

MASTER OF THE LINES 5:  
CODA

Angela Fiddler

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# Master of the Lines 5: Coda

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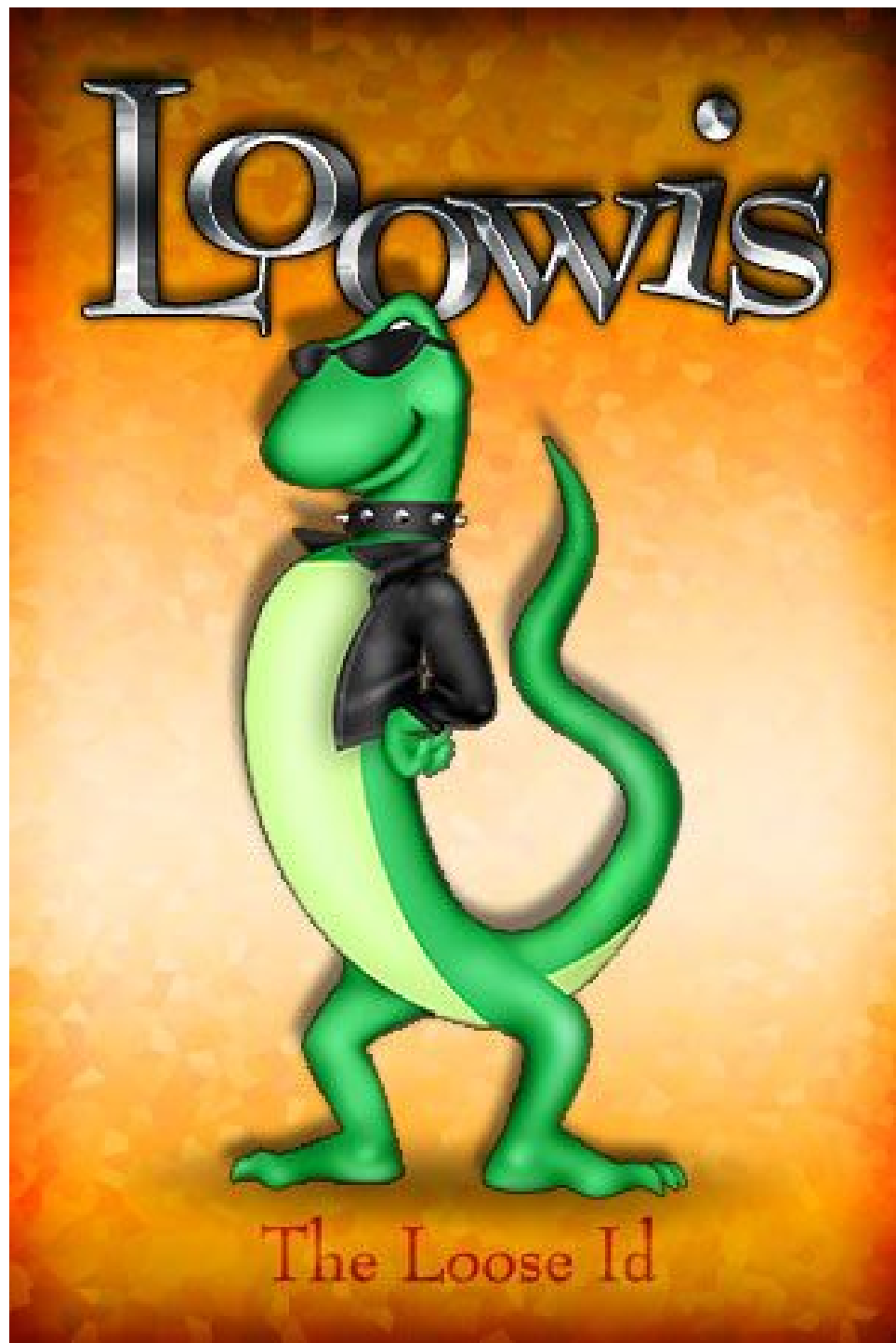
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## Chapter One

The distance between the garage and the house itself was not far. It could be done, and had been done, at a dead run with the streaks of murderous sunlight racing them to the door.

But the night was still early, and Vision paused halfway down the path. He stood in the shadow of the huge oak trees that hedged the east of the property and their bets on their early morning bolts, but the flash of discomfort didn't return. He waited, moving to the shadow of the garage, but just normal night sounds followed.

The moon broke from behind the clouds, a bleak grinning skull, and Vision was suddenly ridiculously glad its light hadn't fallen on his skin. There was something in that moonlight, and it was looking for him.

That was stupid. Heightened senses told Vision that Hanz was working merrily away on an old sports car he'd helped buy, and that...

Vision was being hunted. Awkwardly, with all the panache of a wounded wildebeest. This had nothing to do with the cold moonlight and took less than a willed thought to throw whoever it was "hunting" him up against the far side of the garage. A muffled thump, curse, and crash later, the hunter became the-pinned-against-the-wall-still-seriously-pissed-off.

The music in the garage snapped off. Vision waited for Hanz to poke his head out of the garage. Despite his displeasure, Vision flushed at how Hanz filled out the jeans he wore. He was square and functional, from the line of his jaw to the way he stood, but it worked for Vision. Hanz's sandy hair was in dry spikes, something he would never let off the property, but Vision loved it. Hanz glanced over Vision from top to bottom, but saw no obvious sign of distress.

"Sir?" he asked.

"Wait for me inside," Vision said. The annoyance he felt was a stab in the ribs; he just wanted to follow Hanz into the garage. It was what he'd come out for. But instead, he had an object lesson to look forward to.

Hanz shot him a hesitant look, clearly wanting to say something, but Vision wasn't in the mood. Hanz closed his mouth loudly and nodded. "Of course, sir," he said. He clearly wanted to ask Vision to be gentle on his son, who was still struggling uselessly against the bonds now holding him. Kane was stronger now, pulling at the compulsion that would have ensnared him completely even six months ago.

Vision took Hanz's hand and squeezed it. "I'm not going to hurt him."

"Thank you, sir."

Vision waited an extra second. Hanz went back into the garage and turned his music back on, low at first, then at glass-rattling level. Vision walked around the garage. Kane was floundering now, like an exhausted fly trapped in a web, and if there were any real predators out in the night besides himself, they would have been attracted to the frantic motion. In the old days, Vision would have just had to dig his teeth into Kane's throat and fuck him boneless.

But that was the old way, and Vision wanted to let it go, and not just because Kane was Hanz's son from before Hanz was turned. It wasn't exactly Kane's fault. He'd torn out a

vampire elder's heart with his bare hand. The death should have killed him, violent as it was, and Kane had just been human.

But he'd survived, and it left him something not entirely human, not completely vampire. And there was no hiding how much of an alpha he'd become. The challenge he gave off, when combined with the stain that just looked like a tattoo, left Vision raw inside. He knew he should have sent Kane away, someplace safe but distant, but the mark had with it the power of the elder he'd killed, and Kane was now quite the prize.

Which left Vision in the position of a schoolmaster, and being stalked on his own property definitely meant class was back in session.

He rounded the last corner slowly, letting Kane feel him come. The compound was the center of his power; there was no way Kane couldn't have felt it. At least the struggles stopped.

Kane was still up against the wall. He looked like Hanz in the most basic way. Hanz had the same brow, the same chin, and the same sandy hair, but Kane was beautiful where Hanz was merely functional.

Kane fought again, managing to move his head a good quarter inch from the cedar shake behind his skull. Vision slammed it back into place with a flick of his wrist. The night was brisk, and Kane wore a leather jacket that hid the pulsing mark covering most of his arm, shoulder, and neck.

He was alive, smelling of blood and breath, and he'd probably never develop the full teeth unless he was properly turned, but his incisors were sharper than they had been.

Although not compelled by Vision, Kane slammed his head against the wall again. He swore, under his breath. "I didn't know it was you," Kane began. He didn't call Vision either by his name or by "sir," but masterfully constructed his sentences so he didn't have to do either.



Vision said nothing, not for a long time, but Kane didn't squirm. "Who else would it have been, Kane?"

Kane exhaled. "Something else. Someone else. It didn't feel like you. I'm --"

He didn't apologize, but stared down at the ground instead. Vision had deposed two former masters, both years older, both years stronger. He knew there were those in the conclave he belonged to who would be thrilled if this young pup did manage to take him down, but the two of them had an agreement. It was an uneasy truce, based mostly on how disappointed Hanz would be if Vision screwed up and accidentally killed Kane.

Vision backed away and released Kane from the wall. Kane shrugged, testing to see if he was really free or just free from the wall, but he did so as inconspicuously as possible so that Vision wouldn't know. Of course, Vision did know, because he would have done the same thing. They were more alike than Kane would ever admit. Kane wasn't looking at him, but he wasn't looking at his feet anymore, either. He stared past Vision's shoulder, and there wasn't much Vision could say that would sink in. So he said nothing. Eventually, Kane exhaled. He still sounded human. His heartbeat was sullen, though, and slower than it should have been to keep him alive. "Don't you feel it?" Kane finally asked.

Vision didn't ask him to clarify. Of course he felt it. The threat was gone or was muted so that it no longer felt like nails on a chalk board. But it was there. Wordlessly, they looked up to the full moon. "Go inside," Vision told Kane. From elsewhere in the house, toward the back where the servants' quarters had once been, the video game that Kane had abandoned was still going strong.

Kane looked like he was going to argue, even though he clearly didn't want to admit Vision was right. Vision waited for him to reach the door, not entirely sure, but not wanting the boy to be out in the open, either. The carved, heavy wooden door closed behind Kane, and Vision nodded. To himself or to the moon, he wasn't quite sure. He went into the garage.

Hanz was staring at an engine, up on the blocks, but wasn't actually looking at what he was seeing. His hair had just been cut short enough that the curls didn't have a chance in the short spikes, and he had a new grease smudge under his left eye. He'd been listening for Vision, and probably in no small part for the sounds of a struggle. When Vision walked in, he straightened and turned around. Vision waited, but Hanz said nothing at all.

Hanz glanced up to the chains hanging from the ceiling. Vision's anger disappeared. He swallowed, hard. Hanz looked back to him, asking permission first. Vision nodded. His muscles held a residual tension, but Hanz would take care of that.

The controls whirled to life, and the hook came down to within Hanz's reach. Still, other than summoning the chain down, Hanz didn't move. Vision didn't want to ask him to hurry up, but the silence after the eerie moonlit race put his senses, already on high alert, into overdrive.

Hanz smiled, tossing the hook away and then catching it. It was a lazy motion and yet seemed to take up all of Hanz's attention. "Do you want to tell me what to do, sir?" he asked.

Yes. Yes, Vision did. Hell yes, in fact. Vision wanted to stalk Hanz backward, pin him against the wall, and make him --

Vision forced himself to relax. "No."

"No what, Vision?"

"No. I don't want to tell you what to do." Vision bit back everything else he was going to say. Hanz nodded, regardless. He threw the hook one more time, caught it, and then let it hang still.

"What is it that you want, then?" Hanz came around the engine block. His voice was soft, but his face wasn't. Vision could tell him to piss off, and Hanz would look chagrined for a second and be as deferential as ever. The blood was still raised inside him, and the desire that grew stronger the longer Kane was under his roof, but there was something calming about being alone with Hanz. Vision could relax.

"I want you," Vision said. "You know I want you."

Hanz cocked his head. Vision ground his human teeth. There was no pushing Hanz. Vision didn't have to obey, but Hanz wouldn't let him do both. If Vision were honest, he wouldn't have it any other way. So he took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled. "Please, Hanz."

Hanz's smile didn't change, but he put his hand on Vision's shoulder and pushed him down to the floor. Vision knelt. He was a hundred times stronger than Hanz, but that wasn't the point, either. The cold concrete wasn't at all comfortable, though Vision hardly felt the chill at all.

Hanz settled down against the frame of the hot little orange sports car he was working on. He reached into the body just about half a foot from where Vision was and brought the bottle up to his lips, but didn't drink. Not quite yet. He looked down at Vision, observed him for a minute and toed Vision's knees further apart. Vision hissed before he could stop himself, and Hanz noticed. Rather than draw away, he rubbed his knuckles against Vision's exposed fangs.

Vision snarled, drawing back, but Hanz raised an eyebrow. Vision exhaled but was unable to completely relax. The more he tried -- and he did try -- the less into the headspace he found himself. Hanz stroked the back of Vision's neck, but rather than finding it soothing, the feeling annoyed Vision.

Hanz broke away and waited, but Vision stood up and started pacing. The rows of cars, all lovingly restored and maintained by Hanz, were just wrong. Hanz watched him, concerned. "It doesn't have to be like this," he called. "You could fuck me against the wall, if you like."

Vision glared at him.

Hanz held out his hands. Vision still had anger inside him, but it wasn't directed. He yanked the door open. Hanz began calling his name, but then time slowed right down.

Vision had been stepping through the doorway, but rather than stepping into the private drive of his estate, there was nothing outside of the garage but more of the silvery moonlight.

Vision blinked, but the stark wasteland didn't change. He looked behind him, to call Hanz over to him, but the garage was gone. He still felt the chill from the air conditioner in the garage, but he was alone. The moon was huge, yards across from where he stood, and the moon's seas stared down at him like empty eye sockets.

Whatever had done this wanted Vision alarmed. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited. He could still hear the video game playing, but it was miles away, like the distant sound of traffic early in the morning.

"You don't startle easily, Vision," the moon said. Vision looked back up to it. The bone-like surface grinned down at him. "I have to give you credit for that at least."

"I hate to break it to you, but you're hardly my first bad guy," Vision called.

The moon laughed, a bitter sound that shook the air. "I am going to enjoy destroying you."

"Are you done?" Vision called mockingly, but tested where his power was as carefully as Kane had tried to move. No matter how much he pulled, however, the ground here was dead. No human had ever stepped here before, and there were no lines to pull from. But Vision was still full of his own tension. He stared at the moon, reaching out for it, and when he touched it, he felt the artificial constructs around him. He concentrated on the distant sounds of the video game. The sky rumbled, and huge flakes of silver began to fall, like twisting an oil painting.

Whatever it was, it fought against him, trying to slam him back. But Vision's lands were still beneath the landscape, his lines of power still under the ground, and he'd never taken well to being challenged.

Something struck him from behind. Vision braced himself, and it did no more than make him stagger. Now he had a direction. He turned away from the moon, though it made

the hair on the back of his neck rise. There was nothing behind him, just more silver light off gray ground. But he knew he was facing the house because the video game was louder. More strength came to him, and he pushed back whoever it was. The moon snarled at him, but Vision was back in the drive, Hanz's hand on his shoulder.

"What was it?" Hanz was asking. There might have been more to the question, but Vision didn't hear it.

He looked around, but the drive was empty. Vision exhaled sharply. "We're expecting company."

Without prompting, Hanz glanced at the moon.

## Chapter Two

Janus was bored. He leaned against his boardroom chair, fighting the urge to drum his nails against the leather arms. Vision had sat this one out, as redistribution talks had nothing to do with him and his wild lines. Janus hadn't much cared for the elder sessions when he'd been just a lieutenant. At least then he had Vision to fuck on occasion, and his old master, Breylorn, was never much of a stickler for Janus being there for the whole meeting.

Now, Janus wasn't just an elder sitting down among the other elders; he was at the head of the table. Vision's chair immediately to his right was empty, but Breylorn was to his left, and he was paying attention to both sides. It was another territory dispute; the older of the two had had his lands infringed upon. Janus would have told both of them to just stop whining, but even without Vision there, he heard the disapproving cluck he made with his tongue.

"Vote," Janus said, cutting the younger of the two off. He was pretty too, all wide eyes and curly red hair. He'd obviously been the darling of his master before the elder had died two years ago. Vision gave him a very slim chance of surviving another year.

"Janus, I haven't finished yet," he began.

“We’ve all heard this story a hundred times before,” Janus said. The phone in his pocket vibrated. “So get it over with and vote. I’ll support whatever is decided.” He pushed his chair back. His own pet nemesis, Lagrishe, glared at him as he walked past, but Janus smiled at him brilliantly and pushed open the heavy wooden door.

The lieutenants glanced up from whatever had their attention previously. There was a hunger to them, something that was foreign to Janus. When he was a lieutenant, before the slaughter that had killed off over half the elders, lieutenants rarely became the masters of their territories. They were allowed to kill their own masters, and only their masters, as that was one of their first rules, but most elders could sniff out the most ambitious and remove them before they came into any more power. It was a delicate line between trust and ambition.

They seemed rowdier than usual. Even Janus could tell that, and he wondered if it was because Hanz was missing. It seemed when Hanz was among them, they hid their naked ruthlessness with a veneer of civility. He was glad Lyall had begged off too, rather than be subjected to it. He looked around the faces and regretted, just for a second, that he’d made Lyall one of them.

His phone vibrated again, and he fished it out. It was Vision. “What are you doing, answering your phone? Isn’t the conclave still in session?” Vision said, instead of a greeting.

“My phone rang,” Janus said. “What are you doing calling me if you don’t want me to answer it?”

“There’s this thing called ‘voice mail’ now, Janus. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

“Did you really want to wait until I check my messages, Vision. Really?”

“Point,” Vision allowed. There was tension in his voice, but he was smiling.

Janus leaned against the wall. “So what is it?”

“I’m not sure. It could be nothing but empty threats and promises.”

“But?” Janus asked.

“He seemed to have a lot of power.”

“From where? I’m not feeling a drain.”

Vision exhaled. “The moon.”

“What?”

“You must have heard me. The moon.”

“The moon,” Janus repeated.

“That’s what I said.”

Janus glanced outside the smoked glass. The moon was still out, but it was sinking.  
“Meet me at the apartment tomorrow evening?”

There was a pause. It probably wasn’t fear; Vision wouldn’t have shown it even if he was terrified, but there was hesitation. “I have a meeting with Breylorn first thing. But after the conclave meeting I should have time,” Vision said, finally.

“Vision --” Janus began, but knew that if Vision wanted his help, he would have had no problem asking for it. “Take care of yourself.”

“Of course.”

Janus closed the phone and left. The voting had just finished, against the young redhead. Rather than go back inside, he summoned the elevator and took his car back to his apartment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vision hung up the phone and went inside with Hanz. It felt good not being under the silver light. Once they were inside the entrance, Vision leaned against the door. The wood burned the back of his shoulders as though it had been full daylight. He glanced down at his watch and rubbed the back of his neck. Hanz was still wiping his hands with a yellow rag, but stopped when Vision exhaled.

“I have paperwork to do. If I’m not done in three hours, drag me out of the office.”



Hanz tossed the rag over his shoulder and came up behind him. He kissed the back of Vision's neck. "If that's what you want, sir."

"It's what I want," Vision said and forced himself to step away so that he didn't get perversely turned on by the smell of grease cleaner. He did have standards, however low the years had left them. He cleared his throat. "I'll be..." He made a gesturing motion, because the word "upstairs" temporarily eluded him.

"Of course, sir," Hanz said.

Vision went up and closed the office door behind him.

Paperwork wasn't the bane of his existence. That would be stakes, decapitation, and sunlight, and Vision wasn't fond of hyperbole. But the fat folder marked *Very Urgent* with the *very* underlined twice -- as opposed to the one underlined once, and the one below that marked urgent without any modifier at all -- was getting thicker by the day. He'd just opened it, found a pen that had enough ink, and fired up his computer, when there was a knock on the door.

Vision waited. Hanz would knock and then let himself in, but when the doorknob didn't turn, he pushed back in his chair. "What?" he demanded.

The door opened. It wasn't Frank, who would have known to go through Hanz when Vision was in his study, but a much subdued Kane. Vision leaned back in his chair. "I didn't mean to snap," he said. Which was a lie -- he'd totally meant to snap -- but the look of dejection on Kane's face made Vision wish he hadn't. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Kane didn't answer. He was probably taller than his father now, which was something Vision hadn't noticed until Kane stood in the doorway. His shoulders were broader now too, and the last bit of coltish awkwardness wouldn't last much longer. His mark still pulsed, and the heart in his chest, this far from Jinx, had a sluggish, quiet beat. When he'd first come to New York a year ago, he'd been mostly human. Now, Vision didn't know.

“I want to learn to fight.” Kane didn’t look at him.

“Take a class,” Vision said.

Kane’s jaw clenched. “I want to learn how to fight from you.”

“What makes you think I know how to fight? We don’t magically learn mad fighting skills when we’re brought over.”

“Dad said...” Kane hesitated. It was the first time Vision had heard Kane refer to Hanz as his father to him, or even in general, but from the way he flushed Vision decided he was more bothered by slipping up in front of Vision. “He said you were a street fighter.”

Vision laughed. “I was involved in one street fight, when I was very young and very stupid. I probably survived because I had so little power compared to everyone else, I must have seemed almost human to both sides.”

“Please,” Kane said. His fists tightened at his sides. “I can’t protect Jinx if I don’t know...if I can’t...”

“And they probably don’t teach a vampire slaying for beginners down at the Y,” Vision finished. And they probably never would, considering that two of the elders from the conclave were on the board of directors. “There probably isn’t that much to tell you. You’re strong, Kane, but you’re not going to be strong enough or fast enough to stop a vampire. The most you can probably do is stun him long enough for you to get the hell out.”

“Then teach me that,” Kane said. His voice was flat, and he still wasn’t looking at Vision. His entire body was actually leaning away, and it seemed for all the world like the parquet floor of the office was perhaps the most ingenious of its kind. He’d experienced a lot of rejection, Vision saw, but it still raked him over hot coals each time.

“Okay,” he said.

“Fine, whatever,” Kane said, turning away, then stopped. “Okay?” he asked, back still to Vision.

“That’s what I said. Okay.” It was the least Kane could have asked for. Vision wondered if Kane knew that.

Kane’s shoulders slumped, but he still didn’t turn around. “Now?”

Vision stared down at the jumbled mess of his dock workers doing a half-assed job at working to rule before new contract negotiations. Just below them were leases coming due for his buildings, and below that was an insurance claim for damages to a shipment. He closed the folder and rubbed his temples. “Now’s good.”

Kane nodded, but not at Vision. There was no one in the hall, either. Vision heard him swallow a couple times, but his dry throat remained dry. “Thank you,” he said hoarsely.

“You can thank me after you’ve picked yourself up off your ass a couple times,” Vision said. He stood and crossed the floor. Touching Kane’s shoulder would have been too much, he knew, but Kane knew he was there, and together they went down to the first floor and then out of the house. Vision knew Hanz followed from the bedroom. He felt Hanz’s gaze on the back of his neck like a touch, but neither of them said anything. When he closed the door behind them, he knew Hanz would move to a smoked window so he could watch, and that comforted him.

“Why didn’t you ask your father to do this?” Vision asked, once they found a good spot on the lawn. The moon was higher in the sky, and that added distance took away the menace from the light. He glanced up at it, briefly at first, then for a longer time. The benevolent face smiling down at them didn’t change.

“He wouldn’t...” Kane began and then trailed off. Vision started to speak, to tell him, of course, Hanz would, when Kane shook his head and began again. “He’d pull his punches.”

“And I wouldn’t?”

Kane licked his lips, swallowed again, and paused. “No. Not if I asked you not to.”

Vision nodded and had Kane up against the wall, pinned there by his hand on his throat. It was easy moving so fast on his property. His lines coiled and snaked under the

surface here like a Gordian knot. “Are you absolutely sure you don’t want me to?” Vision asked.

Kane struggled for a few seconds. Vision had bodychecked him into the wall, and was holding his arm with the mark against the brick foundation with his hip. Even through Kane’s sleeve and his own layers of clothing, the black mark burned him. Kane’s lips twitched, baring fangs he didn’t have, but he stopped fighting.

Vision let him go. Kane touched his throat where Vision had held him and stepped away from the wall. “How do I counter that?”

“Move faster.”

A flash of anger crossed Kane’s face, a useless emotion that Hanz had long since learned to channel into more productive means of obtaining that which he wanted. Kane was still so very, very young. “I can’t.”

“Then we’re done here.” Vision wasn’t going to coddle him.

Kane exhaled sharply and rubbed his face. “I’m sorry. Show me.”

Vision picked up Kane’s arm by the sleeve. “Do you know how strong this mark can be?”

Kane nodded.

“Then why don’t you use it?”

A long pause followed. Kane flexed his arm and rubbed it with his other hand. “Because it scares me.”

“It’s your only weapon,” Vision said. “Nothing else you have can help you. As a human, you do have some protection by our laws, but you’re crossing a line here that may one day lose that shield.”

Kane’s face hardened, and suddenly he looked years older than he was. “Your laws don’t protect people,” he said. “We’re still meat to you.”

He was speaking to the general “you,” Vision knew, but his words still stung. “You’re right,” he said, instead of arguing the point. “Which is why we’re here. Again?”

Kane nodded. He was up against the wall in the next second, writhing against him, and Vision was reminded of his first fight with Gabriel. He’d killed for the first time and then had the stupidity to challenge his ex-master. Not for his territories, of course; that would have been suicide. It had just felt so good to stand up and say *no* to him. Vision had been thoroughly beaten, of course, and fucked so senseless he still remembered how the orgasm had ripped through him. It was hard to desexualize the power he had over Kane, with his hand to Kane’s throat and his body pinning him. By the third time Kane hit the wall, Vision didn’t even keep him there. He moved away, trying to shake the need to fuck that which he conquered. But the desire was stronger than he was. It was the way of things; Gabriel had probably felt the same imperative.

“Stay there,” he snarled, and stalked back into the house. It felt good to slam the door shut. Hanz was in the parlor, standing by the window, and turned at the racket. Their eyes met, and in that second, Hanz knew exactly what he wanted.

Hanz let Vision come to him. He didn’t fight, even as Vision had him up against the wall, his left fang poised just on the pulse point of his carotid artery. It was weak, but it felt good to have blood under his fangs again. Hanz sucked in his breath, but rather than fight Vision, he reached up, cupping the back of Vision’s head. “Here, now,” he whispered, and gently pulled Vision closer so that his fang split open the skin.

There wasn’t a lot of blood, nor was Vision particularly hungry, but he drank until Hanz stopped bleeding, and then he pushed him down to the ground. Hanz moved to the couch without fighting, but Vision still growled. Hanz bowed his head, submitting to him, and without looking behind him thrust the tube of lube into Vision’s hand. It felt good to tear at their clothes. Vision removed the bare minimum, kicking Hanz’s legs as wide as possible, because he could.

Hanz made a begging sound. Not to be gentle, but to hurry up. Vision didn't fuck Hanz often, but when Vision did, he reveled in it. Suddenly Hanz wasn't quite naked enough. Vision blamed his own shortsightedness, and he began to rectify the situation by reaching down along Hanz's sides. The flannel shirt was body temperature and rough under his fingertips. Hanz tensed under him, sucking in a breath. Vision worked his fingers between the buttons. He touched bare skin and stroked it.

The shirt was well made -- Vision would give Hanz that -- but the buttons tore free easily. They scattered across the hardwood, and Vision pulled the shirt up and over his shoulder. Hanz reared back. Another sound came from Hanz, this time a little more desperate.

The lube made Vision's cock shiny, but before he enjoyed the slick feeling inside Hanz, he used just two of his fingers. Hanz reared back, to make it easier for both of them, but Vision pushed him back down. He didn't want Hanz's cooperation in this. Hanz understood, of course, and relaxed on his elbows.

Vision gripped Hanz's hips. There was no talking, just the sounds of their bodies. It was brutal, possessive, and something that was outside their relationship, but Hanz took it. When he came, it was with a cold, pure rush of pleasure that was over as quickly as it began. Vision exhaled and pushed away.

Hanz turned around, sitting down a bit gingerly. His erection was flat against his belly, but he shrugged off Vision's questioning look. "Go. Kane's waiting for you."

Vision nodded. He kissed Hanz on the top of the head and went back outside. Kane hadn't moved, but not because Vision had put him there. "Again?" Kane asked.

Vision nodded.

It was still hard for Kane to bring his hand up all the way in the time it took Vision to rush him, but he kept working. He was sweating and getting angrier at himself for making the same mistake over and over, but just as Vision was going to call it a morning, Kane got

his hand up between them. "Very good," Vision started to say, but Kane grabbed his shoulder and twisted him around so that Vision was pinned to the wall. "What are you doing?"

Kane said nothing. Vision didn't push him back, at least not right away. It was only fair, but then he noticed that just behind Kane's head, the moon was once more big and bright and hovered just above the horizon. "We should go inside," Vision said, trying to push Kane away. Instead, Kane knocked him back into the wall. Vision hit hard enough that it stunned him for a second, and when he looked back up again, Kane's eyes were dark.

"Hello, Vision," Kane said, or at least Kane moved his mouth. The voice that emerged was nothing like Kane's at all. It was familiar, too familiar. An uncomfortable feeling began in Vision's chest. Kane leaned forward and licked his way up Vision's throat.

"Back off," Vision snarled, putting his will into each word. Whoever wore Kane's body smiled.

"Come now, Vision, is that any way to talk to a dear old bosom companion?"

"Who..." Vision hesitated. There was something about the malicious twist to Kane's lips that was familiar. "Varaugh?"

Kane bowed, mockingly. Vision grabbed Kane by the shirt, careful not to hurt the boy. "Get out of him, Varaugh."

Varaugh just smiled, and the moon dropped down below the trees. Kane slumped in Vision's arms, and despite his height and weight, it took almost no effort at all to pick him up and carry him inside.

Hanz met him at the door, taking Kane from him. He climbed the stairs to the guest bedroom while Vision called Janus a second time that night.

