

Angela Fiddler  
CASTOFFS

Loose Id

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Loose Id.®

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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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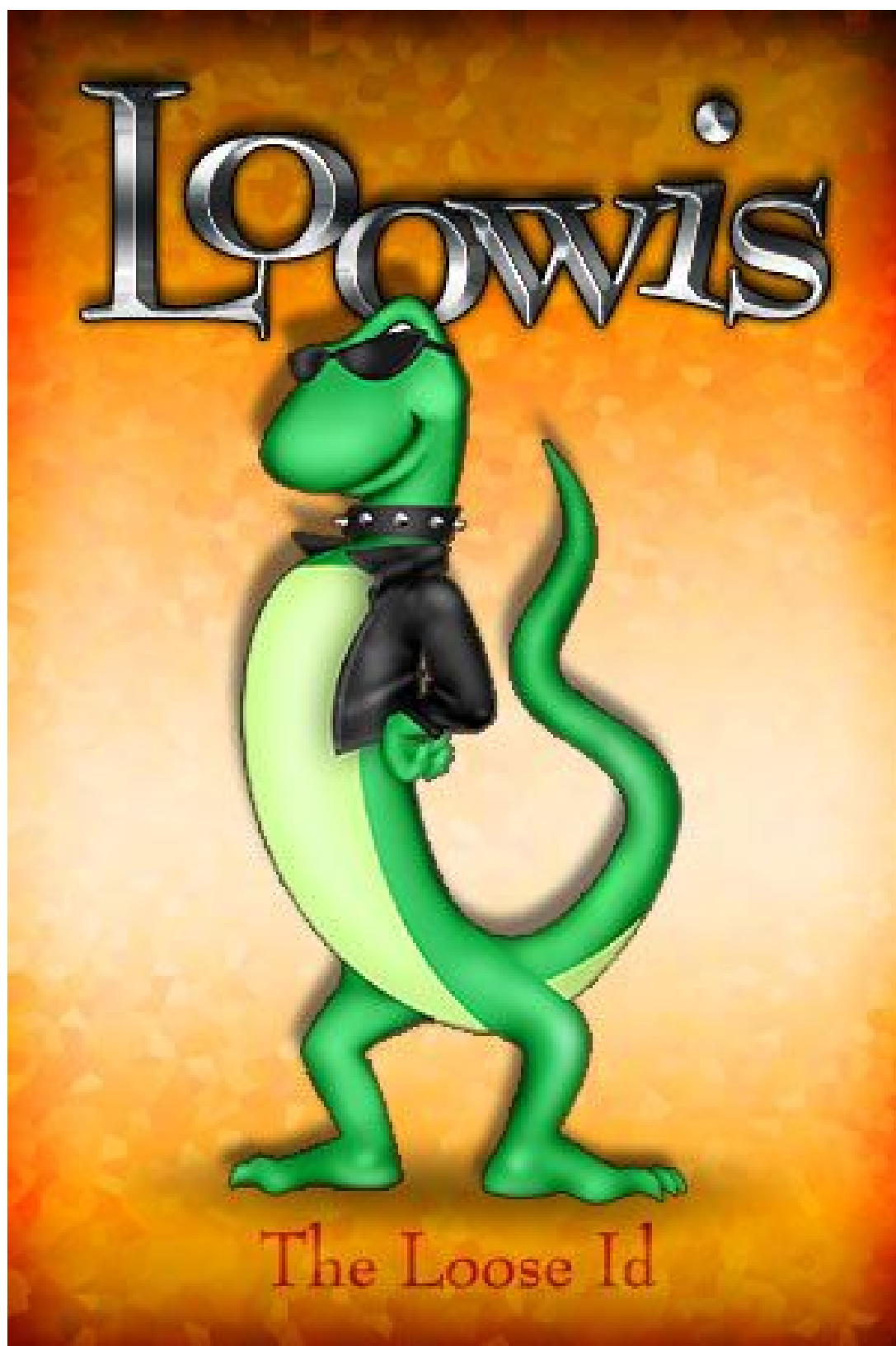
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ISBN 978-1-59632-408-4

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

Janus leaned back in his chair. The beer he'd drunk over the night filled his veins with empty volume while leaving his hunger still gnawing, but he rode the buzz the beer created and painted the rings of condensation his glasses left on the table into wards.

He closed off the last one he was working on, and it made the wood of the table shiver. Another two lines -- three if he kept the strokes tight -- and he'd be able to put his fist through the wood like water. But he wiped the lines off before the hum became audible to humans and the dark shadows.

"Another?" the girl asked, removing his glass.

Janus shook his head. He pulled a couple bills from his wallet, waved off the coming change, and stumbled out of the bar. The beer he'd downed cleared the headache that was building. It upped his blood volume enough that his hunger was constant but no longer dizzying. It had been days since he'd fed. He was not without his own responsibilities, and they'd kept him in his own ivory tower for too long.

He found Jackie, clad in jeans and a thin t-shirt, leaning against a tree. Jackie was bobbing his head, looking like a junkie riding out his last high, but it was more than that. Jackie was tied to the hum of the city, and when Janus drank from him, he felt it, too.

Jackie always tasted sweet, like the sugary gummy things he ate instead of real food. "You've been gone a long time," Jackie said, not opening his eyes.

"Yes." The night was still early enough to have human predators circling about. Two of them, dressed in dark blue hoodies and gleaming white running shoes, eyed Jackie up and down, but then veered off when they noticed Janus standing over him. "You leave yourself vulnerable. It's not safe for another couple hours."

Jackie raised his hands up, trailing them along the sides of the tree. His shirt lifted, revealing his belly button. He smiled, a lazy motion, and he rotated his hips. He nodded along to Janus's words, but obviously didn't hear a word of it. He lifted his hair off his shoulders, exposing the delicate skin on his neck. He still swayed back and forth, running his other hand down his hip. "Dance with me, Janus. Please. Right here."

Janus shook his head, but grabbed onto Jackie's waist and pulled him closer. Jackie's pulse was fast, almost that of a bird's, and his breathing turned shallow. Janus licked the salty city grime off Jackie's skin. His skin was so white, Janus doubted he saw the sun at all. The deep blue veins glowed beneath the skin, and the elastic skin gave way to Janus's teeth. He sank his fangs in and felt the blood vessel burst open. Jackie didn't flinch as Janus began to feed.

There was something wholly arousing about the taste of a human. Jackie groaned, obviously sharing in the feeling. The puncture wounds stopped their bleeding, but it was only enough to make the need in Janus's belly thrum in his ears. He heard it now, the low beat of the earth, and it mingled with his rumbling hunger and Jackie's lust and the need inside him.

Janus let the vein seal itself and then dropped to his knees, tugging at Jackie's jeans. He yanked them down and felt Jackie's femoral artery right beside his cheek. Janus dug his teeth in again, feeling the healthy skin give way to the puncture. Warm, sweet blood filled his mouth. Jackie's heartbeat, while he drank, became his own. For as long as he drank, the world spun around them.

The astringent smell of semen mixed with Jackie's tangy, salty sweat. Janus, now full, was aware he'd ripped the vein more than he should have, and kept tonguing the wound until his saliva acted as a coagulant. Platelets, saltier than blood, came to the surface of the wound, and Janus didn't move off his knees until the bleeding had stopped. Jackie was still gasping for air, and his fingers were digging into the tree as though he was about to climb it backwards. His face was pale, and the sweat had dried on his face.

"You have to drink more tonight," Janus said, straightening up.

Jackie's hands moved ineffectually to his fly, but didn't have the muscle coordination to do it up. Janus did it for him, patting him on the head as he would have a small child, and Jackie only smiled at him, still full of bliss. Jackie's blood diffused into Janus's veins, bringing with it the music only Jackie heard. It would die off soon enough, but as Jackie pushed away from the tree, Janus heard the music Jackie swayed to.

He never paid Jackie. It would have made the understanding they had into something unclean. Instead, Janus painted a ward onto Jackie's skin with his own saliva. It was a simple ward, but one that would keep the human sharks from truly seeing him. It wasn't invisibility, but would serve just as well. The spit glistened under the distant streetlight for a second and then disappeared into Jackie's skin.

That seemed to pull Jackie from his stupor. "Be careful," Jackie mumbled. He looked up at Janus, face serious for the first time that evening. "The wolf has lost his bite."

"What?"

Jackie wasn't hearing him. Jackie bobbed his head, walking away, and crossed the empty street. He hadn't even looked for traffic. Janus watched him wander into an alley, and waited until he felt him sleep before leaving him alone.

Despite it still being a few hours before dawn, Janus knew he should return to his lair. Or even his apartment, though it had been months since he'd been back to the other side of his world. He was full and satiated, but the restlessness inside him wasn't settling. He couldn't stop his fingers from tapping out the beginnings of wards on his thighs.

A whimpering came from the park, across the street, from beyond the bridle path and from the trees along the path. The dawn was coming on, but no accompanying heartbeat followed the sound. Janus followed it, into the darkness.

It was a brand new vampire. The marks on his neck had bled the most. He'd been turned this very night and then allowed to bleed out. Janus pushed through the deepening gloom, and the shadows stung him like a jellyfish. The vampire had stopped his whimpering, but his eyes were wide open and staring. His lips were torn, and where his fangs should have come down over his incisors, black holes still wept blood.

He was so bloodless his veins had collapsed beneath his transparent skin. There was something else wrong with him, Janus realized, beyond the empty sockets where his eyes used to be. A feeling of rage made Janus take a step back. He'd felt this before, with feral vampires who had been alone far too long, just before the shadows claimed them.

The vamp smelled of his own blood. He'd bled so much there wasn't anything left inside of him to bleed. Janus grabbed a sturdy branch, intent on putting the poor thing out of its misery. But when he put it up where his heart was, the branch fell into the empty cavity.

A snake, black as the shadows, with iridescent eyes, coiled out from the cavity. It was at least three feet long. Someone had taken the vamp's heart and put the snake in its place.

The shadows rushed in without a heart to keep them away. The collective of the unthinking hunger enveloped him, and the poor vampire did nothing to stop them from entering his head through the openings in his skull. For a moment, the shadows filled him so much that his back and shoulders came off the ground, and then he sank back into the earth. The shadows released all the light they had absorbed, and it was almost as light as day. Janus had to shade his eyes. He shuddered, not understanding, and hugged his leather jacket to his chest while walking back through the shadows.

They clung to him, fat now from the death they'd just taken, and he swatted them away like flies. His entire body felt electrified, and he jumped when a big black limousine with darkened windows glided to a stop beside him.



The window unrolled. One moment the car was seamless, the next the rich leather interior was exposed. The motor was barely a whisper. It was Strickland's car; Janus smelled the elder on the leather.

"You've had your fun," the human inside the car said. He was dressed in black with dark shades on. "My master would like to see you."

\* \* \* \* \*

The heavy left Janus alone in a small, dark room. In another building, perhaps it would have been a supply closet, but Strickland was using it simply as a holding cell. The room didn't have a window, so he felt trapped but not sun-panicked, but Janus didn't like the doorknob not yielding to his turning. He could force his way out, he supposed, but Strickland had gone out of his way to be civilized, and he had to respond in kind.

When the door finally did open, he refused to let himself jump. The smell of the vampire was familiar, so he leaned against the wall and exposed his throat. "How was Siberia? Did you bring me back any vodka?"

Even in the darkness, Vision's hand on the door tightened until his fingers were as bloodless as the corpse that evening. They were both lieutenants, but while Strickland kept Vision mostly under control, Janus's Breyllorn allowed Janus his freedom.

Vision crossed his arms over his chest. "I should kill you."

Janus sighed. Vision's anger came off him in waves. Janus approached, keeping his body casual, though he wondered if, just perhaps, he'd finally pushed Vision too far. He was in Vision's domain, in bad with Vision's master, and locked in a broom closet until someone deigned to deal with him. Still, Vision allowed him to approach and didn't uncross his arms, even when Janus reached up and pinned Vision's elbows together. It locked Vision in place, and although the anger didn't leave, Vision relaxed slightly in his hands.

Janus leaned forward. Vision could force him back without lifting his fingers. Janus's wards were no match for Vision's compulsion when they were standing next to each other.

"You tried to kill me," Vision said, then dropped to his knees. Janus tried to step back, but Vision dug his fingers into Janus's ass, and the promise of pain brought him up short. Vision could have compelled him to remain still, but he didn't. For a second, they both remained where they were. Janus could have pushed Vision off, but Vision wasn't even looking at him. The silence broke with Janus undoing his zipper.

Vision's mouth was warm; he must have just fed. His fingers worked under Janus's jeans, and his tongue flicked over the head of his cock. Janus groaned, wishing at least Vision had had the good sense to back him into a wall or something. Vision moved his left hand to cup Janus's balls, once it was fairly obvious Janus wasn't going anywhere. Vision rubbed his face up and down Janus's shaft. Friction warmed his skin. Janus's hands tightened in Vision's hair. Vision tensed, for just a second, and then took Janus deep in his throat.

Janus threw his head back, still holding onto the back of Vision's head. It was the only thing that kept him upright. Jackie's blood sang in his veins, Vision's mouth turned his nerves to taut wires, and when Vision's finger pushed inside him, finding its way to Janus's prostate, Janus couldn't last another second.

He pulled Vision down his cock, fingers knotting into the thick brown hair, and Vision swallowed him until he came. The blood inside him warmed again, like it was alive once more, and the orgasm built from the small of his back. Vision kept sucking him, gently now when he was so sensitive Vision's nose against his pubic hair was too much sensation. His fingers moved back to Janus's ass, but were now kneading out the tension in his muscles. Janus stroked Vision's cheek to let him know he was in control once more, and Vision stood up without wiping his mouth. "Strickland is ready for you," he said, and turned around. Janus followed him out of the room. The blood inside him cooled to its usual temperature, and it made him feel lethargic.

He followed Vision out of the broom closet. Once in Strickland's office, Janus couldn't look out the windows for long, even though they were darkly tinted.

The river was an oil spill, and the park's green grass and trees were black. The office was tastefully decorated, the desk a wide plane of old-world wood, and the leather soft enough to melt. It smelled of humans and their small, petty deals. "It's starting to taste like a lawyer's office in here," he said, turning his attention back to the man behind the desk.

"Forgive me if I do not live my life as though I were one of your filthy little rats," Strickland said, tenting his fingers. His well-cut suit didn't cover the bulk of his body. Strickland had forgotten the hunt, forgotten the sweet taste of fresh blood on his lips. He'd even turned some of his operations into the day-world, working with humans.

Janus dusted imaginary dirt off the sleeve of his jacket and shrugged in one loose motion. The niceties were making his teeth hurt, and Strickland could probably smell his arousal. It made him weak. "We all survive in our own way," he said.

"Exactly. Survive. I hire my enforcers to enforce. When you protect the common rats scurrying about, all of my men have to work twice as hard. When my men come back, telling me of the resistance they've met, I have to kill them. You make me kill them, Janus."

"My rats have nothing you want, Strickland," Janus said, but glanced to Vision, who was standing behind Strickland, arms crossed over his chest. His face was stone, his lips, though looking bee-stung, were back in a sneer. It would have been very bad form if Janus had pushed Strickland aside and forced Vision across the desk. They'd never done a desk before.

Strickland's teeth came out as well, ignoring the new tension in the room. "They have blood. And fear. You think you're so clever giving them doorways and hiding places, but they are on my territory."

Janus moved. Once, perhaps, Strickland would have been that fast, but his weight made him too cumbersome to take advantage of pushing through time. Strickland barely made it

halfway to the panic button under his desk when Janus was at his side, inches away from his exposed throat. "They're mine," Janus said, and ignored the way Vision was smirking at him. "They're under my protection."

Vision, curiously, did nothing even as Strickland squeaked like a cornered mouse. "What are you talking about?" Strickland demanded.

Janus looked down at him and then realized Strickland had nothing to do with it. The paperwork for some human deal was spread across his desk, and the room smelled of his stale scent. He'd been in it all day, and Vision was the only one who'd visited him. Janus left him still cowering in his chair and stepped away from him. Strickland didn't even smell like Vision any more. The smell of human was everywhere.

Vision called for more of his guards, which Janus thought was rather unsporting, and spoiled how well the meeting had otherwise gone. He grabbed Vision's arm, slapping his ward onto the wall behind him, and even as Vision was compelling him away, his back touched the now liquid wall. The ward pulled him through, and it took all Janus's strength to even maintain the touch on Vision's skin that would suck him through with Vision.

There was a moment of nothingness, as though they had actually stepped out into the air beside the fortieth floor, and then they were in Janus's apartment.

Vision arrived with his compulsion in full force. Janus couldn't stand any closer than within three feet of him. His apartment was dark, not having any windows at all, but the light bulbs within Vision's field began to glow.

"And what did that accomplish?" Vision demanded, striking out. It wasn't a physical blow, yet the energy struck Janus across the chest. Janus took a huge step back. His veins constricted, making him lightheaded and weak, but he forced himself to move closer.

He was allowed to. Pushing into Vision as angry as he was now was like trying to push together two magnets with the same charge, but he did so out of sheer will. Still, the hair on the back of his neck and arms stood up. "If you were completely harmless, you wouldn't be fun at all," Janus spit out.

"You sent me away because you were bored with me," Vision said.

"True," Janus allowed. "But I'm not any more."

"And with that we're just supposed to fuck?"

"I thought you might blow me again."

"You thought," Vision snapped, rolling his eyes. But he was on his knees in the next second, tugging Janus's jeans down.

Vision bit him on the exposed thigh, a sudden waspish sting, and the orgasmic pleasure of feeding rushed through his veins. Drinking from him wasn't like drinking from a human, but the act almost woke his heart up. It remembered what it was like to beat.

Vision let him fall into the white sofa and then followed him down. Janus could move now and gripped onto the back of Vision's neck. Vision barely seemed to notice; he was too

involved with managing his slacks with one hand. Janus felt his own blood move through Vision's system, and with it came the awareness of Vision's body opening up to him. Janus pushed in, and the tightness was slightly painful until Vision relaxed around him.

The awareness wore off, and he was once again only in his skin. He held Vision's neck, supporting his weight so Vision could slam harder against him. They were joined, the heat inside Vision as real as any human's, and Janus couldn't stop his teeth from coming out.

Vision gave him his wrist. Janus bit down and began to feed with the same frenzy as the fuck. Vision lithely rode him, his thigh muscles bunching with his rise and fall. Janus arched his back, only touching the cushions of the sofa with his shoulders and the backs of his thighs, and even though the wound on Vision's wrist had already stopped bleeding, he kept sucking on the intact skin until Vision's entire body tightened.

Janus reached down, gripping Vision's cock with his fist, and brought him off the rest of the way with fast, hard jerks. It should have been painful -- his hands were dry, and he wasn't remotely gentle -- but Vision grabbed onto Janus's shoulder and shuddered, teeth cutting into his lips. Janus drank the spilled blood as Vision came, and the taste of Vision's orgasm brought him off in one burning, bursting second.

Vision pushed away, stumbling as his legs unfolded beneath him. Janus could have grabbed his wrist and made Vision stay, but they were only a few hours from sunset, and he needed to sleep. Vision made it down the hall to the elevator, and Janus knew Vision would rather spend the rest of the day in the parking garage than be with him.

He stripped off his jeans rather than trying to straighten them up and curled up on the sofa, the smell of their sex following him down into his dreams.

## Chapter Two

Janus woke with electric shocks running down his entire body. He opened his eyes, but the stillness of his living room was undisturbed. The room still had its surgical cleanliness, and he was about to dismiss it as a dream when it happened again. The shocks weren't enough to hurt, but it felt like swimming in the ocean with a floundering, wounded fish.

The shocks got worse, unpleasant enough that it hurt to lie still. Something was disturbing his lair.

He got up and dressed. When he closed and locked the door behind him, his wards slid into place. Nothing would violate his sanctum until he returned.

Miller, his driver, waited for him at the door. He nodded to Janus. "Welcome back, sir. Breyloren said you had returned."

Janus nodded. Those were more words than he'd heard from Miller in a good long time. So Breyloren was keeping track of him as well. He'd have to go see his master once he was sure his lair was untouched.

Janus slid into the back of the town car, and Miller got back behind the wheel. He'd slept in; the night was much further along than he had suspected. It had rained sometime during the evening. It turned the streets black with endless strings of green lights.

Without being told, Miller took him straight to the lower city. The streets became convoluted, and the buildings seemed to press against them. The only open places were as dangerous as the buried rusty metal hidden within its wild, tangled grass.

"Here," Janus said. There were many openings to his lair, but it was here the struggling shocks of alarm were the strongest. He hadn't been to this particular alley in months.

"When shall I pick you up?" Miller asked, his gravelly voice soft.

"I'll call you."

“Yes, sir.” Janus opened the door and pulled his collar up on his neck. The alarm was almost audible. Some poor fish was growing weaker as the night grew longer.

Janus headed down the alley. The smell of the recent rain washed away the most offensive notes to the rotting garbage and filth, but it would be stronger again in the morning with the sun. The water puddles collecting in the holes of the alley did strange things to the echoes, making the alley seem longer and wider than it truly was.

The fish itself was a young man in black leather and filthy jeans. The bloody shirt under the leather stank of his lost humanity. The fish stumbled against the rough stone walls of the filthy alley, no different than any of the drunks and addicts who resided in the alley -- but this one was no longer human.

His white skin was set off by the shocking blackness of his hair and the dried blood on his throat. Whoever had turned him obviously hadn’t cared to ensure that he would wake up at all. His clothes smelled of darkened alley rather than the safety of freshly turned dirt.

“Oi,” Janus found himself calling. He was never the type to clean up other people’s messes, but the shocks were constant now. The fish didn’t realize the danger he was in, but the hungry shadows were growing in strength. It took longer for them to reach through the hard concrete world of the stone buildings and paved roads, but there were enough cracks and holes to allow them to pass through from the earth. The fish didn’t know, but his body obviously did, and that was what tangled with Janus’s wards to create a violent distress signal.

The fish stopped, blinking. He looked dazed, but his eyes were clear and blue. He put his hand to his neck and tried to speak, but those functions wouldn’t work until he survived another night. Janus doubted he could have been up and walking if whoever had turned him had replaced his heart with a snake, but he didn’t want to leave anything out for the shadows to take.

“Come with me.” Janus held out his hand. If the fish survived the night, maybe Breylorn would take him as a pet.

The fish’s eyes narrowed. He looked at Janus suspiciously, and the smirk on his face didn’t need words.

For there to be that level of distrust on the young man’s first day out of the ground meant that it was part of his core programming. Very interesting.

“Your choice,” Janus said, but then pointed to the salmon-pink streak stretching over the horizon. “But rest assured that the sky is not going to be very pleasant for you. Not now, not ever again.”

The fish stared up at the sky. Janus wondered if he had miscalculated the young man’s will to live as well. The sun’s radiation would come slicing through, cloud cover or not, and his cells would react to it as though he’d been microwaved.

This one stared at the sky visible over the lower buildings that lined the street and nodded. No words yet, but he shrugged in a way that suggested he no longer cared. Janus took his arm and led him deeper into the alley. The gateway was in the alley, leading back to his lair. He threw off the filthy, wet cardboard, and the young man balked again.

The runes around the access point were a mixture of nasty warnings for their kind and a sickening spell for humans to turn them away. He supposed both of them were working on the young man. He was about to dismiss them, to temporarily grant the fish access, but the young man had no difficulty stepping through them.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” Janus said.

The young man gave him a look, this one clearly telling Janus that he’d heard that one before. Janus felt the wards against his skin, like breaking though spider webs, and they felt full strength to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lair itself had more than a hundred access points throughout the city. It was attached to all of them and none of them at the same time. The walls were sometimes the smooth rock of a cave polished through years by underground rivers and sometimes the gray stone walls of an institution. It had been a warehouse, a burnt-out shell of an apartment building, and some long ago abandoned temple buried under a ton of rocks. Today it was nothing but gray stone walls, covered in some Slavic graffiti. The crude diagrams needed no translation.

The shape of the room changed, but his treasures always remained hidden here. Bright, shiny things were heaped in piles, from gold coins to jewels to stones he’d found on the road.

The fish collapsed against one of the support beams in the middle of the room. His hands started shaking, and he touched the wounds on his neck again. It was showy work, designed to waste as much of the blood as possible, but there was still plenty enough that was human inside the young man. The fish could feed on that while his body regenerated.

“I’ll wash you,” Janus said. There was a running sink, attached through ways not even Janus understood, and comfortable easy chairs by a fireplace. “It will make you feel better and give the flaps of skin a chance to heal.”

Another knowing look and a curled lip. The fish’s canines were starting to grow. They wouldn’t sink into a boiled potato yet, but the changes were starting.

“I could drag you to the sink and hold you down or you could cooperate,” Janus said lightly. “Anything to get the smell of rotting blood off you. It makes no difference to me.”

The fish opened his mouth, looking like his namesake out of water, but his vocal cords weren’t unfrozen yet. He made a gulping noise and then nodded.

The shirt came off without any force, and Janus raised an eyebrow. His white skin was flawless on his face, but at the collar line turned ugly. He’d been shot at least three times.

The most recent injury was only now turning pink on his right shoulder. It hadn't healed before he'd been bitten. The bullet had been a large caliber; the entry wound was the size of Janus's thumbnail. Two older wounds, looking more like cigarette burns than bullet holes, had missed his heart by about an inch, and the final one had probably collapsed a lung. He'd been stabbed a couple times as well. The scar down his belly looked as though someone recently had tried to gut him. He still smelled of this one and of the poison that hadn't completely left his body. The back of his shoulder had another long cut, but the blade of his shoulder had turned it.

Other wounds crossed the young man's back, belly, and sides. Janus ran his hand over the scar tissue. He'd never seen anything like them before. It was almost like he'd been flayed. His hand on the fish's skin brought him the memory of it. Barbed wire. He'd run straight into a nasty nest of it. The fish shrugged, nonchalantly. It was obviously better than what he'd been running from.

"Who are you?" Janus asked.

Another shrug. *No one*. The jeans came off next, which exposed old puncture wounds on his femoral artery as clear as if they were track marks.

"You've been fed from before," Janus said. He put his hand on the flat plane just above the stretch of skin over the fish's hipbone. Janus felt the last of his heartbeat dying as the sun rose on his third day. Two little beats, then nothing, and a final beat that made the fish collapse to his knees.

"It's the end," Janus said, but he held the fish as the young man shuddered. "There'll be a new beginning soon, but for right now, just mourn the passing."

The fish didn't stop shuddering. It would have been worse for him, Janus knew, than any vampire he'd seen turn. With so many marks of death on the fish's body, each one had to come alive and release before his body could be returned to its perfect state. It must have been hell, feeling each wound remember and relive its agony. Janus's own turning had been bad, but back then, pain was a part of life. He'd never seen anyone alive today who had lived as hard as the fish had.

The fish's hands scraped at the dirt floor. His fingers looked mangled, like a young bird that had fallen from its nest. Janus stroked his hair, letting him writhe, and when the last of the memory passed, he picked up the fish and carried him to the sink. The fish didn't protest, didn't flinch, and didn't raise a hand to help him as Janus washed the blood from his throat.

The hot water put the fish to sleep. If he'd been allowed to die quietly in the safety and protection of the earth, it would have been an easier death for him. Instead, he'd been exposed on a garbage heap, either to be left out to the growing sunlight of the morning or found and embalmed by the city. That would have been worse than the sudden excruciating pain of the sun, to feel the worms feast on his flesh and to still be aware of it as the worms crawled away.



Janus couldn't give him back those two nights, but he could cover the fish in the best Egyptian cotton, shrouding him in white oblivion until his body recovered enough to speak. Janus finished the last tuck, then retired to the rattier of the two comfortable brown easy chairs and waited for their unnature to take its course.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sleep is the mortal way of regeneration, but vampires require it as well. They drink and are whole again, but they need the quiet, still dark to rejuvenate.

After the fish had rested, fresh blood would help, but not until his belly finished adjusting to its new food source. Janus closed his eyes and waited for the sun to finish its victory lap. Even down here, in his most sacred of places, he could still feel the sun's radiation trickling through the stone. When the sun started to set, the room grew noticeably cooler. Janus stood by the shroud and waited.

The fish sat up, gasping for air, and the first sounds that emerged from him were pleading noises. Janus didn't comfort him; he had no comfort to give, and if the fish didn't learn the rules, there would be no saving him. The fish tore at the cotton, revealing his fully formed teeth, and he scrambled back from Janus as much as he could. His legs tangled in the shroud, however, and he fell forward. Even then, he tried to crawl away until Janus stepped on the sheet, trapping him beneath it.

"Do you have a name?" Janus asked.

The fish twisted around to look at him, eyes wide. His blue eyes, once dark enough to be mistaken for black, were pale blue, the color of a northern wolf's. "It makes no difference to me, but if I dub you 'the fish,' I warn you it will stick."

The fish opened his mouth, not expecting sounds to come out. "Lyall," he managed. "Name's ... Lyall."

"Lyall," Janus said. He nodded. He waited for the string of questions, but instead Lyall only looked around the room, his eyes seemingly drawn to the weakest parts of the walls, the entrances and exits marked only for Janus. Then, unlike any other human Janus knew, Lyall actually looked up to the high ceiling and scanned it.

Lyall nodded again and then looked back to his own body, which was still covered in the sheet. Lyall didn't embarrass himself by flushing and leaned back on his elbows, letting his legs fall open under the sheet. The mocking insolence was obviously deliberate.

"Not a fish at all. A little wolf-pup, who thinks he understands," Janus said.

Lyall rolled his shoulders, and the motion undulated down his body. Even with his words back, he preferred his gestures. *Oh, I understand.*

Janus found himself smiling. Lyall smiled as well, thinking he had him. Janus grabbed Lyall by the back of the neck, picked him up, and hauled him to the doorway.

