



Afterthought

Cat Kane

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Blurb

Telepath Vance Gregory never thought that taking down high-powered underworld Path Marcus Rose would be easy. When his enemy proves to be a far more formidable danger than Vance anticipates, he has no choice but to join forces with Ayan, a beautiful low-level Path with mysterious connections to Marcus.

Captured by Vance's organization during a bungled ambush on Marcus, Ayan has no intention of helping them achieve their ends. But Vance isn't like anyone he's known, and given a glimpse of how life with him might be, Ayan agrees to Vance's plans.

Neither of them expect the intense attraction, nor the explosive mental bond it forges. And when Ayan's powers begin to spike out of control, neither of them can face up to the dangers that threaten to tear them apart.

With Ayan at his side, Vance sets out to remove the threat Marcus poses to the Path community. But Marcus isn't that easy to kill, and when Ayan becomes vital to Marcus's continued existence, Vance has to choose between the enemy he hates or the man he loves.

Prologue

The silence was an odd thing to notice. Generally Ayan valued silence greatly, and even more so the empty nothing that came with it.

He'd just expected that when his world fell apart, there'd be more noise.

Most of Marcus's men fell to some unseen assailant, bodies jerking and dancing to the disembodied strings of an invisible puppeteer. Ayan didn't know whether they were dead, but their pain and fear still reverberated through his head every time he let go of Marcus's hand.

"This way." Marcus dragged him down a dark corridor. The power was already out in the building, and the emergency lighting drenched everything in a muted blood-red glow. "Try to keep up, Ayan."

Ayan stumbled, wishing for nothing more than to be able to yank his hand from Marcus's. The repercussions wouldn't be pleasant. Holding on was the lesser evil by far, clinging was easier than fighting.

"I told you, didn't I?" he said. "I told you something was wrong."

"So you did." Marcus grit his teeth, black braid swinging and flicking like a scorpion's tail, lashing out at Ayan. "So you did..."

It was only his worry that had led Marcus to put in place a makeshift defense just before the ambush began, but Ayan didn't remind him of that. Much as Marcus claimed to value Ayan's powers, when those powers warned him of his own failures and lax security, it wasn't quite so endearing.

Marcus opened a door that led to a narrow staircase, and pushed Ayan up ahead of him.

"But, Marcus—"

"Last I heard, Paths can't fly," Marcus said, setting off up the steps toward the rooftop, passing him without a glance. "It'll be safe enough up here. I've got the chopper on its way."

Ayan didn't question how or when Marcus made those arrangements. After all, Marcus Rose didn't need cell phones or radios.

Still the uneasiness that had followed him all day like an oppressive storm just off radar continued to trail their escape. He had little doubt that Marcus would escape—Marcus always did—but how he'd achieve it in the face of such an overwhelming threat was another matter altogether.

He tripped on the steps, hand wrenching free from Marcus's grasp to brace himself. Marcus didn't stop to wait, and Ayan had to hurry to his feet to catch up, keep up.

Always keeping up with someone, always watching someone's retreating back. Marcus promised him when he brought Ayan here that those days were finally over; if he fell behind now, he'd be throwing it all away.

"Marcus—"

"Get a move on," Marcus snapped, not looking back. "I won't be trapped like some rat by these fools."

The fire escape door at the top of the stairs opened out onto the rooftop. A cold wind bustled up from the streets below on a current of wailing sirens and the gasoline stench of

traffic. A sky, black tinged with orange, hung so low above them he could almost reach up and touch it.

There were stars somewhere beyond the murk, he knew, even though he couldn't see it. He had to believe they were still there.

As they approached the edge of the building, a deep rumbled hum reverberated from somewhere beneath their feet. Moments later, a helicopter crested the rooftop, hovering like a metallic dragonfly in the air before dipping slightly, making its way to the centre of the roof where it could land.

Ayan breathed a little easier. He'd never doubted Marcus, but ... well, even his lover could make mistakes.

Lover. Years after Marcus took him in, many months after their affair began, and he still had no better word to describe a man he certainly didn't love, but depended on the way he depended on air, on water, on day following night. He doubted Marcus loved him in return, but he took care of him, and that was all Ayan wanted of him.

With Marcus, he didn't have to think, didn't have to feel. He could just be, and be safe.

Even now, when the rest of his valued entourage fell to their pursuers, Marcus made sure he took Ayan with him when he escaped.

Fleeing at midnight from the top of a high-rise in a blacked-out helicopter; it wasn't exactly how Ayan envisioned his life would go, but since the day he'd realized he was different, he'd known nothing would be ordinary again. It didn't mean he couldn't yearn for it. It was still there, somewhere, he thought. Like those stars.

He followed Marcus toward the chopper, one hand up to keep the wind out of his eyes. Past the rushing of wind and motors, he could hear the crackle of the pilot speaking on the radio, heard the resonant hum of the rotor blades as they sliced the sky.

Marcus climbed into the helicopter's cabin, and Ayan had one hand on the edge of the open door, one foot on the skids when Marcus turned to him.

"Wait."

"What?" Ayan felt the words snatched from his lips, more by bewildered surprise than the wind. "What's wrong?"

Marcus tilted his head, inhumanly calm, watching him thoughtfully.

"You are aware of your function, yes?"

"Is this the time for a pop quiz?" He frowned. Marcus silenced him with a glance.

"Yes, I'm aware, but—"

"Good."

Marcus drew him close, and for a fearful moment he thought Marcus might actually kiss him. Even ignoring the situation, the danger, he didn't want such a clear sense of Marcus's thoughts. There was a calculating darkness in Marcus's eyes that Ayan didn't want in his head.

But Marcus just gazed to him, black stare boring into Ayan's until he could almost feel the cold vines of it probing his soul with dispassionate fingers.

Then Marcus let him go.

Ayan stumbled back, the rooftop tilting like an ocean swell beneath his feet, his body unable to support itself. He dropped to his knees as the helicopter took off, rotors whipping up a wind that sent his hair tangling around his face, gladly blocking off his view.

Somewhere—out loud, in his head, Ayan couldn't tell—he thought he heard Marcus's voice.

"I'll find you."

The sentiment should have been a comfort, but to Ayan the words sounded like a threat, as a consequence of some slight he hadn't even realized he'd committed yet.

Pushing his hair back from his face as the wind eased, he was still staring at the flickering lights of the departing helicopter when the door onto the rooftop opened behind him. He could feel at least a half dozen pursuers, maybe more. At the best of times his powers weren't too accurate in a crowd, and these were certainly not the best of times.

However many of them were there, they filed out onto the rooftop in silence, just the occasional scuff of a shoe against the ground, or the rustle of clothes announcing their presence.

He must look like a forlorn child to these people, a foolish dog still staring at the front door expecting its errant master to come home soon.

Marcus wasn't coming back. The man who promised Ayan that he would never be alone again had left him here.

Summoning what tattered pieces of his dignity he could find, he turned to face his pursuers.

"Slowly," A clipped voice said behind him. "If you so much as breathe wrong, I shoot."

Ayan did as he was told, keeping his hands held out slightly at his sides as he stood. Instinct, he supposed; there was no other particular reason he wanted to stay alive, except that Marcus would kill him himself if Ayan chose an easy out.

Instinct also had him sending out questing feelers of power as he turned around, trying to figure out his captor while he had the chance. There was no point; he couldn't feel a thing. As much emotion emanated from the nondescript young man as did from the gleaming black handgun he held aimed at Ayan's chest.

"Where is he?"

Emotion or not, Ayan knew the man meant Marcus. Everyone meant Marcus.

Yet if he admitted he didn't know, he wouldn't only be selling out on Marcus, he'd be selling out on his own desperate foolishness. How could he, of all people, be seen to be as much of an idiot as everyone else, as much in the dark?

He said nothing, bracing himself for the impact of the shot.

The man shrugged. "Fine. Then you'll come with us until you're feeling more talkative."

One nod brought several of the other men to surround Ayan like a dark-suited fence, until the oppressiveness of it made him dizzy. Closing his eyes against a wave of nausea, he tried to focus on anything else that might distract him.

"The building is secure, sir." One of the suited goons reported. "We're calling ahead, is everything we need at the facility?"

"Call Vance," he heard the man say, and for the first time he felt a flicker of something coming from the guarded psyche; admiration, affection, and not a little annoyance. Whoever Vance was—Ayan drew out the name in his head, harsh and sibilant—he was someone who could create ripples of emotion in an otherwise empty pond. "He can deal with this. Let him do some work for a change."

Chapter One

There weren't many jobs where the employees could carry out business in dark corners of smoky clubs and still call it legitimate work. No one besides bartenders. And him.

The second hand on the platinum Rolex ticked down the last breaths of the minute, bright little flickers of movement on the periphery of his vision in the dim light. Vance took a long slow drag on his fifth cigarette of the evening, gaze trained on the door. Right on cue, a man walked in, making his way through the clustered groups toward the bar.

There was nothing remarkable about Bobby Walker. Generically handsome but nothing that stood out, nothing anyone here would remember, even if Vance allowed them to. Sometimes he did, just to see if he'd be caught. He was never sure whether he was relieved or disappointed when no one did.

He watched as Bobby gave his order to the bartender, who looked Vance's way when the order ended with "...Oh, and send the guy at that table another of whatever he's drinking."

Free drinks were just a simple perk. He'd known the value of simple perks long before the reality of his situation became apparent.

When he'd been a kid, Vance Gregory had made his dad leave the keys in an idling car, just by thinking how cool it'd be if the old guy just plain forgot about it, just went into the house and shut the door. To this day it brought a smile to his face, picturing his dad's face as he tried explaining to the cops that he had no idea how his ten year old son could have found the keys, let alone driven the car three blocks before it skewed off the road into someone's front yard.

At least these days, he didn't have to give the cars back. And no one ever looked at him the way those cops had looked at his dad—like he was out of his damned mind.

Vance Gregory wasn't out of his mind, he was just in other people's.

He wouldn't have to toy with Bobby's mind much longer though, fortunately. When the bartender brought over the drink, Vance feigned surprise at the kind gesture, raising the glass slightly in Bobby's direction in mock thanks.

Stubbing out the cigarette, he refrained from tapping a sixth out of the packet. Something new and far more interesting was fluttering against the edges of his thoughts, and he didn't want to draw undue attention to himself yet, not when things were only getting started.

He didn't have to wait long.

The man that walked into the club would have turned heads where ever he went, with his pale skin, sharp features, and the long black hair that fell in a thick rope of a braid down his back.

Marcus Rose.

Nothing ordinary about this one, and no one would have paid attention to the three goons that subtly trailed him into the room. Vance smiled as the black haired man scanned the room, gaze landing on the same target at the bar. Robert J. Walker. Small time dealer specializing in the kind of mind altering substances that allowed Marcus Rose and his kind greater access to the human user's mind. Word on the street was that good ol'

Bobby had turned informant, and was endangering all of Marcus's operations.

He hadn't of course, but the rumor had certainly forced Marcus out into the open.

Only the swirling ice cubes in his scotch were privy to Vance's smile. He didn't need to look up, he could watch proceedings through Bobby's eyes now that there was something worthy of seeing.

Tendrils of his consciousness seeping through Bobby's like a vine, he turned Bobby to face Marcus, made him smile, made him raise his glass in a parody that probably only amused Vance.

They were his thoughts, but Bobby's voice, his lips that moved to speak. "Did you want something?"

"No," Marcus smiled, showing teeth, the expression too angular and gaunt to be handsome. "I think I've found what I wanted."

Back at the office at the OPS headquarters, he had a file several inches thick on Marcus Rose, but it still didn't quite prepare him for the near electric charge of being this close. He wasn't even deliberately touching Marcus's mind but he could still feel it, like static. Powerful, but then he knew that already. He wouldn't be here wasting his time for anything less.

"Well... " His thoughts spilled from Bobby's lips again. "I guess that depends on what you were looking for in the first place, doesn't it?"

Something swarmed at Bobby's mind, and Vance retreated a little, just enough to allow Marcus's influence to touch his own.

Come outside with me.

The touch felt cold, unnatural even for Vance's experience. For a moment he worried that Marcus knew he was there when that dark gaze swept the bar again. Just checking for witnesses, no doubt, but it paid to be careful.

He let Bobby's face fall into a suitably slack expression as he nodded, and Marcus's smile quirked as Vance encouraged his new toy off the stool, following Marcus toward the back of the club.

So good. Mr. Rose wasn't going to disappoint. He wasn't as good as Vance, obviously, no one was, but he was the best opponent he'd had in a very long while.

He'd need to be more careful than usual, but when the rewards were this enticing that wasn't exactly a chore.

Sinking back slightly into his chair, Vance slipped off his wire-rimmed glasses, polishing them on his tie. He looked okay as far as he could tell, from the occasional glances he allowed Bobby to take in his direction. He'd bought this suit last week and it already looked as though he'd been sleeping in it ever since. His dark gold hair looked as though it had needed a cut about six weeks ago, but had given up the ghost when none was forthcoming and contented itself with brushing his collar and falling into his eyes. It was too dark to actually see his eyes, but the glasses caught the light a little too much for his liking, so they had to go. It was better than a mirror, seeing someone else's three-dimensional view of himself, and it paid to check now and then. If he became engrossed in his task, sometimes it showed, and someone like Marcus Rose would surely notice.

There was nothing to notice. Just an average guy enjoying a drink all on his lonesome.

Putting a little more of a spin on his hold of Bobby's thoughts, enough to throw Marcus off if he decided to probe a little deeper, he tried to keep the amusement out of

the feigned shock.

"What's going on? Where are we going?"

Marcus didn't answer. Outside the club, any pretence at seduction was gone, replaced by a pensive irritation.

Vance let a tendril of his own slip forth, feeling the annoyance, the frustration. Walker. Time wasting. Foolish. Something was bothering Marcus that was greater than their mutual friend.

The goons drew in around Bobby. Vance allowed him to splutter and back fearfully against a wall.

"Wait, what are—"

Through Bobby's eyes, he caught sight of a black car, devoid of any insignia or identifying mark. Then there was just blackness and static as one of the goons threw a punch, and Bobby's head ricocheted between the beefy fist and the wall like a Ping-Pong ball.

Well damn.

Vance chuckled to himself, shaking his head. He wasn't in any danger from Bobby's current predicament—if he awoke and Vance had withdrawn from his thoughts, he wouldn't remember a thing, and no doubt his babbling would be taken for deceit. No, the real issue was where he'd been taken, more importantly how far they were going.

He wouldn't let his quarry escape that easily. He hadn't felt this kind of adrenaline rush in forever, and he didn't have anywhere near enough information to lose his hold on his little puppet quite yet. And seeing as he couldn't really trace the thoughts of an unconscious man, he'd have to follow the trail of that crackling static...

He sighed good-naturedly, finishing off his drink, and pocketing his cigarette and the lighter, pulling out his car keys instead.

You're really going to make me chase you, aren't you Mr. Rose...

The evening was cool and pleasant outside, and Vance could think of a million better things to do. Most of those ended with his boss killing him for walking out on a job, so he reluctantly let them slide. The static from Bobby's scrambled mind lingered like a stale smell, moving and drifting, and he forced himself to focus on its meandering path as he got into his car.

Subterfuge, discretion and blending in, the cornerstones of successful stealth. None of which really applied to the low-slung dark blue Jaguar that passed for Vance's company car. Well ... the company paid for it, they just weren't aware of the fact. Its engines rumbled like its namesake's purr, as it prowled through the streets at a careful distance.

It wasn't as though he was following a car, he probably wouldn't have been able to describe the vehicle if prompted. No, he was following a mental scent, the vibration of a thought-pattern.

He could even afford to let them out of his sight now and then, stay a few streets apart. He could feel the path the car was taking, his target was leaving him a trail of bread crumbs with every thought.

He turned onto a dark, empty street in time to see the black car slink through the rusted gates of an old warehouse. He slowed, but didn't stop as he passed the gates. It was too dangerous to stop here; as abandoned as it looked, there was probably surveillance coming out the wazoo. As long as he was within this kind of distance, he

could still do his job. Probably. And if not, well ... mind control didn't work so well on security cameras, but it did on those operating them.

He eventually parked a street away, sitting in the dark, closing his eyes and trying to pick up the bread crumbs again.

With Bobby still out cold, there was no way to physically watch proceedings. He could have latched onto one of the other minds he felt nearby, intangible as fog, impossible to define in the haze. Still, he preferred to have an idea about what—or who—he was jumping into before he actually did. He reached into his pocket, retrieving the cigarette and lighter. The orange flame illuminated his face for a moment, before settling back into darkness, nothing but the glowing ember of the cigarette brightening with every slow drag.

Touching Bobby's thoughts was painful, but it couldn't be avoided. The sooner Vance could wake him up, the sooner the pain would ease. Massaging his temples, migraine-like flickers of light and shadow dancing across his closed eyelids, he tried to will Bobby to wake the fuck up already.

Each time it felt like he was about to succeed, each time Bobby almost stirred to life, he crashed up against a metaphoric wall, and it dawned on him that it wasn't just a smack to the head keeping Bobby under.

Well fine. If Mr. Rose was into playing dirty, Vance knew those games really well. Tucking into a corner of Bobby's mind, he waited.

When Bobby's vision cleared, the fuzzy black haze became an up close and personal view of Marcus's face hovering above him. Just an experimental tug confirmed that Bobby's body was bound to a table or a beam. The same goons loomed on the periphery.

Marcus smiled down at him, slow and seductive.

"How nice of you to join us again."

In his car, Vance chuckled softly to himself, blowing out a thin narrow ribbon of smoke. Nice view. It didn't feel as though Bobby could manage a different one if he tried—and he was, the sense of struggle was cloying—but if he had to stare at something, well ... there were worse things.

He could have stilled Bobby's irritating sense of panic with as little effort as it took to breathe in a slow drag on the cigarette. But watching this unfold for a moment was much more interesting. He smiled, curling back into the shadows of Bobby's mind as the words tumbled out, bewildered and anxious.

"What? I don't ... where am I? What are you doing?!"

Marcus just tilted his head, hawkish smile never wavering.

"I've heard disturbing things about you, Mr. Walker," he said. "Worrying things that, unless you answer very carefully, will end up with you dead."

A hand came to rest on Bobby's chest, a heavy, threatening caress.

Bobby scrambled to try and answer, digging around his thoughts as though he really should know, but didn't. "But I haven't, I...! I didn't say anything!"

Vance could have put the poor thing out of his misery, but once he linked into the man's thoughts, other things, like that sensation of weight against Bobby's chest, would fade to a barely perceptible haze, and he wasn't quite through enjoying it yet.

Marcus nodded toward one of the goons, whose presence then shifted from Bobby's line of sight. Somehow Vance doubted he'd gone for a coffee and a donut.

"You're going to make me work for it, I see." Marcus smiled, unflinchingly

reasonable. "I had hoped you'd make it brief. I have an important engagement shortly."

It was too tempting, as he'd always suspected this game would be. Power creeping in against Bobby's weakened mind, he asserted control over those panicked thoughts, calming them. The man's body stilled and relaxed a little as a result.

"I just..." It was a fight to keep the amusement from Bobby's voice, still a little whiny and thready, as he put the words in the man's mouth. "I just ... want to know..."

He paused, waiting, watching the tiniest signals that Marcus was actually listening, that he was hoping for some intelligent answer, before letting a smile that really didn't belong there spread over Bobby's face.

"Are you blowing me off for a hot date?"

He succeeded in making Marcus's brow rise slightly in surprise, before it settled into a conspiratorial smile, and Vance felt the first attempts of Marcus's power creeping against Bobby's mind.

Powerful Paths normally canceled each other out, like the eternal repelling of identical magnetic poles. They could be aware of each other's presence, they could even share the mental space between if the Linker binding them was strong enough to endure, but they could rarely read each other and they could coexist even less. It would be easier for Vance if he could have read Marcus, but admittedly less fun.

Bobby Walker wasn't strong. Marcus could push Vance out but they couldn't share the space. He wasn't concerned by Marcus poking around, but drew back a little at the nudges of searching power, flattening his own against the recesses of Bobby's mind. No point making it easy.

Word was that the drugs Marcus and his underlings were pushing made any human's mind strong enough to complete the chain. A strong Path could do enough damage to a weaker mind. Vance didn't want to know what the fight itself would do to an unwilling Linker.

"That would be telling," Marcus said, smiling slyly. "Though, why would you be concerned with that, hmm? Interested in a hot date of your own?"

Cute. He didn't even need to be a telepath to read that look, that tone of voice. The laugh that escaped Bobby's lips was Vance's, and he made no effort to hide that fact. "Seen worse. I'd do you."

Marcus's gaze sharpened, and if he didn't know already, Vance could tell from that look that Marcus knew Bobby wasn't alone in there anymore. A hand rested on Bobby's thigh, sliding higher.

"You like games, Bobby?"

"You tell me. You seem to know an awful lot already." Vance let Bobby's face slide into a grin, showing teeth. He allowed a tiny flicker of power to reach out, licking playfully at Marcus's thoughts before darting back.

"If I knew an awful lot already, you wouldn't be in this position, now would you?" Marcus cocked his head, hand insinuating snugly between Bobby's legs, squeezing a little too hard to be pleasure, a little too sweetly to be pain.

"Ah, and here I thought the whole table thing was just a kink you had. You've shattered my illusions, I hope you're happy." Vance chuckled.

"Sorry to disappoint," Marcus said. The goon he'd sent off returned with a tray of items. Without letting go, Marcus spent several moments perusing the contents, and Vance doubted he was picking out a ring. "Kinkiest thing about me is my penchant for

blondes."

"Blondes." Vance laughed, recalling Bobby's mid-brown hair. "Interesting. You know they're more intelligent than their reputation would have you believe."

Marcus ignored him. He finally chose something from the tray. Vance flinched despite himself at the glint of a blade

"Now would be a good time to talk," Marcus said.

"C'mon, where's the give and take in this conversation? You only ask, ask, ask, you never tell me a thing about yourself.

"Something about me?" Marcus watched him. "People who cross me end up dead. How about that?"

"Oh." The syllable was deadpan at seeing the light glint off the scalpel. "Don't hurt me. Oh no. Please don't hurt me." The raised brow was another expression that didn't quite belong on Bobby's face. "Did that work?"

Marcus paused with the sharp steel of the blade at the hollow of Bobby's throat. Vance could just about feel the cold metal kissing skin.

"Hmm..." Marcus glanced at him, smiling knowingly. "I wonder how much I can do to him before I get to you?"

"What makes you think ol' Bobby wouldn't be smart enough to do this on his own? Or maybe I'm just crazy. It happens."

Marcus's smile widened. "Not since the last time I had him checked out. Always pays to ensure your test subjects are in good health."

Well shit, that was unexpected. Pietro hadn't warned him about that. If Bobby was a user, then this was an entirely different situation.

"I'm a reasonable man," Marcus said. "Tell me what I need to know and we can end this. You wouldn't let someone as insignificant as Bobby Walker take the credit for your efforts, would you? And if you're close enough to do this, then you're well aware of what'd happen to you if," the blade pressed a little deeper, "my hand slipped."

Oh, yeah. He knew exactly what could happen, if his consciousness was deeply entwined with Bobby's when the end came.

"I'm really going to stay here and let you do that." The suggestion was made to flesh, and Bobby stretched lazily against the bonds again. "But you got me there. I'm far too proud of my work to allow this poor loser to take credit. Of course, you're not going to kill Bobby before you find out what I really want." In the darkness of the car, Vance smiled as he turned Bobby's gaze back to Marcus. "Wasn't that the plan when you went all commando on this poor guy's ass in the first place? Find out what his agenda might be."

Marcus stilled, and Vance felt the faint stirrings of anger. He moved too fast for Vance's mind to catch, grabbing a handful of Bobby's hair and yanking his head back. The blade sliced a shallow cut against skin.

"There are many ways of doing that," Marcus said, before running a slow lick along Bobby's jaw.

Vance didn't feel any pain himself—or the pleasure, unfortunately—but the increase in the power nudging against his own was just as uncomfortable as any physical damage. If he drew back any further, he'd lose his hold altogether, and he didn't see poor Bobby doing himself any favors if he came back into his body now.

It was just as risky fragmenting his hold, scattering the thoughts, embedding deeper

in his unwilling host's mind to better shield his presence.

"I knew you were the kinky type."

Marcus didn't seem amused. The knife pressed a little deeper, and he leaned closer, lips nuzzling the skin beneath Bobby's ear, words a vibrating rumble.

"You wish."

"I do, you know." Vance chuckled, aware of Bobby's body beginning to twitch as an instinctive reaction to that touch. He didn't have the hold he wanted, but that didn't matter. He had something far better, he had Marcus Rose's attention. He could pull back now, drive home and go to bed and Marcus would still be consumed by the need to know who he was, what he wanted. That would be the safe option. "I understand kinky people much better than normal people."

"Is that your thing?" Marcus asked. "It certainly was never Bobby's."

"Might have been a side effect of whatever you were pumping into him." Vance paused, questioning that turn of phrase now, considering the position Bobby was in. Maybe Bobby and Marcus were a lot closer than they'd realized.

Curiouser and curiouser...

Vance was always the one doing the chasing. There was quite a thrill in being chased, especially by a prey that seemed as though he could keep up.

"Me? I'm the clean-living vanilla missionary position type..." In the car, the flare of the lighter as it ignited another cigarette illuminated a wicked grin. Shame Vance couldn't transfer it to Bobby now, but the poor guy didn't feel as though he was doing so good. "I'm positively angelic."

Marcus chuckled, teeth latching onto Bobby's lower lip and biting down hard.

"I'm sure you are," Marcus said, evidently unconcerned and Vance didn't like the possible reasons why.

Bobby's voice was getting thready. Granted it was hard to sound smart when your throat was being carved out, but still, it was disappointing. "Give it up, Marcus. You'll have to try harder than this to find me."

Marcus drew back, digging the blade deeper. It was hard to gauge without the accompanying pain, but Vance felt the body he occupied beginning to give way, and painless or not it wasn't a good plan to be in Bobby's mind when it shut down.

But Marcus still hovered over him calmly, sharp hooks of his psyche latching into the feeble mind that stood between them. His voice was soft as he shook his head.

"No, I won't."

Before Vance could pull back, the barrier between them fell away, and he got a glimpse of exactly what Marcus's drugs did to a Linker. Bobby's mind wasn't even that anymore, but a room, a tangible space that was being drawn to Marcus's specifications even as Vance watched. There was something intolerably dangerous and ridiculously protective about the sensation, all at once. Nothing outside could get in, nothing could escape. A flare of something like temptation bloomed in the back of his thoughts. It was easy to see why people wanted what Marcus had to offer if it felt this way.

It was also why Vance had to stop him.

He'd never been the humans' biggest advocate, but they didn't deserve to become disposable little chat-rooms for powerful Paths.

That room—an old-fashioned study—was as vivid a construction as anything Vance could have created himself. He was impressed, he was a little envious and a lot curious.

He'd met plenty of people in his line of work who played games, but they were all party tricks, never anything close to his league. Never anything like this. As much as he was being lured, he had plenty Marcus wanted to know too, neither would let their guard down enough for this to be truly dangerous.

Just as the blade twisted, he managed to wrench his thoughts back from Bobby, but not before he felt the brush of Marcus's mind against his own, cold and jagged as broken glass.

"Next time," Marcus's mind spoke directly to his. "You'd better have the courage to face me yourself."

Next time...

Vance was breathless, and barely noticed. He considered stubbing out the cigarette, but deciding that would be a waste, he rolled down the window instead, breathing in the crisp night air and letting it cool away any lingering remembrance of Marcus's psyche. It took a couple of attempts to get the car started, and even longer to twist and turn through dark side streets until he felt he was far enough away from the warehouse to lower his defenses.

In the passenger seat next to him, his cell phone shrieked.

Vance didn't do multitasking well. He figured he did everything else perfectly, so he supposed something had to give, but taking this call—especially seeing who was on the line—made him groan out loud.

He flicked the phone open, jabbing at the buttons, growling. "Godsfuckingdammit, *what?!?*"

"Where are you?"

"Maui."

"I hear it's nice this time of year." On the other end of the line, Pietro Gratteri sighed, a short exhale of breath that encapsulated all the innumerable ways Vance disappointed him. "What happened?"

"Walker's dead."

Pietro said nothing, and in lieu of the distraction, Vance saw Bobby's face again, smiling at him in the bar.

When Pietro set up the Organization for Path Security—OPS—Vance knew he did what he did to keep humans safe from the likes of Marcus Rose. From the likes of them, too. Risks were part of the job, but it didn't mean Pietro would be happy.

When was he happy where Vance was concerned?

"Marcus needs to be stopped," Vance said eventually, wishing it held more conviction. Wishing he hadn't felt the temptations of what Marcus had to offer.

"That was the point of this evening, wasn't it?" Pietro asked, though there wasn't as much accusation in the jibe as there could have been. The evening had been a failure, and failing didn't sit well with Pietro.

"Yeah well. I'm not gonna be able to finish this alone."

Silence, then a mild tone saying, "Are you asking for help, Vance?"

That'd make Pietro happy, no doubt. Vance took another drag, annoyed. "I'm asking for an accomplice."

Pietro was patient while he recounted the details. There was a first time for everything. It just went to show, he supposed, how desperately Pietro's people wanted to get rid of Marcus.

"So you want another pawn, after killing off the last one?" Pietro said eventually. "What makes you think it'll work out any better this time?"

