

A Sip...



A Torquere Press Short

Mark of the Beast
By Jourdan Lane

The door slammed, and I jumped, my heart going to my throat. The quiet calm of the room was replaced with Nikolas' fury. I saved the file I'd been working on for Peter, my Master's lover and my friend, and closed the laptop before pushing it away.

"What's wrong?" I sat up in bed. "You look like you want to rip someone in half."

"Fucking Lucien," Nikolas fumed.

I rolled my eyes. Nikolas and Lucien butting heads had become a run of the mill thing in recent months. A lot of it had to do with the relationship between Peter and Nikolas, which in turn strained the relationship between Peter and Lucien. Peter was doing the best he could to handle the situation, but Nikolas and Lucien were too stubborn to even attempt sitting down together to work through it all.

As Lucien's servant and Nikolas' lover, I'd spent a whole lot of the last couple of months listening to both of them bitch about each other. There were times I considered locking them both in a room in the dungeon and not letting them out until they fought, fucked, and made up.

"What is it now, honey?"

"Don't fucking *honey* me."

"Oh, hush." I slid off the bed and walked to him, taking his leather jacket from his hands before he could throw it across the room. "Talk to me."

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "I'd rather not."

"Come here." His hands went to his hips and he growled before glaring at the ceiling. I leaned against the wall before him and gave him a few minutes to fume and rave in his head. But too long would do more harm than good. "Nikolas? Come. Here."

I watched the battle war in his expression. Emotional vulnerability had never been something Nikolas dealt with very well, and whether he wanted to admit it or not, he was a wreck.

His body still tense, he took the two steps it required to bring us together. He looked down at me and shook his head, then pressed his forehead to mine. A sigh passed through his lips and the heat of his breath across my cheek made me shudder. I grasped his hips and pulled him close.

"Talk to me, baby."

"Not right now." He groaned and sank to his knees, fingers finding the zipper at the top of my robe. "Please not now."

Soft kisses trailed down my belly. They were followed by increasingly sharp nips that left bruises in their wake. I rested my hands on the top of his head and guided him downward. He pressed his face into my groin and inhaled deeply. He glanced up, gazed locked with mine as he took me into his mouth.

There was nothing sexier to me than seeing him on his knees, my dick in his mouth. It was an intimacy he didn't share with anyone other than me. I guess that made it special in a weird sort of way. I was only half-hard though, worry about his fight with Lucien still heavy on my mind.

He pulled off and nipped at my foreskin with his teeth, drawing a sharp hiss from me. "Nikolas..."

My hiss was followed by a groan as he slid the tip of his tongue just inside the foreskin and around the head of my cock. He licked and teased and nipped until my legs were shaking from the pure pleasure of it.

"Suck me, baby." I grasped my prick with one hand and rubbed the tip over his lips. "Show me you love me."

He growled and took me in deep and I pushed him down even farther, until his nose was pressed against my pubic bone. The wet heat of his mouth and the short exhales of breath against my skin were dizzying, but when he started sucking and moving my brain shut down and my body took over.

I watched him take me in over and over again, fascinated by the sight of his lips wrapped tightly around me. I remembered the last time he sucked me off, the way his lips were red and swollen, the dazed, pleased look in his eyes, and the way he kept licking his lips as if he hadn't gotten enough.

And I wanted to see it all again.

As if reading my mind, Nikolas sat back on his heels and gave me room. I grasped his head and thrust into him hard and fast, the sharpness of his teeth scraping every now and then only adding to the pleasure.

He shifted his position and reached between my legs to grab my tail. I tried to move away, but he growled and tightened his hand. His strokes were sure and fast, hitting just the right spot each and every time. Oh, he was such a cheater.

Every muscle in my body went tense, fire pooling in the pit of my belly. Nikolas thumb brushed the base of my tail and I lost all control. The orgasm ripped through me so fast it felt as if it would turn me inside out.

Nikolas didn't just pull off; he gently sucked and licked until he captured every drop offered and then placed a kiss just above my prick. My legs shook and it took too much effort to keep standing. I slid down the wall and into his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck and stealing a kiss.

I attempted to slide a hand between us to reciprocate, but he grabbed it and pulled it back up, holding it against his chest. "Just sit with me a while."

"That's not something I hear every day."

He started to say something, but seemed to decide against it. Instead, he pulled me into a hug and lowered us to the floor. "I'm not a sex-crazed fiend."

I looked up at him, my eyes going wide in a false display of shock. "Who are you and what have you done with my Nikolas?"

"Shut up, kitty."

"And just what does that say about you, huh?" I laughed and snuggled closer. "You okay?"

"I will be," he said. "Once I strap a leash and a collar on Lucien and take him for a walk at dawn."

"You don't mean that."

"I wonder if he'd just go boom and disintegrate into a pile of ashes..."

"You'd miss him if he did and you know it."

He made a sound as if he didn't agree, and then finally sighed. "Probably."

"So what are you two fighting about this time?"

"Same shit we always fight about," he said through a growl. "You, Peter, piddly-assed shit that doesn't matter one way or another. What else is fucking new?"

"You knew this wasn't going to be easy." I turned so I could look at him. "You understand all of this more than Lucien does. A little patience wouldn't hurt."