It didn't matter which one. Though each path led to another exit, the time of day remained consistent. This close, the weakened wall gave the sun power, and the wall was too hot to touch even in the dying light. Lyall tried to fight, his fingers knowing all the pressure points and sensitive areas to make a human release him, but Janus cracked Lyall's head against the stone wall, just enough to stun him and let him feel the power of the day at the same time.

"It would mean nothing to me to push you out there," he said, not even breathing hard from dangling Lyall's weight. Lyall froze, stopping his fight, and his shoulders bowed in acquiescence. "You know about rules, then."

It was impossible for Lyall to move his head, to shrug, or to respond beyond a strangled cry, but he tried. Janus dropped him, and he fell down to his knees, remaining there. "I know about rules," Lyall said, his voice a low growl. He looked back up at Janus, and his eyes were thin slits.

Old hungers, desires that had been pushed aside when the bloodlust came, rose to the surface. Janus suddenly craved a glass of mellow red wine, the dry warmth of a good pipe's smoke, and his little pup's bruised mouth around his cock all at the same time. But it would be a long time before he'd let this one think he'd won. Instead, he walked over Lyall's prone form and returned to his chair, snapping his fingers and pointing to the empty chair across from him. "Sit," he ordered.

Lyall blinked. Janus wondered when was the last time Lyall hadn't gotten what he wanted when he applied himself. Janus raised his eyebrow, hand still pointing at the empty chair, and Lyall pulled himself up, arms and legs awkward for only a moment. The sheet fell to the side, and no longer tangled within it, he walked naked and unashamed to the chair. He threw himself down into it. Janus watched him move, as he was supposed to, but when Lyall settled into the chair, he stared until Lyall looked down first.

"Who are you?" Janus asked. The moon had risen three hours ago, barely visible in the setting sun's sky, but now it was growing stronger. It gave him strength, just as the sun sapped his energy.

Lyall opened his mouth to answer -- a well-trained soldier to the last -- and then closed it sharply. The smell of blood filled the room as he bit into his own cheek. The silence continued, stretching on until Janus felt his patience being tested. But then Lyall shook his head, and looked down again. "I don't know," he said, finally. He looked up, once, but didn't meet Janus's gaze. "Sir," he finished. He primly folded his hands on his lap, and his body tensed as he awaited orders.

## Chapter Three

Janus waited, but no answer was forthcoming. Finally, he ran his fingers through his hair. “Wait here,” he said. He still had obligations, and those had to be met. Lyall settled down further into the chair, and Janus left him there. He stepped out into the alley to make a call. His wards were not only on the doorway but all the way down the alley. They’d all reacted to Lyall like a fly trapped in a web.

The evening’s cool wind touched his hair. The lair was perfect for him, but the cell phone reception was next to non-existent inside. There was no answer at Breylorn’s, so Janus flipped the phone shut on his thigh and pocketed it.

He smelled blood in the alley, as rotten as the blood that had been on Lyall’s neck, and traveled deeper into the darkness to find its source.

He didn’t have to look long. There was no light back there and the glass of the outdoor bulbs crunched as he walked over it. He didn’t have to keep smashing them; the denizens of the alley did it for him. The darkness was safer at night than a brightly lit street. The predators were afraid of the dark more than the intended victims. The junkies, the homeless, and the dispossessed had nothing more to fear in the darkness than they did in the day. Janus cultivated them outside entranceways to his lair for protection, his and theirs.

There was one place in the entire alley where the thinnest stream of moonlight pooled on the cracked pavement. The smells there were thick; urine, both human and rat, garbage moldering as it rotted, and blood. There was so much blood. Lyall’s was familiar, but also others. Three others, all spilled at the same time. Lyall hadn’t gone down quietly, then. That pleased Janus.

The brick building to the south had arterial blood sprayed on it. Purely human. Janus licked his finger and dragged it across, then tasted it on the tip of his tongue. It was three

days old now, and whatever sustenance it contained was long gone, but he would know it again if the man survived the wound. The blood tasted of metal. His throat had been cut.

He looked back to the moonlit section of alley. They'd spread Lyall out here. The sun would have risen, before he'd had a chance to crawl into the darkness, and it would have burned him alive. His charred remains, not quite human, not yet vampire, would have spoiled in the morning sun.

But Lyall hadn't burned. A nest of garbage piled up under the chain link fence, cutting this alley off from the back of a newer, posh condo building. It had a trail of blood leading to it. Janus kicked off the soiled newspapers and broken garbage bags, nose wrinkling at the used diapers and oozing food-spoil, and found where Lyall had been dragged to.

Whoever had robbed Lyall's corpse had saved his life. Janus dusted his hands off, turned around, and inhaled the air deeply. The shadow behind two garbage cans slid further back against the wall.

It smelled of Lyall. Janus walked to it, but rather than kicking the cans to the side, he crouched down so that he was inches away from the crack between them. "Little sister, you have something that isn't yours," he said.

The woman pulled back, deeper into her filthy rags. She mumbled something, nodding along to the voices in her head. Her gray hair hung in strings down her dirty face. She didn't have either of her front teeth, and her upper lip was split almost into two. Her milky eye, the one he could see, came up to the crack.

"They say you won't hurt me," she said. The words came out soft and unformed, like her tongue didn't entirely reach her lips.

"They're right, little sister. May I have it?"

"I din'n hurt that boy," she said. "But I can't have no po-lice men here, no, sir," she said.

"The voices told you that?"

"They say hide the boy. Hide him away. They said I could take what I wanted, take what I found. I hid him away. Found this." The woman pushed a knife half again as long as his hand at him. It was bloody still, but the blood had dried. Lyall had managed to cut them all. He could smell the layer upon layer of blood.

Janus took his wallet out. Human money was next to useless in his world, where a word or a favor was worth so much more, but it did buy certain comforts he was not entirely opposed to. A C-note would put the woman's life in danger, so he slipped her four fives. "Here you go, little sister," he said, and she snatched the money away. She pushed the blade through the gap, and he left her cackling to herself.

He returned to the doorway, stepping through the moment of nothingness into the comfort of his lair. Lyall swung a statue at his head. Janus didn't stop, but blocked the blow. The swing was clumsy, and made it perfectly simple for Janus to grab hold of Lyall's arm, the

one holding the statue, and duck while pushing Lyall off balance. He spun Lyall around, slamming him into the solid wall that had been the doorway a second before, and held Lyall's hand up tight against his shoulder blades.

Janus plucked the statue from Lyall's now unresponsive hand and set it back on the table it had come from. Breylorn already had a pet, he surely wouldn't mind Janus sampling. He then turned back to Lyall. "If you had wanted my attention, you could have just asked," he whispered into the nape of Lyall's neck. Lyall had fashioned the shroud around his hips, and Janus tugged it free. The white cotton fluttered to their feet.

Lyall shuddered, but didn't fight the grip on his arm. "Ask me," Janus ordered.

Lyall moved his head to the side, exposing his throat. Janus's teeth came out, and he ran the tip of his right fang down over the exposed skin. Lyall hissed under his breath, pushing back against him as much as the hold would allow him.

"Ask me," Janus repeated, running his free hand down from Lyall's neck, down over his chest to his belly. Lyall's dead scar-tissue was healing under his hand, and Lyall's desperation no longer surprised him. The hair on Lyall's lower belly, leading down to his groin, was sensitive enough that when Janus raked his nails through it, the motion forced a whimper out of Lyall.

"If you can't ask for it, this won't happen," Janus whispered. Lyall leaned back into the hold, which Janus knew tore his shoulder, but rather than let Lyall do damage to himself, Janus stepped back, slacking off the tension.

"Please!" Lyall howled. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back, and his skin had broken out into a thin sweat. It was the last time he would sweat, and the smell was wonderfully human. "All right? Please. Just do it."

"Good boy," Janus whispered, and let Lyall go. Lyall stumbled forward, striking the wall, and turned, confusion clear on his face. Janus left him.

Lyall collapsed against the wall. Janus heard the muffled thump as he crossed the room and washed his hands. Lyall had almost finished his change. The smell of his arousal filled the lair with a different, darker scent. It was rich, like fresh blood, and it took almost all of Janus's concentration just to finish washing his hands.

He picked up a hand towel and walked back to Lyall. The pup was in obvious distress. He'd found his old pair of jeans, which were wearable if not exactly clean, and his body was obviously healing. Lyall's entire body leaned toward Janus with an open invitation. His face was in pain, and his full lips were pressed tight together.

"Why won't you do anything?" Lyall demanded. He sounded like a petulant child, and Janus silenced him by placing an open hand on his belly. "It hurts."

"I know," Janus said, simply. "You're changing. Most people don't have that much damage done to them. You're just over-stimulated, like a cat who has lashed out because it's been stroked too long."

He used the word deliberately, lowering his hand another inch so that it just rested on the waistband of Lyall's jeans, and Lyall groaned, arching his back further. There was more healing being done on the inside. Organs pierced, shot, or stabbed were recovering as well. It was a wonder Lyall wasn't curled up on the ground in a locked fetal position. He chewed his lip and sucked on the blood in a newfound habit.

Janus leaned forward to lick off the fat trail of blood that escaped him. "There is one thing you have to understand," he whispered. His fingers caught Lyall's belt loops and yanked him further off his feet.

"What?" Lyall asked, finally.

"Never think you can force my hand," Janus whispered.

He was writhing now, and Janus flipped him over by tugging on the loops. "Never force, gotcha," Lyall repeated. He could balance himself, now, and pressed his forearms to the wall. From there it was a simple matter of thumbing open the button, easing the zipper down. Lyall shuddered, arching his back more. Janus ran his hands down Lyall's inner thighs. The muscles tensed under his hands.

"Put them together," Janus said.

Lyall struggled to pull his legs close enough so that Janus could tug the jeans all the way down. He knelt down and yanked them off and tossed them across the room. Janus licked his way back up Lyall's leg, starting from Lyall's calf, the back of his knee, across his thigh. Without being told to, Lyall had spread his legs back again.

Janus bit open his wrist and gave his wrist to Lyall.

"Keep sucking, or the wound will close," he said and pushed inside as Lyall began to suck.

With Lyall's tongue working the wound to keep it open, he felt Lyall's tension throughout his body. The snapping and crackling of Lyall's turning was channeling straight to Lyall's groin, and Janus's slow thrusting built up a different sort of pressure, one that cooled the overwhelming stress.

The sounds Lyall made were muffled by Janus's wrist. Janus felt them on his skin as vibrations. His blood diffused into Lyall, and Janus felt it as it settled in the most scarred places inside him. Janus braced his other hand on Lyall's shoulder, and pulled him back as much as pushed himself forward.

The spit as lubricant was breaking down, creating more heat. Lyall only reached down and touched the head of his cock lightly with his fingers, and he was over. The shuddering brought Janus over as well, and he stumbled away rather than expecting Lyall to hold both their weight.

Janus took Lyall by the arm and led him still shuddering to the bed. It was his old bed, stuffed with down, covered in fur. Lyall was cold beside him, even with the roaring fire and the double layer of blankets over them.

When Lyall finally fell asleep, his entire body shuddered and then relaxed, like a body giving itself over to death. Janus rolled over to his side and wondered what would cause a human to surrender to sleep only when it was akin to dying.

He knew touching Lyall would make him wake, so resisted the urge to tuck the strand of hair falling into his eyes away. He couldn't give Lyall up to Breylorn, even though lieutenants were not allowed to have pets.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janus woke mid-day. The sun was high in the sky, blazing down on the city, and it left him feeling wooden and thick. Lyall had kicked off his furs through the night; they weren't needed with the fire casting heat even as coals. Lyall's smooth skin was again flawless. Janus touched the shoulder blade that had been stabbed, but felt nothing but cool flesh.

His finger lingered a moment too long. Lyall's skin warmed, too hot for his touch. Janus's mark, the two-faced head, appeared beneath Lyall's skin in what looked like rolling flames barely contained. The heat was unbearable. Janus reared back, covering his eyes with his forearm, and the moment he broke contact the emblem disappeared.

Someone had marked Lyall so that he alone would set off Janus's wards. Janus sat up, running his hand over Lyall's back again.

The air crackled around Janus. Wards painted on with anything but blood and spit had a tendency to corrupt the wearer. Janus put his hand back on Lyall's back, and the ward came back to the surface.

Janus had to pull it out of Lyall's back. It would be painful, but Lyall was still asleep. Janus's fingers remained on Lyall's back for a moment as the ward pushed up from his skin. Janus had to concentrate, pushing with his mind, and his fingers went through Lyall's skin. His fingers turned numb, instantly, like he was pressing against dry ice, but he managed to grasp the icy-hot ward. Pulling it through Lyall's skin took longer, and he kept having to adjust his grip. He pulled it out slowly, in a steady stream, until the entire ward was gone from Lyall's body. He threw it away, and the heat it created evaporated, leaving the air chilly.

Janus got off the bed and stoked the fire up. Through it all, Lyall didn't wake. His face didn't relax, even in sleep, and the dream he was having furrowed his forehead. His body twitched, like a pup, and his hands curled up around something in his dream.

Whomever Lyall was fighting, it was obvious that he wasn't winning. He started to shiver again, even with all the heat. Janus threw his own fur onto his shoulders and returned to the comfortable chairs to read.

The lair had changed again in their sleep. It was now done in red velvet and dusty drapes. Some forgotten theatre lobby, it looked like. The carpet was threadbare and a pinkish gray, but it had once been as lurid and bloody as the walls. The room had been filled with

elegant women in long gowns split open in the back. They had held illicit martinis in one hand and long cigarette holders in the other. The men had been well oiled and groomed to be dashing. The room still smelled of old gin. Janus was good at seeing the beginning of things, but also their end, when the last of the room's decorations would curl up in smoke, and the charred remains would collapse under their own weight.

He looked back to Lyall and saw ... nothing. Just a young man sprawled on his bed. His arm was thrown over the fur, his dark hair more an extension of the pelt than anything, and he saw no more of where Lyall came from than where Lyall was going.

Janus crossed the room to grab the bloody knife.

The white-hatched log on the fire crumbled just as Janus approached the bed. When Lyall's eyes opened and he sat up, Janus wondered if it was because of the sound or because he was approaching the bed armed.

His eyes focused on the knife, then back up to Janus. "That's mine."

"It is," Janus agreed and reversed the blade in his hand. The dried blood was empty to his palm, but if Lyall took it and pulled, he would take Janus's fingers off with it. It was a moment of trust. Janus kept his fingers around the blade even after Lyall took the hilt.

Lyall nodded, but kept his head bowed a quarter of an inch, and Janus stepped away. The knife remembered Lyall, even if Lyall didn't entirely know it, and the blade just looked good in his hand.

"They took it away from me," Lyall said. His voice was hoarse, but not from anything wrong with his throat. His thumb rubbed along the guard, and it was such an intimate motion Janus almost felt he should look away.

"People who are getting stabbed often try such drastic measures," Janus said, voice droll.

"I don't remember much," Lyall said. "There was blood and fighting, but I don't know if I remember fighting or if I'm remembering an old fight." Lyall took the blade and dabbed the tip of the knife on his tongue. "There were three of them," he said. He licked along the flat of the blade. "They were afraid of me." Lyall narrowed his eyes. "And I think one of them got away."

Janus pushed him back against the wall. "Don't leave. You release floundering signals when you're still young, and the hunger shadows will take you."

"Hunger shadows," Lyall said, voice scornful. He tapped his knife against his lips. It was a practiced gesture, made more gruesome by the filth on the blade. "I can take care of myself."

Janus moved through time. It took more energy than he was willing to shed, but he forced his body faster through the seconds than normal. It was like walking upstream of a raging river, but not impossible to do for a short period. Lyall's mouth was still open, his eyes growing wider, but not even he could bring his knife out to protect himself. Janus plucked it



from Lyall's fingers and then had to carry both of them through the raging river. He placed the knife carefully against Lyall's throat.

Janus released the time, and Lyall swore under his breath. He didn't fight the knife, remaining perfectly still. He even stretched his chin up, making the killing slash easier for Janus.

"It's different now," Janus said, hiding how out of breath he was. Lyall was smart enough not to nod. Janus took a step back, dropping the knife, and Lyall snatched it out of the air.

"Yes, sir," Lyall said, bowing his head forward an inch. "You going to show me how to do that?"

"Eventually," Janus said. He licked the line of blood from Lyall's throat, wondering when his hands shook, and then shared the taste on his tongue with Lyall. Without being told to, Lyall dropped to his knees. The brief taste of blood he'd gotten from Lyall had only been enough to tease, and though moving through time had been a neat trick, it took far more energy than he remembered. Janus needed to go out and hunt, but then Lyall put his hand on Janus's cock through his slacks.

He began to kiss it, an oddly touching gesture, and what little blood Janus had to spare became occupied. Lyall sat up off his heels, tall enough that he could rub his face against Janus's cock like a cat. And the phone in Janus's pocket began to ring again.

"That's never happened before," Lyall said, then pressed his finger where Janus's cock was straining to get out. "Hello?" he asked.

Janus put his hand over the phone in his pocket. "Funny," he said. Breylorn was the only person who could call him in the sanctity of his lair. The phone stopped ringing, but was hot to the touch through his slacks. Janus pushed Lyall's head away from him. "Hold that thought exactly there."

"It's a bit difficult when you're walking away with it," Lyall called.

Janus left him on his knees.

## Chapter Four

The black car waited for him in the alley's mouth, parked in halfway so that it blocked traffic in the northbound lane. It wasn't a stretch limo like Strickland's or his own simple town car, but a German-made beast with ripples and vents in places that, if the finish had been even slightly less glossy, would have made it look ridiculous. There were no plates on it, no make or model either, but the wards on it were strong enough that anyone not meant to see would shy away from its presence.

It had taken Janus days to perfect those wards, and he was the proudest of them. The engine of the car purred like a mountain predator as he approached, but the wards that reached out and touched his skin played with his hair.

The door swung open. The interior was leather, and the bulb of the gearshift was solid silver. The digital display glowed an unearthly purple. "You were late tonight."

Breylorn was never a verbose man, and on reflection, perhaps calling Breylorn after the Strickland incident would have been the smart thing to do. "I lost track of time," Janus said, making a vague gesture at the moon. He wouldn't tell Breylorn of his pet, not yet at least, and hopefully the repercussions of his indiscretion would not be severe.

"Get in."

Janus slid into the seat. The door closed without his hand, something that would have been a lot eerier if he hadn't been the one to make it do so. The car was off with a low rumble. Streetlights turned into a chain of jewels as the car sped under them.

"I apologized on your behalf tonight," Breylorn said. How he could see under the thick black glasses and the dark tinted window, Janus didn't know, but Breylorn drove with only his thumbs on the wheel. When they came around the corner, the wheel turned first.

Panic set like a cold stream of water down from Janus's shoulders. He definitely hadn't warded the car to drive itself. The design necessary to take into consideration all the

variables that could possibly occur under even normal driving conditions ... Janus sat up, looking around the interior for the new wards. The darkness didn't lift, and he saw nothing in the car but Breylorn's pale face, lit from underneath by the purple dashboard lights.

He was smirking. Janus was supposed to see the car turning itself. He opened his mouth, trying to form words when his brain was in full panic mode, but Breylorn raised his hand from the steering wheel, and he obediently kept his silence.

Breylorn's building was set on stilts, something that made Janus's stomach uneasy at the best of times. Janus got out of the car when Breylorn did, and the valet ducked inside the car while the doorman opened the door. The motions were seamless; the humans could have been machines. Breylorn took his arm and held it tight as they entered the lobby of the building.

The entrance looked more like something befitting a museum. Two large pieces of art took up the entire south-facing wall. They were a pair of paintings, but the painting of the tortured man had been cut into strips a quarter inch apart and interspersed with an abstract painting of a flower's stamen. It was a surreal thing, to see the gore of the man's belly ripped open from what appeared to be a prison made of a flower.

They said nothing as the doorman inside tipped his hat, and the silence continued as they passed the concierge and the elevator man. The carpet was the color of pooled blood, and it was thick enough that their footsteps made no sound. The music in the elevator was tastefully bland, and the moment the door had closed, Breylorn had Janus up against the wall. It was a familiar pose, and Janus, bared his neck, as submissively as Lyall had earlier that evening.

"So you haven't completely forgotten yourself," Breylorn said, his fangs close enough to Janus that he felt them on his skin. He pushed away from the wall, far enough away that the fang pushed into him.

Breylorn pulled back, but only far enough to replace his fang with his tongue. "You were always so good at deflecting my anger."

"If you want to call it that," Janus said, unable to help the shudder as Breylorn's tongue caught the trickle of blood from the puncture wound. Breylorn didn't share it, but let the gash close under his tongue.

The rejection stung like blowing sand.

The elevator doors pinged, then opened inside Breylorn's suite. The white carpet was deep enough to sink into and the walls a mixture of glossy black paint, chrome and glass. The long hall opened into an archway, leading into the huge living space.

"Close the door, will you?" Breylorn was already out of the elevator. "And take off your shoes."

The doors closed behind Janus automatically, but the order just clarified things. Janus toed off his shoes as well and followed Breylorn. The penthouse smelled different, now. It

would always smell of disuse; vampires as old as Breylorn had lost their last shred of humanity centuries ago, and the prevailing scent had always been that of dust. Janus always had the ghost sensation of walking through spider webs when he walked down the hall.

The new smell had life to it now. Not fully human, or even someone as newly minted as Lyall, but it was definitely a young one. Janus saw his dark head of hair as they came through the arch.

The backs of the black sofa and armchairs were impossibly high and stuck out at angles that were almost offensive. The young vampire was sprawled over one of the armchairs, his leg over the arm, his body limp and relaxed. He wore nothing but a pair of loose, white cotton trousers, the kind that had a drawstring and not much else. His skin was pale for an Asian, making him a good fit for the monochrome room. For a moment, Janus found himself wondering if he'd bleed in sepia tones. The vamp smelled of saké; the sweet, thick smell filled the air around him.

When he looked at Janus, his eyes didn't entirely focus. He smiled, and his teeth scraped across his lips. He probably wasn't aware that they were even out. He was in a perpetual hunting mode and probably didn't even know it. He had black eyes, but the pupils were blown. Every part of him was open, receptive.

"You. Sit," Breylorn ordered Janus, snapping his fingers towards the sofa. Janus sat. It was as uncomfortable as it looked. Terminals at bus stations where the chairs were preformed had more give to them. That the young vampire looked so comfortable sprawled where he was showed how far he'd gone.

"Would you like a sip of Hiroshi?" Breylorn asked. He licked his lips, and Janus wondered if Breylorn still tasted him. "You were a bit dry in the elevator."

Hiroshi pushed through time to go to him. It should have been a fairly dramatic presentation, but Janus was alarmed enough to be able to watch him move. The edges of his body swirled away, bending the light away from where he was. Janus stood up and pushed Hiroshi's chin so that his neck was perfectly exposed.

"Thank you," Janus said, simply. Hiroshi struggled, the display obviously not going the way he'd been expecting, but Janus only squeezed his chin to get him to hold still. "You have a vast amount to learn, still," Janus whispered in his ear, the 'v' sound slicing his own lips. His teeth broke through Hiroshi's pale skin.

The mix of blood and alcohol coated his tongue. Janus had pierced an artery, and the blood memory in Hiroshi was strong enough to remember how to bleed. Janus latched his lips onto it; a single drop on the carpet would not be tolerated, and he drank from Hiroshi until the wound closed.

"Better?" Breylorn asked.

Janus waved his hand and swore he could feel the air moving over and under it. "There's a reason saké cups are so damn small," he managed. His head floated, cut off from the rest of his body, and the blood filled him. The aftertaste of the blood wasn't right.

Hiroshi was probably on something as well. He reached over to entangle his fingers into Hiroshi's hair to pull him back toward him, but Breylorn blocked him.

"No," he said. "Sit."

Janus was compelled. Breylorn's power looped over him, invisible threads that froze his will. Janus sank back down to the sofa. Compelling took even more energy than pushing through time, and how Breylorn did it so effortlessly always filled Janus with awe.

Janus wanted to open his mouth, to say the word 'please,' but he could barely make a sound in the back of his throat. A drop of blood slipped out from between his lips, creeping down the line of his mouth, but he could no more lick it off than he could stand up.

Hiroshi smiled, dark eyes wide, and Janus wondered what he could see with eyes that couldn't shut out any light.

Breylorn held out his hand, palm down, and dipped his fingers a quarter inch. Hiroshi dropped to his knees, between Janus's spread legs, and Janus hadn't even been aware of the fact he'd spread them. Breylorn undid the drawstring holding up Hiroshi's pants, and gravity pulled them down to pool at Hiroshi's knees.

Janus looked down -- at least that he could still do that -- and made another sound. Hiroshi's penis wasn't very big, no longer than Janus's hand, but it was the same strange gray marble as the rest of his body. His testicles were still tight to his body, and Janus wanted to roll them around the palm of his hands.

Another snap of Breylorn's fingers, and Hiroshi carefully placed his hands beside Janus's socked feet. Hiroshi shifted back, so that his chin balanced on the sofa's cushion between Janus's spread thighs. He was far enough away so Janus couldn't touch him.

The graceful line of Hiroshi's back and unmarked skin made Janus want to rake his fingernails down it, hard enough to break the capillaries beneath the surface. Breylorn knelt down between Hiroshi's spread thighs and Janus tried to look away just to give himself a moment to collect himself.

Breylorn shook his head, and Janus was trapped. Hiroshi gave off the frantic scent of arousal, a heavy, musky smell that was almost visible in the air. Janus and Breylorn were too long dead for that, but they still read the message.

"You are supposed to be my lieutenant," Breylorn said.

Before Janus could answer, Hiroshi hissed. His tongue snaked out and licked his teeth, and Janus was captivated by the sight of it. Breylorn had to snap his fingers again before Janus's attention came back to him.

"Did you hear me? Nod your head if you have."

Janus bowed his head, half-expecting to hear the vertebrae crack to allow the movement. Breylorn was barely moving inside Hiroshi, and Hiroshi was trembling underneath him. Breylorn's large hands splayed across Hiroshi's back, and he pulled Hiroshi back to him.

Janus made another sound, unable to stop himself.

"My lieutenants operate as an extension of me. Observe if you will." Breylorn's hands tightened on Hiroshi's hips, hard enough that their flesh around his nails turned sheet white, and the object lesson became a furious fuck. Hiroshi pressed his forehead into the couch, and while Janus did not speak much modern Japanese, the tone of his desperate *onegai* was 'please' in any language.

"I move; Hiroshi reacts. You see how that is?" Breylorn's voice showed the first sign of strain. "He is my extension."

The word Janus would have used was 'fuck-toy,' but discretion was the better part of valor for anyone while compelled. He nodded a second time.

Breylorn looked down, away from him. He moved his left hand between Hiroshi's shoulder blades and pushed him down hard enough that the hard cushion gave way. The sound of flesh on flesh, the slick sound of the fucking, and Hiroshi's small grunts filled the room.

Breylorn had so much control that when he came, his jaw tensed, once. "You, on the other hand, are not an extension of me," Breylorn said. He ran a finger down the slick skin of Hiroshi's back. "You go where you want, you say and do whatever you want, and you do not pay tribute to me in any way."

Hiroshi's eyes were glazed when he looked up. Breylorn must have been more tired than he let on, because Janus could now move his tongue. "Speak," Breylorn ordered.

"Forgive me," Janus said, and his vocal cords felt tight from lack of use. The saké was still moving through his system and he was so hard it was causing spasms throughout his belly, but he fought to keep his voice light. "On reflection, that does appear to be careless and unthinking on my part."

Breylorn's mouth twitched. He slapped Hiroshi's rump, leaving a bright rush of blood on his cold skin, and Hiroshi moved up. He put his elbows on Janus's spread thighs and unbuttoned Janus's slacks.

The cool air on his cock would have made him jerk forward, if he'd had any control of the muscles below his neck. "It was pleasant, once, between us, wasn't it?" Breylorn asked. He'd withdrawn from the boy, and his penis, still shiny from lubricant, was between the cheeks of Hiroshi's spread ass. Hiroshi shuddered and put the flat of his tongue on the head of Janus's cock.

"It was," Janus allowed. The words came out strangled, as every ounce of strength he had went to trying to make his hips shift forward even an inch.

Hiroshi's warm mouth engulfed him, all soft lip and tongue. For a moment Janus thought he'd managed to break free from the compulsion, but then he realized the only relief he was getting came from Breylorn pushing Hiroshi further down his cock. He was so close, not even Breylorn could keep his legs from trembling.

"You did me a large favor, killing Varaugh," Breylorn continued. The wet sound of Breylorn fucking him through Hiroshi was rhythmic and driving. "But that doesn't forgive your obligations."

Janus nodded, now officially beyond speech. His body rebelled, and every nerve ending in his body seemed attached to the first four inches of dick he had down Hiroshi's throat. He opened his mouth, but he was finished with words.

Breylorn nodded. The bright red spots behind Janus's eyes exploded into fiery lights, and the delayed orgasm almost ripped him apart. His freedom came back to him in that second, with the rush of pleasure, and his skin felt hot and cold. He wrapped his hands around Hiroshi's head and pushed it down as his hips came off the sofa.

Hiroshi pulled away when Janus couldn't hold him down any more, and both Hiroshi and Breylorn left him to recover.

When Janus could open his eyes again, there was a hand towel beside him. The cotton should have been soft, but it felt like burlap on his skin. He cleaned up as gently as he could, and when he stood, his knees and back creaked.

Hiroshi was at the long dining room table, its mahogany wood a fine contrast to the dead man's skin he was working on. The ink on his brush stank of ingredients not even Janus dared use, but when a drop of it fell to the table in a moment of carelessness, Hiroshi wiped it up with his finger and rubbed it off on his white trousers.

"When you're up, you're supposed to see him," Hiroshi said, his teeth and tongue still uncomfortable with the English words.

"Be careful with that," Janus said, feeling the need to speak out, despite the fact he knew it wasn't going to be received well.

