

Shadow-Maker

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Shadow-Maker

by [Sulwen](#)

Summary

Vax flies high. Sometimes, afterward, he falls hard.

Notes

Spoilers for Critical Role through episode 70-ish.

Content Notes: This story contains BDSM content with no onscreen kink negotiation. I assume this to be an established relationship with the rules already worked out. There is also a bit of canon-typical discussion of death. Please read with caution if necessary.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

It's late, and there's been no knock on the door. Shaun sets his book aside, gazes a bit wistfully at his long-empty teacup, and waits. Vax, as much as he likes to begin conversations, is awful at actually talking about anything. Thus, the signs. If it's a good night, Vax cocky and grinning and tossing bad jokes around like copper coins, he knocks at the front door like a civilized person, and they have a certain sort of night. Otherwise...otherwise, Vax sneaks in like the stealthy bastard he is, and Shaun knows it's not a joking sort of evening.

At the beginning, Shaun would look for him, but now he just waits. Vax will show himself eventually, usually sooner rather than later. He's not a patient man, a trait Shaun has thoroughly enjoyed twisting to his advantage. He's considering the last such experience and smiling a bit with the memory when a voice comes flowing in from nowhere.

“I'm an asshole.”

Part of Shaun wants to smile ruefully at Vax's predictability. The rest of him aches at the self-loathing dripping through the familiar words.

“Everyone alive?” Shaun asks, his voice carefully neutral. This, of course, means everyone important. Vox Machina rarely ventures far from dealing death, even on the rare occasion when other options exist at all.

There's a pause. “Yes,” Vax says, still invisible.

Shaun raises an eyebrow at the room in general. “And?”

There's a moment of stillness, and Shaun can hear nothing but his own steady breathing. Then Vax appears from a shadow, slowly, still unkempt from battle or travel or both. He's too pale, and there's a stricken look on his face, an almost frozen affect Shaun recognizes too well. He doesn't answer the question.

Shaun pushes away his immediate instincts—*get that filthy armor off him, a wet towel for the dried sweat on his neck, cold spilling off Shaun's fingers for the dark bruise he can already see forming on one cheek*. Vax won't let himself be fussed over, not in this state. It's why he's here and not drinking with the rest of them. He never could hide his emotions on a good day, and alcohol leaves him open and raw, everything on the inside spilling out uncontrollably. And so he tenses up, clutching desperately at indifference, and sneaks into Shaun's bedroom at all hours of the night, wound so tightly he looks as if he might break.

“Vax'ildan.” Shaun threads his voice with a core of iron, just as compelling as his shopkeeper's jovial tone if not as welcoming. “Come here.”

Once, not so long ago, Vax would have hesitated. Now, he steps forward immediately, likely expecting the request. No matter what sort of night Vax brings him, Shaun prefers to have him within easy reach.

Vax comes to stand by Shaun's chair, dirty fingers playing absently over the hilts of his daggers. Shaun holds out a hand.

"The belt, please," he says, implacable.

Vax's fingers tighten on Whisper, and his eyes dart around the room.

"I'd rather..." he starts, but Shaun shakes his head.

"If anyone else comes here tonight, I will take care of it. You've done enough fighting for today." Shaun sighs inwardly and hopes Vax hasn't done anything worthy of getting himself followed, at least for tonight. He much prefers business to battle, especially when the business at hand is such a pleasant one.

The daggers clink together as Vax unbuckles his belt. He hands it over, and Shaun takes it and lays it carefully next to his cushioned armchair.

"Have a seat," Shaun says then, gesturing to the floor as magnanimously as if he were offering the very throne of Whitestone. Vax falls to the ground, impossibly graceful even in his exhaustion, and leans his head against Shaun's knee. Shaun slides a hand into long, tangled hair, and feels more than sees Vax's eyes close.

"My dear boy," Shaun murmurs, looking down at Vax's prone form and stroking his scalp minutely with gentle fingertips. "What to do with you?"

Vax's arms come up to fold around his head and into Shaun's lap, something akin to an embrace. His hands clutch mindlessly, pressing wrinkles into the fabric of Shaun's robes, and he lets out a wordless, aching sound that makes something behind Shaun's ribs go tight in sympathy. The barrier, it seems, is not the only thing he's holding together through these desperate times.

Shaun shifts and tightens his grip on Vax's hair, hard and sudden, and hears Vax's breath catch high and sharp in his throat. Slowly, he turns Vax's face up until he can see the pleading in his dark eyes.

"I'm going to take care of you, of course," Shaun says, and something in Vax's face starts to settle just at the words. As if there was any question. "But I'd very much like to hear about what happened tonight first. Will you tell me?"

