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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ACID

By Wulf Francú Godgluck & S. van Rooyen

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 <u>Goodreads M/M Romance Group</u> and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All rights reserved worldwide.

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ACID By Wulf Francú Godgluck & S. van Rooyen

Photo Description

A man with bionic mechanical arms sits in a dusky room holding a cigarette between his robotic fingers. A shot glass with amber liquid in his right hand. Faded scars and wounds cover his collar bone and abdomen; he stares at nothing, obviously bored with the world he lives in.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is obviously a real tough guy – he likes his guns, booze and cigarettes. His new robo arms are pretty damn awesome, even if the story of how he lost his normal arms isn't pretty and it took a long time to get used to the new ones. He's a man of action, not words, and you'll never hear him spout sappy declarations of endless love. The love of his life clearly needs to be just as tough to keep up with him.

Basically, I want a story with this tough guy and his equally tough love interest(s). Romance shouldn't be the main focus of this story, I want a kick-ass plot with at least a bit of world building, please! Established couple or not, ménage or not and the genre is up to you. Kinky sex would be a huge plus, but only if you can work it into the plot. I'm fine with whatever ending works for the story, I don't need a HEA. Every shade of consent is fine by me. Kink-wise I'm pretty much open to anything, even extreme stuff like med-kink and sounding.

Please NO: GFY/OFY, cross dressing/feminization/trans*, scat, watersports, diabetes-inducing fluffiness, puppy play, PWP, tentacles, torture porn, mpreg

Thank you so much,

Free_Dreamer

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, horror

Tags: revenge, slaves, dystopian, genetic mutations, dark, cliff-hanger

Content Warnings: cannibalism, premastication, rape, forced pregnancy and childbirth (only mentioned), gore, extreme violence and murder, no HEA/HFN, swearing (It's Wulf Francú Godgluck; what else did you expect?)

Word Count: 25,778

Dedication

To the MM Romance Group for being such awesome people and once again holding one of the biggest events on Goodreads. Thank you for your support, time and dedication to this.

To S. van Rooyen for being there in my time of need and helping make this one of the most screwed-up stories I have ever been a part of.

To Debbie Smith for helping out and pep talking me during the times I wanted to give up. I know this one freaked you out but thank you.

To K.C. Wells for helping out in a desperate time of need on very short notice and listening to me bitch about nothing.

To my sweet Alexis Woods, know you wanted to give up on me and really don't like Vex but thank you for helping out beta reading and fixing my same mistakes.

To my editor, Ali, thank you for being you and being so incredibly amazing to work with, it's such a joy doing the edits with you. I didn't even need a bottle of wine to help me.

To Wulf, thank you for letting me fuck with your characters... again... still, and allowing me playtime with Winter and Nirvana and seeing my gore-infested dreams come to life. Love you, S.

<u>Thank You</u>

To Free_Dreamer, may you be taken away to a world far darker than ours, I hope you enjoy these charters however fucked-up they may be.

<u>Playlist</u>

"Gun." – My Chemical Romance [The brave surviving heroes of war, those left amputated, disabled, disfigured and mentally and emotionally damaged by its devastating toll.]

"Ghost Town" – Adam Lambert [*Those who were left behind, their hearts nothing but a ghost town of pain, anger and regret to the love they've lost.*]

"Ghosttown" – Madonna [No matter what we lose; power, civilization, technology, money, light—in the end, when the dark's cold teeth sink into our flesh, we only truly have one another to keep us warm. Our humanity is the only thing we can trust.]

"The Dead Girl Epilogue" – I Am Ghost [The rain (tears) can wash away our dirt (pain/sin/regrets), but only love can purify our hollow hearts.]

"Ghost Town" – Shiny Toy Guns [Do not let your past hollow you out. Keep fighting, striving, never back down and reach for hope however dim it might be.]

"With Arms Wide Open" – Creed [Accepting the mistakes we make, the journey we follow and trusting your heart.]

"Dead Inside" – Muse [There is no fear as great as facing oneself, for only we know our own weaknesses, understand how deep our darkness reach, terrified if the demons snitches us in and drowns us to become dead inside.]

"Candle in the Wind" – Elton John [We are just all candles in the wind, waiting for Death to blow us out.]

ACID

By Wulf Francú Godgluck & S. van Rooyen

Prolegomenon

ACID City was no place for fluffy kittens and puppy dogs. Easy cattle and all. It was the human equivalent of Hell.

Always dark, always raining... Light didn't exist here. Well... unless one counted the light emitted by the vast city. Artificial... everything was.

ACID City was a dump. We, the scattered remains of after-shit stuck on its not-so-white porcelain-rim toilet. It was a Fallen City, one for criminals and lowlifes, the poorest of the poor. And fuckers like me.

Governments and religions were things long-fucked past their sell-by date. No laws or fucking basic animal rights. Fend for yourself and leave the rest to the maggots. Monarchs, the most brutal of crime lords, governed their domains: the Fallen Cities; a breeding ground for all things *pretty*. Their lieutenants, one step away from crazy, did their dirty work: running a cartel with a fucked-up namesake. Dark Heart was mine—lame, stupid and fuck-you-very-much.

Cryo-hibernation does shit to a man—fucks up your head when you sleep for seven hundred years only to wake up and realize everything you loved, everyone you once held dear, was fucking dead and long gone from this world.

I ain't no nice guy, and I'm definitely not the fucking hero of this story... Heroes are wasted breaths of space; no one needs them in their life. I was one, a long time ago, when I used to be a soldier, friend, lover, husband... A father.

Yeah, I can see it in your eyes. You can keep your fucked-up sense of sympathy. No need to honor those long turned to dust. Your opinion don't matter, no one's does.

Except mine. I am law... You can even call me God and, while you're at it, get on your fucking knees and kiss my fat cock and then butt me.

So, let's get some shit cleared and out of the way. There aren't many rules... but these are mine.

The first rule of ACID City: Avoid. Do not get involved in other people's shit. People will fuck you over, in any way they can. And enjoy it.

Two: Lie. Everyone lies. There has not been hard, honest truth in this world for God knows how long. Except for one...

Three: Fake it. No one is who they seem—not even ourselves. Your heart will fuck you over. Your feelings are a bunch of shit made up to make you

believe you once were human... but there might as well not be any more humans left. The ones that are... just don't have the humanity to give a shit.

I broke every one of my own rules.

And I hate him for it.

Chapter One

He was bored, and when Vex Noux got bored, the motherfucker got crazy. The club was silent as shit lying on a wet road, drenched to mushy pulp in a toxic downpour. His lieutenants weren't any less "off," too stiff to raise an eyebrow, tension marinating in their blood, flesh oozing apprehension, smelling like foul fermented piss.

Being bored was a fact of life in ACID City, one the poor fucker begging for his next breath wasn't making any more delightful.

Wrists harshly cuffed behind his back, forced on his knees while snot and tears—God-knew-what that pink sludge pussing from the cut on his brow was—dripped from his face to the floor.

Grant babbled like a fish in need of oxygen in the very water that held his life as Vex's mechanical hand clasped around his skull. There was only one truth in Vex's eyes, one accepted currency, *payment*... A man's very life.

Every person owed their life to someone else. His lieutenants to him for dragging them out of their shit-infested existence. Whether it was picking them off from a street, or Vex's God-complex kicking in, the fucker saw fit to spare their lives while he was wiping out another cartel. Merchants and dealers owed their lives to his lieutenants for the privilege of selling Tech and goods on the streets. In turn, their workers owed their lives to the merchants for the privilege of having a job and earning a shitty credila income to sustain the feces they called life.

And Vex had, once upon a fucking fairy, owed his life to the former monarch of ACID City...

Well—he licked his lips—that was before Vex ripped the man's spine through his ass. They were good memories.

It all boiled down to this: every fucker in ACID City owed their life to Vex Noux.

"Your betrayal leaves the sweet taste of gall in my mouth, Grant." Vex petted Grant's greasy hair while those red-rimmed eyes bore up at the mechanical digits clamped to the top of his head. "And to think, you were always one of my favorites. Such a pity, baby."

"Boss,"—he choked the word out—"I had no choice. They... they were gonna kill... tear me apart, even talked about fucking eating me."

Yeah, sounded like the altered. Fuckers weren't human, weren't animal. Something of a mix: a new species born out of laboratories and eventually interbred with humans. But as life had taught Vex—*these mechanical arms had shown me*—he knew Grant was a lying shit. All Vex needed to do was listen to the erratic pulls of his breaths, the feverish tick of his heated skin's perspiration, the telltale skipping beat of his heart.

"Don't be afraid, little Grant," Vex soothed him, traced a finger along his cheek, watched as he closed his eyes while he combed back Grant's black-anddark-blue hair. Vex increased his grip. "It's time to sleep, my pretty."

Red gunk and gray splatter hit him in the face, slowly slid down his jaw after Grant's skull had popped like an overripe fruit. Vex's two lieutenants, holding Grant down by the neck and shoulder, stood covered in blood and brain guts. He stepped forward smiling, crinkling his nose in amusement, and scooped some from Felex's stark white cheek, right where it landed under his eye patch. Vex brought his finger to his mouth and sucked it between his lips.

"Tastes sweet." He smiled. Next to Felex, his brother, Ferral, with a sickly ashen pallor, swallowed hard.

"Remember, my children, don't fist me in the ass, or you'll be fucking dead." Vex stepped back, held out his hand, waiting for the bitch to start licking up the dead fucker's fresh flesh. Her mechanical tongue, tasting and rasping over his torso, took in every drop of blood and brain juices. Vex really should feed her more often.

Vex watched over his club that night, filled with humans and altered alike, a swarming marina of bodies tranced by the chemical-induced fog gushing from the smokers. Neon lights dribbled, sparked and flicked, having an orgy light show with each other as techno beats pumped from the booth. The vibration of it touched his skin. Trembling through his flesh, it pulsed a mesmerizing chant, holding its captives prisoner in the sea of flesh on the dance floor.

Sweat drifted in the air, fumed with testosterone, as the depths of lust mixed before him. One scene caught Vex's interest. In the darkest corner of the bar, Felex's white coat glowed a neon blue. His large frame crushed something against the wall, his face buried in the person's neck, as his hips rocked back and forth.

There was no point in distinguishing whether his meal for the evening was male or female; it had nothing to do with sexual preference. Most of Felex's meals consisted of younger, effeminate partners. *He does favor the boys*

though. But with the world's current fashion sense, most clothing, hairstyles and accessories were asexual.

Felex was an altered; vampiric and sharklike in nature, he sustained himself on blood alone, while taking whatever pleasure his meal's body could offer. His brother, the same as he was currently manning the entrance to the club, The Black Eye. Which was lucky for the meal, or both those fuckers would have been stretching either the same hole or... Well, one gets the drift; the twins loved to play together.

Still, Grant's betrayal haunted Vex. He had leaked detailed information about him and the Dark Heart Cartel. There was only one fucker who would be crazy-stupid enough to go up against Dark Heart. Perhaps he had a death wish.

Soon. I'll clip your ticket myself.

ACID City had its own enemy. The Gungers. Slave traders for the Higher Cities. They lived on the outskirts, operating their business in the caves along the mountain range of the Black Desert mountain range that stretched beyond ACID. They would sweep into the Fallen Cities, sights set on the higher class that came down to club. Clubbing, and all illegal activities associated with it, was banned in the Higher Cities.

It was mostly teenagers and young adults that snuck down to the Fallen. Drugs and sex and *happy endings*. Stupid and fucking ignorant of the territory they ventured into. Thinking 'cause Daddy has big, endless amounts of credila, they could flash their shiny shit around. It only made them easy fucking targets, like white bleeping dots in all this darkness. The Gungers would hunt them like prey, carry them away and sell them to the highest bidders in the slave markets. There were no qualms with them; they even took children from the Fallen Cities and fluffed them up before selling them off.

But not in his city. Fucking kids might be ignorant of the world they entered, but the cattle were filling Vex's pocket, and there was no fucking way he was going to have some first-generation altered pick off his little lambs.

The first-generation altered were the worst; like a nasty pack of starving beasts, they had given into their animalistic instinct. Which was surprising, as they were once human.

One would expect that the sixth-generation altereds, those now dominating this world, would have been the ones giving in to those baser instincts, but no... Vex's guess: it just proved that the real monsters of this world were the humans.

Question was, how had the first-generation altereds survived while the second through fifth perished?

The story told was that the first-generation altered were humans that had been experimented on after WWIII. They were a means to end White Fever, a deadly disease that struck humanity as a result of nuclear warfare.

Victims of White Fever would develop a white-toned, silvery skin and a boiling fever, which wasn't the worst part... *Zombie apocalypse?* Eh, not quite. The infected weren't dead, only delusional and violently berserk due to the swelling of their brains. And that fever would keep rising till the victims developed hyperpyrexia leading to intracranial hemorrhaging—which always resulted in death.

The disease was transmitted through bodily fluids when those infected attacked—scratching and biting, allowing their saliva to enter and the virus to invade the victim. However, the animals that had fallen victim to attacks from the infected seemed to have had immunity against the virus. Resources had been short, and the virus was decimating a human race still trying to recover from the war. Trials to integrate animal DNA started on humans who offered themselves up for experimentation. Those humans who actually survived the Chimera Project became the first-generation altereds and were forced to breed with humans kept in cryo-hibernation, birthing forth the second-generation of altereds. They were immune to White Fever and a host of other viruses and diseases, causing most post-WWIII diseases to become extinct. The firstgeneration altereds were then placed into cryo-hibernation for later experimentation.

Some fucktard discovered a forgotten cryo-lab, waking up and releasing a group of the first-gen fuckers into the world again. They spread out, breaking into other labs and waking up more of the extended family—all drawn together like a pack.

War met Vex on his first day as monarch. Vex only knew him by name and his vicious, bloodthirsty reputation. Hel, the leader of the Gungers, sparked fear even in the Higher Cities. The Gungers had been after ACID City since day take-over, a term used when a monarch was displaced by his vice lieutenant.

The Gungers had been silent for too long. And Grant's betrayal was like the distant rumble of a Neo storm, its pink-frosted orange clouds on the rise and coming straight for ACID City and the Dark Heart Cartel.

Vailon needed to get his fucking ass back to ACID Central pronto. Vex needed all of his lieutenants in the house before Hel made his move. And right now his vice was on a joyride fuckfest in another city.

Vailon was a loose-cannon junkie, possibly even crazier in the head than Vex. He sure would have jumped up and down seeing Grant's head explode and brain glitter spew everywhere. Regardless of the fact that Grant was—had been—his little brother.

But as crazy as the fuck was, Vex could trust him more than any of the others.

The back of his hair singed with tingles of predatory caution. He had been experiencing the sensation since the club opened its door this evening. Vex was being watched.

He cut his gaze to where Felex was, only to find the darkness empty. He scanned the sea of bodies trying to spy anything that would be out of the ordinary, but nothing drew his attention nor his gut's instinct.

He descended down the stairs from his private viewing point, buttoning his black blazer and slipping on leather gloves to cover his hands. Vex had just passed Jace, a mute lieutenant in his cartel, guarding the stairs, when he spotted a strange lamb seated cross-legged on a barstool.

Vex had to give them credit for the feat of balance, and with their size hidden under a hooded leather coat, wondered how anyone could master such a task on a tiny-ass barstool. The tail of the long black coat draped behind, hanging just an inch above the floor. Short limbs were covered in skintight gray pants, a thin rubber sole poking out from the side, jittering impatiently up and down from under a leg. Elbows braced on the bar's counter, hands covered in gloves, fingers exposed, holding a drink. All of the dress wear signified one thing: for them to be able to move easily, fast and silent, the hood only there to conceal identity and, maybe, keep in the warmth.

He strolled toward the bar, gaze set on the empty barstool at the prey's side. Some things just never got old. Didn't matter if he was the big bad villain, he still liked to stalk, flirt and fuck with his food.

With a nod, Vex signaled for the bartender to mix him a drink, and sat in the vacant chair, observing those slender, pale fingers stiffen and wrap around the glass. He didn't miss the sharp, clawed fingernails. An altered.

Vex stared at their reflection in the bar's mirror, briefly obscured when Grouch placed his drink down. He reached for the glass, careful not to shatter it; the strength these arms wielded surprised him more often than not.

"Whatcha doing?" Vex asked before taking a generous sip of the periwinkle-colored Moon's Milk, far too familiar with its strong taste as it lit alive the path to his stomach.

The response: a shrug. "Why do we do the things we do?" Male. A melody, soft and suave, spilled from the pink, scarred lips just barely visible under the hood pulled low to conceal his face.

The overbleached white skin of his jaw and chin bore a discolored trace of a pale-pink shadow. Soft looking—Vex wanted to taste it. But something was off with this kid; he smelled too clean to be one of the Fallen citizens, his clothes too weather-beaten to be from the higher class. It might have just been him trying to blend in, but people came here to dance and fuck and be toxic. Not to sit at a bar looking like a sulking puppy that had lost its favorite bone. And his smell... distinct... something Vex had not smelled in years, and that was saying something. His mouth watered for it... for him. He leaned in close, brushing his beard against the boy's jaw, closing his eyes as he drowned in the scent.

"Do you know what you smell like?" The words, no less than a hungry grunt of lust, were followed by the sound of shattered glass and a sharp hiss. *Gotcha*. Alcohol spread on the bar's counter as Vex gazed at the boy's hand—a shard embedded right through the leather glove. Its sharp edge laced with the bright-red blood that crawled along to drip into the alcohol.

He nipped at the lamb's cheek, feeling his small body tremble, seeing his hands shake. "Shall we find out what you taste like?"

Vex grasped his wrist, plucked out the piece of glass and stuck out his tongue, running the jagged end of the glass along his taste buds, feeling the razor edge slice his fleshy, muscular organ, and licked his lips.

"Sweet fuckin' cotton candy. Just how I remember it."

Vex swallowed before swiping his tongue across the kid's chin. His own blood smeared across the albino flesh, as he chased toward that mouth, wanting, needing to sample his scarred lip's nectar.

The lamb pulled back, meeting Vex's gaze with bubble gum–pink irises, clear and crystalline, glowering back at him. Soft strands of dull metallic-pink hair poked out and curled around his ears, his hood still shadowing the rest. He

was different, and not just because of his features. Unlike most who changed hair and eye color, Vex included, the lamb's were natural.

A seventh-generation altered. The first of its kind. Vex wouldn't put it past this world.

A smile played at his mouth—cute even—as his tongue licked at the blood on his chin. He was off his stool, hands palming Vex's leathered thighs as he pressed his short frame between Vex's legs. A purr vibrated from him as he ghosted his lips to Vex's. *So tempting to just grab him and shove my tongue down his throat*.

"I remember... do you?" The little lamb whispered poisonous words and took Vex's mouth, softly... God...

Fuck, Vex was hard, needing this kid with a fucking rapacious hunger. The boy pulled back, pressed something to Vex's chest and walked off. Vex glared after the kid, his coat slithering behind him as he disappeared into the denseness of the dancing crowd.

He peered down at his hand crumpling up the piece of paper and unfolded his fingers. He felt his soul rip and shatter. Gaping eyes burned while some fucker was brutally squeezing the life out of him.

Vex ran his thumb over the photograph, sure it would have trembled if it was a living limb, pain lacing his chest as searing razor wire wrapped tighter and tighter around his heart.

"*I remember... do you?*" His words swam in Vex's head—each cruel, violent syllable heavier than death.

A tear fell, spilling onto the photo and running down right in the middle. Vex knew he should be asking how the kid got this... where he got this... who the fuck he was? But Vex had not seen *them* since he departed for war.

That day in the airport, Danny's blue eyes were swimming and drowning in tears... He was only four, didn't understand why his one daddy had to leave. Johan and Vex decided not to tell him the reason, nor that Vex wouldn't be coming back; at that point in the war, no one came back. Johan's taste was still fresh on his tongue—from when they shared their last moment together in the shower that morning—as Vex said good-bye, trying his goddamn hardest not to break. Vex's husband was in no better state as he took Danny outside for causing too much of a fuss. Vex still remembered thinking, *Why?* The woman next to them was on her knees, begging for her seventy-eight-year-old husband

not to go. The man silently cried as he let go of her hand. That was the last day Vex had seen them—his last glimpse was of Danny's eyes, peering over Johan's big shoulder, as they disappeared out of sight.

Four months later, Vex died, or thought he had—wished he fucking had. He was bleeding in the middle of the battlefield, both arms blown to shit, scrap metal stuck in his chest. He knew some shit had happened to one leg, while it felt like the sun was eating away the burnt part of his face. As the world blacked out, the very sight Vex was holding in his hands had flashed in his vision.

Vex looked at the photograph one last time: him and Johan sitting on either sides of their beautiful son, Danny, on his fourth birthday... Not knowing three months after that photo was taken, the first bombs would fall and wipe New York City, and everyone in it, from the face of the Earth.

Chapter Two

Jozi's left hand pulsed as he slammed his fist into the concrete stone. He was grinding his teeth so hard that his gums ached, the taste of that monster's blood still in his mouth. His body trembled, right hand still bleeding, the cut still burning. He wasn't afraid anymore. The scared little boy that had watched his parents being slaughtered because they didn't have the credila to pay that month's rent had long since grown up.

But Jozi had a debt to repay before he could get revenge. And that debt hit too fucking close to home.

He hadn't been inside ACID City for seven years, since Nirvana found him on the city's streets and took him with her. She was like him—orphaned by the cruelty and unfairness of the world. They had found many others like them along their journey through the Fallen Cities. Nirvana had come to offer them power, a promise laced with revenge. She had taught them the secret art of what had once been known, in a forgotten age, as *ninpo*.

She showed them how to hone their altered instinct, said that the Higher Cities denied this hidden strength existed in each of them for fear of what it might bring to the world.

Jozi removed his hand, the concrete now cracked, crumbs of it sticking to his raw flesh. He flexed his fingers, watched as the wounds oozed blood. By the end of the night they would be gone. The cut on his right hand had already begun to heal.

Nirvana had taught them what pain was, nothing but the illusion of one's unripened revenged-filled memories. She had taught them to take that pain and nurture it till it became a single blinding light of vengeance and deadly retribution. A starving lust that could only be fed by the splattered blood of their enemies.

Light... light sure would be a good thing here in this world of endless darkness.

He looked to the horizon. Far in the distance he saw the dull, faint glow of one of the Higher Cities.

"One day, darlin', you and me, we're gonna be livin' up there, together. No runnin', no fightin', just bein' happy, you feel me?"

Beast-O's promise still haunted Jozi. Every day that passed left a new tear in Jozi's dead heart for the giant. Beast-O had been... *was*, once upon a time, a human of the old world, mutated into a first-generation altered.

He pressed the palm of his injured hand against his chest, and took a deep ragged breath. He could still feel him, smell him... remember him. Jozi smiled from under his hood. He could still hear that stupid-ass, tone-deaf singing of a human song Beast-O loved. Hear him laugh and talk about the old days in his club, riding on something called a motorcycle. "Not this pansy, pussy shit you see today, babe. They were real beauties that made men cream their nuts in their leathers as they purred between your thighs."

But Beast-O had turned his back on them. Betrayed them and fucked Jozi right in the heart. Because Jozi had been the one that begged Nirvana to save the first-generation altered they had found on the side of the road beaten bloody, bones broken and flesh dehydrated. Jozi had nursed him back to health, fed him runny slop from his fingers to get Beast-O's strength back. And somewhere in those fucked-up moments, lost in those pale-violet eyes, Jozi had fallen for the big savage, silver-furred monster. He'd ridden the beast dry on his sixteenth birthday under a rare clear moonlit night next to a fire... only to have Nirvana's words come back to haunt Jozi when Beast-O sided with a group of Gungers they encountered in the Misty Desert. Jozi still bore the scar on his lips where Beast-O branded him with his claws.

"Did you get him hooked, kiddo?" Winter's icy voice brushed against Jozi's cheek.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Let's get some grub."

"What, they actually sell food in this dump?"

Jozi chuckled. Winter used to live the high life; she could have been considered royalty she was so closely related to one of the kings. But one little trip, one mistake down in a club at ABORTAZA City cost her that life. Held as a slave for two years before her Master dumped her right on the street not far from Death's doorstep, she owed Jozi her life.

Everyone owed their life to someone. Jozi owed his to Nirvana. And now he was paying his debt. He briefly glanced at Winter, noting the branding mark burned into her left cheek, and silently wondered if things went according to plan, where his would be.

"Yeah, I know a place. They do good fried crickets." Jozi held out his right arm for her to hook on to. "My treat. Whaddya say?" "It sounds disgusting," she snickered and blushed, instinctively raising a hand to cover her brand.

"Don't," Jozi said and caught her wrist. "You don't have to hide that from me, not from anyone. Wear it proudly, let it be a reminder of what you have overcome, of how strong you have become. He'll pay... They'll all pay."

As she stared at him, her white eyes reflected the neon lights of the club's sign and held the slightest hint of moisture. Jozi smiled; he wasn't one for tears—he didn't have any to cry anymore, not after he lost Beast-O. And he really couldn't stand to see other people cry for no reason.

"So, how 'bout them cricket fries?"

Winter shook her head and hooked her arm through his. "I'd love some."

Chapter Three

Hel Lepri sat on his throne of bones watching the pack of beasts play with their latest toy: a young girl, barely fourteen, naked and having the piss scared out of her. She wasn't to be sold off as a slave and, right now, was nothing more than food. It wouldn't be long before one of the boys broke her little legs and started feasting on her. Hel couldn't give a fuck. *Been there, done that, bored now.*

He turned, glowering as he took in the dark minacious presence in the distance: ACID City. Like an ancient-looking palace, its structures stretched, resembling that of Lingaraj temple. Hel licked his lips. Vex, the Dark Heart Cartel's monarch, was living on borrowed life—till Hel decided it was time to take the fucker out and claim ACID City as Gungers territory.

Why were they, the first-generation altered, being shoved out, not just from the Higher Cities, but from the low fucking shit slums as well? If it weren't for them, there would be no species left to dominate this world.

He clenched his right hand into a fist, scraping long claws against his palm and spearing his flesh. His ivory nails sunk into his skin allowing sticky, red blood to ooze between his fingers. He had long since come to terms with what he had become—what he was. That his humanity was nothing more than an insignificant waste of thought to ponder about. He had given up so much for this new world; "for the future," they had said. That lie played over in his mind while his body went through experiment after experiment after fucking experiment. He didn't know what subspecies he would be considered as. He didn't have enough fingers and toes to count the different strands of animal DNA they had fused into his own. The new altereds had no known concept of the horror that was their genesis.

The forced mating they had to endure; "*for the survival of humanity*," they had said, "encouraging" them with cattle prods when they didn't want to rape a woman and impregnate her. The men were nothing more than breeding bulls; the women, cows. It was there, in those laboratories, held as animals, where the first-generation altereds lost their humanity, not during the cryo-hibernation like most humans that were spared.

He smiled when he heard the girl's soul-crunching scream; the scent of fresh, altered blood sweet in the air made his stomach rumble. Hel ran his tongue over his lips and pushed off his throne, planting his heavy feet in the loose sand.

He ignored the pack feasting on the now-dead altered female and snuck deeper into the cave. He walked up to the makeshift cradle, flayed back the blanket made from altered fur, one he had made himself, and smiled at the bright-blue eyes gazing up at him. He grunted a chuckle as the small chubby cheeks dimpled with the infant's smile. He reached in, plucking the small thing up and nestling the boy in his arms.

Hel's stomach made a loud rumble, the sound causing the small infant to giggle. Hel licked his lips again. "You hungry, little one? 'Cause I'll tell ya, Daddy's starving."

He walked with the infant gently clasped against his chest and sank down to the cave's floor. Hel had taken one of the women being readied for slave trade, kept her and forced her to bear his child. She had fought him, refusing to eat, even threatened to deny him the unborn by trying to kill herself, causing significant damage to her stomach in the process. This forced Hel to keep her tied for the duration of the pregnancy. He had lost one child before; he would not lose another. Feeding her had been a lesson in patience, one he lost within the first week. He couldn't drug her and risk harming his offspring, so he had to force slivers of raw meat down her gullet at the end of the day. Now she was dead as shit, nutrients for the bottom-feeding bacteria of this world.

He reached out with his free hand, snagging a bone and ripping it off from the carcass before him. He sniffed at the day-old meat before biting into the flesh, gnawing off a morsel. He chewed, grinding the meat into a pulp before he was satisfied and spat it out into his palm, carefully worked a bit of it onto his finger and offered it to his boy.

He growled as the hairs in his ears vibrated, picking up the sound of boots biting in the soft sand. Hel sniffed the air, relaxing with the familiar scent.

"Whataya want, Vailon?" Hel's muscles contracted, instinct tightening like a molten fist in his gut to protect his young. Even though he knew the altered was no threat, he still held little Gin protectively to his chest.

Vailon came closer, the low light cutting sharp depths over his handsome face. "I never could quite figure out what exactly you smell like."

Hel's gaze lingered over Vailon's deep chest down to his narrow waist. His entire abdomen naked from the coarse, short blue-and-black spotted fur that covered the rest of him. Vailon combed his claws through his charcoal-andpowder-blue mane. Orbs, inked with ebony and shards of white, peered at Hel. The white streaks were a characteristic that ran through all altered generations.

"Some days it just gives me a headache trying to distinguish what your scent actually is, but then I look at you, and you don't look like any of the other first-generation altereds." He shook his head. "Not close to any altered I've ever met."

Hel bared his teeth. He didn't like anyone disrupting his time with his son—especially not with petty shit like this.

"Anyway, Boss—" Vailon grinned, flashing sharp rows of teeth "—just checking in before heading back to the cartel. Wanted to make sure our deal still stands. Nothing happens to my boys, right? I help you get Vex, you don't harm my twin pretties, yeah?"

"Everything stands. You don't fuck me over," Hel's sneered, "and I spare your twin bloodsuckers."

Chapter Four

The grainy mesh of restless sleep stuck to Vex's eyes as he lit another cigarette. The drench of acid rain plunged down upon the club, but a slight hiss louder than the downpour's own cry was a sharp sound in his hazy mind. He huffed, staring at the wet end of the smoke, and brought it back to his lips, sneering at the soggy filter before he took another drag.

Family.

One single picture has the power to rock you to your core. Vex never knew what had happened to the fate of his family. He assumed they had died from White Fever along with everyone else. While chaos raged in a world devastated by the aftereffects of war, Vex had slept in a cryo-lab—helpless to protect that which belonged to him, those who were once dear to him. It was partly the reason he didn't give a shit about the state of the world or his actions. He was just a shell, living till his final interview with death was scheduled, too much of a coward to take his own life and join those that he had lost. Tendrils like the smoke dancing before his eyes—thin, pulling thinner—was what was left of his old self. Marcus Murphy. Sometimes he would crawl in Vex's gut, his raw fingers clawing to reach out and jumpstart his subconscious. There was only one way to deal with it: ass, alcohol and smokes.

Ass was done—fucked raw as his dick felt tender. The best part about ripping out Jace's tongue: Vex could pound into him, no prep needed, and just fuck till he passed out without the altered making a sound... Oh, he squirmed and struggled when Vex held him down, but eventually the beast just sagged, taking it like a good bitch, whimpering and curling into a ball when Vex was done with round one. Which was saying something, since Jace was no bitch. With his immense frame, he could give Vex a go... even against his artificial limbs. But the pup always became submissive around him; guess it had to do with finding him at fourteen lying in his own fecal matter, dying from starvation. Begged Vex with those big emerald eyes to end his life. Why would Vex do that when he knew by saving Jace's sorry ass, he'd owe that life to him.

Vex killed the smoke in an empty bottle of Moon's Milk, barely hearing the frizzle as it met with the sliver of periwinkle liquid left. He watched the gray smoke cloud the glass and breathe out through the narrow neck in long, pulling strands of white and gray.

Pink eyes flashed in Vex's vision, making him grind his teeth. The kid needed to die, just shoving the photo against his chest had already marked the boy as dead. However, that kiss, that smell... *God, it's still in my brain, warping my dreams, bow-tied in fucking cotton-candy silk.* Vex would probably fuck him before he skinned him. The boy'd be back, Vex knew he would. No one just shoved shit like that at another and walked away, never to be seen again. He had a vendetta. And Vex, as sure as hell, would find out what and then twist it back in his cute fucking face.

A rustling of sheets drew his attention to the bed of tangled blankets and pillows. Vex watched Jace push off the mattress and slowly walk toward the bathroom. He could not fucking get that one. The real omega of the cartel pack, even after everything: ripping out his tongue, beating him for entertainment. Jace would still come to Vex—no hesitation—took everything Vex gave him, and still, he remained loyal. *Guess we are all fucked-up in our own way*.

He followed Jace into the shower, gently cupping his ass cheek as he pressed Jace's face against the wall with his right hand and slammed his chest into Jace's back. The large altered quivered beneath Vex, pushing his abused ass back and grinding it against Vex's stiffening shaft. With Vex's fist in his hair, he turned him, shoving his back to the wall and took his mouth, biting his bottom lip till there was blood. Its sour taste on Vex's tongue made him groan and thrust his hips to get friction on his dick. Jace's fat meat was nestled between Vex's legs, warm as Vex's balls rested over it. He felt Jace's touch ghosting over his shaft. This big, abused altered was always so cautious of his own strength, something that entirely pissed Vex off.

"Leave it!" Vex growled, snagging Jace's throat with his left hand and forcing him back against the tiles. The deep, throaty groan vibrating from his chest was one of the only sounds Jace could muster. It usually varied from a grunt, groan or series of growls, sometimes he would hum, but other than that Vex had not wanted to listen to that honey-thick voice Jace once had.

It reminded Vex too much of Johan's.

And anything and everything that reminded Vex of what he once loved, once held dear, needed to die from this world.

Like a beast crawling through Vex's veins and infecting his brain, memories assaulted him: dark olive skin smelling of warm spice, a massive chest covered in dense, black hair rubbing against Vex, strong hands gripping hard while a voracious mouth nibbled on his neck. Jet-black hair and sharp green eyes flashed behind his closed lids... the memory of the tightness and stretch as Vex demanded the pleasure of what Johan's hole could offer him.

Vex shoved his face into Jace's neck, burying himself inside the altered's warmth. Jace wrapped his legs around Vex's waist as Vex drove hard and brutally fast into him, feeling Jace's fingers bruising his back while he held on tighter with each plow.

There was no fuck given for the moisture mixing with the water from the shower.

Vex was going to fucking kill that pink fuzz ball the moment he stepped foot inside his club again.

The night didn't bear any fruit. The club was closing, and still the little shit had yet to show himself. Vex could easily send his lieutenant into the city to search him out, but why, when eventually the prey would walk straight into his web. He had played this fun little game before, many times, each bringing with it a new bag of candy to lure him out and trick him over. But too much sugar tastes bitter after a while, and this one was just as rotten as all the other apples beneath their caramel coatings. Their corpses were now feed for the worms clogging the sewage pipes.

Vex strolled the empty corridor—its low light concealing whatever might await in the dark recesses—on his way to his room below the club. Most of the Fallen Cities were built in a similar fashion: businesses for operations on top, sleeping and living quarters located belowground. If a Neo storm hit, you had a better chance of surviving underground than being caught up in that shitstorm of colored lightning. The residents of Fallen lived with low, but constant, threat and fear. Rumors abounded: the citizens of the Higher Cities had some mass plan to wipe out the Fallen with bombs.

The lone lightbulb reflected off a glint in the distance, flashing as it came flying at him. Glinting gray, the blur of it cut through the air, hissing sharply past Vex's left ear. He heard the thud as the small blade imbedded itself into the wall beside him before he even felt the burning sear in the edge of his ear. Vex flared his nostrils, growling.

Like streaks of lightning, one second there was nothing but the swaying bulb, the next, a fist connected to his face. A snarling mouth of sharp, white teeth gleamed in the dark. He saw pink metallic hair, and then eyes sunk in flushed albino skin glared at Vex as he hit the wall, sliding to his ass. The boy reached behind him to grasp and pull out a long, burnished blade. Vex allowed him to drive it right where he wanted to, straight into his shoulder. He felt the metal slide clean in like a hot knife. The little fucker even twisted it.

The lamb snarled as he crouched, white-knuckled right hand grasping the blade's hilt, left claws pressing into Vex's throat. His sweet cotton-candy breath blew in Vex's face, his voice like acid dripping from his pale lips. "They tried so hard to collect the credila. Sis even sold herself to help out. They were two credila short. *Two!*

"We had no food, only water, ate rotten shrubs to save up the rent. And still..." His shoulders trembled, face bowed, hair concealing his eyes and nose, but Vex could clearly see the shimmering diamonds running down his cheeks, dripping from his chin.

"Why..." he whispered, his voice so soft that if Vex hadn't been thinking remembering how good that mouth tasted, wondering how much better Vex's cum would taste on the kid's tongue—he would have cupped the boy's cheek and wiped the lacrimal gland's piss away.

"Did they have to die? Why? Why couldn't you just put us out on the street instead of taking my family from me? I was eleven when you murdered them, left their remains in pieces, not even a morsel to remember them by... hiding under the bed, listening to them beg for their lives, and all you did was turn them to pulp while you laughed... *Why?*" He screamed, an angry outcry, and let go of Vex's neck to grip the hilt with both hands, driving it through Vex's shoulder right into the wall.

Vex began to laugh softly. Pain had become such a rare joyous feeling for him, his voice rose till he shook with laughter, enjoying each and every flare of agony in his shoulder. Vex grabbed the flat of the blade with his left hand, meeting the kid's gaze, those pink eyes large as Vex snapped the katana in two, yanking the hilt out of the kid's grasp. Vex snagged the boy's face in his right hand, squeezing his cheeks while he held the broken sword against his neck.

Vex leaned forward, feeling the blade slipping through his flesh, feeling fresh blood stain his suit and making his undershirt stick to his skin. He brought his mouth close to the kid's face, snagged a lost tear with his tongue, tasting the sadness in the saline. "If I had spared them, you would not be here now, never to end up in my bed, where you will be very, fucking, soon, my pretty baby."

Vex laid a brutal fist into the kid's face—hard—not caring about the burst of blood from his lip or the cracking sound from his nose. The boy flew backward, slamming his head against the concrete floor. Vex stood over him and pressed a boot to his face and reached up to pull out the shard of metal still lodged in his shoulder.

Vex found it interesting that someone like this boy could get their filthy, little, clawed paws in the WITHC program, when he, who had far more resources, couldn't even get close to it.

There was no way an altered living in the Fallen Cities could know how to use such a historical weapon; this sword was from an era that was way before Vex's first lifetime. He glared behind him at the first knife, hooked his finger into the ring at the handle of the blade embedded in the wall, and pulled it out.

Vex played with the weapon in his mechanical fingers. A kunai, a type of multifunctional tool mostly used in close combat or farming. Both weapons seem to indicate the little furball thought himself to be a pink fucking ninja.

Vex stepped over him, bent forward and grasped his hair. Vex pulled him down the corridor to the descending staircase at the end. A smile playing on his lips.

Yes, he said he would kill him, and maybe one day Vex would, but right now that would be too simple an outcome for the kid. And where was the fucking fun in that. No, Vex'd keep him, play with him, torment him a little more... remind him of his fucking place—kneeling at Vex's feet, licking his boots. He growled under his breath, "You want to be an animal, I'll treat you like fucking one. But first we're cutting off all this pink fluff of yours." And maybe later he would tell Vex how the fuck he got information on using forgotten weapons, and how he managed to get access to WITHC. Then Vex would fucking finally be able to find out what had happened to his family and permanently lay Marcus Murphy to rest.

Chapter Five

Jozi woke; a throbbing hummed in the back of his head while pain flared from his nose. He shut his eyes against the bright, glaring light above him, his head too hazy to process such intensity. Everything felt wrong, his skin tender and icy, more so in the most sensitive of places: under his arms, his groin, balls to crack, his tail... his scalp cold in the air of the room. No doubt Vex had barbered every inch of him. It brought vivid images to his mind of slaves he had seen in the Higher Cities being taken to get groomed and stripped of hair. Not all of them treated poorly, some more like cherished and loved lap toys. But still, no form of slavery, whatever type of affection their owners showed, could be considered love. With that realization, he felt more naked and vulnerable than he had just moments ago.

Jozi tilted his neck, feeling metal pressing into his flesh. Panic flared, causing him to flinch only to find both his wrists and ankles confined, the metal cool as it bit into his skin. He *was* naked—could feel the cold air dragging its invisible fingers over his body while his heart beat in his throat. He swallowed a pool of saliva, his jaw having difficulty moving because of the ball in his mouth... *Not a ball*... It was a ball *gag*, strapped to his face, stuck in his mouth... *Fuck*.

Nirvana predicted this. There was a seventy-four percent chance that Vex wouldn't kill him, an eighty-two percent chance he would rather torment Jozi than end his life, and a ninety-seven percent chance he would brand and keep Jozi as a fuck slave. Just like she said there was seventy-eight percent chance Beast-O would betray them.

Jozi trusted Nirvana.

But *this*... this wasn't in his memory; Nirvana didn't mention anything about this.

He stressed against his restraints, flexing his muscles, putting as much strength into his limbs as he could. A finger on his anklebone, ice-cold, sent goose pimples and a sharp spike of ripples up his spine. He stilled, biting down on that ball gag, teeth and gums beginning to ache from the pressure. That finger ventured up his inner thigh and over his hipbone, making his abs twitch as it brushed over them and stopped to circle around a nipple. A gentle tap made Jozi gasp around the gag, sending spittle down the wrong hole as he burst out in a choke. A soft purr sounded above him. Jozi slowly opened his eyes, forcing down the bile burning in his throat as the monster's face went from blurry to acute.

Deep amber-orange orbs with streaks of violet glared at him. Pale skin stretched over a bony face, high cheekbones and sharp chin. A few days' growth sprouted over the faded ink running along the sides of his jaw. The tattoo stretched into spines on his throat, the gray ink continuing down the sides of his neck, covering his shoulders. From there, two long lines like tentacles reached down to the center of his chest where the Dark Heart Cartel's coat of arms sat—a ribcage in the form of a heart, with abstract lines forming wings, and that telltale flaming skull with its droopy eyes on top, like a fucking crown.

Jozi snapped his gaze back to Vex's mouth when it pulled into a sneer. He hated everything about this monster: the ducktail, sickly looking green goatee, the black and aquamarine strands of hair, and the thick aquamarine brows with the coal-black, S-shaped streaks starting at the tips and running out through the middle of both. He hated the short, bristly stumps growing at the shaven sides of the man's scalp, even the fucking faded scars on his face. Jozi wanted to recarve them, cut them deeper—but he had to hold back. Keep it all inside and only let a little bit of the magma spew... for now.

Revenge was a poison that needed to be administered slowly, silently infecting your victim's veins... till it just ripped their heart out.

"These would look pretty with something in them, don't you think?" Vex's voice rocked Jozi back to the present, making him clench his fist and pull back his lips. "Oh, so feisty. You're gonna be fun to play with."

Jozi had, a long time ago, tried to puzzle out why a man like Vex would allow himself to become the way he had. He was from the old world, the world before the war, before altereds. The stories Beast-O had told him sounded like fairy tales compared to the present. But Jozi's time spent here, playing Vex, served a greater purpose.

Nirvana would bring forth a new existence, a new world freed from the claws it was currently in... and pretending to be the little fuck slave was all Jozi had to do for now.

He didn't scream when he felt the sharp piece sliding through his nipple, nor try to fight when a warm mouth closed around it and sucked the blood from the piercing. Jozi lay perfectly still as the monster did the same to his other nipple. That mouth, however, kept moving, leaving wet trails as it veered over his chest, up his neck and kissed him around the gag. Jozi snarled; if he didn't put up some sort of fight, Vex would catch on. "Now, now, manners, fuzz ball." Vex moved away from him, turning his back and giving Jozi a clear view. The wound on Vex's shoulder was scarred over, most likely closed up with a surgical laser, traces of crusted blood still on his skin. If he was going to take those limbs, Jozi needed to know how they interacted with the living flesh. Nirvana's father was the one who designed them and worked on Vex, hooking them up to the man's body. He knew they worked with, and were linked into, Vex's nervous system. Just cutting them off wouldn't do, Jozi still wanted the man alive to inflict his own revenge. He could see the green nanofibers running under the man's muscles as they glowed with each pulse and charge sent off to communicate with the biological neurons in Vex's body.

Nirvana needed Vex's arms because they contained the bio-map to using the nanotechnology currently in her body. They also hid the blueprints to get into REMISH City, the Higher City that contained Project WITHC's brain. Without those arms, their whole mission—the seven years spent training and planning—would be for nothing.

Vex turned, his metallic fingers playing with a thin steel rod in his hands, a red electrical wire attached to one end. Jozi didn't know what it was, but he didn't trust the glint in Vex's eyes either. The barbarous look made him shiver. Vex stepped forward, and Jozi's sensitive hearing picked up two things: a set of booted steps on a flight of stairs becoming louder, and the soft padded steps inside the dark room. Jozi suspected Vex was either barefoot or naked, and going by his research, he speculated the man was naked.

Jozi didn't avert his gaze from Vex to the newcomer who'd just entered; the scent told him what he need to know. Another altered. He could smell the bloody injury it bore, heard the slow, deep breaths and the dragging gait. Jozi closed his eyes when cool steel touched his stomach again, knowing it wasn't one of Vex's fingers, but rather that thin rod. It mapped down his abdomen, dipped into his belly button and then continued its path to his groin, sliding over his shaft and... *shit... fuck no!* The tip poked at his slit. That wire connected to something, steel conducted electricity. This time Jozi squirmed against his bonds, not caring if he bruised or bloodied his wrists or broke his bones. He didn't want that thing inside his cock. Who knew how many volts could travel along the rod?

Tendrils of panic wrapped around his chest. A sharp talon dragged along his arm, the finger and palm of its owner radiating heat. Jozi held his breath. His heart still strummed away. Just because he placed a damper on his pain and turned it to vengeance, didn't mean he had no fear. Ever since Beast-O's betrayal, Jozi had this annoying defect in his subconscious that liked to rear its ugly head and root him immobile when a larger male altered entered his space. And this time he couldn't help it, couldn't hold it back when that claw mapped over the scars on his lips.

Jozi just let go, grimacing when Vex spat a vicious curse, couldn't even gloat in the afterglow of giving Vex a mouth full of piss.

Cool fingers wrapped around his cock and balls, slowly increasing pressure. "That wasn't fucking nice!" Vex voice snapped in Jozi's right ear, the man's moist breath sending tremors down Jozi's skin.

But what troubled him more than the steel rod was the rising heat and blood flow along with the increase of breaths from the second male altered while Vex mauled Jozi's neck with his mouth.

Jozi couldn't afford to get killed over his intrusion between someone's chosen mate, and the way the air felt, the altered had informally claimed Vex as his. Jozi was nothing more than a rival.

"Enough." Vex scowled at the altered. The claw was slowly pulled back from Jozi's lips. He briefly glanced in the altered's direction and then stared. Sharp pointed ears, covered in short fur, stuck out from a silver mane streaked with black. The altered easily towered over Vex, its chest barren of fur like most fur-covered altereds. However, even with fur covering its shoulders and arms, Jozi could see the defined lines of immense and firm muscle. He swallowed hard... Beast-O was that big, had silver fur and sharp pointed ears; the only difference was the white-streaked emerald eyes.

Jozi realized he paid too much attention to the altered's appearance and none to Vex, till he felt a sharp poke in his arm followed by the burning sensation of a chemical flooding his veins.

It wouldn't take long for the substance to reach his heart, and his blood to carry the chemical throughout his body. He wasn't going to dismiss Nirvana's calculations; they might have been slightly off, but this, more than likely, was a drug to induce sexual stimulation.

He gasped, arching his back when a warm mouth closed around his cock and began to suck. It could only have been Vex because he could hear the altered growling next to him.

The mouth let off, snapping into the room, "Don't fucking scare it." Something flashed as Jozi opened his eyes, light bouncing off worn metal
followed by a loud smack and crash against the wall. "I don't want a stream of piss down my throat, you imbecile!"

The stupid fucking altered was in love with a man he allowed to abuse him. Jozi almost felt sorry for the beast. But that sorrow quickly drowned as his cock flared to life straining hard into the air. He growled when Vex wrapped cold fingers around his girth at the base, squeezing his cock, almost crushing and bruising Jozi's bulbus glandis. The grip lessened but still held firm. "I suggest you don't move your hips, or this won't end well for you, slave."

Jozi held his breath, his heart swelling in his chest, beating hard and fast. He felt the tip of the rod kiss his slit, and closing his eyes, he balled his fists with so much force, he could feel the pain raking up his joints. He bit down on the rubber ball, canines slicing into it as the rod slipped in an inch.

It burned, tingled, hurt with each gentle shove as the rod slid deeper and deeper, and Vex's hold lessened and lessened, a digit gently nudging and rubbing on the underside to encourage the rod deeper into Jozi's urethra.

Jozi's breath flared past his nostrils as he huffed, swallowing vigorously at the blood-laced saliva pooling in his mouth.

"You know what to do." He heard Vex snap, the monster's voice distant in Jozi's mind while he tried to fight against the sensation to piss himself. His cock felt full, violated, and it fucking burned, causing prickles in his eyes.

The metal holdings around his ankles released only for his calves to be grasped in meaty paws, the claws biting into his flesh as his legs were lifted and splayed. Hot damp breath spilled over his hole before a warm, slippery mouth and tongue danced down on him. Jozi didn't understand, he knew this was coming, this was part of what he'd signed up for, but it felt like betrayal, a liquid heat burning in his gut... Only Beast-O had tasted him there, only Beast-O had the right to ever touch him, penetrate him there, and it wasn't like this. A tongue brutally shoved into him, teeth nipping angrily at his ring while a mouth assaulted, kissing and sucking. He despaired with his body's response, opening up for the altered while fingers played over his chest, pinched his right nipple and pulled. Pain sparked and a groan ripped into the gag, one that he would never have given, forced against his will.

The first charge bulged his eyes as he bit into the gag, the groan now nothing more than a muffled scream making his throat hurt. A queasiness erupted in his gut, its claws like shards of ice as the volts increased. Heaving so fast he wasn't even sure the oxygen had time to reach his lungs before he gasped for the next breath. Everything stilled as the beast pulled away his mouth. Thick, cold streams of his own precum dripped from Jozi's cock to his balls, into his crack, sliding down over his clenching hole. He shivered, muscles convulsing with each increase in voltage, his balls and knot aching in dull, pleasurable pain.

Tears burned and blurred his vision, dripping from the corners of his eyes. They were shed for his own dignity. How this monster could play his own body against him, leaving his mind confused and broken to the pleasures and pain part of him anticipating, waiting, *even wanting* his hole to be filled. Pain sliced through him as the altered shoved into him, stretching him while the pulse seared into his cock sending electric fingers to his balls, groin and gut.

He felt the heat of *it* hover over his chest, his skin already pulling tight and blistering from its hot glow.

Through Jozi's assault, even though the very man he had given himself to given the last space of his heart, that part that wasn't infected by hate—had betrayed him, it was his name Jozi whispered in his mind. It was to Beast-O Jozi reached out for as caustic heat bit into his chest, ripping the scream from him, leaving his throat bloody and raw as torrid iron burned into his flesh, peeling and marking his skin.

The darkness came for him then—pain bursting, as his cock attempted to shoot out his cum but was blocked by the galvanic rod—swift and fast, its mouth opened wide and swallowed him whole.

Chapter Six

Vex stared out over the graveyard of scrap and metal, some still-moving mechanical parts and blinking lights. Yeah, it may have looked like a metal dump, but in actual fact, it was a gold mine, and he owned every inch of it. To the Higher Cities, it *was* a dump—literally—where the Tech waste was disposed, some of it brand new with only a minor dysfunction or defect... Hell, it was where Vex picked up the bitch. So she was a bit fucked in the motherboard, but one didn't let a dysfunctional cyborg-android slip by, no matter how psychopathic her humanoid brain had become. Besides, the bitch still served the purpose she was designed for, a bodyguard.

Vex lit the smoke dangling between his lips, annoyed that the only heat coming to him was that from the glowing tip of his right index finger. Sometimes these babies did come in handy, but he never really used them to their full potential, more just for crushing shit, it was way more fun and entertaining that way.

He peered up at the sky while Jace stood at the scrapyard's gate. The clouds were grumbling, growling and moving like a black-gray serpent coiling itself around and around and around, making the black mass denser. The icy air against his cheek was odd. ACID City was known for its warmer temperature but this, this commodity could only be one thing. He peered back at Jace manning the gate. Each time, the altered would give a slow glance at Vex and then snap his attention back to the merchants waiting to gain access to dig through the pile of abandoned and damage Tech.

But the emotional scars in Jace's eyes screamed clear every time. He wasn't stupid, had recognized it for a long time: those scars were reminiscent of the altered's emotional state, the cicatrix Vex had left on Jace's soul.

It was probably Stockholm or some shit. Vex couldn't care, no one gave a shit about psychological disorders and emotional bullshit anymore. It was a part of life, *everyfucker* knew that, everyone was damaged, one way or another; you were no different from anyone else's crazy.

Vex had learned that lesson very fucking fast the day they dug him up. He was jittering so bad they had to pin him down. First thing that had met Vex's gaze was nothing more than a motherfucking gun shoved between his lips. He'd swallowed around the barrel, but the fuck who owned it pressed it even

deeper to the back of his throat and slid it out only to drive it back in. His mouth had been so dry, his skin tight and feeling like wet flaking wax. Swallowing and sucking on the metal like it was a goddamn cock had helped dissipate the numbness in his mouth. Shit stuck to him—globs of wobbly gel as icy as the air in the dark room. His eyes had still burned from the dry air, while shadowed silhouettes moved at the corners of his vision.

He was yanked by his hair, screaming around the gun's barrel as they pulled him out of the hibernation cocoon, ripping out some tubes that were stuck in his arms. Blood and lime-green liquid spurted from his shoulders as they dragged him out and pressed him to his knees on the floor.

Vex'd dry heaved then fucked his guts out right there on that rusty steel floor, all bone-white milk and blood. Strands of spit and stomach juices still strung from his lips when he tried to push himself up.

It had slammed on him hard, heavy and fucking fast.

They were gone.

The arms and hands that he'd vowed to use to protect the ones he loved... were gone.

The shock of it was still seeping into his flesh, making its way to his soul, when a man... creature... *thing* stepped into his vision. Red fur lined his neck and sprouted out from the collar of the thick coat, while dried blood—cracked and brittle—stained his chest. He had no lower jaw, just gore and pus and spit dripping down from black, rotting fangs. In the light, Vex could see the mane was not red by nature, rather stained that way by blood. He had no nose, just two tiny black holes between the thousands of black button eyes covering his forehead to cheeks, and a vile, thick tongue dangled with a will of its own from the mouth.

His name was Thousand Eyes.

He was once the monarch of the Dark Heart Cartel.

He was.

There, in the cryo-hibernation lab, Vex's face had been shoved down against the floor while two of the cartel's lieutenants took turns at his ass till he had passed out.

When he awoke again, it was on a cold table, pain tender in his spine, shoulders and skull, and he had arms. Mechanical, artificial—powerful. He

could feel the embedded titanium move with his muscles in his shoulders, and he was fully aware of artificial nerve fibers running under his tissue, communicating with his spine and the organic ones running to his brain. They were light but strong. Fingers that could crash granite between them like it was a cluster of dust.

Thousand Eyes didn't live long after that, nor did any of the lieutenants.

No matter how they screamed, how he watched their bodily fluids explode between his fingers, no matter how many times he slammed their lifeless carcasses into the concrete floor, cracking it—no matter how much rage Vex threw at the world, it would never bring them back. Johan. Danny.

While blood had been busy drying on the walls like a fresh coat of paint, the scent of sickly gore, piss and shit thick in the air, Vex truly came to understand what Dark Heart stood for.

He turned back, glowering at Jace. Vex's life was once perfect, now it was hell, and if he could help it, so would be the life of every other fucker who came across his path.

He turned in his boots and walked up to the gate. He had barely reached Jace when the first strike came, glowing white-hot, vibrant and fast. One second, a fat blubber of a man stood there wearing a yellow-stained shirt and dirty pants—the next, he exploded like an overripe pimple from the lightning bolt feeding through him.

That was the sad shit. Being partly altered with animatronic parts and limbs, lightning from a Neo storm always targeted the positive discharges given off by the Tech, which meant Vex was an open target standing in a graveyard full of the shit.

Merchants had already scattered and the second strike was far overdue. Vex had heard rumors, filtered down from the Higher Cities, of storm harvesters who gathered the static electricity before it could discharge.

No such luck for the Fallen. And a Neo storm was nothing short of a supercell OD'd on nuclear static 'roids. It brought no rain, but temperatures dropped fast and sudden. If the lightning didn't kill you, you sure as shit would freeze to death; if not, well, the winds would throw you around like a nice mushy piñata.

He grasped Jace by the back of his coat just as the altered had secured the gate to the Tech graveyard. They needed to get into the sewers before the next bolt could strike.

The storm above was a ticking bomb. Every fucker knew after the second lightning bolt descended, a shitstorm of them would follow—each striking before its predecessor had even completed the electrostatic discharge, over and over again until the storm burned itself out.

Vex dragged the altered behind him—didn't understand why he was saving the fuck in the first place—skirting over the sludge-slicked street toward one of the entrances to the passages under the city. He balled his fist, striking the first merchant in his way straight into the wall, leaving a mark, an explosion of blood, its consistency like a popped can of red paint running down the rampart.

He squeezed into the tight, packed space, not caring that he was stepping on people, when a deafening sound erupted above them—so loud merchants ducked, covering their ears. Light flashed in briefly from the mouth of the tunnel before someone managed to shut the entrance. Whoever was still left outside, well... bye-bye to them. Vex let go of Jace and pushed farther down the tunnel, the electro fibers in his arms the only resident light down here. Scuffling feet dragged behind him and Vex smiled.

Of course there was a reason he saved Jace.

Vex kept walking till the passageway gave out into a larger space where a dark, almost-thick, tar-like sludge moved slowly in between the two walkways. He waited till he turned the corner before he grabbed Jace around the throat and shoved him to the wall. Those stained, fragmented orbs flashed in panic as Vex increased his grip just enough to leave bruises.

"You fucking useless fuck!" Vex snarled up at the animal. "You could feel the changing air currents, sense the fucking tremble in the sky, and yet you didn't do fuck to warn me!" He slammed a fist into Jace's stomach, saw those eyes roll back while eyelids fluttered and a cough escaped his mouth, laced with spurts of blood. Vex pulled the beast toward him and whispered in his ear, "Is this your plan, pretty baby? Kill the man you love, the man that saved you, the man that gave your life meaning again? *This* is how you repay him?" Vex drove his knee into Jace's crotch, heard the gasp and let go. He watched as the altered stumbled to his knees, another rush of blood erupting from his lips while he clutched his dick. Jace looked up, shock and horror glistening in those wet eyes. The unintentional error of him not being aware of his surroundings shone clear in a plea for Vex to understand and overlook the mistake.

Vex knew the impact his words would have on Jace, how deeply they would scar the animal's soul.

Vex huffed, grabbed Jace by the mane and flung him into the wastewater. "Take a dip, kiddo, and clear your head," he barked over his shoulder while taking a step away. "And be sure to have yourself scrubbed clean before you enter my fucking club. There might still be use for you yet."

Vex walked off, leaving Jace to ferment in his own fucked-up mind. No doubt the beast would be punishing himself physically and mentally for his screwup.

It hadn't taken Vex long to navigate the underground sewage system till he stood directly under the club. The last time Jace fucked up and took his own beating upon himself, he had been missing for two whole weeks. This time would be no different.

Vex went straight for the shower to get rid of the smell of grime and shit from his skin and hair.

He was still drying off with the brown-stained towel, when the first loud, violent shattering rocked the club, pushing him off his feet. Dust crumbled above him making him glance up. Seconds later, another shock wave came, rumbling into a loud boom, causing a thick split to appear in the concrete of the bathroom's roof before the rock came crashing down upon him.

Chapter Seven

Hel stood in the rubble of torn metal innards, spilled concrete and stone guts. The floor was covered with a knee-deep sludge, a combination of heatsuppressant liquid and water spitting from the outdated furnaces. It had gone boom after Vailon so kindly added the smelting compounds to the stagnant water that had remained.

The motherfucker was currently crouched over two prone figures... In his haste, a few steps were missed. Months of planning, fucked over and pissed on by a hard-on. Hel couldn't say he felt sorry for the poor bloodsucker. Crispy charred suited the twins.

Hel rubbed his straining cock behind his leathers, the smell of carnage and death sweet on his tongue. He stepped over an altered female, her synthetic bodice and mini melted into her oozing, splitting skin, deep-crimson blood and clear liquid bubbling from the wounds. She was lying in a small pool of yellowing liquid, battery piss and other bits floating from her core out into the rest of the muddy sludge.

A small whimper had him turning around in a semicircle, gaze canvassing the once-popular club. *There*. Curled in a corner, a club whore huddled against one of the remaining outer walls. His face was partially caved in below his eye socket, jaw hanging askew, a bloody cut running from the corner of his mouth to the corner of his once-regal nose. Both eyes had started to swell and would be completely swollen shut by the end of the day. The sight was arousing, Hel's adrenaline, already high, spiking. *Fight. Fuck.* His body's natural instinct cut him to the bone.

With heavy booted steps, he walked over to the small whimpering man and extended a leather-clad arm. As soon as the boy took it, he pulled the whore to his feet and up over his shoulder. He sauntered over to an upturned table with his prize, dropping it onto the cold wet floor before pushing the metal contraption back to its feet.

Hel pulled the whore up by his bright-blue mane, its texture artificial and sticky to the touch. With a deep growl he let go, and the whimpering thing dropped to the table, half-on, half-off, fingers curled around the edges as he tried to right himself. The position would do, so Hel kicked the dangling legs apart and wedged his knee between the jumping, squirming limbs. With a claw firmly secured around the whore's throat, Hel made quick work of the short elastic latex covering its hips and crotch. He ripped the soft plastic to pieces, granting him easy access to his pulsing orifice.

Hel roared as his cock punished the wet hole; the small tears on its rim stretching and pissing liquid from its gaping edges that ran in small rivulets down the abused and scarred body. *A little pleasure with his pain*.

He rode the whore, pushing deeper and harder, one fist holding onto the filthy mane, the other placed over the chest harness currently cutting deep red lines into its wearer. Poor boy was howling, his red, rock-hard cock in a crude metal cage spitting pink, curdled liquid between his legs. With a final brutal thrust, Hel pulled out before spilling his seed, the bright-pink bubble butt enticing enough for him to mark it.

He stumbled back before his eruption stopped. Thick globs of cum dripped down his painfully throbbing dick. This was their curse, their one flaw.

Being altered—half-human, half-animal—still had its side effects; if only the researchers had known they didn't have to push the first generation much to breed. The animal mating instinct had manifested in more fucked-up ways than one. The constant need for sexual release of their human continuous-breeder counterpart overrode their seasonal-breeder twin like a dying wish. Male altereds had become more aggressive and violent, while females had become more lax and passive.

It was those altereds who favored the same sex that had the death wish: when males rut, it always turned into a bloodbath to determine the more dominant one. Some, like this fucking whore runt, were taught from birth they would be nothing more than an outlet.

It was during heat, as Hel now found himself in—the four-day time period that transpired once a month in both sexes of altered—that things became deadly. The maddening pain caused by the swelling of a male altered's knot basically drove them to fuck anything with a willing or not-so-willing orifice.

Hel fixed his leathers before leaning over the boy now kneeling before him. "I'm your Master." *Like fuck he was.* He didn't have time for this shit. He bent down and lifted the boy from his knees by his harness, moving his mouth a hair's breadth from the slut's, and licked a line from the unscarred part of his mouth to his small and pointed ears.

"You're mine, boy," he growled, and the slut whimpered in acceptance. Fear glazed his eyes as he looked up at Hel. With one fluid motion Hel clamped his large hand around the whore's mouth and squeezed. Bone cracked and gore bled from between his fingers. The whore clawed at Hel's forearm, but it was a futile attempt. "Thanks for the fuck," he said as those eyes paled and life drained from them. "I needed that." Hel snorted, and tore off the boy's jaw.

He released the harness, letting the carcass fall to the floor, and strolled to where one of his diggers was currently lifting the blast door.

Prax was heaving the heavy door to one side, his shoulders straining and bulging under his white-green fur, as Hel came up to him. Poor fucker's face and chest were covered in a slight sheen of moisture even though his altered genes increased his power to a point that he could easily lift and move half-ton objects without breaking a sweat. The concrete fallout door must have been reinforced before the final placing. The club owner and monarch must have spent a considerable amount on it—perhaps even called in a few debts.

Hel looked down into the black hole Prax uncovered. Emergency lighting pulsated first on and then off. Phase two of his plan only kicked in now. Shit knew nothing went right today. Vailon had done his job, poorly, but the fucker had taken his prize and disappeared from the scene shortly before Hel shot his load.

Prax and the rest of the diggers and scavengers looked at Hel for the signal before descending into the deep-underground living quarters. They knew not to touch what was his.

Screams, whimpers and the sound of rough fucking filled the stone passages—whores, slaves and maggots streaming from its underbelly. None attracted Hel's attention as he pushed his way through a small group being run to ground by Prax and the pack.

Hel's nostrils flared as the scent of others started dissipating. *There*. He took off at a running sprint, lights flickering on—off—on, the crumbling foundations now teetering on edge, about to sink. He needed to find *him*, could taste him on his tongue, could feel his skin pressed to Hel's.

In the dark, between crumbling rock, steel and filth, he found him—his left arm twisted between the rubble. With a growl, Hel heaved a large piece of concrete off its victim, the slow rise of his chest the only indication of life. A steel beam had partially severed the man's right arm, but that would be seen to later. *As would other things*.

He lifted the limp body over his shoulder and started his assent as the internal framework of the walls gave way. Some of his scavengers were still trapped below—Hel couldn't give a fuck.

Hel grinned darkly and licked his lips. It was time for a meal.

Chapter Eight

Everything hurt, everything throbbed, and the black world was spinning in several different directions—too fast for Vex to grab a hold of and secure himself. Through the haze, the tangy smell of blood filtered through to his nostrils, as well as the distinct, sharp prickle of burning wood.

He sluggishly raised his head and pressed bare feet into grainy ground. Soft and loose under his soles, it gave way, and his feet sank into the gritty crumbs.

But there was another scent, familiar, warm and so welcoming...

It reminded him of a time long past. A time he was human. A time when there was love, passion, bliss and... happiness. A time that hurt him to be reminded of. But he would never be human again. Humanity was long gone, fucked over and pissed out. Maggot fodder, and a cozy, soft blanket to keep the monsters at bay. That time had died as he fucked over every motherfucker, long and hard, before spilling their cum and blood for reminding him of his humanity. That shit was for fairies and unicorns.

The crackle of the synth fire grew louder, its music drowned out by a rumbling, dark, carnivorous growl... perhaps just his own hearing acting up after... the information was there... he just wasn't able to access it at the fucking moment. Not only were his senses fucking unreliable, but his mind had taken a little trip down the yellow brick road all the way to who the fuck knows happy land of Oz. Piece of shit fucking with his heart as well, pink fur and sweet fucking cotton candy drowning out the bitter aftertaste of his own blood.

He needed to beat the shit out of the little puppy—fuck him good and bloody and smear his open wounds with battery acid. If Vex could just get his head working right. Fucking piss-poor excuse of a mind, wandering off to somewhere. *Not the fuck now*. He needed to figure out where the fuck he was and fucking kill every piece of shit that had even one thought to cross him.

Cold air breathed along his damp, warm skin, causing ripples of pain up through his abdomen and spine, sending off vicious flares in his shoulder and neck. He shivered. Dark gloom surrounded him, his sight only allowing him to see where the light of the flames lapped along bedrock. It stretched behind him. He could feel its rough and tattered surface biting into his back before extending all the way above him to the roof of the cave. The air was dry here, smelling clean except for his own blood and... *No*, whatever that body odor was, it was only a trick his delusional mind had played on him after he'd somehow knocked his brains loose in the explosion.

Silence settled except for the wolf cry of the wind, like a hungry, wailing child as it cut through the caverns.

He knew where he was. And more importantly, in whose territory and claws.

The Black Desert. Gunger territory.

Someone had fucked him over; it was bound to happen, was a fucking law in the Fallen Cities.

Looking down at his naked body, his stomach revolted and convulsed. Gungers were known for keeping and selling slaves. Didn't matter who had what piece of equipment, a hole was a hole, as long as it was warm, wet and mostly willing. Though the last fact would be forced with pain, pleasure and with whatever instrument the filth was acquainted with. Legs and arms weren't necessities for a hole, so keeping them was low on the list of priorities. Fresh meat was a delicacy and many slaves sold pieces for as little as one night's reprieve. He still had both his legs and feet. Clearly whatever piece of shit had brought him here was yet to have a meal or was perhaps saving him for a special occasion.

Vex followed the trail of grime and sweat that ran the length of his body, up his scarred chest to his left shoulder and all the way up his mechanical arm. It was partly twisted; the outside exo-titanium on his shoulder twisting in on itself, leaving artificial nerve endings connected to his bio ones exposed in the bone-cold, biting air. The rest of his left arm looked just as bad, the elbow joint secured to the cave's wall with a thick rusted bolt hammered right through it. His left hand was bolted in the same way, though with sheer force of will he was still able to move some of the artificial fingers. It was a start. He didn't know how much movement he would retain after the bolts were removed. *If they were to be removed.* The thought sent a shudder up his spine as cold sweat broke out over his body.

Vex turned his head, taking in his right arm, clearly pinned as the left. His breath caught as he took in the warped metal. His right arm had been partly severed from his torso, a deep open wound of crushed metal and raw meat, oozing fluid into a dirty cloth. The compact bandage pressed into the wound, so similar to what he had experienced in what, now, felt like a lifetime ago, the loss of his arms a distant memory that surfaced once again. You thought you would die then, fucker. Perhaps now death will claim your rotting soul.

Then you can be with them. Beg their forgiveness.

Hel watched the altered young struggle to right his senses, this one different than any other he had encountered before. New. Evolved. Just like Gin.

Scents clung to his prize as Hel had carried him out of the crumbled remains of the Black Eye. Two distinct and different scents. One he could not find amongst the chaos, but the other piece of rancid meat was securely clasped in Prax's arms, its limp body held against Prax's dense muscled chest.

The altered young had been barren of any fur and clothes except for the metal collar around its neck, while fading bruises marred the albino flesh. The Dark Heart coat of arms was burned into the thing's chest, a telltale token of ownership that the boy was nothing more than the sole property of the cartel's monarch.

Hel had allowed Prax that special treat. The whore was currently tenderizing on Prax's sleeping chamber's floor. A meal to be enjoyed over time, enough for the period it would take—the breeder already chained and hobbled to Prax's sleeping platform—to birth his own offspring.

The rest of the cartel's lieutenants, those that had still been breathing, were being roasted alive on an open fire outside the cave's entrance—a thank you gift Hel granted the pack as part of the celebration for retrieving his prize.

The lieutenants' eyes glazed over as their flesh was being stripped for dinner. One of the pack was currently holding a dying lieutenant's hip at a clearly disjointed angle, ripping off its yellow dripping cock and shoving it into a stretched mouth, grunting and howling its pleasure at the fulfilling warmth, sinking its teeth in and allowing the juices to spill down its throat. It was sick and beautiful.

Hel left the children to play and growled at Prax to guard the door.

He moved toward his sleeping, curled-up boy and knelt next to the fur-lined cot. With knowing fingers, he tucked Gin in once again, ruffling his curls before leaving him sleeping. Comatose, belly swollen by a meal of fresh meat, the boy would be out for a while. He left his son to sleep as he approached his struggling bull. Vex snapped to attention when a low growl vibrated from the darkness ahead of him, accompanied by the heavy sound of firm feet crunching in the black sand, coming closer. "Come out and face me like a man, fucker," he growled back, nostrils flaring in anger. He was assaulted by a heady mix of strong sweaty musk; the scent searing his nostrils as its wearer came closer.

Vex was unsure of the time that had passed since his capture. His own body reeked of things he tried to block from his senses. He was also burning up and sweating his own fucking water supply. Tears dripped from his flesh onto the dirty, moist sand below him, mixing with the leftover filth that had run down his body during his captivity.

An immense silhouette stepped through the gloom, its mass and build the largest he had seen on any altered. Scuffed black military shit-kickers came into view followed by heavy, muscular legs tightly wrapped by worn leather pants. The male was stripped naked from his hipbones up, a white-furred belly and extended ebony chest in full view. His arms, corded with dense muscle and bulging blue veins running their length, ended in large, rough, ivory-clawed hands. One clutched a length of silver rope. Vex eyed the item suspiciously, wondering what game they were about to play.

Vex glared up at the face that was still shadowed and replayed the possible scenarios over and over again: an unwilling plaything or soon-to-be fresh meat. He didn't like either, but the first would possibly lead to an opportunity to escape. *If only I can dislodge the bolts to my left arm.* As if he had spoken out loud, deep masculine laughter caressed his skin, making it pebble with pleasure, fear and the promise of pain.

"Not yet, baby. We still have a game to play."

Vex gasped, and it felt like his whole body was being torn apart with that single breath.

He knew that voice, didn't want to recognize it, wanted to blame it on the crack to his skull that still harbored dried blood. But no matter its deepness, its rough tremble, Vex couldn't fight the whole-body shudder that shredded through his sore flesh nor the erratic pounding of his heart and soul.

No. No, you're wrong. He's dead; they are fucking DEAD! Stop thinking. Fight. Remember your instin—The dark growl crashed through his conscience, slicing and twisting his words back at him. He snapped his eyes closed just before light could reveal the beast's face. "Get on with it, motherfucker!" he shouted. "I want to memorize this before the end, so I can find you in Hell itself."

"Then we would both be home," the fucker whispered, his warm breath cruising Vex's face, his claw cupping Vex's right cheek, the hand so large his whole head could fit in its palm. "Hell would be a paradise compared to what we have lived through." Lips spoke before brushing over Vex's trembling ones.

He knew from stories told, based on physical appearance, who this was. But based on haunting memories, it couldn't... Hel was not *him*, could never be *him*.

They died!

His breath froze in place as callused palms took hold around his neck and started to squeeze. Bright spotted lights danced behind his lids, blackness wrapped around his mind as more air was stolen from him by brutal lips slanting over his. The taste of metal ran over his tongue as Hel explored his mouth, taking more and more. The kiss left him dazed, squirming in his own skin, his body pushing into and seeking the larger one's heat. Held in place, secured not just by the rusted bolts in his arms but by a ridge of large muscles pressing him into the cave wall, the beast tasted and devoured his mouth.

Vex took in a deep, ragged, burning breath of air as the rough hands left his neck and ran down his chest, twisting and pinching his tits. Hard, sharp nails scraped and tore into the tortured extended nips, ripping a weak growl at the invasion. Thick arms, the muscle solid against his skin, wrapped around his torso, lifting him onto the beast's lap. The altered was large and granite in his leathers, pressing into Vex's buttcheek. That mouth latched on to his right nipple, taking his raw tit between hot lips and flicking the bleeding bud with its tongue.

Daggerlike teeth nipped at his flesh leaving small cuts that burned along his neck, before that tongue ruthlessly licked at Vex's chin.

Lips moved to his again and at the last moment, he turned his face, not willing to grant the kiss. A deep grunt left Hel's kissers before he locked onto the cluster of dense muscle pulsating like a live animal in Vex's neck.

Vex screamed, a weak sound as that mouth bit into him, teeth cutting through muscle and flesh, sinking deep.

Why there? Why there where he used to mark me? Why?

He was shaking in the altered's arms—body, soul, heart—heavy with pain.

The beast pulled back, gripped a fistful of Vex's hair and growled, "Look at me! Look me in the eyes and see what you have caused, see the pain you left there!"

Vex's lips trembled as he slowly forced open his eyes and met his own fear, so deeply rooted in his heart. Only when those eyes gazed back at him was that fear ripped from its roots, leaving open wounds on his shattered soul. No matter how altered they were, how deranged the wounds that had never healed looked, how hard he screamed inside his head to deny the truth, those eyes still belonged to the only man Vex... *Marcus*... had and would ever love.

Hel watched as pain stormed over Vex's face. The mark Hel had made seeped fresh crimson down his husband's scarred body. He had once loved this man, adored him. Shared his soul with him...

Could he once again? No, that man was dead. Left him and their child to fend in a dying world for themselves, left him alone to bear the burden and watch their son choke on his last breath as he died on that hospital bed from White Fever. They wouldn't even let him hold Danny one last time, just whisked his little body away to be burned with the other men, women and children that had perished. No gravestone. No burial. Just one massive pit of burning carcasses.

To love this man would mean to forgive him, to let go of the black bubbling anger that had spewed and thickened in Hel's gut.

But he was here, in Hel's arms, held against him, eyes different but still the same, held the same scars as Hel's own. And Hel wanted him, every inch of him, to hold, to hurt, to torture, *to love... again someday... maybe...*

He tightened his grip on Vex's hair, tilting his head back for another savage kiss, all teeth, nipping at already swollen lips. The metallic taste of blood spread over his tongue and wrapped around his senses as male musk and sweat drifted around them. The air, a pulsing organism of pure lust, was thick with need and want.

Hel startled Vex as he pulled back and released the man's feet. He bent and picked up the silver rope from the floor. It was a short length but more than sufficient for what he had planned. Twist, turn, wrap and twist again. The coarse strands wrapped securely around Vex's balls, between them and around the base of a heavy swollen cock. The sight was beautiful. Bronze skin wrapped in silver, the darkening balls, heavy and tight, separated with an inch of hoary rope from the base of a drooling dick, held tightly in his fist. He toyed with the slab of steel meat, running a nail along the angry bulging veins, and loved the way his husband writhed, shivered and shattered at Hel's dangerous touch. Hel licked his lips. His husband understood these claws could tear him to shreds, rip him apart in seconds; his surrender was a beautifully given sign that Hel was the more dominant species.

He reached for his leathers, ripped open the pants and fisted his dick, pulling back the foreskin to reveal a pointed arctic-blue head, translucent precum as thick as cream pearling at the slit. He brought their cocks together and rubbed his against Vex's, smearing and mixing their juices.

"It's still so breathtaking," Hel grunted, running his nails along the underside of Vex's dick, watched as the thick member bobbed at his touch. He stepped closer, pressing his cock against Vex's groin, shivering with pleasure and carnal need when he felt Vex's dick nestled against his white pubic hair.

Slowly he lifted his lover's face by the hair, grasped both their dicks in his left hand and took his husband's mouth.

Gently, but firmly, Hel went to work pumping their cocks with his hand. Vex was still shaking, his kiss still laced with fear. "Yeah, baby. It's going inside you." The gasp was loud and audible in Hel's mouth, so was the soft, pleading, *No, please,* from his husband's lips.

Hel pulled back. "You'll take it!" he snarled, spitting, anger pulsing in every cell from the mere thought. "You will take every fucking inch inside you, for every fucking time you allowed another to touch you... You are mine, always and fucking forever, Marcus!" He wrapped his fingers tightly around their cocks and squeezed, heard his husband's glorious, painful cry of agony as he bruised them both. The sensation along with the pain sent a pulsing shudder of ecstasy racing down Hel's spine.

Hel could recall Marcus never liked to bottom, back then when they were *still*. Hel's girth was too large for the man. Now, though, it was double in size, reaching over nine inches. Luckily for Vex, its length still remained the same at eight.

He released his hold on Vex's hair and their cocks and grasped Vex's balls, gently twisting his fingers in a whispered touch around the sac.

He bent at the knees and pulled back his lips, displaying his sharp fangs. He stuck out his thick speared tongue, gently running the pale-blue organ along his lover's length, its tip sharp and pointed enough that he could poke it a couple of inches into Vex's piss slit. Hel smiled and darted forth his inner tongue down Vex's urethra, relishing in the agonizing scream above him as he pushed his

proboscis down to sample his husband's nectar right at the source. Hel closed his lips around the cock's head and sucked while coaxing the precum from deep down inside his lover's slit. He could fuck Vex's cock, but Hel's knot was a cramp of swelling pain, needing to be inside his lover.

He retracted his inner tongue, slipping his normal one back behind his lips and allowed the nectar to spurt forth filling his mouth. Hel swallowed and savored the delicious taste: some parts of being altered really did have their advantages, others, such as another painful spasm from his knot, not so much.

He grunted, pushing up off his knees, lapping, nipping and kissing his way across the flesh covered in sweat and traces of blood. Hel moved his mouth first to one pebbled nipple and then the other, biting, sucking and gnawing at the skin as the body against him pulled back but then arched, asking for more. He was more than happy to grant the silent request. With his left hand, he fisted the drenched crown of the cock in his grip while the right tugged and pulled on the roped ball sac. He took in every gasp; every growl; every *fuck you, cunt*, and *motherfucker*; licked his lips at the shuddered *please*, and continued his game. He heard—as he felt Vex reach that limit, a dry, forced orgasm wracking his body before a scream of pain and pleasure erupted from his mouth—a name ripped from his very soul: *Johan*.

Hel snarled at hearing his old name, the sorrow and pain that it carried, and latched on to Vex's throat, hearing a gasp from parted, panting lips.

He was barely hanging on to his own sanity, his control slipping, shattering to the floor just as that bottle of rum had the day his husband left for war.

He tasted blood as he lifted a limp leg over his hip and drove his cock home. Warm flesh enveloped him, contracted in a tight spasm as Hel pushed deeper. He snarled and growled at Vex's delicate neck flesh, forcing his knot past the resistant muscle, ripping an ear-piercing scream from his husband's throat, and started pumping like the animal he was. He let loose his latch from Vex's neck, licked his blood-soaked lips and locked his glower onto the one he hated and loved—the one he wanted to slaughter. He could see the recognition, see Fate in the full fucking orange-and-violet orbs.

With a palm slick with sweat, he clamped a possessive grip down on Vex's cock. The fucker was turning purple, so the pretty rope jewelry had to go. With one hand still holding a muscular thigh to his hip, hips that were still pumping at the speed of a fucking freight train, Hel undid the rope with two quick tugs. Warm streams of pearly cum hit his hand, furry belly and his chin, scattered

drops landing on Vex's own lips. Hel roared and followed the drops to take one last savage kiss from his husband's lips before his own orgasm was milked from his body by the spasming hole clamped around his thickening cock.

Hel felt the barb from his knot engage before lifting his arms to circle around Vex's torso and securing them around each shoulder. "I got you, babe. Always. Forever," he whispered, licking at the salty pearls pooling below closed eyes, before he ripped his lover from the pinned cybernetic arms.

Vex felt his world shatter around him as the words left his mouth. "Johan." His body twitched, going cold and numb postorgasm. He felt strong arms wrap around him, warm, wet lips lap at his, before white-hot searing pain tore through his mind as Johan ripped his body away from the wall, where his arms were still bolted.

Darkness.

And then nothing.

Chapter Nine

Jozi's breath surged. The cave was quiet, soft snoring being its only voice while the wind whispered outside. It was strangely warm, clean and comforting in the nest of pelts, the fur that of slaughtered altereds. Arms curled around him, tightening, pulling him closer to the heated chest, the beast's cock still hard inside him, still fucking leaking in his ass. Thank fuck the altered wasn't in heat—unlike the other one that had carried Vex off to who the fuck knew where.

That one scared Jozi, twisted the knots of fear in his stomach to painful cramps. His scent wasn't like any other altered: very few were even aware of them, that even within their species there was a hierarchy. This one was more than likely an alpha. As rare as they were, Jozi had met one before, still carried more than just the physical scars he had left on Jozi's mouth.

Nirvana had fucked up royally. Screwed this shit up with her calculations, and in this moment, Jozi's faith in her was wavering fast.

He was supposed to be the fuck slave for the Dark Heart Cartel's monarch, but just till the point the man got comfortable with Jozi being nothing more than a personal bed whore. Then, he would strike. But now that whole plan was dead, rotting six feet under and would never transpire.

What really got Jozi's attention was the faint scent drifting from farther back in the cave: it smelled... like his own kind, a seventh-generation altered.

Now was the time to recoup and formulate a new plan. He would get the arms one way or another and he would get revenge for his family's death.

Jozi gave a whimper, pushing back on the fat dick, sure to make his voice just loud enough for the altered to wake up. "More," he purred, gently rocking his hips, driving that pole in and out of his tender hole. He couldn't remember how many times the beast had fucked him before he settled down to sleep cuddled up to Jozi. A low growl reverberated from the chest, arms releasing him and flipping him around as that cock was driven into him again. The beast's yellow eyes glowered down from where he hovered above Jozi, lust thick and heady in his scent and clouding his gaze.

Jozi could play this game very, very well and with deadly precision. With this one, he didn't really have to try all that hard either.

When the altered took him, held him down and shoved into him the first time, Jozi was scared the animal might just fuck him to death. This one was so different, gentle even when he had started to fuck Jozi slowly, almost making love to him.

He whimpered again in false need, pushing his chest out to the altered. The animal didn't hesitate, so bent on having his fill that he failed to guard himself against the one rule in this life that was so deeply set in stone. It didn't matter that he was pinning Jozi's arms to the cave floor with steel strength. There were other ways to kill.

Jozi moaned softly as the altered's lips sucked on his nipple, even throwing in a little gasp to lead him on, those hips still rocking as the beast moved inside him, gently. A couple of thrusts in and Jozi made his move. "Please," he whispered to grab the altered's attention. The fiend pulled back, hair curling around a thick neck and hanging down the male's shoulders.

He licked his lips and Jozi complied, setting in motion his second morsel of allure. "Please." He leaned forward. "Kiss me," he begged, even softening his eyes and whimpering again.

The altered grunted, the thirst in his eyes blowing his vertical slits wide.

Jozi took the offered mouth, allowing the tongue to invade him, trying hard to hold back the shudder rippling through him when the altered grunted and spilled inside him. Jozi kept kissing, kept up his little game till the beast pulled back and pinned Jozi to the floor with its weight, pressing Jozi's face into its neck.

"Such a good, little—"

The altered gurgled as warm blood filled Jozi's mouth. He sank his teeth deep, locking his jaw in place, and then pulled, ripping the beast's throat out.

Jozi spat out the blood and chunk of meat and pushed the dead bulk off him, biting back the sting in his ass as he pushed to his feet, the fuck's seed now dripping from his hole. He wiped at his mouth with his arm. Without the beast's heat, the cold air in the cave bit into his warm flesh fast. He scanned the makeshift chamber for anything he could slip on to warm him against the cold.

A soft whimper drew his attention. He turned only to see the fogged-over eyes of the red-haired female... She was human, older, her arms secured with rusted chain bolted into the bedrock of the wall, her wrists raw and bruised where she had pulled on it. Only a fur blanket covered her where she lay in between other pelts. These first-generation altereds truly did live like animals. Cautiously, Jozi moved closer. By the looks of it, the female human had been bred and now was only held alive to birth the young growing inside her, her belly full and swollen, making a dome underneath the blanket.

"Please... just... kill me." Her words didn't shock him. And it sure wasn't something he hadn't heard before. The human knew what she was, what she was being kept alive for and that in the end she would just be killed. Most likely eaten afterward. Jozi took a deep breath, swallowed and nodded his head.

He moved silently along the shadows of the cave, wrapping the fur pelts tight around his body, his senses honed in on the faint smell. But with it came the scent of blood and the overmuscled sweaty stench of the leader of this group of Gungers. He knew he was entering the altered's territory. This part of the cave reeked of where the beast had marked its domain.

His ears twitched as he held his breath, listening for any sound that would indicate he had safe passage. At the mouth of the cave, a wired fur pelt lay discarded. Jozi dropped the one he was currently wrapped in and covered up with the new one. It wasn't as clean but would serve its purpose to help partly mask his scent with that of a more familiar one.

He snuck in deeper, thankful for the low-burning fire kept safely in some rusted barrel.

He could make out the altered alpha on the makeshift mattress. He wasn't covered in fur pelts, his ebony back rippling in the light with thick muscles and shining with a coating of sweat. The alpha was in heat, which meant he wouldn't sleep for too long, only until he needed to breed again.

The markings, however, glowing on the altered's skin were strangely alluring and beautiful. They kept changing, morphing and dancing into different shapes with each deep breath the altered took. Their edge was a vibrant lightning blue, a dark line running an inch inside along the marking's shape. Toward the center, the blue faded into deep red and finally a bright neon purple in the mark's core. Jozi knew those were marks of warning: he had met quite a number of altereds that were deadly to touch.

Jozi sniffed the air current. What he was after was deeper back. It was darker here as he made his way over the soft sand. The smell of the altered he had faintly caught before was stronger too. But so, also, was Vex's scent, along with the smell of blood and semen. He rounded the cave's mouth, only to bulge his eyes when he found the source of the scent. There was a little crib, something moving under furskins, and next to it, the low glow of cryo-gel

shining from a transporter pod. He pressed his hand and face against the glass and peered inside, only to swallow rapidly. Vex was secured in the icy gel, captured in a state of neither sleep nor death. And the man's arms were fucking missing.

Jozi balled his fist. Just coming in here was putting himself into a very bad situation. He highly doubted if the alpha awoke and found him here that he could play the "Trojan whore in love with his master" card.

He needed to find those arms, and fast. A giggle drew his attention to the small cot next to the pod. Jozi moved over to it and gently pulled back the skins to find the deepest, most electric-blue eyes peering back at him. But more alarming was that the baby's unique scent also held a trace of the alpha in the adjoining chamber.

Jozi's mind sparked with an idea, but first he needed to find those fucking arms. Then... if Vex held any significance to the alpha, this plan would work. Clearly those arms were of no importance to the beast, but the infant...

Chapter Ten

Three days prior to Jozi's capture.

The Fallen City SiWáNG, named after its Chinese monarch, was set between the foothills of the Belue Mountains. The Fortress Between Sky was its name—chosen by Longwei before being poisoned by his first son.

Nirvana had calculated her ascent into the city, moved through Death's gates without detection. Wagers she had made were paid by sex, blood, flesh and lives of the slaves she had brought with her. It took a mere week of ritual to prove her loyalty, nothing compared to the century of alteration and mechanization of her body and mind.

Death held her gaze as she entered, the sneer of pleasure evident over his leathery face. Years of ingesting his own blends had given him life after, but it was a life hard earned. His violent past and hunger for the eternal—as his father Longwei had almost attained—was now his only pursuit. All but his inner circle were considered nothing more than rodents to be trampled on. He smiled at her as he pushed a young girl, barely capable of breeding, off his lap, blood stains clear between her legs—the same stain spread over pure raw silk—his still-hard cock covered with the girl's essence.

This would be part of the test, Nirvana knew. Her formulation of the outcome allowed for a two percent deviation, not enough for her to show her disloyalty. The monarch hall echoed in silence as she stepped toward him, the teaching of the T'ang Dynasty clear in her mind. Her singular foot was light as a feather on the cold stone, while her mechanical replacement—a dark synthetic polymer—cut along with even less sound.

Movement elegant, like a paper parchment in the wind, she slipped into a formal bow, her hair falling forward along her face, the luminous edges; deathly perfection. Heavy black bangs hid her eyes from Death, a law for all looking upon him in close confines. The last to do so still hung from the hall's mantel by a weathered rope threaded through oozing eye sockets.

Nirvana pushed forward in her kneeling position, cleaning Death's cock with gathered strands of her hair, the end cut like deadly blades of black liquid chromium. Once cleaned she stepped back, gaze still cast downward, her diamond encrusted eyelashes lowered, her target still in sight. A single gong brought the hour to a close, before the strings of an ancient Guzheng began to sing. Before her change, the mathematic calculations of music together with the unstructured flow of free dance had been a conundrum of such proportions that she, Nirvana, now carried with her in her active memory a complete library of all music, all dance. In the decades that followed, she had mastered all. Today, this meeting, and her unspoken loyalty had come to pass because of it.

The music carried a weary tone, truly sad—the conductor with eyes as dark as night, looking off in the distance. Nirvana let the tone dictate her movement, her actions that of the silk itself. The monarch had gifted her the white Rugun, its sleeve lengthened into flowing ribbons, now dancing in a breeze created with Nirvana's own pulsing field. Beauty and grace, the music of death. The ribbon dance, known as "*Cai Dai Wu Dao*," now a long lost art—as lost as Nirvana, as priceless. She was singular, unique.

White silk twirled around her body, a full, shimmering vortex, her polymer leg a pointed edge allowing her body full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree spirals—flowing around and above her, the extended fabric, wild but with uniform, calculated movement. Beauty in the unknown. All too soon red started seeping from crystal-encrusted cuffs, the small blades positioned within the sleeves to reproduce Lingchi, death by a thousand cuts, an art left behind for its brutality and magnificence.

White silk became crimson.

A slight light flickered at the outside of her vision, the detection program for her final assignment. Data loaded, computing—verification in process. Nirvana equated the percentage manually with several loops of silk, her movement fluid toward Death himself, his fist wrapped in a tight claw, pumping with each twirl, each drop of red. A sleeve wrapped itself in motion around the supporting beam above, allowing her dance to soar into the sky. White enfolded about her torso, her right arm and neck as her body positioned in the Lotus, turning on its own, unraveling her in a cloud above the monarch.

By the time he met her eyes again, her mechanical leg was deeply imbedded into his piss slit, his cock severed and pushed past his own ass lips.

A moment in time, and yet it would be held close as a memory, one that brought nothing but empty emotion. The Chinese monarch lay slumped over his throne-like chair, Death shrouded by death, seeping blood over black velvet, hand-embroidered lilies and leftover cum. A sight to behold, one that would send shivers and ripples along the veins of the city and into the depth below. Nirvana slipped her body from her robes, or her robes from her body, both straining for release. She held out her hands in supplication, the servants around her curtsying, scampering to dress her in Death's own family robes. Death's hall was now her own, a gift, a prize, a new playground. She ascended the single step, pushed the once-eternal monarch from his place, toppling him down onto the floor. Nirvana gave a slight nod to a quivering servant who dragged the bleeding corpse across the floor, leaving a sluglike trail of innards and gore behind. In time the stain would blend with the existing marble—a piece of art, a warning to those who would come.

As Nirvana settled, a sight of crystal-blue and snow-white entered the chamber, a tiny nymph pouncing around as a child would, untouched beauty and innocence. *But only to those that did not touch the ice within*.

"Oh, Nirvana. It's just so pretty. Do you think I can stay and be a princess for a while?" Winter whispered, as if the Hall itself would reprimand her. "I wonder if there are any princes." Nirvana heard her mutter. Always one to fantasize about fairy tales and happy-ever-afters.

"Winter," she called, "it's time, sweetheart." Nirvana watched as elf-like ears twitched, a silly smile spreading over her face before she giggled again and ran her hand through her long, white tresses.

"Time to collect our pretty little pink, fluffy cake."

Nirvana watched as Winter licked her lips. It was time to play.

The dark-ruby dagger that once belonged to Death sang a sweet melody as Nirvana strung it between her fingers. Without warning, it rang along her palm, its path through the muted light swift before embedding itself along an ancient bamboo trellis, nothing but a hair's width from White Shadow's temple.

"So you have finally come to claim your prize, Shadow?" He heard her snarl. His intention had never been something of such trivial worth, but with a grin, he held her gaze until she looked away in irritation and slipped from her perch. He watched her move about the hall, the evening light flickering over her face. Cruelty mixed with determination. Magnificent.

"My time has come to an end, *mon petit papillion*. Soon I will sleep." He watched her eyes, dark orbs of fire and hate, their message clear... *you I will never trust*... the same message nothing more than a rumble in his chest.

"This monarch seat is yours. For now," he whispered. "The rest will follow soon enough."

White Shadow watched Nirvana's heavy bangs concealing her eyes for a mere moment; it was all he needed to step away and vanish from her.

Chapter Eleven

The foothills of the Belue Mountains, a fortress between the heavens, had many secrets. Buried so deep in the South that none knew of its existence, the bunker and fortification were now long buried beneath the snow. With a slow agonizing pace, he made his way across the forgotten footpaths, ancient steps once regal in their time.

White Shadow's vision faded, spots of clarity as sparse as his breath. Puslike gore dripped from under his coat, leaving a black-spotted trail as he climbed. The fever sent another tendril of haze through his mind of cold and pain and of a darkness, long buried.

Flashes of memory still plagued him in the present day, lingering with longlost dreams distorted by cryo-sleep.

Artificial light faded, and a pulse-like echo from the smallest movement reflected a drawn picture in his mind from his prototype cyberimplant, one that never made it past animatronics testing when the war started. Now long forgotten, but still a piercing blade in his frozen, lifeless heart.

Cold and hot had gnawed on him, his body stretched and pruney. *Wet all over*. A metallic tang of something had swum in his mouth while his eyelids struggled to open. Not just his eyes but his face, his arms, his legs—all the way down to his toes—everything felt held down by a weighted fog. A shiver had racked his body, a silent scream wrenched from his mouth as the fiery rod rushed down his spine at an almost vibrating speed. Pain, so intense he couldn't give a name to it, infected his veins.

There had been voices, some deep, others a pitch higher, crying, sobbing, whimpering. He had wanted to reach out and touch those voices. But the remains of a soft lullaby whispered in his ears from *his* voice... *Who*... He knew his name, could roll it around on his tongue, but on its way out the word got stuck.

From the depth of the hazy black, he could hear the deep grumble of a man again, slowly becoming clearer, but somehow still muffled. The sound had reminded him of being at the aquarium, before, when he still had a name, a name he could no longer remember. The pod surrounded by thick glass. Small orange fish swimming first this way and then that, always together like a string attaching one to another. The man had been talking about him and the other, saying the time for their nap had come. Time for them to sleep. He remembered crying over leaving the little pod. Crying all the way home... and then strong arms... all fuzzy memories, but never faces. *I need to remember his face*.

He tried, for so many years for so long, tried to recall the name of that voice. A voice that once held love, protection, comfort.

The deep grumble had become louder, sounded like thunder in his ears. A sharp ringing had pierced his brain, shattering his cranium, a crooked, splintering pain behind his eyes. He tried to lift his arms to cup his ears, needed to block the shouting, the clattering of metal on metal. That voice again... "*I want to hold him. Let me say good-bye*..." He tried to push up, but everything had felt numb.

The fever of white had rendered him useless.

He remembered then another silent scream from his lips, but the fire had come for him again, and with it, the darkness that had devoured him.

In the aftermath of all, there was a glimpse of a face... faces. One with emerald-green eyes, another with black eyes the color of the forest at night, of the washed-up sea bamboo on a clear summer's day. The ocean. Those were his. He could still hear the gulls squawking. But the sound had turned into sobs again. *Wet*. Moisture over his cheeks—cold, dripping. Tears. That was his last day, or his first, he couldn't remember anymore.

Memories had faded over the days, weeks, months and years. But one remained.

Cold, hard metal digging into his scalp, spreading under his shoulders all the way down to his feet. The harsh artificial light playing over the stainless steel coroner's table, its perforated center leaving deep welts over his already tender back. He had been looking from the outside down onto his once youthful body. Scars, bruises and fresh cuts marred every inch of his pale flesh. Punishment, pleasure, a reward for being a good boy. All sick, all so normal.

Heavy footsteps on ceramic tiles had warned him of the man's approach. He had closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, playing the game he had become accustomed to. There was no real fear; one could not feel fear when pain was absent. So he had kept reminding himself. Over and over again.

"You ready to begin?" the man had rasped over him, his putrid breath from half-rotten teeth and festering blisters that had never fully cleared.

In his mind, time had only been minutes, perhaps hours. *Don't think, don't count*. But his mind always returned to that coping mechanism he was once taught when the seizures had become so bad, he'd all but withdrawn into his own mind. Those experimental meds were what had saved him, changed him, did something to his blood, blood that was draining from the long gouge across his torso, two lines connecting his shoulders to navel, the third a last line joining those all the way down to his raw cock.

The man was licking yellow pus from his top lip. No, not man. *The Master*. His empty stomach had given a token protest at the sight.

But he had known better than to wince, to show emotion. *Weak*. He would never show. Never tell. *Do not feel*. The first slide of the scalpel had cut nothing more than epidermis. Always the same, a thin slice, the width of a fine hair. The second, at an angle, cutting as one would fillet a thin sliver of meat from bone. New blood had gushed from his wound, quickly lapped up by a tongue that rasped firmly over sweat-beaded skin. By the third cut—one hacked into the little subcutaneous fat his body had produced—darkness came to drift over his eyes in swimming spots. Light had faded, the illusion of tunnel vision, as he'd watched, muscles, tendons and finally bone exposed to the frigid air. In the view mirror above, there was a willing corpse with eyes of ocean blue, thinning fire-red curls, and a faded stubble of a young man, lips plump, pale and swollen from the dark silk between them.

Endless black had come to embrace White Shadow soon after, but not before The Master had spilled creamy pearls over his body.

The decaying wind had slowly settled as the hour ended, giving life to another. Silence. Not a whisper of sound but the soft patter of rodent feet bleeding into the crusty snow at their feet. The dark gray of the still moon wrapped in the ever-present mist and soot of the city far, far below.

Obscured from view with the white shadows as his lone companion, he watched the timepiece on his left arm tick over into the witching hour and give a single, muted beep with the first pelt of the new day's snowfall—the consistency that of used grease, sticky, putrid and laced with blue poison. *Cold acid.* No one ventured out in this, maggots and shit-eaters alike. All scurried along like the rats they were, finding little hidey-holes so they could fester and multiply.

He pulled the red Kalin-hide leather coat tight over his broad shoulders, sleeves caked by a salty discharge from the oozing blisters and cracking scabs

barely healed on his rotting face. The upturned collar and fur-lined hood, that of a Kalin's pup, was his single protection from the flesh-eating ice.

Kalin-hide, both adult and pup, was a rare commodity out in the Belue Mountains, the skin, fur and pituitary gland stripped before the meat could ferment and seep *Autolysis* into the air.

Kalin—a rejected and disposed result of the failed altered experiments interbred with some of the last free walking species, creating a new subspecies of predator. One that left him with his current *pretty* face.

White Shadow sluggishly raised his hand—from where he had pulled back his sodden jacket sleeve to view the timepiece—and wiped at the yellow pus dripping from his left eye, his sight no longer that of a human, but preternatural after an implant forced upon him as a child.

One had found him, a savior of sorts. If you could call *The Master* that. *Something* left from the past as *he* had been. The fever had ravaged his body, left parts unusable, decayed, but that had not lessened his punishment from The Master, Tren.

A week past his eighteenth birthday, Tren had altered his DNA for the last time. He spent the days that followed in isolation. Not those pretty white rooms with padded interiors as the old medical texts had shown, but a hole—the wet underground bunker from which he first awoke.

It was during those waking hours that he was allowed to venture out of Hell from where his body had been hooked up to the mechanical ports implanted two centuries ago. Arms and legs were secured to the corners with old, rusted chain and solid, metal stakes pounded into the raw bedrock. The hole, nothing more than a large dug-out grave, served as isolation, and then a tomb if needed. A hard leather bit was secured between his teeth, a precaution as he had severed a piece of his tongue with the last isolation. The air in the bunker held rot and damp, its taste like stale, rancid oil, clingy and sour.

There, between dreamless slumber and vivid nightmare, time and solitude had molded White Shadow with embittered, cold, calculating hate and rage. All other emotions from his past human life had become extinct.

In the dim light, he had held his breath as Tren secured the iron bars over his body to leave thick, black bruises on his new skin after the burning, after the ripping, after he lost his voice.

In those moments, a calm clarity would grip him like an infant to its mother's breast. He would have revenge. And it would be sweet.

"In an age forgotten by darkness, death and waning, there once stood a city with natural light. A man as young as me could prove his worth with blood, sweat and brute strength. Perhaps not as different as from today, but without cunning and deception. Clever was the boy who could outthink his opponent." *Or opponents in this case*.

Tren had taught him well, with his fists, whip and cock. A boy becoming a man after that final infusion took hold. Being altered made him stronger, larger. Gave him something none other had seen before, but the negative repercussions were multiplied. Skin of azure, strong as hardened leather, scale-like, with a soft brush of garnet-red curls from his navel to his crotch. Those same soft curls grew long from a small patch behind his cranium, the heavy length braided into a long rope and secured with a small length of treated skin. Skin he had taken himself.

He stood watch at the edge of the cliff, observing the maggots play with their food. It had been fun to watch... once. His years of failure, trial and success composed and broken down into nothing more than a solar day. *So many pieces already set on the board, no place for variation.*

Like a game of chess, the pieces fell.

The next move, more volatile than the toxins running through his bloodstream.

He finally made it to his home, ice and death worthy opponents, the fortress left behind. White Shadow stood naked in the cold underground bunker, the cement floor recently sprayed down by a blast of water before adjusting the cryo-unit into place and bolting it to the floor. Cold seeped into his bones, or what felt like cold, his body numb from years of suspension and DNA integration.

He programed the system for the allocated time, one year and one day, enough to slow the spread of White Fever, adequate time to splice the final strain on DNA. The countdown began to flicker on the internal control panel of the cryo-unit, the bright-yellow numbers running down from 05:00. Enough time for him to secure himself in his prison before it all began.

White Shadow took one last look at the children's coloring book laid open on the steel table next to the unit. The last page, a bloodstained scribble.

Checkmate. Time for your play, Fathers.

Chapter Twelve

Winter stepped out from the building's overhang, skipping along the filthy alleyway like the child she once was. Her fur-lined, electric-blue overcoat rubbing along her naked, white skin, sending a shiver of pleasure from the tip of her white pointed ears, racing along her spine, all the way to her toes. Long, white hair bounced on her shoulders, the tips hanging lower than the edge of her dress. She skirted first around one corner and then another. *Tonight's the night*.

Nirvana had given her an assignment, *Homework*. She pouted as she looked down at the little white parchment in her hand. The lines were digitally printed and encoded, but why the mechanized woman had to encode it was just another... urrgg-moment. Really, she was ready, she knew she had a job to do... something special. *Something fun*. And fun meant Jozi. Playing with the fluffy boy was always a favorite game. A giggle escaped as she plucked up the first pink tuft from the air. Pink, soft and so pretty. Winter rubbed the strands along her skin, taking in the sweet scent before popping it in her mouth and chewing. *Yum*.

The world started to gray, playtime as Winter liked to call it, her internal instinct pouncing on her from one second to another. As her shattered crystal eyes contorted, a kaleidoscope of tones bled into her peripheral vision, her eyes a void of no color, just white light. Shades of muted gray, black and chalky, like that of an internal scan moved in perfect dimension around her. A living, pulsing beat guiding her to her target. Using her altered reflexes, she took the high road, first scampering up a sheer wall of steel and glass, along the sloped pitch of an overhanging ballasted roof. Winter's leather boots sent loose gravel and blow-offs up in small puffs as her movements across the roof took mere moments. Another tuft of hair settled on her outstretched hand as she stopped and pivoted on the final inch of concrete before stepping off the roof.

Winter's descent was near silent, the rustling of her hair in the updraft the only motion, that of a large, heavy wave of white, before it crashed to the shore. One level, two... four... eight. Her footing strong and precise as she landed behind the shadowed overhang Jozi had stepped under as the heavy drops of rain started to fall. One set of eyelids blinked and then another as color returned to the muted gray that had become her hunting ground. Jozi was dressed in his normal black and gray, the thin rubber-soled boots a stolen gift. Winter slipped

in behind the edge of the building, her eyes and ears taking in her target. Her emotions went to war with her duty, her instincts. This was her friend, her brother... *a part of her soul*... but duty and honor had been a hard lesson, the braided whip marks still fused to her skin.

She felt the air charge and heat around her before he spoke.

Chapter Thirteen

"You've come to play, little girl," Jozi whispered. His altered senses had gone on alert when he entered ACID City. It had been a long, dangerous run from the outer region to here, scavengers running rounds in the desert, seeking fresh prey and bait. After finding something to wear and a stolen set of boots a little too tight on his feet, he ran just as dawn broke. The ground hard as stone beneath his feet, he made his escape, two canvas bags secured to his body. One held revenge, the other, a debt. The latter was currently leaning against the crumbling building, his tormentor's hellhole, sections festering and still smoldering. It was a mess that sparked something beautiful in his heart.

Jozi watched a worm crawl from one hole to another, the small hermit covered in welts and grime. Pity he didn't have the time or the inclination to attend to his day job. Extermination was a fun way to pass the time. He kept an eye on the mortal, its ragged coat as deceptive as the creature behind him. With a deep sigh, he turned to Winter, her hair moving in slow whirls as another Neo storm slowly approached from the west. *Something was up with this weather, something utterly anomalous.* It was time to get this show on the road; he didn't want to be trapped between here and nowhere when the temperature dropped from frost to piss freeze.

Winter's eyes never left his as he slowly moved from his position to the canvas that held his debt. He moved it forward with his rubber-soled boots, the metallic scrape of its contents inside harsh on his already sensitive ears.

"And the other, Jozi?" Winter pointed to the canvas still trapped to his chest.

"Not. Yours," he growled between clenched teeth. Too late.

Jozi dropped down to his knees—frost, sludge and blood seeping through his clothes as he knelt down for discipline one final time. His blood felt sluggish, thick in his veins as Winter's shuriken fell to the ground, embedding in the gravel and mush. A single drop of blood tracked a path down his naked, shaved cheek, Vex having butchered his fur, leaving nothing but loose tufts of pink within the creases of his coat. Jozi's vision started to blur, the compound spreading along his nervous system like a hit from a drug. *If only*.

Winter moved closer to him, swishing her princess coat, ruffles all bunching together in her lap as she knelt down directly in front of Jozi. "Please... don't."

But it was already too late. He slumped forward as she slid her blade between the straps and moved away from him on silent feet. She giggled, skipping away into the gloom of the alleyway, dangling both bags over her shoulder.

Jozi watched as the night drew to a close, his breath a bare whisper of frosted mist dancing before his face. Hours had passed, or what felt like hours, his vision now little more than shadows and light.

Then he came for me, again.

A looming shadow, nothing but hatred rushing past him wave after wave, before death finally called him home.

Epilogue

Hel pushed open the large metal door, the cold air marking his heated skin in thick vapors.

Anger pulsed nonstop, liquid hot in his veins, since he found the crib empty and Prax's throat bitten open. The whore that had carried his young lay dead. Her flesh had still been warm, so Hel had slit open her belly in hope that the offspring inside was still alive.

Unfortunately, it too had succumbed to death.

He grunted as he hauled the cryo-cocoon into the laboratory. The lab, situated inside one of the peaks of Belue Mountain, was the last of its kind still left, apt to functioning.

Blood that had clung to him and froze—pack blood spilled in his blinding rage of madness when he had slaughtered everything in his path after the discovery that his son was missing—now began to thaw out and drip down his body.

He was too angry to speak, to form words. Gin was only an infant, so small, so vulnerable to this deadly world. Hel's stomach twisted, visualizing the possibilities of his son's fate. He had failed one, now a second; maybe this was Fate's way of telling him he was never destined to have a child.

Either way he would find that little whore, and Hel had plans, big motherfucking plans—

The cryo-pod beeped, signifying it had reached the end of its battery life.

Hel knew he needed to move fast. Vex had been bleeding when he was placed inside the pod, and now, with the pod going dead on him, there were mere minutes to get him into the tank.

He didn't wait for the lock to release the glass face, he simply smashed into it and ripped the shatterproof dome off in one clean sweep. The cryo-gel was already tinted red as it went from hard to soft.

He hoisted his husband over his shoulders, carried him toward the tank and climbed the stairs. He watched as Vex was swallowed by the green translucent goo, sinking in slowly.

He retrieved the extractor pen, the metal now dull and covered in grime. Hel had sought after the device for a year, placing things in motion, when he learned who Vex Noux truly was. He returned to the hellhole from where they awoke him to retrieve the information on how the first-generation altereds were created. It took him searching through five different laboratories before he found the missing pieces—the extractor pen now currently in his hand and a still-working laboratory. The one he stood in.

Hel drew a deep breath, clenched his teeth and stabbed the pen into the back of his neck. He couldn't suppress the growl, as pain flared down his spine when the pen's needle shot into his bone marrow. He gritted, counting the seconds to extract his DNA. At the hundred-and-eighty mark he pulled the pen out, a green flashing light indicating the extraction was complete.

Now he just needed to feed it to the program so it could start integrating Vex's DNA.

Hel managed a smile; he was going to love the expression on his husband's face when the fucker woke up, all new, all altered. *All fucked up*.

Nirvana, the sly bitch, was the one who had informed him of this place, kept alive by the nuclear power station manned in SiWáNG City below the mountain. Hel had sold a life debt to Nirvana, the bitch's price, cruel and calculating.

He smiled sadly—she would be dealt with when the time came—but the anger and adrenaline were wearing off, and this fucking mass on his chest crashed down on him.

His boy, his precious little boy, was gone. He stumbled to the glass column containing his husband and pressed a dirty clawed hand against the glass, and then fed the pen into the receiver slot at the front. "Soon, my love. Soon."

It was going to take a week before Vex's alterations were complete. The date and instruction for what the program needed to do were already stored into the pen's memory.

Now the waiting began, a silence that was going to drive Hel out of his fucking mind.

He slammed his fists onto a steel table, sending stainless steel medical implements on an old titanium tray to the ground. Something plopped on the floor next to his boots, the sound soft, the flash of color divergent and out of place in the laboratory.

It was a dusty, faded children's coloring book, the pages bent, the cover cracked with bits of red flaking off it.

It felt familiar in his hands, the picture of a cartoon clown holding balloons in its right hand. Vivid images flashed in his mind of Danny running down a row in a department store, a similar—perhaps the same—book in his hands.

Hel clutched the books between his claws... bending and twisting it... just like his gut was at that moment. He didn't like to think back on Danny; the memories were too raw, embedded too deep. He flung the stupid book aside, a lone paper drifting in the air. Hel snatched and crumpled it between his claws and held it to the light, reading the scribbled message, the script that of a real child:

Checkmate. Time for your play, Fathers.

A sour scent of death burned in Hel's nostrils, the sound of movement, fast and quick before he could react. A slimy, cold hand grasped his throat, pulling him toward a decaying face, those eyes... those eyes... beautiful, precious... *Danny's*.

The creature chose to speak at that moment—its acidic breath pungent and dry. "Hello, Father."

The End

Author Bio

Wulf Francú Godgluck:

They come to me in the night, creeping into my head. Their voices are all different, their stories all dissimilar, but they keep saying the same thing...

"Show us, tell us, bring us into your world, and make us known."

Then I sit and they take over. They tell their tales of love, loss and sinister misfortune. Not all of them get a happy ending, but they are pleased when their part is written.

I sometimes find myself lost in my own mind; a world very similar to our own yet so different. Things don't go bump in the night—they squeal and crawl under your skin, making you grind your teeth, and making your stomach turn over and putting your nerves on edge. Then there's the drama. Oh, the drama!

I write because I must! There is so much inside of me that needs to get out. So many stories to tell, characters that want to be heard, and hearts lost and won. Words and art are my way of bringing my world to others. I enjoy telling tales of the human condition but working in elements of the supernatural. Werewolves, Vampires, Zombies, Witches and the unexplainable all set against the human world or worlds of their own.

I was born and raised in Cape Town, South Africa. I grew up in a workingclass family and enjoy writing, cooking and spending my husband's money! Yeah I'm a cocky little brat too (and proud of it, spankings included)!

S. van Rooyen:

I use way too many F-Yous... and can outswear most sailors. Vodka is my drink of choice and yeah... that comes with the territory of being my father's daughter as well.

I dream in my mother tongue, "It's always vivid with the colours of my homeland."

I believe in something more... I could elaborate... but then you would be here all day.

Some call me angel... others not so much. They don't know me though.

Life is like... yeah, I could get all warm and fuzzy here... but Fate... and all that... She's a bitch that can't get Karma to love her... so she ends up messing with us.

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