"I told you, that wasn't my fault. And not a pawn." Vance corrected. "It'll work because I want Ayan."

Oh, how he wanted Ayan. Seven ways from Sunday, if Vance had his way. But that was besides the point.

"No."

"Pietro—"

"No. You know better than anyone what we went through to capture him. I refuse to hand him back over to Rose just on your whims."

"It's the only way. He's..." Vance caught himself before admitting Marcus was too strong for him. "We can't do this the easy way."

Pietro remained silent. Vance could picture him sitting at his enormous desk, looking like a scruffy school kid in the headmaster's office. He'd be rubbing his forehead beneath an unruly fall of chestnut hair, blue eyes scrunched in a frown.

No, Vance didn't need to be psychic to know his ex's mannerisms. Especially when Pietro was pissed off at him.

"We'll discuss it," Pietro said. "Right now, get back here. I want a full report on my desk in three hours."

The phone clicked off. Vance looked at the LCD clock in the car and groaned. Pietro'd never forgiven him, he decided. Pietro reserved all those cruel and unusual punishments just for him even now.

Chapter Two

Vance spent the drive back to the OPS headquarters thinking about Bobby. Whatever he was, whatever he'd done, he hadn't deserved that.

And as seductive as Marcus was, as much as those lingering touches of the other Path's mind echoed in Vance's like the aftershocks of pleasure, it wasn't. Marcus wasn't interested in anyone's pleasure but his own. If he believed otherwise, he was as good as offering himself up to be the next one Marcus killed.

Ayan was his only hope.

Just the thought of his name made Vance smile. It didn't even matter that Ayan detested the ground he walked on, it was enough to know someone like him existed. Anyway, Ayan only despised him because, right now, Vance worked for what Ayan perceived as the enemy.

He thought about their first meeting, when Pietro's other agents had brought back a prize from another failed ambush on Marcus.

Prize was right, a golden and shimmering trophy that had hissed and spat like a mad wildcat at the fact someone dared lay a hand on him. He'd calmed as soon as he'd been left alone in a containment room, sitting poised and impassive at a table when Vance first walked into the room.

A pale brow had arched at his entrance, the look in golden eyes direct and haughty.

Vance took a seat, and tapped out a cigarette.

"Don't do that. I can't stand it."

He'd paused, lighter halfway to his lips, at the cool command.

Not haughty, Vance had reassessed. Proudful. Strong.

No one ever told Vance Gregory to stop with the cigarettes. Paths' physiological quirks made the habit less dangerous to them, their metabolism processing and renewing far faster than humans. Ayan was a Path, albeit a weak one, barely strong enough to sway even the weakest human. The habit shouldn't have bothered him.

Vance put the cigarette away.

The rest of their meeting had gone downhill from there.

Vance chuckled softly to himself as he parked the car a few blocks from the OPS building. He'd use the time and the exertion of the walk to clear his head of both the memories of the evening and the thoughts of Ayan as he headed toward the nondescript building.

The only thing in the bland lobby was an equally inoffensive looking elevator. The building was as uninteresting as the other identical office blocks that flanked it, but unlike its neighbors, Pietro's facilities lay underground.

Vance let the seemingly unguarded doors close behind him, aware that a dozen cameras tracked every move as he strode toward the elevator. A green light blinked as he swiped his ID card through the keylock at the side of the call button, and the doors swished open.

That was just the start.

He stepped inside. The doors closed. Where the floor buttons would have been, a panel twisted open smoothly, revealing a hand shaped indent in unblemished metal.

"ID please," a smooth genderless voice said.

"You're too polite." Vance grumbled, rolling up his shirtsleeve slightly, gritting his teeth as he placed his hand against the indent. "Gotta work on that."

"Thank you," the voice answered, just about as aware of his existence as a distracted lover.

An electric tingle slid over his palm as the scanner ran his print. A quick, sharp pain bloomed at the tip of his index finger, needles jabbing to draw a blood sample.

"Checking ID. Status cleared. Welcome, Mr. Gregory."

"Like I said," he muttered, sucking at the sore fingertip. "Too damn polite."

Despite the regularity with which he made this trip, he still wasn't used to the speed of the elevator. His stomach lurched as the elevator descended, and again as it jerked to a halt at its destination.

The doors opened. Pietro stood just beyond them, arms folded across a slender chest, one eyebrow arched.

"That report ready yet?"

"Fuck you." Vance headed off through the labyrinthine hallways to the broom closet that passed for an office.

Pietro followed, as though they were having an entertaining conversation. "I thought about what you said—"

"Which part? Maui?"

"—And," Pietro went on, ignoring Vance as surely as the elevator voice. "If you can persuade Ayan to assist you, then you're welcome to use him as you see fit."

Vance paused, a few yards from his office door. He turned, watching Pietro carefully.

"You really want Marcus, don't you?"

Pietro shrugged.

"We can't afford to lose him now. Since you clearly can't manage one man by yourself, you'd better take all the help you can get."

Pietro turned to leave, cutting a slender unimposing figure as he moved down the hallway. "And that report, Vance. Two hours."

Certain he'd been shafted several minutes, Vance glared in Pietro's general direction, before entering his office. Taking a seat at his cluttered desk, he lit another cigarette as he waited for his computer to hum into life. Leaning back, he blew a cloud of smoke up at the ceiling, and sighed.

Even for him, what he was contemplating was risky.

As soon as he could, he hit up Ayan's file.

Ayan—of no known last name or other alias—had been in Pietro's care for the past few weeks, during which time he'd barely told them anything.

Maybe the ambush hadn't quite failed, Vance thought, gaze lingering on the single photo of Ayan before continuing to re-read a report he knew by heart.

Ayan had minimal psy-powers, barely more than a human and certainly nothing to write home about. Nothing that would have explained his position by Marcus's side. Marcus had more powerful underlings, ones more befitting their rank, more involved in his operations. There was something else about him, something important to Marcus. Whatever it was—Ayan sure as hell wasn't helping—it might be the only weapon they had.

Pietro hadn't let Vance meet him after that first interview. With the electronic frequency dampeners built into the facility, there could be no accidental reading, but interview rooms allowed for interrogations. More impetuous captors would have done just that, scanned Ayan for all necessary information the moment he got here.

Vance would have done that. Pietro was more cautious.

Marcus Rose wasn't that stupid. As imperative as Ayan was, Marcus would have booby-trapped his mind with every trick known, and probably a few they didn't.

It was a stalemate, but Pietro was content to keep Ayan languishing in the psy-protected holding cells in the depths of the facility, not being in the least bit useful.

Until now.

The guard at the cell complex—Pietro hated calling it that, he preferred calling it the temporary containment center—looked up as Vance approached.

"What brings you down here. Mr. Gregory?"

He smiled. "Gonna go have a little chat with our guest."

The guard looked skeptical, turning to the computer terminal in front of him to verify that Pietro had indeed authorized this visit, and looking even more skeptical that indeed he had.

He went on unimpeded, passing by a row of identical doors, none of the rooms beyond occupied. Pietro's containment center wasn't containing a whole lot lately. Only one room had light gleaming from around the door.

Vance slid his ID card through the lock, and typed out the single-use code Pietro had given him.

The door slid open.

He'd never been of the opinion that Ayan's photo did him justice. Oh, it had adequately entertained his thoughts and fantasies plenty, but nothing compared to this. The photo didn't capture the rippling sheen of near-white platinum hair, or the unnervingly deep glow in the golden eyes. It didn't capture the grace of long slender limbs, or the slinkiness of Ayan's movements as he stood from the narrow cot to greet Vance's approach with a steely glare.

"Relax." Vance waved a hand dismissively. "I'm not here to do anything to you."

More's the pity.

Ayan folded his arms across his chest, and looked away.

"I have nothing to say to any of you. I've made that clear."

Vance felt the faintest scratching of an attempt to break down his defenses, and wondered again at Ayan's value to Marcus. It certainly wasn't for his powers. Between the dampeners and the sheer lack of power in the attempt, the touch was little more than a tickle, like a mouse's paws tapping at a baseboard.

"Stop that," he said mildly.

Ayan's response was an indignant stare.

"What do you want?"

Vance walked over to the cot Ayan had just vacated, sitting down as though making himself happily at home. He looked up at Ayan with a smile.

"Can't I just come to say hi?"

"No." Ayan scowled. "Besides, you people wouldn't."

Vance chuckled.

"Gotta work on your people skills, babe, really. I mean, what're you gonna do for

conversation when you get out of here and can't enjoy the benefits of my sparkling wit?"

Ayan's gaze flicked to the door, and Vance smiled. *Gotcha.*

For a moment he wondered if Ayan would make a run for it, if he'd noticed Vance hadn't bothered locking it behind him. He wouldn't get very far, but the attempt would score him points in Vance's book. Instead, Ayan just looked back at him with a level gaze.

"Am I getting out of here?" Ayan probably tried for sarcastic, but all Vance heard was the edge of hopefulness.

"Maybe."

Golden eyes narrowing, Ayan's lips tightened into a thin line. Oh, it'd hurt being lashed with that sharp tongue, Vance was certain. Even Pietro didn't want to talk about some of Ayan's more cutting remarks during his time here.

Then the anger tempered to something more futile, more accepting.

"And what are you demanding in exchange?"

The resignation in Ayan's tone made Vance frown. Ayan didn't sound surprised. He sounded as though he'd been waiting for someone to come along with some form of bargaining chip, and Vance didn't like the suggestion of precisely what that chip would be. He took in the tension threaded through Ayan's body, keeping him stiffly upright, shoulders set. His arms remained folded across his chest like a barrier, and his hair obscured much of his face.

Vance thought of Marcus's conversation with Bobby. If Marcus was responsible for the anxiety radiating from Ayan now, he'd seek out Marcus's psyche just to beat the shit out of him.

"What are you willing to give?" he asked carefully. Digging a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket, he went to tug one out with his lips before he caught the look of vague disgust on Ayan's face. He put the cigarette away.

"I've told you all before, I have no information. I can't help you."

Vance smiled. "Oh, I don't know about that." He allowed the appreciation in his thoughts to show in his eyes, trying to push Ayan into a reaction. "You can probably help me in a lot of ways."

A flush crept across Ayan's cheeks and, accompanied by another scowl, it was one of the most adorable things Vance had seen in a while. So Ayan could still be flustered, that was good to know. Maybe Marcus's damage didn't run that deep.

"And that'll get me out of here?" Ayan tightened his arms around himself briefly, before moving closer. "A little predictable, but fine..."

Vance stilled as Ayan knelt in front of him, hands braced against Vance's thighs. Ayan's fingers were cool even through the fabric of his pants, and it only served to make him realize how warm he was in contrast. Warmer still, when Ayan slid those hands upward, making a slow, steady beeline toward Vance's belt.

"Let's make it quick, shall we?" Ayan muttered, refusing to look up at him, and Vance could feel the trembling in the hands creeping along his thighs. From the expression he could see through ribbons of hair, Ayan looked nothing more than purposeful. Despite the heat blooming through his body, Vance grew cold; Ayan wasn't doing this because he wanted to, he just wanted to get away from them by whatever means necessary. Even means like this.

It shouldn't have been a shock that Ayan detested them that much. Vance doubted

he'd be happy cooped up in here for weeks either, but surely Ayan knew they were the good guys? And if not the purer-than-pure kind of good, at least he had to know they weren't like Marcus.

He sucked in a breath as Ayan made short work of his fly, cool fingers grazing his skin like little licks of electricity. Ayan couldn't get much further unless Vance lifted his hips, but that didn't deter him; one hand slid under the loose, wrinkled hem of Vance's shirt, as the other curled against the outline of his cock, palm rubbing, fingers kneading.

He could have given in to it, quite easily. His already finicky principles would have happily shifted to accommodate something as beautiful as Ayan. Those lips would be soft against him, he was sure, and that hair would brush like silk against his skin when Ayan moved over him.

He ran his fingers through a strand of platinum that already tickled against his thigh, leaning closer. Ayan flinched, just a little, something Vance wouldn't have noticed if he wasn't watching so intently. Sighing, he brushed a thumb against Ayan's cheek, cursing his damned morals.

It might be no secret that he wanted Ayan, but not like this.

He let the lock of hair spill through his fingers, then got to his feet, making sure not to touch Ayan as he moved out of reach.

"We don't all use those methods," he said softly. "I don't want that from you."

Liar, his body groused, still more than a little flustered by Ayan's touch and demanding its needs be satiated. Vance ignored it. He was a damn good liar, and that was all that mattered for now.

"You're still important to him, aren't you?" he asked, fastening his pants again, trying to ignore the flickers of pleasure that ran up his spine at the mere promise of touch, of friction.

Ayan's face was hidden by his hair. Still on his knees, his hands were now clenched into fists that rested on his knees.

"Maybe."

"Then that's enough." Vance shrugged. "I'm taking you back to him."

Ayan's head snapped up, hair swirling around him like it had been sparked with lightning. Those exotic eyes were wide as they stared at Vance.

"What? Why?"

"He wants you. I want him. Not like that." He couldn't help smiling at the affronted alarm in Ayan's eyes. The reality of it was simultaneously much more simple, and a hell of a lot more complex.

Marcus wanted Ayan back.

Vance was going to offer it to him.

"That's where you come in. You're bait."

Chapter Three

"Bait." Ayan repeated, not sure whether he'd heard correctly, whether a man who to all appearances seemed in possession of half a brain would actually suggest something so ridiculous. "Do you even know what you're baiting?"

"Do you?" Vance turned the question back on him. "Anything you need to tell me, babe, I'd do it about now."

No one in their right mind would play games with a predator like Marcus Rose, and while Ayan happily questioned the moral judgment of his captors, nothing he'd seen suggested they were certifiably insane. Until now. Until Vance Gregory.

From the first, it had become horribly clear why Vance was the only person capable of gleaning a response from the apparent leader of this outfit, a man that made rocks look emotional. Even in the confines of the facility, Ayan could occasionally sense flickers of irritation, and didn't need any powers at all to deduce the source.

Of course, he was a fine one to talk about moral judgment—he'd given up his claim on any moral high ground the moment he'd become aware of Marcus's plans and hadn't walked away.

For that, he couldn't blame their animosity.

These people would never understand his reasons for it, so Ayan chose not to share. He couldn't blank his thoughts completely, but bizarrely enough there was no reason to. No one here had so much as attempted to read him yet. Over the past few weeks, he'd come to learn that the building itself precluded it, that infrasonic frequencies emitted a field that disrupted their abilities. Maybe it accounted for the low-grade headache that had plagued him since he got here. It certainly did nothing to improve his mood, and Vance, with his arrogant remarks and golden boy grin, really wasn't helping.

The other man—Pietro—made it clear that if Ayan didn't cooperate of his own free will, forced reading would be the only option left to them.

The thought of it made his blood cold.

He couldn't tell if Pietro was remorseful about it—he couldn't tell a whole lot about Pietro, period.

Vance, on the other hand ... Vance, he didn't understand in the least. Foolish enough to go up against Marcus, conniving enough to use Ayan to his own ends, and—assuming that wasn't a pretense too—kind enough to remember that he didn't like cigarette smoke.

Kind enough not to take advantage of the mess Ayan was in.

"You won't tell us anything," Vance said. "So you gotta earn your keep somehow. Don't get me wrong, I'm an action rather than a talking kinda guy, and anyway..." A dark smile lit warm brown eyes. "Marcus and I have some unfinished business."

"What kind of business?" he asked before he could stop himself. He couldn't recall Marcus ever mentioning Vance's name, but since he'd been locked up in here, he'd come to realize there must have been a lot Marcus didn't mention. Like the little matter of his concern and care being nothing more than making use of Ayan for what he could do for Marcus, rather than any altruistic reasons.

"Hm..." Vance made an exaggerated thoughtful face. "Usually I don't offer answers to people unwilling to answer my questions..."

"Fine." Ayan folded his arms across his chest. "Whatever."

Vance grinned. "You catch on fast. That's good to know if I'm gonna have your back."

Ayan looked up sharply.

"You don't want to watch my back," he said. "You just want me to give you Marcus."

Vance Gregory and his people could taunt him with whatever the hell they liked, but not with that. Not with the fallacy that they were really on his side.

He was the only one on his side. Marcus had proved that.

"Believe what you want." Vance sighed softly. "Either way, babe, you don't have a lot of choice."

Ayan looked around the four walls of his cell, the heavy door, the sparse furnishing, and wished he had a comeback for that.

Funny how it didn't matter what he did, where he found himself, he was always at someone else's beck and call.

"And maybe I don't really care about your back," Vance flashed a grin, going from serious to stupid in a heartbeat, "gorgeous as it is, but I do need your help."

"Why me? If you're all so good, why haven't you taken him down alone?"

"Is that a yes?"

Ayan looked away.

"Then let's go." Vance shrugged, turning for the door, outlining the plan as though Ayan wholeheartedly agreed. "You come with me. We're going to a phone booth Marcus can't trace, and you're going to call and arrange a meeting. You're going to tell him you've escaped and that you need him to pick you up."

"Then what?" Ayan got to his feet.

Surely they didn't plan on locking Marcus up in here too? Just the thought of it had him recoiling back a little into the room, like a kid who refused to go out the door to school. But this wasn't algebra and bad food; what Vance was asking was putting them both in danger. Vance noticed—of course he would, Ayan thought wryly; Vance noticed everything.

"I'm after him," Vance said eventually. "What you do after you bring him to me isn't any of my concern. Go home, go where ever. If I do my job right, he won't be bothering you any more anyway."

Home? He managed a bleak laugh. The damn cell was as much a home as the apartment Marcus kept for him. And if Marcus was gone, surely Ayan had no claims on the place anyway.

If Marcus was gone, Ayan had nothing, not even the illusion of a place he belonged.

If Marcus was gone, Ayan would be left alone again. And who'd fill in, Vance Gregory? Hardly.

Still, he couldn't fight the sensory memory of Vance's breath on his hair, the soft sound of the intake of breath, the shifting of warm muscle beneath his hands.

Ayan looked at him. "What are you going to do?"

"Stop him from hurting anyone else."

Under the scrutiny of Vance's gaze, the already claustrophobic cell became several sizes smaller. Ayan could feel the shallow rise and fall of his chest, could hear the rush of his own pulse in his head. If he so much as reached out to touch now, he'd be lost, but

there was nowhere else to go.

He nodded, brushing past Vance as he stepped out into the hallway.

"All right."

* * * *

The phone booth Vance chose was halfway across the city. Better safe than sorry. Vance told him—in sheer bravado, Ayan assumed—he wasn't concerned about Marcus, but Pietro wouldn't be pleased if Vance brought trouble to their doorstep when Pietro himself worked so hard at covering their tracks.

"I could just use a cell," he said, watching Vance from the passenger seat, trying his damndest not to be curious about Vance and Pietro's relationship.

"The signal gives me a headache," Vance said. "And I'm sure he has the capabilities in place to track a signal. I want to buy us more time than that. What's he going to do when the only thing he traces back to is a phone booth, huh?"

Ayan turned to look out of the window.

"You'd be surprised."

"Then maybe you should tell me."

Vance spoke so gently, Ayan had to press his lips together in a tight line to keep the temptation to do just that at bay. He thought he heard Vance sigh, but it might have been the sound of the rain splashing at the windscreen.

"We're here," Vance said eventually, parking the car on a nondescript street. A hundred yards away, gleaming like an oasis under a cone of street lamp light, was a single phone booth.

He could have run. There was absolutely nothing keeping him at Vance's side as they walked over to the booth. A smarter man might have torn off down the street without looking back. But Ayan's faith in his own judgment faltered lately, and he knew his abilities weren't on a par with Vance's; if Vance Gregory wanted it, he could have Ayan crawling back on his hands and knees.

Or maybe not. If he wanted to prove Vance's loyalty one way or another, there was no better opportunity.

As he glanced back, the streetlight caught on the grim determination in Vance's eyes, the tight line of his lips. Whatever Vance knew, whatever he'd seen, he bore that anger toward Marcus, and was Ayan really in any position to tell him any different?

Marcus wasn't the man Ayan knew, but he didn't know Vance at all.

Better the devil you know, Ayan...

"You have his number, right?" Vance pulled open the door for him, and ushered him inside.

"Yeah," he nodded, about to make an indignant remark when Vance went to close the door. "Wait, can ... can you leave it open?"

Bad enough he'd had to endure the damn elevator at the facility, but there was a reward in enduring the metallic box that let him out of his confines and out into the crisp evening. The phone booth? Not quite so rewarding.

Vance gave him the same puzzled look he'd given him in the elevator—and Ayan turned his head away, discomfited by the evidence that no, Vance really wasn't reading him at all—but shrugged, bracing one foot against the door to jam it open.

"Okay."

Dialing Marcus's private line allowed him to ignore Vance's presence for a moment, allowed him to focus on something other than the odd concern in Vance's eyes.

He should run. Damn Vance Gregory, his eyes and his smile and his stubbornly futile grudge against Marcus.

"Hello?" Marcus answered. "Who is this?"

Gripping the receiver till he heard the plastic creak, Ayan took a breath.

"Marcus, it's me."

Silence. Impatience to be acknowledged almost had him repeating himself, but he was as certain that Marcus was there listening as he was that Vance's eyes were trained on him like lasers. He could feel both men's attention as surely as a physical touch.

"Ayan," Marcus said.

Outside, he heard the crackled flare of a match igniting, the hiss of air as the flame lit the end of a cigarette. In the distorted reflection of the phone booth's sides, he saw an orange glint of light dancing off glass and metal.

"Yeah, I..." If Vance wasn't there, would he be pleading right now, begging Marcus to come for him, babbling his apologies, desperate and terrified? He wished he could say "no" with more certainty. After the past few weeks, having Marcus as close as the other end of a phone line unnerved him.

You said you'd find me. Where the hell have you been?

"I got out."

"I see." Marcus's tone was measured, each syllable as purposeful as a caress. Ayan thought he could hear a glass chinking in the background, the trickle of liquid. He could picture Marcus in his study, entirely unflappable.

In the glass, the flickering glow of Vance's cigarette moved, and Ayan felt like a cog in a great mysterious machine, tugged between Marcus's words and Vance's gaze. He closed his eyes, as though that might ward off the discomfort of it, as if it might let him ignore the strange arousal.

"I'm in a phone booth on Fifth, I think," he went on, speaking just to fill the silence. Whatever Vance might imagine Marcus was telling him, it had to be better than these drawn out pauses. "And I ... Marcus, please. I don't know where to go, and I'm not even sure where I am, and—"

"Hush, Ayan," Marcus said, the simple command snapping him to attention like a well trained puppy. "You're on Fifth, you're sure?"

"Yes."

"Were you followed?"

Channeling anxiety into indignation, Ayan frowned. "Of course not, what do you take me for?"

Behind him, he swore he heard Vance chuckle.

"No, of course. I'm sorry." Marcus's tone gentled. "I'll come for you. Don't wander, stay right where you are, all right?"

"Yes."

"And, Ayan? I'm glad you're all right."

Ayan couldn't name the tangle of emotions tightening his throat. Terror, relief and guilt, all wound into one awful sensation.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll be waiting."

Hanging up, he collected himself before turning to face Vance.

With the cigarette casting a soft golden glow across the planes of his face, those brown eyes searing amber, Vance just watched him.

Silence. Far too much damn silence. Again.

Vance dropped the cigarette, and as it fizzled on the wet sidewalk, Ayan's gaze slid instinctively down Vance's body, from shoulder to hip, down long legs to the boot crushing the cigarette butt. It seemed safer than looking at Vance's face.

Vance's face—Vance's eyes—made him think too hard about those decidedly unwanted memories from the cell. This wasn't a man he could trust, the sooner he remembered that the better.

Neither, for that matter, was Marcus. But at least with him, Ayan knew what to expect. He understood Marcus's brand of selfishness, could temper the fear with the security of being needed.

I need your help.

Vance didn't need him. Vance just wanted Marcus.

"He's on his way," Ayan said. "What do you want to do in the meantime?"

Vance looked at him, eyes shaded now without the cigarette glow, as though he could think of several things, none of them remotely appropriate.

"We need to get inside," he said instead. "If Marcus or his people pick up that I'm waiting with you, he'll bolt."

"Well," Ayan's gaze landed on a small café across the street, "want to buy me a coffee?"

Vance grinned at that, and Ayan felt delight and despair in equal measures. That wasn't a look that boded well, and it occurred to him that he should be feeling that fearful dread about now, but perhaps the evening had sapped him of the energy to care.

"Oh, babe, you've got a lot to learn about Paths in general and me in particular."

Vance held out a hand, that, after a moment's confused hesitation, Ayan took. The fingers curving around his were cool and smooth, and squeezed once. "C'mon. Let me give you a lesson or two."

Chapter Four

Rain began falling in fat storm-thick drops as they ducked into the coffee shop. Not for the first time since his discussion with Pietro, Vance wished he'd negotiated some backup, too. The idea of having someone else at his back besides Ayan would have reassured him a little.

Ayan hadn't told him what conversation passed between himself and Marcus, and Vance didn't ask. He didn't think he'd want to know. Neither was he eager to find out the reasons why he wasn't rifling merrily through Ayan's head like he would have done with anyone else in this situation. Ayan could be planning to rat him out to Marcus at the first opportunity, and it seemed Vance was content to sit back and put his faith in Ayan's words, the look in his eyes, than find out for sure.

Ayan distracted him, would make him hesitate and worry, and Vance couldn't afford that. Better to have it all planned out, better to keep him at a distance.

He recalled the shiver in Ayan's hands as he'd knelt in front of Vance, and grit his teeth. Marcus might have taken Ayan up on that bargain. That alone was reason enough for him not to.

"What can I get you?" The middle-aged woman behind the shabby counter didn't even look up as they entered. Her voice remained uninterested, her attention occupied with wiping the counter in slow, bored strokes.

Her hand stilled when Vance touched his mind to hers, letting her imagine money changing hands.

"Two coffees. Double shots, extra cream. Oh and a couple of slices of cake too."

"Coming up." There was a remote edge to her voice as she turned to set about the task.

Vance turned to find Ayan glaring at him.

"What was that?" Ayan whispered harshly. "Some kind of Path party trick? At least when Marcus messed with them, it was for important things. Big things. Not coffee and cake."

Vance shrugged, ignoring the disquiet at Ayan's accusation.

"It's precisely because it's only coffee and cake. It's harmless. It's a couple of bucks and change, not someone's life. I'm not forcing some experimental drug down her throat, so before you get all defensive over him—"

"I'm not defensive," Ayan hissed. "What any of you do disgusts me. Just because you do it with snacks and he does it with his business deals and his people, it doesn't make either of you any less fucked up."

Ayan stalked off to a corner table, putting as much distance between them as possible in the small room.

Vance stared after him. The clink of coffee cups on the counter startled his attention back to the waitress.

"Two coffees, double shots. Extra cream. And two slices of cake." She repeated the order mechanically.

Vance stared at the cups and the plates, then back at Ayan. With a sigh, he reached into his pocket, careful not to reveal the gun holster strapped to his side, and drew out a

ten.

"Keep the change."

"Gee, thanks." She snapped out of the hold he had on her mind with a deadpan look.

"I can retire now."

Vance sighed. Why even bother doing the right thing when no one appreciated the effort anyway? Sometimes, he didn't think humans were worth it.

But if he gave in, gave up, where would that leave him? A megalomaniac like Marcus Rose, certain that humans were nothing but toys, pawns to make his life and ambitions easier. Admittedly, that was the simpler path—the lure of the easy life Marcus offered still resonated in his thoughts. It was tempting to give up the fight when no one seemed grateful.

But he couldn't, any more than Pietro could. For better or worse—and Vance questioned it on a daily basis—they weren't wired that way.

Ayan looked up as he approached, setting the cups down on the chipped Formica table.

"Crisis of conscience?" Ayan asked, sipping demurely at the coffee.

"Not really." Vance blew at the steaming foam piled on his own coffee. "Just figured I'd try impressing you with my consideration and kindness."

Ayan stared at him, before laughing softly.

"I never know if you're serious."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"It can be," Ayan looked at him over the rim of his cup, "sometimes."

"Yeah, well..." Vance turned to watch the street, the rain beating at the café window.

"Sometimes it pays to keep people guessing."

"Maybe," Ayan acquiesced. "But doesn't it leave you guessing a lot too?"

Vance glared. "What is this, a free evaluation?"

"No." Ayan smiled mildly. "Just curious. No one's ever taken Marcus on like this before. No one sensible and right minded, at least. What I've seen of you doesn't qualify you for either, but maybe I don't even know the first thing about you. Maybe you don't, either."

Vance sipped at the too-hot coffee, just for something to do with his mouth.

"You believe that crap?"

"Not believe, exactly. But I can understand why they say some Paths lose themselves when they're so busy being other people."

"Is that what made Marcus snap?"

"Maybe..." It was a low move bringing that up, and Vance regretted it when Ayan's smile faded. "I know he lost any respect for humans a long time ago, and he doesn't think Paths make the most of themselves. Marcus just believes in covering all bases."

"Yeah. He gave me that impression."

"He won't let go, you know." There was something lacing Ayan's tone, something a little fearful and a little resigned all at once. Something far too familiar for Vance's liking. "If you lose him tonight, he'll find you, he'll find a way..." Ayan shivered slightly, arms wrapping around his middle. He wouldn't meet Vance's gaze. "Marcus doesn't give up. Marcus doesn't take no for an answer. And you know how strong he is..."

Vance thought of the rough power in the touch of Marcus's psyche again.