Vax's jaw tightens. "I'm an asshole," he says, petulant.

"Yes, we know that part. Indulge me. Elaborate."

Vax tosses his head, and Shaun immediately releases his grip, letting Vax stare daggers into the floor as he begins to speak.

"I'm a fucking hypocrite, then. My sister...I'm always telling her to stay near me, stay close. And then...I have all this magical shit, you know?" Vax makes a vague gesture at himself. "Magical bullshit. It just means I can rush in twice as fast as I did before. And I know it's

idiotic, and not ever the plan, and it will get me killed one day. Vex tells me that often enough.”

He leans forward a bit and rests the point of his chin back on Shaun's knee, bone on bone.

“She asked me today. You know that...*betrayed* voice she has? She gave me that look, and asked me why I'm always running toward it. Death. What my fucking obsession is.”

Shaun gives a considering hum. “And what did you tell her?”

Vax's eyes shutter, and his voice goes flat. “Nothing. I left.” The words hang in the air for a long moment, until Vax lets out a breath and looks up through his lashes and says, “I came here.”

There's a part of Shaun that wants to press further, wants to bind Vax to the floor and mine his twisting pathos until he's pushed through every evasion, every distraction, every attempt to flee. Shaun wonders if then, perhaps, his soul laid bare, Vax would admit that he's not running toward death. That even after all the close calls, all the fallen companions, he still doesn't quite believe in the concept, not as it applies to himself. In his heart, for all his grim, fatalistic talk, Vax still believes himself invincible.

Shaun could certainly try to sway that belief. He's been tempted before, as he is now. And yet the idea is distasteful, wrong-sounding even in his mind. Vax with a true fear of death in him might—*might*—live longer. And some spark within him, a sharp-glinting thing Shaun sometimes sees playing around Vax's lips when he grins, would go out forever. He would be less himself, and Shaun cannot bring himself to lessen such brilliance.

So. In lieu of the soul laid bare, the body will do very nicely indeed.

Shaun bends down and puts a gentle hand to Vax's cheek, granting himself just a moment to admire. For all that Vax's face is more familiar now, it's no less beautiful, darting eyes and cutting angle of cheekbones just as wounding as the day he'd first wandered through Shaun's door. Vax leans into the touch, eyes falling closed, but Shaun can still feel the tension vibrating through him, a single note of shivering desperation.

“I'm glad you came,” Shaun says, and feels Vax turn and smile a bit against his palm. As he shifts, black feathers brush against the back of Shaun's hand, and he finds himself wincing at the touch.

“Not so happy to see the armor, though,” Vax says, annoyingly perceptive as always.

Shaun sighs. “I'm thrilled that you have it protecting you. That said, I will never become accustomed to the smell.”

Vax looks down at himself, suddenly seeming to realize the filthy state he's in, armor aside. “Was that meant to be a hint?”

“That depends,” Shaun says, sitting back and raising his eyebrows. “How close would you like me to get?”

Something darkens in Vax's eyes, and without another word, he stands and moves into the adjoining room, where Shaun has had a basin of water heating since Vax first made his presence known. Shaun listens to the sound of leather hitting the floor and water splashing and considers his options.

After a moment, he rises and heads toward his small kitchen, bringing the used tea things along. He takes his time clearing away, taking some small satisfaction to see everything in its place just so as he wanders. This small house is practically austere compared to his residence in Emon, but he's managed a few comforts for himself despite the circumstances. He still has a contact or two in places relatively unscathed, and so in among the mismatched silverware and broken doorknobs are little gems: the delicate white tea he's just enjoyed. A few essential books. A set of truly lovely bedsheets doing all they can to make up for the sorry bed underneath.

Stashed in the back of a cabinet, Shaun finds another of these luxuries: a small and unlabeled glass jar, tightly sealed. He hasn't introduced Vax to its contents yet, unsure when or if he'll be able to acquire more, but tonight seems like an excellent time to change that. Shaun smiles a bit to himself as he slips the jar into one of the innumerable pockets of his robes, along with a few other odds and ends. Perhaps he should be annoyed, he thinks to himself, with Vax's tendency to do this, fall at his feet needy and selfish and broken. Fortunate for both of them that Shaun so thoroughly enjoys putting him back together.

He makes his way through to the washroom. Vax is looking at himself in a small mirror hung on the wall, fussing with his hair where it's tied up in a knot on the top of his head, stripped utterly naked. He cuts a striking figure, pale and thin, breathtakingly lovely, and Shaun presses in behind him without a thought for any lingering water, wrapping his arms tightly around Vax and leaning down to skate his lips along Vax's neck. He can feel Vax's chest expand against his grip, a deep, shuddering breath, but he doesn't relax his hold. Instead, he looks up and meets Vax's gaze in the mirror.

