



STEPHANI HECHT

The Drone Vampire
Chronicles Book #4

IN PASSION AND BLOOD

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

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

In Passion and Blood
Copyright © 2009 Stephani Hecht
ISBN: 978-1-55487-361-6
Cover art by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books
Look for us online at:
www.extasybooks.com

IN PASSION AND BLOOD
DRONE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES FOUR

BY

STEPHANI HECHT

DEDICATION

*To my EIC, Jay. Thank you for always being
there for me and catching all my mistakes.*

CHAPTER ONE

Dante just wished the guy would shut up and die already. Not only had the whiney werejackal killed an innocent human, but he had almost blown their cover by drawing the attention of the VRF soldiers who were patrolling nearby.

"Please, it was only one human and it wasn't even me who killed him," the werejackal pleaded, his dirty face contorted in fear.

Dante grimaced as he noticed the small male was filthy all over. Jackals weren't known for their hygiene and it appeared this jerk wasn't about to buck the trend. His natty hair was so greasy it was impossible to tell what color it was.

"One human will bring the rest of them crawling out of the sewers," one of the guards sneered.

Or at least Dante thought he did. Since the VRF uniform called for a black mask and goggles, he couldn't see his face.

"But he was a scrawny one." The jackal yelped, canine like, when the guard jerked on his hair.

"Humans don't think like a pack," the soldier

said. "They don't kill off the weak and small like your kind does. Instead they coddle and protect them."

Even though there was no one that he hated worse than the VRF, Dante found himself nodding in agreement. By killing a kid, the jackal had all but guaranteed the human police would now be involved and that was the last thing any vampire wanted. Be they the Pure Born VRF ones or the made Drones.

His finger caressed the trigger of his gun as he thought about how good it would feel to put a bullet in the jackal's head, then the two soldiers. The jackal because the air was still rich with the smell of the blood from the teenage boy he'd ripped apart. The soldiers because they were guarding a transport truck full of Drone vampire prisoners. He shifted the barrel back and forth. Werejackal or jackass? So many choices, so few bullets.

"You can't shoot him," Brenden whispered as he came up to stand by Dante.

"Why not?" Dante whine-whispered back. Not that they really needed to keep their voices down. The jackal was screaming so loud a marching band could have thundered down the streets of Detroit and nobody would have noticed.

"Look at his wrist." Brenden's blond hair glinted in the poor lighting as he jerked his head

in the direction of the slobbering mess on the street.

Dante cursed under his breath when he saw the remains of silver handcuffs hanging from the jackal's arm. "So?" he challenged even though he knew it was a losing battle. Once his mate got it in his head to play hero he could never change his mind.

"Dante," Brenden said softly, his light blue eyes narrowing.

"But he killed a human," he protested.

"Look at how thin he is." Brenden sadly shook his head as he gazed at the jackal. "He was probably in some prison or something, starving. He just attacked the first food source he came across."

"Yeah, some kid who couldn't defend himself."

"It seems like the jackal is just a kid himself." Brenden pressed his full lips into a grim line as he glared at the VRF soldiers who were still delivering the beat down. "He's scared and couldn't control himself."

"He should have," Dante snarled, more mad at the situation, then he was at his mate. "Weres teach control to even the youngest of their pups."

Luckily he was saved from any more of Brenden's guilt trip when their earpieces crackled before the clan leader Eric's voice came through. "We're ready to roll. What's your position?"

“Besides the fact that Brenden wants to adopt a new pet, we’re set.”

A high-pitched wail filled the air, followed by several sharp yelps. Both Brenden and Dante winced, the sounds harsh on their vampire ears. They lowered their UV goggles and made sure their other protective gear was in place. Another yelp filled the air, showing the jackal was still on the wrong end of the VRF soldiers’ boots. Brenden cursed under his breath as he raised his rifle and trained it on the soldiers. Instead of the usual bullets, it was loaded with a special weapon that Brenden had developed—sunlight grenades. In place of the usual explosion of the human made grenades, these let off a burst of sunlight. Instantly incinerating any vampire who didn’t have specially made clothing, eyewear and masks on.

“Be patient,” Dante warned as he placed a comforting hand on his mate’s arm. “We don’t want to blow it now by alerting the other VRF soldiers still at the convoy that we’re here.”

“How are we going to know when the others have attacked?”

No sooner had Brenden asked than the ground shook with a huge explosion. Bright orange flames illuminated the night before a heavy billowing smoke filled the air. The VRF soldiers let out shrieks of fright as they dove to ground, their bellies flat to the asphalt as they ducked for cover.

"I'm guessing that is how we'll know they attacked," Dante yelled over the roar of flames and beeps of numerous car alarms. The VRF was going to have a bitch of a time explaining this one away to the human authorities. Sucked to be them.

The two soldiers stood up and Brenden wasted no time taking them out. Shooting off the weapon, there was a loud crack followed by a whoosh as it detonated. Bright light temporarily blinded Dante and when he could see again, he found that the two soldiers were now piles of dust while the jackal was unharmed. Dante felt a little thrill of pride go through him as they made their way towards to the were at the evidence of Brenden's expert marksmanship. Not only was he the best weapons maker around, he knew how to handle them, too.

"Remind me never to piss you off," Dante remarked as they stepped over what had moments ago been two full-grown vampires.

The jackal was in a tight fetal position, trembling.

Dante wrinkled his nose in disgust. Even over the mixed smells of gasoline, ash and smoke, he could still detect the rankness rolling off the kid. Brenden didn't seem to mind though, crouching so he could put a gentle hand on the jackal's shoulder. Dante lifted his gun and trained it on the injured youth, not trusting that he wouldn't attack

Brenden.

"Come on, get up," Brenden coaxed. "We need to get you out of here."

The jackal whimpered and shrank away from the vampire's touch. Off in the distance the rat-a-tat of gunfire rang out.

"We really need to get moving before the VRF Cavalry comes and ruins our day," Dante called as he eyed up the bloody mess of a were. Despite himself, he was actually beginning to feel sorry for the jerk. Damn Brenden and his good intentions, they were more contagious than a case of pink eye.

When the were continued with his ball of fear act, Dante cursed under his breath, stepped forward and grabbed him by the back of his shirt. Throwing the teen over his shoulder, he tried hard not to breathe in too deep. It was no use, the rancid stench of spoiled meat, mixed in with the smell of unwashed body, hit Dante's senses like a ton of bricks. "You owe me," he grumbled to Brenden as he walked by.

"Are you going to kill me?" the teen stammered.

"Unfortunately not." Dante shifted his load into a more comfortable position. He frowned as he felt more bones than fat or muscles. Brenden had been dead-on with his guess about the poor kid being starved. *Poor?* Great now his mate had him

sympathizing with the jackal, too.

"I love you," Brenden said, the corner of his mouth hitching up into a grin.

It made his dimples come out and suddenly Dante forgot that he was mad.

"I love you, too?" the jackal ventured in a timid voice. Another explosion ripped through the air and, off in the distance was the wail of sirens.

"We better get out of here," Brenden suggested as his gaze searched the horizon. "I hope the other team wraps things up quick and comes to pick us up or else it'll be a long hike back to the clan headquarters."

"I suppose I can't convince you to leave this kid behind?" Dante grimaced as another wave of toxic fumes hit his nose.

"You know better than to ask that question. Besides, he might have some information we could use." Brenden leaned forward and sniffed himself before he gagged. "I think we'll give him a bath first though. Damn, wherever they kept him must have been filthy."

"Hate to break it to you, but this is pretty normal for even free jackals. Now you know why I like cats better."

"Forget it, I'm allergic." Brenden chuckled as he leaned down to pick up the weapons left by the now ash VRF soldiers.

Dante watched the way his muscles rippled

under the form-fitting Drone Rebel uniform of black cargo pants and long sleeved tee. Even though Brenden had just been turned into a vampire a couple of years ago, he still had the massive build of a predator. As he studied the confiscated weapons, his tongue darted out to caress his left fang. It was a nervous habit Brenden had and for some reason, it never failed to turn Dante on.

He was dragged out of his lustful thoughts by a wet rattling sound coming from the young jackal. Dante both felt and smelled a fresh wave of blood coming from the kid and his heart tripped in concern. Despite all his snide comments, he hated to see anything suffer and judging by the were's appearance, he had been through the wringer. "You better call Doc," he said. "I don't think he's going to make it until we get back."

Brenden nodded, his hand going to his earpiece.

Dante barely heard the conversation with Dahlia, the clan doctor, he was too focused on listening to the jackal's breathing, fearing it would stop before they could get him the help he needed. Finally, a van rounded the corner and Dante ran to greet it.

The back doors swung open, revealing Doc. Instead of her white coat, she had on the same black Drone uniform they did. She had her dark

hair pulled back in its usual bun and her grey eyes were caring as always. Dante breathed a sigh of relief, knowing the jackal was in safe hands and he might actually have a chance of making it now.

The van had been converted into an ambulance and Dante gently laid the jackal on the cot before he sat heavily on the floor on the other side so he was out of her way.

Brenden settled next to him.

Dante took comfort from the way their bodies were pressed together. It wasn't much, but he would take it for now. "How are the others?" he asked as he grabbed Brenden's hand and held tight.

"Fine, we managed to save all the prisoners in the transport." Dahlia didn't look up from the were as she answered. "We did it without any casualties on our side, too, thanks to the enhancements Brenden's team made to our weapons."

He started to congratulate his mate only to find that Brenden was sound asleep, his head resting on Dante's shoulder. Dante frowned as he realized how exhausted he must have been. Between leading his team and working the field, Brenden hardly rested anymore.

Guilt stabbed at him when he noticed a pair of puncture marks on Brenden's neck. Puncture marks made because Dante had fed on him right

before they had left for the mission. Usually they would have disappeared by now since vampires were fast healers, but since Brenden was pushing himself so hard, he was weakening.

As soon as they got back and debriefed, Dante was going to make Brenden rest, even if he had to carry his ass to the bed. The last thing he needed was to go out on missions less than a hundred and get himself hurt or worse.

He didn't realize he was emitting a low, rumbling growl until Dahlia jerked her head up from the patient. "Brenden is fine, he's just tired. I promise you it's not the empusa blood again."

A few months ago, Brenden had accidentally ingested empusa blood and almost died before Dante was able to find the antidote. Even though it appeared that the medicine had worked, he still lived in fear of Brenden getting sick again.

"Are you sure?" he rasped out in a dangerous tone. The darkness that still lurked in his soul threatened to come forward.

"I'm positive," Dahlia replied firmly. She was one of the few vampires who didn't back down when Dante got this way. For that, he counted himself lucky to be her friend. There weren't too many who had stuck with him through thick and thin like she had.

"Brenden needs to start worrying about his own hide instead of parasites like that jackal,"

Dante snapped.

"You can act all hard ass, but you and I both know you would have saved this kid even if Brenden hadn't guilted you into it." Dahlia tapped on the jackal's arm, trying to get a vein to stand to attention so she could start an IV.

Dante grunted, not even trying to deny it because they both knew it was true. He'd always been a sucker for the helpless. It was one of the reasons the VRF had turned on him when he had still worked for them.

"Brenden's going to be okay," Dahlia reassured.

As Dante rested his cheek on Brenden's head, he wanted to believe her, but the sick feeling in his gut refused to go away. It wasn't just the empusa blood he had to worry about. Since Brenden was a Drone and the Pure Born run VRF was now openly hunting them down, Dante lived in constant fear of losing his mate. It didn't help that Brenden had an even bigger target on his back because he had developed the sunlight grenades either.

While the new weapon had helped the Drone Rebels even out the odds in their favor, it had also drawn the attention of the leaders of the VRF who wanted to possess the weapons for their own use.

Dante clutched Brenden's hand tighter. There was no way he could continue to exist if something were to happen to his mate. Dante's

greatest strength was also his biggest weakness. For if Brenden were to die, Dante's soul would perish with him.

CHAPTER TWO

After he had taken a shower to get rid of the stench of smoke, Brenden quickly made his way back to the infirmary to check up on the jackal. Grabbing a cup of coffee on the way, he groaned when he saw his sister, Toni, making a beeline for him. Her blonde hair was pulled back in an angry-looking, tight ponytail and her blue eyes were as cold as ice chips.

"A werejackal?" she spat once she was in ass-chewing distance. "What were you thinking?"

"He was near death. I wasn't about to leave him out there to bleed out in the streets." Brenden didn't back down, knowing from past experience it was always better to face his sister's wrath head-on.

"So you brought him back to the clan? Even though you knew he had already murdered one innocent. Did you ever stop to think about all the children here?"

Brenden looked away, guilt slamming into him

like a two-by-four. *Shit, no that hadn't crossed my mind.* "I'm sorry, sis, I wasn't thinking."

"No, you weren't and what was worse was all you had to do was give Dante the puppy dog eyes and he went along with you. I don't know whose ass I'm going to kick first, yours or his."

"Don't blame him, it was all my idea."

"That's no excuse, Brenden," Toni replied shrewdly. "You've only been a vampire for a few years so it's expected that you may forget the rules sometimes. Dante was born one so he's been in this world all his life. He knows better."

"So what are you saying," he challenged, his own temper firing up, "that poor fledgling Brenden is too stupid to have known better?" Even as he asked that, Brenden gave an internal wince as he remembered how Dante had wanted to eliminate the jackal and he had convinced him otherwise.

"You know I would never think you were stupid," Toni replied, her eyes growing soft. "I just think that sometimes you lead with your heart instead of your head and I would hate to see you get hurt because of it."

"I can take care of myself," he snapped, not ready to hug and make up yet. "I've more than proven myself in battle."

Toni clamped her lips shut, not even debating that one.

Even though Brenden had only been a vampire for a brief time, he had quickly climbed the ranks and even led his own team. Granted they were a team of misfits and outcasts, but they were still under his command. "Have you seen Dante?" he asked as he took a sip of his coffee. He almost closed his eyes in bliss—caffeine was his crack cocaine.

"Yes, he's in the infirmary with Kane." Not only was Kane Dante's half-brother, but he was also Toni's mate.

"Is Kane pissed?" Brenden didn't like that he may have got his mate in trouble. Not that Dante couldn't handle Kane, but it still could get to fists before it was over since none of the Toren brothers were known for holding their tempers in.

"What do you think?" Toni added a heavy dash to sarcasm to her words as she cocked her head the side.

"Shit," Brenden muttered as he pushed his way through the crowded cafeteria. The hallways were even more packed, as the usual number of vampires in the clan was nearly doubled because of the Drones that had been rescued from the convoy. Despite all the chaos, he noticed that all the usual Clan children were nowhere to be seen. Their leader, Eric must have decided to keep them out of sight until they made sure all the newcomers checked out.

Making his way to the infirmary, he found Dante in the corner of the packed room. Kane was in front of him, talking and, judging by the dark expressions on both of the males' faces, it wasn't a pleasant conversation. Dante looked over in Brenden's direction and his expression immediately softened.

Even if he lived a thousand years, Brenden didn't think he could get over how good looking his mate was. With his brown bedroom eyes and the way his raven hair curled just above his collar, Dante was the thing that wet dreams were made of. Add his tight body and dangerous kick-ass aura and you had near perfection as far as Brenden was concerned.

Pausing only a second to admire his male, Brenden quickly navigated the cots and various medical equipment scattering the room until he had reached Dante and Kane. "Don't give him any flak about this," Brenden said to Kane. "It was all my idea."

"You should be in bed," Dante interrupted.

"Are you going to be in there with me?" Brenden countered cheekily.

"No."

"Then bed has no interest to me right now," Brenden replied, ignoring Toni's snort of disgust behind him. Glancing at Dante's soot and blood-covered clothes, he added, "You should go take a

shower."

"Are you going to be in there with me?" Dante queried in a sexy drawl.

"No." Brenden allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

"Then the shower has no interest to me right now."

"You two are really starting to make be gag." Kane's face screwed up in annoyance. While he was the oldest of the Toren brothers, he was only a bit taller than Dante and they were both equally matched in muscles. He shared the same dark hair as Dante, but his eyes were a piercing blue. Dante had once told Brenden that they all inherited their various eye colors from their different mothers.

"You can back down, Kane," Dahlia announced as she came over. "They didn't bring a werejackal into the clan dwelling."

"They didn't?" Toni cocked her head to the side.

"We didn't?" Dante echoed, confusion marring his features.

"No, it was a werepanther. I can see where you could make the mistake, given how filthy he was, but after I thoroughly examined him, there's no doubt in my mind."

"That doesn't make sense." Kane scratched his jaw. "Werepanthers don't live in this area."

"Maybe the prison he escaped from is far from

his home," Brenden suggested. His gut clenched as the implications of the dirty condition they had found the teen in hit home. Werepanthers, like all felines, were fastidious about their hygiene. Whatever hellhole he had been in must have been bad.

"I thought I heard somewhere that werepanthers never attack humans." Toni shook her head in confusion.

"They don't, not even if they are starving." Dahlia peeled off a pair of examination gloves and tossed them into a nearby garbage can. "This kid is not different either. He wasn't the one that killed the human. I had the body brought in and Cherish studied the wounds. She says the bite marks are wolf made."

"But the wolves are the ones who control Detroit," Brenden interjected, "why would they call attention to themselves by killing in their own sandbox?"

"Unless it wasn't a normal werewolf," Dante said, his face bleak. "What if it's Ozzie?" The previous Halloween, the youngest Toren bother, Rafe, had transformed their werewolf friend into a vampire. Even though it had been to save his life, the wolves and Ozzie had never forgiven him for it. Ever since, Ozzie had been shunned by his pack and the vampires had not seen or heard from him.

"Shit," Kane cursed as he ran a hand through

his hair. "Do you think Ozzie could actually kill an innocent? When he lived with us, the only danger he posed was charging porn to our credit cards."

"That was before Rafe converted him though," Toni pointed out gently as she wrapped her arms around Kane's waist and laid her head against his chest.

"I'm afraid Toni has a point," Dahlia added. "There has never been a mixed were and vampire that has survived this long. We don't know what Ozzie could be capable of."

"Should we tell Rafe?" Dante asked.

"I don't see how we cannot tell him," Kane grumbled. "Ozzie wasn't exactly happy with what he did and he might be here to take it out, via way of Rafe's head. He's going to have to be on guard at all times for now. At least until we can prove whether or not it was indeed Ozzie who did this."

Since he'd become vampire, Brenden had seen some pretty scary shit, but he still got chills up his spine as he remembered the rage that had rolled off Ozzie before he had escaped. He had attacked and nearly killed Rafe in the process, too.

"We also have to let Eric know." Dante rubbed his face, suddenly looking weary. "He's going to want to up the number of teams on patrol and let the werewolf packs here in Detroit know, too."

"If they find Ozzie, won't they kill him?"

Brenden sighed. The wolves barely tolerated vampires to begin with. They had made it clear they considered Ozzie soiled and beyond redemption. To them it would be a matter of pride. An honor killing.

"Yes, and there won't be anyone there to plead his case like you did the werepanther," Dante said viciously.

At first Brenden thought he was mad at him before he slowly realized Dante's anger was directed inward. "Hey, don't be too hard on yourself. There was no way you could have known what that kid really was. He was so covered in dirt and blood neither one of us could pick up his scent," Brenden soothed in a quiet voice, suddenly wishing they were alone and in their room. Dante hated for anyone to see him hurting.

