

NINE



edited by SA Clements

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Mine

TOP SHELF

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Foreword

By SA Clements

Who doesn't love a possessive vampire? A dragon of deep affection? A lovelorn werewolf? Mine is all about how paranormal creatures up the ante of love and make it something of an obsession.

The appeal of these creatures is easy to understand. They work outside the rules and regulations of human society. They love more deeply, need more strongly, and what they take, they keep. From Medieval knights to modern, city-dwelling vampires, Mine explores all of the heat, fear, and wonder a more than human lover can inspire.

I hope you enjoy a little toothy, growly love as much as I did when I chose the stories for this anthology. There's nothing like a little adrenaline to get someone in the mood for romance!

Leeches and Layabouts *by JL Merrow*

It was an absolute bloody disaster, that's what it was. Pun very definitely not intended. Crispin could have wept. He'd spent ten years building up his business, establishing a hard-earned reputation as the premier garlic grower in the South of England. He'd knocked those smug bastards on the Isle of Wight for six—the cheek of it, calling themselves “The Garlic Farm” as if there were no other—with his Hampshire Mammoth variety and the phenomenally popular Stinky Pete hybrid. He'd won prize after prize, sneaking the garlic crown from the inflated heads of those complacent Caulkheads. As a final cock of the snook to those insular idiots, he'd even wangled a supply contract with Minghella's, the Isle of Wight firm who boasted their ice-cream was stocked by Harrods. Admittedly, for some reason the Gourmet Garlic flavor hadn't sold all that well, but it was the principle that counted.

And now this had happened. He couldn't even touch his adored Allium, let alone eat it. Never to taste that glorious flavor again... Crispin felt a single tear roll down his nose to drip wetly on the open sack of Stinky Pete at his feet. It left a red stain on one of the plump, pristine bulbs as if the very garlic itself bled for his misfortune.

Crispin eyed it sadly—and then sneezed explosively. Damn all vampires with their bloody garlic allergy! Double damn those government morons who'd courted the Goth vote by supporting sufferance for sanguivores. And quadruple damn for all eternity the undead idiot who'd drained him dry last Thursday and communicated their vile disease! How could he farm garlic, now he couldn't get within three feet of the stuff without coming out in hives? Oh, he could carry on, all right, just delegating far more of the work than he used to—but what if word got out about his unfortunate condition? He'd be a laughing stock—and worse, he'd go bust within a week. Who'd buy garlic from a vampire?

What he needed, Crispin realized, was a personal assistant. A front man. Someone who could deal directly with the employees, unhindered by garlic allergies and photosensitivity. Someone who would liaise with the public and help him keep his shameful secret.

And preferably, someone tasty. Crispin licked his lips and winced as he snagged his tongue on a fang.

Art hummed as he flicked through the sits vac bit of the local rag. The humming was a necessary distraction—if he concentrated too hard on the paper he might actually find a job he could do and that would really muck up his plans to watch every episode of Days

of Our Lives ever broadcast by the time he was thirty. No, the trick was to just skim the ads and only let the eyes rest on phrases like “experience necessary” and “A levels required”. That way his conscience would be clear to continue his easy, if humdrum, existence as a parasite upon society.

Art knew that a lot of people thought sponging off the state was a bad thing. He felt they hadn’t really thought it through. People, after all, needed someone to look down on. If they couldn’t look at him and think “I may be stupid/poor/ugly/still a virgin at forty-two, but at least I’m not a jobless layabout with no prospects in life,” where would they be? Depressed and possibly suicidal, most likely. In fact, if you thought about it, Art was a bit of a lifesaver. He should probably get a medal or something. And then there was the whole parasite thing: Art could talk for hours, and occasionally did when the DSS got particularly evangelical about finding him a job, about parasites being a good thing. Where would the hippo be, he’d argue, without the oxpecker? And what about that new research into fruit flies and Wolbachia? At this point, even the most zealous government employee would develop a glazed expression and tick off his form for the fortnight.

He jumped guiltily as Denise came over. She was the leader of his latest “Back to Work” workshop, and was irritatingly keen to see him join the ranks of the wage slaves, a classic case of misery loving company if ever he’d seen one. They’d gotten off on the wrong foot right at the start, when she’d flatly refused to listen to his argument that the workshop was clearly unsuitable for someone who’d never had a job in the first place. And the way she always greeted him with a cheery “All right, my lover?” never failed to set his teeth on edge. Not only was she the last person in the world he’d have considered as a lover even if he’d been straight, the terminally hideous and aged not excluded, but he had a strong suspicion she’d never been within three counties of Somerset and only put the accent on to annoy him.

“All right, my lover?” Denise cooed, her syrupy voice not quite drowning out the sound of Art’s teeth grinding together. Art entertained a brief fantasy of suing her for every penny she had to cover his dentist’s expenses.

She took advantage of his momentary distraction to snatch the paper from his hands. “Oh, well done, my poppet! That’s the perfect job for you!”

Horried, Art watched as she used thick red marker pen to circle an ad he hadn’t even seen yet:

Wanted: personable personal assistant for vampire.

No experience necessary. Training given.

All meals included.

“I’ll give them a call right away!” Denise trilled excitedly.

Art slumped down in his seat, his face in his hands.

There was no way out of this. He was going to have to go to a job interview.

Thirty minutes later, Art walked miserably out of the Job Center clutching a slip of paper. On it were details of his upcoming interview with the undead employer. Art shuddered at the last word, but he'd have had to admit (although only under the most dire torture, probably involving hot knives and the threat of hard labor) he was a little intrigued. The guy was a secretive bastard, only giving his first name. Art rolled it around on his tongue. Crispin. Didn't seem like much of a name for a vampire. Crispin the Bloody? Crispin the Impaler? And he hadn't given any details of the job and had arranged for the interview to be in a hotel. After dark, obviously.

Still, it'd be kind of cool to work for a vampire... Art stopped dead in his tracks, causing other pedestrians to curse violently as they swerved to avoid him and, in one case, crashed straight into him with perhaps a little more force than was strictly necessary. Art barely felt it, so horrified was he by what he'd just thought. "A vamp may be a vamp, but work is still work," he told himself firmly.

"Got any more astounding insights to share with us?" a sarcastic voice asked from behind. "Something about the toileting habits of forest-dwelling bears or the probable religion of the pontiff?"

"Er, no," Art muttered, his face burning.

"Then would you mind getting your arse out of my way?"

Sheepishly, and still rattled, Art did so.

The day of the interview, Art spent hours preparing. He started at lunchtime, chewing on raw onion until his eyes watered, although the tragic John/Marlina/Roman love triangle storyline might have had something to do with it too. Hopefully, his interviewer would suffer the same overactive tear ducts when he caught a whiff of Art's breath. A simple yet tasty supper of garlic bread and pickled onions added to the pungent bouquet.

Art realised he'd have to tread a careful line, here. The key was to antagonize the vamp, but only to the point of refusing him the job, not to the extent of ripping his head off and sucking out his brains... no, wait, that was zombies. Tearing into his jugular, then, and feeding on his heart's blood as it pulsed from his veins. Or arteries. Whichever ones it was that did the pulsing.

Although from what he'd heard, getting bitten by a vamp wasn't such a bad experience, at that... Art shook his head. First things first: make sure he stayed in the ranks of the gainfully unemployed, and then he'd have all the time in the world for fantasizing about vampire lovers.

Hmm. Art eyed the crumpled white t-shirt he'd retrieved from the bottom of the laundry pile thoughtfully. In many respects, it was ideal: he'd managed to get egg all down the front last time he'd worn it, which would send a subtle, irritating message to anyone on an all-liquid diet. But a slogan would, he felt, be the cherry on the top. Marker pen in hand, he wondered what to go for. Was Vampires Suck sufficiently insulting or just pointlessly factual? God Hates Fangs came a little too close to the bone for someone of Art's sexual preferences. People might just think he was dyslexic, and if he got beaten up by militant liberals who thought he was a homophobe he wasn't sure he'd be able to stand the irony. In the end he settled for Life is for the Living, which he felt made a point without being too confrontational.

Crispin's undead heart beat a little faster when the young man slouched into the dimly-lit hotel room. Admittedly, that just meant it beat roughly four times a minute instead of the usual three, but that seemed to be all that was needed to fuel the rapid redeployment of blood currently taking place in the lower half of Crispin's body.

It wasn't so much that the fellow was good-looking—although sun-bleached curls, an easy golden tan and pecs you could bounce a bulb of garlic off were nothing to be sneezed at—but he smelled divine. Crispin's fangs descended unbidden whilst some sort of internal pulley system seemed to cause his cock to rise commensurately and zip off a snappy salute. Damn it, why was he reacting like this? It wasn't like he was a blushing virgin, bloodsucking-wise. He'd come to a pragmatic arrangement with an ex—the original Stinky Pete for whom Crispin's prize-winning hybrid had been named, although thankfully Pete's personal hygiene had improved beyond all recognition in the meantime—trading a suck for, well, a suck. But Pete had never come close to turning him into the mindlessly slaving bag of hormones and lusts that was currently occupying his shoes. In fact, Crispin had come to the depressing conclusion that he didn't actually like the taste of blood—it was just so, well, bland.

But this boy... Crispin could almost taste the rich, thick blood coursing through his veins. This boy would be a banquet. This boy came with seventeen Michelin stars and a personal recommendation from Gordon F Ramsay (the F, obviously, standing for the chef's favorite expletive). "You're hired!" he managed to stutter out thickly from behind his fangs. "You can thtart immediately!"

Art staggered back a few paces in shock. "But... didn't you read the t-shirt?"

The vamp shrugged. “That’s supposed to be writing? I thought it was just random hieroglyphics.”

“Smell the garlic?”

“Did you say garlic?” The vampire’s eyes seemed to light up. What with the fangs and all, it didn’t make him any less scary. “You like garlic?”

“Love it! Can’t get enough of the stuff! In fact I’m addicted to it. Did I mention I’m not keen on vampires?” Art fumbled behind his back for the doorknob.

“Good. I can’t stand them myself. Crispin Weebly: Garlic farmer.” He held out a hand.

Mechanically, Art took it. It was cold, but not unpleasantly so. More sort of cool and refreshing... “Wait—garlic farmer? I thought you were, you know, one of our fanged friends? I mean, if you’re not a vamp you ought to have serious words with your dentist.” Art backed away a little nervously as Crispin snarled, viciously pointy fangs glinting theatrically in the lamplight. “Not that I have a problem with vamps...” he babbled.

“No? Two minutes ago you said you hated them. Personally I loathe the bloodthirsty little buggers. Did I ask to be turned into one of them? No, I did not. Never join a club that’ll have you as a member, that’s my motto.” Crispin’s fangs receded slightly as he paced up and down the room, incidentally showing off a graceful figure that would look like a million dollars in evening wear. And even better out of it.

“So, er, how did it happen?” Art asked, feeling a little safer now the sharp-and-pointies were less in evidence.

“I was tricked! All I did was meet an attractive young man in a bar, agree to go for a bite with him—”

“And found out too late he meant a bite of you,” Art finished sympathetically.

“I’ll say. One minute I’m having a quick pre-dinner fumble in an alleyway, and the next thing I know I’m having to claw my way up through the earth from six feet under! Took me weeks to get the dirt out from under my fingernails. Personally,” Crispin added, “I think it’s some kind of Caulkhead conspiracy.” He gave Art a significant look.

At least, Art thought it must be supposed to signify something, but whatever it was went way over his head. “Er, Corkheads? Are they what you get after a zombie’s eaten someone’s brain?”

“Worse. Natives of the Isle of Wight. They’re fiendishly protective of their garlic. They’ve never forgiven me for winning the Minghella’s contract.”

Art could feel his brow furrowing. “Didn’t he used to do films? Never mind. So anyway, you’re a garlic farmer, and now you can’t touch the stuff? That sucks. Er, no offense meant.”

“And this is where you come in,” Crispin purred, showing his fangs in what was presumably meant to be an ingratiating smile but which came off as more of a hungry leer.

No, this is where I go out, Art thought firmly. “Look, I’m sorry about your, um, condition, but I’m really only here because they’ll cut my benefit if I don’t attend job interviews.” He started to edge back toward the door. “I’m sure they’ll be able to find you someone much better than me as a PA.”

Crispin’s eyes seemed to be getting darker. Probably a trick of the light. That’d be what was making his fangs look longer, too, and that smile turn really sinister...Oh, bugger. Art’s heart pounded as the vampire crept closer, hands held out in vaguely claw-like fashion, as approved by Nosferatus everywhere. Or should that be Nosferati? This really wasn’t how Art had imagined his last moments on earth would go—worrying about plural formation. “But I want you,” Crispin murmured, and lunged.

“Ow!” Art yelped as the fangs pierced his skin. “That bloody hurts, you know...” He trailed off as the momentary sting eased off into something far more pleasurable. The analogy with other forms of bodily penetration wasn’t lost on certain portions of his anatomy. “You’d better not turn me,” he mumbled without much heat, relaxing into Crispin’s unexpectedly tender grasp. “I can only sign on during daylight hours.” His hips seemed to want to frot up against Crispin’s lean, hard body, so he let them. Warmth coursed through him as he felt his blood being sucked out, most of the heat congregating at his groin. He moaned his appreciation—then whimpered as the teeth at his neck withdrew.

“Hey, I was enjoying that! Why’d you stop?” Art rubbed his neck as he stared at Crispin. He’d backed off about a foot or so and was gazing back at Art with suspiciously moist eyes. “Crispin? Are you all right?” A horrible thought hit him. “Did I, you know, taste bad? Oh my God, it’s the garlic, isn’t it? I’ve been eating it all day.”

“You taste wonderful,” Crispin said dreamily. “Absolutely delectable. Even better than you smell. It must be the blood—it’s denatured the harmful compounds in the garlic without losing that glorious flavor. I could feast on you all night.”

Art couldn’t see any flaw in that plan. Well, apart from the risk of him being completely exsanguinated or turned into a vampire, or both—but hell, what was the point of life if you didn’t take the odd little risk every now and again? “Sounds good to me,” he croaked. “Um, maybe we could use that bed? After all, you’ve paid for it.”

“Glamoured the receptionist, actually,” Crispin said modestly, studying his fingernails, now perfectly manicured.

“Oh. Cool! Do you have superhuman strength too, because I’ve got to say, that’d be quite a turn—mmmmph!” All the breath whoofed out of Art’s lungs as Crispin picked him up bodily and threw him onto the bed, which creaked in protest but nevertheless stood firm. “Oh, yeah,” he sighed happily as Crispin literally ripped the jeans from his willing legs. “Although we might have to steal me some trousers in the morning,” he added practically.

“We shall be leaving under cover of darkness,” Crispin announced grandly. He gave Art a guilty look. “I’m not sure how long the glamour will last.”

“Better make the most of it now, then, hadn’t we?” Art grinned up at Crispin, who’d climbed onto the bed and was straddling his thighs. “You know, you only had a little sip just now. I bet you’re feeling really hungry.” He assumed a thoughtful expression and ran a hand lightly over his own crotch. “I wonder if blood tastes different from different parts of the body?”

“That’s a very good point,” Crispin murmured, coincidentally showing a couple of very good points himself, one at each corner of his mouth. “I shall have to test that theory.”

Art whimpered as those razor-sharp fangs sank into his thigh. “God, yes!” If it was this good when Crispin bit him near his cock, what would it be like if he actually bit him on the—“OhgodohgodohyesyesYES!” Arching off the bed in ecstasy, Art could spare a thought for only two things: one, he’d just had the most hideously premature ejaculation in the entire history of sex; and two, he probably should have asked Crispin in advance whether there was likely to be any lasting damage. Still, neither of those seemed all that important right now.

“Do you think my come tastes of garlic too?” Art wondered as he came down from the dizzying heights and scooped up a fingerful to try. “Mmm, not bad. Piquant, with an earthy flavor.”

“You, Art, are to die for,” Crispin groaned out, a dreamy look of satiation on his handsome, if slightly predatory features.

Which was sweet, considering the bloke already had. “Hey, do you want me to, um...” Art made a lazy gesture in the direction of Crispin’s still-clad groin.

“No need. It, uh, took care of itself when I tasted your cock.”

That was handy. Art wasn’t selfish, exactly, but he really didn’t want to have to move right now. “Wonder what’ll happen when I taste yours?” he mused with a cheeky grin.

“I think you’re going to have to wait an hour or two to find out,” Crispin sighed. “I’m not as alive as I used to be. We’ll have to go back to the farm; I’d hate to cause a scene if we outstayed our welcome here. And I’m told burning up to a crisp in the morning sun is best avoided. Especially with a name like mine—the puns would be ghastly.”

The farm. That was right—Art had all but forgotten this was a job interview. “Er, I don’t actually remember accepting your offer...”

“No? I think you made your acceptance abundantly clear.” Crispin looked pointedly at the trail of come drying stickily on Art’s chest. “Written in words three feet high, so to speak.”

“Nah, I’d say eighteen inches. Two feet, tops,” Art corrected him modestly. “But...” He trailed off. Would it really be so bad, getting a job with the vampire?

“You can live in,” Crispin urged him. “Full board and lodging.”

“Any, um, perks?” Art wavered.

Crispin raised an eyebrow. “How about all the garlic you can eat?”

“That wasn’t quite what I—”

“And don’t forget, all meals are included.” Crispin leaned over to lick a trail from Art’s shoulder to jaw. “Meaning mine as well.”

Art gave in. “Oh. Well, just as long as we’re clear on that,” he murmured, snuggling into the arms of his employer.

Funny how the word seemed almost endearing, now.

The Highwayman of Colby Heath *by Kate Roman*

The black silk mask lay upon the dresser, and Justin's fingers trembled above it hesitantly. He had imagined he would don it only once, twice at the most, and all his troubles would be over, but here he was a month or more since the first time he had robbed a coach, in deeper than he had ever imagined.

Justin tucked his blond hair under a close, black cap and pulled the collar of his jacket high. He had a week more before those he owed in London would consider their debts unpaid and seek for him in earnest. A week to find a hundred guineas to save himself from shame and ruin--or worse.

Resolutely, he grabbed at the scrap of silk and tucked it close inside his pocket. No one would suspect--they could not--and if he made a goodly haul tonight, travelers would once again be safe in the black watches of Colby Heath.

In the stables of the inn, Justin's coal-black mare, Raven, greeted him with a whicker. He saddled up quickly and plied the chalk across her face, hiding her identity with a distinctive star. "Black Bess," he murmured affectionately, and Raven nickered conspiratorially. Justin bit back a grin. At least his horse was on his side.

He bagged her hooves to muffle their sound and led his mare through the shadowed courtyard. He could hear the ostlers at their cards and voices from the taproom, but the quiet scuff of Raven's hooves was barely a sound at all.

Justin guided the mare out of the courtyard and away from the village, along a tiny path through the copse behind the inn, and within moments they were hidden from view. Raven halted under the trees, stamping impatiently as Justin pulled the sacking from her legs.

"Steady, girl." Justin swung up into the saddle, patting her warm neck as she sidled, and held her back as she danced on her toes. "Quietly, lass. There'll be galloping for you later." He held the mare to a highstepping trot as they negotiated the woodland, crossing a shallow valley until, just ahead, he heard the chatter of the river.

Raven picked her way daintily to the bank and Justin pulled her up in the shadow of a gnarled willow. Directly ahead the full moon hung in the sky, stained orange as though it was afire. Clouds like wisps of smoke lurked black across its face, and Justin crossed himself hurriedly. He was not a believer in signs and portents, but he needed all the luck he could get.

Turning the mare downstream, Justin walked her into the water and headed away from

the ford, knowing the movement of the water would mask Raven's hoofmarks. In moments he was back in the trees on the other bank, safely hidden from the strange orange moon, and he forced himself to think of his destination: the top of the hill. Coaches ran slow for the ford and the hill slowed the teams even further. By the time a vehicle reached the hill's crest the horses were blown and pulling with all their strength, the driver had all his attention on his tired team, and the passengers were hanging onto their straps for dear life. Justin reined Raven in, directing her into a small stand of trees, and fished in his pocket for his mask. The spot was perfect.

Raven stopped suddenly, pricking her ears and snorting. Justin started to admonish her, when a blood-curdling growl sounded close behind. With a scream of terror, Raven bolted, and taken by surprise, Justin lost his balance and hit the ground hard. Over the ringing in his ears he heard the thunder of hooves as Raven galloped away and moments later a huge furred body leaped over him and disappeared through the trees, snarling.

Justin lay still on the forest floor, his heart hammering in his chest. He'd never seen a wolf in this part of the country, and whatever had just passed was bigger than any wolf. Some strange exotic beast escaped from a nobleman's estate, perhaps. Nothing more.

Justin lay still as long as he dared, then clambered cautiously to his feet. There was still no sound, neither of the wild beast nor of Raven, and as Justin crept from the trees, his heart turned cold in his chest. If the beast had injured Raven, all was lost.

Finally he risked a low whistle, and to his relief, Raven whinnied her answer almost immediately. He hurried through the trees and found his mare, wild-eyed and restless in a clearing near the roadside. She rolled an eye at his approach and stamped warningly, and as Justin came up she shied away from the corner of the clearing.

Justin swung around, staring into the shadows, and for a heart-stopping instant thought he saw a flash of green eyes.

But then it was gone.

Raven calmed, dropping her muzzle into his hand, and Justin patted her neck soothingly, breathing deeply. He talked quietly to her, trying to calm himself as much as the horse, until at last he swung himself back to her saddle.

This time he got his mask tied in place without mishap. He stayed away from the stand of trees where the beast had lurked, concealing himself behind a hedge a little further along, and settled down to wait.

Raven was restless, raising her nose to the breeze from time to time and shaking her head anxiously, as though she smelled something that disturbed her. Justin thought uneasily of the strange, gray beast, but there was no sound save the quiet murmurs of the woodland and the faint song of the river from below.

Finally he heard the telltale crunch of wheels and the muffled thump of horses' hooves. Heart pounding, Justin checked his mask, freed his pistols from their holsters, and sent Raven creeping through the trees toward the road.

At last the equipage hove into view. Moonlight glinted on the Royal Mail crests on the coach doors and on the clinking harness of the horses. The team of four was pulling hard, heads down as they labored slowly up the last of the hill, and the driver was fully occupied calling out encouragement. The guard sat relaxed on his seat at the rear, obviously not expecting trouble.

Taking a deep breath, Justin set spur to Raven's sides and charged out into the road. "Stand and deliver!"

The coach horses plunged and snorted, the driver swore, and as the guard leaped down Justin fired a warning shot above his head. "Leave go of that blunderbuss," he directed, shaking with relief as the guard cautiously lowered the heavy weapon to the ground. "Now empty the mailbox!" Justin threw a sack to the frightened man.

As the guard moved to comply, Justin turned to the coach door. "Come out of there," he shouted commandingly. It was too dark to see how many passengers were inside. "Give me your valuables and you will not be harmed."

The coach door swung open, and Justin sent Raven forward. She hesitated for an instant, snorting, and as Justin would have spurred her on, suddenly swung away.

The movement saved his life.

A pistol cracked and Justin felt a burn like fire along his arm. He cried out and Raven bolted, swinging wildly across the road. Already unbalanced, Justin lost his seat a second time and hit the ground as his mare made the cover of the trees. Her hoof beats thundered away into the distance and Justin struggled upright, wounded arm pressed to his chest, desperately searching for a means of escape. Two men ran towards him, shouting, weapons at the ready.

Justin froze. Already wounded, he would be taken--there was no way out. Disgraced, dragged before the magistrates, jailed--if they didn't shoot him on the spot. He raised his own pistol with a hand that shook, determined to go down fighting.

There was a sudden crashing in the woods behind him, and before he could turn something huge and hard crashed into his shoulder. Justin hit the ground hard and stared up in terror at the huge, shaggy head of an enormous wolf. Large, white fangs glinted in the moonlight and pale gray fur framed strange green eyes that glowed with an unearthly light.

The wolf rumbled deep in his chest, eyes flashing, and Justin heard the shouts of his pursuers turn high and afraid. His heart pounded in his ears as he stared at the wolf. The

beast dipped his head, blinking slowly once as though he was trying to tell Justin something, and rumbled again. His breath was hot on Justin's neck, and Justin braced himself for an attack.

But instead, the wolf whipped around and snarled at the men from the coach. A shot rang out as the snarl reached a crescendo and stopped, then, stiff-legged, the wolf advanced.

Justin heard another shot, a confused, startled cry, then a bloodcurdling howl. He tried to get up, but pain flashed through his arm. The darkness came swiftly.

Justin awakened breathless from a dream of a masked wolf running ahead of his coach and green eyes glinting in the woodland he passed. He lay on something soft, and it took only a moment for Justin to recognize his room at the inn and his bed.

He stared at the ceiling for a long moment. The failed robbery, the wolf--had it all been part of the dream?

"How are you feeling?" The voice, low, deep, and throaty like the growl of the wolf, set Justin's senses spinning. He struggled to sit up and looked around wildly.

"Careful. Careful, my friend." Strong hands took Justin by the shoulders, supporting his weight, and Justin found himself staring into a pair of bright green eyes. He shivered, taking in the face of a stranger with black hair, pale skin, and refined features. There was an almost predatory look on his face. As Justin drew back, the stranger's features relaxed into a smile which lit up his face. "Come, I won't hurt you, Justin. Trust me."

"You know my name," Justin managed shakily. "Who--who are you?"

"Of course I know your name." The man's smile widened. "My name is Finn, and you are Justin. I have waited a long time for you."

"You were waiting for me? I don't understand."

"Oh, you will." Finn lifted one hand, caressing Justin's cheek lightly. "After all, you've been waiting for me, too."

"Have I?" Justin whispered, almost afraid of the answer.

Finn only smiled. His hand slid behind Justin's head, tangling in Justin's thick, gold hair, and Justin reached for Finn blindly, heart pounding. Finn's lips found his own.

The kiss seemed to go on forever. Justin clung to Finn's shoulders, eyes closed, lost in the magic of Finn's mouth claiming his, Finn's strength dominating him, holding him. It

felt so right, so perfect. Justin knew without question that he belonged in Finn's arms. All the fear and worry of the past month fell away, and Justin surrendered completely.

At last Finn broke the kiss, sitting back and stroking Justin's cheek again. Breathless, Justin leaned into the touch.

"Lie down," Finn said gently. Justin obeyed, trembling with anticipation. But when Finn took hold of his wrist and pulled back the torn fabric of his shirt, Justin whimpered with surprise and disappointment.

"Patience, Justin." Finn looked up, green eyes twinkling with amusement. "You will be mine before this night is over, never fear."

The thrill that rushed through Justin washed away the pain in his arm, leaving him shaken. He felt himself harden and turned his head away, a blush stealing up his cheeks.

"Yes," Finn said throatily, closer to his ear, and Justin felt Finn's breath hot against his cheek. "That is how I want you to feel. But first...first I must tend to this wound."

Justin risked a look at Finn, embarrassment fading slowly as Finn bathed his arm. Finn seemed engrossed in his work, head down as he gently swabbed the angry red gash on Justin's arm, and Justin looked away again quickly. He didn't like blood.

Finn seemed to have no such qualms. In a short space of time the wound was clean and bandaged, the pain eased to a dull throb. Justin lay still, watching as Finn moved purposefully around the room, tidying away the things he had used. At last Finn returned to the bed, and Justin's heart beat faster.

The bedsprings creaked as Finn sat down beside him. "Now for the taking."

Justin had barely an instant to wonder at Finn's words, then Finn claimed his mouth, hungry and aggressive. Justin surrendered to the onslaught, every part of him on fire with need. His cock filled, throbbing and urgent, and he arched off the bed, moaning against Finn's tongue.

Finn pushed him back down with a warning growl, and Justin gasped at the thrill it sent through him. He lay still obediently, trembling with his want, and was rewarded with a soft bite to the neck. Justin stifled a groan and tilted his head, giving Finn access, and Finn bit again, harder this time.

Every touch of Finn's hands on his skin sent chills spiraling through Justin's cock. Every movement of Finn's warm mouth intensified the ache in his loins. Justin moaned, rolling his head back and opening his legs, desperate for Finn's touch.

At last Finn was fumbling with Justin's clothing, baring his skin and following his questing hands with his clever, knowing tongue. Justin whimpered, fighting the urge to

thrash as Finn's tongue traced his collarbone then traveled lower.

Finn teased his nipple, light at first, then bit sharply, making Justin gasp and jerk up off the bed. Finn growled again, deep and throaty, and Justin fell back, breathless and aching with desire. "Please," he whispered. "Finn, please."

Finn's growl turned to a chuckle, and he nuzzled the bitten place softly. "It's nearly time," he murmured, and moments later, Justin felt hands pulling at his breeches. As the garment came down, Justin cried out, raising his hips to help, trembling at Finn's touch.

"Beautiful." Finn's hands slid over his stomach and down, caressing his hips. Justin whimpered, his hands coming automatically to cover himself.

This time, there was nothing playful about Finn's growl. Low and feral, it chilled Justin's blood yet excited him at the same time, and as Finn caught his wrists and pressed them back above his head, Justin felt fire burning in his veins.

"Mine." Finn's voice was soft and dangerous and his green eyes glinted possessively. He shoved his own thigh between Justin's, spreading him open, and Justin drew his knees up, trembling. His balls throbbed, full and tight, and inside him an ache was growing, an ache he barely understood.

"Now that's better." Still pinning Justin's wrists above his head, Finn leaned down and kissed him hard. Justin melted into that kiss, groaning as he felt Finn's heat against his groin.

Finn palmed his cock, stroking him firmly, driving him out of his mind. Justin writhed, gripping Finn's shoulders with his newly-freed hands, bucking into Finn's strokes. Need rose inside him, overmastering, overpowering, until he thought he would explode.

"Come for me. Come on." Finn's throaty whisper drove Justin over the edge and, with a strangled cry he arched off the bed, pulse after pulse wracking his aching body and leaving him wrung out and trembling. Finn's stroke slowed on his softening cock, cradling him gently, smoothing the sensitive flesh. Justin whimpered.

Finn released him, kissing him softly, then slid his hand down into the pools of wet heat on Justin's abdomen. Justin hissed softly, skin quivering, and Finn kissed him again, fingers sliding across Justin's skin. Moments later, his touch disappeared.

Justin whined his disappointment--then gave a high, startled cry as Finn's hand slid between his legs, beneath his balls. "Ah," Finn breathed as his finger touched Justin's entrance, teasing gently at the ring of muscle.

Justin's eyes opened wide, his breath coming fast as Finn probed his rim. Fear and excitement warred inside him, and although he'd thought himself spent, he felt his cock stirring.

Finn's finger, slick with Justin's come, eased its way inside and Justin drew up his knees, trembling. With every moment, the ache inside him grew more insistent, and the more Finn gave him, the more he wanted. Finn leaned down and kissed him, his tongue delving deep into Justin's mouth just as his finger pressed further inside his ass, and Justin thrust back urgently, thrashing as a wave of desire nearly overwhelmed him.

"Hush. You're not ready yet," Finn whispered, pulling back, and Justin cried out as Finn pressed another finger inside. He pushed back as Finn thrust, and suddenly a wave of pleasure spiraled through him, turning his bones to water. Whimpering, Justin tried to force his legs further apart, drag Finn in deeper, but Finn kept a steady rhythm, each thrust building Justin's need, until it was all Justin could do to breathe.

At last Finn slid his fingers out, soothing Justin's loss with another deep kiss. Justin lay back on the bed, unable to summon the strength to reach for Finn, panting as he watched his lover pull off his remaining clothes.

Finn was lithe and wiry, his pale skin lightly furred with silky, dark hair. Justin drank him in appreciatively, from his broad shoulders and defined chest down to his narrow hips and long, strong thighs. His fat, full cock rose proud and swollen from a thicket of dark hair that nearly covered his heavy balls. As Justin watched, a pearly drop formed at the tip, and Justin licked his lips appreciatively.

"There will be time and to spare for that," Finn said, his voice thick with his own desire. "But first, I must make you mine."

The words sent a thrill down Justin's spine, making his half-hard cock twitch against his stomach. Belonging with Finn, to Finn, felt so right, so real.

Finn raised him up and turned him over, pressing Justin's shoulders down and pulling his hips firmly back. Trembling with anticipation, Justin couldn't suppress an impatient whimper. Finn ran his hands up the backs of Justin's thighs, squeezing. "Oh, yes," he said thickly.

Then Finn was teasing at his ass again, fingers slippery with the remains of Justin's come. Justin gasped and pressed back, moaning as Finn slicked his hole, wanting the feel of Finn's fingers inside him again.

Suddenly Justin felt the round full head of Finn's cock pressing between his cheeks. Gasping and panting, Justin clutched the rough sheets as he was taken. Finn slid in slow but sure, pressing home, giving Justin no time for doubts.

Justin's ass burned as Finn ground his hips in hard. Pain and pleasure combined in an intense sensation Justin could barely name. He cried out softly, muscles clenching, and Finn gripped his shoulders hard. Justin arched up off the bed, and Finn started to move, thrusting deep. Every movement connected and Justin found the pain was gone, replaced

with urgent, essential need, growing and churning inside him.

Each stroke took him higher, closer, and Finn wrapped his arms around him, pulling Justin up and back against his chest. Justin flung his head back and gave himself over to sensation.

Finn growled in his ear, deep and guttural, then bit down hard on Justin's shoulder. Justin cried out and jerked in Finn's arms, muscles contracting, and Finn bit again, pumping wildly into Justin's ass.

Justin thrust back as Finn swelled inside him, falling backwards in Finn's arms as the feelings overwhelmed him for the second time.

Finn collapsed on the bed, Justin caught in his arms, his cock still lodged deep inside Justin's ass. When Justin would have moved, Finn held him fast, twining one hand in Justin's chest hair and sliding the other down his body to cradle Justin's soft, damp cock.

Gasping softly, Justin moved his leg to give Finn better access, moaning happily as Finn stroked his sensitive skin. Full and replete, he nestled his ass more comfortably against Finn's groin and closed his eyes.

Justin woke in the cold, gray dawn to raised voices from the inn courtyard. On his feet before he was properly awake, he peered between the heavy velvet drapes. Down below, the Royal Mail coach rumbled slowly over the cobbles, its team of horses sweat-stained and weary. The driver limped at their heads, gesturing wildly as he regaled the ostlers with his tale of a highwayman on a midnight steed. Jeers and more shouts greeted the equipage, but the stable-attendants ran out good-naturedly, joshing the driver as they unharnessed the horses. Driver, passengers, and guard were soon on the way to the taproom, and as the horses were led away towards the stables, Justin drew back from the window, heart beating fast.

He'd meant to be well away by morning, his shot paid, his take stashed in Raven's saddlebags. But instead he'd taken nothing and nearly been exposed. If it hadn't been for Finn--

Justin swung back to the bed. But instead of his lover of the previous night, he saw only the rumpled sheets, mute reminders of their passion. Finn was gone.

Justin arrayed himself in his nondescript traveling suit and ventured downstairs. He knew he should leave, but his abortive attempt at the coach the previous night had left his bags no heavier, and without the gold to pay, he was finished.

His first stop was Raven's stall, where to his relief he found the black mare contentedly munching hay. She was well-groomed, bearing no sweat-stains or marks from the saddle,

and Justin realized he must have the mysterious Finn to thank for her safe return, as well as his own.