"Yeah," he said, trying not to imagine that power aimed at Ayan. He figured it was

almost a success when the only outward show of that anger was the faint squeak of the china cup as it was squeezed between his fingers.

Marcus was dangerous. Misplaced protectiveness was even more so.

Car headlights flashed across the wet street, sparkling in the raindrops on the window.

"It's time," he said. "He's here."

Ayan's coffee cup rattled restlessly as he set it back down on the table, before getting up and heading for the door.

"Ayan."

"What?" Ayan turned at Vance's voice, and for a split second the need was written all over his face; *don't make me do this. Please tell me you're not making me do this...*

"I'm right here, okay? I'm watching. Always. He won't hurt you."

Ayan nodded.

Vance ducked back from the window, watching as a black car—the same one Bobby had been bundled into—pulled up at the curb across the street. Marcus would be looking for someone; Ayan's words hadn't convinced anyone. Any of Pietro's agents would have pissed him off, but if Marcus realized Vance was here, Ayan would be in serious trouble.

Marcus's comment about the hot date echoed in Vance's head as he watched the other man get out of the car. A black tailored suit flapped in the increasing breeze, braided hair whipped against his shoulders. It almost distracted Vance from the realization Marcus had come from the back seat again.

Not much of a driver, Marcus?

Worse than that, Marcus's goons had to be with him again, and doubted there were only guns in their arsenal. Marcus wouldn't surround himself with people who couldn't defend themselves adequately, be it mentally or physically.

Ayan's hair lashed around his face as he crossed the street, like a silk sheet in the wind.

Marcus leaned against the car, tilted his head, and smiled.

Vance tried to listen to the conversation, but between the café window and the wind, he only caught snatches of it.

"How ... escape?"

"They're not ... security is lax, and ... walked here."

Marcus nodded. Even from this distance, Vance could see he hadn't bought it.

"...Followed?"

Ayan shook his head.

Marcus reached out, one hand touching Ayan's cheek. Vance found himself fighting a growl, hands clenching into fists. He couldn't tell how Ayan reacted, every movement of his body was lost to the billowing wind and rain pattered clothes.

For a moment Vance thought he'd have to sit through a kiss, until Marcus's hand slid into Ayan's hair, tightening roughly as he spun Ayan around, yanking him back.

"I'm pleased you tried to lie, at least." Marcus's voice came clearly now, as if all the background static had been filtered out. "But, unfortunately, it doesn't make a difference. I'm not here for you, Ayan."

Vance stood, knocking back his chair. The waitress grumbled at him, but he barely heard her. His attention remained fixed on Ayan's blank eyes, the slackness in his body as it slumped against Marcus's.

Shit...

"You might as well come out, you know," Marcus said, half aloud and half in Vance's head. "And knowing your name would only be polite, don't you think?"

Vance hesitated, knowing he didn't have time to do so. He couldn't see a weapon, but Marcus didn't need one; the grasp he had on Ayan's thought was enough, and if by some chance Vance could circumvent that, there were at least two or three guys in the car with guns aimed at him through tinted windows.

"Why the hell would I want to do that?" He sent the words through the air, through the channels Marcus had opened. "Gotta admit, I didn't think you cared for manners after what you did to Walker."

"Ah," Marcus smiled, tugging Ayan's head back. "I believe you played your part in that, didn't you, Vance?"

Marcus obviously had no qualms about rifling through Ayan's head like it was a Rolodex.

"You'd have killed him anyway."

"Eventually, maybe." Marcus shrugged. "But I had no intention of disposing of Ayan until you interfered."

Shit, shit...

"He has nothing to do with this."

"Unfortunately, he does." Marcus shrugged, tugging the worryingly unresponsive Ayan out into the middle of the street, standing in a pool of streetlight. "It's a shame, when I put in so much work, but you can blame yourself."

"Hiding behind a pawn, Marcus?" Vance asked, cursing himself when he saw Marcus chuckle.

Something didn't sit right about any of this. He was under no illusion that Marcus knew precisely where he was, knew he wouldn't have come unarmed, yet he was making himself an easy target.

Maybe not. Maybe Marcus's range really wasn't that good. After all, he hadn't tracked Vance last night, and why else would he need the goons? A great effort was going into controlling Ayan right now, the goons were no doubt the back up in case Marcus's faultless knowledge suddenly fritzed.

Ayan knows where you are, a little voice reminded him. Ayan could tell Marcus everything he needs to know, whether he wants to or not.

No. Ayan wouldn't unless Marcus gave him no other choice, and so far it didn't seem as though Marcus was digging that deep.

Backing further into the coffee shop, Vance withdrew the gun.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" The waitress yelled. "You ain't taking the money!"

"Shut up," he growled. Forcing her to cooperate in silence would have taken too much energy.

"Oh dear," Marcus's voice came again, amused. "You should learn to control civilians better than that, Vance."

The woman yelled something again, and in his distraction Vance missed the car door opening, and one of Marcus's goons leaning against the frame as he aimed an automatic in their direction.

"Get down!"

The woman did as she was told—better late than never—as the window shattered, ducking down behind the counter just in time to see the display case next to the register explode in a shower of bullets, plastic and cake.

Something in Vance's knee screamed its protest as he fell to the ground, trying to keep out of sight without allowing Marcus to do the same.

"Haven't you been responsible for enough humans already, Vance?" Marcus asked. "Let's not bring her into this, shall we?"

Even as he heard the amusement in Marcus's tone, Vance knew what he'd see when he turned around. Eyes glassy, movements jerky, the waitress swayed unsteadily behind the counter as she got to her feet—as Marcus pulled her strings, making her do so. Vance watched her pick up a knife from behind the counter.

"Leave her alone." He turned back to Marcus, voice a low rumble. "You think I won't shoot her?"

Marcus laughed. "I know you won't. Come on, Vance..." Tone still conversational, Marcus held Ayan out at arms length. One hand loosened its grasp on Ayan's hair, while the other tightened into a fist, lashing out at the side of Ayan's face with a sickening crack. "What'll it take for you to come out and face me, hmm?"

"Ayan!"

"Yes, I thought that'd get you." Marcus laughed at him, letting Ayan's slack form drop to the ground, followed swiftly by a sharp kick to the ribs. Vance couldn't tell if Ayan's stillness was down to Marcus's control or just the pain.

Behind him, the waitress knocked over a coffee pot as she rounded the corner, movements still uncoordinated.

"Do something, Vance Gregory!" Marcus yelled outside, sounding far too pleased for Vance's liking. "Choose!"

Another kick, then Marcus was dragging Ayan to his feet again.

The waitress let out a cry of pure torment, and Vance knew the battle raging inside her, the human psyche still fighting Marcus's power as best she could, trying not to do the things he commanded her to.

She was stronger than Bobby, Vance thought distantly.

There was a faint scratch at the back of his mind.

Ayan...

The waitress flung herself at him, screaming, knife outstretched. Vance rolled out of the way, but not quickly enough. A hot slash of pain cut across his upper arm, tearing fabric, skin and flesh.

Without thinking, he'd aimed the gun. The waitress stared down at him, tears streaking her face, hands shaking even as she raised the knife again.

"No..." It was little more than a whimper.

Marcus laughed, snapping Vance out of the haze of pain long enough to drop the gun. As the waitress lashed out again, he threw a punch, catching her on the jaw and sending her tumbling back.

"Sorry," he said, watching her eyes roll back in her head as she fell away from him, out cold, the knife skittering across the floor. "You're safer that way."

At least they'd chosen somewhere with only one human to deal with. He tried to take comfort in that thought as he retrieved his gun, pressing his fingers to the wound to try and stem the bleeding.

"You really are pathetic, aren't you?" Marcus chuckled. "So tough, hiding behind your little toys."

Vance grit his teeth, trying to block out the pain, compartmentalize it to deal with later. He'd be paying for it later too, but as soon as the numbness seeped into his arm, he levered himself up, gun braced in both hands as he flattened himself against the door.

"Won't work, Marcus." He narrowed his eyes, taking a steadying breath. He'd get one shot, if that, and once Marcus was down he'd have to deal with the goons before they did the same to Ayan.

He felt the scratching again, indistinguishable, but to Vance it felt like a plea. Like "you promised".

I told you, he sent back as best he could. *I told you I'd be here. I told you I wouldn't let him hurt you.*

"Won't work," he repeated, turning in the doorway, arms trembling faintly as he took aim. "I don't hide behind anything."

Marcus yanked Ayan close again, kissed him hard, then flung him aside.

The awareness that something wasn't right brushed against Vance's mind again, but for now he didn't care. He'd finish the job he'd set out to do. He'd deal with the rest afterward.

"Neither do I," Marcus said, and smiled.

Vance pulled the trigger.

The street fell silent. Not just the kind of silence brought about by the gunshot still ringing in Vance's ears, but a silence where nothing else seemed to move. Not a thought. Nothing.

The patter of the rain finally filtered through after a few moments, and Vance took in the two prone bodies on the wet street.

Ayan...

He looked up, preparing himself to hit the goons with every last reserve he possessed, but he didn't get the chance. Headlights flashed blindingly to life, reflecting off the rain, the blood, the broken glass.

Two men exited the car, but they weren't armed and weren't interested in Vance or Ayan. Picking Marcus's body up, they carried it to the car, depositing it in the back seat, getting back in before the car screeched off down the street. Dimly, Vance wondered if Marcus commanded that sort of loyalty, whether the survival instinct was too strong for the life he'd led.

Funny, he should have been thinking of his own survival instinct too, but all he could think about was getting Ayan out of here. He made his way toward Ayan, kneeling in the puddles.

"Ayan..." He hesitated briefly, before reaching out to touch Ayan's shoulder, fearful even though he could feel the residual fluttering of Ayan's psyche, still fighting strongly. Stronger than Vance would have expected. "Come on Ayan, look at me ... please."

"Vance..." Ayan murmured, turning around, voice thready and shaky. "I..."

Vance helped him up, arms wrapping instinctively around Ayan as the other man stumbled against him.

"Are you okay?" Stupid question, but he asked anyway.

"Yeah, I..." Ayan trailed off, gaze landing on the bloodstain on the road where Marcus's body should have been. "Vance, what—?"

"Later. I'll explain later. Right now we have to get out of here."

"But—"

"Now." Still dampening the pain of his arm, he dragged Ayan after him. "We can't be here when someone comes to see what happened."

Ayan resisted for a moment, still staring at the blood diffusing in the rain, and a little flare of annoyance seeped into Vance's touch, making him pull Ayan after him roughly.

"He would have killed you."

Ayan didn't answer.

He couldn't go back to his car, it was far too obvious. A couple of blocks away, he stopped a motorist driving a nondescript truck. Ayan didn't argue this time as Vance touched the man's mind, telling him to get out of the truck, leaving the keys in the ignition and the engine running.

"It's not stealing, okay?" He offered the excuse anyway as they drove away. "It's only borrowing."

"Borrowing, huh...?"

For a moment, when Vance glanced across the cab at Ayan, he could have sworn he saw a smile tug at Ayan's lips.

The moment was gone before he could even wonder at it.

Chapter Five

The OPS had a couple of safe houses dotted around the city precisely for situations like these. None of them were close enough, and Vance wasn't sure he'd trust them anyway.

At the first cheap motel that rolled up on the outskirts of the city, he pulled over.

"You should call the police," Ayan said, the numb sound of his voice startling Vance.

"They can't help us."

"For the car," Ayan corrected. "You should tell them where it is so the owner can come pick it up."

Vance shook his head. Even now, Ayan didn't understand the magnitude of the mess they were in.

"Later," he lied. "Once I've arranged for someone to pick us up. No point leading them straight to us."

A cold wind whipped around them as they got out of the car, though the rain had stopped. Ayan huddled into his coat, and Vance struggled with the urge to pull him closer, wrap Ayan in his arms to keep him warm. Now wasn't the time.

One quick tweak of the desk clerk's mind later and they were letting themselves into a bland, beige motel room. He crossed the threadbare carpet to close the drapes, but the sounds and lights of the highway just beyond the window cut through the paper-thin curtains anyway. At least it hid the worst of the stains, cigarette yellow on the ceiling, and things he didn't even want to consider on the upholstery.

"Sorry." He offered, unsure why he felt the need. "It's not the Ritz."

Ayan shook his head, trying gamely for a small smile, and Vance figured that was as good a reward as any. "It doesn't matter."

"We don't even have a minibar..."

"I'm not much of a drinker."

Vance shrugged gingerly out of his coat, wincing as the torn fabric of his sleeve snagged on the drying blood and tugged at the wound.

Ayan watched, eyes wide as though he hadn't quite noticed before. "You're hurt."

"It's not a big deal. I just need to get it cleaned up." He managed a smile for the concern. "What about you?"

"Ah, I'm okay."

Vance tilted his head, before crossing the room toward Ayan. Stopping close enough to feel Ayan's breath, warm against the dampness of his shirt, he reached up, brushing a handful of Ayan's hair back from his face. The platinum strands were matted and tangled by the rain and wind, and the bruise that curled across Ayan's cheekbone like a crescent moon was turning a livid shade of purple.

Before he could stop himself, his fingers had curved gently against Ayan's cheek, fingertips ghosting across the bruise as though he could soothe it away by touch alone.

Ayan turned his head, leaning slightly into the caress, breath warm against Vance's skin this time.

"Beautiful..."

He didn't even notice he'd spoken aloud until Ayan chuckled softly, depreciatingly. "Well you are," Vance insisted with a murmur.

Ayan shook his head slightly, but held his gaze, eyes almost iridescent with shimmering gold. He'd never seen eyes like that before.

His lips sought out Ayan's before Vance's thoughts could catch up. Ayan made a soft sound of surprise at the first touch, and for a moment Vance was convinced he'd pull away and say no. He couldn't tell, he was floundering in uncertainty and the unfamiliarity of the sensation unnerved him. It was an easy thing to rectify, but he stubbornly refused to read Ayan. That was something Marcus would have done.

He was about to let go when Ayan moved closer, lips nuzzling Vance's softly.

It should have been all right now, he reasoned. It was all over. Except something still muttered in the back of his head, telling him it didn't quite believe that was true.

There was no flinching this time when his hand wound into Ayan's hair, keeping him anchored as the kiss deepened. There was no tension in Ayan's hands as one gripped Vance's good shoulder, the other splayed against his chest, the friction of it magnified by the cool fabric of his shirt.

Ayan tasted sweet and addictive, like an exotic fruit. Vance explored with slow sweeps of his tongue, savoring every moment of the flavor, savoring the sounds Ayan made in the gasped breaths that puffed against his mouth.

Unbidden, he felt the jagged, broken glass memory of Marcus's mind touching his own.

Ayan stared at him, lips parted and puffy, as Vance drew away sharply. Even as a part of him ached with the need to return to that embrace, it was better not to get involved. Better to chalk this one up to a loss and move on.

"I'm going to go shower," he said, turning from the suddenly claustrophobic bedroom to the freedom of the closet-sized bathroom. "I won't use all the hot water, you can have it when I'm done."

He didn't wait for Ayan's response. He could have heard Ayan changing his mind through the walls that separated them even after he closed the door, with no telepathy involved. Still, he'd have chosen to ignore it.

If there was any hurt there, any disappointment, any comparisons to Marcus, Vance wouldn't forgive himself.

He'd have undressed in the bedroom if Ayan hadn't been there. It took a contortionist to peel off the shirt with one good arm while trying not to smack himself with the edge of the shower stall, or back up against the sink. Piling his clothes untidily on the closed toilet seat, he was still grumbling to himself as he got into the shower.

The water wasn't just hot, it stung like little molten darts as it pummeled his skin, washing away the blood and the rain. The force of the jets stung his arm, but with the mess cleared he could see it was just a shallow flesh wound, something easily bandaged up and dealt with.

Hands braced against the tiled wall, he closed his eyes, letting the water sluice down through his hair, over his face.

Marcus was gone. Vance should just forget about him.

He didn't hear the door open, just felt the cold draft of displaced air as the steam around him sought to make its way out into the bedroom beyond.

"Ayan..."

Whatever he was about to say fled his mind as Ayan closed the door. Through the veil of steam, he watched as Ayan undid his shirt, following each lingering push of button through buttonhole. Shrugging out of the garment, Ayan took his time folding it neatly and placing it on top of Vance's crumpled clothes. Vance didn't mind. It gave him opportunity to memorize the slopes and planes of Ayan's chest, his shoulders, his back. A few bruises marred the pale expanse of Ayan's skin, rippling with wiry muscle as he moved, but he was still perfect in Vance's eyes. More perfect than anything he had a right to covet, let alone touch.

Ayan's gaze barely left his, even as his fingers slid down to the waist of his pants, nimbly unfastening them. Vance sucked in a breath as the loose linen fabric slid down Ayan's legs, following their descent with his eyes. The outline left by the rain hadn't even been close to matching the graceful sweep of thigh and calf, deceptively strong beneath skin that looked like cashmere.

"Ayan..." He tried to find his voice again, throat dry even in the water and steam. "I don't think..."

Ayan shook his head, hair spilling around his shoulders, and without a word stepped forward into the small shower cubicle.

Even the spray of water rebounding off Ayan's skin made Vance's body react. The proximity of Ayan's body, cool and smooth and pale under the hot spray, wouldn't let him think straight.

One touch would be all it took, he knew. So he tried to drag it out as long as he could, drinking in the unabashed beauty of the man in front of him. Wet from the shower, Ayan's hair was liquid mercury, a darker silver blonde that reminded him of the color of sunlight just before dawn broke. His eyes were dark, black pupils ringed by a halo of gold, like an eclipse.

It was Ayan who reached out first, hands sliding up from Vance's chest to his shoulders, the movement slick through the water. Vance's body surged in response, Ayan's name just a breath on his lips this time. Just an excuse to say the other man's name.

The water felt cool compared to the heat of Ayan's lips as they brushed against his, tongue darting out to lick delicately. Vance met the lick with a slow stroke of his own tongue, smiling at the raspy breath that whispered against his mouth.

It was adrenaline, he told himself, adrenaline from the evening, and Ayan's beauty, and Vance's complete lack of knowing when to walk away.

Ayan gasped as Vance tugged him closer, turning them around so that Ayan was pinned back against the cool worn tiles. Their arousals slid wetly against each other, pulses pounding in erratic counterpoint.

How was he supposed to refuse this? How was he supposed to stick to weak resolution when Ayan was such a strong temptation?

The only shampoo at hand was the cheap, tiny bottle of some nameless store brand that sat on the chipped shelf above the sink. Vance didn't even have to let Ayan go, didn't have to step out of the shower, to reach across and retrieve it. Next time, he thought, he'd get a bigger room.

It wouldn't do much good, but it was better than nothing. He squeezed out the entire contents of the bottle, working it into a lather between his hands. Ayan watched with silent curiosity until Vance looked up, and nodded.

"Turn around."

"Vance..." Ayan breathed his name, but did as he was told, a tell-tale shiver running through his body as he moved.

The small squeak of surprise Ayan made when Vance's hands only stroked the shampoo through his hair made him smile. Leaning forward, he licked the water from Ayan's shoulder.

"Can't I take my time with you?"

Ayan leaned back into his hands as Vance moved his fingers as a makeshift comb through the tangles in Ayan's hair. Even the cheap shampoo eased them a little, knots unraveling under Vance's patient ministrations. Ayan for his part was making soft pleased noises, head back, eyes closed.

"That's nice."

Smiling, he kissed Ayan's shoulder again. "Good."

Tugging Ayan back under the spray of water, Vance let his hands chase the lather down Ayan's back, over his hips, hands cupping and squeezing his buttocks until Ayan squirmed. If there had been more room to move, he'd have knelt to chase the suds all the way down to Ayan's feet, but he had to settle—settle!—for turning Ayan back around in his arms, kissing him.

Ayan would run after this, and Vance would go back to work and forget any of it ever happened. Oh, yeah, he was a great liar...

They lingered on the kiss until the water turned tepid, lost in an exploration of each other. Ayan's hands were gentle and curious, so soft sometimes that Vance barely felt it. Once or twice, Ayan's fingers raked bluntly down his sides, down his back, and Vance felt the cool tingle of electricity in their wake. He lapped at Ayan's mouth, tasting water and sweetness.

This was how it should be, he thought, fingers sliding with little resistance through the wet satin of Ayan's hair, cradling his head in the kiss. No resigned obligation, just pure want.

"Come on..." he murmured against the kiss, taking a step back out of the shower. He held out a hand, and Ayan followed as though compelled. Vance felt a thrill at the knowledge that he wasn't.

He forgot about toweling them off in favor of another long, deep kiss. Ayan's skin shivered beneath his hands as Vance chased droplets of water down his back. It didn't matter. The room was warm enough, and the rest of the water brushed off on the sheets as Vance backed onto the bed, tugging Ayan on top of him.

Ayan slid against him, a cool sinuous weight, the heat of his arousal a jarring contrast. Vance shifted against him experimentally, drawing a gasp from Ayan while Vance tried in vain to bite back a groan. No, this was too much; no enduring Ayan wriggling on top of him until Vance could control himself longer than a heartbeat.

It wasn't promising, he chuckled, listening to the old motel bed creak as he flipped them over. Ayan was disaster for his control.

The kisses began with Ayan's face, feather touches against the bruises and scrapes. If he could erase them with kisses, he would. He'd erase everything that ever hurt Ayan if he had the power to do so. Ayan's fingers toyed with Vance's hair, body arching languidly beneath him like a sensual creature basking in a sunbeam.

With every kiss that inched lower, need thrummed through Ayan's body, a pleasant

static haze at the back of Vance's mind. It spiked now and then, when Vance's lips or fingers touched a place that drove Ayan crazy. He filed it all away for future reference.

He'd never get enough of this. One night, one lifetime, it didn't make any difference.

"Vance...!" Ayan's body almost curled in on itself when Vance finally reached his cock, rewarding Ayan's dubious patience with a fleeting lick. The static in Vance's head filled his vision for a moment, drowning out everything but Ayan's desire.

Once he could focus again, he nudged Ayan's legs apart with his shoulders and settled between them, hands stroking the soft vulnerable skin along the inside of Ayan's thighs. Turning his head, he brushed a kiss to first one leg then the other, while Ayan moved restlessly beneath him.

"Vance—" The soft whine of his name was a warning, demand and plea all rolled into one, and the touch against Vance's mind became stronger, curling around his thoughts and making itself at home.

It made him pause briefly before nuzzling at the juncture of Ayan's thighs, cheek rubbing against heavy sacs and heated shaft. Ayan almost bucked off the bed, and Vance felt the answering spiral of pleasure in his mind, in his body. It shouldn't have been possible for someone like Ayan to control his power to this extent. Hell, even Vance didn't think he could consciously do what Ayan did, not when his control was this scattered. Experimentally, he turned his head, running an open mouthed kiss along the side of Ayan's cock, broadcasting the pleasure he felt at having Ayan in his arms.

"Oh God, Vance...!" The arousal beneath Vance's lips twitched, and a ribbon of tension shivered through Ayan's thighs. "Don't, I can't..."

Vance chuckled. Apparently he could. "Sorry."

He wasn't all that sorry though, when he parted his lips around the head of Ayan's cock, taking it in slowly, listening to Ayan's cries and mutters. One of Ayan's hands released Vance's hair, dropping to clutch at the scratchy sheets instead. Vance reached out for it, fingers interlocking.

Moisture tricked down between Ayan's thighs, and Vance let one finger slide wetly against the tight ring of muscle in the crease of Ayan's ass.

Ayan jerked at the touch. "You're ... a damn tease."

Vance shifted his hips to try and relieve the ache between his own legs, pulling back so he could watch his finger slide into Ayan, to the first knuckle, to the second.

Look who's talking.

Then Ayan wasn't talking much at all, except in gasps of Vance's name and breathy curses. Vance suckled harder at those noises, tongue rubbing along the underside of Ayan's cock as he added a second finger, trying to temper any discomfort with pleasure.

Ayan seemed as far removed from discomfort as he could get, hips rising into Vance's touch, demanding more.

From the way Ayan's body clung to his fingers, Vance thought that more was a damn good idea. Ayan whimpered—an almost accusatory little noise that made Vance smile—when he drew away. Sliding up Ayan's body, Vance kissed him softly, wordlessly promising that he wouldn't keep either of them waiting for long.

While he still had the wherewithal to do so, he groped around on the night stand for his wallet. A few bills and receipts fluttered to the floor before he found a couple of condoms tucked under a flap of leather. Ayan made a sound suspiciously like amusement, brow raised in question. Vance shrugged.

"What? I never know where the job takes me..."

Ayan tilted his head. "Am I still a part of the job, Vance?"

The job was done. Over.

"No." He held out one of the foil squares to Ayan, giving him the choice. "Wanna help me out?"

He didn't care how Ayan wanted to do this, as long as he still did. All he wanted was Ayan. The order of things was irrelevant; Ayan inside him, Vance buried to the hilt in Ayan, there really wasn't a losing scenario.

He still sucked in a breath when Ayan sat back on his haunches, tearing open the packet with his teeth while the other hand grasped Vance's erection with little preamble or shyness.

Good choice...

Lying back on the bed, his hands grazed Ayan's thighs affectionately. Ayan leaned down, kissed him gently, deft fingers quick and light as they rolled the condom down his shaft. Vance was grateful; any greater friction and this would be over much too quickly. His hands returned to the task of preparing his lover, fingers stretching the tight muscle that would soon be cinched around him. He took a steadying breath as Ayan straddled him, so stupidly turned on just fucking Ayan with his fingers he had no idea how he'd last doing so with anything else.

Ayan must have taken pity on him, going excruciatingly slow as he positioned himself, impaling himself back onto Vance inch by delicious, agonizing, slow inch.

A calming touch brushed across his thoughts, little scratches of power soothing with their distraction.

Pleasure licked along his spine; that kind of connection could be useful. Very useful.

Sitting up, he drew Ayan onto his lap, face buried against his lover's shoulder.

Ayan's hair was still damp at the ends, and they brushed against Vance's hands, cool in contrast to the warmth of Ayan's skin. He didn't stop there, hands curving around Ayan's buttocks, kneading and parting them further as Ayan rode him. Ayan's arms tightened around Vance's shoulders as he arched up, body stilling, and Vance's fingers traced the point his body penetrated Ayan's, feeling slick heat as Ayan pressed back, enveloping him once more.

Ayan repeated the movement, pulling himself up until Vance was only barely inside him, body taut with tension.

"Again..."

As if he could deny Ayan anything in that moment. His fingers slid along his own shaft, circling Ayan's entrance, feeling the muscle stretched taut around him as Ayan sank back down onto his cock.

Ayan's hands came to rest on Vance's shoulders, his lithe body leaning back, and Vance grit his teeth as the angle of the slow thrusts changed again.

He was lovely, Vance thought, looking up at the man astride him, graceful and regal even in his utter wantonness. One hand still cradling Ayan's ass, he brought the other around to stroke the erection that left patterns of moisture against his stomach. In slow strokes, he matched Ayan's pace, leaning in and pressing a kiss to his lover's chest.

"Show me." Rasping his tongue against one pebbled nipple, he shuddered as a shiver ran all the way from Ayan's shoulders down to the heat around Vance's cock. "Show me how you want me to touch you."

Ayan's eyes were dark, ringed with molten gold as they stared down at him, surprise and desire chasing each other in endless succession. Vance felt an echo of the same sensations in the back of his mind, as though he and Ayan were two radios tuned to different frequencies of the same station. Ayan wasn't doing anything on purpose; Vance would have known. He licked at Ayan's chest again, the fingers beneath Ayan teasing the opening that surrounded him, the other squeezing softly as he repeated, "Show me."

Ayan nodded, dazed. His hand trembled before it settled on Vance's. The sweet hum of his desire vibrated through their entwined fingers. Even before Ayan adjusted the pressure, tilted the angle of Vance's hand, he could feel it, knew what Ayan wanted a split second before he was proved right.

He'd never known anything like it, pleasure that ricocheted in an endless echo.

He nuzzled Ayan's chest, gaze lowering to watch their fingers move along the slickly heated flesh of Ayan's shaft. Pale skin blushed a dusky rose, peeking out between their fingers when Ayan rubbed against the head, twisting his grip slightly before sliding back down. Each time, the movement was a little faster, spreading the moisture that beaded at the tip. Ayan's hips rocked in time with their hands, and Vance had no idea where to focus: Ayan, hard and pulsing beneath his hands; Ayan, tight and slick wrapped around him. It almost felt as though both were the same, a cycle that had no end, no beginning, and left him hopelessly guessing at where he ended and Ayan began.

Hopeless and powerful and perfect.

He'd put Ayan's hesitation down to shyness, but Ayan was anything but. Something yearning and sweet and unfamiliar danced across his mind, and he wondered if anyone had ever bothered asking Ayan what he wanted before. Not Marcus. Not Pietro. Not even Vance, at first.

He knew better now. He could make up for it.

Ayan cried out as he was tipped back and pinned against the foot of the bed, hair cascading over the edge of the mattress like a waterfall. Ayan's legs remained wrapped around Vance's waist, holding on tighter in time with the quickening pace and harder thrusts. Ayan's cock, trapped between their bodies now in constant friction, pulsed beneath their entwined hands.

"Ayan..." Vance buried his face against the crook of his lover's neck, inhaling his scent, catching the faint scent of shampoo.

This could have been over before it began. If Marcus had his way, if Marcus had broken Ayan as surely as he'd believed.