## Chapter Three

Janus entwined his fingers in Lyall's dark hair. It was long enough that the slight curls wrapped around his wrist. Lyall hadn't said a word walking into the room, and the wards around the door had pulsed warmly with his arrival. He was half smiling, his blue eyes bright despite how late it was.

Janus had opened his mouth to speak, but Lyall shook his head and slid on his hip along the edge of the desk to kneel in front of him. Energy crackled in his hair. He had fed directly from Janus on his return from the conclave, and for Janus to have all of that energy and feed back to him was heady.

Lyall's smile turned sly. He looked up through his lashes and somehow managed with tiny, minute movements to remove Janus's jeans. Lyall bit the tip of his tongue.

"Are you going to make me ask?" Janus asked.

"Do you want to ask?" Lyall asked.

"I want you to suck my cock," Janus said, his voice thick. "But put your hands behind your back."

Lyall purred. He locked his hands behind him, and the muscles of his shoulders stood up under the thin white T-shirt that he wore. He backed away and licked his lips. It took a



while longer for him to lower himself down further on his heels so that he could dip his tongue and lap at the head of Janus's cock while looking at him at the same time, but he did. "You like that," Lyall told him. "I'd forgotten how much."

There was no recrimination in his voice. Janus had been busy, having spent two days at the conclave building. The adjustment he had made over a year ago had redistributed the power lines in the city fairly across everyone's territory. There were over thirty elders, and that had bought him time, but now that time was gone, and a squabble erupted from the months of tension that plagued the table, despite his and Vision's best efforts. Though if Janus were to be perfectly honest with himself, Vision had done most of the work, even though he had -- on paper, at least -- no more power than any of the other elders.

The first attempted murder had happened a week ago. The first would-be victim was not one of the older, weaker vampires, but one of the seasoned lieutenants whose master had survived the night of long swords. Vision had said it was a real possibility. Going after a lieutenant was not unheard of. Without a dependable, reliable second-in-command, an elder was crippled. To stop it, Janus had made it a crime on par with attempting to kill an elder on the conclave.

Vision had also said that the resulting chaos was not going to be predictable, as all the old alliances between the older and newer elders had broken down. Janus feared another night of assassinations and attempts.

Lyall, still on his knees, cleared his throat. Janus recognized it as his "I'm going to stab you now" sound. "Remember me?" Lyall asked, but still hadn't moved. He was still young, not even five years as a vampire, but understood the importance of what Janus did. Janus ran his hand down Lyall's face, their blood remembering each other, and the recognition washed over him as a precursor to a promised orgasm.

"Of course I do," Janus said, his voice low.

“Then stay with me,” Lyall said. He lowered himself down again, still maintaining eye contact, and licked the head of Janus’s cock again. His tongue was light and teasing, but the look in his eyes wasn’t. There was something dark in them that wanted Janus to push harder. Janus nodded, acknowledging the need, and Lyall visibly relaxed.

Janus took Lyall’s head and laced his fingers in the hair. He slowly pushed Lyall down. They didn’t need to breathe, which greatly reduced the gag reflex, and that left nothing but the smooth glide into the warmth and wetness of Lyall’s throat. Lyall remained still, allowing Janus complete control. Even after five years of being together, Janus recognized how hard it was for him. Lyall, who could get himself out of any situation, remained on his knees, his arms still crossed behind his back, and waited for Janus. The power Janus had was absolute over him, Janus knew, but he would kill or die to protect it.

Janus felt the heat radiating from Lyall’s groin through the layers of clothing. He could have rubbed it with his shin, giving Lyall friction, but he didn’t. Lyall, as though sensing his thoughts, shuddered. Janus felt it against his cock. He didn’t thrust, not trusting his own control, but it was enough to sit there with Lyall on his knees and wait.

Finally, Lyall closed his eyes and bowed his head. He broke the grip on his own wrists. Janus felt all those things. He would have been able to see them if his eyes had been closed. It felt unnatural to release his hold on Lyall’s head, but it had to be done.

Lyall had been a strong human and was an even stronger vampire, yet Janus had no problem lifting him up under his arms and holding him with one hand while he swept the papers off his desk. All of Vision’s carefully crafted notes went flying in a wall of white paper and cramped handwriting.

Lyall didn’t seem to mind. Janus gently put him down, and with Lyall’s help, pulled off Lyall’s T-shirt. They worked on the jeans until Lyall was naked over his desk. Still, Janus hesitated long enough for Lyall to open his eyes. “I told you to stay with me.” The accusation was slightly barbed.

"I am with you," Janus said. He put his hands over Lyall's thighs and spread them wider. The arteries and veins leapt up under his palms, thick and blue and begging for his teeth. Janus's cock was already hard and had been before Lyall had stripped him. Janus bent over Lyall's body and kissed his belly. Lyall sucked in his breath -- an old habit not yet broken -- and stiffened.

Lyall lifted his hips off the desk. "Bite me," he said. "Please Janus."

Janus did. He found a vein under his tongue and bit down. The burst of heat brought the taste of warm, metallic blood. Lyall writhed under him, and Janus drank. Lyall must have stuffed himself for the blood pressure he had. Janus drank and drank, and couldn't keep up with the flow.

From the corner of the desk, having survived the great migration to the floor, Janus's cell phone purred to life.

Janus exhaled, sharply. Lyall froze, his back a good inch from the smudged surface of the desk. A thick drop of blood ran down his thigh. Janus raised an eyebrow and asked permission first.

Lyall couldn't refuse, Janus knew that. With all that was happening, it would have been very dangerous. Lyall shrugged and lay back. Janus put the phone on speaker and gathered up the spilled drop.

"Speak," he said and licked his finger clean.

"What, no hello? No thank you for always keeping your interests nearest and dearest to my heart?" Vision's droll voice came over the speaker with crystal clarity.

"I was in the middle of someone," Janus said. "And besides, there's just one person you keep near to your heart. I'm somewhere less pleasant. Your gallbladder, perhaps. Or your spleen."

"Definitely my spleen," Vision said. Janus felt him rubbing his face. He knew he had that effect on people. "Is Lyall still there?"

It was phrased to be polite; Janus knew Vision knew Lyall was there. It was more of a formality for Janus to decide whether he wanted to keep the conversation private, or semiprivate. He and Vision hadn't always gotten along so swimmingly. They'd been lovers and nemesises...nemesi? Janus's Latin lessons were three hundred years out-of-date. But that was all in the past; he trusted Vision with his life. He had to. And more to the point, he wanted to. "Lyall's here," Janus said finally.

"Tell him to go down and look at the painting in the lobby."

"What?" Janus asked.

"You heard me," Vision said.

Lyall looked to Janus, eyebrow raised -- he didn't take his orders from Vision -- and Janus nodded.

Lyall nodded as well. He was still flat on his back, but pulled himself up and over in a very impressive display of upper-body strength and landed easily on his feet. Janus watched him dress hungrily and didn't speak until his wards had shimmered with Lyall's passing. "What is he looking for?" Janus repeated.

"If I'm wrong, nothing."

"And if you're right?"

"Then we're all well and truly fucked."

"I'm going to go down with him." Janus hung up the phone. He dressed and followed Lyall. There must have been an elevator waiting because the hallway was now empty. It was early enough that another elevator came quickly, and it hummed as it began its descent. Janus filtered out canned music and canned air as he watched the numbers gradually decrease. When Lyall's sudden terror cut straight to him, Janus was still on the ninth floor.

Janus's blood surged. If Vision had put Lyall in any kind of danger he would have Vision's head. It was simple enough, for Janus at least, to override the brakes on the elevator car. Ropes of power surged up from the ground as Janus's summoning broke the elevator into

a freefall that was as controlled as a muzzled dog. Still, the car landed gently on the lobby floor with the caustic smell of burning oil and chewed metal. Janus even stripped the engine on the elevator doors, throwing them open a thousand times faster than they were ever meant to.

The night watchman at the concierge desk hung the phone up from whatever emergency response team he was talking to, despite the red alarms still going off at the desk, when he saw Janus stepped off the elevator. A bill would no doubt be slipped under Janus's door in the not-so-distant future. Janus heard elevator repairs were not exactly inexpensive, but it was worth it to see Lyall standing in front of the huge painting unharmed, alone, and safe.

The painting had been one of the main reasons Janus had chosen this building over all others, when his former master had insisted he take an actual place of residence rather than live full-time in the nest that he'd built for himself in the belly of the city. Since Breyllorn hadn't insisted on attendance, punctuality, fulfillment of his needs, or any other outward sign of fidelity, it was the least Janus could do to appease the man. Actual use of the apartment, after all, had not been a deal breaker.

The painting was actually two. One was a lovely flower arrangement -- the stamens and petals could not have been more phallic and vaginal if the artist had tried. But the floral arrangement had been cut up into half-inch strips and evenly interspersed with an anatomical painting of a man's body being carved open and the organs being removed. The doctors were dressed in medical gowns of the Edwardian age. Janus knew that from personal experience, and everything would have been very proper with the painting itself if it hadn't been for the fact that the cadaver, which had once been a Caucasian male, was grimacing in pain and the sweat on his forehead was exquisitely detailed. Janus doubted any one of the other residents of the building noticed that the body had switched to that of an Asian man. Janus noticed, but Janus had put him there when Varaugh, wearing Hiroshi's body, had tried to kill Lyall.

The painting no longer was that a Japanese man being dissected. The flat Caucasian's face was back, and the drops of sweat on his forehead were once again representational more than realistic. But Lyall himself was fine. The pounding of his blood had retreated back to passive constriction, but Janus felt the horrible scar that Lyall had worn when he'd found him for the first time. Either Hiroshi or Varaugh -- Janus had never asked -- had tried to cut him when he'd first been made a vampire, intending to rip his heart out. Cut and bleeding, Lyall had gotten away from them. But the fear was still there. Most humans would never know the agony of a mortal wound that didn't kill. Janus knew it, and Lyall did too.

"We'll find him," Janus said, voice cold. "We'll find him again, and I will kill him."

## Chapter Four

Sleep didn't come for Vision. He closed his eyes and felt Kane's tongue on his neck. He'd hated Varaugh. Hated everything about him, but Vision couldn't deny Varaugh had known exactly how to push every button Vision had ever had.

Hanz slept soundly beside him. He'd never had a restless night in all the time Vision had known him. If Vision had asked, he knew Hanz would stay awake with him, but that was selfish. He got out of bed carefully, dressed in a blue silk robe that was a present from Hanz, and went downstairs.

The house at noon was heavily shrouded and protected, but Vision still felt tired in his bones.

The sound of the lock turning on the back door carried through the otherwise still house. Vision stood, muscles tense, but the familiar smell of perfume eased the unease he'd felt since Kane's sudden transformation.

He kept humans in his employ out of necessity, but he didn't often see them during the day. He remained in the parlor with its reinforced walls and thick external oak doors. The kitchen off of it was gloomy and dark, but it did have an outside wall, and Vision held a hand

over his face until the door between the two rooms closed again. Even then, the burned imprint of his hand lingered in stark red behind his closed eyes.

Jess no longer wore her uniform; she'd been working for Vision for over a year now, but there was no mistaking the sensible shoes and tight bun she wore for anything else than the nurse she was. She was Hanz's twin. Age had squared off her once-pretty jaw and streaked her chestnut hair gray, but she was still beautiful.

"You're up late," she said.

Vision waved his hand. "And I thought you had the weekend off." Jess always took her weekend off away from the compound. She returned always late on the third night, smelling like a man or another woman. And sometimes, like now, both. Vision didn't begrudge her her time away.

"Kane's advisor called. He's having issues. I was going to leave a note for Hanz, but then I saw the light under the door." She rubbed her face. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I'm remembering past mistakes."

"The best part of past mistakes is that they're in the past," Jess said. She sounded as old as he was. She'd made a huge mistake that had cost Hanz everything.

"I wish that were true," Vision said, bitterly. "No, this mistake licked my neck tonight."

"Are you..." She didn't finish.

"I'm..." The word "fine" didn't form for him. He stopped trying to make it.

Jess hesitated. "I'm probably overstepping boundaries here, but would you like to talk about it?"

"No," Vision said sharply. He wasn't going to tell Hanz's sister that a very bad man who had done some very bad things had made him come by crooking a finger, or a lot more than a finger, inside him. Hanz was there, he must have known what was happening in part, but he couldn't have seen what went on behind closed doors. And Vision wanted to keep it that way.



Jess put up her hands. She looked very much like Hanz in that instant.

"I'll certainly tell him to talk to Kane when he wakes," Vision said. He kept his voice indifferent and deliberately did not offer his services. Vision stood up. The room was dark, but he had no problems going to the small bar in the corner. The ice bucket was full, the edges of the cubes slightly rounded. They clanked in the crystal glasses that Vision took down. He lifted the decanter from the silver tray and poured them both a healthy slosh.

He carried them back and sat back down again. Jess took hers with a grateful nod and leaned back. "If you need to hear it, Vision, you're a good man," she said finally.

"I'm not a man," he said. And he wasn't all that good, either, but at least he didn't correct her on that point.

But he might as well have. Jess waved her glass at him. "I know my brother, Vision. And I've known him longer than you have. He wouldn't have gotten involved with you if he hadn't thought you were good."

Vision drank. The scotch burned down his throat, the artificial heat as warm as any swallow of blood. He rested his head against the back of the chair. "Kindly explain Kane's illustrious parentage, then," Vision said, cutting deep and meaning to. Hanz had involved himself with Kane's step-father and his mother on the rebound before the two of them married each other.

"Youthful indiscretion."

"Hanz will be up after nightfall," Vision said, and he stood. "I'm sure he'll be able to handle Kane then."

Jess nodded, putting her empty glass down. "Thank you for the drink."

"Do you enjoy it here?" he asked, suddenly.

"What?" Jess asked, taken aback. "Why do you ask?"

Because he was tired, and noon was a time for self-loathing, much like the three a.m.'s of his youth. "Humor me," he said instead.

“No one has vomited on my shoes for a year,” Jess said. “I work when I want, with whom I want, and have my days free. Plus there are the boys. Vision, I’m happy here.” She paused, then added, in a way that included him, “We’re all happy here.”

He supposed she wasn’t completely wrong.

“Good night, Jess,” Vision said. He suddenly was tired and didn’t fake the roll of his shoulders. She nodded and put her legs up on the matching leather ottoman. Vision didn’t say anything about the other, more common use for that foot rest.

Upstairs, he heard someone in the office. There really should not have been anyone there. He pushed open the door, fangs out, but it was only Jinx, Kane’s partner, behind the desk. He looked up, eyes wide, like a cat caught out in the middle of the night by a search light. He was crouched over Vision’s computer, which had just been running twenty minutes ago, but now there were bits and parts of...things all around him.

“What are you doing?” Vision asked.

Jinx pointed to the computer autopsy around him.

“What are you doing with them?” Vision asked, again.

“Upgrading,” Jinx whispered, the word pulled out of him as if by horses. He flushed and looked down at the carpet. There was no point in asking him how he got in. Vision knew the words to that answer wouldn’t come at all. Often Vision had woken up to Jinx wandering the halls of the big house during the day, but he was completely unthreatening, so Vision let him have free run.

“Is it going to be working in the morning?”

Jinx nodded, but didn’t look up.

Vision closed the door behind him. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. For almost a hundred years he’d clawed his way up to be the second-most powerful vampire in New York, and his home was now a family dwelling. He should be upset with it, but found that he really wasn’t.

He turned back and opened the door again. Jinx looked up again, and all the parts around him were in different places. Jinx blinked, waiting.

“Is Kane all right?” Vision asked.

Jinx froze, just for a second, then shrugged and nodded a fraction of an inch.

“And you?”

Jinx looked down to the bits about him and then smiled. Vision left him to it, whatever it was.

Vision’s bedroom was just past the master bedroom, though he had closed off the master bath and opened it to the room he’d chosen as his. He pushed the door open, suddenly tired enough that the large bed with its crisp sheets was inviting.

He closed the door behind him with his foot and slid the robe off his shoulders. He had tossed it into the hamper and pulled back the blankets on his side when he heard Hanz sitting up and clearing his throat. “Honestly, sir. You toss your clothing only when I’m awake to annoy me, don’t you?”

Vision turned, unable to stop the smile spreading across his face. But Hanz crossed his arms over his chest.

“What?” Vision asked.

“Don’t stop for my sake.”

“Stop what? I have nothing else to take off,” Vision said. Hanz got out of bed to stand in front of him. He reached up and used his thumb to run down Vision’s cheek, over his chin, then traced his way across Vision’s lips. Vision shuddered, and Hanz wouldn’t let him look away. Hanz kissed him, lightly, their lips just touching. Hanz brushed his hand along Vision’s chin again and knotted up in Vision’s short hair. Vision snarled, baring his fangs, but Hanz held him tighter until he stopped.

“Sir?” Hanz asked, voice still polite.

“Yes, Hanz?” Vision’s voice caught in his throat, and he coughed to clear it. “Did you want something?”

Hanz didn’t let him go. Vision didn’t want him to. He was taller than Vision, but Hanz’s shoulders were much wider. His hands were bigger too. Hanz let go of his hair long enough to grip onto his shoulders. He leaned forward, and again his lips touched Vision’s skin. “I think I want you on your knees, sir. Could you do that for me?”

He nodded, meeting Hanz’s warm brown eyes, and felt his cock thicken.

“You know I like to hear you say the words, sir.”

The admonishment was light -- teasing, really. If Vision wanted something with more of a bite, he could have it. But the exhaustion made Hanz’s eyes look puffy. He leaned forward, and Hanz’s grip let him. He kissed Hanz’s cheek, rubbing it against his own, then bit Hanz’s ear, gently. “Yes,” Vision whispered.

Hanz led the way to the bed and stepped aside to let Vision kneel on it, back to the room.

Vision heard Hanz shift, but he didn’t turn. The skin on the back of his neck felt Hanz’s gaze, hot need obvious, but Hanz was there in an instant, right behind his left ear. “Don’t,” he said, voice sharp as a blade.

“Hanz --” Vision began, but Hanz just kissed his shoulder. Wet tongue first, then Hanz followed with the scrape of his teeth. Blood welled, and it felt good to bleed. The release was sweet. He leaned back, and that apparently was allowed, because Hanz supported him, his naked chest against Vision’s bare skin. The blood sat on his shoulder, cooling off until Hanz lapped it up with his tongue.

For a moment, they remained there, back to front, Hanz’s hard chest and arms soothing.

Hanz sighed and rested his head against Vision’s shoulder. “What is it?” Vision asked.

Hanz shook his head. Vision felt it against his skin, and there was more weight to it than just his own exhaustion. “What is it?” Vision asked. His voice was sharper than he meant it to be, but it was separate from this.

“Nothing, sir. I love you,” Hanz whispered. Each pause was punctuated by a gentle kiss on the nape of Vision’s neck.

Vision tensed; Hanz obviously had something to say, but it was just after noon; what Hanz was going to say could wait until nightfall. He nodded, once, and Hanz dropped his hands down, to Vision’s waist. He drummed his fingers against Vision’s pelvic bone.

Vision jerked with each touch. His cock was hard, and no matter how much he shifted and jerked, Hanz’s fingers remained aching out of reach of his cock. He exhaled sharply in frustration.

Hanz laughed. “Are you going to stay still?”

“Will you believe me if I say yes?” Vision asked.

Hanz dragged his fang in a parallel line to the first scrape. Vision shuddered, but Hanz didn’t let him go. “You know what they say about actions and words, sir.”

Vision shivered again, once, deliberately, and Hanz stiffened. He’d just taken his breath to do so, when Vision relaxed in his arms. “Thank you, sir.”

Vision didn’t nod. Hanz held him until it was clear he was going to remain still. He reached down and picked up the silk belt of the robe and looped it around Vision’s waist. Vision was going to suck in a breath he didn’t really need, but remembered himself. It was harder to relax once he’d already started to tense, but he had more control than most. He relaxed again, loving the tension of the belt against his skin.

The sound that escaped Hanz was more of approval than not, but Vision knew it was roughly a fifty-five/forty-five split.

“Say when,” Hanz whispered. His fingers splayed even further against Vision’s stomach. “Or just take a breath. I can feel that too.”

Vision felt his lip curl, but he couldn't take a breath to question Hanz's parentage, sneaky bastard. His belt tightened like a snake's coil around his hips. The muscles on Hanz's arm tensed against Vision's. Vision closed his eyes, leaning back. Breathing would have put an end to it, but Hanz accepted his weight. The pain followed, hot friction tight around him. Just as Hanz's arm began to shake, unable to pull any harder, Vision took a gasping breath.

"That's cheating, sir," Hanz whispered, but let him go. Vision fell forward onto the bed, and Hanz pulled the belt free. It whispered as it was snaked around him, and Hanz wrapped it around his hand.

Vision reached under him, but Hanz stopped him with a hand on his thigh. "On your back, sir. Please. Hands over your head."

"Were you always this pushy?" Vision snarled.

"Sadly, yes." Hanz didn't sound remotely apologetic. "Your back. Do you need help?"

Vision flipped around by himself. "Satisfied?"

"Not quite. Hands over your head, sir. I am so tired of repeating myself."

Flat on his back, Vision felt his stomach flutter. He loved and hated this part, being this exposed. "You know I detest you, right?"

Hanz waited for Vision to cross his wrists over his head. "I know you like saying it." Hanz paused, and Vision turned away to stare at the wall. "No," Hanz said. "Look at me."

Vision looked up. Hanz's face was beautiful far beyond the sum of his parts. He knelt down, and Vision had to crane his neck to keep watching. Hanz grinned, all teeth, and looped the belt over Vision's wrists. He didn't tie it in place; if Vision wanted to, he could have pulled free, but he didn't. Hanz's kisses on the insides of both his thighs were light. He shifted up, but just to rest his head against Vision's pelvic bone. "I'd like to fuck you, sir. If that's all right."

Vision lifted his hand up and was surprised at the effort it took. Still, he waved it as nonchalantly as he could. For his obvious triumph over the Earth's gravitational pull, he got

bit again on his thigh right next to his testicles. The sensitive skin amplified the pain, and despite himself, he tried to sit up. But Hanz was there, licking away any lingering sting. "Lie back, sir. Please."

Vision did so. Hanz opened the night table on his side of the bed. Without fumbling, he brought out the tube of lube. Hanz slid his fingers easily into Vision, cold and tight at first, then warmer and more relaxed. He missed the rhythmic pounding once Hanz withdrew his fingers and shifted up full on the bed. Hanz further spread Vision's legs, spreading his own thighs so that their bodies joined up in all the right places.

"Fuck me," Vision whispered. If he could have spread himself more open for Hanz, he would have. It felt so good to lock his hands over his head and display his neck as vulnerably as he wanted to Hanz. Hanz's hands shook on his hips, Vision felt, and he fumbled for just a second sliding inside him.

His cock was bigger and thicker, and the slide inside him burned more. Vision grunted, biting the inside of his lip with his human teeth. Hanz manhandled his body, pulling it up to the right angle. The best part was looking up to watch Hanz's eyes as he fucked. The concentration on his face was absolute. Even deep in the throes, Hanz made sure that every stroke, every angle, and every finish was just for Vision's pleasure. Another time, Vision would have reached down his body to gather his cock up in his hand and jerk it off to Hanz's thrusts, but he didn't need to. Seeing the pleasure in Hanz's chocolate eyes, feeling the grip on his hips and the bite from his perfectly groomed nails against his ass was better than even the best-timed touch.

Hanz smiled, baring his own set of fangs, and then licked his lips with a very pink tongue. "Are you going to come for me, sir?" he asked, voice thick.

"If you keep talking to me I will." Vision tasted his own blood. Hanz's thrusts were harder now. The grip on his hips seemed tighter than the belt. The orgasm was so close, yet still missed the one little touch to drive him over.

“What is it that you want me to say?” Hanz growled. His hands tightened; he was obviously fighting his own impending orgasm. “Do you want me to tell you how hot you look under me? How great the way you move feels against my cock? Do you need me to tell you that this is all I think about when you’re not exactly where you are right now?”

“Yes,” Vision whispered. The bright, hot need of the impending orgasm reached the place it needed to be, and he threw his head back. He felt Hanz grab onto him, supporting his weight with one hand while scooping up his cock with the other. His fist hardly seemed to matter. Vision felt it distantly at best. In another second, the sensation would be too much, but on the knife’s edge of the orgasm, it was enough. He sank back, his body still shaking, and while he heard the choking sounds Hanz made as he tried to bite back, the cries were distant.

Hanz kissed him, hot on the lips, then they slid under the covers together. With anyone else it would have been a tangle of limbs ending with a game of tug-of-war over the single sheet, but with Hanz it could have been choreographed. Vision kissed the back of his head and spooned up close behind him.



## Chapter Five

Vision motioned Hanz to just pull over rather than try to find a parking spot. “Have fun playing with Breylorn,” Hanz said and kissed him on the lips. He felt Vision tense. “What’s wrong?”

Vision took a deep breath. He knew Hanz had meant nothing by it, but it was a sore spot.

Hanz continued to look at him. “Sir?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Yes, but I find that if I keep asking the right questions, eventually you’ll spill your guts.”

Vision exhaled. “No. I meant me and my past.”

“Do you mean all your fucking around in your past?”

Vision waved his hand in a “yes, that” motion. “Does it?”

“In all that fucking, did you find what you were looking for?” Hanz asked, voice deceptively mild.

“No,” Vision said. The memories were a pickaxe to his head. “I didn’t.”

“And have you found it now?” Hanz asked, his voice steel, but with the warmth of steel that had been resting on an exposed wrist.

“Yes.” The word slipped out of him involuntarily, but better that than the whimpering sound that was forming in the back of his throat.

“Then why would I mind?” Hanz asked and kissed him again. He let go of the gearshift and gripped the back of Vision’s head. For a moment, Vision was trapped, but rather than panic, he accepted the rush straight to his groin.

Hanz’s soft lips brushed Vision’s forehead, the tip of his nose, and both cheeks, all the while keeping his hand in Vision’s hair, pulling tight one instant, a delicate stroke the next. The combination of pain and pleasure brought tears to Vision’s eyes.

A horn honked behind them, and Hanz let him go. Vision got out, stiffly, walked between the parked cars to the sidewalk, and took a full moment to recover before continuing onto the pub where he was to meet Breylorn.

The evening was warm, though a stiff breeze brought the smell of salt from the ocean and cooled his face. The streets were still crowded with humans with their human smells, a combination of alcohol, sweat, and metal from the coins in their wallets and purses. The streams of people moved aggressively against each other, but the hive mentality of the crowd parted for Vision as though he was walking alone on the hot sidewalk. It made it easy to reach the blue painted façade of the pub, but before he could step inside, someone reached a hand out and touched his chest.

Vision stared down at the rather large hand now firmly planted against his left pectoral. The nails were a bit rough, the calluses thick against the edges of his fingers. He moved his gaze up to the wrist, the tailored suit to the broad shoulders, to finally the look of a very irate vampire. “You can’t go in there.”

He wasn’t pretty, or even handsome, if Vision were to be particularly cruel, but there was strength behind the sloping forehead and square jaw. He also had something aching

familiar about the source of power coming from him. For whatever reason, he was drawing power directly from Vision's old territories, which meant he was Breylorn's. "You're new," Vision said, forcing his voice to sound light.

"My master is meeting someone in there, and they are not to be disturbed."

Vision ran his hand up the man's arm. The muscles were rock hard under the sleeve. "Oh, you butch thing," Vision said. "You're new, *and* you're not from around here."

"Vision," Breylorn said from inside of the door. "Stop messing with the help."

"This is Vision?" the new vampire demanded, shocked, but he bowed his head. "I didn't..."

"That's enough, Octavius," Breylorn said.

Vision waved his hand and plucked Octavius's hand from his chest. Octavius snapped it back as though he'd forgotten it was still there. "Forgive me, sir."

Vision shrugged off the apology. He stepped past Octavius -- not the easiest thing to do in the narrow entrance to the pub -- and followed Breylorn back inside. The interior was dim, even for them, and the music was muted. The fireplace was huge, taking up most of the back wall, but it was cold and dark. Breylorn led the way to a quiet corner and sat down. He looked, as he always did, perfectly groomed, from his brown hair slicked back to his manicured nails. He was beautiful in a statuesque way. Vision slid into his seat, sitting sideways. "New meat?" Vision asked, motioning to the awkward Octavius standing by the door.

"It was time," Breylorn said.

A waitress came, took their order for pints, and left them.

"I'm glad for you," Vision said and meant it. Another time, he would have taken Breylorn for a spin. It would have been fantastic, but that was the old him, and he was okay with that.

Breylorn stared at him. "What would you do if Hanz ever asked you for power?"

Vision blinked. "How did you know I was thinking about Hanz?" he asked.

"The dreamy look to your face?"

Vision flushed. "Oh."

"The question still stands."

"Hanz asking for power? He won't."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, actually, I pretty much do. Hanz is completely loyal."

"Everyone thinks their lieutenant is completely loyal."

"I don't think, Breylorn. I'm telling you. The last thing I have to worry about is Hanz."

Breylorn made a sound in the back of his throat.

"But let me guess. Hanz isn't why you wanted to meet with me," Vision said.

Breylorn shook his head. They were to discuss the conclave, but that was a secondary issue now. "Varaugh's back," Vision said.

Breylorn said nothing for a long minute. Vision was tired of the guilt he had, but he supposed he deserved it. He'd been Varaugh's right-hand man. Breylorn wouldn't have been caught if it wasn't for him, and he'd fed Breylorn some of the poisoned blood that kept him docile.

