

# LINEAGE

Angela Fiddler

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Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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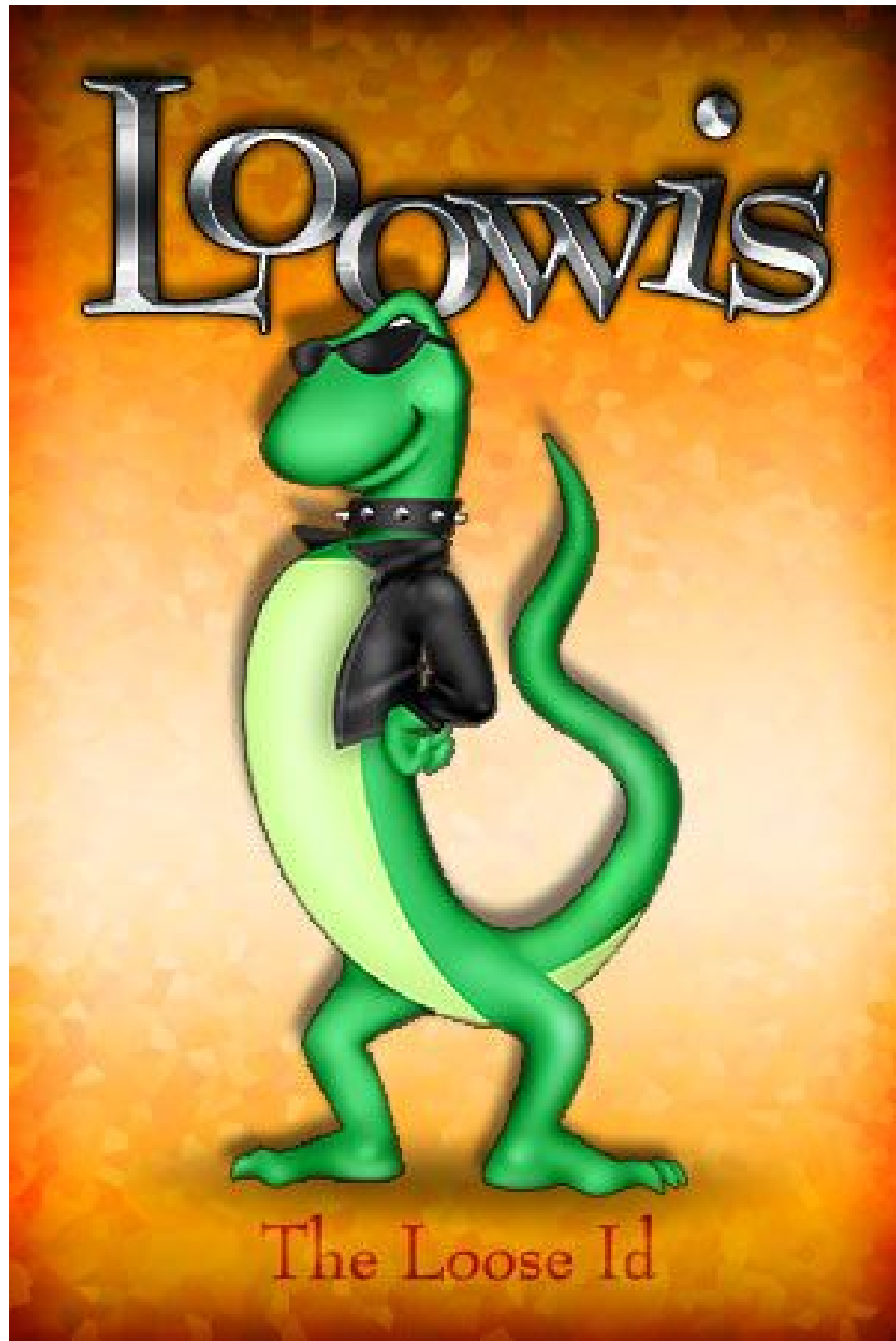
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ISBN 978-1-59632-447-3

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Judith David  
Cover Artist: Croco Designs



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## Chapter One

Once, perhaps, Vision would have been in the divey little bar with Janus, alone. The beer they would drink would smell and taste of piss, the non-conditioned air would wick away what little chill it had to make it potable, and the night would end with blowjobs in the back of the alley.

Vision laughed to himself, and was surprised when his shoulders shook. Being drunk played havoc on his motor skills, apparently. Janus stopped whispering something in his pet's ear, and they both turned and looked at him. This wasn't a divey little bar, but a glass and chrome martini *lounge* somewhere on a side street off Union Square. He and Janus weren't alone, Janus had his little Lyall and Vision had his security force, all five of them, staged in various locations throughout the bar. Sorry, *lounge*.

It was a good thing the martinis were straight alcohol. The night would still end with blowjobs, Janus's, not his. Vision would make it back to the huge house he now had and wander the halls until it was night again.

The bartender came out from around the bar to clear the empties. Janus was generous to a fault when it came to tipping humans, and any of his regular haunts treated him like old

royalty. Vision looked around to his watchers and wondered how Janus would like the taste of new sovereignty.

Still, the bartender was pretty, in a shaven head and eyeliner leathery kind of way, and Vision found himself wondering what the bare skin would feel like under his palms with Vision's back to the deliberately coarse brick walls surrounding the bar. The bartender raised his delicately sculpted eyebrow at Vision, as though welcoming him to find out, but Vision stood.

Janus looked up, untangling his fingers from Lyall's hair. "We done here?" he asked.

"I am. You finish your..." Vision stopped. Lyall was leaning back in the booth, his body an invitation and his long fingers running up and down his neck. The V-neck of his shirt set off the vein work along his throat. "...drink."

Janus tipped his glass, filled with something so blue it glowed in the black light of the bar.

Vision waved him off.

The alcohol in his system only accentuated the other hunger inside him. The night was still young, the moon as bright as the noonday sun he remembered, and the thought of getting back into the dark waiting limo stabbed him.

Hanz and Frank, his two most loyal followers, or at least Strickland's most loyal followers that he had simply inherited along with the rest of Strickland's organization, waited for him by the limo's open door.

Vision got into a waiting cab, instead. "Hey, I'm waiting for someone," the cabbie said, glaring at Vision through the mirror.

All Vision needed was the eye contact. "Not any more you aren't," he said. Pushing into a human's brain took no more energy than pushing into water. He had no problems sliding into the matrix of thoughts and tissues and simply rewrote the man's desires with his own.

“Yes, sir,” the cabbie said, pulling his hat lower down on his head. He put the car in drive.

The entire operation took a couple seconds. Hanz and Frank didn’t move from the car, and Vision watched their faces as he drove off. He promised himself that he’d find new minions as soon as he could.

The dark shadows in the street were different this side of 14th Street. Vision tasted the need and sex in the back of his throat as metallic as blood.

“Wait for me,” Vision said. The cabbie put the car in park. Vision opened the door and stepped out. It took a concerted effort for him to pull his fangs back inside his mouth, but he did so. The bloodlust would just have to wait.

He passed the twinkies and the hustlers. Neither interested him. Any that were interested in him shrank back when Vision shot them a withering look. He felt their discomfort, and reveled in it.

The shadows grew deeper the further he traveled. He supposed the lights here threw off as much as the lights by the cab, but the needs were deeper and tasted of leather.

*Excellent.* A rough hand came down over his shoulder. The heat of blood beneath the skin was a song to Vision.

“You looking for me?” a man’s voice said, a harsh purr of metal.

Vision turned, slowly. The man was big, bigger than he was, and his leather vest showed off his huge arms to best advantage. His face, for all his body work, was fairly plain and dark enough to suit Vision’s preference and need.

“I am now,” Vision said.

The rest of the conversation went unsaid.

*Rough?* the man seemed to ask, crossing his arms over his chest.

Vision exposed his throat, supposing the man would have no concept of what that truly meant. *Oh, yes.*



The man raised his eyebrow. *Here?*

Vision licked his lips. *I'm game if you are.*

The man nodded. Vision dropped to his knees. It was hard, to kneel before a man Vision could break with his bare hands, but he needed. He bowed his head and waited.

The sound of a zipper undoing came from above him. "Say when," the man said, and grabbed hold of Vision's hair with his meaty fist.

Vision forced himself to wince. He doubted that this fragile creature in front of him knew anything about admitting defeat, but the trappings were something when he couldn't have anything.

The man's dick was thick and uncircumcised. Ugly, but Vision welcomed it regardless. "No teeth," the man snapped, cuffing Vision's head in warning.

Vision had already covered his teeth, but he obediently repeated, "No heef," with his mouth full, because that was what the man wanted to hear.

And his own dick strained against his pants when he said it. He brought one hand up to cup the man's balls, and used the other the squeeze the head of his own cock, hard. Delicious pain made his eyes water, and the man mistook them for tears.

"Bit off more than you could chew?" the man demanded, pushing Vision's head further down his cock.

Vision gagged to hide the laughter. *Hardly*, and then winced as the man's fist yanked his hair again.

"Well take it, bitch," the man snarled.

Vision came in his pants.

The need for the scene ended. He'd pulled away, letting himself ride his orgasm to its last shudder. The man stared down at him, obviously furious, but Vision calmly disentangled the man's fist from his hair. The man's erection had deflated.

"Thank you, it was lovely," Vision lied.

“What the fuck?” the man demanded. “I haven’t come yet!”

Vision snapped his fingers, pushing inside the man’s mind, and the man ejaculated even half-flaccid as he was. “We good?” Vision asked, starchly. He popped a breath mint in his mouth.

“You fucking bastard.” For all his bulk, he looked as limp as his erection.

“Born and raised,” Vision said with a mocking twist to his lips. “This never happened. You’ve never seen me before, and you’ll never touch anyone without their consent again.”

The man looked down. His open palms pressed against his thighs. “Yes, sir.”

Vision took the breath mint out of his mouth, spat, and replaced it. He returned to his cab.

Derrick, one of his regulars, waited for him, leaning against the passenger side door.

“What are you doing here?” Vision asked instead of a greeting. His knees hurt, his jaw ached, and his pants were now sticky and cold against his skin. He was also starving, and Derrick was a vegetarian whose blood always tasted sweet.

“Hanz called me. Told me roughly where you would be and to look for the stunned cab driver.”

Perhaps Hanz was not as stupid as Hanz acted. Derrick lifted his chin, offering, and Vision took a step. His sore jaw was no longer a bother. His tongue found Derrick’s artery, and he bit down, sighing.

The blood was heady and filled with life. Derrick hissed under him, sudden erection a converse reaction to losing blood, and Vision jerked him through his jeans to add the taste of arousal to the blood.

“God, yes,” Derrick gasped, body shaking, and Vision stopped drinking before he took too much. He tongued the wound closed as Derrick took a moment to recover.

Vision wiped his mouth off and cleared his throat. "Double your usual fee," he said, voice thick. The blood inside him woke up what was left of the alcohol, and the world seemed to spin.

"Hanz negotiated that, too," Derrick said, then kissed Vision on the cheek. "Good morning," he said. He walked away, a bit unsteadily.

Vision watched him go and then got back into the cab.

The cabbie drove him home without saying a word.

Vision's gated house was so far from the center of the city that the sky was lightening by the time they arrived. Vision gave the cabbie a couple hundreds and released him. The car drove away and the front door swung open.

"Master Breyllorn dropped a gift for you, sir," Frank said. "He said it was the wrong size for him, but perhaps you would like it."

Vision looked past him to the new vampire sitting on the grand staircase. "Oh, hell no," Vision said. "Put him up for the day and tell Breyllorn to deal with his own returns."

"Yes, sir," Frank said.

"And if Hanz is here, send him to my room after my bath."

"Yes, sir."

Vision's old apartment only had a shower and he didn't even want to think about his exile to Siberia. They valued heat over almost everything except blood and he still woke up cold in the middle of the day.

The room had been the guest suite before, but Vision couldn't take over the master bedroom. He was the one who had picked up Strickland's head when it fell.

The attached bath had a huge soaker tub. Vision peeled off his clothes, kicking them into the corner, and waited naked for the tub to finish filling.

The human smell scrubbed off his skin. Halfway through, he heard the door open and close, but he didn't hurry. The sun was well and truly up by the time he finished. He grabbed a towel off the rack and let himself back into his room.

Hanz waited for him on the wicker loveseat by the blacked-out window. "You wanted me, sir?" Hanz asked. His face was studiously blank.

Vision wrapped the towel around his hips. "Do you think I like stupidity, Hanz?" he asked.

"No, sir," Hanz said, in a voice that clearly stated that was, in fact, exactly what he thought.

Vision's lip curled. "So you're happy just opening my doors and arranging my feedings. Good to know."

Hanz froze, just for a second. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, his voice sincere for the first time.

"Yes. I thought you'd be," Vision sat down on the bed. The towel shifted up, and Hanz eyes lowered. Vision let him look. "Come see me tomorrow at the office," Vision said.

Hanz's gaze snapped up. "Sir?" he asked.

"You heard me."

"And today, sir?"

Vision pulled the towel off and threw it at Hanz, who caught it single-handedly. He reached for his tie, but Vision turned over onto his belly. "Take my laundry down, too. You'll find it in the corner of the bathroom."

Hanz didn't miss a beat. "Yes, sir," Hanz said.

The bathroom door opened and closed. The main door opened and closed. Vision slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next evening, he woke up to a knock on his door. "Come," he called.

It was Hanz, dressed in a different suit. He wore sunglasses, despite the lack of sun, but his voice was respectful. "You have a guest waiting for you, sir," he said.

Vision sat up and stretched. Hanz waited, this time keeping his gaze on the floor. Vision stood up, crossing the floor to his closet. He was very aware of Hanz watching him covertly through the sunglasses, and his stomach tightened despite himself, and it made him smile.

He dressed in an old pair of comfortable jeans and a sweater. Hanz opened the door for him, and followed him down the staircase.

"If it's that pet again, I'm going to be very angry," Vision said.

"I've already sent him packing, sir. He definitely wasn't your brand of chew-toy."

Vision stopped going down the stairs. Hanz barely avoided him. "And what brand would that be?" he asked, voice cold.

"Hard, sir. I would imagine. Something to cut your teeth on."

"Hm," Vision said, and continued down the stairs. He made it to the last step and stopped.

Seraph stood in the entrance hall, uncomfortable on the Turkish rug. His dirty blond hair was slicked back, hiding the coppery highlights that Vision had always liked to separate on the pillow, and his complexion was still that of honey. His sharp blue eyes looked bruised, however. The suit he wore was finely tailored to show off the breadth of his shoulders and narrowness of his hips, but then Gabriel did like them well dressed.

Vision waved his hand over his shoulder, all flirting dead. "You, get the car," he told Hanz, and took the final step off the staircase.

Seraph's skin hadn't always been that of wildflower honey. Once it had been dark, baked by the sun. He used to be a Steven, too. Vision, Vic then, had enjoyed licking the salt off that skin in the cool evening breeze.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was 1919, in Boston. The day had been cold, but the clouds had broken by the evening. The cold wind had died down and turned southerly. The streets were still mostly deserted; leftover fear from the Spanish flu still sent people scurrying from their homes to their work.

Soldiers were still about, however; soldiers with back pay and less than accommodating wives -- or so they said. Vic didn't care. He barely listened to his trick's excuses as to why he was out in the Commons, rutting in the bushes. It was food for him and Steven and another week in their rat-infested apartment.

They'd made a scrappy pair. They never tricked together, but watched the other's back while they did--even if watching Steven being mounted made Vic sick to his stomach. Tricks that didn't pay willingly always settled if it took a piece of rough pipe to convince them.

Their mattress on the floor was pulled out into the middle of the room so they got the morning sun. Vic woke up first. He rolled over, draping himself over the still sleeping Steven.

"Get off," Steven said, pushing him away. He was still mostly asleep, but his erection pressed against Vic's belly.

"Make me," Vic said.

Steven opened an eye. "You don't think I can?"

"Maybe." Vic licked his way down Steven's throat. "Maybe not."

Vic shivered. With a flick of the hips, Steven flipped Vic onto his back, locking both his wrists into one hand. "I can."

Vic wrapped his legs around Steven. "I want you," he said, his voice thick. They were lined up exactly right. They'd jerked each other off, orally pleased each other, but they'd never fucked before. "Please."

Vic looked at him. Steven wrapped his hand around Vic's dick. It was tight, almost too tight to be comfortable, but then Steven began jerking him off, the pleasure/pain excruciating, and Vic couldn't stop the sound from escaping his throat.

It was too much, too fast. The orgasm ripped from him hard enough to make him grunt, and Steven rolled off him and stood up, going to the washbasin.

Vic lay back down, flat against the mattress.

Steven washed off, water dripping onto the floor. "We've got to get going," he said.

"I love you," Vic said.

"Get dressed," Steven said, and left the room.

Vic followed him, eventually.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steven was in the bushes with an officer. The groans emerging were those of pure pleasure. Vic recognized Steven's gasps, just as he was about to come.

Someone cleared his throat behind Vic. He turned, and the older man standing behind him was utterly motionless under the gaslight. It made the flames seem still, and the light went from being comforting to eerie in a single heartbeat. The man was dressed well, in a black suit and a crimson overcoat, but that didn't stop Vic's distrust from building.

"You'll have to wait your turn," Vic said, and was alarmed at the fear in his voice. Without the man moving a muscle in his face, Vic knew he was being judged for his harsh accent.

His anger -- already on simmer from listening to Steven -- boiled over. But before he could do anything, Steven was beside him, stinking of sweat and sex, and Vic couldn't stop his body from reacting to it. He turned to Steven, but Steven wasn't looking at him.

Steven smiled, and right out in the open was their secret smile, the one that they shared together. If Steven had gutted him right there in the park, Vic knew it would have hurt less.

“My name is Gabriel. Come with me.” He made the offer to both of them, but the emphasis was clearly placed. Steven pushed past Vic to take Gabriel’s arm.

Almost as a second thought, Gabriel offered his other arm to Vic as well.

In that moment, Vic wanted to turn away and retreat back to the Commons. But he couldn’t leave Steven. He took the offered arm.



## Chapter Two

Seraph waited, silently, until the car arrived. Hanz drove up, then jumped out and opened the door for them. Seraph got in first, as graceful as ever. Vision waited for him to slide over before getting in. Hanz looked at him, eyebrow raised.

“The office,” Vision said, and closed the door himself.

He toggled the glass behind the driver as the car rolled forward.

They were quiet until the car pulled onto the interstate. The car was sound proof, and Vision watched the median fly silently by. He wasn’t going to speak first.

“You’ve come a long way,” Seraph said.

“I don’t need you to tell me how far I’ve come,” Vision snapped.

Seraph looked down. “No, I don’t suppose you do.”

Vision pinched the bridge of his nose. “What do you want, Ser?” It had been years since they had seen each other, almost three decades. Strickland had pinched Gabriel out of his territory, economically and through the elder council, until Gabriel had nothing.

“Gabriel is dying,” Seraph said. “He wants you to come home.”

“This is my home, Ser.”

“You know what I mean, Vic.”

Vision winced at his old name. “No, Ser, I don’t. I don’t think I’ve ever known what you meant.”

Seraph looked raw. Vision hadn’t deliberately intended to cut so deep, but the words felt too good to take back.

“Do you want me to beg?” Seraph asked, voice thick. “Offer to blow you right now? Worship what a big man you’ve become?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” Vision said.

Seraph lips twisted. “You can’t be serious. I know what you want--”

“You have no idea what I want. But right now, I want you kneeling between my thighs.”

Seraph opened his mouth to speak, but Vision shook his head. “Don’t say anything,” Vision said.

Seraph slipped down to his knees. The limo was large enough for him to crawl between Vision’s legs, and Vision leaned back, locking his fingers behind his head. “Begin.”

Seraph undid Vision’s jeans. Vision accommodated him by lifting his hips. Seraph’s mouth was cold, and he closed his eyes. His tongue, though, worked the underside of Vision’s cock, almost viciously, and he kept his hands behind his back while he did so.

“Go deeper,” Vision said. “You’re not even trying.”

Seraph snorted, but pushed himself further down. His nose mashed up against Vision’s pubes. Despite how much Vision wanted to remain impassive, but couldn’t stop his hips from lifting off the seat. Seraph sat up off his heels, still not taking his hands from behind his back. His mouth relaxed around Vision’s dick, and his throat’s swallowing gave Vision waves of pleasure.

It wasn’t enough. Vision’s thighs began to tremble, but it wasn’t enough. He threw his head back, trying to will himself to come, but the orgasm remained denied to him.

“This isn’t winning you any favors,” he managed.

Seraph brought a single hand up between Vision's spread thighs, and ran his finger along Vision's ass, alternating between his knuckle and his nail, giving him the needed stimulation and just a hint of pain.

Vision gritted his teeth. That was so much better. It was almost there. Seraph drummed his knuckles against Vision's perineum.

He shook, feeling like he was melting. Both Seraph's hands were working now, providing Vision the tension he needed.

He exhaled, and closed his eyes again. If he felt the ghost-touch of Seraph's lips, kissing the tip of his penis, he could very well have just imagined it.

When he opened his eyes again, he was cold. He zipped his jeans back up, then sat back into the seat. Seraph had moved back to his side of the car, and was waiting for Vision to notice him again. "He's asking for you," Seraph said, finally. "He loved you too, you know."

Vision leaned back against the chair and closed his eyes. "If you pulled my dick as half as hard as you just pulled my leg, I would have come in half the time."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel didn't take them too far away. The brownstones were just on the other side of the Commons. The houses were huge, and Vic stopped at the stoop.

"You both look cold. I can assure you, I have food and wine inside," Gabriel said, looking at Vic for perhaps the first time.

Vic looked at him, scorn as obvious as he could make it. *Of course you do*, he thought, and Gabriel smiled.

"Well, well, well," Gabriel said, and stroked Steven's arm, once. "Perhaps I misjudged things slightly."

“We’re not stupid,” Vic said. He took a step closer, pressing against Gabriel. “I can assure you of that. You can fuck him, or you can fuck me, or both, I don’t care.” His voice dropped so that it was a bare growl, “But try to hurt him and I will kill you.”

“Vic,” Gabriel purred, “You have nothing to worry about.”

Vic didn’t remember giving the man his name. Steven gave him a look, one that clearly told him to back off. But Vic would be damned if he let Steven go into Gabriel’s room alone.

The irony of thinking that still made him shake his head, almost a hundred years later.

Gabriel’s entrance was larger than their entire apartment. Without being told, Steven walked up the stairs in the entranceway, and the way he walked up the stairs was different. His hand skimmed the surface of the dark wood, and Vic swore Steven actually rolled his hips, strutting like a cheap whore.

“After you,” Gabriel said, motioning Vic to follow. Vic glared, hating the tastefully decorated paneled wall, the smell of exotic flowers despite how cool the fall had been, and the thick plush runner down the stairs. He ran up the stairs and grabbed Steven’s arm.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

Steven looked at him, his pupils so wide there was hardly any blue surrounding them. He looked like he just stepped out of one of the opiate dens down by the docks. “Go, if you have to,” he said.

Vic let him go. “What did you do to him?” he asked in a low voice. Steven hadn’t been alone with Gabriel, and he’d been smitten long before he’d actually touched Gabriel’s skin.

“Nothing,” Gabriel whispered. He was right behind Vic, and yet Vic felt nothing. “Yet.”

Steven was already eight or nine steps ahead of them, just two from the landing. Portraits lined these walls, and Vic knew without being told that they were expensive. They smelled expensive, even from where he stood. “Keep it that way.”

Gabriel laughed, and ran his hand down Vic's back. "You see much, little friend," Gabriel said. His hand cupped Vic's ass. Vic stood still for it, though he was suddenly filled with loathing. He wanted to get the hell out of the house and the hell away from this man.

"Twenty," Vic said, the sum so outrageous that his ears rang. "Each."

"Done." Gabriel slapped him, lightly. Steven's eyes had grown even wider. There was no getting to him. Vic would have to stay, so he took the rest of the stairs.

Gabriel ushered them into a bathroom. Vic didn't have to be told this wasn't the main bath, everything here was too serviceable, too plain white. The tiles would be easy to scrub off, the warning in his head said. And there were no windows. The tub was big enough for two.

He plugged it himself. The faucets gleamed, and it was still strange to see actual hot water coming from it. Steam filled the room, and after how cold he'd been in the park, Vic's wool trousers and rough-spun shirt started to feel uncomfortable.

"Take them off," Gabriel ordered, though he made it sound like a suggestion.

"Money first," Vic said, holding out his hand.

"Vic!" Steven protested.

"Money first," Vic repeated. If he was going to die here, he was going to hold enough money for them to have lived a year like street kings.

Gabriel laughed, but reached into his breast pocket and pulled out two bills. They were huge. Vic had never held such a large bill, but he didn't react. Instead, he crumpled them up and shoved them deep into his shoe.

If Gabriel was looking for a show, Vic denied him one. He stripped off his clothes as quick as he could, and then turned around without shame, even as Gabriel dropped his gaze, taking in his nudity.

"Not bad," Gabriel acknowledged. "Beautiful," when Steven finished. "But you're both filthy. Wash yourselves."

This, at least was familiar. They'd never performed together, but it felt more comfortable to Vic than any of the strangeness that had come before.

Steven, too, felt it. The soap here was just scraps, pressed together, but all of the little bits smelled good. This wasn't the lye shit that made skin burning pink as it cleaned.

They scrubbed each other's shoulders and chests. He dunked his hair under the water and reached for the soap again, but Gabriel stopped them.

"No. Use this," he said, and passed Vic a blue vial of something. Vic opened it and smelled it, suspiciously, but it smelled only of flowers. Steven broke surface of the water too, and slid behind Vic so that his legs were on either side of his hips.

"Let me," Steven whispered. He kissed Vic's shoulder, and Vic hadn't even been aware of how cold it was until he did so. Steven's fingers were strong. The first rinse didn't produce any lather, but Steven guided his head back, letting the warm water lap at his forehead but never letting his head go any deeper. Vic sighed, despite the audience, and couldn't stop himself from relaxing.

The second washing produced copious amounts of lather. Steven left it in. They switched places.

It was a job, Vic had to remind himself. They used the lather to make themselves slippery, and they slid over each other's bodies like seals playing in the harbor.

Even in the hot water, Steven's erection became obvious. He pinned Vic down to the slanted back of the tub and reared up so that his dick was pressed half way up Vic's belly.

Steven wasn't looking at Vic, but at Gabriel as he started to thrust. Waves splashed over the rounded edges of the tub onto the floor. Vic reached, grabbing Steven's ass, and he closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to see Gabriel's hungry face.

Steven's actions became more frantic. The rhythmic waves became chaos. Vic couldn't hold on, and it became all he could do to keep the water from splashing his face. He was so hard it hurt.

“Enough,” Gabriel said, speaking softly. “Get out and dry off.”

Steven was up in the next heartbeat. Vic took a moment to follow. They both stood in front of Gabriel, naked but now aroused, and Vic refused to look away again as Gabriel looked him up and down.

Gabriel passed them both towels. “This way.”

They followed him to a spare bedroom. The fact that this one had a window made him feel better, but it was heavily shuttered. There was no way to tell how much night had passed. The bed was huge, though, and obviously not filled with straw. It was the only thing in the room, and the pristine white sheets didn’t seem real. He brought his hand up just to touch the smooth cloth. He jumped when Gabriel spoke again.

“Begin.”

Steven grabbed Vic’s shoulders, pushing him down. Vic went to his knees willingly. The bath water had taken away all the taste, but Vic still licked his way along the length and rubbed his cheek against Steven’s testicles. He took the entire length down his throat, as Gabriel cleared his throat behind him.

“More.”

Steven pulled him up by the arm and pushed him over the bed. It felt wrong to kneel on something so clean, but that was where Steven tried to get him to go.

“No. On his back.”

Vic stiffened, ready to tell Gabriel to piss off, but Steven leaned forward and licked his ear. Vic turned around and put his hand on Steven’s chest. Steven looked at him, cocky smile back, and they kissed. This wasn’t for anyone’s amusement but their own, Vic told himself. Steven held out his cupped hand. “Spit.”

Vic did. Steven spat as well, and then kissed him again. Vic parted his lips and lay down, and Steven followed him up on the bed. Their tongues touched, and Vic groaned. Steven’s finger slid inside him. The burn was something he’d always hated, but Steven

worked through the initial pain, rubbing the delicate skin behind his testicles until the rawness went away.