"Patience? Fuck patience. I want him to wrap his head around this and stop being such a pain in my ass."

"Wrap his head around it? Jesus, Nikolas. You're his lover's mate. How on earth do you think that makes him feel?"

"I'm not either."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay. So you're his lover's wolf's mate. Do you honestly think that makes it easier for him to swallow?"

He sat up, shaking his head. "I should have known you'd take his side."

"I'm not taking any side, Nikolas."

"You goddamned sure are. You want me to talk about what's going on, to tell you what we're fighting about. When I do, you give me the reasons *why* he acts the way he does and then proceed to tell me why I *shouldn't* be mad about it."

"I never said you shouldn't be upset about it. All I'm trying to do is be fair and equal to everyone involved. I'm just as tired of the fighting as you are!"

"Fuck fair and equal. You're not his—"

"But I am," I said, cutting him off. "I'm Lucien's servant. I, more than anyone, know his reasons for doing and acting the way he does. And you, I know why you do the things you do. And Peter, too. Shall I sit idly by and let you all keep making the same stupid assumptions?"

"You just want to be able to keep fucking us all. As long as you have one of us to run to, you'll not have lost anything."

I just stared at him for a few moments. "Are you jealous of me and my relationships with Lucien and Peter?"

"No."

"Is that the answer you're going to stick with? You swore to me there would never be secrets between us."

"Biggest mistake I ever made." Nikolas stood and glared down at me. "Why wouldn't I be jealous? It's *Lucien's* mark you wear; *Lucien* that you drop everything for at a moment's notice."

"Whose fault is it that I only wear Lucien's mark?" Two could play at this game. Goddamn him for trying to change the rules now. "Were you lying to me when you said you understood my position?"

"I'd have said anything just to fuck you."

"Liar." Nikolas roared in anger and that human glare turned to wolf. Once he let his wolf out to deal with his anger, I knew we were done talking for the night. "I think we're done."

"The fuck we are."

He started toward me, but I got to my feet and held up my hand.

"I'm not playing this game with you tonight and I will not be your whipping boy. You can spend the day in the dungeon."

"You are not kicking me out of our bedroom!"

"I believe I just did."

I turned and walked back to the bed, and when the door slammed a few seconds later it rattled the paintings on the wall. Just as I sat down on the bed, another door slammed nearby and something made a loud thwack against the wall separating our room from Lucien and Peter's.

I found the link between me and Lucien and realized he wasn't even on the property anymore, much less in his bedroom. Which left only one person. After waiting for a few minutes, I dematerialized into the bedroom next door. Peter was sitting on the coffee table near the couch, taking a long, deep drag off one of those custom cigarettes he'd grown so fond of.

"Looks like it's just you and me again, kid."

"This is getting to be a habit," he said in an exhale of smoke.

"Yeah," I said, sitting beside him. "You know smoking is bad for you, right?"

Peter laughed. "What's it going to do, kill me?"

"Give you bad breath."

"Not these." He leaned over and softly blew into my face. I was expecting that bitter, acrid smell of smoke and old tobacco. What I got in return was a spicy, woody scent, mixed with something almost...vanilla. I inhaled, exploring the scents even more. Peter smiled. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Oddly...yes."

"These are one of Silver's specialties." Peter rolled the cigarette between his fingers. "Nikolas should try them."

"Why?"

"Because they'd help calm him down."

I couldn't help but laugh. "And next we try to get Lucien to start smoking them."

He took another long drag and shook his head. "I don't know where he went. It's too close to dawn for him to be away from the house."

"He'll be okay." I knew he would. He wouldn't have been Master, otherwise. "I'm sure he's gone to ground somewhere and will be back home as soon as the sun sets."

"This will be the first time that dawn will take us without us settling things first."

I nodded. "That's a good rule for you two to have."

"And he's breaking the rules."

"I think we all are, Peter. This...thing that's going on with the four of us? There's not really any standard way of dealing with it. It's just too complicated."

"I used to think we'd be okay dealing with it, but now I'm just scared; scared of everything going wrong and us hurting each other in ways that can't be overcome."

I had nothing to say to that. Sometimes things that seemed so cut and dried could take turns for the worse without any warning whatsoever. I couldn't see that happening to us, but nothing was ever certain.

"That's a valid fear, I guess." I stood and took his hand. "But for now, we need to get you to bed or you'll be spending the day on the floor."

Peter sighed and put his cigarette out in the ashtray before standing. "Will you stay with me today?"

"Of course I will. I hate sleeping alone as much as you do."

Peter started undressing, and I slipped off my robe and crawled into bed. I lay on my side, watching him, admiring him. The boy really didn't know how beautiful he was. Poor thing. He'd been dealing with so much change since he'd become a part of this world. He was still too human in ways to grasp all that he needed to, but he was trying like a champ.

He caught me watching and gave a half-smile. "What?"

"Just admiring the view." Something flashed in his expression and it made me pause. Sure, there was a bit of flattery, but beneath that was...guilt? What on earth? "Peter? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said as he climbed into bed. "Just feeling the dawn."

"Don't lie to me, pretty boy."

