

JOEY W. HILL

The touch of a man's
rough jaw, against a
woman's soft flesh...

CLOSE SHAVE

A VAMPIRE QUEEN SERIES VIGNETTE

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A vignette set in the Vampire Queen Series world.

To fans of Joey W. Hill's work, these vignettes have special significance, because they contain many of her readers' favorite characters. Because they are her favorites too, Joey doesn't like saying good-bye at "The End" any more than her readers do. So here for your reading pleasure, is another short vignette revisiting the world of the Vampire Queen Series.

These stories have become a way for Joey to take a breather and simply immerse herself in the pleasure of spending leisure time with past characters. We hope you will enjoy the same experience when reading them!

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The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. Reader discretion is advised.

CHAPTER ONE

Mason stared down at himself. He'd pulled on a pair of riding breeches, but nothing else, and he hadn't fastened the trousers yet. He had a good view of the body he'd inhabited for nine centuries. Other than the tiger on the back of his shoulder, tattooed with his own blood, it had changed very little since becoming an adult born vampire. Until now.

As he studied his chest, he lifted a hand to his jaw, bemused by the friction under his fingertips.

"I've never seen him look freaked out," came the dry comment from his bedroom doorway.

He tilted his head, keeping his back to the two men he was well aware were there. "I'm fairly certain I sent for the more tolerable Green brother," he said.

"Really?" Gideon asked. "Because I heard you sent for Jacob."

Mason suspected that Jacob gave his brother a hard look, since there was a charged silence. Just long enough for Gideon to toss back a guileless, mouthed "*What?*" before Jacob covered the pause with a smooth response.

"How may I be of service, my lord?"

Mason extended what he had in his other hand out to his side. "I have never used one of these. If Enrique had accompanied me to Savannah, I could have utilized his expertise."

"So it worked," Jacob said, intrigue in his tone.

“Apparently.” Mason ran his hand thoughtfully over the stubble on his jaw again. “Brian said to take the medication at dawn and it would work while I slept. He has already come and gone, to record his data.”

Mason had toyed with asking him for assistance, before realizing the scientist, also a born vampire, would have as little experience as himself with how to shave his face. Brian probably would have suggested Googling a how-to video.

Yes, he could learn to use a computer. Mason had accepted he didn’t want to do so. He didn’t even really enjoy driving a car. Cell phones were proof Satan had taken over the earth.

Horses, hand-written letters, and wielding the wealth and influence necessary to ensure other people could handle distasteful interfaces with technology for him. That was his preferred means of existence.

“Yeah, we passed Brian in the hall,” Gideon said. “He seemed as pleased as he gets. Probably thrilled he had a vampire willing to be his guinea pig for...something non-life threatening. For a change.”

Perhaps Jacob had stuffed his fist in his brother’s mouth before he could unwisely choose a different term. *Something cosmetic. Plastic surgery for vampires.*

Vanity was a prevalent and celebrated trait among vampires. If cosmetic surgery was something they needed—which none of them did—they’d likely keep all the plastic surgeons in the world occupied. From that perspective at least, it was unlikely they’d find much fault with Gideon’s uncensored observation. It would be his impertinence that would earn their ire. But that was Gideon’s preferred, and often dangerous, means of existence.

Yes, changing one’s appearance for the sake of vanity was acceptable. But to decide to be a “guinea pig” because one’s servant fantasized about her vampire having a five o’clock shadow and chest hair? He didn’t make apologies for the nature of his bond with Jessica, but he’d been a vampire for too long to feel comfortable acting openly...

Moony about her? Good decision.

Lyssa’s voice, in his head. She didn’t do that often, dip into his mind with the blood link she’d established with him centuries ago, but it did solve the problem of having to say it aloud. Hopefully, she hadn’t shared the observation with Jacob.

When Jacob was a vampire, do you know how much I missed the feel of his

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beard on my skin? Tugging his chest hair between my knuckles? Did you not find it curious that Lord Brian was pursuing such a seemingly frivolous project? Or why he conveniently brought it up when you were visiting his lab during Farida's check-up?

The mention of his daughter pulled Mason's mind temporarily away from any discomfiture. It also brought him a light smile...and a bolstering echo of the relief he'd felt shortly after that exam.

Maybe that was another reason he'd decided to do this...experiment. Brian's reassurance and successful treatment plan had made Mason unwisely sentimental.



During the “baby wellness check,” as Brian had called it, Mason and Jessica had watched closely while the young vampire who possessed several degrees, including one in medicine, weighed her and took her vitals. Despite acting like it was a routine checkup, one of the main reasons they'd come to Savannah was because Farida was showing a lackluster appetite toward the formula made of Jessica's milk and Mason's blood.

“So what are your thoughts on my project to investigate the vampire ability to grow body and facial hair?”

Mason blinked. Brian was obviously trying to relax them by raising the casual topic. Which might have just the opposite effect, since Brian wasn't known for his propensity for small talk. But Jessica's hands were opening and closing on her thighs where she sat in a chair next to the exam table, so Mason made an effort to sound equally relaxed.

“A little less...weighty than your usual project choices.”

“It's not as frivolous as you might think, my lord,” Brian responded. He was listening to Farida's heart. He gave them a quick, faint smile, telling him that sounded good, even as he continued. “Finding a way to alter a vampire's inability to grow facial and body hair might lead to ways to reverse other obstacles to their survival, like sunlight tolerance. This is a step toward that goal. But I need a few willing participants for this experiment. So far I haven't had much luck.”

He then said a few fairly complex things about giving younger

born vampires the ability to take refuge from the sun in more common surroundings, rather than always having to find some place well below ground level. Mason was focused on the crease between the male's brow as he weighed his absurdly tiny little girl. Why did babies have to look so small and fragile? Brian glanced at Debra, and she made a notation on the chart. Damn ability of vampires to talk to their servants without words. Brian better start speaking, or Mason was going to shake words out of him.

"All right, then," Brian said, draping the stethoscope around his neck while Debra lifted Farida, re-wrapping her in her blanket. "You're right. She's underweight. But—" he raised a hand before Mason started firing off questions, ways to fix things. Jessica's hand tightened on his on her shoulder, her heartrate jumping even as she remained outwardly still. "We should try something simple first," the vampire scientist said. "Give it to her straight from your vein, my lord. I think she's just being particular. Her parents are very direct, hands-on beings. Perhaps she is the same. She wants it the way she was given it first."

Within minutes of being born, a vampire babe with a vampire father and a human mother drank straight from the vampire parent. Mason vividly remembered that first nourishment, Jessica's hands on little Farida's bare back, holding her up as Mason leaned over her, hand braced by Jessica's shoulder. Amara, who'd attended the birth, helped guide Farida to the nicked artery in his throat.

Closest to the heart was best. Mothers of vampire young often had them draw blood from near the nipple. An odd tradition, since the major flow arteries were further out from that point. But it was the way it had always been done. Usually after the babe suckled some of the blood from around that sensitive point, the mother would adjust the child higher up on the curve, where a better flow could be found.

Brian suspected the tradition had something to do with the baby's proximity to the womb, their origination point, and the heartbeat of the mother. But for drinking from the father, the throat seemed to work best.

In those first few moments in the world, his daughter had not been hesitant at all. She'd begun to feed as soon as she was close enough to find his blood. He'd cupped her body against him, Jessica's

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hand beneath his. Had the world collapsed around them, they would not have noticed.

After that first draught, however, a child with a vampire father was transitioned to a mix of mother's milk and the father's blood, drawn and bottled. Most vampire babies did fine on that. Most.

Jessica was looking pensive. In her mind, Mason saw her turning over the variables. "I hope you're right, Lord Brian," she said. "But why do you think she isn't doing well on the usual formula mix?"

Mason tightened his hold on her fingers, but he was hoping as much as she was that Brian had a reassuring answer.

"I'm working on some theories." With a flash of unsettling frustration, Brian shook his head. "We haven't had enough vampires born in recent decades to build up a wealth of knowledge about their dietary habits."

It went without saying that, prior to Brian's intense interest in researching their kind and learning such things, vampires had been woefully deficient in recording data about their own kind.

"Sometimes fixing it comes before finding out the why. And fixing it helps to figure out the why."

Debra made that observation as she handed Farida back to Jessica, but not before rubbing noses with the babe and making a face that had their little girl considering a smile. "Other than the feeding issue, she's a strong, alert little soul," the serious, thin woman said. "All her other vitals look good. Lord Brian's theory matches my own thoughts on the matter."

She squeezed Jessica's hand. "Once you give it a try, call me on the house phone and let us know how she does."

Mason could feel the worry in the pit of Jessica's stomach, detecting the unspoken message. If it didn't work, they would need to figure out something else. Soon. Despite incredible vampire adult resilience, their young were no different from that of any other species. A small problem could become a big one, far too swiftly.

After a short amount of further discussion, recycling the same points, Mason thanked them and escorted Jessica back to their rooms. When he closed the door, he decided no amount of words were going to help. When a problem needed to be faced, he much preferred action.

He shrugged out of his shirt, catching Jessica's attention and

pulling her out of her head. "Let's give it a try, shall we?" he said gently.

She nodded. He chose the bed, because then Jessica could stretch out close to him. On his way there, he paused long enough to touch her worried face, cup her delicate jaw in his big hand. "Debra's right, you know. Don't want to get him too full of himself, but the boy is rarely wrong."

There were many vampires more powerful, but it was arguable whether any had contributed so much to the advancement of their race as Brian, a vampire who hadn't even reached his first century mark. Him *and* Debra. Over the past year, Brian himself had started correcting those who called her his assistant. He referred to her as his research partner, and directed others to give as much weight to his servant's opinion on research matters as his own.

"He has a relatively low quotient of the usual vampire arrogance, my lord." Jessica acknowledged his comment, attempted a smile. "If you told him you'd voted him head of Council, he'd likely just nod distractedly and keep staring into his microscope."

"No. He'd frown in irritation, for interrupting his thought process with such an inconsequential matter."

About the only thing that seemed capable of distracting him was Debra, and she was often just as immersed in their work as her Master. Mason made a mental note to figure out something he could do for them, particularly if this worked. Perhaps buy a new piece of equipment for the lab.

He stretched out on the bed, propping himself on the pillow, and gestured to his female, the one always capable of distracting *him*. Putting her knee on the bed, Jessica leaned over him, and laid Farida on his chest. The baby fussed some, and he rubbed her back, murmuring to her the way he did to his horses, settling her. Jessica withdrew a small knife from the night table drawer. All servants were practiced at cutting a vein for when their vampires wanted their blood mixed in a drink. Most the time he preferred to take it directly from her, savoring the taste of her sweet skin, but in mixed company, they often went with the glass method.

She placed her fingers on his throat to find the right spot, and then made a shallow cut he barely felt. Blood welled out as she put pressure on it. Together, with her fingers guiding the baby's mouth,

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and him adjusting the little body, they drew Farida's attention to the blood flow.

He jumped, surprised when Farida abruptly latched on. Jessica's expression brightened like starlight. A smile crossed his own face, both of them feeling a surge of tentative relief at such a quick confirmation of the value of Brian's suggestion.

Her gray eyes twinkled. "Though she be little, she be fierce."

"Like her mother."

"It's necessary, when your Master is a desert tiger." With a relieved sigh, Jess settled next to them, curling her body around his shoulder. It put her soft breasts in the perfect position for him to touch his lips to the mound of one, before he pillowed his head there. She threaded her fingers through his loose long hair, tugging it over the baby like a curtain.

Though Jessica didn't need his blood for her vitality, unless she'd been wounded, the times he'd provided it to her, holding her in his arms while she drew sustenance from him, were indelibly stamped in his mind. He'd given blood for the formula mix regularly, but to have his daughter taking nourishment directly from him again...it was an incomparable experience.

"It's wondrous, isn't it?" Jessica whispered. Her mouth was soft as she watched them. "It's as if the whole world stills and everything, absolutely everything, makes sense. Nothing hurts, even as you ache with joy."

He lifted his hand from her hip, curving it around the side of her fragile throat. As he slid his thumb along her windpipe, she clasped his wrist, linking the three of them.

At that moment, he knew there was absolutely nothing he wouldn't do for either of his females.

Farida fed better than she had in a couple of weeks. Jessica waited until they were sure of it before she made the call. Debra's delight was audible to Mason, though she had a scientist's usual caution, concluding the call with the hope they would see that pattern continue, but to let them know if they had any more concerns.

After she hung up, Mason held out a hand, drawing Jessica back to his side. She curled up inside the span of his arm. Despite Debra's caveat, he could feel the weight of some of the worry leave his servant, bringing a need for a nap. Charmingly, she drifted off

against him, much like his daughter, both of his females now more content.

As he stroked Jess's slim arm, curved over her Master and daughter, he moved his touch down to her wrist. He slid his thumb over her palm, following the crease of her lifeline. While he idly enjoyed touching her, holding Farida, his mind drifted back to Brian's comment in the lab. Facial hair. He shook his head, a faint smile coming to him. And yet...

His mind went back to shortly before they'd left his South American estate to head for the Council meeting in Savannah. Jessica normally stayed with him and Farida through the dawn hours, but she'd needed to handle some more packing, mostly Farida's necessities. The babe traveled with more toys, clothes and toiletries than a queen's caravan.

After the baby fell into a deeper sleep, and Mason had taken pleasure and nourishment from his servant, Jessica had slipped from the bed. Mason had dozed some, but at one point he'd roused enough to indulge one of his favorite pastimes, enjoying the landscape that was the mind of his beloved.

She might detect his presence, but it didn't matter. She trusted him there, so her mind would be engaged in casual things, like running down what the horses needed when she was helping Jorge in the stables, or bantering with the kitchen staff while thinking about Farida...or him.

A stray thought would cross her mind of how he touched her, gripped her body, the things he did to her. He liked the way such thoughts could make her lose her train of thought. How her anticipation would build, thinking of when her Master would command her that way again.

Sometimes those kinds of thoughts resulted in her being commanded back to his bed. *Now.*

Other times, like that day, her thoughts had an easy, lulling rhythm. She'd been attending to some paperwork in his office, another of the many ways she made his life far better, and had decided to go get herself a cup of tea.

As she approached the kitchen, Amara and Enrique, the married couple who were his third mark servants as well, were flirting there. Amara was stroking her husband's dark shadowed jaw, teasing him

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because he hadn't shaved that morning. As he drew her close, she settled her hand on his lightly furred chest.

Jessica had imagined her Master with a five o'clock shadow, as well as a light mat of gleaming copper hair across his broad chest. She'd fantasized about following a silken arrow of hair down toward his groin, and as she did, her fingers had curled. She'd closed her eyes, thinking of his roughened jaw against her tender flesh. Her cheek, her throat. Her inner thighs...

Then, for a moment, she'd remembered Jack, her fiancé, and the hair he'd had on his body.

Mason could never resent or deny her those memories. She'd loved Jack. Her love for him was not the same or as intense as what she and Mason shared, but it was a different time, a simpler, more carefree life. The mortal life she'd lost by force, not choice.

But when she'd been given a choice to get it back, she'd chosen Mason.

He didn't doubt her love in the least. But he was intrigued, and somewhat self-admittedly discomfited enough about her reaction, that he decided to visit Brian's lab on his own the next day and...volunteer.

After Brian went over the procedure and gave him the treatment vial, Mason had turned it over in his hands, considering the greenish-looking liquid he'd be ingesting. He'd experienced a few harrowing thoughts about side effects, like his skin turning purple or something equally humiliating. It didn't help that Brian's observation about the issue was delivered in his usual absent-minded way.