The knowledge fed a little more desperation into the embrace, a little more hunger into the kiss when he caught Ayan's lips again, tongue stroking deep and possessive. He'd make this beautiful creature his, if only for the moment. Here and now, Ayan was his just as surely as he was Ayan's. As surely as his thoughts tumbled against Ayan's, tangling and weaving into one constant pressure of arousal.

The pressure exploded into sparks and emotion behind his eyes, and in that moment he was sure he could see all the way down to Ayan's soul—wounded but strong, needy but defiant—just as Ayan could see into his own.

It had never been like this. Never this powerful. Never so much of his psyche entwined and inseparable with another.

Physical climax came almost as an afterthought. Ayan cried out his name, coming hard against their fingers in ribboned heat. His body clamped down tight around Vance's,

until he could barely move, could barely breathe, could barely feel anything but Ayan's body, Ayan's mind, his fears, his need, his desire.

He was falling through space, one filled with nothing but Ayan, and Vance as a single entity almost ceased to exist.

He couldn't find much wrong with that.

When the daze cleared, Ayan's hands were draped limply around his back, and their panted breaths still wracked their bodies so hard they continued to rock softly together, bodies still joined.

Vance raised his head, even though it felt fifty pounds heavier than before, and gazed down at Ayan.

Perfect. Even if it was just for now, it was all perfect.

He kissed Ayan's cheeks, his eyelids, his lips, hands smoothing that curtain of hair against the sheets. Ayan laughed softly, a sound like crystal and velvet, and Vance held him close.

Just for now...

Chapter Six

Before leaving the motel late the next morning, Vance called the police to report a stolen car. Ayan smiled, reaching for his hand as they waked away from the graffiti-stained phone booth.

"See? You can be a good guy if you try."

"Hey," Vance grumbled good-naturedly, drawing Ayan closer to his side. "I'm always a good guy. Very good." He grinned, turning his head, lips nuzzling Ayan's hair. "You thought so last night."

Ayan shook his head, and made a suitably disparaging noise, but he could feel a blush spread across his face.

Vance's car was waiting in the parking lot of a strip-mall next to the motel. Affixed to the wiper blade was a note from Pietro, saying in bold black marker pen strokes, "We'll talk about this later". Vance screwed it up and tossed it away.

"So, do you have anywhere to go?"

It took Vance a while to ask. Part of Ayan wished he could wait forever, but driving through the rain-splashed city streets, last night felt like lifetimes ago. The bower of safety Vance provided felt further away with every passing mile.

"Ah, yeah, I'll just go home."

Vance nodded. "Is it safe there? Do Marcus's people know about it?"

"Do they know where I live?" Ayan managed a wry smile, trying to temper both Vance's concern and the dramatic tone of the question. "Of course they do. Marcus's name is on the rental agreement, I don't even know if I can stay there."

"Well, it's not like anyone's gonna report him missing any time soon," Vance said. From peripheral vision, Ayan saw his hands turn white on the steering wheel, saw the flexing of tension in Vance's shoulders. "So, he paid your rent, huh?"

Ayan folded his arms across his chest, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "What, you're surprised Marcus kept me in the lap of luxury?"

"No," Vance said. "I'm just surprised you let him."

Ayan couldn't decide what bothered him most about that, the implicit judgment or the suggestion that Vance knew him well enough to make it.

Or maybe the fact Vance was right. The fact he wanted Vance to be right.

"He wanted to keep me where he could find me," he said eventually. "It suited his interest."

"How did you fall in with Marcus, anyway?"

"Not all of us are as lucky as you, Vance." He tried to keep the bitterness from his voice, well aware that he wasn't particularly successful. "We don't all get picked up by secret agencies to save Pathkind."

Vance laughed. "OPS is hardly that. Pietro's just ... never liked what he is. He thinks the world needs protecting from us."

Ayan thought about Marcus, reveling in his power, in his superiority. He remembered the night he was captured, and Marcus's blatant disregard for his subordinates, allowing them to fall to Pietro's people when he certainly had the ability to fight for them.

He couldn't say for certain that Vance would have fought for them either, but Ayan was pretty sure he'd have thought about it. Marcus's thoughts were already on escape, already on leaving Ayan to face their pursuers alone.

"Did you like what you were?"

"Always." Vance answered, quick enough that Ayan knew he hadn't even needed to pause and think about it. He envied Vance's surety, the utter conviction in that one word. "But I'm not him. He's had to deal with worse things than I ever did."

"The two of you are old friends?"

"Yeah." Vance smiled turned a little bittersweet at the edges, and Ayan tried to stifle the flare of jealousy. What did it matter to him what Pietro meant to Vance? "We tried being together for a while, but ... ah, I don't know. Too different, too alike." He shook his head. "Either way, he didn't rescue me or coddle me, if that's what you think."

"No." Ayan watched the hypnotic swish of the wiper blades, watched their futile effort to wipe away the morning drizzle from the windshield. "Just that ... when I came into my powers, it was hard. The people around me couldn't help, couldn't understand. I think they were frightened, and knowing I was the reason for their fear..." Huddling a little more into his seat, as if the plush upholstery of Vance's car could somehow soften the blow of those memories, he fixed his gaze out of the window. He didn't want to see Vance's pity. "When I needed someone, Marcus was there."

"He sought you out," Vance said, a statement not a question.

"I suppose. He had the ability to, that's for sure. He protected me when I needed it."

"Yeah, at a price."

"Only later." Ayan worried his lower lip between his teeth in between speaking. Vance, who cheerfully admitted he loved his abilities, couldn't understand how it felt to fear them. How it felt knowing that it instilled fear in other people. "Only when he realized I had this ... I don't know, intuition about people, about situations, and he realized he could use that to his benefit. Not that I minded, it was good being useful. At the beginning, he was ... kind."

"There's useful," Vance said, "and there's being used. I'm useful to Pietro, but he sure as hell isn't using me. I do it of my own free will, and as much of a brat as he is, he knows it. I might bitch—and believe me, I derive a whole lot of entertainment value from it—but I'm here because I want to be. I'm following his crusade 'cause I believe in what he's trying to do. I might not agree with his reasons for it, but I can't fault the results."

"Then you're lucky you have that luxury. People do what they have to to survive, Vance," Ayan said. "Especially people like us."

"Maybe," Vance said eventually. "They still have a choice."

"Not always," he said softly. "Sometimes the choice is the biggest illusion of all."

Ayan didn't tell him, but Vance knew the way to his apartment anyway. Ayan couldn't sense Vance reading him, which only left the assumption that Vance read his file.

A file. When Pietro brought it out at one of Ayan's interviews, he'd almost laughed at the surreality of it. The damn thing got thicker and thicker every time he saw it, and eventually he stopped caring about the sheer indignity of their doing it, and began to wonder how accurate any of it was.

Evidently his home address was accurate enough.

He'd loved the neighborhood, with its eclectic mix of suburban homes, small

businesses and stores. From the small balcony at the back of his second floor apartment, he could sit out on summer evenings and smell the scents of nearby restaurants, hear music and voices, and pretend everything was normal and ordinary. For a heady, foolish moment he imagined what it'd be like coming home to his beloved apartment with Vance there, waking up in his sun-trap east facing bedroom wrapped in Vance's arms like he'd been that morning.

If he'd met Vance first, would that be his life now?

As soon as he hit the sidewalk, it felt like walking into a glass wall, a barrier nearly tangible in its pressure between him and the apartment building.

"Wait." He held out a hand, stopping Vance. "Something's wrong."

If wrong was even the right word for it. Something swampy rested across his shoulders in a cold mantle, seeping down his spine like shadows creeping away from sunlight. The smallest sounds made his ears twitch, and his heartbeat fluttered in his throat. In such a familiar setting, a place where he felt as safe as he ever could, the sensation turned the street he knew into an alien landscape.

Vance reached for his hand, and instead of worrying why, Ayan fought the urge to cling to him.

"What is it?" Vance looked around. "I can't see—"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm not seeing anything, I..."

Vance looked at him strangely, as though something Ayan said answered some unspoken question.

"You feel it," Vance said.

Ayan nodded. "I don't know why, but..."

He stared down the busy street, trying to pinpoint the source of the unease. Vance said nothing about the fact Ayan wouldn't let go of his hand, but then surely Vance wouldn't have offered it otherwise.

Nothing looked different. The air smelled of traffic and ozone, of rainwater drying on the leaves of the trees that lined the street. A couple of blocks away, shoppers and office workers bustled through the early morning in a honk of horns and clatter of footsteps, going about their business oblivious to the world occupying a parallel space to theirs.

That was Vance's reason, he supposed. Make sure the barrier between the two remained solid, closing off the porous blurred edges where Marcus could take advantage.

Still ... Marcus had protected him from them too, in his own way. It was easy for him to ignore the harm Marcus caused when he himself was so removed from it. Would Vance understand the way Marcus did that Ayan felt far more threatened by humanity, by the overwhelming power of their minds, than he felt he posed a threat in return?

The warm hand around his own, thumb stroking Ayan's knuckles softly, was an insidious little suggestion that yes, maybe he would.

Don't be a fool, Ayan. The voice in his head sounded frighteningly like Marcus. *You're useful to him, that's all.*

He snatched his hand from Vance's unceremoniously, shoving them in his pockets.

"Can you check?" he asked, ignoring the look Vance gave him.

"I can try." Vance shrugged. "But you live in a pretty damn loud neighborhood..."

That was the point. He'd never dared get too close to any of his neighbors, fearful of Marcus's reaction when he learned that Ayan dallied with humans. But their existence

buzzed in the back of his head like a fluorescent light-bulb humming in another room, just reassuringly *there*. A contradiction yes, but one that grounded him, reminded him he was alive. That he *could* coexist without hurting anyone.

"Marcus never had a problem," Ayan said. The jibe stirred up a little guilt, but if it got Vance to negate or verify the bizarre sensations, he couldn't bring himself to feel too bad about it.

Vance just sighed. Seconds later, Ayan felt the inimitable static of a powerful Path's abilities sprawling outward like a radar, a tickling sensation like sinking into a tub of bubbles.

A siren wailed, and a police cruiser swung to a halt at the corner of the block. Raised voices and slamming doors echoed through the familiar buzz of the morning.

"There," Vance said, sounding satisfied. "That's what you picked up on."

Ayan frowned. "Maybe."

"There's nothing else," Vance said, picking up on his doubt. Despite Ayan's rejection, Vance reached for his hand again, squeezing softly before letting go. "It's fine, really. And if it's not..." He let his rumpled suit jacket fall open slightly, revealing the butt of his gun. "We can still deal with it."

That early in the day, the lobby and hallways were silent; too late for the office worker across the hall from Ayan's apartment, too early for the retiree in the first floor apartment beneath his. It was almost as though he could feel the building dozing.

With a sidelong glance, he watched Vance take it all in, irrationally hoping Vance liked the place, liked being a part of Ayan's life.

"So, you were here the whole time." Vance mused, hands in his pockets as he followed Ayan to his door. "If I'd known, I'd have hung around here more."

"Well, now you know."

"What if I wanna know even more?"

"Vance—" He turned, only to have Vance back him up against the door.

"If you think last night was enough," Vance murmured against his lips, "then you're seriously mistaken."

Ayan let the kiss brush away the token argument he might have made. What was the point of lying to a telepath anyway? Even if Vance remained true to his word and hadn't been reading him, he suspected Vance knew perfectly well what he wanted. He wasn't doing a whole lot to conceal it.

It was barely even a kiss, just a touch of lips, Vance's clinging briefly to Ayan's as he drew back. The muted hallway light caught the question in his eyes, the hunger, and Ayan didn't care what he was agreeing to. He just wanted Vance's lips on his again.

He nodded. Vance continued to hold his gaze, fingers stroking the side of his face, palm warm as it cupped his cheek. When Vance's fingers slid up to anchor in his hair, strands tangling around his hand like ribbons, Ayan closed his eyes, breathing out a sigh at the second brush of Vance's lips against his.

This one stayed soft for a heartbeat. Then he was pinned back against the door, Vance's hands on his shoulders, Ayan's hands unable to choose between clenching in the front of Vance's shirt, or tangling in his hair, settling in the end for both. He gasped against the kiss as Vance insinuated one knee between his, thigh rubbing against the arousal that was making its demanding self known in ways neither of them could ignore.

Vance took advantage of the gasp, catching Ayan's lower lip between his teeth, the

tip of his tongue sweeping back and forth in light dabs. Ayan moaned softly, heat sliding through him at the thought of that tongue on other parts of his body, repeating that kind of attention. He ran the tip of his tongue just under Vance's upper lip, tracing the point where the dry softness met wet heat. Vance rewarded the effort with a low groan, thigh pressing harder, his own erection nestling into the hollow of Ayan's hip.

It wasn't the nagging awareness that they were out in the hallway that eventually made him break the kiss—he had a feeling that Vance could make any inadvertent passers-by see whatever he wanted them to see.

The ghost echoes of last night made him stop. The ricochet of pleasure that spiraled and pin-balled back and forth between them until he almost forgot himself, almost forgot to keep up his guard.

For all Marcus protected him, for all Marcus was surely poking around in his head on a regular basis, Ayan never wanted him so ingrained that it was all he thought of. He'd seen a glimpse into Vance's heart last night; seen past the swagger and smart remarks, if only for a moment. He wanted Vance more deeply with every breathless, desperate, sweet second of the kiss, but that didn't mean he *should*.

This was still a man who'd used him as surely as Marcus did, who played around with powers Ayan still didn't understand just for coffee.

"For the record, I never thought last night was enough," he managed to say when Vance finally let him go, turning for the door and finding his keys. Looking at Vance over his shoulder, he offered a playful smile. Keep it playful. Keep it superficial. Keep it *safe*. "But if it was, it'd be your loss and you'd just have to suck it up."

"Ah, I know it'd be a loss, babe." Vance grinned, rocking back on his heels. "Huge loss. Massive. I know that very—"

The psychic energy blasted from the doorway in a blur of movement, like curtains moving in peripheral vision. Cut off mid-sentence, Vance crashed back against the opposite wall. Instinctively, Ayan thought of his neighbor getting caught up in all this, but just as immediately knew the place was empty.

Not only the apartment. The whole building was empty. It echoed like a hollow maw in the back of his mind.

"Vance!"

Dazedly picking himself up, Vance looked unsteady and determined as a stubborn foal as he reached for his gun.

"Stay here." He glanced at Ayan as he approached the door. "I'll deal with this."

"Don't be stupid, you can't just barge in and..."

Vance wasn't listening to him. High speed contact with a wall must have stirred his caveman instincts. If Ayan wasn't so blind-sided by events himself, he'd have smacked Vance for his gung-ho presumptuousness.

Still ... wouldn't it be all right to believe in him if he wants to protect you?

Ayan had left the door ajar, the key still in the lock. Vance pushed it open with his free hand, taking a step into the hallway. Another blast of psychic energy, unmistakable with its near-electric crackle, side-swiped into him, shoving him from Ayan's line of sight. There was an impact, Vance crashing into something. The gun went off, but it wouldn't disturb anyone in the eerily still building.

"Vance!"

What about protecting him?

Rushing in after Vance was just as stupid, but Ayan didn't even pause to wonder. Something even stronger than instinct surged through his blood as he charged into his apartment, too concerned with ensuring Vance's safety to give a damn about his own.

His plants had died. The assortment of potted houseplants on the hallway table had turned brown and brittle in his absence. It was a ridiculous thing to notice given the circumstances, and even more ridiculous to feel angry about it when he had such a considerable list to choose from. But they were his, damn it. He'd chosen them, nurtured them, done so just for himself, and other people who believed they knew better had rendered it all pointless.

The two hulking men who stood in his apartment didn't look as fragile and broken as the plants. Ayan thought he recognized them as Marcus's underlings, but not from their nondescript faces, or plain black suits. They felt like Marcus; being in the same room as them had the same, cold and swampy sensation like walking through weed-thick mud.

This was what he'd felt outside. He'd had fair warning and he'd walked in anyway.

Stupid!

The first man kicked Vance's gun out of reach, and turned to Ayan with a vicious glare. "Is he the one that did it?"

"I don't know what you're—"

The man kicked Vance in the gut, hard enough to make the prone form lift and thump back down like a rag doll flung in the corner by a petulant kid.

"Stop!" Ayan yanked free of the second man, crossing over to Vance. A strong pulse of telepathy stopped him halfway, and dropping to his knees, he tried to fight off a sensation a little like a siren going off between his ears.

He couldn't even sense Vance's awareness as a tangible thing anymore. It drifted around in stops and starts, disjointed as haze, and only without it did Ayan realize how stable and constant a presence it was. Marcus's psyche felt like vines, cloying and swampy. Vance's felt like the pillar of rock those vines could only wind around.

No one could tear that down. No one.

It was his. Vance was his.

As soon as the thought formed, something shifted in Ayan's mind, sliding doors opening and closing, new pathways forming. For a split second, he swore that shadow of someone else, something alien and unknown, moved through the dark, but then it was gone, leaving an intense clarity in its wake.

Clarity and *power*.

No one hurt Vance. Caring little that he could barely look out for himself, Ayan knew without a doubt that he would do anything he could to protect Vance.

He tried touching Vance's scattered psyche with his own, as though he could gather all the fragments back together. The reassuring static of Vance's mind touched him in a ghost echo of last night, sending warmth shivering through Ayan's blood.

Mine, something in Ayan's psyche whispered. *I won't let anyone else have you.*

One of the men picked up Vance's gun, tossing it to the other while he yanked Ayan up by the hair.

"Get rid of him." The man mimicked a gun with his hand, one finger pressing against his temple. "Get a good shot. Can't be too careful."

"No." Ayan stood up. "You're not touching him."

"Oh, really?" The gunman leered as he leaned over Vance. "Seems to me he touched

you plenty."

The man grasping his hair snorted in disgust, his fist tightening, pain sparking through Ayan's scalp. "And after everything Marcus did for you, you little shit..."

"Hey, no damage, remember?" the gunman said.

"Yeah, yeah ..." The man loosened his hold slightly, but it was enough. Ayan was sure he lost a good few strands, still wrapped around the man's fingers when he pulled free, putting himself between Vance and their attackers.

"Get out of the fucking way." The gunman aimed Vance's weapon at him.

Ayan. Vance's psyche touched his, wavering but purposeful, and Ayan was too relieved to care when Vance added, *Go. Leave me, let them...*

He didn't listen; he had no intention of doing anything of the kind.

Facing the men, he let go of all the fear, the anger, the despair and desperation that had been building ever since Marcus's betrayal. It left him in a tangible wave, moving fast like a shimmering heat haze on a desert road.

He'd always picked up on others' feelings, but never before had those emotions been as real as a piece of glass in his hands, jagged and fragile and entirely under his control. He could either crush it or let it cut him, but the choice was his.

He couldn't remember a time he'd had a choice before. The implications of it were as heady and tempting as they were horrifyingly reminiscent of Marcus.

The men's eyes widened, disbelief and an oddly uneasy sense of recognition fluttering through their thoughts, fragile and futile as moths in an inferno.

Ayan didn't care. In that moment, the men in front of him, living breathing Paths with histories as sure as his or Vance's, didn't matter.

Vance mattered. Keeping him safe mattered. How he was doing it was irrelevant, if he could just get Vance out of here.

You brought him here in the first place. You knew something was wrong, and you let him come. You got him hurt. You put him in danger. You're pathetic.

A hand touched his, and the current snapped off like a faucet. The men staggered, dropping to the floor as if someone cut their strings.

"Enough," Vance said softly, leaning on Ayan a little, running the other hand over his face as though he was trying to wake up. "It's okay. It's enough."

Ayan sagged under something like exhaustion, a sudden sapping of energy. The room swayed around him, lights sparkled in his vision, and the only thing keeping him standing was Vance's touch.

He turned around in Vance's arms, closing his eyes, focusing on the one thing he *knew*. Vance was okay. Vance was here, and safe, and while it did little to mitigate the blame Ayan bore for putting him in this situation in the first place, it was good enough.

"Are you okay?" Stroking his hair as gently as if Ayan might shatter, Vance's words were little more than a soft vibration against his temple.

"I'm not the one they knocked out."

Vance acknowledged the little side step in the conversation with a wry chuckle.

"Yeah..." Vance smiled, lips brushing Ayan's hair. "Not my finest moment, gotta admit. You keep seeing me at my worst. It's starting to piss me off."

If this was Vance at his worst, Ayan would be well and truly lost if Vance tried harder. And if all the odd little moments of consideration, the glimmers of kindness, were nothing more than convenient accidents, then where did that leave his judgment? As poor

as it had been with Marcus.

Eventually disentangling himself, Vance's hands skimmed down Ayan's arms as he stepped back. Retrieving his gun, Vance made his way over to the men, still lying where they fell. After a careful prod with the side of his shoe, Vance knelt by the closest body, searching for signs of life.

"Are they dead?" Ayan's lips barely formed the question.

"No." Vance got up. "I think you just ... stunned them. Somehow."

Vance put enough emphasis on "somehow" for Ayan to know he expected an explanation, but he had nothing. Even if he tried, he couldn't do more now than feel the vague stirrings of jumbled signals coming from the men, and a disjointed blend of anxiety and relief coming from Vance.

"It doesn't matter." Vance shook his head, holstering his gun. "But if you think I'm letting you stay here—"

Wondering whether Vance acted because he could feel Ayan trying to pick up on his feelings, he folded his arms across his chest. "I can look after myself, Vance."

"Oh, no doubt." Vance grimaced, looking at the still-twitching goons. "That's what I'm worried about. I don't want my next assignment to be taking you out."

Ayan took a step back. "Vance—"

"I wouldn't," Vance said. "But I don't wanna be put in that position."

Walking up to him, Vance cupped his face between gentle hands, brown eyes desperate as they searched his. What he hoped to find, Ayan had no idea, but supposed Vance found it when their lips met. His fingers clenched in Vance's jacket sleeves, still holding on when Vance drew back slightly, forehead pressed against his.

"Please," Vance murmured, gaze on Ayan's lips. "Don't put me in that position."

Knowing he couldn't make that promise, Ayan just nodded.

"Okay."

"Go get anything you'll need." Vance tilted his head in the direction of the men. "I'll keep an eye on our buddies here."

There wasn't much Ayan wanted from this place now it had been violated, tainted worse than if some faceless burglar had gone through all his possessions. Something darker had infiltrated the place he'd thought was so safe, so ordinary.

He stopped at the bedroom door, looking back at Vance. "They're Marcus's people."

Vance leaned against the windowsill, home of more skeletal, leafless plants, and pulled a crumpled cigarette pack from his pocket. He didn't look as though courtesy was high on his agenda, and Ayan didn't have the heart to complain. He'd done enough damage to Vance for one day.

"Yeah." Vance frowned, not quite meeting Ayan's gaze. "I figured as much."

There wasn't much Ayan had that didn't remind him of Marcus, but he found enough clothes to last a few days. He didn't want to imagine staying with Vance much longer than that. The longer he could cling to the fallacy that everything would get back to normal, that he could go home and forget all about this, the better.

Vance was finishing off the cigarette when Ayan walked back into the living room, fastening the bag.

"All done?" Vance plucked the cigarette from his lips, about to turn and stub it out in one of the desiccated plant pots. Ayan arched a brow, and Vance sighed, stubbing the cigarette out on the china saucer that held the pots instead. "You're hard work, you know

that?"

Vance probably meant it as a joke. Cradling the bag to his chest as though some nylon and fabric could form a defense, Ayan shrugged.

"No one's asking you to rescue me. Especially not me."

Levering himself from the windowsill, Vance headed for the door, leaving Ayan a little surprised that Vance hadn't demanded he hand over the bag for Vance to carry.

"I know," Vance said, not turning to see if he was following. "That's why I'm doing it."

Chapter Seven

Ayan barely spoke a word on the drive to Vance's place. Maybe the poor guy was just tired of seeing the inside of the car, Vance thought, trying to ignore the dull ache in his back that reminded him, oddly enough, of a high impact crash between his spine and a wall.

He didn't want to think about it. Thinking about it invariably meant looking for answers, and he doubted either of them had any of those. Not easy ones, anyway, and after the past twenty-four hours, Vance wanted something to be easy.

He couldn't even summon the internal innuendo to wish that something would be Ayan.

It must be a bad day.

The apartment building, unlike Ayan's homely suburban fantasy, lurked at the edges of the downtown sprawl and most of its neighbors weren't family homes but business high-rises. As different as they were, he wondered if Ayan chose the place he'd called home with much the same logic as Vance chose his. Nine days out of ten, Vance was up and around during the hours of darkness, and with the majority of his nearest neighbors having gone home, leaving nothing but their computers and phones sending electronic messages he couldn't intercept, it was as close to peace as he was likely to get.

Ayan stared up at the building as Vance drove into the underground parking lot, squinting a little at the late afternoon sun sparkling on metal and glass before they disappeared into the dark.

"Is this a trick too?"

"No." He parked the car in its usual spot next to the elevators, and ushered Ayan out. "This is paid for thanks to some of OPS's bigger clients. The jobs are dirtier, but the money's clean."

"I'm sorry..." Ayan lowered his head, as if Vance should be angry. "I shouldn't have assumed."

"Why not? I would have done the same." Vance shrugged. "Come on, let's get you settled in."

Ayan froze when they stopped in front of the polished silver of the elevator doors, one hand reaching for Vance's, fingers tightening instinctively.

"Can we take the stairs?"

Vance blinked.

"I live on the twenty-sixth floor."

"I just..." Even in the distorted reflection, Ayan's face was drawn and pale. The hand grasping his was cool and clammy. "I'm a little ... claustrophobic when it comes to elevators."

Vance recalled Ayan's tension in the elevator when they left the OPS facility. Or as much of it as he could, after cursing out the voice and the ID scanner again. When he'd been done with all that and looked back, Ayan's eyes had been squeezed shut, body braced against one wall as if he was preparing for free fall. He'd assumed then that Ayan wasn't looking forward to confronting Marcus.

Sighing, he squeezed Ayan's hand in return.

"Well, the exercise'll do me good, huh?"

By the time they finally made it to his door, twenty-six floors later, Vance ruefully rethought that statement. He wasn't keeling over, but distinctly out of breath. It was embarrassing.

Ayan smiled at his puffing. "See, if you quit with the cigarettes you'd be in better shape."

Vance raised a brow. He let Ayan into the apartment, relieved to have gotten Ayan this far. Still, even if Ayan was amused at his expense, Vance would do it all over again just to see him smile.

"One bad habit at a time, okay?" He reached for Ayan's bag, noticing how light it felt. "I'll put this in the spare room. Make yourself at home."

"Yeah..." Ayan smiled a little. "Thanks."

He'd never done the sort of deep, committed relationship that would involve anyone staying under his roof more than a day or three at a time. With Pietro, it had been a little like two alpha dogs, neither willing to capitulate entirely to the other to the extent that they relinquished their own territory.

Then again, with Pietro it had always been more of a pissing contest than a relationship. They worked far better as business associates than anything else.

And he'd never, ever, been with someone to whom he'd gladly hand over control of his space. Even in his own apartment, it felt as though Vance was the one circling Ayan's environment, pacing himself, waiting and watching for an unthreatening moment to approach.

When he returned, Ayan was standing in the middle of the living room, huddled in on himself like he was trying to disappear. To look at him now, Vance mused, would be to see something pretty and fragile, something that needed protecting. He wasn't too concerned by the thought that he might be the only one who knew the depth of Ayan's quiet strength. He doubted even Ayan knew. It would have suited Marcus not to tell him how powerful he could be in his own right.

From the things Ayan said, he'd begun to wonder if Ayan's powers ran to the empathic side rather than the telepath side. It certainly explained why Marcus kept someone with such mediocre powers that close. It wouldn't have registered on any scans; empathy as a passive ability couldn't be measured as well as outbound telepathy, especially if Ayan had been blocking it off, unwilling to feel out any of the strangers around him.

A shiver of pleasure teased down his spine at the recollection of the endless circle of connection he'd felt making love to Ayan. An empath could have amplified that pleasure to those heights, but he didn't believe Ayan could have done so without knowing what he was.

But that power ... Vance didn't think he'd ever felt anything like it. How could Ayan be unaware of possessing something like that? How could he hide it, either way?

Why was the mere memory of it so damn intoxicating?

Walking up behind him, Vance wound his arms around Ayan's chest, tugging him back gently into the embrace. Ayan remained taut in his arms, like an over-wound guitar string, vibrating with tension.

"You got hurt because of me," Ayan said, leaning back a little.

"No." Vance let a hand overlap Ayan's, gently unfurling it from the fist Ayan had

curled it into. "I got hurt cause a guy with a hundred pounds on me decided to smack my head into a wall, then a coffee table. Not the same thing."

Ayan snorted softly, clearly disbelieving, but Vance was content with anything that distracted him. "Are you ever not a smartass?"

Drawing him close, lips nuzzling the crook of Ayan's neck, Vance grinned. "Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes there're more important things on my mind."

Important things like who the hell was this man, what could he do, and did Vance even know him at all? But the questions could wait, he decided. Ayan wasn't an assignment and Vance was under no obligation to do anything beyond stand here and breathe in Ayan's presence, feeling Ayan's pulse against his own.

Memories of that power licked at his senses again, the dangerous unknown of it melding with the knowledge that it was probably the only reason he was alive right now. Ayan was the only reason he was alive right now. To come out unscathed against Marcus Rose—twice—only to end up beaten by two Neanderthals with a gun ... karma, maybe, but more than a little embarrassing.

