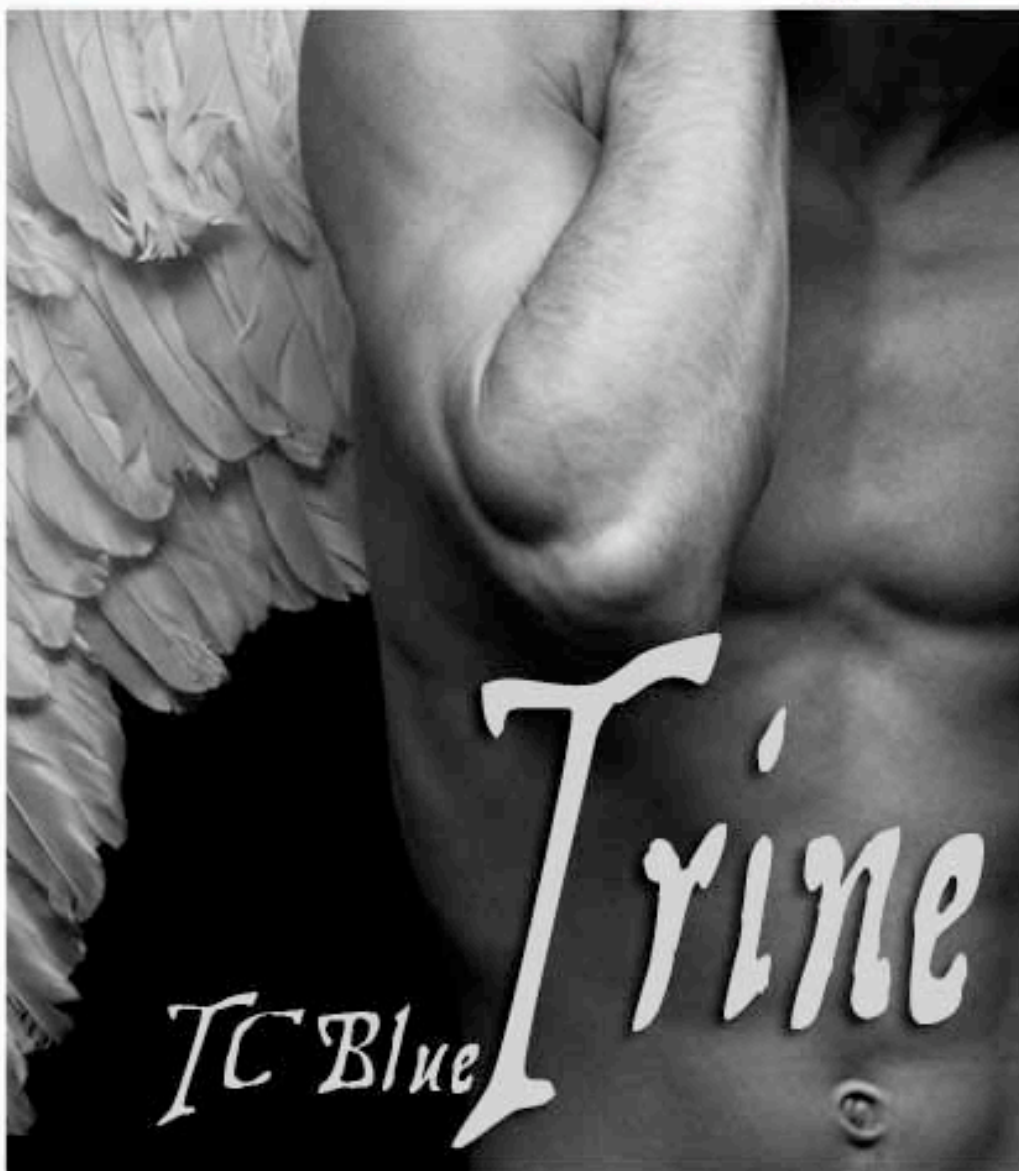




*A Torquere Press Single Shot*



He'd been watching the human for what felt like ages and, frankly, Ashalam was getting bored.

That wasn't to say that the man hadn't done some interesting things in that time, but nothing that warranted the close watch Ashalam had been ordered to keep.

Yes, the human was a Sorcerer.

Yes, the male had a variety of mistresses, but that wasn't so uncommon for the times.

Now, had the human been living a few centuries earlier -- or in a city other than Rome -- the fact that there were three different women sating his needs, as well as a wife? Well, that would have had the fellow burning even if his occupation had somehow slipped past the ever-suspicious eyes of the Church.

The male wasn't young, by any means, either. He was, in fact, nearly twenty-five, which was damnably close to middle-aged, what with as quickly as humans grew and became frail and vanished from the mortal realm... and yet he not only had the many mistresses but seemed able to keep each and every one of them satisfied.

*And he looks far younger than most men his age, Ashalam added silently, his invisible eyes raking slowly down and then up the long, lean form. He has no gray in his hair, no paunch. His skin is still tight and toned. If I didn't know for certain that he still owns his soul, I might understand why I've been put on this particular human. To watch. Simply to watch.*

How much longer could it really go on?

How much longer before the Church finally admitted that Ashalam was being wasted on his current assignment?

Maker help him, but it couldn't be soon enough. Not when watching the male pleasuring his females always had Ashalam feeling so... he didn't know what.

Tight. Bothered. Angry. Warm.

So... *something*, but always at one remove, emotions being forbidden to his kind. Yet he'd come to recognize them over the course of his extended assignment.

Maybe it was simply that he hadn't been Home in more than a hundred human years.

He hoped so, in any case, because otherwise? Well, otherwise, he would have to assume that the so-called Renaissance was having more of an affect on him than he would like.

*Or he is, some rebellious part of his psyche argued. He's smart enough to openly practice magics and still avoid being shunned by the Church, that part continued. And he's beautiful enough to have his choice of mistresses, but he's chosen his own for more than merely looks.*

And that was true enough, Ashalam had to admit, because while the male's wife and first mistress were both more beautiful than any women aside from each other, the last two sparrows the human had taken under his wing were... well, homely in one case, and nothing more than plain in the case of the other.

It was only through his years of watching that Ashalam knew the homely woman had a brilliant mind, while the merely plain one held within her the heart of a giant.

How Caspari Rocco had known these things was a mystery.

In the end, Ashalam didn't believe that it mattered much, if at all.

Perhaps Caspari had gone looking for those who would accept him with relief. Perhaps the male had merely been worried over his purse.

It took many more florins to keep a beautiful woman than a plain one, after all, and the male had gone through some times that had been difficult.

Not hard times, but not easy, either.

Whatever the case might be, Ashalam didn't much care.

Caspari Rocco owned his own soul. He didn't seem to be anywhere near changing that.

The human had enough money and enough power to make himself happy.

He had four women, including his wife, and had thus far sired seven children among them, all of which had lived past the age of two years.

The male was smart and somehow managed to dodge being at odds with the Church, no matter how much the questionable faction involved tried to create some sort of reason -- via Ashalam's reports -- to *acquire* the Sorcerer.

No, Ashalam told himself, pulling his wings tight around his body, this Caspari was doing nothing wrong.

He was simply living his life and using the skills he'd been blessed with.

And even though the human didn't pay as much lip service -- or tithe as much -- to the Church as some others, there was nothing of Evil about him.

Sadly, the Church didn't wish to believe that. Which was why Ashalam was still watching.

He was a slave of sorts, in actuality, and if he were allowed to have true emotions, he thought he might be angry about that fact.

As he wasn't permitted to actually feel, though, he merely sighed and closed his eyes once Caspari began to pull the numerous layers of fine linen from the shape of his homely mistress.

He'd seen it before, after all. Many a time. There was no need to observe each moment yet again.

He would resume his watching in the morning, after Caspari woke and prepared himself for the coming day.

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His hands stilled as the sensation of watching eyes disappeared, and Caspari smiled just a bit apologetically at Lucia.

Fortunately, she was by far the smartest of his women, and the moment his hands stalled, she simply laughed.

"Go, beloved," she ordered. "He will be waiting for you. Though why you refuse to install him here or with Cressia, I still do not know." She kissed him softly, one hand pushing through his unfashionably long hair. "If you are not back in the morning, I will tell the boys that you left kisses for them with me, yes?"

