

Ace

Stephani Hecht

Mad

Blood



Pentacles

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MAD BLOOD:
TAROT - ACE OF PENTACLES

BY

STEPHANI HECHT

Dedication

Jackie. You are both my sister and my best friend.

CHAPTER ONE

Dante Toren was a predator. Born a vampire, he had the natural instincts and urges of a stone cold killer. What he couldn't destroy with his fangs and claws, he took out with his blades or Glock. Never had he backed down from a battle. Hell, he usually ran headfirst into them, grinning the entire way.

Ruthless. Fearless. A killing machine. A true warrior.

A true warrior who was presently sucking down a cherry slurpy while standing in front of the skin magazine rack at rundown, dingy party store. To be fair it was on the seedier part of Detroit and he had used a dirty cup, but it wasn't something that would get him his own comic book or video game any time soon.

The only true danger this predator faced was an overload of T&A or at worst, a nasty case of food poisoning because the slurpy machine looked like it hadn't been cleaned since Jimmy Carter was president and white loafers were in style. Even the food poisoning wasn't a real threat since vampires

were immortal and it took more than mold spores or bacteria to take them down. So no. There wasn't really any danger at all.

Although there was a strange werewolf two aisles over. That counted for something, right? He glanced up at his stalker and scowled, a low curse slipping from his mouth.

Okay, not even that counted. The wolf sniffing after his trail was a teen barely out of his pup years. Even if he did decide to attack, all Dante had to do was bare his fangs, hiss and the kid would go running in the opposite direction. Funny, yes. Helpful in elevating his badass status, no.

Unfortunately, at that time he made eye contact with the wolf. The kid grinned and practically hopped over to him. Even though his movements weren't threatening, Dante still slipped a hand into his pocket to caress the butt of his gun, just in case. It wouldn't be the first time something innocent turned out to be trouble.

Dressed in an oversized army jacket, red sweatshirt and blue jeans, the kid could have walked straight out of a Grunge band video. Like most wolves, his hair was a multitude of different colors, blond, auburn, brown and black were all present. His amber gaze looked Dante up and down, whether to size him up as prey or not remained to be seen. Finally the kid flashed

another one of those goofy smiles before he gave a lazy chuckle.

"Dude," the wolf drawled out slowly. "I know who you are."

"Funny, so do I," Dante replied in clipped tones. "I'm the annoyed vampire who's getting ready to leave before he gets fleas."

The kid went on babbling like he hadn't heard the insult, his tone edged with giddy excitement. "Everyone said you were dead, but I knew better. Nothing could touch a Toren brother. You guys put the bad in badass."

Dante didn't even try to deny the truth. If the kid had stepped one paw outside of the city of Detroit he would have seen the wanted posters. Hell, the only change in his appearance that Dante had made was to let his dark hair grow long in the front so it shielded his brown eyes. "I'll make sure to pass the message on to my brothers, Kane and Rafe. They might want to add the saying to our business cards."

"Vampires have business cards?" The wolf's mouth dropped, his glassy eyes somehow managing to portray surprise. "No way?"

Dante closed his eyes and prayed for a hole to open up in the dirty, cracked linoleum floor and swallow up the punk. "It was a joke."

"Oh." The teen's brow wrinkled like he was trying to process the information before he gave a

slight shake of his head. "What are you doing here anyhow?"

As one, they both looked over at the rack of dirty magazines. Dante felt his face flush as he realized he was inadvertently contributing to the idiot's delinquency. It didn't help matters when a wicked grin spread over the teen's face.

"Sweet. A vampire's gotta get his groove on. I can totally understand. Do you want me to show you the one with the best pictures?" He leaned over to grab a magazine that promised *Bigg Juggs*.

Dante reached out to stay his hand. "Dear God, no." He grabbed his arm and dragged him a couple of feet away. "What's a little dork like you doing out so late? Doesn't your pack have a curfew for you little ankle bitters?"

"So where have you been all this time?" Again the wolf only appeared to hear what he wanted. "Every paranormal creature in the city has been wondering."

"Really?" Dante asked dryly, disbelief making his sarcasm come out full force. "Since when did they become so caring?"

"Whenever someone from the top of the food chain goes missing, everyone starts to worry about what was bad enough to take him out."

"So it wasn't so much out of concern for me, but concerned about what else there may be?" Suddenly it was all becoming painfully clear to

Dante.

"Something like that. So where have you been?"

Taking a slow drink to put off answering, Dante lazily looked through the grimy window at the skyline of Detroit as a bit of nostalgia tugged at his heart. It had been so many months since he'd seen it and he was shocked at how much he actually missed the city.

"I've been here and there." He evaded as he thought about how Rafe and Kane were going to react when he came knocking on the clan doors. Would his two brothers welcome him back with open arms?

Damn doubtful. Not that he blamed them. After all he was the one who walked away on Christmas Eve without giving either one of them a goodbye or a fuck you. Plus, he hadn't bothered to contact them in all the time he'd been gone. No, he'd been too busy running. And why had the big, bad vampire left?

Because he couldn't get a frigging grip on his emotions. He was like one of the teen divas from a reality show who was suffering from a constant case of PMS. Ever since he'd been released from the paranormal prison that he and his brothers had rotted in for ten years, he hadn't exactly been the poster child for mental health. For a while he was content to ride it out. Borderline psycho on

his good days, raging lunatic on his bad. But after one too many times of being strapped down on a hospital bed and injected with drugs, he'd decided it was time to go and find his inner Zen. He was still looking for that damn Zen. Maybe he should try Craig's List.

"Why did you take off in the first place? Were you rescuing someone? Maybe taking out something really bad, like a troll?" The kid persisted as he shoved his oversized hands in his pockets.

"What's your name?" Dante decided it was his turn to play the evasive card.

"My friends call me T."

"Is that short for tool?"

"No." A wounded look passed over the wolf's face.

It was so genuine that Dante almost felt bad for ribbing him. "What's your real name then?"

"Thad."

"Now why would you want to hide that?" Dante didn't even bother to conceal his grin.

"Because it sounds so stuffy and formal, kind of like a vampire name." He ducked his head as his cheeks grew pink, probably because he realized how insulting his statement was.

Lucky for Thad it took a lot more to rile Dante up. "So what would you rather it be, Fangs, Killer or Brutus?" he asked.

"Anyone of those would be better than freaking Thad," the wolf grumbled.

"Well, Thad." Dante made sure to place great emphasis on the name. "You shouldn't be out this late."

"I can take care of myself." Thad curled up the corner of one side of his mouth to show a sharp canine.

Very doubtful, not only where there humans who would love to take advantage of a teenager being out alone, but there were harpies, kubolds, brownies and countless other creatures that would just love get themselves a werewolf pelt for their living room floor. But the last thing you wanted to do was insult a male werewolf's pride. Even one who was still in high school and probably used words like *kewl* and *hawt*.

"I never said you couldn't." Dante reasoned carefully. "Still, you're out past curfew and your pack would have my ass if I didn't take you back. Since my clan is dependent on their generosity for letting us stay in their city, I can't afford to make them angry."

"Awh, man," Thad groused as he screwed his face up like he'd smelled something foul. "Do you have any idea how much this sucks?"

Dante grabbed him by the arm and led him out, pausing only long enough to throw his cup away.

As they passed the human clerk, she barely

raised her head to look at them.

"Using the word suck around a vampire? You better watch it, some would think that was an invitation."

Thad put a hand protectively to his throat as he gulped. "You wouldn't."

"No, but there are plenty who would. Now, let's go." They stopped in front of his car as Dante fished the keys out of his pocket. A look of horror passed over the teen's face and this time it had nothing to do with the fear of having a vampire latch on to his neck.

"Please, don't tell me that the infamous Dante Toren is driving a Gremlin?" The kid continued to gape at the car.

Dante could see the respect the teen had for him drop a couple of notches. "What's wrong with my car?" Now it was Dante's turn to be wounded.

"Well...it's a Gremlin. And a damn ugly one at that."

"Just get in." Dante gave him a gentle shove toward the puke green car.

"No wonder you were loitering by the dirty magazines. Nobody else would be caught dead in this thing. You must not have had a date in a seriously long time." Thad opened the door and immediately clapped his hands over his ears when the rusted hinges let out a squawk of protest. "Dude, if you're trying to torture me, this is the

way.”

“It’s not that bad.” Even as Dante said that, the car’s antenna fell off as a strong gust of wind hit it. He worked hard to keep his face impassive as he refused to look at it. Maybe if he ignored it, they could pretend it never happened.

“Where did you get it? A goblin die and leave it to you in its will?”

“It was free so I gladly took it.” Funny, finding one’s inner Zen didn’t pay too well.

“Shoot,” Thad muttered as he got in, wrinkling his nose in a canine manner at the stinky interior. “Someone should have paid *you* for taking this thing off their hands.”

“If it offends you that much you can stick your head out the window while I’m driving.” Dante got in and slammed the door. “I hear your kind loves to do that.”

“I doubt the window works in this POS.”

“Very funny,” Dante drawled as he turned the ignition. The car coughed, sputtered and groaned before it stuttered to life. “Just tell me where your pack is living.”

Following the kid’s direction, Dante drove to what used to be a church in the outskirts of the city. The entire way there, Thad continued to bombard him with questions and Dante continued to ignore the majority of them.

As soon as he pulled in front of the building,

Dante knew something was wrong. His gut was yelling at him that there was danger nearby and if it was one thing he trusted, it was his instincts. It was one of the things that kept him alive all those years in prison.

He stared at the large church, searching for an answer. The stained glass windows were dark and forbidding. The stone walls seemed so damn silent and lifeless. Double wooden doors appeared to be keeping something trapped inside. The building was tall with a bell tower on top and Dante was half expecting a gargoyle to come swooping down.

"Where is everyone?" Thad whispered, all trace of his stoner accent gone. He tilted his head to the side before a soft whimper came out. "I can smell death."

Yes, there was the ripe stench of death floating in the wind, but Dante kept that observation to himself. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and his fangs elongated, getting ready for battle. There was something nearby and it had been bad enough to take down a pack of werewolves. He inhaled deeper and the rich, metallic scent of blood interlaced with the death smell.

Reaching into his pocket, he got out a handgun and checked it to make sure it was ready. He was already armed with some knives and daggers, but

it would be better to go in with some big stuff, too. Slipping his cell out of his jacket, he handed it to the teen.

The kid's hand trembled as he took it.

"If I don't come in back in five minutes, call my clan for backup," he ordered.

"I can come in with you and help." The wolf's voice shook as he made his offer.

"No, you'll just get in the way. Promise me you'll stay here." When the kid didn't answer, Dante grabbed him by the shoulder and gave it a shake. "Promise me, damn it."

"I promise," he rasped as a tear slid down his cheek. "I was only gone a few hours. Only a few frigging hours. What could have happened in that little of time?"

Dante didn't have any words of comfort to give him. He knew from personal experience how hollow they would sound anyway. Instead he got out of the car, weapon up and ready.

Edging his way to the church, the familiar adrenaline rush hit him. It was the same one he used to get when he was a top soldier for the Vampire Regulation Force and, after he had been disgraced, hunting as a private mercenary. Edgy and thrilling, it shot through his bloodstream, making for a high no drug could match. God, how he missed this. Screw the Zen.

Careful to make himself as small as a target as

possible, he peeked into one of the few windows that wasn't stained glass. Pitch black inside, he couldn't see beyond a few feet. There were dark streaks on the wall and he didn't need his heightened vampire senses to tell him it was blood. Everything was too still and empty. No sign of the pack besides the smears of blood. Nothing but the promise of something bad.

It looked like he was going to have to actually go inside to find out what was happening. While the thought of going into an unknown situation that had already obviously killed off plenty of individuals should have scared the piss out of him, it didn't. It only sent another surge of adrenalin through him.

Moving to the front door, he slowly opened it, gun still up. A heavy silence met him, not even a moan or a wisp of air was present. The only thing more disconcerting than screams and gunfire, was quiet like this. The smell of blood and death was even stronger inside, making him gag slightly. While the kills were so fresh a human may have been able to detect the blood, they wouldn't have been able to detect the decay. Only monsters like him could do that.

He moved from room to room, finding nothing but scattered belongings and more blood. In the kitchen, food was all over the floor and smeared onto the countertops. A pot of something had

boiled over and his nostrils twitched at the scent of burnt meat. Even more unpleasant memories were brought forward with that bitter scent. Bothered more than he cared to admit, he paused long enough to turn it off, his hands fumbling with the knobs of the stove in his haste to get the task done.

Don't lose focus. Keep your eye on the target and don't let them see any weakness. It wasn't his voice chanting those commands in his mind, but his older brother Kane's. After years of fighting next to his siblings, he knew his oldest brother's lectures by heart.

On instinct, he opened his mind to touch his brothers' following the same mental path they had shared from the crib. He'd kept a barrier up for so long it felt good to finally let it down. After a couple of seconds, he frowned in frustration. Just a hint of static, which meant that they were too far away to touch.

Or something was blocking him. His skin crawled with fear. Fuck, not good. That meant whatever was in here already knew about him. Even so, Dante continued to press on because the word *retreat* wasn't in his dictionary. Obviously *suicidal* and *stupid* were though because he should have turned tail and waited for backup. Screw it though. He grinned as his heart started to pump harder and a cold sweat broke out over his body.

There was a reason they called him the *Mad Toren Brother*.

He found the bodies in the common area. Piled like cordwood, what used to be a pack of virile, healthy werewolves, were now just a pile of corpses. Men, woman and, dear God, children were all mixed together. Dante wanted to run to the corner and vomit, but he fought he urge, not wanting to let his guard down. He did allow himself to swallow the bitter saliva that was pooling in his mouth as his stomach objected to the mass carnage around him.

A rush of husky laughter filled the empty air.

Sensual, dark and evil, it made his hackles rise. "So fucking dead. So fucking dead," he wasn't speaking about the slaughtered pack, but rather to his unseen enemy. "You hear me? When I get my claws on you, you're so fucking dead!"

The laughter switched to a throaty song.

Dante strained his ears to pick up the words, but all he got was a humming melody. A slow comforting warmth settled over him as every muscle in his body relaxed. The song invaded every essence of his being, making him feel so peaceful. It was soothing, warm and not at all what you would expect from a killer. It was...nice. Very, very nice.

A female came out of the shadow, her white skin stark in the dim lighting. Dressed in head-to-

toe black from her torn dress to her fuck-me boots, she was what all the humans imagined vampires looked like. She even had the heaving bosoms and raven, glossy hair. Then she opened her mouth and revealed a row of razor sharp teeth, instead of the regular fangs and vampire would have.

Empusa.

Empusa were blood drinkers like vampires, but that was the only similarity they had. Empusa feed on anything they could get their claws on and they had an insatiable appetite. Driven by a hunger that could never be satisfied, they were crazed with blood lust and wouldn't stop until they were killed. Their bite also carried a poison that would make their victims go crazy. Provided they lived long enough.

Even as he rattled off this data in his head, he didn't feel any fear of the creature. Somewhere inside, Dante knew that he should shoot the bitch. Especially when five more of her sisters came out of the shadows and started humming with her. The funny thing was, he couldn't pull the trigger. If he killed them, then he couldn't hear the song anymore and right now, there was nothing more he wanted to do. In fact, if someone were to come along and try to stop the singing, Dante would attack them.

One of the empusa stopped singing and crooked one finger at him.

"Hello, beautiful," Dante slurred in a drunk-sounding voice as he moved forward, letting the gun slip from his limp fingers.

CHAPTER TWO

Brenden sat at the large bank of computers and security screens, carefully paying attention to each little detail. In charge of communications for their rebel Drone Vampire clan that night, he knew he couldn't afford to let any little detail escape his attention.

They were under constant threat from the Pure Blood run Vampire Regulation Force and although they were living in the werewolf-controlled city of Detroit and the VRF didn't dare enter, they could still never let their guard down. So even if it was the duller job in the clan, Brenden remained the diligent little soldier. The communication link in his ear cracked to life and the smooth tones of his sister's voice floated through.

"How goes it tonight, baby brother?"

"Fine, how does the parameter look?" He smiled, always happy to be able to talk to her. After years of separation, he treasured Toni above

all others.

"Quiet, way too quiet. Not even the ghosts are out tonight, which is unusual. It's almost as if something is scaring everything away. Eric doesn't like it."

Eric was the leader of their clan. A former Marine, he ran the place as a tight military operation and he turned out some the best-trained fighters in all the paranormal circles. It was one of reasons that a one-time blond hair, blue-eyed All-American college student like Brenden had become the highly skilled vampire soldier he now was. "Does Eric think the VRF is planning an attack?" he asked, apprehension making his gut tight.

Toni sighed. "We're not for sure. Just be extra careful until we know what's up."

"You be careful, too."

"No worries, I have Kane with me. With as protective as my mate is, nothing is going to touch me."

"Is Rafe still with you, too?" Brenden waved absently as one of his friends, Cherish, came in. As usual, the petite female had a cute newsboy cap covering her riot of dark curls even though she was in the clan uniform of black cargo pants and long sleeved shirt.

"Yes, so I have both of them hovering over me." Toni made a loud kissing noise into the phone. "So

don't worry about me."

"Okay. Talk to you later then?" That earned him another kissy noise and he couldn't help but grin at his sister's antics. After seeing her way too serious too many times, it was nice to see her acting so carefree.

"Everything good with your sister's team?" Cherish asked as she fired up one of the other computers.

"She says it's unusually quiet." Brenden went back to his own monitor, ready to let the subject drop.

"Hmmm..." Cherish mused.

Tension made his shoulder muscles grow tight. He knew that *Hmmm...* way too well. "What is it?" He turned away from his screen because he knew nothing was going to get done until his friend had her say.

"It's just odd that nothing is out there. You would almost think that everything is hiding from something. It would have to be something bad to scare away the unusual monsters and creatures, too. Our type doesn't spook easy."

Brenden clenched his hands into fists as he mulled over her words. Possessing a genius IQ, Cherish knew paranormal creatures inside and out. If there was somebody out there who knew the subject better, he'd yet to meet them. It was one of the reasons she was part of his of his misfit

crew.

Dubbed the Dork Detail, they had all drifted together because of their own unique interests and specialties. Take Cherish for example, she excelled at knowing everything there was to know about paranormal creatures. She knew how their societies functioned plus she knew all their strengths and weaknesses. Her last skill came in handy with Brenden's specialty.

Weapons. More specifically developing weapons that were geared to kill anything that went bump in the night. Given that most of those weapons were still in the development stage, it was a closely guarded secret in their group. Not even his sister knew about all of the things they were doing. "Do you think I should call and warn Toni and the others about your suspicions?" he asked as worry spiked through him.

"Tell them what?" Cherish pursed her lips together before continuing, "That I have a gut feeling. Last time I checked, you were the only one who bothered to put much stock in what I think."

"Don't feel too bad." He patted the communication log with one hand, anger and resentment making him sound bitter. "Unless it has to do with computers, they don't want to listen to me either. To them, I'm still the same geeky college kid that became a vampire over a year ago. Shit, half of them still call me fledging."

"Once you show them those new grenades you're working on, they'll change their minds real quick." She kicked her boots on the desk and leaned back with a huge yawn.

"If they don't exile me first."

"Now why would they do something stupid like that?"

"Because one of my grenades could easily take out half this clan if it were used against us. That weapon could be the bane of vampires."

"It will be the bane of the Pure Born Ones, for us Drones it will finally give us the upper hand." She grinned wickedly, showing off her fangs and the cutest set of dimples.

"So long as the Pure Ones don't get their hands on it and use it to finish us off," Brenden countered angrily. "They won't be happy until we're dead and why? Just because we were made into vampires and not born that way like they were. The news just came through the underground that the VRF eliminated another Drone clan. They think over a hundred were killed. If it wasn't for the werewolves protecting us, our clan would already probably be next. Fucking Pures, I wish they just once had to feel the fear we have to deal with daily."

"You speak pretty strongly for someone who has a sister mated to a Pure." Cherish narrowed her eyes way too knowingly.

"Kane's different," Brenden muttered.

"Yes, all the Toren brothers are special, aren't they?" She pursed her lips together as she continued to pierce him with that look.

"Leave it," he replied darkly.

"It's been months since he left. He's not coming back."

"I said leave it."

"I'm just sick of seeing one of my best friends wasting their time over a jerk." She planted her boots back on the ground and leaned forward in the chair.

"He's not a jerk."

"Really? What else would you call someone who just up and leaves his family with no warning?"

"I'm sure he had his reasons." Even as Brenden defended Dante, he couldn't help but feel some bitter resentment. Dante hadn't bothered to tell anyone anything. He'd just walked away without even looking back. Not that the vampire owed him anything. He'd never even bothered to talk to Brenden unless it was to issue a bullshit or a cutdown.

The clan's main phone line rang and he snagged it up, glad to have a distraction from both his thoughts and Cherish's prodding. When he got a look at the caller ID, his heart slammed against his chest in shock. Speak of the devil. Flipping it

open, he tried not to notice how his hand was shaking as he lifted the receiver to his ear. "Dante?" He gave Cherish his best what-the-fuck look. She returned it as her jaw dropped.

"Help us!" The voice was young, bordering on hysterical and certainly not Dante.

"Who is this?"

Cherish came over and took the seat next to him.

"Those bitches got him, too. Oh God, you have to help." There was a whimper that sounded almost canine. He scribbled the words, *werewolf, young* on the communications tablet and turned it so she could read. "Slow down and tell me what's going on." Even though Brenden wanted to yell at the kid to get a grip, he knew that would only make things worse.

"They attacked my pack and Dante went inside to help them. I was supposed to stay in the car, but when he didn't come back, I looked in the kitchen window and I saw them."

Another one of those whimpers came, followed by a howl of agony. Brenden winced as the high-pitched sound assaulted his ears. "What did you see?" He wrote *Dante and wolf pack attacked by something*.

Cherish sucked in a breath of shock.

"They were some chicks with long dark hair and they had some freaky teeth, man. Even scarier

than you vamps. I know they're blood drinkers though because I saw a few on them attack Dante and latch on. Before that, their mouths were open like they were singing, but I couldn't hear anything through the window."

"What was Dante doing during all this?" Even as he asked the question, he was writing down all the information the kid was relaying to him so Cherish was up to speed. If anyone could figure out what Dante was up against, it would be her.

"That's the strange thing. He just stood there all dazed like. He didn't even fight back when those freaky bitches attacked him." Another howl ripped through the receiver. "They killed my entire pack. My sisters and mom. I want those freaks ripped to pieces."

"It's empusa," Cherish whispered "Tell the kid to stay the hell out of there. They won't care that he's young and innocent. They will drain him dry in seconds."

"What's your name?" Brenden wrote *Round up the others, now.*

"Thad."

"Listen to me, Thad. I want you to go back to the car and stay put until we get there. You just need to tell me where to go and we'll leave right away." As Thad gave him directions, Brenden could hear Cherish on another line getting the gang together. As soon as he had the location, he

gave one last order for the teen to stay put before Brenden snapped the phone shut and started to haul ass.

"Raven is coming to take over communications," Cherish said as she got up and followed him. "Everyone else is already loading up the van. Zeke is joining us to add some muscle."

"Good," the word came out as a snarl as his fangs grew large with aggression. The thought of Dante being harmed or worse was bringing out the inner predator in Brenden. Cold hard rage pumped through his veins and his vision was a red haze around the edges.

"Are you going to contact his brothers?" Cherish asked as they moved at a near run.

Navigating the long white hallways through the clan dwelling, they headed for the garage. Luckily, they didn't encounter that many vampires on their way out. Brenden wasn't in the mood for questions right now. "They're all the way across town and might not be able to make it in time to help." He pushed open the door and stepped into the huge garage that housed the clan's many cars and vans.

"You should still give them a heads up."

"Fine, tell Raven to call them, but we're not waiting. We go in now to bring him out."

"We should wait for backup. We haven't even

told Eric and as our leader we should get his go ahead," she argued.

Brenden stopped short and turned to her before barring his fangs with a hiss. "You want to wait, fine. I'm going now."

"But —"

"No, buts. I'm not going to sit by while Dante's in trouble. If you guys don't want to go with me, I'll understand." He waited for several tense seconds before she lowered her head slightly and gave him a nod.

"Of course we're going with you. You don't have to get all hissy on me. I just thought you should know Eric is going to piss kittens when he hears about this."

"Tough shit. If there are any repercussions, I'll take full blame."

"He'll be even more mad when he finds out about our new weapon."

"Why should he find out about that?"

"Because it will be the perfect thing to take out those bitches." They had reached the van and she hopped in the back.

Brenden was pleased when he saw the other members of their group already there, some still struggling into their battle clothes. "Empusa are sensitive to sunlight?" He nodded hello to everyone as he jumped in after her.

Kyle started up the engine and they pulled out.

"Oh yes, the new grenades will work perfect against them," she replied smugly.

"What new grenades?" Zeke asked suspiciously. With dark hair and eyes and over six-feet of muscle, he was the only one in the van who looked like he had any business going into a battle. The only reason why he was even there was because he had the misfortune of being around when Kyle had received Cherish's call for help.

"We developed a new breach grenade that mounts on our M-16," Brenden supplied, even though the last thing he felt like now was a workshop. His hands were shaking with the desire to go and destroy the things that had dared touch Dante.

