



**IN
THE
FLESH**

JJAE T. JAGGART

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

IN THE FLESH

By Jae T. Jaggart

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

Three young guys sit on the ground outside a public building. The central figure appears to hold the balance of power. His arms are looped around the other two. He is kissing one on the cheek, their hands clasping, while the other, although part of the group, his arm around the central figure's bent leg, looks lost, distressed. The complexity of the relationships between the three is emphasised by the interlinked hands of the two outer figures.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See this picture above? I'm the one on the left and the other two are my best friends. It's been taken last month by another friend of ours after a sleepless night while we were waiting for our ride back home.

Lately, my best buddies have gotten closer than ever. They exchange furtive glances every time they get a chance; they touch and kiss on the cheeks like there's nothing wrong about it. Not that it is wrong; I just never expected that from them.

I think by now everyone knows they aren't as straight as they appeared, but they don't seem to care. What hurts me is that they act like I don't exist even if I'm always right there beside them. I'm slowly becoming invisible and it hurts like hell because I've never wanted anyone more in my life than I've wanted them. I used to feel ashamed that I felt this way toward my best friends. Now, seeing them fall in love right before my eyes, I feel betrayed and jealous.

What can I do to make them see me?

Sincerely,

Shayla

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: shifters, blood drinking, blood play, dark romance, horror/violent elements, light bdsm

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IN THE FLESH

By Jae T. Taggart

One

“Do you love me?”

The words slid out of Elijah before he could catch them. Haul the fucking things back. Shove them back down his throat.

That no option, he turned his head sideways, let his lashes lower over his eyes.

Yeah, that was it. Post-fuck exhaustion. Post-fuck sentiment. He'd go with either, if they'd excuse and defuse the needy bomb of those words. But instead of turning them back on him, Stas leant over, ran a palm up over his hip.

“Well, well, Mister Cain,” Stas drawled, sardonic, detached as he ever was. Sharp teeth bit into his shoulder. A tongue lapped at his underarm, exposed as it was by Eli's upraised arms, wrists bound by Stas's leather belt and lashed to one of the rails of the elaborate, curving metal of the Edwardian brass bed they lay on. Those white teeth bit at the muscle of his pec, stretched taut. His tongue circled a small brown nipple. As Elijah caught his breath in distracted pleasure, Stas drawled, “Why do you even ask? What's not to love? Of course I love you.”

Of course. *Naturally*. He should have known Stas would answer him as if the whole thing were a joke. Tease him.

Taunt him.

Thank Christ. Because, truly, the man owned him. Knew him. *Got him, in every way*.

Elijah turned his head and stared into Stas's face. Stas's eyes, blue-green as tropical seawater, met his, messy hair dark about his face as he leant over Elijah, a smile catching at his wide mouth. That smile deepened as Elijah's eyes closed, his mouth falling open as Stas's hand found his hardening cock, his thumb stroking over the head before he began to slowly pump him.

Stas's lips nuzzled somewhere beneath his ear. “Tell me you don't have to go out tonight. Tell me that you'll be staying in here, in bed, with me. Tell me that I can pound that sweet arse of yours one more time before we grab something to eat and settle in for another real round.”

Another round of... hell, exactly what Elijah loved. Giving himself over to Stas. Allowing Stas to bind him, use him, abuse him so roughly, so tenderly, that Elijah knew he would never find this with another. Never would want to.

The metal of the buckle clinked against metal as Elijah shifted—moved his hands, strong, blunt fingers curling around the cool metal of the railings above his head. His dark eyes stayed steady on his lover.

Yeah, he could feel his asshole throbbing from the ploughing that Stas had given it. The sculpted, powerful muscle of his back flexing, the pelt of his skin stinging as he shifted, the lines left from the crop still scarlet, most probably. Maybe there would be blood on the aged cotton sheets.

But none on himself. He healed fast. Incredibly fast.

Stas knew it, and took advantage of that fact. They both did.

Whatever Stas did to him, it was scarcely without his consent. That would not have even been possible.

Of their unnatural kind, of their murderous shifter pack, Elijah's was the most vicious, the most violent of the bloodlines. The most deceptive, treacherous and powerful. It was of no interest to either that their relationship was scarcely sanctioned by their pack or its leader.

Neither Elijah nor Stas gave a fuck.

Amongst their kind, Elijah was the only one to play solely by his own rules. Not the packs.

He was also the last of his line.

By his lineage, a killing machine. The others, somewhere in their DNA ancestry, had human blood. That trace of human ancestry had freed them of certain needs—needs that had been traded off in the roulette of genetics, without their intending it, against his kind of powers. Abilities. Abilities that were ruled by vicious cravings. No, not cravings, *necessities*.

His powers required the one thing that theirs did not. They were shifters, yes, but limited to animal form only. His possibilities were fluid, *endless*, but those endless possibilities were fed by the one substance that they did not hunt for.

Human blood. Human flesh, if it got in the way. And if that hunger was left unsated, he'd tear himself and anything or anyone else nearby to shreds to ease it.

Fuck—

His parents would doubtless have been disgusted at his lack of initiative, if he could recall them. They'd died when he was young, and he'd been brought

up in the elegant rough-and-tumble of pack headquarters. He should probably begin a fight for leadership of the Cain clan. He knew he was the only one capable of winning such a battle.

But he was crippled by his junkie's hungers, the jags of amnesia that had kicked in as his shifter powers had. Chunks of time had gone missing, events that had slipped his memory, events he should be able to recall. His first kill, for one.

How the hell could he have forgotten something like that?

It was as if some near-Alzheimer's like amnesia protected him from the worst of his actions.

Maybe it was that weight of disturbance that left him uncaring about the other branches, weaker than his. Or about who commanded all the splintered packs, or didn't. Such things seemed too much like human politics, and he'd seen where power plays led humans in the world they shared.

And yet, their kind? With their abilities, the stakes so high—

If he had any real sense of social responsibility, conscience, about his kind or the human world, he would be fighting for leadership right now. Especially considering that Lee—Stas's father—had been pack leader for Elijah's entire remembered life. And Lee was a piece of shit.

He always eliminated the strongest, most challenging pack members of all the branches. Potential alphas. And those he deemed too weak.

And that was just the shifters. As for humans that got in the way—

Lee was a ruthless, dangerous motherfucker. A shifter, yes, but only into one form. A wolf. Their most basic ability. He was also, in the human world, a Queen's Counsel, a most powerful man in the world of laws and lawyers they moved amongst. A man who had all bases covered. Human and shifter. Wolf by flesh and profession.

"*Stay*," Stas murmured, against his mouth.

The devil in silken skin, tempting him. Problem was, Elijah's own skin was beginning to telegraph its familiar warning. His muscles tensing, cells jonesing for their special, their very special, medication.

Elijah closed his eyes. "You know that I can't." Already he could feel it: the raw threads drawing up beneath his skin. Crawling, like ants. Fiery, hungry ants. His dark eyes opened on Stas's face to see that his post-fuck laziness had

gone. Something far more watchful had replaced it. Elijah frowned. "You know that isn't possible." Abruptly he dragged at the thick leather binding his wrists, swore under his breath. "Just fucking unbuckle this, okay? I've gotta get out of here."

Stas studied him, that striking face unreadable. His hand had ceased its slow pump of Elijah's cock. Now he moved, sat up and undid the supple leather buckled about his lover's wrists.

As the belt slid away, he lifted one of Elijah's wrists to his mouth. Pressed a kiss to his blood-flushed skin. He stared into Elijah's eyes. "To answer your earlier question once more, Mister Cain... yes, I love you. I love you, and I don't care what that makes me, so, for once, get rid of that goddamned self-loathing, all right? I love you, no matter what you are. No matter what you have to do to survive. You understand?"

Yeah, Elijah understood. He understood that words were easy.

"Uh huh," he grunted.

"Maybe you'll come upon some trace of Vincent tonight—some scent, some marker."

Elijah's eyes, pupils sharply pinned, shot to Stas. He wasn't joking. But there was something behind his seawater eyes, something in the tone of his voice, too casual, as he mentioned the name they had left behind.

Too casual, because Stas did not *do* casual.

His jaw gritted, and he swung out of the bed.

"I doubt it," he flung over his shoulder.

Vincent was lost to them both. To them all. They just hadn't accepted it yet. And some part of his mind, some self-defence mechanism locked there against intolerable pain, skittered away from thinking about that too deeply.

Twenty minutes later, Elijah was out on the street.

Boom boom boom.

One earbud fed classic seventies disco into Elijah's ear. The singer was asking the eternal question: did he want to funk?

Any other time, hell yes.

The other earbud dangled free, across his thin white top. That earbud beat a slow and steady tattoo against his narrow chest as he strolled up the street.

Appearances, Elijah thought, were about all his mark had to operate on. And right at this moment, Elijah looked fifteen, sixteen max. And if he knew Elijah's truth, that mark curb crawling him right now in the slick imported car would slam his foot down, pedal to the metal, and not stop.

The mark probably thought he was some street kid. Or some lost teen somewhere he shouldn't be. But Elijah was a very, very long way away from either.

Shifters. So much for the romance of the lycan, the werewolf. For being a member of some graceful warrior band. One with its own code of honour.

They had no such thing. Instead they were creatures of the most dangerous, vicious kind. Strengths in their bloodlines streamed out past shifting into magic, into clairvoyance. Some of the crazier branches claimed they could speak with the angels.

Uh huh. Elijah was of the firm belief that, occasionally, pack members had shifted themselves clean into delusions and insanity.

He was becoming afraid that he was touched by madness himself. Not in the form of a lack of logic. But those chunks of memory loss could be terrifying.

Time slipped. Hours, days, sometimes weeks, gone. Sometimes Stas would hunt him down, find him holed up in a hotel room in the boonies with no idea of what had happened to land him there. At times, he'd woken up beside a stranger, only to find that stranger had fallen for whomever, *whatever*, Elijah had become in that drift of days, of weeks they'd spent together. And, snapped back into his own consciousness, he'd have no memory of any of it.

Sure, he could shift into animal form. But amongst their kind, he was the only one who could assume any human form he chose. Male. Female. Young. Old. Harder, but not impossible, he could replicate, exactly, the form of a living being, once he'd brushed against them.

No wonder his own identity, *self*, kept slipping from him.

How Stas could tolerate that unforgivable, unknowing, infidelity was beyond him.

He'd damned near turn human to be rid of that blank terror, of that loss of himself, *of centre*.

But right now, he was feeling and living and remembering every screeching, hungry second. So vivid. Nearly midnight, and freezing mid-winter in a thin jersey top that clung, rain-damp, to his wiry torso, jeans low on his narrow hips, Elijah moved through a fine and haloing drizzle, and paused, turned, and glanced back down along the length of the pavement.

Hooked now, he thought, eyeing the sleek, anonymous BMW sedan. *Line and sinker*. The car liquid metallic black and chrome. *Nice*.

His eyes, dark, blank, moved to the man behind the wheel. He had slowed as Elijah had come out of one of the side streets, paused long enough to capture the man. Now he was simply leading him to exactly where he needed.

Vincent.

Something about the silent shark-trail of that car slammed that name straight back into the most primal part of Elijah's brain.

Fuck Stas for doing that to him, now of all times.

A flash of Vincent's face, that innocence so deceptively human, filled his mind. Distracted him. Had this been what had happened to Vincent? Something like this? Wrong place, wrong time, wrong guy cruising nearby? And Vincent just walking to try and get his head together? Because that was just the kind of damn fool trusting thing Vincent would do.

Because sure as hell, Vincent was not into any of the shit that Elijah was.

He had no need to be.

Fuck. *Mystery*. Elijah hated it the way a cat hates water.

Vincent's disappearance was a puzzle even vicious-clever, razor-sharp and ruthless Stas hadn't been able to solve. And Vincent had been missing nearly a month now.

Vincent, Stas and Elijah had been a club of three exclusive members. By appearance, at least, the three prime males of their generation. Vincent, the closest to human in their little triad, although the poor kid hadn't realised it.

It had become unspoken pack consensus that he was merely some poor lost bastard, drenched in the scent of their kind yet with a useless sprinkling of its DNA. He hadn't been born to the life.

No. Instead one day—Vincent not even school age—one of the Cains had scented Vincent and his birth family out at a park near the ranges.

Just what games had gone on in Vincent's family tree that caused a touch of Cain blood to be mixed with theirs, Elijah didn't know. Vincent's people had been deemed too old to be drawn into the Cain's world, their heritage, but not Vincent. He'd been stolen. The terrible cruelty of that act meant nothing to them. The Cains liked to control what was theirs, even if it was damaged, even if it was faulty, defective, a little inferior. Not fit to fulfil its purpose.

And so, Vincent had found himself living at the Gabriel Street house with Elijah, with Stas, with the central, most powerful tribe of the Cain family. As the years passed, did he even remember his own? Elijah doubted it.

But that tribe was dangerous, even with their own. And especially with the weak who did not fulfil the gifts of their DNA.

Elijah, supreme predator that he was, had found himself protecting Vincent from that hostility.

For Vincent had all but radiated scar tissue as his very human weakness became apparent. Wounded. Bloody little scabs everywhere for the others to pick at.

"Poor kid," Stas had drawled once, one afternoon when they'd all played hooky from the Gabriel Street compound. They'd been sitting by St Kilda beach. He watched as Vincent made his way across the grass to them, soft drink can in his hand, smiling. Stas arched a brow at Elijah. "Sooner or later he's going to realise. Know that he's never going to truly be one of us. Not exactly human, not enough Cain blood to do him much good. He can't even *shift*, poor bastard. Just play on the sidelines. Christ knows what they'll end up doing with him. What would you say? Vincent had a great-grandmother somewhere, playing with the wild side?" He laughed softly. "Our kind can be so... seductive. And she was seduced?"

Elijah grunted. Sometimes he wondered if he actually liked Stas. He could be brutally pragmatic. Outspoken. Nor did he want Vincent to overhear what Stas might say next.

How *did* Vincent feel? Half in one world, half in another?

Lost? An outsider, his home no true home at all? His Cain family no family but a tribe of cruel and mocking thieves? Jesus, poor bastard—

Bloody hell, they'd done him no good stealing away his human life.

He studied the crazy, sunny Saturday afternoon mix of humanity passing by them, loving the dirty, circus atmosphere of the place, loving the pretty and the

ugly. Stas's eyes shifted over his face. Indifferent to any who might be watching, he ran the pad of his thumb over Elijah's full lower lip. Elijah parted his lips, took his thumb into his mouth, licked the salt from his skin before releasing it. The heat in Stas's eyes blazed. "What a creature you are. You fuck with their stinking world so well."

Elijah almost winced at his contempt. "Vincent is never going to truly fit with our side, and he can't go back to his—"

"You really are a bleeding heart, aren't you?" Stas taunted, gaze shifting over his face. His eyes grew shuttered. "I wouldn't worry too much. These things have a way of working themselves out."

Elijah scowled, at first at Stas and then at a couple walking past them, openly staring at their intimacy. In challenge, he curled closer into Stas's tall, lean frame as it draped lazily back against the wooden slats of the bench, dark eyes holding them.

The couple looked away quickly and Stas laughed, caught his long fingers in Elijah's hair and pressed a kiss against his mouth.

"Always at war," he drawled softly, breath soft against Elijah's ear. "Always ready for a fight. Even if you're not dressed for it. Such a dandy."

His fingers plucked at the loosely buttoned, patterned silk of Elijah's fitted shirt, so unlike the mundane clothing Elijah wore, camouflage, at university. "Fuck you," Elijah bit out, pushing them away. "And fuck them."

"Eli, Eli... You're such a beauty," Stas taunted against his ear. "Why wouldn't they stare?"

Despite himself, despite his ready anger, Elijah laughed. The man sitting with him on that bench was so much better looking than himself. They'd have stared at Stas anyway. Having that man, so beautiful, dressed like a vagrant next to his elegant vintage threads, Stas currently nipping at his earlobe, and his own cock hardening at it, probably had them staring even more. What would only make it better would be someone foolish enough to complain about their intimacy to his face.

Stas was right. He was always at war. It took all of his energies.

"You're an asshole," he muttered.

"No. But that sounds like fun," Stas said, lips brushing the cropped fire of Elijah's hair before nuzzling against his throat. He lifted his head to eye Elijah

coolly, now. “Your little protect-the-weak project. *Vincent*. Keep going with it. He needs your help more than ever. He’s grown so restless. And the others respect you, even if it’s total fear. Poor Vincent. *He idolises you*. He really doesn’t get that he’s living under the same roof as the big bad wolf.”

Elijah snorted. “What would you *really* like, Stas? Me as the wolf? Or Red Riding Hood?”

Stas nipped his earlobe hard enough to draw blood. “Oh, easy,” he purred. “The big bad wolf. *Always*. Why do you think you turn me on so fucking hard?”

And Stas laughed softly.

Vincent reached them and sat down on the bench. He didn’t seem to blink at their closeness, even though they had only begun to show it publicly. Even amongst their kind, their preferences were not fully accepted.

Not good for the bloodlines—for continuing the line—especially since Elijah, so special, was taking himself out of the gene pool with his choices.

Stas glanced over at Vincent as he tilted the can up, drank, his throat working.

“What do you think, Vincent? Isn’t Elijah something?” Stas drawled.

Vincent flushed, bloodily, and cut Elijah, then Stas, an awkward, shy, look. Caught off guard, clearly. “Yes. Yes, he is.”

Stas studied him, seawater eyes drifting over his flushed cheeks. Like all the Cains, happy to find a soft spot and twist the knife in it. No matter how fond he was of the poor disembowelled bastard. “You say that, and yet... you’ve never really said, Vincent.” He paused, curling lips taking on a cruel slant. He arched a brow, asked idly, “Do you approve of Elijah and me or not? You know that my father doesn’t. Nor most of the others. Not that they’ve got the balls to say anything.”

Elijah grunted, irritated that Stas was at the wrong angle to be elbowed in the ribs.

Awkwardly, Vincent shifted on the bench, leaning over his outspread knees, elbows resting on them as he looked deliberately away, profile turned to the choppy grey-blue bay. He was silent for so long Elijah wondered if he were ignoring the question. And then he said finally, “I think you two are beautiful together. *Perfect*.” His voice was husky, that pale skin flushing again, and it

dropped a degree, was huskier still as he added, "I think you shouldn't give a shit what the others think. Hell, I don't think you *do* give a shit."

Stas burst out laughing, that casual, impersonal cruelty slipping away as he wrapped an arm about Vincent's muscular, lean shoulders and squeezed him in a rough hug. At moments like that they were truly three, bonded. United against the madness of their lives.

"Screw them," Vincent muttered. "And it's good, you messing with their rules. Shit, their endless bloody ideas about correct shifter behaviour. You think they'd be so free, instead—"

Vincent had begun to laugh with Stas then, too. It had been such a human sound, wonderful, somehow missing the sharper, hidden edges of the rest of their kind.

It had also, Elijah reflected, been the last time that he'd heard Vincent laugh.

The last time he could clearly remember him at all.

Thinking about it now, weeks later, wet night not sunny day—the damp cloth of his scarcely tolerable, too-modern clothing clinging in the midnight drizzle—a knife-blade of a scowl dug between Elijah's brows.

He was never sentimental, but he still had that sole photograph of the three of them together. A study acquaintance had snapped it on a phone while they waited for their lift, a Cain limo—in their case a four wheel drive.

Those were the last of the good days, with all of them at university, mixing in the human world. Playing The Game. Stas was deeply involved in his research. A star in the academic firmament, his interest was in unlocking the secrets of DNA—the codes locked within every cell, every cell a universe. Galaxies of knowledge unfurling for him effortlessly.

Somehow, that interest had come as no surprise to Elijah.

And the masks fell away from the relationship between Stas and himself. No need to hide it, now. From the pack, or from the human world. Or Vincent.

But that had somehow locked Vincent out. Or Stas had. Something in his attitude had changed even before that day. Vincent had become something different to Stas. Just what, Elijah could not have said. But they'd neglected him.

Hell. He'd vowed to protect Vincent. Apparently he'd done a shit job of it.

Which was putting him in a great mood for what lay ahead. *That motherfucker in the Beemer had better surprise him.* That human had better show Elijah his humanity. Some human morality.

Because Elijah possessed neither, and he was angry. And hungered. The barbs of it tearing at his nerve endings. Fuck, he was *aching* for this.

Not a good scenario. He paused again, cut his eyes to the car.

And the driver was pinned by that metallic-sheened gaze. Elijah felt him eyeing him up and down. He was somewhere in his forties, in a sharp city business suit. Not a bad match for the car.

A slight smile drew Elijah's teeth against naturally full lips—too pretty for a male, his jawline clean, delicate.

Elijah lifted a hand, drew it through the thick fall of his hair, flipped the earbuds into one hand, and stuffed them into a jeans pocket as he moved across the pavement to the crawling car. Instead of talking to the occupant, his eyes cut away from the half-opened window and the shadowed driver, to glance at the street sign up ahead. As the man moved to speak, Elijah lifted his eyebrows faintly, shook his head. Trailed by the liquid-black shark of the Mercedes, he moved away and passed two women, one sitting on a brick wall, her thighs heavily tattooed below her mini. The tattoos alone were skin art that should have been framed on a gallery wall.

The thought splintered into his mind and out of it, again, in a split second. The older women splattered him with invective, but he scarcely heard it.

Their turf. So what.

Yeah, he knew it well enough. This wasn't the right beat for picking up boys selling it. Not that he gave a shit. What he was selling couldn't be bought anywhere.

His heart was pounding against his ribs.

This was it. This was... if not the best part, the... foreplay, as some old-fashioned sex manual might put it.

Will he, won't he? Will he ask for it, won't he?

Will he throw the dice in his own favor, or Elijah's?

Because oh fuuuuck, the need was clawing at his nerve endings now. Was this what a human junkie felt like? Ready to kill for the needle in the vein? But

he'd hold back, he'd give the guy a chance, *he always gave the guy a chance for redemption*—

If Stas were here, he'd be putting money down on which way it would play out. But then, Stas was a gambler. Inveterate. Degenerate. *Addicted*, as all their barbarous kind were, to one thing or another.

And Elijah's addiction was... *this*.

Christ and every sobbing angel, would the mark confirm what Elijah already knew about human nature, or give him one of those sweet, soft, gentle surprises that he did, truthfully, hope for? Oh, but they came so very, very rarely, those surprises. And the confirmations, sadly, had so much more of a payoff.

One he was ready to kill for, *right now*—

Scant minutes later and he'd drawn the driver into the shadows darkening a laneway, a stretch of narrow housing. Elijah slipped into the car, lazed back against the leather and gestured to a turning with a flick of his fingers. The mark turned the car down the side street, glossy black paint slipping under the dense midnight canopy of a tree's dripping leaves and shadow as he braked and turned off the engine. No streetlights here. No people. Just quiet houses, flats, and everyone inside just where they should be. The car halted. The headlights switched off.

Mr Slick laughed and put a warm hand on the taut, surprisingly tough, hard muscle of one of Elijah's lolling, spread thighs. He gave a whistle. His fingers tightened a little on that strength and he muttered, "You like to work out, huh? Funny, it doesn't show."

"Yeah. It's a bitch. All those workouts, I never seem to bulk up."

"Looks like you're bulked enough where you need it." The mark smirked, eyes shifting downwards. "And you're young yet. Fifteen candles?"

Elijah laughed. If that was what Slick wanted to believe, fine. Not only was he a complete pervert, he was an idiot. "Roundabout there, yeah. We're big on candles in my family." His eyes studied the man with a blank glitter as that hand worked its way up his thigh. Even in the darkness swamping the car, Elijah could see the sudden blood flush mount his skin and smell the mark's arousal.

It spiked his own need, one for something... bloodier.

That need harshened his voice. “So tell me exactly what it is you want, and I’ll tell you what the price is. And your hand can stop right there because copping any more of that feel will cost you as well.”

“Nasty little bitch for all that pretty face, aren’t you?”

“Uh huh. And they all love it.”

The mark laughed, and his fingers kept moving. Elijah permitted it. For the moment.

Mr Slick gave Elijah a shopping list which he had heard, most probably, since he had never bothered to keep score—couldn’t remember really—past a baker’s dozen of times already. Not every time a full moon hit. That particular cliché was not entirely true. But on many a full moon, blood spilled. Never his. And Slick was going for all the usual sordid requirements and a little more—a statement that he’d pay more for the pain he’d be inflicting.

Pain inflicted by Slick, that was.

Elijah’s eyebrows rose at that.

Irony. He loved it. He studied his man.

It was a nice face, a most attractive individual: early, maybe mid-forties, probably a lawyer, a stockbroker, some good-catch professional. Honest eyes. Eyes that told Elijah exactly what was going on in his brain and right at this moment, it wasn’t anything pleasant. Something told him the guy wasn’t married. No woman in his life. Or man. For one thing, he couldn’t catch another’s scent on him. No perfume. Sweat. No cologne but the mark’s.

What a catch he must look to anyone he played with. If you didn’t know he had a taste for torturing underage male prostitutes, a little bloodletting himself, you’d think he was the bee’s knees.

Hell, maybe you wouldn’t even care about that little glitch if your eyes truly were on the golden prize.

Oh well. He almost sighed. At times, this really did feel like hard work.

His eyes narrowed as if one or two of the items on that list had shaken him back to some form of reality. Namely the pain portion. “You know what—” He glanced sharply through the water-smearred window at a dark, shadowed garden, through bars over unlit windows. Well, this *was* St Kilda. “I don’t think I’m interested in doing some of that shit tonight. Some of the crap on that little list of yours. In fact, I’m fucked if I will. So I’ll be saying good night now.”

The mark was staring at Elijah as if he'd dropped in from another planet.

Maybe I have, honey, Elijah thought. You have no idea—

“What’s all this for, you want to push the price up?”

“We hadn’t even got to talking money. I told you, I—”

The mark caught one of his upper arms in a bone-hard grip. Slammed him back against the seat. It should have had him crying out in sheer pain. He waited, in a silence the mark mistook for terror.

Mr Slick smirked. “You got in the car. No changing your mind now. You like to get your kicks charging for it, right? Because you’re no fucking street kid. So, what I want is exactly what’s going to happen.”

Elijah struggled again at that and was shoved back roughly, the mark’s hard fingers across his slender throat, relentless and pinning.

And yet—

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“No?” Slick challenged.

Elijah slowly, deliberately, lapped at his own fingertips with a wet tongue, ran them down Slick’s cheekbone as his dark velvet eyes glittered on the marks and his hand earned a hard slap away at the intimacy of it. *No, they never liked that.*

Degrading acts, yes. Usually involving his own degradation. The ones more interested in their own humiliation, he walked away from. They got to keep breathing. Together with those he classed as merely desperate.

But the others who did not get to keep a heartbeat... intimacy, no. Not what they permitted. Holding Slick’s gaze with his wide, dark eyes, he licked the taste of him off the pads of his fingers, tasted anger in that fine sweat, tasted lust.

His eyes half-closed, and like an animal, he rolled that salty, metallic wine on his tongue and caught... fuck, the ragged edges of a dirty, thumbled over memory, a glimpse of a bound kid, underage, hurting, bloodied, *terrified*. The mark’s raw pleasure at that grimy image echoed back, through time.

The kid not dead. Left alive.

Possibly wishing even now he *was* dead. Glimpses of savagery, of the other men Slick had shared him with—

Slick so arrogantly certain that their ragged little toy would never report such torture to the cops. Seems he had been right.

Elijah lifted an eyebrow slightly. There was irony there, now, corrosive as acid. All trace of the scared bored kid playing dangerous games had vanished.

That look riled Slick freshly.

“I’ll beat the shit out of you. Forget about recognising me again. You’ll be lucky if you can remember your own name.”

Elijah stared at him indifferently. “How many times have you done this?”

“What?”

“*This.*”

Slick’s head shot around, and he glared at Elijah indignantly, spat the lie out, “Never! Never, you little fuck. But you’re begging for it now.”

Elijah stared at him for a long, long moment. This was it.

Last roll of the dice. Last chance.

“Screw you,” he hissed, and went to grab at the door handle.

The mark grabbed a fistful of his hair and slammed his face into the dashboard. Pain exploded across Elijah’s face.

Blood was streaming down from his freshly broken nose. Trickling over his mouth, dripping from his chin.

And the scent of that blood was a key, turned.

Permission. *He had just been given permission.*

The mark had signed his own death warrant.

He didn’t have a chance to say anything in reply. Elijah shot forward as fast as a snake and caught him in a grip beyond human. Bones began to fracture beneath his fingers in a split second. Powder. Before the mark could even scream, he had torn into his throat.

And fast. So fast. Before the blood could go anywhere but down his throat.

Elijah hated a mess.

It was his last coherent thought as he drank, chewed, fed the hunger that was roaring through him now—unleashed, majestic—tearing at Elijah’s own veins like a junkie’s need for his drug. For a brief instant he thought of all the

movies where vampires fed so cleanly. Well, he was no vampire, and this wasn't clean.

Intolerable hunger. No choice but to sate it.

They had only been a few blocks away from the compound.

He pulled the car up into the driveway and activated the auto gate opener. The heavy, steel barred wooden gates that pierced the high, brick walled perimeter swung open.

And in the distance, the house waited. Lights glowed behind grimy coloured glass, a heart pulsing there of purple, of primrose. The massively treed, dense garden dripped about it midnight deep: a jungle of scent, of hidden small nocturnal animals, of rich, soaked earth.

Tall and narrow, bluestone with a Victorian wealth of metal lace hanging off the eaves, the deep and shading verandas, the Gabriel Street house was older than any of the buildings around it in this seedy side street. To the casual onlooker, the place looked outwardly decrepit, high, forbidding, with metal-spiked brick walls ringing the property, but the rest was a guess for any onlooker and had been for many, many decades.

Satellite photographs that happened to capture it from overhead for the world to see—on the various services that specialised in such things—gave away nothing. Let the developers stare, and study, and lust after the huge allotment the high walls encircled. Every approach had been and would be rebuffed. The house had secrets above ground and below ground. Truly, every inch of fertile, verdant earth contained magic, mystery and the answer to many, many a question, so many of those questions long, long forgotten in the river of time even as others sprang up like dragon's teeth.

No, the house would never be sold. Selling it would be selling the heartbeat of the Cain heritage.

And what a disgusting thing that was, Elijah thought. Creatures that could steal a child without a second thought. Creatures that had stolen Vincent's human life from him. His real family, *gone*.

Vincent, a near-human child, thrown into the snake pit of Cain politics.

Each branch of the pack was at war with the other, and his own the most vile of them all. Not that Lee did much to keep them in line. No, he believed in divide and conquer.

Some mythic shifter pack. Some dunghill of a stinking heritage.

Two

Elijah left the car and its drained cargo in the whitewashed brick double garage. Still, he gave the car's interior a quick check.

Aside from the corpse, immaculate. Wonderful.

That would be taken care of later.

He headed towards the house.

The doors were never locked. Security cameras were trained on every inch of this particular Cain property and, besides, in addition to the bars at the windows, the house had its own inbuilt security system: any one of the occupants within who breathed and had a pulse.

He threw the heavy, glass and lead-encrusted front door open, and dogs bounded out, a rough half dozen, and they poured around him in a liquid, bounding mass, some running down the broad stone flight of stairs and out into the soaking jungle of a garden to inspect and pee in it before storming back to greet him.

Absently, he greeted them, then closed the door, locking them back inside—aware they were overly excited not just by his return but by the smell of the blood on him—and went across the black and white marble chequerboard of a floor to the foot of the stairs. One of his younger female cousins was running down it, only to pause fractionally, narrowed eyes raking him incuriously.

“Eli,” she said sweetly. “The new you's looking sharp. If slutty is the new sharp.”

He flipped her the bird, amused at her gutsiness, and she flipped it back, disappearing down a corridor. Shouts of laughter came out, briefly, as a door opened, then closed.

Music came from somewhere else in the house. Something nineties, someone howling about fucking like an animal.

Nothing wrong with that. *Even if the singer did sound tortured.*

Nothing wrong with *that* either.

There was a ripple of laughter, and he caught the crystal ring of glasses on the table in the distant dining room.

Elijah looked up the sweep of stairs. Stas was standing up there, on the landing by the top, looking down at him, long, pale fingers stretched out over the cedar railings. His ultramarine eyes glowed between black lashes, his dark hair short, ruffled, jagged.

Elijah paused on the chill marble flooring. He was unblinking in the fierce, dusted light of the chandelier as he absorbed the distant racket of their blood, their family, the clip of the dog's nails on the stone echoing.

For a long moment Stas stared back down at him, expressionless. Taking account.

Unconsciously, Elijah wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He could taste the rust of Slick's blood in his mouth, could taste his shock, his fear.

And that blood had hit his belly, was uncurling through his veins.

He didn't want to be in here when it truly hit his nervous system. Because that was where, and when, the trip truly began. Oh, sweet Jesus, ah yes, *the trip*—

“You're all right?” Stas asked flatly.

Stas was too beautiful, a depraved angel from a church ceiling, soaring. And he was... covered in slaughter, in a junkie's sated flop-sweat. He felt as if he were already sweating that blood out through his pores.

He must stink of it. Like soured rust.

Shoving that thought aside, Elijah nodded blankly, looked about himself as he kicked off his shoes, torn between a wired exhaustion and an awareness that the night was far from over. So many tasks to be done. His skin was crawling with the need of them.

At least it wasn't crawling with the hunger, not any longer.

Reaching for the damp top he'd been wearing, he peeled it from his pale torso and threw it over a shoulder, not giving a rat's arse for whoever or whatever might wander out and witness him. Their kind didn't exactly count modesty amongst the virtues.

He began shoving his mind into gear for what would come.

On autopilot, he made his way across the marble towards Stas, who was expressionless, studying the show, *studying Elijah*, in his current assumed skin, *guise*, the most powerful shifter of them all, the most envied, with an opaque, scientist's curiosity.

Fuck him.

“My father wants to see you,” Stas said flatly. “He arrived here while you were out.”

Elijah's eyes narrowed on him. He halted, staring up. “What the hell does he have to say to me?”

Stas lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “I don't know. But you know my father.”

“Yeah, I know your father.”

What a magnificent speaking voice Lee had. Deep, eloquent, persuasive, it was an incredible asset in the courtroom. Apparently, not such an asset when easing silkily across the massive main reception room of the Gabriel Street mansion.

For it was working as well on Elijah as grating metal.

“So, you hunted tonight,” their leader said, conversationally. “Tell me, how was it?”

Elijah's black velvet eyes widened fractionally. Lee had tricks galore, but the gentle concern was a new one.

“I found a violent sadist and killed him,” he said flatly. “Not exactly a clean trade, but it had to do.”

Lee eyed him enigmatically. “Because you choose only to kill the guilty, correct?”

“That's right.” Elijah looked away. His bared torso was icy, his skin clammy under the damp denim of his remaining clothing, and he wished he were out of there. “I find them easily enough.”

“And it makes you tolerate what you are just a little easier, correct?”

Goddamn him to hell—

“Innocence is so important to you, isn't it?”

Elijah could feel a muscle rippling, an impatient cramping spasm running up the length of his calf. He barely restrained his leg from jerking, and ground his bared feet harder into the threadbare antique silk rug. Toes digging into the pile, his control was slipping. *Not good.*

The blood. The blood was working on him, loosening his control, his concentration. "Shouldn't innocence be respected?"

The leader of his pack—a man he could have torn apart, wrenched the leadership from if he wanted it—burst out laughing.

"You worry about the damnedest things," Lee drawled. "And any one of us under this roof would kill for your abilities. Even if, like you, it would mean losing our minds along the way. Because you are insane. You *have* lost your mind."

Elijah stared at him and said flatly, "Do you have any idea just how much I despise you?"

Lee spoke as if he hadn't said a word. "We are all so concerned about you. You're such an *asset*, you know. It's one thing for our kind to be so much more than the human scum we deal with... some of us have lifetimes more than they do. Time. *Strength*. Do you know, Elijah, I was actually born onto this earth before Darwin, himself, was a child?" Lee chuckled. "Tell me, what do you think he would have made of our kind? What would that have done to his theories?" Lee smirked, dark eyes shifting over Elijah's bared, narrow torso with an open lust. But not lust for his flesh. Lust for his sheer power. He shrugged. "But you, you are pure blood... We can merely shift into animal form. Powerful, yes, but there is no real gain in that shift... But you, you can take on any form. Become *anyone*. Have you any idea what a thing that is? *What a weapon you are?*"

"Truly?" Elijah said sourly.

"We need to start using that ability, Elijah. Play it to our advantage. Have you never heard of a Trojan horse?"

Lee had skirted around this before, had hinted at just how they might use his pureblood, tainted gifts. Right now Elijah felt like spitting the last of Slick's blood straight into Lee's face to give him a taste of just what the reality of those gifts was.

Lycan, werewolf, whatever. Lee hunted *as an animal*. Other *animals*. Elijah hunted... the two-legged variety. And that was not good when he had some respect remaining for the human race.

"Yeah, I've heard of a Trojan horse." He stretched just enough to ease his jumping muscles and aching joints. The blood in him was demanding more, *the next phase*. Brutally, he pushed that need down to eye the pack leader with

distaste. "You want to use my skills to gain access to people, locations and information you might not have otherwise, right?"

"Exactly."

Elijah's mouth hardened. "Not happening. Ever. What I am isn't going to be used to turn you a profit. This pack has enough money. Power."

"*There can never be enough,*" Lee said deliberately. "Christ, you are so filled with self loathing. Our most powerful asset, reduced to a snivelling addict. But addicts only exist in the human realm, Elijah. You are simply a predator. And you'd better start remembering that. *And start paying your way.*"

The rage flared in Elijah, raked along his nerve endings like blades. He saw red. Lee was red, red as blood. And something kicked in, deep inside.

For the first time ever, he saw it. *Getting rid of Lee. Taking over.* He saw just what he would do with their pack and its abilities.

Elijah saw how far he could take it, could take them all—way, way past Lee's narrow set of financial hungers and greed. They had money enough. Lee wanted power merely in the financial and legal world. But the pack was not united, instead deliberately divided by Lee, and they could be as one so easily, with the right words, incentives. Strengthened, not weakened. There could be peace—with a firm hand, yes, but peace, not the relentless elimination of potential rivals. Or the weak.

They could integrate further, without fear, become a real part of the human world, secret maybe, but not seethe with contempt for it—

Not steal innocent children from their real families.

That truth slammed into his skull.

It was as if he were seeing all possibilities through a fresh viewpoint, fresh eyes, with a clean, untainted set of ambitions. *And it was wonderful.*

For the first time since Elijah had realised he'd need human blood, not animal, to sustain life, he didn't hate that about himself. It was natural. He was a part of nature. He took only the evil, never the weak, never the pathetic amongst those who were hooked on his seductive, pretty lure.

And that was acceptable.

Yet it only deepened his contempt for the man before him.

He took a step towards Lee, and Lee took a step back without being able to prevent himself. The elegant Italian suit might have been armour enough in a

bout of boardroom politics or in a polite courtroom stoush, but here... Even scented liberally with fresh rainwater and dressed in unstained jeans, Elijah gave off a stench of barely controlled violence, of blood scrubbed out roughly from beneath fingernails, of blood smeared over sharp white teeth.

Of deadly things done to terrible men, of bodies burnt, buried, beyond excavation or evidence.

The unspoken physical threat hung like a stink in the air.

Lee's face hardened, and he eyed Elijah, snapped, "Go. Get out of here. You waste my time. You're tipping over the edge."

"I won't be used," Elijah bit out. "No matter what your damned schemes."

Lee glared back. "Difficult to use a madman. Or a broken addict. And you're right. *That's exactly what you are.*"

And still as Elijah was, his tangling hair, like ragged fire, seemed to stir and move about him as if it were drifting, lifted and stirred by waves of unfelt heat.

From the corner of his eye he glimpsed, leaning against the huge and dramatically carved wooden double doors, still, with arms folded across his chest, Stas, impassive, watching his father. Watching him. Watching them both.

Jesus, Elijah hadn't even seen him come into the room.

What the hell?

He felt as if he were being set up. He felt as if this was some elaborate game that they both had the answers to.

Stas was ever the scientist. The observer. And he was the biggest exhibit in this madhouse.

"I'm a junkie. A blood junkie. I won't deny that. *But I am not insane.* And *this,*" he waved a dismissive hand towards the rooms, the house and its inhabitants beyond. "This circus is over. They are not your soldiers, nor your whores, and their games are done. I give you notice now."

Lee merely smiled indulgently. Whatever he truly thought was hidden. Stas said nothing. He just watched with that scientist's stare.

Elijah left the room, shouldering past Lee, shouldering past his lover.

Wanting to kill them both.

And knowing, now, that it was merely a matter of time before he took out one of them. One of them he despised. The other... he loved. But Stas would

not stand in the way of his assuming leadership. The alien clarity he felt told him that.

That belief was only confirmed when Stas followed him out of the room, leaving his father alone to whatever thoughts, whatever plotting, whatever damage control he was foolishly embarking upon.

Elijah was too exhausted to tell Stas to shove off as he made his way up the stairs, pale fingers dragging through his hair. The curling, sun streaky brown it had been out on the street—for his customer, for the prostitutes, for any witness—deepened with every rough, untangling stroke. Deepened and straightened a little to become a coppery red, cropped short.

And as he moved up the thin, worn carpet he stretched, and his body, his limbs lengthened like thick, heated elastic with that lazy, powerful movement even as he undid the fly on his damp jeans, grunted as he paused, commando beneath them, and roughly dragged free of the denim before it would have to be scissored off him. The jeans were damned near tight enough at that point already, and it scarcely mattered if any of the others saw him in this state.

Out on Grey Street he had been a pretty youth of scarcely average height. Lure. Bait. Now he paced ahead of Stas, naked, damp, unwanted clothes in one hand, his body bulking up, inches taller, near six feet now, stripling muscle filling out broader shoulders, rippling in corded ropes through his arms and flat abdomen, jaw harder, nose straight, mouth still lush but taut now, the column of his neck long but thicker. No teenager, now, instead a man, somewhere around twenty. A blink, and it slid to twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, another blink of those long, dark lashes, and the needle on the dial seemed to slip back years again.

Two decades old. Truly, he, himself, didn't even know.

Stas went to catch hold of him, kiss him, but he pushed him aside roughly, angry at that earlier scene and loathing even the scent of himself. How Stas could tolerate it, he didn't comprehend. "No," he grunted. "Not yet. You know that."

And he should. It was an all too familiar ritual.

Leaving Stas behind, he took a turn and climbed a shorter, doglegged flight of stairs to the small space he used as a bedroom. The others had grabbed the bigger bedrooms.

He supposed he could throw his weight around and gain a suite of rooms. He didn't want one.

He liked the strange security of the tiny space.

The brass double bed almost filled it. A fire burnt in the grate, the pale and curving marble mantle smoked from years of use. The heat the fire generated was like an oven.

Stas must have prepared it, lit it, just after he left earlier.

His damp jeans, the thin top, were thrown into the flames. For an instant, the raging fire died back. In smoky seconds, it revived and ate at the discards steadily.

It was always the same after a kill. To wear the clothes that reeked, even unstained, of blood and death, of decay already setting in, repulsed him. Their disposal was always the first, the most instinctively imperative, task.

Standing naked by the fire, rubbing his hands over his face, he sensed Stas come into the room and arrange that tall frame in the doorway, shoulder propping his weight.

Elijah had just made a declaration of war, but all Stas asked, was, quietly, "It was bad?"

Ah yes, *Slick*. "It was business as usual," Elijah said flatly. "Totally normal. And totally abnormal."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Elijah rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth again, dark eyes narrowed on Stas. *On the son of the pack leader*. Those dark eyes were the only part of his outward appearance he hadn't bothered to disguise for the hunt.

"Call the clean-up crew," he said flatly. "The car is parked in the garage. It has the usual cargo."

Stas tossed his smartphone from one hand to the other. "Already done."

Elijah nodded, his head falling forward a degree. The red silk of his hair fell across his forehead. He stared down at his hands, then threw back his head defiantly, the clean line of his jaw hard. "As I said, 'totally normal', right?"

"Right."

Didn't matter. He was feeling the last remnants of shame he suspected he ever would. He'd never felt shamed by sex, but he had felt shamed by feeding.

Lee had been right about some things, the bastard. And that alien animosity hardened within Elijah.

He welcomed it. This would be the last time, he promised himself, with that strange detachment, the last time he'd ever feel any shame at what he was.

"I've got to get clean," Elijah said, with that new calm.

Stas was silent.

As he stood under the large old-fashioned showerhead, water streaming down hard and hot, he began, for the first time that evening, to shake.

He stretched, and felt a sensation as if his bones were cracking raw in their very joints. There was a scent of blood in the air. Slick's. A clot of the stuff unglued itself from his hair where it had somehow stuck, slid down his white hip, and slithered down the plughole in a swirl of steaming water.

Jesus, his body was aching now. It hurt. It fucking hurt.

And it was only going to get worse.

He looked up, through the glass, the steam, to the mirror above the old-fashioned pedestal basin.

Vincent's face stared back at him. Those blue eyes so wide, so human, so trusting, so filled with love, he realised suddenly. And not the kind of love reserved for friends. Jesus. *Vincent had loved him, and he hadn't even known.*

He stared at Vincent's face, at Vincent watching him back from that mirror. Not his face.

Vincent's.

His mind spun. That calm fled. His identity, always so fluid, spilled out as liquid as the water spilling from the shower.

A fresh, unknown thing, *panicked, a scream*, tore at his throat.

And Vincent was gone. The reflection, himself again. His own dark eyes were staring back at him in that glass. Panting, he was thrashing back from that reflection and unaware of it, only dimly aware of the bathroom door crashing open and Stas yelling something. But nothing could wipe away the feeling of Vincent's face, of Vincent's lips under the hands he'd covered that scream with. The reality of Vincent's face. *Nothing.*

“Baby.”

It was Stas, that low, cool voice gentle, ridiculously soothing. Slumped back against the white tile, hands shaking on fistfuls of shower gel Elijah couldn't find the strength to lift to his body, he watched as, naked, the taller, more muscular male stepped into the shower cubicle, closing the glass door behind him.

Without words, Stas reached out, grabbed the bottle of shower gel from the rack and poured a huge glob of the delicious stuff into his hands. Running it tenderly through Elijah's hair and over his body, he lifted Elijah's shaking hands to his face so that he, himself, could scour the blood scent off his skin.

“My predator,” Stas purred, mouthing against one sudsy, soaking ear. “So broken. But strong again, soon. God, you know I'd give anything to stop this pain for you, don't you? I know how much you hate it. I know it destroys you, every time.”

Elijah's eyes shot open at that. He watched Stas's profile as he poured more gel into his hands, more into Elijah's hair, shampooing it with the stuff, lathering his body roughly even as Elijah reached for his toothbrush and scrubbed his teeth with what was left of the gel and foam on his hands.

Anything to get rid of that stink of blood and decay. Anything to replace it with something beautiful.

Christ, the blood had never done this to him before. Pain, yes. *Hallucinations?* Never. *Vincent*—

He shoved that madness brutally away. And even as the water streamed, washed the now-reeking foam away, performing its everyday miracle, he felt the ache in his bones ease and the slow, warm trickle of honey begin.

Trippy, tripping. Delicious warmth—the slaughter having its payoff, the blood, finally, *thankfully*, working its magic.

He was soaring, flying. Throwing himself into that deep, deep well, that endless golden warmth.

He landed back against the tiles, the water streaming down over them both as he felt Stas slide down to his knees before him, his wonderful hands gliding down the length of his body. And it was *his* body now, not one assumed, patched together, *willed*, not some craziness, some insanity glimpsed in the mirror. But *his* flesh.

And then Stas wrapped his fist about his hardened cock, his mouth closing over the head, and Elijah flung his head back and groaned at the exquisite pleasure like an animal.

A strange, uncentred guilt flooded him with an escalating, horrific and wrenching agony that filled his mind and made him cling to the raw sensation Stas was inflicting upon him.

That pleasure was the only anaesthetic available.

He wanted to run from that guilt, but everything in him embraced it as if it were a lover.

“Jesus. Ah, Jesus.” He swallowed, gasped on a rush of pleasure, a rush of pain, and could not hold the words back. “Vincent. Fuck, Vincent, where are you? *Where the fuck are you?*”

For the barest fraction of a second, Stas paused, frozen.

And turning his head, Elijah's darkening eyes cut through the glass, once more, to the mirror, steamed, yet not steamed enough.

Vincent's face there. Watching calmly.

Vincent's face. Vincent's blue eyes, meeting his.

But this time he did not scream. Instead he closed his eyes and gave in to the joy Stas gave him so fiercely. There was nothing else.

It was a ritual. Their beautiful ritual.

Laughing, completely blood-drunk now, blood-high, Elijah fell back against the tangle of bedcovers, the thick quilt at his back like velvet. His water-soaked skin was singing. Drying rapidly in the heat from the fire still blazing in the grate. Naked, he arched his spine, spread out his arms, cropped hair dark with water, soaking into the layers of cotton, of feather down beneath him.

Stas stood by the foot of the bed, hand resting on a brass bedpost. Elijah's velvet dark eyes took in the lean, powerful muscularity of Stas's body. His cock had been hard almost from the moment he'd stepped into the shower. He hadn't come when Elijah had, back in the shower, pumping into his mouth, fingers dragging brutally at his short hair and grasping against his skull. The only solid thing in a world wrenched apart.

And selfishly, Elijah was enjoying the payoff of that restraint. His gaze moved down, clinging to Stas's thick, hard cock. The precum welling, and the

darkened flesh beaded with the water that glistened over all the muscle and bone, silky skinned, of his body. "Your cock is so beautiful," he murmured, shifting restlessly on the bed and writhing at the sensation. Didn't matter that he'd only just come. His hand drifted down and he lazily stroked himself, already hard. He laughed softly. "Have I told you how much I love your cock, Stas?" he murmured, eyes returning to Stas's seawater ones, while Stas watched the movement of his fist. "Because I do. So much."

For a moment, Stas's usually closed, striking face was entirely open.

He was amused... and filled with lust. "You're tripping. If only I could synthesise whatever fucking chemicals are flying through your bloodstream right now, I'd make millions. Feels good, huh?"

Now, Elijah truly burst out laughing. "So, so good."

"I'm glad, Eli. I'm glad you get something out of this, at least."

Elijah was still laughing, softer now and past thinking. The crash would come later. The crash *always* came later. He turned his head, rubbed his stubbled cheek against the cotton of the quilt, and it felt like silk velvet. Incredible. He gasped at the way his fingers felt, stroking over the head of his prick, slick with himself. His sloe dark eyes turned to his lover. He crooked a glistening finger, beckoned him.

"Fuck me, Stas. Fuck me right now. Before this fades. I love it when you fuck me, and I'm flying. It's so good. It's so fucking good."

Stas strolled over to the bed, took the lube from the bedside table, and tossed it to the bed. He stood, looking down at his lover.

That face, usually so pale, framed by hair like fire, was deeply flushed now.

Stas's blue-green eyes glittered between the inky lashes, water dripping like diamonds from his dark hair.

Elijah watched the movement hungrily as Stas slid a silver band from his ring finger. Elijah, himself, had placed it there long before. Stas arched a brow. "You want it?"

Elijah's tongue slicked his lips. The fingers of his free hand slid up, over the lift of his ribs to squeeze a nipple. "Yes," he muttered. "So much."

"Ask me nicely."

The words were commanding. But that cool voice was roughened. Eyes like black diamonds gripped blue-green. "I'm asking you nicely, *please*," Elijah

muttered. "But if that's not enough, I'm telling you, now. *Do it. Hard. Make me feel it.*"

Stas shivered at that desperation, that demand, and swung himself onto the bed so that he was crouched over Elijah, weight supported on one corded arm as he held the silver ring out to the other man, to his lips. Obediently, Elijah kissed that silver.

It was an Irish ring, a claddagh. Two hands holding a crown over a heart, the top of the crown pointed. It was something one lover would give to another. Except that Elijah had meticulously filed the point of that crown until it was razor sharp.

And now Stas knelt back a little, and drew that point across Elijah's pale, luminous skin. Glowing like a pearl against the dark, tangled covers, in the soft lamplight, the firelight, his skin beaded sudden rubies down, across and around one nipple. Blood welled and slipped over that pearlescent skin. Elijah groaned, eyes shutting tight, with his spine arching up into that sweet sting.

And it went on. The fine razor slice of that ring, the tender care of Stas's tongue, lapping at that blood. Designs drawn. Each nipple circled, and circled again with that fire, and Stas's fingertip, tracing them. Elijah watching that flushed, intent face through slitted eyes. Blood smeared Stas's beautiful lips now.

Every now and again he would pause, sit back on his heels, and study his work.

At one point he shifted over Elijah, pinning him down as he thrust his engorged cock into his mouth. Elijah could taste his own blood on Stas's flesh. He'd stroked Elijah, the blood designs, himself, smearing that scarlet over his cock. Elijah took him greedily, loving the taste of him, the salt of his precum, the clean, soapy taste of his skin, the metallic tang of his own blood.

And before Elijah could do much more than roll his tongue over the head of his cock and try to draw him deeper, it was cruelly taken from him, and Stas was reaching for the lube.

Elijah shifted, watching Stas as he dragged his fingers through the blood beading in circles, dripping down in lines, across his already healing, sealing, flesh.

Glimmering eyes held his. They were filled with lust. Filled with knowledge. "You're going to kill him, aren't you?" Stas asked flatly.

Flying, drowning in sensation, flesh burning with a hundred points of pain, Elijah looked back at him with perfect clarity. “Your father? Yes,” he answered simply. “I am. You have a problem with that?”

Stas smiled very faintly, shook his head. The last droplets of water flew onto the bed, onto Elijah's skin, blended with the patterns he'd drawn and diluted them, ruby into pink. “No. It would only be justice.”

“You mean that?”

Stas smiled without humour. “Of us all, he's the biggest monster. Now shut up and let me fuck you.”

Fingers covered in blood, in lube, Stas eased first one finger, then another, into Elijah's greedy, waiting body. He opened up to his beloved fast, needing this, his mind gone blank. Needing it all, *now*—

Stas's clever fingers found his prostate and he damned near came, hands coming up to grip his skull, drag his mouth down to his for a hungry, devouring kiss. It wasn't enough. The glide of his tongue, the nip of his teeth, not enough. The fingers in his arse, fucking him, not enough.

“More—” he gritted. “More—”

And Stas thrust that thick, heavy cock, eased with lube, with blood, inside his greedy, hungry body, and his mind was blown.

It was morning, and as always happened, after the high, the low was a killer. Elijah rolled onto his side, all the better to see the other man. Stas had brought him black coffee. He'd clearly showered again, his skin glowing, torso naked, dark hair arrowing down under his worn, well-washed jeans. He sat in the chair he'd drawn up in the cramped space by the bed, his face almost... wary.

Which set off a hundred alarm bells. Nothing troubled Stas. Nothing that he couldn't better.

Elijah sat up in the bed, yanking pillows up behind him as he leant back against the headrails, registering that Stas must have cleaned him up as he slept. Or rather, as he lay in the coma-like state he fell into after the hunt and the fucking that always followed.

No blood was left on his skin. No semen dried there. No marks from the cutting of the night before.

All evidence, gone. All evidence, bar the look in his lover's eyes.

He didn't bother to reach for the coffee Stas had put beside him. Instead, he ran a hand over his face, the sinking feeling in his gut telling him he wasn't going to like what was coming. "What is it, Stas?" he asked flatly. "Just tell me. We owe each other some honesty, if nothing else. So what's the deal? You don't like what's happening with your father and me? You've picked a new side? Decided that you didn't like being told I was going to kill him?"

Stas stared at him and abruptly burst into a gunfire of laughter that died away fast. "After this... I think you'll know exactly where I stand." He sighed so heavily, so deeply, that his ribcage lifted on a deep intake of breath. Finally he said one word. "Vincent."

There was a long, ugly silence. "Vincent?"

Stas glanced away, only to stare back at him almost defiantly. "You want to know what *really* happened to him? Why he disappeared?" He paused, visibly swallowed, spat out, "*I drugged him*. And then you. What do you think my research has been based on? What answer do you think I was hunting for? I'd developed a serum... I thought with our bloodlines, *his*... fuck, I truly thought that he might be the cure. So human, yet with our DNA. The end to your addiction. Your torture. So I shot him full of it."

This was not happening. "You what?"

"I drugged him. I drugged you. I handed him over to you, for whatever you... were going to do. You were shaking. You were needing it. Jonesing. About to leave the house, go out, *hunt*. Instead, I gave you... what I thought you needed."

Elijah stared at him in disbelief, and yet knowing. All the endless chunks of memory, gone. Whatever he'd done to Vincent, *gone*—The horror of it tore Elijah apart. "You mean I slaughtered him? I tore into him, just as I did that piece of shit last night?"

"No, I'd thought that but—fuck, Eli. Look in any mirror. *Really* look. You saw it last night. Or allowed yourself to. Look again."

Elijah was shaking his head. But Stas was relentless.

"You absorb the blood of those men you kill. Drain something of their souls, their spirit as well, I think, because with every kill, your transformations are stronger. But I hadn't bargained on what would happen when a shifter of your powers drained a shifter, even a whisper of one. You didn't tear open his throat, Eli. You didn't spill a drop of his blood. No, you wrapped your arms

around him, you kissed him, and... you absorbed him. Day by day. It took almost a week. You two locked yourselves up in here and fucked yourselves senseless. I would have been jealous, hell, I was jealous, I was mad with it, I wanted to kill you both, but you didn't even know who or what you were anymore. You were gripped by one of those goddamn blackouts. But at the end of it, Vincent was gone. Little by little, faded away. By the end, you were fucking a ghost. You want to find Vincent, look in the mirror. You took him. *And he took you.* He stole you, Elijah, just as you stole him."

But Elijah had scrambled off the bed, away from Stas, stood there, staring at him.

"And it worked," Stas said relentlessly. "Tell me, Eli. Have you had a blackout since?" He shook his head. "No, right? And by now... by your old behaviour patterns, you would have lost a few hours here and there. Hit a bad memory and lost a day. *Something.* But no, nothing's happened. You've stayed steady as a rock."

"You sick motherfucker—"

Stas ignored him. "It *worked*, Eli. And that's all that fucking matters to me. Hell, you've even gained the clarity to finally face challenging my damned father. You'll rid the pack of the bastard, thank God."

"Fuck you—"

"It took you long enough. You're the only one that can do it. And taking him out will be a public service."

Elijah was ready to walk out of the room and get as far away from this man as he could before he tore him apart. He'd paced back, shaking his head violently. And even as he did so, he saw Vincent in the mottled mirror set into the old, narrow wardrobe. Watching.

A glimpse. A shake of his head. There. Gone.

But always with him. Now that he had opened that door, *was permitting it*, he could feel Vincent, under his skin. Where he had been, hidden, all this time. And now, at last, Vincent possessed a power he'd never had in life.

Vincent didn't resent this. Hell—

Vincent was welcoming it.

Stas looked at him, the defiance, the fight suddenly leaching out of him, the light fading from those blue-green eyes. "I never knew, Eli. I promise you, I

never knew it could happen like this. I cared about Vincent, too. But I cared about you more. I know I've done something terrible. *Unforgiveable*. Betrayed Vincent. Betrayed you. Destroyed you both, perhaps. I'm a ruthless shit. I always have been. But please, I did it because—Do you still—Do you still love me?"

Do you love me?

Love. The only thing that had ever truly mattered to Elijah. The only thing that had ever mattered to Vincent. That even now, meant that any of them were not alone in this crowded house of monsters. And, himself, the most monstrous of all.

Vincent stared back at him from the mirror. Elijah stared back at Vincent.

Vincent's mouth curled in a smile.

And Stas's voice asked once more, quietly, "Do you love me?"

Well? Each asked the other. *Did they?*

The brutal tenderness of Stas, last night, echoed through his cells. The brutal tenderness of the patterns he'd cut, precious, beautiful rubies. The reverence with which he'd tasted Elijah. Always had. The memories brought a rush of blood and his heart beat faster. He remembered that tender kiss Stas had given him at the end, after the blood, after the fucking, as he slid into the darkness...

He must have known he was kissing not just Elijah but Vincent. *Fucking not just Elijah but Vincent.*

I loved you both, Vincent whispered inside Elijah's skull. I loved you both so much. Stas and you, Eli. Wanted you both so much. It tore my heart out, to be on the outside, watching you two, what you had, always, always watching—

And then, on a whisper, again, Stas, on his feet, close by him and even more desperate now, raw with it, "*Forgive me... forgive me. But please, tell me. Have I destroyed it? Us? Or do you still love me?*"

It was Vincent who turned and tangled his fingers in Stas's dark hair.

Vincent, who Stas stared at helplessly, shields down.

Vincent, who Stas whispered to, *again*, no longer knowing who he spoke to, and in the grip of a sudden terror he'd never shown before, "*Christ, please, do you love me?*"

And for the first time in a long time, Elijah felt at peace. *Whole*. He was made whole by Vincent, and Vincent was no longer alone, no longer weak. No longer on the outside.

But within, within the flesh. His flesh.

And Vincent's humanity, his steadiness, gave Elijah, so powerful, yet so fractured, a unity he had never had.

A unity he would need to take the pack where it should go. Away from the direction Lee had manipulated it towards, and back to peace, to some kind of harmony both with themselves and the human world.

"Yes," Elijah whispered to Stas, to them both. "*I forgive you. And I love you.*"

And it would be all right. The three of them, always together.

It would be more than all right. It would be perfect.

"Yes," Elijah said again, just before he, before Vincent, kissed Stas. "I love you. I will always love you. *Always.*"

And Stas gave in to him, into them both, into the new and most powerful triad they had become.

The End

Author Bio

I've been an artist, a web designer, and a really unreliable cook. I love to write wicked hot erotic romance with fiercely passionate, alpha characters, and love tats, film and fast cars. And judging by that last trio, I'm also extremely shallow!

I am a huge fan of authors who write those magic books you just can't put down, brilliant comedians (hello Eddie Izzard and Russell Brand!) and spoilers. I'm also a happy history geek and a trivia fiend.

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