Gods, he'd been truly blessed with Lucia. Even more blessed with their sons.

He did admit -- secretly and only to himself -- that he was glad he'd not gotten daughters upon her, though.

It wasn't difficult for a man to be less than the pinnacle of attractiveness, after all, but for a woman or even a young girl?

Well, there weren't so many men like himself, Caspari knew. Men who could and would look past the physical and fully external beauty of a woman and see through to a sharp mind, a good heart, a sense of empathy that made appearances irrelevant.

As far as Caspari was concerned, Lucia was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known.

She was also the only woman he'd ever known who knew his true nature, which she proved each and every time she bade him away.

If he were of a cynical bent, he would have thought it to be because he'd pulled her from the streets where she'd have been making less than a florin a month, and set her up in a style she'd never managed to imagine before him, because he had done precisely that.

She'd looked so sad that day; so broken. Out there with her head and feet bare, tears already pooling in her eyes even before the sun had set.

He'd felt something for her the moment he'd seen her; especially with the way her threadbare gown had failed when compared to the softer, newer fabrics worn by the prostitutes around her. So he'd broken his own rule and had offered his arm.

Gods knew what she'd been expecting when she took it, but he'd seen the small gleam of triumph in her eyes when she -- rather than any of the much prettier and better dressed whores -- had been the one chosen.

Hours of talk at a dubious tavern later, Caspari had known that she had one of the brightest minds he'd ever been privileged to meet and that her mother had died weeks earlier. That her father was unknown, and she was simply following in her mother's footsteps as best she could to keep body and soul together.

It had been her maiden voyage onto the streets in more ways than one, and he counted himself fortunate that he'd been the one to find her.

He'd let her a room for the week or so it took to arrange lodging for her.

He'd spoken with his wife and Cressia and Lucretia, informing them of his latest acquisition.

He'd arranged for seamstresses and jewelers and all manner of things.

When he'd finally moved Lucia into her rooms in the same building where Cressia and Lucretia lived, he'd taken her into his arms.

He'd taken her lips with his, taken her hands and twined her fingers with his own... and finally he'd taken her virginity. Slowly. Carefully.

He had given her their first son that night, as well, though neither of them had known it at the time.

"Yes, dearest," he answered, their history a fond memory, as always. "Have I mentioned how much I do truly love you? Recently?"

Lucia laughed again.

"You have. Go now, Caspari! If you wait much longer, he will be spoken for, and you know how it upsets you when he's unavailable!"

His lips compressed slightly as he tried not to smile. "And what of you, dearest? I would not leave you wanting."

Gods, if anyone but he ever saw that smile on Lucia's face, he'd be fighting duels just to keep her.

It wasn't a wild smile, or even one that was suggestive. It didn't imply in any way, shape, or form that Lucia was easy or less than strong.

It was a smile that bypassed the young woman's unfortunate looks and made her -- for that particular moment -- more beautiful than anyone else had ever been.

"I'll slip up to Lucretia's, beloved, since the boys are asleep," Lucia said softly. "Neither she nor I will be left wanting. Now, go. Enjoy your young man while you can."

Their kiss was as simple and as complex as their relationship, and that was somehow comforting to Caspari.

"Sun to my moon," he whispered, pulling away. "So very bright."

A laugh answered him, Lucia already pulling from his arms, her cheeks growing more pink the longer he looked.

"Yes. Always. Now, go! Or do you wish to remain here and... Yes, I thought not." A wink as he finally stepped back.

"Shall I escort you to Lucretia's door, dearest?" he asked, both wanting to do so and not.

The look those words earned him would have made him cringe, had he less knowledge of his woman.

"Perhaps not," he added before Lucia could answer. "But I do hope to be back early enough to bid you and the boys a good morning."

And there was that sweet, wonderful, absolutely smitten look. For their sons. And Caspari knew he'd made a good choice. Not that he hadn't known before, but every time he saw that expression, he was reminded.

"I will be here, beloved. Now, go. Please. Before Lucretia has gone to sleep, I pray!"

And as he wasn't one to deny his mistresses pleasure in each others' arms, Caspari finally kissed Lucia's forehead and went.

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Signora Alberti's House was known only to those within Rome who shared Caspari's particular bent, which was not to say that there weren't many men who enjoyed the pleasures available only with other males.

There were. Most notably within the Church, though Caspari had heard strange -- and unbelievable -- rumblings that the current Pope might be thinking of changing things.

It had passed almost unremarked when that same Pope had denied priests marriage, claiming that such dedication to any earthly person detracted from the attention given to God. But to deny the various levels of clergy the right to experience release with whichever sex pleased them seemed...

It didn't matter how it seemed to him, Caspari reminded himself with a shrug as he walked quickly through the well-known streets.

The Pope -- and the Church -- would do as they chose and it would have somewhere between little and no effect upon his life at all.

He was practically skipping as he climbed the stairs to the Signora's house, and he couldn't help his hopeful smile when the door was opened to his soft rap.

"Is he available?" he murmured to Lorenzo, the usual door-boy who was working his way up to becoming a full employee of the Signora's. The youngster would be fleshed enough and mature enough in another year or so, if Caspari didn't miss his guess.

He could have laughed at the way Lorenzo's lips curled, the boy's smile wanton and so suggestive that Caspari adjusted his thoughts.

Six months, perhaps, and this one would be offered up to the highest bidder -- by his own choice -- and while that might have been a tragedy in any other house, in Signora Alberti's house it was a blessing.

The Signora would never allow anyone less than gentle to even offer for the boy, after all... and chances were, whoever won the honor would seek out Lorenzo more than any other of the florin-hungry and willing.

Caspari was actually fairly certain of that fact. It was how he'd become so attached to Victore, after all.

His former lover in the house had suggested the young newcomer to him when Leo had retired to the small villa he'd purchased with his earnings. And if Caspari hadn't heard from him since, well... it was likely the man had a wife and children. He wouldn't want them knowing how he'd earned his wealth. People thought differently outside Rome, after all.

"He's been waiting for you, Signore Roccaro," Lorenzo murmured, the hand not holding the door reaching out to stroke the velvet covering Caspari's stomach. "He insisted that you would be visiting with us tonight."

Caspari chuckled and shook his head, moving the boy's hand from his body to the young one's own waist.

"As we can see," he answered with a smile, "Victore was correct. And you have been here long enough to know that such attentions are not permitted without a specific invitation, Lorenzo. It

might be wise to restrict your advances to those who might wish to release you of your obviously burdensome virginity."

It was somewhat amazing that the boy still had the ability to blush.

By the same token, Caspari assumed that there had been so many who arrived and found the forbidden fruit so much more appealing than that offered... not freely, but with knowledge and experience, that perhaps Lorenzo's advances had never been refused, though Caspari's words to the boy had been gentle.

"I believe I know the way to Victore's chambers, Lorenzo. Perhaps you would do well to remain at the door."

He almost hated to deny the youngster, but Caspari had never found himself drawn to children, and even though Lorenzo had to be at least fourteen, there was no attraction there.

Even Victore had been seventeen -- and despairing of anyone choosing to bid upon his tightness due to his advanced age -- when the eighteen-year-old Caspari had laid out enough florins to keep old man Drescato from acquiring and then ruining the boy.

Drescato was Signora Alberti's one blind spot. The man was her uncle, after all. Or father. Possibly both, although no one was entirely sure.

All that had been seven years earlier, though and, while Victore was no longer as tight and untried, the man was still beautiful and definitely skilled.

If he could have, Caspari would have taken Victore from the House back then. Would have set him up in much the same style as he'd done with his women, but it had been impossible.

Signora Alberti owned Victore, from the tips of his toes to the top of his head. And even now, with Victore nearing the upper end of his prime -- meaning he got very few new clients and mostly had to rely on repeat business from men like Caspari -- buying the male's contract would have required at least three times Caspari's annual income.