He slipped from the stable without being seen, thankful that the ostlers were busy settling the newly arrived coach horses. Being seen in the stables would give rise to questions Justin had no wish to answer. Straightening his shoulders, he crossed the yard briskly and slipped back into the inn via the rear entrance.

The taproom was just down the hall, and Justin paused for a moment, listening to the sounds of drinking vessels on wood, the raucous voices as the ill-fated coach party tried to outdo one another in the telling of their adventures.

The man in the mask loomed ever larger in each account, mounted on a black, fire-breathing stallion and lashing the side of the coach with his forked tail. Justin allowed himself a small smile as he entered the room. He stayed away from the party and took his ale to a table at the rear of the room, sipping from his glass sparingly as the guard recounted his own bravery with the blunderbuss.

“Nay, lad.” The driver laughed and shook his head. “You didn’t stop that devil, you hear me? It were that there wolf.”

There was a moment of silence, and Justin thought for an instant that the assembled company would hear his heart pounding. He gulped his ale, trying to breathe deep and slow. “There ought not to be wolves,” the guard opined at last, raising his glass. “Ought not to be highwaymen, come to that.”

“There won’t be for much longer.” It was one of the coach passengers, a big, beefy man with a nose that spoke of hard drinking. “The magistrate here is a friend of mine, and I well know his views on highwaymen. When I relate this misfortune to him, he will not rest until this scoundrel’s brought to justice.”

Justin’s blood ran cold. If the magistrate took it into his head to question him, or worse, to search his belongings, he would be discovered. And the penalty for robbery on the King’s highway was hanging. Unobtrusively he got to his feet, and ran upstairs to his room.

It was the work of a moment to gather his meager belongings. The small purse, still far too light to save him, Justin tucked carefully at the depths of his bag, first extracting a shilling to pay his shot. It was funds he could ill afford, but he dared not cause notice or raise a hue and cry. Justin paused and laid a hand on the rumpled bed one last time. The green-eyed stranger who had so fulfilled him had vanished without trace, and Justin wondered for a moment if he had ever been real.

But real or not, Finn could not save him now. Justin had to be away before suspicious eyes turned to his black mare and thence to himself; and anyway, he had to find the funds to pay his debt. Otherwise he would be in worse straits than ever, and there’d be nowhere

far enough for him to run.

Justin found the landlord, red-faced and flustered, in the hall and paid the man as he bustled about, distracted by the demanding customers in the bar. Justin didn't linger but headed straight to the stables and haughtily ordered his mare brought around. The ostlers would be less likely to suspect anything if he behaved as a member of the Quality.

The black mare was led out after only a moment, saddled and bridled, and Justin tapped his foot impatiently as the ostler strapped on the saddlebag. Raven stamped impatiently and tossed her head, bit jingling, and Justin cursed the man to hurry.

"You! You there! Stop, I say!" Justin spun around. The beefy man from the coach stood at the door of the inn, pointing an accusing finger at Raven. Justin didn't wait to hear more. He wrenched Raven's bridle from the startled stable-boy's hand and flung himself onto the horse's back. He kicked the ostler away and clapped his spurs to Raven's sides.

With a snort, she was off, galloping across the slippery cobbles of the yard and out under the arch.

Justin swung Raven away from the road and into a narrow path through the woods. The mare dodged and turned between the trees, sure-footed and nimble, until they crested the ridge and started down a lightly-wooded hillside to the river valley below. Justin reined in, staring keenly about, trying to get his bearings. The ford and the highway lay a little to the west and if he followed the river, he remembered another ford, less well known, further down. Listening for signs of pursuit, Justin set Raven cantering down the hill, staying under cover.

They made good time along the river bank, and Justin approached the quiet ford slowly. Tossing her head, Raven waded into the river and lowered her head to drink. She'd taken only one mouthful when she flung her head up and spun away. Justin had no time to react--it was all he could do to stay on the bolting mare--but as he grabbed for the reins he heard shouts and then a shot rang out behind him.

As Justin got Raven back under control, he realized the pursuers had been ahead of him. They knew the country well, it seemed, and had lain in wait for him just below the ford. Heart pounding, he let Raven have her head, sitting forward to help her as she twisted and weaved between the trees on the river bank, galloping further east.

Their pursuers thundered right on Raven's heels, shouting backwards and forwards between them. His mare was faster than any of their mounts but Justin, in the few glances back he risked, could see at least five men. And they were all armed.

Raven was starting to tire, not yet recovered from her hard ride the night before. Justin held her together as best he could, crooning encouragement. She shook her head, still game, but Justin could hear the hoof beats gaining. Holding the reins in one hand, he freed his own pistol from his belt with the other.

The trees thinned out and Raven settled down to gallop in earnest, stretching out with all her might. She gained a length, then two, and Justin was starting to breathe easier when the ground fell away beneath them.

Raven went down hard. Justin flew over her head and rolled in the dirt, a sharp pain slicing through his injured arm. He struggled to his feet, still clutching his pistol, hearing shouts of triumph from his pursuers. He aimed unsteadily at the group galloping towards him and squeezed the trigger.

The hammer fell with a dead click. Desperately Justin pulled the trigger again, but nothing happened--the gun had jammed. He stared in horror at the oncoming men.

Over the thunder of hooves he heard a long, mournful howl, and the galloping horses stopped in their tracks, rearing and screaming with terror. Suddenly, a huge gray shape flew past Justin, rushing at the group. There was a bloodcurdling snarl, and then as one the horses turned and bolted, their riders clinging on as best they might.

Justin stared in terror as the huge, furred beast turned back from the chase and paced towards him. He trembled with fear and Raven, recovering from her fall, scrambled to her feet, shaking her head and staring wide-eyed at the approaching menace.

It was the wolf he had seen the previous night. Justin was sure of that. There could not be two beasts so huge, nor with such distinctive green eyes. He wanted to run, to hide, but he was frozen to the spot with fear.

The wolf approached, rumbling low in its throat. Raven whinnied, low and frightened, and backed off, limping. The wolf paid her no attention, its deep green eyes fixed on Justin. It came close enough to touch but instead of stopping, passed him by. Its footsteps were heavy on the ground, receding slowly.

Justin shivered, too afraid to turn and look.

Raven ceased her whinnying and stamped her feet, then lowered her head with an impatient shake and began cropping the grass. Justin stared at her, heart pounding. What had happened? Had the beast gone?

"I have put off my wolf, and so she no longer fears me, Justin. I hope that that is also true for you."

"Finn?" Justin swung around, confusion drowning out his fear.

Finn stood a few yards away, clothed in black. There was no sign of the enormous wolf, nor a horse, nor anything to show how Finn had come to be there. Justin stared in confusion.

Finn walked forward, his emerald green eyes fixed on Justin's own. "I protect my own," he said in a deep growl. "They will hunt you no more. But you will not ride the highways by night again, nor stay in the inns where they will find you."

"I don't understand." Justin stared into the mesmerizing green eyes, so like those of the wolf. "They know I am the highwayman--they will send the Runners for me--"

"They will not find you, Justin. Nor Raven either." Finn held out both his hands. "Come, you do not understand because you do not wish to understand. But here--" Finn placed one hand on Justin's heart. "Here you know what is the truth."

Justin trembled. The wild, compelling light in the depths of Finn's green eyes was unmistakable. Twice now the wolf had come for him. "You are the wolf," Justin said. As he put it into words, he knew that it was true.

"I am the Wolf," Finn agreed, "and you are my mate." He pulled Justin in for a close, deep kiss. "Come. We are not far from home, and your mare needs attention."

Head whirling, Justin obediently followed as Finn led the limping mare away from the river, through an overgrown tangled woodland. Where Finn went, the trees parted with ease, but whenever Justin looked behind he saw an impenetrable barrier of forest.

At last they came to a clearing, and Justin did not see the small, camouflaged cottage at the edge until they were nearly at the door. There was a lean-to where Raven could be stabled and Finn treated the mare's leg with liniment and left her happily munching. "She will be well with a week's rest," he pronounced and shepherded Justin into the cottage.

Inside was a small room, dimly lit by two small windows and a cheerful blaze in a pot-bellied stove in one corner. A rough-hewn table stood beneath the window and a long wooden settle furnished with an oxhide cushion stood beside the stove. The floor was swept and everything looked clean.

Above the hearth hung a disc of beaten silver. Engraved on its surface was the portrait of a wolf, hackles raised, snarling a challenge to the world. The eyes of the wolf were two tiny, bright-green gems that glinted in the firelight, making the picture seem alive. Justin shivered.

"There is nothing here to fear." Finn stepped close behind Justin and wrapped his arms around him. "No Runner can find his way, nor the magistrate, nor any save those I allow. No beast will turn on the Wolf. You are safe here."

Justin nodded shakily, heart pounding. Raven needed a week to heal and in that week he must somehow find one hundred guineas, or he would never be safe again.

"Justin." Finn took him by the shoulders and turned him around gently. "There is nothing to fear," Finn repeated, "but you are still afraid. Is it that you fear me?"

Justin looked into the depths of the green eyes and nodded, once. Everything about Finn scared him. But above and beyond the fear, he felt drawn to Finn, a need to be close to him.

Finn rested a hand against Justin's cheek. "You need not fear me," he said, his voice a low growl that seemed to resonate all down Justin's spine.

Justin melted into Finn's arms. In his mind, he knew that he was right to be afraid of Finn--but when he looked into his lover's feral, green eyes and felt the dangerous currents eddying there, his heart jolted with something that was emphatically not fear.

"I will not hurt you," Finn continued, drawing Justin over to the settle. "Nor will anyone else, not while you are with me."

Sinking down onto the oxhide cushion, Justin nodded uncertainly. "I have debts," he whispered. "They will come to seek me out and we will both be in danger--"

"You do not understand. No one seeks the Wolf. All that you speak of is over now, Justin. I am the Wolf, and you are my mate. You have no debts anymore. Here, there is nothing but you and I...and the future."

"Gone?" Justin felt lightheaded. "I don't have to go back to London? But the money--"

"Is of no consequence." Finn pushed him down onto the settle, sitting beside him and staring into his eyes. "You cannot go back. Listen. You were nearly caught today. They know now that you are the highwayman."

"I can't just disappear."

"You didn't," Finn said simply, laying his hand against Justin's cheek. "You were last seen on the ground with a huge, gray wolf standing over you. Justin, no man will ask what has become of you. They will say that you were taken by the Wolf."

Justin shivered, chills rushing up and down his spine. He leaned forward, almost without thinking. "And was I?"

"Yes," Finn breathed, pushing him backwards until he was stretched out on the bench. Finn straddled him, smiling, a predatory look in his eyes, and Justin felt himself harden.

"Finn, please." He squirmed pressing his hips up, desperate to be touched.

"Soon enough." Finn leaned down, dropping a light kiss on Justin's lips. "This time, we become as one. You will know the Wolf, and from that moment, there is no going back."

"I don't want to go back," Justin panted. He fumbled with Finn's shirt. "I want to be with

you.”

“A wolf, as I am?” Finn paused, sorrow clouding his eyes. “I cannot ask it of you, Justin.”

At last, Justin succeeded in getting Finn’s shirt open and reached for the skin beneath. He groaned at the heat against his palms. “I ask it of you,” he said, throwing his head up and staring into Finn’s eyes. “Take me, Finn. Make me yours.”

The sorrow melted from Finn’s eyes. Justin caught his breath at Finn’s hungry growl, and then he was pinned against the settle, Finn tearing urgently at his clothing.

Within moments they were both naked, and Justin was laid bare on the raw leather for Finn’s scrutiny. This time he knew better than to try to cover himself. Finn pushed Justin’s knees apart, opening him.

Justin smiled back shyly. He could feel his cock filling, twitching against his belly, and the tight ache in his balls grew ever stronger. As Finn spread him open his pucker flexed, heightening the ache inside him. Justin whimpered.

Finn bit possessively at Justin’s neck, and Justin let his eyes fall closed. He held onto Finn with everything he had, lost in the sensations of Finn’s hot mouth on his skin, clever, teasing tongue starting feelings Justin had never even imagined.

Justin arched off the settle as Finn worked his way down, pinning him. He thrashed as Finn slid a hand between his legs, palming his balls, squeezing gently. Then Finn’s mouth engulfed his cock, hot and perfect, and Justin found himself unable to move, unable to do anything but keen his pleasure.

For a moment Finn sucked him, massaging his shaft, teasing his slit, then his cock was released. Justin barely managed to whine a protest before he felt Finn spread his thighs, raising his hips. Justin gasped as the slick silk of Finn’s tongue grazed his entrance, light, questing, and Finn’s thumbs pressed his cheeks apart.

Justin tried to squirm but Finn held him fast, tonguing his ass softly, sending electric thrills spiraling through him. Moaning, Justin leaned into his captor, transported to heights of pleasure he had never even imagined. Each slide of Finn’s tongue touched nerves Justin had never known he had, sent clutches of desire deep into his balls. His cock throbbed and all he could think of was the urgent ache inside him. An ache that only Finn could fill.

At last, Finn breached his rim, one finger sliding into Justin’s spitslick passage. Justin cried aloud as Finn found his pleasure spot, sending sparks of pleasure arcing through his body. Finn responded by pressing harder, working Justin’s hole, and Justin fell back against the cushion, spreading his legs as wide as he could.

Finn licked his lips, lowering himself between Justin's spread legs, sliding his hand down Justin's upraised thigh. Justin quivered as Finn's hand came to the tender skin of his ass, and then Finn was guiding his swollen cock to Justin's entrance.

Justin's hole was slick from Finn's preparation, and as Finn pressed in, Justin opened for him. He was ready to be taken, ready to be Finn's, and he bucked with all his strength, trying to draw Finn in faster.

But Finn would not be hurried. He slid forward, inch by inch, taking shallow strokes until Justin was nearly crying with need and frustration. Just when Justin thought he could not take it any more, Finn thrust home hard and Justin cried out in surprise.

Finn leaned forward, nipping imperiously at Justin's neck, and Justin stilled obediently. Finn pressed his chest against Justin's, pinning him down, growling softly against his jaw, and finally started to move.

The sensation was amazing: the heat and thrust of Finn inside him, every stroke stoking his fire, the friction of Finn's belly against his sensitive cock, and the weight of Finn, bearing him down. Justin felt himself melting, conscious thought a world away, replaced with nothing except overwhelming, overpowering need.

With a scream torn from deep in his very core, he let go.

Flames rose inside him, searing down to his very soul. Justin tried to scream as he felt himself consumed, tried to fight.

"Justin!" Finn's voice anchored him, and Justin struggled to see through the white-hot blaze. At last he found a pair of bright green eyes, burning through the fire, and Justin locked on to them with everything he had.

There was the smell of pine, and the cool fresh scent of faraway snow, and then the fire fell away. The pale white light grew brighter, fuller, and as Justin breathed in deeply, he realized that it was the moon.

"Finn," he whispered. "What is it? What's happening?"

"You are now a wolf." Finn's voice echoed in his ears, but Justin could see nothing but the bright moonlight and the brighter green eyes. He tried to reach out, but his arm would not obey him.

"Don't fear." Finn's voice was clearer now, inside his head, and as Finn spoke, the moonlight faded. Justin struggled to keep the bright green eyes in sight, but the darkness came down, blotting them from view. "Do not fear," Finn repeated, and Justin smelled the pines again. This time, the scent was accompanied by another, something wild and musky. A scent that raised the hair on the back of Justin's neck, that sent the blood rushing through his veins.

He cried aloud, but in his ears he heard the cry of a wolf, and suddenly the flames were back, hotter, brighter, stronger than ever, and Justin could not fight them. With a final howl, he fell into the blaze.

“Justin. Justin!” The voice was soft but insistent, and Justin followed it slowly back to awareness, struggling to open his eyes. The first thing he saw was fire, but as he recoiled, he realized it was not the white-hot blaze that had threatened to consume him. Turning his head, he recognized Finn’s rustic cottage, the homely stove, and as he tried to move, realized he was on the floor beside the settle, and that Finn was holding him in his arms.

“Finn?” Justin struggled to sit up, the rough sacking rug catching at his naked skin. “What happened?”

Finn leaned forward, one arm around Justin’s shoulders, laying the other hand against Justin’s cheek. “We are mated,” he said, and Justin trembled as he remembered Finn’s voice, coming to him through the white-hot blaze. “At the height of the moon we will run as wolves, together, and here in our home we will sleep as men. The forest is our kingdom, and none will seek us here.”

“We are mated,” Justin repeated, heart pounding. “I--I am a wolf?”

Finn drew Justin close and kissed him, a deep, sweet kiss that soothed all the fear from Justin’s heart. Justin drew back, lips slightly parted, staring at Finn in wonder, and Finn smiled. He raised a hand and pointed at the silver disc above the hearth.

Where there had been a single snarling wolf, two wolves now sat, shoulder to shoulder. Muzzles raised, they bayed in triumph to the watching moon.

The Devil Went Down to Swindon *by Josephine Myles*

Darren Lock sighed as he leaned back against the lamp-post, wishing he could head back under the shelter of the abandoned shop doorway and save his carefully teased and spiked hairdo from the misty drizzle. But Craig would never bother stopping unless he could see Darren quite clearly, and it was already dark. Sometimes he didn't know why he bothered getting a lift with the loser. He might as well walk down the road and catch the bus in to band practice, rather than waiting here on this god-forsaken crossroads on the outskirts of sodding Swindon, like a pillock -- or like a rent boy, that nasty little voice in his head suggested. Okay, he did have the eyeliner and his tightest ripped jeans on, but that was only because you had to have the right look when you were the front man. It wasn't like he was some kind of slut, after all. Well, not much of one, anyway; never got a chance in this town.

Thinking over how the previous week's practice had gone wasn't improving his mood. The rest of them had had the bloody nerve to say that his vocals on the latest song were "too gay." What was that supposed to mean, anyway? He'd tried to point out how homophobic that statement was, but he wasn't sure he'd managed to argue all that convincingly because he'd been accused of having a hissy fit and of being a drama queen to boot.

What he wouldn't give to have a chance to go solo without the rest of them! There were those auditions for Pop Idol next week, but although he'd printed the information out and stuck it to his bedroom wall, and even booked the whole week off from the salon so he could practice, he had a sinking feeling that when the day came he'd probably chicken out. That little voice -- the one that sounded an awful lot like his dad -- would remind him of how he'd never amount to anything, and he may as well get used to the fact he'd be stuck in this boring provincial town for the rest of his life.

"Fuck it, I'd sell my soul to have the balls to get up there and have a go," he said to no one in particular.

"That's a rather rash offer, don't you think, my boy?"

Darren nearly jumped out of his skin and whirled around to confront the owner of the rumbling voice, about to tell him that at nineteen he wasn't anyone's boy, but the words died on his lips when he got a good look at the man. He wore a long, dark trench coat and a fedora, just like he'd walked out of one of Darren's favorite film noirs, but it wasn't the eccentric dress sense that stole his words. No, it was that sly grin and those hazel eyes -- eyes that seemed to pin him to the spot and turn over all his secret desires.

Gulping back the rush of lust that threatened to turn him into a simpering mess, Darren called upon all of his outrage at Craig and the rest of the bloody band.

“Oh yeah? Well it’s not like anyone’s gonna take me up on it, is it?”

The man just smirked some more, raising an eyebrow and looking almost exactly like a young Mickey Rourke, back from before his face got all messed-up. Goddammit, was he getting so obsessed with old movies that he’d started seeing things? But no, the bloke really did look like he’d just stepped off the set of *Angel Heart* and onto the streets of Swindon. Darren had the horrible feeling that his righteous anger had come out sounding more like petulance, so he folded himself further into his jacket and tried to look like he couldn’t care less what the sexy stranger thought of him.

“Why ever not? I’m sure a soul like yours would be beautifully fresh and innocent,” the stranger said with a wolfish grin.

This guy was definitely taking the piss now. “Yeah, right. Whatever. Anyway, I don’t have a stupid bloody soul, do I? It’s all make-believe Sunday school crap they tell you to stop you stepping out of line.”

“You think so? Well then I guess you wouldn’t be able to sell it if you don’t have one. Damn, that sure is a cryin’ shame, because I was willing to help you out, Sweetheart.”

God, this bloke was nuts, wasn’t he? Why was it always the good looking ones who were crazy? “Yeah, like you could help me out with winning *Pop Idol*, mate. It’s not gonna happen, is it?”

The stranger licked his lips, looking Darren up and down. “Well, if you don’t believe in trading something so intangible, perhaps you could trade your sinfully delectable and oh-so-very-mortal body instead?”

“Are you saying I look like a prostitute? I’ll have you know I’m an artiste.” Even as he flounced his hair and pouted, Darren cringed at how bloody pretentious he sounded. What he really was, the inner voice told him, was a scrawny kid in cheap clothing who worked as a junior hair stylist in a third-rate salon and who sang in a band so bleeding awful they’d be lucky to get a gig in the local scout hut.

The stranger just grinned some more, showing his teeth. “Oh I’m sure you are, Honey, but I am in a position to be able to offer you what you want, in exchange for what I want.” He took a step closer and raked his eyes up and down Darren’s body.

Darren gulped again, feeling terribly unsophisticated and more than a little pissed off with the way his jaw kept hanging open. It didn’t help that his mobile had chosen this moment to start vibrating in his pocket, which was really off putting. “Ehrm, unless you’re Simon Cowell in disguise, I seriously doubt that, mate. Not that it’s not an interesting offer n’ all.”

“I’m much better than that, Gorgeous.” The stranger threw his arms wide with a triumphant leer. “I’m the Devil himself.”

“You’re nuts, is what you are.” Glaring at the lunatic, Darren pulled his vibrating phone out of his pocket and checked his message. “Bollocks! What a waste of bloody time this was.” Band practice had been canceled yet again, because Scott’s mum needed the garage for one of her craft projects. Fuming, Darren stomped off in the direction of his flat, throwing a “See ya,” over his shoulder at the madman.

The madman who was keeping pace with him.

“You don’t believe me, now, do you? Whatever should I do to prove it to you, beautiful boy?”

“You could try turning red and growing horns and a tail like you’re meant to.” Now that really would be something to liven up Darren’s shitty day.

“Sure thing, kiddo.”

Darren was sick of being patronized. “I’m not your bleedin’ kiddo; my name’s Darren, all right?” And he wouldn’t have bothered even looking back at the nutter, if it hadn’t been for the way the footsteps behind him changed into sharp clip-clopping sounds like a couple of coconut halves banged together.

“Oh fuck...”

The Devil leered, his red chest gleaming as he swished his tail and flicked out a forked tongue. “Pleased to meet you, Darren. You can call me Nick.”

“So let me get this straight: you get to own my body in exchange for me winning Pop Idol?” Darren sat back on the bed in his tiny studio flat, watching Nick -- now looking like Mickey Rourke again -- leaning back against the wall and inhaling the steam from a cup of hot chocolate piled high with marshmallows.

“I can’t guarantee you’ll win your little contest, Tiger Pants, ‘cause I gotta maintain free will; but I can promise that, when you sing, you’ll be captivating.”

“Well I’m not sure if that’s worth selling my body for. I’m already pretty captivating, I’ll have you know.” Darren knew that this was an exaggeration even when he was looking his best, which certainly wasn’t right now with his wet hair plastered to his head and his eyeliner running.

“You’ll be so damn captivating, you’ll conquer at least one heart when you sing. How’s that?”

It did sound pretty good, if true, but Darren was damned if he was going to let on. He didn't want to come across like a pushover. "Hmm...maybe. But what's this about selling you my body? What would you want to do with my body?" It was the question that had been burning inside him for the last ten minutes of making polite conversation about Darren's life while they waited for the kettle to boil. He wasn't quite sure if he was terrified or excited about what the answer would be.

Nick gazed at him in a way that made Darren feel weird -- like he wanted to squirm away while at the same time he felt an almost overwhelming urge to roll onto his back like a dog. To distract himself, he started picking at his nail varnish.

The Devil licked his lips. "What would you like me to do with your body, pretty boy?"

There's no way Darren was going to answer that. "I mean, are you going to possess me and make me do evil things, or what? You're not going to change me in some way, are you?" His skin was crawling and tingling at the same time, and the way Nick kept staring at him wasn't helping matters.

"Oh no, I'm only really interested in getting you to do things you want to do. All those dirty little ideas you never dare tell anyone about." Nick raised an eyebrow and smirked.

Darren's throat made a peculiar noise, and it took him a few goes of opening his mouth and shutting it again before he could reply. "Huh, really?" He licked his lips a few times, trying to get some moisture back onto them and thinking about doing some of those things with a man who looked like a movie star. "That doesn't sound very evil." God, his voice was in so much trouble, going all weak on him at a time like this.

Nick slurped down the last of his hot chocolate, flung the mug toward the sink where it landed right way up and unbroken, then grinned salaciously, moving toward Darren's bed with a predatory grace. "Whoever said the Devil was evil, Sweetheart?"

"Uh, try just about everyone throughout history? It's about the one thing I definitely remember from Sunday school. It's even in the name: D-evil."

Nick had his hands on the edge of the bed and was looking at Darren like he was a slice of meatfeast pizza with extra everything.

"No Honey, I just like to persuade people to do the things they really want to. It's not my fault that some of them want evil things. I'm sure you don't want evil things, do you, Gorgeous?"

Darren squeaked as Nick started to climb onto the bed. While most of his body wanted to run away as fast as it could, there was a certain part of his anatomy that begged to differ. He caught Nick giving his erection a pointed stare, and began to think of all the reasons he really shouldn't agree to this. "Uh, oh God... I don't think I should give you my body forever."

“How about until the audition, then? I deliver the results, we’ll see if you want to take it further.”

“Sounds fair.” But why on Earth was the Devil being fair? “And you promise that you won’t make me do anything I don’t want to?”

By now Nick was crawling up his body, straddling his legs and leaning down over him. “My beautiful boy, I think you’ll be able to keep us busy enough for the next week with all of those naughty ideas floating around in your head.”

“Uh...” Shit, could he read Darren’s mind?

“Oh yes, and very interesting it is too. So do we have a deal?”

Darren didn’t know how he managed to get his voice to co-operate, but eventually he squeaked out a yes and watched Nick’s face looming closer.

“Oh, I’m so very pleased you agreed, Gorgeous”

Nick started slowly, peeling away Darren’s clothing and licking at the flesh he revealed, until Darren lay there, naked and writhing, his chest heaving up and down. He was wondering if Nick could make his tongue forked again, and what that would feel like, when Nick took hold of his hands and lifted them over his head. Darren didn’t fight it until he felt the metal close around his wrists and heard a soft snick, and which point he began to struggle and found himself attached to the bedstead.

“What are you doing? Are those handcuffs?” Which was a really stupid question, because what else would they be? “Where did you get handcuffs from?”

“Tiger, I’m a supernatural being. Materializing a pair of handcuffs is as easy as taking candy from a baby. I can make much more interesting toys appear, if that’s what you want.” Nick’s voice dripped with honey, suggesting all kinds of decadent pleasures.

Darren whimpered a little in response, embarrassed at the noise but unable to help it as images from some of the online catalogs he’d bookmarked swam through his mind.

“Oh yeah, I can make all of those things appear, Baby. You just let me know when you’re ready for them.”

Not right now. Not until he was used to the idea that the Devil was in his bed. Nick must have sensed this, must have read his mind again because he proceeded to lick Darren all over his arms and chest. Darren felt the rasp of Nick’s stubble against his skin, heard Nick murmuring about what a tasty boy he was, endured the simmering heat build inside him until he was moaning and bucking his hips and begging Nick for more.

“More what, Gorgeous? You’ll have to be a bit more specific about what it is you want.”

“But you can read my mind.”

“Oh yeah, but I want to hear you say it out loud.” Nick punctuated his words with open-mouthed kisses to Darren’s jaw that burned his skin and made him even more desperate to feel those lips wrapped around his cock.

Darren screwed his eyes shut and squashed down that little voice that told him he was a dirty boy and a disgrace to his family. “I... I want you to strip, then I want you to s-suck me off, and I want you to... to fuck me.” He breathed deeply, gaining courage from the fact that he couldn’t hear any derisive laughter. “I want you to do it with your tongue first, then your cock. And I want it to be hard and fast.” He opened his eyes and saw Nick’s eyes sparkling as if amused. What had he said wrong?

“And what’s the magic word, Honey?”

Magic word? Darren didn’t know any magic words. Then it hit him like a slap around the face, and he flushed at his stupidity. “Please! Please, Nick, would you do all those things to me? Please?”

“Well, Gorgeous, since you’re so pretty and you ask so nicely, I think I could be persuaded.” Nick began pulling off his shirt, revealing a set of abs that made Darren’s heart beat so fast it felt like it was going to pound its way through his ribcage. That was nothing compared to what happened when Nick dropped his trousers. That was one thoroughly wicked, yet beautiful looking cock – heavy, thick, veined and red – Darren wanted nothing more than to taste it, despite what he’d asked for earlier. He may have drooled a little, and certainly made some incoherently appreciative noises, because Nick glanced up at him with a leer.

“Oh yeah, I know what you want, but as it’s not what you asked for I think you’ll have to wait. You’ll have to learn a little patience, Gorgeous.”

It was hard to be patient when Nick straddled him, slapping at Darren’s face with his cock and pulling back whenever Darren tried to get his lips round it, making him beg to be allowed just a little taste. Instead, Nick tasted Darren again, settling down between his open thighs and feasting on his dick like he’d been starving. The deliciously wanton noises Nick made, and the sight of his tongue flicking out -- surely it must be forked, to feel that amazing? -- brought Darren to the brink of orgasm so quickly he’d have felt embarrassed if he’d been able to think straight. But then he felt a sharp pinch and looked down to find Nick holding him very firmly with a stern expression.

“Oh no, Gorgeous. You don’t get to come until I say so, and I say you’re gonna have to wait until I’ve gotten through that little list of yours.”

What list was that? Oh yeah, what he’d asked for, and could no longer remember. Darren’s memory was jogged when Nick rolled him over onto his knees and delved that wicked tongue into his hole. God, he’d heard about rimming, had watched it on pornos,

but never actually shagged a bloke who was willing to give it a go. The little voice told him that was because he'd only ever been fucked by a few losers who didn't know Darren's arse from his elbow, but he drowned it out by concentrating on overwhelming sensation of Nick's tongue inside him. However, focusing on that brought him perilously close to climax again, so Darren bit down on the pillow and thought through all the steps of prepping the perm lotion for one of his regular customers. Eventually the slow torture ended, and Darren felt something large and hard pressing against him.

"Yes please," he gasped, before a shred of sense snagged at his scattered thoughts. "Condoms. You need to wear one."

"I really don't, you know. I don't carry any human diseases. This isn't even a real body." Nick's voice was low, sultry, and he pushed against Darren's entrance as he spoke which felt so fucking amazing it almost made his resolve evaporate.

But he still had his tattered dignity. "No, you need to use one. And lube, too. I'm not doing this otherwise." Even as he spoke Darren was aware of the futility of trying to argue with the Devil, especially as he'd already promised him his body and was cuffed in such a compromising position.

"Okay then, Baby, if you absolutely insist. They're in the drawer, right?"

Darren grunted, reeling inside at Nick's acquiescence. Did he really have that much power over Nick? All further analysis was driven from his head as soon as that pressure resumed, and he felt Nick's cock pushing past the ring of muscle with a delicious burn. Christ, Nick may not have a real body, but it felt more fucking real than any of the other blokes who'd had him. Darren wanted Nick's prick so far inside he could taste it, and by the time those hips finally pressed against his arse, he felt so full of cock he wouldn't have been surprised if he could have. Pushing himself up on his elbows, he craned his head around to try and get a look at the man who had claimed him so completely.

The Devil was gently running his hands over Darren's back, seemingly transfixed by the sight of them joined together. Nick gave a little start as he caught Darren watching, but smothered it with a smug grin so quickly that Darren suspected his mind of playing tricks on him.

"That's one sweet ass you've got, Gorgeous. It's so tight I reckon I'm gonna find it hard to hold back." He gave a wink that sent a delicious thrill down Darren's spine. "You ready for me, Tiger?"

Although no sound came out of his lips, Darren managed to mouth a yes and before he knew it he was thrust into the mattress as Nick took him hard and fast, just like he'd asked for. There was pain, but there was intense pleasure too, and it wasn't long before Darren was grunting with every snap of Nick's hips, and pushing back and bearing down to make it even more brutal. When Nick gave him permission to come he barely needed to touch himself before he came so hard his vision blacked out. Darren heard a demonic

howling through the rush of blood in his ears as his body convulsed, spurting his semen over the sheets beneath him.

As his mind slowly gathered itself together, Darren realized from the hoarseness in his throat that the howler had been him. He felt Nick pulling out of him and pushing him down onto the sodden sheets, saw the well-used condom fly through the air and land on the floor before hot seed splashed all over his arse. Groaning with fatigue and wicked, sinful pleasure, Darren fell asleep to the sensation of Nick licking him clean.

“So why do you look like Mickey Rourke, then?”

It'd been bothering Darren for the last few days. Well, it'd been bothering him during those rare times when he wasn't otherwise distracted by Nick's fiendish skills and the mouthwatering array of toys he could pull out of thin air. God knew what his neighbors were making of all the noise. Darren was sure it must have sounded like he was being murdered at times, but all that had died so far was his sense of shame and that nasty little voice in his head, and he was well rid of those.

But now, lying here quietly with Nick's arm wrapped possessively around him and the comforting, safe warmth of that powerful body pressed up against his back, he was almost able to convince himself that he was in a proper relationship rather than just some sordid pact. It gave him the courage to voice the question: “Why him?”

Nick chuckled, the sound doing funny things to Darren's insides. His voice was always so soft and sexy, even when ordering Darren to do unspeakable things. “Well, Gorgeous, I just had a quick peek into your filthy little mind and found this filed under ‘Sexy Devil,’ so I figured it would be a good bet.”

Darren bristled. “I wish you wouldn't do that.” There were some ways he didn't mind feeling exposed, positively reveled in it, in fact. But there had been thoughts and feelings surfacing that he really didn't want Nick to discover -- at least, not until he'd had a chance to think them through himself.

“You don't want me to read your mind anymore? I don't actually do it all that often, you know.”

“Well I'd rather you didn't do it at all. It's private, okay?” Aware that he sounded petulant, Darren tried to cover up his discomfort by wriggling from Nick's grasp and sitting on the edge of the bed, facing away from him.

“Sure thing, Gorgeous, but you'll need to give me a safe word so that I know if I'm taking things too far, okay?”

“Oh! Okay...” Is that why Nick had been reading his mind? Suddenly, it didn’t seem quite so sinister. “Umm, I’ll have a think and choose one.”

“That’s great, Honey; the sooner you choose, the sooner we can get back to having some fun.”

“About that, er, how about we just take a break for a few hours and watch a DVD or something? Or we could even, you know, go out somewhere...” Oh fuck, was he asking the Devil out on a date? But he needed to spend a bit of time just being able to think and process his feelings -- as well as let his deliciously sore and tender body rest -- because over the last few days, Nick had had him so overcome with lust he’d been unable to string any coherent thoughts together, beyond “please, harder, now!” He took the risk of turning around to face Nick, whose eyebrows were raised, while amusement twitched at the corners of his mouth.