Breylorn waved Vision's concern away. "And you were also the one who gave up your lands to me when I was dying. Vision, you don't need my forgiveness."

"Yes. I'm pretty sure I do."

Breylorn put his hand over Vision's arm. "You have it. You've always had it."

Vision exhaled. "Thank you."

Octavius shouted from the entrance hall, and someone big pushed his way through the doors. Another vampire, as old as Breylorn was at least, entered the room, saw them, and came over. He crackled with energy. His silver hair gleamed as brightly as the brass buttons

down his button-up blazer. The white slacks were spotless and the crease in them would make Hanz proud. "They're always old and powerful," Vision complained to Breylorn and motioned the man to step aside so the waitress could deliver their beer to the table.

He stepped aside, begrudgingly, and once the waitress was gone, he loomed over their table. "Are you Vision?" the vampire demanded of Breylorn.

Vision cleared his throat. "I am Vision."

The vampire's smile, despite how well he was groomed, was ghoulish. "Well, that is a surprise."

"Do we know you?" Breylorn asked, voice cold. Vision felt the power of his lines snap.

"I am Vladimir," the man said with a flourish. He had a slight accent, but it could have just been a speech affectation.

"Vladimir." Vision snorted. "Why didn't you call yourself Dracul and wear a black cape?"

"You mock me," Vladimir said, his lip twitching in distaste.

"Yes. Yes I do, but to be fair, it's just because my friend here didn't think of it first," Vision said. He didn't name Breylorn, and Vladimir noticed. "I think we're going to start on your blazer next, or perhaps your white belt. I haven't quite decided yet. Any preference?" Vision asked Breylorn.

Breylorn waved one hand, covering his smile with the other.

"I do not like being mocked," Vladimir said stiffly.

"Really?" Vision asked, blinking.

"You have something of mine, and I will be taking it back."

"I assure you, Drac, I have nothing of yours."

"Vladimir," the man said, a cutting edge in his voice. He tried to put his hand over Vision's shoulder, but Vision was up and behind Vladimir before his hand dropped. He

threw Vladimir into the stone fireplace and held him there. Vladimir had power, but before he could summon it, Vision let him go. Vladimir straightened his clothes, bowed stiffly to both of them, and left.

“You bring them out of the woodwork,” Breylorn said, once the door had swung shut again.

“Well, I promise not to suck this one’s cock.”

Breylorn shook his head. “Come finish your beer.”

Vision sat down.

## Chapter Six

Kane was dreaming. He hadn't thought it likely to catnap in the lecture hall, but years of having to sleep on the streets made it possible. It wasn't a very deep sleep; he was aware of the fact that he was dreaming in the same way he felt the forced air blow across the back of his neck or the drone of the professor at the front of the lecture hall, miles away.

There were trees all around him. Tall trees, silver in the moonlight. The moon was bloated and leering, and he didn't like looking at it.

He was lost and running. The sensible part of him wanted him to stop, catch his bearings, and formulate a plan, but he couldn't get control of his feet. Branches snapped in his face, blood dripping down the bridge of his nose, and despite himself, he held his hands up over his face and ran even more blindly on.

And still, whatever chased him followed, baying at his heels. It wasn't a dog. An animal wouldn't have triggered such a panic response in him. Whatever was chasing him promised to do more than just rend his flesh, and that left him with such wordless terror he tore through the endless night trying to get away.

Something grabbed his arm. He didn't scream, but not because he didn't want to. His vocal cords were frozen. His arms weren't, and he fought, slamming the palm of his hand

into whatever had him, but instead of feeling cartilage crunch, his hand hit nothing. His sleeve was pulled again, from a different angle this time, but by then, he was mostly in the now-empty lecture hall and not in the forest. Jinx stared at him, eyes wide. If anyone had to wake him up, Kane was very glad it was Jinx, who was fast enough and smart enough to have gotten out of the way. “Damn it, Jinx. I could have killed you,” Kane said, and rubbed his face.

Kane stared down at him, frown frozen on his face. He shook Kane’s arm a third time. Kane had to brace himself to pull himself free from Jinx’s arm. Jinx’s eyebrow’s furrowed, and he looked significantly past Kane’s shoulder. “Mr. Samuels? Was there something about tonight’s lecture that was particularly dry for you?” the professor asked.

Kane squinted at him, unable to pull the man’s name up. Nor could he even recall what class this was. He shook his head and hid a yawn, not very convincingly, behind the back of his hand. He didn’t answer the man. His vocal cords felt scratched.

Jinx put his hand over Kane’s shoulder. The professor cleared his throat, trying to catch Jinx’s attention, and when Jinx didn’t give it to him, he spoke. “Thank you, Jinx. You may go.”

Jinx made a sound. To Kane, it was as good as a “fat chance,” but then, no one really spoke Jinx. “I’m all right,” Kane told him and got the same sound himself. “I’m sorry,” he said to the professor. “I’m tired, and it’s been a long day.”

“It’s barely five o’clock in the afternoon,” the man said. The high windows in the lecture hall let in grimy orange light. Kane stood up, fast enough that Jinx almost fell backward. Fast enough that the professor’s eyes got very wide, and he stepped back.

“Mr. Samuels,” the professor tried again, but Kane already had started down the row in the other direction. Jinx hesitated, throwing up his arms in a “what can you do?” gesture, and followed Kane quickly to the opposite aisle.



The halls were deserted. The class got out at four fifty p.m., but it was a Friday. The few rows of lockers in the annex had all been welded shut as a safety precaution years ago, but other than that, the hall had remained practically the same from the very beginning. Kane's nightmare was so near to the surface, he saw the school's dead reaching out for him from shadows that had no source. Young men in uniform stood shoulder to shoulder with pretty girls in poodle skirts and grunge kids of indeterminate gender. Kane wanted to throw up his hands again and bolt for the first exit, but he knew that acknowledging them would make them real.

He grabbed Jinx's hand, pulling him behind him, and it wasn't until they were out in the clear autumn day with the first touch of chill on the evening air that Kane could exhale. All around him, the trees without an ounce of malice in their height had just begun their final swan song, turning brilliant oranges and golds, reds and yellows as though they could mask the drab, postwar brick buildings behind Kane with their brilliance. A smell of burning wafted on the air, wood smoke combining with something with a high sugar content.

The sun was orange in the sky, just above the horizon. He grabbed Jinx's elbow, pulling him toward the student parking lot. Jinx escaped his grasp and glared, then made a point of straightening the sleeve of the gray sweater that he wore. His hair had escaped the ponytail he'd pulled it back into, and he tucked the strands behind his ear.

"Jinx --" Kane began, but Jinx cut him off.

"Don't pull," Jinx said. His voice was soft, but if he could have bristled like an upset cat, Kane knew he would have.

He forced himself to relax. He let the sharp breath he was holding go and took a new, clean one. "Can we please get back before it gets dark?" Kane asked. The impatience was gone, and that left nothing to mask the fear.

Jinx nodded and deliberately took Kane's hand, which, Kane admonished himself, is what he should have done. Jinx squeezed his hand, telling him all was forgiven, and walked

just as quickly as he did. Something watched them; Kane felt it from above, but with the sun still in the sky, it had no real power. Still, Kane wished there was more than just a soft top over the Jeep's cab. He threw both their bags into the back, fired the engine, and didn't really feel safe until he'd reached Vision's compound, as strange as that was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lyall was dreaming too, though to him it did not seem to be a dream. The trees around him were all identical. He'd tried running, but no matter how hard or how far he thought he'd gotten, the trees around him had all stayed the same. It was like running in a painting where leaving the right side of the frame just brought him straight to the left side. He stopped.

Someone was behind him. Right behind him. Lyall stepped aside, grabbing onto the fist he knew was flying at his head. He pivoted on his heel, setting his weight, and caught a glimpse of dark hair and dark clothes. The body behind him spun around him, landing full face into one of the tall, ghostly trees.

Snow fell in large clumps from the branches. It touched his face, burning rather than frozen, and even though he'd thrown the man head first into the tree, Lyall jerked away as the back of the man's head morphed into his face as his whole body flipped without turning around.

Lyall jerked back. He'd been nowhere near another tree, but one caught him hard between his shoulder blades. He didn't need to breathe, but the phantom pains of having the air knocked from him stunned him.

"You didn't fly very far, my little bird."

Lyall shook his head. Hiroshi leered at him. A silver knife, as brilliant as the moonlight, shone in his hand. More phantom pain, this time splitting open his belly, like it had the first time. "There's no way out, Lyall, not here. You've always belonged to me. I'm taking you back."

Hiroshi took a step forward. Lyall shook his head. There was always a way out; he should know. He closed his eyes, just as Hiroshi drew the knife up. This wasn't right. Lyall always found a way. It was his talent, his gift. This was a dream, and in a dream, all that had to be done was...

Lyall woke, suddenly, grabbing at the thin sheet that reminded him all too much of the burial shroud in which his human body had been dumped. It had been a hot day, was still if the heat of the sun from the exterior rooms was any indication. The sheet had tangled itself around his legs in the huge, empty bed.

He lay back down against the nest of pillows. He kept expecting his heart to be racing, but when he put his palm against his chest, he felt nothing. Of course, he wouldn't have, his heart hadn't beaten in over five years, but that didn't stop him from sweating.

When he had control of the fear that had wracked him, he got up and padded naked out of the room. Janus had been in his office, but came out, cradling a cup of coffee. He raised an eyebrow. "Lyall?"

Lyall shook his head. "Bad dream."

Janus frowned. Lyall shook his head, unwilling to speak about it. He glanced back to the bedroom and saw Janus's pillow untouched from the night before. Lyall rubbed the back of his neck. "What, I'm not good enough anymore?"

Janus snorted. "It's not you, it's me. I was going to finish my coffee and join you."

Lyall shook his head. He didn't want to lie back down again. The muscles of his abdomen were too tight to relax. Janus tossed back the last of his cold coffee. "I won't let him hurt you," Janus said. "You have to believe me. I may not have been strong enough then, but I am now. If he comes anywhere near you, I'll kill him. I swear."

"I don't need you to protect me," Lyall said, but he saw how earnest Janus was, and couldn't get angry. "It's just...that all seemed so long ago. But it really wasn't."

“Memory is strange on this side. You may not forget it, but you will forget the emotions you have attached to it.”

Lyall swallowed. That didn’t help the uncomfortable tension inside him. Janus nodded as though he understood. He put down his mug and took Lyall’s hand. “Let’s go to bed.”

Lyall nodded, but hesitated just inside the bedroom door. He looked to the bed he’d just left, and the sheets seemed as though someone had been tied up with them and just narrowly escaped. The thin blanket they used in the summer had been kicked to the floor, and he’d piled both their pillows in a huge heap in the middle of the bed. “I’m not with you because you can protect me,” Lyall said.

“I know that,” Janus said. They were about the same height, but Lyall was looking down, so Janus lifted his chin to kiss him. “You’re so tense.”

Lyall tried to push away, which probably made him even tenser. But Janus didn’t let him go. And Lyall was okay with that. He didn’t fight Janus clearing off the pillow fort or sheet and sat where he was told to sit. Janus kissed him again and licked his earlobe. “Lie down,” he whispered.

Lyall took a shaking breath. “I can’t,” he said. And he wasn’t lying. Just the thought of exposing his belly made his stomach queerer by the second. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Janus moved around to the center of the bed, letting Lyall sit up, and didn’t stop him from putting his elbows over his knees, protecting his belly. Janus’s chest was warm against him, and when he moved his hands over the muscles of Lyall’s back it was very good. He closed his eyes, feeling Janus work his shoulders, the line of his spine, and the small of his back, until the impending sense of doom had been banished.

“You’re very good,” Lyall said.

“I am,” Janus agreed. “You should see what I can do with a feather boa and a pack of chewing gum.”

“What can you do with a feather boa and a pack of chewing gum?” Lyall felt he had to ask.

“Crack a safe.”

“What does that have to do with this?” Lyall demanded.

“Absolutely nothing. Are you okay to lie down now?”

Lyall found that he was. He lay back, and his discomfort had nothing to do with the pillow-top mattress or the thousand-thread-count sheets. Or the simple cotton rope that Janus brought out of his bedside table. “Would you like this?” he asked.

Lyall opened his mouth to speak, but just nodded. Janus picked up Lyall’s left hand and kissed his way along the wrist. The rope followed next, and even though it was cotton, it felt as soft as the sheet against Lyall’s back. Janus moved quickly, lashing his wrists easily to the posters on the headboard practically too fast to follow with just sight, but Lyall’s talent kept track of the loops and double backs until Lyall had a perfect set of rope gauntlets running down his wrist. Another second, and Janus looped the rope down their length so that his weight would be evenly distributed. All Lyall had to do to free himself was pull the first loop free from the simple knot it was tucked into. Janus caught him looking. “Are you worried?” he asked.

“No,” Lyall said and found it was the truth. He mulled the idea of not knowing how to get free in his mind, found the concept to be agreeable, and lay back down. “Not at all.”

“Good,” Janus said. Janus’s ministrations to Lyall’s right arm quickly followed those to his left, leaving him completely immobile. He shifted, pulling the knots hard in experimentation, but though the rope moved against itself, it never tightened on his wrist.

“Acceptable?” Janus asked.

“Passingly,” Lyall allowed. Janus got off the bed, and the thought of being left alone tied like this made Lyall’s panic flare again, but Janus kissed his way down Lyall’s naked thigh. “Relax,” he said and smiled. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?” Lyall demanded. He tried to keep his voice light, but it plummeted to the ground like a shot marsh bird.

“I promise,” Janus said. He didn’t tie up Lyall’s legs, and for that, Lyall was grateful. Janus kissed his throat, biting down just to the point of breaking his skin. Lyall thrust himself up, wanting the pain as much as the mark of ownership, but no matter how much he shifted against the bonds, Janus seemed to anticipate his moves. “Lie still,” Janus said, mouth still to Lyall’s throat.

Lyall shook his head, about to argue that he couldn’t, but he found he could. He relaxed his grip on the rope, first, letting it support his weight. His shoulder muscles relaxed next, and he sank back down to the mattress.

“Excellent,” Janus whispered, then kissed him just above his Adam’s apple. Lyall bit back the groan and just accepted it. Janus’s laugh was throaty. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?” he asked.

“No,” Lyall said. And it was true. Janus was so strong that it was easy to just allow this. Janus bit down on his throat. Lyall couldn’t stop the groan this time. The pain was instantaneous, but so was the rush of pleasure of having Janus feed from him. He leaned back, exposing his throat further, and Janus held him until he stopped bleeding by himself.

The rush was better than any alcoholic shot. Lyall purred and shifted his body against the sheet. That was apparently allowed. Janus kissed him on the mouth, and Lyall licked his lips clean of the blood that was still on them. He licked Janus’s fangs clean, and because that was also permitted, he moved his attentions to Janus’s throat.

He’d always loved Janus’s throat. He liked to wait until Janus had pushed back his chair from the desk if he was working on a particularly difficult rune, back when he actually had to write runes rather than just wave his hands and have them appear where he needed them. He’d climb into Janus’s lap, shifting up so that he could feel Janus’s groin against his own. Janus, more times than not, would grip his hips. Lyall would put his hands on Janus’s broad

chest, then curl up and lick Janus's throat until Janus couldn't stand it anymore, and would throw him back onto the desk and fuck him.

"You need to spend more time at your desk," Lyall said, pausing his task for just a second.

"I'll tell Vision you said that," Janus said, but his voice caught. "He'll be thrilled."

"Is that the first thing you thought of?" Lyall asked, but kept his voice teasing. Janus's cock against his thigh was hard, and Lyall shifted against him to give him that much more friction.

"I assure you it was a distant second."

Lyall dug his fang into Janus's throat. It was just a nick and bled for a few seconds before closing. Janus groaned and put his hands flat on Lyall's shoulders. "May I fuck you?" he asked.

"Do you have to ask?" Lyall asked, looking up at him.

"I want to."

Lyall relaxed further. "You may," he said. "And also, if I may add? Oh, bloody hell, yes."

"Good," Janus said. He put his buckwheat pillow under Lyall's hips. Lyall didn't look away from Janus's eyes. He reached for the lube. Janus grabbed the vial from his side of the bed and looked down at him. "Hi," he said.

"Hello."

Janus kissed him again, which was good, because Lyall's mouth had been feeling cold. He jerked at Janus pushing his fingers inside him. "Relax," Janus whispered.

"I am relaxed," Lyall said and was surprised to see that he actually was. Janus sliding his cock inside him didn't hurt at all. "Fuck," he said. "That feels good."

Janus laughed, but tightened his grip on Lyall's hips. His first full thrust sent an almost electrical shock through Lyall. He wrapped his wrists around the rope, pulling himself up. It

was tight, and his shoulders took most of the weight, but it was bearable. Janus raised an eyebrow. "You think you can hold that?"

"I'm going to try," Lyall said. It helped that his hips were still elevated.

"Your call," Janus said, but he reached around Lyall, lifting him up even more. The weightlessness let Lyall feel every bit of Janus. After about the third stroke, Janus picked him all the way up off the pillow. The strength it took to manipulate him barely showed in Janus's arms. Lyall let him take some of the weight off his wrists and just enjoyed the ride.

Janus grinned down at him and gripped below his hips with just one forearm. Lyall tensed again, afraid of being dropped, but Janus had him. Of course Janus had him. "Worried?"

"No," Lyall said. And it was true.

"Good." The angle changed. Janus couldn't fuck him as hard without two hands, but he more than made up for it with his now free hand.

Janus, of course, knew exactly what worked for Lyall. He ran his fingers through the soft curls on Lyall's lower belly. Lyall sucked in his breath. "Please."

"What do you want, Lyall?"

Lyall yanked himself up higher in his bonds. "Anything, Janus, please. Just, please."

"Well, then," Janus said and smiled. He wrapped his fingers around Lyall's cock. He was rough, but in the achingly sweet way that matched perfectly with the half thrusts. Janus was close, even with the awkward grip he had on Lyall. Lyall locked his legs around Janus's hips, pulling himself up even higher. The energy snapping around Janus as he thrust traveled through his body and seemed to target Lyall's prostate.

He wasn't completely ready, which pulled the orgasm from him with a dull ache that was about the sweetest thing Lyall had ever felt. Janus let him go, and he slipped down to the mattress. The knots untied themselves without Janus touching them. Janus brought the sheet



up from the floor and tossed it over Lyall. “You’re supposed to be joining me,” Lyall said, grabbing Janus’s wrist. “That was the whole point to this.”

Janus was going to argue. He was going to say that he was far too busy, and he had way too much to do to go back to bed. Lyall circumvented the entire argument by striking Janus squarely between the eyes with one of the pillows. But not the buckwheat one, because Janus had just given Lyall a spectacular orgasm. Janus drew back, furious for just a second, but Lyall kept his face perfectly innocent. “You said.”

“I said,” Janus agreed. He came around to his side of the bed, and Lyall made him lie all the way down and rested his head on Janus’s chest so that he couldn’t wiggle out from under him. By now, he was wise in the way of sly Janus. They slept that way until nightfall.

## Chapter Seven

The door to the study opened and closed quickly, but it was long enough to allow something that wasn't exactly noise into the room. They had to drive into the city, but Vision didn't want to go out until after the moon was higher in the sky. The discord that poured in swirled around Vision's bare ankles like frigid air. "It's getting stronger," Vision said. He didn't look up. There was only one person who could enter his private study without raising the hair on the back of Vision's neck.

Hanz kissed the back of Vision's exposed nape. The growing discomfort that crawled up Vision's legs was banished with Hanz's touch. The solid strength emanated from him in the same way the challenge came from his son, who was now somewhere inside the house. Vision still hadn't looked up from the columns of numbers he was trying to straighten into a bottom line, but he relaxed once Hanz started to work his fingers into the knots that were gathering.

"You work too hard," Hanz admonished, but his voice was soft. "If you'd let me, I could bring someone in to deal with these matters." He made a dismissive gesture toward the reams of printouts and ledgers piled in gravity-defying piles about Vision.

Hanz smelled of rich blood, soap, and the clean engine oil smell that never left his pores. He could strip a carburetor as fast as he could strip Vision, and truth be told, derived the same amount of pleasure doing either. Vision had checked.

All Vision had to do was ask and he knew Hanz would offer Vision his wrist to sink his teeth into, but for now, the slight hunger he felt gave the other hungers a bite that left him on the edge of his seat. It was the way Hanz moved, whether it was to put down the tea tray or a perceived threat, that had attracted Vision to begin with, and the need he had was stronger now.

“Sir?” Hanz asked and went back to rubbing Vision’s neck.

“No, I don’t need anyone besides you,” Vision said. It was true. Both his ex-masters had delegated too many things to others. They were both in a central vacuum, and he was still here.

“Of course,” Hanz said instantly.

He turned to go, but Vision said his name and rooted him to the spot.

Kane’s unintentional challenge came back through him, slipping through the walls. Vision tried to ignore it, but the discord was too strong.

He exhaled, needlessly, and pushed Hanz away. “You say you can’t feel that,” he said.

Hanz exhaled as well. “I feel it through you,” Hanz said. “Say the word, sir, and I will ask him to move away.”

Vision shook his head, pulling himself off the table. He’d given Hanz his word; his son was under Vision’s protection. And Vision knew he had enough enemies out there that there was nowhere safer than on Vision’s property. “I’ll talk to him,” he said, grimly.

Vision slung his jacket back on.

Hanz hesitated. “He’s not doing it on purpose.”

“I know,” Vision said. And he did.

The lesson the night before had dampened a lot of the challenge Kane knew he inadvertently threw into Vision's face, but Kane knew it was still there. The distance between the game room and the upper part of the house Vision was in muted some of the stabbing need -- as though Vision were kind enough to drape a silk scarf over Kane's temple before driving the ice pick back in.

Lyall looked up from the fake guitar he was holding. He didn't pause the game, and the discordant group of notes that followed was like the metal-on-metal grinding of a braking subway car. It set Kane's teeth on edge. "You learn to ignore it after a while. It's like the hum from a refrigerator."

"You're serious?" Kane asked.

Lyall shrugged. "Or as Vision told me once, you can always kill him and take over his interests." He grinned, a wicked thing even if he just used his human teeth, and fell back into the overstuffed chair he was sitting in. His white T-shirt still had grease on it. Lyall had come over to work on the car Hanz was "helping" him restore. His jeans were new. They still smelled of the dye soaked through the fibers of the denim, and for the next little while they were going to be as black as his hair. Lyall should have been his rival; Lyall was the lieutenant of a rival elder as strong, if not stronger than Vision was, but from Lyall Kane got nothing.

"You're putting yourself on the same level as Vision, Kane. Get over your fine self. You're not even a vampire, and Vision could destroy you with about as much trouble as clearing his throat."

"I know that," Kane began, because he did. Deep down, he understood his role. He understood it even better the longer he spent with his father and the more time he was in New York, soaking up the lines Vision and his kind fed from as much as they did blood. His own body was changing, though. The need to swallow was becoming academic, like the need to crack a textbook over spring break. Sometimes he could feel his body giving in to the

death that had started the moment he reached into an elder's chest and pulled out the dead heart.

He heard Jinx's heartbeat coming down from the kitchen. It was a happy, joyous sound, like a bird's when compared to the passive noise from Lyall. Jinx came in, pushing the door open with his back, then turned, bearing a huge tray full of sandwiches and soda. Jinx's white hair was pulled back in a clip, his gray eyes shone slightly green from the reflection of the shirt he wore, and when he smiled, Kane's heart ached, but in the best, sweetest, most sexual way.

"Jess has outdone herself," Kane said, clearing his throat. The food was just part of her love, but it didn't cover the sudden tension in the room. Lyall, from his years of experience, ignored it, and Jinx grinned over the haul. He was bird-like in more than just his heart rate. He also ate his own weight in food several times over. Yet, when they were in bed together, and Kane ran his hands over the white skin of his chest, Jinx's ribs still stood out. All that energy was going somewhere, but it wasn't to put meat on his bones.

The game room was completely soundproof. Vision had insisted on it. The master bedroom, or at least the bedroom the master was in, was in a different wing, but when Hanz and Vision began to have sex, Kane felt it down his spine as pressure. They were together now, he felt, not actually fucking, the tension was there whenever Hanz and Vision were alone. He stood up just as Jinx was about to collapse into his lap. He'd moved too fast, but Jinx, who had always had cat-like reflexes, recovered without so much as a windmill of the arm and blithely poured Coke into a frosted mug.

When Jinx did notice Kane's discomfort, he looked up and cocked his head to one side.

"I have to...go," Kane said. He cleared his throat, but the knot in it didn't clear. He went outside, to the moonlight, and Kane knew Jinx would find him, eventually, when it was "safe" to go back.

It was cold. His breath hung around him like a fog, and he should have gone back to get his jacket. The silver moonlight made everything seem colder. The great house was ablaze with light, and through the glassed-in addition, Kane could watch Lyall restarting the game. It was so clear that Kane could read the writing on the purple rental box on the coffee table.

He felt the release of the tension that had been building up.

"Kane," he heard, from behind him. Kane turned, feeling a puff of real wind against his cheeks. It was too cold too. He closed his eyes, just for a second, and when he opened them again, something flitted, silvery between the trees of the single copse Vision had left standing on his property.

"Jinx?" he called. Soundproofing or not, Kane could still hear the plastic clicking sounds the game controllers gave off from behind him, and the light from the windows was close enough that it cast his shadow a dozen yards ahead of him. The pit of Kane's stomach dropped out, and he felt like a swimmer who had misjudged the distance to shore and was trying to convince himself that the bump he just felt against his leg couldn't possibly be a --

"Kane!" The voice was angry now, sharp and demanding. Kane stepped away from the house and shook his head. Jinx was...in his mind he saw Jinx, sprawled out on the love seat, staring lovingly at the icy chunks of Coke floating free from the chilled mug, but he also saw him as the creature running between the trees, and it made sense that he was out here, going to find Jinx. It made sense now that he was cold, because he now saw Jinx slipping on Kane's jacket though it was miles too big for him, because that was what Jinx did.

A headache he didn't remember flared, sharp enough that when he touched his forehead, he expected to feel hot, clammy blood. He didn't, of course, but when he straightened, he heard his name again, from the trees. Jinx needed him.

He called out Jinx's name, not quite understanding why Jinx was flickering in and out of focus like an old newsreel, but it would be clearer when he was able to catch up.

A hand came down sharply on Kane's shoulder, and Kane turned, unable to stop a snarl. He didn't have teeth *yet*, and it was probably a good thing, because even as he turned, a part of him knew it was Vision. But, the rest of him disregarded the fact in order to get to Jinx. That was the important part. Vision should have known not to come between them. He snarled again, pushing Vision's hand free when Vision said sharply, "Kane."

Vision waved his hand. In the moonlight he was as silver as Jinx would have been, despite his blond hair, and as still as he was, he was beautiful, like marble. Their eyes met, and Kane looked away quickly. He tensed as Vision awkwardly patted him on the shoulder. When he spoke again, his voice had softened slightly. "Go inside. I will handle this."

The push was back. Vision could make a vampire step out into the blinding sun if he so chose. But it was Jinx. Kane took a step forward, toward the trees, and was surprised to find out that he could. The strength wasn't from Kane. Kane wasn't dumb enough to believe the energy came from him -- but he couldn't stop himself.

"Enough," Vision said. No -- commanded. And whatever hold that...thing had over Kane broke, but not completely. It tried to pull him back, but that annoyed Vision. Vision yanked Kane back, hard, then almost lost him a final time. Something with talons raked his skin, and a mocking laugh touched him. Pain was everything he knew, and then there was just black.

Kane looked around. The trees were back, and he couldn't run. It was the dream again, but he didn't remember falling asleep. He remembered pulling into the drive with a huge feeling of relief, and he remembered opening the door to the bedroom he and Jinx shared to dump the bag of textbooks (most of them still in their plastic wrap, he'd remembered thinking guiltily), and then there was the video game. There was more, but when he tried touching it, the memories were gone, and probing for them was like touching his tongue to a canker sore. Then he was here. The air around him was cold, he knew that from the puffs of breath that formed clouds around his head. But he felt nothing.

Breathing. He hadn't needed to breathe in a very long time. He did so because letting his chest fall still alarmed Jinx more than it should have. Jinx was probably the only person in the world who was troubled by a *lack* of snoring. Yet holding his breath was something he had to fight to do, and the act left him dizzy and weak. He took the next breath of air suddenly, very aware of the staccato beating of his heart against the roof of his mouth.

Kane was human again. It terrified him. The lecture halls were all aggressively air-conditioned, so he'd worn a long-sleeved T-shirt for the day and hadn't changed at night. Despite being new, it was tight on his shoulders. His skin under the long, right sleeve felt normal. The long scar that looked more like a tattoo until staring at it revealed the black "ink" swirling just under the skin felt gone. He had gotten used to it. It gave him strength. He earned the power ripping out the heart of a vampire elder, an alpha as he called it then, and though it had nearly killed him, he'd begun to love it.

And now it was gone. He finally fought free of the paralysis he'd been caught in, and he pulled the sleeve up over his elbow. Before, the tail of the scar had curled up around his forearm splitting into two like a snake's tongue. When it had formed, it had wrapped around his arm starting just above the jutting bone of his wrist and had fallen into place with burning agony. The mark had fought its way over his skin -- and *into* his skin, he corrected himself -- as though seeking its way to his heart. The vampire elder had died before the marks, by then elaborate flames, followed the tangled lines of his veins up to his shoulder. He didn't want to know what would've happened if they'd found their way to his heart. It was a race he was very glad he'd won.