"Oh, well, I'm not really sure what the side effects are. But I know they won't be fatal."

"To me at least," Mason said with an ominous tone.



He hadn't turned purple. So, coming back to the present, now he was looking forward to Jessica's reaction, but he was going to have to exercise patience. Since he'd wanted it to be a surprise, he'd arranged for Anwyn and Lady Daniela to take Jessica with them for a shopping trip to Atlanta for a couple days. He'd had a plausible reason for doing so.

Initially, her fear of the vampire world had needed a lot of manage-

ment, but she'd put her trust in him. And he'd trusted that faith—a vital step, one she'd never expected him to make. But, despite his desire to protect her from anything in life that gave her pain or fear, he'd realized how much it hurt her when he kept her in a safe compartment of his life, rather than letting her learn to stand by his side. He could not bear her disappointment.

As a result, she'd learned the sensual demands of a group of vampires didn't have to descend into the horrors of the fucking monster who'd taken her against her will and had her for five years. He and the torments of his thugs had been her first experience with the vampire world, and it had broken her mind.

The fear was still in her, but practice and time were tempering it. Her submissive nature could respond to the limitless desires of an insatiable group of vampires with centuries of experience under their belt. Literally.

Yet, during her pregnancy, they'd necessarily needed to stay in South America, away from vampire politics and group sexual demands on servants. Those fears had a way of resurrecting themselves when they weren't taken out and faced on a regular basis, like a set of unused muscles. While during the last couple months of her pregnancy there had often been at least another vampire or two in residence—Lyssa or Danny, or both—their purpose and demands toward her dealt with protecting her and their child. A unique experience for her, and a good one.

But she also needed help allaying fears about the other side of vampire nature. So he'd initiated their shopping trip not just as a cover for being Brian's science experiment, but to make her transition back to Council headquarters these first couple weeks a little easier. He'd discussed it with Danny, left it in her hands and looked forward to how the female vampire would "help."

But admittedly, when he'd joined them in the driveway to bid his *habiba* farewell, he'd had second thoughts.

Daegan was accompanying them as additional protection. Gideon and he had supposedly "drawn straws" for the privilege of accompanying Anwyn to Atlanta, and Daegan had won. Either Daegan or Gideon had to be with Anwyn to manage her possible seizures.

Since Lady Danny would also be there to watch over the fledgling vampire Mistress and Jessica, Mason had tried not to show how much

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better he felt, knowing that Daegan was also accompanying them. Lyssa saw through that. Of course.

“Sexist ass,” she murmured as they stood in the driveway and waved them off. “Danny would gut anyone that looked at Jessica or Anwyn cross-eyed, and pick up a latte afterward.”

“Or have Dev do it,” Jacob had helpfully pointed out. “The latte that is. If he and Vincent hadn’t been dispatched to Texas to deal with Council servant business.”

Gideon stood to their right, a little apart. Despite his joke that Daegan had actually “lost” the bet, now forced to endure two days of female shopping, he didn’t look entirely happy about being left behind.

It was just a couple nights, for the love of Allah. Mason was uncomfortably aware he probably had the same look on his face that Gideon did, the same hollow feeling low in his gut.

Perhaps Jessica wasn’t the only one who needed to be reminded she could be out of his sight and be all right. That she would not be taken from him, harmed...

He closed his eyes, and had to force himself not to run down the car.



For good or bad, the Council meeting later that evening had been a helpful distraction. When Lady Danny and Lord Belizar locked horns over the new servant protocols, Lyssa threatened evisceration to keep them from resorting to violence. Cruel female that she was, she appointed a Council “subcommittee”—was there any more frightening word in the English language—of Lady Danny, Belizar, Mason and Carola, to hammer down the language.

“I figure if I shut you in together on the issue, you will come up with a consensus,” she said.

“Or we’ll eat one another, like rats trapped in a barrel,” Danny muttered, shooting a dark look at Belizar.

“If that happens, the surviving rat better emerge with viable language for the servant protocols,” Lyssa retorted.

Mason’s lips twitched at the memory, even as he finally tuned back into the present.

“A barber’s straight edge works better than the cartridge razor you’re holding,” Jacob said. “But are you sure you want to shave? Isn’t the point to have some stubble?”

“She will not return until tomorrow night. It should grow to the sufficient length by then. I want to know how to do it.”

“There’s no reason to be flustered by this, Mason,” Gideon said. “Plenty of guys your age need to take a pill to keep their women satisfied.”

“Gideon, if Mason rips out your throat, the blood spatter will stain my curtains. I will have Anwyn give you blood to recover your strength, and then decapitate you.”

At the sound of Lyssa’s voice, Mason finally turned. Jessica teased him about being an “Old World” vampire. He’d felt no necessity to turn and acknowledge Gideon and Jacob, though he held both males in high esteem. No matter that Gideon would never hear those words from his lips.

But Lyssa was his queen. She was the first and most enduring family he’d had after losing his parents. He was a born vampire, but he deferred to her as a sire. More, he’d given her the blood rights of a sire, so she could link with his mind and, given her power, even force her way into the darkest corners, if she had a mind to ever betray that friendship.

Which he knew she never would, unless she felt it was to save his life. Which she’d done, at least twice.

She’d entered their presence in a dress that clung to her petite curves and fluttered around her in layers of blue and green, like the ripples of a Caribbean ocean. The fabric somehow turned her jade green eyes an even more iridescent coloration. She looked toward Jacob first as she entered, as she often did when she was in a more relaxed mood. When her gaze turned to Mason, she looked about to say something else, but the sound caught in her throat, so abruptly that all three males snapped into alert mode, looking for a threat.

But as her attention stayed locked on Mason, he realized she wasn’t sensing danger.

“I wouldn’t say that,” she said, picking up his thought. Slowly, she approached him, studying his face. Then her gaze dropped to his chest. He’d fastened the trousers, but he hadn’t yet buttoned the shirt. As her attention coursed over the revealed area, an intriguing expres-

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sion gripped her features. “You’ve always had a significant impact on a woman’s senses, Lord Mason, but I think you’ve crossed the line into hazardously overwhelming.”

He grimaced, and those jade green eyes sparkled with a rare moment of mischief. “I believe we might have to order a wider test group for Lord Brian’s treatment,” she said thoughtfully. “Much wider. Lady Carola will want to make up the invite list. I have a few in mind myself.”

She tossed Jacob an amused look. Mason could only guess what thoughts had just passed between them. Her servant had adopted that impassive but taut-mouthed expression Mason well-recognized. Lyssa’s servant had her heart and soul, now and forever. But reconciling that truth with the lack of sexual inhibitions all vampires possessed wasn’t always easy, particularly for an alpha male. Especially while watching her obvious appraisal of another alpha male.

It didn’t help that Lyssa was well aware of his reaction. She had a Mistress’s tendency to enjoy yanking her male’s chain. In more ways than one.

But her erotic appreciation had been genuine, which, teasing aside, reassured Mason absurdly about Jessica’s reaction. Maybe Lyssa had intuited that he would welcome that reassurance. After all, he was not the only one who knew what it was to “moon” over a servant.

Her gaze narrowed slightly, a warning, and his own glinted in a “touché” response. She rolled her eyes at him.

“At some point you might want to teach Jessica how to do the shaving part for you,” Gideon interjected. “Anwyn makes it...interesting.”

“Another good point,” Lyssa agreed. “And Jacob is right. Shaving with a straight razor has smoother results. I believe he was about to tell you that he had the set-up for that in the parlor.”

When Mason glanced toward Jacob, surprised, the man nodded. “I have, my lady. Good view of the garden at night there.” It was a studiedly neutral comment. The reason he hadn’t relaxed that impassive demeanor became clear, soon enough.

“Good,” she said. “I will instruct Lord Mason on the proper way to shave his face.”

“Shame. I sharpened the blade myself,” Gideon said, flicking Mason an amused look.

“And the chances you will be near my throat with it are up there with Hell having icicles,” Mason informed him.

Lyssa drew closer to Mason, reaching up to stroke her fingertips along his jaw. It felt odd, but not unpleasant, and his imaginings of Jessica doing it sharpened the edge of his desire for her return. Surprise at Lyssa’s decision helped distract him.

He covered her hand with his. “To what do I owe this honor?”

She made a hard-to-decipher noise and tossed her head. “After dealing with the lot of you for endless hours on these protocols, I wasn’t going to miss out on a hands-on fantasy of putting a razor to your jugular.”

“Ah.” He gave her a wary look. While he doubted she would carve upon him like a roast, they *had* goaded her patience during that meeting. She might feel some payback was in order. “Perhaps we should wait and have Brian give Belizar the treatment. You could exercise your fantasy on him. And he’s far more deserving of your wrath.”

“You are lucky I didn’t stake all of you.” But she chuckled, easing the bite of her dry words. “Gather some of that considerable courage I know you possess, Lord Mason. If you’ll give me your arm, you can escort me to the parlor room.”

“Of course, my lady.” When he offered the crook of his elbow, she rested her fingers there, the pressure firm and sure through the shirt sleeve. As he guided her toward the door, Jacob and Gideon stepped aside, but reformed ranks behind, following at a discreet distance as he led her into the hallway and up the stairs. The path took them from the sleeping quarters for visiting vampires, toward the main floor of the Savannah estate.

He paused on the stairs to button his shirt, tuck it in, while she leaned against the banister, her gaze affectionate. “You are not modest, my lord. But you are formal. I expect most do not know the difference these days, until they’re around someone like you.”

“Jessica has said much the same.” He guided her hand back to his elbow and continued up the stairs. On an odd impulse, he covered her hand with his other one, lacing their fingers.

She slanted him a glance. “Feeling sentimental?”

“Somewhat.” He smiled down at her. The woman was as petite as a doll, likely not more than a hundred ten pounds, and yet she had a domineering presence that would make generals quake.

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“I was remembering how often you asked me to escort you like this during our first century together,” he said. “You were teaching me manners, cultivating that formality, but I never even noticed. When I wasn’t at your side, I was following you like a puppy. I’m sure I was annoying and embarrassing.”

She shook her head. “You followed me like a young tiger. A lot of wild, reckless power, but you were fiercely loyal.”

They’d reached one of the entryway foyers. The floor was polished wood, covered with a large hand-knotted Persian rug. A unicorn was in the center, wolves cavorting along the rounded edges, a floral thicket separating predator from mythical beast. The light fixture above it was a complementary five-foot diameter iron ring with torch style bulbs. It gave this entry hall the feel of a castle, even though it was a rambling pre-Civil War mansion. She’d designed it that way as a biting homage to the Berlin castle that had been the Council headquarters, before she’d become head of the ruling body.

She stopped walking, turned and faced him. No humor was in her gaze now, just a seriousness that brought those centuries-old memories to the forefront of their conversation. She lifted her hands, smoothed them along his shirt front, cupping her fingers over his biceps and gripping lightly.

“Then one night, I turned and looked at that fierce young tiger, and realized he’d matured. Become fully grown, sure of himself. Dangerous and honorable, a devastating combination. You’d become a male *I* would follow without question.”

It moved him, seeing the truth of it in her expression. “You follow no one without question.”

Her eyes gleamed. “Well, a figure of speech. It means you had my trust. You still do.”

“I’m honored to hear it. Always.” He cocked his head. “Was that metaphorical, or was there an actual night?”

“If I say the latter, would you be able to guess when?”

As he considered, she took his arm again and they continued out of the foyer, down a hallway as broad as a room. It looked like the scene of an epic furry battle. The indolent bodies of Bran and the rest of her pack of Irish wolf hounds were stretched out on the carpet runner, taking evening naps. Probably gathering strength for when

Kane rose from a nap. Bran considered himself self-appointed guardian of the energetic toddler during most of his waking hours.

Lyssa poked at Bran with her shoe. The dog grunted and rolled to his back, waving his feet in the air, his dark eyes half-slits.

“Worthless creature,” she murmured. “I shall replace you all with chihuahuas. Have you guessed, Mason?”

He pursed his lips as he stepped over Maggie, Bran’s sister. “The night we attended the dinner with Brian’s father, in London.”

“Very good. Long, long before Brian was born. I’m not even sure forks were used yet. The way you handled yourself that night was my first sign. When you recognized three of the males on the guest list.”

Before she’d saved his life the first time, taking him under her wing as his mentor, earning the rights of a sire, he’d been an adolescent male vampire on his own. Which meant he’d been a target and prey for older vampires. A vampire babe was cherished, a treasure worth stealing. Farida would be guarded around the clock until she reached her teens. Beyond that, if he had his way. Probably through the first couple centuries of her life.

However, in one of the odd contradictions of the vampire world, an adolescent male born vampire on his or her own, without a mentor or parental protection, could become the brutalized lackey of whatever vampire could get hold of him.

Three of the males who’d taken advantage of him that way had been there for that dinner with Lord Brian’s father.

He was a mature male vampire now, one who would never again be that young, frightened male fledgling they’d tormented. But he remembered how he’d felt, the remnants of that broken young male staring at them behind a pleasant, deadly mask.

“I don’t even remember their names,” he said. It wasn’t exactly a lie. He chose not to acknowledge their existence by recalling those names.

“Dead, Deader and Deadest,” Lyssa said calmly. “I think that suffices.”

He chuckled. Though at the time, it had been a serious business. When he’d decided what he was going to do, he’d willed every part of himself to appear outwardly calm during that dinner. Waiting until they went off into the gardens for a smoke, he’d joined them there as if he had a desire to let bygones be bygones, interact as equals. Their

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despicably amiable response told him they saw him as a mature vampire, too strong for them to fuck with. Which was mildly gratifying. But not as gratifying as what he did afterwards.

“So my dispatching them in a discreet way that didn’t disrupt the party told you I’d finally learned to control my impulses, while adequately holding my own in our world?”

“Yes and no. It wasn’t your combat skills, which still needed a great deal of improvement. You were very lucky in that fight.” She tossed him a droll look he answered with a curled lip.

“So what was it, then?”

“The walk you took by yourself afterward. When I came to find you, you were sitting on a bench. Your back straight, chin up. As I came toward you, you turned your head, looked at me.” She paused. The shared memory was like a screen they were both watching. “What I saw in your eyes, your manner, told me you had achieved more than physical superiority over your enemies. You understood what and who we are. You said, ‘They taught me how to survive, which didn’t earn them any mercy. You taught me how to live, and how to know what matters. That is everything, and for it, you will always be my queen.’”

She glanced up at him. “It is perhaps the only time I’ve ever seen you kneel.”

“It seems so long ago.” But her words brought it back, made it feel closer. “I do remember you touched my face, somewhat like you did just a moment ago, as if seeing me new.”

“When I touched your face that night,” she said, “you knew I would take you to my bed. Something I’d never done. You turned your head, kissed my palm, gripped my wrist and held it a long moment. Put your mouth to the pulse there, and I allowed it.”

“I remember that, too.” They’d stopped, so he leaned forward until his hair fell over his shoulder and he brushed his lips over her cheekbone. *One day perhaps, you should tell Jacob that I never did take you to bed. Not technically.*

Her green eyes glowed, the tempting lips parting. “A woman must have her mysteries, Mason. But that was another way I knew. You had learned what has value between two hearts, and how to protect it from passing impulses.”

“The world allows us to protect precious little else.” He couldn’t

help the shadow that touched his heart. She put her hand on his face, fingers once again caressing the short hairs there, with obvious pleasure.

“Tonight is for love and play, laughter and friendship,” she reminded him. “It would make Farida, your first love, smile to see you so. Do not ruin it for her or yourself, with sad thoughts of the past. Time is too short. We both know this.”