He hoped that they might eventually come to some sort of agreement, once Victore decided to retire -- assuming the Signora agreed to allow such at Victore's discretion -- but that would or wouldn't come. Still, it was a certainty that Victore would not be marrying and getting children upon his non-existent wife. The male was not even slightly attracted to women and never had been, judging from the things his rented lover said in the dark of night, his whispers feeding directly into Caspari's ear from the pillow.

So there was a chance, and it was one Caspari hoped for. Whether it came to pass or not was a question he wasn't examining too closely, though, and one he would deliberately ignore until Victore was free.



In the meantime, he would enjoy whatever time he had with the man he was so very fond of. If they never met again after Victore left the House, well... perhaps by then, young Lorenzo would have grown enough to look like a man, rather than a boy.

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"I knew you would come," Victore said, and Caspari couldn't help the grin that spread across his lips.

How could he when Victore was lying there naked, one hand wrapped loosely around the long, thick shaft Caspari dreamed about some nights?

He still wasn't sure of where Victore had come from originally, but he was also fairly certain that the man didn't know, either.

All Caspari knew for sure was that with long, silken blond hair, reddish-brown eyes and gold-tinged skin, not to mention the rest, the male wasn't from anywhere nearby.

And when those eyes were outlined in kohl and the small, tight nipples were rouged to a burnished brass shade while that appealing shaft leaked small dribbles of clear fluid onto Victore's stomach, Caspari didn't care.

Caspari moved quickly, divesting himself of the hindering fabric shrouding him, and when he flung himself onto the feather-filled mattress beside Victore, he laughed.

"It might be more accurate to say you know I *will* come, dearest," he murmured, his own hand wrapping around Victore's, holding it tighter to that hard, nearly pulsing shaft. "How did you know I would even be here?"

He felt Victore shrug. He didn't see it. He was far more focused on the turgid length sliding between his own fingers and his lover's.

Paid, yes, but still his lover. Just as his wife and his women.

Caspari grinned. For the moment, Victore was his. And would be again. He should make the male even more anxious for his return.

"I felt you getting clos... oh. Oh, Caspari. Yes... that's... Oh!"

Caspari hummed softly in agreement, though his mouth was too full of that hard, fragrant flesh to speak actual words.

He didn't take Victore into his mouth often. That was usually the younger man's job. But Victore also seemed to believe that if Caspari came and Victore was still hard, then Caspari's cleft was available.

It was a fairly reasonable assumption, and Caspari knew it, but... not that night. Or rather, not yet.

No, first he was going to suck Victore dry. Then he was going to plunge himself deep into the man's body and show him just how good it was. Remind him.

Once that had been taken care of, Caspari figured he'd suck Victore hard again... and get the deep, strong reaming he'd been wanting for the fortnight he'd stayed away.

He'd paid for the entire night, after all. Two florins and, while he'd never asked Victore how much of that he received, Caspari would be extremely surprised if the slightly younger man wasn't free of his contract within two or three years or so.

He sucked harder on the upstrokes, his tongue swirling around as much of that ready shaft as he could manage, then loosened his lips when he slid low again.

One arm supported his body but the other roamed free, his hand and fingers finding Victore's already tight sac and rolling it, manipulating the twin globes within.

"C-cas... oh. Gods, I... yes, I..."

He felt the shudder. Felt the moment when good became *too* good.

He felt Victore's fingers in his hair, digging deep and wrapping tightly there.

He felt that long, lean body buck against the mattress, driving Victore's shaft deep into his throat.

His hand dropped, finding his lover's already oiled hole.

Two fingers drove inside, spearing and forcing the orgasm from Victore's form.

One more digit joined them, pushing against the spongy nub and propelling still more spurts of thick, rich seed into Caspari's wanton mouth.

He supposed the sounds coming from Victore's mouth could be considered words, but if they were, they were in a language Caspari didn't know.

He didn't much want to know, either. Not right then. Not when he was hard and dripping and needing Victore's depths more than he'd ever needed anything else in his life.

He swallowed one last spurt of semen and surged up, hands behind Victore's knees, and he slammed his lips roughly to his lover's as he pushed inside, groaning when that defensive ring of muscle opened to him and wrapped tightly around his long, thick shaft.

"Vic," he growled, still kissing the man for all he was worth but somehow making at least that much come from his lips.

"Caspari!"

Yes. Victore knew it was him.

Knew it wasn't one of his other clients.

Knew it was the same man who'd done this to him for the first time, way back when.

Still, it had the feeling of goodbye, which was unsettling, to say the least.

But Victore was writhing beneath him. Was clutching at his back in a way the man hadn't done in months.

Hells, Victore was throwing himself into what they were doing with an abandon Caspari hadn't expected in the slightest.

Years with the man and this... sudden degree of recklessness was a surprise. This entirely shocking surrender.

That didn't stop him from enjoying it, of course, but he wondered, somewhere deep in the back of his mind.

His hips shook, moving back and forth, driving his shaft deeper, harder, more roughly into Victore's accepting form, and the man just took it. Moaned. Groaned. Begged for more with voice and hands.

It was only then, when he heard Victore's voice -- "please, please Caspari, please" -- that he knew his lips weren't locked to his lover's anymore.

It didn't matter, Caspari decided, because he was going to give Victore everything he was asking for and then some.

"Come on," he grunted, his hips moving wildly, slamming in and out of Victore's heaving body. "Come on... let me feel you."

Then he shifted up, arms bracing on the bed, and Victore yelped and Caspari knew he'd found the right spot.

"C-casp...ah..."

It was a damned good try at his name, but there was something wrong if Victore could even still speak, so...

Caspari moved faster. Harder. More roughly.

He made sure his every thrust skated against that small spot.

When Caspari felt -- heard -- Victore giving in to the stimulation, he burst, as well.

His eyes slammed shut, clenching wildly as his body tensed before firing shot after shot of hot, thick seed into Victore's spasming, accepting body.

He buried his head in the crook of his lover's shoulder, breathing roughly while the shudders moving through Victore pulled small, impossible spurts from him.

Oh, Caspari realized once again. He was far too lost in Victore.

The man was a whore.

But he was a whore who'd been Caspari's first. Before being anyone else's. And he had a sneaking suspicion that Victore loved him.

The man might even have some sort of magic to him, aside from the obvious, Caspari suddenly realized. How else would he have known Caspari was going to come to the Signora's that night?

Maybe Victore had been naked and slick for whoever showed and requested him, but Caspari didn't think so. Not with the completely unsurprised look the male had given him when he'd walked in, anyway.

And if that was actually the case...

Well, that opened a whole new world of possibilities.

He would have to think on it, of course, but maybe Victore was more than just a high-priced whore Caspari bedded and was bedded by. For whom he felt an unusual degree of affection, granted.

His lips curved into a smile and when Victore wrapped long, slender arms around him and pulled him closer, Caspari just melted over the man's golden form.

He'd figure it all out later.

After he'd slept and been bedded and somehow managed to make himself think.

He wouldn't think about the fact that he could feel eyes on him again, though.

And he would make himself get up in the morning so he could see his and Lucia's boys.

"Good night, lover," he murmured, his eyes already closed. "For the moment. Make sure I'm up for..."

The rest was indistinct gray and wandering tendrils of mist, as far as he was concerned, because that was what he saw in his dreams.

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"Return to your post."

Those had been the words that greeted Ashalam when he'd appeared back in the room that passed as his lodgings, the fabric of the mortal realm wrapped firmly around him. Though prison was truly a more appropriate term, he thought. Just a six-foot square built of stone, without luxury of a bed or even a chair. His kind didn't sleep, said the leader of the questionable faction that had somehow acquired him; therefore, Ashalam didn't require a bed. His kind never grew weary; thus a chair was unnecessary.

But he did get weary, Ashalam admitted to himself. Weary of being directed this way and that. Weary of having his owners, for lack of a better term, direct him to find some crumb of evil in the man Ashalam watched. A crumb that might be used to appropriate the sorcerer or at least his services, gratis. And he definitely grew weary of being blamed for the human's lack of wickedness.

"Return to your post." As much an order as "sit" or "stay". And oh, Ashalam was weary of that, as well. Yet he had no choice. He was bound in ways only another of his kind would understand, in ways Maker had chosen for whatever reason.

