



Loose Id

FAITH REVISITED

MADELYN FORD

*The Watchers:
Faith Revisited*

Madelyn Ford



The Watchers: Faith Revisited

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About this Title

Genre: Vampire Paranormal

Once one of the most powerful of Angels, Bale, along with his fellow Grigori brethren, were punished due to Lucifer's trickery, and the only hope for redemption is to protect those Earthbound souls from the rising of Lucifer's Demon children. It is a duty they gladly accept. But when Bale finds himself fascinated with the vampire, Faith, he fights it. Not only does his longing for her go against a vow he'd made centuries before, he is pretty certain someone is targeting him and his brothers—one of their own—so to protect her, he tries to resist the pull.

For Faith Magee, meeting Bale was like stepping out of the pan and into the fire. An injury due to a Demon hunt sends her into Transfiguration, the process by which a child born of a Vampire father turns, one year early. Instead of getting out from under her domineering father's thumb, she finds that by taking Bale's blood she is bonded to a male who doesn't seem to want her. To make matters worse, blood from any other makes her violently ill. With her only options being starving to death or giving into an alpha warrior, what's a vampire to do?

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Violence.*

1 Enoch 15

“And He answered and said to me, and I heard His voice: 'Fear not, Enoch, thou righteous man and scribe of righteousness: approach hither and hear my voice. And go, say to the Watchers of heaven, who have sent thee to intercede for them: 'You should intercede' for men, and not men for you: Wherefore have ye left the high, holy, and eternal heaven, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men and taken to yourselves wives, and done like the children of earth, and begotten giants (as your) sons? And though ye were holy, spiritual, living the eternal life, you have defiled yourselves with the blood of women, and have begotten (children) with the blood of flesh, and, as the children of men, have lusted after flesh and blood as those also do who die and perish. Therefore have I given them wives also that they might impregnate them, and beget children by them, that thus nothing might be wanting to them on earth. But you were formerly spiritual, living the eternal life, and immortal for all generations of the world. And therefore I have not appointed wives for you; for as for the spiritual ones of the heaven, in heaven is their dwelling. And now, the giants, who are produced from the spirits and flesh, shall be called evil spirits upon the earth, and on the earth shall be their dwelling. Evil spirits have proceeded from their bodies; because they are born from men and from the holy Watchers is their beginning and primal origin; they shall be evil spirits on earth, and evil spirits shall they be called. [As for the spirits of heaven, in heaven shall be their dwelling, but as for the spirits of the earth which were born upon the earth, on the earth shall be their dwelling.] And the spirits of the giants afflict, oppress, destroy, attack, do battle, and work destruction on the earth, and cause trouble: they take no food, but nevertheless hunger and thirst, and cause offences. And these spirits shall rise up against the children of men and against the women, because they have proceeded from them.”

1 Enoch 15:1-12

Excerpt from the *Book of the Fallen*

Little has been written or is known about us, the Grigori. When the Great War broke out, there were those of us—five thousand strong—who agreed to the Fall. We did so with great love in our hearts to protect the Father's second born from the jealousy that had seeped into the souls of Lucifer and his followers. And for thousands of years we stood resolute.

But in our love for those Earthbound, we forgot we were not of them, that we were Grigori. We took wives. We had children. We built a world in which we could live. For three hundred years, our home grew into a place of great advancement, and we were renowned for our technological marvels, our superiority in battle, and our medical achievements. Our greatness was our downfall.

In a vain attempt to save our homes, our wives, our families, we were tricked into attacking Athens. Judgment was rendered upon us, and on that one fateful night, everything we had known, everything we had loved, sank into the sea. Our Atlantis was gone, and we vowed death to Lucifer and all his children.

It is a war we fight to this day. A war those of us who are left are willing to die for. A war we will continue until we are no more.

Samyaza, leader of the Grigori

Faith

“And now as I said concerning faith—faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.”

Alma 32:21 in the Book of Mormon

Chapter One

It was a time of war. No thanks to the damn demons, the paranormal community's presence continued to remain hidden by a thread. But at least now the vampires and shifters were united and were no longer hunting each other. They had a mutual enemy: the demons. For some reason, the bastards from below were trying to drag them all, kicking and screaming, out into the open. And so all paranormals took up Archangel Michael's motto "The only good demon was a dead demon."

Faith cast a glance toward her vampire—or soon-to-be vampire—twin, Hope. At twenty-four, the twins had yet to enter their Transfiguration—the biological process by which a human born of a vampire father becomes a vampire—so they had to be very careful during their hunt. Until the twins transfigured, they were easy to kill. And if their father, Garrett, ever discovered how they spent their evenings, the demons would be the least of their worries.

Hope nodded, and the pair split up, each twin rounding the building from separate directions, hoping to catch the demon unawares and cut off his chance for escape. Seattle had been hit hard these last few weeks: five dead women—proof the Lilu demon had developed a taste for human flesh. Damn, how Faith hated Lilu demons! They were the epitome of most vampire legends—the red-eyed, soulless, bloodsucking vultures that crept into your bedroom at night and drained you dry. She shuddered as she recalled stories of how one had risen from Hell in the seventeenth century and how humans had begun plunging red-hot irons through the hearts of their dead—and unfortunately, some of their living—in their exuberance to eradicate vampires. Fortunately for her, most humans wouldn't know a vampire if one smacked them in the face.

With a smirk, Faith turned the corner. Hope was in sight, nonchalantly meandering toward the demon. As of yet he seemed unaware he was being targeted. Their not having undergone Transfiguration was a plus that aided the twins while hunting. To most demons and many paranormals, they seemed human and were therefore perceived as nonthreatening.

From a distance, Faith watched Hope reach inside her jacket for the weapon she carried. Faith had scoffed when her twin had shown her a picture of the fantasy-game replica online. But the first time she'd seen the clawlike dagger Hope had commissioned in action, *impressed* could hardly define her sentiment. Hope had hurled the blade like one would a boomerang, and it had sheared the demon's head clean off his neck. But this time Faith knew her twin was reacting too quickly, giving away their intent far too early. And the demon responded by lunging at Hope.

"Fuck," Faith hissed, breaking into a run as Hope tried to sidestep the demon. Her sister was an excellent marksman, but when it came to hand-to-hand combat, her skill left something to be desired.

A sudden burst of noise, like the sound of snap pops on the Fourth of July, and the unmistakable scent of sulfur were all the warning Faith had before she realized the Lilu demon

was the least of her problems. An Alu demon—a huge, nasty cross between a human and a bull—had teleported onto the sidewalk between her and Hope. Faith knew they were now well and truly fucked.

Hope's blade whistled through the air, but the Lilu demon pivoted to the right, avoiding near decapitation. Without its intended target to stop it, the dagger continued to fly, spinning as it traveled. It nicked the Alu demon, serving only to further enrage the seven-foot-tall male.

“Son of a bitch!” Faith snapped, ducking just before the wayward knife would have taken off her head.

As the dagger swung back toward its owner, the Lilu demon took advantage of the situation, dissipating before either Faith or Hope could kill him. That left the Alu demon. His nostrils flared in agitation while the tips of the horns shooting out from his temples vibrated, the sound causing Faith to raise her hands to cover her ears. Then the hoofed creature turned to Hope, and with a roar, he charged.

“Fuck! Hope, run!” Faith cried, moving toward the pair, knowing that even with the two of them attacking together, they probably wouldn't stand much of a chance against the beast. She watched in despair as he grabbed Hope's wrist, knocking the dagger from her hand as if it were a useless toy. Hope let out a wail, her wrist snapping under the demon's punishing grip. As her knees buckled from the pain, the demon grabbed her by the neck and lifted her off the ground.

Faith reached the pair and, without thought, embedded her serrated bowie knife into the demon's shoulder. She sobbed in relief when he threw Hope from him, and after slamming into the side of the brick building nearby, Hope slumped to the ground. Faith's respite was short-lived as the demon, yanking the knife from his shoulder, turned his attention toward her.

“Oh shit,” she mumbled, knowing the likelihood of her surviving this encounter was minimal. And if she did survive, her reprieve would last only as long as it would take her father to finish the job.

The demon let her knife slide from his fingers, the clank of it hitting the pavement echoing through the darkened street. Then he reached behind him and pulled out a curved sword from the waistband of his pants. Before Faith could even react, the demon had thrust the blade toward her, piercing her side. As the steel ripped free of her flesh, she clutched at her side, blood flowing over her fingers. Pain lanced through her like a thousand tiny pinpricks. Within moments she began to lose feeling in her legs, and Faith knew something was not right. What she didn't know was that she had been stabbed with the one thing that could kill even an angel—Lucifer's poisoned blade.

* * * *

A disturbance in the air, a tiny ripple most would not notice, caught Bale's attention. Something had just teleported nearby. As he inhaled deeply, the faint trace of sulfur teased his nostrils, indicating a lower-level demon was close by. The smallest sound, a snort of an animal, told Bale he was dealing with an Alu. Zeke's intelligence had been correct. The meeting was going down tonight as planned.

As Bale moved out of the shadows, he watched in dismay as a Lilu demon dissipated and two human females stepped into the path of the huge Alu. His mind did not even register the females' lack of response to the creature's grotesque appearance or the weapons within their tight grips. He only saw one hit the ground unconscious as the bastard turned toward the other.

Pulling his thirty-three-inch Damascus steel sword out from under his sweeping black leather trench coat, Bale stalked toward beast. He did not stop to consider the course of his actions or the fact that he needed information from this demon. Because of the oath he had taken, he had no other option but to interfere.

The Alu stepped away from the other female with a derisive snort. The redhead staggered backward, her hand clutching her side, the metallic tang hitting Bale's nostrils as blood wept from beneath her fingers. He had no time to give any more thought to the female's condition, because at that moment, the bastard spawn of Lucifer and his demon bitch, Lilith, turned toward him.

“What have we here?” the creature asked in a deep, gravelly voice. He grinned, the mouth full of blackened, rotting teeth sickening Bale. “To what do I owe a visit from the Grigori?”

Bale shrugged nonchalantly and raised his sword. Pointing it toward the demon, he widened his stance, preparing for battle. “Your stench was hard to miss.”

The fiend laughed, a sound that caused most to break out in a cold sweat, but there was very little Bale feared about demons. “Well, a little exercise before dinner never hurt anyone. And once I have dispatched you, Watcher, I shall enjoy the bounty before me. Nothing is tastier than human flesh.”

The demon's comment brought a whimper bubbling up from Faith's lips as she sank to the ground beside her twin. The pain in her side was excruciating. She could feel the poison spreading through her veins, her own blood assisting in her defeat. She knew she was dying, and she forced herself to focus on the newest member of this ill-fated dance. She was beyond saving, but there was still Hope to consider.

Thankfully the male looked like he could hold his own. He was tall—almost as tall as the demon—and by far taller than most vampires. A few of the werewolves she had encountered over the years were of similar height, so she vaguely wondered if he was from one of the local packs. His long black hair was tied back and swung across broad shoulders, which filled out every inch of the leather trench coat he was wearing. Though his back was to her and she could not make out what was underneath the coat, she just knew he would be a prime piece of eye candy.

The pair shifted, and Faith caught a glimpse of the male's profile, her jaw dropping in awe. He was beautiful, his face exquisitely flawless even though it was clenched tight in anger. Then, as he lifted the sword, her attention drifted to his hands. His long fingers gracefully clasped the weapon as if it were a natural extension of his fingertips. The veins prominently displayed the strength wrapped around the silver and black handle. He didn't wave the sword around but held it steady, his eyes never wavering from the demon.

Faith attempted to remain focused on the pair before her, but her eyesight was clouding. Blinking quickly several times did little to improve her vision, so Faith gave up the fight, allowing her lids to close.

Bale had felt the female's eyes on him and, with some strange sense, recognized when she had passed out. He also knew within the deepest recesses of his gut that she was dying from more than just the stab wound. How he knew this confused him, but he pushed the thought aside as the demon raised his decorative black and gold khopesh sword. Inhaling, Bale caught the

faintest trace of a scent from something he knew should have been impossible for a lower-level demon to procure—the foul essence of the Utukku. Long ago, Lucifer had discovered that the essence from those human souls pledged to do his evil bidding was the only thing that could terminate an angel—or a fallen one. And as the reality of the situation permeated Bale's mind, he realized he had been right all along: there was a traitor within the Grigori. But the treachery went deeper than even *he* had suspected; it had infiltrated his enclave, and Bale swore he was going to make someone pay. But who? The betrayal was sure to destroy them all.

He shoved the question to the back of his mind. There would be time later to come to grips with it all. Right now he just had to get out of this alive. As he eyed the khopesh warily, the demon smiled more broadly.

“Such a shame, wasting good essence on the female.” The demon shrugged. “Oh well. Guess we'll have to do this the hard way.”

Bale tried to ignore the sense of dismay that flooded his system, unwilling to examine the cause of his inexplicable feeling of dread. Instead he concentrated on the sword the demon held. He didn't have long to wait until the demon made his move. The khopesh was swung toward him, and with a flick of his wrist, Bale intercepted the lunge, his and the demon's steel blades clanking as they met.

Swords clashed again, Bale blocking the demon's attack and forcing the blade downward as he pulled a dagger from the sheath on his thigh. He slashed at the demon's blade arm, cutting deep. With a hiss, the demon stumbled back, and Bale countered, swinging his sword. The bastard met his advance. Grunting, Bale knocked away the khopesh aimed at his chest, and pivoting, he swung. His sword connected with the demon's neck. His head rolled to the ground, and then both body and head disappeared in a burst of black smoke.

After securing his sword back within its scabbard, Bale approached the two females. Both were still unconscious, for which he could only be thankful. He was going to need Remy, the leader of their band of Watchers, to alter both their memories. He refused to consider that the redhead was not likely to live for it to matter. The urgent need he felt to get her help unsettled Bale, and as he flicked open his phone, he studied her. Her vibrantly colored hair was pulled back, but errant curls that had fallen out during her struggle with the demon framed her pale skin.

He forced his attention away from her face. When fighting the demon, she'd appeared tall for a human female, though not tall enough to reach his chin, and her muscles seemed well conditioned. But what the hell she had been thinking in trying to take on an Alu demon, he couldn't fathom.

Bale let that thought trail as he began to seethe at her sheer stupidity. He wanted to shake her awake, but instead he tentatively probed the female's wound. Blood still oozed from her torn flesh, and he shrugged out of his coat, then yanked his T-shirt over his head. He pressed the shirt against her side with one hand as he stuffed the phone between his ear and his shoulder with the other one.

“Remy,” he said to the voice at the other end, “we have a major fucking problem. I need a pickup immediately.”

“A pickup?” Remy questioned, his voice a mixture of surprise and confusion. “Why aren't you just teleporting to the abbey?”

“I've got two injured females here, one from Utukku poisoning.” Bale's tone didn't lend itself to any arguments, and Remy sighed.

“All right. I'll send Levi. He's the only one still at the abbey.”

“No. Only you, Remy,” Bale growled, trying to ignore the twisting sensation in his gut.

“What's going on, Bale?” Remy asked quietly. Bale was not given to dramatics, so when he countered an order, Remy paid attention.

“Later. Right now I just need you here. I'm not sure I trust anyone else,” he said harshly.

Remy swore softly. “I certainly hope that does not mean what I think it means.”

“Later,” Bale repeated. “Just make sure Arak is back at the compound. I'll need him to check out the females' injuries.” Bale didn't even wait for a reply before disconnecting the call. The female's complexion had turned a pasty white, and worry gripped Bale's heart like a fist.

He spoke not a word when, minutes later, Remy pulled up in a black Escalade. He left the other female for Remy to deal with as he gently picked up the redhead and climbed into the backseat. Keeping his shirt secured to her open wound, Bale cradled her against his chest, ignoring the questioning glances from Remy via the rearview mirror.

“Damn it, Remy, floor this motherfucker,” he snarled as the female began to convulse in his arms. Bale couldn't even begin to define what the knowledge that she was probably going to perish right there in his arms did to him. Normally he wouldn't care this much. What was the death of one more human? But for some reason, this one was different. He felt it soul deep. Pulling her closer, for the first time in centuries, he began to pray.

Relief when the truck pulled up to the large iron gates of Castilla de la Vigilia barely counteracted the terror her state caused him to feel, as did the sight of Arak standing in front of the massive stone structure. He heard Remy speaking softly to the other female, trying to rouse her from her stupor, as Bale jumped out of the SUV, and he growled when Arak reached to take away his charge. With a questioning glance, Arak fell in line beside him, only moving ahead to open the front door to the residence. Bale brushed past him and took the steps two at a time, slowing only once he had reached his bedroom.

Bale laid her gently upon the mattress. The convulsions had gotten worse, and he sat next to her, pinning one of her shoulders to the bed with one hand while pressing his shirt firmly to her wound with the other.

“How long has she been convulsing like this?” Arak asked, staring down at the female, concern filling his eyes.

“About ten minutes,” was Bale's clipped response. “Fix her, Arak.”

Arak looked at Bale incredulously. “Fix her?” he repeated, raising a brow at the order. “She was poisoned with Utukku essence, and you expect me to just *fix* her. Christ, Bale, even *I* can't just make the venom go away.”

“Damn it, I know that. But do something,” he growled in reply.

Shaking his head, Arak tried to push Bale out of his way. When he failed to move him, Arak took a step back and folded his arms across his chest. “If you want me to help her, then move.”

Bale nodded his head and slowly pulled back from the female, but then almost lunged at Arak when he began to remove her clothing. He had to force his muscles to stop, knowing he was acting out of character. Arak, the one with the power to heal most injuries, was the female's only hope. Turning from the bed, he noticed Remy for the first time, standing in the doorway, supporting the other female, a tiny blonde.

“Oh God,” she whispered as she stepped into the room, clutching her injured hand to her chest. “Faith, I’m so sorry.” Then her gaze swept over Arak. “What is Utukku essence?”

“Demon poison,” Arak replied softly, looking up from the wound he had been inspecting. “I don’t understand this. The wound is already starting to close on its own. Something is preventing me from drawing the poison out and healing her injury.”

Bale took a step forward, startled by Arak’s comment, but the blonde female only nodded.

“She’s going through her Transfiguration at least a year early. Will it help save her?” the female asked quietly.

“Transfiguration?” Bale repeated, knowing the term meant something, but he just couldn’t recall the significance.

The blonde nodded absently, her bottom lip held tightly between her teeth.

“We’re going to need blood,” Arak stated, looking over at Remy.

“Blood?” Bale asked, still not grasping what was going on around him. He pinned Arak with his stare, demanding an explanation.

Arak nodded. “For when the Transfiguration has finished...if she lives,” he added.

The three males ignored the blonde’s gasp, but Remy did raise a brow at Bale’s deep growl.

“If someone does not explain to me what the hell you are talking about...” He snarled, leaving the threat to hang. But Remy and Arak had known him long enough to know he was good at turning it into a promise.

“She’s changing,” Remy said to him softly, stepping farther into the room. His gaze focused on the blonde, who continued to nod as she watched Arak treating her companion. “A vampire. And if she survives the poison, she will need blood when she wakes.”

“Will any blood do?” Bale heard himself ask and wondered what the hell it was about this female that had him all tied up in knots.

“As opposed to what?” Remy asked, lips twitching as if he found something amusing.

Bale clenched his fists at his sides, though he longed to smash one into Remy’s smug face. His friend’s ill-found humor seriously pissed him off. But instead he widened his stance and folded his arms across his massive chest.

“Really, you’re asking the wrong person,” Remy answered, gesturing to the female standing beside the bed. “Hope?” he said softly as he took position behind the female and rested his hands gently on her shoulders.

“Hope?” Bale mockingly repeated.

The only response from Remy was a gesture with his middle finger. The blonde turned, causing Remy’s hands to slide slowly down her arms. Remy returned his hands to her shoulders, kneading them gently as he asked, “Are there any special provisions Faith will need once the change is complete?”

“No,” she replied quietly, glancing back at the still figure of her friend for a moment before returning to Remy’s face. “Any blood will do in a pinch, but it’s preferred for the oldest in the nest to donate the first time. It helps give the newly changed the strength to make it through the final stage of the Transfiguration.” Hope pulled away from Remy and moved to Faith’s side, then sat next to her on the bed and took hold of her hand. “I need to get in touch with our father,” she added, as if an afterthought.

“Where are you from? Who is your father?” Remy asked.

“Garrett,” she stated, looking back at Remy and Bale. “He's our father.”

“Well, shit,” Remy mumbled, but the female paid little attention as she returned her anxious gaze to her sister.

“The Seattle master?” Arak asked, his head rising in surprise from the female he had been tending.

Bale turned to the female called Hope, waiting for her to confirm or deny Arak's question. The Watchers didn't need the attention of the vampires, especially not the one in charge of the northwestern vampire population. But still Hope ignored them.

“I have to tell him what happened to Faith. He's going to kill me.” She paused, wiping her fingers across her eyes. “But Faith will need him to help her through her change.”

Arak looked to Remy for confirmation. At his leader's nod, he stated, “We can get her through the change.”

“No,” Hope replied, shaking her head. “He'll wonder why he wasn't called when the process began.”

“I'm guessing he'll also wonder why his daughters decided to precipitate an altercation with an Alu demon,” Remy said drily.

“It was a Lilu demon,” she clarified softly as she stroked a hand gently across her sister's cheek. The touch seemed to soothe Faith, and for just a moment, the tremors lessened. “That is the creature Faith and I were tracking. And while my father will be angry, he will not be surprised. We won't sit by and allow the demon to kill anyone else's mother.” She shot Remy an irritated glare, her eyes sparkling with anger.

Her statement captured Bale's interest, but when he asked for clarification, she remained stubbornly silent, returning her attention to her sister.

As if sensing Bale's desire to force an answer from the female, Remy interrupted. “Bale, why don't you get cleaned up? I will get Hope settled in Zeke's room while Arak remains with Faith.” At Bale's hesitation, he added, “If her condition changes or she wakes needing anything, Arak will get you immediately.” Remy waited for Arak's agreement before pinning his gaze on Bale, who was staring at Faith.

After a moment of uncertainty, Bale took a step back as he nodded. “I'll just be in the bathroom,” he said softly, his eyes shifting to Arak before returning to Faith. His gaze lingered on the female, taking note that her convulsions had completely stopped, and for the moment, she seemed to be resting peacefully. Then, fighting the compulsion to remain by her side, Bale turned and stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Arak watched Bale curiously. Of all the Watchers he had associated with over the many centuries, Bale was the one least likely to take an interest in a female—human or paranormal. Even when it came to his baser urges, more often than not Bale chose to take care of matters with his own hand, so to speak, unlike Arak himself, who had a whole throng of lovely females who were willing to service him whenever the need arose. And it arose often.

“Any idea what the hell that was about?” Arak asked.

Remy flicked his head toward the other female, and Arak understood this was not a conversation Remy wanted to have in front of her. He gave a slight nod as he watched Remy bend down to Hope and take her arm.

“Come, Hope,” he said, pulling her to her feet. “Let me show you to a room where you can clean up and get some rest. As soon as your sister is stable, Arak will take care of your wrist.”

Hope attempted to pull her arm from his grip, obviously reluctant to leave her sister's side.

“Arak will take care of her,” Remy reassured gently as he touched the female's cheek.

Her gaze slid to Arak. “As if she were my own sister,” he promised solemnly.

“All right,” she said softly, allowing Remy to lead her from the room.

Arak sat next to Faith on the bed and placed his hand over the spot where the wound had been not thirty minutes before. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the structure of her cells, how the skin had knit together and healed. Finding nothing of concern, he delved deeper. She was still fighting the effects of the Utukku essence, and Arak wrapped the comforter tightly around her as she began to shiver again.

“How is she?”

Arak glanced over his shoulder. Bale was standing in the bathroom doorway, shirtless, in a pair of black silk pajama bottoms, his hair wet from the shower.

“I'm not really sure, Bale.”

Arak watched his friend hesitate for a moment before stepping into the room and approaching the bed. He took a seat on the bed on the other side of the female and stared down at her. Bale's eyes softened, and his hand reached out to touch her cheek. If not for the fact that Bale had not even known her name, Arak would have suspected that all this time their brother actually had a little honey hidden away.

“Bale, what is going on?” Arak asked, surprised by Bale's strange behavior.

Bale only shook his head, instead asking hoarsely, “Will she live?”

“Her body is trying to fight off the poison, but it's being stretched to the limits of its endurance trying to transfigure at the same time. Honestly, Bale, I doubt it,” Arak said softly.

“Arak, leave us,” Remy said from behind them.

Arak nodded, disappointment flooding him. He was obviously being excluded from the conversation. Though he shouldn't be surprised; it seemed recently the other two Watchers were doing that a lot.

Bale did not take his eyes off Faith as Arak left the room. “Now is not the time, Remy,” was all he said to his companion. But as usual, Remy paid him no heed and instead stepped farther into the room.

“It's not like you to leave behind your coat. Or your weapon.”

Bale's spine stiffened at the amusement in Remy's voice. Turning his head, he found his dagger dangling from Remy's fingertips and his coat draped over his arm. Ripping the sword from Remy's fingers and impaling it in his gut would not help matters, even if it was what Bale was dying to do. Anything to wipe the smirk from his brother's lips.

“Is it not our duty to protect Earthbound souls?” he asked, forcing his voice to remain level while referring not only to the humans, but the creatures—the *others*—created by Lucifer and his

followers before the great battle that had ousted them from Heaven. Like the humans all angels were sworn to protect, the vampires and other paranormal species were born with souls entwined with free will. They could be good or evil, just like their human cousins. And the Grigori were honor-bound to bring no harm to the innocent.

“And that is all there is to it?” Remy questioned, his voice leaving no doubt as to his opinion.

“What else would it be?” Bale arched a brow, daring Remy to mention the one thing he knew they could never have.

Remy just shrugged nonchalantly, tossing the objects in his possession carelessly onto the edge of the bed. “So you do not have a problem with my moving Faith to Arak's quarters? He will be in a better position to take care of her if she is nearby.”

Bale slowly rose to his full height, all six feet eight inches of thick, corded muscle. “You are not touching her,” he growled, his voice holding the threat of violence, the promise of retribution.

Remy held up his hands in acquiescence, his lips twitching as if trying to suppress a grin. With a snort, Bale resumed his seat, his gaze returning to Faith. In the chair in the corner of the room, facing the bed, Remy flopped down, and Bale could feel him watching his reactions intently.

“So what happened tonight?”

Quietly Bale recalled the two demons and the fight that had ensued with the Alu demon. “An Alu demon does not have easy access to Utukku essence. He was not the least bit surprised when I showed up. And from what he mentioned about wasting the poison on Faith, I know I was the intended recipient. Someone tipped the demons off.”

This information clearly did not sit well with Remy. He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, and rubbed his hands wearily over his face. “But who knew where you were going tonight?”

“Exactly,” Bale stated, diverting his gaze for a moment from Faith to Remy. “The only souls who knew reside within this fortress.”

“Surely you do not suspect Arak or Zeke? They can be trusted.”

“Can they?” Bale asked, a sudden chill entering his voice. “I also believed following Lucifer would protect the woman I loved. We both know how that turned out.”

“Yeah, we do,” Remy acknowledged quietly. There was a trace of sadness in his voice, for he knew only too well all Bale had lost. All they had both lost. “But Arak? Zeke?”

“Is it any easier to think it was Caym or Raym? Levi, Penny, or Kash?”

“Well, I guess I should be relieved you do not suspect me,” Remy stated, his humor returning. Where Bale hid behind bitterness, Remy's shield was his wit.

Bale smiled at that. “Who says I don't?”

Remy's reply was a snort as he leaned back in the chair.

“I know it was not you,” Bale conceded. “And I also want to believe Arak and Zeke are innocent.”

“And yet you still brought your female here for Arak to cure. You must admit, your actions speak louder than your words.”

“She is not my female!” Bale snapped, more harshly than he intended.

Remy gave another snort. “So we are back to that again, are we?”

Bale turned the full sting of his gaze onto his best friend. “Even if she was meant to be mine,” he snapped, his eyes blazing, “which you and I both know is not possible, that is not a place I will ever return to. We were not meant for humans.”

His attention was pulled from Remy as Faith began to convulse again. Confused by the array of emotions bombarding him, Bale wanted to pull back from her. But even as he tried, he found himself only moving closer instead, pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly. He wasn't even aware Remy had stood up to leave until his parting shot registered.

“And yet, she is not human.”

Before Bale could come back with a retort, Remy had left the room. He picked his coat up off the edge of the bed and tossed it on the closet floor before he stretched out on the bed, anchoring Faith to his side. His presence seemed to settle her, for the convulsions once again subsided. And despite all that had transpired that evening, for the first time in several millennia, Bale slept quietly, his soul at ease.

Chapter Two

Bale's body was conditioned to take a lot of abuse, so it was not the little pinprick of pain that woke him, but the surge of desire that traveled through his blood like molten lava. Instantly awake, he quickly registered Faith was in his arms, wrapped tightly around the length of his body, and she was feeding from his neck. Taking this as a good sign of her recovery, he cradled the back of her head, holding her in place.

"That's it, baby. Take what you need," he whispered hoarsely.

His cock rose between his thighs, and he couldn't resist pumping his hips against her stomach. The scrap of material disguised as a bra and the barely there panties he'd left her in after disposing of her bloody clothing didn't help. Her near nudity only served to heighten the effect as each pull of her lips sent a rush of lust coursing through his veins, and what blood she was not draining from him shot straight to his cock. Hard as a spike, he was thrown into the abyss, where nothing else mattered but the female in his arms.

"Christ," he whispered with a moan, wrapping an arm around her hips and thrusting his silk-clad erection between her thighs.

Unable to believe how quickly his body was priming to explode, Bale tried to pull back from the desire, but his normal rigid control was shot to hell. His balls rose up tight, and a tingling sensation ran down the base of his spine.

"Shit." He groaned, arching up as he ground his cock against her pussy. As it began to pulse, his hips jerked, and then, with a low moan from deep within, he bathed his stomach with semen. As he slowly slumped into the mattress, Faith swiped her tongue over the two small wounds before collapsing on top of his chest.

It took Bale a moment to regain any semblance of thought. His hand idly caressed her back as he waited for his body to calm, his breathing to even out. All the while he considered what had just happened. He had heard of such things before, of uncontrollable lust when a vampire fed. He had just never suspected he would be susceptible. But it was easier to blame his reaction on the fact that Faith was a vampire than on the female herself.

And it had been an amazing orgasm. Mind-blowing. The best he'd ever had, in fact. Even better than with the woman he had loved. That thought jolted him, and Bale wondered what it was about this female that affected him so.

Realizing she was no longer conscious, Bale eased her off him and onto the bed. He propped up on his elbow and leaned over her, gently caressing the length of her jaw with his fingers. She really was beautiful. Her hair, a riot of fat curls, fanned out around her head and onto both their pillows. Sprinkled across her nose was a trail of freckles that stopped just short of invading her high cheekbones. Her fair coloring only served to enhance the pink of her lush lips, and he had to stop himself from leaning over to taste them.

Shaking his head in frustration, Bale rolled onto his back. With his hands behind his head, he stared up at the ceiling for several long minutes. He figured he would be far better off if he had just taken Remy up on his suggestion to move the female to Arak's infirmary, even if the thought had him clenching his fists with the need to hit something—or someone. It was frustrating as all hell, because he didn't want her, but then, he didn't want anyone else to have her either.

Knowing there wasn't a chance in hell of getting back to sleep, Bale forced himself from the bed. He showered away all traces of blood and semen before tugging on a pair of black leather pants and a black T-shirt. A second trip to the bathroom had him returning with a damp cloth, which he used to clean Faith up and ensure she would sleep more comfortably before tossing it on the bathroom floor and heading for the door.

Pausing just as he was about to slip quietly from the room, he cursed softly. A bra and pair of panties would do little to ward off the chill prone to linger in the abbey. One of his old T-shirts he found stuffed in the back of a drawer would have to do.

Faith didn't wake while Bale struggled to get her into the clean clothing. She remained little more than dead, much to his great relief, allowing him to sneak out from his room like a thief in the night. Then, with boots in hand, he found himself standing outside Arak's door, and sighing, he opened it and stepped into the room.

As if sensing the disturbance, Arak was immediately alert. "Hey," he greeted Bale, his voice rough with sleep. Sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he paused to rub a hand over his face. "What's up? Is your Faith awake?"

Bale did not even bother refuting Arak's claim that Faith was his. He knew the denial would only fall on deaf ears. "She was."

Arak reached for a pair of jeans that lay at the end of the bed and encased his long, muscular legs in them before he rose to his feet. He crossed the room and grabbed a T-shirt from the dresser drawer, looking back to ask, "Has she fed yet?"

"Yeah," Bale replied, shifting his gaze away from Arak. Even though only Zeke possessed the power to ferret out the truth in spoken words, his other brothers had the uncanny ability of sometimes seeing too much, and he didn't want to risk Arak reading what had transpired with Faith from his face.

Arak watched him silently for a moment, taking his eyes off Bale only when the shirt he was putting on obscured his vision. "That's a good sign, Bale," he finally stated. "The sister had a broken wrist, which I was able to fix with no problems. But I had a difficult time getting her to sleep. I finally had to put her under. She was so worried about Faith." Arak was referring to his ability to put one into a deep, healing sleep, similar to a coma, in which they rested until he saw fit to wake them. "Maybe if I can bring her some good news, she won't resist so hard."

Bale nodded in silent agreement, only his thoughts strayed to how his own mind would rest once he knew Faith was out of danger. He followed Arak into the hallway, stopping short when Arak tripped, a string of curses escaping his lips.

"Why in the hell are your boots out here?" Arak asked, sending Bale an irritated look over his shoulder.

Bale shrugged, turning his face to hide his scowl. They must have slipped from his fingers when he'd turned from the direction of the stairs toward Arak's room, and he hadn't noticed.

"Man, you are losing it," Arak said, as if hearing his thoughts.

Frowning, Bale turned the full force of his ill humor on Arak, but his brother only shook his head as he continued down the hall. Arak stepped into Bale's room while Bale remained in the doorway, observing as Arak sat beside Faith before placing his hand upon her brow. Eyes closed, he searched deep within. The only indication of his power was the faint glow emanating from his hand on Faith's skin. After several tense moments, Arak removed his hand and faced Bale.

"She's still not out of the woods," Arak said softly, rising to his feet. "But she's doing better. I can't be positive, but I think she is responding well to your blood. The poison is still in her system, but her body is putting up a good fight. She might make it."

"I'm sure her sister will be relieved," Bale responded, feigning disinterest. Ignoring Arak's sharp look, he stepped back to allow him to pass.

Arak closed the bedroom door behind him and then turned to Bale. "I don't know who you think you are fooling," he said quietly, "but it's not me. You forget, Bale, I have been where you are. And I of all people understand your reluctance. What you need to decide is if it's worth the pain."

Arak brushed past him, stopping only when Bale asked, "Was it? For you, I mean?"

Arak turned to him, piercing him with eyes filled with the grief of losing half of himself, and shook his head slowly. Most of the time Bale forgot because Arak hid behind his angelic good looks and his many women. None of them had mentioned—hell, even thought of—Saraknyal in centuries. But of them all, Arak had lost the most. And if Faith was who Bale was beginning to suspect she was, Arak would recognize the signs. Remy too.

Feeling like a complete ass for even asking the question, Bale followed Arak down the stairs. There, in the library, Remy sat in a leather wingback chair, looking grim. Levi stood before the stone fireplace, arms folded across his chest as he stared absently into the flames.

"Where is Zeke?" was the first thing out of Arak's mouth, startling Bale into realizing the time. It was close to dawn. Since most of what they hunted should already be fleeing to the pits of Hell to escape the threat of the sun, and given the fact that Zeke couldn't tolerate being in the presence of humans for any span of time, that he had not yet returned was disconcerting.

"I do not know. I can't reach him or the twins," Remy said as he stood abruptly.

"When was the last contact you had with them?" Bale asked, all thoughts of the female upstairs in his bed momentarily forgotten. His mind was now filled with the fact that tonight someone had tried to have him terminated. One of his fellow Watchers, apparently. And now Zeke and the twins were missing.

"Just before you requested a pickup," Remy replied as he moved to stand before one of the two large glass windows that looked out over the bailey. He clasped his hands behind his back, staring out into the darkness.

"What of Kash and Penny?" Bale demanded.

"I have called them in," Remy answered, glancing over his shoulder at Bale, and Bale knew they were thinking the same thing. He might not have been the only target this night.

Arak's agitation caught his attention.

"I'm going out to look for him," Arak stated, turning on his heels to exit the room.

"No!" Remy ordered, swinging around to face the room. "Under absolutely no circumstances are you to leave these grounds."

Remy's power of compulsion stopped Arak in his tracks, and Bale winced, having been on the receiving end of Remy's will one too many times himself. He hated the feeling of helplessness Remy's voice could inflict.

"Release me, damn you," Arak hissed, his body taut with tension.

"If I do, you had better not storm out of this room or turn around swinging at me," Remy announced as he stepped in between Bale and Arak, coming to a stop directly behind their friend, frozen in place. "There is more at play here, and we need to discuss what has been going on."

"All right," Arak said through clenched teeth. Suddenly finding he was free, he whipped around, fists tightened in rage. But his hands remained at his sides as he glared at Remy. "Do that again and I will knock you into next week," he growled before skirting around Remy and dropping into a nearby seat.

Remy's gaze followed Arak before resting on Bale, and Bale just shook his head. Talking about the traitor in front of Arak or Levi was a bad idea. Sure, he didn't want to believe either one had sold him out. Hell, he didn't want to believe any of them capable of such an action. But someone had. Of that he had no doubt.

But apparently Remy had other ideas.

"The female Faith was not the intended victim of the Utukku essence, Arak," Remy stated tersely.

"Who, then?" Arak countered in surprise, leaning forward in his seat.

"Who do you think?" Bale asked somewhat reluctantly. "I was to be the lucky recipient."

"But how? Why?" Arak asked, flabbergasted. "Utukku essence cannot be that easy to come by, especially for a lower-level demon. And who knew you would be there anyway?" When no one responded, Arak shook his head. "No way!" he snapped as he jumped to his feet. "There is no way a Grigori would have done this. We are brothers."

Bale shook his head, uncertain how to respond. He would have liked to believe they were brothers, but Faith lay in his bed, proof otherwise.

"Jesus, Bale, you have always had a suspicious nature, but do you really think one of us would try to terminate you?"

Bale turned his back on his brother. Remy clasped his shoulder in support as Bale passed him on the way to the window. He took over the spot Remy had just vacated, staring out over the bailey. It was easier to ignore the other occupants in the room if he did not have to face them.

"Son of a bitch. You do, Balam. Do you think it was me?" Arak demanded.

"Did he not bring Faith to you?" Remy asked, interceding before accusations could start being flung.

Bale bit his lip, the denial that Faith was his on the tip of his tongue, but Arak, appeased by the connotation in Remy's question, smiled and flopped back into his chair.

"No, Arak. Bale wonders if it is me," Levi said quietly, joining the conversation for the first time.

"Jesus Christ. Excuse me for being just a little fucking bit cautious after someone tried to kill me."

Remy swore under his breath. This was the day he had feared, when he would have to reveal the deaths in Germany had been an organized slaughter. Having spent far too many nights with Bale agonizing over plans gone awry and demons seeming to expect them when they shouldn't, Remy understood Bale's hesitation. It was one of the reasons Remy hated allowing any of them to hunt alone. The lines between friend and foe seemed to be shifting; to what extent was the only question.

"You all know fifty years ago the enclave in Germany was damn near wiped out," Remy interrupted, drawing everyone's attention away from Bale's outburst and back to their present predicament. "But what has been kept quiet is that it did not just end there." Remy's gaze did not break from Bale's as the room erupted in chaos.

Outrage cast a wild look on Arak's face, and Remy sympathized when he finally turned to look at Arak. He'd often felt the very same way when a member of one of the European enclaves disappeared. Levi, on the other hand, seemed unfazed by the news. While they had never spoken of it, he wouldn't be surprised if Levi had caught a glimpse of the trouble plaguing Europe over the years in the visions that came to him during sleep.

"What? When?" Arak demanded.

"Oh, it's been nothing as destructive as what occurred in Germany. A member here or there, nothing to draw too much attention, but we've lost greater numbers in the last fifty years than in the previous five hundred."

"What was so special about Germany?"

Remy shrugged at Arak's question. "I'm sure the answer to that would be very interesting, but no one knows."

"What of Raym and Caym? They were the only two to survive," Levi asked quietly. This was not something Remy and Bale hadn't considered hundreds of times, but until recently the troubles in Europe had not crossed the Atlantic. And while Remy accused Bale of being a suspicious bastard, Bale had been unwilling to lay any type of blame without proof.

"I can hardly go about pointing the finger," Remy replied. "Raym and Caym are not the only ones to have ties to the German enclave. Our numbers are dwindling; we are stretched too thin. We have all left at one time or another to help out our brothers around the world. And it was negligent of me not to realize whoever tried to take out Bale might go after Zeke."

"Because Zeke, with his power to see the truth in words, would have known which of us is the traitor," Arak added quietly.

Bale grew thoughtful. With Zeke missing, he felt Arak could be ruled out. While Arak might find a reason to turn against the rest of the Grigori, Bale could not in all honesty justify a reason he would turn on Zeke. If not for Zeke, Bale did not think Arak would have survived the termination of Saraknyal. Instead he would have fallen further, to the very bowels of Hell. They would have lost him and eventually would have found themselves hunting their own brother.

Levi, though, was another story, having been found washed up upon the shores of the Mediterranean only five thousand years ago. The famed leviathan of lore, he had served out his punishment in solitude only to suddenly find himself transformed from a giant sea creature to one resembling a human. Thrust into a world no longer familiar, he'd sought revenge against those who had tricked him. Or so he claimed.

A door banging open pulled Bale from his musings. Then Penny's voice, screaming for Arak, echoed through the halls. Her frantic tone caused a chill to sweep down his spine, and Bale teleported to the scene, his brethren appearing around him. There, sandwiched between Kash and a wounded Raym, was Zeke. At first Bale could not determine the extent of Zeke's injuries and was really just relieved to see he was still alive. Then his mind registered the amount of blood pooling around Zeke's feet on the wood floor and the gaping wound across his abdomen.

"He's fading fast," Raym rasped out, his attention focused on Arak. "He should be healing already, but he's only getting worse. You've got to help him."

Arak immediately took charge. "Bale, take Raym's place," he ordered, grabbing hold of Zeke around the waist to help support him while the two males switched positions. Once Bale was beside Zeke, Arak said, "Hope is still in Zeke's room, so take him to the infirmary."

Remy led the procession, clearing the way for Bale and Kash to maneuver Zeke to the second floor. Arak attempted to halt Raym from following, but he waved away Arak's assistance, stumbling behind Bale and Kash. Penny was immediately at his side, trying to remove Raym's leather jacket.

"Forget about me," Raym said, his eyes filled with rage as he glanced down at the mess covering his clothing. "Most of the blood isn't mine."

Arak snorted as he watched Raym falter halfway up the steps and heard Penny murmur to him quietly. Outside the door of the infirmary, Raym leaned against the wall, his gaze following Bale's and Kash's every movement as if he thought more harm might come to Zeke within the walls of the abbey.

"Where are you hurt?" Arak asked, stepping in front of Raym, blocking off his view of the room.

"Don't worry about me, Arak. You're going to need all your strength for Zeke."

There was a threat in Raym's tone that caused Arak to tense and meet his gaze. It was clear Raym didn't trust him, and Arak silently cursed. This night just kept getting better.

"Make sure you have Penny check your injuries, Raym. If Zeke ails from what I think he does, you're right, I'll need all my strength and yours." Arak turned when Bale called his name urgently, but Raym grabbed his arm.

"What does that mean?" Raym asked softly.

"You were not the only one attacked tonight. Instead of Bale lying abed, we have two injured female vampires."

Arak yanked his arm free and entered the room, then strode to the bed. He wasted no time, immediately sitting beside Zeke and pressing his hand to the wound across his abdomen. He sensed the poison coursing through Zeke, but it was not as potent as the dose the female Faith had received.

"Help me get his clothes off," Arak ordered Bale, who stood to the side, clenching and unclenching his fists impotently. "I need to try to draw the poison out of him, or we will lose him."

"Poison? What poison?" Kash asked from the other side of the bed.

"Utukku essence," Arak explained, grabbing Zeke around the waist and forcing the male into a sitting position as Bale lifted his shirt over his head. As Arak lowered Zeke back to the bed, Zeke grabbed his arm with what little strength he still possessed.

“Don't put me out, Arak,” he said, his tone desperate. “I have to tell you—”

“Not now, Zeke. You can tell us when you are healed. If I don't get this out of you now, you're going to die.” Arak pulled his arm free from Zeke's grip and placed his hand on Zeke's forehead. A warm glow emanated from it as his power began to flow into his brother.

“No, Arak...Caym...” Then Zeke passed out.

“Shouldn't you have let him talk?” Bale asked quietly.

“Which is more important?” Arak asked, glancing up from Zeke's supine figure momentarily before moving his hand to cover the wound. “Zeke living or finding a traitor? Because I vote for Zeke.”

Bale nodded slowly, but Arak was not even paying attention to him any longer. As his gaze roamed around the room, he realized someone was missing. “Where is Caym?” he asked, eyes narrowing at Raym.

Caym was Raym's twin, though not really twins in the human sense. They were mirror images of each other and an anomaly in both Heaven and Hell. For whatever reason, they were the only pair created to do more than just resemble each other.

“He didn't make it,” Raym snarled. At Penny's gasp, he yanked his arm from her grip and limped off down the hallway.

“What do you mean he didn't make it?” Bale called, exiting the room and stopping beside Penny.

Raym had already reached the top of the staircase when he turned and pinned Bale with a glare. “Exactly what I said. He's gone.” He shouldered his way past Levi and stormed down the stairs.

Penny called his name, running after Raym. Bale turned back to the bedroom. Arak was immersed in healing Zeke, completely unaware of what was occurring around him. But Remy and Kash had heard, and both looked as shocked as he felt.

“We can't do anything else here,” Remy said, placing a hand on Bale's shoulder.

Bale watched him follow after Raym. Glancing back at Kash, who still stood beside the bed, he shook his head wearily.

“What the hell is going on?” Kash asked, his voice raw and his gaze pleading.

“I don't know,” Bale whispered. He reluctantly dragged his gaze from the bed where Zeke lay motionless and forced his feet to follow Remy. The only way to get answers was to begin piecing together the puzzle, and Raym possessed a huge chunk of it.

* * * *

The males wandered back into the great hall, all but Raym. He had stormed out of the keep, and Penny wavered at the door, not certain what she should do. She knew Remy would expect her presence, would want to know all that had transpired. But her heart said Raym needed her. And so Penny followed her heart.

She set off across the bailey as the sun was just bursting over the horizon. The light seemed odd given the circumstances, out of touch with all that was occurring around her.

Not knowing in which direction Raym traveled, she first went to the gatehouse and up the stairs to the rooms she, Raym, and Caym shared. When she found it empty, she stepped back outside, scanning across the bailey at the various outcroppings of buildings. She couldn't imagine

why he would have headed west, as only Ridefort Tower and Zeke's studio lay in that direction. To the south was Tremelay Tower, which held Kash's forge and the armory. If not for the approaching daylight, she might have considered looking for Raym there. But demons dissipated with the approach of dawn, so even if he sought vengeance—and Penny was certain Raym would—he would have to wait until the sun set. That left Molay Tower and the chapel hidden within.

The abbey, a loose replica of a Templar stronghold overlooking the Pacific Ocean, had been built by Remy some two hundred years prior as a safe haven not only for the Grigori, but to house the relics accumulated over the centuries. It served as a reminder, as did the towers named after the Grand Masters Remy and some of the others had followed, of how far they could still fall if they let greed consume them.

Penny entered the chapel quietly and immediately sensed Raym's presence inside. His grief was overwhelming, and it damn near strangled her. Forcing herself to step farther into the darkened recesses, her gaze finally settled on him.

He knelt upon the stone floor beneath a large cross, as still as the statue of Mary Magdalene on the windowsill, and as silent. With his chin resting on his chest and his eyes tightly closed, he mourned his twin, and Penny's heart broke in two. She longed to go to him, to take him into her arms and console him. But she knew he would only push her away.

“I don't even have his sword to bury,” he mumbled hoarsely.

Since their bodies, like the demons they fought, turned to dust at death, the Grigori had begun sometime in the first century to bury their fallens' swords in consecrated ground. It was a show of honor and respect for those who had given their lives for the cause.

“Raym,” she finally whispered, his grief in addition to her own too much to take.

“Go away, Penemuel,” he said harshly.

“Raym, please. I can't bear it...”

“No one asked you to,” he snarled as he turned, his gaze capturing hers.

The eyes that bore into hers held none of their usual warmth. Now they were just dead inside, and Penny clutched a hand to her chest, covering her heart as if she could protect his cruel words from shattering it.

“You don't belong here, Penemuel. You never have, and you never will. I wish you would just accept that you are nothing to me. Not even a sister.”

Penny stumbled backward as Raym dismissed her, effectively cutting her from his life. With a sob, she fled the chapel. Without Raym, nothing else mattered. Nothing.