It is an understanding that our servants cannot live long enough to comprehend. But it makes them no less precious to us.

He could feel her desire to look at Jacob, but for this moment she looked at Mason, sharing the common bond that such a thought brought, the wealth of emotions. Their awareness of the mortal nature of the servants they had now, and how short the time they’d had with the servants they had already outlived.

“You’re right, of course.” As they continued on toward the parlor, he allowed other memories to surface. “I left you the next day.”

“It was time to be on your own,” she noted. “You had something to prove. And I had my own path.”

Mason stepped forward to open the parlor door for Lyssa. With a nod for his courtesy, she passed before him, but it brought them in close proximity again. She stopped, once more taking a lingering look at his face, the hair curling at his throat, the stubble layering his jaw. He lifted a brow at her playful little smile. It helped push back some of those shadows. “Really? Again? It can’t be that different.”

“You’d be surprised.” She caressed his jaw once more. It was an affectionate gesture, no sexual intent, but with Lady Lyssa, every move was laden with sensual promise.

“It makes me very glad you have a beard, Sir Vagabond,” she said.

She wasn’t talking to him now. Mason glanced down the hall to see Jacob leaning against the wall. He had his arms crossed, his gaze pinned on his lady like a skewer.

“No gladder than I, my lady,” he replied.

“And he can do it without a pill,” Gideon put in. He had dropped to his heels and was giving Bran a vigorous stomach rub. At Lyssa’s look, he shrugged. “Just got my bro’s back against Fabio there.”

“Oh. Fabio.” That gave Lyssa another smile. “I met him at a carnival benefit one night. A charming male. He won me a trinket. Life is full of beautiful men. Thank the Goddess.”

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As she stepped into the parlor, Mason met Jacob's gaze and lifted his hands in a pacific gesture. Jacob responded with a wry tug at his firm mouth, a "*What can you do?*" gesture.

"She could give a succubus an inferiority complex," he told Mason. "We're fine, my lord. Not that a Council member has to justify himself to me."

"But a friend can confirm his respect," Mason replied.

Jacob's eyes warmed and he inclined his head. "Thank you, my lord. But truly, no worries. I know my lady's heart. When she's feeling playful enough to tease the men in her life, it's a good day. For her, and for all of us."

"A-the-fucking-men to that," Gideon murmured.

Mason shifted his attention to Gideon. "You said Anwyn likes to shave you. Next time she does, you might have her take care of that excess hair on your back."

As he stepped inside without further comment, he heard Gideon mutter, "Yeah, right." Then, "I don't have hair on my back. Do I? What the fuck..."

Music to Mason's ears.

CHAPTER TWO

As Mason followed Lyssa into the room and shut the French doors, Gideon tried to scrape up his shirt in the back and look in the polished reflection of one of the wall mirrors. Lyssa seemed to have mirrors everywhere, which was odd, since vampires couldn't see themselves in them.

"I don't have...son of a bitch." He scowled as Jacob chuckled. "I don't believe it. The asshole told a joke."

"It happens. Jess says he has a good sense of humor, when he allows himself the luxury of it. Much like my lady."

Gideon grunted. "You okay with all that crap that was going on between them?"

Jacob smiled tightly. "Mason and I worked that out a while ago, when I was a vampire. It's all right." His expression eased as he looked toward the parlor. "And he's not competition. He's a memory, a very good one. I would never take that from her, since she has far more difficult ones."

"Yeah." Gideon understood that. What's more, he knew Jacob and Lyssa were one of those relationships that no one, himself included, ever fully understood. But the way they felt about each other was something no one could miss. So he'd trust his brother was telling him the truth. Which meant he could feel free to poke at him, an opportunity he never passed up.

"Yeah, you're sounding all magnanimous, but that's because you're

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not thinking this through. Twenty-four hours ago, you had something he didn't. Face hair, chest hair. Now he's pretty much a hundred twenty percent every woman's wet dream."

Gideon dodged the throat punch, barely. "Hey, that might have tickled if it connected. Have you graduated to those pink five-pounder weights yet?"

Jacob grimaced at him. "We can't kill him, Gideon. We like Jessica too much. Plus, think how much our flirting with her pisses him off."

"Tit for tat. I like it. Or is that tat for tit..."



A barber's chair with a side tray laden with shaving accoutrements was positioned by the bank of windows in the parlor. The usual furniture was gone, except for a sofa embroidered with silk white swans against a blue water background, dappled with green lily pads. The lights in here were three silver wire bird shapes suspended from the ceiling, each with a center coil bulb to cast patterns of pleasant illumination throughout the room. It reflected off the winged wires like the flash of the sun as the birds turned with the air currents.

Vampires were an odd mix. Sometimes they embraced the darkness in their interior decorating choices. Other times, they gave themselves the semblance of basking in sunlight.

As Mason crossed the polished wood floor and stepped on the blue area rug, he watched Lyssa pause over the shaving supplies, her eyes lowered to consider her choices. His thoughts, still lingering in the past, remembered standing before a doorway with her, just as they had a moment ago. And the choice he'd made then.

"When I went back to my room that night, I told myself I was an idiot," he said. "You handled it so calmly. Over time, I convinced myself you viewed me in a more maternal way, and that was why you didn't pursue it again."

Lyssa surprised him with a full-throated chuckle, her lashes flicking upward so he glimpsed her glittering eyes. "It was a good decision, made for the right reasons. But I had some very interesting fantasies about having you in my bed, Mason. The blood source I found that night had a very rough time. In all the best possible ways."

Mason shook his head. "You do make a male regret some deci-

sions. Even if I would make the same one over again. But despite the ‘non-sexual’ nature of our relationship, I admit that I am glad to hear you don’t think of me as a son.”

“Oh, Mason.” She left the shaving implements to cross the room to him. She came so close she had to tip her head back to look at his face. Laying her hand on his arm, she rose onto her toes. Automatically, he put a hand to her waist and hip to give her the steadiness and extra inches. It was a familiar gesture, one he’d done for years to accommodate their significant height difference.

She brushed her lips over his cheekbone, lingered. “We may never share a bed, but I would definitely not call us a non-sexual relationship. Now or ever. What fun would that be?”



Dropping back to her feet, Lyssa was touched by the warmth she saw in Mason’s expression. She’d heard Jacob as he talked about their relationship to Gideon, and it didn’t surprise her he understood how immeasurably she valued friends like Mason.

She gestured to the barber chair her servant had procured from Goddess-knew-where. She’d mostly stopped wondering at the miracles he could pull off, though she never ceased being pleased and impressed by them. “Take a seat there.”

As Mason moved to accommodate her, she lifted the lid off a basin of steaming water. Inside, she saw a towel soaking, as she’d expected. The scent suggested the water had been treated with fragrant emollients.

“The best part of a straight razor shave is the prep. I wrap this around your face to soften the hairs. It also feels quite relaxing. If you want to keep that shirt dry, you may want to remove it.”

He lifted a copper brow. “Don’t barbers use a smock or some such thing?”

“They do, but to repeat myself, what fun is that?”

Mason gave her a narrow look, but flicked open his cuffs and then the shirt front, shrugging out of it. Lyssa waited, fully enjoying the view.

He might be perplexed by her reaction, but that was because he didn’t see himself from a woman’s perspective. The man was breath-

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takingly handsome, but the stubble added an even more dangerous edge to the set of his jaw, the thickly lashed amber eyes. The chest hair...she hadn't been teasing him about how much she liked Jacob's. Perhaps it was something primal in a woman, responding to just the right amount of body hair on a man, a reminder that he was perhaps closer to the animal world in his demands, and how he expressed them. Jessica was going to be speechless, Lyssa had no doubt.

When Mason saw her noticing, she widened her eyes enough to hint at an exaggerated ogle. She tossed him a teasing look.

"That's one of the many things Jacob hates about you. How you turn the most casual gesture, like taking off your shirt, into a Playgirl pinup video."

She enjoyed the masculine sound of his chuckle. He was a beautiful man in so many ways. Calm? He had no idea how difficult it had been, not pushing him to lose his noble resolve that long-ago night. If she'd been a hundred years younger, her desires might have overwhelmed both of their good sense.

As he moved to hang up his shirt on a rack, she took it and did it herself, enjoying the heat of the man lingering in the cloth.

Mason snorted. "Jacob is one to talk. Women gravitate to him like the last piece of chocolate in the known universe. I've been surprised you haven't delimbed more of them for their unsanctioned wandering hands."

"Who says I haven't? I'm good at hiding bodies."

As Mason stretched himself out on the chair, all long thighs and rippling upper body movements, she lifted the towel from the water again, letting the excess run free. When he was settled, she wrapped the heated towel securely around his jaw, covering his eyes and leaving room for his nose and mouth.

"How long does this stay on?" he asked.

"A few minutes. Are you all right with it?"

His shoulder twitched, one of his tells when he wasn't entirely calm. She knew he wasn't fond of enclosed spaces, and sometimes having his sight inhibited could bring out the claustrophobia. So, though he nodded, she kept her hand on him an extra moment, reminding him she was here. Giving him time to realize he could pull the towel away simply by raising a hand to it.

"How do you know how to do this?" he asked.

“Thomas,” she said, her voice softening over the name of her former servant, the monk who’d served her so well...and sacrificed so much. “I’d watched him do it and realized the stimulating possibilities of handling the blade myself. Just as Anwyn has with Gideon. So I told him to show me.”

“You are a cruel woman. Honoring your monk’s vow of celibacy but testing it in so many creative ways.”

“I guaranteed him a place in his Heaven, I’m sure,” she said primly. “After he showed me, I would do it for him on occasion. It’s a relaxing and intimate ritual, as well as an arousing one. I’ve done it for Jacob, the times he’s decided to do a complete shave and then grow it out again.”

Her fingers slipped from his shoulder, but she didn’t go far. Mason heard a rhythmic sound, like a brush lightly tapping a drum.

“I’m prepping the blade,” she said. “I honed and smoothed it earlier, but I always like to do a few more strokes before I get started.”

“Hmm. Good thing I trust you. On that note and a different subject, if you wanted to mandate the language for those protocols the way you, me and Danny know it should be, I’d back your bout of tyranny.”

“Don’t whine,” she reproved, humor in her tone. She rested her hand on his thigh as she propped a hip against the chair. “If we were the only vampires in our world, yes. But no matter how fearsome we are in reputation, we can’t be everywhere. The rules should effect change, but at a pace that’s palatable. Baby steps. We must walk before we can run.”

“Didn’t Kane go from crawling to sprinting almost overnight?”

“Stop dwelling on petty obstacles you and I both know you have the will and stubbornness to surmount.” She paused. “I know how important this is to you, Mason, because of Jessica. But we must think of our whole race.”

He knew that. He would have bristled, but he heard no reproof in her tone. Just a mild admonishment to get off his ass and make it happen. And a reminder that victory went to the one who wanted it the most.

“Let the battles to come rest for a moment,” she said. “Sshh. Just listen.”

She moved farther away, and opened up the doors to the gardens,

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letting in the sounds of a Savannah night. Musical insects and frogs, the occasional chirp of a roosting bird. The wind, moving through the trees. The breeze filtered into the room enough to touch his chest, his throat. The heat of the towel around his face was a little cloying, but on a purely physical level, it felt good. And she was right about the meditative part. It helped him be somewhat more in the moment, not worrying as much about Jessica, Farida or anything that might happen in the moments when he rose from this chair.

Helping him with that, Lyssa remained in the doorway, humming a little tune, something she probably sung to Kane. When Jacob had been a vampire and they'd come to stay at his South American estate, Mason had the pleasure of passing by their room one time, near dawn. He'd only paused a moment, not wanting to invade their privacy, but through the generous crack of the door, he'd seen Lyssa sitting on the edge of the bed. One hand had been on her son, who was falling asleep on Jacob's chest, her other in an intimate tangle with Jacob's, lying on the covers between them. She'd been humming like this. Singing her males to sleep.

Jessica often stayed with Mason until the daylight or his own choice to retire pulled him into sleep. Her fingertips would drift over his chest, through the strands of his hair, her mouth usually pressed to his biceps or shoulder. Her breath was a silent lullaby of its own, rippling a smooth rhythm over his flesh.

He was relaxed, yes, but he wanted to know what Jess was doing. As he turned his attention to the link between them, it took barely a blink of effort to be fully in her mind.

She was laughing, and blessed Allah, she had a sexy laugh. Anwyn's long-nailed hand was grasping Jessica's arm lightly, lifting it so all three females could admire the bracelet adorning it. It was a silver cuff, etched with running horses, their tails and manes embellished with traces of gold. When Jessica turned at something Danny said, he closed his eyes beneath the towel as she brushed her hair back. He knew the texture of that thick silk, the scent of it.

Since Jessica still hesitated at spending his money on herself, he'd instructed Danny to make sure his servant bought anything that pleased her, so he looked forward to seeing her wear that bracelet and show it off to Amara when they returned home.

The smile on her lips, reflected for him when she went to a display

mirror, was one he wanted to taste. He wanted to grip her fingers, feel the way they curled up and nestled into his palm, or pushed in between his and locked, holding fast. Or her trim nails, teasingly biting into his knuckles.

The night before last, she'd taken flesh from his back with those nails as he plowed her slick folds, slow, long, deep. He'd driven her climax to one straining, trembling note that built in intensity, until she clawed at him in unconscious ferocity.

Hell, why had he let her be anywhere without him?

Because sometimes he needed to let her spend time away from him, prove to herself she could handle it. Not too long ago, the idea of being with other vampires without him would have triggered an almost insurmountable level of past trauma, sending her into a tailspin.

Even as he ached for her, he was so proud of her. Enough to be without her when he'd prefer her never to be from his side. Maybe he was the one who needed the exercise of not having her with him every minute.

"My thoughts exactly."

"Didn't we agree that showing up in my head was primarily a communication thing?" he grumbled. "You shouldn't be browsing in there like you're reading the daily news."

Lyssa returned to his side and unwrapped the towel, letting the cool air touch his damp face. "Your thoughts were a pleasant distraction, another kind of night sound."

Putting the towel in the basin, she picked up a small salmon-colored container. As she unscrewed the top, he inhaled a mixed, pleasant scent.

"This is Taylor of Old Bond Street, a British shaving cream. It has tarragon and lavender, combined with hints of citrus and galbanum. Plus those nice masculine woody fragrances. Sandalwood, cedar, patchouli and musk. I thought it would work very well for you, since you were born in England, though I think somewhere along the way Bedouin raider was injected into your DNA."

"Well, since my father was a Viking, I can't deny the raider blood," he said dryly. "My mother and he crossed paths on a pillaging trip to England in the ninth century. He got more than he bargained for when he raided her home."

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“And yet he eventually chose to become her servant. It explains your respect and appreciation for strong females. You had an early example.” Lyssa put a dollop of the cream in the glazed bowl, picked up a brush and dipped it delicately into the lotion.

“Don’t they usually churn it up, like a lather?” he asked, watching her.

“Some do. This one doesn’t need it. A little goes a long way.” Drawing close to him, she lifted the brush and started to smooth it on his face. Her unhurried, graceful movements reminded Mason of a tea ceremony, each act ritualized and graceful. Soothing and sensual at once.

Her almond-shaped eyes were narrowed on her task, her soft mouth held in an attractive moue. She’d tied her dark hair back on her shoulders, but the weight of it fell forward on his chest. He tugged it lightly, making her lips curve, altering the dusky smoothness of her features. “I’m not offended, but I am curious,” he said. “I’ve never known you to dip in my head this often.”