"Hate to break it to you, but that's not so new. The US military has been using that for years now," Zeke drawled.

"Ours aren't loaded with the usual explosives. They have a special added feature instead." Brenden held out one. It was long and skinny with a flat tip. The familiar cool sleek feeling of them brought Brenden some comfort.

The other vampire took it with a frown. "What's so different about them?"

"They are loaded with ultraviolet light. When they go off, they fill the place with a whole bunch of sunshine.

"Shit!" Zeke almost dropped the weapon in his

shock. "Are you all fucking crazy? Why in the hell would you make something like that?"

"To take out the VRF. I have a bone to pick with Corbin and nothing would please me more than to destroy his precious organization."

"Look," Zeke held up one hand like he was trying to placate him, "after the way Corbin abused your sister all those years, I can understand your need to get even, but a weapon like this isn't the answer."

"It's more than the way he treated Toni," Brenden replied in clipped tones.

"Is it because what he did to you, too? You know, turning you into a vampire just to jack with your sister?"

"No, if anything I'm grateful for that. It made it so I could be a part of Toni's life again. I'm doing this for all those clans that have been liquidated under his order. You may be happy to just stick your head in the sand and ignore it, but I'm not. I'm going to give some hurt back." He smiled and knew it looked a little sinister when he saw Zeke fidget nervously.

"You guys are seriously scary. You know that, right?"

"We're just prepared," Cherish countered, hurt passing over her soft eyes.

"*Prepared?*" Zeke echoed, incredulously. "Prepared is having a Swiss Army Knife handy or

making sure you carry a condom in your wallet. It's not having a dozen paranormal WMD in the back of your van."

"If you want, we can pull over and let you out," Brenden bit out angrily.

"And miss all the fun?" Zeke grinned, showing off a wicked set of fangs. "Hell no. You just shocked me is all."

"Just make sure you listen to my orders when we go in. I would hate to have to explain things to Eric if one of his soldiers ends up with sunburn because he looked the wrong way." Brenden knew he was probably coming off as a dick, but he couldn't help it. With each passing second, he was getting more and more twitchy as he knew the chances for Dante's hopes were getting dimmer.

"We'll make it in time," Cherish whispered in his ear before she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek. She straightened and started handing out dark goggles. "Make sure you have these on when the grenade is fired. While it won't protect you if you are in the direct blast path, it will help you if you're on the fringes. Make sure you have masks and gloves on at all times."

"How many survivors do we think there are?" Zeke pulled on his gloves and flexed his fingers, making the leather creak.

"From what the young wolf told us it's just Dante. The entire pack was wiped out." Cherish

took a seat and flipped open her laptop.

"How can we be sure we don't take him out when we fire one of those puppies in there?"

"We'll just use your ass as bait to draw all the bitches out." Brenden curled one corner of his mouth up to flash one of his own fangs.

"Be nice," Cherish admonished before she pointed to the screen of her computer. "Empusa have a body temperature that is ten degrees higher than vampires. While you guys go in, I'll use thermal imagining to direct you to where Dante is." She shot a guilty look over at Brenden, before adding, "Provided he isn't already dead."

"Don't forget the ear buds," the youngest member of their group, Micah, added.

"Empusa have the ability to lure their victims into a hypnotic state. They do it by singing. So we have to make sure you guys can't hear them. Micah was kind enough to lend us his hard rock collection to help drown them out."

"It's going to leave us more vulnerable." Brenden frowned as he took a set from Micah. "We won't be able to hear them coming up on us."

"I agree." Cherish shrugged. "But we don't have a choice. We'll just have to keep the communication link up and I will make sure to monitor the empusa by their thermal images. If I see them coming, I'll make sure to warn you."

"Raven just called," Kyle yelled back. "She got

in touch with Kane and Rafe. They said they're on their way and for us to hold tight until they get here."

Every vampire in the van turned to Brenden and he felt the weight of their stares. He slipped his bulletproof vest on and picked up his rifle. "And I say we're going in. Are you guys with me?"

"Every step of the way." Zeke got an evil glint in his eyes as he slipped on his hood. "Lead the way."

The van screeched to a halt as Brenden was pulling the goggles into place. He only hoped that they had made it before Dante was killed.

CHAPTER THREE

Brenden jumped out of the back of the van, his boots hitting the packed dirt of the overgrown yard with a thump. The dark outline of the church seemed to loom over them like a sinister Halloween parody. Brenden squinted, trying to make out any immediate dangers, but couldn't see them. With the damn darkened goggles in place, the night was even harder to see through, but there was no getting around this attack without them. A figure came running at them and they all raised their rifles defensively.

"What are you waiting for?" the unknown runner shrieked.

Brenden relaxed enough to lower his weapon when he recognized the hysterical voice as Thad. "Stand down," he ordered the others. "It's the wolf who called."

"We better get him in the van before his yelling lets the empusa know we're here," Zeke growled.

"Agreed." Brenden nodded to Kyle who reached out and dragged the kid to the van, then threw him in. They would let Cherish have the honor of calming down the teen.

Once he got back in to the group, Brenden nodded. "Okay, everyone stay together and make sure you keep the ear buds on, no matter how crappy the music gets."

They all nodded and got into formation. Now that they had the hoods and goggles on, they were head to toe in black and it was hard to tell who was who. He felt fear, anxiety and even some excitement building up in him as they waited for the cue from Cherish. Micah came over and armed Brenden's gun with a grenade as a soft gust of wind brushed past them, carrying the scent of freshly dead.

Everything was so silent, too damn silent. There wasn't even the usually city sounds bouncing around. Cherish had been right, everyone—everything—was hiding from something tonight and their small group of vampires was running right toward that something.

"You boys ready?" Cherish's voice cracked over the communication link.

"Tell us what you got," Brenden replied, never taking his gaze off the looming building. Even though it was an old church and should have been a place of sanctuary, the place just screamed

danger.

"I see the heat markers of at least a couple dozen empusa. You sure you don't want to wait for backup?"

"Just tell me if you see Dante," he replied curtly.

A heavy sigh came from Cherish's end. "I see something that is probably him and while it looks like he's still alive, he's not moving. He's in the back corner of the building, which is good for our planned attack, but sucky because it means you're going to have to go in deep to extract him. If any of the empusa survive, you'll have to fight your way through them."

"Goody," Zeke drawled. "I've always wanted to have to fight off a gaggle of females who want nothing more than to suck me. It looks like a dream come true."

"If you want, we can leave one alive for you to take home and keep on a leash." Brenden lifted his weapon, trying desperately not to notice how hard his hands were shaking. "Ready for fire!"

There was a sharp crack as the weapon discharged and an even louder bang as it slammed into the wood door of the building. The grenade sliced through and there was an explosion of bright white light that illuminated the interior of the church and blossomed out. The heat seared over Brenden and singed his skin, despite the

layer of protective clothing. Even though he closed his eyes, they watered and stung from the ultraviolet light. He could hear the curses from the rest of group. Forcing his eyes open, he looked over the group for injuries, but saw they were just discomforted like him.

Inside, the building came to life with hideous sounding screams. High-pitched and sharp, they grated on Brenden and made the hairs on his arms stand on end. One of the empusa ran out or at least he thought it was one. It was kind of hard since the thing was completely engulfed with flames. It stumbled forward before it toppled down the five stone steps leading up to the door. When it landed in a heap at the bottom, it didn't get back up.

The stench of burning flesh and hair mixed in with the death odor, making the bile rise in the back of his throat. He shook it off and waved the rest of the group forward. They didn't even hesitate to follow him despite all the shrieking still ripping through the air.

"Sorry, guys but it's time to turn on the music." Cherish's voice was barely discernable over the chaos. Soon the hard rock blasted into his ears and Brenden was glad to have some relief from the empusa cries. He slid up his goggles so he could have a better view at the havoc his weapon created and couldn't help but crack a small smile

at how successful it was.

Using hand gestures, he ordered the group forward. Taking point, he led them inside. Kicking the door the rest of the way open, he drew up his gun just in time to shoot an empusa who charged. Her mouth was open in a scream, but he didn't have to hear it. The music was so damn loud, there could have been a frigging construction crew tearing the place apart and he wouldn't have noticed. They were completely dependent on Cherish to be their ears.

"Three coming eight o'clock," her voice carried over the rock music. "Two more are coming at three. Watch yourselves."

Brenden gestured and the group formed a circle, backs to one another, just as the empusa came into view. This time their mouths were open, but it wasn't to scream. Even though he couldn't hear the bitches, he knew they were singing and trying to gain control of the vampire's minds. When Micah reacted by shooting one of them in the heart, the looks of surprise on the empusa's face was priceless.

They made quick work of the other ones, using their shock to catch them unaware. Once they were taken care of, Brenden continued to make his way to the back corner of the building. He could sense the others following. Along the way, they had to step over the ash piles of the empusa who

were vaporized from the missile blast. Brenden may have felt sorry for them if it hadn't of been for the streaks of werewolf blood that was all through the dwelling.

Finally they were where Dante was supposed to be. Brenden's heart galloped with fear as he wondered what shape the vampire would be in. Almost every other time he'd ever seen the other male, he'd always been so cocky and sure of himself. To think that something, even dozens of empusa, could take him down was boggling.

"There is one in there with him," Cherish informed them. "Other than that, I don't see any more that are alive. Good work, guys."

"Let's not break out the party hats yet," Brenden returned. "We still don't have full retrieval."

"By the way, Kane called their ETA is five minutes. Eric's with him. Thought you would like the warning."

"Thanks." Brenden looked around at the pile of ashes and wondered how the clan leader was going to react to this carnage. Filing that worry away for later, he started scanning the room for the dark-haired vampire, fear going through him when he finally spotted Dante.

He was in the corner of the room slumped over, not moving. The empusa was over him, her mouth latched onto his throat. Rifle raised, Brenden held

back, not daring to take a shot, out of fear of hitting Dante instead. Anxiety ratcheted through Brenden as Dante remained still. He couldn't hear if the vampire was even moaning thanks to the fucking music. Brenden wanted to rip the ear buds out, but didn't dare for fear of falling under the spell of the empusa.

He did fire one shot in the air to get the bitch's attention. That trick worked perfectly. She lifted her head, still in a crouching position, one clawed hand protectively over Dante's bloodied chest. More blood trickled down her mouth as she opened her jaws wide enough to swallow a large cat, showing off row after row of sharp teeth. He worked hard to suppress a shudder at how quickly the move made her go from Goth glam to downright gross. Not even a twelve pack would make that fuckable.

"Come on, you bitch," he taunted. "Why don't you come get me?" When she formed her black lips into what might have been a song, he laughed. "Not going to work, you freak. Now get your hands off my vampire."

She continued to run her hands over Dante, her fingers lingering over his chest in what was almost a lovers' caress.

Brenden let out a snarl at the sight of her touching the exact areas he longed to. Never before had he felt a jealous rage and there was no

room for such emotions in the heat of battle, but damned if that wasn't what was going through him now. Ripping off the hood and ear buds, he let out a loud hiss and launched his body at her.

Shocked, she moved too late, and before she could start that singing crap again, he had a hand wrapped around her throat. Black eyes wide with terror, she started to claw at him, leaving behind deep furrows in his arms, despite the heavy shirt he had on. She tried to bite him in the shoulder and screamed in frustration when she met with the bulletproof vest. Because he still had an iron grip on her neck, the scream came out high-pitched and strained.

"Mine." He pinned her down and slammed her head into the ground a few times for effect. "You hear me? He's mine." He tried to hold on, but she was damn strong. Digging her claws even deeper into his flesh, she arched up and almost tossed him off. In the scuffle, his grip on her throat slipped enough for her to try to latch onto his carotid with her damn ugly teeth. He beat her to it, baring his fangs with a hiss as he sunk them deep into her neck.

Bitter blood filled his mouth, burning almost like an acid. Too pissed to care, he bit deeper before he tore out a chunk of her. She flailed under him, her struggles getting weaker. Brenden still didn't let up, not until she grew still and he could

feel her heart flutter, then stutter to a complete stop. Raising his head, he encountered the shock gazes of the rest of his group.

"You just went fucking berserker," Zeke said in awe, his ear buds hanging from his neck. He was slightly pale, but there was no mistaking the admiration in his eyes, too. "After that, I pity anyone who calls you fledging anymore."

Brenden ignored him, too desperate to get to Dante. Wiping the foul tasting blood off his chin, he scampered across the floor to the fallen vampire. As he got closer, he could detect the steady thumping of a heartbeat showing Dante was still alive. Brenden said a whispered prayer of thanks to a God he'd long ignored as he reached a trembling hand out to touch the male's inky dark hair.

"Wake up," he urged in a hushed voice. Dante's lids slid open, but instead of the warm brown gaze Brenden had grown to love, they were glazed and feral looking. With a snarl that didn't sound too unlike the empusa, Dante threw Brenden off, then retreated to a far corner of the room and sat on his haunches. Recovering quickly, Brenden tried to approach him again, only to receive a warning hiss.

"Great, he's having another one of his famous fits," Zeke spat disgustedly. "Just what we need."

"No, this isn't him this time." Brenden held up

a palm in a silent plea for the others to stay back. "Empusa have venom in their bite that can make their victims mad. According to Cherish, it's temporary though. I just need to talk him down."

"We need to tranq him," Zeke shot back.

"No, he hates the drugs. Just let me try to calm him down."

Zeke gave a reluctant nod, but kept his gun trained on Dante. In fact, the entire group was still keeping the mad vampire in their sites.

"Hey, Dante." Brenden took a small step toward the male who snapped his fangs in response.

"Back off," Dante replied in a guttural voice.

"It's time to go home. Everyone has been missing you." He took another step forward only to stop short when Dante hissed at him. A strange buzzing filled Brenden's head and he shook it off.

"I don't know you." Dante pressed his back flat against the wall as a look of pure terror went over his sweat-streaked face.

That cut Brenden deeper than if he had been aggressive still. It was pure torture having to see Dante fearful because the vampire had always acted like he could kick the ass of anything that crossed him. "It's me, Brenden. Toni's brother. You remember her? Kane's mate." A wave of dizziness made him stumble a step.

"Kane?" Dante cocked his head to the side

before he skipped his bleary gaze over him.

"Yes, Kane is on his way and he asked me to bring you out front to meet him." Okay, maybe not all of that was true, but he was willing to do anything to diffuse this cluster fuck.

"How do I really know you're Brenden?" Dante scrubbed a ragged hand over his face. "Everything is so confusing."

"Remember that time you and I were captured by ghouls? They took us to that old factory and attacked us pretty bad." Brenden was confident enough now to walk the rest of the way so he could kneel in front of Dante.

"I tried to protect you then, but they still got you." This time when Dante gazed at him, the warmth was almost back into his eyes.

"Yes, and I tried to protect you, but we both failed that day still carry the scars. We sure had fun making Doc's life hell while we healed in the infirmary though."

"Sure did," Dante chuckled and it almost sounded normal. "You kept slapping her on the ass."

"Because you kept daring me to do it." The buzzing started again and he shook his head once to clear it. Shit, what in the hell was wrong? Maybe it had been too long since he last fed. His gaze fixated on Dante's throat and the strong pulse beating there. With another shake of his

head, he gave himself and inner smack. *What the fuck is up with me. I'm in the middle of a situation and all I can think about is what Dante would taste like. I'm no better than those damn empusa.*

"Are you okay?" Dante cocked his head to the side as he was the one now throwing looks of concern around.

"Fine," the word sounded slurred even to his ringing ears.

"You've got empusa blood all over you." Dante grabbed both of Brenden's arms and gave him a shake. "Please, tell me you didn't drink any of it?"

"Maybe I took in a tad," Brenden admitted as a hot sweat broke out over his body.

"You stupid idiot. Didn't anyone tell you their blood is poisonous?"

The biting edge to his words was so like the Dante he'd always known, but the soft way he caressed Brenden's cheek was so new and welcome. "I missed you," Brenden admitted as he turned his cheek more into Dante's hand. His touch brought on sensations he'd never experienced before.

"Okay, nice to know." Dante's eyes narrowed in concern.

"No, I mean I really, really missed you." If Dante replied to that embarrassing admission, Brenden never heard it. A shot of white-hot pain lanced through his body. Letting out a scream of

agony, he toppled to the side. Strong arms closed around him as his word became nothing more than anguish.

CHAPTER THREE

Brenden came awake with a start, sitting up and then instantly regretting the move when every muscle in his body shrieked in protest. His stomach rolled in protest and he put a hand to his gut as he swallowed against the wave of nausea. Blinking blearily, he realized he was in the all-to-familiar infirmary back at the clan.

Someone had changed him out of his bloodstained clothes and thank God it wasn't into one of those drafty hospital gowns. It was a pair of his own sweats and his favorite Red Wings shirt. Swinging his feet over the side of the bed, he waited for the fresh bout of dizziness to pass.

"Easy there, big guy." The clan doctor, Dahlia, came through the swinging door, her white lab coat flapping around her shapely legs. As usual her dark hair was pulled up in a tight twist and her gray eyes somehow managed to be caring yet stern at the same time.

"Where's Dante?" Brenden asked, making no

move to lie back down. She frowned and placed a cool hand to his forehead.

"He's over there," she indicated with a tilt of her head.

Brenden glanced over and his heart clenched at the sight of Dante looking way too pale a couple of beds over. Still unconscious, he was in a fresh tee shirt, too, and covered to the waist by a white sheet. Several deep bite marks covered his arms. When Brenden saw the brown leather restraints on the other male's wrists, anger shot through him. "Why is he strapped to the bed?" The question came out hard, but he was too beyond pissed to care.

"When we tried to move in to help you, Dante lost it and almost went feral." Dahlia eyed the unconscious vampire speculatively. "They had to shoot him with tranquilizers to get you away from him."

"How could you allow that, Doc?" Brenden growled. "You know how he hates those drugs. I thought you were his friend."

"You think I'm any more happy about this than you?" Dahlia shot back, anger making her cheeks pink. "It kills me to have to do this."

"Then why did you do it? It wasn't necessary, I had him talked down, he was coming out on his own."

"And then you went into convulsions in front

of him and set him off again." She gave a slight shake of her head. "What in the hell were you thinking anyhow? Drinking empusa blood?"

"I didn't mean for it to happen." He ran a hand through his hair, noticing it was stiff from the carnage of the battle. A shower was definitely in order. "I got caught up in the fight and my instincts took over. I guess this still makes me a fledging, huh?" Bitterness swelled in him. He was damn sick of being on the bottom of the feeding pool. The one everybody went to for computer problems, but the last one they looked for if there was a fight brewing.

"Quite the opposite." Dahlia gave a strangled laugh. "You have everyone all messed up. They don't know what to make of you anymore."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He rubbed his temples. Seemed like empusa blood also gave vampires one bitch of a hangover.

"Half of them now think you're the baddest thing that every walked the corridors, the other half are scared shitless of you because of that new weapon you made."

"How's Eric taking it?" Truth was, Brenden only gave half a damn what the clan leader was feeling. Worry for Dante over road all other concerns. He glanced over at the still sleeping vampire, trying to be as covert as possible about it. Of course Dahlia caught him. Her face grew soft as

the anger left it.

"You mean how is he taking it that you made weapons of pure death for our kind? He's spitting mad."

"I kind of guessed that was going to be his reaction." Again his attention was drawn to Dante. Dahlia followed his gaze.

"Dante's going to be okay." She crossed her arms over her chest, the white lab coat stretching over her shoulders. "Thanks to you. He lost so much blood I don't think he would have managed to last much longer. I know you're probably going to catch shit for not waiting for backup, but you made the right decision. At least in my opinion."

"How about the rest of my group? Are they getting flack for this?" Now that concern did take front and center. He didn't want to see the others punished for his decision.

"Spoken like a true leader." A small smile played on her lips as she walked over to Dante's bed to adjust the IV drip.

Brenden got up and followed her, his gaze locked on Dante's body and those damn restraints. "I'm not a leader." Close enough now to catch the familiar, but still intoxicating scent of Dante, he had to resist the urge to reach out and touch him.

"Not a leader?" Dahlia's voice was laced with amused doubt. "Okay, if you want to believe that."

Since the headache was starting to get worse, he didn't argue with her. Pain pounded in time with his heart, the agony making him nauseous. Fighting it back, he closed his eyes and inhaled deep, letting Dante's scent sooth him. Spices and citrus, with something darker underneath. That helped...some.

"You need to get back into bed." Dahlia gave a gentle tug on his shoulder. "Empusa blood poisoning can be fatal and you took in quite a bit. I was lucky to bring you out of it."

"You're the best doc around." Brenden gave her a smile, but didn't move away from the bedside. "It isn't the first time you saved my life."

"I get the feeling it won't be the last either." She pursed her lips together. "You and Dante have a way of finding trouble."

"Do Kane and Rafe know that Dante's back?" he asked, still ignoring her order to get back to bed since he didn't want to leave the other male's side.

"Who do you think brought him in? They got to the church right as you started convulsing."

He closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. *Crap, that meant Toni saw me hurt – again.* "Was my sister freaking out?"

"That's putting it mildly," Dahlia said dryly as she grabbed him again, this time firmly, and led him back to his bed.

Brenden sat on the edge, but didn't lie all the

way down. "Where is everyone?" he was shocked Dante's brothers weren't camped out at his bedside. It was no secret how close they were.

"They're next door giving blood, same with Toni." She placed a cool palm on his forehead. "You feel too hot. I'm going to see how that blood is going. We need to flush that poison out of your system."

Before he had time to respond, she left the room. As soon as the door closed behind her, Brenden hopped to his feet and slowly walked back to Dante. Mouth dry, from both fear and apprehension, he finally gave into months worth of pent up desires and touched the other male. It was the softest of touches to Dante's muscular chest. Even through the tee shirt, Brenden could still feel the alluring heat of his body.

Giving a guilty look at the door to make sure nobody was coming in, Brenden allowed his touch to grow bolder. Spreading his fingers out, he slowly traveled over the male's hard planes and lines. Going down his chest, he let his fingers trace the abs before ending where the sheet started. Any lower and he would be touching his... Sucking in a breath, Brenden snapped his hand back. It was wrong, he knew that. Dante was unconscious and never once had he expressed any interest in him, but Brenden couldn't help himself. After lusting for the other male so long, it felt so good to finally

be able to touch what he desired.

A soft moan slipped past Brenden's lips as he imagined how it would be to have Dante awake and touching him back. Brenden's only sexual experience had been the total of one humiliating episode with Cherish. That had been because the entire time, Brenden had been unable to stop thinking of Dante.

Somehow he knew sex with Dante would be both primal and intimate at the same time. If only he had shown the same interest back. But Dante had never once looked at Brenden with anything other than annoyance.

Glaring at the restrains, Brenden remembered all the times Dante had made it plain he hated the damn things. Wanting to save him from having to wake up to them if only this one time, he started to unbuckle them. He just made sure to do it quickly before Dahlia could come back in and stop him.

The skin on Dante's wrists was red where the cuffs had been and Brenden couldn't resist rubbing the area in an effort to sooth it. After he was done with the hands, he moved to the end of the bed to release his ankles. As soon as he undid the last buckle, he turned to look one last time. Just as he was twisting around, Dante launched from the bed with a vampire speed.

Even if Brenden had wanted to fight back, he

wouldn't have stood a chance. Dante was way too strong and quick. Before he had a chance to fully realize what was going on, Brenden found himself pinned to the wall. Dante had a hand fisted in the front of his shirt and their faces were only inches apart.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Dante asked, his voice harsh and raw.

"I know you hate the restraints so I thought I would get rid of them for you." Stupidly, Brenden was torn between fear and ball-numbing desire. While he should have been thinking of a way to escape before Dante tore him apart, all he could think about was how good it felt to have the male's body pressed against him.

"I'm not talking about the goddamn restraints." Dante gave a malicious smile that showed off his huge fangs.

Brenden felt his own incisors grow in response. "I was just checking your injuries." The lie sounded weak to his ears.

"Bullshit." Dante leaned in even closer and his breath fanned over Brenden's neck.

"Fuck," Brenden whispered as his cock grew so hard it hurt. His hands shot out and grabbed two fistfuls of Dante's shirt, but it wasn't to push him away, it was to bring him closer.

"Am I scaring you?" Dante's tongue darted to lick ever so briefly.

Brenden shuddered in response. "No."

"Then why are you trembling?" Dante leaned in closer and his pelvis bumped against Brenden's erection.

Brenden closed his eyes with an embarrassed groan. So much for keeping his little fledging-like crush secret. His dick just announced it for him.

Dante's eye grew wide in surprise as they both froze in place.

"Dante! What in the hell are you doing? Let him go!" Kane yelled as he came bursting through the door.

All hell broke loose as Rafe and Toni ran in, too.

Dante was roughly pulled away from him and jerked across the room by his brothers. Toni ran her hands protectively over Brenden.

"Did he hurt you?" she asked as she continued to search for injuries.

"No, he didn't do anything wrong." Brenden shrugged off her touch.

"What in the hell were you thinking, Dante?" Kane snapped. "He's Toni's brother, not another one of your chew toys."

Dante refused to answer, directing his dark gaze to the white tiled floor instead. His hands were balled at his sides and a tick had developed in his jaw.

"It's not his fault," Brenden defended. "I started it." At that admission, the entire room grew quiet.

They all looked at him like he just admitted to capital murder. All of them that was except for Dante who continued to study the floor.