"Why me?" he asked after a few moments of silence. "Why am I the center of so much sexual attention and jealousy? Do I just make myself seem *that* available? Is it because I have a hard time saying no? Is it my—"

I put a finger to his lips to silence him. "Because you're you, Peter."

"Sometimes I'd give anything just to be out of my shoes for one night – to not have to worry about all of this *shit*."

"You know what you'd be then?"

"What?"

"Just another vampire looking to Lucien for approval and acceptance. You know what I think you need?" Peter groaned and I moved closer, taking him into my arms and smoothing his hair away from his face. "You need to learn how to be an asshole."

"Huh?"

Assholes didn't have people fawning over them. Didn't have people bowing at their feet and going to extreme lengths for one touch or for a night of sex. No. They bowed out of respect and hope that the asshole's wrath wasn't turned on them. It wouldn't work for the situation with Lucien and Nikolas – two of the biggest assholes I'd ever had the pleasure of knowing – but it would work with the rest of the coven.

"Yes, I think that's exactly what you need, pretty."

Unfortunately, dawn had already come, and Peter would have to wait until later to hear my suggestions. I thought of another area where he could use some work. The man could be sent on a guilt trip in the blink of an eye. He needed to learn to stand his ground, that it was okay for people to be upset with him. That he couldn't make everyone happy.

What it all boiled down to, was that Peter needed to be dehumanized in a short amount of time. It was necessary for his newly inherited position. A fact no one but me seemed to realize. Humans couldn't lead or rule in this world because they were...too fucking human to get it.

And my Master and my lover were too busy fighting with each other – over me and Peter, both – to notice.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I stretched out on the bed beside Peter, grinning. "Stop trying to be the nice guy."

"I *am* a nice guy."

"Too nice, if you ask me. What you need to do is growl a little more. Okay, a lot more. Say no, even when the request is small and of no consequence. Be a jerk and make people suck you off, then cast them away instead of petting them and making sure they didn't feel obligated to do it in any way."

"I can't do that, Sabaan."

"You can and you *will*."

"Great. I've found the demon who should sit on my shoulder. I'll blame it all on you when I fuck up from now on."

"You might check with Simon. He'd probably go for sitting on your right shoulder."

Peter smacked me in the head with a pillow. "I'm not turning into an asshole because you think it'll fix me."

"I never said you needed fixing. You just need a little...experience of a different kind." I rolled over and straddled his hips, crossing my arms over my chest. "You need to feed?"

He shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass."

"Excuse me?"

"Feeding leads to sex with you and even though I'd love to just fuck you until the sun comes up, I need to go find Lucien." He poked a finger in the middle of my chest. "And *you* need to go make up with Nikolas."

"The man is a stubborn, pig-headed oaf."

"Maybe. But he's your stubborn, pig-headed oaf."

"Yeah, yeah. I know." I settled back on Peter's thighs and sighed. "Tell me something?"

"Shoot."

"Do you think we could get the four of us locked into a room in the dungeon?"

"What do you mean?" One eyebrow lifted slowly. "Lock us in and let us fight until we either make up or kill each other?"

I nodded. "That's exactly what I mean."

"They would be pissed, Sabaan."

"Uh-huh."

Peter lay there for a moment, staring at me, but I knew he was considering the possibilities. After a minute or two he smiled. "We really do need someone to keep us from killing each other if it comes down to it. I'll talk to Logan. See if he'll do it."

"Soon, pretty boy." I leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose. "But not too soon. You need to do some serious thinking, yourself. Figure out exactly what Lucien means to you, what Nikolas means to you, and where everyone else stands. If you don't know that? Then getting us all in a room to work things out will be pointless."

"I know how I feel about everyone, Sabaan."

"No, you really don't," I said sadly. I hated doing this to him, but it was time. "Deep down, you still think *love* is the magic word that makes it all better. There are different kinds of love, baby, and it's time you figured that out and put everyone in their place."

I materialized back into my own bedroom, only to realize that I wasn't alone. The shower was running and steam was steadily pouring out of the open bathroom door. I didn't need to go in to find out who had invaded the shower. No, I could feel his presence as well as my own.

"Is there something wrong with your own shower?" I asked as I entered the bathroom. "Or did you just have this unshakable desire to bathe in a smaller one for a change?"

"Do you wish me to build you a larger shower?" Lucien chuckled from behind the foggy glass door.

"I certainly wouldn't complain if you did." I sat on the floor and opened the shower door a couple of inches. He hadn't been showering long; he was still covered in dirt and grime – and blood.

"And what have *you* been up to today?"

"Thinking."

"Since when does thinking leave you bloody?"

"I was walking along, making my way home, when a rogue decided he would like to test my patience." Lucien shrugged and shifted under the spray of water. "I merely let him know I wasn't in the mood."

"Do I need to send out a clean-up crew?"

"No," he said simply. "I took care of it."

Took care of it.

In other words, he incinerated it. Before I became Lucien's servant, he had a moderate ability to call forth the flame. After our blood bond, however, his ability manifested ten-fold and he was now able to incinerate those less than fortunate enough to test his patience. No one knew about his increased ability but me, but it was a secret that couldn't be kept for long.