“Well, if that’s what you want, Baby, I’ve no objections. How’s about we watch a movie with this Mickey Rourke fella in?”

Was this a trick? Some kind of a test? “Uh, okay. We could watch... Angel Heart,” Darren warmed to the idea -- it was one of his favorite films. “There is the Devil in that film, although he’s not played by Mickey.”

“I see. And would you rather I changed to look like this other actor, then?”

“God, no! You look bloody gorgeous. I can’t imagine how you could look any better.” Or smell any better, taste any better, sound any better, or just sodding well be any better. Darren was aware that he’d fallen and fallen hard, and he was also facing the fact that his immortal soul must be in real danger if he’d fallen in love with the Devil. Let’s face it, if the Devil was real, which he clearly was, then souls would have to real too, and so would Hell, and that’s where he was headed. And as much as he’d enjoyed being tortured by Nick so far, it had all been things he’d wanted, and nothing that hurt more than he found enjoyable -- he didn’t think Hell would be quite so easy-going. Darren was perfectly happy with everything he’d been penetrated by over the last few days, but there was something about the idea of a bunch of demons sticking pitchforks up his backside that didn’t really appeal in the same way as, say, Nick wielding an enormous, stainless steel dildo.

But it was so hard to believe that this was wrong when Nick lay there like that, gazing at him with those twinkling eyes that pulled Darren in closer and closer until he was clutching at Nick’s hair and crushing their lips together. It took Nick a moment to respond, but when he did it was enthusiastically. Moaning into Nick’s mouth, Darren decided he didn’t care if this was going to damn him for eternity because it felt so fucking good right now. Reaching down, he found Nick’s cock, hard for him, as always.

“I thought you wanted to watch a movie, Gorgeous,” Nick drawled, pulling back for just a moment as Darren’s hand started to stroke him.

“Forget about the bloody movie,” Darren said between kisses, before working his way down Nick’s body and lavishing his attentions where he knew he would get a delighted groan in response. Yep, this was far better than watching a film; this was interactive.

“All right, my lover, what d’you think? That the sort of look you were after?” Stacey held up the mirror so that Darren could see his hair from every angle. The choppy cut was teased into random-looking spikes, setting off the purple highlights to perfection. He smiled, knowing it wouldn’t survive long under Nick’s attentions, but confident that he could resculpt it in the morning.

“Stacey, that’s brilliant! Thank you so much.” He reached up and pulled her into a hug, planting a sloppy kiss on her round cheek. She flushed and giggled.

“Stop that, Darren Lock! You’ll be making your boyfriend jealous.” She dropped her voice, glancing into the mirror where they could both see Nick’s reflection as he leaned back against the salon wall. “He’s gert lush, that one. I hope he’s treating you well.”

Darren looked up at his boss, contemplating how well her definition of being treated well would match up with his. She was probably thinking in terms of romantic gestures like chocolates, flowers, and sentimental pronouncements of love, whereas he was measuring how well Nick treated him in terms of how tender and well-used his flesh was feeling. Then he remembered how Nick had taken him out to Bath that morning to treat him to a ridiculously expensive outfit for the audition and then to a swanky restaurant for lunch. Nick had even been willing to shell out for a haircut at one of the pricey salons there, but Darren had insisted that he wanted Stacey to do it, and Nick had been happy to go along with it. Well, perhaps even by Stacey’s standards Nick was treating him pretty well.

Darren grinned, catching Nick’s eye in the mirror. His stomach did a somersault when he saw the desire burning there. “Oh yeah, he’s treating me well, all right. Don’t you worry, Stacey.” She fussed a little more with his hair, her lips pursed, so he slapped her hand away playfully. “Oi! Don’t mess with perfection.”

“Okay then, I think you’re done,” Stacey smiled, then her face turned serious. “I hope you’ve been getting lots of practice in. I want you to ace those auditions tomorrow so I can put your picture up on the wall and tell everyone you used to work here, and were absolutely rubbish at cleaning the sinks after you’d used them.” That earned her another playful slap, which made her chuckle.

“Yeah, I’ve been practicing. Don’t worry, Stace, I’ll be fine. They’ll be falling in love with me and my sexy moves.” He gave a wiggle of his hips as he stood, whipping away the plastic cape from his shoulders with a flourish.

As he walked out of the salon with Nick, to a chorus of “Good luck” and “Break a leg,” Darren’s guts started to roil. Because he hadn’t been practicing at all, had he? Not skills

he could use at the audition, anyhow. Well, not unless it was a very intimate audition... No, no way. Darren couldn't imagine doing those things with anyone but Nick, now. He'd happily give him his body for the rest of his life, whether he won the contest or not, but right now he needed to think about the more pressing matter of tomorrow morning.

"Nick, please, would you mind giving me a few hours to myself this afternoon? I need to practice my song." He didn't dare look up, wondering if he was asking too much.

"Sure thing, Tiger Pants. You want an audience for that?"

Gratitude flooding through him, Darren looked up into Nick's eyes and felt a surge of courage. "I will, later, but I'd like to practice alone first, if that's okay by you."

"Whatever you say, Gorgeous. Your wish is my command."

If only it were, Darren thought, knowing what he'd wish for. And right now, despite the looming audition, it wasn't winning the contest. It was winning Nick's heart.

"Oh, you are gonna knock 'em dead, you sexy thing! That was amazing; you're a diva! Watch out Cher, Darren Lock's in town!"

Not sure how he felt about being compared to Cher, but glowing from the compliment and feeling bold and seductive in his new leather jeans and open, mauve silk shirt, Darren sashayed across the room to where his audience sat on the edge of the bed. Taking Nick's chin in his hand and tilting his face upwards, Darren leaned down to plant a kiss on his lips. As always, Nick's body tensed when Darren kissed him, but it soon melted into heated passion, their tongues tangling together in a manner that made Darren want to offer himself up on a platter. But then again, he'd done a lot of that this week, and he wondered if it was time to try something different.

"Nick, I was wondering, would you mind if we didn't do any of the kinky stuff tonight, please? I could do with being well rested for tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, of course. Sorry Sweetheart, I keep forgetting, but this body doesn't really feel fatigue like yours does." Nick looked apologetic, and stood, moving away from Darren toward the kitchenette. "Would you like me to make you a drink? Something hot, perhaps?"

"No, wait, that wasn't what I meant." Darren reached out for him, grabbing hold of Nick's arm. They both looked down at his hand, as if amazed that it would do such a thing. Releasing Nick and stroking his arm gently, Darren kept his eyes on his fingers rather than risking looking up. "I meant... that maybe we could just try having normal sex without any of the props. If that's okay with you?"

“I thought you liked my toys, Darren.”

The use of his name startled him, and Darren gazed up into eyes that were liquid with concern. “Oh, I do, don’t get me wrong – I love them. I just fancied a bit of a break from that tonight, if that’s all right with you, of course.”

Nick chuckled a little, but his eyes stayed tender, making Darren shiver. “You mean, even though you’ve had the double chocolate chip with extra sauce you still want to try the vanilla?”

Darren gulped, his mouth suddenly parched. He licked his lips and somehow managed to reply. “If the vanilla is you, then yes.”

“Okay then Gorgeous, anything in particular you wanted to do?”

Now that he’d gone this far, he may as well spill the rest. “What I really wanted to do, if it’s okay with you, is I wanted to fuck you. Please?” Expecting scorn at his presumption, Darren lowered his eyes and braced himself for the worst.

“Well! This is a surprise!” Nick didn’t sound pissed off, and he snuck his arms around Darren’s waist, pulling him in close. Darren just let his body mold to Nick’s and was amazed to find him hard again. “I didn’t think you wanted to top, Baby,” Nick murmured in his ear.

“I don’t, normally. Never have done before.” Never dared to before, more like. He’d always been too worried about his performance to even ask, and as all the other guys had just assumed he was a bottom anyway he’d never bothered to correct them. “I’d like to try it, though. With you. If that’s all right.”

“Why Darren, I’d be honored to be your first,” Nick said, with genuine warmth in his voice.

Nick made things easy for Darren, sucking him until he was so aroused he could hardly stand it, and gently taking over when Darren fumbled while putting the condom on, his trembling fingers refusing to co-operate in the task. Darren lay back when asked, watching with wide-eyes as Nick straddled him. Nick’s eyes shone as he ran his capable hands over Darren’s chest, before sinking down onto Darren’s aching cock with a delicious sigh.

Darren almost wanted to pull out when he felt the tight heat engulf him, but the ecstatic expression on Nick’s face stopped him. Nick really wanted this, didn’t he? It was hard to believe that a man like that -- because he found it almost impossible to think of Nick as anything other than a man -- would be satisfied with being fucked by a skinny, inexperienced lad like Darren, but Nick’s face told a different story. Nick’s face told Darren that he was having the time of his life and wouldn’t be anywhere else right now. And as Nick seated himself with a gasp, Darren dared to try a shallow thrust, which made

his lover jerk and moan. It gave him the confidence to try again, and after a few more tentative thrusts he found a mutually satisfying rhythm that drew them both to the brink of orgasm.

Darren opened his eyes to the incendiary vision of Nick towering above him, dripping with sweat and eyes blazing. Darren reached out to take Nick's neglected cock in his hand, and after a few strokes felt it pulse, spattering his chest with hot come as Nick shuddered and clenched around him. The sensation and the sight combined to tip Darren over into a spiraling wave of pleasure that seemed to stretch out forever, while he voiced all his love and desire for Nick in a heartfelt babble of incoherent words.

Coming to, Darren's stomach lurched at the idea that he might have just confessed exactly how he felt, but as Nick was curling up beside him and purring like a cat settling down to sleep, he figured that if he did, he either wasn't heard or Nick didn't really care. He rose carefully and headed to his bathroom, dealing for the very first time with a condom used by himself. Darren peered into the mirror, wondering if he looked different now, or if it was simply that his eyeliner had been badly smudged. With a sigh, he grabbed his cleansing lotion and thought uncharitable thoughts about those who didn't have to use artifice to look bloody perfect, as doubts about tomorrow started to fester inside him.

"Darren, you've got a pretty face, but there's not much else going for you. Your voice is mediocre, and your moves are tired. Don't give up the day job."

And with that short speech Darren's dreams were shattered, breaking into glittering fragments like the shiny confetti littering the floor of the conference suite. He lurched over it on his way to the door, the sparkles blurring as his eyes filled, barely aware of the strong hand that reached out to grab him and steer him through the door and out into the corridor. He was numb; he was lost; he was empty. He looked up at Nick's brooding eyes and realized that he was really fucking angry as well.

"What the hell were those assholes thinking, Darren. You were truly amazing. I was spellbound. I was totally captivat--" Nick clapped a hand over his mouth and looked at Darren with wide eyes.

Whatever it was, Darren didn't give a damn. He tore his arm out of Nick's grasp and stomped off down the corridor, wanting to put as much distance between himself and the scene of his humiliation as possible. He groaned inwardly as he heard Nick jogging after him, and kept his eyes fixed on the carpet ahead.

"What the fuck did you think you were doing? Promising me they'd be falling in love with me just so that you could have your wicked way with me, then not even bothering to do your magic thing. You've welshed on your side of the deal, but I suppose I shouldn't have expected any bloody different from the Devil."

“You’re wrong, Darren. I cast the charm, and it worked perfectly. Rather too well, in fact. Darren--” Nick reached out for him, but Darren shrugged his hand off, not in the mood for lies and platitudes. If only he’d spent the week practicing instead of letting Nick shag him senseless!

“Yeah, right. I could see all the love in their eyes. That must be why they told me I was a fucking waste of space.” Remembering the cold, bored gazes of the judges, he shivered and wrapped his arms closer around himself. You’re a useless, talentless queen who can’t sing to save his life, the little voice told him.

“Darren, it worked, just not on the right person.” Nick’s tone was pleading, and he grabbed Darren’s arm.

“Who did you get to fall in love with me, then? The cleaner? The receptionist? One of the other contestants?” They had reached the lift door, and Darren thumped his fist onto the call button, before whirling around to glare at Nick.

Nick shifted from foot to foot. He didn’t seem able to meet Darren’s gaze. “Er, no. It must have backfired.” He let go of Darren’s arm, only to take hold of his hand and lace their fingers together.

Shaking him off, Darren exploded. “Backfired? What do you mean, backfired? I think I’d remember if I’d fallen in love with Simon Bloody Cowell!”

“Ehrrm, no, not like that.” Nick rubbed the heels of his hands in his eyes, before looking up with a vulnerability Darren had never seen in him before. “I mean it backfired and caught me.”

Darren gaped.

“It’s me, Darren. You’ve captivated me.” Nick’s voice was a whisper, and he sounded like he couldn’t believe what he was saying.

Darren couldn’t either. “You mean the Devil’s fallen in love with me?” Darren gave a short, bitter laugh. “You’ll excuse me if I don’t go celebrating just yet. This sounds like so much bullshit.”

Nick grasped him around the upper arms, pushing him back against the wall and speaking with carefully controlled passion. “Listen to me, Darren, I’m not the Devil, okay? I only told you that to get you to go along with things, but now I’m telling you the truth, I swear.”

“What? But you did that thing with the horns and tail! You can pull things out of thin air. You can read my mind.”

Nick huffed and rolled his eyes. “That’s basic stuff. All angelic beings can do that, and most of them a whole lot better than I can. No, listen to me, Darren: I’m an angel, originally, but I got kicked out of heaven for my, uh, unholy desires.”

“Too bloody right, they’re unholy. You’re a right pervert, you are.” Darren’s heart pounded, thinking of all the things Nick had made him do. He ignored the part of his mind telling him that they were all things he’d already fantasized about doing.

“I only acted on your desires, Darren. It’s not my fault that they matched up so well with my own.”

Nick blushed a little, and the sight of that flush spreading across his cheeks did more to convince Darren he was speaking the truth than his words ever could. He reached out a hand and stroked over the heated skin, marveling that Nick could be so bashful after all the things Darren had seen him do.

Just then the lift dinged, and the doors slid open to reveal a group of elderly tourists who looked at them with poorly concealed alarm. Nick recovered himself, and turned to them with a mischievous smile.

“Excuse me ladies and gentlemen, this is a private moment between me and my boyfriend. Nothing to see here.”

When the door shut on the muttering tourists, Darren heaved out a sigh, and Nick pushed even closer, pinning his body to the wall. It would be so easy to just give in and let him have his way, but Darren needed to hear the full story first.

“So what was all that about bargaining for my soul, or my body as you seemed to prefer?”

Nick looked down, smirking. “Oh, I do prefer, Sweetheart, although I’ll take your soul too if it’s on offer.” He looked up into Darren’s eyes and must have been worried that he’d gone too fast as the vulnerability flooded back into his face. “I was kicked out of Heaven, but Beelzebub didn’t want me either. Said that although some of my tastes were to his liking, I didn’t have enough of a mean streak. He ended up banishing me to that miserable crossroads, saying I’d be stuck there until someone made a genuine offer to sell their soul. Then the spell holding me there would be released, and all I had to do was to convince them I was the Devil, and I’d be allowed back into Hell to train as a demon.”

“What? So you were planning on trading my soul for your place in Hell? Well, thanks a bunch. Nice to know your true colors at last. I’m just a bargaining chip, aren’t I?” This was so typical. You meet a great looking guy; he turns out to be the Devil. Then, after falling for him, he turns out not to be the Devil and says he’s in love with you, but just when you think you can start celebrating, it turns out that he’s planning to sell you out. Well, okay, that probably wasn’t a typical chain of events for most people, but the way Darren’s luck ran, it was for him.

“It’s not like that, Darren! Will you try listening to me for a change?” Nick looked really pissed off now, his eyes blazing and his fingers digging into Darren’s arms. “I’ve never wanted to go back to Heaven or Hell. I just wanted away from that crossroads. It really was the most boring place on Earth.”

“So why’d you tell me you were the Devil, then?”

Nick looked sheepish and let go of Darren’s arms to run his fingers through his hair. “Well, I didn’t think you’d respect me if you found out I was such a failure. I mean, kicked out of Heaven and Hell? It doesn’t get much more humiliating than that. Plus, I was so sick of being all on my own, and I peeked into your mind and saw that we had similar tastes.”

So Nick believed himself to be a loser as well. Darren felt the stirrings of compassion deep inside him. “How long had you been there?”

Nick closed his eyes briefly. “Believe me, Gorgeous, you do not want to know. More years than I care to remember, stuck in Swindon of all places, where no one seems to have the imagination to want to sell their soul for anything. But then you came along and saved me.”

The look in Nick’s eyes was doing strange things to Darren. He kept turning hot and cold, and his head was in a whirl. “I saved you?” He croaked out. “How did I save you?”

“You’ve given me a life outside of that limbo; you’ve given me your body and let me do all those wonderful things to you.” Nick rested his forehead against Darren’s, and when he next spoke, his voice was a hesitant whisper. “Seeing as how I’m stuck here on Earth, would you let me stay with you and prove how much I love you?”

Darren gulped, all remaining bitterness dissolving as he realized the enormity of what Nick was offering. He wanted to make a similar gesture. They belonged together. Two perverted losers whose desires matched up so perfectly. “You can have me, you know. Nick... you can own me, if that’s what you want.”

A slow smile spread across Nick’s face. “Oh, I promise you I’ll take good care of you.” He ran a hand down Darren’s chest where his shirt hung open. “But I only want what you give freely.”

“It’s okay, I trust you,” Darren breathed, before their lips locked in a greedy kiss and his knees buckled beneath him. As Nick clutched him tight, Darren reflected that if this was what being owned felt like, then he would happily give himself over to Nick for eternity.

The next time the lift door pinged, neither of them heard it.

Lover of the Hand of Heaven by *Lauren P. Burka*

Mi-ang was the one hundred and ninety-ninth son of the Emperor. Since he was not a player in the succession game, his oldest brothers took no notice of him. They were competing for positions among the palace hierarchy or the military, or gone into contemplation in the mountain monasteries. The younger ones, however, could only gain from his misfortunes. They were always forming alliances against each other, often enlisting older brothers by the traditional means of bribes and flattery.

Since Mi-ang was only eleven years old, he hadn't learned that the elder sons of the Emperor also played such games, with more subtlety and permanent stakes. It was the boy's misfortune to be the one who united his enemies by refusing to play on anyone's side.

One particular afternoon, the Alliance of the White Tiger cornered him in the Garden of Five Favorable Flowers. Mi-ang sat down on the stone step and tried to stay calm, like a monk, as they hurled uncreative insults. It was safer to wait out his tormentors, who inevitably got bored and left if Mi-ang didn't cry. But then Pe-ro had an idea.

Pe-ro was--at ten--the unquestioned ruler of the White Tigers. He'd learned that he could get trays of sweets from the kitchen girls by threatening to pinch their buttocks. The sweets won him many friends among his cohort. He was tall for his age, not very bright and (because of the sweets) slightly plump. For all that he and Mi-ang shared a father, they didn't look much alike.

"Hey," Pe-ro said, "do the Hands of Heaven piss?"

We-mir solemnly took the end of his ponytail out of his mouth and squeezed his face up with the effort of thinking.

"I don't know," We-mir admitted. "We could find out."

"We could ask one," said Nim, "but it might be dangerous to say something that impolite to an Immortal."

Pe-ro was staring down at Mi-ang, whose heart sank. "Mi-ang will ask one for us," he decided.

There followed a chorus of agreement.

"No, I won't!" insisted Mi-ang.

“You will,” said We-mir, “or we will pull your pants down!”

The White Tigers burst into eager laughter. This was the worst torment they could imagine, a great favorite when they played “torture the spy.”

Thus the White Tigers force-marched Mi-ang up the stairs, under the Garden’s grand arch and down half a mile of bamboo-floored corridors to the Hall of the West Wind. The Hall stood empty on all but ceremonial occasions, but a Hand of Heaven had been stationed there since time immemorial. Mi-ang was so scared that he had started to hiccup, but kept his mouth shut tight.

The Master of Heaven had dispatched ninety-nine of the immortal Hands to guard the Emperor in the mortal world. There were other immortals who communicated between the realms--Heavenly Messengers and Functionaries--but they were less often seen. The Hands were omnipresent, like furniture. From a distance, they looked like beautifully lacquered statues of warriors, somewhat larger than life-sized. Their armor, from the top of their helmet to the toes of their boots, was lacquered so that it seemed made of eagle feathers. The part of the face that showed from beneath the helmet was that of a young man in his prime, smooth as if carved from marble and overlaid with gold leaf. The eyes were faceted emeralds. The swords at their side looked real.

The Hand stationed in the Hall of the West Wind looked exactly like his brothers. Up close, Mi-ang could see that the Hand’s armor was made of real feathers, ones plucked from the wings of the Celestial Defenders. The eyes were the only part of the immortal being that moved, tracking their motion as they entered.

The White Tigers had begun crossing the wide floor at an eager pace, but they slowed as they drew closer to the Hand. Suddenly, their errand seemed less righteous.

“What if it tells on us?” asked Timrem, who was ten years old but tall for his age.

“A Hand can’t tell on us,” said Pe-ro. “They’re supposed to protect us.”

“They don’t protect our older brothers from each other,” pointed out We-mir. “I bet this one won’t do anything if we pull Mi-ang’s pants down.”

“Shut up about pants,” whispered Nim.

The Hand’s eyes were fixed upon them. Mi-ang remembered when the Astronomy teacher had demonstrated that the stars were visible from the bottom of a well--indeed, even in bright sunlight. The Hand’s gaze seemed to come from as far away as the stars in Heaven and to be at least as old.

Pe-ro poked Mi-ang so hard that a loud hiccup escaped from Mi-ang’s mouth. No one laughed.

“Ask him,” Pe-ro ordered.

Mi-ang opened his mouth and waited for his tongue to come unstuck.

The Hand said something, and for a moment Mi-ang did not understand him. Then Mi-ang realized that the Hand spoke in the Language of Heaven. He had asked, “How may I serve you?”

“What did he say?” asked Pe-ro.

“It’s priest-speak,” said Mi-ang.

“You know priest-speak?” asked Pe-ro.

“Of course,” answered Mi-ang, who spent three days a week in tutorials with one of the royal librarians. “You mean you don’t?”

“Priest speak is for men with no balls. How come you know it?”

“How may I serve you?” repeated the Hand. But only Mi-ang understood.

“I am sorry to disturb you,” Mi-ang addressed him haltingly. “My brothers would make me ask an improper question of you. I am covered in shame for disturbing you.”

“The shame is not yours,” said the Hand.

“What are you talking about?” demanded Pe-ro.

“Hand of Heaven,” said Mi-ang, “you protect the Royal Blood. Can you protect me from my brothers? Just a little bit?”

The Hand turned to Pe-ro, who still gripped Mi-ang by the ponytail. “Release your brother,” he said, still speaking in that exalted tongue.

Pe-ro said, “Huh?”

“He wants you to let go of me,” said Mi-ang.

“You’re making that up.” Behind Pe-ro, the rest of the White Tigers edged away nervously.

The Hand stepped forward, gripped Pe-ro by the arm, and lifted him far into the air. For a moment, no one moved. A clear trickle leaked down one of Pe-ro’s legs and puddled on the floor. The Hand put him down.

After a brief, shocked silence, the whole of the White Tiger Alliance turned around and ran--except for Pe-ro, who limped, gripping his sodden pants. He cried "Wait for me!" to no effect as he put the length of the Hall between himself and the Hand. He vanished through the far doorway. The Hand gestured with one finger, and the stain vanished. Somehow this was more astonishing than what the Hand had done to Pe-ro.

"How must I address you?" Mi-ang asked the Hand.

"I am Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti," he said.

The name meant nothing to Mi-ang for a moment. Then his training in the exalted tongue jotted an answer across the parchment of his brain. The name meant "four hundred and seventy-one." Mi-ang, the one hundred and ninety-ninth son of the Emperor, felt an indescribable sympathy for the Hand of Heaven, though it was nothing he could possibly express in words.

"Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti, how may I thank you?"

"Bring one of the wicker chairs from behind the altar here, sit down, and speak to me."

Moving the chairs last used by high priests would have been too scary if it weren't for the Hand standing nearby, who had asked him to. A moment later, Mi-ang was seated comfortably. The late morning sunlight lanced through the windows and lent an additional sparkle to Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti's armor.

"Talk to me," said Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti.

"What about?" asked Mi-ang.

"Anything that comes to your mind. Except for the Ceremony of the West, that is performed here once a year." It was hard to tell, but Mi-ang thought that the Hand looked weary as he said this.

Mi-ang wondered how long Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti had stood in this hall. Was it longer than eleven years?

"I found a frog this morning," he said, after struggling to remember the word for 'frog.' The boy found himself describing the stream in the seldom-used Peony Garden and the wide, worn-smooth stones and the bright green amphibian the size of Mi-ang's palm. When Mi-ang had finished his frog story, the sun had hardly moved. He began telling Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti about the librarian who tutored him in the Empire's history. The librarian was a son of the last Emperor, about eighty years old with parchment skin and spots on his hands. He didn't hear well, but could talk for hours. He alternated the hard learnings, like the Language of Heaven, with stories of bloody wars against the western barbarians, which were much more interesting. The Hand asked Mi-ang questions once in a while. Mi-ang wasn't used to anyone showing an interest in what he had to say and was

intrigued. By the time he had told Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti all about his nurse, Lily, who was responsible for the boy's clothes and giving him tonics when he was sick, the sun had moved toward the evening quarter. Mi-ang would soon be expected for dinner.

Mi-ang was just about to ask leave to go when Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti thanked him for his monologues. "Your conversations have been in excess of my expectations," said the Hand, "so much so that I wish to offer you a favor."

Suddenly recalling the nature of his interlocutor, Mi-ang squirmed in his seat.

"Stand up and hold your arms out at shoulder height," said Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti. Mi-ang swiftly complied. "When you return," said the Hand of Heaven, "bring with you a bamboo pole as long as your arms spread and as thick as your thumb."

Mi-ang bowed clumsily.

"There is no need for you to bow," said Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti. "I have no rank over you."

"But you're a Hand of Heaven," said Mi-ang.

"Yes, and you're the Emperor's blood," said the Hand.

"May I call you Jin?" asked Mi-ang.

The corner of the Hand's mouth curved like a dove's wing. "As you wish," he said.

The very next day Mi-ang returned with a bamboo pole. Jin drew one of his swords with a noise that sounded a lot like ssshing, only sharper. The sword transformed into a bamboo pole identical to Mi-ang's.

"I will teach you swordsmanship," said Jin. "Soon enough your brothers will not trouble you."

On the last day of Autumn, the court gathered in the Hall for the Ceremony of the West. Mi-ang knelt at attention with his cohort, like them dressed in itchy formal clothes and pointed slippers. He had spent so much time in the Hall alone with Jin, playing with the bamboo poles, that he had come to think of the place as theirs. Now thousands of people filled the Hall from one end to the other--courtiers, generals, regional governors, veiled concubines and bent-backed dowagers.

The boy could just see Jin standing at attention in the shadow of five other Hands who surrounded the Emperor. Though the Emperor was his father, Mi-ang had never seen him up close. He concentrated his gaze on Jin and nearly gasped as the Hand's green gemstone eye winked.

Mi-ang was fourteen years old and growing like a bamboo shoot. The sweetest part of spring had arrived, but Jin could not leave his post to join the boy outside. Mi-ang read No-fan's The Classic of the Blade inside with Jin when it rained. In sunny weather, he often went to one of the least-used gardens and swiped the heads off flowers or attacked the mulberry trees. He was there the morning that General Tanji arrived for a walk with his entourage. Because of the racket he was making, Mi-ang did not hear them approach.

When the General's shout penetrated Mi-ang's concentration, he dropped his pole and knelt down, banging his forehead on the ground. In the complex hierarchy of the Court, General Tanji, a brother of the Emperor, was so far above Mi-ang that he might well have the boy thrashed for rudeness. But the General had something else on his mind.

"Boy, where did you learn the Attack of Autumn Rain?"

Just in time, the caution learned growing up in Court stopped Mi-ang from speaking the truth. If he had told the General that he had been tutored by a Hand of Heaven, he might well face the kind of thrashing from which there is no recovery. Instead, Mi-ang said, "I read about it in a book."

One of General Tanji's two concubines tittered. Mi-ang could see nothing of the General beyond the curled toes of his embroidered slippers. Sweat dripped from Mi-ang's forehead so that the dirt stuck to him.

"What is your name, boy?" asked the General.

"Mi-ang, the one hundred and ninety-ninth son of the Emperor."

"Where is my secretary?" shouted the General.

A young man dressed in the robes of a minor Court functionary sprang forward and bowed sharply.

"Do whatever is necessary to enroll this boy into the elite sword brigade under Commander Feng."

Mi-ang was eighteen years old. He had grown into a graceful young man with the muscles of a racing stallion. His face betrayed nothing but thoughtful intelligence, and his manners were impeccable. He had risen through the military ranks quickly. He did not know it, but already a brother or two had marked him as a potential ally or enemy in the perpetual succession game. He served as Commander Feng's equerry, and the duties kept him busy, but not so busy that he did not visit Jin.

The Hand of Heaven listened to Mi-ang's tales of military life and court politics, occasionally offering advice. He might suggest that Mi-ang read the records of the Hai-twun campaigns, court histories, and various classic texts on politics, all of which benefitted Mi-ang's education in that perilous world.

But Mi-ang's visits became rarer, and it wasn't because he was busy. He had a secret so terrible that he could not tell anyone, not even Jin. Especially not Jin.

Mi-ang had grown up watching young men his age become interested in--and sometimes, obsessed with--young ladies. Most of his fellow soldiers spent their wages on sing-song girls, though a few had married the daughters of lesser nobility and had children already. Mi-ang found the young ladies pleasant company, especially when they played music or danced. But he never once brought one to bed.

He began to wonder if he was homosexual. This need not be a misfortune, if he were discreet. Some Emperors had been homosexual and still managed to get children on the royal concubines, though Mi-ang had no idea how this worked. But no, his conversations with the rentboys had all ended choked to death by embarrassment, and Mi-ang had retired alone to his bed to twist and thrash until he fell into exhausted sleep.

On one such night, his fitful sleep opened into a dream of remarkable clarity and beauty.

Mi-ang was sitting on the bank of a lazy stream. A cherry blossom petal drifted downstream between the stones, and silver fish broke the surface to snap at bugs. A small, white cloud drifted overhead. He heard footsteps in the long grass behind him and turned to see Jin had approached and crouched next to him. His armor seemed more flexible than would be possible for metal. He carried his helm under one arm. The rest of his face was as handsome and gold-brushed as the little square that the helmet had revealed. Some hair had come loose from Jin's braid and fallen over one gemstone eye.

"Good evening, Mi-ang," said Jin.

This was nonsense, because the sun was high in the sky. But it was also a dream, so Mi-ang greeted Jin in kind.

"You have not visited me in some time," said Jin, "and I wanted to ask if you were well."

"It has not been that long," said Mi-ang.

"Six months," said Jin.

"Oh," said Mi-ang. And then, because this was a dream and propriety could not possibly matter, he burst into tears.

"Jin," said Mi-ang, "I am in love with you. Deeply, passionately in love with you. You have been the only true companion of my solitary life. You listened to me, something that

mattered more than either of us imagined. You have opened my eyes to learning and wisdom.” Mi-ang remembered with a start the occasion of his meeting Jin, where some other boys had tried to force him to ask whether a Hand of Heaven could piss.

Mi-ang continued, “I do not know if you are made like me in the body, or if you can share the emotions that roil my soul. If there could be no physical love between us, I would love you chastely for the rest of my life. But if I knew that you did not love me, I would die of sorrow.” Mi-ang paused and looked around at the pleasant landscape. “I could not speak of this in the waking world. I’d rather not ever know if you loved me than chance discovering that the answer should be no.”

In the creek a fish leapt high and snapped a dragonfly from the air.

Mi-ang continued, “I have been so stricken with these feelings that I have been unable to eat, and I sleep only fitfully. Last week the Commander was so concerned that he sent me to the physician. The physician could find no apparent cause of my illness, but I believe he suspected. He asked me questions of my moods and passions, but I did not dare answer him. How could I?”

Mi-ang and Jin did not glance at each other, but gazed upon the cherry blossom petals and the silver fish. The single cloud passed over the sun, creating a somber shade that lasted but a moment.

“It is hazardous to bring yourself to the attention of Heaven,” said Jin. “Yet if you are brave, and prepared to accept any consequence, Heaven may provide a resolution.”

Hope lit in Mi-ang’s heart like the candle that guides the lost traveler.

“I would plead my case before Heaven even if my soul were at stake.”

“Your life, perhaps, but not your soul.”

“I accept the risk,” said Mi-ang. “I love you, and my life is nothing if not shared with you.”

“Come with me,” said Jin.

Mi-ang followed in Jin’s footsteps. He fixed his gaze on the back of Jin’s head, which was not so dangerous a sight as the Hand’s armored buttocks might be. The day grew warmer, and there was no breeze to lift the sweat from their brows. Jin followed the curve of the stream until it widened out into a large pond.

An old man sat on a stool beneath the shade of a cherry tree, fishing. At least, he held a slender pole with a string dangling over the water, but the whole time that they approached him, Mi-ang did not see the pole move once. It was as if the old man was less interested in catching fish than in giving his hands something to do and his eyes

something to see. He was dressed in plain linen clothes lightly touched by wear. The young attendant, who was dressed similarly, watched Jin and Mi-ang with mild interest. The path continued on past the old man to some pleasingly-arranged buildings visible halfway to the horizon.

Up close, the old man's hair, beard, and mustache merged in a sparse but pure-white mane, and the wrinkles on his face were like a relief map of the An-dun mountains.

“Well,” said the old man. “Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti. This is the first time I’ve seen you since your posting to the Mortal Realm.”

He motioned to his attendant. „Please bring us some tea. Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti, will you introduce your guest?“

„My guest is Mi-ang, the one hundred and ninety-ninth son of the Emperor.“

„Welcome, Mi-ang,“ said the old man. „The two of you may kneel at my feet.“

Though Mi-ang did not know the rank or station of the old man, he understood, with the logic of dreaming, that kneeling at his feet was right and proper.

After a short while the attendant returned, bringing three servants who carried among themselves a low table and all the accoutrements of tea. After hot water and leaves were assembled and steeped, the old man poured the tea. Mi-ang sipped from his cup. He had half-expected the tea to turn into caterpillars, as in a recurring dream of his childhood, but the tea was a Green Jasmine of high quality.

„Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti,“ said the old man, „tell me why you two have come.“

Jin set down his glass. „Master,“ he said, „the mortal loves me.“

Surprisingly, Mi-ang did not feel the wretched embarrassment he would expect from such an announcement. It was the truth. The dream was obviously one in which it was only possible to speak truth.

„I see,“ said the old man. „How do you feel, Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti?“

Jin was silent for a long time. „I share Mi-ang's feelings as completely as the sky shares the Heavenly Vault with the earth. Never have I spoken so aloud, and the words are strange to my mouth. I am a Hand of Heaven. I have a lawful duty to protect the Emperor's blood, but an Immortal's love is fatal for a mere man. I have expected to feel this love unrequited until his death and thereafter until the end of time.“

„That's dreadful!“ exclaimed Mi-ang, then realized he had said so out loud. He blushed.