Ashalam didn't know that reason, yet he suspected that even if he did, he likely would not have understood it. He was not of a high enough caste to grasp such things.

So Ashalam's jailor said "return" and Ashalam returned. It was the way of things.

He latched on to the sense of his human, letting it pull him through the invisible realm between solid and ephemeral, and sighed silently as he prepared himself to watch the male pleasuring his mistress.

It wasn't the relatively familiar rooms that he opened his eyes to, however. It was somewhere else. Somewhere humans would have called lush or opulent. Ashalam recognized velvet and linen before the sound of a soft, raw groan drew his eyes to the large, pillow-strewn bed against the far wall, and... it was not possible that he was seeing what he thought he saw.

It could not be.

And yet... his human, his assignment, Caspari, was there. The male was on that bed, raised over another body, this one smooth and oiled to a soft gleam from what Ashalam could see. A pampered, pretty pet, and also male. Caspari was pushing, hips moving back and forth, and the pretty little male with the so-smooth skin was moaning, grunting like a beast for some reason... and Ashalam moved closer, only stopping when he was close enough to see it all.

To see Caspari's long, thick member pressing deep into the other male's body, then pulling back in the same way as when the human pleased his women, and yet the other male -- the one being treated to such joys -- was obviously enjoying it more than even Caspari's favored mistress did. And Caspari...

Oh, there was such a degree of sheer enjoyment on Ashalam's human's face. It was as though the male merely went through the motions with his females, and perhaps that was truth. Even among his own kind, Ashalam admitted, there were those who sought the pleasures of their own gender. It was not entirely common, but not so unusual as to be remarked upon. He had enjoyed such a relationship himself, before his current Masters had summoned him to the mortal realm.

"C-casp... ah..." the other male gasped and Ashalam swallowed hard, watching his assignment move faster, harder, the man's thick shaft pushing wordless groans and cries from the lips of the pampered plaything, and Ashalam could have wept. Would have if he'd been permitted to feel things like envy and a desire to see his own former beloved, though theirs had been a relationship with less love than need.

Maker help him, Ashalam realized, his human was even more attractive in the throes of passion. The way Caspari's body tightened, pushing deep and hard, then shook as Caspari undoubtedly spilled himself deep within the pretty male beneath him was... breathtaking, though Ashalam had no need for breath.

He sighed again, silent as always, as he watched his human slip into a light slumber, still buried deeply within the pampered, smooth-skinned male.

His own body was tight, Ashalam was surprised to notice. Tight, hard... as it hadn't been for near-on a century. Such things weren't meant to happen, but neither were his sort meant to be in the mortal realm for so long continually, so perhaps that explained it. Perhaps his form, his essence, such as it was, was becoming accustomed to the different vibrations of the mortal world. None of which was doing anything to return Ashalam's body to its usual state.

He wondered briefly what might happen if he wrapped the solidity of this room around him, as he did when reporting to his Masters. Wondered whether he might be able to touch his human, perhaps feel that soft mouth around his own turgid length. It was an appealing thought, but also a dangerous one. Especially as he'd never seen Caspari even look upon another male with desire. Until a moment earlier, in any case.

Perhaps it was simply this smooth, silk-skinned toy that Caspari desired in such a fashion, Ashalam realized then. He could understand, if so. The male was quite appealing, possibly the most attractive of his breed. If that were the case, it wouldn't do to corrupt Caspari's emotional state by intruding on what might possibly be a singular interest.

"He was mine," Ashalam heard in an unfamiliar voice. A soft voice that was just as smooth and polished as the male it belonged to. "Remind him, when I am gone. That he was mine just as much as I was his."

"How do you know I'm here?" Ashalam barely breathed the words, because the Chavri couldn't possibly know. Shouldn't even be able to suspect. Ashalam was invisible to all eyes in his natural state. Always.

"If you're speaking, you should know that I can't hear you," the pet said, still quietly. "I can feel your presence, but I can't hear you. And as I know you're not here for me, that leaves only Caspari. You watch him, I am sure. For the Church, yes? For I fear they are the only ones with the ability to bind one such as you." A soft laugh, even as Ashalam watched soft, pampered hands slide slowly over Caspari's back. "Please. Remind him that he was mine. That it is not his fault, yes?"

Ashalam barely noticed that he was pulling substance from the world. In truth, he only knew he had when his voice created shivers in the air. "You should not know these things," he said, frowning when two reddish-brown eyes that shimmered cat-like in the candlelight peered at him over Caspari's sleeping shoulder.

"I know many things that I should not," the Chavri said simply, hands still moving, though this time to gather a small bottle of oil from the carved wood that stood between bed and wall. Ashalam watched, unable to help himself, when the male poured a small amount at the top of Caspari's rear cleft. Then those fingers were following the sweet-smelling liquid and Caspari was moaning, spreading himself even while asleep.

"I know that you are aroused, though such a thing is thought to be impossible. I have never believed your kind to be sexless, regardless of the teachings of the Church." One finger pressed slowly inside Ashalam's human's body, pushing a contented mutter from Caspari's lips, though it was muffled by the Chavri's skin. "I know that you wish to enjoy my lover, who is even now becoming firm within me."

A second finger joined the first, while the Chavri's free hand drizzled a bit more oil. "And I know that Caspari would enjoy you just as much. He will find your wings fascinating, I am certain. Just as he finds my tail." The tail that pushed from beneath the twined bodies on the bed, Ashalam saw, was as golden as the smooth-skinned Chavri. It tapered at the tip, though the parts closer to the polished form were thicker.

"He does enjoy my tail," the Chavri said softly, sounding... wistful, Ashalam decided. "I suppose he will miss it when I am gone, but there is nothing to be done for it." And then that flexible, mobile tail curved up, stroked along Caspari's spread cleft, and pushed inside, moving with the fingers already there.

"I do not..." Ashalam whispered, though he stopped there. The list was entirely too long. *I don't want him and I don't do those things on the mortal plane and I don't know what you are talking about.* It was a very long list, actually, composed of those things and others Ashalam couldn't even form into words. But it was a list of lies. He did want Caspari. He didn't indulge while in the mortal realm, but only because he could not. And that was no longer the case, obviously, because he was turgid, engorged. And he definitely knew what the Chavri was saying.

"That is yet another thing I know," the Chavri murmured, a small, sly smile crossing those lips as the male looked more fully at him. "You do not lie. And you do wish to be within my lover." Ashalam couldn't do anything but nod in response to that certainty.

"Caspari," the Chavri muttered, "I need you to awaken, dearest. I've a friend who wishes to entertain you. Do you mind if he enjoys your tightness and heat while I merely lay here and take your lovely thickness again?" Ashalam nearly moaned at the idea. "He's quite nice to look upon, Caspari, and his... member... is even larger than yours. I'm certain you will enjoy him if you but say yes..."

And Caspari was indeed awake, Ashalam saw, because the human was moving slowly, rocking between the Chavri's rear and the fingers and tail that were still working Caspari's opening. It was... beautiful and strange and entirely too appealing.

"Wings," Caspari murmured, sounding intrigued. "He has wings, Victore."

"Yes, Caspari, but if I may direct your attention lower...?" Then Caspari was staring at his hardness and Ashalam felt it jump.

"You will like that, will you not, dearest?" the Chavri added, and that tail slid deeper as more oil was poured and Caspari moaned, his legs spreading wider, as though the human was offering himself up. "Oh, yes, Caspari, you will enjoy that a very great deal."

"Mmmm... soon," Caspari moaned, and to Ashalam it was the most amazing sound ever. Better than the choirs of home. "Make it be soon, Victore. I need."

That need was what pulled him the remaining few feet, Ashalam was sure. That need and the heat and sheer, wanton desire in his human's voice. Then he was on the bed between Caspari's splayed legs, and the Chavri dripped oil over Ashalam's ready shaft. That flexible tail was pulling away, followed by golden fingers, and...

"He likes it hard," the Chavri murmured. "Hard and all at once. Just... push your tip inside and take him fast."

Oh, Maker help him, Ashalam thought, even as he positioned himself, his thick head pressing right there, right up against that oil-slicked opening. He shouldn't be doing this -- shouldn't be *able* to do this -- but he could and he was and it was already so much more than what Ashalam remembered it being like. So much more... immediate.