Lucien and I had been butting heads in recent weeks over all of his secrets, but he insisted there were reasons why he was doing things as he was. I was always left rolling my eyes and grumbling, with him giving me a reassuring pat on the shoulder that all was well.

"So. You going somewhere?"

"To talk to Peter." He shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. "I didn't want to go to him dirty as I was."

"I was just with him. He wanted to find you, too."

"I know," he said. "I heard you talking when I passed our bedroom."

As he dried off, I watched his body language, the expressions that passed over his face. He was concerned, maybe even worried, and none of it was unwarranted.

"He's still too human, Lucien."

"I know."

"I don't think you do know. He's lost. Scared."

"What is he scared of?" Lucien picked up my brush and started running it through his hair.

"Losing you, for one."

Lucien shook his head, a growl rumbling in his chest. "He has no worry over losing me, Sabaan."

"Have you told him that lately?" When he refused to look at me, I stood and went to him. "Just how long has it been since you two talked – really talked?"

"I don't know."

"Lucien!" I ran my hands through my hair in frustration. "You can't just throw him to the wolves."

"It is necessary." Lucien put the brush down and looked at me sadly. "He must find his place before we can find a place together. He must know who he is, first and foremost."

"You're testing him?" I wanted to beat some sense into him. "You are being highly unfair, wanting him to find his way, yet getting pissed when he screws up."

"I am *not* pissed with Peter," Lucien growled. "It's your lover who's making this more difficult than it needs to be."

"Oh, right, because Nikolas is purposely trying to get under your skin."

"He is."

"If you ask me, you both need to kiss and make up. You're both too stubborn to just get along and help each other get through this."

"This? You mean where he's trying to take Peter from me – and doing it in my face, no less?"

I buried my face in my hands. "You still don't get it."

"I get it just fine, sweetheart." Lucien leaned in and kissed my forehead. "But I don't hold it against you."

"You're being an asshole."

He smiled. "It is well within my rights to be so."

After Lucien left, I sat on the floor of the bathroom for a long while, contemplating everything he'd said. Maybe I'd been wrong about this whole thing between the four of us from the very beginning.

No.

No, I wasn't.

This was just Lucien being...Lucien.

Being pissed and making assumptions.

Or was it?

Hell, I didn't know what was going on anymore. All I knew for sure was where I stood with Nikolas. So maybe I just needed to step back, concentrate on that, and stop trying to give advice when I clearly didn't know what was going on.

Maybe Nikolas had a right to be pissed after all.

I finally got to my feet and slipped off my robe. My shower was quick, and I then went to the closet to try to decide what to put on. I settled on a tight, black pair of custom-made pants and a form-fitting red, long-sleeved shirt. For a long while, I stared into the mirror, trying to decide on whether I should pull my hair back, or let it remain loose.

Nikolas liked it long and loose.

Decision made, I slipped on a pair of boots, zipped them, and walked out of the bedroom. The dungeon wasn't that far, but my desire to see Nikolas made me impatient. The moment I stepped foot in front of Nikolas' private room in the dungeon, it opened, and Nikolas nearly walked into me.

"Hey there, pretty kitty."

"Hey."

"I was just coming to find you." He stepped back and gestured to the open door. "But since you found me first, come on in. Been talking with Lucien, huh? I smell him on you like bad cologne."

I rolled my eyes as I edged past him. "I do not want to talk about Lucien."

"That's good." He closed the door and leaned against it, arms crossed over his chest. "He's the last person I need or want on my mind tonight."

He was up to something.

"Is that right?"

"You look nice. Edible."

"Edible is good." I smoothed my hands down my torso. "You like?"

He nodded. I could hear his breath and his heartbeat coming faster and faster. His gaze traveled down my body and up again to lock with mine. "Like it better if you were out of those clothes."

"Really?" I toyed with the hem of my shirt, smirking. "I chose these just for you."

"If you want to keep them, I suggest you start stripping." He shifted against the door, and then hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans. "Slowly."

"Yeah?" I pulled my shirt up over my head, and held it at arms length for a moment before dropping it to the floor. "And what's in it for me?"

His expression became serious, and my question was ignored. "You know that I love you...don't you?"

I nodded.

"More than anything, Sabaan." He closed the distance between us and brushed his thumb across my cheek. "You are my life, kitty."

I swallowed hard. "Nikolas—"

"I'm sorry it took me so long to come around. We've had so many wasted years."

"Oh, I wouldn't say wasted." I leaned into his touch. "I'd say we were building a damned good foundation for our relationship."

Nikolas laughed. "Always positive, aren't you?"

"I try." I poked him in the chest. "And you are getting mushy."

"Am not," he grumbled. "Just... Well, okay, maybe a little. But you know the drill. You'll pay dearly if you say anything."

"Aren't you supposed to be trying to convince me *not* to talk?"

Nikolas captured my mouth in a kiss, his tongue sweeping against mine hungrily. I melted against him, trusting him to not let me fall. His hands moved around me, down my back, and grabbed my ass, pulling me up tight against him. His cock was already hard, and I could feel the length of it against my belly.

"Got something for you, precious."

I rubbed against him. "I know."