Ayan protected him. Ayan, who didn't trust him, barely agreed with him on what day of the week it was, had stepped up against that threat and saved his life. He could still hear the cold intent of the men's thoughts; they wouldn't have hesitated putting a bullet in his brain. At least, he thought grimly, they knew well enough to aim high. Too many theories about the abilities of powerful Paths rested on the survival of the brain after death, and Vance supposed he should take it as a compliment they thought he was that important.

Either way, it seemed as though all his time with Marcus hadn't done a thing to damage Ayan's integrity, his kindness. Faced with the choice, Ayan put himself between Vance and an untimely end. Maybe it was just instinct, something Ayan would have done for anyone, but Vance enjoyed believing it was because Ayan cared about him, just a little bit.

And if someone as special as Ayan cared, then maybe Vance wasn't a lost cause. Maybe he wasn't wrong to believe that Marcus's temptations were nothing but hollow lures.

"Vance..." Ayan turned around in his arms, "I never wanted to hurt anyone."

"I know." Vance held on tight, closing his eyes and breathing in the scent of Ayan's hair. "I believe you. Besides," cracking a grin, he nuzzled Ayan's ear, "I'm tough, I can take it."

Could and would, if he had to.

Ayan looked up at him, and Vance searched those exotic eyes for something to pin the doubt onto, finding nothing but confusion laced with a little fear, a little wanting.

Well, he could fix one of those, at least, and maybe distract Ayan from the others.

Still holding Ayan's gaze, he backed them up toward the couch, sitting down and tugging Ayan onto his lap, knees sinking into the butter-soft cushions either side of Vance's hips. The position brought Ayan directly where Vance wanted him: vulnerable, wanting, and in no position to hide the arousal shaping and stiffening against the front of his pants. His own growing erection nudged the valley of Ayan's parted thighs, just teasing with its presence.

If he was of a mind to write this off to anything but pure desire, he supposed he could blame the adrenaline again. Blame the situation, explain it away by some deep-

seated psychological need to reaffirm their existence.

Maybe it was that. But maybe it was just something in him needing to make Ayan feel good, make him forget, make him understand how much Vance wanted him. Maybe it was just Ayan and the way he got under Vance's skin.

Hands on his shoulders, Ayan looked down at him imperiously, before shifting his hips against Vance's in a slow, undulating circle.

Two could play that game.

Winding his hands into Ayan's hair, Vance tugged him down into a kiss, thrusting up to meet Ayan's movements. Moaning a pleased sound against his lips, Ayan slid his hands down Vance's chest, fingernails raking bluntly through fabric, catching on hardening nipples and sending sparks of electricity zinging down his spine. He retaliated by nipping at Ayan's tongue, wrapping Ayan's hair around his fists to keep the other man locked in the kiss.

Losing the battle might be worth it, but Vance had no intention of handing Ayan the victory without making him work for it.

Fortunately for him, Ayan was well prepared for the challenge. Breaking the kiss, he lowered himself to kneel between Vance's legs, hands running slow and deliberate from his knees along the inside of his thighs.

For the briefest second, an echo of that edgy moment in the holding cell crossed his mind. The Ayan he'd known then—if he'd known him at all—had been resigned to this for all the wrong reasons. Even Vance felt a little ashamed of reacting to those touches, when these caresses given willingly were so sweet.

The only shiver in Ayan's hands this time was the unmistakable tremor of anticipation, as he tugged Vance's pants to his thighs. Lifting his hips to help—far be it for him to get in Ayan's way now—Vance figured he might as well write the suit off to a damn good weekend. Any excuse to buy a new one. And maybe something filmy and flowing for Ayan, too.

He had to think about clothes. Or the weather. Anything that might keep him from exploding the second Ayan touched him. He groaned in pleasure as warm fingers squeezed his cock and stroked firmly along his length.

"Ayan..." The two syllables came out husky and desperate, and it occurred to him that if this was anyone else, he'd have been trying to turn the tables about now.

As he watched Ayan sweep back a handful of hair only to have it cascade over Vance's thighs again anyway, lips so close to the heated head of his cock that Vance could feel his breath in cool puffs, it came to him again that he was in Ayan's world. Ayan's space. And that was okay, even if it had somehow slipped his control again and his efforts to make Ayan feel good seemed to have shifted to Ayan making him feel good.

Too good. When Ayan's lips nuzzled the underside of his cock, velvet soft lips leaving nothing more than whispers of friction, Vance's hips almost arched clear off the couch. It took wherewithal he barely had just to stay still.

Hair shushing against Vance's thighs, Ayan kissed his way to the base of his erection and back again, fingers raking lightly down the juncture of his legs. It wasn't firm enough, not tight enough, not hot enough, but that just drove him closer to the edge, hopelessly needy.

It was all he could do to cup Ayan's face in his hands, drawing his face up. Ayan

darted a lick across the tip of Vance's cock as he lifted his head, a bead of moisture clinging to his lower lip before he lapped it away.

This man would kill him. No doubt about it.

Meeting Ayan's gaze, his own feeling languorous and dazed, he watched the gold in Ayan's eyes darken to something molten and shimmering.

"Come here?"

Ayan tilted his head, considering the question Vance never meant to phrase as one. It hadn't seemed right to order or demand, somehow. Giving Ayan that choice felt right.

In a sinuous movement, Ayan slid back up his body, the couch shifting beneath them again as he sat astride Vance's thighs. This time the friction of Ayan's pants against bare skin, the hand he hadn't removed from Vance's shaft, made all thoughts of teasing slip his mind. Teasing wouldn't begin to assuage the fire burning through his veins now.

His hands were sluggish and lust-clumsy as he unfastened Ayan's pants, needing to feel skin on skin, heat on heat. Touch sliding beneath the loosened fabric, his fingertips grazing along the hard warmth of Ayan's arousal, he smiled to himself at the hitch in Ayan's breath, the hint of a gasp.

Ayan kissed him, pushing his hand away. Before Vance could protest, Ayan spread his fingers against Vance's cock, and nudged his own against it.

Vance's head fell back against the couch at the first touch, just trying to hold onto a scrap of composure while his body thrummed with pleasure. Ayan squeezed lightly, leaning in to brush his lips along the column of Vance's neck.

Gripping Ayan's hips, knowing that if Ayan moved now he'd be gone, Vance caught his breath. A split second later, he felt the puff of Ayan's chuckle against his throat, and the slick slide of Ayan's cock drawing back through the circlet of his fingers. Angling the slow thrust to rub the crown of his erection against the sensitive underside of Vance's cock, Ayan nipped at his jaw, teeth scoring, tongue soothing.

"Bastard." The word escaped on a breath, and only served to make Ayan laugh again, a low throaty sound that sent shock-waves to Vance's cock as surely as any touch.

"I could stop," Ayan murmured, fingers loosening, hips stilling. If Vance couldn't feel the trembling in Ayan's hands, in his thighs, he'd be royally pissed at Ayan's control compared to his own intense lack of it.

One hand slid up Ayan's chest, while the other wrapped over his fingers, interlacing and helping him stroke them both, thumb circling the head of Ayan's cock with every slide of their hands. Vance raised his head. "Don't you fucking dare."

Ayan stifled a gasp, still managing to give him a "I can't believe you did that" look even as his lips parted on a sigh. "Vance..."

Vance leaned up, groaning softly at the tighter angle between their hands, and kissed Ayan gently, lapping reverently at his lips. He didn't even know what he wanted to say, just that he needed Ayan to know he felt it. Ayan's free arm wound around Vance's shoulder, chests pressing together until Vance couldn't tell whose racing heartbeat he felt.

Breath coming in ragged gasps that tickled Vance's ear, Ayan rocked against him, sliding slicker and slicker with each stroke until every thrust sent them both skidding closer to climax, heat and restless pleasure coiling tighter with every touch. It could have gone on forever as far as Vance was concerned, even if he was beginning to forget to breathe in lieu of hungry growls of Ayan's name. Another thrust, and he tightened his fingers reflexively, lost in the haze of sensation: Ayan's cock, hard and hot and pulsing

against his own; warm cries against his ear, ruffling through his hair; Ayan's hands clinging to him like Vance was the only thing he'd ever need.

Heat spurted between their bodies, trickling over their fingers, wetting the loose edges of Vance's shirt. The white noise of orgasm misted his vision for a second, nothing existing but the two of them and that resonating heat.

Even when the pulse thundering in his head quieted, and the moisture on his fingers cooled, he couldn't find the strength nor the will to move. There wasn't anywhere else he wanted to be.

Head pillowed against Vance's shoulder, Ayan traced his fingers along the rumpled fabric of Vance's shirt, idle touches that still managed to set off little aftershocks of pleasure. Vance might have enjoyed it more if not for the thoughtful, distant frown on Ayan's face. He didn't have to wait long.

"What happens now?"

Vance shrugged, toying with the shimmering strands of Ayan's hair, content to do that for the foreseeable future. Like, say, about twenty years. Minimum.

"I don't know about you, but I could do with sleeping for a week."

"Vance—"

"I know, I know..." Combing a sweat damp ribbon of hair from Ayan's face, Vance offered a wry smile. Whether Ayan meant the situation with Marcus and his underlings, or the situation with them, he didn't know, and eventually settled for an answer that covered as many bases as possible without making himself look like a fool. "I don't know what happens now. This is all new to me. Take it as it comes, I guess."

Ayan contemplated that for so long, Vance thought he'd taken him up on the suggestions of sleep. Certainly the comfortable warmth of Ayan in his arms was doing its damndest to make Vance pleasantly weary.

"Yeah," Ayan said eventually. "Okay."

He didn't know what Ayan was agreeing to, but the mere fact of his agreement at all was enough to add to the sated, all-is-well-with-the-world ease permeating his thoughts.

"Good." He kissed Ayan's hair. Asking anything more would be tempting fate, and no doubt there'd be plenty of time for that later. "So, now how about that whole sleeping thing?"

Chapter Eight

They fell into a domestic routine alarmingly quickly. At least to Vance it was a domestic routine. Granted, all the basis he had for such a deduction came from his intermittent knowledge of feel-good television shows and from hazy memories of his childhood. He couldn't recall his mom waiting for his dad with a smile to welcome him home, and couldn't recall his dad making much of an effort with anything.

The spare room he'd introduced Ayan to on that first day went untouched. Whatever he and Ayan were doing, it was addictive. He could believe this had been his life forever.

Pietro seemed happy enough that Marcus was gone. The predictable fallout from the power vacuum his death created posed a handful of problems, but no one else of Marcus's caliber stepped up to fight. The other OPS agents could handle it, which was just as well. Vance found it hard enough to force himself out of bed in the morning.

He tried not to wonder too hard why Ayan had chosen to stay. It was too good a reason to hurry home every evening, and an even better excuse not to drop by the office. Pietro would only want a blow-by-blow account of Ayan's behavior, and Vance didn't think Pietro meant the kind of progress he'd been making.

He stopped short of "honey, I'm home", even though he knew the reaction he'd glean for his trouble. Ayan would scowl at him, hands on narrow hips, and make a delightfully snippy little sound as he looked away and said, "I'm not your wife, Vance."

Sometimes, Vance liked the belligerence, liked working through it with touches and kisses and words until Ayan was squirming beneath him, all grievances forgotten in lieu of gasping his name and seeking friction between their bodies.

Tonight he just wanted Ayan, wanted no argument as he pulled his lover into his arms.

Lover. He wasn't sure when he'd started thinking of Ayan that way, either.

He'd shrugged out of his coat in the hallway, thoughts of Ayan making him impatient. He found his target in the living room, curled up in a corner of the couch. Of all his spacious rooms, Ayan had taken to the one room Vance hadn't stamped his identity on yet. The living room was still Realtor-beige, cream and bland. He didn't dwell too long on Ayan enjoying the only room here that didn't reflect Vance in the least.

"I made a few calls today." Ayan looked up. "Just some people who wouldn't mind so much that Marcus was gone."

"Hmm." Vance dropped into the plush cocoon of cushions, already reaching for Ayan. One hand slid along Ayan's thigh, a touch that left Vance marveling at whatever filmy soft fabric made up Ayan's pants. The other brushed Ayan's hair away from his ear, allowing Vance to lean in and brush a kiss to the sensitive patch of skin beneath his lover's ear.

Ayan laughed, a low husky sound that shot straight to Vance's groin. "Someone's eager. Bad day?"

"Any day I have to be away from you is a bad day."

"Don't exaggerate." Ayan rolled his eyes, but leaned into the touch regardless.

"Much as I like it when you do."

Vance grinned, nipping Ayan's earlobe. "Oh you do, huh?"

Ayan made an attempt at a non-committal sound, smiling all the time, arms looping around Vance's shoulders. "Only a little bit."

"Only a little?" Vance's lips made their way to Ayan's, nibbling softly. "Gotta work on that."

"Vance, I'm telling you about the calls—"

"You're talking about *him*." Vance corrected. "And I don't wanna think about him anymore."

Or didn't want to imagine Ayan and Marcus. It amounted to the same thing.

Ayan pushed him away.

"So I'm acceptable as long as I don't remind you who I used to associate with?"

Ayan glared at him, a hardening in his eyes that Vance couldn't recall seeing before. "I can't change the past, Vance. And you shouldn't expect me to."

"I'm not—"

"Oh, really?"

No, not really...

Just the mention of Marcus's name made Vance shiver. Images flitted through his mind like a relentless flip book: Marcus's gaunt, gloating smile; his tempting power nudging against Vance's own like a coy lover, and all the things Vance would never know unless he broke his only rule.

Without reading Ayan, shattering a trust Ayan barely had in him in the first place, Vance's imagination ran wild and mean. Everything he didn't know about Marcus and Ayan's past together ate away at him when he least expected it. He'd wake up in a fine mood, sunshine streaming through the window and casting his gorgeous bed partner in shades of gold. But a stray thought in the shower, some insidious doubt while dressing, and the rest of the day was lost to making up baseless scenarios where Ayan and Marcus were the most sickeningly lovey-dovey couple in the history of Pathkind.

Stupid. And worse still, he was helpless to shake off the fear that Marcus still had that kind of hold over Ayan. That in his heart, Ayan would rather he was still with Marcus than stuck in this limbo with Vance.

So if there was any opportunity to denigrate Marcus in Ayan's eyes, reinforce the truth of Marcus's betrayal, the remorseless cruelty he showed to humans or lower Paths, he'd take it. Even when he knew it meant reminding Ayan of that hurt, reminding him how he'd set himself up to be betrayed.

The part of him that Marcus could easily tempt wanted nothing more than to ram that idea home until Ayan knew better than to allow himself to be hurt again. The rest of him—the part that could wake up feeling so utterly content just to see Ayan next to him—wanted to soothe away the hurt, fix up whatever Marcus broke and set Ayan free.

Even if free meant far removed from him, far removed from the life Vance led that would do nothing but remind Ayan of Marcus for the rest of their lives.

Before either of them could say anything more, Vance's cell phone rang. Stepping back from Ayan, he let his professional face slip into place as he answered Pietro's call.

"What?"

"Yeah, nice to hear from you, too." He could hear the scowl in Pietro's voice. "Not like anyone here wondered where you've been."

"Aww, you missed me."

"Hardly likely. Anyway," Pietro went on, a split second too fast, "we've got a lead

on one of Rose's last enterprises."

Vance froze. "What kind of lead?"

"We obtained some information about a missing low-level," Pietro said. "Following it up led to a place downtown that looks like it might've been one of Rose's last drug labs. Of course, if you're too busy—" Pietro intoned the word with all the importance of counting the flakes in his cereal. "—then I'm sure we can find someone else to do it."

Ayan watched him as Vance nodded, realizing that once Ayan caught onto the fact Vance really was all business now, he'd retreated back into his shell.

"I'm there."

"All yours," Pietro said, "Though I'm still sending some men with you."

"Naturally."

"No slur on your ability to get the job done, of course." Pietro smiled. Vance could hear it in the barely-there little lilt in his voice. "Not when you did such a bang up job on Marcus himself. Oh, and Vance?"

"Hmm?"

"Why not bring your playmate along?"

Vance's gaze darted to Ayan, and Ayan frowned at whatever he saw there. It was a little hard to reconcile this wary, guarded creature with the man he'd planned to spend the rest of the night kissing, touching.

Then again, he'd done such a great job of making sure Ayan slept in the spare room tonight, he couldn't blame it all on Pietro.

"Might as well test him out," Pietro went on. "No telling when we might need someone of his abilities."

"You're not recruiting him."

"He can tell me that himself," Pietro said, with that monotone finality that let Vance know in no uncertain terms that as far as he was concerned, the conversation was done. "After he sees what it is we do."

Vance's inventive string of expletives was wasted on the dead line, but it made him feel a little better.

"What's going on?" With one look, it was clear Ayan had heard enough of the one sided conversation to realize what Pietro wanted. Getting to his feet, he put the room's distance between Vance and himself.

"Nothing."

Worth a shot, at least, even if Vance could feel the grimace tugging his face taut. Ayan arched a brow, managing to look profoundly pissed off and adorably affronted all at once.

"I have to go to work," he tried instead, groping for the next most vague statement he could. "There's, ah..."

"It's Marcus, isn't it?"

There went that shiver again. Always Marcus, always the first thing on Ayan's mind. "What about me?" he wanted to ask like a tantrum-wielding kid. "What about you?"

Running a hand through his hair, he tried to distract himself by searching for the keys he'd only just deposited onto the coffee table.

"Isn't it?"

Oh, would you look at that, they were there by the remote control all that time...

"We're not sure yet." When all else fails, try for evasive. With an empath. Good one,

Vance... "Even if it is, then—"

"I'm going too," Ayan said, a decisive nod shaking out the loose tangle in his hair wound by Vance's fingers. That moment felt like years ago.

"No, you're not." Vance shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

He heard Ayan sigh. "I can take care of myself, Vance."

Looking up, Vance took in the defiant, stubborn man in front of him. There was nothing fragile in the set of Ayan's jaw, nothing delicate about the glint in his eyes that turned the molten gold of his eyes into cold-fired steel. He wasn't looking at someone in need of anyone's protection, let alone his.

Ayan could take care of himself, but where did that leave Vance? If Ayan didn't need him for anything...

But that just went to show how little he knew of Ayan, how much the man next to him remained an enigma. He might have Ayan's body, but the rest of him was a mystery.

And it wasn't enough, he realized. He wanted more than that. He wanted everything.

Turning the keys over in his hands, he focused on the rough edges, the cold metal, the chink of sound as they clacked together.

"Did you know about Marcus's drugs projects?"

Ayan frowned, as if that was the last question he'd expected, then looked away.

"I know of them," he said eventually. "I was never a part of it, if that's what you're asking."

Without snooping, Vance had no idea whether that was the truth or not, but he went on regardless.

"Maybe you weren't, but other people were. We've found one of the labs where he had his people concocting that shit, probably testing it out. Pietro's had a line on several missing low-level Paths, and humans they associated with, and it led there."

Ayan's gaze snapped back to his. "They..." He made a face, an unpleasant combination of horror and disbelief. "They were collecting people for tests?"

"Likely so, yeah." Vance shrugged, a petty surge of vindication racing through him at that expression. Sometimes, he really didn't like himself very much. "If you want to face up to the things Marcus did, then sure, knock yourself out, tag along."

He hadn't really expected the feeling to escape Ayan's attention.

"Damn it, stop treating me like a child, Vance!" Ayan snapped. "You're the one always telling me how much of a monster Marcus was, how much of a goddamned saint you are—"

"I've never said that!" Vance jangled the keys harder, smacking them from hand to hand until the edges bit into skin.

"Shouldn't you be pleased I want to see it for myself?" Ayan glared, reaching out to cover Vance's hand with his own, stopping the next round of key-jangling. "And damn it, stop that!"

Just that single touch was like touching a live wire, sensation sliding through his skin, his blood. Completing him, closing a circuit, compelling him to reach out to run his fingers down Ayan's arm. The reassurance of Ayan's presence—grudging though it may be—trickled into him like a peaceful waterfall, leaving him calm and soothed. Ayan's power, or just Ayan himself, Vance didn't care which. It felt good. Felt right.

Cupping Ayan's face in his hands, brushing back a stray lock of hair, he leaned his forehead against Ayan's and closed his eyes.

"I don't want you to get hurt. I couldn't..." He smiled wryly, kissing Ayan gently in lieu of finishing that thought. "And there's not a whole lot I wouldn't do for you, Ayan. But please, don't ask me to change my opinion of Marcus. I can't do that, even for you."

Ayan just shook his head, and Vance pretended that was enough.

"But if you really want to come with me ... Pietro wants you to come."

He felt Ayan's surprise in the soft intake of breath, the sudden thread of tension pulling Ayan stiffer in his arms.

"Why? Did you tell him about the men at the apartment?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Despite himself, Vance chuckled softly. "Because he'd want this. He'd want to see if you could be useful. But maybe I'd like you to come too. I think it'd be good for you to see what it is I do."

Ayan drew away.

"I don't need to see it, Vance," Ayan said, in an imperious tone that suggested his opinion of Vance's work ranked a step or two above serial killers and people who drowned kittens. "I know what you do."

"No, babe..." He shook his head. "You don't. And yeah, maybe I want you to see what Marcus did to people, but I want you to see what we do for them too."

I want you to see I'm not him, for better or for worse.

For a long moment he swore Ayan would refuse, take back his stubborn demands. Arms wrapped around himself, Ayan didn't step any farther away, but Vance could feel the distance growing anyway.

"Fine." Ayan nodded eventually. "Let's go."

* * * *

The lab was in a disused, utilitarian building in the warehouse and industrial district on the outskirts of the city. Gray block buildings crowded the landscape under a cobweb net of electricity poles and wires. It might not scramble their abilities the way the dampener did back at the OPS headquarters, but it might have been enough to conceal the goings on at the lab.

Whatever the building used to be, old markers of its past still littered the ground floor: dusty desks; faded papers scattered in a gingerbread trail across the floor; a stained coffee cup rolled onto its side.

Normal. Ordinary. Certainly the humans brought here wouldn't have known any different. Vance couldn't tell whether low-levels might pick up on the humming dissonance of the decidedly unordinary permeating the place.

Pietro, ever frugal, allotted four other agents. Vance knew them by name, but knew little else about them except that they'd managed to pass Pietro's strict tests of loyalty and trust. And man, were those a bitch. If they were good enough for Pietro, they were good enough for him.

No one knew why Paths diverged from humans. Older Paths looked to esoteric hippy-dippy explanations: myths and magic. Younger Paths looked for genetic answers: mutations, free-radicals and pollution.

Without going public, it was hard to get any serious scientific—or serious anything—research. Studies were conducted in clandestine labs and universities by

underground Paths whose livelihoods would be ruined if someone found out what their work really entailed. When Vance met Pietro, they'd both been voluntary test subjects. Pietro had been looking for logic, and a teenage Vance had just been looking for people like himself. When the study collapsed due to lack of funding and lack of results, Pietro took it upon himself to pick up where it left off.

Close to ten years later, answers had turned into this—OPS: two dozen agents who dealt with the unsavory aspect of Pathkind, the ones whose explanations and answers involved a superiority to humans. The abstract sounded good, and it was that marketable angle that Pietro touted to their clients. The reality was very different; the likes of Marcus would get them all outed in the end, and Vance had met very few Paths in his lifetime who thought that would be anything other than a disaster. Whether they claimed themselves myths or mutations, they all agreed on that.

Once, he couldn't have stood out on the streets without the intense amount of information that bombarded the air crashing into him like a punch-drunk fighter. Time and experience had improved his control, but only thanks to those with whom he'd surrounded himself.

He tried picturing a young Ayan, trying to deal with his newfound powers. Most Paths came into their abilities in their early teens. Vance had always been precocious. That, or far more receptive to the odd things happening around him than his peers. He'd taken a perverse satisfaction in being different, in being special, even if he was the only one who knew about it for several years.

Who would Ayan be now, if Vance found him first? If he'd come into his power under the protection of Pietro's organization and Vance's care?

Who would he be if no one found him? Worse than Marcus? Someone Vance would need to bring down for the sake of them all?

"Vance..."

He turned to see Ayan gazing off into middle distance, alert and attentive to something Vance couldn't see.

Couldn't *feel*.

"Someone's still here," Ayan said softly, as if speaking too loudly might spook somebody. "I don't think it's anyone you've come here for. They don't feel like that..."

Vance frowned. Waving the other agents on ahead of him up the stairs, he turned back to Ayan.

"One of Marcus's guinea pigs is still here?"

Ayan nodded, his eyes closing, his breath quickening. "I think so."

So this was what Pietro sought to exploit. Vance never gave much thought to how Ayan's ability could be utilized in the field. He wondered if he'd been too intent on seeing Ayan as a victim himself rather than someone on a par—*better*—than himself as an agent. Ayan certainly had a better moral code, he thought ruefully.

Still, he wasn't here to put Ayan in danger, not when he'd done everything in his power to remove him from harm's way.

"Our purpose here isn't the victims," he said, hating the way Ayan flinched at the words as though they physically hurt. "We're here for the bastards who did this."

"Your purpose," Ayan said. "Not mine."

"You aren't even equipped to—"

"Vance." Ayan looked at him, lips a taut grim line, eyes shadowed. The ice in his

voice could have frozen oceans. "You want me to be useful, don't you?"

Vance winced. "That's not fair, Ayan..."

"Please," Ayan sighed. "I can do this."

Vance hesitated. It wasn't that he doubted Ayan could, just that Vance didn't know if he wanted him to.

He'd wanted Ayan to see what he did, but it wouldn't make any difference if what Ayan saw just reinforced his belief that Marcus was the lesser evil. Maybe he was. Marcus at least never prettied up his acts with claims of heroism, or delusions that he somehow had the moral high ground.

Of course Ayan didn't see the priority as clearing out any remaining lab-coats and securing any and all data from the trials. Ayan saw someone in trouble and wanted to help them. And wasn't that the vaunted spiel Vance gave him?

No damn wonder Ayan still thought he was an asshole. Compared to Ayan, he *was*.

Ayan could never prove anything to himself when Vance never gave him the space to do it. And in the same breath, he couldn't make Ayan believe in him if he didn't have anything worthy of that faith.

Reaching into his jacket, he handed Ayan his gun, butt first. Ayan took the gun, tucking it into the waist of his pants. Vance didn't even ask if Ayan knew how to use it—he'd been around Marcus long enough, after all. Ayan reached out, fingers touching Vance's hand for a brief second, long enough for that current to flow between them again.

Linking his fingers with Ayan's, Vance squeezed once, every damned emotion he could think to feel blasting as loudly as Ayan chose to hear them.

"Be careful."

Ayan held his gaze for a moment. Vance held his breath. Above them, the footsteps of the other agents echoed hollowly through the low ceiling. Vance glanced up, glaring at them for behaving like a herd of buffalo while on such a delicate assignment.

When he looked back, Ayan disappeared into the shadows with a quicksilver flick of platinum hair, and Vance felt as though he was letting go of a raft in a hurricane.

Breathing deep, he turned for the stairs. He was here to do his job.

Chapter Nine

Without the company of Vance and the other agents, Ayan felt the warehouse sprawling out around him like the empty scar of an explosion, hollowed out and still thrumming with the damage caused.

Without them, it would be easier to locate the emotions he felt. Alone in the narrow corridors, trying to forget how low the ceiling was, and how the walls pressed in, he tried to focus on that instinct as he tried door handles, holding his breath when they actually opened. One door opened on a decimated store cupboard, where an affronted rat squeaked at him before scurrying behind a solitary ream of yellowed paper.

His blood hammered in his head as he flinched back, making him dizzy and glad there was no one here to witness it. If they'd even notice. The unnerving nothing coming from the other agents reminded him too closely of the first time he'd met Pietro; the stone cold blankness of his emotions was the psychic equivalent of running head first into a brick wall.

Vance ... Vance was different. Vance did little to hide his emotions in general. Life was lived with one's heart on one's sleeve according to Vance's aura, for better or for worse, and lately Ayan couldn't help but wonder if he was doing it on purpose.

Footsteps echoed somewhere upstairs, quick then slowing, and he wondered which set belonged to Vance.

Ayan took a breath as he continued on, blocking out the sound he knew, trying to seek out one that he didn't, one that might prove him right. Even if Pietro had convinced Vance to let him tag along, he'd be no use to anyone if he allowed himself to get distracted.

Vance wouldn't get distracted...would he?

Those last few moments had been deliberate, he knew that. Even if he hadn't been leaving already, he couldn't have stayed near Vance amid that tumult of fear, anxiety, protectiveness, and desire.

Sometimes, just being near Vance was like living in the eye of a storm, but Ayan was always reassured of his presence. He didn't even have to search for it, though shamefully he knew he would have if he had to. Vance's closeness, and the ease with which Ayan knew he could come to depend on it, had become worryingly necessary over the past couple of weeks. The power he used to wish away was the one delicious thing that linked them more than anything else.

He couldn't keep count of the number of times they'd kissed, touched, made love. Couldn't keep track of all the times, all the ways Vance had been inside him, over him, surrounding him in heat and wanting.

And it was this, this ability he'd never even asked for, the thing Marcus had sought to exploit, that made that connection deeper than anything he could bear.

Even knowing Vance was physically there, the sound of his lover moving above him through a broken layer of old wires and missing ceiling tiles, calmed him. It made his stride more purposeful, even when trash hidden by dust and scattered papers nearly tripped him. It made him shove doors open, almost believing he didn't care what was on the other side.