* * * *

“Is someone going to tell me what the fuck is going on?” Kash barked angrily, stopping his restless pacing as soon as Remy and Bale entered the great hall.

Levi stood silently in the corner, partially hidden within the shadows. It was best if he were forgotten; that way he could observe how things unfolded. It helped him gain perspective, brought things more clearly into focus. He had never particularly liked Bale, had always thought him a suspicious, smug son of a bitch, and the fact that someone wanted him dead was no big surprise. He knew in Bale's mind he was the most likely suspect. The rest all seemed to truly be the brothers they claimed, which made the treachery all the more difficult to comprehend.

He watched Bale and Remy exchange a look. They weren't certain about Kash. Next to Raym and Caym, he'd spent the most time living with the enclave in Germany. Levi could almost see the wheels turning within Bale's dubious little mind. He wanted to laugh as he watched Bale's perfect world fall apart around him.

"You tell *me*," Remy countered. "What happened to Zeke?"

The mention of the Grigori lying upstairs fighting for his life sobered Levi. If not for Zeke, he would be enjoying Bale's misery openly for all to see. But this was not just about Bale. There would be time to enjoy his fall later.

Kash silently watched Remy a moment, a look of confusion crossing his face. He shook his head, turning away from the pair, but not enough that Levi couldn't still see his face. "The best I could piece together from Zeke's mumblings," Kash began slowly, "was that they were ambushed outside the Mercury. He was supposed to meet his snitch there at the bar."

"And did he?" Remy asked as he stepped farther into the room, crossing the wood floor to the wet bar in the corner. "Did Zeke meet this demon?"

An incredulous look passed over Kash's face as he watched Remy pour himself a glass of Macallan 25 scotch. "How should I know? Raym might have mentioned something to Penny, but I couldn't get shit out of him. Hell, I didn't even know about Caym."

"Christ," Remy mumbled wearily, running a hand through his hair. "It's been a long night. Why doesn't everyone get some sleep? Hopefully all of this will be clearer when we rise."

Kash snorted derisively. "Sure. Whatever."

Levi watched him stride from the room. The slamming of the front door echoed into the room, signaling Kash's departure from the main residence. He remained silent, observing in fascination the interaction between Remy and Bale. It was obvious that at least Bale had forgotten his presence.

"I hate this," Bale murmured, sinking into one of the dining chairs. "To think that any of them..."

"I know you do, Bale." Remy sat across from Bale and leaned back into the chair. "You still beat yourself up over Lucifer's treachery. But the vow you made has not prevented it from happening again."

Bale sighed, resting his head against the back of his chair and closing his eyes. "That's the bitch of it. I did trust all of them, and I never saw it coming."

Bale's words genuinely surprised Levi. He stepped forward, his movement causing Bale to raise his head and pierce him with his gaze. He met Bale's eyes steadily until the other Watcher glanced away.

"I'm sorry I couldn't have told you more to save him," Levi said, turning his attention to Remy. He referred to Caym but hoped to hell he wasn't also speaking about Zeke.

"What does *that* mean?" Bale asked, slowly rising to his feet.

It was Remy's turn to sigh. "He's saying he came to me tonight and told me he'd had a vision that Zeke and Raym were in trouble."

Levi felt Bale's narrowed gaze but ignored him, keeping his concentration on Remy. "But I never saw Caym. And I don't understand why."

Levi's comment gave Remy pause. "Could he have already been gone?" Remy asked, his voice cautious.

Levi shrugged. He didn't want to jump to conclusions either, but his visions were the one thing he could depend on. They were never off. Sometimes they seemed obscure, especially if they involved him. But in cases like this, when a vision came through as clearly as the one he had tonight, it was always accurate.

“Did you see *me*?” Bale asked, his tone curious but holding a trace of wariness.

“No,” Levi said with a shake of his head. “I never saw the battle you were drawn into. But Zeke, I saw the whole thing.” Levi went on to describe his vision. An Alu demon had attacked the pair in the alley behind the Mercury. He and Raym had almost made it to Zeke's '67 Charger when the demon struck. “The demon's main target was Zeke, and at first he seemed to be trying to avoid Raym altogether. But Raym was relentless in his attack, forcing it to defend itself. The poisoned blade, though, it reserved for Zeke and Zeke alone. Luckily he only managed to nick Zeke before Raym dispatched the bastard.” Levi paused as he turned toward the wet bar, needing a drink of his own to finish his story. “The wound across his stomach was from his own blade,” he finally said softly, releasing his confusion and fear into that statement.

“But how?” Bale asked hoarsely.

Levi only shook his head before he shot back a tumbler of scotch.

“There was someone else there, someone Levi could not see,” Remy replied, and Levi glanced over his shoulder at their leader.

Levi turned back to the pair as Bale asked quietly, “Raym?”

“No. Whoever it was had knocked Raym out. I could see Raym lying on the ground, and if Arak were to examine him, I bet he'd find a huge lump on the back of his head.”

“Another demon?” Bale continued to question.

“I told you, I don't know!” Levi snapped in return. Bale always had to push and keep pushing until his opponent cracked. But Levi was the type to push back, and he took a step toward Bale.

“Stop,” Remy commanded, stepping between them and halting Levi's progress. “It does not help to attack each other. We are not the enemy.”

“We're not?” Bale countered roughly, arching a brow at Remy.

“Damn it, Bale. I know you are worried about your female, but Levi is not out to hurt her,” Remy stated, his tone softening.

“For the last time, she is not my female!” Bale bellowed, loudly enough to shake the stone foundation.

Levi gave a bark of laughter. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Bale moved around Remy with surprising agility, given how large a male he was, and grabbed Levi by the shirt. “What does that mean?” he growled.

Levi roughly knocked Bale's hands from him, saying, “Nothing that will help you come to terms with your destiny.” Then he pushed Bale away from him.

“What the fuck?” Bale hissed as he stumbled backward into the table.

“Not everyone is out to get you, Bale,” Remy said softly.

“No. Just one.” Then Bale stalked from the room.

Remy turned to Levi. “So do you really still think Bale's attack was only a distraction?”

Levi nodded slowly. "If I wanted Bale dead, I would not have sent an Alu demon. Everyone in this fortress knows the only demon who stands a chance against Bale is an archdemon. So whoever is behind this treachery either does not have the cooperation of Lucifer or was not after Bale to begin with."

"Levi, Bale does not really think it was you. But you understand why he would, don't you?" Remy asked quietly, resuming his seat at the table and taking a sip from his glass.

Levi collapsed in the seat Bale had just vacated. "I was third in command of Hell. Of course I am the most logical choice. But just because I understand does not mean I have to like it...or Bale."

The corners of Remy's lips twitched. "You two are so damn alike," he mumbled.

Levi rose to his feet. "Go to hell," he said without rancor, then turned to leave.

"So who do you think it is?" Remy asked, his question halting Levi in his tracks.

Levi only shook his head. "I have my suspicions. But having been the recipient of a suspicious mind, I will not point the finger at anyone. Not yet."

"All right, Levi. But I would appreciate some warning if that should change."

Levi glanced back at Remy. "You will be the first to know."

Levi left the room and stealthily moved through the keep until he reached Ridefort Tower. He climbed the stairs slowly until he arrived at his rooms at the top. After he stripped off his clothes and climbed into bed naked, he folded his hands behind his head. His mind returned to the vision he'd had earlier, his attention centering on the hand that had delivered the wound to Zeke. There was something familiar about that hand, but Levi could not place it. Not with certainty, anyway, and it was bugging the hell out of him.

* * * *

Remy sat behind the mahogany desk in his study, a large leather book opened before him. As he slowly turned the parchment pages, he scanned the headings. So much death lay within its bindings, the life and death of those cursed to walk this earth relegated to one page each. Coming to the first blank page, Remy picked up the quill and, with a heavy sigh, dipped the tip in a bottle of ink.

Caym, brother of Raym.

The words flowed easily at first—his rank in the order, his history, for whom he had served from the beginning until now, and how he had met his end. All to memorialize a fellow Watcher within the *Book of the Fallen*. But Remy faltered as he ran out of factual notes. When it came to a personal notation, Remy was at a loss. Caym had been a member of the order and a fellow brother, but Remy had not known him all that long—only half a century, which in the grand scheme of things was hardly a moment in time.

He shook his head, deciding to leave it for now. Only Raym could truly honor his brother in a manner befitting one of the Grigori, so Remy lifted one end of the book, allowing the pages to fall. They stopped on the first page, and Remy read the words out loud.

"Saraknyal, wife and mate of Arakiel."

He slammed the book shut and rubbed his hands over his face. His own wife's name did not lie within the pages, because she had been human and not a member of the Grigori as Arak's had been. But as with Arak, Dara had been his heart mate, and to this day, some fifteen thousand

years later, he still believed he would find her again. For Arak, there was no such hope. Saraknyal was lost to them forever.

Chapter Three

In the hall outside his room, Bale encountered Arak. Arak's eyes had a sunken appearance, and his skin had paled from its normal golden coloring. He looked wiped out, and Bale reached out to steady him when he swayed suddenly.

“You okay?”

Arak nodded, clutching onto Bale's shoulder for a moment. “Yeah. I just wanted to check on Faith before I turned in. I'll probably be out of it for several hours.”

“How's Zeke?” Bale asked quietly, knowing Arak had drained himself of every bit of available energy in trying to heal their brother.

“I think he'll make it. Luckily it was a small amount of poison, and I was able to drain most of it from him.” Arak closed his eyes wearily and sighed. “I'll keep him under for a couple days and check his progress. But I think he'll be okay.”

“Thank the Father,” Bale whispered.

With the barest of smiles, Arak nodded. “Indeed.” Glancing back at the door to Bale's room, he added, “She's doing well, Bale. If you can get her to feed again, it will help her immensely. She's entering the final stage of Transfiguration, and from what I understand, it can get ugly. I'm sorry I won't be of much help.”

Clasping Arak's forearm, Bale replied, “You just worry about getting Zeke back to one hundred percent. I'll take care of Faith.” As Arak returned the gesture of brotherhood, hand tightening around Bale's forearm, Bale felt reassured. At least some things were going to be okay. “Go to bed. You look like shit.”

“Thanks a lot,” Arak mumbled, giving Bale a friendly push away from him.

“Do you need help?” Bale asked, concerned as he watched Arak attempt to move down the hallway.

Arak turned to glance at him. “Now you're just insulting me,” he answered with a grin, pretending his hand was not braced against the wall to support him.

“As if that were possible,” Bale teased. Then he sobered, asking, “Are you sure you don't need help?”

“I'll make it, Bale. You need to be with Faith now. It could start any moment. And it will be painful. There will be convulsions, ones that make what you saw earlier seem like nothing. She'll probably sweat profusely, feel incredibly hot to the touch, and she might get sick. Since I've never actually seen a Transfiguration, only heard about them, I can only guess. But I've been told it's a horrible process, both to watch and to endure.” Arak paused and shrugged. “I would guess probably more so to endure. She'll need you, Bale. If you can't give her anything else, at least give her this. A small measure of warmth might be all she needs to get through the horror.”

Bale felt his stomach twist into knots. He'd hoped the female was on the road to recovery so he could move her from his room. He thought it would be easier to purge her from his life now, before she ever woke and he was forced to look into her eyes. But fate, the cruel bitch that she was, seemed inclined to have him suffer...again.

"Don't worry about Faith, Arak. I'll take care of her," Bale said softly, turning with a sigh to face his bedroom door.

"Bale, you asked if it was worth it," Arak whispered.

Bale glanced over his shoulder, surprised Arak would bring up Saraknyal again. She was a subject Arak avoided at all costs.

"If there was a chance in hell, I'd take it."

Bale could hear the grief in Arak's voice and wondered how he could say such a thing. Losing Saraknyal had damn near destroyed him. He couldn't understand how Arak would be willing to endure such pain again. It made Bale wonder at the difference between himself and Arak. Or even Remy. Because for Bale it had not been worth it. And it didn't make sense for the other two males to feel differently.

Bale opened the door and paused just inside the threshold. Faith lay curled around his pillow, her hair spilled around her like a river of fire. Bale's heart lurched in his chest, skipping a beat.

"Christ," he mumbled, rubbing a hand over his face. He trudged into the bathroom to change out of his leathers. Vomit was a pain in the ass to dry-clean out. That he knew firsthand; Zeke couldn't handle his liquor worth shit. Keeping his T-shirt on, Bale substituted leather for black silk, then returned to the bedroom.

He took a seat across from the bed, watching her for any signs of distress. Seeing none, he eased back, letting his head fall against the chair. Against his will, his mind traveled back in time. He saw his wife, her easy smile, the light of her soul shining beautifully in her eyes. His small daughter, an exact replica of his raven-haired wife, stood by her side with one chubby hand fisted in her mother's as she sucked furiously on her thumb. The last memory he had of them.

Bale angrily brushed a tear away. He didn't want to remember. Just like he didn't want another female in his life. He jumped to his feet, intent on getting someone else—anyone—to see to the female's needs. He paused, a hand on the doorknob, when a soft cry penetrated his rage.

He glanced over his shoulder, and his gaze fell on her, and he cursed softly. She had begun to shake, sharp tremors that seemed to center at her spine and travel down her limbs. Her back suddenly arched, and she emitted a sound of such heart-wrenching pain, it sent shards of unease through his gut.

He rushed to her side and gathered her into his arms, hoping the contact would settle her as it seemed to have earlier. But it had no effect now. The spasms only continued to grow worse.

"Christ, baby," Bale whispered hoarsely, "I don't know what to do." He remembered Arak's words—that she would need to feed—and hoped it would help her.

Bale reached for his dagger, which still lay on the edge of the bed where Remy had dropped it, and used the tip to slice his forearm open. He forced her face to the wound, hoping the scent would entice her. "Eat." When nothing happened, his fingers tightened in her hair. "Please, baby. Eat," he whispered urgently.

Bale could have cried with relief when he felt her lips latch onto his skin. Fear kept the extreme sexual need at bay, allowing only faint wisps of arousal with each tug of her lips. Those were easy to ignore. Instead of getting his rocks off, Bale had more important things to center his attention on. He continually monitored Faith's every movement, and by the time she'd pulled back, her shaking had lessened to slight shivers.

Her head fell against his arm, and glancing down, Bale became trapped in her crystal clear emerald gaze. She slowly reached a hand up and cupped his cheek, her thumb brushing away a tear he hadn't realized was there.

"I thought you were a dream," she whispered.

Bale dragged her hand to his lips, kissing her palm lightly. "I'm real enough," he replied, his voice still rough with worry.

Her eyes drifted closed, and her head moved to Bale's shoulder, nuzzling his neck. He felt her lips lightly touching his skin as she slowly relaxed in his arms. Lowering her gently to the bed, Bale found she was asleep again. When he tried to move away from her, though, he was unable; Faith murmured a hushed protest. And when he became insistent, the tremors returned. His curling around her slight frame eased her distress, and Bale sighed as he finally pulled her tightly against his chest.

Over the next several hours, this process repeated itself, her convulsions getting progressively worse. Each time he got her to take small amounts of his blood, but it became more difficult as the tremors took over her frame. By the fourth episode, Bale had considered getting Arak, but it being by far the worst one yet, he'd been afraid to leave her alone.

Bale was at his wit's end, unsure if he could handle witnessing her pain any longer, when the fifth one hit. He breathed a sigh of relief when it didn't last nearly as long, nor was it as harsh. And from there the bouts slowed until she slept peacefully.

Finally able to rise from the bed, he wanted to hightail it right out of the room and get as far away from Faith and the sense of their shared trauma as he could. He felt connected to her now, and that was a feeling he could not tolerate.

But he refused to run. Instead he showered and changed back into his leathers and a clean shirt. With one last look at Faith to ensure she was truly resting comfortably, Bale exited the room. His first stop would be to check on Zeke and make certain his brother had made it through the day. And then he intended to find out if Remy had discovered anything else while he had been confined in his room.

* * * *

When her consciousness returned, Faith was dazed and disoriented. But this didn't alarm her; she had never been much of a morning person. Then the haze lifted and it hit her—she should be dead.

Faith jerked upright, her hands immediately going to her right side. She shoved the shirt she was wearing out of her way and examined her flesh. No wound. Nothing. Not even a scratch. She sank back into the pillows with a sigh. It had all been a nightmare, just a horrible figment of her very active imagination.

Wait a minute. When the hell did she get a Led Zeppelin T-shirt? A *man's* Led Zeppelin T-shirt? She sat up again and stared down at her chest. She was a Marilyn Manson kind of girl,

certainly not a metalhead. Disconcerted, she raised her head slowly, for the first time taking in her surroundings.

Shit! This wasn't her cheerful, yellow-painted room with her white wooden furniture. No, the walls were black. The bed, a massive iron structure, was considerably larger than the average king-size, and it was old. The head- and footboards had an intricate bird design on them, what Faith thought might be a phoenix. The bedding was black silk. Besides a large stereo system stacked on the floor, a black leather chair in the corner, and a wooden armoire against one wall, the rest of the room was empty.

Where the hell was she?

It was unlike her to get drunk and go home with strange men. No, that was more her twin's department. But in an unfamiliar bedroom, dressed only in a T-shirt and her underwear, she couldn't think of another reason for finding herself in these unfamiliar surroundings.

Crap. She had to get out of here.

Faith swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and a wave of dizziness had her bracing her head in her hands.

"Well, that was fun," she mumbled after the episode had passed.

She gingerly rose to her feet, swearing off alcohol for the rest of her life. She felt like shit. Glancing around for her clothing so she could sneak away before encountering the owner of the Led Zeppelin T-shirt, she sighed when she couldn't spot them. Could this get any worse?

Three doors were in her line of sight. One was open and led to a bathroom. Faith hobbled to the closest one and, upon opening it, discovered a huge closet.

"Lucky bastard," she murmured, knowing she would die to have this much space for her clothes. Her closet, if one could even call it such, was scale to her small condo—itty-bitty, teeny-tiny. Then she smirked as she scanned the contents inside. Black. The guy apparently had a fetish for the color. And leather. Black leather pants. Black leather jackets—some short, some long. Black leather boots, all of the biker variety. She picked one up. Steel-toed. It just kept getting better. She had apparently gone home with a member of the Hell's Angels.

She spotted a trench coat on the floor, and it seemed oddly familiar. Picking it up, she had a flash of the male who might have been wearing it. If her memory was on target and not alcohol induced, he was seriously hot.

She was about to drop the coat when a scent infiltrated her nostrils. Bringing the leather to her nose, she inhaled deeply, the smell of a pure, heavenly male overtaking her, and her body reacted instantly. She stumbled backward, hitting the wall behind her as a sudden heat shot through her veins. She was wet and throbbing between her thighs, obviously raring to go for round two. Her stomach had other ideas, though, and she bent over to ease the cramping.

"Oh fuck," she whispered when the taste of blood filled her mouth. She'd nicked her tongue—on her fangs.

Faith rushed to the bathroom, stopping in front of the mirror and opening her mouth wide. Sure enough, she had a set of fangs. One year early. And everything came back to her: the Lilu demon, the Alu demon, the whole scene where the fucking demon had stabbed her and the incredibly hot guy with the sword had come to her rescue.

She made it back to the bed without passing out and crashed on top of the silk comforter. With her nose buried in the pillow, the scent of her male surrounded her, both relaxing her and

amplifying the need for blood. Just on the edge of her consciousness, something tried to gain her attention. But she ignored it, sinking deeper into the pillow.

Turning her head to the side, Faith wondered where he was. She wanted him, craved him. It was his blood. That was all it was. Because the alternative was unacceptable.

* * * *

“Zeke still okay?” Bale asked Arak, encountering him in the hallway outside Bale's room.

When he had checked on Zeke earlier, Arak had still been out of it. He'd found Levi sitting by their brother's side, guarding him while Zeke remained in a deep, healing sleep. He'd tried to make his peace the best way he could with the other Watcher, clasping his shoulder briefly. Levi had looked up at him in surprise and then nodded and asked about Faith. For just a moment before Bale had answered, he'd gotten the impression Levi already knew the answer to his own question, but Bale hadn't pursued it. If he admitted the truth to himself, he was afraid of the answer. He didn't want to know what the future held for him and the female. Because either way it was going to be hell.

“Better,” Arak replied, looking much more relaxed than the last time Bale had seen him. “I am just on my way to wake up your female's sister. Then I'll check on Faith. I assume because you are skulking around, it is done.”

“I was not skulking,” Bale said quietly. “And yes, the transition has passed.”

Arak smiled broadly. “You didn't deny she is yours.”

Bale folded his arms across his chest and rolled his eyes. “Would there be any point? You have made up your mind, whether it is the truth or not. I'm just saving myself the aggravation.”

Arak did not comment; he just stood there grinning at Bale.

“You know, one of these days someone is going to wipe that shit-eating grin off your face,” Bale snapped, turning toward his bedroom door.

“They can try,” Arak replied as he continued down the hall, singing, “She's looking to love you. There's nothing to say. Just turn your head and walk away!”

“Yeah, fuck off,” Bale called over his shoulder. “And quit slaughtering Sabbath. Ozzy you are not.”

Arak's laughter followed him into the room.

Bale received one hell of a surprise when he crossed over the threshold. Lying on top of the bedding was Faith, and the sight of her ass in her barely there panties was almost more than Bale could take. A soft groan escaped his lips, causing her to raise her head and meet his gaze.

Almost immediately Bale realized she was in pain. He moved briskly to her side and sat next to her on the bed. He brushed her hair away from her face, his stomach twisting in a tight knot of tension when she whimpered.

“What is it, baby?” he quietly demanded. He could not—no, *would* not—tolerate seeing her in pain.

“Help me,” she pleaded, her words slurred slightly as she tried to talk around her new fangs. Bent over, she clutched her stomach, tears slowly sliding down her cheeks. Her obvious distress pulled at something deep inside him.

“How, baby? What do you need?” he asked urgently, reaching out to gather her in his arms. He hesitated at the last second, afraid he might make matters worse by touching her.

“Please. I need you,” she whispered hoarsely.

She rolled closer to him, and Bale took it as a sign to embrace her. He pulled her to his chest, holding her tightly against him. As her lips nuzzled his neck, her tongue peeking out to lick over his pulse point, he tensed involuntarily, and she stilled. Then he forced himself to relax.

“Whatever you need. Just take it, baby,” he urged, his hands rubbing her back in gentle reassurance. But when her hands went to work on the ties of his pants, he had a slight change of heart. He grasped her hands and forced them to his chest, while she fought him the whole time.

She let out a frustrated cry. “Please. I ache so badly,” she whimpered.

Bale cursed, then released her hands. She immediately began to untie the strings keeping his cock imprisoned. Once it was freed, she fisted her small hand around him, causing a groan to escape his lips. As she pumped him once...twice, his cock grew hard and heavy in her tight grip. His hips flexed in counterrhythm with her motions as he tried to thrust as much of him through her tight fist as he could.

Not knowing how in the hell this had escalated so damn quickly or what it was about this one female that shot his control to hell, Bale tried to force back the lust and make his cock deflate. But Faith struck, sinking her fangs deep into his neck, causing his eyes to roll back from the pleasure.

He clutched her hips tightly, knowing he would probably leave bruises, but the only thing that mattered to him was sinking between her thighs and fucking them both to orgasm. Bale rolled her under him, his questing fingers sliding under the elastic of her panties. The little bit of silk and lace snapped under his grip, and he glided his fingers between her thighs, finding her unbelievably wet.

With a growl, Bale plunged two fingers into her dripping pussy, and her heat just about scalded him. As he corkscrewed his fingers deep inside her, he had to pry her hand from his cock to grab the organ in his punishing grip and keep from coming right there on her thigh.

Her hips arched up as he frantically withdrew his thrusting fingers from her and drove his cock in deep. There was no pause to give her time to adjust to his large girth. He couldn't. He was too damn far out of control, and his body just took over, forcing through the tightening muscles over and over again as her pussy rippled around him.

Underneath him, she met each forward drive, and with every outward motion, her tunnel clutched him as if to keep him buried deep inside her. As the contractions rippling around his cock grew harsher, she released his neck, sobbing against his skin while her pussy tightened around him like a vise.

Bale continued to push through her spasming flesh. “Again,” he hissed. “I want to feel you come again.”

Continuing to power between her thighs like a male possessed, he brought her to peak twice more before he came so hard, he blacked out.

He became aware of his 280-pound body collapsed on top of Faith, and he rolled off, afraid he might be hurting her. She made a small noise of protest, her body moving to remain in contact with his.

Bale growled softly, unable to believe he had just fucked the female with complete and utter desperation while still clothed. He was overcome with shame. He had treated her poorly and with a despicable lack of respect, despite the fact that she was the one who had initiated the encounter. He sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely. "I didn't mean... God, please tell me you don't have a wife or something."

Bale turned to glance at her, shocked by her apology. He was the one who had rutted on top of her like an animal.

He touched her cheek, shaking his head slowly. "I am sorry. I shouldn't have taken advantage."

"Advantage?" she questioned with a twinge of embarrassment in her tone and a slight smile. "I was the one with your dick in my hand. It was more like *I* was the one taking advantage." She glanced away from him, a sudden blush creeping over her skin. "I just never understood how desperate this whole process would make me."

"Well, I was glad to be of service," Bale said with a grin. He lay back down on the bed, allowing Faith to curl around his body, and wrapped an arm around her waist.

She suddenly lifted her head and stared down at him in surprise. "Why the hell aren't you totally freaked-out that I just bit you?"

Bale gave a soft chuckle. "If the Alu demon didn't send me running, a pair of fangs on a little thing like you certainly wouldn't."

Faith pushed away from him and sat up. Her eyes flittered across his face nervously before glancing away. "How do you know about Alu demons?" she demanded softly.

"I've been fighting demons long before your great-grandfather was even thought of." Bale tried to bring her back into his embrace, needing to hold her close, but she brushed his hands away, scooting out of reach.

"What are you?" she asked quietly.

Bale observed her silently for a moment, wondering how much information he should give her, especially considering who her father was. But he felt compelled to be truthful, as if in the long run it would matter somehow. "Since Remy has been so insistent that you are mine," he said softly, more to himself than to Faith, "I am going to tell you. He can deal with the fallout later. We are the Grigori, the fallen."

Faith attempted to lurch off the bed. For a split second, Bale was too stunned to move, but then he grabbed her and forced her back to the bed and into his arms. It was a struggle to keep her against him. She was stronger than she looked. Finally rolling her under him, he stared down at her, her eyes wide with shock and fear.

"You are a demon?"

"No. I was not born of Lucifer and his bitch," he stated, more harshly than he intended. But he would allow no association of his name with those two. "We are the Watchers, those who chose to fall. But we were deceived by Lucifer and have remained in shame ever since."

Faith appeared stunned for a moment, obviously having never heard of the Grigori. "Do the Principals know of you?" she asked with a measure of caution, speaking of the sector of angels whose sole purpose was to rule over those like herself—the vampires, the werewolves, and the like.

"I would assume they have not forgotten our presence," he replied. "But we have little to do with those created by Lucifer's followers. I could not say who is even still among that rank." Bale brushed her hair from her face.

“So it really happened,” she whispered. “The demons.” As she struggled with the edge of her shirt, Bale let his hip slide to the mattress, keeping her pinned under his thigh. Faith raised the edge of the T-shirt, revealing a smooth abdomen. “The wound.”

He traced a finger over the soft expanse of skin, watching with deep satisfaction as the muscles rippled at his touch. “Yeah.”

“Shit!” Faith exclaimed as she attempted to wiggle out from under his thigh. “Hope. Where is she? Where is my sister?”

Bale framed her face gently with his hands. “Shh,” he murmured softly. He caressed her lips with his own and felt her go pliant beneath him. “She had a broken wrist, but Arak was able to fix it. He put her in a healing sleep so she would not worry about you, and was on his way to wake her just before I entered the room. I suspect that any moment now, there will be a knock on the door.”

Faith gave a sigh of relief. “Truly, she is okay?”

“Yes. She escaped the Alu in a hell of a lot better shape than you did, baby. What the hell did you two think you were doing?” he asked, his voice holding a trace of the rage he'd felt when he'd watched helplessly as the demon stabbed her.

A flash of anger sparked in her eyes. “We were hunting a Lilu demon responsible for the deaths of five women. He has been sneaking into their homes and killing them in their beds. The police are useless. They are looking for a killer that does not exist.”

Bale rolled to his side, keeping Faith locked tight in his arms. “And you are doing this why?” he asked quietly, his eyes searching hers. He didn't like the fact that she had placed herself in danger. And it wasn't because she was female. He had willingly fought at Penny's side on many an occasion. Female warriors were not uncommon among the angels. But this female Bale had a strange urge to wrap in cotton and hide away.

“Ten years ago, our mother was murdered by one of those sick bastards. Our father had already returned us to his nest, and she had been alone. The demon had played with her before he killed her, feeding off her for hours before he drained her.” Faith tried to break away from Bale, but he refused to release her. She wiped away frustrated, angry tears with the back of her hand. “I won't sit back and let more women die. Not without trying to stop him.”

Bale kissed both of her eyelids tenderly and held her as she trembled against him. “Let me take care of the demon. Right now there is more going on than just one Lilu demon, and I want you to stay out of it.”

Faith leaned back, looking up at him. She looked like she considered telling him what he could do with his wants, but a knock on the door had her snapping her jaw shut.

Bale released her quickly, rolling off the bed and landing on his feet gracefully. He tucked his flaccid cock back into his leathers and quickly laced them shut. Then he grasped the edge of the comforter and tugged it back as he said softly, “Under the covers with you.”

She peered up at him, though it was as if she was not really seeing him and was instead lost in thought. He watched an array of emotions flutter across her face and might have poked at what he saw if she hadn't begun to tremble from the lack of the warmth his body had been providing her, reminding him of his earlier request.

“Come on, baby, unless you want Arak to see you in only my T-shirt.”

She shook her head adamantly, allowing Bale to maneuver her under the covers.

“Shit. I don't even know your name,” she whispered as he tucked the comforter under her chin.

“It's Balam...Bale,” he replied huskily, glancing away from her as a knock sounded on the door again. “Come in,” he called out, bracing his body to face the door. With Faith still as weak as she was, he was in warrior mode, the dagger he'd used earlier to assist in feeding her clutched in his fist. Just in case whoever came through the door did so with the intention of terminating him, he was prepared to protect his own.

Faith watched the door open slowly before a male not quite as tall or having the sheer mass of Bale entered the room. She bit her lip to prevent a gasp from escaping her mouth. He was gorgeous. Where Bale's beauty was cold, hard like steel, his friend radiated warmth and sexual heat. Blond hair curled around twinkling blue eyes, eyes that lit up even further as their gaze settled on her. Faith didn't think he could get any more handsome until he smiled, and she found herself returning the gesture, ignoring Bale's scowl.

She felt herself blushing when Bale's friend stopped short, nostrils flaring as his eyes, filled with surprise, turned to Bale.

“Not a word,” Bale threatened, the dagger suddenly visible as he crossed his arms over his chest.

His friend laughed, a delightful sound, almost like the twinkling of bells. “And you protested.”

Faith watched Bale's frown deepen. “It changes nothing.”

The other male cocked his head to the side, his expression turning thoughtful. “Maybe you would now like to move Faith into the infirmary. Zeke will probably appreciate the company once he wakes.”

The male shrugged as if his words held little consequence, but Bale apparently had other ideas. Confused, she watched Bale take a threatening step forward. She figured his bulk could easily overpower the other male, but his friend held his ground, appearing not the least bit intimidated.

“Try it, Arak, and expect to lose body parts,” Bale growled softly.

Arak only snorted. “Yeah, yeah. So you say.” Arak's gaze settled on Faith, and his features took on a sad appearance. “But maybe Remy will have something to say about that.”

“Don't push me,” Bale warned.

“I'll have something to say about what?” a voice interrupted.

Another male stood in the doorway with Hope.

The conversation between Bale and Arak immediately ceased, and both males shook their heads, obviously unwilling to share whatever they were discussing with the newcomer.

The third male, Faith soon learned, was Remy, the leader of this little enclave of Grigori warriors. He was closer in height to Bale and was similar in appearance, except unlike Bale's long, silky strands, Remy's hair was cut close to his scalp, and a goatee decorated his chin. The other major difference was his eyes. They held a warmth Bale's presently lacked, one Faith was certain had been there only moments before.

“Nothing,” Bale snapped, answering Remy's question with a glare aimed at Arak.

With a sigh, Remy stepped farther into the room. "Well, look who is awake," he murmured once his gaze settled on her. "You are looking much better than the last time I saw you."

Faith smiled. "And feeling much better, I am sure." She cast a quick glance at Bale to find him still standing defensively beside the bed.

"Faith, how are you?" Hope asked, ignoring the three males in the room. She crossed to the bed and sat beside Faith.

"I'm okay, Hope. It's done," Faith replied as her eyes traced over her sister, examining for any hints of distress or injury. "And you? You are okay?"

"You scared the crap out of me," her sister said, a reprimand in her tone.

"Me?" Faith asked incredulously. "I was not the one who just stood there staring at an Alu demon. I told you to run."

"And I wasn't the one who charged the bastard and got myself stabbed," Hope added with a trace of sarcasm. "You've got to stop trying to save me."

"Fine," Faith snapped. "When Dad asks why he wasn't called when my Transfiguration hit, I'll tell him it was your fault."

Hope swallowed with visible discomfort. "No need to go that far," she mumbled.

Faith rolled her eyes. "I thought so."

Bale watched the two sisters hug and took a step closer to the pair, then placed his hand on Faith's shoulder. When she glanced up at him, he gestured with a flick of his head for Arak to approach.

"I want Arak to make sure you are okay." When her eyes met his, Bale tensed for the briefest of moments, thinking she was going to protest. And he knew he would probably make a fool of himself getting her to relent. He felt his muscles relax with a sense of relief when she finally nodded her agreement.

Arak waited until Hope moved out of his way before he approached the bed. Sitting beside Faith, he reached to pull the comforter down. Knowing little covered Faith but a thin T-shirt, Bale's unconscious reaction was a growl of warning, drawn deep from his chest, making Arak pause as he cast a wary glance at Bale.

Swearing softly under his breath, Bale forced his feet to carry him away from Faith, backing up until his legs hit the chair, then collapsing into the leather. His fingers dug into the arms as Arak slowly eased Faith's shirt up and his hand began examining her side. He hated seeing Arak, the one who drew women to his side like bees gathering to honey, touching this female, when he had never cared before about any of the dozens of women Arak went through. But Faith was different. Damn if he wasn't coming to understand just how much. And as his body reacted to the assumed threat Arak posed, anger slowly consumed Bale.

He didn't want to feel possessive of the female, had known fucking her would only make the need to conquer her worse. But he'd let his body rule his mind, and now he was just beginning to grasp the true depth of the situation. He suspected Faith would come to mean more to him than his wife and daughter ever had, because as much as he didn't want to admit it, Faith was his heart mate.

Faith watched as Arak placed a hand on the spot where her wound had been. He closed his eyes, and a faint bluish glow emanated from his hand. Warmth spread over her skin, penetrating deep, making her want to purr in delight. He was rigidly still for a minute or two, then pulled his hand away.

“Looks good.” With a satisfied smile, Arak winked at her. “I would suggest bed rest. The weakness you are experiencing should gradually improve over the next several days. Until then, don't try to push it. You will get tired easily at first, so no wandering around the abbey.”

At his declaration, Faith opened her mouth to protest his assessment. She felt fine...actually, better than she'd expected after all she'd heard regarding Transfiguration. But Arak winked at her again as he stood, and she suspected he might have other motives. Whatever they were, apparently they involved her staying with Bale.

Her gaze shifted to capture Bale's reaction to Arak's pronouncement and met his empty stare. It was as if any warmth, any tenderness he had displayed while they were alone, had been her imagination. Faith felt her insides freeze and turned away.

It wasn't that she expected love. They'd had sex, nothing more. Sex as complete, indifferent strangers. Faith hardened her resolve. Once she thought of something to tell her father, she was getting the hell out of here. Because she already knew by the way she was reacting to Bale that if she stayed too long, leaving him would be like ripping out her heart—painful and bloody. And after watching her mother make a fool of herself over her father, a male who had cared about her but who never loved her, Faith had sworn never to make the same mistake. Her self-respect was worth more than that.

Chapter Four

A soft sigh of relief escaped Faith's lips when Bale and the other males had left her alone with Hope. The more Bale had scowled, the more uncomfortable she'd grown. Now, as she tensed under Hope's watchful gaze, Faith almost regretted Bale's exit. Her sister's eyes narrowed, and she winced, wondering what the look on her face had revealed. While Faith could not claim to having ever experienced the "twin phenomenon," Hope always seemed to have the ability to read her as if she were an open book.

"Now that your guard is gone"—Hope began with a trace of sarcasm—"why don't you tell me how you are really feeling."

While Hope was leaning casually against the wall, there was nothing relaxed about her tone.

"I told you, I am okay," she replied, an unintentional defensiveness creeping into her voice.

Hope pushed away from the wall with a snort and strode toward the bed, but then flopped into the only chair occupying the room. "Really," she drawled, one perfect blonde eyebrow arched in disbelief.

Faith could only nod. Hope was suspicious about something, and she wasn't going to give her sister any more ammunition than necessary until she figured out what her twin was angling after.

Leaning back in her chair, Hope silently studied her a moment. "The doc dude said you could go home in a couple of days. Think you'll be up to it?"

Glancing away from Hope, Faith replied, "I feel good...strong. I'll probably be ready to hit the road tomorrow."

"Must be some blood that guy has," Hope replied mockingly, "seeing as how it normally takes at least a week to recover...and you suffering from demon poisoning on top of transfiguring."

"Must be," she agreed evasively, continuing to avoid Hope's narrowed gaze.

The bed dipped under the additional weight as Hope sat on the edge and grasped her twin's chin, forcing their eyes to meet. "What is going on here, Faith?"

Faith struggled under Hope's probing gaze, feeling her face redden. She didn't know how to explain the unease she felt or what she feared was the cause behind it.

"I need to get out of here as soon as possible, Hope," Faith finally admitted softly. "I do not know what will happen if I stay too long. Already there is a strong sense of dependence."

"Dependence? That is an odd choice of words."

"It's what it feels like. I crave his presence this very minute, and I fear it will only grow worse."

“What the hell would have caused such a thing?” Hope asked, horror lining her face as she grasped Faith's hand, squeezing tightly.

“I suspect the reason for having more than one individual donate blood during a Transfiguration is to prevent this from happening,” Faith said, giving voice to her suspicion.

“Why wouldn't we have been told of such a thing?”

Faith shrugged. “I am sure it will pass once I begin feeding from others. But there is something else.” Faith paused, wondering if she could even actually admit to what she had done. “I had sex with Bale,” she finally confided.

Hope's eyes widened in disbelief. “Don't get me wrong. He's hot...like un-fucking-believably hot. But that's just not like you, Faith.”

“The aftereffects of Transfiguration were like nothing I'd ever heard described. We've been told the blood would resemble a favorite flavor...and it did. The richest mocha latte imaginable. But his scent—on his clothes, the sheets—had me desperate. And not just for anyone. It had to be Bale.” Faith glanced down at her hands, embarrassed by what she was going to reveal next. “I practically attacked him,” she added in a whisper.

“And I'm sure he put up a hell of a fight,” Hope added with a smirk, and Faith sighed softly.

“For once, can you not be such a sarcastic bitch?” she asked without rancor.

“All right,” Hope replied, grinning broadly, not the least offended by her twin's comment. “I've never heard mention of anyone needing sex after transfiguring. Are you sure there isn't something wrong with you? Or him?”

With a groan, Faith rolled her eyes. “Can you really see Dad explaining that to us?” she asked with a derisive snort. “Shit, he probably still lives under the delusion that we are both virgins.” She grinned when Hope snickered.

“Good point.” Hope's gaze rested on the empty side of the bed, and the smile slid from her face. “So what do you plan on doing about you know who?”

Faith's amusement fled out of the room right behind her sister's. “Nothing, other than getting the hell out of here.”

“Are you sure you shouldn't move to another room? Feed from one of the other males?”

Faith shrugged, glancing away from Hope. She knew the answer should be “hell yes.” But she couldn't get the words past the lump in her throat, because the thought of leaving Bale made her nauseated.

Hope studied her quietly for a moment and then nodded her head. She seemed to grasp that Faith no longer wanted to talk about Bale, because she asked, “Was the Transfiguration as horrible as we've been told?”

Faith considered her words a moment. While she was unwilling to lie to her twin, she also did not want to frighten her. Hope had at least a year to fret over her own Transfiguration, which was a long time to dread something you had no control over.

“I really only have vague memories of the whole thing. But yeah, I think it was. I remember fire, as if I was so hot my skin literally felt like it was burning. Whether it was due to the poisoning or transfiguring, I don't know, but I feel as if I should be thankful I don't recall the worst of it.”

“Oh, the joys I have to look forward to,” Hope mumbled.

With a weak smile, Faith silently agreed, but with nothing worthwhile to add, she changed the subject. "Any chance you can get me some clothes?"

"I've heard mention of a chick who lives here. I'll see if you can borrow something from her."

Overcome with an odd sense of jealousy, Faith bit her lip, unwilling to dig for information concerning this female. It certainly would not help her current situation to demand answers. It would only advertise the fact that she was feeling possessive of a male she had no business expecting anything from.

"Good. Now, how about I get you something to eat? You must be starving." At Faith's vigorous nod, Hope grinned and jumped to her feet, jostling the bed in the process. "Then I'll just go down and bother the boys."

The eagerness in her voice brought a smile to Faith's face.

Hope paused, her hand on the doorknob. "Wait until you see this place. It's like a medieval castle downstairs. Very cool."

Then she charged out of the room, leaving Faith shaking her head. She almost pitied the males...almost.

* * * *

As Hope trudged down the hallway, passing the room she'd woken in only a couple of hours before, she contemplated Faith's Transfiguration with a mixture of trepidation and relief. Her twin seemed to be doing remarkably well. Maybe too well. Something about it just didn't sit right with her, but she couldn't quite put her finger on the problem.

And her own Transfiguration loomed over her head. Maybe wishful thinking on her part, but she had always assumed because she was older, though only by three minutes, that she would go through the process first. That was how it should be. Now she was the odd man out, and that bothered her.

Then there were the males in this abbey. There was something about them that sent her radar spiraling out of control. And Faith's quick recovery only added to Hope's suspicions. It annoyed her that she owed Bale and Arak her gratitude, because she didn't trust them. And Faith's confession concerning Bale had left her even more disconcerted. If she weren't so afraid of getting reamed by her father, Hope would have already contacted him. But she and Faith were both desperate to get out from under his oppressive control, to live their lives as they saw fit. With her Transfiguration complete, Faith now had her chance.

Lost in her own thoughts, Hope was surprised when the hallway gave way to an opening overlooking a large foyer. Two stone staircases adorned each wall, and Hope slowly began the descent down the set closest to her. A chandelier overhead caught her eye. It resembled those from a century past, when candlelight was still used to feed a room.

The two main walls were hidden behind large tapestries. The one farthest from Hope depicted a battle between two groups of angels. It was a beautiful design but did not hold Hope's interest. As her gaze traveled over the one closest to her, however, a gasp slid from her lips.

The scene was much simpler. A lone angel stood in a green field surrounded by floral splendor. His long blond hair flowed over his massive shoulders, partially hidden beneath a pair of white wings that curled protectively around his body. The ends of his white toga flowed around his ankles as if caressed by a gentle breeze. But he appeared to see none of the beauty

around him. Instead, green eyes, the color of glittering emeralds, gazed longingly into a bright light.

Hope reached up and slowly traced a finger down his cheek. The anguish reflected in his gaze affected her like a punch in the abdomen. His sadness overwhelmed her. With a sudden desperation, Hope backed away from the tapestry. Scurrying down the remaining steps, she attributed her emotional response to everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours: the demons, Faith's injuries, and her own. Otherwise she was going insane, because for the briefest of moments, she could have sworn the angel's eyes had looked directly at her.

Anxious to get as far away from the foyer and that damn angel as possible, she traveled quickly through the abbey, paying attention to very little until she found herself in a monstrously sized dining hall. A large rectangular table rested in the center, surrounded by twelve wingback chairs. In two of the corners, arranged in a square, were identical sets of black leather couches and four chairs. Beside one was a large wet bar. A cursory glance noted it was well stocked with high-end scotch, vodka, and tequila. These males had expensive tastes.

They also apparently had an angel fetish. The walls in this room were also covered with scenes depicting angels. Hope sighed in relief when she found the angel from the foyer was in none of them.

With hands rubbing her arms, she moved toward the enormous fireplace, thinking to chase away the sudden chill, when murmured voices to her right caught her attention. She changed direction, quietly approaching a half-opened door. Hope could see Bale standing inside the smaller room and thought to gain his attention when she heard Faith's name. She abruptly slid off to the side to listen unobserved.

"I'm sure someone would be willing to take the little vampire off your hands, Bale," a deep, husky voice said drily from farther within the room. "You don't need to take sole responsibility for her recovery."

"Yeah," agreed a second voice, this one slightly higher and filled with a teasing cadence. "You've been guarding the female like she's the Holy Grail. I'd be more than happy to give up a little blood. Especially if she is as hot as her sister."

An aggressive-sounding growl followed by a loud scuffle had Hope peeking around the corner. Bale had a brunet about six inches shorter than himself pinned against the wall, his forearm pressed into the other male's throat.

"Stay away from her," Bale snarled, adding pressure to the male's throat.

The brunet managed to break free, though Hope suspected it was because Bale let him. "What the hell is your problem?" he hissed as he righted his white T-shirt. "You've made it plain you want her gone. I was just offering to help you out."

Another growl was issued from deep within Bale's throat. He took a step toward his companion when Remy stepped into view, moving between the two.

"That is enough," Remy commanded, glancing over his shoulder at the brunet. "Faith is under Bale's protection, Kash."

"Since when does Bale give protection to anyone?" Kash asked, his gaze narrowing as he glanced between Bale and Remy. His eyes suddenly widened in surprise. "Unless—"

"It's none of your fucking business," Bale interrupted sharply.

“While Faith is out of the woods, moving her right now could set her back days,” Arak stated. Hope could not see him, but she recognized his voice. “I’ve heard the exchange of blood is an intimate affair. She feels comfortable with Bale. Unless the blood loss begins to negatively affect him, I don’t see the point in causing her undue stress.”

“So tell us, how intimate an affair is it, Bale?” asked the first voice mockingly. He stepped from the shadows, a smirk on his pale face and a brow arched in what appeared to be a challenge. He turned farther toward Bale, and Hope noticed a long, jagged scar that ran from his temple to his chin on his left side. His hair was golden in appearance and long, though she couldn’t make out the exact length because he had it tucked behind his ears.

The one called Kash snickered. “I can guarantee it wasn’t that intimate.”

Bale ignored Kash, keeping his eyes trained on the other male. “If you have something useful to add, then by all means, share it with us, Levi. Otherwise she is not your concern.”

“Oh, I have plenty to add. But I think I’ll watch you sweat it out awhile. It’s much more entertaining.”

“You are a useless prick,” Bale said, his teeth clenched, anger clouding his face. But he remained rooted in place.

“And you are a conceited bastard,” Levi retorted heatedly.

Bale snorted, folding his arms across his chest, but it was Remy who spoke, his voice soft with warning. “Levi, we’ve already had this conversation. Don’t make me repeat myself.” Remy glanced around, his gaze sweeping over every male in the room as he added, “And let’s not make our guest’s opinion of us sink any further than it already has.”

As Remy turned toward the door, the other males followed suit, and Hope knew she was busted. With a sigh, she stepped into the doorway. She glanced quickly at each male before her gaze settled on Bale.

“Faith would appreciate the chance to get cleaned up. I thought maybe she could borrow some clean clothes from the female who lives here. And she’s also hungry.”

Hope watched Bale’s reaction to her announcement in surprise. The male turned a sickly shade of white, and his eyes filled with what appeared to be fear. His reaction did not coincide with her words, leaving Hope with a sense of unease.

“Again?” he inquired quietly.

“Again?” she repeated in confusion, uncertain which statement Bale was questioning.

“Your sister requires nourishment again?”

Hope watched Bale visibly swallow. “Well, yeah,” she replied with a roll of her eyes. “She hasn’t eaten since before our encounter with the demon.”

Bale shook his head vigorously. “No,” he insisted definitively. “I fed her only a couple of hours ago. How often does she need to feed?”

He made it sound like Faith was a huge imposition, and her eyes narrowed in anger. “Not blood. *Food*. You know, that stuff you buy? It comes wrapped in plastic or in cans?” she drawled, sarcasm dripping from her words.

One of the males—she thought it was the one named Kash—snickered, but she wasn’t certain. It could also have come from Levi. He stood next to Kash, a dumb-ass grin on his face. Then Bale made a noise that caught Hope’s attention. It sounded suspiciously like the growl of a werewolf.

“We didn't know your sister would need actual food,” Arak said apologetically, his hand wrapping around Bale's bicep, stopping the other male from advancing forward. “Why don't you and I see what we can find for your sister to eat while Kash sees if Penny has anything Faith could wear?”