"That's easy to say now." Dante swallowed hard as a look of self-loathing went through his eyes. "We both know I was a breath away from pulling the trigger on that kid."

"But you didn't. Instead, you picked him up and carried him to Doc. He would be dead if it wasn't for you."

"Sure, if you say so," Dante replied, his tone far from convinced.

"I know so, babe." He reached up and cupped Dante's cheek. With a harsh intake of breath,

Dante took a step away and shrugged off his touch.

“Let’s go see what the panther has to say.” Not meeting anyone’s gaze, Dante walked away.

Hurt by his actions, Brenden nonetheless followed him to a cot that was curtained and separated from the rest of the patients. As Dante pushed the curtain back, the young panther jerked upright and pressed his back against the wall. The fact that the kid could be conscious, let alone move that fast, was amazing. Like vampires, werepanthers were immortal, but they weren’t invincible.

Then Brenden’s sensitive ears picked up how hard and fast the teen’s heart was beating and he knew that it was pure adrenaline and fear motivating him. Angry that someone so young should have to go through so much, Brenden clenched his teeth to keep from snarling

Obviously, they needed a tender hand in order to get the panther to calm down. Since Toni was the only female in the group, he looked over at her. Chicks were supposed to be good at this whole touchy-feely thing, right? He was stunned to find that everyone else was tossing around expectant looks, but they weren’t aimed at Toni. No, they were all zeroed in on him. “You have got to be kidding me?” He threw his hands up in exasperation.

"You're the best when it comes to this kind of stuff," Dante responded in a low voice, like he was afraid of the panther hearing them. Big chance of that happening, given the kid was whining and whimpering.

"Why not Toni?" He gestured hopefully to her.

"Your sister was a highly trained assassin before she lived here. That doesn't exactly make her the huggy kind." Dante shot her an apologetic look, but Toni hadn't seemed to take offense to his statement.

"Oh, so I guess that means you think I'm Mr. Cuddles?"

"No, it means that you're more understanding and caring than the rest of us." Toni's lips curled in a bitter smile. "Believe me, that's an asset, not a liability."

Giving a sigh, Brenden slowly approached the last couple of steps that took him to the edge of the cot.

The panther responded by wrapping his arms over his head in the typical, tuck-and-protect pose.

The handcuffs were still hanging off his wrist and Brenden could see the raw chaffed skin under the silver ring. "You're safe here. Nobody is going to hurt you," he said in a low, gentle tone, like an animal trainer would use on a caged beast. The irony of that wasn't lost on him. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?" Brenden continued. When the kid gave

the barest of nod, Brenden gave a questioning glance to Toni.

"I'll go ask Doc what he can have and bring him back something," she murmured, turning to leave.

"What's your name?" Brenden asked, carefully sitting on the edge of the cot. He thought that would be less intimidating than to continuing to stand over the panther. Maybe if he got on the same level as the kid, the situation would be less tense.

"Chris," the panther rasped in a whisper so low Brenden had to strain to hear.

"My name is Brenden and this is Dante."

"I didn't hurt that human, I swear." Chris lowered his arms, but still kept his knees tucked to his thin chest.

"We know you didn't."

"No, you don't. I heard you back there. He wanted to kill me." Chris shot a terrified glance over at Dante.

The vampire winced and looked seven different shades of guilty.

"He was just trying to protect our clan. Now that he knows the truth, he won't hurt you either. He's one of the good guys, I promise."

The expression on Chris's face said he doubted that. He did lower his knees, although he scooted closer to Brenden, as if seeking protection.

"How old are you?" There was no way to tell just by looking. The panther was so thin and dirty, it was impossible to judge his age.

"I'm thirty in human years."

Which meant he was about eighteen physically and in maturity since born immortals aged much slower than humans. Looking at the handcuffs and the bruises all over the panther, Brenden wasn't sure if he wanted to curse or weep. How could anyone, even the soulless bastards at the VRF, treat a kid this way?

"What hurts you the most?" Brenden asked as Toni came up with a tray of food. Kane and Rafe were with her, but they stayed back out of the way. Brenden knew they did it so they didn't crowd and scare Chris.

"My head." Chris picked up a glass of water and took a drink, his hand shaking as he raised it. "They did things to my mind...bad things."

"Dark magic," Rafe said. Since his mother was a witch, Rafe could detect such things.

"Can you tell exactly what they did to him?" Brenden asked Rafe.

"No, but my brother, Ethan, may be able to." Rafe didn't look happy with that piece of news. He had just learned of his full warlock brother and even though Ethan was now living at the Drone clan, the two of them were far from pals.

"Why not Morgan or Dominic?" Brenden

asked. Since they were Rafe's mates and a witch and a warlock, they seemed like the more obvious choice.

"Dominic says that Ethan is better at the mind stuff. I hate to admit it, but I really do think we're going to need him. I can tell something big and nasty was used on Chris. I just can't tell exactly what it was or how to get around it."

"You don't have to go groveling to that jerk," Dante declared, his eyes growing dark with anger. "We can figure out another way."

"That will take too much time and I'm not about to let this kid be in pain for one second longer than he has to be." Rafe brushed his dark hair out of his face.

"What if Ethan doesn't want to help?" Brenden asked.

"Yeah, that asshole isn't exactly user friendly," Dante agreed.

"Then I'll just have to make him more cooperative," Rafe snarled, his bright green eyes flashing with anger.

CHAPTER THREE

Ethan sat on the floor next to his bed and tried hard not to let the familiar feeling of claustrophobia sink its claws into him. Not an easy task, given the fact his new bedroom was the size of a closet. Even though he could hear the muffled voices and other sounds that let him know there were others all around him, he had never felt so alone.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. He had felt this alone before, it had just been a while ago. As the years had passed, Ethan had fooled himself into thinking he had manned up and put all that behind him. Now he was finding out he was just as much of a wimp as ever.

There was a sharp knock on the door and his heart jerked in his chest. A scream threatened to rip from his throat before he managed to catch it at the last second. Fear made his skin tingle as a cold sweat broke out over his body.

He hadn't realized that he was just sitting there

like a slug, staring at the door, until there was another knock. This one more harsh—impatient. Slowly getting to his feet, Ethan walked over and flattened his hand against the cool wood.

“Who is it?” he demanded, pleased that his tone didn’t betray his emotions. There was no way in hell he was going to admit to having a panic attack while he was in the middle of a clan full of vampires.

“The Land Shark. Who in the hell do you think it is?” the knocker drawled in an annoyed voice.

“What do you want, Rafe?” Ethan asked, recognizing his brother’s voice.

“How about we start with you actually doing something polite like opening the door?”

Ethan winced, realizing he had once again come off as a prick. Then he remembered that he was supposed to be acting like a jerk. “How about we start with you fucking off and leaving me alone?”

“You haven’t come out of there since you came to the clan. Are you afraid of us vampires?” Rafe taunted.

Ethan jerked the door open so he could snarl in the idiot’s face. “The day I fear anything is the day they can strip my magic from me.” He glared at Rafe, even though the vampire had a murderous glint in his eyes.

Despite the fact they were half-brothers, they

couldn't have been more different. Where Ethan had blond hair that was styled neat, Rafe's was black and looked like it was cut by a lawnmower. Rafe fought with his fangs, claws and muscles, Ethan was more comfortable using his magic and wit. Rafe had others who actually gave a damn about him, Ethan had nobody. But that was fine by him. He had learned not to rely on others long ago. It had been a hard, painful lesson, too.

The only thing they shared was piercing green eyes. A trait they had inherited from their witch mother, Olivia. While Rafe had a vampire father, Ethan had a warlock for a sperm donor. The guy had stuck around long enough to realize what a manipulative bitch Olivia was and then he had hightailed it out of the coven and never looked back.

"I need you to come with me." Rafe didn't seem happy to be making that request.

Not that Ethan expected anything less. Ever since they had met, Rafe hadn't exactly been all about bonding. Of course, it could be that they hadn't got off to a great start since Ethan had attacked him, but didn't everyone make mistakes? Vampires were such sticklers for first impressions. "Why should I go anywhere with you?" Ethan asked, making sure to look as bored as possible. The last thing he wanted was for Rafe to know that he was excited because big bro had actually

paid a visit.

"It's not for me. A werepanther came in and there something around him – dark, magical."

"Why don't you ask Dominic? He knows dark magic better than anyone."

"Someone messed with the kid's head and Dominic said you're the best when it came to that kind of stuff." Rafe shrugged.

Yes, he was the best in that kind of magic. Truth was nobody, not even Dominic, knew just how powerful Ethan was and he intended to keep it that way. It still didn't mean he couldn't go take a look at the panther and see what he could do to help. "Okay," he sighed, running a hand through his hair, "take me to him."

Rafe hesitated, his gaze going up and down. "You sure you don't want to change first?"

Ethan was wearing his favorite pair of gray sweats and faded blue sweatshirt. "Why? I'm comfortable this way." Of course, Rafe was in his vampire uniform. Ethan often wondered how his Pure Born brother ended up with a bunch of Drones, but that wasn't something Rafe had seen fit to share. Not that it mattered, in the end it had worked out for the benefit of Ethan since his coven was now allied with the Drones against the VRF.

"Whatever. Just do me a favor and at least toss some shoes on." Rafe shook his head in disgust.

Ethan plugged his feet into a battered pair of

Chucks and followed his brother down the hall and to the infirmary. Along the way there, several vampires eyeballed him and Ethan met their glares. To show fear was to be weak and that was the last thing someone wanted to look like when they were swimming in a pool of predators.

“What’s a werepanther doing here? Their natural habitat is hundreds of miles from here. They can’t stand the cold climate of Michigan and they sure as hell can’t stand to be in a city environment like Detroit.” Ethan noticed that one female vamp was looking at him with something other than disgust. She gave him a seductive smile as she ran her tongue suggestively over her full, red lips.

“We have no clue what he’s doing here. That’s one of the things we were hoping you could help us figure out,” Rafe said, then led him into the infirmary and to a cot that was surrounded by vampires.

Ethan spotted one scared-looking kid huddled to Brenden’s side. He gazed up at Ethan, his young face looking far too old as he let out a feline sounding snarl. “Friendly little puddy tat, isn’t he?” Ethan drawled. He stopped a couple of feet away. Even at that distance, the dark magic pouring off the panther was so strong it made his stomach roll.

“He’s scared,” Brenden defended. “Chris

doesn't recall anything from his captivity so I don't know how much help you can be."

Ethan already knew he could do wonders for catboy, but he wasn't willing to admit that yet. Instead, he leveled a glance at the kid and sent off soothing vibes. "Are you sure you want to remember?"

"Do you think that whatever happened to me happened to my family, too?" Chris stammered, his green eyes bright with tears.

"Yes." Ethan slowly nodded.

"How can you be so sure?" Rafe demanded.

Ethan bitterly noticed that he had gone to stand by his vampire brothers. "Dark warlocks and witches never just pick off one or two, but go for whole clans, packs or covens. The buggers never believe in doing anything half-ass, including mayhem and murder. If you don't believe me, ask Morgan or Dominic. They'll tell you the same thing."

Chris sat up and took in a shaky breath. "Okay, I guess I better remember so I can help them out. How do we start?"

"By getting those handcuffs off you." Muttering an incantation under his breath, the cuffs clicked open and fell off the panther's wrist.

"Thanks," Chris breathed in relief as he rubbed the raw skin on his arm.

"It's no big deal. Any warlock who had even

the most basic of training could do it.” He cast a sideways glance at Rafe so his insulting words weren’t lost.

Jackass!

Even though Dante had sent the insult out telepathically, he may have well of said it out loud. Since Ethan was one of a handful of magics who had telepathic gifts, he could pick up on any mental conversations. He almost reacted, but held himself back, not willing to share the fact he could hear their internal conversation.

Calm down, as much as his attitude grates on me, too, we need the fucker’s help, Kane responded, his bored expression never giving away the fact he was getting mentally chatty with his brothers.

God, I can’t believe that I’m related to this cocky, pretty boy, Rafe added.

Not fair! Ethan balled his hands into fists so he didn’t give into temptation and zap all three of them. Just because he wasn’t a dark emo vampire like them, didn’t mean he was some pussy. Just give him five minutes one-on-one with any of them on the sparing mat and he would prove that to them.

Putting up a mental brick wall so he didn’t hear anything else that might piss him off, he sat down on the other side of Chris. He made sure to keep sending out the soothing vibes and it was obviously working because the kid was letting out

a low purring sound as his eyes grew half-lidded. Perfect since Ethan needed him as relaxed as possible before he started to probe his mind. If he could actually get the panther to sleep, it would be even better. "I'm going to reach out and touch your temples right now," Ethan informed in a low, hypnotic voice.

"Will it hurt me?" Chris's voice was heavy and slurred.

"Not at all," Ethan assured as he raised his fingers and lightly pressed them against the sides of the panther's head. A harsh surge of dark magic slammed into Ethan and he almost lost control of the situation. He sucked in a breath as he fought to keep the soothing, feel good vibes going. Since the purring didn't break for even a second, he knew he succeeded. "Open up your mind for me," Ethan ordered, his voice a near hum.

"Okay," Chris responded dreamily.

All of the sudden memories slammed into Ethan's consciousness. They played like a movie in fast forward, every once in a while, an image or thought freezing for a second before everything rushed forward again. Ethan mentally reached out, trying to snag them as they went by, hoping to glean information.

"The VRF leaned that the panthers were giving refuge to another rebel Drone clan," Ethan spoke rapidly, trying to keep up with the rush. "They

attacked right before dawn. The panthers tried to fight, but the vampires had dark magics with them and the pack was outnumbered. They killed off the men and left only the women and children."

"If they killed off the men then how did Chris survive? He's young, but still would be considered an adult to anyone attacking." Dante asked, his voice sounded like it was coming from a mile away.

"Because this all happened a couple of years ago, at the beginning of the rebellion. He looked younger then. His time in captivity aged him. They took all the survivors to an internment camp. It was mostly Drones imprisoned there, but they also kept sympathizers at this location."

"Does that mean there were other camps?" This time it was Rafe asking the question.

"Not for sure, but there were rumors. Whispers of other camps that were worse—much worse. Whole convoys of Drones would be transferred and none of them were ever heard from again. Men, women, children, none were spared."

"How did Chris escape?" It was Rafe's voice again.

"They were cleaning out the camp, moving everything north. They left the back doors to the truck open, just barely, but enough for him to squeeze out." Ethan caught a sickening visual of a

cramped and filthy trailer that had been intended to hold cargo and was now overflowing with prisoners.

“Something else happened before we found him though. Why did he forget everything and how did the dark magic get in him?” Dante asked.

“He was caught by a warlock. The warlock put his hands on Chris’s head and squeezed. It hurt so bad, but then it got worse. The warlock said something and then a white pain burned through his head. Chris bit the guy and was able to get away.” Ethan’s temples pounded in reaction to the memory. The dark magic responded as it pulsed and nudged him, icy cold tentacles trying to grab onto Ethan’s mind. He didn’t pull back. To do so would be to let Rafe down and despite all the bad blood between them, he didn’t want to fail his brother.

Ethan knew he was treading on dangerous ground though. He may be one of the most powerful white warlocks when it came to the mind, but whoever had zapped Chris was stronger. Ethan could feel the evil magic leaking from the panther and sliding up his arms. It was like an evil foul oil as it wound its way up his body and tried to absorb his white magic.

His heart stuttered, then froze for one second as the dark magic seeped into his pores. Black fear filled his senses as he realized he had pushed too

far. Desperately, he tried to pull his hands away, but they remained frozen in place. Screams surrounded him. His own mixed in with others, but he couldn't be sure because everything was muffled as a vortex of wind surrounded him.

Fuck he was dying. Dying in the middle of a group of vampires who hated his guts and would probably celebrate his passing. Olivia was just going to have a field day with this one.

A trickle of warm blood slid down his chin and he realized he'd bitten his tongue. It was only then that he noticed his body was jerking and convulsing. Every muscle and nerve cried in protest as the seizing grew worse.

Just as he was taking what he was sure would be his last breath, something hard slammed into his side and sent him flying across the room. The grip of black magic was crudely torn as his hands left Chris. Ethan let out a shuddering sigh of relief as a soothing wave of unconsciousness came over him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Right after the huge cluster fuck of a mindmeld, word came down that another prison convoy was passing through. So it was left up to Dante to play nursemaid to the warlock while everyone else got to go out to intercept it. While he would have loved nothing more than to join them, Eric insisted that they do missions on cycles so they took some nights off. He said it was so nobody got burned out, Dante thought it was just to bore them. The clan leader could be such a buzzkill at times.

Ever since Ethan had gone into convulsions and Rafe had tackled him to get him away from Chris, he hadn't woke up. The damn words the warlock had spoke while he had been still in his trance continued to ring in Dante's ears. If only half of them were true, then the rebel Drones and their allies were well and truly fucked.

Since he didn't have anything better to do, Dante studied Ethan, hoping that the reason the

jerk came to live with the Drones would suddenly be revealed. The warlock had claimed he'd come to help set up talks to strengthen the alliance between the Drones and the magics. Yet as far as Dante could tell, he hadn't done much in that area. Until today, he hadn't seen the guy step outside his room.

So why had he come? If Dante didn't know better, he would have sworn it was because Ethan wanted to know Rafe better, but that was ridiculous. Those two hated each other more than Paris hated Lindsay. Dante leaned forward and put his lips just inches from the warlock's ear. "I don't know what your game is, but if you even think about hurting Rafe, you'll be begging for death by the time I'm done with you."

Ethan shifted, but didn't wake up, his lips forming silent words.

Dante's vampire ears picked up the acceleration of the warlock's heart. It was as if Ethan sensed the danger and his body was reacting, despite the fact he was still down for the count. Movement behind him made Dante turn. Half-expecting it to be Rafe, he was somewhat surprised to see it was Zeke.

Even though he was part of Brenden's team, the vampire was more built than the other misfits. Even standing at ease, he was still a dangerous mass of muscles that looked coiled and ready to

attack at a moment's notice. Adding to his menacing manner was his close-cropped black hair and dark eyes that appeared to miss nothing. Even though he never talked about his past, the way he carried himself screamed of former military training. Even without his fangs and claws, Dante knew the vampire would be a force to be reckoned with. "How did the mission go?" Dante asked, although he already knew the answer from the sour look on the male's face.

"It was a wild goose chase." Zeke scowled as he crossed his arms over his massive chest.

"I'm sure it was a lot better than watching Harry Potter here." Dante jerked his head in Ethan's direction.

"I'm sure it was." Zeke frowned, his eyes narrowing. "Has he been sleeping like that the whole time?"

Confused, Dante turned and saw that Ethan had move. He was now tucked into a small ball, his arms protectively over his head, in a position not unlike Chris earlier. Dante recognized it well from his days in the prison. It was the way someone slept when they were used to being kicked awake.

"What in the hell?" Zeke breathed. "I thought you guys said Ethan was a spoiled son of the coven leader. If that's the case, why is he protecting himself even while sleeping?"

"I don't know. Ethan isn't exactly one to share his bio. Maybe when he touched Chris's mind he took on some of his anxiety and fear?"

"Maybe." Zeke didn't sound convinced.

Quite frankly, Dante wasn't either. No, there was much more to Ethan than met the eye. He knew he needed to get to the bottom of his secrets, too, before they somehow ended up hurting Rafe. Dante decided that first thing tomorrow, he would be talking with Morgan. Since she grew up in the same coven as Ethan, she should be able to shed some light on his path. "I need you to do me a favor," Dante glanced back over at Zeke.