His arm was clear. Where the mark had been was just skin, whiter than the skin around it. Kane had taken to almost being nocturnal like his father, which made getting to school on time difficult, even for evening classes. Still, he hadn't avoided all trace of the sun, just most of it. Jinx, whose skin had always matched the white of his hair, had far more of a tan than he did. Kane formed a fist. The muscle he had put on since finding his father remained. He was still strong, but without his mark he felt naked and exposed.



Someone, somewhere, cleared his throat. Kane jumped despite himself and turned around. The sound had bounced off enough of the silver trees around him that the noise had become directionless. All around him the trees were undisturbed. But he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. At least he wasn't running this time. That was some improvement. The moon, bloated and hateful, stared down at him. Kane didn't call out, despite the panic that flared inside him. He didn't move, either. The snow beneath his boots would give away his position as quickly as a flashing neon sign would.

"You think I do not know where I put you after going through all the trouble of bringing you here?" A voice, male and deep, came. Not from all directions this time, but from just one.

Kane looked up. The shadows on the moon's face leered down at him. It spoke of the pain he could visit on him and all that he loved. Hopelessness crushed Kane, like heavy stones placed one by one on his chest. And for one of his newfound birdlike heartbeats he wanted to surrender to pressure just to free himself from the fear.

He forced himself to shake his head. At least he had control of that. The act of defiance, even if he didn't feel very defiant, gave him strength. He had nothing to draw on, not even the lines here, but whatever the moon was, it wasn't strong enough to take all his will. He pushed back, lifting the weight from him as far as he could. The crushing sensation was no more real than the fog of breath he made.

Unburdened, he glared back at the face of the moon and crossed his arms over his chest. It did nothing but earn him another chuckle.

"Such a brave little puppy. Did your master teach you that?"

"I have no master," Kane snapped. It was mostly true.

More weight pressed on him. His knees almost buckled under it. Kane would have staggered, probably fallen, if the pressure hadn't slacked off as quickly as it had come. "Do you really think I have nothing more to throw at you? I could crush you into nothingness,

and these trees would never forget your screams, but you're nothing to me but a messenger boy."

Kane gritted his teeth. The last attack had left him with a ringing headache. He almost couldn't get out the obligatory "fuck you." He shouldn't have bothered. It just got him laughed at again.

The unmistakable sound of a cart being pushed became deafening. Kane held his hands over his ears, but it did little to dampen the noise. He turned almost completely around, but saw nothing. Just when he thought his eardrums were going to explode, something hit the back of his legs, and he spun around. The cart was right behind him. The archaic medical tools in a jumbled pile on the metal tray didn't make a sound as the cart bounced off him and came to a rest a foot away. In the silver moonlight over a dozen cutting implements from handsaws to knives to... Kane didn't want to see anymore.

The moon laughed a final time. "Forgive me if I must ensure you will take the message back verbatim. I promise to leave you most of your tongue if you think your pantomime skills are somewhat lacking."

Kane felt himself falling back. He knew with the dream logic of a nightmare that there was going to be a gurney behind him. It would be stained a rusted brown color and stink of old, wasted blood. But when he did fall back, it was onto his bed.

Vision stared down at him, his face pale. Or even paler than usual. Their relationship was a tedious one at best, yet still Kane sat up and touched his face. His skin felt cool to Kane's flushed skin, but it was solid and real and not part of the dreamscape at all. Hanz stood to Vision's side. The concern on Hanz's face was obvious, and Kane wondered how long he'd been screaming. If his throat was any indication, it had probably been quite a while. Kane looked around, trying to find Jinx, but it was just the three of them in his and Jinx's bedroom.

"He couldn't stand the noise," Hanz said, almost apologetically. "We sent him out."

“Can you call him back?” Kane asked, his voice rusty. “Please?”

Vision stood up off the bed and stepped out of Kane’s line of sight. Kane still felt a little dizzy. Watching Vision would be too much for what little control he had. He covered his eyes with his arm as the door opened and closed, and felt the familiar pulse. The door opened, and Jinx ran into the room and threw himself onto the bed. It only took Jinx a second to burrow beside him. Vision returned to the bedside.

“Obviously, that was not a normal nightmare,” Vision said. “Will you tell us what happened?”

Kane did. When he finished, Vision nodded once. He patted Hanz on the shoulder, once, and left them.

## Chapter Eight

Once Vision and Hanz had gone, Jinx sat up on the bed with naked accusation on his face. Loose strands of hair had escaped his braid and fell down his face, and with his pointy chin he would have looked almost pixie if it hadn't been for the dour look on his face. Kane held out his hand. Before, Jinx would have snuggled in beside him and slept with him, but Jinx crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "I told you, I'm fine," Kane said.

Jinx snorted. He tapped his foot against the carpet, frowning, then crossed the room and opened the window. The night breeze was warmer than the room, but Kane didn't dare complain. Finally, Jinx looked back to him. "You let them in," he said accusingly.

"I don't let them in anywhere," Kane said.

Jinx shot him a withering look and crossed back to the bed. He took Kane's head in his hands and tilted it back and forth. "You do," Jinx said.

"And, pray tell, how do I do a dumb thing like that?"

"You're not firewalled."

"I'm not what?" Kane demanded. He tried to pull back, but Jinx must have decided he wasn't going to allow it, because Kane suddenly had to choose between staying still and snapping his neck. He chose to stay still.

“Firewalled,” Jinx said. He frowned again, glancing out to the open window, and then nodded to himself. “Now hold still.”

Something touched him, like weeds wrapping around his foot in a lake. It was unpleasant, but not painful. Not at first. “What are you doing?” Kane asked.

“Firewalling you, what do you think?”

“You do know that was the most you’ve ever said to me at once,” Kane said, but obeyed him. Jinx was strange, occasionally crossing over to weird, but Kane was the first one to say that he knew his stuff.

Jinx leaned over and kissed the top of his head. “This will hurt,” he whispered, and then the unpleasant feeling around his ankle became shooting flames of pain. It wrapped its way up his leg, not unlike the way the mark had taken over his arm, but at least it didn’t scar him. It touched his belly, setting off a cramp that just about split him in two, and he cried out, but Jinx held him, tight enough that he shared the pain. His torso hurt less, and when it touched his head, he barely felt it at all.

“There,” Jinx announced, and in that one word, Kane heard just how very pleased he was.

Kane’s whole body hummed. He recognized the pattern as from Vision’s lines. How Jinx had the ability to channel it, he had no idea.

“Just like that?” Kane asked. His teeth chattered, and he bit down on them hard. The vibration was leaving him, bit by bit, but remnants would remain.

“You’re firewalled,” Jinx said, and patted him on the head. “Rest now.”

“Okay,” Kane said.

Jinx smiled down at him. Kane lay back so that his head was on the pillow. He looked up at Jinx’s expectant face and wondered how in the world he was supposed to be able to sleep when his entire body felt as though he’d just French-kissed an industrial-strength light socket, but as soon as he closed his eyes, he was gone.

When he woke again, the sun was just setting. What Jinx had done to him could have been a dream but for the metallic taste in his mouth. Jinx was curled up in the old armchair that had survived the move from Jess's old house, and when he put his feet down, his knees cracked.

Kane opened his mouth again, but Jinx smiled and shook his head. He felt empty to Kane, in a way he hadn't felt since they'd left San Francisco. Channeling that much energy had taken a lot from him, but it had worked. Kane felt different. If he had to put it in words, he felt contained inside himself. The moon, still fuller than not, would have no pull on him.

Jinx grinned and came to the bedside. Kane held out his arms, expecting Jinx to join him under the sheet, but instead, he straddled him. It pinned Kane down, something of which Jinx was no doubt aware, considering the conspiratorial grin on his face. Kane didn't fight as Jinx took his wrists and held them down by his sides. "I'm not going to fight you," Kane told him. "Really, you can do anything you want with me. I'll even provide the maple syrup."

Jinx slid down so that their groins were aligned, then he twisted his body, hard. Kane tried to sit up, but Jinx moved his knees into Kane's open palms and locked his hands down on Kane's forearms. "That's not fair," Kane grouched.

Jinx just lowered himself over Kane's cock, and this time he was much gentler.

"You know, I could just fuck you."

Jinx rubbed his groin slowly up Kane's cock, now hard against his belly. His lips twitched, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he moved down, slowly, so that his mouth was parallel to his groin. He kissed the tip, now obvious through the thin sheet, and Kane closed his eyes, feeling the heat of Jinx's mouth as though it were against his skin. Jinx moved down further, sucking on the fabric till Jinx reached Kane's testicles.

"Jinx, please," Kane whispered.

Jinx grinned, sticking out his tongue, then put his head down and sucked on the sheet until it was wet. The combination of hot mouth and cold, wet fabric was surprisingly pleasant. “Jinx,” Kane said again.

Jinx looked up from what he was doing, his frown now an affectation.

“Please. Let me fuck you. I’ll do anything.”

Jinx crooked an eyebrow, and couldn’t have repeated “*Anything?*” more obviously.

“Yes, anything. Just, please.”

Another devilish grin and he nodded. Kane yanked down the sheet, almost spilling Jinx to the floor, and reached into the drawer with the condoms and lube. Jinx took it from him, with every motion cool and practiced. He grinned, shifting higher, and then took both Kane’s hands and put them on his own cock. It was slick too, though Kane hadn’t really seen him do that.

“Together,” Jinx ordered, sliding down him. He bought Kane’s hands down at the same time, wrapping his fingers around the muscles of Kane’s forearms. He kept his hands there; as he moved up again, he waited to make sure Kane was following orders. Jinx was so hot and so tight, and he felt the energy from Kane’s lines already start to fill him. He arched his back, wanting without asking for Jinx to quicken the pace. Jinx shook his head. So that was officially a no-go. He shrugged his shoulders, reveling in the way his body moved under Jinx.

When Jinx was satisfied that Kane was going to hold the pace, he leaned back, bracing himself against Kane’s legs. He opened his mouth, soundlessly, though his breathing quickened.

So did his heartbeat. And Kane’s was in sync with it. The new surge of blood, now so foreign to him, gave his whole body an almost drug-like rush. Jinx kept it slow for another few strokes, to the point where Kane wanted to howl, but Jinx shook his head and sped up for him. Jinx’s abdominal muscles flexed and tensed, the muscles on his thighs were tight and hard, and he rode Kane for all he possibly could.

Kane felt the orgasm spread, not through his own body, but through Jinx's. It mirrored through his, a second or so behind, and Jinx's cock in his hands had already started to twitch. "Next time," Kane groaned. "I'm going to suck you off so hard you'll actually verbalize your begging."

Jinx snorted again, then groaned softly. Jinx arched his back, coming in Kane's hands, and the semen splashed up onto his chest. It brought Kane up more slowly. It was a softer orgasm, an echo of Jinx's that was as achingly good.

Kane relaxed. Jinx slid off him and fit back into the crook of his arm, where they both knew he belonged.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vision leaned back in the café chair and picked up his wine glass. The waitress had looked disappointed that just the two young men at the table were eating, but changed her expression immediately at the bottle Vision ordered. Hanz raised his eyebrow, but said nothing. The humans walking back and forth in the bright side of midnight were still laughing and talking. Vision remembered hunting among them, and he found himself missing it. Hanz had a series of feeders for him that ate the most organic foods and kept religiously to their low-sodium diets, but it wasn't the same.

"We could hunt if you wish," Hanz said, and brushed his fingers over Vision's wrist. The boys were studying the menu as though there was a test at the end of it, so they didn't see it or the sudden flush to Vision's cheeks. It didn't take much, just a glance sometimes, or a touch, and he was aching and hard. "You just have to ask."

"Why don't I believe you?" Vision said, voice as low, but then heard Kane whispering to Jinx that they were doing it again. Jinx, who didn't have a covert bone in his body, looked on with great interest.

Vision took his hand back. Kane went back to his menu, and when the waitress finally returned, ordered a laundry list of food. It had just arrived when Breyloorn arrived with



Octavius. Surprisingly, he asked Octavius to join them, rather than stay at point. Vision supposed it was an improvement.

Vision raised a hand in greeting, which Breylorn returned. Hanz bowed his head stiffly, no more than a bob. He still hadn't forgiven Vision for giving up his lands to him. Of course, it had been entirely Vision's choice, and he'd had to convince Breylorn to accept the gift. But Vision knew that Hanz wouldn't blame him, so the aggression had to go somewhere.

Octavius, however, didn't seem to appreciate the honor, at least. He stared at Kane the whole time. "You've changed," Octavius snapped.

"Me?" Kane asked, glancing to Hanz for guidance, but Hanz shook his head in confusion.

Jinx frowned, putting his hand over Kane's. Breylorn noticed. "Meet us by the door," Breylorn said.

Octavius jerked in his chair, about to argue, but Breylorn looked at him with the mildest of expressions, and he got up and bowed stiffly.

"What was that?" Vision asked, as Octavius walked past. Octavius heard him, and his shoulders knotted.

"I don't know," Breylorn said and frowned. Jinx ignored the food at the table, instead staring past Vision's shoulder. Vision didn't have to turn around to feel that Octavius had crossed his arms over his chest, but he didn't turn away. He was still staring at Kane, and while Kane seemed oblivious as he ate, Jinx all but shook with anger. "But I'm going to find out."

Vision motioned the waitress to bring him another glass.

## Chapter Nine

Janus woke up first. Lyall had curled up on the other side of the bed and didn't wake as Janus got up. He kissed Lyall's exposed shoulder, and his skin felt cold. So Janus tucked his arm back under the blanket. Lyall snuffled and buried himself deeper into the pillows. Janus closed the door behind him quietly and padded his way back to his office.

When he did, the wards over the door crackled in warning. He turned, unbelieving that anything wishing him harm could possibly make it through the levels of protection he'd set up over the years, and for a moment, he saw nothing.

He was just jumpy, he admonished himself, and was just about to turn back to his desk when he heard someone, not Lyall, clear his throat. He blinked, and a man came into focus in front of him, just under the wards of the door.

He wasn't really there -- the baseboard of the hall and the tasteful mango sorbet color of the wall behind him was very obvious through him. There was a lot of power crackling through the image, and for a second, the image came slightly more into focus. But Janus's wards snapped as well, keeping him in about as much clarity as an early television broadcast.

"I'm very strong," Janus said, forcing his voice to sound slightly apologetic. "Sorry about that."

His guest wasn't used to being thwarted. He bowed his head, accepting the false sympathy with the same amount of false grace. He wore a smoking jacket, of all things, and the red velvet was barely a dingy brown through his poor reception. His hair was salt-and-pepper, though Janus got the impression that was again more of an effect of the signal degradation. "It is all right," he said, speaking with a faint accent. Eastern European, if Janus had to guess, though he'd ever really been there as a human soldier. Something ending in a 'ia,' if he had to guess.

The wards pulsed. If Janus wanted to, he could have infused them with more energy, and they would block even this shadow of an image, but his guest had obviously put out a lot of effort to set up this meeting, and Janus knew he should at least ask him what he wanted.

"What is it that you think I can do for you?" Janus asked. He moved to the desk and sat down on the edge of it. The image tried to follow him across the floor, but Janus waved his hand, and a shower of sparks fell from the burning wards. It caught the image up in a paper-thin prison. But when dealing with just the second dimension, that was all that was needed. "I would prefer if you stay right there, if you don't mind. Do you have a name?" Janus asked, picking up a paperweight off his desk. He tossed it back and forth, outwardly fidgeting, but each time the black, smooth stone slapped his palm, he infused it with more energy.

"Vladimir."

"Vladimir," Janus repeated. "Really."

"Is that going to be a problem with you?" Vladimir demanded, hotly, and it was an obvious sore spot. It was a new sore spot, practically gaping wound, and it had a jagged edge. Janus hazarded a guess. "You've been speaking with Vision, haven't you?"

Vladimir forced himself not to get angrier. It took a moment, which Janus graciously granted, and then the image exhaled. "Yes. I have had that...privilege."

“He really is a dear, isn’t he?” Janus asked. The stone in his hand was hot now, and if it hadn’t been his own energy, it would have burned him. “I just love him when he gets in one of his moods.”

“So I’ve heard,” Vladimir said, throwing the insult as though it had weight. Instead it sailed right past Janus’s left ear in a gentle arc.

Still, Janus sat up. “What have you heard?” he demanded, forcing his voice sharp.

Vladimir spread his hands, but didn’t answer. “He has more power now. A gift from you?”

The obvious implication in his voice was supposed to be another face slap. “Why should I tell you?” Janus asked. He supposed that when Varaugh was about, his intel was good.

“I want his lines. He took them from me, and I want them back. Arrange that for me, and I’ll let him live. If not...” He didn’t finish.

Janus stood up, throwing the rock back and forth. “Do finish. You obviously have a brilliant threat just bursting to come out.”

“I’ll destroy him. And everything he holds dear. His lover, the boy, everything. If you care for him --”

“I care for him very much,” Janus said. That, at least, wasn’t a lie. He snatched the stone out of the air with his right hand, and it hummed with the energy he’d infused into it. “Which is exactly why you should consider this to be fair warning. Coming after him is a direct challenge against me.”

“So be it,” Vladimir said.

The stone passed easily through the prison Janus had set for him and entered the same power frequency that Vladimir was on. It burned him, melting his skin around the stone. Curls of smoke that Janus saw, if not smelled, wrapped around his hand. Vladimir disappeared with another shower of sparks.

The wards over the door had been physically scorched into the paint and the wood below, and on reflection, Janus decided he actually liked the look.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once at the conclave meeting, Vision almost changed his mind about allowing Kane and Jinx to accompany them when he saw the shark-like circling of the lieutenants. When he had been one, moving up from their ranks was almost unheard of. It was much more likely that the master would kill or remove any uppity lieutenant long before the lieutenant was strong enough to challenge the master. Vision surreptitiously kissed the back of Hanz's neck.

"What was that for?" Hanz asked, softly.

"Trust," Vision said. Hanz looked up at the feeding frenzy waiting to happen and obviously understood. He took Kane's arm and didn't let him jerk free. Vision waited for them to sit on an empty couch before pushing open the heavy doors to the conclave room.

Janus was already at the head of the table and broke away from the conversation he was having with Lagrishe. There was no love, but quite a lot of blood lost between them, but they seemed to be having a somewhat polite conversation. Breyloren sat down at his spot as two other elders tried to speak with Vision. Vision extricated himself from their conversation quickly as Janus dismissed Lagrishe when he saw Vision approach. If Janus saw the look of hatred that passed Lagrishe's face, he didn't let it show.

Lagrishe saw Vision see it, though, and his face went blank. Vision walked past him to the sideboard and poured two glasses of scotch. He gave one to Janus and sat on the table with his back to the room.

"So do you think the Rangers will take it this year?" Janus said and took a sip.

"What?" Vision didn't have to turn around to feel the hatred on his back. He and Breyloren were the only two people Janus had taken into his confidence, and that had ruffled some feathers, considering his and Janus's history.

“Yes, I do think it’s going to be a mild winter.”

“You’re very strange.”

Janus put his glass down. “Keep up your end of the conversation, here, Vision. Or should I just look up into your blue, blue eyes?”

“Something is wrong with Octavius.”

“Octavius?” Janus asked. “Breylorn’s new meat?” The ice in his drink clinked as he rolled the glass back and forth between his hands. “So do you think we should string him up, or shall I just have him staked?”

There was a ruthlessness to Janus that really appealed to Vision, but he shook his head. “He hasn’t done anything yet.”

“Say the word.”

Vision nodded.

Janus put his hand over Vision’s knee. He motioned Vision to lean down to hear something even more private than the conversation they’d been having. Vision leaned down.

“They are all watching?” Janus whispered so softly that Vision felt the words break off his skin more than actually hearing them.

“To a man. Are you trying to get me in shit with Hanz?”

Janus laughed, far more than the joke -- if it was a joke, Vision was fairly certain he was being serious -- was worth. “It’s not Lagrishe. Which means that someone else is trying to undermine the conclave,” Janus whispered. He broke away and ran his knuckles down the back of Vision’s cheek.

“And what, you just want to remind everyone how much I am your bitch?”

“Everyone knows you won’t say no to me,” Janus whispered back.

It was Vision’s turn to laugh. He was the only one in the entire conclave who did say no. He called Janus out on his shit on a regular basis.

"I think we're done here," Janus said finally. Vision nodded. He straightened and got off the table.

Even when he had had two territories, his voice had counted as one vote. Now, of course, he didn't have any territories on the map. He had given them both up for Breylorn. Janus had given him the wild magic in return, which was getting stronger day by day. But from the looks of the vampires already around the table, some of them still thought it was payment for a different kind of service rendered.

"Fuck them," Janus said beside him.

"No, thanks, I'm trying to cut down," Vision said. He heard a shout from the hall.

And not just any shout. It was Hanz. Vision was out of the room in a flash.

The smell of burst capillaries came from Kane's neck. Jinx was between him and the rest of the room, and Hanz had Octavius up against the wall by the throat. If Octavius was fighting back, Hanz made no show of it.

Vision took Hanz's arm and felt just how angry Hanz was. "Hanz," he whispered.

Hanz dropped Octavius, who fell from his hands like a sack of bones. Breylorn was there in the next second and looked just about as angry as Hanz was. All the leniency he'd had with Janus as his lieutenant seemed to have been used up. "Let's go home," Vision said.

Breylorn, without saying a word, picked up Octavius off the floor and marched him to the elevator. Hanz waited for the doors to close before speaking again. "You should stay."

Vision glanced to Janus, who shrugged. "There is nothing more to discuss here."

Hanz nodded. He touched Vision's cheek where Janus had touched him just a few minutes ago and then took Kane's arm. Kane, for once, didn't argue.

Or didn't immediately argue. "It's nothing," Kane said once they were in the car and driving home.

"It's not nothing," Vision said. Kane looked taken aback at Vision's harsh words, but didn't say anything.

Vision sighed. “You’re getting hurt because of me, I just know it. Breylorn is taking care of Octavius right now, but I am sorry.”

Kane glance to Hanz, but nodded. It was by far the most civilized conversation they’d ever had. Back at the compound, Vision watched from the backyard as Hanz walked Kane to the house where the gazebo used to be. It was smaller by nine-tenths than the great house and was just a simple bungalow. Half the main floor was dedicated strictly as administration offices for Jess. She had moved out to the compounds to look after the interests of the small army of vampires Vision had suddenly had at his disposal and worked tirelessly to maintain their well-being. It had all mostly been farmed out by then, but she still looked after their interests.

The slight smell of chemicals from the basement darkroom filled the air, and the ink was still drying on plans for a greenhouse. The office space was exceptionally clean, but not sterile. A new photo of the skyline was up over her personal desk. Jess was happy here, Vision felt, and that mollified him slightly.

Jess waited in the office, her arms crossed over her chest. She wasn’t angry -- Vision would’ve recognized that expression from a quarter-mile away -- but she was worried about her boys. The lines on her face were deep with her concern, and Vision felt the pain at the passing of time she had to suffer through that they would never feel. The bruises on Kane’s neck were starting to rise to the surface, and it was clear that Octavius had really tried to tear out Kane’s trachea. Once the adrenaline had left, Vision felt how much Kane hurt, and most of his weight was being supported by Jinx.

Hanz was the last one inside and glanced over to him apologetically and then closed the door behind them. Vision walked out on the grass in the slight chill of the evening and watched the lights of the house turn on, one by one.

As a human, Hanz hadn’t had a fatherly moment from start to finish, Vision knew. He had said he hadn’t even been in love before Vision. And now he had a whole family that



didn't exactly include Vision anymore. Vision didn't exactly feel helpless; it was more the feeling of an outsider.

The north facing wall off Jess's house shimmered like a heat mirage, and then Janus stepped out onto the grass.

"Are you here for a quickie?" Vision asked.

"What would you do if I said yes?" Janus smiled.

Vision stared up to the second floor where the last set of lights had turned on. "Ensure my affairs are in order."

"Ah," said Janus. "And are they?"

"No, sadly."

"My loss."

"Are you going to tell me why the charade?"

"Protection. Yours, not mine. If people think you're my lapdog, hopefully that will make you less of a target."

"No one who has been around for the past two years is going to think that I am in your back pocket, Janus. It's just not going to happen."

"Past five."

"What?"

"Varaugh has been gone for five years. And he's predisposed to believe you will do anything for power."

"How did he get out of the painting? If he could have done it himself, why would he have waited five years? He must have had help."

They both stared up to the moon, which was still mostly full but high enough in the sky that there was no immediate sense of danger. "How do you kill a celestial body?" Vision asked.

“You find the man behind the curtain. And I’ve already killed Varaugh twice.”

“Let’s hope the third time’s the charm.”

Janus nodded, and a pregnant pause between them could have given birth and sent its child off to college before Janus spoke again. “There is one thing...”

A sense of dread moved inside Vision and set up shop. “Yes?”

“I may have already met your moon man.”

“Good old Drac?” Vision asked.

“It is possible that all he wants are your lines.”

“My lines,” Vision repeated. “And are you going to give them to him?”

“No. I told you. I don’t think I could if I wanted to. But if your moon man has freed Varaugh from the painting, he only knows the information from the past five years second or third hand. Varaugh has already approached Lagrishe, who said he hadn’t told him anything.”

“Can you believe him? You trust him?”

“I trust the fear he has of me. It’s not real loyalty, but it will do in a pinch.”

“He’s just one mouth in a dozen. Any one of them could have told the truth.” Vision paused. “He came to you.”

Janus nodded.

“Lyall had a nightmare before?”

“What of it?” Janus asked. Vision didn’t point out that they didn’t dream.

“He was trying to decide who to focus on.” Vision felt his mouth twitch. Obviously, Vision had won the coin toss.

“Maybe,” Janus agreed. “But it should give you enough time to get your family here away. You can’t protect them during the day. Do you have any safe houses?”

"Which state would you prefer?" Vision said darkly. Strickland had been highly paranoid. Not that Vision was one to talk, because he was the one who had maintained them.

"Alaska's far enough away."

Vision rubbed his face. "I'll call my people in Nome."

"Seriously?" Janus demanded.

"No. Not seriously," Vision allowed. He had sold Strickland's interests in Alaska on his return from Siberia and the subsequent beheading.

Janus glanced up to the sky that was just beginning to lighten. "Octavius didn't tell Breyloorn much. I don't think he knows himself why he took after Kane. Tomorrow night you can tell me everything you remember about Varaugh."

"There isn't much to say." Vision found his voice to be only slightly sick. "He promised me the two things I wanted most."

Janus stared at him. His frown and the way his eyebrows touched had the look of a man who didn't want to know but had to ask, regardless.

Vision didn't wait for the question. "He promised me that if I didn't succeed in killing Strickland, he would."

Janus nodded. "And?"

"If he caught you, I could kill you."

Janus nodded again, curtly. "You hated me that much."

"I didn't hate you," Vision said. "At least, not entirely. You betrayed me so badly. Strickland had every right to kill me, and you knew that. You knew the cost of getting caught, and you chose to get caught without a moment's thought for what that would mean for me."

Janus's face lost its warmth for a moment. Vision couldn't help but think of the way that Janus had tightened his hands over Vision's hips when they both heard the scrape of chairs that signaled the conclave session was over. That sound had always given them

enough time to straighten their clothes and look as though they'd just been talking over the Navajo chair in the hall. But Janus hadn't let him go.

"You were older than I was and stronger than I was. But you made that decision for both of us, and I...I didn't hate you. Not even then, but I wanted you to pay. I bet Breyloren did nothing to you."

"He told me my discretion could have used a bit more work," Janus said softly.

Vision shook his head. "Strickland told me he would have cut off my head, but it wouldn't hurt long enough. I had to suffer first. And then Varaugh found me and promised me exactly what I wanted. But in the end it was obvious that he was going to be just another master, and I decided then and there, I was quite done with having one of those."

Janus nodded a final time. "Thank you."

Digging around in the past had brought up more than just one skeleton. Vision cleared his throat. "You never told me why."

"Why?" Janus hesitated, obviously hoping that Vision was asking for anything but the reason that Janus had continued holding him even as the conclave adjourned. Vision didn't jump in and make it easier. *Why*. The word was heavy and full of recrimination. Janus chewed his lip. "It was getting to be more than a distraction from the boredom. It was starting to...mean something."

"Yes, and?" Vision prompted, hating that he'd asked the question. They'd come to terms without ever talking about it, and now he'd exposed a raw nerve.

"And." Janus paused. "And I knew how much work you were going to be."

Vision winced. It wasn't enough to expose the nerve. No, he had to ply it with an acetylene torch. "I see."

"It wasn't a failing in you," Janus said, quietly. "It was my failing. I didn't want to provide it. You saw how lousy I was as lieutenant. You couldn't possibly think I'd be any better as lover."

Vision looked up and saw Hanz standing quietly in the door of Jess's house. His arms were crossed, and Vision cleared his throat. "Well, that's certainly true." All of it -- the betrayal, Siberia, Varaugh -- seemed like such a small price to pay. He swallowed, meeting Hanz's eyes for the first time, and Hanz touched his hand to his throat and bowed his head.

Janus looked at Vision's face one more time, but what he was looking for Vision didn't know. He stepped back and waved his hands over the house's wall. Runes shot up on the blue siding, burning in brilliant whites. When Janus stepped through the arch he'd just made, Vision knew he hadn't stepped through to Jess's bedroom.

"You still love him," Hanz said softly and stepped down into the grass. He took Vision's arm.