Hope was pretty certain Arak gave Bale a slight push as he moved around the other male. She ignored the display, chalking it up to one more oddity about these males that left her eager to get her sister far away from them, and followed Arak out of the room. They traveled silently through the dining hall to a doorway at the other end.

A large butler's pantry lay between the hall and the kitchen. It was lined with shelves on one side that housed dry goods and cabinets on the other. Hope paused, peering through the glass doors at the items arranged neatly inside. Both the china stacked together and the crystal lined in rows appeared to be old.

Once again Hope wondered exactly who or what these males were. If not for the fact that they all appeared around the same age, she would have suspected werewolves. But this was no wolf pack. She figured it was possible they might be some feline variety of shifter. She glanced at Arak, who stood in the doorway, watching her curiously. Felines could mate with human females, so where were these males' mates? Was the female, Penny, a mate? She'd never heard of felines living in packs...but maybe.

“Do vampires have any dietary restrictions?” Arak asked, turning from her and entering the next room.

Hope followed him into the large kitchen and watched as he opened the Sub-Zero refrigerator and began rummaging through containers of prepared food.

“Dairy will make Faith sick. And she'll require larger quantities of red meat cooked to rare. Otherwise she can eat most things. There are certain items a vampire will crave that are unique to him or her. But that is something one develops over time.”

Arak nodded as he pulled out a container and poured it into a pot. “Chicken soup, then. For dinner, I'll have Kash grill steaks.”

Hope leaned against the counter as Arak slowly stirred the soup. “Since we are experiencing this bonding moment and all, how about you explain to me why you lied to your friends about my sister's recovery?”

The spoon clanked against the metal pot as Arak turned toward her, his face lined with surprise. Hope figured he would soon learn she wasn't the nice, quiet twin.

“I don't understand. Your sister is still very ill.”

“And you are full of shit. You and I both know Faith is doing far better than she should.” With an arched brow, she added, “Why is that?”

Studying Hope for a moment, Arak folded his arms across his chest. “Let's just say, right now I think Bale needs your sister as much as she needs him,” he finally stated and then turned back to the stove, adding, “maybe even more.”

Hope's snort of disbelief had him glancing back at her. “And I should give a shit about him why?”

Arak's eyes narrowed briefly, and then he shrugged. “Maybe he will be an important part of Faith's life.”

"If you have something to say, be a man," Hope taunted. She realized Arak had an agenda, and she meant to uncover it. "Otherwise I'm getting my sister out of here as soon as she's dressed."

"And risk your father's wrath?" he retorted, the dare blatantly evident in his eyes.

"Yes, I would more than willingly face his anger than place my sister in danger," she replied, with every intention of meeting his challenge.

Arak's gaze bore into hers for a moment; then, as if he recognized the truth behind her words, he nodded. "Maybe, just maybe, Bale is your sister's mate."

Laughter bubbled up from Hope's throat at the idiocy of his statement. "We are vampires, not werewolves. You should get your paranormals straight," she replied with a smirk. "We don't have mates."

"I must be mistaken," Arak said quietly, turning his attention back to the stove.

"Yes, you must be," she responded, watching him pour the soup into a bowl. "So why not explain to me the real reason?"

Arak placed the bowl on a tray, then moved back to the refrigerator. "I did. You choose to disregard it."

As he set a glass of lemonade on the tray, Hope tried to beat down the anger she felt rising in her chest. Flying off the handle would not get her the answers she wanted, but she knew Arak was playing her.

"You lie," she stated, forcing her voice to remain neutral. "If Faith was Bale's mate, he would not let her leave. I've seen it with the wolves and suspect all shifters are the same. But Bale can't wait to wash his hands of Faith."

Hope watched as surprise flittered across Arak's profile, and then he asked, "Why do you say that?"

"I heard your friends earlier," she said, her tone an accusation. "Bale did not deny it."

"No, he wouldn't," Arak agreed softly. "But that doesn't make it any less true." He turned, tray in hand, and met Hope's gaze. "You mentioned other shifters, as in there are other varieties?"

"Some feline breeds," she answered, watching Arak closely for any indication that she just might have guessed correctly. "Lions, tigers, cougars..." Hope shrugged. "Supposedly there are several."

"Lions are cool." Arak grinned, holding the tray out to her.

With a snort, Hope grabbed the tray and stomped from the room. She was rounding the corner and approaching the stairs when she encountered Bale leaning against the banister.

"And it just keeps getting better," she mumbled as he straightened, blocking her path. The way he stared down at her had Hope immediately on the defensive, and she struck first. "You know, my sister is not a party favor you can pass around to your friends. I won't let you use her as your personal little play toy."

Bale's eyes narrowed, and his gaze swept over her frame. His sneer said he found her vastly lacking. "You'll stop me how?"

Hope took an involuntary step back, finding herself suddenly face-to-face with the warrior who had defeated an Alu demon single-handedly. Bale was not one of the vampires simpering

under her father's command. No, it was in his eyes... Six and a half feet of stone-cold killer towered over her.

"I guess I can't," she conceded, lifting her chin defiantly. "But you didn't let us die in that alley, so I figure you must not be the unfeeling bastard you appear to be."

Bale snorted as he ripped the tray from her hands. "You just can't help insulting people, can you, little girl?"

"I am not a little girl."

His gaze made another insulting trail over her body before it met her eyes.

"Go to hell," she hissed.

"Honey, this is as close to hell as I ever intend to get," he said with a snide smirk, surprising her. Then he turned and proceeded up the stairs.

By the time Hope caught up with him, he was slamming his bedroom door in her face and locking her out. "Bastard," she hissed.

"That he can be," a voice acknowledged from behind her. Hope turned to find Kash standing in the middle of the hallway. "But he will take care of your sister."

"And how can you be so sure?" Staring at him, Hope rested her hands on her hips.

"Because Bale won't allow another woman to die," Kash answered softly, focusing on the wooden door.

"Another?" An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach.

Kash nodded, his face suddenly lined with a deep sadness. "His wife," he whispered in reply. With a gasp, Hope turned back to the door. Kash only shook his head, taking her arm and guiding her gently away from the room. "After you and your sister arrived, Remy brought me the coolest-looking weapon to try to repair. Kind of looks like a boomerang—"

"Oh, you found it!" Hope interrupted happily. "How much damage is there, and can you fix it?"

The excitement in her voice brought a smile to his face. "It is yours?" At her eager nod, he continued, "Very cool. I would love to see a demonstration."

Kash led her down the stairs and out of the main keep. Several of the males were mingled in a large grassy area, obviously training as the clashing of swords rang out. Hope watched for a moment as Remy and Levi paired off, the sweat on their bare chests glistening in the sunlight. If she hadn't been so eager to feel the cold steel of her blade returned to her hand, she could have watched the two males all day. She had never seen as fine a display of male specimens in her life. And sadly, she guessed she never would again.

Chapter Five

Bale was just setting the tray down on the bed, wondering why Faith's sister seemed to bring out the worst in him, when the bathroom door opened and Faith stepped into the room. He barely noticed her wet hair or flushed skin, his gaze fixating on the way the thin cotton top stretched tightly across her chest. He had seen the same top many times on Penny, but it had never left his mouth dry and his tongue tied in knots.

"Please thank Penny for me," Faith said softly as she moved across the room, toweling her red curls dry. "It was kind of her to loan me these clothes."

Nodding absently, Bale swallowed with difficulty as he dragged his gaze away from her. He had heard Penny's name and assumed she had mentioned the borrowed clothing, but truthfully he had listened to very little of her statement. The only thing his mind could grasp at the moment was how the thin strip of abdomen peeking out from above low-riding jeans was turning him into a giant, quivering mess. He looked away as he imagined how easy it would be to strip the loose jeans and tight top from Faith's delectable body and lose himself between her lush thighs.

"Is she the mate of one of the males here?"

Bale blinked, her question registering, and he returned his gaze to Faith, inhaling deeply as he was once again sucker punched by a wave of desire.

"Who? Penemuel?" he asked, his voice sounding hoarse to his own ears. He glanced away, coughing behind his fist to clear his throat. "No, she is Grigori. Why would you think she is a mate?"

Faith moved past him, then carefully sat on the edge of the bed so as not to spill the contents of the tray. Her gaze remained fixed on her hands, refusing to meet his. Bale whispered her name softly, moving to stand before her. Gently he grasped her chin, ignoring her small shrug as he lifted her face. He studied her a moment, unsettled by the uncertainty in her eyes. She was afraid, and for some reason it involved Penny. Then it dawned on Bale why she seemed upset, and he thought he should be outraged. But instead he was pleased.

"Do you really believe I would be here with you if I had a mate?" he asked quietly, tucking a wayward curl behind her ear before sliding his finger down her cheek in an intimate caress. At Faith's slight shrug, he continued, "Well, I would not. There has been no one but you for centuries."

As soon as the words left Bale's mouth, he regretted saying them. They revealed far too much, leaving him feeling vulnerable, exposed. He abruptly released her and backed away. "Eat," he ordered gruffly.

Her gaze held his for just a moment before she nodded. Glancing down, Faith picked up the bowl and began to slowly consume the soup. Her hand trembled each time she lifted the spoon to her mouth, causing Bale to curse softly and kneel in front of her.

“It is almost dark. I must meet with the others and then head out for the night. I have a couple of contacts I want to question...see if I can discover why the Alu demon was topside. And I promised I would terminate your Lilu demon. I will begin tracking him tonight.” He paused long enough to take the bowl from her hands and set it back on the tray. Then he buried his fingers in the back of her hair, massaging gently. “If you need anything, Arak will remain behind. One from our order, Zeke, was also ambushed last night and is in the infirmary. If he awakes, he might like the company.”

“All right,” Faith replied, leaning into him. She rubbed her cheek against his forearm, sighing softly before she met his gaze, then smiled sadly. “I will get out of your hair in the morning. Let you have your bed back.”

Her comment sent a shot of panic traveling through Bale. His fingers unconsciously tightened in her hair. “Arak said you are still weak. You are not ready to leave.”

“I think I am better than your friend believes.” She gave a husky reply. “Anyway, you don't need me interfering in your life any more than I already have. And I have a life I need to return to.”

His focus narrowed on Faith's last statement, and he suddenly wondered who resided in her life. His emotions were seesawing all over the place. While he knew the best thing would be to let her go, he couldn't tolerate the thought of another male touching what was his. “Is there a mate waiting for you?”

Faith shook her head adamantly. “But I have family...friends who are probably wondering where I am. And I have responsibilities, people who depend on me.”

Bale's gaze continued to bore into hers, silently demanding an explanation as, even on his knees, he towered over her.

“I manage one of my father's clubs...Club Dominus. Since it is Sunday, we are closed tonight. But tomorrow I have to open. I have employees who count on me.”

Bale released a ragged breath, pulling Faith onto the floor and into his arms. He held her tightly, his frantic pulse calming as he realized that even if she left, he now knew how to find her again. She couldn't escape him unless he let her.

He kissed her temple, his lips trailing a soft line until they met hers. With infinite gentleness, he demanded entrance and growled in pleasure when she opened for him. His tongue glided in, capturing her taste as he slowly plundered her mouth.

Faith whimpered, her arms winding around his neck as she strained to get closer to him. Bale complied, tightening his arms about her. Her breasts pressed against his rock-hard chest for a moment before he angled her to his side. He slipped a hand between them and gently squeezed a taut globe, the puckered nipple teasing his palm. Rolling that pebbled peak between his fingers, he captured her beseeching cry in his mouth.

A knock on the door had him dragging his lips away with a muffled curse. Breathing heavily, he kept Faith pressed against him as she buried her face in his neck. She was trembling slightly, her breath soft puffs along his skin.

“Bale.” Arak's voice rang through the door. “Meeting in ten. It's almost dusk out.”

“Down in just a minute,” Bale called huskily. Ignoring Arak's response, he fixed his attention back on Faith. “I've got to go, baby. Finish your soup, then get some rest.” Bale gently pushed her from his lap but didn't rise until she was once again seated on the edge of the bed.

“Will you need to feed again tonight?” he asked, his gaze resting on the top of her head. Not resisting the need to touch her, he reached out and tunneled his hand through her hair.

Faith glanced up at him, her freckles hidden beneath an attractive rose color. Her flushed cheeks filled him with extreme satisfaction, and his cock demanded he ignore Arak, wanting to abate the sudden spike of arousal only Faith seemed to trigger.

“I don't know,” she whispered uncertainly.

Bale bent down to her again, meeting her gaze dead on. “I will return around midnight to check on you. If you need me before then, Arak knows how to contact me. Don't hesitate to ask him to do so. He will understand.” He paused as he studied her a moment. “Baby, do you understand?”

“Yes, Bale,” she said with a roll of her eyes, and Bale grinned.

He sneaked a quick kiss, then pulled away from her, even though his lips wanted to linger. He glanced back as he reached for the door. “Get some rest,” he demanded. “I'll be back soon.”

* * * *

Stepping into the hall outside his room, Bale was forced to veer to the right so as not to collide with Arak and Kash. “What the hell?” he barked, staring at the two males incredulously.

“You didn't respond,” Kash drawled, an annoyingly wide grin on his lips. “Arak was just about to knock again.” He waved to Faith over Bale's shoulder.

“I said I'd be down in a minute,” Bale said as he spotted Faith returning the friendly gesture. He shut the door.

“I didn't hear you,” Arak commented, ignoring the glare that would send humans and most demons scurrying for cover. “I was just about to knock again when Kash joined me.”

“Will you be in the infirmary tonight with Zeke? I told Faith that if she needed anything to go to you.”

“Yeah. I was going to try waking him up. His wounds have healed, and while he'll still have to take it easy because the poison is not completely out of his system, he is out of the woods.” Arak fell in line beside Bale while Kash trailed behind the pair. As they entered the dining hall, he added, “And Remy's eager to speak to him.”

“What about Raym? What has he said about the ambush?”

“Raym is gone. Some clothes are missing, and all his weapons are gone,” Remy stated wearily.

Bale glanced around the room, his gaze resting on Remy as he staggered under the weight of Remy's words.

“So it was Raym,” he said quietly. He should be relieved. He now knew whom to look for over his shoulder. But he wasn't.

Remy just shrugged. He had the look of one relaxed, sitting reclined in the leather chair, but Bale knew him well enough to suspect the opposite. Remy took his command seriously, and this defection had to be hitting him hard. Neither Bale nor Remy had seriously considered Raym. He was the least likely suspect, the only one of them who still had faith, who still believed in their ability to return to Heaven.

“Would Raym really conspire with the demons?” Levi asked from the other side of the room where he stood before the fireplace. “Have his own twin terminated?”

“No!” Penny cried out.

Glancing over his shoulder, Bale spotted Penny standing in the doorway. Her burnt-copper hair hung in disarray around her pale, tear-streaked face. She seemed to have had little, if any, sleep. Clearly distraught, her appearance pointed to Raym's guilt more than anything.

“Whatever you think, it wasn't Raym,” she whispered.

“Do you have anything to add, Penemuel? Did Raym say anything to you?” Remy asked quietly. Every occupant in the room seemed to hold his breath, waiting for her reply.

“No,” she admitted, shaking her head and moving farther into the room. “But he wouldn't have allowed any harm to befall Caym. If you'd only seen him in the chapel...”

“Then where is he? I've tried telepathy to reach him and so has Bale, but he's just not there. He has severed the connection with us. Can you still sense him?” Remy demanded, rising slowly to his feet.

“No, he's cut me off too, but I knew he would.” Weariness dripped from her voice. “I knew this morning that Raym would try to avenge Caym's death.”

Snorting in disbelief, Bale rolled his eyes and turned away from Penny.

“Fuck you, Bale,” she hissed, and he whipped around to face her. “Just because you don't give a shit about anybody else doesn't mean the rest of us feel the same way.”

“And you have been jonesing to fuck Raym for years. That hardly makes you an impartial member of this discussion,” he snapped, folding his arms across his chest.

“Bastard,” she snarled. “You are one to talk, with your little tart upstairs.”

A growl inadvertently slipped from between his clenched teeth. He couldn't give a shit what Penny said about him, but he wouldn't allow anyone to speak of Faith in such a manner. He felt both Remy and Arak holding him back but only saw Penny through the red haze clouding his vision. When Levi stepped between them, he blinked in surprise.

“Besmirching Bale's female will win you no points with anyone, Penny,” Levi said quietly. “And as much as it pains me to agree with Bale, Raym's disappearance hardly makes him look innocent.”

“I don't care what any of you think,” she said, raising her chin defiantly. “Raym wouldn't align himself with demons. And he sure as hell wouldn't have hurt Zeke or Caym.” She took two steps backward before turning and striding toward the door. “And I'll prove it,” she hissed over her shoulder.

Remy called her name, but she ignored him, stalking from the room. He glanced at Levi and motioned with his head in the direction Penny had fled. “Follow her,” he ordered.

Levi gave a brisk nod, then trailed after Penny, moving quickly to catch up to the female.

“I'll go with him.” At Remy's agreement, Kash followed Levi out the door.

“Well, that was helpful,” Remy said as he released Bale.

“Shit. I am sorry.” Bale ran his fingers through his hair in disgust. He had lost his temper when he shouldn't have, and he couldn't even defend his actions. It wasn't as if Penny had threatened Faith. Stepping away from Remy and Arak, he remembered Faith's words. She wanted to leave in the morning. While his body protested the thought, his mind recognized the need. He couldn't have the distraction, not when there was a war brewing, and with Raym, it seemed, at the helm.

Remy shook his head with a weary sigh. "I would not have reacted any differently if she were mine," he replied, sinking back into his chair.

"It will not happen again. Faith is leaving in the morning."

"Are you certain?" Remy asked carefully.

Bale nodded. "It is for the best. Until we know what is going on, I can't guarantee her safety."

"So no more denials?" Arak asked from behind Bale.

Bale poured himself two fingers of scotch, then winced as the amber liquid burned down the back of his throat. He couldn't continue lying to Remy or Arak, but he would not consider admitting this to any of the other males. Except maybe Zeke.

"No. I'm not going to deny that in another time, another place, I would have cherished this gift I've been given. A heart mate. But what kind of life do I have to offer? A never-ending battle against demons where she will always be a target because she is with me? She deserves better."

"You know you would not be alone. We would all protect Faith as if she were our own."

"I know you would. But that wouldn't make her any less my responsibility." It wasn't that Bale didn't appreciate Remy's words, and he expected nothing less from his brothers. But it still wouldn't lessen the need he would feel to keep her safe. "What are we going to about Raym?" he asked, making it clear he was done discussing Faith. He had made his decision, and nothing would change his mind.

"Yes. We can't be certain it was Raym who was behind the attacks on Zeke and Bale," Arak added.

"No, we can't. That leaves Penny and Kash. I have requested a replacement for Caym. He should be here by the middle of the week."

"Who?" Bale asked in surprise. It usually took weeks, if not months, for Samyaza, the leader of the Grigori, to supplant a fallen warrior.

"Jet. I told Sam I need someone I could trust implicitly. With Levi trailing Penny, and Jet, when he arrives, Kash, you and I will uncover whatever plot is afoot."

"And where do I fit into these plans?" Arak inquired.

Remy focused his attention on their healer. "For now your job is to protect Zeke and the two females. If there is still a traitor under this roof, I do not want us caught unawares again. Bale will not be able to do his job if Faith is not safe. And we need Zeke awake and talking."

A sense of relief settled over Bale. He only needed to worry about Faith for one more evening, and then she would be safe. If he continued to deny his feelings for her, the traitor would not target her. And with Remy watching his back, he could concentrate on the task at hand—finding the traitor and terminating him or her.

* * * *

Faith set the empty bowl back on the tray and glanced around Bale's room, looking for something to occupy her until he returned. She already missed him, and she wasn't happy about it. She didn't understand this connection she felt with Bale, the compulsion to be with him. It was infuriating.

There wasn't much in the room, but her gaze finally settled on the stereo. Music could help make the time pass more quickly. Eagerly she began rummaging through Bale's CD collection—

Black Sabbath, AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, Judas Priest, Rush. A frown marred Faith's face, and with a sigh, she placed the last CD—Pink Floyd—on top of the pile. Nothing she would willingly sit through. She figured she had already paid her dues in music hell. Her father was a Rocky Horror fanatic. His musical tastes were, frankly, horrifying.

After fiddling with the stereo knob, she settled for 107.7 The End. As Flogging Molly's "Drunken Lullabies" began filtering through the speakers, Faith glanced around the room again, looking for something else to amuse herself with.

Bale had no personal items lying about. No pictures. Nothing to give her a clue about the male's life. With a frustrated sigh, she sat on the edge of the bed. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the wardrobe. Drawn to it, Faith approached the cabinet but hesitated just before opening its doors. Then, with the sharp edge of guilt bearing down on her, she peered inside.

Rising on her tiptoes, she noticed the top third of the cabinet was for storing his sword. It and several others would normally be mounted on the back wall. Currently there was only one, an unusual blade with spikes protruding near the black handle.

Pulling open the top four drawers uncovered a plethora of weapons: daggers, throwing stars, short axes—an arsenal of deadly artillery. Faith pulled out a ten-inch black dagger and held it loosely in her grip. It was very good quality, obviously a custom job. Bale apparently spared no expense when it came to his weapons. On that, he and Hope were in agreement.

The next drawer contained nothing but a small wooden box free of any adornment. Faith held it in her hand, contemplating whether she had the right to open it. Finally her curiosity got the better of her, and she popped up the lid.

Staring at the contents in surprise, Faith took the box with her and sat on the edge of the bed. Inside was a man's ring, slightly tarnished with age. It was old...really old. After carefully removing it, she studied the design. Its heaviness indicated it was solid gold, and the same bird that resided on Bale's headboard wrapped around the band, a large sapphire in place of the phoenix's eye.

Wondering about Bale's obsession with the phoenix and the significance of the ring, she placed it back inside the box. As she did so, her finger grazed a lump in the lining. Realizing something was hidden beneath, Faith gently raised the black silk, and her heart sank when she uncovered an exact replica, only substantially smaller. A woman's ring.

Suddenly ill at ease, she snapped the box shut and returned it to the wardrobe. Curling up into a tight ball on top of the comforter, she tried to force her mind to forget about the ring's meaning and get some sleep.

"Faith...honey, are you all right?" her twin asked, smoothing her hair back from her forehead.

She opened her eyes with a start, not having heard Hope enter the room. Grasping her sister's hand, Faith intended on asking Hope's opinion, to find out if she knew anything that might help explain, until she spotted one of the males behind her twin.

"I'm fine," she replied quietly, removing Hope's hand from her face and brushing it aside.

"Look who I found in the hallway." Hope glanced over her shoulder and smiled at the male. "Kash was able to repair my blade. You should see his shop. I was in heaven."

"So you bonded over sharp, pointy things?" Faith glanced over Hope at Kash. That at least explained Bale's weaponry. They had someone in-house.

Kash grinned broadly. "You bet. Your sister has excellent taste in steel. I might just have to marry her."

Hope snorted in disbelief. "Sorry, bucko. You could be the epitome of super fly, and still I wouldn't marry you. Or anyone else for that matter. Ever."

Kash arched a brow at her response. "Got something against matrimony?"

Hope's hands settled on her hips. "I refuse to associate with anything that can be described as an institution."

Kash chuckled softly. "Good point."

"So who wants to play some cards?" Hope pulled a deck out of her back pocket. She looked at Kash as she began to shuffle them. At his nod, she began to deal. "Five-card stud. Jokers are wild."

* * * *

Remy and Bale returned to the abbey, having accomplished very little toward uncovering the traitor. Zeke's snitch had slithered to parts unknown. And Seattle, a city usually fraught with demon activity, was quiet.

The only highlight to Bale's night so far was making some headway on tracking down Faith's Lilu demon. He was pretty sure he had found the bastard's lair. While no demon had been found in the apartment, Bale felt certain he would return before sunset. And Bale would be waiting.

His good humor fled when he entered his room and found Faith sitting cross-legged on the bed with her sister and Kash. He kept his temper checked, though he couldn't prevent his fingers from clenching tightly. He thought he had been pretty explicit when he'd told Faith to turn to Arak if she needed anything. But apparently he had not been clear enough.

"Stop it," Faith said with a laugh as she swatted playfully at Hope's arm. "I know you are cheating." Then she pointed a finger at Kash. "And you are helping her."

She lifted her gaze and rested it on Bale, and her entire face lit up, a soft smile of greeting taking over her features. Bale's heart skipped a beat. If not for the fact that Kash's presence froze his insides, he would have greeted her properly. Instead a frown marred his face.

"What the hell is going on here?" He crossed the room to the wardrobe, opened the door, and removed the strap holding a dagger on his inner thigh before placing it in a drawer. "I thought you had a job to do," he asked, glancing over his shoulder at Kash.

"Lost my mark, so I decided to join Hope in a friendly little game of poker," Kash stated, watching Bale with an amused grin. "And on that note, our welcome has officially worn out." He grabbed Hope's hand, giving her a gentle tug to her feet. "Come on, doll. I've got work to do anyway. You can help me."

Bale ignored Hope's response. He returned to removing his weapons, but not before he caught a glimpse of Faith. She was staring down at her hands, her bottom lip wedged between her teeth. Feeling guilty as hell that he had obviously upset her, Bale sighed. However, he didn't turn from the wardrobe until he heard the door close behind Kash. Then he studied Faith for a moment. She looked well, maybe a little tired. Kash's visit with her appeared to have had no negative consequences, and he released a ragged breath. Until he was certain Kash, Raym's best friend, had not been involved in the attacks, he would not feel Faith was safe in his presence.

"How are you feeling?"

“Okay, I guess,” she replied quietly.

She wouldn't meet his gaze. Concerned, Bale sat beside her on the bed and grasped her chin gently, bringing her face up for his inspection.

“Baby, what's the matter?”

“Nothing,” was her whispered response.

“It is not nothing.” His tone held a warning. Bale couldn't fix what he didn't know was broken.

She sighed, lifting her shoulders marginally. “I'm just tired.”

Bale suspected fatigue was only a part of the problem. He'd done something, of that he was certain. But what, he didn't have a clue. He'd thought for just a brief moment that he had caught a glimpse of heart-wrenching sadness in her eyes. But she'd either covered up the emotion quickly or he had imagined it completely.

“You'll feel better once you feed,” he stated, his thumbs caressing her jawline tenderly, his fingers gliding across the slope of her neck. “I could get so used to coming home to you every night, to finding you waiting for me here.”

“Don't say something you don't mean,” she whispered, her voice laced with desperation. Her hands rested on top of his, the slight bite of her nails digging into his skin.

“Oh, I mean it. Damned if I don't. And that is killing me, knowing I can't have you.”

Bale slowly brought her lips closer to his, giving her ample opportunity to pull away. A flame of desire sparked in her eyes, and he growled in approval as he captured her mouth in a devastatingly thorough kiss.

Faith did not understand the meaning behind Bale's words. But before she could question him, he was plundering her mouth, his tongue an invading conqueror, dulling her senses to everything but his mastery. She forgot about the rings in his wardrobe and what she feared they represented. She no longer recalled anything but the memory of how he felt when he was deep inside her.

His massive arms enfolded her in a crushing embrace, and her nipples tightened in response. She rubbed the erect tips against his chest and clutched the hard steel of his biceps as Bale captured her whimper with the sweep of his tongue. Faith moaned in protest, her nails digging into his flesh when she felt him start to pull away. She was already burning for his touch.

“Shh. I'm not going anywhere,” Bale murmured, pushing Faith flat on the bed and settling on top of her.

He thrust her shirt up, and his teeth gently tugged a turgid peak before sucking it into the hot cavern of his mouth. A soft cry escaped her lips as she arched toward his, her fingers burrowing into his scalp in a desperate attempt to get closer to him.

“Oh God,” she whimpered as his tongue flicked against her skin before drawing on her nipple. Her body spasmed in delight, light tremors tingling along her spine as she wrapped her legs around his hips, thrusting up to meet the hard line of his cock through their clothing. Her nipples had always been sensitive, but with Bale, it was like they had a direct connection to her clit, and pressing against him only made the ache between her thighs intensify.

Bale chuckled, blowing moist air on the tight pink nipple inches from his lips. Then licking softly over her pebbled flesh, he drew a senseless murmur from Faith as his questing fingers

unzipped and dipped into her jeans. He slowly slid down the expanse of her stomach, her flesh quivering under his touch as he teased a finger beneath the elastic of her panties.

“Bale, please.” Faith grasped his hand, pushing it toward the spot she needed him to touch.

Bale stilled on top of her, raising his head. “What do you want?”

When she tried to force his hand between her thighs, he lifted both of her arms over her head, holding her wrists with one hand while returning the other to caress her belly. Faith shook her head, her lips clamping shut as she elevated her hips in a silent plea.

“Say it.” Bale bathed her nipple, drawing a sob from Faith as she struggled against his hold. “Tell me what you want.”

“Touch me,” she begged, her voice hitching on the words as Bale sucked her nipple back into his mouth.

“Where?”

“Damn you.” Faith hissed harshly. “You know where.”

“I want to hear you say it.” Bale drew on her flesh fiercely, and Faith tensed under him, her thighs gripping his hips tightly as she cried out. He lifted his head in surprise and stared down at her. “Christ, baby, did you just come?”

Bale didn't wait for her response. He plunged his hand into her panties, growling in approval as his fingers encountered her slick folds. Brushing his thumb over her clit first, he teased her opening before thrusting two fingers deep. His lips caressed hers, and his tongue mimicked the glide of his fingers inside her pussy.

Her muscles rippled, and Bale knew she was again close to orgasm. He pressed his thumb to her clit just as his finger curled, rubbing against her G-spot. Faith dragged her lips from his, turning her face into the pillow and crying out as another orgasm exploded through her, leaving her cream dripping onto his hand.

Bale lurched up and struggled to get her pants off before ripping at the laces of his own. He was so hard he hurt, and he had to get inside her before he came in his pants. Once nude, he fell back onto Faith and wrapped her legs around his waist. With his forehead touching hers, he groaned as he slowly sank his cock into her pussy.

“Damn, you feel so good.” Bale fought to keep from hammering deep, forcing himself to maintain a steady, gentle rhythm.

“So do you,” Faith whispered as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Never before...”

He captured her lips in a deep kiss to prevent the words he felt bubbling up inside him from bursting forth. He was home in her arms, buried deep inside her. But he couldn't reveal that to Faith.

As his orgasm approached, he thrust faster, harder. His balls drew up tight, and the tingling at the base of his spine signaled the end was imminent. Unwilling to reach that peak alone, he nudged through her folds until he found her clit. He pinched the pulsating button between his fingers, and her pussy clamped down hard on his cock. The milking of her muscles drew a harsh groan from his lips, and Bale thrust deep one last time, tensing as semen erupted from the tip of his cock, bathing her womb with his seed.

He collapsed on top of her, his hips still involuntarily pushed forward as he kissed her softly. For the briefest of moments, Bale wished for the possibility of impregnating Faith. His

arms tightened around her as he heaved a heavy sigh. Even if he didn't have a traitor to worry about, that hope would never be allowed fulfillment. He was to never again feel his child move within his mate's womb or hear the laughter of his child at play.

Desperate to chase away those thoughts, he turned his head, then drew her face into his neck. "Baby, feed." And much to Bale's surprise, with the first pull of her lips to draw his blood, he hardened inside her.

As the delicious taste of mocha slid down her throat, Faith murmured in approval, and she arched to meet his sudden downward thrust. Curling her limbs around Bale, she drew on his blood in unison with the frantic driving of his hips. She knew she shouldn't be feeling the same lust spiking through him, but apparently her body had not received the memo.

When Bale hooked her legs over his elbows, opening her up wide for his deep, driving thrusts, she had to disengage her fangs for fear she would rip the tender flesh at his throat. She clung to him, lost in the frantic race for the orgasm Bale was driving her toward. Burying her face in his neck, she cried out as her body quivered around his plunging cock. Growling in her ear, Bale tightened his arms around her, and Faith felt him erupting deep inside her.

"Jesus," he mumbled, rolling off her and pulling her into his arms.

As the afterglow slowly began to fade, Faith was left with a sense of unease. While feeding could be a sexual experience for the individual they were feeding from, it was not normally a turn-on for the vampire. She had attributed her desperate need for him to her Transfiguration. Now she knew better. She could try to convince herself that her orgasm was due to the fact that Bale had still been inside her, but Faith knew it would be a lie. Before her Transfiguration, she'd never been able to have more than one orgasm, and she'd come three times with him. Now the question was, was it Bale? Or was she just an aberration? The only way to tell would be to feed from someone other than Bale. And that thought sent a sense of panic shattering over her.

Bale brushed the hair away from Faith's forehead, raining kisses on the exposed skin. But she was deep in thought and must have been frowning, because he stopped and asked, "What's the matter?"

Faith glanced up, meeting Bale's concerned gaze. She shook her head, unwilling to allow her insecurities to ruin one of her last moments with him. She knew in the morning she would have to leave him, and she wanted this memory to carry her through the long nights ahead.

Bale gave a snort of disbelief as he rolled Faith under him. "Baby, don't lie to me. If we can have nothing else, do not regret this time we do have."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and Bale's heart sank.

"Please, baby, don't."

Faith smiled and shook her head. "No. Not for this, not the sex. For earlier."

Bale could not help the slight tensing of his muscles. He did not like that she had referred to what had occurred between them as anything other than making love. "I don't understand."

"I didn't know allowing Kash and my sister in your room would upset you."

Bale sighed. "It's your room too." Her face lit in surprise, and he realized he meant it. He'd always believed the loss of his wife had been his final punishment. How wrong he had been.

Though he knew he had to give Faith up, she would always hold a piece of him. And he would spend the rest of his existence wishing things had been different.

He caressed her cheek and then leaned in to kiss her. "Faith, normally I wouldn't have a problem with one of my brothers in my quarters. But these are not normal circumstances. It was no coincidence that the Alu demon had a poisoned blade in his possession. He should not have been expecting me, but he was. And the only ones who knew where I would be reside in this abbey."

"Someone tried to kill you?" Faith whispered in horror, her fingers clutching Bale's biceps.

"Zeke was also attacked. And another, Caym, was terminated. That is why I directed you to Arak if you needed anything. He will keep you safe."

Faith struggled under him. "But what of the others? My sister left with Kash."

Bale released her, allowing Faith to roll away from him. He rose from the bed, reaching for his pants. "Your sister is safe. There is no reason to harm her, for she holds no ties to me. And in the morning, you both will be gone. You'll be safe then."

Faith watched as Bale dressed. "Where are you going?"

Bale paused as he pulled the T-shirt over his head. He watched her silently, tucking the shirt into his leathers. "I have tracked your Lilu demon to his lair. I am going to terminate him."

Faith sat up, the sheet falling to her waist. As Bale's gaze rested on her breasts, she lifted the sheet, tucking it under her arms. He raised his eyes to meet hers, arching a brow at her actions.

Faith ignored his silent question. "You'll be careful?"

Bale returned to the bed and pulled her into his arms. "A Lilu demon is no match for me. Anyway, I have to return. I have you to take care of."

"Just until sunrise," she whispered.

"Just until sunrise," he agreed quietly, though his arms tightening around her denied his words. But he knew for her to remain safe, they would have to be.

Chapter Six

The very moment Faith woke, she knew Bale had returned. She didn't know how or why, only that it was dawn and he was back. Once again dressed in her borrowed clothing, she crept from the room, intent on finding him.

The sex the night before had been phenomenal, but it had left her feeling more vulnerable, more dependent. Staying wasn't an option, though she longed for Bale to insist she remain. Going home was in her best interest, but not because of Bale's concerns. While she feared for her sister, she was not as worried about herself. She was a vampire now and hardly powerless. No, she was leaving because she did not believe in love at first sight. And if she stayed any longer, she was certain to fall under such a delusion.

Her gut led her down the hallway, past two sets of stairs and two closed doors, one on either side of the hall, before she finally came to a stop in front of the last doorway on her right. The door had been left wide open, and inside the large room she glimpsed two empty beds. The third one on the far side of the room held a large male whom she'd yet to meet.

She could make out very little about the occupant because he was lying down, but she guessed from the size of his broad chest and massive upper arms that he was as large as Bale. Except for the goatee he sported, his head was free of any hair, and while Faith did not normally find that look attractive, he made it look good. Even the odd symbols tattooed down his neck and across his chest and the nipple piercings didn't take away from how hot he was.

Kash and Arak were sitting in chairs next to the narrow bed, and leaning against the foot stood Bale. The four appeared to be deep in conversation and seemed to not realize she was watching them.

“So you remember nothing?” Bale asked with a heavy sigh.

Faith reacted to the disappointment she heard in his voice. She stopped short when she realized she was advancing toward Bale. That so would not do. Instead she leaned heavily against the door frame, making certain she didn't call attention to herself. She wanted to capture Bale's attention only, not the other males in the room.

“Not enough to be of any usefulness,” came a gruff voice from the bed. “I can neither confirm nor deny Raym's involvement in my attack. There is something there, just on the periphery of my mind, but the harder I attempt to remember, the further away it seems to go. I don't think I'll be of much help in time, Bale.”

“In time?” Bale questioned.

“Arak and Remy both told me of your female.”

Bale laughed. “Jesus, she is not the first female I have fucked since Thea died. If Remy had his way, I'd already be married again. But it was a fuck. That is all.”

A fist flew to Faith's mouth, stifling the sob she felt trying to escape. Backing away from the doorway, she turned on her heels and ran back to Bale's room. Once safe behind the closed door, feelings of disillusionment and betrayal swamped her, and she hated herself for letting his words affect her so.

It wasn't the first time she'd noticed a change in him when in the presence of his brothers. He'd seemed cold, distant. But it was the first time she had heard him speak of his feelings toward her. And as his words replayed in her mind, she realized what he had said. Thea. Married again. The rings in his drawer were wedding rings, and Faith was not surprised. Deep down, she had already known. Bale did have a mate. Somewhere.

* * * *

By the time Bale entered the room, Faith was in complete control of her emotions. She'd buried them so deeply, she was certain it would take a nuclear explosion to unearth them. And that was good, because she would be damned before she would demand answers from Bale. She was going to leave without a backward glance if it killed her.

Bale stopped short the moment he looked into Faith's eyes. Something wasn't right. "Baby, what's the matter?" As he reached a hand toward her, Faith stepped back, and he narrowed his eyes at her.

"Nothing." Faith glanced away from him, unable to meet his gaze. "I'm ready to go. If you could just point me in the direction of my sister, I'll get out of your hair."

"Faith, damn it, what is going on?" Bale folded his arms across his massive chest, blocking the door in case she tried to leave without giving him a satisfying answer. He watched her tense, her fists closing tightly at her sides.

"We both agreed I should leave at sunrise." Faith glanced over her shoulder at the covered window. "Well, the sun has risen. If you are looking for one last fuck before I go, I don't think it's a good idea."

Bale arched a brow. "Why the hell would you say such a thing?"

She sighed deeply. "Look, Bale, it's been fun. But neither of us is looking to make this permanent. And I think we both agree the sooner I go home, the simpler both our lives will be. You have a traitor to ferret out, and you don't need my interference. And I have a life I have to return to."

"And that's all this is?"

"Yes. That's all this is."

Bale nodded. "If things were different..." he said softly.

Faith adamantly shook her head. "Don't, Bale. Things are what they are, and unfortunately, there is no place for us."

Even though everything she said was true, still Bale felt the need to deny her words. It killed something inside of him to hear her say the very things he had been touting since she'd fallen near death at his feet. He had to bite his tongue to keep from announcing that she belonged to him and he wasn't going to allow her to leave. And still he might have made the mistake if Kash hadn't, at that moment, escorted Hope into his room.

He followed the sisters from the abbey to the front gate, where a taxi waited to take them back to the city. As Faith paused before following her twin into the backseat, a ray of hope burst to life in Bale's chest.

"Thank you, Bale," she said quietly, turning from the cab to face the males all lined up to see her and Hope off. But she only saw Bale. "You saved me and Hope, and I'll never regret the time I spent here."

Bale was very aware he was not alone with Faith, and he did not trust some of his audience. He stepped forward, holding open the door as she climbed into the taxi. Bending down, Bale took hold of her hand, his thumb caressing her palm.

"If you need me for anything, for any reason, this gate will always open for you. I want your promise you will come to me."

"If I need you," she agreed softly. *When hell freezes over.* Faith pulled her hand free of Bale's grip and sat back as he closed the door, shutting her inside the cab. As the taxi pulled away from the gate, her body began to tremble slightly, physically protesting the distance separating her and Bale.

Hope was watching her with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Faith glanced out the window and sighed.

"You're shaking, Faith."

"Yeah." She looked at her twin and tried to smile reassuringly. "But I'm okay. I just need to go home."

Hope slid her hand in Faith's and squeezed gently. Her twin became Faith's lifeline during the forty-minute ride home. If not for Hope, she might very well have begged the taxi to turn around, completely ignoring her own damaged pride. And afterward she would have hated herself for her weakness.

Remy and Levi surveyed from a distance as Bale closed the taxi door and turned away, not watching as the vehicle drove from sight.

"So he's really going to just let her leave," Levi said in amazement as he observed the scene unfolding before him.

"What kind of life does he have to offer a female? Any female? Even if he could find it in himself to care for another, it's better this way. It's not safe at the abbey," was Remy's weary reply.

Levi glanced at Remy. He knew their leader had not slept in over thirty-six hours. Not since Bale had called demanding a pickup. Levi thought lack of sleep was affecting the other male's judgment.

"Bale's a fool."

Remy sighed. "Levi, I'm tired and I'm pissed off. If you have anything useful to add, I would be more than willing to hear it. Otherwise I'm not in the mood to listen to your bullshit today."

Levi tucked his hands into the front pockets of his wool trousers and shrugged. "I know Bale just let his mate drive away. And no one in this abbey is dumb enough to buy his denials. You think she is not safe here? Out there she is a walking target."

Remy turned to Levi, growling softly. “What have you seen?” he demanded.

“Nothing. This is not a premonition. I have not seen anything to indicate the female is in danger. What I have seen is that if Bale accepts her, she has the ability to heal whatever is broken inside him.”

Levi turned to walk away, but Remy grabbed his arm. He raised a brow at the restraint, waiting for a justification.

“Why am I just hearing about this now?”

“Not everything I see demands my involvement. The amount of useless shit that comes to me would drive anyone else mad. I inform you of the things I think are important.” Levi yanked his arm from Remy's grip.

“Do you not think you might be just a little prejudiced when it comes to Bale?” Remy drawled, folding his arms across his chest.

Levi stiffened at the accusation. “If my silence placed Bale or his female in harm's way, then you might be able to find fault in my actions. But that is not the case. And do you seriously believe if I had come forward, it would have changed Bale's opinion? He would have sent her away just to spite me.”

Remy sighed in acquiescence. “You are correct, of course.”

“Bale will have to decide on his own if he's willing to accept what he has been given. Neither you nor I can do that for him. And if he chooses to refuse her, who are we to negate his decision? I can't say I'd blame him. I wouldn't care to be in his position.”

Remy gave a derisive snort at Levi's assessment. Levi had no reason to feel so negative regarding a mate. He had not loved and lost as many as the Grigori had. Nor had he chosen to fall. He was the only one among them who had been thrown from above. Remy hoped Faith was a sign of the things to come, because he would relish the day those words bit Levi on the ass.

* * * *

Bale stumbled back to his room, feeling drained. He'd spent half the night outside the Lilu demon's lair, only to find come dawn that the bastard had pulled up stakes. He didn't know if the demon had been tipped off or if it was an ill-timed coincidence, but things had just gone to shit from there.

Returning home already feeling like a failure, Bale had discovered Zeke was awake but recalled nothing about his attack—not what had happened to Caym, not if Raym was involved—not a fucking thing.

And then to top off his already crap-filled night, he'd returned to his room to a very distant Faith. After everything else, he'd gone seeking comfort from the one individual whom he trusted he could show his vulnerability, and she'd refused to let him touch her. It had hurt—deeper than Bale would have ever expected. But he'd let her pull away. He'd had no choice. Chaining her to his bed was not an option. But Christ, he'd really wanted to.

He sighed when he spotted Zeke leaning against his bedroom door. The last thing he needed was his psyche examined. And he knew that was why Zeke was there. He'd noticed the way Zeke's lip had curled up in disgust when Bale had spoken of Faith. Zeke had known he was lying, but he had hoped the other male would understand. Apparently not.

“Shouldn't you be in bed?” Bale looked Zeke over slowly. “You look like shit.”

“I could say the same about you. You look like someone just killed your dog.”

“I don't have a dog.”

Zeke sighed. “You know what I mean, asshole.”

“Yeah.” Bale just hoped Zeke would take his hint and leave him the fuck alone. “Look, I'm tired.” He cursed softly when Zeke followed him into the room. He shrugged off his jacket and tossed it onto the bed. Then he moved to the wardrobe and opened its doors. He pulled a six-inch blade from the waistband of his pants and set it inside the felt-covered drawer. Bale felt almost naked without the steel pressed against the small of his back.

“Me too. But since a certain female is not waiting for you to join her, I figure you can spare me a few minutes first.”

Bale pulled a GLOCK from the harness wrapped around his shoulders, unclipping the magazine before putting both pieces away. “Since when is my personal business fodder for the Grigori?”

“Since you looked me right in the eye and lied to me, Bale,” was Zeke's quiet reply.

“Jesus,” he barked, looking incredulously at Zeke. “I figured you would be smart enough to deduce the reason.”

“Kash is not your enemy.”

Bale threw his hands up in annoyance. “And you know this how?”

“I asked him.”

Wearily, Bale moved to the bed, sinking onto the edge of the mattress. “You are sure?”

“Yes. I asked him point-blank if he was involved in your attack or mine and if he was involved with any demons. He told me the truth. He had nothing to do with any of it.”

Sighing, Bale watched as Zeke swayed on his feet. “Man, you should be in bed.”

Zeke waved away his statement. “I've been on my back for twenty-four hours. And as soon as Arak finds me, I'll find my ass right back in that bed. Give a guy a break.”

Bale grinned at Zeke's assessment. Arak could be an annoying mother hen when one of them was injured.

“So all that bullshit about your latest fuck was for Kash's benefit.”

Bale winced and was just glad Faith hadn't heard either of them describe her in such a fashion. She'd likely have ripped off his balls.

“You do understand that no one who knows you would seriously buy that crap anyway.” Zeke folded his arms across his chest and arched a brow at Bale.

Bale was surprised by Zeke's statement and ran a hand wearily over his face. “Why's that?”

“Bale, come on. You haven't been with a female in centuries. If you were Arak, it would be a different story. But no one would believe you've given up your own self-imposed celibacy for a female who means nothing to you.”

Bale stared at Zeke a moment, his words sinking in. “Fuck!” He jumped to his feet, grabbed his coat, and strode to the door. “That means she's not safe.”

Zeke gripped his arm, stopping Bale from exiting the room. “If this is about keeping your female safe, then unless someone here at Castilla de la Tontos is still in touch with the traitor, she is.”

Castle of Fools—Zeke had that right. “Penny knows about Faith.” Bale's stomach clenched at the thought that everything he had done to keep Faith safe was for naught. He had left her unprotected against the wolves.

“But does she have any idea how to find her? Does she even know Faith is not still safely ensconced here in your room?”

Bale let his hand fall from the doorknob and breathed a sigh of relief. “No. She took off last night and hasn't returned.”

“So Faith is still safe.” Zeke moved his firm grip to Bale's shoulder and squeezed softly. “Now we just have to determine if we must terminate Penny or Raym. And then you can bring Faith home.”

Bale shook his head, pulling away from Zeke's support. Running a hand through his hair, he uttered, “This is only the latest in a lifetime of danger. She would never be safe here with me. It is better this way.”

“She is a vampire, no? Do you really think she is safe anywhere? And didn't Arak tell me she tracks and kills demons for sport? Is there safety in that?”

Bale groaned. “I thought I would find support from *you*, at least.”

Zeke laughed. “You will always have my support, my brother. Whether you bring her back or leave her to fend for herself, I will back your decision.”

Bale snorted. “Yeah. Thanks a lot.”

Zeke grinned as he reached for the door. “Anytime.” He opened the door and paused just inside the threshold. “So when do I get to meet the female who has captured the first Grigori in centuries?”

Bale was saved having to respond when Arak's voice was heard from down the hallway.

“Zeke, what the hell are you doing out of bed?”

“Fuck,” Zeke mumbled under his breath, drawing a chuckle from Bale. Zeke glanced over his shoulder, glad to see Bale no longer looked as if the world had caved in around him. “Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up, asshole. I'll remember this next time it's you. It won't be *me* sneaking you a Kilkenny under Mother's beady eyes.”

Bale grinned, remembering the time he'd been laid up and Zeke and Kash had smuggled in a six-pack of beer and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, then sneaked out the remnants of their evening before Arak had returned from hunting. He'd forgotten Kash's involvement in that bit of mischief and felt a pang of guilt for suspecting the other male.

“I heard that, dickweed,” Arak stated as he stepped toward the doorway. “And don't think I didn't know what you had done. You think I couldn't smell the alcohol on his breath? Anyway, Kash was three sheets to the wind. He can't keep a secret when he's shit-faced any more than you can keep from puking all over the interior of Bale's Viper.”