"You want me to tail the warlock. Keep an eye on him and find out what he's up to?" Zeke raised one dark brow.

"Exactly, I don't trust the bastard for one second. I know he has some agenda, I just don't know what it is. Until I do, I don't want him out of your sight."

"No problem. I will become the warlock's new best friend." Zeke gave a wicked smile, perhaps anticipating how much fun it was going to be to annoy Ethan.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Rafe's my friend. Both of you are. That's something I don't have a lot of," Zeke replied gruffly.

"Yeah, well the feeling is mutual. If you don't

mind, I'm going to go catch some sleep." Dante got up and stretched. On his way out, he gave Zeke a light punch on the arm to convey his thanks. The halls were almost empty as the clan members were retiring for the day. Opening the door to his quarters, he smiled when he heard the shower running. Brenden was there.

All the anxiety and piss-poor feeling from the shit-of-a-night went out of window now that Dante knew he was finally alone with his mate and they were both safe for another day. Before Brenden, Dante's sleep had been plagued with darkness, memories of the ten years he and his brothers had spent in the paranormal prison for a crime they didn't commit. Now that he got to hold Brenden in his arms though, the darkness had given way to a light so pure it sometimes made him ache.

Stripping off his clothes, Dante spread out on top of the covers. Pillowing his hands under his head, he watched the door, waiting for Brenden to come out. His cock throbbed in anticipation, hard and hungry. He wanted to fist it to relieve some of the pressure, but he held back, not willing to start the fun until his mate joined him.

After what seemed like an eternity, the door opened. A billow of steam preceded Brenden. His blond hair was wet and slicked back and he only had a towel on. It was wrapped around his waist,

the white material a stark contrast to his tan skin. Several beads of water were running down his torso, gliding down the expanse of his hard muscles. Dante licked his lips in anticipation of capturing that liquid with his mouth, drinking it in right before he slowly trailed his tongue down lower.

"Well, hello," Brenden drawled out slowly with a sexy smile. He leaned against the doorframe and didn't come closer.

Damn his fine hide. "I missed you," Dante replied, the words came out slurred because his fangs were fully lowered.

"I can see that." Brenden's gaze honed in on Dante's erection. Still staring, his tongue darted out to lick his lower lip.

Dante moaned. He didn't have to be a fucking mind reader to know what his mate was thinking about doing. "Are you coming to bed or not?" Dante's voice was thick with need

"I don't know. I'm really enjoying the view from here."

"Damn it, Brenden. Stop teasing me," Dante growled, sitting up.

Brenden's blue eyes flared with passion as he slowly walked over to the bed and climbed on. Straddling Dante's thighs, he leaned down and their lips met in a hard, demanding kiss. Deliberately, he scrapped his tongue against

Dante's fangs, drawing blood.

As soon as the liquid touched his mouth, Dante groaned and thrust his hips up. The sweet taste of his mate made him nearly blind with passion. Never would he get sick of his blood. "Lose the towel," he demanded.

Brenden obeyed, ripping off the towel and tossing it aside.

Dante immediately reached between them and caressed Brenden's cock. "Let me suck you," Dante pleaded, his mouth watering with anticipation.

Brenden shook his head, his lips red from his blood.

Dante tried to sit up further, but Brenden put his hand in the center of his chest and stayed him.

"My turn." Brenden's normally soft voice was a near snarl. Grabbing Dante's cock, he gave him a not-so-gentle squeeze. "Mine."

Dante yelled as the pleasure mixed with pain almost made him come. It was only because of years of discipline that he was able to hold back. It was hard though, so hard. Especially as he watched Brenden lick his own blood off his bottom lip.

Then those lips were on Dante. His mouth, then his jaw, finally his chest. Ever the tease, Brenden paused long enough at Dante's nipples to bite and play, driving him crazy. Just as he was about to

scream in frustration, Brenden started to move lower.

"I love your cock," Brenden crooned as he stroked it.

"Show me how much you love it." Dante fisted his hands into the covers so he didn't go all primal and grab his mate by the hair and force his head down. Dante cursed loud and hard as Brenden's tongue darted out to swirl over the tip of his cock. "That's not that much," he taunted in a breathless voice. "I think you're going to have to do some more convincing."

This time Brenden licked his way slowly up the length of Dante's shaft, before he circled the top, collecting the droplet of moisture that had formed there. "How was that?" he asked, his cheeks flushed with passion.

"Better." Dante moaned as Brenden wrapped his lips around his cock and took him all in.

Brenden was as sensitive inside the bed as he was out and he seemed in tune with Dante's every want and need. He didn't have to speak instructions, instead letting his gasps and groans do all the talking for him. Just as he was about to come, Brenden pulled back, Dante's cock making a loud popping noise as it slid past his lips.

"Fuck me," he pleaded.

"That's something you never have to ask twice," Dante replied.

In a matter of seconds, Dante maneuvered it so Brenden was on his hands and knees, his ass tilted up just slightly. "Nice." He ran his hand down the smooth globe of his mate's ass, before giving it a firm slap. Brenden groaned, his hand moving to his cock as he started to stroke himself. Raising his palm, Dante brought it back down. The sound of flesh hitting flesh ringing in the room.

"Dante, please," Brenden cried.

Dante leaned down to lick at the red-hot flesh that he'd just spanked. He ran his tongue for a few passes before he moved to Brenden's ass. Rimming his hole, he got him ready so he could finally fuck him the way he had been begging for. By the time he pulled back, Brenden was trembling, his hand pumping up and down on his cock as he pleaded for release.

Grabbing his erection, Dante pushed it through the tight opening of Brenden's ass. He meant to take things nice and slow, but Brenden looked over his shoulder and snarled at him. It was a challenge and the predator in Dante had no choice but to answer. Grabbing his mate by the hips, Dante started to fuck him fast and hard. Each thrust, each stroke one of ownership and dominance.

Halfway through, he reached around and grabbed Brenden's cock, brushing his hand away. "You will only find your release from my touch,"

he growled.

Brenden hissed in pleasure, his cock releasing a short jet of semen. "Oh, no you don't. You will not hold back on me. Go ahead, come," Dante urged as he timed the strokes of his hand with the thrusts of his cock.

Brenden threw back his head and shouted his release as he shot off into Dante's hand. After a few more thrusts, Dante joined him. His orgasm so intense he forgot to breathe for a second.

His fangs were still out, the thirst strong. Arching his body over Brenden, Dante sank his fangs into his mate's jugular and drank deep. As soon as the rich, decadent blood hit his tongue, Dante came again. His body jerking, his yell muffled since his lips were still pressed against Brenden's throat.

Pulling his fangs out, he ran his tongue over the twin puncture marks, sealing them. There was another bite there, a scar left behind. It was the mating mark that Dante had left on him months ago and it let all other vampires know that Brenden belonged to him. Dante wore a matching scar on his neck, only that one had been left by Brenden's fangs.

Going fully to his knees so he didn't crush Brenden, Dante brought his hand up. It was wet with his mate's seed and Dante brought it to his mouth and licked it clean. Closing his eyes, he

savored the taste of his guy. The salty taste of his semen mixing with the spicy flavor of his blood.

Flopping to his back, he wrapped his arms around Brenden's waist and hauled him close. Brenden's back was to his chest, the hard curves of his body fitting perfectly against Dante. "I love you," Dante said, still not believing that this wonderful vampire was all his.

"I love you, too," Brenden replied, a content sigh passing through his lips.

"You didn't feed from me. You really should."

"I didn't need to because I grabbed something before the mission." Brenden's voice was heavy with weariness.

Grabbed something before the mission? As in fed from someone else. Unwanted jealousy surged through Dante, making his breath hitch painfully in his chest. A low growl rumbled low in his throat as he thought of just who Brenden might have gotten close and personal with. "Who took care of you?" he demanded in a strained voice.

"Damn it, Dante," Brenden snapped, his voice clear as he turned to face him. His normally soft eyes were sharp with anger and his jaw was clenched into a hard line. "It was bagged stuff. When are you going to get it through your head that I don't want to even touch anyone but you?"

"I'm sorry," Dante rushed out as he saw the genuine hurt flash over Brenden's face.

"I thought you trusted me." Brenden shook his head sadly.

"I do." Dante tried to tighten his grip on Brenden's waist, but his mate pulled away and moved to the edge of the bed.

"No you don't or you would have never asked that question." Giving him his back, Brenden dismissed him.

"You know how hard it is for me sometimes," Dante rasped, running his hand angrily through his hair. "Before you all I could count on was my brothers because everyone else had screwed me over."

"I'm not everyone else. Or at least I let myself believe that you thought I wasn't. I fooled myself into believing I was something more to you."

"You are, you know that, babe." Dante reached out to caress Brenden's shoulder, but pulled back at the last minute, knowing his touch wouldn't be welcomed right now.

"No I'm not," Brenden replied, his tone dull. "And if you don't trust me, then how can you truly love me?"

CHAPTER FIVE

After the last of the dry heaves rocked through his body, Ethan let his head rest against the cool tile on the bathroom wall as he caught his breath. *Nothing like praying to the porcelain goddess right after fainting in front of a room full of vampires. Might as well change my name to Nancy and get it over with.*

Bracing his feet firmly on the ground, he rose on unsteady legs. The bright room spun around a few times before settling back into place. Another wave of nausea hit him hard, making his mouth water and his already aching stomach clench painfully. He gripped the edge of the sink, ground his teeth together and fought it off.

Once it had receded, he looked up at his reflection and winced. There were dark purple circles under his bloodshot eyes and his skin was a pale, sickly yellow. It looked like he had gone a couple of rounds with a flu bug and had come out the loser. Which was a stupid analogy since he

was immortal and no human disease could ever affect him. But it was the best way he could describe it.

The air was ripe with antiseptic, medicine, blood and suffering. He needed to get the hell out of here and back to the comfort of his room. There he could breathe in the scent of his herbs and oils. Not only would they heal his pounding head, but they would help sooth him as his magic built back up. Every time he pushed himself this hard, he always needed a couple of days to recoup.

Pulling open the door, he braced himself for the onslaught of noise and smells from the infirmary. Even though it was during the day and the rest of the clan was quiet, things never slowed down in the medical wing. Even over the chaos of bodies rushing around, Ethan immediately picked up on the dark-haired male.

Arms crossed over his chest, he was lazily leaning against the wall, eyeballing Ethan. He was dressed in the dark Drone uniform, right down to the black combat boots. Somehow it seemed to fit like a glove on this guy. As if he was born to wear soldier's clothes. His dark gaze narrowed on Ethan as one corner of his mouth kicked into a lazy smile. It showed off one long, wicked-looking fang.

Ethan glared back, knowing to look away would make him appear weak. Slowly, he

dropped his hands to his sides and spread his fingers out, like he was warming up to shoot of a magical blast. Not that there was much hope of that. In his current condition, he would be lucky to shoot of a spark let alone anything powerful enough to take out someone as strong as this guy.

The vampire looked vaguely familiar and Ethan scrambled his brain until he came up with a name—Zeke. He served on the same team as Dante. Ethan snarled as he realized Dante must have siced a guard dog on him. Great, just what he needed, over two hundred pounds of angry vampire riding his ass.

“I’m only going to tell you this once, back off,” Ethan growled as he walked by Zeke. He left the infirmary and wasn’t surprised at all when he sensed the vampire tailing him.

Hell, Zeke wasn’t even trying to hide it. He loudly cleared his throat as his boots stomped on the tile.

“You’re seriously beginning to piss me off, fang boy,” Ethan snapped as another wave of dizziness hit him. Not wanting Zeke to catch on, he resisted the urge to grab onto the wall for support.

“Tough shit and it’s fang man to you.”

Zeke’s taunting chuckle grated on Ethan’s nerves. What he wouldn’t do to have his magic back for just one minute so he could blast his ass down the hall. Ethan reached his door and turned

to square off against the male. "Look, Zeke, I know you have orders to watch me, but it's really not necessary."

"Wow, you actually took the time to learn a bloodsucker's name. I'm so honored." Zeke stepped closer so he was invading Ethan's space.

Luckily, he was used to such bullying tactics and the move had no affect on him. "I thought part of the whole idea of tailing someone was the target wasn't supposed to know you were there." Ethan tilted his head up slightly so he could scowl at the vampire. Zeke's smell reminded him a little bit of patchouli--dark, musky, but far from unpleasant.

"I've decided it would be more fun to watch you squirm. Knowing that I'm following your every move. You even so much as piss in the wrong hole and I'm going to take you down." Zeke barred his fangs with a hiss.

"Interesting way of putting things. You really are a poet. That mouth of yours must bring you so many females it's a wonder you even have time to hound me." Ethan could feel himself getting weaker by the second. All he wanted to do was go into his room and curl up in the corner. His legs shook with the effort it took to keep upright, but he still refused to move, not wanting to give Zeke the satisfaction of him being the first to look away.

"I'll let you in on a little secret," Zeke snapped,

stepping in even closer. "No matter what happens, I'll make the time to watch over your magic ass. I don't like your kind, don't trust them. I don't give a kubold's ass who your brother is. The sooner my clan is rid of you, the better. So know this, every second you are here, I will be watching you and just waiting for the excuse I need to take you out and I will do it as painfully as possible."

"Not if I take you out first," Ethan shot back, his hands in tight fists. While it would feel good to take a swing at the ass, he knew that in his current condition, he was nowhere near ready to take on a gnat let alone a full-grown male vamp.

"Please, we both know you can barely stand at the moment. Whatever you did to that panther really sapped your strength. If I wanted to kill you right now, there is nothing you could do about it." He gave an evil grin, those long fangs of his glinting in the florescent light of the hallway.

Ethan was stunned by the verbal attack. While he had expected to face stuff like this when he had come to the clan, he had never thought it would have been Zeke dealing it out. From what he could tell, the vampire was very friendly with Rafe, Morgan and Dominic. So why all the aggression?

"Why have you been holed up in your room so much? What are you hiding?" Zeke asked, his tone heavy with distrust.

"Nothing," Ethan protested quickly. Too

quickly he realized.

Zeke's expression grew even more suspicious.

Holding Ethan by the front of the shirt to keep him in place with one hand, Zeke used the other to push open his door. Ethan silently cursed himself for not thinking to lock it up in his rush to go help the panther. Then he groaned, praying that Zeke wouldn't notice how the bed was made up and hadn't been slept in. Of course, given how crappy his day had been going, that prayer was ignored.

"Why do you bunk out on the floor?" Zeke demanded, his gaze still searching the room. "Don't try to deny it either. I can tell by the pile of blankets that's where you crash at night."

"I have a bad back and the mattress is crappy," Ethan snarked. Not even under torture would he admit the truth to this jackass.

"Ethan! Zeke!" Morgan cried as she came running down the hallway. Her long raven hair was undone and framing her concerned face.

"This isn't over, magic. Don't forget that. I know you're hiding shit from Rafe and the others and I will find out what it is," Zeke promised in a low voice before he stepped back. "Hello, Morgan," Zeke said with fake brightness. "I was just helping Ethan back to his room. He looks a little under the weather."

"I'm sure you were." She came up and pointedly looked at Zeke's hand, her green eyes

glittering with anger. "Let him go—now."

Although Ethan hadn't relished the idea of getting his ass kicked, he didn't like it that a female had come to his rescue either. Could anything else possibly go wrong? At this rate, he would never be able to reclaim what shreds of masculinity he had left. Yup, he was definitely going to have to change his name to Nancy. Might as well give it up and go have the tailor stitch the name on all his shirts.

"No problem. Ethan and I have plenty of time to chat. I'll just catch him later." Zeke patted Ethan's cheek in a condescending way before he walked away.

"You shouldn't have butted in. I had everything handled," Ethan snapped once the vampire was out of hearing range.

"Sure you did." Morgan nodded her head once before she gave him a knowing smile. "So do you want to collapse out here or wait until you're in the room?"

"As much as I would love to have privacy for my final humiliation, I don't think it's going to wait." Taking a deep breath to stave off another round of dry heaves, he gasped, "Going down."

Morgan cursed under her breath as she rushed forward, catching him at the last possible second. She struggled under his heavy weight for a second before she used magic to help levitate him enough

for her to maneuver him to the bed. Unlike Zeke, she didn't seem to notice that his bed had never been used. She just lowered him to it before she rushed over to his supply of herbs and oils.

Ethan would have been more comfortable on the floor, but since Morgan was there, he endured the softness of the mattress. Her back was to him as she moved around his room, mixing together various ingredients.

"What were you thinking?" she demanded in a hard voice. "You used so much magic, you shouldn't even be conscious let alone feel zippy enough to piss off the vampires."

"I just pushed things too far and lost control." He closed his eyes against the oncoming headache.

"Bullshit. You never lose control. You knew exactly what you were doing and what the consequences might be yet you did it anyway. Why?" She turned and handed him a mug.

He took it savoring the warmth coming from it. She must have used magic to heat it up since he didn't rate a microwave. Inhaling deep, he caught the aroma of ginger. "Maybe I just wanted to help out that poor kid. He was upset and I helped him work past some of that pain." He took a sip and sighed in relief as the ginger did the trick, soothing his gut.

"I'm sure that's part of it." She sat on the bed

next to him. "Unlike everyone else, I know that deep under your crusty shell there is a compassionate and caring soul."

Not likely, that soft part of me died years ago.

Morgan put her hand on his cheek. It wasn't an intimate touch, but rather a healing one, assessing his health. "Damn, you drained your magic so dry it's a wonder you didn't kill yourself" she breathed in horror.

Not wanting to see his only friend upset, Ethan shook his head. "It's not as bad as you think. I'll be fine in a couple of days."

"Why don't you let me give you some of mine?" she asked as she tried to place her palm over his heart.

"No!" Ethan protested more harshly than he meant. He immediately tried to cover his slip. "Your mates won't like you touching another, even if it just to heal."

"You're being ridiculous," she huffed, impatiently, pushing a lock of her hair behind her ear.

Yeah he was, but there was no way he was going to let anyone, even her, connect with him magically. Even in their weakened state, his amped powers would make themselves known and that was the last thing he wanted or needed. "I'm going to be okay, I promise. Haven't I always managed to come out on top?" He took another

sip of tea.

"Yes, you do and part of that was because before tonight you never took unnecessary risks."

"Are you calling me a coward?" He peered down at his drink.

"No, just not stupid. I've seen you in battle, you don't fear anything."

How little you know, Morgan. I fear plenty. Most of all I fear that I am never going to be able to shed the nightmares of my past. How can I become a male of worth when inside I'm still a scared kid who just wants someone to love him?

"Oh my goddess." Her eyes grew wide. "You did it for Rafe, didn't you?"

"No," he denied even though his tone sounded far from truthful. "Why would I need the approval of a vampire?"

"Because he's your brother and the one thing you always wanted more than anything was to have a true family."

"I don't need or want him." Ethan swallowed hard against the lump in his throat.

"You don't need to lie to me. You know I have never judged you." She squeezed his arm.

Damn her, did she have to have such a caring look in her eyes?

"That's the real reason you came to the clan, isn't it? You want to connect with Rafe. It has nothing to do with peace negotiations."

"That would just be stupid of me. Why should I want to reach out to anyone when the rest of my family can't stand the sight of me?" he bit out savagely.