"Not that." He smacked my ass and started to push me away. "Not yet, at least."

He took my hand and led me down the long hallway leading toward the bathroom. The shower room Nikolas had down here was more of a community type shower, all tile and dozens of individual shower heads. He'd had a few of them moved around for his personal use, but the main use of his showers now were for the people he *disciplined* to clean up after a session.

There was a wide, wooden bench in the center of the shower room. It wasn't a new addition, but was only pulled out for those who really couldn't walk after whip work. Unease started to fill my gut and I looked over at him nervously.

"Strip off your boots and pants and put them outside of the shower. Lie down on the bench, relax, and I'll be back in just a few."

Before I could question him, he turned on his heel and left. I took my time in getting undressed. After all, he hadn't made this seem as if time was of the essence. When I was finally naked, I went to the bench and lay down, hissing as the cold wood hit my warm skin. The minutes ticked by slowly and just as I began to grow impatient, Nikolas walked into the shower room.

Naked.

The long pieces of his hair were braided and clipped back so that it was completely out of his face. His face was all sharp angles and those eyes that looked with me with nothing but love and adoration were full of an intensity I only saw on occasions when I sat in on his sessions with other wolves or vampires.

He pulled a small, stainless steel cart in behind him. It looked like it was from down in the trauma and treatment room, but I couldn't be sure. The contents of the cart weren't visible from where I lay. All I could see were bottles of assorted sizes and paper towels. He straddled the bench and drew my attention away from the cart. For a long while, he just stared at me. I squirmed under his scrutiny and he laid the palm of his hand to my belly to still me.

"You were right this morning when you said it was my own fault that you only wore Lucien's mark. I don't know why I put it off. Maybe I was afraid you'd decide I wasn't worth the trouble."

"I wouldn't—"

"Shh," he whispered, hand moving lower to caress my prick. "But that was just me. Not letting it happen; not trusting in you – in us. Took me a while to realize that if I wasn't worth the trouble, you'd have kicked me to the curb years ago."

I couldn't help but laugh.

"So. It might not be as pretty as Lucien's mark up there on your neck, but it'll be mine. Done with my own hand, my own blood mixed in. My scent will always be mingled with yours. Everyone will know that you are mine."

"All I ever wanted was to be yours, Nikolas."

"You are. Always have been." He bit at his lip, gaze locking with mine. "Will you bleed for me?"

I swallowed hard. "You know I will."

"You are already a part of me, but I want...*need* to make that public."

"Come down here and kiss me." I scooted down the bench and wrapped my legs around his hips, pulling him closer. "Then you can mark me any way you wish."

He shifted and rose above me, thrusting his hips playfully. His cock barely rubbed against mine and I whimpered, thrusting up for more. "*Any* way?"

"Uh-huh... As long as—"

The conditions I was about to lay out were silenced. His kiss short-circuited my brain and I was left moaning and trying to rub up against him like a cat needing his owner's touch.

"Want me to get you something soft to lie on?"

I shook my head. "No...just hurry."

"Hurry? This isn't a simple little thing, kitty."

He teased me, kissing down my chest, the middle of my belly, working his way even lower. His tongue traveled around the head of my prick and he took me in deep without any other warning. I hissed and bucked my hips and he growled around me. The vibration nearly made me pass out.

Nikolas reached for the cart with one hand, fumbling around and knocking things off. He managed to find what he was looking for, apparently, because he grunted in satisfaction. The click of a bottle opening sounded and moments later, slick fingers teased at my hole.

I spread my legs wide and shuddered as two long, thick fingers pushed into me. My eyes rolled back in my head as those fingers pushed deep and his mouth tightened around me.

"Oh, fuck..." I started moving, fucking myself with his fingers and fucking his mouth. "This is not...gonna..." a third finger joined the two and I whimpered, moving even faster, "...take long."

The tips of his fingers moved across my gland and I couldn't help but cry out. He laughed around me and pushed deep a few more times and then I was coming, body shaking as I rode the wave of pleasure.

Nikolas licked me clean, then placed a kissed my belly. "That should take the edge off."

"It's not going to for long, baby."

He nodded and lowered the cart so he could reach everything comfortably and get everything set up. "I need you to stand up a minute so I can get the design on straight."

I rolled off the bench and stood beside it and the moment he grabbed my tail, I went weak in the knees. "This is *so* not going to work."

"It'll work fine." He placed the design on, wet it, and then rubbed along the paper to make sure it transferred. As he pulled the paper away, he hummed in approval. "Oh yeah, gonna work just fine."

"Can I see?"

"No."

"Please?"

"You'll see it when it's done, now lie down."

I huffed and lay down on the bench, propping my feet up on the edges to try to get comfortable. "Bastard."

Nikolas smirked, but was smart enough not to respond. He got everything straightened out, lined up, all of his ink cups put in easy reach... And then he turned on the tattoo gun.

"Do. Not. Move."

The anticipation of that first touch had my heart racing and my cock already filling. I was biting at my lip so hard that my fangs were drawing blood. All I could do was give a quick nod. He shifted a couple more times, and then leaned forward.

"One. Two. Three."