"What do you mean *you started it*?" Kane finally asked, his blue eyes narrowed.

"I undid his restraints and..." Brenden trailed off as a hot flush came over his face.

"He didn't realize I was still hungry for blood," Dante finished. "I attacked him without realizing what I was doing."

"No it wasn't." Brenden shook his head. "I know I shouldn't have, but—"

"I said it was my fault," Dante interrupted firmly.

Brenden opened his mouth to argue, but a dark look from Dante stopped him cold. There was no mistaking the anger and the disgust on his face. Brenden clenched his jaw shut as the familiar feeling of rejection and shame slammed into him. Pushing away from the wall, he walked to the door, forcing himself not to glance at anyone.

"Where are you going?" Toni asked, her voice cracking with concern.

"Away from here." Before he did something real stupid like make a bigger ass of himself. Of course Doc had to chose that moment to come back in and she slammed right into him, ruining his already fucked-up exit.

"What do you think you're doing?" she

demanded angrily.

"Leaving." He stepped around her out into the hallway and was shocked to see his friends camped out there like they were waiting for him. Shit, even Zeke was there. They all scrambled to their feet.

"You can't leave," Dahlia argued in a loud voice. "You need blood."

"I'll get it somewhere else." He started down the hall, his friends falling in behind him.

"No you won't. You'll get your ass back here, now."

"If Brenden says he wants to leave, then he's leaving," Zeke replied coolly. "We'll take care of him if he needs it."

Brenden nearly stumbled in surprise. Sure the group of friends had been tight before and they had jokingly called themselves a team before, but they were all acting as if they were an actual military group now. What's more, they were acting as if he was their leader.

Things didn't get any better as they walked through the clan. Various vampires gawked at them. Some in horror, others in admiration. When someone made a fist and shook it at Brenden, Zeke growled and flashed some fang.

"Down, boy," Brenden mumbled. His head was starting to pound even worse and with each step, his legs were getting heavier and heavier. Maybe

he should have stayed at the infirmary after all. "What in the hell is up with you guys anyhow?"

"We're just protecting our leader," Cherish supplied as she glared menacingly at the crowd.

"I'm not your leader." A sweat broke out over his body as the nausea built up again.

"Brenden, you really need to start listening to me when I talk about different societies. Or at least perk up when I talk about how vampires function. We are pack animals, very much like werewolves. Packs always follow their alpha."

"Since when am I your alpha." He went to run a hand through his hair only to encounter the dried blood again. Yes, a bath was going to be the first thing he did when he got back to his quarters, no matter how crappy he felt.

"You took out dozens of empusa single handedly," Zeke drawled. "I would say that made you move up in the badass ranks."

Brenden stopped moving so he could look at them in disbelief. Had they lost their ever-loving flipping minds? "I only took one out with my hands, the others died because of our guns and the grenade."

"A grenade you not only made, but fired," Cherish pointed out smugly.

"The empusa blood is making me hallucinate," he rubbed his temples. "None of this is really happening."

"It's happening all right and we need to get you cleaned up and back in fighting form." Zeke said. "Eric wants to see you pronto."

"Ah, fuck," Brenden sighed.

"Ah, fuck indeed," Zeke responded grimly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dante continued to stare at the door long after Brenden had stormed out, a flurry of emotions wreaking havoc on his gut. Two in particular were taking front and center, confusion and blood lust.

Closing his eyes, he remembered how soft Brenden's touch had been and then how the other male's hard cock had felt pressed up against him. Okay, confusion was now on the backburner. All he felt was need, both for Brenden's blood and for his body.

Why hadn't he noticed before how sexy Brenden's full lips were, or how blue his eyes were, or how that blond hair was messed up so it looked like he'd just been thoroughly fucked?

Dante frowned, today was a bit different though. That hair had been stained with blood. "Did the empusa bite him, too?" he asked Dahlia, breaking the icy silence in the room. He tried to recall the events back at the church, but all he got was a muddled haze.

"No, you jackass," Toni spat, her eyes grew icy as her nostrils flared. "He bit one of them though and got poisoned in the process. Just so he could save your sorry hide."

"Toni, don't," Kane pleaded softly as he put a placating hand on her arm.

She shrugged it off and stalked Dante. "No, I won't stop it," she argued through clenched teeth.

She was still dressed in her clan uniform and her hair, which was the same shade of Brenden's, was styled in a tight ponytail. She always wore it that way when she thought she might be fighting and it looked like she was getting ready to do that now. Her small hands clenched in fists and a deadly aura settled over her reminding Dante that she had once been a top assassin for the VRF despite the fact she was a Drone.

"I am sick of everyone making excuses for your no-good, selfish, stubborn ass," she nearly yelled. "Dante, when are you going to start thinking of someone besides yourself?"

"I'm sorry." While he was wary of attack, he didn't step back. In fact, he took a step forward, although out of respect for Kane, he did keep his hands open and loose to his sides in a non-aggressive way.

"I don't believe you. It wasn't enough that you broke Kane's heart by walking out on him and Rafe. No, you had to attack my brother. And after

he almost died saving you."

"Brenden almost died?" His gut clenched at the thought of the younger male suffering because for some reason, Dante had become protective of him.

"You mean to tell me you don't remember him collapsing and convulsing at your feet. How do you think he got all that blood and crap on him? He was rolling around in that carnage."

"You need to remember, Dante was poisoned, too," Dahlia interrupted firmly. "While the venom from a bite isn't as bad, he was still out of it, too."

"His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the ground," Dante whispered as images flashed through his mind like a demented slideshow. "I tried to catch him, but I missed. He was screaming in pain and I wanted to help him, but I didn't know what to do. Then someone was trying to take him away from me, but I knew I had to protect him. Protect him like that time with the ghouls."

"Nobody was trying to take him from you." Kane nervously cleared his throat as he exchanged looks with Rafe who was silently taking in the whole scene.

"That was us coming in to try to help him." Toni choked in a sob.

That got to Dante more than her yelling. She had never been big at showing any weakness and crying would be one big ass weakness. He went to

put his arms around her, but caught Kane's warning snarl and held back. Guess big brother was a little pissed, too. "I sorry," Dante repeated as he dropped his hands.

"You keep saying that," Rafe chimed in, his dark green eyes glaring up from under the shield of his dark hair.

Great, he picks now to get talky?

"There was a young werewolf with me. Is he okay?" Dante asked, suddenly remembering about the poor scared kid he'd left behind in his car.

"He's fine. Thanks to you." Dahlia gave a defiant look at the rest of the vampires, as if she was daring with one of them to argue with her. "Another pack took him in. They promised to accept him as one of their own. He will be considered family to them."

"Speaking of family. Where have you been all this time?" Kane asked as he crossed his arms over his massive chest. Like Dante and Rafe, he had dark hair, but his eyes were a deep blue. Really half-brothers, they all got their eye colors from their different mothers.

"I've been around," Dante tried evasively, even though he knew that tactic wouldn't work with Kane.

"I'm two steps away from kicking your ass," Kane snapped. "Unless you want me to give into that urge, you'll tell me where the fuck you've

been."

"Look, I just needed to get away for awhile." Dante scrubbed his hand over his face, hating that he was having to open this frigging can. "I couldn't take the looks of pity and disgust. I was tired of being the clan whore on my good days and the mad vampire on my bad. What's more, I was sick of having to see how it tore you guys up to watch me when I had to be strapped down on that table and injected with downers whenever I went off into the dark side."

"So where have you been living?" Dahlia asked, her face soft with concern.

"I stayed with those I couldn't hurt. For a while it was with a small pack of werepanthers, then a group of demons."

"And did you find the peace you were looking for?" Tears pooled in Dahlia's eyes.

"No, I just mainly found out how pissed a werepanther got if you bit it on the tail," he admitted with a wry chuckle.

With a sob, Dahlia ran across the room and threw her arms around him.

Dante returned her embrace, resting his cheek on her silky dark hair.

"I've missed you so much," she cried. "So has Markus."

"Hey, you guys have each other now. You don't need me." While that thought used to make him

bitter with jealousy, it no longer did. Strangely, the only one he desired had just stormed out of the room a few minutes ago and it was taking all he had not to go chase him down. "Is Brenden going to be okay?" he asked Dahlia once she stepped back. "Maybe I should go and make him come back. Especially if he's as sick as you say he is."

"You stay put." Toni narrowed her eyes at him. "I'll go check up on my brother. He's my responsibility." She left, but not before shooting him a look that clearly said *touch him and die*.

While Dante averted his gaze, he wasn't too sure if he would be able to follow that silent order. Even now his cock was growing hard as he remembered how sweet Brenden had smelled when he closed the distance and how kind he'd been as he undid the restraints. Even though he'd come instantly awake when the younger male had approached, he'd still feigned unconsciousness. Just so he could enjoy his soft touch.

God, it was still a shock though. He'd never suspected that Brenden had been attracted to any male, let alone him. He's always thought that Brenden...hell, until now he'd really hadn't thought that much about the male at all. Now Dante couldn't get him off his friging mind.

"You need to lie back down so I can get some blood into you." Dahlia led him back to the bed.

"We can do a transfusion for now, but you'll need to get some fresh blood in you before too long."

Instantly he thought of how soft Brenden's throat would feel as he sank his fangs into it. His cock throbbed at that thought and a small groan of desire slipped out before he could censor it. Thank God, nobody seemed to notice it as Dahlia put his IV back in and hung a bag of blood. She gave him one last parting kiss on the cheek before she left the brothers to their privacy.

"I've got guard duty," Rafe muttered before he bolted, leaving behind an awkward silence.

"I take it he's pretty ticked at me." Dante closed his eyes against the pain he'd caused his brothers.

"Things have been pretty rough for him. First you take off and that witch is still here, too. She's refusing to leave until Rafe agrees to go back with her and meet his mother." Kane pulled up a chair and plopped down in it.

"Does the clan know?"

"That Rafe is half warlock?" Kane gave a sharp shake of his head. "No, just a few select. For some reason, the witch hasn't ousted him yet."

"Do you want me to kill her for him?" Dante asked, only half-kidding.

"I think you've caused enough trouble for now," Kane drawled.

"Yeah, you know me, *The King of Fuckups*. As soon as I'm done here, I'll go apologize to Brenden

for almost going fang on him when he was just trying to help me.”

“Are you sure that’s all that happened?” Kane cocked a brow.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I saw the way you looked at Brenden. It’s the same way you used to look at Markus before he bonded with Dahlia and you left.”

“It’s not like that,” Dante argued lamely.

“He’s not like your usual conquests,” Kane warned sternly. “Brenden is young and just came into our world.”

“I know.” He threw an arm over his eyes so he didn’t have to face the judgmental look he knew was on his brother’s face.

“I mean it, Dante. He’s not a plaything that you can use and throw away.”

“I hear you loud and clear. Don’t worry, I’ll keep my distance.” Even as he made this promise, he knew there was no way in hell he could keep it.

Just as he predicted, his promise lasted exactly one half hour and that was only because that’s how long it took him to sneak away from the infirmary. When Doc got it into her head that one needed hovered over, it could be a bitch to get from under her sharp eye. The fact that she knew most of his escape plans didn’t help matters. It was finally a young fledgling who had got hurt out

on patrol that had saved him. While she'd been occupied helping him, Dante had made himself scarce.

It took him a few minutes to figure out which room was Brenden's. The converted warehouse that served as home for the clan was so large and there were a ton of bedrooms scattered through it. To make matters worse, vampires would often switch rooms as they found new bed partners or mates.

Why don't you admit the truth? An inner voice mocked. You don't know where he sleeps because before today you never saw him as nothing more than a little fledging who was a nuisance.

But when Dante had slowly come awake to the sensation of Brenden's touch, all that changed. The younger male's eyes were so full of curiosity and trepidation as he explored Dante's body. It made him wonder just how many lovers the other vampire had. He knew he'd found the right place when he reached a door and saw Micah and Zeke standing guard over it. Interesting. It would seem that Brenden had become alpha of his own pack. Thad, the werewolf, would be so impressed. Zeke's presence really shocked him. Last time Dante had been there, the two males didn't even talk let alone hang together.

Unless he wasn't the only one who was noticing how interesting Brenden was. Suddenly Dante

had to resist the urge to snarl at the dark-haired vampire. Slapping a bored look on his face instead, he just raised a brow as he waited for Zeke to step back and let him at the door. "You want to pat me down for weapons." Dante tossed out a cocky smile as he raised his arms from his sides. The movement caused his tee shirt to rub against his partially healed empusa bites, but he squelched the urge to wince.

"Hell no," Zeke drawled. "Knowing you, you'd probably get off on it."

"Don't flatter yourself." He gestured to the closed door. "You going to move to the side so I can get in?"

"You going to attack him again?" Zeke countered.

"Look at you getting all protective."

"Hey, a guy takes out a passel of empusa, it makes me stand up and pay attention. I think Brenden is doing some good here and I plan on helping him along the way."

"*Passel?*" Dante drawled. "You're showing your origins there. You can take a cowboy out of the west, but you can never take the west out of—"

"Fuck you, Dante."

"Awh, you missed me. I can tell with all the kind words you're tossing my way."

With a heavy sigh, Zeke stepped to the side. "Just don't make it long. He has an appointment

with Eric, thanks to you."

"Why is Eric calling him out?"

Zeke rolled his eyes and exchanged what-an-dumbass looks with Micah.

Realization slowly dawned on Dante. "Is he in trouble for helping me?"

"Eric just found out we were making the equivalent of a vampire atomic bomb in our spare time. I would say that miffed him a bit," Micah bit out sarcastically.

"That and the fact when Brenden led a team out to get your sorry ass, he didn't wait for approval or backup," Zeke added. "Even though the mission was a success and nobody got hurt, Eric still has to make an example of him."

"Crap," Dante whispered as his stomach dropped in dread. Vampire leaders weren't known to be very merciful when they were doling out punishments. The last time he'd disobeyed an order had resulted in him and his brothers going to prison. The thought of Brenden even going near a place like that made his skin crawl. Dark, dangerous and filled with the stench of death, the prison had left a mark on Dante's soul that he doubted he could ever remove. What he'd witnessed there, what he'd been forced to endure was the reason he still went mad at times.

"Relax," Zeke said, a little more kindly. "It's going to be bad, but not as much as you think."

Drones aren't as coldhearted as you Pure Born."

While the slur should have insulted him, strangely it gave Dante a measure of comfort because there was a ring of truth to it. While the Pure vampires like to think they were so much better than their Drone counterparts, they were often times way more brutal.

"Yeah," Micah chimed in. "We aren't the ones going around liquidating entire vampire communities. They do it and don't even lose a wink of sleep. So while Eric may call Brenden under the rug for his actions and probably us, too, there won't be any public floggings."

Despite their reassurances, Dante still worried and that made him want to see the younger vampire all the more. Giving them a curt nod, he delivered a sharp knock on the door. Not waiting for a response, he pushed it open and went inside, shutting it behind him so nobody could eavesdrop.

Brenden was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head bent over the wrist of a small brunette who was on her knees in front of him. His hair was wet and slicked back and he'd changed into the black Drone uniform. Long fangs were embedded in female's skin as he fed from her and Dante found himself strangely jealous that someone else was attending to the male's needs.

Even though the entire situation was almost

clinical and there wasn't any sexual tension at all, Dante had to resist the urge to cross the room and shove her away from Brenden. He allowed himself to fantasize how it would be to have Brenden's breath fan his neck right before he slowly licked the flesh to get it prime for the bite.

Dante licked his lips as he imagined how it would be to then return the favor. Would Brenden's blood be sweet? Spicy? A combination of both? Need slammed into Dante so hard he almost stumbled back a step. Fuck, there was no way to deny it anymore. He wanted Brenden. Bad.

Was it possible Brenden felt even a hint of the same attraction? What if he'd read more into the younger vampire's caresses than were really there? Brenden could have just been checking him out for injuries.

In the short time he'd known the other vampire, he'd never seen Brenden with anyone, male or female. Still new to the vampire way of life, he'd kept to himself. Dante looked over again at the female and barely repressed the possessive snarl working its way up his throat. Obviously Brenden had come out of his shell lately and he'd made himself all kinds of new friends.

"Are you going stand there all day?" the female finally asked. "You act like you've never seen someone feed before."

"Sorry," Dante nervously cleared his throat.

Crap, he'd never been nervous around anyone before and now he felt like a dorky kid at his first dance. "I'm just not used to seeing Brenden playing with others."

"Really?" The female raised a brow, a sour look on her face.

Obviously, she didn't appreciate his attempt at humor. "Really," Dante continued undaunted. Whenever he felt off kilter, he always used smartass comments to cover his unease. "I didn't think Toni let him out after nap time."

Even though he never looked up from the female's wrist, Brenden raised one hand and flipped him off.

Dante laughed for the first time in weeks.

Even the female cracked a smile.

"I'm Dante," he introduced himself, suddenly remembering the manners his nannies had beat into him as a kid.

"I know who you are," she snipped. Brenden gave her a stern look and she let out a heavy sigh. "I'm Cherish."

It wasn't lost on him that she'd only become nice when Brenden had given her a silent order.

Brenden pulled back and sealed the puncture wounds with a sweep of his tongue.

Dante barely held in a groan as his cock twitched like it was begging for the same treatment.

This is Toni's brother. Get a grip. If she knew what you were thinking she would peel the skin from your body and feed it to you, that inner voice admonished him.

"Where's Toni?" he questioned out loud. Better to prepare himself for that impending attack.

"She said she was checking up on you." Brenden's lips turned up in a wry smile. "I think she's really going to Eric to butt in even though I told her not to."

"She's trying to protect you."

"She needs to stop treating me like a fledgling. I can fight my own battles."

Dante thought back to the carnage at the church. Brenden had done what a whole pack of werewolves couldn't. Yes, he could fight his own battles. "Can you excuse us for a minute?" he asked Cherish.

She turned to Brenden who gave her a slow nod. They waited in silence as she walked of the room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

"I wanted to thank you for saving me," Dante said, trying his best to keep his voice casual. It was hard though because his body was humming at the thought of being alone with Brenden.

"It was no big deal," Brenden replied with a shrug as he got up. "You would have done the same for me."

He would swim through a sea of empusa to get

to Brenden, but Dante wasn't about to admit that one aloud. "It was a big deal. If you hadn't of come when you did, I wouldn't have made it. Sorry, you got hurt in the process."

"Yeah, that one was kind of my fault for taking in blood without thinking about it. Doc ripped me a new one for being so stupid."

The flashed a grin that was so innocent and light, it tugged at Dante's chest. Without meaning to, Dante moved forward until he was only inches from the male. The urge to reach out and grab him was so strong Dante shoved his hands in his pockets. Shit, he really needed to a grip on himself before he did something they would both regret. The last thing Brenden needed was to get involved with his messed up ass.

"Why did you leave all those months back?" Brenden asked, his soft blue eyes searching Dante's face.

"I was looking for something."

"Did you ever find it?" Brenden took a step forward and the heat of his body called to Dante.

"No," the admission came out harsh because need had made his mouth dry.

"Maybe that was because the thing you were looking for was right in front of you all along."

Before Dante could ask him what he meant by that, Brenden leaned forward and brushed his lips against his mouth. At first, he was so shocked, his

body went rigid and he didn't react. Then Dante tasted how sweet Brenden's kiss was and he really got into the game. Hell, he cupped the back of the male's head and brought him in even closer so he could really get at him.

Brenden's tongue darted out to explore and Dante parted his lips to give him full access. Slipping inside his mouth, he stroked Dante's fangs. Christ, he may as well have been caressing his cock. Dante couldn't hold back the hiss of pleasure as he fisted his hand in the male's blond hair. A loud banging on the door broke them apart.

"It's time to go, Eric's going to get pissed if you're late," Zeke's muffled voice called.

Brenden started to walk away. Dante grabbed his arm and pulled him close again. Putting his lips inches from the younger vampire's ear, he whispered, "This isn't over yet. Go to your meeting, but know I plan on finishing this."

"So does that mean you're going to stick around for a while?" Brenden was trembling from fear or desire. Maybe it was a bit of both.

"I would never think of leaving," Dante crooned as he nipped his earlobe. "Things have suddenly got way more interesting here."

"Really?"

"It's all I can do not to take you to that bed and show you how much I mean that." Again, he gave

the ear a love bite. "Does that make you nervous?"

"Brenden." Zeke pounded again.

"Be right there," Brenden called.

"You better go." Dante pulled back. "Go, before I show you how serious I really am."

Brenden gave a slight nod before he left.

His absence left Dante alone with just his confusing thoughts and unanswered desires.

CHAPTER FIVE

Brenden was in Eric's office having his ass chewed off, but he wasn't hearing a word of it. He was too busy replaying the incident with Dante in his head. He still couldn't believe he had the courage to kiss the other male. What's more, Dante actually seemed to enjoy it. Heck, he'd kissed him back with an eagerness that had been stunning.

Running his tongue along his bottom lip, he caught a hint of Dante's essence still lingering there. Dark spices with a hint of something more thrilling under it. It was everything he'd ever dreamed it would be. Better than he'd dared hoped and that one kiss had only made him want more.

Eric slammed a fist on his desk, the loud bang jerking Brenden out of his thoughts. He jumped a mile before he recovered and tried to look equal parts interested and chastised.

"Are you even listening to me?" Eric asked, his

tone edged with irritation. Intimidating since he was a built like a stone wall and well over six feet, the former marine was known to make even the toughest soldier shake in fear. With his military cut blond hair and sharp blue gaze, he was far from the warm and fuzzy type.

"Of course I'm listening." Brenden stood straighter and tried to assume his best military stance. Something he'd managed to master really quick in his time serving under the Drone leader, since this wasn't the first time he'd been called to the office to answer for his actions.

"How could you bring a weapon that dangerous into our clan home?" Eric snapped, the tendons on his neck standing out. "We have children here, one of which is my daughter."

"We would never put Misty or any of the other kids in harm's way," Brenden defended. He was the only one that Eric had let into the office so he was now speaking for his whole team. "We developed and stored the weapons offsite."

"And what if one of our enemies got their hands on them?" Eric sat down and put his elbows on his cluttered desk. A mess of papers and maps, it was a wonder he was ever able to find anything.

"We have them hidden in a good location. There is no way they could be found."

"And where is that?"

Brenden hesitated. Even though Eric was their leader, he and his friends had been keeping the location a secret so long it he was uncomfortable telling anyone. Plus, he didn't trust that in the best interest of the clan Eric wouldn't destroy the weapons once they were found.

"Where are they?" Eric slowly enunciated each word, his face set in stone mask of anger.

"Near one of the collapsed areas of the escape tunnels under the city," Brenden finally admitted. Dark and dreary, the tunnels were the perfect spot to hide something. The fact that passages were huge and stretched the entire length of Detroit plus that nobody ever went down there, made them even better.

"Those tunnels are older than most of us put together," Eric said incredulously. "They could have caved in on you while you were working. What in the hell was going through your mind?"

"It was a risk we were willing to take," Brenden shot back, his own anger rising. "We're ready to do anything to stop the VRF from killing us all off. Even play dirty."

That argument seemed to take some of the bluster from Eric's outrage. He rubbed his hands over his face and let out a deep sigh. "What in the hell am I going to do with you and your team? Not only do we have the whole weapon issue, but you guys went into a very dangerous situation

without updating me of your position or waiting for backup."

"Don't blame the other members, it was all my decision. I take full responsibility."

"It was a stupid move."

"You're probably right, but I wasn't about to stand by and do nothing while a member of our clan was murdered." Brenden lowered his gaze respectively, but he kept his voice firm.

"One life is not worth a half-dozen of my soldiers," Eric countered.

"Are you saying that because he's Pure Born?" Brenden fired off before he could censor himself. He was too angry to even care that he was probably only making his punishment worse. The mere thought that Eric would be willing to sacrifice Dante made him too damn pissed to think clearly.

"You know me better than that."

Brenden took in a steady breath. Yeah, he did know better. Eric had never judged anyone on anything else but their actions. Never once had he seen the clan leader turn his back on someone in need. "I'm sorry," Brenden demurred. "I know you would never hold Dante being Pure against him."

"You have no idea how sorry you really are going to be. As of today, you won't be just reasonable for your actions, but that of your entire

group."

"Huh?" Brenden didn't even try to hide his confusion.

"Congratulations." Eric gave him a smirk. "You are now officially the leader of your own team."

"What team?" Brenden argued as he tossed his hands in the air. "We're just a group of nobodies that hang out together."

"The second you pulled them together and led them into a fight, they became a team."

"Fine, we're a team," Brenden conceded. "That still doesn't mean I'm the leader. Most of the clan still calls me fledging for Christ's sake."

"You still don't get it, do you?" Eric leaned forward on his desk and pinned him with a hard stare. "After what happened, they won't follow anybody else."

"Why?" Brenden yelled, outraged. "Because I beat up some chick? It's not exactly something that should get me promoted to tough guy status."

"It wasn't just some chick, it was an empusa. They are twice as strong as the average male vampire and yet you sliced and diced one like it was nothing."

"I just got lucky," Brenden said lamely. He had no idea empusa were that powerful. He'd just sent that one attacking Dante to hell by going all primal.

"You don't get lucky with empusa and

everyone knows that. One thing vampires respect is strength and you showed that in spades. Our kind are more like the wolves than we want to admit. We're just a bunch of packs looking for an alpha to follow and you proved that you're alpha."