"You should go talk to Rafe," she urged.

"So he can spit in my face like Olivia always has? No thanks. I would rather settle for cold indifference than out and out hatred. It would be better if I just left things as they are." He jerked in surprise when she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head against his shoulder.

"What am I going to do with you?" Her voice was sad, almost whimsical. "Half the time I want to strangle you, the other I want to cry over the crappy hand life has dealt you. What's worse, is I get the suspicion I don't even know half of what's happened to you. Thanks to Olivia, you've had to face it alone, too."

"That's okay, I'm used to it. I don't need family," he replied roughly, not trusting himself to say more. He hadn't cried in front of anyone since he had been a boy, he wasn't about to start now.

"Tough, because you have some now." She tilted her head up to look at him, her eyes wet with tears.

"No, I don't." He swallowed hard, remembering the mental conversation he'd eavesdropped on earlier.

"Since Rafe is your brother and I'm his mate

that makes me your sister-in-law. As far as I'm concerned, that makes us family. Like it or not, buddy, you're stuck with me."

Ethan didn't speak again, too overcome with emotion to think let alone voice was he what feeling inside.

CHAPTER SIX

Brenden ripped off his protective goggles and cursed loudly as he stared at the test area. Frustrated, cranky and tired, he wanted to scream, instead he settled for yelling out another cuss word as he threw his goggles in frustration. They broke apart and ricocheted against the gray concrete wall, then bounced to a stop at his feet.

"It was a shorter delay this time," Micah, one of his team members, said helpfully. He still had his goggles and protective gear in place. With a jerk, he pulled the eye gear off and lowered the hood. His brown hair popped up into various cowlicks.

"It's still too long." Brenden wanted to kick the wall to relieve some of his anger, but held back. One temper tantrum a day was enough. "I just wish we could figure out how to fix it. With our long-range grenades, it's not there. Why with the short one?"

"I don't know." Micah's bony shoulders lifted into a helpless shrug.

"Unfortunately, *I don't know* isn't going to cut it anymore. The rebellion needs these new grenades and Eric is starting to get impatient." Brenden lowered his hood, too, and ran a hand through his sweaty hair. The bunker they used to test their weapons was hot and stuffy. He didn't usually mind it though since he was grateful that the clan leader had built it especially for his team. Tonight, however, the tension was making him resent the lack of ventilation.

"Sorry, we'll keep working around the clock if we have to," Micah vowed, his thin face earnest. "We won't let you down."

"I just hope I don't let you guys down," Brenden replied grimly, the weight of leadership resting hard on his shoulders. "It's my design after all. So if there's a flaw, it's my fault."

"But I helped you build it so the fault is both of ours." Micah gave a cocky grin as he added, "I think if you had let me put those posters up, it would have inspired me to be more clever and we would have never had this problem."

"Are you still whining because I wouldn't let you plaster the walls with pictures of your favorite science fiction actresses?" Brenden rolled his eyes.

"It broke my heart when you refused my request."

"I can't believe I know a nerdy vampire." Brenden shook his head, trying hard to contain his

own grin. "I never knew such a creature could exist."

"What's wrong with a nerdy vampire?"

"It's the epitome of irony. Like a bald werewolf. A tone-deaf siren. An ugly succubus." Brenden started walking around the room, putting various weapons and tools away.

"Oh I get it now. You mean like a pretty hag. An articulate zombie. A cuddly harpy."

"You forgot a vegetarian ghoul," Dante called as he strode into the room.

Despite the fight they had the night before, Brenden's heart still skipped a beat at the sight of his mate. Dressed all in black and walking with a predator's smooth gait, he looked like he could face anything and come out on top. Brenden noticed he hadn't cut his hair in a while and the front hung in his eyes just a bit and there was a stubble of growth on his cheeks. While on others, it would have looked sloppy, on Dante it gave him a whole just-got-out-of-bed-after-a-night-of-terrific-sex vibe. "You're going out on a mission?" Brenden frowned when he noticed Dante was armed.

"No, *we* are. Eric sent me down to tell you he wants the team on patrol tonight. First though he wants you and I to go to his office." Dante looked down at the broken goggles. "Rough day at the office, sweetie?"

"Bite me," Brenden replied, no real anger behind his words.

Dante's lips spread out in the wickedest of smiles. One that was full of sensual intent and fangs. "I already did last night, but if you want another go before we leave, I'm game."

The corners of Brenden's lips twitched and he was amused, despite himself. "Let's go see what Eric wants. Micah, round up the rest of the team and meet us in the garage."

"Will do, sir," Micah replied as he quickly ran off to do as ordered.

Brenden waited until he was out of sight before he turned to Dante. "Do you have any idea what Eric wants?"

"It has something to do with the panther we found. That's all I know."

They walked most of the way to Eric's office in silence.

It wasn't until they were near the door that Dante said, "I know I was a jerk last night. Just don't..." he broke off and swallowed hard as he looked at the tiles on the floor. "Just don't give up on me, okay?"

All the lingering anger Brenden was holding onto faded in the quiet desperation of Dante's voice. He stopped walking, grabbing onto Dante's arm so he halted, too. "I won't ever give up on you because when I needed you the most, you

didn't give up on me." Leaning forward, he pressed an all-too-brief kiss on Dante's moist lips. He closed his eyes and savored the dark, spicy scent of his male, drank in the warmth of his strong body.

"I guess we better go see what Eric wants." Dante pulled back.

"I suppose we should." A part of Brenden was reluctant though. For some reason, he was certain that something was about to happen and it wasn't going to be good.

* * * *

Dante leaned against the wall and watched as the rest of the group filed in. It seemed Eric wanted to talk to a lot of individuals. Both of his brothers were there as well as Morgan, Dominic and Ethan. Dante made sure to let Ethan see him glaring at him. He had to give the warlock credit, he didn't back down. Instead, he glared right back, his green eyes turning nearly dark with fury.

"Nice to see you dressed up for us," Dante smirked, noticing Ethan had traded the sweats for the usual warlock garb of a green hooded leather top and black pants. The warlock flashed a cocky grin as he slowly extended his middle finger.

Don't egg him on, Kane sent telepathically. The last thing we need is for you to get into a pissing match

with the magic.

Oh come on, Dante replied in kind. Getting a rise out of this jerk is half the fun.

Really, he reminds me so much of Olivia. Both of them with the same condescending attitude, Rafe agreed.

Dante was about to laugh when he saw it. It was so small most others would have missed it, but years of training as a soldier had trained him to always be aware of the slightest change of expression on his enemy's face. For a brief second, a look of hurt passed over Ethan's face. It was almost as if he'd heard what Rafe had just said. But that was impossible unless...

Oh, shit! Ethan was telepathic and he had been listening in on every one of their private mental chats. That no good, lying, conniving son of a bitch. Letting out a loud roar, Dante launched himself across the room, intent on ripping the warlock's throat out.

Just as Dante was about to make contact, Ethan dodged out of the way. With a painful crunch, Dante hit the wall and fell to the ground. Shaking it off, Dante sprang back to his feet and clenched his hands into fists.

"What the hell?" Ethan asked, his face red with anger.

"Have you been having fun? Dipping into our mental conversations?" Dante yelled.

"You're mistaken. Ethan doesn't have that ability." Morgan moved to stand between them, but Rafe reached out and pulled her back.

"She's right," Dominic added, his hands held up in the classic everyone-calm-down gesture. "Our coven doesn't teach that type of magic. Too many bad things can come of it."

"What kind of bad things?" Dante cocked his head to the side in a sarcastic manner. "Things like hearing private conversations? What else did you listen in on, Ethan? Where we have our weapons? How many children are here? The secret locations of other rebel clans? How much were you going to sell the information for?"

"I would never sell you guys out." Ethan's gaze sought out Rafe and locked on. "I swear to you."

"So you're not going to deny you heard us?" Rafe asked in a dangerous growl.

Ethan pressed his lips together before slowly shaking his head.

"Oh, Ethan. How could you be so stupid?" Morgan moaned.

"It's not something I can exactly control." Ethan continued to look at Rafe as he answered.

If Dante didn't know better, it was almost as if the warlock was terrified of ticking off his brother.

"Just answer me one thing," Rafe said quietly, "did Olivia send you here because she knew about your gift and wanted to use it to spy on us?"

"No, I never let her know I can do this. I knew she would use it to her own benefit. I came here to help form the alliance. If we don't work together to fight the VRF and dark magics, all of us are screwed. I promise I didn't mean to eavesdrop, it's just something I can't control sometimes," Ethan rushed out earnestly.

"Then why didn't you just fess up and tell us the first time you heard us talking?" Dante challenged.

"Because, like Dominic said, it's not something our kind is supposed to be able to do." Ethan finally lowered his gaze, shame staining his cheeks.

"Give us one good reason why we shouldn't just say to hell with this alliance and run your lying ass out of here?" Dante took a threatening step closer.

"Because I say he stays," Eric cut in, his tone hard and unyielding. Like he had taken all the shit he was going to take and the next one who pissed him off was going to take a boot to the ass.

Dumfounded, Dante looked over to see if the clan leader was kidding. But Eric's grey eyes were as cold and serious as ever, his jaw set in a determined line. Crossing his arms over his muscular chest, he glared at Dante.

"Like it or not, we need him and the other magics," he said.

"Then use Morgan or Dominic, we can trust them," Dante argued.

"I trust Ethan just as much."

"After what we just found out? How can you?" Dante was incredulous. Eric was a hard-ass, military-disciplined leader, from his blond crew cut to his combat boots. To know he was willing to side with a two-faced warlock was beyond shocking.

"Let's just say Ethan's not the only one who can read minds and leave it at that."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?" Dante shook his head.

"Are you questioning my leadership capabilities?" Eric asked quietly.

Dante instantly backed down. After he and his brothers had got out of prison, all other vampires had shunned them. Hell, even their own father had disowned them. Eric hadn't looked down on them. Not only had he taken them in even though they were Pure Born, he had made them soldiers of equal rank and had treated them as one of his own clan. "You know I would trust you with my life," Dante replied, chastised.

"Then let's get back to what I called you here for." Motioning them all closer, he unfolded a piece of paper on his cluttered desk. It was torn and splattered with droplets of blood.

Dante narrowed his eyes when he saw there

were also weird symbols scrawled on it. They looked like some form of hieroglyphics.

"We found this in the panther's pocket. When I asked him where he got it, he couldn't tell me." Eric smoothed the paper out more.

"That's not surprising," Ethan said, peering intently at the writing. "When I went inside his head, his memory was like Swiss cheese. It's obvious some dark warlock played with his memories."

"The question is why would they bother cleaning a young shifter's mind?" Kane scratched his jaw, a move he always made when confused or troubled.

"You would think someone like Chris would be the least of their concerns," Morgan agreed as she frowned at the writing.

"Does any of this look familiar to you," Eric asked her.

"It looks like magical symbols, but none that I've ever seen before." She gave a delicate shudder. "It's dark though. I can feel the evil surrounding it."

"How about you?" Dante quizzed Dominic. The warlock had been raised in a dark magic coven before he had turned to the good side.

"No, it's not from any coven I've encountered before." He rubbed his hand through his short blond hair as if frustrated, before he leaned closer.

"Morgan is right. It's dark though. That I'm certain of."

"It's from the Ninth Coven," Ethan rasped. His skin had gone chalky white and he was trembling from head to toe.

Dante exchanged concerned expressions with Rafe. Ethan may be an ass, but he was no coward. In the short time he'd known him, Dante had never seen the warlock this shaken up.

"The Ninth, are you sure?" Dominic asked, his blue eyes growing wide with fear.

"Who in the hell are the Ninth and why are they making you guys so scared you're about to piss kittens?" Dante asked.

"The Ninth were supposedly the biggest, baddest dark magics out there before they were destroyed by some other covens," Brenden butted in. When everyone turned to him in surprise, he gave a sheepish shrug. "What can I say? I was bored one night and read some of the books Morgan brought for Rafe."

"The book didn't do them justice," Dominic bit out savagely. "They were the worst kind of evil. The kind of things nightmares are made of. They got so bad that several covens banded together and annihilated them. It wasn't easy either. The causality rate was huge. It was worth it though because the Ninth was wiped out or at least they were supposed to be."

"You think they might still be around?" Eric asked.

"If this spell is really in their script, then yes. The dark magic around it is fresh, not years old. So it was made just recently." Dominic pinned a glare on Ethan. "The real question is how in the hell did you know it was the Ninth when not even I did?"

Ethan shifted his feet nervously before shooting a worried glance over at Rafe.

"I suggest you answer him," Rafe snarled.

"When I was twelve Olivia fostered me out to be trained. She wanted me to be stronger than any other warlock or witch ever so she could take out her enemies. Her own personal master weapon." Ethan swallowed hard.

Dante hadn't thought it was possible, but he got even paler. The warlock looked two steps from passing out.

"Oh goddess, no," Morgan sobbed as she brought her hand to her lips.

"What are you trying to say?" Dante asked even though he already had a sneaky suspicion what the answer was.

"Olivia sent me to train with the Ninth Coven." Ethan's eyes grew haunted. "I spent a couple decades with the worst monsters in creation. And now they are coming back to get me, my coven and the Drone rebels."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dante's gut grew tight as the implication of Ethan's words hit him like a punch. He had never heard of the Ninth, but judging by the looks of horror on the magics' faces, they must be pretty fucking bad. He had once seen Morgan face down a group of ghouls and not even bat an eyelash. Now she looked terrified. Her eyes were wide, the pulse at her jugular fluttering widely and there was a fine sheen of perspiration on her upper lip.

"How do you know they are coming for us?" Eric asked sharply.

Dante wondered if the leader was thinking about his eight-year old daughter who lived at the clan.

"This is a binding spell meant to hold in white magic." Ethan leaned forward and sniffed. "This is Panther blood on it."

"Well they were beating the shit out of him before we intervened." Dante shrugged,

wondering what the big deal was. "Since it was in his pocket, it probably got on it then."

"No this blood was placed in the symbols. It's a blood sacrifice and about as evil as you can get. Panther shifters and magics have a special connection—a bond of sorts. To kill one is the ultimate crime in our society. Even for those who used dark magic." Ethan held his hand over the paper and muttered some words. A small spark of flame shot from his palm and the soon the paper had burned to ash.

"So that's it then? Threat over?" Rafe asked as he eyed up the ash. He was holding Morgan's hand in a tight grip.

"No, if they're doing what Ethan thinks, then they'll have buried various copies around the outskirts of the city. We'll have to find and burn all of them." Dominic sighed heavily as he moved closer to Rafe and Morgan in a protective manner. "If we don't, our magic will be weakened to the point of useless."

"If that happens, then the dark magics will strike and kill us. They must not like that we're helping out the rebellion and they are no doubt trying to send a message to others who might think of joining in the fight." Morgan gave a hard smile. "Good thing for you guys we don't scare that easy. If anything, they've just pissed us off more and now nothing will stop the rest of the

coven from jumping in."

Dante wasn't sure if he was ready to take out the party hats and celebrate the fact that more witches and warlocks would be coming to Detroit, but he did know the rebellion needed their help desperately. It wasn't going to be easy though. For as long as both sides could remember, they had never gotten along. In fact, Rafe was the only half-breed, none other had been allowed to live. Either one side or the other killed them off.

"We need to go out and find the others right away," Ethan said to Dominic.

"Agreed, we should split up though so we can cover more ground. The quicker we find and destroy them, the better." Dominic cast a glance at Morgan and Rafe, obviously hating the idea of having his mates out of his sight when they were all in danger.

Dante could relate given how he had been having to live with the same fear ever since he found out there was a bounty on Brenden.

"What do you need from us?" Eric asked as he eyed up the pile of ash like it was an offensive bug.

"We could use a team to go with each of us," Dominic replied. "They may have creatures guarding the various burial sites."

"That would be the way the Ninth worked," Ethan scoffed. Some of the color had come back to

his face and he was almost back to his usual cocky self.

"What kinds of creatures?" Dante asked, his heart hammering in dread. The last time he had come into contact with a dark witch's *pets*, he and Brenden had found themselves attacked by a group of ghouls. They had almost died before they were rescued and they both still carried the scars from all the bite marks.

"Ghouls, revenants, zombies, anything with a simple mind that they can easily control," Ethan answered.

"Why can't they for once use something a little less disgusting? Maybe rabid cats or ankle biting Chihuahuas," Dante joked, hoping to lighten up the tension some. He was shocked when it was Ethan who smiled. It made the warlock look softer and almost likable. Despite the blond hair, when he grinned, he reminded Dante a bit of Rafe. The Rafe before prison and war.

"Maybe they'll have a suggestion box somewhere and you can put in that request," Ethan chuckled.

"You can take Brenden's team with you," Eric cut in, getting back to business.

"Sure thing, sir." Brenden nodded. "I already have them getting assembled in the garage. I can split them up into three teams and we'll be good to go."

"Four," Rafe corrected. "I'll take a group and look, too."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Ethan said sharply. "It takes a lot of skill to destroy one of these."

"Yeah, so?" Rafe glared up from under his dark hair.

Dante groaned, he knew that look all too well. Rafe was itching for a fight. Usually it was Dante that was on the receiving end of that look.

"So, you couldn't magic yourself out of a wet paper bag," Ethan replied, not looking too worried about the way Rafe growled in response. "Sorry, but it's true. A kitten with a dime store wand could kick your ass."

"You son of a bitch." Rafe lunged at him, but Dominic held him back.

"True, Olivia is a class A bitch, but that has nothing to do with the fact that you don't know shit about magic." Ethan couldn't have looked more bored. "What we're dealing with is bad and the only skill you have is snarling, punching and being in a permanently bad mood."

Dante didn't know whether to lunge at the jerk himself or nod his head in agreement. He couldn't count the time times in the past where he, himself, had accused Rafe of being the stereotypical emo vampire. While things had got much better since he had found Morgan and Dominic, Rafe could

sometimes still be a grumpy Gus.

"We've both been working with Rafe and he's more than ready for this," Dominic snapped, his arms still around his struggling mate.

"You better hope so. Because if you're wrong, then we're all screwed and not in a good way," Ethan responded darkly.

Dante purposely manipulated things so Ethan was in his group. They were scouring the west side of the city along with Zeke and Brenden. Since leaving the clan dwelling, the warlock had lapsed back into his silent mode.

"Do you want to clue us in on what we're supposed to be looking for?" Brenden asked as he gripped his Glock tighter.

"Don't worry, if we get close enough, whatever the Ninth got to protect the spell will come out and let us know." The hood of Ethan's shirt was up, obscuring his face.

"You mean you can't use your hoo-do to sense them?" Zeke waggled his fingers sarcastically.

Ethan paused before he answered, "No, and I can't tell you the winning numbers for the Power Ball either so don't ask me."

"Well then what good are you?" Zeke snorted.

"My ex said I was great with my tongue and cock, but who am I to brag?"

Dante was so shocked at Ethan's comment he

almost dropped his gun. He shook his head, certain that he had just misheard the warlock, but Brenden's bark of laughter said his ears hadn't deceived him.

"So how exactly are we going to find these things then?" Brenden asked, still grinning.

"The irony is the things the magics set up to guard the spells is often the very thing that gives them away. Have there been any reports of missing humans or bodies found?" Ethan asked. All three vampires stopped dead in their tracks and gave him identical *duh* looks.