As that last number left his lips, he touched the tip to my tail. It had to fight like hell not to jump and move. The pain was instant, but brief, and was far outweighed by the pleasure of the burn. I could feel Nikolas blood being absorbed into my body with the ink and it made me shudder.

"Still, baby."

"Oh, God...Nikolas."

"Breathe for me," he said softly. "Just breathe through it and let your body relax."

I tried to steady my breathing, but every breath out was carried by a moan of pleasure. It wasn't long before the breaths came closer and closer together. My dick was hard as steel and it took more effort than ever to keep from reaching down and jerking myself off. If I jerked off, I'd move. If I moved, I'd fuck everything up and Nikolas would be pissed.

And I would be pissed because I'd ruined everything.

Four times.

I'd come four times in less than an hour, all without even touching my cock. Nikolas had laughed at me the first two times, but by that fourth time, he was growling pretty steadily. I refused to look down at him, knowing exactly what the cause of his growling was.

"Turn over," he grumbled.

Weakly, I got up and lay back onto the bench, but on my stomach, this time. I hissed as the hard wood pressed against my sensitive prick. "Can I have something? A pillow? A towel? It's so hard."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that last bit."

"Please?"

"Don't worry, I got it, precious. Lift up a little."

When I did, he slid a soft, folded towel between me and the bench. I sighed in relief as I lay back down. "Thank you."

He was silent, which never unusual for him. But when he didn't touch me or make a move to get started again, I looked back. The look on his face was priceless. A mix of pain and pleasure so deep, it made him look furious.

I wiggled my ass a little. "Finish me."

"You know, when I said breathe through it and relax, I didn't mean moan and carry on like a whore begging to get fucked."

A giggle escaped, and soon I was laughing my ass off uncontrollably. "What's the matter, honey? Dick too hard to concentrate on using that gun?"

"Shut the fuck. Up."

"Oh, baby. You know as soon as you finish, you can have my ass."

"You have no idea what I'm going to do to your ass when I'm done." He smacked my butt. "Now be still, kitty."

"Yes, Master."

Nikolas' growl was just shy of a roar. "The more you fuck with me, the worse it's going to be."

I crossed my arms in front of me and shook my head before resting it on my arms. Nikolas was never any good at trying to deter me from behaving badly. He always promised that my *punishment* – if there was such a thing between us – would be much worse if I didn't be a good little demon.

Uh-huh.

The harder he bit, smacked, and fucked me, the more I liked it.

Silly wolf.

My wolf.

He started the tattoo gun up again and the blissful torture of pleasure and pain began again. I didn't bother to control my moans and gasps, just letting them pour from my mouth in a stream of incoherent babbles.

"Christ!" he cursed after a while.

All I could do was grin and continue gasping.

In the second hour, I'd managed to come only once. My amusement at Nikolas' predicament had helped immensely. What time I'd spent not gasping and moaning, I'd spent in a fit of laughter.

He was working near the very tip of my tail, which wasn't quite as sensitive. Thank the *gods*! If it was, I'd spend every day of my life just trying not to cream my jeans. He wiped and tattooed away, then finally, the buzzing stopped.

Nikolas grabbed my hips and jerked me back toward him. I yelped in surprise and grabbed onto the bench to try to steady myself. He stretched over me, nipping at my ear.

"Been staring at your hole for hours," he whispered, "watching it tighten each and every time you moaned, every time you came."

"Liked it, didn't you?"

"You're a fucking tease, even when you're not trying to be."

"What are you going to do about it?"

His thick cock nudged at my hole, already slick and hard. "I'm going to fuck this ass. This ass..." he began pushing his way into me and I cried out at the stretch and burn and incredible fullness of him. "This ass...that belongs to *me*."

"Fuck, yes!"

"No matter who we're bound to... You and me, baby. That's what counts." He held me tight against him, pausing. "You're *home* to me, Sabaan."

Ever since the first time we'd made love I'd known exactly how he felt about me. But to hear him vocalize it – like this – brought forth an onslaught of emotion.

"Love you."

"Love you, too." He buried his face in my hair, inhaling deeply. "Nothing going to change that. Ever."

"I know."

I grasped the sides of the bench and pushed farther back into him. He took my weight and let one hand move around front of me to rest low against my belly. With each thrust that followed, he guided me with his hands. The sensations of him against me – the sweat-damp hair of his legs, his arms, his thighs, the strength of his hold, the power behind each and every thrust – had me weak and begging for more.

"God, Nikolas."

"What d'you need, baby?"

"More. I..." he pegged my gland on the next thrust. "Yes! Right there."

"Right there, huh?"

His movements became hard and fast, unrelenting. He panted at my ear and I turned my head, meeting him in a kiss. The kiss became a series of licks bites at each other's lips and then Nikolas strained forward, offering me his neck.

I could feel his heart pounding in his chest against my back, could sense the blood pumping through the veins and arteries in his neck. And I wanted to taste him on my tongue. I set my fangs and bit down and Nikolas roared out in what I now knew to be pleasure. Blood – hot, rich, thick – coated my tongue and I moaned. Nikolas' taste was more familiar to me than any other. I took a few pulls then licked at the puncture wounds.

"Come for me," he hissed. "Need you to come."