Vision leaned forward until their foreheads touched. "But I'm not in love with him."

Hanz moved his hand out and cupped the back of Vision's head. But the sky was growing light, and there was no arguing with the *Farmer's Almanac*.

Vision led the way back inside and shut the door behind them. Hanz reached around him to lock it, and in doing so, caught Vision in place using both hands.

"Now what?" Vision asked.

Hanz only smiled, but didn't move.

"What?" Vision couldn't help softening his tone.

"Tell me what you want." Hanz put his hands flat on Vision's belly.

Vision held in his breath. "Suck me," he whispered.

"Is that all?" Hanz said reproachfully but dropped to his knees. "Seriously, Vision. Your imagination is quite flat these days."

Vision took Hanz's hands off his hip. It was his call, so Hanz didn't fight it, and it felt good against his cock. "Nothing flat about this," he said.

"No, sir," Hanz said. He looked up from his knees and smiled a dark smile. His hands on Vision's cock didn't stop running up and down.

“Hanz,” Vision growled.

“Yes, sir?”

“You said you would do what I wanted.”

Hanz laughed, switching from his fingers to the palm of his hand. The added pressure brought Vision to the tips of his toes. “This is what you want, sir. Isn’t it?”

Vision wanted to say no. He opened his mouth to say no. No was on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it down.

“What was that, sir?”

Vision relaxed, no matter how strong the flutter was in his belly. Hanz rubbed his cheek against the front of Vision’s slacks. His breath was hot as he didn’t move his lips an inch closer. Hanz waited, then leaned forward and bit Vision on the thigh. “Please just answer the question, sir.”

Vision sighed. “Please do whatever you want, Hanz. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Yes. Was that so hard to say?” Hanz asked and kissed the spot that he’d bitten.

“No,” Vision said. And it was the truth. Hanz shifted forward and undid Vision’s slacks. He slid them down Vision’s hips. Vision threw himself back against the hot door.

The air was still cold, and Hanz’s chuckle was barely audible. “If you hold very still, sir, I’ll suck you off.”

Vision nodded. Hanz’s mouth was so hot that Vision had to fight to remain still. It was difficult. He watched Hanz part his lips and take his cock slowly into his mouth, a quarter inch at a time. “Hanz,” Vision said sharply. “Please. Do you want me to beg?”

“Yes,” Hanz said. “I do, actually.”

Vision closed his eyes. “Then please, Hanz. Just...please.”

“Good boy,” Hanz whispered. He pulled away and sucked on his fingers, then slipped them between Vision’s thighs. “Up now for me. Please, sir.”

Vision got up on his toes and fought to keep his hands to his sides. Whatever he wanted. Hanz was all about choice. Hanz's fingers pushed inside Vision, and even with the spit, it was difficult. "Hanz," Vision said, tensing.

"You can take it, sir. You know you can."

"Doesn't mean I want to," Vision groaned.

"Yes, it does." Hanz licked his thigh but scraped his teeth along as he did it. "Come on, sir. Flat-footed, if you don't mind."

Vision dropped down. The fingers inside him seemed to split him, but Hanz was right; he could take it.

"I told you so," Hanz said cheerfully. "Don't take it personally, sir."

"How exactly am I supposed to take your fingers in my ass?" Vision asked. The burning sensation was gone; he was getting used to it.

"Okay. You can just take that part personally. Do you want to chat some more, or should I just go back to what I was doing?"

Vision cleared his throat. "By all means. Carry on."

"Very well, sir," Hanz said. He fucked his fingers in and out and took Vision's cock into the back of his mouth. He no longer seemed to care that Vision couldn't keep still. Vision put his hands on Hanz's shoulders, and when he wasn't rebuffed for it, he moved to his head. Hanz looked up at him, warningly, but Vision raised an eyebrow. Hanz appeared to think about it, then sat back on his heels.

Vision leaned against the door. The sun hit directly on the other side, sending shots of pain pleasantly down his spine, and Hanz found the perfect angle with his fingers. He loved the way Hanz splayed his free hand under Vision's shirt. If he needed to, he could easily push his way down Hanz's throat, but Hanz was good enough never to force it to that. Hanz found his prostate with the rough balls of his fingers, and Vision squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted Hanz to slow down, because it was all too much, too quickly. As though hearing

him -- although Vision supposed if Hanz could read minds, he probably wouldn't tell Vision he could -- he pulled away. Before Hanz could complain that he didn't really mean it, Hanz brought him down to the floor with him. Vision was all too willing to go down. Together they managed their clothes, and Hanz pulled him back. Vision felt the hardness of his cock slide between his thighs. It felt slick, and after the fingers, it slid easily into him. Vision arched his back, letting Hanz choose the rhythm, and there were no more smart remarks. It was just a slide of their bodies, and that was enough.

Hanz gripped Vision's hip, despite how slick with sweat Vision's skin must have been. He started slow enough, working his way always to find the deeper thrust, the better angle, and the right speed to elicit the most sound from the back of Vision's throat. And Vision was only too happy to provide him with encouragement. He felt Hanz fight with himself, but everything Hanz did was for Vision's pleasure. He was grateful for the way he didn't have to hate himself for giving up his trust in exchange for the right angle in a hard fuck. It was too much for Vision. He cried out, fighting with his body to let him feel this joining and this connection just a moment longer. But Hanz touched the back of his neck and told him just to let it go. So he did. Naked and kneeling on the cold stone flooring of the kitchen that was only used to make coffee and ice, Vision came. And Hanz, as in all things, was right behind him.



## Chapter Ten

Kane survived his statistics class, though he now knew there were four hundred thirty-five seats in the lecture hall with one hundred twenty different lights. The bits about Bayesian probability, however, escaped him. Following the droning professor who didn't look up from his notes was too much. At the end of the fifty minutes, he grabbed his books and fled. A minute later, he found Jinx on his hands and knees in the computer lab by the mess of blue Ethernet cables by the lab supervisor's desk. "Jinx? What are you doing?" he asked.

Jinx stared down at the cords in his hand. "Networking."

"Why?"

"Job."

"Job?" Kane repeated.

Jinx frowned, flicking the end of the Ethernet cable with his thumbnail, and sighed. "Job, yes."

"Were you going to tell me? Or at least communicate it in interpretive dance?"

"Don't dance," Jinx said. He pushed Kane aside, but leaned forward and kissed Kane's thigh as he crawled past. "Love you. Please go."

Kane left him, but only to step out of the room and call his aunt. “Did you know Jinx had a job?” he demanded.

“Hello, Kane. And yes, I did. I had to track down his social security number for the official letter of offer to go through.”

“Why does Jinx have a job?” Kane tried again.

“Apparently, he wanted one. He stopped going to his classes three weeks ago and started working his magic,” Jess said. Kane felt a remembrance of Jinx’s magic at the back of his neck. “The head of facilities had to have him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this? Why didn’t he?” Kane demanded.

“You were...” Jess didn’t finish. Asleep or passed out, Kane supposed, depending on how polite she wanted to be.

He rubbed his forehead. “Sorry.”

“Jinx is happy,” Jess told him. “What about you?”

“Of course I’m happy,” Kane said, just a little too sharply.

“Ah,” said Jess. And that was enough. Kane didn’t argue anymore, but said his good-byes and hung up.

The lights flickered, and Kane looked down the empty hall. There were shadows there, but whatever Jinx had done to him kept him from being open to them. He went back into the computer lab, put both hands on Jinx’s shoulders, and kissed him on top of his head.

Hanz was still deeply asleep by the time Vision woke up. Last night had obviously taken more out of Hanz than Vision had thought. In a masterful display of escape artistry, he separated himself from Hanz and the bedding.

The sun had set, if only just, and the house still hadn’t come out of lockdown. It meant Frank wasn’t on duty yet. But as Vision came down the stairs, Frank came out of the servants’ room, still blinking sleep. He saw Vision and did a double take, but Vision only

raised his hand. Frank relaxed, bowing his head, and Vision smiled. Frank was not afraid of Vision as much as he was of Hanz. "Coffee, sir?" Frank called.

Vision shook his head. "I can make it myself," he said. He'd spent far more years where Frank was than where he was now, and less than a decade was not long enough to forget.

He had just poured himself a cup and grabbed the day's newspaper. "Any news?" a voice asked.

Vision looked up. It wasn't Vision or Hanz, but he was in his own house; he really wasn't expecting an attack. But it was Varaugh sitting across from him, his legs crossed. Half the time he was crystal clear, but the rest of the time his image flitted, and the edges around his body blurred. "Greetings, lover boy."

"Get out of my house."

"I'm going to say 'no' to that request. How about a kiss hello? Or a blow job? You were always so good at your blow jobs."

"Thank you," Vision said and tried to push Varaugh out, but there was nothing in him to will. He was a picture without a host, nothing more. Vision stood up. "What do you want?"

"You. I thought I just said that. Or on your knees. Maybe flat on your back, with your legs in the air. You liked that one too."

Vision's lip twitched. "I did. You really rocked my socks. It's too bad I loathed you when you weren't sticking things in me. We would have made quite a pair."

"Join us."

"Fuck off."

"I'm serious, Vision. Join us, or I'll kill you."

Vision pushed the newspaper at him. "You'd be more threatening if you could turn to the funnies."

Varaugh turned, nodding his head at someone Vision couldn't see. "Tell your buddy Drac to fuck off as well. Hey, you could try to upgrade from 2-D from 3-D and fuck him yourself. I'll send flowers."

The phone rang. Varaugh looked startled just for a second and winked out of existence.

Vision was right beside it, and he answered it before the first ring finished. "What?"

It was Janus. "Vision? Are you okay?"

Vision rubbed his face. "I just got a visit from Varaugh. He wanted to talk about old times."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You didn't fuck him. What the hell was I thinking?"

"Don't beat yourself up. Let Hanz do it for you. You'll enjoy it more."

"Janus, you say the sweetest things."

"Lagrishe is dead."

"See what I mean?" Vision asked. "Did you kill him?"

"No," Janus said.

"Oh. Do you know who did?"

"Yes. It was Octavius. Breylorn released him from his duties, and Lagrishe was dead about an hour later. He hired humans to drag him out of his bed. It was probably planned from the beginning."

"Oh," said Vision again, and rubbed his face. "That does present a problem."

"Yes. It does."

Vision glanced at his watch. It was just after sunset, but he felt Hanz still asleep. "Do you need us right away?"

Janus exhaled. "Not immediately, but soon. We need to decide if it should be sanctioned or not."

"You mean you need to decide," Vision corrected. Janus didn't argue the point. It was smart of Octavius. He'd gotten rid of the single man on the conclave that the head of the conclave despised. As a lieutenant, even a disgraced, dismissed lieutenant, he was only allowed to kill his own master. As a free agent, however, it came down to the conclave's vote as to whether it would be permitted. Vision's first master was the last vampire ousted without the conclave's permission, and that had ended badly for all involved.

Vision shook his head. "Why would you sanction it? He knew the rules."

"So did you."

"Do not compare me to him. My honor could not stand it, and I would have to challenge you to a duel."

"You'd lose."

"I'd cheat."

"You'd still lose."

Vision snorted. "I'm really good at cheating. Do you know where he is now?"

"No," Janus said. "But we will find him."

Frank came to the door of the kitchen. "Sir?" he asked.

"Just a second," Vision told Janus. "Yes?"

"It's Octavius," Frank said.

"What about him?" Vision asked.

"He's asking to come inside."

Janus must have heard that. "I've got to go," Vision said. He hung up the phone and followed Frank out to the landing.

Only Janus had permission to enter without an invitation. The door was open, but his threshold kept the large vampire on the other side of it.

"May I enter?" Octavius asked.

Frank glanced to Vision; it was not his threshold to break. Vision shook his head, and Frank went to close the door in Octavius's face.

"Wait, please," Octavius shouted. "Please, Vision, you must speak with me. I beg of you."

"I assure you, I don't," Vision said and came up behind Frank. Octavius looked horrible. Gone was the slick hairdo and fancy silk suits. He looked exhausted, and his face was lined, and if truth be told, he didn't feel an ounce more powerful than he had when he'd been Breylorn's lieutenant. No shreds of Breylorn's power remained in him. Vision didn't feel Lagrishe's either. Nothing made sense to him.

Octavius slammed his fist against the open door. The crunching sound that followed was probably some of the smaller bones in his hand; Vision was no doctor. "Hanz said you would speak with me. He said he would," Octavius said and cradled his hand to his chest.

"When did he say that?" Vision asked, voice like ice. Hanz hadn't left his side since after Octavius had attacked Kane.

"Last night. During the conclave. He said if I had any problems, you would speak with me. I thought --"

"He said that?" Vision asked, keeping his voice light. But he put an edge to his words; an edge that promised untold pain if Hanz were to deny it.

Octavius nodded and then winced. He had blown his wad, metaphorically speaking, and he wasn't even looking to see if his Hail Mary pass had scored.

Vision crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm sure he didn't have killing another elder in mind as a possible topic of conversation," Vision said. "And if you're lying to me, I will kill you myself. Are we very clear?"

"Ask him," Octavius said, miserably. Frank shifted his weight from foot to foot. Octavius was on Vision's territory, and if Frank forced him off the property, he would go. Vision shook his head again. Frank stepped out of the way, and Vision dismissed him.

Vision stepped out into the yard. Octavius closed his eyes, thankfully. "What is it that you think I can do for you?" Vision asked. "You of all people should know that I am just another vote on the table."

"Janus listens to you," Octavius said, not looking at him. "If you intercede on my behalf, he will have to listen to you. It shouldn't be a crime to be ambitious."

"You must have had help killing Lagrishe." Vision hadn't liked Lagrishe -- he had sided against Janus long before he tried to kill him -- but that wasn't really the point right now. "It means someone else is trying to undermine the conclave."

"I killed him myself, without any assistance from the conclave. Were you trying to undermine the conclave when you had help killing another elder?"

"I didn't kill another elder. I had tried to. And I stopped trying just before I saved his ass. And if I hadn't saved his ass, he would be dead."

Octavius held out his hands beseechingly. "Forgive me. I am sorry."

"If you just tell Janus that Vladimir guided your hand, I will speak to him for you."

Octavia shook his head. "He'll kill me."

"Janus or Vladimir?" Vision asked. "Because, believe me, Janus forgives as much as he forgets, which is to say, not much at all."

Octavius covered his face in his hands. "I've done nothing you haven't tried. You can't fault me for this."

Vision stared at him and remembered how impossible overcoming a much stronger vampire could be. He'd been there. "I don't," Vision said, truthfully. "But you're sitting on one of the richest veins of lines and without your backer. I really don't think you will be able to hold your territory. So without Janus's support, you're going to be dangling a huge piece of steak in front of a bunch of slobbering dogs. It's going to cause a cascade of slaughter."

“I can hold my own,” Octavius snapped. Vision laughed and tried to hide it in his coffee cup until he had control of himself. He shook his head. Octavius was on a strong property. Vision was not going to deny that, but he felt weak to Vision.

“There is really nothing I can do for you,” Vision said. “Out of respect for Breylohn, and because he has done the same for me. I won’t promise you anything. Unless you tell Janus what really happened, I don’t know how much use I will be for you.”

Octavius shook his head. “What you’re telling me is, regardless of where I am or what I do, I’m a dead man.”

“You made your bed, Octavius.”

Octavius snorted and opened his mouth to speak, but Vision shook his head. “Sure, yes, whatever. I can assume you just made some incredibly pithy remark about my slutty past. That’s never happened before. Now get out.”

Octavius hunched his shoulders. The gates swung open, and Kane drove his Jeep with Jinx in the passenger seat inside the compound. He didn’t pull into the garage, but pulled over on the red shale. He opened the door, glancing to Vision for guidance, and didn’t step off the running board.

“It’s okay,” Vision called as Octavius walked past them. And for a moment, it was. Then Octavius stopped just when he reached the Jeep and looked up. Vision took a step forward. Kane saw his face and was pulling himself back into the Jeep when Octavius grabbed the front of Kane’s shirt and pulled him to him. They were still a dozen yards away, but Vision heard Jinx’s squeak.

They were too far away. Vision had to pull off his lines to stop them. Kane fought back, bringing his hand up just as Vision threw his will at Octavius. Octavius had already thrown a punch, and it caught Kane just below the eye. Kane’s head snapped back just as Vision struck Octavius firmly on the chest. He flew back half a dozen yards and sent up red shale where he landed.



Vision was there in the next second. Kane bled freely from his cheek, and Vision felt the bruise already start to form, but other than that he was unhurt. Octavius tried to get up from where Vision had thrown him, but Vision pushed him down again, hard enough that his bones creaked. Vision kicked him, hard in the ribs, and when he tried to crabwalk away, Vision kicked him again. "If I were you, I would crawl on my knees to the gate, kneel, and wait. If you do survive Janus, and you do come back again, I'll stake you out for the sun. In pieces. Are we very clear?"

Octavius didn't answer, but nodded and started to crawl. Vision kicked at him again, catching him on the upper thigh, and turned back to Kane. Kane didn't particularly want to be touched, Vision knew, but he didn't let Kane go until it was clear that the damage was only superficial.

"Let go," Kane said, voice flat. Vision did. He looked back to Octavius, but he was halfway down the drive and was obviously done. It was over. Vision glanced to Jinx. "Take him into the house," he said. Kane tried to shrug off Jinx's help too, but Jinx was a lot harder to shrug off. Vision still stood between them and Octavius as Jinx assisted Kane to the front door.

Drops of Kane's blood stained the driveway. It was neither wholly human nor vampire and such a brilliant red it could have been fallen gemstones rather than blood. Vision was going to smear it with a shoe, but changed his mind and poured the last of his coffee onto it to diffuse the energy. When Octavius had reached the end of the drive and was off his property, Vision followed Jinx and Kane back into the house.

Hanz glanced to him from where he'd put Kane on the ornamental bench. He didn't stop turning Kane's head slowly from the right to the left, left to the right. Vision didn't tell him that it had only been a glancing punch and that Kane had all but pulled free before it landed. Hanz wouldn't have listened to him.

Knowing how lucky Kane had been didn't make Vision feel any better. He didn't think a man who had come to his house for a favor would dare hurt the son of his lover. It didn't

make any sense. His own head hurt just thinking about it. He also wanted to apologize to Hanz and beg his forgiveness for not managing to keep Kane safe. Octavius could have just as easily torn Kane's throat out as land a punch, and Vision hadn't been close enough to stop it.

Kane glared at him from where he sat. Vision wanted to apologize to him as well for failing him too. Instead he put his hand on Hanz's shoulder. Kane bristled at that, but Vision ignored it. "I have paperwork upstairs that needs to get done before the conclave. Come join me when you are done."

"Yes, sir," Hanz said.

"And send Frank out to watch Octavius doesn't go anywhere. I left him by the gate."

"Of course."

## Chapter Eleven

Hanz brought tea. Vision raised an eyebrow at that; he wasn't much of a tea drinker.

"You looked tense," Hanz said.

"I almost got your son killed."

"It was a punch to the face. We all have had that at one time or another," Hanz said with forced casualness.

"It could have been more," Vision said darkly, but took the teacup. He didn't even know he owned bone china. The tea tasted like the average tea of Vision's experience: dried grass clippings combined with some anti-saliva agent, but Hanz looked as though he were enjoying his.

"But it wasn't," Hanz said. "I still can't believe he would do something that..."

"Crazy?" Vision supplied.

Hanz just exhaled sharply. "Suicidal. He needed your good word."

"I hadn't promised him my good word," Vision said.

Hanz stared at him. "You didn't?"

“I said I’d talk to Janus. I was going to talk to him regardless. But I don’t think he killed Lagrishe. Or if he did, he’s already given the power away.”

Hanz nodded and looked down to the untouched papers around Vision. “Did you get much done, sir?”

Vision exhaled sharply. “No.”

Hanz put his hand firmly over Vision’s. “That’s too bad, sir,” he said, voice thick.

Vision groaned. “I’ve got to call Janus. He’ll probably want a meet. But hold that thought,” Vision said and stood. He stood up next to Hanz, running his hand down Hanz’s chest, played with his belt for a second, and then cupped his cock gently. “Right about here. Can you do that for me, Hanz?”

“Yes, sir. I can and will.”

“Good,” Vision said and kissed him. Hanz smiled easily, then grabbed Vision’s hand, twisted him around, and threw him over his desk. He kicked out Vision’s legs, fast enough that Vision would have had his breath knocked out of him if he’d needed to breathe. “If you hold that thought right there for me.”

Vision lifted himself up to his elbows. “Consider it held.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hanz said, and backed away.

Vision got up, turned around, and kissed him again. “Do you know how much I love you?”

“Yes,” Hanz said matter-of-factly.

“Good.”

Janus picked up on the first ring. “I have Octavius,” Vision said. “But say the word and I’ll vacuum up his ashes and mail them to you.”

“What happened?”

"The bastard hit Kane. He could have killed him."

"That's not good."

"You're really good at understatement, Janus."

"Yes."

Vision switched the phone to the other ear. "Send someone for him. I'm not putting him in a car of mine. I've got a sick feeling over all of this, Janus. Something is up, and I don't like it."

"We've been through worse," Janus said. He couldn't have been more obviously trying to placate Vision if he'd begun by saying, *I'm trying to placate you*.

Vision heard Frank's shout. He was up and to the window in time to see the late model black sedan speed off, taking Octavius with it. Hanz ran out to the lawn, studying the car even as it sped off, then glanced up to where Vision was at the window. He was asking if Vision wanted him to follow, but Vision shook his head. He didn't want Hanz anywhere without him -- it might be a trap. Hell, it probably was.

"What was that?" Janus asked, still on the phone.

"I wasn't specific enough," Vision said. "Octavius is gone."

"I'll be right there," Janus said. And he was.

Hanz came back into the house and didn't look surprised to see Janus. He raised his hand in greeting, something Vision knew he got from him, and Janus nodded a greeting back. One big, happy family. When he spoke, though, it was only to Vision.

"No plates," Hanz said. "Plus the car was...woogy."

"Woogy?" Janus asked.

"Like you did, for Breyloren, with the wards. It's not natural." From the distaste in his voice, he could have been talking about splicing human genes into ears of corn.

“You noticed that?” Janus asked and was obviously hiding his need to laugh. It probably would have killed whatever new growth Hanz’s opinion of Janus had cultivated.

“It had four wheels, didn’t it?” Vision asked Janus and turned back to Hanz. “Darling, can you get us some coffee?”

“You have tea,” Hanz snapped.

“Make it with the French press. I need to talk to Janus alone.”

“I’m pretty sure you weren’t supposed to tell me that part.”

“You would have figured it out.” Vision kissed his forehead, and Hanz left, only slightly mollified.

Janus walked to the window. “You didn’t feel anything?” Janus asked, turning to him. “Nothing at all?”

“When he was here? I can tell you he didn’t feel like an elder. He didn’t feel much stronger than he had when he was Breylorn’s lieutenant.”

Janus bit his bottom lip, and his fingers drummed against his thigh. “Maybe he isn’t.”

“He’s still a lieutenant? I can’t imagine Breylorn not severing all ties to him.”

“He did. I felt him. But I also felt Octavius kill Lagrishe.”

“How did he do it?”

“Human thugs. They broke into his house through the sunroom and dragged him out into the daylight. Lagrishe didn’t have very many friends left on the conclave and barely any real power. He didn’t have anyone who could have stopped them.”

“He was still an elder. He should have been able to fight them off in the darkness of his house. Why did he just go quietly into the daylight?”

Janus shook his head. Lagrishe had tried to kill him the year before, by poisoning him and Lyall and then blowing out the glass of his apartment. The sun would have taken him in the morning if Vision hadn’t gotten there in time. Janus had invoiced Lagrishe for the repair

bill, and Lagrishe, surprisingly, had paid every dime of it. "We don't exactly have a lab set up to test his ashes for any strange compounds."

"Well, we should," Vision said. "What about you? Do you feel anything? Lagrishe was one of your elders."

"Your elders. Not ours?" Janus asked.

"I only felt Octavius because he had fed from Breylorn, and Breylorn's lines used to be mine. It was a scent memory and a scant one at that. I'm not a part of you anymore, Janus."

"I know," Janus said. He closed his eyes. "I just can't...see it," Janus said. "It's gone."

Jinx didn't knock entering the room, but as quiet as he was, both Janus and Vision turned around. "I can see it," Jinx said, voice a bare whisper. His white skin was flared scarlet; Janus had that effect on him, but he still took a step forward. "It's all a network."

"Can you show us?" Vision asked.

Jinx nodded, but didn't raise his eyes from Vision's knees. He skirted the bookshelves, rather than cross the open floor, and pushed Vision's chair back so he could sit behind the huge desk. He turned Vision's computer on, and within seconds, the computer flared to life. "Well, that's faster," Vision said, despite himself.

"I upgraded it," Jinx said, still not looking at them. He frowned at the computer screen, frustrated for just a second, then opened the DOS prompt and began typing so fast Vision couldn't follow. Jinx stopped twice, to work on the network ports he hadn't seen before, then closed the prompt and opened a shortcut to a program called "That.exe" that Vision had never seen before. The program was a simple map, but the lines flared on it almost immediately. They pulsed as though in real time, all except the dark mark that Janus had created when he'd taken over all the lines.

"Here," Jinx said, pointing to it.

"That's nothing," Janus said to Jinx. "It's dead. I killed it."

Jinx shook his head. “Not broken,” he said. “Not dead.” He picked up the dark free-form shape with the mouse and dragged it to the side. It came off like an excised mole. And the energy beneath it was Lagrishe’s power, draining from his neighboring lands as though a dam had burst. But it wasn’t just Lagrishe’s power. Vision could feel it now that it was exposed, because it was other. Not Janus’s, and not his, but closer to his than Janus’s.

“Where is the other energy coming from, Jinx?” Vision asked.

“Away,” Jinx said.

“Can you...” Vision tried to find the word. “Janus, can you block Lagrishe’s lines? Even temporarily?”

“No,” said Janus. “Not without --”

“Yes,” said Jinx, over him.

“You can?” Vision asked, to Jinx.

“It’s networking,” Jinx said, as though speaking to a moron. More keystrokes, fewer than seven, by Vision’s count, and the flow from Lagrishe’s lines slowed to a trickle, then to almost nothing at all.

“That won’t hold,” Janus said, dubiously.

Jinx patted Vision’s monitor like it was a good dog. He beamed up at them. “It’ll do.”

“Vision,” Jinx said, not looking at him. “Can I have him?”

“Sadly, he’s not mine to give,” Vision said. He patted Jinx on the head like Jinx had patted the monitor. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Janus asked.

“This is all coming back to the beginning,” Vision said. “Where else?”

Janus studied the map for another second. “Breyloren’s apartment.”

Hanz stepped into the room. “Coffee’s ready.”

“Good,” Vision said. “You’re driving.”



Breylorn's building had two doormen in uniform. It felt strange to be back, Vision decided once Hanz had stopped, and the discomfort only grew as they approached the building. Janus approached with a friendly smile and was summarily dismissed. Vision got out of the car, touched the top brass button on the jacket of one man's uniform, and smiled. "Maybe you should just let us in," he suggested, willing it to be so, and the door opened.

"I have got to learn how to do that," Janus said.

"It's my sandbox," Vision said, not moving his mouth to do so. "Get your own, Janus."

"I've got my own," Janus said, with just a minor touch of sour grapes.

Once inside, they were in. Janus hadn't given up his key to Breylorn's old apartment. Vision had never been inside. He and Janus had met in Janus's nest and outside the conclave, but that was about the end of it. At an apartment or in a real bed would have sanitized the relationship. And they didn't want that at all.

The apartment looked untouched, like Breylorn had just stepped out, even though he'd moved out three years ago. There were still glasses in opaque cupboards in the small galley kitchen, and none of the tall, white furniture had dust covers. Janus's jaw clenched as he passed a small bedroom off the main hall, furnished as what looked like a servant's quarters. Vision didn't ask for the story. It was enough that he knew Breylorn had sold him out here. On Hiroshi's erroneous word, but still. At the time he thought it justice, but once Janus had freed himself, Vision couldn't continue his revenge.

For a moment, Vision thought he was wrong, that there was no one in the building, but then he heard the sound of weight shifting from one tired foot to another. They entered the large, empty living space with the hermetic furniture. It was a state-of-the-art apartment, right down to the remote control glass that polarized on command. "I knew you would find us," Vladimir said, from one of the high-backed white chairs. He'd switched from his white slacks to tan ones, but the blazer was back. His silver hair was still in place, meticulous in all

ways, but the huge burn mark on his left cheek, just below his eye, was new and still smelled faintly of scorched flesh. It wasn't fresh, or at least the marks around the edges of the scab were shiny white, but it didn't smell as if it was healing. "Your work?" Vision asked Janus.

"Some of my finest," Janus said, grimly. He looked around to the tattered remains of the wards. "These were too. But they've degraded more than they should have."

Vladimir shrugged, modestly, like he had something personally to do with it. "I did underestimate you," Vladimir said. "Believe me, it won't happen again."

"You'd be surprised to hear how often I hear that," Janus said, voice cold.

Octavius stood behind him, silently. He gripped the back of the chair as though it was the only thing holding him upright. When he saw Vision, his skin turned ashen, and Janus's fists clenched. Janus moved, picking Vladimir up by his throat, and slammed him against the wall. Vladimir hissed, his fangs out, but Janus slammed him again. "This ends now," he said.

"Return to me my lines. You had no right to deny them."

"Open war is not permitted," Janus said. "Your lieutenant did not have the conclave's permission to murder Lagrishe."