"Are you serious?" Zeke clucked his tongue. "This is Detroit. It would be an off day if there weren't missing people or bodies."

"I love this city, but Zeke is right," Dante added. "Since this place is so large and easy to blend into, it has become spook central. Every type of nasty creature has decided to squat here. Even though this is officially werewolf territory, they can't stop all of them from coming in. That's one reason they granted the Drones sanctuary here, so we could help them clean the streets."

"It's like trying to bail out the Titanic with a thimble though," Brenden explained with much more patience. "Every time we get rid of a nest of baddies, two more take its place."

"Did you all stop to think that was because they were all running from something?" Now it was

Ethan who was throwing the *duh* around.

It felt like all the air was sucked out of Dante's lungs. Of course! Why hadn't they thought of it themselves? They had some of the most brilliant minds in their clan and not one of them had ever stopped to think that maybe, just maybe they weren't the only ones using Detroit as a safe haven.

"How could we be so stupid?" Brenden echoed Dante's thoughts.

"Not stupid, just too focused on saving your own clan. That's what happens when you care about others. You lose the bigger picture." Ethan didn't meet any of them in the eye, too busy scanning the horizon.

"Is that fucked up lesson something you learned from your days living with the Ninth?" Dante didn't even try to hide his disgust. One thing he had learned from his brothers and Brenden was love wasn't a liability but an asset.

"I would think you would have learned that same thing from your prison days," Ethan tossed back. "Why did they send you there, by the way?"

"Why don't you just read my mind and find out?"

"Believe it or not, I try to keep out of people's heads. The only reason I heard you and your brothers' thoughts was because you were projecting them." Ethan actually seemed to sound

apologetic.

That shocked Dante. "So you're going to try to deny that you've never been tempted?"

"No," Ethan said adamantly. "I learned the hard way that nothing good can ever come out of playing with others' thoughts and memories."

"I would have thought Olivia would have ordered you to use that skill to spy on us." Dante narrowed his eyes

"Olivia would have, if she knew I could do it. I already told you guys that and no matter how many times you ask me the story is not going to change." Ethan's expression grew bitter. "Call me crazy, but after she sent me away to live with the Ninth, I didn't exactly feel close enough to her to share something like that."

"I don't blame you," Brenden breathed.

"So why did they send you and your brothers to prison?" Ethan asked again.

Dante knew the only reason the warlock wanted to know was because it involved Rafe. Despite denying he needed anyone, it was obvious Ethan was desperate to get to know his vampire brother better. It must have been hard growing up without anyone to lean on. Dante felt for the guy, but not enough not to use it against him. "I'll tell you why we were put away if you tell me about your time with the Ninth." For a second he thought the warlock was going to tell him to go

fuck himself. A flurry of expressions passed over his face--anger, outrage, fear and then finally grim acceptance.

Giving a stiff nod, he agreed. "What do you want to know?"

"Are they as bad as Morgan and Dominic think they are?" Dante was shocked that Ethan had actually gone for the deal. His desire to know more about Rafe was stronger than Dante had ever imagined.

"No, they are worse. Way worse than anyone can ever dream. Some of the things I witnessed during my time there still haunt me in my dreams." Ethan pulled his hood further down over his face, as if to shield himself from his past.

"What kind of things?" Brenden asked in a soft caring tone. It had been the same one he had used on the injured panther.

"Human sacrifices, cannibalism, just about every unnatural thing you can think up. They would have orgies in the blood of their victims."

Even in the dark, Dante could see the shudder that went through Ethan's body as he said that.

"So tell me, Ethan," Zeke cut in, his voice hard. "As you got older, did you join in?"

Dante held his breath, wondering how the warlock was going to answer that.

Ethan slowly turned his head and looked at them. His skin was chalky white and his green

eyes that were so much like Rafe's were haunted. "I've shared, now I think it's time Dante gave me something in return."

"Kane, Rafe and I used to work for the VRF. We were their top soldiers," Dante started.

Ethan rudely interrupted. "I already knew that. I want to know what's not on the official records."

"I'm getting to that," Dante growled. "Corbin is the head of the VRF now, but at that time he was just a wannabe who was willing to sacrifice his own grandma to crawl up the ranks. He messed up on a mission, got some good soldiers killed and Kane was going to report him for it."

"I've met Corbin before when he came to our coven to talk to Olivia. He struck me as the type who wouldn't take a threat to his career lightly." Ethan lowered his hood, a murderous glint in his eyes. "Is that why he went after you guys?"

"Yes, he ordered Rafe to go check out a rumor of a pack of ferals stalking a human family. As far as Rafe knew, it was just supposed to be a recon mission and if he found out anything, he was to call for backup. When he got to the house though, he discovered the family had already been attacked. Rafe has never been the type to sit back and watch innocents being hurt so he went in even though he was outnumbered. It was too late though. The entire family had been massacred except for a baby. Rafe managed to get the kid

hidden before the ferals attacked him and took him down."

"The ferals were sent by Corbin, weren't they?" Ethan's jaw ticked in anger.

"Yes, they were. Rafe used the last of his strength to send off a mental cry for help to Kane and me. We got there as fast as we could, but by the time we made it, Rafe was almost dead. We found him in a sunroom. They had left him just alive enough to know that once day came, he would be turned to ash when the sun hit him. To make it even worse, they had placed vampire slugs all over his body."

"Excuse me for being stupid, but what are vampire slugs?" Zeke asked. Since he was Drone and hadn't grown up in the world, he still didn't know every aspect of it.

"They are rat size leeches. Usually they live in forests and dark areas and feed off the weak and dying." Dante swallowed against the hard lump that had formed in his throat. "To have them drink from you is considered a great dishonor since that means you have fallen prey to the weakest of predators. They did it as one great big fuck you to Kane, Rafe and me."

"How did you end up in prison though?" Ethan's voice sounded strained, almost as if he were fighting painful emotions, too.

If Dante had been a betting vampire, he would

have placed odds on the warlock actually being outraged over what had happened to Rafe. "They charged us with dereliction of duty for failing to protect the human family. By not keeping them safe, we exposed the vampire world to the humans."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Zeke nearly yelled as he shook his head in disbelief. "Rafe almost died protecting them. It wasn't you guys who attacked the humans, it was the ferals."

"Ferals that were conveniently absent when the VRF showed up. By the time Corbin was done spinning things, half the vampire community thought it was us who killed that family." Dante closed his eyes against the memories of the trial. How their father had stood up in the courtroom and publically denounced his sons. The ten hellish years in prison and some of the things Dante had done to keep himself and his brothers safe.

"How was it for Rafe in the prison?" Ethan asked.

"Oh no, now it's your turn again." Dante shook off the bad feelings that always came when he talked about his past and focused his gaze on the warlock. "Did you like it?"

"Like what?" Ethan wrinkled his brow in confusion.

"When the Ninth made you participate in those orgies. When you were covered in the blood of

their victims. As you fucked those dark magics. Did you like it?"

There was a long pause before Ethan admitted in a hoarse whisper, "Yeah, I liked it. I liked it a lot. So what kind of monster does that make me?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fthan shook off the question and changed subjects, "We still haven't figured out how we are going to find the other spells."

"We could just keep patrolling the streets until something attacks us," Brenden suggested.

"We don't have time for that. The only reason the spell hasn't taken hold yet is because Chris somehow managed to take one. It set the dark magics back some, but it won't take them long to make a replacement. When they do, Rafe, Morgan, Dominic and I will be in big trouble."

"You mean because you won't be able to use magic, right?" Dante had a sinking feeling that the warlock was holding back something. Obviously, he wasn't the only one because Zeke stepped forward and grabbed the warlock by the front of his shirt.

"So help me if you're lying about something and Rafe gets hurt because of it, I will do things to you that will make the Ninth look like a bunch of

cuddly bunnies by comparison,” Zeke snarled, his long white fangs inches from Ethan’s face.

“Easy there, big guy.” Dante placed a restraining hand on Zeke’s shoulder. “He won’t be able to answer any questions if you rip his throat out.”

Zeke gave one last growl before he snapped his fangs and stepped back.

Dante took his place, stepping in really close to Ethan. The warlock tried to take a step back, but found his retreat halted by the wall of an apartment building. Dante pinned him between his body and the brick so the warlock had nowhere to run.

“If I find out that you’re hiding something and my brother gets hurt because of it—” Dante started, but Ethan mumbled something and cut him off. Since he hadn’t heard what he said, Dante asked, “What?”

“He’s my brother, too,” Ethan repeated, his gaze directed down.

“Brothers watch out for each other. They don’t keep things from each other that might end up getting them hurt.”

“I’ve got it handled. There’s no reason to make the others worry.” Ethan sounded so sincere.

Dante actually believed him. He backed up a step, but still didn’t move totally away. “Worry about what?” His stomach did a slow 180 at the

thought of Rafe being in even further danger.

"It's not a binding spell."

"What kind of spell is it?" Brenden moved up.

His hand came up to briefly brush up against the small of Dante's back to show his support.

"It's one made to suck the magic from any witch or warlock within the boundary." Ethan swallowed hard, fear etched on his face.

Dante knew it was from the situation and not from them threatening him.

"How is that any different than a binding spell?" Zeke shrugged his massive shoulders. "It sounds like you lose your powers either way."

"With binding we would still have them, they would just be trapped," Ethan explained. "This spell is made to rip the magic from our bodies. It's not a very pleasant experience."

"How unpleasant?" Brenden asked as he rubbed his hand against Dante's back again.

"Imagine having your organs ripped out of your body via your mouth. That should give you a good idea of how it feels." Ethan rubbed his chest as if he were imagining that happening to him or maybe by the look in his eyes, he was recalling a time he had gone through it.

"I guess that would be uncomfortable," Brenden mused as he stepped even closer to Dante and put an arm around his shoulder.

Dante leaned back and allowed himself to take

comfort in his mate's touch. "Why didn't you say anything before now?" Dante seethed at the warlock.

"Maybe because like you, I just want to protect him," Ethan answered, finally meeting his gaze again.

"By hiding the truth from him?"

"I didn't want him and the others to worry. I've got it handled."

"You have it handled?" Dante echoed incredulously. "You don't even know where the fucking spells are."

"I'll figure out a way," Ethan argued, his cheeks growing red.

"How?" Dante cocked a brow at the warlock.

"I'll figure out something."

"Really great plan you got there, buddy," Zeke drawled. "I don't know why we ever doubted you. Everyone just relax because Ethan has it *all figured out*."

"Fuck you," Ethan snarled, lunging at the vampire.

Dante put his hand on Ethan's chest to hold him back. "Easy there, tiger. We have enough to worry about without tearing each other apart," Dante said, shocked that for once it was him playing peacemaker. Turning back to Ethan, Dante informed him, "Lucky for you I'm here to help you with your figuring."

"How are you going to do that?" Brenden asked.

"If there is something bad in town that is supernatural, then there is bound to be talk. So we're going to the best place to hear the latest gossip about all things that go bump in the night—the bar."

"Not the one that has the zombie who serves drinks," Zeke groaned. For some reason the vampire had a real hatred for the creatures.

"That's exactly the one I'm talking about," Dante replied.

* * * *

Okay, after taking one look at the gross looking thing tending bar, Brenden totally understood Zeke's revulsion of them. The tall male, at least he assumed it was a male, had to be in violation of at least a hundred health code regulations. His dusky, wet looking skin was hanging so loose on his face it looked in danger of falling into the drinks. Several hunks of hair were just barely hanging on the thing's skull. Brenden tried not to gag when he saw white bits of bone showing.

It was wiping down the surface of the bar with its green pus-looking hands. As they stepped closer, the strong smell of decay hit Brenden, making it even harder for him to hold down his

dinner. The zombie was deep in conversation with a female who had skin that resembled a snake. Zeke jumped and muttered a curse when a forked tongue darted out from her blue lips as if testing the air. Her raven hair seemed to be moving on its own and it took Brenden a few seconds to realize that was because it consisted of hundreds of tiny, withering snakes.

"Don't worry," Dante whispered in his ear. "Despite what the myths say, one look from her won't turn you to stone. If you screw her though, you will get sicker than a dog."

Brenden opened his mouth to ask how he knew that before he thought better of it and clamped his lips back together. Before he and Dante had bonded, his mate had a reputation of being a bit of a bed hopper. While Brenden knew those days were far behind him, he still didn't like to be reminded of them.

"Dante, it's been too long," the female hissed out, sounding just like Brenden had always thought a snake would if it could talk. "Some say you are hiding now. Afraid of Corbin and the VRF."

"Not true, Maggie." Dante grinned wickedly as he ran his tongue over his fangs.

Brenden and Ethan looked at each other and mouthed *Maggie*? The name was the last thing he would have ever expected a snake lady to be

named. But then since this was the first one he'd ever met, who was he to judge.

"Then where have you been?" the zombie asked in a wet, rattling voice.

Brenden caught Zeke give a small shudder of disgust. Off in one corner there was an uproar of snarls as a group of werewolves got into a scuffle over a game of poker. Neither the bartender or Maggie seemed too concerned about it though.

"Look at his neck," Maggie said to the bartender, a slow smile spreading over her blue lips. "Dante has the bonding bite."

"You with a mate? Who would have thought that the infamous Dante would settle for one warm body?" The zombie shook his head so hard, Brenden worried it was going to snap from his rotting neck. "Who's the lucky vampire?"

As one they both looked over at Brenden, their gazes honing in on the bite scar on his neck. Maggie let out a seductive laugh and she tapped the top of the bar with a long black nail.

"Him? He is nothing but a weak pretty boy. I could kill him and not even lose my breath."

It was a challenge and Brenden knew he had to answer it. Moving so quick nobody had time to react, he leaped across the room so he was next to her. Barring his fangs with a hiss of his own, he drew a dagger and buried it in the top of the bar. It settled in the wood, inches from where her hand

was. "Don't fuck with me, Mags. I'm in a pissy mood today and just itching to find someone to take it out on." Brenden hardly recognized his own voice it sounded so guttural.

One of the werewolves rushed forward, intent on helping Maggie. Ethan raised his hand as he yelled out a word. A blast of magic hit the wolf in the center of his chest and he flew backward. Even though he was still in human form, the yelp he made when he hit the ground was very canine sounding.

"Let me tell you something about my mate," Dante supplied as he took a nearby barstool. "He once took out a whole pack of empusa to save my sorry ass. Ripped one bitch's neck out without even breaking stride."

"Impossible," Maggie replied, her black eyes wide with terror. "No creature can take in an empusa's blood and live."

"Now you know why I picked him. He's no ordinary vampire. Now we have some questions for you and if you are a good little Garter snake and answer them for us, I won't give him the order to attack." Dante yawned like the whole situation was boring him.

Brenden kept playing his part, although after the way she'd been eyeing up Dante like a prime piece of meat, it wasn't too hard. Leaning down, he sniffed the crook of her neck, like he was sizing

her up for his fangs. He was somewhat surprised that her scent was far from unpleasant. She smelled like exotic flowers and rain. "Hungry," he growled, although there was no way in hell that he would ever feed off anyone but Dante.

'Ol Mags didn't know that though. She started to tremble. The zombie shuffled forward, but Zeke pulled out his Glock and pointed it at the creature.

"Don't move, big, tall and decaying, or else I'll keep shooting off body parts until all that's left of you is twitching pieces," the vampire snarled.

"Now you've gone and pissed us all off." Brenden gave an evil chuckle as he made a big show of sniffing her neck again. "Talk!"

"What do you want to know?" her voice trembled as she kept her gaze fixed on the dagger.

"We know there is something new in Detroit," Dante said in clipped tones. "Something that is killing and causing a whole lot of hurt. What and where is it?"

"They say it's something new and horrible. Werewolves that..." she trailed off and swallowed hard as she darted a look at the small pack over in the corner.

"Oh not you don't," Dante tsked. "Whatever they might do to you, won't even compare to what my mate has planned."

"It's not them that I fear, but rather what has taken over their kind. It's so wicked that most of

the packs have pulled in and aren't even venturing out anymore." She looked back at the blade.

"What is it, Maggie? No more stalling." Dante let out a low, warning growl.

"There has been a spell put over some of the werewolves. Something that makes it so they are no longer human and yet not wolf either. A new creature that is a mixture of both. What's worse is they no longer control their minds either. They are mindless killing machines."

Brenden exchanged knowing looks with Dante. That would explain the wounds Cherish found on the human. So it hadn't been Ozzie after all. The relief on Dante's face was heartbreaking. The brothers had all feared they would have to hunt down their former friend.

"You won't have a chance against whoever did that to the werewolves." Maggie cackled as she edged her hand closer to the blade. "The magic they use is dark and evil. They will eat you and your pretty boy mate alive."

Ethan waved his hand and the blade became a scorpion. It writhed around the table before climbing up Maggie's arm. "They may use dark magic, but I do, too, and I'm much more evil," Ethan promised, his eyes dark with intent. "You make sure you spread the word around, too. The VRF may have black magic on their side, but so do

the Drones and they're not afraid to use it."

The scorpion raised its tail, the stinger dripping an acid like poison. Just as it was about to strike, he waved his hand again and it disappeared in a poof of black smoke. Maggie let out a hissing scream that was cut short when she realized the danger was over.

"I'll tell you where they are," the zombie babbled, his filmy eyes wide with terror. "Just keep that thing away from us, please." He pointed a boney finger at Ethan. The zombie quickly drew them a detailed map that showed four separate locations where there had been killings or sightings of the creatures. Once he was done, he nearly threw the map at Dante before begging them to leave. By now, the entire bar was silent as they all gazed at Ethan in collective horror.

Once they were outside, Dante turned to Ethan. "Dude, remind me never to piss you off again. That scorpion trick you did was so freaky it almost had me screaming like a little girl."

"Hey, you okay?" Zeke asked, his face concerned as he looked at the warlock.

"No." Ethan shook his head. "Gotta puke."

They all jumped back out of the way as Ethan grabbed his stomach and hurled. Even over his retching, Brenden could hear the bone chilling sounds of howling. It came from several creatures and it seemed to emanate from all corners of the

city at once. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as he remembered the fear on Maggie's face as she talked about the monsters that were neither man nor wolf.

Brenden swallowed hard as he realized that not only would they have to face these beasts, but they would have to do it tonight. Because if Ethan was telling the truth, then their time was almost out.

CHAPTER NINE

After contacting the other three teams and letting them know of the possible locations of the spells, Dante used the map to lead his team to the fourth spot. It was on the shore of the Detroit River, nestled between two abandoned warehouses.

The lapping of the waves hitting the shore, mixed in with the distant rushing of traffic and the occasional honking of horns. Ever since Ethan's puking event, the rest of the group hadn't said a word. The warlock his hood up so his profile was obscured again and he was pulling a brooding act that would have made Rafe proud.

"That thing you did back there, it was dark magic, wasn't it?" Dante finally asked. No white magic he knew had ever made a giant, acid-dripping scorpion. It wasn't exactly the kind of thing someone picked for a cuddly family pet.

"Yes, it was." Ethan kept his head down.

The hood prevented Dante from seeing his expression. It was the same trick Rafe often

played, but his shield was the fall of his hair. A way to keep the world and everyone in it away. "Judging from the way you puked, I'm going to take a wild guess that you didn't like doing it, but you still did it to help us out. Thank you," Dante said, feeling a whole new respect for the warlock.

"I didn't do it for you," Ethan replied in a toneless voice.