“Ready?” Steven asked.

Vic nodded. His fists knotted into the delicate sheets, but he was so relaxed there was no pain when Steven pushed inside him. He moaned.

“Look at me,” Steven said, not moving inside him yet. Vic did so. Steven grinned, a wicked thing, and wrapped his hand around Vic’s dick while he fucked him.

This wasn’t the painful mounting of some soldier. Steven knew where to touch him, which angles to hit, and it was the easiest thing in the world to put his legs up over Steven’s shoulders and just let himself be fucked, regardless of how exposed it made him. Gabriel made no sound; even Vic’s acute hearing didn’t pick up on his breathing.

Steven grabbed Vic’s hands, and they locked their fingers together. Their breathing came out in gasps. The burn was back, but it only added to the swelling feeling. Steven’s rhythm on his cock didn’t break, his fucking became sharp staccato bursts.

Vic arched his back off the sheets. He was coming, even with Steven’s tight grip, and Steven didn’t last much longer. He collapsed onto Vic, and Vic held him until their frantic breathing had regulated somewhat.

He supposed he recovered first, but had only opened his eyes a crack to see if he could see Steven. He didn’t miss the glance Steven shot behind him, questioning, and felt Gabriel’s nod.

He pushed Steven off him and stood, though he had to keep his legs from wavering. “Are we done here?” he demanded.

Gabriel looked at him. For the forty dollars, he could have demanded the two of them spend the night, hell, the whole week, but he got out of their way. “You’re done,” he said.

Gabriel was only talking to him, but Vic turned to Steven. “Let’s go,” he snapped.



Steven opened his mouth, to protest that he wasn't going anywhere, but Vic got between him and Gabriel and wouldn't let him look away. "I said, let's go," he repeated, voice dark, and Steven nodded, looking away from Gabriel.

They got dressed in the bath, the filthy clothes rough on their clean skin, and Vic took Steven's hand and wouldn't let it go until they were in the entrance way. The money was still in Vic's shoe, pressed against the arch of his foot, and any moment he expected it to disappear like faerie gold.

"Thank you both for a most enjoyable evening," Gabriel said, his voice only slightly mocking. "It's been a pleasure, Steven."

Steven leaned closer to the man, but Vic yanked his hand back and Steven pulled away.

"And young Vic. I have to say you surprised me."

Vic groped behind him for the doorknob. Gabriel retreated further up the stairs when he found it. Vic pushed Steven out of the door first, and then closed it in front of him, never once turning his back on Gabriel.

Once they were on the stoop, Vic felt as though he could breathe again. "You idiot," Steven said behind him, eyes completely normal in the dawn's light. "We could have taken him for a fortune."

Vic shook his head. "No, we couldn't have," he said. He walked backwards, taking the steps one at a time until they were on the street again, and even walking away made the skin on the back of his neck crawl. "Let's get out of here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel left them alone for a week. Vic used the money to buy them both a new set of clothes and he stocked up their food closet, but the rest of the money he kept in his shoe, not even trusting the loose floorboard. He thought everything was good until he woke to the

door of their apartment opening and closing. He wasn't a deep sleeper, but he hadn't heard Steven leave. Vic sat up on his elbows.

The sun wasn't up yet, but they had a street light right outside their door. The shutters were open, and the bars in the window segmented Steven's pale skin. Vic sat up.

"What happened?" he asked. Steven was cold to his touch.

"I don't want to talk about it," Steven said, his voice thick. Vic brought him back to the bed, grabbing their blanket. Steven lay beside him quietly for less than a heartbeat, then rolled over and pushed Vic against the mattress.

Vic didn't fight, and he wondered why Steven thought he might. He was holding something balled in his other fist, and he held it to his chest as he furiously mounted Vic's hip.

"I can take care of that for you," Vic said, gripping onto Steven's hips, but Steven just snarled at him. Vic shook his head, but lay back, reaching along Steven's body to his own groin.

Steven's free hand scrabbled at his bare chest, his nails digging into Vic's skin. It shouldn't have felt good, but it did. Vic arched his back, sliding down so that Steven's frenzied motions did at least something for him. Steven was already starting to shudder and then rolled off him, still clutching his fist to his chest.

The smell of semen filled the small room, but it was the furtive smell of self-abuse that Steven had smelled like when he'd come into the room.

Steven started snoring a moment later. Vic kissed his shoulder, rolled over and mechanically dealt with his own erection. Spilling didn't help the knot inside him from growing.

"What have you gotten yourself into?" Vic asked. Steven didn't answer. He didn't wake up when Vic pulled off his boots and trousers.

Vic exhaled, sharply. They'd survived the flu together, and they'd survive this. He'd take care of Gabriel, but Steven would always come first. The bulky coat had to come off.

Vic had to get whatever it was out of his hand. It took a moment of careful prying, but Steven eventually gave up his prize. It was a silver saltshaker, obviously part of a very expensive set. "You fool," Vic said.

### Chapter Three

Vision nodded a greeting to his men at reception. His elevator was waiting for him on the ground floor, and his key slid easily into the elevator lock. Seraph said nothing as the elevator whisked them away, and a few seconds later they arrived at his office.

He hadn't changed a thing about the home he'd inherited, but he had completely redone his office. Gone were the wood paneling, the heavy leather seats and the enormous desk. What was in its place was mahogany and white. He liked the contrast.

Seraph wandered to the window, to the river view, and Vision sat down in his chair.

Instantly, he connected with the ley lines running beneath the city. The energy recharged him, healed him, and took away his remaining exhaustion. His eyes felt brighter, his body more alert, and it was as close to being alive as he could remember.

"Where is he?" Vision asked, finally.

"Here, in the city. I can take you to him."

"I could have him brought here in seconds," Vision said.

"No," Seraph said. He crossed the room until he was standing across from Vision, but didn't sit down in the offered chair. Vision had to crane his neck to meet his eye. "No. He wouldn't like that."

Vision could only imagine. The thought of having Gabriel dragged in front of him thrilled Vision in a dark place inside.

Vision held his neck in his hands, drumming a finger down his artery. He was already starting to feel hungry again.

"Come with me," Seraph said. "Please."

There was a knock on the door. Vision stood up and answered it himself. Hanz stood in the hall, his driver hat in hand, and he didn't look past Vision to see where Seraph was.

"You said come back this evening, sir," he said.

"Right." Vision motioned to the carpet right in front of the desk, and Hanz walked to it. Vision didn't return to his seat, but perched on the edge of his desk.

Seraph approached Hanz, from behind, and Hanz turned and snarled, baring his teeth. Seraph snarled back, louder, but Vision snapped his fingers and they both looked at him.

"You know I'm looking for a lieutenant," Vision said.

"Yes, sir," Hanz said.

"Let me see what else you can do, and we'll talk."

"Yes, sir. Champlain wishes to speak with you prior to the council meeting. What should I tell him?"

Champlain was one of the elders on the council. He wasn't the strongest or the eldest, but he'd supported Vision in the past. Vision exhaled, sharply. Champlain was losing ground, however, and in just small enough pieces that the council couldn't become involved. "I'll speak with him. And my name is Vision. Say it in a deferential tone if you have to, but use my name."

"Yes, s-Vision," Hanz said.

"Good. Go tell Champlain that I will meet with him prior to the council."

"Yes, Vision."

“What about me?” Seraph demanded.

“What about you?” Vision asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was Vic’s turn in the bushes. Only the trick wanted to blow him beneath the Hangman’s Tree, and the spot had always made Vic queer in the stomach. He kept as little of him as possible from pressing against the bark of the tree, and tried not to think of the poor women hung here and then thrown into the bogs that had been the commercial district.

The man on his knees was getting frustrated, Vic knew. His grip on Vic’s hips tightened, and his nails started to dig into Vic’s skin. He’d just pulled back, trails of saliva still between his lips and Vic’s dick, when the sound of police whistles and torches came from the pathway leading to the street.

Then Steven was there, grabbing Vic’s shirt. “Let’s go!” he howled, and Vic pushed the man away. He turned, running and buttoning his trousers at the same time. They bolted, leaving the trick on his knees just as the coppers burst into the Hangman’s clearing.

“Honestly, constable, that rat made me,” they heard the trick tell one of the coppers, but then they were into the bushes bordering the clearing.

The streets were crawling with police. Huge paddy wagons waited to take them away, and Vic thought of the thirty dollars he still had in his shoe. If they got taken in, the coppers would take the money, and all would have been for naught.

He cursed. Steven’s eyes were wide in the moonlight -- they were both of age. If this came to court, they’d be sent away for years.

“Come on,” Vic said, and cleared his throat. They waited for the first sweep of constables, then he pulled Steven onto the road with him. Vic pulled his cap down lower on his face and turned up the collar of his coat.

They'd made it about a dozen paces, Vic yanking Steven back from his quick, nervous gait, when the coppers saw them.

"Hey! You two!" a copper demanded.

Vic stopped under a gaslight. "Ew, what?" he demanded. He flattened his accent out, though it twisted his mouth to do so.

The copper was obviously surprised. He and his partner stepped up to the light, and studied them. "You two been in the Commons tonight?" the second asked.

Vic spat, and squinted at the man. "What are you getting at?" he demanded.

"You aren't boytoys?" the first copper asked. It sounded like an actual question.

Vic stepped up to him, letting his height intimidate for the first time. "Do me and my mate look like nancy boys?" he demanded.

"He does," the copper said weakly. "What are you doing out here, this time of night?"

Vic rubbed his nose, glad they'd spent at least some of the money on better clothes. "Go for a pint, and this is the shite you have to deal with. We're going to another mate's place."

"And where does this mate live?" the copper asked, eyes narrow. Vic couldn't read whether he actually believed them.

Vic, damning himself, motioned to Gabriel's brownstone. It would be the only reason why they were walking on this side of the Commons.

"Well then, off you go."

Vic didn't relax until they'd reached the first row of brownstones.

"Gabriel will take us in," Steven said, under his breath. They both knew the coppers were watching them.

Vic nodded. He'd better. They walked right up to the fourth brownstone on the left and pounded on the door.

Gabriel answered it himself. If he was surprised to see them, he didn't look it. He nodded, and motioned them in.

The door closed behind them. "Aren't you two the picture of respectability," Gabriel said, voice thick with mocking.

Steven, for once, wasn't looking at Gabriel, but reached out and took Vic's hand.

Vic nodded, then went back to Gabriel. "Thank you for letting us in," he said.

Gabriel motioned in the direction of the Commons with his chin. "Cleaning out the riffraff, are they?"

"Yes, sir." The word came out, not because Vic wanted to say it, but because Gabriel had deserved it.

Gabriel nodded. "You are, of course, most welcome. If you'd come with me?"

Steven glanced at Vic, who nodded. Gabriel was owed this, as well. They followed Gabriel up the stairs.

It was the same ritual. Same bathtub, same bar of soap. Gabriel watched them, hungrier this time, and Vic felt it on his wet skin.

"Enough," Gabriel said. He stood back and gave them both towels. "This way," he said, and walked further down the hall.

The master bedroom was easily half the upstairs of the house. Vic saw where some of the walls had been removed. Again, no windows. They'd been bricked in.

*Turn around*, the voice in his head said. *Just go*.

Vic turned, but Gabriel was blocking the door. "Is there something wrong?" Gabriel asked, voice mild.

Vic wasn't fooled. "No, sir," he said.



Gabriel nodded. He took Steven by the shoulder and kissed him. Vic tensed, waiting for the blood he knew was going to be spilled, but when Gabriel broke away, Steven's throat was intact, but his eyes were almost all black again.

Gabriel motioned Vic to the bed. Vic stood by it, stomach fluttering, and Gabriel turned his back to him and went to the closet.

They could have run, Vic knew. He could have grabbed Steven by the hand and pulled him out, both naked, into the street. Jail would have been better than what was going to happen.

Steven smiled at nothing, and Vic knew in that second that Steven wouldn't go with him. He'd stay, rooted to the spot, even if what Gabriel pulled from the closet were slaughter knives.

They weren't slaughter knives, but silk strips, each over three feet. Gabriel released them, and they fluttered like black butterflies to the bed.

"Victor," Gabriel said, voice hard. "Come here."

Vic would have preferred the knives. He took the two steps that separated them. He would have preferred the knives, but he was hard, and Gabriel watched him with slitted eyes.

"Would you, really?" Gabriel asked.

He knew what Vic was thinking. The thought of this man running a steel blade over his bare skin was far more arousing than it should have been. Shame filled him, but he offered his wrists to Gabriel without being told.

"Very good," Gabriel whispered. The first silk that touched his skin felt like a puff of breath. It was cold, colder than the room, at least, and Gabriel tied it with a bow far prettier than the situation demanded.

He let half of the silk ties fall, and they pooled onto the floor. Gabriel tied the second bow, just as tight, and again the silk sighed as it fell.

“You want to lie down,” Gabriel whispered.

“No,” Vic said. He truly didn’t want to be so exposed, but the thought of it almost made him come where he stood.

“You do,” Gabriel said. “Don’t you?”

Vic sat down on the bed.

“That’s not what I asked for,” Gabriel said. There was no scorn in his voice, just gentle prodding, and the words felt as though they batted against his skin. *Butterflies*.

Steven was still where Gabriel had placed him, watching them both, and Vic wondered how much of this he was seeing. His face was as always pleasant to look at, but now it was vacant.

Vic lay back for him. He didn’t mind his dick on display, that’s what he was paid for, but to have his stomach and throat open almost made him curl his legs up to protect them.

“Good boy,” Gabriel said. With a flurry of motion, Gabriel tied the trails of silk to the bed frame, and--with that--Vic was given permission to fight.

The silk had no give to it. And the struggling he did do only made the knots on his wrists tighter. He figured that out quickly enough, then relaxed again.

“Good,” Gabriel repeated. He took another silk bond and tied it around Vic’s throat.

Vic shuddered. The silk was touching a pulse point, and he felt the whisper of it with every beat of his heart. Gabriel trailed the end of the silk over his chest, across his belly. Vic shuddered. Gabriel gathered up his testicles with one hand.

“No,” Vic said, shuddering, but Gabriel leaned forward, pressing his finger against Vic’s lip. “Don’t speak,” he said, holding his finger too hard against Vic, then went back to what he was doing.

The silk bound his testicles tightly to his body. Vic moaned, arching his back. Gabriel looped the remaining silk along the length of Vic’s penis, then let the erection rest against Vic’s belly.

Vic was so close to coming, any kind of touch would have set him off, but Gabriel moved on. More silk quickly tied his knees up to his chest, and he was completely exposed and open.

Gabriel finished and got off the bed. He looked down at Vic, then nodded. "That will do," he said. He went back to where Steven stood, and pushed Steven down to his knees. Steven dropped, obediently, and Gabriel took his cock out.

Steven took it into his mouth, making needy sounds in the back of his throat, and Gabriel turned his back so that all Vic could do was hear the sounds.

Vic closed his eyes, trying to regulate his breathing. Steven was whimpering now, breath coming in short blasts, but there was no sound from Gabriel, not until the floorboards gave way slightly to his weight.

Then Steven was on the bed with him, pushing inside him, and began rutting even before he was fully inside.

All Vic needed was the first touch and he was coming within his silk prison. It was too fast, too cold, and his orgasm escaped him without ever truly cresting. Steven was three thrusts behind him, then collapsed over where Vic lay.

Gabriel released him with five quick tugs of silk. Vic rubbed the redness out of his wrists, then lay back, not sure why he was feeling cheated.

"You may spend the night in the guest bedroom," Gabriel said, voice cold again. "It should be safe by the morning. Next time, chose your hunting grounds more carefully."

Vic got off the bed, shakily, and wouldn't look Gabriel in the face as they left the room.

Once they were back in the cold, crisp bedroom, Vic tried to pull Steven to him, just to make their sex something better than what had happened, but Steven pushed him aside and started snoring.

Vic lay still, but didn't sleep.

## Chapter Four

“Tomorrow,” Vision said.

“I told you, Gabriel may not make it.”

“In which case we’ll be in time for the service. Good day, Ser.”

“Vision--”

“I said good day,” Vision said, and motioned the door with his chin.

Seraph exhaled, sharply, but then touched his throat. “Sir,” he said, and left.

Vision kept busy until the door shut behind Seraph, then leaned back in his chair. His jaw ached, as though he’d been the one on his knees the entire ride to the office, and he rubbed it, thoughtfully.

Hanz let himself in without knocking. “Is now a good time, sir?” he asked, moving to the carpet in front of the desk.

Vision pushed back his chair.

Hanz cleared his throat. Vision stood up and moved around the desk. “Well, get to it.”

“Now?” Hanz asked.

Vision raised his eyebrow. “Now,” he said.

Hanz nodded. He looked down to the carpet, and if he dropped to his knees, Vision would have him bounced back to the garage so fast--

Instead, Hanz snapped his fingers, and pointed down to the carpet in front of him. "Perhaps you'd be more comfortable on your knees."

Vision coughed. "What?"

"Do you want me to repeat myself?"

Vision stared at him. He hadn't even been aware that that was exactly what he wanted Hanz to do, but it put into words the heavy feeling inside him. Still he hesitated, and Hanz actually snapped his fingers.

Vision slid onto his knees, crossed his arms over his chest. "So, now what?" he demanded.

Hanz's face was stone. Vision, despite himself, found himself looking away. His ears warmed, blood rising to the surface, and his mouth twitched. "I'm sorry," he found himself saying.

Hanz walked around him. As much as Vision wanted to turn, he forced himself to stay still.

Hanz stopped directly behind him. Vision's hearing was acute, but Hanz was utterly still, so he heard nothing at all. His erection was growing, and he wished he'd sat back further on his heels for the added friction. Hanz reached out; Vision swore he heard the air moving, and Hanz forced Vision's head down.

Vision bit down on his tongue. Blood filled his mouth, his own, and he sucked on the wound.

"Are you comfortable?" Hanz asked.

Vision didn't answer. Hanz pushed Vision's face down to the carpet, then nudged his legs out from under him.

Hanz held him there, just with his hand to his shoulder. Vision was completely exposed, and without being told to, he held his hands behind his back. He had been amused before, curious even, but now he was so hard it hurt.

“Don’t move,” Hanz said, unnecessarily. Vision didn’t answer. The blood rush in his head was like the memory of a heartbeat.

Hanz moved back, sitting down on the desk.

“Enough,” Vision said. He pushed himself up, still hard. Hanz instantly looked contrite.

“Of course, sir,” he said, bowing his head.

Vision took a deep breath. He didn’t need to, but did it because it hurt in a sweet way. A second breath didn’t ache as much, nor the third. “Good. You’re good. It’s good. Just, give me a moment.”

“Yes, sir,” Hanz said, but was obviously concerned.

Vision waved him away. “Lock the door behind you.”

“Of course, sir.”

The door closed and Vision exhaled a final time. He unbuttoned his slacks. He licked his own palm, slicking the skin, and took care of himself.

When he was done, Vision called for the car to come pick him up. He had an elder conclave to get to. Hanz waited for him by the elevator. Vision pushed the doors open himself, and frowned when he saw Frank standing beside the door.

Vision nodded. “Door,” he said

Frank opened the door for both of them. Vision paused, expecting Hanz to get in first, but instead Hanz kept his face blank, obviously waiting to be told what to do. Vision motioned him to follow.

“Thank you, sir,” Hanz said.

There was nothing but profound respect in Hanz's voice. Vision stared at him, waiting for it to break, but Hanz didn't look up again. The soundproof glass was still up. Still, Vision waited until they had pulled into traffic before speaking.

"There will be times when stopping will be the wrong thing to do," Vision said, looking away. "And times when not stopping will get you killed."

"Yes, sir," Hanz said.

"Do you understand that? Do you understand what stakes you are playing with?" He let his voice go hard. *It's a mistake*, the cynical part of his brain told him. How long was it going to be before Hanz crossed the line into his business. And then he'd have to destroy Hanz.

"I understand, sir," Hanz said, and knelt down at Vision's feet. "I swear I will follow you."

"And you're still willing."

"Yes," Hanz said. No 'sir'.

"And you're okay with that."

Hanz nodded. "Yes, sir. One day, you should ask me why I was in the carpool."

His face was distant. He didn't ask about Seraph, and for that Vision was grateful. The silence grew between them, but it was comfortable.

"Get up," Vision said, his voice rough. He'd just have to risk it.

"Yes, sir." Hanz took his seat beside Vision again.

They had just about made it to the exit they needed when something seemed to explode in Vision's head. The pain was incredible, like a burst blood vessel. Hanz leaned over and grabbed him before he fell over.

The pain came in waves, each one stronger than the last. Vision touched his temple, then his ear, expecting to see blood, but his hands came away clean.

Hanz held him until the pain subsided enough for his jaw to unclench. Still keeping him steady with one hand, Hanz used the other to reach into the bar and pour him a glass. The scotch was single malt and over a hundred years old, but Vision drained it like cheap beer.

“What the hell was that?” Vision asked, just as his cell phone rang. Hanz took it from his pocket, offering it to him, but Vision shook his head. Hanz answered it.

“I see. I see. I’ll tell him,” Hanz said. He closed the phone and filled Vision’s glass again. “Someone blew up one of your contact places, sir,” he said.

Vision leaned his head against the back of his seat. “Take us there.”

The fire was in the warehouse district where the river line met with the ocean. The lack of power was obvious now that the pain in his head had relaxed somewhat. Vision felt dizzy stepping out of the car.

Human firefighters were already on the scene, and if they noticed that this fire burned hotter than a normal fire, they didn’t ask questions.

The fire marshal tried to move them back with the rest of the crowd. “This is my building,” Vision said.

“What’s inside, sir?” the marshal asked.

“Cotton bales,” Vision said, because that was what the insurance papers said. There were times when he was glad Strickland had married his own needs to those of the humans.

“It looks like arson. Do you know anyone who would want to harm you?”

Vision could think of a hundred without the need for a pen or paper. He shook his head.

“Well, someone did.”

“When can I see the damage?” Vision asked.

“Probably not until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. Is there any way I can reach you?”



Vision held out his hand, and Hanz placed a business card in it. “Unfortunately I will be unavailable for the day. But contact anyone at this number and they will be more than willing to assist you.”

“Thank you,” the marshal said.

Vision pushed into him. “And I’m just going to go inside now,” he said.

The marshal nodded. “Of course, sir. Be careful.”

Vision assured him they would. They ducked under the yellow caution tape, where pieces of debris had collected. It must have been a huge explosion.

The stone cairn had been in the middle of the unused office. Nothing remained in its place but a crater. The damage done to the rest of the building had been secondary to this blast.

Vision stared at the ruin around him for a moment. “Make sure we find out who did this before the humans do,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Hanz said, behind him.

“Good.” Vision turned. “We will be late.”

\* \* \* \* \*

He arrived with the conclave already in progress. Champlain was already inside, which meant he was probably thinking Vision had stood him up for their meeting. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

Back when he’d just been a soldier, he’d always hated these meetings. Strickland had taken him to each and every one. Sometimes they lasted the whole night. Vision couldn’t leave, so if he was hungry before the meeting, he was starving by the night’s end.

Rather than trying to sneak his way into the room, Vision threw the doors open and strode in.

All conversation stopped. Whispers of the fire had obviously already reached the oval table, but only Champlain looked relieved to see him. Besides that, Vision didn't see a single flash of guilt or pleasure from the gathered faces.

And what faces they were. The elder conclave was the only time males and females interacted. The ley lines kept all the elders younger than just blood, but some of the men and women were so old that the lines were the only things keeping them alive.

Some of the elders bowed their head to him, coldly. He was the youngest of all of them, by several centuries at least, and had inherited not one but two elder lines. Maybe there was something personal in the attack. No. There couldn't have been. Even if anyone of them had tried to take the line, the tribunal would have not allowed him or her to keep it without having them declare their intentions first.

A vote was already underway. They couldn't move any of the lines, but they could influence them somewhat, and the motion on the table was whether they should expand or maintain the current interests.

Vision voted to expand. The second vote was whether to expand the number of registered feeders.

Vision voted against. He had his own regulars he used. The conclave was every bit as boring as his human board of directors, but it was important that the illusion of democracy was followed.

Eventually the meeting ended, and Vision left the elders to wait for his car outside. Breylorn joined him.

Vision touched his throat. They were technically equals, but Breylorn hadn't asked for his head when he could have, and Vision never forgot a favor owed.

"Your driver," Breylorn said instead of a greeting.

"Hanz," Vision told him.

"They tell me he doesn't have a single talent."

"That's a matter of opinion, isn't it?" Vision said with a smile.

"You bring pets up to be your lieutenants, Vision. That's the way it's always been. Talents manifest early, or they don't manifest at all. Hanz has nothing to offer you. He's been turned what, fifteen years?"

"Something like that," Vision said.

"The pet I selected is a gifted wardsman. Even Janus was impressed with him. Finer praise you'll likely not hear."

"I thank you for your advice, elder," Vision said. Breyloren's car was the next around the corner. The cars were brought out by ranking, and despite his many lines, Vision had no illusions about his own level in the conclave.

"How many secrets will Hanz overhear in the next century?" Breyloren asked. "Play if you must, but we promote our pets when they no longer entertain us because it's easier than killing them."

Vision touched his throat again, as the car coasted to a stop beside them. "Thank you," he repeated.

Breyloren said nothing else, but got into the car. Janus was with him. They met eyes, Janus bowing his head slightly, and the car drove off with barely a whisper.

"I am sorry for what has happened," Champlain said, from behind him. "But I must say part of me was relieved that that alone was the reason for your absence."

Vision turned. "I would not have missed the meeting on purpose."

"And I am relieved again." Champlain was looking older. His pet, a younger man, was at his elbow. From how they stood Vision could see that the young man was supporting him, but only because he was so close. It was not good to show such weakness at the conclave, else someone actually declare their interests rather than carving off bits from his lines. Vision's car finally arrived, and Vision motioned both of them to enter.

Frank didn't pull out, but kept the car idling. Hanz said nothing, only glanced at Champlain entering the car and got out the other side. He closed the door behind him, and stood on the road, back to the car. It occurred to Vision with a stab of annoyance that Breyloren was, in fact, speaking the truth. He didn't think that Champlain would be saying anything sensitive, but how long would it be until something slipped.

Vision got into the car along with Champlain. "I need your support," Champlain said, his voice strong. "I need you to come out on my side."

"You've supported me when I needed you," Vision said. "I will return the favor."

"I am pleased to hear that," Champlain said. He bowed his head. "If you would excuse us."

The door opened. Champlain got out with his pet. Hanz got back in, and both doors closed simultaneously. Frank waited for Vision to rap on the glass before pulling out.

"Now, Vision?" Hanz asked.

"No," Vision said. He closed his eyes and slept.

When he woke again, the car had stopped for the gates. A minute later, they were inside the house, and then in Vision's rooms.

Hanz stood behind him, hands clasped behind his back.

Vision turned around. "Now," he said.

Hanz smiled. "I think you know what position I would prefer you in," he said.

Vision moved to the center of the room. He dropped to his knees, bent over so that he was touching his cheek to the carpet, and spread his legs.

"Beautiful," Hanz whispered. "You really are."

Vision felt his face warm, and warmed some more when Hanz stood behind him and nudged his legs out a bit more. "Better?"

Where Hanz had kept the leather ties, Vision didn't see, but suddenly they were looped around his wrists and held tight, and that was better than better. He could relax into the position. He still wanted his damn slacks off, but he had to trust Hanz.

Even thinking the words didn't hurt as much as he thought they would. Hanz unbuttoned the slacks, then unzipped them carefully around Vision's erection, but with his legs so wide spread, there was no chance they'd be able to clear his hips. Still, Hanz yanked them down as far as they would go, which left his ass exposed.

His dick, however, lost what bit of friction he could get from the inseam, and that made him groan. "Uh-uh," Hanz said, and slapped his right ass cheek. "Hush, now."

Vision's fangs were down, which made biting on his cheek a dangerous activity, so he forced his fangs back up inside.

Hanz slid his hand down between the taut jeans and Vision's hot skin, and Vision had to bite back a groan. His tongue licked his teeth hard, but they didn't have an edge to them.