He wasn't wrong. Hiroshi narrowed his eyes, probably his only way to focus his vision on something, and he bared his teeth in a snarl. The black mark was already gone off his trousers, and Janus wondered if Hiroshi knew what he'd just welcomed into his skin.

Janus took a step forward, ignoring the snarl. He still outranked Hiroshi, and Hiroshi looked back down to his parchment. "The master's in his study. It's down the hall."

"I know where the study is," Janus snapped, turning on his heel.

He ignored the uttered insult under Hiroshi's breath.

The entire penthouse was warded from all sides, wards Janus had spent months building, testing, and weaving together, and the study was the safest room of all. He had to wait to be invited in, and even then, stepping through the open door took a force of will.

"Your pet has teeth," Janus remarked, once the last of the wards crawled off him and returned to its wall.

"He'll be a good watchdog when he grows up," Breylorn said, not looking up from his books.

“Do you know what he’s teething on?” Janus asked. He still couldn’t get the smell of the ink from his nose. It burned like inhaling concentrated bleach.

Breylorn smiled. “Worried he might take your place?” he asked.

“If by ‘take my place’ you mean ‘rend his body and soul into a pit of ooze,’ yes, sir,” Janus said.

“He’s stronger than you are,” Breylorn said, turning around in his chair.

Janus knew Breylorn only vaguely understood the practice of wards. Their power manifested themselves quite differently. Breylorn could make an aged vampire walk into the sunlight if he so chose, but couldn’t keep a mouse from his lair if he didn’t have Janus there to build the protections up. If he was trying to make Janus nervous, it wasn’t working. Janus only shrugged. “He’d like to think he is,” Janus said. “But don’t let him ward anything without me checking it out.”

“Feeling threatened?”

“Feeling like your lieutenant again, sir,” Janus said. His voice was flat, and Breylorn shrugged.

Breylorn waved his hand, and that was the end of that topic of conversation. Instead, he turned back to Janus. “Do you have something to tell me, perhaps about your own pet you may have found?”

“I found a pet,” Janus said, dutifully.

“I already have a pet, Janus,” Breylorn said, keeping his voice mild. Hiroshi had been his for almost a year now.

Janus exhaled sharply. Not out of need, but habit. “I ...” The words failed him. “I want him.”

“Lieutenants don’t keep pets, Janus. You know that.”

Janus nodded. He did. Pets split their loyalty and put it into question. “I do. But I want him, regardless.”

“That’s highly uncommon, Janus,” Breylorn said. “Who is he?”

“He doesn’t know. I think he’s one of Strickland’s enforcers.”

Breylorn tapped his lip with his finger. “Well, then, perhaps you should ask Strickland’s permission, first.”

The thrill lasted a second before indignation set in. “They left him for dead.”

Breylorn stood up, sliding the desk envelope opener along the edge of Janus’s neck. “You belong to me until you’re all the way dead. I believe Strickland would have the same policy.”

Janus suppressed his natural desire to tell Breylorn to screw it. His object lesson had gone surprisingly well; he didn’t want to push so close to it. Another year, perhaps two, and



Breylorn would let him have his freedom until it was time to yank the chain. But if he took Lyall back to Strickland, Strickland would just take him. He balled his hands into fists.

"Is there a problem, Janus?" Breylorn asked.

"He's ... he's mine, sir. I want him."

Breylorn's mouth twitched again, his answer to a smile. "Do you really think I would deny you this?" Breylorn asked after a long pause. "You're insolent, but loyal, and you usually ask for so little."

Breylorn opened his other hand. The emerald was the size of Janus's fist, raw and uncut, with bits of rock still clenching it. It was beautiful in its unfinished form. "Offer him this bauble," he said. "If Strickland is not swayed, you have my permission to offer him a favor."

Janus touched his throat, bowing his head. "Thank you, sir," he said.

Breylorn dropped the stone into his hand. "Go. If I don't hear from you in a week, I'll send men, and we'll repeat this lesson."

Janus bowed his head. Hiroshi didn't look up as Janus walked past him and deliberately shielded his body so that Janus couldn't see what he was writing. Janus ignored him and was back to his lair by sunrise.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next evening, Janus led Lyall to the doorway closest to Strickland's office. The ward let them pass, and Janus took the time to paint two new wards. "What are those for?" Lyall asked.

"Protection. No one gets in without my knowledge."

"You learn that?" Lyall asked. He still moved like a human would, hunched over with his fists loosely in his pocket to give off the message to both leave him alone and approach him at one's own risk. He carried his knife, a weapon that would be practically useless against anything he would meet that night. No vampire would hold still long enough to have its head sawn off.

"A bit of learning, a bit of talent," Janus said, modestly. Not all vampires developed theirs, or had anything to develop. Talents like talking to wolves were only good for parlor tricks these days -- not that anyone still had parlors.

Lyall was silent for a moment. "Where we going?" he finally asked.

"To your old master's," Janus said.

Lyall frowned and stopped walking. "No."

"I don't believe that was a question that required your input or permission," Janus said.

Lyall crossed his arms over his chest.

Janus stopped walking as well. The mulish look grew stronger.

“Do you have something to say to me?” Janus asked. He kept his voice mild.

Janus’s town car pulled up. He turned around before Lyall could speak again. Miller bowed his head to Janus. “Good to see you again, sir,” Miller said.

It was Miller’s way of expressing his gladness at Janus not being dead, but Janus understood. “My associate,” Janus said, waving backward towards Lyall.

Miller glanced behind him, and obviously saw the look of panicked stubbornness on Lyall’s face. “Of course, sir. Will he be riding in the trunk tonight?”

Janus turned back to Lyall, who was sulking by the filthy brick wall of a building. “He may not be riding with us at all,” he said. “You’re certainly free to go, if you think you can defend yourself and learn our ways on your own. There might be others who will take you as a pet, but you run the risk of being used as their wine bag, or perhaps, just being used. I will treat you fairly, ensure that you are not mistreated in any way, and in return, you will be mine.”

Lyall began pacing, back and forth, like a caged beast at a zoo. He never left the length of the car, however. Janus sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “A man with the scars you had would understand the situation you’re in right now. Get in the car, or be off with you.”

Lyall looked at Janus. Lyall’s fists were tight, his lips bloody from raking his teeth against them, and his eyes as cold as any vampire Janus knew. “Right, then,” Lyall said, then turned heel and ran down the street.

Janus sighed. “Wait for me here,” he told Miller, then ran after Lyall.

Lyall was fast, running with a grace that few humans cultivated these days. He ran silently and at a sprint-like pace over long distance. He ran, paying no heed to the traffic lights or crosswalks. It was a small miracle that cars missed him. They allowed Lyall to pass but blocked Janus’s path, and he almost lost Lyall twice before he actually did.

It was obvious Lyall was heading for the park, and Janus continued at his own pace, knowing that Lyall would probably be obvious to find once he got there.

And he wasn’t wrong. It took him almost fifteen minutes to reach it, the long city blocks nearly killing him, but even before he crossed the bridle path into the park itself, he heard the yips and cries of the jackals hunting their new prize.

Wild vampires, those who hadn’t been taken as pets and had spent too much time fending off the shadows, weren’t the only ones after the new vampires. The shadows were also building, and they sent the huge sewer rats, larger than small dogs, scurrying out of their nests and pipes. The air felt charged with Lyall’s fear and bloodlust.

Janus smelled two jackals, an older and a younger one. The older was teaching the younger how to hunt. How to drive the prey deeper into the treed area and run it in circles until the prey didn’t know what to do. Lyall was still not panicking, though the fear in him was growing stronger, and Janus doubted he could keep it together much longer.

Where Janus walked, the shadows dissipated, but regrouped stronger behind him. If the jackals gave up, the shadows would take Lyall after he'd exhausted himself. Janus broke into a jog and followed the howls from the trees.

Lyall was tiring by the time Janus reached him, and that was affecting his judgment. His fear was so close to the surface that his blood rushed with it. That was as close as a vampire had to a beating heart, and it gave him more strength than anything else could have. But it wasn't going to last long, and when Lyall crashed, there would be no more fight to him.

The dew had drenched the back of Lyall's shirt, and Janus wondered how he'd gone down, and, more importantly, how he'd gotten back up again. The dark circle of trees anchored the shadows, and they collected enough that they blotted out the nearby lampposts. They couldn't enter until the older of the two jackals left, but they lay in wait.

The older one wasn't the bigger of the two, but he was still allowing the younger to move in for the kill. Lyall was up against a big oak tree, but still snarling.

None of them paid any attention to Janus. He could have been invisible. Not even the older of the two looked away from blocking Lyall's only escape route. Janus calmly walked up to him, picking up a stout branch off the ground as he did, and brought it up in a sweeping arch. It caught the older jackal on the back of the head, and he fell sideways.

Lyall reacted before the younger did, launching himself from the tree straight for the jackal's eyes. Although he managed to throw up his hand to block Lyall's finger, he didn't see Lyall switching tactics. Lyall's palm caught his jackal's nose, smashing it inward as he lashed up with his knee, crushing testicles.

Lyall pushed him over with the flat of his hand to the jackal's forehead.

Janus waited for Lyall to step over the body. Lyall's blood was still singing through his veins, but he looked ready to collapse. "I could have handled that," he said, finally.

"Yes. It looked that way to me," Janus said, voice flat. Lyall opened his mouth to protest, then shut it. He walked, a bit more unsteadily, to where Janus stood.

They stood still for a second, maybe two, then Lyall was tearing off Janus's shirt. Janus actually had to pull away to preserve the buttons. Lyall didn't take the motion as a rebuff, but began yanking off his own shirt.

Lyall's thought process was obviously not as fast as it could have been, and Janus watched as Lyall realized he didn't need to take off his shirt to accomplish what he needed. He scrambled to get his jeans undone, and was stripped and ready for Janus up against a tree in the next moment.

Just touching the rush of blood so close to Lyall's skin reminded Janus again of how it felt to be alive. His cock was instantly hard at the memory, and the little things, such as the soft, exposed skin at the nape of Lyall's neck or the way his wrists looked crossed over his head made Janus's fingers fumble as he smeared as much spit as he could onto his cock.

The cool night wind chilled him instantly, but that only made the heat inside Lyall seem all the more intense. Lyall cried out, arching his back, and he shifted to brace himself with one hand so the other could reach down and jerk himself with.

Janus dug his fingers into Lyall's hips, driving him back. The sounds Lyall made could have been heard from the pathway and were growing in intensity, but Janus let him make them. It was right that he was loud. Janus wanted to howl like the jackals had.

Lyall's skin was now a bright, human pink. Janus couldn't stop himself from biting down on Lyall's shoulder. The blood burst into his mouth, bringing with it the lust, heat, and frenzy.

Lyall came, shuddering. The blood took a darker, more intense flavor to it, and Janus pinned him to the tree, not letting him collapse away as he drove himself further inside Lyall. He was so close, the heat building up in his belly could have rivaled Lyall's blood. Lyall hung his head, submitting to him fully, and Janus came on the taste of Lyall's submission.

He pulled away, sweating. They were alone in the clearing. The two jackals had slunk off, and while he realized that was a good thing intellectually, in that moment he would have preferred killing them both. The warm glow he had inside was tinged with bloodlust. Lyall felt it, too, and for several minutes, they remained leaning against the tree until their legs worked again.

Lyall recovered first. He pushed away from the tree and zipped up his jeans. "I take care of myself," he managed.

Janus stood up as well, though he felt woefully inadequate for the task quite yet. "And now, you don't have to."

Lyall looked up at him. "No?" he asked.

Janus shook his head. "All of us start out this way. I was Breylorn's pet, Strickland was his master's. Otherwise, if you're lucky, you'll end up like those two. Do you doubt me?"

"No," Lyall said, flatly.

"Do you doubt that I will some day release you?"

"No," Lyall said a final time, this time with emotion.

"Then you have to trust me. Sending you out on the streets tonight would only be chumming the water. And not asking your old master permission would be a terrible mistake. In case you hadn't noticed, we stand on great ceremony here."

Lyall nodded, though he didn't look pleased again. "Yes, master," he said.

Janus put his arm over Lyall's shoulder. They made it back to the edge of the park, going out where they had gone in. The shadows had disappeared, actually allowing the night sky to shine down on them again. The rats were back in their nests, and the jackals were further still in the park, licking their wounds. Janus patted Lyall on the head. Lyall glared at him balefully, but didn't move away.

They didn't speak again on the drive to the office, but Lyall slid a few inches closer, so that their thighs were touching.

## Chapter Five

Lyall got out of the car and craned his neck back in front of Strickland's office. "I've never been here before," he said.

"If you don't remember anything, how can you tell?" Janus asked. He slipped his hand under Lyall's leather jacket and slid his hand under the jeans. The two guards, vampires from the way they smelled, saw the gesture and nodded to themselves.

Lyall leaned back into his hand. "I'm not seeing the exits," he said. He looked sideways, to Janus, and shook his head. "I couldn't tell you a single strategy to get out. I'm telling you, I've never been here before."

The main lobby was sparsely decorated. The plain black chairs in the central location seemed to encourage people not to linger, and the potted plants were just a shade off the proper green. The floor shone, reflecting the harsh lighting. Lyall glanced up, first, and frowned. It wasn't a closed ceiling, but the metal support beams seemed just right to hold a man. The back of Janus's neck crawled at the sudden exposure he felt.

It must not have posed any threat, because Lyall turned his attention from it. Instead he glanced at the entrance marked for employees and nodded again.

"You sure you've never been here before?" Janus asked.

"I'd swear it," Lyall said.

After hours, the reception desk had two heavy-set men behind it. Their blond hair had the same brush cut, they both wore sunglasses despite the artificial lights, and their dark suits were well tailored to fit their broad chests.

"Janus," the first one grunted at him. "Good to see you up from the rats again. Did the doddering old man yank your collar?"

Strickland had obviously chosen them for the matched set. They were still young; this close to them Janus could smell the long-hair rockers they'd been as humans, in the 80s.

"Everyone sells out," Janus told Lyall and then had both men by their neckties, kneeling at his feet.

"Would you like to apologize now?" Janus asked mildly.

The response was a strangled cry. Janus took it as an affirmation. He dropped the ties. They crawled to their feet.

Janus leaned on the reception desk. "Just because I may occasionally forget my rank doesn't mean that you should, too," he said.

The first nodded, rubbing his throat. "He's waiting for you," he said, clearing his throat.

Janus nodded. "Do you know my friend here?"

"He was a human," the second said. He sniffed, then wrinkled his nose. "He hasn't even fed yet."

"Thank you for your time." He led Lyall to the elevator.

"How did you do that?" Lyall asked. He was looking back to the two watchdogs, still adjusting their suits. "They were twice your size."

"You will learn, one day, that size means nothing. Age is real power here. I can move faster, and I'm stronger than they are."

Lyall turned back, and there was more respect in his face. He bowed his head, a slight movement that both lowered his eyes and exposed his throat. Janus hadn't seen him do it before.

"We'll feed tonight," Janus said, trailing his finger down the exposed line. "I promise."

Lyall shivered under him.

The elevator door opened, revealing a long, brightly lit hall. Vision waited for them.

"Janus," he said, but looked behind him to Lyall. There was no recognition in his eyes, and Janus began to think that perhaps he'd made a mistake.

"I'm here to see Strickland."

Vision bared his teeth, looking Janus up and down again, but then nodded. He licked his incisor, which wasn't a fang, and yet still it was very sharp.

Janus kept his insolent pose. He curled his lip, a twitch to his mouth, and dismissed Vision by turning his back to him. It left his back exposed, his neck, his throat, but the fury emanating from Vision was worth it. Vision snarled, but Janus didn't turn back.

Strickland's office was at the end of the hall. It wasn't until they reached it that Lyall's face went pale. His teeth came out, and he touched his belly where he'd been gutted. "I've been here before," he said, voice tight. His hands went to his stomach, as though he had to hold his intestines in. His lips tightened. "I was hooded and bound. But I remember this door."

Lyall was thinking of his knife. That much was obvious. Janus sighed, and shook his head. "Then you stay out here."

"You can't be serious! That man gutted me. He deserves --"

Janus pinned him to the wall. "He'd pull your throat from your neck and bathe in your blood. You are staying here." He pointed to the ground.

Lyall's entire body tensed, and then he exhaled and nodded his head. "I'm staying here," he said, quietly.

Janus patted him on the head and pushed open the door.

Strickland was in his chair. The new smell of blood didn't completely mask the old. The overhead lights were off, and the bright city lights were muted through the dark glass.

"Close the door," Strickland said. His voice sounded strangled, and he was obviously in pain. Janus closed the door, and headed to the center of the room. Strickland still hadn't turned around, or moved in any way, but the smell of blood was euphoric. It was elder's blood, dripping uselessly onto the fine carpet.

"Bloody Hell," Janus whispered. Strickland's eyes were wide, his lips bloodless and white, and the line across his throat was so fine it looked more like a string than anything. It definitely didn't look as though someone had decapitated the elder so quickly the head hadn't had a chance to fall. But Janus knew in an instant that was what had happened.

He dropped to his knees, hands to his throat. Elders didn't just die. "Tell me what I can do," he said.

"There isn't time. I don't feel anything but cold. They move me, and it will --" Strickland didn't finish.

"Who did this, my lord?" Janus asked. It no longer mattered that Janus wasn't his family.

"I didn't see his face," Strickland said. His words were slurred now, as though his tongue had thickened.

Pounding came from the door, loud enough that the windows rattled. The walls shook, the floor had a slight tremor, and Strickland's head, so delicately balanced, teetered once and then fell into his lap.

"Fuck," Janus said.

Janus stood up, wishing he hadn't blown the exit ward that had taken him months to create without at least having a spare in his pocket. He yanked open the door, but it was only the second of the watchdogs from downstairs. Lyall was pinned to the wall, much as he'd been when Janus had left him, but with Janus's part being played by Vision. "What ever is the matter with your face?" Vision asked. He kept his hand where it was, just below Lyall's navel. Janus broke Lyall's compulsion through sheer force.

The dog was staring at Janus, which gave them time. He grabbed Lyall, pulling him behind, and if either Vision or the dog were to look into the office, he doubted he could move fast enough to the elevator and have it close without one of them stopping them. Moving through time would show their hand.



"Hey, Vision," Janus called, turning around and walking backward toward the elevator. "Hands off what's mine."

Vision sneered, and the dog, as Janus had been hoping, was too busy watching the drama to go into the room. The smell of blood surely would have reached them by now. It would take only a second for one of them to realize what had happened. As casually as he could, Janus pushed the elevator door close button. The door took forever to close, and Janus flipped Vision the bird as they slid shut. But then the elevator was moving, and they were between floors by the time he heard one of them scream his name.

Janus slumped against the wall, and stopped the car. "I figure we got about three minutes before they override the control. Know any other ways out of the building, genius?"

"He's dead, isn't he?"

Janus only nodded.

"This way," Lyall said, pointing up. Janus boosted him, and within seconds the elevator hatch had been popped. "This is what I'm good at," Lyall said, scrambling through and then pulled Janus up with him.

The elevator whirled back into motion, but they'd already made it to the service ladder.

"So now what?" Janus asked.

"Now, we go down."

"Won't they be expecting that?"

Lyall grinned up at him. "Yes."

Lyall stopped on the fourth floor and used his knife to jimmy open the doors. It was a tight fit, but Lyall pulled him through again. Lyall took a moment to study the fire-exit escape plan posted in the dimly lit hall before dismissing it as useless. He looked up instead to the same cheap ceiling tiles as were on the top floor. Then, he climbed up a door.

Janus had never seen anything like it. Lyall braced the tip of his fingers on the door frame, then his left foot was on the doorknob, and he pushed the tile aside. He was gone a heartbeat later. The entire operation had taken seconds.

He reappeared over Janus's head. "There's a crawlspace up here," Lyall said. He offered down his hand and easily pulled Janus up with him. "They might as well have left signs that said 'escape here.'"

"Why is that?" Janus asked as they began to crawl. He didn't have the same talents Lyall had on his knees. Lyall had to stop and wait for him a couple times.

"This leads to the shipping/receiving area," Lyall said.

Janus followed. Several times Lyall seemed disoriented, but then found his way and kept going. The pipes and crawlspaces they slid through were filthy, cramped, and hot, and Janus had no idea what floor they were on, but Lyall knew.

“In here,” Lyall finally said. How he managed to turn around in the pipe they were in, Janus had no idea. But one moment he was facing Lyall’s ass, the next his toothy grin.

The new pipe seemed even smaller. “Are you sure?” Janus asked, hesitant for the first time.

Lyall nodded. Squeezing, Janus just made the first segment of the pipe. “Oh, and master?” Lyall asked, honey dripping from his fangs.

“What?” Janus snapped.

“Don’t mind the fall,” Lyall called, as the pipe beneath Janus tipped, dropping him out of the ceiling. For a heartbeat, the fall was endless, but as soon as he finished that thought, he hit the roof of a parked semi truck under him. He hit hard, stunning his body, but managed to stop himself from rolling off the edge.

Lyall dropped like a cat, landing on his hands and feet. He looked around the service bay, at the white truck beneath him and the general abandonment of the bay. “This will do,” he said.

Janus climbed more heavily to his feet. “And after it’s done, you and I will have words.”

Lyall bowed with another flourish, and stepped off the deck. A moment later, the sounds of the engine rumbling to life came from below. The vibrations shook the entire truck.

Janus dropped down as well, slowing time for his descent, and climbed into the unlocked truck. He glanced to the torn out panel under the steering column. The wires had been stripped and twisted together. “The bay’s still locked,” Janus felt obligated to point out.

“Hm. Yes, that is a problem,” Lyall agreed, then gunned the engine.

The crunch shook the truck, but the metal gate ripped from the wall as the truck powered its way through it. The streets were fortunately deserted; a banging sound followed and bits of rubber blew off the right side. “We’ve lost a couple tires,” Lyall said. The shooting sparks behind them lit up the night.

Not the quietest of escapes he’d ever done, but they were out. There was an entrance close to him, he felt it, but he also felt how close they were behind him. “Ready to jump?” Janus asked.

Lyall nodded. They opened their doors and jumped out. The entrance was waiting for them, as welcoming as anything Janus had ever seen. He heard the cries of the vampires following them just as he scooped up Lyall’s arm and crashed past his own wards.

The wall sealed behind them.

His lair felt desecrated. It wasn’t that it looked very much like the abandoned service bay they’d just collapsed, but the graffiti, paint four feet high, took up the entire back wall. “Khorosho bit’ naehad,” he read. It had been years since he’d had to read Cyrillic.

"That's Russian, isn't it?" Lyall asked. "What does that mean?"

"It's good to be back," Janus translated.

\* \* \* \* \*

Varaugh watched the truck speed off from the window. Three years ago, he would have been the first to rip the semi's door from its hinges and tear the young pup's throat out, but now he could only watch helplessly from the suite below Strickland's corpse.

"They were lucky," Vision said, from his knees, behind him. He was trying not to breath too hard, Varaugh knew. Vision filled the room with the spicy scent of blood and fear.

Varaugh picked up the knife and returned to where Vision was bound to the desk behind him. The lines of blood crossing his back weren't serious, and most had already stopped bleeding. "What was that?"

"Nothing." A long pause. "Master."

The surliness in his voice made Varaugh smile. He didn't doubt for a second that he had Vision's loyalty, but was pleased that Vision had still come to him with Strickland's head as his gift. Vision was strong and smart, Varaugh knew, but not strong enough to threaten him quite yet. He'd use all that he could from Vision and discard what remained. "Good boy."

The knife looked good on Vision's skin, but it unfortunately wouldn't permanently mark. Vision's dead heart would only allow passive bleeding, regardless of how deep he cut, and Varaugh's desire to rend was stronger than the damage he could have done to Vision without killing him.

Instead, he stroked Vision's back, running his hand down his skin and slipped it between Vision's belly and the cold desk. Vision was hard, and Varaugh took the erection in his hand. Vision shivered.

"Master, please," Vision begged, moving as much as he could in the cotton ropes. His hands twisted, but he couldn't move more than an inch from the desk.

Three years ago, Varaugh would have sunk his teeth into the soft flesh in Vision's inner thigh. He would have taken his fill, leaving Vision drained and fragile, but his human teeth wouldn't obey his hunger. He wasn't vampire any more; the wards that had saved him saw to that. But neither was he human, entirely.

"You will bring me Janus, will you not?" Varaugh asked.

"Master, anything, I swear it."

"Intact and whole?"

That made Vision hiss. "Perhaps not entirely," he said, his voice thick.

"You will not defile him in any way," Varaugh whispered, pulling Vision back so that his wrists stretched enough to be painful. They had a history, he and Janus. Vision hissed again, straining against his bonds one more time, but he was held perfectly still. Varaugh pulled him again, back, and Vision put his head against the desk.

"Understand?" Varaugh asked. Vision was now in line with the edge of the desk. Varaugh sucked on his finger, briefly, and pressed it against Vision. His body opened, easily. He'd prepared himself, then.

"Yes, my lord. Janus is not to be touched."

"Good boy. You can teach the pup how to fetch, should you wish to spare his life, but Janus is mine."

Vision fought the ropes, and they tightened more, cutting into his scrotum. "Yes," he hissed.

Varaugh nicked the line where Vision's thigh joined the line of his buttock. Vision's shudder shook the table. Blood welled in the cut, just as Varaugh's finger found the prostate. He sucked at the cut, drinking as much as his stomach could handle. It was never enough. Drinking from a compliant vampire was nothing when compared to drinking from a struggling, terrified human. But his stomach lacked any of the enzymes to even attempt drinking undigested blood. It disgusted him, to be reduced to a peeping chick in a nest, needing to be fed.

He drank enough to fulfill his other needs, which were also dependent on blood. Those hungers were as human as vampire, and at least he could still delight in them. Vision's wound healed a second after Varaugh stopped drinking, but that was more Vision's power than his own.

Varaugh manhandled him back to a better angle and slammed himself inside Vision. Vision was now so tight in the bonds Varaugh doubted Vision could move the air in and out of his lungs to form the words.

Varaugh took his pleasure, and Vision needed no assistance on his part. Varaugh reached up, tangling his hands into Vision's hair, and pulled his head back as his thrusts became harder and harder.

"My little whore," he said, voice only now just starting to thicken. "You honestly think you could take Janus? He's better than you are, and what kills you again is the fact that you know it. If he were here right now, you'd grovel at his feet."

"If you wanted me to, master," Vision managed.

Varaugh cuffed him on the side of the head. "That isn't what I said, is it?"

"No, master," Vision said. His body started to shake.

Varaugh was close, though even when he was coming, the edge just was never quite steep enough. "What did I say?" he demanded. He let go of Vision's head to grab his hips and began slamming himself into Vision.

"I'd grovel," Vision managed. "Please, master."

Varaugh came. Even as he felt his balls tighten and the pulsating sensation begin, his body was already detaching from the pleasure, and it left him chasing the orgasm as it spiraled away from him.

Vision was wrecked, panting in his bonds, but Varaugh didn't care. Vision had his own men who would free him, clean him, and hand him back his dignity, but he didn't concern himself with that.

"Tell anyone, I'll kill you," Vision said. He'd turned his head away, and his voice was muffled.

"You'd certainly try," Varaugh agreed and left the room. The denied pleasure in his body pooled in his belly and began to rot.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lair, Janus knew, was far bigger than it felt. It did take him at least a minute to cross from one end of the room to the other, but he still felt caged. Lyall was sprawled on the bed, shirt pulled up far enough to expose his belly. His hands drew a line, back and forth over where the pink scar tissue was still raised on his skin.

Janus moved to the bed. He put his hand over Lyall's flat space that stretched from his exposed hipbone to the waistband of his jeans.

Lyall shuddered under his hand, but his response was only hunger. He'd promised Lyall they'd feed, but they didn't dare go out for the rest of the night. Lyall's body had stopped feeding on itself, though, and his veins were crying out to be fed. "Do you remember anything more?"

Lyall shook his head. His pinkie intertwined with Janus's finger. "I'd done something wrong," he said. His eyebrows furrowed together, then he touched his chest, two inches from his heart.

"You've worked for vampires before," Janus said. He unbuttoned Lyall's jeans, pulling them down to mid-thigh. His cock wasn't hard, but Janus licked his palm and began stroking it. From where he lay, the track marks on Lyall's thigh were obvious. A bullet wound would heal; the ugly pink scar would eventually settle to a white line and then nothing. But the track marks remained, a marker for the fattest bleeding spot.

"I looked for things," Lyall said. He flinched and shook his head. "At least, I'm fairly sure I did. I remember being punished for being unable to procure certain items."

"Do you remember what?" Janus asked. He bent down and took Lyall's cock in his mouth. It still hadn't hardened any, but he wanted to taste it.

Lyall shook his head.

"The memories will come back," Janus said. "Sooner or later, you'll know what you did."

Lyall relaxed, even with Janus's mouth over him.

His tremble turned into a spasm, and he pulled at the blankets as he rode through the pain. He didn't make a sound, but the muscles in his neck stood out through his skin. "They're just hunger pains," Janus said and left him on the bed. He stepped outside and made a phone call.

Breylorn was not thrilled to hear him. "What did you do?" he barked, even as the phone hadn't quite reached his mouth.

"If I said I did nothing, would you believe me?"

"You quarrel with Strickland; he's dead the next day."

"Okay, so it looks bad," Janus said. "But I didn't do anything. Strickland didn't see who attacked him, but he said --"

"Strickland was completely decapitated. How could he have said anything?"

Janus told him.

"Oh," said Breylorn.

"I need asylum," Janus said. "My pet needs to eat."

"I'll send a car. Come in."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet."

"Yes, sir," Janus said. Breylorn hung up first.

Janus's alleyways had never felt sinister to him in all the years he'd made the lower city his true home. Now, no matter which end of the alley he looked to, he felt exposed. He went back inside to where Lyall was curled up on the bed. "We've got to go," he said.

Lyall groaned and shook his head.