"I know you didn't. You did it for Rafe and that makes me more indebted to you. He's my brother, too, and I'm just as protective of him. Although between you and me, Rafe can take care of himself. I've seen him take out a half dozen werewolves all by himself. He's wily." Dante chuckled as he thought about how insulted Rafe would be if he knew that they were trying to shield him from harm.

"What was he like—before?" Ethan finally raised his head.

Dante could see his face. He was a bit pale, but other than that, he seemed to have recovered from his spell. "He was a lot like you." Dante smiled as he remembered what a cutup his youngest brother had been. "He still is."

"I'm nothing like he is." Ethan shook his head. There was no angry denial in his statement, but rather a sad wistfulness.

"Yeah, you are. You both care even though you hate to admit it. You're both stubborn as hell, too."

"Don't forget they're both moody, too," Zeke added with a grin.

Before Dante could add another smartass remark, howls ripped through the air. Unlike earlier, these were closer, as in just inches away closer. Something hot and fetid smelling hit the back of his neck. His heart jackhammered as he realized it was something big and bad breathing down on him.

"Move!" Brenden order and as one the group turned, their backs to one another so that they formed a tight protective circle. At the same time, the communicators in their ears crackled to life as all the teams starting yelling, reporting that they were under attack as well.

Dante found himself faced with something that looked like it had been spawned in the deepest belly of hell. Even though it was standing on two legs, that was the only human looking thing about it. Long, thick, black hair covered its seven-foot body that was a mass of sinewy muscles. Large, black, razor sharp teeth protruded from an elongated snout. A steady stream of saliva dripped down, like it was unable to close its mouth properly to swallow. The smell, oh shit, the smell was so bad it made the zombie seem like a bed of roses in comparison. Rotted meat, wet fur, blood and dirt all blended together in a potpourri so potent that the bile rose up in the back of

Dante's throat.

There was one other human-like thing about it, Dante decided. Its eyes. The blue gaze staring back at him was filled with such suffering and despair that he didn't know if he wouldn't be doing it a favor by killing it.

"No go! No touch it!" the beast yelled in a gravelly voice.

"On come on. I can't tell you how many dates started with those words, but in the end they were all begging me not to leave their bed," Dante replied with a chuckle.

"No touch it!" This declaration came from another wolf-human creature who had lurched from the shadows and had taken position in front of Ethan.

"I get it." The warlock gagged. "With the way you smell, I don't think that's going to be a problem. I wouldn't touch your junk on a bet."

"Leave now!" a third yelled as it moved to stand in front of Brenden.

"Go away!" A fourth came out and moved to Zeke's feet.

"I think we found the right spot," Dante observed right before he whipped his Glock out and shoved it down his creature's throat. A loud bang filled the air as he pulled the trigger. With a wet howl, the monster stumbled back a few steps before it crumpled to the ground. It twitched once,

then went still. Nothing, not even immortals like former werewolves, could survive having their brains blown out of the back of their head. So when it lumbered back to its feet and started that whole *No go! No touch!* spiel again Dante was so shocked he almost dropped his gun. "You've got to be fucking kidding me," he protested loudly, shaking his head in denial.

"They were transformed by black magic so traditional weapons aren't going to work on them." Ethan proved his belief when he holstered his gun and raised his empty palms instead. "Call Rafe and ask him if Dominic ever taught him how to call blue fire."

"Is it a hard spell?" Dante asked as he shot his creature again. Not that he had any hope of killing it that way, he just wanted to buy them some time.

"It's one of the hardest," Ethan confirmed, a grim look in his eyes. "It's also the only way to kill these things."

"Fuck!" Dante cursed.

"Don't touch!" the monster yelled as it lumbered back up.

"Rafe has just started to learn magic and now you expect him to graduate to the big leagues and do it while under fire?" Dante risked another glance over at Ethan. The warlock gave a sheepish shrug.

"I expressed my worries about him going out

alone with a team, but everyone acted like I was being an egotistical prick."

Zeke shot the monster standing in front of Ethan. The dark-haired vampire snarled, "That was because you were being an egotistical prick. You seem to thrive on it."

Ethan ignored him, instead looking over at Dante, "You got Rafe yet?"

Dante pressed his communicator. "Rafe, you there?"

"No, I'm at the frigging debutante ball," Rafe's sarcasm carried over. "Where in the hell do you think I would be?"

"Just because you're surrounded by a half dozen wolf-human hybrids who are bloodthirsty and want nothing more than for you not to touch it doesn't mean you have to get all cranky."

"They won't die," Rafe growled, sounding out of breath.

"Yeah, about that. Ethan says you have to use blue fire to kill them. You know anything about that?"

"Only that I don't know how to do it," Rafe's bleak tone matched Dante's reaction to his words.

"Fuck!" Ethan snarled, joining in the conversation. "I told Dominic you weren't ready. Fine, I guess I'll have to walk you through it."

"What can I do to help?" Dante asked.

"Just keep those freaks off me so I can work."

Ethan's voice was a strange echo since Dante was hearing him both in person and through the communicator. "Rafe, I want you to listen to the chant I'm saying. Repeat it with me and whatever happens, don't stop. I mean it. Don't stop. Even if one of these things jumps on your leg and starts humping."

"What happens if I stop?" Rafe gulped.

"The flame will turn against you and consume you from the inside out," Ethan replied.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No. Now you know why we don't teach this to beginners like you," Ethan snapped, sounding both pissed and disgusted.

For the first time, Dante wasn't fooled by his whole attitude. Ethan used mean words and anger the way he used his hood – as a shield. By pushing Rafe away, the warlock was protecting himself from the hurt of having his vampire brother reject him. It was the classic case of I'll-kick-you-before-you-kick-me.

Then Dante didn't have time to think about anything else but survival as more creatures came out the darkness and converged on them. Casting one last desperate look over at Brenden, he was relieved to see his mate was already shooting at the ones coming his way. But that would only hold them back for a while, not stop them. Their only hope of survival depended on the magics.

Dante shot wildly, stopping only to change clips. No matter how fast he fired, there was always another monster scrambling toward him. Some were bleeding or missing chunks of body parts from being shot, but that didn't even slow them down let alone stop them.

Over the chaos of gunfire, snarls, curses and yells, he could hear Ethan chanting in a foreign language. What was even more shocking was that Rafe was following along without stumbling over the words. This was the guy who could never master Pig Latin and yet here he was using magic talk like it was nothing.

A slight breeze brushed past him, it built up stronger and stronger until a hard vortex of wind whipped around the team and the monsters. The only sound now was the howling of the storm or maybe it was the wolf-like creatures. A bright blue light, so bright that he had to close his eyes, surrounded him. Dante screamed Brenden's name as he blindly reached out for him.

For several heart ripping, terror-filled seconds all his searching fingers found was air, then just as he was about to give up, he felt the familiar brush of his mate's touch. Sobbing with relief, Dante curled his fingers around Brenden's hand and pulled the male to him. As soon as he was close enough, Dante wrapped him up into a tight embrace and held him to his chest.

The blue wind continued to whip around them. Somehow he knew that it was hot and that it wasn't really air, but rather flames. Yet he felt no heat blistering his skin. He looked around for Zeke or Ethan, but all he saw was blue. Ethan had to be alive still or the magic wouldn't still be working. Or at least Dante hoped so. "Are you okay?" he yelled to Brenden.

"Yes, you?"

"I'm okay now that I know you're safe." Dante held him closer and just savored the feeling of his male. Using his free hand, he pressed the communicator. "Rafe! Kane! Is anyone there?" All he got back was static.

"Try connecting minds with Kane," Brenden suggested. "I wouldn't with Rafe though. Not if he's still doing the chant."

Dante nodded and tried to connect minds with Kane. All he got was a fuzzy, buzzing sound that wasn't unlike the static on the communicator. Brenden leaned up and brushed a soft kiss on Dante's jaw.

"It will be okay, babe," he reassured.

No sooner had he said that, then the wind started to die down. It was slow and barely noticeable, but it was happening. After about five minutes, it had settled down to just a mere breeze. They pulled apart and scanned the area.

Ethan still had his palms up in the air, eyes

closed, but had stopped chanting. All the color was gone from his face and he was trembling so hard that Dante could see it even from a distance. Zeke was several feet in the other direction, a look of stupefied awe on his face. How the team had ended up so far away when they had started back-to-back was a mystery to Dante, but he would figure that out later. All that mattered was they all made it out okay.

Or had they?

Letting out a hoarse cry, he ran across to Ethan.

The warlock's eyelids slowly fluttered open, revealing his bloodshot eyes.

"Rafe?" Dante pleaded.

"He's okay. Better than okay, he managed the spell and the entire team is safe now." A wry grin spread out over Ethan's face. "He puked his guts up though. You make sure to ride him about it."

Dante looked around for the creatures, but all he saw were several piles of ash. "You killed them all? Just like that?"

"Yeah, it's magic that we're only supposed to use on rare occasions though since it's so dangerous," Ethan replied in a dull voice. "It takes a lot from us, too."

"You're scary. You realize that?" Zeke declared as he walked up and clapped Ethan on the shoulder.

The warlock swayed from the blow, but

remained standing. "We still need to find the spell." Ethan swallowed hard and took in several deep breaths.

"Why don't you let us search?" Dante suggested. "You look a little tired." Actually, the warlock looked almost as bad as the time he'd seized and passed out while helping out the panther, but Dante decided to be kind and not point that out.

The three vampires spread out and soon Zeke shouted that he had something. Dante and Brenden rushed over just as he was pulling a small burlap bag out of the earth. With trembling fingers, Zeke untied the rope holding it closed, and pulled out a rolled up piece of paper.

"That's it," Dante exclaimed, not even having to see it further. Even with the strong scent of the Detroit River wafting up, he could still smell the panther blood soaked into the paper.

"Bring it here," Ethan commanded softly.

Dante brought it over to the warlock, who unrolled it. The paper was full of the same black symbols as the one they had found on the panther.

Ethan whispered a few words and the paper burst into flames. Once it was ash, like the creatures, he looked back up at the vampires. "Can we go back home now? I really could use a nap."

CHAPTER TEN

Ethan slowly lumbered out the back of the van and tried to look as steady as possible as he planted his feet on the painted grey concrete of the clan garage. The bright lights played havoc on his aching head. As he massaged his temples with his fingers, he swallowed hard against the bitter saliva building up in his mouth since his stomach wasn't feeling so hot either. The last thing he wanted was a repeat performance of his one-man vomit act.

"Hey, you doing okay?" Morgan asked as she walked up.

Ethan noticed she wasn't wearing the green cloak all female witches wore, but rather the all black uniform of the vampires. He glanced over to where she had come from and saw that Dominic was in a uniform, too. It seemed they were embracing their new clan fully. "I'm fine." Ethan smiled. He noticed that she was pale and looked a little shaky. "How about you?"

"I'm a little drained," she admitted. "We all are."

"Yeah," Ethan replied absently as he gazed over at Rafe. He was laughing at something Kane said. Dominic leaned over and kissed Rafe on the cheek before he talked in his ear. Ethan wondered how it would feel to be able to relax with others like that. To have others who actually gave a damn that you came back from a mission alive.

While he had fellow magics who had served under him when he had still lived at the coven, nobody had ever dared get too close to him for fear of Olivia. Only Morgan had the courage to be his friend and then she had left. He was so caught up in his musings that when Dante came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder, Ethan jumped.

"You did great out there." The vampire smiled, flashing his fangs. "We're all going to the cafeteria to grab a beer. Why don't you join us?"

Ethan was tempted. But then he looked up at Rafe and all his courage fled. "Thanks, but I think I'll just go back to my room and grab some tea."

"Tea?" Dante raised a dark brow. "Dude, you just lost some badass points by saying that."

Ethan smiled, despite himself. "I still don't feel so hot and it helps me, you jackass."

"He doesn't bite, you know."

"Who?" Ethan asked.

"Rafe, he doesn't bite. Well, since he is a vampire he does, but what I mean is if you actually tried talking to him, he wouldn't turn you away," Dante advised.

"I've tried and he made it clear he wanted nothing to do with me." Ethan choked on the words, hurt making him way too emotional.

"No, you've been a dick around him."

When Ethan went to argue, Dante put a hand up to stop him.

"Don't even try to deny it because you have. I'll bet if you went up to him as his little brother and not some jerk with a chip on his shoulder, you'd be amazed at the reception you got."

"Dante's right," Morgan agreed. "Rafe has a real protective streak in him and I know he would love to get to know his baby brother better."

"I don't need him or his protection," Ethan argued, even as his heart argued with his declaration.

"It's not a weakness to want family." Dante's gaze was all-too-knowing for Ethan's liking.

"I'm really tired and I just want to crash." Ethan flashed what he hoped was a convincing smile. "Maybe I'll catch up with you guys later."

"Ethan, don't go," Morgan protested as he walked away.

"Sorry, really tired." He didn't even turn as he gave them one last farewell wave. Ducking his

head so he didn't have to make eye contact with anyone, he quickly made his way to his room. Once he got there, he pulled out his key and slid it in. A wave of loneliness hit him so hard it made him pause, hand on the knob, as he took a deep breath. All that waited for him on the other side of the door was the cold floor and his dark memories. They made for crappy companions, too.

Would it really hurt to go grab something from the cafeteria for once? He could just sit in the corner and not even bug Rafe with his presence. Nobody would probably even know he was there. Turning on his heel, he started to the cafeteria. Since it was midevening it was pretty crowded, but everyone had already got their food so he was able to walk up to the serving line. There was a pretty redhead working and her eyes nearly popped out of her head when she saw him.

"Wow, I thought you were never going to eat in here," she exclaimed in a high-pitched voice. "We have all been taking bets to what you were eating to survive."

"Toadstool and cattails," Ethan quipped.

"No way!" Her eyes got even wider.

"I was kidding." Ethan just managed to keep in his laughter, not wanting to insult her. "I had some stuff I had brought from home. It was all normal food though, I promise."

"Oh." She almost seemed disappointed. "I guess that makes sense. So what can I get you? It's macaroni and cheese night."

"Tempting," he lied as his stomach did a slow roll. It never failed, whenever he used dark magic he got nauseous. "I just need some tea though."

"Sure, what kind would you like?" She flashed him a huge smile, showing off her fangs. Funny on her they didn't look menacing at all.

"I don't suppose you have ginger, do you?" he asked, hoping that Dante never found out. If the vampire did, there would never be an end to the ribbing.

"Sorry," she frowned, acting devastated that she had failed him. "I've got raspberry though. How about that?"

She looked so eager, he didn't have the heart to let her down. "Sounds perfect, thanks." She ran off to get it and was back in seconds, cup and saucer in hand.

As she passed it over, he noticed a couple of cookies balanced on the edge.

"They're ginger," she supplied brightly.

"Thanks." He smiled, touched by her gesture.

"My name's Jessica, by the way." She flashed him a saucy look. "If you ever get lonely, call me. I wrote my number on the napkin."

"Maybe I will," Ethan replied, wondering how it would feel to have her straddle him and sink her

fangs into his neck. He really needed to come to the cafeteria more often. Giving her one last smile, he left the line and went to find a table.

It was packed, but he managed to find an empty table in the furthest corner. He was lucky enough to make it without running into anyone he knew. Sinking into the chair that was closest to the wall, he used the opportunity to study the vampires.

He spotted Rafe at a table way across the room. He was with his brothers, Morgan, Dominic and Zeke and they were all laughing and having what seemed to be a great time. Unbidden, his gaze drifted to and locked on Zeke.

Now there was a pair of fangs that he really wouldn't mind sinking into him. The large vampire was slouched in his seat, his long muscular legs stretched out in front of him. Ethan's gut grew tight as he watched the way those muscles shifted just right under his dark cargo pants.

Zeke brought his beer to his lips and took a long drink.

Ethan watched, mesmerized as he wondered how it would feel to have those full lips on his body. How nice it would be to trace them with his tongue, before he stroked his fangs and plunged inside his mouth to tease and taste.

Goddess, he was really losing it. Here he was

getting a boner over a vampire who had made it perfectly clear he wanted nothing to do with him. Ethan had the sudden urge to bang his head into the table so maybe he could knock some sense into his own thick skull.

"Hello," a high-pitched voice said.

Ethan was so startled by the interruption, he nearly spilled his tea. Looking down, he saw it was a little girl around seven or eight years old.

Small and skinny, her brown hair was pulled back into a thick braid that had a *Hello Kitty* clip on the end. There was a matching backpack slung over her shoulder. Her tiny face was dwarfed by the biggest brown eyes he'd ever seen and when she smiled, she had the cutest set of dimples. She also had a tiny set of fangs.

"Hello," he returned, smiling back at her. It couldn't be helped. Fangs or not, she was the sweetest thing he'd ever seen.

"My name is Misty." She scrambled into the seat next to him and made herself right at home.

"Oh, you're Eric's little girl." Ethan had heard the clan leader had a daughter. "My name's Ethan."

"I know." She reached over and snagged one of his cookies. Biting into it, she spoke around the crumbs, "Everyone is talking about you."

"I probably don't want to even know what they're saying," Ethan said, more to himself than

her as he grabbed the other cookie and sank his teeth into it.

"You probably don't," she agreed with a sigh. They sat in silence for a second before she gave him a hopeful look. "Morgan always does tricks for me."

"Tricks?" Suspicion crept up Ethan's back. There was no limit to what Morgan would do to keep a kid happy. All the children at the coven adored her and from what he'd heard, the same was true with the vampires. Him on the other hand, well, suffice to say kids didn't generally like him too much.

"You know," she whispered in a stage whisper, "magic tricks. My favorite is when she makes a ball of flame dance around her hand."

"Sorry, kid, I don't do birthday parties," Ethan drawled. He instantly regretted his answer when tears welled up in her huge eyes.

"Okay," she replied in a dejected voice. Her bottom lip trembled. "You probably couldn't do something as neat as Dominic anyway."

"Dominic does tricks for you?" Ethan was shocked that the former dark warlock would actually spend time entertaining kids. He should have known better though, ever since Ethan's coven had adopted that jerk, he had been Mr. Perfect. After he was done making all the children in the world happy, Dominic probably finished off

his good deeds by helping old ladies across the street. "I'm way better than Dominic," Ethan protested.

"I don't know." Misty shook her head. "He's pretty neat."

Ethan snorted. "Do you have some paper in that backpack?"

Misty shrugged it off and opened it. Taking out several pieces, she asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Just watch and see." Ethan took the paper from her and spread it over the table. Holding his hand over it, he muttered an incantation. The paper twitched before it came to life, folding and twisting by itself. All the pieces followed suit. Twining and folding around each other until it was in the shape of a sea serpent.

"Snuggles!" she screamed in delight. Snuggles was the sea serpent who lived in the Detroit River.

Other children rushed the table and soon Ethan found himself surrounded by almost every clan child. Paper was thrown at him and he enchanted them all until the table was covered by almost every mythical creature imaginable. It was a strain on his body since he was already low on magic, but it was so worth it to see the looks of delight on their faces

The children's screams of happiness and laughter soon brought adults to the table and

Ethan found himself in the position he'd always dreaded, the center of attention. But for once he didn't mind because he was too caught up in how good it felt to make the kids happy.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rafe standing on the outside of the group. Morgan and Dominic were by his side and they both wore looks of astonishment. Rafe had a half-smile on his face.