She made a noncommittal noise, which increased his curiosity. When he left the question in his eyes, she eventually met them, that same fathomless calm in her gaze.

“She asked me to.”

“Excuse me? Who?” But he already had an idea of the answer. It didn’t make it less surprising to him.

“You shouldn’t move your lips much now. You’ll get it in your mouth.” Lyssa set the brush aside and eyed her work critically. She drew in a breath, her delicate nostrils flared. “I’d forgotten how much I love that blend. Jacob uses a different one. Just as appealing, but more complementary to his own unique aroma. Thomas used this one. It made his skin firm and smooth, very touchable. And that smell... It’s like they figured out the most appealing things about a sexy man and combined it into a scent.”

“Lyssa.” He tried to keep his lips as still as possible, but he closed his hand around her wrist, a reminder that he wanted an answer.

She touched his arm with a light hand. “She was worried about how you’d be without her. That you’d let certain concerns get the best of you. About her well-being.”

When it didn’t seem she would say more, he narrowed his gaze. “Maybe I should pay closer attention to Belizar’s concerns about

giving servants too many rights, if my queen is being cagey about information my own servant gave her.”

Damn it, she was right about not moving his mouth much. The scents that were so pleasing to the nose were far less pleasing to the tongue.

Lyssa shot him a look. “Maybe my decision has less to do with that, and more with how cranky the information might make you. Which will require me to either slap you down or mollify you. I have no patience for the latter, and the former is occasionally entertaining, but I’m not in the mood today.”

He scowled at her. Lyssa sighed. “She was worried your nightmares would return during her absence. She didn’t want you to be vulnerable to the idle curiosity of visitors to Council headquarters, the kind who might use such a discovery against you. It’s actually quite remarkable that she’s progressed to the point she felt comfortable reaching out to me, based on our shared regard for you.”

To prevent the issue with the shaving cream, he spoke in her mind. *I’m capable of anticipating such things. Even if she doesn’t realize that, you do.*

“I do,” Lyssa responded. Now he saw the cool-eyed queen in her expression, as much as the friend. “But I also know that since she left, you have been...edgy. I know you well, Mason. But she knows certain aspects of your nature even better. Loving you like no other gives her that insight. Ever since she actively embraced her role as a Council vampire’s servant, I’ve been impressed by her political acumen and anticipation of problems. She would never have approached me without just cause, so I saw no harm in staying closer to your mind than usual. Your sleep was restless yesterday. I touched your mind quite a few times, but so did she. You open to her in your sleep. A sign of great trust, that unconscious access from a vampire your age, with your experience in staying shielded.”

The information startled him as much as Lyssa’s frank response, and both made him thoughtful. He did feel Jessica’s concerns were unwarranted. If it had been anyone but Lyssa, he would have had serious issue with her revealing any vulnerability about him to another vampire. But that was why she’d done it. To protect him, with the help of the vampire she knew he trusted without question.

“I think she and I will be having a conversation.”

“As is appropriate. A servant shouldn’t get in the habit of overstep-

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ping herself, particularly with another vampire.” Lyssa’s eyes glinted. “But she caused me no offense, and I expect she thought your pride wouldn’t allow you to set up the safety net yourself. Or you would have said it was unnecessary.”

“It was.”

“Hmm. And yet she and I both touched your mind that day, and she calmed it, when it was going to dark places. How far it would have gone...perhaps you would have called it back, perhaps not.” Lyssa touched his temple, a light stroke of the hair there. “You carry many very dark memories inside you, Mason. You are one of the most powerful vampires in our world. Powerful enough to know effective techniques for managing such memories are a wise strategy, particularly when it reduces any perceived vulnerabilities. A far more important consideration than pride.”

She lifted the straight razor so the sharp blade gleamed in the light. She examined it closely, prepared to run it over the provided strip once more. After another close inspection, she nodded approvingly. “All the teeth are in line. Just like when I put it away last. He is a wonder, that man.”

Mason didn’t have to ask to know she meant Jacob.

He knew Lyssa had left her hand upon him when she first covered his face because of his issue with enclosed spaces, caused by two traumatic events in his life. One had been a childhood prank. The other had been the night he lost Farida, his mate and servant before Jessica, his daughter’s namesake. Jessica had suggested they name her that, an homage to the young woman who’d given up everything to be his.

Much as Jessica had.

Mason considered Lyssa’s remarkable revelation about Jessica approaching her. He was well aware of Jacob and Gideon’s protectiveness toward their Mistresses. He supposed it was a sign of how “old-fashioned” he was, that he hadn’t anticipated Jessica being every bit as protective of him as a male servant would be. She didn’t stop with physical protectiveness, but protection for his mind, his heart.

She was right; he did do better with her present, but last night, he’d found holding Farida to him after she fed, waiting until she was fully asleep and then keeping her crib within reach of his hand...it had helped. He had two women to hold his soul from darkness now.

He cleared his throat. “Whose razor is that?”

“It was Thomas’s. He taught me how to hone and strop it, keep it sharp, give a smooth cut. I’ll teach Jessica. This is an excellent razor, slightly curved and, as I said, well prepared, so you can go against the grain, back and forth, to get the smoothest shave. But it takes skill to do it, and steady hands. Be still now.”

As she began to shave him, she proved she had both the skill and the steady hands. The latter moved smoothly over his face, withdrawing to dip the razor into the basin to clean it when needed, and returning to the task in a rhythmic pattern. She braced the heel of her hand on his temple, using her other fingers to keep his skin pulled straight and smooth before the whisking blade.

It was relaxing, sensual...incredibly intimate. Mason imagined Jessica doing this, her sweet breath on his face, the little line of concentration between her brows and around her lush mouth. The touch of her fingers on his face and gliding along his throat, a vampire erogenous zone, whether it was their own throat, or their servant’s. Her mouth...

“I’m not sure any woman, even one who has a ‘maternal’ relationship with you, wants to be the imaginary surrogate for another woman,” Lyssa said dryly. A light smile touched her lips. “Jacob reminded me to tell you that a woman’s thighs in particular are very sensitive to the texture of a man’s jaw. Even a close shaven one.”

“Only her thighs? Nothing else in proximity to them?”

She sniffed. “I expect he was being delicate. And that you can use your imagination. Now stop talking again while I do around your mouth. You will not appreciate a cleft lip.”

He relaxed anew as she once again adjusted the placement and pressure of her fingers to accomplish a thorough shaving around his mouth, over the dip of his chin. Then she lathered him anew and did as she’d described, shaving him across and then against the grain before she rinsed his face.

She eyed her work critically, tsked. “I told you not to talk. It’s your fault I cut you.”

Leaning down, she put her mouth on the small welling of blood on his chin, licked it away delicately with the tip of her tongue. A pleased look crossed her face. “Your blood still has the taste of sunlight and sand, Lord Mason. I see desert and blue sky when I taste you.”

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She retrieved and pressed the hot towel against his flesh once more, an aftercare he enjoyed. But he'd forgotten never to relax his guard against the damnable woman.

His eyes were closed when she stepped back, twirled the towel and popped it, high on his hip.

"Ow." He seized her wrist, and bared his teeth in mock threat. "Give that to me."

"Ha," was her reply to that as she took it and herself out of his reach. As he sat up, shooting her a grin, he ran his hand over her face.

"I think that's a damn fine shave."

"By the time of her return, she'll be able to see the shadow, even close-shaven. A close shave is just as attractive on you, my lord. Perhaps even more so, because you've always been a well-groomed man. A sandpaper shadow is better than stubble for you. It suits that formality you wear so well."

She studied his face once more with blatant appreciation, then her gaze slid back over his chest. "Did Brian say why the hair on your chest and face grew to a typical length after twelve hours, whereas your facial hair was merely stubble?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask. I'm just relieved the rest of the hair grew to the proper length in such a short time. Otherwise, it would have itched terribly in unmentionable places."

"Really?" She tapped the sharp blade, lying on the tray again. "I'm happy to help groom any other unruly areas."

Mason snorted. "With all due respect, my lady, I'm as likely to let you near my privates with that blade as Gideon near my throat."

She sniffed. "Here I thought your courage was limitless."

"It's outweighed by wisdom. And a wariness of a woman with an unpredictable temper."

She chuckled. "As I said, you grew into a man of great insight, Lord Mason. When your mind isn't poisoned by testosterone."

"See? With that viewpoint, you might take it upon yourself to rectify that situation. Like many men—including your own servant—I prefer to embrace my testosterone poisoning."

She folded her hands before her, a deceptively demure pose. "Fine, then. Your shave is done. Go and play. I have things to do."

Yes. He's waiting just outside this door. You've riled him enough I expect

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you'll have to put him in his place. You'll give him as rough a time as you did that poor blood source, all those years ago.

He felt a dangerous shimmer of energy, a reminder not to push his queen too far. But it was followed by a sultry laugh of agreement.

The difference is, Jacob embraces my demands, no matter how savage. And meets them with his own.

CHAPTER THREE

After Lyssa left him, Mason moved to the open doorway to look out over Lyssa's extensive gardens. He braced a hand on the frame. The night was a typical humid Savannah night, but there was a trace of coolness, helped along by the absence of the sun and a flirty breeze that riffled the leaves of some of the plants and left others still. His gaze moved out beyond the landscaping, to one of the garden sections further out from the house, closer to the woods. It had a glittering fountain topped by a pair of herons with outspread wings, looking like they were dancing with one another.

He never closed his mind to Farida, even for a moment. She was napping right now, under the watchful eyes of two second marked servants, and he smiled at the nebulous form of his daughter's dreams. She was looking at something fuzzy, out of focus. A gray flower with a dark circle in the center. Then he realized she dreamed of Bran. What he was seeing was his daughter's typical view of the dog when he nosed her, her vision filled completely with the enormous head.

Then the occupations of his other female drew his mind in Jessica's direction, in a way sure to capture his attention fully.

Mason had a unique relationship with Danny and Anwyn. He'd given Jessica permission to serve their blood needs, though not directly from a vein, where she could be marked. He trusted them, but it was something a vampire didn't do casually.

However, to help with that re-acclimatizing he'd thought about

earlier, he'd also sanctioned something else and Danny had decided to act upon it.

He knew that, because Jessica was actively reaching out to him. Not just to be sure they had his permission, but because she needed his reassurance. After a moment of careful probing, he knew she was going to be all right. He could feel her arousal building. He would use it to sharpen his hunger for her so that, when he at last saw her, she'd have no doubt how much she'd been missed.



They had shopped far beyond the capabilities of mortal women, Jessica was certain. Even with third mark stamina, she'd had to expend more effort than expected to keep up. But the outing with two female vampires had been a delightful girls' weekend experience, something she had not done in a very, very long time.

Daegan was adept at being an unobtrusive escort, though between him and the two female vampires, most of the store employees would have given them merchandise for free.

Despite her Aussie-style, no-nonsense behavior, there was a swing to Danny's hips, the fall of her thick, shining blonde hair, that emanated an impossible-to-miss sexual appeal. When those blue eyes focused on someone, she could turn a normal person into a babbling idiot.

Then there was Anwyn. The sable-haired Mistress of Club Atlantis always projected a Dominant female vibe, whether she was making a sandwich or commanding a male to his knees. She had a subtle style that taunted the senses, like a haunting fragrance. It distracted a man, wound around him and had him bound and off balance before he knew what hit him.

Being the servant in the mix, Jessica had handled coordination of packages and payments. More than once, an employee had leaned over the counter and whispered to her, "Are they somebody famous?"

She'd heard that third marked servants had their own allure. Vampires rarely chose unattractive people to serve them, and the third mark enhanced the beauty that was already there. But she was surprised to find that if she herself received too much male attention

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from anyone, Danny or Anwyn were quick to disrupt the futile come-on of the male in question before he could get too close.

“Sorry, lad,” Danny said to one, a twenty-something department manager who’d offered Jessica a free sample of Godiva with a winning smile. “This one is well and truly claimed. Totally off limits, if you value all your appendages.”

He’d chuckled, and then he spoke, revealing an Australian accent so like Danny’s servant Dev, that it made the blonde vampire’s eyes light up.

“Tell me you and your friend are the ones who claim her for their own, and I’ll have some very good dreams tonight,” he said. The store tag on his suit jacket said his name was Jordan.

Anwyn’s throaty laugh would have made a dead man hard. “Making comments like that to customers will get you sacked, Jordan.” She gave him an appraising look. “But there might be better employment out there for you.”

She’d picked up on how easily he’d accepted the proprietary tag they’d put on Jess, and a Mistress knew the makings of a Dom or sub.

They’d spent a little more time in that store, Anwyn giving him her business card and arranging an interview for him next week, while Danny found out more about where he was from in Oz.

As they walked away, Danny had sighed wistfully. “Damn it all, I miss that bushman of mine.”

Thanks to a Council directive involving the Texas territory, Dev and Vincent had been dispatched to pick up some documentation from Dix, the servant of Lord Caleb Buford “Butch” Dorn, the overlord there. As it related to sensitive information regarding the status of the recently deposed California overlord, formerly Lord Graham, the Council didn’t want the evidence trusted to the mail or relayed in any recordable fashion.

“I told him he better not stay a minute longer than necessary. I know how Butch is. They’ll be grilling out forty-ounce steaks, drinking beer and watching sports in that mega entertainment complex Butch calls a den. His TV screen is larger than most movie theater ones.”

Jess had had the pleasure of meeting the Texas overlord, and had liked him and his servant Dix immediately. Butch had a drawling, relaxed manner, entirely deceptive, since he had a lethal side when

crossed. However, he didn't put on airs. All overlords, made or born, earned the title "Lord" but he understandably winced if anyone tried to call him "Lord Butch."

Even if Butch's ranch was the male paradise Danny had described, Jess was sure Dev wouldn't linger. None of them liked to be apart from their Master or Mistress...or let other servants serve their blood needs, even though Danny took hers from a glass and only from trusted Council second marks, when it wasn't Dev.

"He'll be home by the time we get back. This is a good distraction for you," Anwyn reminded her. "Oh, Jess, check out that bracelet. It would look lovely on you..."



What seemed like miles later, they were relaxing in the upstairs suite at Club Atlantis. Anwyn's private penthouse apartment had a wall of glass windows that showed off a lovely view of the city at night, as well as a dark sky marked with stars. As they shared wine and conversation, Anwyn had a playlist going that provided a nice background of oldies and more contemporary hits.

Jessica didn't consciously register the music's erotic under beat until she started thinking about Mason. Or rather, missing Mason, which meant she was breathing. His touch, his demands, the way he looked at her...

Then she wondered if it was a chicken or egg thing, because the energy in the room was changing, increasing that sensual focus.

Anwyn was curled up on one end of the sofa, Danny on the other. Because earlier they'd been doing one another's nails, they'd arranged things so Jessica was sitting in the middle. Jessica was on her hip, her head resting against the top of the sofa when Danny began to play with her hair, slow windings and unwindings of the strands that occasionally included a light pull on her scalp. Danny's thumb slid along the side of Jessica's throat, following the track of her carotid.

Anwyn's gaze started following the movement, her words slowing then stopping. As her eyes became darker, less humanlike, Jessica's pulse thumped up.

Mason.

She wished her first thought when another vampire touched her

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wasn't always to reach out for him, like a child trying to grab her parent's hand. She wasn't necessarily afraid, but to stay that way, she needed to know he was there.

I expect you to reach out to me, habiba. I would be most displeased if you didn't. I am here. They've enjoyed your body before, in Council chambers, haven't they? I think they have noted your absence. And since we've been away from Amara, I have been deprived of the beauty of women enjoying one another. Seeing them play with you pleases me.