The old man sipped his tea contemplatively. Jin's stony gaze was fixed on the table.

„Why do you say so?“ asked the old man.

„Sir, I had thought that I suffered more than anyone alive that I could not tell my beloved how I felt. No matter what transpires, no matter how my heart aches, merciful Death will give me surcease at last. Where is such mercy for Jin?“

The old man chuckled. „He has a pet name for you, Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti? It’s worse than I thought!“

Though Jin’s hair partly curtained his face, Mi-ang could see Jin’s golden cheek turn red.

„Heaven is perfect, so by definition it never changes. But no perfection is so complete that one cannot strive to make it more so. Some might say that what I will do sets a bad precedent. Yet both parties have behaved beyond reproach, something which I, lamentably, see less and less often as the centuries pass. I cannot but reward you both.

„Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti, as of now I reassign you to the Messenger service, with the rank of Captain. Your first assignment is to oversee the training of a Messenger newly promoted to divine status. This duty may be arduous, but I expect you will find many compensations.“ He turned a bit on his stool.

„Mi-ang, one hundred and ninety-ninth son of the Emperor, I will give you a Peach of Immortality, and you will ascend to Heavenly rank. Fate will unweave your mortal life from her tapestry. You will be gently forgotten by those few who knew you. When in the course of your duties you return to the Mortal Realms, you will be recognized by none. You and Jin would be free to love each other for all time.“

Mi-ang’s heart pounded. Heaven had offered an answer, at the cost of Mi-ang’s life. There was no hint that Heaven was a sexual place, or that in giving up his mortality Mi-ang would ever experience the joys of the body with Jin. Yet hadn’t Mi-ang declared that he would love Jin chastely, as long as the love was returned?

„This is not a dream, then,“ said Mi-ang.

The old man smiled. And then Mi-ang knew who the old man was.

Mi-ang stood up from the table, backed up three steps, and lowered his forehead to the ground. He was too overcome with emotion to say anything, which was just as well, because the only words he could think of were the expostulations of a child.

„Jin-ri An-ji Wen-ti,“ said the Master of Heaven, „would you give the young man some more tea? It will settle his nerves, I believe. I will send a messenger to the Warden of the Garden of Immortality telling him to expect you two shortly.“

The wood-framed pavilion had linen sides and luxurious furs on the wooden floor. Though the day was yet bright, the sun was three quarters of the way down. Servants had set out lamps and bowls of incense. A trestle table held simple foods and a carafe of rice wine.

There was a bed, too, hidden beneath deep blue silk draperies. Was there sexual congress in Heaven? Mi-ang felt as if he would drown in his own ignorance. He tasted the Peach of Immortality where it lingered on his tongue and tried to understand how everything had changed for him. His last instruction from the Master of Heaven was to obey Jin in all things. Perhaps his understanding was not required.

Jin had long since exchanged his armor for an embroidered dressing gown. He addressed Mi-ang, who stood trembling on carpet made of snow-leopard fur, „I once told you that I had no rank over you and that there was no need for you to bow.“

„I remember,“ said Mi-ang.

Jin said, „That is no longer true. As a recently-ascended one, you have no rank in this realm. You will call me Master, and I stand in authority over you in all things.“

Mi-ang shivered. When he had gone to sleep, he'd been a son of an Emperor. Now he was a servant in Heaven. Could he look down over the edges of the clouds and see his brothers in their earthly toils? Perhaps later. „I understand, Master,“ he said.

Jin came up behind Mi-ang. Strong arms wrapped around the young man, and he let out a moan as their warm bodies touched for the first time. Mi-ang nearly fainted when Jin's sharp teeth bit down on the back of his neck.

„You are mine,“ said Jin. „I have waited so long for you, even by the scale of my long life. Let us delay no further.“

„I've never...“ Mi-ang said. „Which is to say, I don't know how....“

Jin turned the young man in his arms and silenced him with a firm kiss. „We will begin your education at once,“ said Jin.

He led Mi-ang under the blue silk canopy of the bed and laid him down upon the sheets. Jin removed Mi-ang's tunic and trousers and unwound the loincloth beneath. The bed sheets were also silk, unbearably sensual against Mi-ang's bare skin. Jin unwrapped his robe and let it fall onto the floor. His body was pleasingly proportioned. The gold tone of his skin extended to all of his flesh. His nipples, though, were darker, as was his pole upon its nest of black fur.

„Master,“ asked Mi-ang, over the sound of his pounding heart, „may I tell you how handsome you are?“

„Indeed you may. But now I will teach you the proper use of your tongue. Pay attention.“

Jin took a glass of wine set by the side of the bed and drank deeply. Then he ran the fingers of both hands down Mi-ang's body, from his forehead to his toes. Mi-ang's pole jumped as the fingers passed on either side. Then Jin did the same with kisses, starting with Mi-ang's face and continuing downward. He paused at Mi-ang's mouth, where he gave a gentle kiss on the lips, then a deeper, more penetrating kiss that explored the inside of his mouth. Jin kissed the lines of Mi-ang's jaw and collarbone, then moved downward to give attention to the nipples that had hardened to sensitive little nubs. Mi-ang nearly jumped off the bed when Jin scraped his teeth against one nipple. Jin slapped the inside of Mi-ang's thigh in a way that only hinted at the power of his arm.

„You will behave properly when I choose to give you my attention,“ said Jin.

„I apologize, Master,“ said Mi-ang. The slap had done nothing to discourage his pole. If anything, that organ grew in size, rising toward Jin like a flower turning to face the sun.

Jin continued to explore with his lips. He visited the pits of Mi-ang's arms, then his navel. Instead of kissing, Jin used his tongue to probe the fleshy indentation. Mi-ang bit his lip and groaned softly. It was torture to hold still under his Master's touch. Mi-ang's pole had grown as hard as it ever had when he touched himself at night, and it dripped clear fluid onto his belly. As his hands had, Jin's lips skipped over Mi-ang's aching pole and continued to nuzzle Jin's legs from his thighs to his toes.

„Turn onto your face,“ said Jin.

Mi-ang laid his cheek upon the pillow. He bit his lip when his pole nearly disgraced him by spilling on the silk sheets. Jin bit Mi-ang's neck once more, then paid the back of Mi-ang's body nearly as much attention as the front. When he reached the cleft of Jin's buttocks, he parted them with his strong hands and laid a single kiss on that most private part.

When he had covered the soles of Mi-ang's feet with kisses, Jin lay back against the pillows with another glass of wine to hand. Mi-ang's pulse slowed. His toes uncurled. Jin set aside the glass again and said, „As I have done to you, so you will do to me.“ His smile showed a hint of tooth. „Be slow about it, for my body is larger than yours. If you spend less time on me than I did on you, the correction will not be pleasant. Have a glass of wine now, and more later if you wish. Properly done, this is thirsty work.“

Jin lay relaxed on his back, gemstone eyes closed. Mi-ang gulped thirstily at the wine while he admired the golden skin of his lover. Though his mind whirled with love and lust, he spent a few moments recalling the details of how Jin had treated him before he began stroking his lover's body with his hands. Mi-ang kissed Jin's brow and began to do as had been done to him. Jin's skin, beneath a delicate spicing of sweat, tasted and smelled somewhat like a mortal's and somewhat like the peach whose flesh had elevated Mi-ang to immortality. Jin's cheeks were smooth, but his armpits were as furry as any

man's. Whenever he felt impatient, Mi-ang schooled himself to repeat what he had just done once more, slower. The rippling muscles of Jin's midsection deserved extra study. From time to time, Jin would sigh, but he gave no other outward signs of pleasure. Mi-ang redoubled his efforts. As he came near Jin's loins, he was disappointed to see that the pole was slack as ever. The sensation of gliding his tongue over the warm, fragrant, furry flesh of Jin's thighs, calves and feet were almost a sufficient compensation.

Then, when Mi-ang had finished with Jin's feet, the Hand turned over. Mi-ang combed the long, black hair with his fingers. A tickle of temptation urged him to bite the back of Jin's neck, as stallions do as they play. Yet he bowed his head submissively and continued with the kisses. Anything else felt improper.

The back of Jin's body was much like the front, except for the intriguing mounds of his buttocks. Mi-ang used the heels of his hands on the powerful muscles, drawing a few whispered groans from Jin. Then Mi-ang parted the mounds with his hands and kissed the curious dark ring he found inside. The fragrance of Jin's body was so much stronger there than anywhere else. Mi-ang gave it another kiss and then a tentative lick. Jin's groan was long and loud. Then he seemed to shake himself. Jin sat up to take another glass of wine and to lounge again against the pillows. Mi-ang gazed hungrily upon Jin's loins.

„Drink,“ said Jin, offering the glass. Mi-ang emptied it. His pole was so hard that it ached.

Jin set the glass aside as he said, „You are so young and raw and eager. I once taught you to fence with a bamboo pole. Now that you are no longer a boy, I am teaching you bed-play.“ He reached out and touched Mi-ang's cheek with a finger, then slid his hand around to the back of Mi-ang's neck, tangling his fingers in the young man's hair. Though his grip was gentle, the force that brought Mi-ang's head down to Jin's loins could not be resisted. Mi-ang suddenly understood what Jin wanted. He reached--eagerly and clumsily--to place a kiss on the pole's soft head. Jin petted the back of Mi-ang's neck.

Drunk on wine and his master's skilled touch, Mi-ang parted his lips and caressed the limp flesh. But it was not limp for long. With Mi-ang's every kiss and tentative lick, the pole swelled until Mi-ang's mouth was stretched wide, and he struggled to take more than the head inside. Mi-ang almost giggled as he contemplated whether or not a Hand of Heaven could piss. Jin was as heroically-equipped as befit an Immortal. If the Hand of Heaven wanted to piss, there was no finer tool. But Jin had something else in mind.

„We have forever and ever again to instruct you in the fine points of this art,“ said Jin. „Yet with all time before us, I am impatient for one thing.“ He stroked a finger down the length of Mi-ang's quivering pole. Mi-ang gasped. „Lie face-down,“ said Jin.

The sun had gone down. The flickering lamps played with silver stars woven into the blue canopy overhead. Mi-ang whimpered as his tender parts rubbed against the silk sheets once more. He heard the click of a jar, and then Jin's fingers spread Mi-ang's

buttocks apart. Jin did not kiss, but dripped fragrant oil into the cleft. Mi-ang gasped and clenched down, but Jin's fingers had disappeared.

Mi-ang's lover lay full length atop him with his pole nestled against Mi-ang's cleft. Jin began to move. His oiled pole stroked up and down, teasing Mi-ang with the slight friction. Mi-ang had learned most of what he knew of this act from dirty jokes. He was surprised by how much he enjoyed it and how natural it was to spread his legs, dig his toes into the bed and lift his hips against Jin's body. His own pole had gone half-soft, but he knew that their lovemaking was focused elsewhere, on the near-connection between them. Mi-ang trembled and thrashed until Jin shifted his weight and pinned Mi-ang to the bed. Mi-ang wondered why he should be impatient with all eternity ahead of them.

The head of Jin's enormous pole pressed against Mi-ang's rear opening, a tiny receptacle indeed for such a heroic member.

„You could not have withstood this penetration as a mortal,“ whispered Jin. „Now you will open for me.“

The pain of entry vibrated Mi-ang's body like a finger did a lute string. It came to Mi-ang that--as an immortal--pain was no longer a sign of danger but another interesting sensation for him, another quality to the music their bodies made. There would be many such lessons ahead. Mi-ang shouted in ecstasy as the sensation permeated his soul and the connection between them was complete. Jin had not been speaking of the penetration of bodies. It was the soul--teased and tormented and tempted with pleasure--that opened for the Hand of Heaven.

Pleasure in its most pure form swept through Mi-ang's being, and Jin cried out so that the tent shook. The lamps blew out.

„You are mine,“ said Jin. „Mine forever.“

State of Mine by Cari Z

“Look who’s got the late shift.” The tall, heavy-set man smirked at me as he strode into the equipment room and tossed his headgear down on the table. “Here’s a hint, Jordan: it ain’t me. You’re a sucker, ‘s what you are.”

I sighed and shook my head. “You do see that I’m here already, right? I can read the schedule, Gary, I know when my shifts are.”

“Yeah, but did you know you’re riding an extraction?” Gary took my silence as a negative and laughed. “Oh yeah, Red One is getting out of Dodge tonight, man. Situation’s too hot for him. Cover’s come close to being blown one too many times in good old Vamplandia; the boss is pulling the plug. We send Red Ten undercover next week. Hope that poor bastard has better luck than the last two.”

“So do I,” I agreed mildly, fitting my own headgear on. “Enjoy your evening.”

“Got Becky waiting for me with a beer in one hand and a steak in the other, Jordan. I’m set. You have fun gettin’ Red One’s tail out of the fire.” He left and I took a moment to get back the state of calm I’d achieved before my coworker interrupted me. Gary was as obnoxious as he was irritating, and I tried not to spend any more time around him than I absolutely had to. If it wasn’t for the man’s idiot-savant psychic abilities he would never have been let into the handler project, because he had the intellect of a randy goat.

I glanced into the long mirrors along the wall of the equipment room and adjusted the fit of my headgear. I didn’t care much for my reflection. I was thin and pale from too many long nights, my blue eyes looked stark with bruise-like circles beneath them, and my thick brown hair was beginning to show the first touches of gray despite barely being into my thirties. I grimaced at myself. Once Red One was extracted I’d have to take some time off, recuperate before I was assigned to another agent. I wasn’t looking forward to that.

First things first, though: I had to get this one out. Of course I knew tonight was Red One’s extraction; I’d made sure that I got the shift for that very reason. I had worked almost exclusively with Red One for the past three months, after his last handler died of a stroke. I wouldn’t dream of leaving the vampire’s safety to anyone else at this point.

The irony of that thought didn’t escape me as I walked to the immersion room. Most humans were terrified of vampires these days, ever since the oldest and strongest of them decided to renounce their human alliances and take more power directly for themselves. The Cabal, as the rest of the world quickly came to call them, quickly and brutally took

over the city of Seattle, slaughtering thousands of humans and holding thousands of survivors hostage while more vampires flocked to their cause.

It was hardly a universal shift, especially at first. Vampires and humans had been symbiotic creatures for millennia, since the first human was turned by still-unknown methods. Humans outnumbered vampires a hundred thousand to one, and vampires had acknowledged the need for cooperation since the days of the pharaohs. Many renounced the old ways and joined the Cabal, but many didn't. Unfortunately the vengeful human populace didn't understand and, after the Massacre of Seattle, hundreds of loyalists were killed by mobs of angry, frightened people, sending even more vampires fleeing to their new promised land.

Those vampires who stayed stopped living openly. Most came to live under voluntary government supervision, which was how the handler program got started. The best way to get into Seattle wasn't with military strength or human spies, but with fellow vampires. A technique was developed to allow a human psychic to ride shotgun in a vampire's psyche, to record his or her movements, provide technical or mental assistance and, with the strongest bonds and most powerful psychics, to act through them. Vampires weren't psychic; it was an ability that didn't cross over once they were turned, but the sharpness and control that made them such deadly predators also made performing minor telepathic or telekinetic acts using them possible.

Such acts were dangerous and very highly frowned upon by the upper management of the CIA, which ran the handler program. When it was needed it was needed, though, and all handlers that could manage it were trained in the technique, just in case. Vampires willing to risk their lives for humans were very few and far between and keeping them functioning was of paramount importance. Red One's last handler's stroke had been brought on by an overtaxing psychic event. It had saved the vampire's cover from being blown, though, and that made the sacrifice worth it.

I entered the immersion room and nodded politely to the tech. "Miss Williams."

"Mr. Beckett," the young woman said with a smile. "You ready for this?"

"As ready as I ever am," I replied wryly as I settled into the chair. Williams came over and attached the network of electrodes to my headgear, and I shivered as the faint current began humming through my mind. The computers needed to see what I saw, recording straight from my synapses. I relaxed as Williams slipped the IV needle into the permanent shunt in my arm, starting the flow of the drugs that enhanced my psychic powers. I closed my eyes and waited for the clarity to come.

"Some music to relax you, sir?"

"Thank you. Something by Chopin, please." The soft, lilting strains of Nocturne in C# Minor drifted over me like a soothing balm, and as the drugs did their work, I sent my mind out scouting for Red One. It didn't take long to find him. It never took me long to

find him; I'd memorized the vampire's mental signature months ago. Good evening, Theo.

Ah, Jordan. So nice of you to join me, the warm tones echoed inside of me. I wanted to wrap myself up in Theo's voice; it was so rich and smooth. I take it you'll be overseeing my escape from Oz.

That's the plan, Theo. I was supposed to refer to Theo by his code name, to help maintain the distance and dispassion that would keep my head clear, but three months of working with the vampire on a near-nightly basis had blown that protocol all to hell. What's your situation?

I'm between checkpoints, currently. I'm leaving via the western gate.

Last night we'd discussed him taking I-5 out via the south of the city. What changed?

The Cabal broke up a Canadian infiltration unit close to the highway early this evening. The entire sector is swarming with patrols. I'm under surveillance as it is; I didn't want my presence there to be interpreted in a negative way. My psychic abilities were rapidly tuning themselves to Theo's mind, and soon I was looking out of the vampire's eyes. Theo sensed it, of course. Hello there, Jordan. Like what you see? He mockingly wiggled his fingers in front of his face.

You know I can't get enough of your hands, I replied, amused sarcasm dripping from my mental voice. Privately there was more truth in that statement than I was comfortable sharing. A month ago I'd ridden shotgun while Theo and another vampire had sex, and it had been one of the most intense experiences of my life. I had never really been a voyeur, but the memory of that intense session had fueled my most private fantasies ever since. The Cabal did accept your reasons for leaving, didn't they?

Of course, but a vampire who leaves Seattle for any reason other than being sent away gets monitored. He paused for a moment. Is that Chopin?

Nocturne.

I thought so. Beautiful. It certainly beats the heavy metal I was forced to listen to with your predecessor.

Gary didn't really get the concept of "peaceful".

He's certainly not you, Jordan. Thank you for doing this with me tonight.

You're welcome, Theo. I took a moment to treasure the sudden tingle of delight I felt at Theo's comment before refocusing. Are you on foot?

Currently. There's a car waiting for me beyond the final checkpoint, entirely legitimate I'm assured. They just have to check me over for any trace of anything that could be deemed suspicious, and we're coming up on the final scans, so if you could rest quiet for a moment, my dear.

Of course. I hoped Theo didn't know how much I enjoyed the affectionate diminutives he used for me from time to time. I mentally sat back and put my feet up, keeping my abilities at a low ebb as Theo entered the checkpoint. Human thralls, voluntary cattle who helped the Cabal maintain their control in exchange for power and the chance to be turned, manned the station. One of them approached and greeted Theo politely, handed his proffered ID over to another guard to process, then ran the scanning wand over his body, searching for unusual readings. Anything that might stand out, from an abnormal electromagnetic signature to a suspicious spot on an x-ray, would be detected. It was an amazing, recent piece of technology, and I held my breath as I waited for Theo to get the all clear. He should, it shouldn't be a problem, we'd done this a dozen times before and only rookie handlers outed their agents this way...the man scanning him looked at the readings and stepped back respectfully.

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, officer." Theo waited for his single bag to be searched, for the third time, and then returned to him, along with his ID. They were handed over just as a call came through on one of the thrall's cell phones. Theo was heading out the door as the security officer's voice called out, "Wait! Turn around."

Theo turned casually. "Yes, officer?"

The thrall looked from his phone to Theo and back again. Two of them conferred, and then their hands dropped to their buzz batons. "Put the bag down and place your hands behind your head."

Damn, looks like I'm outed, Theo said, slowly setting the bag on the floor. Perhaps through the Canadians; I was in contact with one of their agents.

Doesn't matter how; get out of there, I said. I'll buy you a few seconds. Reaching out with my mind and Theo's, I exerted my influence on the humans. It was hard, but I managed to touch the edges of their minds, no more than the last minute of their conscious thought, and cast the equivalent of a warm, fuzzy blanket over it. Their hands dropped to their sides and identical looks of confusion came over their faces. Go, Theo.

Theo turned and walked swiftly out the door, but not so fast that he alarmed anyone who wasn't trying to shake off my mental whammy. He continued on toward the gate, which was manned by another four men. The guards inside haven't radioed ahead. These ones won't let me through until they get the go from the office.

I'll handle it.

Jordan. Theo's mental voice was concerned. You're going to injure yourself if you aren't careful. Let me handle them.

No, they're equipped for vampire. Buzz batons and silver nitrate, and their body armor is too tough to take them out quickly.

Tell you what, Theo reasoned as he drew closer. The guards were beginning to raise their weapons suspiciously. You take out the second two. He was on the nearest man before I could reply, hammering a punch into his semi-exposed face and snapping his jaw hard enough to knock him out almost instantly. I marshaled my thoughts and reached out to the further pair of men, trying to balance using Theo's mind to sling my power through and leaving him with enough control to take down his next target. I didn't have time for finesse with these men. Rather than covering their minds in a blanket, I hit them with the weight of my own, a psychic sucker punch. They reeled back, blood pressure spiking and hearts racing as their autonomic nervous systems tried to deal with the sudden lapse of brain function.

"Mr. Beckett, you need to stop," Williams warned from where she sat monitoring. "You're over-exerting yourself."

"Not yet," I said through gritted teeth. "As soon as he's clear."

Jordan, what's happening? Are you hurting yourself? Theo ripped through the other guard's chest plate, striking him hard in the solar plexus and doubling him over.

I'll be fine. Is the car there?

Fifty yards, perhaps. I can— Sudden, searing pain tore through Theo's back, catapulting him forward onto his hands and knees. I convulsed, my mind shrieking with the secondhand torture before I regained a little control.

Theo! The vampire didn't answer, his mental ability crippled by the consuming agony. Silver-coated bullets, probably.

"You have to leave him, Mr. Beckett," Williams insisted. "You can't be in his mind when he's killed; it'll wipe you."

"He's not going to be killed," I gasped, forcing myself to focus on the anger I felt instead of Theo's pain. "I'm getting him out of there. Don't you dare touch my connection."

If Williams disengaged any of the electrodes before Theo was free and ruined my chance to save him, I would kill her. I plunged back into Theo's mind, fully immersing myself but holding the pain at bay. He'd taken three shots, all through the chest. He wouldn't die from it, but the silver was devastating.

The car would leave him there. I could just see it in the distance, blurred by the blood-red tears clouding the vampire's vision. It would leave, and then Theo would have no chance. He had to reach the car. Fifty yards. I sensed the incoming guards behind us, five of them, warily approaching from the building twenty-five yards away. Theo was still reeling with the pain, insensible to his surroundings. I needed to stop the guards, energize Theo and get him to the car before it pulled away. Fuck, this was going to hurt.

I drew my will in, focusing all my mental powers on the five thralls. I needed to incapacitate them while siphoning from them at the same time. My natural body tensed as I prepared to let loose, every muscle and nerve taut with anticipation.

Jordan...no...

Theo felt me. Even through his pain, he could tell what I was doing. That was a good sign. I let the warmth that realization gave me propel me into my final act. I thrust my mind at the attackers, flaying their psyches like a whip and sucking the energy from them at the same time. They collapsed, screaming in agony. I curved the arc of the power I controlled and brought it whipping back toward Theo. The backlash would be extreme; I was abusing my power and I knew it, but there was no other way. The stolen energy struck us like a fist to the heart.

The vampire jolted to his feet, spurred on by the relentlessness of my will. It wasn't painful for me yet, I was too deep into Theo, but I knew it would be soon. I had to get Theo moving in the right direction before that happened. Controlling his body, I forced Theo to lurch toward the car. The more steps he took, the more Theo reasserted control over his actions and the more I began to feel the excruciating backlash. It was coming at me; there would be no stopping it. I withdrew from Theo's mind just as the vampire reached the car, and the scream that was wrenched from my throat seemed to have an odd echo, as if someone else was screaming with me. Then the world went mercifully black.

Sometimes it felt like I was swimming underwater, through an inky darkness that muted all sound and diminished all touch. People seemed to be there, but while I could vaguely make out their voices and the feel of their hands, I couldn't respond to them. Other times it felt like I was falling down an elevator shaft, surrounded by darkness again and sick with dizziness. The worst part was the silence in my mind. I was used to my body being out of commission; it happened every time I used the immersion room, but my mind was always active, not just thinking but reaching out, psychically, to tell me what was going on. Now for some reason I couldn't.

It was that lack more than anything that finally brought me back to consciousness. I gasped with the strain of reaching out, so desperate for it that I felt like I couldn't breathe. Suddenly an oxygen mask clamped down over my face. I registered the loudness of voices and the rapid-fire beeping of machinery, and forced my eyes open. A young

woman in blue scrubs looked down at me, her face both worried and relieved. “Mr. Beckett! Can you see me? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” I tried to say, but my throat was too dry. I nodded my head minutely instead.

“Good, that’s great! Hang on, let me get something for your throat.” After a moment a spoon was pushed through my lips, delivering ice chips. I let them melt on my tongue, the cold wetness blissful on the dry tissues. It took several more spoonfuls before I felt capable of speaking.

“What...”

The nurse understood. “I think the doctor can explain things better, Mr. Beckett. Let me call him. He’ll definitely want to know you’re awake. I’m Ginny,” she added, her pale blue eyes kind and anxious as they surveyed my face. “I work with the long-term care patients; you can almost always find me on this floor. Just press the call button if you need anything. I’ll be right back.”

The young nurse left the room, leaving me staring at my surroundings. Heart monitor... IV...feeding tube...long term care, she said. How long had I been in the hospital? What had happened to put me here? What was wrong with my mind? Where was Theo? Oh God...Theo.

The heart rate monitor began to beep rapidly as the fear took me over. Oh no. Had he gotten out? Was he alive? Desperately I tried to reach out with my mind, tried to access the psychic abilities that had always come to me as naturally as breathing, but it was no use. I had nothing.

“Try to calm down, Mr. Beckett,” a tall, black man in a doctor’s coat advised as he came in through the door. “You’ve been down a long time. Take it slow.” The man came over to my side and checked the monitors, nodding slightly when the beeping began to slow. “Better. I’m Doctor Holland. It’s good to have you back with us, Mr. Beckett.”

“How...long?”

“You’ve been in a coma for the past three weeks, Mr. Beckett. You were moved from the ICU to the long-term ward two weeks ago.”

Three weeks in a coma. God. I relaxed my head back against the pillow and glanced around. No cards. No flowers. No sign that anyone even knew I was here. It wasn’t too surprising, given that I was a government spook with next to no friends, but it still hurt a little to be so utterly abandoned. “Can’t think.”

The doctor frowned. “Your brain activity is well within normal parameters. What are you...ah. Are you referring to your psychic abilities?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. Well, your system underwent a severe shock, Mr. Beckett. You overextended yourself and overtaxed your body and mind. It’s not surprising that you can’t access your abilities yet. From what I understand of the event that put you into a coma, it may be weeks or months before your mind is recovered enough to use your powers. It may be never.” Dr. Holland must have seen the look of pain and shock on my face, because he smiled reassuringly. “The mere fact that you woke up on your own makes me optimistic for the future, Mr. Beckett. You’ll be given physical therapy and psychiatric counseling, and I have no doubt that you’ll surpass our expectations. Are you in any pain?”

“Headache,” I mumbled.

“I’ll have Nurse Clarkson bring you something for it. Do you think you can handle a pill, or would you prefer to have it intravenously?”

“IV.” I was exhausted. It was a lot to take in all at once, and I needed to rest. I needed it, but I was afraid of it as well. I’d only just woken up after nearly a month of unconsciousness. What if I slipped back into a coma?

The doctor left and Nurse Clarkson, Ginny, came in moments later with a syringe in hand. “This should help,” she said softly as she injected the contents into the line. After a minute or so I really could feel a difference.

“Strong stuff,” I murmured, relaxing a little.

“Only the best for you,” Ginny grinned. “Doctor’s orders.” She glanced at her watch. “Oh wow, it’s almost five! Can you stay awake a little longer? He’ll be thrilled you’re able to take his call.” She passed me a cup with a long straw in it. “Here, drink something. It’ll make talking easier.”

I sipped at the cold water, then asked, “Who’s calling?”

“He says he’s not allowed to leave his name. I know you work for the government, so I can understand the classified stuff. He’s been calling every day at five for the past two weeks, since you came out of the ICU. He—” The phone rang and Ginny turned toward it happily. “I bet this is him!” She reached over and picked up the handset. “Hello? Yes! Yes, hi. Actually, he’s just woken up. Mm-hmm, just a few minutes ago. No, he’s doing very well, all things considered. Ah, let me check.” She covered the handset and turned back toward me. “Do you want to talk to him?”

“Can he give you a name now?” I asked tiredly. I didn’t really feel like talking, and with my luck it would be Gary on the other end of the line.

“Sir, Mr. Beckett would like to know who’s calling.” She paused. “Really? Um, okay.” Ginny turned back. “He says to tell you it’s Chopin.”

My heart suddenly lurched in my chest. Oh. Oh. “I’ll take the call,” I rasped. Ginny smiled and handed me the phone, then left the room. I held the handset to my ear, trembling and anxious and hopeful all at once. “Hello?”

“Hello, Jordan.”

Relief and joy spread through my body, warming and relaxing me. I found myself smiling idiotically into the phone and couldn’t seem to stop. “Theo. Thank God you’re all right.” Actually, I didn’t know that for sure. “You are all right, aren’t you?”

“Perfectly, my dear. The car whisked me away from Seattle before the Cabal could set anyone else on me. I’m in a safe house in the middle of nowhere now, waiting for things to die down enough so that I can make it back home.” His tone turned from brisk to concerned. “But what about you? You’ve been in a coma since you saved my life, and that’s all my new handler would tell me. I had to go well over her head before I could find out where you’re being treated. You sound...” Theo’s voice drifted off.

“Apparently I’m fine,” I said, not entirely able to keep the fear out of my voice. “But I can’t reach out the way I’m used to.” I had to be careful how I phrased things on the phone. The line was probably secure and I knew the CIA would take pains to keep my location confidential, but it still paid to be safe.

Theo was quiet for a moment. “I suppose that’s to be expected at first,” he said finally. “You did some extraordinary things for me, Jordan. When we lost contact I was worried you had...well, something like Mitchell.” Mitchell who’d had a stroke while blinding a vampire patrol to Theo’s presence. “I’m sorry I put you in that position.”

“Nothing that happened is your fault,” I said softly. My throat ached but I didn’t want to hang up the phone. “It’s part of the job. You’re too precious to lose, Theo. You’re one of the program’s best agents and we need you.”

“Why, darling. You think I’m precious?” Theo asked playfully.

I was getting really tired if I had let that slip. Apparently my verbal control still wasn’t as good as my mental control. I’d have to work on that. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry unless you don’t mean it,” Theo replied. “You sound about to collapse. I should let you sleep.”

“Will you call again?” I asked. I wanted to kick myself for sounding so needy but I didn’t have the energy for it. “I don’t think anyone else...knows where I am.” Or cares.

“Of course I will. Every day. Keep the phone close, Jordan, don’t hang up yet. It took me forever to find this. I thought all record players were in museums these days, but...” I heard a muted scratching sound, and then the music began to play. Nocturne in C# Minor. “Sleep well,” Theo murmured.

“Thank you.” I placed the phone on my pillow and closed my eyes, and in moments I was drifting off to sleep, lulled by the beauty of the music and the comfort of Theo’s care.

I stayed in the hospital for another two weeks. True to his promise, Theo called every day at five. It was the only time of the day I looked forward to. The physical therapy was routine, things I could easily do on my own. My muscle tone was gradually coming back, but the exercises were incredibly boring. The psychiatrist wrote me off as fine after two sessions. As for my psychic abilities, there was nothing. Not a hint, not an echo. One of my managers visited and brought the drugs that the program used to enhance our powers, and even then, nothing. It was incredibly demoralizing. I was good, truly gifted, at only one thing. I enjoyed my work and my position, and now both were in jeopardy.

“You can have a month of paid leave,” my manager said over the phone the day of my release. “We’ll reevaluate at the end of that. If there’s no improvement, I’m afraid the program will have to let you go. You can transfer to another department, keep your years in the system that way. Thank you for all your hard work, son.”

It sounded like they were already writing me off. “Thank you,” I said woodenly, and hung up the phone. I bent at the waist until my head was level with the bedside table and proceeded to bang my forehead against it. “Damn it, damn it, damn it.”

“Hey! No damaging the goods!” a friendly voice called from the door. I looked up and saw Ginny smiling worriedly at me. “You okay, Jordan?”

“I’m fine.” I tried to smile for her. She was the only thing apart from Theo that made my time here remotely bearable. “Not really looking forward to going home, I suppose,” I offered. That much was true. I didn’t like being in the hospital but the thought of my small, tenth-story apartment, dark and empty, didn’t appeal either. I’d really only used it as a place to sleep and to have mail sent. I didn’t know my neighbors, didn’t have any friends. Work was my life. Or had been, at any rate.

“Do you have anyone to drive you home?”

“No, I’ll take a cab.” I had a car but I wasn’t allowed to use it yet. Doctor’s orders.

“Oh. Is it far?”

“About fifteen minutes from here.”

Ginny was quiet for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. “If you wait until six I can take you. I skipped lunch today, so I’ve got over an hour’s worth of break time coming to me.” She looked at me slyly. “You could stay in this room, too. That way you won’t miss Theo’s last call.” She’d picked up his name over the course of the past few weeks.

Oh. His last call. Right. The final call, the final contact. Theo was still an active agent, despite his current inoperative status. I might be persona-non-grata with the company, but all the rules and regulations forbid handlers and agents from having physical contact. It was one thing to communicate mentally, it was quite another to meet face to face. Apparently it ruined our objectivity. Mine had been ruined the moment I first touched Theo's mind and heard his voice, but if I wanted to have any sort of career at all I needed to play by the rules. "Thank you. That would be great."

"Sure thing. I've got some patients to check on but I'll be back at six. Just hang out here, do whatever. Let me know if you need anything."

"Yes, Mom."

"That's my boy," Ginny grinned, then left the room. I looked at my watch. Five to five. Any minute now, he would call. Any minute now. Any minute...

Five o'clock crept by. The hour between five and six felt like an eternity, but he didn't call. I tried to rationalize it. Theo wasn't perfect, despite evidence to the contrary. He was on the move, perhaps finally getting out of that safe house. He had forgotten. He simply didn't care to make the effort. He was in some sort of trouble. All the excuses made sense, except perhaps forgetting, but they didn't make me feel any better. Theo had called me every day at the same time for a month, regardless of whether I was capable of answering him. Now I was finally leaving and Theo didn't call? It didn't make sense.

Ginny sensed my bleak mood and didn't ask any questions. We rode in her little yellow Beetle to my apartment complex, I thanked her, and she promised to call. I surprised myself when I realized that I actually hoped she would, and I thanked her again, more warmly. Then she drove away, leaving me shivering in the twilight. It was nearly winter, and the sun had gone down several hours earlier. I picked up my bag and turned toward the building. There was someone standing by the door, silhouetted by the light. He was about my height, with short, light-colored hair and a leather coat that went down to his knees. I studied him for a long moment, a little nervous. It was cold, almost freezing, but the man's breath didn't steam. Finally he spoke.