"Better than Dominic?" he couldn't resist asking Misty.

"Way better!" she clapped her hands in excitement when a paper dragon flew over their heads.

By now, he was using his magic to keep dozens of paper creations alive and his body was beginning to sway with the effort. Normally it wouldn't have taken this much out of him, but after all the activity of the night, he was feeling it. Morgan whispered something in Rafe's ear and the vampire came forward.

"Okay, kids, enough for tonight," Rafe announced.

There was a groan of disapproval from the crowd.

"I'll come back tomorrow," Ethan stunned himself by blurting.

"Promise?" Misty prodded.

"Yes, I promise." He grunted in surprise when

she threw her skinny arms around him and hugged tight. No one had ever hugged him in his entire life and he wasn't sure how to react. "Thanks," he said, gruffly, patting her awkwardly on her back.

The crowd left and Ethan was getting ready to do the same when Rafe sat down next to him. Morgan ran over with a tray of food and sat it down in front of the vampire. The look on Rafe's face as he thanked her was so tender it made Ethan's chest ache as he wondered how it would feel to have someone just once glance at him the same way.

"I think you have some lifelong fans there." Morgan smiled down at Ethan.

He shrugged it off like it was no big deal though her words warmed him.

She leaned down and gave Rafe a kiss. "Dominic and I are going to bed. You coming?"

"In a few. I need to talk to my brother first." Rafe rubbed her arm as he answered.

Ethan actually looked around for Dante or Kane before he realized Rafe was referring to him. They both were quiet until Morgan left. Ethan twirled the cup holding his now cold tea as he suddenly wished he was back in the comfort of his room. Rafe slid the tray across the table so it was in front of Ethan.

"Eat!" the vampire commanded.

"I'm not—" he started to protest, but Rafe cut him off.

"You look like shit, now eat."

"I've never been a fan of macaroni and cheese." Ethan eyed up the bowl of orange goo in front of him with distaste.

"Either you pick up that fork and start eating or I'll hold you down myself and shovel it in." The dark look on Rafe's face promised he would do just that, too. "You look sick and weak. You need fuel and those energy bars you've been living off aren't going to do it."

Ethan continued to eye it up, thinking about all the times various potions and poisons had been slipped into his food—the times it had been spat in. The only reason he had even trusted the tea earlier was because he had watched the female make it.

Rafe gave an aggravated sigh as he reached forward and took a bite. "See, it's safe. Now will you eat it?"

Ethan eyed up the food again, his stomach clenching in hunger before he picked up his fork and scooped up a bite. Bringing it to his mouth, he tried it. The second the warm food hit his mouth, he moaned in pleasure. Satisfied now that it wasn't tampered with, he dug in, eating with gusto.

"We were talking about you," Rafe said.

Ethan just shrugged, not willing to stop eating long enough to answer.

"Dante told us about how you made that scorpion appear. When Dominic and Morgan found out, they freaked out. You want to tell me why?"

Ethan paused, fork halfway to his mouth, as his heart hammered in dread. Finally deciding there would be no way to hide the truth, he admitted, "Because it was dark magic. Our kind is forbidden from using it."

"And yet you did. Why?"

"Because I knew Maggie wouldn't tell us the truth otherwise. I had to make her fear me more than the ones she was protecting." Ethan shrugged. "It was no big deal."

"According to Dominic it was a very big deal. Something that only a warlock who has trained for years in the dark arts could master. We couldn't figure out how the son of Olivia, one of the strongest white witches around, would know how to do that. Then Dante told me about how when you were raised by the Ninth you really got sucked in by the lure of dark magic."

Ethan clenched his teeth together. This was his worst nightmare come to life. Now that Rafe knew what he really was, he was going to send him back to Olivia. Ethan closed his eyes and waited.

"If I had known, nothing would have stopped

me from coming to get you,” Rafe said with a fierce growl.

Ethan opened his eyes in surprise. That hadn’t been what he’d expected. “You mean to kill me before I got too powerful?” He eyed up the exit and weighed his options on making a successful break for it.

“No, to take you away from that hellhole. I swear to you, I never knew that I had another brother and that he was suffering. If I did, I would have done everything in my power to protect you,” Rafe replied in a choked voice.

“Why?” Ethan asked stupidly. Vampires hated magics.

“Because you’re my brother and with me, that means something.”

“You don’t even know me.” Ethan swallowed hard, fighting hard to keep his face from looking too hopeful.

“No, and I would love to change that. Look, I know we didn’t get off to a great start, but believe it or not, you do mean something to me.”

“I don’t need anybody.” Ethan shook his head, still not willing to believe that Rafe could actually give a damn. This all had to be some joke.

“Kid, I can’t think of anyone else who needs someone more than you. You come off as a jackass, but that’s all to hide how scared and alone you feel. Where you come from, you may be some

big shot, powerful warlock, but here you're just my little brother and I'm going to protect you."

"What are you trying to say?" Ethan finally dared to raise his gaze. The look on Rafe's face was so stone serious that he actually started to believe the vampire.

"You're not going back to that bitch if I have anything to say about it," Rafe growled. "Not after the way she treated you. For as long as you want it, you have a home with me. I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you're never hurt again, too. Dante and Zeke told me about how you can't even sleep in a fucking bed because of the harsh way you grew up. I also know why you don't eat any food you don't make yourself. You were hurt by the Ninth—bad."

"I made it out okay." Ethan was shocked that Rafe was actually getting outraged on his behalf.

"No, you didn't. That's why I'm going to find those fuckers and make every last one of them pay for hurting my little brother."

Ethan directed his attention back to his food and started eating again, not trusting himself to talk. He hadn't cried in years and damn if he was going to start now. Not when he'd finally got what he'd always wanted most. A family.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dante walked into his quarters and found Brenden sprawled out on the couch, his gaze fixated on the TV. He must have showered because his hair was wet and slicked back, plus the fresh smell of soap filled their small living area. For once, he was out of uniform, instead wearing a pair of ripped jeans and a *Family Guy* tee. "What are you watching?" Dante asked as he undid his gun holster and put his various weapons away.

"Shark Week." Brenden ran his tongue over a fang.

Dante's cock jerked in reaction. "I love Shark Week." Dante became fixated on Brenden's lips. Full and soft, he never got tired of feeling them caress his body.

"I guess I should probably be cheering for the sharks now," Brenden mused with a wry smile.

Despite his joking, there was an aura of sadness so strong around him that Dante felt his own gut

clench in reaction. "Hey, what's wrong?" Dante crouched down in between Brenden's knees so they were facing each other.

"Am I doing the right thing by making the sunlight grenades?" he asked in a tight voice.

Dante paused, not knowing if there really was a right answer to that question. "What do you think?" he finally said.

"When I first made them, it was to get back at the VRF and Corbin. For years, when I was still human, I didn't know where Toni was. The whole family thought she was dead. Then I found out she was alive, a vampire and Corbin had been abusing her and it nearly killed me. The worst was how he made me a vampire, too, to punish her."

"So you regret being brought into this life?" Dante felt like he'd been punched in the face.

"Of course not, babe." Brenden reached out and gently cupped Dante's cheek. "Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me and that would have never happened if I were still human. I just hate the way it happened. I know the guilt tears Toni up inside. That's one of the reasons I made the damn grenades in the first place. I wanted to make them hurt for hurting her."

Dante didn't even try to deny all the worry he'd felt about the weapons. Ever since the VRF had found out about them, there had been a bounty on Brenden's head. They wanted him alive, too, so

they could use his knowledge for their side. The mere thought of them getting their hands on his mate made Dante nearly crazy with rage. He had no doubt in his mind they would use whatever methods necessary to get Brenden's secrets. But that wasn't what his mate needed to hear now.

"We have already saved countless Drone lives because of the sunlight grenades," Dante reassured. "Just the other night, we saved that poor panther kid because of it and he was able to tell us stuff that finally put us ahead in this war. You may have made the weapon with just revenge on your mind, but we've already managed to do so much good because of it."

"You think so?" Brenden's eyes grew hopeful.

"I know so." Dante leaned forward and brushed his lips over Brenden's mouth. "Regardless of what you think, too, I trust you. I trust you not to leave me, to always stay good and to always do the right thing."

Before Brenden could respond, Dante captured his mouth into a heated kiss. With a moan of surrender, Brenden tilted his head to the side and wrapped his arms around Dante's shoulders. He let out a small whimper of passion when Dante licked his fangs.

"I want to suck your cock so bad." Dante moaned between kisses. "Please let me."

"Damn, it." Brenden gave a small chuckle.

"You should know by now that's something you don't have to ask permission for."

Dante pulled back, pausing just long enough to give his chin a gentle love bite before he reached down and unzipped Brenden's pants. Freeing his mate's cock, Dante admired it as he stroked the hard length. "I love how big you are," he crooned, swiping away the pearl of liquid that had formed on the tip.

"Enough talk." Brenden bared his fangs with a hiss. "Take it in your mouth."

Dante smiled, loving how his once shy mate had no qualms about making his needs known. Parting his lips, he slid them around Brenden's erection. Dante loved doing this. Dropping in front of his male, opening his pants just enough to get to him and then sucking him off. It was such a thrill knowing he could have Brenden hot and ready in just a matter of seconds.

"That's it," Brenden moaned, his dark lashes fanning his flushed cheeks as he closed his eyes. "You always know how I want it."

Dante smiled around his cock. It was true, he did know exactly how Brenden liked to be sucked. Using all those skills, he brought his mate right to the edge. Just as he knew Brenden was about to come, Dante pulled back.

"You're killing me here," Brenden panted, a desperate look of need on his face.

"I'm teasing you and you know it." Dante got up and straddled Brenden's hips. Almost sitting on his lap, he faced him. Eyeing up his mate's fluttering jugular, Dante licked his lips.

Brenden knew what he wanted and tilted his head to the side, exposing his throat even more. With a groan, Dante barred his fangs and sank them into the tender flesh of Brenden's neck.

Brenden cursed loudly as he jacked his hips up.

Not wanting him to come quite yet, Dante reached down and squeezed the tip of his cock to hold him off. Brenden snarled, but otherwise didn't protest. Closing his eyes, Dante savored the sweet taste of his male's blood as it filled his mouth and slid down his throat.

As an immortal, Dante had lived many years and in all that time he'd tasted from the veins of several others, none could even begin to compare to the addicting taste of his Drone. If he lived another thousand years, Dante knew there would never be another for him. Pulling back, Dante swept his tongue over the pinpricks to seal them closed. Cupping the back of Brenden's head, Dante urged him forward. "Your turn. Drink from me now."

He jumped when he felt Brenden's tongue hesitantly dart out to caress the tender cords of his neck. Even though he was no longer a fledgling, Brenden was still sometimes shy when it came to

feeding. It wasn't until Dante gave him another little nudge that Brenden finally sank his fangs in.

Dante moaned as bliss rocked through his body. If done right, feeding could be pleasurable and Brenden sure as hell knew what he was doing. His lips moved against his neck as he took in drags of blood and Dante had to dig his nails into the back of the couch to hold himself back from shooting off right then and there even though his damn pants weren't even off yet.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, yet all too soon, Brenden pulled back and licked the wounds closed. "I want to fuck you," Brenden whispered against his flesh.

"Yes, we're getting to that," Dante teased as he started to undo his own pants.

"No, you don't get it." Brenden reached between them and stilled Dante's hand. "I. Want. To. Fuck. You."

His gaze locked onto Brenden's earnest face, Dante sucked in a breath. Always the top, he'd never allowed anyone to penetrate him. Not even when he'd still been in prison and had been trading away favors for scraps of food. It always had to be him who was in control—the one on top.

"Please." Brenden licked away some remaining blood from his bottom lip as he continued to gaze up. "Trust me."

Dante was scared, but as he saw the look of

pure love in Brenden's eyes, he knew he could no more deny this request than he could stop breathing. Not saying a word, he slowly nodded instead.

Smiling wickedly, Brenden jumped to his feet so fast he almost knocked Dante onto his ass. They both recovered quickly, their mouths meeting in a passionate kiss. Dante tasted his own blood lingering inside Brenden's mouth as he slipped his tongue inside to stroke and caress.

"I do love you," Dante declared, breathlessly as they peeled each other's clothes off. Soon they were naked, both of them allowing their hands to explore and caress.

Fully expecting to be led to the bed, Dante was shocked when Brenden got behind him and bent him over the small table they sometimes took meals at. It was rough, it was primal and Dante had never been so turned on in his entire life. Gripping the edges of the table for support, he tensed as he waited in eager anticipation. When he felt a cool slick finger tease the crease of his ass, he jumped.

"Where did you get lube?" he asked shocked. "You actually carry that in your pocket?" he teased, echoing the same sentence Brenden had said to him the first time they had been together.

"Yup, what can I say, I was a Scout and they always taught us to be prepared." Brenden slid the

finger up his hole.

Dante groaned, never knowing that he could get such pleasure from a gentle intrusion. "Oh hell," he moaned.

"You like?" Brenden asked as he slid the digit in and out.

"God yes." The pressure on his cock became too much and Dante reached down and stroked himself as Brenden slid another finger inside him, stretching him out even more

Dante had never thought it was possible, but after a few more minutes, he was begging Brenden for his cock. With a sly chuckle, Brenden had mercy on him and pushed his erection inside Dante's ass.

They both went still, letting their bodies get used to the unusual sensations. Dante wanted so bad to thrust back, but held himself back. This was Brenden's claiming so he had to be the one in complete control. Finally Brenden moved back and then slammed into him once, twice before he started fucking him so hard the table made scraping noises against the floor.

"Grab my cock," Dante pleaded since he couldn't do it himself anymore. He had to grip the table with both hands to keep himself in position.

"Sorry," Brenden panted as he reached around and circled his hand around Dante's throbbing erection.

"Don't be sorry, this feels so damn good."

"I'm not hurting you?"

"Yes," Dante groaned, "but it's a good pain."

Whatever response Brenden might have made was lost in the roar of pleasure that ripped through Dante's body. He had such an intense orgasm that he forgot to breath as he released himself into Brenden's hand. Over the buzz in his head, he could dimly hear Brenden yell as his cock swelled. Hot come pulsed inside Dante's body as Brenden found his bliss.

After it was over, neither moved for a while as they caught their breaths. Finally, Brenden gave a soft laugh, "Well damn, now I'm going to have to take another shower."

"I guess you are." Dante raised himself on his elbows, but didn't get all the way up. "You need some help getting cleaned up?"

"I would love to have someone scrub me." Brenden ran his finger down Dante's spine, the touch making him shiver in pleasure.

"Well I better get to it then. I never want it said that I don't take care of my mate." Standing up, he took Brenden's hand and led him to the small bathroom connected to their room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I got into a fistfight with Jimmy Hart, what did you do?”

Ethan looked down as Misty took the seat next to him. In truth, it was a lot like being called to the Principal's office since they were sitting side-by-side in straight-backed chairs. They were even lined up against the wall outside of Eric's office. The only thing missing was the mean school secretary clacking away on a typewriter as she shot them angry looks.

“I don't know what I did,” he answered. He had been asking himself that same question over and over in his mind ever since the clan leader had sent the summons. “I didn't get into any fistfights though.”

“Did you call Mrs. Marson a fat sow, too?” Misty had her bag in her lap. She pulled out two packs of fruit snacks. Opening one, she took out a piece and ate it before handing him the rest.

“No, can't say I did.” He paused. “I didn't

know vampires could get fat."

"We can't." Misty shrugged as she opened her own packet and started eating. "I just said that to her because I always catch her looking at herself in mirrors. Toni says it's because she's a snob whose stuck on herself."

Ethan bit the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing. Then he caught a glimpse of something on her arm and all humor fled. Reaching out, he pulled it closer so he could examine it. "What's this?" he asked, even though he already had a sinking suspicion. He just didn't want to believe what he feared. It was too awful to even contemplate.

"It's the mark they give all us Drones." She acted like he'd asked a dense question.

Ethan rubbed the raised *D* scar that had been branded into her flesh. He'd heard that all Drones were marked that way by the VRF. In fact, it was a law that if not obeyed could send the offender to prison for hard time.

"But you were born a vampire not made one." His gut churned with rage as he thought about anyone harming her.

"Yes, but my mom was a Drone and my dad is one, too, so the VRF doesn't like me either."

"Did it hurt?" he rasped. If he hadn't had a vendetta against the VRF before, he would have now. By putting this on her, they were marking

her as a second-class citizen and deeming her not even fit to live. Ethan remembered the tales the panther had told them about how Drone clans were being eliminated.

"I don't even remember them doing it." She shrugged. "I was just a baby when it happened."

Now more than ever, Ethan understood the importance of the rebellion and how they had to win no matter the cost. It wasn't just the fact that they had aligned with the dark magic anymore either. A government that was willing to harm and kill children had no business ruling and had to be taken down.

"Don't be sad for me." She smiled suddenly, looking older than her years. "You were hurt, too."

"How did you..." Ethan started, trailing off when he remembered how Eric had said he wasn't the only one who could read minds. Shaking his head to deny it, he recalled how Misty had taken a bite of the cookie first last night and then she'd done it again with the snacks. She knew he wouldn't eat something unless it was safe. He'd heard of vampires who could read minds. Heck, Rafe and his brothers could. Ethan had just never expected it from anyone else at the clan because it was something only a few lucky Pure Borns could do. There had never been a case of a Drone being able to do it.

But then Misty wasn't a Drone. Not really. Despite what the VRF dictated, she had been born a vampire, regardless of who her parents were. So why was Eric keeping it a secret?

The office door opened and Eric stuck his head out. "Can you come in, Ethan?" He leaned forward so he could glare at Misty. "You wait right there and don't move a muscle. Your teacher called and told me what you did."

Misty rolled her eyes as she crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. "She's mean, Daddy."

"I don't want to hear it. This is the third time this month." Eric shook his head.

"Love you, Daddy," she sang out in a bright, hopeful voice.

"Love you, too, but you're killing me here." Waving Ethan inside, he closed the door and went behind his desk. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be. She's okay," Ethan said as he took a seat.

"Yeah, well she thinks the world revolves around you."

"I know what she can do." Ethan rushed on to add, "Don't worry I won't tell anyone. I swear to you, your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you." Eric was a couple of shades paler. "I just don't want more attention centered on her then there already is. The VRF already has a bounty on her because she's mine. If they were to

find out that a Drone child has an ability that only the precious Pure Borns are supposed to possess, they'd kill her just for spite."

"Yes, they would," Ethan agreed, a wave of fierce protectiveness going through him. "If you want, I could work with her on how to use the gift and mask it from others."

"What would your mother say if she were to find out that you were tutoring a vampire child?"

"The goal to this is to keep all this a secret, but even if it wasn't, I wouldn't care what she thinks."

"I see," Eric replied, his gaze thoughtful.

"No disrespect, sir, but just why did you call me here?" For one wild moment, Ethan worried that maybe Eric had heard about the dark magic and was going to toss the naughty warlock out on his ass.

"I wanted to thank you for your help the other night. I just got finished talking to Zeke and he said the teams would have died were it not for you."

"Zeke said that about me?" Ethan didn't even try to hide his shock.

"Yes, and he wasn't the only one impressed. You really went out on a limb for us and you didn't have to since you're not part of the clan."

"I want in," Ethan blurted, surprising himself as much as Eric. As soon as the words came out though, he knew it was the right thing to do.