“Excuse me?” Bale questioned, an eyebrow arched as he stared at his two brothers.

“Fuck you too,” Zeke mumbled as he walked unsteadily from the room, knocking Arak out of his way as he passed him.

Bale followed, calling after his brother. “Did I hear correctly? Did you puke in my car?”

“Jesus,” Zeke mumbled. “It's a fucking car.”

“So you won't mind if I take the Charger for a spin?”

Zeke turned and met Bale's gaze dead on. "Touch my baby, Bale, and I'll break your fucking neck." He had painstakingly redone his 1967 Dodge Charger on his own after it had been totaled by a Rabisu demon in the late 1990s. Now if someone so much as breathed on the vehicle, Zeke went for the balls.

Bale snorted. "That's what I thought." He met Arak's amused gaze; then the two males watched Zeke walk in what appeared to be a drunken swagger down the hall. When he'd disappeared from view, Bale felt Arak's concerned look land on him like a ton of bricks.

"You okay?"

Bale sighed. "What do you think?" He turned back to the room and pulled the black T-shirt over his head, then tossed it onto the chair.

"I think we'll probably be staking out the bar you said she manages."

Bale chuckled drily. "You are already a regular."

"Club Dominus?" Arak questioned in surprise. The Goth bar was a good place to pick up women who didn't raise a brow at all the leather and weapons the Grigori sported. And sometimes demons went there to blend in. Arak could work and play at the same time.

"Yeah," Bale drawled.

"Well, that is damn convenient. I'm surprised I've never encountered her there before."

Bale narrowed his gaze at his brother. "Considering you go there to fuck, that's not a wise thing to say to me now. Or ever."

Arak grinned broadly. "Please. She's so not my type. Too damn sweet."

Bale grunted as he sat and went to work on the ties of his boots. "Just remember that."

"She'll be good for you, Bale."

He grunted again as he dropped a boot on the floor beside its mate, then stood and began untying his pants. He glanced up to find Arak still watching him. "Get the hell out so I can get some sleep."

Arak chuckled softly as he backed out of the room. "So, we're going tonight?"

Bale stilled with his fingers on the laces of his pants and looked up at Arak. "Yeah." Then he kicked the door shut with his foot.

Bale stripped and collapsed on the bed, where he lay for a long time, thinking about Faith and hating that she was not beside him. He finally drifted to sleep, his arm curled around her pillow, pulling it into his chest.

Chapter Seven

It had been fifteen hours, twenty-four minutes, and thirteen—Faith glanced at her watch—no, fourteen seconds since she'd last seen Bale. Thankfully Mondays were slow, so she could hide away in her office the whole night. She sat behind her desk feeling melancholy, listening to “Ball and Chain” by Social Distortion and trying to ignore how fitting the song's words were as they rang in her mind.

As the song ended and then immediately began again, her bartender, Prue, sank into the chair across the desk from her, propped her size 7 Doc Martens onto the flat surface next to her monitor, and while raising one pierced eyebrow, said, “Damn. What's your problem? If it's a man, just say the word. I'll gladly kill him for you.”

Faith glanced away from her game of solitaire and sighed. Prue would probably at least try. “I don't think even *you* could accomplish that feat.”

Prue contemplated her in silence for a moment. As she pretended to examine her fingernails, she stated, “I know some people.”

Faith smiled at that. Prue probably did. Like most of the employees at Club Dominus, Prue was not human. What she was exactly, Faith still had not managed to unravel, other than she was a half-breed who had taken the whole Goth movement to the extreme. Her alabaster skin glowed against her long black tresses, black bustier, black lace skirt, and of course, her Doc Marten lace-up boots. The only spot of color to mar the all-black look was the bright red lipstick that shone on her lusciously full lips. Without the multiple piercings that graced her ears, eyebrows, and nose, and the tattoos on her shoulder, wrist, and God only knew where hidden beneath her clothing, Prue could have passed for a fashion model.

“Thanks for the offer, but it wouldn't help much.”

Prue's eyes widened. “Shit. You have just transfigured, and already you've found your mate, haven't you?”

Faith laughed, but it sounded bitter to her own ears. “You've got your species mixed up. Shifters have mates, which I am not.”

Prue crossed her arms in front of her, which caused the bustier to rise and display the swell of her breasts nicely. “Are you sure?” She looked skeptical.

Faith rolled her eyes. “I'm sure. I have the fangs to prove it.” Needing to change the subject, she waved toward Prue's ample bosom. “And you should do that out front. You'll make decent tips even tonight.”

Prue glanced down at her chest. “You think?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Well. Okay, then.” Prue rose to her feet, knowing she'd been politely told to go back to work. She paused with her hand on the doorknob and glanced back at Faith, her face lit with

concern. "You should feed. You are giving off some seriously edgy shit. And I don't do females."

Faith dropped her head in her hands as Prue shut the door behind her. Pheromones. It had been discovered about ten years ago that when a vampire needed to feed, he or she gave off pheromones similar to those a werewolf emitted once reaching his or her sexual prime. But Faith certainly did not feel any desire for blood. The thought of having to touch a human for sustenance left her feeling decidedly queasy.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered as she stood and, with great trepidation, exited her office.

The last thing her conscience wanted to examine was using her business as a feeding ground. She stepped up to the bar, debating whether feeding from one of her patrons was a good idea, when Prue's roommate, Tempy, leaned toward her and whistled.

"Damn, girl."

"Shut up," Faith mumbled.

Grinning, Prue leaned across the bar. "Told you."

"I hate you both." Faith glanced around the bar, looking for potential donors. On a normal night she was attractive enough, but she certainly never garnered the attention some of her female employees did. But tonight four men sitting at a table in the corner were definitely checking her out.

"You've got admirers," Tempy said in an amused but hushed tone. She glanced in the direction of the table full of men. "Not bad. The blond is cute."

"Does it really matter what he looks like?" Faith asked, disgusted with the prospect of what she was contemplating.

"I would think it would help. Do you really want to get that close to someone who is visually nauseating?"

"I don't want to get that close to *anyone*," she mumbled as she watched the men seemingly debate something very quickly before the blond in question stood. When Faith finally realized what she'd revealed, she glanced at Tempy to find the other female staring at her curiously. "What? One doesn't come out the other side of a Transfiguration immediately knowing the ins and outs of this. It's a learned process."

Tempy shrugged. "Who knew?" She glanced at Prue. "Did you know that?"

At Prue's grin, Faith narrowed her eyes at both females. "You both are royal pains in my ass." She turned just as Blondie stepped up behind her, and Faith found herself chest to chest with him.

"Hello there, sweetheart," he murmured as he wrapped an arm around her waist and smiled.

Up close he was even more attractive than he had appeared from a distance, and before Saturday night, Faith would have reveled in his attention. Instead she just felt sick inside. She tried to pull back, but he leaned forward, inhaling slowly near her ear.

"Damn, you smell sweet," he whispered huskily.

Faith looked deeply into his eyes, surprised by the dazed look she saw there. Turning her attention from the bar, she realized the other three men from Blondie's table were waiting in the wings for him to strike out. She smiled, though it pulled her face tight with tension, and forced her hands to glide down Blondie's arms to grasp the hands at her waist.

“Let's go to the back,” she said stiffly.

A smug, satisfied smile settled on his face. “I'm—” he began, but Faith cut him off with a finger over his lips.

“It doesn't matter,” she said softly with a shake of her head. The less she knew the better.

She led him silently down the hall, past the bathrooms, and into her office, then shut and locked the door behind her. She hesitated when she turned back toward him, but Blondie held no such reservations. He caged her in, her back against the door as he raised her arms above her head and leaned forward. His lips claimed hers, but when he tried to push his tongue into her mouth, Faith ripped her lips away from his.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he mumbled. His lips moved to suck on her neck as his hands moved to her thighs. Grasping her knee-length skirt, he glided it up far enough that he could force a thigh between hers.

When his hand grabbed her breast through her white silk blouse, Faith couldn't take any more. She just wanted it over with and the man gone. Sinking her hands in his hair, she licked his neck twice, ignoring that the flavor of his skin as it burst across her taste buds didn't seem right. It took only a second for her fangs to descend and sink into his flesh.

Blood filled her mouth, and Faith swallowed quickly two...three times. The taste, like that of soured milk, consumed her. Disgusted, she disengaged her fangs and thrust the man from her. She ran to her private bathroom and managed to get to the toilet just before her stomach revolted and everything she'd just consumed emptied out of her. The heaving seemed to go on long after she had nothing left to give.

It was minutes later before she realized she was not alone. Prue was kneeling beside her, holding back her hair and murmuring sympathetically. Finally moving from the toilet, Faith took the tissue Prue handed her and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said hoarsely as she glanced away from Prue, feelings of mortification settling over her. Just then she realized she had not closed the wound before pulling away from Blondie and made for the door in a panic.

Prue grasped her by the shoulders. “It's okay. Tempy found him stumbling in the hallway and is taking care of him,” she said, as if sensing the cause of Faith's distress.

Faith nodded, moving slowly to her desk and sinking into her chair.

“Want to tell me what the hell happened?”

Faith swung the chair away from Prue and looked out at the darkened Seattle landscape. Only a few lights from the lofts across the alley were visible from her window. “I don't know,” she finally said softly. “But don't say a word of this to Hope.” She turned to pierce Prue with a stern look.

“Jesus, Faith, you can't hide this.”

She sighed. “I won't. I just need time to figure out if it was him or...”

“Or what?”

Faith returned to looking out the window. “Or if there is something wrong with me.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I don't know,” Faith cried in frustration, jumping to her feet. She sighed again, forcing herself to resume her seat. “Please, Prue. I really don't know.”

Prue stalked behind the desk and bent down to really study her face. "All right. I'll give you a couple of days. But Faith, if this doesn't go away, I can't just ignore that there's a problem."

"I know," she whispered in reply.

Prue nodded, then rose and quietly left the office. Once she was alone, Faith released a frustrated sob. She hadn't told her father about her Transfiguration and knew she couldn't hide it from him forever, but she wasn't prepared yet to deal with him and the questions he was sure to have. Now, on top of that, she had this shit to deal with. And she considered, not for the first time, that all her problems could be lain at Bale's feet.

She reached for her mouse, brought up Google on the computer, and typed in "Grigori." After three attempts, she finally got the spelling right and thousands of hits. Faith opened the first link, and that was all it took to scare the crap out of her. The Grigori. The fallen. As in fallen angels, to be more precise. Angels that had, in the words of Enoch, slept with women and fathered giant children.

Since Faith hadn't run into any giants recently, she wondered at the truth behind such words. But shit, who knew? Maybe there were giants hiding in the Andes or something. Or maybe the angels had tried to place the blame of those who had created the likes of her on the Grigori.

She sat there for fifteen minutes, staring at the screen, when a sense of peace settled over her like a warm blanket. Then panic rose inside her too, battling with the euphoric feeling, because she knew the reason. Bale was in her club. She felt his presence as clearly as she did the chair she sat upon. And her very soul was drawn to him.

She spotted Bale as soon as she entered the cavernous room. A quick sweep confirmed Tempy and the blond male were gone, though his friends still sat at the same table. Bale stood at the bar, Arak by his side. Prue had just collected money from the pair as Faith slipped behind the wooden structure.

Taking the twenty away from Prue, Faith said quietly, "Their money is not good here. Understand?"

Prue raised her pierced brow before glancing over her shoulder at the two males. "Sure thing, boss."

As Prue moved to the other end of the bar, Faith turned unsteadily and faced Bale. She set the money on the wooden bar top and slid it toward the males. She found it easier to center her attention on Arak.

"It's on the house."

Bale grasped her arm, ignoring the money she offered, and pulled her closer until her upper body leaned over the top. With his thumb caressing the back of her wrist, he met her halfway and whispered in her ear, "Are we not welcome here?"

Faith swept her tongue across her lips nervously, and she thought she heard Bale groan. "Of course you are welcome. But your money isn't."

"And why is that?"

She leaned her head back to meet his gaze. "Let's just say I admire what you and your friends do. You know, the whole 'dead demon' thing? And it's certainly the least I can do, since you saved my life."

Bale's eyes narrowed, and it barely registered to Faith that Arak had asked her a question. It took all her willpower to drag her gaze from Bale's piercing stare.

"How are you feeling?" Arak repeated with a soft smile. He glanced over her briefly, then his eyes continued to scan the entire room, as if looking for a threat.

"I'm good," she forced herself to say even as every muscle in her body tensed. The reaction was lost on neither male.

"You sure? You look pale."

Faith gave what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "I'm just suffering from a little blood sensitivity. It happens." And she finished her statement with a slight shrug.

"What the hell does that mean?" Bale growled, leaning even closer to her, his lips brushing intimately against her ear. "What is going on, Faith?"

She didn't really mean to, but she couldn't seem to stop her body from leaning into his touch. "I'm okay. Really. Why are you here?"

Bale's gaze swept over her, hot and possessive. "I thought letting you leave would keep you safe, but it has been brought to my attention you could still be in danger. I'll be keeping an eye on things. Just to be certain."

"I'll be fine. Really, there's no need." Faith forced herself to pull away from him, even though every muscle in her body protested the action. And her reaction only served to further piss her off. She didn't know what being with Bale had done to her, but she was certain it was not normal. Jesus! Humans and angels together were what created vampires, shifters, and spell casters. She could only imagine what other changes could occur from being with one, even a fallen one.

Just then, one of Blondie's friends approached. He'd obviously had far too much to drink, and he leered at Faith.

"Man, babe, you sure must have worn Jim out. I've never seen him leave a club this early."

Faith was glad for the darkened interior as she felt all the blood in her face drop to her feet. Bale's eyes narrowed at her and the man who didn't realize he had a 280-pound ex-angel ready to cut his head from his body.

"What did he just say?" he asked quietly, his stance suddenly rigid.

Faith watched his hand slip inside his trench coat and said his name softly, trying to distract his attention from the human. As Blondie's friend turned, he swallowed visibly, noticing Bale for what seemed to be the first time.

"Shit, man. I don't know what the hell I'm talking about. Shit. I'm just drunk." And he scurried off.

"I think you'd better explain what he meant, Faith."

Faith arched an eyebrow at Bale's audacity and folded her arms under her breasts. "You know what I am, Bale, and you know what I need to survive. Exactly what don't you understand?"

"Did you fuck him too?" he snarled, his face etched with anger...and what Faith thought resembled pain.

Anger overtook reason, and Faith blurted out something she regretted the minute the words left her lips. "I could barely stand to touch him, you son of a bitch, so what do you think? And your welcome has officially ended. It's time you both left."

Arak nodded, his look sympathetic as he grabbed a fistful of Bale's coat. "Let's go, Bale."

Bale struggled to loosen Arak's hold, and the gleam in his eyes left little doubt this conversation was not over. Faith's stance remained challenging...daring.

"Damn it, Bale. Now is not the time or the place for this," Arak hissed, and Bale stilled, as if reason had suddenly set in. But Faith seriously doubted it. His eyes were practically glowing red with rage.

"This isn't over, baby," Bale promised, his gaze raking over her. Then he turned and stormed from the club.

In a flash of movement, Arak grabbed her hand unexpectedly, the warm glow from his fingertips traveling up her arm in a soothing fashion. Faith stared at the blue glowing digits like a deer caught in headlights, unable to pull away. When his hand no longer emanated light, her gaze rose to his face. He studied her a moment, deep in thought. Then he nodded, and Faith knew he had uncovered her secret. But before she could ask him what he planned on doing with that knowledge, Arak turned and followed Bale from the club.

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Bale was pacing the length of Arak's '67 Shelby, and as Arak approached, he was glad he had driven. Bale was in no condition to get behind the wheel. He silently watched Bale's feet eat up the pavement. It was clear Bale was still unsettled by what had happened. He had come damn close to attacking a human, and if he had, Arak would have had to destroy him on the spot. All the Grigori had pledged to protect the second born, and any transgression was a one-way ticket to Hell.

Bale stopped abruptly when his gaze landed on Arak. "How often?" he growled, his biceps flexing and jaw muscles twitching in agitation.

"What?" Arak asked, genuinely perplexed. He was not only shaken by Bale's actions, he was also confused by what he had seen when he'd touched Faith. It seemed her body had rejected the blood she had ingested earlier. With the little Arak knew about vampires, he couldn't be sure if this was a normal occurrence or if he should be truly concerned. But with Bale's present mood, he knew better than to mention it.

"How often is it necessary for her to—" Bale cut off hastily with a decisive click of his teeth.

"To feed? Christ, Bale, I don't know. My guess would be every couple of days." Watching Bale warily, Arak rested his ass on the hood of his car.

"Fuck." Bale ran a hand through his hair, pulling several strands loose from the leather tie holding it away from his face. "I almost pulled my blade on a human. If the man she'd been with had been in there tonight, I would have gone after him."

"And I would have stopped you."

Bale pinned him with a hard stare before finally nodding. "Jesus, Arak, what am I going to do?"

"I really don't know what to tell you," Arak answered quietly. "I fear this is going to have to be something you work out on your own. You are the one who will have to live with the consequences." Arak paused, watching Bale drop his head to his chest in defeat. "But let me ask you this. Do you truly think you would be given this gift only to have it taken from you?"

"It's happened before."

“Thea wasn't your heart mate.”

“Maybe not. But what about Saraknyal?”

The agony that always came when her name was mentioned ripped through Arak, and he sucked in a deep breath. Christ. It still hurt like he'd only just lost her, and it had been several millennia. Pushing through the pain, he said, “Saraknyal and I loved for a long time before she was taken from me.”

Bale watched the anguish bleed into Arak's eyes. He knew there was a vast difference between how his brother had loved Saraknyal and how he had loved Thea. He no longer felt pain over the loss, only bitterness and the need for revenge. But Arak still suffered from gut-wrenching sorrow. His brother still mourned.

“Arak, if she were still alive, would you take the risk, knowing she could be punished just for being foolish enough to love you?”

Arak closed his eyes a moment as he considered Bale's words. “Honestly, I don't know.”

Bale nodded, fisting his hands inside his coat pockets. He wasn't certain he could live knowing he had caused another female's death. Losing Thea had almost sent him into the abyss. Losing Faith would destroy him.

* * * *

Faith was back in her office, still trying to calm down from Bale's accusations, when the door flew open and the bastard stepped inside. He kicked the door closed behind him and stalked toward her. Her gaze darted around the room as she looked for a way to escape but found none. Determined to try anyway, Faith spun to the right, cursing the skirt she was wearing, and found herself imprisoned in Bale's arms.

He was still angry. She could see the fire burning in his mocha eyes when he fisted her hair, forcing her head back to meet his gaze. Then his lips were on hers in a bruising display of dominance. Faith beat her fists against his shoulders for a fraction of a second before his tongue forced its way into her mouth and she was lost. It wasn't until she'd slumped into his embrace that, with a satisfied grunt, his mouth released hers.

“From now on, when you need to feed, you will come to me.”

The words he growled into her ear weren't a question but a demand, and Faith didn't see the need to respond.

But Bale gave her a gentle shake. “Do you understand me, baby?”

Dazed and overwhelmed, Faith nodded her head.

“And if I find out you've gone to another, you'd better be prepared for the consequences, Faith, because I almost killed a man tonight. I won't allow anyone to touch what's mine. Especially not some pitiful human.”

Then, as quickly as he'd barged in, Bale released her and left, slamming the door with such force that the window behind her rattled. And feeling properly trounced, Faith collapsed into her chair.

It took minutes, many of them, before what had occurred really settled in, and the more Faith obsessed over his words, the more pissed off she got. The big, giant, son-of-a-bitch bastard! He'd practically tossed her from his life. Granted, she had agreed to leave. But damn it,

she had some pride. If he couldn't admit there was something between them in public, in front of his friends, then by God she wasn't going to accept the words in private. Fuck him.

That thought led to her heart picking up speed as she recalled how it felt to be in his arms again. Her thong grew wet, and her nipples, which were already hard little points from Bale's kiss, tightened even more. Shit. She was so in trouble.

Chapter Eight

It had been a long, frustrating night, and Faith was just glad it had finally come to an end. As she followed Prue through the darkened bar, she couldn't wait to go home and fall into bed. She prayed sleep would be her salvation, because she needed something to get her mind off Bale.

“So what's the deal with the Jolly Green Giant?” Prue asked, glancing casually at Faith.

Even as annoyed as she was at the male in question, Faith couldn't prevent the smile that took over her face at Prue's description.

“I got into an altercation the other night with a really big, really nasty demon. Jolly Green stepped in and saved my ass.”

“I told you, if you mess with the bull...” Prue held up two fingers—her index and pinkie.

Faith sighed. “I know. I got the horns, all right.”

Prue looked at her curiously, as if waiting for an explanation. When one didn't come, she commented, “Things looked really intense earlier.”

Faith snorted. That was an understatement. She wondered what Prue would have thought if she'd witnessed what had occurred in her office.

“Yeah. Well, let's just say Jolly likes control, and he expects total obedience.”

“What about the other one? Lord of the Serious Hotness?”

Faith choked back a giggle, wondering what Arak would think of Prue's assessment. “Lord Hotness seriously knows how to use his hands.”

“No way! You did both of them?”

Prue looked really impressed, and Faith rolled her eyes. The female was truly twisted. “Who the hell said I *did* either?”

Prue snorted. “The way Jolly looked at you did. And who could resist that two-for-one goodness?”

“Good God...the drama,” Faith replied drolly. “Help yourself.”

“To Jolly or Hotness?” Prue wiggled her eyebrows. “Or both?”

Faith wanted to say both. Really. It was on the tip of her tongue. But when she opened her mouth to speak, a wave of possessiveness streaked through her, and she said, “Jolly is mine.” She ignored Prue's rueful chuckle, wanting instead to slap herself. And mentally she did. “You are welcome to the rest,” she added, looking for anything to take her mind and Prue's off Bale.

“There are others?” Prue asked as they stepped out the back door and stopped while Faith locked it.

The hopefulness in Prue's voice brought the smile back to her face. “Oh yeah,” she purred. “All supremely yummy. Though I would say Lord Hotness lives up to his name. He's definitely the pick of the litter.”

Prue rubbed her hands together in glee. "I just looove my men in leather."

"Then you are in for a treat," Faith murmured, pausing a few steps from the door. Something caught her attention, and as she scanned the parking lot, she tried to pinpoint the disturbance.

"Well, well. Look what we have here."

Faith froze, the sound of an unknown male voice sending chills down her spine. "Prue, get out of here," she said softly as she finally spotted a shadow to the far right of the lot.

"I'm not leaving you."

Prue's response sent a streak of unease through her. It bloomed into panic when the male stepped forward and Faith recognized him. It was the Lilo demon she and Hope had been hunting the night she'd been wounded. Obviously Bale had not terminated the bastard.

"Yes, Prue. Please join us," the demon said in a sickly sweet tone.

"Now, Prudence," Faith said, her voice a little more forceful. "This isn't the time to be a pain in my ass."

Prue edged away from Faith slowly, moving to her vehicle without turning her back on the demon. Faith also refused to tear her gaze from the threat, her fingers twitching to pull the five-inch knife from her black boot. She relaxed only marginally when she saw from the corner of her eye that Prue had reached her purple Vespa scooter.

"Hmmm. Something seems different," the demon said as he scanned her over. "Let's see. What could it be?" He paused, a finger rising to tap his chin. "Ahhh, yes. That's it. Vampire. How curious." He moved slowly to her left, blocking her view of Prue. "Do you know what makes your kind so pathetic?"

"Oh, I'm sure you are going to tell me, whether I give a shit or not," she replied drily.

The demon grinned at her with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. "You let your prey get away. Interesting choice, that one."

Every muscle in her froze at the implication of his words. She couldn't decide if he was fishing or if he had really been in the club when she had fed. Had he seen what had happened? Shit.

"Imagine my surprise tonight, finding you still alive. How did you manage it?" The demon waved away his statement. "Oh, never mind."

He stepped closer to Faith, and she seriously wished her arms were longer. While he would have a difficult time killing her now, it could still be done, and she felt naked without her knife.

Leaning into her, the demon whispered, "Just a word of warning. I am not big and dumb like my friend from the other night. Come at me again, and I won't just kill *you*. I'll kill your pretty little human friend. You know the one. The delectable little blonde? I bet she's a tasty morsel."

Faith turned her head, meeting the monster's red eyes. "You do that, and there will be no place for you to hide. Every vampire on this planet will hunt you like the dog you are."

With a smirk, the demon dissipated just as Faith yanked her knife from her boot and thrust it at the bastard. He thought he could scare her with his threats. Instead he'd only made her more determined to see him dead. But it was something she was going to have to do without Hope's participation. She wouldn't risk her twin, not against a demon with an obvious agenda.

"What the hell was that about?" Prue yelled over to Faith.

Faith turned to eye her friend. "Didn't I tell you to leave? Damn it, Prue, sometimes you are worse than Hope."

"Oh shit. I'd love to see some dumb demon take a pass at me. It would add some entertainment to my day."

Faith just shook her head. She fished through her keys until she found the one for her red Volkswagen Bug. She paused after she slid the key into the lock and looked back at Prue. "There is something seriously not right with you. You know that, right?"

"Yep," Prue replied with a grin as she climbed onto her Vespa, slipped the matching helmet over her head, and started the scooter up. With a little *toot* and a wave, Prue was a purple blur out of the parking lot and down the street.

Before Faith went to bed that night, she glanced in on Hope, relieved to find her asleep in her own bed, alone. She didn't have to worry about who her sister might have gone home with or what psycho she might find in their kitchen the next morning. And most importantly, Hope was safe, at least for this night.

* * * *

Faith spent large chunks of the next two nights hunting the Lilu demon. Tuesdays and Wednesdays were just as slow as Mondays at the club, and she trusted Prue to take care of things while she was gone. Thursdays were a prelude to the weekend, usually drawing in a sizable crowd, so even though Faith wasn't feeling her best, she was at the club by six.

She hadn't attempted to feed since the fiasco on Monday, and the need was weighing on her. She couldn't concentrate on anything longer than a few minutes, every muscle in her body ached, and at odd times she would just start shaking like a junkie needing a fix. The lack of control she had over her own body was embarrassing. But fixing it would require feeding, either from a man or from Bale, and neither option particularly appealed to Faith.

She spent what time she could in her office, but eventually the crowds began to overwhelm Prue, and she had to step out of her sanctuary. Slipping behind the bar, she immediately went to work making drinks for the influx of vampire wannabes. On a normal night, she and Prue worked well together, but tonight she was off. Several times Prue had to shoo her out of the way.

To her relief, the crowd finally lulled, and Faith had a moment to catch her breath. It was short-lived, though. She knew he was there before she saw him, and scanning the club confirmed her suspicions. Bale, Arak, and the bald male who had been injured the same night she had were sitting at a table surrounded by half a dozen women, all of them clamoring to get as close to the three males as possible.

Her stare ate him up. He was wearing the customary leather pants and black T-shirt, minus the leather trench coat. His hair was hanging loose around his shoulders, a thick ebony mass of silk that Faith found so very attractive. When one persistent blonde rubbed her barely covered breasts against Bale's arm and his hair fell across her skin, Faith felt the heat around her rise by ten degrees. And with a frustrated groan, she turned to find Prue watching her.

"He's been here every night. Was seriously pissed last night that you weren't. If you hadn't said he was off-limits, I would have offered my services," her friend said, nodding toward their table.

“Looks like he has all the offers he can handle.” The words came out sounding snitty, and she hated that she gave a damn. She had to grip the bar top to keep from rushing over there and prying the woman away from Bale.

“Yeah. It was like that for the three last nights too. Baldy wasn't with them Tuesday, but Jolly and Lord Hotness had no problem drawing a crowd by themselves. Seriously, Faith, they are good for business. Have the whole pack come in, and you'll make a killing.”

“No, thanks,” she mumbled, turning her head so she could observe without Bale knowing she was watching.

Much to Baldy's amusement, Bale nudged the blonde away from him with a scathing glare. It was the only time Bale had taken his gaze off Faith, and it filled her with some satisfaction. The feeling was short-lived when Bale stepped away from the table and headed straight toward her.

“Shit,” she hissed as she made a break for it, ignoring Prue's snicker.

Faith might have made it to her office if she hadn't stumbled on her way. With her luck, her floor-length leather skirt would have ended up over her head so everyone could see she only wore a skimpy black thong beneath. That, or the lace top would have split open and her boobs would have fallen out. Really, that's how her week had gone so far, so she supposed she should have been thankful Bale caught her before she hit the floor. But she wasn't. It only pointed out just how on the edge she was. She could smell the blood flowing in his veins, and her fangs extended against her will.

As if Bale sensed how out of control she had become, he lifted her in his arms and cradled her against his chest as he carried her down the hallway. Her face settled in the crook of his neck, and her tongue peeked out, swiping over his skin quickly. His taste burst over her tongue before she latched on, sucking on his flesh intently.

Bale groaned, his hand trailing up her back to hold her head in place so no one they passed would catch a glimpse of the fangs in her mouth. “Hold on, baby,” he murmured in her ear. “We're almost there.”

The door to her office opened and closed; then Faith found her back pressed against the desk. Bale pushed her skirt up and settled between her thighs as his lips met hers. The faintest trace of blood filled her mouth as her fangs nicked his tongue, but he wasn't fazed in the least if his moan was any indication.

Faith ripped her lips from his, panting for breath. “Please, Bale. I need you.”

“I'm right here, Faith. What do you need?” He groaned as her fingers went to work on the ties of his leathers.

“Damn it, Bale. I need you to fuck me, and I need to feed.” She gave a frustrated yank on the leather straps keeping her from getting what she wanted.

Bale brushed her hands away. Seconds later, he was ripping her thong away and his hot and heavy cock was poised at her entrance. With a triumphant cry, she felt him sink into her and pierced his skin with her teeth. Mocha flooded her mouth. As Bale hammered his cock into her, she gorged on his blood, humming in ecstasy.

“Oh God, I can't hold back,” he whispered raggedly in her ear. His fingers suddenly rubbing her clit had her retracting her fangs and arching her back. “Come for me, baby. Come now.”

With a hoarse shout, Bale thrust deep, forcing his thumb to press hard on her clit. As he erupted inside her, Faith gave a shaken cry, the orgasm rushing through her fast and hard.

Bale's weight pushed her deeper onto the desk, his heavy breathing rasping in her ear. Faith nuzzled his neck, then licked the droplets of blood from around the two tiny bite marks while Bale continued to gently thrust his softening penis into her pussy. She ran her tongue over his skin long after the wound had closed and Bale had grown quiet. It seemed she just couldn't get enough of the taste of him.

But finally Bale raised his head and stared down at her with what appeared to be love shining in his eyes. She pushed at him, wanting him off her before she did something incredibly stupid like spout words of affection, only to find she had misinterpreted what she'd seen.

As if a shade had been lowered in his eyes, he covered whatever emotion had been in his gaze and, with a grunt, rose from her. Faith rolled off the edge of the desk, brushing her skirt down so she no longer felt bare and vulnerable. Turning, she braced her hands against the glass window and stared out.

"Thank you," she whispered, unable to look him in the eye. "But I really shouldn't keep you. There were a lot of women vying for your attention. It wouldn't be fair."

Unprepared for his reaction, Faith found herself suddenly spinning 180 degrees and facing Bale.

"Not fair?" he asked, his hands framing her face as his eyes bore into hers. "Do you really think I give a fuck about any of those women?"

Faith just stared at him, wide-eyed. Bale seemed almost hurt by her insinuation.

"I told you before, there hasn't been anyone else in centuries. I didn't give up years of celibacy on a lark. And I certainly didn't do it so I could fuck my way through a bar full of women." Bale pushed himself away from her and ran a hand through his hair. "Jesus, you can set me off faster than anyone I've ever known."

"Well, I'm sorry I can't be like your perfect little human wife," she retorted, feeling the need to lash out in a sense of self-preservation. Because it was either that or burst into tears. She ached for Bale down to the marrow in her bones, and that scared the hell out of her.

"How do you know about Thea?" Bale's voice had gone quiet, his face pale. She had shocked him.

Faith folded her arms across her breasts and tensed, preparing herself. The last thing she wanted to do was have a conversation about Bale's wife. Then there was the fact that she still suffered guilt from what she'd done, and knew if he learned she'd been snooping, he'd be pissed. "Google," she said, glancing at the computer on her desk.

"And from that you deduced I was married?" he countered with an arched brow.

"And I saw the rings," she finally admitted as she turned back toward the window, unable to meet his gaze.

"You went through my things."

Faith flinched at his incredulous tone. "Please, just go, Bale," she whispered with a tortured plea. "You have already made it obvious there is no future for us, so why continue playing this game. I can't afford it, and I'm sure you have better things to do. You know, demons to kill, a traitor to find."

The click of the door signaled Bale had left without a word, and Faith lost her ability to stand. She landed on her knees as tears flooded her eyes and despair pierced her soul. She tried to scrape herself off the floor, but her legs were unwilling to support her weight, so there she remained, emotionally bleeding all over the black carpet.

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Bale was angry and disillusioned. He'd given Faith his trust, and she had abused it. For centuries he'd ignored his baser desires, and she accused him of lusting after other females. Then throwing his dead wife back in his face had been completely uncalled-for. He'd never given her any reason to use Thea that way. There was no comparison between the two. Jesus, he'd never felt an ounce for Thea of what he felt for Faith.

He stopped abruptly, observing the women surrounding Arak and Zeke's table. His fists clenched tightly, his knuckles turning white from the tension. The blonde who had propositioned him earlier was still standing next to the spot he had vacated when Faith had tried to flee. And her presence only served to further piss him off. He blamed her for Faith's sudden emotional withdrawal.

When he had caught her in the hall, Faith had turned to him, demanding what he knew only he could give her. He'd felt such a connection with her, one he was certain she had also responded to. But after they'd made love, he'd known the exact moment Faith had pulled away. Not physically; that had come later. But emotionally she had withdrawn, and there hadn't been a damn thing Bale could do about it but protect his own heart.

He considered turning around, going back into her office, and letting Faith know just where they stood. She was his, and he'd be damned before he let her get away. Startled by that thought, Bale realized he meant it. If she were taken from him, he would follow her, praying to the Father that their souls would not be parted in death. But she needed time. And so did he—to adjust to the fear the thought of losing her provoked.

Bale stalked to the table, meeting Arak's gaze. Arak, whose smile then faded from his face, extricated himself from the woman in his arms as he whispered in her ear.

Bale ignored the frown the brunette graced him with. "Let's get out of here."

He didn't realize he had come to a halt right beside the blonde from earlier until she scraped a nail down his bicep, outlining the phoenix tattoo displayed under his T-shirt and cooing in his ear, "You're not leaving, are you?"

The promise in her voice only served to anger Bale more. If Faith were to see this woman touching him, he would have an even-harder time convincing her she belonged with him. He grabbed her finger tightly in his fist and squeezed in warning. "Touch me again and I'll break it."

The woman's eyes grew wide, and then she smiled. Bale was shocked to realize she wasn't scared but turned on by his actions. He growled and tightened his fist. Arak said his name softly, then pried the blonde's finger free. He rubbed the digit between his palms to remove the sting of Bale's grip, then gently forced the woman's gaze onto himself.

"Excuse my friend, sweetheart. He gets cranky when he and his female have a falling-out."

The woman glanced back at Bale from under her lashes and purred, "If he ever gets tired of her crap, I'm here almost every night. I could make him very happy."

Bale snorted in disgust and headed for the door. Zeke immediately rose to his feet. Arak was a little slower at disengaging himself from their admirers.

“Sorry, ladies, but it's time to go.”

A chorus of female voices spoke up in displeasure, and Bale shook his head, wondering what it was about these modern women. They were too damn forward and had no sense of decorum or self-respect. It never ceased to amaze and repulse him the number of them willing to fuck Arak at the back of a bar.

“What's up?” Arak asked once he and Zeke had caught up.

“Not talking about it.” They reached Zeke's Charger, and Bale waited impatiently as Arak squeezed into the back. “I saw her, confirmed she's okay. Now it's time we do our job.”

“Yeah, right,” Arak mumbled. “And you almost broke a human's finger for sheer entertainment.”

Bale grunted, glancing out the window as the car rumbled to life. “She knows about Thea.”

“Shit. How?”

Bale turned his head to look at Zeke, who sat next to him silently observing the conversation. Then he glanced back at Arak. “Faith went through my things, found the rings I had purchased before Thea died.”

“And?” Arak prompted.

Bale shrugged. “And what?”

“Did you explain that Thea wasn't your heart mate, but that Faith is? Did you explain your reluctance to commit to her?”

Bale shook his head.

“Did you explain anything?”

“I made love to her. What more do I have to explain?”

Arak barked in laughter. “Jesus, Bale, you need to brush up on women. The females today don't view sex the same way they did when Thea was alive. They expect a male to eagerly whip it out for any occasion. They do not understand about crusades and oaths. Faith is not likely to realize your sudden willingness to disavow years of celibacy as anything other than plain old lust.”

Bale sighed and closed his eyes as he rested his head against the leather seat. “So walking away from her in anger was a bad idea.”

“You fucked up. But it's not beyond repair.” Arak placed a comforting hand on Bale's shoulder. “You'll need to explain everything. And then you'll need to do some serious sucking up.”

“I think I liked it better when a female did what she was told.”

“I wouldn't know. I never had a female who was very good at obeying.”

Bale smiled at Arak's response. Saraknyal hadn't been. But then, she'd been a warrior like the rest of them. Above, gender did not necessarily determine strength or ability. Turning his thoughts back to Faith, Bale knew it would be two or three days before she would need to feed again. That meant he had two or three days to get his mind focused and his thoughts in order before he confronted her and made her his for good.

* * * *

Faith wearily got out of her Bug. It was four a.m., and she was exhausted. While physically she felt better than she had in days, emotionally, she was a raw, bleeding wound. She'd managed to hang on to her sanity by a thread the rest of the evening after her encounter with Bale. It had ended with such a sense of finality that Faith knew things were over. Logically she knew she should be relieved; her feelings for Bale frankly baffled her. But all she felt was despondent.

Usually vigilant, especially after dark, she trudged up to the entrance of her condo, the scenery a blur. Fishing for her keys to unlock the door, Faith didn't see the shadow until it was too late. A low growl was the only thing she heard before it was on her, enveloping her in its embrace.

She struggled against whatever had her pinned, trying to ignore the foul stench of wet dog as the hairy arms wrapped around her chest. A set of sharp teeth scraped against her neck, and though not deep enough to draw blood, it sent a signal to Faith's brain. If she didn't get loose immediately, she was going to die.

A surge of strength unlike anything she'd ever experienced had her breaking free, and quick as lightning, she pulled the knife she never left home without from her boot. With a flick of her wrist, she embedded it to the hilt into the monster. Then she watched in horror as the beast staggered back.

It was as big as an Alu demon—more than seven feet tall. Faith could not tell whether it was male or female because its entire body was covered in long, coarse brown hair, but she wasn't about to get any closer to find out. Not if she could help it. And while she'd never seen such a creature before, she'd had read about them and knew she was staring at a dreaded Rabisu demon. It was said they were so frightening to look at that men expired on the spot from just glancing at them. Though she didn't fear death from viewing the beast, she certainly agreed it was the scariest damn thing she'd ever seen. If it had attacked her from the front instead of the back, she would very likely have been dead, because she was quite certain she would have frozen in her tracks.

It spoke in a language only angels and demons could understand, then dissipated—her knife still protruding from its gut—with a puff of smoke and the nauseating scent of sulfur.

With her hand pinching her nostrils closed, Faith dashed inside her condo just in case it had a friend waiting in the shadows. She leaned back against the door, the events of the evening sinking in, and then slid to the floor, shaking uncontrollably.

First Bale. Then a demon attack in front of her home. She should be dead. There was no way she should have been able to break free from the beast's hold. She recognized that even with vampiric strength it shouldn't have been possible. Rabisu demons were very dangerous, and nothing human—or even part human—could withstand their attack. Only an angel could.

It confirmed in her mind that Bale's blood did something to her. Something that, while it had saved her this time, could add insurmountable complications to her life. And then the implications of the attack dawned on her. How much of a coincidence could the Lilu demon's warning outside her club and then the attack outside her condo be?

Until she knew what was going on, she had to convince Hope to return to their father's nest. She'd apparently pissed someone off, and she wasn't about to let her twin get caught in the cross fire. Not if she could help it.

* * * *

Getting Hope to leave was easier than Faith had expected. In fact, she didn't even have to bring up the topic. The next morning Hope emerged from her room with an excited burst of energy. She'd met the man of her dreams and was going to spend the weekend with him skiing in Vancouver.

Faith did her best not to roll her eyes at her twin's exuberance. Hope had a tendency to fall in and out of love twice a month, so she wasn't expecting anything more to come of this relationship than she had the previous ones. But it served her purposes, so she smiled and nodded and wished her twin a wonderful weekend. Then, with the Hope situation resolved, she finally crawled into bed, high-fiving herself for managing to hide her distress from her nosy, know-it-all sister.

Chapter Nine

Bale was absent from Club Dominus Friday night, and while Faith expected it, she was still disappointed. Her mood dipped even further when Saturday also passed without his presence. Sunday night she spent trying to find that damn Lilu demon, but with no success. At least she could be thankful there were no more demon attacks outside her condo, because Hope returned Monday morning while Faith was still sleeping.

Faith managed to avoid her twin, slipping off to the club before she returned home from a meeting. She hadn't fed since that night with Bale, and the lack of blood was beginning to wear her down. She knew her pheromones were seriously out of whack but ignored the raised brow Prue sent her when she arrived at work.

In her defense, Faith did try to feed that night. She stepped out of her office and was accosted in no time by an incredibly hot man in leather pants and one of those frilly white linen shirts that vampire wannabes loved to wear. But it ended the same way it had with Blondie—with her head hanging over the toilet. At least this time she'd had the presence of mind to close the wound. She couldn't risk Prue knowing what had occurred. And the small amount of blood she'd managed to ingest seemed to trick her pheromones into thinking she had fed, because they subsided. But the hunger pangs did not, and neither did the lethargy.

Ignoring how far her health was sinking, she continued to spend several hours hunting each night. And around every corner she expected to run into Bale, which was really quite silly considering she'd been doing this for several years without ever encountering one of the Grigori.

It was Wednesday evening when Hope finally managed to corner her in her office. Faith knew Prue was to blame for the intrusion, but she didn't have the energy to get angry. A week of not feeding had left her so weak and disoriented, she'd been forced to call in another employee to help Prue. She knew Prue had grown increasingly worried as the week had progressed, and while she'd tried to convince her friend everything was okay, she'd obviously not done a very good job.

Hope only stared at her, her jaw dropping open for several seconds. Faith knew she looked bad. She couldn't cover up the dark circles under her eyes with makeup or hide the tremors that racked her frame every couple of minutes. But she grew immediately defensive anyway.

“What?”

Hope's jaw snapped shut. “You look like shit.”

“Well, thanks a lot,” Faith replied drily. She turned her gaze from Hope, pointedly ignoring her presence.

“It's not going to work, Faith. I'm not leaving. And if you don't tell me what the hell is going on right now, I'll be the least of your problems. I'll have Dad on your ass so fast, you'll think hell has frozen over.”

Faith sighed, her forehead falling to the desktop. "I wish to hell I knew, Hope. If I did, maybe I could fix this."

"Fix what?" Hope asked quietly as she knelt beside Faith's chair and stroked her hair gently.

Faith raised her head and met her sister's gaze. "I can't feed. Every time I try, I get sick."

"Every time?"

She tried to swallow the lump that formed in her throat. "No. Not with Bale."

Hope grew thoughtful for a moment. "Have you ever heard of a vampire and a shifter mating? Maybe it has something to do with that."

Faith grew confused. "Shifters? What do shifters have to do with this?"

Now Hope's forehead knotted in bewilderment. "Bale—all those males—they're feline shifters, right? Arak didn't deny it when he told me you were Bale's mate."

Faith shook her head. "They're not shifters, Hope. And I'm not Bale's mate."

Hope stilled as her eyes narrowed at Faith. "What are they?" she asked slowly.

Faith could sense her sister's slowly rising anger and knew what she was about to reveal would probably freak Hope out. It certainly had her. "They are called the Grigori. Fallen angels, Hope. Bale was an angel."

Hope released a gasp. "They are demons?"

Faith shook her head. "No. I think they were angels punished for taking humans as spouses."

Hope sat back on her heels, thoughtful. "We know some angels do have soul mates, Faith. We spent years watching Muriel and Ezra," she said, referring to the vampire Principal, the angel in charge of keeping the vampires in line, and her husband, dominus of the vampires. "So why should Bale be any different? And wouldn't Arak know if it weren't possible?"

"He doesn't want me, Hope," she whispered as a tear streaked down her cheek.

Hope shook her head adamantly. "He's your mate. He doesn't have a choice." She spoke so decisively, like that was the end of the subject, and Faith released a bitter laugh.

"He doesn't want a mate," she said as she stood, forcing Hope to stand and move back from her.

Hope folded her arms across her chest. "Too bad. He'll have to adjust."

Faith grunted and walked unsteadily toward the small refrigerator near the bathroom. When she stumbled, Hope grabbed her arm and helped stabilize her. Her twin walked beside her as she retrieved a bottle of water and then ambled back to her chair, then hovered next to Faith's elbow as if to catch her should she fall.

"What if *I* don't want *him*? What if I do not want to have to depend on him to survive? Huh?"

Hope met her indignant gaze and asked, "Do you have any choice? Or are you going to starve to death? And before you open your mouth and say something really stupid like yes, answer me this: when you did try to feed from someone other than Bale, did you enjoy it?"

"Oh yeah. I just love hitting the porcelain goddess," Faith said drolly as she rolled her eyes.

“The prospect of it, baby sister. The thought of getting that close to a male. Breathing in his scent. Licking his skin. Consuming his blood.” Hope gradually moved closer to Faith as she spoke, until she whispered the last in her ear.

Faith pushed her twin away, diverting her eyes as she pressed her lips tightly together.

Hope snorted in amusement as she landed on her ass from Faith's shove. “He's your mate, all right.”

“Glad one of us is enjoying this,” Faith murmured drily.

“Oh, don't get your panties in a wad. I'll take care of it.”

“What!” Faith exclaimed, her spine straightening dramatically. “Hope, don't you dare...”

But Hope only waved over her shoulder and strode from Faith's office. With a heavy sigh, Faith leaned her head back against the chair and closed her eyes. She didn't need this shit now, and if she'd had the energy, she would have chased after her sister. As it was, she didn't even have it in her to bitch at Prue for opening her big mouth. She was just so tired that the only thing that didn't sound painful was a nap.

* * * *

The buzzer sounded, and Zeke swiveled in his chair to glance at the television screen behind him. Before the fifteen-foot wrought-iron gate stood a female. He couldn't make out much about her in the dark, so he flipped on a light to get a better view. She blinked and raised a hand to shield her eyes, but not before he glimpsed the pale blue-eyed vision. She was beautiful, and he figured another one of Arak's conquests had followed him back to the fortress. It seemed to happen every couple of months.

“Yes?” His tone was not welcoming, and he was ready to send this one packing like he had all the rest.

“I need to speak to Bale.”

Zeke did not let his surprise alter his tone. “About?”

“None of your damn business. Where is Bale?”

Zeke snorted. Like *that* was going to get him to open the gates. “Bale is not available.”

Thinking that was the end of it, Zeke turned from the camera. The buzzer sounded again, and he turned back to the screen, surprised. She was persistent, he'd give her that.

“I thought I told you to go away.”

Zeke watched in fascination as her face turned red and she widened her stance, hands bracketing her hips.

“If one of you oversize assholes doesn't open this fucking gate and take me to Bale, I will be the least of your problems, buddy. If my sister dies because of him, my father and every vampire in this territory will be all over you bastards. And he's not going to give a shit who you all once were. Fucking no-good, uppity angels.”

Zeke continued to watch her for a moment longer, stunned by her sheer audacity. She needed someone to spank her ass and wash her mouth out. Then her words hit him, and he rose from his chair. He jogged down the stairs and was on the other side of the gate in less than a minute. Crossing his arms over his chest, an intense and imposing stance, he stared at her.

She snorted and said, “Where the hell is Bale?”

“I told you he was unavailable. Now leave, or I'll escort you off the property.”

Zeke was certain that would be all it would take. He found out how wrong he was when she stepped closer to the gate.

“I need to talk to the son of a bitch. Where is Remy? Or Arak? Shit, I'll even take Kash right now.” She paused, and then her eyes narrowed. “Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Zeke arched a brow at her tone but decided to humor her. He took two steps closer to the gate, letting the light hit his face. The female gasped and took a step back.

“It's you. From the tapestry over the stairs,” she whispered.

Zeke was not only stunned that this female knew of the tapestry, but that she recognized him from it. He hardly looked like that angel any longer.

“Who the hell are *you*?” he finally asked.

“Hope. Faith is my sister.”

Zeke's gaze hardened, and he was about to tell the female where she and her viperous sister could go when Remy interrupted them.

“Hope, what are you doing here?” he asked as he stepped up to the gate and opened it.