"Your new civilized rules do not supersede the old way," Vladimir snarled.

Janus's fingers dug more deeply into Vladimir's throat. How Vladimir was still conscious escaped Vision entirely. "I say they do," Janus snapped.

"Which is it, Janus? Old rules or new ways?" Vladimir gasped. He scraped his nails down Janus's arm, but Janus seemed impervious to the pain. "You can't have both."

"The new ways trump the old," Janus said. His words had weight here, and the uncomfortable feeling in Vision's belly flared up again.

"I have your word on that?" Vladimir demanded.

"Janus --" Vision said, quietly, trying to catch his arm, but Janus shrugged him off.

"You have my word. Now, give Octavius up and we'll go. Our quarrel is not with you."

The unspoken *yet* was as heavy as Janus's promise. Vision wanted to turn and go. The air here smelled off, and it was making him sick breathing it in to speak. Vladimir smiled at him, and all Vision heard was the final click of a trap that had just been set.

"He's yours," Vladimir said. "Until this mess has been sorted out. I deeply apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused. Octavius only wanted to please me, and he might have taken it a bit too far." His words were aimed at Janus, but they were for Vision.

"And of course, I'm stripping you of Lagrishe's lines."

"Strip away," Vladimir agreed, cheerfully. He had his own power, they both knew it. Octavius took a stumbling step around the chair, seemingly drunk, and Vision wondered if he'd ever know how lucky he was not to have been turned into another suit for Varaugh to wear.

Hanz was there beside Vision and offered his shoulder. Vision wanted to snatch him back and tell him not to touch Octavius. It was a knee-jerk reaction, but a strong one. As though hearing him, Hanz broke away and walked slowly behind him as they made their way out of the apartment. "What was that about?" Janus asked, once they were down in the lobby. He'd already called Breylorn to inform him of who was squatting in his old apartment -- warded phones got the best reception -- but Vision doubted Vladimir would still be there by the time Breylorn could do anything about it.

"It wasn't about power," Vision said and watched as Hanz kept Octavius from falling down again. The touch was minimal, but supportive. Hanz's supply of pity hadn't been tapped out like Vision's and Janus's. Watching him, Vision found he'd do almost anything to keep that well full.

"What was it about? Octavius killed an elder. I felt the power enter him. But then he gave it all up. So he wasn't Vlad's ass-boy, then. Why would Vladimir have orchestrated the whole thing knowing I'd just come along and strip him of the power and his lieutenant in the same night?"

Vision looked up, but the lights to Breylorn's suite were off. Vladimir could be staring back, and he'd never know. "It wasn't about power," Vision repeated. "Good ole Drac was setting precedent."

"Precedent for what?" Janus demanded.

Vision didn't know. Yet.

The only building accessible to them that had an actual cell was Vision's. Other pressing matters had kept him away from his building, but the night guards, vampires both, snapped to attention as Janus, Vision, Hanz, and Octavius entered. They weren't the blond twins from Strickland's era, but two of the feral vampires that Vision's magic had drawn. They weren't as pretty. Vision was the first to admit. In fact, the redhead was almost homely. The dirt-blond on the other side of him had more potential, if Vision were to notice such things. Hanz glanced at him, eyebrow raised, and Vision kept his face blank. Hanz whispered their names in greeting as he passed, and they seemed eternally grateful for the recognition, however secondhand it was.

"Part of your army?" Janus asked.

"Apparently," Vision said and motioned them to support Octavius so Hanz no longer had to. He had no problem exposing them to whatever was wrong with Octavius, which was probably why he'd hired Jess, even at her ridiculous starting salary, to oversee the small army's well-being. They seemed happy enough to snap to it, so he supposed Jess was worth it.

They got off on the thirteenth floor and went down to the thirteenth door. Vision unlocked the unmarked door, and said nothing as Janus stepped inside. The two cells, made of pig iron, took up most of the room. It had a great view of the river, and probably could have gone for seventy dollars a square foot tomorrow. But Janus wasn't looking at the potential amount of natural lighting or the spectacular location. It was here that he'd found

Breylorn in the second cell, hooked up to a machine pumping poisoned blood into him as bait. It was here, too, that Vision had had him trapped, and they probably would both have been dead by dawn.

“Let’s get him locked up,” Janus said, his voice only slightly strained.

Vision nodded and stepped out of the way. Hanz motioned the two to bring Octavius into the cell, and as the redhead laid him down on the cot, Octavius reached out and grabbed Hanz by the hand.

Vision jumped forward, ready to yank Hanz free, but Octavius’s grip was a weak one. “Sir,” Hanz said. He pulled up Octavius’s shirt.

The black mark swirled over Octavius’s chest, as black as the mark up Kane’s arm. Vision recoiled in horror. Now that it was exposed to the air, he felt how much of Octavius’s body, inside and out, was covered in the mark. While Vision watched, it clawed its way up under the skin along Octavius’s neck, over his lips, and across his eyelids. “What the hell...” Janus began and saw Hanz’s stricken face.

“It’s Kane,” Vision said for Hanz. “That’s his mark.”

“He’s dying,” Hanz said.

“Precedent,” Vision repeated, cold inside. Hanz looked up at him, face blank for a second, and then paled further.

“Kane,” he whispered, prayer-like, then got up and bolted for the door.

Vision followed. He stopped, just before he reached the hall, and turned around. “Kill him,” Vision said.

“I can’t,” Janus said. “Not without at least a trial, however kangaroo court it is. You know that.”

“If you don’t kill him, Kane would have to die. Any attack on a lieutenant...you said that yourself,” Vision said. And whatever kind of hybrid Kane was, he was still human. And

under any of the vampire laws, old or new, that meant he was nothing but meat, when all was said and done. “He won’t have a chance.”

“Vision...I...” Janus didn’t finish. Octavius had done nothing to Janus. Killing him without immediate provocation was against the conclave.

“Vision!” Hanz screamed from the hall. “For fuck’s sake!”

“Kane’s still human. You know that.” Vision tried reason one more time. Perhaps, the small voice in his head suggested, it would have been a lot more effective if the words weren’t chewed up and spat in Janus’s face.

“I know that,” Janus snarled.

Janus’s fangs were out. So, when Vision checked, were his. His lips twitched, about to come to blows with Janus for the first time in half a decade, when Octavius half sat up from the cot, coughed once, and died. The black mark continued to swirl over every inch of exposed skin he had.

“Fuck,” Vision and Janus said together.

By the time Vision returned to the elevator, Hanz remembered he had a cell phone. Jess was slightly cross at being woken up so late, but willingly went up to check the boys. Through the speaker phone, Vision heard the confused noises that would have passed for words from Kane. He was safe in his bed. Hanz still drove as though the hounds of hell could keep up to him in the carpool lane. Hanz left the car parked on the lawn in front of Jess’s house and left the door open and the keys in the ignition. For once, Vision cleaned up after Hanz and followed him inside the house. Kane was sitting up, blinking, because Hanz had thrown on the overhead light in the bedroom. “Still not dead,” Kane said, shading his eyes with his arm. “Really, Dad. Please turn off the light.”

Hanz moved his hand to the light switch, but still hesitated. Vision put his hand over Hanz’s over the switch and forced Hanz’s unresponsive fingers to turn the lights off. Kane

settled back in bed, wrapping himself around the sleeping Jinx, but his back was ironing-board straight. Not that Vision had any more than a very distant memory of what an ironing board actually looked like, but he was fairly certain the overall shape hadn't changed all that much over the years. "Dad, this is weird, bordering on potentially embarrassing. Please go back to your own house," Kane said, voice muffled. The sound that came out of Jinx was one of complete concurrence.

## Chapter Twelve

Hanz didn't fight Vision as he gently propelled Hanz through Jess's house. Jess didn't come out of her bedroom. If Janus wished, he could compel people. Vision wished, closing and locking the door behind him, that he could ward the house to the support timbers. Instead, he did the next best thing that was within his power. He called the security company he used during the day when his own people were out from the sun. "Four guards," he told the company manager, after giving his home address. "Armed? Yes, of course. Is there an adjective stronger than heavily? Yes, thank you. Massively will do."

"Thank you," Hanz said.

"It's the least I can do," Vision said, but he meant the most, and Hanz knew it. Together they went upstairs. Vision stripped Hanz's clothes, hanging up the pieces that needed it and tossing the bits that didn't into the laundry basket. Hanz watched with amazement, but oddly enough, didn't offer to help. When they were both naked, Vision led the way into the bathroom and pinned Hanz under the main flow of the showerhead.

"It might be enough for tonight," Hanz said, still miserable. "But you can't protect him from the conclave if the conclave chooses to go after him."



Vision wrapped his arms around Hanz, though Hanz's muscled shoulder sent up stinging spray directly into his eyes. "I told you. I will protect him. I meant it then, and I mean it now."

"I heard you and Janus."

"Janus has Kane's best interests at heart. You know that too. Kane is human."

"What if you can't?"

"I can," Vision said.

"But what if you can't?" Hanz repeated.

Vision kissed him and pressed his fingers against Hanz's bruised lips. He must have been chewing them when Vision wasn't looking. They felt as though they stung. "I can. And I will. If you don't believe that, then you don't believe me."

"That's not a fair --" Hanz began, but he spoke against Vision's finger. When Vision didn't remove it, Hanz shut up. He hung his head miserably instead, as though that was any kind of improvement.

Vision gathered him up, hot from the shower spray, and held him for a good minute. Outside he heard a truck arrive, and the guards taking their place. Hanz heard it too, because he relaxed in Vision's arms.

It was easy, then, to turn Hanz around. Compared to the almost boiling steam, the conditioner felt good and thick in Vision's hand, and better and thicker on his cock. Hanz braced himself against the wall, easily, putting his right foot up on the tub edge for him, which put Vision at exactly the right angle. He slid inside Hanz easily, comfortably, and Hanz just as easily accepted him. The shower masked the slapping sounds their bodies made as they came together, and afterward, when Hanz's body shook so hard Vision was starting to doubt he could hold himself up, the pounding water, now no warmer than tepid, carried away the acrid smell. "I love you," Vision told him.

Hanz said nothing for the longest time, then straightened. “And I am nothing without you.”

Sleep came like death for both of them.

The phone rang before complete darkness. It was on Vision’s side of the bed, but Hanz groped for it over him. Still half asleep himself, Vision ran his hands down Hanz’s sides and kissed his chest as Hanz moved over him. But his stealth plan for getting fucked before true dark ended when he felt Hanz’s body stiffen.

Hanz sank back to his side “Jess? What is it?”

“Kane,” Jess said. Vision heard her part of the conversation as though he were on the phone with them.

Hanz sat up stiffer. “What about Kane?”

“They came and got him in the middle of the day. I tried to stop them, but they were humans. There was so much fighting. I gathered the boys up, and we hid, but they knocked the door down and found us. I thought they were going to kill everyone.”

Vision got out of bed with Hanz. Hanz got dressed, still holding the phone with a white-knuckled hand. “They said to meet them at the conclave. I’m so sorry, Hanz. I tried.”

“It’s okay,” Hanz said, grimly. “I’ll take care of it.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Vision said. He heard the phone click on the other end, signaling the end of the conversation, so Vision took the phone from Hanz and hung up. Hanz wanted to leave the room, but Vision stopped him. It was still light out. They couldn’t leave. Hanz fought him, just for a second, then relaxed. Vision put his hands on Hanz’s cheeks, but Hanz looked away. Vision made him look up and then kissed his forehead. “I swore to you that I would protect him,” he said. “You are not alone.”

“If something happens to him...” Hanz didn’t finish. His voice broke.

“Nothing will happen to him.”

Still, when Hanz drove into the city, he did so in the only car that had a V12 engine.

The body lay on the mahogany table. The swirling black mark over the skin reflected with crystal clarity on the polished surface. Kane sat at the head of the table in Janus's seat with his hands tied behind him. Janus stood beside him, a hand on his shoulder, but Vision recognized it instantly as a touch of comfort and not one of judgment.

Vladimir stood to Janus's right. He wore a simple business suit that made his silver hair gleam, but Vision recognized the accuser's robes that he had on. Hanz made a sound and tried to break away, but Vision caught him before he could get himself in any more trouble for Kane. Hanz fought him, hard enough that Vision had to pull on his lines to make Hanz obey him. He grounded Hanz to the spot, kissed him on the cheek, and turned back to the room.

There was no arguing the connection the body had to Kane; both the body and Kane's arm swirled in the same pattern. Kane looked at him and shook his head. He'd only done what Vision had showed him, and none of this was his fault. Vision nodded, telling him he understood, and Kane physically relaxed in his bonds.

Vision turned his attention to Vladimir. "I don't know what you think you will accomplish with this display," he said coldly. "But Kane is mine, and I'll be taking him now."

"It's not that simple," Janus said.

"You're not seriously saying that Dracula here is a member of the conclave," Vision snapped.

"Are you making fun of my name out of misplaced hostility toward my claim against your lieutenant?" Vladimir asked. "Because your ill-timed humor does nothing to negate my assertion."

"You have no claim against my lieutenant," Vision said, coldly. "And I will kill you if you say otherwise."

“I do no such thing as to accuse you of having anything to do with it,” Vladimir said, and Vision got the impression that the oiliness in his voice was deliberate, to make Vision even angrier.

Instead of giving in to his baser nature, Vision took a deep breath. “I am not saying that you are saying that.” If he could keep his emotions in check, he could make his voice equally oily. “But Kane had nothing to do with this.”

Vladimir raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really?” He motioned to the marks on the body and then motioned to Kane. “I am told Octavius had several altercations with the boy previously. I am told blows were exchanged. The young man has a history of slaughtering vampires, and that mark all over my lieutenant’s body is his.”

Vision didn’t have to look. When Kane had first come to the city, he was under the control of another vampire and had attacked Hanz. The black mark had almost killed him, and Vision was forced to open the wild lines fully to save Hanz. The look on Kane’s face changed from fear to resolute certainty, and Vision knew he was thinking the same thing.

But Vision wasn’t done yet. “You just said that you would not suggest that I would have anything to do with such an attack, yet you accuse an agent of mine of such a crime.”

Vladimir spread his hands. “I am not saying this action wasn’t any part yours.”

Vision waited for the *but*. Janus frowned. Vision saw it out of the corner of his eye. He wasn’t thrilled with this, either. In fact, Vision recognized the murderous glint in his eye from personal experience.

“I am saying your lieutenant’s son acted either entirely by himself, or he did it out of some misguided loyalty to his father. Octavius transferred his power to me, and the boy, not knowing the transfer had occurred, wanted to please. I think your lieutenant or the boy wanted to assume the power. But I do not accuse you of anything, my dear Vision. Even though Octavius was just my lieutenant, I believe you have new rules supporting a much tougher sentence on killers.”

Hanz made a choked sound in the back of his throat.

"So we can make peace between us right now, Vision. Either give me the boy or your lieutenant to replace the one your minions, for whatever reason, took from me."

Hanz made another cry, managing a full step forward regardless of how much Vision had grounded him. Janus was refusing the deal too. Vision heard his tone if not the words themselves. Kane's shoulders sank. Vision would never choose him over Hanz. But if Vision did so, Vision knew that Hanz would never, ever recover from that, either.

"Name another price," Vision said his voice light. Daring, even. He felt Hanz fight his control from behind him, but it seemed the easiest thing in the world to force Hanz to stay still despite how strong Hanz was. In the mood Vision was in, he felt as though he could force anyone in the room to jump off a cliff. "Anything."

"The boy or his father," Vladimir said. "I am owed, and you will pay."

"Let the boy go," Vision said, speaking to no one. Kane cried out, fighting his bonds, but Vision held out his hands, and Kane settled as well.

"If you deny me what is due, you will turn the conclave against you," Vladimir snarled.

"I won't deny you anything," Vision said. "But Kane was not acting on Hanz's orders. He was acting on mine. I wanted more territory, and I acted solely on my desires and no one else's."

Vladimir smiled. Vision knew he was walking directly into Vladimir's trap, but better to do so willingly than give up either Kane or Hanz. Vision could not make that choice.

"You ordered the hit on my lieutenant?" Vladimir wasn't good enough to hide the delight in his voice.

"Let Kane go," Vision said, voice sharp.

Janus did it himself. Kane remained still as the ropes came off and then jumped to his feet. He walked as close to the table as possible, preferring to be closer to the corpse than

Vladimir, but still, he approached Vision and took his hand. “You don’t have to do this,” he said, eyes wide.

“Trust me. It is the only option,” Vision said and looked at the self-satisfied smile on Vladimir’s face. He ignored it, and instead pushed the brown hair off Kane’s sweat-slicked forehead. Kane would probably never know how much he looked like his father. Being this close to the mark on his arm made Vision slightly sick, but still he leaned forward and kissed Kane on the cheek as he had his father only moments before.

Kane was still so young, and despite the mark, so frail. He would not be able to use the lines Vision transferred over to him any more than a bird could start a phone company by sitting on a single power line strung up between two poles.

Kane’s eyes grew wider, feeling the power fill him, but Vision hushed him quietly, and Kane nodded. Whether he understood was a different story, and Vision could only hope. He left one tendril connecting them.

“You want me, you can have me,” Vision said.

Vladimir smiled, bared his fangs and nodded. “You’re mine.”

Vision smiled too, and separated the tie he’d made between Kane and himself. Vladimir’s smile drained as Vision’s grew stronger. Vladimir looked back at Kane and Hanz, but Hanz had moved Kane behind him already. “Which one is it?” he snarled.

Vision didn’t turn. “I am sure I have no idea what you are talking about,” he said, then added “sir” insolently. All his time on his knees with Hanz over him had given him plenty of exposure to the exact tone he wanted.

Vladimir grabbed him by the throat. Vision heard Hanz’s angry exhalation, but there was nothing he could do. Vision hated the all-too-familiar feel of compulsion and duty wrap around his chest again. He had made his choice, and would probably have made it again if he’d had to, and Hanz could no longer interfere.

The fingers around his throat tightened. There was no air to cut off, but his weak passive circulatory system still needed blood to go to his head. He didn't claw at the hand that held him, knowing with every ounce inside him that that was exactly what Vladimir wanted. Instead he went limp and let the blood flow stop.

Vladimir tossed him aside, and he hit the table, hard. Vision had knelt in front of a lot of weak people in his life, craving from them something he hadn't really understood until he had met Hanz. And then...well, then it had meant everything. He looked up into Vladimir's face, blankly and tried to rob even more meaning from the subjugation. His reward was a stinging backhand across the cheek.

Janus stepped forward. "I will give you anything that is in my power to give," he said, voice thick. "If you take it in Vision's stead."

Vladimir turned on Vision. It would have been better, Vision thought, to have waited until Vladimir had tired of him. Then he realized with a laugh that Janus was trying to save his honor. He had to clamp his hand over his mouth after a dark look from Vladimir.

"Do you have something to add?" Vladimir demanded.

"No, sir," Vision said, voice syrup sweet. It got him smacked again, but he took the pain. He heard Hanz snarl behind him, but didn't turn around. He looked at Janus instead. "Get them out of here," Vision said.

Janus nodded. Hanz cried out, charging at Vision, but Janus was there and caught him. Hanz was taller and wider than Janus was by quite a bit, but he might as well have been a child. Janus cradled Hanz's head to his chest. It was easier for Vision to watch the boy's lips tremble and his eyes grow wet, than watch Hanz fight Janus with every ounce of strength he had remaining. Janus stared down at the floor, but pushed them out of the room. Janus shut the door, using his back to latch it and then barred it with a ward. He then straightened and stalked Vladimir to the wall. "Hurt him, and I will kill you."

Vladimir put his hand on Janus's chest. Vision heard the crackle at the touch, but Vladimir kept his hand on Janus despite the grimace of pain.

"Janus," Vision said still on his knees. "Enough."

"Silence," Vladimir snarled.

Vision looked down. But Janus pushed Vladimir aside and stormed away. The door shimmered and slammed behind him. Vladimir approached Vision again. Vision watched him through his lashes and exposed his throat despite the loathing he felt.

"You think that this is going to be easy for you, don't you?" Vladimir demanded and ran his hands through Vision's hair. Vision took it, no matter how tight Vladimir knotted his fingers in Vision's hair.

Vladimir undid his slacks, or at least began to, before Vision stopped him with a raised eyebrow. "Pardon me, sir. But if I may ask, what are you doing?"

"Will you refuse me my first request?"

"I believe Janus said we were to follow the new rules," Vision said. He kept his voice light. "And if we are to follow the new rules, it means that even though I am to replace your lieutenant, sir, I do not owe you sex." Vladimir hit him again, so hard that Vision fell to his side. Blood exploded in his mouth, and he brought his hand up to dab it away. Vladimir followed him to where he fell and tried to kick his legs apart.

The wall of power Vision was used to wasn't there anymore. The ocean had been reduced to a tidal pool, but it was still wet. "No," he said, and Vladimir was brought up short, his foot caught in midair. Vision sat up. "I will accept your rules, but I will never, ever fuck you. And if I catch you in my bed..."

"You will kill me. I know," Vladimir snarled. "Get up and heel."

Vision followed him. Vladimir didn't take him in his warded car back to Breylorn's old apartment. Janus would have the car watched, and that would have been too easy, and



Vision suspected Vladimir wasn't at all stupid. "How did you know what I taught Kane that night?" Vision asked.

Vladimir glanced to him in the passenger seat as though he'd found a rather large Madagascar hissing cockroach in the exact same location into which he'd just forced Vision. Vision sighed and put his hand on Vladimir's thigh. "How did you know?"

"You're going to trade me sex for answers?" Vladimir inquired.

"I've traded it for less," Vision said, dismissively. "I remember there was this one time --"

Vladimir dropped his hand down over Vision's and held it there. When Vision didn't jerk his hand free, Vladimir squeezed it, hard, and pulled it over his groin. Vision felt around and what he found was average at best. His snort must have effectively conveyed how far down the bell curve his discovery was, because Vladimir picked his wrist up with just two fingers and threw it back at him. It hurt -- it was supposed to -- but Vision couldn't help thinking he'd won that one. "You were in the moon, not Varaugh," Vision said, crossing his arms over his chest and leaned against the headrest.

"You're not the only ones with minions," Vladimir snarled.

"Do you really think this is going to work?"

"Going to work, *sir*," Vladimir corrected, nastily.

Vision said nothing. It was Vladimir's turn to put his hand on Vision's thigh, and he squeezed it hard enough that bruises started to form. Vision ignored it for as long as he could before the pain became too much. "Do you really think this is going to work, sir?" Vision repeated. He didn't choke over the words, but it took every ounce of strength he had. Vladimir hadn't let go of his thigh.

"What could you mean, Vision?" Vladimir said. Vision's thigh was on fire. If he could have crawled over the back of his seat, he would have. When Vladimir let him go, Vision embarrassed himself by trying to rub some of the sting out of his muscles.

“You’re only allowed to kill your own master. You’re my master now, which makes you pretty much fair game for me. And if you think I’m not going to look for the first opportunity to stake you or cut your head off, you’re mad. Sir.”

“I know that,” Vladimir said, with a dark smile. “But forgive me if I think I will be able to keep on top of you and your cunning plans.”

“*En garde*,” Vision said darkly. “Sir.”

“Indeed,” Vladimir said. “I am going to enjoy breaking you.”

Vision, who had bested his first master at the tender young age of seventy, didn’t let a show of stubbornness cross his face. “Yes, sir,” he said instead.

Vladimir smiled in triumph. Vision hoped it would be as short-lived as Vladimir was going to be.

## Chapter Thirteen

Vladimir drove down to the warehouse district. Vision owned several of the buildings in the neighborhood, many of which hadn't blown up. If he had to guess which one was owned by Vladimir, he would have said the one with the painted black windows, and he wasn't wrong. Vladimir pushed the garage door remote located on the car's visor, and the middle part of the east-facing side of the building slid up and out of the way. "Home, sweet home, sir?" Vision asked, sitting up taller in his seat.

"Yes," Vladimir said. "I dare you to mock it."

"Well, I wasn't," Vision said, honestly. "But since you put it that way, painted black windows? Really? I bet they're not even double paned. And you can't be --" Vladimir raised his hand, and Vision, like a good slut, flinched, but Vladimir chopped his hand down and caught him on the back of his skull regardless. "Fuck," Vision said, holding a hand over the spot. His eyesight narrowed as thick black circles took over most of his peripheral vision, and his ears rang like a struck gong. The headache had established itself firmly in the back of his head by the time he straightened. Vladimir stared at Vision dispassionately as Vision determined his brains hadn't really scrambled, despite how they felt.

"Are you done?" Vladimir asked, as though any answer would suffice.

“For now,” Vision said in all honesty, but the meekness that crept into his voice had done so without his permission. “May I get out of the car?”

“Suit yourself,” Vladimir said and got out himself.

Vision took an extra second, just to make sure his jaw was entirely okay, and got out behind him. He looked up to the golden set of chains that were the only objects in the lower receiving area of the huge building and sighed. The metal scaffolding that created a second level in the otherwise empty building looked much more comfortable. One of the old offices actually had curtains up, even if they were hideously orange and brown, three decades out of style. Vision found he already missed curtains. At least the cement floor looked freshly swept, and the garage door -- the only thing that appeared to be between him and certain death -- didn't seem to have any cracks.

Vladimir motioned him to the chains, and Vision, not wanting any more chopping blows to the skull, went. He didn't fight, not as Vladimir attached the cuffs to his wrists, and not even when Vladimir pulled him almost off his feet and tied him off the same way Vision had watched Hanz tie off an engine block. Vladimir patted him down -- permitted, Vision grudgingly allowed, although there would be no way he could possibly have reached a lockpicking tool in his pocket even if he had one -- then patted him on the cheek.

“Good night, Vision,” Vladimir said and started to leave him.

“Wait,” Vision called. “What do I have to do to...” He didn't finish the rest of the question. He knew what he had to do to be invited upstairs, and he supposed there was going to be a time when he would gratefully take that deal, but he wasn't going to embarrass himself by not lasting a single night out here.

Vladimir smiled at him, and Vision couldn't help think he knew exactly what was going on in Vision's head. He made it all the way to the stairs before turning again. “Tell me, Vision. Is it true that you've exposed a couple vampires to the sunlight?” Vladimir asked.

"I staked one of them first," Vision said, in his own defense, since no one else was leaping to it. His arms were already starting to hurt, and he experimented with how much he had to stretch in order to put the ball of one foot down.

"Good to know," Vladimir said. "Do you know what else is good? That automatic garage door opener has two remotes." He held up his key chain. "Sleep tight, Vision. Don't let the blinding sun in the morning bite."

Vision let his head hang between his arms as Vladimir's boots struck the metal stairs with a ringing noise that echoed throughout the building. Great. Just. Fucking. Great.

Vision slept. He must have, though he didn't know how he could have, what with the stretched, aching muscles of his arms and calves. Still, when he opened his eyes, he was in the snowy, empty forest. "You've already got me," Vision called to the empty dull moon. "What more do you want?"

"Shut up," Varaugh said, coming up behind him. "He'll hear you. And believe me, you don't want that."

"And you're so much better?" Vision demanded.

"Do your arms hurt?" Varaugh asked, mildly.

Vision had to think about it. "No," he allowed.

"Then I'm so much better." Varaugh looked at him. "Aren't I?"

"Only in the strictest dictionary sense," Vision allowed. "And what is it that you want?"

Varaugh smiled.

"Besides that," Vision said. "That is so off the table it's outside locked in the shed. Are we clear?"

"For now," Varaugh said. "But you have to realize right now it's your only bargaining chip."

“You’re one to talk. At least I’m not stuck in a hotel room landscape.”

“Trade you,” Varaugh said, and it was said so casually, so off the cuff, every alarm Vision had that wasn’t completely wrung out by Vladimir’s blow went off. “Oh,” said Vision. “So you *are* after my body.” Just not the way Vision had thought. Going back into service was making him stupider than he thought.

Varaugh spread his hands. “What do you have to look forward to?” he asked. “You know you’re going to cave. You may not like it, but you’re no match for your body’s baser needs. All Vladimir has to do is stroke you exactly the right way, and you’ll be welcoming him with the same eagerness you showed me. Let me take over, and I promise you won’t feel a thing.”

“Put me back,” Vision said.

“Or what?” Varaugh demanded.

“Or I start screaming about how even in two dimensions you’re trying to backstab your new master.”

“Our new master,” Varaugh said, his words cutting deep. “A couple nights of your balancing act, and you’ll be begging, me or him -- it won’t matter -- but mark my words.”

“Back, Varaugh, now,” Vision snarled.

And a second later he was back, all the aches and pains of his body suddenly remembered. He shook his head, glad to feel that at least most of the headache had cleared. He sighed, trying to shift his weight to the other foot as delicately as possible, when he felt it.

Or, to be more specific, it found him, somehow, through the dark windows. His wild magic slid up his legs easing some of the worst muscle spasms of his calves before working its way up his arms and slid back into his palms where it belonged. He flexed, and the trickle of power now filling him made him feel as though he’d grown enough that he could now take his own weight on both his feet. Just the balls, of course, but still, he was balanced. He couldn’t see the moon where he was, so no one was there to see him grin.

He didn't have to see Jinx to hear him say, in his very quiet way, "Wireless."

\* \* \* \* \*

Hanz didn't pace. Pacing denoted a controlled to-and-fro motion that showed minor aggravation. He was furious, and he brought his fury with him. Janus knew better than to speak to him, look at him, or even, really, think about him or any other word that started with *h*. There was no consoling him, and Janus didn't even want to try. Instead, he tried another one of Breylorn's contacts. He'd already run through his own and Vision's. Vladimir had disappeared so thoroughly he might as well have gone to the moon. If Janus could have checked there, he would have.