"What do you mean?" Eric leaned forward on his desk.

"I don't just want to be some dignitary from the magics. I want to be part of your ranks, I want to fight."

"Do you realize what you're asking?"

"I know I'm not one of you, but neither is Morgan or Dominic. You don't have to give me any rank or anything, just make me a soldier." Ethan took a deep breath and added something that had never been easy for him, "Please."

"Why?"

"I've seen what the VRF is capable of and I want them stopped. They need to answer for what they've done to kids like Misty, to my brother, to all the clans they've decimated."

There was a long pause before Eric finally answered, "You do this and your coven may not welcome you back. Becoming our ally is one thing, donning our uniform and joining our armies is another."

"I know and I don't care." He didn't either. If he never stepped foot back into his coven again that would be fine by him.

"Okay." Eric nodded. "Let's go get you a uniform."

It was an hour later before he was all suited up and had his assignment. Following Eric's detailed

directions, Ethan went to find his new team leader – Brenden. This meant he would be serving on the same team as Zeke. A strange fluttering went through his body as he thought about all the time he would now be sharing with the dark-haired male.

Goddess, who would have thought that he could have fallen so hard for a vampire? There was no use in denying it anymore either. When he wasn't spending his waking hours thinking about Zeke, Ethan dreamed of him in his sleep.

Going into the large bunker that Brenden's team used to develop weapons in, Ethan walked up to him and handed him the orders. Brenden was crouched down next to a huge contraption and he set down his wrench to take them. Opening the paper, he grunted in surprise.

"Is this some joke?" He rubbed the side of his cheek, leaving behind a streak of grease.

"No, it's not." Ethan resisted the urge to shift nervously on his feet. He was well aware that he had now attracted the attention of all of the team and that included Zeke. They all gathered around Brenden to peer at the paper over his shoulder.

"Why would Eric give us the magic?" a skinny brown-haired one asked.

"Duh," another guy answered, "because we're the misfits and you don't get more weird than a warlock who wants to pretend he's a vampire."

"Just because he wants to fight with us doesn't mean he wants to be a vampire," Cherish scoffed. She was one of the few in the clan that Ethan knew by name. A small female with a mop of brown curls and an inquisitive mind, she was always tracking Ethan down to ask questions about coven life and customs.

"I guess he's okay since he's Rafe's brother?" the first one mused.

"Now you can't go by that," another piped up. "My brother was a Republican and a banker who went to jail for taking a bunch of investors for a ton of money."

"Ouch! I don't know what one of those three is the worst crime."

"Don't worry." Brenden grinned up at him. "After a while you'll get used to them."

The rest of the team didn't hear him because they were now arguing which was worst, to be a Republican, a banker, a con, or a warlock. Ethan was dismayed to hear way more votes going for warlock. Zeke was the only one not joining in the debate. He was leaning against a wall, his arms over his chest as he studied Ethan. A half-smile was playing on the vampire's lips, like he was laughing at a joke only he knew.

"Okay." Brenden stood and shook his hand. "Welcome to the team. Go with Zeke to the gym so he can see how you stand fighting-wise. I need

to know whether we can count on you when it comes to fists."

"This is going to be fun." Zeke grinned, showing off the sexiest set of fangs Brenden had ever seen.

Zeke led him to the training area and, for the next couple of hours, the vampire trained Ethan hard. Several times he wanted to curl up into a little girlie ball and give up, but Ethan didn't want to lose face so, despite the pain, he forced himself to continue.

It was hard though. Zeke pushed him harder than ever before. Most of Ethan's training had been in magic. Since fists and muscles were considered beneath a warlock, very little of his schooling had been dedicated to physical battle. Unfortunately, Zeke quickly figured that out and used it against him as he threw Ethan down on the mat time after time.

By the time he finally called a halt to the training, Ethan was out of breath and wincing every time he moved. Zeke led him over to a corner and handed him a water. Ethan took the bottle gratefully and chugged down the cold liquid.

"What game are you playing?" Zeke asked, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ethan argued as Zeke backed him up against the

wall. They were now hidden behind a huge stack of mats so even if Ethan had wanted to get help, no one would be able to see him.

"This." Zeke waved a hand at Ethan's uniform to indicate what he was talking about. "Who are you trying to fool?"

"Nobody." Ethan tilted his head up slightly so he could still look the male in the eyes. Zeke was really close now, trying to intimidate him, but unfortunately that wasn't the effect he was having.

Unable to stop himself, Ethan breathed in deep, taking in the dark, almost wild, scent of the vampire. His warm body seemed to call to Ethan and every time Zeke exhaled a breath, he could smell peppermint. Eyeing up the full lips that were barely concealing sharp fangs, Ethan wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

"Then why are you doing this?" Zeke's voice was now a low rumble. He moved closer so the hard length of his body pressed even more against Ethan. Their mouths were now inches apart.

"Because it's the right thing to do," Ethan whispered. Their hips brushed against one another and Ethan could feel that Zeke was hard. Hard and incredibly huge. That gave him the courage to reach up and press a hard kiss against the vampire's lips.

At first Zeke grew stiff, his lips hard and unyielding, then he growled and wrapped his

arms around Ethan's waist. It was everything Ethan had always dreamed it would be--hot, carnal, wet and pure heaven. He tried to move forward to get at Zeke better, but the vampire growled low in his chest and pushed Ethan harder against the wall.

Ooooookay, so Zeke wanted to run the show. That was okay by Ethan just so long as he could keep kissing him. Zeke slipped his tongue inside and Ethan thrust his forward to caress and stroke. He tasted like he smelled--wild and dangerous--and Ethan's cock throbbed in response.

"I don't know what kind of spell you've put on me, but all I can think about is tasting you--fucking you," Zeke rumbled in his ear.

"I didn't do anything to you," Ethan panted, his voice a near whimper.

"Bullshit, every time you talk, move, look at me, you do something to me." Zeke's lips moved down so they were hovering over the pulse on Ethan's neck. "I can't think straight from wondering what you taste like."

A soft hiss was Ethan's only warning before Zeke struck, sinking his fangs into his neck. There was only a brief flash of pain before a warm feeling of euphoria washed over his body. The empty water bottle slipped from his fingers as he closed his eyes and gave over to the bliss. Then just as quick as it had started, it ended.

Zeke pushed himself away with a growl. "No I can't. Not even with you." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What did I do?" Ethan asked confused. He could feel warm blood trickling out of the bite wounds, but that didn't seem to matter right now.

"It's not what you did, it's who you are. I can't get close to anyone who's a magic. Not after what your kind did to me."

"I'm sorry," Ethan whispered, feeling the cut of rejection. It shouldn't have hurt so much since it had been happening all his life, but for some reason coming from Zeke, it pained him more than all the others combined.

"Just stay the fuck away from me. This never happened." Zeke turned and left. He never once looked back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ethan was still nursing the hurt a half hour later as he was in his room getting ready to go on patrol. He was just finishing checking his weapons when the door to his quarters burst open and Rafe came in.

"What the hell?" Ethan demanded angrily. Rafe didn't answer him, instead coming up and grabbing him by the head. Tilting it to the side, his gaze honed in on the bite marks on Ethan's neck.

"Son of a bitch," Rafe breathed, fury making his eyes nearly black.

"It's not what you think." Ethan jerked away and retreated to the other side of the room.

"Zeke used you for blood like you were his bitch. He didn't even have the courtesy to close the wounds up when he was done," Rafe snapped.

"How did you find out?" Ethan resisted the urge to reach up and touch the throbbing bite marks. While it had felt good while Zeke had been doing it, ever since he pushed away, they had

been aching like a son of a bitch.

"I saw Zeke running laps around the gym like he was jacked up on something. I know from personal experience that nothing can get a vampire higher than taking in a magic's blood. Since I know he didn't tap Morgan or Dominic, I had a pretty good guess who it was."

"You?" Ethan quipped, playing dumb.

"No, you idiot, you."

"Oh," was all Ethan could come up with. He'd never dreamed his blood would affect Zeke that way.

"I'm going to fucking kill him for using you like that." Rafe let out a feral sounding growl as he turned to leave.

"I initiated it," Ethan called.

Rafe stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. "You want to run that by me again?" A tick developed on his jaw.

"I started it. I kissed him and then one thing kind of led to another." Ethan dropped his gaze.

"That still doesn't excuse him leaving you in this condition." Rafe waved at the bite marks. "A vampire only does that if he has no respect for his source. For that alone, he's going to feel my boot up his ass."

"I don't need your protection," Ethan lashed out. "I didn't have it while I was growing up so I sure as hell don't need it now."

"I told you, I didn't know about you." Rafe threw his hands up helplessly. "How can I protect someone I didn't know existed?"

"You may not have known about me, but I sure as hell knew about you. Every time I took a punishment from Olivia, it was your name she yelled over and over." An inner voice was telling Ethan to shut the hell up, but he was so far gone with hurt that he didn't heed it. "As far as I see, you owe me big time since half the beatings I took were because of you."

Rafe turned an unhealthy shade of green. "Shit, Ethan, I knew it was bad for you, but I had no idea."

"That's just it, you don't know," Ethan spat out bitterly. "So don't think you can walk into my life now and tell me how to live it." Not waiting for a reaction, Ethan brushed by Rafe and left to go on patrol.

Ethan didn't know how much time had passed as he walked the perimeter of the building. When Brenden had put him on guard duty, Ethan had been glad for the solitude. If he had gone out with the rest of the team, then he would have had to face Zeke and that was the last thing he wanted or needed right now.

A small shadow of movement caught his eye and Ethan came alert, his adrenaline kicking in.

Following it, he was both shocked and annoyed to see it was Misty. Her long hair was undone and she was dressed in a white nightgown. "Misty!" Ethan hissed. "What are you doing out here? Your dad finds out and you're going to be in big trouble."

She just kept walking, ignoring him. She didn't even turn her head in his direction.

Ethan huffed in irritation as he started to follow her. 'I'm serious, you need to get your little hide inside. Come on, I'll even sneak you back in so you don't get into trouble.'

When she still didn't answer him, Ethan stopped, alarmed, as the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Looking closer at the little girl, he noticed for the first time that she was barefoot and already had bleeding cuts on the soles of her feet. She wasn't even flinching as she continued to stumble onward.

"Misty!" he yelled louder, but she still ignored him, her vacant gaze directed ahead.

Of course, he should have realized it instantly, but he had never expected it in the middle of a clan of vampires. Misty was under someone's mind control. He wanted to kick himself for his stupidity. When he looked up and saw how far they had wandered from the clan building, he really, really wanted to kick himself.

It would have been best to bring Misty out of

her trance slowly, but there wasn't time for that. Waving his hand in front of her face, Ethan spoke the counter spell rapidly. She sucked in a deep breath as if someone had doused her with a bucket of ice water as she snapped out of it.

"Where am I? What happened to me?" she wailed, her eyes now clear.

"It's okay, sweetie," Ethan soothed as he grabbed her by the shoulders. "I've got you now, but we need to run back home."

"Why?"

No sooner had she asked, then the air filled with low growls. They came from every direction in the dark night. Ethan pulled up his Glock as he spun in a slow circle, trying to decide which way the threat was coming from, but it was useless because they were surrounded.

His hands twitched with the urge to use magic, but he knew that wouldn't work this time. When Zeke had taken his blood, he had inadvertently taken a lot of Ethan's magic with it. So now he could call up the blue fire no more than he could call up a passel of unicorns to ride to their rescue. Several large figures came from the darkness, forming a circle around him and Misty. He heard her stifle back a scream, but otherwise make no sound. The creatures' still sniffed the air in delight as if smelling her fear.

Not good. Not good at all.

"What do you want?" Ethan called into the darkness. He had no doubt the warlock who had beguiled Misty was there. He was proven correct when a male came into view, shouldering his way past two of the monsters.

He had on the red and black leather that marked him as a member of the Ninth. With rangy features and wild brown hair, he had a dangerous don't-turn-your-back-on-me vibe. Ethan didn't recognize him, but that didn't mean anything since the Ninth had the habit of picking up exiles from other covens. So long as they were willing to play dirty and had no soul, they were welcome.

Not wanting the warlock to see him as a magical threat, Ethan quickly masked his powers and ducked his head to hide the fact he didn't have fangs. He was hoping that and the uniform would be enough to fool him into thinking he was another Drone. "Let the girl go," he ordered as he put his body between Misty and the warlock.

"Sorry, we need her." The warlock smiled.

It did nothing to soften his features though, instead it made him look more sinister than ever. "This is low even for your kind," Ethan sneered. "Taking children. What are you, afraid to face a full grown adult?"

"No, we just know that the only way to make Eric more amicable is to take his daughter."

"Why should you give two squats about Eric?"

His clan is small they are no threat to you," Ethan tried to reason desperately even as a pit of despair in his stomach told him the true reason.

"Fuck, you're stupid, even for a vampire," the warlock sneered. "We want the sunlight grenades his clan has. If we have his daughter, then he will be more than willing to trade anything, even them, for her."

Misty whimpered and clutched Ethan harder, her tiny fingers digging into his arm.

"Take me instead," Ethan offered quickly.

"Why would we take you instead? You're nothing."

"Not true. I'm Brenden, the one who made the sunlight grenades in the first place," Ethan lied, hoping desperately they bought it. While he didn't have blue eyes like Brenden, they both shared the same shade of blond hair.

No! Misty projected into his head. Don't do it. They'll hurt you.

No they won't, kitten, Ethan reassured. Once they find out who I really am, they'll be mad, but they'll let me go.

Promise?

Promise. Even as Ethan sent that back, he knew he was lying. There was no way in hell he was going to get out of this alive. Then he felt Misty tremble against him and he knew it was worth it. She was an innocent and good where he was

tainted and unworthy. Besides that, this little girl had done something that nobody had ever managed to do, wormed her way into his shell of a heart and actually made him see there was some light in this world. If she were to be taken away, so many others would be affected by it. "Do we have a deal?" he yelled.

"What's to stop me from taking both of you?" the warlock asked, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. Ethan took his Glock and pressed it to his own temple.

Misty made a muffled scream of protest.

"I swear to all that's holy I'll do it. If I'm dead, then you'll never get the secrets of the grenades," Ethan vowed with stone cold resolve. He would, too, if that's what it took to save Misty. "Let her run away from here and I'll go peacefully."

"Fine, we'll let the vampire whelp go." The warlock nodded to the monsters to let her through.

No! Misty protested, mentally. I won't leave you alone.

You have to, sweetie. Run as fast as you can and tell your daddy about this so he can send help for me, Ethan urged even as he knew no help would be coming. One of the first lessons magics in his coven had been taught was you don't risk more lives to save just one soul in a rescue mission. It was better to lose one life than to lose many.

Misty gave one last strangled cry before she ran as fast as her bare feet could carry her.

Ethan waited until she was out of sight before he slowly lowered his Glock and tossed it away. He was about to raise his hands in surrender when the warlock hit him square in the chest with a magic bolt. The last thing Ethan saw was the asphalt rushing up to meet his face.

* * * *

Dante was just getting back from patrol with Brenden and his team when he saw Rafe charging up, a look of murder in his eyes. "Oh shit!" he cursed.

"What now?" Brenden asked warily, but he was used to Dante and his brothers fighting.

"You better grab Zeke and make his ass scarce. Rafe is coming and something tells me he knows what the vampire has been doing with his baby brother."

"Damn." Brenden craned his neck, looking for the sitting-duck vampire, but it was too late because Rafe had already found him and had tackled him.

"You son of a bitch," Rafe snarled as he delivered a left hook.

It was a testament to Zeke's guilt that he didn't even bother to fight back. The vampire just took

the beating, not lifting one finger in his own defense.

Dante ran forward and pulled Rafe off. "You're going to kill him," he warned as he grabbed Rafe by the waist and dragged him across the garage.

"The fucker deserves it," Rafe roared, fighting to get away. "I ran into Ethan earlier tonight and he had an open bite wound on his neck. Zeke fed off him and didn't even have the decency to close the marks. He just left him bleeding."

Dante sucked in a breath. If what Rafe said was true, then Zeke had just delivered one of the biggest insults to Ethan. He looked over at the large vampire, hoping he would deny it.

Zeke just hung his head in shame.

"How could you?" Dante asked, disgust dripping from his voice.

"I didn't mean for things to end that way, I—" his excuse was cut short by a high-pitched scream. Turning toward the source, they saw Misty come running in. She was dressed only in her nightgown and eyes were full of tears.

She ran right to Brenden and threw herself into his arms. "You have to get Daddy," she sobbed hysterically.

"Sure thing," Brenden assured in soothing tones. "What happened?"

"They have Ethan," she wailed.

The entire garage grew silent except for her

sobs as the implication of her words hit them. Finally it was Rafe who broke it, "Who has him."

"The bad warlock and doggy men. They were going to take me, but he lied and said he was Brenden so they would take him instead."

Dante's stomach did a flip as he instinctively grabbed Brenden's hand in a protective gesture. There was a low growl that filled the garage and Dante looked at Rafe, expecting it to be him. Only it wasn't Rafe, it was Zeke and the look of despair and rage in his eyes made for a pretty fierce combination. Letting out a roar of agony, he punched a hole in the wall.

* * * *

Ethan didn't wake up until he was being roughly dumped onto the ground. Cracking open his eyelids, he realized he was in a ceremonial room. His heart jackhammered in his chest as the familiar smells of blood and black magic hit his nose. He started to breathe fast and rapid, making wheezing noises. While he wanted to be brave and hide his fear, all the past memories hit him too hard.

"What in the hell is this?" an all-too-familiar voice asked.

More panic clawed at Ethan's insides as he recognized the voice of the Ninth's leader, Davis.

"I brought you Brenden, the vampire who makes the sunlight grenade," the warlock who had captured him proclaimed proudly.

"You fucking idiot. He's not a vampire, he's a warlock!" Davis roared.

Ethan flinched, remembering all-too-well all the times he'd been on the receiving end of that fury.

"But I didn't sense any magic coming from him?" the warlock protested in a whimpering voice.

Davis stormed over, grabbed Ethan by the hair and roughly pulled him to a kneeling position. Despite the fear coursing through him, Ethan still managed to throw off a cocky grin, "Hey Davis, buddy, long time no see."

"Who is he?" the warlock asked with a pout.

"He's Olivia's whelp. That's the only reason I'm going to let you live after your massive fuck up. I'm going to have fun breaking this one and returning the pieces to his mommy."

Ethan laughed. He couldn't help it. The mere idea that Olivia would actually give two shits if that happened was so ludicrous that he couldn't keep in the hysterical giggles. That was until Davis backhanded him across the face. Ethan instantly sobered as he tasted blood in his mouth.

"Why would you sacrifice yourself?" Davis sounded genuinely perplexed.

"Because some things are worth dying for,"

Ethan replied simply.

Davis grabbed his hair again and jerked his head to the side so he could see the bite marks. "So you like to have vampires suck on you?"

"Really, who doesn't like a good suck?" Ethan shot back with a wicked grin.

"We'll see how much you like it when I let my vampire friends drain you dry." Davis stroked the side of Ethan's cheek. "But not before I have some fun with you. By the time I'm done with you, you'll be begging me to kill you."

Ethan tried hard to keep the fear off his face. He knew the warlock was going to make good on his promise. He also knew that there would be no cavalry coming to rescue him either. He was going to face his death like he had faced his life--completely and totally alone.

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.