



Alpheli Solution

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC

<http://www.resplendencepublishing.com>

Resplendence Publishing, LLC
2665 N Atlantic Avenue #349
Daytona Beach, FL 32118

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Copyright © 2010, Anny Cook
Edited by Mary Ann Haverlack
Cover art by Les Byerley, www.les3photo8.com

Electronic format ISBN: 978-1-60735-204-4

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Electronic Release: October 2010

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Chapter One

Adjusting to the vampire life can be difficult. Are you one of the new undead? You say your sire doesn't have time to teach you everything you need to know? Enroll in the Vampire Bootcamp course at the Others Lifeskills Institute. Our vampire instructor, Julian Taglio will teach you the important facets of the vampire lifestyle. Our new semester begins soon. Register at www.otherslifeskills.com.

Julian read the ad with impatient disgust as he pondered the sad depths he'd reached. His fall from a wealthy Roman senator with a spacious villa on the sea and a hundred slaves to do his bidding to a lonesome bloodsucker fighting off poverty depressed him no end. Julian had initially rejected the idea when Harry Lightfoot, the werebear director of the Others Lifeskills Institute offered him the opportunity to teach, but even vampires had to pay their mortgage and utilities. Oh, he knew he had the option to accept Pierre's offer, but so far, he'd resisted that avenue of escape. That way meant swearing fealty to Pierre Bonnaire and accepting his sexual advances. Though Julian had been drawn to Pierre for many years, he was not willing to submit to such a complete abdication.

With a sigh, he shrugged on his coat and headed for the door dreading the first class tonight. What kind of *bambini* would he have to teach? Harry had called to tell him he had a full class. Julian found it difficult to believe there were thirty young vampires whose sires refused to mentor them. The world was surely coming to an end. He shook his head in dismay as he locked his condo door and stomped down the carpet-covered stairs. Who knew what the new fledglings would be like?

At seven o'clock sharp, *he* knew. His gut clenched uneasily as he faced the motley collection of newly-turned vampires. It had absolutely nothing to do with hunger, either. His students ranged from a frumpy woman in the front row with Coke bottle glasses to a balding over-aged over-tattooed biker type squeezed into a too small desk in the back row. In between, there was every possible representative of the no-longer-human.

Fishing his reading glasses from his shirt pocket, he perched them on his nose and scanned the computer printout class list. Thirty-two students with six more names on the wait list in case someone dropped the class.

"Susan Abbott?"

"Here." *A skinny red-head with thousands of freckles and bored blue eyes*, he silently observed as he noted she was reading a book with a nearly naked man portrayed on the cover. From the implausibly bright fangs, Julian deduced it was probably one of the new sexy romances with a vampire hero.

"James Barker?"

"Here." Julian peered at the biker flapping his hand listlessly. He'd shed his jacket revealing bare arms covered with colorful tattoos, including a snake that wound around his beefy bicep.

"Cameron Billings?"

"Yo." A towering young black man with hundreds of neat braids shot his hand into the air.

Jotting brief descriptions in Latin next to each name, Julian worked his way through the list while absently wondering how many students would still be in the class next week. As he neared the end of the list, the students shifted in their seats restlessly.

"William Walker?"

"Here." Julian flicked a quick glance at the quiet man. *Geek*. If he looked it up in the dictionary, he would find a picture of Mr. Walker who was a complete stereotype from the heavy framed glasses with the taped break to the pocket protector stuffed with pens. Stifling the sigh that threatened to escape, he continued.

"Gabriel Zapata?"

"Here." Carefully hiding his discomposure Julian met Gabriel's eyes. Gabriel was a huge man. He didn't carry an ounce of fat on him as far as Julian could tell, but he was the biggest man Julian could remember seeing in a very, very long time. Gabriel wasn't just muscular, but tall, likely as tall as Mr. Billings, though he would never be mistaken for a basketball player. His reason

for co-opting the instructor's chair was crystal clear. Another glance at the copper-skinned man with the beaky Mayan nose convinced Julian that he didn't want to challenge Mr. Zapata for the right to sit down. Julian was quite certain that he could take the chair from the big man, but it would be messy. He jotted down a couple words next to this last name on his list.

"All right. Did I call everyone's name?"

A few quiet seconds ticked by.

"Very well. Then let us begin. My name is Julian Taglio and I will be your instructor. This class is titled Vampire Bootcamp. I will be covering the basic adjustments you are now facing as new vampires.

A hand shot up. Julian consulted his list. "Yes, Mr. Billings?"

"Are *you* a vampire?"

"Yes."

"So, man, how long you been a vamp?"

Keeping a tight rein on his temper, Julian stared at his student while he silently debated his answer. Meeting clear provocation with aggression would not be wise. Very coolly, he replied, "Certainly, longer than anyone in this classroom. And definitely long enough to know better than ask rude questions or insult a fellow vampire."

Every student in the class glanced away in embarrassment except for Gabriel Zapata. When the silence had stretched long enough to grow uncomfortable, Julian continued.

"Rule number one. Never use the word vamp. It is derogatory and disrespectful. We are vampires or some prefer to be called night walkers. Rule number two. Never ask how old another vampire is. In vampire society, such a question is considered incredibly rude and unacceptable. Rule number three. Do not flash your fangs at me unless you are inviting me to drink from you. Flashing your fangs is an aggressive behavior indicating your intent to engage in battle."

Mmmmm. In the last row, Danamara Higgins sighed as she folded her embroidery project and put it away in her over-sized bag. Mr. Taglio was the first positive thing she'd run across in the week since she's been attacked and changed. After another long look, she decided her initial impression of the Bootcamp instructor was wrong. When he first strolled into the classroom, she'd automatically assigned him to her private nerd category. Now she wasn't so sure. She sneaked another look at the man standing in front of the class. Italian, she decided, with a wealth

of cropped dark wavy hair and penetrating brown eyes. She was willing to bet his broad chest was covered in fine curls, just the way she liked. Not tall, but sturdily built. Her eyes drifted down his body, pausing at the juncture of his thighs. She studied the shape and size of the projection, speculating on such things as thickness and heft. Mr. Taglio appeared to be *endowed*.

She pulled out her notebook and pen, doodling on the blank notebook page before her as she considered ways to discover Mr. Taglio's measurements firsthand. Prior to her change to a vampire, she'd not been all that interested in such things, but now...now she was dealing with a disconcerting obsession with male genitalia. She found herself checking out every man she encountered, even the ones that weren't even remotely attractive. With a start, she realized the instructor was finished with attendance and had moved on to something else.

"I need certain information from each of you if I'm to teach you the things you need to know. Please take one card and answer the questions I've written on the board," Mr. Taglio instructed as he distributed stacks of large index cards to the first person in each row. "Do this as quickly as possible and pass your cards back up to the front."

Silent rustles fell over the room as her fellow students filled out their cards. Danamara peered at the white board at the front of the room, wishing the lighting were better. Apparently, vampirism didn't improve mild nearsightedness. Maybe when her income tax refund came back next spring she would be able to afford new glasses.

She squinted at the board again, tempted to raise her hand and just ask the instructor to read the lines out loud. Then Mr. Taglio turned to the side, revealing an intriguing partial erection pressing against his fine wool trousers and she discovered she had no problem at all with her sight. She shifted in her seat, slowly pressing her legs together as a bolt of lust struck. Her cheeks flushed as she bent her head over the white card. That was another one of the things she didn't understand about her new status. She seemed to spend a lot of time in embarrassing states of arousal. Until her change, sex had definitely not been high on her list of priorities.

With the heightened awareness of lust, her vision sharpened. The red words on the white board jumped out in bright relief.

Name. Thankfully that was easy to answer because her brain was suddenly worthless.

Telephone number or e-mail address. Hmmm. Her tongue moistened the small smile playing over her lips, as Danamara wrote down both. With another glance at that obvious sign of his aroused state, she considered adding a small personal note. Something along the lines of "Hey, big boy, call me sometime." Yeah, right. Like that was going to happen.

Sire's name. She snorted under her breath. How the hell was she supposed to know that? The son of a bitch grabbed her in the parking lot at the all-night grocery when she stopped for milk and eggs after her late shift at the warehouse. The next thing she knew, she was waking up with blood all over her in the woods behind the grocery store. She scowled as she remembered stumbling out to the parking lot in the predawn hour, struggling to find her groceries and handbag. It still pissed her off when she thought about her eggs—all but three were cracked or outright broken. She couldn't eat food anymore, but dammit, she'd paid for those eggs. By the time she crawled into the car she'd purchased from the Rent-A-Wreck auction, the sun was nearly on the horizon. She barely made it back to her apartment in time and then she spent the day curled up on the bare floor in her windowless bathroom. Frowning down at the white card, she wrote, *Don't know. If I ever find out, I'll kill the son of a bitch.*

How long ago were you changed? That was easy. One week. One week spent avoiding her crazy, cruel brother, Donal, so she wouldn't have to listen to his merciless ragging because she worked nights. Every time she saw him, he went on and on and on about the dangers of night shift work. God only knew what he would do if he knew the truth. Sometimes she even wondered if he would try to kill her.

One week of calling into work making excuses for her absence because she wasn't sure she would have enough self control to leave all those lovely humans on the night shift alone. There were so many shadowy corners in that huge warehouse.

One endless lousy week she'd spent trying to figure out things on her own. When she saw the ad for this class, it seemed like it was meant just for her. The yummy Mr. Taglio was an unexpected bonus. Privately she admitted she would never have the courage to approach him. Nor was she foolish enough to believe she would ever attract such a gorgeous man. In her extensive experience gorgeous men didn't date warehouse workers.

How do you meet your feeding needs? Danamara squirmed on the hard wooden seat. That was something she definitely didn't like to think about. That first time she'd grabbed the maintenance man in her building. He was always sneaking around, trying to catch the female tenants alone. She didn't feel bad about snacking on him, though he wasn't very appetizing. Strange—he avoided her like the plague since then.

After that, afraid she'd be caught, she'd taken a leaf from her sire's playbook and fed from people who wandered too close to the dark edge of parking lots or alleys. At least she thought she

was feeding from them. She didn't remember much after she had them in her clutches. She wondered how to explain that? She simply wrote down, *Strangers*.

The final question stumped her.

What do you hope to learn in this class? How to explain all the questions and uncertainties bubbling in her turbulent brain? After a moment she scribbled, *How to survive*. Tapping the shoulder of the guy in front of her, she passed him her card.

Perched on the edge of his desk, Julian silently shuffled through the cards, stopping briefly when something in particular caught his eye. He noted Danamara Higgins' card especially as she professed to not know her sire. Ahhh, the dark haired woman in the last row who'd been eyeing him with obvious interest all evening. It wasn't his custom to bed fledglings, though she *was* quite attractive. Perhaps after the semester was over, if she still showed signs of interest, he would test her willingness. Finally, he set the cards aside and crossed his arms over his chest.

"All but one of you has had some interaction with your sires. I'll be speaking to each of them in the coming days to determine if they have any recommendations. In the meantime, we'll begin with some basic courtesies and behaviors.

"By now all of you have no doubt realized that your life is never going to be the same. How different your life is in the future will be determined by each of you individually. In this day and age things are much different than in the past when vampires—or nightwalkers had to live a secret hidden life. There are advantages and disadvantages to this new age." Julian went to the white board and erased the questions on it. "Come. Tell me some of the advantages or disadvantages," he commanded as he drew a line down the center of the board and neatly wrote the headings.

"Unreasoning fear of us," Gabriel's deep voice rumbled. "That would be a disadvantage." He shifted uncomfortably on his chair. "Of course, that could just be because of my size."

Soft snickers spread across the room before a young woman in the front row ventured, "It's easier to make arrangements for changes in our jobs." Julian noted that Susan had put her romance away, apparently eager to take part in the class now.

James, the biker type in the back pointed out, "Unless your job is a day-time job only. There aren't too many all-night libraries open. I was very lucky my boss created an on-line research position for me. He didn't want to lose my skills."

Well, Julian thought, James exhibited hidden depths. He would have to remember that. He castigated himself for his stereotyping, though he did wonder about the tattoos as he added James' observations to the white board.

Clearing his throat, William Walker timidly raised his hand. "It's hard to find opportunities to feed safely...not like you can pick up blood at the nearest food mart."

Flashing an approving look at Mr. Walker, Julian nodded. "Even if you could, it wouldn't be as nutritious as blood from a human donor." He turned to face the class. "That's something all of you need to understand. You can survive for a very short time on bagged blood, but inevitably you will have to find a donor."

"What's the difference?" a woman in the middle row asked.

Julian glanced at his class list. Blonde spiked hair and a heart tattoo on her neck. Melissa Jones. "Certain necessary nutrients for vampires deteriorate in bagged blood. It changes nearly from the moment it's drawn. Only taking blood from the source truly preserves those nutrients."

"What about diseases?" Victoria Smith, a small gray-haired woman near the windows nervously tapped her fingers on her desk. "I'm already at risk because I'm a nurse."

"I have good news for you, Ms. Smith. We are immune to human diseases. We don't contract them, carry them, or transmit them. That's fortunate as we have enough of our own problems to worry about." Julian gave up on the white board and moved to perch on his desk again. "Shall I just cover some of the basic misconceptions?"

Nods from the students encouraged him to continue. "How long will you live? I have no idea. It depends on numerous conditions. As for the popular ideas in the literature—I know of no one who will not die if beheaded. And I know of very few who will survive a stake through the heart, regardless of species. As most of you have likely found out, we are highly allergic to the sun, tanning beds, and sun lamps."

He worried his lower lip with his teeth. "You've probably also discovered that you have a reflection. If you're religious, you know by now that crosses don't affect you, nor does holy water or garlic." He grinned suddenly. "I'm sure you were all relieved to find you won't need to sleep in a casket or underground."

Julian straightened and shot his class a commanding glance. "None of you will be capable of creating another vampire for several decades. If you should try to do such a thing, both of you will die most painfully. You are *infants*—what we call fledglings. Though you've no doubt realized that you're stronger than your human friends and family, you are not stronger than even

the weakest mature vampire,” he warned. “Actually at this point, even the youngest of our were-brethren is stronger than you are. Avoid confrontations unless you enjoy pain.”

“Were-brethren? There really are werewolves?” Susan’s expression was a mix of fascination and fear. “How do we know they’re werewolves?”

“By their scent. There are many types of weres—not just wolves. There are bears, many of the feline types, coyotes, plus many non-carnivores such as deer, horses, and gazelle.” He twisted his face into a stern mask. “There are also many races most humans consider mythological or legends. By the conditions of an ancient treaty, vampires do *not* feed from any of them without express permission.”

A blond surfer type in the front row waggled his eyebrows. “What about *sex*?”

Julian frowned while he tried to recall the name of the young man who was leering at the redhead next to him. *Brian*. “Ah. You have a true death wish.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“A vampire is at his or her most vulnerable during sex.” Julian shrugged. “Your mind and body focuses on one thing only—and that is not your physical safety. If your partner should decide to kill you, you will probably not realize their intentions until too late.”

“I thought you could hypnotize them, like a Vulcan mind meld,” Brian protested.

“You thought wrong. That is not true.”

Brian’s face wrinkled in a fierce scowl. “Then why do donors allow us to feed? What’s that all about?”

“Primarily, they let us feed because they feel pleasure. Something in our saliva trips the pleasure centers in the brain. If you pay attention, you will note that the first time you feed from a new donor, they may fight the experience until your teeth pierce the skin. If you feed from that donor again, they will probably not object because they’ll remember it as a pleasurable experience unless you were clumsy or frightened them. One other thing I want to tell you—vampires are sterile.” Julian glanced at his watch. “This class is nearly over. Your assignment this week is simple. Write down your questions as you think of them and bring them to class next week. If you have an emergency query before then, you can reach me at JTaglio@Lifeskills.org. But you should first try to meet with your sire for explanations.”

The class bell rang just then. Before Julian had completed gathering his notes, the students were gone, leaving him alone in the empty classroom. Sighing with weary relief, he shrugged on his coat and grabbed his briefcase. It had gone better than he expected. With the exception of the

young woman in the back row, he should be able to touch base with his students' sires before the next class session.

After locking the door, he headed down the dim hall to the office to turn in his keys and paperwork. From the shadows on the right, a huge form drifted into the light. Julian shifted his brief case to his other hand, vigilant and aware even after he recognized his student, Gabriel Zapata. With a casual nod, he passed the big man, though he reflexively tightened his grip on his briefcase.

"Mr. Taglio?"

Julian halted at once at the query in Gabriel's deep voice. Turning to face his student, he straightened, his body shifting to alert mode. "Yes?"

"I wondered if you would join me for a drink at the Coffee Mug? I have some questions that really can't wait until next week."

After a moment of reflection, Julian agreed. "All right. I must stop at the office first."

"Not a problem." Gabriel accompanied Julian and then they walked the two blocks to the coffee shop in silence.

When they were seated at a small table in the back corner, Julian tore open pink packets of sweetener and stirred them in his black coffee while he eyed his companion. "How can I help you?"

Gabriel sat back, his fingers drumming lightly on the table. After a moment he asked, "What do you know about the organized crime activity in this area?"

Puzzled, Julian stared at him for a moment before replying, "Very little. Mostly what I read in the papers or on the Internet. What is this all about?"

Gabriel wearily scrubbed his face. "I was hoping you could steer me in the right direction. According to my sources, you're the head vampire in my line—whatever that is."

Julian considered that startling bit of information. "Forgive me, but I don't recall your information from your card. Who is your sire?" he inquired bluntly.

Gabriel grunted and shook his head. "Street name is Mocker. According to the little bit of information I've been able to gather, he doesn't have another known name."

"Mocker." Julian pulled his cell phone from his pocket and regarded it thoughtfully before selecting a name from his contact list.

After three rings, a grumpy voice answered, "Dead of Night."

"Julian Taglio here. I require a background search on a vampire named Mocker."

"I can do that. What can you tell me?"

Julian could hear the faint scratch of a pencil on paper. "Angel City, possibly tied to organized crime in the area. I also require a complete lineage. Apparently, this Mocker is one of my line. If you can give me a general report on organized crime and the vampires who are involved, that would also be nice."

"All right. I'll get back to you."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"I owe you far more than I can repay," the voice on the cell growled. "Ask me anything and it's yours." Then the line went dead.

Julian glanced at his companion as he slipped his cell phone back into his pocket, tempted to laugh at the expression on his face. Gabriel appeared to be in the midst of a religious experience.

"That's it? One phone call?"

"I should have some information for you before morning," Julian replied tranquilly as he sipped his coffee. "If you give me your card, I will call you."

Gabriel dug out his wallet and extracted a card, offering it to Julian.

Taking it, Julian scanned the information with interest. "*Detective G. Zapata, Angel City Police Department. Did he know you were a cop when he turned you?*"

"No. If he had known, I wouldn't have survived the attack. He was more interested in obtaining a new boyfriend. Fortunately, he was distracted before he could carry out that particular part of his plan."

"Do your superiors know about your change?"

"It was impossible to hide," Gabriel pointed out dryly. "Since the distraction was the cops responding to a fight reported by the locals. After I was back on my feet, I was assigned to the joint vampire-other-human task force."

Julian considered the surprising implications, but merely nodded at his huge companion. "Excellent. I will call you as soon as I have information." After a moment, he slipped his card case from his pocket and slid out a creamy card with stark black lettering. "It occurs to me that you may need to reach me quickly. I am always available at that number." He nudged the card across the table toward Gabriel. "Needless to say, I would rather you did not share that number with anyone else."

Taking the card, Gabriel studied the phone number. "Not a problem." He pulled out his cell, programmed the phone number in the contact list and handed the card back to Julian. "Take this back. I put you in the contact list as Teach. You never can tell when I'll be searched."

Gravely, Julian accepted the return of his card. "Wise, then. Thank you."

Leisurely, they finished their coffee, chatting idly about the other students in the class. Gabriel's observations were pithy and perceptive. When they were done, they went their separate ways. The meeting was unexpected, but Julian was strangely satisfied and intrigued with the encounter.

At the edge of the thick woods that bordered Angel City a young woman waited impatiently for a lone unwary pedestrian to wander past. As unwise as it seemed to her, a surprising number of people chose to walk down the road in spite of the absence of lighting or nearby nightlife. Every evening, she was amazed anew at the blithe disregard for life and limb exhibited by the young men and women who meandered by.

In the silence, she detected the soft shuffle of sneakers on the damp pavement. Cocking her head to one side, she followed the progress of soft footsteps until the figure was visible through the trees. A young man. Not too big. Her fangs flashed in the faint moonlight as the blood lust surged up to inflame her.

With a leap, she landed on his back, taking him easily to the ground. Flipping him over, she sat on his torso, swiftly ripped his jacket and shirt open at the neck and buried her fangs in the soft flesh before the young man could mount a defense. Within seconds, he relaxed under her weight, though she was vividly aware of the burgeoning erection under the soft sweatpants he wore. Vampire feeding was always an erotic experience for the victim.

Sometime later, she climbed off her victim, idly noting he'd lost consciousness. With a sigh, she wearily dragged him into the edge of the woods before collecting her purse and staggering back to her car. Dawn was approaching quickly. It was time to return to her apartment.

Chapter Two

Adjusting to the vampire life can be difficult. Are you one of the new undead? You say your sire doesn't have time to teach you everything you need to know? Enroll in the Vampire Bootcamp course at the Others Lifeskills Institute. Our vampire instructor, Julian Taglio will teach you the important facets of the vampire lifestyle. Our new semester begins soon. Register at www.otherslifeskills.com.

Cursing, Pierre threw the paper at the wall in such a fury he didn't even notice the limp pages fluttered to the rug far short of the intended destination. Finding that demonstration of his anger unsatisfactory, he grabbed his bedside clock and hurled it at the fireplace. It crashed against stone with a pleasing snap and tinkle as bits and pieces showered the hearth. No doubt, Charlie, his nosy lieutenant would be poking his head through the door to investigate the noise.

As Pierre expected, Charlie whipped open the bedroom door and peered inside, shaking his head. "What's up?" he asked as though he didn't see the shattered clock or crumpled papers.

"Fucking Julian. You saw the paper. Don't even pretend you didn't." Pierre shook his finger at Charlie before leaping out of bed and storming naked over to the window, kicking the papers out of his way. Shoving the drapes aside, he stared down at the dark street. Though the vampires and others had "come out" years ago, he still savored the freedom to sleep in a real house and look out the windows, even if he could only do so at night. "Why the fuck is he so damn stubborn?"

Charlie laughed.

Pierre whipped around, snorting irritably when Charlie leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms over his bare chest. It purely pissed him off when his lieutenant reacted like he was a two-year-old having a temper tantrum.

"I hate to repeat myself, but I told you Julian will never be forced. Five hundred years, Pierre. Five hundred years of you trying coercion, bribery, fighting. Julian is *never* going to accept you except on equal terms. All you've done with your latest stunt is to guarantee his refusal."

"*I'm* in charge," Pierre snarled.

"Certainly. The evidence is all around us. Until you show Julian you're interested in something other than a power struggle, you will be alone."

"I'm an alpha male. A warrior. A leader. I will not consider less," he shouted, glaring at Charlie when he straightened and shoved his hands in the back pockets of his soft jeans. Oh yeah, he knew that move. Charlie was no doubt getting ready to try reason and logic. Pierre didn't feel like being reasonable. He wanted Charlie to tell him he was right.

"I can have anyone I want," Pierre declared in frustration.

"Except Julian." Charlie left, shutting the door behind him.

"Fucking vampire school." Pierre yanked on a soft pair of sweats and stormed from the room to take out his anger on the punching bag in his workout room before he hurt someone.

* * * *

Across town, in the wee hours near dawn, when his cell phone rang, Julian reluctantly lifted his head from the book he was reading and sighed. Setting it aside, he checked the cell ID before taking the call. "Hello."

"I have the information for you, sir. Shall I e-mail the file?"

"Yes, please. And thank you again, Jack. I appreciate your efficiency and discretion."

"Always happy to be of service."

As usually happened when he tried to convey his thanks to Jack, Julian found himself listening to dead air. With a small shake of his head, he closed his cell and opened his laptop, oddly eager to study the information Jack had gathered. Gabriel's story was just the most recent in a string of vague hints that all was not well in the vampire world. If vampires were indeed selling their services to organized crime, that would attract the unwanted attentions of law enforcement. Vampires lived a shaky existence as some of their traditions and practices would not stand up under the close inspection of the police. So far, the authorities had chosen to ignore them, but that was clearly subject to change.

He opened his e-mail and downloaded Jack's file, dismayed at the size of the document. After checking his watch, he concluded Gabriel would soon be deep in his daytime rest. Knowing he would not be able to pass on the information until that evening, Julian took his time reading

the file very carefully, pausing to admire the masterly way Jack had assembled a myriad of unconnected bits of information into a coherent whole.

When he finished, he took a deep breath. There was big trouble in Angel City. And it was spelled V-a-m-p-i-r-e-s. One other thing had been confirmed. Detective Zapata was indeed in his line. Julian couldn't decide whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. That was something he would mull over while he slept. But tonight—tonight he would share the file with Gabriel.

Shivering with cold, Danamara muttered and twitched on the small bathroom rug. Abruptly, she lashed out, kicking the porcelain toilet with her bare foot. Howling in pain, she sat up, staring at her surroundings in foggy puzzlement. Finally, she shoved her dark hair back from her face and crawled to her feet. She was damn tired of waking up on the bathroom floor half dressed. Once again, it seemed her panties had gone on a road trip. At the rate her clothes were unaccountably disappearing, it wouldn't be long before she would have to hit the Wal-Mart for replacements. She didn't make enough at her warehouse job to afford that.

Shucking the ripped remnants of her blouse and skirt, she tossed them in the trash basket in disgust. After inspecting her bra, she decided it might be salvageable with some artful stitchery. She hung it on the hook on the back of the bathroom door and stomped over to the shower, stubbornly ignoring the clear evidence of a forgotten sexual encounter splattered on her sticky thighs.

If she didn't think about it...well, it was easier to deny the possibilities.

Under the hot pounding water, she scrubbed her skin mercilessly, ignoring the contradiction between reality and her behavior. When her skin was bright pink from friction and her hair had been shampooed to squeaky cleanness, she turned off the water and stepped out of the tub, avoiding the full length mirror on the wall while she yanked on her long terry robe. After knotting the belt with trembling fingers, she wrapped her wet hair in a towel and stumbled out to the kitchen in search of hot tea.

The last hint of twilight seeped through the windows, barely lighting her way. She flipped on the lights and went to the sink to fill her kettle with water, mourning the loss of her ability to eat her usual peanut butter toast. The first evening when she woke up after her violent change in the woods, she'd made the mistake of eating. *Bad idea*. After puking for hours, she decided not to repeat that particular mistake.

Curling up on the couch with her mug of tea and latest embroidery project, she picked up the remote and turned on the television, clicking through a montage of squealing contestants, canned laughter, and howling sirens until she chanced on a program about vampires on the Discovery Channel. Setting her embroidery aside, she watched the program with growing horror as the narrator discussed the intensely erotic aspects of vampire feeding.

She groaned when a heavy fist pounded on the door. She knew that knock. Her brother had finally lost patience with her not returning his calls. Tugging her robe more tightly around her, she turned off the TV, went to the tiny hall and opened the door.

"Why the fuck didn't you return my calls?" Shoving past her, Donal swaggered into her living room. That was Donal. No hello. No affection. Just arrogant demands.

"I've been busy." She shrugged, closed the door and followed him into the living room. Tucking her feet beneath her, she slumped down in the corner of the couch. "What do you want, anyway?"

"I've organized a group of people to fight for our rights."

"Uh-huh." She yawned and resigned herself to listen to him rave about his latest enthusiasm. He would obsess about it with single-minded devotion until he grew bored with it and moved on to the next thing. "So?"

"I expect you to come to the next meeting. We have to stop these things before they take over the world." Donal paced back and forth in front of her, gesturing wildly. "They're blood-sucking fiends."

Danamara didn't care for the direction the conversation was going. "What are you talking about?"

"Vampires. Others. Weren't you listening? I'm telling you, they are taking over. First they were involved in legitimate business. Now they're meddling in the gangs. If we don't do something, they'll be everywhere."

Something, some deeply buried instinct uncurled, holding her back from revealing her new status. Carefully, her mind racing, she thought about the consequences before finally replying, "I have too many other things to worry about, Donal. I'll have to give this one a pass."

"I tell you—"

"Donal. I don't have time for this tonight. I have to get ready for work."

He whirled to face her, pointing an agitated finger at her. "If you are not with me, then you're against me. You will not thwart me this time, Danamara. I'll send someone to pick you up Friday evening at seven. Be ready." Stomping to the front door, he left, slamming it behind him.

After a moment, once she was sure he wasn't going to come back, she got up and went to lock the door before returning to the couch to watch the rest of her program. When the program was over, she turned off the television and threw the remote control across the room. There was no avoiding the truth. Every night she was out feeding and fucking some stranger. She shivered and rubbed the raised bumps on her arms as she thought of the men she'd chosen at random in her blood lust. What if she'd picked a serial killer or some weirdo? Then she started laughing hysterically when it dawned on her that she would likely kill anyone who retaliated. If she killed a killer, would she go to prison? Or would they give her a medal? Finally, sighing deeply, she carried her mug out to the kitchen and went to dress for work. She couldn't afford to miss any more nights. Even vampires had to pay rent.

* * * *

"John Mockston. Thief, murderer, spy for the British during the Revolution. Wonderful sire, I have there." Gabriel flicked the laptop screen in disgust. "He's tailor-made for organized crime. I bet they were overjoyed when he showed up. How do they hook up with the families? They don't just take anyone who walks through the door."

"I would suspect he was introduced by his sire, Gato Muniz, a Napoleonic spy. There are serious implications in this file. Vampires normally police themselves. If vampires such as these are moving in society with impunity, evil will rapidly become the norm. I have lived retired for over a decade, but back when I was leading an active social life in the vampire community, they would not have dared flaunt their criminal connections."

"Who is responsible for governing the vampires?" Gabriel inquired.

Julian frowned. "The tribunal overlords. Actually, the guardians who answer to the tribunal overlords."

In fascination, Gabriel watched the screen as Julian shuffled the information in various patterns. Though he himself didn't understand the significance of the reports Julian generated, the older vampire's alarm clearly increased with each new report.

Abruptly, Julian slapped the table. "We need more information," he said grimly. "I must talk to Jack, again."

After experiencing Jack's skills, Gabriel had no objections to Julian calling on his mysterious source. Whoever Jack was he had capabilities far beyond anything Gabriel could call on so he listened with interest as Julian called the mysterious source, listing the items he wanted him to focus on. Gabriel did raise his eyebrows when his instructor began listing all his students' names and sires, but he was content to discuss that with Julian after he finished his call.

While Julian was conferring with the mysterious Jack, Gabriel went out to the kitchen for coffee refills. He noted the small counter top refrigerator that adequately served his host's needs. Where the refrigerator would normally stand, a washer-dryer combo was sitting. Gabriel thought about the hours he spent at the Laundromat and decided he would follow Julian's lead. A washer-dryer would be far more use to him than an empty refrigerator.

When he carried the filled mugs back to the living room, Julian had finished his call and was jotting notes down on a blue legal pad. "Well?" Gabriel inquired calmly. "Now what?"

"Jack will call back when he has something. In the meantime, there are some items you might be able to deal with. I'm making a list for you. If you don't object, we will meet here again tomorrow night."

"I can do that. What are you going to be doing?"

"I am going to meet with my peers," Julian replied sourly. "That's always a dangerous and chancy proposition. There are valid reasons the ancients do not congregate except on rare occasions."

Gabriel frowned at him uneasily. "Perhaps I should come with you."

The offer surprised a chuckle from Julian. Very gently, he said, "Gabriel. You would be a fine target. As big as you are, you are still a fledgling. Definitely no match for one of the ancients."

"So, while they're coming after me, you can take them from the rear."

"Thank you for your concern, but your assistance won't be necessary. I still have some influence. And we might be killers under the skin, but we're very civilized killers." Julian tore off the sheet and handed it to Gabriel. "Whatever you can discover from this list will be helpful."

Gabriel took the paper, folding it up without even looking at the list. "All right. I'll see you tomorrow night. I need to get home before the sun comes up." He shrugged on his leather jacket.

"Yes you do. Go safely."

Julian closed and locked the door after his visitor left. Then he went from window to window, securing the metal shutters that blocked out the sunlight. Finally, he settled before the

fire to contemplate the few hard facts he had at his disposal. As reluctant as he was to approach the tribunal overlords, there was no other option. Clearly, the guardians were not carrying out their responsibilities.

When he woke with no new ideas other than bringing the situation to the attention of the tribunal overlords, he decided there was no time like the present to complete this most unpleasant duty. Approaching the overlords was a tricky business. Their positions as judges and jury placed them in a lonely shady situation where relationships with other vampires—even the most casual of relationships—were not encouraged. Vampire politics were convoluted and complicated. No hint of influence, accidental or purposeful, was allowed.

His first step was to ascertain the current schedule of court. For that, he went to his computer, brought up the tribunal website and received his first confirmation that all was not well in the vampire world. The website was months out of date, no new schedule of court dates was available and the contact information was missing.

He sat contemplating the conundrum for several minutes before logging on to the Locarno website. Clicking on the vampire registry, he brought up the personal web pages of the tribunal members. Again, he was confronted with missing and outdated information. Every vampire was responsible for maintaining his own page on the registry so the webmaster at Locarno wouldn't necessarily notice this anomaly. Flipping through the pages reminded him of yet another item to discuss with his students. He jotted down a note to remind himself to add it to the class agenda.

Abruptly, he powered down and set the laptop aside. It was time to do some personal investigation. After donning warm clothing and his weapons, Julian set out on a journey of discovery. He had a very bad feeling about the night. Something was not right in Angel City.

Almost all vampires who belonged to the *Suzerain Anciens* maintained a public office manned by lesser vampires in their line. A few, like Julian, couldn't currently afford the expense of a public office, but those mostly employed the services of a public message center such as the one offered at Dead of Night. Certainly, the current tribunal overlords would have no such difficulties on that score.

His first planned stop was at the office of Miguel Aberquero y Medina. As he approached the small brick building, it was clear it was no longer open. Weeds, dead potted plants and used condoms littered the doorway. Taking up an observation post in a narrow alley across the street,

Julian studied the deserted building. From the outer evidence, it had been abandoned for quite a while. Two homeless men shuffled past him and took shelter on the shadowy stoop.

Crossing the road, he moved to stand in front of the men, blocking their escape. "Excuse me, gentlemen. How long have you been using this doorway for shelter?"

One of the men, clearly inebriated, slumped over on a filthy blanket and commenced snoring quite loudly. The other squinted as he peered up at Julian in the dim light. "What's it to you?"

"Just curious. My friend had an office here. I didn't realize he'd moved elsewhere."

"Two weeks," the man said abruptly. "Before that, we were over to Jefferson Square, but the cops roused us and Jerry is too sick to go any farther." He pointed a thumb at his companion. "I walk with him to the clinic over on Belding. Keep the others from stealing his medicine and blanket."

"Ah. Then you wouldn't know how long my friend has been gone. Thank you for your help. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"Nah. Nice to talk to someone," the man growled. The hint of fangs glittered in the streetlight. "Jerry tries his best, but mostly he can't even remember his name."

Catching the scent of werewolves Julian inquired softly, "Where's your pack?"

"Dead. Wiped out in a war with the Fenelli gang. Humans and nightwalkers came in and burned our village to the ground. Jerry and I are all that's left and he has lupine leukemia."

Julian pulled out his cell phone and called Harry Lightfoot. "I have two wolves here, sick and homeless," he said without giving Harry time to say more than hello. "Where can they find assistance?"

"Give me the address," Harry replied abruptly. "I'll send someone over to take care of it."

After reciting the address, Julian crouched on the porch in front of them. "Assistance is on the way. You and Jerry will be safe and he will have medical care."

The man slowly climbed to his feet. "Who are you?"

"Julian Taglio."

"The Roman lawyer. I've heard of you." When the man smiled, his teeth glimmered in the shadows. "Perhaps I can tell you something about your friend. About six months ago there were suddenly a large number of subordinates—warriors, well armed and alert, guarding the area. Then one night the word went out to stay clear of this part of town. The next night the place was empty. No one ever came back."

Julian nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate the information."

A dark van pulled up at the curb. Harry Lightfoot and two men hopped out and rushed up the steps. "We'll take it from here. Thank you for letting us know, Julian. We appreciate it."

Trotting down the steps, Julian observed from the shadows as Harry and his men carefully moved the men to their van. Thoughtfully, he moved on, heading across town to Chrysanthé Xanthopoulos' headquarters.

Unlike Miguel, Chrysanthé chose to keep her public office close to home. Her staff maintained her office in the small gatehouse at the entrance of her estate. Two subway rides later, he found himself once again facing a dark abandoned building and estate with the gate ajar. This time, secure in the deserted surroundings, he drew his sword and walked through the gate. Time to investigate Chrysanthé's home.

The front door stood wide open. Stalking through the moonlit shadows, he slowly moved from room to room. *Looted and defaced*, he noted with disgust. The stench of Nephilim, the giant half-human, half-fallen angel race permeated the house. Slipping into the library, he stood in the shadows as his eyes went to the far wall where Chrysanthé's great sword with its graceful leaf-shaped blade was still hanging on the wall. He squeezed his eyes shut, holding his tears back as he recalled the day he'd stood holding hands with Chrysanthé as a powerful wizard friend placed a spell of protection on the sword. *If she were alive, she would never leave her sword behind*. Stifling the grief that threatened to overwhelm him, for he had given her that blade as a gift long ago, Julian went across the room and lifted the beautiful sword with its fancy gold and leather-worked scabbard down from the wall.

He buckled the belt around his waist beneath his overcoat and finished searching the house. In her bedroom, the wall safe stood open, but the looters obviously didn't understand the value of the contents. After locating one of her elaborately embroidered bags on a high shelf in her closet, Julian carefully packed the ancient Greek manuscripts and books in it before slinging it over his shoulder. With one last look around, he walked away. There was nothing else of Chrysanthé in the echoing rooms. And he could not bring himself to investigate further tonight. It was time to go home, time to have a drink and remember the good times and the bad.

* * * *

Three evenings later, Julian and Gabriel sat in silence at the Coffee Mug somberly finishing their drinks. "You're sure?" Gabriel asked after a while.

"Positive. None of the tribunal overlords survived."

“So what’s next?”

Julian’s eyes met Gabriel’s. “A new tribunal must be assembled. And the guardians must be assigned. It will be a perilous undertaking. I suspect there will be a bloody war—a power struggle that will make your drug wars look like children’s games.”

“And if we do nothing?”

“Then the human backlash will be terrible. They will rise up and hunt us down to the last of our kind. Already, according to Jack’s intelligence, there is a new human leader in Angel City advocating burning all of us at the stake. If the rogues provide him with enough ammunition, nowhere on Earth will be safe.”

Gabriel stood and gathered their empty mugs and trash. “Then I suggest we get busy. Every night we delay allows the rogues to grow stronger.”

With Gabriel keeping him company, Julian approached the small storefront with *Celtic Travels* emblazoned across the window. The specialized travel agency was one of Morag’s many businesses. Her thrifty soul evidently saw no reason to pay for a separate set of offices.

“This is it?” Gabriel stared through the window with a frown. “I pass this place every night.”

“And?” One of Julian’s eyebrows lifted in query. “What did you expect?”

“Well, it’s not very vampirish, is it?”

“No. And that’s the point. Come. It will be warmer inside.”

A deep toned bell rang as Julian opened the door.

“Be right with you,” a young man called from the back room. “Soooo cold out there tonight.” He sashayed into the front office, carefully bearing a steaming mug which he settled on a carved hot plate on his desk. Planting one hand on his hip, he studied his visitors with a slight smile. “Well, now. Aren’t you a big boy,” he exclaimed as he ran an appraising eye over Gabriel’s form. “My, my. What can I do for you?”

Gabriel’s fangs flashed wickedly as he smiled back. “Answer my elder sire’s questions,” he said softly.

“Oh. Well, all you had to say was ‘no,’” the young man pointed out with a pout. Turning to Julian, he plastered a professional smile on his face. “What can I do for you?”

“I wish to speak to Morag Iomhair.”

Pursing his lips, the young man shook his head. “I’m sorry. She isn’t available at this time. I could take a message, I suppose.”

"Do that," Gabriel growled.

The young man flashed him a saucy look before turning away to fetch a message pad.

"Touchy, touchy. You act like a cop."

"I *am* a cop."

"In that case, forget I said anything, though doing it with a gay cop might be interesting."

The deep silence that fell over the small office was broken by the click of footsteps in the back hallway. A beautiful woman peeked through the door, before flinging her long ebony curls over her shoulder and sauntering into the office. "Julian Taglio. What brings you to my humble business? Surely you aren't planning a trip to Ireland. After defeating the Clan Faolchú Dubh alpha the last time you were there, the wolves would devour you the moment you stepped foot on Irish soil."

Julian's shoulder jerked in a negligent shrug. "He shouldn't have challenged me. Most wolves know better than to challenge a vampire who is unknown to them. That was four hundred years ago. In any case, I don't wish to go to Ireland. I would talk to you about the tribunal."

Morag toyed with a curl, twisting it in her fingers as she stared steadily at her visitors. "You know, Julian, I don't get involved with vampire politics anymore. Nasty things happen to people who meddle in affairs that aren't their business. I would suggest that you just walk away if you value your life. Just walk away. Just like this." She turned on her heel and slinked from the office, hips swaying provocatively.

"Well, now. I guess she told you." With a shake of his head, the young man followed his boss, leaving Julian and Gabriel alone in the office.

After a moment, Julian led the way out the door, hoping they would have better luck with the next name on the list. In that, he was doomed to disappointment. Hugh Chastain declined to meet with him. Alfred Buckler listened politely to what he had to say, then ushered him out without another word.

Discouraged, Julian went back home to plan a new strategy while Gabriel went to work.

When Julian woke on the next evening his class was scheduled to meet, he discovered winter had arrived with a bitter mix of swirling snow and ice. As he stared out at the driving flakes, his shoulders relaxed with a huge sense of relief. Snow wasn't good trolling weather for vampires as it left too much evidence of their movements. Tonight should be a quiet night on the streets except for the fledglings. And the fledglings weren't dangerous yet.

He released the drapery, allowing it to cover the window. Time to get dressed and prepare for the evening. What he had to impart to his students was far more important than he had guessed when he agreed to teach the class. If he could exert even a small influence on the newly turned, then something was gained.

Two hours later, his students soberly listened as he explained the reality of vampire politics. Even those he'd considered lightweights readily grasped the seriousness of the situation. When he finished the class presentation, there were many questions, particularly about the relationship between fledgling and sire and their obligations to the other vampires in their line. Julian gave them as much detailed information as he could, stressing their rights, privileges, and obligations.

Hunched in her seat in the back corner, Danamara listened in increasing distress. Very little of Mr. Taglio's lecture applied to her experiences in the last two weeks. It was as though everyone else was in an alternate universe. Each evening she woke amid the evidence of a life she couldn't remember. Trembling with a dread she didn't quite understand, she concentrated on his deep voice, taking comfort in the reassurance and calm confidence he radiated.

"Next week, we will cover the traditions and taboos of vampire life. If you have any questions before then, please e-mail me and I will do my best to answer them." Just then the evening bell rang. "I will see you next week."

Within moments, she was alone with Mr. Taglio in the empty room. He showed no impatience as he waited for her to gather her things. She slung her heavy canvas bag over her shoulder as she shifted from one foot to the other, uncertain and uncomfortable.

"Mr. Taglio, may I ask a question?"

Cautiously, he replied, "Of course."

Suddenly she determined to ask the question that still burned in her mind. "Why would my sire abandon me in the woods?"

Chapter Three

He frowned, trying to decide how he should deal with her. If she truly did not know who her sire was, then that was something that must be dealt with quickly. On the other hand, if this was a clumsy attempt at a pass, he preferred not to be alone with her in an empty classroom. He chided himself for failing to follow-up on investigating her story earlier. Side-tracked by Gabriel's inquiries, he'd completely forgotten about Danamara. "I would rather answer your questions in more congenial surroundings. Would you be willing to join me for a cup of herbal tea at the *Coffee Mug*? After I hear your story, perhaps we can come to a useful conclusion."

She hesitated then nodded. "All right."

"Come along." He herded her out to the hallway, flicked out the room lights and locked the door behind him. "Do you mind walking? It's just around the corner. I'll be glad to escort you back to your car when we're finished."

"I came on the subway. I hate driving in the snow."

"Oh? Well, that will work out even better as I used the subway, myself."

After Julian turned in his attendance sheet, they made their way to the small coffee shop in strained silence. When they were finally seated in a booth in the back corner, Julian asked Danamara to share the story of her turning. She hesitantly related what she remembered and then he reached out and tapped her wrist.

"May I have a small sample? Perhaps I can identify your sire. If so, that may explain what happened to you." He didn't have to wait long for her decision.

Instantly, she offered her wrist. "Please try."

Julian was a very old vampire. He had reached the stage in life when nothing surprised him. Nothing. He cradled Danamara's wrist on his broad palm, noting the unusually fast beat of

her pulse. Fledglings had a relatively strong heart beat in the beginning, but within days it faded and slowed down. Hers should have been less discernable by now. "Are you afraid of me?"

"N-no. Just nervous I guess." She shivered though the coffee shop was warm and her gray eyes glittered with unshed tears.

"Let us see what we can determine, eh?" Julian lifted her wrist to his mouth, piercing the fragile skin gently. When blood beaded and threatened to trickle away, he brushed the small wound with his tongue, sealing it even as he captured her essence for identification. Suddenly his heart pounded uncomfortably as blood rushed to his cock, engorging him to the point of pain. He froze as primal recognition slammed through his veins before settling at the base of his brain. *Alpheli*.

His fangs remained extended as he shifted uncomfortably on the hard plastic bench while his thoughts churned. His conscious mind struggled to comprehend the news his body was screaming. Danamara was his *alpheli*. Every instinct urged him to leap over the table and claim her in no uncertain terms. Grimly, he forced himself to sit still as he concentrated on what was required of him in the next few moments. Their bond must be sealed before they left this place. How was he to convince her to agree?

Much of the modern romance literature posited that vampires had mate relationships. Some called them heart mates or fated mates or even blood mates. Julian had long suspected that those fictional romantic relationships were loosely based on the ancient *alpheli*, a relationship so rare that Julian had never personally met an *alpheli* pair. Until now.

His dark eyes met hers, searching for a spark of kinship. Surely there should be some glimmer of recognition? Deep in her dark pupils, tiny flames flared. Her head tilted back, she inhaled sharply, her fangs extended and a low liquid growl floated across the table.

"You are mine," he said softly. "Will you feed?"

Sharply, she shook her head. "What are you talking about? What's happening to me?"

Surrendering to his instincts, he sought to compel her by increasing his influence over her. "You are mine, Danamara. Accept what I offer."

"What's going on? Do you know who my sire is?"

Backing off, it took him a moment to set aside his clamoring instincts long enough to read her sire's identity from her blood. Her direct sire was unfamiliar to him, but he knew the eldest sire in her line very well. Oh, yes, the unmistakable tinge of Pierre Bonnaire's essence was present.

In the old days, many of Julian's lovers had carried the heady flavor of Pierre in their blood. His intention to claim Danamara before taking her to meet Pierre hardened into cold determination.

"I don't recognize your immediate sire, my dear. However, I know the oldest vampire in your line. We will go meet him in a little while."

Her brow wrinkled in an uneasy frown. "Why do I need to meet him?"

Propping his elbows on the table, Julian steeped his fingers together, wondering how to explain the complicated *alpheli* relationship to the woman sitting across from him. "First, *he* will be able to identify your sire. To leave a newly turned *bambina* unattended is the sign of a rogue. As the oldest vampire in his line, Pierre must deal with this at once. Secondly, as a sign of respect, I must inform him that you are my *alpheli*. He will wish to arrange a guardian for you until our relationship is settled."

"I'm your what?"

"*Alpheli*." Julian's head dropped for a moment in frustration. "Among the vampires there are—very rarely—compatible pairs whose blood combines to form a rare enzyme that allows them to digest regular food rather than survive exclusively on blood." He paused as he chose his words carefully. "They may be any gender combination and a sexual relationship is not necessary although the few I have heard of did eventually become pairs."

"And I'm this *alpheli* for you?" she demanded in a fierce whisper rife with disbelief.

"As I am to you," he pointed out patiently. "It is a reciprocal relationship. Though you are an infant vampire it seems to me you already find the idea of feeding from strangers very distasteful. What if you never had to do so again?"

"Never?"

"Not unless you wished to do so. *Alpheli* may still feed from a donor, but once they bond, it is only necessary for one of them to find a donor." He shrugged his shoulders as though he didn't care. "Perhaps I was wrong in reading your expression."

"No." she shouted. Based on her horrified expression she only realized how loud her reply was when the patrons in the booths around them turned to stare. "No. You were not wrong. It's just that I never heard of this *alpheli* thing before."

He smiled at her grumpy scowl. "And now you're wondering if this is some exotic way to seduce you."

"Well?"

“No. Not immediately. But you will be mine, in some ways, at least, if you feed from me.” He nipped his wrist and deliberately tempted her well aware of the irresistible allure it would carry for her. “I offer you my blood.”

She lunged forward, taking what he offered, delicately lapping and sucking the blood seeping from his wrist. After a moment, he gently nudged her lips aside and withdrew his hand. “You will be blood drunk,” he explained at her whimper of protest as he sealed the wound with his tongue. “You’re a *bambina* and I’m a very old vampire. When we know each other better, if you still wish to experience blood intoxication, I will be delighted to accommodate you. For now, it will be better if we go see Pierre.” Amused, he studied her eyes, noting the owlish look of early intoxication. “You’re very susceptible, aren’t you?”

With an overwhelming sense of inevitability he moved to her side of the table and supported her with one arm while he unclipped his cell from his belt and punched in the speed dial number, filled with sadness and dread. Though he’d repeatedly refused Pierre’s overtures in the past, he had no desire to inflict unnecessary heartache. It grieved him to accept they would never be lovers in the future.

“Hello,” Pierre bellowed in his ear.

Julian held the phone away, shaking his head. Though he loved technology, Pierre had never quite adjusted to the electronic age. “Pierre. Cease with the shouting, please.”

Pierre roared with false laughter. “I forget, my friend. Julian, how may I help you?”

“There is trouble to be discussed. May I bring a guest to meet you?”

Danamara’s head went up as her worried eyes met his in query. He held up a finger, asking her to wait until he finished his call.

“Hmmm.” Pierre sighed. “Yes, I can tell that this is a serious matter for you. You would never approach me unless it was a true emergency. Please come at once. I will tell Charlie to expect you.”

When Julian heard dead air, he closed his cell and put it away.

Her head wobbled, as if it were too heavy for her neck. “What?”

“Come along.” He slid from the booth, stood next to her and grasped her elbow. “Maybe by the time we reach Pierre’s you’ll be sober.”

“I’m not druck...dunk...drunk,” she protested with a hiccup.

"Of course not," he agreed as he helped her into her coat and retrieved her bulky hand bag before steering her through the doors, out to the chilly snow-blown sidewalk. "You're just a tad happy at the moment."

"Nope." *Hiccup*. "Not happy yet." *Hiccup*. She listed toward him, burying her nose in his coat. "Mmmm, you smell delish...delishmess."

"Stand up, Danamara."

"I think you're hot," she confided. "Ver'...very hot."

"Hold that thought." They reached the stairs down to the subway. He shifted his briefcase and her bag to his other side, bent and draped her over his shoulder before descending the steps to the underground. It could be worse, he reflected. She could be screaming bloody murder instead of humming *Someday My Prince Will Come*. The few riders waiting for the subway didn't bother to hide their smiles.

"Good thing she's a happy drunk," a motherly gray-haired woman muttered.

With relief, Julian entered the subway car as soon as it pulled to a stop next to the platform. Next time he fed Danamara, he vowed he would be someplace private. He settled her on a graffiti scarred seat and sat down next to her. Their bodies swayed with the train movements. Julian closed his eyes, mulling the best way to manage the startling new complication in his life. With a jolt, his attention shifted back to Danamara when she planted her hand on his partially erect penis and lightly squeezed. The arousal he'd worked hard to tamp down since tasting her roared awake.

Her head lolled on his shoulder as she teased, "Are ya happy to see me? You're getting hard."

Firmly, he peeled her hand loose and tucked it under his arm. "Indeed I am. However, we are in public so we'll wait to deal with my problem later."

Her lips drooped in a sad pout. "But I wanted a little taste."

"Not now."

Tears trickled slowly down her cheeks. "You don't want me anymore."

He noted the other passengers shooting uneasy looks at them. Irritably, he grabbed her hand and placed it beneath his coat back on his now hard-as-a-rock erection. She curled up next to him contentedly, closed her eyes and promptly fell asleep with a faint snore all while holding his penis in a tenacious grip.

With a deep gusty breath, Pierre disconnected and tossed the cell phone on the large coffee table in front of him. It clattered as it slid across the distressed wood surface before shooting over the side to land in front of the wide screen TV hanging on the wall.

“Julian is on his way. He’s bringing a guest.”

“Male or female?” his lieutenant inquired calmly as he cleared the paperwork they’d been working on from the table.

Peering at Charlie thoughtfully, Pierre finally said, “I have no idea. Why? Are you thinking of taking charge of the guest?”

“If you wish,” Charlie replied equably. “As you know, I’m capable of seducing a female, even if that isn’t my first preference.”

Pierre slouched back on the wide leather couch and planted his feet on the coffee table. Grabbing the remote, he clicked through the zillion channels available while he considered Charlie’s offer. “We will decide how to proceed when they arrive. I suspect Julian is not coming to offer his surrender. Surely, he would not bring another vampire to witness his abdication. So, no. I think we must wait to see what transpires.”

Charlie swept up the pile of paperwork, leaving Pierre alone with his thoughts. Something bad was coming. In his seven hundred years as a vampire, Pierre had learned to pay attention to the curling in his gut that signaled danger. As he clicked through the channels, he mulled over the possible scenarios Julian could present.

Against all the current odds, Julian *could* be coming to abdicate. If Pierre actually believed that, he knew where there was a bridge he could instruct Charlie to buy for him. No. Julian was not coming to accept his offer.

What other possibilities were there? Though vampires were ruthless when pursuing a possible lover, they were also quite civilized during the pursuit. There were traditions and rules. Julian’s request for an interview broke all those traditions. Ergo, this was not an abdication.

The subject of this interview was something quite different and likely to lead Pierre in a direction he didn’t want to go. Abruptly, he determined he would deny whatever Julian requested, not because of Julian’s intransigence regarding their courting, but because it was obviously not in his own best interest. With that decision, he relaxed and clicked on the channel with his favorite television series, a show about vampires. He found it amusing, not because it was accurate, but because it wasn’t. Humans were so creative.

By the time they reached their stop, Julian's teeth were pulsing in tandem with his cock. When he first realized Danamara was descended from Pierre, he was deeply dismayed. Second thoughts, cooler thoughts, had prevailed in the meantime. Back when Pierre had staged a hostile takeover of his company, leaving him penniless, a terrible sense of betrayal had engulfed Julian and he had vowed eventual revenge. Their previously friendly competition took on a different aura. Pierre made his wishes quite clear. In return for help, Julian would abdicate everything and join him as his lover.

Though he could appreciate Pierre's likely reaction when he presented Danamara, there was no time for jockeying for position now. According to tradition, Pierre would find his house inextricably bound to Julian's line because of the *alpheli* relationship. That was a fortunate thing as they would need to work closely to subdue the rogue vampires. Ultimately, neither money nor love was of first importance, though he admitted Pierre's traditional obligations to provide a type of dower for Danamara would certainly be welcome.

Julian woke Danamara, reluctantly freeing himself from her possessive clutches and stood next to their seat, unobtrusively adjusting himself before hauling her to her feet. The train swayed as it roared into the next station. Plucking their belongings from the seat, he steered her over to the door, thankful the other riders were mostly dozing, too sleepy to pay any attention to Danamara or him.

As soon as the train stopped, he urged his companion out onto the concrete platform where the cold air snapped her wide awake. Her eyes widened as she stared around them.

"Where the hell are we?"

"Garden Street subway station. We're on our way to see Pierre. Remember?"

"No." Danamara rubbed her head. "What happened?"

Tugging her across to the exit, he smiled grimly. "Permit me to observe that you are extremely impressionable to blood intoxication. How in the world have you managed feeding?"

"What gives you the idea that I managed it at all?" She stopped dead half way up the steps. "I *hate* this. Every time I feed I end up someplace weird without any idea of how I arrived there or I wake up on my bathroom floor, missing half my clothes. What happened this time?"

"Nothing that terrible," he assured her. "You propositioned me, informed me that you found me 'hot', and then fell asleep."

"What?" In the dim lighting, he could see the warm flush on her face.

"Come along. Pierre is waiting for us. We will discuss your strange vulnerability when we get there." He gripped her elbow firmly, leading her up the steps to the deserted street.

In silence, they walked two blocks to a big Victorian house on the corner. Even in the darkness the painted lady was more colorful than most. Julian stopped at the closed gate and pressed the bell

"Yes?" the tinny voice blared from the small intercom speaker next to the gate.

"Julian Taglio and guest."

When a low buzz signaled the gate release, he pushed it open and held it for Danamara. "In you go."

The front door opened as they walked up the steps to the wide porch.

"Hey, Julian." A very young man stood backlit in the doorway. He didn't look old enough to be a vampire but the fine hairs on Danamara's neck stood up in alarm. She stumbled over an uneven section of walkway when Julian nudged her toward the door.

"Charlie. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Who is this?"

She jerked to a halt when Charlie delicately sniffed the evening air, his nose wrinkled as though there was a noxious odor in the air. Who was this punk anyway? He was still blocking the doorway as though he wasn't going to let them enter.

Julian snagged her elbow, tugging her forward and Charlie stepped aside though he left barely enough room to pass.

"Huh. Why are you bringing one of Rick's fledglings here?" he demanded.

"Where is Pierre?"

Julian was pissed. Danamara could sense the irritation in his voice even as he kept a firm hand on her arm. Yeah, he was way past annoyed. This visit might be a big mistake. She didn't want to meet anyone who could tick Julian off like this.

Charlie shrugged and pointed down the hall. "In the TV room. Where else? He's watching that new vampire series on cable. He's not going to be happy with your little guest, you know."

"Why on earth would he want to watch a vampire show?" Danamara blurted out, then wished she could take it back.

"How would I know? He says he likes the author's imagination. I told him if he liked the show that much, he should read the books." Charlie led them into a high-ceilinged great room

where a Viking dressed in faded jeans and a pristine white tee shirt was sprawled on a tan leather couch watching TV. "They're here, Pierre."

Julian wasn't shy about entering the room. While Danamara studied the vampire they'd come to meet, Julian undressed her as though she was a child, taking her coat and bag from her to toss on the end of the couch.

Pierre spared them a quick glance. "Sit down, sit down. The show is almost over."

Without comment, Charlie left them to wait until the end of the television show. Danamara settled on the matching leather loveseat across from the sofa and stared around at the room. It really didn't impress her much. She expected something a bit more exotic. This was just a big masculine room dedicated to an enormous flat-screened television. Finding little to attract her interest in the furnishings, she turned to study their host.

He didn't look very old, she decided as she frowned at his bare feet propped on the coffee table. Of course, the now-absent Charlie looked like a sulky teenager so perhaps she wasn't a very good judge of vampires. Anyway, what did Julian think this vampire Pierre was going to do for them? Her temper heated at his blatant rudeness. She supposed he was attractive in that romancelandish way with his long blond hair and brilliant blue eyes. Personally, she found Julian's Old World manners and looks far more to her taste.

When Julian joined her on the loveseat, she noticed how their bodies naturally curved together. He cuddled her close with his arm around her shoulders. With a sigh of contentment, she relaxed against his chest, inhaling his scent. Yes, she definitely preferred Julian.

She glanced at Pierre again, intercepting a most disturbing expression on his face. There was yearning there and pain. Danamara pondered the possibilities. Surely, he wasn't interested in her. He didn't even know her. She watched him sneak another glance at Julian. Very slowly, the truth dawned. Pierre wanted Julian.

Danamara wasn't totally naive. She understood that some men liked sex with both men and women. But she sensed this wasn't about sex. This was something deeper and far different than a simple roll in the hay. She didn't think Pierre was going to be very happy when he heard what Julian had to say.

Suddenly, Pierre pointed the remote at the television, shutting it off. "So what have you brought me, Julian?"

"According to Charlie, she is Rick's fledgling. Permit me to present Danamara Higgins, a student in my Vampire Bootcamp class."

Danamara nervously pleated the hem of her sweater as she watched the expressions flicker across Pierre's face. Hope, lust, devastation, anger. How could Julian not see? She noted the rigid muscles in Julian's chest and realized he wasn't immune or blind to Pierre's feelings. This meeting was difficult for both of them.

"When?" Pierre asked softly.

"She was turned two weeks ago and left alone in the woods. If she had not rescued herself, she would have burned in the morning sun."

With surprising gentle courtesy, Pierre turned to her. "Tell me your story, Miss Higgins."

She licked her lips and looked at Julian. When he nodded, she stumbled through her story, ending abruptly with Julian's invitation to the coffee shop.

"What is your part in this, Julian?"

"She is my *alpheli*."

Danamara braced herself for an explosion in the icy hush that followed Julian's blunt announcement. No one spoke and Danamara suddenly wished the television were on to fill the uncomfortable silence.

"You are positive." The raw desolation in Pierre's voice clawed her heart. Based on their very short acquaintance, she had to admit she didn't like him, but no one should suffer such heartache.

At last, Julian took a deep breath. "Recognition was confirmed when I sampled her blood to identify her line. I'm requesting you release her to my care. And asking you to assign someone to guard her until her sire is dealt with."

"Is this your revenge? You are in no position to demand anything from me." Pierre leaped to his feet, pacing over to the bar in the corner.

"Unlike you, I have *never* made any demands. You asked me to speak and I told you the truth. You know very well it is forbidden to interfere with an *alpheli* bond. We exchanged blood immediately so the bond is sealed."

Pierre turned to face them. "Danamara! Did Julian explain the bond?"

"A little." She tilted her head to one side, smiling as she thought back to the events in the Coffee Mug. "I suspect he left out some of the details, but he did emphasize it was a permanent bond."

"I suspect he left out a *lot* of the details," Pierre retorted sourly. "Did he tell you sex was part of the deal?"

Danamara nodded. "Yes, he told me that."

Pierre splashed some brandy in a glass and gulped it down. "What do you want from me, Julian?"

"I formally request protection for my *alpheli*, a vampire of your line. Such a request is traditional," Julian pointed out stiffly. "Especially, since she was abandoned by her sire."

"Fuck. You couldn't be this cruel." Pierre stepped across the coffee table and sat down in front of Danamara. "I need to confirm your sire."

With shocking speed, the atmosphere in the room changed. Danamara was impressed with the control Pierre exhibited over his emotions. One moment agony and anger filled the air. The next, there was nothing but courtesy and warmth. Without hesitation, she offered her wrist.

She watched as Pierre bit down, his fangs easily piercing the skin, before he sealed the wound while collecting the sample he needed. "Well?"

"There's no doubt you're Rick's fledgling."

He stood up and sighed lustily before leaning down to kiss Julian squarely on his lips. With surprising interest, Danamara watched the little drama, noting Julian's willing participation. She licked her lips as she found it unexpectedly sexy and hot.

Pierre straightened up and stared down at her with a twinkle in his eyes. "You have the taste of Julian in your blood, also. Quite irresistible." Then he turned away, bellowing as he went out into the hallway. "Charlie! Find Rick and bring him to me."

She picked up Julian's hand and kissed it. "He's in love with you."

"Yes."

"It was very exciting watching you kiss."

He smiled and said, "I suspect you are a far kinkier woman than you've admitted so far. It will be interesting to find out, won't it?"

"Julian—"

At that moment Pierre returned with three glasses and a dusty bottle of wine in his hands. "I confess it pains me to acknowledge you as Danamara's *alpheli*, Julian. In all our years of friendly competition I never dreamed we would end as allies with joined houses under such circumstances. I had envisioned a far different scenario."

"I suspected that would rather stick in your gullet. I, on the other hand, am pleased to be allied with your house." Julian accepted two of the glasses from Pierre. "In your place, I would also be envious. The *alpheli* bond is very rare. I appreciate my good fortune."

Pierre poured the wine. "To Julian and Danamara. May your hearts be joined as one." They touched their glasses and drank. "I suppose I must ask the tribunal overlords to deal with him."

"Not possible," Julian said bluntly. "They are no more. None survive."

After a moment of shocked silence, Pierre demanded, "What are you talking about? What happened?"

Julian set his wine glass on the table and began to speak. He went into a lengthy explanation of vampire politics and intrigue that apparently involved Gabriel Zapata, another student in the Bootcamp class. Danamara tried to follow the details Julian shared but it sounded very complicated, especially as she had no way of identifying the vampires Julian mentioned. When Julian was finished, he sat back wrapping his arm around Danamara's shoulders. She found his closeness comforting after the story he'd told Pierre.

"You are quite sure of your information, of course," Pierre observed. "You always had impeccable sources."

"Yes. Every scrap of information I've gathered has been confirmed. It was my intent to approach each of the ancients with my conclusions. So far, I've met with Alfred and Morag. Hugh declined a meeting."

"Hugh's reaction does not bode well. In the meantime, we must assemble a temporary tribunal." Pierre poured more wine in his glass. "You are not eligible because of the *alpheli* bond. Who do you suggest?"

"Moirra could stand. Ming Lee. And...Reginald, I think. All are fair minded and well versed in our laws and traditions. And none are descended from Hugh's line."

"They're all good choices. I must summon Rick's sire and the tribunal. Do you stay here? Or will you return later?" he inquired as he went to the door.

Danamara was taken aback when Julian suddenly stood up and helped her to her feet. "We will return when you call. You have my cell number if circumstances change." She slipped her coat on, wondering where they were going next, but that was soon answered. "We have our own plans to discuss. Much has changed for us in the last few hours."

"Very well. I will arrange for the contract to be drawn so that Danamara is protected. Do you have a male family member to stand for you?" Pierre asked.

Danamara shook her head. It struck her it could be dangerous if they insisted on meeting with Donal. "No, no. My brother—he hates vampires."

"Has he threatened you?" Julian asked.

She shook her head. "No more than usual. He's always threatening to do something to me. Especially, if I don't agree with him." She twisted her fingers together. "I-I didn't tell him I'm a vampire now."

"When we reach home you will tell me all about him. No one will ever be permitted to threaten you." Julian picked up her bag and handed it to her.

Danamara relaxed when the men didn't insist on informing Donal. "That would be better. Thank you."

"Under the circumstances, I will stand in your brother's stead. No problem." Pierre offered Julian his hand. "I will take care of her interests, then. Do not worry. Julian, I always knew you were an honorable man, though very stubborn. You know I am now in your debt."

Chapter Four

They walked down the path to the gate. Danamara hauled her bag higher on her shoulder and finally summoned the courage to ask, "What contract?"

"There are ancient traditional contracts stating the terms for the *alpheli* relationship. Since the *alpheli* are usually from different houses, the contract dictates such things as financial support, physical living conditions, and sexual expectations."

She tugged him to a halt as she looked up at him in the dim glow from the streetlight. "That sounds like a marriage contract."

"It is similar," he admitted before urging her through the gate. "Remember I mentioned that there is often a sexual component to the *alpheli* relationship."

"Uh-huh. And you also said it wasn't absolutely necessary," she reminded him.

He placed his arm across her shoulders, edging her closer so their hips touched as they walked. "Tell me, Danamara. Can you honestly say that you are not intrigued by the idea? Won't you welcome my touch as I will welcome yours? I don't think I'm mistaken in my interpretation of the glances you've been sending my way for the last two weeks. Even this evening, you indicated your interest."

"Perhaps. But things are moving kinda fast, aren't they? I don't know you."

On the corner in the shadow of a huge pine tree, he drew her to a stop. Turning her to face him, he bent his head, taking her lips in a gentle kiss.

She swayed closer, her coat flapping open and her body molding with his as her lips parted. Surprised and pleased at her immediate surrender, he dropped his briefcase on the sidewalk with a thump as he shoved the sides of his unbuttoned coat out of the way before tucking her against his chest. He inhaled sharply at the touch of her soft curves, free and unfettered by a bra.

Heedlessly she dropped her bag and slipped her arms around his waist, flattening her palms on his back as she opened her lips wider, displaying her eagerness to accept his touch. Julian slid his tongue inside, savoring the taste of tea, wine, and mint. As they strained together, his cock nudged her belly. When Danamara's leg wound around his, he yanked up the soft fabric of her skirt and tilted his hips so his erection prodded the silk-covered folds of her pussy.

Danamara whimpered, rubbing frantically against the enticing hardness beneath his wool trousers. Julian worked his fingers inside her panties, plunging two fingers in her slick pussy while working her erect clit. In moments, she cried out as she trembled in climax.

Abruptly recalling their vulnerability on the open corner, Julian tugged her toward the darker bushes and set about straightening their clothing. With shaking fingers, Danamara struggled to button her coat. Julian retrieved his case and picked up her bag. He returned to her, giving them to her to hold while he brushed her fingers aside and finished fastening the buttons for her. "Do you still have reservations about where our relationship is going?"

She shook her head though she refused to meet his eyes.

"We should find a more secure place to talk. Come." Taking her hand in his, he led the way. Pondering the best way to explain the breadth of their new relationship, Julian considered all the things she would need to know in the next few days. As he walked with her toward the subway station, he came to a decision. "Where do you live, Danamara?"

"Across from Andrews Park. Why?"

"Are you still sleeping in your bathroom?" he asked, working out the logistics in his head.

"Yeah." His gut clenched at her morose admission, "I don't own anything dark enough to block the windows in my apartment. Besides, there are too many of them. I loved that apartment when I moved there, but now..."

"Now, it does not meet your needs." He hummed tunelessly under his breath as he debated his next step. "I think you should come to stay with me for a few days. My condo is sun proofed. In the meantime, if you wish, I'm sure Pierre will arrange the necessary changes for your apartment so you can safely sleep there."

Danamara shook her head. "Are you sure this isn't some attempt to seduce me?"

"For a vampire there is a huge difference between seduction and sleeping," he explained patiently. "Anyway, given your susceptibility to blood intoxication, I would be very surprised if you've avoided sexual contact when you fed. Certainly, I could have taken what you offered earlier tonight if I had no conscience or control."

She stopped dead and stared at him in horror. "You think I screwed everyone I fed from? I was afraid of that."

"I merely point out the possibility. I would think that you would be more comfortable with someone you know rather than a total stranger."

"Oh, gross."

"Thank you. Your eager anticipation fills me with joy."

"Not you, J-Julian. But a stranger? What if they were a serial killer or something?" She glared at him.

He bit back a smile. "I suspect he or she would be the one who needed to worry."

She turned away, tilting her head to one side as though listening to the night sounds. "Did you hear that?"

Julian tugged her until she leaned against him, secure in his embrace. "No. In any case, it will be my pleasure to protect you. Do you mind riding the subway?"

"No. Not as long as I'm with you. If I am going to stay with you, I need to go home and pack some clothes," she mumbled into his coat.

"Then, let us go downstairs quickly. I hear a train coming."

They raced down the stairs, arriving just in time to board the next train. Julian asked which stop was hers, pleased to discover they lived within three blocks of each other. When they reached their stop, he took her hand, leading the way across the empty echoing platform to the stairs. While walking from the subway station to her apartment she softly admitted how much safer she felt with him by her side. Happy with her demonstration of trust, he tucked her hand under his arm even though unseen danger signals were raising the hair at the base of his neck.

"Is there someone we should notify about your move? Family or friends?"

"There's just my brother, Donal. And his new interest is hunting vampires," she confessed. "I don't think I want to talk to him right now. We weren't ever very close, even before this. I don't like the people he surrounds himself with. They make me uncomfortable when they look at me."

"Then it shall be as you wish. Dealing with your family is often difficult when you're changed." Julian took her hand in his, offering what comfort he could. "I will always be with you, no matter what."

Danamara wasn't used to feeling afraid so the helplessness she'd endured since her change pissed her off. She hated the constant indecision. In her life prior to the attack, she'd walked

everywhere with confidence and self-assurance. Now she spent her life timidly darting from place to place, always fearful of the dark and never able to enjoy the security of sunlight again.

Abruptly, it occurred to her that she was allowing other people to dictate who she was and what course her life would take in the future.

When they arrived at her apartment, she determined to invite Julian to enter primarily because she didn't want to have such a personal discussion on the street. But before their *alpheli* relationship went any further, she planned to have some concrete answers. She was finished with playing the victim. Silently, they climbed the stairs to the third floor. She pulled out her keys and unlocked the door, pushing it open with a sigh.

"Come inside, Julian."

Before she could enter, he jerked her back, shoving her against the wall while he stood in the dark opening, delicately sniffing the air.

"What is it?" she demanded crankily.

"You've had visitors." He inhaled again before flicking on the light switch, revealing tumbled belongings and furniture.

"What the hell?"

"I take it this is not your normal housekeeping style?" he inquired calmly.

Danamara glared at him in disbelief. "You're kidding, right? Who the hell would do this?"

"I detect the scents of at least two vampires. Possibly three. Come inside and close the door." Dodging the scattered possessions and debris on the floor, Julian headed for the dark hallway with lethal determination.

As she followed his directions, she noticed the way his entire posture changed from mild-mannered academic to deadly predator and wondered how she could have ever thought he was harmless. It was indelibly impressed on her in those moments that her companion was a very dangerous ancient vampire who had committed to her for life. And in that instant, it occurred to her to wonder whether her *alpheli* or the vampires who'd invaded her apartment posed the greater risk to her future.

Maybe she'd been too hasty in agreeing to stay with Julian. Maybe she would be better off staying in her own apartment, even if she had to sleep in the bathroom. If she needed to, she could cover the windows with heavy blankets or sleep under the bed. Looking at the destruction around her, she decided no one was going to force her to leave her home.

By the time she reached the hallway, Julian was there to meet her. "It's worse in your bedroom," he warned. "I left the light on. Stack whatever you can salvage near the door while I call Pierre. It's a good thing you're not going to stay here."

"What? This is my apartment," she protested.

Julian grasped her chin in his hand. "Look at me."

When Danamara reluctantly obeyed, he said, "I understand. Truly I do. You've endured much upheaval in your life the last two weeks. But your survival is at risk if you stay here. This was not a random attack."

Shivering as the reality of the situation flooded her, she nodded.

"I offer you the security of my home. When we can arrange a place of safety for you, I will be the first one to lend my assistance with your move, if you still wish to leave." Julian shook his head in clear impatience. "Go pack while I see to your interests."

With a shuddering sigh, she whispered, "Okay."

As Julian watched her trudge down the hall a hard knot of anger smoldered in his chest. While she was distracted with the unexpected assault on her home, he reluctantly called Pierre though he had planned to allow the other vampire more time to accept the changes in their relationship. Sometimes even vampires couldn't arrange the future to meet their wishes.

"Hello." Over the scratchy connection, it was clear that Pierre was in a rage.

"Pull yourself together," Julian snapped. "We require your assistance."

"Fuck you."

"Perhaps another time. At the moment I have an emergency." Julian knew the exact moment Pierre realized there was a serious problem.

"Where are you and what do you need?"

With a sigh of relief, Julian's shoulders relaxed just a bit. "We're at Danamara's apartment. Vampires have been here. Possibly some other breed of non-human was with them. In my quick survey, I would say the destruction is pretty near total. Security is nil. It isn't possible for her to live here."

"What is your solution?"

Julian hesitated before delivering the final blow. "She has agreed to stay with me for now."

After a very long pause with nothing but static humming across the air, Pierre abruptly said, "Someone will be there shortly to take care of things. I will meet with you tomorrow to discuss the other decisions we must make."

"Thank you." Julian disconnected, knowing it was not possible for him to offer any comfort to his friend. Every *alpheli* pairing he'd ever heard of was a mutually exclusive one. Though they were more or less on even footing now, there would never be any evening delights with Pierre.

"Fuck tradition." Pierre threw the cell phone across the room where it shattered against the stone fireplace in a shower of tiny pieces.

In the shadow of the doorway, Charlie watched with sympathetic eyes. "What happened?"

"Vampires destroyed the *alpheli's* apartment. Send someone to take care of the mess."

"That is not what put you in this new rage," Charlie observed.

Pierre spun to face him. "Nor is that any of your business."

Crossing his arms, Charlie leaned on the doorframe. "Of course it's my business. I told you back when you engineered your hostile takeover that Julian would not be coerced. He would walk into the sun before accepting a lover on any terms except his own. Well, now you are on more even ground. What's the problem?"

"He has an *alpheli*."

"And? You cannot convince me they already have a serious attachment. If you want him, then court him, you fool." Charlie dug his phone from his pocket and punched in a number. "Julian Taglio requires immediate assistance at his *alpheli's* apartment. I suggest you take boxes." After rattling off the address, he closed the phone and stuffed it back in his pocket. "If you want him, you must accept his *alpheli* wholeheartedly. In Julian's case the way to his heart is not through his pocketbook or his dick. It's clearly through Danamara."

Shaking his finger at Charlie, Pierre protested, "You have the nerve to say *I told you so? You?* You can't even manage your own love life. If you know so much about love, why did Andros take off for Greece?"

"Low blow, Pierre. I suppose I should have expected it. I believe I'll go out to help hunt Rick. You know how to find me." Charlie walked away into the shadowy hallway.

Irritably, Pierre stomped over to the desk and jerked open the drawer where Charlie kept the stash of programmed replacement phones. Poking through the collection, he chose a green one and slammed the drawer shut. He'd show Charlie. Court Julian? He'd damn well romance Julian so thoroughly he wouldn't be able to resist his advances. Punching in Gerard's number, he summoned his lawyer to work on the *alpheli* contract. Danamara was going to be one of the luckiest female vampires in the world.

* * * *

His long coat flapping in the frigid wind as he searched, Charlie concluded the alleys of Angel City were much the same as alleys in any other city he'd ever lived in. *Filthy, dark, and malodorous*. His nose wrinkled as he stalked past a drunk lying in a puddle of urine. *Piles of garbage*. Around the corner, he heard a cat howl as it leaped into an overflowing bin. Soft terrified sobs emanated from a dense pool of darkness behind the bin.

He delicately picked his way past broken bottles, dog crap, and crumpled newspapers as rats scurried hastily out of the way. Huddled against the broken wooden fence, he discerned a naked young woman, curled tightly in a vain effort to fend off the cold. Innately cautious, Charlie crept closer, inhaling the disgusting odors from the surroundings until a familiar scent drifted past.

Rick.

Whirling in his tracks, Charlie jerked his sword free while searching the murky shadows for the rogue vampire. The alley was empty. Behind him, the woman sobbed and whimpered. Edging back slowly, he halted next to the woman and leaned down to touch her. Rick's scent flowed over him, hot, coppery and not quite right. When his fingers brushed her shoulders, she screeched and slumped to the side.

He hesitated before carefully rolling her on her back, revealing the gaping wound in her neck and the sticky blood smeared down the front of her body. His head dropped to his chest as he finally accepted the unpalatable truth. He was too late. Rick was gone, leaving behind another of his abandoned fledglings. He stood up, searching the alley once more. Pulling his phone out, he summoned a recovery team. He dared not do more than hold her hand until they arrived and gathered the necessary evidence. But whoever she was, she wouldn't be alone anymore.

While he waited, Charlie checked in with the team sent to Danamara's apartment. "Are you there yet?"

"We're just parking out front," a soft feminine voice replied. "I'll call you back as soon as we survey the job."

“Good enough. Thanks, Rita.”

The woman at his feet moaned and twitched. Charlie stuck the phone in his pocket and squatted next to her with his sword resting on his shoulder. Taking the woman's cold hand in his, he softly hummed, lulling her back under, ever watchful as he waited for the recovery team to arrive.

* * * *

Pausing in the doorway of her room, Danamara stifled a cry of anguish as she took in the extent of the destruction. Very little was left intact. The furniture was smashed. Her mattress was slashed in ribbons. Glittering shards from her shattered mirrors littered the floor. Tatters of ripped clothing were strewn about the room. The acrid stench of the bleach that soaked everything was overpowering.

The open closet door revealed a handful of empty hangers, but nothing else. After one last angry glance at the shredded books and fragmented knick-knacks, she thought to check the hall closet she used for storage. Her shoulders slumped in relief when she saw the contents were untouched. For the first time in her life, she was incredibly glad that she'd put off doing her laundry. Hauling out the two brimming hampers and the plastic boxes containing her embroidery supplies, she found something to smile about, even in the midst of the destruction.

Joining her in the hallway, Julian stared down at the two hampers with a small smile on his lips. “I have a washer and dryer. We'll do your laundry when we get back to my place.” He turned his head toward the living room at the soft knock. “Pierre's sent over some people to help. I'll go get the door.”

Danamara slumped against the wall, resting her forehead on the cool surface. When the hell was her life going to return to something resembling normal? Was she going to spend the rest of her days dealing with one disaster after another?

Quiet voices in the living room reminded her that there was still work to be done. She straightened up and went into the bathroom, relieved to find her toiletries had been spared. Rummaging under the sink, she located a small bag and packed the tubes and bottles along with her brush, comb, and toothbrush.

A gruff voice from across the hall summed up the situation succinctly. “What a fucking mess.”

Danamara grabbed the bag she'd packed and moved into the doorway, slouching against the jamb while her visitors discussed their plans.

A petite red-head dressed in a black leather miniskirt and jacket and red spiked heels shot her a sympathetic look. "Thank God for dirty clothes. At least you'll have something to wear once you do the laundry. Later in the week, we'll go shopping for replacements."

"Yes. I'm glad for that."

"Well, boys, bring in the boxes and pack up the stuff in that closet while Dani and I see if there's anything to salvage in the living room. George, go in the bedroom and collect the front covers from the books. Maybe we can replace them later this week from the second hand bookstore on Hardy Street." Plucking Danamara's sleeve, the redhead tugged her toward the living room. "I'm Rita, by the way. Sorry to meet you like this."

"Me, too," Danamara replied mournfully. "I can't believe someone did this to my place."

Rita found an intact chair and set it upright. "Sit and listen to me. Better that someone trashed your place than trashing you. Things can be replaced. People can't. Now, is there anything in this room you particularly want?"

"The cross-stitch panels. My mother embroidered them. I should be able to reframe them, even if the glass is broken." Danamara took a closer, more careful look around the room. "The collection of cast iron crosses in that corner. I doubt they could damage them much."

"You got that right."

Danamara leaped up and went to the bare wall between the two big windows. "My cross-stitch. Where is my embroidery?" She dropped to her knees and tossed bits of debris aside as she frantically searched for the matted frames that displayed her completed embroidery pieces.

"What the hell happened to *my* cross-stitch work?"

"Tell me what we're looking for," Rita suggested patiently. "We'll find them."

Danamara took a deep breath and carefully described the twelve framed pieces. "Angels. Each one is the angel for a different month—flower, birthstone and meaning of the stone."

"Okay. Anything else?" she asked as she picked her way over to the corner. "What's this?" She held up a folded knife with a distinctive carved jade handle. "Yours?"

Danamara shook her head. "My brother Donal's. That shouldn't be here. He never goes anywhere without it."

"Julian!" Rita set the knife on the faux mantel Danamara had installed. Then she collected the iron crosses and carried them over near the door to the pile of debris waiting for the packers. When Julian poked his head through the doorway, she nodded at the mantel. "Her brother's knife. Have a look."

They went through the shambles that remained from her cheap curio cabinet. While Danamara mourned the broken angel figurines she's inherited from her grandmother, Rita collected the few miniature boxes that had survived intact. Together, they retrieved the photographs from the cracked picture frames before beginning the task of salvaging the unbroken bits from her two potted plants.

By the time Rita and Danamara had worked their way through the destruction in the living room and kitchen, the packers were nearly finished with their job, merely waiting for any last minute finds. They recovered more intact items than they expected, but nowhere did they find Danamara's cross-stitch pieces, though her embroidery supplies that were safely stowed in the closet hadn't been touched. Julian assigned two men to search the rooms for any other items that might belong to the vandals while the rest of the helpers carried the boxes down to their van. With the last pieces packed, Danamara entrusted her apartment keys to Rita and wearily followed Julian down the stairs to the front walk where another man was leaning against his parked car, waiting for them.

"Ready to go?" he asked quietly, opening the back door before going around to the driver's side.

"Yes. It will be dawn soon." Julian helped Danamara into the back seat and slammed the door. Slipping into the front seat next to the driver, he closed the door and fastened his seat belt. "Please convey my thanks to Pierre."

"No problem. He said to inform you they still haven't located Rick, though Charlie found another of his abandoned fledglings," the driver told him grimly.

"Alive?"

"Yeah. She's in a safe house with a recovery team. Charlie's still out hunting. If I was Rick, I wouldn't want to meet Charlie tonight."

"If he approaches me, he'll wish he had met Charlie instead," Julian retorted. "He's a rogue, out of control and dangerous."

At the news, Danamara gave up her attempt at hiding her feelings. Curling up on the seat, she closed her eyes and let the tears come. Too much, too many changes piled up in too short a time. The car stopped. There was movement and then Julian was in the backseat with her, holding her on his lap with her head on his shoulder while she cried.

Life sucked—especially for a vampire.

Chapter Five

In the early evening hours, Charlie wandered into Pierre's bedroom, yawning and stretching as he tugged a green "Save the Earth" T-shirt over his head. "Rick has crossed the line to unsanctioned territory."

Pierre rolled over, burrowing his head under his pillow. Charlie ripped the bedding down, leaving Pierre naked in the cool air. "Time to get up. We're the only ones left to hunt that bastard down."

Lifting his head, Pierre blearily stared at Charlie in astonishment. "What the hell bit you in the butt?"

"Rick. Or specifically Thea, the woman he turned and abandoned last night."

"A woman?" Pierre sat up and looked around for his flannel lounging pants.

Charlie handed him a pair of sweatpants instead. "Yeah, yeah. Don't get excited. No one should have to deal with what happened to her."

"Danamara did. She even found her way home and figured out that she needed to sleep in a room with no windows." Pierre yanked on the sweatpants and shuffled into the bathroom.

"Why don't you get me some coffee while I shower? If we're going hunting, I better be awake."

"That would help. Maybe I should spike it with some whiskey. It's cold out there."

"Nah. Then I would just be a wide awake drunk. Actually, on second thought make me some hot tea with Rock 'n Rye." The bathroom door slammed and Charlie heard the shower start. Shaking his head, he went to make tea.

When Danamara woke in luxurious comfort the next evening, it took a few moments for her to recall where she was and why she was naked in a strange bed. She stretched and rolled on the softest sheets she'd ever slept on before sighing and reluctantly sitting up on the side of the

bed. Yawning, she stood and reached for the dark blue silky robe Julian had loaned her, slipping it on as she headed for the door. As Julian's scent surrounded her, an ache low in her belly reminded her of the formal decision she still must make. Should she fulfill the bed bond with Julian? She snorted as she acknowledged what she'd instinctively understood from the beginning. She'd lusted for him from the first moment she saw him. There was never any doubt that she would be his lover. Lover and *alpheli*.

Julian had suggested she start her laundry before toddling off to bed at dawn. Now she needed to toss that load in the dryer and begin another load so she would have clean clothes to wear to work. Goodness knew she couldn't afford *another* night off. If she missed anymore work, she had a feeling she wouldn't have to worry about her job. As it was, she was using her precious hoard of vacation days to take the Vampire Bootcamp class.

After a quick detour to the bathroom to clean her teeth and run a brush through her tousled hair, she finished loading the washer and dryer as the seductive scent of fresh coffee drifted through the laundry room door. Following her nose, she wandered out to the kitchen where Julian was filling two mugs with black coffee.

"Good evening," he greeted her with a smile. "How are you feeling?"

Danamara shoved her hair back from her face as she wanly returned his smile. "Better. Sleeping in a real bed rather than on the cold bathroom floor helped."

He bent his head and kissed her gently before handing a mug to her. "Well, I'm glad you were more comfortable. I woke early and spent some time in my library refreshing my memories about the *alpheli* laws and traditions."

Her stomach cramped with fierce hunger at his casual mention of their *alpheli* relationship. The slow beat of his blood abruptly magnified in her ears and her fangs appeared despite her attempts to prevent them from popping out.

Julian chuckled quietly. "Hungry? If I feed you now, love, I will not turn down what you offer," he warned. "Are you ready for that?"

"How does this work?" she asked with sudden urgency. "You said I wouldn't need to feed from anyone else?"

He took her mug, setting it back on the counter before tugging her so that her body curved into his. He didn't bother to hide his arousal as his engorged cock nudged the soft juncture of her thighs.

"I am responsible for feeding you as frequently as you need. And in exchange, you will allow me to feed from you once or twice a week. I will also find an outside donor to feed from at least once a week. I'm very old so my requirements are minimal. In addition, we will both be able to eat moderate amounts of anything that's not fortified with vitamin D. Apparently, there's some type of toxic reaction to that."

She tilted her head back so she could see his eyes. "I still need to feed every day."

"Yes," he replied answering the question she didn't quite ask. "I will feed you every day. And if you desire or need sex with your feeding, I'll happily take care of those needs, too. Every day."

"Julian, isn't this sort of cold and unemotional?"

"I'll be happy to warm you up," he assured her before covering her lips with his. He slid his tongue across the tips of her fangs, purposely allowing them to nick his soft flesh. When tiny beads of blood welled up, he shared them with her, brushing his tongue over hers.

She melted against his body, pressing closer as the spicy flavor of his blood exploded on her tongue, snapping her taste buds wide awake. Winding her arms around his neck, she rocked her hips, frantically rubbing her mound on his hard length.

Julian slowly broke the kiss, tilting her head up with his thumbs until their eyes met. "Tell me now, my *alpheli*. Do you accept what I offer?"

Shuddering with aching need, she nodded. "Hell, yes, *my alpheli*," she replied, adding the extra possessive emphasis. "I accept what you offer. I need what you offer. I desire you—your blood, your body, and your soul."

Immediately, he swept her up in his arms and carried her down the hall to his bedroom where he placed her in the center of his wide bed before untying her robe and spreading it open. After a moment, he stripped it off, tossing it on the floor. As he slipped his own robe from his shoulders, his eyes were focused on her restless body.

"You're a lovely woman, Danamara Higgins. I assure you our joining will never be unemotional. Not the first time, nor any time after that."

Reaching for him, she sat up as her eyes moved over his body, noting his muscular barrel chest, flat stomach and heavy erection.

"Julian, come to bed."

"Willingly." He stretched out next to her, gently pushing her back so she rested against the pillows. "We have plenty of time this evening for lovemaking before I escort you to work."

"I need you," she confessed as she carefully cradled his cock in her warm hands.

"And you shall have everything you need." Capturing her hands in his, he tugged her arms up over her head. "But I intend to take my time, savoring you like a fine wine." Rising up on one elbow, he leaned over her with a sober expression in his eyes before adding, "I don't want our first time masked by blood intoxication so we will not feed until the end."

"Okay." She arched her hips, needing to feel the weight of his body on hers. "Come to me. Cover me, Julian."

"Such impatience," he chided before shifting his body so he rested between her legs. He kissed her again, nibbling lightly at her full bottom lip before nipping her tongue, eagerly taking that tiny taste of her blood. Their tongues tangled as they took turns exploring each other. Then he moved to plant tender kisses along her jaw, in the soft spot under her ear. "I watched you in class, you know. I saw you staring at me," he admitted.

"I wanted you," she whispered with a naughty smile. "I tried to imagine what you would look like naked. I saw your penis poking at your trousers."

"You were most distracting. You kept shifting in your seat, squeezing your thighs together as if you were aroused. And you wore a skirt. When I imagined how easy it would be to slide it up and taste your pussy, it was difficult for me to control my cock. Now, you will pay."

Julian caught the luscious pulsing vein in her neck in his teeth, lightly biting down. When she moaned, he applied a bit more pressure before flicking it with his tongue. "The taste of your skin is delicious. When we feed, it will be the most erotic experience of your life. But first...first I wish to taste the rest of you."

Danamara tugged, trying to free her hands from his grip.

"I want to touch you."

He released her, moving to kneel between her legs. "Place your hands under your head," he directed. "I've spent too much time in the last twenty-four hours anticipating making love to you. If you touch me now, I'll take you like a barbarian raider. Please help me by doing as I ask."

Immediately, she folded her arms together, resting her head on them while he rearranged her legs so that they draped over his thighs. His cock nudged her mound, teasing her as he leaned over to take one puckered nipple in his mouth, pressing it against the roof of his mouth as he sucked avidly. She arched wantonly, silently urging him to take more. In response, he captured her other nipple between his index and middle finger, flicking it with the pad of his thumb. She

whimpered and writhed beneath him, desperately trying to position her body so his cock would stimulate her hungry clitoris.

“Please,” she pleaded.

“Soon,” he muttered as he switched nipples. “Soon.”

“Julian,” she moaned as he nibbled at the tight nipple, clamping it in his teeth and lashing it with his tongue.

Releasing it with a pop, he shifted so that her legs were spread wide, draped over his arms to reveal her soft wet pussy, all pink and swollen, glistening with slick moisture. His tongue slowly flicked over his lips in anticipation as his breathing audibly deepened.

“You have a beautiful delightful cunt.” He slid his hands under her hips, lifting those tempting folds to his mouth. “And it belongs to me.”

Julian buried his face in her pussy and feasted.

Thrusting his tongue in her pussy, he nipped and licked with gusto, alternating with quick forays to lightly suck her erect clit and long slow sucking kisses on her puffy labia. Danamara squirmed and heaved, pleading for him to fuck her. In response he slid two fingers inside, curling them so they grazed the sensitive bed of nerves on the front wall.

With a shriek, Danamara curled up, her entire body tightening in a wild series of contractions. Continuing with his ministrations, Julian brought her to a second climax before he straightened up, plunging his cock in her pussy. Immediately, she convulsed again.

Julian gathered her body close and rolled until she was sprawled on top. Tilting his head to the side, he commanded, “Feed.”

Without hesitation, she obeyed hungrily latching on the wildly pulsing vein at the same time his fangs punctured her soft skin. They fed, mindlessly sharing their life's essence as Julian pumped his cock in her greedy pussy relentlessly, their bodies straining together toward orgasm. Danamara's cunt muscles clamped down, gripping his pulsing rod, milking the spurting seed until they were both satiated and content. Withdrawing their fangs, they curled together in exhaustion and slept.

When Danamara woke, they were on their sides facing each other on the rumpled bed. Julian was leisurely working his cock in her pussy, gently nibbling at her nipples as he cupped her breasts in his hands. She thrust her hips forward as a soft tender climax slowly unraveled. He

raised his head and took her mouth in a loving kiss before pressing deep as he filled her with his scalding seed.

Her arms wound around his neck, holding him close. "Julian."

"Yes?"

She searched his face, noting the contentment and relaxation. "That was very beautiful," she said quietly. "It's never been like that for me."

"Maybe you just needed a really old lover," he teased. "The younger generations are all so impatient."

"Ummm." Resting her head on his chest, she idly kissed the warm damp skin. "It would be very easy for me to fall in love with you, Julian. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know." He cuddled her close as he sighed. "You must understand. I'm nearly two thousand years old. For all of my long life, an *alpheli* wasn't even a dream. Now, suddenly you are here and I am still trying to adjust my ideas. I never thought to have a longtime lover. Yet as you just said, it would be very easy for me to fall in love with you. You are a loveable, generous woman."

"Then we must take our time," she suggested. "If what you say is true, time is one thing we have in abundance." Her eyes widened as she glanced over at his bedside clock. "But not tonight. I have to shower and get dressed if I'm going to be on time for work."

He kissed her once more before disentangling their legs and rolling to his feet. Stretching and yawning, he looked down at her sprawled across his bed. "I'll race you to the shower. Last one there has to wash the other one."

She bounced from the bed and rushed into the bathroom while he followed at a leisurely pace. Sometimes, losing was the best way to win. When he reached the shower, Danamara was standing under the steaming water, eyes closed as she reveled in the warmth. Eyes still closed, she crowed, "I won."

Julian bent his head, taking her mouth in a conquering kiss. "No," he murmured against her lips, "I won. Allow me to demonstrate." He filled his palm with a puddle of body wash, slowly spread it over both hands, and proceeded to wash her with aching thoroughness, meticulously searching out every single nook and cranny. His fingers lightly plucked at her nipples until they were high and tight. He flattened his hands, running his palms over her shoulders, under her arms, across her ribs, massaging her belly.

Turning her body so her back was facing him, he soaped her back, scrubbing each bump on her spine until his fingers reached the upper swell of her ass. Spreading his hands wide over the enticing curves he squeezed the plush half moons while leisurely running his thumbs up and down in the center crevice, stopping to probe inquisitively at the tight rosette of her ass.

Danamara shuddered, but made no objection, even when he slowly inserted a soapy finger. As he fucked in and out, he slipped his other hand up to toy with her swollen pussy, gently pinching her clit and finger fucking her vagina. As her muscles relaxed, he inserted a second and then a third finger in her ass, thrusting them in and out in tandem with the fingers fucking her pussy though he refused to bring her to a climax. By the time he declared himself finished, Danamara was trembling with fierce arousal and lust.

"My turn," she whispered, seizing the bottle of body wash and a shower puff. After dousing the puff with liquid, she knelt down, starting at his feet and ankles, slowly working her way up his muscular legs to his hips. Avoiding his erect cock and heavy balls, she stood up and moved up his chest, stopping briefly to investigate his naval before meticulously washing his ribs and chest, paying particular attention to his tiny hard nipples. She bent her head, sucking them in turn before gently grazing them with her teeth.

Julian groaned as he held her close with one hand cupping her head. "Again," he grated. "Bite harder."

Without hesitation, she complied, biting down on the tip.

Abruptly, he turned her so she faced the wall and placed her hands on one of the rails he'd installed in the roomy compartment. "Hold on."

Eagerly she obeyed, ready for whatever Julian had in mind. He positioned her so that she was bent over at the waist, legs splayed, her ass prominently on display.

"Pussy or ass?" he demanded with a deep shuddering breath.

Once again, she shook with arousal. "Either. Anywhere. Fuck me, Julian."

"Both," he decided, thrusting deep in her pussy. While fiercely plunging in and out, he reached around, grasped her clit between his thumb and forefinger, lightly tugging as he pounded her from behind. Moments later orgasm seized her in a grip that left her weak and shaking.

When the contractions slowed, Julian withdrew, grabbed a tube of lubricant from the basket on the back of the toilet and thoroughly coated his penis with the clear gel. Positioning the tip against her rosette, he pressed in, slowly but firmly. Still trembling with her climax, Danamara met his pressure with her own. With gentle thrusts, Julian worked until he was well seated.

“Now, we’ll fuck,” he declared as the water poured over them. With his chest pressed tightly against her back, he embraced her, capturing her breasts in his hands, tugging on her nipples in time to his thrusts.

Blindly, Danamara met each thrust in wild counterpoint as Julian drove them both higher and higher until she clamped down in climax, squeezing his cock in rhythmic contractions that forced him over the edge. Desperately he bit down on her shoulder, clinging to her as his cock jerked, filling her with his hot seed while he savored her spicy taste. Finally, his fangs slid from her soft skin. He sealed the wound and withdrew from her body, soft and depleted.

Wearily straightening up, he helped Danamara stand before taking time to cleanse her and himself. Then he turned off the water and helped her from the shower. “Call in sick,” he urged as he briskly dried her. “You’re tired and still adjusting to all the changes in your life.”

“I can’t do that. I have to pay rent.”

He rested his head on her shoulder. “Not if you move in with me permanently. You can even have your own bedroom,” he offered.

“Is that what you want?”

“No.” His instinctive denial shocked Julian. He was not comfortable sharing his space, even with a lover, yet he knew at once that he didn’t want Danamara sleeping alone in another room. He wanted to hold her through the long daylight hours as they slept. When her body stiffened under his hands he realized he hadn’t made himself clear. “Yes, I want you to move in with me,” he said hastily as he met her troubled gaze in the mirror. “No, I don’t want you to sleep in the other room. I want us to sleep together. I want us to make love. I want us to live together.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. Will you stay with me?”

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “For now. We’ll take it slow.”

“Will you call in?”

She chuckled under her breath. “Pushy, pushy. All right, I’ll call in sick tonight. But, Julian, don’t think you’ll win every time,” she warned.

Without a word, he sketchily dried his body and swept her up in his arms, carrying her back to bed. “Nap time.” He fetched her cell phone. “Call in. Then in a little while, we’ll celebrate our ability to eat real food by visiting Burger Heaven.”

“Oh, sad stuff. I was thinking along the lines of a steak.”

“Unfortunately, we have steak tastes on a hamburger budget. Perhaps in the future we’ll have the money for that.”

“What happened, Julian? Obviously, you had money at one time. I didn’t grow up in a wealthy home, but even I can tell the difference between two hundred and eight hundred thread count sheets.”

“Bad investments,” he said vaguely.

Willing to allow him to keep his secrets for now, she punched in her brother’s number. In her experience it was always better to let him know she wouldn’t be home for a while. Absently, she hummed under her breath while she counted the rings, never expecting him to answer. “Where are you?” Donal demanded.

“I’m staying with a friend for a while.” Julian’s warm hand on her breast calmed her in a way she’d never expected. “I just wanted to let you know we found your knife.”

“We? Who would *we* be, Danamara? One of your vampire friends?”

“W-what?”

“You’re one of *them*,” he accused angrily. “I saw your name on the class list.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Vampire Bootcamp at the Others Lifeskills Institute. You’re a bloodsucker.”

“Donal, are you crazy?”

“One of my men hacked into the school computer records,” he said smugly. “I didn’t believe it, so I followed you tonight. I watched you with *him*. The vampire.”

“That’s illegal.” Indignantly, she sat up in bed. “You’re not allowed to look at school records.”

“You’ll never escape Danamara. I’ll make sure of that. I’ll kill you myself.”

“Is that why you left your knife in my apartment?” she demanded bitterly. “What did you do with my angel panels?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Demons shouldn’t mess with angels, Danamara. You’re one of them now, one of the bloodsucking demons. I couldn’t let you keep the angels. That would be sacrilege.”

“Why do you hate me, Donal?” Silently, she disconnected and lay down next to Julian. “He wants to kill me.”

“He will fail. I will keep you safe, beloved. Always.”

“Well, I would rather be with you anyway,” she muttered tearfully as he held her in his arms. After she called work and left a message on the machine, they snuggled together. In moments, they both slept.

Chapter Six

Pierre and Charlie stood near a small wooded clearing, watching the cops going about their business as two detectives talked to the medical examiner. Between the detectives and the M.E. the body of a young woman sprawled naked, robbed of her dignity in the insult of sudden death. Abruptly, the M.E. summoned an assistant and they draped the dead woman with a sheet.

"There's no doubt?" Pierre asked.

"No doubt. This was Rick. There's a dead vampire about thirty feet into the woods." Charlie looked around before softly speaking. "It's a vampire named Mocker. According to my sources he's connected pretty high up. This isn't good, Pierre."

"Summon a clean-up crew. Warn them about the cops working this scene. No need to add more confusion to their investigation."

"Nope. We wouldn't want to confuse the cops," Charlie agreed sarcastically. "While I deal with this, there's another rumor you might be interested in."

"Yeah? And what is that?"

"Rick's going directly after Julian and Danamara. And fire was mentioned in the same sentence."

"Come on." Pierre immediately rushed toward his car with Charlie at his heels. The moment Charlie made arrangements for the dead vampire's disposal, Pierre started rapping out orders. "Start a team evacuating the residents in Julian's building. If Rick decides to burn it down, the lives of a few dozen humans won't dissuade him. As crazy as he is, it might even encourage him. And find someplace to send the residents."

As Charlie started carrying out his instructions, Pierre punched the first button on his list of contacts, praying they were a step ahead of Rick. Praying there was still time to warn Julian. Any other option didn't bear thinking about.

The tinny strains of Flight of the Bumble Bees roused Julian from his nap. He groped on the nightstand for his cell phone, peered at the caller ID and pressed talk with a restrained yawn. "Hello, Pierre."

"Julian. Is Danamara there?" Pierre asked.

"Of course. What's wrong?"

"Did she take her brother's knife?"

"No. One of your team took charge of it."

Pierre cursed then cursed again. "Rick has gone mad. He's attacking every vampire he can find. According to an eyewitness, he's using a knife that bears a striking resemblance to Donal's fancy knife. And Rick's taken it in his head that Danamara can be his *alpheli* if he kills you."

Julian sat up, clutching his head. "He *is* mad if he thinks he can take my *alpheli*. In any case, I set the condo on lockdown when we went to bed this morning."

"Lockdown will not save you from a fire. That's the word on the street."

"No, it won't," Julian admitted softly. "We will retreat to the bunker immediately."

"Please do so, old friend, while my enforcers track down the rogue. We're already evacuating the building. My apologies to both of you." A soft click signaled the end of the call.

Julian got out of bed, jerked on pajama pants and his robe, then shook Danamara awake. "Time to get up."

"Wa-aa?" She pushed her hair back from her face, peering at him in the dim glow of the night lamp. "What's wrong?"

Julian located the robe he'd loaned her and held it up. "We must re-locate. Your sire is on the warpath. Pierre fears that he will use fire to destroy us."

Danamara leaped from the bed and snatched the robe from his hands. "What the heck did I ever do to him—except survive?" She ran into her room, grabbed her over-stuffed bag then raced into the laundry room and started loading her clothes into the laundry baskets sitting next to the dryer. "I'm beginning to feel like a refugee. Every time I move I end up with less than I arrived with."

"Yet, you are more fortunate than others. Once your sire is captured and dealt with, Pierre will replace your belongings...as long as you survive." Julian stacked the baskets and carried them to a door Danamara had assumed was a closet. "Open the door."

When she opened the door, a small elevator was revealed. Julian set the baskets inside. "In with you," he said, waving his hand. "When you get downstairs, don't bother with the baskets. Just send the elevator back upstairs." As soon as she was inside, he pressed the release, sending the elevator zooming down toward the underground bunker beneath the building. As the elevator hurtled through the dark tunnel Danamara finally accepted that they were in serious danger until Rick was apprehended. If she was ever to have a normal life—whatever normal was for a vampire—Rick would have to be eliminated first.

When the door opened at the end, she leaped out and sent it back for Julian. He arrived a few moments later, dragged the laundry out into the lobby and locked the elevator. Grabbing the basket of wet clothing, he tilted his head to the right, indicating a long dim hallway. "This way."

Danamara seized the remaining basket and followed as he led her on a bewildering journey through a baffling array of shadowy tunnels punctuated by steel fire doors and short pauses at security panels where Julian punched in complicated number sequences.

Fifteen minutes later, he opened a door to reveal a sumptuous apartment decorated with fabulous antiques and lined with a series of ornately framed mirrors. She edged past him and stopped dead in the center of the room, amazed at the gorgeous rugs and furniture. "Wow. What'd you do, rob a museum?"

Julian smiled as he shook his head. "The advantage of living a very long time is you may retain the best of each generation or era. Sometimes your personal taste changes. By the time that happens, those items are often very valuable." He shrugged and walked past her into the kitchenette setting the basket in front of an under-counter washer and dryer near the bathroom door. "And sometimes, new technology mandates change. I hated to give up my wringer washer, but my new front-loader is far more convenient."

"Wringer washer?" Danamara shot him a quizzical look.

"You'd be surprised how efficient a wringer washer is. It uses far less water, for one thing." He opened the dryer door and tossed the wet clothes inside. Adding a fabric softener sheet, he shut the door, set the timer and pressed the button. "Why don't you make some coffee while I call Pierre?"

"What precisely did he say when he called?"

"Unfortunately, they have not apprehended Rick. Pierre seems to think that your sire believes he will be able to take you as his *alpheli* if he kills me. Minimal research would inform him otherwise, but from my brief experience with Rick over the years, I would say that research

is not his forte. He's much more likely to take a completely unfounded notion and run with it." Julian folded his arms over his chest, leaning against the counter while he watched her fill the pot with water and measure the coffee. "Good job I brought your boxes down here earlier while you were still sleeping and made sure everything was stocked up."

"You've been threatened before?"

"Many times." He plucked the phone from the counter and called Pierre, abruptly informing him they were safe.

"Good." Pierre took a deep breath before informing him, "Your condo is burning like a torch but we were able to make sure everyone escaped safely. Rick has much to answer for."

"Until you apprehend him, he will answer for nothing. In the meantime, you should track down Danamara's brother. Almost certainly he is involved not only with the crime families, but also in Rick's vendetta," Julian pointed out tartly.

Pierre cursed quietly. "Working on it. He doesn't know it, but he's in trouble now. Several of your students found out about the fire. Zapata has organized them in teams. Did you know Zapata's a cop? And also from your line?"

"Yes I was aware of his connection to my line—and his occupation. He's on the gang task force. It seems that some gangs have recruited vampires for their enforcers. Zapata was investigating when he was turned by a low level vamp with high connections named Mocker."

Danamara poured a mug of steaming coffee and placed it on the counter next to him before preparing her own. Julian watched her rummage through the cupboards and fridge while he listened to Pierre. "This Mocker is dangerous. As I told you, we are losing control over the fledglings."

"In the last few hours, this has been amply illustrated. However, I can guarantee Mocker is no longer one of our problems," Pierre informed him. "He was one of Rick's most recent victims."

Julian sipped his coffee while he kept an eye on Danamara as she placed two sausages in a pan and set them to cooking. "Gabriel will no doubt find that comforting. Have the other families in my building been placed in appropriate shelter?"

"They'll be housed on the tenth floor of The Mayflower Hotel until other arrangements can be made. Fortunately, the staff had just cleared that floor because the painters were to begin on Monday. Each family also received gift cards for the mall and one of the superstores so they can replace clothing and other necessities."

"Thank you, Pierre. I appreciate your prompt response."

“Well, we both know who’s responsible in this case. Stay out of the line of fire and keep Danamara safe. I will call you when I have news.” Pierre disconnected, leaving Julian much to think about.

“What happened?” she inquired.

“The building is gone. The residents were safely evacuated and placed in a hotel.”

Danamara bent over the counter, her face in her hands. “It’s all my fault. What does he want?”

Julian set his coffee down and rubbed her back. “No, it’s not your fault. Rick was always an asshole. Apparently, your brother is, too. It sounds like they were a match made in heaven.”

“I’ve been thinking about Donal. Do you really think he’s working with Rick? It doesn’t make sense to me, though. He’s so prejudiced against anyone who isn’t human.” Pressing her cheek against the cool surface, she mumbled, “I’ve never understood him, even back when we were kids. I bet he is a crook now.”

“Without a doubt, he is involved with organized crime. We just don’t know who he’s aligned with at the moment. I suspect he would not hesitate to use Rick if it served his purposes.” He spread his hands, massaging from her tight shoulders to the soft curves of her buttocks.

She moaned and arched under his ministrations. “That feels so good, Julian.”

He moved closer to her, pinning her against the kitchen counter with his body, groaning as his cock cuddled in the enticing curve of her ass. “What is it about you that fascinates me so?” he asked. “I look at you and my dick stands at attention. All I can think about is fucking you until we both pass out.” He tugged her upright into the shelter of his arms.

She leaned back, resting her head on his shoulder. “I want you again,” she confessed softly. “Right now. I need you, Julian.”

“Turn off the fire. We’ll eat later. Maybe,” he muttered as he nibbled at the soft skin just beneath her ear. “If we remember.” He led her into the living room where he turned a leather over-stuffed chair to face the bank of mirrors. After shucking his pajama pants, he seated himself, and smiled. “Remove your robe.”

Clutching the soft folds, she hesitated a moment, then shrugged the robe from her shoulders, allowing it to slither slowly down her body. When it pooled around her feet, he spread his knees and stroked his cock. “Kneel down between my legs and take me in your mouth.” With his other hand, Julian cupped his balls, displaying them for her perusal.

Her tongue slid over her lips as her eyes rested on his cock.

"I've never done that," she admitted. "I don't know what to do."

With a lithe shrug, he said, "Whatever you wish. There is no right or wrong way. Between vampires, it's even permissible to graze the skin with your teeth."

Her fangs flashed at his words. The thought of combining blood and the taste of his cock was more than she could resist. Dropping to her knees between his legs, she bent her head to kiss the fat tip of his cock as he held it for her. Clear drops welled from the slit as she licked and sucked on the portion uncovered by his hand. Savoring the salty, musky scent, she allowed her fangs to gently score the velvety skin. Tiny beads of blood welled up, blending with his beefy taste.

Avidly, she sucked harder, unbearably aroused by the combined tastes. When Julian released his grip and leaned back in the chair, she seized his cock with eager fingers, holding it so she could slide more into her mouth. Frustration mounted as she found her limits.

Gently Julian tapped her cheek. "Relax."

She lifted her head and glared at him. "I want more. It won't fit."

"When you have as much as you can take without gagging, then swallow while pressing forward," he suggested calmly.

Falling on him in a renewed frenzy, she stuffed as much of his hard rod as her mouth would hold. Inevitably, her gag reflex kicked in. At that moment, Julian cupped her head in his big hands, pressing her onward as he commanded, "Swallow."

Mindlessly obeying him, she abruptly found her nose buried in the dark crinkly curls at the base of his groin as his cock slid effortlessly into the tight confines of her throat. Before she could panic, he removed his hands, allowing her to move back. Danamara sat back on her heels and stared at him in puzzlement. "How did you know?"

"There's very little that I haven't tried at least once in my life. When you have hundreds of years at your disposal, you tend to be more adventurous." He sat waiting as she mulled over the new information.

"Did you like it?" she asked curiously.

"Which part?"

She tapped her fingernails on her thigh as she reconsidered her question for a moment before venturing, "Did you like sucking his cock?"

"Yes. He was a very close friend, a man I trusted implicitly. We enjoyed touching each other."

Danamara studied him closely, noting his apparent patience with her questions. It seemed to her that he might be willing to answer whatever she asked. "Was it Pierre?"

"No. Pierre and I have never been lovers."

Something in his voice confirmed the fuzzy speculations she'd been entertaining. "He wants to be your lover. You want him, too."

"I have you now," he said firmly, dismissing her conclusions.

"I don't think I would mind," she confessed thoughtfully. "I would want to watch, though. What is it like?"

Julian straightened up. "Making love with another man?" When she nodded, he replied, "Harder. The sensations are less gentle. Men use a firmer grip and touch. We know we won't break." He smiled down at her. "Women touch their lovers the way they want to be touched in turn. You're far more gentle and lingering in your touch."

"But you would rather have something else? Something like Pierre would give you."

"No." Julian waited until their eyes met again. "I love the way you touch me. As I told you before, there is no right or wrong between lovers. Do whatever you wish with me."

Absently, she bit her lip as she thought about the dazzling array of possibilities. "I want to suck your cock some more." She slid him a sly glance from under her drooping lashes. "If you change your mind about Pierre, I might suck his cock, too."

Refusing her snare, Julian relaxed back in the chair. His cock bobbed and juttied out over his plump balls. "Here I am. You will need a lot of practice if you ever decide to satisfy two men."

She licked her lips and bent to her work. Holding him in place with a firmer grip, she slid her mouth over the fat flaring tip, exploring the ridges and valleys around the crown with her tongue. Carefully, she noted the way his cock twitched and jerked when she brushed the area under the ridge. With a hidden smile, she tickled it again with her tongue as she gripped his staff, fascinated with the way the soft outer skin moved over the hard muscle beneath it.

She felt the way his legs grew tense. Tucking away that bit of information, she moved on, alternately tracing the dark veins with her tongue and sucking the heavy pulsing rod. His body grew more rigid with each thing she tried. It dawned on her that he was fighting to maintain control. Suddenly, she was determined to make him come. She wanted him to surrender that iron control completely to her. She was his *alpheli*. He would never be safer with anyone than he was with her.

Using every bit of knowledge she gained as she teased and explored his genitals, Danamara made love to Julian. She cupped his heavy testicles, playing with the taut wrinkled sack that was drawn up high and tight under his cock indicating how close he was to coming. Slyly, she slipped a finger behind them to rub his perineum. His body jerked and hardened.

Then she remembered something she'd read in an erotic romance. At the time, it had sounded mildly disgusting, but now—well now she was willing to use any weapon in the war to win his final surrender. Wriggling her finger a little further back, she located the tight entrance to his ass.

Everything seemed to come to a crashing halt. Julian inhaled sharply and froze as Danamara lightly toyed with the crinkled flesh before gently poking the tip of her finger inside.

Abruptly, hot salty semen was spurting on her tongue as his cock wildly pulsed in her mouth. She relaxed her throat, taking him deeper before she gently bit down piercing the skin near the base of his cock. And then she lapped up the sweet taste of his blood as her *alpheli* clutched her head in his trembling hands, surrendering completely.

Long moments later when she released his softened cock and rested her head on his thigh, he wearily leaned against the soft leather and sighed. "I must remember that you are a very fast learner."

Contentedly, she snuggled closer between his legs as a tipsy smile tugged at her lips. "I was inspired," she confessed with a little slur. "I wanted to pleasure you to your limits."

He reached down and tugged her up onto his lap. In the cool silence, they cuddled as he softly petted her, toying with her breasts and the damp swollen folds between her thighs. "It's your turn now."

Danamara yawned and burrowed her head beneath his chin with her eyes closed. "Too sleepy, now. Wan' a nap."

"Ah, but I'm hungry," he protested. "I will carry you into the bedroom. Then you can sleep while I grab a quick snack. I promise I won't disturb you. Much."

Her eyes flashed open and she struggled to sit up. "Uh-huh. You won't be satisfied 'til I'm screamin' in ecstasy."

Gathering her in his arms, he stood and stalked into the bedroom. "Exactly," he agreed as he settled her on the bed. "I'll only be satisfied when your screams of delight reach every vampire on the planet. You belong to me. My *alpheli*."

"My, my, isn't that sweet?"

The hair on Danamara's nape stood straight up in alarm, her light intoxication abruptly gone. With dread, she recognized that sneering voice from the night in the woods when he stole her life and left her for dead. Scrambling to her feet, she stared at the vampire in the doorway. "How did you get in here?" she shouted.

"It's amazing what you can accomplish if you're willing to throw enough money in the pot." His eyes skimmed over her before flickering to Julian. "Some folks don't like you very much, Julian. One in particular was most eager to help me in my quest."

Danamara cast a cautious glance at Julian standing naked next to the bed. In an odd departure from his normal upright stance, he was leaning casually against the wall with his hand resting on the wide top rail of the bedstead. Turning back to her sire, her attention focused on the folded knife he tossed in his hand, a knife with a highly decorative jade green carved casing. She knew that knife very well. That was Donal's knife. Abruptly, Rick pressed the release and the blade shot out, four inches of glittering steel.

"Julian Taglio, I formally challenge you to combat. The ultimate prize will be the possession of the *alpheli* vampiress Danamara Higgins." Rick licked his lips and stared at her bared breasts. "I can see the attraction. I should have taken her that night in the woods, but who could tell she was such a looker under those cheap clothes?"

She watched Julian as he watched Rick, puzzled by his lack of response to such clear provocation. If she hadn't been studying him so intently, she might have missed his minute shift in stance as his fingers slipped over the back of the railing.

"Are you going to fight or talk?" Julian inquired in a patently bored tone. "We were busy when you so rudely interrupted."

"You put on quite a show. After I kill you, the first thing I'll do is shove my cock down her throat. Then I'll fuck her in the ass. When I finish, she'll know who she belongs to," Rick boasted. "And if for some reason she isn't my *alpheli*, I'll kill her. It was part of the deal I struck to obtain your location."

That pissed her off. Her fear swamped by disgust, Danamara stuck her finger in her mouth and made gagging noises. "I don't think so. After Julian, do you seriously believe I want your hands on me?"

With a giant leap, Rick landed in front of Julian just as the older vampire released the sword from the clamps that held it to the broad bed railing and brought it up in a wide slash at Rick's midsection. Uttering a girlish shriek, Rick jumped up on the bed clutching his bleeding belly.

Without prompting, Danamara dropped to the floor and rolled under the bed, desperately clawing her way to the other side. Cursing at the rug burns on her butt, she kept moving. Cautiously lifting the heavy dark bed skirt, she peered out at the room, trying to assess the flow of battle as Julian and Rick stabbed and slashed between terrifying leaps around the room. To her untutored eyes, it appeared that Julian was winning, but at the speed they were moving, it was difficult to be sure. She found it comforting that Rick definitely had more obvious wounds than Julian. Since Julian was naked and Rick wasn't, that was a positive as far as she was concerned.

From the corner of her eye, she spied the phone handset on the floor between the bed and the night stand. She slithered closer and grabbed it, scooting back to the safety of the middle of the bed. In the suffocating darkness under the bed, the display light was startling bright. Scrolling through the contact list, she picked the one for Pierre and pressed send.

"What?" Pierre's voice boomed in the dark confines under the bed.

"It's Danamara. Rick is here and he's fighting with Julian," she shouted.

"On our way."

Silence echoed in her ear. Carefully, she disconnected, then clutched the phone as she squirmed back to the side of the bed and lifted the bed skirt to venture another peek at the action.

Chapter Seven

With horror, she saw Rick had somehow gained the upper hand in the last few moments. Though blood was dripping from his own numerous wounds, Rick had obviously inflicted considerable damage on Julian. She howled in outrage when Rick skewered Julian through his shoulder with his knife, even as Julian twisted his legs around Rick's thighs, throwing him to the floor with a vicious jerk.

Rolling from under the bed, she seized the first thing at hand, an intricately carved walking stick that shared space with a tall swath of silk irises in a beautiful Chinese vase. Racing toward Rick from the rear, she brandished the walking stick in front of her like a lance.

He vaulted to his feet, shifting at the last possible moment and whirling around to face her. The makeshift lance deflected off his ribs, sending her boomeranging back onto the bed. Bouncing once, twice, she landed on the floor on the far side. As Rick leaped over the bloody mattress in pursuit, she clutched the walking stick to her chest and rolled back under the bed, scrabbling to reach the safety of the space in the center.

Rick shouted vile curses and threats as he vainly stabbed the deadly knife under the bed.

Danamara's heart pounded as she desperately scooted to the other side. With a terrible crash, the bed above her bowed and squealed before rebounding as someone landed on the other side with a hard thud. She turned to her side, curling her body into a tight ball with the renewed clash of fighting ringing in her ears.

Goosebumps rippled up her spine as Julian growled low in his throat. There was a whistling swish followed a few seconds later by a soft thump. And then an ominous silence fell over the room.

"Danamara?" Julian said quietly.

She trembled with relief at the sound of his voice. "Is it over?"

"Yes, it's over. Stay there while I tidy up."

"O-okay..."

Someone pounded at the bunker door. Suddenly Danamara remembered her desperate call to Pierre. "Julian. I called Pierre."

"Excellent. Stay there in case it is *not* Pierre at the door."

Above the roaring in her ears, she heard the faint indistinct rumble of deep voices and then in an instant it seemed the room was full of men. She recognized Pierre's voice as he directed the clean up. Charlie's satisfaction was evident as he started calling off the search for Rick.

After another series of thumps accompanied by curses, silence fell over the room again. The bed skirt twitched. Then Julian's weary face appeared. "Come out this way."

When her head and shoulders were in the open, he grasped her upper arms and pulled her the rest of the way, helping her to her feet so he could wrap her in his robe. Then he swept her up in his arms and carried her out to the living room where he sat in the same leather chair he'd occupied only a little while ago. She snuggled in his arms, taking comfort in his presence.

As Julian held her close, he fought to relax his muscles so he wouldn't squeeze her too tightly. The threat to Danamara had struck terrifyingly close. He shuddered as he imagined her fate if he had lost the fight with Rick. Tucking her face in the hollow of his throat, he whispered, "Feed, beloved. I need the touch of your mouth on me."

"I don't want to be drunk," she protested.

"I'll keep you safe. Always."

The brush of her soft lips on his neck was reassuring. With the sharp nip of her fangs, his muscles slowly relaxed. His breathing matched the rhythmic pull as she sucked, taking in his life's essence. She lived. She lived and trusted him to take care of her. He spread his big hand over her back, stroking her gently as he took solace in their survival.

While his people efficiently cleaned the mess in the bedroom, Pierre tugged another chair into place across from Julian. Their eyes met for a long moment. "It was close," Pierre observed.

"Too close," Julian agreed. "We must make other arrangements. This place is compromised."

"Someone talked."

Julian brushed his knuckles over Danamara's shoulder. "Someone talked. Someone in my line," he suggested grimly. "Once Danamara is settled in a safe place, I will go hunting. Rick bragged about striking a deal for our location. If he couldn't use Danamara as his *alpheli*, he agreed to kill her. Who wants her dead? The only one I can think of is her brother, Donal, but I have no information on him. Rick was carrying Donal's knife, though. That says something."

"We have a traitor, Julian. That knife disappeared on the journey from Danamara's apartment to your condo. I have a safe house available. Only Charlie and I know the location. Allow me to track down your traitor while you care for Danamara." Pierre stood and returned the chair to its place. "Charlie will pack whatever you want and bring it to the safe house."

Julian hesitated, then gave him a curt nod. "All right. We will clean up first and get dressed."

"Do you have any candidate in mind other than her brother?" Pierre asked quietly.

With weary discouragement, Julian met his gaze. "Always start at the top. Cesar or Paulo would both be happy to head my line and neither of them brought the demise of the overlords to my attention. If they check out, move on down the line. Someone obviously desires more power than they deserve. If I might suggest?"

"Certainly. I can use all the assistance I can get."

"Enlist Zapata—and whoever he thinks will be suitable."

Silently, Charlie had joined them. He considered Julian's suggestion, then observed, "Excellent idea. I have a feeling your foray into teaching is going to reap more unexpected benefits than just a paycheck and your *alpheli*."

"Let us hope so." Since Danamara had ceased feeding and now dozed on his shoulder, Julian stood with her cradled in his arms. "We will use the spare room to get ready. If you could bring Danamara's clothing from the dryer that would be helpful."

"I'll take care of it at once." Charlie headed for the kitchen while Pierre fidgeted with his keys.

When Charlie was gone, Julian queried, "What is it, Pierre?"

"It occurred to me that the simplest way to track you down would be to plant a bug. Do you object to a search?"

"No." Julian looked around the beautiful room. "Technology has shattered many of our long held taboos. Danamara's safety comes first. If that means my privacy is compromised, then so be it. Initiate any measures you believe necessary."

“Julian.”

Something in the way Pierre said his name tore at Julian’s heart. There was grief, acceptance and yearning. Julian stood facing him, their eyes meeting over the unconscious body of the woman who separated them. “What, Pierre?”

“I love you. I’ve pursued you for years, employing strategies that hurt us both because I couldn’t let go of my pride. After today I realize pride would never replace our friendship, even if that’s all we have. You hold a priceless gift there in your arms. All I’m asking is your willingness to allow me to help protect her. Can we start over?”

Julian squeezed his eyes shut as his heart seemed to expand far past the confines of his tight chest. His eyes flashed open, glittering with unshed tears. “My heart has always been yours, but I cannot make the impossible choice now between you and Danamara. I am honored by your friendship.”

Turning away, he carried Danamara into the spare room and pushed the door shut with his foot before heading into the bathroom. He set her on the vanity chair, holding her upright as he gently shook her awake. “Wake up, beloved. We need to bathe and get dressed.”

Her head wobbled as she obviously fought to focus. “Julian? I’m tired,” she whimpered.

“I know. Once we’re cleaned up and dressed, we will go to a safe place where you can sleep.” Holding her upright with one hand, he reached into the shower and set the water controls. Then he stripped the robe off her and lifted her into the shower.

When the warm water pelted her, she jerked in protest. “Julian.”

“This won’t take long.”

Her eyes focused on his body, taking in the myriad cuts and bruises. Abruptly, she was wide awake as adrenaline surged through her. She stared down at the bloody water swirling at the drain. “Julian. You’re hurt. You’re bleeding.” Grabbing the washcloth and shower gel, she started washing the stains of battle from his battered flesh, moaning as each new injury was revealed. “Why didn’t you tell me? You *fed* me.”

“Enough. Within the hour, the worst of these will be healed. I fed from Rick before I passed judgment. And if necessary Pierre would be very happy to provide all I need.” Taking the washcloth from her, he whisked it over her body, before tossing it in the corner and reaching for the shampoo. Briskly, he squeezed a dollop on her head and worked up a froth of suds before carefully rinsing the shampoo out.

He turned off the shower and nudged her from the cubicle. After sketchily drying off, they dressed and returned to the living room where Pierre and Charlie were waiting. Luggage was neatly stacked next to the door.

"Michael will meet us at *Dead of Night* with a sweeper. After we verify that you're both clean, then Charlie and I will escort you to the safe house." Pierre gestured toward the luggage. "Charlie has packed everything. Michael will also check the luggage. I want to make sure there is no possibility of tracking you electronically."

Julian nodded. "You've planned well. Thank you, Pierre."

"Gerard will also meet us at *Dead of Night* with the *alpheli* contracts. Once you both sign them, you will automatically be under my protection," Pierre pointed out.

"It will be an interesting new relationship for us," Julian observed with a sly smile. "I'm sure we will work well together."

"Certainly. Shall we go?" Pierre retrieved Julian's sword and harness from the table nearby, presenting it with a grave bow. "Charlie took the liberty of cleaning the blade after we verified the blood ID. You will no doubt have your own rituals you will set in place once you are settled."

"Thank you." Julian slipped the harness over his shoulders and buckled it across his chest before shrugging on his long coat. "Please ask Gabriel to meet us there. I wish to introduce Danamara as my *alpheli*."

"Consider it done," Pierre assured him with a nod. "Once again, you're thinking three steps ahead."

"And the *Suzerain Anciens*? How went your meetings?"

"Badly. We will discuss it at *Dead of Night*. There is much to hash out before you disappear, Julian. We are indeed in perilous times as you forecast. Now your *alpheli* is apparently at the center of the power struggle. And our joined houses are in chaos."

Julian fetched a heavy shawl from the couch and wrapped it around Danamara's shoulders. "Come. Let us get this over with."

Their exit from the hidden bunker and transport to *Dead of Night* was a blur of movement for Danamara. Fuzzily, she tried to focus on what was happening around her, uneasily sure it was important. Something about the behavior between Pierre and Julian plucked her last nerve though she couldn't put her finger on the exact reason. By the time they arrived at their destination, she reluctantly surrendered to the fatigue dragging her down. She was vaguely aware

of Julian lifting her in his arms and carrying her through the cold night air to the waiting warmth of a dark building.

The next thing she knew, Pierre was offering her a steaming cup of black coffee and a very rare hamburger, dripping with beefy juices. A pile of crisp French fries filled a bowl next to her plate. Wearily, she chewed, too tired to really enjoy her first post-vampire meal, yet unable to refuse it as she was afraid she would need the sustenance it provided. Across from her at the table, she noted with relief Julian was also eating. Despite his assurances he would heal quickly, she worried. Sometime during the meal, when Gabriel Zapata finally arrived, sliding into the seat next to Julian, Danamara subtly relaxed. There was an aura of integrity about the big cop that reassured her.

When they were finished eating, Pierre poured glasses of wine for all those present and proposed a somber toast. "To success in our survival. May we protect Julian and Danamara. May all honorable vampires join us in our endeavors."

"Hear, hear," the group replied softly.

Gerard, a sober patient vampire with jet-black hair pulled back in a stern braid, presented a leather-bound sheaf of parchment and a fresh legal pad for notes of any changes Julian required. The sheets were covered with lines of tiny meticulous script that was completely incomprehensible to Danamara.

"Latin," he explained with a small smile. "Your eldest sire, Pierre, has read the complete document and will explain its details to you while your *alpheli* reads it."

"Oh." Danamara frowned as she mulled that over. "Isn't there a way to give me a copy in English?"

"If your eldest sire approves."

"But I'm the one you expect to sign this document," she objected. "I'm supposed to just take another vampire's word on its contents?"

Julian picked up the heavy leather book and stood. "Perhaps there is another room where we may go over the contract together?" he asked.

At once, a silent vampire appeared from the shadows and indicated they should follow him. Pierre helped Danamara stand, before resting his hand on her back. The three of them, Julian, Danamara, and Pierre, followed the nameless vampire down a long hall to a windowless room lined with bookcases. When they were comfortably seated around a well-lit table, he left, shutting the door behind him.

Spreading the book open on the table, Julian began to read aloud, translating it as he went, stopping whenever Danamara asked a question. Sometimes Julian answered, other times Pierre explained as Danamara scribbled down extensive notes on the legal pad provided by Gerard. An hour later, when they finally reached the end of the contract, Danamara was mostly satisfied, though stunned at the magnificence of the terms. It seemed that an *alpheli*—especially a female *alpheli*—was far more important than she had guessed. According to the ancient texts, it was even possible that she and Julian would be able to have children, though no one was exactly sure how that worked. There were too few surviving *alpheli* for the archivists to form a viable hypothesis.

When they asked her if she was ready to sign, she tapped her notes with her pen while she considered. Finally, she drew a circle around the paragraph she'd scrawled covering the sexual obligations for Julian and her. It seemed to her the restrictions prohibited any possible chance of a relationship between Julian and Pierre. From the first time she met Pierre in his home, it was clear the men had a long-term attraction even if they had not chosen to act on it so far.

"Give me a minute to think about this."

With a curt nod, Julian moved to the other end of the table while Pierre fetched fresh drinks for all of them. Danamara doodled on the pad as she mulled the implications of the contract. It wasn't as though Julian could walk away if he found the terms unbearable at some time in the future. While she knew she was falling in love with Julian—and she was willing to admit she was even attracted to Pierre—she wasn't willing to sign anything that prevented them from consummating their relationship if they wished. After all, their feelings were so longstanding they surely took precedence over the three day wonder of their *alpheli* bond. In her opinion two weeks acquaintance did not equal an enduring union.

When Pierre returned, she questioned them both very closely about the restrictions in the contract. "So according to this, you may not have sex with each other? Ever?"

"No," Julian exploded.

Pleased, she noted he was beginning to look harassed while Pierre's face was hopeful. "Then that man needs to change it," she said firmly. "I refuse to sign anything that keeps you and Pierre apart."

"Danamara. You do not understand what you're doing." Julian glowered at her from across the table. "The contract cannot be changed on a whim."

"I know you and Pierre love each other. Just because you refused to admit it until tonight doesn't mean any blind fool couldn't see that," she insisted stubbornly. "I'm not saying you have to be together right this minute. But someday, when you're ready, it will happen. And neither of you are going to use our *alpheli* contract as a barrier to your happiness."

Julian pointed his finger at her. "You are a willful, headstrong woman."

"And you are pigheaded. Your cock will fall off before you admit the truth staring you in the face," she charged.

"At least I don't meddle in your affairs," he retorted coolly.

Danamara gasped in disbelief. "Who the hell was it who claimed me as their *alpheli*? And then—" she leaped to her feet gulping for breath. "*Then* you dragged me off to your condo and ravished me until I didn't have a thought left in my head!"

Pierre wrapped her in his arms, tucking her head under his chin. "Peace. Enough." When she would have raged on, he silenced her with a scorching kiss until she was quiescent and quiet. He urged her back into her seat. "Julian? Do you truly object to the changes she wants to make?"

She watched intently as their eyes met and held for a long heated moment. Then Julian's eyes flicked to catch hers. "I will agree to the change if *Danamara* will agree to amending the contract so she may also take you as a lover, Pierre."

A shocked silence filled the room. Then Danamara nodded and softly agreed. "Done. Fetch Gerard before Julian changes his mind."

With a shaky laugh, Pierre went to summon Gerard. "You are sure you wish to do this?" Julian demanded.

"Oh, yes. Forever is a long time, Julian. I refuse to stand between you and Pierre."

Pierre returned with Gerard on his heels. Standing at the end of the table, Gerard stared at them in obvious bewilderment. "What is wrong?"

"I'll tell you what is wrong." Danamara's tongue slicked her lips, sampling Pierre's lingering intoxicating taste. Then as a slow smile dawned on her tired face, she pointed at the leather contract. "You have to change that."

"That's not possible. *Alpheli* contracts can't be changed on a whim."

"Are you implying my wishes are whims? Isn't this contract supposed to be for life?" Danamara was tired of the constant thou-shalt-nots. Irritably, she demanded, "Would you sign a contract you didn't approve of? Wouldn't you want it to cover everything you needed?"

"Of course. What is lacking?"

Julian detailed the required amendments. Appalled, Gerard was not inclined to make the changes until Julian and Danamara both indicated their refusal to sign unless the contract was amended to their specifications.

“Very well. Give me the contracts.” Sitting at the table, he unfastened the heavy leather bindings and separated the specific sheets that spelled out the sexual responsibilities of the *alpheli* partners. When the changes were agreed upon, Julian nipped a vein in his wrist and the corrections were written in blood.

Horrified, Danamara protested until Pierre explained it was longtime tradition, guaranteed that the changes were the will of the *alpheli* partners...just as their signature on the documents would be signed with their own blood.

At last Danamara expressed her willingness to sign the contracts and the others came in to witness the signing and add their own signatures to the contract. Once the signing was complete, Gerard assembled the completed contract and took it in his charge to return to the vampire records hall in Switzerland. Three vampires were assigned to accompany him as guards. Within moments, they were gone, leaving a much smaller group huddled around the table.

The dark silent vampire returned, bearing a tray of coffee. “All is secure,” he commented as he set the tray on the table. “How can I be of assistance now?”

“If you could provide a pillow and blanket so Danamara can nap on that couch in the corner, I would be most grateful,” Julian replied. When she protested, he touched her lips with his fingers. “Rest, beloved. I will share everything we discuss with you later. It has been a stressful evening for you and time grows short. We must make some decisions very quickly.”

Without further argument, Danamara rose at once and went to the couch, accepting the pillow and blanket the man provided. She stretched out with a sigh, determined to listen carefully to the discussion, but slid into sleep as Julian said, “Please stay with us, Jack. I value your insights.”

Ah, that was the strange vampire’s name. *Jack*.

When Danamara woke, she was curled in Julian’s arms. The red numbers on the clock on the night stand informed her it was eight o’clock. Apparently, she’d slept the day away. Julian’s hand slid from her waist down, down to rest between her thighs.

“Hmmm. You’re awake,” she murmured as she twisted so she faced him. “What happened at the meeting?”

“Boring stuff that I will share with you when we are not in bed,” he replied evasively as he slid his middle finger inside her pussy.

“What happened between you and Pierre?”

He slid another finger along her slick folds, inexorably moving toward her ass. “We came to an agreement.” His thumb nudged her clit, rousing her sleepy passions to full alert.

She wriggled so that his finger slipped deeper in her pussy. “I see your point and raise you two nipples,” she teased, plucking the flat brown disks buried in his dark curls.

“Two nipples are good...so I’ll have to ante up. I’ll offer a finger in the ass,” he said as his fingertip breached her tight rosette.

Danamara whimpered and lifted her leg so it rested on his hip. “I’ll have to find something really valuable to add to the pot.” She slid her hand down between them, grasping his warm cock in her fingers. “Now what have we here? I do believe it’s a rock hard penis. What do you suppose a hand job is worth?”

“Whatever it’s worth, a blowjob is worth more,” Julian pointed out breathlessly.

“Really.” She stroked him, then cupped his testicles in her palm. “Isn’t it fortunate that it’s time for breakfast?”

“Yours or mine?”

“We could nibble together,” she suggested.

“That’s a fine idea.” Julian kicked the covers to the foot of the bed as Danamara sat up. When his cell phone rang, he groaned and retrieved it from the nightstand. With an evil grin, Danamara sprawled on his chest so her mouth was in perfect position to suck his cock. Just as he said, “Hello”, she opened wide, taking the tip inside her mouth.

Julian croaked, cleared his throat, and mumbled, “No, everything is all right.”

Ignoring everything he said after that, Danamara settled down for some serious feasting. Seizing him in a firm grip, she alternately sucked and nibbled at his smooth flesh. The temptation to graze him with her fangs grew stronger with each taste.

Abruptly, Julian nudged her aside. “We have to get dressed.”

“What?”

“We’ve been summoned by the tribunal overlords. Rogue vampires, accompanied by Hugh Chastain, are bringing counter charges against Pierre and us.” Julian leaped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. “Hurry. They have given us one hour to make our rebuttal.”

"Us? What us?" she shouted as she bounced out of bed and hurried after him. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Clearly, one of the rogue vampires wants to get his hands on you." When Julian gave the shower faucet a vicious twist hot water sprayed from the shower head. He hurriedly modified the temperature as Danamara joined him in the large stall. "I will tell you right now. No one is going to take you from me."

"Damn straight." Grabbing the shower gel, she squirted some on a shower puff before handing the bottle to Julian. "Hurry up. I have a few things to say to this tribunal bunch. They think I'm some sushi to pass around? Well, they'll find out different. I am not brainless doll."

Julian just nodded.

"And furthermore, I signed a contract. Don't these jerks believe in contracts? Isn't that *alpheli* contract supposed to be sacred or something?"

"Yes, it is." Julian stepped under the spray and rinsed off before leaving the shower.

"Well, then." Hot water poured over her head as she stood there, furiously holding back the angry words that wanted to burst out. She was mad, dammit, and she decided she wasn't going to take this shit anymore.

Turning off the water, she jumped out of the shower and grabbed the towel Julian was offering. "And another thing. Who do they think they are? They're crooks. Can't Gabriel arrest them or something?"

"Arresting a vampire is a difficult proposition. That's exactly the reason we have a tribunal and guardians. It's also why the current situation is so dangerous. If the tribunal overlords throw their influence on the side of the rogues, we will be reduced to living in secret again."

"What? No, no, no. It's bad enough I have to spend my life in the dark."

"I know, beloved. We will go to the meeting and do our best. But I warn you, if they seek to take you away, a war will break out. I will not give you up willingly."

"I should hope not." Danamara tossed her suitcase on the bed, unzipped it and flung back the lid. Pawing through her clothes, she chose a dark blue pair of slacks, a matching sweater and socks and panties. Then she dressed with quick jerky movements while she peppered Julian with questions. "Where is this meeting? Will they allow you to take your sword? What about me? Can I take a weapon, too?"

Julian leaned over and covered her mouth with his lips. Long moments later when he straightened up, Danamara touched her lips with her fingertips. "Why did you do that?"

“Pierre suggested it as an effective way of capturing your attention.”

Smiling, she decided she could get used to Julian’s methods. Slipping on her black fur-lined Crocs, she sighed as she stood next to the bed. “I hate to say it, but I’m starving.”

He nodded. “I thought you might be. However, we can’t take time for that at the moment.” He hesitated. “If we should run into trouble, your hunger might prove useful for you. And if not? Well, I will feed you as soon as we are safely away.”

She didn’t like the implications of his explanation though she understood well enough. Julian expected to face trouble and if necessary, her hunger would strengthen her determination to fight. With a little shudder, she followed him out to a wide foyer where he handed her a thick black fleece hooded jacket. While she slipped it on, he buckled on the leather harness for his sword, slid the blade into the scabbard, and then pulled on his long woolen overcoat.

“In the movies, the vampires all wear leather dusters. Why don’t you?”

“Leather creaks when it gets cold,” he explained as he pulled his gloves from his pocket and put them on. “It also has very little pliability when cold. Silence and speed are the vampire’s friends. In a hostile situation, you don’t want to be caught weaponless because you’re fighting with a stiff leather coat.”

“Gotcha.”

He offered her a folded knife that was previously hidden in his pocket. “Open it.”

Reluctantly she took the knife from him.

“This is Donal’s knife.” After scrutinizing the unusually long handle, she pressed the hidden button, unprepared for the glittering blade that shot straight out from the hilt. “Holy cow. I didn’t expect it to shoot out like that. Aren’t they illegal?”

“So is murder,” he pointed out wryly. “In our world, we do whatever we must to survive.”

“This is true.” After a couple passes in the air with the blade, she asked, “How do you close it?”

“Press the button again.”

When she pushed the button with her thumb, the blade slid home in the handle with a sharp snap. “All righty then. That will work.”

“Keep it in your pocket. For the moment, it will be better than leaving you unarmed. As soon as possible, I will begin your self-defense lessons.”

“Ooooh, I can just imagine how much fun those will be. I bet you’re a real taskmaster.”

“Yes, I am,” he readily agreed. “And in your case I’ll be twice as tough. I don’t want you to be as vulnerable as you are at the moment.” With a flourish, he opened the door. “Pierre is undoubtedly waiting for us out front. Shall we go?”

Chapter Eight

As Danamara stood on the snowy sidewalk, she stared up at the dark office building in disappointment. "This is where the tribunal is?" she demanded.

"Of course. What did you expect?" Pierre teased as he slammed the car door.

Frowning, she looked around them at the late evening hustle and bustle of downtown Angel City. "I don't know. Maybe something dark and mysterious. This is kind of retro, you know?"

Tucking her hand in his arm, Julian led the way to the wide electronic doors. "Vampires live in the twenty-first century, just like everyone else. We use electronic devices, watch television, own businesses, and even have 401K's."

"Besides, we wouldn't fit in if we insisted on using Dracula's castle," Pierre pointed out drolly.

"Not to mention the fact he would howl in protest." In the lobby, Julian headed for the bank of elevators. "Dracula is really touchy about his castle. Except for his Halloween party, nobody visits without a formal invitation."

"I thought it was a tourist attraction. I'm pretty sure I watched a Discovery Channel special on it," Danamara protested.

"Oh, not that castle. He never even lived there. No, his castle is deep in the Carpathian Mountains. Not many outsiders even know it's there." Pierre followed them in the elevator, punched the button for their destination and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed until the doors slid open on the seventeenth floor where two male vampires guarded the lobby.

"Good evening, Masters," the blonde on the right murmured as he bowed.

"Is this the woman?" his bald partner added with a sneer.

Julian stepped out into the lobby, his head held high. The men moved back, quelled by the powerful presence emanating from him. When Pierre joined him, they backed into the hallway, wary eyes on the two ancient vampires. Deliberately Danamara strolled out to stand between Julian and Pierre. "I am *the* woman."

Before she had a chance to elaborate, Julian strode across the lobby with Danamara and Pierre in his wake. The vampire guards fell back, then turned and fled down the hallway, bursting through the double doors at the end. Stalking confidently in their wake, Julian, Danamara, and Pierre paused in the doorway, three abreast as the conference room's occupants stirred uneasily.

Then Pierre took the lead with Julian and Danamara following on his heels. Instinctively, Danamara placed her hand in the crook of Julian's arm and glided forward, carrying herself as though she was royalty. Her eyes widened in amazement when they came to a halt in front of three people seated in a row at the other end of the room. Glancing quickly from one to the next, Danamara was uncertain where to look. Finally, she settled on staring at the painting on the wall behind the tribunal overlords though she listened intently to the conversation.

That didn't keep her from wondering about the two women and man who made up the tribunal and how they possibly lived the retired lives necessary to a vampire without attracting unwanted attention. On the quick trip to meet the tribunal overlords, Pierre and Julian had given her very short sketches of the tribunal members. But they failed to mention the extraordinary physical features that distinguished each individual. Irresistibly she found her eyes drawn to the three ancients.

Reginald, who sat in the middle, was a dignified dark skinned man with short grizzled black hair and dark penetrating eyes who appeared to be about forty years old. Danamara thought he was quite likely very tall, though it was difficult to be sure since he was sitting. His face told a story of its own. Without any other information, the elaborate spiraling tattoos covering most of the skin pegged him as Maori, though she couldn't begin to guess how old he might really be.

The tiny oriental doll sitting in her high tech wheel chair on his left was clearly Ming Lee. At first when her eyes drifted down to Ming Lee's feet, Danamara thought they'd been amputated. Appalled, she realized the beautiful woman had suffered the horror of foot binding. Danamara stifled the gasp, but not quite soon enough to hide it from Ming Lee.

The woman met her eyes, then nodded slow approval.

Danamara's eyes slid to the redhead seated on Reginald's right. Obviously, she was Moira, the last of the trio. Then she turned her head, revealing wrinkled red scarring from mid-cheek

back to her ear on the left side. Slow tears trickled down Danamara's cheek when she thought of the terrible pain Moira must have suffered. Surreptitiously, Danamara brushed the tears away as she faced the tribunal.

"We have come, as commanded, to present Danamara, *alpheli* of the ancient known as Julian. How may we serve you?" Pierre stood relaxed, almost to the point of arrogance in front of the tribunal overlords.

"The contract has been signed and filed?" Reginald inquired.

"Yes."

"The woman is content with the terms?" Reginald countered.

"Yes."

"Excuse me." Danamara burst out, unable to contain her irritation. She moved forward one step and stared him in the eye. "I am neither mute nor deficient in understanding. Through no fault or wish of my own I am now a vampire—a vampire who has abruptly found myself in most unusual circumstances. I would appreciate it if you address me face to face when you need to know how I feel, what I want, or what I think. Just because some asshole turned me into a vampire and abandoned me to die, it doesn't follow that I'm a brainless puppet."

"Your sire is Rick?" Moira asked.

"Yes." Danamara shoved her cold hands in her pockets. "At least he was."

Ming Lee shifted in her wheel chair then said, "It was our understanding that we were summoned to consider the matter of his judgment. Is this not so?"

"Well, I don't know about that. He attacked us in our home. After a terrible fight, Julian killed him." She stopped and swallowed before adding, "Julian was injured. Rick tried to kill me but Julian didn't let him."

"I see." Tilting her head to the side, Ming Lee studied the two ancients standing before them. "In that case, it clearly behooves us to ask how we may serve *you*."

Julian made a show of looking around the large conference room before turning to face the tribunal overlords.

"As you know, the former tribunal overlords were assassinated. The guardians have all disappeared, either murdered or in hiding. Rogues have joined with the human organized crime lords. Those who are capable are creating fledglings indiscriminately, often leaving them to survive on their own."

"What do you wish from us?" Reginald reiterated.

“Restore the guardians. Deal with the rogues. If they continue as they are now, the humans will rise in a terrible wave of anger and hunt us down to the last vampire.” Julian stepped forward until he was face to face with Reginald. “Already, I have lost a home. The loss was next to nothing compared to the human families who were also displaced and endangered. At this time, they are being relocated and recompensed for their loss. They believe the fire was an accident. If they discover the fire was instead the result of vampire in-fighting, there will be a backlash in the press and law enforcement arenas that may be more than we can meet.”

Leaning forward, Moira demanded, “And what will prevent our assassinations? The last tribunal overlord members were extremely capable and yet they are gone.”

After a moment, Pierre gave a curt nod. “So. It has come to this. The honorable vampires are no longer in charge. We run like cowardly curs with our tails between our legs, hiding from those who would take our hard-won freedom from us. If we are not going to fight back, then I suggest we scurry back to our caves and dungeons, back to our hiding places in the night like the rats we resemble.”

“Not necessarily.”

Looking back over her shoulder, Danamara frowned at the unfamiliar vampire stalking to the front of the room.

When he reached the trio standing in front of the tribunal overlords, he bowed. “My apologies, Pierre. Julian.”

“Hugh.” Julian’s acknowledgement was civil enough, though cool.

Crossing his arms across his chest, Hugh spoke, “When you approached me about a meeting, I was not aware of the precarious state of our race. Though I declined your request, I was curious enough to make investigations of my own.” He looked around the crowded room at the vampires who had shown up expecting a very different outcome. Under his cold stare, several shifted uneasily in their seats. “Until you arrived with your *alpheli*, I was under the mistaken—and ill-informed impression that she was with you against her will. Obviously, this is incorrect.”

Julian gave him a curt nod. “Yes.”

“Do I look like I’m unhappy?” Danamara demanded indignantly.

“No. Therefore, I suspect that other facts I gathered were also...less than reliable.” Hugh tapped his arm with his finger as he hesitated before turning to the tribunal overlords. “I withdraw all charges against Julian and Pierre. And I offer the services of my house as guardians. The rogues must not win.”

A startled murmur filled the room.

"Silence." When Reginald leaped to his feet, Danamara saw that her speculations were correct. He towered over Julian, Hugh and Pierre by nearly a foot. Between his impressive height and the tattoos on his face, he was such an intimidating presence the murmuring stopped instantly. "This audience is over. We will meet with Hugh, Pierre, Julian, Danamara, and Miguel, Hugh's second."

The remaining vampires fled in a panicked stampede. Danamara watched in amazement as they jostled each other in their rush to force their way through the double doors. As the last ones passed into the hall, the doors slammed shut with a resounding clap.

"Come, sit down," Ming Lee urged. Only then did Danamara realize the others had drawn extra chairs to form a semi-circle in front of the tribunal. She perched restlessly on a chair between Julian and Pierre.

Reginald sat back down, propped his elbows on the chair arms with his fingers steepled under his chin and regarded Danamara for a long moment. "Tell me young woman—I read the amendments to your *alpheli* contract—are you actually willing to accept Pierre in a ménage with Julian?"

"Of course." Danamara stared back at him with an unflinching gaze. "Pierre and Julian love each other. If anyone is intruding, it's me. Just because an accident of nature or fate happened making me Julian's *alpheli*, that doesn't mean he owes me his heart."

Silence fell over the group. Then Ming Lee observed, "That is very broadminded of you."

"Do you think so?" Danamara's eyes widened innocently. "I believe there's nothing quite like having two men who are devoted to keeping you happy and safe."

Moira chuckled quietly. "And I am no longer worried about whether you can hold your own with them." Her smile faded as the door opened, revealing Gabriel. "This is a closed meeting."

"I requested his presence," Julian informed them quickly. "This is Gabriel Zapata, a fledgling from my line who is also a detective with the Angel City Police Department. He was the one who brought the current situation to my attention."

"A cop?" When Reginald's eyebrows shot up, the tattoos on his face stretched in odd patterns. "What idiot turned a cop?"

"A crook named Mocker. Apparently, he had ties to the organized crime machine in Angel City." A faint smile tugged at Julian's lips. "Fortunately for us, Gabriel has a strong sense of

justice and was concerned about the possible consequences of vampires joining forces with the criminal element.”

Gabriel picked his way forward through the jumble of chairs and seated himself directly behind Danamara. “I apologize for being late. My partner and I found another abandoned fledgling. I called Charlie and he agreed to see to her care. Is it my imagination or are most of the abandoned fledglings women?”

A pregnant silence fell over the small group as each of them considered the possibilities. Then Pierre observed, “They’re looking for *alphelis*.”

“I thought an *alpheli* could be either a male or female.” Danamara frowned. “Isn’t that what you said, Julian?”

“It is.”

When Gabriel shifted in his seat, it creaked ominously. “Males, however are traditionally warriors. Even if a male fledgling wasn’t an *alpheli*, he could be trained for other uses. I suspect someone is also creating an army.”

“Aren’t female vampires as strong as male vampires?”

Moira shook her head at Danamara’s objection. “Not as fledglings. Also, statistically speaking, a male is more likely to have some previous military service. It’s as Gabriel suggested—someone is creating potential soldiers.”

Hugh stood up and went to the white board. “I suggest we divide our problem into more manageable bites.” He listed *fledglings*, *soldiers*, *organized crime*, and *assassination squads*. “What else?”

“Accurate intel. As you pointed out earlier, it’s difficult to gather accurate information.” Julian took Danamara’s hand when her stomach gurgled softly. “It isn’t just the individual facts, but assembling them in such a way as to show the entire picture.”

Hugh added *intel* to the list. “Anything else?”

“Security and protection for those at risk.” Pierre nodded toward the tribunal overlords. “We need people in place to guard them.”

Security.

Reginald studied the list. “I can think of nothing else to add. Now we have a list. What do you propose?”

“There is one more item to add to the list,” Ming Lee said. “The *Suzerain Anciens* need to be informed.”

"I attempted to meet with several of them without success. Most refused outright. The rest made it clear they were not interested in getting involved in the current political situation. It's not possible to make them listen," Pierre concluded bluntly.

Hugh nodded and wrote *Suzerain Anciens*. "To answer your question, Reginald, I propose that we split the list between us. My house will be responsible for security and tracking down the assassination squads." He printed his name after the two words.

"I can handle intel," Julian offered.

"And since my house already has a set up to deal with the abandoned fledglings, I will take that one," Pierre added.

Hugh added their names after their choices.

After looking at the list, Moira said, "We—the tribunal—should take the ancients. I suspect they would be more open to our approach than from any of the rest of you."

"I can gather information on organized crime," Gabriel said softly. "Actually, I can give that information to Julian to add to his overall intel."

Miguel cleared his throat. "I think we might have the perfect person to infiltrate the ranks of the soldiers."

Hugh turned to look at his lieutenant. "Shawn?"

"Yeah."

"I agree." He turned back to the list. "Good enough. I suggest we meet two nights from now to bring everyone up to date."

"Where?" Ming Lee inquired.

"We'll begin our security measures immediately. Each of you will be fetched by one of the guardians. Only they will know the meeting place. Every time we meet we will choose a different location." Hugh scowled at the small group. "Already, there have been attempts on some of you. From now on, you live as though the only person you can trust is yourself. Take nothing for granted."

Soberly, they nodded agreement.

"Then this meeting is adjourned." Reginald stood up. "Thank you for coming."

Pierre steered Danamara toward the elevators while Julian had a few last words with Gabriel. After punching the button to lock the elevator in place until Julian joined them, he

tugged her close to his body, tilting her head back for his kiss. He backed her up against the elevator wall, crowding close so her thighs separated permitting his cock to stroke her pussy.

Shoving her fingers in his hair, she returned his kiss with shocking abandon. From the moment he'd kissed her the evening before she'd known she wanted Pierre in their bed, not just as Julian's lover, but hers also. She wrapped her legs around his waist, struggling to position his hard flesh exactly where it would rub her clit.

"You've behaved quite boldly tonight. Be careful you don't provoke more of a reaction than you're ready for," he warned.

"She likes provoking reactions," Julian said as he joined them. He selected the button to release the elevator. Leaning against the wall next to her, he cupped her breast, pinching her nipple through her shirt hard enough to send a fiery assault to her empty pussy. She twisted her hips, grinding her pussy on Pierre's cock.

Julian jerked her shirt up, revealing her bare breasts. "I *thought* you omitted your bra. I believe you have exhibitionist tendencies, my dear. When things are more settled, we might indulge your fantasies."

She arched against the elevator wall, closing her eyes in delicious anticipation. Her nipples ached as the hard nubs brushed against Pierre's rough wool coat.

"Look at yourself in the mirror overhead," Julian commanded.

Danamara's eyes flashed open as she stared at herself in the mirror and then flushed.

"Definitely exhibitionist. I can think of several scenarios I would like to arrange," Pierre said before hoisting her high enough to take one nipple in his hot mouth. He sucked it for a moment before moving to the other one.

Julian pressed the stop button when the elevator reached the lobby. "No more time to play, Pierre."

"Isn't that the story of my life?" With a low groan he settled Danamara on her feet and tugged her shirt down so she was covered. Her fingers trembling she zipped up her jacket as both men drew their swords and Julian punched the button to release the elevator doors. Pierre went first leading the way across the lobby while Julian brought up the rear.

The moment they were in the car, Julian settled her on his lap. Her belly gurgled again. "I will feed you as soon as we're safely home."

The scent of aroused males permeated the back seat. Sniffing eagerly, she caught the intriguing different pheromones that belonged to Pierre. Lust roared through her as she inhaled deeply. "Can Pierre go home with us?"

"Danamara—"

"Please, Julian?" She wriggled her bottom on his lap, rubbing against his burgeoning penis. She ran her hand over his chest as she nuzzled his chin. "You know you want him. I want him, too. He got me so hot in the elevator when you were watching us."

Pierre slumped in the opposite corner. "Fuck, Danamara. Are you trying to kill me?"

"She could teach stubborn to a mule."

"I can see that." Pierre leaned toward them, taking Danamara's chin in his long fingers. "If I stay, Julian will certainly not be the only vampire I fuck. You've been pushing us at each other. Be very sure this is what you want. Once we go down that road, there's no going back."

Her lips parted as her tongue flicked out brushing the tip of his thumb that rested near her lips. "Does your cock taste as wonderful?"

"You need to be soundly spanked," Pierre announced.

"Excellent idea," Julian agreed, flipping her over so she was stretched out face down over his knees. "What? Julian," she protested.

"Naked, I think." Jerking down her slacks, he bared her panty-clad ass. "Please do the honors, Pierre."

"No, no. You deliberately provoked this punishment," Pierre declared as he ripped her silky panties off and stuffed them in his coat pocket.

"Shall we see how excited you are, Danamara?" Julian inquired as he slid his fingertips down the crevice between her thighs, lightly skimming her anus before moving to her pussy. "Ah, my goodness you're wet. Perhaps, spanking isn't really a punishment." Fresh moisture trickled on his fingers. "Obviously, the idea turns you on."

Danamara jerked and cried out in shock when Pierre smacked her ass. Then helplessly she tilted her hips up as he sensuously massaged her curves with the rough pads on his calloused fingers. The forbidden attention of two men touching her as they discussed their plans for her was incredibly exciting. There was something unbearably arousing about them doing so within earshot of their driver, a vampire she'd never met before this evening. She squirmed, rubbing her aching nipples on Julian's hard thigh.

“Oh, she liked that, Pierre. Do it again.” Julian slipped a finger in her pussy, fucking in and out slowly. Danamara’s internal muscles clenched and squeezed, holding his thick finger in their grip.

Pierre’s hand came down on her soft skin, setting her ass on fire. “No, clearly this isn’t punishment. We’ll have to think of some other way to convince her not to meddle, though I confess I am happy about her meddling this time. I will gladly stay with you this evening—or any other evening.”

“Evidently Danamara is happy about it, too,” Julian said, sinking a second finger in her slick pussy. “Spank her again. If we’re both going to fuck her, she’ll need some preparation.”

Her entire body gathered in readiness, waiting for the burn from Pierre’s palm. Her fangs had dropped at the mere idea of the spanking, but now they were aching fiercely in anticipation. Against her softly gurgling tummy, she could feel Julian’s rampant cock twitching and pulsing. She licked her lips, searching for the tiniest remnant of Pierre’s flavor even as she also longed for the taste of Julian’s cock. But Julian gripped both her wrists in his hand as he held her in place on his lap. When Pierre’s hand landed on her ass, she cried out and lifted her hips.

“Harder.”

His warm palm lightly massaged the tingling burn before he trailed his fingers down to her anus and gently teased her there. “Has Julian fucked you here, yet?”

Julian snorted. “Do you doubt it? I have claimed her in every way possible.”

Pierre sat up, stretching his leg straight so he could fish the tiny tube of lube he always carried from his jeans pocket. “Excellent. Then we will be able to fuck her without restraint. Do you hear us, Danamara? We are going to claim you together.” He daubed the clear gel on his finger as he taunted her. Without acknowledging her soft whimpers, he slid his finger up to the first joint in her tight rosette

A soft shriek escaped her as Pierre inexorably fucked her ass in tandem with Julian’s fingers in her pussy. “I need to come.” She moaned and humped her hips when Pierre spanked her again, the sound like a pistol shot in the small space.

The car slowed before turning into a garage. “Ah, we’re home,” Pierre said. Danamara heard the rattle of the garage door overhead and then the boom as it slammed shut.

Julian withdrew his fingers and tugged her pants up to cover her ass. “Just in time. I’m hard enough to drill wood.”

“Anticipating my cock in your ass, Julian?” Pierre taunted wickedly.

“Actually, I was looking forward to fucking *you*.” Julian helped Danamara sit up. “After we fuck and feed Danamara—though we should make her wait.”

Pierre opened the door and got out before turning to help Danamara to her feet. “I believe that’s a good idea,” he said thoughtfully. “That will be her punishment. What do you say?”

After a quick word with their driver, Julian joined them, leading the way inside. “Yes, I think that would be most a suitable punishment.” He unlocked the door and flung it open. “Welcome home, Pierre.”

Chapter Nine

Pierre led Danamara directly to the bedroom while Julian secured the perimeter. By the time Julian appeared in the doorway, Pierre had stripped off Danamara's clothing. Her wrists gripped in one hand behind her back, he sucked on the nipple of the breast he had cupped in his other hand.

Julian produced a handful of silk ties from his drawer and he took charge of her hands. "I believe we should seat her in that chair over there," he suggested, nodding toward a red leather chair in the corner. "Bring it over here so she has an unimpeded view."

Pierre fetched the chair, arranging it so Danamara would be able to watch everything. Then they arranged her in the chair, tying her elbows and ankles to the chair arms so she was spread open for their delectation. Pierre stepped back, watching her as he proceeded to undress with more haste than care.

"What a delicious picture."

Julian lightly tweaked her nipples before moving away to remove his own clothing. Danamara panted with excitement as each bit of skin was revealed.

"Julian," she whimpered as his cock bounced into view when his trousers dropped to the floor. "I need you."

He shook his head. "After Pierre and I fuck, then we will take care of you. This is what you wanted. Now you must reap the consequences. Watch Pierre, beloved. See how you excite him? Before morning, we will claim you in every way possible."

She squirmed on the slick leather as Pierre approached her, his cock in hand. "Julian is too cruel, my pet. I will allow you a quick taste."

Immediately, she opened her mouth wide, anxious to sample Pierre's cock. "No biting," he warned her. "Not even any grazing. That is for later." Carefully he presented his cock.

Ravenously, she sucked in the tip, hungry for the flavor and scent of his skin. Her tongue flicked all around, searching out every ridge and crevice, licking the clear drops seeping from the plum-shaped head. After a moment, when he tried to back away, she growled under her breath.

Grasping one of her nipples between thumb and forefinger, he twisted hard enough to capture her attention. "No more."

Danamara whined and reluctantly released him. "This is hardly fair when I was the one to invite you."

Pierre patted her cheek. "Be a good girl. We'll take care of you in just a little while."

"Next time, you'll be more careful about what you ask for," Julian observed as he absently stroked his cock. "However, since I'm indebted to you for insisting that Pierre joins us, we will have an extra special treat for you later."

Pierre shoved Julian back on the bed, sprawling out on top of him, holding his head still as they kissed. Julian spread his legs and dug his fingers in the taut muscles of Pierre's ass, pressing him flat so their cocks rubbed together. Wrapping his legs around Pierre's hips, Julian lifted his muscular ass, in silent demand. Panting in excitement Pierre stared down at the ancient vampire lying submissively beneath him. "Who's going to fuck who?"

"Does it matter?" Julian asked breathlessly. His fangs flashed in a clear show of dominance. "Haven't we waited long enough?"

"Hell, yes. I just figured you would want to be on top. You're older than me, Julian."

"That would take too long. I don't have to be on top to be in charge. You go first. Never fear, when it's my turn I will fuck you blind." Julian groped under his pillow and fished out a white tube of lube.

Standing up at the foot of the bed, Pierre grabbed Julian's legs and tugged him toward him so that Julian's butt was touching his legs. Taking the tube from Julian's hands he twisted off the cap with shaking fingers. "I just cannot believe I'm finally going to fuck you. It seems like I've waited forever."

"It has been forever. Get on with it," Julian grated through an impressive array of teeth. "Or we'll switch places."

"No, no." Pierre generously coated his cock with the lube before squeezing a dollop on his fingers. Applying it to Julian's anus, he spread it around before gently sinking his finger inside. "I don't want to hurt you after finally getting you where I want you."

Intently watching the men, Danamara squirmed in frustration. She wanted to be over there stroking Julian's cock or sucking it while Pierre fucked him. Hell, she wanted Julian to fuck her while Pierre fucked him. Her breasts swelled as her nipples puckered in taut little nubs. She needed someone to suck them.

Then Pierre added a second, no a third finger, in Julian's ass and she moaned. When Julian wrapped his swollen cock in his fist, Pierre stooped to take it in his mouth. The musky aroma of aroused males filled the air. Danamara licked her lips catching a hint of the remaining taste of Pierre's cock. Julian grimaced in ecstasy as he lifted his hips in a plea for more.

Impetuously, Danamara commanded, "Fuck him, Pierre. Can't you see he needs you?"

Pierre shot her a lightning glance before meeting Julian's dark eyes. "Are you positive you're all right with letting me go first?"

"Pierre, give me your cock!"

"I have to finish making sure you're ready."

"Trust me. I've been ready for the last five hundred years. Enough foreplay."

With a curt nod, Pierre placed the tip of his cock at Julian's puckered opening and pressed forward. The men groaned in unison as Danamara writhed madly on the leather chair as she watched. Pierre slowly filled Julian to the hilt, resting with his balls nestled against Julian's ass. "Stroke your cock, Julian. I want to see you come."

Julian closed his eyes as his face twisted with passion. His fist stroked once, twice. His testicles drew up against the base of his cock. Pierre cupped them in his calloused palm and carefully squeezed. Julian cursed as his cock swelled and jerked coating his belly with semen in disjointed spurts.

Pierre's face lit with incandescent excitement. "Yesss." He slowly withdrew and thrust in again as his fingers dug into the taut muscles in Julian's legs. "You feel so good."

Danamara growled low in her throat and ripped the ties loose. Leaping for the bed, she crouched over Julian's belly, lapping at his seed like a wild woman. Seizing his cock in her hand she frantically stroked it to new rigidity. Julian speared the fingers of one hand through her hair while covering her other hand with his. Together they worked his erection until he climaxed again at the same time Pierre thrust deep and came.

With another groan, Pierre collapsed on the bed next to Julian opposite from where Danamara still crouched licking Julian's skin like a well satisfied cat.

“Clearly, we must find some other way to punish her,” he panted. “She doesn’t obey worth a damn.”

Lazily massaging her head, Julian laughed. “You must admit her actions added to the excitement, though.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s true.” With another groan, Pierre sat up. After placing a lingering kiss on Julian’s lips, he whispered, “Either one of you would be incredibly exciting by yourselves. Together, you’re completely irresistible.”

Julian’s arm wrapped around Pierre’s neck, holding him in place. “Will you feed me?” he asked. “Will you share blood with me?” Immediately, Pierre turned his head to the side, baring his throat.

“Feed each other,” Danamara suggested as she slyly dipped her tongue in Julian’s navel. “Show me what it looks like.”

Gently tugging her hair, Julian commanded, “Come up here and watch.”

Danamara scrambled up to crouch next to Julian’s shoulder. Keeping an intent eye on the men, she hissed in excitement when they struck simultaneously, burying their fangs in the pulsing veins. Almost immediately, they withdrew and stared at each other in shock.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded impatiently.

“It’s impossible.” Pierre’s whisper was a bare thread of sound.

“What are you talking about?” Irritably, she sat up, planting her hands on her hips. “I thought you were going to *feed*.”

“We’re *alphelis*!” Pierre exclaimed in excitement. “Julian is my *alpheli*.”

“*Alpheli*,” Julian agreed.

“I thought you said that couldn’t happen. Didn’t you say you could only be *alpheli* with one person?”

“I have heard rumors of *alpheli* trios but as far as I know that’s all they are—rumors. We will need to consult with the Vampire Lords at Locarno. Until then, I can only conclude the blood evidence is true.” Julian reached out to take her hand, but she jerked away from him backing off the bed.

Collapsing on her knees on the floor, she stared up at him in accusation. “Now that you have Pierre, you don’t really need me at all.”

Pierre and Julian lost no time scrambling to join her on the floor, one on each side. "Without you, we would never have known," Pierre protested. "You're the one who brought us together."

"You're the one who gave me hope," Julian added as he pulled her up in his lap. "I need you, Danamara. I love you."

"Yeah? Well, I don't know why. I'm just a girl who works in a warehouse. Until I was Julian's *alpheli* there was nothing special about me."

"Hah." Pierre wrapped his arms around them. "Nothing special, she says. Do you not understand? An *alpheli* trio is almost unheard of. We will speak to the archivists later to find out what this means."

"Definitely later," Julian agreed firmly. "For now...for now, it is time to consummate our triad bond. First Pierre and I will take you together. Then when we are ready to come, we will feed to complete the bond."

"Together?" Danamara repeated in wonder.

"Oh, yeah. Fuck. Feed. And complete the bond for all of us." Pierre cleared his throat noisily and nodded his tousled head. "Come, my lovers. I am hungry for both of you." He leaped to his feet, scooped Danamara in his arms and sat on the bed with her on his lap. "Besides, it is time for us to focus on you as we promised."

Julian stood next to the bed, staring down at them with a strange gleam in his eyes. "I believe we should shower first and then retire to your Roman bath. Surely, we would be more comfortable in surroundings designed especially for romantic play."

"What a wonderful idea. By the time you have the shower ready, we'll be there." Pierre waited until Julian walked into the bathroom before he inserted a thick finger in Danamara's pussy while his thumb very lightly toyed with her clit. She squirmed on his thighs, finally grabbing his hand with both of hers to increase the pressure. He chuckled at her aggressive move. "Are you getting anxious, baby? Once we are all clean, I promise you we'll take care of you until you can't stand or kneel anymore." Pierre withdrew his hand and patted her on the rump. Then he stood up and set her on her feet. "Come on, woman. Julian awaits."

With his arm around her, Danamara walked into the bathroom, curiously reluctant to take part in the promised bonding. "What does it mean? Why are both of us *alphelis* to Julian and yet not to each other?"

“Is that really what you’re worried about? Or are you wondering what will happen if Julian decides he doesn’t want you anymore?” Pierre paused outside the huge walk-in shower, grasped her chin in his big calloused hand, holding her still for his kiss. “Or maybe you’re wondering what will happen if I want you instead of Julian. Have you considered that?”

When he released her, Julian snagged her arm and guided her in front of him so the water poured down on her head. Once her hair was completely soaked, he nudged her out of the spray so he could shampoo her hair. Across from them, beneath the waterfall shower head, she watched Pierre lather his semi-hard cock.

Julian finished with her hair and directed the hand sprayer so a stream of shampoo flowed down her body. After her hair was clean, he placed a soapy body puff in her hand and went back to cleansing his own flesh. Clearing the water from her eyes with a quick shake of her head, she watched Pierre clean his body with ferocious intent, scrubbing every possible nook and cranny. Julian turned the faucets off when they were all rinsed clean.

They stood for a moment, dripping in the silence. Then Danamara asked the question that burned in her mind. “Why? Why are we both *alphelis* to Julian but not each other?”

Pierre’s shoulders jerked in a shrug. “I don’t know. We will call the archivists later and ask them to research it. In the meantime, why does it bother you so much? Aren’t you still willing to share?”

Julian tugged her close so she stood in the circle of his arms with her back to his chest. He cupped her breasts in his hands, lightly tweaked the nipples until they stood up high and pointed, then displayed them for Pierre. “Perhaps the question is whether I’m willing to share Danamara.”

“Are you?” she asked, relaxing in his embrace at his demonstration of possession.

“Only if you’re all right with it. Pierre and I can meet elsewhere if necessary.”

She watched Pierre’s face as Julian played with her breasts. There was hunger in his eyes but it wasn’t directed at Julian. Impulsively, she demanded, “Suck my nipples, Pierre.”

Instantly, he was there, avidly sucking as Julian held her while he pumped his cock along the slick folds between her thighs. Danamara squeezed her legs together and groaned. “More.”

Lifting his head, Pierre looked into her eyes. “Answer the question. What do you want?”

“Both of you. I need both of you. Now.”

“Need?” Julian whispered in her ear as he rolled the nipples between his thumb and finger.

She threw her head back against his shoulder. “Need. Want. I crave both of you.”

“No matter what?” he pressed.

“No matter what.” She reached out to touch Pierre’s cock, cradling and stroking it in her hands. “Is it wrong that I want you both?”

“Wrong? How can that be when we all feel the same way?” Pierre leaned against the shower wall with his arms crossed and a quizzical smile on his face. “What now, oh ancient one?”

“Now we take care of our woman.” Julian lifted her in his arms. “Bring the pile of towels.”

Snagging the towels, Pierre strolled behind Julian as he walked down a short hall to the hot tub. Strictly speaking, it wasn’t really a standard hot tub so much as a Roman bath. Pierre had built it as a whim, hoping he could entice Julian to visit some evening. Apparently, this was finally the evening, although he’d never dreamed there would be three of them instead of two.

The warm steamy room was perfect for adult play. There were comfortable loungers, an assortment of toys, and a well-stocked bar in the walk-in cooler.

When Julian stopped next to a wide lounger, Pierre quickly spread towels to cover the leather while Danamara stared around the room with wide eyes. “This is the hot tub room? It looks like something you’d see in a sex shop.”

Julian laughed. “I have heard of this room—Pierre’s idea of a Roman bath. Actually, I believe he improved on the original in some ways. It is certainly a room designed for seduction, isn’t it?” Turning to Pierre, he asked, “Top or bottom?”

With a wicked avaricious gleam in his eyes, Pierre said, “Bottom. Then we’ll switch.” Suiting his actions to his words, he stretched out on the lounger on his back.

Julian helped Danamara climb atop Pierre, legs on each side. When she would have immediately moved to capture his cock in her pussy, Pierre smacked her butt. “Hold still. Julian needs to prepare you first.”

She writhed on his belly, trying to stimulate her clit. When he smacked her again, she whimpered, “Pierre, I need you.”

“We’ll take care of you in just a moment.” Grasping the generous curves of her ass, he held her motionless while Julian anointed her anus with a cool gel that rapidly heated up.

“Julian,” she gasped. “What is that?”

He chuckled as he slowly sank a finger inside her anus, spreading the gel with a slow circular motion.

“Just a little something to enhance the sensations.” As the warmth extended and intensified, he added another finger, gently massaging the muscles as he finger fucked her.

She tried to wiggle, but Pierre continued to hold her in place, though he offered a distraction. "Put your nipple in my mouth," he growled.

Eagerly, she complied. As he sucked and nibbled, bright hot ribbons of fire zipped down to her clit. Desperately, she tried to slide her hands between their bodies so she could touch herself to provide a modicum of relief.

"No, no, no. Julian, are you nearly ready?" Pierre inquired as he released his grip on her butt and captured her hands.

"This very minute." Julian placed the tip of his cock at her anus and pressed forward.

Immediately, Danamara pushed back, anxious to have a hard cock inside her *somewhere*, anywhere. She found her range of motion still limited as Pierre grazed her nipple with a fang. Julian forged forward as he held her in place.

"Julian," she moaned. "Fuck me."

"I'm working on it," he assured her. "You are very tight and I refuse to cause you any pain."

"Hurt me already," she yelled. "I'm a vampire. I can take it."

He choked out a laugh. "Not possible, beloved. Ah, I'm in." With a sigh, he said, "Pierre, your turn."

Pierre settled his hands on her hips while she seized his cock, lining it up at the slippery entrance of her pussy.

Sinking down, she was dismayed and frustrated when she discovered he was not going to instantly slide right in. "Pierre, put it in."

"Patience, darling. Patience," he grunted as he slowly worked his way in with short inexorable thrusts. "There now. You have all of it."

"Mine," she whispered, reveling in the outrageous sensations as their cocks filled her to capacity. "All mine."

"Oh, yeah. I could stay here for a couple centuries, just like this." Pierre dipped his head and took her nipple back in his mouth.

Julian leaned forward until his chest was pressed against her back. "Time to take care of our woman," he croaked. "Pierre, feed Danamara."

Releasing her nipple with an audible pop, Pierre urged her down until her nose was buried in the curve of his neck. "Feed."

Immediately, her fangs slid through his soft skin as Julian offered his wrist to Pierre. Then Julian carefully withdrew and thrust, settling into a leisurely rhythm that satisfied all of them. Finally, he placed his lips on Danamara's shoulder and nipped her satiny skin with his fangs.

Wallowing in the overwhelming welter of emotions bombarding her, Danamara rode the crests of repeating climaxes, lost in chaos as each built on the one before until she reached an extreme shuddering peak that lured Pierre and Julian in with her. With a final shriek, she crumpled on Pierre's chest and promptly passed out.

She woke in the dark, firmly wedged between Julian and Pierre in the bed. Cautiously, she shifted position and discovered moving was a mistake. A vampire's quick healing notwithstanding, she was stiff and sore. She had very vague memories of a never-ending wave of orgasms. Nibbling at her lower lip, she tried to remember how she'd arrived in the bedroom. That didn't seem to be in her memory bank.

Julian tucked her under his arm, muttering, "Go back to sleep."

Elbowing free of the clinging men, she sat up. "Bathroom," she pleaded.

Mumbling curses, Pierre sat up on the side of the bed and helped her down. Julian rolled over, pushing his dark curls out of his eyes and peered at the clock before grumbling, "It's too early to get up. Hurry back so we can sleep."

"I need a shower," she protested.

"We cleaned you before we went to bed." Pierre yawned widely and stretched. "Believe me, we were very thorough. Come back to bed. We'll go sit in the hot tub when we wake up."

"What am I? Your dolly?"

Sighing deeply, Julian pulled the pillow over his head while Pierre laughed. "No, you're our woman. We will always take care of you, even if you're not awake enough to know about it."

"Well, that's just weird, you know?"

"You passed out. When you didn't come round after a little while, we called the healers at the Castle in Locarno. They assured us you would recover within twenty-four hours, but probably not less than six. Surely you didn't expect us to leave you in that condition until you woke up?" Pierre inquired.

"No, I guess not." Danamara stomped into the bathroom and shut the door. In a little while, she returned to bed and crawled in between Pierre and Julian, snuggling her chilled body down under the warm covers.

"Go to sleep," Julian mumbled.

"You're not much of an evening person, are you?" she teased.

"Go to sleep."

"How long did you guys stay up?" she persisted.

"Long enough." Pierre rolled so she was tucked next to his chest with his arm around her hip, leaving his hand conveniently situated to cup her pussy. "Go to sleep. When we wake up we'll tell you all about what the archivists at Locarno told us. In the meantime, humor us. We're just grumpy men."

She snorted under her breath. "Right."

The next time she clawed up out of the depths of sleep, she was alone in the huge bed. She heard the water running in the shower and from the kitchen, the scents of coffee and sizzling bacon. Her stomach rumbled as she rolled on her belly, contemplating the changes in her life.

Three weeks before she led a boring, lonely existence. Only a nosy, crazy brother. No close friends. No man in her life. And a dull, dead end job. Now suddenly, she was having hot sex with not one, but two sexy men while living in an exquisite suite of rooms. With no regrets at all, she'd yielded to pressure from Pierre and resigned from her job after he pointed out the provisions he'd arranged for her in the *alpheli* contract.

Of course, there were vampires trying to kill her. Hell, even her brother wanted her dead. And she couldn't go out in the sun. And she had to feed on blood from someone, but hey. Everyone had to deal with a few drawbacks in life.

"Aren't you going to get up, sleepyhead?"

She shot Pierre a covert look through her tousled locks and decided that he was definitely a studly vampire. He was light where Julian was dark, but together they were far more than any girl had a right to expect. She turned on her back, sprawling across the bed with her legs spread wide.

Immediately, his focus shifted to the juncture of her thighs. She watched him watching her while he absently dried his hair. Abruptly, he looked at her face and smiled.

"Nice try, Dani, but we have things we need to do tonight. Rise and shine, woman. Gabriel is on his way over."

With a flounce, she rolled from the bed and headed for the bathroom, pausing on the way to briefly caress his cock.

"Witch."

She shot him her finger.

"Thanks for the offer, darling, but we don't have time," he teased.

The door slammed.

Chapter Ten

By the time she was showered and dressed in a set of soft sweats, Julian and Pierre were lounging in the living room with Gabriel, enjoying their steaming mugs of coffee. She stopped in the kitchen to pour her own mug of coffee and with a delighted cry fell on an open box of donuts. Selecting two, she dumped them on a small plate and carried her meal out to the living room. Gabriel smiled at her while she settled herself on the couch next to Julian though an uncomfortable silence fell over the room when she appeared.

“What’s new?” she asked as she inspected her donut before taking a bite.

“An assassination attempt was made on Ming Lee,” Julian growled.

“Is she all right?” Danamara set her plate down on the coffee table. Suddenly, even the enticement of sprinkles was no longer attractive.

Pierre nodded. “Yes. Hugh’s men were prepared. Gabriel’s taskforce is working with them as they’re most interested in the conspiracy of vampire and organized crime.”

“What’s the next step?” Julian asked calmly.

Gabriel put his empty mug on the table. “We apprehended two humans last night. They’re being questioned as we speak. It appears there are bigger things afoot than we suspected. This is a wide-spread conspiracy with fingers in Europe, Africa and South America. The tribunal is in a video meeting with the vampire lords in Locarno. In the meantime, we are charged with de-fanging the local threat.”

“Continue on in our current mode, in other words.” Pierre leaped to his feet to pace back and forth. “What does Hugh say?”

“The same. Guard your *alpheli*. Be aware of the danger.”

“There is more than you know, Gabriel.” Julian steepled his fingers under his chin. “We are an *alpheli* trio.”

“A trio. How is that possible?”

Pierre sat down on the couch on Danamara’s other side of. “After they received Danamara’s contract, the archivists were so intrigued they researched the records. When we called them last night, they were not surprised at all. Though only two trios are mentioned in the histories, they all have the same things in common. Two of the three vampires are in the same direct line. One was an all male trio. The other was a male with two females. Because Danamara is in my line, the *alpheli* gene is undetectable—to me. In our case, Julian is the catalyst that creates the trio.”

“You’re also my *alpheli*?” Danamara’s face lit in wonder. “Truly?”

Julian clasped her hand in his. “Truly. We are a trio, each of us dependent on the others.”

Gabriel scrubbed his face and groaned. “Do you have any idea how much this will up the price on your heads?”

“Pierre and I are aware. We are working on alternate plans and will certainly keep Hugh informed. We’re awaiting the most recent intelligence from Jack.” Fighting back a yawn, Julian patted Danamara’s knee. “I would take it as a kindness, Gabriel, if you would share this new information with Hugh. No doubt the tribunal overlords will be informed by the vampire lords during their conference.”

Gabriel stood and gathered up the empty coffee mugs in his huge hands, carrying them out to the kitchen before shrugging on his dark brown leather coat. “I’ll certainly speak to Hugh about this new development. In the meantime, keep your eyes open.”

Getting to his feet, Pierre followed their guest to the door. “You watch your back, too. When they find out exactly how involved you are in the counter strike, they’ll come after you.”

Merely nodding in agreement, Gabriel slipped through the door, vanishing into the darkness. After locking up, Pierre turned back to his *alphelis*. “Ready?”

Julian heaved a weary sigh. “Ready.”

“For what?” Danamara stood, planted her hands on her hips and faced her men. “Don’t you think it’s about time you told me what the plan is?”

“Nightwinds Castle at Locarno.” Pierre breathed the words so softly she wasn’t sure she actually heard them correctly. “Final sanctuary,” he added in explanation.

“Final sanctuary? What does that mean?”

Julian climbed to his feet and took her hand. "If a vampire reaches a point where his life is in constant danger, he can retire to Nightwinds. It is a refuge, a sanctuary, a neutral ground where all disputes are left outside the gates."

"What happens when someone doesn't honor the rules?" she objected.

"They die." Julian led her into the bedroom, pulling her into his embrace. "I know it seems like we've done nothing but pack, but I promise this will be the last time for a while. A secure suite of rooms is waiting for us at Nightwinds."

Danamara sat on the side of the bed, hunched over in dejection. "Will we ever be able to live somewhere in peace?"

Sitting down on each side of her, the men took her hands. Pierre gently massaged her tense fingers. "I promise you the day will come when we will live a normal life. But until then, safe is better than normal. Julian and I have waited centuries to be together, never dreaming we would be gifted with you. For the moment, survival is most important."

"I know." She squeezed their hands before caressing the thighs pressed against her on each side. "I just needed to whine a little bit." She kissed each of them on the lips, then stood up. "All right, what can I take with me?"

"Whatever you wish. We're flying on Pierre's private jet. I'm sure there will be room for anything you want." Julian retrieved their cases from the hall closet and set them on the bed. "First I suggest you get dressed."

"*Our* plane," Pierre barked. "What we own, we own collectively. Gerard delivered the amendment to the *alpheli* contract before dawn this morning, cursing all the way about having to travel to Locarno twice in one week. So get it right. *Our* plane is an Airbus A320 Prestige."

Julian whistled. "When did you buy that?"

"The last time you turned me down. Actually, I bought two in case you came to your senses and capitulated. I believe you'll enjoy what the designers have done with them." Planting his hands on his hips, Pierre watched his *alphelis* pack methodically. "Thank the gods we are one from now on. I won't have to spend so much money on consolation prizes for myself."

Pitching the handful of colorful panties she carried on top of the neatly folded clothing in her case, Danamara impetuously launched herself into Pierre's arms. "You're wonderful."

Cuddling her close, Pierre looked across the room at Julian. "I've had my hands full in the six years since I took over your assets," he confessed. "You're a difficult man to follow, Julian. Please say you'll step back in your place."

Julian snorted in derision. "You are the most capable man I've ever known. I'll do what I can to *help* you." He slammed down the lid of his suitcase. "But I confess that it leaves me raw to walk away from my students. I found unexpected pleasure in sharing my knowledge with them."

"Didn't Harry say he'd found someone to teach your class?" Pierre demanded gruffly.

Danamara had pushed his robe lapel back so she could nibble at the flat tan nipple she exposed. As she teased, licked and sucked, he started peeling the sweat suit from her body.

She grumbled when he nudged her back so he could pull her sweatshirt over her head. "I wasn't finished."

He lifted her so she knelt on the bed and hurriedly shrugged off his robe. With a gentle hand, he pressed down on her head until her lips brushed his erection. "Breakfast," he whispered. "Suck me while you feed. Take what you need."

More than willing, she eagerly took him in her mouth. The brief taste she'd been allowed the previous evening just whetted her appetite for more. When he thrust forward, she relaxed her throat allowing him to sink until her nose was buried in the soft golden curls at the base of his cock. As he tirelessly fucked her mouth, she allowed her fangs to graze the blood rich flesh, sucking the beaded droplets. The mix of semen and blood was a heady cocktail.

Julian zipped his cases closed. Pausing next to Pierre, he kissed him before flicking him on his smooth shaven cheek. "You smell delicious, lover. Next time Danamara and I will take turns."

Abruptly, Pierre pressed forward until his cock filled her mouth completely and grunted, "Feed."

Her fangs pierced his flesh enough to flood her tongue with the sweet tang of his blood. As she blindly sucked, she felt the soothing touch of Julian's lips against her shoulder before he gently nipped the soft skin. For a brief moment, she wished Julian was fucking her, but the lure of Pierre's blood blurred her thoughts. His fingers twisted in her hair as the salty taste of his semen blended with the fine sweet blood on her tongue and there was nothing in her universe except Pierre.

Julian strolled into the bathroom to pack their toiletries. At Pierre's shout of satisfaction, he looked at his lovers through the open door. With a last slow lick of her lips, Danamara curled up on the bed and promptly fell asleep. "Once you finish there, you're going to need to help her pack."

"Me?" Pierre growled. "Why do I have to help her pack?"

Julian came out of the bathroom with a steaming washcloth and towel in his hands. "Because she is very vulnerable to blood intoxication. Up to now, you've never been around her when she feeds. Her unconsciousness last night was only partially due to our bonding. The rest? That was her intoxication."

"Now you tell me?" Pierre stretched until joints popped before wearily accepting Julian's ministrations as he first gently wiped Danamara's face and then cleaned his lover's cock. "Who ever heard of that level of intoxication? I'm surprised she survived two weeks." Julian returned to the bathroom for another cloth to cleanse the delicate folds between her legs with care.

As he finished up, her eyes fluttered open and she yawned, "Julian?"

"Yes, beloved."

"Did I feed or something?"

"Yes, beloved."

Morosely, she sighed and closed her eyes. "Damn. Was I supposed to be doing something important?"

Pierre stooped to brush his lips across her forehead. "Nothing is more important than making love with us. Nothing. Everything else can be handled without your active participation if necessary."

"Oh yeah?" She struggled to focus on his face. "Pierre?"

"That's me."

His lips twitched and she suspected he was trying not to smile. Her eyes fluttered closed. "Ver' tired."

"Darling Dani. Don't worry about it. Take a little nap," he softly urged her. "I'll take care of everything."

Julian and Pierre silently packed the rest of Danamara's belongings while she slept. After carrying their luggage out to the front door, they went through the rest of the apartment collecting all the odds and ends that had somehow ended up in the out of the way spots. When they were finally fairly certain they had everything, Julian washed the mugs and cleaned the kitchen while Pierre packed the last little items away.

Pierre came into the kitchen, turned a chair around backwards and sat watching Julian wipe down the counters. "Tell me about Dani."

"She's extremely susceptible to blood intoxication. I want the healers at Nightwinds to check her out when we arrive."

"How susceptible?" Pierre asked softly.

"She'll be unconscious now for at least two hours. She likely won't remember much after Gabriel left. She finds it very disturbing, Pierre." Julian spread the towel over the counter and turned to face his *alpheli*. "When I met her, she was just beginning to realize her loss of memory could be masking unacceptable behavior—at least unacceptable to her. Denial was in full force, though she had strange things she couldn't account for. Missing clothing. Lost time. Physical evidence of sex."

"Then what happened?"

"I offered her a taste of my blood the night we came to see you. Just the tiniest sip. She was disoriented and behaved out of character. Once we boarded the subway, she slept until we reached the stop near your house. Then the shock from the cold helped to snap her out of it." His shoulder jerked in a sharp shrug. "I've taken great care to refrain from feeding her unless we are in a protected private secure situation."

Pierre scratched his chin and mulled over the new information. "She slept nine hours before waking up early in the evening. And then another six hours before she finally roused the second time. If she crashes like that every time she feeds, it will be a huge handicap for her."

Nodding, Julian dared to voice a thought that had been circling in his mind since their discovery of Pierre's place in their trio. "I have this idea. What if she is the reason there are two of us? I believe we should ask the archivists if there is any record of a similar issue in the other *alpheli* trios."

"So...we're just here to act as caretakers?"

"I don't know. But it's something to think about."

Pierre frowned as he tapped on the high chair back. "Are we going to wait until she wakes up? I really wanted to be at Nightwinds by morning. I don't like the information Jack dug up on her brother. We don't know enough about him. Either he's a dumb redneck bigot—"

"Or he's far more dangerous than we've imagined and we're underestimating him. Either way, we need to remove her from his sphere of influence. We'll dress her in her sweats, wrap her in a blanket and take her with us. When she wakes, we'll be there." Julian stifled a yawn. "It's the only way to travel. I wish I could sleep through it, too."

Within the hour, they were stowing the luggage in the trunk of the car, reserving only their weapons and warm coats for the back seat. While Julian carried Danamara to the car, Pierre carefully arranged their swords and daggers in the back window deck for easy access. After considering how many times they would need to move Danamara on the way to Nightwinds, they had decided to dress her in her jacket rather than wrap her in a blanket. Once the car was packed, they were off, barreling down the dark windy highway to the airport. Occasional street lights or brightly lit gas stations flashed by as they reached the edge of town. Then, long stretches of thick foreboding woods lined both sides of the road. The lonely miles between town and the airport seemed endless as Julian tried to relax in the back seat. Something dangerous stirred in the wilderness rousing the buried atavistic instincts of his species.

After exchanging thoughtful glances, Pierre slipped Danamara onto the floor and covered her with their coats while Julian retrieved their weapons from the back window deck. Pierre leaned forward to mutter in Keven, their driver's ear. "Be ready."

"Yes, sir. We hear you. Something is definitely wrong. We've already pressed the panic button to notify our home base."

"They're tracking us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent." Pierre slid his sword from the scabbard, dumping the oiled leather sheathe on the floor next to Danamara. "Let us hope it's a false alarm."

"It's not," Julian said flatly. "The foul stench of Nephilim taints the land. They hold their evil in check only on the command of their master."

"The question is then—who is their master?" Pierre whispered.

Something heavy, a creature of the dark, leaped onto the car. "We're about to find out," Julian observed sourly. "Ready?" At a nod from Pierre, Julian braced himself and thrust his sword up through the roof of the car, spearing the creature in the foot.

A terrible roar echoed all around them, thrown back by the thick belt of trees along the roadside. Julian withdrew the sword and thrust upward again, this time a little to the left. With a horrifying shriek, the creature tumbled from the car, falling to the roadway behind them.

Then more creatures boiled up from the sides of the road, leaping at the car, pounding at the windows as Keven grimly pressed down on the gas pedal, steering the car down the center of the road. Gibbering screams and howls drowned out the hum of the car engine as Pierre and

Julian struggled to keep the roof clear while Keven's partner, Brand, rolled his window down far enough to use his pistol on the succession of creatures that landed on the hood.

At a soft moan from Danamara, Julian placed his hand on her shoulder, holding her down on the floor. "Stay still."

"What's that awful noise?" she whimpered. "And that smell? I think I'm going to be sick."

"Not now," Pierre snarled as the back window shattered. He caught the spare pistol Brand tossed him from the front seat, turning it on the creature trying to crawl through the window.

Abruptly, they were free, speeding through the night as the creatures howled, racing in their wake. Brand took the opportunity to eject his used clip and replace it with a full one. From the glove box, he took another spare clip and passed it back to Pierre while Julian carefully sniffed the smeared residue on his sword from the creature.

"Well? Any idea?" Pierre demanded as he stuffed the spare clip in his pocket.

"Viktor."

"You're sure?"

"Oh, yes. His scent is quite distinctive. His arrogance is endless. How like him to lead the attack." Julian rolled down the window and spat into the darkness before rolling it back up. "His taste is a foul evil."

Brand held his cell phone to his ear, shouting out a report over the whistling wind while Pierre kept a sharp eye on the road behind them. Keven drove like all the demons of hell were still after them. Julian crouched over Danamara, doing his best to comfort her at the same time he exerted all his influence to keep her on the floor.

Flashing lights loomed out of the darkness and suddenly they were on the perimeter of the airport with police cars blocking the private entrance. Warily, Keven slowed down as a lone officer appeared at the gate. With a shout of warning, he shifted the car into reverse, backed down the road, spun it in a circle and sped along the grass verge that edged the high fence.

"What the hell?" Brand yelled as he returned fire from the figures jumping from the cop cars.

"Vamp. Rogue vamp," Keven shouted. "I recognized him."

"Fuck." Pierre crouched on the back seat on his knees and cursed. "I don't suppose you have something a little more far reaching than this peashooter?"

"If you lift that back window deck, you'll find a couple rifles in a storage space under there," Keven replied while Brand reported the new developments. The car swayed and dipped

over uneven ground until they reached another locked entrance. Without pausing, he turned toward the gate, pressed the gas pedal to the floor and crashed through.

"Hugh said to go directly to the plane. They're cleared for take-off. We're going with them," Brand added as he pointed off to the right. "There. They're taxiing to the runway. Go. Go."

The car raced across the tarmac, reaching the end of the runway as the jet rolled into place. The door opened and the steward lowered the stairs while Julian and Pierre ran for the plane with Danamara draped between them. Keven and Brand covered their backs as they pounded up the steps, racing into the lounge where they stumbled to a breathless halt.

Allowing Danamara to slide to the floor, Pierre brandished the rifle he still held in his hand as Julian shifted his grip so he held a sword in each hand. Behind them, Keven and Brand were roughly shoved into the lounge while the steward secured the door.

"Welcome, gentlemen. And thank you for the use of your plane."

Julian easily recognized the powerful man sitting across from him in the luxurious cabin. He'd figured prominently in the reports compiled by Jack. Yuri Gregori was both vampire and organized crime.

"I suggest that you take your seats at once," Gregori said calmly. "Takeoff is imminent."

Gregori's men quickly disarmed the little group. After helping Danamara to her feet, Julian led her to the sofa across from Gregori and belted her in the center seat. Then settling in the seat next to her, he asked, "What the hell do you want?"

"Relax. Unwind." Gregori gracefully waved his hand in the air. "We will have plenty of time to discuss my requirements while you are my guests. You've had a trying evening so far. It would be best if you rest until we reach our destination."

Pierre cursed. Slumping down on Danamara's other side he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "What the fuck did you do with my crew?"

"I assure you they are quite safe, though no doubt uncomfortable, in your private hanger. Surely Hugh's men will discover them soon."

"Where are we going?" Pierre growled.

Gregori shrugged. "I see no reason to keep our destination from you. We're going to my home in Redsylph. It's quite beautiful there. Your *alpheli* mate should find it very pleasant while we wait for my associate to arrive. Her brother is most anxious to see her. Family is so important, don't you agree?"

Donal? No! Danamara fumbled her seatbelt open and struggled to her feet, staggering two or three steps before bending over to throw up on Gregori's beautiful Italian leather shoes.

Chapter Eleven

“Stupid bitch. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Gregori grabbed Danamara by her hair, jerking her upright so they were face to face. “I’ll kill you for that.”

Swaying with the movement of the plane, she poked vainly at her coat pockets. “I have a tissue in here somewhere,” she mumbled tearfully. Blindly, she fumbled in the soft folds, searching for the knife Julian had given her the evening before.

Gregori shook her as though she was small yapping dog.

She vomited in his lap at the moment her fingers closed around the smooth switchblade. “Found it,” she announced triumphantly as Gregori yanked her so close she could smell the blood on his lips where he’d grazed them with his fangs.

With a terrible roar, he flashed his fangs as he bent his head to strike, ignoring her puny struggles in his blind fury. Before he could strike, *she* attacked, rage and instinct lending her extra strength. She pressed the hidden button on the knife in her pocket and the blade shot out, taking him square in the heart. Desperately, she twisted the knife as he fought to free himself. Her fledgling hunger roused with the irresistible scent of fresh blood, Danamara head-butted him, breaking his nose before sinking her fangs into the exposed flesh bared by his shirt collar.

Oblivious to the chaos around her, she surrendered to her vampire nature, feeding greedily as Gregori’s heart ceased pumping. By the time their abductors were defeated she sighed and slithered bonelessly to the floor, out cold.

Bursting into the cockpit, Pierre set the edge of his sword against the pilot’s exposed neck. “Turn back,” he commanded coldly. “You better put us on the ground without even one hair harmed or you won’t survive this night.”

While Pierre ensured the pilot's cooperation with his wishes, Julian determined that Danamara had survived her encounter with minimal injuries. Keven fetched blankets from the onboard closets while Julian stripped off Danamara's blood soaked clothing. By the time Julian had finished, Keven returned with several warm wet hand towels.

Brand dragged the bodies of the abductors by their heels to the back storage area and guaranteed their demise by expeditiously taking their heads, while Julian and Keven were tending to Danamara. After carefully wiping the blade, he pocketed the switchblade. When he returned they were crouched on the floor, wrapping her in a snug blanket cocoon. From the angle of the plane, it was clear Pierre had everything under control as they were descending on a course to land. Needing confirmation that it was safe for them to land, Brand called Hugh for instructions—which were short and pithy, consisting mostly of inventive curses.

Suddenly they were speeding across the tarmac toward the hanger and a sea of flashing lights. When the plane rolled to a stop, Hugh was waiting for them with their second plane already on the tarmac. Brand opened the door and lowered the stairs. Hugh and Gabriel pounded up the steps, entering the plane with some trepidation. "Is everyone all right?" Hugh demanded.

"As all right as we can be after this evening," Julian replied dryly from where he knelt next to Danamara. "Can we have a stretcher?"

"What's wrong with her?" Gabriel asked anxiously.

"Severe blood intoxication. She took out Gregori." Julian shook his head. "I have no idea how she was able to hold two thoughts together, let alone come up with a plan that worked. Thanks to her, the others were distracted enough we were able to take them all out. