



BOUND BY BLOOD

DRONE VAMPIRE SERIES

STEPHANI HECHT

Ethan thought that he'd finally overcome all the horrors of his past. With his lover, Zeke, by his side and an entire clan of vampires at his back, he thought he could finally have true happiness. That all changes when an enemy from his old life comes back and threatens all that Ethan holds dear. Then when he finds out that his old coven is under attack, Ethan knows he will have to embrace his dark side in order to save his childhood home and all those he used to hold dear. But once he gives over to the dark magic, will Ethan even be able to come back? And if so, will he lose Zeke's love in the process?

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Bound by Blood
Copyright © 2010 Stephani Hecht
ISBN: 978-1-55487-469-9
Cover art by Angela Waters

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

BOUND BY BLOOD
DRONE CHRONICLES BOOK BOOK SEVEN

BY

STEPHANİ HECHT

DEDICATION

*For all those teachers who work so hard to teach
the love of reading to our next generation.*

CHAPTER ONE

Ethan really didn't feel like killing anyone tonight, but didn't see any way around it.

The evening had started out innocently enough. Well...as innocent as a half dozen warlocks who each had a major chip on their shoulder could be. They were patrolling the streets of Detroit, looking for any sign of trouble. The problem with looking for trouble was you usually found it and damned if they hadn't stumbled upon a bunch of it.

It all took form in one man, or rather one warlock who reeked of dark magic. Since the only reason a dark magic would be hanging out in Detroit would be to cause someone harm, Ethan and his warlocks had immediately started trailing the bastard. Then the dark warlock had made things even more interesting when he'd ducked between two buildings. Ethan immediately motioned for the others to follow.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" his second in command, Kavan, asked.

Ethan turned to scowl at him. Like all the

others, Kavan had the hood of his black leather top pulled up so Ethan couldn't see the warlock's face, but he knew it was tight with stress. "What do you suggest we do?" Ethan snapped. "Wait until he injures an innocent or attacks the clan?"

For several months now, his band of covenless warlocks had been living with a Drone Vampire clan. Although none of them had gone as far as Ethan by taking a vampire as a mate, with the exception of Kavan and Derik. Then again, none of them were quite like him either. Right before the others had come to live in Detroit, Ethan had been captured by Pure Born vampires and a dark warlock. By the time he was rescued, he had been dying and his mate, Zeke, had turned Ethan in order to save his life. So now he was an anomaly. Not quite vampire, not quite warlock, he had a boot planted firmly in both worlds.

"Of course I don't think we should let this bastard troll around unchecked. My third is a vampire and both Derik and I would rather die than see any harm come to her." Kavan finally turned to face the others as he curled his upper lip into a snarl. A lock of his blond hair had fallen over his eyes, making him look even more sinister for some reason.

"Then what's the issue?" Ethan cocked a brow, not even bothering to hide his irritation. Last time he looked, he still led their small band of warlocks,

which meant he didn't like being on the business end of questions.

"Did you get a good look at the dark warlock?" Kavan slightly lowered his voice, as they got closer to their target.

"Yes, it's Peter."

"He's lower level," Kavan reminded, his harsh features even more drawn than normal.

"He's still part of the Ninth and that's enough for me." The Ninth were the most notorious dark coven around. Well known for their brutality and murderous ways, they brought fear to all supernatural creatures. That said a lot considering how nasty some of said creatures could be. Hell, one time Ethan had even seen a fire demon piss itself in fear just at the mere mention of the coven.

Ethan and his buddies had an even bigger bone to pick with the Ninth than most though. As teenagers, they had been sent to train with the evil coven. Most of them still carried scars, both inside and out, from those horrible years.

As they walked between the two buildings Peter had ducked into, Ethan felt a predator's smile spread over his face. The dumbass had walked right into a trap. At the back of the buildings, a tall brick wall had been erected, forming a barrier not even a scared-as-shit warlock could get past.

"Give it up, little rat. We've got you cornered."

Ethan let out a low chuckle. On either side of him, the rest of his group spread out slightly and covered the entire width of the makeshift alley.

Peter jumped, his loud squeak filled the night air before he slowly turned around and lowered his hood. Dressed in the red and black colors of the Ninth, the bastard wasn't even trying to hide his affiliation. It insulted Ethan since all of magical society knew this was his stomping ground.

"I don't know what pisses me off more—the fact that the Ninth thinks it's okay to come piss in my sandbox or the fact that they sent you—the weakest piece of shit they have." Ethan's hands hung loose to his sides, ready to shoot off a magic blast at the first sign of aggression.

Peter's watery blue-eyed gaze slowly traveled over the warlocks.

Ethan could almost hear the man's brain ticking as he slowly recognized them.

The dark warlock tried to put on a grin, but his trembling lips gave away his fear. "Ethan," Peter gushed in an overly happy-to-see-you tone.

"Peter," Ethan patronized, with the same inflection to his voice.

"I never expected to run into you here." Peter started to nervously wrench his hands together.

Kavan let out a loud snort of disbelief while Derik cursed under his breath. Besides that, there was no noticeable reaction amongst Ethan's crew.

He knew they were all as pissed as him though. With all they'd been through, he could almost read their emotions as well as his own.

"Don't lie. It insults us and makes you look even dumber than you already are." Ethan slowly shook his head as he ran his tongue over one of his fangs. He did it nice and slow so there was no way Peter could miss it.

"So the rumors are true—you're a vampire, now." Peter noticeably swallowed, his large Adam's apple bobbing against his scrawny neck.

"Are you going to try to say that you already didn't know that? Come on, it has to be the talk amongst magics. The son of the great Olivia, now a throat sucker." Even as he used the derogatory term for vampires, Ethan cringed. Once he'd thrown it around with the rest of the magics, now it stung since he'd heard it used in reference to him so many times and never in a good way.

"Well, it's not that shocking. Not since we found out she already had a son who was half vampire." Peter gave a nervous laugh.

"Ah, but my half-brother was born that way. He was raised by his vampire father and knows nothing of our ways. Now me on the other hand, not only do I know about magic, but I know how to use it." Ethan flicked his wrist, bringing up a small fireball. "Thanks to your coven, I know all kinds of fun ticks, too."

"You can't kill me," Peter shrieked, holding his hands up in a defensive manner.

Ethan cocked his head to the side, but still didn't call in the fireball. "Why not? It seems like a great plan to us."

"If you do, then I won't be able to give you the message Davis sent." For the first time, Peter showed some confidence, a sinister gleam coming to his eyes.

Ethan's chest went cold at the mention of the Ninth's leader. Not only had he made his training years hell, but the bastard was also the one who'd captured and tortured Ethan a few months ago before turning him over to be drained dry by Pure Born vampires. Anger surged through him, replacing the shock. "So how does it feel, Peter, knowing that Davis thought so little of you to send you on this suicide mission?"

"Like I said, you won't kill me. Not if you want to know what Davis has to say, and face it, you're just dying to know what it is." Peter smirked, obviously thinking he had the upper hand.

Which just showed the guy was even more stupid than Ethan had given him credit for. "Do you remember Doyle?" Ethan cocked his head to one of his men. A dark-haired warlock who barely spoke, Doyle had black eyes that were so haunted they appeared wild at times. While other members of his crew had managed to get past most of the

memories of their training, it was clear Doyle still carried a lot of that baggage with him.

"Yes." Peter nodded, as his gaze darted to the warlock. All of his newfound cockiness faded.

"You better tell us what Davis said really quick or I'll lose interest and let Doyle take care of you." Ethan knew that Doyle would only be too happy to carry out that mission, too. Peter was a weak bastard and he'd taken great joy in bullying them all when they'd first come to train with the Ninth. For some reason, Peter had taken a particular interest in Doyle and been especially cruel to him.

While Ethan liked to believe that he was one of the good guys now, it still gave him a sadistic thrill to see the fear on Peter's face. Even better, the vampire part of him could feel the horror wash over the dark warlock. It was so potent, it almost had a taste to it. Despite himself, his fangs descended as bloodlust roared through his body. He fought to control himself, even though the primal instincts in him were screaming at him to attack. "The message," he prompted, ducking his head in hopes that a combination of darkness and shadows would hide the fact he'd vamped out.

"Davis is impressed with the work you've been doing here. Tales of your growing magical strength have been reaching his ears. He —"

"Did he just fucking say *reaching his ears*?" Kavan interrupted, his disgust ringing through the

air.

"Yeah, he did." Derik let out a short laugh. "Really, who talks that way anymore? I'm thinking somebody has been watching too many low budget fantasy movies."

"Seriously, Ethan, if he offers you a magical ring, do not take him up on it," Kavan snarked.

Ethan let them go, knowing the bullshit remarks both served to sooth their nerves and upset Peter even more. It wasn't until the chuckles had faded that he gestured for the dark warlock to continue.

"Davis is graciously offering to let you come back to the Ninth. He will allow you to continue to lead your men so long as you swear allegiance to him." Peter actually seemed to believe he was offering up some great prize.

Ethan exchanged incredulous expressions with Kavan and Derik. Friends since before they could walk, they didn't need words to know what each other were thinking. Yeah, they were just as pissed by the offer as he was. "Peter, I know you put the dumb in dumbass, but did you honestly believe I would agree to any of this when you were sent on this mission?" Ethan asked, as he twisted his hand so the fireball danced down his arm. Just as it reached his elbow, he allowed it to slowly dim out. It served as a little reminder that he did have almost full control of his powers now.

"Yes, I did. Anything has got to be better than living with those Drone parasites. It's bad enough having to live around bloodsuckers who were born that way, but to further lower yourself to associate with ones that used to be humans has got to disgust even you." Peter's face twisted in revulsion.

Ethan curled the corner of his mouth up with a hiss. "One of those Drones is my mate, you fucking idiot."

"I'm sure Davis will allow you to bring along your pet if you must."

"He is not nor will he ever be my pet." Rage made Ethan's voice gravely. Zeke was worth a hundred Pure Borns or dark magics.

"Ethan, you really need to consider Davis's offer. Now that the dark magics have joined up with the Pure Born vampires, you and your Drones have no hope of defeating us. If you come over to our side now, Davis will allow you to still keep your freedom and some power."

"So long as I agree to be his bitch," Ethan spat out bitterly. "No thanks. I'd rather be dead—again."

"That can be arranged." Peter snarled and flexed his fingers.

Ethan knew the bastard was gearing up to use magic. "Not by you it can't and you want to know why?" Ethan took on the cold, uncaring tone that

his trainers had so often used on him.

The fear came back over Peter's face.

Even though he knew it was wrong, Ethan savored it. After all the pain that the Ninth had caused them, it felt so damn good to finally be dishing it back.

"Why is that?" Peter croaked.

"Because, as soon as you walked into Detroit, you were as good as dead." Ethan knew how hard and brutal his words were, but he also knew that to show any sign of weakness would only encourage more of his enemies to come. While he despised having to go to the dark side, his need to protect the ones he loved was stronger.

"That's not fair. It's just me against all of you," Peter shrieked.

"That's rich coming from you. When we were just a bunch of scared teens you and your buddies had no issue stomping on us," Doyle finally spoke up. He lowered his hood, revealing the full fury of his expression onto Peter.

Ethan took one look at the rage and hurt on his friend's face and knew what he had to do. The only way his friend could ever heal was to have some form of closure. However, brutal it may be. "Doyle, finish off this piece of shit. Make sure you do it right so the Ninth knows what happens when they try to invade our space."

Not waiting to see how Doyle took care of

business, Ethan started to walk away, Kavan and Derik flanking him. If he had any doubts that Doyle was going to obey his order, the sounds of Peter's screams ringing down the city streets erased them. "As soon as he's done we need to go back to the Drone dwelling and inform Eric what we found," Ethan ordered, referring to the leader of the vampire clan.

"Do you think more will be coming?" Derik asked. The dark-haired male was Kavan's third, his sharp good looks in direct contrast to Kavan's more rangy appearance.

"I don't think—I know, and Eric is going to need to put his guards on watch for even more trouble."

"As if they already didn't have enough," Kavan declared grimly. Detroit was home to many of the worst—zombies, empusa, various shifter breeds and a full-grown sea serpent just being a few of them.

By now, Peter's screams had trailed off to loud, keening sobs. Ethan may have felt sorry for the warlock had he not seen firsthand all the evil the man was capable of. Ethan motioned for the group to stop and wait. He leaned against a parked car and rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to stave off the headache that was creeping up.

For three days now, Zeke had been gone on a mission. Not only was the vampire his mate, but

his sole source of blood. Ethan was beginning to feel serious hunger pains. Unfortunately, his suffering didn't go unnoticed by Kavan.

"You okay?" he asked, his grey eyes narrowing in concern.

"Yeah, just tired." Which was partly true. Since Zeke left, Ethan hadn't been getting much sleep either.

"Have you fed lately?"

Ethan almost smiled. Leave it to Kavan to get right to the heart of the matter. "No, but don't worry. I'm fine."

"Is it normal for vampires to go that long? Cherish usually drinks from Derik and me every couple of days and she's been turned longer than you."

No, it wasn't normal for him. Since he'd become a vampire, he had to drink daily or suffer the ill effects of blood thirst. That didn't mean he'd fess up to it though. No sense in worrying the others. Luckily, he was saved when Doyle rejoined them. The warlock seemed a bit pale and had the slightest of tremors in his hands, but otherwise didn't appear weak from using too much magic.

"It's done," he said shortly.

Ethan waited for him to say more, but as usual, the warlock was stingy with his words. Ethan started to ask for more details, but held back. If he knew one thing about Doyle, it was the warlock

knew how to follow orders. So even without checking, there was no doubt that not only had Peter been taken care of, but it'd been done in a way that would send a real back-the-fuck-off message to the Ninth. "I'm sorry you had to do it," Ethan sighed.

"I'm not," Doyle snapped.

"Let's go back and tell Eric what happened." The sun had been down for several hours now so the vampires should all be up and moving around.

"Can we stop by Starbucks on the way?" Derik requested.

Kavan groaned as he gave the group a sheepish shrug. "He's addicted to that place."

"Sure, why not," Ethan drawled. "Because nothing will draw attention to us more than seven hooded, leather-clad men going in and ordering a Venti Mocha."

"Does that mean yes?" Derik crinkled his brow in confusion.

Ethan sighed. "Lead the way."

CHAPTER TWO

The sun had been down for over seven hours before Zeke's team made it back to the clan dwelling. Glad that it wasn't his job to go and debrief Eric, Zeke immediately went off in search for Ethan.

Even though it had only been a few days, it had seemed like forever. Every moment he'd been away from his mate felt like torture. Up until recently, the realization that he'd grown to be that dependant on another would have terrified him. Now it just made him feel a little warm inside as he rushed around the dwelling. He looked in the cafeteria, training room and even the armory with little luck.

Where in the hell can he be? Zeke knew Ethan couldn't be out on a mission. He'd spotted more than one of the other warlocks, so where was his mate? Finally, out of frustration, he went to the communications room in search of their mutual

friend, Cherish.

The petite vampire was sitting in front of a computer. For once, her long, curly brown hair was down, the tresses reaching past her shoulders. Kavan and Derik sat on either side of her like some set of giant, hulking, magical bookends.

“Hey, you’re back.” Cherish smiled as he came into the room.

“Yeah, we just got in. Brenden’s still giving the report to Eric. How have things been here?” He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest like he didn’t have a care in the world. All the while, he wanted nothing more than to ask Cherish’s warlocks about Ethan, but held back. He and Kavan didn’t have a shining history and he hated to go to the jackass for anything.

Kavan still seemed to know what he wanted though. The warlock gave a knowing smirk as he absently twirled a piece of Cherish’s hair around his fingers. She looked away from her computer long enough to give both her guys a dotting smile and Zeke held back a grunt of disgust.

“Plenty of stuff happened.” Cherish let out a soft sigh as Derik kissed her on the cheek.

He missed the old Cherish—the one who was all business and didn’t allow herself to get so easily distracted. Now, she never went anywhere without her two magical goons by her side. Crap, she’d even gone so far as to mark them both with

a deep bonding bite, so now they'd forever be known as her property. Not that he and Ethan hadn't done the same thing to each other. Zeke claimed Ethan as quickly as possible. It's just neither one of them were half as annoying as Kavan. "What kind of stuff?" Zeke prompted.

"We ran into a warlock from the Ninth tonight," Derik supplied.

Out of the two, Zeke hated him the least. "Is everyone okay?" Zeke felt his gut clench in fear as the need to see Ethan grew. Even if he hadn't been physically hurt, just seeing one of his old tormentors probably ripped off some emotional *Band Aids*.

"Everyone on our side." Kavan gave another one of those smirks. "Can't say the same for that piece of trash from the Ninth."

It was on the tip of Zeke's tongue to ask just who had dealt the killing blow, but he held it back. While the worry of Ethan sliding back into the lure of black magic was always there, neither he nor Zeke ever dared vocalize it. It was kind of the big fat, thousand pound, darkside elephant in the middle of the room.

"It was Doyle who killed him, not Ethan. So you can get that look off your face," Kavan snapped. With the long scar that ran along his jaw and the hard glint in his eyes, he appeared every bit the predator he was.

"What look is that?" Zeke challenged, he could be every bit as dangerous as Kavan so he'd be damned if he back down to the prick.

"The worried has-he-finally-gone-evil expression you get whenever someone mentions that Ethan had to go into a fight." Kavan stood up and slowly walked over to Zeke so they were inches apart.

"Kavan," Cherish soothed, "I'm sure that's not what Zeke was thinking at all. He just worries about his mate like you do over Derik and me."

"If he's so worried, then why did he leave for three days?" Even though Kavan directed that question to Cherish, he never took his glare from Zeke.

"I was on a mission. It's not like I had a choice." He curled his hands into fists, but didn't give into the urge to use them. While he'd love nothing more than to slug that arrogant expression from Kavan's mug, Zeke valued his friendship with Cherish too much.

"Do you have any idea what you being away has done to Ethan? He hasn't slept good or fed once since you left." A slight tic developed in Kavan's jaw.

Every one of his words felt like a blow to Zeke's stomach. It's not like he hadn't feared this would happen, he'd just hoped that with him and Ethan being together, it might have eased some of the

warlock's fears. "Where is he?" Zeke wasn't too surprised that his voice cracked a bit. Nothing cut him quicker than the thought of Ethan suffering in any way.

"Do I look like an Ethan GPS device? He's not mine to keep track of."

"Kavan!" Cherish said in a sharp voice.

It gave Zeke some satisfaction to see Kavan wince a little under the small female's fury.

"Fine, he may have mentioned something about catching a nap," Kavan finally informed him begrudgingly.

If he said anything after that, Zeke didn't hear because he was already beating a path to the room he shared with Ethan. When they'd gotten together, Zeke had moved all his stuff to Ethan's living quarters. The place was too small for one guy, let alone two, but they managed. Hell, it was the first place that had truly felt like home since before he'd been turned.

He reached the door and opened it as quietly as possible, just in case Kavan had been right and Ethan was really asleep. The room was dark and cool, but the cloying scent of the spices and essential oils invaded his nostrils. When he'd first moved in, it'd taken him a while to get use to the smell, but now he welcomed it because he'd come to associate it with Ethan.