His hands were spread on Caspari's rear, fingers wide and holding the male open, and Ashalam couldn't help groaning, moaning roughly as he pushed, pushed again, feeling that tiny ring give just a bit more with each small shove, and then... Caspari was crying out, the sound made up of pain and pleasure and something else, something that went straight to Ashalam's heavy sac, and he was in.



Oh, Maker, he was inside his human and the male was almost unbearably tight around him. Strangling Ashalam's shaft, right there below the ridge and it felt... unbelievably good.

"Yes..." Caspari hissed.

"Yes," the Chavri murmured. "Now, all in one thrust. Our Caspari does adore a good, hard joining."

His human was moaning in what sounded like agreement, and that was good enough for Ashalam. He tightened his grip on Caspari's flesh and pushed himself deep, shoring up against the human's skin with an audible smack as both Caspari and the Chavri released broken wails, and it was better than good. Better than anything.

Ashalam did it again, pulling back until just his tip was still embraced by his human's hot, slick opening, then forcing himself to flush once more. "Yes," Ashalam moaned. "That is... yes. Good."

He would never be able to remember every moment, Ashalam knew, but neither would he ever forget the slick slide and press; the way Caspari pushed back into his rough thrusts, then slammed forward into the Chavri's moaning, rocking form.

And Ashalam knew he would never forget the sensation of the Chavri's slick tail tickling his opening each time he pulled back from Caspari's tight heat. "Yes," he grunted, answering the question in the red-brown eyes he could just see over Caspari's straining shoulder. "Yes," again, and that tail was pushing in, making him gasp as it went deeper, the three of them moving in concert, suddenly, chasing sensation and pleasure and completion. Then the Chavri's tail pushed deeper still and made circles within Ashalam's body, rubbing repeatedly at a spot that made him want to scream, and... Ashalam couldn't say for certain which of them went first. It could have been the Chavri because he cried out first. It could have been Caspari because the human's opening clenched around Ashalam's pistoning shaft tighter than any fist ever could. It could even have been himself, Ashalam knew, because of the way the Chavri's tail was curling, bending double inside him like an obscenely flexible member.

Whichever of them burst first, though, had surely dragged the rest of them along, leaving them nothing but a pile of sweaty flesh in a room that stank of males and sex and pleasure, and... it was good, Ashalam decided. Very good.

"Perhaps your friend will allow me the pleasure of his body once we have... recovered, Victore," Ashalam heard his human mutter, and the Chavri laughed softly, then twitched his tail within Ashalam's form.

"I don't believe him to be likely to object, Caspari," the male said, winking at Ashalam when he pushed back on that flexible appendage. "In fact, I will happily keep him... primed for you, dearest. Until you are firm and thick and ready to enjoy his... blessedly lovely body."

"Oh... God," Caspari moaned, his voice raw and rough to Ashalam's ears. "You have your tail in him right now, don't you, Victore?"

It wasn't really a question, Ashalam knew, but the Chavri -- Victore, he reminded himself -- answered anyway, with "Of course I do, dearest. Have you ever known me to pass on a good thing? And he is definitely a good thing, Caspari. I despair of ever seeing you again after you've sampled the rest of his wares."

Oddly enough, the Chavri sounded pleased, which Ashalam didn't understand. Then he remembered the male's first words to him. That Ashalam should remind Caspari that he had been Victore's. That whatever Victore believed was going to happen was not Ashalam's human's fault.

Ashalam couldn't quite determine why, but the idea of anything undesirable happening to the young Chavri was repulsive to him. Then Caspari spoke and Ashalam frowned.

"Does your lovely friend with the amazing shaft have a name, Victore? I would rather like to know what to call him when I am plundering his body."

*Ashalam*, he mouthed, trying to make the movement of his lips as distinct as possible, then *Ashalam* again, when Victore merely blinked.

"Oh, yes. Well. Ash Melon." Ashalam rolled his eyes, but too late now. To change what the Chavri had said would likely announce that they'd never met until just that evening, and for whatever reason, Ashalam didn't want to make the young male out to be a liar.

"Ash Melon?" his human echoed, and Ashalam couldn't blame him for the amusement in his tone. Ash Melon was a ridiculous name, after all. "Perhaps it will not offend if I were to call him simply Ash."

Ashalam blinked. In more than three millennia, he had never been called by anything but his name. And yet, Ash. It was... simple, yes, and didn't define him as closely as his full name, but even at that, he found he... rather approved.

"I would like than," Ashalam answered, his voice raspy, though he believed it to be due to all the yelling he'd done so recently. "Yes, Caspari. I would like it very much if you and Victore were to call me 'Ash'."

They settled into a comfortably tangled position, though it took Ashalam some time to find one that didn't bend or pinch his wings, and he was surprised to find himself dozing, just a little. Right up until the Chavri somehow slithered from the bed, though it was the male's tail leaving his body that truly dragged Ashalam from his slightly foggy state.

"He is asleep," Victore whispered, "and is likely to remain so until we choose to wake him. I would like it if you were to join me in the sitting area for a short time. Please, Ash. It is... remarkably vital to me, if you would not mind."

It was likely to be regarding more things that the Chavri wished him to tell his human, Ashalam realized, but even so, perhaps he might discover just what Victore thought was going to happen, as well as where the young male expected to be going, because Ashalam remembered now. When Victore was gone, Ashalam should tell Caspari such and such.

Yes, Ashalam told himself, he would definitely join Victore in the area for sitting. He was... curious, he realized. Curious and... concerned and, for the first time in a hundred years, he actually felt the emotions fully. With the immediacy that a human would likely feel. It was disturbing, yes, but also oddly comfortable.

"I do not mind, Victore," Ashalam murmured as he rearranged Caspari's leaden limbs enough to slip from the bed, himself. His human slept like a rock might, as Ashalam knew very well after the years he'd been watching. He had no fear that Caspari would awaken for anything other than sunrise, or perhaps the Chavri's voice in his ear.

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Victore was taking a chance, telling Ash the truth of the situation. He couldn't be entirely sure that Ash wouldn't turn around and tell Caspari immediately, but Victore hoped he would remain silent. If he didn't, Caspari would try to fix things and that would merely get Victore's lover into a distressing degree of trouble. So much so that Caspari might not survive the experience.

Even so, Victore was fairly certain that Ash wouldn't create problems once he understood exactly what could happen to Caspari.

He'd wondered, for a moment, because Ash had been set to watch Caspari, which meant the winged male wasn't acting in a guardian capacity, but rather for the Church. Because Ash was bound. Victore could see that much. The ties were thick and nearly black around Ash's body when Ash was in his less solid form. Victore hadn't been able to see Ash, then, but he'd definitely seen the bonds. They had flickered in the corners of Victore's vision, pulsing a sickly purple-black-poison-green. It had been that sight, more than the sensation of being watched, that had told Victore of the uninvited spectator in his room.

He was glad for it now, of course, because Ash had proven to be nothing like what Victore had expected from the look of those bonds. The male was stunning and good in a way Victore had never even aspired to. Of course, that was Ash's nature, regardless of who he was constrained to assist.

Victore settled on the low bench, smiling slightly when Ash sat beside him and placed one big hand on Victore's knee. Ash was warm. Solid. And Victore thought he might actually miss the male, come morning. Not as much as he would miss Caspari, of course, but that wasn't exactly surprising. He had been entertaining Caspari for just over seven years, after all, though in Victore's heart it was much more than the client and whore relationship it really was.

There were all sorts of cheerful euphemisms for what he did, Victore knew, but he'd never been in the habit of lying to himself. Not even when his two-year-old baby sister had accidentally

shown her tail in the village Victore's family had lived in for his entire life... not even when the rest of the villagers had killed her, and Victore's parents, for being demon-spawn. It had been his fault, after all.

He was supposed to be watching Lillibetta that day, but he'd wanted to go hunting. He hadn't understood why it was a bad idea to leave his little sister with the headman's wife who had a boy just a year older than Lilly-billy-willy-girl. So when little Roberto had shown off his trick with a cup and a piece of string, Lilly had shown off her own trick.