Hanz wrapped his fist around Vision's cock, dry skin on his sweat-slicked. He used just enough pressure and began to jerk Vision off, hard.

Vision tried to get away from the harshness. He reared up, but Hanz slammed Vision back to the carpet. "Now is not one of those times," Hanz said, but his fist didn't stop moving.

And Vision was coming. The orgasm almost split him in two. He felt ripped apart, but only in the most glorious way. Sweat stung his eyes, his cock didn't stop pulsing, and he rode the wave after wave of pleasure. Each time it began to subside, Hanz would squeeze him again, and he was off again.

Hanz helped him to his feet, washed him off, and put him to bed. If he hadn't, Vision knew he would have happily have spent the rest of the day on the floor.

Vision woke a few hours later. The night was still dark. Hanz was asleep beside him; warmth in his bed he hadn't felt in years. Looking down at Hanz sleeping warmed him in a

place that hadn't felt heat since things had gone badly with Seraph. It should have been disturbing, how properly Hanz had just seemed to be in his bed, but it just felt right.

What was more, there had been no shame in the sex. No judgment. Hanz had offered, Vision had taken, and he didn't feel like he'd lost anything. It was enough to make Vision want to wake Hanz up so they could do it again. And Hanz would do it without the mind games that Seraph had excelled at.

He couldn't bring Hanz up. His house was tied to the lines; the foundations hummed to their vibrations. They slid under everything and thrummed with the life of the city. He fed on it. Without being able to tap it, once Vision was gone, Hanz would lose all claim to his territory. And Vision couldn't have that. He'd been without a lieutenant for too long, he supposed. He had no one to sap off the excess energy inside him, and who knew what the excess would eventually do to him?

Would he ever grow tired of Hanz? Possibly, and an eternity was a very long time. He'd loved Steven, too, and that hadn't lasted. He still had a gray, ashen place inside him where that love had been stored. Now, when he looked at Seraph, he felt nothing, like an empty socket where a tooth used to be.

He got up. Hanz didn't stir. Vision walked down, opened the garage door himself, and took his old car back to the city again.

Gaining entrance to the building only took a second. He walked up to the doorman, and smiled. *I belong here*, he sent. The door opened for him. He left his car out, and went to the top floor.

Janus's apartment was half of it. He knocked, and Lyall answered it. He wore nothing but an old pair of jeans. His dark hair was slicked back with water, and his skin was luminously white. It was flawless now, but Vision still saw the ghosts of his old scars.

Lyall touched his throat. "Master," he said.

"I need Janus," Vision said.

Lyall nodded, but by then Janus had stepped into the hall. The jeans he wore were of a better quality and fit than Lyall's, but he was just as wet and half-naked.

Vision's throat tightened. He'd thought that he and Janus would have been good together, but his embarrassment and exile just proved how fickle any of their tastes were.

*It's different with Hanz*, Vision thought, angrily, but seeing Lyall lighting up, literally, as Janus approached showed him over again that this was still very different from Hanz and him.

"I do so miss the old days," Janus said. "You'd come to my place, stand in my hall and say nothing. This is just like that."

Vision shook his head a final time. He supposed he could just order Janus to let him in, but he just needed to talk. "Please."

All kidding ended. "A beer," Janus said, speaking only to Lyall, and Lyall disappeared into the kitchen. Janus motioned Vision to follow, and they went into Janus' living room. The white couch was the same, but his predominate decoration was bookcases. Vision raised an eyebrow, and Janus shrugged. "Don't ask. Okay, ask, but it's all Lyall's doing." Janus collapsed onto the couch and kicked his legs up. "What's up?"

"Hanz is a driver," Vision said.

Janus nodded, once. "And by that you mean the problem lies in his inability to have a talent, and not the fact that he commandeers motor vehicles."

"Breyloren told you."

"He knew you are I were... friends."

The hesitation made Vision flush. Breyloren hadn't done anything to Janus when the meeting got out and Janus was still fucking him. He could have killed them both. Both their loyalties were compromised in that second. Still, Vision had let Janus fuck him, knowing full well the door could have opened at any moment.

Lyll returned with two cold beers. He offered the first to Janus, and that got his ass slapped. Lyll mulishly went to Vision instead.

Vision took the offered beer.

"It is what it is," Janus said. "This thing you have. It may be forever, it may be for six months. You don't have to name it."

"Has Breylorn found a new pet yet?" Vision asked.

Janus shrugged. "He says he isn't looking too hard." The new pet would either have to fit into Janus's organization should Breylorn die, or kill Janus and take his place. It was the way of things.

"There is something there," Vision said, thinking back to Hanz. "It wouldn't be so good if there wasn't."

Lyll sprawled between Janus's spread thighs. Lines crossed with their touch, and the room seemed to warm with them in it.

Vision thought for a moment that Janus couldn't possibly know how lucky he was, but then saw the look that crossed Janus's face.

He did know.

Janus drained his beer. "There is no way you are going to make it back without hitting sunrise. Stay here the night. I'll make sure your car isn't towed."

"Thank you," said Vision, and retired to the guest bedroom.



## Chapter Five

Steven was freaked out when they returned to their flat. His eyes took a long time to adjust to the amount of light in the room. When Vic touched his shoulder, Steven clung to him.

Gabriel had given them more money. "Let's get out of here," he said, stroking Steven's hair. "Let's go west. Become cowboys. My uncle's still in New York. Please, Steven."

Steven pulled away from him in revulsion. "We can't go," he said.

"Yes, we can," Vic said. "Why the hell not? We've got enough for the train fare. What's in this place that you couldn't live without?"

"Him," Steven said. He shuddered, and his hand went straight for his groin. He began jerking himself off, and Vic doubted he was even aware of what he was doing.

Vic caught Steven's hand, and dropped to his knees. "I can give you anything you want," he said, unbuttoning Steven's trousers. He kissed the head of Steven's penis, and let his tongue linger on the slit.

Steven pulled Vic's head further down his length. Vic gagged, once, then adjusted the angle of his head to take it further in. His hand was on his own dick, squeezing it as hard as he could.

Steven held Vic's head still and slammed against it. Vic's nose began to ache from the pounding it was taking, but Vic didn't move until Steven came in his mouth. Steven held still, shuddering for a minute, and then just as urgently forced Vic down flat onto their mattress. Vic tried to unbutton his own trousers, but Steven swatted his hands away and ripped them off himself.

Steven swallowed him in one go. Vic arched his back off the mattress. The softness of Steven's tongue working the bottom of his dick, combined with the tightness to the back of Steven's throat was almost too much. He locked his fingers, pushing Steven down further, and Steven, for once, didn't fight him.

He fucked himself using Steven's mouth. It wasn't pretty and it wasn't easy, but when he came Vic could barely unlock his fingers. No contentment followed the last wave, and Vic felt he could have come ten more times and still would have felt the need for more.

And he'd still feel as though Gabriel was watching them.

Steven sat back, wiping his mouth. His lips looked bee-stung. "It doesn't matter," he repeated. He looked at Vic, vulnerability so close to the surface that Vic wished he could just lick it off his skin. "He's in your head, too."

"He is not," Vic snapped. He did up his trousers and pushed to his feet.

"He is," Steven said, and laughed, a harsh bitter sound. Something else Vic had never heard.

"You're wrong," Vic said, pulling on his coat. He wished his wrists didn't look so bare without their silken bonds.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vic ran, but without Steven he couldn't go far. Away was up the street to the corner grocer. Vic helped the old man empty the pallets in the morning and went down to the docks to bring back the freshest fruit the old man could afford.

He couldn't abandon Steven. During the evening, he followed Steven and his tricks into the trees. He was still propositioned, and the way the businessmen and soldiers eyed him now disgusted him. He pushed away their gropes, and when that didn't deter the most ardent, Vic had no problem squeezing the offending wrist until he heard the bones crack.

He'd just rebuffed his third man of the evening, when he heard Steven's yelp of pain. Vic pushed away from the soldier and bolted for the trees.

The trick had a knife. "The nancy pinched my wallet," the man said. "You don't need to get involved here."

"You want to turn around and go," Vic said, his voice thick. Steven stayed behind him, and jumped as the man feinted a lunge.

"Don't be stupid. If you want a piece of him, you'll have to wait until I finish taking it out in kind."

"That's not going to happen," Vic said. The first real thrust was all show. Vic stepped away easily. "Get out of here," he told Steven, then stepped out of the way of another jab.

Steven ran past him, but Vic blocked the trick's route.

The trick watched him go. "You just cost me ten dollars. Maybe I'll take it from you, instead."

"You're welcome to try," Vic said.

The trick came after him, but it seemed as though he moved in slow motion. Vic stepped out of his way and plucked the knife out of his hand. He grabbed the wrist with his other hand and braced himself for the coming weight.

Things returned to normal, and the trick fell flat on his back. Vic was over him in the next second, and threw the knife as far away from them as he could

"No harm done," the man said. "I suppose that tight ass was worth the whole bloody lot." He gave Vic a leer.

Vic didn't realize there was so much pain punching a head that had nowhere to go, but still he pounded the man's face into the ground. Bones broke, teeth cracked, and blood splattered his face, but Vic couldn't stop.

And he didn't--not until someone pulled him off. He wanted it to be Steven, telling him it would be okay, or even a constable to haul him away, but of course it wasn't. It was Gabriel, and somehow, that was all right, too.

Gabriel led him a few paces away. Vic went, as docile as a lamb. "Did I kill him?" he asked, voice harsh. He'd been panting.

Gabriel glanced over. "No," he said. "Wait here."

Nothing truly held him, but Vic waited, regardless. Gabriel crouched by the body and for a moment Vic thought Gabriel had lied. The trick didn't move even when Gabriel grabbed him by the hair and yanked up halfway.

Gabriel bit down into the man's throat. At least then, the trick's feet jerked. The man groaned, but no longer sounded like he was in pain. Gabriel didn't move away until the body stopped twitching.

Vic knew he should have been frightened. He just about killed a man, and hadn't stopped on his own volition. The clearing was too bright. He watched Gabriel straighten and wipe his mouth, and saw how the man's pupils had completely swallowed the color.

Then Gabriel was back. "Let me see," he said, voice soft. Vic gave over his bloody fists. One had done the punching, the other hand held the man's head down. Gabriel took them. His teeth were still out, bright white fangs despite his recent meal, but he was gentle. He licked off all the blood, working his tongue between Vic's fingers.

Vic groaned.

"Come away, now," Gabriel said. "You have broken bones."

Vic followed. They went back to the brownstone. "He's dead now."

"Of course he is."

“My hand hurts.”

“I know.”

“I can’t work if my hand hurts,” Vic repeated.

Gabriel touched his lips. “I know,” he said.

Then Vic slept.

Or at least, it seemed like a dream. He had no recollection of going upstairs or taking off his clothes, but he had crystal clear memories of the silk caressing his pulse-points. Something stung his leg, and he remembered swallowing something that was too salty to be semen.

He woke in his own bed with Steven snoring beside him. His hand hurt, but not enough for broken bones.

He stood up. Steven grumbled over the cold air, but Vic left him, going to where Steven’s clothes were piled.

The billfold wasn’t hard to find. The man’s wages were still wrapped in brown paper. Vic folded it back up and returned it to the secret fold of Steven’s vest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lyall was sitting on his bed when Vision woke up. “Janus wants to know if you want a quick bite before you leave,” he said.

Vision groaned. “How long have you been waiting to say that?”

“About an hour,” Lyall said, truthfully.

Vision nodded. Lyall moved closer. The back of his neck was freshly shaven, and the smooth skin was salty under Vision’s teeth. He bit down, tasting Janus’s and Lyall’s love making, and that, if nothing else, settled the issue of Hanz. He finished drinking and stood up.

Lyall held a white towel over his neck. “Your ride is waiting downstairs,” he said. “And I had your clothes cleaned. They’re in the closet.”

“Thank you,” Vision said. Lyall bowed and left.

Hanz was downstairs, leaning casually against the car, which, despite every traffic or parking law to the contrary, was still sitting in the loading zone after fifteen hours.

Vision came out of the building. Hanz dangled the keys from his finger, so Vision held out his hand. “I’m driving,” he said.

Hanz tossed them to him.

Vision didn’t want to talk. He wanted to drive instead. Hanz said nothing from the passenger seat, even as they turned away from the skyscrapers. He was in the warehouse district, now, and the lines beneath the asphalt vibrated. “You don’t feel that?” he asked.

“Feel what, sir?” Hanz asked.

The energy was all around them. Vision switched the car from second to third, and all the lights in the row of cross streets suddenly turned from what ever their light cycle said to green. Vision tapped it into fourth.

The engine purred. They were a quarter of the way down the street now, and still picking up speed. Vision pushed the car to the red line, the purring becoming a howl, and just at the halfway point slammed it into fifth.

“You don’t feel it at all?” Vision asked.

Hanz had braced himself against the dashboard, as though that would be enough to save them if they crashed. If they escaped any traumatic decapitation, recovering from the wreckage would still take months.

“If I said yes, would you slow down, sir?” Hanz asked.

They were three blocks away from the dead end. Two. “Only if you mean it,” Vision said. He grabbed Hanz’s hand and wrapped it around the gearshift. It was the closest thing tied to the street, to the lines, to everything.

Hanz's eyes widened. Vision slammed on the brakes, throwing the emergency brake as well. The car spun around, going up on two wheels, and the smell of burning rubber filled the interior. The car spun around three times, in the middle of the T intersection, then slowly came to a stop.

"I felt that," Hanz said.

Vision groped for his seat belt. Then they were outside of the car, Vision bent over the too hot hood, and Hanz tore at Vision's slacks. Spit wasn't enough of a lubricant, but it had to do, because there was no waiting. The engine pinged and groaned, but if it wasn't for Hanz holding Vision back to him, Vision would have crawled across it.

He hadn't been fucked in a year, and Hanz didn't appear to be caring about the lack of use. His big hands held Vision at the perfect angle for both of them, and Vision splayed his hands along the hood. He didn't even have to touch himself. He'd probably started coming the moment Hanz had thrown him across the hood, and the rough fucking just added to the layer upon layer of orgasm.

Hanz pressed his forehead against the back of Vision's neck. "I felt that, too," he said.

Vision straightened, eventually. "We should go," he said. Hanz's eyes were wide, and he shook his head and coughed. Still, he stood, blocking Vision's way around the car and held out his hand. "Sir?"

"Yes, Hanz?" Vision asked, feeling more indulgent than he'd ever felt before.

"May... may I drive?"

Vision gave over the keys. Hanz took in a breath to use as a sigh. "Thank you, sir," he said.

"I want you, Hanz."

"I want you too, sir."

"This...thing, is good. I'm good, you're good, and we're good together."

"I'm pleased you think so."

Vision held up his hand. "I'll still need to find a lieutenant. I'm going to need someone to take over the lines and to support me, but I don't want that to change anything between us."

Hanz seemed to relax against the car. It was not the reaction he was expecting. "You don't need to name this, sir. I'm yours. I always have been, even if you didn't know it, and I always will be until you tire with me. I have no designs or plans for your lands. You don't need to name it. It's just us."

"Do you mean that?"

Hanz touched his throat. "Every word, sir."

Vision kissed him.

As Hanz walked past the side of the car, he wiped up where Vision had come into his handkerchief. *You could take the boy from the carpool*, Vision thought wryly. Vision slid into the passenger seat, and rested his head on its back until they arrived back at the office.



## Chapter Six

Steven never asked what had happened the night Vic stayed away, and that made it easier to pretend that it had never happened. The autumn hit with the last few days of blue sky and sunshine, and Vic blamed his sensitivity to the light on the cold he swore he was coming down with.

He lost his job at the grocery. There were a dozen young men more than willing to be at the grocers before dawn, and Vic could no longer force himself off the mattress until his body took all the sleep it could wrangle from it.

Steven became more brazen, both in his fucking and his picking. The trees should have been dark shadows that blocked out the stars with the amount of light there was, but Vic saw the red and gold leaves as they rattled dryly in the wind. Steven was with his trick under a gas light on the path, and it didn't matter to Vic whether the groans coming from him were real or an act for his benefit. They still cut. He wouldn't let himself turn, and Steven always looked up and met his eyes as he was being fucked or sucked.

It was a cold thing, Vic thought, to feel love die. The man paid, buttoning up his pants, and shoved the bill down Steven's pants. "Thanks for the ride, sweetheart," he said, and continued down the path.

Steven stretched, pocketing the money. Vic headed toward him, and Steven grinned. "Two more?" he asked.

"You're done," Vic told him.

Alarm crossed Steven's face. "The night's not half over!"

"Yeah. You're done," Vic said.

Steven crossed his arms. "I'm not finished," he said.

"I am."

"You're telling me you're leaving me all alone out here," he said. He let his voice go soft, almost childish, and if that was supposed to evoke something protective out of Vic, it only left him colder.

"That's what I'm telling you."

"You're going to his place," Steven said, voice suddenly sharp.

"I am not. I'm tired, and I want to go to bed. I don't want to have to worry about you getting your fool throat cut out here, so you're coming with me."

"No," Steven said. He began walking away from Vic, with short, choppy steps. "I'll go to him, instead, so you can have a good, long sleep."

Vic followed. Neither had been to Gabriel's in over a week, and Vic was just now starting to feel the hold on him slip. "You can't," he said.

"I bloody well can," Steven said, and started running.

And he'd always been faster. He darted across the road without looking, and narrowly escaped a late night cab. The driver shook his fist, and Vic had to wait for the hack to get out of the way before he could follow Steven across the street.

By then, Steven was already on the stoop. He pounded on the door, and for once Vic found himself praying that Gabriel wouldn't be there. But, as usual, because Gabriel's

predominant occupation seemed to be fucking with Steven and Victor's lives, the door swung open.

"Young Steven," Gabriel said. He looked down the street. Vic stopped walking, but Gabriel saw him regardless. "Come in, both of you."

"No," Steven said. "Vic's tired. He has to go to bed, he says."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. "He does?" the man purred. He glanced up, to where Vic stood in the shadows, and turned his back to him. He put his hand over Steven's rump and guided him into the house.

The door closed behind them.

Vic turned around and walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

It didn't take long to pack up what little he had. The grocer wouldn't take him, but he found a baker who would let him sleep on crates in the back room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Days passed, and neither Steven nor Gabriel contacted him. A week, two weeks, and then four. He supposed he was free, but he wondered why he felt so dark inside.

He still dreamed, though, of when it was still good between them, and of Gabriel. He wished it was Steven that had made him so hard in his dreams that if he woke before he could expel, his stomach tied in knots and his face was washed in sweat. All he'd have to do is touch the spot behind his testicles, lightly, and he'd come, right there.

He was working out in front, sweeping the sidewalk, when he heard the blast of a police whistle. Once, it would have caused him to freeze in terror, but now he just stepped out of the way and hoped that whoever was running wouldn't knock the loaves already set out to cool.

Of course, it was Steven rounding the corner. He didn't know why he would have thought it would have been anyone else. He was clutching something, tight to his chest, and taking the corner had cost him valuable speed. The whistle came, right behind him, and Vic acted without thinking.

He grabbed Steven's arm, twisting, and Steven's weight twisted around him and into the empty store. It only took a heartbeat, and by the time the copper managed the corner, Vic was back to his sweeping.

"Which way did he go?" the copper demanded. It was one of the constables that patrolled the park. Vic recognized him easily, but the man looked at him as though he'd never seen him before.

*You're respectable now*, Vic thought, and almost laughed. Would have, but the crash from behind the store stopped him. "Sir! We got him!" another copper yelled from the alley.

Vic cursed Steven's stupidity. If he had just stayed in the bakery, he would have directed the constables into the back of the open kitchen across the street.

"He went in here," Vic said.

"Thank you," the constable said, and if he noticed the delay, he didn't say anything about it.

The sounds of struggle came. Vic recognized the muffled curses. It took three men to hold Steven, one on each arm and a third following behind, pinching Steven's ear.

It was obviously hurting. "Help me," he mouthed, eyes wide, and Vic's hands tightened on the broom.

The copper who'd spoken to him shot him a look, one that said clearly *don't get involved, boy*, and if the copper hadn't tried to warn him off, Vic probably wouldn't have done what he did.

Vic used his broom to push the one pinching Steven's ear, and the man went flying. Steven slammed himself against the constable to his left, throwing him to the wall, and Vic brought the broom slicing down on the side of the other constable's head.

Steven grabbed his hand. Together, they ran south.

They bolted across the last road between them and the Commons, too. Vic wondered where he thought they could have gone from there, because the whistle blasts were coming from all over, and eventually they were cornered under the Hanging Tree.

"Turn around, put your hands on the tree," first constable said. He had a red mark across his face from Vic's broom. His billy swung left to right hypnotically.

Vic turned, bracing himself against the bark. He expected to feel the billy upside his head, but instead, the constables just slapped the shackles on his wrists. "No more tricks, boy-o?" the constable asked.

"No, sir," Vic said.

There were three constables on Steven, and two more standing close enough to jump into the fray should they be needed. Steven was howling inarticulately, and no matter how many times he was punched, he kept fighting.

The constable watched with Vic. "He must have been some friend," he said, conversationally.

"He had been." Vic didn't look away from the struggle. The men managed to shackle one of Steven's hands. When he was a child, Vic had seen a young colt so much against being shod that they had to twitch his lip and both ears and still had to tie up his left foreleg in order to let the farrier near enough to even size the shoe.

Steven looked much like that.

Eventually, the second shackle came on, then the leg cuffs. Steven lay still, only with two constables sitting on him. The constables counted to three, and together, lifted Steven. He was carried back down the path, a constable on each limb.

“Are we going to need to do that with you?” Vic’s constable asked.

“No, sir,” Vic said. His body felt good, better than it should with his arms shackled behind him, like he could relax again.

“Didn’t think so,” the constable said. “This way.”

Vic walked first.

The black paddy wagon, with two big bay horses, waited for them. “In you go, boy-o,” the constable said. Steven was already inside. The wagon rocked on its struts.

“Thank you,” Vic found himself saying.

“You’re more than welcome.”

Vic stepped up into it, eyes adjusting to the darkness, and felt his way to the bench as the door closed and locked behind them.

“Are you all right?” he asked. The wagon jerked a few times, then started to roll forward.

“Can’t complain,” Steven’s cracked voice came from the darkness. The fresh blood smell came from him, and between the sounds of his gasps was a thick, dripping sound.

“You?”

“I had bread I had to take out of the oven,” Vic said.

“Victor Ivanov, baker,” Steven said, and his laughter was a harsh bark.

“It was good while it lasted,” Vic said. There was no point in lamenting what he’d lost; Steven was right. That wasn’t his life.

Someone above them rapped the roof, obviously telling them to shut it. Since Vic had nothing more to say, he closed his eyes and waited for the wheels to stop rolling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seraph waited for him in the lobby. Vision supposed he'd forgotten to give permission for Frank to let Seraph wait in his office. The chairs in the lobby were not designed for comfort.

"Sir?" Hanz asked.

"Wait here," Vision said.

Seraph stood, but didn't speak until they were on the elevator. "You reek of sex. With the help, too."

"What do you want, Ser?"

"When are we going? The old man isn't great towards dawn."

"I have work to do," Vision said. "We'll go when I'm done."

"Vision--"

Vision held out his hand, and Seraph silenced for a moment. He stood, obviously steaming, then took a step forward, pinning Vision to the wall.

"What are you doing?" Vision asked, keeping his voice mild. He didn't push Seraph back, partly in fear he might dent the panel opposite to them.

"We are going to see Gabriel," Seraph ordered.

Vision's mouth twitched, but he couldn't fight the smile forever. "Do you honestly expect that to work?" he asked. The elevator door pinged open, and Vision pushed Seraph aside with his forefinger.

Vision hadn't lied. There was work to be done. Hanz had found a homeless old man who had seen someone running from the warehouse district. Vision okayed bringing him in. His human directors wished to take over a Malaysian freight company, cutting out a middleman. Vision okayed that, too, but set a line in stone to how much they could offer. He was about to call Tokyo when Hanz buzzed through.

"Sir, you should come down," he said, voice guarded.

“What is it?” Vision asked. Seraph didn’t look over from where he’d pulled one of the chairs to the floor-to-ceiling window.

“Derrick, sir.” Hanz’s tone of voice had the finality that humans reserved only for their dead.

“I’ll be right down,” Vision said.



## Chapter Seven

The Charles Street Jail's stonework was beautiful on the exterior and raw in the interior. The constables tossed Steven in, and then held the door open for Vic. "Here," the constable said, and undid his shackles.

Vic stepped into the cell. "Ask your friend if he wants to be unlocked," the constable who had been nice to Vic asked.

Vic turned, but Steven craned his neck back and bayed like a hunting-dog.

"I would take that as a 'no'," Vic said, dryly.

"You'll be before the magistrate by Tuesday," the constable said. He touched his cap to Vic, and Vic waited for the man's boot falls to echo away before lowering himself down beside Steven.

"Here," Vic said, helping Steven to put his head on Vic's lap. "Do you realize how quite mad you've gotten?"

"Gabriel won't make me stay in here very long," Steven said, ignoring Vic's question.

"He doesn't know you're here," Vic said, brushing the hair from his eyes. He'd forgotten how soft Steven's hair was.

Steven laughed, but settled down to the caress. "Oh, he knows."

Vic ran his fingers down Steven's cheek. "Can I convince you to come to New York?" he asked.

"I'm going," Steven said. His lips twisted up into a smile. "Gabe is taking me."

Gabe. Vic hesitated, inches away from Steven's skin. Steven whined, angling for the touch. "You might as well get some sleep, then," Vic said. The hall had a window, some fifteen feet up. The morning sun had just crept past it. "He's not going to be here for a while."

"You don't know that," Steven said.

Vic pressed his fingers against Steven's forehead. "Oh yes. I do."

Lunch came, if Vic could call bread and water 'lunch'. The stale crusts disintegrated when dipped into the cup, and after a month of fresh German rye and sweet sourdough straight from the oven, Vic couldn't take a bite without tasting the mould and maggots on it.

He gave his to Steven, instead. Steven looked like he needed it more.

The sky turned pink, then deep orange, and remained indigo for a very long time before true night came. Steven hadn't moved, but he hadn't been uncuffed yet. Vic didn't mind. Others had joined him, drunks sobering up, young men like them still on the hustle regardless of being behind bars, and a few hard cases who paced the bars like wild animals. Vic glared at them and the six of them remained on the other side of the cell.

Something crossed the window, black shadow across black, and Vic knew they were being watched.

He looked up. Gabriel was standing in front of the bars. His face was pale, but distinguished, and he didn't have a hair out of place. The suit he wore was old, outdated by at least a decade, but it suited him.

"Well, well. I hadn't expected to see you here," Gabriel said. Even in his sleep, Steven reached for Gabriel.

"Don't take him," Vic said. "He's not strong enough for you. Leave him here, with me."

“No,” Gabriel said. A guard came in, but didn’t act surprised to see Gabriel standing there. Instead, he cocked his head, staring at Gabriel for a moment, then nodded and reached for the ring of keys on his belt.

The door swung open. The guard went to where Steven was now awake, still in his cocoon of chains, and one by one, the guard unlocked them. Steven sat up when he could, stood when he was free, and rubbed his wrists.

He stepped out of the last set of shackles, and went to Gabriel, who put his arm out for him. The guard remained on his knees, still stunned.

Vic didn’t look up. Steven was on his knees and the wet sounds that came to Vic were as familiar as Steven’s breathing. “Are you going to ask if you can come?” Gabriel asked.

“Are you going to make me ask?” Vic responded.

“I think I am.”

“Then I think I’m good here,” Vic said.

Another moment passed. Gabriel grabbed onto the back of Steven’s head, and hunched over for a moment. When he straightened, he pushed away Steven, who wiped his mouth. “Get over here.”

Vic stood. He also took the guard who was still kneeling by the elbow and guided him up, as well. Most of the other cellmates were as stunned as he was, but the hard cases were eyeing the young guard.

“Leave him,” Gabriel ordered.

“No,” Vic said. “One of them has been kind.” He propped the guard against the bars, and then swung the door shut.

And suddenly he was against the bars, Gabriel’s teeth against his skin. “You push my good will,” he said.

“But it amuses you,” Vic said, not allowing himself to panic.

“For now,” Gabriel said, but held him there. Vic went limp, exposing his throat, and eventually Gabriel pushed away. “But it’s a delicate line, Vision.”

Vic turned. He wanted to ask who was Vision, but the name sounded right to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Derrick’s throat had been cut, but that hadn’t been the cause of death. Hanz had covered the body, but even where the sheet touched the open wound, nothing but plasma seeped into the cloth.

He’d been hung to dry.

Vision touched the cold skin. He’d been fond of Derrick, whose quick wit amused him as much as he had tasted good. “Where was he found?”

“Outside, sir,” Hanz said. “Propped up against the building.”

“No one saw anything,” Vision said.

“No, sir.”

“And the cameras?” They had installed them after Lyall had walked into their building. In fact, Lyall had helped them tighten the holes. Of course, Vision had still asked for an outside firm to ensure Lyall’s work truly had been watertight, and for the most part, it had been.

“Here,” Hanz said, and led the way around the desk. The top left closed circuit camera went black, then a grainy picture of the exterior flipped on. A black car drove up with its door open, but the angle was wrong to see the interior.

Whoever it moved too fast for the camera. One second the car was there, the next it was speeding off and the body appeared between one frame and another.

Vision shook his head. “Fuck,” he said.

“Exactly, sir.”

“Send the files down to support,” Vision said.

Seraph stared at the replay. "Cameras won't work on us," he said.

"Not these," Vision said. The video feed he was most interested in would be the infrared, but that would only work if the vampire had fed recently. He was going to tell Seraph that, but closed his mouth, instead.

"Bring the car," he told Hanz, instead.

"Yes, sir," Hanz said.

Vision pinched his nose. "I assume the warehouse is safe."

"Yes, sir. They gave us the all clear to go in this morning."

"Good, we'll go there first." Vision looked back down to Derrick. "And have someone deliver that to the morgue," he said. He knew it was cold, but there was no dignity they could give the body to make it any more comfortable. He did, however, walk around it rather than step over it.

Seraph waited for Hanz to open the back door for him. Vision got in the front.

The yellow tape was everywhere, but the scene itself was deserted. Hanz popped the trunk and took out a bag of stones. Vision ducked under the yellow tape and Hanz joined him a moment later. Hanz let the tape fall before Seraph got to it.

"Watch my back," he told Hanz.

"Always, sir."

It had been a simple request, but Hanz had turned it into something more. Vision looked at Hanz, not quite positive Hanz knew what he'd just offered, but the frank look in Hanz's eyes didn't change. Vision felt suddenly more at peace than he should have. Hanz moved behind him, close enough that Vision could feel him, and he smiled.

Seraph stood behind him as well, but Vision ignored him. He sat down, cross-legged over the line, and closed his eyes. He'd never done this before, but knew how to as easily as he did finding an artery with his tongue. He spilled the stones out around him.

He closed his eyes. The line beneath him was as thick as his thigh, and neon green. Even with his eyes closed, it almost burned his retinas.

The biggest stone by his left foot glowed a soothing blue. He put that down first. A second one just out of his reach glowed, and as he reached for it, it leaped into his hand. A third and fourth came just as quickly, and the vibrant light of the line diffused slightly so that it was no longer physically painful to sense.

A stone small enough to be a pebble finished it, and Vision opened his eyes again. His skin crackled with the build up. He turned, a bit unsteady, and a spark of energy, bright as an ember, crossed the space between him and Seraph, and Seraph's eyes flew open. He stumbled, and Hanz caught him before he fell.

Nothing passed between Vision and Hanz, even when Vision put his hand on the back of Hanz's neck and willed the energy to transfer.

Vision bent down, touched the cairns, and poured off what strength he couldn't use.

"Let's go," he said, the sadness inside him inescapable.

## Chapter Eight

Outside the jail, an actual automobile waited for them. The black metal shone, and the engine hummed. Vic had seen them on the street, of course, had nearly been run over by a couple, but he'd never sat in one before. This was a four-seater, and obviously a cut above the Model-Ts. Gabriel and Steven got in the back, so Vic gingerly climbed up into front seat beside a driver. The man didn't look at him, but cranked the car into gear, and Vic gripped the seat, suddenly afraid he'd be thrown from the moving vehicle.

There was a vampire in the back seat, and Vic was afraid of modern technology. The thought almost made him laugh, and he relaxed and enjoyed the ride.

The car drove quietly down the streets, until they pulled up in front of the brownstone. Vic climbed down and stood on the side of the road waiting for Gabriel to help Steven down.

Without saying a word, they both turned and headed up the stoop. Vic didn't say anything until they reached the upstairs. "Should I come?" he asked.

"I think you ought to, don't you?" Gabriel asked, voice cold.

"Yes, sir," Vic said, and shuddered. This time, however, Gabriel waited for him, and his hand slid down Vic's body. Vic shuddered again, and relaxed into the solidness of Gabriel's body.

"It's easier if you don't fight me," Gabriel whispered, smoothing Vic's hair.

Vic offered him his wrists, right there in the entrance hall. He couldn't help it.

Gabriel took them, and held them over Vic's head to bring him in close enough for a kiss. No matter how hard Vic fought, he couldn't pull away, and that made him so hard he couldn't stop himself from thrusting against Gabriel's hip.

"Upstairs. Wash first," Gabriel said, and dropped him.

Steven didn't come into the bath. That made it seem...Vic searched for the right word. It seemed more profound, being alone in the room. He took a towel down from the rack, and wrapped it around his hip before entering the master bedroom.

Steven wasn't there, but Gabriel was. He lay naked in the middle of the bed, with his arms crossed over his chest.

Vic let the towel fall from his hips.

"Better," Gabriel said. He got off the bed, faster than Vic could follow, and he was up against the wall. "Now put your hands over your head."

Vic did. Gabriel buried his face in Vic's neck, and Vic closed his eyes, expecting sudden pain.

If he were honest with himself, he would have admitted he actually craved it.

Gabriel moved down, kissing down the line of his chest, over his belly, then dragged his tongue through the line of hair between his navel and his groin.

Sparks exploded behind Vic's eyes. He chewed his lip, hot sweet blood spilling over his tongue, and he realized he'd actually shredded the lining of his mouth. All Gabriel had to do was touch him. Just once, and he'd come so hard he doubted he would be able to stand.

Then he was alone by the wall. Gabriel had moved back to the bed, and sat, almost primly, with his legs crossed. "You think you're stronger than I am," he said, voice hard.

Vic shook his head, desperately. He sucked the blood, tasting his own arousal in it. Straining his hips did nothing to help.

"Please," he said, voice gruff.



Gabriel grabbed Vic's hands, holding them out, away from his body in a perfect line from his shoulders. Gabriel took down two books from his bookcase, leather-bound first editions, no doubt, and balanced them on Vic's outstretched hands.

Gabriel moved to the bedside table, and lit up a cigarette. He sucked on it long enough for the ember to catch, and then held it out. "If you're still holding them when this cigarette burns out, I'll ride you all night."

"That's your big test?" Vic demanded.

"That's it," Gabriel said, and smiled.

Vic shook his head, determined to show him how easy it would be, but within a minute, his arms started to tremble. The cigarette had only burned down a quarter inch. Vic shifted, but that seemed to make the pain worse. "And if I can't?" Vic asked, hating the way his voice sounded.

Gabriel eyed him, coldly. Nothing would happen. That would be the whole point.

Gabriel didn't suck on the cigarette to make it burn faster, and the acrid smell of tobacco filled the air. Vic tried to regulate his breathing, tried to force his body to just ignore the pain, but he couldn't. The hot burn of his muscles told him so. The cigarette was only half way down, and there was no way he could possibly keep his arms up.

And then Gabriel was there, holding his hands in place. No longer having to take the weight, his arms stopped hurting almost immediately. It felt so good to just relax and let Gabriel take the pain away. The cigarette burned out harmlessly in its ashtray.

Vic's arms were cold when Gabriel let him away from the wall. He got obediently into the bed and lay flat out on his back, knees hugging his chest. Gabriel manipulated him easily, stuffing pillows under his hip, and he reached into the same drawer that the cigarette had come from to pull out a vial of oil.

The oil warmed his skin. Gabriel lubricated two of his fingers, sliding them inside of Vic, and with cold precision scraped the sweet spot inside him until Vic was spilling onto his

belly. Vic twisted, wanting it to last, but Gabriel pressed his finger against Vic's lips. "I said all night."

And it was. The first time Gabriel mounted him, Vic was thankful that he'd already come once. Gabriel pushed him, harder and faster than anyone had before, and Vic willingly gave himself over.

Gabriel fucked him on his back, on his hands and knees, and standing up. Whenever Vic thought he couldn't possibly take another stroke or another fuck, Gabriel bit into him and the exhaustion inside dissipated.

When morning came, it was all Vic could do to crawl down the hall to where Steven slept in the guest quarters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vision left the scattered stones about his newly raised cairn. "No one disturbs that," Vision said, looking at Hanz.

"Yes, sir," Hanz said.

Vision turned, and touched Seraph's cheek. He knew Seraph was as talentless as Hanz, but so close to the cairns Vision felt the cracks in him. Vision tried pushing, and sure enough, some of the energy he had within him seeped inside.

Seraph's eyes widened.

"What has he done to you?" Vision asked.

Seraph smiled. "Nothing's changed," he said, but his voice had turned husky.

Hanz turned away. Vision wanted to comfort him, but felt if he didn't follow the thoughts he was having down to their natural conclusion, he'd lose them. For that reason alone, he sat in the back as they drove away, if only because he could ignore Seraph much better than Hanz.

By the time they arrived, though, the thoughts were gone. It was frustrating. He wasn't used to not understanding things. His brain usually could take two unrelated matters and force them to give up their correlation, but now regardless of how hard he thought, he couldn't think of a way Gabriel could have opened Seraph.

He supposed he'd actually have to ask the old man.

And that was unfortunate.

Seraph led the way into the hotel lobby. The wide-open space with chandeliers and gleaming floors gave way to small, cranky elevators and dingy halls. The carpet was threadbare and the reds and pinks faded to a dull, dusty gray. Vision stopped just outside the door, beside Seraph.

"How is he?" Vision asked, voice low.

"Suffering," Seraph said, and sounded completely exposed. "He has been calling for you. It took forever to have him come to you. He's been convinced all these years that you'd come back to him."

"He thought wrong," Vision said, grimly.

"And doesn't that just make you the big man," Seraph said, voice bitter again. He unlocked the door with a huge metal key and pushed it open. "After you."

Vision stepped in, and his first thought was that they probably didn't have maid service. The room smelled of dust and decay, though the exposed surfaces of the room looked clean enough.

The smell was coming from the bed, or more to the point, the figure in the bed. Vision wouldn't have recognized the old man if he didn't know it was Gabriel. Gabriel's clothes hung off him like a corpse laid out for viewing. His hair had receded and had lost all of the raven-wing blackness. It hadn't even gone white, but gray, like dusty cobwebs. His cheeks had sunken, exposing his bone structure. His dark, noble eyes were closed.

Vision fought the urge to touch his throat. He owed this man nothing. Still, when Gabriel woke and looked at him, Vision felt the need to drop to his knees.

“My Vision,” Gabriel said, and held out his hand. It remained up in the air, wavering, and then collapsed back to the bed. “Always the stubborn one.”

Vision said nothing. Gabriel closed his eyes. “At least do me the honor of hearing my last words,” he said.

Vision looked behind him. Seraph’s face was unreadable. Vision bent down, knowing he shouldn’t. Still, it was a shock to feel Seraph’s hands pushing his head down. Vision twisted back. Seraph was no match for him, but by then Gabriel’s teeth were in his neck and Vision couldn’t stop him from feeding.

## Chapter Nine

Gabriel hadn't told them that their escape had cost three guards their lives. Vic knew Gabriel could have waltzed through the jail without anyone seeing anything. Vic couldn't help but think that the deaths were done just so that Steven's and Vic's likenesses were spread over Boston.

They took the night train to New York.

One of the dead had been the constable who'd been kind to him. "Why?" Vic asked. Steven was asleep beside him in their private car.

"I smelled you on him," Gabriel said.

"I would have come if you had asked," Vic said, going back to watching the countryside fly past.

"No, you wouldn't have," Gabriel said. He smiled, baring his fangs and Vic felt himself shrinking back.

"So what now?" Vic asked.

"You come with me. Become my eyes and ears in the daylight. Stay loyal, and I will reward you."

Rewards didn't interest Vic at all. Steven still slept, and Vic touched his thigh. Steven didn't stir. "And him?" he asked.

“Leave him to me,” Gabriel said, and bared his teeth again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel had another brownstone ready for them. This one was larger, and three stories tall. All the windows were bricked in, and Steven had his own suite. Vic took one of the servants' quarters in the back of the house. He preferred the distance from Gabriel.

He spent the days learning how to drive, and then spent his nights motoring Gabriel around. Gabriel never asked Vic to accompany him down the deserted alleyways or into the dock area. It made Vic's stomach queer, sitting behind the seat of a very expensive vehicle in the middle of the worst areas of town.

But Gabriel always came back, sometimes exhausted, sometimes victorious. When he was too tired to do it himself, Vic put Gabriel to bed. In the beginning, he called Steven to be with him, so that he didn't go to sleep hungry, but the more drawn Steven looked, the fewer times Vic called him.

Instead, he rolled up his sleeve and fed his master. Feeling his blood being sucked out of his wrist aroused him, and when he finished, Gabriel sucked him until he came.

That night, Gabriel had been successful and rather than having to put Gabriel to bed, Vic was dragged into bed with him. Vic didn't bother to fight; Gabriel was always quick on nights he was successful. Gabriel pushed Vic's head down, and Vic took the erection into his mouth. Steven must have woken up with the slamming of the door, because he walked in on them.

Steven's face darkened. Gabriel ignored him, holding Vic's head until Gabriel finished. Then he pushed Vic off.

Vic wiped his mouth and stood. How Steven was staying on his feet, Vic didn't know. He was ghastly pale and rod thin. Vic crossed the floor to him. He grabbed Steven's throat, and tilted his head.

There were so many puncture wounds on his throat Steven barely had a pulse. Vic turned to Gabriel, who was getting comfortable in his bed. Vic didn't ask permission, but took Steven's arm and led him down to the kitchen.

There was soup in the icebox. Vic took it to the stove, and it took him two attempts to get the fire going. The soup reheated slowly, and Vic stood with his back to Steven as it did.

Steven sat at the table, head in his hands. He swayed back and forth. His heartbeat, when Vic heard it, was sluggish and slow.

Vic put a bowl down in front of him. "Eat this. When you finish it, I'll get you another."

"He doesn't love you," Steven said.

"You don't have to tell me that," Vic said.

"He loves me. Just me," Steven crooned.

"He's killing you."

Steven grinned at him. It made him look like a grinning skull.

"Eat your soup. All of it."

"Yes, sir," Steven said, voice mocking. He'd never once called Gabriel 'sir'.

Vic leaned against the wall. Steven's hands shook so badly the soup barely stayed on the spoon.

Vic left him and went back upstairs.

"Why are you doing that to him?" he demanded from the doorway.

"I've done nothing to him," Gabriel said. "Nothing that I haven't done to you."

"That's not true. You're draining him."

"It's what I do."

"You're killing him."

"What does that matter to you now?" Gabriel asked. "You don't love him any more."

“Let him go,” Vic said.

And Gabriel had him against the wall, pinned there by his throat. The first indication that he’d lost control was when his shoulders struck the wall behind him. His breathing snapped closed, and the hand holding him two feet off the wall was like marble. The lack of air made him see the muscles and tendons on Gabriel’s arm with absolute clarity.

Instead of fighting, he went limp, closing his eyes. Gabriel snarled, throwing him to the side. “I have you both,” he snarled.

Vic lay on the floor for a heartbeat, waiting for a full sweet breath before pushing to his feet.

Vic straightened the rest of the way. “You won’t have him much longer, and when he goes, I go.” He held his throat, trying to see if there was any damage. “Free him.”

“And if I do?” Gabriel inquired, voice mild.

“Free him,” Vic repeated. “Cut him loose, release him, whatever you want to call it. Walk him away from here, and you have me.”

“And why would I do that?” Gabriel demanded. “His soft head belongs to me.”

Still, after all they’ve been through, Vic couldn’t have Gabriel insult Steven. “Take that back,” Vic said.

“Or what, young Victor? I throw you against the wall again? Hardly an incentive for me, I must say.”

Still, and against Vic’s better judgment, Vic crouched, meaning to rush under Gabriel’s center of gravity and throw him to the ground. But again he found his back thrown against the wall before he even remembered moving.

“Ow,” he managed, before his teeth locked down.

Gabriel was at his throat, close enough that Vic felt the man’s lips a hair from his skin. Vic tried to remember any of the prayers his mother had forced him to repeat before going to bed each night, but his brain was empty.



Gabriel bit him. It didn't feel like the usual wasp sting, but more like an animal bite. The pain didn't last, and as it radiated down it turned to a warm rush of pleasure.

"No," Vic managed, but it felt so good.

Gabriel drank, deeply, and Vic started to feel distant. Gabriel dropped Vic again, and this time Vic remained on his knees.

Gabriel wiped Vic's blood from his lips. Vic wished he could calm how much the blood rush was exciting him. He couldn't.

"Are you sure about this? This is your last chance," Gabriel said.

"Don't take him." Vic sucked his breath through his teeth as a shudder of pleasure shook him again. He forced himself to stand, even though it pulled his muscles to do so.

"You have no idea what you're asking for," Gabriel said.

"You keeping your hands off Steven," Vic said. "That's what I'm asking."

"And who's going to take care of your boy when you're with me?"

Vic looked away. Steven wasn't stupid; he just wasn't all that bright, not compared to creatures like Gabriel. Hell, Vic wasn't that smart against Gabriel. "That doesn't matter."

"If that's the case, then strip," Gabriel said, crossing his arms.

Vic didn't bother wasting the breath to ask if he meant here, in the middle of the hall. He shrugged out of the thick sweater he wore and dropped his trousers.

"Look at me."

Vic met his eyes.

"You will belong to me. Say it."

"I'll belong to you."

Gabriel grabbed the back of his head, angling it backwards. Gabriel bit into his wrist, then held the wound over Vic's lips. "Again, say it."

"I'll belong to you."

Gabriel let him drink. It was just as heady as the first time. When he pulled his wrist away, Vic wanted it back. "Again, say it."

"I belong to you," Vic whispered.

"Good boy." Gabriel grabbed him, by the shoulder, pushing him face first into the wall.

Vic spread his legs without being told.

Gabriel bit down on the back of Vic's neck, again tearing the artery. The blood ran uselessly down his back, and Gabriel gathered it up. Vic knew Gabriel was using his own blood to coat his penis.

There was no preparation. One moment Gabriel steadied himself with his hand on Vic's shoulder, the next he was inside. If Vic hadn't been so turned on, that pain would have doubled him over, but now it only made his dick jerk in anticipation.

"Abuse yourself if you must," Gabriel said, then bit through Vic's neck again.

It was like drinking a bottle of cheap whiskey in a single motion. The world spun, and Vic was glad he'd been well and truly braced before Gabriel started fucking him. His heartbeat slowed, the more Gabriel drank from him, and he was coming against the impressionist master's work without even touching himself.

His mind shut down after that, but the orgasm lasted for what seemed like hours.

He came back, lips dry and bruised. He was still on the floor of the hall, the runner pattern marking his cheek, and he was embarrassed to realize that he'd been drooling.

Gabriel was waiting for him. "Knees," he ordered.

It took more effort than Vic knew he had to push himself up. His hands didn't feel truly connected to his arms, which felt like a foreign body to the rest of him. If he'd eaten anything in days, he supposed he would have been sick.

Gabriel was naked and limp. He hadn't perspired an ounce, despite how broken Vic felt.

“Drink,” Gabriel ordered. He put his hand on his thigh, tracing the biggest blue artery beneath his skin, and dug his nail into his leg.

The first swelling of blood broke through Gabriel’s white skin. Vic locked his lips onto the wound, just about ready to lick the drop off, when Gabriel ripped the artery open.

Blood flooded into mouth, and Gabriel held him too close to his body to break contact. Drink or drown were his obvious choices, and Vic drank until he couldn’t hold another mouthful.

He was sick with blood, unused to the heat of it, the thickness or the salt, but then Gabriel was back at his throat, drinking so much that Vic spiraled down to the safety of unconsciousness.

Vic came back, gasping in the total darkness. Air moved in and out of his lungs, but he didn’t feel the need to actually have to breathe. He just did so out of old habit.

He hurt. His whole body ached, especially his left leg, which he’d broken years ago. His heart was still beating, but it was a sluggish and lazy sound. Soon it would stop as well, he knew, but the thought didn’t fill him with panic.

He looked around. The dirt floor was a basement. He wasn’t tied or tethered in any way, and when he moved his limbs it looked as though he’d been placed out, arms and legs crossed. He expected to feel the pins and needles of flesh just waking up, but he was fine.

He stood up. He wasn’t breathing as often as he had before. There were a lot of things that had to be consciously done in order take air in and out, and without the necessity, he found it harder and harder to concentrate on doing it.

Basement. He shook his head, not letting himself be distracted. Basements had stairs that led up, and he needed to go.

It was night, his body told him, and that was good. He wasn’t alone in the basement; he shared it with a family of rats in the corner and a hundred or so insects, and he felt those as

well. It was the rat brain that told him where the staircase was, and he followed the rodent's memory of food up the stairs.

Which, of course, led to a locked door. He rattled the handle, but it didn't budge more than a quarter of an inch to either side. He tried pushing it, pulling it, though had that worked he would have tumbled down the stairs and probably have broken his neck as well. When none of the attempts were successful, he banged on the door with his fist, foot, and knee until the door unlocked and opened.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vision couldn't pull away from Gabriel. He brought his fists down uselessly on the old man's chest. But for as long as Gabriel drank from him, Gabriel could use Vision's own strength against him.

Then the door was off its hinges. Hanz was there, yanking Vision back. Gabriel reared up, long old man's nails becoming sudden weapons, but Hanz had Vision out of Gabriel's reach.

Vision held his hand to the wound. Hanz lifted him up. "What took you so long?" he asked.

Hanz grabbed Gabriel's wrists. He lashed them together with a simple leather tie, as though that would have helped bind an enraged elder, but when Gabriel tried to get off the bed, he couldn't.

"Come, master," Hanz said, and pulled Vision out of the room.

Gabriel's enraged shrieks followed them down the hall. They made it to the elevator, and it slid shut before Vision collapsed.

Hanz tore his own wrist open and held it to Vision's lips. Vision gripped it, drinking as much as he could. By the time they reached the lobby, Vision had recovered enough to stand on his own two feet.

The bellboys leapt out of their way. Vision's shirt was bloody, his throat was torn but healing, but no one tried to stop them.

Hanz opened the door for Vision and he slid inside.

"That was my leather tie," Vision said, finally.

"Really, sir, I think it belonged to me."

"You...bound him."

"It seemed like something I could do."

"I'm glad you did it," Vision said. As they drove away, Vision felt the blood in him re-establishing connections with the lines. For the first time, lines began to form between him and Hanz.

Hanz had talent.

Vision stared at Hanz in amazement. Or perhaps it was massive blood loss. Either way, it seemed the most miraculous thing Vision had ever experienced.

Hanz had talent.

Vision felt the cracks in Hanz form, slowly breaking the galvanized exterior that had refused him over the cairns. That he wouldn't have to shoulder the entire source was good.

He only wished his throat would stop bleeding. Holding it helped, but he didn't feel the skin mending.

"You're bleeding pretty badly, sir," Hanz said. "I can...I can take you to someone."

Vision sat back. Hanz drove them to the suburbs, then helped him out of the car. Hanz helped him up the stairs, and he leaned on the buzzer until the sound of movement came from within.

"Safe house?" Vision asked. None of the windows looked particularly well boarded.

"No," Hanz said. A woman, not quite young but not old yet, answered the door. She wore a silk kimono and her brown hair was up in a bun. She looked familiar.

She looked like Hanz. Vision looked at Hanz, eyebrow raised and Hanz shrugged. “She’s my sister.”

She looked at Hanz, questioningly, and Hanz nodded. “Welcome to my house,” she said, and stepped back.

The odor of the place was almost overwhelming. Actual food was in the refrigerator, and from all around came the smell of the living. It was heady. Vision braced himself against the wall, and left a bloody handprint.

“Never mind that. Come into the kitchen and let me look at your throat.”

“She’s a nurse,” Hanz said.

“We’re a little different from the average patient,” Vision said, not moving from the wall. It wasn’t the smell of the cinnamon bread she’d been baking that made him dizzy, but the lack of blood. Hanz pried his hands away and led him to one of the solid wooden chairs.

The kitchen was clean if not sparkling, and all the appliances on the counter looked to be several years old and not used. The woman got a pair of tweezers and a suture kit from one of the drawers. “Hank leaves out the part where I was a former feeder,” she said, then washed the wound clean of excessive blood. “This isn’t going to be pretty,” she said, and began to sew the wound shut.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hank?” Vision asked, in the dark. His throat had healed during the day, and he was only mildly hungry.

Hanz rolled over on his belly. “Jess likes to tease,” he said.

“Strickland really stretched himself when he found your new name,” Vision said. It seemed ridiculous to smile in absolute darkness, but he did so, regardless.

“Hm,” Hanz said, in a voice carefully guarded. Vision supposed he could have pushed and gotten the full story out of him, but he didn’t.

Instead, he pushed himself up to his elbow and placed a hand on Hanz's back. He liked the way it felt. He liked the way he felt with Hanz.. "I'll take you," he said.

"Take me where, master? And can I drive?"

"That's not amusing," Vision said. "I'll take you as my pet."

Hanz stiffened under Vision's hand. "You can't, sir," he said.

"Like hell I can't," Vision snapped. All the warmth that had been building between them now felt as though it was being shut out, and he didn't understand why. And he couldn't stop his old lashing-out reaction. "You have talent. We'll work on growing it together."

"You can't, sir," Hanz said. He stood up, reaching for his clothes piled beside the bed. "I'm sorry."

Vision sat up. "I could just order you to," he snapped. It had been years since he'd not gotten his own way with an underling, and he couldn't stop the overpowering anger from building.

Hanz turned. His white flesh glowed in the darkness, and if Vision looked closer, the veins beneath his skin were blown. He was in a panic. "Would you?" he asked, voice choking.

Vision couldn't quite believe he was in the process of being rejected. Telling himself that it had just been a hand job, a fuck, and a couple pretty words didn't help the hurt inside; it only made it worse. It had seemed like more since the first moment Hanz had told him to kneel, and he didn't want to give up what had taken him so long to find, but he wasn't going to leave himself open for Hanz to hurt again. "No," he said, finally. He stood up and got dressed himself. He made his way up the stairs and took the car. Being out in the night again made Vision stronger.

He drove down to the meat market. It wasn't hard to find a little junkie who'd let him drink all he wanted. The drugs tainted their blood, and it was a miracle that he arrived back at his house in one piece.



## Chapter Ten

Hanz winced when the door slammed shut. “Well, that went well,” he said into the darkness. All the words he’d been meaning to tell Vision, from the fact he’d wanted him since the very first time he’d seen him as Strickland’s lieutenant to the fact that he was by now, without a doubt hopelessly in love with him caught in his throat. It would be easier if he could just tell Vision that Strickland hadn’t been the one to make him and he still belonged to someone else, but that hadn’t mattered as long as Vision didn’t know he had talent.

Only now Vision did know, and there was nothing Hanz could do to take that back. When their relationship hadn’t had a name, it had been perfect. He put his slacks back on, then went upstairs.

Jess had come down from the upstairs. “Lover’s spat?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s a little more than that,” Hanz said. “I think I’ve just been fired.”

“And one is worse than the other?” Jess asked.

“In this case, yes.”

She went into the fridge, into his special section, and pulled out a bag of blood she always had on hand. “Drink. You’ll feel better.”

"You say that now," Hanz said. He rubbed his face.

"You know, I know this is a unique thought, but I wondered if you had considered telling him what happened."

Hanz shook his head. He took the blood from her and drank. Cold blood kept alive through chemicals didn't taste as good as blood fresh from the vein, but it sustained him. "I won't involve him in this," he said.