"Are you kidding me?" Brenden gapped at the clan leader in shock.

"I just tried to order Zeke back to his previous team and he refused. He says he'll only work under you now," Eric replied in a dry voice. "Does that sound like kidding to you?"

"Crap," Brenden muttered as the ramification of Eric's words slammed home.

"Yeah, that would pretty much sum up my reaction. Now I have to figure out your punishment."

Brenden steeled himself, it wasn't as if he didn't know it was coming. "If I could just have one request?" He waited until Eric nodded before he continued, "It was my decision to go in, not my team's. So I ask that you just punish me, leave them out of it."

"Wow, that sounded so leader like," Eric replied smugly. "You're falling into the role easily. Just remember while you're the leader of your team, I'm still head of the clan and you report to me."

"Yes, sir." Brenden nodded respectfully.

"Now, let's get to your punishment. Sorry, but this will include your whole team. There have been some reports of kubold packs lingering nearby." Eric grimaced. No vampire liked the creatures, which were nothing more than giant talking rats. "I can't have them around, not with all the kids we have in the clan."

Brenden groaned. While it would be easy enough for an adult vampire to take one out, a whole pack could take all night to root out. He knew better than to voice his complaints out loud though. In truth, he was getting off easy. He just wished his team didn't have to be involved, since it really was his fault they'd gone in to get Dante. "Consider the rats gone," he assured.

"Now, this will be in addition to your regular duties," Eric added.

Brenden bit back a curse. His team was already overwhelmed with all the computer and communication details at the clan. They barely had time to sleep before. Now they would all be running on fumes before it was over. "Yes, sir." He fought to keep his face composed, not wanting Eric to see his frustration.

"Plus, I want you running them through maneuvers. Daily. If you are going to be taking them out into the field, they need to be ready to fight hand-to-hand. You and Zeke aren't enough. I'll be assigning Jonas to help you get them

ready."

That was one piece of good news. Jonas had been Toni's friend long before they had come to live with the clan. A former Detroit City policeman, he was fiercely protective and loyal toward Brenden and Toni. It would be good to have Jonas at his back. Of course given the fact he was a veritable mountain of muscle and meanness that made even Zeke look like a scrawny girl, Jonas was sure to stick out while with the members of the Dork Detail. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "Jonas will be a great help."

"Go." Eric waved his hand, dismissing him.

Brenden gave him a salute that still felt awkward, even given all the time he'd been at the clan, before he stumbled out of the room. To his shock, he found his entire team was still there, waiting expectantly.

"What's the verdict, chief?" Zeke asked.

"What do you want first?" He gave them a wry look. "The good news or the bad?"

"Oh," Micah raised his hand like an over eager schoolboy. "Let's start with the bad. That way we can get all shitty stuff out of the way first."

"The bad news is we get to hunt down a nest of kubolds."

"Oh fun!" Cherish chimed in sarcastically. "What's the good news?"

"There isn't any," Brenden supplied. "All I got

for you is more bad. Somehow we've ended up as a formal team and Eric appointed me your leader."

"But that's good news." Micah was still overflowing with the excitement.

Brenden decided his first move as leader would be to cut back the vampire's sugar intake.

"Does this mean we get a fancy patch to wear on our uniform?" Another member of the team, Derek, asked. Black Irish, he had snappy blue eyes and an unruly shock of dark hair.

"I hope not," another member, Jeremy, added earnestly. With mousy brown hair and light gray eyes, he tended to fade into the background a lot. "I don't know how to sew. When I was in Boy Scouts my grandmother always put my patches on for me."

"Well that's not an option," Cherish cut in. "Contact with our human family is forbidden."

"It wouldn't be an option anyway." Jeremy shrugged. "She's dead."

"Well then I guess you're right," Zeke said. "If she's dead than she can't very well handle a needle and thread."

"Unless she's a zombie," the ever-so-helpful Micah blurted.

"Or a ghoul," Derek added.

"Actually ghouls were never human," Cherish pointed out. "That's a common misconception."

"I just want to get drunk," Brenden muttered more to himself than to the group. "But I can't because I'm too busy leading a group of morons."

"But now we're *your* morons." Micah beamed.

"God, help me," he moaned as he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I think my headache is coming back."

"Maybe you need more blood," Jeremy piped up. "Or I could take you back to Doc."

"I'm not going back to the infirmary. I've got too much crap to do."

"What about us?" Zeke asked formally. "What's our orders?"

Brenden's first urge was to fire off one that involved a very long walk on a very short pier, but he held off, not wanting to take all of his frustrations out on them. He owed them big for helping him with the empusa. "We are to do our normal clan duties first and then we go rat hunting later. Eric also wants me to start taking you guys on maneuvers."

Every one of them, save for Zeke, looked at him like he'd just suggested a fat-free, low-carb diet. All faces were filled in shock, horror and disbelief.

"You mean, we would have to learn to fight and stuff?" Jeremy's eyes were so huge they looked ready to bug out of his head.

"Yes, we have to learn to handle ourselves in a battle. Look, we all knew this would be coming

someday, we can't hide out in the labs and computer rooms forever. Don't worry, Jonas will be helping us out," Brenden added, trying to sound cheerful, when inside he was feeling the same oh-fuck horror. None of them were candidates for the next Chuck Norris. The last time Derek had sparred, he had somehow managed to punch his own eye. Brenden still couldn't figure out how someone managed to give himself a shiner. The others weren't any better in hand-to-hand and Eric was expecting him to turn them all around. Suddenly Brenden wanted to go back to being just a fledgling again.

"Jonas is scary," Cherish said in an awed voice.

"Don't worry, sugar." Zeke winked at her. "I'll protect you."

"Yeah, who will take care of you?" Jeremy smirked.

"I take care of myself just fine." Zeke snapped his fangs and gave off a cocky grin.

"And on that note, everyone get their asses out of here and get to work." Brenden was shocked when they all actually scrambled to obey his order. Soon it was just him and Cherish in the hall. A speculative look came into her eyes as she slowly tapped her chin with the tip of her index finger.

"Hmmm..."

"Oh, shit." Brenden threw his hands in the air

and started walking, the sounds of boots pounding on tile said she was following. "Don't start that humming crap with me. I'm not in the mood for any more of your freaking observations."

"I was just going to tell you something I noticed." She ran faster so she was by his side.

"Which is an observation."

"I think you'll be interested in this one. Did you notice the way Dante was glaring at me when you were drinking from me?"

Okay, so maybe this one did interest him. "No, I was still looking down, remember?" He slowed down a bit so she wouldn't have to work so hard to keep up.

"For a second there I thought he was going to tear my head off."

"You were probably just imagining things. Dante doesn't get jealous of anybody, least of all me. I'm just Toni's pesky little brother as far as he's concerned."

"Then what were you two doing in there alone so long?" She gave him a smug smile that would have been cute if the question hadn't been so annoying.

"None of your damn business."

"Oh!" Her smile grew wider. "It must have been really good then."

"It's not what you think." He sighed. "I'm not

his type."

"Last time I checked, everyone was his type," she snorted.

Ouch, that comment stung a lot more than it should have. Cherish looked over at him and regret instantly came over her face.

"Damn, stupid me." She nibbled on her bottom lip. "I really need to think before I talk sometimes."

"It's okay." Brenden gave her a smile he was nowhere near feeling. "I'm probably just a nobody to him."

CHAPTER SIX

Dante paced the hallway in front of the closed door for so long it was a miracle he didn't wear a tread on the tile. Several times, he stopped, raised his hand to knock, only to lower it again.

What the hell? He'd never been this nervous about approaching someone. Not since he'd been fifteen and had his first female. Since then he'd had too many encounters, with male and female partners, to even count. So why was this one time making him feel like a weak-kneed wuss?

He reached out and lightly caressed the metal door with his fingers. That was because Brenden wasn't like any of his other encounters. He was so pure—innocent. When the male had kissed him earlier, there had been no mistaking how timid and unsure his moves were. Normally something like that would have turned Dante off, instead it had only made him want the other vampire more.

Dante frowned. Why had Brenden kissed him in the first place? For all the searching in his mind,

he'd yet to come up with one clue from the past that would have told him Brenden was attracted to men. A brief surge of anger came over him. What if Brenden was just dicking around with him. Maybe he was just curious and had decided to use the clan slut to sate that.

Dante felt his familiar feral smile spread out over his face. So Brenden wanted to play games, did he? Well, what would he do when Dante called his bluff? Not bothering to knock, he pushed open the door and stalked into the small room. Brenden was sitting in a black office chair in front of a computer. He looked over his shoulder in surprise.

"Dante? What are you doing here?" he asked, his brow wrinkling in confusion.

"Just shut up." Dante grabbed the arms of the chair and spun it around until Brenden was facing him. Stepping between his legs, he pushed him on the chest when the younger vampire moved to stand.

"What the hell?" Now there was a bit of anger to his question

"I said shut up," Dante ordered slowly as he dropped to his knees. Brenden started to disobey, but hissed in surprise when Dante undid his pants and slid down the zipper.

"Cute little boxers," Dante crooned as he looked at the dark blue underwear with cartoon

characters on it. "I would prefer that you wear nothing though. Remember that."

Brenden gave a nod and let out a groan.

Dante reached in to stroke his thick erection. "Who knew my little fledging was hiding such a big cock." Dante wrapped his hands around it and pumped slowly up and down, enjoying the look of pleasure that came over Brenden's face.

Dante leaned down, his mouth open to take in his cock. Any minute now, Brenden would chicken out and call an end to this. He leaned even closer and blew on the tip, noticing a drop of pre-cum was collection there. Any minute now Brenden would stop this. Darting his tongue out, Dante collected that drop, the salty essence washing over his taste buds. Fuck, if Brenden called an end to this, then Dante knew he would surely die. Dante ran his tongue slowly over the tip again and Brenden let out a muffled cry as his hips jacked up a bit.

"I'm on duty," he protested weakly. "I shouldn't be doing this."

"Do you want me to stop?" Dante pulled back and looked up at him. Brenden opened his eyes and they were so full of passion, the normal baby blue and gone to near black.

"Don't stop." His voice was thick with need as he reached out a lightly stroked Dante's cheek. "Please."

Dante curled up one corner of his lip in a triumphant snarl before he leaned back down, opening his mouth enough to take in Brenden's cock. Brenden let out a slow moan as his eyelids fluttered shut, the dark lashes striking against his pale face. Dante opened his mouth wider and relaxed his throat, wanting to take in as much of Brenden as he could.

Slowly pulling back, Dante sucked in so deep his cheeks hollowed in. The hard, heated flesh felt like velvet under his lips. There was a salty burst as Brenden gasped, his cock jerking. Dante gripped the vampire's thighs in a silent warning. *Don't you dare come yet. I'm not done playing.*

"Oh, fuck," Brenden gritted between clenched teeth.

"You keep teasing me," Dante said as he pulled back, "and fucking just may become part of the game plan."

"I didn't mean to tease." The hold Brenden had on the armrests was so hard it was a wonder he didn't snap them off. "But I do want to..." He trailed off, a slight flush coming to his cheeks.

Dante smiled at his endearing bashfulness. "You would like to what?" he prompted as he ran a tongue along the sensitive underside of Brenden's erection. Brenden reacted as if he'd been tasered.

He let out a hoarse cry as his pelvis shot up. "I

want to fuck," Brenden panted.

"I have every intention of fucking you," Dante promised as he used one hand to gently squeeze the other male's balls.

"When?"

"Not today." Another drop of cum had formed and Dante licked it away. "You're not ready for that step yet. Soon though. Very, very soon." Brenden opened his mouth to say something, maybe to protest that he was ready, but Dante took the male's cock back in his mouth and whatever he might have said turned into a wordless groan instead.

Dante could have gone on tasting Brenden forever. His reaction was so pure and without guile. He wasn't letting Dante do this to him to gain something or just so he could boast about it like so many others had. No, he was doing it because he simply wanted to be with him.

How had he gone so long without realizing how attractive Brenden was? All this time he'd never really seen the male. Never noticed how alluring his sandalwood and citrus scent was. Never knew how right it would feel to be caressing him. Never noticed how strong his chest was with hard abs and just the perfect size biceps.

He slowly worked Brenden, binging him to the brink only to pull back at the last second. The third time he did this, Brenden bared his fangs

and gave out a low hiss. The move was something a fledging would do and damned if it wasn't cute to see it now. Dante smiled until Brenden reached out and cupped the back of his head. He pushed him down, not hard, but enough to let it be known he was done playing.

"Now who's teasing," he chastised lightly.

"You love it and you know it," Dante replied, but he did get back to work.

"Yes, I do."

Brenden whispered so softly, Dante wasn't sure if he really said it. This time when he felt Brenden tense up, Dante continued to suck and lick until finally the male let out a cry as he threw back his head. Hot jets of semen exploded into Dante's mouth and he eagerly drank it up. All too soon, Brenden was spent and there was no more to give. Dante was far from satisfied. He needed to taste more. Letting out a feral growl, he jerked Brenden's pants down on the side so his hip was exposed. Licking his lips, Dante bared his fangs and struck, sinking them in deep.

Brenden jerked in response and moaned.

Whenever two vampires shared blood, it could be pleasurable if done right and Dante knew exactly how to do it. The sweet taste of Brenden's blood mixed in with the salty aftertaste of his seed and Dante's grew so hard, it was painful. He yearned to stroke himself for some relief, but he

resisted. This was all for Brenden. For once in his life, he was happy to put someone else's needs ahead of his.

That wasn't going to stop him from enjoying the buzz that washed over him as Brenden's blood went through his body. Brenden let out a small whimper as he ran his hand through Dante's hair. The movement was so gentle and loving that for some strange reason it made him almost want to weep.

Despite all the sexual partners he'd had in the past, it was very rare he experienced a soft caress that was so caring. Dante slowly licked the puncture wounds closed and laid his head on Brenden's lap. With a shuddering sigh, he closed his eyes and let the other male continue to stroke his hair.

"Hey, Brenden!" The door burst open and the small brunette came bouncing through. "I got a hold of a Raven and she—"

She stopped dead in her tracks so quick Dante could almost hear the cartoon skidding sound.

Her eyes grew huge as the female rapidly took in the scene in front of her.

Dante quickly jumped to his feet, but there was no hiding what they had been doing. Not only did the position they had been in scream *blowjob in progress*, but Brenden's pants were still open and he was hanging out. He shot to his feet and turned

his back on the female while he zipped back up.

"Oops," she squeaked, her mouth forming an O.

"You ever hear of knocking, Cherish?" Brenden griped as he turned around and ran a hand through his hair.

"Knocking on the door of the one of the very public computer rooms of the clan?" She smacked a palm against her forehead. "Of course, I should have. How rude and silly of me."

"Okay, smartass." Brenden ran his tongue over his teeth. "What do you want?"

"It can wait." She cocked her head slightly to the side as a sly grin spread over her face. "Why don't I get out of here and you two can finish your...meeting."

Dante stifled his laughter with a mock cough as Brenden rolled his eyes.

"Why don't you go round up the team so we can go hunting?"

It wasn't lost on Dante that Brenden was issuing orders like a leader. Kane had told him that Eric had named him the head of the newly formed team. It was nice to see the younger vampire finally get his stripes and earn some respect. At least he hadn't been poisoned by the empusa for nothing.

Brenden sat heavily back in the office chair.

Dante pulled up a metal folding one and joined

him. An awkward silence filled the room, the whirring of the computer fan the only sound. Just when Dante was thinking that he should have made his exit with Cherish, Brenden cleared his throat.

"You don't have to worry about her saying anything. Cherish is really good at keeping things to her chest." Brenden kept his gaze focused on the monitor.

"Are you lovers?" The ache in his chest wasn't jealously, honest.

"We were at one time." Brenden gave a grimace. "It didn't turn out so hot."

"What happened?"

"I kind of shouted out someone else's name while I was inside her." He ducked his head.

Dante's heart thudded in his chest as something that only could have been hope came over him. "Whose name did you call?" His mouth was dry as he nervously licked his lips. Why did it matter so damn bad that it be him when something like that would have never mattered before? Was he finally going over the edge completely?

"It was yours," Brenden said so low it was hard to hear.

Even though his heart sang with pride, a part of Dante felt a bone-numbing fear. But it wasn't for himself. It was for Brenden. He reached out and grabbed his chin, gently tugging until those blue

eyes were directed his way. "You don't know anything about me. I'm no good for anybody." God, it hurt to say that.

Brenden gave a slight shake of his head. "I know that you were born in Vermont, the second on three sons. While you all had the same father, each of you came from a different mother. Yours died when you were only one so you never knew her. You were raised mainly by nannies, but you always had Kane and Rafe with you. When you got old enough, you all joined the VRF and served for years, as one of their most elite soldiers. If there was a difficult job, they called in the Toren brothers. That was until you were disgraced and sent to prison. Even though you're now out, the VRF and your father still shun you."

"Really, you took the time to find out all that about me?" Dante dropped his hand, shame making him sick to his stomach. "Did your little birdie tell you what I went to prison for?"

"There really is no record of the exact charges, just that you and your brothers were sent to the paranormal prison for ten years. Toni filled in some of the blanks for me. She said you guys were framed for something you didn't do. That a human family died, but it wasn't your fault."

"Did she tell you who set us up?"

Brenden nodded, his normally soft eyes growing hard with hate. "Corbin. Just one more

reason for me to pay him back."

That comment touched Dante to the core. Besides his brothers and maybe Markus, nobody had ever wanted to protect him before. It still didn't mean he wanted Brenden to put himself into the lion's den either. "I wish you would just stay off Corbin's radar. You have no idea how bad he can be." Dante ran a finger up and down the male's arm.

"You forget Corbin was the one who kidnapped me and turned me into a vampire in the first place," Brenden replied darkly. "All to punish Toni for going against his rule."

"I know." And that was one more reason Dante wanted the bastard dead. "I just don't want to see him hurt you."

"I'm not a fledging anymore."

"I know you're not. I just can't help but worry about you though. Not only do you have all this hate eating you up, but I don't like that weapon you made." Running a hand through his hair, Dante let out a deep sigh.

"That weapon saved your ass in case you forget," Brenden shot back, his eyes were black again, but this time it was from anger instead of passion.

"As soon as Corbin hears about that damn thing, he's going to do anything to get his hands on it and when he can't, he's going to go after the

one who made it." He pinned Brenden down with a hard stare. "That's you."

"Good, let him come." Brenden gave an icy smile, his fangs wicked and long. "I would just love to face off against him."

"You don't get it." Dante was half-tempted to grab him by the shoulders to shake some sense in him. "Vampires like Corbin don't play fair. If he gets you, it won't be fun. He has ways of breaking anybody." Dante didn't add that he knew this first hand, having learned it for himself the hard way during his time in prison.

The door opened again and Toni poked her head in. Her blue eyes widened in shock as she saw the two males together, before they narrowed and her lips pressed together in a tight line of anger.

"Hey, Toni!" Dante said, brightly, refusing to be intimidated by even his brother's mate.

"Hey, Dante," she countered in a tight voice. "What are you doing here? Dahlia's been looking all over for you."

"I was feeling much better so I thought I would come and personally thank Brenden for coming to help me." He put on his best innocent face and saw by the way her nostrils flared and her cheeks flushed that he hadn't fooled her for one second.

"Dahlia wants you to go back to the infirmary and get some blood." She glared at Dante.

"Not needed, I already got some blood," he replied cockily.

Toni's gaze immediately shifted to Brenden's neck, but there was nothing there except unblemished flesh.

Little did she know that Dante rarely went for the throat, preferring to feed from more intimate areas. Like a sexy hip. Damn, this was not the time to think of that. His cock got even more hard as he remembered how Brenden's intoxicating scent filled him as he buried his fangs in his tender flesh.

"You need something, Toni?" Brenden asked as he started typing on the keyboard, his gaze fixed on the monitor.

"Yes, I need to talk to you."

She turned and gave Dante a look so deadly a lesser vampire would have been shaking in his boots.

"Alone."

"Sure, thing sweetie pie." Dante always loved to use pet names with her because he knew it got her tail up. "I was just leaving." He took two steps toward the door.

Brenden called, "See you later?"

Dante couldn't help but smile, although he kept his head ducked so Toni wouldn't see it. There was no mistaking the hopeful tone in the male's voice. "Yeah, we can finish our conversation

then." Ignoring Toni's warning growl, he walked out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind him. With each step he took down the hall, his heart grew a bit heavier. Almost as if it hurt because he was going further away from Brenden. Which was crazy. Only life mates felt that way about each other. There was no way Brenden could be that special vampire, heaven help him if that were ever the case.

* * * *

The second the door clicked behind Dante, Brenden had to fight the urge to go running after him. The only thing that held him back was the way his sister was glaring at him, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Do I even want to know what was going on in here?" she asked before she stomped over and took the chair Dante had vacated.

"That's really none of your business," Brenden replied in clipped tones.

"I think it is. What were you doing with Dante?" She gave him a warning glare that he really wasn't feeling.

"Like I said, none of your business. I don't go around asking the ins and outs of your sex life." Knowing that he wasn't going to get any more work done in the short time before he had to go

out with his team, he started to shut down the computer.

"Sex life?" her voice cracked. "But you're not..."

"Gay?" Brenden supplied. "Yeah, I am."

"Since when?" Her eyes went wide with shock.

"I know now that I've always been that way." He gave a slight shrug.

"Why didn't you ever say anything before now?"

"Please," he said drolly. "Like I could drop something like that on Dad. With as strict and rigid as he was, you coming home and saying you were a vampire would have gone over better than for his only son to come out of the closet."

"Then why didn't you tell me when we got to the clan?"

She didn't seem angry and Brenden let out a sigh of relief. She laid a hand on his arm and the love evident in her eyes made him feel even better.

"Once you got here you must have noticed that nobody here cares about that."

What Toni said was true. There were as many same-sexed matches as male-female ones. What's more, in the vampire world, nobody thought twice about it. "For so long, I hid who I was, even from myself. I got so good at pretending to be something I wasn't, it became almost second nature to me." A wave of melancholy went over

him as he remembered how miserable he'd felt growing up, feeling as if something was wrong with him

"Wow, this is all so unexpected. I always thought that you and Cherish would end up together." She shook her head slowly.

"She's a really good friend and I tried, but it just wasn't right."

"I still don't understand why you would think you had to hide it. Mom and Dad would have understood."

"Things changed after you went missing." He gave a bitter laugh because it was either do that or cry. "Mom became withdrawn and would disappear into her bedroom for days at a time. Dad he got really strict and never wanted to let me out of his sight. Not only that, he wanted me to be the perfect son, complete with the 4.0 GPA and Varsity Letter. I remember one time I scored the winning goal in a game and he got mad at me because I missed getting a hat trick because I hit the crossbar on my last shot."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it."

"He wouldn't talk to me for days, I think that shows he was pretty damn serious." Years worth of bitterness choked him. He swallowed hard. "Until the day he died, I was never good enough for him and he made sure I knew it."

"Damn him." Her curse came out ragged.

"Why is this the first time I'm hearing all this?"

"You already felt so guilty about what Corbin did to me, the last thing I wanted was to add more to it."

"So why are you telling me now? Not that I'm not glad you did it, I think it was long overdue, but what prompted you to do it today?"

"So you can prepare yourself." He steeled himself for the battle he knew was going to ensue.

"For what?" She narrowed her eyes before she slid her glance to the closed door.

"You know what," Brenden said quietly, but with enough of a hard edge to let her know he wasn't going to be pushed around on this. Now she was really shooting daggers at the closed door as if Dante was still standing there and she could strike him dead with her dirty look. "I care for Dante and I want to be with him," Brenden continued. Toni had the tendency to play the overprotective sister part way too much and it was time for him to put an end to it. Not only because it could hinder whatever hope he had of a relationship with Dante, but it could make him look weak in the eyes of the other clan members.

"But why him of all vampires?" Toni wailed. "Why can't you go for someone like Zeke?"

"I don't want Zeke. I want Dante," he replied simply.

"I don't trust him. He'll only end up hurting

you."

"Then I get hurt. It's my choice, not yours," this time he made his command hard and clear, letting her know he wasn't dicking around.

"Have you lost your mind?" she snapped, her own anger rising. "Dante's been with almost every unmatched vampire in this clan. He's crazy half the time, a certifiable ass the other half. You can do so much better than him."

"Maybe he's like that because individuals like you judge him all the time."

"And maybe you're letting your judgment be clouded by dark good looks and a killer bod," she shot back as she slammed a hand on the desk in frustration.

"Gee, kind of like you did when you first fell for Kane," he smirked. Getting up to his feet, he started to the door.

"Don't you dare leave. We're not done here," Toni ordered.

"I'm thinking we are more than done. I have so many other better things to do than this. Right now even the rat hunt is looking better. I don't want to find out that you even breathed one word of this to Kane or Dante either." He walked out, not even turning around when he heard her let out a very unladylike curse.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I don’t know whether to say hello or beat the shit out of you,” Markus exclaimed as he sat down at the cafeteria table with Dante.

Since he’d deliberately chosen a table in the far corner because it had the best view of the door, Dante wasn’t surprised to see the blond haired vampire. Nor was he surprised that Markus was a bit pissed at him for pulling his disappearing act. The two had become close inside of the prison and they had stayed that way until Christmas Eve.