"I know it hurts," Janus said. "But you can't let yourself give into it. Get up. Walking around will make it better, for a short time at least."

"And then?"

"You'll probably die. Get up."

Lyall closed his eyes, but let Janus pull him to his feet. The car was waiting for them, and Miller helped him put Lyall in the back seat. Miller didn't ask him where to go. Although they did have a solid working relationship, Janus didn't ask him to compromise himself.

The men on duty in Breylorn's building didn't look at them as they entered. Janus pushed the button himself to summon the elevator. The painting was in shadow from the dim light of the lobby, and that made the torture of the eviscerated man, trapped behind the penises of flowers, seem even more gruesome.

The elevator lurched, then began pulling itself up. Lyall was still shivering, so Janus put his arm over his shoulder and helped him inside the apartment.

"So this is him," Breylorn said, standing in the hall, his arms crossed over his chest. "Was he worth it?"

"Was I?" Janus asked. Breylorn didn't answer, but the aggression in his stance lessened. Breylorn had saved him when he was dying in a battlefield in Europe.

The pain had been excruciating, and Breylorn had been there, feeding him his own blood until he could uncurl from the ball of pain his body had turned into.

"In here, then," Breylorn said and opened a door in the hall. The room was small and was probably meant to be the maid's quarters. A single cot was against the far wall. Its dull metal and the gray blanket made Janus's skin itch.

A professional sat on the cot. He smelled of other vampires, and the marks on his neck were as long as the tracks of any heroin addicts. Pros kept their blood clean and were paid a healthy wage to do so. This one stood up and took Lyall's other arm. "Let me help," the man murmured.

"Take care of him," Janus said.

The man lowered his eyes. He was fairly plain, medium height, brown hair, face a little soft, but Janus didn't sense any animosity to him.

"I will, sir," he said. Lyall called out for him, as Janus passed him to the pro. But Breylorn was still at the door, and Janus knew that he'd be needed. Instead, he helped Lyall sit and knelt down beside him.

"I'll be outside," he said. Lyall's face was flushed, and he pressed his too warm cheeks into Janus's cold hand. Breylorn said nothing, but Janus knew his patience was about to snap. "I have to go."

He stood up, as the pro took his place. The man lifted the hair off his neck and guided Lyall's mouth down to his neck. "Not too deep," he instructed, and Lyall, weak as a pup, could only obey.

The scent of blood filled the room. Janus's teeth came out despite himself, wanting to join Lyall for his meal, but he knew that wasn't an option. He forced them back inside; teeth were a sign of aggression, and he needed to appear as docile as possible.

He was relieved when Breylorn led him into the white living room, but less so when he saw the sheet of plastic rolled out. He didn't hesitate, however, and walked over it to stand in the middle.

Breylorn took his time settling down in the armchair. He drummed his long nails on the black enamel. "You may begin your explanation now."

Janus dropped to his knees and touched his throat. "I told you everything. I went there to ask for Lyall. I was told at the desk he was expecting me, and when I walked into the office, he was lucid and talking. But his head had been completely severed from his body, and it tumbled into his lap when someone banged on the door."

"That's it?" Breylorn asked.

Janus knew Breylorn didn't believe him. Still, he had to try. "If I had killed him, why wouldn't I have drunk from him first?" Janus asked. There wasn't a mark on Strickland's neck. He looked up. "And most importantly, sir, I'm telling you I didn't do this."

Breylorn crooked his finger. "Come."

Crawling forward on the plastic was uncomfortable. Without being told, Janus unbuttoned the man's slacks. Breylorn's nails held his throat, and Janus felt how sharp they were. The slightest bit of pressure would tear open his throat. He might recover from it, he might not, but there would probably be no recovery at all if Breylorn wrapped him up in plastic and threw him into the Hudson. His skin crawled.

He'd loved Breylorn, once, with the blind stupid love of a child. Breylorn had saved him, kept him, and treasured him as something beautiful. The stronger he'd gotten in his own right, the less interest Breylorn had had in him, until one day Breylorn had come back to the house they'd shared in Boston with a new pet on his arm.

Taking Breylorn into his mouth was familiar, like slipping on a pair of well-worn leather gloves. It didn't matter to him that he could very well be torn and bloody in a second; he kept his teeth covered.

Breylorn relaxed and removed his hands, wrapping them into Janus's hair. He made a soft sound on the back of his throat and began pushing Janus down as he thrust his hips.

Young vampires hadn't completely conquered their fear of not being able to breathe. Janus had no such worry. He was too hungry to get off himself, but the warmth spreading from his groin out was enough to at least wake his cock from its slumber. He didn't stroke himself; it required too much coordination he didn't have at that moment, but rocked back and forth on his heels just to enjoy the friction.

Breylorn pushed his head all the way down. All Janus had to do was be the receptacle. He swallowed what was given to him and felt his body wake up even with just that bit of life.

Breylorn didn't let him go. He held him down for one second more and then pulled Janus up by his throat. Breylorn stood up, and Janus dangled half a foot from the ground.

"You must think me a fool," Breylorn said and dug his fangs into Janus's neck. Janus kicked out, struggling when he knew he should just accept the punishment, but Breylorn kept pulling his blood. His head went fuzzy, his limbs cold, and only when there wasn't much left inside Janus at all did Breylorn drop him on the plastic.

Hiroshi emerged from the shadows.

Janus's head hurt. His joints ached, and his muscles started to spasm. It wasn't hunger pains; he'd lost too much blood for that. His entire body went into shock from lack of blood, and watched almost dispassionately as Breylorn left him in the room, alone, without even enough blood in him to make the plastic sheet a necessity.



The last thing Janus heard was Hiroshi's sycophantic assurances that he would take care of the matter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blood dripped into the back of his throat. First a drop, then a trickle. It woke him up, reminding him of how much pain he was in.

"If you don't open your mouth, I can't feed you," the pro said, his voice sad.

"What's your name?" Janus asked. More blood dripped into his mouth. He swallowed, trying to reach for the man's wrist, but the chains over his chest, arms and ankles wouldn't let him move. He was in a truck, and the whine of the tires on the road told him they were moving quite fast. It was at least sunrise, and the radiation from the sun made the metal hot. "What's your name?" Janus asked.

"You don't need to know it," the pro said.

"More," Janus said, opening his mouth. "Please."

"You've had your fill," the pro said.

"Wine. Beer, damn it, water, please. It won't make me any stronger." His stomach spasmed.

The pro looked up and nodded. He opened a filthy, lukewarm bottle of water, then poured it down Janus's throat.

Janus swallowed as quickly as he could to keep it from bubbling out his mouth. The agony from his muscles relaxed, and while his body had no more strength than before, at least the pain ended. "Thank you," Janus said.

"Don't thank me yet." The pro put the bottle away.

There was something in the water. His head felt suddenly heavy, his tongue thick. He lay back, and the chains went from something restraining to a welcome, safe weight.

"What was in the water?" he managed.

"Nothing, just water," the pro whispered. His eyelids were drooping. "The drug is in my blood itself. It will wear off, soon enough."

Regardless of how heavy his body was, Janus forced himself to sit up. "Lyall drank from you," he said.

"He did," the pro agreed. Janus now smelled the drug on his breath, and he wondered why he missed the sweet smell before. "Sleep now."

Janus couldn't fight it any more. He slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

He woke, several hours later. The truck was still for the day. The interior was dark enough, but he still felt the sun's rays beating down on him. The truck's door opened, and Janus recoiled in horror at the sound of the lock moving. But it opened up into what must have been a service bay.

"Do you think we've gone through this much work just to have you burn in the back of a truck?" the pro asked.

Janus lay back. "You could give me your name," Janus said. "I couldn't compel you to give me water, I'm not going to have any more power with your name."

"That may be true, but I still don't want you to have it," the pro's voice was still sleepy, which just made him sound more satisfied with himself. "You must be hungry."

The day must have been hot. The man's hair was damp curls plastered to his neck and face. Janus eyed him, knowing he'd be a fool to turn down the drugged meal in exchange for starvation.

"I am," Janus finally said.

The pro nicked his wrist with a razor blade and wasted precious drops crossing the truck.

Janus strained against his chains, not too proud to want to lick the spilled blood off the filthy floor. The man let his blood drip into Janus's mouth and let him drink two mouthfuls. The added drug in the man's system made it work much faster, but Janus didn't care. He was even allowed more water.

And then he didn't fight the dreamless sleep.

Janus woke again.

He was no longer in the back of a truck. The safety of the walls around him gave him a moment's respite from the panic inside. He was still chained, but the room was soothing and dark.

He feigned sleep; the sounds of heartbeats and breathing told him he wasn't alone in the room. There were four of them, one at each corner of the room. The pro was the only one who wasn't even slightly nervous. "He's awake," the pro said. His voice was becoming more animated as the drugs in his system wore off.

Janus opened his eyes. The pro approached, a swagger in his step. His face had even lost some of its formlessness. His thin lips twisted into a smile.

"Are you going to be good?" he asked, his voice pleasantly mild. Janus pulled his lips back. The man slapped him, and it was surprisingly painful.

Janus jerked back in his chains. The pro slapped him again, hard, again, and again, until Janus's teeth came out despite himself.

In a practiced motion, the pro had a pair of pliers out and pressed to his upper fang. The metal was cold, and its grip pinched his gum. Janus couldn't retract the tooth without pulling it out of his skull.

"Do you want to lose this?" the pro asked.

Janus didn't answer, but looked at the pro. The feeling of the man's fingers holding his lip back was an affront. He couldn't stop the growl in the back of his throat.

"Easy now," the pro said, speaking to him as though he were a wild beast. He wasn't that much wrong. Janus tensed; the desire to tear the man's throat out, wasting the blood to let it pour down his chest, was overwhelming.

"You can see, he's really a vampire," the pro continued, speaking behind him, to the man closest to the door. From him, Janus smelled how old he was. He lacked pigmentation in his hair and elasticity in his skin.

"May I ... approach?" the man asked.

"He's contained."

Janus hissed. The pliers on his tooth tightened, and a hair's breadth more of pressure would shatter it. He stopped hissing and looked away. The tension slacked.

"This one is stronger than the last," the man said. The human pulled up his shirt, and dared running his hand up Janus's belly.

"Yes. He should last you quite a few years."

Janus wanted to snort. The old man didn't look as though he had a few years left. When the old man touched Janus, all he felt was the man's death.

"You haven't figured it out yet," the pro said. He was now speaking to Janus, although using a tone that would have better suited a child. "But you will."

His attention was so focused on the pro, he didn't see the old man take something out of his pocket. The nick on his arm was so quick he didn't feel the pain until he felt the old man's lips on his wrist.

He didn't get much -- there wasn't enough blood in Janus to bleed well at all -- but it seemed to satisfy him. He pulled away and wiped his mouth, sucking his fingers clean.

"We've kept him pretty well drained for transport, but if you let him drink and continue with his injections, he should keep producing for you."

"Excellent," the old man said. "Take him downstairs."

"One more drink," the pro told Janus. "The effects are wearing off, but it should be enough to move you to your final home."

He removed the pliers, and Janus turned his head away the moment he had the freedom to do so. "Come now," the pro said, unbuttoning his cuff. "Open wide."

"Go to hell," Janus said, and clenched his teeth.

The pro held the fatty part of his arm over Janus's lips. "Come on, you can even bite. It may be your last taste that's not spoon-fed. Come on, now's not the time to become stubborn."

It appeared, to Janus at least, to be the perfect time to become stubborn, but his denied hunger had been prolonged for so long he couldn't help his teeth coming out. The arm in front of him, plump enough that there were no immediate veins reachable, would give him nothing from the heart. Still, he couldn't stop himself.

He bit down, the flesh providing wonderful elasticity to his teeth. He sucked the blood as fast as it came to the wound, and then his tooth struck the implanted sack, deep in the man's arm. He couldn't pull away; couldn't withdraw from the wound fast enough. The drug absorbed into the lining of his mouth before he even had a chance to spit the blood out, and he was falling back on the table.

"You can unchain him," was the last thing he heard.

He woke up, again, his arms and legs tangled beneath the weight of his body. It woke a long ago memory of pins and needles. With no blood in his system, his body felt leaden.

"You're the new one," a voice said.

Janus lifted his head. The room was damp and cold. They were underground, that he knew, but it didn't feel like any kind of cellar. It felt like it had concrete walls. "What is this place?"

"Does it matter?" the voice asked. It sounded dry, more like an echo. The blackness couldn't be penetrated, and it made Janus's skin crawl.

"Who are you?" Janus asked.

"No one." The laugh sounded like leaves blowing across a courtyard. It was an empty, hollow rattle.

Janus pulled to his knees and banged his head on the bars above his head. He reached out. The bars were four feet in any direction. "What is this place?"

"Nowhere." There wasn't a laugh that followed that comment, but Janus could feel the man's shoulders shake. "The hells. Does it really matter?"

Janus rattled the door. It was stronger than he was, and he barely moved it a quarter-inch.

"You don't want to do that, babe. You're just going to bring them sooner."

"Who's them?" Janus called. He heard footsteps down the stairwell. The other voice didn't answer. "Who are they?" Janus repeated.

Silence. The footsteps came down the hall and stopped in front of the door. The light spilled in, blinding, from the hall. Janus pulled back, slamming his shoulders against the bars, then threw his arm over his eyes to keep his retinas from burning.

"Who was making the noise?" a human demanded. He was nothing but a dark shadow against the white light, but Janus heard the other vampire in the room shudder.

"No one, master. Forgive us," the old one said.

Janus's anger grew. He understood the vampire to be tired, but to call a human master was sick to his ears. The human had a flashlight, and he shone it directly into Janus's cage. "Is that right?" he asked.

Janus jerked away from the circle of light on his chest. The human came into the room, and stopped maddeningly more than an arm's reach away.

"Is that right, beast?"

The human smelled of drugs and blood, but stale, shipped blood from a cardboard box. His hair was brown and spiky, his face long and angular. His white jacket looked out of place in the darkness of the cellar. Janus coiled himself, ready to strike, but couldn't move until the human moved a step closer.

"He's new, master. Please, forgive him. He hasn't learned his manners yet. He will, I swear."

"You," the human said, and turned his flashlight away. "Time for your shot."

The vampire pulled away. "Master, no, please."

"Your arm, now, meat," the human snapped.

The vampire stuck his arm carefully through the bars. Janus moved to the edge of his cage, rattling it as hard as he could, but the old thing in the opposite cage looked as fragile as the man upstairs had. The vampire in front of him must have been ancient. "Leave him alone!" Janus cried, but was completely ignored by both of them.

The human produced a syringe, as thick as Janus's thumb, and injected the thick fluid into the old man's arm. His other hand tightened on the bar, and the human picked up a copper bowl from the floor.

"This is going to hurt," the human said, then nicked the vampire's skin with a razor, just up from the injection site. The old one's blood poured into the bowl. The vampire bowed his head, but didn't fight until the wound on his arm healed itself. The human left with the blood.

Janus knelt down in the cage. "You're an elder," he said, touching his throat. "Forgive me. I should have tried to stop him."

More leaves rattled about the courtyard. It sounded like his lungs were filled with fluid. "I'm no elder," he said.

Janus didn't understand. "Who would turn an old man?" he asked.

Another laugh. "I'm younger than you are," the vampire said. "I am Shaw," he said. "The human, his name is Grant. Don't anger him. His anger is bad, but it is worse when you're fighting him. Don't fight him." Shaw looked at him. The light was fading from the

cracks in the door, and soon they'd be back to utter darkness. For a second, the defeat in Shaw's face was illuminated. "Whatever you did to annoy Hiroshi, you will probably live to regret it."

Janus snorted, derisively, but the old vampire didn't respond. "Hiroshi is nothing," he said. "This is Vision's work."

He'd seen Vision around quite a few times before they were introduced. Vision's scent, the way he moved, and the cold way he kept staring at Janus told him more of Vision's character and rank than any name he might have had. They officially met at one of the stiff, all-night meetings their masters had on neutral ground.

The elders were meeting to discuss what to do with Varaugh. His body count was rising. Although Varaugh hadn't completely broken the peace bond by making the attacks look purposeful, he was getting sloppy in his hunger, and the humans were not stupid.

Janus had been furious; he remembered that now. The masters in their darkened rooms discussing motions and agreements, and the people out on the streets, the most vulnerable humans, were being woken up from their street corners and devoured.

"They told me you cared for the rats," Vision said, behind him. The park, with its string of lights, didn't much penetrate the thick fog coming from the river. The streetlights looked more like dull opals that couldn't provide any protection against the night. "I'd always thought they meant the four-legged kind."

"That's funny," Janus said, crossing his arms over his chest. Vision pulled his lips back into a smile. "You've been waiting to use that one for months, haven't you?"

The smile died, as did Vision's very obvious appraisal of Janus's body. "Strickland's lands are the wharves. He doesn't appreciate the interference."

Janus turned away. "If he doesn't protect what's his, he shouldn't stand in the way of those who will."

"And you're the one who will protect the pathetic little humans."

Janus nodded.

"Pathetic," Vision spat.

"Do you think, just by coming over here, that I'll suddenly see the error of my ways and decide, yes, once and for all, humans deserve to be prey?" Janus asked, keeping his voice mild. "Or is this your pathetic attempt at foreplay?"

Vision's mouth gaped, but just for a moment. "What?" he demanded.

Janus took Vision's hand, and pulled it to his groin. "Breyloren said the meeting would last the night and that Varaugh won't even be mentioned until tomorrow at the earliest. So, if you want to fuck, let's just fuck."

Janus could tell Vision was going to tell him to piss off. It was in his eyes and the furious way his mouth twitched. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he snapped.

"Sure you don't," Janus said. "Which is why you're jerking me off, right now." He looked down, pointedly, and Vision didn't stop running his hand down Janus's cock, over the jeans.

"So, let's just recap: insult, insult, dissing your master, dissing my master, done. Why don't you just hurry it up and bend over that chair there?"

Vision looked over. At the end of the hall, a stuffed chair, done in a Navajo pattern of terra cotta and turquoise, sat alone with a real potted plant and a black table. Months-old magazines were piled on the table, and the harsh lighting above flickered on and off. "Do you think I'm going to just --" Vision began, but his hand didn't stop moving over Janus's jeans.

"Yes," Janus said. "I do."

Vision moved to the chair. It wasn't high enough, putting Vision at an awkward angle. Janus didn't pull down Vision's jeans very far past his hips and undid his far enough to take himself out.

"Quickly," Vision hissed. The voices droned at the end of the hall, one senior vampire calling another a liar, and there seemed to be no end to the argument. As long as they were still fighting, they wouldn't be out in the hall. Janus forced Vision's head down.

He pushed himself inside. He wrapped his hand around Vision's cock and fucked him as hard as he could without banging the chair against the window. Vision was trying to be quiet as well, but neither could have stopped the grunting noises. Neither of them wanted to, either, and Janus wasn't the only one staring at the meeting door that could open at any moment.

That gave it a spice that just made the sex better. Vision gripped the chair, entire body tense. "Cry out," Janus told him and licked down the edge of his ear. "I dare you. Let them know how good this feels."

"Please," Vision whispered. "Like that, oh hell, yes."

The voices died down, and the sounds of chairs scraping against the polished floor came from the council room.

Janus bit down on Vision's neck, sucking his blood and his arousal, and that was what he needed. Three more strokes, each one as fast as he could make it, and Janus was done.

By the time the door opened, Vision was sitting on the waiting chair, and Janus was back to the window. The first one out of the room was a servant, and then the entire council of elders walked past them. Strickland snapped his fingers at Vision, and Vision jumped to his feet. Breylorn glanced up, meeting his eye, and Janus nodded and joined him.

They'd met up a dozen times during that long month. Varaugh's attacks were getting crueler and bloodier, and it was becoming more and more difficult to continually hide the damage.

Janus became more and more dissenting over lack of action on the part of the elders' conclave.

Vision came up behind him, putting his hands over Janus's hips. "How long does it take to agree on killing him?" Janus asked. It was mostly a rhetorical question; he truly didn't care what Vision thought was a good timeline.

"He's an elder," Vision said.

They were back at the same hall, the same council meeting, the same Scotchgarded chair. The elevator door opened, and Varaugh himself stepped out of the car. Vision immediately turned to him, holding his throat with his head bowed, but Janus refused to move. It was Janus that Varaugh locked eyes with, and his teeth came out, just before he pushed open the door of the council room.

"Blow me," Janus said.

"What?" Vision demanded.

The room was silent, the shock audible through the cherry-wood door. Janus grabbed Vision's arm and pulled him in front of him. "I said blow me. Now."

Vision opened his mouth to argue, then dropped to his knees. "Hurry up," Janus said, cuffing Vision's head hard enough to sting. Vision undid his jeans and had him in his mouth a moment later.

There was no mad scraping of chairs back. Janus knew there wouldn't be. He entwined his fingers into Vision's hair, face fucking him hard enough to distract him from the door opening. His belly was already tightening in the familiar pool of warmth; this wasn't going to take long.

Strickland was one of the first ones out. "Vision," he snapped, voice shocked. Vision's finger found Janus's prostate, and Janus finished in Vision's mouth. Vision whipped around, lips wet with Janus's semen, and Strickland stormed over and grabbed Vision by his hair. He pulled Vision away, and Janus casually tucked himself back into his jeans.

"That was a bit cruder than your usual style," Breylorn said, eyebrow raised. He stood in the doorway of the meeting room.

"He annoyed me," Janus said.

Breylorn crossed his arms, but didn't move from the doorway. Less than half a dozen of the council had seen the display, but Janus reckoned that was enough.

Vision argued with Strickland over Varaugh the next night in the lobby of their building, and within hours, Vision was on a plane, bound to Siberia.

Janus woke to the lights flipping on again. Flood lights attached to the ceiling flared to life and blasted the shadows away. Janus hit the ceiling bars, and the pain from his eyes shocked him into numbness. Not even covering them with his balled fists shut out the light. He could see the thin vessels of his eyelids through his hands.



“Wakey, wakey,” Grant said, coming into the room. He wore white coveralls and dark sunglasses. Janus only caught a glimpse before the bright light made him squeeze his eyes shut.

Shaw’s screams began in the next second. The light was too bright for Janus to watch; he couldn’t even open his eyes all the way, but he shaded them as best he could. Grant approached Shaw’s cage, ordering him to stick out his arms. Shaw begged, but still obeyed. More injections, and Shaw’s desperate pleas turned into mumbles for mercy.

Mercy, from a human. If it didn’t hurt so much, Janus would have snarled. The light beat down on him, threatening to boil his brain from his skull, but even in his weakened state he realized that Shaw hadn’t been cut. They’d put a shunt into him.

A shunt. A fucking shunt, tapping a vampire like a maple tree. Shaw rolled around on the bottom of his cage, his blood filling the copper bowl, and Grant kept bleeding him.

Shaw’s skin, bleached even whiter by the bright lights, became translucent. The blue web of veins, the mass of muscle, and the connective tissue were visible, and the shunt kept pouring blood.

“You’re killing him,” Janus yelled, but couldn’t even remove his hands from his eyes to rattle the cage.

“That is the general idea,” Grant said. The blood filled the bowl, at least half a gallon’s worth. If Shaw had been healthy and full, he could still survive it, but he’d already been so pale to begin with. Grant left him bleeding, the shunt open in his brachial artery, and even after the door had closed, only a dribble of blood, barely more than a drop or two, escaped from it.

“Shaw, don’t fight it,” Janus said. He kept his voice level. If that was what Shaw had been reduced to, he didn’t know if he was strong enough to fight it. “Shut down, close your eyes. Let your body rest and heal.”

“Won’t stop,” Shaw said. His voice was a whisper. He swallowed, and under the bright lights Janus could see the muscles of his throat contracting to do so.

Another bubble of blood leached out into the tubing of the shunt and traveled downward. The blood welled from the open mouth of the plastic, then dropped to the ground, three perfect concentric circles, drying in the otherwise surgical room.

The smell, even so diluted from whatever Grant had injected, made Janus’s stomach cramp. He’d forgotten his hunger from the pain and the bright lights, but it woke inside him and tried to gnaw its way out.

“Don’t drink what they offer you,” Shaw said. He opened and closed his mouth, and the gaping hole where his fangs had once been came into view.

“How long were you down here?” Janus asked.

Shaw’s body was shutting down. His brain was failing, and his eyes wouldn’t stop roaming up and down the ceiling. “Long,” was the only word Janus heard.

Suddenly Shaw sat up. Janus jerked back. More blood traveled down the tubing, almost a solid line of black, and it turned to brilliant red as it fell in dime-sized drops to the ground. Shaw slumped over then, and while his body was still alive, there was no recovering from the blood loss.

Janus sat back down on the bars. The lights kicked off, and even though the hall lights were still on, his retinas had been so burned from the floodlights he could only see dark purple blotches where the lights had been.

When the door opened, he turned to it blindly, but at least the flashlight didn't hurt this time. Grant thrust the copper bowl between the bars.

"Your last meal, or your first, depending on how you want this to happen," he said.

"Shaw's dead," Janus said, his voice dull.

"Not dead, but close enough. He won't be dead until we cut off his head. His blood was getting too weak to be effective. Your blood, on the other hand, should work for quite a while."

Janus pulled himself up, balancing his weight on the balls of his feet. "I'd very much like to see you try," he said, keeping his voice a low growl.

Grant kissed his fingertips, blowing it toward Janus, and his men came in to remove Shaw's body. "As I am looking forward to watching you try and stop me."

Janus couldn't stop the growl. Grant left him alone in the darkness and slammed the door shut. The sounds of the footfalls going up the stairs followed, one man unburdened followed by two carrying a weight of no consequence. Janus waited until the door at the top of the stairs opened and closed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The blood had congealed on the sides of the bowl, but hadn't dried out yet. Janus's hunger knotted inside him, until he was convinced if they opened him up, they'd only find half-hitches and bow lines.

All the while, the blood just sat there. At first, he kept it far away. It was surely dead, it had been so long from the body, but if the drugs had stopped it from hardening, it might have found a way to keep fresh.

He was fooling himself into thinking he could deny himself any longer. If he tasted it, and it was dead, it would make the suffering more bearable.

The blood was cold, always a bad sign. He shuddered as he tasted it on his lips, first. It tingled. He couldn't force himself to swallow, but even after he'd wiped his finger on his pants, his lip still tingled.

At first he thought he'd been drugged, but it didn't make him any more tired. Both the humans he'd come in contact with would have just demanded he drink the drugged blood, knowing that he was too weak to refuse.

This was a different tingle, like a vibration.

He sat up. The blood was dead, but it still had power. He went back to the bowl, and scooped up more of the thick, black blood.

It wasn't the blood of an elder. The strongest wards, wards that Janus didn't dare touch, demanded elder blood. In that instant, he remembered Hiroshi casually wiping the ink off on his own slacks, and knew what was in that ink. Shaw had been much younger than him, but the bleeding had aged him so old that his teeth had become loose and rotting in his mouth.

But Shaw was still an old vampire, and that had power in it as well.

He'd deal with Hiroshi, later, once he was out. He removed his shirt. If the ward magic was to work, he'd need to paint this on himself. There were wards he knew that would make metal weak and flesh strong, and he hoped there was enough blood in him to finish his work before Grant returned.

The blood absorbed into his skin as soon as he finished each line of the ward, but that didn't matter. The image he had of the circle was in his head. He didn't need the guide on his skin. The blood gave him strength, though not as much as the ward leached from him, and when he finished the last of the marks it was all he could do to lie back and not move.

But he had to. Grant would return and offer him tainted blood, and he would drink from it, because that was what vampires did. His death would be far more painful, lingering, and drawn out, but he would cling to each passing moment as a lifeline, and that sickened him.

He stood. There was nothing inside him. Even in the dark, he could feel how pale his skin was. He made it to the edge of the cage, though it felt half a mile rather than the two feet it actually was, and put his hands on two of the bars.

The ward flared on his chest, hot, but he'd contained it correctly. The bars gave way, though he didn't have any tension in his arms. The ward flared like a struck match, and it didn't stop burning until Janus slipped from the cage.

He'd been on a table, and he fell to the floor. From there, he crawled to the door, using his elbows and hips when his hands and knees refused to move. At last he struck the opposite wall. He put his hand under the sealed door and felt the briefest stirring of air.

This was the right place.

He'd wait. Or he'd die. Someone would come down, and he'd feed, or he'd slip away into the vegetative state that had taken Shaw.

Regardless, he was free.

He pulled himself up, feeling for the light switch he knew was above him, and smiled when his hands touched it. They would come here first.

And he would feed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Even after Vision had been sent off, the council still met. Janus waited for Breylorn to return to his apartment just before dawn.

Breylorn didn't look surprised to see him sitting at his desk. "The wards you set up told me you'd be here," Breylorn said, sifting through a sheaf of parchments.

"I'd designed them to do so," Janus said.

Breylorn sighed and put the parchments down. "You are getting stronger. Perhaps it's time to put you down. I'm not looking for a replacement right now."

Janus spun the chair around so that he was facing Breylorn. "I'm no threat to you," he said. "I don't want any of this."

"And what is it you do want?" Breylorn asked. He moved to Janus, using his knees to spread Janus's legs. Janus even leaned further down in the chair so that he was more exposed to Breylorn.

"I want to kill Varaugh."

"The council hasn't yet decided on a plan," Breylorn said, eyebrow crooked. He pulled Janus's shirt off halfway so that it trapped his arms back behind him. Janus could have torn the cloth and been done with it, but he kept still.

"But you're going to decide to do nothing, and let Varaugh have his way. He's killing innocents."

"He's an elder," Breylorn said. He dropped to his knees in front of Janus, and undid Janus's jeans. Breylorn yanked them down. It left Janus unpleasantly restrained and still hard.

"I know that, master," Janus couldn't remember the last time he'd called Breylorn that, but it made Breylorn smile. "And as long as you haven't decided to do anything, I can still do something."

"This isn't just ancient history speaking?"