"Then you're doing him a great disservice. If you can't trust him with this--"

"It's not a matter of trust!" Hanz snapped, then regretted it. It wasn't Jess's fault that Jess had no concept of how much a promised favor would cost. "I'll deal with it myself."

Jess's eyes widened. "You can't. It almost killed you the last time."

Hanz laughed, bitterly. "What are you talking about? It did kill me."

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Jess had come to New York seventeen years ago with a scholarship and an elderly aunt to live with. Hank had gone with her, just because. They were twins, but being born on the same day was about as similar as they had ever been. She was pretty, smart and destined for great things. He'd barely graduated from high school. But not going with her to the city just seemed like the wrong thing to do. They'd never been apart before.

"Come with me," Jess had said, sitting down beside him beneath the huge oak tree they always sat beneath for lunch. "You have nothing here to keep you."

Hank looked over to where John sat with his buddies. He supposed he'd loved him, or at least mistaken pure lust for love, but John had just become engaged to Heather. He hadn't even known the two of them liked each other, but it was a small town and all of their families went way back. And everyone knew Hank and Heather had just officially broken up, and no one would think twice if Hank refused to talk to either of them.

John saw him looking and turned his back. Better to be miserable his entire life than a fag, Hanz surmised bitterly. The shiny red truck in the student parking lot had been the carrot to dump him. The stick? Disinheritance. John's father had a big, big stick.

There were secrets that everyone knew in small towns, and there were darker ones that no one but the immediate people involved knew. He felt this one would be one of the latter.

"You could have anyone in this school," Jess said, putting her arms around him. "But Heather cut your heart out and John served it with ketchup. It's really time for you to go."

"Sure," Hank said, just as John laughed. It didn't cut into him nearly as much as he thought it would.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been quite the change, that move to the big city. Back home, the traffic light that went up on the main street had made the front page of their weekly paper.

But it was a change he could live with. Big city cars needed their oil changed as much as country cars did, and Hanz found a job with a garage within a week. The skyscrapers quickly became part of the scenery. The underground tunnels took another day or so, but eventually he felt them as arteries moving through the city.

The crap pay in the garage didn't bother him, not with their rent and board paid for already. He seemed to be the only one working who wasn't trying to be something else. He wasn't trying to pen the next American novel, nor was he trying to act. He showed up for his shifts when he was supposed to be there, and quickly became an essential part of the daily working of the garage.

He was happy.

Jess worked her way through school. She balanced her schoolwork with her job at the local café. They barely saw each other; when she was at school, he was in the garage, and she worked late nights. It wasn't unusual for them to go without seeing each other for days.

He'd eaten something bad the day before. He'd known it within the hour, and dragging himself to work in the morning had taken a Herculean effort. Of course, once he got to the garage, he'd been immediately dispatched back home, in a taxi, no less. He was so focused on getting his stomach and its contents inside the house before dispelling anything that he didn't notice Jess's little Volkswagen Bug still in the drive.

He slept in the basement, but the only bathroom was on the top floor. He heard a moan from Jess's room.

"Jess, you sick too?" he called, opening her bedroom door without knocking. They'd never knocked, not the two of them. Jess's bedroom window had been blocked by two large posters. That wouldn't have been strange, except for the fact that they'd been taped in place as though she were trying to block out every strand of light. The room, despite the early hour, was dark.

Someone else moaned from the bed. It was deep and throaty, but still undeniably female. *Close the door*, the voice in his head said. *Walk away. Pretend you didn't see anything.*

There was something so wrong with the groan, however. His hand reached for the light before he could stop it. He threw the light on, and the woman who was with his sister burst off the bed, snarling like a caged beast. Her lips were drawn back, and her fangs out, still covered in his sister's blood.

Whatever the woman was, the rational side of his brain said, it was definitely not a vampire. *It's a vampire!* the irrational part screamed. He shook his head. "Come here, Jess," he said, keeping his voice flat. Calm. The panic inside him wouldn't subside, he knew, until he was between whatever the hell it was and his sister.

Jess stood up, her hand still clamped over her neck. She was bleeding, he saw, and naked, but she went to him.

He pulled off his jacket and put it over her shoulders. The woman hissed from the shadows where the arch of light from the door didn't reach. The bedroom door didn't have a lock but Hank felt better just closing the door behind him.

"Go downstairs and grab some of my clothes," he said. "We're getting out of here."

"You don't understand," Jess said. She took his arm. "I invited her here."

"Jess," the woman crooned. "Come back to bed."

Jess moved to the door. Hank grabbed her arm, trying to pull her back to him, but she yanked her hand free as though he were an annoying child.

She slid back into her room. The mattress creaked, then settled, and Hank slid down the wall and waited.

The day cooled. The sun went down. Their aunt was visiting their mother, so they were alone. It wasn't until evening arrived and the streetlights came on that sound came from the bedroom.

Hanz pushed to his feet. The door opened, and the woman came out. She was dressed in red velvet and black leather, and the corset she wore so tightly cinched it made her look like a wasp.

*My sister tightened that*, he thought. The woman hissed at him, still clutching her cloak. Hanz didn't try to bar her way, but still, as she passed, she turned and grabbed him by the throat. "Well, you're the cutey," she said, and held him up against the wall. "What's your name, sugar-pie?"

He couldn't answer; he couldn't breathe. She smiled, then dragged him down so that his toes touched the carpet. "If you want to save your sister, meet me outside." He barely heard her even two inches from his ear.

He tried to nod, but coughed instead.

“Bethany,” Jess said, from her bedroom door. “Let him down.”

Bethany dropped him. Hank remained on his feet, if only because that’s how he landed. “For you, anything,” she said, then left down the stairs with a flourish.

“You didn’t go to class today,” Hanz said.

“That’s all you have to say?” Jess asked. She looked exhausted, despite the fact that she had obviously spent most of the day sleeping. Or at least in bed. He stopped his brain from following that line of thought downward.

“It’s the most important part, yeah.”

Jess laughed. How long had she been that pale? He wanted to take her arms and shake her, only he was afraid she might crumble beneath him. “We should get you to the hospital,” he said, and reached for her arm.

She pulled back faster than he thought she could. “What could they possibly do? I feel fine.”

“You look half-dead.”

“Exactly.” She smiled, showing how bloodless her lips were. “They need blood.”

“And what do you get out of the deal?” Hank demanded.

Jess was silent for a moment. “It feels so good, Hank.”

“It is going to end,” he said, and dragged her into the bathroom.

She fought him. He supposed she could have pushed him away and be done with it, but she was in a stupor. That didn’t break until he managed to get her under the shower and blasted cold water on her.

She howled, a cry that chilled him more than the water did, but he stood under the water with her until she started to shiver.

He snapped the water off, wrapped her up in one of the towels that went around her body twice, and then helped her downstairs to the kitchen.

No coffee; the caffeine was bad. Well, it was bad for the severe cramps Jess had gotten throughout high school, and that was his only basis for comparison. Tea, thick with honey, he knew, and chicken soup. The tea probably should have steeped -- *stooped?* his frantic mind asked -- for longer and the soup came from a can. Still, he added soy sauce like he knew she liked it, and rubbed her shoulders while she ate.

"How many classes have you missed?" he asked.

"A week," she croaked.

"I'll call in sick tomorrow. We can go down to the registrar and beg forgiveness. You'll just have to make the classes up."

She laughed. "Do you think you can swoop in and save me?" she asked. "Everything's already been decided. I can't change what's going to happen."

He knelt down beside her legs, holding her knees. "There isn't anything that can't be changed. Jess, you've come so far. You were going to be a nurse, remember? Eventually become a doctor? This isn't what you want, is it?"

Jess took another sip of tea. She moved to push him away, but he held onto her knees and wouldn't let go. "Jessie, no," he said. "Answer me."

Jess cracked. She hid her head in her hands and sobbed. "No," she managed. "I don't want this. But it feels..."

He kissed her hands. "Get some rest, Jess. I'll take care of this."

"What are you going to do?" she croaked. He wished he had something more than a kitchen towel to give her, but he didn't. She took it from him and hugged it like a doll.

"I don't know," he said, then stood up. "I'm sure it will come to me when I need it to."

"My brave little brother," she said.

He patted her on the cheek.

The woman, if she was that, was waiting for Hank on the street, alongside a huge limousine. He'd never seen a car that big. His ears rang. He walked down the cement blocks in the middle of the small lawn and opened the gate, then latched it carefully behind him.

"Get inside," Bethany said.

"You aren't going to force me?" Hank asked.

"Dear boy. This isn't about being forced to do anything," she said, and bared her fangs. "If you don't want it now, you will soon enough."

"I want you to leave my sister alone," he said.

"Inside," Bethany said, then stepped back for him to open the door himself.

He did.

The interior was black, even with the door open. He swore he heard something shift, like a rattler coiling itself readying for a strike, and he shook his head. It was just a cool, dark interior of a car, he thought, and stepped inside.

He wasn't alone. The woman who sat across from him sat with her legs curled under her. Bracelets went halfway up her arm, and she wore silk beneath her leather corset and trousers. Leather was the only scent in the car -- cold leather, though, not the warm spice of leather brought to body temperature. Her hair was down, free in smooth black sheets around her heart-shaped face, and her lips were blood red.

Bethany got into the car behind him and knelt down beside the woman. "See, mistress? I told you he was handsome," Bethany said. Any coldness had left her voice. She sounded as a dog would, if it could speak while begging for treats.

The woman caressed Bethany's face, and Bethany shuddered. "Young," the woman said. Her voice was heavy, sexual, and Hank, despite himself, felt himself respond to it. "But you did well."



“Wait--” Hank said, and even forcing that word out took more energy than he thought. She held out her hand, and he fell silent. “It’s tonight, you know that. Either you or your sister is coming with us, so make your choice, and make it now.”

There was no choice. Hank sat back. Bethany moved to him, unsnapping his shirt button by button, and purred when his chest was exposed. “So pretty,” she whispered, then turned to the woman. “May I, mistress?”

The woman cocked her head to the side. “Ask him,” she said. The car had started moving without Hank realizing it. It made his stomach lurch as his inner ear caught up with the movement. He pushed Bethany aside.

Bethany pouted. And while she was pouting, she scratched Hank’s chest so that blood ran. “None of that, kitten,” the woman said, and held out her hand. Bethany instantly returned to it. They kissed, the woman taking Bethany’s breast in her hand, and with a careless twist freed it from the velvet encasing it.

Hank looked away. “Ah, he’s shy,” Bethany said.

“Where are we going?” Hank asked, ignoring her.

“My house,” the woman said. “You may address me as madam, or mistress.”

Twenty-four hours ago his major concern had been not getting to the market in time to buy beer. Hank stared at her, uncomprehendingly, and she smiled. “It won’t seem so strange soon enough, my little buck.”

“Yes, mistress,” he said, and the word was easier.

They were silent until they arrived at the house. Hank stopped. The grass around the old house was dead, in direct contrast to how rich the lawns were around them. The house itself was huge, and done in one of those styles that screamed old money. Hank couldn’t remember it, but knew it was named after one of those kings. The tasteful white building

was at least three stories tall, and all the windows had been blacked out. “This way, little buck,” Mistress said.

Hank’s back knotted. “If it’s me you want, why involve Jess at all?”

Mistress walked away from Bethany, who hissed at Hank. “You’ve caught the eye of someone very powerful. I need you as leverage. Your sister’s blood in me allows me to turn you. It is nothing personal.”

She backed him towards the front door. The solid wood struck him, and despite himself he leaned into her.

“I could have you kneel right here,” she told him, and she wasn’t wrong. He pushed her back.

“No,” he managed.

Bethany approached and slid her hand under Hank’s shirt. “This one still has some fight in him, mistress. I can change that.”

“We don’t have time,” Mistress said. The door behind him opened, and he fell back. Luckily he managed to take three stumbling steps before he caught his center again.

The hall was grand, with an actual chandelier hanging from the rising spiral staircase. It was all wood with oriental rugs. Little ones. They didn’t look like they’d come from any store Hank had ever been in.

“Drink,” Mistress said. Bethany jumped him. Hank fought, and when Bethany tackled him he was expecting it. He turned her weight, just like in football practice, and he grabbed her wrists. Bethany snarled at him, more dangerous than any wounded, cornered beast. He’d only startled her and gotten the jump. She was only beneath him because he’d surprised her.

He didn’t want to be under her when it happened. So instead, he offered her his neck where she lay.

She dug her teeth in, and it hurt worse than being bitten by that weasel in the third grade. Then it didn't hurt at all, and he couldn't stop his hips from moving against her. The rush of pleasure went straight to his groin.

Then Mistress was there, and they were sharing him. Her bite didn't hurt at all. Mistress cut her wrist. *This is Jess's blood* the cold voice told him, and he was drinking it even as he slid downward.

There was nothing. Then there was something. It was like coming out of deep, frigid water. He was gasping, and the air moving in and out of him did nothing to alleviate any of the starving tissues in him.

"The pain will subside," Mistress said. He was in a cell, hands chained over his head. . And he hurt, from his hair to his toes. All the broken bones he'd ever suffered through on the playing fields were re-mending themselves.

The door swung open. For all the fancy upstairs, the basement had a stone floor and steel bars welded together. The walls were rough stone, and large metal rings hung on the walls, spotting them at different heights.

Mistress stood over him, her leather mini-skirt barely covering the mounds of her buttocks, but it was the same corset. She'd pulled her hair back into a severe braid, and she carried a riding crop.

The chains fell off his wrists and she stepped away from him for a moment. "The stairs are to your left. They will lead you up to the foyer. You'll be free and clear. No one is holding you here against your will."

Hank opened his mouth to speak, but he didn't have the motor control to do it. Where would he go, he wanted to ask, but couldn't manage it.

"Exactly," she said, and smiled. Despite himself, Hank couldn't help feeling how much he belonged to this woman. It was only right. He was naked; she might as well have been.

He hadn't moved from where he'd been staked out, and he kept his arms over his head as she mounted him.

Without words, he couldn't beg. Her body was so warm compared to his, and he felt his body dying even as her body pushed him deeper and deeper into his orgasm. "I know it hurts," she said. "But this will make you feel better."

It was too much, too soon. As he came, he felt himself spinning backwards, and she was right. The thick, black blanket was safer than the real world to him.

She rode him a dozen times. Each time he came back, he was stronger and more drawn to her. By the third time, he could speak, but then she only allowed him to say 'no', 'please', and 'more'. He didn't feel like saying much else.

If the blood letting had been good, when it was combined with sex it was intoxicating. By the fifth or sixth time--he'd lost count--he could get up from the floor and move about the open cell. But each time she approached the door he crawled back to his place on the floor.

"I'm going to miss you, little buck," she sighed, as she slid him into herself.

"What?" he managed through clenched teeth.

"Your new owner will be here tomorrow. More's the pity, actually, but all good things, little buck."

"No," Hank said. His name was Hanz now; she'd renamed him out of his second waking, and it was like finding something he'd been missing his entire life. The name just fit. "I want to stay."

"You have no choice," she said, moving faster against him.

He whipped his head back and forth, trying to lift his hips off the floor.

"Good boy," she crooned, riding him harder. It was violent, but without the need to breathe it felt surreal. He was going to come and slip back down into nothingness.

Her skin was too slick against his. There was a perfect moment of anticipation of how good it was going to feel. It blended into the actual orgasm and Mistress screamed, digging her nails into his chest.

She got off him and Hanz rolled onto his side.

“Be ready,” she said.

“Yes, Mistress,” he said, and was surprised that he could lie to her.

She left him alone.

He crawled to where his clothes had been neatly folded and pulled them on. His entire body wanted to sleep, but he didn’t let it.

The stairs to the left did in fact lead the way up to the foyer. Then he was out.

But by no means was he free. The moment he was out on the street, he felt shadows gathering behind him. He didn’t understand what they were, but when the first tendril touched his ankle, it burned like a jellyfish. He started to run. It started out as a shuffling gait, but then he found his stride.

Just before he fell down with exhaustion, right when his legs had refused to lock anymore and he was about to collapse and let the shadows just take him, two of Strickland’s enforcers found him and took him to the elder.

The next evening, he was put to work in the carpool. It was better than nothing.

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Jess took his hands over the coffee mug. “Go to him,” she said. “Explain.”

“No,” Hanz said. “They’ll be nothing he can do. I have to go see her, instead.”

Jess’s hands started to shake. “You can’t be serious,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Jessie,” he said. The night was still young. If he were lucky, he could get to the Mistress’s house and back to Vision before morning.

His hands were shaking, too.

## Chapter Eleven

The house hadn't changed, only now Hanz knew it was a Tudor-style mansion. The steps up to the doors didn't creak, but the door still swung open for him. He stepped inside. His invitation had been made, once, and it obviously had never been revoked.

Of course it was Bethany. She hadn't changed much. Her eyes were a little more set into her skull. "You're back," she said, coldly.

"Is she here?" he asked.

"No," Bethany said, then blocked his way up the stairs. "And even if she were here, I wouldn't let you up."

He took a step towards her. "You can't stop me any more," he said.

She stood up to him. "Oh, does the sugar-pie think that just because he got his teefs he can take on anyone?" she asked, voice syrup.

He charged her, knowing that she was right. She was older than he was, doubtlessly much stronger, but he managed to get a few swipes in before she had him pinned to the wall.

"Enough," Mistress said, coming down the hall.

She had dyed her black hair blond. Her peasant blouse was off her shoulders and exposed quite a lot of cleavage. She wore suede pants today, and knee high riding boots. Bethany snarled at him and let him stand up.

He stood, pushing away from her. "Mistress," he said, and bowed his head. She was still a dozen steps away, but there was no denying her pull on his body. It was organic.

"Come upstairs," she said, and with the flick of her wrist, clearly told Bethany to stay. Bethany didn't move from the step on which she stood, and they roughly brushed shoulders as Hanz passed. He just wished he hadn't been the one that bounced against the wall.

"Your physical strength is still developing," Mistress said. Hanz's ears warmed that he was so obvious.

She took him to a sitting room. The antique furniture looked to be the right period for the house, and the grandfather clock in the corner tocked away in an eerie artificial heartbeat. The fireplace was cold and empty, but the chairs gathered around it as though it had once been the centerpiece of the room.

Another woman, another vampire, sat in the chair in the corner. She was dressed in a white suit which, if nothing else, gave her blond hair a tinge of yellow. Her skin matched the too white carpet of the room, and when she stood up, her trousers didn't hide her five-inch stilettos. She kissed Mistress on the cheek, smiled lavishly at Hanz, and left without saying a word.

"One of your new master's contemporaries," Mistress said once the woman had left. "She believes we can settle our differences with a vote and a best-behavior promise."

"And you don't," Hanz asked, haphazardly guessing.

"I don't," she agreed, then sat down. He went to join her but she snapped her fingers and pointed at the carpet in front of her.

He was going to disobey, to sit down on the chair the woman had stood up from, but found himself compelled to the center of the room and down on his knees. It was his will, however, that allowed him to sit cross-legged, instead.

“Oh, it would have been fun to break you,” she sighed. “But you’re not here for that, are you?”

“I want a release,” Hanz said. His mouth opened again and the word, “Mistress” escaped.

“Of course you do. I’m truly surprised you’ve lasted this long. So tell me, Hanz, what do you have to barter your freedom with?”

Hanz spread his hands. He had nothing. She must have known that. Mistress leaned forward, crossing her legs to do so, and she grabbed Hanz’s chin, pulling him towards her. It was an awkward struggle for him. If he had been kneeling it would have been flawless, but sitting as he was it took an extra second and she mocked his fumble with her eyes.

“I felt your decision to come,” she said. “I know how important he is to you, I feel that, too. You love him, don’t you?”

Hanz nodded, though her nails pressed into his skin as he did so. He had been attracted to Vision, long before he’d become an elder. The hole in Vision, his need, called to Hanz, and yet there was no way he could have possibly responded under proper decorum. He swallowed, though he had absolutely no need to. “Yes,” he said.

“And you would do anything for him?” she asked. She kept her voice flat, but it didn’t sound as though she completely knew the answer.

“Yes,” Hanz said, without hesitation.

“Good,” she slapped his cheek, lightly, and sat back. “Then I have a business proposition for you.”

Hanz sat back as well, this time properly on his knees. He waited.

She snapped her fingers, and the door opened again.



Seraph walked in.

Hanz jumped to his feet, all compulsion broken.

Mistress laughed.

"You two know each other," she said, clapping her hands in delight. "This is better and better."

"You?" Seraph asked, eyebrow raised. "You said you had something good, Trance, but I had no idea."

"What are you saying?" Hanz asked, back to the wall.

Mistress stood up. "It's simple. Seraph's master is the one who wanted you originally. I turned you for him. Those original terms have long since been renegotiated, but I thought if you were to become Seraph's pet--" she held out her hand, silencing his explosion of anger, "--for ten years, perhaps I would consider letting you go."

He'd hated Seraph on sight. There was something smarmy about his good looks, and the way he thought he could ride over Vision made Hanz sick. "No," he said.

"Do you think I will ever get bored and free you?" Mistress demanded, her face suddenly furious. "Why did you come here if you weren't willing to bargain?"

"I didn't come here to bargain away my freedom."

She touched his cheek. "What did you come here for?"

Hanz stopped. He supposed he had, in fact, come to bargain away his freedom. The thought stopped him. He pushed her hand aside, but before he made it to the doorway, her voice stopped him.

"Leave now, the time doubles," she called.

Then he supposed his time would double. He walked out of the room and out of the house.

Vision's gate didn't open to his card, so he sat out, blocking the gate until almost sunrise. He knew Vision was watching him from the house, and supposed that waiting in a car for the gate to open or for sunrise was some kind of perverted game of Russian roulette, but he waited, arms crossed over his chest.

The eastern sky was orange by the time the gate swung open. Hanz floored it, and was inside the house just as he felt the first rays of the sun hit the other side of the door.

"Was that supposed to impress me?" Vision said from the staircase. He was afraid to be hurt again, Hanz knew, which made the fact he was here, deliberately to hurt him all the more difficult. But he had to; he wasn't going to hand deliver himself into Seraph's hands to be used against Vision. That was not acceptable at all.

"I need to talk to you."

"Hm," Vision said. He turned to go. "We just saved ourselves an expensive vacuum job on your interior, nothing more. Frank, show him to the door. And if you can't do that, put him up somewhere as far away from me as possible."

Frank nodded, getting between Hanz and Vision. Vision went up the stairs. Hanz grabbed Frank by the arm.

"You have to do something for me," Hanz said.

"Like hell I do," Frank said.

"Frank, please."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just knock on the door."

"That's it?"

"I swear," Hanz said. "Give me ten minutes."

"You won't halfway be done in ten minutes," Frank said, under his breath, but clearly enough that Hanz heard.

Hanz kept his face expressionless. That was the point.

He went up the stairs to Vision's room. Vision didn't order him away. Once in his room, with the door shut behind them, Hanz took Vision's hand.

"Let go of me," Vision said, voice ice.

"No," Hanz said.

"This," Vision hissed, "is not one of those times."

"I think it is," Hanz said. He forced Vision back onto the bed and because Hanz's throat was still intact by the time Vision's shoulders hit the mattress, he took it as permission to go ahead.

Still, Vision fought him, and Hanz kept him pinned to the bed with both hands over Vision's head. He barely held Vision down, and even when Vision had exhausted himself, he still wouldn't let Hanz gather both his wrists in the same hand.

Finally, Hanz had enough. "Stop it," he snapped.

"Fuck you," Vision said.

Hanz leaned over Vision, pressing more of his weight down on Vision's wrists, and his hands turned white. Vision continued to fight for a few seconds and then settled. Despite everything, Vision still responded to him, and he to Vision. It was like slowly tearing off a Band-Aid, and he wished he could just stop.

"You done?" Hanz said, instead, when he really wanted to beg forgiveness.

"No," Vision said, churlishly.

"Well, too bad," Hanz said, but successfully gathered up both Vision's wrists, and Vision 'let' him. "Good."

It took him three times as long to undress Vision. Vision glared daggers into him, but didn't stop Hanz from removing Vision's slacks and undoing his shirt.

“Don’t move,” Hanz said. He let go of Vision’s hands, and Vision kept them up there. Hanz licked his way down Vision’s chest. Vision lifted his back off the mattress. Hanz let him. He licked down Vision’s belly, and Vision bit his lip.

Vision lifted his legs up, bringing them up to Hanz’s shoulders. Hanz licked his way back down the length of Vision’s erection, then cupped Vision’s testicles. Vision begged him, but Hanz took his time. Vision was already trembling. His perineum was soft and sensitive.

Hanz licked his fingers, sliding them down the skin to Vision’s ass. Vision slid away but didn’t move his hands away from above his head.

Hanz slid a finger inside, then two. He found Vision’s prostate, and he ran his fingers up and down it while pressing down behind his testicles.

Vision kept the lube beside the bed. Hanz groped for it, and pulled back to take off his own jeans. Vision fell back to the bed. His cock was hard against his belly, and Hanz began jerking it off as he slid himself in.

He lifted Vision’s legs over his shoulders again. Vision’s fists tightened over his head, but he didn’t move.

Frank pounded on the door.

“Don’t move,” Hanz ordered.

“Sir?” Frank called. “Forgive me, it’s important.”

Hanz grabbed Vision’s wrists. “I said, don’t move.”

“What are you doing?” Vision snarled. He couldn’t move his hands from over his head. Hanz didn’t stop fucking him, and he doubled how fast his fist was on Vision’s cock. He stopped trying to please Vision in favor of getting off hard and fast.

“Stop this!” Vision snarled. “Now!”

Hanz was so close. Vision was too. He squeezed his eyes shut, ignoring the pounding from the door, and let himself go just as he felt Vision come.

Vision pushed Hanz off the bed. Hanz let himself fall, and made no move to cushion it. He hit with his shoulder, hard, and rolled to avoid the kick he knew was coming.

“Go back to your room,” Vision said. “At dusk, you will get yourself the hell out of my house.”

Hanz relaxed on the carpet. “Yes, sir,” he said.

It took Vision only a moment to dress.

Hanz was free to go back into slavery. And he hoped he had successfully disarmed whatever weapon Gabriel thought he had against Vision.

He pulled himself up and went to his room, alone.

## Chapter Twelve

Vision paced the length of his room a dozen times. His fists clenched, and he was torn between going to Hanz's room to apologize and going to Hanz's room to stake Hanz himself.

He wasn't sure which one he'd rather do, or which one he would eventually regret doing more, so he didn't do either. He'd been up most of the day before, if he was being perfectly honest with himself, out of worry that Hanz had gotten into trouble. Then to have Hanz come into his house and disrespect him that much made Vision cold inside.

His teeth were out. He realized he was hungry, so he snarled into his phone that he wanted a feeder in his room, now. Frank told him it would just be a moment, and the fact that Frank wasn't Hanz angered Vision further.

"Damn it," he snarled. When the feeder did come up, the young man, who had just quit smoking to become snack food, cowered away from him. Vision enjoyed stalking him down, pinning him against the wall and drinking his fill from him.

"Out," he snapped, and the human fled.

Vision tried to sleep after he fed, but even with a full stomach, the knots inside ate at him.

He woke early enough that the sun was just beginning to set and left his room. Hanz was by the door, waiting for the sun to go down. He didn't look like he'd slept much at all during the day, either.

*Afraid that I was going to cut his throat in the night*, the voice in Vision's head said. But that couldn't be right. Hanz had to know that no matter how disappointed he was, there was no way he'd be able to just kill him.

*You did threaten him*, the voice said.

*I didn't mean it!* He wanted to scream. Hanz hadn't looked up to where Vision was skulking in the shadows, and Vision supposed that was the worst part. Vision retreated further into the darkness of the hall, and Hanz responded to the noise by turning around.

He was wrong. The worst part was how relieved Hanz looked. He even sighed, a completely useless sign of reprieve when the sun had gone down far enough for him to leave.

Hanz couldn't wait to be gone.

Vision's teeth came out. Good riddance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vic made it to the top of the stairs, although his name no longer felt right to him any more. What did Gabriel call him? *Vision*. His name was Vision, and that was all right. He climbed the stairs up to Gabriel's bedroom, and his body sparked in its death throes. *This is death*, he thought.

As he pushed open the door, the betrayal hit him, a smack to his face.

