



CJ
BLACK

The book cover features a man and a woman in a dark, moody setting. The man, with long brown hair and a serious expression, is shirtless and has his arm around the woman. The woman, with blonde hair, is wearing a dark, low-cut top and a wide, ornate belt. She is holding a small, glowing flame in her hands. The background is dark with swirling clouds and a silhouette of a dragon or similar creature on the right. The title 'ILLUSION OF NIGHT' is written in large, stylized yellow letters at the bottom, and the author's name 'CJ BLACK' is in the top right corner.

ILLUSION
OF NIGHT

Illusion of Night

CJ Black

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Blurb

A spectral war has torn the veils that separate life and death into pieces. Beings of the darkness slip through these rifts as armies of man wage a losing battle against the corporeal invaders.

Dane Tanderes was once a mortal man condemned to an unjust death, cursed to live as a fiend until such time as the gods decree him worthy of forgiveness. Now that he has escaped back to the world of the living he is determined to never again live in darkness. Dane is instrumental in the war against those he once called brethren, fighting to give his people a chance return to the light.

Vanlyn Sarn is the second son of a cruel lord. He lives a life of one of misery and degradation, despised by his brother and father for reasons known only to them. He is tasked by his father to journey deep into enemy territory and escort troops to aid in the fighting. However, Vanlyn knows the true nature of this mission. He is not expected to return.

When Dane takes Vanlyn prisoner, he plans to use the young prince as a pawn to seduce Vanlyn into betraying his kingdom and his people. But passion ignites red hot and Dane is torn between his burgeoning feelings for the young prince and doing what his honor demands. Which decision will lead him to what he desires most?

Chapter One

Vanlyn Sarn, prince of Toryn, reached out with his power and touched upon the horse as it galloped toward the manor. Despite the distance, Vanlyn sensed the fear surrounding the fleeing beast. It caused a taste of hot metal to fill his mouth. The horse was terrified beyond reasoning.

"I need to act. I can't just stand here." He could only bridge the vast expanse separating him from the beast and silently urge it to quicken its stride. However, he could do little from his position on the balcony. Vanlyn watched as the rider thundered toward the main gates of the manor in a desperate attempt to escape the group of winged beasts that pursued him.

Fiends—oh gods, if he's caught, he's dead. How could the man be so foolish as to ride alone? Fiends were a blending of man and other worldly being that killed without thought or reason. Vanlyn ached to command some other conjurers' art. An elemental could call down lightning or bring a wall of flame to life. Better yet, a necromancer could banish the fiends to their dark world beyond the veils. But Vanlyn had neither power, and he hated the feeling of helplessness.

He turned his attention back to the rider. Vanlyn reached out again, this time touching the man himself. His brow furrowed at the impression he received. Normally, Vanlyn would have experienced a mild sense of the feral inherent in all humanity. However, this man exuded an aura that was predatory in nature.

"Gods, who are you?" Vanlyn muttered. He turned and slipped inside the manor. His steps were hurried, but he avoided breaking into a run. *How unseemly for a prince, even a second son, to be doing such,* Vanlyn silently mused.

Servants filled the halls as they went about their duties, their drab homespun in contrast to the colorful garb of members of various noble entourages as they strolled about. They appeared unaware that their country was at war.

Vanlyn made his way down to the first level of the manor but wisely avoided the main entrance, instead choosing a side door used by the servants. Vanlyn was relieved to find the rider had made it to safety. His father's soldiers struggled to close the massive iron gates. As he watched, Vanlyn's fear lay bitter on his tongue. Would the fiends be bold enough to attack the manor?

Apparently not, for the fiends were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps, Vanlyn surmised, that the archers lining the wall proved to be enough of a deterrent. The lead archer was signaling for the other bowmen to lower their weapons, and Vanlyn released a sigh of relief.

Vanlyn turned his attention back to the rider and observed for a moment as he dismounted and was given scant time to gather his belongings before being hastily escorted into the manor. Vanlyn retraced his steps, and this time went straight for the entrance hall.

The elderly steward to the Sarn household was speaking to him. Forgoing any formal greeting, the man said, "I need to see the High Lord right away." He removed his cloak and draped it over his arm in one fluid motion.

Even from his position at the far end of the hall, Vanlyn could still see the aura

surrounding the rider in swirling eddies. He was a conjurer that was certain, although Vanlyn couldn't tell what practice.

Something awful must have happened, Vanlyn thought. Why else would the man immediately ask for Vanlyn's father? Aelden Sarn had led the armies of the king since the threat had first appeared in Toryn. It had fallen to the High Lord and their nearest neighbors to keep the enemy from Great Ordwyn and the seat of power.

"Prince Argent has ordered you be brought to him immediately." The steward bowed slightly.

"I've no interest in—" The man turned, and he caught sight of Vanlyn. Vanlyn drew in a sharp breath and took an involuntary step back, caught in that gaze.

Dark eyes rested on him in mild assessment, then increasing interest. A ghost of a smile played across the man's lips, and Vanlyn suddenly felt exposed, vulnerable as though the man had stripped him bare.

Now others noticed Vanlyn's presence. Despite the sudden urge to run back the way he had come, Vanlyn forced his feet to move forward. The man's eyes never left Vanlyn's as he approached. When he was within arm's reach, Vanlyn caught the scent of leather and horseflesh. "Sir, welcome to House Sarn. I am Vanlyn, second prince of Toryn and son to High Lord Aelden Sarn."

"I know who you are, Highness." The smile never left his lips. "I am Minister Dane Tanderes of the Isle of Penryn."

Not *High Lord* Tanderes. The seven lords and ladies who led the other provinces were already gathered at the manor, and they all used the traditional titles. Vanlyn was curious as to why Tanderes didn't bear the title that was his right. He'd heard rumors about some unpleasantness with another branch of the Tanderes family who claimed the title should be theirs. Yet, Dane Tanderes was still Penryn's leader.

"Sir, what has happened?" Vanlyn said. "You were expected several days ago—"

Tanderes' jaw stiffened. "I need to speak with your father immediately. I bear grave news. My island has been decimated by the fiends."

"Oh gods," Vanlyn said. "Yes, of course, I'll—"

"What is this?" A man approached surrounded by retainers and bodyguards, and drew the attention of the group. Vanlyn's older brother, Argent, possessed an almost feminine beauty. He remained in the midst of his entourage, keeping his distance from Tanderes. His fine-boned nose wrinkled in disgust. "Minister Tanderes? Gods man, you're a mess. Is this the way you present yourself in my house?"

"As I was saying to your royal brother," Tanderes' brow knit and his eyes narrowed, "Penryn was attacked by the fiends, and I was ambushed as I journeyed here. I barely made it with my life."

Argent's lips thinned tightly. "Matters of the provinces are to be discussed with myself or my father, not with Vanlyn." His brother leveled a warning look on him; as always, Vanlyn shrank back from it. He hated the effect his brother's ire had on him, reducing him to a child again. Argent barely tolerated his presence. It had been easier to bear when his mother and sister were alive.

"The War Council will begin soon," Argent went on. "You may speak with my father then. I hope you'll take what time you have to make yourself presentable."

"Of course." Tanderes forced out the words. Argent's cruelty and lack of concern for the minister's plight came as no surprise to Vanlyn. Without further comment, his brother

turned and strode away, his followers practically stepping on his heels. Minister Tanderes' eyes tracked Argent with open hate in their depths. If Argent hadn't turned, he would have seen how dangerously close he was to injury. It was a few tense moments before Tanderes started in Argent's wake.

Vanlyn thought himself forgotten until Tanderes glanced at him briefly in passing. A sensation brushed across Vanlyn's skin like an unseen caress. The feeling departed with Tanderes.

"Who are you?" Vanlyn asked after him.

* * * *

Vanlyn stood at stiff formality within the council chambers. As the second son, he wasn't permitted to speak during a war council unless Argent was incapacitated, and in the decade Vanlyn attended the councils, that had never occurred. The only reason he was present was part tradition, part necessity for he was to receive his task.

Vanlyn was well aware of his duties. Earlier that morning, Argent had taken great pleasure in informing him of such. The announcement during Council was merely for the benefit of the other lords and ladies present. Vanlyn was to lead his own regiment in battle. He was to fight—and perhaps to die—for Ordwyn. It would surprise him, considering the ill treatment he endured, that Argent and his father hoped for the latter.

Vanlyn tried in vain not to dwell on the horrors that awaited him—the blood he would spill, the lives he would take or seen ripped away. Fiends never took hostages. Despite his fear, Vanlyn knew he would not shirk his duties. His mother taught him those who observed were the most capable and intelligent, and Vanlyn determined to use those traits to his advantage.

"Vanlyn," his father's voice broke into his musings. "Come here." He beckoned to him, absently waving his hand. The gesture irritated Vanlyn to no end. He detested being treated like one of his father's hounds. But showing his annoyance would earn him a stern reprimand.

As Vanlyn approached the table, he examined the map of Toryn. Tiny carved figurines placed there represented the positions of their regiments and the others. It was a struggle not to allow his eyes to fall on the one man whose very presence commanded Vanlyn's attention.

Minister Tanderes had spoken very little as the meeting progressed. Vanlyn learned Tanderes' discussion with his father was brief and moments before the council convened. Vanlyn spent a great deal of time trying not to meet that dark gaze, although he was eerily aware of Tanderes' attention on him.

"It is time for you to prove your worth." Lord Sarn didn't look at his younger son but kept his eyes on the map. "You have examined the latest intelligence reports, I gather?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you are aware of the armies attempting to break our gauntlet at Ciarri?"

"Yes, Father."

Aelden gave him a warning look. His father insisted on Vanlyn addressing him with the proper honorific during official functions. "You will take your contingent and act as decoy. I have had our spies disclose information that we have assistance from Inys—that their king has agreed to lend us troops, and they are waiting for us at the bay, a thousand strong."

“My lord,” Vanlyn said. “Surely the fiends will have their own intelligence network?”

“Do not be an ass,” Argent, as always, looked at him with loathing. “Fiends are savage creatures of darkness. They have no organization. We’ve seen enough of their methods to know that. The information itself will be enough to deceive them.”

The cruel grin on his brother’s face brought heat to Vanlyn’s cheeks before he averted his eyes. The insult was like a dagger twisting painfully in his chest.

“I beg to differ, Your Highness.”

All eyes turned to Dane Tanderes.

“The fiends have shown quite a propensity for intelligent thought.” Tanderes scrutinized Argent. His jaw tightened, and his eyes were cold blue stones, glittering in silent challenge at Argent’s words.

Argent’s voice grew soft. “Surely you can’t believe that.” His hands fumbled aimlessly with a few of the scattered figurines. Something in his brother’s suddenly flustered behavior made Vanlyn completely forget his humiliation. It wasn’t uncommon to see Argent flustered, but still it seemed odd that Tanderes would have such a chastening effect on him.

“I seem to recall the skirmish at that little village near the Bay of Haissa. The fiends buried themselves in the ground and caught your men unawares.”

Argent flushed an angry red. “I see no reason to make mention of that.”

“I believe we were discussing the reason.”

“Minister Tanderes,” Aelden growled. “You will show my son the proper respect.”

“With all due respect, my lord, how have I disrespected him by speaking the truth?”

“Tanderes,” Sarn deliberately omitted his title, a clear insult, “you are a guest in my home, and while we appreciate your concern regarding the decimation of Penryn. I’ll ask you not to distract us with wild speculation.”

The measuring gaze fell on his father for a brief moment. “As you wish.” It didn’t escape Vanlyn’s attention that the man had returned the insult by not addressing Aelden as “my lord”.

Vanlyn looked from Tanderes to his father and brother. Aelden would have had anyone else horse whipped for such an insult, yet now he dismissed it as nothing. And Tanderes merely acquiescing to Aelden’s demands was an even greater puzzle.

What by gods and fiends was going on here?

Vanlyn felt as though he were an intruder, a babe in a room full of men speaking of adult things and his presence there was merely for show. As his father addressed him again, and Argent looked upon him with cold eyes, Vanlyn was aware without looking, without truly knowing, that Tanderes watched him again.

* * * *

Vanlyn decided to eat dinner alone as he preferred. His chambers were small, yet richly furnished though his hand had decorated none of it. Vanlyn found the dark polished wood and red velvet cushions distasteful, but he wasn’t interested enough to order a change. The one room that he was responsible for—and was his alone as far as he was concerned—was the library. Vanlyn loved books. They lined the walls and were stacked on the floor in neat piles. The majority of them were gifts from his mother and sister, and he planned to read them all.

When he did seek companionship, Vanlyn preferred the company of his servants to his own family, especially since his mother's passing. She had been the voice of reason in his chaotic life—the wall between his father and brother. When the fiends began their bloody war, his father sent his mother and sister away to Great Ordwyn. Less than a fortnight later, they had received the *message*. His mother's fine wool coat, covered in old blood, came wrapped in a crude burlap cloth.

There were never hostages or prisoners with fiends.

Vanlyn set up his dinner table on the small balcony outside the library so he could look out onto the land. Despite the war, it was still verdant and green, bursting with the new life of early spring. Sparrows had built a nest in the tree outside his window and one of them now bobbed across the table searching for crumbs. The tiny bird accepted a piece of bread from him without fear. Vanlyn had come into his power as a Naturalist at an early age, his gift that of communication with animal kind. To “speak” with them in a special voice and sense their emotions. To Vanlyn, their speech sounded clear. They looked upon him as one of their own, and they honored him with their trust.

He was supposed to have gone to school to gain further knowledge of his craft, but his father made it clear he had no use for the arcane arts. Aelden didn't even keep his own spell-caster, which Vanlyn always thought the height of idiocy. His mother and sister were healer-empaths, so it wasn't as though Aelden had no experience with the arcane.

Argent never missed an opportunity to remind Vanlyn how useless his power was, but Vanlyn always had a sense that his brother was jealous of his ability. Vanlyn couldn't understand why. Worse, Vanlyn agreed with Argent regarding his power. As much as Vanlyn enjoyed their company, what good was talking to animals in battle?

As the hour passed, Vanlyn's brow furrowed as his thoughts drifted down a darker path. How fortunate they were that Toryn still flourished. Vanlyn knew not all lands were unscathed. Places touched by the war found their crops decimated, their people brutalized.

Like Penryn Isle. The moment the thought invaded his mind, the image of those dark eyes, fierce and passionate, filled his vision. It caused a chill to run over his skin. Vanlyn drew his arms across his chest. What was it about Tanderes that caused such a reaction? A part of him pitied the minister and the pain he must be living with, his home destroyed because of a sorcerous conflict that started beyond their shores. Penryn Isle was located off the southern coast, between Ordwyn and its sister country of Inys.

Inys had fought a bloody civil war with the foulest of magic, which had torn the very realm asunder, and the poison was slowly infecting Ordwyn.

The leaders of Inys, caught up in the aftermath of their conflict, had made it clear that they would offer no help to their neighbors across the great Walk's River.

Vanlyn released a frustrated breath. Pushing back from the table, he walked in his stocking feet, rolling his shoulders forward to relieve the tension. In three days, he would leave Ordyni and lead his men to the city of Ciarri.

“And there,” Vanlyn said aloud, “you will be a lure for the fiends.”

And, in all likelihood, you won't return.

His troubled mind led him to the chapel.

He knew he would be alone there. The chapel was only for the High Lord and his family. A shrine was set up for his mother and sister with a trinket or two of theirs on a

low table, surrounded by candles. The room was bare of any other adornments. Vanlyn sat and stretched his long legs in front of him.

“Mother,” he said quietly, “I don’t know what to do.” The words wouldn’t come. How could he express what he was feeling? “Soon I go to battle, well, not battle exactly, but most assuredly to my death.

“I suppose I should be terrified but...I feel nothing.” Vanlyn swallowed thickly, “Then again I haven’t felt anything since you and Eselda...”

He felt it then—the ache of loss. His mother and sister had been the two greatest influences in his life. Vanlyn had so wanted to be like them. Perhaps it wasn’t good he wanted to define himself by other people, but the Sarn women made you want to follow their example.

The sound of a footfall outside the chapel door interrupted his musings. Vanlyn frowned. The servants knew better than to be skulking around, especially here. Vanlyn pulled himself up sharply and stretched the kinks out of his legs before stepping outside.

The hall was empty. Vanlyn started a few paces to his left. Everything was as it should have been. Had he imagined the sound? He turned back and drew in a sharp breath as he came to face Minister Tanderes.

“Gods and fiends, man!”

Tanderes merely studied him briefly. “Did I frighten you, Your Highness?”

“You didn’t frighten me.” Vanlyn moistened suddenly dry lips. There was an air of dark sensuality about him. It was nothing like the power that exuded from his father and brother. It moved over Vanlyn like a caress, and he shuddered against it. “You merely surprised me. You’d make the perfect spy, Minister Tanderes.”

“Would I?” His full lips quirked in a sardonic smile.

Vanlyn wasn’t certain if the minister’s question required a response. He wasn’t certain which to give, at any rate. Tanderes spoke again. “Why do your father and brother show you so little respect?”

Vanlyn couldn’t reply. The words lodged in his throat. Tanderes invaded his personal space.

“Are you not a prince of the realm? Are you not of pure lineage?” The words, though spoken softly, demanded a response. They seemed to imply he should fight for what was his, but he had no fight left in him. Vanlyn wanted his father and brother’s approval, but years of failure had sapped his willingness to try.

“Your father and brother are both blind fools.”

Vanlyn was uncertain how, but he found himself pinned against the wall. Honor dictated that he defend his father and brother against insult, but Tanderes was so close that the sensuous heat overwhelmed Vanlyn. He turned his face aside when Dane casually laid his arm against the wall above Vanlyn’s head. “I was witness to how they dismissed your logic, if you recall, but so were others.”

Vanlyn closed his eyes. His breath came rapidly, and a shiver raced across his body. Tanderes leaned his face close, his breath caressing Vanlyn’s ear. “You should know there is much dissatisfaction among the other nobles.”

Vanlyn couldn’t move. Despite the fact that Tanderes was slightly taller than he was, Vanlyn could have easily pushed the man aside, but he was bound in place, as if by an unseen force.

“I cannot deal with fools and cowards.” The minister straightened away from him

abruptly. His retreat left Vanlyn with a strange sense of having been in flames and abruptly doused by icy water.

His brother rounded the corner and halted, seeing them there.

“Minister,” Argent approached and didn’t even acknowledge Vanlyn’s presence. “We’ve been searching all over for you. My father needs to speak with you.”

“Very well,” the minister answered though his gaze remained on Vanlyn. “I’ll be there shortly.”

Argent’s brow furrowed. “Now, if you please.”

Tanderes turned towards Argent and a very different aura surrounded him—one of dangerous intent. “I will follow you.”

Argent hesitated a moment then spun on his heel and strode back the way he had come.

Vanlyn, still caught in the minister’s snare, could only gape. *To have such power...*

The dark gaze was on him again, searching—assessing.

“What do you want from me?” Vanlyn spoke in a quiet voice.

Tanderes brushed gentle fingers down Vanlyn’s jaw. The touch burned a trail of heat across his skin. “I’ll consider.”

Chapter Two

Dane tore his jacket from around his shoulders and tossed it across the room, not caring that a moment later it spilled from the chair and into a silken pile on the floor.

“Insolent fool. Stupid coward.” Dane supposed he should be pleased that Aelden was a poor soldier and strategist. It would make conquering Toryn so much easier. Still Dane hated dealing with men like him, especially when they attempted to exert their authority over him. Aelden wasted his time by doing just that. Dane had to fight to keep from shifting and ripping the man’s throat out. It was difficult enough keeping his first form. Of the three forms that a fiend could take, it was actually the third form that was the most powerful and the most difficult to maintain.

And Argent. The pompous imbecile made Dane want to cut him off at the balls.

Dane crossed the room to the sideboard. Contrary to popular myth, fiends had to eat and drink, although it wasn’t as necessary as it was with mortals. He poured himself a glass of amber liquid and downed it in one swallow. Dane savored the burning in his throat. “Much better.”

He wondered if it just wouldn’t be easier to kill the High Lord, but he dismissed the thought immediately. His mission was that of a spy. Besides the High Lord and prince were always surrounded by bodyguards, and as powerful as Dane was, he wasn’t into sacrificing himself for the cause. None of his people would do so, so why should he?

An image came to his mind, a face still fresh with the softness of youth. Honey-blond hair framed deep-set dark brown eyes over an aquiline nose and full lips. Dane shook off the mental picture, yet his thoughts stayed on the lesser prince.

What Dane had learned of Vanlyn Sarn, he’d found hard to believe at first until he witnessed it firsthand. His brother and father looked upon Vanlyn as insignificant, but Dane knew the power the younger prince wielded, even if he didn’t. The lords and ladies looked upon Vanlyn’s mistreatment with disdain. Not one of the representatives was fond of Aelden, particularly those with military experience. The High Lord took advice from no one, not even the representative who was originally from Inys and had led men and fought in the Shaper War. Said war was the reason why Dane found himself returned to the mortal realm.

Because of the effects of the dark magic, rifts appeared between worlds. Some opened to places that would send a mortal to insanity on sight and within them dwelled beings of nightmare. They escaped, as Dane had done, when he’d found the small rift and passed through.

Dane had his life many decades ago, but his lust for a woman not his had brought about his premature death. Upon crossing over, he’d come to know that some legends of perdition held true. The malevolent being known as the Arch-fiend held sway there and had sentenced him to the darkness of that world until whatever higher gods deemed him worthy of redemption.

However, his punishment did not end there. His body became a vessel for one of her demonic creatures. It transformed him into a grotesque thing of nightmares. He was always aware of its presence inside of him and the torture he’d gone through as it joined with him.

After spending what seemed to him an eternity in the hellish place, Dane ceased to believe the stories of deliverance, of men sentenced to torment finding themselves granted their eternal rest. Besides, what could he possibly do to redeem himself?

Oddly enough, his thoughts went back to Vanlyn.

The young man was a curiosity. Why hadn't he exposed Dane for what he was? Any formally trained spell-caster, specifically a necromancer or another illusionist, would have seen through Dane's ruse or at least gotten a sense of something wrong about him. He'd not expected to see the second prince since his intelligence network advised him Aelden Sarn seldom allowed Vanlyn anywhere near official functions. Moreover, it was common knowledge that the High Lord never kept spell-casters, which made things quite convenient for Dane.

When Dane had caught sight of Vanlyn lurking in the hallway for a brief moment, he'd been concerned. Dane assessed the young man, trying to ascertain his motives. That innocent face of his gave away all. Dane saw curiosity, worry, and an almost immediate mutual attraction that made Dane smile, but there was no malice. And Dane certainly wouldn't mind taking a tumble with the young prince.

Well, there certainly wasn't any time for that. Besides, in two days, Vanlyn would be traveling to Ciarri. Dane would travel there too. It enraged Dane's sense of honor that Aelden was sending his son to his death. He couldn't fathom why father hated son or brother hated brother. Dane hadn't heard anything specific, but he figured it would be easy enough to find out.

But did he want to? Vanlyn had never been a part of the plan. It should hardly matter to him.

* * * *

It was well after midnight when Dane rose from his bed. Sleep was something he needed only on occasion, and he preferred not to whenever possible. Fiends seldom had dreams so Dane always found himself in darkness, and he liked that even less.

Dane stepped out onto the balcony and breathed in the cool night air combined with the rich scent of tilled earth and pungent wood smoke. He let his eyes scan the ground below him. The manor wasn't large, but it was four stories high with just barely enough room on the balcony for Dane's needs.

Even as a fiend Dane was handsome, or so he'd been told by others of his kind. His body, already muscular, became better defined as thick veins traced along the outlines of his torso and arms. His spinal column reformed as bones shifted and reshaped in his shoulders to become a widened v-shape to support the membranous wings. His fingers, already long and slim, stretched farther as his nails shaped themselves into claws. Ivory horns broke free of his skull and curled at his temples at the same time pearlescent fangs protruded from beneath his lips.

In truth, the fiend was his natural form. The human form was merely a disguise, although anyone looking at Dane would see an attractive mortal male. If one were a talented spell-caster, they would be able to see the image of Dane's fiend form imposed against his human form.

Dane launched himself from the balcony and caught the wind as his wings unfurled. Despite what he was and how he came to be that way, Dane loved to fly. His muscles worked, his wings sliced through the air with powerful timed strokes, his lungs filled with

the cold rush of wind, and if he still had a heart, it would have been beating with the sheer excitement of it all.

The ground rushed past him quickly. Buildings, trees, and animals dozing in their pens were all a blur as he raced to his meeting. When he passed over a pen filled with drowsy sheep, Dane snatched one up with little effort and less noise and silenced its bleating by wrapping its face in darkness.

The abandoned inn was just outside the city, its occupants and patrons having fled to the safety of the capitol. Dane had stayed there when he first arrived in Toryn. It was dark inside. Fiends didn't need light, although Dane wished his contact had bothered. He alighted at the front entrance, which was a gaping square of darkness. There was no need for a locked door. Dane stepped across the threshold, his nose wrinkling at the acrid scent of unwashed flesh and defecation.

"You're late."

Dane laid the sheep at his feet. "From the smell, I can honestly say you don't need this." Such gifts always made the meeting tolerable as his companion was more inclined to talk on a full stomach.

The shadow moved with unearthly swiftness, snatching the animal from where it lay on the dusty floorboards. The sounds of ravenous feeding filled the night air as fragile bone crushed under glistening fangs.

"Care for some?"

"Thank you, no." It took every ounce of his will to hide his disgust. Did being a fiend mean decorum was forsaken? If he had shown how much he loathed the sight by turning from it, he would seem a coward.

The fiend took his time licking the blood and gore from his fingers. He was an obese creature with heavy jowls on his pockmarked face and folds of skin hanging from almost every part of his body. His eyes were small and mean and contrasted weirdly with his bulbous nose and fleshy lips. Dane found it hard to believe the being had once been human.

Dane only knew his name was Baro. The fiend shared nothing of his past, although Dane was certain he wasn't Ordwyni, for the people of his country valued name and bloodlines above riches and power. Despite losing everything else upon his death, at least Dane had kept his name.

"So, I trust you have good news?" Baro lumbered across the dark expanse of the common room. Long ago, someone had arranged the tables against the wall. Baro had rather haphazardly stacked the surface of one with bottles of various shapes and sizes. He grabbed the nearest one, tipped it up, and received only a trickle. "Damn it all," Baro swore. "Next time bring some drink, Tanderes."

"Of course," Dane muttered. "They had their war council. I can safely say we'll have little trouble. Aelden is no warrior. He even plans to send his younger son out as a lure for us."

Baro laughed from deep within his chest and followed it with a wet burp. "So he really doesn't give a horse's ass about his brat, does he?"

"Apparently not," Dane said. "The information we received is false. There is no assistance coming from Inys. I seriously doubt Inys has even been in touch with Ordwyn what with their recovering from the wars."

"Indeed." Baro picked up the bottles one by one and shook them, testing for anything

that might remain within.

“Ordyni is too well fortified for us to take just yet,” Dane continued. “However, there is a great deal of dissension with the other High Lords and Ladies against Aelden and amongst themselves. I have spoken with the leaders of Acasia, Lysandre and Gan. They each feel they should be in command. I didn’t have the opportunity to speak with the lord of Riordan’s Walk, but I shall do so as soon as possible.”

“Great Ordwyn has no representative?”

“They apparently are leaving this entirely up to Aelden.”

Baro snorted a laugh. “I see you’re concocting a plan?”

“Why risk ourselves unnecessarily? Have our people at Ciarri fall back and regroup. It will be a pity to lose the town, but the advantage will be ours in the end. Alert our spies to cause as much dissension as possible. A well-placed word is a hundred times more powerful than a well-placed dagger blade.”

“True, although I never understood the mortal need to be so concerned with one’s reputation and bloodline.”

“You were mortal once.”

Baro waved dismissively, “You are new to our world, Tanderes. I have been a fiend for over three centuries. My mother was a whorehouse madam and my father a thief.”

That explains much, Dane thought. A part of him was curious. Dane preferred to know the ins and outs of those he had to associate with so there would be no ugly surprises if past secrets came up. But he supposed it didn’t matter. If Baro was a fiend and was satisfied with it, he was obviously long past redemption.

“And what of the young Prince Vanlyn?”

“What of him?” Dane said. “Let him go about his business. It will only help us. If they believe their ruse worked, they will further let down their guard.”

“Brilliant.” Baro stretched languidly, then scratched his bare buttock. Unlike Dane who had retained his modesty even in death, Baro and others like him found little want or need for clothes. Dane thought it disgusting.

Perhaps that is why they think we are unintelligent beasts.

“I will return to Ordyni until it is safe for me to take my leave then I will join you and the others in Ciarri.”

“Very well.”

“The other provinces will take some time convincing. We must have patience if we are to succeed. You must convince those who want to rush in headlong to re-consider.”

“I’ll say it as you have said. Why risk yourself when you don’t have to? That will convince them quick as you like.”

Dane nodded once, suddenly tired of Baro’s company. “By your leave then.” He turned to go.

“The Arch-fiend will be pleased, won’t she?”

Dane kept his back to Baro. “I doubt she is overly concerned.” *As am I with whether she is pleased or not.*

He was relieved that Baro could not see his face.

* * * *

As always, Vanlyn found himself alone when he visited the library. It was another room where he was comfortable. His father and brother never came here. At times guests

used the library, as did the servants who wisely did so in the early morning hours to avoid punishment. Despite the fact that neither man was what one would label “well read”, his father and brother would reprimand any servant who dared use something meant for the nobility. It was arcane thinking in Vanlyn’s opinion. Of course, Vanlyn didn’t care and often encouraged them, which was why he got along better with the servants than with the people of his so-called class.

Vanlyn loved books. The feel of the aged leather under his fingers and the scent of the yellowing pages were familiar and as comfortable as the library itself. Of course more important than their feel and scent was what they contained inside.

Now he was ensconced in his favorite chair, several tomes spread out on the table around him, and his nose deep in a book of ancient battle strategies. At the same time, he wondered why he was bothering.

A soft tread had him lifting his eyes to the open door, and moments later, Minister Tanderes stepped across the threshold. He halted in surprise upon seeing Vanlyn.

“Oh.” Tanderes hesitated. “Your Highness. I’m sorry, I’ll—”

“Please come in.” Vanlyn had no idea why he’d offered. Their last meeting earlier that night had left him shaken. He didn’t understand it. It was as though Tanderes had some unseen power over him. Yet now Tanderes seemed just a harmless man encroaching on his solitude, although he was apparently going to allow it.

“You’re up rather late,” Tanderes said.

“I could say the same of you.” Vanlyn set the book aside.

Tanderes approached the table. “I couldn’t sleep. So I came to get a book.”

Vanlyn’s interest couldn’t help but be piqued. “What do you enjoy? Perhaps I could recommend something?”

Tanderes sat across from him and leaned back in a casual manner, his arm draped loosely across the chair back. For some inexplicable reason, it made Vanlyn straighten in his. The half-smile the minister gave him made him shift in his seat.

“Well, I’m partial to histories I suppose,” Tanderes said. “I also enjoy epic poetry and stories of the supernatural as well as adventure. I’m an admirer of Talrain, Norin and Harros.

“But—” he leaned forward and grinned conspiratorially, “for true entertainment, I enjoy the works of Mara Galire.”

Vanlyn drew in a sharp breath and felt his face warm, “Sir, that is inappropriate.”

“Oh?” Tanderes went back to the casual stance. “So inappropriate that *you’re* familiar with her works?”

His blush deepening, Vanlyn averted his eyes. “The book was a gift to my sister. A lady friend gave it to her. Apparently stories of...of that nature—”

“Of men loving men?”

Vanlyn winced. “...were becoming very popular with the young ladies at court.”

“And how pray tell did you get your hands on it?”

Vanlyn sighed, embarrassed by the whole situation. “I was a little brother messing about in his sister’s room, hoping to find an appropriate place to secret a garden snake.”

Tanderes looked taken aback then, moments later, a burst of rich laughter filled the room. The minister slapped his knee in his mirth, and a few moments later, Vanlyn found himself chuckling wryly as well. It occurred to him that Tanderes had a nice laugh. It came from deep within his chest and held a sincerity that Vanlyn hadn’t heard in a long

time from anyone.

When their laughter faded, the ensuing silence reminded Vanlyn that he would never see his sister's smile or hear her laughter again. Yes, pranks were played and arguments ensued, but he truly missed Eselda.

"I'm sorry about what happened," Dane said.

Vanlyn startled. He'd almost forgotten Tanderes was in the room with him. Many people had told him they were sorry, but the soft tone of his voice and the true compassion in his eyes made Dane Tanderes the first person Vanlyn truly believed.

"Thank you." But the memories filled his mind and with them came the pain. He could barely remember them now, his mother and sister so much alike, filling their estate with joy. People loved to be around them. Even the servants willingly ran to do their bidding, catering to their every whim. For years, they had been a buffer against his father and brother. Argent was afraid of Eselda, Vanlyn knew that much. She had blackened his eye once, much to their father's displeasure. Argent had been bullying a small servant girl no older than seven and he a strapping teen at the time.

Now they were gone. His father and brother refused to talk about them. It was as though they never existed. Vanlyn slammed the book shut, barely aware that Tanderes was watching him without comment as though he'd known Vanlyn was awash in memories. Vanlyn pushed violently away from the table. "It doesn't matter," he muttered aloud.

"What doesn't?"

Vanlyn stood and turned away. He hadn't been speaking to Tanderes and was now annoyed the man was there. "Tomorrow I will travel to Ciarri. They both know I'm to die."

The sound of the chair scraping back made him turn. Tanderes was carefully making his way around the table.

"Then do not give them the satisfaction."

Annoyance flared to rage. "What do you care what I do? Do you have any idea what it's like to—" He stopped himself, wondering why he was saying anything to this stranger. He longed to tell someone of the pain that he thought he could barely put to words, but words did come unbidden. "I can't stand it anymore." He looked at Tanderes, pleading silently for the man to understand even though there was no reason for him to.

To his shock, as Tanderes looked at him through eyes dark and enigmatic, Vanlyn knew he did indeed understand. There was an old knowledge in those eyes. The man had his own pain.

"Excuse me, minister." Again, Vanlyn found himself caught up in the sensual power. He had to get away.

As Vanlyn went to move past Tanderes, the older man reached out and took firm hold on his forearm. "Vanlyn."

He looked and was entranced. Vanlyn stared, lost in the depths of those eyes. For a second time, he was barely aware of Tanderes' actions as he pulled Vanlyn close, his breath a light caress on Vanlyn's cheek.

"Do not," Tanderes' voice was a harsh whisper, "give them the satisfaction."

The minister abruptly released him. Vanlyn took two steps back, his breath ragged in his chest, his heart hammering.

Tanderes turned and left the room without another word.

Chapter Three

His company consisted of twenty men not considered the best of his father's army, but they were adequate at their duties, and if they didn't respect Vanlyn, they didn't openly disrespect him. They all knew why they were here, and Vanlyn didn't attempt to reassure them. He did, however, thank them for their service, and they agreed when Vanlyn said he hoped the deities smiled favorably on them and their venture.

Ciarri was a prosperous town, one of the larger ones in Toryn, and it was home to a melting pot of various trades and peoples. The Magisteri was an older woman, but Vanlyn wasn't to meet with her. He would report to the captain of the guard for a brief conference then continue towards the harbor. Of course, the citizens knew of their coming and gave them an enthusiastic greeting. Vanlyn felt like the worst type of liar.

The guard captain did not treat him as courteously.

Vanlyn's first impression of the man was that he was merely waiting for the day of his retirement and the war with the fiends was one last inconvenience. Orlan Barris wore his battle scars proudly and was as stern and grizzled as Vanlyn would expect from a seasoned soldier.

Vanlyn stood before him now trying his best not to fidget. Although he had been ushered into the office quickly, Barris seemed to have his mind occupied with the mess of papers on his desktop. A harried assistant scurried around like a rat surrounded by boys with sticks. He seemed to be bringing in endless piles of paper to sign. Barris did not offer him a seat, and Vanlyn knew what type of reaction he would get if he voiced a protest.

"Now then," Barris pinched the bridge of his nose. "If it is my understanding, you're to be sent for reinforcements?"

"Yes."

"We'll supply an escort as far as the city limits, then you're on your own." Barris gave him a knowing look. It didn't surprise Vanlyn that Barris was aware of the true nature of this supposed rescue mission. "I suggest you move quickly. Perhaps you will make it to the shore with no problem. From there, I'm sure you'll meet with the ship that will suit your needs."

Vanlyn caught the not-so-subtle hint. If they did get to the harbor alive, Barris was suggesting they leave the country on the first ship available but where would he go? His mother's family was from Gan, several hundred miles north. His only other family was in Inys on his father's side, and Vanlyn doubted they would harbor him. Besides, Vanlyn wasn't so desperate to go into a land scarred by war.

No, Vanlyn Sarn, second son to High Lord Aelden Sarn, had other plans for himself.

"I will take your advice into consideration," Vanlyn said. He saw the brief flash of sympathy in the guard captain's eyes.

The sudden commotion that arose outside the office drew both their attention. The voice was that of a woman without mistake, though her words were hard to comprehend at first. Moments later, she forced her way across the threshold, much to the dismay of the guards at the door.

Barris stood and leaned forward, bringing his balled fists down on the desktop. "Here

now, what's all this about?"

"Sir!" The woman wrenched herself free of the binding hands and threw herself at Vanlyn's feet. "They took my family!"

"Cease these hysterics, woman," Barris demanded. "Who took your family?"

"The fiends." Her eyes darted wildly within their sockets.

"Fiends within the city?" Barris straightened, his eyes going wide.

"N-no." For the first time, the woman seemed to compose herself. "Outside the city. At my farm."

"What were you doing outside of the city?"

The woman opened her mouth, but no words came forth. She twisted her hands until they were red.

"Well?"

"We...my family... We couldn't afford—"

"Are you saying you disobeyed the edict? Your family didn't move within the city?"

"Please, milord," she begged. "We had nowhere to go within the city, and my husband refused to leave our farm."

"Provisions were made for the outlying families in the farmsteads," Barris' tone was dismissive. "And I'll not risk my men on the foolishness of one man."

"No!" The woman scrambled to her feet, reaching for Barris. The guards took hold of her again. "My children—"

"Madam," Vanlyn said. For the first time in his life, all eyes were on him. "Where is your farmstead?"

She seemed not to comprehend his words at first. The guards exchanged a discomfited look, not certain what to do.

"Three miles along the south road," she said. "The name is Lanwen."

"I will see what I can do."

"Who are you?"

"Vanlyn Sarn," he said

"Vanlyn..." Her eyes widened. "Surely not the second prince?"

Vanlyn stepped forward. "Release her. I'm assuming your mothers taught you how to treat a lady?"

The guards hesitated, uncertain, and looked to their captain. Vanlyn caught the brief nod from Barris out of the corner of his eye. Only then did the guards obey.

Vanlyn took the woman's hands in his. "I'll do my best to rescue them. However, you must realize..."

She nodded mutely, worrying her lower lip as her eyes pooled with unshed tears. Vanlyn gave her all the gold he had on his person. It was enough for her to afford a room at a fine inn. He had no need of it since he doubted he'd see the sunrise tomorrow. She departed after thanking him again. Pressing her lips against his cheek, she said, "Go with the grace of the gods."

After she was gone, the inevitable explosion occurred.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Barris turned on him. "The Magisteri's edict was quite clear. It was her husband's own foolishness that—"

"And should innocent children suffer because of their father's bad decision?"

Vanlyn, who normally didn't like confrontation, was in no mood to be civil. Drawing on what little ire he still possessed, he went on. "Besides, we both know why I was sent

here. At least allow me to retain some dignity. At least let it be known that I died doing something worthwhile.”

Barris’ jaw tightened. “Leave.” He dismissed the guards with a wave. Vanlyn could see how grateful they were to do just that. “You mustn’t—” He paused. Suddenly, the anger seemed to drain from him like water from a cistern. He released a breath. “It’s not my business. I don’t know what caused such...” He sighed again. “If you are determined to do this, at least take some of my soldiers with you.”

“No,” Vanlyn said. “I’ll not risk any of your fine men. However, a map would be appreciated.”

“I know the farmstead that she speaks of. It’s one of the larger ones. I suppose you could say the man considers himself wealthy and is blinded by greed. I’ll have my assistant draw you a map.”

“Thank you.”

“Your Highness?”

“Yes?”

“Go with the grace of the gods.”

“Thank you.” It was the second time in the space of a few minutes that someone had spoken those words to him. Perhaps they would bring him luck.

* * * *

Vanlyn made it clear to his men that they were not obligated to follow him. Like Barris, he suggested that they find ways to make themselves scarce. Quite a few of them did, leaving Vanlyn with a paltry six soldiers who decided to go with them. He heard one make a muttered comment, “We are a hopeless group.”

Vanlyn could not help but agree.

It was near dark by the time they were organized, and Vanlyn received the marked map from the harried assistant so they decided to start out in the morning, allowing the men an evening of merriment. The town was in a celebratory mood for their soldiers had successfully driven the hosts of fiends into the forest outside of Ciarri. Of course, they weren’t reckless enough to pursue and saw no need since Vanlyn was supposedly in their town to escort the reinforcements.

Vanlyn dragged himself up to his room. The scents of rich meat and cold ale made him sick, and the raucous cries and laughter blackened his mood.

Once locked inside, he pulled a chair to the window and sat looking out over the city.

So tomorrow, you will have your wish, Vanlyn Sarn. I suppose I should be despondent or at least frightened, but all I feel is relief.

Once it was over, he would be welcomed into the afterlife by his mother and sister. How lonely he’d been and how he ached to see them. His brow furrowed as he suddenly remembered, something to do with his being sick and Eselda there, always with him, taking care of him, and then one day, she was gone. Vanlyn inhaled deeply, trying to force the sudden surge of emotion that made his eyes burn and a stone lodge in his throat.

Oh Mother, Eselda, I’ll be with you soon...

Do not give them the satisfaction.

Vanlyn literally leapt from his chair, but a frantic sweep of the room with his gaze revealed nothing. The softly spoken words seemed to come out of nothing as though the speaker was right next to him.

Vanlyn had not thought of Dane Tanderes since leaving Ordyni. Now, images of the man filled his mind, and the sound of his rich laughter filled his ears. Vanlyn remembered those intensely spoken words. A shiver passed along his flesh. He was barely aware of his dropping back into his seat and wrapping his arms around his torso. Something was building inside of him, taking hold, causing his body to tremble and forcing him to listen.

Do you really want to do your father's vile work for him? Do you want Argent to feel his triumph? Do you truly want them to win?

"I don't care." Vanlyn spoke aloud, fiercely turning his head back and forth, hoping to break his thoughts. "I'm tired of fighting. Of hoping for something I know I'll never have. Am I supposed to live the rest of my life this way?"

The voices were silent for they were his own thoughts taunting him, and Vanlyn didn't have the answer any more than they did.

* * * *

It was not a good day.

The sky was heavy with gray clouds edged with the silvery tinge of a coming storm, the first true one of early spring. There was nothing uplifting about it despite the old saying. The weather matched Vanlyn's mood. Dreary and forlorn, it was the type of day where one wished to remain indoors in front of a good fire with an even better book in his lap. Vanlyn's lips upturned. At least that's what *he* liked to do.

The five men with him were silent as they made their way down the road. Although the earth beneath them was packed solid by the passing of many travelers, their mounts made barely a sound as they walked. There was an oppressive sense all about them. Despite the cool breeze that carried the scent of rain, the air seemed too thick to draw into his chest.

They didn't see anyone as they traveled. The edict made the situation clear. Safety was within the walls of Ciarri, and anyone who chose to stay without did so at their own peril. Vanlyn made a silent vow. If he came through this alive, he would use the power he had to see the foolish landowner punished.

They came upon the abandoned farmstead late morning. It was clear that anything of value was gone. A stench of rotting meat filled the air, assaulting their senses. Vanlyn muttered an oath, hoping it didn't turn out to be what they all feared. The horses danced nervously, and Vanlyn went to each of them, speaking softly and petting them to reassure. It calmed them to an extent, but there was no guarantee they wouldn't bolt.

Someone behind him slid from his mount as his body shuddered with dry heaves. Vanlyn swallowed the bitter taste as his own gorge threatened to rise. It would not be proper for the prince to vomit like a dog in front of his men.

Vanlyn dismounted and drew his sword. He was a decent fighter but not an expert. He trained alongside of Argent at their mother's insistence until he was thirteen. After she died, the Master-at-Arms was given explicit instructions to train Argent only. Vanlyn could never figure why his father had an issue with his learning to defend himself. Then again, much of his father's treatment was making sense now, although Vanlyn still couldn't fathom why his father hated him.

"Well, Father, I suppose I'll never know," Vanlyn muttered aloud, "but at least now you'll have your wish."

“Sir?”

He hadn't been talking to the soldier. He was the oldest of the five. His name escaped Vanlyn now. “We'll check the farmstead first.” Vanlyn nodded to the two standing closest to him. “You two circle around back. We'll take the front. We can expand our search out into the surrounding woods. It shouldn't be far.” He was dreading finding anything. If fiends had captured the father and children, there was no hope, and there wouldn't be much of them left. Vanlyn violently pushed back the image that threatened of his sister and mother in the hands of the fiends and made his way through the front yard strewn with the remains of furniture and farming implements.

The front door leaned haphazardly against the wall, torn off its hinges by an unknown force. The stench was overpowering within. It was the cloying smell of some beast choosing to live in its own filth. Even with the murky light, it was hard to see. Ordinary things took on surreal shapes as the shadows hid them from plain view.

“Nothing lives here,” the elder soldier commented.

“Something is living here,” Vanlyn said. There was one table set upright, littered with empty liquor bottles.

“Dear gods!”

Vanlyn turned to where the younger soldier had cried out as he stepped into the next room. When Vanlyn crossed the threshold, what he saw made his bile rise. He shoved his fist into his mouth and forced it back with a thick swallow. The young soldier had less success. The carcass of a goat lay in the middle of the room, and swarms of flies gathered to partake of the feast. It had been a messy death for the poor beast. Old blood and gore splattered about created a horrifying and surreal portrait.

Certain his knees would give way, Vanlyn turned from the gruesome sight, only to be caught in a paralysis of fear by another that now stood filling the doorway.

The fiend was enormous, a bloated monstrosity with pale mottled skin and a heavily jowled face. Never had Vanlyn seen such eyes burning with malevolence and an all-consuming hunger.

A cry burst from his throat. Whether warning or fear, Vanlyn didn't know. He only knew that the thing meant death for them all, and the lives of the men were his responsibility. He had come there expecting to die, but not like this. This was not quick death, but slow and painful, relished by the beast.

For its size, the fiend moved with frightening speed as it leapt, cleared the length of the room, and fell upon the younger soldier. He was on his knees retching up his guts and reacted too slowly to avoid the attack. His cry rent the air as Vanlyn watched in morbid fascination as the fiend, with one powerful movement of his hand, snapped the soldier's neck.

“Dear gods!” Finally torn from his stupor, Vanlyn drew his sword and charged. This was his fault. None of these men should have been here. He should have refused their assistance and accepted his fate alone. Just as he was upon the fiend, it turned, baring fangs coated with blood. He shoved a meaty hand against Vanlyn's face and squeezed until the prince thought his skull would shatter.

“Plenty of time for you, little man!” The sound of his voice was an insult to his ears. Its guttural tone spoke of everything vile and disgusting. With little effort, it tossed Vanlyn across the room. He landed hard, winded and in pain as the room spun crazily about him.

“Highness!” Vanlyn’s felt himself pulled to his feet. “We must get out!”

The older soldier dragged him, along as though he weighed nothing. Disoriented, Vanlyn couldn’t resist. When he finally had his wits about him, he cried out, “We have to go back!”

“Did you see? There’s no hope for him now!” the soldier cried. “We must escape with our lives!”

The commotion had brought the other two running. Just as they rounded the corner of the house, the fiend burst from within.

There was a dangerous hesitation. The horses reared, screaming in fright. The fiend pounced on one, carrying it up, up while the beast struggled in its panic. Then the fiend released it, causing it to plummet to its death. Vanlyn could not look away.

Vanlyn cried out as the fiend fell upon the horse to feast. The other three dashed forward, swords drawn. The fiend launched itself into the air, flying just out of reach, taunting them as a bully does a child after he has snatched a favorite toy.

Movement to his right drew Vanlyn’s attention. “Men, beware!”

A second fiend landed in the clearing. Unlike the first, this one was tall and slender with a rope of golden hair. To Vanlyn’s horror, it turned. Its eyes fell on him, and it smiled.

Two soldiers charged at it, and it narrowly avoided a sword strike by the first man. The beast cried out in fury, knocked the second man senseless, then grabbed him up by the collar and took to the air.

“No!” Vanlyn rushed forward, forgetting the first fiend. Another man would not die because of his stupidity.

Someone was calling to him, but Vanlyn didn’t care. With single-mindedness, he ran into the woods and continued until the sun was merely dappled rays seeping through the canopy of leaves.

Nearby, he could hear the second man thrashing about. He wanted to tell him the need for silence but yelling through the forest certainly would have defeated the purpose.

Up ahead, he heard the first man scream, a plea for his life, and Vanlyn dashed forward, no longer concerned with dying, merely wanting to save the man. So help him, he wouldn’t allow another death.

He never saw the attack coming. He was so intent on finding the soldier that it didn’t occur to him, there might be others. Vanlyn burst into a clearing, saw the golden-haired fiend with the soldier, and was close enough to see the fear in the soldier’s eyes.

Something took hold of the back of his collar and effortlessly jerked him off his feet. A malformed hand wrapped around his wrist crushing his sword from his grip and causing a scream to burst from his throat. Suddenly, Vanlyn was a helpless rag-doll dangling several hundred feet off the ground, and still they climbed higher, past the tallest limbs, his body wrenching in time with the wing beats. Then, just as abruptly, they descended, and when he was a safe distance where he could have jumped and been uninjured, his attacker tossed him aside like a useless sack of garbage.

He slammed painfully against the nearest tree, the force driving his breath from his lungs and slid into an ungainly heap at the base.

A shadow loomed, the image of a tall powerful figure, dark and menacing, blotting out the cheerless light. Vanlyn opened his mouth, but nothing came out. The beast was on him, and he knew there was no hope.

It pinned him there on the forest floor. Black eyes stared at him with what Vanlyn would swear was disgust. There was a sense of familiarity, as though he knew the beast that was about to end his life.

The fiend lifted one clawed hand from Vanlyn's left shoulder but still managed to hold him fast. The first cut of the single claw on his flesh brought a strangled cry from his lips. The beast traced a line down Vanlyn's throat. He felt his own blood warm on his skin. The fiend leaned close, forcing Vanlyn to close his eyes. The nearness caused a shudder of revulsion to run over him. His throat suddenly devoid of moisture he could only make a feeble sound of disgust as the fiend drew his tongue across the wound.

"Vanlyn, your blood tastes so sweet."

Vanlyn cried out as recognition dawned. His mind was unable to form any words even as it screamed out the truth.

Dane Tanderes, dear gods—

It was Vanlyn's last coherent thought.

Chapter Four

“This is quite a puzzle.” Dane absently scratched behind his ear with one claw. “Did you truly wish to end your life so badly, Vanlyn Sarn?”

Dane had felt a little sorry for Vanlyn until now. The foolish little pup led six men to their deaths all because *he* hadn’t wanted to live.

Dane had no patience for men who wanted to end their lives. Perhaps that was cruel of him but considering how he had died...

No, he was not going to dwell on that. It haunted his nights enough to last his eternity. Then again, how could he admonish Vanlyn when he could have avoided his own demise just by using the common sense the gods gave him?

If the soldiers who remained were smart, they would flee and leave Baro to feast on the horses. According to the fat ass, horseflesh tasted sweeter than human flesh.

I certainly wouldn’t know anything about that, Dane mused.

A figure stepped into the clearing. Like Dane, this fiend kept himself fit and presentable. He was tall and lithe, his long blond hair done up in a thick braid down his back. Also like Dane, he preferred to dress in loose-fitting trousers when he was in his second form.

He was the closest Dane had to a friend among the fiends as Dane enjoyed his company the most. His name was Lahn Aurris. Unlike Baro, Dane knew Lahn’s history and how he died. They had both made mistakes during their lives that had not only cost them said lives but also their reward in the afterlife. Lahn no more believed in redemption than Dane did.

“And who is this?” Lahn said in greeting.

“Prince Vanlyn Sarn of Toryn.”

“You jest. The second son?”

“That would be him.”

“I thought he was on his way to the harbor.”

“He was as far as I know.” Dane stretched out his legs and leaned back on his palms.

“Why he was snooping around the farmstead I’ve no idea.”

Lahn sat down heavily and crossed his legs. “That mortal will be out for awhile. If he’s smart, when he comes to, he’ll get as far away as he can.”

Lahn, like Dane, didn’t kill unnecessarily. It always caused problems later.

“What of the others?”

Lahn sighed. “Baro killed two of them. The others ran. I left Baro gorging on the horses, poor beasts. So... What are you going to do with the handsome young prince there?” Lahn nodded in Vanlyn’s direction. “Ransom him?”

“His father would never pay.”

“You have another plan, then?”

“Well—”

Baro took that moment to ungainly stumble through the underbrush. His already bloated stomach distended from his feasting. He calmly licked blood from his fingers. Dane glared at him with all his loathing behind the look, and Lahn mirrored his actions.

“What’s this? A pretty little boy for us to share?”

“No.”

Baro raised his eyebrows but didn't seem the least put out by Dane's tone. “Want him for yourself then?”

Dane stood and stretched as he brushed the decomposing leaves from his trousers.

“Dane has a plan,” Lahn said.

“I'm in, whatever it is,” Baro said. “Your plans make it, so I don't have to do anything more than necessary.” He laughed at his words as though he'd made a good joke.

“It occurs to me,” Dane mused as he rubbed the growth of beard with one hand, “that Argent would be preferable but...”

Dane approached the unconscious form and toed the prince lightly at his thigh with the tip of his boot. “Aelden is very close to losing his position. A scandal may be just the thing to bring about his downfall. What would the other lords and ladies say if Aelden's son was turned by one of us? Seduced into betraying his country? A man who cannot control his own house is certainly incapable of controlling an army.”

“I've seen lives destroyed for lesser reasons,” Lahn commented.

Baro gave a great laugh. “Good idea! I suppose you'll have that honor?”

Dane avoided the question entirely. “With Aelden deposed, chaos would reign. The other lords and ladies will be so busy vying for his position that we would be free to press the advantage. Who knows how much we could accomplish? What do you think, Lahn?”

“It may work at that,” Lahn nodded. “You don't intend to force him then? That would do little good.”

“Indeed,” Dane said. “He has to come to us willingly. Then we can either coerce his father into doing our bidding or present the young prince to the council. One truth-saying and he would be branded a traitor. Yes, that should be more than enough to ruin Aelden.”

“Killing Aelden would be easier,” Baro said.

“Would it?” Dane raised a critical eyebrow. “Aelden seldom leaves his estate anymore. He leaves all tasks to his subordinates. He is never alone. The one time I met with him, there were five bodyguards in the room. That's why I didn't try to kill him then.” Only a man with a death wish fought outnumbered in closed quarters. “If you want to attempt it—,”

“Nah,” Baro dismissed the suggestion with a sneer, “your way's better.”

“It certainly is the safer course of action.” Lahn nodded as he brushed back an errant strand of hair. “I wouldn't be surprised if the country erupted into civil war over something this petty.” Lahn gave him a grin. “Mortals are notoriously predictable.”

“And even more foolish,” Dane said.

“Glad I'm a fiend,” Baro muttered. Dane could tell he was quickly becoming bored with the discussion.

“Then I will take him to Penryn with me,” Dane said. “Which one of you shall make the progress reports?”

“I will,” Lahn said. Dane was grateful. He wanted to spend as little time in Baro's company as possible, and Lahn understood. “When should I come to Penryn?”

“Two weeks should suffice.” Dane nodded. “I should have made some progress by then. In the meantime, Baro, I'm sure you'd have little trouble seeing that this news reaches the proper ears.”

“So, what? I'm playing some fat farm-wife spreading gossip?”

“You are a spy disclosing information.” Dane said, his tone cajoling.

Baro smiled nastily. “Do I get to tell the others that you’re off rutting some boy on that island of yours?”

“Tell them,” Dane said pointedly, “I’ve taken a royal hostage.”

* * * *

He remembered floating in darkness. Sounds were his only companions. There were snatches of whispered conversations and murmured comments. A light tapping brought Vanlyn from his deep slumber. Lights, colors and shapes took time to sharpen to clarity.

The room was huge, yet there wasn’t much in the way of furnishings. The four-poster bed in which he slept was grand enough for several people it seemed. His body was nestled in silk sheets of royal blue. Across the room sat a dresser topped with a heavily gilded mirror that showed him someone had taken care to clean him up. To his right, glass doors led out to what he supposed was a balcony.

To his left, two plush chairs sat on either side of an immense fireplace, the logs arranged as they awaited the first cold night. Twisting his body farther around revealed another door next to the bed. A washroom perhaps? A closet, its door pulled open to reveal clothes neatly hung was on the other side of the bed.

He had no idea where he was or how he’d gotten there.

The knocking sounded again, polite yet with a hint of insistence. Vanlyn doubted if whoever was behind the door intended him harm if they would bother knocking.

“Enter,” Vanlyn called.

His first look was of a pair of stooped shoulders fitted neatly into a black overcoat normally worn by valets. The man, if he could be called that, was lanky in build. His fingers long and knobby grasped a covered breakfast tray. His face is what held Vanlyn transfixed. It was smooth and hairless, making his eyes, accented by his dark pupils that remained in a perpetual state of fullness, seem over large.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” he said. “Are you well? Suffering no ill effect?”

Why would he think him ill? “Who are you? Where in the ethers am I?”

The lanky man seemed unaffected by Vanlyn’s words, either choosing to ignore them or following some type of etiquette. “The master will see you after you have eaten. He’s waiting for you in the library. Just pull the cord and I will come to fetch you. He will answer your questions then.”

“Damn right he will,” Vanlyn muttered. Memories were winding their way into the forefront of his consciousness—the farmstead, the battle with the fiend, that poor soldier and—

“Wait!” Vanlyn said, and the man paused at the door.

“Sir?”

“Your master. Is he Dane Tanderes?”

“Yes, sir,” the man answered and left without elaborating.

So I was right. The fiend that had pinned him to the forest floor was Dane Tanderes. He’d not been struck with a sudden madness. Dane Tanderes was a fiend.

“Oh dear Lady,” Vanlyn moaned. There was that part of him that felt the panic rise in his chest. Yet that other part, that rational part, which told him if Tanderes wanted him dead, he would be. So what did Tanderes want?

Vanlyn thought to set aside the meal, throw back the blankets, find the library and

demand an explanation. Unfortunately, the enticing scents coming from underneath the lid had his stomach rumbling and his hand lifting the cover. His mouth watered at the sight of eggs, crisp fried fish and potatoes and—*thanks to all the gods*—hot coffee.

Feeling as though he hadn't eaten in days, and perhaps he hadn't, Vanlyn took a fortifying sip of the coffee, savoring the hot rich taste and it helped clear the last of the cobwebs from his skull.

While he ate, Vanlyn pondered his current situation. Did Tanderes hope to ransom him to his father? For what purpose? He would be sorely disappointed. And, once Tanderes realized no funds were forthcoming, what would he do? Vanlyn would be useless to him and kidnapping of a member of a royal family, even of the second son, was punishable by death. Tanderes would have only one choice in the matter since Vanlyn could identify him.

"Well," Vanlyn muttered aloud, "there are worse ways to die. I may as well enjoy the minister's hospitality."

He finished his meal at his leisure. Afterwards, he set the tray aside and slid from the bed to examine the choice of clothes, which he supposed were for him. He finally chose a plain white shirt and dark trousers, sliding his feet into a pair of slippers. He found no reason to dress formally and felt it would suffice.

Vanlyn was halfway to the door when he realized he had no idea where the library was. Then he recalled the man's words. He found a braided cord within a recess in the wall directly above his nightstand. He pulled it, hearing a far-off bell chime. The man must have been nearby for moments later came the polite knock.

"Was the meal to your satisfaction, Your Highness?"

"It was indeed, Master—?"

"I am Dawkins," he said. "At your service."

"A pleasure," Vanlyn said automatically despite his situation.

"If you would please follow me."

Vanlyn couldn't help but examine his surroundings as Dawkins led him through the halls of the Tanderes estate. It was a nice enough place, but there seemed to be an air of mild neglect as though the house itself and the things in it were old and tired just barely clinging to life.

"Are there other servants besides you?" Vanlyn was uncomfortable with the silence.

"There are others who care for this place as best they can," Dawkins replied. "The master keeps things in check with his power as you will see."

Vanlyn thought to ask again why he was here, but he figured if Dawkins knew he would have told him by now. Servants, despite never being privy to a master's secrets, always seemed to know them anyway.

When they came to the library, Dawkins stood aside. Both doors were open, and as Vanlyn stepped across the threshold, he halted in silent admiration. The place was twice as large as the library in his estate, and the shelves reached to the ceiling. No shelf was empty, each one literally stuffed with an assortment of books and scrolls, some the size of a palm, others so large it would take two men to carry them.

The gods could strike him now, and Vanlyn would be content.

"Impressed, I see."

The voice caused him to turn abruptly to his left. How long had Tanderes been sitting there looking at him gaping like a country boy at his first time in the capital?

“You have an amazing collection.” Vanlyn felt it necessary to say. “Why did you abduct me, Minister Tanderes?”

“To the point I see.” Tanderes sat in a comfortable overstuffed chair before a finely carved wood table. Coffee and pastries had been set out, but Tanderes had set them aside in favor of the piles of official looking documents.

“If ransom is what you seek, you’ll be sorely disappointed.”

“Ransom isn’t what I seek.” Tanderes set the pen aside. “Come sit.”

Vanlyn approached the table with some wariness, although again he thought if Tanderes wanted to injure him, he could at any time. Vanlyn was curious as to how Tanderes managed his mortal form. By some spell, Vanlyn guessed. He pulled a second chair out and turned it around to face his captor.

“Help yourself to coffee. It’s an exotic blend imported from across the ocean. I don’t get to enjoy it often. Usually only members of the higher nobility can obtain it.”

Vanlyn sighed. Although he was familiar with court intrigue, he’d never been overly good at it. He wished—*he hoped*—Tanderes would speak the plain truth and be done with it.

“As to why I’ve brought you here,” Tanderes picked up the pen and signed one of the documents in a neat even script, “I plan to use you to ruin your father’s reputation.”

Vanlyn barked a scornful laugh. “You’ve taken the wrong prince.”

“Have I?” Tanderes flipped over the first paper and started to examine the second, his eyes never leaving the page. It annoyed Vanlyn that the minister wouldn’t even look at him. “Granted, Argent would have been preferable for this scheme, but you so readily supplied yourself. Incidentally, why didn’t you go straight to the harbor?”

The abrupt change of subject completely caught Vanlyn off guard, and he stammered. “I—there was a woman. She, that is, her family was taken by fiends and—”

Tanderes looked at him for the first time. “And you thought to rescue them or to commit suicide? Although you’d retain more honor dying in—” An eyebrow rose. “That was your plan? To die and preserve your honor?”

Vanlyn couldn’t help the flush he knew was spreading across his face. He averted his eyes involuntarily. Tanderes had looked into the darkest recesses of his heart and brought his feelings to light.

“You stupid little pup. Did you have to drag five innocent men along with you?”

“They came on their own!” Vanlyn cried. “And how dare you judge me!” He stood in a terse move and tipped the chair over. His hands fisted, nails biting into his palms. “You’re nothing but a mongrel beast hiding in the skin of a man. A murderous spy preying on the innocent. Filth like you belongs in the darkest nether-hells!”

Tanderes stood, his eyes hard stones beneath half-lowered lids. The fury emanating from the minister worked its way through Vanlyn’s red-haze of anger. Too late, he realized that he had pushed Tanderes too far.

The minister’s hand shot out, and there was the sharp crack of flesh meeting flesh. The blow sent Vanlyn to the floor.

Dane stood over him, cutting an ominous figure, and Vanlyn could only stare up at him, the stinging in his cheek a painful reminder of his mistake.

“I am Minister Dane Tanderes of Penryn,” Tanderes said in a voice that made Vanlyn shudder. “I am a member of the nobility and of a noble house. Before death took me, I was a mortal man and a prince like you. Despite my crimes, my family would not

allow me to be named a commoner. Therefore, I am still a noble, perhaps not your equal, but I demand the respect, I am due. You will *never* disrespect me in my house again. Understood?"

Vanlyn rubbed his still tender cheek. He blinked back tears as he gathered himself up to face Tanderes. "My apologies, sir. You are correct. I acted badly in your home."

Tanderes drew in a deep breath. "I owe you an apology as well. I shouldn't have insulted you. You are right. I cannot judge."

"Please," Vanlyn said. "Why am I here?"

"As I said, I plan on using you." Tanderes turned away and walked around the table as he idly fingered the papers. "I'm sure you've noticed that your father is not a favorite among the lords?"

"Yes," Vanlyn said. "Many of our people feel my father doesn't have the experience needed."

"You were right about one thing. I am a spy," Tanderes said. "I have watched, listened and whispered in the ears of the lords, and they are quite on the edge of the precipice. They all agree your father should be ousted, but they also quarrel about who will take his place."

"So if my father is removed, there will be civil unrest," Vanlyn said. "It would give you—the fiends—the opportunity you need to press an advantage."

"True."

"And I fit in how?"

"As a betrayer." Tanderes had walked the circumference of the table and now stood directly behind him. "Already you are an embarrassment to him. If you are branded a traitor, it would accomplish the task."

Vanlyn drew in a breath and released it on a shudder. "You'll torture me into submission."

"Of course not." Tanderes placed his hands on Vanlyn's shoulders. Vanlyn could feel Tanderes' warm breath on his neck. "That would do no good. One truth-telling and you would be the poor, sympathetic prince too weak to resist his captors."

Vanlyn found he couldn't move, though his mind demanded he get away. Tanderes moved around to face him. "To be blunt, Prince Vanlyn, I am going to seduce you."

"W-what?"

"I believe I made myself clear." As Tanderes moved close, Vanlyn drew another breath, his whole body drawing up into a rigid stance. "I plan to make you mine, Vanlyn. To possess your body and your soul. To make you betray everything you've ever known. Your father must comply with our wishes or have his shameful secret revealed—that his son is a traitor. A man who cannot control his own house cannot control an army."

Tanderes was almost upon him, and Vanlyn found himself stepping back in his need to get away. When he met the table, he grunted and twisted his body around as he muttered a low curse on himself for his lack of attention. In addition, as Vanlyn feared, the raw sexual power caught and held him. It seemed to flow from Tanderes to surround Vanlyn, caressing him, and raising a feverish heat across his skin. Vanlyn could swear he was breathing fire into his lungs and scorching from the inside out. He was shaking, and his breath hitched in his chest. He only managed to keep control of his emotions by turning his face aside, thus avoiding looking into those fathomless eyes. Tanderes placed his hands flat on the table on either side of Vanlyn, forming a barrier that effectively

trapped him.

“Shall we begin?”

Chapter Five

“You...” Vanlyn said, “surely jest?”

Tanderes laughed. There was nothing mocking in it, yet Vanlyn sensed the minister thought his words rather naive.

“I assure you this is no jest.”

Vanlyn still couldn’t face him. “And you expect me to merely comply with no protest?”

“On the contrary,” he could hear the smile behind Tanderes’ words, “I’m hoping you will fight me.” The words were a whisper that was a mere caress across Vanlyn’s skin.

Vanlyn shuddered. “You’re sick.”

“Perhaps.” Tanderes flicked his tongue at the base of Vanlyn’s ear.

“Don’t!” Vanlyn shoved hard with his folded arms, and Tanderes moved, but he knew it was more the man’s willing movement than the force of the blow.

“You seem flustered,” Tanderes said mildly.

“Touch me in that manner again and I swear I’ll find a way to kill you.”

“So you disapprove of men loving men?”

Gods how does he do that? Turn my actions against me! “I never said that,” Vanlyn said coldly, wondering why he was defending himself to his captor. “What I disapprove of is *you*.”

Tanderes didn’t reply immediately. “I suppose I should be offended by that, but a few insults are expected.” As though nothing had occurred, Tanderes returned to the desk. “You are free to move about the estate, and Dawkins will see primarily to your needs. You cannot, however, go outside. I’ve placed a geas on you against that.”

“You’ve bespelled me?”

“It was necessary.”

Vanlyn approached him quickly and slammed his hand over the paper on which Tanderes was working. “How dare you?”

Tanderes looked up calmly. “You may as well settle in. You’ll be here for quite some time.” He inclined his head at Vanlyn’s hand. “Do you mind?”

Vanlyn jerked his hand away. Disgust warred with frustration inside him. He wanted to pummel Tanderes with his indifferent attitude and was completely aware of his helplessness.

“I’ll not stay here.” Vanlyn knew the words were useless, but he couldn’t merely let it go.

Tanderes grunted noncommittally.

Vanlyn turned and strode from the room. He was being childish he knew it. It was obvious Tanderes possessed great power. Still, he would not stand by and allow himself to be some sort of sexual plaything.

Vanlyn was only half-aware of things going on around him as he walked. He recalled glimpses of things—movement that suggested people were nearby and about their business, but he only saw them as a fleeting glimpse of shadow. Vaguely, he remembered Dawkins stating there were other servants about.

He came at last to the kitchen where Dawkins was bustling about. The man halted

when Vanlyn entered.

“Highness, how may I be of assistance?”

Vanlyn ignored him. The back door was sitting open. Sunlight and a warm breeze filled the room. Vanlyn was a mere few steps from the threshold when—

He felt the effects in his hands first. His muscles seized, twisting with violent cramps. Vanlyn stared at them, as though they weren’t his own. The sensation raced up his arms, paralyzing them and they fell useless to his sides.

“Highness—”

Vanlyn forced another step, and it was as though someone had punched him in the gut. He doubled over with a groan as his knees locked. Vanlyn pitched backward and was saved a painful fall by Dawkins, who moved with surprising speed to catch him.

“Highness lies still,” Dawkins murmured soothingly. “You can’t get out this way. The feeling will pass in a moment.”

Dawkins stretched him out on his back. The old man was surprisingly gentle. More embarrassed than he’d ever been in his life, Vanlyn lay there, knowing his face was burning.

Dawkins left his line of vision for a time but returned moments later with a cup full of steaming liquid. Tea, Vanlyn gathered. Dawkins cradled Vanlyn’s shoulders with his arm. “Sip.” For a moment, the subservient attitude had fallen away, and Vanlyn saw an entirely different being before him, one that had old knowledge and power and little time or patience for upstart princes.

Warmth suffused his body, and after a time, Vanlyn felt the knots loosen. Dawkins held the cup to his lips again. The flavor was fruity with a slightly nutty aftertaste, and Vanlyn soon found he had emptied the cup. By then he was sitting up and in control of his body once again.

Contrite for his earlier rudeness, Vanlyn said, “I’m sorry. Thank you, Dawkins.”

The old man smiled. “You must not do that again.”

He opened his mouth to ask Dawkins to help him escape. The sense remained that the old man was more than what he seemed. Perhaps he was even more powerful than Tanderes. However, Vanlyn doubted they would honor his request.

Dawkins helped him to his feet. “Was there anything in particular you cared to have for lunch, Highness?”

It was such a mundane question Vanlyn almost laughed. A few moments ago, he had been in agony on the floor and now Dawkins was asking him about food.

“Nothing in particular, thank you, Dawkins.”

“Let me know if you change your mind,” then Dawkins turned and went back to his work.

Vanlyn stood there a moment gazing out the open door. In his line of vision, fresh laundry dried on the line. To his right, he saw wood stacked neatly against a tool shed. A few hundred yards beyond the shed was a fine garden. From there was freedom so achingly close.

And if you could escape, where would you go?

Would anyone help him leave Penryn or were they all loyal to Tanderes? Surely someone would assist him. Of course it was all moot if he couldn’t even leave the manor.

Vanlyn was aware of two things as he left the kitchen. There were two ways to remove a geas. First, of course, was if the conjurer removed it by their will, and the

second course of action...

His thoughts disgusted him, but there was no help for it. If he couldn't find another way to escape then he would have the grim task of trying to kill Dane Tanderes.

* * * *

Dane watched from the landing as Vanlyn strode across the entrance hall.

"Stupid pup," he said again. Well, he'd keep saying it as long as Vanlyn did things like attempting to circumvent the geas. Dane had gone to his room to retrieve a disturbing letter he'd received from one of the Magisteri, which he'd not had the chance to address. As Dane came to the head of the stairs, he saw Vanlyn coming from the direction of his study. Dane knew as soon as Vanlyn tried to make his escape.

Still, it is to be expected, Dane mused as he returned to the library.

He sighed as he looked at the letter. Although Penryn was officially a province of Ordwyn, it was divided into three smaller municipalities each governed by a Magisteri. Taddeus Ramsay was a distant cousin of Dane's and was vehemently protesting Dane's right to rule, although their small council had stood behind him. Dane knew that Ramsay fled Penryn days before the fiends came without seeing to the safety of his people. How he'd found out about the attack was a mystery. Had Dane not arrived when he did the fiends would have destroyed Penryn, and he wasn't having that. The Arch-fiend had been useful in that regard. Penryn was his, and the Arch-fiend had granted him that right although he was supposed to have subjugated the people.

Instead, Dane sent out messages, calling the citizens back to their native soil. They knew who and what he was, and it had taken him years to prove that all he wanted was to live in peace and to make Penryn as prosperous as it once was. In gratitude, the island council had ruled that Dane was the rightful heir to the seat of power.

Others came as well. Penryn had become sort of a safe-haven for those running from their own demons. As far as Dane was concerned, they were welcome as long as they abided by the law.

Ramsay returned, and assumed his duties. His voice was loudest protesting Dane's appointment. After all, what proof did Dane have that he was who he said he was? According to all recorded history, Dane Tanderes had died seventy years ago.

Therefore, they had summoned the necromancer and the dream weaver.

No one, not even Ramsay could deny Dane's claim, and yet that was exactly what the man was doing.

Dane read over the letter again. It requested an audience with him to "discuss matters of great import", one of which, to Dane's annoyance, was Vanlyn Sarn.

His people knew of his plans more or less and were aware of Vanlyn's presence. So even if Vanlyn was able to escape the estate, no one would assist him in getting away from Penryn. Dane promised to bring Penryn to greatness when the war ended.

He needed to take care of Ramsay as soon as possible. He'd put the man off for far too long. Dane began to draft a response when he sensed that something in his house had been disturbed. It was like a humming in the back of his skull. Spells attuned him to everything that went on at the estate, and he knew at once what the sensation meant.

"So," Dane said aloud and with a bemused grin, "he's found the gallery."

* * * *

Vanlyn slowed his steps once his ire had cooled. Damn it. Where was Tanderes? He wasn't in the library or in the adjacent room, which apparently was a study. Vanlyn realized he needed a clear head if he was going to escape this predicament. For the first time, he actually looked at where he was.

He had noted before that there seemed to be a look of disuse about the estate, as if it was a tired man at the end of his life who no longer cared about appearances. He wondered why Dane chose to live this way.

He wasn't certain how many floors there were to the manor, but the room where he resided was on the second. He wondered if the other floors of the estate had been in use.

Since there was nothing else for him to do, he decided to explore. Vanlyn wanted to test the limits of the geas. What little he knew of magic gave him the assumption that it would take an enormous amount of power for Dane to prevent him from leaving the estate. So it seemed reasonable the spell holding him had limits. There was somewhere in this whole estate that Vanlyn could safely pass through, and he was determined to find it.

The hall ahead of him was in semi-darkness, but when Vanlyn took a hesitant step forward, light appeared pouring through a line of thick cubed glass set along the top edge of the wall. It was as though some great hand had pulled aside a heavy black curtain.

The room itself was once a gallery now fallen into disrepair. The paintings were worn and dust-covered, the walls mottled with water stains. The once ornate paper—it was hard to see what the pattern had been—peeled from the walls or hung in tattered moist clumps eaten away by mold and vermin.

The floor beneath his feet fared no better. What probably was once finely polished wood was badly scarred and pockmarked. When Vanlyn walked forward, his shoes came away with an uncomfortable tearing sound. Whatever tacky substance covered the floor Vanlyn was certain he didn't want to know its origin. He cast his eyes above him and saw with some dismay the mural that was probably magnificent in its day was now completely unrecognizable.

Vanlyn took another step and halted when the unmistakable hum—one he couldn't help but recognize even with little training—told him something was about to happen.

Again the unseen hand touched the place. Where first there was ruin now came renewal as layers of the old peeled back, turned aside as a child turns the pages of a storybook. What was in disuse was polished and clean. Colors leached from the paintings were suddenly vibrant; patterns unintelligible were sharp and clear.

Vanlyn was only semi-aware of walking down the hall, of this miraculous thing preceding him, sweeping ahead of him, showing him what once was.

The gallery went the length of the hall and ended at a door. Beyond it, two more halls branched off to the left and right. This section seemed to be devoted to various peoples—family members Vanlyn guessed. They all held the dignified poses of nobility. Vanlyn would stop and admire and wonder at the people and what kind of lives they had lived. He wondered if they had been happy.

Music suddenly reached his ears. His brow creased as he crossed the hall to a second set of closed doors. Nothing challenged him, magical or otherwise, as he pulled them open. Yet another hall that had already renewed itself, and as Vanlyn stepped across the threshold, he found that it didn't contain portraits but in fact, murals of...

"Gods and fiends," Vanlyn spoke aloud.

The murals depicted couples, some male and female, some male on male. Others had

several participants of either sex in every erotic pose Vanlyn had ever read or been told about. Men and women of all types, shapes and nationalities participated in lewd displays of sexual acts. Vanlyn gaped. He couldn't do anything else. His face heated in embarrassment despite the fact that they were merely portraits, and that he was alone in the room. It made no sense for him to feel guilty, yet he did, as if he'd encroached on something private.

A soft breeze swept the hall even though it was impossible for it to be happening. Something moved at the corner of Vanlyn's sight, and when he turned to his left, he saw two of the painted figures begin to move.

Even as his mind told him it was impossible, he watched it happen. The couple twisted and gyrated in the throes of heated passion as they cried out in their bliss. Movement to his right told Vanlyn the same thing was happening. Two young men were engaged in oral sex. The dominant male had his lover on his knees before him. He fisted his hand in the younger man's hair, forcing him to accept his cock in his mouth.

Vanlyn began to shake. The images around him were all coming to life, their moans of pleasure filling the hallway. His mind screamed for him to leave. To get away from these images before...

He continued to watch with a sort of morbid fascination. He was entranced. A total prisoner of what he was seeing. And, to his shame, he was reacting. His cock was swelling in heated response, and there wasn't a blasted thing he could do about it.

A sound alerted him to the fact that he was no longer alone, just a soft footfall, heard even over the din around him. Vanlyn turned around, startled.

Tanderes stood there, the hunger in his eyes inimitable and only for him. How long had the minister been watching, feeling, experiencing the same desire that now burned through Vanlyn?

"Gods," Vanlyn whispered as Tanderes approached.

Vanlyn raised his hands in a feeble gesture of warning. It did no good. Tanderes took hold of his wrists and lowered Vanlyn's hands to his sides, then proceeded to twist Vanlyn's arms behind his back. His broad chest pressed against Vanlyn's own. Vanlyn turned his face aside in an involuntary response.

"Look at me, Vanlyn."

He had no choice. Vanlyn lifted his gaze.

"Do you feel as I do?" Tanderes asked.

Vanlyn nodded even as he wanted to escape. Tanderes leaned in, his strong mouth covering Vanlyn's own. Vanlyn's protest was a mere sound in the back of his throat, more thought than said as Tanderes nibbled at his lower lip, tasting it as though it was fruit dipped in honey, then ran his tongue over it before pressing it between Vanlyn's lips.

They parted of their own volition it seemed, allowing Tanderes in. Their tongues grappled in a heated dance. Vanlyn's breath quickened as Dane forced his will. He grunted, struggled trying to break Tanderes grip and, at the same time, wanting to press his body closer to have Tanderes go deeper. And, all the while around them, the many lovers continued their erotic dances.

It wasn't until Vanlyn felt Dane rub up against him that the fog cleared from his mind enough to break from Dane's hold.

"Stop it."

Tanderes looked at him mildly, not the least bit concerned by Vanlyn's discomfort. In fact, he smiled when Vanlyn viciously wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Don't you ever—"

"Oh I plan to, dear Vanlyn, many times."