Kane wasn't with him; Hanz had sent both the boys off to a safe house the day before. Janus supposed that was a good thing. It wasn't his fault; the whole thing had been set up from the beginning, and they'd all played their parts. If Janus had just scratched the surface of the first murder attempt on the lieutenant, he was sure he'd find Vladimir's fingerprints all over it. Janus felt used, and worse, he felt played.

He hung up the phone and stood. Hanz focused on the movement like some feral beast, but decided it was nonthreatening until Janus approached him, then he put his back to the wall. "I'm not going to hurt you," Janus said.

Hanz swallowed.

"Unless you want to spend the night, you should go."

Hanz moved his throat, but didn't say anything.

Janus tried again. "I'll drive you myself. Shall we?"

Hanz looked sick. He was thinking of the huge, empty house. Janus touched his shoulder and wasn't pushed off, so he kept his hand lightly on Hanz's bicep. And quite the bicep it was. He shook his head to clear the thought. "Vision loves you," Janus used the only

trump he had left. “He wouldn’t want you to do this to yourself. Come, let me take you home.”

“He needs me,” Hanz said, speaking for the first time. His voice was gravel.

“Of course he does,” Janus agreed. He petted Hanz’s arm. “But he needs you well. He’s smart, Hanz, I don’t have to tell you that, but I will. He’s smart and crafty, and if there’s anyone who can get himself out of this, it’s Vision. You know that.”

Hanz swallowed again. “I do. But if that bastard touches him...” he didn’t finish. His body started to shake, not out of anger, but out of helplessness. Janus shook his head, about to speak, but they’d progressed past words. Instead, he took Hanz in his arms and held him until the worst of the tremors had finished. Hanz finally pushed away, mopping at his face, looking mortified, but Janus turned around making a show of trying to find his car keys to give him a minute.

Janus didn’t say Vision had been through worse. He didn’t say Vision could take care of himself, or that Vision, by his own admission, was very good at cheating. He found his keys, but waited until Hanz had control of himself before turning back. He also didn’t promise Hanz first crack at Vladimir once this was all over. He knew that should Vision manage to extricate himself -- *when*, Janus corrected quickly -- there wouldn’t be enough of Vladimir left to make a sand castle.

Hanz nodded, as though he heard him. “Found them,” Janus said, forcing his voice to sound light, and Hanz shuffled off in front of him. Lyall came out of the bedroom, curious, but saw Janus’s keys in his hand, nodded, and went back to bed.

The drive was a quick one. Janus delivered a very quiet Hanz to his sister and managed to drive back before dawn broke.

\* \* \* \* \*

By nightfall again, Vision’s whole body hurt. He’d managed to doze in fits and starts for never longer than a few minutes at best. The single black wall, not more than a quarter of an



inch in places, wasn't enough to keep the sun from burning him. And every time he heard anything like the whirring of gears, he was up and fighting the chains.

Laughter floated down at his expense, but to Vision it didn't matter. He still felt ridiculously grateful that the door didn't come up.

It wasn't fair. And Vision had thought he'd never actually complain about something being unfair. He hadn't complained when he'd volunteered to be turned in order to save an empty-headed lover, only to wake up three days later and find Steve right there, turned with him. He hadn't complained when Gabriel had decided on a whim that after fifty years of service he was, in fact, bored with Steve as his pet and wanted Vision to give up everything he'd earned to be his replacement toy. He hadn't even complained of Janus's betrayal or the fact that Strickland had banished him. Bitching didn't count. He got that life was unfair. He accepted it.

He rattled the chains holding him in place again, like this yank would free him when the hundreds previous had failed. This wasn't fair. He didn't want to accept it. If it were just him, he'd wait it out and bide his time until he had Vladimir where he wanted him, even if it did mean sharing his bed. But Vision couldn't even begin to formulate that plan without seeing Hanz's face. Vision could do this -- all of this -- if it weren't for Hanz's fear. The knowledge robbed Vision of the only thing that would possibly get him out of here in one piece: time. He didn't have any left, and he gave the chains a final shake. He forced himself to relax.

If Vladimir saw the pain that he could cause Hanz, it would be a weapon against Vision. Vision wasn't stupid. It hurt to divorce his feelings for Hanz from Hanz. In his mind he wrapped everything, all of those feelings, in cotton batting and put it all carefully away.

By morning, he was ready. He was half asleep, a real doze once the sun had started to set, and when the metallic ring came down the staircase he had to fight with himself not to windmill his arms.

“Good evening, Vision. Did you sleep well?” Vladimir asked pleasantly. There must have been washroom facilities somewhere because he looked very refreshed.

“No,” Vision said, flatly.

“That’s too bad,” Vladimir said, sounding not the least bit regretful. “We will have to do something about that, won’t we?”

“You can,” Vision said. Vladimir unhooked the chains, not the shackles. The rush of blood, despite Vision’s poor vampire circulation, hurt enough that even with all the other aches in his arms and legs he had to stumble sideways to keep his feet.

“Oh, no, Vision. That’s going to have to be a group effort on both our parts. And if you’re not willing to put the effort in, then I’m not going to, either. Does anything have to come off, or do you think you survived your night?”

“I survived,” Vision said. After four years of having Hanz rub even the slightest knot out of his shoulders from sitting at a desk too long, he couldn’t believe how much his shoulders felt like rocks under his fingers. He worked them as best he could and tried not to get annoyed at the D-ring hanging from the cuffs smacking him in the face.

“Tell me,” Vladimir asked, innocently enough, but the glee on his face brought out the gargoyle mask he’d worn the first time he and Vision met. “What did your fuck toy...what was his name? Hans?”

“Hanz,” Vision said, blankly. It hurt hardly at all. “There’s a *z* at the end, not an *s*.”

“Indeed,” Vladimir said, obviously annoyed at being interrupted. Vision decided that a tacked on *sir* at the end would make him even angrier and chose not to add it. He supposed that was growth on his part. “Funny how the new rules allow you to fuck your lieutenant, yet bar me from doing the same.”

“I’ve never forced Hanz to do anything he didn’t want to do,” Vision said. It was true, and even with feelings locked away, he still felt a pang. “Maybe that’s the difference you should be looking at, sir.”

“Indeed,” Vladimir said again, and this time his voice was stone cold. “What did he bring you, first thing in the morning? Coffee, perhaps? A little blood? Or did he fetch your slippers and a newspaper like a good dog?”

Vladimir was daring him to rise to the bait, but Vision only shrugged and had to ignore the shooting pain the motion caused. “Of course not,” he said. “He would have laid out the slippers the night before.”

Vladimir dusted his hands off. “Good. And just for my own benefit, Vision, is there anything you’d like to mock me for today?”

Vision looked at Vladimir’s white shoes, the white belt, and his captain’s hat set at the obligatory rakish angle, and shook his head. “I can’t think of a single thing, sir,” he said.

“Very good. You can be taught.”

Vision nodded, but said nothing. He took off his suit jacket, and if he never felt another suit jacket bunch up around his shoulders again, it would be far too soon. Vladimir watched him. Vision felt his gaze burning between his shoulder blades. “Is there a problem, sir?”

“Did I tell you you could undress?” Vladimir asked, lightly.

Vision stopped loosening his tie. “In a sentence I never thought I’d hear myself say, if I begged, would you let me keep it off?”

“Vision, please. I’m trying to build a working relationship with you. Of course, you may keep your jacket off, if that pleases you.”

“Then why point out the fact that I lacked the foresight to request permission?” Vision asked, then added, finally, “Sir.”

“Because you’re smart enough to make sure that it never happens again. You’re either going to learn to follow my lead and obey me, or I’m going to have to kill you. I’d rather have you on your knees than be forced to put a stake in you, but either way...” Vladimir inhaled deeply, possessively. Vision had to force himself not to shrink back. He fought to keep his face blank, to ensure every muscle in him declared that none of this bothered him,

but it did. He wanted to strip down and scrub his skin. He wanted to force Vladimir up against the wall, tear out his throat, and leave the same way he came, but the chains of obligation were too heavy. If he made a wrong move, there would be no contest between them as to who was the stronger one, and Vision knew he would lose.

He forced himself to look away, swallowing to prevent his lips from betraying him by forming the words *I hate you*. When he looked back, Vladimir was by the car.

“You’re driving,” Vladimir called.

Vision slid his tie free and folded it neatly. He placed it in the pocket of the jacket he’d just taken off and hung it on the banister. “Yes, sir.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They drove out of the city to the deserted stretch of beach near Whitestone Bridge. The moon was a quarter gone, and out there, without the lights of the city, the moonlight was bright enough that it hurt Vision’s eyes if he stared at it long enough. Or at least that was what he was blaming the pain on. Beside him, Vladimir kept up a long string of insults. Vision barely listened. When Vladimir complimented him on the fact that he drove passably well for a man who fucks his driver, Vision had thanked him and told him he should see what Hanz could do with a cruise control button. He was above Vladimir’s words, like one of the seagulls hovering on the cool ocean drafts.

There was nothing different about the patch of beach where Vladimir told him to pull over. The sand was rocky, the sea grass yellow, and there wasn’t even one of the lighthouses that dotted the coastline. During the day it would be crawling with people, but the ocean wind had already carried away their smell. Still Vision parked the car and waited for permission to exit the vehicle. When it came, he locked the door behind them out of habit. There wasn’t a soul within several miles.

Maybe that was the point. Vladimir moved down the beach to a particularly smooth rock and sat down, turning his face up to the bright moon. There were no traces of the city

magic here. Maybe that was another point. Just the magic Vladimir called down to him, and Vision's own. The wild magic was here too, beneath the sands and shifting tide. It was frustrating, like poking his finger at a blood pack. He couldn't break through the thick casing of it or the magic around him. Jinx's flow of energy in the back of his head was the weakest out here, and he only felt it if he concentrated on it very hard.

"You may go for a walk," Vladimir said, not looking at him. "But stay inside my line of sight. I don't want to tell you what will happen if I look up and can't see you."

Vision could tell he actually really did want to tell him, but Vision didn't ask. He thanked him instead, with enough gratitude in his voice that Vladimir looked up to study his face to see if it was genuine, but Vision kept blank. Vladimir frowned at the unnecessary interruption. "You're very good," he said, at last. "Be careful I don't kill you."

"Yes, sir. I will, sir," Vision said and left the man.

But it felt good to get away from him, even for a little bit. Vladimir's eyes were closed again, so as Vision walked, he stretched out his arms. The moon was bright, but it wasn't as strong as it had been the night Vision looked past Kane's shoulder and saw it shining down at them. So...so Vladimir had to come out here where the moonlight was strongest. With the sea reflecting the moonlight in every choppy surface, he might as well be holding up a reflective sheet. There was something else, though. Vision squinted up at the moon, regretting for the first time in seventy years the fact that he had never once bought a pair of sunglasses. The moon was feeding Vladimir. If Vision had another twelve days or so, when the moon was new, he might be able to do something against Vladimir if that was when he was the weakest, but twelve nights of remaining on his feet in the chains seemed impossible. Vision's chest tightened at the thought.

He could always play along, though the thought made his skin crawl. He'd gone trolling for humans when he was...what? He wasn't between masters. Strickland might have deigned to use his silver-topped cane on Vision when Vision became particularly antsy about the lack of control he was getting, but it was hardly what he would have called fulfilling his

needs. And Hanz wasn't his master at all. Just the opposite. But whatever that vacuum of time had been, he'd knelt down in front of men he could have broken over his knee at any given moment.

*But not down in front of any man who could have broken you,* the voice inside him whispered. There hadn't been any around, Vision told himself, angrily. Janus might have done in a pinch, but he was gaga in love with Lyall at the time. *And just a lieutenant, back then,* the deceitful voice added. *Remember?*

Vision shook his head, unwilling to remember. Janus had to be pushed, kicking and screaming, into the mantle of an elder. There'd been no one for Vision to ask. And his territories were so new they squeaked. He wouldn't have asked anyone to...to...have him.

Would he have? He'd found Hanz shortly after. There'd been a very brief dance while Vision let go of his disbelief that Hanz didn't want to take over. And things had been good. It was a moot issue.

One thing was certain, however; Vision wasn't going to spend much time at all in those chains.

His arms were loose. He supposed it was time to go back. Vladimir hadn't moved, but he opened his eyes when Vision approached. "Let me guess. You've decided to play along in order to get me to believe that you can be trusted."

"Yes, sir," Vision said. "But the key to the plan was not telling you that."

"If I may ask, what is your plan B?"

"Try to suss out the minimum I need to do in order not to be chained up all day."

"Oh, you'll be chained up, regardless of what you do," Vladimir said. "The wiggle room you have is whether it's going to be on your wrists or your ankles."

Vision chewed his lip. "Just so we're clear, by ankles, you don't mean hanging upside down by them, right?"

"For the sake of argument, let's say yes. But aren't you the suspicious sort."

“Old habits, sir,” Vision said. “But I’ll bite. What do I need to do?” As soon as he said the words, he regretted them. Not the offer, as much as he wasn’t thrilled with himself for rolling over so quickly, but his stomach woke up at the word *bite*, and it was hard to ignore the hunger pains on top of everything else.

“What do you think you need to do?”

Vision looked away. “Forget it.”

“Come now, Vision. Don’t be stubborn. You and I both know you don’t want to go back to your chains. And I’m done here. You’ll still have most of the night and all day. Do you really want that?”

“No,” Vision said. It wasn’t exactly the *go to hell* he’d been planning to say, but he guessed his self-preservation had to have kicked in, eventually. “I really don’t.”

“Then what do you think you need to do to earn it?”

Vision’s jaw seized up like sudden onset tetanus. He swallowed, but didn’t speak. He couldn’t stop himself from looking down to Vladimir’s groin.

He didn’t have to look up to see Vladimir smile. His teeth gritted together, but he said nothing.

“I suppose you don’t want to hear that you are much more fun like this than any obedient fuck toy, do you?”

A seagull called out, splitting the night. Vision looked over the ocean. The water looked like cut sapphire, and the moon reflected perfectly in each of the facets. The tide was turning, and the moon pulled on his body. “Come here. Sit down,” Vladimir said, his voice gentle.

Vision looked back. His lip curled, but just to strengthen his will. It was this bit, the gentleness between the cruelties that he was the most susceptible to. “You don’t have to talk to me as though I were a blushing virgin.”

“Then stop acting like one,” Vladimir said. Vision supposed he had a point. He sat down on the rock, not letting their thighs touch, and Vladimir touched his shoulder. Vision flinched. “If you don’t want this, stand up and go back to the car. I’ll be with you presently,” Vladimir whispered. “Nothing you don’t want. Isn’t that the rule?”

He picked up Vision’s hand like it was a dead thing between them. For all the feeling Vision had throughout his body, his hand might have been. Vladimir brought it -- *it*, thought Vision, not his hand. It wasn’t a part of him -- to his lap, and just as he dropped it, Vision snatched his hand back and stood. “Another night, then,” he said, stiffly, and stalked back to the car.

“You’re making this too easy,” Vladimir called. But that was a lie. From the way his white slacks had been tented, Vision knew he was making it quite hard indeed.

He drove back in silence. Vladimir had returned to the car, stinking of his own semen, but Vision said nothing about it. He caught Vladimir staring at him a couple times, but Vision ignored it. His stomach betrayed him once they were back in the warehouse district, and Vladimir put his hand over Vision’s stomach. Vision jerked, but had no real place to go, so he took the touch rather than crash the car.

“I take it you haven’t had a good feeding in a while,” he said.

“No, sir,” Vision said. Vladimir let him go and pushed the remote over the visor by Vision’s head. Vision flinched at the grinding of the engine.

“Would you like a bite?”

Vision shook his head, not trusting himself to answer in case it slipped out that he’d rather hunt sewer rats. Self-preservation went so far.

Vladimir laughed. He held out his wrist, exposing the blue veins just below Vision’s wrist, but Vision ignored it and turned to him. “Permission to exit the car, sir,” he said.

“By all means,” Vladimir said. Vision didn’t slam the door hard enough to break the windows of the warehouse, but they did rattle a bit. “You’d better hope you didn’t shake any



of them loose,” Vladimir said, behind him. Vision hadn’t heard him move. He tensed, but wasn’t surprised at the pat down. He hadn’t brought back a piece of driftwood to use as a weapon because he hadn’t found any. Something clicked, and he looked down at a new cuff just above his ankle bone. “What’s that for?” he asked, keeping his voice light, but couldn’t keep the tremor of fear completely contained.

“Can’t you guess?” Vladimir asked, and patted his ass. He went to the wall and pushed a green button. One of the gold chains fell to the ground and coiled there for a second or two before being brought up. It wavered back and forth, in perfect time with Vision’s stomach. He recognized hydraulics when he heard them.

Vision licked his lips with a very dry tongue. He could guess, but he didn’t want to. Vladimir grabbed him by the back of the neck, walking him around the car, and Vision fought. He couldn’t stop himself, but as though he were holding a child, Vladimir gathered up his wrists easily in his other hand and pushed him forward. “No,” Vision said, before he could shut his mouth. Vladimir threw him to the ground by the chains and seemed to ignore Vision’s failed attempts at scrambling back while he attached it. “I’ll be back before dawn. Don’t wait up, darling.”

Vladimir turned away and got back into the car, but didn’t hit the button that would bring up the slack in the chain. He still might, on his return, Vision knew, but for right then, he took up as much of the slack as he had and made it all the way to the wall before he ran out.

He hated the little shiver of gratitude that slid down his spine, but as soon as he put his head back against the dirty brick wall, he was asleep.

In the snow. He sat up, cursing. Varaugh had swapped out the hard floor for cold and hard ground, and the tree behind him was no better than the wall he’d been using. “He’s got you beat,” Vision said, not looking around for Varaugh. He’d be around somewhere. “My arms don’t hurt anymore.”

Varaugh walked into his line of sight and leaned against another birch tree. “He must be getting soft.”

“Quite the opposite, actually,” Vision said. “Is there anything else? Because there’s a chance I will get out of it alive with Vladimir. With you, there is no chance at all.”

“Then let me amend my offer.”

Vision didn’t know he’d made an initial offer, but said nothing. Varaugh nodded, once, at the lack of interruption, and smiled. “Bring me a body. Vladimir has promised me one, but he’s had plenty of time, and I am beginning to doubt him. I wouldn’t doubt you, Vision, if you bring me that which I ask for.”

“A body.”

“A body,” Varaugh repeated. “I want to walk again, and I am so sick of the smell of oil paints. Bring me someone to take over, Vision, and I swear I’ll take you to Hanz. In a dream, but you’ll see him again.”

It was the wrong thing to say. “I will see him again,” Vision said. He pulled himself away, willing himself back to the warehouse floor, and Varaugh’s eyes grew wide as he succeeded. He fell backward, for a split second, and was free of the painting. He closed his eyes, thankful, and then realized he was getting stronger.

And that was a bad thing. He was getting stronger when he really shouldn’t be, and if Vladimir hadn’t already noticed, he would soon. He rested his head against the wall again and was very, very glad that bit about the sewer rats hadn’t actually been vocalized.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janus walked down the street. Vladimir waited for him half a block away, leaning against a clothing store window with a sun-bleached GOING OUT OF BUSINESS sign hung prominently and perpetually in the window. It was late enough that the bars had already closed, and there were no humans on the street. Vladimir brought with him the smell of the

ocean and Vision. Hanz made a sound in the back of his throat, but Janus turned on him. "Hanz. You have to promise me you will let me speak."

"No," Hanz said.

Janus put his hands over Hanz's chest. "If I can't trust you, I'll have to temporarily remove you, and I don't want to have to do that to you. So if you swear to me you will behave, you can stay. Are we clear?"

"Janus --"

"Do you really want to say anything or do anything that will have any negative consequences for Vision?"

"No," Hanz said bitterly.

"Then trust me."

"He used to say that," Hanz snarled. Janus looked in his eyes and believed him. But there was such fury inside him. "If it were Lyall, you'd tear his throat out."

"Not before getting Lyall back," Janus said. "Come on, Hanz. You can do this."

Hanz set his jaw, but he nodded. Janus nodded as well and turned back to Vladimir. He hadn't moved. Janus led the way. Vladimir bowed his head a quarter inch to Janus. "Greetings."

Janus didn't return it. He did smell of Vision, faintly, but not of his blood. Janus supposed that was a good thing. "You offered me anything in Vision's place," Vladimir said. "I will take you up on that. Give me your lines."

"I don't have lines."

"You're arguing semantics, Janus. I want the power you have."

Hanz tensed. Janus waited for the explosion, but it didn't come. "How is it that you think I can give that up to you?" Janus asked.

"That's not my concern."

“Anything else,” Hanz said.

Janus didn’t turn around to look at him, but his words surprised him. They surprised Vladimir too. “Your lover is not worth everything to you?”

Hanz’s voice was a low growl. “I couldn’t imagine having you as the head of the conclave. Neither would Vision. Anything else, Vladimir.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him what order he is in your regard,” Vladimir snarled. “After all he’s given up for you.”

Hanz shrugged. “I think we’re done here, Janus.”

“I’ll tell you when we’re done,” Vladimir snapped.

Hanz gave the man a blank look that he had probably learned from Vision. “Nice belt,” he said and spat at the ground at his feet. Janus called to him, but he waved over his shoulder and walked away from them.

Vladimir bared his fangs. “You should keep better control over your minions.”

“That’s not one of mine,” Janus said. “How is Vision?”

Vladimir sneered. “Mine.”

No argument there. “Is there anything I can do to ensure his fair treatment?”

“Other than my word? I am not trying to kill him. I want him as my lieutenant. I’d wanted that one,” Vladimir said, pointing to Hanz. “Or the other one, the boy. Catching the King Bee himself was something unexpected. I’ve actually become attached. And just a little bit deep down inside, I think Vision likes it.”

“He’s biding his time before he kills you,” Janus said.

“Perhaps,” Vladimir said, but grinned. “Or he’ll start eating out of my hand.” He looked to Hanz, who was glaring at him from down the block. “Once he gets a taste, it actually means something.”

“Good luck with that,” Janus said, and turned on his heel. “You’re really going to need it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The garage door pulled open just before sunrise. Vision had been sound asleep, but woke to the engine coming to life. He pushed himself up to his feet when Vladimir got out of the car. “Yes, Vision?” he inquired.

“I’m hungry,” Vision said, and that wasn’t a lie. The thought of biting down through skin made his stomach rumble again.

“I can hear that. Is there anything you’d like me to do about it?”

“Yes, sir,” Vision said and looked at Vladimir for the first time. The captain’s hat hadn’t changed angles the whole night. “Please. You offered me your wrist before. May I have it again?”

“In your head, what did you say to yourself you’d rather have?” Vladimir said, coming around the car.

Vision closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Sewer rats, sir.”

“Sewer rats. That’s hardly original.”

“Forgive me, sir. I didn’t get a whole lot of sleep the night before. If you give me a minute, I’m sure I can think of something more creative.”

Vladimir smiled. “You like this part,” he said, voice thick. “The subservience. It shows. You may hate me, but you love this.”

Vision would have spat. Not with you, he wanted to scream, but smiled instead. “Please, sir.”

“You don’t fool me,” Vladimir said, but he held out his wrist. Vision took it gingerly with his hands and brought it up to his lips. He smelled of Hanz and of Hanz’s saliva. So

Vladimir had gone to see him. His throat was still intact, so the meeting had obviously gone in Vladimir's favor, but Vision wasn't going to ask.

"You can smell him on me, can't you?" Vladimir asked and stroked the back of Vision's head.

Vision's fangs came out, wanting to tear and shred, but he nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Then you should know he supports Janus's decision not to trade you for Janus's power lines."

Vision didn't move. "If Janus had intended you to have them, he would have offered them to you during..." Vision didn't finish. When Vision had thrown himself on the sword.

"Oh, that's right," Vladimir said. "You were so quick to decide it was going to be you. You did realize that neither the boy nor your lover wanted you to make the decision you did. You were so quick to kneel down before me, Vision. Did it feel good to do it for real? How long has it been since you knelt down in front of your betters?"

"I don't remember," Vision said. "Sir."

"Does it feel the same way?"

Vision looked up at him. He was still holding onto Vladimir's exposed arm, and his fangs were still out, but he forced himself to look away, and even added a guilty look to boot. "Yes." The truth was, he'd hated it then, and he hated it now. He looked up through his lashes and then back down again. "Master."

The word felt hollow and empty in Vision's mouth. He couldn't even remember if he'd called Gabriel that and decided he probably hadn't. But Vladimir sucked in his breath and looked thrilled. "Good. You may feed, if you want."

"Thank you," Vision said. He delicately tore into the skin over the wrist and began to feed.

Vladimir watched him, carefully, but Vision kept his drinking to small, controlled sips. Vladimir wasn't even really bleeding all that much. It made it easier for Vision to nick the inside of his own lip and let the blood flow from him into Vladimir's arm.

"Enough," Vladimir said eventually, pushing Vision away. "Are there any changes you'd like to make to the sleeping arrangements?"

"No, Master, forgive me," Vision said.

"Then sleep well." Vladimir waved the remote for the garage door in his face. "Or as best you can. I may have already decided that you are incorrigible."

Vision sat back. Vladimir went up the stairs, a door closed, and another day passed.

## Chapter Fourteen

Vision woke, and his head felt clearer, even with the chain still around his ankle. More of his energy had flowed into him during the day, and he felt almost himself again. He sat up. It'd felt good just to be lying down, even if it was on a floor.

It was the fifth night, if he counted right. Varaugh had shown up twice that night, sullenly offering him the deal again, but Vision was strong enough now to push him away and have him obey.

Vladimir had gone out two nights ago and hadn't returned for the day and the night again. Vision was just starting to get worried when he heard the garage door. The sun had set, or at least, the wall felt cool to Vision's cheeks.

Still, when he heard the garage door open, Vision climbed to his knees and waited. Vladimir, coming from around the car, looked to him first, and smiled when he saw him. "Good evening, Vision."

"Master," Vision said. The word sounded perverse to his tongue, but Vladimir didn't hear a bit of insincerity.

"You're certainly bright-eyed. Are you hungry?"



“Yes, Master,” Vision said. That wasn’t a lie. The first three nights, he hadn’t been exactly sure. He’d fed from Vladimir every night. But each time he’d pushed his own blood into him. He was growing stronger. Each time he’d taken less and bled more, and the third time Vladimir’s hand shook when he held it out for Vision to drink from. And from the way Vladimir came to him almost eagerly, it seemed to be working. He radiated the moon’s strength, but he had Vision’s marker in him too.

He thrust his wrist in Vision’s face. “Drink.”

Vision was hungry. He bit down, harder than he had before, but rather than cuffing him across the head, Vladimir sighed. Even after two days away, Vision still tasted himself in Vladimir’s blood. Vladimir had his eyes closed, and his erection was hot and hard against Vision’s ear. It was easy, then to just cut his lip again and bleed into the wound. His blood was absorbed as fast as it bled, and Vladimir exhaled, noisily. Vision lapped at the wound until it stopped bleeding, and the skin closed up. Vladimir had a dreamy look on his face. “Master?” Vision whispered. Vladimir didn’t respond. “Vladimir,” Vision said.

Vladimir looked at him, the slight confusion on his face. “Unchain me,” Vision said.

“I...can’t,” Vladimir said. “I won’t.”

“The keys,” Vision said, losing him. He felt his control strip away. “Please, Master, may I have the keys?” he asked, putting both his hands on Vladimir’s thighs.

Silently, Vladimir reached into his pocket and pulled out the set. Vision took it, as gently as he could, and unlocked his cuff, keeping one hand over the turning key. The leather cuff snapped off, but he shifted on his hip to hide it. He slid the keychain back into Vladimir’s pocket and put his hand back on Vladimir’s thigh. Vladimir blinked and then shook his head. He smacked Vision’s hand away and went upstairs in a daze.

Vision had been holding a breath, and he let it out, slowly. The sun came up, and whatever Vladimir had been planning had obviously taken it out of him, because he’d almost immediately fallen asleep. Vision felt it because of how much of his blood was in Vladimir.

He eased the cuff off his ankle, trying to rub some feeling into the shiny white skin that had come up over the past week, and put the chain down, link by link.

He stood up, feeling off-kilter. He strode past the circle he'd been forced into and climbed up the stairs slowly, distributing his weight step by step, so there would be no metallic ring. Upstairs, there were two offices and a bathroom. One of the offices looked like it hadn't much changed from its original purpose. The other was shrouded, locked from the inside. "Sleep," he said at the door and felt Vladimir slip even deeper into slumber.

Vision went into the office but kept the door open so he could hear Vladimir sleep. There was an old rotary phone on the desk. When he picked up the telephone receiver, the dial tone that followed was one of the most beautiful sounds Vision had ever heard. He dialed his own number, but thought about it before it started to ring. He hung up and dialed Jess's private number instead.

Vision picked up the base of the phone and slid down the wall behind the basic desk. It wouldn't be much protection should Vladimir wake up. He'd have no excuse as to why he was up here. The phone rang three times. A very tired-sounding Jess answered the phone.

"Jess, it's me. I need Hanz," Vision whispered.

"Vision?" Jess demanded. "Is that..."

"Yes," Vision tried to bite back the snarl. "Hanz, please. Now."

"Of course. Let me get him."

"Don't..." Vision hesitated. "Don't put me on hold, please."

Jess was silent for a second. "Of course."

He heard her breathing as she went up to the guest room. There was a confused sound from Hanz and then the sound of the phone being snatched up. "Sir?" Hanz asked.

"Yes," Vision whispered. He closed his eyes and cradled the phone to his ear. "It's me."

Hanz didn't say anything, not for the longest time. He didn't need to. "I love you," Vision said. "You know that." It wasn't a question, and it didn't have to be.

“Yes, sir.”

“He doesn’t want to kill you, sir. He doesn’t, he told me, and I believe him. You don’t have to fight him over it on my account, really, sir. I’d rather...”

“You’d rather me be a whore, Hanz?” Vision said, but kept his voice light. “Really?”

“If that’s what it takes. I want you back, sir. That’s all I want.”

Vision wrapped the coil around his finger. “I know. But I can’t let him touch me. It sickens me to think about it.”

“Then don’t, sir.”

Vision quirked his lips. “I won’t. How’s Kane?”

“Blaming himself. I told him he should blame me, but you know kids.”

No. Actually, Vision didn’t. “And Jinx?” Vision said. He didn’t want to come out and say it; he didn’t entirely believe that Vladimir would just have an unsecured phone.

“He’s working on something. As you can probably guess, he won’t shut up about it.”

Vision smiled. “Tell Jinx that whatever he’s working on is working,” he said, quietly. “And...and thank him for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Vision felt Vladimir shift in his sleep. “I have to go, Hanz. I’m sorry.” He didn’t promise to call again. Hanz didn’t ask him to. He heard Hanz gulp in more air, and it didn’t embarrass Vision at all that he heard Jess on the other line whispering things to him.

“I love you, sir.”

“I love you, too.”

He hung up the phone and put the phone back exactly where he found it. The chair was wooden. It would do. He stood up and saw the binder on an old filing cabinet that looked original to the building. The filing cabinet, that was, not the binder. The binder itself had one of the fancy D-rings that allowed pages to turn freely. It was so new looking that it

didn't belong in an office that had a phone that took four minutes to dial any number in the ten digit dialing zone they were in. He took it down, and it didn't have any dust on it. Nor did it leave a dust-free mark in its location.

He didn't understand most of it, not because it was written in Cyrillic, but because it wasn't in Russian. His grandmother had forced him to study the language when he was a very, very young child a very, very long time ago. The map of the city was recognizable, as were the arrows to the dead spot Jinx had shown them. He didn't need to read it to know that it was going to be a very bad thing indeed. And if he could stop it...well, he would have to.

He put the binder away with the same care as he'd put away the phone. He snuck back downstairs, and with a great deal of regret, locked the cuff back around his ankle. If he had to, he could always free himself again.

He woke to the feeling of being watched. It was Vladimir, of course, and it was early. A soft whoop followed his wake-up call, and Vision sat up and stared at the pile of clothes by his ears. Jeans, a white T-shirt, socks and underwear, all looking as though it had come from a big-box shop. "You shouldn't have," Vision said, and was half-serious.

"Upstairs. There's a washroom. Clean yourself off as much as possible and get your ass down here," Vladimir said and dropped the key by Vision's hand. Vision let it fall and then picked it up, in case Vladimir had a memory stored away of handing Vision the keys before. He fumbled unlocking the cuff, then scooped up the clothes and went back upstairs. His shirt had been the finest silk, his slacks the softest wool, but he kicked them as far away from him as possible. If he were at home, he would have enjoyed watching Hanz burn them in the backyard.

And the pain came. He rested against the dirty sink, waiting for the wave to pass, but speaking to Hanz last night had ripped off the carefully laid bandage.

“Is there a problem?” Vladimir asked. Vision was still undressed, and Vladimir took in his nakedness with a hunger that was supposed to shame him. Instead, Vision turned around and faced him.

“No problem at all. I was about to wash up.”

Vladimir was still staring. The extra blood Vision had leaked into him was pumping through his veins now, and it let Vision feel the man’s lust. Under his navy blue polyester slacks, Vladimir was hard, and his testicles were tight to his body, but he didn’t say anything, so Vision ignored him and turned back to the sink. There was a clean face cloth hanging by the towel at the single industrial shower stall, so Vision got it wet and wrung it out. He began washing his arms, moving to his shoulders, and through it all, Vladimir stared as though he were in a trance.

“Vladimir?” Vision said voice low. “Are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” Vladimir hissed, the word mangled by his fangs.

If it were this easy, Vision would have stripped down ages ago. “The binder in the office, what is that for?”

Vladimir took a step forward, reaching for his hips. Vision sidestepped quickly out of reach. “Stop,” he ordered. Vladimir froze where he stood.

“The binder, Vladimir. Why?”

“What...binder?” Vladimir asked.

Vision took a step forward. “The one in the office. Vladimir, answer me.”

Vladimir did, backhanding his face so smoothly Vision didn’t feel it come until he got caught in it. He hadn’t pushed any of his will in Vladimir. He had more power now, but not enough that the step was unnecessary like before. “How did you get into the office, Vision?”

Vision didn’t answer. He stepped back out of the way of the punch, but failed to avoid the follow-up. It caught him hard in the belly, and Vladimir caught him again with another backhand. “How?”

Vision's face hurt, and his stomach hurt. The blows seemed to stop, so he dabbed at the corner of his mouth where he bled the most. "I took your keys," he said.

That unleashed a new battery of blows. Vision cracked his head against the wall, and he fell. After that it was a matter of protecting his belly from more kicks. When that was over, he heard the unmistakable other kind of flesh hitting flesh. He didn't look up, unwilling to watch Vladimir jerk off over him. When the semen hit his hip, it was hot enough to burn. "Get up," Vladimir demanded.

Vision straightened, leaning up on his elbows. "Should I repeat myself?" Vladimir asked.

"Do you think you can so soon?" Vision asked and then groaned when he was kicked again.

He stood up, careful not to put on any of his weight on his hip. He reached for the cloth that was now cold, and when he wasn't snapped at or beaten again, he wiped the body fluid off his skin.

"You're not going to do that again," Vision said, still not looking at him. "That was your one free one."

"What, no master, Vision?"

"Oh, I think we're beyond master now, don't you?" Vision asked, voice cold.

"Are you challenging me?" Vladimir asked, even colder.

"No," Vision said. "I just want to make sure I show you all the respect you are due."

"Do this again and I'll have you licking my boots."

Vision crouched down to pick up the pile of clothes he'd kept by the door to stay dry. It left him very close to Vladimir's groin, but he ignored it. He straightened. "And when this is over? I'll have you licking mine."

Vladimir raised his fist. Vision smiled, twistedly. "Do it or let me dress. But don't try to cow me."

Vladimir grabbed his neck again and tried to drag him into the room Vision assumed was his bedroom, but Vision knocked his hand free and walked into the room himself. The simple cot was not exactly what Vision had expected, but the yard-long oil painting of birch trees in winter was. The moon, added behind the branches, didn't look original to the painting. Nor did Varaugh in the foreground, pounding on the canvas hard enough that it bulged and cracked on this side of the frame.

"That is one truly horrible example of perspective," Vision said. Varaugh howled, throwing himself against the canvas, but his cries were empty and soundless.

"When I'm tired of your body, that's where you're going to end up," Vladimir snarled.

"Could be worse," Vision said. "You could have sprung for an Escher."

Vladimir smacked the back of his head. "I will expect you downstairs presently."

"You do that," Vision said. Vladimir looked him up and down again, sneered, and walked out. Vision returned to the bathroom and got dressed. The T-shirt was far too tight, and the cheap denim rubbed his waist, but it was clean. He walked down the stairs, head held high, and slipped his shoes back on. "Where are we going?"

"You don't need to know. Get in the car."

Vision got in the car, obedient to the last.

"When we get back," Vladimir said, backing up onto the street. "You will do what I say, when I say it, and you will hop to obey. Are we clear?"

Vision didn't answer.

Vladimir put his hand on Vision's knee. Vision pushed it off. It came back, higher up on his thigh, and Vision pushed it off again, harder. "It has something to do with the black spot," Vision said, as a distraction.

"What does?" Vladimir demanded.

"Your plan. You know that Janus isn't going to just hand over his power, so you're just going to take it. Only...you can't."

“Shut up,” Vladimir snarled.

Vision chewed his lip. His brain just couldn’t work fast enough, so he pushed it harder. “You couldn’t take Janus’s lines. You must have felt that. Janus couldn’t give them to you even if he wanted to. But you still want to be the biggest cock on the block, though to be perfectly honest, from what I saw that’s not going to be happening any time soon.”

Vladimir cuffed him. Vision supposed he deserved that. He continued on. “So you’re going to destroy the lines.”

“And tell me, Vision, how am I going to do that?” Vladimir snarled.

Vision looked at him. Even after jerking off, he still had power in him. But part of that was Vision’s. Vision tried to pull up the answer, but got nothing. His probing, however, caused Vladimir to shift in his seat.

Not that Vision trusted him. He sat back, pulling up more of his wild lines and fed them directly to Vladimir, who took the power as his due.

They entered the dead zone on the bottom border of the park just before midnight. Vision’s wild lines still ran under it, but there was no trace here of Janus. The zone pulsed with negative energy, so much so that the lights, from the posts to the few apartments with lights on so late, flickered ever so slightly. Vision found himself wondering if humans could see it. From the looks of the few pedestrians on the street, along with the occasional doorman standing by his post, they all felt something, and Vision wondered if the energy that had gathered here was affecting their brain chemistry.

“Why doesn’t Janus feel this?” Vision asked, mostly to himself, but Vladimir chose to answer it.

“This whole area is dead to him,” Vladimir said, with a smirk. But he’d obviously been keeping it to himself for too long. “Why would he feel it? This is the death of what he is.”

“But still, he must feel something,” Vision said. His teeth hummed with the excess energy.



"If he ever returned. I thought he was on to something when he noticed his wards had broken down, but he didn't clue in then, and he won't now."

"Do you really think you can reverse the entire city's lines?" Vision asked.

Vladimir stopped in front of Breyllorn's old building. "I already have. It surprised me how easy it was. I had thought I would need another month, especially given how much the moon has waned. You're a lot better for me than you think you are, my little bitch." He ran his knuckles down Vision's face, and Vision was very, very glad he didn't bite him.

"Yeah, about that," Vision said and got out of the car. He wasn't reprimanded for it, but then, they had company.

The doorman didn't greet them, but pulled the door open silently. "It will all be over soon," Vision told him. The man didn't respond. Vladimir grabbed the back of his neck and squeezed, hard enough to bring tears to Vision's eyes, so he didn't offer any more words of comfort to the concierge or the elevator man, even though their jaws were clenched just as badly.

"You don't hurt Janus's humans," Vision told Vladimir on the way up to the penthouse.

"Actually, I do. Though it won't be for much longer. This mark spread out over the entire city won't cause too much discomfort."

"Wow, that's big of you."

Vladimir grabbed him and threw him against the wall. Vision hit hard and didn't try to fight him. Vladimir's eyes didn't quite focus on him. In the center of the city as they were, Vision had far more juice to pull from. Vladimir's pupils dilated just that little bit more. "You should thank me that I needed you here," he whispered. "And that you would be no use to me if I had broken you in completely. But rest assured, when we get back to the warehouse, I'll have what's left of you on your back for me. Are we perfectly clear?"

"Crystal," Vision said, glad that Vladimir didn't recognize any change in Vision. It was probably because he had so much of Vision's power in him, and everything was a matter of

perspective. It probably meant they were very close to being equals, but Vision had never liked even odds. He followed Vladimir into the apartment and into the white living room. The lights were dark, the moonlight weak in the window, but still the white leather furniture seemed to glow. When Vladimir stepped into the center of the room, where the moon's light was the strongest, his footsteps rustled. It didn't surprise him that Breyloren had left his supply of painter's plastic drop cloths behind.

Vision leaned up against the archway. Janus's old runes were on the hall side, so of course Vladimir didn't see them when they started to glow. "Did I forget to mention the one important bit?" Vladimir asked and took a wicked-looking knife out from his suit jacket.

"Apparently," Vision said, staring at the naked silver blade.

"I didn't think you'd be so willing to come if I mentioned the fact that the ritual to replace the existing lines with my own is either going to take at least the rest of the month or most of your blood. Or my blood. It's why I've been feeding you so regularly."

"How foolish of me," Vision said, but didn't take a step back. He couldn't risk Vladimir seeing the glow of the runes just a few inches behind him. They were hot now, and the smell of burning wood was starting to fill the apartment. Vision doubted Vladimir could smell anything. "And here I thought it was me, feeding you."

Vladimir laughed. "That hardly seems possible."

"Doesn't it?" Vision agreed. Vladimir took a step forward, blade at the ready. "You do have a valid point."

"Shut up, now, Vision. I've had fun sparring with you, but I think you can admit you've lost now. I'll need you in the center of the room, of course. I don't mind the spray so much as I need all your blood to pool in one place."

"If I had a dime for every time I've heard that," Vision said, but stepped into the room. Vladimir put his hand on Vision's chest.

"Would you feel more comfortable on your knees?" Vladimir asked, almost politely.

“No,” Vision said for the first time in his life. The moon went behind a set of clouds. Vladimir looked up, surprised by the sudden dip in his power, and Vision took back all the power he’d been storing in Vladimir. Vladimir’s mouth opened, but he had no breath in him to speak. He stumbled, and Vision caught him, easily supporting his weight while plucking the knife from his hand. He pushed Vladimir down to the plastic wrap and turned the polarization of the windows, which closed off any power Vladimir might have pulled.

Vladimir pulled himself up to his hands and knees and turned to stare at him. “How...” he began.

“Sorry, Vladimir. You’re only allowed to kill your own master, remember? That rule has not been rescinded.”

Vladimir looked down, shaking with rage. Vision stepped back onto the plastic and nudged the side of Vladimir’s foot with his shoe. “You might as well get it over with,” he said. “You’ll find I’m very literal when I’m angry.”

“Over my dead body,” Vladimir sneered, but Vision kicked him hard in the face. His nose broke, and the blood poured out of him.

“You’ll find that that option is not on the table.”

The walls started to shake as Janus stepped through them. “Heya, Vision, how goes?” Janus asked.

“Good,” Vision said. “We’ve just got one minor issue to settle, and then I’m killing our friend here.”

“Need a hand?”

“Nope. A pair of lips and a tongue will do.”

“Whatever works for you. I’ll be over here. Call me if you need me.”

Vision waved. “Oh, wait, you can call Hanz. Tell him I’m here, will you? But don’t bring him here; have him drive. He doesn’t need to see this.”

Janus took out his cell phone.

Vision crouched down beside Vladimir and stroked the back of his head. “The one thing I’ve never really liked doing was causing pain.”

“You broke my nose,” Vladimir said, but made no effort to stem the bleeding.

“Yes,” Vision said. “Sorry about that. If it gives you any comfort, I didn’t enjoy it.”

The bleeding didn’t slow. Vision almost didn’t hear Janus calling Hanz in the noise the blood made hitting the plastic. “I could make you,” Vision said, and as easily as it was before, he forced Vladimir’s head down. He fought it, and the first line of blood slid down the plastic to Vision’s foot. “All right!” Vladimir snarled. “You win. Does that give you pleasure?”

“Yes,” Vision said. “Actually that does.”

Vladimir pulled himself up higher on his knees. He crawled to Vision and bled all over Vision’s shoes as he lowered himself down to lick them.

The walls began to shake again as Vladimir’s tongue touched his shoe leather. Vision turned away as soon as it did. “I told you not to bring him here,” Vision said, turning his head to look at Janus, but Janus was already off the phone.

“I didn’t --” Janus began, but Vision looked back down to the growing pool of blood on the plastic and swore.

Vladimir looked up. Blood ran down his face, and when he smiled his teeth were stained red. “It’s too late,” he said. “It’s enough.” He grabbed at Vision’s knife, but Vision yanked it away from him and threw it across the room. Janus bolted into the room, stared down at the bloody plastic, and froze. The dead spot’s hum was loud enough that even he could hear it. “We need to get him out of here,” he said.

“Grab the other end,” Vision said, gathering up the corners. “Don’t spill anything.”

Janus was already doing it. “Of course not,” he said. Vision didn’t know if the painter plastic was going to hold, but they had no choice. “I will have you know that my laundry service is going to kill me,” Janus said, and he threw a new set of wards on the wall.

"After the week I've had?" Vision asked, stepping through it. "Cry me a river." The silence seemed loud enough to stun him once they'd passed through the wall.

Janus dumped his half of Vladimir into the tub of the bathroom they were now in, and Vision quickly followed with his. "Bitch, bitch, bitch bitch bitch," Janus said. "Are you done yet?"

"Am I done yet?" Vision snarled, but waited for Janus to bind the plastic so that Vladimir wasn't going to go anywhere. The wards probably burned through the plastic, but Vision found he didn't much care. "No, I am not done yet." He followed Janus out of the bathroom. "You have *years* of my bitching to listen to. I could have snuffed Vladimir last night, but thought I had to figure out what he was doing first."

"So what do you want, a prize?" Janus asked.

Vision looked around. The walls were oddly familiar, in a strange way. As if he were to visit his great aunt. Or the top floor of a barely visited wing. "Hey, this is my house."

"It is. I'm allowed in, remember? Oh, hi, Hanz," Janus said, brightly. "I brought you Vision back. Vision, I told Hanz to wait. Just so you know. I'm really glad you're not dead."

Vision turned slowly. Hanz was down the hall, face frozen.

"And with that, I'm going to let myself out," Janus said, cheerfully, and punched Vision in the shoulder. "Again, I'm really glad you're not dead. Or a meat puppet or something. Good job!"

Vision didn't hear him leave. Though he did hear Vladimir groan. Apparently Janus didn't have the same compunction about causing pain that Vision did.

"You sounded so final on the phone," Hanz said. "Like you'd already given up."

"Sorry," Vision said.

"Sorry," Hanz repeated. "Sorry? That's all you have to say to me?"

"I...won't do it again?"

Hanz took another step forward. "You better hope you won't do it again."

Vision pulled off the T-shirt. "Look," he said, suddenly exhausted. "I get that I scared you. I get that you were hurt. And from every little bit of me, I apologize. But can we just get to the fucking bit? I can't stand the thought of another bullocking." Hanz touched his shoulder, delicately. "Not even a little bullocking?" he asked.

"Maybe," Vision allowed. "If you stop treating me like a Fabergé egg."

Hanz kissed him, pushing him up against the wall. Well, it was a start. Hanz kissed his lips, his throat, his cheeks, and his chin. He kissed over Vision's eye, down his temple, and his earlobe. He didn't realize how many kisses could fit on his throat or across his clavicle. Hanz took his wrists and held them, but Vision hissed.

Hanz let him go. "So not today," he whispered, then spread Vision's thighs so that he could fit between them. Vision groaned, feeling Hanz's cock against his. Hanz grabbed his hips, and Hanz saw the conflict cross his face.

"What's the matter?" Vision asked.

"I want to fuck you."

Vision searched, but couldn't find the issue. "And?" he asked finally.

"I have about nineteen thousand other places to kiss on you."

"I'm willing to work with you on an installment plan," Vision said. "Just this once."

"Layaway," Hanz whispered, angling his body a bit so that even more of their groins lined up. "I like the sound of that."

"I thought you might." Vision arched his back. Hanz yanked on his jeans, pulling them off him hard enough to almost yank him away from the wall. "Hey, careful now."

"Yes, sir. Forgive me." Hanz dropped to his knees, kissing down his belly. Vision's cock was aching hard. He didn't know how long he could last if Hanz were to kiss the tip as one of his nineteen thousand places.

Instead, Hanz concentrated on his inner thighs, in between sucking on his fingers. No lube in his pocket, Vision noticed with a pang. It was the first time Vision knew him not to be fully prepared. "I'm going to go slowly, sir. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

Vision groaned. Hanz was gentle, working his fingers in so slowly Vision thought he would go insane. When Hanz finally managed three fingers inside him without any discomfort, he backed away. Vision made a complaining sound from between clenched teeth.

"You have to trust me, sir," Hanz whispered. He pulled Vision down to his knees and held out Vision's palm. He licked his way across it and slid his tongue between Vision's fingers one by one.

"You're killing me here," Vision whispered.

"I need you to feel this," Hanz whispered and brought Vision's hand down to his cock and wrapped it around. It was so hard and felt so good in his palm, Hanz had to pull him off. "I'm going to come if you do that much again, sir."

"Then come. I need you," Vision whispered.

"I love you," Hanz whispered and manhandled Vision around. He wrapped his arms around Vision's chest, running them down to his belly, then slowly pushed inside. Vision took him in, willing Hanz to freeze in place, just so that he could remember exactly how this felt. Hanz did stop moving, but his entire body was trembling. "You're going to have to fuck me, sir. Come back to me."

Vision could do that. Hanz's fingers were light on his hips, but tightened like a vise when Vision went too far. Vision reached behind him, locking his fingers behind Hanz's neck. "Hanz, please, I need..." Vision gasped.

Hanz let him go with one hand, taking his cock in his hand. The first wave of orgasm caught him up. His entire body tensed. Hanz, with just the one hand, managed another couple perfect strokes both inside Vision and out, and Hanz bit him on the neck. He bled as

he came, exquisite pleasure building with each tremor of his body. Hanz came inside him, drinking his blood, and held him until Vision no longer trembled.

He pulled away, managing to get to his hands and knees, and then after another couple of minutes, tried to stand. “Whoa,” he said, stumbling into the wall.

“What is it? Are you hurt?” Hanz demanded.

“No,” Vision said. He swallowed, testing the weirdness inside him once the orgasm had passed, and then nodded to himself. “Not at all.”

“Then what, sir?”

“The moon just set.”

“You felt the moon set?” Hanz asked.

“I...did.”



## Epilogue

The moon had crested in the sky. Vision felt his original lines now ebbing and flowing under the gravitational pull, and it was strange. He hugged the blanket Hanz had brought down for him.

Hanz brought him another cup of coffee, but didn't say anything. Vision looked at him, tilting his head back to see him. He'd heard Breylorn earlier; Janus before him, but neither of them had come onto the porch and Vision was grateful for Hanz keeping them away. He wasn't quite ready yet.

"Breylorn says he's sorry he didn't kill Octavius when he had the chance," Hanz said, obviously summing up what had been almost an hour of conversation.

"It wouldn't have mattered. Vladimir would have found another brick to throw."

"He knows that."

Vision nodded, rubbing his face. "And Janus?"

"Something about calling him as soon as you can or he'll finish the job."

Vision nodded again. He didn't think he could have handled the company, regardless of how much he loved them. "The boys?"

"Jess is at the airport. They'll be back when we get home. Are you ready?"

It was good they were alone. He could tell Hanz he wasn't ready at all, and Hanz would only nod and pick another day. But with Vladimir tied up in the garage, Vision found he could do it. He nodded, but didn't relinquish his blanket.

But he did wait until they were back into the city before dialing Janus's number.

"You got the moon?" Janus howled, instead of a greeting, which was odd because Vision was dialing from Hanz's phone. "How is that fair?"

"I don't know," Vision said. "But I'm willing to say it isn't." Vision covered the mouthpiece. "No, he drove further east. Can you go a block down?"

Hanz nodded, grimly. The warehouse district was full of tin, and even though the moon was slightly half full, Vision felt the reflections almost as strongly. It was...interesting. It was low on the horizon; he and Hanz had had a very late start that night.

"Can I have it? Please?"

"Sorry, Janus. I gotta say, I kinda went through hell to get it."

"Are you still on about that?" Janus asked, making a rude noise. "Are you finding the warehouse?"

"We're close," Vision said, grimly. He reached up with the remote that they had taken from Vladimir's car, and the third warehouse on the left began to open. Vision closed the phone and found his fist clenched over it at the clanking sound.

"Vision?" Hanz asked.

"Nothing. It's just...nothing. No, wait, it's not nothing. Can you take the garage door opener off-line for the next little bit?"

Hanz pulled into the warehouse, and saw the golden chain hanging at about wrist level and the other behind the stairwell. His jaw clenched.

"Say it," Vision said, staring straight ahead. "You know you want to."

"Ah," said Hanz. Vision got out of the car and slammed it shut.

"Yeah," Vision said. "Ah." Hanz moved to take the suit jacket from the banister, but Vision shook his head. "Leave it."

Hanz hesitated. He was going to point out that it was an Armani tailored to him, Vision knew, but he only nodded. Vision took the stairs two at a time and kicked in the bedroom door.

Vision took the painting down. "Hanz, would you do me a favor?"

"Anything, Vision. You know that."

"There's a shirt and slacks in the bathroom. Would you collect them? Those, I'd like you to burn for me."

"But not the jacket?"

"No. Not the jacket."

"Yes, sir." Hanz left him, just for a second. Between the trees in the painting, Vision saw Varaugh flit in and out. He was running for his life, but he would always be trapped in the painting. Hanz returned with the clothes.

"Hanz?" Vision asked.

"Yes, sir?"

Vision gave him the painting. "This too."

"Yes, sir."

Vision wiped his hands off on his pants. "You might want to invite Lyall to watch."

Hanz smiled. "Of course, sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

The ride back to the compound was better. Vision felt he could relax enough that his stomach muscles didn't feel totally tense. Hanz looked at him, asking if he wanted to go with him, but Vision shook his head.

"Are you going to make him suffer at least?" Hanz demanded.

“No. I don’t think I will. No more than he already has, at least.”

Hanz threw up his hands in disgust, but kissed him. “I love you.”

“I know,” Vision told him. Hanz hesitated again, just for a second, but went inside. Vision opened the garage door, manually. Vladimir looked up from where he was hog-tied on the ground. He’d spent the day staked out on the floor, and his eyes looked wild. Vision hadn’t wanted the bastard to touch his chains. Still, Hanz was less than trustful and had fettered Vladimir down to his drain. Vision had found that an acceptable alternative.

“You know,” Vision said, crouching down next to him and removing Vladimir’s gag. “Now is probably the time to tell you that I don’t actually have a second remote control for the garage door.”

Vladimir said nothing at first. The moon had set an hour ago. It made Vision feel colder, like his wild lines weren’t strong enough. “If you had given me all your power at the beginning, it would have been a different story. I earned it.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Vision said. He squinted at the horizon. He could feel the rolling ball of burning gas coming closer and closer to the edge of the world. It wasn’t going to be long. “Good-bye, Vladimir. I can’t say it’s been a pleasure.”

Vladimir laughed. Vision turned to him. “I owned you.”

“So what? I’ve had way more masters than most.”

“You’ll have amazing powers and go on to do great things, but I owned you. I came on your body, and you had to take that from me. If that’s the immortality I get, I’ll take it.”

“Whatever defense you have to get you through the day,” Vision said and replaced the gag. “I’ll take my several layers of brick and concrete. You can have whatever level of melanin your body produces between now and when you burst into dust. And best of luck with that.” Vision stepped over Vladimir’s screaming body.

Jinx and Kane waited for him on the front step; Hanz had called them back from the safe house Vision had in Florida. They looked well tanned for humans, and Jinx was wearing

giant mouse ears that didn't entirely make sense. Still, Vision took Jinx's face between his hands and kissed him right between the huge plastic lobes. Jinx beamed at him. "If there is anything you need from me, anything at all at any time, you know you just have to say the word, right?" Vision asked, then thought about it. "Or write it down. Better yet, tell Kane."

Jinx nodded and flushed.

Kane wasn't looking at him, but at the prone body in the open garage bay. He didn't look any worse for storing Vision's lines. Vision took them each by the arm and led them inside. "You don't have to see that," he said.

Kane was going to argue, but then his mouth twisted like Hanz's, and he went inside willingly.

"I hate school," Kane blurted out.

"So I've been told," Vision said. "What do you want to do instead?"

"Work. For you."

"For me?" Vision repeated. "You don't have to like me to work for me, Kane, but I would expect some level of respect in all my employees."

Kane looked away, but then forced himself to meet Vision's eyes. "I do respect you," he said, and the words didn't sound like they were being drawn out by wild horses.

Vision waited, but no "but" was forthcoming. He sighed. "I can start you in the shipping yards, if you like. It wouldn't take much to apprentice you in one of the trades."

Kane relaxed and nodded. "Yes. Please." He opened his mouth to say more, but all that came out was, "Sir." He swallowed, and looked back up. "Should I tell Jess to arrange it?"

"No," said Vision. "Give me the day and I'll arrange something myself."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Kane said and beamed.

Hanz cleared his throat from the top of the stairs. Vision sent them both away and went up the stairs alone. "You don't have to say I didn't have to do that," Vision said, suddenly exhausted again. His sleep debt was earning loan-shark levels of interest.

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Hanz said. He didn’t say “sir.” Vision looked up.

“What were you going to say, then?” he asked.

“I think I was going to tell you to go into the bedroom, take off all your clothes, cross your arms behind your back and your legs at your ankles, and wait until I decide to join you.”

“You think?” Vision asked, pushing his exhaustion to the side.

“Fairly certain. Wasn’t too clear about the dismount, but it all worked out in the end.”

“So...uh...I should go do that, then.”

Hanz kissed his cheek. “Yes, sir. I think you should.”

 THE END 

## Angela Fiddler

Angela Fiddler was born and raised in Northern Alberta. She began writing smut at a very early (legal) age, and has written more than her share of slash fiction in her life. She wrote *Castoffs* for a darling friend who requested a birthday present involving hot, gay, kinky vampires. The novel practically wrote itself.

When she's not following the exploits of hot vampires, Angela write epic fantasy and has had several short stories published.

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