Janus paused, only for a second. Varaugh had tormented him, briefly, when Janus was a human, but that hadn't even entered his thinking. "No."

"Good." Breylorn's dry hand running down his cock felt as raspy as a cat's tongue. Breylorn rolled Janus's testicles between his fingers, a movement designed neither to arouse nor hurt, and Janus arched up in his chair.

Breylorn pressed his elbows into Janus's thighs, holding him down. His teeth were out, but Janus had suspected it would come to this and had drunk more than he usually did. Breylorn's fang ran along the vein on the underside of Janus's cock, but Breylorn kept still, and it never once punctured the skin.

"And what is it you think you can do?" Breylorn asked. His tongue came out, wet and soothing, and licked back down where his tooth had traveled.

"I'll kill him," Janus said. "The council can say they didn't condone the action, and you can punish me for my impudence."

Breylorn made a sound in the back of his throat, and Janus felt it against his cock. He pulled away long enough to speak. "This conversation never happened."

"No, master," Janus said.

Breylorn was growling now, or purring; it was hard to tell with the teeth so close to his femoral artery.

Part of Janus still remembered he was actually dying against a wall in a cellar, so drained he couldn't remember to blink, but the memory of just how full he'd been, how immobilized he'd been, and his hell-forsaken love for the man on his knees in front of him managed to override his discomfort.

"Then I have no idea what you are talking about," Breylorn said. The sound he'd been making felt just fine when his cock had been pressed against Breylorn's throat, but internally it was too much. Breylorn's tongue moved with a talent Janus didn't know his master had, and his hand cupped his ass and pulled him closer.

When Janus came, he thought it lasted forever.

The upper door opened. Footsteps came down the stairs. Janus recognized the swagger, even when walking down stairs.

He tensed, which meant waking parts of his body that had already shut down. His muscles shuddered back into life, but trembled from the effort. He balled his fists. It wouldn't work if Grant managed to turn on the lights. Janus would be blinded as well as drained.

The locked door clicked open. Grant stepped in. His hand was already reaching for the light, an inch from Janus's head, but grabbing it to drink from his wrist wouldn't incapacitate the man. Janus moved up, silently, and opened his mouth to where he assumed Grant's neck would be. His tongue touched the jugular first, the pulse beating in the quickened pace of an excited human. Janus bit before Grant got a fraction of an inch closer to the light.

Blood, hot and sweet, rich and delicious, filled his mouth. Janus drank and drank, filling his belly as fast as he could. His starving system wicked the blood away to the rest of his body before his stomach ever filled. Grant's life filled him.

In the first few swallows, Grant could have probably pushed him away. But the pain of the bite had stunned him. Janus supposed he hadn't been able to produce any of the saliva that numbed the pain. After the first few swallows, where Grant's strength passed directly into Janus, there was no more fight. Grant hung in his arms like a rag doll, and Janus drank until he couldn't possibly swallow any more.

He dropped Grant's body, stripped off its sunglasses, and turned on the lights.

Even with the shades, it was hard to see in the bright room. It was really quite an effective method to shock a vampire into acquiescence. Janus appreciated ingenuity when he saw it. There were two cages in the room, both empty, but there was also a long gurney in the middle of the room. He dragged Grant onto it.

Grant woke a few minutes later. He was pale, but nothing compared to how Shaw had been. He touched his neck, and even though the wound had been made to a major vein, it had already sealed.

"I'm not dead," Grant said.

"There's six quarts of blood in you. I barely took two," Janus said. He licked the cooling blood off his lips, then sucked his fingers clean. "You have to give me time to recover, tiger."

Grant tried to sit up, anger in his face, but Janus was up and over him, his knees pushing down on Grant's shoulders hard enough that he heard the left one pop. Grant didn't make a sound, but his face lost another shade of color.

"I'd really prefer you not moving right now," Janus said with a toothy smile. He licked his fangs off as well.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Eventually. What were you doing to Shaw?"

Grant lay back, a smile tight on his face. "I tell you, you kill me."

"You don't tell me, I kill you, too, and I go upstairs and ask the old man what the deal is."

Grant's smile faltered. "You wouldn't get past my men."

Janus leaned down, shifting his weight off Grant's shoulders and scooping up his wrists in his hands in the same motion. He pinned Grant's hands above his head while licking the blood from the wound.

"You don't smell like you have men," he said. His teeth came out again, and he pricked the other side of Grant's neck, lapping at the blood as it welled and spilled. "You smell pretty dry, like it's just you and the old man." He sniffed a moment longer, and licked his lips. "No, there's one other. The cook, perhaps? His cholesterol level smells high."

"Leave the old man out of this. It's between you and me."

"You'd really like to think so, wouldn't you?" Janus bit down into Grant's neck again, drinking more, and this time opened himself up to taste some of the emotions within the blood. Grant had schemed and twisted to be right where he had to be in order to be noticed in the old man's firm. And he had been, feigning surprise when the old man had selected him as his heir apparent, over his own son. It had taken years of manipulation.

Janus broke contact, wiping his mouth with the back of his bare arm. The line of blood on his arm was a beautiful thing. "Hemophilia," Janus said. He might have nicked Grant's trachea.

The wound bubbled bright blood until it sealed shut. "Leave ... him ... alone," Grant managed.

"Whose idea was it to use our blood to heal him?" Janus demanded.

Grant shook his head. Janus might have taken too much blood the second time; Grant was going into shock. His lips started to shiver, and his mouth gaped open and closed like a fish. Janus slapped his face.

"Stay with me now," he said, backhanding him again. "Come on. Your idea or his?"

"He was ... approached. He made a deal. I was against it." Grant's voice had gone tinny.

"What deal?"

Grant opened his mouth one more time, but his eyes weren't focusing. Shock affected humans in the most pathetic way.

"Useless," Janus proclaimed, then tore Grant's throat out. He spat the cartilage that had been Grant's trachea onto the floor. He'd taken his fill, but there was more than enough to bleed onto the ground. Janus got off the gurney, and Grant immediately clamped down on his torn neck, as though that were enough to stop the bleeding.

Janus left him there, tracking bloody footsteps across the floor. Grant died when Janus was halfway up the stairs, and the blood memory inside Janus shuddered. Janus leaned over the railing and spat, before kicking the upper door in.

"Rudy?" a voice called. The cook was upstairs, asleep, so it had to be the old man.

The stairwell led down from a huge hall, with an actual chandelier hanging from the second story ceiling. The polished, rich wood of the split staircase, floors, and walls blended well with the stonework. It was easily the biggest house Janus had ever been inside in the new world. The lush, oriental carpets were hand-knotted, and the tapestries hanging from the walls were older than Janus was.

His lip curled.

"Rudy, it's time for my drink," the old man called again.

The man was down the hall, away from the grand doors, and in the library. The first editions were locked behind glass cabinets, and the ladder on wheels hadn't moved for so long that the mechanism had rusted. The fire was dying in the huge fireplace, and it occurred to Janus that the last thing Grant had done before going down for Janus's blood was stoke the fire.

"Grant's not coming back up," Janus said from the doorway. The old man sat beneath a huge portrait of a woman. It was modern, done to look as though it would match the paintings in the halls, but Janus could smell the oils still drying.

It was of a woman, younger than the man by about fifty years. The rocks around her elegant neck and hanging from her ears were huge, but she was still young enough that the elegant sweep of her hair and low-cut red dress made her look more like a girl playing dress-up than a grown woman.

Janus stared. She looked familiar. Her eyes, her cheekbones, he'd seen the face before.

Her eyes were dark blue, almost black.

Lyall's eyes.

"You traded your own son for the secret," Janus said.

The old man's snowy cheeks brightened into hot red circles. "You don't know that," he said. He raised his palsied hands above the plaid blankets wrapped around his legs, and his hands shook as he held the crucifix and rosary up.

"You don't have a single ounce of faith to support that," Janus said, crossing the room. "You sold your son for this. You may be older, but are you any stronger than before you made the deal?"

"He said I'd live forever," the old man said. "The drinks worked."

"Why?" Janus asked. He looked up to the painting again, then down to the old man. He tasted it now. Grant had hated Lyall. He'd been against the marriage, and when the old man's wife had brought the brat into the house --

"That thing wasn't my son," the old man said. His voice was so full of vileness that it stopped shaking. "I wasn't going to let that whore's brat inherit. When Hiroshi came to me, I made the deal. Ten years, and I'm still here."

Hiroshi hadn't smelled like he was more than a couple years old. He still smelled human. The wards he used must have contained more than just elder's blood. "You know I'm going to kill you," Janus said.

"I'm already dying. You can't kill a dying man."

"No," Janus said. "But you can set him on fire."

Lyall woke, mouth thick like it was filled with cotton. He sat up and realized it was morning. The heavy curtains felt hot to him. He'd been able to walk out into it a week ago, and now the thought of stepping closer to the window made him recoil in horror.

The door wasn't locked, but the moment Lyall's hand breeched the doorframe, it felt as though insects were stripping the flesh from his fingers. He drew back his hand. His skin was white, and he had to rub the feeling back into it again.

He wasn't getting out that way. He moved to the window, but didn't dare approach further. The glass was tempered and barred, as well as warded.

He didn't see a way out.



Panic set in. His chest tightened, but he refused to pace. He didn't like having no way out. Not when he'd been locked in his room, back in the mansion when his mother was healthy enough to protect him from most of her new husband's wrath. Certainly not when she'd become too ill and could no longer temper the man's punishments for whatever imagined insult Lyall had done. The old room above the kitchen had always been almost impossible to escape. He'd spent a week chipping through the painted-shut window. After he'd broken his leg falling from the huge elm, old man Sulter had cut down every tree within a dozen yards of the window.

He rubbed his leg now. The lump where the bone had knitted together was gone now, and he actually missed it. Touching just above his knee, feeling the hate, gave him strength when he needed it most.

Sulter had let him stay on out of propriety rather than any sense of duty, even after his mother had died, but Lyall had worked hard and was in line for enough scholarship money to get out.

Still, the old man always insisted they dine together. Not in the long, formal dining room, which Lyall could have understood, but at the smaller, informal table in the kitchen. He remembered trying to warm the old man up, but Sulter made it perfectly clear that he was not interested in anything Lyall had to say.

No one ever came to visit. Lyall supposed the bell ringing in the hall should have been his first warning that something was wrong. His second was Sulter motioning him to get it, rather than waiting for Grant, who was always only a few yards away.

Lyall crossed his knife and fork over his plate and stood up. Folded napkin returned to the side of his plate. Sulter followed him out, and the skin on the back of his neck crawled.

He opened the door. The Asian man didn't look threatening standing under the old-fashioned porch light. "You're Lyall."

Lyall nodded. The Asian man smiled and took a step into the house, and Lyall was against the wall, beside the door, and dangling a foot from the floor.

"When I ask you a question, you will answer it," the man said.

Lyall clawed at the hand at his throat. His air cut off. It was an odd sensation, not being able to breathe. To feel his diaphragm moving and yet to feel no air moving in and out of his lungs made him helpless. His ears warmed, the muscles of his neck were strained, and he managed to dig his nails into the hand holding him.

"Stop it," the man demanded.

Lyall didn't think he could, but his hands dropped to his side. The man lowered him. Lyall's knees wouldn't lock, and he kept sliding down so that he was on his ass. He held his neck, but couldn't tell if his throat was damaged. It hurt to swallow, but at least it felt intact.

He looked up, past the man to Sulter, but Sulter only smiled. "If that's all you want, Hiroshi, take him. He's yours."

"Many thanks," the man, Hiroshi, Lyall supposed, said. He snapped his fingers at Lyall. "Up," he ordered. Lyall pushed to his feet, still quite unbelieving that this was actually happening.

"I would have been out of what little hair you had left in two months," he told Sulter.

"And what possible use would you have been to me, then?" Sulter said, voice oily with self-satisfaction.

"I need to pack," he said, not sure of which one to address.

Hiroshi shook his head as Sulter moved to block his path up the stairs. "You'll do no such thing," Sulter said.

Panic shot through him, but Lyall refused to show it. "Then I just need my mom's picture."

Neither one of them moved. "You want to see that whore, look in the mirror. You wear her features. Get the hell out of my house."

His mother's photograph was on the mantle in the library. He could probably duck around Sulter if he did so at an ambling walk, but Hiroshi tensed, as though expecting him to bolt. Lyall saw the smile grow on Hiroshi's face.

Lyall had been dragged into the house, not once but a dozen times. He'd be damned if the last time he'd walk through the door would be against his will. He turned to the old man, spat at his feet, and walked out of the room with his head held high.

Lyall looked around the room. It was different now. He was ten years older than that frightened boy, and he was a hell of a lot stronger. Hiroshi had seen to that. He sometimes had forgotten Lyall was human, and the number of times Lyall had been shot and stabbed -- Lyall supposed he forgot that himself.

Lyall moved to the center of the room and crouched down, hugging his knees. They couldn't keep him locked in the room forever. He bared his teeth, licking Hiroshi's blood off his fangs. And when they let him go, he'd kill his former master.

"It's hard to adjust," someone said from the doorway.

The simple room, with its metal cot and gray walls and carpet, was far more familiar to him than the lair was. For a moment, Lyall thought it could have all been a dream, but the hunger inside him wasn't anything food could help.

"Hiroshi," Lyall said. He remembered screaming the name into a cell phone and leaning heavily against a brick wall of a building, holding back the bleeding gunshot wound to his shoulder, pushing on the man's buzzer. His fingers traced out the pattern of the buzzer number on a standard keypad, 6793.

"Do you remember?" Hiroshi demanded, then bitch-slapped him with an open palm. Lyall saw it coming, he felt the air displace as the hand came toward his face, but he did nothing to stop the blow from landing, because he wasn't allowed.

"I worked for you," he said.

"You always have worked for me, little magpie," Hiroshi said. "And you always will."

His human masters hadn't been human at all. Hiroshi had been his handler since he'd been given over. Lyall shook his head. "I'm Janus's now."

"Janus was just one more thing I needed you to bring to me. You belong to me." Hiroshi said, then pointed to the ground in front of him. "On your knees."

Lyall bared his teeth. His growl was hesitant; his belly burned at the memory of this man holding his wickedly curved blade, but he forced himself to keep standing.

Hiroshi backed him to the wall, hand at his throat, and he squeezed hard enough to cut off the circulation. Dark circles appeared, and his blood memory cried out. Despite himself, Lyall dropped to his knees.

"If I have to teach you again how to behave, I will," Hiroshi told him, pulling the drawstring free from his sweats. "I enjoyed it so much the first time. Suck me."

Lyall glared up, lips twisting at Hiroshi's smirk, but obediently took his cock in his hand. That, at least, was familiar, and he'd been trained to please this man as much as he had been to fetch and roll over.

The appeal of Hiroshi's femoral artery was new. Hiroshi had obviously just fed, and his veins were thick and fat.

He looked up again. Hiroshi patted his head, like a good dog. Lyall leaned forward, running Hiroshi's cock along his cheek, forcing himself to purr, and then sank his teeth straight into the vein.

The blood was so sweet. He tore it, sucking up the blood as fast as it bled out, and snatched Hiroshi's flailing fists out of the air. Blood spilled down his chin; he couldn't possibly drink fast enough to capture it all, but he drank until Hiroshi's screeches brought Breylorn himself through the door.

"Enough," Breylorn said, and Lyall, despite himself, pulled away from the bleeding wound. Hiroshi immediately clamped his hand down on it, but not before it soaked into his clothes and spilled onto the floor.

"You shouldn't be here," Breylorn said to Hiroshi, and then down to Lyall. "Forgive me. I should have had someone in here to feed you earlier. I trust you're full now?"

"Yes," Lyall said, still on his knees. "And the lack of drugs was a nice touch, as well."

"Hiroshi," Breylorn snapped, motioning toward the hall with his chin. Hiroshi left Lyall, glaring only when Breylorn couldn't see.

"I do apologize for Hiroshi," Breylorn said. "He's still young and not the best selection for a lieutenant. It will not happen again."

Lyall nodded, but doubted it.

"Tell me what happened in Strickland's office."

"Where is Janus?" Lyall asked. He wasn't certain, but he didn't feel his master in the apartment any longer and that worried him. Worried him more than it should. His master needed him. If Hiroshi had ever gotten into trouble, Lyall would have been the first to help the other guy, but the thought of Janus not being well set every nerve he had on edge.

"He murdered an elder. There is no forgiveness for that."

"Janus is dead?" Lyall demanded.

Breylorn honestly looked pained. "I am sorry to be the one to tell you."

Lyall sat down, feeling hollow.

Breylorn sat across from him, on the chair. "Wipe any thought of revenge from your head right now," he continued. "I knew Janus far longer than you had, and it pained me to give the order, but the rules are clear. He'd escaped the judgment the first time, and there was no way to dodge it the second."

The hollowness made the words echo. Lyall looked up. "But you didn't kill him," he said. "You didn't see his body."

Breylorn gave him a look, one he was well familiar with. Stupid child. "I had my new lieutenant do it," Breylorn said.

"Hiroshi," Lyall said.

Breylorn nodded.

*But Hiroshi can't be trusted.* Lyall thought he had said it out loud. He hadn't even opened his mouth. He took a deep breath and tried again, but his face remained impassive, and he didn't make a sound. He shook his head. Pain flared from his shoulder, and the harder he fought to speak, the more it hurt.

When he gave up, the pain retreated back inside him. It left him ruined. Breylorn moved to the couch, taking his head in his hands.

"You'll adjust. I'm looking for a new pet, but I will give you time to mourn," he said, running his fingers through Lyall's hair. "Do as I say, and there will be a place for you."

"Piss off," Lyall said, ducking away from him. He was quite sick of doing as people said for just a place.

"I'd be careful," Breylorn said. "Surely Janus told you of the world out there for young chum like yourself."

"And like that, I'm supposed to roll over for you?"

Breylorn didn't stop him from standing up. "Let me go," he said.

Breylorn laughed. Hiroshi moved into the archway, lounging in a way that only made him look like a cheap imitation of Janus, and Lyall again felt the words he wanted to say as only echoes in his head.

Breylorn nodded, and Hiroshi entered the room and grabbed him.

He pulled away and followed Breylorn, who led the way back to the elevator. The elevator went down, and the lights of the lobby were too bright for Lyall. He resisted the urge to shade his eyes.

The building was located next to a garden, supposedly for the city, but locked with wrought iron and keys given only given to the residents. A lot of the taller buildings had them; he learned to ignore them like most of the people who walked past the iron-barred gates. Just another sign that someone else's life was better than his.

The green grass, when the city's grass was already brown and dusty, seemed out of place. The door swung open at Breylorn's touch and then both he and Hiroshi stood back. "Go in," Hiroshi said.

The flowers had all closed for the night, their scent muted on the slight wind. There was an old tree, well tended and without a single leaf on the ground. Beneath its branches sat a memorial bench, the copper plating now green, and the names almost rubbed off. He wondered who would be sitting on the bench. Despite its meticulous care, it didn't feel as though a living human had stepped past the iron fence in months.

Hiroshi slammed the gate shut. Lyall turned at the first sound of the noise, but had no way of getting to it before the lock clicked into place. He wouldn't embarrass himself. They were going to lock him out for morning.

"No, we aren't," Breylorn called. "Wait."

Lyall waited, refusing to allow his panic to surface. The green grass wouldn't have looked out of place on a golf course, and the pebbles used to border the flower gardens were all the same shade of eggshell white and uniform in shape. It wasn't exactly the stuff of nightmares, and yet his throat still tightened.

He thought he heard something behind him, where the tall bushes obscured whatever was on the other side of the back fence. He didn't call out, not wanting to give Hiroshi the pleasure of seeing him afraid.

The shadows didn't smell like anything, at first, then smelled of rotting leaves. Rotting leaves and upturned earth, and although it wasn't visible, Lyall still saw them gather up from the grass, collecting and pooling at his ankles.

Something was reaching for him from the shadows of the tree, and he had to stumble back in order not to be touched.

He heard Hiroshi's laughter behind him; Lyall had heard that often enough. The tree had no branches within his reach; he could probably scale the rough bark for a couple feet, but they would follow him up.

The shadows clawed at his ankle. He danced away the moment he felt them touch his skin, and the scent of his blood seemed to give them strength. The smell was stronger now, masking the flowers and the trees, the river, and the city itself. All he could smell was an open grave.

“Here,” Breylorn called, snapping his fingers, and Lyall bolted to the iron gates, which swung open easily.

“The dead have voices, too.” Breylorn’s own voice was cold. The door opened behind him. Lyall almost fell as his support swung away, but he kept to his feet. In the yard, the shadows retreated whence they’d come. “My pet or not, you will belong to me for the next year or so. Then we’ll discuss your role.”

Lyall felt a bit weak as they walked back to into the building. Even with the two older vampires behind him, he still felt them, gathering in the darkness. He pulled the door open, not waiting for the doorman, and stood by the elevator.

Hiroshi and Breylorn were talking as they entered, but silenced as they approached. The panic didn’t settle until he was back in the apartment. Hiroshi put his hand on Lyall’s shoulder. “You will belong to me, little magpie,” he hissed. “Shouldn’t be a problem; you’ve adjusted before.”

Lyall pushed him away. “Don’t ever touch me again,” he said. The small, gray room allowed him to enter, but he felt the wards close down immediately behind him.

It wasn’t as though Lyall was a bad student in the months following his purchase. Hiroshi’s learning curve was just steeper than Lyall thought possible.

He’d been started out small. The thieving hadn’t been hard to start, and Hiroshi was genuinely pleased when he brought back whatever he’d been sent out to get. He started calling him his little magpie. He’d sweep in and steal whatever bright and shiny thing Hiroshi wanted.

Lyall shuddered. He’d enjoyed it, too. Perhaps that was the worst part of it. Hiroshi, at first, had been so kind.

Lyall touched his leg, feeling the smooth bone under his fingers.

He remembered the first time Hiroshi came for him. Hiroshi had sat down on the hotel bed, and the moving mattress had woken Lyall. He didn’t remember what city they were in, but it was old, with strangely shaped roofs making up the skyline. The windows were open, and the smell of spice wafted through.

It was in Budapest, or perhaps some place in Morocco that Hiroshi had found him. It seemed so surreal Lyall didn’t think he could deny him.

Hiroshi held a small blue vial. It looked like an exotic perfume bottle. With his other hand, he pulled down Lyall’s thin blanket.

There was no questions asked, but Hiroshi did look at him. The moonlight gave his features a grayed-out, film-noir tone. He didn’t respond, but lay back down to the mattress.

Hiroshi trailed his nails back up Lyall’s chest, to his shoulder, then cupped the back of Lyall’s neck. He tilted Lyall’s head back. “Drink this.”

Lyall caught his wrist. “What is it?”

"It will help you flow," Hiroshi said.

The words didn't make any sense. Lyall tried to catch Hiroshi's wrist, but the warm liquid poured down his throat before he could stop it.

"Don't fight," Hiroshi whispered.

There was nothing to fight. Lyall was suddenly too warm, and the sheets, which had been fine, were too scratchy. He hadn't even realized he had an erection, and now it was heavy against his belly.

"Better," Hiroshi said. He moved down Lyall's body, lips trailing down his chest. Hiroshi's tongue found his cock. The stimulation was almost too much, and Lyall tried to push Hiroshi away. He was already so hard it hurt.

Lyall reached down. His body felt feverish to him. Hiroshi moved down. Now his tongue was licking Lyall's balls. "Good. So very good," Hiroshi murmured. He forced Lyall's legs apart, wider, leaving him more exposed than Lyall had ever been in his life. Something hard nuzzled at his inner thigh, and what Lyall had assumed was Hiroshi's tongue was actually his wet thumb.

Hiroshi had teeth outside his lips. It didn't seem real to him. But they were tips of fangs, pushing through his gums to cover his human teeth.

"What is this?" he managed, still impossibly hard.

"Something to keep you still," Hiroshi said. He licked a spot, half an inch from where Lyall's thigh met his groin, and Hiroshi's hand was still lazily moving up and down Lyall's cock.

Hiroshi's teeth pushed into his leg. It hurt, like twin wasp stings, but the pain was momentary. The rush of pleasure that came from the bleeding eclipsed his orgasm, but he rode both highs until the blood loss made him pass out.

He came to again several hours later, when the sun was so blinding white in the sky it bleached all the color from the city.

He sat up and groaned at the shooting pain from his groin. No, not his groin, from just below. He felt hungover and exhausted. *Don't even use the word 'drained.'* He reached under the blankets, touching the two bumps just on the upper part of his thigh, and felt the pulse of his femoral artery just below the raised welts.

They weren't wasp stings. He lay back down for a moment, and let the memory of the day before come back to him. He'd been digging in an old cemetery -- so old that if Hiroshi hadn't told him where exactly to find it he never would have -- and he'd collected his pound of soil. His brain was already playing tricks on him; they'd been plague victims, and he could feel how cursed the soil was. Hiroshi, who should have been in his penthouse suite in New York, didn't travel with him.

And yet the bite marks on his leg didn't seem to become any less real. He hobbled into the second room of the hotel, but was alone except for the cockroaches.

But that had been then. Lyall sat up, still in the gray room. He touched his upper thigh, and still felt where Hiroshi's teeth had opened him. The house was quiet, and the wards so strong he could feel them humming. Hiroshi hadn't replaced Janus's wards, but had put his over the existing ones. They were stronger -- even Lyall could feel that -- but not as tightly woven.

He went to the door and tapped a mindless rhythm into the shimmering air. It hurt, each one like another bite, but like a fly floundering in the net, eventually it summoned the spider.

Hiroshi yanked the door open and almost off its hinges. "What?" he demanded.

"I'm hungry," Lyall said. He ran a hand down his stomach, letting it rest an inch away from his cock. "And bored."

"So now you want me to feed and entertain you," Hiroshi snarled. But his eyes were on Lyall's hand.

"It only seems fair," Lyall said. He undid the button of his jeans and slowly pulled the zipper down.

Hiroshi stepped into the wards. It made Lyall's skin crawl. Then Hiroshi had him back against the wall.

"You always thought I was a fool," Hiroshi said and raked his fang on Lyall's ear. He felt his blood well in the thin cut.

"I didn't --" Lyall began, but Hiroshi pressed a finger against his lips.

"I could always smell when you were lying. You're weak, you always have been."

"I killed for you. I stole for you, and I whored for you. Don't confuse obedience with weakness."

Hiroshi smiled. "And now? Will you trade yourself again? Kneel down, take your master's cock, and accept my guidance?"

Lyall dropped to his knees.

"Good boy," Hiroshi said. Lyall placed one wrist over the other and gave them up to Hiroshi. Hiroshi grabbed them, pulling his arms up past the point of comfort, and held them against the wall.

It hurt, being stretched out, but Lyall knew it gave Hiroshi the feeling of power. Hiroshi held him in place with one hand and shoved his cock down Lyall's throat with the other. They'd done it a thousand times before, each time Lyall wondering if this was the time Hiroshi would lose control and not give him his air passage back. But that worry was now dead.



Lyall could feel the number of wards on Hiroshi's skin. He must have had more than a dozen, and they swirled beneath the surface. He didn't understand their power; it wasn't a part of him. But what he did know was that his escape depended on that power.

Hiroshi was humming now. It was hard to remain perfectly still, cover his teeth, and let Hiroshi throat-fuck him, harder still when the smell and the familiarity of being on his knees made him stiff as well. The only satisfaction came from what little friction he could rub off on the back of his heels.

His nose was sore from Hiroshi mashing it. His jaw hurt, his lips and tongue were numb, and, most infuriating of all, he was now painfully turned on. Hiroshi smirked down at him, pinning Lyall's wrists to the wall with his forearm. "Are you ready for this?" Hiroshi asked.

Lyall couldn't even nod. He looked up, and only when they made eye contact did Hiroshi come. Lyall gagged out of reflex, but Hiroshi wouldn't let him down or pull himself out of Lyall's mouth.

"You belong to me," Hiroshi snapped.

Lyall wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and slowly felt his way down his body.

"You think I'm going to believe this?" Hiroshi demanded. "You've never given me an ounce more than what I forced from you." He didn't look away. Lyall spread his legs further, easier to do now that he wasn't staked out. Hiroshi's mouth opened.

Without permission, something that would have gotten Lyall cuffed when he was human, he undid his jeans and slid them past his hips. He licked his lips, still tasting Hiroshi's come on them, and faked a smile.

"Maybe you should have been nicer to me," Hiroshi said.

"Maybe I should have," Lyall said. His hands were wonderfully cool on his too hot flesh, and his skin silken. He leaned forward again and stood up, pushing himself up along the wall. Hiroshi didn't say a word. Lyall continued to lazily jerk himself off, but glanced to the cot, eyebrow raised. "I could fuck you, if you wanted to," Lyall continued.

Hiroshi took a step back. "I should beat you for that."

Lyall shrugged and sprawled back on the bed. It was difficult to concentrate on speaking when his entire body was screaming at him to bloody well finish it, but he kept to his gentle stroking "Suit yourself. I plan to suit myself any second now."

Hiroshi took a step forward. "You have forgotten yourself, haven't you?" Lyall backed up to the wall. Hiroshi followed him, pressing his body against Lyall's. Skin on skin, not impeded by sweat, Lyall pulled from Hiroshi. Hiroshi's fist closed over Lyall's cock, jacking him hard enough that it should have killed any hard-on, but Lyall was accustomed to it. His insolence fueled Hiroshi's possessiveness, and that raised wards to the surface.

He clung to Hiroshi's shoulder, fingers searching for the right ward. His fingers still stung from the pain of the door's protection, and the ward that dulled the pain was the one he wanted. It wasn't a very big one, barely the size of Janus's palm, and the more he rubbed it, the further it pushed up from Hiroshi's skin.

*This is the way out.* He dipped his finger through Hiroshi's skin. Hiroshi was rutting against him, jerking him off as hard as he could, and Lyall bit down on his shoulder to hide the sting of his finger. He hooked the ward, pulling it free as he sucked the blood from the wound, and felt his body start to shudder. Lyall lost the crest of his orgasm too quickly, leaving him empty, but the ward he'd stolen absorbed into his skin and left his head buzzing. Lyall slid down the wall, and Hiroshi let him fall.