The hall was silent. The images had ceased their movements. Vanlyn found himself in the uncomfortable position of being fully aroused and with no way to relieve himself.

"Come with me now," Tanderes said quietly, taking a step forward as he held out a hand in invitation.

"No." Vanlyn turned. He ignored the images as best he could for, despite the fact that they were still, the very sight of them made his current state unbearable. When he was far enough away, he pressed his back against the nearest wall and buried the palms of his hands against his eyes. "Damn it!" he growled. "Damn it all!" Why had he let Tanderes do that to him?

Vanlyn sighed in resignation. He knew he had to see to this problem if he were going to have some peace. Now to find a roundabout way to his room. He would avoid the gallery in the future.

It took longer than he thought to find his way around, and as he rushed through the halls, he again had the impression that others were about. What if they'd seen him and Tanderes? Gods and fiends, how humiliating would that be? Vanlyn fought to banish the thought.

Once he was safely in his room, Vanlyn closed and locked the door.

It wasn't as if he'd never done it. And it had been a long time, since he'd been with a woman. The last time was with a distant cousin visiting his father's estate. What was her name? Meleinda, if he recalled. Unlike many instances such as theirs they'd both gone into it with the understanding that it was a fling and nothing more. Meleinda was reasonably attractive, Vanlyn had found her company pleasurable, and she apparently felt the same for him. They'd coupled, fulfilling a need more than anything else. Then she'd kissed him, told him how good it was, and they parted ways with little upheaval. The war started soon after, and as far as Vanlyn knew, Meleinda was safe at home in the capital.

Which was ironic considering where he currently was.

Vanlyn released a frustrated breath as he lay across the bed. Undoing his trousers, he freed his painfully swollen erection. He envisioned Meleinda or at least he tried to. He remembered her dark hair and green eyes and those full lips that had tasted so sweet.

But the only image his traitorous thoughts could conjure was that of Dane Tanderes.

The memories of their first encounter came unbidden. But this time there were no others in the forest. It was merely Vanlyn and Dane Tanderes.

"*Vanlyn, your blood tastes so sweet.*" Those words sent a ripple of desire through him now even though they'd sent a shudder of disgust through him earlier. Then perhaps that wasn't the case at all. Perhaps the two feelings were alike.

Dane was kissing him, a deep slow affair that left Vanlyn breathless. His arms of their own volition snaked around Dane's muscular shoulders. Heated flesh melded as Dane's body and erection rubbed against his. A strangled groan erupted from Vanlyn's throat as he continued to stoke himself, helplessly allowing the fantasy to commence. It was several moments before he was dimly aware of the fact that what he thought was a mere construct of his mind was actually becoming real before his eyes.

Yes, he was still in his bedroom with everything around him looking as familiar as it

had but now a different image interposed itself on what Vanlyn was seeing. It was of the forest, the cool leafy canopy and the moist humus beneath him. There was also the unmistakable sense of magic about.

And someone else was there.

No wait—Vanlyn's mind, drowning in his desire, didn't immediately comprehend what he was seeing. Dane was on top of him, kissing a searing path across his chest, licking the moisture from his collarbone, biting his nipples, eliciting a sharp cry and, immediately after, a low moan when he soothed the bitten area with his tongue.

And, at the same time, Dane stood in a shadowed corner of the room watching him. His eyes were on fire with his own arousal, trousers in a pool at his feet, his hand rubbing his own swollen erection. There was a message in that gaze. One that told—no *commanded*—Vanlyn to continue, to let the dream run its course. Vanlyn writhed as his climax built within him. The dream Dane, the one who ravaged Vanlyn's willing body, was slowly working his way down his torso until his mouth closed around Vanlyn's straining cock, causing his hips to rise from the bed, his hand fiercely stroking even as the shadowed figure continued to play the voyeur.

A place in the deep recesses of Vanlyn's mind protested what he was doing. That part was embarrassed and insulted by Dane seeing him like this and invading his privacy. Yet another part of him found the whole thing appealing and highly erotic. He watched Dane through half-lidded eyes as Dane watched him. *Gods and fiends, the man was a picture of sensuality.*

When his completion tore through him, Vanlyn reached out for—what? His hands longed to fist in dark hair, to press the hot mouth deeper on him. Vanlyn bit down hard on his lower lip to stop from crying out that name as the hot ribbons of his essence splashed across his belly. Vanlyn was entranced again as Dane followed him in his own completion, his back arching forward, his teeth grinding, suppressing his own guttural cries.

Vanlyn lay spent, unable to move, watching the deep rise and fall of his own chest, his erratic breathing a testament to the intensity of his climax, and he saw Dane on his knees, his shoulders heaving. Vanlyn longed to call Dane to his bed.

Dane knew. The minister raised his head and regarded Vanlyn with a knowing smirk, his eyes challenging Vanlyn to deny what he truly wanted. *I know you hunger after me. Why not give your permission?*

Dane dragged himself to his feet, his movements lethargic from his own climax as he approached the bed, letting the tips of his fingers slide up Vanlyn's leg as he walked alongside.

No, it was all Vanlyn could manage even in his thoughts as Dane leaned over him.

For a few moments, Dane held Vanlyn in his gaze. "No, my prince, not yet. It's too soon. Yes, I see how willing you are, but you are *too willing*. There is no meaning behind it. No surrender."

He leaned closer, his breath brushing Vanlyn's cheek, "And I want your total surrender."

Then Dane straightened. He turned and left the room without another word.

Vanlyn lay there staring at the top of the canopy, not truly seeing the patterns embroidered there. Despite just achieving climax, he was still aroused from having Tanderes near him. He was certain Dane would make love to him and then—

“*Gods, what am I thinking?*” Vanlyn covered his face with his hands. He’d never even been with a man before. How could he yearn for something he’d never experienced? Yet he felt a vague sense of disappointment. Why didn’t Tanderes want him? Vanlyn shouldn’t care that Dane spurned him, but he did.

Gods, he hated that man.

Why? his inner voice challenged. *Because he said he would make you want him and then, when he succeeded after only a few hours, he tossed you aside?*

“I don’t want him,” Vanlyn growled. His hand fisted, and he slammed it into the headboard. The pain seemed to clear the fog in his brain. Somehow he dredged up the anger and humiliation. Tanderes had watched him, had violated him and invaded his privacy, encroaching on an intimate act where he hadn’t been welcome. If Tanderes demanded respect Vanlyn would do so as well.

He gathered his wits and rose from the bed. He paused for a moment, staring at nothing as he was overwhelmed with feelings of failing at Dane’s rejection. It brought back painful memories of what he’d endured at the hands of his father and brother. It was these thoughts that caused him to make a sharp negative shake of his head, bringing him out of his lethargy.

A washbasin with a jug of water sat on the dresser. When he saw his reflection, his hair disheveled, his shirt in disarray, and the evidence of his desire splashed across his chest he felt ill. He stared at that reflection suddenly disgusted. Was he so spineless?

He washed, almost violently rubbing the cloth across his skin until it was pink and raw. He still felt dirty. He chose a clean shirt from those in the closet. He buttoned it as he left the room.

Vanlyn realized as he walked he had no idea where Tanderes was. He would have obviously gone back to his room to wash and change, but Vanlyn didn’t know where that was either. Finally, he decided to make his way back to the study.

As he walked, he became aware of voices raised in heated discussion. Vanlyn followed the sounds, which led him to the room he sought. Tanderes was facing him and caught sight of Vanlyn immediately. The other occupant of the room as far as Vanlyn could tell was a corpulent and well-dressed man.

“Please come in, Highness,” Tanderes said formally. “After all, we were discussing you.”

Chapter Six

Discussing him? Vanlyn stepped full into the room just as the man turned.

He reminded Vanlyn of the jolly uncle that visited with presents galore. His face was a bristling sea of salt-and-pepper hair, his beard and eyebrows badly in need of trimming. The look would have been endearing were it not for the cold glint of his blue eyes. He examined Vanlyn at first with his lips pressed in disapproval, but a moment later, he gave a decidedly false smile in welcome.

Vanlyn disliked him on sight.

"I'm afraid Da—Minister Tanderes is not being completely forthright. We were discussing more than you, Highness."

"Your Highness," Dane said formally, "may I introduce my grand-cousin the Magisteri Taddeus Ramsay."

Ramsay's eyes narrowed at the words "grand-cousin", apparently not appreciating the reference. Vanlyn realized he had no idea how old Tanderes truly was.

"Highness," Ramsay bowed slightly, placing his hand on his chest, "I would say it is a pleasure but considering the circumstances—"

Now Dane clenched his jaw. "Magisteri, you were saying?"

"Oh, I've made my position clear." Ramsay waved a hand in dismissal. His attention was totally on Vanlyn. "So you harbor no ill will towards me, Highness, I will say I was against this scheme from the start."

"Ramsay," Tanderes warned.

Ramsay completely ignored Tanderes. He was obviously unafraid of any retaliation with Vanlyn as a witness. "Please take that into consideration when your father attacks the island."

"When my father—?"

"Ramsay you know that's a falsehood." Tanderes growled.

"Is it?" Ramsay still didn't look at Tanderes. "Do you really think the great High Lord Aelden Sarn will bow to your demands? Oh no. He will retrieve his son."

Ramsay started for the door. "Please do not miss the council meeting. I have new evidence that directly refutes your own."

Now Vanlyn was thoroughly confused. What exactly was going on? What evidence? Was Tanderes involved in some illegal activity? Vanlyn realized Ramsay had left the room. "Wait, sir!"

He caught up with Ramsay at the front hall where Dawkins were helping the man into his coat. He turned to face Vanlyn, and there again was that false smile. "Highness, how may I be of service?"

Vanlyn hated the very idea of asking him a favor but he said, "Is what you say true? Is my father coming?"

Ramsay sighed. "I don't know, Your Highness, I was making an assumption. However—" His eyes fell on Dawkins. "Would you excuse us, please?"

Dawkins' face remained impassive as he turned away, though Vanlyn thought he saw a faint disgust in his expression.

"Highness, I spoke the truth when I said I was against this scheme," Ramsay said. "I

can't make any promises, but I will try and help you. I will try and get a message to your father."

"Thank you."

"And I will consider how to help you escape," Ramsay continued. "Again no promises, and I don't have the power to challenge my *cousin*." He said it with a bitter tone.

"I understand, sir, anything you can do," Vanlyn said.

"Don't confront him," Ramsay said. "The only advice I can offer you is stay out of his way and kill him if he tries to touch you."

Despite himself, he blushed. Just how much did Ramsay know? "I won't let him touch me."

Ramsay nodded, seeming satisfied. If he suspected anything else, he made no indication of it. "Good fortune to you."

He was a few moments gone before Vanlyn realized he still had no idea what the situation was between Ramsay and Tanderes. Not to mention the fact that he'd come to see Tanderes because he was angry about *the incident*.

He would worry for his own problems. Vanlyn returned to the study and halted at the unexpected sight of Tanderes as he sat the table.

His hands covered his face as his elbows rested on the tabletop. Even though Vanlyn couldn't see his expression, he could sense the despair filling the room. It was in the slump of his shoulders and the way his chest heaved. Something was weighing heavily on Tanderes.

For a brief moment, Vanlyn felt sorry for the man. What must he be going through? Then he hardened his resolve. This was his abductor. He didn't deserve his pity.

"Tanderes."

He looked up with a brief flash of surprise before his face went impassive. "Yes, Highness?" Despite his face being a blank mask, his voice came out tired.

"I came to say—" Just what had he come to say? *That I was aroused by your voyeurism?* "I demand to be released. Magister Ramsay is correct in that, if my father comes for me, there will be much trouble."

"When your father—" Tanderes chuckled without mirth. "Do you really believe he will come to your rescue?"

"I am a prince of—"

"Do you think that matters to him?" Tanderes' face twisted in disgust, his eyes glittering and dangerous. "Then you're a bigger dullard than I thought."

Caught off guard by Tanderes sudden hostility, Vanlyn could think of no reply other than "How dare you?"

Tanderes came to his feet and strode over to him. "Wake up, boy! You're nothing to him. *An embarrassment*." Tanderes punctuated each word with a stab of his finger to Vanlyn's shoulder. "And when I'm through using you, he'll wish you had never been born if he doesn't already. So tell me, out of curiosity, what was your crime, Highness? What did you do to make your father and brother despise you so?"

Something crashed down on Vanlyn, smothering him in an oppressive blackness, sending him somewhere in his mind he didn't want to go. A place he'd left behind and had forgotten.

He looked at a point past Tanderes. "*It wasn't my fault. I didn't do anything wrong.*"

“What did you say?”

Vanlyn shook himself, trying to clear the fog that obscured his vision. He had no idea what had just happened.

“Vanlyn.” He was surprised when Tanderes used his first name and by the true concern in his voice. “Where did you just go? What did you mean by it wasn’t your fault?”

“I meant—” Vanlyn drew in a breath, the anger building again. “You will not address me by my first name. And don’t you dare ever invade my privacy like that again.”

“You mean watching you? You’re very passionate, you know.”

Vanlyn quickly turned, damning himself for his embarrassment. “Even if my father doesn’t care, honor will not allow him to leave me here or cater to your demands. If you care anything about your people, you’ll let me go. If my father isn’t willing to kill innocents to preserve our family’s honor, I know Argent certainly will be.”

“Yes,” Dane said softly. “I will agree with you on that, but honor has nothing to do with your brother’s lusts.”

“Lusts.” Once again the darkness threatened. Something about Argent and his appetites.

“Argent certainly has unusual appetites...”

“I won’t let you go, Your Highness.”

Vanlyn was about to reply when Dawkins appeared outside the door. He knocked politely before entering. “Sir, Master Aurris is here.”

“Already?” Dane raised an eyebrow. “Very well. Thank you, Dawkins. Please escort him here.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness.”

“I will not.” Vanlyn turned to face him again.

“My meeting with my guest doesn’t concern you,” Dane said coolly.

“You’ll be discussing me, won’t you? As you were with your cousin? Or are you ashamed of these schemes as well? You are a dishonorable rogue, Minister Tanderes.”

“He does have a sharp tongue, doesn’t he?”

Vanlyn turned at the sound of the voice and let out a startled sound when he found himself facing the blond fiend who had carried off one of his soldiers. Like Tanderes, he had taken a mortal shape.

“He’ll lose it if he’s not careful.” Dane directed his words to his guest. “I don’t need him whole to use him.”

The fiend called Aurris grinned. “But it won’t be as pleasant now, will it?” He examined Vanlyn with a bemused expression before speaking again. “Politeness dictates, I introduce myself, Your Highness. Lahn Aurris at your service.”

Vanlyn ignored the proffered hand. “So you’re a part of this too. Are you so eager to die?”

There was an imperceptible change in Aurris’ features. “You’ll leave us now. As Dane said, we have matters to discuss that don’t concern you. Besides, do you truly wish to deal with us both?”

He didn’t. Gods, he was certain if Tanderes decided to injure him, there would be little if anything he could do. He thought to take a parting shot and realized there was no

point, but he swore to himself, he would not let them use him.

* * * *

“He is quite the pompous little monster, isn’t he?” Lahn pulled up a chair. He idly fingered some of the papers strewn across the tabletop. “Are you certain he’s worth fucking?”

“If it helps us, yes.” Dane sighed as he continued to examine the documents before him. “I have already seen that he is willing and very passionate.”

“I suppose you don’t wish to discuss it.”

“No, I don’t,” Dane said. “You’ve come earlier than expected.”

Lahn sighed. “It was necessary. I knew you would want to know what happened.”

Dane’s head snapped up, suddenly alert. “Something happened?”

“The citizens of Ciarri banded together and burned the woods where we had our base.”

“Gods, no—”

“No one was injured to incapacitation,” Lahn hastened to assure him with a placating motion of his hands. Of course fiends could not be killed since they were by all the laws of the realms already dead, but one could be injured to the point where they would be nothing but a useless piece of flesh. And life such as it was for a fiend in that condition was pretty much over. “But I could not stop our people from wanting to attack the village. Baro goaded them on, and the other generals agreed with him.”

“Damn,” Dane said. “So?”

“We now occupy Ciarri,” Lahn said. “There were many deaths of innocents there.”

“Damn it!” Dane slammed a fist to the table, leaving a noticeable dent. He shoved back angrily. “That is exactly what I wanted to avoid!”

“Not all fiends are like us,” Lahn said quietly. “They don’t understand that the more we kill, the more trouble will befall us.”

Dane rubbed his eyes roughly with one hand. He felt suddenly and inexplicably tired. As a fiend, he commanded great strength, but it seemed that everything was eating it away.

“Dane?”

He wanted to fly, to leave all of this behind and soar into the velvet night and—

“You are placing too much on yourself. The rest of us don’t have a principality to manage,” Lahn said. “Let me take some of the burden.”

Dane couldn’t help but smile. “You are the only one I would trust to do that. Let the others know that you are to be the overseer of Ciarri. I will have Dawkins draw up the necessary papers.”

“Good,” Lahn said.

“And there is to be no more senseless killing,” Dane said. “See that we hold Ciarri and defend ourselves but do not spread our forces thin. As it is, with the prince here as well as the loss of life, the council may force Aelden to act, and if he comes at us with his full army—”

“Yes, I see,” Aurris said. “We need another necromancer or a dream-weaver to find more rifts.”

It had been Dane’s duty to find the rifts and lead more of their people out of *that place*. He had hated every moment of it. “Then find one, even if you have to take them

prisoner. Bring more into the light if they wish it.”

“I will.”

“And we can use the mortals as labor. That should appease anyone who wants to do otherwise.”

“A wise decision.” Lahn stood. “Then I shall return, and let them know your progress is good?”

“Yes,” Dane said. “It is going very well.” Dane smiled in anticipation and was surprised to feel a hunger building within him. He wanted to experience Vanlyn Sarn’s passion. “I have already planned to weave Vanlyn Sarn a very special dream.”

Chapter Seven

That night Vanlyn dreamt of black silk.

After leaving the minister's study, he wandered. There was little else for him to do. He called it planning his escape route, but in truth, he was bored and feeling somewhat useless. It irritated him that they dismissed him so casually, especially since he was royalty and by rights could command both men to do his bidding.

Vanlyn knew his way enough around the first floor to avoid the gallery, although a part of his mind and his lust urged him to experience it again.

Perhaps Dane will come to me again...

He violently shook those thoughts off, angry that he was wasting time when he should be planning his escape. Could he do so from the second floor? Vanlyn decided it wouldn't hurt to look.

He learned quickly the house was in the shape of a somewhat hollow rectangle. He'd been through the first floor, where the library, study and gallery shared space with the servant's quarters, kitchen and receiving room.

Vanlyn found himself barred from most of the rooms on the second floor, but he had ways around locked doors. There was the immediate room at the head of the staircase that Vanlyn figured to be a nursery. When he stepped across the threshold raising a cloud of dust before him, Vanlyn recalled his own days in the nursery at his estate. The only mementoes of a lost childhood here were a few broken toys and a rocking horse with one glide. It leaned forlorn and sullen against the far wall.

The wallpaper depicted a scene of children at the fair. Vanlyn could barely make out the colorful patterns and smiling faces from the grime and bits that hung in tatters. Vanlyn moved to a doorway to the right and came upon a smaller room that seemed to have become a repository for old furniture. The nanny's room he guessed. To the left there was a bathing room, occupied by a claw foot tub and a changing table, long since crumbling with age and disuse.

He wondered briefly if Tanderes had played in this room, and if a kindly old matron of a nanny had changed his diapers as he fussed. It was a ridiculous notion and actually brought a chuckle to Vanlyn's lips. It echoed through the room, and the lonely sound made him vacate immediately.

On the opposite side of the floor was a game room that Vanlyn found was in reasonably good condition. There were games—billiards and cards, mazes and stones, intricate puzzle games and board games as well. Apparently Tanderes enjoyed games. Vanlyn did as well, but who was there to share them?

The game room had four balconies but when Vanlyn went to step outside he felt the force of the geas begin to cramp his insides. So it extended to the second floor as well. How much power was Tanderes expending to do that? Surely he couldn't keep it up forever. Vanlyn put that thought in safekeeping.

He left the game room, taking the nearest flight of stairs to his left, which brought him out by the kitchen again. Continuing would lead him past the study, the opposite direction from the gallery. Vanlyn decided it would be easier to retrace his steps.

By then Vanlyn was getting tired and hungry. The scents from the kitchen drew him.

He didn't want to eat with Tanderes so he returned to his room and summoned Dawkins. Vanlyn felt a twinge of guilt making the man go through extra work for him, but if Dawkins minded he didn't show it. He agreed to bring Vanlyn dinner in his room, which turned out to be a delectable and flakey chicken pot pie, crunchy green beans and one of his favorite delicacies—ice cream for dessert. Vanlyn didn't mind the simple fare. In fact, he preferred it to the rich and elaborate meals his father insisted on having.

Not certain what to do with his tray, he opted for setting it outside as they did in his estate for retrieval by the servants. It was close to evening as he made his way to the library and took a few hasty moments to choose several books before returning to his room.

In all that time there hadn't been a sign of Tanderes.

Later tonight, he would check the other floors. Vanlyn wasn't certain what he'd find there. He wanted to wait until Tanderes was busy with dinner, or better yet, he hoped the man went out, which would give him uninhibited time to search. Vanlyn hoped that the other unseen servants wouldn't try to stop him. He'd caught glimpses of them during his meanderings, and it had been unnerving. When he saw them, they drew the memory of a rustle of autumn leaves in a soft breeze when they moved. He could find no other description.

He was also aware of the animals that made their home within the manor. Some showed a natural curiosity by watching him from shadowed corners, not quite ready to make themselves known.

When the words of the adventure novel began to blur, Vanlyn laid the book across his lap with the intent of closing his eyes for only a moment. *There's really no reason for me to be so tired.* As his eyes closed, there came the sensation of magic in the works.

He floated in the darkness, carried on gentle waves that caressed his skin with calloused fingers. Vanlyn thought he should be scared, but he wasn't. In fact, he had never been so at ease.

Vanlyn reached out and let the silk pass between his fingers. He traced patterns in it, even as it entwined around his hands, snaked down his arms, its kiss raising gooseflesh. Vanlyn's breathing heightened as the silk slid across his chest in an embrace and pooled in shimmering circles on his stomach.

He groaned at the first touch on his sex, an almost unearthly sound of both desire and agony. It twined tightly around him, stroking and caressing, bringing him to rock-hardness.

"Vanlyn." The voice was a whisper as soft as the silk against his skin. "Vanlyn."

Don't—no! The silk tightened around his wrists and bound his legs, pulling them spread-eagle while unseen hands continued to stroke him, enticing the fire to build.

"No!" Vanlyn came awake as his climax erupted, and he could do nothing but ride out the storm. "*Damn it!*" He laid there afterwards, his arm draped over his face as he willed his racing heart to calm. After awhile, he thumped his hand on the pillow several times. "Tanderes." That stink of magic that had enveloped him before he'd fallen asleep, that voice whispering seductively. *Of course, he's a conjurer.* It made sense now, why hadn't he realized it with that first waking dream when Tanderes had watched him. Vanlyn realized he had never inquired which branch of magic Tanderes practiced. Dreamweaver, Illusionist or both, was Vanlyn's guess. Tanderes would naturally use his power to augment the experience or to invade Vanlyn's dreams.

That thought added fuel to his anger for Vanlyn realized he'd have little defense against such intrusions. He literally threw himself from the bed, stripping off his shirt as he did so. He crumpled it into a ball and threw into a dusty corner of the room. Vanlyn snatched the first available shirt from its hangar in the closet and tugged it violently over his head even as he was striding from the room.

Dawkins was still in the kitchen, his arms elbow-deep into scrubbing pots. As angry as he was, Vanlyn was reasonable enough not to take it out on the elderly servant.

"Dawkins, could you tell me where Minister Tanderes is?"

"He just returned from his sojourn into town. He awaits you in his study."

I'm certain he does, Vanlyn thought. He thanked the old valet and retraced his earlier steps to the study. Vanlyn pounded on the closed doors with an insistent fist.

The doors came open with a rush of wind as Vanlyn had his raised hand in mid-knock.

Tanderes stood there, looking somewhat put out. His once pristine white shirt was wrinkled and dusty. He had it unbuttoned to the waist, giving Vanlyn a tantalizing view of the ridges and planes of his torso.

"Yes?" He was leaning forward slightly with his hands on each of the door latches. There was annoyance in his voice. It took Vanlyn a few moments to find his.

"I know what you did."

Tanderes had the nerve to smirk. "Do you?"

"The dream. How dare you invade my privacy that way?"

Tanderes straightened in a languid motion, stretching his muscular form. "I didn't invade your dream. That would take an extraordinary amount of planning and—"

"That is beside the point!" Vanlyn stepped towards him in what he hoped was a threatening gesture. Tanderes didn't seem the least bit impressed. "Even you should have more honor than that, *beast!*"

With unnerving speed, Tanderes moved, wrapped an arm around Vanlyn's shoulders and fisting his hand in Vanlyn's hair. Pulling his head back, exposing the arch of Vanlyn's throat, Tanderes bit into the tender flesh just above his collarbone. Vanlyn growled harshly, shoved against that unyielding chest as Tanderes marked him. Fire engulfed every nerve, culminating in arousal that had his cock stiffening.

And, just as quickly as he had caught him, Tanderes released Vanlyn, shoving him back and leaving him feeling bereft. "I've told you I'll use whatever means necessary."

"Bastard." Vanlyn's hand found the spot on his throat, knowing without even seeing it that an angry bruise was forming.

"You'll need to find something to occupy your time tomorrow morning." Tanderes spoke as though nothing had occurred. "I have an issue I'm dealing with in the city."

A myriad of hateful words formed and lodged in his throat. Through his anger and humiliation, all Vanlyn could manage was "And with what am I to occupy my time as you say?"

"Oh," Tanderes frowned in contemplation, "I have it. You never received any formal training correct? For your magical skills?"

"N-no." *What by the gods is he about now?*

"Then I shall instruct you," Tanderes said. "Although it's preferable that a conjurer of the same practice is your instructor, I reached conjurer certification before—"

Whatever he was going to say was lost in his sudden foray into his memories. "Meet me

here after breakfast, and we'll begin."

Tanderes shut the doors. Vanlyn heard the audible click of the lock. He stood open-mouthed and dumbfounded as he stared.

What the hell just happened?

Vanlyn had come to demand Tanderes respect him and suddenly he'd become his student?

"Gods, what did I do to earn your wrath?"

* * * *

Vanlyn had finally gotten to sleep in the early morning hours. He was in a foul mood as he made his way to the library. Every time he fell asleep, the dreams started. Tanderes was never in them, of course, but no matter what was happening, Vanlyn would wake up with a stiffening erection and would pace across his room until he was calm. Finally, exhaustion made him give into his dream, which played itself out and left him to sleep the rest of the night. Still, it wasn't enough that he felt rested. Well, it wasn't as if he wouldn't have plenty of time to nap during the day.

He rose from his bed after daylight and walked to where his washbasin rested on the dresser. He truly needed a bath, so he figured he'd better ask Dawkins before he started to reek. As he peeled off his nightshirt, his gaze immediately fell to the red circular bruise on his throat. The memory came unbidden—the potent way Tanderes had forced his head back, the feel of his mouth on his skin and the delicious pain as Tanderes had bitten him.

Vanlyn's fingers traced the outline of the bruise as he remembered the pleasure he had experienced. It was several moments before it came to him what he was doing. He stared at his reflection in disgust. "Why must you be so pathetic?"

The first thing he saw when he entered the library was a plump tortoiseshell cat sitting on the table. Vanlyn grinned as he approached and reached out his hand, palm up and presented it to her for inspection. He gathered his power and spoke softly. She moved towards him and deemed him worthy of her attention. When he asked her mortal name—what the occupants of the manor had named her—she replied *Gypsy*.

Of course, she would not tell Vanlyn her true name. She didn't know him well enough for that. Vanlyn knew it took a powerful bond for an animal to reveal a true name.

For now, Gypsy presented her stomach to Vanlyn and demanded with a bat of her paw a lengthy belly-rub. Vanlyn complied.

"And you say your power is nothing unique?"

Vanlyn jumped slightly at the sound of Tanderes' voice, and he wondered how long the minister had watched him.

"I see my Gyp has worked her special magic on you as well." Tanderes ran gentle fingers through the cat's fur. "Her clan has claimed this manor for many years. I'm surprised you didn't meet her in your wanderings."

"She was aware of me but chose not to appear," Vanlyn said. "She was assessing me."

"And apparently has found your company acceptable."

"Apparently." Vanlyn stepped back, deliberately creating space between himself and Tanderes. He saw no need to mention the dreams. It would just be a waste of words.

"We'll start with a few exercises today." Tanderes stepped away from the table and

turned towards the door. Dawkins entered the room, carrying a large jar with its opening covered in cloth and sealed with wax.

Vanlyn saw what was in the jar and huffed in outrage. The angry hum of the hornets sounded through the cloth. "What did you do?" He stepped forward. "They're furious!"

"Then calm them." Tanderes leaned against the table.

His jaw set, Vanlyn crossed his arms in a defensive gesture. "I can't," he muttered. "I'm not... That is insects..." Vanlyn drew in a breath. "Hive insects are difficult for me. When I try to speak with them, it only confuses us both." He knew he wasn't explaining it very well.

So he was surprised when Tanderes said, "Understandable. It's somewhat like trying to make yourself heard in a crowd, and it only causes more turmoil as all the voices intermingle."

"Yes," It was uplifting that someone finally did understand and could find the words he couldn't.

"Sit down." Tanderes motioned to the nearest chair as Dawkins set the jar on the table and left them.

"You are allowing the whole to consume you," Tanderes began. "You must find the creature that holds sway. There is one even in a small gathering such as this. Focus your power on that creature, and the rest will follow."

It was such a simple thing that Vanlyn was somewhat embarrassed at not having thought of it before. He reached out and pulled the jar closer.

"The creature will have a strong presence," Tanderes continued. "Calm him first then use his power to influence the rest."

Vanlyn nodded, the irony not being lost on him. *You should be trying to escape him. You should be obstinate, refusing to do anything he says. You shouldn't be passively following his instructions.* But even Vanlyn knew how important this guidance could be.

It was hard to concentrate on a tiny insect's presence when Tanderes' own filled the space between them.

Vanlyn let his power flow from his fingertips to brush across each tiny body. Their rage was like pinpricks across his skin. His intrusion only agitated them further.

"Don't touch them," Tanderes said. "Draw near but don't be invasive."

He tried again, letting his power surround them but not actually making contact. It was tedious work. A conjurer's power wants to flow from them like water from an urn. It was up to the conjurer to regulate the flow. When Vanlyn felt the heat surrounding one of the tiny bodies, he knew he had found his mark. Following Tanderes' instruction, he spoke softly, just a whisper off to the side, enough to capture the attention.

The hornet responded by lashing at him in outrage. The sting was only figurative, but Vanlyn felt it all the same. He jerked his hand back with a startled cry.

"Try again," Tanderes said.

Vanlyn sucked his fingers in his mouth. "You make it seem effortless."

"It certainly isn't," Tanderes said, "But you'll never master it by giving up."

The hornet had moved to the very top of the jar, seeming to know escape and freedom lay just beyond the cloth. Vanlyn reached out again, and the result was the same. His frustration building, Vanlyn tried again, forcing his will onto the insect. It took offense, drawing the others into its indignation. His hand burned with multiple stings.

"Damn it." Vanlyn growled the words between clenched teeth.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you not to lash out in that manner,” Tanderes said.
“Remember, they will always be stronger.”

By now the hornets were in a highly agitated state. Vanlyn attempted again and what he feared happened.

A myriad of thoughts went darting through his head to focus on one thought alone. A culmination of every emotion imaginable went into one searing white-hot dagger of anger that thrust into the midst of his forehead. Vanlyn was still aware of what was around him despite being in that fog of confusion. Still, he didn’t quite comprehend at first what was happening when he saw the jar rolling across the surface of the table. He watched its laborious journey to the floor and heard the shattering of glass and each facet as the light glittered on the shards.

“Gods!” Vanlyn slammed his back against the chair, and the hornets burst forth in an angry storm. “*No!*”

A protective arm dropped around his chest. Tanderes’ breath was warm on his cheek as he thrust his hand out, palm forward. Fire and smoke exploded before them, but Vanlyn saw that it wasn’t real. The hornets, however, saw only what they feared, and despite the fact that it wasn’t real, it did them in.

Vanlyn, his hands gripping the sides of the chair, his back arched against the cushion, watched as each hornet dropped. “You did that on purpose. Why?”

Tanderes completely ignored his question. “Your heart is racing.” Vanlyn drew in a sharp breath as Tanderes spoke. The arm tightened around him in a possessive gesture.

“The blood is rushing through your veins,” Tanderes continued. The hand that he used to conjure the illusion lowered to rest just below Vanlyn’s belt. “Exhilarating, is it not?”

Vanlyn grunted as Tanderes began to stroke him through the fabric of his trousers. His hips lifted towards the hand in an almost involuntary motion. In a meager gesture of protest, Vanlyn reached above him, and his hand fisted in the collar of Tanderes’ shirt.

“It’s fortunate for me, you’re so passionate.”

His head lolled back, exposing his throat in invitation. “I’ll fight you.” Vanlyn breathed the words.

Tanderes adjusted his body and moved it to the left of the chair so he could lean over and kiss him right above the bruise. “I know.”

The shock of Tanderes withdrawing left him sitting there gawking at glass shards and dead hornets.

Chapter Eight

“You’re certain you want to pursue this course of action?”

Taddeus Ramsay stretched himself to his full height. “I believe I’ve made my intentions clear.”

Repeatedly, Dane thought, but he dare not voice it. He could easily see by the semi-bored looks of the six council members that they grew tired of Ramsay’s protests as well.

The last three meetings had been the same. The council gathered with the ruling Magisteri in attendance. Each individual represented a province of Penryn. The current elder, a woman named Marcelyn Hale, seemed at first look to be more suited as someone’s matronly grandmother, but Dane knew that gray head housed a sharp, analytical mind.

They met in the large back room of the town hall in the capital such as it was. In Penryn, nothing was larger than a town. Dane was always relieved he didn’t have far to travel or fly in his case.

The room itself was hot and stuffy to the attendees, but Dane, who had lived a century in the cold and darkness of that other place, found it pleasant. His fellow islanders did not as attested by the wet stains at their armpits and the glistening moisture across their foreheads and above their lips.

Ramsay droned on for a time as Dane indulged in a daydream, something he seldom did since it was necessary to keep his guard up. And, of course, his daydreams went to one thing or more accurately to one person—Vanlyn Sarn.

Gods and fiends, how he responds to me. The thought actually troubled Dane. Vanlyn was responding to him a tad *too easily*. Was it all a game he was playing, lulling Dane into a false sense of triumph where he would make an error? There was no indication in his investigations of the second son to make Dane believe Vanlyn had a male lover in the past. Then again, there was no indication that he had a lover of any sort. Perhaps Dane had not delved deep enough. He hadn’t thought it necessary at the time. He would have Dawkins contact Lahn, who could probe further.

In the meanwhile, he would enjoy himself with Vanlyn Sarn until the younger man begged Dane to take him hard.

“I now ask the council to come to a decision,” Ramsay was saying.

Dane brought himself back to the issue at hand, knowing instinctively that he hadn’t missed anything important.

“Were you not satisfied with the previous findings?”

The voice came quite and serene from across the room. She impressed Dane, despite her few years. Ramsay, however, looked upon the necromancer as nothing more than a little girl.

It was her light that led me from the darkness, Dane mused. When he had stumbled through the rift, he had come upon her as she stood there trying to close it with her power. Taking her hostage just seemed natural, and it kept her safe from the others that found the rift. Now she made her home on Penryn. He never thought himself much of a negotiator.

“I believe we need someone with more experience,” Ramsay went on. “The evidence

I've presented before you clearly refutes the claim made by Tanderes."

"You know we need the opportunity to examine your documents." Hale adjusted her specs as she shuffled the sheath of papers Ramsay had presented to them.

"Honored madam, take care, please." Ramsay reached as a though to steady Marcelyn's hands.

"You have protected these with inscriptions, have you not?" Marcelyn raised a critical eyebrow.

"Of course madam but—"

"Then I see no need to worry." Marcelyn went back to the papers. "We will examine these documents and employ a Scribe to authenticate them. When we have word, we will reconvene."

Dane knew that would take time, as there weren't any Scribes currently on Penryn. Whenever Dane needed documents protected, it became necessary to send for someone on the mainland. He hoped that would change soon. With the advent of the war, it would become impossible to garner any services from the mainland.

With the meeting over, Ramsay gathered his things and departed quickly, seeming upset over the council's decision.

Really, he must have known the council would question his supposed proof. Dane shook his head in a gesture that was part bemusement, part disbelief.

"Dane?"

Dane turned and smiled in welcome at Marcelyn Hale. Also a distant relation of his, as were most people on the island, Marcelyn treated him as a favorite nephew.

"What do you think?"

Dane ran his hand across the back of his neck, massaging the ache there. "They look authentic, but I know they're falsified. My father would have never relinquished the governing of Penryn to Ramsay's side of the family no matter what the situation."

"You're certain, Dane? How many decades has it been?"

Dane couldn't help but smile slightly at how easily Marcelyn accepted the fact that he had literally come back from the dead. It was one of the reasons why Dane admired her. "I didn't die a young pup, nana. My father and I knew each other well before I made a boy's mistake." *And even then my family was behind me, supporting me.*

Dane pushed the memories aside. "I have my own documents to present. I will have them all together by the time the council reconvenes."

"If the documents are proven to be authentic," Marcelyn said, and her tone told Dane she didn't believe they were, "the council may still feel that Ramsay has no claim. He knows we are all aware of his actions when the fiends first attacked Penryn."

"I am pleased, I've earned the council's trust."

She gave a hint of a smile. "You did that by saving us all from death and by protecting us."

"Even in death, I am a part of this place." Dane loved his home. It wasn't a paradise, but he always felt it was the closest a man could come.

"And how is your guest?" Marcelyn asked with mild curiosity and a tilt of her head.

"Rather put out at this point." Dane had not given specifics about how he planned to convince Vanlyn Sarn to join them. Yes, his people knew all about Vanlyn, but—and Dane was surprised to realize—it embarrassed him to even think of telling his people his plans to seduce Vanlyn. "But I feel I will be successful. Prince Sarn was not treated well

by his family.”

If Marcelyn suspected his true plans, she didn’t comment. “Any way we can assist.”

“Thank you,” Dane said. “And, speaking of Prince Sarn, I should be returning.

Please let me know when you employ the Scribe.”

“Of course,” Marcelyn said. “I’ll walk you out.”

Dawkins had the coach waiting for him as the two stepped out into the warm spring evening.

“Don’t take too much on yourself, Dane.” Marcelyn’s words were eerily similar to Lahn’s. “We are here to assist you.”

“I know,” Dane said. “Thank you.”

Dane dozed on the ride back. He wondered how Vanlyn had occupied himself while he was gone. Tomorrow morning, they would continue his lessons and then Dane needed some time to go through the family archives.

His words to Marcelyn repeated themselves in his mind. He knew his father would have never given up his title. And with that memory came another—

No matter what is said of you, son, you are my child, and I will always love you.

“Sir?”

Dane wasn’t even aware the coach had stopped and that Dawkins had opened the door. Dane struggled to suppress the ache in his heart. “I’m fine.” Dane climbed from the coach. Home was a welcome sight and a lonely one.

He refused Dawkins’ offer of a meal. All he wanted now was a hot bath and a good long sleep, with or without dreams. First, he needed to see to Vanlyn Sarn. Dane was surprised to find him in the library. He was asleep at the desk, a haphazard pile of books making a makeshift pillow.

The subjects were various—from simple magic spells to the anatomy of animals. For a moment, Dane let himself enjoy the look of serenity on Vanlyn’s sleeping face. There was vulnerability, an innocence there that was attractive to him.

“Vanlyn?” Dane gently shook his shoulder, eliciting a sleepily muttered protest from the young man.

“Let’s get you to bed.” Dane draped his arm underneath Vanlyn’s shoulders and lifted him from the chair. The prince came awake slightly and again mumbled something Dane didn’t quite catch in a grumpy voice. Dane couldn’t help but chuckle.

Half walking, half carrying him to his room, Dane paused at the door and Vanlyn’s mostly inert body rested against the frame. His breathing was steady, and his lips parted slightly. Dane couldn’t resist kissing them. They were as soft and as pliable as they looked.

“Stop,” Vanlyn muttered.

But Dane didn’t. He ran his tongue across Vanlyn’s lower lip.

“We can’t. Not here.”

Dane didn’t immediately realize what Vanlyn had said, so intent was he on seduction.

“Rasleigh, stop.”

Dane froze.

Slowly he drew back, examining Vanlyn’s face. There was no sign the prince was awake.

Who the hell is Rasleigh?

It was ridiculous. Why should he care who this Rasleigh was? It was no concern of his. Dane leaned Vanlyn's against him and led him to his bed. He drew back the covers and managed to maneuver Vanlyn onto it. Dane then removed Vanlyn's boots. He completed his ministrations by drawing the blanket over him.

Dane stood there, watching the man in slumber as an uncomfortable feeling blossomed in his chest. He was only half-aware of his hands fisting and the troubled furrow in his brow.

* * * *

"We'll continue our lessons today." Dane tried to keep his voice even as the two ate breakfast the next morning.

"Very well." Vanlyn seemed unnaturally subdued. Of course Dane was feeling somewhat annoyed himself at that moment.

"Do you have to leave again today?" Vanlyn asked.

The question had him immediately wary. "As a matter of fact, I need to search my family archives for some important documents, so I'll be in the library most of the afternoon."

"That wouldn't have anything to do with the situation with Magisteri Ramsay?"

"As a matter of fact, it does." Dane didn't elaborate and was relieved when Vanlyn didn't ask.

The silence between them was tense. Dane tried to convince himself it was simply because of the situation they were in. Did he really expect Vanlyn to be relaxed and talkative? It was enough to ask that the man had actually chosen to eat breakfast with him.

"Who is Rasleigh?" The moment the question was out he regretted it. Did he sound so much like a jealous house maiden?

Vanlyn was about to take a drink and froze in the middle of the action. Slowly, he lowered the cup back to the tabletop. "Where did you hear that name?"

"From you, last night. You muttered the name in your sleep while I was putting you to bed."

"While you were... What did you do?"

"Nothing." Dane furrowed his brow in exasperation. "You were asleep. I thought perhaps he was your lover."

"Certainly not."

"Then why—?"

"I don't know why." Vanlyn averted his eyes briefly, telling Dane he wasn't being entirely honest. "I don't remember."

"So who is he then?"

Vanlyn expelled a breath. "He was an acquaintance of Argent's."

"An *acquaintance* of Argent's?" Dane raised an eyebrow. "Not a *friend*?"

Vanlyn sipped thoughtfully of his coffee. "No. I don't believe they were. It was an arranged companionship."

Dane grunted. Similar to marriages, arranged companionships were to insure the noble had someone of his own age, and at least near his status, to serve as more of a trusted valet than a companion. Of course, that was the official explanation. Usually such arrangements were made when the noble was difficult to deal with.

Dane suddenly touched on something Vanlyn had said. "You said *was*. Is he...?"

"Yes," Vanlyn said. "Or I believe so. He disappeared long ago. Argent sent him away I think. Became bored with him, I'd wager. No one ever spoke of him again. One moment he was present, the next..."

Vanlyn shrugged as though ridding himself of an unpleasant memory. "Perhaps I thought of him because he was always nice to me."

"Perhaps," Dane muttered into his own cup. Other words that Vanlyn had spoken last night returned to his memory. Somehow there was more to this.

* * * *

"You're not concentrating," Dane admonished him. "What's got your brain addled?"

The admonishment irritated Vanlyn. "I am not exactly in favorable circumstances here. I'm only taking these lessons because—"

"Because there's not much else for you to do, and you figured since I was using you, you should use me as well?" Dane smirked.

"I'm glad you find this situation so amusing."

Instantly, Dane sobered. "No, I don't find this situation amusing at all. There is much at stake here."

"Such as what? You getting what you want for your own personal gain?"

"You honestly believe I'm only doing this for myself?"

"What else am I to believe?"

Dane snorted and waved any further comment away. "Continue."

Four green lizards explored the tabletop. Unlike the hornets of yesterday, Vanlyn was attempting to speak with each in turn while distracting the others, but lizards were notoriously curious creatures, and whenever Vanlyn spoke to one, the others approached to see what it was about.

So far, the lessons had followed no discernable pattern that Vanlyn could see. He'd questioned Tanderes about it, and he'd replied simply that there were basic exercises taught at the Sorcesteri Academy for first year students and seemed surprised that Vanlyn didn't know. Tanderes also said he'd create a more detailed curriculum once he settled things with Ramsay.

Vanlyn responded rather curtly that he didn't know because he'd never attended the Academy. "I was supposed to go, and in fact, left home at one point, but..." There was where his memory seemed to drop off into an abyss. "I was called home, for some reason. I can't remember why. Something to do with my father."

Tanderes had regarded him with a guarded expression and didn't comment.

They went on with the lessons for most of the morning, and Vanlyn did rather well. He managed to garner the attention of each lizard separately, setting them at various tasks.

Later, Dawkins rolled in a cart with a light brunch of fruit and cheese, which they partook of in silence. The lizards explored every inch of the table when they weren't tangling in Vanlyn's hair, and a great deal of his food went into their bellies.

After awhile, Tanderes announced he would be spending most of the afternoon in the archives, and they would continue with lessons after dinner, leaving Vanlyn to his own devices.

He thought to read for a while, maybe go to a balcony on the third floor and sit out.

Vanlyn even chose a book to do just that. Then he filled his plate with some more food much to the lizard's delight, and thinking to help Dawkins out, pushed the cart to the kitchen. Dawkins was nowhere around, although there were pots simmering on the ancient stove. As Vanlyn turned to go, he noticed the heavy iron key ring hanging by the door.

He remembered how he'd found several locked doors on his last exploration of the manor. There was really no reason for them to be so. He wondered...

He'd grabbed the keys and taken the stairs before he could reconsider. The first room to the immediate left of the stairs was a bedroom. After trying the first five keys, the door yielded with the sixth. Vanlyn was at first disappointed until he saw a door to what he hoped was the adjoining room. It was he found when he tried the knob, but it was a smaller study similar to the one that adjoined the library downstairs.

He moved around a bit, not sure what he might be looking for. A weapon? Something he could pass onto Ramsay? Did he want to help the odious man? Of course, without knowing what was going on, how could he know what Ramsay needed? He made a mental note to obtain further information when Ramsay visited again.

The third door opened to another bedroom, and Vanlyn knew instinctively that it belonged to Tanderes. Vanlyn's first thought was that this wasn't a master bedroom and wondered why Tanderes had settled for a smaller one. It was similar to Vanlyn's room, decorated in rich dark woods certainly of better quality and dark blue sheets and linens.

And again the thrum of magic.

Safeguards? It didn't feel like it. Why would Tanderes have such a thing? Besides magical wards had a certain feel to them, like pinpricks across the skin. This was something different. It drew Vanlyn inexorably into the room.

There was a rush of air, impossible in the closed space, and a soft sound like the rustle of crisp sheets drawn back. Vanlyn saw ghostly shapes take form on the bed, blurred at first as though he were viewing it through thick glass, but when it sharpened into clarity, the image caused a surprised breath to catch in Vanlyn's throat.

Tanderes' image lay prone across the bed, his naked body glistening with sweat. He moved with a practiced rhythm over the trembling form of the lover beneath him.

That lover was Vanlyn.

His mirror image also lay prone, his ass raised slightly, meeting Tanderes' rhythmic thrusts. His hand fisted around the silk sheet. His face was a picture of sweet agony. There was no true sound, but Vanlyn heard the moans of ecstasy filling the room. The sounds were coming from his throat.

He continued to watch, unable to look away even though his mind protested his cock had other ideas, swelling in his trousers as he responded to the erotic show. Although he'd never seen two men at lovemaking, he had read on the subject in both fiction and factual books. There was something primal about the act itself, an aura of animalism that Vanlyn was certain he'd never experienced with any women.

At the climax, when Tanderes body arched, his mouth open in a silent cry, Vanlyn, or at least the image of him, mouthed a single name—*Dane*.

Vanlyn tore himself from the scene, literally falling into the other room. He regained his feet and rushed for the door. Sometime during the flight, Vanlyn remembered he had the keys in his hand. He was gripping the ring so tightly the impression of it was in his palm with rusted flecks splintered into his skin.

“Sir?”

“Damn it!” Vanlyn was embarrassed that someone had seen him. He turned. “You scared the life out of me!”

Dawkins seemed unperturbed. “Is everything all right?”

No, he wasn’t all right, and he was certain he didn’t look it. He thought his feelings must be showing on his face, and his cock was still in a state of semi-erectness. If the old man noticed...

“As I said, you scared me.” Suddenly, Vanlyn noticed Dawkins’ gaze rested on the keys. “I was merely curious, and bored, and there were so many locked doors...” He realized how utterly ridiculous he sounded.

After a few heartbeats, Dawkins said, “The master did not say you were forbidden to enter any room of this manor. I will see to them. Please wait here a moment.”

Dawkins plucked the keys from his grasp and then the old man was gone. Vanlyn blinked, and once again, there was nothing more than that impression of leaves rustling in the wind. It only seemed a few moments later that Dawkins returned.

“I’ve taken care of all of the rooms for you, sir.” Dawkins didn’t return the keys, instead depositing them in his jacket pocket.

Vanlyn had managed to get his emotions under control with some effort. “Thank you, Dawkins.”

Dawkins then turned to Tanderes’ bedroom door. Vanlyn’s heart leapt into his throat. He almost yelled a warning when he realized what he could possibly say that wouldn’t cause him further humiliation. However, when Dawkins opened the door, nothing happened. It was just a bedroom with no erotic ghost images to haunt him. *That spell was attuned, specifically to me. Tanderes wanted me to see it.*

And again he’d let his baser desires take control.

What was wrong with him? He was acting like some back alley trollop. And, of course, confronting Tanderes would be futile. Vanlyn figured the only thing he could do now would be to continue his explorations. Dawkins said all doors were open to him.

Down the hall from the nursery had been other locked doors. Now that he knew they were open, Vanlyn felt a twinge of nervousness as he turned the first knob. The room was dark within, and Vanlyn was about to retreat when light flared to brilliance. It reflected countless times on polished steel and flickered across the facets of gems.

It was an armory.

Chapter Nine

The first sword he picked up was a fine falchion. His thumb pressed against the edge told him how well cared for the sword was, as a line of blood immediately welled across his skin. At least he knew that was one of the signs according to the books he'd read. Vanlyn was by no means a sword expert.

"But then again," he mused aloud, "neither is Argent for all his supposed *training*."

In the beginning, he and Argent had trained together, and Eselda had joined them later, much to their father's displeasure. Their mother, however, had approved. And although Argent complained, the weapons master, whom Vanlyn was fond of, disciplined them equally. It all changed when his mother and sister died.

During one of the last few conversations Vanlyn had with the old man, he'd told Vanlyn that with further training he would far surpass Argent in swordplay. Simply put, Argent had the brains to learn but not the discipline or heart. This became apparent when Vanlyn secretly viewed one of Argent's lessons.

The weapon master had bested him a few times, and Argent behaved like a petulant child as usual, stamping his foot and exclaiming that he couldn't work with such a poorly made sword. He punctuated his complaints with threats of having the smithy beaten and dismissed and demanded a good sword.

When the master tried to patiently explain to Argent that a sword was merely a tool only as good as the man who wielded it, the threats suddenly turned from the smithy to him. Argent knew the master had a rather large family to support. Vanlyn would never forget the look on the weapon master's face. All at once, there was disgust, anger and resignation in his features. Without explanation, Argent could suddenly best the weapon master. Vanlyn watched these training sessions with his own disgust and anger that such a talented master was forced to coddle his charge.

Said lessons didn't last for long, however. Fed up after three months of the supposed training, the old master left his father's service. A new master was hired, but even Vanlyn could see this man was nothing more than a brutish lout who spent most of his time sitting on his ass and drinking while Argent play-acted sword fighting. Occasionally, the new master would toss out a compliment—"You're doing well, my lord, keep it up!"—or so-called instructions—"Raise your sword a little higher, that's it!"

Vanlyn rode several miles to the old weapon master's home and gave him an account of the new lessons. The old man just shook his head and said, "He's dead the moment, he faces a true opponent."

And Vanlyn was secretly glad.

Vanlyn shook himself from the memories. At some point, the falchion had slipped from his grasp. Argent was cruel and vicious, but he was still his brother. Did that account for something?

Vanlyn picked up the weapon. He couldn't say it felt right there. He was a scholar by preference. Vanlyn replaced it where it belonged on the wall.

Further inspection found him walking through three more rooms filled with meticulously cared for weapons of all variety—swords of every type, daggers, crossbows, pikes, staffs and war hammers. Vanlyn wondered what the purpose of all of them was.

Each room also held a space with a long table specifically used for the care of each weapon. Whetstones, sharpeners and bottles of oils and polishes were arranged on their surfaces.

But what had Vanlyn staring in true awe was the last room obviously dedicated to the study of weaponry and their uses, for shelves had been built into the wall and not one of them had an empty space. Like in the library, the books came in various sizes and thickness. Vanlyn breathed deeply of their scent.

He chose a random book, which turned out to be for fighting with a staff. He was well into the first chapter before it came to him that he could read every book here and not truly learn how to wield any of the weapons. He needed a teacher.

Tanderes?

The memory of the incident in the bedroom returned in force. He felt his face heat and closed the book with a dull snap. He quickly replaced it on the shelf and strode from the room.

As he passed a wall display, the light reflecting off one of the dagger blades drew his attention. His hand reached for one, drawing it from its place. His gaze reflected back at him. It was of a man—no, a boy—who had never killed.

Could he kill Tanderes if it came to that?

The dagger went into a chosen sheath. Hadn't he been over this before? Vanlyn told himself if he were strong, killing anyone wouldn't be necessary. He firmed his resolve to resist.

* * * *

There were two boxes on his bed when he returned to his room.

Vanlyn hid the dagger and sheath underneath the mattress before sitting down and cautiously examining each box. They weren't anything special, just polished dark wood, although one had a symbol he didn't recognize etched in its top.

Vanlyn breathed a sigh of relief as he discovered that the box at his left hand contained items used to attend to his grooming. There was a razor, cream, brushes and combs, mouth rinse and cologne.

And the second box...

The sound Vanlyn made was not one of relief. He was glad he was alone so no one could see the blush he knew was spreading across his face. Within were tools of a different nature, and Vanlyn was rather embarrassed to realize he knew what they were thanks to some of Galire's works. There were four of the phallic rods, each finely craved and polished to suppleness. Some artisan's hand had intricately carved three of them with deep ridges and raised knobs, made to heighten the pleasure.

Four sealed jars sat in recesses next to the rods. Vanlyn's curiosity overrode his common sense, and he opened one. It contained a thick dark green salve. The scent was medicinal with a hint of a familiar spice that Vanlyn couldn't quite place.

"I see you've found my gifts."

Vanlyn drew in a sharp breath as his head snapped around towards the sound of the voice. Tanderes leaned against the doorframe, his lips upturned in a satisfied smirk. Vanlyn slammed the lid shut as though he could hide its contents when both men knew it was a futile gesture.

Tanderes straightened away from the doorframe. "I expect we'll both have much use

out of them.”

Vanlyn’s face burned. “I-we’ll do no such a thing.”

“I’ll, of course, instruct you in how I plan to use them.” When had Tanderes moved so close? “I guarantee they’ll give you great pleasure.”

A fleeting thought of the dagger passed through his mind. Vanlyn hoped nothing showed in his face.

“Really, Vanlyn...” Tanderes brushed his fingers across the stubble on Vanlyn’s cheek. He had the absurd thought that he needed a shave. “Am I so horrible?”

Vanlyn turned his face aside. “What you’re doing is wrong.”

“Yes.” Vanlyn wasn’t surprised that Tanderes didn’t deny it. The man, it seemed, had no shame. His body went rigid as Tanderes placed his splayed hand across his chest and with a firm, yet gentle push, guided Vanlyn to lie back across the bed.

“You may find our couplings to be to your liking.” Tanderes traced his calloused fingers across the contours of Vanlyn’s face. He was annoyed to realize the action was somewhat soothing to him. There was nothing sexual about the touch, but Vanlyn found himself enjoying the caress. His eyes drifted closed, and his hands gathered up the cloth of the blanket in a sort of tense anticipation as he wondered how far Tanderes would take it. He would fight him off, of course, and use the dagger if he could get to it.

But Tanderes went no further. Vanlyn could sense his regard. Tanderes rose from the bed and left him. Vanlyn opened his eyes as confusion caused his brow to furrow. “Now what was he about?”

* * * *

Dane still had a lot of work to do. He supposed he’d better get at it. He wasn’t looking forward to plunging back into the piles of papers and journals in the library. Still he knew he would need the information to counter Ramsay’s claim.

“Damn it all. That man is more trouble than he’s worth,” Dane muttered aloud. Any other fiend would have ripped Ramsay’s throat out, completely resolving the issue.

As he was organizing his family histories, his thoughts as always strayed to the prince. He allowed a knowing smile to blossom. He’d watched Vanlyn’s reaction as he’d discovered what was in the second box. The heated flush and that look—part horror and part intrigue—was well worth his gifts. He’d thought then to make another move. Touching Vanlyn like that hadn’t been part of his scheme. He was far too...*tender*.

He realized as he’d done so that he’d just wanted to explore.

Dane remembered his gentle breathing, the sense of anticipation, a slight scent of fear coupled with the unmistakably sweet tang of longing. And Vanlyn had such an interesting face. The boyish smoothness was finally giving way to the roughened features that came with experience. He’d delighted at the faint rasp of his fingers against the stubble. *I hope he makes good use of the grooming kit*. Then again, Dane thought a beard would probably enhance his features.

He shook himself from such mindless reverie. The boy was here as a tool not for Dane to cherish him as if he was—

A lover?

Dane gave a wry chuckle. He truly did need a rest.

He didn’t realize how much time had passed until his attention was drawn by a soft knock. Dawkins stood at the threshold. “Dinner is prepared, sir.”

“Dinner already?” Dane said, hopelessly confused.

Dawkins smiled slightly. “You’ve been at this for hours.”

“Have I?” Dane looked down at the journals he’d been looking over. They were his and perfectly preserved with spells, renewed now by his presence. He’d been reading of his sixteenth birthday. His father had presented him with a fine horse. He’d been so happy.

And you ruined it all. You could have lived a long happy life. Died content with children and grandchildren at your bedside—

“Sir?” Dane didn’t know how many times Dawkins had said it before he heard.

“Yes, of course, Dawkins. Is Van—Prince Sarn already in the dining hall?”

“Yes, sir, he’s waiting for you.”

“Thank you.” Dane closed the book and wondered at the same time what Vanlyn had been doing.

* * * *

Vanlyn’s wanderings had inexplicably drawn him to the study. He was still puzzled over what Tanderes had done in the bedroom. The tender caressing was much different from what Tanderes had tried to do earlier, forcing his presence and his body on Vanlyn. What he’d done was almost gentlemanly.

Vanlyn recalled the rough feel of Tanderes’s fingers on his face and the rasping sound of them against his jaw. His own heavy breathing and his rapid heartbeat had seemed loud to his ears.

Vanlyn halted when he realized he was outside the study door, and he saw Tanderes bent over piles of paperwork and leather-bound volumes. Despite his rather ungainly approach, Tanderes didn’t notice him.

His would-be captor seemed deep in thought, although every other moment, Tanderes would smile slightly or chuckle at something he was reading. Vanlyn wondered what he was doing.

Vanlyn continued to spy and caressed him with his mind. He wondered how that dark luxurious hair would feel between his fingertips. Vanlyn imagined that strong jaw roughened from his growth of beard. Tanderes had a dimple in his chin which Vanlyn thought endearing. His eyes had intrigued him the most. They were so deep and fathomless, dark to the point of blackness. Vanlyn was sure he’d never seen their like.

He turned away quickly, banishing the line of thought then halted as he realized Tanderes might have detected his movement. After a time, when no invitation for him to enter issued from the room Vanlyn moved back down the hall, the scents of dinner leading him to the dining room.

It was there that Vanlyn had his first glimpse of one of the others.

He couldn’t tell at first if they were male or female. The form was one of an adolescent of about thirteen. Like Dawkins, the fingers that carefully placed dishes and silverware on the table were long and held a grayish pallor. They were dressed in the clothes of a servant—plain brown shirt and slacks with soft shoes—but what passed for their hair seemed like the decomposing remains of the forest floor had been arranged it into a haphazard crown on their head.

Vanlyn was afraid to move farther into the room for fear of frightening the being off, but his curiosity overrode his caution, and he stepped forward. “Your pardon?”

The being turned. Large round eyes the color of moss blinked back at him. She was female he could see now. Her mouth was small and bow-shaped. Her nose was barely a bump on her face above two pinhole nostrils.

“Good evening, Highness.” The formal way she spoke surprised him. “We’ll be ready soon. Apologies for the delay.”

He was glad she didn’t run off. “It’s no worry. And please call me Vanlyn.”

“Oh no, sir, that would be improper.”

It had been worth trying, “And how may I address you, young lady?”

Something passed within her eyes, a fleeting look that Vanlyn was certain was amusement. It came to Vanlyn that this “young lady” might be very well several decades older than he.

“Miranda,” she said. Vanlyn was certain it wasn’t her real name.

Vanlyn moved to the sideboard and poured himself a drink, “Miranda, you’re the first person I’ve seen besides Dawkins. Are you related?”

“Yes,” Miranda continued at her task. “He is...” Her lips pursed. “What you would call my uncle, although we have no such word.”

He wanted to ask just what she was, but he didn’t want to pry. “So, your family then serves Tanderes?”

“We have acted as servants for many lifetimes,” she said. After a few moments of silence, Vanlyn realized she wasn’t going to elaborate.

The door separating the dining area from the kitchen swung open, and another one of the beings entered carrying a steaming platter of meat. This one seemed to be a young boy of about seven.

“Good evening.” Vanlyn approached him. “Do you need some help?”

“No, Highness,” the boy said in a quiet voice. “But thank you.”

“Please be seated, Highness. The master will be joining us soon.” Miranda’s smile showed pointed teeth. “We are much stronger than we appear.”

Vanlyn cleared his throat, “Of course.” He wondered why Dawkins didn’t have pointed teeth. Vanlyn slid into a seat as the two brought the courses to the table.

“Miranda, do you know why I’m here?” He didn’t know why he was asking her. He hadn’t asked Dawkins. Or maybe he had just wanted to talk to someone besides Tanderes, and Miranda seemed nice enough.

Vanlyn expected that Tanderes had made up some plausible story as to why he was here, so he was completely surprised when Miranda said, “Yes, Highness, I know exactly why you’re here. We all do.”

“And you agree with this course of action?” He regretted the words as soon as he said them. He had no right placing her in such a position. “My apologies. I had no right to—”

She dismissed his apology with a tilt of her head. “No need for apologies. We did not say we agreed, but we are loyal to the family Tanderes.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully with one finger. “To be honest, we thought you’d be some pompous ass as most royals tend to be, but I find you rather pleasant company.”

No ordinary servant would have voiced such an opinion, but Vanlyn had a feeling Miranda and the others like her were but a slight measure below Dawkins in status.

“Thank you. I’ve enjoyed talking to you as well.”

He was pleased when she blushed and a little surprised. Who would have thought

mortals and beings such as her shared the same trait? “You’re quite welcome.”

“So, if you don’t mind my asking, why do you serve Tanderes if you don’t agree with him?”

“Trying to subvert Mistress Miranda, are you?”

Now Vanlyn’s face heated. “I was trying to do no such a thing,” he protested as Tanderes took his seat to Vanlyn’s right.

Tanderes chuckled, and Vanlyn belatedly realized he’s been the object of a jest. “I don’t require my servants to agree with me on anything. In fact, I value their opinions, but ultimately it is my decision to make as master of this house.”

“Of course.” Vanlyn realized they were alone in the room, their plates and glasses filled. “What manner of beings are they?”

Tanderes didn’t respond. He instead lifted his wine glass and took a sip. His eyes closed in pleasure, and Vanlyn saw his jaw move before he swallowed. “Excellent. I suggest you try it. Those beings as you call them made this wine.”

“I wasn’t trying to be insulting,” Vanlyn said. “I was just curious.”

“Of course,” Tanderes said. “I suppose you would be annoyed if I told you we don’t have a word for what they are called. They go by many names in our world, but none of them are flattering. The most widely known and inaccurate name is bogie.”

Vanlyn’s jaw dropped. “Bogie? Like in the stories we were told as children?” That would of course explain their uncanny ability to move as though they were merely shadows glimpsed as an aside.

“The same.”

“But they are malicious beings!”

“Are they? Or are you merely going by the stories?” Tanderes stabbed a fork at him as he spoke. “Don’t judge beings of a different nature by what you’ve heard. Learn for yourself.”

He resented being lectured like a child, especially about something that was plain and simple common sense. Something he’d tried to do. “You certainly aren’t making a very good case for fiends.”

Tanderes snorted. “You’re still breathing, aren’t you? I’m sure you’ve heard that fiends never take hostages.”

Vanlyn glared at him.

“Now try the wine. I’m sure you’ll find it to your liking.”

Vanlyn tasted it, and the sudden infusion of fruit and spice on his tongue surprised him. It warmed him clear down to his toes. It wasn’t like anything he’d ever tasted. “It is delicious.”

“The people of the ground are very talented,” Tanderes said. “They, of course, can pass freely between worlds. I’ve learned the veils are very thin.”

His curiosity was piqued again. “And what of you? You came through a rift, correct?”

“Yes.”

“What was it like back there?”

Tanderes’s fist came down on the table, disturbing the fine china and silverware. Vanlyn started in his chair.

“Don’t ever ask me that question again.”

A tremor raced across Vanlyn’s skin. “I-forgive me.”

Tanderes eyes were slits, his mouth an angry slash across his face. "Are you mortals always so curious about things? Do you truly wish to know? It was punishment. *How do you think it was?*"

His appetite gone, Vanlyn moved the succulent beef around the plate with his fork. It was a long while before he regained the courage to speak again. "I wanted to ask you if you would teach me swordplay."

"What? No!"

Now how had he offended Tanderes by that question? Vanlyn didn't understand the man at all.

Tanderes expelled a breath, "I'm sorry. I haven't wielded a sword since, well, of course you're not aware of what happened, so I shouldn't take it out on you."

Vanlyn could only assume a sword had killed Tanderes or he'd used a sword to kill someone.

Vanlyn wouldn't consider that. From the stories and god texts he read, one only became a fiend if the gods and goddesses felt that person was worthy of redemption. Once achieved, the lost soul would have their sins wiped clean and be granted their eternal reward. There was no information in the texts on how this was determined, but who could guess at the thoughts of the gods? One thing was certain. There must have been some good in Dane Tanderes that caused him to arrive in his present state. But how could Dane, or any of the other fiends, be on the path to redemption if they continued on their destructive course and took innocent lives? Perhaps now that they returned to the living world, such things no longer mattered or applied? It was a puzzle to Vanlyn.

"Then," Vanlyn said as though there hadn't been a pause of several minutes, "will you teach me how to wield a staff?"

"Oh." Tanderes seemed taken aback. "Well, yes, I can do that. I mean to say that I don't have the most experience with staffs, but I'll show you what I do know." Tanderes speared one of the baby potatoes on his plate. "I'm by no means an expert. I was thinking of turning the old nursery into an indoor practice arena anyway. I'll have Dawkins and the others take care of it. We'll start as soon as they're done." Tanderes eyed him in speculation. "I am curious as to why you want to add this to your teachings."

Unable to resist, Vanlyn smiled evilly. "Well, I have to fend you off some way, don't I?"

Tanderes screwed up his face in a most comical expression before the man burst out laughing. "Well said!" He lifted his goblet in a toast. "After dinner, we'll have a short magic lesson, but then I'll need to get back to my work."

"Just what is it, you're trying to do?"

Again Tanderes sighed. "I'm gathering evidence of my family's right to rule Penryn. I was distracted earlier and didn't get much done."

"Does it have to do with Ramsay?"

Tanderes raised an eyebrow. "So many questions."

Vanlyn opened his mouth to apologize then decided he was tired of doing it. "I'm going to be here for a while, and obviously, Ramsay intends to involve me. Don't you think I should be prepared?"

Tanderes moistened his lips. "Ramsay won't rescue you, you know."

"I know that," Vanlyn said.

"You do?"

“He was very...false,” Vanlyn couldn’t think of a more appropriate word. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll attempt it, but he won’t do anything that doesn’t benefit him in some way.”

Tanderes regarded him with something approaching admiration. “Well, I’ll be damned. It seems I’ve underestimated you, Your Highness.”

“Not a good thing, don’t you think?”

Tanderes sipped his wine. “Indeed.”

Once dinner was finished, Dawkins appeared, cleared the table, and served a rich flavored coffee and a sinfully decadent desert of puff pastry and vanilla cream. Tanderes told Dawkins of his desire to convert the nursery, and the old man nodded and said he would have the work completed in three days.

They chose to carry their coffee and dessert into the study, and as they settled, Tanderes spoke to him of Ramsay.

“When the fiends first attacked, Ramsay fled the island,” Tanderes said. “My descendants, the last members of my family at this manor, went to join the fight. When they heard that Ramsay had abandoned his family and his people, they went to their aid.”

Vanlyn sipped his coffee as Tanderes continued. “Very few of my immediate family survived the initial attack. Those that remain each govern a district of the island. I came along as the fiends threatened to overrun my home. I knew I couldn’t stop them without help so I sought permission to take ownership of Penryn.”

“Sought permission?” Vanlyn chose one of the pastries.

Tanderes neatly avoided the question. “Once the fiends were brought in check, I gathered what was left of the island council and revealed my true form to them. They were understandably upset that their lives were saved by one of the very beings who sought their destruction.”

“The head council representative, a woman named Marcelyn Hale, was—*is* a relative of mine. It was her cool head and sound reasoning that kept them from trying to tear me apart where I stood.” Tanderes licked vanilla cream from his fingers before continuing. “Delicious. I employed a dream weaver and a necromancer, and through them, I proved my claim. Despite this, Ramsay still protested. At the most recent meeting, he claimed to have evidence that my father turned over rule of the island to his side of the family after I...passed away.”

“And you’re searching for your own proof to refute that claim.”

“I know my father would have left explicit instructions in this matter. He always preserved documents with renewing spells. That’s the kind of man he was.”

“You’re fortunate,” Vanlyn said.

“How so?”

Vanlyn lowered his eyes. “When you speak of your father, I can hear the love and admiration in your tone. He must have been a good, decent man.” Thinking of his own father only brought to the surface what type of man Aelden Sarn was, and Vanlyn found he was ashamed.

“He was,” Tanderes said carefully. “We can’t take our father’s sins on ourselves, Vanlyn.”

“Perhaps not, but it’s what often happens no matter if we wish it or not.”

Tanderes didn’t reply. Even he couldn’t refute the truth.

“I’ll help you,” Vanlyn said. He wanted to be of some use, even if it was for his enemy.

Chapter Ten

For the next three days, Dane practiced magic with Vanlyn.

Dane found his captive student was proficient with most small beasts and birds. Vanlyn could easily tell their wants and needs. They helped him in all sorts of tasks. At times they were simple, like telling him when food was close to spoilage. Others were more complicated, such as predicting the weather. Vanlyn couldn't go outside of course but would stand on a balcony and call birds and gulls to him and speak with them. Vanlyn spoke to the mice in the pantry, and they came to an understanding. He would leave food out for them to keep them out of the grain.

Despite all this, Dane still hadn't quite convinced Vanlyn that his power was of some use. The young prince conceded that predicting the weather and determining the freshness of food was useful, but was there anything else? Dane had been vague. He needed to get Vanlyn outside, but Dane didn't quite trust him enough to take the risk.

Vanlyn had also been an asset in setting his family records in order. A devoted scholar, he seemed to have a talent for ferreting out information. When Vanlyn had come across his family chart, he'd given a startled exclamation. "Tanderes, is this true?" Vanlyn showed him the chart. "This is you?" He pointed to where Dane's name and the year of his birth and death were written.

"Yes," Dane said mildly. It was still somewhat disconcerting to see the date of his death.

"But that means you're..." He could see Vanlyn do some quick mental calculation. "One hundred and three years old!"

"That sounds about right," Dane said. "Although one doesn't age where I was so I suppose by all intents, I'm the same age. I was thirty-three when I...when it happened."

"I was curious as to how old you were," Vanlyn said. "You seemed much older than I." His eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Is that so?" Dane said dryly. "And just how old are you, pup?"

"Too old to be called pup," Vanlyn said. "I'm twenty-two if you must know."

"Gods and fiends, I am an old man compared to you," Dane grumbled.

"It's only been seventy years," Vanlyn said. "Are there no relatives alive who remember you?"

"My oldest living relative is my niece who is seventy-three," Dane said. "So, she remembers little if anything about the time I was alive. It's hard to recall things when you're just a few years out of diapers."

He realized he hadn't seen his niece in awhile. He would need to make a special trip and give Vanlyn something to occupy his time while he was gone.

It was after breakfast of the fourth day that Dane announced they'd start their training with the staff. Dane found himself inordinately pleased when Vanlyn brightened considerably.

"We'll start with some simple exercises first," Dane said as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. "Then progress from there."

Vanlyn nodded, eager but not so much so that it worried Dane. He'd seen some students so eager to get to the "real fighting" that they refused to listen to anything the

instructors said in the beginning.

"I want to learn everything I can from the basics," Vanlyn said. "We had a master swordsman as our trainer, and Argent abused the poor man until he resigned his post. Argent refused to listen to anything he said. I don't want to be that way."

It was almost eerie how the two of them had been thinking along the same lines. "Good," Dane said. "I'm curious as to who taught Argent his skills."

Vanlyn sighed. "No one. He never learned. Another man was hired, but—"

"He was a charlatan," Dane said matter-of-factly.

"Yes."

"So my sources were correct."

Vanlyn raised a brow. "I went to visit with the old master, and he said Argent is as good as dead."

"He is." Dane felt he could be blunt. He knew there was no love between the brothers. "And both Argent and Aelden know it, although they are too pig-headed to see. That is why neither has ever been on the battlefield. I also know Aelden is untested. Unfortunately, the other lords and ladies know this as well. High Lady Faeya Dacien of Gan could best him with her eyes closed." Gan, although the smallest principality in Ordwyn, was known for its swordswomen who practiced with a religious fervor. To be a conjurer and a swordswoman in Gan earned you the highest honors.

"I remember her from the war council," Vanlyn commented. "She did look formidable." Dane saw Vanlyn's brow crease as he mulled something over. Finally he said, "In fact, she was looking at him with ill-concealed disgust for most of the meeting." The furrows deepened. "Truly most of the other lords and ladies were."

"Ah..." Dane smiled. "So, you finally see. I have told you that the others do not think your father fit to lead the armies." They had stopped outside the nursery door.

"I was so wrapped up in my own troubles..." Vanlyn worried his lower lip. "...so hurt by their treatment of me, I didn't notice."

Dane decided to deter Vanlyn from his current train of thought by opening the door. Vanlyn drew in a sharp breath. Dane had seen the room late last night, but he was still impressed.

"Goods and fiends, Dawkins and his people are truly talented," Vanlyn said.

"Indeed," Dane agreed.

The difference was astonishing. Polished wood slats replaced the ragged wallpaper. The floor received similar care with a good scrubbing. Weapons and gear transplanted from the armory found new homes arranged neatly on the walls. Practice mats sat in twin stacks in front of them. In the room to their right that used to be the nanny's bedroom, there were more supplies and tables dedicated to their upkeep. Jars of polishing compounds and cloths were also present.

"I didn't hear a thing for three days." Vanlyn strode across the room and selected a wood staff from its pegs. "You would think after three days we would have heard some noise of the reconstruction."

"Have you ever heard a bogie at his work when he doesn't want to be heard?" Dane said with a bemused smile. He chose his own staff. "Let's begin, shall we? Dawkins will bring up a light lunch later then we'll go again afterwards."

They spent several hours doing simple exercises. Dane came to realize early on that Vanlyn was indeed a good student. He thought of what Vanlyn had said about Argent. He

had to commend the unknown master for his patience. Or had it been something else? Dane knew many fighting experts who would deliberately wound an errant student to teach him a lesson. If it didn't work, he found students that were more promising.

They had their lunch. Dawkins brought up some bread, fruit and cheese with a dark red juice that was delicious and infused them with energy, another product of the older man's world. They began again, this time with a light sparring match, in which Dane proved to be the victor. By the third time he bested Vanlyn, both men were sweaty and tired. He could tell, despite his good nature, that Vanlyn was now becoming somewhat irritated, but it was more that scholar's aspect of him. Vanlyn felt he should be able to grasp the basic skills by now if he put his mind to it.

"We'll go one more time then rest. It will be dinner time soon."

"I don't know why I'm not grasping the basics." Vanlyn held the staff in a white-knuckle grip.

"This isn't like book learning, Van," Dane said. "It's going to take more direct experience and training. It doesn't make you less intelligent."

Vanlyn was looking at him strangely a mixture of confusion and surprise. Dane couldn't figure out why.

Uncomfortable under that gaze, Dane said with a tone of self-satisfaction, "I'll tell you what. Perhaps a wager would motivate you. If I win the next battle, I get to take a kiss."

Vanlyn's face screwed up. "Even if I would allow something like that, I'm not some swooning young maiden pining away for you."

Dane held one hand up in deference. "My apologies."

Vanlyn held his staff out before him. "Let's have at it, then."

Dane shook his head. "You'll lose with that attitude."

Vanlyn charged, bringing the staff in a downward stroke in a most haphazard manner. A move so predictable, Dane's blocking was almost an afterthought. Annoyed now, Dane slapped the staff from Vanlyn's grasp with a deft motion.

"Now you're behaving like Argent." Dane carried his own staff and replaced it on the hooks. As he moved past Vanlyn, he patted him on the shoulder in a placating gesture. "We're both tired. Let's stop for now."

Dane sensed more than heard Vanlyn's movement. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Vanlyn snatch up the staff and charge again with a feral growl. His power coursing through him, pulsing with heat through his veins, Dane turned and caught the staff in its downward swing. Wrenching it from the young prince's grasp, Dane brought it around with a sharp crack against Vanlyn's shoulder. Vanlyn grunted in pain as he dropped.

Seething, Dane tossed the staff aside and stared in annoyance at the young man. "Stop acting like a child."

"To the hells with you." Vanlyn sneered.

Dane seized him by the collar and yanked him to his feet. The anger melted into shock on Vanlyn's face as Dane shoved him roughly until his back met the far wall. Dane twisted the material of Vanlyn's shirt in his fist. He was aware of Vanlyn's fear, saw the beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, the slight catch in his breathing. He could almost hear Vanlyn's heart thudding in his chest as the blood rushed through his veins.

Dane forced his mouth on Vanlyn's. One hand still held his collar, the other fisted in Vanlyn's hair. Vanlyn's obvious shock made his reactions slow, and he yielded without

protest. His mouth was warm and sweet and tasted of the dark juice. Dane plunged in and drank deep.

There was a muffled protest that Dane barely heard, yet he drew away, looking at the dazed expression on the prince's face. Vanlyn's eyes were unfocused. Dane tilted Vanlyn's head back and licked at the salt on his throat, tracing the peaks and valleys with his tongue. Vanlyn's hands grabbed at his shirt in a feeble gesture of objection.

Dane knew when Vanlyn gave in. The young man uttered a low moan as Dane opened his shirt, continuing his ministrations. When Dane released his hold on Vanlyn's hair, the younger man's head lolled back to rest against the wall. Vanlyn's hands found their way into Dane's hair.

"Gods, it's so soft," Vanlyn muttered.

Dane smiled against Vanlyn's chest. His tongue found one dark nipple, and he began a gentle laving. Dane knew he should stop soon if not now. If his plan were to work, he'd need Vanlyn to come willingly, although it seemed at this point he would. There could be no doubt. If Vanlyn felt, at any point, that Dane forced him...

Yet, he couldn't be denied, not now. The blood pulsed in his cock, which was straining against his trousers, wanting, needing to have this man.

So it took every bit of will in him to straighten away, to step back, to take a calming breath that did nothing to douse his passion. The sight of Vanlyn, his eyes closed, his lips parted slightly, and his smooth glistening chest exposed was enough to send him over the edge without any assistance.

It was a few moments before Vanlyn realized it was over. When his eyes opened and he saw Dane just standing there, his face flushed hotly. "Damn you," he muttered.

His whole body coiled tight for an attack. Dane forced his steps forward until he was out of the nursery and well away from the impassioned young man.

* * * *

Vanlyn looked on in disgust at the mess he'd made and realized belatedly he had nothing to clean himself with. He was angry, at himself more than anything. He'd practically let Dane Tanderes fuck him.

Vanlyn hated that word and wondered why he used it. It was a crude representation of sex used only by back-alley whores and their ponces.

Of course, he'd been angry. Tanderes had treated him like a child, and he resented it. Even so, he knew by attacking Tanderes he *had* acted just like Argent. His shoulder was a painful reminder of his mistake.

Worse was Tanderes' attempted seduction and subsequent rejection.

Why was it, even though he was well aware of Tanderes' plans for him, that he once again allowed him to use him so? And when he'd gone to release his desire, he thought again of Tanderes. Tanderes laying him on his back, Tanderes' mouth hot and wet on his cock...

"Stop it for the sake of the gods!" Vanlyn growled. He was embarrassed enough. Vanlyn climbed to his feet, moved slowly into the other room, found one of the unused cleaning clothes, and wiped his seed from his hand and chest. He'd need to wash now, and his stomach told him he needed food. Vanlyn thought at first to eat in his room, but then he dismissed that thought. He was not going to hide like some maiden who'd given her virginity against the wishes of her family.

He moved carefully. Now that he had his wits about him, his shoulder ached with every motion. He'd completely forgotten the pain of it when he...when they'd... At any rate, he was aware of it now and knew he had to tend to his injury.

Vanlyn returned to his room and removed his shirt as he stood in front of the mirror. He muttered a curse at the sight of the ugly bruise. He'd have to ask Dawkins for something to put on it.

Once changed and washed, Vanlyn slowly made his way down to the dining room, his shoulder aching with each step. Tanderes was already seated and sipping from a cup, presumably tea if the service on the table was a testament.

"Good evening," Dane said over the rim of his cup.

"Evening," Vanlyn muttered. He was still out of sorts, and the pain made it almost impossible for him to eat comfortably. Although the succulent fish fell apart easily with his fork, it was still awkward using his one hand.

"You're in pain," Tanderes commented. "I didn't realize your shoulder was injured so."

"I'm fine."

Tanderes sighed in exasperation as he pushed back from the table. Curiosity made Vanlyn follow his progress out the room. It was several minutes later before Tanderes returned with a small jar made of smoked glass. He twisted the lid off as he approached. The medicinal smell was unmistakable.

"Take off your shirt," Tanderes said mildly.

Vanlyn gave him a look of warning before turning his chair to the side. It had taken him several minutes to put the damn thing on.

"Here," Tanderes reached for the buttons. Vanlyn tensed, but when he saw there was no predatory gleam in Tanderes' eyes, he relaxed.

Tanderes spread the salve on, and a cooling sensation spread through the area, dulling the pain. They were both silent while Tanderes worked, and Vanlyn found himself grateful for the care.

"According to Dawkins, this should be better by morning," Tanderes commented.

"Thank you," Vanlyn said.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper."

"You were right. I was being just like Argent." At once, a stab of pain different compared to his shoulder filled his chest and caused his throat to tighten. Yet it was not a physical pain.

"We'll hold off any more training until tomorrow," Tanderes said. "There are some books I want you to study tonight. I've already laid them out in the library."

"Fine."

"Something wrong, Highness?"

Of course, there is, Vanlyn thought sourly. He was being idiotic feeling the way he did, but he couldn't seem to help it. And it wasn't as if Tanderes would care if he told him anyway.

He was homesick.

It was absurd. He could not continue to behave like a child. What did he have to be homesick about? But he was. Not for his family, of course, but he missed his room, his books, and his warm comfortable fire. It wasn't the most exciting life, but he was satisfied with the niche he'd carved for himself, well away from court politics and his

father and brother's hate.

Of course, how much longer would they have left me in peace if this hadn't happened?

"You went somewhere again." Tanderes voice broke through his thoughts. "Tell me what troubles you."

"Nothing. Everything." Vanlyn stood. "Thank you for the medicine." He left the room quickly, forgetting dinner, his appetite gone. Tanderes was using him. He didn't truly care. It came to Vanlyn that he was tired of being used.

* * * *

Vanlyn awoke several minutes before the knock, sensing that something was wrong. The thick tendrils of interrupted sleep clung to his mind as he attempted to focus his thoughts. "Yes, enter," he said more sharply than he intended.

The door came open a portion, and a small figure was a shadow against the light. "Your Highness?" It was the young boy who had helped Miranda set the table earlier. "Master Tanderes requests your presence in his study immediately."

Vanlyn drew back the covers. "I'll be there."

"I was told to escort you," the boy said. "There was an intruder tonight."

Vanlyn halted in the act of slipping on his trousers. "An intruder?"

"Yes, Highness." The boy didn't elaborate.

He followed the young man down the semi-dark halls of the manor. As they approached the study, Vanlyn heard several voices in discussion, and when he entered was surprised to find two more bogies there. One was a plump older woman and the other an elder gentleman who seemed about the same age as Dawkins.

"Your Highness," Tanderes said. "It appears we had, or have, an uninvited guest."

"A conjurer?" Vanlyn said.

Tanderes smiled in approval. "That would explain how he or she got past the wards, but I didn't sense they had been disturbed." Tanderes moved over to his desk. Two lanterns were set there. "Dawkins and his people can't sense the presence of conjurers as you and I can."

That seemed strange to Vanlyn considering how powerful he suspected Dawkins was, but then again, he couldn't sense the bogies when they didn't want to be.

"They've already searched the manor and the grounds and didn't find anything," Tanderes continued. "I felt a stirring in the air before Dawkins came to get me."

"As did I."

"I thought as much." Tanderes held his hands over the lanterns. A spark of yellow light came to life from within each glass enclosure, which quickly bloomed to a flickering orb of gold. Vanlyn swore he saw the space around the two lamps dim.

"I want to see if we can't get some sense of where they entered," Tanderes said. "And if they're still here. We'll start on the fourth floor since that is where the warding ends and work our way down." Tanderes handed Vanlyn one of the lamps. "I've already sealed off the exits on the first floor, so if he or she is still here, maybe we can drive them downward."

They started off, taking the front stairs then separating to each walk one side of the manor. Dane took the right hall to search while Vanlyn the left. Since the area between the two halls was open, they could keep an eye on each other and yell if they needed help.

On the fourth floor, nothing was amiss as far as Vanlyn could see. He hadn't spent much time there, but Vanlyn supposed he could remedy that soon enough. When they met back at the stairs, Vanlyn told Dane he'd sensed nor seen any trace. As they descended, Dane said he had expected that because there was no reason for the intruder to be on that floor except for his lab, and if it had been broken into, Dane would know. Dane doubted the intruder would have fled to the roof, since they would have no avenue of escape unless it was another fiend or perhaps an elemental, and they would have both sensed a conjuration, and Dane would have known of the fiend.

After Dane searched the master bedroom, and again Vanlyn wondered why Dane didn't make use of the room, he reported, with his jaw tightly set that he'd found a slight trace of a presence there, but the scent was almost cold.

"Since we didn't identify anything on the upper floors, they must have gone down. They're trapped," Dane said. "Use caution now in your search, Highness. They will undoubtedly be desperate."

They separated again, and Vanlyn entered the armory. The spelled lamp filled the room with cheerful light, but Vanlyn could only describe how the room felt as having a vague sense of shadows in the corners. He didn't sense anything unusual.

No windows had been broken which also didn't mean anything. Vanlyn walked the length of the room and cautiously approached the workroom, the favored scents bringing him no comfort this time.

The silence began to disturb him. Vanlyn felt he should at least hear Tanderes moving about. Vanlyn turned to go and halted in utter shock to find he was no longer alone. He drew in a sharp breath but could manage no more.

He was a bogie, but he wasn't anyone that had been downstairs in the study. He seemed to be around Tanderes' age, his features closer to human, similar to Dawkins. But there was something amiss with the way he looked. The shadows that had filled the room surrounded him, lending a cruel glint in his eyes and pressed his mouth into a bitter line.

Who are you? The thought came, but Vanlyn found he couldn't give it voice. To his disbelief, his body refused to obey his commands. The shadows ensnared him like a fly in a spider's web.

The intruder moved with unnerving speed towards him, and at the same time, something lashed out from the bogie's outstretched hand—a whipcord vine of nettles and thorns. The cry burst from Vanlyn's lips just as the cord struck him in the forehead. Pain exploded in a thousand pinpricks, filling his skull with agony. Then the thing was on him, shoving him down, amber eyes burning into his. His look was unmistakable. This creature meant to kill him.

"No!" Vanlyn cried out as the lantern flew from his grasp. "*Dane!*"

The lantern shattered, plunging the room into darkness.

Chapter Eleven

Vanlyn came awake to a pounding skull and squinted against the light. "Dane?"

"I'm here. Lay still, Van."

Slowly, the world around him took shape. Vanlyn found himself cradled in the gentle embrace of Dane Tanderes. Those strong arms corded and muscular, the same ones that kept him pinned to the forest floor now held him with a protectiveness that caused a stirring in his chest.

"I've taken care of the wound, sir," There was a moment of fear before Vanlyn realized it was Dawkins kneeling before him. "I'll get some powders for the headache."

"Thank you, Dawkins," Dane smiled down at Vanlyn. "You gave me quite a fright."

Tanderes' true form should have belied his words. What, after all, did a fiend have to be afraid of? But even Vanlyn could see the truth in his eyes and how Tanderes sheltered him within the circle of his massive leathery wings.

"That thing," Vanlyn said, and his hand grasped at Dane's forearm. The need for the warmth of human contact was an ache in him. "It was like a nightmare. I..."

"Shh," Dane admonished. "Rest for a bit. You can tell me about it after you take the medicine."

"D-Don't treat me like a child." But, even as he said the words, something unraveled in his heart. Vanlyn closed his eyes as a shudder passed over him. The memory of those eyes and the pain coupled with his inability to defend himself was a blow to his pride. Even as he remembered, Vanlyn caught Dane's scent and felt his heat and the way he'd come to his aid when he called. *Gods, I called out his name!* Vanlyn realized. *What must he think?*

Vanlyn thought suddenly how little he cared. Despite everything, he found he couldn't help but want to feed off Dane's strength and feel protected. Vanlyn turned aside and buried his face into the crook of Dane's arm, knowing where he was, knowing nothing could harm him with Dane here.

Am I a coward? A traitor for what I'm feeling? Should I be so at ease, so safe in the arms of my enemy? It is just a part of his game after all.

Perhaps Dane knew, for the man was speaking softly to him, brushing the hair from Vanlyn's forehead, reassuring him that everything would be fine.

Vanlyn sighed, too embarrassed to face him yet. "Thank you," he muttered against Dane's skin.

Vanlyn must have dozed for the next thing a cup was pressed to his lips.

"I can do it." Vanlyn took the cup and drank the potion. "Thank you, Dawkins." If the bogie noticed the wariness in his voice, he didn't show it. Moments later, it seemed the pounding dulled to an ache.

"Can you walk to your room?" Dane still held him.

"Yes." Vanlyn was grateful for Dane's assistance for he wasn't sure his own legs could support him.

When they came to his room, Dane helped him undress. Again, like with the embrace, there was nothing sexual in his actions. Dane removed Vanlyn's shirt and slippers, then fetched one of the silk nightshirts he'd been given. Vanlyn slipped

gratefully into it, the cool material soothing his skin.

There seemed to be genuine concern on Dane's part. Despite himself, Vanlyn was warming to him even though he knew it was all a part of the game. Dane seemed in no hurry to leave, and as Vanlyn sat on the edge of the bed, he was secretly glad that Dane stayed.

"Dane?"

Dane grinned at him. "I'm glad you finally started calling me by my first name."

Vanlyn couldn't stop the chuckle from escaping. He turned away quickly to hide his blush. "I know you must think I'm the worst type of coward."

"Of course not. Why would you believe that?"

"I couldn't even defend myself," Vanlyn said stubbornly.

"Vanlyn." Dane moved from where he stood and sat down next to him. "What did happen?"

"You didn't see him? The male bogie?"

"Male bogie?"

"He was around your age," Vanlyn said, "Tall and muscular."

"You saw the three earlier. Rorie is the young boy, and Kellen is the older man. He's my stable master. The older woman is Bella, my housekeeper." Dane rose and walked to the wall where the red cord hung and pulled it. "Vanlyn, there are no other male bogies serving in this manor."

"I know what I saw."

"I'm not saying you didn't," Dane said. "But Dawkins would have sensed the presence of a sixth."

The subject of their conversation appeared at the door. "Yes, sir?"

"Please come in, Dawkins. Vanlyn, I want you to tell everything that happened."

Vanlyn began his story, telling of how the armory had looked and felt when he entered. He realized it never occurred to him to call Dane at that point. He told of the look the man had given him, and he couldn't repress a shudder. There had been such malevolence in that gaze directed at him, which was nothing like the looks he received from his father and brother.

When he ended the tale, Vanlyn said to Dane, "And you didn't see him at all? Did he escape out the window?"

"When I heard you call out for me, I rushed into the room and found you lying on the floor unconscious and with the wound on her forehead." Dane said. "Both rooms were empty, and the windows were closed." Dane leaned forward and clasped his hands at his knees. "I will not have this," he said, righteous indignation filling his voice. "I will not have some stranger coming into my house and hurting those who stay here."

"Yes," Dawkins said. "The idea of one of my people committing this act upsets me greatly. For you, Your Highness, and for the honor of my family, we serve this house."

Vanlyn was surprised by their declarations and somewhat impressed by his concern. Still he had to remind himself that he was a prisoner here, and the fact that if he were hurt, Tanderes would lose his bargaining chip. As much as he wanted to believe their words, Vanlyn had his doubts.

"With your permission, my lord," Dawkins went on. "I will return to my realm and look into this matter. My people do not tolerate such crimes. I should be away no more than three days. I will prepare things for your comfort first."

“Yes, of course, Dawkins,” Tanderes said. “Please do what you need to.”

“Rest well, gentlemen.”

They sat in silence for a while, both men deep in their own thoughts.

“I’m sorry this happened to you.” Dane’s voice was soft.

“I’m sure.” Vanlyn’s words came out entirely the wrong way.

“You don’t believe I am? You think I wanted you to get hurt?”

“Of course, you didn’t want me to get hurt.” Vanlyn turned his face aside to hide the pain he knew must be there. “You lose your bargaining chip if I’m hurt. Do you think I’ve forgotten why I’m here despite this cloak of civility we wear?”

Dane was silent for a few heartbeats. “I can understand why you would feel that way, but I was truly worried. When I saw you lying there, I thought...”

Vanlyn drew his arms around his chest, suddenly cold.

“I felt your trembling,” Dane whispered. “I sensed your fear.”

The heat rose in Vanlyn’s cheeks.

“And I know I brought you comfort, and I was glad I could do that,” Dane continued. “I want you to be safe.”

“Please.” Vanlyn closed his eyes as the pain threatened to overwhelm him. “Please don’t say things like that. I don’t, I can’t, believe them.”

Dane released a sigh. It was a sound of defeat. “Get some rest. In the morning, I’ll go into town and let Hale know what happened. She’ll want to start her own investigation. She may need to come and question you.”

Vanlyn rose, mutely obeying the command. Dane drew back the covers, and Vanlyn climbed into bed. The sheets were still warm from his heat. Sleep stole over him almost immediately as the events of the night took their toll.

Dane stood at the foot of the bed and leaned casually against one of the canopy posts. “Will you be all right?”

Already half asleep, Vanlyn muttered, “I-I believe I will.”

Dane moved closer and leaned over, straightening the blankets. “I could come to bed with you, if you like.”

The words dragged him out of his haze for a time. Vanlyn supposed he should be annoyed until his sleep-drugged brain realized that Dane’s tone had no intimate connotations to it. For a heartbeat, he almost thought to take Dane up on his offer. The thought of the press of a warm body against him was tempting.

“I’ll be fine.” Vanlyn burrowed under the covers, creating a warm cocoon. As sleep finally claimed him, he thought he felt a light brush of soft lips against his temple, but he dismissed it as a dream.

* * * *

Dane found Vanlyn in the library when he returned from town in the late afternoon. The minister was pleased to find Vanlyn reading the books he had selected. Vanlyn didn’t notice him at first, and Dane was content with watching the young man at one of his favorite tasks.

Hale wanted to look into the intruder, although she was uncertain how she would progress since this involved an otherworldly being. Hale blushed the moment the words left her mouth, but Dane just laughed it away. There was no point in denying what he was.

Dane sighed as he thought of last night. He shouldn't be surprised that Vanlyn hadn't believed him. Why should he? Dane had made his objective clear, and he had every intention of following through.

Still, when Dane heard Vanlyn cry out his name in his panic, and when he'd come upon the young man sprawled on the floor, his heart had given a painful lurch. Before he knew Vanlyn was all right, he'd silently vowed that whoever had done this would be dead before sunrise.

Dane straightened his stance and firmed his resolve. No, he couldn't become fond of the boy. Dane had his people and his land to consider. He was doing it for them and for his comrades who had lived in the darkness alongside him for so long.

His attention went back to the young prince when he closed the book and stretched like a languid cat, looking just as pleased as one. His eyes fell on Dane, and they widened with pleased surprise. "Good evening."

"Highness," Dane said formally. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"I'm through with this book." Vanlyn's brow furrowed, Dane's tone not lost on him. "I thought I'd have an early dinner."

"Fine."

"How did it go with Magisteri Hale?"

"She will be looking into the matter as well, Highness," Dane said. "She wishes to visit tomorrow morning and speak with you. I invited her to breakfast."

"Very well. Although I'd like a bath before I meet with a guest."

"As a matter of fact, I have a remedy to that," Dane said. "I've been meaning to show you. If you'll follow me, Highness."

"Dane?"

He didn't turn.

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No," Dane said. "But you said last night you didn't forget why you were here. I suggest you keep that fact in mind."

"Yes, you're right, minister."

Vanlyn fell into step beside him as Dane walked. Neither spoke as Dane led him down the hall and towards the kitchen where Dane took the key ring from its hook. At the end of the hall, they came to a stairwell, which descended narrowly into the darkness. Dane muttered an invocation and lanterns placed in wall sconces glowed with the same conjurer's light he'd used last night.

"Be careful, it's steep," Dane said. The stairs didn't bother him as he'd walked them countless times.

"Where are we going?"

Dane's mood lifted a little. "You'll see."

The air around them became moist as evidenced by the glistening sheen of condensation on the walls. At the bottom of the stairs, there another door which Dane unlocked with one of the keys. He heard Vanlyn's surprised breath, and Dane knew why. Here, the walls were natural stone and glittered muted in the light. The stairs continued down.

"How far are we going?" Vanlyn asked.

"Just a little farther."

At the bottom of the stairs was another door, opening out to a man-made corridor

carved from the stone. Although there were lanterns here as well, they were unnecessary for natural light filled the hall from the arched opening, which were two man-heights tall and wide.

“Is that water I hear?”

Dane was cryptically silent as they stepped through the opening and into the light.

“Gods and fiends!” Vanlyn gasped out.

Dane stepped aside and grinned smugly. He was used to the site of the cavern by now since his family had utilized them for generations. It was large enough to fit two of his manor houses within its confines. Its smooth floor was dotted with pools filled with steaming hot water. Like the stairwell, the stones glittered but on a grander scale. Dane knew of the fortune in gems and precious metals the cavern housed. Natural recesses opened where the wall met the cavern ceiling, and the red-gold of the setting sun filled the space, causing a riot of rainbow colors.

The far wall directly before them sported several openings at its base that allowed fresh water to flow in and underneath the pools were similar vents that allowed standing water out. Dane wasn’t familiar with the full logistics of it as the bathing cavern had been created long before he was born.

Vanlyn, fascinated by what he saw, stepped carefully across the smooth rocks, marveling at everything. He looked to his left and nodded. Some clever soul had carved square niches in the wall where an assortment of oils, soaps and other toiletries were stored. Several polished wood boxes held robes and towels.

“Feel free to use the baths as much as you like. Be certain you lock the doors when you’re done, especially now.”

Vanlyn nodded as he knelt in front of one of the pools. “Is this all man-made? Or conjured?”

“A little of both,” Dane said. “My family consisted primarily of elementals and illusionists with a few necromancers and dream-weavers thrown in.”

“These stones have the ransoms of fifty kings,” Vanlyn mused.

“Indeed,” Dane said. “Which is why we lock the doors.”

“I see,” Vanlyn said. “May I bathe now?”

“If you wish,” Dane said. “I’ll leave the keys here. Take as long as you want.”

“You’re not staying?”

Images of smooth heated flesh, glistening with sweat invaded his thoughts. “No.” As much as he wanted to stay, he refused to cast aside a chance to confound the young prince. This would be the perfect opportunity to make an attempt.

“I see. Thank you.”

Let him think I’ve rejected him again, Dane thought. But, if he allowed himself to truly muse on the matter, he knew that wasn’t the reason why he turned away at all.

* * * *

Vanlyn watched Dane’s retreating with a measure of confusion and disappointment. Then he immediately banished the useless emotions. Why by all that was good and decent had he asked Dane, Minister Tanderes, if he was staying?

Well, he wasn’t going to dwell on it now, not with the inviting baths just waiting there for him. Vanlyn stripped off his clothes and left them in an ungainly pile besides one of the pools. The rocks were warm under his feet and covered with a spongy moss

dotted with tiny purple flowers that made walking on them comfortable.

The bottles and jars in the niche were intricately labeled. He chose bath oil that had a definite woodsy scent, then grabbed two towels and returned to the pool. He tested it with his foot first. It was a little hotter than he would have liked, but he sat down on the side and slid in, groaning in contentment as the hot water sluiced up to his waist.

He spent a luxurious hour in the pool, scrubbing his skin until it was pink and washing his hair. He wished he'd brought his razor. Well, he could take care of that in his bedroom. When he finally emerged, he felt invigorated, not to mention ravenous. He dried himself and his hair thoroughly, noticing its length as it brushed between his shoulder blades. He decided to leave it and quickly braided it up. The dark growth of beard would definitely have to go.

He slipped on one of the soft robes and grabbed up his clothes before making his way upstairs and locking the doors as Tanderes had asked. The scents from the kitchen made him hasten his steps. Once in his room, he tossed the clothes and the robe in the hamper, chose a plain white shirt and brown trousers, then he went to work on the beard.

He froze, turning quickly when the door open, his heart racing, only to find it was Gypsy.

"You scared several years off me, you know," he scolded gently. Gypsy, of course, being a cat saw no reason for the silly human to be upset and ensconced herself on Vanlyn's bed while he completed his task.

Feeling better than he had in weeks, Vanlyn made his way to the dining room. Gypsy followed, and he was glad for her company. Although Tanderes had assured his safety, now that he realized he was alone, his stomach leapt slightly in nervousness. He tried not to let the memory of the incident ruin his mood. Instead, it gave him an idea.

Tanderes was already at the table. His face buried in a sheath of papers, but he looked up when Vanlyn approached. "Impressive."

"You must be jesting me," Vanlyn sat. "I wanted to ask you something. I know it's possible I'm overtaxing my power here since you're already teaching me and—"

Tanderes tapped his fingers on the tabletop. "What did you need, Highness?"

"I suppose I should learn some self-defense as well," Vanlyn said. "I mean I know the basics but—"

"Yes, that is a good idea but," Tanderes said, "I'm not the one to teach you such things. I was never much for fist fighting. What I know, I learned from Lahn Aurris."

This came as a surprise. "Really?"

"He was," Tanderes said, "in that *place* a lot longer than I was. He should be here tomorrow to report, so you can ask him yourself. Realize there's no guarantee he will agree or have the time to tell you much."

"Because he's your man on the mainland," Vanlyn said.

"We are both generals of sorts," Tanderes said.

"I have one last favor," Vanlyn spoke quietly, his eyes on his plate.

"Really, Your Highness—"

"I want to hear Master Aurris make his report."

"You want to hear—?" Dane quirked an eyebrow. "Why?"

"They're my people, aren't they? Captive or not, I'm still a prince of the realm," Vanlyn said. "I want to see how they're doing in this war." He would not admit he was homesick, that he craved any news of the goings on in Ordwyn or of his people. "Father

and Argent may not care about our subjects, but I do.”

“As you wish, Highness.” Tanderes went back to his papers.

Chapter Twelve

“The problem, Your Highness,” Marcelyn Hale examined him with shrewd gray eyes, her fingers thread before her chin, “is that I’m uncertain as to how to pursue this matter.” She took a moment to slice a piece of the succulent ham on her plate. “I appreciate your patience in this matter.”

“I appreciate you’re looking into this,” Vanlyn replied as he sipped his coffee.

Through their breakfast Tanderes had remained silent, speaking only when asked a question, but Vanlyn was very aware of his regard.

They had been over whether or not Vanlyn had any enemies, and Vanlyn assured them that he didn’t. He just wasn’t important enough. And, as for someone trying to get to Aelden or Argent through him, Vanlyn didn’t say so outright, but he knew that idea held no merit whatsoever. Anyone would know that his father and brother wouldn’t be the least bit concerned about his safety. They certainly wouldn’t be affected by any such threats.

The next question was if it was an enemy of Tanderes, and of course, the only name they could come up with was Ramsay.

“Of course, it’s quite a coincidence that this happened right as we managed to hire a Scribe,” Hale continued. “My lord, with your permission I’d like to offer him a permanent position. Apparently, he was released from his position because he refused his employer’s advances.”

Tanderes shook his head. “Very well.”

“He should arrive by the end of the week. Will you be prepared by then?”

“Yes,” Dane said. “I have all the necessary information in order.”

“Excellent.” Hale nodded in approval. “Returning to the original subject, would one of Dawkins’ people actually assist Ramsay?”

“Not without reason,” Tanderes said. “There have been instances of one or the other folk going rogue but what reason would they have?”

“Again it would return to you.” Hale nodded to him. “The tales goes that an ancestor of yours saved the life of one of Dawkins’ ancestors?”

This was something Vanlyn hadn’t heard. He leaned forward eagerly.

“The particulars have been lost through the generations but apparently so,” Tanderes said. “But Dawkins assured me before he left that it was no one in his family.”

Hale shook her head and sighed in defeat. “The only thing I can promise is to have someone patrol your grounds. Send someone out every other evening just to check around.” Hale nodded to Vanlyn. “Highness, my lord, I apologize that I can’t do more.”

“We appreciate anything you can do,” Tanderes said.

Hale rose, and the men followed suit out of courtesy. “I must be off. Thank you for the meal.”

“I’ll see you out,” Tanderes said.

“Safe journey back,” Vanlyn said. He realized he liked Marcelyn Hale even from their brief meeting. She neither condescended nor fawned to Vanlyn, and he could clearly see the wisdom in her.

For a brief moment, he thought to take her aside and ask for her assistance but after

being introduced to and speaking with Hale, Vanlyn put his thoughts aside. He didn't want to place Hale in the unfortunate position of having to choose between Vanlyn and Tanderes. Of course, a persistent and nagging inner whisper told him he should care. Tanderes was his kidnapper, and these people were his accessories.

This brought to life an entirely different train of thought.

Tanderes walked back into the room and took his seat. He poured himself a cup of the fragrant coffee.

"Marcelyn Hale is a good woman. I can tell."

"Indeed she is."

"You do realize what danger you've put her in? The danger you've put all of your people in?"

Tanderes eyes narrowed. "And what danger would that be?"

"Ramsay touched on it somewhat," Vanlyn said. "Even if my father doesn't care about me, what makes you believe he won't do something to punish these people? Or worse, maybe Argent will do something without my father's knowledge. Argent cares nothing for people he feels are beneath him. He'll have this island decimated just to spite you or me. He knows I'll feel responsible because my being here caused it. He won't care about father's reputation."

"You think I don't have ways to protect my people?" Tanderes challenged.

"Against my father's army?"

"I think you overestimate, Highness," Tanderes said. "It's doubtful Aelden will allow Argent to do anything of the sort."

"My lord?" Miranda interrupted the debate. "Master Aurris."

The blond fiend entered the room and halted, an eyebrow raised when he saw Vanlyn, "So, he breakfasts with you now?" Aurris said by way of greeting

"Impressed?"

"I am," Aurris said. "I have good news." Once again, he turned to Vanlyn. "Your Highness, if you'll excuse us."

"His Highness will be staying," Tanderes said.

"What's this?" Aurris' eyes widened in shock.

"His Highness is concerned for his people and his kingdom. It's only fair he knows what goes on."

"Does it matter, considering where he is?" Aurris took a seat and reached for an empty plate, which he proceeded to fill with eggs, ham and biscuits. Coffee with a generous helping of cream and sugar went into his cup. "Very well. As to my news, we commandeered a sizable amount of weapons and goods being secretly transported to aide the soldiers camped outside Ciarri. Thank one of our sisters for that. She infiltrated their ranks and seduced a lieutenant in the Ordwyni troops and obtained his secrets."

Probably one of father's useless bootlicks, Vanlyn thought dourly.

"Excellent." Tanderes nodded once.

"We sent a group of women to the camp with a few of the weapons in their possession," Lahn continued. "We gave them a plausible story to tell, that their husbands were with the caravan and that they escaped when the fiends attacked it." Aurris devoured two eggs in quick succession.

"I thought we agreed—"

"I know," Aurris said quietly. "It seemed the best course of action. I will be truthful."

I'm afraid there were casualties on both sides. I was hoping it could be avoided but..."

Tanderes released a frustrated breath. "Very well. Continue."

"The group split up, and we were waiting for them," Aurris said. "We let a few escape, and then when they brought reinforcements, we were able to catch them by surprise as well, using the women as bait."

"Very dishonorable of you," Vanlyn spoke.

A slight narrowing of his eyes was the only indication that Aurris was angered. "This is a war, *Your Highness*." His tone clearly made the words an insult. "And, to be frank, if you humans weren't so grounded in your belief that we are no more than dim-witted savage beasts, the victory wouldn't have come so easily."

Vanlyn's hand fisted on the tablecloth even as his face burned. He knew Aurris was right. If only his father and Argent had listened to him in the council chamber...

"His Highness isn't like that." Tanderes steepled his fingers and examined Vanlyn over their tips. Vanlyn's blush deepened. "But, even though he suggested such to his father and brother, they dismissed it."

Aurris glanced quickly from Vanlyn to Tanderes then back again, his gaze lingering on Vanlyn for a moment. "I see," was all he said. But that look almost completely unnerved Vanlyn.

"I recommended we press the advantage. Many agreed," Aurris went on. "I regret to say many of our people were becoming impatient. These battles at least slake their blood thirst for a time."

Tanderes muttered something ungentlemanly. "You were saying about pressing the advantage?"

"Of course," Aurris said. "Without the soldiers to protect them, the villages of Allhan and Kettsgate are also ours."

"And our forces are not being stretched thin?"

Aurris grinned in a conspiratory fashion. "Not since several hundred more of our people escaped the rift."

"Yes." Tanderes tapped a fist on the table. "You located a necromancer?"

Aurris hesitated. "A betrayer I'm afraid. Of course we're keeping an eye on him."

"Yes, of course."

"How many people were hurt or killed?" Vanlyn asked.

"Only a few dozen. Men who chose to fight. I assure you we gave them honorable deaths," Aurris said.

Vanlyn was appalled at Aurris' matter-of-fact tone. How could he ask this man to train him? "I suppose you will work your way through all the smaller villages and use the humans there for either labor or to set more traps." His voice was edged with sarcasm.

"There is much to do before we take any further action." Aurris apparently chose to ignore his tone. "Fear and superstition are just as good as weapons as the sharpest blade. One fiend can throw a farming village into a panic."

"I ask you, sir, leave the innocents out of this war," Vanlyn said.

"Don't be naive, pup. No one is innocent in a war. Not even children."

"So if a child is killed, their death holds no significance?" Vanlyn asked. "You merely say his death is a product of war?"

"Did I say—" Aurris' voice fell to a growl, and his face suddenly changed, reshaping itself into something not quite human. "—that *any* of the deaths were insignificant?"

“Lahn.” Tanderes held up a hand. “Let it be. The prince has a favor to ask of you.”

“A favor?” Aurris spat. “You want me to do you a *favor*?”

“Sir, would you teach me to fight?” Vanlyn said.

Aurris gaped at him. His jaw worked for several minutes and sounds of disbelief came forth. Finally, he managed, “You jest.”

“There was an incident here.”

Aurris’ head snapped around to face Tanderes. “An incident?”

Tanderes told of the intruder and how Dawkins and Marcelyn Hale were investigating.

“I could stay if you like,” Aurris said.

For some reason, his offer annoyed Vanlyn a little although he wasn’t sure why.

“No, you’re needed on the mainland,” Tanderes said. “You know I can defend myself but Vanlyn—”

Again came that look. Aurris leaned forward and rested his chin on the heel of his hand. “Realize, Highness, that the fighting I teach you will have nothing to do with honor or fair play. I don’t know how much Dane told you about the world we come from, but those concepts are unknown.”

“I still want you to teach me,” Vanlyn said.

“Very well,” Aurris said. “Since I have to return to the mainland soon, we will begin now.”

Before Vanlyn could even react, Aurris was out of his chair with unnerving speed, and it seemed in an eye blink that the blond fiend took hold of him. There was a glint of light off of cold steel, and Vanlyn dared not swallow as the knife blade pressed to his throat.

“You’re dead,” Aurris said. “That was your first lesson.”

Aurris calmly moved away and went back to his seat. Lifting his fork, he finished his breakfast as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

Vanlyn swallowed finally as he rubbed his hand across his throat and tried to quiet his trembling. “Am I to take it that exercise was to show me that I must be prepared for the enemy strike?”

Aurris didn’t look at him. “Did you convert the old nursery yet?” he asked Tanderes.

“Yes.”

“Fine,” Aurris said. “Eat up, my prince. You’re in for an interesting morning.”

“Have you anything else to report?” Tanderes lifted his cup.

“Only that Baro is missing.”

“Missing?”

“You know it’s not unusual for him to be so for a few days,” Aurris said. “We suspected he would return as usual smelling of wine and old blood, but it’s been a week, and no one has seen him.”

“When was the last time?”

“Right after we took Ciarri,” he said. “He wasn’t doing much to cause the dissention as you ordered him, but it’s all worked out well since the situation had taken care of itself.”

“What was he supposed to be doing?” Vanlyn managed to compose himself enough to ask.

Aurris glanced at Tanderes. “Are you certain you wish to know?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t I?”

“You are apparently the talk of the town, my prince,” Aurris said.

“Me?”

“Some say you were killed by fiends while trying to rescue some dull-witted laborer’s family,” Aurris said. “And others, well, the favorite gossip is that you betrayed your country and allied yourself with the fiends.”

“That’s—” Vanlyn couldn’t find words to describe his distress, “—not true.”

“It benefits us,” Aurris said. “The lords and ladies are beginning to pressure Aelden to seek the truth. He feels it’s unnecessary.”

“How do you know that?”

“We are everywhere, Highness,” Aurris continued. “What you, what many of you, don’t realize is that we were once living, breathing mortals, so we do nothing to betray ourselves to you.”

“Your spies are in my father’s court?”

Aurris rolled his eyes. “Of course, we are. You thought Dane was the only one?”

I’ve got to get out of here and warn them.

“What do you think you’re going to do, Highness?” Aurris’ voice broke into his frantic thoughts. “Escape to warn them? Do you think anyone would listen to you? You could point one of us out, and we could reveal ourselves, and you’d still be called a liar.”

“Damn it!” Vanlyn shoved back violently from the table, his body shaking as he stood and faced the fiend, his fingers flexing. He ached to lash out at the man.

“You want to hear all, pup?” Aurris stood. “Fine. No one cares about your welfare. No one in all of Ordwyn. Your own brother dismissed you as a traitor, and your father feels you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

Aurris went to move past him and laid a hand on his shoulder as he did so. “Come with me now. We’ll start your training in earnest.”

It was almost perverse the way he seemed assured that Vanlyn would follow him. As Aurris footsteps faded into the hall, Vanlyn clenched his hand into a fist, feeling the nails bite into his flesh. Like Dane earlier, he slammed it on the table, but his action was driven by a very different emotion.

“I won’t.” Vanlyn couldn’t keep the tremor from his voice. “I won’t.”

Tanderes hadn’t spoken through the argument, and now he looked at Vanlyn, his face expressionless. Vanlyn violently suppressed the urge to demand why Tanderes hadn’t spoken in his defense.

Why would he? his inner voice challenged. *You know what Aurris said is true.*

He wouldn’t let Aurris show how much his words hurt him even if they were true. Vanlyn forced his footsteps in Aurris’ wake.

* * * *

True to his word, the training that Lahn Aurris put Vanlyn through those few hours had nothing to do with honor. Lahn taught him what he called his own basic moves which involved strikes to the most vulnerable areas on the body, including and more seriously the nether regions. Something Vanlyn would have never considered doing in the past.

And each time Vanlyn didn’t successfully orchestrate a move, Aurris would throw insults at him, goading him on, causing him to anger and make more mistakes which

Aurris explained later was exactly something an enemy would do to distract his opponent.

It was well into the afternoon by the time Aurris called a halt. Vanlyn was sore all over and entirely put out. Worse yet, he realized that everything Aurris was teaching him would be useful in defending himself. Despite his dislike, Aurris seemed to be genuinely imparting his knowledge.

Vanlyn sank down by the window and wiped the sweat dripping from his brow. Aurris tossed him a towel just as Tanderes entered the room.

"All through I see? How was he?" Tanderes held a squat bottle of smoked glass, which he handed to Aurris.

Aurris unstopped it and took a healthy draught. "He is a good student. Although he tends to let his anger get the better of him."

"Yes, he is the same way during my training as well."

Vanlyn was mildly surprised by Aurris' roundabout compliment, and even more shocked when the blond fiend approached him and handed him the bottle.

"Are you willing to drink after a fiend, Highness?"

Vanlyn snatched at the bottle with an annoyed grunt. Aurris chuckled good-naturedly, but Vanlyn had a feeling it was still at his expense. Like Aurris, he drank deeply, realizing it was the wine from the night before. It occurred to him how thirsty he really was as the cool liquid washed down his parched throat. He sighed in contentment.

"I shall take my leave now and return in a fortnight with more news." Aurris turned to Vanlyn. "Keep practicing what I taught you, and we'll continue when I return. I will also bring news of your father's court."

"Very well," Vanlyn said. He suddenly felt envious of the fact that Lahn Aurris and Tanderes could come and go as they pleased. It brought the homesickness, which he'd managed to hold at bay during the training, back to the forefront of his mind.

Said homesickness made Vanlyn decide to have dinner in his room that night. With Dawkins away, Miranda was taking care of the meals, and Vanlyn didn't want to put additional work on her so he made himself some ham and cheese sandwiches and grabbed an apple and a cask of wine on the way out.

He ate his meal quickly. It was more for nourishment than anything. Sunset found him seated comfortably at the window, with pillows propped up at his back. Lahn Aurris' words came to him unbidden, and Vanlyn wondered what news he would bring when he returned.

It was silly that he was homesick. Since his mother and his sister, the only time he was happy there was when he was cloistered in his room with a book. He supposed it was that he missed it, as well as the fact that when things got too volatile at home, he could always go for a walk in the garden or take one of his favorite horses for a ride. Here he was given neither luxury.

"So here you are."

Vanlyn didn't turn at the sound of Tanderes' voice nor did he even acknowledge his presence.

Tanderes was silent for a moment. "You mustn't mind Lahn Aurris. He tends to be ruthlessly honest, but it stems from, well, let's just say he spent a lot of time lying to himself and others before his execution."

He wished Tanderes would go away. He didn't want to be reminded of what Lahn

Aurris had said, despite how true his words were. Vanlyn drew his arms across his chest in a gesture of defense.

“But you know it’s true.” Tanderes footsteps were quiet across the carpet. “You know no one cares about you there. Why yearn for something that causes you pain?”

“Shut up,” Vanlyn muttered.

A slight movement out of the corner of his eye was the only warning Vanlyn had before Tanderes was on him. “What did you say to me?” He roughly grabbed him at the collar.

“Get your hands off of me!”

Tanderes pulled him closer, and pressed his cheek against Vanlyn’s. “I told you never to disrespect me in my house.”

His struggling was a waste of time. Tanderes held him there. His whole body strummed with tension, tight like the string on a lyre. His body jerked convulsively as Tanderes ran a hand through Vanlyn’s hair in a caress. “It would be so easy to take what I want.”

“You,” Vanlyn swallowed, “said you wouldn’t force me.”

Tanderes blew out a breath. “So I did.”

Tanderes released him so abruptly, Vanlyn stumbled back a few steps.

“Good night.” Tanderes left him.

This time Vanlyn gave a sigh borne of frustration.

Chapter Thirteen

Vanlyn's desire to be home didn't fade with the morning. Tanderes had left to run errands all over the island with the promise that he would return in the evening for another training session. Among the duties, he was to perform was mediating between two families over land rights as well as officiating a wedding.

As agreed, a province guardsman stopped by and checked the manor, promising to patrol the grounds until Tanderes returned. Since Vanlyn couldn't go out this left him with very little to do.

Tanderes gave him more books to read on animals so Vanlyn spent the majority of the morning in the library. Afterwards he strolled leisurely through the arboretum, one of the few places he could relax. He loved the moist air thick with the scent of newly tilled earth. There was all manner of flora there, from the mundane to the exotic. Birds flitted about in the tallest, almost tree-like plants raising their branches to the top-most floors of the manor. Vanlyn sensed other life there as well, including insects, squirrels and mice. It was the perfect hiding place from predators, at least as long as Gypsy wasn't on the prowl.

There were benches placed along the marble path, and Vanlyn sat at one for a time, softly calling out until a goldfinch answered his invite. Vanlyn watched with a smile as others joined the bird, and Vanlyn wished he'd brought some breadcrumbs for them. He had to remember for later.

Once again, he found himself considering his options, which he realized, were few. "It's too bad I don't have your gift of flight," he commented aloud. "Or even the gift of levitation. Not that I don't find pleasure in speaking to you, but I truly wish I were an elemental."

The goldfinch hopped up onto the bench next to him, and Vanlyn absently stroked its feathery head with one finger. "I'm in real trouble here." He said it as though he realized it for the first time. "I need to use what they're teaching me to escape. I can't think of anything else." He wasn't physically stronger than Tanderes or Aurris, and he wouldn't dream of hurting or using one of the bogies, even if he could. He doubted they'd allow it anyway. Not for the first time, he had the impression of great power within them. Suddenly restless, Vanlyn pushed up from the bench, causing the birds to scatter in surprise. He continued to walk, and his footsteps echoed with isolation.

He was surprised when he came upon the shrine. Vanlyn had seen such like it before, dedicated to more than one god or goddess, which the varied members of the Tanderes family worshipped in accordance with their practices.

Vanlyn sat and bowed his head. "Lady of Beasts, I ask that you grant me the strength to resist, the wisdom to escape my captivity. Help me find the answers I seek." He always found peace when speaking to the patron goddess of nature. Animals had all the strength and wisdom man lacked. He need but a little bit of that strength and wisdom to triumph over his enemy.

He became aware of Gypsy approaching. She looked up at him, some of the wisdom which he sought hidden in her amber eyes. Vanlyn turned where he sat and stretched out his long legs. Since no cat from the dawn of time itself had ever resisted a warm lap,

Gypsy partook. Vanlyn found his measure of peace in her company and sat with her until the sky darkened with evening.

* * * *

Tanderes returned right after dinner and retired immediately to his study. Vanlyn sought him out after a time. He found Tanderes stretched out in one of the comfortable chairs, his eyes closed in an apparent doze, a brandy glass held loosely in his grasp. He'd loosened his collar and had his stocking feet propped up on a footrest.

"How was the wedding?" Vanlyn said by way of greeting. He stood at the threshold not certain if he'd be welcome.

"Come in and have some brandy," was Tanderes reply. "It went very well. That was my first time actually. I enjoyed it immensely. It went much better than the land issue."

Vanlyn sat down on the settee across from him and sipped the brandy. It was, as most of the things Tanderes seemed to covet, of high quality.

"I could tell they will be very happy together," Tanderes continued. "The groom is originally from Inys. His family was killed in the war. There are many people on this island who lost everything during the wars."

"There aren't problems with so many refugees?"

"There aren't that many. Many people believe that this island was destroyed when the fiends attacked." Tanderes smiled wryly. "Some believe this is a cursed land, beset by fiends and the souls of the dead. It does wonders for keeping the disreputable away."

"Are you the only fiend here?"

"For the moment. At times, others come."

There was a brief pause of almost companionable silence. "I'm glad the couple will be happy. How often do you find the love of your life?"

"Indeed," Tanderes said. "My parents' marriage was arranged, although they grew to love each other after a time. My father treated my mother with the utmost respect and kindness. There was true passion there. They weren't just lovers. They were best friends."

Vanlyn turned his face aside and watched the flames dancing on the hearth. "I wish my mother had known true passion. My father only looked upon her as a means to an heir. He barely allowed her to be near Argent when he got older. He thought she was coddling him too much. There's irony for you."

"Argent is betrothed, correct?"

"He is. She's a minister's daughter. A very intelligent and charming lady."

"You've met?"

"Yes." Vanlyn continued to gaze at the fire. "At her formal introduction. Argent was off rousing with friends during the party. I walked with her in our garden."

"You like her?" Tanderes smiled.

"Yes, but not in a romantic way." Vanlyn sipped some brandy. "We just had a lot in common. She found me easy to talk to, although she did compliment me by saying she wished it were me she was to marry. I wouldn't have been adverse to the idea." He frowned into his glass. "She told me that when she and Argent were alone for a few moments she attempted to tell him of her interests." Vanlyn traced the rim of his glass with one finger, "She breeds champion hounds."

"No jest?"

"She's won competitions." Vanlyn smiled. "She wanted to continue in Toryn. Do you know what my ass of a brother told her? That she would be too busy on her back to be concerned with some stupid hounds."

"He's indeed an ass," Tanderes muttered into his glass. "What happened? Did Argent decide he didn't want to marry her?"

"He put her aside," Vanlyn said. "Because of the war he said. He told her he would send for her eventually. It would have been better for her if he lost interest."

"He would be cruel to her." He spoke it matter-of-fact.

"My brother..." Vanlyn couldn't seem to find his voice. "There were rumors about his ... appetites." Darkness was creeping up on him like a murky fog, enshrouding him, separating him from reality. For a moment, he fell into that place again where memories taunted him but refused to reveal themselves...

"Argent, I don't want to go."

"I don't give a damn what you want. I'll tell father if you don't obey me."

A bloated face with fleshy lips that smiled at him, showing rotted teeth. Hands planted on his back shoved him forward...

"Vanlyn!"

"What?" The urgency pulled Vanlyn from that place. The present swam back into focus. A shudder passed over him. Vanlyn suddenly felt soiled, like something had occurred, and he had not been aware of it.

"You went away again. Lost in memory." He jumped slightly when it came to him how close Tanderes was. When had he moved from his chair? "This has happened several times already. Tell me, where do you go?"

"I don't go anywhere." His protest sounded weak to his own ears. "I just..."

"Just what? Don't you remember? I think there is something eating away at you, but you've hidden it in your mind. What is it, Vanlyn?"

A dull ache started against the back of his eyes. "It was nothing." Then Vanlyn raised his head, hoping his stare was defiant. "It's none of your business anyway."

"So there is something."

"I didn't say that." Vanlyn went to rise, and Tanderes shoved him back by his shoulders. The older man braced both knees on the couch cushions and planted his hands on either side of Vanlyn's shoulders.

"These memories will destroy you if you don't deal with them."

"There are no memories." Vanlyn was surprised at the agony in his voice. "There are no memories..." He was slipping away again. What by the goddess was happening to him? "I was fine until you brought me here."

"I'll not have you keeping secrets from me," Tanderes said. "I will bring these memories out."

"Don't you dare!" Vanlyn shoved, but it was futile. His hands gripped the open collar of Tanderes' shirt. "Please don't."

Tanderes sighed as he ducked his chin. "I would never violate you that way. I thought..."

Tanderes had not touched him for days, so Vanlyn was unprepared when he felt the slim fingers come to rest on him. Vanlyn hissed a breath. Relaxing his body against Vanlyn's, Tanderes closed the trap. Deft fingers stroked his cock and balls through the cloth of his trousers, forcing a feral growl from between his teeth. "Don't."

Tanderes wrapped an arm around his shoulders, gathering him close as he applied more pressure to his touch. Vanlyn's hips arched upwards of their own volition, responding despite his best efforts to resist. He couldn't stop the soft moan that issued from his lips. His head lolled back, and his eyes filled with the shadows dancing across the ceiling.

"So many unpleasant memories." There was a scorn in Tanderes' voice. "Yet you wish to return? What could they possibly give you to make you happy?"

"W-what could y-you possibly give me but lies and b-betrayal?"

Tanderes laughed lightly. He shifted his body again and moved his hardening erection against Vanlyn's, setting the young man aflame. Threading his hand in Vanlyn's hair, he tilted his head back and claimed his mouth with fierce determination. Tongues warred in a heated dance tasting faintly of brandy. Vanlyn was suffocating, drowning in a sea of arousal. Hands that had grasped the folds of Tanderes' shirt now snaked around his muscular shoulders, plying his dark hair.

Tanderes pulled back and seared a path across his heated flesh with his tongue, dipping it into the arch of Vanlyn's collarbone before returning to steal his breath again. "I can give you pleasure," Tanderes murmured into his mouth, pressing Vanlyn's head back as he deepened the kiss. His desire was building, threatening to erupt and pushing him over the edge. *Gods and fiends, I am so close. If only Tanderes would—*

"—or I can give you nothing."

Tanderes drew away from him so abruptly that Vanlyn hands continued to reach out into the empty space. Still surrounded in the sexual haze, it was a few moments before Vanlyn became aware of the rejection.

"Tanderes!" Vanlyn bolted from the settee. Rage overtook him, effectively dampening his ardor. His fists clenched so hard his nails bit into his palms. His teeth ground until his jaw ached. "Damn you, Tanderes!"

The fiend was gone.

* * * *

Dane hastened his stride as he left the study. He hoped that Vanlyn wouldn't follow him. He doubted it. He was quite sure Vanlyn wouldn't want it to appear he was chasing after Tanderes.

And if Vanlyn did chase him?

"Damn," Dane muttered aloud. This was proving to be much harder than he thought. If Vanlyn were more like his brother, Dane's attempts at seduction would be merely a part of the plan, just an unfeeling thing that he did to satisfy a need and further his schemes. As Dane approached his room, he realized something that was going to make his plan all the more difficult to carry out.

He was truly attracted to Vanlyn Sarn.

In the short time he'd been in the prince's company, Dane had seen various sides to the man's personality, from his kindness to his dogged determination, his fierce anger to his sadness and there was much of that. Dane realized he wanted to make it go away.

He imagined, his hand stilling on the doorknob to his room, what he would have done if Vanlyn had approached. He would have taken hold of the young man and punished him with an unrelenting kiss before crushing him against the nearest wall. He'd bare Vanlyn to him in a few moments, and Dane would have rammed himself deep inside

him. There would be some resistance of course...

And that was what stopped him. The resistance. The slightest notion in Vanlyn's mind that he felt forced would ruin all Dane's plans. Any truth-telling would reveal those emotions no matter how faint.

"Damn, get a hold of yourself," Dane growled. He had a duty to his people and to himself. He had ruined his life and disgraced his family. Perhaps he could not redeem himself, but if he found himself once again facing the powers that controlled life and death, he would have at least something for his defense.

As Dane pulled open the door to his room, Gypsy dashed past him. "Now how did you get yourself stuck in there?" Dane called to her retreating figure. He stepped across the threshold and halted.

Something was wrong.

There was an unmistakable sense of magic done. The scent wafted on the air, metallic and dark as it fouled the atmosphere. Yet mingled with it was smoky tinge of a warding activated. He should have noticed it beforehand, but of course, he'd been preoccupied. Now it all seemed to be fading. Someone had tried to get into his room but the warding had stopped them. They even had the nerve to try to break through it. He immediately ruled out the servants. The warding wouldn't stop them to begin with.

That meant—

"Vanlyn." Dane turned and ran for the stairs.

He was just down the hall from the study when he heard the sound of glass breaking and a cry of part anger, part pain. Dane sprinted for the room, not bothering to check for an ambush or trap. Vanlyn was just picking himself up off the floor. An ugly bruise was blossoming on his right cheek. Five gashes tore ragged lines across his shirt. Claw marks.

"Vanlyn..."

The look in his eyes and on his face—part terror, part rage—caused Dane to pause where he stood. "Vanlyn?"

Vanlyn strode towards him, balled his fist, and struck Dane across the face. It was the last thing Dane was expecting, and the force of the blow caused his head to snap back. Dane stumbled and righted himself, his own rage building.

"You son of a back-alley whore!" Vanlyn cried. "What in the nether-hells did you think you were doing?"

* * * *

Dane looked up from the cup of wine he was drinking when Dawkins let himself in thorough the back door. He was early. Dane hadn't expected him to return until tomorrow.

"Sir? Is something wrong?" he said by way of greeting.

Dane took a sip of the ruby drink before responding. "There was another incident."

"It was not one of my people." Dawkins approached the table. "I verified—"

"I know it wasn't one of your people." Dane sighed. The whole thing weighed heavily on him. He would never forget the look of betrayal in Vanlyn's eyes.

"Is Prince Vanlyn all right?"

"I assume," Dane said. "I don't truly know. He won't let me near him."

"But why?" Dawkins said.

Dane blew out a breath, a mixture of frustration and despair. "Because apparently the

one who attacked him was me.”

Chapter Fourteen

Vanlyn propped a chair up against the door, shoving the top of the back under the doorknob. As for his window, he locked it and then stacked bottles of his various toiletries on the sill. At least it would give him some warning if someone entered that way. He simply didn't know what else to do.

Vanlyn sat heavily on his bed. For a time, he stared at his hands, his thoughts a jumble of emotions. Vanlyn was certain of one thing though. He had to escape this manor now. He definitely wasn't safe here.

Most of all he was hurt.

Not physically, although he was. The five lines across his chest had been treated and bandaged. They ached dully but didn't cause him any great discomfort.

The feelings of duplicity annoyed him. Tanderes was his enemy, after all, and had tried to seduce him on several occasions already. Why should this time be any different?

Vanlyn knew the answer of course. Despite the fact that Dane was using him—his emotions and his desire—he had never outright abused him. True he was forceful, using Vanlyn's strong attraction to him against him, and he was humiliated to admit he *was* attracted to Dane, but what had happened in the study...

He had been sitting there with his face buried in his hands, trying to calm his racing heart and throbbing cock as he resisted the urge to pursue Tanderes. The door had come open, slamming against the wall, and Tanderes was there. His face twisted in a look of pure malevolence. The training he had received at the hands of Lahn Aurris escaped him as Tanderes swiftly crossed the room. He pulled Vanlyn up with a violent jerk of his wrist and struck him backhanded across the face.

Vanlyn remembered fighting. His memories of the incident were disjointed as though he were someone else watching Tanderes wrestling with him. Then he was gone. Vanlyn was picking himself off the floor when Tanderes appeared again. Not giving him the opportunity to strike first, Vanlyn was on him, his fist connecting with a sharp crack.

Dane had the insolence to say he wasn't guilty as though to imply that Vanlyn couldn't believe his own eyes. Vanlyn had backed against the fireplace, his hand grasping around the thick metal of the poker. He'd dared Dane to come closer.

Instead, Dane had left him, telling him he was going to check all the wards and muttering about spells deteriorating. Vanlyn knew that magic—like any natural substance—had a shelf life for want of a better term. At times, spells would start to decline, decompose as any living thing exposed to the elements. If so, the spells could react in bizarre and sometimes dangerous ways. That apparently was Dane's theory, that something was going wrong with one of the manor spells.

Vanlyn had chosen to treat his wounds himself and had rushed right to his room.

He didn't believe Dane of course. How could he? As Vanlyn lay across his bed, his hands behind his head, he couldn't help but continually play what had happened repeatedly in his mind.

Vanlyn didn't realize he'd fallen asleep as he suddenly found himself in the library sitting in one of the comfortable chairs. He was confused for a brief moment. Hadn't he been in his room? Or was he dreaming then? He had a glass in his hand, and when he

sipped it, he found brandy or at least what his mind told him was brandy.

“Vanlyn?”

“Dane?” He looked up as the minister approached and took a seat across from him. For a moment, Vanlyn thought he should be scared or angry, but he couldn’t dredge up either emotion. In fact, he felt peaceful and perfectly at ease. The incident was like a distant memory in his consciousness that no longer seemed to matter.

“I’m sorry I had to do this, and I hope you won’t be too cross with me,” Dane said. “But I couldn’t figure out any other way to approach you.”

Vanlyn wasn’t certain he understood. Why would Dane have trouble approaching him?

“First, I wanted to tell you that I have Miranda guarding your door,” Dane said. “And I had Dawkins summon another of his people. A young woman called Tae. She’s guarding your window.”

“All right.” It seemed strange that he’d need guards at all.

“Also, I wanted to make it clear to you that it was not I who attacked you.”

The mention of the attack brought it back to the forefront of his mind. He had been in his room! He remembered now. Vanlyn sat up straighter as realization dawned. This was a dream. Dane had invaded his mind.

“I see you’ve realized what’s happening,” Dane said. “Again, I’m sorry.”

Vanlyn came out of his chair. The glass in his hand was gone abruptly, solidifying the fact that Dane had woven him into a dream.

Dane stood as well but did not approach. “Dawkins and I will be checking the spells all over the manor. It will take some time, and my energy will be depleted. I will probably be unconscious for a number of days, so you’ll be on your own. I’m going to set out more books in the library for you.”

Vanlyn nodded slowly.

Dane took a few tentative steps. “I know you don’t believe me when I say I’m not guilty. You have no reason to believe me after all.”

“I don’t,” Vanlyn said.

Dane was before him although Vanlyn didn’t remember him moving. “Vanlyn, I may be using you for my own ends, but you have my word as an honorable gentleman that I would never abuse you that way.”

As he spoke, Dane drew his face close to Vanlyn’s. His lips brushed Vanlyn’s gently. There was no force in the kiss. It was tender, more an affirmation of Dane’s innocence than his usual attempt at seduction.

Vanlyn awoke with the feeling of Dane’s lips on his.

It came to him, of course, that Dane had been inside his mind, and if he had really wanted to injure Vanlyn, that would have been the perfect opportunity.

Vanlyn swung his legs over the bed and sat up. He stood and approached the door, removed the chair and carefully turned the knob. True to Dane’s word, Miranda was sitting across the hall, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chest. She smiled at him. “Are you all right, Highness?”

“Yes.” Vanlyn smiled in return. “I’m fine. I just wanted to thank you.”

Her face lit up. “It’s no bother, Highness. Rest well. I assure you you’ll be safe.”

He believed her. “Thank you.” He closed the door. Remembering Dane’s words, his curiosity overrode his fear, and he went to the window, removing the bottles and undoing

the latch. Pulling the window open, Vanlyn leaned out, and his jaw very nearly hit the ground below.

She was sitting precariously on the narrow ledge outside of the window, her long shapely legs hanging over the edge. She turned to look at him, and her youthful beauty surprised Vanlyn. Like Dawkins, she seemed to have a firm grasp of human appearance. She had a pixyish look about her and short brown hair that framed her face. Even in the semi-darkness, he could see an almost playful gleam in her dark eyes. If Vanlyn didn't know better, he would say she was around his age. Unlike Miranda, her body was muscular, reminding him of the women of Gan.

"Young lady, is that safe?"

"I'm fine, Highness," she said. "Don't fret. I'll keep anyone from entering."

"I'm grateful, thank you," Vanlyn said.

"You're welcome, Highness. Good night."

He pulled the window closed. Surely things couldn't get any stranger.

* * * *

Vanlyn followed the voices, which eventually led him to the armory. It had been a restless night, despite his bodyguard. He made his own breakfast since Dawkins didn't seem to be anywhere around. Vanlyn soon discovered why when he found both Dane and Dawkins together.

"I don't see how the ward deterioration had anything to do with it," Dane was saying. "Still I think I should repair the three."

"Very good, sir."

"At least I won't have to worry about it later." Dane noticed Vanlyn. "Good morning, Highness."

"Minister, Dawkins." he nodded to both men.

"We've found that the wards here in the armory, the library and my laboratory are starting to decay," Dane said. "So I've decided to renew all three. I've already set out the books for you in the library. While I'm resting, Dawkins and his people will see to all your needs and continue to protect you."

"All right."

"Have you eaten yet? If so, I want you to continue your studies now."

Vanlyn bristled slightly at the order but realized he'd agreed to have Dane as his instructor. "As you wish." It occurred to him as he walked away that this was the perfect opportunity to plan his escape. Vanlyn knew that conjurers were vulnerable in healing sleep. Yes, wards could be set, but another conjurer could break them since the conjurer who set them would not only be devoid of power but also concentration. Being a conjurer of another practice would make it difficult for him but not impossible. It would also take time, sap his own power, and leave him just as defenseless, but he probably wouldn't need to go into healing sleep. Still, there was a chance that something could happen to him, considering there had been two attempts to hurt him.

Still, Vanlyn was willing to try. He'd never broken a ward before, but he was willing to wager there were books in the library that would tell him how. He could break the ward and then...

And then what?

Vanlyn knew of many ways to incapacitate a conjurer in spelled sleep. Of course, the

easiest way would be to kill him. Vanlyn violently shook that thought off. Even though some would say he was within his rights since Dane had attacked him first, killing a man while helpless, in Vanlyn's opinion, was an act of unconscionable cowardice.

Still, there were entrapments he could do. Again, the fact that he was of a different branch of magic would affect how well it worked. If he were a dream-weaver, necromancer or illusionist, there wouldn't be a problem. Naturalists had a closer relationship with elementals and shapeshifters. Since Dane had said elementals were in his family, he had a chance, however slim.

Vanlyn realized he was in front of the library, still musing on his options. The books were where Dane had said they would be. They were more books on the various species of animals as well as on practices directly related to his. Vanlyn set them aside. A cabinet had been set up near the entrance, and like any library, there were printed cards specifying where each book was and its subject. The books he wanted were across the hall, the library taking up two large rooms of the first floor.

He found spell books, specifically one he knew on entrapments and carried them back, adding them to the pile on the table. There he immersed himself in the knowledge so deep he barely noticed when Dawkins brought him in a meal of sandwiches and fruit which he munched on absentmindedly.

It took him the rest of the day to find what he was looking for, and even when he did, he wasn't eager to try it. Vanlyn discovered it was late and sleep was calling to him.

The manor was quiet as he walked to his room, yet he could somehow sense the presence of the bogies. Miranda was at her place by his door again, although how she knew to be there was anybody's guess. She smiled at him as he said good night.

His mind filled with the knowledge he'd gleaned from the books, and he was already formulating a plan as he washed and changed into his nightshirt. There had been a passage in one book where it told how to turn a geas back on the caster. Vanlyn wasn't certain he had the power, but he resolved to try. With that, he wouldn't need an entrapment. He could leave, and Dane couldn't follow. Of course, that wouldn't stop the bogies from following, but maybe he could be away before they caught him.

And, although he hated to do so, the only person he knew where he could go for help in escaping the island was Taddeus Ramsay. There had to be a way to find out where the man was. He supposed he could ask the guard when he returned. He probably wouldn't think anything of it.

Vanlyn was musing on these thoughts when he fell asleep and began to dream.

He found himself walking the corridors of the manor, but there was a definite change in the place. It seemed brighter, like new, as though the clock was turned back to a happier time.

Someone dashed past him. A servant he didn't recognize. The harried woman clutched an armful of towels to her breast. She continued down the hall and disappeared around the corner, her skirt moving breezily behind her.

Two others—an older man and a young woman—walked from the opposite direction. They didn't seem to notice Vanlyn standing there. Somehow, Vanlyn knew these two were a doctor and his nurse. They went down the same hall as the harried girl.

Without even remembering his moving, Vanlyn was walking behind the pair. They stopped at a room halfway down the hall. An older woman ushered them inside.

Vanlyn seemed to know instinctively that this was a birthing room. Although he

thought that knowledge should embarrass him, it didn't. He was supposed to be here.

An older gentleman, whose face bore the aging lines of character and wisdom, leaned casually against the edge of an enormous feather bed. His arm draped possessively across the shoulders of a woman swathed in silk sheets. She was exhausted Vanlyn could tell. Her red-gold hair spilled across the pillow, wet with the testament of her struggle, but her smile was radiant as she cradled a newborn in her arms.

On the opposite side of the bed was a young man just into his teens, and Vanlyn knew who he was immediately. Despite his face still bearing the softness of youth, those piercing dark eyes were unmistakable.

"May I hold him?" Young Dane asked with awe.

"Of course, son, he's your little brother after all."

His mother showed Dane how to hold his arms as his father gently laid the infant across them. Dane cuddled the baby against him. "Hello, little brother. I'm Dane. I'm going to look out for you just as I promised Mother and Father. I swear on my honor I'll never let ill befall you."

Mother and Father smiled at their son with love and pride. Vanlyn felt a twinge of envy in his chest. He so wished things were like that for him. When had his father ever looked at him with such pride? When was the last time he had seen his mother's smile?

Vanlyn realized he was no longer alone in his private world.

Dane spoke at his side. "That's my little brother, Trey. He means the world to me. He wasn't well growing up, and I swore to always look out for him."

Vanlyn wondered why Dane was showing him this. He realized that Dane was weaving a dream within a dream, simple since he was already in a deep sleep unlike if he were awake. And this was Dane's dream where Vanlyn was the visitor. Dane wasn't intruding in Vanlyn's mind, merely showing Vanlyn something of his.

The scene before him began to fade, and the next that opened up before him was a room filled with people. The men smoked fat cigars. The women sipped brandy and gossiped in their circle. One man, a plump and hearty older gentleman, waved the cigar he had clutched between two fingers in an exaggerated motion as he slapped young Dane good naturedly on his back. The boy winced, but managed a grin.

"Well, Dane," the man boomed, "looks like you've got a big responsibility coming your way!"

"Father said so." Dane smiled.

"He is correct," a woman said. She was around Vanlyn's age with auburn hair done up in classic chignon. She sat demurely with her hands in her lap. "You'll be responsible for taking care of your little brother."

"I will," Dane said resolutely.

Thoughts of Argent filled Vanlyn's mind. His earliest memory of his brother was unpleasant. The image of him laughing as one of his friends shoved Vanlyn into the mud still brought an ache of betrayal.

The scene faded again, and this time Vanlyn found himself in another bedroom, but the atmosphere was decidedly different. There was an aura of sickness and pain about the place. Several men of varying ages, all doctors, surrounded another over-large bed that seemed to swallow the pale form of a red-haired boy.

"Trey," Vanlyn said the name aloud as he reached out, yet he couldn't seem to touch the lad.

The doctors were muttering and shaking their heads, each expression grim. The boy laid there with a look of defeat on his face that made Vanlyn's throat tighten. Someone that young should not look that way.

In an eye-blink, the doctors were gone, and the boy was alone. He turned a baleful stare at Vanlyn, and for a moment, he was sure the child could see him. The look chilled Vanlyn to his bones.

Then Dane was there, a strapping sixteen-year-old on the verge of manhood. His brother's whole countenance changed when Dane appeared. There was true admiration in Trey's eyes for his older brother.

"Come on, Trey, let's go."

The boy was thoroughly confused. "Where are we going, Dane?"

His brother grinned in a conspiratory fashion. "We're going out to play."

Then they were outside. Dane didn't try to dictate what Trey did. He let his brother explore their surroundings on his own. The two of them walked along the small creek that flowed through their property and hunted frogs in a shallow pool. They fished and splashed in the water, then dried off by racing through a meadow full of wildflowers, the sun beating down on them until they were red with sunburn.

Vanlyn had never seen a little boy so joyous.

So he was infuriated, along with Dane, when the brothers returned to their manor to be confronted by the doctors.

They gathered in the library along with Dane's parents. The moment he saw them, Trey pressed himself against Dane's side, his tiny fingers clutching desperately to Dane's arm.

The eldest doctor, a fat old man with bulbous eyes and a haughty way about him, strode across the room to confront Dane first. "Master Dane, forgive my airs but what the hell did you think you were doing?"

Dane glanced in his father's direction, and the man's almost imperceptible nod was all the permission Dane needed before he faced the doctor again. Although still in his teens, Dane was at least a head taller. "I'll ask you to watch your tone with me, sir."

The man became to sputter and bluster at such supposed impudence even though as a High Lord's son it was Dane's right. A second man, this one tall and lithe with a cadaverous face, said in a coolly condescending voice, "Was it your wish to kill your brother?"

Dane turned fiercely on him, his dark eyes alight with fury. "It was my wish to keep you charlatan pricks from killing him!"

"I say that's quite enough!"

"No, it is not," Dane said. "I've watched you bastards poke and prod at him until you sucked the very life from him. Well look at him, you dim-witted old sons of bitches; he's happier than he's been in years. And since I have no desire to further subject him to your cock and bull, we're leaving."

As he turned to go, the thin doctor grasped his arm. "I would advise against this course of action. You obviously care little about his welfare. I won't allow you to interfere further, boy."

Dane's whole body coiled tense as a tiger about to spring. "Trey, why don't you go into the kitchen and have a snack?"

"Dane?" Trey looked at him, obviously worried but not for Dane's safety.

“It’s all right, really,” Dane said.

The moment Trey vacated the room, Dane turned and slammed his fist into the doctor’s aquiline nose.

Vanlyn gave a cheer and pumped his fist into the air.

Dane looked at the man with disgust as he lay sprawled on the floor, gingerly prodding his bleeding nose.

“Now does anyone have any further objections?” Dane eyed each man in the room. No one spoke of course. Many could not even look him in the eyes. His father, on the other hand, bore a look of pride for his eldest son, perhaps because Dane had acted when he had not.

As Dane left the room, the fat man started his sputtering again.

Vanlyn came awake and frowned thoughtfully as he sat up in bed. He was unsure as to why Dane had allowed him to see those memories. They kept him thoughtful for the rest of the day, even through his studies and his meals, and when he retired that night, they came again.

At the start of the dream, Vanlyn found himself in the kitchen. Four men sat around the table playing cards—Dane and a much older and healthier Trey, along with two others.

“My brothers Aron and Locke,” Dane explained. Like Dane, these men were dark-haired and eyed like their father.

“How many are in your family?” Vanlyn asked.

“Five besides myself.” Vanlyn could hear the smile in Dane’s voice. “I have two sisters.”

The remains of their food and drink, as well as a healthy pile of coins and possessions, sat atop the table, most before Trey. It was a pleasant scene of brothers enjoying each other’s company. There was an obvious mutual love and respect amongst them.

Vanlyn’s attention turned to the rear exit when the heavy wood door came open a crack and a young girl of about fourteen slipped through. She was obviously trying to move past, hoping the men didn’t notice. Vanlyn cursed when he saw her torn dress and the smudges of dirt of her smooth face. Her eyes were swollen and red from crying. She clutched at the tattered bodice in a vain attempt to keep herself covered. As she moved closer, Vanlyn could see angry bruises on her arms.

“Amalia?”

She started and turned to look at the four, her eyes doe-wide.

“Gods and fiends, Amalia what happened?” Trey reached her first.

The questions came at the girl rapid fire.

“Where have you been?”

“Who did this?”

“Amalia, say something!”

“Stop!” It was Dane as he motioned his brothers away. “Buttercup, tell me what happened?”

Amalia made a soft mewling sound before throwing herself against Dane’s chest and breaking down into hysterical weeping. Dane gently cradled her against him and made soothing noises as he smoothed her hair.

“What’s going on?”

Another woman, an older version of Amalia strode into the room. “Dear gods—” Assessing the situation immediately, she crossed the room. “Let me see to you, sweetheart.” She looked at Dane. “Did she say—?”

“No,” Dane said.

“Come in a little while.”

Dane nodded. The older woman led Amalia out of the kitchen, leaving four stunned and very angry men in her wake.

The dream shifted abruptly, and Vanlyn found himself in a bedroom that he knew to be Amalia’s. The older woman was just putting her to bed. Dane stood at the threshold, and his brothers tarried in the hall.

“Corlaine, you won’t go far, will you?” Amalia asked as Corlaine moved towards Dane.

“No, love of my life.” Corlaine smiled at her.

From Corlaine, Dane learned what happened, and by route, so did Vanlyn.

Amalia was betrothed to a young man a few years her senior, an arranged marriage when she was but a toddler. The intended was the son of a local Magisteri.

With their parents away, Amalia was left to her own devices. The boys were playing cards, and Corlaine was working on a new gown for a neighbor’s daughter. Amalia had watched Corlaine for a time but then grew bored. The door chime caught her attention, and Amalia was surprised to find a messenger there with a note from her intended inviting her to his home to discuss wedding arrangements. In her innocence, Amalia could only think of the fact that she was going to have an adult conversation with her beloved.

So she’d stolen from the manor, saddled her favorite pony, and had ridden through the gathering dusk to his home.

He greeted her at the door as polite as ever and led her to a receiving room where he offered her refreshments. There they sat and talked over things like invitations and the menu. Amalia was so into this she didn’t notice her intended’s two brothers moving about the room, guarding the exit, barring her escape.

It wasn’t until he tried to touch her inappropriately and refused to stop after she’d demanded it that Amalia realized what trouble she was in.

Her magic saved her. A fire elemental just coming into her power, Amalia managed to fight them off long enough to attract the attention of several servants. In the chaos that ensued, she escaped.

Vanlyn could feel the rage pouring off Dane in heated waves, despite the fact that this was merely a memory. Vanlyn’s fury ignited at the man who would abuse an innocent little girl.

Barely containing his rage, Dane approached his younger sister. “I have something for you, Buttercup.” Dane then weaved an elaborate illusion of mystical beasts and beings that cavorted and danced to entertain her.

“Dane, wait!” Amalia reached out to him. She seemed to Vanlyn much more mature than her years. “Please don’t kill him. I don’t want you to go to prison because of him. Please give me your word.”

Dane didn’t even attempt to deny his purpose. “All right you have my word.”

“Please be careful,” Corlaine said. “Don’t let anyone see you.”

Dane and his brothers left the manor and strode towards the stable.

“We’re not going to kill him?” Trey asked.

“I gave Amalia my word.”

“We didn’t,” Locke said bitterly.

“No,” Dane said. “It would hurt Amalia. We’ll deal with them.”

The four rode swiftly to the manor. Their violent pounding was answered by a young maid who took one look at them, stepped aside and said, “The master will be home within the hour. You have that long.”

So she knows, Vanlyn thought as he followed the four through the halls.

They came upon the three lounging in the receiving room, nursing their wounds and their egos. Dane stepped across the threshold first and flung a violent illusion at them of cold-eyed serpents crawling all over their bodies, sinking horrible fangs into their flesh and making their blood boil with poison. The sight even caused Vanlyn to shudder.

When the three came to themselves again, Amalia’s intended bolted for the nearest exit. The others tried to impede Dane from pursuing him and found themselves dealing with Trey, Locke and Aron.

Dane caught up to his quarry easily. He was half-drunk and scared out of his wits. Mindful of his promise, Dane gave him a sound thrashing but not so much that he lost consciousness. He then dragged him to the garbage heap and flung him down. Dane cast an illusion of light, wanting the man to see his face. It had the desired effect. He looked upon Dane with terrified eyes.

“I want you to listen well,” Dane said. “Tomorrow you will announce that the arrangement is off. And you will do so in a manner that places the blame squarely on you. Nothing derogatory is to be said about my sister. In fact, if my sister’s reputation is damaged in any way, I’ll make you pay. Understood?”

He nodded.

“Furthermore, you are to never call upon her, approach her, talk to her or even look at her ever again. Clear?”

Another nod.

“And if you need greater incentive to do what I say consider this. The only reason why you are still breathing is because she asked me not to kill you despite what you tried to do. So you owe her your life.” Dane turned. “My brothers and I will see ourselves out. Good night.”

The next morning word came of the annulment. Amalia’s reputation went undamaged to the point of people rallying behind her against the cad who would dare act irresponsibly. No mention was made of Dane’s visit.

Chapter Fifteen

Vanlyn had many other dreams.

Some were of pleasurable times with the family. Simple things that they did every day like eating meals together, taking trips or going about family business. Others were more specific. There was a time when Dane helped search for a child lost in the woods and found her before night fell. Vanlyn had experienced the same sense of relief everyone had.

Other instances had him chuckling in his sleep. Like the time Dane and Trey had gone fishing and had both ended up tipping the boat and dropping unceremoniously into the pond. Corlaine met them on the shore and took in their drenched and muddy appearance with her hands on hips and her lips pursed in bemusement. Both Dane and Trey stood there, trying their best to look contrite and failing.

Vanlyn saw many things. Births, deaths, accomplishments and camaraderie. Things he missed so terribly. Corlaine reminded him of his own sister. He ached to know more about her, and Dane obliged him. Even though when he woke he plotted what he would do to escape, at night he found himself hungry for more glimpses of this family who went through life's happiness and trials as a single family unit. Yes, there were disagreements, but they never lasted longer than necessary, and when they did, High Lord Tanderes intervened, sitting all parties down and giving them a stern lecture.

Vanlyn came to know eventually why Dane was showing him glimpses of his life, and it angered him that Dane would use such a loving family in that way. Vanlyn was angrier with himself for falling for the ruse. The man he saw in his dreams was not a kidnapper and fiend, but a caring gentle man of the family who was willing to do anything to protect those he loved and cared about. It was as though Dane was saying, *See my true self and come to care about me.*

Dane awoke five days later. Vanlyn was completely surprised to find him in the dining room that morning with his breakfast and piles of papers. He halted with a start at the threshold of the entrance.

Dane looked up at him. "Good morning."

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"Very well," Dane said. "Will you have breakfast with me? I have to leave soon."

Cautiously, Vanlyn slid into a chair. Although he no longer believed Dane had attacked him, he was particularly wary considering what he was going to try. Dane had been in his mind, and he wasn't certain how much Dane had seen.

"It seems work has gotten away from me, and I have much catching up to do," Dane said. "I'll be back late this evening. If not too late, we can continue our studies. I see you finished all the books?"

"Yes," Vanlyn said softly as he looked down at his plate. *Those and others.*

"Perhaps I should ask *you* how *you* are."

Vanlyn's head snapped up. "I'm fine."

"After everything you've seen?"

Vanlyn's grip tightened around the fork. "I know what you're trying to do, and I think it's disgusting."

“What?”

“You’re using your family and the memories of them to try and sway me. You should be ashamed.”

The look Dane gave him caused a shiver to pass along his skin. There was icy disdain in his dark eyes. “Is that what you believe?”

Vanlyn swallowed. “What else am I to believe?”

Dane’s silence was more nerve-wracking than anything he could have said. He went back to his papers. Vanlyn suddenly lost his appetite. He pushed back from the table. Dane didn’t even acknowledge his departure.

He thought to head to the library to begin his studies, but Vanlyn found himself too preoccupied to concentrate so he began wandering as he’d done before. He realized that his steps led him to the family gallery. Vanlyn knew not to venture into the living gallery, but this place contained portraits of the Tanderes line over several generations. Vanlyn had mused on them before but now their images held new meaning to him after experiencing their lives indirectly.

He recognized Dane’s immediate family of course. One of the first paintings was of Corlaine posed on the edge of a settee, the picture of elegance in a gold ball gown, her nimble fingers caught in the action of sewing a piece of cloth.

“That’s one of my favorites.” Dane stepped up beside him. “Although neither one of us could fathom why the artist insisted she dress up like that to sew.”

A chuckle escaped, which Vanlyn tried and failed to smother with his hand.

They moved a little to the left to a portrait of the Tanderes men. Thoughtful Trey, mischievous Locke, studious Aron, and of course Dane, standing at the very rear seeming to encompass the rest with his forceful presence.

“We got into trouble a little bit after the artist finished. Mother and Father should have known better than to get us together like that.” Vanlyn could hear the fond smile in Dane’s voice. “The artist was an insufferably arrogant pig, so Locke came up with the perfect prank. Unfortunate for the artist and just as much for us when we were found out. Father was not pleased to have to pay extra for the so-called emotional trauma. Still, we felt it was worth it.”

“That’s Amalia and her husband.” Dane nodded at the portrait. “I’m surprised the poor man didn’t run away screaming the way we tortured him. Locke came up with some very inventive pranks for him. But, he took everything in good humor, and we all came to be great friends.”

Her husband stood behind Amalia’s chair, his hands resting on her shoulders. Two children sat at Amalia’s knee. The artist was a true talent for he had captured their looks of contentment perfectly.

“My niece,” Dane said. “She’s the one I told you about who is still alive and living here on the island. She’s Amalia’s daughter.”

It struck Vanlyn as he looked at the row of portraits how utterly alone Dane must feel. No, it was more than utterly alone. Vanlyn didn’t believe there were words to describe such isolation. To make a fatal mistake, die for it, then return only to find that everyone and everything you held dear was gone.

Dane had moved farther down the hall. When Vanlyn approached him, he said, “Before I died, I told Trey to look after the family. I know I should have told Locke being the oldest but—” He sighed heavily. “I knew Trey.”

The portrait before which Dane stood was of him and Trey, their arms draped around each other's shoulders, their faces alight in grins of mischief.

Vanlyn glanced at Dane. His whole body was tense. His fists clenched, his knuckles white he said, "Trey died three weeks before I..." His head bowed, he closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them, they glistened with unshed tears. "I was so stupid and arrogant. I lost everything. I saw how they fared afterwards." Dane faced him, his next words spoken on a sob. "You see things. Visions of those you've left behind come to you in dreams. Even when they die you see and feel their supreme joy as they go to their reward, and you know it's lost to you."

Dane faced the portrait again, and his chest heaved with ragged breaths. "Three weeks!" The tears fell then. "If I had only escaped three weeks earlier I could have talked to him. Told him I was sorry. Said good bye..."

"Dane, stop it!" Vanlyn grasped both of Dane's hands in his and squeezed. "I may have never met Trey or the others, but truthfully from what you've shown me of them, I think I can honestly say that they wouldn't want you to punish yourself this way. The only thing they would want for you is to be happy."

Dane looked at him with an expression that was a mixture of sorrow and admiration. Vanlyn wiped the tears from Dane's cheeks with the backs of his thumbs.

"Vanlyn." Dane kissed him. A gentle pressure of his tongue, and Vanlyn parted his lips, allowing Dane entry. Vanlyn held Dane's face in his hands, allowing Dane to express his heartache and his gratitude. Vanlyn didn't fight or try to pull away. Dane needed this, and he wasn't so heartless as to refuse him.

Dane broke the kiss. There was a brief flash of confusion across his face, then understanding. "Thank you, Vanlyn."

Vanlyn cleared his throat and abruptly turned away, suddenly embarrassed. Gods and fiends, what was the matter with him? He received a further shock when Dane embraced him from behind.

"Vanlyn," he said. "I'm not trying to use my family to sway you. I just want to, I need for you to..."

The meaning of Dane's words was clear. *I want you to understand why I'm doing this.* Although at the same time, Vanlyn wondered why Dane cared what he thought. He was a captive after all. And Vanlyn did understand. This was Dane's atonement. He had failed to take care of his family and his business. Now he looked after his people, both fiend and mortal. He was willing to do whatever was necessary to bring them victory. Vanlyn was just one man in the scheme of things. He should be willing to sacrifice himself.

Nevertheless, Vanlyn wasn't agreeable to being the lamb lead to the slaughter. As much as he may grudgingly admire Dane for his conviction, he refused to be a pawn. He would make his attempt to escape tonight when Dane returned.

* * * *

It had been a bad day.

Dane climbed from the horse and fought his annoyance long enough to leave him in Kellen's care without biting the poor bogie's head off. He removed the leather case he carried from where it tied to the saddle. In it were copies of a petition and land ownership that he'd have to go over tonight. As Dane walked across the yard towards the kitchen

entrance, he flexed his shoulder, annoyed that it ached when he did so.

He had hoped the land dispute would be resolved today. The involved parties included his cousin and a cousin of Ramsay's so things were volatile from the start. Ramsay's cousin claimed Dane's cousin had encroached on his land. Dane's cousin had said the land belonged to him but unfortunately didn't have the papers to prove it. Ramsay's kin wanted to take it before the Council, not giving Dane's cousin a chance to find the papers. Dane thought it was only fair to give all parties a chance to prepare.

Ramsay's side didn't feel that way and felt Dane was playing favorites. To be honest, Dane didn't see a problem. There was plenty of grazing area, and the water flow was more than adequate so it wasn't as if either side's livestock was getting more benefits than the other was.

Unfortunately, his attempts to work out a compromise met with stiff resistance that unfortunately escalated into a physical confrontation. Dane had gotten hurt only because he'd been forced to hold back to prevent from killing Ramsay's nephew when he attacked.

Dane strode through the kitchen, which thankfully was empty, although dinner simmered on the stove. He heard someone moving around the pantry and guessed it was Dawkins, but Dane wanted badly to get to his room and change out of his torn clothes.

First, he'd drop the case off in the library. No point in lugging it all the way—

The almost eerily sudden appearance of Vanlyn standing before him caused him to stop abruptly, his head snapping up. His brow furrowed, his mind still on the land dispute, and it was a moment before Dane sensed the building of energy in the air that precluded a powerful spell.

Vanlyn cried out the words of power, and as time slowed, everything came into sharp focus as the red-hot ribbons of energy flowed from Vanlyn's fingertips, reaching to ensnare him. Dane knew them for what they were immediately.

His reaction was bad. Still furious from being attacked, that anger formed a solid wall of his own power. The need to retaliate, to punish, reinforced it so when Vanlyn's entrapment hit Dane's protection, the strike went back at him full force.

"No!" It was too late. There was no way to stop it. "Vanlyn, protect—!"

The entrapment hit him, wrapping cords of white-hot fire around his muscles. All this Dane could see as plainly as he saw Vanlyn standing there. Dane watched as Vanlyn's body seized in one painful spasm. His mouth opened wide, but no sound came forth. Like a lead weight, his body dropped.

Dane transformed mid-leap, his wings beating the air as his fist closed around the collar of Vanlyn's shirt. Dane could see the agony in Vanlyn's eyes. Tears began to stream down his face as the only expression of his pain left to him.

"I have you, Van," Dane said. "Dawkins, quickly!"

The old bogie assessed the situation immediately. "I'll bring the tea."

Dane gently cradled Vanlyn's head in his lap. A soft grunt was the only sound he made. "Oh, Van, I know you're in pain, but it will have to last a little longer. Dawkins' tea will help some, but further measures must be taken."

Dawkins returned with the cup filled with the steaming brew. "Sir, what did happen?"

Dane grinned. "He attempted to turn the geas on me."

"You seemed pleased by that." Dawkins raised a brow.

"I am pleased." Dane held the cup to Vanlyn's lips. "As his teacher, I am pleased that he learned enough to make the attempt. He would have had me at any other time."

He looked down at Vanlyn. "I'm sorry I allowed the spell to turn back on you so violently, but you took me by surprise."

When the cup was empty, Dane said, "Would you prepare his bed and bring some salve up, Dawkins?"

"Right away, sir."

"Vanlyn." Dane brushed back a strand of honey-colored hair. "I'm going to lift you. It will hurt, so prepare yourself."

Vanlyn blinked twice, and Dane took that as consent. He gathered the younger man in his arms. A strangled grunt was the only sound he made.

As much as Dane wanted to rush, he didn't want to cause Vanlyn any further pain, and by the time he reached Vanlyn's room, Dawkins already had everything prepared. Dane laid Vanlyn across the bed. "I'm going to have to undress you, all right?"

Two blinks. Dane started with his shoes and worked his way up until Vanlyn was naked on the bed. Dane was aware of the splashes of color on Vanlyn's cheeks, and despite their position, Dane couldn't help but admire Vanlyn's finely sculpted body.

Dawkins had left him a large jar of salve on the nightstand. Dane spoke as he broke the seal. "Vanlyn, I'm going to take care of you now so you have to trust me." Dane took a generous glob of the salve and spread it across his palms. Starting with Vanlyn's arms, Dane first applied the salve to his skin and began to knead at the stiff muscles with the tips of his fingers. His other arm received the same treatment. He had to take extra care with Vanlyn's torso. Dane felt Vanlyn's stomach muscles quiver in response as he rubbed. His legs were next. Dane's hands came aching close to Vanlyn's cock as he applied greater pressure. Vanlyn grunted, but Dane continued. He was gentle where he needed and pressed with his knuckles among the more difficult areas of muscle.

The fact that Vanlyn was hard didn't go unnoticed by Dane.

"I see you're truly enjoying this." Dane smiled gently. "A pity you're in such straits. I would love to have my way with you."

There was a slight rumbling in Vanlyn's chest that Dane recognized as a chuckle. His skin was flushed pink, although Dane couldn't fathom why he was embarrassed.

"It's all right, you know," Dane said. "You don't have to be worried. As much as I want to have you, I know I can't."

Dane stepped back. "I'm going to turn you over now. It may hurt a bit."

Dane climbed onto the bed, straddled him and went to work on his shoulders. It was agony being in this position with him, so Dane fought to concentrate on his task. The muscles there were harsh twisted balls. Dane applied more pressure. "You may feel as though you failed, but I must commend you on your effort. At such an early stage in your teaching, you shouldn't have been able to attempt that spell. It would have worked if I hadn't been so angry in the first place."

As Dane continued down Vanlyn's back, he said, "I'm proud of you."

He didn't speak after that, continuing down Vanlyn's legs until he heard the young prince moan in response. It was a vicious battle. Seeing that delectable ass of his, Dane could barely resist the urge to coat his finger with salve and explore deeply. Would Vanlyn allow it? Then he shook off those feelings. Vanlyn was in no condition to do anything.

Dane finished his ministrations and then capped the jar again. "You should feel better later. I'll bring you something to eat."

For a moment, he stood beside the bed, tracing the plains and valleys of Vanlyn's body with his eyes. His skin glistened with the salve, enticing him to run his tongue over the smooth flesh. Dane released a breath and pulled his shirt over his head. He sat on the bed and pulled off his boots.

"I'm going to lie down beside you." Dane didn't wait for a response. He stretched his tall frame across the bed and gently draped his arm across Vanlyn's back. His hand entwined with Vanlyn's as it lay across the pillow. To his surprise, Vanlyn's grip on his hand tightened slightly.

"Rest, Van," Dane said. "I'll be right here."

* * * *

Vanlyn was sitting propped up against the pillows when Dane brought in a tray. It was well after midnight, and Dane had slipped from the bed when he felt Vanlyn first come awake. He lit lamps and instructed Vanlyn to remain. *Well, at least he obeyed my orders in a sense.*

Vanlyn looked with mild interest at the food, thick ham and cheese sandwiches and grapes plucked fresh from the vineyard. A cup of the special wine was there to slake his thirst.

"Are you feeling better?" Dane asked.

"Yes, much better." Vanlyn turned his face aside but not before he saw the man blush. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Dane sat down on the bedside. "I'm not angry, you know."

Vanlyn opened his mouth as though to speak, then closed it. "I'm never going to get out of here. Not that it matters. I don't know what's wrong with me. Maybe Argent and my father are right. Maybe I'm just—"

"That's enough!" Dane said. "When are you going to realize what a good person you are? That anything your brother and father say is meaningless?" He moved the tray aside and placed it on the floor then crawled farther up on the bed until he was so close to Vanlyn he could feel the young man's breath on his face. "You would make a better High Lord than the two of them put together and do you know why?" His mouth met Vanlyn's as the prince grasped his shirt, pushing back, but Dane refused to yield. His tongue tasted and probed, his mouth swallowed the impassioned moan that erupted from Vanlyn's throat. Dane pulled back slightly. "Because you give a damn." One hand wrapped around Vanlyn's wrist, pushed it against the pillow, locking it there. The other curled at the nape of Vanlyn's neck. Dane tasted him deeply, sucked at his lower lip and traced it with his tongue. The sound of Vanlyn's breath catching in desperation goaded him on.

Dane was finished playing the game.

He abandoned Vanlyn's mouth and licked a wet trail down his throat, lapping at his skin, tasting the medicinal salve. Vanlyn grunted when Dane bit into the soft flesh at the base of his throat. Dane was pleased with the mark that remained. He realized he wanted to do more than just mark him. He wanted to brand him, possess him. Ingrain himself deep in Vanlyn's soul.

Dane continued to trace patterns with his tongue, stopping at the dark nipple, sinking his teeth again, sucking roughly, smiling when Vanlyn cried out and his back arched.

Dane moved to the other side, savoring the taste of him like a fine wine.

When Dane withdrew to look at Vanlyn's face and saw the ardor there, he knew he couldn't refuse the young man completion this time. Dane drew away for a moment to retrieve the box that Vanlyn had left on the nightstand. Dane laid it on the bed beside them as he resumed his place. The click of the latch caused Vanlyn's eyes to snap open. He lifted himself slightly on his elbows and watched with a look of sheer panic. "What are you doing?"

Dane completely ignored his question as he withdrew the jar of ointment and one of the phallic rods.

"No wait—"

"No," There was a cold finality in Dane's voice. He smeared the gel on his palms and wrapped both hands around Vanlyn's length. Vanlyn gave a strangled cry as his body slammed back into the soft mattress. Dane's left hand continued to massage the thick length, while his right went to cup Vanlyn's sac, applying a slight pressure. The sight of Vanlyn writhing on the bed was the sweetest torture for Dane. His own arousal pushed insistently against his trousers.

Dane dipped three fingers into the jar again and planted his free hand on Vanlyn's right thigh, pushing it aside and smeared a generous glob across Vanlyn's opening.

"This may hurt at first," Dane said gently. "So you must be still. Once I reach inside of you, the feeling will be more than you can endure I promise."

"D-dane, please—"

"Hush." Dane applied more of the gel to the rod and positioned it at Vanlyn's opening; the first tentative push brought a grunt from Vanlyn's throat. Dane was beyond being able to stop. He pushed farther until it was completely enveloped. Dane drew the rod out and twisted it a half turn before pushing it completely in again. He repeated the action several times while he spoke. "Do you feel where I'm touching you, love? Do you crave this sensation?"

"Yes," Vanlyn moaned. "Oh Dane—,"

Dane stretched himself across Vanlyn's body, his skin moist with sweat. "Here, touch me," Dane commanded as he undid his trousers, freeing his straining cock. He grasped Vanlyn's hand and guided it to his member, wrapping Vanlyn's fingers around it.

"Oh yes, love, that's it. Don't be afraid." Dane was rapidly losing himself in what Vanlyn was doing to him. He fought for control. As much as he wanted to finish Vanlyn off, there was still that chance that the prince may have some doubts about what he was doing. But the time was soon. Dane would wait no longer.

"Enough." Dane pulled back and reached to remove the rod. Taking Vanlyn in hand once again, Dane pressed his lips and murmured against Vanlyn's length, which was red and throbbing, glistening with the salve.

"Stop it." The words were an impassioned plea.

"No, Vanlyn," Dane said. "I have no intention of stopping."

He swallowed Vanlyn whole, letting his cock touch the back of his throat. Gods and fiends, nothing had ever felt so wonderful. Dane's eyes gazed on Vanlyn whose own were wide in shock, his mouth open but no words formed.

Dane pulled up, savoring this even more, this heady taste of Vanlyn's skin. He watched as Vanlyn's head thrashed back and forth and as his hands reached out to force Dane's head down farther and hands fisting in his Dane's hair.

Dane reached across once again and wiped the jar clean of its contents, letting the salve run down his fingers. He positioned his body slightly to the right to give himself better access and pushed two fingers into Vanlyn's opening.

"No, please... oh gods!" The cry that burst forth caused Dane to go deeper until he touched the place that had Vanlyn lifting his hips from the bed, taking on a rhythm of sucking him off and fucking him with his fingers. Dane forced Vanlyn to that pinnacle, and when he tumbled over, Vanlyn screamed his name.

Vanlyn filled his mouth and his throat, and Dane drank greedily, milking every drop of the young man's essence. When Vanlyn's thrashing finally subsided, Dane lapped up the remaining like a man dying of thirst, withdrawing once Vanlyn stilled.

Dane was now in desperate need himself, his cock so painfully swollen that Dane knew release was his only choice. "Vanlyn, look at me," he demanded of the young man.

Vanlyn's eyes were wide and unfocused, but at the sound of Dane's voice, his attention diverted to the man. "You'll watch me." Dane began to pleasure himself, allowing the fire to overtake him and consume him. Yet, on a primal level, he knew Vanlyn watched, knew the man was aroused by the sight. When Dane reached his own completion, his essence splashing across Vanlyn's stomach, he fell against the prince's body and waited for his breathing to slow and for his pounding heart to quiet.

It was several moments before either of them spoke.

"I don't..." Vanlyn muttered. "Why did you..."

Dane managed a wry chuckle. "I wanted to suck you off."

Vanlyn drew in a sharp breath. Dane lifted himself off Vanlyn's chest and saw Vanlyn's eyes wide in shock once again as his breathing came in short gasps. "But I want more now. I want to fuck you. I want to bury myself so deep in you you'll never get me out. I want your total unconditional surrender. I want to possess you—your body and mind—and I will. You will belong to me, Vanlyn Sarn."

Dane pushed away, looking down at Vanlyn's face, which held a mixture of stark terror and even greater realization.

"You'd best prepare yourself."

Dane decided it was the last time he would walk away.

Chapter Sixteen

Vanlyn came awake from woven dreams that had him involved in erotic play that he would never even consider in his waking life. He was uncomfortably hard but refused to see to the matter. He lay there with one arm flung across his face.

After a time, his mind drifted, which was dangerous inasmuch as it drifted to Dane and what they had done. Whenever he tried to banish the images, they would return in greater force. Gods and fiends, the feel of Dane's mouth on him was like being wrapped in warm silk. And the sense of Dane's fingers stretching him, stroking that *something* within him, had him moaning like a back-alley whore. Vanlyn was aware of that *something* through his studies. Similar to the place in a woman, it was supposed to bring far greater pleasure when touched.

Vanlyn hadn't felt such pleasure since—

No, he wouldn't return there, to that place that was shrouded in dark memories.

He needed to focus on what he was going to do. He wasn't about to try and break the geas again. Vanlyn couldn't remember being in that much pain. He'd once fallen from his horse at a canter. Until the moment the spell hit him, he realized he didn't know what true pain was.

Then Dane had cared for him.

There were times when Vanlyn didn't understand Dane at all. He could be incredibly gentle and tender and just as quickly passionate and fierce. After Dane had massaged his aches away, he'd lain next to him and cradled his bruised body. Vanlyn couldn't find the words to thank him, so he'd grasped his hand instead. He'd felt safe for a time until it came to him that it was all a lie. Yet he yearned for that feeling of security again.

Vanlyn blew out a frustrated breath and turned on his side only to come face to face with the open box containing the remaining phallic rods. The empty jar lay overturned on the sheets.

"Damn it," Vanlyn muttered as he turned away. He realized he was feeling quite soiled not to mention hungry. A glance to his right, and he saw the tray on the floor, but the sandwiches, which had been sitting since midnight, no longer looked appetizing. He wanted a bath and a hot meal, but he was too embarrassed to leave the room.

Eventually, the discomfort was too much. Vanlyn swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat, unmoving. His eyes strayed to the box. With a sigh borne of frustration, Vanlyn grabbed it, replaced the rods and tossed the jar into the wastebasket. He threw one of the robes around his shoulders, belting it tightly.

Vanlyn grabbed up the tray and left the room, his stride purposeful. Surprisingly, he didn't notice anyone around. There wasn't even that sense of the bogies moving about near him. It was as though he were truly alone in the manor.

The kitchen was empty as well, although breakfast was on. He left the tray on the block and approached the stove to find fried fish and potatoes. He procured a plate, and piled it with generous helpings and grabbed some biscuits to go along with it. Then Vanlyn went for the cavern. Once there, he set everything down and slipped out of the robe.

Vanlyn chose a bottle of one of the liquid soaps and sank blissfully into one of the

steaming pools. He scrubbed himself clean first and then dunked his head into the water, washing his hair with brisk movements. Concentrating on that kept the memories at bay. When he'd rinsed himself off thoroughly, he leaned over the edge of the pool and started in on his meal, eating quickly. Now clean and full, Vanlyn felt himself relax as he sank up to his shoulders. After a time, he slipped into a light doze.

The dreams were not clear and shrouded in twilight, but Vanlyn was aware of everything happening.

Arms and legs in a tangled embrace...

Flesh glistening with sweat melding hotly together...

Vanlyn looks up into the face of his lover, wanting and needing to please him. He loves him so much...

Vanlyn knew that face.

There were other places, other times, stolen in secret. Lying together, basking in afterglow...

A door opens. Someone invades their safe haven. There is a shocked gasp, and a hand rose to painted lips. The person flees.

"Rasleigh, wait, don't go!"

Vanlyn came awake with a start. His reflection stared back at him, distorted by the rippling of the water. Still, even he saw the shock and realization mirrored there.

Rasleigh.

Vanlyn pressed his fists to his eyes. The memories came to him again in rather stark and graphic detail. Dane's words sounded loud in his ears, *I want to fuck you. I will possess you.*

Vanlyn gave an irritated grunt and worked to banish them again, but they persisted until even he had to admit how good Dane was and how much he'd enjoyed it.

Vanlyn sighed and let himself slip beneath the water. The gentle thrum of his own heartbeat was his only companion in that world of muted sound. It brought him some measure of peace.

Finally, the want for air had him surfacing. He stretched, feeling at least a little better as he stepped from the pool.

The feeling that he was no longer alone, that eyes were on his back, had him whipping around to face the door.

Taddeus Ramsay stood at the entrance, his eyes freely roaming over Vanlyn's naked form. There was no surprise or embarrassment, only the look of a predator facing a very desirable prey.

Vanlyn was so shocked at this blatant disregard for his privacy that it was a few moments before he found his voice. "What by the hells do you think you're doing? How dare you!"

Ramsay didn't seem in the least bit contrite. "Your pardon, Highness." He turned away, rather too little too late in Vanlyn's opinion. Vanlyn snatched up the robe and violently jammed his arms into the sleeves, tying the belt uncomfortably tight. Still Vanlyn felt naked and exposed as though the clothing didn't truly form a barrier. He was blushing, and he knew it, and wished by all the gods he wasn't.

"You had better have a damn good reason for this breach of propriety." Vanlyn strode angrily to the man and faced him despite his humiliation.

"I believe I do, Highness," Ramsay said calmly. His demeanor enraged Vanlyn.

Ramsay wasn't in the least bit repentant for his actions. "I don't believe I've mentioned it before, but my nephews are both conjurers."

"And?" Vanlyn thought Ramsay had better damn well get to the point.

Ramsay reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out an object. His anger curtailed, Vanlyn stared at the smooth oval gem in Ramsay's hand. "My nephews collaborated on making this. It isn't very powerful, but it should be enough to aide you."

His curiosity piqued, Vanlyn took the gem from Ramsay's hand. It was of the most unusual design. It was a deep red, the color of blood Vanlyn thought uncomfortably, but at its heart, there were streaks of opalescent black. And Vanlyn could swear the flaws changed shape and position even as he held the gem.

"This gem, when placed against Dane's skin, will paralyze him for a few moments," Ramsay went on. "But only for that long. Dane is too powerful to do anymore."

Vanlyn looked up at Ramsay. "It won't hurt him, will it?"

Ramsay raised an eyebrow. "It won't but why should you care about that either way?"

"I don't." Vanlyn dropped his gaze again to the gem in his palm so Ramsay wouldn't seem him blush. "So, I place this against his skin and then what? The geas will still prevent me from escaping."

"This may take care of the geas as well," Ramsay said. "But I must be honest, they were unsure. So, I highly recommend that the moment Dane goes down, you should run for the kitchen exit. My nephews and I will be waiting there with a mount for you. We'll take you to one of their homes. My manor wouldn't be safe. It's the first place Dane will look for you."

"Of course."

"My nephew will try and relieve you of the pain if the geas is still in effect, but we can't promise," Ramsay said. "You may have to live with it for a bit until we can employ a conjurer who is Dane's equal."

Vanlyn nodded.

"I must return to the study," Ramsay said. "My nephews won't be able to keep Dane busy forever. We will wait twenty moves of the clock for you after we leave. If you don't appear before then, we will assume it didn't work and devise some other plan."

"Thank you, Magisteri Ramsay."

He nodded once. "Good fortune to you."

When Vanlyn was alone once more, he examined the gem again. He knew a little bit about them from his studies. His mother had employed a craftswoman to design specially made jewelry as gifts for relatives and friends. Vanlyn had asked her to make something special for Eselda's birthday. While watching her at her work, he'd asked questions about the various gems she used. She'd been glad to teach him and flattered by his interest.

This gem didn't fit any classification he knew. It resembled an opal, but it also had characteristics of carnelian. He couldn't figure it out at all. Vanlyn was still contemplating these things when he arrived at his room. He put the gem aside so he could get dressed, choosing a vest with side pockets in which to secret the gem.

He descended to the first floor, and upon hearing voices raised in heated discussion, Vanlyn decided he didn't want to be in the midst of it. Vanlyn went into the library, positioned himself nearest the door to Dane's study, and waited. When he heard Dane order Ramsay out of the manor, he knew his opportunity had come.

Vanlyn stepped into the study as Dane returned. He could tell the minister was distracted and angry by the way he came to a sudden halt at Vanlyn's appearance.

"Oh, good morning," Dane said. "I gather you heard that argument?"

"I did." Vanlyn was suddenly nervous as a virgin lad with his first lover. "Are you all right?"

"Oh yes." Dane waved dismissively with one hand. "Ramsay is an arrogant ass. I take it he sought you out to discuss his grand plans for your rescue?"

"Yes."

"And?"

Vanlyn looked away. "Nothing came of it, if you want to know."

"Really?" Dane raised a critical eyebrow. He stared at Vanlyn, seeming to weigh his answer, then tilted his head as if he would comment further but thought better of it. Dane approached him instead. "Did you rest well?" He gently cupped Vanlyn's chin with his palm, turning Vanlyn's face to him, forcing him to meet his eyes.

"No."

"Good." Dane smiled suggestively then immediately his eyes narrowed, his gaze intense. "I was being truthful with you." Dane's hand came to rest on him and commenced a slow circling. Vanlyn grunted; his arousal immediate. Another hand snaked around his waist, pulling him flush with Dane's chest. Vanlyn opened himself to Dane's kiss without resistance.

He almost forgot himself in the moment, forgot that he wasn't supposed to be succumbing, that there was supposed to be a plan.

The gem was smooth and surprisingly warm against his palm as he drew it out of his vest pocket. Vanlyn yanked Dane's shirt open, running his palm across the smooth expanse of Dane's chest. "Dane, will you let me go?" Vanlyn muttered against Dane's mouth.

Dane moved to nuzzle his lips against Vanlyn's throat, and his tongue traced Vanlyn's earlobe. "No."

Vanlyn pressed the gem against Dane's right shoulder. There was a moment where Dane, so focused on his task of seduction, didn't seem to notice. Then his actions ceased abruptly. Dane shoved back and held Vanlyn at arm's length. His brow creased in puzzlement as he looked down at the gem attached to his skin. Dane didn't seem to know what it was.

Dane cried out, a sudden strangled sound from between clenched teeth. The stench of burning flesh filled his nostrils, and a scream burst from Dane's lips, and much like Vanlyn when the geas turned on him, his body arched in a painful spasm.

Vanlyn watched his horror building and squeezing his chest tight as the gem burned into Dane's flesh. "No! No, it wasn't supposed to—"

Dane transformed, his leathery wings slashing the air. He clawed at the gem, tearing skin, smearing his hands with his own blood. The gem adhered, burning deeper. Dane continued to scream as he went to his knees, his arms flung wide. He no longer seemed conscious of anything but his pain. The image turned Vanlyn's blood to ice and held him paralyzed.

Another cry, a feral roar, ripped Vanlyn's attention away from the screaming man before him. A creature stood crouched on the threshold, stunted and malformed, its body covered in the loam of the earth. Its bulbous eyes were silver orbs glistened wetly.

It leapt upon Dane, bearing pointed teeth. Its mouth closed around the gem, tearing it from Dane's flesh. There was a sharp crack as the creature broke the jewel in its powerful jaws and spit it out.

Vanlyn continued to watch the surreal scene that played out before him. Dane fell into the creature's arms. His breathing was ragged, his eyes wide and staring but not truly seeing. The creature rested him against the desk.

"Hush, I am here," It leaned in and began to lave Dane's wound with his tongue. "You are safe." Dane's head lolled to the side, and his body went slack. "Stay awake." The creature framed Dane's face in his hands. "Look at me."

"D-dawkins," Dane murmured. "It hurts."

"I know. It won't for much longer." Dawkins laid clawed hands on the wound. "You will help me." Dane nodded.

They fell silent for a time. Vanlyn's breath caught. He wasn't certain what he was seeing, but his senses told him not to disturb the calm. When Dawkins removed his hands, Vanlyn saw Dane's wound had begun to scab.

Footsteps sounded outside the door, and Miranda entered carrying a tray on which she'd arranged various jars and medical supplies. Unlike Dawkins, she had retained her mortal form.

"Thank you." Dawkins nodded to her. He began ministrations to the wound. Cleaning it and washing the blood from Dane's chest. Dawkins reached for a jar and opened it, taking a glob of a thick dark salve and spreading it across the injured area.

"You saved me, thank you."

"It may be my duty, but I've grown rather fond of you, so it's no trouble."

Dane laughed lightly. "I am grateful for that."

They were silent for a time. The only sounds in the room were those of Dawkins at his work.

"It felt as if I were being torn apart."

Dawkins didn't seem to have a response to that. He instead turned his head, and his cold gaze fell on Vanlyn. "And what shall we do with you?"

Those words tore Vanlyn from his stupor as his reason returned to him. *Gods, I was supposed to run! Why didn't I run?* Vanlyn realized that Ramsay was probably long gone by now. There was no escape.

And I almost killed Dane.

Vanlyn wrapped his arms around himself. He went to move, but his legs seemed to tangle within each other, and he sat hard. A violent shudder claimed his whole body. Dane's next words stopped his heart in his chest.

"I'll deal with him."

Gods no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. He said it wouldn't hurt you. But the words wouldn't come. Vanlyn drew his knees up against his chest as though that would form a shield to protect him.

With Dawkins' help, Dane regained his feet. "See if Ramsay is nearby."

"Yes, sir."

The door closing behind Dawkins was as final a sound as Vanlyn had ever heard.

Dane approached him. He was still pale, but his body had that position that Vanlyn had seen many times before—of a predator readying to capture its prey. "Stand up."

He couldn't. A glimpse into Dane's eyes had shown him something—a void, dark

and without life. He couldn't stand to look again. Vanlyn needed to escape. He was slipping into that place, into his own dark world.

"No!" Dane took him by the shoulders and jerked him to his feet. "You won't escape this, Vanlyn."

That gaze like the cold depths of the blackest ocean held Vanlyn, and he couldn't look away.

"I have but one question," There was a guttural inflection in Dane's voice. "Why?"

"I'm sorry," Vanlyn muttered. "He said it wouldn't hurt you."

"And you believed him, you stupid pup? You honestly didn't realize he was using you?"

A spark of anger flared. "Like you are?"

Dane backhanded him. Vanlyn hit the floor with a grunt as stars exploded in front of his eyes. He lay there afraid to move. What by the gods had made him say that? Vanlyn knew he was treading on dangerous ground.

"Have I treated you ill? Have I abused you?"

A very different kind of tremor passed over Vanlyn's skin. He remembered the force of Dane's kisses, the possessiveness of his embrace, and heated touch of him inside his body. Vanlyn may say it was abuse, but his body would disagree.

"Answer me!" Dane demanded.

"Y-you abducted me, stole me from—"

Vanlyn was roughly pulled to his feet again, Dane's grip on his arm painful. "Stole you from what? A life of self-loathing? You were nothing there!"

Dane tossed him aside like a rag doll. As he fell, his temple struck against the side of Dane's desk with a sickening crack. Pain exploded in his skull, and his stomach lurched. He lay there dazed and unable to move. He wouldn't have moved even if he had the strength. Dane approached him and stood over him, his face twisted with disgust. "I can't look at you right now."

Dane turned and strode from the room.

Vanlyn lay there in misery as his stomach gave a painful convulsion. He had scant time to push himself over on his side before he vomited.

Chapter Seventeen

Vanlyn had no recollection of falling into unconsciousness. Muted voices brought him back.

“...how long?”

“A few hours.”

Something was pressing against his temple. Vanlyn reached up and felt the bandage. There was also a medicinal taste in his mouth. One of Dawkins’ potions no doubt. His muscles were stiff. He turned his shoulders about underneath the blanket.

“...insanity...let me kill him.”

The words caused his stomach to roil. Vanlyn lifted himself up on his elbows.

“No.” It was Dane.

“I tell you, Dane, he’s more trouble than he’s worth now.” Vanlyn recognized Lahn Aurris’ voice. “If you don’t want him dead, why not let me try for Argent? Your plan will work just as well—”

“No,” Dane repeated. “I’m near success. And I will not let him get away with this insult.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Vanlyn heard the concern in Lahn’s voice. He felt a twinge of emotion in his chest. Jealousy?

“Yes,” Dane said.

The rest of the conversation was too low for Vanlyn to hear. He pulled himself up. They had moved him to the sofa near the fireplace. Vanlyn swung his legs around and sat up. The room tilted crazily for a moment. Vanlyn held himself still and closed his eyes as he waited for the lightheadedness to pass.

On the table next to the sofa, a light repast had been placed on a tray. A cup of wine rinsed the taste from his mouth and slaked his thirst. Vanlyn nibbled on some sliced melon, concerned that any more would make him sick again.

He sat and waited.

Although he was expecting the confrontation when the door came open, his breath caught, and his hands fisted in his lap.

Dane had regained his human form. He moved slowly across the room as though he knew Vanlyn had no way to avoid facing him.

He wore only a pair of trousers. The scar from the wound was merely a mark against his skin. Vanlyn found himself aching to reach out and caress him just to assure himself Dane was no longer in pain.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

Vanlyn stood and faced him. He supposed he should have been frightened or at least nervous, but he was neither. There wasn’t even guilt, just a sense of resignation where he awaited the inevitable. If anything, he was relieved that Dane was going to be all right.

“Should I confine you to your room?” Dane said. “You obviously can’t be trusted. Dane moved towards the fireplace. “I am hurt deeply. I would never expect such a malicious attack from you.”

It was too much, seeing the warm glow of the fire against Dane’s bare skin. Seeing the grace with which he moved and as he paced and being enveloped in that familiar aura

of his feral magnetism, Vanlyn could stand it no longer. Something shattered within him, releasing a torrent of fire that burned him from the inside.

"I can't let what you did go unpunished."

Vanlyn released a long low breath. "Then punish me."

Dane whipped his body around at the sound of his voice. "What did you say?"

Vanlyn swallowed, his throat suddenly devoid of moisture. He was shaking, his hands balled into fists. "Punish me."

Dane seemed rooted to the spot at first. Something stirred between the two of them. It was like a current of electricity that charged the air and raced along Vanlyn's skin, connecting the two men as they stood facing each other.

Dane was across the room quicker than what Vanlyn thought was humanly possible. And it wasn't in a sense. Dane was everything that embodied the primal. He took hold of Vanlyn, gripping his face, forcing him to gaze into the depths of his eyes. His kiss was powerful, unremitting. His tongue probed deep, stealing the very air Vanlyn needed to breathe.

Vanlyn was helpless against the onslaught. His struggles meant nothing. He was falling, plummeting into darkness. Dane rent his shirt easily, exposing skin glistening with sweat. Dane feasted on the tender flesh, stroking with his tongue, drawing wet patterns across Vanlyn's collarbone. Dane's mouth closed around one of the dark nipples, suckling roughly at first and then biting down gently. Vanlyn trembled in his arms from the pain, which Dane brushed away with a skillful laving. He repeated his ministrations on Vanlyn's other nipple until his head fell back with a cry and his arms encircled Dane's powerful shoulders, drawing them together.

Dane no longer sought his permission, no longer gave Vanlyn the opportunity to protest. Vanlyn was dimly aware of the fact that Dane had warned the next time they were together he would give no quarter.

He could only watch as Dane knelt before him and undid his trousers. Vanlyn gave a single negative shake of his head, even as his breath caught in his throat and his skin flushed with anticipation. Dane saw and ignored his feeble protest with a sneer.

Dane's tasted him, licking the length of his shaft, pulling the head into his mouth, his tongue tickling his slit, tasting the pre-cum that gathered there. Vanlyn gave a strangled cry, his fists clenched at his side, his teeth grinding in a mixture of frustration and desire. Dane continued to coax the heated response from him, drawing Vanlyn full into his mouth until the head of Vanlyn's shaft touched the back of Dane's throat. Vanlyn was sure he would go mad with desire if Dane didn't finish him, but the older man was in no hurry, seeming to savor the taste and wanting to prolong Vanlyn's agony.

He pulled out slowly, drawing in his cheeks, his tongue continuing its caress. Vanlyn's hands found their way to ply Dane's hair, forcing him deeper. The sounds coming from his own throat surprised him. His ears filled with them. At times he whimpered, others he cried out. Everything inside of him was aflame, a fire which continued to devour him feeding on his desire building to the inevitable completion.

Then Dane released him abruptly, and the loss was acute. Before Vanlyn could cry a protest, Dane returned. He'd only stopped to retrieve the jar of salve that Dawkins had left in the room. He knelt before Vanlyn again, opened the jar and scooped out a generous portion, smearing it across his fingers.

Vanlyn held his breath, knowing what was to come. Dane reached around him and

began to stroke him at his opening, coating him with the slick gel. Vanlyn's eyes closed again, his head lolled, and of its own volition, his hand reached back, coaxing, encouraging...

Dane did not refuse him. Their fingers probed deep, touching that place within Vanlyn together. It was almost strange, loving himself this way, yet he couldn't stop. It only caused the fire to rage. Gods and fiends, he was so close now. If Dane stopped—

"Look at me," Dane said unexpectedly.

He couldn't at first, lost as he was in the darkness, burning to ash by the fire.

"Look at me!"

Vanlyn did and saw the feral passion within Dane's eyes, that predatory streak, and Vanlyn knew he was the prey.

Dane stood, taking Vanlyn by the wrists. He twisted his arms behind him and forced another kiss. He pulled away abruptly and almost immediately grasped the flesh of Vanlyn's throat between his teeth and branded his mark into him. Once more, he worked his way down Vanlyn's torso.

Then to Vanlyn's surprise, Dane turned him around and grasped the globes of his ass, spreading the cheeks wide, and before Vanlyn could comprehend what was occurring, Dane was stroking his place with his tongue. His actions sent a jolt through Vanlyn that had him groaning aloud, but at the same time thinking, *How can he do such a thing?* However, the area was sensitive, and he quivered from the sensation.

Dane was drawing out the last of his resistance, overwhelming it in desire. Dane's hands, his mouth, his very spirit was consuming him. Dane returned to the gentle stroking of Vanlyn's cock, taking him deep in his mouth once again. Vanlyn was going mad. He knew it, he couldn't stand this, couldn't believe he was giving in. He couldn't—

Vanlyn came. His body jerked convulsively as he filled Dane's mouth, and a series of cries erupted from Vanlyn's throat as he watched Dane drink deeply of him. Vanlyn cried out in a plea for more as Dane drew the last of Vanlyn's essence from him.

He would have collapsed if not for Dane taking hold of him, wrapping an arm around the small of his back and pulling him close. Dane kissed him, making him taste his own essence on Dane's tongue. When he drew away, Vanlyn could barely take in enough air, and the look in Dane's eyes caused a shudder to pass along his skin.

"Get down on your hands and knees," Dane demanded.

Vanlyn obeyed. He was incapable of anything else. He sensed Dane kneeling behind him. Moments later, the sensation of Dane smearing more of the salve across his opening had him biting his lip in worry. "I can't let you do this," Vanlyn muttered.

He heard Dane's snort of derision as he draped his body over Vanlyn's back. He grabbed a handful of Vanlyn's hair and pulled him up against his chest. Dane's chin rested on Vanlyn's shoulder, and his breath was warm on his cheek.

"I will not be gentle with you." Dane's words were a feral growl.

His will gone, his reserve shattered, Vanlyn shivered at the words and managed to get out, "I-I don't want you to be."

Dane released him, and there was a brief moment between relief and confusion before he felt Dane take hold of his hips. The only warning he received was the feel of the tip of Dane's sex at his entrance before the man thrust himself deep inside him.

His whole body arched, and a cry burst from his lips part agony and part—

Oh gods, it was the most incredible sensation of being consumed, of being claimed,

of Dane keeping his promise to possess him. The bolt that shot through him was burning him alive to his very soul. Dane pulled almost completely out and shoved into him again.

Dane's hand snaked underneath Vanlyn's waist, still slick from the salve as he took hold of him and stroked him roughly, both intensifying the agony and easing it at once. Dane moved feverishly inside of him, stroking and teasing the center of his craving, and Vanlyn screamed for mercy, but Dane had none in him to give. Vanlyn knew this as he knew he didn't want Dane to stop. His grip on Vanlyn's hips tightened, and animal grunts issued from his lips. Vanlyn's hands fisted on the plush carpet, his head dropped forward, and he fell onto his elbows, his bottom rising to meet Dane's thrusts.

"Deeper. Oh gods, Dane, deeper!"

"Yes." Dane obliged him, filling him, stretching him wide. Vanlyn had never felt so invaded. When he realized the culmination of the end was fast approaching, something in him, that voice that still held his reason, told him that once he crossed that threshold, he would never be able to go back to what he was.

Vanlyn didn't care.

"Dane!" Vanlyn cried out as his climax erupted, causing his hips to buck, driving Dane deeper into him. Dane shuddered, and Vanlyn knew Dane was in the middle of his own release. His very life drained from him, his breathing ragged in his lungs. There seemed to be not enough for him to take in. Vanlyn collapsed to the floor, Dane's body atop him. He felt as though he'd fought a battle and lost. His muscles were useless, his body replete. Blood rushed through him, culminating in the strong pulse of the throbbing in his cock.

Vanlyn's gaze took in the dancing flames before him and saw his world burning to nothing within them even as he'd never felt such an incredible sense of satisfaction. His arm stretched carelessly in front of him, his hand again reaching for something. The last fragments of his honor. His hand clenched.

Traitor, a voice accused. You're a traitor, Vanlyn Sarn.

* * * *

They made love three times that night. No protest or denials discouraged Dane. He sent Vanlyn to dizzying heights again until Vanlyn pleaded for him to stop, and even then, Dane ignored him, drawing one more shattering completion out of him.

Vanlyn didn't know what time it was when he awoke, but he was alone in the study. He lay on the couch with a blanket draped over him.

Oh gods, what did I do?

Vanlyn remembered each time with stark clarity. Dane on his knees, lifting Vanlyn easily, impaling him on his cock, their bodies melded together with heat and sweat, Vanlyn clutching onto Dane for dear life. Vanlyn on his back, his legs spread wide, one tossed carelessly over Dane's shoulder as the older man drove into him.

And he'd reveled in the feeling each time.

He'd dreamt of his father, looking at him with a deep loathing and embarrassment. And Argent... How would Argent react? He would share his father's opinion of course, but Vanlyn could almost see the knowing smirk, the triumph in his eyes. With Argent, it had always been about who was the better man. Vanlyn had just handed him victory.

Vanlyn curled in a ball of misery and remained that way until the doors opened. He heard the soft footfalls as they drew near. Dane knelt before him, laying a hand on his

shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

Vanlyn didn't, couldn't, respond. He was hollow, empty, a golem devoid of any emotion. No matter where he looked, all he could see was his father's disgust and his brother's sneer.

"Why don't you have a bath? I'll come with you," Dane brushed back the hair at his temple. The tender gesture meant nothing to Vanlyn. He managed to find the strength to sit up, but it was an automatic movement. Vanlyn had nothing better to do so why not bathe?

They walked together to the basement. The beauty that had so impressed him before seemed pale and uninteresting now. Vanlyn stood before the nearest pool, lost in a miasma of indifference. Dane sighed as he looked upon him. There was true concern in his dark eyes. Earlier Dane had gotten back into his trousers and now removed them.

"Go on, get in."

Vanlyn stepped into the water. It soothed his aching muscles but not his troubles. Dane climbed in after him. He had obviously prepared for them, for there was already a selection of bottles and a pitcher and basin at the edge of the pool.

Dane took a sponge and dipped it in the water, applying a liberal amount of bath oil, working up lather. He began on Vanlyn's chest, going over his skin with gentle circular strokes.

"I love the way you look." Dane's voice was soft. "I love touching you, Vanlyn." He proved his words by running the calloused tips of his hands over Vanlyn's flesh behind the lathering. "You're the most beautiful man I've ever seen."

No one had ever called him beautiful. A word reserved for women. He supposed its use should upset him, but the first spark of emotion he felt had nothing to do with anger.

"I know you don't believe I speak true when I say being with you last night..." Dane shook his head, as he continued his ministrations down Vanlyn's thighs. "I can't find the words." Dane then took both his hand and pulled him forward. "Rise up a bit. I'm going to do your back."

Vanlyn rested on his knees as Dane continued the bath, his movements deft and sure, "And I know you've been with other men, even though you've been denying it. You have nothing to be ashamed of you know."

I haven't! The protest rose to Vanlyn's lips and died there. Memories long held in the darkness of his mind were returning. They were not all pleasant.

"I know you are hiding something, perhaps not deliberately. I promised you I wouldn't pry, but I can help you with those memories if you'll allow me."

Vanlyn shook his head, although he wasn't sure why. As Dane finished his work, Vanlyn realized he was trembling. Dane's tender words and gentle touch were coaxing him back from his self-imposed exile. He didn't want it. He didn't want Dane's actions to affect him, but they did. Something blossomed in his chest, a feeling of comfort as though he were in the presence of an old friend, someone who knew him better than he did himself, and perhaps it was true of Dane.

Dane washed his hair, massaging his fingers against Vanlyn's scalp. He stole a kiss, shocking Vanlyn who could only gape at the playful gesture. Dane, for the most, part acted as if nothing had occurred as he rinsed the soap from Vanlyn's hair. When he finished, Dane finger-combed it, looking very pleased with the results of his work. Then Dane rested his hand on the back of Vanlyn's neck and drew him forward, the kiss light

and teasing, and Vanlyn shuddered with an almost immediate reaction. He grew semi-erect and alarmed, trying to push away with a muttered no against Dane's mouth.

Dane responded by wrapping his arm around Vanlyn's shoulder's, effectively locking him into the embrace. His other hand pushed between the space to grasp Vanlyn's cock. His body lurched once, in a vain attempt to escape. The moan that uttered from his lips was one of wanting.

Dane broke the kiss. "Vanlyn, I want to watch you. Gods, I love the look on your face right now."

"No," Vanlyn moaned even as his hand closed over Dane's, encouraging him. His completion ripped through him, but again Dane held him as his body convulsed with release. It was several moments before Vanlyn could compose himself enough to straighten in Dane's arms. That look of hunger was in his dark eyes.

"No," Vanlyn growled, as he sat heavily. "Damn it!"

"Vanlyn?"

"Damn it!" Vanlyn slammed a fist against the rock edge of the tub. "Damn it!" He did it again, finding a macabre solace in the pain. "How could you do this?" Vanlyn seemed to be speaking to himself. "How could you?"

"Vanlyn, stop!" Dane grasped at his wrists. "You'll hurt yourself!"

He didn't care. Vanlyn jammed both hands in his hair, clutching at the thick strands, his breath going in and out of his lungs in painful heaves.

"Vanlyn, please, don't!" Dane pulled him into his embrace, fiercely protective. "It's all right."

It's not all right. Vanlyn could do nothing more than hold on, his nails digging into roughened flesh as his body shuddered in a mix of desperation and self-loathing. *It will never be all right again.* He needed to draw on Dane's strength, to surround himself with that familiar aura of safety. Otherwise, he would shatter.

* * * *

Dane released a breath as he laid his head against the polished wood door.

Let him go. You know you shouldn't have taken him in the first place.

"I can't," Dane muttered. "Not just yet. It's not done."

Is that truly your reason?

It wasn't of course but even he wasn't strong enough to admit it to himself.

Dane had held Vanlyn until he had regained some semblance of calm. Then the younger man, without protest, allowed Dane to lead him to his bedroom. Dane had wanted to tell Vanlyn what he was feeling, but how could he when he himself didn't understand?

Oh, you understand all right.

"Quiet." Dane silenced his inner voice, but somehow there was a smug laugh.

Perhaps it was more than just an inner voice he heard. Perhaps it was the thoughts of the creature who shared this body with him. Dane had thought them to be mere beasts with no reason, but perhaps he was wrong.

Dane laid his open palm against the smooth wood surface as though he could somehow forge a connection between himself and the man who slept on the other side.

"He has to love me," Dane said. "Before I let him go, he has to love me." Dane laid his forehead against the door. His eyes closed, and his throat tightened. "I need him to

love me.”

He pushed away, suddenly annoyed with himself. *Foolish sentimentality*. Remember your duty, Tanderes. Remember your people. They are counting on you to rescue them. Dane had treated the prince’s bruised and bloody hand himself. Vanlyn had accepted his help without protest or even conscious thought it seemed. To Dane, it appeared that after the dam had burst Vanlyn was drained empty.

Whatever secrets Vanlyn held, he would have to reveal all or they would destroy him inside. He could assist Vanlyn in easing the troubles of his heart and mind, but only if Vanlyn asked.

His stomach growling told him how long it had been since he’d eaten. Dane didn’t need sleep immediately, but he wanted to rest before he confronted Vanlyn again. They had both been up all night, so Dane figured Vanlyn would sleep for most of the morning and into the afternoon.

Dawkins was cooking breakfast and barely spared Dane a glance as he entered. “Are you feeling better this morning, sir?”

“I am, Dawkins, thank you.” And Dawkins pointedly ignored him after that. *So the old man must have something on his mind*, Dane thought. And it certainly didn’t take a seer to figure out what.

Dane nodded his thanks as Dawkins poured him coffee and served breakfast. At times he ate in the kitchen with his servants since it seemed to be too much trouble to set the table for one person. He was ravenous this morning, appeasing yet another hunger not unlike the one he’d experienced last night.

Gods and fiends, he is as passionate as I imagined him to be, a hundred times more so. It was like being consumed in flame. I don’t care if he’s been with others. He’s mine now. Just thinking of Vanlyn made Dane’s sex twitch in reaction.

The metallic crack brought Dane from his reverie. Dawkins took a great deal of time, arranging pots on the stove and making an awful racket. The look on his face told Dane the bogie wasn’t too pleased with him right now.

Dawkins drew a pan of hot biscuits from the oven. Despite himself, Dane breathed deeply of their scent, his mouth watering. One thing he was glad of, especially after last night, was that his five senses had remained intact throughout his journey between life and death.

“Dawkins, have you something to say to me?” Dane broke open the biscuit and watched the steam rise before spreading it with butter.

The bogie went on with his work without looking at Dane. “Will His Highness be joining us for breakfast?”

“No. I’ll take him up something later.”

This seemed to give Dawkins pause. “Is he well?”

“He’s...had a difficult time of things.”

“Indeed.”

“He’s fine.”

“If you say so, sir.”

Dane blew out a breath. Why couldn’t he just be like other lords and demand Dawkins’ respect instead of wishing to earn it? Dane sipped his coffee and continued to watch Dawkins over the rim of his cup. Dane wanted to offer an explanation, to let the old bogie know that he meant Vanlyn no harm. It was obvious Dawkins was growing

fond of Vanlyn. Instead, Dane finished his breakfast in silence.

Chapter Eighteen

Vanlyn tossed in a fitful sleep. Memories of what he'd done intermingled with snatches of dreams where his father looked upon him with disgust and the sound of his accusing voice invaded his mind. He would come awake, pulling himself from the deeper sleep with effort, knowing on some instinctual level that if he allowed it to run its course it would descend into nightmare. This went on it seemingly forever until Vanlyn succumbed to his exhaustion and the dream that he'd tried to keep at bay took hold.

He was standing outside his father's study although he was uncertain how he'd come to be there. His father looked up from whatever task he'd been working. "Come in, Vanlyn."

Vanlyn hesitated. A chill ran across his skin, leeching the warmth from his body. Perhaps being in a place surrounded in dream weaving enchantments made him more aware of what was happening.

"Come in here now, boy! Don't just stand out there like a dullard!"

"Yes, sir," Vanlyn stepped across the threshold. All seemed normal, but Vanlyn couldn't shake the pervasive sense of fear.

At first, nothing seemed amiss within his father's study. Aelden Sarn stood over his worktable, as he perused stacks of official looking documents. Argent sat across from him.

The look of sneering triumph on Argent's face made his stomach toss painfully and caused his breath to catch in his throat.

"So you have betrayed your people and your kingdom." Aelden's words were matter-of-fact. His eyes never left the papers. He seemed not at all surprised by Vanlyn's actions.

"I didn't mean to—"

"Didn't mean to what?" Aelden turned to him in a challenge. "Allow a mindless beast to fuck you?"

"He's not a mindless—"

"You enjoyed it, didn't you?" Argent stood. "Didn't I tell you, Father, what a perverse little whore he is?"

"You gave your word!" Vanlyn whipped his body around and slammed both fists on the table. "You said if I did what you asked, you wouldn't tell Father!"

"I recall no such vow." Argent stood, seeming inordinately interested in a non-existent thread on his sleeve. "It was only my duty to tell Father of your transgressions."

"Because I had what you wanted?" Vanlyn said.

Argent moved around the table with unnerving speed and backhanded Vanlyn across the jaw. As Vanlyn fell, the room around him melted away, a child's chalk drawing running together in a mish-mash of colors during an unexpected rain. The world around him reshaped itself into the semi-darkness of a forest. Yet, he could still see his father at the table, seeming oblivious to what was happening, still see pieces of furniture in their places.

"You'll learn your place, little brother," Argent went on. "I'm going to make certain you know who owns your life."

"You don't—" Something snatched the words from his mouth, and when he tried to speak again, his words came out nonsensical.

"You see?" Argent's face was in his whole view. It was a grotesque misshaping. His eyes were oily pools of black; his mouth was stretched obscenely, full of dagger sharp teeth. "See what a pathetic jest of a man you are?"

No. Again Vanlyn couldn't form the words, couldn't make his body move.

Others joined his brother. Faces leered down him, all warped caricatures of humanity like some mad artist had shaped their features in a burst of violent inspiration. Despite that, Vanlyn knew who they were. They stole the light and his air, and Vanlyn cried out in terror.

"You see your punishment?" Argent moved within the group, his body passing through theirs, melding for a moment giving them many eyes and mouths before separating himself. "This is what you feared?"

Clawed hands grabbed at him, ripping at his clothes and his flesh. They laughed cruelly and taunted him.

"You ain't goin' nowhere, boy."

"Your brother wants to teach you a lesson!"

"You ain't no kind of man at all, are ya?"

No, no! Don't touch me! Argent, why? Vanlyn lay there helpless as the group seemed to close in around him, completely blotting out the light, the horrible faces filling his vision. The stench of unwashed bodies and rotting loam filled his nostrils and burned his throat. Vanlyn wanted to scream, but to his humiliation, tears filled his eyes.

"Poor little Vanlyn." Argent's face now floated above everything else. "So easily seduced. Such a pitiful thing. What will you say when you face the Council? When the beast discards you, know that he's used you. You'll have nothing. You'll be nothing!"

"Argent—" Vanlyn's voice returned as the people became mere shadowed forms that dissolved into stinking mire that threatened to pull him under. "Please..."

"You know the honorable thing," Argent said. "I've told you what you must do if you betray me."

"I won't!" Vanlyn gave one last defiant cry as the darkness swallowed him. He opened to mouth to scream as his eyes came open to the semi-darkness of his room.

"Gods!" Vanlyn sat up, realizing it was early morning. He could barely keep hold of the blanket. His body shuddered as he threw back the covers and half-crawled to the window, throwing open the thick curtains, letting the light pour in.

"Gods," Vanlyn moaned again, his hand gripping the cloth. His trembling threatened to cause his knees to give way; he crawled back to the bed and sank beside it.

Vanlyn closed his eyes against the throbbing in his skull. His fists pressed to his forehead. Yet, he couldn't blot out the images that had burned beneath his eyes. Vanlyn knew with certainty that they were not dreams. They were memories.

"Do what your honor demands."

Vanlyn cried out in surprise as his eyes flew open. His body turned in a frantic searching at the sound of the voice, but he found nothing. Was he going mad? Had he truly just heard his brother's voice?

Vanlyn pulled himself to his feet and approached the mirror. A stranger looked back at him, skin washed away of color, contrasted with the bruises under his eyes.

He blinked, and Argent was there beside him.

“Do what your honor demands.”

“Don’t!” Vanlyn slammed a fist onto the dresser top as he squeezed his eyes shut. “You aren’t here. You can’t be! Leave me alone.”

The face and the voice were gone. Vanlyn gazed in the mirror again and saw a face twisted with all the loathing and disgust he could muster.

“Argent was right,” Vanlyn whispered. Anger boiled from the bottom of his stomach to explode up into his chest. With a vicious swipe of his arm, he sent the contents of the dresser to the floor.

Vanlyn turned away. He couldn’t stand the sight of his own face. A bitter taste was on his tongue with the true realization of what he had done.

The leering faces were surrounding him again, the hands that grabbed at him dragging him out of the carriage into the stark sunlight, the coachman running into the woods, abandoning him to his fate.

“No!” Vanlyn shook his head. Dane Tanderes. This was his doing. Why hadn’t he resisted? Vanlyn strode from the room. He was going to finish this. He figured Dane would probably be in his study and went there first. When Vanlyn found the room was empty, the fact infuriated him. Where was Tanderes now that he’d made Vanlyn a traitor?

“Do what your honor demands.”

“I said I won’t,” Vanlyn forced the words between clenched teeth. With a vicious swipe of his arm he sent the items on the desk to the floor. “You can’t make me.” Vanlyn went to leave when something caught his sight. It was his image in the mirror hanging on the far wall. He saw himself again, the man that was a stranger. Slowly Vanlyn approached. Argent stepped up beside him.

“Do what your honor demands.”

“Stop it!” Vanlyn’s hands clenched into fists. “Stop it!” He raised his fists and smashed them into the mirror repeatedly until Argent’s image and his voice were gone.

* * * *

The screaming voice froze Dane in his seat, his wide-eyed stare matching Dawkins’. The sound of glass shattering had him bolting from his chair.

It didn’t stop. A wail of anguish carried down the corridor, adding speed to Dane’s stride. His study door was ajar, and Dane shoved it all the way open.

Dane took everything in at once, the jumble of papers on the floor, and the shattered mirror but what brought the bile to scald Dane’s throat was the sight of Vanlyn on his knees as he rocked back and forth. His fists pressed against his thighs, the knuckles a mess of torn skin and blood.

* * * *

Something was wrong with his hands.

Vanlyn drew them from under the coverlet and frowned at the bandages wrapped around his knuckles. A memory briefly flashed of shards of glass and Argent’s face. His brow creased. He wasn’t certain how he’d gotten to his bedroom and in his bed. Wasn’t he somewhere else before?

Vanlyn drew back the blankets and sat up. His head spun, and he took a moment to collect himself. Why did he feel like he’d done something bad? Memories crowded his

mind. Images long forgotten had him standing motionless in the room, his arms wrapped around himself.

It was need that drove him to move. He needed to know what had happened. The manor was eerily silent as he left his room. It wasn't until he neared the library that he heard voices in conversation.

"There is much memory surrounding him," Dane was saying as Vanlyn stepped into the room, announcing his presence by knocking gently on the doorframe.

Dane straightened away from the worktable. His face was impassive as he spoke. "Good evening, Highness. How are you feeling?"

So now they had returned to *Highness*. Dawkins turned to Dane, his brow raised at the use of the word.

"What happened?" Vanlyn presented his bandaged hands as emphasis.

"You don't remember?" Dane said.

Dawkins approached him and lifted Vanlyn's right hand. "Here let me see, sir."

As Dawkins began to undo the bandage, Vanlyn chose his words carefully. "He wouldn't stop." He stared at the cuts on his knuckles that were already beginning to scar over, no doubt thanks to Dawkins' formidable talents.

"Who?" Dane approached him.

Vanlyn opened his mouth then closed it. Would Dane even believe him? He needed to know what was happening to him. Dane had said he could bring those memories to light.

Dane was looking at him expectantly, waiting.

"Sir, if there's nothing else, I shall go straighten the study now," Dawkins said.

"That's fine, Dawkins."

"Straighten the study?" Vanlyn said.

"You did some damage," Dane said.

"The mirror," It was coming back now, and he could feel the flush come to his cheeks. What did Dane think of him now? "No, Dawkins, wait." Vanlyn approached him and touched the elder man's arm. "I made the mess. I'll clean it up." It was as good an escape as any.

"You should be in bed, Highness." Dawkins said. "Although I healed you, you still lost a lot of blood."

"I'm fine really," Vanlyn said. "I need to do something."

Dawkins glanced at Dane and apparently received permission because the bogie nodded. "Very well, sir."

"And thank you, Dawkins."

"You're welcome."

He didn't look at Dane as he turned away. It made him feel like the worst type of coward, which he didn't understand since he wanted to be furious at Dane for dragging him into his schemes in the first place. Since coming here, things from the darkest recesses of his mind continued to claw their way to the light. Memories buried deep within him that would drive him insane.

"If they haven't already," Vanlyn muttered bitterly.

Once he returned to the study, Vanlyn looked a moment at the mess of glass shards and papers, ledgers and knickknacks on the floor. He started with the easy task first, picking up and reorganizing everything back on the desk.

It was several moments before Vanlyn realized he was no longer alone in the room. The harsh chink of glass made him turn to find Dane methodically sweeping the shards into a dustpan. He didn't look at Vanlyn as he continued to work.

Once finished and Dane had deposited the shards in a wastebasket, Vanlyn thought he'd merely walk out of the room, but instead, Dane moved over to the couch and sat staring into the cold fireplace.

Vanlyn didn't know if he should do or say anything. He took a few tentative steps forward. "I'm sorry about this, Dane." Vanlyn found he needed Dane to understand. Of course, how could he expect Dane to understand when he couldn't himself?

"I don't know what's happening to me," Vanlyn said. "I have all these memories—"

"Have I mistreated you, Vanlyn?"

"What?"

Dane finally turned to face him. "You are a captive here, but I have treated you with fairness. I have allowed you free access to my home and made you as comfortable as possible." Dane was suddenly and unnervingly close. "Am I so repulsive? Did being with me sicken you so greatly?"

"You think..." Vanlyn could barely form the words. For the first time he truly saw the pain in Dane's eyes. Vanlyn started to look away as guilt welled but he thought, *What have I to feel guilty about?* "You arrogant bastard! Do you realize what you've done to me? What else did you expect? You have no right to be offended."

"So you are saying you were disgusted by our lovemaking? That is not the impression I received when you were screaming my name like a back-alley harlot."

It was eerie how he'd used the same term that Vanlyn had when he thought of the other times Dane had loved him. It shocked him into silence. Dane brushed past him, leaving him alone.

Why had he reacted that way? Well, Dane had accused him of being repulsed. He actually believed that was why Vanlyn had had his episode. He hadn't even allowed Vanlyn to explain that something was happening to him, something that was truly frightening. Dane was only concerned with his own wounded ego.

It angered him. Dane had no right to be hurt. He was a prisoner, a pawn. If anything, Dane should be ashamed of what he had done.

Vanlyn walked. His steps led him to the arboretum, but he couldn't find his usual calm there. Even though he sat and Gypsy joined him, curling up on his lap, he couldn't keep his thoughts from splintering in different directions.

He thought of the dream, and a shudder passed over his skin. Suddenly, the place was too empty and too much like the forest. That memory was still clinging to the dark place in his mind like a cloying mist. He wanted it to stay there, but it crept forward whenever he was unaware.

Vanlyn rose, unceremoniously dumping Gypsy from his lap who meowed in protest. He found himself next in the gallery. Seeing the faces of Dane's family only irritated him further. "You were so happy growing up. You had such a loving caring family. You even destroyed that yourself. You didn't have it taken away from you."

Vanlyn left the gallery. The scent of food cooking almost led him towards the kitchen, but he didn't want company right now. What he wanted was to leave. He was even willing to go home and face Argent and his father. He just wanted his life to himself again.

Vanlyn went to his room and sat heavily on his bed. His walk had done little good. His mind was a jumble of thoughts and images. His inability to focus frustrated him.

You should confront him, his inner voice challenged. *Demand your release*. He'd done that, and it did little good. Vanlyn let himself fall back on the bed. For a few moments, he stared at the canopy above him until he remembered—

Vanlyn came off the bed, knelt before it, and shoved his hand between the frame and the mattress. His hand closed around the dagger hilt. He pulled it out and looked at his reflection in the blade as it glinted in the red-gold rays of sunset.

It was late. If he could get out now, he could hide in the darkness and perhaps find some way off the island. Vanlyn pushed away from the bed. Clutching the dagger with grim purpose, he strode out of the room.

He had not seen Dane in his walk, and Vanlyn was only guessing he was in his room. It seemed he was correct when he saw a tray placed by the door. Dane must have told Dawkins he wouldn't be coming down to dinner.

With the dagger in one hand, Vanlyn reached for the knob, turning it slowly. Opening the door a crack, he could see Dane stretched out across the bed, apparently asleep. Vanlyn slipped in and closed the door behind him. He kept still, waiting.

Dane didn't move. His body lay over the bed in an almost haphazard way. He was naked beneath the coverlet, the silk twisted around his mid-section. The sunlight warmed his skin, glistening on the sheen of sweat. He looked peaceful, his chest rising and falling, his lips slightly parted.

The sight enthralled Vanlyn, and for a moment, all he could do was drink in the image of Dane's finely sculpted body and the sunlight touched him in an intimate caress.

No. He firmed his resolve and approached the bed. He clutched the dagger hilt in both hands and positioned the blade over Dane's throat.

"Dane."

"Yes."

He nearly dropped the dagger. Dane had been awake the entire time. Why had he allowed Vanlyn to approach? Vanlyn was at a loss. Now that he'd gone down this path, he found himself uncertain.

"Well, what are your intentions?" Dane's eyes never opened. "Kill me and escape the island? Or take me hostage and demand your release?"

"Don't mock me."

Dane grunted. "Leave my room, Highness."

"Remove the geas."

"No."

"Damn you." Vanlyn's hand tightened on the hilt as Dane's own shot out and grasped Vanlyn's wrist, twisting it back. Vanlyn growled, trying to pull from the grasp even as he knew it was impossible. The dagger dropped from his suddenly nerveless fingers.

"You attack me again, in my house?"

Vanlyn brought his left fist around. Dane effortlessly caught him by that wrist and twisted both behind Vanlyn's back. Dane pulled him flush against his body.

"You want me to punish you again, don't you?" Dane breathed the words into Vanlyn's ear.

A knife-edge of panic sliced through him as he tried to pull his hands free, even

though it was a useless gesture. Dane seemed to be patiently waiting until Vanlyn realized it himself. Finally discouraged, Vanlyn let his body slump against Dane's in defeat. As always, being so close, that feral hunger surrounding him, Vanlyn shivered with response.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“What do you want?”

Vanlyn breathed slowly, in and out for three heartbeats. “Pleasure. Pain. Everything.”

“Very well.”

Chapter Nineteen

Dane commanded Vanlyn to wait in his bedroom until Dane came for him. And Vanlyn did so, impatient, aroused and wondering what Dane planned for him. Dane ordered him not to seek relief for his state, and Vanlyn thought he wouldn't be able to stand the wait much longer.

Finally, Dane came for him. He was naked and had apparently walked the halls without fear of discovery. "Take your clothes off."

Vanlyn obeyed. It was difficult, for his hands trembled as he undid the buttons on his shirt. His breathing was ragged in his chest as he removed his trousers.

"Follow me," Dane led him down the hallway until they arrived at his bedroom. "Go inside."

Dozens of tapers lit the room, their flames causing flickering shadows across the walls. The air was heady with a familiar scent Vanlyn couldn't place. Jasmine? Lavender? Vanlyn breathed deeply of it and moaned softly as the scent filled his nostrils, reminding him of a caress of supple flesh.

"I see you like the scent." Dane moved towards his bed. "I have other things intended for you."

It was then Vanlyn's gaze truly took in the scene before him. Two carved wood boxes sat atop the bed. What truly caused Vanlyn's breath to quicken was the apparatus of leather straps secured to the bedposts and, suspended at their center, were a pair of shackles, padded in what appeared to be lambs wool.

Dane?" A tremor of fear passed over him when Dane didn't respond immediately. Dane was a picture of calm as he lifted the lid of one of the boxes. It contained, as Vanlyn suspected, phallic rods and several jars as well as another items that made Vanlyn's breath catch in his throat.

Dane lifted the short riding whip and examined it with a practiced eye. One finger traced along the contours of the braided leather. "Come here."

Vanlyn moved his head wildly back and forth. "No."

Dane glanced at him, and one eyebrow rose. "That was not a request."

Vanlyn bit down hard on his lower lip. His steps were hesitant as he approached.

"Climb onto the bed. Raise your arms."

His mouth was dry, Vanlyn swallowed painfully, and his protest went with it. He was trembling even though it was warm in the room.

Dane lay the whip aside, then moved behind Vanlyn and reached to secure his wrists with the shackles. Once done, he returned to the side of the bed, selected one of the ridged phallic rods and coated it with the dark gel. As Dane approached him from behind again, Vanlyn tugged at the shackles, testing them, knowing it was useless.

"Be very still, love," Dane said.

Vanlyn bit down on his lower lip again as Dane coated his entrance with the gel. Despite himself, he pushed back against Dane's hand, wanting the touch that was like a shock. Vanlyn felt the tip of the rod at his entrance, before Dane eased it within him, the initial pain passing quickly. *Oh gods, it is too big. I'll be torn apart!*

When it was within completely, stretching him to beyond what he felt he could

stand, Vanlyn released a breath. Only a part of him felt satisfied, yet there was that seed of denial in him that demanded he escape, that this was wrong. When he went to adjust his body, the rod brushed against that place within him, and sent a shock through him.

Dane climbed on the bed and knelt before him. Vanlyn tried to hold himself still and, at the same time, avoid Dane taking control, but every time he moved, it sent the shock, which had his cock swelling and his balls tightening against him.

He couldn't stop Dane from kissing him. He didn't want to. This domination, this complete wresting of control, was done with a slow deliberation. Dane broke the kiss again, affirming to Vanlyn who held sway. Dane wrapped his arms around him and clenched his buttocks, causing another moan of pleasure stemming from the touch of Dane's fingertips on his skin and the rod inside him.

Dane kissed a slow path down Vanlyn's throat, leaving a wet trail across his collarbone. "You said you wanted pain as well." Dane bit down hard around Vanlyn's right nipple.

Vanlyn forced a strangled grunt from between his teeth. His body arched as his muscles clenched around the rod. "Gods, you're insane!"

Dane only smiled at his words as his tongue licked the bruised area, tracing his tongue around the aureole before sucking it roughly into his mouth. Vanlyn soon found there were more places where Dane would feast.

"Oh." Vanlyn groaned the single word as Dane gave his left the same treatment before continuing down Vanlyn's torso. Dane placed tender kisses on Vanlyn's shaft, which was stiff and throbbing with need. Vanlyn's head lolled back, and his eyes drifted closed, and the fire raced through his blood, setting it to boil. He couldn't keep still any longer. His body jerked forward in an almost convulsive action. Vanlyn was powerless to stop himself.

Dane muttered against it, strange words that didn't quite reach Vanlyn's hearing. He tried to make sense of them through the haze of desire and the scent of magic building in the air. Vanlyn was dimly aware of something cold and metallic sliding down the length of his shaft. He looked to see the thick gold band encircling the base of his cock. Vanlyn stared at Dane in wordless confusion, his brow creasing.

Vanlyn was distracted when Dane bit him on the inside of his thigh and soothed the sore area with his tongue as he'd done with Vanlyn's nipple.

Dane climbed off the bed again and, after a brief examination of the box, chose the whip once more. He looked at Vanlyn with a dangerous glint in his eyes. For a brief moment, the sight of the whip and the intensity of Dane's gaze cooled his ardor. "Dane?"

"Vanlyn." Dane smiled slightly. "What is this look?" Dane shook his head, his expression bemused. He ran the whip across Vanlyn's neck and down his torso, finally stroking his cock and balls with the supple leather. "Like a lamb being led to the slaughter."

Was that how he looked to Dane? There was a thrill of terror in his stomach, but at the same time, the thought of the leather striking his flesh set his heart to racing. He was ashamed of his feelings. His eyes downcast, Vanlyn whispered, "Please don't hurt me."

"Vanlyn." There was a command in Dane's voice. "Look at me." It was a few moments before Vanlyn could gather enough courage to raise his eyes to meet Dane's. "You know I would never hurt you, don't you?"

Vanlyn moistened his lips and nodded. It was all he could manage. *What would he*

do if I tell him of these wanton feelings? Of course, he knew how Dane would react.

Dane gently grasped him by the chin and turned Vanlyn's face up to his. Dane ran his tongue along Vanlyn's lower lip, and he couldn't stop the helpless moan he uttered. Dane followed the initial contact by pulling it into his mouth, sucking gently before demanding entrance, his tongue caressing in Vanlyn's mouth but only for a brief moment. It was like refusing a man dying of thirst when Dane pulled away.

"Do you want this?" Dane muttered the words against Vanlyn's mouth while using the whip to stroke his genitals and the insides of his thighs.

Yes, I want it, gods and fiends. My whole body aches for it.

Again, all Vanlyn could manage was a nod.

Dane stepped away to move behind him again. Dane leaned forward, his breath hot on Vanlyn's ear. The whip pressed against Vanlyn's throat. He swallowed involuntarily. "There is nothing to be ashamed of."

The first strike, the crack of the leather meeting his flesh, wrenched a cry from Vanlyn's throat as his back arched. His chest heaved as the air left his lungs in rapid breaths. The second hit came without warning. Vanlyn's hands pulled the straps taut, his hands grasping in desperation onto leather, needing something solid to convince him he was still in the real world and that this wasn't some surreal dream fabricated by his own mind.

There was a third and a fourth, and with each, the sound of leather on him. The sting of it on now tender flesh brought him closer to completion.

"More," Vanlyn pleaded, and the whip came down again. He was close now, his balls so painfully tight, and his cock red as the blood filled it. Vanlyn knew Dane had cast a spell, and the ring was the catalyst. Dane was in control, even of his release.

It was a few moments before Vanlyn could collect his wits enough to see that Dane was no longer nearby. He could hear the man moving around and heard a familiar sound of metal striking glass, but Vanlyn couldn't twist far enough around to see him. When Dane finally came within his sight again he was holding a bottle of wine and two goblets.

Pouring some of the golden wine in each glass, Dane set one on the nightstand and brought the other over to where Vanlyn stood. "Drink," he said. "I know you must be thirsty." Dane tipped the goblet to Vanlyn's lips.

The cool liquid relieved the dryness in Vanlyn's throat. Some trickled down his chin and onto his chest. Dane's tongue caught the errant drops.

When the goblet was empty, Dane set it aside and crawled on the bed, kneeling before Vanlyn, his hand fisting in Vanlyn's hair. The kiss was not gentle as before. Dane ground his hips against him, re-awakening his desire, his cock swelling to a painful erection within the ring.

"Dane," Vanlyn gasped out as Dane broke the kiss.

Dane turned, crawled to the head of the bed, and sat, stretching out his muscular legs, his back against the headboard. He lifted his own goblet of wine and took a sip. His face was expressionless.

"Dane?" Vanlyn's whole body craved release. He was right on the precipice, that moment between agony and ecstasy. He trembled with the need of it, and it seemed Dane planned to refuse him.

"Dane." Vanlyn couldn't hide the entreaty in his voice.

"Yes?"

Vanlyn's breathing was painful in his chest. His throat had gone dry again "Dane, please."

Dane lifted the cup to his lips and drank. "Please, what?"

Vanlyn lowered his eyes. He couldn't give what Dane was asking for. His complete surrender had been Dane's vow.

"Please," Vanlyn said. "Fuck me."

"What did you say?"

Vanlyn met his gaze with defiance. "*Fuck me.*"

Dane set the goblet down and swung his legs over the opposite side of the bed. He stood, stretched like a languid cat. His calm demeanor was contrary to the look of animal hunger in his eyes. His cock was huge, and even though Vanlyn had seen him before and Dane had been inside him, Vanlyn was certain he would not be able to accept its length.

Dane made a slow half-circling of Vanlyn's captive body. From the box Dane chose and opened a second jar and smeared the salve thickly over his cock. When he moved behind Vanlyn, again Dane removed the rod, allowing Vanlyn's muscles to relax

"Vanlyn." Dane rested one knee on the bed, and his arms encircled Vanlyn from behind in a possessive embrace. He gently nuzzled the nape of Vanlyn's neck. "My lamb."

He felt the head of Dane's shaft press against his opening and despite being anxious to have Dane inside of him, he felt his muscles tense against the intrusion. As always, Dane was relentless. Vanlyn pushed against Dane's incursion until he was fully inside him.

"Dane, I want you so much. Please..."

"Anything, love."

Dane pulled completely out of him, his calloused hands gripping Vanlyn's waist for support and plunged into him to the root, ripping a cry free from Vanlyn's lips. Dane pulled out again, thrust in deep, and began a rhythm of it as he worked his cock around in Vanlyn who would swear he felt Dane's shaft swelling within him, stretching to a monstrous proportion. The hand that gripped him extended, claws pressed into his flesh, and it came to Vanlyn what was happening. Dane was shifting, becoming that beast as his ardor took complete hold of him.

Vanlyn was terrified for a few heartbeats. What would Dane do to him? Even as these thoughts occurred, Vanlyn found himself meeting Dane's rhythmic thrusting, wantonly encouraging the beast to devour him.

Dane grabbed Vanlyn's shaft in one huge hand, fisting him hungrily until Vanlyn's felt the inevitable explosion building. Dane seemed to sense it too. As he dragged Vanlyn's hips to him, building the power behind his thrusts, Vanlyn's body arched violently once as his seed erupted, and he screamed with each release. His essence splashed across Dane's hand and in white ribbons on the coverlet.

Dane followed him, the animalistic howl sending a thrill of fear through him. It was the cry of a beast. Dane's hot seed filled him, and the wind from the beating of wings cooled the moisture on Vanlyn's skin.

He knew Dane was spent when the man fell against his back, grasping onto Vanlyn's waist with an almost desperation. Dane's ragged breathing was warm in Vanlyn's ear. Vanlyn's own breathing was the only things that disturbed the quiet.

Vanlyn fared no better. His body dipped forward, and the straps pulled taut. "*Oh*

gods,” Vanlyn moaned. He was shaking from the sheer power behind his climax. He wanted to curl up and sleep, wrapped the warm arms of his lover.

Vanlyn couldn't say how much time passed before Dane straightened away from him. He freed Vanlyn from the shackles, and then guided him to lie across the bed.

Dane gently brushed his fingertips down Vanlyn's face. "Did I bring you great pleasure, love?"

"Yes."

"Let me care for you."

Dane coaxed him onto his stomach. Vanlyn was too exhausted to do anything else so he lay still when Dane began to rub salve on the tender area of his buttocks where the whip had struck. When he was finished, Dane moved the boxes to the floor, then crawled into bed beside Vanlyn, draping his arm around his shoulders. Vanlyn sighed in contentment as he turned into Dane, breathing deeply of his musky scent. He had what he truly desired.

Chapter Twenty

“Good morning, Vanlyn.”

Dane smiled slightly at the flush that crept along Vanlyn’s cheeks as he entered the dining room although he had no reason to be embarrassed. Dane was in his customary place with his usual pile of papers and official documents. He was, of course, totally at ease.

Vanlyn on the other hand fluttered about like a nervous hen. Although breakfast was laid out on the table, he chose a cup of black coffee.

“Did you sleep well?”

Vanlyn’s flush deepened. “I slept fine.”

This talk was meaningless, Dane knew. He wanted to know what Vanlyn was feeling. Had he enjoyed the erotic play as much as Dane had? Did he yearn to experience it again? Dane thought so but he wanted to hear Vanlyn say it.

“Vanlyn—”

The young man rose abruptly, nearly spilling his coffee. “I’m sorry, excuse me.”

Dane could only sigh after him as he left the room. “Why are you so embarrassed, love? No one is here but us. No one knows what we do.”

Dane went back to his papers, stacking them neatly once the chore was completed. He filled a plate with a generous helping of food and took it with him, and after a bit of searching, found Vanlyn in his study. The man was sitting on the floor and staring at the cold fireplace, deep in thought, much like Dane had before. The troubled look on his face saddened Dane. He moved over to the couch. Vanlyn didn’t even notice him right away.

“You’re troubled.” Dane sat down beside him.

“I am.” Vanlyn didn’t look at him.

“About last night?”

Vanlyn risked a glance at him. “That and other things.”

“Eat,” Dane said. “You’ll find no solutions in starvation.”

His words elicited a slight laugh from the younger man as he picked up his fork.

Dane watched him for a time finding his enjoyment in Vanlyn’s own. *We’ve been through so much he and I*, Dane mused. *I never imagined it would be this way between us*. He was also worried about Vanlyn. The episode of yesterday disturbed him greatly. Whatever was clawing at the cage that was Vanlyn’s subconscious would destroy him if he didn’t deal directly with it.

“I guess I was hungrier than I thought.” Vanlyn grinned sheepishly at his empty plate. “Thank you.”

“Why don’t I get us some more coffee?”

Dane returned to the dining room while he considered how to broach the subject of Vanlyn’s actions. He refilled their cups, then decided to grab a few of the fresh-baked cinnamon rolls Dawkins had prepared.

Vanlyn’s welcoming smile made his heart swell as he sat down. Dane watched with mild amusement as Vanlyn’s eyes were alit with pleasure. He selected one of the rolls, swiped some of the icing with his finger and mmm’d with pleasure as he licked it off. The sight was incredibly erotic, and Dane’s reaction was immediate. He watched Vanlyn

enjoying the treat as his cock swelled in response.

When Dane noticed some of the icing clung to Vanlyn's full bottom lip, he couldn't resist. He leaned forward and drew his tongue across it, drawing a gentle moan from the younger man.

"Dane," Vanlyn breathed, and Dane took the opportunity by gently probing deeper with his tongue. Gods, he loved kissing this man. There was the sweet and spice taste of the rolls within and the familiar sweetness that was Vanlyn.

He drew away and couldn't help but smile at the dazed look on Vanlyn's face. Dane began undoing the buttons of Vanlyn's shirt, following each time he exposed flesh with a kiss. Vanlyn leaned back on his elbows, watching Dane's slow progression down his torso.

He licked and nibbled, tasting the salt and breathing deeply of the clean scent of sandalwood soap. Playfully, Dane flicked his tongue into Vanlyn's navel and was surprised when the young man laughed and quickly stifled it. Dane looked at him, and he smiled with a sense of amazement. Vanlyn blushed and looked away.

Dane couldn't help but chuckle. "You're ticklish."

Vanlyn's only response was an annoyed grunt.

"Do you have any idea how adorable that is?"

Vanlyn's blush deepened, and he harrumphed in irritation. "I am *not* adorable."

The protest, in Dane's opinion, made him twice as adorable. "You are to me." He began to undo Vanlyn's trousers. Dane gently cradled Vanlyn's rapidly hardening erection, enjoying the velvety feel of it against his fingertips. Dane lifted his gaze to Vanlyn's as the young man moaned softly and fell against the cushions.

His tongue traced patterns, swirling wetly around the bulbous head. Dane sucked the salty pre-cum from the slit, drawing a harsh cry from his young lover. There was a sudden need in Dane to be as close to Vanlyn as possible. He would not take him at this point although he wanted to. He would make them comfortable later. For now, Dane was content with satisfying the mutual want between them.

He rose off Vanlyn and freed his own erection before sliding his body up Vanlyn's torso. Moist flesh against each other, Dane rotated his hips, rubbing against Vanlyn's sex. The sweet agony on his face was the greatest aphrodisiac. His brow furrowed, that delectable bottom lip caught between his teeth, and the sight of him stoked the fires. Dane pulled him into an embrace him, wanting, *needing* him closer. "Come for me, love," he breathed against Vanlyn's ear.

Vanlyn did. The helpless cries from his lips pushed Dane over the edge. He ground fiercely against the man, his hot seed melding heated flesh as his body jerked convulsively in his release. Dane lay heavily against him, his energy spent, his cock throbbing in the aftermath.

They slept. Dane awoke first, and for a moment, he watched Vanlyn in slumber. The lines of Vanlyn's face softened in contentment. Dane gently traced his fingers along Vanlyn's jaw, enjoying the rough feeling of the stubble there.

Gently disengaging himself from Vanlyn's embrace, Dane treaded lightly as he made his way from the room. He retrieved first a blanket and some pillows and returned to the study, spreading them out on the floor next to Vanlyn. It was early evening, and Dane was sure they would need a fire later. Vanlyn was still sleeping as Dane went to the kitchen for a fresh bottle of wine. Bella had made an apple pie, and Dane took it and

some fresh cream to go with it.

Vanlyn was just coming awake when Dane returned the second time. He smiled sleepily. "What time is it?"

"Early evening." Dane saw Vanlyn's gaze fall on the items on the floor. "I thought you might like to be more comfortable."

Dane joined Vanlyn on the floor and poured them both glasses of wine. He cut them each a hearty slice of the pie, adding a dollop of the thick cream. Dane was aware of Vanlyn's eyes on him as he served him.

"You'll spoil me with such decadent treatment." Vanlyn smiled.

"I want you to be at ease." Dane leaned back and drew one knee to his chest, draping his arm over his knee. "Vanlyn, you realize we have to discuss what happened to you."

A slight flush rose in the young man's cheeks, and he averted his eyes. "Yes, I know."

Dane drew back, his eyebrows raised. "You agree?"

Vanlyn drew in a deep breath. "Yes." He paused, his tongue flicked out, moistening his lips. "It's just that..." His head lowered, Vanlyn breathed deeply again. "I'm afraid."

Dane's heart caught in his chest. *How difficult admitting that must have been for you.* He set his glass aside and crawled to where Vanlyn sat. The young man didn't look at him. "Vanlyn, please let me help you. I promise that I will not go where you do not wish me. And, the moment you feel uncomfortable, I will withdraw on your say."

Vanlyn shook his head. "You don't understand. It's not you I'm afraid of. I fear what will you find. What if it damages me to where I lose my sanity?"

"I won't let that happen."

Vanlyn finally looked at him. "You won't?"

"You have my word."

"What would I need to do?"

"Nothing but open yourself up to me. Trust me."

Vanlyn looked at him for a moment, fear and uncertainty in his eyes, then finally said, "I trust you, Dane."

Dane was surprised at how pleased those words made him. More than anything, he realized he needed Vanlyn's trust. Dane rose from his place to walk to the fireplace, taking a few moments to light the carefully laid wood. He waited until the flames burned steadily. He returned to where Vanlyn sat and positioned himself behind him, drawing the younger man against him and folding him in a loose embrace. The purpose was to let Vanlyn know he would protect him and, at the same time, avoid making the prince feel as though he was imprisoned.

"Be at peace, love," he said against Vanlyn's ear. "Watch the flames dance."

He felt Vanlyn relax against him. Dane began, weaving the spell with whispered words, surrounding both men in an aura of power.

"Tell me what instigated the episode." The two of them were enshrouded in the flames. Embers danced like fireflies around them.

"It was a dream." Vanlyn's voice was unsteady.

"Remember I am here. And I won't let you relive the experience if you don't want to."

Indistinct forms darkened within the flames, coalescing into solid objects, their blurred lines becoming clear, amorphous globules sculpted into faces. Dane recognized

them right away.

“Your father and brother.”

“They were angry because I betrayed them. I betrayed my kingdom and my people.”

A seed of guilt sprouted in Dane’s chest. It came to him, in an aberrant rush of emotion that he regretted what he had done.

“But,” Vanlyn went on, “I wanted you. *Gods, I wanted you.*”

His heart swelled at the words. Dane tightened his embrace, slightly and buried his face in Vanlyn’s hair. “I wanted you to.”

Then Vanlyn’s body went rigid. “No!”

Dane saw the dream going into dark places that he knew Vanlyn didn’t want to tread. “It’s all right. I have you. Remove yourself from it, love. I’ll help you.”

“He said I had to do what my honor demanded.”

Stark images played themselves across the smoke. They all involved his father and brother, but the greater amount involved Argent. One memory stood out amongst the rest, interwoven with the threads of the dream.

The coach slowed to a stop, and Vanlyn looked out the window. The moment he saw the driver running into the woods his heart dropped into his stomach.

“Oh gods, no.”

The door opened, hands grabbed for him, dragging him from the coach. He struggled and cried out—

“Don’t! Not this, please!”

“I’ve got you, Vanlyn.” Dane wove an image of him taking Vanlyn’s hand and leading him from the scene. They stood alone away from everything. “Do you know what was happening here?”

“I’m not certain,” Vanlyn said. “I have a faint recollection of this. I was on my way somewhere, yes, to the Academy. My father finally agreed to let me go. I remember watching the coachman run and then—”

A shudder passed over him, and Dane pulled Vanlyn to him. “We will turn this memory aside for now. We need to focus on the dream.”

Vanlyn nodded, moistened his lips then turned to face the flames again.

“Argent told you to do what your honor demands,” Dane said. “When did he first say that to you?”

Memories melded into a surreal picture, resembling a child’s finger painting. Dane enveloped his fingers over Vanlyn’s and guided him to rearrange the events into a coherent scene.

Argent and Vanlyn stood facing each other.

“You have my instructions. Carry them out to perfection. I want no protest or thought of disobeying me.”

“Whatever you say.”

“If you betray me, you will do what your honor demands.”

“Yes.”

Dane felt the subtle yet complete control. Argent was no conjurer, but one didn’t necessarily need to be to cast a spell. Argent had taken Vanlyn’s fear and confusion and manipulated it to his own ends, and Vanlyn, young and innocent as he was, had no weapons with which to fight.

But what was the catalyst?

As though in response to his silent question, another memory solidified in the mist.

Vanlyn walked into the library and was surprised to find both Argent and Rasleigh there. Surprising, because Argent seldom if ever came into the library since completing his studies.

"What do you want?" Argent graced him with a sneer.

"Don't talk to him that way!" Raleigh's violet eyes flashed with annoyance.

"He's my brother. I'll speak to him as I like," Argent muttered, but Vanlyn noticed he said no more.

"Argent was afraid of this Rasleigh," Dane commented.

"Yes," Vanlyn said. "I realized it that day. Rasleigh was the only one besides Eselda who could get away with speaking to Argent in that manner."

Vanlyn walked to the library to find Rasleigh sitting alone.

"Hello, Vanlyn." Rasleigh smiled at him.

"Where is Argent?"

"Off with one of the servant maidens. Honestly, he has little sense and less decorum."

Vanlyn sat down at the table but didn't comment.

"It's all right to agree, you know."

"You don't have to live with him."

Rasleigh laughed. "True." A strange look passed over Rasleigh's face that Vanlyn was hard pressed to interpret. "I was about to retire to my rooms with this book for some wine and cheese. Would you care to join me?"

Excited at the invitation to speak with the older boy, Vanlyn agreed. Rasleigh's room was in the royal wing as a special guest of the house. One of the first things he showed Vanlyn was the piles of books he'd purchased in town.

"Feel free to look. In fact, I wanted your opinion on whether or not these were good choices."

Vanlyn blushed. "Oh, my opinion isn't worth much."

"It is to me." Rasleigh sat down on the couch and motioned for Vanlyn to join him.

Vanlyn had chosen a book and presented it to Rasleigh like a gift. "I have read all of his works, and they have been exquisite. You'll like this one I'm sure."

"Then this is the one I will read first."

Vanlyn flushed scarlet at the compliment.

"May I ask you something?" Rasleigh moved closer.

"Yes?"

"Are you fond of me, Vanlyn?"

"Yes, I am," Vanlyn smiled, "very much so."

"I am glad," Rasleigh smiled, "for I am very fond of you too." Rasleigh leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth.

Vanlyn's eyes went wide, his fingers curling on the couch fabric. Rasleigh broke the kiss and smiled gently.

"Why?" Vanlyn said. "I'm a boy!"

Rasleigh chuckled, amused at Vanlyn's discomfort. "I'm aware of that." Rasleigh leaned towards him again, but Vanlyn backed away.

"Rasleigh, I don't understand."

"Did you like it when I kissed you?"

"I-I don't know. I mean boys don't kiss each other! Well, they do in books—"

"And you've read those books?"

Vanlyn's blush deepened.

"Men love men, Vanlyn." Rasleigh grasped both of his hands. His gaze was frightening in its intensity. "May I show you how I feel about you?" He pulled Vanlyn forward, their lips meeting. Emotions he didn't understand rose in his chest. He wanted to please Rasleigh. He was truly fond of the older boy, but did he want this? Did he want Rasleigh touching him that way?

"Rasleigh I don't—I'm not—"

"Hush," Rasleigh said. "It's all right, Vanlyn, I promise you." He was guiding Vanlyn back onto the couch.

Dane withdrew. Jealousy burned hot through his veins, although he had no real right to be jealous. It was a few moments before he realized Vanlyn was with him.

"We made love." Vanlyn's voice was hoarse. "No, he made love to me. I didn't understand anything that was happening or what I was feeling but..."

He was silent for a time, and within that, a thought came to Dane that had anger start as smoldering embers, which rapidly became a raging fire. "Vanlyn." Dane voiced each word with care, hating to ask the question but knowing it was necessary. "This Rasleigh, did he force himself on you?" So help him by all the gods and fiends if this Rasleigh had done so, he was a dead man.

"What? Oh no," Vanlyn said. "That is, I wanted to please him so I allowed it. It was strange and bewildering at first, but then I—"

"It was still not by mutual consent at the beginning." Dane despised this man for what he had done to Vanlyn. "He still took advantage of your innocence. He did nothing to make you feel at ease and to be certain you truly were ready to be intimate with him." Dane drew in a deep breath. "I owe you an apology."

"Whatever for?"

"Because," Dane said, "I have mistreated you in the same fashion."

"How?"

"By assuming that you were familiar with all the nuances of male love." Dane's self-loathing was a bitter taste on his tongue. "I thought you were merely denying who and what you were. In truth, you were still an innocent."

"I'm not a child anymore, Dane." Vanlyn went to draw away from him, but Dane tightened his embrace.

"You are in this," Dane said. "I ask your forgiveness."

Vanlyn sighed. "There's nothing to forgive. I told you I wanted you, Dane. I wasn't repulsed by you."

"I figured such." Dane smiled. "It was arrogant of me to think that was the reason."

"I've enjoyed everything we've done." He could hear the conviction in Vanlyn's tone. "I just don't know why sometimes. When you had me bound and you whipped me..."

Dane closed his eyes, and a shiver passed across his skin at the memory. "I believe it is a want to be controlled, possessed by someone. To trust that person enough to put yourself in their hands and thereby free yourself to experience true pleasure."

Vanlyn didn't speak, and Dane knew he was contemplating his words.

"Shall we continue?"

They did not delve deeply into his relationship with Rasleigh. There were stolen times together, fierce kisses in darkened spots, and instruction in how to better bring pleasure as well as experiments with bondage and spanking.

Then one day it all ended.

They lay in Rasleigh's bed together bathed in the afterglow. Rasleigh was feeding him peaches dipped in thick cream. They'd met in the hallway and had rushed to Rasleigh's room, divesting themselves of clothes along the way. Vanlyn lay in his lover's arms and thought how peaceful he was.

Then the door came open.

The maid shrieked as though she'd found a murdered corpse. Rasleigh leapt from the bed and caught her as she escaped down the hall. Vanlyn remained where he was and drew the covers up to his chin, watching with his heart in his stomach as Rasleigh dragged the maid back into the room. A bag of coins supposedly bought her silence.

Afterwards, Vanlyn climbed from the bed and hurriedly pulled on his clothes.

"Vanlyn?"

"No, please, I need to go. Oh gods, if my father or Argent finds out..."

He ignored Rasleigh's pleas to stay. Retreating to his room, Vanlyn implored any gods who would listen that the maid kept silent.

She did not.

"The girl," Vanlyn said. "After she took Rasleigh's gold, she went straight to Argent, hoping he would find favor with her. I learned afterwards he had her beaten and bodily thrown from the manor."

"And what of Rasleigh?"

Again, the images took form.

Vanlyn stretched his slim frame across the window seat and clutched the book to his chest. A gift from Rasleigh, he cherished it above all else. He had not seen or heard from Rasleigh in days.

Vanlyn turned his head sharply at the sound of the door coming open with such force it hit the wall with a resounding crack.

"Slut!" Argent strode into the room, his handsome features twisted with loathing.

Vanlyn had no defense, no words to protect himself. "Argent, I—"

Argent reached out and grasped Vanlyn by the collar, pulling him from his seat. The book fell from his grasp. "I should kill you."

Vanlyn's blood froze in his veins. "But why? Why do you even care?"

Then it came to him.

"You wanted him. You wanted Rasleigh," Vanlyn said. "What did you do to him?"

Argent shoved him away, and Vanlyn landed hard against the seat. "He's gone. You'll never see him again." Vanlyn realized that the look in Argent's eyes that he had mistaken for loathing was jealousy.

"You disgraced yourself and this family," Argent said. "I'm disgusted by the sight of you. You're not even a man anymore, letting another man fuck you."

Vanlyn wanted to protest, to defend himself, to throw Argent's accusations back at him, but an aura of malevolence surrounded his brother, and it reached out to grip Vanlyn in its icy fingers.

Argent knelt before him. His gaze bore deep into Vanlyn's soul. His voice was deadlly soft as he spoke. "I could tell father. Do you know what he'll do to you?"

"No! Argent, please don't!"

"I won't." Argent's smile made his stomach turn. "But you're mine now, little brother. You'll do whatever I tell you to do without question. Swear to me."

"I swear."

Argent's mouth curled in a lazy smirk. "Good."

Then he left him alone. Vanlyn wrapped his arms around himself as he began to tremble.

"No," Vanlyn moaned as he trembled in Dane's arms.

"Vanlyn." It was enough, Dane thought. He released them from the spell. The flames returned to their place within the hearth. "I'm sorry, I should have brought you out."

"N-no... It's... I had to know," Vanlyn said. "It was my choice."

Dane climbed to his knees, and then guided Vanlyn with firm hands on his shoulders to lie down. Dane lay next to him and pulled him close. Vanlyn buried his face in Dane's chest, and Dane gently stroked a hand down Vanlyn's hair.

"So it would seem Argent has his own dirty little secrets," Dane commented darkly.

"I was nothing more than his slave." Vanlyn was in agony, and Dane hated Argent for it. "I was made to steal for him, lie for him, and made to entertain his friends."

"Oh, love." Dane held him tight, nuzzling the hair at his temple. "I am so sorry you were used that way." Gods, the first chance Dane had he was going to rip Argent's throat out.

"I remember now," Vanlyn said. "The dream followed me into the waking world."

Vanlyn spoke of hearing Argent's voice, of his brother telling him to do the honorable thing, and finally of Vanlyn silencing Argent's taunting voice by smashing the mirror. Vanlyn's words faded into silence, and for a moment, they lay there in each other's arms. Dane softly caressed Vanlyn's hair and placed gentle kisses on his brow.

"Vanlyn," he said when he felt Vanlyn's muscles relax, "you have to shatter the hold Argent has on you. It will be the only way to find peace."

"I know." Vanlyn's voice was muffled against Dane's shirt. "Will you help me again?"

"Of course." Dane drew away and gently tilted Vanlyn's chin up with one hand and brushed his lips lightly across Vanlyn's. *Vanlyn, love, don't you know by now that I will do anything for you?*

Chapter Twenty-One

They settled into a routine again.

Things Vanlyn had long since forgotten filled his mind, memories that bore deep into the darkest recesses. Dane helped him sort through them, all the while comforting Vanlyn with reassuring words and gentle caresses.

They were minor things, according to Dane. There was still that one memory which was the major focal point of all that Vanlyn had suppressed. It frightened Vanlyn that something that happened to him was buried so deep it had stolen parts of his true self. He suspected it had something to do with the ill-fated coach ride, and Dane agreed.

Vanlyn had no idea if Dane thought to continue with his plan.

Although Lahn Aurris came and reported the fiends were advancing almost daily and his father's troops were giving ground, Dane said nothing about releasing him or turning him over to the Toryn Council as promised.

Now that the memories of the mistreatment he'd received at the hands of Argent and his father were full in the light, Vanlyn was beginning to be of a mind that he did not want to return to Toryn after all. But what was he to do?

Days spent in practice and developing his power blended into nights of passion.

Vanlyn's resistance was almost a token effort now. Dane's very presence in the same room with him was enough to bring Vanlyn to heated arousal. There was still that part of him that hated himself for allowing his baser instincts to take hold, and the other, the one that couldn't get enough of Dane, reveled in each and every lovemaking session.

Vanlyn also found himself cultivating friendships with the bogies who seemed to have an uncanny sense of when to disappear when Dane turned his thoughts to seduction.

It was an incident a few weeks after Vanlyn's episode that brought about a monumental change in their supposed relationship.

Vanlyn lay awake in his bed; the only sound in the room was Dane's gentle breathing. In the semi-darkness, Vanlyn traced the outlines of Dane's form with his eyes.

"Gods and fiends, why can't I resist you?" Vanlyn traced a gentle pattern across Dane's well-defined chest with his fingertips.

Dane's body gave a spasmodic twitch. He muttered something unintelligible.

"Dane?" Vanlyn pulled his hand away.

"Go away," Dane muttered.

For a moment, Vanlyn thought Dane was speaking to him until he realized his lover was still asleep.

"Dane, wake up." Vanlyn brushed aside the hair from Dane's temple.

"No. Go away." Dane's began to weakly thrash, caught in the throes of a nightmare.

"Dane?" Vanlyn came up on his elbows. There was an edge of panic in Dane's voice. "Wake up." Vanlyn took him by the shoulders and shook him slightly.

"Don't touch me! Get off! Get off!" Dane began to thrash wildly. His eyes flew open, and even in the semi-darkness, Vanlyn could see the stark terror in them.

"Dane, it's all right, stop! It's over!"

Dane was beyond hearing him. He struggled, his body entangled in the covers, further trapping him.

“Dane!” His own panic now rising, Vanlyn threw his body over Dane’s, pinning him. He held Dane’s face in his hands, forcing him to meet his gaze. “See me! I’m here, you’re safe. Listen to me.”

“The dark,” Dane cried. “It’s too dark! Oh gods!”

Vanlyn literally threw himself from the bed and scrambled desperately for the lamp at the bedside, his fingers fumbling with the wood matches.

Dane screamed a cry of agony and launched himself from the bed, his wings erratically pushing through the air. Vanlyn’s whole body shook, but he forced his hands to steady themselves as he struck the match and pressed it to the lamp wick. The light wasn’t nearly enough to chase all the shadows away, but it guided Vanlyn to the fireplace, where he hurriedly set it alight.

When he turned, Vanlyn saw Dane at the far end of the room, his body pressed into a corner, curled into a miserable ball. His eyes were wide, his body caught in fierce trembling. Vanlyn cautiously approached as he reached out towards the older man.

“Dane, it’s all right.”

Dane moved with that unerring speed of his and caught Vanlyn in a painful embrace. Vanlyn ground his teeth against it and held on, knowing Dane needed him. He brushed a hand down Dane’s hair and muttered soothing words to him until he felt Dane relax against him. Still, it was several moments before Vanlyn was able to coax Dane back into bed. He lit another lamp, then hurried to the kitchen and retrieved a bottle of wine and a cup.

Dane was sitting up in bed when Vanlyn returned. He seemed reasonably calm and accepted a cup of wine without comment. Vanlyn sat on the bed beside him.

Dane moistened his lips. “I am sorry you had to see me that way.”

It had been disturbing. Seeing Dane in such a panicked state when he’d always presented himself as somewhat stoic. But every man had fears and apparently Dane had been made to face his in his dreams.

“Dane, you needn’t be embarrassed,” Vanlyn reassured him. “I was worried about you. I was afraid you’d hurt yourself. I’m glad you’re well now.”

Dane smiled slightly. “I believe I’ve mentioned before we seldom dream, but at times—”

“You said ‘go away’ and ‘get off’,” Vanlyn said, carefully. “Were you being accosted?”

“Yes.” Dane’s straightforward answer surprised him. “By the beast that shares this body with me.”

Vanlyn frowned in confusion. “I’m not sure I see your meaning.”

Dane sighed and let himself fall against the pillows. He laid one hand over his eyes as though trying to block out the light he so craved. “It is difficult for me to discuss.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No,” Dane said. “I want to tell you.”

Vanlyn moved towards him and slid underneath the covers with him. He drew Dane against his chest, encircling him within the protection of his embrace.

“When I crossed over,” Dane began, “when all those like me cross over, we are judged by a being calling herself the Arch-fiend.”

Vanlyn shuddered involuntarily at the name. “I have heard horrible tales of the one who rules the realm of fiends.”

“No one truly knows her form. When you approach her, you see...” It was Dane who now shuddered, and Vanlyn tightened his embrace. “You see whatever your worst nightmare is come to life. Her voice is cruelty itself.”

Dane buried his face in Vanlyn’s shoulder. “I recall walking down a path and on either side of me was a diseased forest, twisted and grotesque. All manner of hideous beasts thrived within their shadows, some that cannot be described in mortal terms. I knew when I was before her for I despaired and gave myself over to my terror.”

Vanlyn drew the blankets closer to them, creating a warm cocoon of protection. One of the lamps started to dim, and Vanlyn hoped Dane didn’t notice. He didn’t believe it was a good idea to leave Dane.

“I don’t recall her words. I don’t believe she ever actually spoke. It was as though my sentence was etched into my very being.”

Dane was silent for so long, Vanlyn thought he would be unable to continue. Then, “I heard a cry. It was a sound unlike anything I’d ever heard. It was as though a host of wounded animals were keening for flesh. I turned to look, and there it was. That horrible apparition. I knew what it wanted, what it was going to do to me. I cried out and tried to flee but—”

Dane grasped onto Vanlyn’s shoulders as though he feared the thing would come again and drag him away. “It invades the body, becomes a part of you. Yes, it imbues you with the power of flight, great strength and enhanced senses, but the agony of that first joining...”

Again, he was silent for a time. “Soon you grow used to it I suppose. I learned to live with it, but there was one thing I could never come to terms with. It was too much.”

“What?” Vanlyn prompted, gently as his hands caressed Dane in reassurance. He knew Dane did not want pity, but Vanlyn ached for the man and what he’d had to endure.

“The darkness,” Dane said. “No, not darkness, more perpetual twilight. That time when there is that faint glow to the horizon that tells a man that the dawn will come again so he does not fear. But dawn never came. When I realized it was the fate of that world and its people to be in darkness, I assumed the light was made by a great city.”

“So I vowed to travel there and make my home,” Dane continued. “I flew at times, but flying is dangerous. Mostly I walked. It was how I met Lahn Aurris. A group of rouges set upon me, and he helped me fight them off. Even in that world there is avarice.”

“Was Lahn your lover?” Vanlyn knew it was the worst possible time to ask, but morbid curiosity got the better of him.

Dane looked up. “No, love, Lahn and I are just comrades. There was never anything between us. Yes, we discussed it but decided our friendship was too valuable, not to mention our current situation made it improbable.”

His words pleased Vanlyn, although he figured he probably shouldn’t be.

“I told Lahn I was searching for the city,” Dane said. “He said, ‘What city?’ and I said, ‘Where the light comes from’. It was then he told me there was no city, and that the light moved away from you no matter how long you traveled. You never reached it. He knew because he searched for years himself. Lahn supposed it was there to further demoralize us.”

“It was more than I could bear.” Dane snuggled into Vanlyn’s shoulder again. “I went mad for a time. Lahn brought me out of it. He had been there, by our calculations, for almost one hundred and thirty years and knew all the tricks of survival.”

“Gods and fiends.”

“But, even with Lahn’s company, the darkness weighed on me, pulling me into despair,” Dane said. “Things hid in the darkness, ready to destroy you. We’ve already suffered death, so any severe injury may leave us trapped within our own bodies for eternity, or worse, our bodies can be destroyed. If that happens, we become formless apparitions, tormenting the living that are close to us until a necromancer banishes us to oblivion.”

His voice was soft and filled with a fierce conviction. “I cannot—I *will not*—return to the darkness. I can’t be alone in the darkness anymore.”

Once Dane’s tale was finished and he lapsed into silence, Vanlyn found he only wanted to protect him. It no longer mattered to Vanlyn that he was Dane’s prisoner. He’d come to truly understand this man and feel his pain. He thought he understood what motivated Dane, and Vanlyn wanted Dane to know that he wasn’t alone.

Vanlyn pressed his lips to Dane’s brow. “I will make a vow to you. I promise that, if it’s within my power, I will *never* leave you alone in the darkness.”

Dane made a sound, a barely audible sigh as though he’d let go of something weighing on his heart. “Vanlyn.” Everything Dane felt, Vanlyn heard in the speaking of his name.

* * * *

Dane knew when Vanlyn fell asleep. The myriad of thoughts tumbling through his head for a time kept him from slumber.

This is not the first time you have shown me compassion, love. Despite everything I’ve done to you. So I will make my own vow. I will repay your kindness with my trust.

* * * *

Dane wasn’t beside him when he woke the next morning. Vanlyn wasn’t overly worried. He knew Dane rose early to see to the affairs of his land. It seemed his thoughts were on the right path, for when he went downstairs, he found the study door closed. The scent of breakfast led him to the kitchen.

“Good morning, Dawkins.” Vanlyn smiled at the elder bogie who was at the stove frying thick slabs of bacon.

“Good morning, Highness, I shall have your breakfast in a moment.”

“Thank you.” Vanlyn looked out the open door with a wistful sigh. It promised to be a beautiful day. Dawkins opened the door to allow the spring breeze in. Vanlyn had spoken to the insect life, and they’d passed the word onto their respective hives that this kitchen was not their domain.

As Dawkins put the plate before him, Vanlyn noticed Bella walking down the path towards the door as she hefted two large milk jugs. Vanlyn was aware of the bogie’s unnatural strength, but still it seemed the woman was struggling. When he saw her stumble, Vanlyn, in a reflex action, leapt from his stool and dashed out the door to help her. He caught the one milk jug just as she lost her grip.

“Bella!” Vanlyn admonished. “You shouldn’t try to carry this yourself. I would have—”

He halted as the words suddenly stuck in his throat. Vanlyn let his eyes travel in a

slow sweep of his surroundings. He drew in a deep breath before turning back to Bella who had the most self-satisfied smirk that he'd ever seen on a woman.

Vanlyn turned and with deliberate steps carried the milk jug back into the kitchen and set it on the cooking block. Bella was behind him. When he turned, he saw her exchange a look with Dawkins who was looking as smug as she was. *They know*, Vanlyn thought.

Again, Vanlyn drew in a deep breath and, keeping his gait measured, approached the threshold again and stepped over it.

The sun warmed his face, and the breeze brushed his hair aside. Vanlyn raised his face to the sky and let his arms fall to his sides. Tears welled beneath his closed lids. Gods, he'd never take the sunshine and warm breeze for granted again. He stood there reveling in the sheer freedom of being outside.

Freedom. He could make his escape right now. Just start running and never look back. He could probably grab a horse from the stable, and ride to the docks...

Vanlyn chuckled without humor. As if he knew where the docks were or which way to ride for that matter.

As if I actually want to leave.

It had been on his mind for quite some time. Where would he go? Perhaps his mother's family in Gan? He supposed he would be welcome there. It would probably be the logical course of action.

For now, however, Vanlyn just wanted to enjoy the day.

He had seen portions of the grounds during his explorations of the manor, so he had an idea of where everything was. The gravel path wound its way around the outside wall and branched off at intervals to travel up a slight incline.

Vanlyn knew if he took the left path that would lead him to the stables. The right would just take him around the manor, but any one of the paths up the incline would bring him to the vast garden and vineyard. Vanlyn decided that was as good a place to walk as any.

He started up the path from which Bella had come and, when he reached the top of the incline, stopped a moment to let his eyes truly see in a wide view what he could only from afar on a balcony.

He saw the stables and the adjacent barn in the distance, where obviously Bella had just milked the cows. He had to admire her strength for carrying the jugs all that way. As strong and in good health as he was, Vanlyn knew it would have been too much for him. He could also see chickens running around in the fenced in yard and a muscular bull sunning himself in the enclosed pasture. There were pigs too. On the opposite end of the barn was their sty.

Vanlyn forwent visiting the barn, but he intended to do so later. Right now, he let his steps lead him to the right, where the path lined by dozens of types of flowers twisted like a snake. A butterfly joined him, landing on the lapel of his shirt, so Vanlyn slowed his stride not wanting to cause her injury. She was a beautiful tiger-striped creature, and Vanlyn realized how long it had been since he'd taken pleasure in seeing one.

Vanlyn took another path where tall evergreen bushes obscured his view of the manor for a time. The line of bushes ended as the area opened up into a breath-taking landscape of color and life. The garden seemed to go on forever. Arrangements of flowers, green plants and fat bushes laid in geometric patterns, their colors arranged to

appear as though an artist had chosen this place for his palate.

The path branched off here in several directions. Vanlyn chose none in particular and started to walk. Two more butterflies landed on his shirt, one whose wings were a shimmering onyx with a pale blue lining and the other a monarch—the royalty of the species.

Several steps down his chosen path, he came to an area where flowering bushes encircled a pond of white marble. Curved benches were set around the perimeter of the space, and Vanlyn chose one to sit.

The butterflies took their leave as where Vanlyn now sat a spider was busily working at her web strung between two branches of the nearest bush. Vanlyn thought to speak to her at first, then he decided it would be best to leave her to her task and chose to watch instead.

He didn't know how long he sat there with his mind wandering before he noticed Dane standing at the end of the path. Vanlyn smiled in greeting. "Good morning."

"Greetings returned." Dane carried a plate covered with a napkin. "Dawkins said you left without eating breakfast."

As though to scold him for his inattention, Vanlyn's stomach growled in response. "Yes, I did."

Dane handed him the plate, and Vanlyn removed the cloth, his mouth watering at the sight and scent of fried eggs, bacon and fresh made biscuits. He sat down on the bench and turned his body to the side. "Were you speaking to her?" He nodded to the spider.

"Oh no," Vanlyn said. "She is focused on her task, and I didn't wish to disturb her." His eyes dropped to his plate and despite himself, he felt his cheeks warming. There was no reason for him to be embarrassed. "Thank you." He lifted his gaze to Dane and could see that the man understood that the thank you encompassed more than his breakfast.

"You have shown me compassion on several occasions," Dane said. "I felt it was the least I could do."

You could do more. The thought came unbidden. *You could let me go.* Vanlyn wondered what Dane expected of him now. Did Dane assume that Vanlyn would adhere to some honor code and not attempt escape? Or was Dane expecting him to do so and was already prepared for that eventuality?

Vanlyn sighed inwardly. It was too much to consider. Right now, all he wanted to do was focus on his meal.

"I was detained by a messenger," Dane said. "The council is to convene today, and the Scribe will present his findings. I also need to see to my business ventures and speak with my people at the harbor."

"When will you return?"

Dane gave him a mischievous grin. "We probably won't be back until late."

Vanlyn's jaw dropped. "You want me to come with you?"

"If you wish."

His breath caught in his throat, and a tremor of nervousness raced across his skin.

"Yes, I'll come with you."

"Good," Dane said. "Perhaps you can assist if you're so inclined. I usually stop at a few of the farms on the outskirts of the town, and there is always something about the animals there."

"I'd be happy to help," Vanlyn said.

Dane rose from his seat and stretched. "When you're finished, meet me at the stables."

"All right."

Now your chance has finally come. How difficult will it be to lose yourself in the crowd and steal aboard a ship? You can go to Gan just like you planned.

Vanlyn ignored the voice and went back to his breakfast.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sights out the small coach window were familiar to Dane, but for Vanlyn, it was as though he were a lad having an adventure. He could see the nervous excitement in the young man's features. Dane found it terribly endearing.

"No need to be nervous, Van." Dane smiled.

"Do I seem that way? Yes, I suppose I am. It's just that, well, everyone knows about me and what will they say?"

"They will say the same thing that Marcelyn Hale said about you. That you are charming and amiable."

Vanlyn blushed. "I will try my best to be."

As Dane had said, they stopped at a few of the outlying farms first. Like his father, Dane wholly believed in having an interest in the lives of his people, to know how they were faring, and to have, perhaps not an intimate knowledge of their family, but at least know enough to interact with them in a familial way.

His people were thriving; the crops were doing exceptionally well. Dane was pleased that everything he'd worked so hard for was beginning to see fruition. His people still had much to do for their recovery, but Dane knew how strong they were and how devoted they were to their island home.

One of the farmers, after much stammering and blushing, asked Vanlyn to look at his prized bull. The animal hadn't been eating properly and had been fussy overall. From outside the pen, Dane watched as Vanlyn and the farmer approached the great creature. Vanlyn spoke softly to him as he walked around the massive body, at times pushing against the bull's torso. Dane experienced a moment of worry when Vanlyn walked behind the bull, but the creature made no move to injure Vanlyn.

After a time, Vanlyn and the farmer had a long discussion. Dane didn't understand everything that was going on. He was a merchant-trader after all, not a farmer, but the gist of the conversation was that the bull had an ailment in his stomach, and Vanlyn recommended what the farmer needed to do. Dane continued to watch, his heart filling with pride at his young lover's patience and understanding.

They visited a few other farmsteads, and each time, Dane grew more impressed with Vanlyn's skill, not only with the animals but with his people as well. Dane had reassured Vanlyn they found him pleasant and likable.

Finally, they were on their way again. Dane could tell by the slight smile Vanlyn wore that he was pleased that he'd been able to assist. Dane was even more eager to have Vanlyn see what he had accomplished and his work showed itself in Penryn's capital.

* * * *

Synnove surprised most first time visitors who landed at her harbor. Since Penryn was a relatively small island, most expected that both the city and the harbor would be rustic in appearance. Dane was proud of the fact that both were well maintained. The city sat at the edge of the bay surrounding it in a crescent-moon shape, its buildings a mixture of stone and wood structures, some of the older ones kept in their original state to

preserve their history.

There were still parts of the city under construction. Synnove had survived, battle scars notwithstanding.

The streets were cobbled and swept clean. There were gardens set aside to beautify the surrounding area and supply a refreshing break within the rows of businesses, homes and official buildings.

Everyone looked to be reasonably prosperous. Those that found themselves in need of assistance received it. For the people of Penryn, turning someone away was never an option because there was always a chance you were turning away a distant cousin.

Dane saw Vanlyn was impressed. He had also expected something more rural. Dane didn't fault him since that was the usual reaction, and it always gave Dane a sense of pride to see how well his people were faring.

The coach traversed the streets, making its way to the harbor where Dane was to check on the progress of his business as he'd told Vanlyn earlier. When they reached their destination and climbed from the coach, Dane pointed with great pride to the row of ships currently docked as the sailors and labors rushed about their work.

Marine traffic was not as heavy as it normally was due to the fighting, but the fiends knew not to accost any ships that Dane owned and with whom he did business. Dane led Vanlyn to the harbormaster's office.

The workers within the busy space called out greetings to him, and he stopped to introduce Vanlyn to some of the higher-ranking employees. Yes, Rhys was in his office busy at his work as usual.

The older gentleman with the receding hairline looked up at them from over his spectacles. "Uncle Dane." He grinned, tried to stand and only succeeded in causing complete chaos with the stacks of papers on his desk. "What a pleasant surprise. I wasn't expecting you today."

"Hello, Rhys." His nephew walked around the desk, and Dane met him halfway. He embraced him warmly. "I'm sorry I came unannounced. Just here to take care of business."

"Yes, of course." Rhys removed his glasses, drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped at them.

"Rhys, may I present Prince Vanlyn Sarn of Toryn?"

"Goodness!" Rhys fumbled his glasses back on. "I'm so sorry, Highness. This office is an awful mess. If I had known...oh dear." He executed a clumsy bow.

"Really there's no need to make a fuss." Vanlyn grasped Rhys's hand and shook it. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine." Rhys was blushing fiercely. "Welcome to Penryn Isle. I know the circumstances are a bit...that is..." His blush deepened, and he fell abruptly silent.

Dane intervened. "Rhys is Trey's grandson."

"Really? Yes, I can see the resemblance now." Vanlyn grinned.

"Your pardon?" Rhys asked, his face scrunched in comical confusion. "You couldn't have met—Oh." Rhys glanced at Dane. "You saw him in a dream then?"

"Yes," Vanlyn said.

"He was a great man," Rhys said a little sadly. Then he brightened somewhat. "You'll want to see how everything is faring, uncle?"

“Yes, if you have the time.”

“Always for you.”

Dane was pleased with how the business was progressing. Like his grandfather, Rhys had an eye for making a business successful despite whatever happened to be going on in the world around him. The fiends had nearly destroyed everything. Rhys was instrumental in bringing the family back from ruin.

“I’m glad you’re pleased,” Rhys said after Dane’s examination of the records. “I’m not sure if you’re aware of some of the disturbing reports we’re getting from the mainland?”

“Such as Torny ceasing all trade with us?” Dane said. “Yes, I know.”

Vanlyn’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t comment.

“You don’t seem worried, uncle,” Rhys said.

“Don’t let my outward calm convince you of that,” Dane said. “But there’s little point in distressing over it. We knew that Aelden would eventually receive news that I am perhaps an ally of the fiends.” *And quite possibly had something to do with the disappearance of his son.*

“True,” Rhys said. “I have a few ideas I wish to discuss with you when you have the opportunity but for now...”

“Yes, all right. Return to your work, young man. You’ve messed about long enough.”

Rhys laughed and hugged Dane again. “See you soon, uncle.” Then he inclined his head to Vanlyn. “A pleasure, Highness.”

“Why don’t we walk past the docks?” Dane asked as they stepped outside. He wasn’t certain why, but it was important to Dane that Vanlyn see just how prosperous they were. “I like to see for myself that everything is running smoothly, and there are others I need to speak with.”

“All right,” Vanlyn said.

His goal was to speak with the ships’ captains and members of their crews. Like his fellow fiends, they were a valuable source of information. Most of what he learned was rumor. A very interesting tidbit that piqued his interest was a tale of Prince Argent receiving a thrashing from none other than the little sister of Lady Dacien.

The entire time they walked, Vanlyn was silent, not even reacting when the captain had told them of the story concerning Argent. Dane couldn’t help but glance at Vanlyn as they continued along. Despite the activity going on around them, Vanlyn seemed in his own little world. Dane ached to know what was on his mind.

“Would you like to have lunch now?” Dane asked as they started away from the docks. “There’s a nice place I know.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Vanlyn said, although it was a rather half-hearted response.

“What troubles you, love? Won’t you tell me?”

Vanlyn sighed. “It’s all this and what Rhys said earlier.” His expression was pleading. “Will Penryn suffer greatly without Torny’s business?”

Now Dane sighed. He didn’t want Vanlyn to feel any guilt, but he wanted to be truthful. “It will be a problem, yes,” Dane said. “But Rhys is a smart man. Whatever he has planned, either way we’re determined to survive.”

“I’ve seen that in your people,” Vanlyn said so quietly that Dane had to strain to hear him.

“Thank you,” Dane said, equally soft. He was aware of the sadness in Vanlyn’s tone and instinctively knew Vanlyn worried for his own people and wondered if he could be a good leader. Dane had much the same thoughts not too long ago.

“You’d be a good leader, Van,” Dane said.

“You know my thoughts,” Vanlyn said. “I wonder if I could command the respect you seem to on Penryn.” He nodded at the people who called friendly greetings.

“I’m certain of it,” Dane said.

“My father and Argent never went anywhere in the city without several bodyguards.”

“When I first returned, well, I was not welcomed with open arms shall we say? I worked hard to earn the trust of these people,” Dane said. “I feel if, at this point, I cannot walk freely among them then I am a poor leader and deserve whatever comes.”

Vanlyn mused on that for a bit. “I think both my brother and father are well aware of the feelings of the general populace. I always thought they merely didn’t care. But perhaps they are truly afraid.”

“Another certainty,” Dane said.

* * * *

The employees of The Rare Blessing greeted Dane just as warmly as they stepped into the establishment. Vanlyn could only assume the name implied that it was a “rare blessing” among all the supposedly awful eating-places. Still Vanlyn thought the name clever.

Dane told him the inn was originally one building, but business had gone exceedingly well, causing the owner to expand to the buildings on both sides. Men lounged on the front deck, which was the length of the facade, smoking and sharing coffee and news. They nodded at the pair as they entered.

It was in the midst of the lunch rush, so most of the tables were full. There were three large common rooms, each containing their own bar. The inn was clean and well kept, the workers pleasant and, although harried, seemed satisfied with their positions.

A pretty serving maid approached and greeted them, then led them through the common room to the right, past the filled tables and through the din of conversations and called hellos to Dane.

In the rear of the room, there was a corridor with several closed doors on either side; Vanlyn guessed these were originally guest rooms. The maid opened the first door to their right to reveal a private dining room. Plush carpeting of a royal blue sank beneath their feet and filmy curtains allowed the sun to fill the space but gave them a measure of privacy.

The decor was simplistic with the walls paneled in rich dark wood and enhanced by several paintings, mostly of the seascape and various beach views. There was one large circular table there, with seven chairs and four smaller tables placed at each corner of the room.

Menus were already on the table. Vanlyn lifted his as the serving maid poured them both coffee, and Vanlyn inhaled the rich cinnamon scent deeply. The maid curtsied and departed.

They took a moment to examine the fare. The spicy fish and rice dish looked good, and Vanlyn chose it while Dane followed suit. As they waited for their meals, they spoke of things concerning the meeting and Penryn in general. Dane told him more of the island

on which he'd lived his life and how things had changed since he crossed back.

"Which was very little," Dane smiled with fond memories. "I'm glad Penryn remained the same, outside of all the so-called progression of the world. Even after all this time, it still feels like home. I just wish—" Dane downcast his eyes and shook his head, shaking away his regrets and sorrows. "I expected to feel so out of place, and I did at first until I was welcomed by my people."

"The people are truly the heart of any land," Vanlyn said. "I'm beginning to grow fond of this place. I wish—"

Vanlyn halted when the door opened, and the server returned with their meals. She laid their plates before them, asked if they needed anything else, and left them again. Both men were hungry, and they dove into their meals with gusto. For a while, the only sounds were of the two enjoying their food.

It was a little while later as Vanlyn sipped his coffee that he gave a slight sigh as their previous conversation returned to his thoughts.

"Vanlyn?" Dane said.

"I was saying before..." Vanlyn had no desire to hurt Dane. He smiled at that thought. Weeks ago, it wouldn't have mattered but now... He raised his eyes to Dane's. "Dane, do you wish things could be different? I mean between us?"

Dane straightened away from the table. He didn't respond immediately, but he appeared to mull the question over. Finally, he pushed back his chair and stood. Vanlyn followed his progress as he walked around the table. He turned to the side and faced Dane as he approached.

Dane then folded Vanlyn into his arms, his temple resting into the plains of Dane's stomach. Dane released a breath. "Yes, Vanlyn, I do."

They remained that way for a little while.

* * * *

When they stepped outside, they found it had clouded up a bit. This didn't surprise Dane as storms often came upon the island rather suddenly and usually lasted no more than a quarter to a half hour. He explained this to Vanlyn, who called on some pigeons in the rafters of a nearby building. They confirmed that it would indeed rain soon. Dane watched with a new respect for the young prince as he communicated freely with the birds.

The coach was present, but Dawkins wasn't. Whenever he had the opportunity, the old bogie ran his own errands around town. Dane supposed Dawkins suspected they would take longer.

"Shall we go back in and wait?" Vanlyn asked.

"Actually, there are some items I need to purchase. We can walk to the shop from here. Dawkins will know to wait for us."

"Very well."

Vanlyn followed Dane back towards the heart of the city. Neither spoke for they were both into their own thoughts. Dane would steal glances at his young lover every so often and could see the contemplation in his expression. Dane knew what a risk it was, admitting to Vanlyn how much he wished they could be together. Dane seldom, if ever, relinquished control. He knew he'd given Vanlyn a small measure of power over him, and yet, he was fine with it.

“This way.” Dane steered Vanlyn down a narrow alley to their left.

After a few more turns, Dane halted before a plain wood door with no ornamentation or anything to distinguish it from the dozens of others that dotted the alley buildings. Fortune was with them for a few moments later the first drops of rain began. Dane grinned at Vanlyn, his heart full of mischief as he knocked twice and then opened the door.

At first, there was nothing to see. The door opened into a short hallway paneled in dark wood. The air in the dimly lit interior held a musky scent that Dane knew well. Once the two of them stepped beyond the alcove, the wares were displayed for all to see.

Dane heard Vanlyn draw in a breath behind him, and Dane was thankful Vanlyn couldn't see his face. He couldn't suppress the grin if he tried.

“Well, I'll be.” A woman's voice drew his attention. “Minister Tanderes, always a pleasure.”

“Good afternoon, Rosa.” Dane smiled at the petite woman behind the counter. She always reminded Dane of a porcelain doll, with the same smooth features and almond-shaped blue eyes and a tiny bow mouth. Behind her was the door to an inner office, and a second woman peeked out from around the wall, then a grin broke out across her face.

“Dane!” Unlike Rosa, this woman was tall and muscular, her skin deeply tanned. She wore her dark brown hair in a loose braid, which caused wisps to curl around her deep-set green eyes. She walked around the counter and punched him playfully on the arm.

“Haven't seen you in awhile. And who is this handsome young gentleman?”

“Pirra, this is Prince Vanlyn of Toryn.”

Pirra's grin broadened. “He looks to be quite stunned.”

Dane finally turned to face Vanlyn. “Indeed.”

“Dane,” Vanlyn swallowed, “this is—”

“Look about.” Pirra motioned in an expansive gesture to the vast array of sexual toys, oils and salves, as well as books and scrolls that lined the shelves and were displayed in cases. “Perhaps you'll see something that catches your interest?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Vanlyn stared. Blinked. Then stared some more.

Some of the devices he recognized. Others, he couldn't begin to discern their uses. He surmised that by the look of them they would be very uncomfortable within certain areas of his body. But he supposed someone purchased them, otherwise they wouldn't be present.

Vanlyn was only half-aware of Dane, Rosa and Pirra watching his progress with amused eyes. Despite himself, Vanlyn moved amongst the shelves, reaching out every so often to touch something with a morbid sense of wonder.

Even the books weren't safe. Vanlyn picked up a loosely bound tome and discovered it was a thumb book. The type contained multiple pages with near identical drawings and, when moved rapidly with the thumb, took on the illusion of being alive. This particular book featured two plump woman engaged in a heated embrace. Vanlyn felt his face go scarlet.

"Anything in particular you're looking for today, Dane?" Pirra said.

"Yes. I need to replace some items in my boxes."

Oh gods and fiends, Vanlyn moaned inwardly. The items needed replacing because they'd made such good and consistent use of them.

Vanlyn continued down the aisles, past phallic rods and restraints, wood paddles and reed switches. He was thoroughly unnerved as he stepped through a curtained doorway at the rear of the room. He saw immediately he'd made a grievous error.

Mannequins, both male and female, stared at him with carved eyes. They arranged in a series of poses to present the various trappings they wore. Twelve mirrors, hung four on each wall, served a two-fold purpose. They gave the impression that the room was larger than it was and provided a view from every angle.

Although Vanlyn had never seen such, he knew what the mannequins displayed on their polished bodies were for one purpose only.

Vanlyn's throat was dry. He swallowed painfully. It was moments before he realized he was trembling. He approached one of the male mannequins. The straps of the harness passed across the chest, bound the lower extremities and secured the hands of the wearer behind their back. It made the one receiving the pleasure helpless and at the mercy of the giver.

Vanlyn reached out and caressed one of the straps. The leather was butter-soft. He found himself imagining what it would feel like against his skin.

Movement behind him and Dane was there, their reflections looking back at them in the mirrors. The look in Dane's eyes was achingly familiar to Vanlyn.

"You like that?" Dane nodded at the harness. "Shall we see how it feels?"

"Dane, we're in public," Vanlyn protested.

Dane laughed. "Easily rectified." He raised his hands and gestured, calling on his power. That familiar current of magic surrounded him as Dane worked his spell.

The room shattered into fragments as though it were a mirror image itself, the shapes dispersing into glittering sparks until they faded into velvety darkness. A single mirror remained whole.

Reflected within its surface Vanlyn saw himself, not standing in the mannequin room, but within Dane's bedroom, his body awash in the soft glow of candles. It reminded him of their last lovemaking encounter when Dane had bound him and nearly driven him to insanity.

Only now, his reflection wore the harness.

His body flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and anticipation as Dane approached him. Vanlyn's breath quickened as he watched, his eyes wide in silent pleading.

"How beautiful you look." Dane's voice was a whisper in his ear, a warm breath across his cheek. "You shouldn't be embarrassed. This is our world. One I have created just for us, and I will allow no one else in."

Calloused hands roamed over his flesh. "Everything here is illusion but us, love, but what you experience is quite real." Vanlyn let his eyes drift closed as he leaned against Dane, feeling that familiar raw animal heat.

Dane was undressing him. After casually undoing his shirt buttons, his trousers came next. He seemed to believe they had all the time they needed, and Vanlyn supposed they did. Then Dane was fitting him into the harness, his movements deft and sure.

The straps were cool and supple across Vanlyn's skin, just as he imagined they would be. With his hands secured behind his back, it truly came to him that he was indeed at Dane's mercy.

As Dane reached to touch him, his body became smoke, dissolving into a silvery mist which filled the room, surrounding him much like the black silk of his first dream. A dozen hands caressed him, sliding over his chest, down his spine to his buttocks, massaging his cock and balls. Vanlyn threw his head back and moaned from deep in his chest.

"Yes, love." Dane's voice came from all around him. The sensation of a hot mouth on his cock, surrounding it in velvet warmth brought a second cry from his lips. A tongue traced the deep ridges of his balls, and even while this occurred, the hands continued their ministrations.

Vanlyn was drifting on a calm ocean, the waves undulating beneath him. Soft kisses brushed against his chest. A tongue traced his nipples, sucking each one roughly while the mouth continued to work at his cock, swallowing it deep. Teeth sank into his flesh.

Vanlyn found his voice. "Dane, please."

"Vanlyn." He felt himself encircled in a possessive embrace, which was pulling him into the depths of the ocean. "Come with me."

"I don't understand." His mind was emptying of all thought as his climax built. His balls tightened, and his cock throbbed, preparing for his release. He was suddenly free, the harness no longer holding him. He reached out, trying to find something to grab onto to slow his descent into oblivion.

Vanlyn knew. He was losing himself in Dane Tanderes.

Dane's hand entwined with his, even as Vanlyn's hand reached out. Dane drew them both against Vanlyn's chest. Dane was pushing inexorably inside of him. Vanlyn's protest was a mere whimper as his body welcomed the invasion.

"Descend into me, love," Dane said as he moved in and out of Vanlyn, his hard length working hungrily within the younger man. "Let me devour you. Truly take you captive and never release you."

No, don't make me. But even as Vanlyn thought the words, he knew it was no use. His climax erupted, his hips bucking, his essence spilling from him in a rush as Dane filled him with his own.

"*Dane,*" Vanlyn's cry filled the emptiness around them, echoing from all around them. He came down, falling into Dane's embrace until he was swallowed whole.

"Yes," Vanlyn whispered. With that single word, he knew Dane had won.

* * * *

Vanlyn held himself still as Dane gently washed him with the sponge. When Dane dispersed the spell, Vanlyn collapsed to the floor, his body spent and still bound by the harness.

Dane stood behind him. There was no look of triumph on his face as Vanlyn had expected. His expression was impossible to read. Without a word, he helped Vanlyn to stand and released him from the harness. Then Dane led him into another curtained room where two standing tubs had been prepared. It embarrassed Vanlyn to know that Pirra and Rosa were quite aware that they would need to bathe.

Dane made use of his tub first, while Vanlyn sat and watched him. His movements were quick and efficient, his only goal cleanliness.

When it came time for Vanlyn to bathe, Dane led Vanlyn to the other tub and began to wash him from top to bottom, taking extra care. Every so often, Dane would smile up at him or steal a kiss.

Vanlyn could not remember being more troubled and frightened than he was now.

You have what you want. I've completely given my whole self to you. No truthsaying would find me blameless. I love you, Dane Tanderes. Do you hear me?

A part of him dared not voice his question. For he knew if he asked, Dane may decide to do just that—send him away. He'd concluded in the inn that he didn't want to leave him, didn't want to leave this island or the people he was just coming to know.

"Dane?"

"Yes?" Dane straightened and began washing Vanlyn's shoulders although he'd done so already.

"Why am I still here?"

At first, Dane averted his eyes. It was a few moments as the older man bit down hard on his lower lip. Dane faced Vanlyn again after a time and unexpectedly caught Vanlyn in a near-painful embrace. Vanlyn returned it as an afterthought. Dane's action only confused him more.

When it seemed to Vanlyn that Dane wasn't going to answer his question, the older man spoke.

"Because," he breathed in Vanlyn's ear, "I'm not ready to let you go quite yet."

It told Vanlyn many things, but not the one thing he truly needed to know. Still he returned the embrace in earnest. Perhaps if he showed Dane what he needed and how much he needed him—his strength and his warmth and everything else that he was—he would be content.

* * * *

Vanlyn kept his back turned, feigning interest in a display of masks and blindfolds as

Dane concluded his business with the two women.

"Everything will be placed on your account and delivered tomorrow." Rosa presented an invoice for Dane to sign. "I hope you found everything you needed?"

"I did indeed."

Vanlyn sighed and turned. No sense in delaying it. He expected the women to give him a knowing look, but neither did. They both smiled pleasantly as they said their goodbyes but nothing more. Vanlyn didn't feel quite so embarrassed when they left.

"Pirra and Rosa are always discreet and professional," Dane said as they walked back down the alley. "They would never cause a customer discomfort."

"I see that now," Vanlyn said. "I didn't mean to make them feel as though..."

"They understand." Dane halted and turned to him. "They know how new you are to this."

"I enjoy it." Vanlyn downcast his eyes at first, then raised them to look directly at Dane. "I love being with you."

His expression softening, Dane fisted his hand in the back of Vanlyn's head to pull him forward for a lusty kiss. Dane drew him close as they continued on their way.

Dawkins was waiting for them by the coach, still in its place by the inn. He'd secured their packages at the top and back.

"Were you waiting for us long, Dawkins?" Dane asked as the old bogie opened the coach door.

"No, sir. I was able to run all the house errands," Dawkins said.

"Then let's be off. To Council Hall, if you please."

"Right away, sir."

Vanlyn was silent during the ride, his thoughts in turmoil. Admitting to himself that he loved Dane had taken much of his courage. A part of him wanted to declare it, while that other side that ached to be with Dane was terrified of the result. Then there was his people and Toryn. They needed him, and he needed to go back and make things right, but he didn't know how. And, as selfish as it was, he didn't want to leave Dane.

What Vanlyn did want more than anything was to be happy for the first time since losing his mother and sister. Living in solitude was no longer satisfying for him.

He sighed. It was a wistful sound within the confines of the coach, and it caught Dane's attention. The man didn't speak but merely moved to sit beside Vanlyn. He draped an arm around him and drew him against his shoulders. Vanlyn closed his eyes and sat there listening to Dane's gentle breathing.

* * * *

The Council Hall was at the edge of the city and took up two buildings connected in the center by a garden plaza where street vendors presented various wares. The smaller building all laid out on one floor was where various organizations representing province and mainland government did their business. The larger building was where the council met and city officials kept their offices as well as various city organizations. It was an elegant structure of gray stones and marbled columns, sporting two stories. The council itself convened at the rear of the building, and Dawkins guided the coach to the stables behind it.

There were already several coaches present. "We'll have the public meeting first," Dane said as they climbed from the coach. "The private aspect concerning Ramsay's

claim will be held in closed chambers. You've sat on town council before?"

"Yes." Vanlyn was interested in what would go on. It seemed ages since he was involved in any type of city workings.

"It's easier to enter through this door," Dane explained as he led Vanlyn to the rear entrance. "It's closer to the council chambers, and you're not accosted by a passel of citizens all wanting your attention."

There were doors along the left wall, which Dane said led to private boxes where nobles could observe the proceedings.

"I'll show you my seat, and you can watch from there." Dane halted them by the last door. "There will be an attendant along, and I'll let him know he's to give you anything you need. Have him fetch me if there are any problems. I'll come for you once council is ended."

"All right."

The door opened up to a winding staircase and at the top was indeed a private box with four cushioned chairs. Vanlyn sat and had a good view of the hall. It was like most he'd seen in the past, rectangular and filled with several neat rows of benches. The walls were constructed of the now familiar wood paneling and adorned with paintings of men and women holding studious expressions. Vanlyn guessed they were past government officials.

At the far end of the room was the council table, one seat raised higher than the others where Vanlyn supposed Dane sat. People filed in through the double doors at the far end of the room opposite the council table, and when the chambers were full, two attendants closed the doors much to the protests of others waiting in the hall. Vanlyn frowned as a memory invaded. Argent had found great delight in having the guards remove such hangers-on. Vanlyn shook the memory off. No, Argent would not spoil this day.

Soon the council walked in and took their respective seats. Just before they began, a soft knock at the door drew his attention. The young male attendant wheeled in a cart with a decanter of juice and plates of sweet cakes. Vanlyn thanked him and told him that was all he required, eager to watch. The petitioners ranged from a young woman seeking to divorce her husband for his infidelities to a farmer accused of using entrapment spells. The practice infuriated Vanlyn as spells, such as those, bound the animals who suffered and often injured themselves until the hunter released them for an easy kill.

Vanlyn continued to watch while absently munching on a strawberry and honey filled cake. He realized he missed things like this, making himself a part of the governing of his land and his people.

Finally, the meeting was at an end. The buzz of the petitioners and the observers filled the hall as they filed out. The council didn't leave their seats until the room was almost empty.

Another quiet knock came at the door. Dane had sent for him. It was time to deal with Ramsay.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The attendant led Vanlyn into the private Council Chambers. This more resembled Dane's study at the manor except on a larger scale. It was also decorated in dark wood paneling and rich royal blue in the carpeting and plush furnishings.

Large windows lined the far walls, which allowed light to pour in, but filmy curtains gave them a slight privacy. Opposite this were several glass cases that displayed various award plaques and statues.

A highly polished rectangular table, with three chairs on either side and two at each end, took up the center of the room. Single chairs and small tables lined the wall placed between each window. It was to one of these chairs that the attendant motioned for Vanlyn to sit before asking him if he'd like a repast. Vanlyn agreed, and as the door opened and the council members arrived, the attendant brought him a cup of juice and some fruit slices artfully laid out on a tray with a small cup of sweet cheese dip.

Vanlyn smiled up at Dane as he approached. "Are you faring well?"

"Yes." Vanlyn grasped his outstretched hands. "Is my being here all right?"

"Oh yes, I have already spoken with Marcelyn," Dane said. "She said as long as you don't use your rank to influence events—"

"I won't," Vanlyn said. "I won't give Ramsay that leverage."

"I know." Dane turned as Marcelyn Hale called to him, saying they were about to begin.

The members of the council took their seats with Marcelyn Hale at one of the end chairs. Ramsay sat next to her and opposite Dane. Ramsay's nephews moved past Vanlyn without looking at him and each chose a chair along the wall. There was a third man who carried a leather case and took the farthest seat. Vanlyn wondered who he was.

"Let's begin, shall we?" Marcelyn Hale inclined her head to the man who had taken the farthest seat. He was an older gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair and beard and deep brown eyes that shined with a great knowledge. He wore the robes of a teacher or scholar in an understated pattern of varying grays. "Conjurer Finnon has completed his examination of the documents presented by Magisteri Ramsay. Conjurer, if you would present your findings?"

Finnon stood and held a leather case under his arm. He approached the table and released the ties on the case, drawing out a sheaf of papers. He laid them out neatly on the tabletop before Hale.

"As you know Magisteri Hale, I examined letters and documents provided to me by Minister Tanderes as well as the letters from Magisteri Ramsay," Finnon reported. "There is no doubt that the letters Magisteri Ramsay have presented were written by the same person, High Lord Tanderes."

"No!" Dane's hands slammed onto the tabletop just as Ramsay mimicked the action with his fist.

"You see! Did I not tell you—"

"If you gentleman will allow me to finish?" Finnon said in a voice that reminded Vanlyn of one of his tutors. The man folded his arms and sent Ramsay and Dane a look that had both men squirming in their chairs. *Yes, just like my old tutor*, Vanlyn thought.

“Although the letters were written and signed by High Lord Tanderes, my research leads me to believe that he did not create these documents under his own power,” Finnon said.

“Which means?” Ramsay asked.

“Which means,” Finnon said, “that the High Lord was coerced or forced into writing and signing the documents. Whether by magical means or perhaps someone threatened him or a member of his family, I can’t ascertain.”

“And how could we ascertain this?” Hale asked.

“Well—,” Finnon tugged at his collar, seeming uncomfortable for the first time. “The only way to know for certain would be to ask High Lord Tanderes.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. No one could pretend that they didn’t know Finnon’s meaning.

“You mean disturb my father’s rest *again*.” Dane was staring at his hands still splayed across the table, his tone defeated.

Again. Vanlyn recalled Dane saying he’d used a necromancer and a dream weaver to prove he was truly the son of High Lord Tanderes. Calling on a spirit immediately after death was difficult but not impossible and was useful in determining, say, how the person died if it happened under suspicious circumstances. Not everyone had the luxury of being able to hire a necromancer, which was why people still committed murders.

With each passing year, Vanlyn heard it became next to impossible and quite dangerous. The necromancer would have to project their very being through the countless planes to find the spirit then guide them back, that is, if they chose to come. There was the chance that a dark spirit occupying one of the planes of existence could use the necromancer as a doorway back to the living world. They could get lost on the various planes with no way to get back. Not actually dying, their bodies became a useless shell wasting away.

“We may employ Mistress Daellyn for this.” Hale said. “That is if you would you be willing, Dane.”

Dane continued to stare at his hands. Vanlyn ached to go to him, to hold him in his arms and soothe Dane’s heart, which Vanlyn could sense was breaking. If Dane said no, then what would happen?

“There is no way to prove the Scribe’s words,” Ramsay said into the silence. “And I find it difficult to believe he was coerced. If that is true, why did my family not take control of the island back then? I say the High Lord relinquished his title, then changed his mind and refused to keep his word.”

Dane raised his eyes to meet Ramsay’s. Vanlyn shivered at the dead cold he saw in their depths. Ramsay must have as well for Vanlyn saw him shudder.

“Ask Mistress Daellyn.” Dane’s voice was devoid of emotion. “If she agrees, then so do I.”

* * * *

Mistress Daellyn was only a few years older than Vanlyn, but he could see the power that emanated from her person. For one so young, she was very focused and reserved. She had angular features made more severe by the way she wore her silver-blond hair pulled back in a fiercely coiled braid at the crown of her head.

Vanlyn got the impression that there was once a vibrant and carefree woman within

that harsh facade, but something had happened to her to change her outlook. Vanlyn understood those feelings well.

She curtly advised Hale that she would need a quiet empty room with no windows to make her preparations, and until she sent for them, she must not be disturbed. He saw her soften ever so slightly when she spoke to Dane, asking for something that had belonged to his father. Dane removed his signet ring. Vanlyn was completely unaware it belonged to High Lord Tanderes.

Hale walked them to her office within the hall and told them to wait in private until Mistress Daellyn called for them. Besides Dane, Hale and Ramsay being present, Vanlyn and one of Ramsay's nephews would serve as witnesses.

Vanlyn was worried about Dane. He could see by the way his lover paced and rubbed his hands in a nervous gesture that he did not want this to be happening.

"Dane." Vanlyn crossed the room and stopped Dane by grabbing his hands. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes I do." Dane's voice held a hint of desperation.

"Listen," Vanlyn said. "I know I said I wouldn't intervene but..."

For a moment, Dane looked at him, his lower lip trembling slightly. He wanted to say something, Vanlyn could see, but the words wouldn't come. They both knew, as a prince, Vanlyn was currently the highest authority on the island. Only the king could strip him of his title, unless he renounced it himself, and the king had no reason to do so, unless his father or another High Lord made a formal petition. If he commanded the council to rule in Dane's favor, they would have no choice but to comply.

Ramsay could contest the ruling of course, but he would have to file a petition with High Lord Sarn, and Vanlyn didn't need to guess how his father would react to a lowly Magisteri pestering him about his second son.

Dane released a sigh. He shook his head. "No. It is as you said. We can't give Ramsay that leverage."

Vanlyn pulled Dane against him. "Then draw strength from me, love. You know I'll never abandon you."

"I know." Dane's voice splintered.

They remained that way until Hale called for them.

* * * *

When Vanlyn stepped into the room, he drew in a sharp breath at what he saw. Lady Daellyn sat cross-legged on the floor, before a circle of polished round stones. Vanlyn noticed each stone had a symbol etched into their surface. Larger stones sat around the circle at each of the four compass points. They glowed with an unearthly blue light. Within the circle, a pillar of fire danced, tongues of flame flickered and cavorted, their beauty eerie.

When Hale closed the door, shutting out the light of the world, Vanlyn shuddered as the radiance from the fire bathed them in its glow. They all looked like wraiths standing there, their eyes reflecting the flames.

Mistress Daellyn began an invocation in a language Vanlyn didn't recognize, her voice reverberating emptily within the chamber. Vanlyn expected to feel a chill, but instead the room filled with warmth and a scent of something familiar—old leather and a low fire on the hearth.

The dancing flames began to coalesce into the shape of a tall muscular figure. Daellyn's voice rose, the words coming out at a fever pitch, the stronger the inflection, the more the flames until they coalesced into someone recognizable, or at least to Dane.

"Father."

High Lord Tanderes was an older version of Dane, although his features were more weatherworn. Yet there was a peace to his face that Vanlyn was certain he'd never seen on any mortal being, least of all himself.

"Son." He spoke the word with such love that Vanlyn wanted to weep.

"Please forgive me for disturbing your rest again." Dane could barely keep his voice even.

"I sensed you had a need my son, so I came."

"You knew?" Dane stepped forward, moving closer to the circle but not crossing it.

"Indeed." The High Lord nodded. "What is it that you need to ask of me?"

Dane explained their dilemma with the papers that Ramsay had presented.

The High Lord nodded again, and for a brief moment, he glanced at Ramsay before turning back to Dane. "Not long after you were taken from us, I was visited by Magisteri Von Ramsay."

Dane glanced at Ramsay. "What happened?"

"He demanded that, because of your supposed disgrace, I should declare his eldest son to be the next High Lord," Tanderes said. "He seemed to believe that, by your death, our family had lost the right to rule. I refused, of course. I told him that even though you had lost the title of prince according to law, we had not accepted the fact, and even so, Locke would be the next High Lord. I told him he was free to petition the king, but I would not support him. Von came ready for that eventuality. The spell he cast made me into his willing puppet. He took the papers and fled."

"So why didn't he present them to the king?"

"He was killed soon after," the High Lord replied. "He never had the opportunity."

"Is that true, Ramsay?" Hale asked although they all knew it was. Not only were spirits incapable of lying, but all the secrets of the living and the ethereal realms were open to them. "Your ancestor was killed?"

"According to the family records, he was murdered by an unknown assailant who was never found." Ramsay pointed an accusing finger at Dane. "One of your family no doubt!"

"He was killed by his lover when he turned her aside and refused to acknowledge the child she carried was his," High Lord Tanderes said.

"That can't be true," Ramsay said. Again, they knew it was.

"Father." Tears pooled in Dane's eyes and tumbled over his lids. "Thank you so much. I love you and miss you, but I promise never to disturb you again."

"You do not disturb me, son. I will always love you and be with you." Then to Vanlyn's shock, the apparition turned to him and held out his hand. "Come to me for a moment, Vanlyn Sarn."

Vanlyn's jaw dropped. He took a tentative step forward.

"Don't be afraid. I mean you no harm."

"But should I? Is it safe?" Vanlyn's heart beat rapidly against his chest. "What if I hurt Mistress Daellyn?"

"As long as you don't break the circle, all will be well. Come here, if you please."

Vanlyn's steps were cautious as he approached. He couldn't help the nervous trembling as he reached out, careful not to disturb the circle. His hand brushed High Lord Tanderes' fingertips and—

Suddenly, he wasn't in the room at council hall anymore. He was standing at the threshold of the library in the manor. Only things seemed different. There was an air of newness about the place. Bright sunlight poured through the windows, warming the cheery scene before him.

Five people were in the room, two women and three men lounging in comfort. They were dressed casually and seemed relaxed and happy in each other's company. And Vanlyn knew them all.

The younger of the two women was sitting on the floor in front of the sofa, reading from a book. She looked up and caught sight of him, and she beamed in welcome. "Vanlyn!"

She leapt to her feet, tossing the book aside as she did and ran to him, her arms open wide. She caught him in a fierce hug.

"Amalia?" Vanlyn looked at her, his mind unable to comprehend that she was here. That they were all here. At the same time, he realized he had no idea where *here* truly was.

"Well, I'll be." Corlaine rose from the sofa and straightened her skirts. "So you made it, did you?" Like Amalia, she embraced him and kissed his cheek.

The three men approached. "So good to meet you at last." Trey grinned at him.

"Trey." Vanlyn returned the welcoming smile. They embraced.

"So you're the love of my brother's life, eh?" Locke slapped him playfully on the back. "I don't know. He looks kind of scrawny—Ow!"

"Don't you pay my brother any mind." Corlaine had given Locke a clout on the back of his head.

"We just wanted to give our blessing," Aron said. "So you wouldn't have any doubts."

"Doubts?"

"Walk with me, Vanlyn." Corlaine took his arm. In an eye blink, they were outside, as though the walls had dissolved into the sunshine, and Vanlyn found himself walking with Dane's sister in the garden.

Corlaine turned to face him. "My brother loves you."

"He does?" Vanlyn dared to hope.

"Yes, very much so," Corlaine said. "Please be patient with him. He will come to realize it soon."

"I hope so," Vanlyn said. "Then you don't mind?"

"Of course not." She kissed him on the cheek. "We like you, Vanlyn."

"I wish I could have gotten to know you all," Vanlyn said.

Corlaine placed two fingers against Vanlyn's lips. "Would you do me, all of us, a favor?" Dane's brothers and sisters who looked at him with affection suddenly surrounded Vanlyn.

"Of course."

"Take care of our brother," she said. "He needs you desperately. Help him find his way again."

Vanlyn inclined his head. "I will, I promise."

They surrounded him with gentle touches and warm embraces. Vanlyn was content by their acceptance. He resolved not to fail them.

“Farewell, Vanlyn Sarn.” Corlaine smiled.

Vanlyn blinked, and he was back in the room again. He stepped away from the circle. Everyone was staring strangely at him, including Dane

“The necromancer grows weak,” High Lord Tanderes said. “Dane.” He reached out his hand again, and like him, Dane brushed his fingertips against his father’s. For a moment, Dane’s face went blank, and his skin drained of all color. It was as though he slept without closing his eyes. He remained that way for a few moments before coming back to himself. Vanlyn wondered if that was how he had looked.

“Goodbye, son.” High Lord Tanderes’ form was already fading back into the flames.

“Father!” Dane called out, reaching for a memory that was no longer there. “Oh no. Father, no! Please don’t leave me!”

Dane fell to his knees, his shoulders heaving with sobs. Vanlyn knelt beside him, drawing him into his arms, threading his fingers into Dane’s hair. Tears burned Vanlyn’s eyes behind his closed lids. Dane’s pain was a tangible ache in Vanlyn’s heart.

Vanlyn was only half-aware of them carrying Mistress Daellyn out and of Marcelyn Hale saying in a cold voice, “I think this proof enough, Magisteri Ramsay. Be grateful I don’t file charges against your family.”

Then Vanlyn was alone with Dane. He held his lover as he wept until Dane had nothing left.

* * * *

The ride back to the manor was a silent affair. Vanlyn held Dane as he sat next to him. His lover’s head nestled on his shoulder, Vanlyn caressed the hair at Dane’s temple.

When they arrived, they both climbed from the coach without speaking. Vanlyn immediately drew Dane close. He sighed, and it was a sound of such aching loss that Vanlyn truly worried for his love.

Dane went straight for his room, refusing food and drink. Vanlyn followed him and found him sitting on his bed, his eyes downcast. It took some time, but Vanlyn coaxed him to undress and washed him down in the standing tub that Dawkins had provided. He led Dane to bed, then went to attend to his own cleanliness. Vanlyn made certain a lamp was nearby before sliding beneath the sheets with Dane. He remained awake until he was certain Dane was asleep.

That night Dane had one of his nightmares. Vanlyn awoke when Dane cried out for his lost family. Vanlyn gently shook him awake, and Dane held onto him, desperation in his painful grip on Vanlyn’s shoulders.

Neither one of them could sleep after that. Vanlyn didn’t need to ask Dane what the dream was about, for he had his own suspicions. Vanlyn wanted to say something, to do something to ease his lover’s pain.

Vanlyn retrieved a bottle of wine for them. Dane was sitting up in bed when he returned, one knee drawn towards his chest and his arm loosely draped over it. He accepted a cup that he sipped absently. He didn’t look at Vanlyn, and Vanlyn could tell his love was very far away. Vanlyn sighed as he sat on the edge of the bed and placed his cup on the floor.

“Vanlyn, may I ask you something?”

"Of course."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't wish to."

"It's all right, Dane."

He smiled, reached over and brushed his fingers down Vanlyn's jaw. "When my father drew you into the ethers, what did you see?"

Vanlyn averted his eyes and worried his lower lip. What if the information hurt Dane further? Vanlyn decided to tell him the truth, of meeting his family. Vanlyn didn't reveal what Corlaine had said about Dane loving him, but he let Dane know they had his family's approval.

"I hope you're not angry." Vanlyn swung his legs up onto the bed then bent them up against his body, resting his chin on his knees. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You haven't," Dane said. "And I'm not angry, Van."

"I'm glad," Vanlyn said. Then he brightened. "Corlaine reminds me of my sister."

"Truly?" Dane said mildly. "I don't believe I ever told you how sorry I was. I know they were attacked by fiends."

"So I was told." Vanlyn released a breath at the memory.

Dane's brow furrowed. "So you were told?"

Vanlyn rubbed his hands up and down his forearms to chase away the sudden chill, despite the warmth of the room. "No one would tell me..."

"What?"

"I was sick." Vanlyn frowned as he tried to sort the jumble of memories. "I believe it had something to do with the coach journey. Eselda was taking care of me, and then one day, she wasn't there anymore." Vanlyn straightened out his legs and leaned against the bedpost. "A servant took care of me afterwards but refused to tell me what happened."

"Vanlyn," Dane said. "Exactly why did they leave the manor?"

"I managed to find out that father had them sent away, supposedly so they could be safe. My mother was originally from Gan, and she has relatives there. Their coach was supposedly attack en route. But I wanted, needed to know more, so I finally gathered enough courage to confront my father."

"What did he tell you?"

"Nothing at first." Vanlyn rubbed the back of his neck as the tension built. "It was only after I pressed him. Then he just said, 'They're gone. They're both gone. Dead.' He didn't even pretend to care."

Dane set his cup aside and crawled across the bed towards him. Taking both of Vanlyn's hands in his Dane began gently caressing the pad of Vanlyn's thumb with one finger. The action was soothing. "It's all right. Continue."

"I asked him how," Vanlyn said. "Then he told me about the coat."

"Coat?"

"My father said a messenger brought my mother's coat back stained with blood." Vanlyn's couldn't keep the sob from his voice.

"This messenger saw what happened?"

"I don't know," Vanlyn said. "I assume he did. I didn't think to ask, and I doubt my father would have told me." Vanlyn breathed deeply. "I did ask to see the coat, but my father said he had it burned." He looked away, suddenly embarrassed at the stinging in his eyes, heralding tears. "There was no memorial for them. No honoring their memory, nothing. My father behaved as though they never existed. He said we were at war, and

there was no time for such things as memorials, and of course, I didn't go to Argent."

Dane was frowning severely, his brow creased deeply as he seemed to process the information. "And they... Their remains were—?"

Vanlyn's voice broke. "Father said there was nothing."

"No one survived? Surely, they had bodyguards and maids-in-waiting?"

"No one." Vanlyn shook his head as the tears spilled over his eyelashes. "I know he didn't love her, and she was only a means to an heir for him, but she was his wife, and she shared his bed. Shouldn't that mean something?"

"Oh love." Dane moved to sit beside him and drew Vanlyn into his arms. He buried his face in the crook of Dane's shoulder. When had this turned to become Dane comforting him? "Yes, it should mean something." Dane pressed his lips to Vanlyn's forehead and threaded his fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry." Vanlyn's was surprised at the hoarseness in his voice. "I just miss them both so much." He looked up. "But you know how that feels, don't you?"

Dane nodded, Vanlyn's pain mirrored in his eyes. He suddenly needed to touch Dane. Vanlyn ran his fingertips over Dane's chest and recalled how Dane had once said he was beautiful. Well, Vanlyn thought he could use that word to describe Dane as well.

Vanlyn continued the light caresses before reaching up and drawing Dane's face to his. They kissed for a time until both men were moaning into each other's mouths. It was all the indication Vanlyn needed of Dane's arousal. Never breaking the kiss, Vanlyn maneuvered them onto the middle of the bed. He had not yet initiated intimacies with Dane. Could he give his lover as much pleasure as Dane had given him? Vanlyn was uncertain, but he needed to show Dane how much he appreciated the fact that he'd put his own pain aside to help Vanlyn deal with his.

Vanlyn thought he would be inept and clumsy at it, but his experience with Dane and Rasleigh seemed to flow to his touch. Dane was already semi-hard when Vanlyn guided him to lie on his back and took Dane's cock in his hand. He stroked three times along its length before circling his thumb over the bulbous tip. Smearing the pre-cum over the area, Vanlyn drew his thumb to his mouth, tasting the clear liquid.

"Vanlyn." His name was a breathy whisper on Dane's lips.

Encouraged, Vanlyn turned his body and came up on his knees between Dane's outstretched legs. He fisted the base of Dane's cock before leaning in and swirling his tongue into Dane's slit, letting his lips encircle the head and his tongue caress.

"Vanlyn." Dane spoke his name again, his tone pitching towards entreaty, his back arching.

Vanlyn allowed instinct to take hold, and it was as though it had not been several years since he'd pleased another man. He lowered his mouth over Dane's length, drawing up slowly, letting his tongue continue to tease the moist flesh.

Dane grunted through clenched teeth. His hand reached out and plied Vanlyn's hair, applying a slight pressure, forcing Vanlyn down. Vanlyn never mastered the technique of deep thrusting no matter how much Rasleigh instructed him in the art. He had a very sensitive gag reflex, which prevented him from doing such.

Vanlyn lifted his head, allowing their eyes to meet, letting Dane know he wasn't comfortable with going any farther. Vanlyn pressed Dane's shaft against his stomach and stroked up and down with the heel of his hand while massaging his testicles that had already tightened against Dane's body. Vanlyn continued this while Dane's hips slowly

rocked, and he heard Dane mutter, "More."

Satisfied, Vanlyn drew away and retrieved a bottle of salve stored within the nightstand. He was painfully hard himself, and very aware that he'd not initiated sex with anyone in several months. Would Dane allow this reversal of their roles?

One look into Dane's eyes and Vanlyn needn't have worried. There was only a look of heated anticipation. Vanlyn opened the jar and smeared the salve on his fingers. His gaze never leaving Dane's, he inserted a finger. Crooking it upward, he massaged that place within his lover that had him writhing in sweet agony on the bed.

"Gods and fiends, Vanlyn. So good..."

Vanlyn inserted a second finger, then a third. Dane was surprisingly tight, his muscles sucking Vanlyn's fingers farther in. But it wasn't enough for the Vanlyn. He needed to be inside Dane, needed to feel those tight muscles devouring him.

Vanlyn held himself into position, glancing down briefly as he guided the head of his cock into Dane's opening. There was resistance at first. Before his mind drained of coherent thought, he wondered how often Dane received pleasure.

He pushed into his lover, making certain not to leave off eye contact. Vanlyn had to be certain Dane wanted this. The man looked at him through half-lidded eyes. "Yes, Vanlyn, it's all right." It was all the permission Vanlyn needed.

Vanlyn lifted Dane's leg and positioned it over his shoulder. He leaned his body forward, rocking on his knees, and with each movement, pushed himself farther in.

"Yes, gods, yes," Vanlyn murmured as Dane's muscles, hot and slick, contracted around Vanlyn's shaft, drawing him in deeper. "You're so tight, love. By all the gods you feel..." There were no words he could use to describe the slick heat that enveloped him. Vanlyn's back arched, his head lolled, and his grip tightened around Dane's leg as he put the force of his passion behind his thrusting until his body glistened with sweat and his teeth ground as animalistic cries were forced from his throat.

Dane's whole body was laid stretched out, his head buried into the pillows as Vanlyn pounded into him. He needed to feel Dane against him, hot flesh melding with each other. Vanlyn pulled out and stretched his body over Dane's grasping him by the shoulders; he pulled him forward, claiming his mouth in a near-punishing kiss.

"This is for it all, for taking me prisoner, for making me your captive." Vanlyn bit him on the lower lip. Dane moaned into his mouth. Vanlyn guided Dane to rise up on his knees, and positioning his cock over Dane's opening again, Vanlyn, impaled the older man to the hilt. Vanlyn's hands grasped his hips and slammed Dane down onto his cock, causing Dane to throw his head back and cry out Vanlyn's name.

"I'll have my vengeance," Vanlyn hissed into his ear. "I'll make you pay for what you did."

"Yes." Dane ground himself against the base of Vanlyn's shaft. "Yes, I'm guilty."

Vanlyn wrapped his arms around Dane's torso, pulling him into a fierce embrace, knowing he was close to erupting, reveling in that feral scent that so drew him to his lover. "I love you, Dane Tanderes."

Vanlyn witnessed the change for the first time. Corded muscles bulged beneath flesh, fangs protruded like glistening ivory dagger, his face reshaped and became more angular and beast-like, and the wings expanded, growing before his eyes. Dane's completion tore through him. A massive shudder claimed his body, and the cry was unearthly in its passion. Claws dug into Vanlyn's shoulders, and he responded by thrusting harder, as

deep as he could ever go until his own seed erupted.

Spent, they held on to each other, panting like dogs until neither could stay up. Dane fell heavily onto Vanlyn, but he angled his body to the right, relieving Vanlyn of some of the pressure. They lay until their breathing quieted.

* * * *

He loves me.

Dane closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and was surprised to find his own matched Vanlyn's. He lay there listening. He'd suspected Vanlyn loved him but to hear it from Vanlyn's own lips—

And, by all the gods, I love him too.

The self-admission frightened him, and at the same time, he wanted to shout to the gods of his happiness. Yet some perverse third part of him knew that his feelings meant the ruination of his plans. And Dane realized he didn't give a damn about it.

What he did know was that he wanted to make the man in his arms happy. He wanted to take away the pain Vanlyn was feeling. Dane thought of what Vanlyn had said earlier about the deaths of his mother and sister. Something about the whole situation rang false to him. He doubted the account of the events given to Vanlyn were true.

No bodies, no proof, no witnesses. The only evidence of their deaths brought by some mysterious messenger and then conveniently destroyed? Not even a memorial? Even if Aelden didn't care, his people would. He took a great risk merely dismissing the High Lady and princess's deaths as nothing.

Unless—

Dane resolved to delve farther into the intrigue surrounding the deaths of Vanlyn's mother and sister. There were most assuredly more pieces to this puzzle. For now, Dane wanted to concentrate solely on Vanlyn.

"Dane?" At some point, his lover had awakened without his noticing.

"Yes, love?"

"You're still troubled, aren't you?"

I am but not for why you believe. "It's nothing."

"Don't tell me it's nothing." Vanlyn raised up on one elbow. "Don't I have your trust?"

"Of course you do."

"Then please don't shut me out." Those beautiful earnest eyes were unnerving him.

Dane drew away. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, his hands gripping the side. Dane closed his eyes and bit down on his lower lip as he began to tremble with the emotion welling in heart. "I'm sorry, I can't do this now."

"What?" Vanlyn sat up. "What do you mean?"

"The plan," Dane said softly, "to use you. I can't do it anymore. I shouldn't have brought you here to begin. I was being cruel, and I hope you'll forgive me."

"I'm not angry at you, Dane." Vanlyn reached out to touch him, but Dane pushed himself off the bed and stood. He knew if Vanlyn touched him now he would shatter.

"Please believe me," For the first time in a long time, Dane needed someone to know he was sorry for something he had done. Dane wrapped his arms around his chest, and he shivered. He'd transgressed again.

"I do," Vanlyn moved from off the bed, but again Dane stepped away.

He could sense Vanlyn's hurt. "Why won't you let me touch you?"

"Because if you do, that will be the end of me," Dane said. "My resolve will be finished. I'll never let you leave, Vanlyn. I'll keep you here for the rest of your days. You'll never see your home again. And I know you feel responsible for your people and—"

"Did you not hear me before?"

Dane swallowed, knowing what Vanlyn meant. "Yes, I heard you before."

This time when Vanlyn touched him, Dane did not move away. He couldn't.

"Do you want me to stay?" Those eyes had Dane again. Vanlyn embraced him, his breath warm against Dane's neck. "Because I want to stay."

Dane tightened his arms. "You do?"

"I love this place. I love the people here. I want them to be my people, but of everything, I want to be with you, Dane."

The tears that burned beneath his lids shocked Dane. He drew back and framed Vanlyn's face with his hands. "I want you to stay, Vanlyn. Please stay with me."

Dane kissed him, a gentle touch on his lips, but he did not draw completely away. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply of Vanlyn's familiar scent. "Gods," Dane breathed. "I love you too, Vanlyn."

He heard Vanlyn sigh. It was a sound of both relief and contentment. "I'll stay with you always, Dane Tanderes. Even if you did send me away, I wouldn't leave."

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Master Aurris to see you, sir.” Dawkins stepped aside from the doorway of Dane’s study as Lahn Aurris walked in. He halted when he saw Vanlyn and Dane at the worktable looking over the various papers and posts that had arrived at the manor that afternoon.

“Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all. In fact, I’m glad you’re here.” Dane motioned to a nearby seat.

“Dawkins, some refreshments for Lahn if you please.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You seem to be in good spirits today,” Lahn said.

“I am.” Dane couldn’t help but glance at Vanlyn. Vanlyn felt the warm flush rise in his cheeks at Dane’s regard.

Lahn inclined his head to Vanlyn before sitting down. “Highness.”

“Good afternoon, Master Aurris.”

“It has been some time since we’ve practiced, and it may be more so what with the situation on the mainland.”

“I believe we both have news, my friend,” Dane said. “But why not tell me what you have first?”

“Most is rumor, but one thing is certain. The High Lords and Ladies are all questioning High Lord Sarn’s decisions in battle. The loudest voice is High Lord Maxus of Lysandre.”

“Not surprising,” Dane said. “I spoke with some of my captains, and they implied as much.”

“He’s the man who fought in the wars in Inys,” Vanlyn said.

“Precisely,” Lahn said. “Maxus was seen in conference with Lady Dacien of Gan. That is fact. The rumor is that Maxus is vying for Lady Dacien’s support, although it’s also rumored that Lady Dacien feels she should take command of the forces.”

Lahn sipped his coffee and nibbled red grapes and cheese, compliments of Dawkins. “I would say Maxus would be best from a military standpoint. However, many of the lords and ladies find him too abrasive. Maxus has the experience, but like Aelden, he refuses to hear any other ideas but his own. Most people favor Lady Dacien.”

“She’s a good woman,” Dane commented as he flipped through a sheaf of papers, although his attention was on Lahn.

“She has no love for Sarn or his son, especially after the incident with her sister.”

“Yes, I’d heard about that as well,” Dane said. “What exactly *did* happen?”

“Well, as you know, Lady Dacien’s sister is a lieutenant in the Gan army. Prince Argent tried to force himself on her.”

“Stupid, immoral ass,” Vanlyn muttered.

“Indeed,” Lahn continued. “And I’m certain you’ll be pleased to know she gave him a sound thrashing.”

Vanlyn grunted. “My compliments to her. He deserved it.”

“Lady Dacien was furious, of course. She demanded that Argent be punished and threatened to sever all ties with Toryn and take her forces and withdraw.”

“And my father refused.”

“Yes,” Lahn said. “Now we go back into rumor, but I was advised that Lady Dacien sent her sister and some troops to Great Ordwyn to petition the king to have High Lord Sarn removed from his post. I haven’t confirmed if this is truth, but we have someone in her entourage, so I’ll see if we can verify our information.”

“And what of Maxus?” Dane asked.

“Maxus was not pleased of course. He wanted to petition the king for himself. Though, as far as I’m aware, he hasn’t made any move against Lady Dacien.”

“And the others?” Vanlyn asked.

“Divided,” Lahn said. “Some have their own schemes going and the remainders speak of you.” He nodded at Vanlyn.

“Me?” Vanlyn frowned. He wondered what the other lords and ladies could be saying about him. He didn’t have long to do so.

“Yes.” Lahn nodded to him. “Word concerning you, my prince, is varied. At first there were rumors that you’d betrayed your country, but as of late, well, your father and brother’s actions have been under much scrutiny. It’s common knowledge that mission you were sent away on was a malicious and deliberate act, its sole purpose to bring about your demise.”

Vanlyn thread his fingers together and rested his chin on them. “Yes, I was aware of that.”

“The other lords and ladies want proof of your whereabouts and are pressuring Sarn to act.” Lahn said. “Some wish to use you as a puppet. Others believe you should stage a revolution and seize power.”

“I would never…” Vanlyn’s hands fisted on the tabletop. “I don’t want to be High Lord. And I am as untested in battle as both my father and brother put together.”

Vanlyn pushed back from the table and stood, beginning to pace the length of the room, suddenly filled with a nervous energy. “They would expect me to find a way to destroy the fiends, but I would not.” He turned to face the two men. “Do you know what I would do? I would recommend a parley.”

“You would do that?” Lahn said on a surprised breath. “After all that we… I mean to say—”

“I’ve spoken with Dane of this,” Vanlyn said as he continued to move about the room. “Isn’t all you want, Master Aurris, to live your life out of the darkness and to have your rightful chance at redemption?”

Lahn nodded slowly.

“Who are we mortals to rob you of that? You all were mortal once just as we are, and you deserve your lives back.” Vanlyn approached Dane’s chair and met his gaze. “We should see if perhaps there are those who may wish to parley.” Vanlyn turned to Lahn. “Could you see about that, Master Aurris?”

Lahn stared at Vanlyn for a moment. His glance moved to Dane and back. “Yes, I can, and since we’re obviously on the same side now, you may as well call me Lahn.”

“Good.” Vanlyn grinned at him.

“I must say, Prince Vanlyn, you are nothing like your brother and father,” Lahn said. “Then again, I’ve heard your mother and sister were both gracious and charming so perhaps you learned from them.”

“Thank you,” Vanlyn continued to look at Dane, hoping to convey a message with

his eyes. *This doesn't change anything between us. I won't leave you.* It came to Vanlyn that he could be an advocate for the fiends, but even as the thought emerged, he realized that if he did go back, they would expect him to stay and to be High Lord, to rule Toryn.

And he would never be able to return to Dane.

There had to be a solution to ensure his people were safe and ruled by someone with the wisdom and honor to do so. If no one was found suitable, it would be expected of him, and as he'd said to Lahn, Vanlyn had no desire to be High Lord.

Now he looked at Dane for support and guidance. Dane grasped his hands seeming to know Vanlyn needed him. "It will be all right. I promise."

"Dane—"

"Do you trust me, Vanlyn?"

"Of course."

"There may yet be a solution." Of course Dane understood his fears. As always, the man seemed to know without Vanlyn having to give them voice. "Would you give Lahn and I a few moments?"

Vanlyn couldn't help the troubled furrow of his brow. "Yes, of course." He said he would trust Dane, so he kept his curiosity to himself for now.

* * * *

When it was just him and Lahn, his friend asked, "What was that all about?"

"This is a boon I need to ask of you on a personal level." Dane went on to explain about Vanlyn's mother and sister and what he needed Lahn to find out.

"That does not answer my question." Lahn scratched the stubble on his chin. "But I see your point. Yes, something about this does ring false. I'll see what I can find out."

"Thank you."

"By the way, did you settle the matter with that Magisteri Ramsay?"

Dane sighed, the memory causing a dull ache in the pit of his stomach. "Yes I did." Dane didn't go deeply into it as it hurt too much.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that alone," Lahn said.

"I didn't," Dane said. "Vanlyn was a great comfort to me." He realized what the tone of his voice implied, but it was too late.

"So, how does the plan go? Has the prince declared his love for you? If not, he's very close, I mean with agreeing to help us."

Dane's blush gave him away.

"So your plan worked, did it? He told you he loved you?"

Dane sighed. "Yes."

"Excellent," Lahn said. "So how do you plan to proceed? Shall I take him back with me? Or did you want to present him yourself? Despite everything, this may be what we need to—"

"I'm not sending him back," Dane muttered, his eyes fixed on the papers before him.

"Why, by the realm, not?" Lahn asked. "We obviously have him and his assistance is of his own free will. I'll admit, he's not as bad of a sort as I thought, and I somewhat wish we didn't have to do this to him, but still what reason—"

Lahn went silent in mid-sentence and remained that way for so long that Dane couldn't help but raise his eyes to meet Lahn's gaze. A look of utter shock was on his friend's face. His mouth opened, but he didn't speak for a few breaths. "Well, I'll be

damned.” Lahn shook his head. “You love him too.”

Dane’s hands fisted on the table. He set his jaw and waited for Lahn’s admonishment. It never came.

Instead, Lahn sighed and, for a moment, averted his eyes, “It’s fine. We truly don’t need him anyway, although you’ll have to think up an explanation as to why you’re not going to use him.”

Dane drew in a sharp breath, his own surprise immobilizing him in his seat. It was the last thing he expected.

“Baro has been stirring up trouble among the more feral members of our race. You’ll have to come soon. The majority pays him no heed, but he is making some believe you’re merely messing about while they fight. Although he’s done no fighting himself.” Lahn’s tone was soft. “I can stall them for a time, possibly a few weeks. We’re stretching ourselves mighty thin, and with the onset of autumn, we need to prepare for the winter. I will keep my word to the prince and see about someone who is willing to parley.”

“Lahn,” Dane finally found his voice. “Thank you so much. You’re a true friend.”

“You’re welcome,” Lahn said. “I wouldn’t do this for anyone but a friend. And, as your friend, I offer this advice. Do not turn him aside. Be good to him and love him always.” There was a profound sadness in Lahn’s eyes. “A love lost because of foolhardiness is a tragedy.” Lahn’s voice was unsteady as he spoke the famously quoted words of a poet they both admired. Dane knew that Lahn lost both his wife and children because of his addiction to gambling before he lost his life.

“I will always be good to him,” Dane said. He wanted to say more, to reassure Lahn that he would find true love again someday if that were what he truly wanted, but he sensed that would mean nothing to his friend.

Before the blond fiend left, he made one last remark. “You know I envy you right now.”

Again, he was at a loss for words. He could only silently ask any deities who might be listening to help Lahn Aurris.

Dane found Vanlyn waiting for him in the library. He sat with one of the larger tomes open in front of him, but his attention was on a family of mice who were sneaking treats from the plate of bread and cheese Vanlyn had on the table.

The prince smiled up at him. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, love.” Dane pulled up a chair. “I’m sorry about that. I hope you’re not angry.”

“No,” Vanlyn said. “Just curious.”

“Well, I asked Lahn to run an errand for me, and depending how it turns out, it’s not something I can tell you about yet. But I will when the time comes, I promise.”

“Very well.”

“Also…” Dane reached across the space and grasped Vanlyn’s hand. “I told him about us. He guessed it actually. Lahn is going to try and buy us some time until I can decide how best to handle the situation.”

“Then he wasn’t angry?”

“No, surprisingly,” Dane said, “but Lahn has been in love. He understands.”

Dane sighed as he fiddled with the page edge of the book. “Lahn told me one of my people is causing discord. You may recall the fiend Baro? He was at the farmhouse. He was the one that attacked the horses.”

“Yes.” He could see Vanlyn shudder.

“I’ll have to think of something to tell them,” Dane said. “To explain why I’m not going to use you after all.”

Vanlyn’s brow creased in a puzzled frown. “Tell them the truth.”

“Say again?”

“Dane,” Vanlyn said. “You’ve succeeded. The only way in which the plan differs is I’ll go before the council freely as your advocate.”

“And you’re certain of this course?” Dane grasped Vanlyn’s hand with both of his. “I know you worry for your people. At this point there’s no way to determine how this will influence Aelden’s continued rule.”

“I’ve already told you I want to be with you, Dane,” Vanlyn said. “Whatever the council decides, I’ll make my decision then. If I have to go to the king himself to find a suitable regent, I will. Anyone is better than Argent or my father.”

“Your mother has relatives, correct?”

“Yes. My mother is originally from Gan.”

“Then it’s obvious you should speak to High Lady Dacien,” Dane said. “I think she would be fair and give you the best advice.”

“Agreed,” Vanlyn said.

For the first time, Dane felt truly hopeful about the future. “Lahn did promise to buy us some time.” Dane grinned. “I thought I could show you more of Penryn or we could do other things to pass the time.” Dane left his seat and straddled Vanlyn. Dane took a deep kiss as he plied Vanlyn’s hair at his temples with both hands. His rapidly hardening shaft rubbed against Vanlyn’s. “I plan on showing you the time of your life, Vanlyn Sarn.”

* * * *

The next morning, Dane had Dawkins drive them into town and left the coach at council hall while the two walked along the busy streets. Dane could see how happy Vanlyn was, almost schoolboy-like in his enthusiasm. Dane felt an unerring sense of pride being with the young man.

Dane pointed out the various historical structures and the buildings that had extensive damage and how well the reconstruction was going. There was a new library, and a small university was under construction.

“Most citizens, specifically with magical ability, usually go to school on the mainland, although there are some that would prefer to stay here. We hope that when the conflict is at an end to coax more instructors here.”

Their steps led them to the main thoroughfare much like any in a small or large town. The streets were lined with rows of businesses selling the familiar and the exotic. Dane reminded Vanlyn that the clothes he’d purchased when he first came to the island were showing a bit of wear. Dane could hardly believe that was almost two months ago and how much had happened since Vanlyn’s arrival. The clothiers they visited over the next few hours were eager to cater to their minister and his young charge.

They continued to walk, and Dane proudly pointed out all there was to see in the ever-growing city. They found their way to the town square where street performers entertained the crowd for coppers. There were dancers, musicians and sweet-voiced singers. Elementals awed the crowd with pyrotechnic displays while pantomimes entertained children, their faces colorfully painted. They sparred with the puppeteers who

drew laughs even from Dane and Vanlyn with the antics of their finely carved dolls.

It was lunchtime, and Dane led Vanlyn over to an open stall where a corpulent man tended an open fire stove. Several large slabs of meat sizzled over the fire as the man ladled a greasy concoction over each.

The man gave them a toothless grin as they approached. “Well, if it isn’t Minister Tanderes. Come to sample the fare?”

“Of course, Master Samyr.” Dane turned to Vanlyn, “Want to be daring?”

“I will if you will,” Vanlyn said.

Samyr took a pair of iron tongs and seized a slab of the meat, carrying it to a cooking block behind him where he went to work with a wicked looking knife. He added an assortment of vegetables and folded it into a bread trencher, wrapping it all in oily paper he presented one to Vanlyn. “There you go, kind sir.”

As Dane paid Samyr, Vanlyn took a tentative bite. “Ah! It’s hot!”

Grease ran down the sides and soaked the trencher. Vanlyn took another bite. “It’s delicious, though.”

“Ah! Glad you’re pleased, young sir.” Samyr grinned again then went to calling to the nearby patrons.

Dane bought them two mugs of barley wine, and they continued to enjoy the sights. They were pleasantly surprised when they ran into Rhys and his family. When his wife had complained of his constantly working, Rhys had scheduled the outing to ease her ire. Rhys had heard about the incident with Ramsay and told Dane that the Magisteri was supposedly in seclusion at his manner since the calling.

Ramsay’s nephews were another matter. They’d been seen frequenting several taverns, spending as much time getting as drunk as possible, and saying how they’d very much like to show Dane a lesson. Dane thanked his nephew for the information, but he truly wasn’t concerned with Ramsay’s nephews.

Vanlyn, however, expressed his concern as they went their way. “Shouldn’t we at least report them to Magisteri Hale?”

“We can, although there will be little she could do. I don’t fear those two.”

“I know you don’t,” Vanlyn said softly. “But please be careful.”

“I will.” Dane was more worried about Vanlyn. He made a silent vow—if either one of Ramsay’s nephews came near Vanlyn, he would make them pay dearly.

For now, Dane banished thoughts of Ramsay.

They shopped for gifts. They purchased jeweled earrings for Marcelyn Hale and a set of leather journals for Rhys. Lahn Aurris would receive a fine wool coat for the winter months. Vanlyn also suggested gifts for the bogies. That took more time for what did one purchase for a magical being?

As the evening arrived, they stopped and purchased fruit ices at a little stall and sat on the curb while they enjoyed their snack and each other’s company.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Dane tipped the cup of fruit ice upward to indulge in the dark syrup.

“Oh yes,” Vanlyn said. “In fact, I can’t remember when I’ve enjoyed myself more.”

“Good,” Dane said. “There’s an open-air theater in the park just down the way.”

Dane motioned with his cup. “They hold these impromptu short plays every hour or so. Shall we?”

“Yes.”

The theatre was actually a raised stage in the midst of a grassy square. There were no benches and people brought blankets or just lay out on the grass with food and drinks. The two made themselves comfortable.

The performance was one of Dane's favorites. It centered on a young man from a family of elemental magicians who were world renowned for their skill. To his dismay, he found that his practice was that of Dance. So the young man and his friends had many misadventures trying to hide his true power and to convince his family he too could command the elements. The results quite often had the audience in a fit of laughter.

In the end, the man embraced his power and invited members of the audience to come up on stage and participate in a rousing bout of dancing. To Dane's surprise, Vanlyn pulled him on stage, not the least bit shy about dancing with another man.

As Dane watched Vanlyn, he affirmed his feelings for the young man. *You belong here, my love. I'll never let you go.* Holding Vanlyn in his arms, feeling his breath on his cheek, feeling the gentle thrum of his lover's heart, Dane was truly content for the first time since his previous life.

"I love you, Vanlyn."

Dane felt the gentle nuzzle at his ear. "I love you too."

* * * *

"Why don't we stay in town tonight?" It was late, and Dane couldn't help but notice the fifth time Vanlyn yawned. "I already have a suite of rooms prepared at The Rare Blessing. It will be better than riding back when we're both too tired to do so."

Vanlyn yawned again. "All right."

Dane didn't say so, but he wasn't feeling as well as he had been earlier and hadn't been looking forward to the coach ride, so he was glad that Vanlyn agreed.

Dane wasn't surprised to find Dawkins waiting for them by the coach. He seemed as relaxed and content as they were, and Dane knew he'd probably spent most of his time commiserating with his own people.

Vanlyn was leaning up against him, half asleep. "We'll be staying in town tonight, Dawkins."

"The Rare Blessing, sir?"

"Yes, thank you."

Vanlyn slept the short ride to the inn. They were greeted at the door by the inn-wife and immediately ushered upstairs. Dane asked if she would prepare something for an upset stomach, and she agreed, returning later with a milky concoction that she assured him would ease his stomach.

Dane put Vanlyn to bed first. The young man smiled sleepily at him and muttered something Dane didn't catch. Dane sat on the bed and began to drink the medicine.

His stomach suddenly gave a violent spasm, so much so that he crushed the metal cup in his grip. Dane stared in horror as the medicine ran in white rivulets down his hand and wrist.

A second spasm had his teeth grinding as a growl of pain was forced from his lips. The third sent him to his knees beside the bed.

His heart was hammering, threatening to burst from his chest. The room tilted crazily, familiar things obscured by a red haze. Dane was burning up, and an invisible fire consumed him. He looked at his hands and saw the claws forcing themselves to bear.

Oh gods no, not this. Not now!
The beast awoke.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Vanlyn burrowed deeper into the warm cocoon of down quilts. They smelled of lavender soap, and he burrowed deeper like a rabbit in winter, enjoying the scent. He was only partially awake as he waited for Dane to join him. He must not have been feeling well for Vanlyn had come awake just long enough to hear him ask for some medicine to calm a queasy stomach. If Dane were ill, Vanlyn would take care of him.

Of course, I'll do that always, Vanlyn silently mused.

There was a sound on the very fringe of his hearing. Sleep was pulling at him, but the sound was enough so that he staved it off for a moment to reassure himself it was nothing.

Another sound came, like a strangled growl, and Vanlyn came to stark wakefulness. He felt the pressure on the mattress. Dane was obviously sitting there. Why didn't he come to bed?

Then the pressure was gone. Vanlyn heard the thump of something hitting the floor and then a cry of pain that had Vanlyn tossing the covers back. He twisted his body around, his breath suddenly ragged in his throat. "Dane?"

The room was in semi-darkness, lit only by the glowing embers of the fire. Vanlyn sat up, his eyes darting frantically around the room. Fear coursed through his veins, but he couldn't figure on the source. He had a sense that something was horribly wrong.

"Dane, where are you?" Perhaps he couldn't sleep and had retreated to another room in their suites so not to disturb him? Even as this thought came to Vanlyn, it brought no reassurance.

Something moved within the shadowed corner of the room.

Vanlyn's hands fisted around the rumpled sheets. "Dane?"

Another sound came that Vanlyn couldn't quite put description to, but reminded him of steam hissing in its release, and Dane suddenly fell prone before the fireplace. His wings twisted back on themselves in a grotesque way, his skin glistening with sweat.

"Dane!" Vanlyn scrambled to the edge of the bed.

"No," Dane's voice was all wrong, like shards of glass being ground together. "Don't come near."

Clawed hands scored deep marks into the polished wood. Vanlyn watched, immobile as Dane dragged himself forward. Vanlyn realized that Dane's body seemed wrong as well. Dane pushed off from the floor with his palms. His chest and stomach lifted higher than they should have, and his lower half no longer held the sturdy legs of a man but the glistening scales of a serpent's tail.

"Dane, oh gods!" Vanlyn pushed himself off the bed, landing hard on his knees. He looked up as the beast lifted itself to his full height and hissed with its fangs dripping in the firelight.

His third form. Vanlyn had heard the horrible rumors of the fiends able to take a monstrous form that robbed them completely of their humanity and caused them to kill without mercy or thought. Why Dane had taken this form Vanlyn could not guess. The fear that held him stripped his mind of reason. Vanlyn could only stare agape, movement beyond him, the only sound the pounding of his own heart and the sharpness of his

breathing.

“Vanlyn.” When the beast said his name, Vanlyn cried out. It was terror on the most primal level, although within the farthest reaches of his soul, he knew this was Dane. The one person he truly loved. He had to quell the fear. He couldn’t let it rule him.

“Dane, please tell me why this is happening.” Vanlyn regained control of his body and cautiously came to his feet. Despite his resolution to quell his fear, he was still wary as to what Dane might do and any sudden moves may aggravate the situation. “Dane, please, I want to help you.”

Dane moaned a sound of agony as he pressed both fists to his forehead. “Get away!”

“I won’t.” Vanlyn filled his voice with resolve. “Tell me what you need for me to do!”

The move was unexpected, and it gave Vanlyn no time to react. The beast lunged for him and slammed Vanlyn to the floor, the crushing weight holding him there and robbing him of air.

“Stupid mortal pup!” The beast held him by the shoulders, claws piercing flesh. “I gave you leave and you chose to stay? I shall rend you in pieces!”

Vanlyn looked into those eyes, so alien and yet familiar. “Then rend me in pieces love, if that is what you wish. I won’t leave you.”

Dane’s face twisted, the product of his inner struggle before threw his head back and gave another cry, and when he bent forward again, his fangs sank deep into the fleshly part of Vanlyn’s shoulder. He stifled his scream with his teeth ground painfully. He grabbed hold of Dane, his arms in a fierce embrace. “I told you I won’t leave you.”

Then there was nothing but the crackling of the flames and Dane’s ragged breathing for Vanlyn held his breath, and his teeth sank into his lower lip against the agony in his shoulder. It seemed they remained that way forever.

Vanlyn grunted when Dane withdrew. Vanlyn’s shoulder throbbed, and he felt he would vomit at any moment, but still he held on.

“Why?” Dane’s voice wavered. “I could have killed you.”

“Look at me,” Vanlyn said.

“I can’t,” Dane said. “For you’ll see a beast.”

“No. I’ll see you, Dane.”

Dane lifted his head. Tears filled his eyes and dropped on Vanlyn’s face. “I’m sorry.”

Dane lowered his head again. He tongue flicked out, passing over the wounds, making Vanlyn draw in a breath. Dane continued with his gentle cleansing. It was almost erotic in a sense. Vanlyn closed his eyes, and a shiver ran across his skin. It was a few moments before Vanlyn realized the pain was subsiding. Dane drew away again and dropped his full weight on Vanlyn, causing him to grunt.

“I’m sorry.” Dane was openly weeping now. “I’m sorry.”

The third form was receding. Vanlyn could sense his lover’s return to humanity.

“You should have fled,” Dane said. “I could have killed you.”

“No,” Vanlyn said. “I don’t believe you would have. I know you would never hurt me, Dane.”

* * * *

Vanlyn pushed open the door to their room with his backside as he balanced the

serving tray in both hands. He was relieved to find someone tending the kitchen. No, no one had heard the cries, and no, his injury didn't need further tending. Vanlyn had torn strips from the bottom of his shirt and bound the bite marks although they'd stopped bleeding. Vanlyn made up an excuse to explain why they needed a fresh bath, some food and more of the stomach medicine. The inn workers, as professional and discreet as Vanlyn hoped, did not question him.

Dane was sitting up in bed, after having his bath and Vanlyn helping him back to bed. He watched Vanlyn cross the room and muttered, "Thank you," as Vanlyn set the tray down. The inn worker had supplied a chicken broth and some bread, along with the medicine to quiet Dane's stomach as he'd complained of lingering nausea.

"I told the inn workers you may have had some bad meat while we were out," Vanlyn said. "No one heard the noise as we're the only ones in this part of the inn so you needn't worry about it."

Dane drained the cup of medicine, and his lips pursed in distaste. "That is awful stuff."

Vanlyn smiled slightly and then quickly sobered. "What happened, love? Will you tell me?"

Dane sighed, not quite meeting Vanlyn's eyes. "I truly didn't expect that to happen. I'm sorry you had to see me that way."

"Don't," Vanlyn said. "Do you think I care if I see you at your worst? Could I truly say I loved you if I did?"

"If there was any doubt in my mind that you loved me," Dane said, "although there *isn't*, you proved your love for me tonight."

Dane began tearing the small loaf of bread into pieces. "Every so often, sometimes without warning, like tonight, the beast that shares this body with me stirs in its sleep. Like when you change position in bed in the middle of the night."

Vanlyn nodded. "And you take the third form."

"So you've heard of the third form. Yes, although I am still somewhat in control of myself and my humanity," Dane said, "the beast reminds me it is here before returning to its slumber."

"It won't take control, will it?"

"Oh no." Dane tried to smile with reassurance. "It is a part of me, as familiar as my own hands."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Well, I didn't expect it to happen, and it's not something I really give much thought," Dane said. "I certainly wasn't expecting to fall in love with you so I would have seen no reason to make my personal affairs known." Dane lowered his gaze. "There will be things you will find out about me. Please don't think I'm intentionally keeping secrets from you."

"I don't," Vanlyn said. "And as long as you are honest with me then it's fine."

Dane looked at him with gratitude, before glancing at his shoulder. Dane reached out tentatively towards it. "Is it... Are you all right?"

"I am actually," Vanlyn said. "It's strange the pain dulled after your ministrations."

"Another gift from the beast. We can create a venom that will dull the pain of a bite. Enough and we can render our prey—" Dane halted in mid-sentence and bit his lower lip. "I'm sorry. This must be uncomfortable for you."

“Stop apologizing,” Vanlyn said. He took the tray and set it on the floor before crawling into bed beside him. He drew Dane into his arms, and Dane nestled his head into Vanlyn’s shoulder. “As you’ve said, it is a part of you, and there is nothing about you I don’t love.”

Vanlyn began to caress Dane with his fingertips on his face and chest, and Dane raised his face for a kiss. Their petting soon evolved in heated lovemaking. Afterwards, with morning near, Dane slept first but not before he murmured his love’s name. Vanlyn smiled and followed him into sleep.

* * * *

They had spent most of the day in town again not doing as much walking as before for Dane was still fatigued from his ordeal. Mainly they sat in the park and watched their people—for that was how Vanlyn thought of them now—as they went about their lives.

A storm was blowing in from the river according to some seagulls that chose to perch on the inn railing, and Dane thought they should head back before it hit. Vanlyn sat next to Dane as the coach jostled its way back to the manor. They alternated between touching and kissing the whole way. Vanlyn was eager to get home and take his handsome lover to bed.

The rain was coming down in earnest by the time Dawkins pulled the coach to the front entrance. The coach door came open, and Vanlyn drew in a breath by the bogie’s appearance. There was an air of magic about him in the form of a silver mist that surrounded him and adhered to his glowing skin.

“Going to enjoy the storm?” Dane grinned.

“Yes, sir.” His features were reshaping into their true appearance. He seemed infinitely older and, at the same time, almost child-like. “If you don’t mind, I’ll see to the coach and the packages and join my people.”

“That’s fine, Dawkins. Enjoy,” Dane said.

“Enjoy your night, Dawkins,” Vanlyn said.

“I will. Merely summon me if you have a need.” Then the bogie was gone, and the mist with him.

“The rain nourishes the earth,” Dane explained. “Since the bogies are of the earth this is a special time for them where they can replenish themselves.” Dane conjured an illusion of light. “I suppose we’re about to get drenched.”

“I don’t really mind,” Vanlyn said.

Dane’s expression softened. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Despite the fact that the front entrance was no more than a few steps away, they were thoroughly drenched by the time Dane hurriedly inserted the key into the lock. They were both grinning like idiots when the door closed behind them. Water adhered to their eyelashes and dripped from tendrils of hair. Vanlyn wrapped his arms around his waist. It wasn’t too cold, but he began to shiver nonetheless.

“We’ll have to get out of these clothes soon or we’ll catch our death, as my mother was so fond of saying.” Dane gestured again and spoke an incantation, conjuring a cloud of flame to surround them.

Despite being illusion, the flame warmed Vanlyn. With deft fingers, Dane unbuttoned Vanlyn’s shirt. He shivered again, but it was not from the cold. When Dane

had divested him of all his clothes, Vanlyn watched as Dane removed his own, Vanlyn's breathing quickening with each expanse of flesh that Dane exposed.

With the light of the flame glistening off their skin, Dane pulled Vanlyn close as Vanlyn fisted his hands in Dane's hair and pulled him forward for a lusty kiss. When Dane drew back, his smile was one of pleased surprise that quickly faded into something altogether different. That look of feral desire that Vanlyn knew so well.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Dane quelled the cloud of flame. His hands grasping Vanlyn's shoulders, he spun him around and pressed him against the smoothly polished door. Hands cupped Vanlyn's ass, spreading the cheeks apart and a shiver of anticipation raced across his skin. Dane's tongue began to lick and probe at the area. Vanlyn caught his lower lip between his teeth. A whimper escaped his throat as his hips rocked, encouraging.

"You enjoy this pleasure, don't you?" Dane muttered, his tongue invaded Vanlyn's opening, sending a shock of electricity through him that had his cock rigid and his balls tightly drawn.

"I..." Vanlyn found himself suddenly shy. He moistened his lips before speaking. "I enjoy it much better when you are inside of me."

"Truly." It was a statement of fact. Dane came to his feet. His warm body slick with sweat pressed against him. "We've no salve. I may hurt you."

"I-I don't care. Please, Dane, fuck me now."

"Very well."

Dane spread his ass cheeks. The bulbous tip of his cock pressed into Vanlyn's entrance. His hands fisted against the wood as he thrust his ass out, once again making his desire known.

"I-I don't want to hurt you, Van." Dane forced the words from between his teeth. "But I can't stop."

The tip of Dane's cock was in. Vanlyn grunted against the pain. "More."

"Spread your legs more. Yes, that's it, love."

"Oh gods, you're almost there, Dane."

"Vanlyn..." Dane was moving, drawing his cock completely out, then plunging back, rousing that place that now sent the fire all through his body.

"Harder love," Vanlyn pleaded. "I've waited for this all day."

Dane laughed. It was a sound of pure male delight. "Do you find me that desirable, sweetheart?"

"Yes." Vanlyn could barely force the word out, his hips bucking in time with Dane's thrusting, forcing him deeper. "Oh gods, I'm going to—"

Vanlyn's back arched in one great spasm as his essence rushed from him. He knew when Dane joined him in completion. The older man wrapped his muscular arms around him, literally lifting Vanlyn off his feet as Dane's own hot seed filled him.

They held each other up as they floated in the afterglow. Once their rapid breathing quieted, a chuckle escaped from Vanlyn's lips. "I think I've made quite a mess on the door."

Dane laughed as well and nuzzled Vanlyn's neck. "Shall we retreat to the library?"

"All right."

They decided to settle in front of the fireplace. Dane went to attend to his toilet. "I want to kiss you, after all." He smiled bemusedly, and Vanlyn was grateful he'd taken

such consideration. When Dane returned, he had pillows and blankets arranged them for comfort, then lit a fire. He wasted no more time after that, descending on Vanlyn like a hawk.

Vanlyn lay on his back, his arms above his head. Dane draped his body over him as he reached up and intertwined his fingers with Vanlyn's own. They kissed for a time, merely enjoying the sensation of such an intimate caress. With Dane taking his breath from him, Vanlyn felt truly at peace.

Afterwards, they lay in each other's arms. Vanlyn had chosen a book of erotic poetry, and after reading a scant three passages, they were at lovemaking again. Temporarily sated, Vanlyn lay content in Dane's arms, watching the patterns made by the fire.

"Are you hungry?" Vanlyn asked after a time. Although he was reluctant to leave Dane's arms, his stomach was rumbling distinctly. "I'll go get us something if you like."

"I could do with a little something," Dane said.

Vanlyn kissed him quickly. "I won't be long."

Vanlyn slipped from the library and jogged down the hall. The stones were cold beneath his feet so he quickened his pace until he came to the kitchen. There was a steady glow of light within the room, one of Dane's spells no doubt, its source a shimmering ball of luminescence floating in a far corner.

Some of their packages were neatly stacked on the cooking block. Vanlyn searched among them, selecting a jar of pickles, a wedge of cheese and a loaf of dark bread. Further searching and he found a half bottle of wine. It was quite a balancing act, since he couldn't seem to find a tray and had to gather the food, drink, utensils and glasses in his arms for his trek back to the library.

As he walked, he had to stop every so often to adjust the items, and because of that, Vanlyn didn't notice the lone figure standing in the hall until he halted a third time. Vanlyn raised his eyes to meet those of the man standing there.

It was Dane, and in that instant, Vanlyn knew it was not for he had never seen such a look of cold malice. No, that wasn't true. He had seen it twice before.

"You—" Vanlyn began.

The counterfeit Dane moved with frightening speed, almost as agile as the man he impersonated. His lips twisted in a triumphant grin, knowing he had his victim trapped. Vanlyn reacted as Dane and Lahn had taught him. The memory of that first day, with Lahn holding the knife to his throat spurred him into action.

Vanlyn flung his arms outward, sending everything that he held in his arms to the floor. Glass shattered, spraying diamond fragments as the dark wine spread across the floor and mingled with the acrid brine of the pickles.

The intruder, unable to slow his momentum, slipped clumsily in the liquid and went down hard with a sickening crack as his head met the stones. His attacker bellowed an obscenity, his voice at a higher pitch and certainly not Dane's.

Vanlyn dashed around the mess on the floor, past the man who was struggling to rise. "Dane! *Dane!*"

Something, Vanlyn didn't know what, caught at his ankle. It was a cold and slick, covered with a viscous fluid that burned into his skin like a cattle brand. A scream burst from Vanlyn's lips. The thing yanked hard, pulling Vanlyn off his feet. The thing was moving up his leg, bringing the flames with its cadaverous touch.

“No! Lady, help me!” Vanlyn clawed at the floor, finding little purchase on the smooth stones as the things inexorably pulled him back to whatever waited for him.

Then Vanlyn was no longer alone. Dane was there in the hallway, all claws and fangs. He leapt over Vanlyn, and his wings unfurled, giving him momentum. The sound of a strangled cry was all Vanlyn heard before his ankle was freed.

Vanlyn struggled to rise, pushing himself up by his hands. He had to see, had to know Dane was safe. The sound of a confrontation—a thump with a sickening crunch of bones breaking and the cries of someone facing death—was all he had as indication.

Hands reached for him, pallid and cold like the thing that had taken hold on him. Beasts surrounded him, their near-naked flesh glistening with the fresh rain. The loam of the earth was their hair. The largest lifted Vanlyn to his feet. There was a momentary twinge of panic until Vanlyn recognized those kindly eyes.

“Dawkins?” Vanlyn tried to turn. “Dane—”

“He will deal with this. Hold on to me. Let Miranda work.”

Vanlyn rested against Dawkins’ thin frame. To his left, he could see Tae moving nervously about. Vanlyn knew she wanted to assist Dane, but as the rest of them did, she deferred to Dawkins. Whatever Miranda was doing to his leg, it was working for the pain was fading.

When finally the corridor was quiet, Vanlyn straightened away from Dawkins and turned just as Dane approached, in the process of regaining his human form. Seeing him, Vanlyn suddenly realized he was naked, and the flush caused his face to redden. Even though he knew the women present were probably hundreds of years old still...

But Vanlyn had scant time to be embarrassed when Dane grabbed him and pulled him close. “My love, you’re safe.” Dane planted kisses over his face. “Are you injured? Oh gods, if I had lost you...”

“Dane.” Reaction set in, and Vanlyn started to tremble. Looking over Dane’s shoulder, he saw the bloody and shattered body of his assailant lying on the floor. Something was happening to the remains. Limbs were reshaping themselves—losing or gaining something, reshaping to another form as though some ethereal potter was working a lump of potter’s clay. “Dane?”

Dane turned to look. Keeping a protective arm around him, the two men approached the corpse as it continued to change, the magic that held it in that form gone in its death.

Vanlyn drew in a sharp breath when he saw the face. He had seen this man before. And he suddenly knew what he was. “Is that...”

He looked at Dane for confirmation. The older man nodded. “He always said he was a shapeshifter, but it appears he lied. He is a Mimic.”

Mimics were rare indeed. It was said for every ten thousand conjurers born there was only one who may be a Mimic. “Is he who I believe him to be?”

“Yes,” Dane said. “His name is Eoric. He is... *was* one of Taddeus Ramsay’s nephews.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Vanlyn made his way down the path towards the barn. His pace quickened when he heard the plaintive howl. The animals calling to him, distress in their voices, had awakened him. Vanlyn knew what disturbed them so.

As he stepped into the cool interior, the familiar scents of hay and manure tickled his nostrils. Dane and Dawkins halted in the midst of their conversation, yet they were not the first to greet him. The barn was also home to two dogs, one a shepherd named Abel and the other a furry sheepdog named Tassel. They bounded over to Vanlyn, vying for his attention. Vanlyn knelt and allowed them to say hello in the customary canine fashion. They were relieved by his presence but still wary of the atmosphere.

When Vanlyn straightened he said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but the animals are very agitated."

"It's all right, love." Dane held out his arm, and Vanlyn walked into his embrace. "Dawkins was telling me that he has seen to the remains."

"The animals sense his spirit," Vanlyn said. "Or at least that is the impression I receive from them."

"Eoric Ramsay is here?"

"Yes." Vanlyn couldn't suppress a shudder. "They say his shade stands guard over his body. They say he fills the air with regret and despair."

"Then we'll need the necromancer, sir," Dawkins abruptly turned to gaze out the barn door. His brow furrowed. "Many people are drawing near."

The abrupt change of subject didn't seem to surprise Dane. "How many?"

"I will see." The old bogie disappeared for a time to return only moments later. "It is Marcelyn Hale and Ramsay along with ten others."

"Ten?" Dane paled. He turned to look through the open barn door as though he could see them in the distance. Vanlyn could feel his muscles tense underneath his shirt.

"Dane?"

"Vanlyn..." When Dane looked at him, his eyes told Vanlyn he was somewhere very far away. "Would you return to the manor and wait for me, please?"

"I don't understand." Vanlyn furrowed his brow. "I'll need to be here. Magisteri Hale will undoubtedly need to question me—"

"No," Dane said. "I don't want you involved."

"I'm already involved," Vanlyn said. He moved away from Dane's embrace and placed his hands on either side of Dane's face. "There's something else, isn't there? Can't you tell me?"

Dane wouldn't quite meet his eyes. "Vanlyn, please—"

"Listen," Vanlyn said. "I said the animals were agitated. The horses are about to break out of their stalls. They'll hurt themselves if they're not calmed. Why don't I see to that? I'll be near if Hale needs to speak to me." *And if you need me.*

Dane drew in and released a deep breath. "All right."

Vanlyn moved to the end of the barn with the dogs trailing at his heels. He spent a few moments calming the horses, speaking softly to them and holding his face against theirs.

The group rode up. Ramsay was the first to dismount. Dane and Dawkins went to meet him. Ramsay had a sword at his hip. The presence of the deadly weapon did little to ease Vanlyn's troubled heart. Hale approached Dane and spoke softly to him. Vanlyn didn't recognize any of the others in the group except for Ramsay's remaining nephew. He wished he could hear what they were saying.

"Where is he?" Ramsay's voice carried clearly down the length of the barn. Dane nodded towards the one empty stall nearby. Ramsay and his nephew strode forward and waited anxiously as Dawkins pulled the gate open.

The cry of anguish that followed sent a spear of ice through Vanlyn's chest. He knelt and gathered Tassel and Abel to him, burying his face in the sheepdog's fur in a vain attempt to drown out the sounds of Ramsay's grief.

Ramsay wept, and despite everything the man had done and what his nephew had attempted, Vanlyn felt some measure of pity for him. It was obvious his nephews were like sons to him. The rest of the group stood around, shifting their stance or fidgeting. Only Dane and Hale seemed calm and intent on the drama that was unfolding.

Ramsay finally emerged from the stall, and even from that distance, Vanlyn could see the burning hatred in his eyes.

"You murdering bastard!" Ramsay's strode fiercely to stand before Dane. His face was deep red, his hands fisted. "I will see you destroyed for this!" He turned to Hale. "I want him arrested, Marcelyn. I want him punished!"

"I'm sorry, Taddeus," Hale said. "I am truly sorry for your loss. But before I can do anything we need to know the truth."

"What is there to know? My Eoric is dead!" Ramsay pointed an accusing finger at Dane. "Do you deny you killed him?"

"Only in self defense," Dane said. "And in defense of Prince Vanlyn."

"Tell us what happened, Dane," Hale said.

Dane began to describe the incident from his end while Hale listened and Ramsay looked as though he would leap upon Dane at any moment. Vanlyn spoke softly to Abel. "Go and give Dane courage."

The shepherd trotted over to where Dane stood and settled down next to him as he finished speaking.

"Do you know anything about your nephew coming here, Taddeus?" Hale asked.

"No." Ramsay was on edge, a viper preparing to strike. "I'll wager it was to speak to Dane about the meeting."

"My brother told me he was coming here," Ramsay's nephew said. "He said he was going to—I'm sorry, Uncle, we've been worried about you—convince Dane that having his reputation so badly damaged was effecting our uncle, physically. I told him there was no point. How can you expect sympathy from a ruthless beast?" The last sentence was said with a sneer.

Now Dane fisted his hands. He seemed about to respond when Hale said, "That's quite enough. Dane, who else was witness to this? The prince?"

"Yes, and the servants."

"Bogies," Ramsay muttered. "Their word is worthless!"

"I would watch your tongue, Ramsay," Dane said.

"I will not!" Ramsay cried. "Marcelyn, I am through seeing this inhuman beast have his way. He comes and insinuates himself in our lives and leadership through lies and

treachery. And my nephew paid for our acceptance with his life! Will we allow him to go unpunished this time for the very crime that brought about his own execution?"

Vanlyn's breath caught as Ramsay turned to him. "I'll wager you weren't aware of how your paramour died, boy. He was executed for murdering an innocent man because he wanted the man's wife."

"Ramsay, damn you—" Dane went to leap upon him.

"That is quite enough!" Hale stepped between Dane and Ramsay. "That certainly has nothing to do with this situation. I promise you, the truth will be brought to light." Hale stepped away. "We'll summon the necromancer."

"You'll not violate my nephew that way!"

"I see," Hale said. "It's all well and good for Dane to suffer through a calling but not you?"

"I will not let him evade justice!" Ramsay's hand closed around the sword hilt. "I'll send you back to the blackest hells myself, Tanderes!"

Ramsay drew his sword, the fine edged steel glinting even in the dim light of the barn. Ramsay's face frightened Vanlyn more than the weapon itself. His eyes were like a wraith, pupils black stones within gray the color of a corpse's shroud, yet they burned white-hot in his fury. His teeth bared in a predator's snarl, and his face flushed scarlet, colored by heated blood.

Vanlyn saw the sword make its downward arch. He could clearly see the triumph on Ramsay's face, the shock on Hale's as she turned to reach for Ramsay, and the anger on Dane's as he threw his arm up in a defensive gesture. Vanlyn leapt, even as he knew the action was useless. Yes, somewhere in the far reaches of his mind he knew Ramsay couldn't kill Dane, but Dane himself had once told him a fiend could be incapacitated. Trapped in a useless body for all eternity or, worse yet, destroyed.

All Vanlyn truly saw in that instance was Ramsay trying to hurt the man he loved, and he would be damned if he let that happen.

So Vanlyn threw himself forward, reaching with everything that he was—his power, his love for Dane, his very life—and the unexplainable happened.

Suddenly, the realm around him spun in a dizzying circle. The vivid spectrum of colors that he was so accustomed to seemed to drain away, blending into muted versions of their true appearance. Yet, as his vision was out of kilter, his other senses were incredibly enhanced. A myriad of scents filled Vanlyn's nostrils—things that he knew were impossible for him to sense, but on an instinctive level, Vanlyn recognized them. He could smell Ramsey's anger with its undercurrent of fear. It was hot and metallic, as sharp edged as the sword he wielded.

Vanlyn found himself facing Ramsay now. He was kneeling—no, his body was kneeling—but he was changed. Muscles bunched in powerful shoulders and hindquarters, canine teeth bared in challenge, the hair rose on the back of his neck.

The undercurrent of fear burst forth, overpowering Ramsay's anger. The scent was sweet, like the finest wine. Yes, he wanted Ramsay to fear him.

Voices screamed as Vanlyn propelled himself forward with a feral growl, his teeth sinking into flesh, the taste of it as sweet as the scent of Ramsay's fear. Ramsay's blood filled his mouth. Still, he sank deeper, ripping and tearing, the salt taste of sweat and the metal taste of blood satisfying.

There was screaming all around him but not as shrill as Ramsay's. It filled the air

and hearing it caused Vanlyn an even deeper level of satisfaction, but it wasn't enough. He wanted this man dead. He saw Ramsay's throat, his Adams apple bobbing, and could sense the pulse of his life's blood there.

"Vanlyn, stop!"

That voice! There was a tone of command in it. He knew that voice. He had been trained to obey it, hadn't he?

"Vanlyn," the voice said again. "Let him go."

Ramsay was weeping. Tears streamed down his jowled face and dripped off his chin. His nose ran in a disgusting stream. Vanlyn didn't want to let him go. He wanted the man to remain cowed, to know Vanlyn could take his life at any moment.

"Vanlyn, you must go back." A hand rested on his neck, stroking gently. "Concentrate on returning the way you came."

Go back to where? He tried to frown in confusion but couldn't. His mouth, his whole face felt *wrong*. The sound of a plaintive whine coming from his own throat surprised him.

"Sense Abel with you." Dane's voice was close to his ear. "He shares this body with you, but soon he will force you out."

Vanlyn did sense a feral presence somewhere deep within him. It was allowing him dominance for now, but Vanlyn sensed the want to take back what was his.

Dear gods.

And Vanlyn knew what had happened. The stark reality of it brought him back to his humanity. The very thought that he'd wanted to kill, that he fed on human blood...

Vanlyn opened his mouth, suddenly awkward in a body that was not his. He stumbled on four legs and sat down hard. He cried out, and it erupted as a howl.

"Vanlyn." Dane knelt before him and caught his face in his hands. "Listen to me, love, you're going to be all right."

Then Dane gathered him up in his arms and turned away from the scene of Ramsay on the floor and all of the people looking horrified.

"You're heavy," Dane said as he set him down.

The presence in his mind was insistent now. It demanded that Vanlyn give him back what belonged to him. Vanlyn tried to navigate the body he found himself in and gave a yelp of shock when he saw another person lying on his back in the dirt, his face expressionless, and his eyes unfocused.

It was he.

Vanlyn cried out again, looking up at Dane, his pleaded coming out as growls and short sharp barking.

"Concentrate." There was an urgency in Dane's voice. "What were you thinking when you invaded Abel's body?"

I was thinking to get to Dane, to leap upon Ramsay, to stop the killing blow. I reached out with everything that I am—

The world tilted again, and he couldn't quite describe the feeling. Was this what it felt like to be born? To slip from one place to another while something forced you out, pushing and straining?

The next thing Vanlyn knew, he was gasping for air, drawing in deep breaths. Uncontrollable shivering claimed his whole body. It was surprisingly cold in the room, one moment wrapped in warmth and the next thrust into an icy world. Colors exploded

within sight, so bright they hurt his eyes.

He opened his mouth, and for a moment, words would not come. Then he managed to croak out, "Dane."

"Oh my love." Dane grabbed him up, holding him close, rocking him back and forth. "I was so worried."

"Dane." All strength was draining from Vanlyn's limbs as his body adjusted, no longer carried by the animal strength that had filled his spirit. He was powerless, and he found he yearned for that strength again. Vanlyn could do nothing more than lean against Dane, while his racing heart slowed to normal.

Dane was lifting him in his arms again, and the twinge of envy shocked the young prince. *For a moment, I was almost as strong as you are.*

The only persons remaining in the barn were Hale, Dawkins, Ramsay and his nephew. Dawkins was healing Ramsay who made no comments that the bogie he'd insulted was helping him. Ramsay's nephew looked up at him, the threat on his face clear.

"Is he all right?" Hale asked.

"He will be," Dane said.

Vanlyn could see Hale was curious about what had happened but chose not to ask.

"I'll make certain things are seen to here. Don't worry."

"Thank you, Marcelyn." Dane nodded at her.

It was all Vanlyn had left. He didn't recall leaving the barn.

* * * *

Dane stepped across the threshold and into the moist heat of the bath cave. He balanced the tray on one hand on which he'd placed sandwiches and a bunch of grapes and carried a bottle of wine and two cups in the other. He stood and watched Vanlyn as he rested in the water, sunk almost up to his neck.

Damn that Ramsay. Dane had wanted to rip his throat out when he'd mentioned how Dane had died.

Gods and fiends, what does Vanlyn think of me now?

But there was a matter of greater import to discuss. Dane moved into the cavern and to the side of the pool. Vanlyn had his eyes closed, and at first Dane thought he was napping, but he opened his eyes and smiled up at him. "Hello."

Gods, he loved him so much. "Hello, Vanlyn."

Dane set the tray down nearby and went about pouring two glasses of the wine. His hands shook. They were always steady before.

"Thank you," Vanlyn said. "Why don't you get in with me?"

Dane nodded once and began to undress. His fingers fumbled with the buttons.

Please don't hate me. Please give me a chance to explain.

Dane stepped into the water. Vanlyn leaned forward, and Dane slid his body behind the younger man, gathering him into his arms. Vanlyn sighed as he inclined against him. They were silent for a time. Dane cupped his hand full of water and trickled it down Vanlyn's chest, repeating the action a few times.

"What happened to me, Dane?"

It was a safe enough subject. "That was actually going to be the next level of your training," Dane said. "Some Naturalists have the ability to project their selves into an

animal. Not everyone can do it, and of course, I had no idea you could. But you seemed to have done it on an instinctual level.”

“All I knew,” Vanlyn said, “was that I wanted to stop Ramsay from hurting you.”

Dane felt Vanlyn shudder. “I tasted his blood. I had his blood in my mouth, and it was sweet. When I think of it, I want to be sick. Oh gods, Dane, am I crazy?”

“No.” Dane tightened his embrace. “You shared the instincts and emotions of Abel. For a moment, you were one and the same until Abel wanted you out.”

“I could sense his intelligence, his knowledge of all the things of his kind. It was so intense. I don’t know, but I think I want to do it again.”

“As I said, it will be a part of your future training.”

“Can I do it with any animal?”

“I believe so,” Dane said. “But you must take care. The beasts of this realm hold more power than man believes. If you meld with a beast that does not want you there, it may bring about grave consequences.”

“Grave consequences? Such as?”

“I don’t mean to frighten you,” Dane said. “But the animal could completely consume your self. You would become an animal trapped in the body of one. Or it would expel your consciousness completely, and you would be—”

“Trapped with no body, possibly forever.”

“Abel allowed you in before. Speak to him and see if he is willing to do so again.”

Dane nuzzled the spot on Vanlyn’s throat below his ear. “I won’t let anything befall you.”

“I know.”

There were a few moments of silence. Dane felt his throat go dry, and he tried to formulate the words he dreaded speaking. “Vanlyn, about what Ramsay said? About how I died?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you want to know... That is—”

“Of course I want to know but only if you want to tell me,” Vanlyn said. “And of course, I knew Ramsay was lying.”

Dane drew in and released a breath. “He wasn’t lying.”

“Say again?”

“I did kill a man because I was in love with his wife.”

It was several heartbeats before Vanlyn spoke. “Would you tell me the whole truth of the matter?”

Oh gods, Vanlyn. “Yes, of course I will.” Dane gathered his power around them both. The steam rose and coalesced before them. “I’ll show you everything, Vanlyn. It is well past the time that you knew.”

As before with the flames, Dane used the steam as a canvas to weave a waking dream of his memories of the past.

“Her name was Raesa Brin,” Dane began. “She was the wife of a wealthy merchant much older than her.”

Images took form in the mist. Despite the fact that it was many decades ago, Dane still remembered every nuance of her face. “As you can see she was very beautiful.”

“She was,” Vanlyn agreed.

“I don’t remember where we first met,” Dane said. “Some party or another function

that we nobility are required to attend. We started to talk, and she immediately began to hint that her marriage was unhappy. She pulled me in with her lies and suggestive comments, and I stupidly fell for them. We stole away and made love that very night.”

The scene changed to Dane visiting her when her husband was away. A young maid who wouldn’t quite meet Dane’s gaze opened the door.

“She looks afraid,” Vanlyn commented.

“She was afraid,” Dane said. “All the servants were. At first I thought it was because they feared the master of the house discovering his wife’s affair and punishing them for not saying anything.”

“But it was another matter?”

Calling upon his power and his memories again, Dane constructed another view.

The maid showed Dane into Raesa’s bedchamber. She was at her dressing table, staring into the mirror, the distress in her eyes reflected in the mirror’s surface.

“Raesa?”

“Dane.” She turned with a gasp, her hand flying to her collar to grasp the lapels of her dressing gown closed but not before Dane saw the bruising at her throat.

“Raesa, dear gods.” Dane strode over to her and took her hands, pulling them away. The bruising painted a violent map up her shoulder, marring her creamy skin.

“What happened by the nether-hells?”

Raesa didn’t speak at first, biting her bow-shaped lower lip. “Nothing.”

“Don’t tell me it was nothing.” Then realization struck. “It was him, wasn’t it? Delfior did this to you!”

“Dane, please, it was nothing.” Raesa said. “He’s lost his temper like this before.”

“Before?” The rage was building, seething cauldron of liquid fire. “He’s done this to you before?”

Tears glistened in her green eyes. “Please, it is nothing, make no mention of it.”

“He returns today, doesn’t he? He has no right. Only a cowardly whorson puts his hands on his wife. I will confront him.” Dane straightened away from her. “I will show him you have someone who cares for you and will defend you with his life if need be. Stay here. I will come for you later and then we will go away. My family’s summer home is empty, and you may stay there as long as you like until we can negotiate your divorce.”

“But, Dane, I...”

Dane took her hands again. “It is time, don’t you think? I love you, Raesa. I want you to be my wife. Please wait here for me. I’ll return soon.”

She called after him as he strode away. “No, Dane! Please don’t do it! Please! Please don’t hurt Delfior.”

Dane didn’t notice the servants staring fearfully after him. He didn’t know what was going through their minds. Dane rode out to the main thoroughfare where the roads intersected before continuing on to town. As Dane suspected, Delfior Brin came riding along. It was something he did, whenever he returned to port. As soon as his business was finished he rode home to see to his estate and to his wife.

“I cannot believe I admired him.” Dane’s mood darkened as the man approached. Delfior was a plump older gentleman, his girth attributed to the many exotic foods he imported and subsequently sampled. He always seemed a pleasant sort to Dane, but apparently, it was all a ruse.

By the time Delfior reined in his horse before Dane’s, the white-hot fury had

returned, making Dane's blood boil.

"Dane? What are you doing here?"

"I came to tell you," Dane forced the words through his teeth, "that if you *ever* put your hands on Raesa again, I will kill you."

"Put my hands on—I'm sorry, Dane, I don't understand."

Dane's horse danced nervously underneath him, sensing Dane's mood.

"Do you think me dim-witted? I saw her bruises, you bastard!"

"Bruises? On Raesa?" Delfior's eyes widened in panic. "Did something happen to Raesa?"

"Damn you and your games," Dane said. "Off your horse, now!"

"Dane, please tell me—"

He'd strapped his sword to his saddle so his ride was swift. Dane's drew it then. "Get off that horse before I cut you off, old man!"

Delfior cautiously slid from the saddle. Dane could see him trembling as he stood in the middle of the road. Somewhere in the darkness that clouded his mind, Dane saw Delfior clutching a short sword, but Dane knew he'd not had much training with weapons. Dane held his own sword in a white-knuckle grip as he dismounted. "Will you admit you've been abusing Raesa and agree to a divorce?"

"Abusing Raesa? Dane, of all the insane—I would never harm a woman, least of all my wife! Who on earth said—"

Dane's fist lashed out, and the crunch of bone brought him a great deal of satisfaction. Delfior tumbled to the ground with a cry laced with agony and fear. He sat in the dirt of the road and wept while he held his bleeding nose.

"What a pathetic excuse for a man you are," Dane said. "You lay hands on your wife but when faced with another man who is your better—" Dane shook his head. "Get up."

Delfior climbed shakily to his feet. "P-please, Dane," his words came out nasally. "Please tell me why you're doing this."

"I promised Raesa I would protect her from you." Dane lifted the sword. He didn't recognize his own reflection in the blade. It was a warped, twisted visage of himself.

"But I never touched her! Please, Dane, you have to believe me! I don't know why she told you—"

"Shut up! Shut your foul mouth!" Dane pointed the sword tip at Delfior's heart. "Will you allow her to leave? Will you never touch her again?"

"I didn't! I never—!"

Dane was moving in a fog that surrounded his body, choked off his brain and filled his vision. Delfior screamed. All he saw was the panic in Delfior's eyes and the flash of the sword blade as it came down.

Dane dispelled the illusion just then. Watching it now he felt empty. Devoid of all emotion concerning his crime. Perhaps because he had spent his time in the darkness. Perhaps because he *was* just a mindless beast.

"Gods," Vanlyn whispered.

"I was so filled with hatred for him because of Raesa," Dane said. "We fought and I disarmed him easily. Then he fled. I chased him and... I don't know what happened. I just knew I wanted to punish him for what he did to Raesa. I didn't even realize what I had done until they came for me."

There were at least two dozen men and women surrounding him as he stood there

over Brin's body, his sword still dripping with the man's lifeblood. They would have taken him away and meted out justice had not the authorities arrived on the scene.

"That man," Vanlyn said. "He reminds me of Magisteri Hale."

"He is—*was*—Hale's grandfather," Dane said. "We were related, but we'd been good friends all our lives."

Hale escorted Dane to the guard station and, with many apologies, placed Dane in one of the small holding cells. He didn't leave. He sat with Dane on the cot and asked Dane to tell him exactly what had happened. Dane did not meet Hale's eyes the whole time. He looked at his hands. There was dirt, but all Dane could see was blood.

Hale left him to go and speak with Raesa. Dane sat and stared, the scene of Brin's death playing itself out in his mind in graphic detail. Things became clear to him as he sat there. One of the younger guards brought him a tray with a bowl of chicken and dumplings and some ale, but Dane ignored it.

It seemed only a short time later that Hale returned. Dane didn't notice him standing there right away. When Dane raised his head and met Hale's gaze, the look in his friend's eyes told all.

"She played me for a fool, didn't she?"

Hale sighed. "It appears so." He entered the cell and sat down next to Dane again.

"Dane, I'm sorry. When I arrived, there was a man there."

Dane's hands fisted where they lay on his knees. His chest tightened, and he had to fight for each breath. To his shame, unshed tears burned beneath his closed lids. *No, I will not weep over a scheming whore!*

Hale went on to tell him how Raesa claimed that Dane was harassing her, coming by uninvited, trying to coerce her into having an affair. When she refused, Dane gave her the bruises. Raesa went on to tell Hale that the servants were witnesses to all of this. Hale spoke with some of them, and they corroborated Raesa's words, telling him how Raesa screamed for Dane not to hurt Delfior. Thinking to aid her mistress, the young maid summoned her brother, the local blacksmith, and he gathered friends and neighbors to pursue Dane.

Then of course, there was the young man who, in Hale's opinion, was an arrogant prick who loudly voiced his opinion on what punishment to enact on Dane and how he was there to offer comfort. This said while running his hand up and down Raesa's back who looked rather content for a woman newly widowed.

"I know you, Dane. I know you wouldn't kill anyone without provocation."

"I appreciate your trust."

"We're going to need more than that to prove your innocence," Hale said. "Very well. Here's what I'll do. First, I'll have the necromancer do a calling and see what information we can glean from Brin's wraith."

Dane flinched but nodded.

"I also want to have a look around Brin's manor," Hale said. "Our young widow may have left some trace of her treachery in letters and—"

His words to cut short by the sound of glass shattering which brought Hale swiftly to his feet. "What the hell?"

"Captain!" one of the guards cried out as the room filled with the sounds of screaming voices. The crowd came spilling into their line of vision, their faces twisted in rage as they wielded the crude weapons of farmers and laborers.

“Stop! Cease this insanity!” Hale exited the cell and tried to close the door behind him. Hands grabbed at him, pulling him into the midst of the tumult.

“No!” Dane cried. “Don’t hurt him! I’ll go with you, please!”

Two men Dane didn’t know dragged him from the cell and threw him to the mob. Caught up in the murderous wave, Dane could only let the tide push him where it may. His ears filled with their curses on him and dire oaths that he would pay. They dragged him out into the street, where the curious citizens made way and watched with eyes that went from interest to shock to loathing within the space of a few heartbeats.

Dane lost all sense of time and place. There was only the suffocating press of bodies with their stench of sour sweat. The buildings of the city gave way to an open meadow. The crowd continued until they reached a lone tree, an isolated sentinel on the flat expanse of grass. It was not difficult to guess their plans.

Someone brought a horse. They tied Dane’s wrists behind him. Dane felt his first stirrings of fear then, which he found strange. He knew from the beginning these people were going to kill him. He thought somewhere during this last walk that he had accepted his fate. Why was he fearful now?

He refused to struggle. Refused to show them how terrified he was. He was guilty. He faced his punishment even as his mind screamed for him to escape. He had the power. He could cast any number of illusions. He would have to leave Penryn forever, be a fugitive, never see his family again.

Then something happened that changed all of his plans.

An explosion of fire drew the crowd’s attention away. “Stop, damn you all!”

That voice! Oh gods, no!

His family. They were there. His father, brothers and sisters rode up to the edge of the crowd. Amalia had conjured the flame.

“Are you people insane? Release my son this instant!”

“He murdered Delfior Brin in cold blood!”

“He stalked Brin’s wife like a common rogue!”

“That’s preposterous, and you all know this!” His father moved his horse forward, “Now release him!”

“No!” The crowd surged forward, surrounding his family, swarming like ants over an injured prey.

“Drag them from their mounts!”

“Bring them to justice! Let them die with the murdering bastard!”

“*Oh, gods, please, no!*” In desperation, Dane gathered every dram of his power around him like a granite wall and then caused it to shatter, sending it streaming through the crowd in shimmering waves. He poured everything that he was into those final illusions.

He surrounded himself with an aura of malevolence. A putrid stench of rotting corpses that sent a shudder of revulsion through all those present. He was an ugly disgusting thing that deserved to die.

At the same time, he cloaked his family in an aura of warmth and protection. They were merely a soft breeze against the cheek, barely noticeable, something so common that the crowd no longer gave them a thought. Within the aura, Dane weaved special illusions for each of them.

He continued even as they lifted him onto the horse, even as the noose tightened

around his neck. Tears threatened, but he refused to let them fall. He had to work so his terrible grief would not taint the illusions surrounding his family.

Right before the end came, something moved just outside his line of vision. Dane turned his head slightly to the left and saw the lone figure standing away from the crowd. No one seemed to notice him. Even at that distance, Dane knew who he was.

Delfior Brin.

Dane didn't know why he could see the wraith. Perhaps because he was so close to death himself, the veils had opened, ready to accept him into their embrace. Dane expected the wraith to appear angry or triumphant that Dane was receiving his due.

Instead, Brin looked sad.

Though the man never spoke aloud, Dane heard his words. *I'm sorry, Dane. She betrayed us both.*

It was too much for Dane, and he lost all composure. He wept openly. *Please don't forgive me. Don't have pity on me. I don't deserve it!*

I do forgive you, Dane. I hope you find peace or redemption. Then the wraith that was Brin was gone.

The people, who were still caught in the dark illusion, never saw.

* * * *

He was weeping. Dane was glad Vanlyn couldn't see.

"Dane." Vanlyn's voice broke. "I'm so sorry."

Dane angrily wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. "Why?" His voice was sharper than he'd intended. "It was my stupidity—"

"Stop it." Vanlyn turned his body in the water until he straddled him. "You've punished yourself enough already. How long has it been, Dane? Delfior Brin forgave you. It's past time you forgave yourself."

Dane swallowed, his throat tight. "I don't think I can."

"You have to try," Vanlyn said. "You've realized your grievous error. You've lived in the darkness, and you did not deserve it." Vanlyn lay his hand on Dane's cheek. "If anything, it is Lady Brin that should have been punished."

Dane made a noise of disgust. "In a sense she was, although it was at a great cost."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, first I must tell you that Delfior Brin was quite the businessman. He was well liked and respected by all because he was fair and honest in his dealings. He learned these lessons from his father, passed down from his great-grandfather who started with nothing more than a cart filled with his wares. Because of this, his business was prosperous. When I returned to the living plane, I learned that Raesa and her paramour went through their savings with no regard.

"When their savings ran out, Raesa began to look to the business. You see, she had no experience in such matters and couldn't understand why she had to give money to vendors, laborers and the like. She merely wanted to enjoy the rewards of Delfior's efforts but did not want to share his bed, even though he treated her well and gave her everything."

Dane halted, as pity welled for Delfior and disgust surfaced for his wife. "The bitch didn't have to do what she did. I believe Delfior would have taken care of her even if she had divorced him. There were people that Delfior trusted to run the business, and they did

so, but of course, they couldn't make certain decisions without the approval of the owner. Raesa's lover convinced her to have him appointed as executor."

"Oh damn," Vanlyn said.

"Indeed." Dane shook his head. "Within six months, the business was gone. Most of the profit siphoned off by the lover and used to feed *his* appetites, which of course didn't include Raesa.

"The servants left because Raesa refused to pay them. The lover brought in associates of his own to replace them, all of whom proceeded to walk off with most of the possessions and certainly didn't find it necessary to coddle some spoiled noble woman.

"Eventually whatever remained was taken for her debts and taxes and the like." Dane didn't feel one dram of sympathy for Raesa when he'd heard she'd been thrown out into the street. "Her lover disappeared when the collectors came, and Raesa was left with nothing but the dressing gown she wore."

"I find myself unable to be sympathetic towards her." Vanlyn's words mirrored Dane's own thoughts.

"Her family refused her. She had disgraced them," Dane said. "True to his word, Hale continued with his investigation, and although he never found hard evidence of her crimes, it didn't take long for people to figure out that all was not as it seemed. Her family was embarrassed by the scandal that ensued.

"For awhile friends or relatives took her in, but her selfishness and vanity caused them to drive her away. Finally, the nobility turned their backs on her. She met her end at the hands of another lover, a disreputable sort who did not appreciate her being unfaithful to him."

"A fitting end," Vanlyn said.

"Yet, I only feel a small measure of justice served," Dane said. "She not only murdered Delfior but destroyed his good name and the business that was in his family for generations. If only she'd received her due without the harsh price."

Vanlyn didn't respond to that, and Dane figured he didn't know what to say. They were silent for a time before Dane said, "Van, thank you for being so understanding."

Vanlyn nuzzled his chin in Dane's hair. "You thought I would leave you?"

"I should have known better," Dane said.

"Yes, you should have." Vanlyn moved from behind him to straddle him again, he ran his hands over the glistening expanse of Dane's chest. "I see now. Why you wanted me to leave the barn."

"I was so afraid that you... that Ramsay and his group would... like with my family—"

"Hush." Vanlyn leaned in, and Dane bent forward to meet him for a kiss.

Dane wondered what he'd ever seen in Raesa or perhaps it was fate working his wiles on him. At any rate, it no longer mattered. He kissed Vanlyn, letting the younger man take control. It didn't take long for Vanlyn to pull him forward, to guide him to turn and kneel, his elbows resting on the rim of the pool.

Vanlyn trickled water on his opening, then he began to lick Dane with slow strokes that sent a shiver through him and caused his back to arch. Dane couldn't stop the whimper that emerged from his throat, something he seldom did, but with Vanlyn's warm, moist tongue on him, his resistance crumbled.

"I'll never leave you, love," Vanlyn said as he spread Dane's ass cheeks. The first

push of Vanlyn's sex against him made him grunt and push back against the bulbous tip. The initial burning passed quickly as always.

Vanlyn draped himself over Dane's back. "Do you love me? Do you want me?" Vanlyn began to move in that slow familiar rhythm, filling Dane, touching that place in him.

"Oh yes."

"Then say it, Dane. Say it."

"Fuck me," he said. "Please fuck me, Vanlyn."

Vanlyn drew away, his hands grasping Dane's hips, he shoved his cock into the man fully, drawing a cry from Dane's lips. His head lowered between his shoulders, his ass rose meeting the powerful thrusts, plunging deep, circling, pushing Dane's body against the side of the pool.

His own cock ached for his lover's touch, and Dane cried out, "Vanlyn, please!"

Vanlyn's hand gripped him, painfully hard, stroking almost violently. Blood pounded through his sex, and fire raced through his veins. Dane stretched his body like a languid cat, the static traveling up his spine, the change to his beast form developing as he approached climax.

Dane came, his body straightening away, his semen coming in hot spurts. Vanlyn took hold of his wings and rode him like a stallion until he joined him in completion.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Two weeks passed after the incident with Ramsay's nephew. Dane learned that Ramsay and his remaining nephew had left Penryn. No one knew where they had gone, not even the servants. Ramsay gave instructions that he would be away on a business trip and left his steward to see to things in his manor.

Marcelyn had delivered this news one evening after Dane and Vanlyn had finished training. Vanlyn had successfully joined with both Abel and Tassel, one of the horses, the bull and the pig, although after that Vanlyn raided the kitchen like a man starved.

They invited Hale to join them for dinner.

"I really wish I could tell you not to worry," Hale said. They were eating a rich dessert of pecan and fig pie. "But Ramsay was not silent about the supposed injustices done to him this time."

"What is the word?" Dane asked.

"Talk is he's gone to petition the king." Hale took a forkful of pie.

"Surely he knows how futile that would be," Vanlyn said.

"Indeed," Hale said. "Ramsay may find himself in a pest-ridden cell if he annoys the wrong person."

"He'll more than likely be dismissed outright, or they'll file his petition and it will promptly be forgotten." Dane cut a portion of his pie with his fork but didn't eat it immediately.

"You look pensive, my friend," Hale said.

Dane blew out a breath. "I would feel much better if I knew for certain what Ramsay was up to. I don't like him being on the mainland. Then again, if he lands at Toryn, there's a good chance he'll never make it to the capital."

"Yes." Hale nodded. "Your fiends occupy the southern end of the province?"

"That they do."

"And Ramsay doesn't know." Hale shook her head. "I wouldn't worry overmuch about him, Dane."

However, Dane did worry, despite Hale's reassurances. He just didn't know why. Ramsay was hardly a threat to anyone, but Dane still couldn't shake the feeling that his dear younger cousin would bring trouble to them in the future.

Dane didn't sleep that night. He mind ran with thoughts of the past weeks and what lay ahead for them. Dane stayed up, keeping the lamp low and being angry with himself for needing it at all.

In addition to their training, Vanlyn began to study books on negotiation and diplomacy. He'd received such instruction as a child but felt he'd needed to reacquaint himself with his lessons.

Vanlyn slept as Dane looked upon him, mentally tracing the ridges and valleys of his face. When morning came, a shaft of sunlight found its way to wash across his features. Vanlyn muttered a sleepy protest and turned on his side, facing Dane. Dane drew the sheets over him.

So much will happen to us soon, love. How I admire your courage.

Dane frowned at the soft knock on the bedroom door. He moved carefully from

Vanlyn's embrace. Again, Vanlyn muttered but didn't waken. Dane slipped his robe around his shoulders.

"Sir." Dawkins waited on the other side of the door. "Master Aurris is here. I have set him up in the dining room with coffee and breakfast will be ready soon."

"Thank you, Dawkins. Please tell Lahn I'll be right down."

Dane washed up as quickly and as quietly as he could and pulled on the trousers and shirt he wore the day before.

Lahn sat with his body turned slightly to the left. He had two envelopes in his hands, which he tapped on the tabletop in an impatient gesture. Lahn ignored the cup of coffee where it sat on the table. He stood and turned to face Dane when he walked in. "Good morning. I have much news."

"Please." Dane motioned to the chair. "Are you all right? You seem upset."

"I am," Lahn said. "A group of fiends, numbering over fifty, left with Baro."

Yet another complication. "I see."

"My apologies, although I was aware of some dissension, I had no idea there were so many on Baro's side. They've taken to attacking people on the roads, be they friend or foe. There seems to be no logic to their actions. I was unsure as to how you wanted to handle them. We could lock them up, but—"

"That would do no good," Dane mused. "Have they caused unrest amongst our people?"

"Yes," Lahn said. "They need to be made an example of."

"Agreed. Take as many as we can spare and hunt them down," Dane said. "We're too close to victory to have to deal with Baro and his stupidity. Give all who wish it a chance to return to our side. Incapacitate anyone who does not." It was the last thing Dane wanted to do, but there was no choice.

"We won't destroy them?"

"No," Dane sighed. "There may be others who are close to the ones who turned against us. We don't want to do anything to turn *them* away."

"Yes," Lahn said. "I'm sorry. I know these decisions are difficult for you. Know that you have my support."

"I do know." Dane managed a grateful smile. "Thank you, Lahn."

His fellow fiend returned the grin but quickly sobered. "I have been in contact with our man in Lady Dacien's entourage."

"Yes? Has she agreed to parlay?"

Lahn sighed and averted his eyes, something he normally wouldn't do. "There are conditions of course. The fiend in her entourage and I are to be held as guarantee. I of course must deliver the response, but once I return, I am to surrender myself into her custody."

"You mean you'll be held hostage." Dane's hand fisted. "No." He refused to allow his friend to take this risk. "How do we know she'll honor her word?"

"I've already agreed to it and so has Taren."

"The other fiend?"

"Taren Valryce. He trusts her. He has reason too. Besides, you know Lady Dacien and what type of woman she is," Lahn said. "I believe she will keep her word. Also, she wants proof of Vanlyn's presence here." Lahn opened one of the envelopes and drew out a sheath of blank papers. "Vanlyn is to send his proposal and to seal it with his ring. The

paper was bespelled by a Scribe so they'll be no doubt of their authenticity." He handed them to Dane. "And also, that favor you asked of me." Lahn handed him the second envelope. "Don't open that. It needs to go to Prince Vanlyn."

"All right." Dane nodded. "Can you tell me what you found?"

"Yes," Lahn said. "I hope this is what you wanted, my friend, for the information will undoubtedly affect both your lives."

* * * *

"Good morning, love," Dane smiled nervously as Vanlyn entered the library. He halted at the threshold. Something was obviously wrong.

Lahn Aurris abruptly came to his feet. "I'll be going now."

"All right. Take care, there's supposed to be a storm coming. Don't try to cross the river if it looks threatening."

"Very well." Lahn nodded to Vanlyn. "Highness."

"Would you close the door, Van?"

Vanlyn swallowed thickly, his throat uncomfortably dry. His hand shook as it grasped the knob. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, love. At least..." Dane sighed. He stood, and for the first time, Vanlyn noticed the envelope in his hand. "Do you remember that favor I asked of Lahn? The one I said I couldn't discuss with you quite yet?"

"Yes." Vanlyn couldn't put any strength to his voice.

"Well, he had some news for me." Dane flipped the envelope back and forth between his finger. "Or more accurately for you." Dane drew in a breath. "Why don't we go into the library."

Once they were comfortable on the couch where they'd had many conversations and confrontations before, Dane handed him the envelope. "When you told me what happened to your mother and sister, well, a few things didn't sit right with me as I'm sure they didn't with you."

Vanlyn nodded slowly. He moistened his suddenly dry lips.

"So I had Lahn investigate the incident," Dane said. "Since you had said they were attacked by fiends, I knew someone would know about the incident. As it turns out, the fiend in Lady Dacien's entourage was present when it happened."

"What are you telling me? One of the fiend's responsible for murdering my mother and sister—"

"No." Dane silenced him with that single word. "The fiends didn't murder your mother and sister."

Vanlyn's brow furrowed deeply, his mind trying to make sense of the words. "I don't... How do you know this?"

Dane nodded at the envelope. "Read it."

For the first time, Vanlyn truly looked at the envelope, addressed to him by only his first name and became aware of the light scent coming from it. A scent sparked a feeling of familiarity. A long ago memory cloaked in darkness.

His hands shaking, Vanlyn broke the unfamiliar seal and opened the envelope.

"Oh gods." The words were a moan, part agony, part joy as he saw the familiar rounded script. His heart leapt, and he was certain it would burst through his chest while in the same instant, utter shock froze every coherent thought. The scent wafted over him,

drawing images of a beautiful face into clarity in his mind.

“Vanlyn,” Dane said. “Do you want to... Do you need to be alone?”

Vanlyn couldn’t speak. His throat closed as the tremors raced through his body. He drew in a sharp breath as tears stung his eyes. “Oh gods,” he said again in a strangled voice. “N-no, please stay.”

Dane nodded once and sat back, letting his arm drape across the chair back, not quite touching Vanlyn but provided a feeling of nearness that Vanlyn appreciated.

Vanlyn knew it was impossible. He knew this must be a dream, but here was the proof right in his hands.

His sister was alive.

My Dearest Baby Brother,

Words cannot describe the joy I felt when I received the message that you were safely away from Toryn. How many days did I worry, and how many nights did I cry knowing I could not take you away from such misery.

Please let me explain why I have not contacted you for all of this time. I would not blame you if you never forgave me, but I hope you’ll find it in your heart to understand.

I am sure father told you that fiends killed us. That is as far away from the truth as a falsehood can be. As our coach made its way, a group of brigands attacked us. Our guards fought valiantly, but there were just too many of them. Mother was mortally wounded, and when I thought we would all perish, the man who is now my husband came to my rescue. Like your Dane, he is a fiend as well. Of course, I thought things had worsened until the fiends slaughtered the brigands.

There was a healer among them, but I am aggrieved to say he could not save Mother. The fiend comforted me as I cried. There was a necromancer among them. She did a calling on one of the brigands, and that is when I learned the awful truth. It was not a random attack. Argent employed the brigands.

“No.” Vanlyn ground the word between his teeth, the paper bent and crackled as his grip tightened. “The murdering dog!”

I have always suspected that Argent was jealous of us—of you, Mother and I—because of our power. I firmly believe he was also responsible for the attack on you.

“Attack on me?” Vanlyn muttered the words, more to himself. He caught his lower lip between his teeth as he tried to remember.

I truly don’t know what motivates him or what goes on in that disturbed mind of his. I am also uncertain if Father knew about this and everything else that Argent has done in his lifetime, although I am sure he would turn a blind eye as always.

When I learned what Argent had done, I knew I could never return to Toryn as long as he and Father were alive. I knew I could never ask you to join me without our both losing our lives. At one point, I even thought to have you abducted and brought to me, but I knew that would only draw them to us all the quicker, not to mention causing a rift in relations between Toryn and the province where I now reside.

Perhaps I was wrong not to take the risk leaving you to fend for yourself against Argent and Aelden. Perhaps I was too frightened. When I heard you were with Minister Tanderes, well, I didn’t know what to think at first, but my husband’s friend Taren told me of your plans to speak with Lady Dacien about negotiating peace with the fiends and that you were in love with Tanderes. My dear Vanlyn, you have made a wise choice in Lady Dacien. She is trustworthy and fair. And I am so happy that you have found

someone to love as well. You tell this Tanderes he'd better not mistreat you or he will answer to me.

Now, my love, I must ask that you do something that will undoubtedly tear your heart in two. I must ask that you destroy this letter after you read it. By fire would be the best way. I ask this because I know if Argent knew I was alive, well, I don't believe I need to tell you of the consequences. If all works well with your parley, perhaps we can meet again, and I will embrace you and never let you go, and we will talk for days.

If not then, know that I will always love you and think of you often. Please take care and be content.

*Love,
Eselda*

Vanlyn stared at those final words, not truly seeing. The tears that blurred his vision made a light tapping on the page as they fell, smudging the flowing script.

"Vanlyn." Dane turned his body to face him. He reached out tentatively.

Grief washed over him. Even though Eselda was alive, Vanlyn's heart did shatter at the knowledge that he would still never see her again, never be able to tell her how much he missed her, how much he loved her.

Argent.

No, he couldn't think of his brother right now. Not while his sister's words were still fresh in his mind. Not while he was in such turmoil, feeling pulled in different directions like wires stretched taut.

He made a noise like a defeated whimper. It was all he could manage. Dane seemed to understand as Vanlyn threw himself forward, his arms reaching and needing Dane's warmth, just needing him. When Dane embraced him, Vanlyn's arms pressed tight, and an agonized cry followed. It was a sound of complete loss, the keening one hears an animal make that has lost its mate.

Vanlyn wept, the bitter tears streaming down his face, dripping off his chin, his body heaving with the force of his grief. Why was he in such pain? He should be rejoicing that Eselda was alive.

But Vanlyn wanted more. He wanted to see her, to talk to her. She was no longer his sister. She was some unattainable treasure, just within his grasp but guarded by wards. The princess locked in a tower surrounded by a forest of thorns.

Dane's voice, shushing him softly, his hand caressing down the back of Vanlyn's head was the only thing keeping him from losing his sanity. When he finally had no more in him, when all of his sorrow was spent, he drew away from Dane, wiping roughly across his eyes with the back of his sleeve. "Please, I-I need some time alone."

"All right."

Vanlyn sat. He held the letter in his hands. It was crumpled and smeared, and to Vanlyn, it was the most valuable thing he owned. Nothing else mattered. It was a long time before he moved again.

* * * *

Dane needed to fly.

"I shouldn't have done it," Dane said. "I should have left well enough alone."

As always when he was troubled, a good flight helped clear his mind and gave him back his rationality. Dane flew low over the tree line, mindful of the angry clouds that

were gathering off shore. Mist coalesced on his wings and bare torso and wet his hair.

“Would he have been happier not knowing?” Vanlyn had not divulged the contents of the letter to him, but Lahn had told him enough that he knew that Argent was responsible for Princess Eselda’s supposed death.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, yet Dane continued on, skimming the treetops. The area in which he flew was one of many dense wooded copses that dotted his island. It was in these places that the bogies were known to roam.

Something caught his eye suddenly, just within his peripheral vision, a large shape loomed, coming straight for him. Dane folded his wings and dropped as the shape streaked through the space he’d just occupied.

Dane waited patiently as he back beat his wings. A light drizzle began to fall. “If he doesn’t hurry, I’m leaving.”

“Damn it all!” Lahn grumbled when he approached. “I almost got you that time.”

“Decided to stay, did you?”

“Look at those clouds.” Lahn nodded in the direction of the storm. “Only someone with a death wish would fly in that.” His brow creased in a puzzled frown. “Why are you out here? Why aren’t you with the prince?”

“He said he needed some time alone.” Dane sighed. “And I could ask the same thing of you.”

“Just contemplating,” Lahn said. “I may have agreed to be a hostage. That doesn’t mean I’m comfortable with the idea.”

Dane had a sense there were other things on his friend’s mind but decided not to pursue his suspicions. “I wonder if I’ve done the right thing.”

Lahn looked at him a second. “Let’s go down.”

The copse was cool and quiet, the air heavy with moisture. The sound of the thunder was reminiscent of the mutterings of a god turning over in his sleep.

“Yes, I think you did the right thing,” Lahn said. “He had a right to know.”

“You didn’t see him.” Dane turned and began walking, only half-aware of his destination. “He was devastated. I want to ask him what the letter said but—”

“I don’t think he’ll mind telling you.” Lahn had fallen into step beside him. “I don’t need to tell you how much he’ll need your support. He’s in for a rough time. You’re both fortunate to have each other.”

Lahn had looked away when he’d spoken those last few words. Dane wished his friend would tell him what was troubling him. “Lahn—”

“What is this place?” Dane wasn’t sure if Lahn was just trying to change the subject or if he was truly interested.

Their meandering had led them to a spot within the very center of the copse, and at that heart stood an old and gnarled tree, its trunk knotted and black with age, its branches thicker around than a man’s torso. A good portion of the root system was above ground, looking like the legs of a spider and giving one the impression that the ancient sentinel would walk away at any second.

“This place,” Dane said. “I’m not certain. I know it is where the bogies come. I think they use this tree to pass back and forth between worlds.”

“No jest?”

“That’s what I’m told.”

Lahn seemed to examine the tree for a moment. “You need to go back. Vanlyn’s

been alone too long, hasn't he?"

"And what about you?"

Lahn sighed. "I'll get a room at The Rare Blessing."

"Why not just stay at the manor?" Dane looked up at as the first drops found their way through the leafy canopy.

"I don't believe the two of you need me there," Lahn said.

"It's a big manor, Lahn. Just speak with Dawkins, and he'll see to things."

"Very well."

Dane ran a nervous hand through his hair. Lahn was not the only one contemplating. Yes, the future had been on Dane's mind quite a bit.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Vanlyn was in the same position he was when Dane had left him. As he slipped into the library, he closed and locked the door behind him.

Dane's steps were cautious as he approached. When he saw Vanlyn's face pale and haggard and how he held the letter in a white-knuckle grip, his heart ached.

Dane moved around the couch and resumed his place next to Vanlyn. The young man continued to stare at the sheath of papers before speaking. "She wants me to destroy this." Vanlyn's voice was an agonized whisper. "This is the only thing I have of her."

Dane moved closer. "May I?"

Vanlyn relinquished his grip on the letter. Dane's eyes skimmed over the words until the end where Eselda had asked her brother to destroy the letter. He had to admit it was probably a wise course of action.

"Love, I'm so sorry," Dane said. "I should never have—"

"No!" It was the most vehement emotion he'd seen from Vanlyn since he'd first opened the letter. "I-I'm glad you did it. I just can't... I can't..."

Can't destroy the only tangible proof that your sister is alive. The only little piece you have of her. Dane thought.

"Would you light a fire, please?" It was such a simple question. One that Dane knew twisted Vanlyn's world. Dane didn't know what else to say or do, so he obeyed, taking his time. When the flames filled the hearth, Dane moved aside and waited.

Vanlyn stood. It was one slow and painful movement, as though he were a much older man beaten down by life. He approached the fireplace and stared into the flames, their dance reflected in his eyes.

"Vanlyn wait." Dane reached out and grasped the wrist of the hand that held the letter.

Vanlyn paused, his eyes filled with questions.

"You don't have to do this," Dane said. "I can conceal the letter in illusion. Make it impossible to be read."

"No." Vanlyn's voice was soft. "Eselda asked me to promise. I won't break that vow, certainly not for my own selfish wants."

"You're not being selfish!" He was sorry he'd suggested it, but he couldn't stand to see Vanlyn so distraught.

Dane released him, and Vanlyn turned to the fireplace again.

The papers fluttered down like hapless butterflies unaware they were falling into a predator's trap. The beast rose up and engulfed them quickly, leaving nothing behind but ash and the lingering scent of Eselda's perfume.

Vanlyn made a strangled cry as he pressed a fist to his lips. Dane opened his arms to him, and Vanlyn fell against him. The tears that escaped from beneath his own closed lids surprised Dane.

* * * *

The thick curtains blocked out the wan light, cloaking the room in a false darkness.

The storm had hit the island in its fury and had raged and diminished for two days.

Vanlyn lay stretched out in his bedroom and tried to conjure an image of Eselda in his mind and found he couldn't. What he did discover was that every attempt came out disjointed. He could see her eyes, her smile, and her upturned nose but never did these images meld into a proper picture of her face.

Another face, however, came clear to his mind, and each time he saw that face, his anger waxed hotter.

Argent.

The bedroom door came open. Vanlyn turned his head to face it. Dane walked in carrying a tray. Vanlyn knew Dane worried about him. In the time since he'd burned Eselda's letter, his emotional state had fluctuated between depression and fury. Vanlyn had eaten little and said less, and he could tell by the dark bruises under Dane's eyes and the haggardness of his features that his lover was beside himself with worry. He hated distressing Dane this way, but try as he might, Vanlyn couldn't dredge up enough energy to resume his life.

"Vanlyn." Dane's voice was heavy with distress. "Please eat something."

The agony in Dane's voice gave him the reason to move. Vanlyn rolled over on his side and pushed himself up, letting his legs swing over the side of the bed.

"Here," Dane said as he held the tray out.

Vanlyn pressed his palms flat against the coverlet, then fisted them around the material. He didn't look at Dane when he spoke. "I need a favor from you."

"Anything." Dane set the tray in the floor and knelt before him, placing a hand on Vanlyn's knee.

"I need you to allow me to return to the mainland for a little while."

Dane frowned in confusion. "Why? I mean to say it's not to meet with Lady Dacien, is it? You haven't even—"

"It's not about that." Vanlyn tightened his hold. The anger that was smoldering just below the surface of his consciousness threatened to erupt in flames. He was trembling, and he couldn't stop. "I'm going to return to Toryn. I'm going to kill Argent and my father."

"Gods and fiends." Dane breathed the words. "Vanlyn, you can't mean that."

The silk bunched in his hands. "It's the only way Eselda will be safe. The only way any of us will be safe. It doesn't matter if I speak with Lady Dacien. Argent will still become High Lord one day. The people will suffer under his rule, and he'll undermine any effort we make. And must I take every step with caution? The moment he finds out I'm alive—"

The anger was molten metal flowing through his veins. "Eselda said he was responsible for the attack on me. I know it has something—*everything*—to do with that journey I took."

"Vanlyn—"

"Enough." Vanlyn pushed himself off the bed. Dane remained on his knees. Vanlyn could see the distress on his face. "I'm leaving." He had to do so now. If he looked at Dane any longer, he would lose his resolve, and this had to be done.

"You won't." Dane came to his feet and took him by the wrist. "Do you honestly believe I would allow this?"

"Let go of me!" Vanlyn tried to jerk his arm away; knowing even as he tried it was a

futile gesture.

“Stop it, do you hear me?” Dane said. “It’s suicide!”

“I don’t give a fuck!” Vanlyn spat out the crude word, and his hand swung around as though an unseen puppeteer controlled it. Dane moved, leaning back and to the right. At the same time, he jerked violently forward on his enclosed wrist.

“Damn you!” The wall holding his anger crumbled. Vanlyn realized even as it consumed him that it was not Dane preventing him from leaving. It was everything. The lies, deceit and the cruelty. He was furious with his father for allowing it, with his mother for leaving him, with his sister for not taking him away.

And at himself for allowing it to happen.

Even with everything Argent had done to him, he could have done something. So what if their father had found him out? It wouldn’t have changed things. It wouldn’t have mattered.

He struggled, trying to pull from Dane’s grip. The fiend flung him onto the bed like a rag doll and pinned him there.

“Get off!” Vanlyn thrashed madly beneath Dane’s weight as his lover held him painfully by both wrists.

“Stop this.” Dane pressed Vanlyn’s into the bed. “I’ll place the geas on you again if I have to.”

“You wouldn’t!” Vanlyn said on a sharp intake of breath, renewing his fighting.

Dane released his wrists. Grasping Vanlyn’s face between both hands, Dane forced his mouth against Vanlyn’s, sucking his lower lip deeply into his mouth before plunging his tongue inside Vanlyn’s.

The explosion of shock completely robbed Vanlyn of coherent thought, and for a few moments, Dane controlled the almost violent kiss, his tongue probing deep until Vanlyn came to his senses again.

Vanlyn grunted into Dane’s mouth, his hands clawed at Dane’s shoulders, digging deep into the fabric of Dane’s shirt. Dane did not yield to his efforts. Vanlyn tried to turn his face aside. Dane fisted his hands in Vanlyn’s hair forcing him to turn his head back.

“*Stop it.*” The words uttered into Dane’s mouth were a feral growl.

Dane bunched the folds of Vanlyn’s shirt and ripped it apart, his warm mouth finding Vanlyn’s nipple. He bit down hard, and Vanlyn’s cry of protest melted into a low moan. Dane suckled him, the fire burning him at Dane’s touch. Vanlyn’s head moved back and forth, his hands grasping Dane’s shirt as Dane had done to him but not to push him away.

Dane’s tongue traced patterns, and his teeth found tender flesh as the fiend continued his ministrations. All protest faded as Dane undid Vanlyn’s trousers.

“I can’t...” Vanlyn felt himself falling, his resolve crumbling as Dane lowered his mouth to his straining cock. His hips rose, forcing Dane deeper. The tip of Dane’s thumb found its way into Vanlyn’s entrance.

“Oh gods, Dane, please...” He felt the familiar tightening in his balls, the building of his climax. His long, low cry filled the room as he shot his load down Dane’s throat.

As his chest rose and fell, his breath filled his lungs deeply, and his cock throbbed with the beat of his heart. His body filled with the warm afterglow and, coupled with it, a spark of anger at Dane and at himself.

Dane pulled his own trousers completely off. Vanlyn neither moved nor responded as Dane worked both arms underneath him and positioned his body down the length of

the bed. The metal clink of Dane undoing Vanlyn's belt sounded through the room.

Dane was fully erect, the tip glistening with pre-cum as he crawled onto the bed. "I'm sorry," Dane said softly. He reached placed his hands on Vanlyn's thighs, opening him up. Vanlyn closed his eyes and accepted Dane inside of him.

* * * *

Dane couldn't sleep.

He listened to Vanlyn's gentle breathing, caressing his jaw as the younger man slept. *Damn it all, Dane, why did you do that?*

Because he couldn't think of anything else to do to keep Vanlyn from leaving. From going to an almost certain death.

Outside the storm had intensified. It was nothing compared to the storm in Dane's heart. Would Vanlyn hate him now? Or forgive his transgressions yet again?

"You're a selfish ass, Dane Tanderes," Dane muttered aloud.

"Why?"

Dane drew in a sharp breath. He hadn't realized Vanlyn was awake.

"Because I don't want you to ever leave me. No matter what you may be feeling."

Vanlyn was silent for a moment. "Is that why you..." He didn't finish.

Dane flinched. How could he explain?

He lifted one of Vanlyn's hands and traced the pattern of veins with his finger.

"Your hands are clean."

"Say again?"

Dane sighed. "I didn't want you to have blood on your hands." He lifted his own hand to stare at it. Even though there was nothing truly there, Dane could still see the stain of red. "It's still on mine. I can't ever wash it away. I didn't want you to have to feel this way even if it were Argent and Aelden."

"They deserve it."

"Yes," Dane agreed. "But I won't allow it to be by your hand. I'm sorry. Dearest Vanlyn, to me you are so innocent. I want to keep you that way forever. To protect you. I know how that sounds to you. Please understand, I'm not trying to rob you of your dignity."

When Vanlyn didn't respond immediately, Dane said, "I know how angry you are with me."

"Yes, I am angry."

Dane swallowed thickly. "Fair enough. I hope you'll forgive me."

"But I'm not angry with you, at least not as much as I suppose I should be," Vanlyn said. "I don't want to discuss it anymore."

"All right, love."

Dane held him until Vanlyn's breathing evened out, and he knew his lover slept again.

* * * *

Vanlyn started awake, his eyes wide. He looked up and didn't seem to know who Dane was at first.

"Are you all right?"

Coherence returned. Vanlyn sighed then bit his lower lip. “I had that dream about the coach ride.”

Dane encircled Vanlyn in his arms, pulling him closer. “I see.”

“Cast your spell now, Dane,” Vanlyn said. “I need to know.”

Dane opened his mouth to ask Vanlyn if he were certain but nodded once instead. “You already know what you need to do. Draw on your memories of that day.” Dane’s power heeded his call, gathering in a swirling cloud as though a piece of the storm had found its way inside, and at the same time, he manipulated the veils that enshrouded Vanlyn’s memories.

They revealed themselves easily to him, a bit too much so in Dane’s opinion. He had the impression that these memories were merely a distraction to the true darkness.

“I recall being in my room.” Dane knew Vanlyn was being drawn into the past and with the younger man so close to him, Dane felt his tremor of fear.

“I’m right here, sweetheart,” Dane said. He conjured an image of himself standing nearby, surrounding Vanlyn in a reassuring presence. Dane examined his environs. The room was definitely Vanlyn’s, the decor in keeping with his personality. There were, however, articles of clothing on every surface, some folded neatly and others in a haphazard pile.

A woman was in the room with him. She smiled with love and warmth at Vanlyn, her dark eyes alight with pride. She wore her hair in a tumble of silver-blonde curls down her shoulders, and unlike most princesses he knew, she was in a trouser suit and boots.

Vanlyn apparently had some very interesting roommates. On one of the tables, a light repast of cheese, fruit, bread and cookies had been set up and scurrying amongst the delicacies was a family of field mice. Dane had to chuckle as one of the smaller beasts attempted to carry off one of the massive cookies between its jaws.

Across the room on a perch was a handsome snowy owl. It amazed Dane that neither the owl nor the mice seemed to mind each other’s presence. Three cats lay curled up on the bed watching with the usual feigned disinterest inherent in their kind. Two ferrets poked their heads out of an open dresser drawer, and on a second perch, a monkey nibbled on a half of banana.

Dane turned his attention back to the human occupants of the room. “Your sister is indeed beautiful,” Dane said

“Thank you.” Dane did not miss the catch in Vanlyn’s voice.

“You seem to have a decent grasp of your power here.”

“I recall how I always had animals around me,” Vanlyn said. “I didn’t even have to call. They just came to me, until...”

“Easy, let me find those memories.”

“Yes,” Vanlyn said. “Once Mother and Eselda—I mean when I thought they were dead—all the animals disappeared, and I no longer recalled how to summon them.”

Without Vanlyn’s knowledge, Dane called on his other power, searching the darker veils of the past. Unlike a necromancer, who could actually manipulate the veils for their own uses such as calling the dead, Dane, in his role as an Illusionist, could only gather information from them. All things that happened in the living world were woven within their threads. He soon found the explanation. Argent had commanded the servants to take the animals outside and kill them. Instead, they released the wild ones into the woods and found homes for the domesticated ones. Still, the knowledge that Argent would have

innocent animals slain only made Dane despise the High Prince even more.

Dane turned his attention back to the scene before him. "You are preparing for your journey?"

"Yes, Eselda was giving me advice as she was wont to do." He spoke the words with affection. Apparently, Vanlyn appreciated his sister's opinion.

After a time, an older woman, a mature image of Eselda, entered. Dane knew this was High Lady Fianna. She handed Vanlyn a wrapped package. "A gift for you, my handsome man. Don't open it until you reach the city."

"They stole it from me," Vanlyn suddenly said.

Dane frowned. "Who did?"

Vanlyn's brow creased deeply. The scene was shrouded in midst before Dane found himself standing before a fortress of gray stone. A heavy iron door barred him from going farther. Dane knew behind the forbidding structure lay all of the answers.

"You have to allow me entrance, love," Dane said gently. He reached out and drew Vanlyn's unconscious self to him. "I'm here with you."

There was no reply at first. Then the sound of an ancient groaning, of hinges rusted and unused, turning with agonizing slowness. Light poured from beyond the door, filling the space around them, blinding them both.

Dane blinked and found himself sitting in a luxuriously appointed coach. Vanlyn sat beside him, a young man brimming with excitement at the start of what he hoped to be the grand adventure. Beside him, burying his face in the crook of Dane's shoulder, the older Vanlyn's breathing left his lungs in an erratic cadence.

"Tell me what's occurring," Dane said.

"Everything seemed well," the boy said. "I was excited to finally be going to the Academy. To be able to find a good use for my powers."

The coach bumped along and nothing seemed to be amiss. Vanlyn had a leather case on the seat next to him, and from this, he drew a book and began to read.

"I was so immersed in the book I didn't notice the coach slowing," Vanlyn said.

The boy looked up and frowned as the coach came to a stop.

"Driver?" he called. "What's going on?"

There was no response. He heard a thump that he knew instinctively was the driver jumping to the ground. A puzzled frown aging him, the boy moved to open the coach window. The driver was running for the woods.

"Oh gods," the boy muttered.

Dane realized what was occurring at the same moment. He cried out a warning to the boy, forgetting it was only a memory. Vanlyn almost succumbed to it before Dane seized control again. "Vanlyn?"

Hands reached in, calloused and scarred, dragging him from within. Smelly bodies surrounded him, draped in ragged homespun, armed with deadly weapons. One, a large piggish man who smiled at Vanlyn with green, rotted teeth drew a rusty knife from his belt.

"Oh, gods, what do you want?" Vanlyn cried. "My money is in the case."

"Vanlyn, remember I'm here," Dane said.

"We got a message for ya," the man said. "Let's go, little princeling."

"No!" Vanlyn pulled back from the hands that held him. One of the brigands cuffed him across the head before Dane had a chance to ease the pain Vanlyn experienced in his

mind.

“Vanlyn, you are in memory. You’re safe. Remember that!”

They were dragging him off the road, into the semi-darkness of the trees.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

They came to a clearing where they shoved Vanlyn to the ground.

“I told ya, ya little prick. We got a message for ya.”

The man drew his foot back. Dane grabbed onto Vanlyn, pulling him from within the scene. The booted foot smashed into the boy’s ribs. He screamed, and the tears began.

“No, please, what have I done?”

The men laughed. “Look at the little prick cry!”

“Where are your balls, little boy?”

The leader grinned. “His Highness Prince Argent wants ta make sure ya never cross him again. So maybe we just piss on you a little and get paid for it. How do you like that?”

Dane tightened his grip on Vanlyn and cloaked his eyes and his mind to the violence. The brigands hired by Argent had beaten and savaged the boy to near death. Dane’s fury exploded white hot in his soul and ran along his veins, feeding the flames. It took every ounce of restraint he possessed to say calmly, “I will see to this for you, love.”

Dane knew he should seek permission from Vanlyn before manipulating his memories, but he never wanted Vanlyn to have to suffer from them again. The boy who cried for help, who begged and pleaded for mercy, suddenly received it in the form of a strange man, coming to his aid, tearing the brigands asunder and leaving their bloody bodies for the carrion.

Dane delved deeper into the memories, always keeping Vanlyn aside as he did so. The brigands had placed him back in the coach and slapped the horse on its flank. Horse and coach thundered off into the twilight.

“Dane? Let me see,” Vanlyn whispered.

Reluctantly, Dane opened Vanlyn’s eyes and mind.

“I remember now,” he said. “When the coach finally stopped, it was near a farmstead a little ways from our manor. The farmer was afraid he’d be blamed for my condition so he drove the coach closer to the manor and tied it there.”

The memory came vividly now, of the coach door being opened, of light pouring in, and a gasp of surprise. The little boy reached out, silently pleading for help, the pain almost impossible for him to bear.

Dane worked the veils again. They took Vanlyn to his room. Eselda had come to care for him.

“She was all I knew for what seemed liked weeks,” Vanlyn said. “I could feel her power bringing me back from death.”

There were whispers from the servants. The High Lord was making no effort to find the brigands who had tortured his son. The High Lady was furious. The servants didn’t seem to realize that Vanlyn heard these whispers.

“I awoke one day to find a servant administering my medicine,” Vanlyn said. “Eselda did that every day.”

“Where’s Eselda?” Vanlyn asked, his voice hoarse.

The servant lowered her eyes and didn’t respond. When she finished, she left without a word.

"I asked everyone, and no one would talk to me," he said. "Finally, one of the elderly matrons requested I stop asking. They feared the master's ire."

When he was finally well enough, Vanlyn went searching for his sister and mother and found no evidence that they had even lived in the manor.

Finally, he approached his father.

"Where are Mother and Eselda?"

"What?" His father looked up from the piles of papers on his desk. "Oh, you're out of bed now?"

Dane's hands fisted at the unfeeling response. His anger waxed hotter. Beside him, he felt the tension coiling in Vanlyn's body.

"Where are Mother and Eselda?" Vanlyn asked again, his voice rising.

"Don't raise your voice to me, boy!"

"Answer me, damn it!"

His father came to his feet and slammed his palms flat on the desk. "You watch your tongue!"

"What did you do to them?"

"I didn't do anything, you stupid little man-child," Aelden rolled his eyes. "I suppose no one told you. They're gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone. Dead. Killed by fiends." His father resumed his seat, calm as though they were discussing the weather.

"Dead?" Vanlyn's whole world crumbled with those words. "How?"

"I had to send them away for their safety. Fiends attacked their coach. No one survived."

His body quaked. Vanlyn's throat tightened, and tears stung his eyes. "Where are they? Their memorial—"

"There was no memorial. We've no time for such things. The fiends have been advancing."

"You." Vanlyn's voice broke. "H-how c-could you—?"

Behind him, he heard a sound. Vanlyn turned.

Argent was standing in the doorway, his face twisted with a smirk, his eyes glittering with knowledge.

And Vanlyn understood.

"I knew," Vanlyn said. "I knew he'd had them killed. His face said as much. How could I have forgotten?"

The answer came, moments later when Vanlyn went for his brother, his rage erupting in an incoherent scream, but Vanlyn never reached Argent. Never without one of his bodyguards nearby, the man intervened. Vanlyn still weak from his injuries had succumbed to the blows. He lay there curled in a ball of pain, his eyes wide and unseeing.

"It was too much," Vanlyn said. "I didn't remember anything after that. Not the beating, not the knowledge that it was Argent's doing—nothing."

Something wet hit Dane's hands. Vanlyn was crying. "Damn you, Argent. I want to kill you for everything you've done but I can't. Oh Dear Lady..."

It was enough. Dane touched Vanlyn with his power, sending the younger man into sleep. He wove only good dreams for him where he was loved, happy and safe.

Dane dispelled his power and moved from Vanlyn's arms. Gently, he drew the

covers up and kissed him on the lips.

“I said I didn’t want blood on your hands,” Dane said, his rage barely contained. He recognized the electrical current traveling up and down his spine, knowing what it meant. “But it is deep on mine, red and cold, so it will make no difference if I spill blood again.”

Chapter Thirty

Dane wasn't aware of anything around him. His vision clouded by a red haze of fury, his muscles corded and hard with tension, his feet were, at first, silent on the floor. As he hastened his stride, he was partially aware of the scraping of claws on stone.

His skin stretched and pulsed in several places, each a sluggish heartbeat under his skin. His stride changed, from the purposeful gait of a man to the loping of something monstrous.

"Dane?"

He heard a voice calling a name that he almost didn't recognize.

"Dane, where are you going?"

The beast fluttered its wings, testing them in the confines of the hallway. It ached to be free, to claim the sky. To fall upon hapless prey and rend flesh in pieces.

To taste blood.

"Dane, stop!"

Something leapt upon his shoulders, bearing him down with its weight. The monster reacted, and it struggled, trying to throw the thing off. Wings beat the air, fanning the strength of sweat and blood lust.

"Dane, stop, do you hear me!"

Claws scored flesh, and animalistic grunts uttered from his throat. The weight remained on him until his strength began to ebb.

"That's it, my friend." The voice, familiar and soothing, finally penetrated the animal madness.

Dane breathed deeply in and out, and his chest ached with each motion. Slowly, the fire ebbed, until it was mere embers in his chest.

"Are you all right?"

A face came into focus, which looked at him with a mixture of anxiety and confusion.

"Lahn?" Dane had completely forgotten his friend was still in the manor.

"I'm going to release you now," Lahn said. "I have your word you won't transform?"

"Why would I..." The memories came flooding back of his anger along with the dark mission he had set for himself. "Oh gods and fiends, was I—"

"You were near your third stage." Lahn's voice held and accusation that made Dane cringe. "What did you think you were doing?"

Dane averted his eyes. "I was going to kill Argent and Aelden Sarn."

"By the gods, why?" Lahn said. Then he lifted an eyebrow. "It has something to do with Vanlyn, doesn't it?"

Dane lifted his head and nodded.

"I see," Lahn said. "And I take it, he doesn't know?"

"He's upstairs asleep," Dane said.

"Go and calm your ire," Lahn said. "I'll sit with Vanlyn and let him know you've gone if he wakes up."

"How do you know I won't leave the island?"

“You do realize that question would make one doubt your integrity.”

Dane snorted. “Very well.” He turned away, and his shoulders fell from the pressure of what he’d almost done. “Thank you. If you hadn’t stopped me...”

“Make no mention of it,” Lahn said.

* * * *

Lahn was waiting for him in the same place when he returned. Dane was dripping wet. The lull in the storm had ended quickly as he’d flown a short distance, the wind whistling past his ears, the air cool on his heated skin.

“Look at you,” Lahn said. “What a drenched and ragged mess you are.”

“Thank you,” Dane said, dryly. “Is Vanlyn—”

“He’s waiting for you in the kitchen.”

“Is he very angry?”

“A great deal, even more so than before,” Lahn said. “What have you been doing, Dane Tanderes? Not following my advice I see.”

Dane didn’t respond. He was not going to give Lahn the satisfaction of knowing he was right.

A tantalizing scent wafted from the kitchen. The glow of a warm fire beckoned, although Dane didn’t truly need it. Vanlyn was at the stove stirring a pot. It was an unusual sight, a prince at a domestic chore. Then Dane recalled Vanlyn saying something about him spending a lot of time with the servants before his father had put an end to it. *No, don’t think about Sarn or his son.*

“Vanlyn?”

He turned, and despite Lahn’s saying he was angry, the young prince smiled in welcome. “Welcome home. Why don’t you sit?”

Dane obeyed, seating himself on the stool at the cooking block. “Lahn said you were angry with me.”

Vanlyn sighed. “I am.”

Dane was suddenly very interested in his hands. “I’m sorry.” Damn it all, he was saying that a lot lately.

“You’re soaking wet,” Vanlyn said. “Here, I heated some soup for you and made some mulled wine.”

Dane watched, his heart filling with love as Vanlyn poured the soup and filled his cup with wine. Dane partook of the warm drink first, the taste of citrus and cinnamon filling his mouth. Vanlyn poured himself a cup and took a seat opposite Dane.

“So,” Vanlyn said. “It’s all well and good for you to go off in a rage and I cannot?”

“I spoke my reasons.”

“And what would I have done had you been killed?” Vanlyn said.

Dane looked at the dusky reflection of himself in the dark liquid. “Gods, Vanlyn, when I saw how much pain you were in, I wasn’t even thinking. I wanted to punish them for what they did to you.” His hands embraced the cup, the heat seeping into his skin. “I love you so much.”

Vanlyn slid from the stool and walked around the table. Dane turned towards him in his seat.

“I love you too.” Vanlyn loosely draped his arms around Dane’s shoulders and kissed him. “Will you give your word that you will not do such a thing again?”

“Yes,” Dane said. “Anything for you.”

* * * *

They spoke no more of killing, and for that, Dane was relieved. The storm passed with minimal damaged to the island. Dane and Lahn went into town to coordinate any clean-up efforts with the council, while Vanlyn remained at the manor, working on his proposal to Lady Dacien.

At times, Dane and Lahn would assist Vanlyn with his efforts, helping him find the right words to convince the High Lady of Gan that peace was a viable and perhaps their best option. The three, however, had no illusions that said efforts would be successful, and even if they were, it was obvious it would take time for them to reach an agreement.

When they weren't working on the proposal, Dane and Lahn continued Vanlyn's training. Vanlyn was becoming quite proficient with the staff and even managed to disarm the blond fiend a few times, much to Lahn's approval.

Finally, it was finished. Vanlyn and Dane signed the document, sealed it with Vanlyn's ring and entrusted it to Lahn for delivery.

“Please take care,” Dane told his friend, and he and Vanlyn saw him off. They secreted the letter in a special pocket of a leather harness that Dane had specially made to allow his friend to fly unencumbered. “If you run into any trouble, return here with all haste.”

“I will,” Lahn said.

“Make haste and take care,” Vanlyn said. “Good fortune to you.” The prince embraced him like a brother. There was shock at first on Lahn's face then his expression softened. “Thank you, Vanlyn.”

They stood and watched until Lahn was out of sight.

* * * *

Abel and Tassel bounded up to greet him as Vanlyn entered the barn. He stopped to speak with the horses for a bit, then looked down when he noticed Gypsy rubbing at his legs. The dogs were quite put out by her presence, but with Vanlyn there, they were forced to endure her company. Their ire amused Gypsy, and she took every opportunity to torment them further.

Vanlyn was now aware of every beast, bird, and crawling and flying insect around him, and they were completely aware of him. He had successfully joined with Gypsy, several of the mice, a few squirrels and some of the songbirds. The sensations and thoughts he experienced were unique to each one and yet there was an underlying sense of oneness, on a deeper level within the animals' minds.

There was a hornet's nest attached to the corner of the window at the loft. Vanlyn had reached an uneasy agreement with the dangerous insects. The old adage of “you don't bother them, they don't bother you” was in full play here.

Vanlyn checked on the mice nest in the corner of one of the stalls and the lizards he had set up in a glass case. Satisfied that everything was as it should be, he whistled to the dogs. Dane was waiting for him. Dane was having him practice with the two dogs firstly, but Dane planned a sojourn into the forest.

So far, Vanlyn had worked with mainly domesticated animals and those used to a

close human presence. Dane wanted him to attempt to call and then meld with the animals that roamed the forests of Penryn. There were, of course, the smaller denizens like rabbit, fox, and wildcat as well as the immense such as deer, bear, and to Vanlyn's surprise, Dane had told him there was a wolf pack living on the island. The thought of melding with a wolf both terrified and excited him. What would it be like to see through the eyes of such a feral and proud creature?

Vanlyn was eager to begin. So much so that he wasn't truly paying attention to his surroundings. He had become accustomed to the paths snaking around the manor, to everything else about his home, so he could have walked with his eyes closed, and felt his way.

The dogs continued in their play, but as they approached the kitchen door, both halted. Vanlyn was a few steps ahead before he noticed. He turned back, saw them stock still, their muscles bunched at the shoulders, their hackles rising. Low growls erupted in their throats.

"What is it?" He felt the pinpricks on the back of his neck. Through his connection with them, their distress became his.

There was a sound before him, like daggers scoring stone. His body clenched in a painful spasm as his mounting fear caused his heartbeat to quicken.

Vanlyn turned.

There on the low kitchen roof sat a bloated ugly monstrosity. Leathery wings stretched wide, they cast an ominous shadow before it. It washed over Vanlyn and caught him in a chill. Clawed hands grasped the edges of the gutter, as it balanced itself on its fleshy legs.

Vanlyn's mouth opened in a soundless scream, but all that emerged was a hoarse croak. He wanted to flee, to fall to his knees and plead for mercy, but his body seemed disconnected from him, refusing to follow his commands.

The thing grinned at him. There was recognition in its eyes. A surety that it had Vanlyn trapped. And Vanlyn knew this horror. He had seen him before in the forest of Ciarri while he'd feasted on horseflesh.

Baro.

And Baro knew when Vanlyn recognized him. His eyes flickered with smug satisfaction, but that was the fiend's only reaction.

Finally, it seemed to grow bored with the stalemate or perhaps it was trying to find a more comfortable spot to continue the game, but it shifted its weight suddenly.

That single action brought Vanlyn from his stupor, terror churning acid bile in his stomach to rise to his throat. The scream burst forth as Vanlyn propelled himself forward, the open door so achingly close, yet his legs felt mired in a bog. Safety seemed a world away.

Baro launched himself forward, his stench coming before him in a sickening and overpowering wave. Vanlyn raised his hands in a futile gesture to ward him off. The fiend crushed him to the gravel path, the force of the blow pushing their bodies several feet, the stones lodging deep and biting into his skin.

"Please, oh dear gods, no!" Vanlyn had barely the breath to whisper the urgent prayer as he lungs contracted painfully.

Abel and Tassel were circling the fiend, fangs bared. Vanlyn's heart dropped when the fiend turned his attention to them, while still keeping Vanlyn trapped.

“No, don’t! Stay away!” Vanlyn spoke urgently with power.

The dogs were beyond truly hearing them as instinct took hold in them. Abel was the first to attack, leaping at Baro’s left, and the fiend caught the dog by the throat. The meaty hand squeezed, and Abel whined in pain before his body went limp.

“You bastard!” Vanlyn cried. “How could you—”

“Shut yer mouth, you little mongrel!” Baro tossed Abel’s body aside like so much trash. Baro leaned in close, his fangs glistening. He ran a bloated tongue over cracked lips. “Yer a pretty one all right.” His fetid breath was hot on Vanlyn’s face as he turned it aside. His eyes focused on Tassel who was backing away from the scene. *Yes, go.*

“Don’t ya fret now. I’m not gonna eat your guts yet,” Baro said. “I’m gonna have a little fun with yer ass first. Since ya like fucking fiends so much.”

“No, I won’t let you.” A shudder of revulsion raced across his skin. His eyes squeezed painfully shut as Baro shifted his weight to straddle him.

The filthy black claws dug deep, sending knife wounds of agony through Vanlyn’s shoulders. He screamed again. There was no helping it.

“I said shut yer—”

The cry of rage cut off his next words. At the very edge of Vanlyn’s vision, he saw the beating of wings fanning the air then smelled the metallic scent of rage. Suddenly, the horrible weight was off him.

“Baro, you filthy son of a poxed whore!” Dane crouched in a fighting stance. His wings curled forward, surrounding his body where his muscles were taut. There was loathing in his eyes and on his face, all directed at his fellow fiend.

“There you are, you traitorous son of a bitch! Is this what you call helping your people?”

Dane launched himself forward with a powerful backbeat of his wings. The stronger and more agile of the two, he was the first to score a blow, his claws raking across Baro’s face. Baro recovered, slamming his body into Dane’s, knocking them both to the ground where they wrestled, their struggles kicking up stones and a cloud of stinging dust. Claws and teeth tore at flesh as their wings beat in a vicious dance. It was impossible to tell who had the upper hand, as one was intent on destroying the other. Their animalistic cries were the only language they spoke.

Vanlyn could not look away, totally entranced by the violent scene. His heart slamming in his chest, his limbs seemed caught in an odd paralysis.

“Prince Vanlyn!” It was Tae. She took him by the arm. “You’re hurt. Come inside! It’s not safe.”

Vanlyn wasn’t even aware of his injuries or of the blood that stained his shirt. “No, I have to, I can’t—Oh gods!”

Dawkins and the other bogies were there. They remained just outside the zone of battle, their bodies shifting between their human and supernatural forms. They circled ominously, claws and teeth ready to rend flesh at the first opportunity or the first sign that Baro prevailed. Vanlyn wanted to scream at them to do something, to stop Baro, but another part of him knew that their interference may very well give Baro the upper hand.

Tae was pulling him away. Despite her slight build, her otherworldly self made her much stronger than he was. Dane and Baro continued to fight, oblivious to those who watched.

Baro broke free of Dane’s hold, back beating, and as Dane came for him, the fiend

pursed his bloated lips and spat in Dane's face. His shock and slow reaction gave Baro the opening he needed. Dane somehow turned aside as Baro struck, scoring a line of ragged gashing across Dane shoulder. Dane slammed into the gravel, prone. Baro fell on him pinning him. His hands fisted in Dane's hair, jerking his head back and exposing Dane's throat.

"No, I won't let you!" Vanlyn somehow wrenched himself from Tae's hold, only the gods knew how, and lunged for Baro, but it wasn't truly him doing so.

He knew that his power was taking hold. Perhaps he'd asked for help long before, sending out his conscious self in a silent desperate cry.

And his call was headed.

A black cloud, lethal in his fury darkened the air around them and filled it with their thousand voices. Hornets. Their number was uncountable. With them came scores of their brethren—bees and wasps. Hosts of biting flies and stinging beetles of innumerable types joined the melee, the whole mixing until they created a single body.

And Vanlyn was within them all.

His thoughts became disjointed, splintering like glass through the thousands of conscious minds. He saw with each of their many eyes, ichor boiling with hatred.

You won't hurt him. I'll kill you first. We will kill you first!

Baro was involved in a mad dance, flailing about like a bloated rag doll. His cries muffled as the poisons swelled his face and tongue. Legions mottled his sickly pale skin, and his eyes and nose bled mucous.

Vanlyn was all around him, striking repeatedly, his consciousness spreading further, filling each tiny body until it was grains of sand spread before a great ocean.

"Vanlyn, stop! You're going too far!"

The voice so familiar was merely a whisper over the collective mind, over the angry buzz of his hive brothers. Vanlyn recognized nothing but them.

"Vanlyn, please come back!"

The bloated ugly thing was gone. Vanlyn sang in triumph, and his brothers mimicked the sound.

"Vanlyn, can you hear me? Leave them."

Vanlyn frowned. Leave his brothers? Why would he leave? Then a tiny spark of realization came to him. Something that was left of his humanity told him, no, it's not a hive. He was not many, he was one. Despair threatened to choke him. Caught up in the many, Vanlyn didn't know how to rejoin the fragments of his self. Another thing approached him. Ugly like the other. The hive turned. *Stay away.*

"Vanlyn, please!"

Yes, he had to try. Vanlyn imagined many threads, connected to the fragments of himself. He pulled on these threads, drawing the shattered pieces together, fitting them neatly like a puzzle. He was separate from the hive, not a part of them. Yes, yes, he was an individual. Vanlyn removed himself from the many.

He drew in a deep breath, as he returned to himself. The cloud of insects dispersed, satisfied their work was done. Vanlyn's stomach roiled, his balance suddenly off as a wave of dizziness and nausea claimed him. He stumbled, but Dane was there to catch him. "Oh love, I thought I was going to lose you."

Vanlyn couldn't speak. His mouth worked, but he suddenly didn't know how to use it. His eyes fell on Abel's body lying sprawled across the gravel, and he managed to

groan, "Abel..."

Vanlyn felt Tassel snuffling at his hand, confusion and distress in that single action. It filled Vanlyn's heart and brought tears to his eyes.

"Dawkins," Dane said.

"Yes, let get him inside." Dawkins said. "We will see to Abel, Vanlyn. He will receive the best of care."

Dane lifted him up in his arms. "It will come back to you love, it will. I promise."

Vanlyn nodded. He trusted Dane, although he wasn't quite sure what the words meant. Dane carried him into the manor. Vanlyn moved restlessly in his arms. No, he shouldn't be inside this man's dwelling. The hive. He needed to return. Vanlyn felt a deep sadness envelope him. What was this? Why did he feel this way?

Dane slid him across the bed then turned to the remaining bogies. "Look for Baro. If he's alive, destroy him."

"Yes, sir." Dawkins said.

Dane turned back to him. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry."

Vanlyn reached out a hand, and Dane gasped it. There were cuts and bruises all over Dane's body, some injuries deep and jagged, but the fiend seemed to pay no heed.

Dawkins came and began administering to him, although Vanlyn tried to motion with his head to see to Dane first. Vanlyn squeezed Dane's hand in desperation as he felt the world fading. The vitality from his joining drained away as the extent of his injuries made themselves known.

Something was very wrong. Vanlyn wanted to tell Dane there was no reason for Baro to have come to Penryn. Baro called Dane a traitor, and he seemed to know that Vanlyn was no longer Dane's prisoner. Coherent thought, human thought, returned and the questions were many. He looked up at Dane, his eyes pleading for answers, but Dane didn't seem to notice.

"Baro," Dane growled. "Gods damn it, Dawkins. What the hell was he doing here?"

* * * *

Dane sat, his frame stiff and aching in the comfortable chair, his hands steepled, resting against his lips. He watched and thought as Vanlyn slumbered.

I know what you were trying to tell me, love. I was more worried about you.

The bogies had tracked Baro as far as the shoreline and had lost the trail there. Seeing no further sign of him, they'd returned, but Dane sent Miranda and Rorie to warn Hale and alert the council. Dane doubted Baro would take refuge in the city where the mere sight of him would cause a panic.

Dawkins came into the room. He didn't speak and worked quietly and efficiently at changing Vanlyn's bandages and giving him more medicine. Dane barely knew he was there.

When he was alone again, Dane spoke aloud. "What did you do to Lahn, you son of a bitch?"

Baro and Lahn must have had a confrontation. Lahn was the only one who knew their true goals besides Lady Dacien and her entourage, and Dane highly doubted Lady Dacien would consort with the likes of Baro.

The thought came unbidden, and it caused Dane's heart to catch. In all likelihood, Lahn had been incapacitated or destroyed. Whether or not the treaty was in Lady

Dacien's hands was anyone's guess. He would have to find out for himself.

Which meant leaving his beloved here.

There was also the risk that Baro hadn't come to Penryn alone. There was the risk of another attack, but he didn't have a choice. He'd get there faster unencumbered anyway.

"I don't want to leave you, but I promise I won't be long," Dane muttered. Vanlyn did not hear his words. Dane wished he could leave now. Despite his exceptional night vision, he wasn't foolhardy enough to fly at night with Baro somewhere out there. He would leave as soon as it was light.

* * * *

Dane was in a light sleep, just on the verge of falling into deep slumber when a heavy thump brought him to full wakefulness. Not immediately sure where it came from, he was surprised to hear two more, heavy and muffled, as though from outside.

Something—he didn't know what—plummeted past the window. It was a large pale shape. There was the sound of impact on the ground below.

"Damn it!" Dane muttered, mindful of Vanlyn. He hesitated, not wanting to leave him alone but still, if it were Baro...

The door came open. "Sir, come outside quickly!" Dawkins said.

Vanlyn stirred and muttered in his sleep. His eyes opened, and he stretched, his head turning aside. "Dane? What's going on?"

"Stay here," Dane said curtly as he strode forward.

"No, wait."

Dane moved swiftly with Dawkins right behind him. Despite his advanced years, the elder bogie had no trouble keeping up. "Is it Baro?" Dane asked.

"No sir, Lahn Aurris. He's been hurt."

Dane quickened his pace. The two exited through the kitchen door.

Tae and Kellen stood a safe distance from the blond fiend, who was crouched in a warning stance near the same area where Dane had his fight with Baro. He was half-way into the third stage, his more draconian in appearance. There was no recognition in his eyes, just an animal madness that told Dane his injuries had become too much for him to bear.

"Lahn Aurris," Dane said. Lahn's head whipped around, and his blue eyes glittered dangerously. Lahn hissed a warning as Dane stepped forward.

"Lahn Aurris, hear me. Do not let the beast keep hold of you." Dane removed his shirt and began his own transformation. Lahn sniffed the air, which was the reaction Dane had hoped for. Perhaps the familiar scent of a brother would bring him closer to sanity.

Dane took another step forward. "You're safe, Lahn. No harm will come to you."

Lahn tilted his head in confusion, sniffed again, his face beginning to reshape to a semblance of a human form.

"Dear gods."

Dane turned sharply at the voice. "Vanlyn, stay back!"

Lahn's gaze was on the younger man now. Lahn lifted one hand, lowering his head at the same time and scrutinized this new threat, seeming to decide if attack was worth the effort. Dane knew he had to get Lahn's attention back on him.

"Lahn, look at me." It had the desired effect. Lahn watched Dane closely as he

continued to move forward, and with each step, Lahn's body changed. He was near complete when Dane reached him. Lahn looked up, his eyes finally clearing. "Dane..."

Dane lifted Lahn into his arms. "Dawkins."

"Yes, sir."

"Dane," Lahn said again. "Have to tell you..."

"Gods, what happened?" Vanlyn followed them inside.

"I don't know," Dane said. "And you should be in bed."

"Like the nether hells," Vanlyn said.

Dane carried Lahn to one of the guest rooms. Dawkins was already there with his healing poultices and supplies. Miranda brought in a pitcher and basin for water. Dane laid his friend across the bed and went to move aside so that Dawkins could work.

"Dane!" Lahn grasped painfully onto his wrist. On instinct, Dane tried to pull away but despite his injuries, Lahn held on. "I must tell you. You are in danger. You all are."

"We've already encountered Baro—"

"No," Lahn said, urgently. "Not Baro. High Lord Sarn."

At this, Vanlyn approached the bed. "What do you mean?"

Lahn moistened his lips, and his eyes squeezed shut for a brief moment, whether trying to deal with the pain or the news he had to impart Dane didn't know.

"Aelden Sarn," Lahn said. "He and Prince Argent are on their way here with their army."

Chapter Thirty-One

“How long?”

“I don’t know,” Lahn said. “I lost all track of time. I don’t even recall how I came to be here.”

“You were nearing your third stage,” Dane said.

“Was I?” Lahn covered his eyes with his hands. “My harness, where is it?”

“There.” Dane nodded to where Dawkins had laid the harness across a chair.

The presence of it seemed to calm him. “Thank the gods.”

“Lahn,” Dane bent over his friend, “let Dawkins see to you. There’s little we can do now. You’ll tell us all when you are stronger.”

Lahn managed a quick single nod as Dane stepped back.

When Dane turned to Vanlyn, he was surprised at how calm his lover looked. There was no fear or anxiety. Only a grim acceptance of what was occurring.

“So my father and brother are coming.” His voice was even. “Yes. We expected this. Penryn doesn’t have a true army, correct? Only a civilian militia?”

“Yes,” Dane said. “I’ll send for Hale and have her meet us here. Hopefully, we’ll have no use for them, and your father will be willing to talk first.”

“It’s doubtful.” Vanlyn said. “Since he is coming, he more than likely bowed to the pressure from the other lords and ladies. He’ll need to make a show of power.”

“We’ll need to keep watch at the harbor. It’s the only place they can land besides a stretch of beach on the eastern side, but that would be hazardous.”

“When my father and brother come, I will be there to confront them.”

“Love, are you certain?” His respect for the man increased tenfold

“Yes,” Vanlyn said with conviction. “It’s long past time I did so. And Dane, I can’t guarantee that I won’t kill them. If something happens—”

“I understand.” How he wished he could protect Vanlyn from this.

* * * *

It was well into the next evening when Lahn was strong enough to speak. Dawkins’ ministrations had done him well, and he was healing nicely, although he was still somewhat pale and haggard. Lahn accepted a bowl of chicken and dumplings and sipped on a glass of wine while he told his tale.

“Your proposal was delivered safely into Lady Dacien’s hands,” Lahn began with the first piece of good news they’d had in two days. Both Dane and Vanlyn couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. “I have her response there.” He nodded in the direction of the harness.

“However,” Lahn went on, “and this is partially my fault, as I was on my way back, I stopped in Ciarri to see how our people fared. I learned several of the rogues who went to Baro’s side wanted to return. Apparently, Baro isn’t much of a leader.” Lahn frowned.

“You said he was here? What happened?”

Dane gave a brief explanation of the events occurring with Baro. “We lost the trail at the shore. I’m hoping he was incapacitated.”

"After all that, he most likely is." Lahn nodded to Vanlyn. "Excellent piece of work there, Highness. Baro had it coming."

Vanlyn blushed. "Thank you."

"Baro knew of our plans," Dane said. "I thought he'd... that you..."

"No," Lahn shook his head. "But your concern is appreciated. Baro didn't truly know of our plans. His information came from another source. That man, Taddeus Ramsay."

"Ramsay?" Dane leaned forward in his chair, his hands clutching the armrests. "How the hell did Baro and Ramsay—"

Lahn held his hand up, halting Dane's tirade. "From what I was told and witnessed, Ramsay went to Toryn to look for someone who was willing to kill you."

"Damn it." Dane thumped his fist on the rest and leaned into the back. He rubbed the back of his neck while the tension built there.

"Apparently," Lahn went on, "while he and that nephew of his were traveling, they ran afoul of Baro's group. That Ramsay must be quite the talker for he managed to convince Baro not to kill him outright."

Lahn took a fortifying sip of wine. "They were witnessed in Baro's forest encampment speaking of the terms. Ramsay presented Baro with enough gold to buy his own army and told Baro of everything that was transpiring here. Baro agreed to do it."

"Damn Ramsay," Dane muttered. "I swear I'll kill him if he ever sets foot on Penryn again."

"You needn't bother," Lahn said. "Baro beat you to it."

This made Dane sit up in his chair. Vanlyn gasped, and the two exchanged a look before turning their attention back to Lahn.

"Why?" Dane had to know although he wasn't quite sure *why*.

"According to my sources," Lahn said, "after Baro agreed to kill you, he said to Ramsay, something to the effect of, 'So I'm gonna kill that bastard Dane for you, but I'm gonna kill you first.'"

"Ramsay practically shit himself begging for his life. He offered Baro more gold, land, women, but Baro just shook his head and said, 'Nope. I can get all that myself. Wanna know why I'm gonna kill you? 'Cause, even though Dane's a traitorous son of a whore, he's still a fellow fiend, and ain't no mortal scum gonna kill one of my own.'"

Dane released a breath and leaned back again. "Poor bastard."

"His nephew managed to escape," Lahn said. "Just left his uncle there to his fate. My mistake was hesitating and not following Baro immediately. I followed the nephew for a bit to see if he'd get away. I figured Baro would go after him, but he didn't. While I was on my way back to Baro's encampment, I was set upon by a group of his own."

Lahn managed a grin. "You'll be happy to know I did a lot more damage to them than they did to me. Most were new to their power."

"Not surprising." Dane returned the grin.

Lahn sobered suddenly. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop Baro."

"Stop it," Dane said. "I'm just glad you're safe. Besides, Baro was alone as far as we know so it looks like none of his people were able to assist him thanks to you."

"It was probably more his greed that kept him obtaining assistance," Lahn ducked his head, a slight flush on his cheeks. "My last coherent thought was to get to Penryn to warn you. Apparently, I succeeded."

“But how did my father...” Vanlyn began. “It was Ramsay’s nephew. He must have made his way Ordyni.”

“That is my assumption,” Lahn said. “I heard the news when I briefly regained consciousness. A farmer and his wife had found me in the woods and took me in. I heard them speaking of Aelden’s army being on the march.

“I stole away from the farm and sought out some of our contacts and confirmed this. I supposed my injuries were more dire than I thought for I remember being in great pain before blacking out.”

Lahn set the tray aside, the bowl and cup empty. “That was very good. My compliments to Dawkins.”

Dane could see Lahn was exhausted after telling his tale. “Rest now, my friend.” Dane rose from his chair and approached the bed. “You’ll need your strength.”

Lahn muttered something incoherent, already succumbing to the pull of sleep. Dane lifted the tray and turned, motioning with his head for Vanlyn to follow him. The young man grabbed up the harness in mid-stride.

Once outside the room, Vanlyn asked, “He’ll be all right, won’t he?”

“Yes, he just needs rest,” Dane said. “His injuries could have been much worse. He merely aggravated things by flying here.” The two continued down the hall. “I know I should have greater sympathy for Ramsay...”

“I understand.” Vanlyn leaned over the tray, his lips brushing gently over his. The action brought a deep ache to his heart. He missed touching Vanlyn, kissing him. They’d not been intimate since that time in the baths, and he did not count that time when he was trying to convince Vanlyn not to leave the island. Dane swore when this was over he was going to keep Vanlyn in bed for weeks.

* * * *

Marcelyn Hale was waiting for them in the study. The rest of the council members and Dane’s nephew, Rhys, soon joined them. Dane told them all what happened to Ramsay, and although there was a measure of pity, there was very little sympathy.

He read Lady Dacien’s letter to them all. She had agreed to a meeting in Gan which, of course, gave her an advantage if Vanlyn attempted treachery. She gave specifics on the number of people allowed in Vanlyn’s entourage and other conditions for the meeting such as the time, place and the order of discussion for the matters at hand.

Dane was not pleased with the myriad of conditions Lady Dacien demanded, but Vanlyn said he would acquiesce to prove that he was truly willing to negotiate, but he added he would not kowtow to her. There were things that Vanlyn wanted accomplished, and if Lady Dacien couldn’t come to a mutual agreement with him then, as Vanlyn said, “I’ll damn well find someone who will.”

Dane’s heart had swelled with pride.

There was much discussion as to how they would deliver their response to Lady Dacien. Lahn was still too weak to do any flying. Hale surmised that Lady Dacien would in all likelihood accompany Aelden, if not bring her own army altogether.

They finally decided that if Lady Dacien were not present with the army, Lahn, who would be strong enough by then, would make the journey.

It seemed once Vanlyn’s memories were unlocked, animals gathered to him as in the past. Dane hadn’t done much sleeping since Lahn’s arrival but when he did, he found

himself having to extricate various furry woodland creatures from their bedroom.

With so much preparation, they were often too preoccupied or exhausted to consider intimacy. Gone were the days when Dane and Vanlyn could leisurely enjoy each other's passion and bodies. They missed those times with a tangible ache.

Lookouts patrolled the coast, the militia was at the ready, and the citizens, duly alerted, were aware of evacuation procedures. Dane expected some to flee the island and nearly wept when no one did, although some sent their children to stay with relatives on the mainland. Marcelyn succinctly told him, "This is our home. You know many of us are related by blood or have found refuge. We will not give that up easily."

Other fiends joined them on the island, aware of the advance of Aelden's army and provided valuable information. Some volunteered to carry Lahn's message if he still wasn't able.

At night, Dane stayed awake, watching Vanlyn at slumber, knowing what they would both soon face, and during the day, he joined his people in watching and waiting.

The waiting soon ended.

* * * *

"They're coming." The young fiend, one of Baro's former allies, made the grim announcement.

Dane looked up at him. "How many ships?" The council was with him, as well as Lahn and Rhys. They made a ragged base of operations in the Rare Blessing, empty now, since the innkeeper had closed down after sending his children away. They used Dane's private room where, across the table, they had laid a map of the two countries and Penryn, showing the evacuation routes and the placement of their troops.

Vanlyn was by his side of course, and every so often, his young lover would give him a smile of reassurance. Dane was grateful for his presence. Two ferrets were on his shoulders and there were mice tangled in his hair. The scene could be either amusing or peculiar, depending on how one looked at it.

"I counted five," the fiend said. "We saw them from afar, and I flew closer to investigate."

Dane had ordered boats to patrol Walk's River, watching for High Lord Sarn's ships. "Have our militia take their positions. Begin the evacuation of the businesses and homes nearest to the harbor. Have the rest prepare in case..." Dane could barely speak the words. Instead, he straightened, firmed his resolve and said, "I will fly out to meet them."

That brought on the inevitable protests, the most vehement from Vanlyn, which Dane silenced. "We need to know if Sarn is willing to talk. I want to know this before he reaches our shores. Hopefully, he'll have enough honor not to shoot down a lone fiend in the sky."

"And what of Argent?" Vanlyn said. "Even if my father displays some honor, which we both know is an impossibility, he'll turn a blind eye to Argent's doings."

Lahn spoke up. "I think we would all rather have someone watching your back. I'll come with you."

"No."

"And why not?" Lahn asked.

"You're not strong enough yet, for one."

Lahn slammed his fist on the tabletop, and the wood cracked and splintered. "You

were saying?”

Dane grunted. To be honest, he did want Lahn with him. “Very well.”

The group walked outside. The sky was overcast, a dull gray. It made things once colorful and vibrant looked devoid of life.

“If Sarn’s ships come into sight, and we haven’t returned, assume we failed and continue with our plans,” Dane told Hale. He tried not to look at Vanlyn, whose distress was a tangible presence. He wanted to tell Hale to get Vanlyn as far away as possible, but he knew Vanlyn would never comply.

He turned to Vanlyn then. They had agreed that he would acquiesce to Hale in Dane’s absence despite Vanlyn’s rank.

“Please take care,” Vanlyn said. “I don’t—”

Dane fisted his hand in Vanlyn’s hair and pulled him forward. The kiss was possessive, Dane taking control and letting Vanlyn know as his tongue invaded that he belonged to him. It took every bit of strength he could rally to cease.

Lahn had respectfully turned away when Dane kissed Vanlyn. There was a look of sadness in his eyes. If they made it back, Dane decided he would sit down with his friend and have a talk with him.

They took to the sky. They flew at an easy pace, not wanting to sap all their strength. Still the buildings rushed past them below. Even then, Dane felt the thrill of flying, coupled with the anxiety of what lay ahead.

The harbor and the blue-green expanse of Walk’s River came into view. Dane dropped slightly, to make certain the patrol boats saw them. Lahn followed suit.

It wasn’t long before they saw the ships, or so it seemed to Dane. They didn’t approach immediately, choosing to circle until they were certain no attack was forthcoming. There was activity on all the decks, but a group gathered at the bow of what Dane knew to be the lead ship as it flew Sarn’s banner.

“Stay behind me,” he called to Lahn as he descended.

When Dane alighted on the forecastle, no one approached immediately, although there were several of Sarn’s armed bodyguards, and archers had taken positions where any one of them had a chance at Dane. The Minister of Penryn ignored them all. His eyes scanned the group gathered. The High Lord Sarn and Argent stood at the forefront of course. How else to prove their courage? Dane let his gaze linger on Argent until the man visibly squirmed. High Lord Maxus was there, as well as Lady Dacien. With a movement in the group, Dane also caught a glimpse of Ramsay’s nephew. At first glance, the man’s eyes burned with fury, then guilt before he stepped behind one of the guards.

Dane started forward. All eyes followed his progress. Dane glanced at Lady Dacien, careful not to linger on her too long lest Aelden or Argent suspect something was amiss. Dane was mildly surprised when her lips upturned slightly, and she gave him a barely visible nod.

Dane halted to stand before Sarn. Lahn was a few steps behind him. Dane did not bow or extend a greeting. Sarn waited until it became clear that Dane was not going to give him the courtesy he was due. Sarn’s face heated, and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Filthy beast,” Sarn said. “Where is my son?”

Dane ignored the insult. “On Penryn, waiting for you. He wishes to speak with you to begin negotiations—”

“Bah,” Sarn cut off Dane’s words with a dismissive wave. “We do not negotiate with

mindless animals.”

“Mindless animals?” Dane said. “Yet, I stand before you in exchange? My people have taken much of your land. Your own son wants to parlay with us.”

“I’m certain he does.” Argent spoke for the first time. “So tell me, did you enjoy fucking my brother?”

Dane had already steeled himself for any insults from Argent and let nothing show in his face. Completely ignoring Sarn’s eldest son, Dane continued. “Will you speak with your son as a prince of the realm and help him bring an end to this conflict?”

“I came here to bring my son home and to punish you for treason.” Sarn said. “I know of your plans to seduce him to destroy me. I will burn that island of yours down to the last hovel. Nothing will stand. I will subjugate your people, and any resistance will result in execution.”

“So it is genocide you plan,” Dane said, his voice cold as the beast stirred in his anger. “You say this before the others lords and ladies. Do you condone this course of action?” Dane let his eyes travel over the others.

“I do not,” Lady Dacien said. Dane was very aware of how she spoke for only herself. “It that is the course of action you plan to take, Sarn, then I will have no part of it, and I will bear witness against you and see you punished.”

“As will I,” Maxus chimed in.

Uncertainty flashed within Sarn’s eyes. He wasn’t so foolish to commit such an atrocity in front of so many witnesses. Dane let his gaze wander farther and saw Sarn’s own men looking at him with disgust and shock.

“I will spare your people,” Sarn said. “But you will pay for your treason, Tanderes. Surrender yourself to me.”

“I will not,” Dane said.

“What makes you believe you’ll get off this ship alive?” Argent challenged.

Dane again ignored him. “I will await you on Penryn. If you wish to negotiate, we will meet with you. If not, we will defend our homes and our freedom.”

“If it is your wish to die, then I will oblige you!” Sarn said.

Dane turned away.

“Tanderes!” Argent called. “I’m going to kill your little whore.”

Dane halted.

“I’m going to subject him to such tortures that he’ll scream to me for mercy and then I’ll cut the traitorous little slut’s throat,” Argent said. “It’s what he deserves!”

Dane turned back to face Argent, allowing the beast to further stir. His face was reshaping itself, his muscles bunched and corded. “Prince Argent,” Dane spoke each word in a deadly whisper, but still everyone heard. “Did you just admit to plans of assassinating your brother? In front of witnesses?”

Argent straightened, his jaw set, attempting defiance and failing. His face flushed, and after a few moments, he averted his eyes. Dane turned his back on the prince and nodded to Lahn.

As the two took flight from the forecastle, Lahn slightly ahead of him, Dane heard a commotion behind them then a voice crying out, “Tanderes!”

Dane twisted his body around to find that Argent now stood on the forecastle, a crossbow in his grasp. He let the bolt fly.

“Lahn!” Dane knew if he moved the bolt would strike Lahn in the back. He couldn’t

allow that to happen, Dane pushed back and to the left. The bolt tore through his wing, barely missing Lahn.

Dane growled in pain, but managed to keep himself aloft. Lahn was at his side. On deck, Dane saw Lady Dacien wrestle the crossbow from Argent's grasp. Several of her soldiers surrounded him.

"Dane!" Lahn said.

"I'm fine," Dane said. "Let's return."

"Thank you," Lahn said.

Dane managed a grin, which quickly faded. His calm resolve hid his disturbance at what was to come, but Argent's words concerning Vanlyn disturbed him more. "It appears we've obtained our answer."

* * * *

Of course, Vanlyn was there when he alighted on the dock as Lahn supported him. He rushed forward, one hand reaching out tentatively for the rip in his wing.

"It's nothing," Dane said.

"Do not say it is nothing," Vanlyn said, chastising him as he took Lahn's place supporting him.

The others stood anxiously nearby. Dane didn't see any reason to delay the news, but he spoke only to Vanlyn, "I'm sorry, love, your father, High Lord Sarn, refused to parlay." Again, Argent's words came to him, and Dane feared for Vanlyn's safety.

"I see." The sadness in Vanlyn's voice made Dane's heart ache. Many emotions played across the young man's face. Dane knew Vanlyn worried for his people but was also hurt by his father's dismissal. Despite everything Sarn had done to him, there was still a part of Vanlyn that craved Sarn's approval.

"Then we shall fight," Vanlyn said.

"Yes." Dane knew he would fight, but he had other plans for Vanlyn.

Returning to the Rare Blessing, they deposited Dane in the dining room, and Vanlyn left him, returning after a time with food and bandages for his wound.

Dane watched his love for a time. Vanlyn took his time bandaging Dane's wound and then served up the seafood dumplings. Perhaps it was to prolong his time with Dane, perhaps because he just needed to do something mundane.

"How long before he arrives?" Vanlyn asked.

"Within the next half hour, possibly less."

"And was Argent there?"

"He was. He was the one who shot the arrow."

"Not surprising." Vanlyn set the plate down on the table before him.

Dane looked at the food. He didn't want it. "Come here, Vanlyn."

"What is it? Don't you want the food?" Vanlyn approached.

Dane reached out and grasped Vanlyn's wrist, pulling him down onto his lap. Dane's other hand supported him underneath the small of his back while he formed a sort of cradle with his arm. It was an awkward position for Vanlyn to be in, his long lean body barely fitting, but Dane held him there with little effort.

"Dane," Vanlyn murmured.

"Hush." Dane began stroking him through his pants.

Vanlyn moaned. "Dane what are you—"

Dane smothered Vanlyn's protest by covering Vanlyn's mouth with his. He opened up to Dane, unresisting. Dane applied greater pressure, increasing the speed of his stroking. Vanlyn, continued to mutter protests into his mouth, but continued to allow Dane's touch.

Dane was painfully hard himself and ached to take Vanlyn, but that was not the purpose of this brief seduction. Dane had other plans for the man he loved.

When Vanlyn's final cries came, and his hips awkwardly moved with his climax, Dane pulled away, drinking in the sated and drowsy expression, the flush across his cheeks and the kiss-swollen lips.

"Dane," Vanlyn whispered.

"Yes, love, speak my name. Let me hear it one last time."

"What?" Dane's words drew Vanlyn out of his haze. "Dane, no—"

Dane silenced his cry with a hand over Vanlyn's mouth, the invocation leaving his lips. Vanlyn struggled briefly, and his eyes pleaded with Dane, filled with the knowledge of Dane's betrayal.

"I'm sorry, love." Dane pulled him close, nuzzling Vanlyn's temple with his lips. "But I made a vow to do anything to keep you safe."

Chapter Thirty-Two

As Vanlyn came awake, his head throbbed a painful rhythm, and his stomach roiled uncomfortably. Shapes and colors that melded into a surreal picture slowly came into focus.

He recognized his bedroom at the manor immediately, but how by the gods had he gotten here? Vanlyn lay still, willing his head to stop aching. When he tried to rise, dizziness swept over him. Had he not known better, he would have sworn he'd sampled too much of the Tanderes' family wine.

The last thing he remembered was Dane kissing and stroking him then he remembered the static racing across his flesh as Dane had cast the spell. It had taken Vanlyn only a moment to realize what type of spell it was, and it was a moment too late.

"Damn you, Tanderes." Vanlyn reached out and grasped the canopy support, pulling himself up. "Where are you?" And, as though his words had called the man up, the door opened, and Dane stepped into the room.

"Vanlyn." Dane strode towards him, but Vanlyn stepped away, nearly falling over his own feet. Dane reached out to steady him.

"Don't touch me." Vanlyn's voice was petulant, but despite his anger, he didn't fight as Dane pulled him close.

"It will be a moment before the dizziness clears."

"What did you do to me?" Vanlyn muttered against Dane's shirt.

"I'm sorry," Dane said. "But I had to be certain you were safe. It seems we have been deceived. Sarn has employed a necromancer."

"What?" Vanlyn pulled back, the air leaving his lungs in a painful rush. "That can't be true! My father would never—"

"Apparently he has." There was something in Dane's voice, an emptiness Vanlyn had not heard in a long time. "More than likely it was at Argent's goading. I know the necromancer. He should be dead or at least too old to move, but he looks as young as he did when I was alive."

"Dark magic," Vanlyn said.

"They don't know who their dealing with." Dane seemed to be talking more to himself. "Neither of them will be able to keep him under control for long, and after the threat Argent made against you—"

"Threat?" Vanlyn said. "You think I still fear Argent? Is that what this is about? You're protecting me from him?"

"No," Dane said. "What he'll do. What he'll cause the necromancer to do. It's a moot point anyway. The battle is at an end."

Vanlyn stepped free from Dane's embrace, and his blood turned to ice. "What happened?"

"When Argent's forces landed, Mallan revealed his presence." Vanlyn assumed Mallan was the necromancer. "We barely had enough time to get away. He nearly decimated our forces. His spells stole the life from our people." Vanlyn saw the tears in his eyes. "He killed Daelynn right in front of me."

Oh, no, Dane, I'm sorry," Vanlyn had liked the young necromancer who had been

sympathetic to Dane's grief.

"I managed to call enough power to cover our escape. Our people have hidden themselves in various safe places across the island. Sarn's forces are camped outside Synnove. They await my surrender."

"No! Dane, you can't!"

"It's already been agreed upon." Dane was no longer looking at him but at something very far away. "Sarn gave his word that our people would be harmed no further if I allowed myself to be taken to the capital for trial and have the king decide on the fate of Penryn."

"Dane, you know my father's word means nothing. And Argent?" Vanlyn laughed in derision. "You know you'll never make it to the capital."

"I have to try. I'm not strong enough to beat Mallan yet." Dane said. "I've ordered Dawkins to spirit you away to their world if necessary. Your father's troops have already been here, but I cloaked you well. Even Mallan couldn't see you unless he did a calling and summoned a spirit to search through the veils for you."

"I'll not be put aside like some helpless maiden, Tanderes."

Dane released a breath. "I'm sorry," he said again. "Good bye, Vanlyn, know that I'll always love you." He turned to go.

"Dane, no!" Vanlyn lunged forward to grab him as the older man called an invocation. Threads flared into existence, shining with an eerie pale light. Vanlyn knew them for what they were as they entwined around his body.

"No!" The entrapment took hold, forming an intricately woven cage around him. Vanlyn beat against the threads to no avail. Sparks exploded, burning the hair on his flesh as his anger and frustration mounted. "Dane Tanderes, don't you do this to me!"

"The entrapment will dissipate eventually. You'll be safe here. Hale will see to our people."

Then he was gone. The door closed with a sound of finality.

"Dane!" Vanlyn struggled against the threads, only making them bind him further. The air was filled with the stench of burning cloth, then flesh.

"Vanlyn, stop!"

Dawkins approached the cage. "You'll only make it worse. Be still."

It was the command in Dawkins' voice that gave him pause. That cleared the red haze of anger in his brain. Vanlyn looked the criss-cross of burns on his hands and arms. "Dawkins—"

"We'll see to your injuries in a moment." Bella stepped within his vision to the left. "We have to get you out of here first."

"You're releasing me?" Vanlyn asked.

"Dane can be very foolish when it comes to protecting those he loves," Dawkins said. "We've been with him all this time, but this... No, we can not abide by what he has done."

Vanlyn knew they were no longer just dutiful servants. These were beings of old knowledge and immense power. Perhaps to them, Dane needed correction, to be set on the true path. Perhaps they knew Dane truly needed him. Vanlyn watched and waited while they acted.

Dawkins, Bella, Tae and Kellen approached the cage. Dawkins pursed his lips and sucked in air, and to Vanlyn's surprise, one of the glowing threads detached from the

framework and disappeared into Dawkins' mouth. He saw the others repeating the action, sucking in long lines of the threads until their eyes glowed with the same luminescence.

After a time, when there were considerable gaps in the cage, Dawkins asked, "Now who will take his place?"

"I will," Tae said.

"No." Bella shook her head. "You'll be needed to fight. I'll do it."

Take his place? Just what were they planning?

Bella was taking on her true form. She closed her eyes, and her lips moved silently. Vanlyn felt the building of something powerful in the air. Bella stepped forward, turning when she did, until she had her back to him. Her body filled his vision, imposing itself over everything until—

He could feel her presence within him, like when he shared his self with the animals, but it was different. Here he got a glimpse of a place bathed in silver light, of exotic landscapes and rivers coursing with power, all warmed and lit by the fiery glow.

Then something shoved him. It wasn't an actual planting of hands on his body, but as though a force surrounded him, applying pressure until he gave way.

He was in the room again but outside of the cage. Bella was in his place. Without a word, Miranda approached and began to treat his wounds.

"If we had just released you," Dawkins said, "Dane would have been made aware of this. Once he's far enough away, Bella can escape herself."

"Is it true, Dawkins? My father's army has seized control of the island?"

"Yes," Dawkins said. "Dane did all of this without consulting the others, so they are quite cross with him. Aurris thinks we should attack, Hale thinks we should obey Dane's wishes and wait until they leave."

"I'm not letting them leave here with Dane," Vanlyn said. "And I want them the hell off my island."

The bogies exchanged a collective look, and Dawkins turned to him and nodded. "Then, Highness, we await your orders."

"I need to get to Hale and the others first," Vanlyn said. "Can you tell me where they are?"

"I will do you better," Dawkins laid two fingertips on his forehead and silently mouthed a phrase. After a few moments, he drew away. "I will gather all who wish to assist you, and we will come."

"Thank you," Vanlyn said. "We'll meet at the hiding place, and hopefully I will have our next move figured by then." *Lady, help me, guide my actions. Allow me to succeed.*

* * * *

His steed felt the urgency coursing through Vanlyn's tall frame and lengthened its gate. Vanlyn leaned forward, his eyes on the road, searching for any indication of enemy soldiers. The roads were surprisingly empty. He had expected to meet with at least one patrol. Perhaps his father felt there was no need since they had Dane, or perhaps he'd just been lucky so far.

Dane. Gods when they got him away, Vanlyn intended to give him a sound thrashing.

Others come.

The horse spoke the words, and Vanlyn guided him to a stop. He managed to get off

the road just in time before a group of ten riders came thundering by, so intent on their course they didn't even notice him. Vanlyn recognized the livery of the Sarn family.

When they were far enough away, Vanlyn moved his mount back onto the road. He closed his eyes and saw it again, the location of the safe house where Hale and the others were hiding.

How Dawkins had imposed that image in his mind was too much to comprehend, so Vanlyn didn't try. He only knew he didn't have too much farther to ride. More cautious now than before, he kept his mount at a slower pace. It agitated him, because he knew it would be dark soon. A cave served as an entrance to catacombs similar to the ones beneath the manor. The safe house had been set up. Vanlyn didn't relish looking for it in the dark.

He had to hide again when a second patrol came by, headed in the same direction. Vanlyn wondered what was going on. The only things in that direction were the outlying farms and the manor. Dane had said they'd already searched for him there.

Vanlyn remained beneath the trees and carefully made his way along the forest floor. The creatures gathered around him, all curious as to why the *bad strangers* were on their island. They spoke to him of the taking of the *dead beast*—which Vanlyn assumed was how they described Dane.

He sent some of them ahead, asking them to see where they held the dead beast and to bring the information back to him. Vanlyn hated to place them in such peril, but he realized how they would suffer if the *bad strangers* weren't expelled from Penryn, and that is what Vanlyn planned to do.

His mount was speaking softly to him. It sensed something. No, he would go no farther. Something was there. Age-old power would do him harm.

Vanlyn told him to wait for him here and to run back to the manor if anything happened that made him feel threatened. Then he moved forward.

He had only gone a few steps when something flashed by to the right like quicksilver. Vanlyn turned and came face to face with the age-old power.

The wolf sat and stared at Vanlyn with golden-yellow eyes. His mouth slightly open, his tongue lolled as its barrel sides expanded and contracted with each breath. His silver fur seemed to shine with its own light as bright as the light of intelligence in his eyes.

Vanlyn moistened suddenly dry lips. Keeping his movements slow and non-threatening, he knelt before the beast and spoke with a humble respect.

He didn't respond at first. Vanlyn was made aware of wolves nearby—his mate and their pups. There were others as well. Dane had told him about this pack.

We search for you.

Vanlyn had not found them. They had been looking for him. He asked the wolf his name, and after another hesitation he said, *Gray Moon*.

The wolves were not pleased. The invaders were on their land and they wanted it back. Yes, they knew Dane was a prisoner and where he was. It filled Vanlyn with a great deal of respect for the beast. Vanlyn entreated the wolf to help him. He promised to expel the ones on the island.

Vanlyn then asked him to look ahead on the road to see if the way was clear. Gray Moon sent one of the younger wolves in the pack to investigate, and he dashed off. It seemed only moments before the pup returned. *One man comes.*

A single rider? This piqued Vanlyn's interest. And maybe this one rider could give

him some additional information. Vanlyn would have to take him prisoner and with him to the safe house. He didn't like the idea, but he felt there was no choice. Vanlyn asked Gray Moon to send the pup with him and was mildly shocked when he said *pack go*.

They returned to the road. Moments later came the pounding of hoofs. A cloud of dust rose as the single rider bore down on them. Vanlyn stepped out into the road, and the rider caught sight of him, pulling back on the reins, just as Gray and his pack exploded out from the trees. The horse screamed in fright, and Vanlyn reached out with his power, demanding the beast be calm. But instinct took hold, and the horse ignored his reassurances. The rider was unseated and landed with an unceremonious thump right on his ass. The horse went careening back down the road.

Stupid prey. If Gray Moon had been human, Vanlyn was certain he'd be laughing. The wolves surrounded the rider, their teeth bared, their hackles raised. As Vanlyn approached, his heart started to beat rapidly. He realized that he knew this man, or at least he thought he did.

"Make them go away, please!" The rider looked up at him, his violet eyes filled with panic. Road dust coated his dark hair and the Gan livery he wore. He raised his eyes to meet Vanlyn's, and for a moment, there was confusion, until the light of recognition came.

"Dear gods, is it you? Vanlyn?"

Vanlyn looked down with all the loathing he could muster, for this man whom he had once called friend now it seemed was a part of the invasion force. Gone was the desire to please this man. "Hello, Rasleigh."

"Vanlyn..." He started to rise, but a warning growl from a few of the pups stilled his actions.

"I would suggest you not move."

His smile fading, Rasleigh said, "I see you are upset with me."

"That's a rather mild assessment," Vanlyn said, his words sharp with bitterness.

"What are you doing here, Rasleigh? Did you and Argent make nice?"

A brief flash of anger flickered in his eyes then he said, "I am with my Lady Dacien. I've not spoken to Argent and have no desire to. I was on my way to the High Manor. Did you see the patrols before me? They have orders to find you and then burn the manor down, but I was told that Argent had ordered them to kill you and make it look like an accident."

"Nothing Argent does surprises me anymore."

"My lady gave me leave to try and stop them, but I see you've handled things well yourself."

Rasleigh twisted his head to one side. "Perhaps we should get off this road."

"My thoughts exactly. In fact, you're coming with us. You're going to impart any and all information you have. Understood?"

"Yes." Rasleigh nodded.

"And I'd advise you to behave yourself." Vanlyn spoke to Gray and the wolves retreated but not by much.

"I'd never hurt you, Vanlyn," Rasleigh said. "I never really stopped loving you."

Rasleigh's words meant little now. "What we had, if anything, is gone. A memory," Vanlyn said. "My only wish is to save the one I love and expel my father and brother from my island."

“That would be Tanderes,” Rasleigh said, his voice matter-of-fact. “Then it’s true. You’re lovers.”

“We are more than that, and it’s nobody’s damn business.” Vanlyn motioned for Rasleigh to go ahead of him.

“I wasn’t meaning to pry,” Rasleigh said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything to—”

“Enough.” Vanlyn turned on him. The wolves halted, their ire rising, wondering if Vanlyn meant for them to attack. “I’m not in the least bit concerned about that now. It has nothing to do with our present situation.”

“Yes, of course.” Rasleigh was quiet after that. Vanlyn knew he should feel badly, but he didn’t. He was too worried about Dane and his people to be concerned with hurting Rasleigh’s feelings.

They made their way back to where Vanlyn had left his mount and, after much coaxing, convinced him he was safe with the wolves nearby, and they continued on. Vanlyn was relieved that Rasleigh didn’t try to talk to him anymore.

They would have missed the cave entrance if the image wasn’t burned into Vanlyn’s mind. It looked like a mere mound of dirt hidden with a dense copse of trees. As they neared, the wolves halted, their throats filled with low growls.

“Greetings, son of Penryn. Prince Vanlyn Sarn comes as a friend and requests entrance.”

“Prince Vanlyn?” A figure stepped from behind the trees. “Thank all the gods. We— Gods and fiends!” Rhys went to draw the sword at his hip.

“Rhys, wait. It’s fine!” Vanlyn said. “The wolves won’t harm you.”

“Do they know they’re not supposed to harm me?” Rhys slid the sword back in. It was obvious to Vanlyn he was uncomfortable with it. A grin broke out across his face, and he strode to Vanlyn, bowed slightly, then embraced him warmly. “That uncle of mine. Now I know what my grandfather meant about his stubbornness.” Rhys’s brows creased in puzzlement. “Who is that? He wears the livery of Gan.”

“His name is Rasleigh. He’s an old acquaintance. He’s going to supply us with information about my father’s troops.”

“Come in quickly, then,” Rhys said. “Magisteri Hale and that Lahn Aurris fellow have been at each other all day.”

Vanlyn followed Rhys to the cave entrance, which was no more than a crack in the side of the mound. Gray and his wolves refused to enter, and Vanlyn asked them to wait outside for him.

A man-made corridor ran several yards until it stopped at a set of rough-hewn stairs. When they reached the bottom, they could hear voices rising in argument. One was given the choice of going left or right, and Rhys turned right, walking a short distance until they came to an arched entrance that opened out into a massive room carved from the stone.

There were dozens of people within. Vanlyn saw the injured as they were cared for. Others were giving out rations of food and water to those refugees uninjured. Vanlyn’s heart ached for them, and he firmed his resolve the end the conflict.

In the midst of the room was a rectangular table with the map they had used in the Rare Blessing spread across its surface. And leaning over the map facing each other were Aurris and Hale, their clashing voices rising above the din.

“Cease this! Damn you both!” Vanlyn said.

Aurris and Hale did just that, and in fact, there was a noticeable reduction in the

noise of the room.

“Prince Vanlyn.” Hale approached him with only a brief hesitation before embracing him warmly. “Thank the gods. We were so worried.” He was only mildly surprised to see her in leather armor with a rapier and main gauche at her hips.

Vanlyn returned the embrace, “And I’m glad you’re safe as well.”

“You know they have Dane?” she asked.

“Yes. We’ll get him back.”

Hale leaned to the left, looking behind him. “And who is that?”

“This is Rasleigh. We know each other from way back. He’s with Lady Dacien’s men.”

“Vanlyn.” Lahn approached. “We’re all relieved you’re safe. Now tell this old grandmother we have to attack now while they’re camped. It’s the only way to save Dane.”

“These people are not soldiers, and it’s been a long time since I’ve held a sword,” Hale shot at Lahn. “We need to determine first who in our ranks can fight, and besides, Dane said to wait here until—”

“Dane isn’t here,” Vanlyn said. “And, as the highest ranking official, you will take your instructions from me.”

This silenced them both. The two exchanged a look but said nothing. Vanlyn realized that all attention in the room was now on him. “You’re both correct. We have to save Dane, and we have to assess who can fight. Dawkins has assured me his people will fight with us, and I have my own resources to call upon. Then there is the necromancer. Lahn, Dane said he knew him.”

“He was very powerful,” Lahn said. “He didn’t make his presence known until the ships landed. He called apparitions that sucked the very life out of many of the fighters. Lady Daellyn included. She was not strong enough to defeat him. She gave her life protecting as many as she could.”

Lahn shook his head. “Dane tried everything he could.” He closed his eyes, his hand balled into his fist. “He ordered me to lead the civilians to safety. I didn’t want to leave him there.”

Vanlyn laid a hand on his shoulder. “It seems you saved many lives. You didn’t even have to be here. Thank you.”

Lahn sighed. “I didn’t do much.” Vanlyn could see the compliment raised his spirits.

“Dane called the retreat,” Hale said. “The apparitions weren’t going after him. Dane realized they wanted him alive, so he turned back to face Sarn. That was when Prince Argent made his demand.”

“And what was my father doing during all of this?”

“Looking like he wanted to vomit on his boots. I take it he’s not overly fond of conjurers?” Hale asked.

“No,” Vanlyn said, wanting to return to the subject. “So they are still camped outside of Synnove?”

“From what our informants tell us.”

Something bumped against Vanlyn’s leg, and he looked down to find Gypsy. He couldn’t stop the grin. “Well, hello, girl. I’m glad you’re safe. Yes, I know about Dane.” He lifted Gypsy into his arms and scratched her behind the ears. “Here is what we will do first. I want to find out where they’re holding Dane, and what they plan to do to him and

us. Hale, continue with your efforts to find out who can fight. Lahn, Dawkins will be here soon. When he arrives, we can begin preparations for an attack but not before. We need information first.”

Vanlyn turned to Rasleigh. “You will give these men any information they require.”

Lahn stepped forward and assessed Rasleigh, his eyes traveling up and down his form, his gaze piercing. “How do we know we can trust him, Highness?”

“You can,” Rasleigh said. “And how dare you question my honor?”

“Perhaps because you are a part of an enemy force that used the foulest of magic against innocent people?”

“Stop this now,” Vanlyn warned. “Lahn, I’m giving you responsibility for Rasleigh. Glean any information you can from him. I will return as soon as I find out more.”

“Sir, where are you going?” Hale said with worry.

“To the enemy camp to see what I can find out.”

“I take it you don’t plan to merely walk in,” Lahn said over Hale’s protest.

“No,” Vanlyn said as he stroked a hand down Gypsy’s back. “As I said, I have my own resources to draw upon.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

The soldiers were relaxed, enjoying their meals, despite the fact that they were part of an invading force. They were almost lax in their duties. He saw the only soldiers who remained on guard were the ones who wore the colors of Lady Dacien.

No one noticed the cat.

Vanlyn made his way through the grass, just tall enough to hide his body, and he took full advantage of Gypsy's skill as a hunter. Her presence was a ghost in his mind, mildly imposing her will so he would behave as her species did.

Within her body, Vanlyn was at first assailed by the myriad of scents and sounds and the clarity of sight that allowed him to see a moth fluttering around a lantern several hundred yards away. After awhile, he adjusted so they did not overwhelm him, his training serving him well.

It didn't take Vanlyn long to find his objective—the large tent at the center of the encampment. A stench reached him—the smell of day's old carrion and blood—causing a hiss to erupt from his throat and Vanlyn knew it was the necromancer.

Vanlyn backed away, his hackles rising. He was so intent on escaping that scent he didn't immediately notice the shadow that fell over him. Vanlyn whipped around and crouched, ready to fight until he saw who it was.

"Well, hello there." The High Lady of Gan smiled down at him. Her scent was pleasant and safe. Gypsy's instincts took over, and Vanlyn batted his head on the underside of his palm.

"I love cats." Lady Dacien lifted Vanlyn into her arms. "But I'll wager you're a long way from home. Perhaps we can find something for you to eat?"

Then she was carrying him into the tent, and Vanlyn had to fight not to leap from her arms and flee. There Vanlyn saw a scene similar to the one he'd just witnessed in the catacombs where his people had taken refuge. Several figures gathered around a large table while servants ran about preparing food and refilling drinks. Lady Dacien carried him over to a sideboard on the other end of the tent where three servants stood ready to cater to her every whim. She ignored them, selected a plate herself, chose some raw salmon, and put it on the plate.

She placed it on the floor, and Vanlyn in front of it. He'd eaten raw salmon before, and Gypsy wasn't going to allow him to turn down such a treat anyway. Besides, it gave him a reason to be in the tent. Lady Dacien approached the table.

"Those ignorant clods," Argent was saying. "How could they not have found him?"

"They obviously spirited your brother away somewhere." Aelden glanced nervously at the gaunt man sitting at the end of the table, his face a caricature of skin stretched thin across bone. He had a scraggly mustache, and his dark hair was unkempt. Vanlyn couldn't look directly into his eyes, which were lightless voids that made him shudder. "And Tanderes isn't talking."

"He'll talk soon enough." The necromancer Mallan nodded, his lips curled in a smirk.

"Perhaps Tanderes will be more willing to talk if we threaten his people," Aelden said.

“Those we can find,” Argent said. “Bothersome commoners. I say I burn this island to the ground and be done with it.”

“I could always do a massive sending. Cause them all to shrivel up and die no matter where they’re hiding.” Mallan smiled evilly.

“You’ll do no such a thing,” Lady Dacien said. “Sarn keep a leash on your pet here.”

Mallan sat up in his chair. “You bitch! How dare you—”

Several Gan women were there, swords drawn, moving in defense of their lady. Lady Dacien stood her ground. “Insult me again and I’ll cut your balls off and stuff them down your throat, necromancer.”

Mallan tried to appear disinterested in Lady Dacien’s words, but Vanlyn saw the fear in his eyes. It raised his respect for her one hundred fold.

“Mallan, you will not disrespect Lady Dacien that way again.” His father’s voice broke, completely ruining the effect that he was admonishing the necromancer. “And as to killing these people, do you want us all to be executed upon returning to the mainland?”

Mallan shrugged. “I don’t fear the king, or any man or woman for that matter.”

“Neither do I,” Argent said, an obvious lie.

“We need to get Vanlyn back,” Aelden said. “If you have to torture a few people do it or let them watch as you torture Tanderes, so be it. Someone will give him up. We’ll make an example of that inhuman beast.”

“Very well.” Mallan rose. “I think I’ll see if the fiend is prepared for more persuasion.”

This was his chance. Mindful of how he was supposed to act, Vanlyn avoided the table and the people and quietly made his way from the tent. Mallan was striding across the center of the camp. Vanlyn noticed how everyone got out of his way.

They came to the very edge, right where the darkness met the light to a tent cloaked in shadow that didn’t seem of this world to Vanlyn. There were no guards, which made Vanlyn even more uncomfortable.

Gypsy’s influence came forward, causing Vanlyn to crouch, his hackles rising, his ears laying flat against his head. The smell that came in choking waves from the tent caused his stomach to roil. It was everything foul and dank, something Vanlyn was certain he didn’t want to see. Yet, he forced himself and Gypsy to move forward, although every animal instinct was screaming for her to get away.

Vanlyn crawled to the tent and wriggled underneath the tarp.

Oh gods, no...

There was Dane, in his full second form, his hands and legs outstretched, his wings completely unfurled, his body suspended several inches off the ground by threads similar to the ones that had held Vanlyn in the entrapment. But these threads were the color of old blood, and they pierced his skin, threading in and out of his flesh, forming a burning web around him.

Dane’s eyes were open wide, but Vanlyn knew he saw nothing. They were empty, as devoid of life as Mallan’s own. Yet he knew Dane lived by the slow and ragged rise and fall of his chest.

“Now then, Minister Tanderes.” Mallan grinned in a sickeningly amiable way. “It’s time for another session.”

No, oh Dane, love!

Gypsy was crying out to flee while Vanlyn ached to attack the necromancer, rending flesh. However, the cat won out in the end. Vanlyn back-crawled from underneath the tarp and fled into the woods just as Dane's screams followed him into the darkness.

* * * *

"Lady, no." Vanlyn came to himself, not far from the encampment. A shudder passed over his body. Bile rose, burning in his throat, and tears threatened.

"Highness?" Rhys knelt beside him. "Gods, I was worried. You were away for so long."

"Rhys." Vanlyn was shaking and he couldn't stop. "Take me back, quickly."

"What happened? What did you find out?"

Dane, love, please hang on. I'm coming for you.

"When we get back," Vanlyn managed. He could say no more.

* * * *

"Here." Hale handed him the cup of wine.

"Thank you." Vanlyn could put no force into his voice. The image of Dane suffering burned into his mind in more vivid detail than the map to the safe house. He had to get himself together. He couldn't allow Dane to suffer another moment.

Vanlyn sat off in a corner by himself and had been there since returning to the safe house. The others seemed to know that something weighed heavily on his mind and had let him be, but Vanlyn knew, as they all did, that he would need to act soon. He had told them they would acquiesce to him. Now, Vanlyn had to prove his worth.

Lahn approached him next. "Highness."

"Yes?"

"Master Rasleigh was very helpful in providing us with the number of soldiers and weaponry they have as well as the current positions of Sarn's forces." Lahn nodded in Rasleigh's direction. He was standing by the table, looking mildly worried. Lahn had not let Rasleigh out of his sight since Vanlyn had given Lahn the responsibility of watching him.

Vanlyn knew Lahn was expecting him to do more, but he couldn't. They had all been giving him worried glances as they went about their business.

"What did you see, my friend?" Lahn said gently. "What did they do to Dane?"

Vanlyn's throat tightened. He feared he would never be able to speak again, "Oh gods Lahn, it was horrible. They had him—"

"Then we must help him." Lahn knelt before him. "What would you have us do?"

Vanlyn didn't know, except he wished they could go back to the time when his only concern was if Dane truly loved him. But he knew such indulgences would do little good. Gathering his courage like a shield, Vanlyn stood. "Has Hale determined who may fight?"

"She is still gathering information, but we should have what we need by morning."

"Then I shall do my part to weaken their defenses." Vanlyn said. "Once the enemy is sufficiently distracted, we'll see to Dane's rescue. Then we'll plan our final attack. Wait for me here. I need to go outside."

"Yes, Highness."

Vanlyn made his way back down the corridor and climbed the stairs. He greeted the guard at the entrance, then stepped from the protection of the copse, knelt and waited.

Gray Moon came to him on silent paws. When he was close, Vanlyn wrapped his arms around the wolf and buried his face in his soft fur. "Please help me. I need you to do something for me. I don't want to place you in such danger but..."

Vanlyn told the wolf what he needed. He agreed with an inclination of his head and disappeared into the shadows as quietly as he had come. Vanlyn then made himself comfortable on the forest floor and gathered his power to him.

They heeded his call. All the beasts that walked on land and the birds that claimed the sky. From the insects with venomous bites and lethal stingers to cold-blooded creatures that slithered on the ground, scaled and deadly. They came alone or in packs, flocks or nests. They too wished to rid Penryn of the interlopers. He spoke to each of them and gave them their tasks. Then he made his way back down.

Dawkins was present when Vanlyn stepped into the room. The old bogie approached him immediately. "Sir, I have gathered my people."

"And quite a few I might add," Lahn commented.

"Thank you, Dawkins. Lahn, if you would gather everyone, please," Vanlyn said. "Dawkins, I'm going to rescue Dane tonight. They..." Vanlyn swallowed thickly. He released a breath. "I will need your assistance."

"You have it," Dawkins said.

"That necromancer has him trapped in a cage similar to the one Dane trapped me in with the exception that the threads are passing through his skin," Vanlyn said. "He's in agony. I know it."

"I know the entrapment," Dawkins said, his voice grim. "And I know how to release him." Then those wise and ancient eyes caught him in a piercing gaze. "Are you prepared to sacrifice for his freedom?"

"If it involves only me, then yes."

Dawkins continued to regard him, then nodded once. "Very well."

* * * *

They waited in the shadows. Vanlyn and his people. They were his people and this was his home. He would fight beside them to preserve it. First, to bring Dane home.

Vanlyn heard the murmurings around him as they watched from the cover of the trees in darkness.

All around them, the enemy camp was in chaos.

"I have spoken with the beasts of the island," Vanlyn recalled his words to the group gathered at the map table. "The wolves will cause fear among them."

As they crouched within the cover, even then Vanlyn heard the mournful keening of Gray's pack. He'd received word that Argent had ordered them hunted down and killed. Lord Maxus of all people had protested, refusing, in his own words, to stand by and watch such noble beasts harmed. For once, Lady Dacien agreed.

With the soldiers thoroughly unnerved, the smaller furred denizens went to work. Food supplies were soiled, and leather harnesses chewed through. Crawling insects found their way into bedrolls and, more alarming, within clothes and hair, sending some screaming from their tents, ripping at fabric. Serpents found places warmed by bodies and had the same effect.

Their mounts refused them, not allowing them near. They cropped at the dirt and snorted in warning. The rats chewed through their harnesses, setting them free, and they galloped off into the moonlight.

"We will wait until the necromancer is with Argent," Vanlyn said. "If I know my brother, he will insist Mallan stay near him." Vanlyn turned to Dawkins. "Can you get us into the tent unseen? I know you have that power."

"Yes," Dawkins said. There was something in his voice. An underlying sadness that Vanlyn wished to question but decided he should not.

So Dawkins stood with him along with Kellen and Tae, and when they saw the necromancer stride away from the tent, Vanlyn touched Dawkins on the shoulder.

Even in the darkness, Vanlyn could see them take their true forms. As Dawkins took hold of him, he said, "Close your eyes, Highness."

Vanlyn obeyed. A sudden burst of wind surrounded him in a swirling vortex that lifted him off his feet, and the air filled with the sound of leaves rustling on the forest floor. His nose was tickled by the scent of the rich loam. These things he associated with the bogies, and they gave him a small measure of comfort.

Vanlyn knew when they were inside the tent. The musky closed scent and the muted cries told him as much. The beasts would press their advantage now, keeping the soldiers occupied and away from the area.

Vanlyn stood aside. Although he wanted to reach for Dane, to take his body from the trap, he knew he had to let the bogies do their task. Dawkins, Tae and Kellen circled their bound lord, muttering in a sort of non-language Vanlyn couldn't quite grasp. Finally, they seemed to come to a decision, and Dawkins nodded.

"It will have to be me," he said.

"Dawkins." Tae reached out for him. "You can't—"

"I must. It's the only way."

Vanlyn approached the old bogie. The realization came quickly. "Dawkins, no."

"It must be done this way, Highness. If we merely remove Dane, the necromancer will know."

"Please—"

"Remember when I told you, you would need to sacrifice?" Dawkins said. "Well, now you must. I will escape when I can. For now, it will take everything Tae and Kellen have to get you away from here."

Vanlyn embraced the old man. "Please take care."

Dawkins smiled at him as though he were a favored nephew. "And you as well, dear Vanlyn."

Like with his entrapment, the bogies breathed in a few of the threads first. Dane's body would jump convulsively every time they did so, but at least that told Vanlyn Dane was coherent enough to feel pain. Finally, Dawkins drew in a deep breath, and the air around him came alive, cracking with fire. Dawkins turned and stepped, and his body became fog, surrounding and finally permeating Dane's flesh.

"Go around behind Dane, Vanlyn," Tae said.

Vanlyn nodded his understanding. The fog was coalescing into Dawkins' bogie form, imposing itself around Dane for a brief time before Dane's inert body slipped from within the confines of the cage and fell back into his Vanlyn's arms.

"Dane, love, can you hear me?" He was pale, his skin cold and damp to the touch.

There were lines of age on his face that weren't there before. Dane's eyes fluttered briefly for a time, but he remained unconscious. Besides that, there was not a mark on his body.

"Highness, we must make haste. Someone comes," Tae warned.

"Dawkins—"

"He will be fine. Close your eyes again." Tae and Kellen formed a circle on either side of them. Pulling Dane to him, Vanlyn did so, and they were off again.

Once back in the woods, his group surrounded them. They agreed that the bogies would take Vanlyn and Dane back, while the others would follow. Right before Tae whisked them off, Vanlyn gave the order for the animals to withdraw. Tomorrow, the true fight would begin.

* * * *

"Gently, that's it." Vanlyn nodded as he, Tae and Kellen lowered Dane into the steaming pool. Vanlyn had come out of his shirt, and now stood waist-deep as he supported his love with his arms underneath his shoulders.

Vanlyn hoped this would help in some way. The single pool filled the room with steam and coated the walls with sparkling droplets. The room, which was a few steps down from the main hall, had an intimacy about it within its dimly lit confines.

Vanlyn sank into the water, drawing Dane back against him.

Tae and Kellen exchanged a look. "Highness, with your permission—" Tae said.

Vanlyn knew they were going after Dawkins. "Yes, go ahead and please be careful."

"We will, sir."

And Vanlyn found himself alone with Dane for the first time in what seemed like years. "Oh love, why did you do it? I don't know whether to be furious with you, or—" Vanlyn made a noise of disgust. "I'll be furious with you for now."

Vanlyn cupped some of the water in his hand and trickled it across the exposed parts of Dane's body. "I hope this helps you."

Vanlyn stopped speaking when he heard footsteps reproaching. Lahn entered the room followed by Rasleigh of all people.

"I didn't know what else to do," Vanlyn said by way of greeting. "He was so cold."

"It will probably help." Lahn approached the edge of the pool and knelt. "All we can do is wait. Why don't you stay here with him?"

"I want to," Vanlyn said quietly, "but I can't. We need to attack while the enemy is still disoriented."

"Highness." Rasleigh spoke up. "I could stay here with him."

Vanlyn whipped his head around. "You? Why?"

"I figure it's the least I can do."

Lahn twisted around and looked at him. "You've done quite a bit. Don't discount your assistance to us."

Rasleigh's jaw dropped, and a flush stained his cheeks. "Thank you."

Vanlyn looked first at one then the other. Now what was going on there? "Thank you, Rasleigh. I'd appreciate it." Yet he wondered how wise it would be to leave his former lover with his current one?

* * * *

Vanlyn supposed he should get some sleep, but he couldn't. He stayed by Dane's side as night slipped into the early morning hours. He knew he would be no good to anyone if he didn't get some rest. Marcelyn had brought in a bedroll for him and had offered to sit with Dane, but Vanlyn had refused. She said he was being pig-headed. He agreed.

Vanlyn was sitting on the side of the pool, his bent legs immersed in the water, lost in his own musings. It was only until he heard someone clearing their throat that he realized someone had joined them.

Vanlyn twisted his body around to find Rasleigh at the entrance, holding a tray in his grasp. The scent of food reached him, and despite his stomach reminding him loudly that he'd not eaten all day, Vanlyn was certain he wouldn't be able to take a single bite.

"I know you haven't eaten," Rasleigh said. "A farmer brought some lamb stew."

Vanlyn drew in a deep breath and moistened his lips. "Thank you. Why don't you come in?"

Rasleigh moved carefully towards him as he balanced the tray. When he was next to Vanlyn he set it down on the floor. "No change?" he asked gently.

"None."

"I'm sorry, Vanlyn."

Vanlyn sighed again. "Thank you."

Rasleigh made no move to leave, and Vanlyn didn't have the capacity to be unkind. "So how have you been?"

He smiled slightly. "As well as I can be. I just wish..." He didn't finish. He instead rubbed his hands across his face. "Argent told my father everything. It was decided that I needed to be *cured of my affliction*, so it was arranged that I would marry a magisteri's daughter."

"You're married?"

"Yes." Rasleigh went down on his haunches. "And I have a son."

"No jest?" Vanlyn found he was pleased for the man.

"He's four. Also Rasleigh." He grinned sheepishly. "Yes, I know, pretentious of me but..." Rasleigh didn't meet his eyes. "She's a good woman. I couldn't lie to her. I told her everything." He looked up, his expression fierce. "But I've never been unfaithful to her."

"Good," Vanlyn said.

It was Rasleigh who released the breath this time. "Vanlyn, I—"

The soft moan pulled Vanlyn's attention away. Dane grunted in his sleep, his brow furrowed. Vanlyn figured he was in the throes of a nightmare. Vanlyn pushed himself off the rim and moved towards him. "Dane?"

Dane's eyes opened, unfocused at first. Vanlyn saw when coherency filled them, "Vanlyn?"

"Oh gods," Vanlyn moaned. "You stupid ass! How could you... Damn it, I don't think I'll ever forgive you."

Vanlyn embraced him, careful if he might be in pain. He drew back and kissed him deeply, until Dane muttered in protest. "Van, where are we?"

"A safe house outside of Synnove," Vanlyn said.

"Why did you... You shouldn't have—"

"Not a word from you, Dane Tanderes, or so help me..."

Dane managed a small grin, then his eyes tracked to the left. “Vanlyn, who is that?”

Vanlyn had completely forgotten Rasleigh was in the room. He felt a flush at his cheeks at the awkward situation. “He’s—”

“Nobody,” Rasleigh said, his voice empty. “I’m nobody.” He straightened away and turned.

“Rasleigh, wait.”

“Rasleigh,” Dane’s brow furrowed again. “Yes, I remember now. In Vanlyn’s dreams. You’re older, but it is you.”

Rasleigh kept his back to them. “So you’re aware of me.”

“I’m aware that you nearly ruined Vanlyn’s life, you son of a bitch.”

“Dane!”

“No.” Rasleigh turned to face them finally. “Your Dane is correct. I should have never...” He sighed again. “I’m not sorry we were together. I loved you, Vanlyn, but I am sorry that you had to bear the brunt of your family’s wrath alone.”

“It’s all in the past, Rasleigh,” Vanlyn said.

Rasleigh glanced at Dane. “Indeed it is.” And he left them alone.

* * * *

“You’re a stupid ass!”

Dane sighed. “So Vanlyn has told me.”

“You think this is a jest?” Marcelyn asked.

“No, of course not.” Dane didn’t blame her, her anger, or Vanlyn his for that matter. His love had moved aside and allowed Marcelyn full opportunity to vent her ire. Lahn had come earlier and was now letting their people know he had regained consciousness.

Now Vanlyn sat on the edge of the pool. He didn’t speak, and to Dane’s dismay, he looked disappointed. Dane wanted to tell Vanlyn he’d not made the decision to leave him trapped in the manor lightly, that he just couldn’t stand to see Vanlyn at the mercy of his father and brother, and certainly not at the mercy of the necromancer. But Dane knew none of it would matter. Vanlyn felt betrayed. It was the last thing Dane had wanted.

He was exhausted from his encounter with the Mallan. There would be a reckoning there. Mallan had made him aware of every agonizing moment of the torture. His body was intact, but he fought a silent battle against the nightmarish visions that taunted him. A shudder raced across his skin.

“There is something else, isn’t there?” Vanlyn spoke up. “Something beyond the physical. What else did he do to you?”

It was as unexpected a question as Dane had ever heard. He opened his mouth to protest, to tell Vanlyn that everything was fine, but he realized if he did—if he lied to Vanlyn again—everything they had would be over. “Mallan laid a curse upon me. My mind is filled with visions of the torture and other memories. I can no longer merely turn them aside as I did.”

Vanlyn climbed into the pool, made his way over to Dane, and gently embraced him. “I’m sorry, love. What can I do?”

“Oh, Van,” Dane said. “I missed you so. I’m sorry for what I did.”

“Hush.” Vanlyn kissed him. “I understand why you did it, but if we are to be together—”

“I know. Never again, I swear to you.”

“Now tell me everything that happened.”

Dane nodded once. He didn't hide anything from his love. He told how he'd gone to the enemy camp and immediately been taken by Aelden's men. Aelden demanded to know where Vanlyn was. Dane refused to tell him, so they gave Dane over to Mallan with the threat that, if he resisted, innocent people would be tortured and killed.

“Mallan didn't ask me anything about you or anyone else for that matter.” Dane tightened his embrace and buried his face in Vanlyn's hair, reacquainting himself with the younger man's scent. “To him it was all a sadistic game for his own pleasure.”

“I know,” Vanlyn said. “I saw.”

“You did?”

Vanlyn then told him about his joining with Gypsy and acting as their spy. “I wanted to kill him for what he was doing to you, but Gypsy's instincts took hold, and we escaped.”

“She was right,” Dane said. “If Mallan had caught you and killed Gypsy, you would have...”

The thought was too much. Tears pooled in Dane's eyes, but he kept them at bay. “You've changed so much.”

“I?” Vanlyn pulled back.

Dane smiled slightly. “When you first came to me, you were so shy and meek and now, I'm very proud of you.”

Vanlyn blushed and smiled, ducking his head.

“Now to our business, love,” he said. “You've been up all night and are in no condition to lead an assault.”

“I have an idea about that,” Vanlyn said.

“First, sleep. Then tell me everything that has come about.”

Vanlyn snuggled within the crook of Dane's arm, sleep claiming him almost immediately. “I love you, Dane.”

“I love you too.”

* * * *

Someone moved within the cave entrance. Dane watched the opening, frowning as he did. He thought he almost recognized who skulked in the shadows. He wanted to call out, but he didn't want to waken Vanlyn. Finally, whomever it was stepped into the light.

“Dawkins.” Dane breathed the name.

The old bogie looked as haggard as Dane had ever seen him. “Hello, Dane.”

“Please come near. Are you well? So help me if Mallan hurt you—”

Dawkins smiled slightly. “Mallan was concerned with other things.” Dawkins looked with affection at Vanlyn. “Our boy has made quite a leader of himself.”

“That he has.” Dane looked down at the familiar lines on Vanlyn's face, relaxed in sleep.

“I will be able to fight,” Dawkins said. “We will all fight for you.”

“Thank you,” Dane said. “Tell me, Dawkins, how may I end Mallan's life?”

“As you normally would end any man's life,” Dawkins said. “The spells he uses merely prolongs his life. They do not grant him immortality or invincibility. Death waits with greed in her heart for him. She has been denied his life too long.”

Dane nodded. “This curse on me will end with his death.”

"I can attempt to break it," Dawkins said.

"No, my friend, you will be needed for the fight." Dane looked at Vanlyn again when he muttered in his sleep. "We all have our tasks to perform."

* * * *

The beast was restless.

Mallan's torture had not only caused Dane agony but the beast as well. Dane was afraid it would awaken.

"What's on your mind, love?" Vanlyn had awakened at daybreak, or so Marcelyn told him when she brought them both breakfast. She had also supplied a change of clothes, and Vanlyn sat beside the pool watching him.

"The beast is stirring." Dane stretched his wings, testing their strength.

"Will it come out?" Vanlyn's voice was fearful.

"It may," Dane said honestly. "The only advice I can give you is to stay clear. I'll not know friend from foe if it does. You must warn others to do the same."

"All right."

Dane regained his human form and reached for the pair of trousers. "Will you tell me what's been happening?"

Vanlyn nodded and began. It took some time, and the more his love spoke, the prouder Dane was. The affinity Vanlyn had developed with the wolf pack impressed him the most, and Dane told him so.

Vanlyn blushed with pleasure. "I believe your training had a lot to do with it."

"Well, thank you." Dane grinned at him. He pulled the shirt over his head, and finger combed his hair. Dane realized when he concentrated on Vanlyn he could almost forget the visions but hadn't Vanlyn always been his source of strength? "Come here. Let me give you a proper greeting."

The moment Vanlyn was within his reach, Dane framed his face in his hands and pulled him into a deep kiss, sucking and wrestling with the younger man's tongue until Vanlyn moaned in surrender. Dane pulled back slightly, his mouth hovering over Vanlyn's. "Gods, how I've missed this." He pulled Vanlyn close, moving his stiffening erection against Vanlyn's, trapping him against his body while his tongue worked around Vanlyn's mouth again.

"Oh, Dane, gods, please..." Vanlyn said on a breathless whisper.

"Gentlemen."

"Gods *damn it!*" Dane growled as his body whipped around. "Damn it, Lahn!"

Lahn drew himself up where he stood in the doorway. "We have news of the enemy."

Dane released a breath, mainly of frustration. Vanlyn looked mortified, his face flushed scarlet.

"Fine, we're coming."

Lahn nodded curtly then withdrew.

"I suppose I shouldn't have yelled at him," Dane said. "But I've ached for you for so long. I swear I'm never letting you out of the bedroom after this."

"I thought the same thing." Vanlyn smiled. "Let's finish this. Then we can work on rebuilding and on our time together."

"I feel bad for Lahn," Vanlyn said as he walked. "I think he's lonely."

"I believe so to," Dane said. "But he seems to have gained an interest in Master Rasleigh."

"Rasleigh is married."

Dane shook his head. "I hope Lahn isn't hurt."

Applause broke out when they entered the map room, and Dane couldn't stop the blush from creeping along his face. "Thank you, everyone. I thank all those involved in my regaining my freedom. I will always be in your debt."

Lahn stepped forward and led a young man by the elbow that Dane recognized, but he couldn't quite place who he was. "Lord Tanderes, this young man came to us from the enemy camp."

The young man bowed. "Sir, I was with a group of citizens who were taken prisoner by the enemy. They were taken from the outlying farmsteads by soldiers."

"How did you escape?" Dane asked.

"I didn't," the man said. "I was allowed to leave to deliver a message. It was by great fortune that I found this place."

"So it's come to this," Vanlyn said. "I can't believe even my father would allow such a thing. He must be desperate to use such tactics."

"Or he's knuckling under to coercion." Dane returned his gaze to the young man. "Go on, young master."

"I was advised to inform you that you have until sunrise to surrender yourself and Prince Vanlyn, or they will begin to torture the captives." The man's eyes were wide and pleading. "Please, sir, my mother and sisters are prisoners. Please help them." The man reached into his vest and held out a folded slip of paper. "I also have this." He handed it to Dane. The scribbled message was curt:

Will do what I can to stall them. Act now.

"Lady Dacien." There was no doubt in Dane's mind.

"Yes, sir," the man said.

Dane heard the fearful whispers in the group gathered. How could they be certain their relatives were safe? This was the very thing that Dane had wanted to avoid.

"Tell them we'll come."

Dane's head whipped around to look at Vanlyn.

"Deliver your message and tell them we'll be there," Vanlyn said. "At dawn, as they demand."

The mutterings increased. "Your plan?" Dane said.

"The soldiers are already unnerved. Tonight we will make it more so. Tomorrow we will finish what we have begun."

Dane nodded, his respect for the man he loved increasing tenfold. "Tell us what you plan to do."

* * * *

The wolf that Vanlyn called Gray Moon stepped from the shadows into the dim lamp light. Dane caught his breath at the sight of the noble creature, its eyes glowing. That primal, animal part of him responded with respect to the feral one. For now, Gray sat on his haunches with a regal bearing about him as Vanlyn spoke to him.

Earlier that night, they'd spoken to Dawkins. Vanlyn had asked the old bogie to make the legends about their people real. To use the night to terrorize. To invade slumber

and induce nightmares. To cause paranoia and madness by feeding on fears. Dane could tell Vanlyn hated the idea, that the soldiers were innocent men merely following orders, but they both knew what was at stake and how those very same soldiers wouldn't hesitate to torture the civilians.

Now Dane watched as Vanlyn put the second phase of his plan into action.

"Silence," Vanlyn said. "Not a creature is to make a sound. Not a cry or a song or movement. Surround the bastards with night and silence."

Dane could have sworn Gray inclined his lupine head, before rising and stretching with an almost unconcerned air and disappearing back into the shadows, drawing the pack with him.

"Incredible," Dane breathed.

Vanlyn turned to look at him for a moment, then threw himself into Dane's arms, embracing him tightly. Dane stumbled, righted himself, holding the lamp away from their bodies with one hand outstretched, and with the other, he held Vanlyn to him. All the doubt and fear surrounding them, along with the realization that tomorrow they could both lose their lives.

For just a moment, Dane put tomorrow from his mind.

* * * *

It was the early morning hours when Dane and Vanlyn met their people in the map room for the last time. Lahn stood before them with the news they had been waiting for.

"It worked." Lahn crossed his arms at his chest and leaned against the table.

"Reports are coming in. All night there was restlessness and nightmares within the camp. Mistrust amongst the factions bred an atmosphere of violence. Officers were breaking up fights all night. I think Mallan's presence only made it worse. The soldiers are blaming him."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did our job for us," Dane said. "Mallan better watch his back, or he'll find himself skewered by some over-eager soldier's dagger."

"The fact that Dawkins was there in Dane's place is common knowledge," Lahn went on. "They feel the island is cursed or haunted. There have always been rumors to that effect." Lahn smiled slightly. Dane noticed Lahn seldom did so lately. "So this assists us a great deal."

"Agreed," Dane said. "Lahn, spread the word and have our forces begin preparation."

"Yes, Dane."

"Thank you, Lahn, for everything."

Lahn's face brightened, just a little. "You're welcome."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Dane experienced an unerring sense of calm as he and Vanlyn stepped from the cover of the trees. Vanlyn stood beside him, and Dane just knew the young man felt the same. They knew what was about to occur, and as it was inevitable, they no longer dwelled on it.

Vanlyn wore a fine suit of leather armor that Dane had instructed his people obtain for him. One of the finely carved staffs, tipped with metal, was strapped to his back. Dane wished he could have added a circlet of gold to the ensemble, but with the wolf at Vanlyn's right hand, he looked every bit the prince of man and beasts. Dane was proud to walk beside him.

"Did you ever expect it to turn out this way?" Even though Dane did not look at him, he knew Vanlyn smiled.

"No," Vanlyn said. "And I'll wager neither will my father and Argent."

A small group waited, gathered at the edge of the camp. It was Aelden and about twenty of his soldiers. There was no sign of Argent or Mallan. Lady Dacien and Lord Maxus were also absent from the gathering. They had expected this.

"Argent will more than likely lay in wait for us with a trap," Vanlyn had advised him earlier.

Dane nodded in agreement. "Then I see no reason not to make our own preparations."

They found they were no longer alone. The gentle sound of swirling leaves combined with a swaying of the grass beneath their feet where there was no wind to disturb it. The bogies had come.

Their people had taken up position within the woods waiting for their signal. Dane had long given up the hope that Aelden would do the honorable thing and deal fairly with them.

"I see no other soldiers around," Vanlyn commented.

"I doubt many of them will come after last night," Dane said. "Aelden has completely lost face. Nothing he does now will matter."

"I still fear for my people. Who will lead them?"

"Something will work itself out. It has too." Dane wished he could offer more.

When they were within shouting distance, the two men halted.

"Dane Tanderes," Aelden called. "I see you have finally brought me my son."

Vanlyn responded. "Lord Tanderes has not brought me to you. I come to you as a prince of the realm to demand you renounce your title as High Lord and that you remove Argent from his place as well. I demand you show honor and concern for the welfare of your people. Allow the true High Lord to command in your stead."

"And that, I take it, would be you?" Aelden bitterly spat.

"Yes," Vanlyn replied easily. "What is your answer, Aelden Sarn?"

The fact that Vanlyn hadn't addressed him as father or Lord Sarn was lost to no one. Even his own son had no respect for him.

"You who lay with a fiend and betrayed your people and kingdom?" Sarn said. "You have the gall to believe you would rule Toryn? I'll cut my own wrists before I see you

rule.”

Even from the distance, Dane could see the rage that caused Sarn’s body to tremble, and he knew the confrontation was drawing near. “A traitor’s life is worth nothing, and I shall see your end.”

It came then. Dane sensed the gathering of the magic to their right, a festering miasma of hate and violence. He knew Vanlyn sensed it too. It sprouted tendrils foul and black, which stretched out with burning fingers to take hold of them.

Dane was ready, weaving his own spell even as Vanlyn and Aelden had their verbal sparring. He knew he didn’t have the strength to attack Mallan directly, so he didn’t try, but as he had done with his family on that day so long ago, Dane surrounded them in illusion, creating a barrier that the darkness could not penetrate. It swirled around them in a fiery cloud.

Behind them came the cries of their people, rushing in response to the signal. There was a moment of shock from the other side with the realization that their enemies had prepared for treachery. The twenty by Aelden created a barrier of bodies while the remaining of Toryn’s forces burst from the cover of the tents at the same instance. Dane saw how few they were, but he didn’t drop his guard. They were trained fighters against people who were mainly farmers and merchants.

“We must end this quickly,” Vanlyn said.

“Agreed.”

The black tendrils were withdrawing, seeking other prey, and the hapless soldiers who charged Dane and Vanlyn were its first unfortunate victims. The tendrils withdrew, leaving the empty shriveled husks that were once living men. It was apparent that Mallan wasn’t concerned with the lives of enemy or ally and merely wanted to cause as much suffering as possible.

Dane dissipated the cloud, and Vanlyn dashed off to their right, his staff already drawn and at the ready. Dane could see Argent running towards the safety of the camp, but they didn’t see Mallan anywhere.

Dane should have been able to trace the spoor of the magic, but the necromancer seemed to have disappeared from the realm altogether. A shudder of anxiety passed over him, but seeing his people fighting, Dane pushed it aside. There would be time for a reckoning later.

Dane transformed, unfurling his wings and pushing off into the air. Vanlyn had his destiny and so did he.

* * * *

Vanlyn watched as his treacherous brother hid behind the necromancer when the foul magic had tried to destroy them. Now Vanlyn dashed through the clearing, past grappling soldiers who ignored him. At his feet was the familiar rustle of leaves, and Vanlyn knew the bogies hid him from their sight. Around him, the world shifted into a scene somehow familiar and unreal, where a silver light washed over the landscape. The world he had seen through Bella’s eyes.

But Vanlyn took no time to marvel at the sight. All his concentration was on his objective. *Argent*.

The soldiers who were rushing to battle hampered his brother’s flight. Vanlyn recognized their livery as belonging to Lady Dacien and Lord Maxus. Argent fell, and as

he was struggling to rise, Vanlyn was upon him. "Argent!"

Argent turned, and Vanlyn expected there to be the usual smugness in his brother's eyes, but instead there was something he never expected.

Fear.

It was not just the fear of dying but of losing everything as punishment for all his crimes. Argent knew in that black heart of his that Vanlyn had come to mete out justice.

"So, little brother." Argent tried to grin with malice, but it came out sickly and false. "You've come for me, have you?"

"I have."

"And what makes you believe I'll merely let you take me?"

"Because you are everything that is filthy and immoral. I know what you did to Mother and Eselda. I know what you did to Rasleigh and for all that you have done to me," Vanlyn said. "You have gone unpunished far too long."

"So you'll punish me, little fiend slut?" Argent drew his sword. "Come to me then."

"No," Vanlyn said. "You'll come to me, if you even have the balls to do it. Which I doubt."

He saw the angry flush stain Argent's cheeks. He held the sword before him, his legs crouched, grasping it with both hands. His face, twisted with hate, seemed older than his years, and his eyes were alight with madness. "I'm going to kill you, little fiend slut, then I'll be rid of you forever."

With a cry, Argent rushed him, his sword raised high over his head. Vanlyn could see, even with the little bit of training he received, that Argent left himself completely open to attack. The words of the sword-master rang in Vanlyn's mind. *He's dead the moment he faces a true opponent.*

When Argent came with reach, Vanlyn sidestepped his brother's reckless charge and brought his staff across and down. There was a violent crack as bones splintered.

Argent gave a mewling cry as his body crumpled to the ground. Somehow, he managed to keep hold of his sword as he splayed his hand across his mouth and blood seeped between his fingers.

Argent spoke, but the words came out incoherent, bubbling with blood and saliva. Argent struggled to his feet, the sword in his shaky grasp, but before he could do anything further, the staff came down again on Argent's exposed hand. The sword dropped and Argent did as well. On his knees, he glared at Vanlyn as he jammed his injured hand underneath his other arm. Tears streamed down his face and snot ran from his nose, mixing with the blood. He looked very much like the petulant and injured brat.

"You are a pathetic excuse for a man who deserves to die," Vanlyn said. "But I will allow you to keep your life so you may be judged by man before you are judged by the gods. I will ask you this only once. Do you yield?"

Argent tried to speak and spat out blood. There was still a bit of defiant light shining in his brother's eyes, but even he knew Vanlyn had won. Finally, Argent inclined his head, slow and deliberate.

"Go to the main tent and wait for me there. You should be safe." Vanlyn turned to go, eager finish his business and join Dane on the battlefield.

He had taken two steps before he heard movement. Vanlyn whipped his body around, bringing his staff with him and seeing, at the same time, the glint of steel of the dagger blade. As Argent went to strike, he halted suddenly, stumbling clumsily, his eyes

wide. Slowly his gaze lowered to the sword blade protruding from his chest. Vanlyn did not move or react. He watched as the realization that he was dying filled Argent's eyes before the light faded from them completely.

Lady Dacien pulled her sword from Argent's back. "Your father is in the main tent."
"Thank you." Vanlyn nodded once to her.

The camp was almost empty, the sounds of battle seeming very far away. Vanlyn was not surprised to see Gray Moon seated outside, waiting for him. Vanlyn nodded to him as he moved the flap aside.

Aelden was frantically stuffing items in a valise, and he didn't notice Vanlyn's presence until he turned and saw him there. The valise dropped from Aelden's nerveless fingers. "You!"

"Argent is dead." Vanlyn spoke the words without emotion.
Aelden paled. "No."

"Now, Aelden, will you stop this?"

"You killed him? You killed your own brother?" Vanlyn decided not to correct him. There was no point in letting him know that Lady Dacien had delivered the killing blow.

"This was you." Aelden had dropped his gaze. He acted as if Vanlyn wasn't truly there even though he was the subject of Aelden's words. "This was all you."

"Not all. I have my people, and I will fight to protect them," Vanlyn said. "Leave Penryn and do not return."

"I was a good leader." Aelden's eyes blazed with that same fire of madness that had claimed Argent. His hands fisted, and he brought them down in a violent motion. "This is your fault!"

"No," a voice said from behind them. "It's yours."

Lord Maxus stepped into the tent. "Running like a coward, are you? Prince Vanlyn is correct. Go out and call the surrender. Have your soldiers withdraw. Lady Dacien and I are already assisting the people of Penryn so stop this."

"No!" Tears fell down Aelden's face. "You won't take this from me!"

Maxus turned to Vanlyn. "Highness, I will deal with him. Go and help your people."

"Thank you," Vanlyn said as he turned to go. "Lord Maxus, I ask that you and Lady Dacien find a solution to the conflict with the fiends. They will need many advocates in the days to come."

"I will," Maxus said. "You have my word."

"No, Vanlyn! Don't you dare walk away from me! I am High Lord Sarn of Toryn! You are nothing but a lowly traitor!" Aelden's cries and the sounds of struggling followed him out the tent, but for Vanlyn they held no meaning.

Vanlyn rushed back across the encampment. The sounds of battle now seemed at their normal tempo, as though his final confrontations with his family had wrapped them in another world.

When Vanlyn emerged into the clearing, he could see the battle was nearly at its end with the troops of Maxus and Dacien joining with his people. The bogies had some of them trembling in fear and throwing down their arms in surrender. He caught sight of Lahn Aurris, as impressive in battle as Vanlyn had expected and Rasleigh holding his own.

Where by the gods was Dane?

Vanlyn caught sight of his love, fighting a group of soldiers. This puzzled him. Had

Dane already taken care of Mallan? Beside him, Gray let a low growl erupt from his throat so Vanlyn asked the wolf to lend him his sight and that's when Vanlyn saw.

A wound was opening in the air, a tearing of the realm itself, the heart of it pulsing with darkness. Vanlyn could see into the burning sore. He knew what that thing was, and what he was seeing, although he knew there was no way he could possibly have that knowledge.

A rift. A doorway to a world of darkness, perhaps even the one that once held Dane imprisoned. He would never consider that is where Mallan would hide. The necromancer stepped from within the rift and raised his hands. The blackness gathered again.

The tendrils reached out, searching and probing and caught Dane as he launched himself into the sky. Vanlyn cried a warning but was too late. The tendrils wrapped around him, forcing their way into his mouth and eyes, down his throat, taking hold of Dane from the inside and shaking his body like a dog would a stubborn piece of meat. Dane's agonized scream filled the air.

"No!" Vanlyn dashed across the clearing, but Mallan seemed so far away. Dane's body was reshaping, tearing from its place in the world, the form of something else imposing itself against the stretched skin. Vanlyn knew with sick realization what was happening. Mallan was separating Dane from the beast.

Vanlyn knew what this meant. Dane would be destroyed. His body would crumble to dust, and his soul would be lost forever in the mists, tormented and tormenting. Vanlyn would walk the nether-hells themselves before he allowed that to happen. Gray howled, and it came to Vanlyn.

"Help me one last time, great one. Lend me your power."

Then Vanlyn was within the wolf, seeing the world through his eyes, filled with everything that was primal. Muscles lean and powerful, teeth fierce and sharp as daggers, the scent of prey filling his nose.

The grass rushed under Vanlyn's feet. The fighting humans were a mere blur. The strongest scent took hold, causing him to act on his instinct and senses alone.

There he saw him, and Vanlyn could see the darkness and smell the stench, and it offended his sensitive nose. This one was insulting to him, to nature and Death herself. Vanlyn leapt, all his muscles working as one in a graceful bound no other beast could imitate. Jaws opened, craving flesh. Mallan was so intent on torturing Dane he caught sight of Vanlyn a moment too late.

The taste of blood filled his mouth, at the same time bitter and sweet. Flesh suddenly putrid and rotting sickened him, but a wolf is unconcerned with such things. Vanlyn bit deeper, tearing at muscle and finally at the pulse at Mallan's throat.

Vanlyn called into the air, a sound of triumph and of the hunt completed. The prey had fallen. For a brief moment, he shared everything that Gray had seen and experienced, but when he felt his humanity slipping away, Vanlyn withdrew, returning to his rightful place.

He feared for his defenseless body, but he knew right away that he didn't need to worry. Tae and Dawkins guarded him, and the battle was at its end.

"Dawkins," Vanlyn said. "We have to get to Dane!"

Then he was running, but the bogies caught up with him and bore him on the wind itself and then he was there. Lahn was the first to reach Dane where he had fallen and Vanlyn watched, his heart wrenching as Dane's body convulsed, shifting between the

man and the beast.

"It's almost fully awake." Lahn's voice was high and desperate. "We have to send it into sleep again."

"Stand aside," Dawkins commanded as the bogies surrounded Dane. "We will do what we can."

Vanlyn could only stand and helplessly watch as the bogies went to work. Soon Marcelyn Hale, Lady Dacien and Lord Maxus joined him in his vigil. Two soldiers, at Maxus' command, brought a litter and waited.

The bogies surrounded Dane and took their true forms, and they knelt before his convulsing body. They opened their mouths, sucking air in as Vanlyn had seen many times before, but this time, the blackness poured forth from Dane's mouth, ears and nose. The bogies took the tendrils inside of them. Their own bodies spasmed, their flesh pulsed and black legions formed where their skin bubbled. It appeared that, once the bogies devoured them, the tendrils sought to escape.

Once the blackness seemed drained from Dane's body, the bogies laid hands on him, their skin taking on the silver glow. Vanlyn knew they were drawing their power from the earth as Dane had once told him. They chanted a song that Vanlyn didn't understand, but it soothed his troubled heart somewhat. It came to him that the melody resembled a lullaby. Vanlyn then realized with much relief that the convulsions had ceased.

"We have calmed the beast somewhat." Dawkins seemed infinitely tired. He motioned for the soldiers to come forward. "It may still struggle to wakefulness. It is beyond even our power to send it back into sleep again."

Vanlyn swallowed the stone in his throat as he watched them load Dane onto the litter. "How is he? Will he—"

Dawkins released a breath. "I don't know, Vanlyn, not this time. The damage is severe. It will take much time for him to heal from the poison of the necromancer, and there is the matter of the beast."

"Oh Dane, love." Vanlyn approached the litter and took Dane's hand. "All this and then to lose you?"

Vanlyn looked at Dawkins. "Please, isn't there anything you can do?"

"Well," Dawkins said, "there may be one thing."

"What?"

Dawkins didn't reply immediately. "I will ask you this again, Vanlyn. What are you willing to sacrifice?"

Vanlyn didn't hesitate. "Anything."

"Very well," Dawkins said. "Let's make him comfortable for now. See to things here and come to me, and I will tell you what I mean to do."

Vanlyn hated leaving Dane, but he knew Dane would want him to take care of their people first. "Take him to our home. I'll be there soon."

"Yes, Highness."

Vanlyn's heart ached as they took Dane away. What if Dane woke up while he wasn't there? But he knew Dawkins would take care of him.

"Highness?"

"Yes, Lahn," Vanlyn said. Now to the matter at hand.

* * * *

Vanlyn learned most of the soldiers had abandoned Aelden to join with either Dacien or Maxus when Aelden said he would torture and kill innocent people. Some had relatives on the island, so of course, they would not do anything to hurt their families.

Maxus had Aelden in the big tent, with two of his soldiers as guard. They needn't have bothered for his father was sitting in a far corner of the tent, his face a mess of dried snot and the salty tracks of old tears. He looked up when Vanlyn entered, then looked back down.

"We will take him before the High Council in Great Ordwyn to be judged," Lord Maxus said. "We let this go on too long, and we apologize."

"Lives were lost, although not many. It is a pity either way," Lady Dacien said. "We will accept responsibility for it as well."

Maxus nodded in agreement. "Will you come with us when we return?" It seemed as though Maxus didn't expect him too.

"I will come later," Vanlyn said. "Tell the Council I will accept the responsibility for ruling Torny if I must."

"Are there no other successors?" Dacien asked.

Vanlyn frowned as an idea occurred. "Lady Dacien, will you do something for me?"

"Of course."

"I need you to get a message to my sister."

"Your sister? I thought—"

"No." Vanlyn gave her a quick explanation. "I want her first of all to know she is safe and can come home now."

"Eselda," Aelden whispered.

Vanlyn looked at him. "Argent was responsible, but she escaped his treachery. You were so blind to what Argent was doing, but that is no longer important." He realized he had no more to say to Aelden Sarn. He had stopped being Vanlyn's father long ago if he ever was.

"I will deliver your message." Dacien smiled.

"Thank you. I will join you in the capital as soon as I can. Remember what I said, Lord Maxus."

Maxus nodded. Vanlyn turned to exit the tent and glanced back at his father one last time. Then he moved on without looking back.

* * * *

There was much to do, dead to mourn and bury, and homes and lives to rebuild. Vanlyn was thankful it wasn't as bad as it could have been. He mourned with his people, helping where he could, giving comfort and instruction.

Vanlyn also said his goodbyes to Rasleigh, seeing him off at the docks as Lady Dacien prepared to return to the mainland.

"So, I'm losing you again." Rasleigh sighed. Vanlyn accepted the quick embrace, but Vanlyn drew away first.

"Did you ever truly have me?" Vanlyn said. "I want no ill feelings between us, Rasleigh. Do well with your life."

"Perhaps we'll see each other again. I want my son to meet his godfather."

Vanlyn grinned, pleased and surprised. "Someday soon, I promise."

When they embraced the second time, Vanlyn returned it warmly as he would to a

friend.

Vanlyn continued with his business, seeing off the army, and continuing to help with the efforts his people were making to reassume their lives.

After a few days, Marcelyn Hale pulled him aside and told him to go home.

The manor was so familiar now, but there was sadness about it as well as Vanlyn made his way to their bedroom. Dane lay there, still thin and pale, his skin pulled tight over his frame. Every so often, something would shift underneath his skin, in the shape of fingers or dagger like appendages. And with each movement, his love would writhe in pain.

Vanlyn sat down on the bed beside him and took Dane's hand again. "I'm back, love. I'm sorry I stayed away for so long, but I have seen to our people. It is over. Argent is dead, and my father is no longer High Lord. He is being taken away for justice."

There was no response, and Vanlyn began to despair. "Oh, love, can you hear me?" There was no response. "Dawkins," Vanlyn looked at the old man

"I shall tell you now what I mean to do," Dawkins said. "I have obtained permission from those who are leaders among my people. As I said, Dane will need time to heal, and to return the beast into its deep slumber. I cannot tell you how long this may be. Time is measured differently in our world."

"How does that help Dane?"

"We will place Dane in a spelled sleep," Dawkins said. "He will be in an in-between place—within this world and ours where our power may be of greater benefit to him."

"But you can't say how long? It could be weeks? Months?"

"We do not know. As I have said the magic nearly destroyed Dane. The necromancer weakened the bond between Dane and the beast, nearly sending him to oblivion." Dawkins smiled at him. "Thank you, Highness. You saved his life, and Death is very pleased. You may very well live a long life yourself."

"I want my life to be with him." Vanlyn's gaze rested on Dane. "And I won't age in your world?"

"No."

"Very well, I want to go with him."

"You're certain of that?" Dawkins said. "You willingly join him?"

"Yes," Vanlyn said.

Dawkins inclined his head with respect. "I thought you would, so we have arranged it."

"Besides," Vanlyn smiled slightly, "I made a promise to him that I intend to keep."

* * * *

It was in the early morning hours when Dane came awake. Vanlyn lay next to him, naked as Dane was, hoping to warm his lover's cold body with his own.

"Vanlyn."

Vanlyn propped himself up on the bed at his elbows. "Dane?"

Dane's eyes were fathomless pools of black. "It struggles."

"Yes, I know."

Dane turned his head towards him. "What happened?"

Vanlyn told him how he'd joined with Gray Moon to kill Mallan.

"I can't keep it at bay." Dane's voice trembled in fear. "It will destroy me."

“No,” Vanlyn said. “Dawkins has an idea.”

Vanlyn drew Dane into his arms and began to speak, his voice gentle and reassuring, Dane snuggled comfortably in the crook of Vanlyn’s arm. When he was finished, Dane said, “Vanlyn, you can’t.”

“What else may I do? Watch myself grow old and decrepit, living my life without you?”

“Oh dear gods.”

“Do you remember that promise I made to you?”

Dane moistened his lips and nodded.

“Do not make me break my word,” Vanlyn said. “There are arrangements that must be made here, and I have to return to Toryn for a little while. But, when I come home, we’ll be together, I promise.”

“You don’t have to promise,” Dane said. “Your word will always be good with me.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

The doors to the Council Hall closed on the sounds of bickering voices. Vanlyn was glad the heavy and intricately carved wood shut them out. What they did with Aelden Sarn was not his concern anymore.

He was, however, concerned with how they would handle the fiends. Even with Lady Dacien and Lord Maxus standing with him and all the witnesses presented to them, the men and women of the Council still looked upon the fiends as mindless beasts that did not deserve any consideration.

A small part of him thought he should stay longer and see the Council convinced, but Dawkins had come to him—passing easily between the worlds—and told him that time was growing short. Dane must go into the spelled sleep or Vanlyn risked spending the rest of his life alone.

He had one more task before he left.

Lady Dacien had spoken with him before the council convened telling him she had completed the task he'd set for her. Vanlyn had wanted to abandon the meeting and his duties, but he knew that wouldn't go over well.

There were waiting rooms in the hall, like the ones in the council house on Penryn, larger and more ornately decorated of course, but they served the same purpose. Vanlyn approached one of these now and knocked before pulling the door open.

Vanlyn ignored the finery and the sideboard laden with food. His eyes were on the woman who halted in the midst of her pacing. She turned towards him with a flurry of her skirts, her hands clasped anxiously before her. How many times had he dreamed of this moment since learning she was alive?

She whispered his name. "Vanlyn."

Now that he saw her, his feet refused to move, his breath caught in his chest. She was as beautiful as he recalled, even more so, with a glow of happiness from being with someone she loved.

Tears welled and spilled over Vanlyn's lids. "Eselda."

He rushed to her as she stood and held out her arms, and he fell into them, astonished, grateful and unbelieving all at once. "Oh, Eselda, oh gods, I can't believe it. I've missed you so."

"I missed you too." Her eyes glistened with tears.

They embraced again, and Vanlyn kissed her cheeks and all the memories of her returned, her scent, her face and her smile. "I thought I would never get the chance to see you."

"Oh it's been so long. I'm so sorry, dear little brother. I never meant to—"

"Not a word," Vanlyn admonished playfully. "Don't fret, I'll have the perfect prank thought up when I return."

Vanlyn saw her face fall, and he was sorry he'd jested. "You truly don't know how long you'll be gone?"

Vanlyn sighed. He'd trusted Lady Dacien with a letter to give to Eselda once she located her. In it, Vanlyn told her of how quickly he'd had to act and how he needed to see her before he left. "No love, I'm sorry."

“This Tanderes must be quite a man,” Eselda said.

Vanlyn took her hands and led her over to the couch. “He is. I love with all my heart, Eselda.”

She laid a hand against his face. “Then go and be with him. I promise Toryn is in good hands. And when you return, we’ll have the most scandalous fun.”

“Indeed,” Vanlyn said.

They embraced again and spoke of old times until another knock sounded at the door. Vanlyn spoke with the man who loved Eselda, asking him of course to take care of her and threatening him with dire consequences if he didn’t. Then they embraced like brothers, and Vanlyn bid them both a tearful farewell.

* * * *

Vanlyn arrived on Penryn, and Dawkins was there to meet him with the coach. The old bogie greeted him with an affectionate smile. “Welcome home, my lord.”

Vanlyn embraced him. “I’ll need to finish things.”

They visited Marcelyn Hale, and Vanlyn said his goodbyes to her. He left with her warning to make certain Dane got his proper rest and they come back soon. Rhys was next and already getting settled into his new role as High Lord of Penryn. Vanlyn had grown very fond of him and wished him well.

Gray Moon and his pack waited at the door. Vanlyn asked him to watch over the island and see its beasts safe. Gray had agreed and then his pack ran for the woods with a promise to be there when Dane and Vanlyn arrived.

As Vanlyn entered the house, he made his way to the library where he knew Lahn Aurris waited.

Before Vanlyn had left for Toryn and Great Ordwyn, he and Dane had spoken with their friend.

“Rhys will be named High Lord of Penryn,” Dane said to him. “But the fiends need an advocate behind them, and my manor needs to be cared for. I want you to stay here and be Minister and do what you can to help the fiends.”

“But why me?” Lahn seemed truly terrified of the request. “Surely Hale—”

“Why not you?” Vanlyn said. “You are our dearest and most trusted friend.”

Lahn swallowed and averted his eyes. “I am not so great.”

“You will do well, my friend,” Dane said. “Will you take on this task?”

Lahn drew himself up, gathering his courage. “Yes.”

So papers were drawn up, providing proof of the transfer of power. The three signed them in silence, and Dawkins took them for safekeeping.

Afterwards, Lahn asked, “May I walk with you?”

“Of course,” Dane said. “You must know where the place is.”

“If you need to come to us,” Vanlyn said, “ask Dawkins, and he will guide you.”

Lahn nodded and swallowed again. He left them alone in their bedroom.

“Are you ready love?” Vanlyn asked Dane.

“Yes,” Dane pulled the sheets back. “Will you help me?”

“Of course.” Vanlyn approached him.

They dressed simply in trousers and shirts. It was difficult for Dane. Although the beast seemed to be slumbering, at times it still stirred, seeming to try and force its way through Dane’s skin. When they were finished, Dane took Vanlyn’s arm, and they left

together.

They took a slow turn around the manor. Dane would touch an article here or there, straighten a picture or wipe at some dust. He never let go of Vanlyn as he did this. Although they knew they would return, they ached to leave this place.

Finally, they made their way to the front where Lahn and the bogies waited.

“Dawkins,” Dane said. “Please remain with this manor and help Lahn with whatever his tasks may be.”

“I will, sir.”

“We want to thank you all for what you have done,” Dane said. “We hope to see you all again, soon.”

They’d prepared a litter for Dane, but he refused it, choosing instead to walk. Dane had once told Vanlyn about a place in the forest where the bogies passed freely between the worlds

The two didn’t speak as they walked, but Vanlyn could sense Dane was content he was there. They passed beneath the canopy of trees into the cool semi-darkness. All around them the beasts gathered, following with curious eyes until they finally came to the place where Gray and his pack waited.

The tree was as ancient and tall as anything Vanlyn had ever seen, its trunk split a good ways down the middle. It opened into a gaping hole where muted light caused dappled patterns to play across the insides. Vanlyn was aware when Dane hesitated.

“It’s all right love, I’m here.” Vanlyn smiled up at him.

Dane returned the smile with all his love and affection. “I know.”

“It won’t be long,” Dawkins said. “Do not worry. We will see you there and help you adjust.”

Vanlyn entered the space first, breathing that familiar scent of the forest that always accompanied the bogies. Dane stepped in beside him, and Vanlyn pulled him close.

“Prepare yourselves,” Dawkins said.

“Are you ready, love?”

He could hear the anxiety in Dane’s voice. “Vanlyn.”

“Don’t worry, love, I’m here.” Vanlyn said. “Yes, Dawkins, we’re ready.”

The bogies began a musical chant, similar to the one they used before, the power sending a tingling across Vanlyn’s skin. Dane gasped, and Vanlyn knew he felt it too. There was a ponderous groaning like an ancient voice yawning as the opening began to draw together. As the song progressed, Vanlyn felt the pull of sleep and he succumbed.

* * * *

Dane smiled in welcome as Vanlyn stepped into the open-air room. The place they found themselves in was huge, the world around them lit with a dappled silver light. Dane knew there were others in the strange world he found himself in, but for now, it was he and Vanlyn alone, and no one could take this moment from them.

Dane lay sprawled comfortably amid rumpled sheets made from the finest silk. Goose down pillows supported his back. Everything was pristine. No darkness could come here, not in their world. Vanlyn climbed onto the bed, Dane opened his arms to his young love, and Vanlyn came willingly as always.

They kissed. The fruity taste of the wine they had sampled with their sumptuous meal filled Dane’s mouth, as he tasted it on Vanlyn’s tongue. They wrestled playfully this

way for a time, but it was too soon that both men were fully erect, their breathing heavy, their skin damp with sweat with wanting of each other.

“Vanlyn, it’s been so long, too long.” Dane grasped him by the shoulders and turned the young man’s body beneath him. “I told you when our trials were at an end, I was going to keep you in bed for as long as I was able.”

Vanlyn smiled up at him, his eyes unfocused in his passion, and it reminded Dane of how endearing the young man was. Dane claimed his already kiss-swollen lips, his arms wrapped fiercely around Vanlyn’s shoulders while Vanlyn plied Dane’s hair with his slim fingers. Their erections rubbed against each other and became slippery with pre-cum until Vanlyn moaned into Dane’s mouth, causing his heart to race with ever-increasing desire.

Dane pulled back, and he claimed Vanlyn’s throat with his teeth, wrenching a cry from him as his teeth sank deep into tender flesh. Dane’s tongue soothed the sore area as Vanlyn writhed beneath him.

“Dane, how I’ve missed this. Please love me forever,” Vanlyn breathed.

“Of course I will.” Dane was working his way down the length of Vanlyn’s torso as he so loved doing, taking playful nips at the dusky nipples and rippled stomach, noticing with some bemusement that the lines were harder, more refined. His Vanlyn had changed in many ways.

When Dane finally reached Vanlyn’s sex, which was rock hard as the blood filled his veins, Dane ran his tongue along the bulbous tip, suckling it and tickling the slit.

“Oh gods, Dane, yes!” Vanlyn’s back arched. “So long. It’s been so long.”

Dane plunged in, swallowing Vanlyn’s straining member whole. Vanlyn gave his cry, and his body thrashed from side to side as Dane held him there until he calmed, not wanting the end to come too soon.

Then Dane began to move. The musky taste of Vanlyn replaced the sweetness of the wine, and Dane let Vanlyn’s engorged sex touch the tip of his throat, holding it there, before drawing his mouth up in a slow caress.

Vanlyn continued to thrash, half mad in his desire, and Dane allowed a smile of satisfaction on his lips before he increased his stroking, his hand fisting around the base of Vanlyn’s cock, pumping the flesh. His other hand cupped the heavy testicles, as they tightened and drew against Vanlyn’s body. Vanlyn was screaming his name.

His climax erupted, filling Dane’s mouth, and Dane drank like a man dying of thirst. He was in a sense. How long had he hungered for this again? When Vanlyn’s thrashing stilled, Dane rose up over him, supporting himself with his arms, and looked at the man he loved. That sated, sleepy expression was all Dane needed.

On the stand at their bedside were several jars cut from some bejeweled crystal. Dane selected one and opened it, taking a liberal amount of the salve and coated Vanlyn’s entrance before inserting one finger and circling the muscle.

Vanlyn bit back a cry, his teeth catching his lower lip as his hips rocked in time with Dane’s moving finger. When Vanlyn was completely hard again, Dane spread the salve on his own painfully hard cock, positioning himself at Vanlyn’s entrance.

As Dane slid inside the slick heat, the fire engulfed him almost immediately, spreading through his blood in a scorching flame. How he’d ached to be inside his Vanlyn once again, and now Dane had to take care or completion would come too fast for *him*.

Dane eased himself in and out, forcing himself to go slow, but with Vanlyn

wriggling underneath him, enticing him with his ass slightly raised, Dane knew he could no longer resist the call. He lifted Vanlyn's legs and flung them carelessly over his shoulders, and rammed home deep inside the man. Vanlyn cried out again, and Dane withdrew, thrust deep again, relentlessly taking what he knew was his—*would always be his*. Dane's cock moved, working, feeling every bit of sensation and the wet heat that enveloped his sex.

The end came too soon for him. Dane felt it building at the base of his spine, in the tightening of his balls. He threw his head back, the cry erupting from his own throat. There was no transformation; the beast was not here with him. He was a man who need not fear tearing his lover apart.

When he had filled Vanlyn with his essence, when there was no more in him, Dane moved from beneath Vanlyn's legs and found the strength to pull himself flush with Vanlyn's body. His young lover was moaning softly in the afterglow.

It was of course some time before either man moved, not that they wished too. They lay content in each other's arms, Vanlyn in the crook of Dane's shoulder, his breathing even and peaceful. Dane drank in his warmth. His mind wandered to thoughts of when he had first seen Toryn's handsome young prince, and Dane couldn't stop the chuckle from escaping.

He had thought Vanlyn was asleep, so Dane was mildly surprised when Vanlyn said, "Something amusing?"

"Yes," Dane said. "I started out to seduce a prince so I may use him for my own ends, and now it appears the prince has seduced me."

"I did no such a thing." Vanlyn slapped him playfully on the arm.

Dane quickly sobered. "I still feel concern for our people and for everyone we've left behind."

"They will be well," Vanlyn said. "They know we are watching over them. They will do their tasks and help mortal and fiend."

"Yes, of course." He drew Vanlyn closer, relieved by his presence and truly hopeful of their future and their life together. "Thank you, Vanlyn."

"Whatever for?"

"For staying with me," Dane said. "I know what you've sacrificed."

"Hush," Vanlyn said as he moved his body atop Dane's and claimed him with a deep tonguing kiss. When Vanlyn drew away all the love and admiration shown from his eyes. "Didn't I tell you, Dane Tanderes, that I would never leave you alone in the dark?"

The End

About the Author:

CJ Black has been an author for over two decades, publishing short stories and a fantasy novel. Hoping to expand her horizons, she began writing erotica and has stories published in two of the Better Sex.com Amatory Fiction anthologies as a weekly contest winner in their yearly erotic fiction contest. She has several short stories in online magazines and with major e-publishers. When she isn't writing, she's reading, gaming or gardening (if weather permits) and is an amateur "Foodie". Feel free to drop by her site at

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