If he'd been there, he could have stopped her, Victore knew. Lilly had loved him like he was the sun rising. But he'd been far away, hunting rabbits with his sling, and by the time he'd gotten home...

Their little house was embers. He'd been able to see his parents and Lilly there, bones melded where they'd been holding each other, and he'd cried, screamed, run to the headman's house, demanding to be told what had happened. And they'd stripped him naked, then beat him unconscious, and tied him with rough rope.

When Victore came to, surrounded by crosses and the priest from three villages over, he'd been ignored, the words coming from his mouth disregarded as though he wasn't even speaking. It was then that he'd found out how it had all come to pass. When the Priest announced that he knew of some people who might be willing to pay the village -- and the Priest, naturally -- to remove the spawn of Satan from their midst, then explained what sort of people he meant, well... Victore had figured he deserved it.

He'd deliberately chosen not to fight any more. To let the rest of his life be arranged for him. To do his penance in a way that the Gods of his people -- whoever they might be -- could look upon and believe the truth of Victore's regret. That he knew he'd ignored the one basic, but so important rule. Family first. Family always. Family before self.

"I actually thought I was lucky when Signora Alberti's man picked me for her house," he said softly to Ash, not even looking at the male. "I mean... I was fifteen, which is old to be just starting out, and I had no manners. No concept of how to be what I've become. And yet the Signora bought me. Trained me." He laughed mirthlessly. "It was ages before I even knew how to sip a glass of wine, rather than guzzling it. And even longer before I mastered a proper bow."

That was true, too, Victore remembered with a small blush for the ignorance of the boy he'd been. "I was determined, though. I would make my amends with my Gods and the family I'd killed through selfishness by giving myself over without complaint to whomever the Signora chose. And when I was finally judged ready for 'special' training, I refused to complain. Refused to beg or whimper or plead with Signora's trainers when they put fingers inside me. They didn't even have to tie me down, as they've done frequently with several new boys. I just... took it. It wasn't until a few weeks later that I started to enjoy it, though, because that was when the trainers introduced me to that spot inside. The one that makes men... shiver."

He smiled just a bit, but he couldn't quite bring himself to even glance at Ash. Not yet. "After that, I started to look forward to my penance, and I suppose that should have been a sign. Penance isn't supposed to be pleasant, after all. But I finally knew why I'd never longed for any of the girls in my village, and it wasn't because they were human. It was because they were female. I was very certain of that the first time one of the trainers presented his swollen member to me and told me the proper way of pleasuring a man with my mouth. Because I enjoyed it. Not as much when it was one of the older, more heavy set trainers, but even then, it was... Gods, it made me proud that I could bring a man that much pleasure with just my lips and tongue."

Ash was making a sound like a growl, but Victore wasn't willing to stop. Not when he was so close to being finished. Rather like sex, he realized, which had him laughing softly. "In any case," he finally went on, Ash's hand still hot on his leg, and that was a nice surprise. Apparently the male wasn't disgusted with Victore's past. Or not yet, anyway.

"In any case," he repeated, "Signora eventually decided I was ready. After more than a year of lessons in everything from speaking properly to listening well, to conducting myself as a gentleman during a meal, to spreading myself at a word, though nobody ever came close to me with more than two fingers. I would have been worth far less as used goods, after all, and Signora believed my virginity, such as it was, would net the house a tidy sum. I don't believe that she expected her customers to assume that I was far too old to be an actual virgin, though, because she was getting a good bit angry after two months with no bids. She had actually started to negotiate with Signore Drescato when Caspari made his offer."

And Signora had accepted, which Victore was still thankful for. "I thought I'd been saved, Ash," he admitted after a silent moment. "I truly thought I'd been saved. Signore Drescato has ruined every boy he's ever touched and, when Caspari chose me, I thought I wouldn't have to worry about that evil, old man ever again. But I was wrong. Because I took my training too much to heart. Because I listened entirely too well, and once Signora taught me to think and consider and look at how things interplayed with each other, I... put some hard facts together. Like... Signora doesn't really set any of our fees aside for the day we'll work off our debt. We are not -- not any of us -- indentured servants. We are slaves. Bought and paid for and nothing more than an investment for the Signora."

He sighed. "I'm sure it makes it easier that most of us aren't exactly human. That's how Signora got her reputation, after all. Men can find things in Signora's house that aren't available anywhere else. Not with the veneer of civilized behavior, in any case. And since we are not human, we are not real. Which means it's not sinful or even slightly wrong to 'retire' us by giving us to the Signore and letting him... break us. Destroy us to the point that we choose to end our own lives."

Ash was growling even more, so Victore forced himself to look up, to look over and meet those blue and gold eyes. "So," he said simply, voice as flat and expressionless as he could make it, "Signora is giving me to her... uncle, who is also her father and the father of her two daughters. In the morning, once Caspari has left. She will undoubtedly tell him that I leaped at the chance to be free and took my earnings to start a new life, should he return and express any interest in my whereabouts. Somewhere outside of Rome, she will say. And he will believe her because why would she lie? It is precisely what he was told about his last regular whore, after all."

"Victore," Ash began, but Victore just shook his head, hoping he looked as accepting and sad as he was, rather than as furious as he also was.

"There is nothing to be done for it, Ash. Even if Caspari had the ridiculous number of florins Signora demands for buying one of us outright, she would not agree to sell me. I know too much, you see, and I foolishly allowed one of the others to goad me into saying as much." He shook his head. "No, my friend. I am afraid I am well and truly caught. I don't ask that anyone save me from my own mistakes. I just... please tell him for me. Tell him that..."

"That he was yours, too," Ash finished for him, which only proved the male had been listening from the very beginning, even before the moaning and groaning and completion they'd enjoyed. "That it is not his fault that you are... gone."

Ash sounded angry, but Victore simply nodded. "Yes, and that I am well, wherever I may be. And when he has replaced me with another of the Signora's boys, I would like it if you would make sure that he does not grow too attached. He has a tender heart, my Caspari. A gentle soul, for all that he works with darkness more often than I like."

"Maker," Ash said, sounding just as sad as Victore felt. "This is..." The male sighed and shook his head.

"Yes," Victore agreed, letting one deep breath leave him in a slow, shuddering gust. "Precisely, Ash. This is. It just... *is*. And I believe we should return to bed. My Caspari will wonder if we don't wake him as we promised."

And he would have to take what joy he could in the remainder of the night, Victore knew, because Caspari would be gone with the sunrise, and Ash as well. And then, he realized, his true penance would begin.

He only hoped he survived it long enough to balance the register with his Gods and the spirits of his family.

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Ashalam couldn't quite believe what he was doing. It went against everything he'd ever believed Maker would allow, and yet... there he was, wrapped in the fabric of the mortal realm, though he'd thinned it almost nothing around his wings. They weren't even noticeable unless a human already knew what he was and stared with intent.

And Maker hadn't sent a single sign to indicate that Ashalam was endangering his own existence, which meant... what?

Well, that Maker either wasn't opposed or wasn't paying attention, and if Ashalam chose to believe the former, that was acceptable. He was an imperfect creation, after all, and Maker knew as much.

That didn't really explain why he'd crept from Victore's bed after experiencing the unexpected ecstasy of Caspari's member being buried deep inside his yearning body. It didn't explain why he was treasuring the ache of that thick shaft or remembering the way he'd felt when Victore's tail had pushed into him, as well, sliding along Caspari's shaft and opening Ashalam more than he'd ever known possible.

It didn't even come close to explaining why Ashalam could still taste the Chavri's essence on his tongue from when the male had cried out and pushed so deep into Ashalam's throat, he'd wondered whether they would ever be able to work that warm plug from his grasping muscles.

They had, though, and that had led to Ashalam wandering the pre-dawn streets of Rome, barely making note of the street walkers who were at least in charge of their own destinies, unlike Victore.

It was wrong, he knew, that the male would be cast off to be abused and defiled in the way he'd seen in Victore's mind when the Chavri had been speaking about Signore Drescato. Because he had seen it. Seen it so clearly, it still made him feel ill, which wasn't something Ashalam had ever experienced before. His kind were never unwell, and perhaps that was why it had taken him so long to understand what the strange twisting in his gut meant, Ashalam realized.