"Hello, Jordan."

Oh God. That voice, the voice I'd been obsessing over for what felt like forever now. Theo's voice. And if that was his voice, then this was the man. Vampire. Whatever. He was here, and he was looking at me. "Theo."

"In the flesh, my dear." He stepped a little closer. "You've got to be cold. You don't have a jacket?"

"I...wasn't wearing one when I was admitted. It wasn't this cold a month ago."

“Let’s get you inside then.” Theo held out his hand, and I took it. It felt like lightning suddenly shot down my arm. In an instant I dropped the bag and threw myself into Theo’s embrace. He held me tightly, pressing his face into my curled, messy hair and holding the back of my head with one hand. “I had to see you,” he whispered. “I didn’t call today because I was in transit. I know we’re not supposed to meet but I had to make sure you’re all right.”

“Glad you did,” I muttered back, voice muffled by Theo’s coat. My embarrassment took a few moments to catch up with me, but when it did I blushed. “I’m sure I’m not what you expected.” Skinny, weak, hair grayer than ever and utterly powerless. Not exactly an impressive figure.

“You’re better, darling,” Theo said soothingly. His voice resonated with warmth and sincerity. “You’re so much better. You’re real. Living, human, more than just a whisper in the back of my mind. I’ve wanted you for so long.”

“Wanted me?” I pulled back a little and laughed. “God, Theo, how could you want me? Look at me! I’m nothing now.”

“No, Jordan. You’re everything. You’re mine.” He smiled and I wasn’t sure if the thrill down my spine was from his expression or from the words, but I hadn’t felt that thrill in a very long time. It was the feeling of sudden desire. “Let’s get inside. We need to talk, and you’re freezing to death out here.”

It was actually quite cold, now that he mentioned it. It was October, I was even thinner than usual, and Theo wasn’t putting out any body heat to help me. I picked up my bag and we went in, taking the elevator up. I realized, standing in the tiny chamber next to him, that this was the closest I’d actually ever been to a vampire. I’d worked with them for years now, but only on a psychic basis. They didn’t go out in public these days, not that they could during the day anyway, and while I’d seen a few agents before it was always from a distance. Now I had my first chance to really look at one of them.

Theo was gorgeous. Possibly I was biased as I knew how clever and charming he was as well, but he was truly physically beautiful. All vampires tended to be slim and muscular, but Theo made a trench coat look as alluring as a negligee. There was something about the way he moved that was immediately sensual. His features were long and sharp, his large eyes dark brown, his lips full. His hair was golden blond. He was almost as pale as I was, but he made it look good. He was here. With me. I could barely believe it.

The elevator opened on my floor. I led the way to my apartment in a bit of a daze. There was a pile of newspapers on the floor, but I ignored them and pressed my way in. Wow. Barren was a good descriptor for my apartment. Bleak might give it a run for its money. I’d forgotten exactly how little time I spent here. The living room we walked into consisted of one couch, one table, one television. No art on the walls, no books, no shelves, no stereo. Rather pathetic. I sighed. This was my life.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed, my dear.”

“It’s hard not to be,” I said, gesturing toward the lifeless space.

“This place is obviously no reflection of you, love. Don’t let it disturb you. I happen to know where much of your time has been spent lately, and I positively flourished under your attention.”

I turned and looked at him. “You called me love.”

“Yes, I believe in being both honest and straightforward, Jordan.” Theo smiled at me. “You’d better get used to it.”

“I don’t understand how you can love me.”

He looked at me with concern. “This last month really affected your self esteem, didn’t it, darling? We really do need to talk.” He glanced around. “Do you need anything first? A drink, something to eat?”

“I don’t think there’s anything here to eat,” I sighed. “And no, I’m fine.” I wasn’t letting myself think too hard about Theo’s declaration. It couldn’t be real. It was gratitude, or friendship, but not love. Not the way I craved it.

“Then we should sit down. May we move to the bedroom?”

“Sure.” I didn’t really like sitting on my old couch either. I led him back into my bedroom, furnished with a queen-sized bed, a dresser, and a bedside table with a lamp. That was it. Theo took the bag from my unresisting hand and laid it on the floor, then pulled me over to the edge of the bed. The comforter was surprisingly clean. We sat down and Theo looked at me, searching my face with his beautiful eyes. I was too tired to be coy. I matched his stare.

“You love me.” He didn’t even make it a question.

“Yes,” I murmured.

“Why?”

“Why?” Was he serious? “Why wouldn’t I? Who could resist someone like you? You’re intelligent, courageous, funny, patient, gorgeous—”

“I’m a vampire,” he reminded me gently. “I feed from humans to survive. My kind have murdered yours by the thousand. I can’t give you warmth, or a life lived openly under the sun, or children. I’m over three hundred years old, scarcely making us contemporaries. You could find someone to delight with you in all the joys of being human.”

“What joys?” I scoffed. “I sleep the day away so I can work all night, I’ve never wanted children, I have a heater for warmth, and humans kill each other just as often as vampires do. I’ve never met anyone like you before, someone I feel so comfortable with. I loved being in you.”

“You will be again,” Theo promised me. Then he grinned a little. “In one way or another. I think your abilities will come back, perhaps once you stop trying so hard, but I don’t care if they never do. I fell in love with you for you, Jordan. I fell in love with the man who adores classical music and studied theater in college. I fell in love with your kindness and bravery and brilliance. I fell in love with the human who almost died saving a wretched vampire’s life.” His hands stroked down the sides of my face, light like feathers on my skin. His expression was somber. “Feeling our connection sever was the worst pain I’ve ever experienced, darling. I was desperate for you, to know if you were alive, what had happened. I could only assume the worst, after Mitchell. To have you here with me, alive and loving me...it’s all I could want. It’s all I do want.” Theo leaned in close to me, so close our lips were almost touching, and he cradled my face in his hands as he asked, “Do you want me?”

The desire I felt earlier skyrocketed in my blood, pulsing down my entire body. “Yes,” I whispered. “So much.”

“Then we start with that. The rest will come, my love. I need you.” Theo brushed his lips against mine, soft and almost hesitant, and I felt my fear evaporate. This was exactly what I wanted. Who I wanted. I had never felt this way before, felt a love so encompassing it threatened to drown me, and I couldn’t stop my reaction. I threw my arms around Theo’s neck and pulled him closer, bringing our bodies flush as I fell back onto the bed. I kissed him and drank him in, loving everything about him, the coolness and smoothness of his skin. He came with me willingly, easing back just long enough to slip his coat off. It slid to the floor as he slid over me, rubbing our erections together as he kissed me back. I groaned into his mouth.

“God,” I gasped, pulling back for air. “Oh God. It’s been...I’m not going to last long, Theo, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, love,” he grinned at me. “We have forever to explore each other. Take what you need.”

“No,” I said insistently. I wasn’t sure why, but it was important to me. “I want you inside of me when I come.”

Humor was replaced by lust in Theo’s face, and something else as well. Something hungry. “I want that too,” he whispered. “But I don’t want to hurt you. Do you have anything?”

Good question. It had been forever since I’d brought someone home, and for a moment I was discouraged. Then I remembered my bag. I pointed toward it. “In the outside pocket.

Massage cream.” Ginny had given it to me to use on myself after I did my therapy exercises. It was unscented and menthol-free, thankfully. Theo got up to get it and I sat up as well, pulling my clothes off hurriedly. I was desperate for him, but still embarrassed about my own body. It would be better if I got myself ready. I reached for the tube but he stopped me.

“I want to touch you, Jordan,” Theo said, his gaze devouring me. “You’re beautiful. I want to learn you.”

“We have forever to explore,” I quoted back at him. “I need you inside of me, Theo. I want that connection.” I needed to be as close as possible to him. He understood my need and smiled, then spread out and covered my body with his own.

“Then you’ll have it, love,” he whispered against my lips, kissing me so consumingly that every thought flew from my mind and left nothing but love and desire. I canted my hips against him, rubbing myself against his pants as we devoured each other. He moaned and reached a hand down my body, finding my length and stroking it. His touch was light, which was good because otherwise I would have come right then.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned.

“Such dirty words from such a pretty mouth,” Theo chided with a grin. “I want more of them.” He pulled back a little and got out of his own clothes, so fast I barely had time to register his movements, and then he was back on top of me. He opened the cream and spread some onto his fingers, then slid his mouth down to my chest. His lips closed around one of my nipples just as his slick, cool fingertips brushed my entrance. I shivered violently in reaction, partly from the chill but mostly from the reality of his hands and mouth against me. It was so incredibly good. I pressed down into his hand, wanting more, but he stopped me. “Slowly,” Theo whispered, his tongue laving my nipple. “It will be better this way.” And then he worked the tip of his finger inside of me.

“Fuck!” I shouted. His finger slid inside my body, warming quickly from my own heat. He thrust gently, curling and finding my prostate, and the light touch was breathtaking. I panted heavily, trying to keep control of myself as he slipped a second finger inside with the first. Theo’s lips moved down my stomach, trailing kisses over my obvious ribs and sharp hipbones. I had to reach down and grab his hair when he got close to my cock. “No,” I whimpered. “Not yet. I’ll come, I want to wait for you.”

“I won’t touch you,” Theo promised me. “With my body.” And he didn’t. He blew on me instead, steady puffs of cool air on my overheated cock that contrasted sharply to the warmth inside my ass. He hovered, millimeters away from my skin, and breathed his sighs against me. I was coming undone, practically incoherent as he slowly and steadily opened me and drove me insane. Finally, just before I exploded, he sat back. I watched through hazy eyes as Theo slicked his length, then leaned back in.

“I want you like this,” he murmured to me as he settled between my thighs. “Face to face for our first time. I want to see everything you feel.”

“Yes,” I exhaled, my voice barely audible. “Please.” Theo kissed me again, slowly and gently this time, and began to press inside of me.

God, it had been so long. He’d prepared me well, but fingers could never imitate this. I felt stretched, taut to the edge of pain, but wonderfully full and intimate at the same time. We were connected again, really connected. As he slid further inside and his head brushed against my prostate, I cried out. Theo swallowed every sound I made, his hands clenching and grasping in my hair as he made love to my mouth. Finally he was completely sheathed, and we both paused. “You’re...oh, fuck...Theo...” I was insensible with pleasure.

“You’re mine,” Theo told me, his expression intense and eyes burning. “Mine now, mine forever. I love you, Jordan.” He rocked inside of me, pulling back and pressing in again, and we both moaned. “You’re mine, love.” Out and in, his long cock touching every part of me, driving so deep that I was filled from head to toe. “Mine,” he whispered.

I stared into his eyes, finally letting myself believe it. Theo loved me, maybe even as much as I loved him. I felt everything in me open then, my mind, my body, my heart, all reaching out for this incredible creature who made me feel exceptional. I let him inside of me, and it was as though by reaching for him, I found myself. Suddenly I was in him, seeing through his eyes, staring down at my own face with all the amazed affection that Theo felt for me. I love you, Jordan. Don’t doubt me, I can’t bear it if you doubt me. I heard it in his mind, and I grasped him tightly.

“I don’t doubt you,” I managed, and then I pulled him in for another kiss. It was jubilant now, bringing two halves of the same whole together. “I feel you,” I moaned, my pleasure spiraling out of control now that our connection was complete again. “Everywhere.”

“You’re back,” Theo whispered against my lips. The tempo of his thrusts suddenly picked up, and I felt Theo’s own sense of urgency spike with the sudden realization. “Stay in me,” he begged. “Watch me take you, watch yourself...feel how much I want you.” Words deserted him as he pummeled me, desperate to come in me, to claim me, to mark me and bite me and taste me for the first time...

“Yes, bite me,” I gasped. “It’s all right, I want it.”

Theo didn’t need anything else. He licked a line from my neck to my shoulder, tasting my sweat-tinged skin before biting down and sinking his sharp teeth into the crook of my neck. He didn’t penetrate far, I knew he was trying so hard not to hurt me, but as soon as I felt the first pull of my blood into his perfect lips, I was coming. “Theo!”

Jordan! He came inside me, pulsing cool seed into my body as he suckled at my neck. I spurted my own offering across our stomachs, not even having to touch myself. I'd never come like that before, so hard and long. The aftershocks coursed through my body, and I felt dizzy. Or perhaps that was the blood loss. Or some of both. I clung to Theo and he held me, caressed me and calmed me down as he slowly lifted his lips away from my neck, and even more slowly withdrew from my body.

We lay together for a long time, unspeaking. We didn't need to speak. I was inside him; our connection was back. I realized that I never wanted to lose it again. I love you.

And I you. You're mine, Jordan. Promise you'll stay with me.

I promise.

I have a house in this city. I want it to be our home. There's nothing for you here.

I smiled weakly. That's certainly true. I want to be with you.

I'm glad we agree, Theo thought cheekily. No matter what happens or where we go, you're first for me, Jordan. You're mine and I'm going to take care of you.

Good. I thought about it for a moment. You're mine too, you know.

Theo grinned and nuzzled my cheek. I wouldn't have it any other way.

The Dragon and his Knight *by M. Raiya*

“No, we will not,” Justin said firmly.

“I think we could,” Wells said, zipping the little green tent closed behind them and rising to his feet, shouldering the small pack containing their essential gear.

“But we will not,” Justin said, leading the way into the meadow before the tent.

Wells sighed and gazed at his master’s retreating body. Justin was gorgeous from all angles. Tall and dark and wild and dangerous, even in human form.

Justin turned and walked backward through the early morning mist, leaving tracks in the dew-soaked grass. “It is not going to happen. It is too dangerous. I would not be able to control myself. I would hurt you.”

Wells smiled at his master’s formal, clipped sentences. After all these years, Justin had never really perfected the art of speaking aloud. “Justin,” Wells said. “You wouldn’t hurt me.”

Justin tore at his long, dark hair in mock agony. “I have failed! You do not fear me. You should obey my every command without question. You--”

Wells fell to his knees and clasped his hands on his breast. “I beg, I plead!” he cried. “I fear you! Please, o master of my soul!”

Justin rolled his eyes. “No one else’s knight gives him these problems! What you beg for is my ultimate threat! I could accidentally kill you!”

“It matters not to me!”

“Well, it matters much to me. You are my chosen link to the human world. Now, will you arise? We are late.”

Wells stayed on his knees.

“Fine! Remain here all week. With no food.” Justin turned and set off toward the middle of the field.

Wells watched the master of his soul walk away, knowing Justin wasn’t going very far. Sure enough, after a few more steps, Justin turned. Wells held his breath, spellbound, as always, when his lord changed form. It was fast, almost instantaneous. One moment,

Justin was human, wild and tall and dark, and the next moment, Justin was dragon, large and black and winged.

And incredibly desirable. Oh, in human form, Justin was an incredible lover. But Wells wanted to feel the whole press of Justin's dragon weight, the strength of his thrusts, the deep roar of his passion bursting inside him...

Justin growled and beat his satin-smooth wings, baring his fangs, flexing his talons, making himself look deadly, doing everything in his power short of breathing flames at Wells to show how terrifying he could be.

It only turned Wells on even more. The sight of this great, plunging beast in the mist almost made him swoon like a damsel of old when confronted by the epitome of male prowess. Ironically, as Justin began to move closer, muscles all aquiver with strength, Wells felt the degree of awe Justin wanted. He truly did feel overwhelmingly overpowered by this creature who had defeated him, not by tooth and talon, but by the beauty of the soul behind the dark eyes. Enchanted, possessed, hypnotized, Wells didn't know or care. He'd laid his sword at the dragon's feet -- the first dragon he'd ever seen -- and sworn he would never hurt a creature of such wonder.

And to his amazement, the huge dragon turned into a man, a man with the same power and beauty and soul. The man took up Wells's sword and held the point to Wells's breast and drew blood, and Wells closed his eyes and opened his hands and offered up all that he was to the incredible creature before him.

The dragon had not killed him, any more than he could have killed it. Justin had taken Wells back to the dragon lair to join the other knights captured by dragons the same day. The humans' purpose was to serve as captive guides in the human world, which the dragons were preparing to enter secretly, in disguise, to hide from the knights who were hunting them to extinction. But from the beginning, Justin's relationship with Wells had been different. Wells was Justin's prisoner, yes, but one who had surrendered rather than been taken.

And Wells had found that being a prisoner was amazingly freeing. For the first time, he had freedom from the medieval manor, where daily survival was a struggle over food, disease, greed, and the cold power of the kings in their castles of stone. Now, the sky and wind and starlight were his on Justin's back with his great wings bearing them both aloft, alone, and together throughout time as Justin's magic soaked into Wells and gave him magic and long life, too.

But never, in all those years, would Justin make love to him while in his true form.

Two hours after they left the tent, they sat together in history class.

It had been fifty years since they'd last felt the urge to take part in human life, which they did occasionally just to remind themselves they were still part of life on Earth, even though it had long since turned past their own time. Now they were in New Hampshire, in the United States, renting an apartment in a college town near the coast, keeping the tent hidden in the mountains far away where they could spend weekends as themselves. It had been Wells' idea to register for classes and actually go to them, as opposed to just pretending to be students, since they both still looked youthful. He'd always wanted to study history, to see how it compared to the real thing, and by the third week, he was completely caught up in the stories the professor wove for the class.

It actually made him a little homesick.

Justin, cramped next to him in a small wooden desk in an amphitheater that smelled of wet carpet from the damp day outside, rested his head on the wall and slept. They'd been flying in the moonlight for the joy of it most of the night, and then, after only a few hours rest, they'd flown down to their apartment. Fortunately Justin had long ago mastered the art of hiding them from human eyes, but it took strength to maintain invisibility. They hadn't even had time for breakfast before class. And now the strain was catching up.

When the professor, an old man with wispy, white hair and leather patches on the elbows of his corduroy jacket, called for a break, Wells saw Justin jerk awake and then look around blearily.

"Sit," Wells said. "I'll get you some coffee."

"Right," Justin said, settling back down again.

Wells bought coffee and bagels at a cart parked on the green just outside the history building's door. When he went back inside, the professor had just woken Justin. Wells could see the frustration in his master's body. He hurried down the wide stairs in the center of the amphitheater.

"I don't understand why you come here and sleep," the professor was saying, arms folded. Even standing up, he wasn't much taller than Justin sitting down. "It's been three weeks now, and you haven't heard a word I've said. It's your choice, of course, but your grade is going to reflect it."

"My grade," Justin repeated, raising his eyebrows, as though he couldn't believe such a thing had any relevance.

"Yes, your grade, young man! You may be a freshman, but believe me, these next four years are going to fly, and you'll soon find yourself on the street looking for a job. You'll wish your grades were better."

"A job," Justin said, raising his eyebrows even higher and looking as though he were about to laugh. The last thing they ever worried about was employment -- they had a

fortune in dragon treasure locked away in Swiss banks, currently the best storage place. But Wells should have given Justin more credit. He just nodded as though the professor had a point.

"I think your lectures are very interesting," Wells said, reaching them at last.

"Thank you." The professor gave him a smile, sent Justin a frown, and returned to the lectern as the class gathered again.

Justin took the cup of coffee Wells offered with a scowl. He never thanked Wells, who was his prisoner after all. "I can not endure this much longer," he growled under his breath, then took a swallow.

Wells sighed. He'd known this wouldn't last. "Thanks for trying."

Justin flashed him a quick frown, then unwrapped one of the bagels. "And this is what?"

"It's a bagel. Bread. The white stuff is cream cheese. It's delicious."

"No meat? I liked that thing with the ham and egg you got last week."

"I'll get you a hamburger for lunch."

"Fine."

A couple nearby students stared. In fact, most of the young women in the room had been staring at them -- Justin in particular -- for the last three classes. Justin ignored them all, except one woman, who'd dared stare at Wells the very first day. The look Justin had sent had made her take a seat in back.

Justin took a bite of the bagel, chewed, and nodded. "All right." Their eyes touched, and passion kindled. Justin did a sensuous thing with one hand as he brushed his wild hair out of his eyes, and then sent Wells a sideways look. Heat stirred Wells' groin. Justin's revenge, Wells thought. Justin would endure the rest of the class, but he'd keep Wells in a state of arousal the whole time. It was one of Justin's many dragon talents.

This was going to be a long day. Wells opened his thick textbook and tried to focus on the chapter they'd read for homework. Or rather, which he'd read aloud to Justin. He'd taught Justin how to read and write long ago, but Justin had never really gotten the knack of it. The dragon was content to let Wells take the lead in dealing with things human.

And the human world had been worrying Wells lately. Exactly why, he wasn't sure, but this worry was behind the reasoning he'd given Justin for wanting to take a college class. Keeping in touch with the human world had been Wells' responsibility, and he'd enjoyed it, making use of the excellent memory and quick wit that had earned him a knighthood

in the first place. At first, it had been easy. He and Justin had had all the advantages. Justin's magic and the ability to fly had given them the world, or so it felt.

But suddenly, humans could sail across the sea. Justin could not fly that far, and for the first time, the two of them had used a human-made device for something they could not do on their own -- reach the new world. Then rapidly had come guns and trains and phones and electricity and planes and nuclear bombs. They watched humans reach the moon and fight wars that covered the whole planet, and in the last few years, seen them develop computers that made time and distance truly irrelevant. And it had all happened so fast. Somehow, he and Justin had been pushed into the mountains, but even the great woods of the world were falling.

It was all making Wells so uneasy that he'd talked Justin into going to school.

The professor coughed and started in again. Justin settled back with bagel and coffee, brushing his leg sensuously against Wells' and sending another rush of warmth into Wells' groin. Wells tried to ignore it and focus on the lecture, jeans getting tighter by the second.

"We're going to finish our lecture today on weapons of the Medieval Period," the professor said, clicking on a projector mounted to the ceiling and touching a few keys on his computer. The screen on the wall was suddenly filled with the images of swords, spears, lances, bows, and arrows.

Then the professor bent down, and Wells heard the sound of something unzipping. After a moment, the professor straightened. In his right hand was a sword.

Wells leaned forward intently.

Justin winced away.

It was a beautiful weapon. A reproduction, Wells knew at once, of a sword made during the High Renaissance, years after the Medieval Period, with fancy filigree work and jewels set into the hilt. The professor gave it a few glamorous and completely ineffectual waves in the air, then laid it across the top of his lectern.

"Swords, of course, were the weapon of choice by the knights, whom as you'll remember from last week, were noblemen who owed their allegiance to a vassal, who in turn served his king in return for a land grant, or fief. If a king declared war on a neighboring kingdom, which he often did, he would call on his vassals for support, and they would ride to his side with their best knights."

A painting of a knight in armor filled the screen. Memory assailed Wells. Armor had been horribly hot, heavy, itchy stuff, but oh, the glory of riding up to the castle, the serfs bowing and bending as he passed, cheering him. In those days, he had ruled the world, or so it seemed, encased in silver, bearing a sword his hand and honor in his soul...

Justin made a very slight, mocking bow, and the sight of Justin's lean, tanned fingers reaching toward him made Wells draw a sharp breath and fight for control of the arousal that had just been threatening before.

"In times of peace, a knight rode the countryside upholding the king's laws and acting with chivalry, the knight's code of honor. He would be expected to aid any damsels in distress from the attack of marauders, or, of course, the wayward dragon."

The professor put up a slide of a dragon about to swoop down on an unsuspecting young woman working in a field, gathering grain into her apron. The dragon, bright red and gold, actually wasn't too far off, Wells decided, though the wings weren't quite wide enough and the neck was too thick. He certainly recognized the glint in the creature's eye as it reached for its prey. Lucky girl, he thought wistfully. Justin could snatch him any day.

The other students laughed at the whimsical painting, nicely covering Wells' shift of position as he gave up fighting the inevitable and sought to merely hide it. Justin was trying not to laugh. Wells distracted himself with a sip of hot coffee.

The next painting showed the dragon impaled on the lance of a knight who'd just arrived on the scene.

Wells choked on the coffee. The agony in the dragon's eyes, the torture of his arched back, the painful drag of the proud wings trailing to the ground... It wouldn't have been so bad if Wells hadn't just seen Justin's expression in his eyes.

Never Justin, no, never! Wells would die first! He would kill anyone who tried to--

"Hey, easy," Justin said, leaning close.

Wells drew a shuddering breath and let Justin take the cup as he tried to stop choking. The other students were looking at them. "Sorry, sorry," he managed to say around his coughs. He wondered if the other students guessed he and Justin were a couple. At least here they wouldn't be killed outright. He'd lost count of the number of towns they'd fled with Justin's magic to escape execution.

"Ah, yes, the fate of the poor dragons," the professor said. "Wiped out by knights to the last one, or so a person must believe considering there are no dragons around today. If, of course, one believes in the whimsy that they did, in fact, exist."

The professor put up another painting of a dying dragon, so detailed it was almost photographic. This dragon, too, was being killed by a knight, who was sitting boldly on the dragon's back, pulling its head up with one hand and slitting its throat with the other. Wells took one look and came to his feet. Okay, enough college, he decided. Enough humans. They could blow themselves up for all he cared. Back to the tent for another fifty years. Hell, make it seventy-five.

He didn't count on Justin remaining in his seat, staring at the picture.

"Let's go," Wells said under his breath, not caring that the class was turning to them again.

"A moment," Justin said. Then he directed himself to the professor for the first time. "This painting, when was it made?"

"This year," the professor said. "It was done by one of the art majors in this college."

"What year is it now?" Justin asked.

There was a sudden silence. "Ah, 2010," the professor answered with raised eyebrows.

Justin's jaw dropped. Wells followed his master's gaze to a timeline on the wall above the board. It started with the ancient river valley civilizations and ended with the present year. Wells had noticed it before, but it had never really sunk in until that moment.

He and Justin were something like a thousand years old!

Wells sank back into his seat, seeing shock on Justin's face. Drawing a deep breath, Wells opened his mind to Justin's and sent the words, We are all that matter to each other.

Justin gave a little nod, then sent, How long has it been since we have heard from any of the others?

The others, Wells knew, were the dozen or so dragon and knight pairs who were living as they were. We saw Aron and Dep at Christmas, a few years ago, he answered. And Dep said they'd been in contact with others in Europe recently.

But how many years has it been since that Christmas?

Wells thought hard. There'd been a war on. Which one? The one with that crazy little German man? No, before that. The fighting had just been in this country. The Civil War. That was it. He looked back at the timeline.

A hundred and forty-five years ago.

Shit.

Everyone's just gotten busy, he said quickly.

Justin was staring at the painting on the screen again. The agony of the dragon pulsed.

That is Aron, Justin said heavily.

No!

He is my brother. I ought to know.

Horror swept through Wells.

Remember, it is only a painting. Not a photograph, Justin sent quickly. It could be that this is an imagined scene. They might even have posed for it.

Wells drew his eyes from the dragon to his slayer. Now he recognized Dep's blond hair and heavy build. The artist had even gotten the scar that pulled Dep's mouth slightly out of shape. Then Wells saw a gold medallion hanging against Dep's chest that he'd never seen his friend wear before.

What is that medallion?

Justin shrugged slightly.

"Anyway, as I was saying," the professor went on, clearly writing Justin off as a student with major issues and best ignored, "the reason I showed this painting is because it was made by a student right here in this class, a student who is majoring in medieval studies and is particularly interested in the mythical dragons. She has come up with a fascinating theory that the dragons survived by taking human form and enticing certain unlucky men into becoming sort of human guides for them."

Wells almost stopped breathing and felt Justin's tension explode.

"Ms. Anna Montgomery," the professor said, smiling. A young woman in the front row rose and gave an embarrassed wave.

Wells caught his breath. She was the woman whom Justin had glared at for staring at him on the first day. She knew who they were!

"Thank you," Anna said with an English accent as many people in the room clapped. She was tall, athletic, and had an aristocratic face. Like the other students, she wore jeans and a sweatshirt. Her long blonde hair was tied back.

Who is she? Wells sent to Justin.

Danger, he sent back, eyes intent.

Wells didn't need Justin to tell him that. Dragon?

Justin shook his head, then asked him, Knight?

Impossible. She's female.

Though in this day and age, anything was possible, Wells amended.

Had she known that the professor was going to show her painting to the class? It was certainly a good tip off to them about her, and she'd kept her secret for three weeks. Wells doubted that she'd known the professor was going to do this. But now she must know that Justin and Wells realized. And that would make her feel cornered, and dangerous, as Justin had just said.

Still, the last thing Wells expected her to do was leap out of her seat, seize the sword lying across the lectern, and race up the wide stairs toward them.

But she did.

Wells acted on instinct. He and Justin were cornered where they sat at the end of a row, halfway up the room, right next to the wall. Wells knew he had to get out of there, out to the stairs where there was room to maneuver. He sprang up, drawing the dagger he always kept in his right boot despite the campus rules on weapons, and ran to meet her, scattering backpacks and books and water bottles as he went. People screamed, but he ignored them, just as he ignored Justin's shout. All he could think about was stopping her from plunging that sword into Justin's throat.

Wells made it to the end of the row just as she made it to his level. Dagger met sword with a clash of metal. The sword was a better reproduction than it looked, and she was a better fighter than he'd hoped. He heard Justin bellowing, "Out! Everybody out!" and had time to flash on the irony that the dragon was urging the humans to safety while the knights fought in the midst of them.

Then he lunged for her with the knife. He might have the experience, but she had the better weapon. He couldn't afford to be gallant.

"No!" she cried, parrying his blow. "Wells, listen to me! I am not your enemy! I'm here to save you! He's had you ensorcelled for centuries! You looked into his eyes!"

Wells saw an opening and darted in under her guard. But to his surprise, she didn't fall back, she leapt sideways, and before he knew what she was doing, she slipped a chain around his neck with her left hand. A heavy gold medallion banged against his chest, and with its touch, everything changed.

The world went dark and cold.

No! he heard Justin shout.

He turned and saw Justin, who'd been running down the stairs toward them -- somehow they'd made their way to the flat surface of the floor -- come to a halt about five steps away.

"Let him go!" Justin ordered.

"No closer, or I kill him!" she shouted.

Justin froze.

And Wells felt dark and coldness sinking into his heart. Where there had been warmth and love, now there was nothing.

The woman grabbed Wells' unresisting body and turned him away. "A knight's biggest mistake," she said, her words melodic in her accent, "is to look a dragon in the eyes. You knew that, Wells, but you did it anyway. Did you think you could be stronger? Did you mean to test yourself, or was it a mistake?"

"I -- don't -- remember," Wells heard himself say far away in the cold. Oh, it was so cold, so lonely.

"Don't worry," she said. "It'll take time, but you'll learn to be your own again. But first, we must finish him. We'll do it together."

"Together," Wells repeated. "The Brotherhood of Knights." It had been so long.

"Yes," she said. "That's it."

Outside, someone banged on the closed door. "Security! Open up!" The door rattled but stayed shut. Justin's magic held it. Wells knew the door would not open again until Justin willed it or died.

"What's going on?" the professor croaked. He hadn't fled with the students but remained behind his lectern, clinging to it as though it were a life raft.

"History, unfolding before you," Anna said. She raised the sword toward Justin. "This is the last and greatest dragon alive. He has killed many humans and kept this one under his spell for centuries. You are about to see him meet his end."

The professor gaped at Justin, who ignored him.

"Damn you," Justin said to her.

Anna laughed tauntingly. "Come ahead! Kill him now, if you can. Before Wells takes this sword and finishes what he began a thousand years ago. You'd better hurry before he finds his strength. Because he will have no compunction against killing you this time."

“Damn you!”

“You can’t kill him, can you, mighty dragon? You’re in love with a knight. You’ll just stand there and let him slay you. Your brother fought, but then, he didn’t feel as deeply for Dep as you do for Wells, did he? But that won’t matter, because Wells feels nothing for you now, and never did, really.”

Wells felt the heaviness of the medallion around his neck. “What is this?” he asked weakly.

“It is an old, holy medal from your own time, and so it broke the evil spell holding you,” she answered. “The power of good over evil.”

“Evil?” he asked. Everything was so bleak and empty and cold when before it had been warm. How had that wonderful warmth been evil?

“The right path is not always the easy one,” she said. “You’re a knight. You know that. He has lured you into sinful ways.”

Justin growled and changed form. Wells sensed the darkly familiar dragon take to the air. Drafts from his wings sent papers flying and blew Anna’s long hair. Wells did not look at Justin as he flew over their heads to land near them. Wells heard a thud and saw that the professor had slumped to the floor. “Mother of God,” the man whispered in awe. “A dragon!”

The woman knight grinned at Justin. “Oh, excellent,” she said. “Will you give us a good fight, or will you just lay your head in his lap?”

Wells glanced at Justin, careful to keep his gaze away from the dark, mysterious eyes. He remembered the touch and taste of the dragon, remembered the desire Justin could stir in him with just a glance. He remembered his longing to feel Justin in this form, too. Now all was cold and alone. Unendurable. Wells had to end this. He raised his dagger again. Anna raised her sword. The two knights slowly marched toward Justin.

As they reached him, Justin turned back into human form.

“Prepare to die,” Anna said.

“I ask you please to consider a moment,” Justin said quietly, opening his hands to her. “How do you plan to remain free after my death? The moment I cease to breathe, those doors shall unlock, and this room will fill men at arms. You will be holding a sword covered with my blood.”

“No, Wells is going to be holding a dagger covered with your blood,” she said. “But there will be no body, because dragons vanish the moment they die. I’ve done my research.

Not to worry, Wells. I know people in high places who'll get you off for having a weapon on campus."

"Despite witness who saw you draw the first weapon?" Justin asked.

"My lawyers can handle it. But you won't have to worry, Justin, will you?"

"No. And you are right in the fact that I cannot hurt Wells. Believe it or not as you wish, I will not hurt you, either. Not because you're a woman -- I always laughed at the thought of chivalry -- but because I have come to care for your kind. Wells taught me more than how to read and speak."

"While you had him under your power. Admit it."

"Freely. I don't expect you to understand our relationship. My point is that it is not yet too late for you to walk from here. Put down the sword. I will say nothing. You can tell the humans this was your semester project, to bring the Medieval Period to life."

She laughed. "Are you insane?"

"No, Anna, I assure you I am not."

"No way."

"I thought you would say that," Justin said with a sigh. "So I suggest you prepare to die."

"Me?" She laughed scornfully.

"Because while we have been talking, Wells has removed the medallion and looked into my eyes again."

"Oh, shit!" she cried and whirled.

Wells smiled, raised the dagger, and would have buried it in her chest if Justin had not said, "No! Wells, do not!"

Wells froze, because his master bade him to. And it felt so incredibly good to have to. Everything was all warm and love again.

"Give me the knife and the medallion."

Wells handed them both over. They vanished instantly. "You did not have the knife," Justin said, and Wells believed him. Then Justin pointed at the professor, still sitting on the floor, awestruck. "You are a good man," Justin said. "I will not take your memory, but I will require your silence on what you have seen."

“You have it,” the professor whispered.

And then, before Anna could react, the doors burst open and police swarmed in. Anna stood, sword in hand, facing two unarmed men, with the professor on the floor. Within moments, she was borne screaming in fury from the room.

Wells let Justin gather him close. Wells’ instincts said to deal with the people crowding around, not to let his guard down now, especially in public, but he sensed that for the first time in a long time, if ever, Justin needed him. Needed to hold him. And Justin’s needs always took precedence over everything. So Wells wrapped his arms around Justin’s neck and pressed close, allowing himself to be held so tightly that breathing almost ceased to be possible.

“You were gone,” Justin said softly.

“It was terrible,” Wells whispered back.

People pressed around, tried to interrupt them, but the humans were no more than flies pestering.

“You love me,” Justin said. He sounded as though the idea astounded him.

“Well, yeah,” Wells said.

“You actually took the medallion off so that you could become mine again!”

Wells tipped his face to Justin’s. “You didn’t know that I love you?”

Justin hesitated a moment. I always feared I was forcing you to.

You own my heart, yes, Wells said. But it was freely given. Always.

Justin swept him into a kiss like Wells had never felt before.

“Excuse me,” someone said insistently and tapped Wells on the shoulder.

Justin growled deep in his chest.

Wells felt a surge of warmth shoot through him and didn’t stop kissing.

“Oh, just leave them alone,” someone else said. “A couple minutes of what they’re doing is worth hours of psychologists.”

Wells couldn't have agreed more. Justin's mouth was taking Wells places he'd never been in a thousand years, as though a dam in Justin had just burst. For the first time Justin was completely and totally giving himself up in a way that Wells had never realized had been missing until it was suddenly there. He might be Justin's knight, but now, for the first time, Justin was his dragon, too.

Forever, they both said in each other's minds at the same time.

"Yes, but they're both victims of traumatic violence, and the sooner they begin processing, the better."

Wells wanted to laugh at that. The real trauma they'd experienced today was not something he was going to share with anyone. Thinking about that, however, caused some worrying thoughts to begin to worm back into his mind. Who was this woman? How had she done what she did? And were Aron and Dep really dead?

I will go deep and try to find out, Justin sent to his mind. Cover for me.

Okay. If you make contact with Aron, try to get a telephone number for them.

Justin sent acknowledgment, though Wells wasn't sure Justin knew what a telephone was. Then Justin went motionless as he sent out his mind in a search for his brother's. Wells tried to make it look as though they were still sharing an intimate moment, even though one of them was now miles away. Fortunately, it didn't take Justin long to return. His muscles gave a slight spasm and his breathing caught, then he raised his head.

They are safe, was all he said. And I have a number to call later.

Wells felt a surge of relief. She had lied. Her painting had not been real.

Do we stay, or do we disappear? Justin asked.

Wells had been wondering the same thing. Justin could make an entire village forget that they had seen a dragon, so he'd have little trouble making a handful of people forget what had happened. But this time it was different. For the first time, ever, Wells felt as though they belonged. It was a very strange sensation.

Can we stay? he asked, since Justin was his master.

Justin hesitated, then answered, I think she was wrong. Our time once was long ago, but this new time is ours, as well.

“Why didn’t you let me kill her?” Wells asked that night, sitting across from Justin at the table in their sparsely furnished apartment, eating take-out hamburgers and fries and drinking milkshakes. His knife was back in his boot.

Justin tried to tear open another package of ketchup, but he didn’t have the right technique and it sprayed everywhere. Wells wiped it up, opened another one, and put it on Justin’s third hamburger.

“Because of you,” Justin said. “You were a knight once, and you turned out quite well. There might be hope for her. And she was right. I did kill many people. I did not like the feeling, and I would not have you feel blood on your hands, too. Besides, this country has laws, and she was breaking them. I had no desire to do the same.”

Wells nodded slowly.

“Yes. I want to start living through time, Wells, not moving through it.”

Wells froze in the act of opening another ketchup. “You don’t want to give up being a dragon, do you?”

Justin laughed. “Never. You know that is not even possible. But I do not think we should isolate ourselves again. There is too much changing.”

“I’ve been sensing that, too.”

“That professor,” Justin said. “I like him. And I trust him. That is a new feeling for me. One which I like. There is bad in this world, but there is good as well.”

“There always has been,” Wells said quietly.

Justin nodded slowly. Then they looked at the cell phone on the table beside them. Wells had bought it that afternoon, as soon as they had given the police their statements. But they were oddly unwillingly to use it. Wells knew they feared to find out that there was another crusade underway of knight against dragon.

Still, they needed to know.

“Do it,” Justin said to him.

Wells entered the number Justin gave him and hit send, then handed it to Justin, who held it to his ear awkwardly. Wells leaned closer to listen.

After a moment, a voice cried, “Justin!”

Wells felt a surge of relief as he recognized Aron’s deep, dragonish voice coming through the phone. He rested his forehead on Justin’s shoulder to listen.

“Aron?” Justin asked. “Your voice is strange this way.”

“Yes, it is I! This new technology has its amazements, does it not?” He paused a moment, then asked, “Are you all right, my brother? For days, we have been trying to reach you.”

“We are safe,” Justin said quickly. “But we saw a painting of Dep murdering you.”

“Ha! Unholy woman who calls herself a knight! She showed us a similar painting of you, not three weeks ago.” Aron’s melodic voice held deep emotion. “She tried to get a golden medallion upon Dep, but he foiled her, and she took to flight in one of those damned air vehicles, and I could not catch her. You?”

“She got a medallion upon Wells, but just for a few moments. She has been arrested by one of those uniformed guards -- I forget the word. Police, yes. They will deal with her. Is everyone else all right?”

“Yes. I put out a warning, and when Greyson and Paulet saw her coming, they fled. I tried to find you, but no one in Alaska knew who you were.”

“We left there long ago. Is she working alone?”

“I believe so. But it would be good to destroy that infernal medallion.”

“I will take care of it,” Justin said.

“Have a care.”

“I shall indeed. Aron, we should contrive to meet in person. The world is becoming strange.”

“Agreed. Keep this phone with you. We will arrange it.”

“I want to talk to Dep,” Wells said quickly.

“A moment,” Justin said into the phone. “Wells would like to speak with Dep.”

“Dep?” Aron asked, as though wondering why. “Very well. Dep, leave that. Wells would like a word with you. Quickly, now.”

Justin handed Wells the phone. Through it, he could hear what sounded like fabric rustling, then footsteps, and then Dep’s soft, quaking voice. “Hello?” he asked timidly.

“Dep,” Wells said quickly. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Certainly.”

“Don’t wad up my cloak like that!” Wells heard Aron snap. “Give it here!” There was more sound of fabric.

Wells had been going to ask Dep for his thoughts on the female knight, but Wells decided not to bother with minor details. There was a much more important question. “Dep, does Aron ever make love to you in dragon form?”

Justin gave a startled gasp. Wells ignored him.

Dep didn’t answer. Wells decided it had been too personal a question when Dep said softly, “What other way is there?”

“Ah, you know. As humans.”

Another pause. “You mean, with Aron in human form?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, no. He hates that. He only changes when necessary. He would never be in that mood when he’s human.”

“So you do it in his real form, then? And he doesn’t hurt you?” Wells was ready to shoot Justin a triumphant look, but Dep’s words froze him.

“Of course it hurts. Often I am weeks, recovering. Wells, are you saying Justin never has his pleasure with you? He uses you only as a guide?” Dep sounded envious.

Wells heard Aron growl in the background, and an instant later, he came back on the phone. “Wells! Give me Justin, now!”

Wells handed over the phone, deeply shocked. Justin’s frown deepened.

“Justin, what ails your prisoner, asking such questions? You are too lenient! Dep serves my needs well. I do not want him stirred up!”

Justin looked furious. For a moment, Wells wasn’t sure who he was angry with – him, or Aron.

“You are my elder brother,” Justin said icily. “I respect you. How you manage your prisoner is up to you. But how I manage mine is up to me.”

“Well, keep yours off the phone! Until we meet again!”

The phone call ended.

“Shit,” Wells said. “I’m sorry.”

Justin frowned and closed the phone. Wells felt his heart beating strangely. Many things which he thought he understood, now he was not sure about any longer.

“You attacked her with just a knife,” Justin said, not looking at Wells.

Wells tried to follow Justin’s thoughts, but this was one of those times that dragon-logic lost him.

“A knife, against a sword. To defend me,” Justin said.

“Well, the time we were attacked by that grizzly outside Fairbanks, I was glad to leave the fighting to you. Justin--”

“I think that my brother does not, in fact, manage his knight well.” Justin turned to look at Wells. “I love you, Wells.”

Wells felt his heart filling. “I love you, too.”

Justin surprised him by standing up. “Let us fly.”

“Now?”

Justin led the way outside into the warm, dark evening. Their apartment was on the ground floor with an open field outside the back door, which was why they’d chosen it. Justin changed without a word, and Wells climbed up onto his back with practiced ease, stretching forward and slipping underneath the wide leather straps Justin wore. As soon as Wells was comfortable, Justin tightened the loops with magic, binding them so close that Wells would not fall no matter what aerial antics Justin performed. The position was so secure and comfortable that Wells often slept on long flights.

Tonight he stayed awake. Justin flew back into the mountains, dim shapes of darkness below the star-pierced blackness of sky. Wells watched for planes, though he knew Justin would hear one before he could. A satellite crossed the sky, a new feature of this world where the humans ruled all that they could see and even that which they couldn’t see. Humans who, today, had found a way between him and Justin.

And yet that had made them closer.

They landed in the meadow outside the tent, all still and quiet, just as they’d left it that morning. Justin released the straps and Wells slid to the ground. In the moonlight the dragon shone silver. Wells ran his hands over the smooth, soft hide, glorying in the fact that he still could. Ah, if that sword had slit Justin’s throat today, his own heart would have ceased to beat as well. He would have willed it to stop rather than live even a breath longer than Justin.

Justin dipped his head so that the crook of his jaw rested over Wells' right shoulder, and Wells leaned against him. It was one of their favorite positions. Wells stroked the great, gentle head, lightly touching Justin's eyelids and the silky skin around his nostrils. He loved to feel Justin's deep, hot breath. For a long time they just breathed together.

Then Wells ducked out from beneath Justin's neck and moved around to stand facing him. He always thought Justin should smell spicy, and he was always surprised to find the dragon's breath was like sweet lavender, utterly good. He wanted to feel that breath all over his body, so he pulled off his clothes and stood naked. Even if he never felt more, this was wonderful in itself. Justin's forked tongue flicked out snake-like, thin and rapid, and its tentative touch on his chest almost brought Wells to his knees.

"Please," Wells whispered, and the tongue flicked across his stomach. And then all the arousal Wells had felt that morning in class flooded back. The tongue touched him, wrapped around him, and then, abruptly, Wells felt the dragon's tongue drawing him in, sharp teeth against his hardness.

If Justin meant to frighten him, it didn't work.

"Oh, Justin!" he whispered. "Oh, please, I beg you! You have never been like Aron. You will not hurt me."

For another moment Justin hesitated, then his mouth opened and released him. Wells sank to the soft grass. As he lay down on his stomach, Justin moved over him and wonderful, warm weight covered him. And then he felt it, what he'd always longed to feel. The dragon's erection. Hot and far longer than a man's, but not much bigger around, it probed his back first, then shifted lower and found the place. Wells braced himself, unable to bear the moment, so erect he thought he would explode from this alone.

He cried out as Justin hesitated, trying to deny Wells one last time. Wells thrust upward. Justin lost the battle and slid in, and in, and in, and Wells screamed as Justin filled and filled him. Heaviness pressed him into the ground and all went dark and there was no air. Part of Wells started to panic -- crushed to death, smothered! Justin had not been able to control the passion after all! But then ecstasy shot through him as Justin came deep inside his body. He felt the hot, tight spurts of release, and then his own burst out, and their minds caught and reflected each other's and everything exploded and if this was death, Wells thought it well worth waiting a thousand years for.

But it wasn't death. He woke hours later when the sun rose, curled protectively against Justin's side, under the shelter of one wing, and he sighed and lay still, utterly safe and at peace with his world.

Possessed *by Sue Brown*

His nights are full of whispers, strange dreams that he doesn't fully remember in the morning. He wakes up to sticky boxers and vague memories of golden eyes and silver-tipped fire. He should find it scary. He does – a little.

It was a suggestion, a thought in the back of Jason's mind as he reached for the box of Trix as usual. His hand hesitated, hovering indecisively, and then it was bypassing the half a dozen boxes of sugary coated cereal in favor of the Rice Krispies, lying nearly forgotten at the back of the cupboard.

He poured some into a bowl, automatically reaching for the sugar, but a whisper at the back of his mind suggested firmly that maybe today he could go without his early morning sugar fix. Jason grimaced as the first unsweetened mouthful slid down his throat, but, by the time he had finished the bowl, it was almost palatable.

As Jason finished getting dressed he drank his coffee, with one spoon of sugar rather than three. He didn't know why, but he'd had the notion that maybe it was a good idea to reduce the sugar in his drinks and slowly – because it had nearly killed him – he'd cut back.

Absently he noticed that he had to tighten his belt a notch. Not that it made a lot of difference. Jason was six foot two inches of blubber and a few spoons less of sugar weren't going to make much difference. He scowled at his reflection in the mirror as he did every morning. Lank hair and a jowly face scowled back at him. Maybe if he smiled? He tried but the effort was weak. Lots of practice. Jason scowled again.

He rode the subway to work as normal, getting out a stop before the station nearest to his office to walk the last few blocks before he spent another day trying to be invisible. Jason wasn't sure why he'd started to that the walk but it had been another thought, a suggestion from his subconscious, that maybe he needed a bit of exercise. Initially the walk had almost killed him, but today he found it easy and there was another suggestion, maybe he could jog the distance?

"In your dreams," he muttered, and then had the distinct impression his subconscious was huffy at him.

Jason hid in his cubicle as normal. He'd been there five years, and he could count on the fingers of one hand how many people he'd actually talked to beyond the needs of the job. The sad thing was Jason wasn't naturally shy. He'd been an outgoing, friendly guy before

the accident at eighteen that had left him immobile for six months. From jock to self-pitying slob in a short half year, and then no one bothered to call any more. Built like he was, Jason wasn't easy to ignore, but somehow people managed to bypass his cubicle every day.

He could hear a lively conversation going on over his head, Suzie and Allie discussing the merits of the mailman's ass versus the new IT newbie's on the third floor. No one ever discussed Jason's ass – at least not in his hearing. Jason stared at his monitor, biting down hard on his lower lip. He was so wrapped up in misery he didn't notice the strange sensation at first. Then he squeaked. Someone had pinched his butt, and they didn't stop there. As someone slapped one of his sizeable buttocks he spun around, but no one was behind him. He was on his own except for the startled eyes of Suzie and Allie peering over the top of the cubicle and he was sitting down.

"Uh... Jason. Are you alright?" Suzie asked, hesitantly. Jason was surprised she even remembered his name.

He blushed hotly but stammered out some lame excuse. The girls gave each other a significant look and went back to their conversation.

Jason may as well have been in the next state for all the use he was for the remainder of the day. He knew he wasn't dreaming; someone or something had smacked his ass while he was sitting on it.

On his way home, he paused to look in the windows of the hair salon. Jason's hair was a disaster. He'd avoided getting his hair cut in a salon ever since he'd got stuck in one of their tiny chairs. The ensuing humiliation as he struggled to get free was etched across his soul like fingernails across a chalkboard. Since then he'd hacked at the greasy locks himself and it was a misshapen mishmash of lengths.

"Go in. They're nice here. You'll be fine."

Jason snorted quietly. His subconscious was playing tricks on him again. This was the sort of place he avoided like the plague: black and chrome and filled with beautiful people paying a month's salary for the barest fraction off their over-styled hair.

"Sir?" A cultured voice interrupted his musing.

He looked up to see a woman, probably in her late thirties, standing in the doorway of the salon. Absently he noticed how flawless her skin was in the late evening sun.

"Sir? Do you have an appointment?" She sounded curious, but her voice was friendly enough.

Jason took a step back. “I-I don’t have an appointment. Sorry, I’ll go now.” He turned to leave, but stopped when she laid a hand on his arm, perfectly manicured nails digging lightly into his skin.

“I’m sorry, sir, my mistake. We do have an appointment free, if you’d like to come in.”

He stared into her wide, knowing eyes, and felt the uncontrollable urge to run away. She saw too much, stripping away his fragile defenses.

“No, I can’t, sorry...I...” Jason tugged his arm out of her grasp and walked away swiftly, feeling her gaze burning the back of his neck.

For the next few days he walked a different way to his subway stop only to end up back outside the window after work a week later, plucking up every ounce of his courage to walk inside and make an appointment.

“Go on, you can do this. You’ll feel better, I promise.” Jason’s subconscious urged him forward despite his reservations.

“Good evening, sir. Please come in.” It was the same woman again, her long hair swept up into a complicated knot and her nails tipped with dark pink.

“I thought...” Taking a deep breath he tried again. “I want to make an appointment.”

Privately he thought that this was the last thing he wanted to do and no amount of nagging by his subconscious was worth the torture he was volunteering to go through. Jason wasn’t sure he was being given a choice.

She smiled and stepped back, leaving the door free. “No need, sir. We have a stylist free now.”

“If you’re thinking of bolting, forget it.” The voice within was amused, but firm.

“For my subconscious you’re a fucking nag,” Jason muttered, a little aware of the ridiculousness of arguing with himself.

“I’m sorry?”

He looked up to see a frown marring the ivory forehead of the woman. “God, no. Not you. Sorry... I... was just talking to myself.” He trailed off uncertainly.

Jason was about to bolt when she smiled again. “I quite understand.”

“I bet you don’t,” he thought cynically.

“Now, you have Lorenzo for your stylist today. He’s very experienced, so you’re in capable hands.” She gestured him forward into the main body of the salon.

Jason stood uncomfortably, relieved that the seats looked capable of supporting his ample body. He watched the rest of the room in the mirror, trying to work out which one of the sleek, professional hairdressers was the “experienced” Lorenzo. His eyes widened as a vision came toward him in the tightest black t-shirt and ripped black jeans that must have been painted on, judging from the bulge in the front. They certainly didn’t hide much. Jason found it hard to drag his eyes up from the guy’s crotch, but when he did, he was drowning in the most stunning light-blue eyes he had ever seen.

He was without doubt the hottest man ever to have crossed Jason’s path, and Jason felt huge, sweaty and totally inadequate next to him. Jason took a step backward, ready to stammer out his excuses and run, but Lorenzo was smiling at him with a flash of bleached teeth and leading him to an empty seat.

At the end of two hours – and who the hell needs two hours for a haircut – Lorenzo was smiling again, his eyes twinkling at Jason’s stunned expression as he stared at the strange man in the mirror.

“What do you think?” Lorenzo asked, deftly twirling the mirror behind Jason so that he could see the way his hair was shaped into the nape of his neck. Jason didn’t think he’d ever looked at the back of his head before.

“It’s amazing,” Jason said faintly.

He’d sat through Lorenzo’s chatter on his life, the trials with his clients, and his job as the young man snipped and fluffed Jason’s hair into something that resembled a decent shape. Jason hadn’t needed to contribute much beyond the occasional sympathetic murmur and watch as the mess was transformed into something he’d never have achieved for himself.

“See, you look gorgeous now. You’ve been hiding under that haystack for far too long.” Lorenzo flashed his white even teeth in a secretive smile.

Jason looked back at him startled. How the hell did Lorenzo know that?

“We see you go past the window every day,” Lorenzo explained, a knowing look in his eyes. Cheeks flushing, Jason ducked his head. “None of that! My clients go out with their head up showing off my talent to the world,” the hair stylist commanded, tapping Jason on his head.

“Okay.” Jason raised his head obediently.

“Good boy.” To Jason’s surprise Lorenzo spun his chair around and dropped a chaste kiss on Jason’s mouth.

Jason was too surprised to return the kiss but he was sure that at the back of his mind he heard a growl of displeasure. The strange thing was, from Lorenzo's expression when he raised his head and the hasty way he stepped backward, Jason was convinced he had heard it too.

It was amazing. Jason turned his head from side to side staring at himself in the bathroom mirror. He was shocked at the difference a simple haircut made. Even his face looked thinner than it had this morning.

Jason took one last look at himself in the mirror before he switched off the light, heading for bed. It was hot, and he didn't bother wearing any pajamas. Slipping under a sheet, he turned off the small lamp on the nightstand and closed his eyes. He couldn't relax enough to get to sleep though, the events of the day running on a loop through his mind, the loop pausing every time he thought of Lorenzo's smile and his kiss.

He shifted restlessly, his hand sliding around his cock, feeling it lengthen and harden in his loose grip, aroused as he thought of the young man he'd met a few hours ago. It had been a while since Jason had felt the need to jack off for anything more than mechanical need, but he was restless for some reason, needing to get off just to get some sleep.

A thumb rubbing over the head had him hissing. His hips bucked up involuntarily. He was leaking pre-come and he spread it over the head and down the shaft, aiding the gentle movement of his hand. The other hand pinched one of his nipples, tweaking it hard and making a groan erupt from his throat. Jason wished someone could suck on them. He loved the feel of his nipples when they were swollen and slightly sore from his fingers and could only imagine what it would be like to have someone's mouth around them. Maybe Lorenzo's lips sucking them hard. The hand wrapped around his cock speeded up as he thought about what he'd like Lorenzo do to him, what he'd like to do to Lorenzo.

He was close, so close, his chest heaving and breath stuttering, balls drawing up tight as he dreamed of those lips sucking his cock into his mouth, piercing golden eyes staring up at him, watching Jason fall apart. Jason squeezed his eyes shut, hips bucking up into his fist and he cried out as he covered his hand and belly in spunk.

Reaching over to the nightstand for tissues, Jason cleaned himself and aimed the wadded tissue paper at the trash can. He missed as a sudden thought crossed his mind. Lorenzo's eyes were blue, not golden.

"Jason?"

He looked up from the paperwork on his desk. Allie and Suzie were peering over the walls of his cubicle, their mouths open in astonishment. He noticed Allie had coral lipstick on her teeth.

“Yes?” Jason was unnerved by their twin expressions of curiosity.

Suzie leaned over and reached out to tug lightly on his hair. Jason was hard pressed not to shrink away.

“Your hair. I mean. You’ve had it styled.” Her fingers lingered for a few awkward, disconcerting seconds as she stupidly stated the obvious.

“Does it look bad?” he asked uncertainly. God, he’d spent his monthly paycheck just to be laughed at again.

Allie shook her head, her bangs swinging vigorously. “It looks great, Jason.” She smiled at him reassuringly.

He looked over at Suzie, who was, quite frankly one of the office bitches. She was looking at him with an expression he didn’t recognize and it made him nervous. It was only after they’d gone back to whisper by the coffee machine that he realized Suzie had been checking him out and so had Allie. Him! The fat kid in the corner.

Jason wondered if your own subconscious could give you a smug I told you so.

“Fuck!”

It was the only word he could think of as he approached orgasm. His mind was full of gold and silver and his whole body was screaming for release. Jason panted, trying to stave off the inevitable, but he was beyond that. His hands were wrapped white-knuckled around the wooden slats of the headboard as he came, covering his chest and belly in thick, white ropes.

It was only as he was lying in a sticky mess of sweat and semen that it occurred to him. He was, as always, on his own in his bedroom.

So whose hands were on his cock?

That night Jason’s dream was equally vivid. Golden eyes, full lips, everything framed by silver-tipped fire. He should be scared. He wasn’t sure if he was or not.

The last couple of blocks were easy now. Initially Jason thought he would have keeled over from heart failure if he attempting jogging instead of walking, but the run from the stop to the office was easier than he'd imagined. His usual route took him past the salon. He'd waved at Lorenzo as he went past. The hair stylist had waved a pair of scissors at him in return. Jason grimaced. He wasn't sure his bank balance could stand another visit to the salon, but it would certainly give his ego a boost.

He jogged the last few steps and entered the building. Immediately the cool waft of air-conditioning hit his skin, leaving trails of goosebumps where his flesh was bare under the black wife-beater.

"Morning, Jason," Bob, the old security guard, grinned at him as he headed for the elevators. He'd been running for six months now and Bob had been encouraging him since day one. Jason couldn't remember speaking to the guard before then. "How's it goin'?"

"Good today, Bob. Ran nearly all the way here." Jason was pleased to note he didn't even sound too winded.

Bob whistled at him. "All the way? You're gonna be running marathons next."

Jason snorted and Bob chuckled appreciatively. Both of them remembered the first few weeks when Jason was in danger of needing CPR as he stumbled in the building. His subconscious had needed to constantly encourage and nag at him. Now it was a whole new ballgame. He was looking more toned and fit, the last of the excess body weight changing to muscle as he pounded the streets. The suggestions had gotten fewer as time went on.

"Jason?" A high, feminine voice simpered his name.

He looked down to see Suzie standing next to him. She smiled at him, completely ignoring Bob's cheery greeting. Jason frowned. He hated the way she constantly blanked the old man.

"Hi Suzie," he said flatly and took a step away from her. She always seemed to invade his personal space. Over her head Bob rolled his eyes sympathetically, and Jason nearly snorted again.

"Have you been running again?" she asked, staring up him with what he suspected she thought was a flirtatious smile. Jason thought it made her look slightly creepy.

"Just like I do every morning," he agreed. "You must be used to seeing me come in red-faced and sweaty."

“Oh yes,” Suzie breathed. Jason could swear she was fluttering her eyelashes at him. “You certainly look good for all the exercise. Just think, six months ago you were so...” She trailed off uncertainly.

Jason’s lips twitched. “Fat?” he supplied. “Yes, I suppose I was. Excuse me, Suzie, Bob. I need a shower.”

“Uh, sure.” Jason could swear she licked her lips, and then she said, “I’ll see you in the office after you’ve... cleaned up.” Suzie walked away, ignoring Bob as usual, and headed toward the elevators.

Bob shook his head as she walked away. “Lucky escape there, son. She was all set to offer to scrub your back.” He laughed as Jason shuddered. “Not your type?” he asked.

“Not my gender,” Jason said unthinkingly and then looked up. Bob’s expression hadn’t changed and smiled easily.

“I don’t think she’s anyone’s gender. That’s one scary broad,” he joked and Jason smiled back, relieved.

He opened his mouth to say goodbye, but out of the corner of his eye Jason saw a man walk toward one of the desks at reception. His eyes were drawn to the long, golden braid down his back. It contrasted oddly with the formal suit the man was wearing. It wasn’t the fact that the man had long hair; it was the silver tip of the braid that caught his attention. The hair stood up on the back of Jason’s neck and his mind was filled with fiery eyes and silver-tipped flames.

Bob followed Jason’s gaze. “He more your type, huh?” At Jason’s nod he said, “I haven’t seen him here before. Odd-looking dude, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Jason said huskily. He shivered suddenly and Bob clapped him on the back.

“You need to get a shower, Jason. Go on.”

Jason smiled at him and walked toward the elevators, keeping an eye on the golden-haired stranger as he hit the up button. As the doors opened, the man turned around and caught Jason staring at him. Jason flushed guiltily and hastily moved into the elevator. As the door closed he saw the man’s eyes on him, intense and so golden, the color blazing out and holding Jason’s gaze steadily.

Holding Jason in his thrall and making him hard as a fucking rock.

Jason concentrated on the slip-slap of his slicked hands on his cock. He screwed up his face, trying and failing to reach his climax. It seemed further and further out of reach.

He'd been hard all day, and that was after a jerk-off session in the shower at work that morning.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" he panted. Both of his hands were around his cock and his feet were planted firmly on his bed for leverage. He sped up, trying to reach his goal, but it eluded him and he growled in frustration. There was a growl right back.

Then his hands were batted out of the way and, before Jason could even open his eyes, a hot, wet mouth was sinking around his cock. His breath caught in his throat, but he didn't open his eyes. The mouth didn't stop, just sank until lips were creating a tight seal around the base of his dick. Jason wasn't modest. He was huge and the thought of someone who could deep throat him was just – Jesus, it was too much.

"Fuck!" Jason yelled and his back arched so high he was sure he was going to choke the person sucking him off. Even though the haze of heat and arousal he could hear the chuckle. It should have made him pissed. Jason didn't care. He just wanted to come the fuck now!

He came. But only after he'd been sucked six ways to Sunday by a fucking talented mouth and then left alone, spent and wrung out on his bed, wondering what the hell was happening to him.

That night Jason dreamed not of fire, but of flying high above the city. He looked down at the distant buildings but he wasn't afraid, perched on the back of something with silver-tipped wings – it held Jason firm and whispered that he'd never fall. Jason knew that he was safe but he needed to know what it was that inhabited his mind and caressed his body.

He went out with his co-workers to a bar near the office block. It wasn't the first time Jason had been invited, and it was on the tip of his tongue to refuse again, but this time he found himself nodding in agreement and being swept along with the crowd.

Suzie was there, with Allie and Jo, in a huddle in the corner as they cackled over something that had happened in the office that day. Ben, one of the accountants, grimaced as he looked at their table.

"I wonder if they parked their broomsticks outside?" he said and Jason laughed quietly. Ben gave him a speculative look. "She's got her claws into you," he said.

"You mean Suzie?" Jason wasn't blind. Suzie had gone from ignoring him to blatantly flirting with him at every opportunity. She seemed oblivious to the lack of response from Jason.

Ben nodded. "You're her new target, and she isn't going to give up."

Taking a swallow of his beer Jason wondered what to say. Should he admit he was gay? Should he pretend he was playing along with Suzie? She wasn't bad looking for a girl. Tall and skinny with a nice bust. He could pretend for a while.

"That dude's staring at you," Ben interrupted Jason's musing.

"Where?" Then Jason saw him and all thoughts of Suzie slipped out of his mind.

He stared at the man across the bar. It was him, the man from the lobby. Only this time his golden hair swept unfettered down his back. Swallowing hard, Jason's eyes roamed over his body. Despite the muted lighting in the bar he could see every detail: a hard, toned body, lean muscles, the unbuttoned neck of the button down black shirt exposing fine golden fuzz over his chest. He looked into the man's eyes and, oh fuck, it was like looking into the sun, blazing so brightly it was too much to take all at once.

Ben was pointing him out, but he may as well have been in a different state for all the attention Jason paid. The guy was leaning back against the wall, a small grin on his face and one eyebrow quirked as if to say, "Well?".

"Jason!" Annoyed at the interruption he looked down to see Suzie laying one hand on his arm. "Would you like to come to a club with us?" She leaned into him, her body pressing against his. His skin actually crawled at her touch, and as he looked at her Jason could feel the dark intenseness across the room.

"Jason," she repeated, a tad snappishly, and he smiled down at her, gently removing her hand.

"I'm sorry, Suzie but I already have a date. See you tomorrow." Jason could hear Ben snorting with laughter as he grinned at her astonishment. "Night guys," and he walked toward the man, hoping he wasn't about to be shot down in flames.

It was the longest walk of his life. He was aware of the golden eyes on him the whole time, Suzie's outraged glare at his back and his subconscious crooning a welcome to him. He needn't have worried. When Jason was within touching distance the guy pulled him in with a hand around the neck and kissed him, long, slow, and dirty. Jason initially tensed, wary of such a public display, but his cock had no such fear, hardening fully against the jut of the man's hip. Everything faded into insignificance besides the feel of the full mouth on his. He knew this mouth, had felt its heat around his cock. Now he wanted the man to take him and fuck him into the mattress. The man – what was his name?

"My name is Long." The voice in his head supplied the name. His mouth was engaged in kissing Jason.

The need to take a breath forced their lips apart and some sense into Jason's brain. This was a public place, and what the hell was he doing? Jason took a small step back, Long not preventing his movement. He dragged in a shaky breath and licked his swollen lips. Long tracked the motion of his tongue, Jason seeing the heat flaring in his eyes.

"This time will you fuck me for real?" Jason asked.

Long raised his eyebrow again. "Into the mattress if that's what you want."

Jason leaned into him, "I want," he said, "for you to fuck me into the mattress, against the wall and anywhere you like. Just as long as this time, I get to fuck you back." For the first time he felt confident to ask for what he wanted.

"Then you shall get what you want." Long's breath tickled his ear, his hips pressing close into Jason's, "Let's get you out of here before that woman decides to ask for a threesome. I get the feeling she's working up to it."

Jason turned to look at his co-workers. Ben was giving him a discreet thumbs up, and Suzie had that look that always made him want to run far, far away. He wished them a good night and then hurried out the bar before she could ask him any questions.

That night Jason came with Long inside him. On him. Around him. Holding him together as he shouted his release, golden hair brushing his body and golden wings in his mind.

Sated and sleepy, Jason let his body relax back into Long. Despite the fact the man was slightly shorter than he, Jason felt protected in his embrace, enfolded by something more. He could hear Long, crooning a distant lullaby and realized it was in his head. Jason suspected Long didn't even know he was doing it. He couldn't sleep though, not until he asked, "Are you staying now?"

There was distinct amusement in Long's reply. "Do you want me to stay?"

Jason pressed back against Long's hard body, hissing as the hard cock slipped between his ass cheeks. "Yes," he said simply.

He became aware that Long was completely still. Before, he had been stroking Jason's arm and pressing soft kisses against Jason's shoulder blades. Now he had ceased moving.

Jason tried to look over his shoulder. "What's the matter? Don't you want to stay with me?" He wriggled, trying to turn around in Long's arms. He found himself on his back with Long's body stretched down the length of his.

Long was looking down at him, his expression indecipherable. "If I stay with you we are together for life." He made it sound like a prison sentence. "Now do you want me to stay?"

Jason thought over what Long had said to him, looking deep into his unearthly golden eyes. "What are you?" It was suddenly vitally important that he knew, that he understood everything.

"Are you sure that you want to know?" There was no humor in Long's expressive face.

Jason was equally serious. "I have to."

"What do you think I am?" Long's scrutiny was making him uncomfortable, but Jason was oddly reassured by the firm press of his lean body against his, the awareness of a slow heartbeat pressed against his.

Jason took a deep breath. He almost wanted to roll over, roll away from the eyes that seemed to read every thought that crossed his mind. "My mother had a book from when she was a child. She used to read it to me." Jason's voice dropped. "My favorite story was about a princess who heard a voice in her head. Everyone thought she was mad, but the voice was of a prince. Only he wasn't quite a human prince." His fingers curled uselessly against Long's chest. "He was a dragon. A golden dragon." He immediately felt stupid.

The smile that spread across Long's face didn't do anything to make him feel any better. He turned his head to one side.

"Look at me!" Long's voice was soft, but the command was unmistakable. Jason reluctantly dragged his eyes back to that golden gaze.

"You're right, Jason. I am a dragon." His body was pressing down into Jason's; hard, hot, and aroused, his hard dick sliding into the groove of Jason's hip. "And dragons mate for life."

Jason's head was so full of dragons and hard cock that he almost missed it. "M-mate? You're calling me your mate? For life?"

They both hissed as Long moved, straddling Jason's hips. Jason looked up at him, at the pale golden skin and long red-blond hair falling in a swathe over his shoulder.

Long stared at him, his expression solemn. "From the first moment I saw you I knew you were my mate." His hands traced slow patterns across Jason's sweaty chest. Jason hissed as Long grazed a swollen nipple with his nail.

"When was that?" Jason frowned, trying to force his brain to remember despite the slow torture of his torso. Surely he would have remembered seeing someone like Long?

“A year ago. I was watching from one of the rooftops and I saw you walk into the office.” Long brought his hand up to cup Jason’s jaw.

Jason gave a bitter laugh. “Waddling in, you mean.”

Long stroked a finger along his cheekbone. “I thought you were the most amazing thing I’d ever seen.” His intent expression made Jason gasp.