She relaxed somewhat, other parts of her staying very attentive, particularly when Danny leaned in, nuzzling Jess's throat. "I've missed her scent," she said.

"She thought of her Master a great deal today," Anwyn observed, her voice a purr. Though she was a fledgling vampire, Anwyn's skills as a Mistress had been honed most of her human life, and they showed now, especially with her being here, on her home ground. She looked at Jess the way a vampire and a Mistress did. Not to meet Jessica's eyes and encourage interaction, but to study her.

She'd already fed on Jessica's earlier offering of a generous amount of her blood, provided in elegant wineglasses. So the chance her fledgling bloodlust would be spiked by hunger was low, and Daegan was there if she had a seizure.

However, there was no doubt that Jessica's presence, a human servant available to be fully enjoyed, was rousing a different hunger. Their discussing her in the third person made it clear Jessica was now to wait for their cues, their demands.

When she was first brought into his household, Mason had often told her that her old Master had exploited what was already there, a deeply submissive nature that embraced the demands of a Dominant. She'd learned to believe it, especially when she'd healed enough from the fear to experience the miraculous, unconscious shift that always seemed to happen in such a situation.

No matter how wildly aroused her body became, it was anchored by an undercurrent of what could only be called purpose, a concentrated centering on their desires. A sense that she was being called to do what she was meant to do.

"She ached for him," Danny agreed. "Every time she thought of him, her desires bloomed on her skin like the sweetest of perfumes. Do you want me to help you with that ache, Jessica?"

Those blue eyes locked onto her, encouraging response. An answer to her demand. Automatically—more of that unconscious sense of what was required, what she wanted to give—Jessica swept her gaze down.

“If it is my Master’s desire,” she said, a little breathlessly.

It is, habiba. Though I expect you to ache just as much for me by the time you return.

Since wanting him was a constant that never abated, that could be stirred to life just by the thought of him, she had no worries about that. Even now her mind filled with images of his strong features, his direct glance. His firm touch, the thrust of his cock filling and taking her.

“She’s doing it again,” Anwyn noted. She curled her hands around Jessica’s legs, guiding her so Jessica was turned and had her head in Anwyn’s lap. The position stretched her out fully on the couch, her legs over Danny’s thighs. She’d worn low-riding, snug jeans belted on her hips, and Anwyn slipped that buckle, the button, and pushed down beneath with her slim hand. The zipper gave way before her insistent touch as she leaned over Jessica.

She had generous breasts, held in attractive display in a snug knit shirt, and they were close to Jessica’s face. Close enough that, when Anwyn’s fingers found silky panties, and rubbed over the rise of her clit beneath them, Jessica tipped her head back, her open mouth and nose pressing into that tempting valley.

Anwyn’s touch became more demanding, the vampire knowing that Jessica’s body had simmered with arousal all day. Thoughts of her Master, and proximity to the sexual temptation the three of them emanated, had that effect. Jessica gasped against Anwyn’s bosom as her fingers did something incredible.

The Mistress of Atlantis straightened, withdrew her touch. “She’s already shamelessly wet.”

“You’ve seen Mason.” Danny snorted, though her fingertips played over Jessica’s upper thighs, making her shiver. They spoke over her like a meal they intended to savor...and devour. “Imagine having him in your head all day. He’s a ruthless Master when it comes to reminding his servant to stay ready for him. Even when she’s miles away. Cruel bastard.”

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“Well, maybe not.” The smile was in Anwyn’s sex-on-steroids voice. “He did say we could play with her.”

“Good. I’m in a playful mood.” The Australian vampire shifted, pressed her knee into the couch between Jessica’s spread knees, pulling the jeans down her thighs. Jess dared a quick look up, then down again. Perhaps because Danny sensed some of her underlying nervousness, her next words had a purr of reassurance to them. Jessica was grateful, even as the intent made her shiver more. When vampires became like this, there was a feral note to it, something closer to the animal world, where rules and civility had no place, even if the words they spoke gave the illusion of such.

“A sweet, polite sub. So very shy under command, so giving. Lord Mason is very fortunate.”

“I’m glad I brought up toys,” Anwyn agreed.

It was then Jessica noted the satchel by the coffee table. It hadn’t been there a few minutes before. Had Daegan brought them to his fledgling, the Mistress who called only him Master? Jess wasn’t sure where he was, but she knew he was in the room watching. That gave her a slight ripple of unease, much as she tried to quell it.

He will not touch you, my love. He is attentive to Anwyn, her susceptibility to seizures, and so will stay in the room to safeguard her and you. But you know I do not have a high tolerance for another male touching you. Even the casual brush of a store manager’s hand on your arm. Lord Daegan respects my will on this, in part I think because he feels a similar way about Anwyn. And Gideon.

She welcomed the reminder, used it and his voice to anchor her as other lines were thrown off to send her spinning away in the currents.

Danny teased her cunt through the filmy fabric with clever fingers. Anwyn had replaced her body with a pillow under Jessica’s head, giving the female vampire the freedom to open the case. Now she had a flesh-colored phallus in her other hand, and she brought it into Jessica’s field of vision. “I want to come as close to your Master as possible, ease that ache. So...this one?”

Jessica moaned as Danny’s fingers slipped beneath the elastic edge and inside her, a slow easing.

“I asked you a question, Jessica.” Anwyn slid her fingers to Jessica’s temple, then into her hair. They tightened, pulling her head back over the edge of the pillow so she was staring up at the Mistress. The angle made her pulse beat harder.

With her free hand, Danny cupped Jessica's left breast through her thin tank. Then, not satisfied with that, she pulled the soft cotton up so it gathered around Jessica's neck. Anwyn released her hair to fold down a bra cup, toy with Jessica's nipple, squeeze the curve.

With her jeans open and down to her thighs, the shirt rucked up, she was in wanton dishabille, spread on the couch.

She jumped as Anwyn pinched, and remembered the question. "No...wrong size."

"No, what?" Danny said pleasantly. "You're talking to a Mistress, Jessica."

"No, ma'am."

"Thicker? Longer?" Anwyn asked. "Just overall bigger?"

She jerked through another nod and pinch. Danny emitted a pleased little purr. "I've never had the pleasure of an up-close look, but I should have guessed. The male wears the hell out of a pair of jeans. Almost as noticeably as my Dev."

"I hadn't noticed either," Anwyn said, tossing a humorous look elsewhere in the room, which told Jessica that Daegan was likely sitting in the chair by the fireplace.

"I'm sure," came his dry reply. "But you are forgiven, *cher*, because it's impossible not to notice a man given far more than his share. It matches his cocky attitude, pun intended."

"Are you letting Gideon watch?" Anwyn said, caressing Jessica's throat. Jessica pushed up into Danny's hand, biting back another moan as Danny continued to play with her cunt. Rub, tweak, stroke... oh God, thrust.

"Yes." Daegan's voice had a growling note to it. "And he is quite, impressively responsive. As impressive as that."

Jess glimpsed the new dildo Anwyn had found. It was a good match for Mason. Though nothing would feel like the real thing, she was in the presence of two Mistresses who could take the mind just where it—and they—wanted it to go.

"That works," she managed, and shuddered as the women's chuckles ran heated fingers of sensation down her spine.

Danny stripped off Jessica's sandals, her jeans. Anwyn guided the tank over Jess's head, unclipped and removed the bra, leaving her only in her jewelry. The pink faceted crystal pendant was one Mason had given her, that she wore as a reminder of his ownership.

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The vampires were still fully clothed. She was the center of their attention, something that she had never imagined she would voluntarily desire, but she had changed. Healed, grown stronger. Found a different, deeper part of herself that could take pleasure in this. It helped, feeling her Master there, in her head. It also helped, a lot, that Daegan was staying quiet and out of view, only a subtle provocative hint in all this. Raithe had mostly tormented her with males.

She tried not to castigate herself for her weakness. Her Master had already chastised her for it. But damn it, she wanted to be strong. Wanted him to know she could handle something like this on her own, in the event it ever happened when he couldn't give her his full attention.

Danny helped save your life and mine. And Anwyn is still more human than vampire. Plus, you have spent much time with Gideon and Jacob. Familiarity eases fear. Daegan is not as well known to you, and he has a detachment that can trigger old fears. You are always everything I desire and more. So if you think you are falling short, you are not focused on your Master properly. Tell Danny and Anwyn your Master says you are thinking too much.

Trepidation leaped in her breast, but when she felt that strong push of heat and demand from him, she spoke in a voice that broke a little, particularly as Anwyn's nails stroked around her nipples, cutting over them with quick, sensation-spearing flicks.

"My lord says...I'm thinking too much."

"I was wondering if he was paying attention," Danny commented. At Anwyn's nod of agreement, Jess realized how closely both Mistresses were watching her. She expected Anwyn had noticed first, because detailed attention to a submissive's state of mind was something the Mistress had honed to the mind-reading vampire level *before* she'd become a vampire. Being a fledgling, Anwyn would not have said what Danny had just said about Mason, even teasingly. But she smiled at it now, before the smile left her face and her considering gaze lasered in on Jessica once more.

She tightened her grip on Jess's throat, lifting her chin, directing her gaze to the ceiling. "Close your eyes."

Jess obeyed, her body twitching as Anwyn's touch grew firmer, squeezing her breasts, lifting them. "Keep your head up. Your Master is about to fuck you. He's standing over you, gazing down at you. What do you do?"

Jessica swallowed against that grip and her legs widened.

“Good girl,” Danny purred, and Jess felt the broad head of the phallus at her opening. “He’s pushing in, in... Stay still, servant. You move when he tells you to move.”

Little quivers, spasms, from between her legs, her thighs, deep in her stomach. She dug her fingers into the couch. With the hand firm at her throat, her eyes closed, legs open, she could feel him, imagine him.

It is me, Jessica. I've told you before. Every touch sanctioned by me is my touch. My cock. My mouth.

Another moan as the phallus sank deep, then slowly slid back out.

“Beg for it.” A whisper.

“Please...I need...I need my Master’s cock.”

In again. A slow glide deep, withdrawal, then back in, then out it came, the broad head stroking the mouth of her sex, holding there while her thighs trembled.

“Spread those legs wider. Lift your knees.”

She obeyed, which gave her less control, no feet on the couch, no center resistance. As the cock started moving in and out at an increased pace, her muscles were strummed by the stimulation. Her tongue swiped at her lips frantically. “Please...”

“There’s only one thing to beg for now, Jess. What is it?”

“Whatever my Master desires. Please...I want to be...do...everything he wants.”

He wants to fuck you past dawn. Take you over and over. He never wants to stop enjoying every inch of your body.

“Yes...you...”

“Can you feel him, pushing between your legs? His hands on your hips, driving you, ass flexing under your heels as he marks you with every thrust?”

“Oh...God...”

“Keep those knees up.” A strong slap on her thigh. “Don’t make me stripe that pretty ass. You’ll come when I say. Or not at all. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Master.” She almost wailed it. She could feel him pushing between her thighs, again and again. Could feel that strong body pumping into her, pressed against her.

He’d taken her in almost every way imaginable, and yet, it always

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came back to this position, him on top of her, her opening and surrendering to him.

With her knees up, the orgasm stayed just out of reach, and nobody was better than a vampire at orgasm denial. Bringing the servant so close, pushing them onto that edge and keeping them there. Lord Brian probably had a whole research wing dedicated to new and diabolical ways to do it.

She was making pleading noises. Hands on her breasts, her throat, sliding down her abdomen. Cock pushing into her.

“Please...”

Now, habiba.

She screamed at the vibration that went through her like an electric current. It built and spread, making her shake through the climax. Two strong hands held her thighs open, knees up, so she had to experience the release that way. It became a long, torturous plateau that somehow, after it was finally done, left her body aching for even more.

A trait that her Master cherished in her. He whispered it to her, left it echoing through her mind.

You have pleased me like no other, Jessica. As always.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mason opened his eyes. He was stretched out on their bed, Jessica's scent in his nose. He had the heel of his hand pressed against his sizeable erection, but now he took away his touch. He would deny himself until he could have her, demand everything from her she'd just given to them, and then make her give him three times as much.

That was also what a vampire did. A Master owned his servant all the way to the soul. The day was going to be too long. He wanted her home. Now. But there was no way for them to get back before sun-up. They would be home by midnight tomorrow. He would have to be satisfied with that.

To his way of thinking, patience was not a virtue. It was a fucking pain in the ass.



“I have heard the rumors of your legendary fighting skills, Lord Daegan,” Danny remarked. “But after braving a variety of Atlanta shopping venues for two nights, seeing how you navigate everything from jewelry counters to crowded secondhand stores, the rumors haven’t done you justice.”

“Don’t forget his epic battle with the three tourists from New

Jersey who wanted that opal bracelet you snagged,” Anwyn reminded her. “That took serious guts.”

“Yes. He dropped them with that infrequently seen though lethal charm. They are ruined for other men forever.”

Ingram, who'd cleared them through the gate of Council headquarters and met them at the door, didn't try to hide a grin at Daegan's expression. The male vampire came up the front steps, leaving the females at the car with the hired limo driver, sorting out whose bags belonged to whom. His face reflected wry amusement, deep affection for the women, but also a peculiar brand of bone-deep exhaustion. Remembering similar shopping excursions with his aunt down in Tampa, when he was younger and the spirited woman had still been alive, Ingram recognized it.

“Gideon said when you are able to extricate yourself from the estrogen-fest, he's run you a bathtub full of beer for a long soak, followed by cigars and enough male-centric porn videos to flush your system of female shopping toxins and restore your inner warrior chi.”

Daegan's gaze glimmered with his reserved humor. “There is a God, then. Though having Gideon as His instrument disturbs me no small amount.”

“You are not alone in that.”

“Mr. Ingram.” Danny was coming up the stairs at her usual brisk, graceful pace, one that often reminded Ingram of a bounding deer. “Vampire hearing is excellent. As countless dead messengers through the ages would attest, it's not always wise to say everything you're told to say.”

Ingram had the grace to clear his throat and look semi-deferential and apologetic. “Believe me, Lady D, that was substantially and tastefully edited, in case it was overheard, as it obviously was. Welcome home.”

Jessica, bringing up the rear, shifted her small bag of packages to one hand. She followed the good-natured banter over the threshold and into the wide foyer. As she stepped across it, she drew in a deep breath, let it out. Let herself realize a small, satisfying miracle had occurred.

She'd done it. She'd had a very enjoyable weekend trip with two female vampires, a shopping trip with little purpose other than female indulgence. On occasion, she'd felt some anxiety, some touches from

shadows of the past, but she'd been able to keep them separate in her mind from her present company. She'd trusted Anwyn, Danny and Daegan to care for her as her Master would expect.

But all that said, she had one goal right now, and the urgency to accomplish it was reaching a critical level. She was going to lose her mind if she couldn't see her daughter and Master in the next few breaths. The problem was she couldn't leave their presence without leave, and it was poor manners for a servant to initiate the matter, for any reason other than the demands of her Master or Mistress.

Anwyn was offering a tart response to Gideon's relayed message. "Male-centric porn? I thought I'd burned all those."

"Accidentally maliciously, a la *Despicable Me*? The Internet is only a key stroke away," Danny noted. "It would be a pointless act."

"Miss Farida has been an angel, and she has not lacked for attention." Ingram had stepped to Jess's side, and spoke in a low voice... though not too low. She guessed it wasn't hard to read where her mind was going, and bless the man, he was trying to make it a little easier, both by giving her some news of her daughter, and reminding the others in a subtle way of her likely desire to see her child. "I had the unwise urge to suggest a number system like they employ in the DMV," he continued. "And a time limit for holding her, so everyone could get their turn."