It couldn't be worse than the fear clinging to his soul the way cobwebs clung to his hair.

He didn't want to know what Vance felt, what he wanted, if it wasn't him, if it wasn't anything less than always. But Vance refused to let the ghost of Marcus go, and if he dwelled on it too hard he began to wonder if he wasn't just a means to an end to Vance, too. Just like Marcus.

He'd never get away from it. Neither his past, or the power that cursed and blessed him all at once.

It was familiar, at least, even if he still didn't like it. This was a power he knew belonged to him and always had, unlike the odd blip at his apartment.

Right, he thought, yanking another door open so hard a cloud of old, flaking plaster rained into his face. Almost murdering two people was a blip.

Yet he had to cling to something that proved he wasn't going crazy, wasn't becoming the one thing he detested—a Path like Marcus, with little regard to either his own humanity or anyone else's. Maybe this was Marcus's ultimate revenge, that without him as a buffer, a measuring stick by which Ayan could gauge how far down the rabbit hole he'd fallen, he was losing himself faster than he'd ever feared.

"Don't put me in that position."

Did Vance even know how much it horrified Ayan to even imagine himself as the sort of person Vance's people hunted down? And it *was* hunting, he was in no doubt about that—Vance's disregard for any survivors proved that. Ayan, alone here looking for even the potential that someone survived proved that. If he hadn't pushed to come along, no one would care if someone was alive beyond these doors. Just the possibility that, one day, he'd be the prey, the one these cold, emotionless Rottweilers chased down made nausea coil in his stomach, a chill chased down his spine.

You could run, a little voice suggested in his head. *Right now. Or while Vance is at work, you could run. No one's making you stay.*

Nothing except Vance, his annoying shrewdness, his smart ass remarks, his gently reassuring presence.

Nothing except Ayan deluding himself that it might be that way for a very long time.

He doesn't want you, that voice chided again. *He wanted Marcus, and you were the best way to get him. Now he's just stuck with you.*

Logic might very well agree, but he'd left logic behind a long time ago. Rationale might catalogue all Vance's actions, his kindnesses, and label them as evidence complicit with this being nothing more than a job.

No. Vance said the job was over. Vance could have taken what he wanted and walked away. He had nothing to gain by dragging this out.

Nothing except Ayan, if that was what Vance wanted.

Ayan shook himself out of his thoughts. It was too dangerous to be mooning over Vance when he was surrounded by strong telepaths, and besides, there was something more important he had to do.

As he was drawn to a closed door at the end of one long, utilitarian corridor, he recalled how often he'd done something similar for Marcus; a hunch there, a suspicion here, all things Marcus had acted upon without fail. Vance clearly thought his intuition was something more than that—maybe Marcus knew that too.

Marcus knew a lot he hadn't seen fit to share.

Including this place.

There was an acrid smell of something recently burned in the room beyond the door, a scent that clung to the back of his throat like sandpaper. The room might have been sterile once, given the look of the broken utensils and machines left abandoned by whoever vacated it. Someone clearly hadn't wanted to leave a single piece of it in tact for others to take.

Maybe that had been the plan for the man chained to an old radiator at the far end of the room, too.

Even knowing he wasn't alone didn't stop the startled jolt that ran through him, the same odd thrill as when an optical illusion finally became crystal clear.

They'd left him for dead. Ayan couldn't know for certain, but that was the emotion etched deep into the fear that radiated from the redheaded man. Ayan reeled at the pang of recognition in those feelings. They'd used him and thrown him away when he'd served his purpose, and for a blinding moment before he regained his bearings, Ayan didn't know whose emotion was whose.

Left me. Walked away. Useless.

There was no relief, no gladness in the redhead's emotions that someone had come to his aid. The animosity was almost a living thing, striking out if anyone got too close. A dirty rag bound around the man's mouth kept his words from doing the same, but he didn't need them.

Ayan opened his mouth to speak, hoping something reassuring and calming might come out, but he couldn't quite remember how to form words.

Instead, with every breath, the atmosphere of the room began seeping into his head. The darkness, the anger, the desperation, each braiding together to coil in a choking haze around his thoughts.

I'm not doing this, he told himself as though it might help. *I don't want this.*

Vance's presence might have distracted him, given him something else to focus on besides the dark. He could have twined his mind around Vance's, burrowed and hidden behind the vibrant power of Vance's psyche, safe and protected.

But Vance wasn't here. And Ayan had chosen—*demanding*—to go off on his own to do this, even if there was something going very wrong. It wasn't right to involve Vance in this. It was his choice, his responsibility.

Only it *wasn't*. It felt a million miles beyond his control.

"Be careful," Vance told him, but there were limits on what Ayan could do—he could keep others from getting too close, but he couldn't control how things affected him. He couldn't shake off the oppressiveness of the room as it blanketed every other thought.

Something stirred in the back of his mind as he watched the redhead—something that hardly felt like him at all.

The redhead glared at him like a wounded, prideful animal as Ayan approached, feeling tugged along by a leash he couldn't see.

"It's all right..." It didn't even sound like his voice, taste like his words. He knelt in front of the redhead. "It's over now."

All over, the voice in the back of Ayan's head said. *You can't let them find him. If they find him, they'll use him, just like they used you.*

A noise echoed out in the hall. Levering away from the redhead, Ayan drew Vance's gun. If he'd been thinking at all, he'd have wondered about the instinctive reaction, but it

was hard enough just clinging on by his fingernails to the last tatters of himself.

"Ayan?"

Vance stood in the doorway, little more than an outline and shadow in the dim light. Behind Ayan, the redhead made a sound that could have been a plea. Ayan couldn't pay attention, too mesmerized by watching his hands raise the gun to point it at Vance.

Vance stared at him. He laughed, once, a nervous disbelieving sound.

"Ayan, what are you doing?"

He couldn't speak to answer. Couldn't even shake his head. Pulse racing in his head, the room and its sounds fading into the kind of unreal haze that came before a faint, all he could do was point the gun left of Vance's shoulder before he pulled the trigger.

Even the bullet's ricochet ping didn't break the spell, or the recoil from the power that should have sent him sprawling if some equal power wasn't keeping him on his feet.

Turning with a dizzying jolt, Ayan found himself aiming the gun at the redhead instead.

Dark eyes widened as the redhead shook his head, struggling against his bonds.

"No! Ayan, what the fuck are you doing?" Vance's voice sounded very far away. Even through the pounding in his head, Ayan could feel the faintest edges of Vance's bewilderment, his fear, his anxiety.

For him. For the redhead. For anyone in this situation who might get hurt.

Vance, I'm so sorry...

"Ayan, stop." Arms wrapped around his, pulling him back against a strong chest, holding so tight Ayan felt the thumping of Vance's heartbeat against his back.

Always have my back, don't you Vance?

"Please, sweetheart." Vance's arms banded around his chest, warm and strong, and Ayan tried to focus on the possessiveness of it. Lips against the crook of Ayan's neck, Vance's voice was barely a murmur, so soft Ayan didn't know if he heard it aloud or in his head. "We can deal with it, babe. Whatever it is, we can deal with it. As long as you're okay, I don't care. Just please, give back the gun."

As if he didn't want to! The damn thing felt magnetized to his hands, fingers shaking in an effort to let go and hold on all at once.

"If they get here and see you ... Ayan, *please*."

Carefully, slowly, Vance ran his arms along the length of Ayan's, pausing at his wrists to brush a gentle touch to the pulse points, before continuing on toward the gun.

"That's it, sweetheart," Vance cajoled. If Ayan was anything but a passenger in his own head, he might have rolled his eyes at that tone, elbowed Vance in the ribs and told him he wasn't some skittish pony to be tamed.

Now, that voice was all he could latch onto.

Vance's hands overlapped his, and for the first time Ayan noticed how badly his own hands were trembling. Vance's fingers interwove with his, matched by a soft nuzzle on the back of his neck.

"Remember this?" Vance asked, fingers squeezing gently, and Ayan caught snatches of image and memory: their hands entwined; heat; pleasure.

Like the sudden awareness that a dream was just a dream snapped the sleeper awake, something about the memory broke a chink of light in the fog in Ayan's head.

Memory. His memory. *Theirs*.

He didn't know why it was working, just that it was. The more he tried to focus on

thoughts and recollections he knew were his own, the more he felt in control. With every reminder of the things he and Vance did, things untainted and uninfluenced by anyone else, the less hold the oppressive darkness had on him.

"That's it..." Vance breathed against his hair, soft and coaxing. The fingers linked with his squeezed again, and a sensory memory so vivid it could only be coming from Vance himself—their bodies locked together, friction and tightness, slick heat and the scent of sweat and sandalwood—snapped across his psyche like a whip-crack.

"Vance..."

The gun skittered off along the floor. Vance continued to hold onto him, crushingly tight, murmuring soft nonsense as though he was the one that needed to explain, to apologize.

Ayan didn't even feel like his head was his own anymore. If he knew the first thing he might be apologizing *for*, he would.

Vance let him go and bent to retrieve the gun a moment before the other agents barreled through the door.

"What happened?"

Vance holstered the gun, running a hand through his hair sheepishly. Even Ayan believed him when he chuckled ruefully.

"Ah, got spooked by these two." Vance glanced at the redhead, and Ayan felt the faintest stirrings of power. Without blinking, Vance must have tweaked the redhead's memories to suit his story. "No big deal."

"Spooked?" The agent looked skeptical, before his attention shifted to the guy chained to the old radiator, tone softening. "Who's that?"

"I have no idea," Vance said. "But yeah, I didn't expect anyone in here, and fired one off by accident. I'll write it up for Pietro, don't worry about it. Right now, we need to get this guy out of here, and get him checked out."

The agents still didn't appear convinced, but evidently protocol and Vance's winning charm swayed their attention to the redhead. The man's eyes, dark and sunken above the makeshift gag, seemed glassier than they had been, as though his head was trying to assimilate the fact he'd just lost the past ten minutes from his memory.

The guilt settled in Ayan's stomach like a cold blanket, but what good would his remorse do now?

Watching the other agents tend with unexpected care and gentleness to the redhead, Ayan could barely bring himself to look at the man standing next to him.

"Vance—"

"Not here." Vance shook his head, fingers curling against the small of Ayan's back, the grazing touch sending shivers up his spine. Then the touch moved away as Vance turned and headed out of the room without him, and Ayan felt unnaturally cold and bereft without it.

Chapter Ten

They took the elevator. Ayan kept his eyes closed, counting off every soft ping as the floors swept past. If ever he needed a sign that he'd overstepped his bounds with Vance, that was it.

Vance's anger roiled and churned the space between them, directionless and frustrated. Even if he could have shut it off, Ayan would have endured the torrent. He'd just aimed a gun at the only man he'd truly believed might have some faith in him, enough for both of them. A little mental bombardment was a small price to pay.

No damn wonder everyone always leaves you behind...

Inside the apartment, the questions he'd expected didn't come. Vance hung up his jacket, removed his holster, pulled out the gun and emptied the cartridge.

He thought Ayan would do it again. It shouldn't have hurt as much as it did. Ayan would have done the exact same thing, probably with far less discretion.

When Vance still wouldn't ask, he began talking anyway.

"I don't..." He ran his hands through his hair, trying again. "I couldn't control it. I could see me doing those things, but I was ... a passenger. You're all that grounded me."

Please, Vance. Please believe me.

His pride wouldn't let him plead out loud, but if Vance was reading anything in a ten mile radius, surely he'd feel it.

For a moment, he didn't think Vance was even listening. Unfastening his collar, rolling up his shirtsleeves as though the merest hint of constriction drove him crazy, Vance turned for the drinks cabinet.

"Was there anyone else there?"

Ayan stopped, turning around to stare at Vance. For the first time, he found himself wishing he had Vance's abilities instead of his own, the means to learn the truth without the taint of feelings. Vance was inscrutable, as shut off from Ayan's radar as Pietro or the other agents. He'd never done that before, and the distance felt like more of a rebuff than any words, any actions ever could.

As surely as watching Marcus's departing back, he could feel Vance slipping away, out of reach.

"No."

Vance poured himself a whiskey, downed it in one grimacing gulp, and poured another. "What you just described sounds like someone was trying to control you." The second sip was a little more measured. Vance swirled the liquid around the bottom of the glass, frowning at it as though he could blame the world's ills on the whiskey. "Maybe they weren't aware of what you are, maybe they didn't know you could fight back."

Cold down to his bones, Ayan stared down at the floor. He hadn't done a whole lot of fighting.

"Y'know the café?" Vance went on, not waiting for a response. "When you said I was the same, no, worse than Marcus?"

"I didn't..." Ayan began. Vance looked at him, brow raised, and denying it seemed futile. "Well, it was just cake, Vance."

Vance chuckled. "Yeah, but if her doing that went so completely against the grain

for her, her psyche would've fought me, and I'd have given up. Marcus never gave anyone a choice. Not the idiots he pumped full of drugs to make his little network. Not you."

"Vance—"

"So if you're blaming yourself, quit it. You fought it. If you hadn't, they'd have taken two of us outta there in bags, and they didn't."

"But that guy ... he saw, he knows—"

Vance wouldn't look at him. "Not anymore he doesn't."

"You fucked with his head because of me."

"And I'd do it a million times over if I had to." Vance slammed the glass onto the coffee table with a thunk, whiskey splashing over the side and onto the tabletop. "That wasn't you. You wouldn't do those things, I know you wouldn't."

Throat constricting almost too tight to speak, Ayan shook his head. "Did you find anyone else?"

"Ayan, that doesn't—"

"Did you?"

Vance said nothing. He didn't have to. The walls began creeping closer as though something behind them expanded to push him into a smaller and smaller space. If he didn't move, he'd be trapped, crushed, broken. If he moved, there was nowhere to go. Dizziness clouded his vision, rang in his ears.

It was *him*. He'd done those things of his own free will. In one second, with one action, he'd turned Vance into his enemy.

"Oh, God, Vance ... what's happening to me?"

"Ssh..." Vance drew him close, holding on tight. "It'll be okay."

No, it wouldn't. They were both becoming something worse than they were because of him. Something was turning him into the thing he hated most, and he was useless and helpless to fight it. Trusting Vance terrified him, he'd come close to killing four people in half as many weeks, and the more it went on the more he became convinced Marcus was the only thing stopping this dark viciousness in his psyche from lashing out.

That was about as far from okay as Ayan thought things could get.

He fought weakly against Vance's arms, pushing him away when all he wanted to do was curl up in that embrace and never resurface.

"I could have killed you. Doesn't that even register in your goddamned head?"

He had to leave. Leave, before he changed beyond all recognition, before he changed Vance into something he wasn't. Before he ended up harming the man he loved.

Vance smiled wryly. "I can think of worse ways to go."

"You think this is all some fucking joke? For once, Vance, just for fucking once can you take something seriously?"

"Seriously?" Vance gripped his shoulders, shaking gently to snap Ayan out of his struggling. "You think I don't take this seriously? You think I kept things from Pietro for shits, that it had nothing to do with my not wanting you to become his experiment?"

"Vance—"

"You think I did everything I did tonight, lied to the people I work with, went against what I know you approve of, for no better fucking selfish reason than never wanting anyone taking you away from me, because I don't take it seriously? I don't know how else to take it, babe. If you have any goddamn suggestions I'd like to hear them."

“I don't—”

“You think I don't know that there's nothing I can do to make you believe me?” Vance's hands slipped from Ayan's shoulders, as though they couldn't summon the will to hang on anymore. “That I could show you things like tonight from here to Kingdom-fricking-come and you'd still hate what I do? Believe me, babe, I don't need to read you to know exactly where you stand.” Vance ran both hands through his hair, once, twice, leaving finger-width furrows in thick gold. “We're not all fucking saints, babe. And maybe I was a goddamn idiot thinking I could be that for you.”

“I never asked you to be.”

“No. You never asked for anything.”

It was safer not to. Better to demand little than be refused, especially when he wanted so badly.

“I don't want anything from you,” he lied. “I don't want anything from anyone. I can look after myself.”

“Yeah,” Vance conceded, looking away. “You don't need me for anything.”

There was a hopelessness in Vance's face that made Ayan wish he could take back those words, erase that look with kisses and touches until Vance looked at him like he hung the moon again. How could Vance believe that, despite the reflexively vicious words, when everything about Ayan screamed for him, protested with every fiber as he turned for the door.

I need you for everything. I need you.

“I should just go,” he said, and Vance didn't argue with him. Ayan didn't know if it'd be easier or more tortuous if he did.

He wished he could have blamed something else for the way his feet made their way to the door, but this was all his doing. His heart refused to take responsibility, but his head—memories of Marcus walking away, of Vance refusing to look at him—kept him moving.

Better to walk away now while he had the choice. It'd only come to this eventually anyway, and while he wasn't burdened with the guilt of Vance getting seriously hurt—and hating him for it—because of Ayan's unpredictable power, he still had time.

He was doing the right thing.

“No,” Vance growled, catching him by his arm and spinning him around, pinning him to the hallway wall. “No, I'm not letting you walk away from me.”

“You have to. I'm putting you in danger and—”

Vance cut him off with a kiss, desperate and hungry, leaving Ayan in no doubt as to what Vance thought of that suggestion. Lips clinging to Ayan's, refusing to quite break the kiss, Vance's hands traced his face, gentle worshipping touches that left tingles in their wake and warmth blooming in his blood.

“I put myself in danger,” Vance whispered roughly, his breath hot against kiss-slick lips. “We could give it all up, walk away, have a little ordinary apartment and an ordinary life.”

Hands rising between their bodies, Ayan cupped Vance's face between his palms, hoping his smile wasn't as bittersweet as it felt.

“You can't. This is your life.”

Vance shook his head, before turning his face to nuzzle Ayan's palm, lips soft, a darting lick sending sparks racing up his arm. “I can't call it that without you here.”

“Vance—”

Another kiss robbed the breath from him, hard and urgent. The nips and bites were soothed by licks and nuzzles, as though Vance was punishing him and begging him at the same time.

He'd never known anything like it. Not the generous, unselfconscious broadcasting of Vance's feelings—things Ayan couldn't begin to understand let alone assimilate—and not the joyously clear need. Vance wanted him, and let him know in no uncertain terms. He'd never known with anyone else; not his family, not Marcus. With Vance, he knew.

And still he'd walk away, if Vance let go long enough.

Don't let go. Don't ever let me go...

Vance's arms crushed tight around him, Ayan's fingers tangling hard in Vance's hair. Everything that refused to take form in words, everything that wouldn't come together in scattered thoughts, flowed through the kiss like a current. Vance pinned him against the wall and Ayan arched up, legs wrapping around Vance's waist. Pleasure shot through him as his arousal pressed snugly against the muscles of Vance's stomach. Vance's erection shifted beneath him, rubbing the sensitive skin behind his balls even through the loose fabric of his pants.

Once, he promised himself. Once more, just to imprint every memory of Vance onto his psyche, and then he'd walk away. It wasn't safe for Vance that he stay.

He might have cursed his weakness if Vance hadn't chosen that moment to rock his hips against the cradle of Ayan's thighs, and pleasure zigzagged up his spine.

“Please...” Vance murmured against the side of his neck, sucking at the skin, marking him. Ayan didn't even know what Vance was pleading for anymore, just that he wanted it too.

Still keeping his legs wrapped around Vance's hips, he held on as Vance spun them from the wall, hands plaiting beneath Ayan's ass to hold him in place. Vance's elbow smacked into the door frame, and Ayan's knee caught on the door handle, but they were both beyond feeling any of it. Sensation focused Ayan's attention on the heat between their bodies, the sweep of Vance's kiss, the squeeze of their hands.

He groped blindly along the wall for the light switch when Vance paused by the bedroom door. He didn't care about the dark. He could feel his way around Vance's body with both eyes closed.

Vance tumbled back onto the bed, headboard smacking into the wall, tugging Ayan down on top of him. Knees parted astride Vance's thighs, Ayan leaned up, palms flat against Vance's chest. Vance's heartbeat raced beneath his hands and he reveled in knowing he was responsible for that; he drove this man that crazy.

He'd be a fool to leave it behind, but if he didn't...

Vance reached up to touch his cheek, brushing a lock of Ayan's hair back behind his ear.

“What's wrong?”

Ayan shook his head, leaning into the touch briefly before lowering his head, kissing Vance slow and deep just to savor the taste.

“You're too dressed, that's what's wrong.”

He doubted Vance believed him, but he was happy to let Ayan's hands stroke down his chest, unfastening buttons and peeling back fabric, revealing the golden skin and planes and shadows of muscle. Vance made a soft, pleased sound as if the raking gaze

alone was a teasing touch, and closed his eyes. Ayan smoothed his hands over Vance's chest, reveling in a sense of power that was even more intrinsic than the intuition.

Vance hissed a breath when Ayan leaned down, licking a slow rasp across one pebbling nipple. One hand curving around the nape of Ayan's neck, Vance clenched the other in the sheets.

Licks leaving a wet criss-cross pattern that meandered down to Vance's stomach, Ayan ran his hands down Vance's clothed thighs, fingernails digging in as he raked his fingertips back upward, just offering the hint of friction. Vance shifted restlessly beneath him, his erection pushing the front of his pants taut. Ayan reached down, just skimming the outline with spread fingers.

Eyes closed, lips parted, Vance bucked up demanding more. Ayan chuckled to himself, withdrawing his hand. Vance made a delightfully pissed-off sound, brown eyes cracking open to look up at him, imploring and petulant.

He leaned back to strip off his own shirt, watching Vance's eyes darken as they trailed down his chest. Vance licked his lips; Ayan smiled. Scooping his hair over one shoulder, he leaned down to nuzzle Vance's collarbone, only to feel Vance's hands in his hair, combing fingers that made his scalp tingle.

His fingers made their way to Vance's waist, making short work of unfastening his pants. Hungry for contact, he just pushed the fabric out of his way, fingers sliding beneath the material, seeking and finding the hot hardness that all but reared up against his palm.

"Oh, babe..." Eyes darkening even further, Vance gazed down at him as Ayan stroked him slowly. Touch by touch he memorized every ridge, every sensitive spot along the length of the shaft.

Driven by the urge to taste, the urge to see how far he could push Vance and test this new-found control, Ayan shuffled lower on the bed, kneeling between Vance's parted legs. Telepathy or not, Vance seemed to know a second before he did it what Ayan planned. His bitten back groan vibrated in Ayan's ears as he leaned down, taking as much of Vance's length between his lips as he could.

"Oh, shit ... Ayan..."

Vance's mutters just propelled him further, hearing in every teeth-gritted syllable just how hard Vance was clinging to his own control.

He wanted to shatter it. He wanted to see it fragment into a million pieces just so that he could pick them up and put them back together. He needed to prove to himself that he could, and that Vance wanted him that much that he'd willingly surrender to it.

Lips tightening beneath the flared ridge, he traced the tip of his tongue from the slit down to the ridge of skin beneath the head, rubbing until Vance's breaths turn to moans. The bittersweet tang of moisture smudging against his tongue spurred him to suckle harder, goading Vance to give in, give up.

Of course it wouldn't be that easy. But easy wasn't close to satisfying.

Curling in on himself, as if that somehow lessened the focus of sensation from Ayan's mouth, Vance rested one hand on his hair while the other reached for Ayan's hand, overlapping and linking. The memory of the things that snapped him from his stupor flooded Ayan's head again; if not for this touch, this man's tenderness, he couldn't begin to contemplate what might've happened.

He drew back slowly, lips nuzzling and kissing the head of Vance's cock until they

were just ghost brushes displacing the air around the tip. Vance's fingers curled beneath his jaw, tugging him up into a kiss, and Ayan whimpered softly as Vance's tongue swept across his, tasting, lingering.

Vance shrugged off his shirt, letting it pool in a rumpled tangle around his wrists. Ayan kissed him deeply again, teeth scraping Vance's lower lip as he pulled back.

"Turn around."

Vance made a low sound in his throat at the command, but did as he was told.

Fingers hooking in Vance's belt loops, Ayan pressed a kiss to the small of his back. The kisses trailed lower as he tugged Vance's pants down over the curve of his raised ass.

He ran his lips along the furrow, feeling Vance shiver beneath him. One hand squeezing, he lightly parted his lover's buttocks, Ayan nuzzled the point where soft skin met sensitive crease.

Unable to resist the temptation, he bit down lightly. Vance jerked beneath him, hips snapping back.

"Fuck..."

"In a minute." Ayan smiled, turning Vance's words back on him. "Can't I take my time with you?"

Stroking harder, Ayan turned his attention to the other cheek, nipping a little more roughly. A shudder skittered through Vance's back and he arched further into Ayan's touch like a cat.

"No, you can't."

Ayan laughed, hot breath against vulnerable skin that made Vance squirm.

"I don't think you're in any position to argue with me."

Oh, but he was in a position to tempt. From the subtle flare of his hips to the shallow indents dimpling either side of his ass, Vance was enough to drive anyone to wanting. Squeezing again, he blew gently against the crease, watching Vance's muscles tighten and relax in response.

Just the tip of his tongue flicked against the quivering hole, testing, like a snake tasting the air. Vance gasped.

"Ayan, I..."

Licking once more, Ayan let his thumbs trace either side of the opening, sliding gently over saliva-slick skin. Another lick, another stroke of his thumbs, this time pressing harder against the tight muscle until they almost dipped inside. Spreading the hole a little wider, he dabbed another lick, before lifting his head. He wanted to watch Vance's reaction.

Vance's arousal twitched, balls tightening and flushing a deep rose, cock curving up toward his stomach. Ayan wondered what had happened to all the noises his lover made, only to find Vance's lips pressed hard against his forearm, muffling his cries.

Sliding one hand up Vance's spine and into his hair, Ayan let his fingers tangle in soft gold, tugging Vance's head back.

"I want to hear you," he said, still rubbing against the puckered hole, losing slickness but gaining friction as Vance's skin dried with the heat and attention.

"People down the street don't," Vance managed, voice shaking with a husky edge of desire that sent satisfaction dancing through Ayan's head.

"Always the smartass..." He let go of Vance's hair when he was satisfied Vance would do as instructed, picking up the tube of lube from the night stand. It must have

lived there ever since Ayan agreed to stay; certainly there hadn't been much point putting it back in the drawer, not when it cost valuable time retrieving it.

Smiling at the thought, he tried to ignore the pang of loss as he knelt back. If there was a choice, he'd choose to make a million more memories like that—silly things like their need for each other, or the fact Vance knew without asking now how Ayan liked his coffee, or the way Vance smiled at him from out on his narrow balcony, banished out there to smoke, a look that said "I'd do this for eternity for you".

Kissing the small of Vance's back, he shooed the thoughts away, concentrating on the ever-tempting present.

Unfastening the tube with his teeth, he squeezed a little cool gel against Vance's crease, hissing softly at the cold against his fingers. If it felt that good for him, he could imagine the delicious shock of the contrast for Vance.

With his free hand, he awkwardly undid his own pants, freeing his aching cock from its confines. Even the thin linen of his pants felt as though it constricted like leather, but wouldn't give him any friction, wouldn't ease the need to rub and move against something till it all exploded in pleasure.

If the time spent at the facility was good for anything, it was that all the poking and prodding meant they could forgo condoms with a clear conscience. It was just as well—Ayan thought he might explode if he had to touch himself for more than a moment.

He returned his attention to Vance's ass, fingers splayed against his cheeks, thumbs rubbing the slick entrance again. This time, they slipped in with little resistance, both digits sliding inside to the first knuckle.

Ayan tilted his head, twisting his fingers back and forth to massage the gel thoroughly into the muscle.

Vance groaned, long and low.

Ayan paused, then twisted the other way, gently putting pressure on his thumbs to stretch the opening wider.

"Fuck..." Vance's cry almost made him stop, concerned, till his lover pushed back against him, driving his fingers deeper. "Please, Ayan ... please..."

"It's not—"

"It's enough." Vance shook his head. "Please..."

Ayan swallowed, nodding even though Vance couldn't see him. Withdrawing his hands, he touched Vance's hips, wordlessly asking him to move.

Vance turned around, legs parting immediately around Ayan's waist, hips tilting up.

Stroking himself once, coating himself with a cool glistening film of lube, it was all Ayan could do to cling to sanity by the skin of his fingernails as he positioned himself.

"Please..."

He wasn't even sure he'd heard the word, or just imagined it on the soft exhale of breath as Vance's entrance twitched against the head of his cock. Almost unconsciously, Vance's hand tracked down over his stomach, wrapping around his arousal, tightening just as Ayan pushed against him, the tip of his cock pressing inside.

Hands against the back of Vance's thighs, fingers leaving white indents where they dug in too hard, Ayan watched Vance stroking himself with long fingers and indolent grace. Watching his own cock slide into Vance, disappearing inch by inch into that exquisitely tight hole, Ayan could almost feel each brush of those fingers. The thought of the light ticklish touches warred with the vise-tight grip of Vance's body.

"Oh, God yes..."

His groan echoing Ayan's thoughts, Vance's head fell back against the bed, sweat-damp gold strands clinging to the sheets and to the side of his face. His free hand tightened on Ayan's arm, a rhythmic squeeze that mimicked the way it felt buried deeply inside him.

Ayan closed his eyes, too overwhelmed by his physical senses to cope with all five at once. He could still taste Vance on his lips, every cry felt like lightning snapping through his blood, and that heat ... that heat was addictive; he could spend forever wrapped up in Vance's body, knowing he was the reason for his lover's pleasure.