The female rushed forward, but Zeke moved to block her. She ignored him, her gaze fixed only on Remy.

“I need to see Bale, but this dumb oaf won't let me in.”

Remy shook his head to deny her request when her eyes filled with tears.

“No. I have to see him. Faith is sick. Really sick. She needs Bale, or she will die.”

Zeke studied her as she spoke, watching the colors of her aura. It had remained the same vibrant shades of pink from the moment she'd engaged him in conversation. She at least *believed* what she was saying. He glanced at Remy and nodded. Then he decided to take things one step further.

“Bale was attacked last night while visiting your sister. Someone stabbed him and left him for dead. Luckily he was able to teleport back here with your sister's knife protruding from his gut. Why should we give a shit if she dies?”

Hope looked confused for a moment; then her face twisted in anger, and she launched herself at Zeke. Remy grabbed her around the waist, trying to keep a hold on the twisting spitfire.

“You son of a bitch. Faith didn't see your precious Bale last night. If she had, she wouldn't be such a mess. Thanks to your buddy, she can't feed from anyone but him.” Hope finally managed to break free and turned to Remy, her eyes pleading. “Have Arak go see Faith. He'll tell you. There is no way Faith can hold a knife steady, much less have the strength to stab it through someone's flesh. Please, Remy. She's going to die without Bale.”

Once again Remy looked to Zeke for confirmation, and Zeke had to nod. She was pleading for her sister's life. He watched as a look of horror suddenly crept across her face.

“Oh God, is Bale okay? Please tell me he is going to be okay.”

“Worried about our precious Bale now?” Zeke asked with a large dose of sarcasm.

“Only because my sister's life is tied to his. If she is going to live, so must her mate.”

Remy held his arm out to Hope while sending Zeke a look of disappointment. “Come on, Hope. We'll find Arak and have him wake Bale. I think it's time we received some answers.”

Hope nodded, glancing over at Zeke with a smirk before moving to Remy's side. “Why would you possibly think Faith would hurt Bale?”

“Another of us has the ability to see things from objects. He saw a red-haired female stab Bale,” Remy replied quietly, studying Hope for a reaction.

“And because she had red hair you assumed it was Faith?” Her tone was indignant, and Zeke couldn't prevent the smile from taking over his face. He found her spunk amusing.

“He described your sister to a tee.”

Hope was shocked by this turn of events. She hadn't expected Bale's friends to accuse her sister of trying to kill Bale. Even if Faith had been angry enough with him to want to, Hope did not think she could have done the deed, sick *or* healthy. While Faith had yet to admit it, Hope was fairly certain her sister was in love with Bale.

“Faith couldn't hurt her mate.”

The bald dude who had yet to introduce himself snorted, and the desire to slug him was so strong, it took all Hope's willpower not to turn around and do it.

“Mate?” he asked with a smirk.

She glared at him. “Don't give me that look. We are vampires, not shifters, so the fact that Faith is physically tied to Bale is not our fault. And I'm only repeating what Arak told me.” Hope turned her attention to Remy. “Who is this jackass, anyway?”

Baldy stopped short, glaring down at her. He would be an intimidating figure if Hope intimidated easily.

“You need to be taught some manners.”

His tone was threatening, and it brought a smile to her face. “So Bale has already informed me. What? You think you can do it?”

“Oh, I guarantee it, sweet pea,” he growled, and her arms broke out in goose bumps. Not from fear but from excitement. And that only angered her more.

“Zeke,” Remy said, his tone that of a warning, “don't you have a job to do?”

Zeke lifted her chin with a finger, raising her eyes to meet his. And she had a long way up to look. He was at least a foot taller than her. Hope could tell by the gleam in his eyes he was used to using his height to his advantage, and even though that single touch left her shaking, she refused to allow him to think he affected her in any way. She met his gaze steadily.

“Most definitely,” he murmured.

Hope seemed to be falling into his gaze, but at the last minute, she yanked away from his touch. “Try it, and lose a limb.”

Zeke chuckled. “I'll be seeing you soon, sweet pea.”

Over her dead body. Hope backed away from the giant, moving closer to Remy. She had to remind herself she was here for Faith, and if she didn't want to end up as badly screwed as her twin, Zeke and all his buddies were completely and totally off-limits.

Still grinning, Zeke turned and disappeared through a darkened archway. Hope heard him climb some stairs, then forced her attention away from the male and glanced at Remy. He was watching her curiously, and she shook her head.

“Don't even go there,” she mumbled. “Ain't gonna happen. So is Bale really okay?”

Remy smiled at her quick change of subject but followed her lead as she trailed next to him through the darkened bailey. “He was injured pretty badly, but it was not life threatening. Arak

had to put him out, though, because he refused to calm down and let Arak treat him. He kept screaming about your sister. He wasn't making much sense, but his words led to the belief that she was the one who had attacked him.”

Hope snorted in disbelief. “I'm telling you, Faith couldn't even walk across the room to get a bottle of water without my assisting her. She didn't do this.”

“I hope not, because Bale can't take another betrayal.”

Hope looked at him sharply, but by the harsh angles she saw on his face, she knew not to bother even asking for clarification.

“Faith loves him,” she said quietly. Remy was the only one she would reveal such words to. There was something about the male's calm strength that made her trust him, even when she didn't want to.

Remy smiled sadly. “He loves her too.”

Hope smiled, relief smoothing the lines from her face. “Good. That's all I needed to know. Then ultimately, Faith will be okay.”

Remy studied her for a moment before he opened the front door to the keep. When they stepped into the foyer, it seemed all hell had broken loose. The first thing that registered was the loud bellowing that echoed through the rooms. Then Kash rushed past them without even noticing they had entered, and took the stairs three at a time.

“Come on,” Remy ordered as he quickly followed Kash.

Hope had a hard time keeping up and was soon trailing far behind the other two. At the top of the stairs, she turned to the right. At least she was kind of familiar with the upstairs. She knew they were heading toward the wing of the abbey that housed the infirmary and Arak's bedroom.

As she moved closer, the bellowing grew louder. Stopping in the doorway of the infirmary, she spotted Remy standing beside a bed. He was staring down at who she could only presume was Bale, but there were so many males standing around, she couldn't see for sure.

“Damn you, Remy. Let me go!” a voice yelled. Yep, it was Bale all right.

Remy glanced at Arak, and the other male replied, “He managed to throw off my sleeping suggestion.”

Remy returned his gaze to the bed. “Bale, if you do not stop thrashing around, you are going to reopen your wound. And then you won't be going anywhere.”

“You son of a bitch. If anything has happened to her, I will kill you myself,” Bale hissed as Hope moved closer to the bed.

“Bale, just tell them Faith did not do this,” she said quietly, and every male head turned to her.

“Why the hell would my mate try to kill me?” he barked as he glanced at the males, pinning each with a harsh glare. “It was a Rabisu demon. It got me in the parking lot of the club. Was my own damn fault, really. I was distracted and didn't see it coming.” He looked to Hope, his eyes pleading. “Faith? Is she okay?”

Hope glanced at Remy, uncertain exactly what she should tell Bale. He didn't appear to be in any kind of condition to help Faith at the moment.

“Hope, tell Bale that your sister was not attacked by any demons.”

Before Hope could respond, Bale beat her to the punch. “But there is something you do not want her to tell me,” he growled. “What?”

Hope stopped beside the bed and looked down at Bale. The sheet was resting across his hips, leaving his bandaged and bruised abdomen visible. His skin didn't have the usual tan glow of health but was rather a pasty white.

“Bale, you need to stay calm and listen to me.” When she had his complete attention, Hope continued, speaking softly. “Faith is sick.” When Bale moved to rise, Hope sat on the bed and placed both hands on his arms. “Listen to me!” she demanded, and Bale stilled. “She is sick. Not from a demon attack, but from the inability to feed. She appears to be slowly starving. It's not critical yet, but you need to get better, Bale, because Faith needs you.”

“She's so damn stubborn,” Bale murmured with a sigh. “I told her...” His voice dropped off, and he shook his head. Then he turned to Arak and said, “Bring my mate to me, Arak. I need her with me as much as she needs to be here.”

Arak's gaze narrowed at Bale, and he appeared to brace himself for a fight. “But you need to promise me you will lie here and relax. It's going to take me a good hour to bring her back.”

At Bale's nod, Arak suddenly disappeared right before her eyes. “That is so cool,” she announced.

Chuckling, Kash said, “I've missed you, doll. Let's get something to eat and leave Bale to rest.”

Hope nodded eagerly, giving Bale's arm one last pat before she rose from the bed. Of all the brothers, Kash was her favorite. They were like two peas in a pod. “So did you get that movie you were lusting after?”

“Oh yeah. You up for watching it?” he drawled, wrapping his arm around her shoulders as he led her from the room.

Hope smiled and wrapped her arms around Kash's thick waist. “You know it,” she said, leaning into him. A strange feeling of being home washed over her. It was something she hadn't felt the last time she was within the abbey, and it unsettled her. Feeling the weight of a stare on her, she glanced around until her gaze met the male with the scar's, the one called Levi. He was standing in the doorway to the infirmary, just watching her. She snuggled deeper into Kash's embrace. She didn't like Levi. His look seemed to pierce right through her, obtrusively seeing things she didn't want revealed. And what worried her even more was that her sixth sense might have already come to pass.

* * * *

Faith was shocked when Arak suddenly appeared in her office. One minute she was staring at her office door, the next she was looking at Arak. She probably made an amusing sight, gasping and flailing about like she did. She expected a laugh or at least a smile, but the gaze that traveled over her remained serious.

“You don't look so good, sweet girl.”

“Really? I never would have guessed.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “Why are you here? Obviously Bale did not care enough to show himself, so why send you?”

“Faith, Bale was hurt last night outside your club.”

“What?” Faith jumped to her feet, the backs of her knees hitting her chair and sending it rolling toward the wall. Without the support, she wobbled and would have surely fallen if Arak had not teleported across the room and encircled her with his arms.

“He is okay, just not well enough to get out of bed yet. But the first thing he demanded when he woke was for me to come get you,” Arak said softly next to her ear.

“He's really okay?” Her eyes searched his face for any hint that he was lying or telling her a half-truth.

“I promise. But he won't rest until he knows you are safe.”

Faith shook her head. “No. Bale is mad at me.”

Arak chuckled. “Even if he were, there is nothing like almost dying to make someone reevaluate things. And I was with him when he stormed out of here the other night. He wasn't as upset with you as you might think.” Arak moved back from her slightly, framing her shoulders with his hands. “Did Bale tell you about us?”

“Yes, though at the time I didn't understand. I learned some interesting things on the Web about the Grigori.”

“Really? We're on the Web?”

Arak seemed surprised by that. Faith couldn't wait to show him all that was available with the click of a button. But later. Now she only wanted to know about Bale.

“Then you must understand how terrifying this is for Bale. I won't go into details, because that is for Bale to explain. But I will say this: he has already lost a wife.”

Faith tried to pull away because she wasn't sure she could stand to hear how much Bale had loved his wife, but Arak only tightened his hold.

“Bale loved Thea, and he was devastated when he lost her.”

“I don't want to hear this,” she hissed.

“If you would just let me finish, you would understand why I bring it up. I do not speak of Thea to hurt you, Faith. Bale was devastated, and she was not even his heart mate. You are, and he fears not for himself but for you. We Grigori are always only one step away from becoming archdemons, and if you were punished by the Father for loving Bale, he would gladly take his place in the ranks of Hell as punishment.”

“But why would anyone be punished? There are several angels who have mates.”

Arak appeared surprised by her statement. “Who?” he asked hoarsely.

“The vampire Principal, Muriel, for one. She is mated to Ezra, the dominus,” she said, referring to the leader of the entire vampire population. “They even have several children.”

Arak looked like someone had hit him with a two-by-four.

“Why is that so important?” she asked quietly, placing her hands over Arak's.

He smiled sadly and only shook his head. “We have wasted enough time. I have exactly forty minutes to get you back to the fortress before Bale starts hunting us. Can you make it? I would offer you my blood, but I fear Bale would take my head for such an act.”

Faith smiled weakly. “It's okay. It would probably only make me sick anyway.”

She clung to Arak as he helped her from her office to the parking lot. He rolled his eyes when he saw her car.

“What is it with you and Bale and the sardine boxes you two drive?”

He was not amused by her giggle as she watched him try to fit behind the wheel of her Bug. It was just not made for a six-foot-four male, and he looked simply ridiculous with his knees pinned to his chest. Faith had to spend the entire drive with her fist to her mouth and looking out the window, because every time she glanced his way, she burst into a fit of giggles. She couldn't help herself. Really, she couldn't.

Chapter Ten

Bale lay with his eyes closed, looking a bit pale but still large and intimidating in the narrow bed. A white bandage covered a great deal of the part of his abdomen under his ribs, and Faith hesitated in the doorway, not wanting to wake him. She was terrified that if she got too close, she would jump him. Her fangs were aching to drop just from the sight of him. She knew once she caught the scent of his skin—mocha with just a hint of vanilla—every cell in her body would begin to pulsate in need.

His eyes opened, meeting hers briefly before traveling over her body. A look of relief flooded his face when everything seemed to pass inspection. He raised an arm, hand outstretched to her.

“Come here, baby.”

Faith released the hold she'd had on Arak, wanting to make it across the room on her own two feet, but she faltered after only a few steps, and her knees buckled under her. Arak rushed forward and caught her before she hit the ground.

“I'm no good to her right now. Just sitting up in this damn bed takes all my energy. Arak, bring my girl to me.”

Faith protested when Arak scooped her into his arms. “It's not a good idea, Arak. I'll only make things worse. I won't be able to control myself if I get too close to Bale, and he needs his strength to get better.”

Arak paused midstride. “She's got a point, Bale.”

“And I won't get any better if I have to get out of this bed and chase her around the fortress, Arak. I can control her.”

Arak must have believed him, because he continued to walk closer to Bale. Her fingers dug into Arak's shoulders the moment Bale's scent reached her. Against her will, her fangs dropped and her body spasmed.

“Jesus,” Arak muttered, almost dropping her. She guessed he hadn't seriously expected her to go all toothy on him. He finally set her in Bale's outstretched arms, and as she buried her face in Bale's neck, she barely heard Arak ask, “Should I stay to make sure everything is okay?”

Bale was already cradling the back of her head, and she was licking his delectable flesh. “Just get out,” he demanded hoarsely.

Not completely lost in the haze of her lust for blood, Faith hesitated from actually sinking her fangs in and consuming all he had to give. Her mind had latched on to the fact that Bale was injured, and she was terrified she would hurt him further.

“Do it, baby. Feed.”

Faith rested her forehead on his shoulder. “I can't,” she whispered. “I'll be okay for another day or two until you are well.”

“Damn it, Faith. You wait any longer and you won't be able to function at all. You won't hurt me. Your body won't let you. And I will not allow you to remain this weak. There is a traitor who quite obviously wants me dead. What better way to get to me than through my mate.”

Faith lifted her head to meet his gaze. It was the first time Bale had ever admitted that she was anything other than a good time. His eyes narrowed as a look of disappointment crossed his face.

“You can explain to me why you are so surprised later. I think I made my intentions pretty clear the first time I made love to you.” At her snort of disagreement, he smiled tenderly. “Feed. We'll discuss the rest later.”

For a moment longer, Faith studied his determined face. “If you get worse, I'll so kick your ass.” Bale's chuckle turned into a groan as her fangs penetrated deep into his neck. Moaning at the exquisite taste of his blood flooding her mouth, she sank farther into his embrace.

Unlike the last time she'd fed from Bale, her mind stayed focused on Bale's body and his reactions. She felt him tremble against her but realized it was from desire and not because she was harming him. Her hand slowly wandered down his chest, avoiding his injury as it slipped beneath the sheet. Grasping his erection in her hand, she slid down his length before tightening her grip and pumping the velvet steel several times.

Bale arched his back and then hissed, causing Faith's hand to still. “Don't stop,” was his husky order as his hand covered hers, encouraging her to continue.

She maintained a steady rhythm, and Bale's hips soon rose to meet each downward stroke. As he quickly grew closer to orgasm, his blood seemed to thicken and sweeten, and when he came, the flavor spiked—it was like an orgasm for her taste buds.

Having consumed enough to satisfy her, Faith pulled back as Bale lay panting beside her. “Are you okay?” He tightened his arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head, and she took this as a sign of confirmation and snuggled into his embrace.

“Feel better?” Bale asked once his breathing had resumed its normal rate.

“Yeah.” Her lips brushed softly against his collarbone. Then Faith rolled away from him. Bale reached out to grab her back, but she shook her head. “Let me get a towel to clean you up. You won't be able to sleep comfortably otherwise. And it feels like I haven't slept in days.”

Bale watched her move gingerly across the room, grab a hand towel hanging by the sink, and wet half of it. “I know I haven't slept peacefully since you left.”

Faith glanced over her shoulder and smiled. Returning to him, she wiped the evidence of his recent orgasm off his skin. Then she rinsed the cloth in the sink before crawling under the covers with him. Bale pulled her back into his arms, and she sighed in contentment.

“Arak's not going to be too happy about what we did to the sheets,” Bale said with a low chuckle.

“Lord Hotness can deal,” Faith murmured sleepily against his chest.

“Lord Hotness?” Bale questioned with a teasing growl.

Faith gave a soft giggle. “That's what Prue, my bartender, calls him. She was really impressed with the three of you, but I told her you were mine.”

Bale growled again, only this time in approval. His hand caressed her lower back, and he wished there were naked skin under his touch, but he'd deal with that later. Right now he was just relieved to have her back in his arms.

“While Arak likes to hang out in those kinds of places, he still likes his females to look feminine. Your friend is a bit 'out there' for him.”

Faith laughed. “Prue is a bit 'out there' for most everyone.”

“Go to sleep, baby. You sound exhausted.”

Faith nodded, and soon her breathing evened out. A sigh of pure contentment rumbled from Bale's chest. He hadn't realized how fulfilled accepting Faith as his mate would leave him.

Glancing up, he was surprised to find Levi watching them. Through the partially opened door he could see his brother's face, and once their gazes met, Bale's eyes narrowed, his arm tightening around Faith protectively. It was only the shaken look in Levi's eyes that prevented him from demanding a reason for his presence.

As Levi opened the door farther, he said, “I thought I would enjoy watching you fight your attraction. But now I realize my silence could very well have harmed your mate. I apologize for that, Bale.”

Bale shook his head. “Don't. I would have acted the very opposite way of any suggestion just to spite you, Levi. I think it's time you and I come to terms with both our pasts.”

Levi smiled sadly. “Easier said than done, isn't it?” He turned to leave, then paused and looked back at Bale. “Treat her right, Bale, and she could be your salvation.”

Bale glanced down at Faith, his fingers tracing the skin above her black tank top, and kissed her forehead. Raising his gaze, he met Levi's. “She already is. Whether I am ever allowed back in the Father's good graces, Levi, she already is.”

* * * *

When Faith woke, she was no longer on the narrow metal bed inside Arak's infirmary; she was in Bale's bed, and she was alone. She sensed Bale somewhere within the walls of the abbey, but not nearby, and she wasn't very happy about that.

After freshening up in the bathroom and changing into the clothes she assumed Bale had lain out for her on the chair, Faith left the bedroom to find her mate and give him a piece of her mind. But her first sight of him completely distracted her from her intention.

The courtyard was alive with activity. Half-naked men with large broadswords were sparring all over, but her gaze was quickly drawn to Bale. Sweat glistened off his back, and blood trickled from a small cut on his bicep.

Faith remained in the shadows, as the bright afternoon sun weakened her, causing her to break out in a terrible rash. One of the pitfalls of being a newly turned vampire—sun sensitivity. Though it varied from one vampire to another, prolonged exposure to the sun when at its highest wouldn't turn them to ash, but it could cause one hell of a nasty burn.

Her fear for Bale had her wanting to rush toward him, but she worried any sudden movement would distract him. And she wasn't entirely certain what she would do once she reached him—hug him or slap him.

Levi fought him like a man possessed, lunging and thrusting his sword at Bale's side. Bale met his advance, knocking the blade off course, then returning with a forward drive of his own.

The tip of his sword sliced through Levi's skin above the nipple, and a cut about three inches long began to weep profusely. With a growl, Levi swung, barely missing Bale's abdomen, an area that only eight hours earlier had been heavily bandaged. Faith might very well have attacked the bastard if Remy had not stepped beside her at that very moment.

"They've been at it for an hour."

"And no one thought of stopping them? Last night Bale could barely sit up, but today you are just going to let the fool play warrior god."

Remy sighed. "But he is a warrior, isn't he? A warrior who now has a female to protect. That is something we take very seriously."

"I can take care of myself. I'd rather have my mate alive and in one piece."

Remy smiled at the indignation in her voice. "We are rather difficult to kill. And we heal amazingly fast."

Faith's gaze moved to Bale's abdomen, which only held a faint trace of a scar. "So I can see."

"And I have let this continue because I believe Bale and Levi are finally willing to come to an understanding. I have been hoping for centuries their bickering would cease, and it seems I am finally going to get my wish. You cannot imagine what a relief that is."

Faith had her head turned from the field, but she could still hear the grunts and the clash of steel as the fighting continued. She thought not actually seeing it would help ease her anxiety, but no such luck. The sounds alone were enough to keep her muscles tense.

Then Remy relaxed his stance. "Ahh, it's about over."

Faith whipped her gaze back to the two males just in time to see Bale disarm Levi and cause his sword to fall uselessly to the ground. He pointed the tip of his blade at the other male's neck.

"Do you yield?" Bale asked, his voice breathless from the exertion.

"Bastard," Levi hissed, his own voice sounding winded. "Yes, I yield."

Bale slid his sword back into the scabbard at his waist and grinned. "It was a good fight, Levi."

Levi grunted. "All that sex is apparently giving you an unfair advantage. Seems I should get *me* a female."

Bale chuckled good-naturedly until Remy cleared his throat, and both gazes settled on Faith. The grin on her mate's face softened as his eyes roamed over her possessively.

A look of horror passed over Levi's features. "I beg pardon, my lady. I meant no offense."

"What is this, the sixteenth century?" Faith asked, cocking a brow at Levi. Then she turned to Bale and folded her arms across her chest. "And if you ever scare the crap out of me like that again, you can forget about the sex. That well is going to dry up."

Bale took in her rigid stance and flashing eyes and straightened to his full height. "Is that so, mate?"

Faith snorted. "That only works the first time, bucko."

He moved to her, then he took her into his arms. "How about this?" he asked as his lips hovered an inch from hers. "Good afternoon." Then his mouth was on hers, his tongue pushing inside to gently mesh with hers.

As Faith leaned into him, moaning softly and clutching his damp shoulders, Bale slowly released her lips and kissed the tip of her nose before pulling back with a smug gleam in his eyes. “Apparently that works.” With a gasp of indignation, Faith tried to move from his embrace, but chuckling softly, Bale ignored her struggles, tightening his arms around her. “I am sorry you woke alone, but Levi and I had some things to settle. It won’t happen very often, baby.”

Now standing next to them, Levi snickered. At Faith’s glare, he appeared instantly contrite. “Sorry. We just don’t get to hear Bale speak so very often.”

Bale tightened a fist and sent it flying in Levi’s direction. The other male pivoted, and Bale missed him by mere inches. Laughing, Levi stepped around them and entered the house.

Bale met Remy’s amused gaze. “I still don’t like him.” But his tone no longer held any trace of anger.

“Sure you don’t. It’s always hardest to get along with those most like us.”

Bale frowned. “Don’t start that shit again. Levi and I are nothing alike. He’s bitter and angry, while I am a male content with his lot in life.”

Remy snorted. “How quickly things change. Why, just forty-eight hours ago you were a bitter, wrecked shell because a certain female had rejected you.”

“I wouldn’t say rejected,” Bale murmured as he glanced down at Faith. “More like a misunderstanding that shall soon be corrected.”

“Before you take your mate off to do what mated couples do”—Remy paused with a smile on his lips that Faith noticed did not quite reach his eyes—“Arak mentioned an interesting piece of information that I would appreciate Faith confirming. Is it true some angels now have heart mates?”

Faith wondered why this seemed so important to them. First Arak, and now, Remy and Bale watched her expectantly. “They call them soul mates, but yes, it is true. I know of roughly a dozen names that have been bandied about by our Principal over the years. It always amused her when another fell. I guess she got some grief from the others when she hooked up with Ezra.”

“Have they not been punished? Any of them?” Bale demanded, tensing against her, almost as if he was afraid of her reply. She glanced at Remy from the corner of her eye; he seemed to be holding his breath. Whatever this was about, it was of great importance to both.

“Not for loving a vampire,” she said softly, almost afraid of how the two males would respond. “It is actually rumored she’d been blessed by being allowed to conceive.”

“She had a child?” Bale asked, his voice a hoarse whisper. He turned from her and watched his brothers as they continued to spar.

Faith shrugged. “I never understood why that should be an impossible feat, but yeah. She’s had four—one girl and three boys.”

Bale released a shuddering breath as he ran a hand through his hair, loosening some strands, causing them to fall around his shoulders.

“Why is this so difficult to believe? I read that many of the Grigori had mates.”

His eyes filled with such sadness it made her heart ache. Then Remy looked away from her. “I’ll leave you to explain,” he said softly, his gaze resting on Bale.

Bale nodded, then took hold of her hand, leading her slowly inside the house.

“Bale?” By the way the two were reacting, Faith was becoming very concerned, even a bit frightened.

“When we get to our room, Faith.” He stopped and met her gaze. “For some, the tale is too distressing to relive. I will not torture the others, not any more than I already am.”

She was taken back by his words but didn't demand an explanation. She followed him silently up the stairs and to his room. When he motioned for her to sit on the bed, she did so, though with great wariness.

“It is true many Grigori had spouses, but not many were heart mates. Those were few.” He paused, glancing down at her hand, which was encased in his much larger grip. “You know I had a wife.”

Faith looked away just as he met her gaze. The mention of his wife brought a sick feeling to her stomach. “Do I even want to hear this?”

“Probably not any more than I want to speak of it.” Bale caressed her cheek, bringing her gaze back to his. “I cannot lie to you. I did love Thea and our daughter, Callisto.”

“Daughter?” Faith whispered, feeling as if she'd just been punched, and an irrational hatred of Bale's wife settled over her. She pulled away from him and rose to her feet. She couldn't sit there touching him, not when he was ripping out her heart.

“She was just three when Lucifer told us the Athenian army planned to attack. Many were jealous of the advances we had helped the people of Atlantis develop, so the notion that someone wanted to war with us was not a new one. But this time we had so much more to lose, and we decided to attack first. It was a slaughter. We killed them all.” Bale glanced back down at his hands, flexing the fingers that had just moments ago held Faith's hand. “When we returned to Atlantis, it was gone...had just disappeared...our families with it.”

Faith felt his pain and pushed hers aside, kneeling before him and taking his hands into hers. “So you were not punished for taking a wife but for harming humans. Arak mentioned how you could turn into an archdemon for breaking your pledge.”

“Yes.” Bale squeezed her hands. “This is why I tried to push you away. While I cared greatly for Thea, I never needed her with every fiber of my being. My soul did not scream in agony when I lost her. I wanted to avenge the death of my family. I wanted to slaughter every one of Lucifer's children. And I still do. But Thea's death did not cripple me.” Bale pulled a hand free and lifted it to her face. “You... I could not survive losing you. And I was so afraid my selfish longing would result in your death.” Bale grew silent, and Faith waited as he seemed to consider his words. “But maybe there is hope. If the angels are allowed mates, children...”

Faith lunged backward, breaking free from him as she choked back a sob. She fled into the bathroom, praying Bale would not follow.

“Baby, what is it?” he demanded, coming up behind her as she stood hunched over the sink.

Faith's hands closed into fists, her nails digging into her palms. She didn't fight him as he turned her around.

“Don't go getting your hopes up,” she said with extreme bitterness. It was better to get this over with now than to drag the relationship out, to end things before Bale's disappointment ate away at her. “You don't want me.”

His eyes narrowed. “What is this nonsense? I just told you I couldn't survive without you.”

“You'd better learn. You need to find yourself a human mate, because that child you long for is something I will never be able to give you.” A look of confusion settled over his features,

and she continued, her tone harsh. “Even male vampires turn to humans because we cannot give them the children they want.”

Bale sighed, pulling her rigid body into his arms. “Faith, I have lived thousands of years thinking I would never hold you in my arms, never feel your body wrapped around mine, never wake with you beside me. To have those things is enough. If children are never a part of our lives, that is okay.”

A tear slid down her cheek, and she shook her head. She did not believe him. She had seen the look on his face when he had mentioned his daughter. He might have loved his wife, but it was his daughter who had owned his soul.

Bale pulled her closer, his lips near her ear. “Baby, the hope for a child is just that—a hope. How do you feel sharing your life with a male who is not able to impregnate you?”

“I have never before considered having children,” Faith whispered against his shoulder. Why bother contemplating what she could never have? And without a male in her life, it hadn't seemed important.

“But miracles do occur. The reason Remy and I were so shocked about your Principal having children is because when Atlantis sank, we Grigori lost our ability to have children. We had assumed the same held true for angels.”

“Miracles.” Faith scoffed. “Ask the female in the nest I was raised in who repeatedly tried for a child but always lost it before the fifth month. Miracles don't occur for my species. And if by some chance I *did* conceive, only to miscarry? How could you remain with me knowing it was possible to have a child with someone else?”

“Losing our child would hurt. But would I stop loving you? Or regret that you came into my life? Never. Think about what you are asking, Faith. You are my heart mate, my other half. With you, I am whole. How could I ever regret that?”

Faith stilled when Bale mentioned love. She'd never stopped to consider anything deeper than lust, had not allowed herself to hope for affection, much less love. While her mind understood that mates naturally loved each other, up until this moment her heart had not believed.

“What?” Bale stepped back from her and held her at arm's length so he could study her face.

She shook her head. She did not have the courage to point out he'd used the word “love.” He wanted her. He thought he needed her. That was enough.

Bale smiled. “This is where you are supposed to tell me you love me also. Because I love you so deeply, it makes my chest ache.”

Faith did not realize tears were streaming down her face until Bale whispered, “Hey,” as he brushed them away with his thumb. She threw herself into his arms.

“I love you, Bale. God, I never thought I'd ever utter those words to anyone. After the way my father treated my mother, I never wanted to. And then you came along and tilted my whole world off its axis.”

Bale chuckled. “Well, I wasn't exactly prepared for you either, Faith. I'd made a vow, but if you were dumped into my lap to test me, it's a test I will gladly fail.”

“A vow?” For the first time, Faith believed Bale's practice of celibacy was more than just words.

“I told you I had given up all carnal relations. I was not joking.”

“Oh, Bale,” she whispered as she was hit with a wave of guilt. Because of her and her need for blood, this male had disregarded a pledge he'd made to himself and to his God.

“Shh.” His lips brushed gently against hers. “I am not the only one who sees you in a hopeful light. Many lost far worse than I. Both Remy and Arak lost their heart mates. Remy's belief in Dara's return has never wavered.”

“And Arak?”

Bale's eyes filled with sadness. “Saraknyal is no more.”

“I don't understand.”

“She was not human, but one of us—a warrior. She would have been with us had not Remy's mate been so close to giving birth. Saraknyal decided to stay behind to protect those we'd loved.”

“He must resent me,” she said hoarsely.

“No. Never think that. Arak has not stopped campaigning for you since the moment I brought you home with me.”

“You make it sound like a war,” Faith murmured with a small smile.

“It was. I fought hard against the knowledge that you were my mate.”

Her smile turned into a frown. “Thanks a lot.”

Bale wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her hard against him. “I told you, I was afraid. Now I need to take a shower. How about you join me?” His voice grew husky as he leaned down, his lips hovering a fraction of an inch from hers.

Rising on her toes, Faith closed the distance, kissing him quickly before dropping back down to her normal height. “I've already showered. I need to get home so I can change for work. Doors open at seven.”

Bale's eyes narrowed. “You are home.”

“I am?” she asked with a teasing lilt to her voice. The soft growl that escaped his chest drew up the corners of her lips. “Are you sure you're not a shifter?”

“Don't tempt me, baby,” he warned in a soft voice. “I've been dreaming of tying you to our bed since the first time you mentioned leaving me.”

Faith snorted as she backed away from him and folded her arms across her chest. “Uh-huh.”

Bale grinned just before he rushed her, lifting her and throwing her over his shoulder. Faith beat at his back halfheartedly, laughing the entire time as he carried her from the bathroom and dumped her onto the bed. He was on top of her before she could even sit up, pinning her hands above her head and nuzzling her neck.

“Where is your home?”

“Twenty-eight forty-two South King Street,” she said, giggling as she squirmed under him.

His teeth nipped her skin, and his growl of displeasure reverberated in her ear before his fingers began teasing her sides. “Where?”

Faith's giggles turned into bouts of laughter as Bale increased the pressure, tickling without mercy. “Here,” she cried. “Here with you.”

“Good answer,” he whispered as he stared down at her, his face radiating satisfaction. “I live a dangerous life, and I won't tolerate knowing my mate is vulnerable. I want you here with me always. No. I need you here with me.”

“Well, okay, then.” Faith wrapped her arms around Bale's neck. “But with everything that has been going on, I worry about Hope being alone. And I hate to just leave her. Anyway, what about all my stuff?”

“We'll work it out. As for your sister, she is now under my protection. Your family is my family.”

Faith felt her insides melt at his proclamation. “Who would have thought under all that muscle lived the soul of a sensitive male?”

Bale snorted. “No. Just a dominant one. What's mine stays mine. Now, are you sure I can't convince you to join me?”

“Sorry, but no.” She grinned at his look of disappointment. “And you have about twenty minutes before I leave. I suggest you make the most of it.”

“You leave this fortress and you will find yourself tied to this bed. I've never been into whips and chains, but baby, with you I could make concessions.”

Faith pushed at his chest as she glanced over his shoulder at the watch on her wrist. “Tick. Tick.”

“Tick, tick, my ass,” Bale mumbled as he rose off her and strode into the bathroom. But he proceeded to take the quickest shower of his life, because he did not doubt for a minute Faith would hold to her threat.

As he got dressed, concealing more weapons than usual on various parts of his body, he glanced over his shoulder at her. She sat on the bed, fidgeting impatiently. “I have to attend the nightly meeting before we head out.”

“Bale—” She began to protest, but he cut her off.

“I meant what I said, Faith. You try to leave without me tonight and this abbey will become your prison. Another half hour won't kill you.”

“Do I have any choice?” she mumbled in annoyance.

“No.” Bale turned to hide his grin, but Faith caught a glimpse of it anyway.

“Bastard.”

He chuckled as he pulled her into his arms. “I'm the bastard who loves you,” he added, and she couldn't help herself; she melted right into his embrace. “Will you need to feed tonight? Because I'd prefer to take care of that here instead of at the club.”

“No. I should be good for another day or two.”

He searched her face. “Are you sure?”

Faith nodded.

“I can't say I'm not relieved you can go some time without needing me. If something were to put me out of commission for any length of time, your health will not be at risk.” His lips nipped lightly at her neck. “But you don't need an excuse to bite me. It feels so damn good, I could become addicted.”

She met his grin with a soft smile. “You are not the only one.”

“Then we'll have to work something out,” he murmured, tightening his arm around her briefly.

Anything else Bale might have said was lost when a knock sounded on the door and Arak called through the wood, “Meeting in five.”

Bale sighed. “But first, duty calls.”

Chapter Eleven

Faith felt very self-conscious when six pairs of eyes turned to her as she and Bale entered what appeared to be a large dining room. Males were scattered about the area, some sitting at the large wooden table, others on a leather couch and a set of chairs in one corner. She was familiar with them all, at least by sight, except one.

And this male was different. He was large like the rest, with dark auburn hair that fell to his chin. But it wasn't his looks that set him apart. It was his manner of dress. A tan Stetson covered his head, while brown and black cowboy boots encased his feet. He wore brown chaps—not the biker variety Kash preferred, but those with actual fringes—over blue jeans and a Garth Brooks T-shirt.

The only other male who quite possibly stood out any more was Levi, in his black wool slacks and gray silk button-down shirt. The rest looked like members of a biker gang. Shit, for all Faith knew, they could be.

Behind them, Kash entered the room with Hope. Faith went to take a step toward her sister when Bale wrapped his arm around her waist, turning to survey the other males in the room. “How about someone tell me why you assholes thought my mate had tried to kill me?”

The cowboy slid his watchful gaze from her to Bale. “Because I saw her.”

His statement pissed Faith off. “That's mighty interesting, since I wasn't even there.”

“No?” His tone left little doubt that he didn't believe her. “Then explain this.”

He tossed something at her, but before she could react, Bale caught it in his fist. She stared in shock at the object.

“Where did you get that?” Clutched within Bale's hand was a knife—her knife. To be more accurate, he was holding the knife she had used on the Rabisu demon not quite one week ago.

“That was what was protruding from your mate's abdomen.” He said “mate” as if it were a dirty word, and Faith instantly disliked this male.

Ignoring Cowboy, Faith glanced from the blade to Bale. “I don't understand. I got jumped outside my condo Thursday night by a Rabisu demon. When I got free, I stabbed the beast with that before it dissipated. What attacked you?”

“A Rabisu demon,” Bale replied quietly.

Faith broke away from Bale, ignoring the intense look in his eyes. “Jesus, none of this makes any sense.”

Before Bale could respond, Hope spoke up. “Wait one minute. How the hell did you get away from a Rabisu demon? The only vampires that might be able to survive such an attack are several thousand years old.”

Faith winced at the growl that bubbled from Bale's throat. She'd really hoped he wouldn't realize that. But ignoring him, she glared at Hope. "I should also need to feed every twelve hours, but I don't. With Bale's blood, I can go three days. And I'm stronger than I should be."

"You were going to tell me about all of this when?"

Faith found herself staring up into Bale's very pissed-off expression. She threw a look at Hope that said *thanks a lot*, then narrowed her eyes at Bale. "I wasn't. And you know, you walked out on me, so I didn't really think you gave a damn."

Bale leaned down, his lips a fraction of an inch from her ear. "Baby, I'll be getting that rope tonight. I'm sure Jet has a nice long piece I can borrow."

As a blush crept over her skin, Faith seriously hoped the Grigori didn't have the excellent hearing shifters had. It was bad enough Bale was threatening to tie her up; she didn't need the others to know. Shit, Hope would never let her live it down.

"Then I'll ante up and tell you I also had a visit from a red-eyed sharp tooth in the parking lot of my club. The very same bastard you told me you were going to take care of. He thought threatening Hope would get me off his back. You know, he's a hard son of a bitch to find."

With a satisfied smirk, Faith squeezed between Arak and Zeke on the couch, glad to see Bale had forgotten about the rope, until he pointed an accusing finger at her. "Are you telling me you have been out hunting that damn demon?"

Crap. Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned that part, but she didn't like being told what she could and could not do. She'd moved out from her father's nest to get away from such restrictions. And she wasn't weak. Nor was she useless.

Faith opened her mouth to protest, but Bale shook the protruding finger at her. "Last night you couldn't even walk across the room without aid. Arak had to carry you. You better have been joking, Faith."

Shit, he'd used her name; Bale was really angry. "For a couple of days I was feeling really strong. He had threatened my sister—my *still-human* sister. And I didn't think I could depend on you, Bale."

Bale made a disturbing sound of anger mixed with frustration as he turned from her, ripping his hand through his hair.

"See, Bale, I told you females were nothing but trouble. You should have listened to me." Baldy was grinning like an ass.

Faith glared at him, her gaze sweeping over his large frame. Only a black leather vest covered his broad, tattoo-ridden chest, partially concealing the silver rings protruding from his nipples. "This coming from a male who dresses like one of the Village People." Her eyes traveled to the Cowboy. "Really, people, the seventies are over."

As she rolled her eyes and leaned back into the couch, Arak burst into a fit of laughter, with Kash snickering behind them. "God, Bale, I already love her." Arak threw his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer to him.

Faith smiled at him. "Back at ya."

"Shut the hell up, Arak." Faith glanced at Bale. He was looking at her again, the finger pointing back at her. "Don't think insulting my brothers is going to get you out of this." Bale's gaze then slid to Cowboy. "But seriously, Jet, she does have a point."

The cowboy, apparently named Jet, rubbed his eye with his middle finger, aiming the action directly at Bale. Then he turned his narrowed gaze on Arak. "Yeah, yeah. Very funny, asshole. At least I can afford a whole pair of jeans."

Arak glanced down at the two big holes his knees protruded from; then he looked up, grinning. "Wait until you see the back. It shows off my ass nicely."

He jumped to his feet, and Faith tried to stifle a laugh. The back of Arak's jeans had a hole the size of Rhode Island where one pocket should have been. Thankfully he was wearing a pair of black silk boxers, or Faith would have gotten an eyeful.

Hope leaned over the back of the couch toward Faith's ear. "And it's a mighty fine ass."

Arak turned and grinned at her. "Why, thank you."

Faith watched her sister nod, her gaze fixed on Arak's butt. Baldy, who Faith would learn was named Zeke, leaned across her, his eyes focused intently on Hope.

"Sweet pea, you can see my ass anytime you like."

Hope glared at him. "When hell freezes." She backed away from the couch, returning to her spot next to Kash, and Arak sat back down.

"As amusing as all this is, can we resume our meeting now?" Remy asked with a hint of sarcasm.

"Don't think I'll forget. You and I will finish this later," Bale promised Faith as he slumped into a vacant chair, his eyes lingering over the arm Arak had draped around her shoulders.

Faith gave a snort and folded her arms in front of her. She hadn't exactly expected her attempt at diversion to work, but she had hoped.

"As everyone is aware, there is a traitor among the Grigori. Bale's second attack only serves to remind us that extreme caution is needed and expected. No one can afford to lower his diligence. And no one is to patrol alone. We do not know where Raym is, and Penny managed to shake Levi last night." Remy paused, glancing around the room at every male. "Kash will remain here, manning the gates. He will also be responsible for the phones, so if anyone needs a pickup, it will be up to Kash to either pull a pair from the streets or go himself. Levi and I will stay north, while Jet and Arak will take the south. Bale, Zeke will be with you. I assume you want the downtown area." Remy's gaze traveled over Faith before returning to Bale. "What are your exact plans?"

"I'll be at Club Dominus until around four." Bale arched a brow at Faith. When she nodded, he continued. "Then I need to take Faith to get some of her things."

He watched her as if he waited for her to contradict him, and after her teasing earlier about where she was going to reside, he probably did expect her to gainsay him. But Faith wisely kept her mouth shut. The truth was, she didn't want to be anywhere without Bale, especially after discovering the same Rabisu demon had attacked them both. And she figured the longer she could get Hope to remain, the safer her twin would be.

"Am I the only one still concerned that her blade was used on Bale?"

Faith narrowed her eyes at Cowboy. She couldn't think of him any other way. The hat and fringe were way too distracting.

"Yeah." Bale leaned back in his seat, his gaze doing a leisurely sweep over her.

Cowboy snorted in disgust. "You need to think with your other head."

Faith's jaw dropped; she was overcome with indignation. What the hell had she ever done to this asshole? But Bale only laughed.

"Afraid to disappoint you, brother, but at the moment I am. Did you actually see Faith stick that blade in me? Because I *did* see a demon. So the real question is, why was her knife used? Was it an attempt to divert our attention? If so, that means someone who knew of your power also knew Remy would request you to replace Caym."

"Which would make Penny innocent," Remy stated. "She couldn't have possibly known Jet would be the one I'd call in."

"But points the finger at Raym," Arak added. "Before Jet was transferred to Texas, they were both here for several decades. Raym would remember how close we all were."

"And someone wants Faith left unprotected." Zeke's quiet statement sent a ripple of tension through the room. All eyes turned to him, some in surprise. But apparently Bale had already come to the same conclusion.

"Exactly." Bale's gaze never left hers. "The question is why? Is it just because Faith is my mate and someone wants to hurt me? Or is there another reason?"

As if sensing her discomfort, Bale reached a hand toward her. Faith didn't resist when he pulled her off the couch and settled her in his lap, tightly encased in his arms. With a sigh, she leaned back against him, letting the feel of his body comfort her.

Looking across the room at her sister, Faith contemplated just what her actions meant for her sister's welfare. Had she put her twin in danger when she'd gotten involved with Bale? "What about Hope?"

"Until we know why you have been targeted, I can't answer that." Bale stroked the back of her neck gently, and his touch helped to still some of the fear his words generated.

"Hope, I should have made you return to Dad's when the Rabisu demon attacked me, but I had hoped it was a fluke. You really should do so now."

Hope smirked at her. "Not happening. And why would anyone come after *me*? I'm nothing to any of you."

Kash shook his head. "You are the sister of Bale's mate. That makes you family. Not only to Bale but to all of us. Raym would understand that." Kash turned his attention from Hope to Bale and Faith. "Hope can remain here with me. And if it would help, we could spend an hour or so tonight getting some things for them both from the condo."

"I can't just stay here all night. I have work." Hope's protests seemed to fall on deaf ears.

"And where would she sleep?" Zeke asked. The question was asked in a neutral enough tone, but the intense look he cast at Kash made Faith wonder if something was going on that she was unaware of.

Kash shrugged. "Do you have a preference?" He seemed amused by Zeke's question and flung an arm around Hope's shoulders.

Flashing him a frown, Hope pushed Kash's arm from her, then glared at Zeke. "Excuse me, but I really don't think that is any of your business. Anyway, I'm not staying here. I have a life, a boyfriend. I'm sure he wouldn't mind my staying with him."

"And put his pitiful human ass in danger?"

Zeke's snide, taunting tone made it obvious he thought little of Hope's boyfriend, and Faith watched in fascination as her usually vocal sister stammered and turned red with anger.

Hope's mouth opened and closed; then her eyes narrowed at Zeke. "You needn't worry yourself about his ass. He has no complaints about how I take care of it."

Zeke snorted in disbelief. "Only because he doesn't have a clue what to do with you."

"Oh, and you do?"

"Sweet pea, I would rock your world."

Hope gave a humorless laugh. "In your dreams, biker boy. First off, no male is that good. And secondly, you just don't do it for me."

Zeke's gaze traveled over her; then a slow grin took over his face. "Keep telling yourself that, sweetness."

"You arrogant prick."

Zeke eagerly watched Hope take a few impulsive steps toward him, but before she had gotten an arm's length away from Kash, the other male grabbed her wrist.

Faith glanced at Bale, wondering just what the hell was going on. Was her sister even safe here at the abbey? He resumed the soothing strokes on her neck, gently pulling her closer to him. His lips brushed against her ear, and he placed a soft kiss there before whispering, "I'll talk to him."

His attention riveted back to Hope, Zeke, and Kash. "You have two choices, dear sister. You can stay here where we can protect you, or you can be escorted back to your father's nest. From there it would be up to him to see to your safety."

Hope blanched as her pleading gaze turned to Faith. The twins knew there really was no choice. If their father learned all that had occurred in the last couple of weeks and all they had kept from him, there would be hell to pay for them both. And once he got Hope under his roof, she would have a hard time getting back out. Faith's only salvation was that her father would not interfere with another male's claim on her, at least not a mating claim.

Hope sighed, knowing she had lost this battle. "Just keep him away from me." She pointed an accusing finger at Zeke.

"The feeling's mutual, sweet pea," Zeke drawled as he dragged his gaze over Hope one last time before turning to Bale. "When you are ready, I'll be waiting by the car."

Faith's eyes narrowed at Hope, watching her sister frown as her gaze trailed Zeke's exit. The males in the room had already turned their attention to how to track down Raym, but Faith studied her twin. Hope remained next to Kash, her eyes now fixed on the floor as she chewed on her thumbnail. There was quite obviously something going on between her and Zeke. Faith only hoped her twin's attention had moved on before her Transfiguration. The last thing her flighty sister needed was to be physically tied to Zeke the way Faith was tied to Bale. There was no room for boredom or moving on once mated.

* * * *

Faith arrived at the club with Bale and Zeke in tow. She'd spent the entire drive clutching the seat in the back of Zeke's black Dodge Charger. The male drove like a maniac. And she rolled her eyes when he ran a hand lovingly down the side along the orange and yellow flames before he stepped away.

"Would you like some time alone?" She watched him with a raised brow as she and Bale waited for him by the back door.

Chuckling, Bale wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Zeke turned toward her, a small smile gracing his lips.

“She's the only female I can count on not to annoy the piss out of me. She's dependable, loyal, and hot as all hell.”

Faith snorted. “She's a car.”

“Yeah,” Zeke drawled, glancing back at the vehicle in question.

Faith laughed. “You are insane.”

She was amused by the sheepish little shrug Zeke gave her. Faith unlocked the door to her club and stepped inside, Bale and Zeke following.

“If you are so against women, why were you harassing my sister earlier?”

“Faith,” Bale said sharply. “I said I would talk to him.”

Faith sighed as she lifted her shoulders. She met Zeke's narrowed gaze, not letting the way his chest suddenly puffed out intimidate her. She noticed all the brothers liked to use their immense size when there was something they didn't want to get into.

“Not gonna work.”

Zeke glanced at Bale from the corner of his eye. “She's going to be a pain in my ass, isn't she?”

“Yeah.”