"Let me guess who hogged her most of the time," Anwyn said, tucking her tongue in her cheek. "Other than her father, who always cuts to the front of the line."

"The big bully." Danny cocked her head. "My guess for second in that line would be Kane, if he was big enough to be trusted to hold her properly. He thinks she's already his. Supervises everyone with her, even Mason sometimes. He felt that way about Jessica initially. Still does. That boy is accumulating a harem."

Ingram chuckled. "If I may be so bold, I believe Farida has a similar tendency. John has become her current favorite, after her father, of course."

"He has a calming energy that's quite extraordinary," Jessica agreed. "You've a fine grandson, Mr. Ingram."

Ingram's expression reflected his pride in the adolescent. Anwyn nudged him. "So who *has* monopolized her the most?"

"Lord Belizar," Ingram said, the lines around his eyes creasing in

amused reaction. “She is quite fascinated with him.”

“Lord Belizar as part of a harem?” Danny choked on a laugh. “Now that’s a disturbing thought.”

“I think it sounds rather...intriguing.” Anwyn grinned. “Though you didn’t hear it from the lowest ranked vampire in the place.”

“Wise thinking,” Danny said.

“Farida’s godmother capitalized on Belizar’s mutual fascination with the gerbil,” another voice cut in. “She had the genius idea to let him hold the kid during yesterday’s subcommittee meeting.”

That drawling comment came from Gideon, who had arrived in the foyer. He carried the scents of a fresh shower. His nearly shoulder length hair was damp. It was a nice look, particularly in his usual T-shirt stretched tight over his impressive chest, and the jeans that fit him well enough to catch any breathing woman’s eye.

Or one particular vampire male, because Daegan had already been looking toward the doorway, anticipating his servant’s approach. His dark eyes stayed locked upon him with unmistakable heat.

Anwyn went to Gideon, sliding her hand up his chest. He captured her wrist, kissed her palm and pressed his face into it as she curled her other hand around his bowed head, an intimate greeting.

With that appealing blend of alpha male and deferential servant that his brother also had—though Gideon’s style was a bit less polished—Gideon dropped to one knee, his hands sliding along her hips and upper thighs. He planted a kiss on one of them before rising again in the span of her arms. The kiss they shared drew Daegan to them. He put one hand on Anwyn’s shoulder, holding her still as he slid his fingers into Gideon’s hair and used a hard grip there to turn his mouth to him, for an even more demanding greeting.

Okay, she was going to say the hell with it and slip away. Except Danny was still here, and not distracted enough for her to get away with it. “What prompted Lyssa to have Belizar hold her during a Council meeting?” she asked Ingram. “I’m sure there was an ulterior motive.”

“I could not speak to Council machinations, my lady,” Ingram said diplomatically. “But Jacob did say it was quite something to hear Belizar threaten to exterminate all servants in a gentle coo, so as not to upset the baby.”

Though he said it in good humor, Jessica felt her lower stomach

tighten. The servant protocols. She'd been trying hard not to think about them, trying to cushion the blow ahead of time, since the chances of any of them being passed without significant discussion for months or possibly years longer were slim and none.

"Mason and Belizar are in a meeting right now." Ingram said, an implied message of why Mason had not met her at the door. Not that it would be expected that the vampire would come to the servant. "But it has been awhile, so I expect he will be free soon."

"That looks nice," Danny murmured. Her gaze had at last been caught by the intimate tableau of Daegan stroking Anwyn's hip, his other hand resting on the juncture of Gideon's shoulder and nape, gripping with obvious firm strength, as if he didn't intend to let him go anytime soon. "Think I'll go find Dev. He's back, but I told him to meet me in our room. Properly prepared." She tossed Jessica another wicked grin.

Though she had no Domme fantasies, the words conjured a vision of the rugged bushman, naked on Danny's bed, his ankles spread and cuffed, at least one wrist in the same condition. The position would show off the ropes of muscle along his arms, abdomen and thighs. It only increased Jess's screaming restlessness to be at her Master's command. Then Danny granted her mercy.

She glanced at Jessica. "Go see your daughter. Be sure and bring her out to play later. We'll be easy to find."

Expectation flooded Jess, though she inclined her head respectfully. "Thank you, Lady Danny. And Lord Daegan"—she drew his attention with another short bow in his direction—"your kindness and patience, as well as your protection, were deeply appreciated."

As a servant, she was still careful to observe the courtesies, but they were backed by genuine regard in this case, not fear of inciting reprisals if they weren't offered correctly, or when the recipient was in the right mood.

"We'll do it again sometime," Anwyn promised. "And we'll make Mason come with you."

"I wouldn't suggest threatening one of the most powerful vampires on the Council, *cher*," Daegan mentioned, prompting a wave of chuckles.

"I hope I was good company to you and Lady Danny and Anwyn," Jessica added.

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“Eminently,” Anwyn said, with a lingering look that brought back vivid memories of the previous night. Danny only added to it by stepping closer, sliding an arm around Jessica, brushing her temple and then her lips with her own heated mouth.

“Much as I do love our girl time, it’s time for me to find a different kind of horse to ride. I’ve drawn out the wait long enough for both of us.”

With a wink, she handed off her shopping bags to Ingram. The majordomo was used to doses of vampire allure, but he managed, barely, not to fumble the packages at that look. Dev was definitely in for a ride.

“We’ll expect to see that little queen bee later tonight. After you and Mason have some time with her yourself.” Anwyn tossed a grin to Jess before she wrapped both arms around one of Gideon’s, allowing him to escort her toward their quarters. Daegan gave Jess a brief nod before he sauntered in their wake, his eyes upon Anwyn and Gideon like a hawk considering which part of his meal to start first.

At one time, Daegan’s identity and role as the Council assassin had been a closely guarded secret. But over time, various situations had brought him into contact with more vampires who needed his aid, and they had therefore lived to tell of their encounter with him. And to speak of his fearsome abilities, far beyond what even the strongest of vampires seemed to possess.

The Council members weren’t fools, particularly Lyssa. She’d realized the value of allowing some carefully managed rumors to circulate. They helped deter a certain number of vampires who might otherwise have stepped across the line and incurred a Council death sentence, carried out by Daegan.

From the things Anwyn had implied, Jess knew she wasn’t unhappy that he might not be called out as often to do the work he did, taking him away from her and Gideon. Sometimes both of them went, if Anwyn was at Council headquarters, where she was safer, because she wanted Daegan to have Gideon at his back, but that just doubled her worry.

“Farida is in the upper nursery with two second marked staff,” Ingram said to Jessica. “I can take your belongings to your room if you like. Make it easier for you to sprint unencumbered.”

“Thank you, Elias,” Jessica said, with a chuckle. She was already in

motion, though she managed to keep it to a fast walk. Maybe a trot. She tried not to think about how long it would be before Mason could join her. If he and Belizar were arguing, the wait could be interminable hours.

Not as long as that, habiba, never fear. I will call for you soon. I missed you greatly.

She closed her eyes. The words wrapped around her like his arms. *I missed you, too. Can't you just stake Lord Belizar and come to me? I'll help you put the body where it will turn to ash and never be found.*

As sexy as his laughter was to the ear, in his mind, it was a carnal sin, the way it affected her heartrate and blood pressure.

You know Jacob relies heavily on Vincent's help to run Council headquarters, Mason said, referring to Belizar's servant. We cannot leave him short-handed.

I guess not. But I will look forward to attending to you, my lord.

Not nearly as much as I will.

The promise in that thought made her glad to have as a distraction the only person in the world whose presence she craved equally as much.

As she entered the nursery, Val and Steph, the two second marked Council staff members, rose, bowed at her appearance. Jess didn't encourage such treatment, but apparently a servant of a Council member, and one who'd given birth to a rare vampire child, had a higher status in the servant ranks, so she gave them both an amiable nod.

She wasn't surprised to find Kane with Farida. Farida was on a blanket next to Jacob and Lyssa's son, where he was playing with blocks. She was gnawing on one of her assortment of brightly colored rubber toys. Jessica noted the puncture marks from her sharp little fangs. At the sight of Jessica, her absorption in her baby world dissolved and her face brightened. The noises she made were incomprehensible, but the meaning was clearly enthusiastic welcome.

Suffused with love, Jessica dropped to her heels. "Hello, sweet girl. Have you been keeping your father straight?"

"He's stopped by...frequently." Val's brown eyes twinkled. She was a woman in her thirties with tidy blond hair tucked in a demure bun that contrasted with the hot pink streak through it. She exchanged a

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hard-to-read look with Steph, but Jessica noted a barely suppressed ebullience to it. She'd almost giggled when she referred to Mason.

Though in his presence they demonstrated a wise decorum, her Master was a very stunning male, even among the tedious beauty of all vampires. Female servants tended to act a tad distracted about him. But this seemed something different from that.

She would figure it out soon enough. Maybe there'd been some kind of drama with Council and his infamous temper had been unleashed. Perhaps Lord Belizar now only had one arm.

It brought the servant protocols back to mind, damn it. She'd wondered if that had been another reason he'd sanctioned her trip to Atlanta. To distract her from worrying about something she couldn't influence. One particular part of the proposed changes weighed more heavily on her heart than she could admit, and Mason knew it.

She stroked a hand over Kane's head. The boy was clearly in the midst of important design considerations with his blocks, but that allowed her to lift Farida in her arms without incident. As she held the little body close, contentment filled her, driving everything else away. The servants considerably withdrew to an antechamber, giving her privacy.

Home.

Though Mason's love had taken her far past where she'd been, she knew Farida had given them both another miracle. With born vampires being so very rare, her birth was a message of hope to them both, literally. Looking at her, holding her, being her parents, had driven away an element of despair about the darkness they'd both suffered. Healed those open wounds even further.

If it had led to her creation, all of it had meant something. Which defeated the lingering hold of their past enemies, both physical and mental. In an often-senseless world, hope for better things was in every beat of her little heart.

"There's my sweet girl," she murmured. "What's all this then?"

Farida had started rooting, something she hadn't done much since she'd started being fussy about her feedings. Jess adjusted her blouse and jumped as Farida sank those fangs in just above the nipple. Her milk had been drying up, but that was fine, because blood was what Farida wanted more now.

Jess sank down onto a rocker, holding her, rubbing her back. At

this age, seeking human blood in addition to the blood of a vampire parent was the sign of a very healthy baby, and it filled her with joy, as much as having her at her breast again like this did.

Farida touched her cheek with one small hand, making Jess nestle her face against that touch. But then she felt another hand on her knee. Kane was there, holding the chair arm to steady him since he still wasn't entirely sturdy on his feet. Lyssa's vivid green eyes gazed up at her. During the initial months of his life, the irises had gone back and forth between green and blue, and sometimes still did, when his moods changed. Jess wondered if it would end up being a cue, some aspect of his mother or father's personality taking the upper hand.

His face was all Jacob, his dark hair Lyssa's. Even if he wasn't a vampire, he was going to be heart-stoppingly gorgeous. But he was, which meant that he'd likely have problems blending in human company. Even Hollywood stars needed time with their makeup and hair people to pull off their glamorous looks. Not vampires.

He handed her a block and then scrambled onto her knee. As he settled, he laid his head on her other breast. He wound his fingers in her hair and petted Farida, making some toddler noise, more conversation. It was a blissful moment, and she didn't care that eventually her limbs would fall asleep. She cherished the feel of the small bodies, the evidence of the children's trust and affection for her.

She rocked them both, holding them until she realized both were snoozing. That was close to a miracle, at least with respect to Kane. Usually he seemed to power through all the way to dawn, no matter how cranky he became from the effort. He was a stubborn one. That was a Jacob trait.

"You are a picture," came a soft voice from the door.

Speak of the devil. Jacob leaned in the frame in his usual uniform of worn jeans that fit his body just right and a conversation-starter T-shirt. Today's had a DragonCon symbol on it, a dragon roaring over the logo. It also bore last year's date for the convention.

"Did you go?" she asked, just as quietly, nodding to it.

"My lady enjoyed walking around as she is, in plain sight. Though we had to take it in small doses. Lots of beating hearts and high adrenaline there."

"I can imagine." She smiled at Jacob, then her heart leaped, because another male spoke to her.

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Habiba. Come to me in the winter garden.

The heated note of urgency told her exactly why he intended to see her without Farida first. Her own body responded in kind.

“Do you mind?” she asked. Val and Steph were just a room away, but if she moved Kane before he was ready, squalling would definitely ensue—unless it was his father doing the dislodging. Kane respected Jacob’s authority in a way he did no one else’s, except his mother and his uncle.

Jacob came and scooped up his son with practical ease, taking her place in the chair. As he did, he brushed a pleasant kiss over her cheek, the corner of her mouth, tickling her with his neatly clipped beard. “Welcome home.”

She smiled at him, brushing her nose along his whiskered cheek, and took Farida to her crib. Steph slipped back in, waiting until Jessica got Farida settled, the blanket over her, to step closer. “I hope you enjoy your reunion with your Master.”

That secretive smile again. This time she noticed Jacob shooting Steph a look, a slight edge of reproof in it.

“Okay, what’s the deal? Did he change his look while I was gone? Get a unicorn tattooed on his ass?”

Jacob snorted. “No, to Gideon’s eternal disappointment. Go see him.”

He wasn’t going to tell her anything. Stubborn indeed. She turned her attention back to her child. “I’ll be back, dear one,” she murmured. “I brought new toys from Atlanta.”

As she moved to the door, she passed by Jacob and Kane again, so she laid a brief hand on Kane’s back. He reached out a sleepy fist to try and snag her hair, which Jacob foiled, but she had bent close enough that Jacob feathered playful fingers over her collar bone. “Will he like the toys?”

Anticipating his concern, she reassured him. “Don’t worry. I brought Kane some things to distract him, so he won’t try to take them from her.”

“I was talking about Mason.”

His eyes laughed at her as she gave him a light punch in the side before she slipped away. Her Master’s impatience was there in her mind, along with a few sparks of energy, a reaction to Jacob’s touching her. She was sure Jacob had intended that. Then she remembered his

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barely suppressed grin when he'd brushed the corner of her mouth with his own. What *was* going on?

CHAPTER FIVE

The winter garden was what Lyssa called the section she'd dedicated to her half-sister, the Fae Queen Rhoswen. It was planted with foliage that thrived in the winter months. Icicles spun of blown glass hung on many of the trees. The fountain there was permanently frozen, even in summer, thanks to Lyssa's experiments with her Fae magic. Those skills had been helped along by her half-sister's rare visits here, and some further tutelage by the Fae Lord Keldwyn, who was always an unsettling and limitless reservoir of untapped powers.

It had another enchanting feature. Falling snow that melted against the warmth of the skin without chilling it. Jessica had her hands out, her head tipped back, delighting in the unexpected harmless frostings on the crab apple trees. But she saw him immediately in her peripheral vision, and felt him even sooner than that.

She was a mother, a woman who'd seen a hundred years of suffering in the span of five, and yet, her love for him, his for her, gave her this. The desire to fly into his arms like an innocent girl, whenever he called. Perhaps because of the way he looked at her when she did.

So she ran to him. He was wearing jeans, that fashion choice Danny had so justifiably admired, and a button-down shirt he'd left blissfully unbuttoned. The wind lifted the fabric away from his body, bringing it back for a quick caress before picking it up to flutter in the breeze, expose the muscular upper torso, the hint of broad shoulders.