"Don't make me remind you who you belong to again," Hiroshi said, standing over him, leering.

"Why would you want me to deny you your pleasure?" Lyall asked, barely able to open his eyes.

"You're very lucky you are so talented with your tongue. I might let you keep it for the next hundred years or so."

Janus had promised him his freedom. Hiroshi would do no such thing. If Lyall got out and found that Janus was truly dead, he'd come back and kill Hiroshi.

*And even if Janus is fine.* He bowed his head to Hiroshi. "Thank you," he said, and waited a second before adding, "master." The word tasted hollow.

Hiroshi's smile was wolf-like. He closed the door behind him.

The other two were resting again. Lyall waited until he felt Hiroshi's restless mind settle before moving to the center of the small room.

Hiroshi's wards crackled under his skin, but he had to push the discomfort aside. They would get him past the first hurdle; he still had to manage getting out of the building and onto the street.

The plans for the building unfolded in front of his eyes, but the simplest gambit was to just walk out the front doors.

If he survived the shadows on the street. He dismissed that the moment it occurred to him. He'd either outrun them, or he wouldn't. And if he couldn't, the death would be preferable to being Hiroshi's boy until Hiroshi tired of him.

The door didn't hurt his hand. He pulled it open. It felt as though he walked through Cling Wrap. For a moment he pressed against it, and it smothered his face and sealed around him completely. Then he broke through and was on the other side.

They weren't Hiroshi's wards, he realized, but Janus's. His throat tightened. Janus wasn't dead. He couldn't be.

The apartment was quiet, like he remembered early dawn to be, although it was almost seven in the evening. Breylorn's room was well guarded, with Janus's wards still stronger than Hiroshi's. Hiroshi's wards allowed him to walk right through.

Hiroshi was on his bed, hands clasped over his chest, deep asleep. The knife he slept with poked out from beneath his pillow.

Hiroshi didn't stir when Lyall entered. Lyall pulled the knife free from the pillow and climbed on top of Hiroshi in one, fluid motion.

Hiroshi woke, snarling. Lyall twisted his hand around the hilt and pushed so that if Hiroshi tried to knock him away, Lyall would take most of Hiroshi's head with him when he went.

Hiroshi's skin went white around the blade. The knife was sharp enough that too much pressure would cut into his neck like a cheese. His lips curled back, exposing his fangs.

Hiroshi went still. "Where is Janus?" Lyall asked.

"Dead," Hiroshi said.

Lyall lifted the blade, smacked Hiroshi's face with the back of his hand, and then replaced it again before Hiroshi could move. "He's not dead."

"How do you know that?" Hiroshi demanded.

Lyall narrowed his eyes. "His simple death had no advantage for you."

"I saved your life!" Hiroshi snapped.

"You killed me," Lyall said, and he forced his hand not to shake like it wanted to.

Hiroshi's nostrils flared. "Do you think any human could have survived having his belly cut open like yours was? I turned you to keep you alive."

Without any proof otherwise, Lyall knew he was lying. "Where is Janus?" Lyall repeated.

"Gone. I told you." He met Lyall's eyes and smiled. "And he's probably dead by now, regardless."

"Then you wouldn't mind telling me."

Hiroshi looked away first. "He's with your old man," he said. He looked up and leered. "He's dying to keep the old fool alive and well."

"You bastard," Lyall said. His muscles tensed again. He wanted just one cut, deep to the bone, and a second one to saw through the spinal cord. He'd done it before. It would be nothing.

"You're a dead man," Hiroshi said.

Lyall leaned over and kissed Hiroshi's forehead. He sliced into Hiroshi's neck as he moved, not enough to sever the head, but enough to bleed. Lyall clamped his lips over the wound and drank. He left Hiroshi drained on the bed and pulled away as quietly as he came.

"Did you kill him?" Breylorn asked, from the hall.

"I don't think so," Lyall said. He didn't close the door, and Hiroshi continued to thrash in his bedding.

Breylorn nodded. "And how did you get through the wards?"

"I leached one from Hiroshi's skin," Lyall said and bowed his head. Breylorn's presence demanded no less, and he wondered how much his dependence on Hiroshi was an act.

Breylorn nodded. "You may go," he said, and pushed the button to summon the elevator.

"You aren't going to stop me?"

"You got out of the room. I'm assuming you have a plan."

"The shadows have to gather," Lyall said. He watched Breylorn's face and saw the brief smile.

"You noticed that."

Lyall bowed his head. "Is Janus dead?" he asked.

"You love him." His voice sounded distant. "You shouldn't."

Lyall's temper flared. "What do you mean by that?" he snarled, teeth out. Part of him knew what a very bad thing it was to challenge an elder, but he couldn't stop himself. Not being with Janus made his skin itch almost as much as the ward he'd taken.

"I mean he wasn't an elder. You weren't his pet, not technically. Yet here you are. Defending him."

"Don't put him in past tense," Lyall said. "He's not dead. I'd feel it!"

Breylorn held out his hands. "Peace, little brother. I'm no threat to you. Janus killed an elder. Whether he's dead or not, I had no choice."

"You're an elder, too," Lyall said. The elevator button lit behind them, but neither of them moved. "You could have protected him."

Breylorn bowed his head. "I could have," he said. "But I didn't want to."

"I will be sure to tell him that," Lyall said. He kept his voice flat. Breylorn raised his eyebrow at that. He was thinking of tearing out Lyall's throat. Lyall stepped up, holding his throat out, all but daring him.

"I hope for your sake Janus is still alive," Breylorn said, and stepped away from the door. "You would make a good pet for him."

"Thank you, sir," Lyall said. He walked past Breylorn, into the elevator car, and turned so that his back wasn't exposed. He touched his throat. The doors closed.

It wasn't quite dark yet. The sky still had streaks of color even though the sun had set. Lyall ran into the street.

The shadows did stir, and he felt them start to trail behind him. As long as he kept moving, though, they didn't wake.

He was out. He was free.

He was going to find Janus.

Hiroshi paced. The office wasn't that large, but Vision sitting back in his chair, feet up and completely relaxed, made the tension in the room that much worse.

"And he just got out," Vision repeated. "I thought you were some kind of ward master."

"Shut it," Hiroshi said, voice dangerous. He wasn't as old as Vision, but even as Vision sat behind the desk, Hiroshi imagined himself dragging Vision across it, forcing the man to submit. The leather pants Vision wore would only make the final entry worth the effort of getting them off him.

"Your master plan seems to be in tatters," Vision said. His voice was cold. As much as Hiroshi wanted to grind that smugness out of Vision, he somehow doubted Vision would submit to him, and his failure would be humiliating. He gnashed his teeth again.

"Shut it."

"What was it? You have Janus bring your pet to Breylorn, who would take him in and promote you to Janus's position? After only a year's service? If the master knew how pathetic your plan was, he'd never have allowed it."

"Varaugh is not going to be pleased. He needed Janus delivered tomorrow."

Hiroshi's feigned innocence. "He will be quite angry that you didn't procure him, won't he?" he asked. "But then you are Varaugh's dog, aren't you?"

Vision, damn him, kept his face smooth. It was like trying to rile an ice sculpture. "I succeeded where I said I would."

"If my wards hadn't worked, Varaugh would be dead right now."

"And you think that ranks you higher than me?" Vision asked, standing up.

"I don't think it," Hiroshi snapped.

Vision shook his head. "I get it. You think you're as good as Janus. You think just because you have some of his talent and have part of his life, that you can become him."

"Janus was weak," Hiroshi snapped.

Vision moved, faster than Hiroshi planned, and by the time he tried to counter Vision's movement, he was already over the desk, head pressed to the smooth desk. "Whores who forget themselves have no purpose," Vision said, undoing Hiroshi's tailored slacks. They pooled to Hiroshi's ankles, and Hiroshi shivered. "Step out," Vision said.

Hiroshi didn't feel compelled. He supposed Vision wouldn't try it; there'd be no victory in that. Still, he struggled, and Vision cuffed the back of his head. "Did you hear me? I don't like the look of a man with his pants around his ankles."

Hiroshi turned his head, mulishly.

"Janus is more than you could ever be."

If Hiroshi's mouth wasn't bone dry he would have spat. His lack of response earned him another ringing ear.

"Do you want me to keep hurting you?"

"I thought that was your thing," Hiroshi snapped.

Vision slapped his head again. "Would you like to repeat that?"

"No," Hiroshi said. He paused for another second and then stepped out of his slacks.

"This must have hurt," Vision said, putting his hand over where the knife had cut Hiroshi's throat. Hiroshi had had to drink two pints of blood to make up for the loss. Breylorn had sent him out to feed, but he'd come straight to Vision to demand Lyall's return. Vision's hand remained on his throat for one more second and then slammed Hiroshi down so that his forehead hit the cool wood of the desk.

"Are you going to stand there or spread your legs for me?" Vision continued, now thrusting his hips against Hiroshi's ass. Vision leaned over Hiroshi, pulling up Hiroshi's shirt so that his suit jacket scraped on his bare skin. "There's only one right answer to that question, by the way."

Hiroshi felt his cock press against the cold desk. He spread his feet apart. Vision kicked them away even further, so that it strained his upper thigh muscles.

The door opened and closed. Vision stepped away, leaving Hiroshi with his shirt pushed up over his shoulders, his pants off to the side, and his socks still on. What was worse, he was flexing his hips, trying to get what little stimulation he could from the desk.

"Thank you, Vision. What a wonderful present," Varaugh said, moving to the desk. The sound of a zipper being undone came from behind him.

Varaugh had to breathe, now. His lungs were still scarred from his exposure to the sun, and it left his breath with a slight wheeze. Hiroshi had used Varaugh's humanity to protect him from the morning rays spreading into the alley, but that same humanity still disgusted Varaugh.

And Vision knew that. Varaugh put his sweaty palms on Hiroshi's hip, and Varaugh's feeble pulse under the skin made Hiroshi hungry again. "Where is the pup?"

"I'll find him," Hiroshi said and braced himself. Varaugh entered him with minimal difficulty.

"When I'm done here, you will bring him to me," Varaugh said.

Hiroshi nodded, "Yes, sir," he said, but he'd have rather rot in the ground than obey.

Varaugh slapped Hiroshi's ass, his dry hands scraping his skin as the thrusting became deeper. "If you want assistance to kill your master, you will bring me the boy," Varaugh said and then started to grunt.

Hiroshi gripped the table, letting a thing, more human than not, fuck him.

The refrigerated car lurched and shuddered along upstate. Lyall hugged his knees. The swaying beef carcasses had been drained of blood, and their empty-smelling death left him feeling empty.

The sun was still out, but it was losing strength. He felt it through the thick walls. Whatever he had absorbed through Hiroshi's skin was making him sick, if he could be sick now. Chills passed through his body, and his hands wouldn't stop shaking. He wasn't as ill as he had been an hour ago, and even an hour before that, but still, it was miserable.

Another hour and the sun would be down completely. Hopefully by then he'd be able to feel his legs.

\* \* \* \* \*

The full moon was high in the sky by the time he made it to the lane leading to his stepfather's house. He never had felt comfortable walking up this road, but now he dreaded it. Sulter had two big black dogs that had always terrified him. They had always been allowed to run free on the property, but now Lyall smelled them cowering in their doghouses. They must have smelled him and were terrified.

That gave him the last bit of courage he needed to climb the steps to the front doors. He'd never gone in this way and only left this way the once. The doors gave way to a single kick on the doorknob, and Lyall stepped past the splintered remains to the main hall.

The house smelled of blood. Grant's blood coming from the basement. Vampire blood coming from everywhere. He smelled Janus, too, but it wasn't his blood that had permeated the carpets, wood, and stone. Janus's smell was coming from the library, and it was as strong as it had ever been.

He ran into the room.

Janus was about to set old man Sulter up into flames. Sulter was shaking his head, but his only defense was bringing the blanket up closer to his shoulders. The burning log dipped down another quarter inch and then stopped. Janus wasn't dead. Lyall felt drunk with exhilaration.

"Are you going to ask me not to do this?" Janus asked, not turning around.

"I'm going to think about not asking you to do that," Lyall responded.

Sulter looked away from the burning wood to where his stepson stood at Janus's shoulder. "Lyall," he said, his voice weak. "Please, I beg you. Help me."

His words had no effect on Lyall. "Vampires have been keeping him alive all this time," Janus said. The old man had always had his regimen of pills, but toward the end, even Lyall could tell the old man was slowing down. Now he looked as though his skin had melted away from his bones, but his eyes were still cold. His cane, the one he had used to rap Lyall's knuckles when he was a child and beat him as a teenager, was still against the wall. Lyall went to it and broke it over his knee.

"If I have to relight the log, it's going to lose all of its drama," Janus said, turning to him.

The weight of the cane felt good in Lyall's hands. He wondered if Sulter got his rocks off when swinging it. He pocketed the splinter with the handle still on it and turned back to where Sulter sat, mouth opening like a floundering fish.

"Do it," Lyall said. The fire touched Sulter's blanket, and within seconds, his clothing caught. The old man didn't scream so much as keened where he burned, but that might have been his sick blood boiling out of him.

Janus turned away and hugged him, then pinned his head between his hands and kissed him deep enough that Lyall heard nothing but the blood memory inside Janus beating faster.

His back was up against a wall, and he had no idea how they'd crossed the floor. Sulter had managed to get out of his chair, but he was burning so fast the hardwood floor scorched but didn't catch. The flames died out, and although he wasn't dead, he would be, soon.

Janus lifted his chin, rotating it slowly. "You stink of Hiroshi," he said. His voice was mild, though, and his hands warmer than his own chilled flesh.

"He was my last meal," Lyall said. "And I took his ward to escape the room."

Janus nodded. "I knew there was a problem with wearing them on your skin."

Lyall wanted to stamp his foot like a petulant child. "Yes. Quite. Interesting. Fascinating, even. Look, can we fuck now?"

Janus led him out of the library. The smell of charred flesh really wasn't appetizing. The night wind through the broken door moved some of the burnt smell, and Janus pulled him to the staircase. "Here," he said.

Lyall immediately dropped to his knees. Janus unbuttoned his jeans. Where Janus's skin touched him, Lyall felt the blood almost bursting inside. His skin felt alive. Janus reached down his body and sliced open his skin at his thigh with his fingernail. "Drink and get that nasty taste out of your mouth."

Lyall licked at the blood. "Grant," he said. He sucked more. The man had died unbelieving and in pain. That pleased him more than Sulter's death. He drank until the wound healed itself. The fresh human blood was heady after Hiroshi's, and he felt almost drunk.

Janus's cock was hard. Lyall licked from the base of it to the tip, just thrilled to be this close to Janus again. Janus guided his head down, gently. Then Lyall turned around, kneeling on the staircase, and Janus was over him.

Janus's hand moved over his face, across his lips, down Lyall's fangs. Lyall sucked on it, running his tongue along his thumb. Janus entered him, the amazing sense of fullness overtaking the burn within moments.



Lyall threw his head back. Janus bit his shoulder. The blood leaving him mingled with Janus's, and he felt it. Janus's cock moved inside him; Janus's hand wrapped around his.

Janus bit him again. More blood ran down the line of his back. "Relax," Janus whispered. "Let it go."

Lyall didn't understand until Janus leaned over and licked the blood again. His control wavered, and he gave it over to Janus to use as he saw fit. The orgasm started in his brain a long time before he was physically ready for it, and he rode wave after wave of pleasure. Janus bit him a final time, just as he was about to come, and Lyall felt both of them, shooting through his body, like being electrocuted.

"Good boy," Janus said, pulling away, and Lyall was again alone in his skin.

Lyall collapsed onto the staircase, taking the trouble of turning over. But anything more seemed too much effort.

"So all we need now is to get back to New York," Janus said, adjusting his clothing.

"And kill Hiroshi," Lyall said. "Breylorn while we're at it, too."

Janus stopped. "Why Breylorn?"

"He could have saved you. He chose not to."

Another long pause. "That was his prerogative," Janus said, finally.

"You can't be serious!" Lyall said. He wanted to put into words all the ways in which Breylorn deserved death, but his mind was a bit slow after the orgasm.

"He is my master," Janus said, his voice strained. "And I would not have him harmed."

And suddenly, that made sense. Lyall lay back down again with his head on one of the steps. "Who's Varaugh?" he asked finally, rubbing his face.

"Where did you hear that name?"

"I pulled it from Hiroshi. Something about him needing my body."

"He's dead," Janus said. "I killed him."

"Then why would he need me?"

Janus started to pace, tapping his lip just like Breylorn did, but he didn't answer. Lyall shrugged and pulled his clothes on. He felt better just being with Janus and had no doubt that together, they'd find out.

"I'm glad you're not dead," Janus said, finally.

Lyall wrapped himself around Janus. "I love you, too."

Hiroshi woke, staked out in the middle of the room. He remembered being fucked -- his ass still burned from it, at least -- and then nothing after that.

He tried to move his wrist, but there was less than a quarter inch of give in the chain. He closed his eyes, willing his muscles to stop hurting, but even they ignored him.

“You’re up, then,” Vision said. He was sitting at the desk, legs back up on the desk and his arms crossed. His leather pants shone in the harsh, artificial lights. “It would have been a shame if you hadn’t woken up for this.”

“What are you doing?” Hiroshi demanded and rattled the chains again.

“You will figure it out. You knew we had to work fast. Your boy isn’t here, so we’ll have to use you.”

Hiroshi stopped fighting. “What?” he demanded.

“You heard me.”

“The wards won’t work! You need a young vampire! One that still remembers being human!”

Vision smiled, and it tightened the skin on his face into a skull. “You’ve made yourself into that, Hiroshi. You’re not perfect, but you will work.”

“You can’t do this to me!” Hiroshi howled.

The door opened and closed. “You did it to yourself. You cloaked who you were, disguised your scent, and I allowed you your illusions as long as you brought me your boy. You let him go, and now you have to pay,” Varaugh said.

“I didn’t let him go, but I’ll find him. I’ll find him, and I’ll bring him back. You need him, not me. I swear.”

Varaugh smiled. The wards on his skin all came to the surface in rotating waves, each one trying to push through his skin like Braille. “This isn’t happening,” Hiroshi said.

Varaugh, his filthy beating heart audible as he entered the room, knelt beside him and put his hand over Hiroshi’s chest. The wards on Hiroshi parted, opening his skin for Varaugh’s hand.

He knew that his sternum and ribs should have protected his organs, but he still felt Varaugh’s hands tighten around his heart. He looked up, saw Varaugh’s face leering down at him, and then he saw his own body, flopping as much as the chains would allow.

Then, nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Varaugh’s body fell to the side, and Hiroshi collapsed. Varaugh stood. Hiroshi’s body was just a meat suit for an instant, and then Varaugh was Varaugh regardless of whose body he was in. He pulled the chains from their iron rings and the links gave way with a scream of metal.

Vision kicked his feet off the desk and stood up. He grabbed the keys from the drawer and knelt in front of him. “Master,” he said, exposing his throat. “I drank more, just for you.”

Varaugh moved inside Hiroshi's body, flexing his new shoulders. Vision saw him as a separate entity to his body, but only for a moment before he adjusted himself to better suit the skin he was wearing. "This will do," he said, finally. "For now."

Vision unlocked the shackles from his wrists and ankles, then rubbed the skin whitened by lack of circulation. Varaugh stood still for it, then backhanded Vision across his face.

Vision lifted his hand to his cheek. His lip felt split, and he dabbed at the blood. "Don't," Varaugh said. "Give it to me."

A warm feeling in Vision's belly began to spread throughout his body. He held his hand out, the blood deep-red over his finger. Varaugh took his wrist, roughly, and licked the blood off. "You didn't have respect for this body," Varaugh said, pulling his finger wetly from his mouth.

"No, sir," Vision said. He could feel his blood pooling inside him. Varaugh still held him, his fingers squeezing into his wrist. It was hard enough that he felt the bones start to separate, and the pleasure from the radiating pain made him want to drop to his knees. But Varaugh held his hand up too high for that. "Please."

"Please. Do you think I'll just let you get off with a lick and a promise?" Varaugh said. "This body can feel it. You had nothing but contempt for it."

"He was weak," Vision said. He dropped his eyes, looking slowly back up Varaugh's body. Hiroshi had been beautiful, even with his raving ego.

"And me?" Varaugh said. His lips pulled back. His fingers dug into Vision's skin. He backhanded Vision, again, and Vision pulled his teeth back so that he wouldn't cut himself again.

"You, I love, master," Vision whispered. "Please."

"You'll have to prove yourself again," Varaugh said. He smiled.

"Anything." He didn't fight it as Varaugh pushed him over the desk. It didn't even bother him that it was in the same position into which he'd forced Hiroshi. It just seemed right for him to be there. Varaugh picked up the knife, its blade so sharp it cut right through the leather.

"Put your knee up," Varaugh ordered, then went around the desk, not even waiting for Vision to obey. The Vaseline was in the bottom drawer. Varaugh brought it out and then moved behind him again.

Varaugh's finger pushed into him. The slickness made it impossible to fight it. Varaugh retreated, only for a second, and slid two fingers in. Each scrape against Vision's prostate made him shudder. The desk was wonderfully cool on his cheek, and he stretched out further along the desk. Three fingers. Then four. They moved inside him, relentlessly. Vision bit down on his wrist to keep quiet.

The fingers retreated again, just for a second. Varaugh heard the unmistakable sound of more Vaseline being applied. Vision shuddered, pushing his hips out further.

"There's a good boy," Varaugh said. The tips of his fingers slid in, going from pleasantly filling to straining within a moment. "Don't fight me," Varaugh said.

Vision didn't. He relaxed as much as he could. He felt Varaugh's knuckles work their way in, then pull out, then push in again. His dick slid across the smooth wood of the desk.

"Good. Very good," Varaugh said, then slowly worked his thumb in. He howled, Varaugh completely inside him. Varaugh's other hand wrapped around Vision's cock.

Vision dug his fangs into his arm. Blood filled his mouth, his cock under Varaugh's hand was hard enough to hurt, and his entire body felt opened. He came, screaming, and Varaugh pulled back, leaving him gapingly empty and used.

Varaugh slapped the back of his head. Vision managed to turn his head, though it took more effort for him than he thought possible. "Before you remove the carcass, lick my desk clean."

Vision turned his head. "He's not dead," he managed. His voice felt raspy.

"He will be. Stake him out. The sun will do the rest. I do not accept failure."

"No, master," Vision said and went back to pressing his cheek against the desk.

Eventually, it didn't hurt to move. Vision pushed away, but didn't fail to lick his semen off the desk's finish. It would have made him hard again, he knew, if he had an ounce more of blood in him to spare. He grabbed Varaugh's old body and dragged it out of the room, down the hall, and into the elevator.

It woke up, halfway down to the lobby. "My heart's beating," it -- Hiroshi -- said.

Vision kicked the body in the head, and it stopped talking.

Grand Central Station, with its painted ceilings and fancy tiles, had the smell of humanity that would never wash away. Janus led the way out of the building and into the street. It was a warm night, with a warm wind blowing, and for a moment he turned his face into that breeze and just inhaled the smell of the city.

Lyall trudged behind him. Lyall was obviously hungry and looked sallow. The sky was still true night, but the sun was going to rise, and soon. Janus took his arm and led him away.

Jackie was again under his tree. The moment Janus approached the boy, Janus heard the music again. Jackie opened his eyes, still swaying, and reached for him. "The trees told me you had died," he said. "Or that you'd gone far away. I suppose it's the same thing. The wolf came out when you weren't looking."

Lyall looked at him, clearly asking if he were serious. "He's altered, not stupid," Janus said, soft enough that only Lyall could hear. He turned back to Jackie. "My friend here needs to drink," he said.

Jackie's eyes focused behind Janus. "Tell him to come here," he said.

Lyall stepped past him. Janus grabbed his arm. "Don't drink too heavily," he said.

Lyall nodded. Jackie licked down his neck and then looked back to Janus. "This one is good," he said and lifted his hair off his neck. Lyall bit down, hesitantly. Jackie shuddered, but it wasn't a deep bite.

Afterwards, even though the bleeding had stopped, Jackie still held his neck. Janus would feed tomorrow; he wasn't as hungry as Lyall had been.

"Do you want to see it?" Jackie asked.

"See what?" Janus turned back to him.

"The tree that doesn't sing. There's something sick in its roots."

"Sick," Janus repeated. "Show me."

Jackie pushed away from his tree. It was still dark, and the heavy skies didn't let any of the stars through. Jackie moved unsteadily, and Lyall moved under his arm, helping him along.

"That one there," Jackie said, but then refused to go any closer to it. The upturned earth at the foot of the tree was a grave. Janus glanced to Lyall who nodded, and they both dropped to their knees and dug.

Varaugh's body was less than two feet into the ground. Janus grabbed it by the shirt and pulled it up. When he touched the skin, he felt a weak pulse still struggling.

Janus dropped the arm. "He's human," he said.

"That's not human," Jackie said from behind them. "He smells like you do."

"He smells like us, but his heart's still beating," Janus said. He yanked the man's shirt open. The man's skin across his chest and down his belly was burned and scarred with white tissue. He put his hand over the bare skin, and the ward, hideous and bloody, rose to the surface.

"Hiroshi saved his life," Janus said. "That bastard."

Varaugh grabbed his wrist. Janus backhanded him, pulling his wrist free, and Varaugh half-fell back into his grave.

The blood welling up where he'd bit his lip was half-human. That was how he'd survived the sun when Janus had put him down. It was how he survived under the dirt, but there was something wrong. Janus dabbed it on his fingers and licked it off.

It wasn't Varaugh. The blood tasted tainted, but not ancient at all. The body's eyes were open, and it tried opening its mouth. It must have been hell, being deep enough into the earth that the sun didn't kill, but burned like all the hells.

"Who are you?" Janus asked.

The mouth opened and closed again, but they narrowed. Lyall lifted the man's chin, rotating it back and forth, and then spat. "It's Hiroshi," he said.

“Fuck,” Janus said.

“We can’t leave him here,” Lyall said. He looked up, eyebrow cocked, then back down again. “We can just leave him here, can’t we?”

“We could,” Janus said. He stood up, “But I don’t think we’re going to.”

Lyall nodded. They stood up. Janus grabbed Hiroshi’s head, Lyall the feet, and they dragged him back to Janus’s lair.

The wards welcomed him back. Hiroshi had tried to batter the wards down -- Janus felt their bruised edges as he passed through -- but they remained standing quite easily.

The lair was his theatre again. The fire burned in its place, and his chairs looked cleaner than when he left it.

“Put him on the bed?” Lyall asked.

Janus looked at him, incredulously.

They both dropped the body in the next second, and they returned to the unchanging private part of the lair. Janus poured them each a glass of port and passed one to Lyall. Lyall took it with a smile of thanks and waited for Janus to sit before perching on the arm of the chair. He put his legs into Janus’s lap, and Janus stroked his thigh while he drank. He was too knackered himself, but once his wine was gone, he undid Lyall’s jeans, pulled them just far enough down his thighs to release his cock. He took Lyall in his mouth.

Lyall couldn’t move; he was sitting precariously on the chair as it was and had to fight to remain perfectly still, regardless of what Janus did with his tongue. Janus felt Lyall’s muscles tense, and the way Lyall’s fingers dug into his hair was endearing. Lyall moaned, then relaxed into it, allowing Janus to do what he wanted. Janus teased Lyall with his lips and tongue, and Lyall shuddered.

Janus rubbed his fingers along Lyall’s perineum, the spit on his fingers making the skin slick. Lyall couldn’t help lifting his hips off the arm of the chair, which drove his cock deeper down Janus’s throat. Janus supported their weight.

Lyall’s shudders turned to jolts running through his body.

Hiroshi had managed to move an inch or so when Janus stood up to fill his glass. He smelled of burnt flesh and fractured souls, and for a moment, Janus actually felt sorry for him. He walked over, poured his glass into the carpet, and walked away to the sound of Hiroshi sucking the port from the fibers.

Lyall had stripped naked, and as ruined as Hiroshi’s body was now, Lyall’s was shining perfection. “Are you going to let me kill him?” he asked, getting into bed.

“Do you still feel the need to?”

Lyall looked over his shoulder at where Hiroshi was still drinking from the carpet. “No,” he said.

“He can’t be turned, and the sun obviously hurts him without killing him. The wards won’t work with his half-life, and he obviously doesn’t have much mind left. We’ll let him stay the night, perhaps two, to get his strength back, and send him out again.”

Lyall nodded, mouth twitching, and then he got into bed. Janus joined him as the sun broke into the sky.

Hiroshi’s wards were already degrading. Janus stepped off the elevator. He’d been gone by the time they woke up, and Janus didn’t care where. The wards only stopped entrance, not exit. The wards were powerfully strong and poisonous, but curling at the edges like a frayed blanket. Lyall wasn’t with him, and for that, Janus was grateful. If Breylorn killed him, at least Lyall would be safe.

The house smelled empty. Janus walked down the long hall. The lights were all off, not that that made a difference, but it bleached the color from the room.

The apartment was empty. Janus sat down and waited on the couch. But he sat there until the sun rose in the morning.

Breylorn did not return.

Janus stood up. Hiroshi’s paper and products were still on the table. He spent most of the morning preparing two wards. Once he was finished, he used one to return to the lair.

Lyall stopped pacing. “How did you do that?” he asked.

“One of my patented ‘Get out of jail’ wards,” Janus said. “They’ve taken him.”

“Breylorn? How can you just take an elder?”

“I don’t know,” Janus said, finally. “But we’re going to find out.”

Lyall walked to him and exposed his throat. “I drank extra,” he said. “I thought you might be hungry.”

Janus pushed him away. “I don’t drink human blood that was taken violently,” he said.