Zeke's heart broke when he saw their bed still

tightly made up and not slept in. "Oh, babe. I'm so sorry," he breathed softly. Moving carefully, he walked around the bed and saw his worst fears confirmed.

Ethan was asleep on the hard, tile floor. His large body curled up into a tight ball and his back wedged as tightly as possible to the wall. The warlocks living at the Drone clan had adopted their own black uniform and Ethan still had his on even though he'd probably been off duty for hours. The hood of the shirt was pulled up and his head was tucked tight to his chest so Zeke couldn't see his face, but he'd bet his good rifle that Ethan's complexion was pale from lack of feeding.

Zeke hunched down next to Ethan, but didn't reach out to touch him. Past experience had told him he always woke up swinging if he was surprised. So he just waited. His scent would eventually register with Ethan, even if he was asleep. Sure enough, within minutes Ethan stirred slightly before he shifted his face up to blink blearily at Zeke.

"I thought you weren't coming back until at least tomorrow," Ethan said, his voice cracked and dry sounding. He sat up then pushed the hood down.

Zeke had to work hard to keep the despair off his face. In the short time he'd been gone, Ethan

had taken a real nose dive. He wasn't just pale, he had a sickly pallor that would have made a zombie proud. His normally, intense green eyes, were dull and bloodshot. Unable to hold back any longer, Zeke reached out and cupped his cheek. "It's a good thing we came back when we did. You look like shit."

"Thanks, I love you, too." Ethan grinned crookedly.

"You know what I mean. Why haven't you been taking care of yourself?" He fanned his thumb over Ethan's bottom lip, frowning when the normally soft, sensual skin, felt dry and chapped.

"I just got preoccupied." It was a lie Ethan used often.

Zeke had to work hard to hold back his anger. It wasn't Ethan's fault that he still had to carry around so much baggage. The man had seen more horrors in his short lifetime than most and that said a lot considering what kind of society they lived in. It still didn't mean he could let Ethan avoid the subject though. "After all the times you were poisoned while living with the Ninth, I can get why you don't like to eat or drink from just anyone, but the bagged blood I left for you was mine. Dahlia was the one who drew it. Don't you trust us?"

"Of course I do." Ethan dropped his head,

shame staining his cheeks.

"Then why didn't you use that?"

"Because someone else could have go to it."

Ethan spoke so low that, even with his amplified vampire hearing, Zeke still had to strain to hear him. "Babe, nobody here would hurt you. They consider you one of us and we always protect clan." Not only that, but they all had a healthy fear of Ethan and his powers. Zeke didn't think this was the time to point that out though.

"Did I ever tell you about the last time I was poisoned?" Ethan asked as he pulled the hood back up, hiding his face from Zeke once again.

"No. You hardly talk about your past." God knows there were plenty of times Zeke had been tempted to probe, but he'd always held back—hoped that eventually Ethan would be ready to discuss it on his own.

"You'd be amazed at how proficient magics are when it comes to poisons. In fact, we have ten times more potions that kill than ones that to heal. That's in white covens. The ones that practice black magic are even worse." He snorted in disgust as he pulled the hood forward even further. "What does that say about warlocks and witches as a whole? That we spend more time learning to kill than save lives?"

"It says that you're like most other societies," Zeke answered carefully. He would have given

anything to be able to see Ethan's face. To reach out and hold him. Instead, he waited, not knowing if his comfort would be accepted.

"The last time I was poisoned was by my own coven. Some power hungry dick was making the moves on my mother. He was hoping to become her mate so he could rule the coven by her side. When I came home from the Ninth, he saw me as an obstacle who needed to be taken out of the way."

Zeke felt his blood turn to ice. More from the inflection of Ethan's voice than anything. His tone was flat and hard, like he'd turned off all his emotions just so he could tell the story. It made Zeke wonder how many times Ethan had done that in the past, shut down emotionally just so he could cope. "What happened? Tell me it all," Zeke demanded as he squeezed his eyes shut.

"I collapsed in the middle of the dining hall and started to go into convulsions." Ethan gave a short laugh. "I kind of made a spectacle of myself."

"What did your mother do?"

"Olivia? She just walked away. It was Morgan who nursed me back to health."

"What happened to the bastard who tried to kill you?" Zeke finally allowed himself to reach out and put a hand on Ethan's knee.

"When I left to come here, he was still living at the coven."

"You mean Olivia didn't punish him for it?" Zeke's outrage echoed through the small room.

"No."

Zeke waited for Ethan to expound on his answer, but he didn't. If anything, he seemed to shrink further away, his face still shielded. Zeke couldn't take it anymore. Moving closer, he reached under the hood and cupped Ethan's cheeks. Forcing the warlock's face up so they could lock gazes. "You know I would never let anything happen to you. I love you more than life itself and everyone here knows that if they so much as give you a dirty look, I'm going to hurt them back."

"I love you, too." Ethan licked his dry lips, his eyes going smoky with desire. "Take me to bed."

"That's something you'll never have to ask twice." Zeke dipped his head down so he could brush a soft kiss against Ethan's mouth.

"I missed you," Ethan breathed before he darted his tongue out to stroke Zeke's fangs.

He hissed at the contact. A vampire's fangs were a very sensitive erogenous zone. The only thing that could have felt better would be if Ethan had lapped his cock with that sweet tongue of his. With a low growl, he pulled Ethan closer, so he was on Zeke's lap. His cock pressed into Ethan's ass, the contact sending sharp, spikes of desire through his body.

"This isn't the bed," Ethan pointed out between kisses.

"Sorry," Zeke said, smiling against his lips, "when I get near you, I lose control."

Ethan stood and held his hand down. His fangs were totally distended, a look of hunger in his eyes. At that moment, Zeke saw just not the man he loved, but also the predator he lusted.

"Come to bed with me." Ethan smiled, somehow managing to look dangerous and sensual at the same time. "I'm hungry."

CHAPTER THREE

Ethan almost laughed at Zeke's eagerness as he scrambled to his feet. A dark-haired warrior, with even darker eyes, he very rarely let his guard down. A soldier through and through, he acted and looked hard. Only when they were alone did Ethan get to see the softer side of the man he loved.

Zeke grabbed his hand and led him to the bed. As he followed, Ethan's gaze was drawn to the vampire's tight ass. Muscular, rounded and just the right size, he could feast on it all day long. Licking his lips in anticipation, he decided he just may do that. After Zeke had fucked him senseless of course. He did have to make priorities.

Once they reached the edge of the bed, Zeke paused long enough to take off his shirt before he laid down. The move wasn't surprising since Zeke's favorite position for feeding had always been for Ethan to stretch his body out over him so

they were touching as much as possible, their cocks pressed against each other. When Ethan moved to get into position, Zeke shook his head. "Strip first."

"That's an order I'm more than happy to obey." Ethan smiled before he slowly peeled off his clothes and tossed them to the side. Before he climbed on the bed, he stopped long enough to unlace Zeke's boots and tug them off.

As he got onto the mattress and slid over Zeke's hard, warm body, Ethan hummed in delight. The familiar touch of his vampire's tight muscles, his familiar dark scent did more than anything to sooth the anxiety of being separated. "Aren't you going to take your pants off?" he asked as he settled into place. It became complete once Zeke wrapped his strong arms around his waist.

"In a minute. I don't want to get distracted. Not until you've drank your fill."

"Not fair, you had me take my clothes off," he pointed out as he hungrily eyed up Zeke's jugular.

"I've got to get something out of this exchange, don't I?" Zeke teased lightly before he tilted his head to the side in invitation.

Even though every molecule in him screamed out for blood, he forced himself to take it slow. Dipping his head, he slowly licked the salty, warm skin of Zeke's neck.

Zeke moaned in appreciation as he ran his

hands up and down Ethan's body.

"Please, do it," Zeke pleaded, his voice a harsh whisper. "I need it as much as you."

With a soft hiss, Ethan bared his fangs before he struck, sinking them into Zeke. As soon as the first trickle of blood hit his mouth, a soft whimper escaped his lips. After going so long without, it was like pure heaven getting to taste his mate again, and it made him hungry for even more. Gripping Zeke's shoulders for support, he started to take in long, deep drags.

"Fuck, I love your sweet mouth. Almost as much as I love this." Zeke's hand trailed between them and wrapped around Ethan's cock.

He let out a cry at the heated contact, some of the blood slipping from his mouth. It dripped down Zeke's neck and stained the sheets. A tinge of regret went through him at the thought of any bit of blood going to waste. That made him seal his lips tighter against Zeke's flesh.

"This is all I thought about while I was gone," Zeke said as he slowly began to pump his hand up and down Ethan's shaft.

Since he couldn't respond because his mouth was busy, Ethan tried to convey how he returned the feelings by squeezing his fingers into Zeke's flesh even more. His balls were already growing tight as Zeke's fingers kept working his cock and he knew he wasn't going to last long. Then again,

a secret part of him knew that was exactly the way Zeke wanted it. The vampire had always let it be known how much it delighted him to push Ethan over the edge, to make him lose control.

Although he could have drunk all night, he reluctantly pulled back and licked the wounds closed. He quickly transferred his mouth to Zeke's face, smashing their lips together in a blinding flash of lips, fangs, tongues and blood. When Zeke's hand tightened on his cock, Ethan let out a choked sob.

"Fuck me, please," he begged between hot kisses. Wanting Zeke to lose a little bit of control, too, Ethan scraped his tongue against his fangs so fresh blood sprinkled in the vampire's mouth.

"Don't worry, I have plans to fuck you all day. By the time I'm done with you, you'll be too tired to worry about anything else but you and me and how right it feels to be together," Zeke promised in a dark, husky voice.

Ethan let out a gasp of surprise when Zeke flipped them over so he was now on the bottom. Gazing down at him, Zeke smiled, his fangs looking long and wicked. "Now it's my turn to eat."

"Oh, goddess," Ethan whimpered as Zeke started to kiss his way down his body. "You go there and I'm not going to last long."

Zeke looked up at him from under his long

dark, lashes, his lush mouth just inches from the tip of Ethan's aching cock. Licking his lips, he said, "It's a good thing vampires have a fast recovery time because I'm not waiting for one more second to taste you."

Usually, when Zeke went down on him, he took his time, going so slow it was almost torture. Tonight though, he attacked Ethan's cock like he was a vampire starved, sucking him in deep. He tried to cry out in pleasure, but then Zeke hummed around his cock and the only thing that passed through Ethan's mouth was a breathless gasp.

Zeke started to slide his lips over Ethan's shaft, setting a fast rhythm that had him writhing on the sheets. Then Zeke added the sides of his fangs to the mix and that threw him over the edge. Fisting his hands into Zeke's hair, Ethan shot off hot waves of cum into Zeke's waiting mouth.

Zeke licked and sucked him all the way through it, not pulling back until every drop was gone. Sitting back on his heels, he lapped away a few stray drops on his bottom lip before he ordered, "Get the lube. I can't wait any longer to be buried in your tight ass."

Ethan flipped unto his stomach and reached over to the bedside drawer nightstand where he kept the special lubricant that he made from various herbs and essential oils. Behind him, he

could hear the rustle of clothing and his cock twitched as he realized it was Zeke taking off the rest of his uniform. Ethan grabbed the vial and started to turn around, but Zeke put a hand in the small of his back to stop him.

“Stay just like that. Fuck, you look so damn beautiful right now.”

Even though he couldn't see his mate's face, he knew Zeke's fangs were fully out by the slurred way the command came out. Ethan stilled, barely moving enough to even take in a breath as he waited to see what would happen next. When Zeke's hand traveled down to lazily cup his ass, Ethan shuddered with pent up passion.

“Who do you belong to?” Zeke asked before he reached up and took the vial from Ethan's limp fingers.

“Zeke.” He gasped when Zeke poured some of the oil onto the crease of his ass. As soon as it hit his skin, it started to warm and make a wonderful tingle across his flesh. “I belong to Zeke and nobody else.”

“You know what kind of high I get hearing that? You may be the leader of your own team. You may be one of the most powerful warlocks ever, but when it comes to the bedroom, you're my slut.” Zeke slid a slick finger past Ethan's ass cheeks, slowly circling the tight ring of muscle.

Ethan groaned as he fisted his hands in the

sheets. "Yes, I'm your slut, Zeke. Always will be." That must have been the right thing to say because Zeke rewarded him by sliding a finger inside his aching hole. Ethan stifled a loud cry of pleasure at the welcoming stretch.

"Tell me, while I was gone, were you tempted to drink from another male? Maybe one of your warlocks?" Zeke added another finger, scissoring them to stretch Ethan even more.

"No, I don't want any other taste in my mouth but yours." Ethan tucked his knees under him, lifting his ass up to Zeke in a plea for more. He nearly wept in relief when Zeke moved his hand and he felt the familiar pressure of the tip of his mate's cock pressing against him.

"Mine," Zeke snarled before he entered Ethan in one hard thrust.

It was painful, but in a wonderful way and Ethan couldn't hold back the yell of pleasure as his body adjusted to Zeke's wide girth. Even though he'd just fed and came, both his fangs and cock reacted and he let out a feral sounding snarl. He didn't want this to be a tender bout of lovemaking and obviously Zeke didn't either because he started to pound into Ethan in hard, punishing strokes.

Halfway through, Zeke hauled Ethan up to his chest so they were both sitting. The move put Ethan's neck just inches from the vampire's long

fangs. He shivered, knowing what would be coming next. Still when Zeke struck, sinking his teeth into his flesh with a savage snarl, Ethan screamed. All the while, Zeke continued to push into his ass with quick, demanding thrusts. Ethan hung limp in the vampire's crushing grasp, too weak from pleasure to do anything else. When Zeke only took a few sips, Ethan let out a disappointed whimper. "More, please."

"You're too weak, babe. After you get your strength back, I'll suck you senseless. I promise." Zeke reached around and started to stroke Ethan's cock in time with his thrusts. Putting his mouth back over the puncture marks, Zeke started to slowly suck at the healing wounds, making pinpoints of pleasure shoot from the area.

"Too much. I can't hold back," Ethan panted right before his cock pulsed in Zeke's hand. Wave after wave of hot cum coated his stomach and chest, some of it getting on the sheets and mixing with the already spilled blood.

"I love you so damn much," Zeke breathed right before Ethan felt his release inside his ass.

Ethan let his head drop back against Zeke's shoulder. Even though their position felt awkward, he could have stayed that way forever. It wasn't until Zeke gently lifted him up that Ethan rolled to his back and snuggled his head into the pillow. He didn't even open his eyes

when he felt the velvet heat of Zeke's tongue on his stomach.

"A shower would be easier to clean me up," Ethan chuckled although he made no move to get up.

"Yes, but not nearly as tasty." Zeke slowly swirled his tongue around his navel, making Ethan hiss in pleasure.

"How is it you haven't gotten sick of me yet?" Ethan asked, trying to keep his voice light, but he could tell by the way Zeke stilled, he hadn't fooled his mate for one second.

"Never. You should know that by now." Zeke moved up so they were lying side by side.

Ethan wanted to believe him. Goddess he did, but at the same time, he couldn't help but wonder what appeal he could possibly have for Zeke. He was the one who had been stupid enough to be captured. He was the one who had died. He was the one who still couldn't get past his hang-ups enough to even sleep in a fucking bed.

"What's bringing this all on?" Zeke got up on one elbow so he could look down at Ethan.

"Nothing," he lied. "I'm just still tired and not making any sense."

Zeke opened his mouth to argue, but Ethan distracted him by cupping the back of his head and pulling him down for a kiss. That led to more. With each touch, each caress, Ethan vowed to

himself that one day he would prove himself worthy of Zeke and maybe then, he would know this vampire needed him just as much.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethan took another sip of coffee and tried not to grimace at the tepid temperature as he watched the other vampires file slowly into their leader's office. It was still early for them and they all looked just as tired as he did. He wondered if they were just as confused by the mysterious summons, too. All he and Zeke had been told was to get their asses to the office, pronto. Nothing had been said about the why.

"This had better be good to drag my lazy hide out of bed at the buttcrack of dusk," Rafe bitched as he came in and plopped heavily into a seat.

Ethan managed to smile at his half-brother. He was in a bad mood, but then that was nothing new for him. From his dark hair that hung in his face to his sour looks, he was the poster child for brooding. The only time Ethan ever saw him smile was when he was with his two mates, Morgan and Dominic.

Ethan was shocked when he saw those said mates come into the room, too. As a warlock and witch, they usually didn't sit in on meetings. Ethan nodded at Morgan, since he was fond of the dark-haired female, but pointedly ignored Dominic. He and the warlock had never gotten along and Ethan was damned if he was going to make an attempt before he'd finished his first cup of coffee. "Do you know what's going on?" he asked Rafe.

"No clue." Rafe looked up at him with his intense green-eyed gaze. It was the only feature they shared. Where Rafe looked nearly identical to his two vampire brothers, Dante and Kane, in every other way.

"So Eric didn't say anything when he called you guys either?" Zeke quizzed as he gently ran his fingers up Ethan's arm.

"He just said to get here and do it fast," Morgan said as she shrugged a slim shoulder.

Ethan took some grim satisfaction in seeing Dominic's normally perfectly styled blond hair mussed and his movie star blue peepers bleary from lack of sleep. He wanted to make some scathing remark about someone losing their beauty sleep, but held back since for some insane reason Rafe loved the guy so much.

Things got even more interesting when Ethan's warlock team showed up and then both of Rafe's

brothers, plus their mates.

"Shit, if this keeps up we're going have to start sitting on each other's laps," Rafe griped as he shuffled his chair over to make room for the crowd.

Ethan agreed. If Eric was calling this many to a meeting, why not use one of the bigger rooms? It made no sense to cram them all into his office unless he had decided to start a circus and was having them practice for the clown car. He jumped when a strong pair of hands settled on his shoulders. Turning, he groaned when he saw it was Rafe's vampire brother, Dante. The middle of the siblings, he was the smartass of the group and looked way too chipper even at this time.

"Why do I have a feeling this meeting is somehow because of you, fledgling?" Dante asked as he flashed a big grin.

"I don't know, maybe because for once the magics outnumber the throat suckers," Ethan drawled as he tried to unsuccessfully to shrug off the vampire's hands.

"Hey, that's not nice to call us that. Especially since you're sucking throats yourself now." Dante reached out and poked at one of Ethan's fangs.

"God, don't you ever shut it off?" he asked as he batted the offending hand away. At the same time, he shot Rafe a will-you-rein-him-in-already look. Rafe just shook his head in response, clearly

telling Ethan he was on his own.

"Don't be such a grumpy gus. If you're good, after we're done here, I'll buy you a real man's coffee."

Ethan looked down at his thermal mug, feeling insulted. "What's wrong with what I have now?"

"There's no booze in it." Dante snapped his fingers. "Oh, yeah that's right. I almost forgot. You can't hold your liquor. Wouldn't want to see you get drunk and sing pop tunes again. Once in an immortal lifetime is enough for anyone."