Gabriel sat in the corner, reading his daily newspaper. The market was fluctuating, Vision read from the screaming headline. Better to stare at the leading headline than at the body lying in Gabriel's bed, under a shroud.

It was Steven's height. Of course it was. Gabriel stood up, smiling, and didn't try to stop Vision from tearing the shroud from the body.

Steven. Cold and gray. His face was beautiful even in its death mask. He turned and glared at Gabriel. "I'm going to kill you," he said.

"No doubt one day you'll try."

"You promised me you wouldn't kill him!" Vision howled.

"I promised you I wouldn't drain him. And I haven't killed him. Do you think I would be so gauche as to take a stinking corpse to my bed?"

"You mean..." Vision couldn't say it. He was too cold inside.

"I turned him," Gabriel said, then bent over and kissed Steven on his gray forehead. "My darling Seraph should be waking soon. Come. You may not be hungry right now, but I am famished. Do you remember how to drive yet?"

Vision stared at him. Steven -- Seraph -- got the bed and a shroud, Vision a dirt floor in the basement. It was going to be year after year of being Gabriel's whipping boy while Seraph would be cherished. He shook his head. "No," he said, though it was physically painful to deny his master that which he wanted.

Gabriel turned to him. "What did you say?" he asked.

Vision tried to repeat the single syllable, but his tongue wouldn't move. "How quickly you forget your promise to me, Vision. You belong to me now. You will always belong to me until I decide to give you up."

Vision bowed his head. Gabriel was right, and it was a waste of energy to fight him. "Yes, master," he said, finally, because it was the only thing he could say.

Gabriel's mouth quirked. "You think I've already done you a disservice, don't you," he said.

"The basement floor, master?" Vision asked.

"The dirt floor," Gabriel said. "It restores you faster than anything else could have. You can already speak; Seraph will not be able to do so for days. You must trust me, Vision. Everything I do, I do to test you, to make you stronger."



Vision looked away, but in his heart, he knew that if he failed, even once, Gabriel would allow his 'test' to kill him, if that were possible. This close, with Vision's senses as heightened as they were, he smelled something new on Gabriel.

Fear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vision waited for Frank to come around to the side of the door to let him out, something he rarely did. The ley lines beneath the building gave him strength. Still, the anger was inside him. He hadn't felt that full of anything since Breylorn had taken him to the start of his lines to join with it. If Breylorn hadn't have been there, the lines would have shredded him. And now, they felt as though they had.

Hanz's replacement, Vision couldn't remember his name, called him over. "You're going to want to see this, sir," he said.

The video had been analyzed. Vision watched it play. It was a little eerie, seeing a face rendered in various degrees of capillaries and vein work, but from there his computer geniuses had put a 3-D network of tissue and flesh over it.

"Do you recognize him, sir?" the man asked.

Vision shook his head. "It could just be one of Gabriel's goons," he said, and turned to go to the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vision had just slid the picture across the table to Janus when Janus's phone rang. Even from where Vision stood, he heard Lyall's frantic voice. "You should come. I'm in the alley, behind the building."

They were down in the next minute. Lyall waited for them, face pale. The smell of blood was all over him. He led them behind one of the dumpsters, to where a body leaned up against the brick building. He wasn't dead yet, but his breathing barely moved his chest.

“Jackie,” Janus whispered, and dropped down to his knees. “No pulse.”

“Not much of a pulse,” Lyall said. He had his cellphone to his ear again. Janus brushed the dirty hair off Jackie’s neck, and Lyall grabbed his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Lyall demanded.

“Turning him. It’s the only way.”

Lyall didn’t let go of Janus’s shirt. “What, you’ve never heard of blood transfusions?” he demanded. The 911 operator answered the phone and Lyall gave them the address. They couldn’t be seen with Jackie, but Vision waited with Janus in the shadows until the paramedics got an IV. “Your feeder?” Vision asked, once the night’s stillness had returned.

Janus nodded.

“Mine died,” Vision said. “His corpse was already cold by time they delivered him.” It had to be Gabriel. Vision’s hands tightened into fists.

“Come up. I need a drink.”

Lyall served Vision first this time, then sprawled beside Janus where he sat. “Do you have any idea who did it yet?” Janus asked.

“We were able to reconstruct some of the facial features. I’ll have the office email the entire video.”

Janus rubbed his face. “Modern technology, eh? So, have you made any decisions about your pet?”

“He’s gone,” Vision said, and he nodded to himself. Draining the glass felt good, and the whiskey’s rich tobacco and leather aftertaste filled his mouth. The only time he would have wanted ice was to rattle it about the glass to signify how empty it was.

Still, Lyall pushed to his feet to pour again, this time giving him at least three fingers.

“That bad?” Janus asked.

“It wasn’t going to work.”

“What happened?”

Vision glanced to Lyall, and Janus dismissed him. Vision waited for the bedroom door to close. “He crossed a line. And he couldn’t wait to leave.”

“Which was worse?” Janus asked.

“This isn’t funny!” Vision snapped.

“I’m not saying it was. Which one was worse for you, Vision?”

“He couldn’t wait to leave,” Vision said, quietly. Hanz had looked so relieved. He knew the consequences of not releasing him when needed, and he’d deliberately pushed Vision past the point he knew Vision could forgive him. And it was all over an inconsequential message.

All over an inconsequential message.

Vision sat back. “Fuck me,” he said, softly.

“Not with Lyall in the other room,” Janus said. “Or did you just epiphany all over my couch?”

Vision just looked at him. “Hanz is in trouble,” Vision said, as though Janus hadn’t just spoken. Hanz couldn’t have been his pet, because...Vision allowed his brain to catch up to the new facts. Because he already belonged to someone else.

*One day ask me why I was in the carpool*, Hanz had told him. Vision stood up. “Who made him?”

“I’m supposed to know that, how?” Janus asked.

“Who would?”

“His master,” Janus said, pointedly.

Vision finished his drink and rolled his head against the back of the chair. “I should go.”

“I’ll have my driver take you.”

“Thank you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Miller, Janus’s driver, brought Vision back to his office building. None of the senior vampires on his staff even knew Hanz existed before Vision’s interest in him. Vision realized how stupid he was being. He took the service elevator down to the garage level.

There were only two vamps working. Both of them looked older than he was. They worked alone in the dark, like moles, and Vision felt a stab behind his eyes. He wondered how Hanz had managed to survive down here for so many years.

The two vamps stopped what they were doing and stared at him before he even stepped off the elevator.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

“Yes, master,” the older of the two said. He bowed his head, and they both waited.

“I’m looking for Hanz,” he said.

“Yes, master,” the first said again.

Vision forced himself to take a moment to calm down. “I need to know who made him. Does either of you know?”

The second man looked at him, surprised, then remembered himself and looked back down again. “He didn’t say, master.”

Vision took a step forward, not wanting to threaten, but finding he had nothing else in his arsenal. “Do not lie to me,” he snarled.

The first vampire glanced to the second, and they had an entire conversation without saying a word. Of course it wouldn’t matter who Vision was; masters came and went. Their cars would always need maintenance.

“He’s in trouble,” Vision tried again. “And not from me, I swear. Who was it? Gabriel?”

“No, master. Trance.”

“Trance?” Vision repeated, confused. He didn’t know of a single male vampire named Trance. Only a female vamp who’d spurned the elder conclave.

It was the only Trance. “He was turned by a woman?” Vision demanded.

Both men dropped their heads down again. “Yes, Master.”

“How is that even possible?”

“She drank most of his sister, master. He told us that must have bridged the blood concern.”

“Thank you,” Vision said. “Both of you. Name your reward.”

The two men glanced to each other again. Vision expected them to ask for promotion, better living conditions, anything, but the first man only shrugged. “You don’t got anything we want, sir. Except for maybe a cat. The rats are pretty big down here.”

“Consider it done,” Vision said. He thanked them both again, and had Frank meet him in the lobby.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hanz waited for the door to open, which of course it did. Bethany hissed at him as he entered, and he snarled back. She dropped down, shifting her weight back and forth, but he turned his back on her and walked away. It put him at greater risk, but he hoped it showed her his contempt for her.

He took the stairs up, slowly. There was no point in hurrying this along. Just as he raised his fist to knock on the door, it swung open. “Well,” Trance said, raising her eyebrow. “I hope that walking out in a snit was worth ten years.”

“It was,” Hanz said. “Thanks for asking.”

Trance stood up. She wore a suit this time, a severe blue pinstripe jacket and skirt without a blouse. The skirt went half way down her thighs, but was tight enough that he wondered how she walked in it.

Despite how much he hated her, he hated more the fact that he wanted her. She smiled. "I take it that means that you would like a quickie before we seal this," she said, eyebrow cocked.

He nodded, his mouth suddenly dry.

She grabbed his shoulders, turning him around. There was nothing on her desk but a folder and a pen, but she swept it off regardless. She pushed him, and he went back, willingly.

She ripped his jeans off, yanked his shirt up, and pulled away, admiringly. "You've certainly kept yourself up," she said, and obviously wasn't just talking about his erection. "Such a waste."

Nineteen years in the carpool. It had been safe, from her, from himself, from having to be anything. But he supposed that that just wasn't going to be any more. He didn't like it.

"You're not thinking of me right now," she said.

He said nothing. Her hand caught his flank, hard enough to hurt and glancing enough that it just stung. "Answer me, little buck."

He tried to get off the desk. "This is ridiculous," he said. She slammed him back down, and a moment later, had twisted him onto his belly.

"Do you want to repeat that?" she demanded.

He couldn't move. He rested his forehead against the cold surface of the desk, and waited.

The flat of her hand caught him on his ass. He flinched, and felt a second slap on the exact same spot.

His stomach knotted at being so exposed. She slapped him again, then he heard the whistle of something cut through the air.

He thought it was the riding crop, right up until real pain laced right across his back. A cane, probably bamboo, his brain told him, helpfully. It caught him again and he jerked,

although the sound was still the worst part. She wasn't hitting him very hard, then. The cane sang down again, and struck him just below the first stripe. Each switch against his skin was as much humiliation as actual pain, at first. The slight pain accumulated, with each blow taking the hurt up a notch, until his first real grunt escaped between his teeth.

"I ask you again, do you respect me?" she demanded.

He wanted to nod, but couldn't unclench his muscles. The cane came down, one swipe after another, until he felt himself jerking against the table at the mere sound of the cane slicing through the air.

The final time was the loudest. Hanz couldn't stop his grunt or his attempt to get out of its way, and when the bamboo struck the desk rather than his skin, he gasped. When she manhandled him over again, he was more than willing to be used.

She was hot and wet, and her skin against his, even with the desk aggravating the slices on his ass, was enough to resuscitate his sagging erection. The sting from his body only made sliding into Trance more delicious. Ten minutes ago, he would have grabbed her hips and driven her deeper onto him, but thought better of it at the last second.

"Well done," Trance said, throwing her head back. She was kneeling over him, on the desk itself, and she braced her hands on the edge of it to drive herself faster. Hanz's back was off the desk. "You have to learn how to take your hand off the gear shift, little buck. I don't think Gabriel will let you drive for a long, long time," she said, grinning down at him.

He wished she hadn't punctuated what she was saying with vicious twists from her hips. He'd managed a tiny bit of self-control, but when she took hold of his testicles and did that thing with her hips, he had no chance.

The pain just now ebbing away added to the orgasm, bringing him from one extreme to the other faster than he thought possible, and she had to finish herself with her hand over him. She trembled, her shoulders shaking, once, and then brought her wet fingers to his mouth.

He suckled them as he should have. She patted his cheek, and got off the desk.

He took a bit more time. By the time he did up the last button on his shirt, Seraph was there to pick him up.

“I release you to Seraph,” Trance said, formally, and with that, he felt his allegiance transfer.

Seraph smiled. “Excellent,” he said, and then snapped his fingers. Despite himself, Hanz leapt to obey.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was almost dawn by the time Vision made it to the lobby. He could either make it back to his house, or to Trance’s. But if things didn’t work out there, and he assumed that they wouldn’t, he’d be out of luck. “We can make it,” he told Frank, refusing to let himself feel defeated.

“No, sir, we can’t. You can’t help him if you’re outside at sunrise.”

Vision shook his head. “I’m telling you we can make it.”

Frank’s face wavered. His hands began to shake, but he took out his car keys. “It’s not safe,” he managed, shaking his head, but still took that step closer to the door. “Please, sir.”

Frank’s voice was desperate. Vision had thought that only Breyllorn himself could force a vampire to step out into the rising sun, but Frank was under his control and would have done the same thing.

Vision shook his head, and the compulsion ended. He rubbed his face, and realized how close he’d come to ordering Frank to risk both their lives.

“Take me home.”

Frank sagged against the wall like a dropped marionette. “Yes, sir.”



## Chapter Thirteen

Once the newly minted Seraph woke, things changed again. Seraph didn't speak for the first three days, and Vision found he preferred it that way. Seraph followed him, and Vision again took care of his needs. But the moment his voice returned, Gabriel swooped down and took him up to his bed.

Still, Gabriel left his angel behind when he and Vision went out at night. Gabriel had put out a call, and Vision felt it as strongly as any of the ones who answered. That surprised him, because the call specifically went out to unattached vampires who were not strong enough to fight off Gabriel's wants.

Vision had avoided the Great War; his eighteenth birthday had come too late, and he sure as hell didn't volunteer under-aged for the fight. It surprised him to be engaged in a real battle months after the cease-fire had been called. But fight he did, and regardless of how many vampires joined Gabriel, Vision was Gabriel's right hand.

When they returned to the brownstone just before dawn, Seraph waited for Gabriel. And that didn't hurt, Vision found. Gabriel still had Vision at his beck and call, but it was easier for him when Gabriel just left him alone.

They were out. Gabriel had just taken a bit of the line from the weakest elder, and while the old man he fought didn't have the strength to hold, the old man had allies, and it was these Gabriel fought with hand-to-hand

They were in one of Gabriel's warehouses located on a strategic pulse point of the line, when a dozen vampires appeared in the middle of the street, between them and the car.

Gabriel had eight men with him, including Vision. Vision was all set to fight, his eyes widening to absorb every bit of light, when Gabriel grabbed him by the shirt.

"Stay back, you fool," he snapped. "You're so young they'll make leather out of your hide before you can turn around."

Vision opened his mouth to protest, but by then the fighting had begun. There was no way he could even follow the attacks.

He hung back.

A vampire dropped from the warehouse awning, weighing no more than a fallen leaf. If Vision hadn't been looking, he probably wouldn't have heard anything.

The vampire held out his hand in warning, then licked his lips. *Silence*, he said, clear as day. *Or I'll tear your throat out right now.*

Vision nodded, barely moving. Even if he raised his voice, he doubted Gabriel would hear him in time. And Gabriel's back, from this angle, was horribly exposed. The vampire smiled.

Vision remained perfectly still, and felt how much strength this vampire had over him. The vampire knew it, too. Vision bowed his head, stepping back, wanting to project an air of being non-threatening.

The vampire quirked his lips, and dismissed him. Vision ducked under his defenses and latched onto the back of his neck. As long as Vision's teeth were through his skin, Vision controlled both their strengths. The vampire tasted nothing of weak human. The blood was

so rich Vision couldn't stop himself from biting again and again until no more blood flowed from the wound.

The fighting had stopped. Gabriel himself knelt beside Vision, but Vision snarled. When Gabriel tried to put his hand on Vision's shoulder, Vision dragged the empty body back a foot, then three.

"Enough," Gabriel snarled, smacking upside Vision's head.

Vision snarled back.

"Go," Gabriel ordered, speaking to the men behind him. Vision had come back into himself enough to see that six of them had survived, and they all looked well fed. "Leave us."

"But, master," one of them began. Gabriel howled at them, sounding more like a mountain cat than anything that had been human. Once, that sound would have turned Vision's spine to water, but he stood his ground.

The men fell back, disappearing back into the night.

Vision dropped the corpse. It was no longer about that. A new bloodlust filled him, and he couldn't stop the rage.

"You think you can take me," Gabriel said. His voice was light, like he could barely contain the laughter.

Vision hadn't stopped snarling. Gabriel reached out and pushed him, right between the eyes. It left his wrist completely exposed. Vision lunged for it, already tasting Gabriel's skin on his lips, but even though he was only an inch away, Gabriel managed to pick him up and throw him against the warehouse brick wall.

Gabriel was at Vision's throat and scraped his teeth against Vision's too full veins. Then he backed away, slapping Vision across the face with another flash of wrist.

This time, Vision didn't rise to it. Neither could he contain the low growl in the back of his throat. He moved forward, and Gabriel allowed it. "Come on," Gabriel crooned, holding his wrist out at arm's length. "Come on, Vision. You know you want it."

Vision moved, not even getting past the point where he moved off his center of gravity, and he was back, nose pressed against the wall, ears ringing. Gabriel was behind him, thrusting his hips against him.

"You're a disappointment, Vic," Gabriel said, using his old name as an insult. "You can be many things, but that's one I wouldn't recommend."

"You finished?" Vision snarled, surprised he could form the words through the anger.

"Are you?"

Vision snapped his head back, hoping for the satisfying crunch of bone, but Gabriel wasn't behind him anymore. He had to twist to keep from falling.

Gabriel was always there, taunting him with his open exposed left hand, and his right was always present, always ready to smack him if he got too close.

On his third smack, Vision shook his head. "Enough?" Gabriel asked, mockingly.

Vision glared. He tried to make another clumsy feint, and saw Gabriel's hand sliding towards him. He yanked his head back, and swept Gabriel's left foot out from under him. He never got to try the second part of his plan, which was to drive his knee into Gabriel's groin, because he was on his hands and knees in the dirt.

"One day you might win," Gabriel said, and the victory in his voice overpowered the slight conciliatory tone. Gabriel yanked down his slacks, and Vision hadn't even been aware his own trousers were down around his knees.

Gabriel spat, and pushed inside Vision.

Vision stopped fighting and lowered his shoulders. He brought his hands up to his face, if only to keep his head out of the dirt.

He was so hard his erection kept slapping his belly with every thrust Gabriel gave him. This was punishment--Vision wasn't fooling himself--but it felt so good he didn't want it to stop. Gabriel had found the perfect angle, straight to his prostate, and much like the growl, he couldn't stop the whimpers, either.

Gabriel was coming. He grabbed Vision's hips and pulled him back and forth rather than thrust any more. The different tension was enough, and Vision came without touching himself.

Gabriel held him until the tremors stopped, then got off him as though disgusted.

"Never forget your place again," Gabriel said.

"No, sir," Vision said, for the first time noticing how cold the night air was. Gabriel turned and walked back to the car, and eventually, Vision followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evening came again, and this time it was Vision waiting by the door for the wood to cool. The sun set, but the radiation was still strong enough in the sky that by the time they reached the car, Vision's skin felt tight, and he was thirsty.

The Tudor-style mansion smelled different to Vision. This was female territory, and the two sides did not interact. They took different strength from the ley lines, and even though they joined the conclave, Vision didn't much trust them.

No one answered his poundings for a long while, and when the door swung open, it was only a lackey. She was dressed in a robe, one that barely covered her upper thighs, and her dark hair was tousled.

She smelled of Hanz. "Where is your mistress?" he demanded.

She blocked his way. "Not in."

"It's first thing in the evening. Where is she?" Vision snarled. The girl didn't blanch.

"Bethany," Trance said from behind her. "Thank you."

Bethany turned. "You always let them in," she accused, and stormed off.

Trance held out her hands. "Pets. What can you do with them?" she asked.

"I'd like to find out. I'm looking for Hanz, of late from my employ."

"Hanz," she said, her showmanship obvious. "Why do I know that name?"

Vision could smell Hanz's scent on Bethany, but Trance reeked of him. The smell was stale though; Hanz was no longer here. "Because he was all over you," he said, voice low.

"I assure you, it was just the one side," she said. "You don't think it's going to be that simple, do you?" Trance asked, hands on her hips.

"How complicated do you want it?" Vision asked.

"That depends on what you have to offer."

It was Vision's time to spread his arms. "What do you want?"

"A favor," Trance said, and smiled, baring her fangs.

"No," Vision said, despite how much he would have loved to have said 'yes'. A favor was too much. It would allow her to ask for anything, and he couldn't do that, not even for Hanz.

Not unless it was a last resort.

Trance's smile faded. "If you have nothing to offer me, then there's really no point to this negotiation."

"I didn't say I had nothing to offer," Vision said.

"And what is it?"

Vision held out his hand. His blood had been valuable enough to Gabriel. He could see she wanted it by the way her eyes widened. "Elder blood," she whispered. "A week."

"A drink."

"Three days," she said, crossing her arms.

"A drink," Vision repeated.

"The night."

Vision looked at her. "I have men all over this city. I will find him eventually. I want to find him now."

"It won't do you any good. He's bonded to them. You can't just snatch him away."

“You don’t know what I can or can’t do,” Vision said. “Do we have a deal or not? I can already assume you’ve been paid handsomely for his transfer. Anything else is gravy for you.”

“One drink,” she agreed, and then her eyes narrowed. “And a free audience, when I request it. You do not have to agree with me, but you do have to hear me out.”

“That sounds fair,” Vision said. He held out his wrist, but she shunned it and pulled his head down to hers.

Her bite hurt, and he counted to ten and then counted backwards, and then tried to push her away. It was hard, like pushing against a brick wall, and her teeth tore out of his neck.

He clamped his hand down, already feeling woozy. She’d taken too much, he wanted to say, but couldn’t without losing face. Frank was behind him, but he felt none of the support he had when it was Hanz. “Where is he?”

“You look a bit pale,” Trance said. “Perhaps you’d like to come in and sit down a while.”

“Where is Hanz?” Vision demanded.

She sighed. “Your kind is impudence wrapped in petulance. But fine, if you must know, I gave him to Gabriel.”

Vision stared at her, and wondered, with distant annoyance, why he bothered at all coming. “Of course you did,” he said. He didn’t nod. The irrational fear of his head toppling off kept him from moving it at all. Instead, he turned slowly and headed back to the car.

Frank caught his elbow. Vision hadn’t realized he’d been leaning so much. “I’m taking you to Janus’s apartment,” Frank said, struggling to keep him upright and get the door at the same time.

“Good idea,” Vision said, when he meant to say, ‘fuck that, let’s go’. It was an odd mistake to make.

## Chapter Fourteen

Gabriel's victory did not come from crushing the bones of his enemy, as he had initially wanted it, but from quietly winning over the elder's allies. He had managed to gather himself quite the army, and the moment he took his position, began to turn them into something with organization to it.

His lieutenant was an old grizzled vampire with one eye. He refused to wear a patch over it, and Vision hated the way the dry socket looked. He also didn't like the way Georges always seemed to be sizing him up, as though Vision were moments away from doing something incredibly stupid, and that only he, Georges, could stop Vision.

Gabriel obviously didn't care for him either, but he needed someone to support him, and Vision wasn't strong enough.

Yet.

Georges was at the kitchen table, sharpening a set of knives he always had on his person. Vision had just returned, exhausted and filthy, from the wild goose chase Georges had amused himself by sending Vision on. Seraph had woken from his nap because of the commotion. Gabriel walked into the room, stinking of the new energy that filled him.



He had to pick a pet, officially. Vision felt the tendrils of energy caressing him. The pet would follow him, Vision knew. It would be the one to become his lieutenant if Georges died before the succession, and the pet would eventually become the elder himself.

It should have been Vision. Vision knew it, Georges knew it, even Seraph, who sat swaying in his chair as though there were a wind in the kitchen wouldn't look up, but Gabriel put his hand over Seraph's shoulder, sealing the pact.

"Right then," said Vision, and he walked out again. He barely made it underground before sunrise.

It was Georges, of all people, who found him the next evening. "You're being an idiot," he announced, as Vision crawled out of his hiding spot.

"You don't say," Vision said.

Georges put his arm around Vision's shoulder. "In thirty years, I'm either going to kill you, or you're going to kill me. You have to keep your eye on the long prize, Vision. What happens between Gabe and that squeak is not your concern."

"Pet becomes lieutenant, lieutenant becomes boss," Vision said, tonelessly.

Georges slapped Vision on the back. "It's meaningless, trust me."

And Vision did. For the most part, right up until twenty-nine years later, when he beheaded Georges himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janus opened the door himself. "Vision," he said, and took his other elbow from Frank. "Get a cloth from the bathroom," he told Frank.

Frank let Vision go and obeyed.

"Fucking Gabriel," Vision said. Janus had helped him to the couch. *White leather*. He hoped Janus had it treated against stains with something.

Janus cleared his throat. "Are you okay?"

"I'm thinking about installing a shunt."

Janus stopped, only for a second. "Don't joke about that," he said.

"Sorry," Vision said. The cloth was soothing, and he was more tired than he thought possible. "Hungry."

"I'll get you something," Janus said, and snapped his fingers. Frank brought up a human, and Vision drank as much as he could. It wasn't enough. It stopped his veins aching with emptiness, but even blood at that moment felt no more full of life than beer. He needed time to recharge, to draw more energy from the lines.

"I need to go," he announced, and it surprised him how rational his voice sounded.

"You shouldn't go anywhere," Janus said. "Rest here the night."

"Too far away." He motioned for Frank to help him up. "Must get back to the lines."

Janus looked like he wanted to argue more, but Vision was already on his feet. The blood was helping, and he was grateful for it, but he still felt empty.

The hull of the office had been rebuilt, but his cairn remained untouched. Vision went to it and laid down on the dirt floor, missing the way Hanz had had his back the first time like a dull, empty ache. He crossed his arms over his chest. From the moment he approached the cairn, he felt the lines reaching for him, and he had to concentrate on ensuring that they weren't going to overload him. He relaxed, moment to moment, letting more and more of the lines enter him until he was just a part of the energy flow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Things hadn't been easy for Gabriel in the following decades. The conclave was in the midst of setting up rules and regulations for coups, to make them as bloodless as possible. But there was nothing definite in place, and Gabriel was suffering for it. He'd had five attacks against him in four years, and his support was crumbling.

Gabriel had taken Vision and Seraph to Strickland's building. Why, Vision didn't know, but he suspected it was to ask for a ceasefire. He wanted to ask Seraph, who had been a party to Gabriel's thinking, but Seraph had wasted away in the past decades. Vision didn't even know how to talk to him any more. Whenever he tried, Seraph's face went distant, and he looked past Vision's shoulder until Vision gave up and stopped trying. It had been five years since the last time they were even alone together.

"Ser?" he asked, touching Seraph's wrist. Seraph jerked, trying to pull away, but Vision caught his hand and wouldn't let go. He was almost empty, Vision felt. Not entirely, but almost.

Vision slid beside him. Seraph didn't move, but neither did he protest when Vision pulled Seraph's head to Vision's neck. "Drink," he said.

Seraph wouldn't. Vision had to draw his nail across his throat, pressing hard enough to make himself bleed before Seraph latched his lips onto Vision's skin.

At first he just drank what Vision passively bled. And then he sat up, his teeth coming out, and he began to tear at the veins. Vision held him back, far enough that he couldn't tear anymore, but still let him drink his fill.

Seraph finally sat back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Color returned to his skin, and Vision smelled him becoming aroused.

He knelt in front of Vision. "What are you doing?" he demanded, catching Seraph's wrists, but Seraph looked at him, face cold. And Vision let his hands go.

Seraph opened his mouth and swallowed him.

Seraph's skills had improved markedly over the years. Vision wondered if his own had, too. What Seraph did with his tongue, sliding it delicately over Vision's glans and then hard over his testicles, was mind blowing. Seraph licked his knuckles and used them to thrum over Vision's perineum. Vision threw his head back, lifting his hips off the seat.

Then Seraph's other hand wrapped around Vision's length, and he began fisting Vision's cock with the same pattern as his knuckles. His thumb worked the sensitive area just behind Vision's testicles. Vision wanted to grab Seraph's head, to force it all the way down and just to take it all, but every second he held off coming amplified the hot tension exquisitely.

And then he couldn't hold back any more. Nor could he stop his hands from shoving Seraph's head down. He bucked against it until the waves of pleasure ebbed away. He pushed Seraph away, suddenly too sensitive to be touched, and Seraph didn't blink. "I miss you, Gabriel," he said, tonelessly, and met Vision's eyes.