Lyall exposed his throat again. “Then you’ll have no problem,” he said. Janus took him, dug his teeth into his neck, and drank.

Lyall was right. The little man had danced around him and offered himself freely to Lyall. Janus still tasted the euphoric high in his blood. He drank his fill. It took the pinkness from Lyall, but didn’t hurt him in any way.

“Right. Tomorrow, we go back to Varaugh’s building,” Janus said and wiped his mouth.

“Why would they keep him in a place so obvious?”

“Who alive does Varaugh think will challenge him?” Janus said. He looked back to the ruined remains of Hiroshi.

The building was locked down from the street level. Metallic, warded shingles -- Hiroshi’s last gift, apparently -- sealed the doors and the glass, and there were no lights on in

the building. It looked like a dead tree in the middle of winter when compared to the lights around it.

Janus looked up, waved at the camera he could hear but not see, and rattled on the metal. It sounded like thunder and echoed off the buildings around them.

When the metal started to move, he wasn't surprised. He stepped back, and was impressed to see Vision himself standing in the open doorway.

"We were expecting something a little more subtle," Vision said, voice dry enough to catch fire.

"Where is Breylorn?" Janus asked.

Vision crossed his arms over his chest. He had his two blonds hulking uselessly behind him and more men still in the darkness of the lobby. "Upstairs. Nineteenth floor. Would you like us to hold the elevator?"

"If it's going to be that simple."

Vision laughed. "Trust me. It's not going to be that simple."

Janus stepped into the building. The metal shingles snaked down and locked into place. Vision beckoned him further inside the building and held up his palm.

Janus stopped. Vision walked behind him, and Janus forced himself not to turn around. His lip curled. Vision grabbed Janus's hair, hard, and Janus hissed, but only because he was supposed to.

"You sent me to Siberia," Vision whispered. He raked his fingers through Janus's hair. Vision's nails broke the skin. Janus felt the blood rise.

"You were stupid. You took stupid risks," Janus said, but kept his voice low enough that only Vision heard. He leaned into Vision's hand, still holding his head. "You wanted to get caught."

"You wanted to get caught tonight," Vision said.

"So I did," Janus said. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I suppose I can start by asking you if you'd be more comfortable on your knees right now."

Janus dropped to his knees. He hated the way they were being watched, but he supposed Vision had earned at least that.

"You look good down there, Janus," Vision said.

Janus sat back lower on his heels and rocked back and forth.

"I could tell you not to do that," Vision said.

Janus reached down and unbuttoned his jeans with a flick of his fingers. He sucked on the fingers of his other hand, letting the zipper down tooth-by-tooth.

Being on his knees made his skin feel too hot. The hair on his neck stood up, but he kept his hands steady. "You could," he agreed.



Vision was dropping his slacks. His dick was already hard, and all Janus had to do was angle his head correctly. Vision tried grabbing Janus's hair, but Janus grabbed his wrists and squeezed, hard enough to hurt, and they fell to the sides.

Janus rewarded him by reaching through his legs with his wet fingers. No one was behind him to see his thumb working Vision's perineum and his fingers tapping against the ass.

The lobby was silent, but for the wet sounds they made. Janus's finger slipped into the ring of muscle easily, first one, then two, and he crooked them. He found Vision's prostate easily, and steadied him with a hand on Vision's belly as Vision almost jerked forward. He synchronized his fingers to his tongue working the sensitive head of Vision's cock, and Vision grabbed the back of his head a final time to come.

Janus let him. He swallowed rather than spit it out; he was that grateful Vision hadn't tried to jerk off in his face. Vision backed away, and as a final insult, motioned Janus to stand. Janus did so, doing his jeans back up, and he and Vision walked into the elevator alone.

The doors pinged shut. They hadn't managed to cut the emergency light from the elevator, and it cast everything with a Satanic red light. Vision threw Janus against the wall, hitting the emergency stop button with his elbow, and for a moment of cold terror, Janus thought he'd seriously misjudged good old Vision.

Then Vision dropped to his knees. He yanked down Janus's jeans hard enough that it almost caught his dick. Janus swatted Vision's head, catching his ear, and Vision was already mumbling an apology as he stuffed his mouth with Janus's cock.

Janus entwined his fingers in Vision's hair, hard enough that he felt the roots start to give way, but it only seemed to make Vision purr. The vibrations deep down in his throat made Janus gasp.

It was hot, awkward, and clumsy. Janus didn't last any more than a minute. He thought his skin would burst, the orgasm built in his belly until he couldn't stand the pleasure/pain. He pushed Vision so far down his dick that Vision's nose mashed against his pubic bone, and he was gone. His lungs remembered gasping for air, and it took a moment for him to be able to push Vision off him.

"Thanks," he said, wiping his forehead off with his sleeve.

"Don't mention it," Vision said, already standing. His clothes didn't have any apparent wrinkles, but the suit he wore looked as though he'd been on his knees sucking cock. It was a difficult look to lose. Both their lips were a little too chapped, and there was no hiding the acrid smell about them.

Vision pushed Janus into the wall again, hard enough that he bounced before settling back down. "I mean it. Don't mention it."

Janus smiled. They were once again captor/captive. He licked his lips, lavishly, once, and then zipped his finger across them.

"They'd better be," Vision said and looked straight ahead, like a human would on his way to work in a company elevator.

"You've hurt Breyloren in any way, and I will kill you," Janus said, turning to stand beside him.

In the red light with black shadows, his face looked like a mask. "Where's your pet? Slipped his leash, did he?" Vision asked.

"One day you'll be given permission to have a pet, and we'll discuss training methodology."

The further the elevator rose, the stronger the smell of distress grew. The smell of the elder came from the vents and hung heavy in the air. Breyloren was hurt. Janus smelled his fresh blood.

The elevator pinged open. The moment before it did, Janus had Vision against the wall, his teeth a hair from breaking Vision's skin. It felt good to push against time, as that was the only thing he could fight against, for now. He didn't have time for words, but the threat didn't need much else. By the time the doors opened all the way, he was back to the center of the elevator, calmly waiting for Vision to haul him off his feet.

Working on the shipping bay entrance reminded Lyall of the old days, when a simple set of lock-picking tools and a pair of wire-clippers were all he really needed. The locks on this building actually still had cylinders. He worked them until they all clicked open and slowly tried to pull the door up. It made it about a quarter inch before meeting resistance. There wasn't much, but enough to make him stop. He got out his long, bendable mirror, slid it under, then cranked it up and turned it on its side. The wires were attached in three spots. It took him almost twenty minutes to by-pass the first one correctly. The second took less time, and the third hardly any time at all.

Never let it be said that he couldn't be taught. He was able to roll up the metal doors a foot and squeeze himself through it.

The room was dark and quiet. No red lights lit any corner, and he didn't feel the hum of static on his skin like he did when there was infrared in the room. He rolled the door shut and removed his wiring.

They'd sealed the pipe he and Janus had come down on. The welding marks were still shiny silver slugs against dull metal. The trucks were gone, too, leaving the service bay empty.

He climbed up onto the shelf. The electric keypad by the door was a newer model that locked down after the third incorrect entry and was wired to the security center to boot. He wasn't going out that way.

He sat still. The schematics came to him. They slowly expanded like blueprints starting where he was and radiated outward. Routes that were impossible turned red inside his head and fell away, leaving him with only one blue exit out of the service bay.

The fresh air intake. Rodents had chewed through the old wires, a problem found after his and Janus's escape, but they'd been wired in wrong.

He stood up, craning his neck back. All he had to do now was scale the twenty-foot wall.

No problem.

Hiroshi's body sat behind Strickland's desk, its feet up and crossed at the ankle. It was just a meat suit, though. The eye-shape was different, the ice blue gone for chocolate brown, but Janus knew it was Varaugh.

"Where's Breylorn?" Janus demanded.

"You're in no position to come into my territory and demand anything, young Janus. Shouldn't you be on your knees?"

Janus's teeth came out. He hadn't asked them to, but he was quite done with kneeling. "You want me on my knees, you're going to have to put me there and keep me there," Janus said. Varaugh's men moved toward him. Janus snarled, and they glanced to Varaugh before falling back.

"Such pride. Only you would have nerve to think you could attack and kill an elder. How dare you?"

"You were killing in my territory," Janus said. "No other elder would have allowed you to do that."

"You were arrogant as a human, and the years of being a pet has done nothing to change that," Varaugh said, standing up. It was instant. Janus had been waiting for the movement, and still it caught him unaware. He took a step back. "You dare claim Strickland's lands as your own?"

"The lands I couldn't care less about. But the people are innocents. You broke the single law we have," Janus said. From where he stood though, there was no denying the power Varaugh had. Janus had planned the wards for weeks, and even then, he was sure it had been surprise that had allowed him to capture Varaugh. Janus hadn't been able to kill Varaugh, but had to leave him for the sun to finish him off.

Janus backed up until he was against the glass. The wards across Varaugh's skin rose to the surface between the edges of his unbuttoned shirt. They'd been made with Strickland's blood, Janus knew, the blood of an elder, and Janus wondered if they were making Varaugh ill.

Varaugh's hand shot out and caught Janus by the throat, lifting him up along the glass. If Janus's neck broke, it would be a long and painful healing process, but he couldn't quite see what disadvantage that would be for Varaugh.

He felt the tendons and muscles in his neck stretch. The blood flow to his head stopped, leaving him dizzy and detached. He grabbed Varaugh's arm and felt the dark blood under his skin.

It wasn't blood at all, but ink. The wards transferring the bodies must have left Varaugh so full that there was not much room for blood.

But the ward magic wouldn't last forever, Janus realized. Eventually even the elder blood would lose its effectiveness. And then what would Hiroshi use? "You keep yourself pure, don't you, Janus? You don't invite this nonsense inside your skin?"

Varaugh held him easily by the throat with one hand. With his other, he pulled up Janus's shirt. The wards on Varaugh's skin reacted badly with his flesh, and he felt his chest indent to match the raised wards on his arm. "Yes. You have kept yourself pure," Varaugh said and dropped him.

Janus fell. His feet didn't lock, and he landed hard on his ass. He held his throat, not out of deferential duty but to make sure everything was still attached, so that if he let go, his head wouldn't flop uselessly onto his chest.

It felt intact. He tried moving his head left and right. It hurt, but no more than a strained ankle. He let go, and his head stayed upright.

"I wouldn't damage you," Varaugh said, his voice now tender. He crouched down running his fingers down Janus's cheek. "I need you."

Janus looked up, still feeling weak in the knees. "For what?" he asked, his voice chewing up the inside of his throat.

Varaugh smiled. "It's too soon for me to move," he said. He looked down at his hand, the one next to Janus's cheek. Janus looked at it as well, and saw what he was talking about. He couldn't pull away completely from the skin he was in yet, the wards were too strong for that.

"I was just going to take your boy, not you," Varaugh said, pushing to his feet. "But why not harvest your strength as well?"

Janus looked down. Varaugh patted him on the head. "Good boy," he said. "Take him down to see his master. Make sure he gets enough to eat."

"Yes, master," Vision said. Janus had forgotten he was even in the room. Vision hauled him to his feet and supported his weight as they went back to the elevator.

"You were Strickland's lieutenant," Janus managed, once the elevator doors shut. Vision took a key from under his shirt. He plugged the round key into the elevator lock and pushed a blank square on the metal face. It lit from underneath.

"Hiroshi came to me," Vision said. "He couldn't save Varaugh from your wards, but he could change him so that the sun wouldn't kill him. Varaugh was threatening Strickland, and Strickland was losing his support from the council. I couldn't take being reduced to yet another vampire's possession. I did what I had to, and so would you."

Janus didn't want to waste the words to deny it. He became a lieutenant to further serve his master, not out of any of his own ambition. The idea of living in either Strickland's pampered office or Breylorn's chrome and glass tomb made him sick. His own apartment was empty most nights.

The elevator pinged and opened for them. Instantly, the smell of Breylorn and pain washed over Janus. Janus stumbled away, through the darkened hall. The entire floor was empty, but for the row of cages. They looked better suited for zoo animals than an elder. A loud hum came from down the aisle.

Breylorn was in the farthest one, the one closest to the windows. These windows weren't as well insulated as the others, and the sun's radiation had been allowed to pass through. Not enough to kill, of course, but enough to continually drain Breylorn's energy, forcing him to heal the sun's damage over and over again.

Breylorn's head hung as though his neck had been the one wrung. He'd been staked out, hands chained to the walls spread out in both directions, and one of them had surgical-grade tubing running from his brachial artery. The tube was clamped, though, tight enough that only a steady drip of blood fed into a machine. It was two feet by two feet, containing a blood pack continually rocked. Vampire blood didn't need anti-coagulants added to it, so Janus had no idea what the thick yellow fluid that didn't mix with his master's blood was for.

Janus didn't have the words to demand an answer to why they were bleeding out his master. But the dull way Breylorn's head hung and the lack of response to Janus's presence told Janus there was something else wrong with him.

Vision stepped past him, unlocking the cell with another key. "We're not hurting him, too much," Vision said. The hum came from a cooler plugged in within the cell. "If you'd be a good boy, I'd like to see you in that cell next to him."

"He needs help," Janus said, turning to Vision. "You have to help him." As still as Breylorn was, there was no denying the waves of fear coming off him. Janus smelled it as thick as a blanket.

"I'll help him. Into the cell."

Janus opened and closed his hands into fists. "You'll have to make me," he said.

Vision turned back to him. "You're weak, and you're tired. Healing up your throat took something out of you. Maybe on your better days we'd be a good match, but for right now, get in the cell."

"Like I said. You'll have to make me."

Vision grabbed him. Janus pushed him off, angrily, but Vision was too fast. Too strong. Every time he even tried to grab Vision's wrists, Vision was there, catching him, pushing him aside. Janus began to give up ground. He didn't want to; he was being herded into the cell.

One final push, and Janus went sprawling. The metal door sprang shut, and Vision left him there, dusting off his hands.

Vision returned to Breylorn's cell. The door wasn't even locked. He reached into the cooler, and pulled another blood pack out.

Janus pulled back. The blood was human, but stale. So stale it barely had any life to it at all. Vision bit into the plastic, tearing it open, but then spat out whatever blood entered his mouth.

"You must be so very hungry now," Vision said, speaking in a soft, calming voice. Breylorn didn't move, but Janus knew he'd become more aware. Janus's own hunger nipped at his belly like hounds.

"Don't do it," Janus said. He crawled to the bars between them, but Breylorn was too far away to touch. "Please. Don't do this. Let him drink from me."

"You don't think Varaugh is going to allow that?" Vision asked, voice mild.

"He doesn't have to know," Janus said.

"You're just full of compromise these days, Janus. Whatever happened to the old you?" Vision looked at him, briefly, bared his fangs, and went back to carefully walking across the room. The bag, now that it was open, moved like a living thing. The smell of stale blood filled the entire floor. Janus's head swam with it and the sick scent of need that came from Breylorn.

"Please," Janus said. Breylorn tilted his head back, mouth open, and he looked like a baby bird waiting to be fed. Vision carefully lined up the blood bag and poured it down Breylorn's throat. He'd have to drink three times as much to get the same amount of blood memory, and Janus had to look away.

"Any one of us would have done what he'd done, if he'd been bled long enough," Vision said.

Janus remembered being fed in the truck. Vision, rot his eyes, was correct.

The first, second, and third attempts at tossing up the rope over the pipe hadn't worked. The rope was too light. But the fourth time Lyall tossed it, it had made it up. The rope snaked back down, and Lyall tied the two ends together.

"Right, then," he told the empty room. He wanted one more chance at finding another way up to the vent, but he literally didn't see any other way out. He exhaled, sharply, out of habit, and began the first pull. The rope would chew up his hands before he reached the top, but there was no choice.

The first twenty yards went easier than he thought. Within half an hour he was halfway there. All-liquid diet. Then things got harder. It became more and more work to grab the rope ahead of him and loop his foot into the right spot so he could reach again. He had to work twice as hard for half the distance.

Footsteps came from the hall adjoining the service bay. Two men, humans by the smell of them, debated whether or not they should go in and check the bay. Lyall held his breath, again, out of habit, but the humans moved on.

The break gave him the strength he needed to shinny up the rest of the rope. He only unscrewed three of the grate's corners, and let it swing down on the fourth. He wriggled inside the shaft and hauled the rope up. He used the rope to pull to grate into place and tied it off, secured to an exposed support. Then, he started his long crawl to the elevator shaft.

Lyall hadn't failed to steal the heart; it had been impossible. The crypt was solid marble. There was no entrance or weak spot. He'd tried blasting his way through, which only left dark smudges on the smooth rock and caught the attention of the local police. For more than two hours, they'd played cat-and-mouse with him before he finally eluded them. They'd closed down the airports, plastering his composite picture up and down the state. He'd had to get out by foot, through thick forests.

He'd come back furious that Hiroshi had sent him on a fool's mission.

"You sent me there for nothing!" Lyall snapped, slamming the door behind him.

Hiroshi stood up. "Where is it?" he demanded.

"The heart? It doesn't exist. There's nothing in the crypt, and you know it!"

Hiroshi stared at him. "You failed me," he said, his voice so incredulous Lyall suddenly realized Hiroshi had never thought he could fail.

"You send me to steal something encased in solid marble, and you're concerned I failed you?"

Hiroshi backhanded him, hard enough that Lyall hit the wall beside him. He'd been standing three feet away, and yet he hit it still standing up. Blood filled his mouth, and he spat it out onto the Turkish rug in the hall.

"I needed that," Hiroshi said, backhanding him again. Lyall didn't move; Hiroshi was holding him up by the throat. Lyall tried to claw the hand open when the ringing cleared from his head. Hiroshi's nails dug into his trachea, and Lyall swore he felt it collapse a little from the pressure.

Lyall had seen a dozen movies in which people had their throats ripped out, but up into that moment, he hadn't thought it possible. He reached down Hiroshi's arm, trying to find a soft part of Hiroshi to dig his thumb into, but he was growing weaker with each floundering heartbeat.

Black circles began to form behind Lyall's eyes, closing his vision off. He hadn't taken breath in a long time, first from the shock of falling, then from his throat being squeezed. It left him detached from the pain.

His hands fell to his sides. Fighting now seemed ridiculously unnecessary. If he just closed his eyes, just for a second, he'd feel better.

The pressure released, and he was falling. He fell, face first, not even trying to block the fall. "No," he heard Hiroshi over him. Lyall's forehead was smeared with his own blood, spat on the floor when Hiroshi had hit him. Even so, the carpet seemed like an excellent place to sleep.

Hiroshi continued as Lyall drifted off. "You'll just have to explain to Varaugh why you failed."

The name meant nothing to him. He slept.

He came to in the car. His forehead was sticky and burning at the same time. He'd been handcuffed, but still managed to touch the roughness over his eyes. He recognized it now, although usually it only plagued his knees and the palms of his hands.

Carpet burn. Hiroshi had dragged him face-down across the floor. Well, great. His throat hurt as well, not just from where Hiroshi had almost crushed it, but off to the side and down further. He was covered in blood that could only be his own, and his lips tasted salty when he licked them, nervously.

The black-and-white lobby hadn't impressed him, although the way the men at the desk had just glanced up to watch Hiroshi pull him into the elevator led Lyall to believe this sort of thing happened all the time. Their bored looks went well beyond city-apathy.

Hiroshi paced inside the elevator, but stopped long enough to unbutton Lyall's shirt. Lyall started to bat his hands away, but Hiroshi placed the curve of his fingernail just where Lyall's eyelid tucked into his skull, and the threat was crystal clear. He let his hands fall to the side, and Hiroshi finished unbuttoning it in peace, then pulled it out of his slacks.

The smell coming from the office at the end of the hall made Lyall think of a rotting rat's carcass, washed up on the shore beneath the pier. It was rank and salty, but old, too. Whatever it was, it had been dead for a long time.

The door opened when they reached it, but no one stood by it as they entered. Lyall's body was still hurting. He still very much wanted to keep both his eyes in his sockets, so he didn't fight Hiroshi, even when he threw him across the desk. He landed hard, hip first, and the gray, bloated thing behind the desk applauded. He'd seen corpses that hadn't been weighted down properly and had floated back up on their own accord a week later. They looked better than his flesh.

"This is the eldest?" the thing demanded. It moved out of Lyall's vision, and he caught a glimpse of a belt buckle. He supposed it must have been a man, but nothing like any man he'd ever seen before. "He smells of milksop."



"He's a pup," Hiroshi said. "But his heart is still beating. It will do, for a stopgap."

Silence followed. Lyall tried to turn his head, but Hiroshi slammed it back down into the desk. "You are going to turn over," Hiroshi told him, pressing his forehead hard enough into the desk that for a moment Lyall thought his skull would fracture under the pressure. "Yes?"

Lyall tried to nod, words having eluded him, but he couldn't move. Hiroshi must have felt the muscles clenching, because his hand came up long enough for Lyall to force his body to turn over on its back. He had to push up with his bound hands to move. He touched the painful part to his throat and jerked his hands away. He could have been touching ground meat for the raw flesh exposed.

*What did you do to me?* No words came out. He'd spent the day flying back on a commercial airplane. That he remembered. But where he'd been going and what he was doing there was now just a black spot in his head. He tried to just open his mouth, but couldn't even do that.

One of the two men in the room, the dark-skinned one, at least, came out with a wicked looking curved knife. Lyall's hand remembered how to wield one, and it grasped the empty air. He had nothing to defend himself with.

The knife cut into his belly, not deep enough to cut through the subcutaneous layer of muscle. He pushed the pain away, focusing on the man. He had to stop and get a better grip on the knife if he was going to cut deeper. When the man's hand left the hilt, Lyall gathered his feet up and lashed out. The man stumbled back, and Lyall pulled the knife out of his stomach and threw it at the other one, the one who looked as though he were dying.

Sitting up ripped open Lyall's belly. He got off the table and bolted for the door, holding the wound shut with his hands. The first man didn't notice he was missing until he made it to the door.

Lyall got into the elevator, and the door closed behind him. He wasn't bleeding as much as he thought a belly wound would. He pushed a random button and leaned back against the wall for a minute. The blood on his wrists made it possible to slip off one of the handcuffs, though that just about took the skin off his hand while he did it. Once the cuffs were off, he managed to break down a panel and crawl deep into the building's pipes. He lost count of how many times he had to stop and stuff parts back inside himself. When he couldn't go any further and allowed himself to collapse, he didn't think he'd be able to get back up again.

But he had got back up again. The wound had closed, becoming a horribly ugly, raised pink welt. But when he looked down at it for the first time, he had no idea how he'd gotten it.

He'd slipped out of the building, falling from an open third-story window, but he hadn't been completely successful. They'd found him in the alleyway, three human

enforcers. He'd killed two and wounded a third before collapsing in the pile of garbage that had saved his life.

The door to his cell swung open, but Janus didn't look up. Vision came in, dangling handcuffs off his finger. "Are you going to give me any trouble?" he asked.

Janus shook his head, too tired to fight. "Let me feed him," he said. Vision stood in front of him, looming.

"It won't help. He's too far gone for just blood. The blood packs are tainted."

"Why?"

"Varaugh needs his blood. Breylorn should be commended, at least. His body absorbs the poison and gives Varaugh only the pure blood."

Vision bent down. Janus saw he was holding another blood pack. "I'm supposed to give you this," Vision said. He reached down, the chill of the plastic pressed under his chin. Vision forced Janus up to his knees.

Janus looked away. Vision undid his own slacks, pulling them down to his thigh, and grabbed Janus by the hair, pulling him up another few inches.

Janus was going to fight, pulling the hair out of his head if he had to, but Vision guided Janus to his thigh rather than his cock.

Janus bit down. Blood flowed, filling him. His strength came back, and out of courtesy he tongued the bite wounds until they healed.

Vision patted him on the head. "Breylorn's done for," he said, stroking Janus's head. "He truly is. I'll replace him. You can join him, or you can join me in his place and become my lieutenant. What will it be?"

Janus turned his head away. "Varaugh is dying, too. There's more poison in his veins than he has room for blood. When Breylorn dies, he'll die, too."

"And you, Janus? Do you want to be left out for the sun? I don't want to stake you through the heart, that's just so clichéd. Shall we let you bleed out, again, or do we just chop your head off and call it done?"

Janus looked up, and saw Lyall standing right behind Vision. "How about a fire-extinguisher to the head?" Janus asked. Vision's look of confusion was almost as satisfying as the dull thud that sounded when the red extinguisher struck his skull.

Lyall was over Vision the next second, chaining him to the bars that separated Janus's cell from Breylorn's. "Should I kill him, master?" Lyall asked as he pulled the elevator key from under Vision's shirt.

Lyall stepped over Vision, offering his hand. They'd only been apart for a couple hours, but Janus never wanted Lyall away from his side again. Vision's blood filled him; he no longer felt weak. Lyall's face was tight with concern as well. Janus took his head between his

hands, but before he could kiss away the worry, Breylorn groaned. "We don't have time, darling," Janus said.

Lyall groaned, the sound ripping from him, but reluctantly pulled away. "What of Vision?" he asked, his voice thick.

Janus shook his head. "He was supposed to feed me the poisoned crap he's feeding Breylorn," Janus explained. "He fed me from himself, instead. I'd like to return the favor."

Lyall looked up, to where Breylorn was still staked out. "And him?" he asked, his voice deferential.

"Search Vision for more keys," Janus said and stepped over them.

Lyall locked the cell door and joined Janus in the next moment. Janus pulled his sleeve up, all ready to bite down on his exposed wrist, when Lyall put his hand over it. "Allow me, master. My blood is more human than yours is right now."

Janus nodded. He picked up Lyall's hand and sank his teeth in. "Go ahead," he said.

Lyall knelt down, hand clamped over his bleeding wrist. Breylorn didn't respond despite how close he was. Lyall brought his bloody hand up to Breylorn's cheek. Then Breylorn's lip curled back. Lyall waved the blood under his nose, and they both heard him snarl.

Lyall bowed his head, submissive where he knelt, and Breylorn bit down on the already opened flesh.

The pain was obvious on Lyall's face, but he didn't make a sound. Wet, sucking sounds followed. Lyall held the back of his head to the right angle for Breylorn to swallow with minimal difficulty.

"Enough," Janus said. He still needed Lyall to have some strength. Lyall pulled away, and Breylorn actually rattled his chains in an attempt to get back to the open wound.

Lyall stood up, and Janus knelt down in Lyall's spot. "Master," he whispered. Breylorn looked at him, with blank eyes, but there was fresh blood on his teeth and lips. Breylorn didn't smell entirely of himself. The blood he did smell of was familiar, and it took a moment to realize it was Strickland's. The daisy chain of elders Varaugh was using to sustain himself made Janus sick. It *was* sickening.

"You will come back," Janus continued. Lyall moved to Breylorn's right hand and unlocked the cuff. Janus caught the hand and felt Lyall's blood moving into it. The other blood inside him was sick. The healthy blood diluted it, but he was still dying.

Lyall unlocked the other hand. Janus massaged that one as well and then held both of them to his cheeks. "We will be back," he promised.

Breylorn didn't move from the wall. Vision hadn't woken yet, but flinched when Janus closed Breylorn's cell as well. Lyall looked at him, eyebrow raised, and Janus shook his head. "I don't want him to hurt himself," Janus said.

Together, they went back to the elevator. Lyall stopped and turned around, concern on his face. "He is an elder," Lyall said. "How could they do this to him?"

"Hiroshi warded him," Janus said. "It won't happen again." Lyall nodded, and Janus put his arms around him. Lyall gripped him, hard, and the residual human smell of him had become more welcoming. Janus released him and summoned the elevator.

"Varaugh is crippled, but he's not helpless," Janus said. "And he will go straight for you, if he has any sense at all."

Lyall nodded. He hugged Janus one more time, touching where his heart would be, and then slid his finger down another inch. "I'll just keep out of the way," Lyall said.

Janus nodded and turned to face the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janus kicked the door open. Varaugh stood up, in real time, and glanced between Janus and Lyall. He smiled. Janus moved to intercept him, halfway through pushing time, but by the time he reached where Varaugh should have been, he was alone.

He stopped. Looked around. Saw Varaugh's body hanging off the splinter of cane in Lyall's hands. The wards in Varaugh's body all rose to the surface, making the entire surface blacker than ink. None of the wards protected against staking, however. Varaugh had already started to dry. His skin went papery, split, and by the time it drifted to the ground, Varaugh's body was empty inside. The blood memory he'd been storing released, and the pain in which the blood was taken screamed past Janus and released.

Lyall threw the cane away from him, hard enough to crack the glass of the window.

Janus went to him and took his head in his hands. Lyall's blood was coursing now; he felt almost alive. When he kissed him, Janus felt a part of the rush. Both their pupils were dilated, his nostrils flared, and it was all Janus could do to tear himself away and not throw Lyall onto the desk.

Breylorn groaned from his cell. "We have to go," Janus told Lyall, barely able to pull himself away.

"Uh," Lyall said.

Janus resisted the urge to kiss him again, though he felt well and truly snared. "We're getting Breylorn the hell out of here," he said.

"How?" Lyall asked.

"Through the front door. No one will stop us."

Lyall nodded, and they went back to the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janus was right. No one tried to stop them on the way out of the lobby. Even the two blond brothers at the desk bowed their heads as Janus and Lyall passed, supporting Breylorn's weight between them.

Miller waited to take them home. Lyall ran around the other side, and together they managed to get Breylorn into the car. Vision would probably be watching from his window, and Janus looked up and held out his hand.

By the time they reached Breylorn's building, it was almost light out. Pale salmon streaks stretched across the sky as they pulled Breylorn out of the backseat. The doormen, who were paid vast sums of money to not ask questions, didn't say anything, but their concern was clear on their faces. Janus ignored them.

The elevator door opened in Breylorn's apartment. Hiroshi's wards had rotted away, although Janus's wards were still strong. "Get his bed ready," Janus said. Lyall ran ahead, opened the door, and pulled the blankets down. Breylorn was feverish as they put him down on the mattress.