“I would prefer you just stuck with the hello.” Dante took a long pull of his beer, glad that just because he was immortal didn’t mean he couldn’t still get a good buzz going. “I’ve already had my ass kicked by a bunch of Elvira wannabes.”

“So I heard.” Markus smiled although it never reached his brown eyes that continued to look sharp with anger. “Maybe they knocked some sense into that thick skull of yours and reminded you what in the hell a cell phone was.”

"Do we really need to get into this?" Dante took another drink.

"You left the nice warm bed you, Dahlia and I were in, and just disappeared. Without a goodbye. Without an explanation. You gave us nothing."

"I just needed to get my head together. I was getting more and more twitchy."

"That's bullshit and we both know it," Markus accused.

Dante fiddled with the label of his bottle, not wanting to make eye contact with the male. "It doesn't matter anymore. It's done and over with."

"It's not over with. Not until you tell me what I did wrong. I thought we were closer than that. Damn it, Dante, I don't trust that many others, but I did you."

"You didn't do anything. It was all me."

"Oh God," Markus sighed as he scrubbed his face with a hand. "Please, tell me that Dante Toren did not just give me the it's-not-you-it's-me speech."

"I'm trying to be serious here." Every inch of his body went alert when he saw Brenden come in. He was deep in conversation with his team and didn't even look in Dante's direction. Realizing that Markus was still looking at him, Dante forced himself to focus. "That night you, Dahlia and I were together, the sex may have been mind blowing, but I saw the way you two were looking

at each other. I knew then I was an extra and I would just get in you guys way. I figured some distance would help make things easier for you two while you settled in together."

"Dante, we never meant for you to feel as if we didn't care," Markus said gently. "Dahlia and I love you."

"You may love me, but you guys are *in* love with each other." Dante was surprised that fact didn't hurt him anymore. When he'd first realized it while he lay in bed with them, it had felt as if someone hit him over the head with a brick. For so long he'd yearned for Markus and to see that he'd fallen in love with Dahlia had really broke Dante up.

Now all he could think of is another blond male. One with soft blue eyes and a nasty habit of making WMD. Again his gaze shifted to Brenden. He had a tray in his hands and was sitting down at a table across from the room. A tall, female with long dark hair was with the group and she was pressed so tight to Brenden's side you would have thought someone had duct taped her there.

"Dahlia and I have missed you. There's always room for you in our lives," Markus's voice cut into his gawking.

"A pity fuck?" Dante smiled and knew it was bitter looking. "Not even I've fallen that low."

"It wouldn't be a pity fuck," Markus snapped.

It seemed that Dante was going to piss everyone off today. Oh yippee. This might be a record, even for him. "Then what would it be?" He cocked a brow at his friend.

"Like I said, Dahlia and I really care for you."

"But you don't love me like you love each other." He darted another glance at Brenden. He was sitting and the female was now draped over his side. A wave of jealousy slammed into Dante and he didn't even fight it. Hell, he was ready to finally acknowledge that was what he was feeling. Brenden was his.

"Whoa, I know that look." Markus gave a small laugh.

"What look is that?"

"Like you are two seconds from pouncing on someone because you like what you see." Markus's lips tipped into a cocky grin. "It's the same look you used to give. Who's the lucky vampire?" Markus looked over his shoulder to see who Dante had been staring at. "Holy shit, do you have a death wish? Toni sees you making cow eyes at her baby brother and she will spank you, not in a way you like either."

"Toni's always mad at me. That won't be anything new." He couldn't resist looking back at Brenden. He was deep in conversation with Zeke and Dante was pleased to see he was ignoring the female who was continuing to throw herself at

him.

"Since when have you liked the innocent, quiet types?" Markus nervously cleared his throat. "He's not what you usually go for."

"I know," as Dante uttered those words, Brenden turned his head and their gazes met and locked. Even if Dante had wanted to look away, he couldn't have. From across the room, he could see the same passion and want he was feeling reflected in the other vampire's eyes. Markus was still talking to him, but all Dante heard was a distant drone because his brain was totally focused on Brenden.

The female was tugging impatiently on Brenden's arm, her face twisted in anger.

Dante smiled at the flash of annoyance that crossed the male's eyes.

"You're really getting sickening here," Markus cut in. "I thought you were way beyond making moon eyes across a crowded cafeteria. You keep this up and you could star in your very own teen drama show."

"Who's that female suctioned cupped to Brenden?"

"And it gets worse," Markus sighed.

"Sod off and just tell me who she is."

"Her name is Raven, she just came to live at the clan a couple of weeks after you left. She really hasn't found her footing here though and she's

been hanging out with Brenden's group since they take about anybody. It looks like she figured out that Brenden's the new alpha and she wants to claim him."

"She won't be claiming shit. Brenden is—" he bit off the last bit of his sentence with a vicious snarl.

"Brenden is what?" Markus cocked a brow at him before a smile slowly spread over his face. "Don't tell me that the infamous Dante has finally found someone who he wants all to himself."

Yes, that was exactly what was happening. Damn it. "It doesn't matter what I want," he said bitterly. "It could never happen."

"Why not?"

"You said so yourself, he's not my type. The last thing Brenden needs is to be touched by my fucked up world."

Brenden was still staring at him. Raven finally jerked him the chin and forced him to look at her. She said something to him and he responded, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Whatever it was must have been really bad because she shot to her feet and stared him down.

"From the way he's been looking back at you, I think he feels differently," Markus drawled.

"He's a fool then."

Raven stormed away from Brenden, purposely changing course to pass by Dante's table, she

reached over and backhanded his bottle of beer on her way out. It tipped over, spilling the cool liquid into his lap. With a curse, he stood, Markus's laughter ringing in his ears.

"Damn it." Dante grabbed some napkins and started to wipe himself up. "What the hell did Brenden say to her to piss her off so much?"

"He didn't have to say a thing." Markus continued to chuckle. "The way he was looking at you with fuck-me eyes was enough."

Pure gut reaction made him glance up to see if Brenden was still looking at him with those eyes, but he was gone. Dante frowned as he realized how much that disappointed him. He made a few more lazy attempts with the napkins before he realized how hopeless it was. "I'm going back to my room to change." He tossed the sodden paper in a nearby wastebasket, flipping the bird at Markus because the asshole was still laughing at him.

It was getting more crowded in the cafeteria as everyone rushed in to get the final meal before sunrise. He dodged a group of children running through, their giggles floating in the air. All the tables were filled with young and old alike. He saw his brothers sitting at one with Toni. Kane waved, Toni glared and Rafe ignored him. So nothing was new there. He gave them a nod on his way out.

By the time he made it back to his quarters, the wetness in his pants was getting damn uncomfortable and he couldn't wait to get them off. Turning the corner to his door, he stopped dead in his tracks, shocked. And shocked wasn't something he usually did. Brenden was standing there, arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

He was still in his black uniform and boots and his hair was messed up some like he'd been working hard. A small grin was playing on his mouth showing just a brief hint of his fangs and a tiny bit of a dimple.

Dante's pants became even more uncomfortable and it had nothing to do with the beer spilled on them. Markus hadn't been kidding when he said Brenden was shooting off fuck-me stares. Damn, the desire that was rolling off the male hit Dante like a punch in the gut. He was eyeing Dante up like a predator would its prey and damned if it wasn't giving him the hard-on of his immortal life.

"I wanted to apologize to you for what Raven did," Brenden said by way of greeting. "I'll make sure to discipline her."

I'd much rather you discipline me, Dante thought. Aloud he said, "Is that why you really came here?" God, what in the hell was he doing? He should send Brenden away before they did something the younger vampire would regret. Yet, Dante couldn't bring himself to do it. Now that the

male was within his grasp, he just couldn't seem to let him go.

"No, I wanted to talk to you." Brenden swallowed hard. "Alone."

Dante stepped in so he was invading the male's space. It didn't seem to get Brenden's hackles up. He leaned forward a bit himself so they were even closer. "We shouldn't be alone," Dante said as he bent down so he could fan his breath against the male's neck.

"We probably shouldn't." Brenden trembled a bit before he tilted his head to the side so Dante could get at him better.

"The two of us getting together is a bad idea." The pulse fluttering so close to his mouth was a temptation he couldn't resist and Dante had to flick his tongue out to caress it.

Brenden sucked in a harsh breath in response. "It's a horrible idea." Even as he agreed, Brenden bushed the back of his hand over the erection that was straining against Dante's wet pants.

Any minute now someone could walk in on them, but Dante couldn't make his feet move back. Not when this felt so damn right. Yes, it would be so wrong to allow himself this one bit of happiness when it could end up hurting both of them in the end, but damn him, he didn't have the strength to fight it. "Somebody's going to see us," Dante warned Brenden as he licked the male's

neck again.

"I don't care."

"You should care. Being grouped with the clan whore could be bad for you rep."

"Don't say crap like that about yourself," Brenden said so forcefully that Dante looked up in surprise.

"Why not?" Dante asked harshly. "It's true?" Gently, Brenden cupped his cheeks and lightly brushed his lips over Dante's mouth. Sweet hell, lips that soft and warm should be illegal. Instantly, what little self-control Dante possessed was shredded. All he could think about was how it would feel to have Brenden's mouth giving that special attention to all of his body.

"Invite me in," Brenden pleaded before he leaned in for another kiss that left both of them panting when it was over.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Do you really want this?” Dante wanted to give the male one last out. Brenden took Dante’s hand and put it on his cock. Dante swallowed hard when he felt Brenden’s massive erection.

“Does this answer your question?” There was a hint of amusement in his eyes, but there was a whole lot more passion.

Some voices from down the hall snapped Dante into reality. He pulled his hand back like he’d touched something hot and finally retreated a step. “Come inside with me.” Dante’s heart pounded in his chest as he realized how much those four words were going to impact his life. This wasn’t just some fuck, this meant so much more. By giving into his desires, he would be giving a piece of himself to the male forever and he would never be able to get it back.

Brenden gave a grin that was both wicked and sexy at the same time as he slowly nodded his

head.

Dante fished the keys out of his front pocket and opened the door, fully aware of Brenden's heated gaze the entire time.

"You share this room with Rafe, don't you?" Brenden asked as they walked in. "Would you rather go back to mine? It's a lot smaller, but I'm the only one who uses it."

"It won't matter." Dante hurried up to pick up some of the dirty clothes that littered the room. Neither he nor Rafe were big on housekeeping. "Rafe volunteered to do some extra duty so he won't be back tonight. He's still pissed so he's doing everything he can to avoid me."

"Ouch, sorry about that."

"It does suck even though Rafe will eventually forgive me. I knew me leaving would hit him hard, I just hadn't realized how much."

"He's not the only one who missed you." Brenden grabbed the waist of Dante's jeans and gave a slight tug. "You really should get out of these wet clothes."

"I probably should," Dante agreed with a thick voice.

"Since it was my fault you wore that beer, I think it's only right that I help you out."

"You do have to be polite after all." Dante grinned until Brenden slowly popped open the button of the jeans. That was all he did though. He

made no move to undo the zipper and Dante found himself holding his breath in anticipation.

"Do you know how long I've waited to stroke your cock?" Brenden cocked his head slightly to the side.

When Dante grew mute and could only shake his head, the male continued.

"I have wanted this from that night I first saw you when Toni and Kane met."

"Didn't you have a gun on me then?" Dante finally found his voice, but it was strangled.

"Well, yes, but I think for you that's a turn on. Besides, we didn't know if you and your brothers were on our side."

Brenden finally worked the zipper down, but did it so slow Dante almost growled in frustration. "Damn it," Dante groaned. "Don't you realize how dangerous it is to tease me like that?" His stomach clenched in shock when Brenden dropped to his knees, his sensual, full lips, just inches from his cock. It was all he could do not to take a handful of that blond hair and force him forward. Instead, Dante fisted his hands into tight balls and dropped them to his sides so he wouldn't give into temptation. Brenden pulled Dante's jeans down enough to free his erection.

Taking his cock out, he slowly stroked it with one hand. "You're so fucking hot."

Brenden moved up and down, adding a little

squeeze at the end that drove Dante almost to his knees. "Thanks," Dante teased. "I'll make sure to add that attribute to my resume." Brenden chuckled before he leaned forward and blew lightly on the tip of Dante's erection. Just when Dante thought he was going to take him in his mouth, Brenden pulled back, a look of worry and confusion on his face.

"Sorry," Brenden whispered a slight flush coming over his cheeks. "I've never done this before and I don't exactly know what my first move should be."

"You'll do fine." Dante ran a hand through the male's blond hair. "Just give it to me like you like it."

Brenden leaned forward only to pull back again, the same mix of emotions playing on his soft features.

Realization slowly dawned on Dante and he couldn't help but grin. He cupped Brenden's chin and forced him to look up. "Haven't you ever had someone give you a blowjob before?"

Brenden slowly shook his head, the flush deepening on his face. "You were my first."

Holy hell, how humbling was that? He was going to be the first for Brenden on almost everything. Dante wasn't for sure if the thought thrilled him or filled him with ball-numbing fear. All thoughts went out the door when Brenden

hesitantly flicked his tongue over the top of Dante's cock. Dante jerked, the light touch doing more for him than some of his other full-blown encounters. "That's a great start," he crooned, reaching out to lightly brush a touch on Brenden's cheek.

"I just don't want to disappoint you." He gave another timid lick. "After all the pleasure you gave me, I want it to be just as good for you."

Dante started to answer, but then Brenden parted those sweet lips of his and took his cock in. As the hot, moist heat enveloped him, Dante almost made a fool out of himself by blowing his top. "Don't worry about disappointing me," Dante groaned as he jacked his hips forward slightly. "This is already fantastic. Now, relax your throat and you'll be able to take me in even deeper." When Brenden obeyed and took him in so far that the tip of his cock bumped the back of his throat, Dante's hands shot out to take in two handfuls of the male's hair.

"That's it, baby," Dante urged. "Suck my cock, just like that." Brenden's movements got more practiced as he continued to suck, lave and tease. Halfway through, he paused long enough to look up at Dante questioningly. Dante sucked in a breath as that blue gaze seared into him. It was as if a piece of his heart that had long been dead was now coming back to life and it belonged to the

younger vampire.

"Please, don't stop." Dante wasn't surprised to hear there was an almost pleading whimper to his voice. He was so desperate to get Brenden's mouth back on him, he would go on his knees and beg if that's what it took. "God, Brenden, take me back in." *Better yet, take all of me. I need you like I've never needed someone before.*

"You taste so good," Brenden marveled as he trailed a finger down the length of the shaft. "I never knew how nice this could be. I could really get to like doing this."

"It had better be just my cock you suck or else you'll learn really quick how jealous I can get," Dante said, only half-teasing.

"Don't worry, it's just you." Brenden's eyes held so much promise. "It's always just been you."

Brenden opened his mouth and slowly took Dante's cock in, inch by slow torturous inch. Sweat dotted Dante's forehead as he fought back the urge to grab the back of Brenden's head and pull down as he thrust forward. "You do realize I'm going to make you pay for teasing me like this," Dante moaned as he closed his eyes. There was an answering rumble of laughter from Brenden before he finally sucked in deep.

For someone who had never given head before, Brenden caught on quick. Dante felt his knees grow weak as the male all but worshiped his cock.

Then he reached between Dante's legs and gently squeezed his balls and all bets were off. "Ah, fuck," he nearly yelled. "I'm sorry, babe, I can't hold it back. Just be careful with your fangs."

He threw his back as he came with a blinding flash of pleasure. Brenden jerked a bit as Dante's semen shot into his mouth, but he didn't pull back. Dante looked down, loving to see the way Brenden's dark lashes feathered his cheeks as swallowed. After Dante had been drained, Brenden stood, licking his lips.

His eyes were black with passion again and his fangs were so big they hung out over his bottom lip. There was no missing the predator's glint as his gaze honed in on Dante's throat. Dante's cock jerked back to attention as he realized that Brenden was eyeing him up as his next meal. Usually, he hated it when others fed off him, but the thought of Brenden's full lips caressing his flesh before sinking his fangs in had Dante nearly blind with need. "Are you hungry?" he asked, his chest tight.

Brenden nodded slowly. "Are you volunteering to help me out with that?"

In answer, Dante tilted his head slightly to the side, giving full access to his throat. There was a harsh sound as Brenden sucked in a breath before he stepped forward and pressed his body to Dante. Brenden was smaller by a couple of inches,

which made it so he had the perfect angle to go in.

There was a hiss as Brenden bared his fangs right before he struck.

Dante jerked as a flash of pain shot through him, it slowly gave way to a pleasurable buzz. Brenden's lips moved against him as he took in his first swallow. Instantly, Dante felt as if his soul was merging with the other male's. Each pull Brenden took made it grow stronger and stronger until they were so closely connected that they seemed as one. After a few moments, the buzzing in his head grew and he put a hand on Brenden's chest. "You need to stop," Dante said, even though stopping was the last thing he wanted. "You're taking too much."

Brenden ran his tongue over the wounds, leaving a velvet, heated path. Stepping back, he licked a drop of blood from his bottom lip. "Sorry." He took in a shuddering breath. "I got carried away."

Dante frowned as he noticed how pale the male still was and that there were dark circles around his eyes. "You shouldn't be back on duty. You haven't fully recovered yet."

"I'm okay." He gave a crooked smile. "I just need to catch some sleep."

"I'm going to go take a shower and change out of these pants." Dante lifted a hand so he could caress Brenden's bottom lip. "Why don't you lie

down and rest up some until I get out?"

"Okay." Brenden nodded.

"I'll be right back." Dante took a couple of steps toward the bathroom before he stopped and looked back at the male. "You will wait, right?" Dante gave an internal flinch when he realized how weak that question made him sound. Brenden gave that sexy smile again before he came over and pulled Dante in for a kiss. The male's lips parted so Dante could slip his tongue in, the salty taste of his seed mixed in with coppery tang of blood still lingering in the male's mouth.

"Don't you realize?" Brenden asked breathlessly once he'd ended the kiss. "I've been waiting you for all this time. I'm not about to leave now that you've finally noticed."

Too overcome with emotion, Dante merely nodded before he went in to take a shower. Despite the male's reassurances, the entire time he was lathering rinsing and repeating, Dante half-expected him to be gone when he went back into the room. It wouldn't be the first time someone had rabbitied as soon as the sexual encounter was over.

Turning off the shower, he quickly got dressed, not even taking the time to really comb his hair. Opening the door, the first thing he saw was Brenden, stretched out on his stomach, fast asleep.

The second was Rafe standing by the door. His jaw was slack in shock and his normal downcast green gaze was wide. He was staring at Brenden and Dante realized that he was taking in the male's swollen lips, messed hair and the fact that he was in Dante's bed. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what had been going on.

"Toni's brother?" Rafe asked, his jaw set in outrage.

"His name is Brenden."

"I know what the fuck his name is," Rafe snapped. "What I don't know is what in the hell is he doing in your bed."

Dante opened his mouth to respond.

Rafe silenced him with a slice of his hand. "I know what he and you were doing so save that smartass comment. What I don't understand is why you are doing anything with him. He is one of the few good vampires I know and I can't believe that you would play your mind games with him."

"It's not like that," Dante snarled, working hard to keep his voice down so he didn't wake up Brenden.

"Really?" Rafe mocked, glaring up from under the shock of dark hair that always hung in his deep green eyes. "Somehow I have trouble believing that. He isn't another one of your taste-of-the-day groupies. He'll end up getting hurt

because it won't be just casual sex to him."

"It's not casual to me either," Dante mumbled.

"Oh, please." Rafe gave him a disgusted once over. "Since when hasn't it been just a chew and screw to you? I won't let you do that to Toni's brother."

"Why are you so protective of him?" Dante curled one side of his mouth, showing a bit of fang. It was a vampire's way of showing aggression. "Are you attracted to him?"

"What's it to you? The last time I checked you never minded sharing."

Dante balled his hands into fists and let out a low growl. "Don't you touch him. He's mine."

Rafe stared, his face the same brooding mask it had been since prison. After several heartbeats, he sighed and shook his head. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes." Dante still didn't relax, keeping on the balls of his feet, ready for attack. "I care for him deeply and the thought of anyone touching him makes me want to tear some heads off."

"Shit, you never could do anything easy." Rafe rolled his eyes.

"I didn't see it coming if that's any consolation. It just happened." Dante finally relaxed, realizing that Rafe was merely annoyed now and not pissed anymore.

"Does he feel the same way about you?"

"I think so." Dante glanced over at Brenden who was still sleeping on the bed. "At least I hope so." Because he now knew it would kill him to have to let the male go.

"Son of a bitch," Rafe groaned as he ran a hand through his hair. "Kane and Toni are going to be pissed when they find out about this."

"I'm sorry," Dante said with a helpless shrug. "I can't help it though."

"With as much as you say *I'm sorry*, it should be tattooed on your flabby white ass."

"Hey, there is nothing about me that is flabby," Dante protested with a chuckle.

"Just your brain." Rafe smiled back, although his eyes remained as troubled as always. "Go get Brenden's keys from him."

"Why?"

"Because, God knows why, I'm going to do you a favor and give you guys some time alone. I'll crash at his pad."

"*Crash at his pad*," Dante echoed incredulous. "Since when do you talk like a hippie?"

"I've been hanging out with Morgan way too much." Rafe grimaced to show how much that task was welcome.

"Morgan the witch? Why would you spend any time with her?"

"Because she won't leave until I learn about my *great and mystical powers*." Rafe made air quotes in

the air.

"Tell her to fuck off and leave you alone." Dante didn't blame Rafe for wanting nothing to do with her. Witches and vampires were like the Sharks and Jets of the paranormal world. To say the two sides didn't get along would be a huge understatement.

"Don't you think I've tried that? She's a witch and she has ways of being very persuasive."

"How so?" Dante tried to hide his amusement. Morgan really must be getting Rafe all up in a lather. Usually his brother didn't say much and he was just babbling away about her.

"Last time I told her to get bent, she gave me a case of jock itch so bad I nearly cried like a girl."

Dante snorted with laughter before he managed to compose himself. "I'm really broken up to hear about all that, baby brother."

"Yeah, I'm sure it just busts your heart." Rafe gestured over to the bed. "Now go get the keys."

"Okay, but all joking aside, promise me you'll be careful around Morgan. I know she's pretty and all, but she still is a witch and they can't be trusted."

"I'm half warlock, what does that say about me?" Rafe tried to act flippant.

Dante saw right through him to the raw fear and insecurities that were lurking underneath. "You are one of the bravest and honest individuals

I've ever had the honor of knowing."

"You don't have to get all sappy on me. I already said I would help you."

"I'm serious," Dante said through the lump in his throat. "You and Kane are so damn important to me. When most other brothers would have given up and kicked my ass to the curb, you two still kept me together."

"And yet you still left us." Rafe looked back down at his scuffed boots.

The vulnerability in his words was a knife into Dante's chest. "Crap, Rafe, I never meant to hurt you. I just needed to get away from everything until I had my head together. I knew it was killing you and Kane to see me like that. For a while there I thought Markus might have been the one to pull me out of it, but then he fell in love with Dahlia and things really went south."

"And now you think Brenden is the one?"

"I know so." Dante glanced over at the sleeping vampire. "Since I got back, I haven't had one dark moment. All I think about is him."

"Dante." Rafe looked up from under his hair again, his gaze all smartass and cocky. "That is so touching and unexpected coming from you." A slow grin spread out over his face. "I think I'm going to puke it sounds so sweet. Now go get those damn keys before I have to hear you sing a love sonnet or something equally as lame."

Dante sat on the edge of the bed and gently shook Brenden's shoulder. When that didn't work, he shook harder. Brenden mumbled something in his sleep and turned over onto his side before tucking his knees into his chest. "He was really tired," Dante explained with a grin.

Rafe shook his head and let out a huge sigh. "Yeah, I hear being poisoned by empusa blood can be a real bitch," Rafe said. "Just get the keys out yourself and let him sleep. Just don't get frisky when you put your hand in his front pocket. At least until I leave."

"Boy, you are just one Chatty Cathy today. Whatever happened to the dark, broody, quiet Rafe?" Dante started to search Brenden's pockets for the keys. Since the Drone uniform called for black cargos there were plenty of pockets to hunt through.

"I still brood, I just do it with more flare."

"Oh, and you're even joking now. I am impressed." He found the keys and tossed them to Rafe who caught them with one hand.

"I'm trying to expand my horizons," Rafe quipped. "I'm even on Twitter now."

"Really?" Dante cocked a brow, not sure if his brother was serious or not.

"Sure, I already have tons of followers." He gave one last wave before he left the room, locking up behind him.

While he was glad the talk with Rafe had resolved some of the bad blood between them, he was happy to finally be alone with Brenden again. Even if the male was still sound asleep and it didn't look like he would be getting up too soon. His face was more relaxed, making him look even younger and the dark circles were even more pronounced.

Dante ran his fingers over Brenden's brow, noticing his skin was a little hot. First thing in the evening, he would give Doc a call and have her check up on the male. Brenden would go back to that damn infirmary if Dante had to drag him there.

Even though Rafe's bed was right there and empty, Dante still crawled in behind Brenden and threw one arm around him. He'd done many things in bed, but spooning and cuddling had never been one of them. This was nice. He breathed in deep, taking in the male's sandalwood and citrus scent. Yeah, this was really nice.