Still fighting his slacks, Vision fell out of the car rather than correct Seraph. The cool night air helped after the stuffiness in the back of the car.

He leaned against the car until the last of his aftershocks passed.

It was only then he realized they'd been watched. A portly vampire, the first rotund vampire Vision had ever seen, was in the shadows of Strickland's building.

He was an elder; Vision sensed that right away. "So, you're Vision," the elder said. "I thought you would have been...less."

"Less?" Vision asked.

"Just less," the elder said, moving his cane from one hand to the other.

Vision looked up. "You have me at the disadvantage," he said.

"I heard you like it that way." The vampire smiled, not exposing his teeth. Vision should have been insulted, but found he wasn't.

"And the other? That's Gabriel's pet, no?"

Vision moved to the side, blocking his view of Seraph. "He is," he said, again guardedly.

The elder looked back to Vision and his smile deepened. "That is all I wanted to know. I want to know what kind of a man I'm dealing with, to have made such the obvious wrong decision."

The elder approached. *This is Strickland.* The man Gabriel had been waiting for, inside, for at least an hour. Vision bowed his head again and touched his throat.

"I hold high in my esteem those who make the proper decision," Strickland said. "Soon, I should like to talk to you, one-on-one. Good day, young Vision," Strickland said, and bowed his head.

Strickland went inside.

A short while later, Gabriel stormed out, with Georges at his side. "We're leaving," Gabriel snapped, and got into the back with Seraph.

Vision slid into the front seat with Georges, and wondered what Strickland meant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks later, Vision finished digging a grave and leaned against his spade for a minute. It was getting light, and they still had to cover the bodies and be back inside by sunrise.

Georges brought the first corpse to its edge and threw it in. They had four more to bury, so Vision went back to the trunk. The failed coup on Gabriel's land had been costly for both vampires and their human supporters. It was the humans he had the most problem dumping in the graves just outside of the city. But they'd made their choice just as willingly as the vampires they supported.

Georges dumped his last body into its grave, and Vision followed suit a moment later. "Good job," Georges said, and slapped Vision on the back. "You may be Gabriel's bitch, but you put in a hard night's work."

"I'm not Gabriel's bitch," Vision said. There had been less than a dozen times in the past ten years when Gabriel backed him into a corner and fucked him. The last time had been over three years ago.

Georges shot him a pitying look. "Oh, you are," he said. "You eat out of his hands."

“No more so than you,” Vision snapped. Georges turned, faster than Vision thought, and Vision barely avoided walking into him.

“Don’t,” Georges said, carefully, “Say that again, ever.”

Vision had to hold himself back from challenging Georges. He would lose; Georges was older and stronger than he was, and their somewhat truce had lasted too long to risk it so stupidly.

“Forgive me,” he said, but let his tone mock his words.

“Things are changing, Vision. You would be smart to change with them.”

There was something about his tone. Vision kept his eyes wide and guileless, but he wondered if Gabriel would have to look much farther than his house to see where the sixth challenger would come from.

Vision was in his room, freshly showered and changed that evening when his door opened. He put down the book he was reading and turned, knowing it was too late to be asked to go out again. Part of him expected to see Seraph.

Gabriel stepped into the room. Vision stood. “Do you fuck around behind my back?” Gabriel demanded.

“Not often,” Vision said. “Why?”

Gabriel crossed the room. It only took about three steps. Vision backed away, until he was against the wall, and deliberately looked down and kept his hands open and flat against his thighs. He wasn’t looking for a fight, and wasn’t particularly horny, either.

Gabriel smelled like he wanted to fight and fuck, but still he stood, pinning Vision against the wall.

Vision waited. There was nothing else to do. “Did I do something wrong, master?” he asked, when Gabriel still didn’t speak.

Gabriel slapped him, open palm. Vision's head snapped back. His teeth came out, but he bit back a snarl. Instead, he shook off the pain and went back to staring at the ground.

Gabriel slapped him again, from the other side. Vision couldn't stop his lips from pulling back and exposing his teeth, but he shook it off again and didn't move from the wall.

"Should I send for Seraph, master?" Vision asked. His fang had ripped the inside of his cheek, and he sucked on the blood. He concentrated on not getting hard.

"You disappoint me, Vision," Gabriel said, an inch from Vision's ear.

"I'm sorry to hear that, master."

Gabriel drew back to slap him, hard, and Vision caught his wrist before the hand fell. It landed into his hand with a satisfying thump, and Vision stared at Gabriel. "Are you done?"

Gabriel stared at Vision's hand, not at him.

"Get on the bed," Gabriel ordered.

Vision dropped Gabriel's wrist and moved to the small gray cot. He was about to pull off the sweater he was wearing, but Gabriel stopped him. "No. Get on the bed."

"Yes, master," Vision said. He started to kneel on it, but Gabriel pushed him down, so that he was flat on his belly. Vision gathered up his pillow and hugged it.

Gabriel started to pace. It didn't take much to go from one end of the room to the other. Vision felt the sunrise through the bricks of the house and wondered how long Gabriel was going to be.

"Seraph has lost his appeal for me," Gabriel said, finally.

Vision said nothing. It wasn't a question.

"You will replace him."

Vision sat up, against Gabriel's will, but he had no problem doing it. "Replace him?"

Gabriel turned on him. "I require a new pet."

"Pet," Vision repeated.

“Are you hard of hearing, Vision?” Gabriel snarled.

“No, master,” Vision said. He didn’t want to be Gabriel’s pet. He was too busy.

Gabriel approached him and ran his hand down Vision’s cheek. Vision let him, but it left him cold. He’d have to lose the part of himself that he’d been becoming since he was no longer Vic. He was fooling himself in thinking that Gabriel would want him as he was now.

Vision shifted away from the touch. “Georges will try to kill you,” he said, instead.

“Georges?” Gabriel demanded. “That is sour grapes talking, Vision.”

Vision looked up at him, face blank, then forced himself to look down. “I’m really tired,” he said.

“We’ll talk more on this in the morning.”

“Yes, master,” Vision said.

Gabriel left him.

Vision lay awake all day, staring at the ceiling. Just at sunset, he let himself into the garage and took one of Gabriel’s cars.

Strickland acted as if he weren’t surprised to see him.



## Chapter Fifteen

The hotel room was the smallest space in which Hanz had ever been confined. If he remained still long enough, he heard the water leech from the water pipes running through the walls to feed the growing colonies of mould growing behind the walls and in the corner of the closet. The room wasn't truly dark, and being locked in a room where the only protection from the sun was thick curtains made him nervous.

Seraph was gone, with Gabriel, no doubt, which left Hanz alone. As much as he hated Seraph, he still couldn't cross the floor and simply reach for the door.

Each time he tried, and he tried over a hundred times, something in his head started to hurt.

"Again," he told himself, and took a step toward the door. He had free movement until the edge of the second bed, but the moment he entered the small hall to the bathroom, his head began to hurt. Walking past the closet by the door made the veins over his temple start to throb. He took another step, pressing down on the sides of his head, but the headache became like a swarm of wasps. He started to feel dizzy, and knew if he passed out here, his veins would probably explode by the time Gabriel returned to drag him away. He was still three inches from the doorknob. He worked his jaw, hoping that would alleviate some of the

pressure, but it only made it worse. He groped for the door and actually managed to touch the metal. His ears and nose began to bleed, a trickle at first, but he felt his blood pressure fall.

He bolted back to the bed. The headache didn't go away like it had all the other times, and he tasted blood down the back of his throat.

He collapsed onto the bed, uncaring that his blood smeared the pillow. Any amount of light, from under the door to the faint radiation that slipped through the heavy curtain, made the headache worse. He buried his head into the pillow until it no longer ached to move.

Eventually, night came. After that, the door opened and Seraph walked in. The blood on Hanz's pillow had cooled and congealed, and the headache had retreated to a low grade hurt behind his eyes.

Hanz opened his eyes once Seraph stood over him, but didn't move.

"You're really quite plain," Seraph said, and ran his hand down Hanz's back. He hooked his finger into a belt loop of his jeans, and rested his hand on Hanz's ass.

Hanz didn't move. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Seraph repeated. He tugged on the loop. He wasn't very large, but Hanz knew that meant nothing. Hanz sat up, suddenly, and Seraph fell back, finger still caught in Hanz's jeans. For a second, Seraph panicked but then he pulled free.

Seraph's hand moved faster than Hanz could follow, and it caught him exactly on his cheekbone. His head whipped to the side, and he felt the joints of his neck crack. The second blow was just as stinging to his other cheek.

"Have you forgotten who you belong to?" Seraph asked, coldly.

Something had compelled Hanz not to approach the door, but it wasn't this pathetic thing in front of him. Still, if he wanted out, being bull-headed about it wasn't the way to make it happen.

He sat back on the bed. "Forgive me," he said. The words were rough in his throat, but he said them, regardless.

"Tried for the door, did we?" Seraph asked. He moved to Hanz, and Hanz realized his face was still streaked with blood.

"I had to," Hanz said. He looked down to the hideously ugly floral bedspread. He could smell on it a dozen different humans' bodily fluids, and yet he pressed his open hands against it. "I was hungry."

"You have to ask for what you want," Seraph said. His tone was meant to be salacious, but it came out too weak. "Did Vision teach you nothing?"

Hanz had a terrible image spring up. If Seraph attempted to top him, he'd probably have to laugh, and he could just tell how much of a bad idea that would be. Seraph stood back over him, and Hanz forced himself to lower his shoulders.

"What do you want?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

Seraph stepped back, and motioned him to follow. "You are to come with me," he said.

Hanz nodded, and felt better just getting off the bed.

The hotel was not the one Vision had burst into. That at least had the illusion of declining gentry. This hotel was a slum, and the halls were dark, the carpets as grimy as the walls.

An old woman, dressed in clothes so worn they were gray, shrank past as they approached. Seraph snarled at her, but Hanz put his hands up in a non-threatening gesture and bowed his head.

Her eyes were still wide, but at least she pulled away from the wall somewhat. "We don't involve humans," Hanz said, when the woman scurried away.

Seraph turned on him. "What?" he demanded.

"We don't involve humans, you know that. It's not right."

Seraph pushed him against the wall. Seraph's sudden anger brought the veins thick to the surface of his pale skin. "It's not right?" he mocked. "We have teeth, and they have blood. What more right do we need?"

"They have iron, and wood. They have laws, and police officers."

Seraph snarled, but let him go.

Gabriel's room was down the hall. Seraph didn't knock. The room had both bedside lights on, which did nothing to chase away the dark shadows.

Hanz, despite himself, touched his throat.

"You are welcome," Gabriel said, as though reading his mind. He wasn't the old man that had bitten Vision, but neither was he completely recovered. His hair was still white, but it had a healthy sheen to it, and his eyes no longer looked as though they had fallen through his skull. "Come here and sit with me."

Hanz sat.

"Hm, you still smell of him, faintly. How long has it been since you've coupled?"

Hanz thought about it, but the fact that it was only three nights ago didn't seem real to him.

Gabriel didn't wait for him to answer. "And it's been a while since you've fed," he continued. This time Hanz nodded. "That is unfortunate," Gabriel said, and bit Hanz hard on the neck.

Something struck Vision between the eyes, and whatever it was snaked down and pooled on his forehead.

He jerked awake. He was back in his bed, still recovering, and his body was still trying to adjust to the hyper-concentration of energy within it.

Hanz's leather tie lay coiled on the bed beside him. Vision sat up and saw Gabriel sitting beside his bed. He was in perfect clarity, neither the old nor the young Gabriel Vision

remembered. But the rest of the room was gray and unfocused. *Just a dream*, Vision thought to himself, but then Gabriel bared his teeth and drew his nail along Vision's exposed thigh.

The pain stung. "Okay, no dream," he said out loud, and his voice had a strangeness to it that was like speaking just as he was waking up.

Gabriel smelled of Hanz and Vision's own blood. Gabriel's transformation had happened because of Vision, and at the realization, Vision's hand went to his throat, touching where Gabriel's teeth had sunk in.

"Come now," Gabriel said. "Surely you don't begrudge me a little blood after all we've been through."

Vision's eyes narrowed. "After all we've been through, Gabriel, I'd begrudge you the urine it took to piss on you."

"Did it give you pleasure to say that?" Gabriel asked.

"Do you want to see?"

"Don't be juvenile, Vision. You are beyond that."

"You are in no position to tell me what I am or am not being."

"Your old master stole from me, you stole from your old master. You're a whore, Vision. A lucky one, but a whore nonetheless."

Vision snarled. Gabriel snarled back, and even though this was a dream, Vision felt the hackles on the back of his neck rise. If he felt pain, it probably meant that Gabriel could feel pain, too.

But then Gabriel sat back, raising his hands. "But I didn't come here to fight you, my boy. I came to offer you a trade."

"Rot in hell," Vision snapped.

"Brave words. I have your boy-toy here, Vision."

“And if I don’t meet you, you’ll kill him, right?” Vision snarled. “I’ll find you. And when I do, I’ll kill you. Don’t doubt it for a second.”

Gabriel smiled. “He’s hungry, Vision. I don’t think he’s eaten since he left you. Maybe even before. And he’s weak. These young ones just don’t have any stamina, do they? You will give me your lines, all of them, and I’ll let you have your pet back. I may even give you the honor of exiling you, rather than killing you outright for your betrayal.”

“You think I’ll trade all of my territory for a vampire I haven’t even taken as my pet?” Vision asked, voice shaking.

“I do. You’re impetuous like that. You would have traded your life for Seraph, so why not for him?”

“I have people who depend on me,” Vision said. “And how do I know he’s even alive?”

The dream shifted. Gabriel was still sitting on his bed, but he also appeared in the grayness beyond the bed. His teeth were embedded in Hanz’s neck, and he wasn’t even drinking the blood that spilled down Hanz’s throat. He was just letting Hanz bleed.

Vision stood up. The image vanished. “You know I have him. Now. Do we have a deal?”

“I can’t,” Vision said, but his voice caught in his throat.

“You can. It will feel like someone’s cut out your heart, but you can,” Gabriel moved, pinning him down into the bed. He moved lower, sniffing Vision’s skin, and then licked his way up Vision’s cheek. “You’ll know how I feel,” he snarled.

## Chapter Sixteen

Strickland's office was in a new building, and it boggled Vision's head that Strickland owned all of it. He even had one of the new fangled computers on his desk, and they cost as much as a car did.

"What do you do with all the space?" Vision asked, staring out at the river.

"Initially, I'm going to rent it out. Real estate is big business," Strickland said. "The world is changing, Vision."

Vision turned. "What can you do with money?"

"Oh, come now. You haven't been a vampire that long. There are all kinds of power."

Vision bit his lip. Strickland had none of the pull that Gabriel had. He wasn't a tenth as charismatic and he didn't look as though he'd hunted in decades. Still, he did seem more aware than Gabriel did.

"You're still thinking about it," Strickland said. He stood up, and rapped the cane against the floor. "You think you might go back to him."

Vision remained still.

"You don't think we can be...compatible," Strickland said with a smile.

“I can get my...compatibility elsewhere,” Vision said. “I’m just not sure I can betray him.”

Strickland approached him. Vision didn’t back away, and Strickland pressed the silver head of his cane against the soft spot on Vision’s throat. “Loyalty is based on respect, or it’s not based on anything at all. Tell me, Vision, when was the last time you respected Gabriel?”

The silver knob cut into his circulation, and it was a sensation much like being strangled. Vision closed his eyes. “Years,” he whispered.

The silver ball moved down, again, not hard enough to hurt, but it left a hot line of sensation where it touched. His shirt had snaps, and the cane pulled at them one by one until it reached his navel. Vision sucked in his stomach, afraid and yet turned on at the same time. The silver knob stopped an inch below Vision’s jeans waist, and his hands fumbled as he opened them. Vision yanked them down, but Strickland batted his hands away before they reached mid-thigh.

“Nice,” Strickland said. The silver should have been warmed with whatever residual warmth Vision had, but when it ran the length of Vision’s cock, it was cold. “Put your hands behind your head,” Strickland ordered.

Vision did so, and was surprised to find he’d been backed against a wall. He had no recollection of moving to it. The silver knob was back, now slick and dull from Vision’s perspiration and pre-come, and Vision’s blood ran hot in his ear.

Strickland kicked his feet apart, as wide as the hard denim would allow him, and Vision arched his back and the silver knob slid between his thighs. Strickland slid his free hand under Vision’s shirt, pushing his hips further out from the wall, and when the silver first touched Vision’s anus, he couldn’t stop a muffled cry from escaping.

“Still worried about compatibility?” Strickland demanded. He pushed the knob up tight to Vision’s testicles and gave the cane a vicious twist. The heat and the snakebite-like pain crossed the line between not enough sensation and oh-too-much too quickly, and Vision



couldn't stop himself from coming. His whole body shook, and through it all, Strickland held him.

When the orgasm was over, so too was Strickland's control. He'd already backed away, and Vision pulled up his jeans and began snapping his shirt closed again. He cleared his throat, and was surprised at how thick it had gotten.

Strickland was back at his desk, wiping his hands clean with a gleaming white handkerchief. "Make your decision, Vision, but make it quickly. I'd rather have you willingly than take you as a prize."

"Yes, sir," Vision said. He touched his throat and left.

It was still early enough in the evening that there was actual traffic on the roads. Vision sat behind the wheel and licked his fangs. The last of the orgasm was still in his blood, which gave a warm glow to Strickland's name. Gabriel was right. It was only a matter of time before someone toppled him, and then Vision would become a part of Gabriel's property and just belong to the victor. Worse, even if Gabriel wasn't toppled, Gabriel still wanted him as a pet, and he couldn't go back to that.

Vision parked on the street and let himself back into the brownstone.

"Where were you?" Gabriel asked from the dark front room. The room was decorated from an age a hundred years past. It was never used in their daily life, and Vision often forgot it was even there.

He froze in the archway. "Out," he said.

Gabriel stood and stalked Vision. Vision refused to back up even an inch, so they stood in the archway.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

Vision's brain spun quickly. "Out fucking around behind your back," he said.

Gabriel's face darkened. "What did you just say?"

“Out. I was out. I need a shower,” Vision said. He tried ducking away, but Gabriel grabbed him by the shirt.

“Where were you?” he demanded, and slammed Vision back into the archway. Vision’s ears rang, and he tried to pry Gabriel’s hands off him.

“Let me go,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm. “You haven’t confined me to my room, I didn’t break any of your rules.”

Gabriel slammed him against the wall again. Vision’s head snapped back, catching the edge of the wall. His skin didn’t break, but his skull took the brunt of the blow. He started to feel distant to the whole situation within seconds.

“Let me go,” he said, and worried over how slurred the words were. “Gabriel, please.”

“You don’t think I can smell the sex off you?” Gabriel demanded. He put his nose into the crux of Vision’s neck. *All he has to do is bite down and I’ll bleed out in the hall.* His hands wouldn’t obey him. “I can smell him. He smells old. He smells--”

Vision closed his eyes. Gabriel was going to put it together any second, and then he would feel Gabriel’s teeth ripping out his throat. He’d be exsanguinated, but that wouldn’t be enough to kill him, and Gabriel would probably stake him out for the sun to take.

Instead, a prolonged silence followed. Vision didn’t want to open his eyes, but when he did, the lamp over the sitting area reflected off the long, exposed blade in Georges’s hand.

“Let go of him,” Georges said, when neither of them said anything. “Gabriel, do not tempt me.”

Gabriel’s hands wouldn’t release, but this time when Vision tried to pry them free, he could. He ducked down, between Gabriel’s arms, and slid behind Georges, and ran into the sitting room.

“What are you doing?” Gabriel demanded.

“You’ve outlived your usefulness,” Georges said. “So I’m here to take the remaining bits of it from you.”

"You can't do this. The elders will never allow it."

"The motion to censure hostile takeovers hasn't been ratified. Not yet, at least. They won't be happy, but they'll allow it." Georges turned to Vision. "Don't just stand there."

"No, sir," Vision said. He walked to the wall, where Gabriel kept his crest, and took down the nearer of the two swords. He walked back, as steadily as he could, but didn't hold his sword out at the ready.

"Give me your land, and I'll let you live," Georges demanded.

"Never," Gabriel said. "You don't have the skill to claim it yourself. It is meaningless to you. Vision, I want you to know I'm going to kill you slowly."

Vision nodded, and touched the spongy part of his skull. "I figured as much," he said. His fingers came back covered in blood, and the redness caught Georges's eye.

It was all the distraction he was going to get. Vision brought the sword up with his free hand, and cut fast. Georges's head was almost severed from the first blow. The second splattered blood on the wall, across Gabriel's chest, and up over the ceiling. Vision had swung the blade with his left hand, which caused the muscles to twist. He dropped the sword and nursed his wrist.

Gabriel said nothing for a long time. He stood there, bathed in Georges's blood, while Vision felt nothing but the pain in his wrist. "Thank you," Gabriel said, finally. "I will make you great."

Vision wasn't fooled. Gabriel had believed he'd side with Georges. "I told you he was going to do it," Vision said. Gabriel opened his mouth, no doubt to pour honeyed words at Vision's feet, but Vision felt nothing for Gabriel anymore. Walking out the door was the easiest thing Vision had ever done.

And he took Gabriel's sword with him.

By the time he thought to return it, Strickland had ousted Gabriel out of his territory, and the new law in place ensured that no one else would ever keep ill-gotten lands.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vision found the old hotel, but waited in the car until Frank and a dozen more of his staff climbed up the decrepit remains of buildings on either side. It only took them a few minutes to reach the roof.

“You don’t have to go alone,” Frank said.

“No,” Vision said. “But it would be easier.”

Frank followed Vision into the hotel. They walked past the uninterested night guard. Vision felt Gabriel, and went up to the second level. He motioned Frank to wait. Vision was going to kick the door open, but when he tried the doorknob, it was unlocked.

Gabriel sat on the bed, propped up by pillows. Hanz sat by his side, as pale as a corpse. Seraph was at the window, not that Vision had ever perceived him to be a threat.

“Hanz?” Vision asked.

Hanz didn’t respond. Vision didn’t think he could. Gabriel moved his hand down Hanz’s back, and there was absolutely no controlling the sudden rage inside Vision.

Gabriel smiled like a cat licking up spilled cream. “You’ve enjoyed this one,” he said. “I can taste it in his blood.”

“Let him go,” Vision said. “You’ve got me now.”

“Let our only leverage go? How stupid do you think I am?”

“Can I take past considerations into account?” Vision asked.

Gabriel’s face hardened. “Give me your lines.”

“What now? You’re not going to wine and dine me first?” Vision asked.

“I’m sorry if I’ve forgotten my cane,” Gabriel said. “I didn’t know that’s what got you off. How many times did he fuck you with it?”

Vision forced himself to stretch, as though he were completely relaxed. “Every day,” he said, and smiled. “Twice on Tuesdays. Let go of him now, or I’ll kill you.”

“Kneel down, now, or I’ll kill him.”

Vision remained on his feet. “Leave us,” he told Frank. Frank glanced at him, startled. “Go,” Vision said, gentler. Frank still didn’t look as if he wanted to, but eventually he turned and left.

“Looks like you’ve already got problems with the help,” Gabriel snarled, running his hand down Hanz’s back again.

“It’s called loyalty. You should have tried it sometime,” Vision snarled back.

Gabriel stood. It was obviously meant to be quick, but he lumbered to his feet. “You have men all over this hotel,” he said.

Vision nodded. “You didn’t think I came here alone, did you?”

“And you didn’t think I’d leave your boy-toy with a drop of extra blood, did you?”

He nodded to Seraph, who brought out a sword. It only took Vision a second to recognize it as the mate to the sword that took Georges’s head. The blade rested against Hanz’s neck, and Hanz didn’t react.

Gabriel nodded. Seraph knelt down, holding Hanz’s neck to the blade. His teeth came out, and when he bit down onto Hanz’s neck, Hanz cried out.

“Stop it!” Vision snapped, stepping forward. “Stop it right now, Gabriel.”

Seraph hadn’t started to drink yet. He looked over to Gabriel, teeth still embedded, and Gabriel motioned him to hold fast.

“What are you offering me?” Gabriel asked, eyebrow raised.

“Not to kill you both where you stand,” Vision snarled. “Give him to me, and I promise you safe passage from this hotel.”

“That’s not even the appetizer, Vision, and you know it.”

"I've got men throughout the building. You kill him, and even if I don't tear your throats out, you won't leave alive. But I'll grant you any favor you ask," Vision said. "Anything, just let him go."

"You. Grant me. A favor," Gabriel repeated, slowly.

"It's not what I want, it's not what you want. But it's a compromise that will see both of you alive come the morning," Vision said.

His men were coming down the hall. Seraph hissed, and was a second away from tearing out Hanz's throat. Hanz closed his eyes.

"Done," Gabriel said, just as Vision's men burst into the room.

Vision held up his hand. "They walk out of here," he said.

"What?" Frank demanded.

"You heard me. They walk out. Anyone who harms them answers to me."

Seraph removed the sword and helped Gabriel up. "A favor," Gabriel said, and brushed past him. Vision stepped out of his way, and didn't move until Gabriel and Seraph had left the room.

He sat down beside Hanz. Frank rushed to him as well, but Vision pushed him away. "Leave him with me."

"You've been fed from too much, master. Let him drink from me."

It only made sense. Frank rolled up his sleeve, exposing the meaty part of his forearm. Vision was afraid Hanz wouldn't respond to the soft, white tissue. Hanz turned away, only for a second, then turned and snarled. He bit down, sucking hard. Vision stroked Hanz's cheek as he swallowed.

Color returned to Hanz's face, slowly at first. He reached for Frank's arm, holding it to him with a snarl, and when Frank started to go pale, it took both Vision and Frank to pull them apart.

Hanz whined. Vision held him until Frank stumbled out of the room, and then offered his wrist.

Hanz pierced the skin, but didn't suck. He lapped up the blood when Vision bled it, but it took a long time for Hanz to allow the wound to close. "You're okay," Vision told him.

Hanz started to shiver. Vision stripped off both their clothes, and curled up with him in the bed.

Someone wrapped at the door. "What?" Vision asked. Luckily, the walls were thin enough that his voice carried.

"We have to leave if we're leaving, sir," Frank called.

"Come get us in the evening."

"Sir?"

"Evening, Frank. And thank you."

A long pause. "Yes, sir, you're...welcome."

Frank retreated.

## Chapter Seventeen

The day became uncomfortably warm by mid-afternoon. Even Hanz kicked off the blankets. They lay naked on the small bed. Hanz was dreaming, but at least he was smiling. He slid over Vision's body so that their groins were aligned.

"Hey," Vision said.

Hanz's face creased, his body fighting to stay awake, but Vision flicked him lightly on his forehead. "Hey," he said, stronger this time.

Hanz opened his eyes, startled, but then relaxed when he saw it was Vision. "Good afternoon, sir," he said.

"Good afternoon yourself," Vision said.

"I'm naked."

"You are," Vision agreed.

"And this is a--" Hanz said, looking around.

"Hotel room. You don't remember?"

"Vaguely." Hanz shifted his weight onto one hand and touched his throat, and was obviously surprised to feel it intact. "I remember that," he said. He looked down between



their bodies, and shifted his hips slightly. Vision found himself arching his back despite the added weight. "And this."

"Hanz?" Vision asked, voice strained.

"Yes, sir?"

"If you feel up to it, can you either get off my spleen or fuck me?"

Hanz sat up, quickly. "Forgive me," he said.

"Don't mention it."

Vision rolled onto his stomach, drawing one knee under him. Hanz grabbed Vision's jacket and pulled out the small tube of lube that was in the inner pocket. Vision had honestly forgotten Hanz slipping it in there. A moment later they were joined, and Vision wrapped his hands around the cheap headboard of the hotel bed.

Hanz grabbed onto his hips. They fucked in the bed until the sheets couldn't handle the abuse, then moved to the dresser, desk and finally against the wall. Twice neighbors pounded on the walls--and once the floor below--but that didn't slow their pace.

When Vision couldn't take another second, he finally pulled away. Together they showered, and just lay flat on their backs together on the bed that Hanz had remade. Vision used Hanz's arm as a pillow, and the solid muscle was nice. "All of that stuff before...you didn't mean it," Vision said.