I was right there on the edge, but I'd come so many times I figured my body had given up on me. But Nikolas' took my cock in his hand and jerked me off in the same rhythm as his thrusts and it pushed me over the edge. I came in a rush, shuddering hard, coating his hand.

"Oh, fuck!" Nikolas jerked hard and pushed deep, his heat filling me. The cries that spilled from his lips were like music to my ears. "Oh, God."

"Uh-huh."

I was shaking so hard, I could barely hold myself up. He rested his head between my shoulder blades, sighing in contentment. "We needed that."

Grinning, I nodded and leaned back against him. "I don't have the energy to move now."

Nikolas laughed. "Don't worry, kitty. I'll take good care of you."

"I have no doubt about that."

He stood up beside the bench and picked me up. I wrapped my arms around him, thinking he was going to be a good boy and carry me to bed. But he carried me to his private showering area instead. Before I could ask what or why, he started the shower and leaned against the wall, smiling down at me.

"Shower, then bed."

"I don't really need one," I argued.

I wasn't one to fuck and run to the shower in fear I'd get come on the blanket or somewhere besides up my ass or on my dick. No, I was fine to fuck and then turn over and sleep.

"Yes, you do. I got ink all over you."

"Oh. Well, in that case."

Nikolas reached out and tested the water, then set me on my feet. "I promise it won't take long."

I stepped under the spray of water and shuddered, the heat making me relax even further. To keep from falling, I spread my hands on the tile wall and leaned against it. He moved my hair to the side and began washing me with a soft, soapy cloth.

When he got to my tail, the up and down movements elicited a series of gasps and moans and a deep, hearty laugh from Nikolas.

"So pretty, Sabaan. You should see it."

He rinsed me off, then turned off the water. He'd apparently set aside a towel earlier, because he immediately began drying me off. After that, he walked me across the room to stand before a full-length mirror.

Nikolas turned me to stand sideways and my heart stopped. The design was heavy and dark, starting low on my back and going all around – and down – my tail. Tears burned at my eyes. This was so much more than I'd ever expected. And meant more, too.

"It's beautiful." I was so in awe, I couldn't look away. "It's...you."

"Mark of the beast."

I blushed and grinned, finally looking from my tail up to meet those gorgeous green eyes in the mirror. "A mark I'll wear proudly."

He nipped at my neck. "It should show even after you shift."

"How *does* a tattoo look on a big, black cat?"

"Sexy, I bet."

I elbowed him in the gut. "Pervert."

"Why, yes...yes, I am."

I rolled my eyes. "*My* pervert."

I stretched and yawned, but found it difficult to open my eyes. Nikolas' breathing was so even and deep, I figured he was still asleep. We weren't in our own bed, but it didn't matter to me. All that mattered...was this.

These precious moments when nothing – or no one – else existed. They happened more and more often, and for that I felt truly blessed. For Nikolas to be so inexperienced in love and emotion, he was doing a damned good job of finding his way.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing, really." I snuggled closer into his warmth. "Just enjoying this."

He hummed in agreement and caressed my cheek with the tips of his fingers. "I love lying here beside you, listening to you purr, *knowing* you're happy."

I opened my eyes then, unable to not look at him. "You make me happy."

"Do you think it'd be okay if I came back to our bed?"

"Of course you can, Nikolas."

"I hate fighting with you." He moved over me, settling between my legs. "Sometimes I'm just an asshole, though, and I'm sorry."

"Aren't we all?"

"You?" he chuckled. "I think you're the only sane one in this whole bunch – me included."

"And sometimes?" I sighed and shook my head. "I just need to keep my mouth shut."

"No, you don't." He kissed the hollow of my throat, then laid his head on my chest. "If it wasn't for you, none of us would be getting along at all. We need you to keep on doing what you're doing, baby."

I thought of my conversation with Lucien before I'd come to see Nikolas. What he was doing was well-within his right as Master, but I didn't agree with it. And I couldn't stand by and let him hurt Nikolas *or* Peter and not do anything about it. Even if it meant I was betraying my confidence to him as his servant.

No matter what, Nikolas and I came first.

"Forgive me," I whispered, to no one specific.

Karma, maybe.

Last thing I needed was for that bitch to bite me in the ass.

"For what?" Nikolas murmured.

"Nikolas, baby?"

He looked up at me, then. "What is it, Sabaan?"

"Lucien."

"What about him?" he asked cautiously.

"He's testing Peter." Nikolas rose up a little, concern in his expression growing. "Making him deal with most all of what he's going through alone."

"He wouldn't be so cruel..." His words trailed off. "Tell me he wouldn't."

"I don't think he's trying to be," I said quickly. "I think he's just... I think he's jealous of you and is letting it cloud his judgment on what's best for Peter and for the rest of us."

"Why in hell is he so jealous of me? This thing between me and Peter... It's nothing compared to what he and Lucien have. And me and you – you're my life! Doesn't he know this?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure he believes it." I smiled up at him. "He doesn't really see us like this, you know?"

"I have to admit, I was jealous as fuck of your relationship with him. But now? My mark on you is much bigger – and better, if you ask me – than his. And I know where your heart lies. I know that if you *had* to choose—"

"Oh, Nikolas. Don't ever make me have to choose."