Dante ruffled his hair and it dawned on Ethan that he was just teasing him, much the same way he'd seen him play around with Rafe before. Even though it was stupid, it still brought a genuine smile to his face. "Yeah, well when I got drunk in that bar, I heard plenty of interesting tales about you. So I wouldn't be so cocky," Ethan joked back, amazed at how easy he fell into the banter.

"Boy, you get froggy with a demon one time and the rumors forever haunt you." Dante clucked his tongue with a remorse Ethan didn't buy for one second.

"News flash. That was the tamest thing I heard."

They were both laughing when Eric came in. Once look at the leader's stoic face was enough to sober them up. Not that their leader didn't always look serious. A Marine in his human life, he still

carried himself in a sharp military fashion, from his crew cut blond hair, to the hard lines of his jaw. Tonight though, he seemed even more somber and something Ethan had never seen before—nervous?

"I'm sorry for the cramped conditions, but I wanted to keep things as quiet as possible," Eric announced as he stood behind his desk. As usual, the top was messy, in direct contrast to the meticulous care the vampire took with his appearance. Ethan waited for him to take a seat, but he remained standing, his fingers tapping on the back of his chair in a fast rhythm as he looked over the group.

Okay, there is no doubt now. Eric is nervous as hell, but about what? Ethan exchanged confused looks with Zeke as they waited for their leader to speak.

"I guess I just better spill since there is no easy way to say this," Eric finally said. "Around one hour ago, we received a message from Olivia saying her coven was under attack by the Ninth."

It felt like all the air had been sucked from Ethan's chest as the words slowly sunk in. He gripped the arms of the chair tightly as he waited for Eric to continue. Behind him, he could hear muttered curses and gasps from the other magics in the room.

"We tried to hail her back, but got nothing," Eric finished grimly.

"Try again," Ethan ordered woodenly.

Eric shot him an apologetic look. "We have been. With no success. We managed to contact a wolf pack that lives five miles away and they reported seeing smoke coming from the direction of the coven. We asked if they would be willing to go do some recon and report back to us, but the wolves aren't too fond of your mother."

That wasn't surprising. Not very many creatures did get along with his pit viper of a mother. "Did you remind them that there are innocents living at the coven? Children who have never done any harm to anyone?" Ethan bit out angrily.

"My sisters are there," Kavan interjected in a broken voice.

"I know you all have family still living there and I pleaded your case with the wolves, but I couldn't sway them." Eric hung his head in a defeated way.

"How about the Drones? When Olivia allied herself with them, she just didn't do so with our clan. Are there any living nearby who could help?" Ethan suggested desperately

"None of the neighboring clans have the numbers to be able to spare a rescue team."

"How about..." Ethan swallowed hard, forcing himself to do something that was still hard, ask for help. "How about this clan? I know my old coven

is in the Appalachians, but we could get there in a couple of days." Actually, they could make it in one, but he'd have to stop and take cover once the sun came up.

"Why do you think I called you here?" For the first time, there was a hint of a smile on Eric's face. "You can take everyone here, if they're willing, plus a team of Drone Soldiers."

"I'm in," Rafe immediately volunteered.

"I'm not so sure if that's a good idea for any of you vampires to come," Dominic said with a slight shake of his head.

"I hate to agree with Malibu Ken, but I think he has a point." Ethan sighed as his heart sank with disappointment. "As soon as you guys leave Detroit, you'll all have a great big target on your back. So long as you stay within the city and under the werewolves' protection, the Pure Borns can't touch you. All bets are off if they catch you between here and my coven. They can not only arrest you guys, but they could execute you as rebels and they won't be nice enough to even give you a trial."

The vampire government was run by the Pure Borns and they had long disdained their Drone counterparts. Before several Drone clans had rebelled, they had lived under a strict set of laws and guidelines that denied them even the most basic of rights. While Rafe and his brothers were

technically Pure Born, their affiliation with Eric's clan was widely known and because of that, they all had a hefty bounty on their heads. It was a risk that Ethan couldn't ask them to take. Not especially since he already owed them all so much for jeopardizing themselves once already to rescue him.

"You need to learn something." Eric leaned forward on his desk and pinned him with a hard stare. "This isn't just my clan, or Rafe's clan. You're one of us, too, by blood and honor. We may be willing to go because of our alliance with your mother's coven, but we are determined to go because we're standing by one of our brethren."

Ethan didn't say anything, too choked up to form words. Several emotions slammed through him—gratitude, shock and then finally a deep sense of belonging that he never thought he'd have until he'd come to live at the clan. Zeke reached out and grabbed his hand, linking their fingers together and that held Ethan together.

"I'm going, too. My brother isn't going to face his bitch of a mother without me," Dante declared.

Ethan thought he was talking about Rafe until he felt the vampire pat his shoulders. "You and I aren't brothers," Ethan reminded him. That got him another shoulder thumping.

"You belong to us just as much as Rafe does. Besides, I always thought we needed to add a

blond brother. You know, mix things up a bit."

"God help you. Now you're never going to get rid of him." Zeke smiled at Ethan.

"Dante's right though. We're going with you," Kane added, his face solemn. As the oldest brother, he tended to be the most serious of the three.

"Good, it's decided then." Eric nodded. "I suggest you assemble your team and leave as soon as possible so you can get some serious hours in while the sun's down."

They all stood and Ethan turned to face the group of vampires and warlocks. "Thanks, everyone."

"Hey, it's our home, too. Or rather it used to be," Derik said, sheepishly as he raised the palm of his hand to show off the long vertical scar running across it. When they had left the coven, they had ritualistically shed their blood on the way out to show the break.

"We'll take a convoy of vehicles and leave in an hour. I want to take as much weaponry as possible in case the coven is still under siege when we get there." He turned to Dante's mate, Brenden. "Do you think you could spare some Sunlight Grenades in case the Ninth have vampires working for them?"

Brenden was a soft-spoken blond, the calm to Dante's fire. He nodded. "No problem. If you

want, it can be my team of Drones we take, too. It makes the most sense since Zeke and Cherish are already on it and they've signed on to go."

That pleased Ethan. Although Brenden's team had been dubbed the *Dork Detail* by many because they had more brains than muscles, he couldn't think of a better group he'd want at his back. "Okay then, let's get everything together and meet in the garage in an hour."

* * * *

For Zeke the next hour passed too quickly. While he wanted nothing more than to get Ethan alone so he could see how his mate was handling all the bad news, they never had a chance because they were too busy rushing around, packing stuff. He was stuffing the last of his gear into his duffle when Ethan came in and handed him a small canvas bag that was the size of a teabag.

"Keep this on you at all times," Ethan instructed before he dashed into the bathroom to gather some stuff.

"What is it?" Zeke asked, bringing it up to his nose for a tentative sniff. It had an odd pungent smell that reminded him of old cedar and mold.

"It will protect you against some of the more basic black spells." Ethan came out with some toiletries and shoved them into his messenger bag.

"It's not much, but maybe it will help if one of the Ninth uses lower level magic against you. A lot of times, we don't want to waste our powers on someone who isn't a threat to us magically so it may be enough."

"Thanks, I think." He shoved it into the front pocket of his cargo pants. Ethan came up and brushed a soft kiss across his lips. By the time Zeke could react enough to lean in for more, Ethan had already pulled back.

"There's a good chance they'll all spit in my face as soon as I reach the door of my coven. I don't think they're going to be too thrilled with my *Extreme Vampire Makeover*," Ethan said with a casualness Zeke knew he didn't really feel.

"Then I give you permission to bite them in retaliation," Zeke joked, trying to lighten the mood. He didn't add that he'd personally break the legs of anyone who dared to insult his mate.

"Are you sure you want to offer that? I've heard that vampires can get addicted to the high from drinking magic blood." Ethan had changed back into his warlock's uniform.

Zeke found himself admiring the way it fit so nicely against the curves and muscles of his body. He'd never been a leather guy before, but when Ethan put it on, he always found himself getting hard with appreciation. "I wouldn't know since I'm only addicted to my mate's." Zeke put a hand

in Ethan's chest and backed him against the wall so they could kiss properly.

"We're supposed to meet the others in five minutes," Ethan protested with a moan.

"Just another kiss, that's all I want." As Zeke said that, his hand was drifting down to cup Ethan's cock. Even through the leather, he could feel the heat from his mate's erection. It made Zeke all the hungrier as a fresh wave of desire coursed through him.

"That's not kissing," Ethan gasped as he rolled his hips forward.

"I'm sorry, my mistake." Zeke buried his nose in the crook of Ethan's neck, savoring his scent. A mix of the herbs and oils he used for his potions, it always held a special appeal to Zeke because it managed to smell both dark and sweet at the same time. He darted his tongue out to lick the bonding bite scar on Ethan's throat, smiling when he saw how it made the man shiver in response.

"Damn it, we really have to go," Ethan said with a groan, his voice laced with disappointment.

"Not until you feed again. You still look too pale and we won't have a chance until we stop for the day."

"Okay," Ethan agreed, "but you have to take your hand off my dick. If I bite you while you're touching me like that, I'll come and I don't have time to change."

Zeke reluctantly obeyed. He loved nothing better than hearing the small whimpers Ethan made while he fed and came at the same time. He settled for pressing a kiss to Ethan's lips before pulling back and tilting his head to the side in offering.

"Just a quick drink before we go. I don't want to be late," Ethan whispered before Zeke felt his hot tongue lick a velvet path against his neck.

Even though he expected it, Zeke still cried out in pleasure as he felt the white, hot lace of pain as Ethan struck with his fangs. A fresh wave of passion slammed into him, making his already jacked up body almost reach the breaking point. He wanted nothing more than to rip off Ethan's pants, pin him against the wall and pound into his ass so hard they left cracks in the plaster. Instead, Zeke settled for threading his fingers through Ethan's soft hair and holding him close.

"This time when you go home, it's going to be different and you want to know why?" Zeke asked.

Ethan moaned questionably, never taking his mouth away from feeding.

"Because I'll be with you the entire way and no matter what, that bitch can't take away my love for you."

CHAPTER FIVE

Much to Ethan's dismay, he and Zeke somehow got saddled with Dante and Brenden as driving buddies. While he didn't mind Brenden, since the guy was pretty easy to get along with, he wasn't sure he wanted to spend several hours cooped up with his new big brother.

Luck was finally with him though and Dante was content to snuggle with Brenden, the only sounds coming from the backseat being their whispered conversation. That allowed Ethan to stretch out on his side in the passenger seat, his face toward Zeke. Even while driving, his vampire managed to look sexy. Ethan could have watched him forever.

"How are you feeling?" Zeke finally asked.

"Sleepy and full." Ethan smiled. It was true, too. Even with the anxiety of what he'd find at the coven, he still had the satisfied high that always came after a good feeding.

"Are you sure you're up to facing Olivia again?"

Ethan shrugged. "Honestly, as far as she's concerned I feel nothing. Does that make me a bad son?" He had felt more than his share of guilt at his lack of worry over his mother. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't conjure up any emotional response as far as she was concerned. Sure, he was apprehensive about the fate of the other members of the coven, but that was as far as it went.

"That doesn't make you a bad anything. As soon as she shipped you and the others off to the Ninth when you were just kids, she gave up all rights to any affection from you," Zeke said, his fingers white-knuckling the steering wheel.

There was a tick in his jaw, but Ethan knew the anger wasn't directed at him. "It's still going to feel strange going back there now that I'm so different," Ethan admitted.

"You mean because you're a vampire?"

"Not just that. I don't have as much hate and anger anymore."

Zeke laughed. "I'll admit you were a real asshole at first. It took me forever to realize you were just using the attitude as a shield."

"I guess I'll agree with you on that." Ethan chuckled softly. "There's more though. I still don't have all my magic back from when Davis stripped

me of it." Even now, he felt a hollow ache in his chest as he recalled how painful it had been when the leader of the Ninth had ripped his magic from him. As he rubbed at it in an absent manner, he wondered, not for the first time, if he'd ever be whole again.

"You're worth ten of those magic jerks, with or without your powers," Zeke said fiercely.

Ethan felt touched by his immediate support.

"If they get too pissy, you can just bite them," Dante called from the back.

Ethan shifted his head enough to look at him. "Somehow I don't think that's going to help my cause any."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. I've seen how jacked up Zeke gets when you go fang on him." Dante gave him a cheeky grin.

Goddess help him, but Ethan was actually beginning to enjoy the jackass' banter. Maybe because he knew it was the one constant he could count on besides Zeke.

"What's the plan when we get there?" Brenden asked as he settled back against Dante's chest.

"Since the coven is situated in a series of caves, it's going to be hard to approach it without being spotted. I'm worried that the Ninth will already be embedded there and they'll see us coming and attack us or whatever survivors may be inside," Ethan replied, finally giving voice to his biggest

concern.

"Ah, but you forget we're vampires, which means we're much stronger and quicker. If it comes down to a real fight we can kick some serious ass," Dante pointed out.

"Not to mention, we can walk in the pitch of night and still see perfectly," Zeke finished for him.

"The warlocks with us can't though. They'll be stumbling around, blind," Brenden interjected.

"Can they use magic to amplify their vision?" Dante kissed the top of Brenden's head.

"No, because if the Ninth are inside, they'll sense it the instant we use magic. It's going to take everything we have to mask our presence from them as it is." Ethan rubbed his bottom lip as he tossed the problem around in his head. "I asked Eric about night vision goggles, but he said you guys didn't have any."

"Yeah, because why would a clan of vampires waste resources on equipment we don't need?" Zeke nodded, clearly as frustrated with the situation.

"How far away from the Ohio-Kentucky border are we?" Dante asked suddenly.

"About an hour. Why?" Zeke frowned as he glanced in the review mirror.

"I know someone who could help us out with our situation. He deals in all kinds of fun things."

"How much would that cost?" Ethan worried. It wasn't like Eric had gifted them with a huge budget.

"Nothing cash wise. He'll probably demand some magical charms and potions though. Do you think you could hook him up?"

"It depends on what he wants," Ethan replied cautiously. He and his warlocks still carried some stuff they'd learned from the Ninth—stuff that most other magics wouldn't dare touch.

The sharp glance Zeke threw his way didn't go unnoticed, but Ethan chose to ignore it at the moment. Hopefully, they could get to this guy, get what they needed and the vampires would be none the wiser. It didn't sit well with him, having to keep secrets from Zeke, but Ethan learned the hard way that not everyone understood the need to occasionally step into the *grey zone* if needs called of it.

"I'm sure it won't be anything big," Dante assured him.

For some reason, Ethan had a sinking feeling things weren't going to go as smoothly as he promised.

* * * *

As soon as Zeke pulled in front of the ramshackle house, he had a hinky feeling. If someone had

asked him to put it into words, he'd be hard pressed to say what exactly had his alarm bells going off. Something just felt off. So much so that the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and a bolt of adrenaline shot through his veins.

"Fuck," Ethan muttered, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at the home that was just one building code away from being labeled a shack.

"What is it?" Zeke asked sharply. He knew that look all too well. Ethan always wore it when things were about to go the way of F.U.B.A.R.

"Nothing." Ethan shook his head and plastered on a fake smile.

Now Zeke knew beyond a doubt something was hinky. He also knew that his mate was keeping something from him yet again. Before he could demand to know what it was, Ethan had opened the door and made a quick exit.

"What exactly is this guy of yours?" Zeke turned around to pin Dante with a glare.

"Mostly full of shit." Dante rolled his eyes. "He claims to be some voodoo priest, but I think he's just a human who's seen way too many Buffy reruns."

"When's the last time you had any contact with him?" Zeke watched as Ethan went over to the warlocks. They formed a tight circle, their heads together as they engaged in what looked to be a very animated conversation.

"It's been over twenty years. Why?" Now Dante was beginning to study the house, his eyes dark with suspicion.

"I just got a bad feeling."

"It appears you aren't the only one," Brenden observed as he nodded to the warlocks. They all watched as Ethan turned to glare at the house, almost as if there were some dangerous monster inside.

"I'm beginning to see your point though," Dante agreed. "I don't like this any more than you do."

"Do you think we should abort?" Brenden nibbled at his bottom lip with one of his fangs.

After serving on the vampire's team for so long, Zeke knew it was a gesture the guy made whenever he was nervous.

"I don't see how we have any option but to push on. We need the goggles or else the warlocks won't be any help to us unless we decide to carry them on our backs, piggyback style," Dante quipped.

"Interesting visual, but I don't think it would be too feasible," Zeke shot back. He kept staring at Ethan, hoping he would turn long enough to make eye contact, but he never did.

"Well, one thing is for certain. We're not going to get anywhere if we all just sit here and stare at each other's bellybutton lint." Dante opened the

door, then climbed out of the vehicle.

Zeke and Brenden followed suit, getting out, then walking over to the warlocks. As soon as they got within hearing distance, all the magics shut up really quick. Ethan gave a grim nod before he turned and addressed Brenden, "Tell your team to hold back on this one. I think it would be best if only the warlocks went in."

"I agree," Dominic chimed in as he, Rafe and Morgan came to join them. "That house has some bad mojo in it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zeke snapped, finally having enough with the whole cloak and dagger game.

"It means I need all vampires to wait in the car." Ethan tossed him a look that clearly said *and that means you, too*.

Zeke glared back. Like there would be anything that could make him watch the man he loves walk into danger without him at his back. "I'm going in and there is nothing you can say to make me do otherwise. You may be the leader of the magics, but with me, you have no pull."

Ethan's gaze flared with anger and if Zeke wasn't mistaken, also a hint of desire, before he curled his lip into a sneer. "Fine, but promise me you won't interfere unless absolutely necessary."

"Sure." Zeke flashed a cocky grin that would have made Dante proud.

"We're going in, too," Dante declared, for once the good humor gone from his expression was replaced with the hard warrior façade that made so many in the supernatural world quake with fear.

Ethan let out an irritated grunt. "The shack isn't that flipping big. How many bodies do you think we can crowd in there?"

"It'll be just like Eric's office all over again." Dante's lips parted into a smile, but this one had a cool predator's edge to it.

"I want you to go back to the car," Rafe told Morgan.

The small witch shook her head as she lifted her chin stubbornly. "I can sense what's in there as much as you can and I'm not about to let you and Dominic go in there without me."

"He's right, love," Dominic added to the argument. "We'll be fine, but not if we have to worry about you, too."

"I'm not leaving you two." Morgan's eyes blazed with fury.

"Morgan, get your ass in the car," Ethan ordered, in a hard not-taking-anymore-crap voice.

Everyone tensed, as they looked over to see how she would take his order. Zeke even found himself holding his breath. While Ethan was technically the head of all the magics of the clan, Zeke had never seen him issue a direct order to

Rafe, Dominic or Morgan.

Her mouth dropped open as she gaped at him, her shock clearly evident in her face. After a second, she clamped it shut and gave a curt nod. "Yes, your Lordship," she hissed as she turned heel and stormed back to her car.

The entire group flinched when she slammed the door hard enough for the sound to echo through the air. All of them except Ethan, who had gone back to studying the house.

"You don't have any right to order her around like that," Rafe protested with a growl.

"Yes, I do," Ethan replied shortly. "We can't sit around listening to you moan about it either. He already knows we're here."