Faith folded her arms across her chest, annoyed at her mate's reply. “And still you're going to answer me.”

“What can I say? Your sister has an extra special ability to *really* piss me off. A PhD in it.”

“That's not an answer.”

Zeke arched an eyebrow as he looked down at her. “It's all you're going to get, sunshine.”

“Fine. Just stay away from her. I'm sure you don't want to be any more bound to her than she does to you. Drinking your blood very well could leave her physically tied to you. Be sure to remember that.”

Zeke turned a questioning glance at Bale, and Faith watched her mate sigh.

“From the moment I laid eyes on Faith in that alley, I knew deep down she was mine. But if I hadn't fed her during her Transfiguration, she very likely wouldn't be with me right now. I would have continued to deny her, thinking I was protecting her. But by consuming my blood, she is unable to feed from anyone else, so without me, she would starve.”

Bale's gaze raked over her, hot and possessive, leaving trails of tingling sensation in its wake. Faith stepped into his embrace, allowing him to hold her close. His lips grazed the top of her head, his hands settling across her lower back and his fingers on her ass.

Bale glanced over the top of her head. “Whether it is due to the fact that we are mates or if such a reaction will occur between any Grigori and vampire, we are not certain.”

“Do the others know about this?” Zeke asked quietly. Faith turned her head toward Zeke and noticed his face held a startled expression mixed with something Faith thought looked like jealousy.

Bale nodded. “Everyone else was in the infirmary the night Hope explained Faith's condition. It is not something we need to concern ourselves with in general, but only in our

dealings with Hope. If any of my brothers ignore this warning, I will see to it they take care of my sister, mate or not.”

Zeke was silent a moment, then acknowledged the warning Bale had just given with a brisk nod. Before he had a chance to speak any further, Prue called out to Faith as she entered the club. Zeke took a step back, watching Prue like a hawk on its prey, as if searching for any sign that she might now be a threat. Faith rolled her eyes when he finally took a seat off to the side on one of the bar stools. Look “distrustful” up in a dictionary, and there would be a picture of Bale and his brothers.

“Where the hell have you been?” Prue tossed the monster-size black backpack she carried with her everywhere onto the bar top. “I’ve been calling all day. You just disappeared last night, and I had no clue what to say to your father. He must have called like six times, twice at home. Damn it, Faith, stop avoiding him, because he’s seriously becoming a pain in my ass.”

Amused by Prue’s tirade, Faith tried to hide her smile. When the rant continued, she figured she had not succeeded.

“Oh, you bitch. If you were off getting laid while I had to deal with your bullshit, you are seriously going to owe me.”

“You are absolutely right. I should have let you know what was going on, but when I was told Bale had been injured, my mind went to shit.”

Prue’s gaze raked over Bale’s long frame. Glancing over his shoulder at Zeke briefly, she then returned her gaze to Faith. “He appears fine now.” She snapped the piece of gum she had in her mouth. “So...he’s, like, your mate now?”

“Like yes.” Bale’s deep voice resonated through the empty club, a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

Prue grinned at Bale. “Okay, then.” She turned back to her backpack and dug through it until she pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights and a purple lighter. With one cigarette between her two fingers, she pointed at Faith. “But call your father, because if he wakes me before three again, you and I are going rounds, girlfriend.” Then Prue lit the cigarette and headed behind the bar. She began to pull down bottles of her favorite alcohol and lined them in the well for easy access.

“Though I am dreading it, I’ll call him in a few. You know he’s going to be pissed.” Faith sat on a stool closest to her friend.

“You knew that weeks ago, Faith. Unless you plan on never having contact with any of the vamps in this town again, you’d better suck it up and call him.” Prue’s gaze followed Bale as he took a seat beside Zeke. “What’s the deal with Tweedledee and Tweedledum?”

Faith snorted in amusement. “Just don’t call them that to their faces. Either of them. Their sense of humor is limited, especially Zeke’s.” The eager gleam that took over Prue’s features caused Faith to sigh. She shouldn’t have mentioned that neither male would appreciate Prue’s nicknames. It was like waving a red flag in front of a bull. “They are here because Bale was concerned when I told him about the visit from the Lilu demon.”

Prue paused as she wiped down the bar top. “Really? And what are they going to do about it?”

“That is what Bale and his friends do. They hunt demons.”

“I didn’t realize shifters had gotten into the game.”

“This pack has,” Faith replied, allowing Prue to continue to think Bale was a shape-shifter. It was easier than trying to explain what he really was. And she got the impression from things Bale had said that the Grigori didn't want to be acknowledged.

“Well, that *is* cool. You two can work together.”

Faith grabbed Prue's hand. “Just be careful out there. It seems some of the demons have decided to collaborate. You might be targeted because you work for me.”

Prue's smile turned deadly. “Oh, I hope so.”

“Prue, I'm serious. I was attacked by a Rabisu demon outside my condo.”

“And still you lived.”

Faith shrugged under Prue's narrowed gaze. “Yeah. By the grace of God, I got lucky. The next person might not.”

Prue patted Faith's hand before pulling away. “Don't worry about me. Or Tempy. We can handle ourselves. It's Hope you should be concerned about.”

“I've got her in protective custody.”

Prue winced. “Bet she's lovin' you right now.”

Faith laughed humorlessly. “Not so much. But she'll live to get over it.”

“And that's all that matters.” With a nod, Prue turned her back on Faith and went back to setting up her bar.

Faith swiveled on her stool, her gaze taking in Bale and Zeke at the other end, heads bent together in conversation. As she went to walk past the pair, Bale's arm snaked across her waist and reeled her to his side.

“And where do you think you are going, baby?” he asked quietly.

“I have some paperwork I need to work on in my office. You two can wait out here if you like.” Faith nodded to her friend, watching as she grabbed two shot glasses. “Prue will get you something to drink.”

Bale's lips pressed in a firm line. “Wrong answer, Faith. The correct response would be to ask me nicely to ensure there are no demons hiding in your office so you may enter.”

Faith stared at Bale a moment before she snapped her jaw shut. The audacity of the bastard. *Ask him nicely*. She smiled as sweetly as she could without gagging. “Would you please, oh master of mine, get up off your ass and check my office, because little ol' me needs your protection from the big bad guys whose very stench would have me quaking in fear.”

Bale leaned back, arm resting on the bar top, and narrowed his gaze at her. “Zeke, do you have any rope in the trunk of your car?”

“Sure do,” was Zeke's amused response as Faith folded her arms and stared at her mate.

“If anything even ropelike in appearance comes in the briefest contact with my body, you had better not ever sleep again. Just remember, handcuffs are harder to rip your way out of, and Hope has a nice, sturdy pair.”

It was Zeke who frowned. “What the hell is she doing with handcuffs?”

“Hope is a chronic dater, and one of her guys was a cop. Such a shame he only lasted a couple of months. He was one of the few I really liked.”

A funny noise escaped Zeke's lips before he threw back the shot Prue set in front of him.

“What did you do to the poor guy?” Prue asked, pouring Zeke another. “He looks like he swallowed his tongue.”

Bale chuckled softly, and Faith tensed as he pulled her closer to him. “Mate, I think you need a reminder of just who is in charge here.”

“And I think you need to realize I am not some weak human.” Bale's eyes filled with sorrow for just a second, but it was long enough to flood Faith with guilt. “I'm sorry. That was uncalled-for. But because of you, I am not a weak fledgling. Have some faith in that, Bale. That's all I ask.” At his tortured nod, Faith smiled and kissed him softly. “Now, if you would check out my office for me...I really need to get some work done. I have to make up for last night.”

Bale seemed relieved that she was not fighting his need to protect her, and Faith figured it took nothing away from her to give him this. Once he was appeased that no one was hiding in the shadows and the only entrance was through the hallway he could monitor from the bar, Bale left her to catch up on her paperwork.

Chapter Twelve

Faith stared at the red light blinking on her phone, knowing that at least half the messages were from her father. She had no desire to pick up the receiver and listen to them, much less return any, but knew she had no choice. Her father was persistent when he wanted something, and he obviously wanted to speak to her.

After wading through the messages, Faith set about dealing with them. Three were work related and required simple confirmations of orders. She played phone tag with her older sister and a friend, leaving messages for both Grace and Charity. Then she broke off a date she'd made two weeks prior with Doug, a guy she'd been seeing off and on for the past year. His job sent him out of town frequently, and he'd been the perfect boyfriend—not around enough to get on her nerves.

With a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, she chewed on her thumbnail while she listened to the ringtone, waiting for someone to answer at her father's nest. She had just about given up when a deep, resonating voice said, "Hello."

"Eli, it's Faith. Is my dad around?"

The two-hundred-year-old enforcer for the northwestern vampires tsk-tsked at her. "No, darling. Your dad is out."

Faith sighed heavily. "Damn. Do you expect him back soon?"

"I don't suppose he'll return until well after dawn."

Faith brought her finger to her mouth, pretending to use it to induce vomiting. That was code for her father had found himself another dumb, big-boobed blonde who was attracted to his good looks and money and, in exchange for lots of shiny things, gave her father sex. And unbeknownst to the woman, blood.

"But I do know he's been in quite a fit," Eli added. "You should have phoned before now."

"Don't start, Eli. I'll hear enough from him. It's about time you all understood I have a life that doesn't revolve around him."

Eli snorted. "He's not only your dad. He's also your master."

His censure had her rolling her eyes. Like she needed the reminder that her father was in charge of the northwestern vampire population. If only Eli knew how little that now meant to her. Before Bale, maybe she'd have given a crap. But now...not so much.

"Just tell him I called. I'm at the club but don't plan on staying past closing. It's been a long day, so I'll tackle the cleanup before I open tomorrow."

"All right. I'll give him your message."

Faith clicked the button, ending the call before tossing the cordless phone on her desk. Leaning back in her chair, she closed her eyes. While avoiding a lecture from her father was welcome, she would have much preferred getting the conversation over with. Having it hanging

over her head did not help her level of anxiety. And to top that off, she missed Bale. Not having been separated even two hours, she already felt the need to seek him out. And that just thoroughly pissed her off.

Finally, with a sigh, she gave in to the desire. Stepping into the main area of the club, she did a quick perusal. Everything seemed to be in order. Prue was handling the bar while her two waitresses dealt with those patrons seated at the tables around the dance floor. Twentysomethings moved to the sound of Marilyn Manson, and everyone appeared to be having a hell of a good time. Well...except for Bale and Zeke.

The pair was now seated on the stools at a corner table, surrounded by admirers. Faith would have enjoyed the expression on Zeke's face had she not been so determined to get to Bale. Zeke could only be described as appearing to suffer from severe constipation. Bale, on the other hand, just looked annoyed. And as Faith moved closer, she understood why. Standing at his left elbow was the friendly blonde from the other night.

His gaze raked possessively over her as she approached. Hesitating only a moment, she considered how to get close enough to touch him. The clearest path was through the blonde, but since Faith was not a ghost, her options were to either ask the woman to move or push her out of the way. Liking the second one better, she used her shoulder to check Bale's friend, causing the woman to stumble back, then wormed her way between the two.

"Excuse me! I was standing there," the blonde said indignantly.

Faith might have responded had Bale not beat her to it. "And now my mate is." His hand caressed her cheek gently as he glanced down at her. "Everything okay, baby?"

"No. I needed to see you, and I'm not happy about it." A look of smug satisfaction settled over Bale's features. As if she weren't annoyed enough. "Don't make me hit you."

He chuckled, leaned down, and brushed his lips against her neck. "I missed you too."

Faith sighed, melting into him, while behind her, Zeke made a gagging noise.

"Christ. If you two are going to start that shit, I'm going to be sick."

Pulling back, Faith narrowed her eyes at Bale's brother, but Bale only continued to laugh. "So close your eyes."

Zeke snorted. "Thank God you are the only one afflicted with this malady. This whole lovesick bullshit is just embarrassing, Bale."

Looking up at her mate, Faith asked, "Did he just compare me to a disease?"

"I believe he did." Bale grinned down at her, and Faith slugged his arm.

"I really don't like some of your friends."

"Yeah, I know. We're uppity fucking angels," Zeke mumbled.

Faith's eyes were drawn to Zeke as she contemplated his words. "That has Hope written all over it."

"Your sister can be quite vocal when she gets going."

"Tell me something I *don't* know. I've had to deal with her for twenty-four years and still have an eternity to look forward to."

"An eternity? I'm requesting a transfer," Zeke muttered under his breath.

“And we'll miss you so.” Sarcasm dripped from Faith's lips, contradicting the innocent smile she flashed his way. Zeke might have had a quick retort, but voices raised in anger caught Faith's attention.

Turning, she discovered Bale's blonde friend standing between two very disgruntled men and eagerly observing the pair flinging insults at each other. Then she glanced over in Bale's direction, and her entire appearance changed in a split second. Her eyes grew wide, and Faith was particularly impressed with the way her bottom lip quivered. She had perfected the whole “damsel in distress,” and she practically begged Bale to save her scrawny ass.

When the first punch was thrown, Faith's attention turned back to the men. Quickly sizing up the situation, she realized her bouncers were busy breaking up a catfight on the dance floor. No way was she going to let these two knuckleheads trash her club. She rushed forward and received a fist in the face for her trouble.

Knocked backward, she slammed into a nearby table. The impact wasn't hard enough to do any damage, but it did cause her to stumble and lose her balance. As she went down, she heard a bellow and saw a smile break out across the blonde's face. From where her ass had planted on the floor, she spotted a black blur grab the two men by the backs of their heads, then winced at the sound of their foreheads connecting. Both men slumped to the ground, and the blonde stepped forward to eagerly thank her rescuer—only the black blur immediately turned his back on the woman and stalked toward Faith.

“Oh shit,” she muttered, her eyes focusing on the look of pure rage encompassing Bale's face.

“You think?” he barked. With narrowed eyes, he examined her cheek, his thumb brushing gently over the injured skin. “You'll have a hell of a bruise.” He pulled her against him and squeezed her tightly before moving her to arm's length. “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

“I was trying to keep my club from being wrecked.”

“And if one of those fools had pulled a knife or a gun?”

“I'm kind of hard to kill, remember?” she hissed.

“But not injure. Damn it, Faith. You purposely put yourself in harm's way. Just how the hell am I supposed to react to that?”

“Can we discuss this in my office?” she asked quietly.

The muscle in his jaw flexed wildly, while his eyes burned with a mixture of anger and fear. Then with a brisk nod, he helped her to her feet.

Once ensconced from public view, Faith ran a hand slowly up Bale's chest, coming to a rest on his clenched jaw. “I've been hunting demons since I was eighteen, and damn it, I am good at it. I know my limits. I never would have purposely sought out an Alu or Rabisu demon.” She paused, staring up at him. Her heart pounded in fear, and a sick sensation settled in the pit of her stomach when Bale pulled back from her and strode to the other side of the room. “Bale, I accept that you need to protect me, but you need to deal with the fact that I am not some helpless bimbo. I left my father's nest to get away from this controlling attitude, to maintain some freedom over my life. I don't need a father figure. I need a lover...a mate.”

Bale did not respond but continued his pacing in front of the door. Faith whispered his name, and he stopped midstride, turning his irate gaze toward her. “So just like that, I'm supposed to be okay with the fact that you repeatedly place yourself in unsafe or downright

dangerous situations. Do you not grasp what would happen to me should you die? My brothers would have to hunt me like one of your damn demons, Faith, because your death would send me straight to Hell.”

“What about *your* death?” she hissed frantically. “Because apparently that poison I got hit with can do more than just knock you on your ass. You are not indestructible. But I am just supposed to contently sit at home and wait for you to return to me, never knowing if you are lying somewhere, slowly dying.”

Bale raked a hand through his hair, then clutched the back of his neck, his head hanging. A low growl rumbled from deep within his chest. “So what is it you want? Do you really want to spend an eternity killing things? Because if you get into the game, that is what you have to look forward to. There is no backing out.”

“I'm already in it,” she said quietly. Bale lifted his head, his gaze boring into hers. She stepped toward him cautiously, stopping when she was within reach without actually touching him. “But I'm not asking for Remy to send me on assignments. I want to go out with you. I couldn't handle being forced to remain behind.”

“Then we have reached an impasse, because I could not patrol with you.”

His words hit her like a punch in the gut, and Faith turned from Bale, unwilling to let him see the tears in her eyes. He sighed raggedly behind her, and then she felt his arms wrap around her, pulling her into his embrace.

“Christ, you mean everything to me,” he said softly. “My life is fraught with danger, and there will be times when fighting will be unavoidable. But the thought of you seeking a confrontation leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.” He tightened his embrace, his face nuzzling the top of her head. “Give me time to come to terms with your needs. Refrain from patrolling for the time being.”

Faith didn't want to agree. She was afraid of the shelf Bale would place her on once the words left her mouth, and she stiffened in his arms. “And then what?”

“We train until you wish you were dead. And then we train some more.” As she slumped against him, Bale kissed the top of her head. “But I will never just allow you to wander through the night, seeking out trouble, baby. Only assigned missions.”

“It's a start.”

Bale turned her in his arms, his fingers burrowing through her hair as he forced her to look into his eyes. “It's all you'll get. When I have determined you are ready.”

When she was ready. Faith rolled her eyes. She wasn't delusional enough to believe Bale would ever find her ready. But what were her options? Accepting his agreement to train her with the understanding more would come later, or leaving him? Neither was very appealing. One boxed her in a cage; the other left her without her mate and dead from starvation. They both sucked.

* * * *

Hope hadn't wanted to remain at the abbey, but she was even less eager to allow any of the males to invade her personal space. At least it was Kash and not Zeke. There was just something about Zeke that seriously rubbed her the wrong way. And if the way he spoke to her was any indication, the feeling was mutual.

As she moved to enter her apartment, an arm shot out, preventing her forward motion.

“Wait here, doll.” Kash shouldered past her and grasped one of the twin twenty-inch swords he had strapped at his sides all the time, brandishing it before him.

Hope rolled her eyes. She wasn't altogether sure just how she'd found herself in this position but knew she only had Faith to thank. Her twin certainly owed her...that was for sure.

“All clear,” Kash called from inside the condo, and Hope found him in the dining room she had converted into a small office. He was standing at the drafting table, flipping through pages of her work.

Horrified, she raced forward. “What do you think you are doing?” She began gathering the scattered pages, clutching them to her chest. No one saw her work until she was finished and she had sent it to her editor. Not even Faith.

“What is this?” Kash was studying one of the pages. When Hope lunged for it, he lifted the paper above her head, and all her attempts to snatch it away were unsuccessful.

“None of your business,” she hissed as she continued futilely trying to reach her work, but the bastard was close to a foot taller than her, and even jumping up didn't help her nab the paper from his grip.

“Is this what I think it is?” Kash's eyes, narrowed on the series of sketches, were filled with disbelief. “Is this *The Vampire Hunter*?”

“Yes, it is.” Hope ripped the paper from his fingers. *The Vampire Hunter* was a series of graphic comic books she had begun writing shortly after her mother had been murdered, based loosely on the encounters she and Faith had with demons. In recent weeks, specifically since meeting Bale and his brothers, she had begun introducing several new male characters in the book she was working on. Looking at the paper in her hand, she realized it wouldn't take a genius to figure out she had used the angel from the tapestry as inspiration for one—Zeke, with long blond hair.

“This is what you do?”

His tone turned her horror to anger. “Why sound so surprised? Didn't think I could rub two brain cells together to form one cohesive thought? Don't let the blonde hair fool you.”

Kash folded his arms across his chest and arched an eyebrow. “Have I ever implied I thought you unintelligent? Zeke loves this series. I guess I just assumed it was written by a human—a man.” He shrugged, then grinned. “I would make an excellent action hero, don't you think? Maybe you could add me?” His gaze slid down to the paper in her hand, and Hope knew the resemblance hadn't been lost on Kash.

She sighed. “You're already in there somewhere, you annoying bastard. But I think I'll kill you off.”

The grin slid from his face to be replaced by a frown. “Now that is just mean.” He turned his attention to her drafting table. “So you can work anywhere?”

“In theory, but you would be surprised how important setting can be.”

Kash grinned again, an amused look that irritated her immediately. “I think we can find you the right setting.” He glanced back at the page with Zeke's image. “Most definitely the right setting.”

“Shut up,” she mumbled, her face flaming bright red.

Kash slung an arm around her shoulders. “Our secret, doll, I promise.”

Raising her gaze, Hope met his and realized she could trust Kash not to say a word about her sketches or the fact she had been drawing Zeke's image for weeks. Leaning against him, she sighed. "It means nothing."

Kash placed a light kiss on the top of her head, then moved away from her and began examining her table. Hope didn't know how to take his silence, but she suspected her denials sounded as false to his ears as they did to her own.

"Does this thing fold down?"

"Yes. Your fingers are on the levers right there. Press them in, and it folds inward."

"Good thing we came in Remy's Escalade." Kash flashed a grin before centering his concentration back on taking apart her desk.

Hope gathered her pens, papers, and notes and placed them all neatly into a backpack. After setting the bag just inside the front door, she moved deeper into the apartment. She grabbed a suitcase from the hall closet, rolled it into her bedroom, and began stuffing clothing into the leather case. It couldn't be described as an eager endeavor. She was still highly resentful of the way she'd been neatly ordered about by Bale, and she was not particularly concerned with what went inside. If she spent the entire time in her pajamas, so be it. But Hope spent more time packing Faith's things, and she did so with a sense of regret.

"You know Bale is going to eventually have all of your sister's things moved to the abbey."

She glanced over her shoulder, surprised to find Kash leaning in the doorway. "I know."

"What are you going to do then?"

She shrugged. "I guess I'll find a roommate. I knew this day would come eventually. I just expected a century or two first."

"You could join her. Move to the abbey permanently."

Hope frowned as she imagined just what her life would be like surrounded by Bale and his brothers. She would slowly suffocate. "I think not." She shuddered visibly. "No offense, but some of your brothers are dicks."

Kash laughed, pushing away from the door frame and joining her. "You refer to Zeke."

Hope rolled her eyes. "He's not the only one. Jet isn't exactly a prince. And I'm not certain I'd enjoy spending any time with Levi. But yeah, Zeke is an ass."

"Want to tell me what is going on between you and him?"

"Nothing. There is nothing between Zeke and me."

Kash lifted a brow at her statement. "Really, 'cause I could have sworn—"

"Nothing," Hope repeated, interrupting him.

"You can trust me, Hope."

His quiet tone caused her to nod as a sense of ease filled her. "I know. And if I ever have an answer for that question, you'll be the first to know." She turned her attention back to the suitcase and snapped it shut.

Kash gently grasped her chin. "Zeke can be difficult in the best of times. If you need any help..."

He left the offer hanging, and Hope smiled, affectionately rubbing her cheek against his palm before she pulled back from him. She followed him out to the SUV and climbed into the passenger seat. Glancing into the back, she saw that her white drafting table stood out against the

black interior of the vehicle. Her entire life had been taken over by her sister's mate, and it really just sucked. With a pout she settled into the leather seat, ignoring Kash's chuckle as he climbed in beside her. She could at least be thankful for his friendship. Something good had come out of all this.

* * * *

Before Bale had dragged his mate from sight, Zeke had watched the entire encounter with a large dose of relief. He'd never been unfortunate enough to require possession of a female. In his mind, it was like a pestilence that spread through the body, affecting judgment and reason to the point where a male could find himself in the bowels of Hell before he'd even realized he was walking that path.

Zeke had taken on the role of Grigori for one reason and one reason only: his friendship with Arak. From his very first memory, Arak had been his constant companion. When Saraknyal had stepped into their lives, it had only been natural to love her for no other reason than that she was Arak's mate.

As for the Grigori, they had become a tight-knit group, brothers and sisters in arms. He'd had no qualms about following Remy into battle. Everything his brothers had held dear had been threatened. And he had grown fond of the mortals—the husbands, wives, and children of his brothers and sisters. Their loss had left a hole in his soul. But it was Saraknyal he still mourned.

So while he was willing to acknowledge, if only to himself, that Hope piqued his interest, he was not about to pursue it. He'd watched Arak suffer through the loss of a mate, and he had worried he would lose his best friend also. It was a situation he would never willingly place his brothers in. Not even for a petite blonde vampire who sent his pulse racing.

Glancing around the club, he carefully examined everything and everyone within its perimeter. While Zeke had no desire for a female of his own, he was willing to protect Bale's with his life. Better his death than Bale's. And like the rest of the Grigori, he wouldn't let another mate die on his watch.

His narrowed gaze settled on the demon that was slowly making his way toward him. Ray was the product of a human raped by a low-ranking archdemon. And while appearing to align himself with the demon world, he supplied Zeke with whatever knowledge he gained for the sheer pleasure of seeing Zeke and his brothers destroy those plans to hell. Ray could be a vindictive bastard when provoked, and Zeke had trusted any information Ray tossed his way.

But that was before Zeke had been jumped outside the Mercury and Caym had been terminated. Now he wasn't so sure about Ray and wondered if that vindictiveness he had so highly admired had been turned on him. While he didn't want to believe Ray could have been involved, he wasn't going to take the risk. Not with Faith so close. With a hand on the hilt of his dagger, he watched Ray take a seat across from him.

“Where the hell have you been?” the demon asked before popping a handful of peanuts from a basket in the center of the table into his mouth. “Some serious shit has been going down, and you've apparently been on vacation.”

Zeke slowly raised the bottle of Kilkeny to his lips and shrugged nonchalantly. Grimacing as the piss water Bale was so fond of burst across his taste buds, he signaled for the waitress. While he waited for his bottle of Cabo Wabo, he arched an eyebrow at Ray, skeptically demanding an explanation.

Ray glanced around nervously before leaning forward. “Word has it there is a new asshole in town who has a serious hard-on for you and your brothers.” He glanced longingly at the bottle of beer, then grabbed another handful of peanuts.

Zeke slid the bottle across the table as the waitress set the tequila and a glass in front of him. He wasn't going to drink the crap anyway. “Does this asshole have a name?”

Grinning, Ray took a large gulp from the beer bottle, humming softly in appreciation. Zeke rolled his eyes. There was no accounting for good taste. But what could he expect from a demon?

Ray set the bottle on the table. “I haven't heard his name, but he's an ambitious son of a bitch. He's already terminated Beelzebub's lieutenant general and taken over the position.”

Zeke leaned back, studying Ray. As he watched the play of colors weave throughout the demon's aura, he knew everything Ray had said so far was the truth. It helped ease the disquiet his presence caused Zeke.

“Are you missing one of your own?” Ray asked nonchalantly as he fiddled with the label on the beer bottle, and his question hit Zeke right in the gut.

“Why? Are you saying this new player was a Watcher?”

“This dude pops out of nowhere and suddenly has Beelzebub's ear. Yeah, that's what I think. And Zeke, it's being said he has promised the head of a top Grigori as tribute.”

“Anyone in particular?”

“Not that I've heard. But if he succeeds, it's a big promotion.”

Zeke watched Ray's face turn ashen and knew without looking behind him that Bale was approaching. Like most demons, Ray was terrified of Bale—and probably with good reason. Bale was a mean son of a bitch when crossed.

Ray slid off the stool and stood. “I'm going to be lying low for a while. Things are hot enough here. Below, they are positively hostile.”

Zeke nodded as Ray started to slink away. He could sense Bale right at his back, so he was surprised when Ray paused and glanced over his shoulder.

“Be careful, Zeke. This bastard plans to hit and hit hard.”

“Will do. You too, Ray.”

The demon nodded, then turned and began to make his way through the crowd of ridiculously dressed humans, glancing avidly around him. Sighing, Zeke turned to Bale. Ray hadn't really been able to tell him much. What he needed was proof either damning or clearing Raym. And while he still hoped for his brother's innocence, he was beginning to suspect none would be found.

* * * *

Faith sighed when Bale shoved her behind him. As they'd approached Zeke's table, she'd felt him hesitate for a fraction of a second and had seen the reaction of Zeke's companion when his gaze had rested on Bale. He'd visibly paled and backed up several paces before he fled.

With the perceived threat gone, Bale relaxed, pulling her into his side. She felt like a rag doll, positioned wherever Bale wanted her, and she shot her mate a blazing look. Only he was paying her no attention, his own gaze fixed on Zeke.

“I cannot believe you just allowed that bastard to walk out of here!”

Zeke grinned at Bale's outburst. "What can I say? Ray is useful."

Bale arched a brow as he sat on the edge of a stool, forcing her with a tug to follow him. Faith made sure to dig her elbow into his side, receiving only the mildest grunt for her effort. He maneuvered her in front of him, between his legs, and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on top of her head.

"Beelzebub has a new right hand to do his bidding. Someone who is willing to trade one of us for a higher ranking in Hell."

"Who?" The threat in Bale's voice sent shivers rippling down Faith's spine. She forgot her anger, burrowing deeper into his arms, and he obliged her by tightening his embrace.

"He didn't know, but he did ask if we were missing a brother. Whatever is getting ready to play out, it has Ray running scared. For the first time, I think he's afraid of getting caught on the wrong side."

"And that would be?" asked Faith.

"Us." Zeke met her gaze, his eyes tinged with curiosity as he watched Bale absently rub his knuckles along her jawline.

"Who is Ray?" Faith finally asked, Zeke's ominous words ringing in her ears. She thought it pretty obvious who the target was; Bale had been attacked twice.

"My informant," Zeke explained, lifting his gaze over her head, probably meeting Bale's. "Because his father was an archdemon, he is able to blend in below."

"Why was he so afraid of Bale, then?"

Zeke grinned. "Sunshine, there are few demons who don't quake at just the sound of Bale's name. Even fewer have the nerve to actually face him, in battle or otherwise."

Faith turned in Bale's arms, running a hand slowly up his chest. "So my mate is the big and bad, huh?"

Bale's eyes glittered with desire as his hand sank into her hair, tilting her head up. His lips captured hers, and she felt his other hand cupping her ass as he cradled his semihard cock between her thighs.

"Oh Christ," Zeke muttered, and Faith heard his stool scrape against the wooden floor. "Can we blow this joint? I can't handle this crap."

With a soft sigh, Bale released her lips with a lingering kiss. "Are you ready to head home?"

Faith nodded. "Paperwork is all done. And message to Father has been left."

Bale's hand slid from her hair, slowly traveling down her neck. "Did you give him our private number?"

Faith's gaze narrowed at Bale. "We have a private number?" This was news to her.

"Each brother has one. It's the only way to get ahold of us. The main line will only get you a machine. And rarely do we listen to, much less return, those messages."

She frowned. "Since I do not even know the main line, I could hardly give out your private one."

Bale frowned back at her. "I programmed it into your cell phone before I let you leave me."

Well, if he hadn't just taken over her life. "I was supposed to know this how?"

“Did you really believe I would just let you walk away from me?”

“You gave a damn good impression of letting me do just that,” she hissed softly.

“Only to protect you, baby. I wouldn't risk you then, and I won't do so now.”

“So you keep saying,” she muttered under her breath.

“And I'll do more than just say it. I *will* keep you safe.”

Faith sighed. She so didn't want to get into this again. “Just not at the expense of my freedom, Bale.”

“On that note, I'm out of here. If you two would like a ride, this conversation does not leave this table. Otherwise you are more than welcome to procure another form of transportation.” At Faith's narrowed look, he added, “I will not suffer through you two snapping at each other the entire way to the abbey.”

Faith pulled out of Bale's embrace. “No referee necessary.”

Bale chuckled. “Yes. My mate is much more likely to get her way without an audience.”

Zeke looked nauseated. “Don't go there. Not in my baby. I'd kill even Arak for that.”

“A virgin car. How interesting,” Faith purred, intrigued by the way Zeke blanched. The male certainly did love his car.

“Thank God Bale cannot fit in the back,” he mumbled as, with a grin, Faith and Bale followed him out into the darkened night.

Chapter Thirteen

Kash saw the headlights approaching from behind at a fast speed. He glanced next to him where Hope sat staring out the window, then uneasily back into the rearview mirror. The road leading to the fortress was a narrow two-lane strip of dirt that was rarely used by anyone other than those who resided within the abbey walls. Another vehicle coming up behind him meant one of two things: someone in the field had been injured, or they were about to be attacked.

Kash was lurched forward in his seat, and the sound of metal impacting was all he needed to know it was the latter. “Shit!” He slammed his foot hard on the accelerator, as his only concern was getting Hope to safety.

“What the hell!” Hope turned in her seat to peer out the back window.

The window shattered, the sound of gunfire ricocheting through the night. “Get down!” Kash grabbed her by the back of the neck, forcing her forward and out of sight. He swerved the SUV to the right, then to the left, in a series of quick movements. While a bullet would hurt like a son of a bitch, it would not kill him. He wasn't so sure about Hope.

The vehicle stayed right on his tail. Not that Kash had much of a chance of losing it. There was no place to go but forward or into the dense forest that surrounded the fortress. If he'd been on his Harley, that would have been an option. But the distance of the trees from one another did not make that feasible in Remy's Escalade.

“Oh God.” Hope clutched the dashboard as they were sent pitching forward again.

The third hit was on the back corner of the passenger's side, and it sent the SUV skidding to the left. Kash tried to right the vehicle, but he overshot the road. The truck went down a small gully and came to a stop as it slammed into the embankment. The force of the impact into the steering wheel had Kash struggling for breath.

Beside him, Hope was unconscious. He reached across the interior, pushing her prone body back into the seat. Gently grasping her chin, he whispered her name, noticing the line of blood rolling down the side of her face. “Damn it. Hope, doll, you need to wake up.” He gave her chin a little shake, and an unsettled laugh escaped his lips when she groaned.

Kash grabbed his phone and punched in a few numbers, then threw it onto the floor of the vehicle. Turning his attention back to Hope, he found her eyes open.

“Sweetheart, I'm going to get out, and I want you to lock the doors behind me. Remy should be here any minute. Do you understand?” At her slow nod, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Kash opened the door and stepped out of the SUV. The headlights from the other vehicle temporarily blinded him, and he raised a hand to block out the glare. That's when he saw them. There were ten males, all brandishing weapons—guns, bats, and a few knives. But what stood out was that they all appeared human. Upper-level demons. Kash cursed under his breath. They would be as difficult to kill as he was, but Kash pulled out his twin double-bladed swords

anyway. Dissipating wasn't an option, not with Hope, so his only choice was to fight until help arrived.

He was rushed by five while the rest hung back, fanning out around him. Kash tried to keep an eye on all of them while his attention was focused on those he fought, but there were just too many of them. One got close enough, and he swung a sword. The blade connected with the demon's neck, slicing his head cleanly off. With a sickening thud, the head hit a nearby tree as the body slumped to the ground. While surprised by the turn of events, Kash didn't have time to contemplate them. One down, nine to go.

While another took the place of his fallen comrade, Kash parried and lunged, swiveled and sidestepped. A second demon made the mistake of stepping within range of his blade and quickly shared his friend's fate. The rest quickly changed tactics.

The sound of a gun discharging was his only warning. He dived out of the way, but not in enough time to keep the bullet from ripping through his side. The distraction allowed another demon to step closer, and Kash gritted his teeth as the end of a baseball bat smashed into his forearm. He barely managed to maintain a grip on the sword in his hand.

The bullet wound hurt like a son of a bitch, and he was pretty certain his arm was fractured, but Kash kept fighting. With some satisfaction, he thrust his blade through the chest of a demon and watched in fascination as blood bubbled up from the bastard's mouth. It was the damndest thing he'd ever seen, and he briefly wondered if these were not full demons but, like Zeke's informant Ray, half demons.

A bullet shattering glass and then Hope's scream tore Kash's attention away from his attackers. Glancing behind him, he spotted a demon dragging her from the car and attempted to rush toward her, stopping only as a blade pierced his back, slicing through his spinal column. He lost the ability to stand, dropping like a ton of bricks onto the forest floor.

"Let go of me, asshole!" Kash heard Hope scream, and then, "Don't hurt him!" just before another gunshot erupted through the night. As a bullet pierced Kash's temple, he knew no more.

* * * *

"Son of a bitch."

Bale's expletive had the hairs on Faith's arms standing on end as he pivoted so that she was between his body and Zeke's car.

"Six o'clock."

His explanation to Zeke had her glancing around Bale, and for one brief moment, she saw what had him on high alert. Walking briskly down the other side of the street away from the club was a demon that looked suspiciously like her Lilu demon.

She sensed rather than saw Zeke tense. Then a deadly smile spread across his face. "This night will not be a total waste after all. Let's see where our *friend* falls in all of this."

"Friend" was spoken with such maliciousness that she might have pitied the demon if he had not threatened her sister. Oh...and been a murderer. So maybe not.

"Let him go."

Bale's response had her gaze darting back to him in disbelief. There was no way she was going to let this opportunity slip by. She owed the bastard and intended on making sure he paid in blood.

With a quick glance at her, Zeke fished a hand in his pocket. "I'll go after him. You take Faith home." He tossed something that reflected in the light of the parking lot, and as Bale caught the object in one hand, she realized it was the keys to Zeke's car.

Eyes narrowing at Zeke, Bale threw the keys back. "You heard Remy. No one is to hunt alone. Especially *that* demon, Zeke. I know in my gut he's connected to this."

"Then shouldn't one of us get the information we need from the bastard?"

"Not tonight."

Zeke had already pulled out a small dagger and held it clutched in his fist when Bale's words stopped him short. He turned sharply and arched a brow, as if challenging Bale to try stopping him.

Faith shifted restlessly as she watched the demon turn the corner, moving out of sight. "Hello. While you two argue like little girls, the demon is getting away."

Bale growled, clearly not amused. His gaze shifted from her to Zeke; then he sighed. He held up a hand, catching the keys Zeke tossed back to him. After opening the trunk, he bent down and pulled out an eight-inch curved blade. "We just follow. We will not confront him," he said, demanding Zeke's agreement before he handed her the dagger.

Zeke nodded brusquely.

Much to Faith's entertainment, Bale continued to retrieve a small cache of weapons, handing her another eight-inch knife, three throwing stars, and a set of claws he made her slip her fingers through. They were too big, designed to fit his much larger hands, and she had to struggle to keep from dropping them. Zeke gave a snort as he looked her over. She would have flashed him a middle finger if she could have.

With a roll of her eyes, she turned to Bale. "Can we go now? Or do you intend to completely weigh me down so I cannot outrun the bad guys? Is this your not-so-subtle way of getting rid of me?"

"Would you prefer I leave you locked inside the car?" he asked even as he was gently removing the claws and dumping them back into the trunk. After he closed the lid, he folded his arms across his chest and stared down at her. "This is a bad idea."

"We are just seeing where he goes, not confronting him. But come on. It's only a Lilu demon." Her protests seemed to fall on deaf ears.

"If you do something foolish, I will be getting that rope, Faith."

Faith arched a brow at him. "You know, you keep threatening that, but so far, all talk, no action."

"As interesting as this conversation is becoming, don't we have a demon to track?" Zeke asked, his voice laced with amusement.

Faith turned from the two males, her face reddening at the realization Zeke had overheard their conversation and understood the significance. For the briefest of moments, his eyes had flared with desire. As Zeke took the lead following the demon, her thoughts turned to the rope he'd told Bale was in his trunk, wondering now at its purpose.

Faith found herself bracketed between the two males, and the trio crept silently after the demon in a fluid motion, as if they had done this a million times before. She was a little disconcerted at how comfortable it felt. While Bale and Zeke moved like a natural extension of

each other, she found it very easy to adjust to their rhythm, not needing verbal cues to understand which direction Zeke would turn to stay in the shadows and out of sight.

The demon walked purposefully for three blocks before turning to the left down a cross street. He traveled another four blocks, then veered to the right into a darkened alley. At the end was a set of wooden garage doors, one of which the demon opened. As he slipped inside the small warehouse, he left the door open.

Zeke hesitated, glancing back at Bale before following into the dimly lit building. Cautiously they crept after the demon, then came to a stop and crouched down behind a vehicle hidden beneath a gray tarp. Peering over, Faith could see the demon was meeting with someone, but he was standing with his back to them. He was human in appearance, tall and muscular, and his curly black hair shone purple under the overhead light. He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a dark T-shirt, and the sword strapped to his waist looked out of place. Focusing her attention on the sword's handle, she thought it looked familiar. As Bale's sudden curse captured her attention, she understood why. The sword was very similar to her mate's, and Faith suspected she was looking at their missing brother, Raym.

The unmistakable stench of sulfur enveloped them just before a deep, gravelly growl reached them—and it wasn't the cute noise Bale made when he was angry. There was no mistaking that what was behind them had every intention of tearing them limb from limb.

Bale said something to Zeke in a language Faith did not understand, but it made his brother grimace and nod. Then Bale stood to his full height and turned to face the threat. Glancing up to the ceiling, he muttered something under his breath, and the air within the warehouse began to swirl like puffs of smoke. As visibility diminished around Faith, she noticed the tendrils of fog sweeping around the Lilu demon and his companion.

The dark-haired male glanced around at the wisps of vapor that appeared to be enveloping him, and recognition dawned on his face. "Damn it, you fool. You've led them right to us." Then he was gone, and only the thickening fog remained where he had stood.

As Faith struggled to figure out a way to stop the Lilu demon from vanishing like his friend, his gaze met hers, and he smiled. Giving her a small wave, he too disappeared. "Shit," she muttered. The bastard had escaped her again.

A loud *crack* caused her to jump, and she watched in horrified fascination as what appeared to be lightning shot from the ceiling, illuminating the area where she was crouched at Bale's feet. As she scoped out the threat, she wished she had remained in the dark. Poised ready to strike were six Rabisu demons and three Alu demons.

"Oh...double shit."

"If Zeke or I tell you to run, you'd better hightail your ass out of here. And you'd better not die on me. Do you understand?" Bale snapped over his shoulder at her.

As Bale waved his hand, another bolt of lightning shot toward the demons, causing two of them to lunge out of the way. The others cringed back, the light hurting their eyes. At first Faith had thought that the conditions inside the warehouse could be attributed to the demons, but as it was only negatively affecting them, she'd begun to revise her thinking. But who? And how?

"Edge toward the door. Bale's ambience will only confuse them for a little while." Zeke's head motioned to the open door leading out to the alley.

It took a moment for his words to register. "You mean Bale is doing this?"

Zeke grinned, a look that said he thought the fun was just beginning. “We all have our talents.”

As he slowly rose to his feet, she noticed for the first time the double-edged ax he held in his hands. Between him and Bale, she was feeling slightly out-weaponed with only the measly eight-inch blade and three throwing stars Bale had handed her earlier. She now wished she hadn't made fun of the set of claws he'd given her. They'd have been useful, because she wasn't about to run for the door unless she had to.

Zeke and Bale charged, taking advantage of the demons' confusion. Having promised she would not do anything rash, Faith held back. But she did not have to wait for long. Charging toward her were not one but two Alu demons. *Shit.*

They came at her snorting and puffing, and it took everything she had not to let fear overcome her. With Bale's blood running through her veins, she knew she was strong. She only hoped it was enough.

Faith pulled her dagger from her boot, testing the weight of both weapons briefly before the demons were upon her. She met their advance, amazed at how fluid her movements felt as steel clashed against steel. The vibrations traveled up her arms, but she held her ground, gripping the handles of both knives tightly.

One grunted to the other over her head, and before Faith realized what was occurring, a third blade appeared, aimed for her neck. Without even thinking, she arched her back, her upper body angling toward the floor in a movement she hadn't even been aware she was capable of. The steel swung past her, the disturbance it caused ruffling her hair.

She immediately popped back up, her own dagger slicing through a demon's forearm, that third blade falling to the cement floor with an echoing *clank*. The squeal of outrage the demon emitted was much like that of a wounded pig, and Faith was surprised her eardrums didn't explode from the offensive sound.

She had lost sight of Bale and Zeke in the fog, but the sounds of fighting continued. She knew she was on her own, and against the two Alu demons, she was tiring quickly. In a desperate attempt, she maneuvered her body between the two, and with such precision it could have only been described as pure luck, she ducked just as both demons swung at her. The head of one went sailing through the air just before head and body exploded in a puff of smoke.

With a shriek of rage, the remaining demon did a three-sixty, his sword swinging back at her. Faith met the attack with her knife while she went for the demon's sword arm with the one Bale had given her. The blade sliced clean through, the arm falling listlessly to the ground before it disappeared with a poof.

Thinking the demon's sword her biggest threat, she failed to react quickly enough when, with his other hand, he reached for her. She found the meaty appendage wrapped tightly around her throat and her feet dangling off the floor. In a panic she dropped one of her knives, clutching frantically at the hand holding her. As the air was choked from her, she swung the other blade uselessly at the demon.

Knowing she would die if she did not calm down, Faith forced her eyes to focus on the demon. Then, taking the knife in her hand, she plunged it into the demon's throat. Immediately she felt herself falling to the floor. Grabbing the sword the demon dropped, she rose upright and swung, the sword connecting with his neck.

Just like his friend, the Alu demon disappeared almost instantly. But she wasn't given a chance to even breathe a sigh of relief as another sword came swinging at her through the fog. In a defensive move, she met the attack, only to find herself face-to-face with Bale.

"Damn it, Faith," he barked, lowering his sword, then yanking the demon's from her fingers. "You were told to run. I swear to God I will blister your ass."

But Faith couldn't concentrate on his words. She was too distracted by the scent of blood—Bale's blood—as it hit her full force. From a cut on his bicep, a trail of red ran down his arm. A shudder ran through her, and she unconsciously moved closer to him.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked just before she slowly licked her tongue up his arm.

With a soft hum of pleasure, she cleaned up the blood rolling down his arm, then moved to the wound. Knowing her saliva would only help close up the cut, she ignored his hiss of discomfort as she went to work on it. His taste consumed her, and she probed through the tissue, collecting every drop she could.

She didn't pull back until the wound had stopped weeping, not even aware that Bale had wrapped an arm around her waist or that he'd dragged her tight against him. He lifted her, forcing her back until she was pressed between his body and the brick wall.

"Jesus Christ," he said hoarsely before his lips lowered to hers, brutally taking command. His arms bracketed the sides of her head, his hands in her hair as he angled her for a deeper penetration.

Whimpering, Faith clutched at his shoulders. She'd never felt Bale this out of control, as if he couldn't stop himself, and she was certain he would have taken her right there against the wall if "Bad to the Bone" had not begun to play from one of his pockets.

"Fuck." Wrenching away from her, Bale raked a hand through his hair as he fished within his pocket.

Faith sagged against the wall, panting as she tried to gain her breath.

"Fuck." This time Bale's expletive was aimed at his cell phone. "Zeke, we've got to go. There's been trouble."

Turning her gaze across the warehouse, Faith realized the fog had dissipated. Zeke stood on the other side, a phone in his hand also. Before Faith could even question him, Bale grabbed her arm and they were running from the warehouse.

* * * *

Remy's phone chirped, and he dragged it out of his pocket. It was a text message that read *SOS 4 Hope*. A sick sensation settled in the pit of his stomach as he realized the meaning of the message. "Goddamn!"

Levi looked at him in surprise. "What is it?"

"Kash has fallen under attack. And Hope is with him."

"Should I get the car?"

"We don't have time. They are in sector four," he stated, referring to a section of road leading to the abbey. He had mapped out the entire Seattle area years ago and had required each brother to memorize it just for situations like this one.

"Jesus. That's too close to the fortress for comfort."

“Precisely.” His clipped tone was the only indication of the rage that boiled inside Remy. Demons daring to attack that close to their sanctuary pissed him off. But even more so was the knowledge that they had attacked an innocent human who really had nothing to do with the war that brewed between them. There was a time when at least some rules had been sacred. Apparently no more, and he would retaliate, like for like.

He teleported to the road leading to the abbey, knowing Levi would instinctively follow. It was not hard to find the scene. Half a mile from where he arrived, skid marks showed the way to the crash site—and the body.

“Jesus Christ.” Remy dropped to his knees beside Kash. He'd been shot in the head and left for dead. Remy didn't even stop to consider the oddity of the gunshot wound. He immediately turned to Levi, who stood a pace away, visibly paled by the carnage. This hadn't been a typical demon attack. It had been personal. “Get Arak.”

Levi nodded and moved to turn, but he didn't have far to go.

“I'm here.” Arak moved quickly toward them, Jet trailing behind. “Good God,” he rasped hoarsely, dropping beside Remy.

Remy nodded briskly, rising to his feet. “Heal him, Arak. The rest of you fan out. Find Hope.”

Arak's eyes narrowed at Remy for just a moment, both of them thinking the same thoughts before he turned his attention to Kash. If their brother was in this shape, Hope was somewhere in the woods, most likely dead. Remy could only pray that, like her twin, if she were injured, her vampire genes would save her.

He turned, unable to look at Kash again. Even knowing that none of what had occurred would kill Kash, Remy couldn't stomach imagining just how much his brother had to have suffered before he had gone down. And on top of that, the knowledge that Hope had likely suffered the same fate made him ill.

Arak placed a hand upon Kash, his consciousness being drawn inside his brother. His broken forearm was easily repaired, as was the gunshot wound he'd acquired in his side. The other two injuries were an entirely different matter. A blade had completely severed his spinal cord, and a bullet had turned his brain to mush. It could take days before Arak would be able to heal him completely.