"I wouldn't," he said sincerely. "But I know that if you had to, you'd choose me – choose *us*."

I nodded. "Always."

He sighed and moved off me a little, so his full weight wasn't on me. "Part of me wants to fight him over this, but part of me wants to just let it go."

"Go with the second part, baby."

"But if I do, then what? Show that I'm weak and that I'm just going to roll over for him?" He shook his head. "Hell, no. I can't do it."

"If you fight him, he'll continue to think it's Peter you're trying to steal from him."

"And if he thinks I could sway Peter from him, then he needs to search deeper into their relationship for the reasons why. Peter loves him more than life itself."

"Since you and Peter are so hot and heavy sometimes, maybe it's hard for him to keep that in sight."

"If Lucien would just stop and *think* about what is driving Peter to me – and me to him – he would understand everything. But no, he's thinking like a goddamned human. Letting his fear make his decisions for him."

"I'm going to have to agree with you, there."

Nikolas grinned. "See? I know what I'm talking about sometimes."

I had to laugh. "Yes, honey, sometimes you do."

He poked me in the ribs. "I'm hungry. Want to go raid the fridge?"

"Sounds good to me." I hadn't eaten since the night before. No wonder I was having trouble thinking straight. "I'd kill for a steak and something...fried."

"I'll fry if you'll do the steaks," he offered. "Make 'em nice and bloody like you always do?"

"Deal!"

"Peter!"

I called out to him as we walked up the hall toward the treatment room. He'd just come out of the room and was headed back upstairs. He paused and waited for Nikolas and me to catch up to him. Poor thing, he looked absolutely miserable. I tried to rein in my good mood a little, knowing he'd be able to feel it, but it was too late.

Peter was already smiling and trying to push his own emotions aside. "What have you two been smoking?"

"Each other." Nikolas raised his eyebrows suggestively. "Need a drag?"

I elbowed him in the gut. "Pervert."

"Hey, I haven't heard either of you complain." Nikolas moved closer and slid his hand up around Peter's throat and Peter instinctively leaned into his touch. "We were about to get something to eat. Want to join us?"

"I think I should just go back to the study."

Crap.

He'd been spending more and more time there. It was the one place in the mansion you were almost guaranteed to find him. He always claimed to be working, but I think that he was just so lost that being in a place that was clearly defined as Lucien's gave him some kind of peace. But he needed to get the hell out of there a lot more and just...live.

"I don't think so," I said. "If you hang out in the study any more I'm afraid you're going to become a permanent fixture. You need to get out of there and have some fun for a change."

At my words, Peter's smile faltered. I knew fun was the wrong choice of words when Peter's smile faded. But the warning look he tossed my way made me drop any additional words of comfort I might have given him.

"I'm not really in the mood for fun."

Nikolas pulled Peter in for a kiss. "You sure?"

He nodded.

Nikolas sighed and turned to me, clearly confused about how to handle Peter's state of mind. Thankfully, he must have realized that leaving Peter alone when he wanted to be alone was the best thing to do.

"Steak?"

I nodded at Nikolas and smiled up at Peter. "We'll be in the kitchen if you change your mind."

As we walked away, I fought not to turn and look back at Peter. The sheer amount of heartache and misery that came from him made me stumble. Nikolas' hand tightened around mine and he shook his head.

"If Lucien doesn't fix that, I will kill him myself," Nikolas whispered.

When we were in the clear of Peter hearing us, I stopped and turned to Nikolas. "It's going to take more than Lucien to fix this, baby."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Take the first step," I said.

"And that is?"

"Do what Lucien refuses to do. Come clean – with both Lucien *and* Peter."

"I've never kept anything from Peter."

I just stared at him.

I knew for a fact exactly what Lucien and Nikolas had conspired to do. And I also knew that when Peter found out, the shit was going to hit the proverbial fan. They'd fucked with his life, and in doing so, had destroyed a part of him that I was sure he'd have rather kept in place.

Nikolas sighed heavily and shook his head. "He doesn't have to know—"

"I think it is well within his rights to know, Nikolas." I cupped his cheek, making sure he was looking at me. "If I were in Peter's place, I'd certainly want to know. And if years went by and no one said a thing...and I found out later from someone else? The betrayal might be too much for me to forgive."

He was silent for a few moments, then finally nodded. "It'll mean a fight."

"A very nasty one, I'm sure."

"Can I have a day or so to mull it over?"

He was stalling for time, and I certainly couldn't blame him. But now that he'd made his mind up, I knew that he'd follow through. The fight to come would be bloody and painful, but I had no doubt that it'd go a long way to fixing this between the four of us. Something I wished Lucien had been man enough to do months ago.

I nodded and gave him a kiss. "Just remember that every day you put it off, Peter hurts that much more."

Nikolas grumbled. "I'm not the only one hurting him."

"No, but you're the only one willing to step up and stop being such an ass."

Nikolas chewed at his lip. "You sure I can't strap a leash on Lucien and take him for a walk at dawn?"

"You would miss him terribly."

After a while, he sighed and wrapped his arms around me. "Yeah, I would."

Mark of the Beast

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