"Who?" Rafe glowered at him.

"The dark warlock that Dante led us to." Ethan took point, his warlocks falling into formation on either side of him so they formed a tight V.

As always, Zeke was amazed at how easily they seemed to read each other, showing how long they'd been working as a team.

"That's ridiculous," Dante protested. "Killian is just a wannabe poser."

"That's just what he wanted everyone to think." Ethan let his hands fall to his side, his fingers flexed in the way he always did when getting ready to throw magic.

CHAPTER SIX

Ethan didn't have to see the bastard lurking inside his shit-hole of a house to know that he was just waiting for them to get close enough to strike out. Nor did he have to lay eyes on him to know he practiced black magic. The rank, vile scent of it rolled around him, overpowering even in the fresh air swirling around them.

There was surge of magic, it's oily and evilness slithering around him like many serpents before a thick carpet of spiders scampered through the open door. The arachnids were of every size and species, all of them crawling over each other in their haste to make a direct beeline to Ethan's group. Behind him, he could hear yells of shock and fear from the vampires, but to his warlocks' credit, not one of them so much as flinched.

"Looks like he's trying hard to impress us," Kavan observed dryly.

"Yes, a little too hard," Ethan agreed, the thrill

of the hunt going through him. That high never got old. "This is going to be to almost too easy." Mumbling an incantation under his breath, Ethan released a wave of green flame. It moved so quickly, it was a near blur as it flashed over the wave of spiders. The creatures went into a panic, some of them letting out audible screams of pain as they were roasted alive. In a matter of seconds, they were reduced to dry husks that crumbled in the wind.

"We come in peace, but if you try something like that again, I'll boil you from the inside out, just like your pets," Ethan warned. At the same time, he sent out his own pulse of magic. He made sure to let out a tinge of his own dark abilities, too. Just so the warlock inside knew not to dick around anymore.

"I'm not afraid of you, you half-throat sucking, bastard. Why don't you fuck off then go home to your mommy and tell her to suck my dick?" A snide voice called from inside the house.

"You think he knows who I am?" Ethan drawled to Kavan.

The warlock smirked in answer.

"Killian, you rat bastard. What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Dante yelled.

There was a long pregnant pause before an answer came, "Dante? Is that you?"

"No, it's the census taker wanting to know how

many frigging dependants you have. Of course, it's me. I come here for some business and you let lose a creepy little tide of spider minions on me? Not cool."

"I didn't recognize you over the reek of the rat bastard warlocks you have with you," Killian defended.

Ethan didn't detect one hint of true apology in his voice.

"Well, it's me you freak, and I need to buy some items from you," Dante snapped.

There was a shadow at the door and Ethan flexed his fingers, getting ready to go on the defensive again. This time though, Killian came out. Tall and rangy, the warlock had long, stringy grey hair that framed his sallow face. Dark, sunken-in eyes shrewdly stared back at them, not one hint of fear in his thin features. He wore a long brown duster jacket that looked like it had seen better days, and worn boots that were cracked at the toes.

"What can a humble old man possibly have that you would want?" Killian smiled, showing off yellow, stained teeth.

"I need night vision Goggles. Eight of them to be specific," Dante answered.

"What can a vampire use those for?" Killian paused, his gaze traveling over the warlocks before a knowing look came over him. "Oh, I see.

It's for your little magic friends. I'm shocked to see such a large group of vampires and warlocks playing nice. Usually your kind like to make war, not fun."

"What can I say? eHarmony works wonders at bringing all types together," Dante deadpanned.

"That almost makes me sad that I'm going to have to let you down. Sorry though, but I don't have that kind of equipment." Killian turned to leave.

Ethan called out, "You haven't asked what we're willing to barter."

Killian stopped in his tracks, before slowly turning around, his face holding full of devious interest. "So, what can the lily-white son of Olivia possibly have for me?" Switching to the language of the Ninth, he added, "Then again, we both know you're not so pure, are you? I can smell the rank of the Death Ritual on you, even though you've tried so desperately to wash it away."

Ethan's gut clenched at the mention of one of the worst mistakes of his life. There was no way he could deny it though. Even though his intentions had been good at the time, he'd agreed to participate in the most taboo of ceremonies years ago. So he might as well use it to his advantage. "Then you know how far I will go to get what I want," Ethan replied, the language of his enemy rolling easily off his tongue, even after

all this time.

"I also know how you have tried to put on the front of the good, dutiful white warlock. If you harm me, then all your allies will see you for who you really are." Killian smiled snidely.

Ethan clenched his hands into fists as he fantasized about wiping that knowing look off the slimy, asshole's face. "My coven is presently under attack and I'm finding myself not caring about my reputation anymore. Now, you can either barter with me or not, I don't give a fuck anymore. All that matters is I leave with what we came for. If I have to add your carcass to the mess already littering your yard, so be it." Ethan gave a silent prayer of thanks that Zeke couldn't understand the vile things he was saying.

Killian slowly walked down the steps of his porch, then moved toward the group.

Ethan maintained his cool, hard, unmoving stance even when the dark warlock stopped within inches of him and gave him a sly smile. "I know who you're planning on going against. Word of your coven's attack has reached my ears. There is no way even I'd be foolish enough to go against them by helping you."

"Speak English," Ethan ordered, slipping back into said tongue. The last thing he wanted was to have a group of even more nervous vampires on his hands.

"Fine. What could Olivia's little whelp have that could possibly make me psychotic enough to cross the Ninth?"

"This." Ethan reached inside his inner pocket and pulled out a vile. Deceptively small for all the power it held, it was just larger than a quarter and filled with a ruby fluid. Even as Killian's eager gaze devoured it, the liquid pulsed with light. Behind him, Ethan could hear Kavan shift forward, no doubt to protest, but Ethan held up a hand to stop him.

"I'll go inside and get what you requested right now."

Killian reached out to take the vial, but Ethan pulled his hand back. "Not so fast. Give us the goggles first and then you get this."

"How do I know you won't try to double cross me?" Killian demanded as he flashed his disgusting teeth into a leer.

"You have my word of honor as a white warlock."

That made Killian laugh, his oily chuckles making the hair on Ethan's arms stand on end. Licking his bottom lip, Killian then said, "You're no more a white warlock than I am. I can see into your soul, boy." He turned around and walked back into the house.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Kavan demanded in a low voice once they were alone

again.

"Trust me," Ethan snapped, casting a worried glance Zeke's way. It dismayed and worried him to find his vampire shooting him a suspicious look back.

"That's just it, Lordship. As far as this kind of thing goes, I can't," Kavan answered with a fierce determination.

"Stand down," Ethan commanded in a hard, tone.

"Lordship—"

"I said, stand down—and quit fucking calling me that." Shit, first Morgan and now Kavan. If they weren't already in a froggy situation, he'd be tempted to take a swing at his friend.

"What's going on?" Zeke finally demanded.

"Trust me, you don't want to know," Dominic interjected.

Ethan balled his hands into fists and fury snapped up his spine. Leave it to the jackass of magics to butt in and add his two cents. Not that it surprised Ethan. If anything, he was shocked *Mr. Perfect* had kept his yap shut this long. Ethan turned to glower at him. "It's a price I'm willing to pay."

"That's easy for you to say when you're not really ponying up the sacrifice."

"What makes you think I'm not?" Ethan challenged, praying that would be enough to shut

Dominic up for now. If Zeke or Rafe caught on what really was going down, there wasn't a doubt that they'd both interfere.

Dominic's eyes widened with sudden understanding. "When am I ever going to learn not be surprised by you?"

"Someone better tell me what the fuck is going on?" Zeke came up and jerked on Ethan's arm, spinning him around so they were facing each other

"I'll explain everything later," Ethan said evenly. He forced his lips into a small smile even as his heart beat crazily in his chest. *Calm the fuck down. The vampire in Zeke will be able to sense fear. If he knows what I'm about to do, he'll call the whole thing off and drag my ass back to the car. He won't understand that sometimes you have to make sacrifices in a war like this.*

"What's that?" Zeke nodded to the vial in Ethan's fingers.

"Just a little fountain of youth kind of thing. It will add a few years to Killian's pathetic life." Ethan cast a disgusted glance over at the hovel. "Although I can't understand why he'd want to prolong this." Luckily, he was saved from further interrogation when Killian came out with a large box in his hands.

He walked back over to them and set the box on the ground. Once again, his gaze became

fixated on the vial as he licked his lips like a druggie eyeing their next fix.

"Zeke, go over and make sure they work," Ethan suggested. Since the vampire had been military in his human life, he should be familiar with that type of equipment.

As Zeke hunkered over to do as he requested, Ethan shot a grateful look over to Dominic. He was more than a little taken aback to see the flurry of emotions dancing over the warlock's face—guilt, worry and even a dash of respect.

"They all seem to be in working order," Zeke announced as he stood back up.

Ethan nodded before he extended his hand, offering the vial up to Killian. The dark warlock tripped over himself in his eagerness to get at it. As his thin fingers claimed possession of it, there was no mistaking the look of pure, unmasked joy on his ugly mug.

"Just one word of warning. If you have any plans on calling the Ninth to let them know we were here, forget them," Ethan warned, before he gave the scattered spider carcasses a pointed look.

"Never. You have it on my honor as a dark warlock." Killian lovingly caressed the vial with one finger.

A shiver of repulsion went through Ethan as he noticed the dried, brown matter crusted under the man's long, sharp nails.

With quick movement, Killian opened the vial, then downed the contents.

Even though Ethan braced himself for it, the white, hot lance of pain that slammed into him still made him scream. He tried to break it off, tried to suck in a breath, but the agony continued to grow. Strong hands wrapped around him, the familiar touch letting him know it was Zeke. Ethan desperately wanted to reassure him, tell him it would be over soon, but all that came out were a garbled, gibberish noise that was no better than the scream.

The edges of his vision started to grow dark and Ethan welcomed it, knowing if he became unconscious, he'd find relief. Somehow, before he went out, he managed to shift his eyes to Zeke. Mouthing *I'm sorry*, as he allowed himself to go under.

* * * *

"Ethan!" Zeke cried as he stumbled to get a better grip on him. There was an awkward moment of struggling before they both landed on the ground. Zeke shifted them so he could hold Ethan's head in his lap. To the side of him, Rafe cursed loudly as he rushed over to kneel by his brother's side.

"What in the hell happened to him?" Rafe asked, his normally strong voice trembling.

"Why don't you ask your mate?" Zeke growled as he lightly patted Ethan's cheeks. The man's skin was pale, the skin cold to the touch, but Zeke could still hear his heart beating, see the steady rhythm of his chest rising and falling.

"Dominic?" Rafe sent a beseeching look to his mate.

"You know that all magic has a price," Dominic replied, his face stamped with guilt. "You can't take without giving something in return."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zeke demanded. He didn't feel like having to work his way around riddles and just wanted some straight answers for once.

"It means for Killian to get extra years in his life, someone had to give up some of their lifespan in return," Kavan said. He crouched down and hovered his palm over Ethan's chest.

"Are you saying Ethan just gave away five years of his life for a bunch of fucking goggles?" Zeke roared. Ethan was damn lucky he was out of it or Zeke would have strangled him for being so stupid.

"It wasn't for some damn equipment – well, not really," Kavan argued.

"Did you just see some other transaction go down or something? Because that's what it looks like to me," Rafe snarled.

Zeke thought that maybe Ethan would be

facing both of their rage when he woke up.

"He did it for the coven," Derik explained in a soft, earnest way.

"The same one that refused to come help him when he was being tortured by the Ninth and a bunch of Pure Born vampires?" Zeke's hands were trembling with rage. As if Ethan hadn't already sacrificed enough for those self-serving pricks, now he'd gone and done this?

"Yeah, that'd be the ones," Derik agreed with a rueful shrug.

"You want to know what the sickest thing about this is?" Rafe asked.

"What?" Zeke tapped Ethan's cheeks again.

"When they see for themselves what he's become, they'll probably spit in his face and tell him to go away."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ethan opened his eyes and immediately groaned from the pounding ache in his head. He gingerly sat up to blearily take in his surroundings. They must have stopped for the day because he found himself surrounded by the usual mute earth tones that marked most hotel rooms. Even though Zeke's gear was on the next bed over, the vampire was nowhere to be found.

The drapes were tightly shut, but Ethan could sense the sun would be coming up soon. That meant wherever he was, Zeke would be coming back and he'd be bringing a whole bunch of questions with him. Questions that Ethan knew he couldn't answer without causing a huge fight.

He decided that he didn't want to face an argument without a shower so he gathered his stuff and tottered to the bathroom. There he quickly cleaned up, got dressed in a fresh uniform, then brushed his teeth. It helped to make him feel

halfway normal again and by the time he left the bathroom, his headache had mostly faded away. That was until he opened the door and found Zeke waiting for him. He didn't look very happy either.

Zeke was standing a few feet from the door, arms crossed over his chest, hip leaning against the dresser and there was no mistaking the fury snapping through his dark eyes.

Ethan tried to smile at him, but all he got in return was a heated glower. "I can explain everything." That must have been the wrong thing to say because Zeke stormed forward until they were inches apart and directed his full rage on Ethan.

"No need. Dominic and Kavan spelled out exactly what kind of fuck-up move you made." Zeke didn't yell. No, his voice was hard, measured and controlled and for some reason that seemed even worse.

"Kavan told you?" Ethan squawked, shocked that his right-hand man would tattle on him.

"Yes, he spilled it all, including the part where you handed that asshole five years of your life!" Zeke poked a finger at Ethan's chest, hard.

"What's the big deal? Last time I checked, most vampires and warlocks lived for hundreds of years. Since I'm both, I think I could spare a few in order to help out the mission." Ethan rubbed at

the spot on his chest as he felt his own anger start to build up. Zeke could at least give him a chance to explain himself before jumping down his throat like this.

"You don't get it do you?" Zeke stepped back, running both hands through his hair as he paced the room. It made his normally perfectly tame raven locks stand on end.

"I'm sure you'll be happy to explain it to me," Ethan replied with a snarky bite. It was the attitude he always pulled out when he was getting ready for a fight.

"It's just not you anymore." Zeke punched the wall.

"You think I don't know that? That was the entire reason I made the deal in the first place. What's some of my years in comparison to all the innocents at the coven?" Ethan shrugged, confused. Surely as a soldier Zeke had to make hard sacrifices like this before? So why was he acting like he'd committed some horrible crime?

"That's not what I meant, you idiot. When you made that deal, did it ever once cross your mind how it would affect me or Rafe?"

"God, Zeke. It was only five years. What's the big deal?" Ethan rolled his eyes.

"They're not just your years to give away anymore!" Zeke roared.

"I did it for the mission. For all of us!" Ethan

yelled back.

"There were others ways it could have been done, but as usual, you have to take things into your own hands. Going off and making the great sacrifice without caring who you hurt in the process."

"I'm sorry," Ethan spat. "My life hasn't been all about black and white like yours has. Sometimes I've had to do things that not everyone agrees with. You knew that before you started fucking me."

"You know you're one of most selfish people I've ever met. You like to act like you'll do anything to save the day, but you don't give a damn about the ones closest to you."

That hurt — so much so that Ethan reacted in the only way he knew how. "Fuck you. I don't need this or you." He stormed out of the room.

"Yeah, that's it leave, just like you always do," Zeke called.

The only answer Ethan had for him was to slam the door in his face. Once outside in the hall, Ethan didn't stop, walking in no particular direction along the short, industrial carpet that tried hard to look fancy with some abstract designs running through it. After five minutes of roaming the halls aimlessly, he stopped, sliding down to his butt, his back pressed to the wall. Bringing his knees up, he rested his forehead on

them and finally let hurt take the place of anger.

Didn't Zeke realize that when it all boiled down to it, everything was for him? That every discussion and action Ethan made was so he could prove himself worthy of the love they had? He thought Zeke understood, believed in him, but now he realized that it had all been a joke. Zeke didn't see him any better than all the others did.

"What are you doing out here?" Dante's voice broke through his troubled thoughts.

Ethan looked up and saw the vampire standing over him, an ice bucket in his hands. The anguish he was feeling must have been on his face because Dante's gaze softened. "Oh, that bad, huh?"

"Let's just say I think I'll be sleeping here tonight," Ethan tried to joke, but failed because his voice sounded so hallow.

"Why don't you come back to our room? Brenden won't mind," Dante offered.

"I don't think so." The last thing he wanted was to intrude on their private time.

"Ethan, buddy, you can't sleep out here. Not only will you look like a bum, but it's not safe."

"I don't know," Ethan hedged. "Maybe I could just go crash with Rafe."

"Uh, yeah," Dante gave a nervous chuckle. "That might not be such a good idea. I think he may need a night to cool off, too."

"Rafe's mad at me?"

"Yeah, for the same reason Zeke is." Dante extended his hand. "So you're stuck with me. Come on, we just ordered a pizza."

Ethan allowed himself to be pulled to his feet and numbly followed Dante. Each step he took made his heart break a little more as the hard words he and Zeke had exchanged replayed in his head. What if Zeke never forgave him? Ethan knew that he couldn't survive without him. Hell, he didn't want to. If he had to face life without Zeke in it, then he didn't think he could go on.

"Honey, I brought someone home for dinner," Dante announced as they walked into the room.

If Brenden was surprised to see Ethan, he didn't show it. Instead, he just waved and got another plate and soda out. Dante grabbed a slice, taking a bite to show it was safe before he put in on Ethan's plate. The move was so brief that a casual observer may have missed it, but to Ethan it meant everything. It was Dante's way of showing he accepted the hang-ups and didn't judge them.

"Thanks," Ethan said, his voice thick with emotion. Not trusting himself to talk, he curled up in one of the chairs and started to dig in. He'd neglected to eat earlier, so he was famished and, before he knew it, had scarfed down several pieces. Even though it helped, another hunger continued to gnaw at his gut, but that one would have to wait for later.

"When's the last time you had blood?" Dante suddenly asked, almost as if he was in tune to Ethan's needs.

"I don't know. Back at the clan," he admitted. "I didn't get a chance just now before I left the room."

"Come here," Dante ordered softly.

Ethan looked up and jumped in surprise. Dante was sitting on the edge of the bed, his wrist up and elevated in some kind of offering. "You don't have to do that," Ethan protested, his shock making him stammer over the words.

"We need you in top shape for whatever we find at the coven tomorrow and you were sick earlier. So yes, I do." Dante crooked a finger.

Ethan shot a worried glance at Brenden. There was no way he could possibly be okay with his mate offering to feed another male. But, Brenden didn't seem miffed at all. In fact, he hadn't even glanced up from the TV.

"It's okay," Dante reassured him. "Like I told you earlier, you're one of my brothers now and this is what family does for one another. It'll just be a clean, clinical feed, nothing hinky about it. I promise."

Ethan still looked over uncertainly at Brenden.

The blond vampire finally tore his gaze from the television. "It's okay, my sister and I've had to feed from each other before and I know that's how

it is with you and Dante.”

“It’s not like you haven’t drank from me before. During your transition, you sank your fangs in all of us at some point.” Dante smiled crookedly.