His fingers traced the ridge that ran up to the heavy sacs beneath Vance's cock, putting pressure there in counter-rhythm to his thrusts, angling and timing both to deliver a near-constant bombardment of touch to Vance's prostate.

Without warning, a phantom echo of the sensation hit him, knocking him off his stride. As surely as if Vance was touching him in return, Ayan's muscles tightened around nothing.

It always blew his mind. He'd never felt pleasure like it, almost too perfect to comprehend.

"Vance..."

"Hmm." Vance just smiled—*the smug bastard...!*—laughter interspersed with breathless noises that did almost as much damage as the disembodied pleasure.

Not quite disembodied. In the snatches of coherence, he could feel the familiar presence of Vance's psyche as a near-tangible thing, vining around his own, sending and receiving the pleasure in a never-ending loop.

If it never ended, he thought he might be okay with that, but neither his body nor Vance's could tolerate much more.

Vance came with a shaky cry, body trembling, muscles coiling tight. As he watched white ribbons splashing Vance's stomach, Ayan surrendered his own body to the assault. The tension dissipated from his shoulder-blades to the small of his back, trembling chills of pleasure making his last few thrusts erratic and clumsy.

In the long, mind-numbing seconds of orgasm, he didn't know where his body ended and Vance's began. Where his pleasure ended and Vance's began. And there couldn't be anything more amazing than that.

Maybe if Vance knew Ayan loved him, but that would only bring more complications. More danger.

Unable to do much besides lean on Vance, cheek against his lover's chest, he closed his eyes against the dangerous swell of feelings. If Vance was still that attuned to him, if the feedback loop wasn't dulled and distracted by the haze of climax, he'd pick up on things Vance didn't need to know and Ayan didn't want to face.

Even as Vance murmured his name, arms wrapping tight around him as their bodies rode out the afterglow and aftershocks, Ayan knew it wouldn't matter, anyway.

He'd leave here with that knowledge safely tucked away in his heart, and Vance would never have to know the difference.

Chapter Eleven

As bonelessly exhausted as he felt, Vance should have been able to sleep. Lying in Ayan's arms, just listening to the soft inhale exhale rhythm of Ayan's breathing, his mind wouldn't give him a second to rest.

Something was wrong. Ayan might have given him the best sex of his life—and that was saying something—and broken his mind in a dozen different ways, but even the gauzy mist of that couldn't quite distract him from the weird sense of unease.

He'd asked Ayan if everything was all right. He wouldn't ask again. The ball was in Ayan's court; he could either tell Vance the truth, or he could realize that despite that, Vance wouldn't break his promise and read him.

It seemed like a win-win at the time.

Ayan wasn't getting much rest either. Every now and then, Vance felt the warm puffed breath of a sigh against his chest.

The incident at the warehouse was to blame, he supposed. Hell, he still wasn't sure he'd gotten over it himself. It might not have been the wisest thing in the world, letting a guy who'd pointed a gun at his head fuck him through the mattress just hours later, but ... he stared up at the ceiling and let out a breath. He wanted a cigarette, but he didn't want to move and disturb Ayan.

Ayan. His Ayan. Whoever it was that held that gun, whoever was behind Ayan's eyes, it sure as hell wasn't the man Vance held now.

Was it?

"You asleep, babe?" he asked, trying to put the right inflection in the question to cover up the knowledge that Ayan was indeed as wide awake as he was.

"No." Ayan murmured, shaking his head. "Why?"

"Ah, just didn't wanna disturb you if I got up." Vance shrugged, smiling as Ayan snuggled closer. "You blew my mind so hard, the moment sort of calls for a cigarette."

"You'd leave me alone just for a cigarette?" Ayan's arms tightened around him, and he leaned back to look up at Vance through his lashes. "And here I thought you might want to go another round."

Vance blinked. Of all the things he'd expected, that ranked just above Ayan suggesting they share the cigarette. Oh, it was pleasantly surprising, no doubt, but instead of feeling as elated as he should, it just added another little grain or two to his unease.

"But," Ayan exaggerated a sigh at the lack of response, "if you don't think you can manage..."

"Oh, I can manage all right." Vance grinned, resting his forehead against Ayan's, nuzzling his lover's lips once, twice, before settling in for a kiss. "I can manage as long as you want me to."

"So industrious..." Ayan smiled, lips parting beneath his, tongue darting out to lap at his mouth. His hands wound into Vance's hair, pulling him deeper into the kiss, teeth nipping at his lower lip, almost sharp enough to hurt were it not for the dabbed licks of his tongue soothing away the aggressiveness.

Vance melted into the kiss, body curving against Ayan's. Sometimes, he thought Ayan couldn't decide what he wanted to be; passive or aggressive, wanting or fighting.

Either way, Vance got what he wanted out of it.

Ayan's fingers tightened, teeth snapping down more painfully, angry rather than arousing.

Okay, maybe Vance didn't want *that*.

"Ayan—"

"Not enjoying yourself, Vance?" A voice asked, neither his or Ayan's. "Oh, I forgot, you do enjoy surrounding yourself with ineffectual pawns, don't you?"

Pulling back, wincing at Ayan's fingers snagging his hair, Vance looked around the room, convinced someone else had to be there watching.

Ayan yanked him back, bringing Vance's face back in line with his. It wasn't Ayan glinting maliciously in those golden eyes. It wasn't Ayan's smile curving those soft lips, and it certainly wasn't Ayan's voice coming from his mouth.

"Hello, Vance," Marcus Rose said. "Did you miss me?"

* * * *

He awoke in a darkened room. It wasn't his, he noted, a ridiculous thing to notice but all his psyche could latch onto. The couch was dark, leather, and decidedly not Vance's beige number. He'd have to ask the owner where he got it, it'd look great in his living room...

The owner.

A small, dark part of Vance's mind knew exactly who the owner was, but in the face of such an overwhelming impossibility, it turned and fled to the dirtiest recesses of denial.

"Nice of you to join me. Oh, wait." A voice chuckled. "I think I've used that line on you before..."

His vision expanded out into a heavy oak-paneled room, resembling an old-fashioned study. The edges were still hazy and weaving themselves together, but several bookcases were filling themselves with aged leather-bound tomes.

There must have been a bar somewhere too. The man sitting in the high-back chair across from him was swirling a glass of golden whiskey.

Vance needed a stiff drink or three.

"I'm glad you like what I've done with the place." Marcus watched him, black eyes shaded in the shadows. "I've had plenty of time to work on it, after all."

Vance swallowed, swinging his legs off the couch. There was no sign of Ayan, not even the faintest resonance of his psyche.

"He's not here," Marcus said pleasantly.

"You shouldn't be here." Vance muttered. "You're—"

"Dead?" Marcus smiled. "That's a subjective thing for the likes of us. The mind and the body aren't necessarily the same thing."

"I don't—"

"And it doesn't matter." Marcus set the glass down on a large desk, where a glowing lamp cast mosaics of light and shadow through the whiskey and crystal. "You should be asking why, Vance."

"Why what?"

"Why you're here. Why I haven't seen fit to return the favor yet." Marcus stood, making his way toward Vance. The same lamp-glow caught on the angles of his face, one

side warm, the other in cool profile. "Why I can do this at all."

"Because you're a sick, self-satisfied bastard?" Vance suggested, questioning the wisdom of arguing with a figment of his imagination. "Because I'm probably dreaming. Yeah, probably fell off the bed, knocked my head on the night stand, and I'm having a nice psychotic episode right now."

Marcus laughed.

"Do both have to be mutually exclusive, Vance?" One hand reached out, touching the side of his face. Vance didn't know what he'd expected, but the soft, undemanding, familiar touch wasn't it.

Half-heartedly, he pushed the hand away.

"Assuming I'm not crazy, and psychotic episodes aside, what do you want?"

"Only what you want, Vance." Marcus leaned down, one hand winding into Vance's hair. It was naggingly familiar again, though he didn't want to dig too deep in wondering why it felt like Ayan's last rough tugs on his hair.

"I wanted you dead," he said. "Goes to show I never get what I want."

"Did you, Vance?" Marcus smiled, lips moving close to his cheek. "Or did you want the game?"

"No." Vance shook his head. "All I want is for you to leave Ayan the hell alone."

Marcus looked surprised. "Who said anything about my being here for Ayan?"

"Bullshit. You've been using him from the start."

"Using?" Marcus tilted his head, as though the mere suggestion of it offended him. "I prefer to think of it as training. But then I'm nothing if not an adaptable man—" a grin flashed white in the dim light, as Marcus gestured to the room "—so when something better came along, well ... a wise man knows when to change tack."

"Something better?"

"Hmm..." Marcus leaned down, his cheek against Vance's. "I did warn you about that penchant I had for blondes, Vance."

Vance went cold, as if every grain of blood drained from him. He didn't have the nerve to contemplate the possibility that all this trouble wasn't following Ayan—it followed him, and had ever since his mistake with Bobby.

"What the hell do you want with *me*?"

"Oh, many things, Vance." Marcus smiled, a curved whisper against the side of his face. "But trust me, I want you for your brains as well as your body. Or, well, your mind at any rate."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Vance said, focusing on a bookshelf beyond Marcus's shoulder in an attempt to snap himself out of this trance. In an attempt to ignore the touches that felt a little too real for comfort. "Frankly I don't care. Someone'll wake me up any second and I won't have to listen to you at all."

"There you go again," Marcus said. "Always with the smart answers. He doesn't like you doing that, you know. He likes honesty."

"Then why the hell was he with you?"

"I never lied to him. Just..." Marcus smiled. "chose not to share information that would make no difference to him anyway. Though I never thought he'd bring me such a welcome gift."

"Gift?"

"Imagine my surprise," Marcus purred, "when the man who'd made the mistake of

catching my attention in the first place, made the second error of getting himself involved with my dearest Ayan. Careless, Vance. Careless."

"He's not your anything."

"Oh, but that's where you're wrong." Marcus smiled. "He certainly is, and continues to be. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

Forgetting for a moment that he was in someone else's mindspace, Vance launched himself at Marcus, planning on grabbing him by the shirtfront and slamming him against the nearest hard surface. In this space, however, he found himself pitching toward the floor as Marcus simply thought himself out of the way.

Picking himself up, Vance glared over his shoulder.

"What have you done to him?"

"Clearly, far more than I ever imagined." Marcus chuckled down at him, standing over Vance and kneeling down. "But then you've done a great deal more, haven't you? You're spoiling the boy..."

Vance swallowed hard, as Marcus ran the fingertips of one hand down his chest. He couldn't get up, Marcus was in his way, and if he scuttled back ... well, he preferred having Marcus's hand where it was. Marcus smiled at him as if he knew precisely Vance's dilemma.

"I should have sought you out before," Marcus said. "The two of you do make such a pretty picture together."

"You fucking bastard...!" Vance reared up. Marcus pushed him back down with the slightest touch, reminding him again that he wasn't in an environment he controlled.

"You're sick. Or I am, for imagining all this."

"Oh, relax Vance. I don't want your precious Ayan anymore."

"You sent your people to kill him!"

"Collect him," Marcus corrected. "You made that far more problematic than it needed to be. The transition would have been a lot easier if you'd both done as you were told." The smile turned malicious. If that was possible. "But it goes to show how much he likes you, that he used my power to save you. How sweet."

Marcus said "sweet" the way most people said "ebola" or "back-owed taxes".

"So you don't want Ayan, what do you want?"

"You." Marcus smiled.

"No fucking way."

"Do you honestly think it ends with me, Vance? Do you honestly think I was working alone?"

"What do you mean?"

"You and your friend are so insular," Marcus said. "There's a big world out there, Vance. A big society. What difference does it make, killing me? Someone will only come to take my place. I could give you names and addresses if you like..."

"Doesn't matter. We'll deal with them too."

Marcus chuckled. "How naïve."

"And throwing my lot in with you is gonna end up in sunshine and rainbows? I don't think so."

"Can you imagine what it'll be like, Vance?" Marcus went on, as if he was describing a romantic getaway, professing his undying love. Well, the undying part seemed to be right. "The two of us, able to coexist like this? Nothing could come close, we would be

invincible. Anything we wanted would be ours, nothing would stand in our way."

The flare of temptation that bloomed through Vance was about as appropriate and welcome as a hard-on in church. It was Marcus's doing, he assured himself with little conviction. Marcus controlled this space, surely he controlled Vance's reactions too. Because Vance couldn't be tempted by him. It wasn't possible.

He didn't really have much faith in that sentiment till an image of Ayan drifted through his head. All his, nothing to do with Marcus's illusions. For Ayan, he'd turn down whatever Marcus offered a million times over.

"No. Where ever you think I fit in your fucked-up plans, then—"

"You don't have to do anything, Vance." Marcus's voice was a low warm vibration against his ear. "You can just sit back and let everything I've worked for come to fruition."

Whatever that was, Vance had no idea, but he was pretty sure it wasn't good. He thought of Ayan again, and the image around him fritzed, like a television channel losing the signal in a storm.

"No."

Marcus laughed, a grated edge to it letting Vance know he'd noticed that little interference too. "Too late. But it's all right, you won't have to adjust too much. If you just close your eyes..." Lips brushed against his. "It'll all feel the same. It'll feel better."

"No." He shook his head. "I don't want this."

Marcus smiled, lips against Vance's, leaving nothing but the contact and the word reverberating through his mind like a pinball machine.

"Liar."

No.

Liar! No!

He couldn't distinguish touch, couldn't distinguish voices. Someone was speaking his name, but Vance had no idea who it belonged to anymore.

Liar.

"Vance. *Vance!*"

Ayan's hands shook him roughly, but at least Vance could tell it was him. No-one else's slender fingers would have trembled as they grasped his arms.

Marcus's touch—real or imagined—remained vivid in his mind, and he pulled away from Ayan's hands abruptly, while he could still differentiate between the two.

"Vance, what's wrong?"

Reaching for his cell on the night stand, Vance's fingers were shaking badly enough that it took two tries just to hit the speed dial to Pietro's number.

"Vance?" A flare of hurt crept into Ayan's confusion and concern. If the circumstances had been different, Vance might have enjoyed it.

Pietro answered on the second ring.

"What?"

Vance let out a breath, leaning back against the bed, and looked at Ayan as though he was staring at a stranger.

Maybe he was.

"We have a problem."

Chapter Twelve

Pietro's agents were waiting for them at the bottom of the elevator when they got back to the OPS facility. Taking one look at them, and thankfully ignoring their disheveled state, Pietro nodded toward Ayan.

"We need to put him back in containment."

Vance had expected as much. Pietro wouldn't allow Ayan to roam unchecked. While a part of him still wished there had been another option, this was all he knew to do.

He still remembered the look on Ayan's face as they dressed, and Vance explained—if that was even the word for the jumbled series of statements that fell from his lips—what had happened.

"Marcus?"

"I know, it's impossible..."

Ayan's eyes narrowed at the doubt trailing off in Vance's words, turning away from him to finish getting dressed.

"You don't seem to think it's that impossible."

"I don't know what to think." Vance had stomped into the bathroom, feeling uncomfortable in his clothes, in his skin, and splashed cold water on his face. "What do you remember?"

Silence. When he stuck his head around the bathroom door, Ayan had been staring at the bed, hands stilled on his shirt, as if frozen in the moment.

"I ... I don't know. I don't remember much of anything."

That same blank stare fixed on him now as Ayan turned to look at him, as if he expected—hoped—Vance might challenge Pietro's demand.

"Vance..." Ayan's hand tightened around his.

"Go."

"But—"

"Listen." He cupped Ayan's face between his hands, pushing aside the unease. This was Ayan. Proudful, beautiful, strong, finicky Ayan. There would be another explanation for what had happened. There had to be. "It's just for now. I need to go and see what we can do about what happened, and you need to be somewhere safe."

Ayan pushed away his hands, eyes blazing. "I'm not a danger, and I'm not a child. If you expect me to go along with this quietly like an orderly little pet, then—"

"Damn it, Ayan, not now. Be pissed at me later, but—"

"It's always later with you." Ayan glared at him. "If your words meant anything, you'd tell me the truth."

"The truth?" Vance ran a hand through his hair, ignoring the fact his fingers trembled. "Right now, I have no fucking idea what the truth is." He nodded at the other agents. "Put him back in his old room. I'll come down later."

"Vance!" Ayan hissed his name angrily, struggling not to get away from the agents but to get back at him. "It's not my fault, I wouldn't..."

I know, he wanted to say, but it would be a lie.

Trying to shut out the sound of Ayan's voice, he strode toward Pietro's office.

Pietro was leaning against the desk, waiting for him. Vance walked in and slammed

the door behind him.

"What's going on?"

"Marcus. Marcus is ... doing something."

Pietro looked at him impassively. "Marcus is dead."

"You think?" Vance scowled. "I pulled the damn trigger. I know what he should be. But he's..."

"What?"

"Still there. In my head, somehow..."

He told Pietro, as dispassionately as he could, about the moment he and Marcus had connected in Bobby's head. He told Pietro about the room, the creation Marcus had mapped out around them.

He tried to keep any mention of how damn seductive it had been to a minimum. Pietro would be pissed off enough that Vance saw fit to keep this from him, let alone the fact he'd gotten off on it.

"But he didn't know who you were then."

"Maybe not, but he knew my psyche. He knew it was me with Ayan. He knew..."

Vance's words trailed off as he frowned, recalling the unease around Marcus on that wet street. That smile. The kiss. The brazen recklessness. "He *knew*."

"Knew what?"

"That I'd kill him. He wasn't afraid of it. He didn't seem to give a shit either way." He looked at Pietro. "What if he's still in my head somehow? What if he jumped, or..."

"You're too powerful." Pietro said, nothing dramatic in the matter of fact tone. "Two Paths as powerful as the two of you couldn't coexist. One couldn't overwhelm the other without it becoming permanent."

"Maybe it is becoming permanent. It was the same room." Vance persisted. "The same space. The same psyche. He was fucking around with me."

Pietro let out a breath, gazing at the ceiling. Outwardly, the posture looked contemplative, but Vance knew better. This was Pietro's "I'm going to have to explain the obvious to you again, aren't I?" pose.

"There's a far more likely answer, you know."

"What?"

"Ayan was Marcus's Conduit."

Vance shook his head, pacing the office. "We don't know that. The Conduit is only a theory—"

"Not anymore."

Vance searched for an answer to that, eventually settling on running a hand through his hair and dropping into one of Pietro's easy chairs. Like everything else about Pietro, the tough leather wing chair was about as easy as neurosurgery.

"Besides, Ayan is an empath."

Pietro didn't seem surprised by that information. "It might be easier to mold an empath into becoming a receptive Conduit." He watched Vance for a moment. "And there's more you aren't telling me."

It was neither a question nor an accusation. In the same tone as he'd have told Pietro he totally forgot to get the milk when he picked up the groceries, Vance told him about the surges in Ayan's powers, that evening and back at his apartment.

"I can see why you didn't see fit to tell me," Pietro said, not sounding happy at the

admission. "But you're not a novice. You should have accepted the warning signs for yourself, even if you didn't want me involved."

Vance nodded. There wasn't much he could say to that.

"I thought it would keep him safe."

"And now we're here." Pietro looked at him. "Good job."

"Fuck you."

Pietro sighed, the closest thing Vance might get to an apology. "Let's get back to trying to fix this, shall we?"

"Okay so if—if—your Conduit crap is true, then what? Marcus kept him close because he'd trained Ayan to be some sort of backup?"

Pietro sat down at his desk, chin resting on steepled fingers.

"That's the theory. That if two psyches synch so closely that one becomes receptive to hosting the other, a transfer can be made in an emergency. Makes sense," he said. "If you're as particular as Marcus is—"

"Was."

Pietro shot him a look at the interruption. "Either way, creating a receptacle for your psyche would be the first thing I'd do if I was in as much trouble as Marcus."

"Make it sound easy why don't you?" Vance deadpanned. "If it was possible, we'd all be doing it."

"True," Pietro nodded, "but not without a suitable host, not without considerable power. And not if you didn't believe it was possible in the first place."

"C'mon, Pietro. What am I now, some paragon of practicality? It's not possible. I'd have done it by now if it was. So would you. Conduits are fairy tales Paths tell their kids. It's a fantasy."

"Well you'd better hope it's more than that." Pietro raised a brow. "Because it's all you can do for your Ayan now."

Vance stilled.

"What do you mean?"

"In theory—" Pietro's smile was grim and wry "—the only way to counter the effect of an old Conduit is to create a new one. A stronger one."

Vance looked up, chuckled softly in disbelief. "You mean me."

"I doubt he'd enjoy my efforts," Pietro said. "But if it means being rid of Marcus Rose once and for all..."

There was a softness to the unspoken threat that made Vance shiver. If Pietro was going easy on him, it had to be bad.

"And if I can't? If he won't let me?"

Pietro shrugged. "Then he'll be dealt with before Marcus has the chance to act, or to attach himself to anyone else."

"It could just be a ruse, you know."

"Do you honestly think that? Do you think that's just a display of Ayan's new found powers when two weeks ago he couldn't make a paper clip change its mind?" Pietro watched him for a moment. "Do you think he's the same?"

Ayan's words in the car right after Marcus's death came back to him. "*Borrowing, huh?*" The smile he thought he'd seen, an expression that didn't belong on Ayan's face.

Vance shook his head, words soft.

"No."

Chapter Thirteen

Stepping into Ayan's room, Vance closed the door and leaned back against it. Taking a breath, he folded his arms across his chest.

Ayan watched him, trying to look nonplussed, but the tremors of anxiety manifested in the way his hands clenched in the sheets beneath him, wringing creases into the fabric.

"What happened to me?"

"I don't know." Vance shook his head, eyes narrowing. "How did he do it?"

Ayan looked up. "Do what?"

"Trained you," Vance bit out the words. "Made you receptive. Whatever the hell it took."

"Vance, I don't—"

"He's in your head. You're hosting him. And unless you tell me how he did it so that we can undo it, then Pietro is going to order you and the threat you pose neutralized."

Ayan stared at him.

"That's impossible. That's crazy, he's not..."

Vance sighed, running his hands through his hair as he levered away from the door. He sat down next to Ayan, reaching for his hands to keep him from clenching the sheets into dust. Ayan didn't seem to mind that he was holding on a little too tight, fingers wrapping around slender wrists.

"Was that you, Ayan?"

Ayan stared at him, eyes wide, and shook his head.

"Then help me out here." He searched Ayan's gaze, looking for something in those golden eyes he should have known so well that would prove Pietro wrong. Voice soft, he went on. "Tell me something..."

"What?"

"Was it always you, Marcus?" Vance tightened his hands around Ayan's. "Was it you from the start?"

For a moment, the pretense of affront filled those golden eyes, a last ditch attempt to fool him. Marcus's psyche had been swirling around the room ever since Vance stepped into it, jagged and alien, reminding him of dark leather and sharp metal.

"Wouldn't you like to know." Marcus's smile made Ayan's face unnaturally cruel. "I sat back for a while, watching the two of you. So sweet. It was quite ... sickening, actually. But how will you ever know, now? It might very well have been me you were fucking all the time, not him."

Vance barked a laugh at the edge in Marcus's tone. "Are you jealous of him or me, Marcus?"

"Why would I be jealous of your insipid little affair? All it did was give me the chance to gain a foothold. You made it too easy for me, Vance."

Vance glared.

"All I needed to do was give him a hint of doubt about you and your intentions, Vance, and he'd open the door for me just like that." A vicious little laugh. "Of course, he opened other things for you."

"You bastard—"

Ayan—Marcus—moved too fast for Vance to counter. He might have felt Ayan's intentions in the split second before he carried them out, but Marcus was too powerful and blocked him with ease.

Or at least, Vance allowed it. He still didn't know if he'd done enough. He replayed the end of his conversation with Pietro in his mind, looking for any loopholes, any failures he might have missed.

"What are you planning?" Pietro had asked as Vance left the office.

"I don't know yet." Vance answered honestly. "But I want you to turn down the dampeners."

Pietro frowned, arms folding across his chest, bound and determined to say no. "It'll take the best part of an hour. And I don't want someone like Marcus to have free reign in here."

Pietro never reduced the dampener frequency strength in the facility, even if it meant his agents—himself and Vance included—were weakened. Pietro considered it a small price to pay in exchange for keeping their enemies powered down too.

"He'll try it again," Vance said, ideas half forming as he spoke. "When he realizes he can't come to the forefront, he's going to run."

"There's nowhere here for him to go. We'll take him down before he gets far."

"So he'll harm Ayan. He'll harm anyone who gets in his way, however he can. If the dampener is down, then he can feel in control. He might make mistakes. At least he might tell me why he did it."

Pietro remained silent for a moment. "I'll reduce it, and only in the cell block."

"But—"

"Bring him out." Pietro turned to look at him, blue eyes intent. "Do you know what'll happen to him if he comes to the forefront, then runs out into a damped environment?"

Vance paused. The half-assed plan took on a rather more stable foundation. "Stasis."

Would Marcus know that? While no-one had ever come close enough before to bring him back here, the idea of dampeners was commonplace among Paths. It had begun with the advent of greater technology—cell phones, wireless connections, digital transmissions, electronic signals criss-crossing with human thoughts until it blocked a Path's ability to broadcast their own psyche. Once they'd learned what caused it, it was a simple method to use to their own advantage. The OPS facility was probably one of the best examples of it, but it was by no means the only one. Vance had dealt with Path dens where a makeshift dampener had been set up with laptops and boosted television antennae.

Once the dampener came into effect, Marcus couldn't change his circumstances, couldn't retreat back into Ayan's psyche and hide.

But Ayan could. An empath wouldn't feel the effects of a dampener. There wasn't a lot that could dampen a passive, absorbing power like Ayan's. It would have driven Vance crazy. That Ayan controlled it as well as he did...

Had. 'Til Marcus.

"If you lose him there," Pietro went on, "then I can't make guarantees about Ayan's safety."

Vance nodded. "If I lose him there, I'm out of ideas."

Had he told Pietro that he only had one idea, he doubted he'd have gained his boss's blessing. He wouldn't have gained his friend's blessing either—for all his severity, Pietro

only ever watched Vance's back, for better or worse, and this time Vance needed him to be right.

If Ayan was truly a Conduit and not an ordinary Linker like Bobby, his psyche still existed somewhere, deeply suppressed by Marcus but still functioning.

It was surprisingly easy to believe that with the familiar weight of Ayan's body pressing his down onto the cot. It took an effort just to school his hands not to reach out and wrap around the graceful form he knew so well.

Ayan straddled his lap, Marcus's smile on his lips as he lowered his face to Vance's.

"What made you realize it was me?"

Vance could have thought up some impressive answer about the differences between Ayan and Marcus's psyches, but he wanted Marcus to know the truth. He wanted Marcus to realize he didn't know Ayan at all.

"He wouldn't have said 'what happened to me'. He'd have snapped at me and said something like 'So it's later now, is it?'."

Marcus tugged Ayan's face into a frown, and for a moment Vance thought he saw something like comprehension in those gold eyes. Not Marcus's, but Ayan's.

"So you face me like this when it concerns your beloved, but not before? So courageous of you, Vance."

"Shut up..."

"Though I can see why you'd do it." Marcus's voice purred from Ayan's lips, brushing against Vance's cheek. "It's quite a thrill, isn't it? Controlling someone so directly like this, pulling their strings..."

Vance sucked in a breath. "Like you've never done it before."

"Well," Ayan tilted his head. "Never between lovers, no. It adds a certain spice to it, doesn't it?"

"We're not..." Vance tried to bite out the words, but they died on his lips.

"Oh, that's harsh. He's still in here with me, you know." Marcus's voice said, casual as though they were talking about the weather. "He'd be quite upset to know you won't face up to the fact you love him. It's so romantic."

Vance grit his teeth. "Did you?"

"Perhaps." It was Marcus's smile again, casting a shadowed profile to Ayan's features. "Tell me, Vance, how did it feel, fucking him? Did he scream for you the way he did for me?"

"Bastard—" A moan chased off the word as Marcus rocked Ayan's body against his, grinding his hips into Vance's. "Stop..."

"Do you want him to stop, Vance?" Marcus asked softly in Ayan's voice. Only the malicious glint in golden eyes betrayed the truth. "Do you want me to stop? You don't want to touch me?" Ayan's hands slid down his chest. "Kiss me?" Ayan's lips brushed against Vance's jaw. "Fuck me?" Ayan's hips ground hard against Vance's, arousals pressing in near painful friction.

"Him." Vance breathed. "Not you. Ayan, please, fight him."

Marcus's laugh vibrated against the side of Vance's neck. "Oh, please. Do you think he can stop me? How do you think he feels, hearing you pleading for him so pitifully, when he can do nothing about it?"

At Vance's gasp, Marcus chuckled.

"Oh, yes, he wants to help you. He desperately wishes he could fight me, that he

could save you. Isn't that so sweet? Should I tell him not to bother, Vance?" Lips nuzzled beneath his ear, soft and teasing. "Should I tell him you don't really want saving? Should I tell him about our little conversations, and the way you still lie to yourself about refusing what I'm offering?"

Marcus shifted Ayan's hand, tucking it between their bodies, fingers dipping between Vance's thighs. Something deep inside him yearned to give in to the touch, to close his eyes and pretend it was Ayan's caress. He could just pretend none of this was happening.

But he'd asked Pietro to reduce the dampener for his own reasons, too.