"Is he going to be all right?" Lyall asked, but hovered back, toward the door. Janus didn't blame him; the room had a profound feel to it. *A death chamber*. He forced himself to stop that train of thought.

"Yes. Can you leave us alone?" Janus asked.

Lyall took a step forward, as though wanting to touch Janus, but then left the room, closing the door behind him.

Janus took Breylorn's hand, holding it in his own so that it warmed, and then brought it back to his cheek. "Master. Can you hear me?"

For a long moment, Breylorn's face didn't change, and then he opened his mouth a quarter inch. Janus saw Breylorn's teeth through it, and the very beginning of the 'J' sound emerged.

"Yes, it's me," Janus said. He kept Breylorn's hand on his cheek. Breylorn's eyes began to flutter, but he didn't open them or make another sound.

Breylorn nodded.

"You sold me out," Janus said. "Hiroshi would have killed me. I would have been killed by a junior."

Breylorn was still.

"I forgive you," Janus said. "Master, please. You will get better, and you will take your place again. Rest, now. We'll have some real blood up for you in the evening."

Breylorn swallowed, then nodded. He was asleep before Janus stood up, and his dreamless slumber was still tinged with the poison Vision had fed him.

Janus closed the door behind him. He'd kill them all.

Lyall waited for him in Hiroshi's room. Now Janus smelled the real Hiroshi; the strength to his wards here were undeniable. His bed was barely more than a platform an inch or so off the floor and a thin mattress.

Lyall had stripped and sprawled on the bed above the blankets. His skin was again flawless, but Janus was remembering the pain that had marked him so well. He wanted to protect Lyall from it, but knew that was impossible.

"Breylorn has never been in here," Lyall said. "At least, I don't smell him."

Janus moved to the edge of the bed. "That's not how it works," Janus said. He kept his voice cool. Without even being aware that he was doing it, Lyall collected himself. He pulled up to his knees, and spread them, just enough to leave himself exposed. "The pet comes to the master, not the other way around."

Lyall's smile was a pained one. His hand raked down his belly, leaving red welts. "Would you come for me?" he asked.

Janus watched the redness absorb back into Lyall's pale skin. "I'm sure you meant come to you," he said. His teeth were out. Janus sliced his tongue on his left fang, and he started to bleed right away.

Lyall shifted on the bed, spreading his legs wider. His hand moved lower still. He ran his fingers up along his dick, which was erect now against his belly. "I'm fairly certain I've picked my words carefully, master," Lyall said.

Janus was tired. Too tired to guard his words, so the truth tumbled out of him. "I'd crawl to you," he said.

"Good," Lyall said and took off his clothes and left them where they fell to the floor. Lyall moved to the edge of the bed, his fingers wrapped around himself. He parted his lips, invitation obvious.

Janus got it. He moved closer, entangling his free hand into Lyall's hair, and began jerking off his own cock.

Lyall grinned, but kept his lips parted. His long fingers matched Janus' rhythm, even after he closed his eyes and turned his face up.

Janus groaned. Lyall's soft hair, the warmth of the blood in his cheeks and his parted lips affected him more than any simple blowjob he'd ever had. Lyall was close, too; the warmth growing from his knees to his elbows was obvious as a flush on Lyall.

"Do it," Lyall whispered, then stuck his tongue out. He might as well have just flipped a switch. Janus groaned again, already coming. Lyall came, too, Janus smelled his excitement. For the first time Lyall's tongue touched the tip of his cock, and Janus almost came again.

Janus collapsed on to the gray bedding, trying to regroup. He almost missed Lyall licking off his palm. Lyall crawled up to where he'd lain down, and spurned the pillow to use Janus's upper arm.

The next evening, Breylorn wasn't any better. Janus fed him by hand, but Breylorn only took two or three swallows before turning his head away.

"He's dying," Lyall said.

Janus didn't turn. "You don't think I can see that?"

"Forgive me."

Janus turned this time. Lyall looked vulnerable against the wall. He was starting to understand a lot of what was happening between Janus and Breylorn, but now he wasn't threatened by it. Janus wanted to go to him, to kiss the line where his neck joined his shoulder, but he couldn't leave Breylorn's side.

Janus came to him, instead, and nuzzled at his neck. Lyall's hand touched where the scar had been on his belly.

"Hiroshi was looking for a still beating heart. Does that make any sense to you?"

"The still beating heart," Janus repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Sure enough that they tried to go in and get mine," Lyall said. "What is it?"

"Ancient lore," Janus said, but he stood up. "It's supposed to be curative."

"Hiroshi wanted it. I guess for Varaugh. When I couldn't get it, he tried to kill me."

"And why couldn't you get it?" Janus asked.

Lyall shrugged. "I don't have the skill set to go through solid marble."

"I see now why so many people have shot you."

Lyall just smiled, exposing his fangs.

Janus went back to Breylorn. Even with the fresh blood, his face had looked waxy the night before, but the shining hot-wax look of a burning candle. Now it looked dull and opaque, like a candle long blown out. His mouth was a thin line. It wouldn't be long before the sheen to his skin would dry out and there would be nothing left inside him.

"You can't just leave him alone," Lyall said. "And I need you to get into that crypt."

Janus nodded. He stood up and made a phone call. Miller found Jackie under a tree, no surprises there, and both of them swore to tend to Breylorn's needs.

It had taken them two days to cross into Massachusetts. Janus had more experience than Lyall did, and when Janus told Lyall it was time to take shelter, regardless of how dark the night had been, Lyall didn't argue.

Lyall held open the gate to the cemetery. The consecrated ground had been desecrated years ago, once the abandoned church had been turned into a truck pad and the headstones destroyed. The graves themselves were overgrown with weeds. Janus looked around. Once upon a time, this sort of yard would have been their ground, but he'd been far too comfortable in the city for too many years.

Things moved outside of his vision, in the low-hanging trees and in the darkness of the hangman's tree in the middle of the yard. He walked up to the old oak tree.

Janus saw the large crypt. It was marble, though it was dirty enough to pass as granite. The fault lines of color running through it brought with them the sound of the beating heart.

Lyall stepped around Janus. "It wasn't doing that before," Lyall said.

"I'm willing to bet it was," Janus said. The stone was cold to the touch, despite the warm evening. The heartbeat itself was faint, but it gave the cold stone the feeling of life. Janus fought the urge to be on his knees.

They weren't alone in the graveyard. Janus turned, just as Vision walked from the other side of the crypt. The crumpled ruin that was Hiroshi was behind him.

Lyall stepped up to Janus's shoulder. He'd single-handedly killed Varaugh, but still, Janus wished he wasn't there. "How did you know I'd be here?"

Vision motioned to Hiroshi. Hiroshi walked around the marble crypt. He was whispering something to himself and touching the rock as if it were alive.

"He hasn't stopped talking. He had a lot to say about going down on you, Janus," Vision said, sneering. "He's a little less clear as to what is inside the crypt."

Janus took Vision's hand, leading him to the marble. He put Vision's palm to the stone and held it there. "You feel it."

"The heart." Vision's voice changed and became almost reverent. "You're taking it for Breylorn."

"I am," Janus said. Hiroshi moved towards Lyall, who slammed him into the marble wall. Hiroshi fell, still babbling, and Lyall stepped over his body.

"I could stop you." Vision's voice was curious, as though he was debating with himself as much as with Janus.

Janus crossed his arms. "You could definitely try." He was full of blood and strong again.

They moved together. Each time he tried to grab Vision's wrist, Vision batted his hand away, but neither did Vision catch his.

Janus pushed Vision into the crypt. Vision caught hold of Janus's shirt, pulling him with him. They hit the ground.

Lyall leaped out of the way. Janus got two punches into Vision's face before Vision managed to fling him off. Janus grabbed Vision's shoulders, and the force carried them both through so that Janus was on top again. Vision had him by the throat, but was weakening. Janus punched him again, over and over, until the hand dropped, and Vision stopped fighting.

Janus sat back, letting Vision's hands fall to the ground. He met Vision's eyes. Vision looked away first. He exposed his throat to Janus.



Janus bent down, digging his teeth into the exposed skin. Hot blood, heated more by the fight, filled his mouth. He didn't drink that much. He was already full, but it still had to be done.

Lyall moved away. They both heard it, but didn't look away. Janus stared at him, and Vision nodded again. Janus moved off him, enough that Vision could have crawled away. He didn't crawl very far.

Behind them, Lyall kicked Hiroshi in the head, and Hiroshi went back down again.

"I won't let you take the heart," Vision said, but climbed to his hands and knees. Janus roughly jerked down his slacks. Vision's skin was hot enough that it felt human.

"Yes, you will," Janus said. Lyall moved beside him, dropping down, and took Janus's cock in his mouth. It wasn't as warm as Vision's skin, but welcoming enough.

Janus gently pushed him away. He put two fingers together, and Lyall took them into his mouth, too. Janus then pushed Lyall towards Vision's head. Lyall looked at him, eyebrow raised, clearly asking for permission, and Janus nodded. Lyall took hold of Vision's head and brought it down to his groin. "Please," he asked, as was proper. Vision took Lyall into his mouth.

Janus slid his fingers inside Vision. They both made the same sound in the back of their throats. Janus moved up, guiding his cock to replace his fingers. Vision pulled away from Lyall long enough to hiss. Janus slapped his ass, hard enough to leave a white handprint on the very pink skin.

Vision took Lyall's dick back in his mouth. Janus stroked Vision's skin, and Vision pressed back against him.

Janus thrust for the first time. Vision fought, but Lyall had him by the head and Janus by the hips. They fucked him, Lyall meeting Janus's eyes, and hells, Vision's ass felt good. Each stroke sent an obvious wave of pleasure up Vision's spine, and they both shuddered.

The grave dirt was moist and clung to Janus's knees. Vision groaned, pulling away from Lyall, but replaced his mouth with his fist.

Vision braced himself with his elbows, pushing back into Janus. Lyall was now stroking his shoulders. Janus grabbed the hair on the back of Vision's head and yanked it back.

"Yes," Vision hissed. "Please."

Janus just pulled harder. The reins made it easier to control his thrusts. The harder Janus pushed, the more Vision begged for it.

Lyall shuddered. Vision took him back into his mouth. Lyall came, going very still, and backed away.

It was just Vision and Janus. The angle wasn't right. He threw Vision over to his side, then yanked him on his back. Vision opened his mouth to protest, but Janus put his hand over Vision's mouth. It was better this way. Face-to-face. Vision lifted his ankles to Janus's shoulders.

"I hate you," Vision said. Janus pushed back inside him. "If I could destroy you, I would."

"You could have killed me several times," Janus said. Vision didn't look away, and the hatred in his eyes only turned Janus on more. He braced himself, holding onto Vision's legs, and after three quick thrusts, came.

"You unbelievable bastard," Vision snarled, flat on his back with his hard-on still on his belly.

Janus touched his knee and moved off. Lyall took his place, kneeling between Vision's spread legs. He took Vision's cock into his mouth. Janus stroked the back of Lyall's neck as he sucked. Vision didn't last long, and was soon grabbing onto Lyall's head and lifting his hips off the dirt to go deeper down Lyall's throat.

Janus left them there and went to prepare the ward he'd, thankfully, already started the morning he realized Breylorn had been taken.

The wet sounds continued until Lyall pulled away far enough just to take the tip of Vision's cock on his mouth when he began to come. Lyall didn't swallow. He stood up, leaving Vision wrecked on the ground, and went to where Janus was working.

"Good boy," Janus said, and held out his left hand, palm-side up.

Lyall spat out the semen in his mouth. Vision forced himself to sit up on his elbows. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Three into one," Janus said. He had nothing to paint with but his hands, but then he needed nothing more than his finger. The ink of the wards warmed as he brushed the come over their words, sometimes tracing out the existing lines, sometimes creating new lines. "It's not as strong as elder blood, but then, it's not likely to taint your veins, either."

Vision pushed to his feet. Lyall got between him and Janus, but Vision raised his palms, non-threateningly. "I just want to see," he said.

Janus nodded, and Lyall let Vision pass. "Is it really going to work?" he asked.

"We're about to find out." Janus finished the last symbol and carried it to the crypt. He looked to Lyall. "Ready?"

Lyall nodded. Janus smacked the ward onto the crypt. For a moment nothing changed, then from within the marble, an arch formed. The marble in the archway was the color of pure beef fat, and Lyall had no problem walking through it. Janus had to concentrate on the ward. If Vision tried anything, he probably couldn't maintain the vigil, and Lyall would have been locked in the stone forever, but Vision waited, almost reverently, until Lyall emerged.

His hands were cupped over something that had an audible pulse. He opened his hands, just for a second, and the red muscle within his hands beat in time to a human's heartbeat.

Vision stood to block their way. Hiroshi was just coming back, lips split and bubbling, and already he was starting to babble.

"I said I could stop you," Vision said.

"Do you need to fight again?" Janus asked. He was tired now, and the sun was due out soon. He just wanted to go back to the warehouse he'd found to shelter them during the day.

Vision glanced to him, to the heart Lyall held, and then stepped out of their way. He was still naked, while Janus and Lyall had taken the time to dress themselves. He was magnificent to look at. Finally, Vision touched his throat and moved aside.

Janus touched his throat back. He and Lyall were back in the warehouse before the sun reached the horizon.

Breylorn was releasing his hold on his body. He'd reverted to the most primal instincts and was actually drawing air into and out of his lungs as though that would help. His skin was warm, so he'd at least managed to drink the offered blood Jackie had provided him, but it hadn't stopped his flesh from drying out. Janus dropped to his knees the moment he saw Breylorn's face.

He was afraid to pick up Breylorn's hand. He was afraid it would crack and break free. "Master," Lyall said, voice unsure. Janus didn't fault him his uncertainty; there didn't seem to be any way for Breylorn to come back.

But he wasn't going to write Breylorn off, either. He reached under Lyall's shirt and found the knife he was looking for. Lyall stood back, still holding the heart. Janus stabbed the knife between Breylorn's third and fourth rib, away from where his heart should have been, and twisted the blade so that it shifted the ribs apart.

The chest opened. The blood flowed through his veins, bringing no life to Breylorn. His heart was a grey, waxy lump. Janus cut across the chest as delicately as he could, and opened the hole he'd created, wide enough that he could grip Breylorn's ribs. The bones themselves were also more waxy than bone, and he managed to pull them apart wide enough that Lyall could remove the heart.

"Put the beating one in first," Janus said, voice thin from the strain.

Lyall hesitated, but only for one beat of the heart he held. He took a step closer, pouring the heart from his cupped hands like water. For a moment the two hearts were still in Breylorn's chest, then the second beating heart flipped around of its own accord.

Veins attached themselves to the beating muscle. Breylorn's waxy skin around the incision turned positively pink, and the healthy color of new blood radiated inch-by-inch across his chest. "Hold," Janus said, moving the hand that held the lower rib.

Lyall hesitantly took the rib in his hand, then gripped it and kept it from moving. Janus took the lump of wax that had been Breylorn's heart.

The heart continued to beat, rapidly at first, then it slowed. Once the healthy pink flesh reached the roots of Breylorn's hair and down to his feet, the new heart stilled.

The pinkness settled back down to the more proper hue. The heart in Breylorn's chest stopped beating. When Janus released his grip on the ribs, they settled back where they were, and the cut slowly sealed.

Breylorn let out a long, shuddering sigh, and his chest went still. A moment later, he opened his eyes and sat up.

Janus dropped to his knees. Lyall was a moment later. "Master," Janus said, bowing his head.

Breylorn swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He touched where his heart was. "Do I have you to thank for this?" he asked.

"Lyall knew where the heart was, master," Janus said. "I knew how to get to it."

Breylorn stood up. Janus readied himself to jump to his feet if need be, but Breylorn managed to walk with no difficulty. He was an elder, after all.

Breylorn rubbed his wrists. "And that probably wasn't a dream," he said, but mostly he spoke to himself. Janus wanted to ask if Breylorn had ever dreamed, but refrained.

Breylorn looked to Lyall. "And you fed me in the cell," he said.

Lyall hadn't looked up to know he was being addressed, but he nodded, regardless.

Breylorn reached down and pulled them both to their feet. He took both their hands, brought them to his mouth. The kiss was feather light and as dry as his skin had been. He then let Lyall's hand go and dismissed him with a nod.

Janus remained behind. Breylorn still held his hand. He dropped to his knees in front of him, and Janus almost fell backwards. "Master, no, please."

"There are two ways to be released from my service. Killing me was one. Me letting you go is the other."

Janus continued to shake his head. "Master, no."

"You've earned your freedom. I can provide you with territory and power. You'll have to earn the rest, but I'm sure that you will."

Janus took another step back as Breylorn began to pull off his ring. It didn't take any effort at all because of all the weight he'd lost while sick. "Master, no, please," Janus repeated, stronger this time, and Breylorn actually stopped.

Janus motioned him to stand, the gesture making his ears ring. Amused, Breylorn climbed back to his feet. "If I had wanted territory, master, I would have killed you and taken yours, probably years ago."

"No doubt," Breylorn said. His voice remained lightly amused.

"This relationship suits me. I have no interest in elder councils. No taste for politicking. Leave me my streets, and I swear I will serve you."

Breylorn studied him, then ran his hand down Janus's cheek. "I do miss you," he said.

Janus put his hand over Breylorn's.

"Come back to me," Breylorn said. In that moment, he was still weak, and that cut into Janus like blade.

"I love you," Janus said, slowly. "But I can't be your pet again."

Breylorn withdrew his hand. "Do you think it will be different with Lyall?" He looked at Janus with real pity on his face. "You love him now, but do you think it will last?"

"It's different," Janus said.

"Different how?" Breylorn demanded. "Lyall will tire of you, or you with Lyall, and then where would you be?"

"I love him," Janus said, firmly. "And I always will. He's like me."

"I hope for your sake he is," Breylorn said, then exhaled the extra breath. "I will need a new pet," he said, finally. "I only mention it because I want you to assure me he has not a single ounce of skill warding off even a cold."

They didn't get colds, but Janus nodded. "I'll see what they have in a nice 'can talk with wolves'."

Breylorn rubbed his wrists. "I'm sure that would be lovely. I think I will lie down for the rest of the day. If you are not here this evening, I will understand."

Janus kissed Breylorn on the cheek. "Yes, master," he said.

Breylorn moved back to the bed.

Janus again returned to his old room. Lyall was naked in bed, lying on his side, and it was very easy to enter him. He'd obviously prepared himself. Lyall pushed against him, but didn't make a sound until Janus grasped his cock. The smooth skin was slippery as well, and for the longest time the only sounds were the wet sound of flesh on flesh and Lyall's muffled grunts. The room was wonderfully cool, the sheets under them soft and clean, and the dim light filtering through the window made everything a comforting gray.

Janus didn't have to hurry. He allowed the orgasm to build on its own. When he finally was close to the brink, they moved together so that Lyall was on his hands and knees, and Janus could fuck him more easily. He missed the sensation of sweat to cool his skin while he fucked, though the rush of blood memory of what it was to be alive more than made up for it.

When they came, they came together, and Janus collapsed into Lyall's arms. Breylorn was wrong. If Breylorn chose to remember only the best of their early relationship, so be it. But they'd clashed on so many things, cumulating in Janus's temporary banishment to Japan. Lyall was already much more comfortable to be with than he ever was with Breylorn.

He slid his hand down Lyall's chest, over his belly, then cupped Lyall's testicles. Lyall shifted closer, but didn't wake. He leaned over, licking the soft skin behind Lyall's ear. Lyall didn't wake, but it did bring him out of the deepest level of sleep he was in. "I love you," he whispered.

Lyall smiled, still in his sleep. "Of course, you do," he mumbled. "I like cheese."

Janus kissed his shoulder. Together, they recovered until evening.

Evening brought the elders' conclave. Breyloren hadn't expected Janus and Lyall to be there, but they were, dressed conservatively in dark suits. They rode downtown together with Breyloren in his limo.

Breyloren looked as though he'd never been taken. His tailored suit was flawless, and the silk shirt set off his ice-blue eyes. He was going to demand the head of Vision, Janus knew, and Janus didn't want to stop him.

So there he was again, at the Navajo chair with the fake plants at the end of the hall. Lyall was actually sitting in it, eyes closed under his dark shades, and he didn't move even as Strickland's, then Varaugh's and finally, Janus supposed, Vision's blond brothers came out of the elevator.

They didn't come alone. Vision was behind him, though Hiroshi was not with him. Vision looked pale, even for one of them.

"I wasn't expecting you to be here," Vision said, his voice cold, though his sneer looked false. "I'd thought you would have retreated back to your rat hole to pretend you're human."

"You should never have listened to Hiroshi," Janus said. At the name of Hiroshi, the smallest of wards, barely the size of Janus's thumbnail, rose to the surface, just below Vision's ear. It wasn't big enough or powerful enough to sway his judgment to one decision or another, but perhaps it was there just to allow his influence to be felt.

The filth made Janus shudder. He went to Vision and dug his nail into the mark. It bled black ink and ripped out of Vision's skin like a cancerous mole. Vision swore, holding his hand up to his neck, but then he must have realized he wasn't bleeding. "What was that?" he demanded.

"Hiroshi," Janus said. He threw away the black mark, already crumbling between his fingers, and actually entered the room of the council.

They were talking about Vision, but stopped the moment Janus entered. He ignored all of their curious looks, all of their whispered conversations of what he and Vision had been doing in the hall that day, and walked straight to where Breyloren sat at the head of the table.

The woman to his left hissed at his approach, but he bowed his head to her and touched his throat, and she allowed him to pass.

"What is it?" Breyloren demanded.

"Spare Vision," Janus whispered, kneeling. He made sure his voice didn't carry, not like the rest of the stage-whispered conversations around the room.

"You interrupt me for that?" Breyloren demanded.

Janus leaned over and kissed Breyloren's knee. "Please, master," he said.

A moment passed. Then two. Then Breylorn's hands came down over Janus's head, and he knew Vision was to be spared. He stood up, again ignoring the whispering, and closed the door behind him. He motioned to Lyall, who stood up from the chair and pushed through the blond brothers to join Janus in the elevator.

"Are we going home?" he asked.

"Not yet," Janus said. "We'll wait for Breylorn tonight, and then we'll return."

Lyall pushed the button for the ground floor. "Good. I'm hungry."

Lyall was still complaining about his empty stomach as the doorman opened the door for them in Breylorn's building. The man's eyes reflected a bit too much light from the street. His dark skin in the dim light made it impossible to see any mark on him, if it even was on an exposed part of his body.

Lyall was more aware than he was, hungry or not. The ward, filthy as it was, made filthier by the black bile of an elder, aimed straight for Janus. But before Janus could even begin to move out of its way, Lyall must have discovered the trick to pushing through time. Janus would have been impressed; it wasn't a skill that most vampires picked up for the first hundred years. With Lyall falling to what probably was his death, how he came by that skill was meaningless.

Janus touched Lyall's chest, and his hand came away sopping in blood. Good. He was going to need it.

Hiroshi's mouth was agape. Janus didn't suppose it had even occurred to him that Lyall could have pushed to the front. Or that Janus would still be on his feet. The two other doormen were dead at their posts, throats slashed rather than bitten.

Janus pushed Hiroshi back. Back so far against the wall that he rode up along the painting. With Lyall's blood, Janus began to paint. The marks on the painting absorbed into the stripes of canvas, the ones on Hiroshi's forehead did not. When he pushed the second time, Janus went through the canvas and into the painting itself. Janus sealed the wards with a crude handprint, and the tortured man in the picture became Hiroshi.

Hiroshi started to scream. His intestines, spewed out onto the floor of the painting, began to writhe, and the sound was hardly audible, like a television down low in the next apartment. It would be a pleasant sound to walk past. He spat in Hiroshi's face, wishing there were still more ways of hurting him, then turned back to where Lyall lay.

Lyall's eyes were wide. He was already starting to dry out. It wouldn't be long before his skin would split, and there would be nothing remaining of him. Janus carefully picked him up. There was no way he'd allow Lyall to die in the lobby of a building. He thought about taking Lyall home, but by the time they could have reached an entrance to the lair, Lyall would probably already be gone. Dying in the back of a cab or in an alley somewhere was almost as bad as a lobby.

Janus laid Lyall down on the low bed in his old room. Lyall's lips moved, but he said nothing. Janus held his hand. The ward was too deeply embedded. He couldn't get it out fast enough.

When Breylorn returned from the meeting, Janus almost didn't have the strength to call for him. Breylorn entered the room, and the smile on his face died.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Hiroshi had one final goodbye," Janus said. "The ward's too deep."

Breylorn moved to the edge of the bed. He took off his jacket, carefully draping it over the foot of the bed, and rolled up his sleeve. He bit into his own wrist, like Janus had Lyall's, and held it to Lyall's lips. One drop, then two poured in, and the ward came closer to the surface.

The markings showed Hiroshi's insanity, but the strength to the ward was undeniable. "Can you get it?" Breylorn demanded.

"Maybe," Janus said. He didn't know. There would have to be a lot more blood for one, and if he could tear it out, he had to hope the ward wasn't barbed.

Breylorn turned his opened wrist to Lyall's lips, but as hard as Janus tried, he couldn't grab the ward. The marking slid though his fingers, down deep over Lyall's heart, where to tear one out would rip out the other.

*Three into one.* It had worked through solid marble; it might work here as well. He gave up his wrist to Breylorn, and Breylorn took it without needing an explanation. The bite hurt, but as soon as the teeth dug into his skin he felt the strength Breylorn's blood was giving Lyall.

The ward rose to the surface. The bile Hiroshi had used, kept on ice this whole time, had obviously come from Strickland's corpse. Janus supposed that if it had been fresh, he wouldn't have had a chance. But now he could just barely reach in and grab it.

His forefinger grasped it first, but it evaded his thumb until Breylorn sucked extra hard on Janus's wrist. That gave Lyall the strength to push the ward further away from him. "Damn you, Lyall, help me!" he screamed, fingers maddeningly touching the ward only to have it slip away. "Damn it, please!"

Lyall groaned. He'd been in agony before, but his face pinched even more. Janus felt the scream build inside Lyall, but instead he pushed at the ward.

Janus managed to grab it. He yanked it away, no longer caring what he ripped out to get it from Lyall. But it, and it alone, tore free. "It's out, Lyall, it's out."

Janus threw it as hard as he could against the opposite wall. Where it struck, the paint turned a sickening black. The ink ran down, stain spreading through the wall, and by the time it reached the radiator, there was nothing remaining of the original mark.

"I do believe you now officially owe me something again," Breylorn said, his voice weakened by the blood loss.



"Anything, master," Janus said.

Breylorn blinked. "You are serious about this," he asked, and from his voice, Janus knew he still didn't really believe.

"He's it for me," Janus said. The words were not something he ever thought he'd hear himself say. "I swear it."

Breylorn hesitated, hand an inch away from Lyall's chest. "You are a fool," he pronounced. "Do you think this will last? He'll tire of you as you tired of me, once."

The color in Lyall's face began to fade. Janus grabbed onto Breylorn's shirt. "What are you doing?"

"If he dies, when you look back it will only seem like a moment of pain for you."

"Don't do this," Janus asked. "Please. I beg you." His voice was flat. "Help him, for me, please."

Breylorn shook his head, but put his hand over Lyall's chest. Lyall still didn't move, but his blood began moving again. His face smoothed over. Then he sat up, screaming. Janus grabbed him and held him tight. "Thank you," Janus said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Lyall's screams died to sobbing.

"I'm here," Janus said. "I'm always going to be here."

Lyall nodded, but didn't let him go. Janus barely registered the fact that Breylorn had left them and closed the door as he went.

## Epilogue

Lyall, when he was flushed with blood, still looked human. Even in the moonlight, his skin looked pinkish. He'd taken a week to recover from the ward, but he was young enough that the recovery had been complete. Janus had spent another week with him, not leaving the lair for anything but food. Unlike any other mate, even Janus himself, there wasn't a moment in that week that always being with Lyall annoyed him in any way. If Lyall was too quiet in one of the rare moments they were actually out of bed, Janus had found himself compulsively looking around, just to make sure he was still there and still safe.

It felt almost claustrophobic, to be so tied to another, but the bands around his chest, restricting the blood flow in his system, were sources of pleasure, not panic.

The moon reflected off the metal buildings and the chopped-up water, giving up enough light for them that it might as well have been day. The night wind off the water was wonderfully cool compared to the day. Janus flexed his shoulders, feeling relaxed.

"Are you sure he's going to show?" Lyall asked for what seemed the twelfth time.

Janus didn't answer. They both heard the footsteps on the pier. The pro's human eyes would only see two dark figures standing on the edge of the river. Breyloren had given Janus his number and, more importantly, sanctioned the hunt.

He was human, but not stupid. The pro stopped, a few dozen yards away from them, and waited to be called. When that didn't happen, the smell of his fear permeated. "Janus? Is that you?" the pro called. His voice wavered.

"Yes," Janus called back.

The fear turned to panic, sharp as vinegar to the nose. The pro turned to run, but the jackals Lyall had found in the park got in his way. Janus nodded to Lyall, and they ambled toward where the pro was now cornered.

“It was only a job,” the pro said, holding up his hands. “I swear. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Janus licked his lips. He was full, and the thought of ever again drinking from this man turned his stomach. But he knew from the new wave of terror from the human that it was effective. “I tasted your blood. Don’t lie to me.”

“Janus, please. Let me go. I won’t do a single thing to harm you, ever again. I swear, just please, let me go.”

Janus appeared to be thinking it over, then smiled and nodded at the jackals. “No.” he said. The two vampires swarmed the pro, pulling him down between them. The smell of hot blood filled the air, and the two jackals didn’t look up from their feasting as Janus stepped over the body.

“Home,” said Lyall, taking Janus’s arm.

Janus nodded. “Home.”

 THE END 

## 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.

When she's not following the exploits of hot vampires, she write epic fantasy and has had several short stories published.