She flew along the stone path, toward the wide-canopied long leaf

pinus where he'd been standing. Yet when she reached the spot, he was no longer there. She turned, reaching out with her senses. She knew the moment he was behind her. Just as she knew to be still, her eagerness to see him channeled into the pleasure of obeying his cues, like this. To deny herself the sight of him until her Master gave her permission.

He touched her waist. "You're trembling, *habiba*. A hundred heroes through the ages couldn't feel more exalted than I do when you run to me and quiver at my touch."

The authority of his voice, its beloved deep timbre, made her close her eyes as he drew her back against him.

Bringing his mouth to her throat, he trailed his lips along the artery, giving her the hint of fangs and another shiver. As she leaned into his heat and strength, she noted his scent was slightly different. He didn't usually wear cologne. He scraped her, a hint of fangs, and then she identified it. The spicy scent of an aftershave.

She closed her hand over his forearm. His sleeve was rolled up to his elbow, a look she exceedingly liked on him. Her fingers curled into his skin and then...

She stopped. Lifting her fingertips, she skimmed lightly over...hair. Then he rubbed his jaw along her throat, her collar bone. A jaw that had the sandpaper feel of a man with an evening shadow.

Lord Brian's research project. *Holy crap*. She and Anwyn had talked about it, laughed when Danny said that Debra had assured them Brian was limiting his focus to male body hair.

"He knows it's pointless for females," Anwyn had said. "Being able to eat an entire box of Belgian chocolates? That, I miss. Having to shave my legs and armpits every day? Not even slightly. But now, Daegan...with facial hair..."

"And that sexy forearm hair," Danny added. "When Dev has his arm over me and he's sleeping, I can run my fingertips over it, play with it. There's something so distracting about a strong man's forearm. It makes me want to stroke it." She tossed them a devilish look. "As well as other things."

When Brian had mentioned his project, it had planted itself in a corner of Jessica's mind. After her worries for Farida's appetite had receded some, it had come back to her. Purely for fun, she'd toyed with the imagined results of her Master becoming one of the test

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subjects. Never thinking there was the slightest chance he would consider it.

Yet he had.

Jessica tilted her head further toward her Master's shoulder, her fingers drifted over that hair. Fine and coarse at once. Playing, discovering.

"My lord...I can't believe you decided to do this. Why..."

His mouth closed over her throat again. More response tingled through her skin where his jaw scraped her. She let out a small moan as his fangs broke through. She'd left him blood, just in case, but he hadn't touched it. Being older, he didn't hunger as quickly, so would wait for the meal he wanted.

"Master." A gasp escaped her as he bit deeper, his other hand coming around to cup her breast with firm possessiveness, before lifting that touch to her throat, clasping her there and tilting her head up to an ever more straining angle, bringing her to her toes.

"Master," she said again, more breathlessly, and shuddered at his approving growl. He wanted no words but that one from her right now. No questions. Just response and surrender. He was driving away any thoughts but of pleasing him, though she had a fleeting thought about where else he might have that appealing hair. Chest hair. Oh, sweet mother in heaven. As she imagined that firm, broad area with a gleaming pelt of copper-tinged hair narrowing to a tight arrow between the sectioned stomach muscles, the tightness in her stomach and upper thighs increased. She wanted to turn around and see him, touch him there, tug at the hair. She was eager to do so, but oh God... this felt so good.

He would give it all to her in his own time and way, and she wanted to savor every sensation in the now.

My thoughts exactly, habiba.

He withdrew from her throat, licking the wound closed, and then turned her in his arms. But as he did, he gave her a command that, despite her earlier thought, she was reluctant to obey.

Close your eyes.

She obeyed, though, and he lifted her in his arms. He didn't take her far, but she guessed he'd taken her to the secluded arbor in the winter garden, one that was woven with evergreen vines.

She knew there were benches here, and a table, and when he put

her on it, she was lying on a blanket. He'd prepared for her, for her comfort.

I only cause you discomfort when it suits my purpose, my love. The diabolical intent was there, in the way he tagged the endearment. You have a punishment coming. But I'll not deny myself the pleasure of you first.

Saying "he removed her clothes" never covered it adequately. He always took his time with the task, giving his fingers ample time to fondle the same area the clothing had covered, as if reminding it that his touch was the only true and legitimate garment she should be wearing.

She'd learned when he removed a shirt that had to go over her head, she would lay her arms above her, feel the glide of his fingertips along her wrists, the softer flesh of the underside of her forearms, her biceps, and then a teasing trail along the outside of her breasts, over her ribs. She would leave her arms like that, self-restraint, until he bade her otherwise.

Even in more urgent moments, his removal methods left an imprint on her mind. She remembered a silk blouse she'd worn that he'd torn down the front. He'd gripped the fabric on either side of her in tight, large fists, his knuckles pressing against the outside of her bra cups. As he tightened his grip and lifted her by the fabric of the shirt, her body bowed up and her head fell back. The hold pressed her breasts closer together, the better for his tongue to play in the channel between them, reminding her of what it could do in other, even tighter spaces.

Like now. If she could open her eyes and see, she knew her naked flesh would be pale, bathed in the glow of moonlight, heated by the burning look in his amber eyes. He'd set aside her clothes, for now he gripped her thighs, an unspoken demand, and she spread them wider. Her feet braced against the bench seating of the table, toes digging into the wood. He gave her glimpses of herself through his eyes, letting her feel his heat and lust, one strong wave, as he held her open, gazed upon what was his.

She felt it when she looked at him, when he held her, but when he gave it to her from his mind, like this, he let her see just how dangerous that edge within him was, the desire to take, overwhelm. Possess utterly with animal intent and fierceness. The only thing separating the feeling from violence was his love for her, but how close the

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two rode together in a vampire's mind was something that only a servant could comprehend and be aroused by, just as much.

The little spurt of fear, of being so overpowered and hungered for, on so many levels, became part of it all. Another gift he'd given her, transforming something that had once been the bedrock of her nightmares into what it had always been meant to be.

Your thoughts overwhelm me, Jessica. And you are right. I have a very powerful hunger for you right now.

His mouth was at her servant's mark, the tiger imprint high on the inside of her thigh. This time she felt not only the sharp prick of his fangs, but the friction of a jaw with beard stubble. A five o'clock shadow. Though for a vampire, that might have to be a different setting of the clock. At the moment, the brain cells required for such a computation escaped her.

I was assured even if you found face hair repulsive, you would react well to what its texture could do for you in the right places.

At the scrape of his jaw there, so close to her core, her pussy contracted, her hips twitching. "One sweet drop of your honey, just for me," he murmured, and his tongue slid over her labia, collecting it. "Be still, *habiba*, or the tiger will devour you."

She dearly hoped so. But she remained as still as she could, for it was her Master's wish. But her body convulsed as he put his mouth fully between her legs, slow licks, a firm sucking of her clit. He feathered his tongue and breath over her. That incredible friction on the inside of her tender thighs again, over her perineum as his chin bumped her there. He burrowed deeper, devoured, the tiger taking control. The roughness of his upper lip was rubbing against her clit, her mons, her labia, every nerve-rich inch of her cunt.

She was coming off the table, knees open so wide for him, and then his hands were gripping them, additional restraint to hold her down and in place as the sensations built and reached excruciating. She had to move, had to writhe, before that wide-open posture shattered her. But her Master would not permit it.

You will shatter for me.

He kept it going, building, keeping her so close. He might have little experience in how an unshaven face could drive a woman to ecstasy, but Mason had nine hundred years of practice with all manner

of erotic torments. The learning curve barely slowed him down. Only in the ways he wanted to slow down.

“Mason,” she gasped. Pleaded. “Mason.”

Who owns your soul? Who cares for you?

“You,” she whispered. “Please... Oh God...”

He did something with his tongue that caused a shudder and then he gave her the command, plunging deep and letting her go to buck against his face. The friction...Oh God, the friction.

“Come for me.”

Having a servant roaring or shrieking in the throes of ecstasy was a normal background noise at Council headquarters. It helped stoke the flames for others, a never-ending fuel from which they all drew. But she still couldn't help thinking of all who might be listening to her raw, hoarse screams.

That is fully my intent. So they know you are mine. I am reminding you of that, after being in the hands of other vampires.

He held her throughout all of it, working her, that unbearable friction alternating with the wet, slick heat of his mouth and twisting, clever tongue. When the orgasm finally ebbed, she whimpered and shuddered as he continued to eat her pussy, enjoying himself, her wriggles and twitches, her mewls of sensual discomfort as he played with the overly sensitive skin, using the roughness of his face.

If there were a photo finish for the race between a Master's command to come and the point when he drove her body beyond the possibility of waiting for it, she wouldn't want to call it, and hoped he didn't look close. Her Master was gentle, nurturing and loving. As well as ruthless, strict and very Old World in his view of such things. He'd deny her an orgasm for hours under the same type of stimulus to drive in the lesson, even as he did his best to make her incur the punishment again.

The lesson was simple. His will held sway over everything. Even when her mind, heart and soul knew that, the flesh was the weak link, and he wouldn't hesitate to discipline it to remind her.

She could feel the heat of his gaze on her. She wanted to open her eyes, look at him.

“Then ask me, sweet servant.”

“Please Master...may I open my eyes to look at you?”

“I would very much like to see your beautiful eyes. Yes.”

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She lifted her lashes. He was straightening, leaning over her, his mouth damp from her climax. His tiger eyes were fierce flame, and her mouth was dry at the size of him against his straining jeans. Her legs were still held open by his command, his hands, and his body between them, and she was suddenly keenly aware of her position, an offering to give him more. Whatever he needed.

Soon. I simply want to gaze upon my servant right now.

She was torn between wanting him inside her, her pussy aching for his fullness, another way to confirm she was back home with her Master, where she belonged, and wanting to do the same. Gaze upon him.

She returned to his mouth. His long copper hair enhanced the penetrating amber eyes. His beard, the short layer of stubble, looked as if it was darker, more bronze. It sharpened the authority of his features, making the Dominant nature even more out front.

Which meant sweeping her gaze downward was instinct, but it rewarded her with the desired view of his chest. The layer of hair on that broad expanse made his overwhelming masculinity even more powerful to her, illogical as that might sound. While she wouldn't presume to dictate to the creation gods, their decision not to give male vampires body hair had been a mistake, though she guessed Mason didn't need anything to make him more devastating to female senses.

He'd taken off the shirt at some point, so nothing impeded her view of the soft pelt over pectorals, the way it narrowed down to that center line to his waist, just as she'd envisioned.

Though her body felt limp, she reached up to his face. He clasped her wrist, but obliged her, leaning forward. She felt the heated dampness of his mouth, the slightly sticky residue of her climax. Stroking her fingers over it brought her musky scent to her nose. But then she moved outward, to that delightful sandpaper texture.

"I like how it feels."

"Good. Given the overwhelming nature of your response, I fully intend to test it on your lovely thighs. Hour by hour, see which length gives you the most enjoyment when my mouth is between them."

She was convinced one of the main reasons a vampire had to third mark a servant was to keep from killing them with sex. Now she was sure of it.

He shifted to the side, gathering her to him so they faced one another on the wide platform of the outdoor table. She was securely in the span of his arms, her head on the pillow of his substantial biceps while he gazed down at her. As her fingers played over his chest, tugged in the hair there, he covered her hand with his own, but not to stop her. He followed her movement, his head dipped down to watch her touch him.

“I like, very much, the way that feels,” he said. “The way you tug on it. Demanding, yet in a charmingly feminine way, a shy expression of your desires.”

“It’s almost unconscious,” she said, her attention on the same area, the overlapping of their fingers as hers curved inward, strands of the short hair teasing the insides of her knuckles. “I can’t help myself.” She shifted her attention to his jaw again. “Did you ever want a beard?”

“When I was in the desert centuries ago, the tribes viewed a beardless man as a boy. I had to prove myself other ways. The beard would have been useful then.”

She knew he often felt the shadows of his past when he remembered the desert. She moved her touch to the side of his neck, stroked, brought him back to her. “

“Other than that, I’d not given it much thought,” he said. “Until you thought of Jack’s beard.”

Chagrin gripped her, for she instantly knew which thought he must have heard, and the circumstances for it. But her Master cut off that reaction. “I did not feel slighted, *habiba*. You know this. You gave me a new way to reduce you to mindless, writhing pleasure. Something that brings me nothing but satisfaction.

“Now, to another matter.” He gripped the wrist of the hand that had been stroking his chest, squeezed in a way that caught and sharpened her attention. “I wish to discuss your approaching the head of the Vampire Council about my state of mind.”

She had never thought of it in those terms. Lyssa was family to him, and at the time, it had seemed...

“I remember a certain servant who was so terrified of Lady Lyssa, of all vampires, that she would never willingly approach one on her own. And now I hear you demanded she keep watch over your Master, babysit me, during your shopping trip.”

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“I didn’t demand,” Jessica said. “I merely suggested, to someone who cares about you like I do, that it would be nice to know someone was watching over you in my absence, keeping you out of trouble. Which, I admit is more of a servant’s job than a vampire’s, since you vampires are endlessly in trouble. But she was the best I could find on short notice.”

She’d shifted her glance to his chest as she teased him about it, a bit nervously, her fingers plucking at those silken hairs. She bit her lip. “I approached her with nothing but respect, my lord, and truth, I was still intimidated, but when it comes to your care...”

“You tend to be foolish,” he finished.

“I will not let fear be an obstacle,” she corrected, on firmer footing. She lifted her gaze, touched his face. “You don’t want me to feel a moment of distress or fear. Is it odd that I would desire the same for you? I know, when we are apart, those shadows inside you...they can be more difficult.”

“They can, but there are now two brightly burning candles in my life, driving them back. And the one who is barely bigger than my hand is actually even bossier than you and Lady Lyssa combined.”

Her gaze softened. “Is she still sleeping?”

“She is. My mind has not left her. Jacob was called to other business, but since tomorrow is not a school day, Ingram has allowed John to stay up later. He is doing homework in the nursery to give Val and Stephanie their dinner break. When she wakes, he plans to take her out to the garden to play on a blanket while he studies some more. I think he and Kane are both quite besotted with her. But now, back to your behavior.”

He touched her face. “Such foolishness was driven by your love for me. By that sudden mutinous set of your pretty chin, an unwise reaction to me at any time, I suspect you object to me using the word ‘foolish’ to describe it. But in discussing this with Lady Lyssa, she understood your motives, and honored your request, a little too well, which was how I figured this out.”

“I didn’t tell her to keep it a secret. And you can read my mind, my lord.”

“I can. But you, like all experienced servants, have figured out how to pass a casual inspection of thoughts, by holding things deeper.

Unless the vampire is specifically in the mood to delve deeper, or looking for that tidbit of information.”

She said nothing further, and he nodded. “Silence is a better decision. You know you will be punished for it. Even as your Master cherishes your love for him that makes you do such unnecessary things.”

She lifted her gaze to his and held a moment. Lyssa’s oversight *had* helped, a good safety net strategy, as the vampire queen had pointed out. Jess knew he knew it, because even if he could block her from his thoughts, his heart had no way of keeping her out. But she’d understood the consequences of what she’d done, and how he’d react. The balance of power had to be maintained between them.

At their home in South America, he kept a bundle of three whip-like branches, taken from a rose bush. The thorns were still on them, and they were wrapped with a rough twine at one end so the branches on the unsecured end spread out and covered a wider area when he struck with them. The thorns were capable of piercing and biting flesh, drawing drops of blood.