But thankfully he would live. Arak did not even want to consider Hope. Shit, Bale was going to go on a rampage when he discovered what had happened. And Faith. Arak shut down that thought. He didn't even want to think about Bale's mate at the moment. They'd all made a pledge to protect her with their lives. It seemed it just might come to that.

Chapter Fourteen

Zeke came to a screeching stop about a mile from the abbey. He immediately jumped out and stalked toward Remy. The other brothers were milling around the road, seemingly looking for something.

“Stay here,” Bale said, his hand on the door.

“Yeah, right,” Faith mumbled after he had gotten out and closed the door behind him. She had just battled two Alu demons and survived. Like she was going to wait in the car, playing the helpless little female. Getting out, she then looked around until her gaze finally latched onto the source of the commotion. Remy's SUV was stuck in a ditch. The significance didn't register until she spotted Arak hovering over Kash, who was a bloody mess. And then she knew. “Where is my sister?” she screamed, rushing forward.

Remy was the first to reach her and grabbed her around the waist, keeping her from approaching Kash. She fought him with all she had. She had to find her twin. She had to know.

“Let go of me, you son of a bitch. I'll kill him if anything has happened to her. Where is she? Hope?”

She broke free, only to find herself trapped within Remy's grip again. He shook her by the shoulders as he hoarsely replied, “Damn you. If he had been anything other than Grigori, he would not have survived his wounds. He would have died for your sister.”

He released her so abruptly, Faith stumbled backward. “Oh God.” His words sank in as her gaze swiveled to where Kash lay. Her knees buckled, and she found herself huddled on the ground.

“Damn it, Remy,” Bale barked as he pulled her into his arms, cradling her in his embrace as he knelt beside her in the dirt. “That was uncalled-for. You are talking about her sister.” Bale's gaze narrowed on his best friend over his mate's head.

“I know to whom I refer,” Remy bit out, his eyes fixing on Kash. “And I know the price Kash has paid.”

“Please,” she begged fearfully. “Where is Hope? Is she dead?”

“We do not know. She is not here.” And Remy turned away from her, moving to where the other brothers had huddled together, watching as Arak feverishly worked on Kash. Except Zeke. He was nowhere to be seen.

* * * *

As soon as Zeke had learned Hope was missing, he'd immediately teleported from the scene. He found Ray in the room the demon rented in a skanky motel downtown. Ray was startled by his sudden appearance.

“Jesus, Zeke. You gave me a heart attack.”

Zeke grabbed him by the front of his shirt, pulling him close. "It won't kill you. Now, before you go crawling into a hole somewhere, you are going to go below and find out where this new asshole would hide a female."

Ray grabbed at the fist holding him upright. "Man, you've got to be kidding me."

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" Zeke growled, the muscle in his jaw twitching spastically.

Ray paled and visibly swallowed. "Who is she?" he asked in a whisper.

"Bale's sister. And if anything happens to her, I'll be the least of your problems, Ray." Zeke threw the demon away from him.

Ray landed on the twin bed, the metal frame buckling under the sudden motion. He nodded vigorously, the threat of Bale coming after him all he needed to hear. "I'll see what I can find out and call you in a couple of hours."

"Thirty minutes," Zeke corrected, his eyes blazing with fury. "You have thirty minutes, Ray, not one minute more."

Ray's eyes widened in distress; then he nodded slowly, gulping frantically before he disappeared.

* * * *

Faith had finally calmed down enough to listen to Bale as he whispered in her ear, rocking her gently in his embrace.

"You couldn't have prevented this." Faith lifted her head to meet eyes filled with regret. "I'm sorry about Kash. Will he be okay?"

Her heart felt leaden. She'd been on such a high after the fight with the demons. Bale had grudgingly admitted she had done well against them, and she felt she had finally made some ground toward his loosening the leash he held her with. Now she wished she had taken him more seriously.

"He will recover."

"It's my fault," she said softly. "If I had only listened to you, Hope wouldn't have been on this road tonight. I should have stayed at the fortress where she would have been safe."

Bale kissed her forehead, then glanced at Remy over her head. He stood before them, his hands shoved within his pant pockets. Crouching down, he met her gaze.

"It was not your fault, little warrior." Remy smiled sadly. "I am sorry for the things I said. You had every right to your reaction."

Faith shook her head. "It wasn't fair of me to insinuate I blamed Kash, because I do not. I know he did all he could to protect her."

"Yes," Remy agreed. "And he will heal. Once Jet has pulled my truck from the ditch, he and Arak will take Kash back to the abbey. Arak has done all he can for now. He needs to rest." His gaze lifted to Bale. "And you and I need to discuss his injuries. They do not make sense."

"What do you mean?" she questioned, unwilling to let the males leave her out of anything. Not when it involved her twin.

Remy studied her for a moment. "Kash was shot. Twice."

Surprise filled Faith. "Demons do not usually use guns."

"Or baseball bats. Arak thinks one was used to break his arm."

Bale tensed against her. "What the hell?"

Faith pulled away from Bale and rose to her feet. Holding out her hand, she said, "I need your phone."

Bale's response was an arched brow.

Faith sighed. Nothing was ever easy with her mate. "I know someone," she explained quietly. "Someone who might be able to give us some answers."

"Who?" he asked, handing over his phone.

Faith only shook her head as she began dialing the number of one of her waitresses.

On the eighth ring, a sleepy female voice said, "Whoever this is, it had better be good."

"Chari, it's Faith. I need a huge favor."

Faith heard a rustling sound in the background as Charity, in a much more alert voice, immediately agreed to anything. Thirty minutes later, a silver FJ Cruiser came to a screeching halt at the scene of Hope's disappearance. Jet and Arak had already removed Kash, but Remy and Levi had remained behind, mostly, Faith guessed, to protect her.

Charity, climbing out of the vehicle, blanched. "Jesus, what happened here? There is so much blood." Charity inhaled deeply, moving slowly toward the spot where the Escalade had come to a stop. From there, sniffing every couple of feet, she stopped to kneel at the spot Kash had fallen. With a trembling hand, she reached out to touch the blood-soaked ground. Then she stood and began to remove her clothing.

"What the hell is she doing?" Bale whispered in Faith's ear, his voice holding a trace of alarm.

"Shh." Faith glanced around and noticed the same unease on the faces of Remy and Levi. "Let her do what she needs to." When Charity stood before them completely nude, she dropped suddenly to the ground. "This part always amazes me."

Bale's sharp intake signaled the process was complete. Where Charity had stood only a moment before now stood a strawberry blonde wolf.

"A werewolf," was Remy's incredulous whisper.

"You'd be amazed at the people I know," Faith replied with a smile.

Charity gave a sharp bark, then began darting through the trees, stopping occasionally to sniff a spot where blood had been shed. Then she made her way to the road, sneezing as the dust hit her nostrils.

Thirty minutes later, she returned to where her clothes lay on the ground, and the whole process of changing form reversed until a naked female stood in place of the wolf. She bent to pick up her clothing, her gaze riveted to Faith.

"Whoever fell here, he managed to kill three of them. They pulled Hope from a vehicle that was there." Charity pointed to the spot where the Escalade had been. "Then they dragged her to the road, where they must have forced her into a car, because the scent just stops. I'd say nine or ten of them, but I can't be completely certain. Some smell similar, like they are related." Charity shrugged.

"Demons?"

Charity seemed surprised by her question. "No, Faith. Didn't you know? It was vampires."

Faith's gasp was her only reply. Vampires could only mean one thing. And that pissed Faith off more than any notion of demons. Either some rogue vamps were loose in Seattle, or her father had ordered Hope's kidnapping and allowed his asshole followers to leave Kash for dead.

* * * *

Zeke stopped in the doorway, watching Bale pace angrily before the fireplace in the dining hall. Remy, Jet, and Levi sat on the sidelines, quietly observing his restless movements.

Ray had been useless, which only served to fan the rage within Zeke. There was no word below of a female being held by anyone, so whoever had Hope was keeping this hushed. Very unlike a demon.

Bale paused, his gaze centering on Zeke. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Looking for answers," he snapped, his anger mounting with each breath he took.

Bale nodded. "It was vampires."

Zeke couldn't have been more surprised if Bale had belted him one. "Vampires?"

"Yeah." Bale's reply was long and drawn-out. "Whether rogue or their father, Faith is trying to find out now. As soon as she does, we're going in. I'm getting my mate's sister back. And I'm going to make the bastards pay. For Faith and for Kash."

Zeke was all for making someone pay. And not just because Kash had been gravely wounded. Someone was going to pay for the sick feeling that had settled in the pit of Zeke's stomach the moment he'd received Kash's page, for the tightness in his chest that made breathing difficult. Yeah. Someone was going to pay.

Unfortunately he was going to have to stand back and let Bale collect that payment. Zeke wanted to draw blood, but it was not his right. Bale, as her sister's mate, had that honor. It was a notion that burned deep in his gut. But the alternative was staking a claim on Hope, and he was not willing to do that. It would only end terribly. Because what he felt for Hope couldn't be what Bale felt for Faith, but rather rage that another female within their protection had come under fire.

Zeke moved out of the way as Faith approached him from behind. Following her into the dining hall, he noticed her slight nod toward Bale before she sighed deeply.

"According to Prue, Eli, my father's enforcer, hit the club right after we departed. He must have left my father's nest as soon as I hung up the phone. He had about eight males with him, and they were all armed. She said he wasn't happy to find me already gone."

Bale moved toward his mate and wrapped her in his arms. "Did he harm anyone? Your employees? Prue?"

Faith sank into his embrace, encircling her arms around his waist and clinging to him tightly. Zeke had to glance away as Bale kissed the top of her head. The love Bale and his mate displayed for each other filled him with a mixture of wonder and dismay.

"No. Thankfully Prue kept her smart-ass comments to herself. But it leaves me fairly certain my father is responsible for what happened to Kash and for taking Hope."

"So when do we leave to get her back?"

Faith lifted her head from Bale's chest, arching a brow in Zeke's direction. "I thought you would be glad to see the last of Hope," she said with a little sniff.

Zeke gave a humorless smile. “Kash will be avenged. And no one takes what is under our protection. Last I recall, your sister fell into that category.” With a nod, Faith turned her face, her gaze resting once again on her mate. “So how are we doing this?”

Bale studied Faith for a moment, lifting a hand to caress her cheek. Zeke watched her lean into his touch, a soft smile gracing her lips. Then Bale glanced at him over Faith's head.

“Once you have convinced me this fortress is impregnable, we go after Hope. But I will not leave Faith here unprotected.”

Zeke snorted at Bale's reply. Like they would be leaving his mate behind. Even *he* knew that wouldn't be happening. Folding his arms across his chest, he waited for Faith's response. It was not a long wait.

She pulled back from Bale, saying, “You won't be, because I am coming.”

“No, you are not,” Bale countered. Zeke snorted again, and Bale swiveled toward him. “Do you mind?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Zeke watched Bale arch a brow and grinned. “We don't have time to listen to you two banter. She'll insist she's coming. You will order her to remain behind. She won't listen. You'll threaten. She'll beg. And you'll relent. So how about we just save some time and you give in now?”

As Jet snickered, both Bale and Faith frowned at him. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You're seriously pussy-whipped. That's what he's saying.”

Bale pivoted toward Jet. “Want to say that to my face?”

Zeke sighed. “Jet doesn't speak for me.” Having recaptured Bale's attention, Zeke continued. He wanted everyone focused on the task at hand: bringing Hope home. “But Faith is familiar with the terrain, and I'm sure she has some idea where her sister is being held.”

“How much stronger than a normal vampire are you after you feed?” Bale asked quietly, his gaze boring into his mate's. “Stronger than your father?”

“I think so,” Faith murmured. “But no one will hurt me. If this is about getting Hope and me back, once my father understands we are mated, he will stop pursuing me.”

“And Hope?” Zeke asked harshly.

Faith hesitated a moment before shaking her head.

“This night your father will understand both his daughters are no longer his concern.”

Zeke stilled as Bale's pledge sunk in. Clenching his fists, he fought the desire to step his foot into the middle of this mess. Something about hearing Bale lay claim to Hope just didn't sit right in his gut.

Remy stood, joining the conversation for the first time. He seemed as surprised by Bale's declaration as Zeke was. “Faith, I get. But are you certain you want to take responsibility for her sister? It's one thing to do so now while there is the demon threat. But maybe Hope is better off under her father's protection.”

Bale glanced at Zeke as if waiting for him to respond. When he looked away, Bale sighed. “I promised my mate I would get her sister back. And that is what I intend to do. If I have to storm inside and kill every last vampire, I am prepared to do so. Faith wants Hope back. They are both my responsibility now.”

“If we are voting, I'm all for the killing.”

Bale snorted at Zeke's eagerly spoken words, not missing Faith's reaction. His mate was now anxiously chewing her bottom lip. “I would like to see this resolved with as little bloodshed as possible. Right now Faith wants revenge for Hope and for Kash. So do I. But this is Faith's family. Death will solve nothing...only start a war we are not prepared to fight.”

Zeke grunted in reply, his biceps flexing as he held his arms folded in front of him.

Remy arched a brow at Zeke before glancing quizzically at Bale. Their gazes met, Remy studying him for a moment; then he nodded. “Tell him as little as possible, Bale. And he pays for Kash.”

A slow, menacing grin spread across Bale's face. “Oh, I intend on making the bastard pay. I did not say I wouldn't draw blood, just that he would live.”

Again Remy nodded, accepting Bale's answer. Zeke could feel the impatience of his other brothers. They all wanted to avenge Kash. Whatever the vampire's reason for his attack, he would be held accountable, no matter that he was Faith's father.

“What of Arak?” For the first time, Zeke was aware of his brother's absence.

“He did what he could for Kash before he passed out. He'll continue once he's recovered his strength, but he thinks it will take several days.”

Zeke nodded at Remy's reply, relieved Arak was not going to try to convince them he was up for what lay ahead. While he wouldn't have hesitated doing what was necessary to see that Arak remained behind, Zeke knew from past experience that Arak could carry a grudge for a very long time.

Bale wrapped an arm around Faith, drawing Zeke's attention to the pair. “I want Faith her strongest, so we will return after she has fed.” Bale began to lead Faith from the room.

Jet's snickers brought a frown to Bale's features. “I bet you do. So how long do these *feedings* take?”

The sarcastic emphasis Jet placed on the word “feedings” caused Zeke's hackles to rise. He wasn't the least bit surprised when Bale turned slowly to face their brother. The silence as they waited for Bale's response was deafening.

Bale pinned Jet with a chilling gaze. “We are Grigori, and I think we are above the failings of humans.”

And if Zeke had not known Bale was lying, he would have taken his brother at his word. Bale spoke with absolute sincerity. But his aura was spiked with shades of brownish green.

Jet, at least, had the courtesy to look contrite. “Well, that just sucks.” Remy smacked Jet on the back of the head as Bale led Faith from the room, but it didn't stop Jet from turning and asking, “Was he lying?”

“Not that I could tell,” Zeke said with a shrug. “And if he was, I really don't want to know.” And that was the truth. Zeke didn't want to know Bale was upstairs getting his rocks off.

“Damn,” Jet muttered, falling back into his chair. “Then why bother?”

The rest of the brothers stared at him like he was an idiot. Remy smacked him again just because he could as Zeke collapsed into the chair across from him. He figured they were in for a long wait, when all he wanted to do was rescue Hope and bring her home.

* * * *

Faith could not remember a time when she had felt so mortified. Jet's thinly veiled insults did nothing to endear the brother to her. She had hoped her first impression of the male to be in error. Apparently not.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she watched Bale shut the door. "Thank you." At Bale's questioning glance, Faith elaborated. "For what you said to Jet. Lying."

He frowned at her, clearly displeased with her statement. Bracing both hands on the bed at her hips, he leaned into her. "Baby, what occurs in this room is between you and me. We might live in this fortress with six other males, but when and if we make love is none of their damn business. Just like how you feed is none of their concern."

"I really don't need to."

Bale spread her thighs, kneeling between them before tucking a curl behind her ear. "But I would feel better if you did. Even if it is just a sip or two."

"We need to be quick. We really don't have time..." Faith glanced down at the bed coverings clutched in her fists.

Bale chuckled softly. "No, we don't. If you would just stay here, we wouldn't have to be discussing this."

"Bale," she said, her tone laced with warning.

"You cannot fault me for worrying, Faith. You saw what your father's vampires did to Kash."

Faith nodded in agreement. "But he won't allow them to hurt me."

"Really?" Bale's voice held a hint of disbelief. "Then tell me why they left Kash for dead? Why was your sister abducted?" She frowned because she could not give him a reasonable response. "You can't tell me, can you?"

"No," Faith admitted. "I told you my father is very controlling. It took quite some finagling for Hope and me to get out from under his thumb. We have an older sister who still has not managed that. Taking Hope against her will, that does not entirely surprise me. Kash is a whole other story."

Bale pulled the neck of his T-shirt down, angling his head to the side. "Feed."

Faith hesitated for only a moment before licking his skin and sinking her fangs into the throbbing flesh. Their fingers interlaced on the bed as she pressed against his chest, swallowing three mouthfuls quickly.

Bale's labored breathing fanned her ear. It was the only indication that she was affecting him in any way. For just a split second, when she tried to pull back, Bale followed her, his fingers tightening on hers.

"Are you okay?" she whispered when he released a ragged breath.

"Yeah." The word was long and drawn-out, but at the end of it, he kissed her gently. "I didn't come in my pants, so I'm good."

Laughing softly, Faith wrapped her arms around his neck. "Would you like me to take care of that little problem before we leave?"

Bale nipped lightly at her nose. "I wish we had time. But if I am going to lie to my brothers, I need to back it up."

"And a hard-on will do that?"

He rolled his eyes. "The hard-on is supposed to go away. But it won't if you keep pointing it out."

"Ohhh," she purred with a wicked gleam.

"Baby, don't forget that rope."

His voice got all growly, and shivers broke out across Faith's skin. "I really think I am going to have to take you up on that. Test out your roping skills."

Bale groaned at her teasing tone. He scrambled away from her and tossed a cell phone into her lap. "Call your father."

"Well, that killed the mood," she murmured, curling her fingers around the phone. "And why would I want to call him?"

"Arrange a meeting. Let him know your mate is coming for Hope. And add that while his males attempted to leave Kash for dead, even a bullet to the head cannot stop us permanently. We will kill every last one of his vampires if he does not give your sister back."

Faith swallowed heavily, staring at the object she held.

"Baby, if you have had a change of heart, now is the time to let me know." Bale was leaning against the door, watching her carefully, his arms folded across his chest.

Faith shook her head. "It's just...there are females and children in my father's nest. I don't want to see them hurt."

He strode across the room and pulled her into his arms. "I want to see as little bloodshed as possible. That is why I am giving him this opportunity to meet me away from his nest. To protect his young. But Faith, your father will bleed for coming after us. Whatever the reason."

She rested her cheek over his heart, comforted by the rhythm it played. "But I couldn't live with his death. He is still my father. Even if he is an asshole."

Bale kissed the top of her head. "I will not lose you because of this night. It's the only reason your father will live. And I understand this was your family. But you are Grigori now. As is Hope."

"A bloodsucking Grigori," she said with a smile. "I bet Cowboy is just lovin' that."

"I'll have to remember to call him that. It should piss him off just enough to be amusing. Now call your father," he said, his hand squeezing the one holding his cell phone.

And as Bale watched his mate relaying his message to the male who had sired her, his cock deflated, his hard-on becoming a pleasant memory. Faith was right; listening to her rage at her father could sure kill the mood.

Chapter Fifteen

The meeting was held in an abandoned warehouse downtown. The building, owned by the Grigori, was used just for purposes such as this. It allowed for plenty of space and was just close enough to be easily accessible while still maintaining the privacy needed if things turned ugly.

As Bale stood across the empty room with his arms folded across his massive chest, staring at the vampire who was essentially his father-in-law, he knew the other male thought he had the advantage. If it came down to a brawl, the 350-year-old vampire, who didn't look a day over forty, had the numbers to back up his position—his twenty-or-so vampires to Bale and his four brothers. A smug smile settled over Bale's lips. He loved a good fight.

If only Faith hadn't been standing beside him. Her father was eyeing her with a narrowed gaze, and Bale sensed he was trying to assert some type of control over her.

"Faith, come here now," her father ordered loudly, frustration settling upon his face.

Bale glanced down at his mate, arching a brow in question. She shifted nervously, shrugging slightly. Looking back at the vampire, he smiled broadly at the confusion marring the other male's face.

"It appears Faith is no longer yours to order about."

Garrett Magee gave a hoarse laugh. "My daughter. My vampire. My control."

"Really? Then why is she not coming to you? I can feel your compulsion, vampire."

"Because she is still human. But she knows better than to defy me." Garrett centered his attention on his daughter. "Faith, get your ass over here and let's go home. Enough is enough."

Bale met his mate's gaze. "Baby, show your daddy those pretty little fangs of yours."

Faith rolled her eyes at his attempt to bait her father, then allowed her fangs to drop. A hiss sounded from across the warehouse.

"You were not due to transfigure for another year. What the hell is going on? And why wasn't I informed of this?" Garrett turned an accusing eye toward his enforcer.

"She has been avoiding us all for weeks," was Eli's chagrined reply.

"Faith, you'd better have a damn good explanation for this." Garrett's angry look pinned Faith, and Bale felt her stiffen at his side. He ran a hand slowly up her back and embedded it in her hair at her nape, massaging gently. The tension drained right out of her at his touch.

Bale's gaze roamed hotly over his mate, and he asked her, "Are you going to tell him to go to hell, or should I?"

"Don't antagonize him. We're here to get Hope," she reminded him with a soft sigh. Bale knew confronting her father was the last thing Faith wanted, but he also knew it was inevitable. There was no way Garrett Magee would be leaving that warehouse without some form of retribution for Kash.

“You know I can't do that, Faith,” he replied with some regret. “Your father needs to understand he no longer controls you and Hope and that neither of you needs his protection.”

“Damn it, Faith, you are trying my patience. I'm waiting,” Garrett snapped.

Faith sighed again before her gaze centered on her father. “I just want Hope back, Dad. We didn't come to start a war.”

“But you arrive armed to the teeth, demanding what is not yours to have. I thought you smarter than this, Faith. You are going to get your friends hurt.”

As the vampire spoke, he eyed the brothers with a smugness that only further amused Bale. He couldn't wait to bring the bastard down a peg or two—or twenty. But it was what he said next that sent Bale into a rage.

“And then there will be no one to keep me from making you regret this. Stop this now, and I will go easy on you. But keep this up, and you will not like the punishment.”

Without even realizing he was moving, Bale teleported across the room and appeared, sword drawn, right before Faith's father. He grabbed the vampire by the hair as he pressed his blade into the male's neck. Garrett's eyes filled with horror as he stared into Bale's frigid gaze. The click of a hammer cocking did nothing to ease the vampire's terror or Bale's rage.

“No one threatens my mate,” he growled through clenched teeth. “And a bullet will not stop me permanently. I will keep coming back until you are dead. Because you, vampire, *can* die. I cannot...not by something as pathetic as you.”

“What are you?” Garrett whispered hoarsely, his throat working frantically. A trickle of blood ran down his neck, pooling on his shirt collar.

“I am your worst nightmare, vampire. Belonging neither to Heaven nor Hell. Caught between worlds.” Bale stared deeply into the vampire's eyes.

The vampires shifted nervously around them. The enforcer, Eli, still had his gun aimed at Bale, but he hesitated to use the weapon. And Bale wasn't going to deny he was glad for the vampire's delay. A bullet would have put him out of commission for a time, and God only knew what would happen to Faith while he recovered.

Feeling her hand on the small of his back, Bale eased the pressure on the vampire's neck. Much to his annoyance, she slid between him and the gun pointed at him, her eyes pinned on the enforcer. “We only want Hope back.”

Garrett's gaze sought out his daughter, and it hardened as it fell upon her. “There is no going back after this, Faith. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“He's my mate. And I love him.”

“Mate?” Garrett scoffed. “We do not mate.”

“Tell that to Muriel,” Faith replied softly.

Her father studied her a moment, appearing to measure her words before finally nodding, and Bale lowered his sword, sensing Faith's relief. It seemed she had been more worried than he'd first thought. Bale didn't know if he should be insulted or glad her fears had not come to pass.

“And your sister?”

Bale snorted. So much for worst fears and all that.

He could feel the tension tightening Faith's limbs and wanted to take her from the warehouse, sparing her this distress. Not that she'd thank him for it. No, she'd probably try to gut him. But he couldn't resist wrapping an arm around her waist, needing to touch her.

"Bale and his brothers will look out for her," was her quiet reply, and Bale was impressed that even now, while staring down this bastard, the vampire who called himself her father, Faith looked completely composed. His mate. Christ, he had to be the luckiest son of a bitch on earth.

"But I see no male here claiming her as his mate."

Garrett looked among Bale's brothers, waiting for a denial, and Bale was right there with him. But when none came, the vampire shook his head.

"He can't," Faith blurted out, much to Bale's surprise. "Whoever you sent after her shot him in the head and left him for dead. It will take several days before he has recovered enough to leave his bed."

Bale tightened his hand on his mate's hip, his fingers digging into her skin. She sent him a pleading look, and Bale sighed. "As Faith's mate, I do so for Kash."

Garrett studied them for a moment, as if judging the truth of their words; then he glanced over his shoulder and nodded to a vampire standing on the fringes. Stepping out of the warehouse, the vampire returned only a moment later with Hope and five other vampires. His mate's twin looked exhausted. Her hair was in disarray, and her eyes were red and puffy from tears.

"Hope, your sister has said one of these males is your mate. Is this true?"

Bale watched a look of confusion settle on Hope's face, her eyes seeking out her twin. Her gaze shifted to behind him for the briefest of seconds before returning to her twin as Faith called out, "He lives, Hope, and will recover in a matter of days."

A look of relief washed over Hope, and the tension seemed to drain out of her shoulders. "Yes," she said softly, her gaze moving to her father. "Kash is my mate."

Garrett Magee's eyes narrowed for a brief moment, as if he thought they might be lying. Watching Hope move to stand beside Faith, he said, "I am sorry for your mate's injuries. Martin thought he was forcing you from your apartment."

Though she did not appear entirely convinced, Hope nodded, stuffing her fists into the front pockets of her jeans.

The twins' father turned to Bale then. "I pity you. Truly I do. And I wish you better luck than I ever had with them."

Grinning down at Faith, Bale said, "Never fear. I know just how to handle them." He moved as if turning from the vampire. "Oh, and by the way. This is for Kash." Pivoting on his heels, he planted his fist into the vampire's face.

Garrett Magee hit the floor. Hard. But Bale didn't wait to see how he would react. Placing an arm lightly on both females' shoulders, he led them from the warehouse.

"What the hell just happened?" Hope asked, breaking away from him once her father was no longer in earshot, the words rushing from her lips.

Bale chuckled. She'd probably been biting her cheek the entire time her father had been in the room. "I am amazed at your ability to keep silent for so long."

Hope glared at him. "Fuck off." She turned to her sister. "Care to explain?"

"Your twin's overwhelming thanks is just embarrassing."

Faith smiled at his sarcasm; then she centered her attention on Hope. “Not really,” she replied to her twin's question.

“How about you do so anyway?” Hope folded her arms across her chest and frowned at her sister.

“Let's just say a lot of male posturing occurred, and due to poor Kash's misfortune of being the one attacked with you, you have gone from under Dad's thumb to Bale's. Welcome to my life.” Faith smiled brightly at her sister.

“I so hate you,” Hope mumbled, her eyes narrowing at Faith.

Faith laughed. “At least when this demon thing is over, Bale will happily allow you to go home. Can you say the same for Dad?”

Hope's frown deepened. “And you suck.” Faith threw an arm around her twin's shoulders. “Is Kash really okay?” she asked, resting her head on Faith's shoulder.

Faith cast an uncertain look at Bale.

“He will be. In a few days. Your father's vampires did one hell of a job on him.”

Hope's eyes began to tear up. “When Martin held that gun to his head—” Her voice hitched, and she shook her head, blinking her eyes rapidly. “I'm relieved he will be okay. He shouldn't have had to suffer because of me.”

“No, he shouldn't have.” Zeke stepped forward, his voice barely controlled and the rage blazing in his eyes. “Maybe next time you will do as you are told and stay home.”

A single tear slid down Hope's cheek. Faith stepped in front of her sister, and by the look on her face, he could see Faith was getting ready to blast Zeke into next week. Bale put a restraining hand on his arm, stepping between the two, because if Zeke even threatened Faith with violence, Garrett Magee wouldn't be the only one losing some teeth.

“Don't say it, Bale,” Zeke hissed, yanking his arm from Bale's grip. “You give your mate far too much freedom, but that is your business. You are the one who will suffer from that decision. But Hope is not your mate. And Kash is the one suffering now. Which of us will be next? All to protect a female who has no business roaming the streets.”

Bale was silent a moment. “Do not worry, my brother. I will not force you to risk yourself for my sister. Rest assured, you will never be required to assist in her aid again,” he said quietly.

“Good. Because I won't.” Zeke's eyes glittered dark green with fury; then he just disappeared without another word. As Bale's gaze roamed over his other brothers, Remy studied Hope curiously, and Jet seemed perplexed by the events. But something in Levi's gaze told Bale he understood. Levi nodded before he looked down at his black loafers, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his prissy black slacks as he turned and walked away. Jet followed, leaving Bale with the two females and Remy.

“Ready to go home, baby?”

Leaning against him, Faith smiled and nodded. She cast a worried glance over her shoulder at her sister while Bale led her back to the car. Hope walked beside Remy, looking lost and alone. Bale knew he shouldn't interfere, but he had a suspicion Faith was going to insist. Sighing, he pulled her tighter against his side. When her father had threatened her, he'd realized he would do just about anything for his mate. But he really didn't want to go up against Zeke. Not over Hope. Because Bale suspected he knew what ailed his brother. Saraknyal.

* * * *

Faith lay curled against Bale, idly tracing the bird's head tattooed on his right shoulder as she waited for her breathing to even out. Something had gotten into her mate, and as soon as they had returned to the fortress, he had dragged her back to their room, much to the amusement of Remy. Not that she was complaining.

"Tell me what I did to earn that, so I can do it again." Bale flipped her onto her back and hovered over her, and the amusement she felt died at the ragged look in his eyes. "Bale?" she whispered, but he only shook his head. With trembling fingers, he caressed her cheek. "Bale, you're scaring me."

"If anything ever happened to you..." he said hoarsely.

Faith leaned into his touch, rubbing her cheek against his palm like a little kitten. "You won't let anything hurt me."

Bale rolled away from her, flopping onto his back and throwing an arm over his eyes. Faith sat up, and after tucking the sheet under her arms, she glanced down at him. He was breathing heavily, as if something had really upset him. She whispered his name, pushing his arm from his face. The tears that shone in his eyes stunned her.

"Bale, what is it?"

"Tonight I realized just what you mean to me." His gaze slid away from her, fixing on the door behind her. "Not that I didn't have some idea before, but tonight it really hit me just what I would do to keep you safe. To keep you happy."

Faith cupped his cheeks in her hands, forcing him to meet her gaze. "Being with me is the only thing you need to do to keep me happy. As for my safety, Bale, it is not your sole responsibility. It falls on me to know not to get myself into situations that are dangerous. And I do know I am neither infallible nor immune to injury or death. Do you trust me?"

Bale studied her, and for just a moment, Faith feared his answer.

"You know I do." Bale yanked away the sheet covering her, then pulled her to his chest, holding her tightly against him. "I do not trust anyone else. That's the problem." He rubbed his face in her hair, his fingers flexing his hold on her hip. "Anything," he mumbled. "I'd do anything."

He flipped her onto her back, one thigh sliding between hers, his arms bracketing her torso as his body covered hers. Burying a hand in her hair, Bale angled her head and traced her bottom lip with his tongue. Sighing softly, Faith opened for him, and he swept inside.

While the sex had been fantastic, it had been quick. Bale had stripped her and bent her over the bed, entering her with little foreplay. It had been a show of dominance—one Faith had reveled in. But this one kiss felt much more intimate.

When Bale pulled back, they were both gasping for breath. "Just don't ask me to get in the middle of the shit between Hope and Zeke. Please, baby, don't make me go there."

Laughter bubbled from her lips at the look of distress on Bale's face. "Even *I* am not stepping in that pile of crap. I promise not to ask it of you."

"Thank God," he mumbled, his forehead dropping to rest against hers.

After a moment, Bale rolled once again onto his back, pulling her with him. As she snuggled into his embrace, her gaze returned to the tattoo creeping over his shoulder. She reached up to touch it softly.

“What is it about the phoenix? The tattoo, the bed frame, those...” Her voice dropped off, unwilling to mention the rings in Bale's drawer.

“I never gave them to her. She died before I was ever given the chance. And you do not need to be jealous of a dead woman. Not you, baby. Not when you mean everything to me.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I shouldn't have brought it up.”

“No. You can ask me anything. If they upset you that badly, I will get rid of them. It is time anyway.”

Faith lifted her head from his chest and stared down at him. “They must be worth a fortune. You can't just get rid of them.”

Bale shrugged. “They are nothing but a worthless reminder of how empty my life was before you. I will have Kash melt them down.”

His decisive nod told Faith he had made up his mind and was done with that subject. Sighing, she returned her head to his chest. “So what does the phoenix mean?” she asked again.

“Rebirth,” Bale replied softly. “Remy, Zeke, Arak, and I all had tattoos done during the Middle Ages when we fought with the Templars. To this day, I don't know if I feel such an affinity toward the legend because we suffered a type of rebirth on earth or because I hope to eventually regain the grace of Heaven.”

Faith was silent a moment, considering Bale's words and the longing she heard in his voice. The symbol hit him more deeply than he was letting on. “What if I wanted that wedding ring?” she asked, attempting to keep her voice nonchalant.

Bale stiffened under her. “You would wear a ring purchased for another woman?”

“When put like that, I guess not.” She tried to roll away from him, but Bale refused her release.

He forced her head from his chest and peered into her eyes, as if looking for something. “I would be greatly honored if you would wear my symbol, but would never have suggested it for fear of hurting you.”

“You're right. I would never wear the rings of a dead woman. But they were never really hers, were they?”

“No, they were not. Neither were my heart and soul.” Bale guided her head back to his chest with a grateful sigh. “So you will allow Remy to marry us...you'll become my wife?”

“It's not really necessary,” she murmured, feeling slightly embarrassed that the thought alone filled her with such longing. Her, the cynic on love.

“No, it's not,” Bale agreed. “You are already mine. But I would like to see my ring on you.” Bale brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers lightly; then, clutching them tightly in his, he laid them over his heart.

“Well. All right, then.”

“But if you ever tell my brothers I said that, I will adamantly deny it.”

Faith laughed. “I wouldn't dream of it. I will inform Remy that I insisted you make an honest woman of me.”

“That's my girl.”

* * * *

Dropping the heavy box onto the carpeted floor, Penny heaved a sigh of relief. That was the last of it, and while every fiber in her protested the move to the main residence, wanted to deny Caym was gone and that Raym had disappeared, she also couldn't remain in the apartment she'd shared with the pair. It just hurt too damn much.

So she'd vacated the gatehouse, leaving it available for Jet, who it seems had arrived while she was out looking for Raym. Hating to return like a whipped dog with her tail between her legs, she'd spent days searching for Raym with no success. But she knew he hadn't done the things he'd been accused of, would never believe him capable of such things. Penny loved him with everything in her and would never accept that he'd murdered his twin...her mate. Just as she would never believe he was not meant to be hers also.

Looking around at the mess that was to be her room now, she decided it was too much to contemplate, so instead of unpacking her possessions, she went to the dining room, knowing the rest of the brethren would be in the bailey training. While she was starving, she'd not wanted to have to deal with any of the males within the abbey, especially not after learning about the female now residing with Bale. His mate. That knowledge twisted something inside her, leaving her insides freezing.

Penny had just settled down when footsteps fell outside the arched doorway. For a split second, she considered fleeing but then forced her stiffening limbs to remain in the seat. She glanced up from buttering a slice of toast, and her gaze narrowed at a stunning redhead. Just great. The mate.

"And who might you be?" she asked in a cool British tone, leaning back in her chair. "One of Arak's little tarts, or Bale's?"

The words were out before Penny could stop them. Was that bitter-sounding bitch really her? Biting the inside of her lip, she forced the tears back. She wouldn't let any of them see her cry. Not any longer.

"Penny!" Arak said sharply from the doorway on the opposite side of the room.

Arak's disapproving glare pierced her core, and she lashed out without thought. "You are right. You don't usually bring your fucks home, so this must be Bale's."

Arak's quick strides brought him into the middle of the room, and he braced his arms on the wood, leaning across the table toward her. "You will show the respect due to a mate of the Grigori."

Mate. The word stopped her cold. *She'd* been a mate, had hoped after Caym's death that she still was, but Raym had abandoned her without a backward glance, his hateful words still ringing in her ears. Nothing...she was nothing to him.

Bale took that moment to enter the dining hall. Sweat gleamed on his bare chest, indicating he had been outside sparring with someone. When Bale's gaze fell on Faith, the emotion shining in it brought the bile in Penny's stomach rising to her throat. No one had ever looked at her with such pure love. Not even Caym.

"Morning, baby," he said softly, leaning down and touching Faith with only his lips.

"Oh God," Penny mumbled, lurching to her feet. The walls she had been trying to fortify for days were crumbling down around her. The two bits of toast she had forced down were threatening to reappear. "I'm going to be sick." And with a hand over her mouth, Penny shot out from the room, knocking Arak out of her way in her determination to get the hell away from Bale and his damn mate.

Surprise lit Bale's eyes. "What the hell was that about?" Bale asked, his gaze seeking Arak's for answers.

"How should I know? I was just stepping into the room when I heard her verbally attacking your mate."

Both males turned to Faith, and Bale arched a brow.

"Why are you looking at me?" Faith asked defensively. "Your friend went for my throat the minute I stepped into the room." Then she mimicked Bale's look, lifting her brow.

Bale sighed softly, looking over her head at Arak before returning to her face. "While they did not exactly broadcast what was between the three of them, Penny was involved with the twins, Caym and Raym, mate to one or both of them."

"Both of them?" Faith asked softly, her eyes wide. While not a prude, she wasn't exactly sexually adventurous either. At least not *that* adventurous.

"Yes," he replied, amused by her horror if the smile gracing his face was any indication. "That is the consensus." His lips met hers briefly before he took a step back, remembering he was covered in sweat. His gaze traveled slowly down her body, and her skin tingled in response. "You need to go put on something that will allow you to move in comfort."

Faith glanced at the jeans encasing her legs, then sent him a questioning look.

"I told you I would train you until you begged for mercy." Faith rolled her eyes, and Bale narrowed his, folding his arms across his broad chest. "Just because you got lucky last evening does not mean I will let up on you."

Faith's hands rested on her hips in indignation. "Luck, was it?"

Arak chuckled, and both of them turned to look at him. Holding up his hands, he said to Bale, "You are on your own here, brother. Saraknyal taught me better."

The look in Faith's eyes softened. "From what Bale says, she was an amazing female. I am sorry I was never given a chance to meet her."

Arak glanced away from her for a moment. When his gaze returned, his eyes were moist and filled with such sadness, it made Faith's heart ache. "Me too," he said quietly. "She would have liked you and rejoiced at Bale's good fortune."

Bale clasped a firm hand on Arak's shoulder. "You are a true friend, my brother."

Arak smiled weakly and nodded. "Now take your mate and train her into the ground so I can eat my breakfast in peace."

"You heard the male." Bale waved a hand toward the door. "Go change so I can train you into the ground."

Faith rolled her eyes but couldn't stop the smile that broke across her face. Her last glance was of Bale still standing beside Arak, his hand squeezing his brother's shoulder. And for the first time, Faith got a glimpse into what Bale meant about not being able to face losing her. Forever was a long time to mourn, knowing you would never get back what you had lost—your mate.

Guilt flooded her at how many times she had just brushed Bale's fears aside. But her mate beat any signs of that feeling from her shortly afterward. By the time she was done "training," her feelings toward Bale were hardly sympathetic. Of course, she was just too damn tired to feel much of anything. And she'd thought she was in good shape. These Grigori were insane.

Chapter Sixteen

Once again Faith found herself amid all the brothers, feeling mildly intimidated and uncomfortable. Remy had called them down for a meeting to discuss what the demon Ray had revealed to Zeke, and they were all huddled in the library. Well, except for Kash. Though finally awake, he was still not well enough to leave his bed. And Hope remained by his side, entertaining the grumpy male as best she could.

“While all of this is terribly intriguing,” Penny drawled, sarcasm dripping from her tone as she sprawled into a chair, “what does it have to do with Raym?”

With a snort, Bale sat beside Faith on the only couch in the room. “Since he was meeting the same Lilu demon who was involved the night I got jumped and Faith was injured, I'd say everything. Not to mention a band of Alu and Rabisu demons attacking Zeke, Faith, and me in the same warehouse.”

Penny arched a brow at Bale. “And you are sure it was Raym, how?”

“Because I saw him, Penny.”

“Either that or Caym has come back from the dead,” Zeke stated, sitting on the edge of the desk in the corner of the room, his arms folded across his chest.

Penny sucked in her breath and jumped to her feet. “Take it back, Zeke. You were mistaken.”

Arching a challenging brow, Zeke eyed Penny but did not move a muscle. The tension in the air fairly crackled. Glancing around, Faith was glad for once Jet was not giving her the evil eye. Penny had the pleasure this time.

“His sword...the handle was wrapped in black leather and had a gold cross embedded in it,” Faith murmured softly.

A gasp told Faith her words had struck home, and Penny glared at her. Unconsciously she flinched, elbowing Bale in the side. He grunted softly before wrapping an arm around her shoulders, anchoring her to him.

“You lie,” Penny snarled. She whipped her head around, pointing an accusing finger at Remy. “Why is she even allowed to speak? She does not belong here.”

Remy very calmly rose to his feet. “I can hardly gag Bale's mate. And since she did happen to witness the event, I believe she has every right to state what she saw. Now if you would kindly sit down, Penny, we can get to the bottom of this. Finger-pointing and name-calling will hardly help.”

Penny was shaking her head. “I will not sit here and listen to you malign Raym. He is innocent of what you charge. He would not have his own twin killed.”

Faith watched the almost unnoticeable head motion Zeke's directed at Remy. While she wasn't certain what it meant, apparently Penny did.

“Go to hell, Zeke,” she hissed, clenching her hands into tight fists. “Until this moment, I had no reason to want to hurt Bale or you. Neither did Raym. Now is a whole other story. And you can guarantee that is the truth.”

“Penny, we do not understand how Raym could be capable any more than you,” Arak interceded quietly from where he stood by the door. “It makes no sense. But you heard what Zeke's snitch said. Something is going down, and we need to be prepared.”

Penny warily watched Arak approach her. He reached up and cradled the side of her face in his hands, and a light bluish glow emanated from his fingers. Her eyes took on a glazed appearance for a moment; then she nodded and slumped back into her chair. For just a moment, she looked broken, defeated, and Faith wanted to reach out to the other female.

“The question is, why now? And why Beelzebub? Why go after Bale and not me? And why attack Faith?” Remy sighed. “We have more whys than answers.”

“Who is Beelzebub?” Faith asked quietly. She couldn't even begin to fathom the why until she knew who stood against them. His name meant little to her, and she wished she had her laptop. Google was her friend.

“How much do you know of the rankings of angels?”

Faith pondered Remy's question, trying to recall what she had heard in passing during her childhood. It was not something Muriel had ever openly discussed, at least not in front of her, and Faith shrugged. “I believe the powers and the Principals were formed after Lucifer was thrown from above. And there are higher ranks than those, but truthfully, that's about it.”

“Actually, the powers existed before the war, but their role changed greatly after Michael took over. And they were a lower-ranking group anyway. The top angels are the seraphim, to which Michael and Lucifer belonged. Then the cherubim. Beelzebub was a member of this group. All of that really has little play now except to say ranking usually equates with strength.”

Bale snorted. “But not always.”

Remy smiled. “Not always. Your vampire Principal is proof of that. She was nothing more than a member of the masses when, during the war, she showed her strength by throwing the number three archangel from above. But Beelzebub hasn't managed to maintain second in command of below through sheer luck. He has backed up his position through strength and cunning, wiping out any who thought to get in his way.”

Remy's words filled her with dread, and Faith wished she had not asked about the demon. Glancing around, she wondered where the males in the room had ranked and if any were strong enough to defeat Beelzebub. But she did not dare ask the question out loud.

As if reading her thoughts, Arak said, “Remy and Bale could face Beelzebub and win, and Levi and Zeke could stand a pretty good chance against him. The rest of us, probably not.”

“Well, that is reassuring, I guess.”

Bale chuckled as he weaved his fingers through her hair, tickling the back of her neck. “But this is not about Beelzebub. It is about someone trying to gain his favor. Beelzebub does not have the balls to come to earth. Up here he'd have a hell of a lot more to worry about than Remy or me. Legions of angels would be on his ass, swords ablazing.”

Remy smiled. “There is that. So Raym...” Remy paused, his gaze shifting to Penny. He conceded with a nod and continued, “Or *someone* thinks to use one of our deaths as a way to gain Beelzebub's favor. The *pièce de résistance* would be Bale or myself. But if it is Raym, he

does not stand a chance against either of us and he knows it. So it is only logical to assume the attacks on Bale have been a diversion. But for what?"

"To draw the rest of us out?" Levi suggested.

"But he would have to know that after the attacks on Bale, I would not allow anyone to patrol alone. So what is his angle?"

"To draw us away from the fortress?" Arak suggested.

"For what purpose?" Bale asked.

Remy glanced at Penny and arched a brow.

She seemed genuinely perplexed. "Why would Raym need to draw us away from the fortress? He designed all the security for this place. If anyone could get in, it would be him."

"Yes, he could sneak in and we would never know," Arak added.

"So we, what...hole up here on the off chance we have something Raym wants? Ray said the traitor has offered tribute to Beelzebub in the form of one of our heads. He can't get to one of us if we remain in the fortress." Bale removed his arm from around Faith and leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him.

"We need to capture that damn Lilu demon."

Zeke's and Bale's gazes locked, and for a moment it seemed to Faith they were silently debating with their eyes. It wasn't the first time she had witnessed such an event, and she wondered if maybe they could communicate with each other telepathically. Her father, as the master, could do so with the members of his nest. And Ezra, the dominus, or vampire of all vampires, could do so with every vampire pledged to him. Maybe it was an ability inherited from the angels.

Bale finally nodded. "We begin hunting the bastard tonight, and we end this."

Everyone began to stand, but uncertain what the hell had just occurred, Faith remained seated beside Bale. He wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her, sliding her onto his lap. She watched the others file out; then, when they were alone, she met Bale's gaze.

"What just happened?"

Bale arched an eyebrow. "Did you not hear me? Zeke and I will begin hunting the Lilu demon tonight."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Don't be obtuse. I meant the whole 'silent talking' thing, and you know it." Bale tried to worm his hand under her shirt, but Faith slapped it away. "And don't think you can distract me."

Bale grinned. "Could you not hear us?"

That question gave Faith pause. "Am I supposed to?"

Bale gave a slight shrug. "Dara, because she was Remy's heart mate, could converse with him."

"So you really can speak to each other telepathically."

Bale nodded. "And you cannot?"

He seemed puzzled by this fact, and that concerned Faith. "What if we are not really heart mates?" she whispered.

Bale snorted. "We are heart mates." He slid his hand back into her hair, and his lips hovered over hers. "Already I can feel you inside me. Just a tiny spark, but it will continue to grow."

"How do you know? Did you, you know, with her?"

Bale slid his hand down her back and settled it at her waist as he studied her. "No. At the time, I did not understand the significance. But it hadn't really mattered. We did not recognize heart mates. That came later, when we began to realize some of us could not handle the suffering. We lost many dear brothers, having to hunt them down. It tore us apart for a time. Thankfully Sam was able to bring us back from the brink."

"Sam?"

"Our leader. He maintains our home in Jerusalem."

Faith laid her head on Bale's shoulder and sighed. "It's like this whole other world you live in."

Bale wrapped both arms around her, holding her tight. "We have remained on the fringes for so long, forgotten. And it has suited our purposes. The humans do not want to know of the war we fight. And they would only get in our way."

"But there are more than just humans out there."

Faith felt Bale nod into her hair. "And they are monitored by angels. We have managed to keep them from coming after us because we stay out of their way. We thin out the trash, sometimes by even taking out an archdemon or two. But it is better that they have forgotten us."

His comment did not sit well with Faith. "Are you saying they would kill you?" When Bale did not respond immediately, she lifted her head and stared at him uneasily. "Bale?"

"Honestly, we do not know," he said softly. "We have not had an encounter with them for a millennium."

"But your fears, they are there for a reason."

"Yes, there was a time we were hunted like demons for simply existing."

"Damn it, Bale. Ezra is sure to have known almost immediately about your encounter with my father. And if Ezra knows, so does Muriel. What did you risk by getting Hope back?" Fear, thick and putrid, consumed Faith.

His hands framed her face. "It is a chance I was willing to take for you."

Brushing his grip away, she jumped to her feet. "Then you are a fool. Hope is not worth it. I am not worth it."

With a roar, Bale rose and grabbed her by the waist, pressing her body against his. "Do not ever say such words again," he growled. "If they come, they come. But loving you is worth everything." His fingers dug into her scalp, gripping the back of her head, and his lips took deep possession.

"Disgusting." The disgruntled voice had Faith pushing away from Bale's embrace. Penny stood just inside the doorway, watching them with a hard stare. "I said I'd help you, Bale, not stand around watching you paw your... whatever."

Faith felt her ire rise at Penny's dismissive glance. Then she noticed the other female had changed her clothing. She'd gone from wearing jeans and a T-shirt to a black leather tank and pants. PETA would have a field day with these guys.

“With what?” Faith questioned, Penny's statement finally sinking in. She'd tried to keep her tone neutral, but when Bale arched a brow, she figured she had not succeeded.

“I asked Penny to train with you.”

Oh, no way in hell! Bale tensed, and for just a moment, Faith thought he might have heard her. When she sensed nothing in return, she dismissed the notion, figuring he must have suspected how she would react, which was why she was just hearing about his brilliant idea only now.

“Look, I've got better things I could be doing while you are patrolling, Bale, than babysitting for you.”

Oh, this bitch is so going down. “Penny, I would love to train with you,” Faith fairly purred, and the other female's gaze turned wary. “Just give me a minute to change.” She broke away from Bale and forced Penny from the doorway so she could exit the room. She knew both followed her through the house, but she did not pause until she reached the staircase. “I'll meet you in the courtyard in say...ten minutes,” she called over her shoulder.

“It's a bailey,” Penny responded in her snooty British accent.

Faith tensed but turned and flashed Penny a tight smile. “Of course,” she replied through clenched teeth. Her cool gaze narrowed at Bale for one brief moment before she headed up. She barely recognized that he murmured something to Penny, instead concentrating all her effort on not flying at the other female and tearing her hair out. She stopped short at the top of the stairs, almost running into Hope.

“I really want to knock that bitch on her ass,” her twin murmured, watching Penny slam her way out the front door.

“Get in line.”

Hope snorted. “Your mate shouldn't let her treat you like that.”

Bale had been watching her as he steadily climbed the stairs after her but paused, raising a brow at Hope's interference.

“And your sister should mind her own business. If I thought you couldn't handle Penny, I would do something about it.”

Faith nodded at his words. While having him defend her would be nice, and would certainly appease her sense of outrage, she did recognize the only way to end Penny's snide remarks was to lay her out. And she planned to do just that. Or end up on her ass trying.

* * * *

Well, Faith did end up on her ass. Thankfully so did Penny. Call it a draw, but in her mind, it was a victory. She'd held her own against the once-angelic female. She couldn't have asked for more, and she'd certainly surprised the hell out of Penny.

She sneaked away from the fortress an hour later, already late for work. Friday was one of her peak nights, and she liked to be at the club early to prepare for the rush. Faith hadn't discussed her plans for the evening with Bale any more than he had bothered to discuss his. And while she was feeling a little chafed about it, she knew he would not be happy once he discovered her gone. Hence her sneaking away.

Prue, Tempy, and Calie, one of her other waitresses, were waiting for her in the parking lot when she arrived.

“So where is Big Jolly?” Prue called out as Faith climbed out of her car.

She grinned, approaching the door with keys in hand. “He's out being the big and bad.”

“Ooh,” Prue purred. “I just love big and bad.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Calie curiously, one of the young vampires who worked for Faith and had yet to go through her Transfiguration.

Prue stopped short in surprise. “Haven't you heard about Faith's mate? Super huge. Super yummy.”

Faith rolled her eyes at Calie's grin. “Who hasn't? It's had twelve hours to sweep through the grapevine. Lucky bitches.”

“I'm only one, and I'm not a wolf,” Faith teased, following the three females inside the building.

Calie gave a wistful sigh. “I was talking about you and Hope. To both find your one and only at the same time.”

“Hope?” Prue questioned, turning around to grace her with an arched brow.

Faith gave her head a quick shake when she was certain Calie was not looking, then rolled her eyes and replied, “One of Bale's yummy, leather-wearing brothers.”

With a slight nod, Prue indicated she understood something was up, something that Faith could not speak about in front of the little vampire. “And you plan on introducing me to *my* mate, when?”

Faith laughed. “I'll have to give that some consideration.” Finally she glanced at Tempy, her curiosity piqued. “What are you doing here this early?”

“I'm filling in for Chari. She called me earlier; some wolf shit she has to take care of. She'll probably be out of touch all weekend,” Tempy answered.

Faith was silent a moment, considering Tempy's words and actions. “Just tell me, is she okay? Or do I need to do something for her?” While Faith was not going to step over the boundaries of her boss-employee relationship with Charity, she did consider the other female her friend and would use all resources available to her if Charity needed them.

Prue sighed. “She's going to have to work this out herself, Faith. But I wouldn't be surprised if she disappeared for a while.”

“What's going on, Prue?” Now Faith was really worried.

“I don't know all the details. What I do know is that her mate died.”

Faith sat down on one of the bar stools, stunned. “I didn't know she had a mate,” she said softly.

“Neither did we,” Tempy added, sitting next to Faith. “And she wouldn't say much more than he was gone.”

“Shit,” Faith mumbled.

Prue nodded. “She was seriously messed up, so much so that she shifted right there in our kitchen. Tempy barely got the back door open before she took off into the woods.”

“When things slow down here, I'm going to head out looking for her, if only to make sure she is okay.”

Faith immediately nodded to Tempy. "I'll try to get someone else in to cover for you. If I can't, I'll help with the tables so you can scoot out as soon as possible." At Tempy's look of relief, Faith realized she and Prue were more concerned than they were letting on. "What?"

Tempy glanced at Prue, then shrugged. "It's just that a wolf cannot survive the death of her mate, can she?"

That stopped Faith for a moment, and she considered Tempy's question. "That kind of mating for wolves is really rare, I think. And if that had been the case, we would have known, right? Male wolves get really possessive. I'm certainly no expert, but how could Chari have had a mate and we not know?"

"We all have our secrets," Tempy said softly. She glanced at Prue, who clasped a hand on Tempy's shoulder.

Faith looked away from the two, silently agreeing with Tempy's assessment. She certainly had her own doozy of a secret herself. She left her employees to get ready while she went to her office. After calling every available person she could think of, Faith finally gave up trying to replace Charity and did so herself.

The club was packed, but she had Charity's tables firmly within her control, and Tempy on her way before ten. It was a long and tiring night, and Faith was relieved when it came to an end. Having already sent everyone else home, she exited the back door, locked it tight, and moved to her car.

She didn't realize she was under attack until it was too late.

He sneaked up behind her and hit her at the base of her skull with the handle of his broadsword, knocking her out cold. As she slumped to the ground, he stood over her, a strong sense of satisfaction filling him. He'd beaten Remy, Bale, and the rest of the damn Grigori.

Whistling, he dragged the redhead to the van where Magnus sat waiting for him. He slid the side door open and tossed the female inside, then quickly wrapped her wrists and ankles with thick rope. While he wasn't worried about her posing any threat—he was fairly confident he could overcome one little female vampire—he wasn't about to let his prize escape. He had big plans for this one. He grinned, a set of perfectly white teeth shining in the darkness. Yes, big plans.

* * * *

Hope glanced around the library, looking for something to encourage the creative juices to flow. Remy had been nice enough to set up her drafting table in a corner of the room before he had left to patrol, and after spending thirty minutes arranging her things just right, she ran out of ways to procrastinate. It was time to get to work. She was under a serious deadline and couldn't afford to let herself become distracted.

Her gaze lingered on a full set of armor standing in the corner by the door. She'd already come to recognize Kash's work. He had others littered around the abbey, as he enjoyed the creativity of designing the full-body armor when he wasn't making the males' weapons. It amused her that deep down he was an artist.

The sun was peeking over the horizon behind her, just starting to filter through the large windows. She usually liked to work through the night, the lack of light helping to add a sense of darkness to her work. Setting her pencil down, she wondered what it was that was trashing her

concentration. Was it the knowledge that Kash was lying upstairs, injured because of her? Or was it the room itself and working in an unfamiliar setting?

Hope shook her head, glancing down at the image before her. She would be lying to herself if she didn't acknowledge she felt at home in the abbey...safe for the first time since her parents had split up. As Zeke's image stared back at her, Hope recognized that, while the male irritated her beyond reason, she found herself drawn to him. But she had not been joking when she had told Kash she despised marriage. She hated love, period. Love had ruined her mother, left her open to a Lilu demon's attack. Never would Hope be so vulnerable as to allow herself to be destroyed by a male.

She rose to get a cup of coffee, hoping the caffeine would give her the jolt she needed to get her ass moving. That was when it hit her, an overwhelming sense of panic, and she had to grip the edges of her table to keep from falling. With wild eyes, she glanced around, her gaze finally settling on the figure standing in the doorway. Zeke.

Zeke had been watching Hope for several minutes. He hadn't wanted to, had tried to turn away, but his feet had refused to cooperate. Then it was as if the very air in the room had been sucked out, replaced by the putrid stench of fear. Panic had slid into Hope's eyes. His feet ate up the distance with a sense of desperation as he moved to her side.

She turned to him, her gaze meeting his. "Bale, help me," she whispered just before her eyes rolled back in her head and she started to slump to the ground.

Zeke lunged forward and scooped her into his arms. He was left shaken because for a moment, her eyes had appeared to change from their normal light blue to a vivid green, and Zeke could have sworn he had been gazing into Faith's.

Then he heard Bale bellowing his mate's name throughout the abbey. Carrying Hope, Zeke moved in the direction of Bale's voice. As he rounded the corner with the intention of climbing the stairs, he met Bale.

"Where is she?" Bale demanded, his glare pinned on the bundle in Zeke's arms. "Damn it, Hope, I'll beat you both if you do not tell me this very minute."

Zeke shook his head, drawing Hope tighter against his chest in a protective gesture. "She passed out, Bale, just after she said your name and begged for help."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know, but I could have sworn her eyes changed color...from blue to green."

All color drained from Bale's face.

"If you are looking for your little chickie, she sneaked out not long after you left last night," Penny stated from behind Bale. As Bale slowly turned, Zeke caught a glimpse of her walking down the steps.

"And you did not think to stop her?" Bale barked, his stance rigid as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

Penny shrugged nonchalantly, stepping around them. "I did not realize it was my responsibility to supervise her."

Remy appeared just as Bale lunged for Penny, and wrapped a beefy arm around Bale's shoulders. Jet and Arak were also there, helping to control a struggling Bale. He ceased all movement, pinning Penny with a deadly glare.

“If anything has happened to my mate, I will hold you personally responsible.”

Then they all felt it, like an invisible thread being snapped. Bale severed all ties to Penny, leaving her effectively dead to him, unable to sense him or mind-speak with him, and she staggered back from the loss of the connection.

“Bale,” she whispered, reaching toward him.

Bale broke away from those holding him. “Do not,” he warned raggedly. “Never did I begrudge what you had found with Raym and Caym, even if I did not understand it. Now my mate is missing, and if she has been harmed, I will never forgive you.”

Penny sobbed his name, but Bale did not remain to listen to her tears, her pleas for absolution, as he teleported from the room and from the abbey. Zeke thrust an unconscious Hope into Remy's arms, then immediately followed Bale. When he appeared in the parking lot of Club Dominus, he wasn't surprised to find Jet and Arak right beside him. Zeke nodded to the two before approaching Bale. Their brother was kneeling over something lying on the pavement.

As Bale looked up, the tears rolling down his cheeks tore at Zeke, and he almost staggered back from the extent of his brother's despair.

“I should have realized she would feel the need to come here. How could I have been so stupid?” he whispered, his voice rough and haggard.

Zeke glanced down at the purse and keys scattered across the parking lot, uncertain how to respond to Bale's misery. He couldn't tell his brother what he really thought—that Faith's senseless act was what had led to this event. If she'd remained where she should have, she'd still be safe.

A few drops of blood splattered around her possessions caught Zeke's attention. It was a relief to realize there was not enough blood to signal any serious harm had come to Faith. At least not here.

“Vampires again?” Arak asked softly, coming to stand beside Zeke.

Bale glanced up, his eyes lit with fury. “If so, I will destroy every last one of them,” he vowed; then he disappeared again.

“I will go and confirm whether they were involved. You said a werewolf had helped determine who had attacked Kash. Now would be a good time to find this female and get her assistance. Who knows? She might be able to lead us to Faith.”

“Faith should have employee files inside the club. As soon as Jet gets the lock picked, I'll start calling around.”

Jet was already moving to the door when Zeke closed his eyes and concentrated on Bale's presence, then reappeared in front of Garrett Magee's palatial estate. Bale had his weapon in hand, his gaze glued to the windows in the far right corner of the estate. Then he blinked out again.

Zeke sighed, trailing his brother into the fortified home of the vampires. They were in a large master bedroom, and Bale had pinned Faith's father to the bed, the blade of his sword pressing into the vampire's neck. Zeke stepped forward, observing the scene indifferently. The vampire was devoid of color, clearly unprepared for their invasion and quite terrified by it.

“Where is she?” Bale growled. “Where is my mate?”

“Who?” Garrett whispered, the confusion on the vampire's face something Zeke was not certain could be faked. But the male's aura couldn't lie. Not to Zeke. The vampire had no idea what Bale was ranting about.

“Tell me where Faith is and I'll kill you quickly. Otherwise I promise it will be slow and it will be painful.”

The vampire tried to shake his head, denying Bale's accusation, but the blade only further embedded into his skin, nicking the flesh and causing the male to wince.

“Bale,” Zeke said quietly, placing a restraining hand on his brother's shoulder. “He's telling the truth, Bale. He didn't take Faith.”

“And what of your vampires? Which one of them has gone rogue?”

The vampire's eyes narrowed angrily even though there was a silver-cored sword poised to slice his head from his neck. “If any of my vampires had done anything to Faith, I would know.”

Bale's laugh held no humor. “Really? So you knew one of your vampires intentionally tried to kill Hope's mate while she begged and pleaded for his life.”

Garrett studied Bale for a moment. “I do not monitor every thought my vampires contrive to have or every action. I trust them...at least I did. If what you say is true, Martin will be punished.”

Zeke was beginning to suspect vampires had had nothing to do with Faith's abduction. He knew none of them would want to consider the possibility that it had been someone else. That thought was entirely too frightening. If it had been Raym, how would they ever find Faith in time to prevent her death? Because Zeke was certain that would be Raym's intention.

A shudder passed through Bale, and then he released the pressure of his blade against the vampire's neck. The knowledge in his brother's eyes ripped through Zeke, the loss in those brown depths haunting. Bale had already come to the same conclusion. He believed Faith already dead.

Zeke felt something inside him break. “No,” he growled. He clenched his hand into a fist, then shot out, connecting with Bale's chin. He wanted his brother angry, not defeated. As Bale grasped his jaw in surprise, Zeke grabbed the front of his shirt. “You will not for one moment believe she does not live. Because damn it, Bale, we will not lose another one. Not this time. What the hell will Faith think when she learns you have already given up on her?”

With a roar, Bale rose to his feet, knocking Zeke backward. It was a damn good thing too, because then Bale swung his sword, and it would likely have connected with a part of Zeke's anatomy he'd prefer to keep. Not that Arak ever thought he used his dick for anything worthwhile.

Bale's sword fell uselessly to the floor before he lunged at Zeke, catching him around the waist. The overall mass of Bale's body sent him crashing to the floor. Zeke figured he was about to get his ass kicked and struggled to keep Bale's fists from doing too much damage.

“Where is my daughter? What has happened to Faith?” The vampire's voice froze Bale in midswing.

Bale rolled off Zeke, landing on his back. Neither male answered for a moment as each tried to catch his breath. As Bale sat up, he stated, “We do not know for certain. She disappeared outside her club.”

The vampire rose to his feet and covered his naked form with the navy blue silk robe that had been folded over the end of the bed. The door to his bedroom opened, and two other

vampires stepped in. One of them Zeke recognized as the male's enforcer. If they had arrived due to the noise or if the vampire had silently called out to them, Zeke did not know, but Garrett immediately turned to his men.

“Send a call out. I want every vampire and wolf—everyone at our disposal—here within the hour.”

The other vampire nodded and turned to do as he was bid, but the enforcer didn't move a muscle. “Why the sudden urge to play nice with others?” he drawled.

“Faith is still my daughter, and any slight against her is against me. She has been kidnapped by...” The vampire arched a brow at Bale.

“Demons,” he snarled as he accepted the hand Zeke offered to help him rise to his feet. Ignoring Garrett's gasp, Bale met Zeke's gaze, nodded, and then dissipated.

With a sigh, Zeke also ignored the other vampires' surprise, centering his attention on Faith's father. “We will get in touch with you over the next several hours. Hopefully we will know more by then.” Zeke reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card that had his cell phone number on it. He normally used them for his snitches but figured he could always use an informant within the vampire community. “This is my number. Call if you learn anything useful.”

Zeke didn't wait for the vampire to respond. As soon as Garrett took hold of the card, Zeke teleported from the room. He found himself once again in the club's parking lot. Remy and Levi had joined them, Remy having pulled Bale aside, talking to him quietly while Arak paced the area, a cell phone held to his ear. Jet knelt on the ground, eyes closed as he tried to get a reading from Faith's purse.

“Who's Arak on the phone with?”

Levi stood on the sidelines, keeping his eyes glued to their surroundings, constantly scanning the area for any movement or threat. “Some female who works at the bar. He's trying to track down that werewolf friend of Faith's.” Levi looked him up and down. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Bale.” Zeke raised a hand to his eye and winced. It was starting to swell and hurt like a bitch.

“Had to keep him from killing those vampires?” he asked with a soft chuckle.

“Something like that,” Zeke murmured, his gaze settling on Bale.

Following the direction of his gaze, Levi sobered instantly. “How's he holding up?”

“Exactly how you'd expect. And if he doesn't beat her ass when we get her back, you can be guaranteed, I will.”

“I pray you both get the chance.”

Zeke clasped his hand on Levi's shoulder. “Christ, me too.”

Chapter Seventeen

Hope slowly opened her eyes, feeling fuzzy and disoriented. It took her a moment to determine she was in Arak's infirmary, lying on one of the twin beds. Glancing to her left confirmed her suspicion. Kash was in the bed next to her, watching her carefully.

"What happened?" she asked, finding her voice hoarse. "Why am I here?"

"You don't remember, doll?"

Hope shook her head.

"It was some weird shit. Zeke said your eyes changed color; then you passed out."

She considered what he said...and what he didn't. Straining to recall anything, Hope released a frustrated sigh. "I don't remember."

Something flashed in Kash's eyes that looked suspiciously like regret, and it put Hope on edge. He said her eyes had changed color. What the hell did that mean? And when she only received a shrug as a response, an unreasonable anger spread through her.

"What color?" she demanded savagely.

For a moment, Kash did not respond, and it almost seemed as if he was afraid to answer her. "Green."

Hope's heart picked up speed. "Where is Faith?" When Kash's face fell, she knew deep in her gut that something terrible had occurred. "Where is my sister?"

"We do not know," he replied quietly. "Bale thought it might have been your father who took her."

"Was it?" She pinned him with her gaze, expecting to rise from the bed and go head-to-head with her father, no matter how much he frightened her.

Kash shook his head. "Zeke confirmed the vampires had nothing to do with it."

Hope swung her legs over the side of the bed, intending to stand on her feet, but was surprised by how weak she felt. "And he can tell for certain? You trust him?" Her voice held no condemnation regarding Zeke, and even though in general he annoyed the crap out of her, she was only attempting to gain factual information.

"Absolutely."

While Kash's unwavering conviction sent a wave of curiosity crashing over her, Hope ignored all the questions that came with it. Right now wasn't about Zeke but about Faith.

"Who, then?"

"We think Raym kidnapped her."

Kash's reply sucked all the air right out of her, and she gasped for breath.

Kash rose from the bed and grabbed her by the back of the head, forcing her face between her knees. "Breathe slowly," he said softly.

Hope tried to do as he demanded, concentrating on his murmurings. His voice became a lifeline, one she clung to as she attempted to control her rising panic. She watched a tear drop from her eye, soundlessly hitting the floor, and released a sob. Without looking up, she felt Kash pull her from the bed and into his, and he enveloped her in his tight embrace.

"Is she still alive?" she whispered against the curve of his neck.

He gently raised her head to meet her gaze. "You tell me, doll. You are the only one who has had contact with her. We don't know how, but through you, she called for Bale."

With wide eyes, Hope stared at him. She knew she shouldn't be surprised by his words. She'd always been able to sense things about Faith, something her twin had never been able to reciprocate. But still, if what he said was true, that was taking the twin thing to a whole new level.

Kash gently cupped her cheek. "Close your eyes." When Hope slid her lids closed, he inquired quietly, "Do you feel her? Sense anything?"

There was a sense of desperation in his voice that had Hope struggling to please. Digging deep within, she tried to feel a connection to her twin...to feel anything. Just when she was about to give up, she stumbled across it, weak but still there, and she sobbed a slight gasp.

"Shit," Kash mumbled as her eyes flicked open. Meeting his defeated look, she smiled.

"She's still alive."

"Oh, thank God. That should help Bale."

Bale. She felt a twinge of guilt because not once had she considered her sister's mate. "How is he?"

"Just as you would expect—out of his mind. But don't worry about Bale. You just concentrate on contacting Faith. Maybe we can use your connection to find out where she is being held."

Safe within Kash's arms, Hope closed her eyes again, centering all her attention on the link she held to her sister, trying desperately to turn that little spark into something more.

* * * *

When Kash's words whispered in his mind, confirming Faith still lived, it was like a weight had been lifted from Bale's chest. That small bit of hope was all he'd needed to get his head screwed on straight and concentrate all his efforts on bringing his mate home.

Arak had just flipped the cell phone shut when Bale approached.

"Any luck?"

He shrugged. "The bartender isn't certain the werewolf is available, but said she'll find us another shifter if that's the case. Apparently Faith and Hope are not the only ones out hunting demons for fun. There seems to be a group that calls itself the Venator Society. Prue's going to call around, see if any of them saw or heard anything last night."

Bale cursed softly. "What the hell kinds of trouble are these females getting into every night?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to meet Prue in a dark alley. The mouth on that female..." Arak shuddered, causing a grin to break out across Bale's face.

“Yeah, I've been on the receiving end of that.” He mimicked Arak's shudder. “It's an experience I'd not care to relive.”

“Was Jet able to get anything?” Arak asked, referring to the images their brother had tried to pull from the things Faith left behind.

All humor fled Bale, and his face pulled tight. “She was hit from behind...knocked out cold.”

“Damn,” Arak muttered. “That's it?”

Bale stuffed his hands in his pockets, nodding briskly, then glanced away. He hated feeling so helpless. He was used to action, finding the bad guy and terminating him—job done. Now they all stood around with their thumbs up their asses, and the futility of it left Bale feeling vulnerable. And angry.

He wanted Faith back. Wanted to break the bastards who had taken her. Waiting around was killing him.

* * * *

Faith struggled to regain consciousness, both wanting and fearing it, though her brain couldn't quite reason out why. A sharp, throbbing pain in the back of her skull caused her to squeeze her eyes tightly closed, concerned the light filtering in would only make the migraine worse. Her arms, stretched over her head, were stiff and achy. When she tried to move them into a new position, she realized she could not.

Her eyes darting open, Faith found her wrists secured to the bed frame, and it came back to her, the attack outside the club. And then she groaned. Bale was going to kill her—if she survived.

Taking a quick account, she realized the only injury she had sustained was the blow to the head. Otherwise she seemed to be okay. A little weak and disoriented, but still, she could be worse. She was still clothed, and her legs had been left loose. The intention behind the restraints seemed to be to keep her from escaping. They must have thought that because she was female, she was weak. *That* she could use to her advantage.

Her one disadvantage was that she needed to feed. Fortunately, having been forced to go for days without Bale, she understood how long she had before she really got sick. And since she felt as if she'd been run over by a truck, she figured if she didn't get free soon, she wouldn't be able to function on her own. So as the minutes ticked away, Faith planned and plotted, waiting for her kidnapers to show.

* * * *

Faith had been missing a little over twelve hours when Prue finally drove into the parking lot in Charity's FJ Cruiser. Prue looked like hell, but Bale couldn't be bothered with how she was holding up. His only concern was getting Faith back.

“What the hell took you so long?” he barked as she opened the passenger door, allowing a red wolf to jump out.

Her eyes narrowed at him for a split second, and she slammed the door shut. “You are not the only one who has some shit going on. I got here as soon as I could.”

“Faith will be glad to hear it.”

Prue came to a screeching halt. “For your information, I wasn't sitting on my ass doing nothing. Rumor on the streets is that some demon is looking to start a breeding program. He thinks he's found the cure to some curse. Any of this make sense to you?” She arched a defiant brow at him.

“Son of a bitch.” Bale met Remy's look of disbelief. If either Raym or Beelzebub thought they could reverse their inability to procreate, then that meant the brothers had been following the wrong assumption all this time. The tribute had never been one of the brothers, but a brother's mate. And Faith had stepped right into their eager hands. “Jesus. They must not know vampires can't conceive.”

Prue was shaking her head. “Oh, Faith can conceive. She will just suffer miscarriage after miscarriage, carrying each baby until around the fifth month, only to lose it.”

“It will kill her,” Bale whispered. He shook his head. He wasn't going to consider what Raym might intend, because he was going to get her back. He wasn't going to allow that sick little bastard to hurt Faith. As soon as nightfall hit, Garrett's vampires would be scouring the city, each holding a leash as the wolves on the other end scented for any trace of her. They were going to find her.

“It's crap, Bale, and you know it. There is no cure to the curse.”

“And exactly how do you know this?” Prue folded her arms before her defiantly as she stared Zeke down.

“Believe me, doll, I know. Those demons don't have a snowball's chance in hell. They haven't for centuries.”

Prue's eyes narrowed even farther as her gaze swept over Bale and his brothers, leaving him feeling slightly unsettled. Hoping to divert the female's attention, he nodded at the wolf by her side. “What can your friend tell us?”

With that gentle reminder, Charity began to walk slow circles around the parking lot, nose to the ground, until she came to a stop where Faith had been hit. Then she seemed to follow a trail to the street. She remained in the area for several minutes, sniffing the ground, then the air, and then the ground again. Barking once, she scented the air one last time before startling Bale when she shifted.

She remained on her hands and knees, seemingly unconcerned with her nudity, but embarrassed, Bale had to look away.

“Faith was dragged here and placed into an automobile. There is something odd about it. It has its own distinct scent.”

Bale's gaze returned to the female. He thought Prue had looked haggard, but Charity appeared unwell, and Bale felt instant guilt for the crap he had given Prue. He caught how Prue was watching the werewolf with a look of pity. He thought to pursue it, but then Charity's next statement caught his attention.

“I might be able to follow the trail.” She paused a moment, glancing at the ground, and released a shuddering breath, which traveled down her spine.

“Sweetie, are you sure you are up to this?” Prue stepped closer to Charity, resting a gentle hand on the other female's head.

“Yeah. I need this, Prue.” The other female nodded and stepped back, and Charity centered her attention again on Bale. “I can't make any promises, and I would really hate to send anyone on a wild-goose chase.”

“Right now that's all we have. Wild-goose chases. A chance is better than nothing.”

Charity gave him a small smile, then shifted back to wolf. Prue placed a collar loosely around her neck, then clipped a leash to it. Holding up the other end, she said to Bale, “Would you like to do the honors?”

Zeke stepped forward. “Let me. If we find anything, I'll let you know immediately. But if it doesn't pan out, there's no sense you wasting time better spent.”

“As soon as you know,” Bale repeated before watching as the red wolf led Zeke down the street. He would have continued to observe them if his attention had not been immediately captured by a moving mass out of the corner of his eye. Two beefy vampires—Faith's bouncers—wanted to help in the search, so coordinating with Remy, Bale sent them to Arak, who was heading the search north of downtown. Once he returned his gaze to them, the pair was out of sight.

* * * *

Faith never heard her captors; they just appeared in the room. There were two of them, one being the bastard Lilu demon, and Faith swore if she got free, she was going to kill the son of a bitch.

She knew the other had to be Bale's missing brother, Raym. He wasn't as tall as Bale, nor did he have the overall mass of her mate, but what he lacked in physique, he made up for in beauty. His hair was cut to his ears, sweeping around the crown of his head in a mass of black curls. His olive complexion only served to highlight the blue-green of his eyes and enhance his white teeth. He smiled as he looked down at her, revealing a dimple in his left cheek. Standing beside the Lilu demon only further emphasized how wrong this situation was. He was far too lovely to be a demon, and he should be helping her, not looking upon her with that wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Balam does have exquisite taste,” he murmured, running a finger lightly down her cheek. “If only I did not have loftier goals, I would keep you for myself.”

Faith turned her face away, her stomach clenching at his touch. He only chuckled as the finger continued to trail down her neck, tracing a circle around her nipple before he tugged on it roughly. She bucked, a protest lodging in her throat as she tried to break free. Laughing at her feeble attempts, he pinched the nipple harder.

“Stop playing with my gift,” a voice commanded from behind the pair.

Raym immediately stepped aside, allowing the newcomer to come forward. A gasp escaped Faith's lips as she caught a glimpse of him. And she'd thought Raym was beautiful; this new male was several inches taller than Raym but carried himself with a gracefulness Raym lacked. His long silver hair framed a pale face and shimmered around his shoulders as he moved. He was definitely not human. And he was not a demon.

“My gift is lovely,” he purred, “and I shall put my new pet to good use.”

“Thank you, master.” Raym moved back, knocking the Lilu demon out of his way as he turned from the bed.

“I am Beelzebub,” the newcomer murmured as he began to roll up his sleeve. “And you, my pet, shall come to enjoy your new life. But first you must feed so you are strong enough for our journey.”

He slid his arm under her nose as if that was all it took. She didn't know what this asshole was thinking, but she'd rather die than feed from him, even if she could. Faith turned her head to the side, ignoring Beelzebub's *tsk*.

“Naughty, naughty.” He grabbed her by her hair, forcing her eyes to meet his. “I am told you have to feed every twelve hours. You have been unconscious for fifteen. You will eat.”

His comment surprised Faith. She'd only been out fifteen hours? Her body was telling her it had been much longer, and that confused her. She considered that, maybe because of her injuries, her body was out of whack.

From his belt he procured a knife and passed the sharp edge across his wrist, slicing it open. The scent of blood hit her nostrils, and she fought her body's reaction. But her teeth would hear none of it. Her fangs dropped as Beelzebub shoved his bleeding arm into her mouth. As she choked on the blood running down her throat, Faith's head thrashed about, seeking freedom, only to find her chin imprisoned in his steely grip.

As soon as the bastard released her, Faith turned her head to the side. “Oh God,” she sobbed, her stomach beginning to burn, and her back arched off the bed. Through a fog, she heard Beelzebub ask the other two males what the hell her problem was, but she was too consumed with agonizing pain.

If she could have moved, she would have curled up into a little ball. Instead, the silver handcuffs around her wrists sliced through her skin as she shifted about restlessly. Then her stomach began to heave, and blood rolled down her chin as she emptied all she'd been forced to consume.

Finished, she sank back into the mattress, her body still spasming from the assault and her skin drenched in sweat.

“What the hell have you brought me?” His face lit with anger, Beelzebub turned to Raym. “You said she would be the one to end the curse.”

A laugh trickled from Faith. She didn't know what the bastard had planned for her, but she hoped she'd seriously fucked them up. It would serve the son of a bitch right. “Mated. Only Bale's blood.”

“What did you say?” The archdemon turned his eyes, flashing red, on her. The sight almost had Faith peeing her pants.

Closing her eyes, she fought for her last ounce of courage. If she was going to die—and she figured either way she would, because she was no use to them now—she'd at least make Bale proud. She opened her eyes and met his gaze. “Without Bale, I'll die, so kiss your plans good-bye.”

Beelzebub's fists clenched at his sides before one connected with her cheek. “Then you are worthless.”

Her cheek throbbed, and tears leaked from her eyes. “Yeah, I kind of already figured that,” she whispered, turning her head away. She didn't have to hear his next order to know what was going to happen. She was going to die.

“Kill her,” Beelzebub commanded Raym. Then he blinked out of sight.

Chapter Eighteen

Zeke allowed the wolf to drag him down the street, wondering how the hell it had come to this. Had he sunk so low that he was now following a mutt around?

He snorted when she came to a halt, her tail wagging happily as she sniffed the tires of an old, beat-up, black utility van. If she pissed on them, he was so done.

When the wolf was quickly replaced by a very nude female, Zeke almost stumbled back in surprise but caught himself just in time. Averting his gaze, he shrugged out of his coat and shoved it toward her.

“That is amazing.” He peeked from the corner of his eye, making sure she was covered before he turned to face her.

Charity smiled softly. “Thanks.” She reached through the open driver's window and snatched something from the rearview mirror. “This is what I smelled.” She held the air freshener to her nose. “Baby powder. How odd.”

“Well, I'll be damned.”

Zeke glanced around, taking in their surroundings. Charity had led him a good five miles from the club to the old Rainier Cold Storage complex. The parts that had not been ravaged by a fire years ago stood dilapidated and in ruins. The truck was parked behind the old brew house, and he was unable to get a glimpse of the occupants inside due to the boarded-up windows.

“I can't guarantee it's the right truck, but...” She shrugged. “I'm going in with you.”

Zeke had been trying to contact Bale, but her statement captured his full attention, causing a smirk to break out across his face. Charity was tall for a female, probably around five feet ten, and still she did not reach Zeke's shoulders. He scoffed at her fragility. She was such a little thing despite her height. He could probably span her entire waist with one hand. And on top of that, she was nude. If she planned on distracting Faith's kidnappers, it would be one hell of a disruption.

“No, you're not.”

She arched a brow before slowly discarding his coat. Zeke watched as it cascaded to the ground. Then she turned into the ugliest damn thing Zeke had ever seen—something from horror flicks. She still had the appearance of a human, only one covered in thick red fur and sporting the wickedest set of claws. Growling at him, she made sure he got a good glimpse of her razor-sharp teeth.

“It's your funeral.” Zeke wasn't about to argue with the Sasquatch, not when she could probably eat him and use his bones to pick her teeth.

Charity growled, and Zeke could only assume that was a good thing. With one last wary glance in her direction, he reached out to Bale.

“The wolf has led me to a van behind the old Rainier Cold Storage complex. I think we've found them. And let me just add, your mate has some interesting friends.”

Bale appeared to his left, then stopped short when he saw Charity. “What the hell is that?”

Zeke shrugged, amused by the look of horror on Bale's face. “Apparently werewolves have more than one form.”

Charity growled again, this time deeper...annoyed. She obviously didn't like their talking about her.

Bale threw his hands up defensively. “Well, shit,” he mumbled.

The rest of their brothers blinked in behind Bale, each just as stunned when they caught sight of the werewolf. Several minutes ticked by as Zeke was flooded with a flurry of silent questions until Bale barked, “Enough!”

He yanked his sword from the scabbard hanging at his side. Then raising it high, he said, “Let's do this.”

* * * *

Faith struggled to free her wrists from the handcuffs that tied her to the bed as Raym slowly approached, his sword drawn. All she could think about was Bale. She didn't want to leave him. And as his words came back to haunt her, of what would happen to him should she die, she called herself twelve times a fool.

Breathing became difficult as fear seeped into her bones. She saw no way out of this, no way to save herself from the death Raym planned to inflict. Desperate to reach out to Bale, to at least tell him she loved him, Faith tried to mind-link with him. To no avail, she searched for the link Bale seemed to think they should share. And as tears streaked down her cheeks, she knew even if she did possess such a connection to him, she would never figure it out in time. She was going to die.

“It's a shame the condition you are in now. I would have loved to have sampled you before you died.” He sighed, and Faith released a grateful sob. At least she didn't have to suffer through that indignity. “Oh well. I still get the pleasure of seeing Bale destroyed.”

Rage, sure and swift, consumed Faith, drowning any fear or good sense. “You can't harm Bale, you pitiful little shit. That's why you sent the Rabisu demon to attack him. Against Bale, you don't stand a chance.”

His face clouded with hatred, and his fingers whitened around the handle of his sword for just a moment before he seemed to gain control of himself. “I don't need to raise a hand to destroy Bale. Your death will do that for me.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

Raym gave an indifferent shrug. “Because I can. Do I really need any other motive than that?”

Shaking her head, Faith could not fathom his reasoning for turning traitor. Had he really gone from being one of the Grigori to something so evil?

“But why Bale? There must be a reason.” And Faith needed to know. If she were to die, she had to understand why.

“This is not about Bale. It never has been. My brother, my foolish twin. Beelzebub promised to give me the means to see him destroyed. Destroying Bale? Beelzebub fears only Bale can stop him. For me, it's just for fun.”

Faith tensed, and her eyes narrowed as she waited for Raym to draw close enough. When he did, she raised her leg swiftly, connecting her foot with his abdomen. With a *whoosh*, he bent over and backpedaled a couple of feet.

“Goddamn it,” he snarled. “Hold the bitch's legs down.”

“What's the matter? Not man enough to handle one little female by yourself?” she taunted as the Lilu demon rushed forward to do as bid. Faith swung her legs at him in an attempt to waylay him. He finally managed to grasp both her ankles, pinning them to the bed. But Faith had gotten several good kicks in, and he was breathing heavily from the pain and exertion.

“I should get to drain this bitch dry for my trouble.”

Raym's fingers gripped her throat, digging into her flesh as he stared down at her. “Maybe I *should* let Magnus drain you before I cut off your head. From what I understand, a Lilu demon's bite is not as pleasant an experience as a vampire's. He's also not quite as picky about hygiene.” Raym glanced down at the blood covering her chest. “You should have done what Beelzebub wanted. He would have protected you, at least until you'd served your purpose.”

He paused, his narrowed gaze meeting hers, and she saw only pain and death in those teal depths. Faith whimpered, drawing a slow smile from Raym.

“Yes. I think I shall enjoy watching you suffer.” He released his hold on her throat and stepped back from her. “She is all yours, Magnus.”

A huge grin spread across the Lilu demon's face, sending Faith into a panic. She renewed her struggles violently. Still pinning her legs to the mattress, he climbed onto the bed and slowly began to slither up her body.

Faith knew Raym stood on the sidelines avidly watching, but her main concern was fighting off the Lilu demon. She prayed her resistance would become too much of an annoyance and they would just kill her. To suffer the agony of the Lilu demon's bite and rape was more than her mind could bear. So when all hell broke loose, the room flooding with people, Faith never even realized what was happening.

A flash of steel caught her attention, and feeling triumphant, she knew she'd won—she was going to die. And even though she was relieved, she still could not prevent the cry that rose from her throat. She watched in confusion, and her mind didn't register that the blade had sailed right over her, taking off the demon's head, until his blood splattered across her. A different kind of fear—that of the unknown—crept over her, and she continued to scream even as her voice grew hoarse.

Bale expected there to be more than one demon within the building and was stunned to find only the Lilu demon. But when he'd seen the bastard on top of Faith, pinning her to a mattress, he'd let loose a bellow of rage and attacked. The demon never even had a chance to react as Bale decapitated him in one fell swoop.

She fought Bale when he tried to reach out to her, the sight of her blood-covered body chilling him. Taking the same position the Lilu demon had unwillingly vacated didn't seem a pleasant option, but Bale felt he had no choice. With all the blood covering Faith, he had to find the injury and have Arak heal her before she bled out.

He sat on her thighs, mostly to prevent her from kneeling him in the balls as she thrashed under him, as she seemed unaware he was even there. Grasping her shirt, Bale ripped it away from her chest. She arched her back while he tried to examine her, looking for a wound, but he found none. Then, after Arak picked the locks, Bale released her wrists and he gathered her into his arms.

“Damn it, Faith, settle down,” he snapped, and his voice seemed to penetrate her senses. She stilled instantly. “Where are you hurt?” He pushed her at arm's length, his gaze sweeping over her again for the source of all the blood.

“Bale?” She stared at him, eyes laced with confusion. As her vision began to clear, Bale understood when she first really saw him. “Bale,” she sobbed, flinging herself against his chest.

Bale grasped her by the shoulders, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Baby, where are you hurt?” he repeated.

She seemed confused by his question at first, and then she shook her head. “It's not my blood. He forced me to feed, but it all came back up.”

Her words filled Bale with such rage, he knew if Raym had been standing before him, he would have torn the son of a bitch apart with his bare hands. “Did he rape you?” The words came out more harshly than he intended, causing her to tense. To his relief, Faith shook her head, and Bale wrapped her in his embrace. “Baby, where is Raym?”

Faith's eyes glazed over with fear, and she glanced around the room as if expecting her assailant to pop out of the shadows. “I don't know.” She gripped his shirt in her fists, burrowing deeper into his arms. “But Bale, it wasn't him.” She shuddered against him, her breathing suddenly erratic, labored. “He said I was his gift, his pet.”

Her voice tripped over the words, and Bale felt something wet against his neck. Forcing her head back, he was met with a stream of tears cascading down her cheeks. “Who, baby?” he questioned, brushing the wetness away with his thumbs.

“Beelzebub,” was her reply, and Bale felt his stomach lurch.

“What else did he say?” The thought of that archdemon being so close to his mate—that he had even touched her—was almost more than Bale could handle. He wanted the Lilu demon alive again just so he could kill him once more. And then he wanted to take what was left of his rage out on Raym, because he figured he would never get the chance to wipe Beelzebub permanently from this world.

“He said something about a plan and taking me on a journey. Then he got mad at Raym because I couldn't hold down his blood, and he called me worthless. Raym was just getting ready to follow his orders and kill me when you burst in.”

“What plan, Faith?” he asked tersely, but she only shook her head.

“I just want to leave here,” she whispered into his ear.

“You are too weak. You need to feed.”

“Please, not here. I want to clean up first. I want to go home. Bale, take me home.”

Bale held her a moment longer before he climbed off her fragile frame. She continued to shake, though he did not know if it was from her ordeal or from the cool air on her naked skin. He ripped off his jacket and wrapped it tightly around her shoulders, then scooped her gently into his arms. He carried his mate out of the dilapidated building and into Faith's car, which Jet had retrieved from Club Dominus.

The drive home was silent. Faith was snuggled on his lap as Jet maneuvered the vehicle through the dark city streets. Bale knew each one of his brothers was aware of what had occurred to his mate within that abandoned warehouse, but even in the darkest recesses of his mind, there was quiet. It would be discussed and analyzed over and over again as they sought answers. But that would come later. For now he was just going to be thankful he'd gotten her back and that she was all right.

* * * *

Remy wearily climbed the stairs to his room. The night had ended on a high note; Faith was safe and returned to them. But there was still the matter of Raym. Why he'd turned on the brothers and involved himself with Beelzebub, they still didn't fully understand. Zeke was working on that angle, his snitches scouring Hell for clues.

For Remy, the why didn't matter as much as catching the son of a bitch. Raym was out there somewhere, and he would have to be dealt with. He'd dared to raise a hand to Bale's mate, and if not for the female werewolf, Remy doubted they would have found Faith in time.

With a sigh, he conceded that maybe some involvement with the outside world would not hurt them. It didn't appear as if he was going to be able to prevent it anyway. Already the vampires knew something of them. And with Faith, they couldn't remain completely hidden. Not if Bale's mate was to be happy living with them.

He dropped his weapons one by one onto the dresser across from his bed. As he ripped his T-shirt over his head and let it fall to the floor, he sensed a presence and knew he was not alone. Grabbing a dagger, he quickly turned to face his visitor and let the weapon sail. But instead of connecting with his target, it embedded in the wall with a *thunk*.

"I see you haven't lost your touch, Remiel," an amused voice drawled, now from behind him.

Remy faced his seven-foot-tall visitor. "To what do I owe this monumental event, Gabe?" Turning his back on the male, Remy retrieved his dagger. At Gabe's chuckle, he asked, "Finally come to kill me?"

Gabe sprawled onto the couch behind him, looking every bit as comfortable as Remy suspected he felt. He was certainly no threat to his uninvited visitor. Examining his nails, Gabe replied nonchalantly, "Have you done something to deserve termination?"

"I live, do I not? I thought that was the only excuse your kind needed."

"My kind?" Gabe seemed genuinely confused. "Are you not my kind?"

Remy snorted. Like he was buying that. "Funny. I spent an awful lot of years avoiding being terminated by those like you. So if that is your purpose, just get it over with and put me out of the misery of having to endure your company."

"Oh, come now, Remiel. Such melodrama. That is no way to treat the messenger."

Remy arched a brow and folded his arms across his chest. "And you have a message?"

Gabe rose to his feet, a set of golden wings unfolding around him.

With a roll of his eyes, Remy murmured, "Creative."

"And you have always been a bore." The wings disappeared, though the peevish expression on Gabe's face remained. "The Mother bids you hello and wanted me to deliver this

message: 'Understand that once the Watchers have rediscovered their virtue, you will be blessed with grace.'

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't make them; I just deliver them."

"Yeah. You were always good at relaying bullshit."

Gabe grinned. "You could say I've made a living at it."

"And you've done your job. Now get the hell out of my abbey."

With a salute, Gabe flashed out.

Remy groaned and sank onto his bed. He didn't even want to stop and contemplate the load of meaningless crap Gabe had just thrust on him. Grace...he'd given up on redemption a long time ago, so maybe later, when he wasn't feeling so mired down, he'd remember that the messenger's words always came to pass. But for now, he and his brothers had plans to make. Raym had to be caught and made to pay for the atrocities he'd committed.

At sunset, after they'd all gotten some sleep, the hunt would begin.

Epilogue

Bale slowly made his way up the stairs. It had been a long night, and fatigue seeped deep into his bones. Six weeks had passed since he and his brothers had rescued Faith from the dilapidated building in which Raym had held her hostage. Six weeks of nights they had spent hunting the bastard who had dared kidnap his mate. Six weeks with Zeke right by his side. His brother was as diligent as Bale himself. Well, almost. Zeke was not haunted by the sound of Faith's terrified screams. It was a sound Bale would never forget.

Faith was doing better. She no longer suffered the night terrors that reminded her of the hours she'd spent in Raym's captivity. Episodes where she would scream and thrash on the bed, and Bale would wake to seeing her arms stretched over her head as she relived being cuffed to the metal frame.

But she refused to patrol with him. Had rarely left the abbey, period. She worked on the nights he was able to go with her. The other nights, Prue took over managing Club Dominus. Bale prayed it wouldn't last forever, that eventually she would be ready to fight the evil of this world. While he wasn't eager for her to be placed in any sort of danger, he did want to see his mate whole again.

Briskly he walked down the hall toward the bedroom he shared with Faith, curious to see what she had changed while he was away. It had started subtly enough—a peach-and-blue-striped pillow thrown on the leather chair. Then sheets to match. At least she allowed him to keep his silk. The comforter followed shortly after, gone from black to a pale peach.

The biggest change—and the most difficult to bear—was the pale blue paint on the walls. But Faith had rubbed against him and whispered in his ear how relaxing he would now find the room after a night of patrolling. And with her licking his pulse point and teasing his cock with each brush of her stomach, he could do nothing but agree wholeheartedly.

Opening the door, Bale cautiously peered inside. His mate was nowhere to be seen, and he took that as a good sign. If she had been waiting for him with a seductive smile, he instantly would have known she'd done something he wouldn't like. So he crossed the room with a deep sigh of relief and opened the wardrobe, then unloaded his weapons, placing them inside. Once finished, he closed the door and stepped back. That's when he noticed the shelves lining the wall on the other side of the massive structure.

The shelves themselves wouldn't have given Bale much pause, but it was the items placed on the shelves that stopped him in his tracks. They were lined with the little wooden statues Faith loved to collect. Kachina dolls, she called them. He had fucking dolls on his walls.

“Home so soon?”

Bale glanced toward the bathroom, his heart skipping a beat as his gaze took in his mate. She was standing in the doorway, wrapped only in a very skimpy towel and watching him with a lazy smile, as if she'd just woken.

“I was just getting ready to jump in the shower. Why don't you join me?” she purred, and his pulse accelerated exponentially. Tossing a bewitching smile over her shoulder, she then moved out of sight.

Bale threw his coat on the bed, the dolls quickly forgotten, and strode across the room, an eager grin lining his face. His heart—his soul—waited just beyond that door. Jet thought he was pussy-whipped, but Bale knew the truth. With his mate at his side, he had found salvation. Faith had saved him.

☪ THE END ☪

Madelyn Ford

In 2006, a dear friend gave Madelyn a copy of Laurel Hamilton's *Guilty Pleasures*, and she was stunned that books about vampires were actually being published. Where had she been all these years? Lost somewhere in the land of the Little Mermaid, most likely. Suddenly insanity hit and she thought, "I can do this!"

Well, sadly for her husband and three children, sanity never did return and now Madelyn spends most of her days immersed in a world of her own making. The stories and characters are clamoring to get out of her head; filling her days (and nights) putting pen (yes pen) to paper in the effort to silence the voices (he he).

Now trying desperately to ignore the ever growing mounds of laundry and the children screaming for dinner, the stories just keep coming.

Her husband blames Kris. You can, too.