Tucking his chin on the top of Brenden's head, Dante brought him in even closer so his smaller body was pressed in tight to his chest. Maybe he was a little smaller, but he was still built mighty nice. Dante ran his hand down the male's chest, savoring how hard and defined his muscles felt even through his tee shirt.

"What am I going to do with you?" Dante

asked aloud, since there was no chance Brenden was going to hear him. “Even though I know the best thing for you would be to let you go, I can’t. I love you too damn much.”

CHAPTER NINE

Brenden woke up to the wonderful sensation of being in Dante's arms. Even though his back was to the male and he couldn't see him, Brenden would have recognized that dark spicy scent anywhere.

"You're finally awake," Dante said softly in his ear.

"What time is it?" Brenden stretched and tried to blink the fog away from his brain.

"Six. I thought you were going to sleep forever." Dante's voice was sleepy in a perfectly sexy way, but then everything about the vampire was sexy.

Brenden smiled in response until he realized how late it was. "Shit, I got to get going." He jumped out of bed and instantly regretted it when a wave of dizziness almost dropped him to his knees.

"You need to get your ass back to the infirmary," Dante said as he got up and placed a

steadying hand on Brenden's arm.

"No time." Brenden shook off the lightheadedness "I have to round up the team and find that nest of kubolds. We were supposed to take care of them last night, but we couldn't find the buggers anywhere."

"You're not going to do your team any good, if you keel over in the streets. All that will do is piss them off because they will have to carry your ass back here."

Dante tried to nudge him back to bed, but Brenden shrugged off his touch. "I don't have any choice. I don't get those rats and Eric will have my hide." Brenden patted his pockets and found them strangely empty. "Where did my keys go?" Could this get any worse? Not only did he sleep in, but now he was missing stuff.

"I gave them to Rafe so he could sleep in your room." Dante shuffled his feet, almost like he was nervous. "It was getting kind of crowded in here."

"I see." Strangely the knowledge that someone knew that he and Dante had spent the night together didn't upset him.

"Don't worry," Dante assured. "He won't tell anyone about us."

"I don't care if he broadcasts it over a loudspeaker to the whole clan." Brenden's heart thumped as an unsettling thought occurred to him. "Unless you're worried about this getting

out. I know hooking up with a fledgling probably isn't great for your reputation."

"Stop being an idiot." Dante took the edge off the insult by leaning in to give him a tender kiss. "Rafe can Twitter about this for all I care."

"Rafe Twitters?" Brenden asked, his body still buzzing from the brief kiss. Whenever Dante touched him, his whole body came to life and left him hungry for more. He wondered wildly what would have happened had he not fallen asleep last night and wanted to kick himself for the missed opportunity.

"Rafe is changing." Dante's gaze grew intense. "He's not the only one either. For first time in a long while, I've found myself addicted to one vampire's touch."

Hope and shock flared through Brenden. Could it be that Dante's feelings were as strong as his? He searched the male's face, looking for the usual cocky expression, but it wasn't there. All he saw was a tenderness that he'd always hoped for, but never dreamed possible. "You're just saying that because I gave you the best blow job of your life," Brenden teased with a nervous chuckle.

Dante laughed. "That was fantastic, but that wasn't what finally did it for me. It was when you took my blood. Tell me you didn't feel the connection?"

How could he not have felt it? The instant

Dante's blood had touched his tongue, he had felt their souls binding. At the time, he had just chalked it up to keeping his own lust pent up for so long. Now Dante was telling him he felt it, too. He gave a slight nod. "What does that mean for us?" he dared to ask, his gut twisted in nervousness. Dante gave that wicked, sexy smile of his before he leaned forward and brushed another kiss against Brenden's lips.

"It means you are so screwed and in more ways than one." Dante gave a heavy sigh as he pulled back. "Even though I'm the worst thing that can happen to you, I know I won't be able to give you up."

"Why would that be so bad?" Brenden frowned.

"I'm so fucked up inside and I don't want any of that to rub off on you. You deserve better than me."

"I don't want anyone but you," Brenden replied simply.

"Are you sure the empusa blood didn't make you lose all your common sense?"

"I'm pretty sure. But if I start howling at the moon and stuff because I lost my marbles, feel free to clock me over the head to knock me out of it." Brenden grinned.

"You have my word." Dante gave him a playful shove toward the bathroom. "Go take a shower. I

have a spare uniform you can use."

"No underwear though?" Brenden shot back, ignoring the heat he felt come to his face at asking such a blatant sexual question.

"Hell no," Dante drawled, his eyes getting heavy with desire. "I want to be able to get to your cock as easy as possible. After that fantastic blowjob you gave me last night, I owe you one back."

"Are we ever going to do more than that?" Brenden swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Do you want to?" Dante asked huskily.

Did he want Dante to take him? To finally make him his? Yes, Brenden wanted that more than anything. Although the whole situation scared him just a bit since he'd never made love to another man before. Something told him it would be very intense with Dante, too. That Dante would want to claim his body in all ways. "Yes," Brenden whispered, his cock growing tight with need. "I want you to fuck me."

* * * *

Dante closed his eyes as he sucked in a breath, then let out a low curse. "Are you trying to kill me here? You drop this on me right before you have to leave to go on assignment. I'm going to have a

hard-on all night just thinking about it."

"You love it, admit it," Brenden scoffed as he went into the bathroom.

"Yes, I do love it," Dante said softly to himself.

* * * *

"Tell me why you brought us catnip again?" Micah shook a small cotton bag that was holding a mixture of herbs. He sniffed one and made a face.

Brenden tried not to laugh. Truth was the things did stink to high heaven. They reminded him of a compost heap that had been stewing in the sun too long. Since the team was all crammed into the back of a van and the ventilation wasn't too great, the aroma clung around even more so.

Dante leaned over and flicked Micah on the ear. "It's not catnip. Well not exactly," Dante hedged. "It's something that Morgan mixed up. She swears to me that kubolds can't resist this crap."

"Crap?" Micah went in for another sniff. "Is that what this stuff is? It sure stinks bad enough to be it."

"Actually kubolds can't stand to be around excrement," Cherish pointed out as Zeke parked the van and they all got ready to hop out the back.

"How is it you know shit like this?" Zeke turned around in the seat to give the female an astonished look.

"Unlike you, I know what a book is." She sniffed her delicate nose at the vampire. "You are such a caveman."

"But I'm a cute caveman," Zeke shot back with a cocky grin.

"Says who?" Cherish snorted.

"My mommy always said I was so adorable and I was her big boy."

"Are they always this big of idiots?" Dante asked Brenden.

"No, usually they are ten time worse." Brenden sighed as he resisted the urge to rub his head. It had suddenly started to pound again. The back doors to the van opened to reveal Jonas who was looming like a damn giant. The moonlight glinted off his baldhead and his dark skin seemed to stretch out over muscles too huge to be real. It wasn't until one looked closer that they would see the hint of kindness in his brown eyes.

"What in the hell are you all waiting for?" he demanded in a deep gravelly voice. "The rats are all going to die of old age before you get your asses out here."

"And that would be a problem?" Micah grumbled as he hopped out. "Then I wouldn't have to trot around half of Detroit with a stink bag."

Jonas pinned Brenden with a glare. "It looks like we're going to have our work cut out training

this bunch."

"They'll be just fine," Brenden automatically defended. "They catch on really quick."

Just as he said those words, Micah fell flat on his face, his rifle skittered across the street before finally coming to a rest several feet from him. "I'm okay!" he shouted as he struggled to his feet.

"Yeah, no worries," Zeke quipped as he watched the vampire's struggles. "Once you teach them to walk, everything will be peachy."

"Hey, they still managed to save my sorry ass." Dante ran over and grabbed Micah's rifle. "I say that proves they can handle themselves. They're just a bit rough around the edges."

Brenden smiled as Dante acted like it was nothing to hand a soldier back his own weapon. He knew Dante was acting that way to ease the embarrassment Micah was suffering.

"Sorry," Micah mumbled, turning six different shades of red.

"No big deal." Dante shrugged. "You should have seen me when I first started. Kane was always dragging my hide out of trouble."

"There is no way you were ever as bad as me. You don't have to say that just to make me feel better."

"No lie, it was so sad."

"Like I'm supposed to believe that," Micah drawled. "You're Dante Toren for God sake. You

probably learned tactics from the crib."

Dante shared a covert amused look with Brenden before he walked down the street with Micah. Brenden could see him giving the vampire tips and instructions.

"I guess I'm going to have to let him live a bit longer," Jonas grumbled as he came up.

"Who, Micah?" Brenden asked, still watching Dante.

"No, Dante." Jonas held up his palms. "Now don't go giving me that killer glare. I just thought he was playing you and I didn't want to see you get burned."

"Damn it," Brenden spat, seeing red. "What is it going to take for you to see that I can handle my own life?"

"I know you can hold your own in battle. You've more than proven yourself in my book," Jonas conceded. "That still doesn't mean that you and Toni can't get hurt in other ways. I just now learned to accept Kane into our fold and now you expect me to let another one of the Toren brothers waltz in."

Brenden swallowed the anger still pulsing through his body. Jonas had lost his human family when he'd been attacked and turned into a vampire. While he served with Toni for Corbin, Jonas had come to care for her like another daughter. When Brenden had come back into her

life, the huge teddy bear of a vampire had adopted him as well. So it would only be natural that he would want to protect his charges from all kinds of hurt, not just the physical kind. "Dante isn't playing me," Brenden said, well aware that several members of his team were overhearing this conversation, but screw it. It wasn't like they couldn't have guessed something was already up with as close as Dante had sat next to him during the van ride.

"He better not be." Jonas gave a smile that was all fangs. "Or else he'll find out how nasty Drones can be."

It was several hours later before Brenden was back at the clan dwelling and knocking on Eric's door.

"Someone better be dead," Eric's muffled, irritated voice called.

"As a matter of fact, several somebodies are," Brenden said, with a little bit of cockiness in his voice, but he figured he was due.

"Damn, I guess I got to let you come in then."

Brenden pushed open the door, surprised to find the desk an even bigger mess than the last time he'd been in there. "You ever think of hiring a maid?" he asked, tilting head toward the paper disaster.

"Hey," Eric replied with mock hurt. "There's a

method to my madness. Now tell me what in the hell you want so I can get back to it."

The way he smiled while giving the order let Brenden know he was kidding. "We found the kubolds and eliminated them." Brenden allowed himself to feel a moment of pride that his team had actually managed to pull off their first official mission successfully.

"Good job." Eric cocked a brow. "I must admit, you finished that quicker than I expected."

"We had some help," Brenden admitted. "Dante and Jonas came along, plus the witch, Morgan, made up some bait for us and it worked like a charm. As soon as we laid it out, those rats went after it like a fat kid goes after cake."

"Interesting analogy and yet I can see the kubolds doing just that. How did your team do?"

"Jeremy was a bit freaked out to find out kubolds can talk." Brenden shrugged.

"Did he freeze up," Eric asked sharply.

"Only until the kubold started to make fun of his hairstyle. That pissed Jeremy enough to snap him out of it. Then he killed it with one shot." Brenden smiled at the memory of his friend's outrage.

"Good for Jeremy. So you think you can actually manage to make your team functional soldiers?"

"I know I can," Brenden answered even though

he has some lingering doubts. Right now he would be happy with them being able to successfully disembark from the van, let alone be a highly functioning Drone team.

"I can smell that lie on you." Eric gave a wicked grin. "But I like your attitude."

"Thank you." Brenden shifted slightly in his attention position. "I think."

"We do have another problem. News has been trickling down the grapevine that not only is the VRF aware of your weapon, but they are very interested in knowing how you managed to come up with it."

Brenden's blood ran cold as he realized Dante's prediction was coming true. It was never fun to find out one was under the VRF's radar. That still didn't change shit though. "I'm not backing down," Brenden shot back.

"I didn't think you would." Eric sighed heavily. "Plus the selfish bastard in me doesn't want you to. Since our last conversation I was thinking about how this weapon could finally give us an up in this damn war."

"So they don't scare you anymore?"

"They terrify the living hell out of me, but now that the cat's out of the bag and everyone knows about them, I'm damn glad it's our side that has them and not the other way around."

"Wow," Brenden couldn't resist ribbing.

"That's a real big turnaround."

"Another clan was liquidated," Eric revealed, his words hitting like heavy stones. "The men were executed on site and the woman and children were carted off to some undisclosed location."

"Shit," Brenden breathed, his fists balling up in fury.

"Shit about sums it up," Eric agreed with a curt nod. "The VRF is starting to attack clans without any reason now. Before at least they would make up an excuse for the attack, saying they were stockpiling weapons or something like that. Now they just go in and kill for shits and giggles."

Brenden realized he was subconsciously rubbing the *D* that was branded in his forearm. All Drones were forced to wear it so they couldn't pass themselves off as Pure Ones. It was just another example of how their rights had slowly been taken away and now the VRF was going to even rob them of their right to live.

"For now the VRF is leaving us alone because of the werewolves," Eric continued. "But that won't last for long. We were one of the first clans to fight back when they tried to attack our first home."

Brenden remembered that night well. It had been the one where he'd been transformed by Corbin. Again he rubbed the mark, recalling how

much it had hurt when they had burned it into his flesh. Even though he has still been in the agonizing throes of his transformation, the smell of burning flesh, the sizzle of his skin under the silver device they used, would forever be imprinted on his brain. That horrible incident had been the first bitch slap that had told him he would not even have the basic rights he'd enjoyed as a human. Too bad the VRF didn't believe in the US Constitution. "So you think they are going to come gunning for us?" Brenden asked, alarmed but not totally surprised by the news.

"Sooner or later, yeah. This is one of the reasons I'm pushing you so hard to get your team up to par. Corbin's good and he'll know by now who made those weapons. He'll come after all of you, hard."

"We'll die before we help him kill our own kind." Knowing how every member of his team felt about the VRF, Brenden felt comfortable to talk for them.

"I'm hoping it never comes to that." Eric shot him a concerned look. "I really do."

CHAPTER TEN

“Admit it, you smell like a big, hairy, greasy rat,” Rafe growled into Dante’s ear.

“Fuck off,” Dante shot back, although his reply was muffled because his face was smashed into one of the blue mats lining the training room floor. He groaned when Rafe ground his knee deeper into the small of his back.

“That’s not a nice way to talk,” Kane chastised. He was sitting a couple of feet away and there was a nice shiner forming on his right eye.

Dante took some satisfaction in seeing it since he was the one who had caused it. “Okay.” Dante shot him a dirty look. “Both of you, fuck off, please.”

“Nice language,” Kane drawled. “Now I see why we missed you so much. You add so much to our conversations.”

“I didn’t think we were here to chat. You told me you wanted to spar.” Dante struggled and almost got free from Rafe before both he and Kane

managed to subdue him again. This time he ended up with Rafe on his legs and Kane's knee in his back. Just to show that his brothers liked to mix things up a bit.

"We are sparring." Kane informed in an annoying happy voice. "It's not my fault you're out of shape."

"It was two to one," Dante protested. "By the way, Rafe, how's the nose? I really hope I broke it." That comment earned him a blow to the kidneys. He grunted, but didn't cry out in pain. Not going to happen since half of the clan had decided this incident was so interesting. If Dante could have, he would have flipped them off to add some spice to the performance.

"Okay, maybe, just maybe, Rafe and I decided that it was time to discuss your disappearing act," Kane conceded.

"And maybe, just maybe, we're still a little pissed about it," Rafe added.

"Don't even think about going back into that crap about how you did it because you were all messed up and it was better for us to be away from big, bad Dante either." Kane leaned down and spoke low so the rest of clan couldn't hear. "We're brothers, goddamn it, and we stick together, no matter what. How are we supposed to have your back when you leave us?"

"Is this where I'm supposed to click my heels

and realize there's no better place than home?" Dante gave a dark chuckle. That earned him another kidney shot. "What the hell is up with the hitting? You guys are talking this tough love bull way too literally."

"Did you even think about how you leaving would make Rafe and I feel?" Kane demanded loudly.

"Of course I did."

"I don't think you did," Kane argued, his voice harsh. "When we were in prison, my cell was three down from yours. Not enough to talk to you, but close enough to hear it when they used to go in and do those things to you."

Dante took in a shuddering breath and closed his eyes against the pain. God, he'd never known that Kane realized what had gone on in that hell pit. He'd always prayed that neither one of brothers would have figured it out. Never known what he'd done to make sure Kane and Rafe were safe. "It was worth it," he whispered, shame making it impossible for him to open his eyes. "I would do anything to protect you and Rafe."

"Yet, you wouldn't let us protect you in your time of need." Kane pushed away from him and stood. His brother was dressed in black sweats and his hair was slick with sweat. He ran a hand through it making it stand on end. "Damn it, Dante. Damn you."

Dante twisted his body, throwing Rafe off him. Since he was pretty sure at least one of the kidney shots had come from his younger brother, he gave him a swift kick in the ass before he got up. They may be having a total drama moment, but that still didn't mean he could resist an open shot when it came to him. "You're right," Dante said as he shrugged off the hurt between his shoulder blades. "I was a complete and utter jerk for what I did and I promise to never do it again. You and Rafe were right to kick me around for it."

Kane paused, mouth slack, as if the last thing he ever expected was for Dante to agree with him.

Dante licked the corner of his mouth and tasted some blood. A cut lip no doubt caused when he'd been slammed down on the mat.

"How do I know you're telling the truth and you won't leave again?" Kane demanded as he gingerly touched his swelling eye.

Because I wouldn't just be leaving you and Rafe now. I would be leaving a part of my soul behind. Dante didn't dare say this out loud quite yet so instead he quipped, "You could always put a microchip in my ass." The bystanders all laughed and Dante's ears picked up one voice that was comfortably familiar. Brenden must have come in sometime during the conversation and he was standing in the front row. Dante smiled at him and was warmed from the inside out when

Brenden gave him a cute grin back. Dante reluctantly pulled his gaze away so he could focus on his brothers. "It was wrong of me and I know I'll probably never be able to make it up to you guys." Dante ran the pad of his thumb over his cut, wincing from the sting. "If you want, we can *spar* every night until you forgive me if that's what it takes."

The bystanders must have realized that the show was over because they all dissipated, save for Brenden. Dante dared another glance out of the corner of his eyes. The male was staring at him with concern and what looked like desire. Dante sure as hell hope it was desire since he'd spent a better part of the night with a hard on. All he could think about was getting Brenden back into bed and finishing what they'd started the previous evening. "Kane, how did you know Toni was the one for you?" he asked, knowing he was completely changing topics, but not caring.

"He heard a sappy ballad playing in his head and little tiny unicorns started dancing around," Rafe said with heavy sarcasm.

"Shut up, jackass." Dante slid another glance at Brenden. "I'm trying to be serious for once." Brenden was still staring at him and there was no mistaking the fuck-me-now look in his eyes.

"I just couldn't imagine not being with her." Kane shrugged. "Even when I'm not with her,

she's all I can think about. Why the sudden curiosity?"

"Are you really sure you want to open this can?" Rafe muttered to Dante. "You just may find yourself beat to the mat again."

"What in the hell is going on?" Kane asked, his brow cocked in confusion. Then he caught who Dante was looking at and groaned. "No, Dante. Not Brenden. Anyone but him, please."

"What's wrong with Brenden?" Dante asked, even though he was pretty sure what Kane was going to say.

"You mess with Toni's brother and she will skin you alive," Kane seethed. "Then she'll have my balls for a bonus. This is why she's been in a bad mood, isn't it?"

"Yup, that would be the reason," Rafe confirmed.

"I can't help it." Dante looked over at Brenden again and noticed he was finally coming in their direction. "I need him."

"Anyone, please. Anyone but him." Kane ran his hand through his hair again. "Brenden's not like all the others you been with. He won't be satisfied with a quick bang. He'll expect more."

"For the first time. I'm ready to give that." He reached out a hand as Brenden approached and was thrilled when the male took it. "What I feel for him is real."

"You were really serious when you said you don't care who knows about us." Brenden chuckled.

"That's because I meant it." Dante suddenly felt his usually cocky attitude slip away. "Unless you changed your mind." The corners of Brenden's mouth kicked into a smile before he cupped the back of Dante's head and brought him forward for a kiss.

Brenden held nothing back.

There was no hesitation as he parted his lips and slipped his tongue out to tease Dante's lips. Dante groaned in appreciation before he started to return the kiss in earnest. Brenden's tongue darted out to caress Dante's cut, his velvet caress soothing away the sting. He was fully aware that his brothers were gaping at them and there were more than a few gasps to let him know they weren't the only ones watching, but damn if he could find a reason to care now. All that mattered was Brenden and getting to taste more of him.

"I take it he didn't change his mind," Rafe quipped.

Brenden broke the kiss and Dante had to resist the nearly overwhelming urge to reach out and pull him back.

"Get a room," Rafe bitched. "Oh yeah, that's right you already have a room, mine."

"You knew about this?" Kane turned his

outrage to Rafe.

"Just since yesterday."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Kane asked. When Rafe just shrugged and looked back down on the ground, Kane threw his hands up in disgust. "Now you decide to go mute again."

"Hey, your witch is trying to get your attention." Brenden pointed to a small female with dark flowing hair. She was covered in a black cloak and was frantically waving at Rafe.

"Shit, gotta go." Rafe took off through a door on the opposite side of the room from Morgan.

"I'm really worried about him." Dante frowned at the door Rafe had just rabbitted through.

"We're not talking about him." Kane cast him a dark look. "We still haven't finished discussing your problems."

"Sorry, Kane." Brenden tugged on Dante's hand. "You've had him long enough, I need him now."

By now they were really beginning to catch the attention of the other clan members again, but it wasn't because the infamous Toren brothers were fighting. It was because not only had Brenden just kissed him in front of a room full of witnesses, but because the two very different vampires were obviously an item. The clan members' slack jawed expressions brought a grin to Dante's face despite the fact Kane still looked pissed enough to chew

steel.

"This isn't over, we'll be talking more at dinner," Kane called as Dante let Brenden lead him away.

"Sure thing," Dante agreed even though, judging by the smoldering look Brenden was giving him, they wouldn't be leaving bed long enough to eat.

Once they reached the hallway and had as much peace as one can have in a vampire clan, Brenden looked over his shoulder. "Whose bedroom are we going to?"

"Let's go back to mine." Dante's cock grew hard in anticipation as he realized that it would only be minutes before he had it buried in Brenden's tight ass.

Almost as if reading his thoughts, Brenden nervously licked his lips.

Despite the gesture, the way his eyes were glazed with passion told Dante that he was anxious for this to happen, too. "You keep looking at me like that and I'm going to fuck you right here in this hall," Dante warned as he raked a glance over Brenden's body. Was he hard, too? Dante would give anything to be able to brush his hand over the male's cock to find out.

"Is that a threat?" Brenden grinned, his dimple making a brief appearance on his cheek.

"If you don't get us back to that bedroom,

you're going to find out how damn serious I am." By now, Dante's cock was throbbing with need. He couldn't remember the last time he was this jacked up for an encounter.

Finally they made it to the room and Dante struggled to get his keys out, his hands shaking so hard the task was almost impossible. It wasn't any easier when Brenden came up behind him and pressed the length of his body against his back. Dante almost dropped the keys when he felt Brenden's lips feather against the nape of his neck. The male's erection was pressed against his ass and Dante had to resist the urge to thrust back against it.

"Hurry, Dante," Brenden moaned in his ear. "I'm about ready to come right here in this hall and you haven't even touched me yet."

He reached around and caressed Dante through his pants. "Damn it, I'm trying." He finally managed to get the keys in and opened the door. A growl was his only waning before Brenden shoved him inside and slammed the door behind them. Before Dante had a chance to recover, the male pinned him against the wall and slammed his lips on his mouth.

Dante could feel Brenden's desperation and need for acceptance with every stroke, nip and caress. Dante relaxed and let the male take control for now. The cut on the corner of his mouth

opened up again and he let out a small hiss of pain that was lost in Brenden's mouth. The scent of fresh blood filled the room and seemed to add to Brenden's frenzy, his fangs now longer. Dante ran his tongue up the length of one of them, making Brenden moan. Whenever a vampire was aroused, it always felt so damn good to have their fangs caressed. "Slow down, babe." Dante gently pushed him away. "We have all night, there's no rush."

"I don't want it slow," Brenden panted. "I want you to screw me hard, please."

"I am going to make love to you, I promise." Dante caressed Brenden's cheek. "But I don't want to hurt you. We need to take it slow. Don't worry though, you will be one happy vampire when I'm done with you."

"Dante, I—"

Dante cut him off by placing a finger on his lips. "No arguing. You will do as I say. Understand?" He moved his finger so Brenden could talk.

"Yes, I understand."

"Good." Dante cocked his head to the side as he looked the male up and down. "You can start by taking off all your clothes. Now."

With a soft whimper, Brenden stood back so he could peel off his uniform shirt.

Dante sucked in a breath as the male's taunt abdomen and large chest were exposed. The tan

flesh just begged to be licked and his fingers itched to explore the hard lines and muscles. His pants hung low on his hips and Dante's mouth watered as he remembered how that flesh had yielded to his fangs just a day ago. "All of them," he ordered, his voice slurred with passion. "I want everything off."

Brenden fumbled with his belt and fly a few seconds before finally getting them open.

Dante smiled when he saw the male's cock thrust forward, nothing confining it. "You're not wearing your boxers."