Jason couldn’t – wouldn’t - believe him and raised one eyebrow cynically. “So you spent a year turning me into a Ken doll?”

Frowning, Long ran his fingertip along Jason’s brow. His hands were lethal weapons, Jason decided. “What is a Ken doll?”

“It’s a... oh never mind,” Jason huffed and turned his face away from Long’s intense gaze. It was a futile attempt to hide. His chin was forced back so Long could look into his eyes.

“You are mine,” he said, his voice a low rasp over Jason’s grated nerves. “A dragon’s mate needs to be strong and healthy. I needed you strong in mind and body.” He moved off Jason’s lap, ignoring the involuntary grasp of Jason’s hands, wanting him to stay.

Jason’s mind was still racing, and he said the first thing that came into his mind. “Shouldn’t you be mating with female dragons? Don’t you need little dragons to carry on the species?”

He was worried he had offended the dragon and was relieved when he saw Long’s full lips twitch in amusement. “It is the job of the female of the species to procreate.”

“So the males get to play around and choose who they like?” Nothing much changes, Jason thought.

Long nodded, “Although you should be grateful. Female dragons are rather hard on their mates. They don’t often survive the coupling.”

Jason gulped hard. Long chuckled and settled behind Jason in much the same position they were in before, Long’s thick, hard cock nudging at Jason’s ass.

“Will you be my mate?” Long asked, with a little thrust of his hips on the word mate.

Pushing back against him, Jason answered without hesitation. “You’re in my head, in my dreams. You’ve haunted me for a year. Do I have a choice?” He reached back to grasp Long’s hips, pressing back to allow the tip of Long’s dick to slide in, brushing his hole. He was still wet and open from before.

“You feel so good,” Long murmured, not answering the question. His voice dropped as he pushed in, his passage aided by lube and come. “I’ve never met anyone like you.” He thrust in hard, one hand splayed possessively across Jason’s belly.

Jason closed his eyes against the sensations crawling in his mind and his body. It didn’t matter what he wanted. He knew that he and Long were inextricably linked together, like swans or Scooby and Shaggy. There was no way of breaking that binding now, and Long fucking knew that. All he could do was hang on for the ride and hope that he was strong enough to survive loving a golden dragon.

There was a sense of satisfaction in his mind as he reached his conclusion and a definite sense of smugness. Jason thrust back against the smugness, for the first time trying to reverse the flow of emotion. It was a shock to both of them when Jason touched on a mind so vast it threatened to overwhelm him.

Long’s thrusts faltered and his arm tightened around Jason. “You are definitely my mate. There has never been anyone strong enough to explore my mind.” He pulled out gently, rolling until he was on his back and Jason was straddling his hips and riding his cock.

“You are mine,” Long repeated, and Jason felt he was going to burn up in the intensity of his gaze, “and I am yours.”

Jason bent down to kiss him, losing himself in the feel of Long’s swollen lips on his, the parrying of their tongues and the slow, languid thrusts of Long’s hips rolling against his.

He was owned and possessed by the golden dragon. Jason should have been scared by being consumed body and soul. This time he knew he wasn’t.

The Hand that Feeds *by Gabriel West*

It started with dead field mice.

They would appear every morning on the doorstep, next to the morning paper. Alan used the personal ads to scoop the critter off into the shadow of the bushes before his wife could see the thing.

At first, he figured it was their cat -- or rather, his wife's cat. Boots was a rambunctious ball of fluff that liked to parade his newly discovered manhood to the lady-cats of the neighborhood. When he'd still been a kitten, Alan had made sure to praise him when he'd accidentally killed an old squirrel. It stood to reason that Boots had remembered such praise and was using his hunting prowess to astonish his owners.

The occasional dead vole or chewed up deer-mouse was easy to ignore. They lived in a relatively new development, with spatters of trees between each cookie-cutter house. White picket fences and two-car garages kept Nature from noticeably contaminating the natives' hum-drum lives. A dog here, or two-point-five children there, and the illusion of normalcy was set.

That was, until the dead possum leaked its blood onto the sports section. Its gray, mottled pelt had been matted down by the savage fangs of a beast too big to be any cat. Alan could only stare at the flat, black eyeballs that reflected no light and the gaping maw that exhaled no air. The possum's belly had been slashed open by five long gashes that let the organs leak onto the porch steps.

He didn't know if he could trust himself to simply pick it up. The garbage had yet to run; his trash can was tucked behind the house. Saliva welled in his mouth, forcing him to swallow it and dry out his tongue. This was just too much, too early on a Sunday morning.

The shrill barks of a dog captured his attention. His neighbor across the street was standing out on the sidewalk, a short distance outside the hip-high chain gate that cut Alan's yard off from the rest of the world. Strapped to the man's hand was a red nylon leash, and to that leash was a small powder-puff of Pomeranian dog. The Pomeranian was pressed against the chain of the gate, trying its level best to tell its master that it smelled a dead animal nearby.

The man attached to the leash held up his hand and waved at Alan. "What the hell is that, Richardson? Cat didn't bring that in, did he?"

Alan struggled to remember that the man's name was Bill. His green and white tracksuit was as blinding as an over-lit Christmas tree. "Shit, I dunno. I'm starting to think I have a secret admirer or something."

"Helen didn't see that mess yet, did she?"

"No, thank God." Bill's voice helped keep Alan's attention away from the blood soaking into his dollar-store slippers. "I need to get this cleaned up before church."

Bill lifted his Pomeranian off the sidewalk. "You know, there's been this big dog roaming the neighborhood. I saw it when I was walking Killer here a couple days back. Black as the ace of spades."

That was news that Alan wasn't sure he liked. "No kidding?"

"Damn thing would have swallowed me and my dog whole."

"I'll keep an eye out for it." Alan shuffled his feet toward the edge of his porch. He did not like the idea of a strange animal in his territory.

That evening Alan pushed away the screen door to carry two bags of trash out to the trash can. The bottles and rubbish inside the bags clattered as he eased his way down the cement steps that lead to the backyard. The tall wooden slats of fence were nearly indistinguishable from the young pine trees behind them. Alan had carefully nurtured every fruit tree and every bush he had in his back yard with the same care a zookeeper would give his animals' environment.

At first, the yard was for him. It was the only thing he demanded of the realtor when they'd been house-hunting. As his years with Helen settled him down, he began to hope his big yard could be for a child or two. A false hope. A vain hope that all his attempts would bear some kind of fruit. He didn't like the idea that all his desperate trying wasn't leading to anything.

He stalked his way to the side of the house where the trash cans stood. He had to put down a bag to pry off the lid. The trash would have to be taken to the street tomorrow as would the recyclables. He'd have to remember to empty the bins in the house and get all his bills together. Helen could take care of the power.

A soft howl pealed across the yard. Bushes rattled and snapped; some small animal gave its shrill scream before a deeper voice silenced it. The trash can lid fell out of Alan's hand and clattered against the walkway. He had to press his hands against the side of the house to catch his breath.

When he had the strength to turn around, the hot, gold glint of eyes held him. The lights from the kitchen window shone on the face and muzzle of a very large animal. Between its jaws dangled a small rabbit.

He knew what the animal was, why it was there, and how it intended to survive.

“No.” Alan stood his ground against the animal’s stare. “You don’t belong here! Go home! Go away! Get away from me!”

The animal did not leave. It didn’t magically vanish into the shadows nor did it take its bloodied rabbit away with it. The animal simply walked toward the light and forced Alan to take in all of its countenance in one shocking moment.

The shine of gold became two green eyes, trapped in the head of a very large canine. The animal was covered in fur so black the evening’s shade melted from it. The animal could have been a wolf. It could have been a German Shepherd. It was all how his mind perceived the animal. It had four legs, a head, neck, and tail that were all attached to a rectangular body. The length of the legs, the shape of the muzzle and the length of the fur were all up to individual interpretation.

The animal padded its way to Alan’s feet and gingerly placed the rabbit between them. Its tail did not wag, nor did it part its jaws to pant. It simply looked up at Alan; its green eyes gazing into his.

“No.” Alan stepped back, “No, please.”

The animal ducked his head to push the rabbit toward Alan.

“I can’t.” He rubbed his hands over his face to clear his eyes and his mind both. The animal’s green eyes followed him to the darkness. “Please, just go home.”

The screen door rattled; Helen’s voice pierced whatever darkness tried to cloud Alan’s mind. “Alan, hon, who are you talking to out here?”

Alan looked at his feet. Only the rabbit remained.

“No one, dear. Just myself.”

He could still feel the eyes on him, even at work. In the cramped space of his office. In the car, and elevator, and bathroom stall; knowing, longing, wanton green eyes.

He went down to the park across the street instead of to lunch. There were few people walking along the manicured paths or beneath the finely groomed trees. Only him, in a natural place where he could hear his loafers click against the pavement.

With his head bowed and mind on other things, he didn't notice the wall of black leather until he walked into it. He lifted his head and snarled, "Watch it, buddy!"

Alan followed the expanse of black leather to find the man's face. Very few people were as tall as he was; even fewer people were taller than he was. His license reported that he was six foot nine, but that was only because he'd been purposefully slouching. The man before him had to crane his neck down to look at Alan's face.

All he could make out was the tan skin color and a mess of black hair that covered the man's head. A thick pair of black sunglasses hid the upper half of his face. He looked like a bandana and a motorcycle short of being a gang member. Alan wasn't deterred by such things. If the man wanted a fight, he was well equipped to give him one.

The man did nothing but smile down at him. Smile, with thick fangs instead of flat, normal teeth. "Did you miss me?"

Alan cocked his head to the side, his pulse slowly quickening. "I know you..."

"You should." The sunglasses were pulled down to expose two brilliant green eyes. "We used to live together, as the apes would say."

All the color drained from Alan's face. He could barely draw in a breath to whisper, "Go home..."

"Oh, I will go home." The man bowed down to stare Alan in the face. "I'll go back to your house. I'll piss on your rose bush and eat your cat too. I'll make you watch as your wife puts her hands all over me and not you."

"How did you find me?"

The man bared his teeth in some semblance of a smile. "You should know."

"Go home! Please!" Alan would have given any amount of money to the man if he would have but vanished. The man shouldn't be anywhere near him, but God help him if he could remember why. "You can't stay here! Not you. Please!"

"I'll go where I want." The man pushed himself against Alan's chest. The smell of his musk flooded every part of Alan's lungs. "Did it taste good? The mouthful I caught for you? Did you enjoy the wildness it put back in your slow blood?"

Alan reached up his hand, either to punch the man in the face or to take a handful of the black hair atop the man's head. He didn't know which he wanted more. But the man denied him and took hold of Alan's shoulders.

There was no amount of time that could have prepared Alan for the man's kiss. Hands raked through his hair, forcing him still, holding him as the man pierced his mouth.

Alan's hands wound around the lapel of the man's coat, then slid over the man's shoulders to dig against the man's back. His calm rationale was tossed aside; a low growl rose up through his throat. Their positions turned, and the man became the prey to be tasted from the inside.

"Come with me." The man's tongue lapped across the pale expanse of Alan's throat. "Now."

"I can't." With breath came reason. "Helen..."

A snort told him more about the man's opinion of Helen than any words ever could. "You speak her name when you have yet to call mine?"

"I can't leave her!"

The man leaned in to stare into Alan's eyes, "Why? Because she bends over and lets you inside her?"

"No," Alan wasn't shying away. He was...backing up because the man was in his personal space.

"Say it," the man's snarl made Alan flinch.

"I won't!"

"Then I'll be seeing you later. I'll see you every day until you can say the words. Either for her or for me."

The man peeled away from Alan's body and walked away, leaving Alan to drop onto the concrete pathway. His suit was a mess, his erection strained the crotch of his trousers, and all he could think about was how much he wanted to crawl in a hole and die. The burn of the man's musk followed Alan for the rest of the day.

When he opened the door of his home, he threw his coat and briefcase into the corner of the hallway. He barely had enough strength to stay on his feet.

And then, he heard the yip. Then the sound of his wife's laughter, echoing in from the living room. Alan closed his eyes, tight. Maybe, if he went up stairs, he could be forgotten.

"Honey, is that you? Come in here and see what I found for you!"

He thought it was ironic, how she phrased that. He trudged toward the living room, his head low to receive his long over-due punishment.

Helen sat in the middle of the floor, her hands brushing through the deep black fur of the animal. Tail wagging, tongue lolling, the animal looked every bit as pleased as any dog would be. The animal sat still for her embrace, even lapped at her cheek when she hugged him.

“Look, honey! Isn’t he just the sweetest?” She laughed as the animal licked the makeup off her cheek. “Poor thing was just sprawled across the porch. I thought he was dead ‘til he lifted his head. Poor thing was just abandoned. Can you believe it?”

Alan could believe a lot of things. He tried to think up some certifiable excuse to give his wife, something that would make her just peel away from the animal and come crying back to him. Or at least something that could get her out of the room long enough for him to kick the animal out. The green-eyed stare was boring beneath his skin, trying to hunt down the part of himself he’d locked away.

It was only his heavy feet that kept him in place. He did his best to match the gaze, but only got as high as the animal’s muzzle. “No, I can’t...”

“I know!” Helen finally glanced over her shoulder at him. “Oh, baby, why don’t you come sit down. You look horrible.”

“I feel horrible.” He fell into the folds of the couch, “Thank you for noticing.”

The animal padded past Helen’s shoulder to place his paws on Alan’s thighs. For a few moments the animal and Helen shared the same wistful, hopeful look. Alan couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen those green eyes so...

He pushed the animal off of his lap. The animal whimpered, as if it were genuinely concerned for him.

Helen scooted next to the animal, her hands pressing against Alan’s knees. The animal butted his head against her closest arm. She took it as a sign for attention; she couldn’t see the wide, wild anger in the animal’s eyes. “What’s the matter, dear?”

If he told her the truth about the animal, he would have to tell her the truth about himself. Where he’d come from. Who he was. Why they would never really ever be man and wife or have a family of their own. He wanted her to keep her dreams of white picket fences and two-point-five children. They were so much nicer than anything he could ever pretend to offer.

As he leaned his arms against his lap, Alan kept his gaze to the floor. “You know I don’t like dogs, Helen.”

“Please? The poor thing is so nice and he doesn’t have anywhere else to be. He likes us.”

Those were all horrible, terrible lies but she didn't know that. "Dogs are expensive. Vet bills. Food. He's big. He probably eats like a damn horse."

Black fur and green eyes suddenly came into his line of sight. Like a horse? No, but he would eat one if given half a chance. Maybe the rider too. The animal didn't glare at him, but simply looked as if it had been captured by Alan's voice.

Helen chuckled, "But he likes you."

The animal ducked his head to reach Alan's hand. The fur beneath his fingers had the same texture as the man's hair. Alan closed his eyes.

He could hear the rustle of Helen's skirt against the carpet as she stood up. "Why don't you two get to know each other, and I'll get dinner ready."

The words were in his mouth. He was even ready to show her. Everything.

But as he looked up, the green eyes filled his vision. The animal had become a shadow of black velvet, a mixture of animal features and man, but only a strong mind would have been able to tell them apart. Alan could neither think of words to share nor desire to try and speak them when the shadow's lips pressed against his.

"We're having steak tonight, Alan. Your favorite. I'm dying to try out this new potato recipe I got from Shirley from across the street." With all the pans she was clattering, she wouldn't have heard him if he'd called out for help. "You remember her. She was the one in that gold pencil-skirt at the dinner party last week."

He couldn't keep his mouth from being pierced anymore than he could take in a single breath.

The shadow's growl was so soft, it didn't leave the room. "I love you."

"I know." Alan was having a hard time breathing. He had to part his lips and drink the air, and even that didn't seem enough.

"That's not what you usually say to me. You know how hard it is for me to say it?"

"It's not hard for her," he growled back.

The green eyes softened, then turned to the shade of cold emeralds. "Is that why you left me? For that?"

"Sometimes all I want is to hear those words. It beats out all the kisses, all the fucking--"

"We never fucked." The shadow showed his fangs as he growled, "I made love to you. That was how I told you what was in my heart. With my body."

“Sometimes that’s not enough.”

“It used to be.” The growl deepened to a depth Alan had not heard since he was young. His gaze naturally dropped to the shadow’s shoulder, for he could not bear to stare into the green eyes anymore. “You’re going to feed me that steak I smell. You don’t have the fangs to chew meat anymore.”

“Fuck you.” Alan realized the problem with those human words the moment they passed between his fangs.

A cold, white-fanged smile broke the shadow’s face in half. “I could. Tie her up. Gag her. Make her watch me give you the pleasure she could never give you.”

“Don’t.” For the flash of a breath, Alan turned his head and showed his throat. “Please. This isn’t her fault.”

“Then whose fault is it? Mine? Yours? Hers?”

The shadow dropped to the carpet and became the animal before Helen passed through the archway.

“Dinner will be ready very soon, dear.”

Alan tried his best to fake a smile. “Thank you.”

He lay down on the couch to keep the animal away. When the animal pressed close to him, he rolled over to face the cushions of the couch. He had to keep his knees bent so his legs could find room on the couch with the rest of him. The animal nosed his hair, his back and shoulders until finally setting down on the carpet. A soft, thin whine leaked from its muzzle; Alan had to bite down on his fingers not to answer.

Helen called him to the table when the feast was finally finished. The animal followed him to his seat to lie between the legs.

When the phone rang Alan waited for Helen to leave the room before placing his plate down on the kitchen tiles. He wasn’t hungry to begin with. His stomach was only snarling at him because of all the acid his stress was building up.

When dinner was cleared from the table, Alan made his escape to the living room. He didn’t feel like turning on the television, nor did he want to invite the curiosity of fleeing to the bedroom. The animal followed him to the couch; Helen was detained by an expected phone call. The animal pinned his back against the cushions with thick, black paws. When he tried to shove the animal away, the animal became the shadow.

“Go home,” Alan groaned. It was all he could think to say.

“I like it here.” The shadow’s velvet withered into the man’s tanned skin. There was no scrap of fabric to hide the taut muscles that crafted his powerful body. “With you.”

Helen yelled from the kitchen, “Alan dear, why don’t you take Shadow out for a walk? I’m sure he’d love it.”

“Yes, Alan,” as the man stretched out his back to expose his defined abs. Alan must have been staring too hard, because the man noticed. “Why don’t you take me for a walk? I would enjoy it.”

Alan’s voice grew strained as he tried not to notice how powerful and how close the man’s body was. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

The man leaned over to stare Alan in the eyes. “Afraid?”

“Damn it, go home.” Alan closed his eyes and tried to will the man away.

“My home is where you are.” The man forced Alan’s back against the cushions. “Remember when you told me that? After I was done, you couldn’t walk for the rest of the day.”

Alan lost the ability to make simple sounds as the man sat atop his lap. His hands instinctively sought the man’s back, just as they did when Helen sat on his lap the same way. The curve of the man’s back guided his hands down to the firm muscles of the man’s bare buttocks. Alan had no idea what he was doing.

Helen’s high-heels thumped against the hallway floor. Instead of hands, two thick paws pressed the air out of his chest. A fat tongue lapped at his cheeks and throat, all to the sound of Helen’s laughter.

“See, hon. He’s really excited to be with you.”

“You have no idea.” He had to struggle to keep the animal from crushing his chest with its weight. The wet tongue, licking the sweat from his pores, was too much for him to handle. “All right! All right already, just get the hell off me!”

The animal leapt off the couch to sit on the carpet. His tail was a flapping banner, hailing his victory.

Alan balled his fist. The muscles of his hand tightened, his arm flinched -- thickened -- beneath the fabric of his shirt. One good hit, right in the muzzle. He could even get Helen out of the room with some cheap excuse. If the animal raised too much noise, he could always say the thing attacked him.

The animal stepped up to press his muzzle against Alan's knuckles, daring him to strike. The animal's green eyes were so bright with laughter that he could hear it echoing in his ears.

It was what the animal wanted. Lose control. Fall hard. There'd be no hiding himself then.

"I think I'll take him for a walk." Alan did his best to keep the tone of his voice level. "Just let me go get my sneakers on, and we'll go, buddy. How about that?"

The animal showed more of his teeth than was needed as he panted. Instead of the hallway, Alan went to the downstairs bathroom first to run cold water over his head. If he thought he could have gotten away with it, he would have taken the time to jerk off instead of forcing himself to calm down. But, the man would know. The man would have been able to smell the seed he'd spend, no matter how much of it he'd wash away. It would be a victory in the man's favor.

Alan slammed his thick fist against the bathroom wall. The hit was strong enough to rattle the medicine cabinet that doubled as the bathroom mirror. Helen's voice whispered between the door cracks. "Honey, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He snatched a towel off the rack to dry his hair. "Just slammed my foot against the door again."

The man was waiting on the front porch for him. Thankfully, he was fully clothed -- conspicuous, but clothed. He wasted no time in pushing Alan against the wall of the house.

"Run with me."

"No." Alan bared his own fangs in response to the man's grin. "I'm supposed to be out here walking you. Remember?"

"Walk me then." He led the way off the porch. "So long as you're with me, I don't care."

There was a long stretch of silence between them, where only the clack of the man's boots reminded Alan that he was there. Their hands were close enough to touch. Alan could feel the leather brush against his arm. He wondered why he wasn't flinching away.

"You missed me that much?"

The man's voice was deep, gentle and as warm as Alan's memories of it. "Is that not obvious? I need you. It's your own damn eyes that don't see that."

"I'm needed here..."

The man stopped to point at a small mutt, barking at them from the safety of its yard. "Look at that little thing there. See how it barks at us? It's afraid, yet it must bark like that so its owners know it's brave. That's what you've become. A dog."

Alan grabbed the man by the collar of his jacket and snarled. "I'm not a goddamned dog!"

"Then come, fight me! I've invaded your territory, made my mark all over it and am hunting your prey." With the ease and grace of a practiced fighter, the man broke Alan's hold. All the gentleness bled out through the man's snarl. "Come be rid of me! Once and for all!"

No matter how tempting it was, Alan could not bring himself to even lift his hands. His mind -- his memories -- wouldn't let him act. His fingers flexed against his palm. Alan knew exactly where to hit to bring the man to his knees. But he also knew where the man's most intimate places were. He could kill the man or bring him the greatest pleasure. Alan didn't know which he wanted to do more.

"Do it!" The man threw off his coat and held his arms outstretched, "Go get your tools, ape! Shoot me! Kill me with your own bare hands if you like!"

Alan shouted back at him, "No!"

"Kill me." The man's hands dropped to his sides. "Please. I would rather die than see you betray yourself like this."

"I'm not--"

"Look me in the eyes and say that." The man didn't give Alan much of a choice on the matter. With his thick hands on either side of Alan's face, the man forced Alan to look where he least wanted. "I still love you."

Alan forced the man's hands off his skin. "You keep saying that!"

"Because it's true. I never stopped loving you. It's only your heart that grew cold. There is still a fire in mine."

There was a look in the man's green eyes that made Alan back away. "Wait..."

The man captured Alan's hand to press it against his chest. He forced Alan to feel all the taut muscles that stretched beneath. "Do you feel it? It still beats for you."

All that escaped Alan's mouth were vowel-sounds. His mind was broken apart by a fevered dream of warm flesh. A soft whisper of a moan cracked free from the man's lips as Alan's touch slid between his pecs. Old habits and lurid, fitful dreams lured the two of them close enough to share the same wasted breaths.

The man slid the edge of his index finger beneath Alan's chin to lift his head. Their lips were so close Alan could feel the heat from the man's breath enter his mouth. The scent of the wild flooded his being; if he closed his eyes, his mind would take him back to the place where a stream coursed over the rocks. The place where young bluebirds played between the leaves of old pine trees. A place so different from the home of Helen Richardson.

Alan shoved away from the man. "No. I can't. I won't!"

The man's voice cracked as it escaped his lips. "Why?"

"You know why! She needs me."

"I need you more," the man's voice weakened. "I almost died."

Time and space around Alan froze. "What?"

"You weren't there to help me." He led Alan's hand down to his side. A massive gash of scar tissue caved in a large portion of the man's side. The wound was a near perfect fit for some beast's muzzle. "You weren't there when I needed you."

"Y-you stupid--" Alan pressed both hands over the man's cheeks. "How?"

"Someone thought they could take my place. If you'd been there, they would never have tried."

"Was it him? That scrawny little--!"

"He's not so scrawny anymore. Neither are his litter-mates." The man slid his touch down Alan's wrists. He stepped forward, his hands following the curve of Alan's arms, shoulders, then down the length of Alan's back. Alan didn't argue when the man guided him inside the zipper of the black leather coat. "I'm not lying when I say I need you."

Alan leaned his head against the man's chest. "But you survived..."

"Just barely." The man lifted a hand to stroke Alan's hair. His kiss was so light, Alan didn't know if he could truly call it a kiss or not. "I need you so much."

"No you don't." The memory of angry shouts and bared fangs stung Alan into action. He pushed himself out of the man's embrace, just as he'd done before and would do again. "You didn't need me then. You sure as hell don't need me now!"

The man's lips curled, but Alan ran away before any sound could pierce the air between them. He rushed over sidewalks and tore across lawns. His neighbor across the street, who'd just stepped out to grab the mail, tried to wave him down. Alan leapt over the

fence, the cat in the middle of the walkway, and the front porch steps in three successive bounds. If Bill asked, he would lie. If Helen asked, another lie.

He lied to himself. He lied to the world. He tore open the screen and door, only to close them again. Locks were locked just as easily as lies were made. There was a sound, trying to crawl up the insides of throat that needed to be locked away as well. He shouldn't have been out of breath, but he was. Drinking in every breath was better than making the sound.

Helen's voice startled him. "Honey? Is that you?"

"Y...yeah," he winced, then pretended to cough. "Yeah, babe, it's me."

Alan leaned against the wall as he broke the knots of his tennis shoes. He tossed both of them into their corner as the wail of a cat was cut short. There was just enough time for him to rush to the living room window and watch the house-cat dart across the street. The animal stopped short of the sidewalk; he either didn't feel the need to follow or thought Alan hadn't born witness to the chase.

The animal turned around, and Alan jerked the curtains closed. On his way to the couch, he heard the scrape of thick claws attack the front door. He had to press his hands against his ears to deaden the strained howl that followed.

"No." The words he let slide between his lips were flavored with the whimper he couldn't lock away anymore. "I can't. You shouldn't be here. Go home. Please, before you fall too. Please go, leader. Please..."

The howls died away. The scratching stopped. There was wood, glass, and several well-placed nails between him and the one that hunted him. It needed to stay that way, for his sake. For the animal's sake. He slowly slunk to the couch and sat down, holding his head between his hands. He didn't know what to do anymore. He could feel his control cracking.

He could smell Helen's musk beneath the scent of her rose-perfume when she stepped into the room. He shouldn't have been able to, but Alan was having a hard time caring.

"Honey, what's wrong?" She sat down next to him and scooted as close as she could. The moment her hands pressed against his back, he spilled over her lap. "I've never seen you so upset..."

Her voice wasn't the balm it once was. He wanted something much deeper...gentle, yet heavy...

He couldn't bring himself to utter a single word. He couldn't think of anything to say, even if he could speak. His shoulders were shaking and his breaths quick, but he wasn't crying. He couldn't cry. Not over something like this.

She remained still, even when he spread her over the cushions. He did his best to think of her as he kissed the warm flesh beneath his lips; flesh was flesh no matter who wore it. She gave all of the right responses, all the right signs that she was enjoying whatever the hell he was trying to do to her.

But as soon as her shirt fluttered across the carpet, he was forced to see the whole of her body for what it was. The slender, willowy arms that could barely lift grocery bags, let alone wrap around him. The clean, pale skin, bereft of even the sun's kiss. He spread his hand against her side and tried to imagine just how savage it would have been if she'd been marked there. She would never have survived. Not like him. Not like the man with green eyes and the scent of the wild.

Helen sat up and touched his cheek to rouse him from his daze. "Why don't you let me take you to bed, dear?"

He nodded his head obediently. Brokenly.

He was a dog. He'd only been barking too much to feel the collar against his neck.

They spent the rest of the evening in bed, doing what a man and a woman did when the stars were out and the moon bright. She did most of the work, teasing and pawing at him, trying to comfort what the man had disturbed. The rest was easy. The rest was his body, reacting to what it was used to.

It took him too long to spill his seed. He'd had to think of another body, stronger than hers would ever be. His howl soaked into every wall of the house. The wretched stink of her arousal stung at his nose. His lips peeled away from his fangs; he was just beginning to lean over her back when another howl answered his. His one true name was hidden in its sound.

"Aw," Helen hissed as she dropped down to the sheets. "He sounds lonely."

Alan never closed his eyes when he lay atop the sheets. His eyes stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows battle the moonlight for control of the room. The howls didn't stop until dawn.

When the alarm went off, Alan rolled over and slammed his fist against the nightstand until the sound died. He felt something light make the bed shiver; he wasn't awake enough to understand the words he heard, so he growled them away. A delicate hand touched his bicep, but he rolled onto his side when the touch tried to shake him awake.

The touch, the warmth and the other presence gradually faded away. He could hear her move around the bedroom, sliding open drawers and collecting clothes. He could still smell her, even when she wafted into the master bath. He tried to sink back into the reaches of sleep as the patter of water echoed into his ears.

Her voice roused him before he could fully fall. "You're going to be late if you don't wake up, honey."

He waved off her concern. "It's fine."

Her lips gently pressed against his cheek. "All right, dear. I'll see you tonight."

The gentle click of the door announced her exit. He heard the rumble of a car soon after. He had the whole house to himself. Neither the shadow, the man, the animal, nor the green eyes that bound the three ever crossed his mind.

Just the hint of touch and his length was awakened.

He had it all planned out. Pleasure first, then a shower -- maybe a little more pleasure there -- a shave after, and a call into work. He had enough time saved up that he could take a day off. He'd need to clean up the bed before Helen found out. She didn't know the first thing about his body. Nor he, hers. Maybe that was the real thing that kept them from bringing pups - children into the world.

Another presence slid into bed, crawling beneath the sheets to press against his back. He was too occupied with himself to feel a difference between the new presence and the one that had left him. He continued to stroke his length as he looked over his shoulder. Maybe, if it was Helen, then maybe she'd...

The shadow pressed against his back gave him a moonlight-colored smile. "You're happy with her, huh? You're so happy, you're trying to fuck yourself."

"This is your fault!" Even with the shadow watching, he didn't stop jerking his hips against his hands. "Teasing me, leaving me. You could have the fucking decency to finish me off if you're going to do that shit!"

"You kept begging for her, so I figured she was doing it for you. Or can't she give you what you want?"

He bared his fangs at the shadow. "Why don't you just go back to hell where you belong!"

"I am in hell already." The shadow's hand followed the curve of Alan's side. "Hell is listening to you howl out my name after you give your seed to someone who doesn't deserve it. It's watching you do this to yourself, when I have two very capable hands to soothe you with."

The words came so fast, Alan didn't realize them until they were dying in the air. "Then soothe me now!"

"You know that's all you ever had to tell me."

The shadow took over what Alan had started. One velvet-covered hand coursed over his length, the other spilled against a thigh. The open span of his shoulder was a playground for the shadow's lips. Kisses, nips, licks -- he left them all as he nudged his own hips against Alan's buttocks.

It had been so long since he'd been touched that he'd forgotten the pleasure trap he'd rushed into. Helen had never been drawn to do such things. Their games of give and take always left him wanting more than what she could offer. There were places upon his body that she would not touch, places that the shadow made warm again. The bedsprings creaked as the shadow sat up to ease him onto his back.

As the shadow's hand coursed up and down the length of his erection, the other caressed the expanse of his thigh. The shadow spread between his legs to lap at the skin that lay between his leg and his pelvis.

Alan jerked his hips off the sheets, his voice unable to give anything but a wild cry. The shadow's lips eased kisses up and down the root of his shaft. Once the tip was discovered, the shadow simply parted his lips for Alan to push himself inside.

He raked his hands through the shadow's head-fur and let his hips push him inside the shadow's mouth. The pound of his buttocks against the sheets made the bedsprings wail. The shadow didn't seek to push him down or control his strokes; he would have choked Helen. He'd had to be in such control with her -- such damned, mind-numbing --!

His snarls transformed into a sudden, powerful howl. The shadow that had hunted him down and tortured him, willingly -- happily -- suckled the seed out of his body. Only the thinnest trickle of white escaped the shadow's mouth, only to be lapped up when the shadow peeled his lips away from Alan's length. The shadow's hands slid up from Alan's thighs to caress his sides, abs and chest.

The shadow spread himself over Alan's body, kissing what bare skin was offered him. There was no part of Alan's body that was safe from the shadow's touch. Alan tried to convince himself that it was habit or instinct that led their lips to meeting. Not desire. Not need or lust.

The shadow leaned in so close to Alan's face that their noses touched. "I followed you from the cold. I left our pack to come and walk among these human forests. I wanted to understand what drew you here. Away from me."

The shadow's fur withered into scarred, browned skin.

“Is this what I must become before I earn your love once more?” His hand slid across Alan’s shoulder to press all five fingers against Alan’s chest. “Sweetest starlight, that haunted my steps...”

“Stop it!”

“You once called me your love. We shared the most wonderful den, beneath the willow tree, by the spring. You remember? How the birds sang for us? How beautifully the sun shone across your face...”

“No more.” A broken whine choked Alan’s throat.

The last lock that bound his lies shattered. His nails lengthened and thickened into blackened claws. Ears lengthened into triangular, canine shapes. He had to spread his thighs to let his tail curl between his legs. The last of his human facade withered away when the brown velvet conquered his skin. He lapped his blackened lips in submission to the shadow atop him.

“Please, leader. No more...”

“There you are!” The shadow’s velvet returned as he hurried to press his kisses against Alan’s lips. There was no need to dominate or be dominated; the heat they gave one another was enough. “My heart still aches for you. I love you!”

Whimpers eased between Alan’s lips, “Please...”

“What do you wish of me, my heart’s only love?”

Alan slid his arms over the shadow’s back. “Touch me.”

He had forgotten the feel of his shadow against his body. The shadow’s lips pressed against his cheeks, brow, and lips -- all in the rush for connection. Alan raked his fingers through the shadow’s head-fur to pull them closer still. His mouth was pierced; the breath was ripped out of his lungs by the shadow’s nubile tongue.

There was no need to think anymore. There was no way he could mistake the pleasure he gave as the shadow’s hips jerked their cocks against one another. Their kisses became rushed duels to taste the inside of each other’s mouths. Alan howled as he felt the shadow’s fangs scrape the flesh beneath his fur.

His shadow, come down from the forests of the north to save him from the two-legged deer-kind. Come to remind him of the wolf he’d been and the wildness he’d breathed.

Kisses scraped down the wealth of his chest. His shadow didn’t simply kiss his nipples -- he suckled them until Alan was whimpering. His sides were stroked, his buttocks groped

and thighs spread apart. His shadow didn't have to help him to his hand and knees. Alan needed to be there before his shadow wasted their seed again.

His shadow did not enter him gently. They were too wild for grace, or ease, or even simple lubricant. What was torn, his body healed; the rush simply made the heat that much more intoxicating. His thrusts were rushed by his shadow's quickening. The slap of their bodies overshadowed his desperate panting.