By now, he knew intimately the shape of Ayan's psyche. So many moments and hours he'd spent learning its contours, its softness and sharpness, the way it slotted against his own like a missing piece of a puzzle. He couldn't feel the first trace of it any longer, but he could still allow his own to reach out, searching for its missing fragment.

"Ayan." Vance forced his thoughts past Marcus's suffocating influence, letting his psyche sprawl outwards in a messy wave that hadn't been that uncontrolled since Vance first learned that he was different from all the other kids.

This wasn't about control.

"I think I told you. No one's home," Marcus said, fingers gripping tight.

Vance grit his teeth, hating the pain, hating more the fact he was almost reacting to it. "That's not your choice to make."

The first lick of Ayan's mind against his own was so faint, Vance barely felt it. It was just a flicker, a distant fragile candle in a storm, but it was enough. While Ayan was still in there, Vance would never allow anyone to hurt him. Not Marcus, not Pietro, not himself.

He'd promised that once. It still stood, whether Ayan knew it or not.

"Ayan, goddammit...!" Vance reached out for the flicker again, thoughts an inelegant jumble.

"What are you—?" Marcus's hands loosened around him, just enough distraction that Vance could shove him off. Vance fell off the side of the cot, while Marcus crashed back against the headboard, bracing the fall against the night stand, sending its sparse contents scattering.

Sorry, Ayan. I'll make it up to you later...

He scuttled back across the floor while Marcus picked up Ayan's body, standing up from the cot, and Vance felt his awareness greying out at the edges.

Marcus was trying to draw him into the room again. Vance saw shadows and lamplight on polished oak, smelled whiskey and leather and books. The illusion almost seamed together, only to shatter into pieces again, leaving Vance's ears ringing and his head spinning as the dampeners did their job, capping off the worst of Marcus's abilities.

"That," Marcus said softly, "was a mistake."

Vance managed an ill-advised grin, even as Marcus strode toward him and a sharp kick connected with his stomach.

In the doubled-over pain-laced daze, he felt Marcus comb his thoughts for the code to the key-lock. Vance hadn't buried the information that deeply. Past the thunder of his pulse in his head, he heard the door slide open. Forcing himself to his feet, he watched Marcus moving out into the hallway beyond, making a direct line for the guard.

"Hey, you can't—!"

Vance winced at the jarring punch that sent the guard sprawling, his skull cracking

on the edge of the desk. He couldn't stop to check, knowing that once Marcus was past the door, he'd be unable to use his power to alter his situation. Vance only hoped Pietro had listened to him when Vance suggested he have back-up for the damage Marcus might do.

Right now, he was taking Ayan and running, and without any connection to Ayan, Vance would never know where they'd gone unless Marcus chose to tell him.

Vance didn't want to give him the chance.

He stumbled down the hallway, using the walls for support until he could block off the pain. It was never easy, and never smart; Pietro had lost several agents in the past doing just that, blocking off the pain until they pushed past their limits.

Vance was already way past his limit. Marcus had seen to that when he used Ayan.

"Vance." Pietro and a handful of armed agents came down the left branching hallway toward him. Marcus was heading along the right branching corridor, toward the only exit in the building.

Toward the elevator. If nothing else had proved to Vance that he wasn't dealing with his lover any longer, that would have done it.

A light-bulb went off in his head.

That was how he'd make it work.

"He's hurt." Vance jerked a thumb back toward the cell block guard.

"So are you."

"I'm fine."

"Vance—" Pietro's tone remained modulated, if a little strained. That was Pietro; never let a fugitive running amok in his facility wring the slightest emotion out of him.

"Lock us in the elevator." Vance turned to him as he moved past. "Once I'm in there with him, lock it off. It doesn't move, those doors don't open, no one comes near it until I say so. And even then, read me to make sure it's not him."

Pietro met his gaze, and nodded.

"All right." A ghost of a smile threatened to tug at his lips. "You know what'll happen if you screw up, don't you?"

Vance smiled grimly. "I'm counting on it."

Marcus jabbed at the elevator buttons, quickly losing patience. Vance couldn't waste any more time. Breaking into a run, he followed Marcus's route down the hallway. Marcus raised Ayan's head, but didn't have time to escape. Vance's momentum carried them both back into the elevator, crashing into a breathless jarred impact against the opposite wall. It felt like centuries later when the doors swished shut behind them.

"Doors locked," the calm voice said. "Security, code red."

"What are you doing?" Marcus's voice growled at him as Ayan curled beneath Vance, kicking out and pushing him away.

"You want to take us both down, Marcus?" Vance shot out an arm, pinning Marcus back against the wall. Ayan would forgive him later. Hopefully. As long as Vance was correct in his belief that Marcus wouldn't risk Ayan's physical body yet, not till he could transfer successfully into someone else. "Be my guest. Just know that you aren't getting out of here, either way."

Marcus laughed. "So what's my incentive to keep either of you alive, Vance?"

"None." He shrugged. "You won't get the chance."

Marcus glared at him, mistrust blazing in Ayan's golden eyes, as Vance let go and

took a step back.

"Fool," Marcus murmured, moments before Vance felt the first blow connect with the side of his face, snapping his head back. "You could have had the world, you realize that don't you? I could have given you everything and you throw it back in my face for a piece of trash like this."

Fight him, Ayan. I know you can. I know this isn't you.

Ayan's delicate fist slammed into the other side of his jaw. Marcus in his own body would have hurt more, Vance thought. Marcus with Ayan's wiry, slender body at his disposal was fast, fluid and agile, but didn't have the same power and bulk behind the punches.

He felt his jaw protest at the smile; Ayan would be so mad at him if Vance suggested such a thing. In his defense, the strikes hurt.

Vance needed them to.

He didn't hold back as he broadcast the pain, the hurt, the irrational fear that this wouldn't be enough, the blind faith that it would be.

Feel it, Ayan. Feel all of it.

Marcus's gaze narrowed Ayan's eyes.

"What are you doing?"

Marcus threw another punch, but Vance ducked to the side, unwilling to take three successive hits. Hopefully Ayan would forgive him for a few bruised knuckles too, Vance winced to himself, hearing bone connect hard with the metal elevator wall.

"I'm a patient guy, Ayan." Vance grit his teeth. "But I'm kinda running out of time here."

Marcus laughed. "You're not still trying that are you?"

"Only 'til he figures a way to fight you." He shook his head. "Only to buy him some time."

The elevator around them flickered like a holographic image, something darker taking its place. Marcus didn't have the power to fill the room with as much detail this time; the bookcases were missing, the boundaries instead made up of shadows that moved like shimmering heat haze. The desk remained, as did the leather couch. Marcus bent him back across the former, hands going for Vance's throat.

If Marcus was shifting his energies from interior design to defeating Vance, it was working.

"He doesn't have time," Marcus said. "And neither do you."

Ayan, please...

Marcus didn't seem to care that he wasn't fighting. Unless he was right, unless Ayan lived up to the belief Vance had in him, then fighting wouldn't do much good anyway. He focused instead on breathing past Marcus's illusions, his thought spilling out like the warm golden glow of the lamplight that cast their shadows across the large potted fern on the desk.

Vance blinked, Marcus's image above him distorting for a split second.

There hadn't *been* a potted fern. Marcus didn't do houseplants.

But he knew someone who did.

He couldn't turn his head, but Vance knew what he'd see if he could; he could feel it fitting into place like a jigsaw.

"Vance," Ayan said, casual tone belying the ridiculously precarious situation.

"About time."

"I thought you liked it later, rather than sooner."

Vance smiled at the faintly indignant tone. "With you, I'll take it any way I can get it."

Marcus's hands loosened around Vance's throat, but this time Vance didn't bother pushing him away.

It wasn't easy trying to reconcile seeing Ayan in the semi-dark of Marcus's mindspace. Considering all Vance had done and felt here, it was a little like being found in a mistress's bed. Ayan didn't seem to mind that part. Standing in the middle of the room, dressed in something as loose and flowing as his hair and glowing as though something lit him from within, Ayan looked at him.

"Are you okay?"

"Perfect." Vance managed a smile. "Now, anyway."

And he was. This was the real Ayan, not the puppet locked with him in the elevator. Vance could feel it in every breath, and it filled him with all the warmth and power of a summer storm.

"He'd be quite upset to know you won't face up to the fact you love him."

It hadn't registered when Marcus said it. But watching Ayan now, feeling his presence, knowing that everything he'd risked came good because of the connection they shared, *that* registered with the force of an atom bomb.

Ayan was everything to him. Ever since that first meeting, when Ayan dared knock Vance Gregory off his stride and insinuated himself under his skin, this was a man he couldn't shake. This was a man he wanted forever.

He was right to believe.

"I always knew you'd come," Ayan said.

Vance smiled, closing his eyes. "How?"

He couldn't see Ayan shrug, but heard it in the words anyway. "Because you promised."

"Ayan, what are you doing?" Marcus growled. "You can't fight me. You never could."

With every last scrap of energy he could summon, Vance let his mind brush against Ayan's, thoughts dancing and swirling together. Vance couldn't fight this battle in Ayan's place, but he could lend him everything his power afforded, give Ayan all he needed to overwhelm Marcus by himself.

"No," Ayan said. "But we can."

The golden glow became stronger, cracking and fragmenting Marcus's tenuous hold on the illusion, and Vance felt the quiet renewed strength of Ayan's psyche enveloping all of them. It drowned out the shadows, burned away the darkness, and if he reached out and touched it, Vance thought it would sweep him away, electric and beautiful.

He hesitated, just for a heartbeat, just because he could. If there had ever been a question, if there had ever been a doubt, Ayan had already answered it.

We can.

When he opened every facet of his thoughts to Ayan, Vance expected a feeling that was a little like drowning, a little like losing a part of himself in exchange for a shared power.

The cool, silent tranquility that swept over him instead took his breath away. Ayan's

every thought vined around his, like satin ribbons binding and tying him up in their knots. Memories snaked around his own, things he couldn't possibly remember or know: young Ayan sheltered by a happy family; Ayan, older, and something shattering that happiness into pieces, angry and violent. Guilt, then acceptance. Loneliness, then Marcus, and wounds that healed and opened and then healed all over again.

Everything that was Ayan flowed into him, and Vance knew the same occurred in return; he could feel Ayan reacting to it. He'd have felt mortified if he had the chance, but there was nowhere to hide and no reason to. Ayan felt everything about him, and yet the threads of his mind still wrapped tight around Vance's.

Possessive. Protective.

Loved.

"You'll regret this, Ayan." Marcus snarled. Vance couldn't even feel the mental hands around his throat anymore, the illusion breaking down around him. "You've both made the wrong choice."

"No," Ayan said. "I made the right one."

The image around Vance froze for a moment, before rebuilding itself, more detailed than he'd ever seen it. He could feel the grain of the desk beneath him. The rich scent of bourbon and leather filled his head, and the books on the shelves gleamed, gilt-edged binding shimmering in the lamplight. There was a door now. A real damned door. Beyond it, Vance knew, as certain as he knew his own name, his own face in the mirror, that there were more rooms, halls and paths and corridors and galleries. The space felt as if it sprawled on forever, strong and real.

It wasn't even something he could do alone.

He'd banked on Ayan taking in his abilities. He'd never accounted for Ayan taking on Marcus's powers too.

Yeah. Empaths. Really passive...

"This is ours," Ayan spoke softly. "You don't belong here."

Marcus's voice barely sounded recognizable as such, just a whisper of thought and fury. "You are my Conduit!"

"No," Ayan said. "I'm his. And he's mine."

It was only giving word to what Vance already felt, but the impact hit Marcus as though it was physical. Vance felt the rush of displaced thought as Marcus's psyche pushed away from his.

"That's not possible!" Marcus hissed, the sound dissipating into nothing, like ice vaporizing to steam in the face of the serene onslaught of Ayan's determination. With nothing to latch onto in Ayan's thoughts, Marcus couldn't even hold his own image together.

The bourbon turned to water. *"I'm not much of a drinker."*

The leather couch turned to cream velvet.

Vance hadn't thought any of this was possible either. Watching Ayan chasing the last vestiges of Marcus's psyche out of his own made him rethink a lot of things.

He closed his eyes as the sounds Marcus made faded into the gentle white noise of silence, a place where just his pulse and his breathing echoed like gunshots.

"Vance." Just a breath of his name, but it was Ayan's voice and that was almost enough.

Almost.

"Ayan?" Vance opened his eyes. Shadows danced around the edges of his vision, but the sterile walls of the elevator came back into clear focus. He was sitting against the doors, the cool metal at his back.

"Yes." Ayan knelt at his side, gaze flickering across Vance's face. "But you won't believe it until you see for yourself, will you?"

Vance shook his head, stubborn even now. "I won't read you."

"Yes," Ayan leaned closer, words a warm breath across Vance's lips, "you will."

"No, I—"

As Ayan's lips touched his, those ribbons unfurled inside his head again, delicate as lace, unbreakable as steel.

So this was a true Conduit, not controlling but shared. Ayan's psyche was neither giving nor taking, merely coexisting with Vance's, another intricate part of a whole.

He breathed Ayan's name, just to hear Ayan hiss, "Yes," again, his hands running across Vance's shoulders, down his arms, as though drinking him in by touch. He curled a hand against the nape of Ayan's neck, feeling a pleased shiver, and drew Ayan into a deep, desperate kiss.

His body was moving of its own accord, needing contact with the fervor of a starving man at a feast, but every nuance of every movement imprinted itself on his mind with perfect clarity. He felt the texture of Ayan's hair, the softness of his lips, the warmth of his skin.

The joining of psyches demanded a consummation, and Vance yearned for reassurance that this was Ayan—his Ayan—and that this was finally over.

"But how will you ever know, now? It might very well have been me you were fucking all the time, not him."

How *would* he ever know, with Marcus gone? The Conduit did little to assure him that it was Ayan who wanted him, Ayan who'd *always* wanted him. If Marcus could make Ayan point a gun at him, he could certainly make Ayan fake some emotions.

"Did he hurt you?" Ayan spoke against his ear, cheek nuzzling Vance's. His knee pressed between Vance's legs, palms flat against his chest, frantic touches as urgent as anything Vance felt.

"No," he said, because it was true. Still, he wondered how things had been turned on its head so greatly that it was Ayan worried about his safety.

Always, something gentle in his mind murmured, warm as a summer breeze. *Always*.

Conduit, he thought. One half of one entity now.

Always.

And in that moment, Vance couldn't tell for sure to whom or what he'd just bonded his entire psyche.

He'd pushed away from Ayan before he realized it, panic taking over and drowning out instinct. Standing, he almost lurched back against the wall, disorientated for one dizzy second, the elevator swaying around him.

"Vance..." Ayan followed him, sincere concern darkening his eyes, and Vance had to look away.

"I can't, I..." He shook his head. "It's too much. I don't know..."

Ayan's stare burned into him like a brand while Vance continued hitting the button panel, until eventually a corner of it bent outward and he could yank the front panel free. His hands were shaking as he pressed one against the scanner, trembling so badly the

needle cut a scratch rather than a pinprick. It was still enough for the ID reader.

"Security override," the mechanical voice said. "ID verified."

Pietro verified it too; Vance felt the cool brush of static in his head. Maybe Pietro recognized enough of his psyche to let him leave, but Vance still didn't feel like his mind was quite his own.

The elevator lurched, heading upwards. Ayan stumbled back against one wall, eyes closing.

"Vance, please."

"I'm sorry." His voice was as flat as the ID machine. "Bear with it. It'll be done soon."

"I don't care about the damn elevator," Ayan breathed, the uneasily pale tinge to his skin belying the words. "Don't just walk away."

Even as Ayan spoke, the soft ribbons around Vance's mind tightened, longing and claiming. The elevator doors slid open with a quiet swish, and for a second he just stared at the empty doorway, torn between walking through it or turning back.

He wanted to turn back, so badly, and that was precisely why he had to leave.

"Vance—"

"Tell Pietro what happened. Tell him Marcus is gone."

He hit the button to close the doors as he stepped out of the elevator, and Ayan didn't try to stop him.

It was just as well.

The binds around his psyche only tightened further, as the elevator descended back down to the main facility, and Vance walked out of the lobby into the cold evening rain.

Chapter Fourteen

In all his half-baked theories about the nature of the Conduit, Pietro had never informed Vance how painful it would be when the connection wasn't complete. He'd never mentioned that separation from the other half of the Duality—"Conduit was a theory, Duality ... you're just making that up, Pietro." "It's more convenient that way, Vance."—was a little like separation from a body part; unnatural and unpleasant.

Vance thought it was easier to blame it on Pietro. Thinking about Ayan was too fraught with danger.

He spent two days following the final encounter with Marcus holed up in his apartment, studiously avoiding the living room, and trying not to think at all. When that didn't work, he spent another two days thinking far too much.

Without the least provocation or warning, the binds Ayan tied around his psyche, around his heart, around his soul, would tighten and remind Vance of their presence. They would remind him how unhappy they were with him, how unhappy they were with the lack of their counterpart.

In the silence of his too-empty apartment, Marcus's words still echoed even though their owner was gone for the final time.

"So courageous of you, Vance."

He wasn't courageous at all. He'd always thought of Ayan's power as passive, but nothing was as passive and powerless as Vance himself. Ayan had saved himself. Ayan might well have saved himself anyway, even if Vance hadn't been involved.

You gave him a reason to, something hummed along the binds. He couldn't tell if it was real or wishful thinking, but either way it didn't comfort him much. Ayan would have found his own reasons. He had been strong long before he met Vance.

But who exactly did he meet? Who exactly did he fall in love with?

The flashes of memories he'd inherited from his new Conduit came back in dreams, the fragments coming together to form longer movie-clip remembrances. Ayan's happy, loving family, far more affectionate and adoring than Vance's had ever been. Their deaths at the hands of some desperate Paths. Vance didn't know whether the suspicions at the coincidences of their violent deaths and Marcus's sudden appearance in Ayan's life were his or Ayan's. Memories of Ayan's relationship with Marcus woke Vance up from sleep, breathing hard, panic clutching at his chest, and "mine" thundering in his head.

His. He'd known the difference between Marcus's jagged, cruel psyche and Ayan's warm, soothing one from the beginning. Marcus wanted to derail him, wanted to destroy whatever tentative bond Ayan and Vance had formed.

Now that bond wasn't so tentative, and Marcus was still winning. Vance was here, and Ayan was somewhere else.

Sometimes he wondered if Ayan dreamed of him, too, and what he'd make of Vance's past. Where Vance saw love and affection, Ayan would see indifference and Vance being a brat in retaliation. Where Vance saw loss, Ayan would see laziness, Vance drifting from one thing to the next until he met Pietro. And where Vance saw cruelty and emotional blackmail, Ayan would see a friendship strained by forced casual emotion.

Where Vance saw strength, Ayan would see weakness. Why would he choose to tie

himself to someone like that? Why would he choose to tie himself to someone with such flimsy, wavering faith in both of them?

He stayed away from the OPS facility. He knew Ayan would demand their connection be broken, disappointed and disillusioned by what he'd seen.

Yet he couldn't stay away forever. The strands of his psyche that had forged with Ayan's wouldn't allow him to do so, they always forced him to the place they wanted to be. Twice he'd driven out to buy milk and a coffee, and he'd been on the road toward the facility without realizing it.

Finally, he allowed his mind to have its own way.

In retrospect, he supposed, standing in the cell block and staring at Ayan's empty room, he probably shouldn't have trusted such a foolish whim.

The replacement guard whimpered in the face of his annoyance—and in the face of being pinned against the wall and threatened with his own coffee cup—and told him to ask Mr. Gratteri.

Vance stormed to Pietro's office, fuming all the way, tempering fear with anger.

"Where is he?" He pushed open Pietro's door. "Where's Ayan?"

Pietro rearranged the papers on his desk calmly without looking up. "I let him go."

"Go where? Why?"

"Vance..." Pietro sighed, hands coming to rest on a sheaf of documents as though the action could prevent him reaching across the desk and beating Vance senseless.

"What reason do I have to keep him? He's no threat anymore. He's not a prisoner. I won't waste a room or resources on him unnecessarily."

What was unnecessary about keeping Ayan safe, Vance thought. Just because he'd failed to do it didn't mean everyone would.

"Where did he go?" he asked, before answering himself. "He has nowhere to go. He wouldn't go back to his apartment, would he? Not now that I know where it is."

"That I couldn't tell you. You're his Conduit aren't you, shouldn't you know?"

Vance glared at the amusement in Pietro's tone. Fantastic. Now the world's biggest ice-block was laughing at him.

"Yeah well, it doesn't come with as many perks as your theories would have a guy believe."

Pietro looked at him, a half-smile touching his lips. "Really?"

The anger deflated, leaving Vance sighing as he perched on the edge of Pietro's chair.

"No..."

"Well then."

"That's it?" Vance raised his head, miserable. "That's the extent of your help, `well then`?"

"What would you like me to say?" Pietro shrugged. "Go home, Vance."

"But—"

Pietro let out an exasperated sigh, the papers in his hands scrunching a little under the pressure. "Go. Home."

Vance stared, before understanding dawned. "You sent him there."

"I gave him directions." Pietro corrected coolly. "And I gave him the bill for fixing the elevator panel. I said he'd better give it to you or I'd be deducting it from his paycheck."

"His *what*?"

"It's better to have the ones we can't predict under our control," Pietro said. "Besides, I figure you'll be coming in late again in future. Maybe if I have you both working for me, I might get one good agent out of the deal."

Vance barely heard the end of that sentence, already out of the door, leaving it swaying on its hinges.

The newly repaired elevator couldn't move fast enough for him. His car wouldn't start fast enough, and the traffic didn't get out of the way fast enough. His apartment was too far, and the ties in his psyche were thrumming like vibrating guitar strings the closer he got.

Out of unintentional habit, he skipped the elevators in favor of the stairs; he was on the twenty-fifth floor before it occurred to him that he had the choice.

Ayan was sitting outside his apartment door. When Vance reached the hallway, out of breath and disheveled, Ayan stood in one fluid movement, brushing imaginary dirt from a long pale coat.

"Pietro sent me," Ayan began, holding out a crisp white envelope. "He said this was yours and—"

The letter fluttered to the floor as Vance yanked Ayan close by the lapels of his coat, kissing him as though the act itself was breathing and he'd been holding his breath for years.

"*Yes!*" his mind sang, "*This is where we're meant to be*". He couldn't hurt anymore, not over this, not when Ayan was a part of him, a missing half he never knew he'd been living without.

Ayan made a muffled sound of protest, putting just enough distance between them so that he could speak, his hands grasping Vance's sleeves.

"Vance, if you're not sure, then..."

The second kiss was softer, sweeter, and Vance didn't quite understand how the whole Conduit thing worked, but figured he was thinking something right when Ayan smiled against his lips, satisfied at something he'd picked up from Vance's thoughts.

Sometimes though, Vance needed words.

"I love you," he said, words a murmur against Ayan's mouth. "That's about as sure as it gets for me."

Pietro's elevator bill remained forgotten on the hallway floor as Vance drew Ayan close with one hand, fumbling with the door with the other. As if Pietro really believed he would have paid it anyway.

They got as far as the living room couch. It was the first time Vance had set foot in there since leaving Ayan behind. The room might not have had any of him stamped on it, but it screamed to him of Ayan, calm and serene.

Ayan wasn't all that calm now, he noted with a smile, licking at the column of his lover's throat while Ayan squirmed beneath him, tangled up in his coat. Ayan must have caught the tail-end of that thought, growling softly as he wrenched his hands free from the sleeves.

"You left me in that place!" Ayan scowled at him indignantly. "I thought you were coming back for me. I thought..."

"Thought what?"

Ayan refused to meet his gaze until Vance tilted his lover's face up to his.

"That you didn't want to deal with me now Marcus was gone."

It sounded so much like something Vance should have said, he couldn't help laughing softly. Closing his eyes, he let the Conduit tell him about Ayan's fear that Vance's interest was Marcus, and that without him Ayan himself held little appeal.

"You're so wrong, you have no idea."

"Vance—"

"Feel it." He shook his head, allowing himself for the first time to wallow in the insecurity over Ayan and Marcus's relationship, letting Ayan see that whatever irrational anxieties he'd had, it was never Marcus he wanted. "It's always been about you. I never wanted to think that bastard still had some hold over you."

He felt Ayan's frown like a crackle of static on a phone line.

"He *did*—"

"No, he didn't. Not the way I thought. What he did was never your choice. It was never you."

"Why didn't you just tell me all of that?"

Brushing a handful of Ayan's hair back from his face, Vance kissed him gently. "I'm sorry. I'm a chickenshit idiot. But then you know that, you've been in my head."

"No you're not." Ayan shook his head, eyes fluttering closed. "Well, maybe the idiot part..."

Vance chuckled, nipping at Ayan's earlobe. "Smartass."

"I get it from you."

Hands tangling in Vance's hair, Ayan knelt above him, controlling the angle of the kiss. For a moment, Vance froze, remembering what had happened last time they'd been in this place, in this position.

Ayan's kiss turned soothing. "He's gone."

"I know."

Nuzzling his nose against Vance's, Ayan stared at him intently.

"Do you trust me, Vance?"

There was an honesty and vulnerability in the question that deserved the same in kind in answer. He gazed up at Ayan, letting the rolling emotions filling Ayan's head wash over him, knowing without a doubt the only thoughts snaking around Ayan's were his own.

"Yes."

Ayan smiled. Sliding back from Vance's lap, he stood, extending a hand.

"Good."

Vance didn't hesitate, reaching for Ayan's hand the way his mind instinctively reached out for Ayan's, knowing the feeling of contact was sweeter than the feeling of separation. Ayan's touch was near-electric as his fingers closed around Vance, tugging him up off the couch, down the hallway toward the bedroom.

Maybe Ayan had memories of the living room too. Maybe Vance needed to redecorate...

They took their time undressing, re-learning each other's bodies with the benefit of the strange foresight provided by the bond. Vance knew before touching how Ayan would react, knew before every lick, every kiss, how they would drive Ayan crazy. Ayan, in return, knew without asking the way to hold him, the pressure and friction that made lights flash behind Vance's eyes, the angles that made his senses go a little fuzzy at the

edges with want.

He had no idea how he'd managed without this before. Ayan was buried so deeply inside his head, every thought sent pleasure skimming through his body. Ayan wouldn't even have to touch him at all, he thought, although if Ayan ever tried that theory out, Vance would have to argue the point. Ayan's psyche was heady, but the warm gentle touch of his hands was addictive, just like the sweet, wet taste of his kisses.

"Trust me..." Ayan murmured again, lips against Vance's shoulder, hair tickling along his spine as he stretched out on the bed, forearms braced against the pillows. Vance didn't know which word Ayan wanted him to believe the most, contenting himself with believing both.

"Wouldn't be here if I didn't."

Ayan smiled, kissing the nape of his neck, fingers trailing down to the small of Vance's back. "I love you too."

Vance closed his eyes, smiling against his arms.

"Wouldn't be here if I didn't think that, too."

Ayan chuckled, fingers moving away for a moment before returning cold and slick, making Vance jump. "Now who's the smartass?"

"Now who's the tease?" Vance muttered, shifting his hips in an attempt to make Ayan hurry.

Ayan took his time, enjoying every moment of Vance's grousing and yearning. Long fingers spread and stretched him slowly until Vance's hips were rocking rhythmically against the bed. Eventually, Ayan took pity on him.

He'd never felt someone else's pleasure so acutely before. His own cock twitched in sympathy with Ayan's, aware of everything his lover felt as he slid into him, slow and measured and careful.

He knelt back a little as Ayan's hands wrapped around him, stroking knowingly. Braced on his hands and knees, Vance pushed back against the too-slow, too-patient thrusts, broadcasting the sensations as loud as he dared. He focused on the sweet stretch and friction of Ayan inside him, his tip rubbing against the place in Vance that made him see stars. He focused on the way Ayan's fingers felt around his erection, cool bands around feverish flesh. He focused on fuelling both their desires with the physical contact, the emotional connection flaring wildly out of control at the shared—truly shared—pleasure.

When climax came, Vance had no idea whose he felt more strongly, his own feeding into Ayan's and feeding right back into him, in a cycle of endless aftershocks. It wrung the orgasm from him until he felt boneless and detached.

More than that, he felt Ayan's pleasure, felt his happiness, his need and his love. There could never be any doubts. There was nothing cold or jagged about Ayan's psyche; it was a warm protective bower, standing guard around him like sanctuary. Like home.

Ayan was a reassuring weight at his back, as Vance drifted at the fringes of sleep.

"Thank you," he heard Ayan say softly. Half turning, Vance stretched a hand back, touching his lover's cheek.

"What for?"

"Knowing me. Knowing who I am and who I'm not."

Vance smiled, as Ayan brushed his lips against his fingers.

"Like I said," he chuckled, wrapping himself up in the loving glow of Ayan's mind.

Their mind. Their soul. "You have a lot to learn about Paths in general, and me in particular."

A teasing lick snaked its way through his mind, all-encompassing, all-knowing, ever-loving.

"No," Ayan smiled. "I don't."

The End

About the Author:

Cat Kane is a BA honors graduate in Creative Writing, currently pursuing her Masters in the same field, and has been writing for as long as she can remember. Cat hails from Wales, the land of song, saints and sheep. She adores felines of all varieties, peanut butter cups and cookie dough ice-cream, bleeds espresso coffee, thinks several Gods got together to send her the best friend anyone could hope for, and would marry her computer if it was legal. Actually even if it *wasn't* legal. Visit Cat at <http://www.morethanfiction.com>

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