"You said you would like it better if I didn't." After a bit of a struggle, Brenden got rid of his boots and socks before he kicked his pants to the side so he was finally naked. "Are you going to get undressed, too?" Brenden asked as he wrapped his fingers around his own cock and stroked.

"In a second." Dante watched a pearl of pre-cum form on the tip of Brenden's cock. "First I want you to lie down on the bed. If I don't get your dick inside my mouth soon, I'm going to lose it."

Brenden obeyed, walking slowly over to the bed, and lying down on his back.

Dante followed him, climbing on the bed and settling between Brenden's legs. Dante ran his hand up the length of the male's erection, catching

the drop of cum. Bringing his finger to his mouth, he sucked it clean. "Your cock belongs to me now." He closed his eyes and savored the salty taste of his vampire. "Say it."

"Belongs to you," Brenden moaned as he thrust his hips up.

"Good, remember that because I'm not about to share you with anybody. So you can tell that Raven bitch to back off."

"There's nobody else but you, I swear it."

Sweat broke out over Brenden's body, making him slick under Dante's touch. Dante leaned down and ran his tongue up the male's chest, stopping to swirl his tongue around one brown nipple.

Brenden quivered under his touch.

"I love how you react to me." Dante sat back on his haunches so he could grab onto Brenden's cock again. "There's nothing fake about it. It's all really you." He scooted even further back so he could bend over and take Brenden's erection in his mouth. Damn, it had never been this good. Brenden tasted sweet and salty, felt soft and hard all at the same time. Dante knew that if he were with a hundred more vampires not one would even be able to compare with the male. He was fully able to admit that this was so much more than just infatuation. He attacked Brenden's cock, sucking hard.

Brenden let out a cry of pleasure as he lifted his

hips off the bed, his hands fisting into the sheets.

Dante pulled back and licked his way to Brenden's ass. Flicking his tongue out, he rimmed the tight ring of muscle before thrusting his tongue inside.

Brenden jerked in response before he let out a long moan of approval.

"You like?" Dante asked between licks.

"Fuck yes. But it would be even better if you were naked, too."

Dante gave him one more passing lunge of his tongue before he stood and pulled off his shirt. Brenden watched him under hooded eyes, his chest heaving in passion. Before taking off his pants, Dante pulled something out of one of the cargo pockets.

"Lube?" Brenden chuckled when he saw it. "You actually carry that in your pocket?"

"Not all the time." Dante tossed in on the bed before reaching down to unlace his boots. "I just started after a certain vampire looked up at me with his blue, fuck-me eyes while he was giving me the blow job of my life." Dante quickly lost his pants and got back into bed with Brenden, once again settling between the male's legs. When he finally fucked Brenden, he wanted to be looking down in to his face. He wanted to see the flush come over his face as he came.

"You're so hot," Brenden exclaimed as he ran

his hands over Dante's chest.

Dante closed his eyes and moaned as he savored the soft caress. "You keep that up and I'm going to come before I even get inside you." Dante sucked in a breath when Brenden continued to explore. Finally, Dante stilled his hands and gazed down at him. "You still sure you want this?" In response, he picked up the bottle of lube and handed to Dante.

"Please," Brenden whispered thickly. "I want you to make love to me."

Dante poured a good amount of the lube into his hand before he started to suck Brenden off again. He worked the male cock with his tongue and lips for a few moments before he slid one finger in his hole. Dante closed his eyes in bliss. Brenden was so tight and his virgin ass belonged to only him. He pumped the finger in and out several times before he added another one, slowly stretching the muscles so Brenden could eventually take him in. Brenden's cock jumped in his mouth and Dante used his free hand to dig his nails into the male's thigh to stop him from coming. Not when things were just starting to get good.

"Please, Dante," Brenden cried. "I need more."

"Easy, babe," Dante crooned as he pulled his lips free. "You'll get it all. We just need to take it slow so I don't hurt you." He entered a third

finger through the tight ring of muscle. "Damn, your ass is so tight it almost sucks me in."

"I'm going to come," Brenden moaned as he grabbed onto the sheets.

"No you're not," Dante demanded as he continued to finger fuck him. "You're not going to come until I'm inside that ass, screwing you."

"You better hurry then." The chords on Brenden's stood out, showing how hard it was to hold himself back.

Dante drew his fingers back and shifted around so his cock was right at the entrance of Brenden's lubed ass. Grabbing his shaft so he could have better control, Dante slowly pushed passed the tight ring. Dante growled and bit down on his own bottom lip as he fought for control. Even though he wanted to pound into Brenden, he slid in, inch by agonizing inch. Finally Brenden let out a growl of his own before he thrust up, forcing Dante all the way in. They cried out together as he buried himself balls deep into Brenden.

"I love you so much," Brenden sighed, his eyes closed.

That shattered the last bit of control Dante had, he started to move in and out, first slowly and then faster as the pleasure built up. He could feel Brenden shudder under him and then the warm jets hitting his stomach as the other male came, but Dante still kept thrusting. Finally his balls

clenched right before he came with one last powerful thrust. His semen shot into Brenden's ass, the tight muscles wrenching every last bit of pleasure from him.

Once he was able to get his breath back, he pulled his cock from Brenden and collapsed on the bed by his side. Pulling the male to his chest, he spooned him, both of them still buzzing from the after-sex high.

"I love you, too, Brenden." Dante trailed his fingers up the male's arm. It wasn't a sexual gesture, but rather one that one lover would give to another. "I've tried fighting my feelings for you, but I can't."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brenden let Dante's declaration wash over him. He actually loved him back. A thrill went through him. After so long of lusting after the other vampire from afar, he'd never dared dreamed that his love would actually be returned.

"You're quiet all of the sudden," Dante rumbled in his ear.

Brenden smiled to himself. For all the swagger Dante liked to show the world, Brenden knew there was a bit of insecurity lurking, too. "I'm just thinking," he said.

"We're guys," Dante grunted. "We sleep after sex, not think."

"Not even if we're thinking about how soon it will be before we can screw again?" Brenden asked with false innocence. Dante laughed his deep rich chuckle that too few got to hear.

"I would love, too, but you still look pale to me." He squeezed Brenden's waist. "I noticed you had a few dizzy spells while we were hunting the

kubolds, too."

Brenden stiffened. He'd thought he did a better job than that at hiding it. "Do you think anyone else figured it out?"

"No, you did a pretty good job at covering. I still wish you would go see Doc again."

"I will," Brenden promised, touched by Dante's concern. "First thing tomorrow. I'm too tired to move from this bed right now."

"Not even to get some food?"

"Screw food." Brenden yawned. "Sleep is much higher on my list right now." He twisted his body so he could trace his fingers up down Dante's arm, frowning when he saw all the scars marring the tan flesh. Some were so slight a mortal eye would not have been able to pick them up while others were vicious and deep. "You've gone through so much hurt," he murmured, his heart breaking.

"I've lived a long hard life." Dante brushed his lips over the shell of Brenden's ear. "Scars are part of the package. You have a few yourself, thanks to the time the ghouls captured us."

"True." Brenden fingered up one scare that did look too damn familiar. "But nothing like this. How many of these did you get in prison?"

"Too many." Dante sighed heavily.

"Why did they put you there in the first place?" Brenden had wanted to know this for so long, but he hadn't dared to ask before now. For several

tense moments, he thought that he'd pushed Dante too far and the vampire was pissed at his prodding. Brenden started to get up, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked such a personal question."

"Stop." Dante tightened his grip in Brenden's waist. "I don't mind telling you at all. For the first time, I've found someone I actually want to share this crap with. I'm just trying to figure out where to start."

"Take your time," Brenden soothed as he got comfortable again. "I can wait for as long as you need."

"Do you know what vampire slugs are?" Dante finally asked after several more minutes of silence.

"They're like huge leeches the size of a small cat. Cherish told me they latch onto an already dying victim and slowly drain them dry." Brenden's stomach rolled as he remembered some of the pictures she'd shown him. Brown and slimy looking, the only feature they had on their faces were a circle-like mouth lined with rows of razor sharp teeth.

"The night we were arrested, Kane and I found Rafe covered in them. He had been nearly beaten to death by a group of feral vampires and someone had put them on his as a final *fuck you* to us." Dante's voice shook with fury.

"I'm so sorry." No wonder Rafe was so withdrawn sometimes. "How did the ferals get to

him?"

"Kane, Rafe and I were all still soldiers for the VRF. We were damn good at what we did, too. So good that if there was a job nobody else could do, they would give it to us. Corbin was just beginning to weasel his way up the ranks and Kane didn't like his tactics. When Kane went to our superiors to complain, Corbin decided to take all of us out."

"What did he do?" Brenden felt his gut clench.

"Corbin sent Rafe out on a mission to check out reports of a group of ferals stalking a human family. It was supposed to be just a look-and-see mission. You know, check to see if there really were ferals and if so call for backup. When Rafe got there, he found the family was already murdered. The ferals were there all right, but they had been sent there by Corbin. He led my brother there to be slaughtered."

"Excerpt for a baby," Brenden supplied, remembering that one scrap of info from the heavily doctored reports he'd come across.

"Yes." Dante swallowed hard. "He managed to hide it under a couch right before the ferals took him down. Rafe used the mental link that we share to call for help and we got there as soon as we could—" his voice broke off.

"You don't have to keep going if you don't want to." Brenden turned around so he could put

his arms around the grieving male.

"No, I think it's time to get this shit off my chest." He smiled weakly. "Dahlia has been after me to let go of my demons." He took a deep breath and continued his tale of horror. "When we got to the house, we found that poor family had been so ruthlessly cut down. Most of them were on their stomachs because they had been attacked while they were trying to run away. Kane and I turned over those bodies, dreading that one of them would be Rafe. The entire time, that baby was screaming. The crying ripped my heart apart, but I couldn't find the baby or Rafe anywhere. Then we went into a sunroom and that's when we found him covered in those damn slugs."

"I still don't get how they could arrest you for anything. You guys didn't do anything wrong." Brenden felt rage surge through him as he eyed up Dante's scars again.

"We were charged with dereliction of duty. By not saving the human family, we risked exposing our existence to humans."

"That's so unfair," Brenden protested. "What happened wasn't your fault."

"But Corbin made it look like it was and he's really good at what he does," Dante said bitterly. "The worst part wasn't losing our rank or reputation. Or even when they took away everything we owned. It was when our own father

disowned us. He just tossed us aside like we were garbage."

"Shit," Brenden said because he couldn't think of any words of comfort. While his father had been cold at times, he'd never turned his back on Brenden. He could only imagine how much that must have hurt Dante and his brothers.

"When they sent us to that prison, it was bad, really bad. The things that nightmares are made of."

He shuddered and Brenden tightened his grip. Brenden had heard gruesome stories about what went on behind the walls of those paranormal prisons. Stuff that had made him sick to his stomach. Rape, murder, cannibalism. The survival rate was lower than ten percent and yet Dante had managed to survive and so had his brothers. But at what price. It was easy to see all three of them carried internal scars that were far worse than the external ones Dante had. "I'm going to kill him," Brenden snarled as he felt the rage bring out the darker side of him. "This is just one more reason for me to find Corbin and rip his fucking heart out."

"No, you can't go after him."

Dante shifted to his side so he could give Brenden a pleading look.

"He's too powerful. You'll never survive a confrontation with him."

"As long as I can take him out with me it will be worth it." Brenden bared his fangs with a hiss.

"No it's not," Dante argued fiercely, his eyes growing almost black with emotion. "You are everything to me, damn it. If I were to lose you, I don't think I could survive. I would finally go over the edge and never come back."

The heart wrenching despair in Dante's words cut through Brenden's anger. He breathed in several times to gain control of himself before he gave Dante a reluctant nod. "Okay, I promise not to do anything rash."

"I can't stand the thought of Corbin ever getting his hands on you."

Dante gripped Brenden's arms so hard it hurt a bit.

"That's why I wanted you to stop making those damned grenades. I don't want you on his radar at all."

"It doesn't matter if I stop or not anymore." Brenden sighed heavily, knowing Dante wasn't going to like hearing the rest of what he had to say. "Eric found out that Corbin already knows about both me and the weapon."

"Fuck," Dante cursed as he briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were filled with determination. "Fine, that just means you don't leave my side, ever."

"I have my team to run," Brenden protested. "I

just can't curl up into a ball and hide."

"Run your team, but I'll be there the entire time. We don't even have to tell them why I'm really there. We can just tell them Eric assigned me to you for some extra muscle."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Brenden asked, raising a brow. "You'll have to work with Jonas and you guys hate each other."

"Hate is such a strong word." Dante grinned. "We just strongly dislike everything about each other."

"However you want to put it, you smartass. How do I know you two won't end up killing each other?"

"Because we're both going to be too busy protecting you." Dante leaned down and brushed his lips over Brenden's eager mouth.

"Make love to me again," Brenden begged once Dante pulled back. With a wicked smile, Dante slipped his hand between them and cupped Brenden's cock.

"That's something you never have to ask me twice, but let's go take a shower first."

Getting up, he held a hand out to Brenden and pulled him out of bed.

They took a long, hot shower. Letting their soapy, wet hands explore every inch of each other. Brenden wanted to do more, but another wave of dizziness hit him hard. He gripped the wall of the

shower as he waited for the room to stop spinning.

"That's enough," Dante said as he put his hand in the small of Brenden's back to steady him. "We need to get you back to Doc. That empusa blood really messed you up bad."

Another wave of vertigo slammed into Brenden, making him suddenly very amendable. "Okay," he nodded. He managed to dry off and get dressed, but not without some help from Dante. A cold sweat broke out over his body as his stomach heaved. He only managed to hold down his lunch by sheer force of will and several deep breaths. Dante put one arm around his waist and guided him down long hallways that led to the infirmary.

Once they got there, Dante tried to lead him to a bed, but Brenden shrugged him off. "I don't need to get back in one of those damn things." He had so many bad memories associated with vampire hospitals. "Just get me a pill or something to make me better."

"Really," Dahlia snapped as she came into the room, putting her lab coat on as she strode over to them. "Since when have you become a doctor? And before either one of you even think of it, if you say *I'm a doctor of love, baby* I'm going to kick your ass."

"Buzzkill," Brenden mumbled, weakly. He eyed up one of the beds. Maybe getting prone

wasn't a bad idea. He suddenly felt very tired. Giving a stubborn shake of his head, he forced himself to remain standing. If he crawled into one of her cots, there was no telling how long Dahlia would try to keep him. Worse yet, she would pull him from active duty and his team couldn't afford to be without him. No, better for all that he not let on how bad he really was.

Dahlia marched over and put a hand on his brow. "Damn it, you're burning up."

"Is he?"

Dante reached over and touched Brenden's cheek.

"Shit, you're right. This is new, I've been with him all night and he hasn't been hot before."

Brenden noticed Dahlia didn't react to that other than giving a curt nod of her head.

"When was the last time he fed?" she asked Dante.

"Last night and he took a lot. Nearly knocked me on my ass."

"I'm standing right here," Brenden grumbled. "You can talk to me directly. If I need some extra blood, then give it to me so I can get the hell out of here."

"Fine." Dahlia put a hand on her hip. "But if I'm going to give you blood, I'm going to have to do through a transfusion. That means you have to lie down."

"I'll be okay sitting." Brenden knew he was being an ass, but was too sick to care. He got up and took two steps toward a chair before another dizzy spell hit him.

This one was worse than all the others. The room tilted and whirled before he felt his body pitch forward. The last thing he heard before he went unconscious was Dante cursing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Dante reached out and wrapped his arms around Brenden to keep him from hitting the hard tile of the infirmary floor. Grunting under his weight, he managed to hang on until Dahlia rushed over to lend a hand. Between the two of them, they struggled to lift Brenden onto a bed. The entire time, Brenden didn't even move, much less wake up.

"Is he going to be all right?" Dante asked, frantic. His heart was hammering in his chest and fear was clawing at his insides. In a span of a few minutes, Brenden had made a drastic turn for the worse. No longer just pale, his skin had taken on a ghastly gray appearance and was clammy.

"I don't know yet," Dahlia replied honestly as she brushed him to the side so she could exam Brenden. "He should have never left in the first place until I fully checked him out, but he's as stubborn as you are."

"Just make him better, Doc," Dante's voice

cracked as a painful lump formed in his throat. "Give him what he needs. If it's blood, he can have mine. I don't care how much it is."

"I just hope blood will help him." Dahlia pressed her lips into a tight line. "Truth is, I don't know that much about empusa so I have no clue as to how to help him."

"I know someone who may be able to help us." Dante reached into Brenden's pocket and pulled out his cell. Scrolling down until he found Cherish's number, he punched the digits. As soon as she answered, he barked out, "Get to the infirmary now. Brenden needs you. Don't say a word to anyone though and make sure you're not seen." Slapping it shut before she could respond, Dante tossed it to the side. Running his hands through his hair, he let out a growl of frustration. "Why did he get bad so suddenly? He was a little off, but nothing that would let me know this was going to happen."

"I really wish I could give you some answers, but I honestly don't know." Dahlia got a bag of blood from the cooler and hung it up on an IV pole. "This is all uncharted ground for me. You have to remember I was still human when I went to medical school and vampire biology wasn't part of the curriculum."

"Well you have to do something," Dante roared in frustration.

"I am." She pulled out a needle and started an IV. "You need to get in contact with Toni and let her know what's happening." She lifted her gaze, her eyes bleak. "Just in case."

Since he wasn't about to leave Brenden's side and he didn't feel like any more phone time, Dante closed his eyes and opened up his mental link to Kane. *You need to find Toni and get to the infirmary as fast as you can. Something has happened to Brenden.*

What's wrong? Kane's reassuring voice filled Dante's head.

He collapsed and now he's unconscious. Doc thinks it's the empusa blood. Dante took in a deep breath to hold back the tears. *She doesn't know if he's going to come out of it.*

Hold tight, Kane ordered. *We're on our way.*

I can't lose him. Despite his best efforts, a tear escaped the corner of his eye and slid down his cheek.

We'll figure something out, I swear it to you.

Kane's calm tone was in direct odds the turmoil swirling around inside Dante. *If he dies, I don't think I'll be able to go on.* He looked over at Brenden, who still hadn't moved. Dahlia had hooked up the blood, but his color was getting even worse. *I love him so much.*

Dropping the mental link, Dante edged his way back to the bed. When Dahlia didn't object to his

closeness, he reached out and grabbed Brenden's hand. It was so hard to believe the cold lifeless fingers had been so warm only a short time ago as they had caressed him.

"Oh my God, what happened?" Cherish asked in a shocked voice from behind him.

"Those fucking empusa and their blood," Dante bit out between clenched teeth. "Brenden told me you know everything about paranormal creatures."

"I thought I did." Cherish shook her head, making her brown curls bob. "But I never saw this coming."

"Then I want you to find out how to make him better. Learn everything you can about those bloodsucking bitches and find a way to reverse this." Dante choked back a sob. "Please?"

"Of course I will." Tears pooled in her large brown eyes.

"Who from the team can we trust? I don't want it to get around that Brenden is out of commission." Because if it became common knowledge he would forever look weak in the eyes of the clan and it was never safe to be in that position with a group of predators. Even ones that lived and ate with you.

"All of them." Cherish nodded in understanding, her gaze never leaving Brenden. "We've always been very tight and none of us

would ever betray him."

"How about Zeke? He's new to your team?"

"He won't tell either." A slight flush came over her cheeks. "I can personally guarantee that one."

If the situation hadn't been so bad, Dante might have laughed at her embarrassment. Part of him was surprised, too, since he'd never know Zeke was into females. Putting all those thoughts on the back burner, he returned his attention to Brenden. "Good to know the team will have our back if we need them," Dante said as he brought Brenden's hand up and brushed a kiss on the back of his knuckles.

"We won't let him down," Cherish vowed as she put a comforting hand on Dante. "We all love him, too, and will do whatever it takes."

Toni came bursting through the door, Kane and Rafe on her heels. "What did you do to him?" she yelled at Dante.

Dante ducked his head. For the first time in his immortal life, he didn't have a smartass comeback. In truth, he blamed himself more than she ever could. If Brenden hadn't come to save him, then he never would have been poisoned in the first place. Plus, Dante should have forced his mate to come back to the infirmary sooner.

"It's not his fault." Cherish put her tiny body between him and Toni. "It's the empusa blood that did it."

"Cherish is right," Dahlia cut in gently. "The reason Brenden is sick is because of the poison."

"My brother got poisoned saving your sorry ass," Toni fumed, her eyes bright with unshed tears and anger. "If you hadn't been selfish and left in the first place, then he wouldn't have had to drag you out of that church."

"Nobody forced Brenden to go there." Cherish continued to defend Dante when he made no move to do so himself.

"He went because he has this stupid idea that he actually loves Dante." Toni tossed a disgusted look at Dante.

"Toni, enough," Kane warned in a low voice.

"No, it's time he heard this." She glared at Dante, waves of hate rolling off her. "It was hard enough to watch as his leaving tore you and Rafe apart. I'll be damned if I'm going to watch him do the same thing to my brother."

"You're pissed at me, I get it," Dante snapped, his own anger taking over. "But that's not going to help right now. I know I shouldn't have bailed on Rafe and Kane and I know I don't have the best reputation as far relationships go. That's all history though, I've changed."

"Why should I believe that?" Toni threw her hands up in disgust.

"You don't have to believe me. Brenden does and that's all that matters."

"He's not another one of your conquests!" she shouted.

"No, he's not. He's my mate!" Dante yelled back.

The entire room got silent as they all looked over at Brenden's neck, which was devoid of the mating bite. That was the one scar Dante wouldn't mind wearing himself. The one that would let everyone know he belonged to Brenden. "We didn't have time go through the ritual," he feebly tried to explain to the others. "I hadn't even got around to asking him if he wanted to do it. For all I know, he would have refused me."

"No, he wouldn't have." Cherish turned and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Brenden has always cared about you. It's always been you he wanted."

Dante returned her embrace, taking whatever comfort could be found. A sob ripped through his chest and, before he knew it, he was bawling like some friggin baby. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried. Not since that night they found Rafe.

"Oh my God," Toni breathed, her hand up to her open mouth. "You really do love him." She ran over and took over the hug once Cherish stood back.

Dante clutched Toni tight as they both wept together. United in their grief.

Hours later and Brenden still hadn't woke up. Dante sat on one side of the bed, Toni on the other. Neither one of them leaving, not even for meals. His brothers would come in from time to time, to give updates before they left again to help Brenden's team.

Cherish had been scouring the internet for hours, looking for a cure and so far she'd come up with zilch. Eric was putting out a covert call to some of his trusted contacts outside the clan to see if anyone knew something, but he wasn't having any better luck than Cherish.

"You should get some sleep," Dahlia suggested as she came over to hang another bag of blood.

"You should, too," Dante countered as he took in her tired eyes that were sporting a nice set of dark circles.

"I caught a nap a little bit ago and Markus has been helping me run things. He makes a damn fine nurse." She took Brenden's pulse, then returned her attention to Dante.

"I still don't get it," he mused with a frown. "Since the empusa bit me, shouldn't I be sick, too?"

"You just had their saliva in you, their blood must be more toxic." She shrugged as she pulled her stethoscope out of her lab coat pocket.

Brenden moaned as his eyelids fluttered open.

Toni let out a cry of happiness as Dante felt his face crack into a relieved grin. Brenden seemed to focus on Dante first.

"Hey," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "What in the hell hit me?"

"Empusa blood." Dante grabbed the male's hand and held tight. "You had me worried. I didn't think I was ever going to get to see those baby blues of yours again."

"I want out of here." Brenden gave a few feeble attempts to sit up, but Toni put her hand on his chest to push him back down.

"You sure hate this place," Dante observed.

"Our grandmother died of cancer and her last days were in the hospital," Toni explained. "I wasn't there, but Brenden spent weeks by her bedside. Ever since, he's hated hospitals."

"Sorry, Tiger." Dahlia said. "You're staying this time if I have to tie you down to the bed."

"You do and I'll be the worst patient you ever had," Brenden replied with a ghost of a smile playing on his full lips. "I'll refuse to take my pills, smack you on the ass, use a bad HMO as my insurance."

"Bring it on." Dahlia grinned, flashing her fangs. "I've dealt with harpies, witches and demons. A punk vampire with an attitude is nothing."

"Ouch! You just wounded my pride."

Brenden's eyelids fluttered before he went back to sleep.

As soon as his breathing became regular, Dahlia took several steps away and motioned with her hand to Dante and Toni that she wanted them to join her. Dante reluctantly left Brenden to see what she wanted.

"We need to find that cure and fast," Doc whispered, casting a concerned look over at Brenden. "He's getting worse."

"How is that possible?" Toni asked, her hair was a mess and her eyes were red from crying. "He was just talking to us."

"Yes, but his vitals are getting worse. The blood transfusions are helping, but not for much longer."

"Maybe it's because it's the bagged crap. Why don't you do a direct transfusion from me?" Dante offered, frantic.

"It won't help." Dahlia gave a hopeless shake of her head.

Dante hissed in frustration before he turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Dahlia asked.

"To make sure his team is on track." He turned back and gave Toni an imploring look. "Will you watch out for him?"

"Of course I will." She wrapped her arms around her middle, looking as miserable as he felt.

"Make sure he knows I just stepped out and didn't leave him."