Whatever the impetus, though, he definitely felt ill. Victore had been one of those who had tried to clean up the last young one in the Signora's house who had either annoyed the woman or proven to be too stubborn to give in. The boy hadn't been like Victore, discovering his own leanings. In fact, the boy had been entirely opposed to the idea of males using his body for pleasure. So opposed that even when tied to the training rack, he'd managed to break one trainer's nose and made another incapable of doing more than moan for close to a week.

By the time Victore and a few of the other males had been called in, the poor fifteen-year-old boy had been bloody and raw. It was only the fact that Signore Drescato had left the young one's face alone that assured the boy of a spot in the house once he healed. And when the boy had, he hadn't muttered a single word of objection to the string of perverted pain-mongers the Signora had sent his way in an effort to defray the florins she'd spent on training him but not being able to sell his virginity, because that was entirely gone. Likely within moments of Signore Drescato entering the room where the boy had been strapped, immobile this time, to the same training rack he'd fought from before.

Yes, Ashalam realized. He felt ill and he had every reason. The Signora was the kind of person the Church should be spying on, not Caspari Rocco. It was the Signora and her father-lover-uncle who should be punished, and Ashalam was going to see to it that they were.

It was outside the scope of his duties. Even outside of the actions he was permitted. He shouldn't be able to even consider taking action without his Masters demanding it, and that should have bothered him, but it didn't.

He would do what was necessary, Ashalam knew. He would destroy the Signora and her mate. And he would do it within the next hour, because there wasn't a single possibility that he was going to let the evil woman -- and her minion or master, whichever Signore Drescato was to her -- harm either his human or his Chavri. And if Maker had a problem with that, then Maker could show up and stop him, Ashalam thought, feeling decidedly militant.

The only problem, Ashalam told himself a few minutes later, was the daughters. He had no idea of whether they were as twisted as their mother and... father, though it made him feel even more ill to think that the daughters' father, great-uncle and grandfather were one and the same. That didn't make the children evil, no matter how much Ashalam wished otherwise. That would be easy, but nothing in the mortal realm was easy, he was starting to realize since he'd wrapped himself in the solidity of it and held to that weight.

He needed to see the children first, though he hated the necessity. It wasn't something he could put off. He needed to *know*, and before he took any action with regards to the Signora and Signore.

That decided, he slipped quickly in to the next alleyway he passed and shrugged off his mortal substance. The children would likely be in some part of the Signora's house that was closed to her clients, he decided, and that being the case, he... shifted, letting the ether slip past as he focused, remembered, and found himself in Victore's room once again.

Ashalam surprised himself with the tenderness he felt as he gazed at his human and Chavri wrapped so tightly together, then he pushed on, sliding through the closed door and into the dimly lit hallway.

He heard all sorts of things through the doors scattered at random intervals, some sounds seeming pleased, others sounding pained. He only stopped once, on the next floor down, when he heard the unmistakable sound of a young male being forced. The desperate, hopeless cries of "No, Gods no... stop, please, I'll do whatever you want," were met by a smug, self-satisfied voice grunting, "This *is* what I want. Fight more, little whore. The more you bleed, the better it is for both of us. Yes, just like that. I love the smell..."

It took less than a moment for Ashalam to shift himself past the thick plane of wood and see that it wasn't a fantasy but that the big, fat, and truly old male was really forcing himself upon the much smaller male -- a satyr, Ashalam thought, and for a satyr to be begging someone to stop was... well, Ashalam didn't feel even the slightest bit of guilt when he slammed his invisible hand through the defiling male's back and wrapped his fingers around the pounding heart. He didn't feel anything but justified when he let his hand become solid inside that laboring chest and squeeze, either.

In fact, he felt nothing but good when the offending male toppled over with a look of shock frozen on that dead face. Then he felt better than good because the young satyr -- and he couldn't have been more than eighty years old, which was something like twelve for a human -- was curling into a ball of smooth skin and furry legs and bleeding rear, muttering "Thank Zeus, oh, thank you, Zeus, and please get me out of here soon..."



Yes. He would see to it that nobody working in the house ever had to do anything they didn't want to again, but first he had to find the children, which meant no more distractions, no matter what he heard.

Even so, Ashalam pushed his incorporeal hand inside the young satyr, rearranging torn bits and ripped edges, lining them up as best he could in the hopes that the male would heal faster.

Then he slipped through the heavy wooden door and let himself drop through the floor. Then through the next floor. It had occurred to him that sound generally traveled upward, and if he were the Signora and her... well. Her whatever. He wouldn't want his daughters hearing the screams and cries for help. Until they were of an age to be useful, in any case, but Ashalam thought Victore would have said something, if that were the case.

It was amazing, Ashalam told himself, how things could change between one floor and the next, because he'd been right. In fact, he'd been more than right.

The level he had found boasted lush furnishings, yes, but only those of the sort that might be found in any other obscenely wealthy household. There were beautiful books in a case against one wall -- what looked like fifty or so, which was wealth beyond measure -- and a large mirror hanging that had to be long enough to reflect an entire body. It barely distorted the reflection of the room, and that was another sign that the people inhabiting that place were likely on par with the upper level Doges, financially.

Of course, Ashalam reminded himself, they should be, considering what they charged for the services of the males upstairs... and even more so since they killed those same males when they became too old or merely...inconvenient.

He heard an odd sort of barking laugh and followed it down a hallway, then into what was clearly a little girl's bedroom. Or two little girls who weren't so little, he realized as he stared at the long but narrow beds and the two young women who were staring raptly at a woman who had to be the Signora.

She was reading to the girls, but Ashalam could tell that the young human females weren't getting anything from it other than the fact that the nice lady was back and paying attention to them.

Their coarse features and dazed expressions would have made it clear to him, even if one of the girls -- presumably the one he'd heard laughing before -- hadn't spoken just then. The only word he could recognize in her indistinct ramble was love.

Those poor children, Ashalam told himself, wishing he were still wrapped in mortal substance so he could cry. Those poor, poor souls. Cursed by their own creation and innocent. So very, very innocent. And their mother loved them; that much was clear. Yet the Signora was evil when away from her daughters, and it was necessary that the woman die.

He couldn't even delay, Ashalam knew. She had to die before the sun rose if Ashalam was to keep her from giving his Chavri to the male who had likely been the one to twist her so much that she'd become... what she was.

It wasn't the Signora's fault, Ashalam admitted to himself. She had been dragged into being the woman she'd become. But it was too late for her, even though she clearly loved her daughters, as ill-made as they were. God-touched, he'd heard some of the priests say when referring to poor souls like the two young women who were really little girls inside.

But Maker had nothing to do with the kind of insanity that caused one to breed children who would never grow up in any way other than physically. And Maker had definitely never supported or suggested any belief system that said people being different was cause enough to enslave them, work them until they were no longer useful, then give them to someone who would manipulate them into ending their own lives, thus keeping them and their experiences from Maker-himself.

And oh... the Signora and her lover were almost unbelievably smart, Ashalam realized. No matter that their daughters were... special and innocent.

Buy the males. Work them until their usefulness ended. Then break them down, moment by moment and pain by pain, until they were so deep in despair that they took the final step and deliberately removed themselves from torment. Likely because either Signora or Signore Drescato had left the means nearby to accomplish just that. Accidentally, of course.

And those souls would never go to Maker. Maker would never know how or why they'd disappeared. And more importantly to the Signora and Signore, Ashalam was sure, they would remain unknown.

It was a very good scheme, Ashalam admitted with a small bit of anger at himself while the rest of his fury was directed to the creators of the idea, as well as of the poor, unaware girls they had also created. In fact, on a deeply buried and highly loathsome level, he was impressed.

"Now sleep, my loves," the Signora said as she closed the book and kissed two jutting foreheads. "Mama will be here when you wake. My beautiful, perfect girls. I love you more than anything."

She meant it, Ashalam realized when he prodded her mind. She truly did love her children, no matter that they didn't have enough awareness to love her back. In fact, he realized sadly, she was excited that the older one moaned "Maaaaaaaaa..."

And yet the Signora was still evil, and he had to do what he had to do.