“I wasn’t exactly myself then,” Ethan argued, but went over to Dante, kneeling down before him. Despite his reservations, his fangs had already dropped in anticipation as his stomach growled. “You sure?” Ethan felt like he should give Dante one last out.

“Yes, I take care of those who matter to me and that includes you, you dumbass. Now bite me already.”

Ethan struck fast, wanting to get things over as quickly as possible.

Dante flinched, but otherwise showed no reaction. As he swallowed the first mouthful, Ethan realized Dante and Brenden had been right. There was nothing sexual or uncomfortable about the situation. It was just Dante helping him out with a basic need, nothing more.

“Now that your mouth is full and you can’t talk back, I want to tell you something,” Dante said in a surprisingly serious tone.

Ethan gave him his best *what* look.

“You and I are a lot more alike than either one of us want to admit.”

Ethan tossed him an are-you-kidding-me glare. He’d given anything at that moment to have his

old telepathy gifts back so he could communicate with Dante that way.

"Yes, we both think that we are so dirty from our pasts that anyone we touch will get tainted. That we're somehow not worthy of love because of what we've had to do to survive."

Ethan lifted a hand and slowly extended his middle finger.

"I almost lost Brenden before I realized that wasn't true. He loves me for all of me, good and bad. Zeke's the same way with you."

Ethan rolled his eyes.

"I'm serious. Why do you think he got so mad at you? It's because you scared the piss out of him. He doesn't want to lose you and he realizes that one of the biggest threats to your safety is you."

Ethan pulled his fangs out and closed up the pinpricks with a quick sweep of his tongue. "I was just trying to help the mission." How many times had he said that since he woke up?

"Yeah, and he just wants to protect you."

Those words struck hard, making Ethan realize that he'd been wrong. Zeke had understood all along and in Ethan's attempt to make things better, all he'd done was make the one person he loved the most hurt even more.

"Get some sleep. You can talk things over with him when the sun sets." Dante patted the bed.

"What if he doesn't want to work things out?"

Ethan asked, finally putting words to his biggest fear.

"He will. Zeke loves you too much to ever give up on you." He patted the bed again. "Come on and lay down. You can rest easy, too. Brenden and I will take shifts standing guard so you don't have to worry about someone sneaking up while you're sleeping."

Ethan swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. "Damn it, you would have to make me like you," he grumbled as he got up, then crawled on the bed.

Even though he'd woken up not too long ago, that rest had not been a natural one, so his lids felt heavy. His full stomach and knowledge that Brenden and Dante were protecting him served as a balm and despite his worries about Zeke, Ethan found he was able to drift off to sleep,

It seemed like just minutes later, though he knew hours had passed, when he felt someone climb into the bed with him. Even before the hard body pressed into his back, Ethan knew it was Zeke because of the dark, spicy scent that marked his man. As Zeke wrapped his arms around him, Ethan allowed himself to melt into his embrace. "I wasn't sure you'd come looking for me," he admitted as he snuggled his ass against Zeke's groin.

"I missed you," Zeke said, before he pressed a

feather of kisses along the nape of Ethan's neck.

The kisses made shivers dance down Ethan's spine and he wiggled his butt again, delighting in the way the movement made Zeke hard.

"I can tell." Ethan took Zeke's hand and led it down to his erection. "I missed you, too...see?"

"Fuck, you feel so good," Zeke moaned as he gave Ethan a hard squeeze.

"Where's Dante and Brenden?" Ethan panted as he rolled his hips into Zeke again.

"They left to give us some privacy so we could make up properly. Dante's words not mine." Zeke gave a slow, lazy chuckle that made Ethan's cock twitch.

"How long do we have?"

"Long enough, don't worry." Zeke unzipped Ethan's pants and reached in for some skin on skin action.

"I never thought you'd want to touch me this way again."

"I'd have to be dead not to want you. I couldn't sleep because you weren't next to me." Zeke's strong fingers took Ethan's erection out, then started to stroke the shaft slowly up and down.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left like that." Ethan groaned.

"Next time, I'll tie you down to the bed and fuck you so hard you'll be too satisfied to even think about storming out on me," Zeke threatened

as he brushed another kiss across Ethan's neck.

The thought of being helpless, naked and at Zeke's mercy made a fresh wave of arousal shoot through Ethan. He thrust against Zeke's hand, his hips making short, jerky motions.

"You slept in your uniform," Zeke observed. "That makes more sorry that I didn't come sooner. You look so fuckable in all that leather, but then you could be wearing that ratty sweatshirt and workout pants of yours and I'd still get hard just looking at you."

"Please, Zeke." Ethan was so close to the edge, he felt as if his skin were about to split.

"Please, what?" Zeke taunted.

Ethan knew he damn well knew what he wanted. "Fuck me, hard!"

Zeke's eyes flared with passion as he got off the bed and stood up. "Get naked," he ordered.

That was something Ethan was eager to comply with. Scrambling off the mattress, he hurried to pull off his clothes. It wasn't until he was standing nude that he realized Zeke hadn't moved to strip, too. "Aren't you going to get naked?" Ethan frowned.

"Not until you're ready."

"Ready for what?" Confused, he reached out to touch Zeke, but the vampire stepped back out of reach.

"Get back on the bed on your back."

Zeke's face revealed nothing, leaving Ethan more clueless than ever. Still he did as asked. Even though he didn't know what Zeke had planned, Ethan did know he trusted his mate implicitly. Once he was in position, Zeke reached behind his own back and took something out of his pocket. He only spotted a flash of silver before Zeke moved. Cool metal encircled Ethan's wrist, followed by the telltale clack that let him know he'd just been cuffed. By the time he could open his mouth to question him, Zeke had already attached the other end to the headboard. Ethan pulled lightly, not quite believing what he saw. "Zeke?" The name came out breathless, with more than a hint of passion lacing the edges.

"I told you, I'm not letting you get away again." Zeke reached behind him again, producing another set of cuffs.

Even though he knew what was coming this time, Ethan didn't fight him. Hell, he even lifted his own hand up in offering. Only when both hands were shackled and Ethan completely secured, did Zeke get back up and start to pull of his clothes.

Ethan stared, mouth dry, as every inch of his vampire's tan flesh was slowly exposed for him. First, his chest, strong and tight, the muscles rippling as he moved, then, his hips, lean and hard. Finally, his thick, erect cock, the tip already

glistening with pre-cum.

"You're so gorgeous," Ethan breathed, his chest heaving with passion. Although he could have easily broken the handcuffs and lunged forward, he kept still. After all he'd done, the least he could do was give Zeke this.

It was hard though because once the scent of Zeke's arousal hit him, Ethan felt himself hanging onto his last vestige of control. Need, raw and feralness ripped through him, making his fangs drop and a growl rumble through his chest. Opening his mouth slightly, he ran his tongue over his sharp incisors, doing it nice and slowly so Zeke couldn't miss it. "Come and show me, Zeke. Show me why I shouldn't run away."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Zeke couldn't decide what looked sexier — the of Ethan's, lean, naked body all exposed for the taking or of him slowly licking his fangs while he eyed Zeke up like he was sizing him up for his next meal. The bonding scar on his neck tingled in anticipation of how it would feel when Ethan finally did sink those teeth into him.

"I should just leave you this way." Zeke stepped closer, but didn't reach out to touch Ethan. Instead, he slid his hand down his own body and fisted his cock, stroking it in slow, teasing glides.

"You won't though, because we both know you want me as much as I want you," Ethan challenged, his words slurred with passion.

"True, but that doesn't mean I can't make you beg first."

"I already said please." Ethan cocked his head to the side, his gaze clocking the movements of

Zeke's hand, which continued to work up and down his dick.

"Oh, it's going to take a lot more than that."

Ethan bared his fangs even more, a low hiss passing his lips.

Zeke chuckled, "That's not going to work either." Abandoning his cock, Zeke climbed on the bed and straddled Ethan's thighs.

Ethan hissed again, trying to thrust up to grind against him.

Zeke reached out and grabbed his hips. He held tight, his fingers digging in too hard--there were sure to be bruises left behind. That didn't daunt Ethan though, if anything, it made more passion bloom through his dark gaze. "Don't move or else I'll stop." Zeke trailed one finger down Ethan's chest, stopping to linger at one of his nipples.

Following the path of his finger, Zeke leaned down and nipped at Ethan's chest, taking the nipple between his teeth and pulling slightly. Ethan moaned in pleasure, but didn't move, playing by the rules. Zeke sucked in deeper, digging a fang into the skin so just a drop of blood beaded out. With a hum of delight, he sucked it in.

"Nobody tastes better than you," Zeke declared before he started to move his mouth lower. He gave not-so-playful bites all the way down Ethan's chest and stomach until his lips were hovering just inches from the warlock's cock.

"Who's your mate?" Zeke demanded.

"What?" Ethan asked, confused before he seemed to recover. "You are, of course."

"Say it again." Zeke ran his tongue along the top of Ethan's dick, probing the slit so some pre-cum washed over his mouth.

"You're my mate," Ethan gasped. He still hadn't moved, but a fine sheen of sweat was beginning to break out all over his body.

"That means your life is my life, right?" Zeke continued to push. He needed to hear it out loud, for Ethan's lips to form the words.

"Yes, forever."

Ethan's cock twitched against his lips, but Zeke decided to not count it against the no-moving rule. "That means you're going to stop sacrificing yourself for others because we're partners now. Correct?"

"Yes, I won't hurt you like that anymore. I'm sorry. So sorry. Just please fuck me."

That answer satisfied Zeke enough to lower his head and finally start really using his mouth, only instead of wrapping his lips around Ethan's cock, he moved lower to the tight opening of his ass. Pushing Ethan's knees further apart so he could really get at him, Zeke started to use his tongue on the man's hole, getting him slick and ready. Rimming the muscle several times, he finally plunged his tongue inside, slowly fucking Ethan.

"Zeke, I can't take it anymore. Do it now."

After giving one last lick, Zeke got up and positioned himself between Ethan's legs. "Open your eyes. I want to see the look on your face when I take your hot ass."

As soon as Ethan's lids fluttered open, Zeke surged forward, pressing through the tight opening. Ethan yelled, the hard muscles in his arms bunching, but he didn't tug against the cuffs. The love on Ethan's face—the need stamped in his eyes, was enough to finally make Zeke lose all control. Letting out an animalistic growl, he started to pound into Ethan's ass.

"Oh goddess, touch me, Zeke," Ethan begged.

Zeke reached between them and wrapped his hand around Ethan's cock, stroking him in time with his thrusts. It took only a few passes before the warlock let out a hoarse cry and shot off, hot, sticky liquid coating Zeke's fingers.

Zeke's balls grew tight to his body, and with one final thrust, he joined Ethan. Desire shot up his spine, making Zeke roar as he emptied himself inside his lover. He collapsed on Ethan's chest, both of them panting for breath.

After a few seconds, Ethan muttered a few magical words that unlocked the cuffs. Once his hands were free, he wrapped them around Zeke and held him close. They were both sweaty and the cum was starting to stick and dry to their skin,

but damned if Zeke could bring himself to care at the moment.

"How long before the sun sets?" Ethan asked as he started to play with Zeke's hair.

"Another hour at the most." Zeke closed his eyes against the soothing sensation of Ethan's fingers massaging his scalp.

"We should probably get cleaned up then," Ethan sighed.

"I suppose," Zeke agreed, but neither one of them moved.

"I am sorry about what I did yesterday," Ethan whispered.

"I'm sorry, too, for yelling at you." Zeke gave him a squeeze.

"Next time I pull something like that, I promise to ask you ahead of time. No more surprises."

"I promise that no matter how bad things get for you when you have to face your coven, that I'll stand by your side. I won't let them hurt you again."

"I know, Zeke. I learned that the day you came to rescue me from the Pure Borns. You'll never let me down."

"Good, now that we have that cleared up, let's go take a shower." Zeke slid out of Ethan's hold and got up to his knees.

"Are you sure we should go in there together?" Ethan propped up on his elbows as he shot off a

cocky smile. "If we do, I don't know how much washing will get done."

"That's what I'm hoping for." Zeke leaned down and captured his lips in a scorching kiss.

* * * *

Ethan got out of the SUV and surveyed the forest that surrounded the caves housing the coven. The air was still and quiet. Almost too much so. The silence was so foreboding and oppressive, a shiver went down his spine. Not even the crickets were out. "Do you hear that?" he asked Zeke.

"You mean the nothingness? Yes." Zeke came to stand next to him, every muscle in his body tense and coiled for action.

"It's as if everything is hiding from something," Kavan added as he walked over.

"That's because they are," Ethan said as he gently put out his magic feelers. He did it in increments, careful not to send off any signals himself that the enemy could pick up on. "The Ninth are still here. They're waiting for us."

"They know we're coming?" Kavan's eyes widened in shock.

"They've known all along. That's been their plan. To bring us in." Ethan didn't know how he was so certain of that fact, but it suddenly became as clear to him as if Davis himself had come and

whispered it into his ear.

"We should have realized," Kavan spat. "He's been trying to get to you all along. When you didn't die the last time, he's using this to try again."

"Why Ethan?" Zeke demanded sharply.

"Because Davis knows he's the only one who can be a match for his power. Ever since he realized Ethan's potential, Davis has had a hard on for him and not in the good way." Kavan muttered a curse under his breath as he started to pace.

Dante, Rafe and Kane joined them just in time to hear the bad news. Ethan expected them to try to take over and run everything. Instead, they all look expectantly at him.

"What should we do?" Rafe asked.

Ethan couldn't hide his shock. That had been the last question he'd been prepared for. "We can't pull back. We do and the Ninth will kill everyone in the coven just to prove a point. I say we try to breach through and make it inside to check out the situation. See who's still alive."

"Do you have any idea how many warlocks the Ninth have out there?" Dante scanned the area, although there was nothing to see.

"Plenty and I sense some Pure Born vampires, too." Ethan looked over at the Drones. "If you guys don't want to come, I understand. You didn't

sign up for a suicide mission. I just can't leave the coven when it's in trouble like this. Some of my warlocks still have family there."

"You're not getting rid of us that easy," one of the Drones, a male named Micah, replied. The rest of the vampires nodded their agreement.

Ethan looked over at Zeke. He hoped that his unspoken question was clear. A sigh of relief went through his when Zeke gave a slow nod.

"I understand why you have to do this. I'll be with you the entire way."

"Now, what's the plan?" Kane cocked a brow. "Somehow I don't think the Ninth are just going to stand to the side and let us waltz through their ranks."

"I have an idea." Doyle stepped forward and lowered his hood. When Ethan nodded, he continued, "I can take Vince and we can cause a distraction."

Vince was one of Ethan's most fierce fighters, a blond warlock, with dark eyes and a mean streak larger than Lake Michigan. As soon as the suggestion came up, he gave an eager nod, no doubt, excited at the prospect of causing some damage during said diversion.

"How will you do that?" Ethan asked.

"They could take some Sunlight Grenades and blow a whole bunch of Pure Borns the fuck up," Dante suggested, ever so helpful.

Ethan hesitated. "How will you guys get away? I don't think the Ninth are going to take that sitting down," he quizzed Doyle.

"Don't worry. We always land on our feet. We're like kitty cats that way." Doyle flashed a snarky grin.

It was on the tip of Ethan's tongue to say it should be he that takes a risk that great. He'd never let someone else take the lead like this. Then he remembered his promise to Zeke. "Okay, but be careful. First sign of trouble and you run. No heroics."

They agreed before running off to get the weapons from Brenden. After they left to get into position, the vampires scrambled into UV protective gear to shield themselves from the grenades. Even though they'd be at a distance, nobody wanted to take the risk of accidentally getting exposed to manufactured sunlight. At the same time, the warlocks got the goggles ready so they could slip them on when needed.

Ethan kept his warlock uniform on, but had the added facemask, gloves and UV eyewear like the Drones. The irony wasn't lost on him that even his uniform was mixed. Once everyone was suited up, he gestured them to follow him into the thick covering of trees.

Within moments, he began to spot familiar landmarks in the forest. The rock they used to

play *King of the Mountain* on as kids. The stream he'd shared his first kiss before Olivia had sent him away. The dark patch in the earth where the teen magics liked to have bonfire parties. Once they got several hundred feet from the entrance of the cave, he indicated for everyone to take cover behind some trees. Since he had enhanced vampire vision, it wasn't hard for him to pick out the Ninth warlocks guarding the perimeter. His heart sank when he saw how many there were.

"Shit, I didn't even know they had that many in their coven," Dante breathed in a low whisper. "Have they been cloning them in a lab or something?"

"More and more dark covens have been absorbed into their ranks as the Ninth take over additional territories and grow in strength," Ethan explained.

"He's right," Dominic added. "I recognize some of them from the dark coven I grew up in."

"Are you going to be okay? We may have to use deadly force to get through." Ethan turned to look at him. "Nobody would think less of you for not being able to strike against your former friends."

Dominic lowered his goggles so he could lock gazes with Ethan. "I'm looking at my coven right now. All my loyalty lies with you and the others."

"I'm no coven leader," Ethan argued.

"Keep telling yourself that. Maybe you'll actually start believing it." Dominic chuckled before he stepped back to join Rafe and Morgan.

Ethan shook his head, wondering what in hell had brought that on. He glanced over at Kavan, expecting to see the same confusion on his face. Instead, he found that not only was Kavan stone serious, but so were the remaining warlocks.

"I pledge my soul and magic to you," Kavan solemnly vowed.

It felt like someone had hit him in the gut with a brick. By speaking those words, Kavan had formally sworn allegiance to Ethan, to always go where he led, to die to protect him if necessary. This went a whole lot further than him just agreeing to serve under Ethan on a team. It was a lifetime commitment that could only be broken with blood.

Before Ethan could object, every other warlock stepped forward and recited the same words. He stood there like a fool, his mouth agape as shock thundered through him. Then he noticed Rafe, Morgan and Dominic walking to him. "You can't be serious?" Ethan protested. How did they expect him, the exiled, disgraced son of Olivia to lead them?

"I pledge my soul and magic to you, little brother," Rafe said, his voice gruff with emotion.

Ethan felt weak in the knees. It was too much.

All his life he'd failed so many times and now they wanted him to guide them? Panicked, he turned to the one source of comfort he knew he could always count on. "Zeke, can you believe this?" his voice was high-pitched with anxiety.

"Of course I can." Zeke smiled.

The pride in his eyes gave Ethan the courage to look back at the group and nod. "Okay, I guess I accept and pledge my soul and magic back to all of you." What other choice did he have? To refuse would dishonor their offering and that was the last thing he wanted to do.

Before he could consider the ramifications of what he'd just agreed to, the sky grew bright as the ground rumbled beneath them. Doyle and Vince had let off the Sunlight Grenades, meaning it was time for them to make a run for it.

CHAPTER NINE

Just as Doyle had predicted, most of the Ninth left the opening of the cave to investigate the explosions. There were still over a dozen left, but Ethan knew his group could take them out quickly.

“Now let’s go!” he yelled as he left the cover and ran toward the cave.

A dark warlock shot an energy bolt at Ethan that he deflected with an easy flick of his wrist. He sent it back at the offender, the magic hitting the warlock in the chest. He let out a keening wail as he fell to the ground.

He kept running, never breaking stride. Zeke was to his left, Rafe on his right and they were standing shoulder to shoulder with him as they fought their way through. Kavan shot off a fireball, killing a Ninth, Zeke shot another with his Glock. Each second they got closer. Ethan could see the outline of the door now. He only hoped

that whoever was inside would recognize them as friends and let them in. If not, they would be trapped between the rocks and the enemy.

A couple more steps took him within hailing distance. Raising his hands, he sent out a magical call, praying to all that was holy it would be answered. Behind him, he heard a scream as yet another dark warlock was cut down. Ethan reached out, his fingers touching the thick wood of the door. If he had to, he'd pound on the damn thing, human style until someone answered it. The explosions had stopped so he knew the other Ninth would be returning any second.

Just as he was beginning to get seriously worried, the door clicked open. With a cry of relief, he pushed it open. When he tried to stand back and let the others through first, Rafe physically picked him up and thrust him inside.

Their legs got tangled and they tumbled to the ground, landing in an ungraceful heap. When Ethan saw the pair of white shoes with stylishly pointed toes inches of his face, he knew without looking up that it was Olivia. He glanced over at Rafe and realized they both had on their goggles and masks on so she probably had no idea it was her pair of wayward sons lying at her feet.

Ethan didn't have to see Rafe's face to know he wore a shit-eating grin. A small laugh bubbled past Ethan's lips. Even though the situation

shouldn't be so damn funny, he couldn't help it.

Slipping off the mask, Rafe grinned up at Olivia. "Hi, Mommy!" he exclaimed with sickly, fake, sweetness.

Ethan snorted in laughter before he pulled off his gear, too. Smiling at her, he blinked innocently. "Hey, Ma. We're a little hungry. You didn't happen to make some cookies for snack time, did you?"

They both dissolved into hysterical laughter. Even some of the Drones joined in. Olivia didn't seem as amused, nor did any of the handful of her coven members who'd joined her.

"Stand up, both of you," she snapped, her green eyes blazing with fury. As usual, she had her waist-length blonde hair done up in an intricate style of knots and braids and she was wearing a white robe that almost reached the floor.

They got up, having to lean on each other for support because they were still cracking up. Olivia let out a huff of disgust as she reached out and grabbed Ethan's face. Pinching his cheeks, she forced his mouth open.

"Just what I'd heard." She shot a scathing look over at Rafe. "You corrupted him."

Zeke moved forward, a warning growl rumbling through his chest. "Actually, I was the one who did the corrupting and I suggest you let

go of him. Now."

Olivia ignored Zeke's order, instead jerking her hold on Ethan's face, tilting his head to the side so his bonding scar was exposed. "I just bet you corrupted him." She let out a hiss of displeasure. "I knew you were a disappointment, but I never thought you'd stoop so low as to actually rut with a vampire."

"Like mother like son," Rafe quipped, flashing his fangs.

Olivia brought her hand back and slapped Ethan across the face, the loud smack echoing through the hall.

Even though his ears were ringing, he still held up a hand to hold the others back. "Ouch," he rubbed at the spot, "why did you hit me? Rafe was the one who called you a fang whore."

That earned him another slap, this one to the other cheek.

"Okay, maybe he didn't exactly call you a *fang whore*, but the implication was still there."

Olivia brought her hand back, but this time Rafe intervened, reaching out and grabbing her by the wrist. "You're not using him as your punching bag. Not anymore."

As soon as Rafe touched her, the warlocks from her coven surged forward. Ethan's group braced, ready to attack back. Ethan realized he had to calm things down quickly, before there was more

bloodshed inside the coven than outside.

"Stand down," he ordered his warlocks. When they all obeyed, Olivia seemed to grow angrier. Rafe let go out her wrist, but his face had a clear warning that anyone who tried to hit Ethan would be pulling back a stump.

"You actually have them following you around like trained puppies?" She let out a short bark of disbelieving laughter.

"As Rafe said, like mother like son," Ethan drawled.

"Why did you come here? I exiled you."

"Eric got your distress call and sent us to help."

"I expected Drone warriors, not a smattering of have-been warlocks and some pathetic excuses for vampires." She flicked a scornful glance at the group.

"They are the best team I've ever had the honor to work with and you should kiss your precious, over-protected ass that Eric was willing to lend them to you. Now as I see it, your coven is surrounded by an army of warlocks from the Ninth, plus a whole lot of pissed off Pure Born vampires. You should be thanking your lucky runes that I'm here to help."

"Oh, really?" She shared a can-you-believe-this-schmuck look with one of her warlocks.

"Yes, because while you were busy all these years, kissing up and playing politics, I was doing

exactly what you wanted. Learning how to fight, how to kill and how the Ninth work. So if you want to save your coven's collective asses, I suggest you take your pride and stifle it."

"You really think you can defeat the Ninth?"

Doyle and Vince came crashing through the door. They're eyes were wild from the fight and there was no mistaking the delight on their faces.

"I think we took out half the Pure Borns with those Sunlight Grenades," Doyle announced.

"Dude, you and your weapons rock," Vince pointed at Brenden.

Ethan turned and smiled at Olivia. "I'd say that's a good start."

As his mother led him through the coven's many rooms and hallways, Ethan was amazed how everything looked the same. With all that'd changed with him, he somehow expected time to march on with his childhood home, too. When he'd left all those months ago to go with Rafe, Ethan had been a bitter, lonely and damaged in more way than one. Now he had more swagger to his step, he held his head high and had a sense of contentment around him. It had nothing to do with his new fangs either. It was all because of Zeke.

Ethan reached out and grabbed Zeke's hand. Maybe he wanted to show him off a bit, but who

could blame him? As far as he was concerned, he had the best looking male around and he wanted to make sure everyone knew the vampire belonged to him.

Olivia paused in front of the communications center. All the computers were off, the screens blank. "We lost contact with outside a couple days ago and haven't been able to get it back up."

Ethan looked over at Cherish and Brenden. "You guys mind?"

"Not at all," Cherish beamed as she sank into one of the chairs.

"Give us an hour and we'll have it up and running again," Brenden promised even though they hadn't even started yet.

Ethan didn't doubt him though.

Cherish's fingers were already flying over the keyboard, her lips pursed in concentration. Derik and Kavan were both giving her identical looks of adoration.

"Wait until you see what she can do," Kavan bragged to one of Olivia's warlocks. "Our girl is the best when it comes to this stuff."

"Thanks, sweetie. Does this place have any coffee?" Cherish requested, never looking up from her work.

"I'll go get it," Derik volunteered quickly. Giving her a quick kiss on the top of the head, he rushed off.

"How many casualties have there been?" Ethan asked Olivia.

"So far twenty-five. All of them were adults who got killed in the first wave of fighting." For the first time, she showed some real grief.

"Where are the children?" He looked around. Usually the coven was overrun by kids. He missed how they seemed to bring life to the place.

"We're keeping them confined to the school since it's the most protected part of the building."

Ethan nodded that made sense. "How are you doing weapon wise?"

"Not too well," a male warlock answered for her. "We didn't prepare for a siege like this."

He wanted to berate them for their stupidity. With all the attacks that had been occurring with the other covens, he'd started advocating long before he left for the coven start stockpiling weapons. In her pride, Olivia had always refused, saying their magic would be enough to protect them. "How many Sunlight Grenades do we have left?" he asked Doyle.

"A few, but not enough to take out all the vamps still out there." Doyle gave a grim shake of his head.

Ethan bit back the impulse to curse out loud.

Zeke put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "This is just a setback, nothing more. We'll figure out something."

"Zeke's right," Rafe added. "What you said to Olivia was true. You were trained for this. Those bastards taught you every dirty trick they knew. Now it's time for you to turn things around on them."

Ethan smiled as an idea suddenly came to him. It was dark. It was devious. It was perfect. "I'm probably pretty safe in assuming they're using the stream for their water source."

"Yes, I would say so." Kavan smiled, showing he knew what Ethan was thinking.

"I think it's time they learned how it feels to be on the wrong end of a poisoning."

"You can't," Olivia objected. "Our coven doesn't practice that kind of magic."

"As you seemed so inclined to remind me, I don't belong to this coven anymore so I don't think the rules should apply to me either." Ethan turned his back on her, dismissing her and her high morals that only came out when they suited her.

"Do you have the stuff to make a poison like that?" Zeke asked. The corners of his mouth twitched and amusement made his eyes sparkle.

"Yeah, in my old bedroom." Ethan paused. "Let's just hope Olivia didn't turn it into a workout room or something else after I left."

Zeke laughed at his joke as Ethan led him away from the communications room. He navigated the

long, white hallways, ignoring all the gawking stares being tossed his way. He'd be willing to bet they were all shocked that the halfling had the guts to actually show his face. Once they got into his bedroom, Zeke shut the door behind them and came up behind Ethan. As soon as he felt the familiar warmth of his vampire pressed against his back, Ethan relaxed for the first time that night. He even allowed his head to fall back against Zeke's chest.

"How are you handling all this?" Zeke rumbled into his ear.

"It's about what I thought it would be." He allowed his eyelids to flutter closed as a small smile spread over his lips. "Thanks for not going for Olivia's throat when she hit me. I know how hard that must have been for you."

"I'll admit it wasn't easy. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to kill her, but I knew you wouldn't want that. If it happens again though, I don't know if I'll be able to control myself."

"It was just a couple slaps. Trust me. I've suffered through much worse at her hands." As soon as Ethan felt Zeke's arms tighten around him, it dawned on him that had been the wrong thing to say.

"I say we take Olivia and toss her out for the Ninth to deal with."

"Be nice," Ethan chided with a small chuckle. It

felt so good in Zeke's arms that he could have stayed there forever.

"Of course, knowing our luck, the Ninth would throw her back at us. I don't even think they could put up with that Ice Bitch."

"Speaking of her, I better get the supplies and get back before she gets more pissed." His breath hitched when he felt Zeke's hand drift down to grab his cock. As always, the vampire's touch set him on fire.

"Or I could throw you down on your bed and fuck you until you scream so loud everyone hears for themselves what a fang whore you are," Zeke suggested playfully.

"I'm only a whore for one vampire." His heart pounded in his chest as Zeke gave his erection a tight squeeze.

"Then get down on your knees and prove it."

Ethan groaned, "I wish I could, but we really do have to get back. I promise to be your slave later on though."

Zeke grumbled in disappointment as he moved his hand. "I'm going to hold you to it."

Ethan turned in Zeke's arms so they were facing each other. Brushing a tender kiss across the man's lips, he said, "I can hardly wait."

CHAPTER TEN

As Zeke watched Ethan move around the bedroom, he couldn't help but be struck by how sparse it looked compared to their room back at the clan dwelling. When they'd first moved in together, it had taken Zeke forever to get used to the stacks of books, the various bottles scattered all over and the herbs hanging down from the ceiling.

Here at the coven, Ethan's bedroom was as sterile and clinical as the rest of the place. It had shiny white floors, a tightly made up double bed cover by a white comforter and marble white walls. In other words, it was everything Ethan hated.

"Did they clean this up after you left?" he asked, frowning as he recalled what his own childhood bedroom had looked like—posters all over the walls, hockey equipment piled in the corner, old trophies collecting dust on his dresser.

It looked lived in, where Ethan's room looked one step above institutionalization.

"Huh?" Ethan looked absently over his shoulder as he opened the closet. "Oh, right. No this is how I left it."

"So when did you lose the clean bug—somewhere on the highway between here and Michigan?" Zeke teased.

"I just felt more comfortable being myself at the clan. Here, I still felt like I had to be something I wasn't." Ethan reached up to get something on the top shelf.

Zeke didn't respond at first. Too struck by the fact that even when Ethan had been an outcast warlock in the midst of strange vampires, he'd felt more at ease at the clan than he did his own home. Then again, he probably didn't feel like this place was home. Not after Olivia had ripped him away from it and thrust him into the nightmare world of the Ninth. "I like your room better at the clan."

Ethan turned around, a crooked smile showing just a flash of fang. "Here I thought all my clutter bothered you."

"No, because it's part of you." The perfectly made up bed bothered him even more now and Zeke gave into impulse and reached over, messing it just slightly. Ethan caught him, but other than a raised brow, didn't object.

"Good, then I won't have to listen to you bitch

about how strange my potions smell anymore." Ethan went back to searching the top shelf. Once he had a large shoebox in his hands, he turned around and set it on the bed.

"I'll always complain about that. Especially when it smells as rank as that crap you cooked up last week. What was that again?"

"An herbal ointment for Dahlia. Even though vampires heal really quickly, sometimes she needs a little extra help and that stuff works wonders on bruises and cuts," Ethan replied absently as he took off the lid.

"I'll put up with the pain and let everything heal up on its own, thank you very much," Zeke quipped as he looked down at the contents of the box. It had various jars, herbs and what looked like dried creatures of some kind. "Do I even want to know what they are?" he pointed at one husk that looked like a scorpion.

"I promise there aren't any zombie parts in here."

Zeke barely held back the shudder. Since he'd been turned and found out the world was full of *others*, he'd adjusted with one exception—zombies. Those things never failed to freak the hell out of him. He'd take one look at that hanging rotten skin and wonder what kind of worms and bugs were scurrying around under the mess. The smell wasn't any better either since it was a

mixture of decay, grave dirt and mothballs that no amount of body spray could cover. That wasn't the worst thing about them though. It was their annoying habit of being whiney. Seriously, in all the horror flicks he'd seen as a kid, not once had the brain-eating zombies cried and bitched half as much as their real life counterparts.

Ethan pulled out a few bottles and set them to the side.

Zeke reached out to grab one.

Ethan gave a curt, "Don't touch that."

"Afraid I'll break it?"

"No, it's a combination of seven different spider venoms. I don't want you to accidentally get some on you."

That made Zeke pull his hand back quickly. "Why can't you have something nice like unicorn tears, dragon giggles or something sweet like that?"

Ethan laughed. "That's in the other box."

When he pulled out a mummified snakehead, Zeke let out a loud curse. The thing was a dusky black color with beady red eyes and its mouth was open in a silent hiss. "Shit, remind me never to piss you off."

"This is only the beginning of what I have planned for them." Ethan got a wicked gleam to his eyes.

That instantly made Zeke hard again. "I love

your mean streak." He still continued to eye up the snakehead wearily.

Ethan rolled his eyes. "You're just saying that to get into my pants."

"Like I have to work to do that."

Ethan paused, cocking his head to the side. "No, I guess you don't."

A heavy knock on the door interrupted them.

"That's Olivia. Let's get going." Ethan let out a put upon sigh as he gathered his ingredients and gingerly placed them in a duffle bag. He seemed to be taking great care not to break them, even going so far as to wrap a few of the bottles in socks.

When the knocks continued to go unanswered, Olivia must have gotten sick of waiting because the door opened and she burst through. "What's going on in here?"

"Lots of gay sex and you just missed it, Ma," Ethan deadpanned, never looking up from his work.

Like a bullwhip, Olivia's gaze snapped to the bed and her attention seemed to hone in on the spot Zeke had purposely messed up.

Actually chagrined at his sloppy behavior, he had reached out to smooth it out before he caught himself and shook his head. What the fuck? He hated the bitch so he sure as hell didn't want to fall into line for her. Next, he'd be getting down on

his hands and knees and scrubbing her precious, shiny floor.

"This thing that you're planning, it won't harm the wildlife, will it?" she demanded, turning her blistering glare back on Ethan. "I can't have someone from my coven hurting the earth."

"Save it, Olivia. Nobody is around to be impressed by your false declarations of love for the Mother," Ethan snapped with unveiled disdain.

"Just answer my question."

"No, I'll specialize it to work only on magics and vampires. It won't harm anything warm or furry. So let's just hope they don't have any werewolves on their side." Ethan zipped up the duffle and carefully slid it over his shoulder.

"How about after they leave? You can't expect me to have a coven beside a stream that is polluted by evil." She crossed her arms over her chest.

It almost seemed to Zeke that she didn't want the plan to work. As if she was afraid of her son showing her up to her followers.

"It's not long acting. After forty-eight hours, it will be completely out of the water."

"You're actually that good? I've never seen any warlock, dark or white, who could have that much control over a poison." Her voice rang sharp with disbelief.

"Well you did send me to the best to learn how to do this kind of shit," Ethan replied.

"Watch your mouth. Just because you associate with heathens doesn't mean you have to act like them." She shot another look of disgust Zeke's way.

"Those heathens are the only ones who were willing to risk their necks for your coven, so you better treat them with respect. You want to know why we're the only ones who came here? Because everyone else refused. You and you're venom are second on the most hated list. Only the Ninth rank higher than you. So before you keep passing judgment on the vampires who are bravely coming to help you, I'd take a deep look into the mirror and ask who the real monster is." Not waiting for a response, Ethan turned and left the room.

Olivia stood there in place, seemingly paralyzed with shock. Her mouth opened, then closed before she let out a low growl of anger and left the room, too.

Zeke had never been more proud of Ethan. He'd finally faced up to his mother and told her what he really thought. He couldn't wait to catch up with him and tell him that either. He just needed to remember his way back to the communications room. He was saved when Ethan poked his head back into the room.

"Sorry, babe. You coming?" He gave Zeke a sheepish grin.

Zeke walked over to him and cupped him by the back of the head, bringing him in for a hard kiss. "I wish I could have videoed that. Her face was priceless when you walked out on her like that."

"I thought I went a little far with the whole look-in-the-mirror cliché," Ethan confessed once they pulled apart.

"Nah, it was perfect." Zeke grabbed Ethan's hand and let him lead the way back to the communications room.

On the way there, Ethan refused to look at any of the magics as they passed by, but Zeke did. While he saw many of them glare at Ethan with disgust and hatred, he noticed a lot more look at him with hope, admiration and longing. It really didn't come as a surprise. After seeing the way Ethan always went out of his way to help others at the clan, it only stood to reason he'd been the same way with his coven.

Once they entered the communications room, Zeke wasn't shocked to see the computers up and running already. Kavan hadn't been lying when he said Cherish was the best. Brenden was a god when it came to stuff like that, too. She wore a headset, her mouth moving as she talked to someone on the other end.

"You did it," Ethan observed, although he didn't look surprised either.

"Yes, the Pure Borns were scrambling the signal, so we had to do our own kind of magic to work around it. Who knew my degree from MIT would come in handy in the vampire world?" Brenden cracked.

* * * *

"Is Cherish talking to Eric?" Ethan asked as he clapped Brenden on the shoulder as way of thanks.

"Yes, he's going to try to convince one of the neighboring wolf packs to come help, but so far no luck." Brenden shot a jaded look over at Olivia, letting Ethan know without words the reason why the pack wasn't willing to come save the day.

"Do they know that we have children here?" Ethan bit out angrily. If they didn't like his mother, that was fine by him, but how could they be so heartless to leave innocents at the mercy of the Ninth?

"It won't matter what Eric says, they'll refuse to come," Olivia interjected in a thin voice. She started to nervously fiddle with an amulet at her throat as she averted her gaze to the side.

"Why?" Ethan felt his stomach sink. What in the hell had she done now?

"I was the one who told the Ninth where the Wilcox Pack was hiding," she confessed in a near whisper.

The room grew silent as everyone held their breath in shock. Ethan gaped at her as he slowly shook his head in stunned horror. He'd always known she would do anything to save herself and the power she held, but to actually sacrifice a pack of werewolves?

"Holy shit, I heard about that attack. The entire pack was wiped out. Children and woman, too," Dante snarled, his fangs coming out aggressively. "They were a peaceful group, never caused any harm to anyone. Made sure their young were trained not to hunt humans. What could they have possibly done for you to lead the Ninth their way?"

"The Ninth was looking for some adult werewolf males to try some new spell on. The Wilcox pack heard that they were being hunted so they came to me for help in hiding. Instead I led them directly into the arms of the Ninth." Her voice warbled as she continued to toy with that damn amulet.

Ethan exchanged knowing looks with Zeke. Back in Detroit, they'd encountered werewolves who had been magically trapped between their human and animal state. The creatures had been out of their mind, feral and violent, but

underneath, Ethan had always sensed they'd been suffering, too, so much so that when he'd been forced to kill the poor things, he actually felt their relief.

"It was either them or the coven," Olivia defended. "If I had refused, they would have killed us instead."

"Come on, even you had to realize you couldn't ignore the violence of the Ninth forever," Ethan scoffed. "All you did was buy yourself a rain check and now they've come to cash it in." He gestured to the security footage Brenden had up on the monitors. It showed the area outside the entrance to the coven.

"It was right after that, I contacted Eric and set up the alliance with the Drones." She let go of the amulet and walked over to him, finally meeting his gaze. Grabbing his hand in an almost motherly fashion, she continued, "I never meant for any of this to happen."

"Yet, it did and I don't know if I can clean it up for you," Ethan replied honestly.

She reached up to cup his cheek.

It took all he had not to lean into her touch. So many times he'd prayed she'd caress him this way. To give him just one ounce of the affection he'd seen all the other coven mothers bestow upon their children. Even though he knew she was now using that longing against him in order to bend

him to her will, a weak part of him still savored it.

"You can do it. I've always believed in you," she soothed.

He reached out and pulled her hand down, ignoring the look of anger that flared in her eyes. "If that was the case when I was captured, then why did you refuse to send help? You just left me there to die."

"I had no choice. You know coven law dictates that you don't risk several lives to save just one," she defended without any guilt.

"Do you know what they did to me? First they beat me and then Davis stripped me of my magic. After he was done, he left me to the Pure Born vampires to play with. They tortured me and drank me dry."

"I heard and it broke my heart."

"I died! Then when Zeke did what he had to in order to save me, you still exiled me because I didn't live up to your standards." Years of pent up hurt made his voice raw.

"Honey," she smiled while using a term of endearment she'd never uttered before, "we all make mistakes."

"True," Ethan conceded, "but when it's your mistakes, somehow you always seem to make someone else pay the price." Shaking his head sadly, he went back to the monitors.

"Is this enough grogon blood," Dominic asked as he peered down into the beaker in front of him.

Ethan gave it a cursory glance. "You're going to need twice as much," he told him before going back to his own mixture.

"I already put in ten drops," Dominic protested, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"We're trying to poison the Ninth, not tickle them from the inside out." Ethan worked hard not to roll his eyes. For some reason when Ethan and his warlocks had gone to the potions room to work, Dominic had insisted on coming along.

"You know, I'm not a complete idiot when it comes to this." Dominic paused for a moment to add the other half of the blood. "My old coven did use some of this stuff."

"I'm betting they didn't use all of it though," Ethan retorted.

"Ethan, half of this crap isn't even legal in *any* coven," Dominic pointed out.

As much as he hated to admit it, Dominic did have a point. As Ethan cast a glance over the various ingredients spread out over the table, he realized just how deep he'd been into dark magic in the past. Maybe when it all came down to it, he wasn't any better than Olivia.

"I'm not judging you," Dominic added. "In fact, if I didn't think it would scar me forever, I'd kiss you for it."

"No thanks. The last thing I want is Morgan coming after me for touching you." Ethan smiled.

"I would, too," Morgan called out from across the room where she was working with Rafe. They had both insisted on coming as well. She gave Ethan a saucy wink. "Nobody is kissing those cute dimples of Ethan's but me."

Ethan laughed as he started to crush the scorpion. "You guys better get control of your girl."

"Please," Rafe snorted. "Since day one, Morgan has been the one in charge. Dominic and I just sit back and take it."

"I think we're ready here," Kavan announced.

Ethan nodded and went around, gathering up the various mixtures. Once he had them all in front of them, he very slowly poured them all into one large bottle. The rest of the group gathered around him as they watched the process. The room was quiet as they all waited to see if it would work.

When he poured in the last of the ingredients and the potion turned to a dark green, Ethan let out a whoop of delight. "We did it, guys. It worked. Now all we have to do is get the Ninth to take it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

By the time Ethan stumbled back to his room, the sun had already come up. While the activity of the coven was picking up, he was ready to go to sleep since his body now worked on *Vampire Time*. Along the way, when he passed some of the coven members, a few actually called out greetings to him. He blearily returned them, too weary to be surprised.

When he got inside his room, he felt more than a little happy to find Zeke already stretched out on the bed, asleep. For a while, Ethan paused, content just to take in the beauty of his mate. Zeke's hair was slightly mussed from sleep, his dark lashes fanning his high cheekbones. With his face relaxed in slumber, he somehow looked younger, almost boyish. That was until Ethan's gaze traveled lower to take in the hard, muscles of Zeke's chest and legs. He wore his uniform and the dark cargo pants accentuated the hard lines and planes of the

vampire's body.

"Hey, you finally are back," Zeke mumbled sleepily as he slowly cracked his lids open.

"Yeah, we just finished the poison and Doyle and Vince went out to slip it into the stream. As soon as they get back, Kavan promised to text me." Ethan had wanted to wait up until the pair had got back, but Kavan had insisted he go to his room and rest.

"Good for him. I was missing you." Zeke scooted over and patted the now empty spot next to him.

Ethan didn't need another hint. He gratefully strode across the room and crawled in, snuggling his back against Zeke's chest. As soon as Zeke wrapped his arms around him, he sank into his mate's warm embrace.

"You need to feed?" Zeke asked, his voice already heavy with sleep again.

"Yes, but I'm too tired right now. Let me rest a few hours and then maybe I'll be up to it." Ethan closed his eyes and let out a happy sigh. While a part of him still worried about Doyle and Vince, he had enough confidence in their abilities to know they would be able to pull off their mission.

"How about you?" Ethan brushed a kiss on Zeke's forearm. "You haven't really drunk from me since we left."

"I can wait, too. I just want to hold you right

now.”

Ethan could live with that. “Thanks for being there for me,” he whispered.

“Always, babe. You don’t even have to ask.”

Zeke gave his cheek a kiss and then they both fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Ethan woke up to the wonderful sensation of Zeke’s lips pressed to his neck. Not opening his eyes, he allowed himself to get lost in the pleasure of Zeke’s tongue making velvet paths against his skin before he gently took the skin between his front teeth. It wasn’t a true vampire bite. No fangs were used. No blood drawn. Yet, it still sent a shock of desire through Ethan that went straight to his cock.

Zeke gently tugged on his shoulder and Ethan allowed himself to be rolled onto his back. Still keeping his eyes closed, he moaned as Zeke’s mouth started to travel lower. His shirt was pushed up to his chest so Zeke could lave at his stomach, using just the corner of a fang to lightly scrape his nipple.

“Looks someone was hungry and couldn’t wait any longer,” Ethan observed with a low, humming moan. Zeke gave his stomach a light nip before traveling lower, his mouth just inches from the waistband of Ethan’s pants.

“What can I say? I’m not very patient.” Popping

open the top button, Zeke then used his teeth to lower Ethan's zipper. As soon as the cool air hit his aching cock, Ethan let out a sharp gasp.

"Are you going to ever open your eyes?" Zeke's amused voice drifted to him.

"No. This is surreal right now, just laying here and feeling you."

Zeke pulled off Ethan's pants and tossed them aside before crawling back over him. His strong hands gently parted Ethan's thighs, his palms leaving a heated path as they skidded over his skin. Even though he knew it was coming, Ethan still let out a surprised gasp as Zeke's warm lips wrapped around the tip of his cock.

Zeke took his time, seeming to savor every lick and caress he gifted Ethan. The love between them unspoken as he gently brought Ethan's pleasure up. Halfway through, Ethan reached down and threaded his fingers through Zeke's silky hair. He didn't tug and try to speed things up, instead he gently massaged his scalp, returning the loving touch.

Just as he felt his balls tighten up, Zeke pulled back, Ethan's cock slipping past his lips with an audible pop. A whimper of disappointment escaped him until he felt Zeke's tongue making lazy path up the artery that ran along the inside of Ethan's thigh.

"Yes, right there, Zeke," Ethan urged in a husky

whisper. He expected a quick strike. Instead, he got a slow sensual sinking in of fangs as Zeke took the same care as he'd had with the blowjob. It didn't make it any less pleasurable though, if anything, it made it all the harder for Ethan to hold back. He managed by biting the inside of his cheek so hard the tangy taste of his own blood filled his mouth.

All too soon, Zeke pulled back and slid up Ethan. Before he'd woke up Ethan, Zeke must have taken off his clothes because every inch of the vampire's flesh was bare. Zeke rubbed against him, eliciting a moan from Ethan. Both their bodies were slick with sweat, the heat of the moment making for the most delicious friction. "Tell me you have lube here," Zeke demanded.

Ethan finally opened his eyes so he could look into the dark gaze he loved so much. "I don't need it. I'm ready for you now," he protested as he thrust his hips up so their cocks rubbed against each other.

"No, I won't hurt you, even when you ask for it. Now where is it?"

"In the top drawer." Ethan tilted his head to a small desk that stood within arm's reach of the bed.

Zeke leaned over enough to get the small tube. It wasn't the usual stuff Ethan made, but it would do. Getting back in place, Zeke squeezed some on

his fingers and reached between Ethan's legs, to his hole.

As he slowly rimmed his fingers over the opening, Zeke leaned down and started to lick Ethan's fangs. A strangled cry burst through Ethan's lips. It felt just as good as when he'd been caressing his cock. He didn't stop there, but continued to suck and lick Ethan's fangs as he slowly worked first one, then two fingers inside, stretching him out to take his cock. Finally, Zeke had mercy on him and pulled his fingers out, replacing them with his dick. As soon as his thickness filled Ethan, he let out a cry of pleasure.

For Ethan, it almost felt like too much, as he became overwhelmed by all the pleasure of Zeke's love and the fact that this could very well be the last time they were together. Some part told him this siege would be coming to a head today. That the rest of their lives hinged on the next few hours and things would never be the same again. Using that to spur on his need, Ethan wrapped his legs around Zeke's waist, hooking his ankles together and urged him on with gentle rocks of his hips.

"I love you so damn much," Zeke exclaimed in a near whimper.

That let Ethan know he felt the same helplessness and need. "I love you, too, and nothing will ever rip us apart," Ethan declared fiercely. He meant it, too. He would do anything

to protect the vampire—even if he had to die himself in the process.

“Bite me,” Zeke pleaded as he continued to move inside Ethan.

Since the only place he could reach was Zeke’s shoulder, he sank in his fangs into that spot. Like Zeke had earlier, Ethan made it a tender bite, rather than the usual hard strike. As soon as the first mouthful of hot blood ran over his tongue, Ethan’s body was hit with an intense orgasm. Like the feeding, it was a slow, warm euphoria that washed over his limbs as his cock pulsated between their bodies.

Zeke groaned as he came a couple of thrusts later, his hot fluid shooting inside Ethan’s ass. Ethan tried to pull his fangs back, but Zeke held him tighter and commanded, “No, drink more.”

Ethan obeyed, not stopping until his stomach felt ready to burst and the cum had started to dry between their bodies. Zeke was soft again as he pulled out of Ethan and rolled to his side so they were facing each other. “You didn’t feed enough,” Ethan protested, more than a little worried about his mate.

“I’ll be fine. I didn’t want to deplete your magic any more than necessary.” Zeke reached out and ran his thumb along Ethan’s bottom lip.

“But I don’t want you weak either.” His heart thudded at the thought of Zeke facing the

upcoming battle at less than his best.

"I'll be fine," Zeke assured as he continued to caress Ethan's face.

"No, you won't. We didn't have a chance to bring any bagged blood with us so it's not like you can get some of that." Worry now bloomed into full-blown panic.

"I can go longer than you without blood so don't concern yourself with that."

Ethan sat up, his chest tight. "You are my main concern. If things get physical, I won't allow you to fight unless I know you're full strength.

"You won't allow me?" Zeke's lips curled up in an amused smile.

"I'm trying to be serious here," Ethan snapped as he frantically worked out possible solutions in his head.

"Do you want me to feed from someone else? Maybe Micah or one of the other males on Brenden's team?"

"No!" Ethan protested sharply. The thought of Zeke sinking his fangs in any male made red-hot jealousy claw at Ethan's insides.

"Then who?" Zeke sat up, too, and wrapped his arms around Ethan's waist.

"I know a witch named Greta who would be willing. She's always been eager to help me out," Ethan said, relieved as the perfect solution came to mind.

"Let me guess, Greta's been around the ugly block a few times." Zeke's eyes danced with amusement.

Ethan smiled, realizing he'd been busted. "Maybe she won't win any beauty contests, but at least her blood is warm and since she's a witch, you'll also get a magic boost."

"Okay. If I agree to do it, will you lay off?" Zeke pressed a soft kiss to his shoulder.

"Yes." Ethan sighed as all the stress eased from his body.

"I wonder if Doyle and Vincent made it back okay," Zeke mused, changing the subject.

"Yeah, they did great. The text came through a few hours ago." Ethan pulled away. "Which means we should get showered and back to the control room so we can monitor how it works."

* * * *

Zeke sat back, admiring Ethan's ass as he walked into the bathroom. "Will it kill the Ninth and the Pure Borns when they drink the water?" Not that he really gave a damn, but he just wanted to know what they were looking for.

"No," Ethan's voice called right before the sound of the running water hit Zeke's ears. "It'll make them wish they were dead though. Take it from someone who's been through it."

Zeke's gut clenched as usual whenever he heard about Ethan's past suffering. The confrontation between his mate and Olivia still fresh in his mind, his throat grew tight as he remembered the raw anguish on Ethan's face when he asked her why she'd left him to die. Getting dressed, he ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "Why not just kill them and be done with it?" he asked as he walked into the bathroom so Ethan could hear him over the shower.

"Because not all of them are there voluntarily. Some have been forced into service when the Ninth took over their covens."

Zeke watched Ethan's hazed silhouette move around behind the glass of the shower door. "Maybe, but they're here helping them do their dirty work," Zeke argued as he leaned against the counter to get a better view.

"Yes, but they know if they refuse, Davis will kill not only them, but their families in retaliation. It's not like I'm going that easy on them though. Like I said that poison's a bitch. I'll go in for the kill, but I want to give some of them a chance to leave on their own first."

Unable to resist being apart from his man any longer, Zeke pulled off his clothes and got into the shower. Ethan looked as hot as ever, wet and with a slightly surprised look on his face, but he recovered quickly enough. Grabbing the scrubber,

he soaped it up and started to run it over Zeke's body. He noticed how Ethan lingered over the bite mark on his shoulder. Even now, his touch sending waves of desire rolling down his arm.

"I wish we had time for you to pin me up against the wall and fuck me senseless," Ethan sighed with regret as he moved back to give Zeke room to rinse off.

"Tell you what, when this is all over and we get back home, we'll take an entire weekend off to hump like bunnies." Zeke tilted his head back, letting the warm spray wash over his face. There was a whoosh and then a brush of cool air against his back as Ethan got out.

"We need to get out of this mess Olivia's got us into first," Ethan pointed out as he began to dry off.

"If anyone can do it, it's you. I believe in you, babe," Zeke told him with complete and total honesty.

After they had made their way to the kitchens to grab some food and Zeke had fed from the ugliest female in history, they rushed back to the communications room.

"A couple of times around the ugly block?" Zeke bitched, good-naturedly. "She looked like she took the three-hour tour in Ugly Land."

"Stop your whining. You got your blood, didn't

you?" Ethan tossed back, a smile playing on his lips.

"She had hairier arms than me." Zeke ran his tongue in his mouth, half-expecting to find a stray hair lingering there from when he took her meaty wrist.

"She's just fuzzy, like a big bunny rabbit."

"Yeah, a great big, fat bunny rabbit with the buck teeth to prove it," Zeke muttered. It hadn't helped matters that she'd ogled Ethan the entire time, at one time getting so caught up in her staring, she'd actually drooled on the back of Zeke's head. The blood had helped though. He felt less groggy and even had an extra high in his body from the magic in Grim Greta's system.

"I think she liked you," Ethan offered.

"She whispered that she wished I were dead and *roasting in her oven*," Zeke drawled. "Not exactly the thing to say if she's trying to shed her whole Hansel and Gretel baddie image."

Ethan laughed as he pushed open the door. They found Brenden and Cherish in the same chairs as they continued to run the monitors. Although Zeke knew that their mates would have insisted they get some sleep, the pair still looked tired and haggard.

"I was just going to send Kavan to get you," Cherish announced before she took a drink of coffee. Several empties littered the table in front of

her and her hair was pulled back into a sloppy ponytail.

"Is the poison starting to work?" Ethan asked eagerly as he took a seat next to her.

"We just started seeing signs of it. A couple of them have even passed out. The rest are just holding their guts and crying to their mommies. I have audio if you want to hear for yourself." Brenden reached for a switch.

Ethan held up a hand to stop him. "That won't be necessary. Wouldn't want to shock Cherish's delicate ears with all the dirty words that are probably being thrown around."

"Please, Cher could probably teach them a few new ones," Brenden snorted. That got him a light slap on the shoulder from her.

Zeke found himself nodding in agreement though. For her cute little, nerdy image, Cherish had a potty mouth that could put most guys in the military to shame. He stared at the video, frowning at something on the screen. "I think someone is yelling at the camera." Zeke squinted and saw a tall man with dark hair. Even over the monitor, the warlock's soulless, black gaze sent a shiver of apprehension down his spine.

"It's Davis," Ethan said, his jaw clenched in a grim line. "Oh, crap, he would have to pick now to get chatty. Turn on the damn feed."

As soon as Brenden flipped the switch, the

sounds of wailing and screams filled the small room. The cries were so full of pain and fear that a few of them even covered their ears against it. Out of the corner of his eye, Zeke caught a look of guilt that briefly passed over Ethan's face.

"Davis, old buddy. Can we help you with something?" Ethan spoke into the mike with false brightness.

"Do you honestly think this is going to work, you worthless piece of shit?" Davis sneered.

Zeke noticed that he sounded remarkably calm, considering all the suffering going around him.

"Hmm, looks like it's working pretty damn good to me," Ethan replied casually.

"It's not going to make me leave," Davis warned as he gave a disgusted kick to one of his own warlocks, who was writhing around the ground in pain.

"I've got more where that came from." Ethan gripped the mike so tight his knuckles blanched.

"You're no match to me. So if you think that scares me, you're wrong."

"Oh, I didn't expect some poison to terrify you away, but maybe this will." Ethan closed his eyes and started to mumble under his breath.

Even though Zeke wasn't magic, he could still feel the power beginning to build up in the room. It started with Ethan and spread out, almost like those funny electric balls from science class. The

air became static, making the hairs on his arms stand on end. A low buzzing sound filled the area, underlined by the humming as Ethan muttered some incantation. Finally, with one last shouted word, Ethan threw a bolt of energy at the monitors.

Even though Zeke hadn't thought it possible, the screams from outside became louder. He pressed forward to the screen to see what had happened and what he saw there made his heart seize in his chest.

Crawling across the ground outside was a carpet of the vilest creatures ever created. They looked like a cross between spider and scorpions, their hard bodies as large as rats. The monsters quickly descended on the dark warlocks and Pure Born vampires, bringing them down in a flurry of terror.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Ethan sat back in his chair, he tried hard not to hate himself for some of the things he'd done over the past hour. He'd shown no mercy as he sent wave after wave of black magic attacks at the Ninth. He used every dirty trick they'd taught him and some he'd developed on his own before he'd given up the dark arts.

"More are leaving. Plus, the last of the Pure Born vampires just pulled out five minutes ago," Olivia exclaimed. She came up behind Ethan and gave his shoulders a squeeze.

It was the closest thing to a hug he'd ever seen her give anyone. "I wouldn't call in the celebratory clowns yet. Davis is still out there and I don't think he'll be leaving anytime soon," Ethan replied. He didn't add that he knew within a shadow of a doubt the prick wouldn't be leaving until he got what he wanted and that it was Ethan and Olivia's heads on a platter. Hers because she

was the leader of the coven, his because now that he'd shown the full extent of his powers, Davis now knew for sure he was a threat.

"I'm so proud of you," Olivia continued, as if she hadn't heard Ethan's dour prediction. "You have become everything I knew you could be."

"You mean a half-vampire who you exiled, or someone who can do this to others?" Ethan gave a disgusted flick of his hand to the monitors.

"If it hadn't been them, it would have been your coven who suffered." Olivia ran her fingers through his hair.

"It still doesn't make it right." Ethan didn't think he'd ever be able to wash away the stench of some of things he'd done. The poison and creature attack had just been the beginning. Since then, he'd sent out a wave of bat demons, several hundred asps and then good old-fashioned rats.

After each attack, the ranks of the Ninth had grown thinner as their fear of Ethan started to outweigh their terror of Davis. Now, the leader had only a few dozen men with him and they didn't look like they were in the best condition. "This isn't going to end until I go out there and confront him directly," Ethan said softly.

Zeke, who had been silently sitting next to him, immediately shot up straight in his chair. "No way! You are not going out for a face him down." Zeke shook his head.

"He won't leave until I do," Ethan argued.

"Do you think he's going to face you warlock-to-warlock and fight with honor? No, he'll use whatever it takes to beat you," Zeke argued. His eyes were sharp with anger and a flush spread out over his face.

"I don't have a choice. He'll stay out there and not give up and I'm the only one who can take him."

"And what if he kills you?" Zeke sprang to his feet.

"That is a risk Ethan will have to take," Olivia butted in.

Ethan groaned. *So not helpful.*

"Excuse me, your holiness, but that's not your call to make."

"He's my son and this is my coven. So yes, it is my call to make." Olivia crossed her arms over her chest as she stood toe-to-toe with him.

"You don't give a kobold's ass about Ethan or if he comes back. Just so long as it doesn't have to be you who goes out there and jeopardizes their neck."

"Zeke." Ethan sighed. He got up and put himself between his mate and Olivia. "I hate what she's saying, too, but she's right. If I don't go out there and end this, then Davis will just get more reinforcements and overrun the whole coven. I have to strike now while he's weak."

"So, once again it's you who has to sacrifice for everyone else." Not giving Ethan a chance to reply Zeke walked out of the room.

* * * *

Zeke stood in front of the door of the coven as he silently berated himself for the way he'd treated Ethan. Deep down he knew they were in a lose-lose situation and Ethan didn't have a choice, but at the same time, it made Zeke sick to think of the man he loved going out to fight the worst dark warlock in history.

He didn't want Ethan to be a hero. Didn't want it to be him who saved the day. Instead, he wanted his warlock where he belonged. In his arms, safe from anything that may want to hurt him.

Hadn't Ethan sacrificed and suffered enough? If his goddess was so great, then why was she asking that he make this one last offering? Letting out a frustrated growl, he punched the wall and immediately regretted it when found out the hard way that cave walls don't give to vampire flesh.

"Ouch, that looked like it hurt," Ethan observed in a soft voice as he ventured into the room.

He had his hands tucked into his front pockets, a worried expression marring his good features. It dawned on Zeke at that moment that nobody had

the power to hurt Ethan more than him. Crap, when his mate had needed him the most, he'd let him down.

"If there were any way around it, I'd jump on it in a heartbeat. You mean more to me than the coven, my mother and my honor." Ethan took in a halting breath before continuing, "But I don't think either one of us could live with ourselves if Davis went on to kill others because we let our own needs and wants pull us back today."

"I'm going with you," Zeke demanded as he closed his hands into fists.

Ethan slowly shook his head as horror danced in his eyes. "No, I don't want you anywhere near this."

"Now you know how I feel."

"I'm serious, Zeke. I don't want anything to happen to you." Ethan stepped forward, but didn't reach out for him.

"It looks like neither one of us is getting what we want tonight because I'm going," Zeke insisted stubbornly. If Ethan could dig his heels in on this, then so could he.

"No," Ethan shook his head again, this time harder, almost desperately.

"You go, I go. That's the deal."

They were saved from further arguing by a sudden burst of music. It sounded almost like flutes, but a bit more high pitched. Ethan's face

blanched as his eyes grew wide. "That's someone from our coven asking for entrance."

"How do you know?" Zeke asked, following Ethan to the door.

"It's kind of our coven theme song I guess you could say. We all use it to recognize each other."

Zeke got out his Glock as Ethan pulled open the heavy wooden door. Outside, the dark had already fallen and the air was cool. The once plush grass and trees were now stripped bare, thanks to all of Ethan's creations. Across the barren land, a few figures were running their way.

Dressed in the red and black colors of the Ninth, they looked slightly smaller than the other warlocks. They were also acting like they were running *toward* Ethan as opposed to away like the rest.

A witch came running from inside the coven building. She lunged for the door before Ethan reached out and held her back by the waist. "You can't go out there," he told her as he struggled against her flailing arms.

"I have to. That's my son," she shrieked, tears running down her face. "Dylan! Oh goddess, they're going to kill him."

Zeke fought back a wave of nausea as he exchanged looks of horror with Ethan.

"She sent another group of teens to be trained by them," Ethan whispered, all the color draining

from his face. "Even after what they did to us, the bitch still sent the Ninth another group of kids."

Zeke cursed under his breath as he shot a look back outside. The figures were getting closer, their young, terror-filled faces becoming clearer. Then he saw several more bodies following the kids, these the larger forms of adults. Zeke knew the newbies were there to stop the kids from retreating by any means possible.

"Help him, please," the witch pleaded as she gripped Ethan's arms. She sagged in his hold as her sobs grew louder.

Ethan turned and gave Zeke a helpless, apologetic look. Zeke responded by raising his gun into the ready position. "Let's go get them. What are we waiting for?"

After Ethan managed to pull himself away from the frantic witch, the two men ran out to meet on the fury of Davis.

* * * *

"Run! Faster!" Ethan screamed so hard at the kids, his throat ached. The youths looked hopeful for the first time as they seemed to find a fresh burst of energy. A dark warlock got close to one of them, practically riding the kid's heels. Ethan shot off a blast of red fire, knocking the man onto his ass.

All around him, the hum of dark magic rode through the air. Even though it felt so thick and cloying, he still found himself taking in deep breaths. Much like a druggie would when they were around their drug of choice.

"Get inside," Zeke yelled at the kids as he pushed one in the right direction.

Ethan turned to help him when he felt an explosion of pain between his shoulder blades. Letting out a cry of surprise, he found himself air born for a moment before he landed face-first onto the dirt.

He tried to scramble to his feet, but another blast hit him, this one even harder and longer. It pinned him to the ground, almost like a giant, iron hand as waves of fire pulsated through his body. Over his screams of agony, he could hear Zeke's roar of denial.

Davis! How pathetic am I? I didn't even last ten seconds against him.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the pain ended. Ethan lay on the ground, taking deep cleansing gasps as he recovered. Struggling to his feet, he turned around in a half circle, looking for Davis.

When he saw Zeke fighting with the dark warlock, Ethan's gut clenched in horror. Zeke had his fangs buried deep in Davis's neck, the two grappling for the upper hand. It lasted for a few,

terror-filled moments before Davis lifted his hand and sent a magic bolt into Zeke's stomach.

Ethan screamed as he lifted his palm. In his haste, his bolt was weaker, but it distracted Davis's attention back his way and away from Zeke. Davis smiled, condescendingly, almost like he was placating a child before he returned fire.

This one hit Ethan in the chest. He let out a yelp of pain as he fell to his knees, the hard ground ripping his pants and cutting into his knees. Ethan stumbled back to his feet, took a few steps and fell back down again.

"So this was supposed to be the hope for all white magic?" Davis sneered as he pulled his hand back. "Pathetic."

Ethan braced himself for another blow, but it didn't come. Instead, there was a snarl to his left, then a blur hit Davis hard, taking him down. Ethan gasped in shock when he realized it was Rafe and he wasn't alone. Dante and Kane had joined him.

Zeke staggered to his feet and Ethan breathed out a slight sigh of relief, although he still worried about Rafe. Davis quickly blasted Rafe off him, too, but Ethan noticed the magic had a lot less power behind it than before. A sigh of relief went through him when saw Rafe spring to his feet, seemingly unharmed.

Rafe, Dante, Kane and Zeke all surrounded

Davis, boxing him in, but they made no move to attack. It was as if an unspoken order had gone down. This was Ethan's battle to end and they all knew it.

"You think your vampires are going to help you?" Davis taunted.

For the first time Ethan could hear real fear in the warlock's voice.

Ethan noticed another fresh pair of puncture bites of Davis's neck where Rafe had bit him. Then everything clicked into place. The blast to Rafe hadn't been weak because Davis had been going easy on him. No, it was because he'd lost some of his magic when Zeke and Rafe had taken his blood. Ethan smiled as he realized just how this would be ending.

"I think the vampires are going to help me out a lot." Baring his fangs with a hiss, Ethan moved in. Davis saw him coming, but he was no match for Ethan's vampire strength. Ethan felt the thrill of the hunt shoot through his body. By the surprise scream that bubbled past Davis's lips, Ethan knew he'd been right to assume the warlock would never expect an attack like this.

"You would fight me like this with no honor?" Davis shrieked as Ethan hit him in the chest and took him down.

"*Honor?* Why, Davis, you should know better than anyone that I don't have any. You are the one

that helped make me this way after all," Ethan growled in an animalistic sounding voice before he ripped into Davis's throat.

Davis tried to throw off another magic bolt, but Ethan hardly felt it. All he knew was the high of the hunt, how it felt to have his victim helpless and squirming under him. Davis's blood was hot, fetid, but there was so much power behind it. Ethan felt an instant jolt of euphoria and he drank in long, greedy gulps, wanting more.

With each draw, he could feel the alluring call of dark magic beckoning him. Ethan welcomed it, knowing that with it came Davis's power and life force.

Davis had long since stopped fighting, his body limp and cooling, but Ethan continued to drink. It wasn't until the blood came out in weak threads that he pulled his fangs out and let out a feral sounding roar.

Around him, the Drones and his warlocks were fighting the few remaining Ninth men left. Ethan laughed, the sound demented and twisted. Closing his eyes, he called on his newfound strength and sent out a wave of destruction. He didn't have to speak any words, or wave his hands, just simply had to will it.

The surge of magic bloomed from him and quickly spread out. When it hit one of his warlocks or the Drones, the wave passed them by,

leaving them unharmed, almost as if they were encased in a protective bubble. The members of the Ninth were not so lucky. As soon as the magic touched them, their bodies combusted from the inside out.

As their agonized wails rented through the air, Ethan closed his eyes and relished the sound. Why had he been fighting this? The power surging through his body, made him feel so strong, so alive. He never wanted to come down.

Strong arms surrounded him. A familiar touch bringing him into a hard embrace. "Let it go, babe. Come back to us."

Ethan ignored the plea, smiling as he thought about all he could do with this magic. The Drones would finally be free, his coven safe. No one would dare touch those under his protection because they would all fear him too much.

"Not this way, Ethan. Fight it for me. I can't lose you this way," the voice cooed into his ear.

Ethan's breath caught. He knew that voice. He loved it. Lived for the vampire who was behind it. "Zeke?"

"Yes, babe, it's me and I want my Ethan back. Not this." Zeke brushed the softest of kisses against his jaw.

Ethan licked his lips, tasting the lingering dark magic blood. Instead of it making him want more though, it made him heave. The heavens turned

into full gags and before he knew it, he was bent over, wrenching.

Zeke rubbed his back as Ethan vomited up all the blood he'd drank. Even though it hurt like hell, Ethan welcomed it because with each amount he purged, he felt his mind clearing.

"That's it," Zeke's soothing tones reached him.

"Is he okay?" Rafe asked.

"Yes, he is now."

Once Ethan's stomach emptied, he allowed Zeke to help him to his feet. When he saw all the carnage around him, his stomach lurched again. Ash and charred bones mixed in with the already scarred landscape. He'd done all this destruction. What kind of monster was he?

As always, Zeke sensed his thoughts. He grabbed Ethan by the chin and forced him to lock gazes. "You saved your coven and you have nothing to be sorry for."

Even though he wasn't totally convinced of that, Ethan nodded and allowed Zeke to lead him back to the coven. As soon as they passed the door, the witch mother threw herself at Ethan's feet.

"Thank you, Lordship. My soul and magic I pledge to you," she sobbed as she wrapped her arms around his ankles.

"I knew you could do it," Olivia said with a beaming smile as she walked into the room. She

seemed about to embrace him, but pulled back with a frown as her gaze settled on the blood all over the front of him.

"We're leaving now," Ethan told her with a voice dull.

"What do you mean?" Her smile faltered.

"We came here for a job and it's done. I'm taking my warlocks, the Drones and we're leaving within the hour."

"My family will be going with you," the witch declared, still keeping her death grip on Ethan.

"Fine. Whoever wants to come with us is welcome to do so." Ethan tried to wiggle his feet free with no success.

"Why would you want to go back to that wretched city?" Olivia spat, her normal anger returning full force. "You should stay here and help us rebuild the coven to the glory it once held."

"Times have changed. The coven is no longer safe. With the Ninth gone, it's only a matter of time before another dark coven seizes power and joins up with the Pure Borns. When they do, they'll come back and try to finish the job," Ethan predicted with certainty.

"And you think you can guard them in your precious Detroit?" she scoffed.

"Yes, I do. There, I will have the protection of the Drones and the wolves once I make amends

with them." Ethan finally managed to get free and he grabbed Zeke, pulling him in the direction of the communications room. If Olivia said anything else to him, he didn't hear her.

It only took an hour to gather up all their gear and make their way outside. Ethan couldn't wait to put all this behind him and get back home so they could settle back into their comfortable routine.

As he stepped outside, he tried hard to ignore the lingering stench of burned flesh and kept his eyes averted to the ground.

Zeke breathed, "Fuck me."

Ethan whipped his head up and felt his eyes grow large in stunned shock. Car after car was lined up and loaded down with suitcases. All around them milled hundreds of coven members as they rushed around to get ready for the trip. One of the elders approached Ethan. "What's going on?" Ethan stammered.

The older warlock, smiled at him "We pledge our soul and magic to you," he replied.

"I'm not the coven leader," Ethan argued as his heart pounded. There were so many of them.

"You are now. We're all going with you." The warlock gave another grin before he turned and walked back to his car, obviously deciding that cleared up everything.

"You did say anyone was welcome to come who wanted to," Zeke pointed out, his shocked gaze taking in the group.

"I can't do this," Ethan stammered, full-blown panic setting in.

"Of course you can. You'll do a whole hell of lot better than Olivia, too. This is what you were born for." Zeke gave him a half-hug.

Olivia came out of the coven, her face tight with anger. "I hope you're happy."

Ethan looked over at her and for the first time in his life, actually felt sorry for her. While her methods may have been twisted, demented and just plain wrong, she'd always worked hard for the coven. Now she was losing it all in the span of an hour. "You can come, too," he offered.

"I would rather die first."

It would probably come down to that. Ethan had no doubt the Pure Borns would be back and this time Olivia would be more vulnerable than ever. He opened his mouth to argue with her, but Micah came running up.

"Eric wants to talk to you," the vampire said as he handed over a cell phone.

Ethan took it. "Hey, we're getting ready to pull out and should be home in a couple of days."

"I heard that you did a great job there. Dante filled me in," Eric replied.

Ethan was warmed to hear the pride in his

leader's voice. "Thanks. There are going to be some extra bodies coming back with us."

"Sure, we're pretty crowded already, but I'm sure we can squeeze them in. How many are there?"

Ethan shot a worried glance over the numerous cars. "A few...hundred."

Eric let out a squawk of surprise. "Are you shitting me?"

"No, I was thinking that the building next to the clan dwelling is vacant. We could always convert it and then the magics and Drones can work side-by-side. Think of it, they could protect us during daylight and we wouldn't have to depend on the weres so much," Ethan suggested, surprised at how quick he was able to think of a solution.

"That actually sounds like a great idea. I'll call the wolves and ask them to push the paperwork for the building through with the human officials."

"That would probably be a good idea since it will give them a heads up that we're coming," Ethan agreed. Detroit was still officially the territory of the werewolves and thanks to Olivia, he had to tread even more carefully with them. "Will you also tell the wolves that when I get back, I would like to set up a meeting with them so we can decide how I can make amends with them?"

"Do I even want to know why?" Eric asked.

"I'll explain when we get home." Ethan finished up his conversation before he ended the call and handed the phone to Micah. Turning to Olivia, he said, "Are you sure you won't come? Last chance."

"No, I won't leave the coven. This is my home." She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly looking defeated.

How Ethan wished he could tell her that home wasn't a place. Home was where your loved ones were. As he felt Zeke reach out and caress the small of his back, he took comfort in the fact that as long as he had his mate, he'd never be lonely. He had something that Olivia never would and that made him feel sad for her.

Going over to her, Ethan placed a chaste kiss on the top of her head. "Bye, Mom." He turned around and didn't even look back as he went to Zeke. As they walked hand in hand to the car, Ethan suddenly felt lighter than he had in a long time. Finally, he could leave his past behind and embrace a hopeful future.

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