"I'll make sure he know." She gave him a watery smile. "Go, find a cure for this. I'll take care of your mate for you."

He strode back to her and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "Thanks, Toni."

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed.

"For what?"

"For ever doubting you. I know if anyone can make him better, it's you."

"I won't stop looking until I find the cure." Dante gave her another kiss before he walked out the infirmary.

He went to the communications room because that was the place Brenden's team most often gathered. He found them all there, crammed into the small room. Eric was there, too, which surprised him a bit, but gave him some comfort. It was nice to know their leader cared enough to help. "What have you found?" Dante asked Cherish.

"Diddly and shit," Micah answered for her. The whole team looked exhausted and cranky. Empty coffee cups and food wrappers littered the room.

"Not entirely true." Cherish somehow managed to find one unopened candy bar in the mess and she handed it to Dante, never taking her eyes off the computer screen. "It has been damn hard

though. Most species know better than to drink empusa blood, but there is one creature out there that tends to lose control and take a chunk from time to time."

"Who?" Dante tore open the candy and started to eat.

"Werejackals," she informed with shudder. "The disgusting beasts never have been known for their control. Once they go into a feeding frenzy, they can't stop. So they have had more than their fair share of poisonings. We think they may have developed an antidote to it though."

"Why do you think that?"

Cherish pushed a button on her keyboard and a picture popped up on the monitor. It was of a small, scruffy looking male. Actually scruffy really didn't begin to describe it. He had brown stringy hair that was so crazy it almost looked cartoonist. Even in the picture, he looked like he hadn't seen a bath in weeks and there was a wild look in his dark eyes. Yup, jackal no doubt about it. Disgusting little buggers. Almost as bad as kubolds. Almost. "Can you get email on that thing?" he gestured to the computer.

"Of course we can." Micah acted like he'd asked a dumb question. "Why?"

"I have a former...friend who's jackal," Dante admitted.

"Ewww..." Jeremy drew the word loud and

long. "You humped a jackal?"

"She was only part." In truth, Hannah was actually smoking hot, jackal or not.

"Sick, there is not enough beer in the world to make me want to tap some jackal ass." Jeremy gave an exaggerated shiver.

"Remember that when you see her."

Cherish typed in a few strokes and Dante's personal email box came up. He cocked a brow at her. "You know how to get into my email?"

"I can get into anyone's personal stuff," she said with a shrug.

"Remind me never to piss you off." Shoving the rest of the candy into his mouth, he quickly typed up a message to Hannah, asking her to meet him at a dive bar that was just outside of Detroit. Hidden from human eyes, it was a place where everything that wasn't human met for fun.

"I know that joint," Micah declared, reading over Dante's shoulder. "I heard that half the vampires that go in, don't come back out in one piece. You can't be seriously thinking of going in there by yourself."

"I'm not." Dante hit the send button before turning to give a cocky grin. "You all are coming with me."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“This place is frigging awesome!” Micah exclaimed as he watched two witches making out on a black couch. One of them noticed him staring and crooked a finger at him. Flashing a goofy smile, he moved to walk to her.

Dante reached out and pulled him back by the scruff of his neck. “I want everyone to stick together,” Dante ordered as he scanned the dark interior of the bar for all exit routes. There had never been a time when he’d visited a place like this that he hadn’t made a run for it sooner or later.

“But they look so sad and lonely,” Micah objected, looking as if someone had just stolen the last cookie.

“Trust me, kid,” Dante drawled. “They are way too hard core for you. They’d chew you up into itty-bitty nerdy vampire pieces.”

“I’d probably like it.” Micah sighed.

Dante cocked his head to the side. The vampire

probably would enjoy it, but then they weren't here to play. A male zombie was lumbering all Lurch-like behind the bar, his sallow gray skin, dusky in the poor light. Zeke curled up one corner of his lips to expose a fang in aggression. Dante gave a slight shake of his head and the vampire relaxed. Well maybe he didn't relax, but he did stop throwing off hostility.

"The only things I hate worse than witches, kubolds, ghouls and jackals are fucking zombies," Zeke grumbled.

"Zombies are actually docile unless provoked," Cherish informed in that annoying know-it-all voice of hers. She whipped out a PDA and started working the keypad.

"Are you taking notes?" Dante asked, nervously eyeing up the crowd. Almost every paranormal species was present from little and mean, to big and badass. The last thing they needed was for her to start acting like she was paparazzi.

"There so many interesting creatures here," she explained, not looking up from her device. "I'm just making a few observations."

"You're going to get us killed," Dante growled as he jerked it out of her hands. She made to grab it again and Dante hissed at her before he slipped it into his pocket. An all-too-familiar chuckle told him his brothers had come in and they were

witnesses this fine display of fuck-upitry. "I don't know how Brenden manages to work with these idiots," he muttered to Kane. "I swear Eric should pin a medal on him."

"It was your bright idea to come here," Kane reminded him with a cocky smile. "Oh look, I think your jackal friend is here."

A tall female was making her way toward them. Gliding with the grace of a cat rather than a jackal, she moved in a sensual dance that had almost every male in the bar taking notice. Long whiskey colored hair flowed down past her shoulder, the curls at the bottom teasing the tops of her full breasts. Full breasts that a short belly-baring pink top did little to hide. She had on a pair of tight hip-hugger blue jeans that showed off a tattoo circling her navel. It was a Celtic design that had been part of her witch mother's heritage. Dante knew every whirl and curve of that tattoo because the last time he'd been with Hannah he'd given a great deal of attention to it while they had been in bed together. Her tawny eyes locked onto his as she raised a finely arched brow in question. No doubt wondering why he'd brought the vampire parade with him.

"Sweet fuck," Jeremy proclaimed with awe.

"Not as ewww-ey as you thought?" Dante couldn't resist ribbing.

"No, she is hot. I think I'm in lust."

"She's a biter," Dante warned.

"Sweet mama, I hope so." Jeremy gave a wicked grin. "Lord knows I am." He made a chomping motion with his fangs.

"You're such a dork," Cherish snapped, still pouting over the loss of her PDA.

Dante knew that for all their joking they were as worried about Brenden as he was. They were just using some humor to help keep their nerves steady. It was the same game he and his brothers had used countless times before.

"Dante," Hannah purred as she came up. She smiled, showing off tiny canines. "You brought friends? It's going to get crowded in the bed with so many of us."

"Unfortunately I didn't come here for that." Not that he would ever consider being with anyone other than Brenden, but he didn't want to piss her off, not when they needed her so much.

"Since when has Dante Toren not had time for fun?" Her voice was all smoke and sex. She leaned in and made a show of slowly sniffing the air, before she pulled back and pursed her lips in confusion. "Strange, you still smell like sex, but there is only one scent on you now, not many like before." She inhaled again. "I don't detect the need with you anymore."

Dante didn't have to ask her what she meant by need, knowing she was referring to the bleak

loneliness that had once plagued him. She moved over and wrinkled her pert nose in Jeremy's direction. "Now this one I smell the need, but I don't scent sex on him. None, not even a lingering hint."

There were several coughs and snorts as everyone tried to hide their laughter. Jeremy turned a dozen different shades of red until Hannah walked closer to him and pressed her curvy body into him. She ran a finger suggestively down his chest. "I love a vampire in uniform. You will wear it to my bed when I pop that cherry of yours."

Jeremy's jaw dropped as his eyes nearly bugged out of his skull.

While Dante could have watched this all night long, he had Brenden to think of. He gave a sharp whistle to get Hannah's attention. "You can play with Jeremy later." He pulled the picture of the mad jackal scientist out of his pocket and held it out. "After you tell us how we can find him."

"No fun, Dante. Your new boyfriend is making you dull." She frowned as she took the picture. Looking down at it, her brow wrinkled as she frowned. "What do you want with Isaac?"

"My mate was poisoned with empusa blood and we heard that Isaac may be able to help us." Dante decided to lay everything out on the table. Hannah may be half-jackal, but she'd always been

honorable as far as he could tell.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you vampires that was a very bad thing to do?" She snorted.

"Obviously nobody has told the jackals or else you wouldn't have the antidote in the first place," Rafe quipped sarcastically.

Hannah gave him a look that may have been annoyance or amusement, Dante couldn't be for sure.

"You smell, too." She shifted her tawny gaze over to Rafe. "But you reek of female witch." She moved closer to Rafe.

Her gaze way too knowing for Dante's comfort, he gripped the butt of his gun and caught Kane mimicking the gesture.

"Yes," she inhaled deep. "You more than reek of witch, you are one of them. Aren't you, my little grumpy guss?"

"Hannah!" Dante yelled to get her to look back at him. "I didn't come here for that."

"Fine." She sighed heavily and walked back over. "I'll see what I can do to set up a meeting with Isaac. It won't be easy though."

Of course not. "Why? Don't you know where he is?"

"He sees himself as too important to talk to any vampires. Especially Drones like your friends." She gave them a helpless shrug.

Dante could feel the team get their hackles up.

It was no secret that jackals hated Drones almost as much as the VRF did. Why, Dante had no clue. He just knew that they didn't shed a tear when another Drone clan was liquidated. There have even been reports of jackal packs helping out in the slaughter. "Tell him we'll make it worth his while." Dante didn't have much money left in his accounts, but he'd gladly give up every cent if that were what it took.

"He'll insist on it." She held out her hand. "Give me your phone and I will call the pompous ass and see if he is willing to meet with you."

Dante handed it over, silently wondering if he would ever see it again. She blew him a kiss before she walked over to the corner for some privacy while she made her call.

As soon as she was out of earshot Kane asked, "Can we trust her?"

"Probably," Dante hedged. "She always had a soft spot for me."

"Looks like Jeremy is taking that position now," Rafe mused with a small grin. Hannah was still on the phone but she was eyeing up said vampire like he was her next meal.

"Hannah has a thing for wounded puppies." Dante shifted uncomfortably, remembering how many times she'd used that term to describe him.

"That's okay," Jeremy assured, eyeing Hannah back up. "I don't mind taking one for the team."

Cherish snorted in disgust.

"I'd wish she'd hurry her ass up." Dante shifted impatiently. "Brenden doesn't have that much time. What in the hell is she doing? Checking up on her stock options?"

"Looks like she's finishing up now." Kane gave him a gentle bump on the shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll make it in time. Right before we came in, I talked to Toni and she told me he woke up two more times for a little bit. He's asking for you."

An ache built up in Dante's chest. How he wished he could be by Brenden's side instead of this dump. What if Brenden thought that he'd bailed on him? Did he realize that the only reason Dante wasn't there was because he was trying desperately to find a cure?

"Hey, he knows," Kane said, obviously reading mind. "Toni made sure of it."

Dante gave a curt nod of his head as he watched Hannah flip the phone shut, slip it into the front of her tight jeans and come back over.

"You are lucky, Isaac says he will meet with you," she told them. "But he won't do it here."

"Why not?" Micah pointedly looked at a pair of chucabra who were feasting on what looked suspiciously like a human leg. "This place is so classy."

"Even jackals have some standards." She screwed her face up in disgust at the creatures.

"Isaac wants us to meet him at the old Tiger Stadium."

"Back in Detroit?" Dante didn't even bother to hide his surprise. "He better hope the wolves don't catch wind of him stomping around in their territory."

"Isaac likes to live dangerously."

"Either that or he's suicidal."

"Come, let's go." Hannah took Jeremy's arm like he was escorting her to a debutante ball. "Isaac will not like to be kept waiting."

As they walked by the chucabra, one of them reached out a furry hand to slap Cherish on the ass.

Before she had even finished her outraged gasp, Dante grabbed the creature by its furry chest and slammed in against the wood, planked wall. Opening his mouth wide to show off his fully engaged fangs, he hissed in its squashed face. "You must have a fucking death wish," he roared, his voice distorted with rage. Fully in vampire mode, claws grew on the tips of his fingers. He used them to punch a hole in the wall, right by the terrified creature's head. All the anger, fear and anguish Dante had been feeling had finally boiled over and the chucabra had the misfortune to be the one to piss him off when it happened.

"Dante, back off," Kane's voice cut through the red haze of fury.

"Dante doesn't want to back off." He gave a

smile that he knew was cold. "Dante wants to kill."

Urine dribbled down the chucabra's legs to puddle onto the ground.

Distantly he could hear Hannah's husky laughter and Cherish's pleas for him to stop. With a roar of rage, Dante slammed the creature into the wall one last time before he let it go. As soon as it hit the wet floor, it scampered away with a squeak.

Zeke gave it a kick on its ass as it left.

Dante took in several deep breaths as he tried to get a grip. He didn't turn away from the wall until he felt his fangs go back down and the claws retract. Even then he still couldn't look them in the eye, too embarrassed by his lapse in control. "Let's get the hell out of here," he grumbled as he led the team outside.

Once they got to the van, Hannah pulled back with a disgusted grunt. "You drive a Scooby van?" her outrage echoed off the empty street.

"What is it with weres and cars?" Dante asked. First Thad with the Gremlin and now Hannah with the van.

"I just thought vampires would drive something more...well, more." She sighed heavily as she let Jeremy guide her into the back.

Dante said a silent prayer of thanks that nobody made a smartass remark of her being able to be the

Scooby in their gang since she was a shifter. He let Jonas take shotgun and crammed into the back even though it was more crowded than usual since his brothers were back there, too.

How do we know this isn't a set up and we're walking right into a trap? Kane asked telepathically.

We don't. Dante answered honestly. *While I trust Hannah, we really don't know dick about Isaac, but I don't see how we have any other choice.*

I trust Hannah, too. Rafe chimed in. *Her aura is clean, I don't see anything that would tell me she's lying to us.*

Both Kane and Dante gave him looks of disbelief. Since when had Rafe been reading auras? He gave them the bird in response and slapped his mental link shut. Dante turned his attention to giving the team last minute instructions, getting a small measure of comfort when they actually seemed to be listening.

The ride there seemed to take forever. Dante could almost hear a clock ticking down the seconds that Brenden had left. Using Cherish's cell, twice he called Toni to check up on his mate's status and twice the answer was the same, "Getting worse, hurry." When they finally got to the old, partially demolished, baseball stadium Dante almost shouted in relief.

Zeke pulled up as close as possible to the entrance Hannah pointed out and they all piled

out.

"Isaac told me that we wouldn't have to worry about the security guards," Hannah said as she led them through the dark, her sensual sway made more lithe in the shadows. "He promised to take care of them."

"How?" Micah asked as he clutched his rifle tighter to his chest.

"Sometimes it's better not to know all the answers," Dante advised grimly. He noticed that while part of the stadium still had walls and good part of it was exposed with only a chain link fence shielding it from view. Not exactly the ideal spot to meet without drawing human attention. They would have to make sure to be quick about it.

They all followed closely behind Hannah, their guns out and ready. Dante was amazed at how tight and efficient the team appeared. *Brenden would be so proud of them.*

They found Isaac standing on home plate, which just went to show what an egotistical, showoff the jackal was. He was as small as the picture made him out to be, but the half dozen jackals standing around him more than made up for his lack of muscle. None of them looked like they had seen a bar of soap since the eighties.

"I thought you said they had standards," Dante said to Hannah as he tried hard not to gag on the stench of rotten meat that rolled off the jackals.

"I never said they were high standards," Hannah pointed out as she wrinkled her nose in disgust. It seemed her witch side was much stronger than her jackal half.

"You be quiet, halfling," Isaac sneered, showing off his rotted canines. "When we want you to talk, your betters will let you know."

Dante gripped the butt of his rifle tighter, fighting back the urge to kick the jackal's ass for that comment.

Hannah curled her lip and let out a soft growl. The pack just laughed at her in return.

"Enough," Dante snapped. "We didn't come here to chat."

"No, you didn't." Isaac held up a small vile full of amber liquid. "This is what you want."

Brenden's salvation. Dante resisted the urge to run forward and snatch it from the jackal's dirty fingers. Instead, he fought to keep his face impassive. It wouldn't be good to let Isaac know how desperate they really were. "How much do you want for it?" he asked, making sure his tone was even, almost bored sounding.

"We don't want any money." Isaac wiggled the vile, tauntingly. "We want that new weapon your clan had. The sunlight grenade."

Shit, how in the hell did everyone know about the weapon already? Did Corbin take an ad out in the paper? "We don't have any of the weapons with

us," Dante lied. They did in fact have a few back in the van, but he had no doubt if they gave them up they would become the jackals' first test subjects. His heart raked in his chest as he realized this whole situation was going FUBAR.

"Then give us the one who made them." Isaac's wild gaze glided over the group of vampires. "I know he's here somewhere."

"No, he's not." Dante felt a strange tinge of relief that Brenden was sick. At least then he wasn't close to this psycho freak.

"Oh, I get it now." Isaac gave a manic smile that almost made his dark eyes glow. "He's the one this is for." Again he shook the vial. "Fine, I'll take another one from his team."

"Not going to happen." Dante shook his head.

"I'll take her." Isaac pointed a filthy finger at Cherish. "We'll be able to use her in more ways than one."

"Two words." Dante braced himself for attack. "Fuck and you."

Both sides roared and attacked at the same time. Since Isaac was the one with the cure, Dante aimed for him. Just as he was reaching out for the vial, a huge jackal guard tackled him in the chest and they both crashed to the ground. Even though the wind was knocked out of him, Dante continued to fight. He used all the tricks he picked up as a soldier for the VRF and then some dirty

ones he got from prison.

The jackal was stronger, but Dante was more pissed. He was smarter, too, or at least he hoped he was. His rifle had been knocked out of his hands when he'd been tackled so Dante frantically grabbed a knife that was tucked into the waist of his pants. Finally yanking it free, he twisted until he was on top of the jackal. Using all his vampire strength, he plunged it into his opponent's heart. The jackal let out a long howl before he fell silent and grew limp.

All around him, he heard snarls, curses and bursts of gunfire as the vampires fought with the weres. Dante cast a worried glance at the fence and the street beyond it. It was only a matter of time before they attracted the attention from the humans and their police. Then Dante would never be able to get the cure.

Micah was fighting with Isaac. The vampire clipped the jackal's jaw and he staggered back, dropping the vial. Dante's stomach dropped as he saw it fly through the air. *Please don't break.* He breathed a sigh of relief when it landed intact on a pile of dirt.

Not wanting to take any more risks, he scrambled to it. Just as he was reaching for it again, a shot rang out. Dante yelled in pain as a bullet pierced his thigh. He tried to keep running, but his leg gave out from under him. He could

only watch helplessly as the vial remained just out of his grasp.

A hand reached down and scooped it up. He looked up and saw it was Hannah. Dante's heart stopped beating as he waited to see what she would do. She looked over at the jackals, then back at the vampires before she nodded like she'd made a decision. Running over to Dante, she squatted and pressed it into his hand.

"We better get out of here." She smiled at him.

"Thank you so much." He clutched the vial tight. "I'll never be able to pay you back for this."

"You can start by granting me asylum with your clan. My pack will want my hide for this. And yes, that pun was intended."

Rafe and Kane came over and scooped Dante up. He noticed that all the jackals had been taken out, but that still didn't mean more weren't on the way. They needed to vacate immediately. He was relieved to see he had the worst injury on the vampire side.

"Grab Isaac, too," he ordered Zeke.

Zeke cocked a brow, but obeyed, tying up the unconscious jackal. When they got to the van, he seemed to take great pleasure in throwing the mad scientist roughly into the back of the van. On the ride back home, Micah patched Dante's leg up best he could. It looked as if he'd had some training from Dahlia, too, because the young

vampire didn't do too shabby of a job.

Someone must have called ahead because Dahlia was waiting at the door with a cot. Kane and Rafe tried to pick him up to put him on it, but Dante brushed aside their hands and hobbled to the door.

"Dante don't be an ass," Dahlia hissed.

"You can doctor me all you want once Brenden is better. Until then, I don't want you to think of anyone but him." Dante stopped long enough to point a finger back at the van. "Zeke, grab that pathetic scrap of fur and bring it with us. Cherish take Hannah to Eric and explain what happened. Don't leave his office until he promises to give her shelter."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Once they got to the infirmary, Dante handed Dahlia the vial and limped over to Brenden's side. He noticed his wound had left a trail of blood behind, but he didn't care, all that mattered was getting to his mate.

Brenden was barely breathing and his skin so pale it was nearly translucent. When Dante grabbed his mate's fingers, he winced when he found the flesh so cold to the touch. Toni looked at him her eyes full of hope.

"Did you really get it?" she asked, her voice quavering.

"Yes, I just hope I'm in time." He looked over at Isaac cowering in the corner. He was awake, but still gagged and tied. "I'm warning you now, jackal. If this hurts him in any way, I will slowly kill you and enjoy every second of it. You better pray to whatever God serves your pathetic species this cure works or you will wish I had finished you off back at the stadium."

"Why did you bring him?" Dahlia asked as she drew up a syringe full of the antidote.

"Because I wanted him to know that if he's trying to trick us or worse, poison Brenden, I will punish him." Dahlia moved to give Brenden the antidote, but Dante shook his head. "I want you to give some to Isaac first. I want to make sure he hasn't given us something that will only kill Brenden quicker."

Dahlia nodded her agreement and pulled up another syringe. She jabbed it into the jackal's thigh, ignoring his grunt of pain.

When nothing happened after several tense filled minutes, Dante finally nodded his consent for her to give Brenden his dose. After she pushed it into his IV, they all waited with baited breath.

Zeke pulled the gag down from Isaac's mouth. "How long will it take?" he asked.

"With a case this bad, it could take hours before we know for sure whether or not it will work." Isaac whined, "Please, don't kill me. I will do whatever you ask. I know many secrets that you vampires can use."

"God, gag him again, please." Dante couldn't help but be disgusted by the jackal's sniveling.

Zeke seemed more than pleased to follow that order. Once the room was silent again, they all sat, watching Brenden and hoped for the best.

* * * *

The first thought Brenden had when he woke up was where in the hell was he. The second was, did anyone get the number on the bus that had hit him. Every muscle in his body seemed to scream in pain, even some that he hadn't known he had. He tried to shift to a more normal position and groaned in agony.

"Don't move too much, babe." Dante's sweet voice drifted through the fog. "You've been through a lot."

"What the hell happened?" he asked through parched lips.

"Open those beautiful eyes of yours and I'll tell you," Dante urged as he squeezed Brenden's hand. "Come on, do it for me."

Brenden opened his eyes and blinked against the sudden brightness. It was a few seconds before he was able to focus on Dante's face. "Dante, you look like hell." It was true, too, the male looked he'd been run over by that rogue bus. His hair was a mess and he hadn't shaved in days. Brenden lifted his arm to rub the sexy stubble on the male's chin, but quickly found he didn't have the strength.

"Brenden, you're awake!" Toni exclaimed as she leaned over the bed. She only looked slightly better than Dante and tears were falling down her

cheeks.

"Hey, Sis." He smiled at her. "Don't cry, I'm feeling better."

"Thanks to Dante." She sniffled. "You should have seen him. He wouldn't stop fighting for you."

Brenden was surprised to hear the praise and, judging by Dante's face, he wasn't the only one.

"It was nothing." Dante pressed his lips against Brenden's brow. "I would do it all over again."

"Even the part where you got shot?" Toni asked, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

"You got shot?" Brenden struggled to get up. "How? When?"

"Relax." Dante put a restraining hand on his arm. "I'll be fine."

"No you won't," Dahlia butted in as she came to the side of the bed and started to check Brenden's vitals. "Not unless you let me treat you. Stupid stubborn vampire will probably end up with gangrene."

"Fine, you can treat me, but you'll have to do it right here."

Dante gave Brenden another kiss. He couldn't seem to keep his hands off him.

"I'm not leaving my mate's side."

"*Mate?*" Brenden echoed, looking pointedly at Dante's neck, which didn't have a bond bite. "Did I miss something?"

"Only me regretting not asking you to be my mate. As soon as we get better, I want to go through the ritual to bind us together." Dante seemed to be holding his breath.

"Nothing would make me happier," Brenden replied as he felt a swell of happiness fill him. After all this time, Dante would truly be his and his alone. Never in his wildest dreams had he even dared hope for this. "Are you sure you want the stigma of being stuck with a Drone?"

"That doesn't matter to me. You're *my* Drone and you are the bravest most honorable vampire I know."

He leaned down to brush his lips over Brenden's mouth. Brenden closed his eyes and let the now familiar rush go through his body from Dante's touch. The male's dark and dangerous scent invaded Brenden's senses and he felt so at peace at that moment. "I love you," he said, opening his eyes to gaze up at his mate.

"And I love you so damn much." Dante's eyes seemed to water up a bit. "There will never be another for me."

"This is all really sweet," Dahlia cut in, "but I need you to lie down so I can look at your leg."

Dante shot her a cocky smile before he climbed into bed with Brenden.

Toni stifled as giggle.

Brenden used the last bit of his strength to scoot

over to make room. As soon as Dante got settled, he wrapped his strong arms around Brenden and pulled him close.

"I was thinking of your own bed," Dahlia muttered. "I guess this will do though. Right now I'll take what I can get."

Exhausted, Brenden snuggled his face into his mate's chest and started to drift off to sleep. Yes, they still had the problem of Corbin wanting to capture Brenden so they could control the daylight grenades. Yes, Dante was still a fugitive as well. Hell, the entire VRF could come marching in and attack the clan at any moment. All those problems faded at that moment. Because he was in Dante's arms and that was where he belonged.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.