"Much better," Shaun says, and Vax laughs softly despite himself.

"So pleased that I no longer repulse you," he replies, sardonic.

Shaun gives a low hum and leans down again, laying open-mouthed kisses against Vax's warm skin, tasting him. Vax immediately tilts his head, baring his throat, and something inside Shaun thrills at how easy he is for it, how open. Talking to him feels, at times, like navigating a field of hidden traps, one wrong step away from disaster—but this never has.

His hands begin to wander, running slowly over Vax's bare skin, stomach to chest to neck and down again. There are scars everywhere, mostly quite faint. They had spent a whole night discussing them once, Vax telling the story behind each one and Shaun doing his best to kiss away the old hurts. He can read them like a book, now, Vax's story inscribed in his skin. There are no fresh scars tonight, and Shaun sends up a thank you to whatever god has blessed Vax with such inexplicable luck.

Vax, leaning heavily against him, gives a contented sound and says, "If you were aiming to put me to sleep, you're doing an excellent job of it."

Shaun narrows his eyes and changes course to brush his fingers over Vax's nipples, teasing at first, pinching down when he feels Vax begin to squirm.

“Am I boring you?” Shaun asks, pulling slightly just to feel Vax arch beautifully against him. “Shall we call it an evening?”

Vax groans, and his voice is shaking when he says, “Please, no, I...”

Shaun presses in close, his lips right up against Vax's ear, and murmurs, “Shh. No fear of that. I'll stop when you're begging me for it, no sooner.”

“That a promise?” Vax says, already reaching for his cock.

Shaun moves quickly then, grabbing Vax's wrist before he can begin stroking himself and twisting his arm behind him.

“My word on it,” he says, and spins Vax around to kiss his lips, muffling any impudent reply. Vax's arms go around Shaun's neck, pulling him closer, and Shaun obliges happily, sinking into the embrace until Vax is practically sitting on the small table behind him, crockery clattering out of his way. His legs fall open, and Shaun moves into the space made for him, luxuriating in the sight of his robes draped over Vax's nakedness. Vax leans his head back against the mirror, and Shaun brings a hand up to rest on the delicate curve of his neck, not gripping, just enough pressure to feel a heartbeat. He can feel Vax's cock twitch at the contact and can't keep the grin from his lips even as he leans in for another long, searching kiss.

“Lovely boy,” Shaun murmurs, eventually, whispered words laid against Vax's gasping lips. “Tell me what you need.”

There's a long pause, and Shaun waits, waits until Vax is stumbling over syncopated syllables, searching for an answer Shaun doubts he'll find. It's perhaps a bit cruel, to push him inward again. It would be so easy to let this night spin out like a heady liqueur, sweet and distracting and leaving little memory behind. There would be laughter, and sex, and then Vax would go back to his life with something dark still hanging over his head, still gnawing at him. Whatever absolution Vax finds here comes from Shaun pushing him toward it, and Shaun doesn't intend to leave him unsatisfied.

Finally, Vax bows his head and admits, “I don't know.” His voice is firm, deliberate, leaning into his failure.

Shaun touches a finger to Vax's chin, tilting his face up until Vax concedes and meets his gaze. His eyes are shining wet, a window on the well of emotion that threatens to overwhelm him at every turn. A stray thought strikes Shaun, a momentary curiosity at what Vax might have been like if things had been different, if clutching at the edge of survival hadn't forced him into sharpening his knives and hardening his heart. But it's a passing fancy, and Shaun lets it go, put to the back of his mind to mull over another time.

“I'm sorry,” Vax says, and Shaun can't help but kiss him again.

“Shall I tell you what I'd like to give you, instead?”

Vax's eyes brighten at that. "Please."

Shaun trails a finger along Vax's forehead, brushing a stray strand of hair back and tucking it neatly into place. Then he reaches for the knot of Vax's hair and looses it, letting it fall in waves over his shoulders and down his back. Beautiful. "I think I'd like to take you out of the world. Make you forget the dragons. Today's fight and tomorrow's. Your friends, your family. Your dark goddess. Just for tonight, I want you to forget everything except *this*."

He can see the conflict in Vax's eyes, how it tempts him to be free of the weight of the world even for a moment, how guilt creeps around the edges, telling him all the reasons he shouldn't ever let go.

"Would you like that, Vax'ildan?" Shaun asks.

Vax's gaze drifts away, drawn to a memory or a promise or a mistake. His voice trembles a bit when he replies. "I don't know if I can."

