire inevitably brought out in him. "Kiss me hard and deep, and roll me over onto my back."

Jadoc licked his lips. His eyes were still huge. "I don't deserve such a second chance."

"Who said this was about rewards being earned?"

"You're right." Jadoc laughed shortly. "Aye, you're right, and no mistake. You're giving yourself to me as a free gift. I can do no less. I'll have you by my side, because I swear never to leave you. I'll keep you safe, and in the future... well, we'll deal with other questions as they rise. I'll trust you if you trust me."

"I do. I will. I give you my word. Now kiss me, and lay me on the floor. The snow won't pick up for a while, and we've a long way to travel, but there's time enough for us to have one last fuck in the place where the gods meant for us to be. Meant to bring us back together."

"You've no idea how tempting you are..."

"I hope so. Otherwise my efforts are for nothing."

"You devil."

"I've told you once already, and you well know, there's no demon in me. I'm nothing but a human, but one that's so in love with you, even though you're a vampire, that I can hardly breathe. Kiss me and lay me down on my back. I burn to have you inside me again."

"Aye." Jadoc kissed Kiether again, careful in the way he now remembered -- there's an art to touching a vampire's mouth with one's own. Kiether kissed him back, remembering the ways to best please the creature he'd chosen as a mate, and laughed as he felt himself being lowered to the floor.

"One last fuck in this place," Jadoc whispered against the corner of his mouth. "Once more down this winding road, and then we leave for the vampire city. I know the way, for it was passed to me by one who's been long gone, another 'tame' vampire who made good on his escape."

"No more talking." Kiether lay on his back now, with Jadoc above him. He could feel the vampire's cock waking against his leg, and he wanted to make it grow hard, ready to plunder him deep. Reaching down, he began to stroke the organ, feeling it swell. "Fuck me, Jadoc. We've sworn to each other, and now we'll seal our oath with blood and seed."

"And then we're off, to a place where we can live together without any worries. At least none we can't do something about."

"We'll leave."

"You and I."

"The both of us, together." Jadoc's cock was fully hard now, and Kiether knew he was still slick. "Come inside, and use your mouth for nothing but kissing, do you understand?"

"Only if you do the same," Jadoc answered before pressing his mouth to Kiether's.

Kiether surrendered gladly, wrapping his arms around Jadoc's neck as the vampire guided himself unerringly to Kiether's hole and began to push in with a suddenly urgent need. They rocked to and fro, penetrating and receiving, with nothing but moans and cries to break the silence between them -- a *good* silence.

*If this is madness, then to the hells with sanity, Kiether thought before he was swept away with the force of their lovemaking. I'm where I belong, and going where I need to be. We'll cross other bridges when we reach them, and there's the end of our story.*

Then he was washing away on a tide of bliss, and the time for thinking had stopped.

The time for new beginnings had come.

## **Willa Okati**

Willa Okati is one hundred percent in love all things vampire and supernatural. However, she's an even bigger fan of stories that feature beautiful men exploring their desires for one another. Casually known as the "blue-haired, tattooed wench" among Changeling folks, she lives for the fun of acting just as young as she feels. She'd love for you to visit her website at <http://www.willaokati.com> or join her reader's loop for fun and chatter at [willa\\_okati@yahoogroups.com](mailto:willa_okati@yahoogroups.com). Happy reading!