He waited until she was in her bedroom and had changed into her sleeping gown. Waited until she'd bound her hair in a complicated knot that Ashalam thought would look good on Victore. He even stayed his hand when she picked up a book of crabbed writing and blank pages and sat at her desk. Right up to the point when he saw her words flowing onto the page.

*I hope Papa can get the little satyr prepared for his place here, she wrote, because I spent fifteen florins for him. Fifteen! It will likely take close to two months to make that back, once he's sufficiently cowed. And yes, I know we will have him for... decades because they age so slowly, but I need to be sure I have enough to leave for the girls. Papa won't live forever, even though I'd like him to, and he's certainly handy for eliminating...problems. He has a skill with turning hate into love, after all. I remember how much I despised him when he first showed me how much he loved me, six months after Mama died.*

The Signora paused then and bit her lip, like she was trying to decide how much to say, even in her private account.

*But then he gave me my darling Emelia, and there has never been a child so sweet and kind. Then my dear Julianna, though Papa insisted upon that name, as it was Mother's. I have even become used to the way Papa forces me, and I suppose that is a good thing. I rather look forward to it, most mornings. Perhaps he will finish with the satyr soon and come to our bed. I am somewhat anxious for his strong, heavy body forcing itself upon me. Even when he chooses to make use of that channel that will provide me no more sweet girls to raise.*

Maker, Ashalam thought, he almost felt badly for the Signora. Almost wanted to find some method of showing her the error of her ways. But he couldn't, or at least not quickly enough to save his Chavri... and possibly his human, too, because even if he told the lie Victore had asked of him -- if he'd been *able* to lie -- Ashalam was sure Caspari would blame himself.

There was no other way, Ashalam told himself, though he was feeling an odd degree of sympathy for the human woman sitting there. She was twisted and wrong and, yes, she loved her insensate daughters. But she was dangerous to every single person in the building. Dangerous to Ashalam's human and Chavri. And there was little chance that she would ever change. So, no. The Signora had to die. It was... necessary.

So he did exactly what he'd done to the human who'd be defiling the young Satyr. The human Ashalam suddenly knew was the Signore whom Victore had so feared.

He reached into the woman's chest and squeezed fingers cloaked in mortal fiber around her heart until it was nothing but a limp, abused muscle that would never become active again. Then he faded out, shifting through space to his cell, where he wrapped himself in mortal fabric once again.

"There is a place," Ashalam announced to the young priest who was waiting there, and who was Ashalam's favorite simply because the young human treated him like a being, rather than a particularly insensate commodity. "A place in the city. It is known as Signora Alberti's and it is a..." The priest was blushing, and Ashalam knew what that meant, though he wasn't going to say as much.

"Beneath the main floor is a home," he went on, all the while hoping the young priest would either forget to ask how Ashalam knew or decide not to care. "In that home, there are two

children. They look like young women, but they are children. They need somewhere safe, Father. Somewhere that their parents' wealth will make pleasant."

"Like a nunnery," Father Gaspardi suggested. "But do their parents want this, Ashalam? Is it a prayer that you've overheard?"

Ashalam sighed and for the first time in his entire existence... lied.

It wasn't easy. It didn't flow from him as effortlessly as he'd heard falsehoods drop from the lips of humans, but he did it.

"Their mother, at least, wanted them to be happy and safe. Their father..." and maybe he wasn't lying, after all, Ashalam realized, and so he spoke the truth with a great deal of relief. "Their father was their grandfather and uncle and... Maker only knows what else he might have decided to be to them, given a few more years. But these children... they're innocents, Father. Unable to speak, even for themselves."

"I will do what may be done," the Priest said a moment later, and while Ashalam had never listened in on one of his Masters before, he did this time... and saw that this young human could be trusted.

"I thank you," Ashalam said seriously, and when the Priest merely nodded and left Ashalam's prison, Ashalam let the fabric of mortality leave him and shifted himself to his males.

Or tried to, because when he opened his eyes, he was still in his cell.

He tried again, with as little result, then again. And again.

He tried enough that his knees were weak, his eyes blurry.

And then one of his Masters was there. One of his Masters who Ashalam didn't much like. One of those who spoke to him as though he was a trained dog, unlike the younger priest who'd been there before.

"You think yourself so clever," that human stated, his glance darting around the tiny stone room. "You think... what? That you're some sort of savior? That God actually cares what you do or why?" The male chuckled and Ashalam really wanted to rip the raiment of supposed faith from that mortal's body.

"God gave you to *us*," the male went on. "To use as we see fit. And at no point did any of us tell you to ruin Signora Alberti's House. After all, what could be more blessed than using demons the way they seek to use us? If you were any kind of an angel, you'd see that. When we add that to the fact that you couldn't even manage to find an excuse to bring in the *sorcerer*," the male went on, "after as long as you've been watching him? It is clear that you have been swayed. By whatever means. Thus, you are no longer a representative of the Creator. You're just another non-human who needs to be taught a lesson."

And the male was lifting the tails of his cassock, fingers struggling to open the fastenings there, and Ashalam was done. He was through. Finished with this bizarre sect that assumed they knew more and better than he did. He was one of Maker's first creations, after the six or so pantheons before him. Which still left him at least five generations of Creation before the ancestors of the repulsive specimen before him had even started to think about crawling from the primordial ooze Maker had designed.

"I would become a baby-raping philistine like Signore Drescato before I would willingly allow you near me with your member, Father," Ashalam said seriously. "You would perhaps do well to reconsider whatever course of action you are currently entertaining, for I will not have you." Except Ashalam was really hoping the priest wouldn't rethink things. Really and truly, when he thought about it.

"Oh, you'll have me," the human announced. "In whatever manner I so choose. You don't have any choice. Ashalam. On your knees!"

And Ashalam sank to the floor, though not as quickly as he would have even a day earlier. Then the male's pitifully small shaft was pushing at his lips and the male demanded "Open!"... and that was just what he'd been waiting for.

Ashalam sprang up from the floor, fully wrapped in mortal seeming, then kned the priest hard, crushing the offending flesh viciously.

"I should thank you," he said, meaning every word. "If you had not violated the terms of your clan's *contract with Maker* with your vile command, I would likely have been stuck with your sect forever. As it is, you might consider yourself lucky that I'm leaving your manhood intact. Such as it is." Ashalam pretended to consider before he gave the unfortunate priest a sweet smile. "Then again with as well as you sing, Father Danielo, perhaps they will make you a castrati. Either way, it is you who has freed me. I believe I may almost... pity you your future, if one may call it that."

And with that, Ashalam was gone, following the ether-sense that would lead him to his lovers.

When he got arrived, he cloaked himself in the fabric of mortality again, then slipped into bed with his human and Chavri.

He wrapped himself around them both and moaned softly when Victore's tail slid up between his thighs, finally pushing into him, opening him for what Ashalam knew would be another round of Maker-help-him joy.

And that was fine. He was free of the church, free of everything that had constrained him before. He could even be just : "Ash", if he so chose... and he did.

He would be Ash to his lovers, the both of them. And he would not willingly leave them until Maker called him back to the fold. Even then, Ash told himself, he would watch over them if

such should occur in their lifetimes. It was what his sort did, after all, when they weren't being held prisoner by an evil cult within the Holy Church.

Ash believed they had at least a day or so before the news of the Signora and Signore's so-sad and so-deserved fates made it up to the third floor. Until then, he was more than happy to enjoy his sorcerer... and his Chavri.

Beyond that, well... there was something to be said for the human idea of figuring things out as one went along. Regardless of how sudden it seemed, Ashalam was interested now in the human things. Or at least real world things.

He might never shed mortal substance again, Ashalam realized. Or not as long as his lovers remained alive, barring Maker's call. And that was... fit. Acceptable within Maker's code.

That being so, Ashalam did what he'd never done before, in three thousand years of existence, give or take.

He wrapped himself carefully around Caspari and Victore, giving himself a moment to commit the sensations to memory. Then he closed his eyes and slept, secure in the knowledge that his males would be there when he woke.

It was... almost unbearably perfect. But only almost. Ash felt sure that he could endure it for as long as they had.

Trine

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