"Perhaps not," Shaun says, voice considering. Then he slips a hand between their bodies, between folds of silk and the smoothness of newly-clean skin, and finds Vax's cock, gliding his fingers along the wet slit in just the right way to make Vax moan. "Still. Would you like to try?"

*

Shaun takes his time binding Vax to the bed, smooth ropes entwining his wrists where they're crossed over his head. Vax tests his strength against the knots and throws Shaun a teasing look.

"Don't you have spells for this kind of thing?" he says.

Shaun kneels onto the bed next to him and checks that the ropes haven't slipped too tight at Vax's pulling. "Are you questioning my abilities?" he asks lightly.

Vax pulls a dramatic offended expression. "Would I ever?"

The ties are fine. Inwardly, Shaun rolls his eyes. Gods, has there ever been a creature as emotionally volatile as this one, nearly weeping in his arms one moment and grinning behind a sarcastic wit the next?

"Maybe I want the marks to show tomorrow," Shaun says, overly casual, and Vax shuts his mouth abruptly. In truth, Shaun can't afford to pull much of his attention away from the barrier, and he has other plans for the free bit of concentration left to him.

He reaches into a pocket and finds a long strip of red cloth, silky soft and embroidered with delicately intertwining feathers. Shaun holds it to his lips for a moment, watching Vax watch him. It's almost a shame to cover up those eyes, but Vax is too damned perceptive, too good at seeing too much, distracting himself from the matter at hand.

"I want to blindfold you," Shaun says, tone shifting, signaling in a moment that he's done with the light back-and-forth that colors so many of their conversations.

Vax's expression changes to match, gaze softening and lips falling open. He closes his eyes and shifts his head up off the pillow, and Shaun lays the silk over his face and ties it securely, careful to avoid catching Vax's hair up in the knot. As Vax settles again, Shaun rests one hand on the center of his chest, fingers splayed, as if Vax would float away without the weight of it. For a moment, there are no words, no movements, just the grounding sensation of breaths slowly keeping time with one another.

"All right?" Shaun asks, eventually, and Vax gives a nod. Shaun shifts away, watching Vax's breathing as he's left alone with his thoughts, still slow and deep and even. Something in Shaun twinges at this sight, Vax bound in his bed, trusting and vulnerable and so, so open. There's a part of him that wants to keep Vax like this always, close and safe, stripped of both destiny-laden armor and the need for it. It's a selfish thought, and Vax would not thank him for it, would never accede to such a life. Shaun allows himself a wistful smile, now that Vax can't see, and wonders if their encounters will always be like this, bittersweet and beautiful, satiating and yet leaving him longing. Vax will not stay, and Shaun will not go, and so it is.

"Shaun?" Vax stirs, just slightly, and calls for him in an uncertain voice, and Shaun sinks to the bed at Vax's knees, bringing his hand to rest on one smooth thigh.

"I'm here," he says, and leans down to taste the expanse of clean skin, kissing and licking his way up to the jut of a hip. There's a spot near the bone where the skin is pulled tight, and Shaun drags his teeth over it, not hard, just enough to light up the nerves underneath and make Vax hiss in a breath. He braces one arm on the other side of Vax's body, letting the drape of his sleeve fall over Vax's cock and smirking at the sound it draws from his lips. Then he leans down to the stretch of skin at Vax's hip again and *sucks*, drawing the blood to him and Vax's body with it, arching up into the sensation. He tastes his fill and pulls back to admire the mark left behind, dark and red and the shape of his mouth. It's impossible to resist reaching up and stroking his fingers over the bruise, gently at first and then pressing his thumb down, hard, into the center of it. Vax lets out a wordless sound of pain-pleasure, and Shaun grins, high already on the power of it, his familiarity with Vax's body, the effortlessness of bringing him to the knife-edge between too much and not enough.

He draws his sleeves up and shifts to hover over Vax's body, predatory, stalking, pinpoint focused. Vax is hard, has been for a while, and his cock juts up wet and ready. Shaun leans in slowly, closer, closer...and stops, a hair's breadth away, just breathing, letting Vax feel the warm air dance over him.

Vax immediately thrusts toward him, instinct more than intention, and Shaun moves easily out of the way, leaving Vax with nothing to touch but empty air. Shaun can hear a huff of frustration, but Vax says nothing, and soon enough his hips come to rest on the bed again.

Shaun waits, draws the moment out, and leans in again, whispering in Marquetian: *patience, my love, patience*. Vax jerks, straining against the ropes and thrusting into nothingness.

"You fucking bastard," he says on a groan, and Shaun grins.

"That filthy mouth of yours," Shaun says, placing a quick kiss on the delicate skin of Vax's inner thigh. "All this time together, and you have yet to learn any manners."

Vax pauses, considering this, his hips still twitching slightly even as he tries to keep still. Shaun waits.

Eventually, Vax sighs and says, "Please, Shaun. Give me *something*."

"With pleasure," Shaun says, and sets one fingertip against Vax's straining cock, the lightest of touches, dragging it down the length and delightedly watching Vax react. His hands are clenched into fists, grasping the ropes, and his bottom lip is caught fetchingly in his teeth. Shaun changes direction, arcing his touch up again, and Vax throws his head back against the pillow, baring his neck and biting back wordless pleas.

Shaun sits back on his heels and draws his hands away, sparing a moment to press a palm against his own growing hardness. "Do you want to come?" he says, solely to hear Vax ask for it.

"Yes please," Vax says, tone high and quick and just on this side of cheeky. Shaun doesn't respond, and a moment later, Vax tries again. "What, do you want me to beg?"

Shaun licks his lips, considering. A bit of a challenge, perhaps. Something to occupy that too-quick mind and keep any dark thoughts at bay. "What if I want you to wait for it? Can you do that for me, Vax'ildan? Be patient for me?"

He leans in again as Vax says, thoughtlessly, "Yes, just please, I..." And before he can finish speaking, Shaun takes the tip of Vax's cock into his mouth, tasting salt and heat and sex, rendering Vax wordless as he sucks.

"Are you very sure?" Shaun asks, pulling back and wrapping Vax's cock in his fist, not stroking, just holding. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

"Fuck," Vax whispers under his breath, and Shaun knows he's remembering other nights, other moods, and how Shaun knows him like no one ever has. How quickly Shaun could force him over the edge if he chose to.

Finally, Vax sets his teeth, and his voice is determined as he says, "If you want me to...I can wait."

Interesting. Shaun isn't quite sure if he believes that. He dips his head and sucks Vax's cock into his mouth again, deep this time, burying him in heat and wetness and the playful drag of a talented tongue. He can hear Vax's breathing quicken, feel pulsing in his mouth, but Vax doesn't cry out, working hard to control his reactions. Even when Shaun presses deeper, pushing up against his own limits, Vax manages to keep still, keep from chasing his release.

Eventually, Shaun sits up again, takes a deep breath, and draws the back of one hand across his mouth. "Very good," he says, watching Vax preen a bit at the praise. "But you should know that we're only just beginning. I have something to show you."

He reaches into a pocket and finds the small glass jar stashed away there for just this moment. There's a story behind it, this lovely little treat, but now isn't the time to tell it. Instead, Shaun twists the lid off the jar, releasing a bright, clean scent into the air. He can see

when Vax notices, can practically see his thoughts spinning, wonders if it reminds him of anything.

Inside the jar is a thick, white substance, creamy and viscous and almost decadent, like something you might see topping a dessert at a royal banquet. Shaun dips his fingers into the jar and brings out enough to cover his hand with a thick layer of the stuff. It clings deliciously to the skin, and Shaun grins, anticipating.

In one motion, he takes Vax's cock in a firm fist, stroking in a slow, smooth rhythm and coating him with the slick.

"Holy..." Vax gasps, breath catching, tightening up everywhere as he struggles to process the sensation. Shaun understands. He'll never forget the first time he'd sampled this particular luxury.

"Fabulous, isn't it?" Shaun says, keeping his rhythm achingly slow.

Vax groans low in his chest and throws his head back again. "It's...gods, Shaun, you've been holding out on me."

That brings a laugh to Shaun's lips, unintended. "My apologies, dear one. There is only one place in the world making this particular blend—a certain brothel in Ank'Harel—and even they are not keen to share."

"Right...keen, of course...you'd have to think so..." Vax is just rambling now, lost within himself.

"Did you actually listen to any of what I just said?" Shaun asks, still amused.

A pause. "Maybe half?"

"Hmm." Shaun leans forward, speaking directly to Vax's blindfolded face. "In that case, I must not be doing my job."

He dips his fingers into the slick again and sets to it, with purpose now, working Vax over with fast and rhythmic strokes. It's beautiful, feeling Vax throb in his hand and listening to him spout endless curses to the ceiling, and it's agony, ignoring his own need, how easy it would be to press up between Vax's splayed legs and rut against him until they both lost the last remnants of control. His mind wanders for a moment, drifting, and it isn't until Vax bucks hard enough to nearly throw him off, legs flying out to the sides and almost kneeing him in an inconvenient place, that he focuses again on the task at hand.

"Please, Shaun, I can't, I can't, I..." The words trip over each other, each higher than the last in a desperate, frantic tone Shaun recognizes. He strokes tighter, faster, pushing Vax toward the edge—and in the next second, pulls his hand away entirely.

"Not yet."

Vax shakes his head back and forth, panting now, and his knees come up around Shaun's hips, seeking any sensation he can get.

Shaun makes a considering sound and puts his clean hand on one of Vax's knees, pushing it outward and relishing the effect the movement has on the sight before him.

“Perhaps I'm being too hard on you,” he says, running his fingers up and down Vax's thigh. “We both know how *sensitive* you are, how easy you give it up for me whenever I play with your pretty cock.”

It's ridiculous, how gratifying it is to watch Vax throb and struggle and moan at his words alone. Then again, Shaun thinks, they all might be dead tomorrow. Best to wring as much pleasure as possible out of these moments, ridiculous or not.

“Maybe patience will be easier for you if I...” Shaun says, dipping a finger into the slick and sliding it down, down, until...

“Oh, that's dirty pool and you *know* it,” Vax exclaims, playing at annoyed even as he spreads his legs wider, letting Shaun press right up against his hole. He's still making near-constant noises, but they're deeper now, throaty and hungry rather than high and desperate. Shaun slowly works his finger in, bit by bit, and Vax's body does something truly lovely to watch, stretching out long and lean as he presses for more, deeper, *now*.

Shaun drags himself forward on the bed and hitches Vax's legs up over his own, tilting his body to a more advantageous angle and pressing as deep as he can get into that glorious tight, slick heat. He's been with men before who wanted to be stretched, opened up on fingers and cock and more, but Vax has always just wanted it *deep*. Shaun can take him apart with a single fingertip when he applies just the right pressure to just...the right...place...

He can feel the moment he gets it, feel Vax clench impossibly tighter around him and curse the gods and pull so hard at his bindings Shaun worries a moment for the integrity of the bed frame. A moment later, he thinks of Vax's wrists and winces.

“Vax'ildan.” Shaun freezes, one finger still buried inside, and Vax stills as well, pleasingly obedient at Shaun's use of his full name. “Do you trust me?”

For perhaps the first time all night, there's no hesitation from Vax when he answers. “Always.”

“Good,” Shaun says, smiling, sensing something in Vax's tone softer and sweeter than anything should be in this moment. “Then I want you to stop struggling. Didn't I say I would take care of you? I want you to be still, and good, and bear what I give you, the way I know you can.”

Vax draws a long, shuddering breath. Then something in him seems to relax a bit, and Shaun feels something in himself settle as well. He crooks the tip of his finger, once, twice, and feels the involuntary tightening of Vax's body around him, but Vax hardly gives any other sign of the sensation singing through him. Shaun nods, pleased, and says, “Lovely, just like that. Stop chasing. Stop thinking. Let go.”

Shaun doesn't give Vax time to reply before redoubling his efforts, thrusting a finger into Vax with one hand and returning to torment his cock with the other, everything slick and hot and

messy. He watches, fascinated, as Vax tries to obey, tries to relax and lose himself in Shaun's touch without fighting for more. There are moments when Shaun can see him almost get there...and then he'll start thinking again, and the chance at surrender will be lost.

Finally, Vax shakes his head and says, "I'm sorry, Shaun, I *can't*."

It's not entirely surprising that pleasure isn't enough to silence the noise in Vax's head, but Shaun can't help trying. Days like this, Shaun is inclined to think that Vax has suffered enough.

Still, he knows well the relief pain can bring, the all-consuming focus, and he has never been able to deny Vax anything. "It's all right, dear one. I've got you," Shaun says, slowing his hands on Vax to a gentle caress.

Both hands occupied, Shaun mentally rifles through the contents of his robe until he finds what he's looking for. He levitates a white candle slowly out of one pocket to hover before his face, lighting it with a whispered phrase. In moments, a pool of wax gathers around the wick, shining with latent possibilities. Leaving his right hand toying with Vax's cock, Shaun draws his other hand back and turns his arm over, baring a stretch of sensitive, hairless skin. With a thought, he tilts the candle and lets the wax drip, wincing at the burn and quickly experimenting with various heights to refresh his memory.

The whole process takes less than a minute, but Vax is already squirming impatiently as Shaun turns his full attention back to the task at hand.

Shaun gives him no warning, just sends the candle to float over Vax's chest and slowly, slowly lets it tilt, two fat drops of wax splashing onto bare skin. Vax hisses in a breath at the unexpected shock of pain, but there's something in his exhale that speaks of relief, and already he's more present, more here with Shaun and less buried in the constant tug-of-war between impulse and control.

"More?" Shaun asks, past the point of unnecessary words.

Vax just nods, mouth open in breathy, anticipatory panting.

Shaun loses track a bit of the game, then, mesmerized by the patterns he's creating on Vax's skin as he sends a drop here, a streak there, Vax's gasps and cries and curses going to his head like too much wine. He watches closely, playing one sensation off another. When the pain gets too intense, Vax twisting to protect vulnerable flesh, Shaun grips his cock a bit tighter, strokes a bit faster. When Vax nears the edge of orgasm again, Shaun lets the candle drip, wrenching him back into a frustrated purgatory.

He's so intent on maintaining this delicate balance that he almost doesn't notice when Vax's breathing changes, his movements becoming less intentional and more instinctive. Shaun watches for a moment, then pulls his hands away from Vax completely, waiting for a reaction. Vax gives a low sigh, more breath than sound. Though he must still be aching for release, there's a note of satisfaction in his voice that pleases Shaun deeply. He reaches up with a still-slick hand and tugs the blindfold up and off Vax's face to find his eyes closed and features, for once, at ease.

Shaun calls his name once more, and Vax slowly blinks his eyes open, not focusing on anything, looking hazily in the direction of the ceiling. It takes a moment, but eventually he shifts his gaze and finds his way to meeting Shaun's own, eyes glinting in the candlelight.

Shaun smiles at him, feeling unreasonably proud. "Well done," he says, and means it. Vax described this sensation to him once—not like flying at all, but like floating, drifting along on the waves of a calm sea. It's elusive and difficult to reach at times, but, for Vax, always worth the journey.

Vax's legs shift around him, and Shaun remembers that, floating or not, he's had Vax on the edge for quite long enough. He closes a hand around Vax's cock again and asks, "Are you ready to come for me, darling?"

Vax closes his eyes and lets his head fall to one side, pressing into the pillow. Shaun would almost think he was falling asleep if not for the arch of his hips, pushing himself up into Shaun's touch, answering without words.

"All right, love. I won't stop you this time. You've earned it."

It doesn't take long—maybe a minute of Shaun's focused attention, all clever fingers and murmured words of encouragement. Vax doesn't thrash, doesn't pull at the ropes, doesn't curse or plead or beg for more. Shaun watches him let it happen, and wonders what it's like in Vax's head, if it's a wave rushing over him or an undertow pulling him down, lost to overwhelming feeling.

In the next moment, Vax is tensing under him, sighing brokenly as he finally crests. It seems to go on and on, fresh white splatter joining the cool wax drops on Vax's chest in abstractions of pleasure. Shaun works Vax through the peak and past it, past sensitive to oversensitive until he's right up against the wall of pain again. Vax takes it all mindlessly, reacting only in the pitch of his wordless cries, nothing but raw material in Shaun's hands. Some distant voice in Shaun's head wonders if he could get Vax to come again, one high right on top of another, but he shoves it away, unable to ignore his own need any longer.

He crawls up Vax's body, pausing just a moment to blow the candle out and let it clatter to the floor before straddling Vax's narrow shoulders. He shoves his robes out of the way to each side and reaches for his cock with one hand, cradling the back of Vax's head with another and realizing too late that his hands are still a mess of slick. At this moment, it's hard to care. Vax lets himself be moved, mouth falling open with the ease of much practice, and it's the easiest thing in the world for Shaun to lean forward and guide his cock between those waiting lips.

It's warm, and wet, and Vax is *beautiful* like this, letting Shaun take exactly what he wants. Control unravels quickly, and Shaun braces both hands on the wall, letting his hips do the work, knowing Vax won't fight it. He can't look away from Vax's face, his *mouth*, obsessed with the stretch of his lips and the strain of his jaw, lost in the choked-off sound he makes when Shaun pushes too far. It's everything he can do to hold on, to stay in the desperate, thrilling high of this moment just a little longer—and then Vax opens his eyes, and looks up at Shaun with something akin to *worship*, and he's gone, spilling with a shout into Vax's throat, across his tongue, painting his lips shiny and obscene. Vax's eyes close again, and he doesn't back away from it, still so open and accepting of everything Shaun has to give. It's

overwhelming, that trust, and Shaun has to close his eyes for a moment, breathing deep and letting the shattered pieces of his mind reassemble themselves in the aftermath.

When he can think again, Shaun opens his eyes to the sight of Vax lifting his head toward Shaun's softening cock, lapping at him with little kitten-licks, gently cleaning the come off him and swallowing it down.

"If you keep on like that, you're asking for another round," Shaun says, teasing. He's not quite as young as he used to be, and he's sure he doesn't have it in him to go again tonight. Mostly sure.

Vax hums with interest, playing along and sending a shudder through Shaun's body at the vibration. But underneath the satisfied peace on his face, exhaustion is starting to peek through, and Shaun knows they're done.

He sits back on his heels and begins loosening the ropes around Vax's wrists. At first, his fingers slip against the knots, and he realizes he still hasn't cleaned them of the slick. He winces as he wipes them against his robes, but it does the job, and when he goes back to the knots they spring loose easily enough. By the time he's done, Vax is half-asleep already, and he hardly moves his arms even once they're free.

"Come now, none of that," Shaun says, easing himself off of Vax's chest and settling next to him on the bed. "Things to do before we sleep."

He takes Vax's arms one at a time and draws them down to rest in a more natural position, rubbing slow circles into Vax's shoulders to get the blood flowing again. Vax's chest is a *mess*, no other word for it, drying come and dry wax, and Shaun spares a moment to be grateful for Vax's near-hairless skin. That will take a bit more time to deal with, and Shaun doesn't particularly feel like leaving Vax's side yet.

He shucks the robe from his shoulders and stretches out next to Vax, pressing the long lines of their bodies together all the way down to the toes. Time passes, slowly or quickly, difficult to say. Shaun can feel their breaths begin to match, becoming one united motion, and wonders if their heartbeats are doing the same. Eventually, he brings one hand up to rest against Vax's cheek, the slightest pressure prompting Vax to turn and show him that beautiful face. He still looks a bit hazy, somewhere in between pleasure-drunk and just worn out, and there's no sign at all of the guilt or strain Vax had worn all over when he'd fallen at Shaun's feet not an hour ago.

"Tell me how you feel," Shaun says softly, and Vax smiles at him, just as soft.

"You always know," he says, the words blurring into one another. "You know just what I need."

You are everything I need, Shaun thinks, and for one mad moment he almost thinks about saying as much. These are the dangerous times, these stolen minutes of afterglow when it feels like the rest of the world has ceased to exist. It would be so easy...but Shaun holds his tongue, and leans forward for a kiss instead, tasting himself on Vax's lips and reminding himself of what this is, and what it is decidedly not.

He forces himself out of the bed before he can be tempted to say too much again, and walks naked through the small rooms to find a warm cloth and a glass of water. When he comes back, Vax is sitting up against the headboard, picking at a circle of wax on his chest and wincing slightly as it peels free.

Vax glances up, gives him a wide smirk, and says, "You know, it really should have been *black* wax. That seems to be my color these days."

Shaun laughs and sits on the bed, starting to rub at the mess with the wet towel. "Suppose I'll have to buy new candles."

"Honestly, Shaun..." Vax grabs the hand clutching the towel and brings it to his lips, kissing Shaun's knuckles one by one before continuing. "Thank you for this. I don't know how you do it, but...thank you."

Something about that rubs Shaun a bit the wrong way, as if this is just another service he's providing, nothing more personal than enchanting a weapon or selling a potion. But that's unfair, and Vax looks so genuine, and he's *happy*, truly happy and not playing at it, and at the end of the day, isn't that what matters?

"It's my pleasure," Shaun says, and presses the water glass into Vax's hands, and goes back to clearing up the mess they've made together.

Soon enough, there's nothing more to do, and nothing else to say. They sit, silent and somehow awkward, and Shaun wonders how it's possible that the most intimate acts could feel so easy and a simple conversation feel so very difficult.

"I should get back," Vax says, after a while, and Shaun nods.

"Back to the fight again tomorrow?" he asks, heart clenching at the thought of it, Vax right back to throwing himself at danger's toothy maw.

"More than likely. The longer we wait, the worse this gets." Vax reaches out and claps a hand on Shaun's shoulder, looking at him earnestly. "I'll be back soon. I pro...I'll be back soon."

Don't make promises you can't keep. Shaun's own words come back to him, and he feels a chill go down his spine.

He covers Vax's hand with his own and presses the touch down into his skin. "Until then, my bird."

Vax slips away from him then, and Shaun hears him from the next room as he drags the essential pieces of his clothing back on and shows himself out by whatever shadowy way he'd entered.

Shaun sits unmoving for a long time, until his bare skin begins to grow uncomfortably cool in the night air. He rises, draws a fresh robe from the wardrobe around his shoulders, and goes into the kitchen to make tea. Above the city, the barrier shimmers at the edge of his consciousness, and he spares a moment to be sure it's holding fast.

They will never be everything to one another. But this, Shaun can do, keep a safe place for Vax to return to, when he can, when he needs it.

It's enough. It will have to be.

End Notes

Shadow-maker create me everywhere
Dark spaces (your face is my chosen abyss),
For I said I have come to possess your darkness,
Only this.

-Gwendolyn MacEwen

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