When he’d used it in the past, he’d kissed each pierced wound, teasing the blood away with his tongue. Jess half expected him to produce something like that, but instead he used his hold on her waist to draw her to her feet. She was wobbly, and had to brace her other hand on his chest. Or rather, that was the excuse she gave to not deny herself a touch of that springy hair for even a moment before...

“I can see some discipline is well past due to remind you who is in charge.”

“You are, Master.” She knew part of this was play, about pleasing the side of him that enjoyed inflicting punishment, because of how she received it. But she would address the more serious side, in case she’d committed the unintended offense of giving him a moment of doubt. “I love being yours. If I could tell the world I’m your servant, your property, wholly yours, your slave, I would do it with pride, in a clear, strong voice.”

The truth of it, the certainty, made her voice ironically break under the weight of the emotions, the knowledge of how hard-won that revelation had been. How close she’d come to losing her way, turning her back on it out of fear and grief.

“If I died before you did...”

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His hands tightened on her, his eyes darkening. “You won’t. I will not permit it.”

“If I did,” she continued softly, “I would remain on the banks of the River to carry me to the Other Side, tell the boat man I can not go until my Master is here, for he forbids me to go anywhere without him. And because I feel that way about you, unable to breathe if you’re not part of my heart and soul, I never see caring for and protecting you as any less my responsibility than anything else. You matter to me above all things except Farida, not because my love for her is greater, but because it is one and the same. So I ask your forgiveness if you thought I was disrespecting your dominion over me, but I can’t stop trying to protect your happiness and wellbeing in all that I do.”

“Ah, Jessica.” He pulled her in against him. When she closed her eyes, the tears that had naturally come to her wet them, along with the chest hair she had her cheek pressed against. “You could derail Judgment Day with your pure heart, generous spirit and hellbent stubbornness. At some point before we leave Savannah, I will borrow a flogger that can mark your flesh. You will kneel before Lady Lyssa and let her see the marks, so she knows I’ve properly instructed my servant on her place, though it would not have changed a single thing about what either of you did.”

“No, my lord,” she said. “And yes, my lord. I will kneel before her just as you command.”

“But that is for much later.” He tipped up her chin and put his mouth on hers. She moaned into his mouth, a sound of pleasure, relief, homecoming. He put his arms around her bare body and her hand went back to his jaw, the other digging into his chest, tugging on the hair, much like a needy young tigress herself

He laid her back down then, divested himself of the jeans. Her gaze slid down, followed that arrow. He’d trimmed himself there, but there was hair, a burnished fringe that framed his cock and testicles in an intriguing way she hoped to explore close up. Rub her cheek over it before she took his thickness in her mouth, served him on her knees. But right now her Master had other desires for her, and distractions.

“Leave your hands there,” he said softly. He allowed her to keep the pressure of her curved fingers on his chest and the side of his throat. A pressure that increased as he guided himself to her still slip-

pery cleft. She held his gaze as he slowly pushed in, stilling her. Today the phallus Anwyn had provided might not have been as accurate. Her tissues were still tight from her climax, but even so, he was an exceptionally large size.

“I have missed you a great deal, *habiba*. And your responses to me only increase my reaction.”

She caught her lip in her teeth as he slid into her. He would never hurt her unnecessarily like this, but he would be inexorable enough, put enough intent behind it, to make the demand aggressive, pushing her limits. Taking her past them, because that was his right.

Reminding her of that perversely removed any limits she had.

When he was seated all the way, he loomed over her, knee on the bench, hand braced next to her on the blanketed table. “Don’t you move until I say,” he murmured. And then he began to move.

Thrusting in, letting her feel the touch of that hair against her labia, her mons. Then drawing out, slow, teasing, another kind of friction. As he thrust, he curved his powerful back to nip at her collar bone, move down and close his mouth over her breast. He cupped it with his other hand, squeezing it, using her body, taking everything from it he desired.

His control should be the stuff of legends, she thought desperately as her climax built once more. She squeezed down on him, let him hear her whimpers and moans, sounds she had no choice but to make.

God, he filled her, and every millimeter of her channel was rippling at his thrust and withdrawal. Each time he withdrew enough that the ridge of his glans stretched her opening again, a cry broke from her lips and her nails dug in. His return thrust this time was powerful enough to make the table shudder and her body jerk with the impact. He lifted his head, fiery eyes close to her. He picked up the pace, while she grew more desperate, tongue flicking out at her lips.

He captured them with his own, growled when she bit him in her need. At the height of his own, he cupped a hand beneath her nape, lifted her upper body off the table as her head dropped back and he bit the pounding artery in her throat, just as he began to release, jetting inside her.

Go now, my love.

She did, screaming out her pleasure once more to the night. The

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notes of it always seemed different, as if he sought to command a different music from her every time, each composition more powerful than the last. She held onto him as he pounded into her, as her body clutched him and she worked herself for him, giving him as much of herself as she could, wanting to give him just as much pleasure as he gave her.

“Your pleasure feeds mine,” he said in a whisper, in her mind. They held onto one another, her arms now around his shoulders, his snuggled around her waist and shoulders, holding her upright enough to be flush against one another, though at enough of an angle he stayed seated high within her.

I would forbid you to ever leave my side except...

She drew back, her eyes on his strong face, the beloved amber eyes. “Except for this. A reminder of what a gift it is, to come home to one another.” Her gaze drifted to his jaw, her fingers curling against his chest, the hair there. She couldn’t get enough of looking at the change.

His lips pulled into a smile. “So you really like this?”

“I like you with or without it, my lord. My desire for you never ebbs. But it is...wonderful.”

“Women are very odd.”

She gave him an amused look. “Yet saying the word ‘breast’ in a crowded room will swing every straight man’s head around as if it they are on a swivel.”

“A fair point. Now...my internal monitor has informed me we’ve reached our time limit to indulge ourselves.”

She chuckled. “The only queen more formidable than Lyssa demands our presence?”

“And there will be dire consequences if we do not comply.”

CHAPTER SIX

They helped one another get dressed, exchanging a lot of touches that were not functional in the least. Jess didn't want to button his shirt, but she did, even though it took a while and she couldn't help brushing her lips against his flesh, the base of his throat, until he tightened his hand in her hair, growled a warning at her that this was not going to get them out of the winter garden anytime soon.

Truth, only their eagerness to be with Farida or the coming dawn was a compelling enough reason to get them not to linger, and he knew it as well as she did. Despite his admonition, it was him who put her up against a tree to kiss her mouth for another blissfully long minute or two.

When at last he put her down, she was glad for his supportive arm as they strolled out of the garden, hip to hip. She sought other topics, telling him things about her shopping adventures she expected a male could care less about, but it was an attempt to shift herself to a more presentable state of mind for being around others. The way he listened and watched her, with that penetrating gaze, didn't really help much with that transition, and he well knew it. Sadists, all of them.

"I brought her back some toys, but I wanted to open them with you and her together. A new mobile, and a swing..."

She thought he was being deliberately distracting. She didn't

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realize he couldn't help gazing upon her the way he did. He'd looped an arm around her waist, so that as they walked away from the haven they'd created in this spot, her body brushed against his. In the span of his arm, their feet never tangled and tripped one another, and he didn't think it was only because vampire and servant had enhanced grace.

She looked up at him thoughtfully, her expression more wary. "Dare I ask? The servant protocols. How did they go?"

He'd held off because he didn't want her to feel disappointment. He hadn't achieved everything he'd hoped. Yet.

"We'll get some of what we want. Belizar and Carola contested some things, but the most important point..." He stopped and faced her, gripping her hands. "They will pass it. I convinced Carola and Belizar it is to the benefit of vampire kind."

Her face had paled, as if she were bracing herself for disappointment. Now, as it sunk in, she became even paler. It was shock. She hadn't truly believed it could happen.

"Would you...can you say the words, my lord?"

He nodded. He was glad to give her the news, but it also hurt his heart, knowing why it was so very important to her. Knowing that it was a bittersweet victory.

"If a human is taken into a vampire's service against her or his will, the vampire, if he or she holds a title, forfeits it. The servant will have Brian's memory-erasing treatment and the offending vampire is required to ensure that the servant is restored to as much of a normal human life as possible, including financial restitution, if the Council deems it necessary. Oversight will be provided to ensure the vampire does a proper job of it. If he or she is incapable, it will be handled, while the vampire will be punished another way."

"Mason, that's remarkable." It took her a few minutes to digest it, say it. "Will it be enforced? How?"

"If brought to this Council's attention, the members on it, yes, it will. And perhaps this Council will last long enough for it to become accepted behavior. It won't apply to Trads. They are a different problem to solve. The solution is not perfect, and there is much to hammer out. But for today..."

She shook her head. Her grip on him was still tight. So tight. She had tears in her eyes, and he didn't think she was even aware of them.

“It’s more than I or any servant would ever have expected. With the weight of the Council behind it, then...”

“It should result in some improvement. Over the next two years, all vampires and servants will be required to appear before a Council subcommittee, so that the servant may verify they are willingly in the service of their vampire. From here forward, all new servants will be required to appear before that sub-committee within the first thirty days of the bond being made.”

From her expression, he knew she’d guessed who would head up that subcommittee, ensure it was done right. And who he would make sure was standing by his chair during every meeting, in case she saw something they missed.

She was trembling. He pulled her close to him, tucked her head under his chin. “Jessica.”

She shook her head again, closed her arms around him. When she spoke, it was against his chest, her fingers curling into his flesh through the cotton of his shirt. “It’s a terrible thing, my lord. There are those who say things like ‘Because this path led me to you, I would endure it all over again,’ but that’s because they’ve endured the terrible thing. It’s behind them. I love you more than anything, would die for you, but to know someone will at least have half a chance of escaping what happened to me... I’m sorry.”

“You have no need to apologize to me. I know your devotion to me. I would kill myself a hundred times, remove my existence from your awareness, if that was what it took for you not to have to endure such a thing again. And it is very much because of *you* that a human taken against their will shall have some weight of vampire law to help protect them.”

She drew in a deep breath, still holding him. It was as if she was drawing that breath from him. Then she nodded, tipped her head back, and gave him her beautiful smile, so full of sweetness, sadness, life and regret, happiness and joy. Everything in the universe of meaning was in that smile. Every victory and defeat, every step on the path of life, often so dark and yet so wondrous at once.

“I love you, Jessica.”

He’d said it to her before, inside her mind and with his lips, but it was still new enough—and still taboo enough in the vampire world—to always have a heart-stopping significance to her.

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She brought his knuckles to her mouth for a reverent kiss. *I know. I truly know. It is a miracle to me, my lord.*

She lifted her head again. He'd given her news that brought a lightness to her heart, and so, with her next words, she recovered the ability to tease him, lighten *his* heart.

"As impressive as that accomplishment is as proof of your love, my lord, it pales next to this one." She ran her fingertips over the hair along his forearm, lifted her palm to his jaw.

He lifted an indifferent brow. "You assume I did that for you. Perhaps I felt it just compensation to Brian, for his great service to us."

"Well, no argument there." But a little smile flirted on her lips. As she gazed up at him, she let out a half laugh, mixed with a breathy sigh. "I still can't get over it. It really is quite...distracting. You're going to have women walking into walls for the next few days, until we are used to it."

"I only care about one female's reaction. And I will get you a helmet to protect your lovely head."

She chuckled, pushed at him, and let herself be gathered against him for another kiss. Long, slow, lingering, their bodies swaying as if in a dance. Even when the kiss broke, they did that, her hand between them, stroking the coarse hairs at his throat. He watched her, bemused, as she slipped a couple buttons of the shirt, glancing up at him to ensure she had his permission to do it. Then she curled her fingers against his chest, heated flesh and gleaming hair.

"Will you leave your shirt like that...for a little while?"

He nodded, though he had a bit of discomfort with it. As Lyssa had said, he was as formal vampire, particularly in this environment. But there was no one in the gardens other than family, so tonight, he'd let it go.

When at last they moved onward again, they did so quietly, holding onto one another. But as they reached the north part of the garden, their pace quickened. Though Jessica normally had to trot to keep up with his longer legs, her eagerness helped her keep pace this time.

Farida was on a blanket, squirming, kicking arms and legs as Kane crouched over her, showing her a frog in his small hands. At their appearance, John looked up at them, nodded respectfully.

He was a thin boy, tall for his age. He wore his hair with short twisted curls on the top and shaved sides that enhanced the unexpectedly mature look of sharp intelligence on his face.

Both parents moved forward, more hastily, as Kane extended the frog to Farida. The baby was clearly about to grip the hapless creature, at which point she would likely try to stuff him into her tiny mouth and gnaw on him with sharp fangs.

Jacob, sitting on a bench, likewise went into motion, but John was already on top of it. He smoothly nicked the frog from Kane's grasp without harming the animal. When Kane snarled and snapped at John's fingers, John casually slapped his head, a friend's gesture that Kane seemed to take as mollifying affection.

Farida, deprived of the frog, thought about crying, but then saw her parents and brightened, waving her arms some more.

This was true happiness, Mason thought, watching Jess bend down, touch Kane's head and lift their daughter in her arms. Not worth every moment of agony they'd had in their lives. But worth surviving it, overcoming it, to appreciate, protect and cherish every moment.

Jessica looked toward him, her cheek pressed to her daughter's. "See how handsome he is, your father," she murmured.

I really do love it, my lord. And that you did it for me...that means more than I can say. You do not have to keep it, bear the maintenance of it forever, but if you could keep it awhile...I would like it very much.

Then I will consider it.

It was a Master's response. But Mason knew he would keep the beard and chest hair as long as she wished. Because anything she desired, he would give her.

The End

AFTERWORD

Did you enjoy reading this? Was it a true pleasure to spend time with Joey's characters? If you feel it was, then she asks that you do one simple thing in support of her future work. Please share that experience with at least one other book-reading friend who hasn't read her. Or mention her on a Facebook page, at a book club meeting or online forum, on Twitter, in an Amazon or GoodReads review, or wherever you feel comfortable. You, the pleased reader, are the best marketing strategy an author can have. If you do just one of those things to spread the word about her work, she will be very grateful! And thank you again for taking the journey with her characters.

READY FOR MORE?

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You can find free novellas and shorts that revisit her series characters on her website. Just look under the Books drop down menu and choose the Cantrips series page. While the Cantrips volumes are compendiums of her vignettes you can purchase, if you scroll beneath the volumes, you will see the free standalones, available in all the popular download formats.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joey W. Hill writes about vampires, mermaids, boardroom executives, cops, witches, angels, housemaids...pretty much wherever her inspiration takes her. She's penned over forty acclaimed titles and six award-winning series, and been awarded the RT Book Reviews Career Achievement Award for Erotica. But she's especially proud and humbled to have the support and enthusiasm of a wonderful, widely diverse readership.

So why erotic romance? "Writing great erotic romance is all about exploring the true face of who we are – the best and worst - which typically comes out in the most vulnerable moments of sexual intimacy." She has earned a reputation for writing BDSM romance that not only wins her fans of that genre, but readers who would "never" read BDSM romance. She believes that's because strong, compelling characters are the most important part of her books.

"Whatever genre you're writing, if the characters are captivating and sympathetic, the readers are going to want to see what happens to them. That was the defining element of the romances I loved most and which shaped my own writing. Bringing characters together who have numerous emotional obstacles standing in their way, watching them reach a soul-deep understanding of one another through the expression of their darkest sexual needs, and then growing from that understanding into love - that's the kind of story I love to write."

Take the plunge with her, and don't hesitate to let her know what you think of her work, good or bad. She thrives on feedback!

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