They hadn't spoke much; they didn't need to. The sex had been animalistic in that regard. Vision knew what Hanz wanted, Hanz knew what he did. It had been perfectly choreographed. He was drained again, but only in the best possible way.

"You had to hate me," Hanz said. Vision had been half-certain that Hanz had been asleep, and his deep voice sounded distant, even though he was only a few inches away. "I wasn't going to let them use me to hurt you."

"I was inches away from going to your room and begging you to stay," Vision said. "And I've never begged for anything in my entire life."

“Knowing you, sir, you were also inches away from going into my room and killing me.”

“Would you have stopped me?”

Hanz shook his head. Vision felt it. “I told you, I’m yours.”

Hanz found his hand, and entwined their fingers together. “Then I’m awfully glad I didn’t stake you.”

There was a slight pause, then Hanz rolled over him. “I’m very glad to hear that, sir. Why don’t you be a good boy and go ahead and grab the head board?”

“A good boy?” Vision asked, archly, but crossed his wrists to grab the same iron bar. When Hanz slid inside him, he could only bury his head in his arms.

By the time Frank came to collect them that evening, they were sitting in the two wicker chairs, reading different sections of the same newspaper.

Frank knocked, and if he looked surprised to see what shambles the room was in, he didn’t let it show. “The car is ready, sir,” he said.

Vision nodded, folded his paper, and put his arm around Hanz as they left.

Hanz put his head on Vision’s shoulder on the ride back.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week passed. Hanz took that long to recover. Vision felt odd without him. Everything continued as it was, and Vision’s crawling into bed with Hanz at the end of the night was clearly the best part of the day.

“So, um, about the cane,” Hanz asked, one afternoon. The sun hadn’t set yet, but the shadows were long in the yard and the sun’s power was weakening on the outside wall.

Vision lifted his head from the pillow. “Cane?” he asked.

“From before. Gabriel asked about it.”

Vision closed his eyes. “Oh, that,” he said. “It’s nothing.”

Hanz moved his hand beneath the blanket, gathering Vision's cock. It was already hardening, and Hanz's fingers only made it better.

"This doesn't feel like nothing, sir," Hanz said.

Vision stretched out, content to just enjoy the way Hanz's fist moved slowly up and down his length. "Strickland had a cane. It was long and black. And had a silver knob," Vision said.

"Sounds interesting," Hanz agreed, keeping his voice as neutral as Vision's. "And did he have much skill with it?"

"Passingly," Vision said, and let out a slow hiss as Hanz tightened his grip on Vision's cock.

"Hm," Hanz said. "Perhaps we'll have to get one of similar dimensions."

"There's no need," Vision said. He drew his legs up, letting his knees splay apart.

"What if I want to use it?" Hanz asked, and for the first time his voice dropped below normal conversation.

"There's no need to get one of similar dimensions," Vision said, and started jerking his hips. Hanz knew exactly where to touch him. "The old one is in the closet."

Hanz stopped his hand. "You think you're pretty cute," he said.

Vision tried to jerk his hips, to get the hand to move again. "Only if you want me to be," he said.

"Right now I think I want you on your knees and crawling to this closet," Hanz said. "And I think you should keep your head down while you're doing it."

"I liked the old plan, where I was here and you were jerking me off," Vision said, and tried to keep his voice from sounding too plaintive.

"Vision," Hanz said, his voice down low.

Vision groaned, but rolled off the bed. He felt like muttering under his breath, but that would have given Hanz too much pleasure, he felt. He wished he could say he didn't know exactly where in the closet the cane went, but he knew it was behind the long formal coat that he'd only worn twice since he'd bought it.

There it was, spotless. The silver had dulled in the past months, but the ebony wood still glowed. *If Hanz thinks I'm going to carry it back in my teeth, he had another think coming.* The words were a tangled snarl in his head, but the moment he touched the polished wood his dick got even harder.

*Well, maybe this once.* Even the voice in his head had turned traitor. It wasn't as easy or as graceful as he imagined it to be. He spat it out beside the bed, more annoyed than turned on.

Hanz stroked his cheek. "There, there," he said, and picked up the cane. Vision tensed, still on his hands and knees, and Hanz used the knob to push him down into a kneeling position. "Better," Hanz said.

Vision bit back a snarl. Hanz reversed the cane in his hands and brought it down hard on Vision's ass. "What was that?" he asked.

Vision lowered his eyes. "Nothing," he said. Another long pause. "I'm sorry."

Hanz touched Vision's forehead, then rapped the silver knob onto the carpet. Vision glanced at Hanz, as covertly as he could, and wondered if Hanz was absolutely serious.

A second passed. Hanz's face didn't change, so Vision lowered his forehead to the carpet. It left him hideously exposed, ass straight up in the air, and Vision had a hard time relaxing his stomach muscles.

Hanz walked behind him and kicked his legs wider apart. Vision bit back a grunt. He was hard again, achingly so, but immobilized as he was, he couldn't get any friction against himself. The knob ran up and down his inner thighs twice, and when it brushed his testicles, Vision drove himself forward.

“A bit sensitive,” Hanz said, and tsked. “We’ll have to work on that.” Hanz did it again, and Vision jerked a second time.

The knob moved up the line of Vision’s ass, and traced its way up between Vision’s shoulders. Vision shuddered, arching his back. “I think I’d like to watch you suck on this,” Hanz said. Vision, rightly, didn’t move from where he was placed.

Hanz dropped to his knees behind Vision, again reversing the cane to tap him on the ass. Each strike made him wince, but none of them was hard enough to hurt. Not yet, at least. Hanz ran his hands down Vision’s thigh, then cupped his testicles.

Vision couldn’t stop his hips from humping against the palm of Hanz’s hand. It felt so good. He hunched his back, wanting more, but Hanz kept his hand flat. “You’re not giving me any chance to play here, boss,” Hanz said. “You keep this up.”

Vision forced his hip to stop moving. It made him shudder all over, and he thought not moving was going to kill him. Hanz’s palm remained below his testicles, skin touching skin. It gave off just enough sensation to electrify Vision’s skin.

“I love you,” Vision whispered.

“I know,” Hanz said as he pressed the knob against Vision’s ass. “Tell me you want this.”

“I want it,” Vision said. He repeated it, again and again until it became a mantra. The cane knob was bigger than he remembered it, and just hard enough. Pain tears pricked the back of his eyes.

Hanz never tried to push it inside Vision any further than it could go without truly hurting him. Hanz put his hand on the small of his back. Vision trusted him explicitly, and when the silver knob found his prostate, he was beside himself.

Hanz shifted his hand, letting Vision apply weight to it again. “I love you, too,” Hanz said. “You can come now, if you want, sir.”

Vision began thrusting in time with Hanz's rhythm. His knees started to ache, his belly radiated warmth, and his dick couldn't take the sensations any more. Coming made him collapse down to the carpet, and Hanz helped him back to the bed before the last shudder passed.

Vision was very close to falling back asleep, despite the fact that the sun had just gone down. Hanz shifted in the bed, placing his erection into Vision's hand, and then closed Vision's fingers around it.

"Um," Hanz whispered. "Just like that." He nuzzled the back of Vision's neck, and Vision brought him off silently as he drifted to sleep.

They got to the office late.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week after that, Hanz opened the door for Vision to enter the building, and then froze. Vision stepped around him. Gabriel sat on the uncomfortable black chair in the lobby. He hadn't looked up at them, but Vision saw him sit back, smugger.

Hanz glanced to Frank, who frowned. Hanz nodded. "They can take him, sir," Hanz said.

"I owe him," Vision said. "Let him up."

"You can't be serious," Hanz said, but he spoke softly, so that no one else could hear him but Vision. Vision turned to him.

"Take his coat," Vision told Hanz, and went off to the elevator alone.

Hanz brought Gabriel up a few minutes later. He had the old man's arm, a bit more strongly than was probably necessary. Vision's blood in him was obviously losing some of its potency. It wouldn't be long, Vision smelled, before the tissue regeneration reversed itself and he'd be a dying old man again.

Vision sat in his chair and steeped his fingers in front of him. Gabriel didn't take either of the chairs in front of the desk, but nor did Vision offer them.

"What do you want?" Vision asked. Hanz hadn't moved from behind him.

"A drink," Gabriel said.

Vision motioned the wet bar behind him. "Scotch? Brandy?"

Gabriel stared at him.

Vision stared back.

One minute passed. Then two. Gabriel's eyes narrowed. Vision kept his face flat. He supposed he had the advantage, sitting in a comfortable chair in his office, and from where he sat, Gabriel's attempt to intimidate him from the height advantage was laughable at best.

Finally Gabriel shifted. "I need a drink," he repeated. "And I will dictate when and where."

"You know I can't refuse."

"Then have your boy here bring the car around."

"Where are we going?" Vision asked.

Gabriel smiled, his teeth exposed. "To your cairn, of course."

Hanz waited for Vision's nod before leaving.

They waited in silence until Frank told Vision the car had arrived.

"You were the better fuck," Gabriel said in the elevator.

"That's so sweet," Vision said, but kept his voice flat. "I wish I could say the same for you."

The elevator door arrived on the main floor. "No one follows," Gabriel said.

Vision shrugged, but caught Frank's eye. He understood. Frank would shadow them.

Hanz opened and closed the door for them, and then slid into the driver's seat.

"Roll the window up," Gabriel said.

“No.” Vision shifted in his seat. “Tell me something.”

“If I want to.”

“Why kill Derrick? Why attack Janus’s feeder?”

Gabriel raised his eyebrow. “Who?”

“My feeder. You had one of your goons deliver his corpse to me.”

Gabriel shook his head. “It wasn’t me.”

“Like I’m supposed to believe that,” Vision snarled.

Gabriel sat back as well. “Believe what you will,” Gabriel said. “But you should know, dear Vision, that I don’t have any ‘goons’, as you put it. If it wasn’t Seraph, it wasn’t me.”

Seraph had been with Vision when the body had been found. It couldn’t have been him. “If you’re lying to me,” Vision warned.

Gabriel laughed. “You’ll do what, exactly?”

Vision closed his eyes. “So, what do you think is going to happen? You drink, but then the favor is finished. You’ll be dead within the year regardless.”

Gabriel smiled.

Hanz pulled up in front of the warehouse. Vision got out first.

The office had been completely restored. Vision let himself in. “Are you going to bring me flowers first?”

Gabriel touched Vision’s cheek. Vision snarled, throwing Gabriel against the wall. It took no more effort than tossing a broomstick. “Do not presume to touch me,” he snarled.

Gabriel snarled, but he hadn’t stood up yet so it made him look weak and old. Vision growled, arms low and at the ready, but when Gabriel stood up, he did so without making eye contact.

“You owe me,” he said, voice low.

“And I’m here,” Vision said.



Gabriel smiled and approached. Vision wanted to throw him against the wall again, or smash his head into the office counter that still had -- and probably always would have -- its protective plastic over it. The computer was nothing but a box, but it was solid enough to do some damage.

"Enough of this," Gabriel said. "You promised me."

Vision exposed his throat. Gabriel was on it a second later, and Vision started to feel the now familiar pull. He let Gabriel feed for thirty seconds, and then nodded to Hanz to break it off.

Gabriel grabbed him. Hanz beat at him, but, attached to Gabriel, Vision felt how completely ineffectual the blows were. Vision was starting to lose his grip, and the lines at his feet snaked through his body to try to replenish the loss.

That was what Gabriel was trying to do.

"Stop this," Vision managed, trying to pull Gabriel's head from his neck.

Gabriel snarled, teeth still deep in Vision's neck.

Vision fought off sleep. "You want it?" he asked.

Vision stopped fighting the flow. Being sucked on, being filled, he opened himself up to the line and let it run. Gabriel laughed, the outburst of air making bloody bubbles around the seal he had on Vision's throat, but it only remained pleasant for another second.

Vision grabbed onto Gabriel's head. "It's yours," he managed, then dropped his last defense.

The line filled him. If he wasn't being fed on, it would have been enough to cook him, but instead he was simply the conduit the energy passed through.

And cook it did. Gabriel stopped trying to fight him after the first minute, but Vision didn't let him go until he was sure. It took over half an hour for Vision to reinstate his control on the flow, and even then he felt too full of it to manage it completely. He reached for Hanz, but couldn't touch him.

Then Hanz had Vision's hand, holding him. The energy leached out of him slowly, disappearing back into the line itself. Eventually, it no longer hurt to sit up.

Hanz still held him, though. "Did you know that would happen?" he asked.

"I had my suspicions," Vision said, once his jaw unclenched.

"Can you get up?"

"Help me," Vision said. He'd just made it to his feet, when the blackened remains of Gabriel groaned. He hadn't actually burned, nor had he been staked or exposed to the sun, so Vision supposed he must still be at least partly alive.

He held out his hand. Hanz stopped. Vision kicked Gabriel in the ribs. They heard bones break. "Can you hear me?"

The ligaments in Gabriel's jaw tensed.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'." Vision toed the broken bones. "Give Hanz to me, and I'll kill you," he said. The single window, high in the wall, would catch the later morning sun.

Gabriel made a coughing sound. If Vision didn't know better, he'd swear that it was a laugh. "Give him up," Vision said. "Or I'll leave you like this."

"Not...mine," Gabriel croaked. His throat was ruined.

"Fuck," Hanz whispered.

"What?" Vision demanded, to both of them.

"Not mine," Gabriel said, the mocking tone coming across his death rattle.

"I'm not his," Hanz said. His voice was dull. "Trance released me to Seraph, not Gabriel."

"Where's Seraph?" Vision snarled, wanting to shake Gabriel, but was somewhat repulsed at the thought of what might fall off if he did so. "Where is he?"

"Dunno," Gabriel said. He opened his eyes, which had gone murky from the current he'd been exposed to. He smiled, and his fangs were still out.

Vision raised his fist, but Gabriel was beyond that. He stared through milky eyes. He groaned, and the sound started to rattle around his chest.

"You're not going to die," Vision said. "Not until either I kill you or the sun gets to you. Where's Seraph?"

Gabriel tried to shrug, but couldn't. "He left. This evening. Haven't seen him."

"He left you?" Vision demanded. "That's not possible."

Gabriel closed his eyes.

"It's true," Hanz said. He put his hand on Vision's shoulder. "I can't feel him anywhere around."

"He left you," Vision said, then shook his head. "I bet that must have hurt."

Gabriel made that horrible choking sound again.

Vision turned away. "Should I kill him?" Hanz said, looking down at the body.

"If you must," Vision said. Gabriel was a husk. It no longer mattered to him.

Hanz grabbed one of the slats on the crate still holding the chairs. He yanked it off, which splintered both ends.

He only needed one side pointed. Gabriel watched him, eyes wide, but he didn't protest. Hanz brought the stake up, then down, and turned around before the body started to degrade.

"We'll find Seraph," Vision said, as Hanz opened the door for him and helped him inside.

Hanz nodded. "I know, sir."

"Good." Vision relaxed into the seat. "That's just...good. I need to eat."

Frank took them to a park. It didn't take much effort on Hanz's part to find a willing victim, and they moved into the darker part of the shadows. "Here," the young man said, and exposed his throat.

Vision and Hanz bit into the whore. Hanz's teeth must have broken in first, because Vision tasted the sting of pain in the blood before his own teeth fully broke through. The connection between the whore and Hanz was more intoxicating than the blood itself.

Pulling away hurt. It hurt the whore, too, because he leaned into them, begging them silently to take more, but any more would do more damage than Vision could allow. Hanz had already undone the whore's jeans, and was jerking him off with precise, exact motions. Despite just having drunk, Vision felt his mouth go dry.

Vision held the whore as he came in Hanz's hand.

Hanz brought his hand up, covered in the whore's semen, and the whore licked it off his hand, small tongue darting out to gather up that which had slid between Hanz's fingers. "It will help."

"Thank you," the whore whispered.

Hanz kissed him on the cheek. "No, thank you." He gave the whore money, and the young man shuffled off.

Vision waited for him to go around the corner. "And you?" Hanz asked, archly.

Vision heard nothing in the park except the residual life pounding in his ears, and he was already aching hard in his slacks. He nodded.

"Then perhaps you would be more comfortable on your knees," Hanz said. He changed, but it wasn't anything physical. His features--dirt brown hair, same colored eyes--were nothing unique or special. His face was neither handsome nor pretty, but put together in a blandly appealing way that somehow masked how quickly his mind worked. Vision studied it, trying to decide what had changed between the mild-mannered henchman he'd been and Vision's aching hot lover he was, when Hanz rapped his knuckles against Vision's cheek. "Did you hear me?"

"No," Vision said. He began pulling on Hanz's tie. "I didn't hear you say anything about my knees."

“Why do you always make things more difficult than they have to be?” Hanz asked with a sigh.

There were many answers to that. Vision wrapped his hand around Hanz’s tie. “Because I can,” he said, picking the most truthful response.

Hanz took Vision’s hand, engulfing it, and gently began to pull the tie away. The contact made Vision flush. He moved slowly, until the last layer of silk no longer separated them, and then Vision was spun around, arm twisted behind his back, and he slammed into the brick wall.

Not, on further reflection, how he had planned it at all.

“Ow,” he gritted out between his teeth.

“Kneel,” Hanz snarled.

No politeness now. Vision knelt, the question of Hanz not letting go of his arm as he did so dismissed as quickly as it was raised. Sure enough, Hanz followed him down. His arm was still firmly between his shoulder blades and Vision wondered what Hanz would do, as he was still facing a rather solid brick wall.

“Undo your slacks, sir,” Hanz said. The ‘sir’ was there just to mock him. It certainly shouldn’t have made a shudder run through his body. He pulled away from Hanz, despite the pain, so he could rest his forehead against the rough brick wall.

Vision moved his free hand to his slacks. It was difficult, but not impossible, to pull the button through its hole. Hanz wouldn’t have asked for the impossible. Vision succeeded on the fourth try.

The button slid through, and the zipper let the cold air touch his skin through the silk of his briefs.

He stopped. Hanz hadn’t told him to do anything else. Hanz let him kneel there, to the count of ten, and then slacked off the tension of his arm, slightly. “Good boy.”

If Vision could, he would have purred.

“Good. Now, the briefs.”

Vision pulled them down as far as he could. The cool air touched him like a hand. He shuddered.

Hanz’s zipper slid down, the sound right beside Vision’s ear. He didn’t turn to it, though he wanted to. “Go ahead,” Hanz whispered and his hand tightened on Vision’s.

The pain, radiating from his shoulder, channeled straight to his groin. Smelling Hanz’s arousal so close to him was heady. They were both so full. All he had to do was tighten three fingers along the thick vein, now engorged with still living blood and follow it up to the head of his cock, and he was coming. The first shudder passed through him, even as he smelled Hanz ejaculating behind him, and Hanz let his arm go.

It took a long time for the blood to passively return to Vision’s arm, longer still for the numbness to fade. He rubbed his shoulder ruefully, and did his slacks up as best as he could.

Hanz stood behind him, waiting. “We should go, sir,” he said, and bowed his head.

Vision nodded. Together, they returned to the car.

Vision was feeling still a bit of aftershock. The companionable silence between them was comfortable and warm.

He didn’t know what had changed. But one moment he was contemplating the energy it would take to reach over and put his hand in Hanz’s back pocket, the next he’d turned around, fangs out. Hanz was right beside him, and their snarls were in sync.

“Impressive,” someone said from the shadows, then stepped out. He had an American accent, flat vowels perhaps a bit too practiced, and was dressed in a black suit. His hair was curly, cut short. He had his fangs out, too, but was smiling. The vampire stank of power the same way Vision now smelled of Gabriel’s smoking remains.

“You are Vision,” the vampire said. “Victor Ivanov, perhaps, in another life.”

Vision didn't nod. He doubted the man would give over his name that easily, and he was not wrong. The vampire looked familiar, in a vague sort of way, but Vision couldn't pull up the memory of where they might have met. His brain was still orgasm-fried.

The man took another step, sniffing the air about them. "They say you've betrayed every master you've ever had. What do you say about that?"

Hanz's snarl deepened, but Vision laid a hand on his shoulder and the snarl subsided to a low growl in the back of Hanz's throat. Vision stepped in front of Hanz.

"I say they couldn't have been very good masters," Vision said, and crossed his arms. "What do you want?"

The man snarled, and pushed towards him. If Vision hadn't been tied to the lines, it would have been faster than he could follow, but he was and it wasn't. He raised his hand.

The man stopped dead in his tracks. Vision's compulsion wove its way into the man, and it gave him complete control. "Despite all your knowledge of me, you apparently still don't know to whom you're talking," he said.

The man's anger was nothing compared to Vision's compulsion. He snapped his fingers, forcing the man's knees to give way, and he knelt in front of Vision. "Speak."

"No," the man said, as though the word was ripped out of him with fishhooks. "Apparently I don't."

"What do you want?"

The man grinned at him. "Through no work of your own, you have two territories, and yet you are the youngest."

"It was all my work," Vision said.

The man bowed his head. "I will not bother you again."

"Good."

Vision left the man on his knees. The compulsion would wear off shortly. Vision felt it go, just as they reached their car.

“Who was that, sir?” Hanz asked.

Vision shrugged.

Vision put his hand on Hanz’s knee, and Hanz pulled it up to the inside of his thigh.

Vision left it there.



## Epilogue

The doormen bowed their heads to Vision and nodded to Hanz. The elevator to which they were ushered never had buttons in it. It went to the right floor and stopped.

Vision must have been slightly late. Janus was already there, waiting on his master who must have already been inside. Vision wondered where Lyall was before pushing open the huge oak doors into the boardroom.

The conclave was again already started by the time they arrived. This time, however, when he threw the door open, the entire room went silent.

At least they hadn't removed his chair. He stalked to it, ignoring the looks, and threw himself down at his place.

"That's an interesting scent you have about you," Breylorn whispered, leaning over to Vision.

"Fumé d'Elder," Vision whispered back.

"I see," Breylorn said, but was smiling.

Champlain was just about to rise to speak, but remained in his seat when the door banged open. Everyone looked up.

It was the same vampire that Vision had left on his knees an hour ago. He looked over the whole room, giving his toothiest grin to Vision, and then bowed with a flourish. "You have rules," he said. "Regulations. Restrictions." He smiled again. "None may take. They may only inform of their intent, then gather their strength."

The oldest and the youngest of the male elders shifted in their seats. Breylorn caught Vision's eye, raising an eyebrow, but there was nothing he could say. The new vampire bowed a second time. "I am Lore, and I challenge Champlain."

Champlain hissed. The name apparently meant something to most of the men, because they immediately broke into fighting. Lore bowed a final time and retreated.

Vision finally recognized the man. Of course he'd never seen him before, but his image, reconstructed from the security camera feed, had missed how intense his eyes were or how much his lips peeled back when he grinned.

He killed Derrick and attacked Janus's Jackie. Vision stood up to follow, but Breylorn grabbed his wrist. He wouldn't let him go until Vision declared himself for Champlain.

The meeting ended after that. Already, factions were forming in the two groups that had stood and started to argue. The women retreated, the coming battle not affecting their lines at all. Breylorn motioned Vision to follow him.

Vision did so. Champlain was in the center of the largest group, proclaiming his willingness to fight. Vision smelled deception on over half of the men surrounding Champlain.

Vision took Hanz home. Neither of them recognized the old Ford parked in the driveway, tinted windows all around. But Vision wasn't surprised when Lore got out.

Vision got out as well. "What are you doing here?" he asked, keeping his voice cold.

Lore smiled. "Would you believe I just wanted to ask how the vote went?"

"No," Vision said. "But that doesn't change the fact that you still lost it."

"Isn't that too bad," Lore said. He parted his hands. "I suppose this means that it is over."

"Of course," Vision said. They continued staring at each other.

"You supported Champlain."

"He supported me."

"That's very honorable of you," Lore said.

"It is that." None of the conversation had an ounce of emotion in it. The flat delivery could have been scripted. "Can we cut the bullshit now? What do you want?"

"Champlain supported you," Lore said. "I would like a chance to earn your favor, too."

"There is nothing you could offer me to earn it."

"Nothing?" Lore said, and rapped on the roof. Seraph got out of the passenger side. Vision's teeth were out before he could control them.

"Seraph has something to offer you," Lore said. "Free and clear, with no obligations."

Vision doubted that very much. "What?" he demanded.

"Hanz is yours," Seraph muttered, clearly under duress. "I relinquish him."

"Just like that?" Vision demanded.

"Just like that," Seraph said, but was glaring at Lore when he said it.

"Looks like your new pet needs to be declawed," Vision said.

"Looks like he does," Lore said. Lore rapped on the roof again, and Seraph got back into the car. Vision wondered if, when Seraph jumped ship, he realized how much control he'd just given up.

Still, he felt the control given over, and Hanz's exterior, only just cracked at the best of times, was now open and receiving. It was a heady rush.

"Thank you," Vision said. It was the absolute least he could do, and still, he did it begrudgingly.

"It's over," Lore said, bowing his head.

"For now," Vision said. His teeth were still out.

"For now." Lore smiled.

Lore got back into his car and drove away. Vision watched him go, hackles on the rise. He couldn't stop his lips from curling back. Lore had been on his property, and the scent of the man was an insult.

Vision was so caught up in his anger at his territory being invaded that Hanz's groan was the indication he noticed that Hanz was in distress. Vision spun around, throat tight. He felt his blood cool at the sight of Hanz leaning hard against the hood of the car.

"Hanz --" Vision began, taking a step forward. He'd kill Lore. He'd kill Lore and tear the man's spine from his dying corpse and strangle him with it. He'd --

Hanz looked at him, his eyes too wide for the dimness of the evening. He groaned again. Sweat covered his exposed skin, and Vision realized it was the lines -- making Hanz one of their own. He took another step forward, and Hanz shuddered, violently. There was no mistaking the look of pleasure on his face.

"Please," Hanz whispered, reaching for him. "Do something."

"Slacks," Vision said, and Hanz groped for his belt. A moment later his slacks fell to his knees, and Vision only adjusted what clothing he needed.

With only spit to make the entrance easier, pushing into Hanz should have caused him at least some pain. But Hanz threw his head back and began to pant.

Lights exploded behind Vision's eyelids, like cheery red fireworks. He could only hold on to Hanz's hips with fingers digging in harder than he intended. To let go would be to lose himself in his spiraling headspace. He was lost, or was losing it, and only his grip on Hanz's flushed skin kept him grounded.

A pulse of energy from the lines gathered deep in his belly, and he was thrusting now, in and out of Hanz's body. The sexual energy guided the lines, knotting Hanz to him, and he

to Hanz so the transfer could take place. Vision could only be amazed. He supposed he should be worried that it might hurt Hanz, but it felt far too correct for that to happen.

Hanz threw his head back. Vision wrapped his right arm around his throat, biting down into artery. He'd been fed from too much, Vision knew, but his teeth, breaking through Hanz's skin, felt exactly right. He was coming; Hanz was too. The energy, which should have been explosive, gently leeched its way from Vision to Hanz through the contact of their skin.

A lark sang from a tree. It had been decades since Vision had been close enough to a lark to hear it singing. For a moment that was all right, and then for another it was terribly wrong. He grabbed Hanz's arm and dragged them both inside before the first ray of sun reached them.

Hanz still hadn't opened his eyes. "We could have been killed," Vision said, because that was what the logical part of his brain was thinking. But he couldn't stop his smile.

Hanz looked at him for the first time. "But it would have been worth it," he said. He closed his eyes again and leaned against the wall. "Sir?"

"Yes?" Vision asked.

Hanz smiled, exposing his teeth, even if he didn't open his eyes. One moment he was still leaning against the wall, dead to the world, the next he was up and into Vision's defenses, his teeth a hair from Vision's skin. Vision exposed his throat, waiting for the kiss of pain, but only a kiss followed.

"Nothing," Hanz said. He drew his tongue down Vision's neck, and kissed him again. "Let's go to bed."

Vision followed him up the stairs.



## Angela Fiddler

Angela Fiddler was born and raised in Northern Alberta. She began writing smut at a very early (legal) age, and has written more than her share of slash fiction in her life. She wrote *Castoffs* for a darling friend who requested a birthday present involving hot, gay, kinky vampires. The novel practically wrote itself.

*Lineage* is the sequel to *Castoffs*, and Angela is hard at work on the third book. When she's not following the exploits of hot vampires, she write epic fantasy and has had several short stories published.