His shadow drove deep and came hard. He hurried to grab at the velvet-covered wrists, trying to make their touch quicken as well. There was so much he needed!

He howled out his leader's name as his seed splashed against his belly. For those few moments, as his shadow's lips lapped up the sweat from his velvet, he tried to think of the one time he'd felt as satisfied with Helen. He really, desperately tried, but all that came to mind was the water, dribbling down the rocks of the small stream.

The water there had been so much sweeter than the water the tap drained into his coffee pot. He didn't have to wonder about what he was going to be fed. The skill they used and the strength they exerted made the meat taste so much better than anything Helen had prepared for him. He didn't have to worry about human habits or human morals. Wherever they were, whatever they were doing, his leader could but speak his desires and they were making love once more.

Beneath the stars. Inside the den. By the steam. Why had he left it? To follow after the two-legged deer that smelled like flowers? Did she even recognize him?

No, that wasn't all of it. It couldn't be.

He'd wanted to give his one-mate something precious -- he remembered that much. Something small and precious that the two of them could love together. But too many other memories fogged his mind. The need to fit into the world where meat couldn't simply be hunted. It had to be earned. Money. Job. Oh God, he couldn't just lean back his head and howl anymore! Leader! Where was his leader? What had the two-legged deer done to him?

He could feel the beginnings of a slide, trying to part him from his leader's body. His hands darted behind the shadow's buttocks, forcing them still. His snarl was so sharp it would have broken glass. He wasn't ready to be emptied yet! He would decide when they were through!

The shadow's deep chuckle echoed through out Alan's body. "What is this? Is it the season already? But my nose says it is summer here, fair one."

"Mine." Alan had to crack his fangs apart to say that much. Whatever else he could have said became darkened growls for his shadow to soothe away with kisses.

“That I am, my love.”

Alan turned his head so his shadow had a cheek to nuzzle. The whimper that escaped his lips was so pained it brought tears to his eyes. His shadow did his best to lap away every tear before they could splash across the sheets. Black-velvet hands rubbed against his chest and belly, spreading comfort wherever they touched.

“Shhh,” his shadow whispered into the slope of his ear, “I am here now. I’m here and I love you. I won’t let them poison you anymore. We’re going home.”

“You...knew?”

“I would be a poor leader if I couldn’t figure out the mind of my second. There is too much venom in the meat of these two-legged deer. You’ve become weakened by it.” His leader lapped the nape of his neck. “You’ll need good meat to grow strong before the winter.”

Alan licked his upper lip as he exposed his throat. “Forgive me. I only wanted to .-”

“There is nothing to forgive,” his leader rumbled. “I told you already. I don’t need pups. I only need you.”

Alan shed his human name and his human seeming as his leader led him out from between the sheets. His leader pried the band of gold-metal from his finger. That would be all they left for the two-legged deer-female to mourn. Let her make of it what she wanted.

Impasto by Lydia Nyx

Alexander wanted to paint a picture.

Being in London was like seeing through time. The jagged spires of cathedrals and old world towers juxtaposed with modern skyscrapers; the cobblestone streets running parallel to wide-lane freeways; the smell of tea and fresh-baked bread opposing the acrid fog of industry; these things presented a dichotomy of new and old that reminded Alexander of the timeline of his long life. He had seen London in the days of dirt streets and rat-plagued alleyways. He saw it now, clean and vibrant and coated with a fresh veneer of progress. This was one of the greatest things about being a vampire: a bird's-eye view of human advancement.

Alexander sat sideways, ten stories up on a hotel windowsill, in a building even older than him, gazing out at the night. The windowsill was cool, the air flowing in the window damp and chilly. He wore a pair of silk pajama bottoms, knees bent so they rode up his calves, bare toes resting on the grates of the air conditioner beneath the windowsill. This high up they put wrought-iron bars over the windows, so they didn't open out all the way. He had pried his open just enough to let the night in. It was mid-autumn and the scent of leaves and decay and the peaty, wet odor of the Thames enticed him.

Lights twinkled in the darkness, glowing windows and streetlamps stretched out in the distance. It was past midnight and no one was on the street below. The sleepy quiet of the city was broken only by the faint, dull roar of traffic and trains. They'd been in London for two days, waiting to meet with Laurent's mother, who was coming from Paris. Laurent wanted to see her one last time as a human, before he went into the darkness. They would have gone to Paris to see her, but she wanted to come to London, as she had taken Laurent there on holiday many times as a child and wanted to reminisce.

Alexander leaned away from the window, reaching for a small table nearby, on which a half-empty pack of cigarettes and a cheap disposable lighter sat. He'd tried to give up smoking completely, but every now and then he got an itch for nicotine. Being a vampire didn't exempt him from addictions, as he'd learned profoundly over many years and many follies. It was better to give in than deny himself and later smoke an entire pack. He'd been nursing this one for going on three months, and though the cigarettes were stale by now, he didn't buy a new pack.

Tapping the pack against his hand, one slender white stick fell into his palm. He tossed the pack on the windowsill. A momentary flash of orange as he lit the lighter, then just the tip glowing dully, and he tilted his head back against the wall, blowing a cloud of gossamer gray toward the ceiling. The smoke burned and tasted like hell, but the feel of the cigarette in his hand and against his lips was comforting.

As he looked back out the window his breath fogged the glass, making lights dull and buildings smear. London sparked his muse, infusing him with a nagging, inward-focused need even stronger than the desire for nicotine. Yes, he wanted to paint a picture, but not of what was outside.

Looking back into the darkened room, his eyes flitted over shapes in the murk. He didn't want to paint the buildings or the nighttime river. He wasn't very good at realism anyway; abstract was more his style. What he wanted to paint could only be painted with words.

Taking another slow drag off the cigarette he glanced toward the table again, then reached over and picked up a spiral-bound notebook from it. The cover was red and worn at the edges, a picture Laurent's teenage son Henry had drawn in heavy black marker decorated it. He had drawn a graveyard scene with an iconic, leering vampire in a cape and with a widow's peak, like Dracula. Beneath it, he had written *Ne mangez pas les paysans*. 'Don't eat the peasants.' Henry was bright and clever and possessed a sarcastic wit like his father. Laurent told him he would turn him one day, when he was older and had known some human life. It had taken Laurent many long years to come to the decision he had made a week ago, after all, and he was not going to let his son come to one anytime soon. Alexander knew he would keep the notebook even after all the paper was filled. He would put it in a stack with all his other notebooks on a closet shelf in their home in Versailles, where the cardboard would grow soft with time, the marker fading until the picture was a ghost of itself.

Pulling a ballpoint pen from the spirals, he opened the notebook and started looking for a clean page. The notebook was filled with all sorts of things—poems, bits of story, journal entries, drawings, a note from Laurent that said 'please remember to bring the wine this time, Alexander!' The note was from their anniversary nearly nine months before, which said something about how long he'd had the notebook. He found a clean page nearly at the back. Only about twenty good pages were left in it, which made him sad. There was no point in carrying around a full notebook, but getting a new one always seemed like leaving something behind and starting over.

He took another drag from his cigarette and flicked the ash out the window, then sat pondering for a moment, notebook resting on his drawn-up knees, pen poised over the paper. He looked back into the room and wondered where to start. After another careful moment of thought he crushed the cigarette out on one of the iron bars and dropped it beside him on the windowsill. Maybe he'd save it for later. Maybe he'd just throw it away.

There was enough light from outside to write by, if he leaned close to the window. His night vision was sharp, but it required at least a bit of luminance for him to see properly, especially if he needed to do something intricate. He wasn't about to turn on a light and ruin the picture he was trying to paint. Quiet and dark were what he needed. But where to start? At the edges of course, and work his way in.

At the table near the window, a few overstuffed leather chairs stood in a semi-circle. One had been pulled away and an overflowing suitcase sat in it. From it spilled various clothes—a white t-shirt, a pair of jeans, something dangling that might have been another shirt. A scarf, which looked black in the darkness but Alexander knew was actually blue, draped over the back of the chair. It was cashmere and had little tassels on the end. In the orange glow from outside, they looked like strange little bug legs clinging to the chair. Alexander recalled how the scarf looked draped around a long, graceful neck, trailing elegantly over one shoulder, the color lovely against such pale, creamy skin. On that skin, along the tendon of that graceful neck, faint pink marks, old shiny scar tissue, glistened in the light. They were marks of possession, of ownership. The owned wore them proudly, without reserve or trying to hide them.

On the table were two keycards and a half-full bottle of mineral water. The cap was off, lying with the keycards, and tiny bubbles clung to the inside of the bottle. There was also a set of keys attached to a black, oblong key chain. Alexander couldn't see it, but he remembered the rental car company logo emblazoned on it in silver. There were other things on the table, too—a bottle of cologne, a can of shaving cream, a stick of deodorant. 'Personal effects,' as they were called. Personal indeed, for Alexander knew personally the body they were used on.

Moving from the table to the floor, he saw two sets of shoes at the bottom of the bed. One was a pair of shiny black loafers, a pair of dark socks stuffed inside. The other was a pair of leather Sergio Rossi slip-ons, metallic silver, something like a loafer but much more casual. One of these was sitting straight and proper, like it had been placed, and the other was on its side, the toe on top of one of the loafers.

Around the left side of the bed, a pair of jeans lay rumpled on the floor—Gucci, with Calvin Klein underwear tangled up in them, light blue, though they looked darker in the dim light. Alexander heard in his head soft, breathy laughter as his fingers remembered slipping beneath the waistband of those underwear, feeling warm flesh under soft cotton. His nose had nuzzled over the material, working between craggy metal lines of opened zipper, smelling musky arousal, lips brushing what rested firm and thick beneath the cloth and hearing a sigh of pleasure from above.

Close to the discarded jeans, but further from the bed, another pair of pants. They were black, dressy, made of sheer linen. He didn't know the designer and couldn't remember where he'd bought them. The black silk boxers though, he'd gotten in Madrid. They were lying in a dark puddle on the other side of the bed, almost hidden under the edge of the comforter. Eager, nimble fingers had yanked them off then tossed them carelessly away. Those same fingers had gripped and squeezed and played adroitly along Alexander's rigid length and every nerve, making him not care if he ever wore underwear again.

On the same side of the bed as their pants, a white, long-sleeve shirt rested on the floor near a chair next to the nightstand. A black jacket was draped over the chair—velvet, stylish, with a high collar and gold buttons. The light from the window picked the buttons out in tiny gleaming pinpoints. Alexander had tucked his hands beneath the coat earlier

for warmth, hiding them from the blustery evening. Soft flesh and the hard lines of ribs tantalized his fingertips, as the warm breath on his neck did. He'd surreptitiously slid his hands up higher, thumbs brushing over cold-hardened nipples poking against thin fabric. A gasp and a shift of warm body against his had been his reward. It was in heady, stolen moments like that Alexander wondered which of them was truly the possessor.

As for the white shirt, crumpled at the foot of the chair where slender fingers had dropped it earlier, he knew it was soft, knew how it shifted and clung to lean curves, knew it smelled faintly of Fahrenheit by Christian Dior, except at the armpits, where it held its wearer's own musky, unique fragrance. Alexander had held the fabric to his face while his love still wore it and breathed deep, bringing soft chuckles to his ears and caressing hands to his face.

His own shirt was lost somewhere, probably in the bed, or beneath the covers that were trailing on the floor. It was simple, dark-red silk, button up, brand new. It smelled mostly like him, and like his soap, because he wasn't fond of cologne. He wore it occasionally, but mostly he liked smelling it on other people. Too much of his own fragrance got in the way of his lover's smell.

He continued working inward, approaching the bed now, drawing more lines and weaving meaning into the scene.

On the bedside stand, a mound of jewelry rested—rings and necklaces, gleaming faintly in the light, a glimmer of gold and the flash of a blue stone set in one of the rings. Alexander recalled the whisper-soft feel of a skin-warmed chain sifting through his fingers; watching pretty sparkling baubles being removed, sleek silver circles slipping off fingers, leaving them unadorned but with their natural beauty; the clink and clatter as jewelry was dropped on varnished wood, a soft shtttik as one long chain slid off and fell to the carpet. It was still there, a thin, coiled cord resting on thick cream shag.

Also on the nightstand were items less intimate than the jewelry, yet somehow more private. A flat, narrow box with one end torn open and several discarded foil packets beside it caught his attention. The well-used contents of the packets rested in the little wicker wastebasket beneath the stand. It was a small chance, but his semen could infect Laurent the way his blood could, and Laurent wasn't ready yet. He wanted two more days. Next to the box was a short, ergonomic white bottle, the flip cap still open. Black words were printed on the bottle that he couldn't make out in the dark, but he knew it said 'personal lubricant.' The stuff inside the bottle was clear and slick, thick like jelly but very slippery. Half the bottle was gone now, and Alexander would have done a commercial for the stuff if they asked him, he liked it that much. No odor, no stickiness, it didn't dry up like some lubricants did. He could almost hear himself extolling its virtues on television, the home viewers stuttering in horror at the flash of his fangs. Vampires used lube too. He wondered vaguely if his kind were a profitable market.

Of course there was always a mess, and a white terrycloth hotel towel lying on the floor next to the stand attested to that. It was probably still damp and sticky in places. The hotel's crest had been monogrammed on one corner, indistinct in the darkness.

Now came the centerpiece of the painting, the object that would tell the observer exactly what had happened here, if they hadn't already guessed. Most likely they had, but were wondering with who, and why. The 'who' was simple enough, the 'why' a bit more complicated, and had been, for nearly two decades.

The sheets on the bed were white cotton. They were soft and had smelled of industrial detergent. They'd been wound around Alexander's bare legs earlier, before he'd gotten up and pulled his pajama bottoms out of his suitcase. Atop the sheets was a cream-colored blanket, then a green and white comforter with pink flowers printed on it. Both were tangled, twisted. Pillows were scattered at the top of the bed, one on the right propped against the headboard and slumped toward the edge of the mattress. The smell of detergent had been replaced by the scent of sweat and sex, skin and musk, and just a little blood, that sweet, coppery odor. Alexander fancied he could smell it still, even over the damp air and lingering cigarette smoke.

On the left side of the bed, the fire behind his inspiration lie tangled up in the sheet. He was on his stomach, his bare shoulder blades angular and sleek, his arms sprawled out to either side and his right hand lost amongst the mounds of pillows. The left dangled off the bed, fingers curled against the box springs, swaying slightly with his breath. The comforter was draped over one leg and the other rested atop the blanket, long and muscled and bare, the light picking out downy hair on the back of his calf. Across the white pillow beneath his head, sable curls were flung scattered and wild, a few clinging to the back of his neck. One tumbled onto the smooth, pale skin of his back, a dark, tempting ringlet on a bed of creamy velvet. Alexander felt the urge to go over and pluck it up between his fingers, curl it around his knuckles, press it to his lips.

Beneath the sheet, the shape of his lover's body was exquisite, long and slender, a sloping back and narrow hips, jutting hipbones and slim thighs. The swell of his ass was subtle, the sheet so far up his bare leg Alexander could just see the soft round beauty of one cheek peeking out.

How could anyone capture such glorious beauty on canvas? Michelangelo would have thrown his brushes into the Tiber upon seeing him, knowing he could never replicate such a thing in pigments and oils.

Alexander stared at the sight for a long time, then the figure on the bed suddenly stirred, as though feeling the weight of his gaze. The head moved, curls sliding over the pillow, a delicate, shadowy profile revealed against the white contrast of the pillowcase. A murmured, sleepy voice broke through the quiet. "Alexander?"

"Right here," he said softly, sliding one leg off the windowsill. "I'm here."

“Mmm.” The face buried itself against the pillow again, voice muffled against it, so gentle the lilting accent in it was almost non-existent. “Come back to bed.”

Alexander looked down at the notebook. A blank piece of paper stared back up at him, accusingly. He hadn’t even started. The pen was still poised over the white sheet, waiting to form the picture he saw before him. Words were still trapped in the tip of it, dammed and frozen. Then suddenly, he knew—this picture didn’t need a lot of detail, or color, or anything complicated or grand. It required no glaring reds or subtle greens, no blazing yellows or stark whites. Nor did it need contrast and definition, depth and character. No agonizing , no false starts and painting over. It only needed one word, one word to capture it and make it vivid and real and startling. If a picture was worth a thousand words, then just this one word was worth an entire picture.

Alexander touched the tip of his pen to the paper and wrote the word, big and sprawling and with a great flourish beneath it. He looked over at the bed again. The figure on it shifted, imploring him once more in a soft, promising voice to come back to bed. He couldn’t sit on the cold windowsill anymore, shrouded by the dark night. His days as an artist were over. He had tossed his brushes into the current and he would write no more. Alexander held the notebook out in front of him, admiring his masterpiece, and smiled contentedly. Simplicity. Minimal execution for maximum effect. Just one word.

Mien.

Mine.

Mediocre Art *by Julia Talbot*

There was no reason for Daniel to worry that he was being followed.

He was no great looker, he was a marginal artist and he knew it, and he was too big to look like a willowy boy-victim.

So why had he been feeling the prickle on the back of his neck for two weeks? Every time he left the studio, he felt it. It raised the hair on his arms, made his nipples draw up. He'd searched, watched, even had Joey follow him at a good distance to see if someone was after him, and found nothing.

That didn't mean it wasn't there.

Hell, maybe he was losing his mind.

His dreams sure felt like it. They were full of crazy, goth-like images of black fabric and blood, of leather and glowing eyes. He started a new art series because of it. Multi-media. It was kind of erotic, if he was pressed to classify it, but that was pretty happy-making.

Yeah, Daniel figured he was kind of a mess, but it was the best art he'd put out since all that pot he'd smoked in art school.

He'd smoked a lot back then. He couldn't understand why everyone said it killed so many brain cells. His seemed the same as they always had. Hell, maybe that meant he hadn't had two to rub together to begin with.

His first piece of the new series was going to the gallery tonight. Tucked under his arm, wrapped in paper to protect it from all of the soot and damp outside, Daniel headed for the Tube stop at Russell Square. He was a lucky fool to live in such a good neighborhood of London, even if it wasn't considered artsy like Soho or even the new enclave at Canary Wharf.

Daniel was American, after all. His Bohemian art roots only went so deep. He liked a cleaner neighborhood with lots of little restaurants and a nearby grocery store. Plus, he had hot and cold running British Museum, which was free and kept good hours for an artist. Who wasn't inspired by mummies and Rosetta stones and Sutton Hoo treasures?

The Russell Square stop was one of the weirdest, with these elevators that went down into the bowels of the earth. It was Saturday, and there was no rush hour, so at that time of the evening, the place was like something out of a horror movie. Like one of those zombie movies that had the fast-moving creepies in them.

He rode the elevator down and got on his train, heading for the Square Mile, where Cale's gallery sat between a pub and a touristy tarot card shop. It wasn't far from the whole horror museum and all, and people there loved Daniel's stuff.

The prickling on the back of his neck started up again as soon as he sat took a seat. Daniel glanced up, trying not to meet anyone's eyes, but checking out the other three passengers. One was obviously a tourist, with her British Library gift bag and her Starbucks coffee. One was a businessman, his shoes shiny and his tie slightly askew. Both the woman and the businessman studiously avoided his eye.

The third passenger, though, stared right at Daniel, his eyes dark like two holes in a blanket.

The guy looked like what people imagined Daniel to be before they met him. Slender, with lean, pretty hands. He had sharp features and dark hair that had little to do with dye, if anything. He wore jeans and a leather moto jacket, his boots more used than not, and his lips curved in the tiniest smile when their gazes locked.

Hot. Too young and breakable for Daniel, but hot.

Daniel stared back for a moment, then looked away, only realizing when he did that the prickle on his neck had gone away. It came back the moment the man was out of his line of sight. When he turned his head to find the guy again, though, the man was gone.

Just gone.

Daniel shook his head, checking on the other passengers again. They were still there and seemed not to have noticed what had just happened. Jesus. Maybe he was losing it a little. He'd been up for two days working on the third piece in the series. Sleep deprivation and hunger. That was all it was.

When he changed lines, he looked to see if the man was there at the station, and Daniel would swear he saw a flash of denim and leather. Still, that could be at least half the male population of London. Daniel stood out in his faded Wranglers and flannel shirts. Sometimes not in a good way... There had been that one time in Stratford when he'd almost gotten his ass kicked by a rugby player all because of the pattern of his plaid.

He got off at Tower Hill, deciding to walk a bit. Daniel loved this part of the city, day or night. Either side of the river made him happy; he just loved to stroll and watch people and see the buildings lit up in the dark.

The Tower of London should have been ominous, what with its reputation, but Daniel found its shape soothing, found the stone monster almost homey. Maybe it was innate American fascination with buildings that were older than his whole country.

Across the bridge, he stopped in at the pub for a beer before going to see Cale. The man was a good friend, but he flamed like crazy, and he was a gossipy bitch to boot, so Daniel needed shoring up a bit before braving the lion in its den.

He sat in a little wood booth and sipped his beer, the feeling of being watched intensifying so much for a moment that Daniel almost choked. Then he glanced up, and it went away because there sat Mr. Too Young and Pretty, staring right at him, two chairs away.

Daniel nodded, and the guy got up and came over to sit across from him.

“Why are you following me?” Better to go ahead and get it out of the way, not pussyfoot around.

“Because that painting you’re carrying is mine.”

Daniel raised a brow, sitting back in his seat. “Yeah? You get a jump on Cale at the gallery?”

“You might say that.” The man smiled -- a closed-mouth, Mona Lisa kind of smile.

It made Daniel shiver. Something about the man was truly predatory up close. It was hot and a little frightening. Which just made it hotter.

“Well, as soon as I see his receipts, then you can have it.”

“Cale is a bit under the weather today, Daniel. I think it would be best if you let him sleep it off.”

“I have to drop off the painting.” When he was this close, the guy’s eyes were truly black, like something out of a movie. Like he wore contacts or something. “Is that your real eye color?”

“Mmm. It is. Sloe eyes, my mother called them. Touched was what they called it in my village. Marked by the devil.”

The guy had an accent he couldn’t make out. It wasn’t Brit, but it was smoothed by years of living in England, he could tell. Cale was like that. American, but with a definite expat twist.

“Where’s your village?”

“Oh, it will be long gone, now. Destroyed.” Those long, lean fingers that everyone would have mistaken for artist’s hands tapped out a tattoo on the table.

“Yeah? Bad weather? War?” This whole thing was just too surreal. Why was he still sitting there?

“Bad blood, more like.” The man said blood like “blued”.

“You got a name?”

There was that smile again, slow and mysterious. “Yes. Ivan.”

“Ivan.” Daniel knew it would be spelled with an I even though it was pronounced E-van. “Neat.”

“You think so?” Ivan chuckled. “Good. Good, Daniel.”

“Cale tell you my name?”

“No. I have been following you for weeks.”

“I knew it. I knew someone...” Daniel paused. Okay, this guy was a stalker. “Why?”

“Maybe I like the way you look in plaid.”

Daniel blinked. “That’s not funny.”

“I am not joking.” Ivan flipped a hand at him languidly. “I like the look of you, Daniel, and you are far from mediocre as an artist.”

“How did you—“

“Cale told me many things about you. He likes to talk when given money for art, yes?”

“Yeah.” Daniel was starting to regret getting trapped between Ivan and the wall. He was bigger, though, and probably stronger, so he could fight his way out if he needed to.

“Are you frightened of me, Daniel?” The tapping fingers stilled, Ivan staring at him intently with those amazing eyes.

“Should I be?”

Ivan smiled, a real smile with teeth. Sharp teeth that slid down past Ivan’s lower lip. Shit. Shit, that was freaky. Daniel stood, pushing at the booth table so it slid and hit Ivan in the belly.

“I’m out of here.” He grabbed the painting. He’d take it to Cale, call a cab to get him back to Russell Square. It would be way fucking harder to follow him that way.

“No.” Ivan reached out and grabbed his arm, fingers digging in but not quite hurting him. “No, I think we will go together.”

“Are you crazy?” That had to be the only answer. The guy had to be a madman to try and hold him up in a pub. Okay, so it was an almost deserted pub, but there was still the bartender and the few old barflies that were sitting around.

“No. Do not bother to yell for help, they will not hear you.”

Daniel looked around. No one was so much as even looking at them. It was like they were in a bubble. A weird, toothy, stalker bubble.

“Come.” Ivan tugged on his arm, and Daniel felt his feet moving of their own volition, even as his brain told him to call out for help, fight, or run.

“Let go.” He told his lips to shape the words, but he wasn’t sure they were actually going to come out. In fact, he would bet that they didn’t.

Ivan just ignored him, pulling him inexorably out into the night, leading him to the bank on the Southwark side. They ended up at one of those fancy-assed buildings with all the lights, the kind no one Daniel knew could afford.

“Never been inside this one,” Daniel murmured.

“Well, now is your chance.” Ivan drew him inside, nodding at the doorman. The place was lush, with carpet thick enough to swallow sound, and the kind of modern, understated elegance that screamed millions of dollars.

“Nice. Why are you doing this?”

“Because I want you to see how lovely your painting is going to look on my wall.” The elevator made as little noise as the carpeted floors, the whole place seeming eerily quiet.

“I should be fighting you.” He should. Daniel knew he was no shrinking violet. His body just didn’t seem to want to argue. Damn it, he was going to shit a brick any minute.

“I would like that, but not until we get inside my condo.” That toothy little smile flashed again, and Daniel thought he might prefer the Mona Lisa one. Those sharp little fangs made him want to gibber a little. They looked natural, not fake, not filed down.

Who in hell had teeth like that?

They finally stepped off the elevator, and it was clear that Ivan’s condo took up the whole floor. Jesus. The man could afford to buy and sell him fifteen or twenty times. His whole life, not just his paintings. No wonder Cale had gotten so cozy with Ivan; that little butthead loved hobnobbing with the rich, even if they weren’t famous.

“How do you do this? Is it some kind of mind whammy?”

“No.” Ivan opened the door and pulled Daniel inside. “Oh, I mean I am perfectly capable of it, but with you I do not need it.” Ivan took the painting and set it aside. “You may fight me now, if you like.”

The bubble around them seemed to burst, and Daniel grunted, taking a swing at the man, a wild haymaker owing more to fear than to rage or the desire to damage.

Ivan ducked the blow easily, coming up from his crouch to slam into Daniel’s chest with one shoulder. Daniel thudded against the front door, Ivan’s body all but covering his. The man had seemed so much smaller than him, so much more delicate.

That had been misleading as hell.

Ivan slid a thigh between Daniel’s, pressing it up, and Daniel’s cock took note, hardening in a rush that left him breathless, his heart pounding.

“You can do better than that, can’t you?” Ivan spoke the words against Daniel’s throat, those sharp, sharp teeth barely scraping along the skin there.

Daniel gritted his teeth against the singing of his nerve endings, the pleasure so great that his balls drew up like he was about to come. He put his hands on Ivan’s shoulders, meaning to give the man a shove, but another tiny bite had him pulling Ivan closer.

“Please...” He had no idea what he was asking for, but he knew he needed something. Something more than what he was getting.

“You’re exquisite.” Ivan pushed against his cock again, hard, pressing Daniel’s balls up against the seam of his jeans. “I could eat you up.”

“Okay.” Yeah. Whatever, as long as it made him come.

“Let me see you.” Ivan pulled away for a few excruciating seconds, undressing Daniel so fast he hardly blinked before he was nude. One of Ivan’s hands went to Daniel’s crotch, lifting his cock and balls and rubbing them in a slow circle before letting go. “You smell amazing.”

“I—who are you? How are you doing this to me?”

“Like this.” Ivan bit him again, this time hard enough to sting, hard enough to make the little hairs all over Daniel’s body stand up.

“Gonna leave a bruise.” Daniel was panting, his nude body starting to rock against Ivan’s clothed one, his mouth open, his eyes closed.

“Yes. I cannot wait. My bruise on your skin. It will be like art.” Ivan sucked a bit of skin up between his lips and pulled.

“Christ.” Daniel went up on tiptoes, his ass cheeks clenching. The leather of Ivan’s jacket rubbed against his nipples, making him want to scream. “I -- touch me.”

“Where, my Daniel? Here?” Those long fingers slid up his chest, finding one of his hard nipples and twisting it. That sent a shaft of pure heat to his belly, but it wasn’t enough. “Perhaps here.”

Then that hand slid back down, all the way down to Daniel’s cock, closing around it, nice and hard.

“Fuck. Fuck, yes.”

“Mmm. I will have you, but not yet. For now, I want to taste you when you come, Daniel.”

God, please let that mean what he thought it meant. It had been years since he’d had a good blowjob. Ivan didn’t go down, though, just stroked him from base to tip, teasing his balls on every few strokes. It was going to kill him, this slow, maddening pace. Daniel was going to just explode.

Ivan’s thumb scraped over the slit at the end of his cock, and Daniel shouted, his hips rocking back and forth. “More. More.”

It was becoming a chant, a low sound of need and desperation. He’d never in his life gotten so hot so fast or done something so damned stupid. He didn’t care. Daniel knew he would let this man suck him, fuck him, spread him out and use him for days on end, just blood and come and sweat, all mixed together.

He tried to touch Ivan in return, but his fingers got no purchase on the slick leather of that damned buttoned-up jacket. He cursed, trying to find the zipper, but Ivan just laughed and nipped his chin.

“No. This one is for me. This time I want to see you, Daniel. To have you feel only what I make you feel. Come, love. Fight me if you dare.”

Some kind of primal violence rose up from his cock into his belly and chest, and Daniel went a little crazy. He struggled, trying to get loose, trying to push Ivan to the floor and fuck his face or his ass or whatever he could get into.

Ivan held him, though, kept him still with ridiculous ease. The door was cool and smooth against his ass, Ivan slippery and yet firm against his front. He couldn’t get away and he couldn’t get closer and in the end all he could do was beg.

“Ivan. Please. Please. I need to—I gotta come. You’re killing me.”

“No. No, not yet.” The words belied Ivan’s movements, because that beautiful hand started stroking faster, harder, giving him the friction he needed, and before he could take a breath, Ivan was biting him again.

Those needle teeth sank deep into his skin this time, right at the base of his throat. His brain flashed up little pictures on his inner movie screen, visions of wild animals mauling men. That was what it felt like. It also felt like white-hot pleasure, like nothing ever had in his life.

Daniel screamed, his cock pushing into Ivan’s hand as his balls emptied. He came so hard that he blacked out a little, the world blurring and spinning, his knees feeling weak and shaky as a toddler’s.

All the while Ivan fed from him, because what else could you call it? Blood rose up to the bite, and Ivan sucked it away and, like there was a string attached to his cock, Daniel rose again.

He came three times before Ivan was done with him, and when those hands and teeth finally released him, Daniel slumped to the floor, hardly able to breathe.

He damned near landed on his painting, but managed not to smash it. Not that he needed the damned thing anymore. He had experienced it firsthand now. Who needed dreams?

Ivan bent to stroke his hair back from his face before picking Daniel up like he weighed no more than a child, carrying him into a lush, black and red bedroom. With no windows.

The bed was big enough to hold them three times over, and the coverlet was soft as clouds. Jesus, he could get used to this shit.

Ivan smiled down at him, bending to kiss his forehead. “Beautiful.”

“You said it wasn’t a mind whammy. That you didn’t need it with me.”

“I did not lie.”

“Then how can you do this? I’ve never—I don’t hook up in bars with weird guys.”

“Mmm. You never will again, either.” Ivan stroked the bruise on Daniel’s neck, making him shiver, his cock trying valiantly to rise once more. “It works because you are like your painting, Daniel.”

“Yeah? How’s that?”

Ivan smiled, the teeth slipping down to prick that full lower lip. “You’re mine.”

Contributors

Sue Brown is owned by her dog and two children. When she isn't following their orders she can be found at university listening to lecturers discuss long dead theologians. In her head however, she's plotting how to get her cowboys into bed together; she just hopes the lecturer doesn't ask her any questions.

Sue discovered male/male erotica at the time she woke up to find two men kissing on her favorite television series. The series was boring, the kissing was not. She may be late to the party but she's made up for it since, writing fan fiction until she was brave enough to venture out into the world of original fiction.

Lauren Burka - Lauren Burka's tarot cards told her she would never have a normal life. So far they have been one hundred percent correct. Her publication history begins in 1992 with her Circlet Press chapbook *Mate: and more tales from the erotic edge of sf/fantasy*. Susie Bright's 1997's *Best Fantastic Erotica* reprinted the short story "Mate." Torquere Books has published her novella, "The Memorial Garden" and novel *Wishbone*. Lauren is an assistant editor for Circlet Press and the editor of three anthologies with a fourth on the way. She has Asperger's Syndrome and two black cats.

JL Merrow is that rare beast, an English person who refuses to drink tea. She read Natural Sciences at Cambridge, where she learned many things, chief amongst which was that she never wanted to see the inside of a lab again. Her one regret is that she never mastered the ability of punting one-handed whilst holding a glass of champagne.

When not writing she enjoys reading, martial arts and surprising people who judge a book by its cover. Stories by JL Merrow have been published by Torquere Press, Dreamspinner Press, and Ravenous Romance.

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Josephine Myles - here is nothing Josephine Myles dreads more than becoming respectable. Since she's now a married mother - no longer sporting a silly hairstyle, facial piercings and living on a narrowboat - she reassures herself that she isn't one of the good girls by writing gay erotic romances. Visit her blog at <http://josephine-myles.livejournal.com/>

Lydia Nyx is from Cleveland, Ohio. Fond of all things paranormal, urban fantasy, and historical, she prefers her fiction with a male/male twist. She currently resides in a little apartment with her teenage son and a crazy cat and spends countless hours of the day entertaining the dirty fantasies in her head. As a 'day job' she works as a waitress, which gives her lots of free time to slack off and plot stories. Writing since the age of 13, she has always wanted to be a writer, and hopefully, one day, writing will be her day job.

M. Raiya was a Scottish warrior in a previous life, as well as being a sailor out of Nova Scotia in another one. Currently she lives in Vermont with her family and battles the sea and swords only in her writing.

Kate Roman - In case there are any questions, Kate Roman doesn't even own a black silk mask, and nor are her eyes green. Her alibi is unimpeachable and she can be reached at romankate@gmail.com or www.kateroman.com.

Julia Talbot - Julia Talbot has been assimilated by Texas, where there is hot and cold running rodeo, cowboys, and smoked brisket. A full time author, Julia has been published by Torquere Press, Suspect Thoughts, Pretty Things Press, and Changeling Press. She can most often be found in coffee shops and restaurants, scribbling in her notebook and entertaining other diners with her mutterings. Find her on the web at <http://thegates.net/juliatalbot>

Gabriel West - Mild mannered job-seeker by day, but when the sun goes down, our transgendered heroine becomes the perverse mind of Gabriel West. Savage, willful, Gabriel uses his tremendous writing powers to transform static characters to strangely dynamic personalities, and hum-drum descriptors into vivid settings. He currently has a legion of followers reading his scriptures at (<http://gabrielsknife.livejournal.com/>). This writer has been seen consorting with Ballique skin-thieves and Maa'rish blackguards. The Galactic Union urges caution when dealing with this writer.

Cari Z is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine. She currently lives in Western Africa, where she gets a lot of one of those things and none of the other. If she had a refrigerator, she'd be sitting in front of its open door, sighing wistfully.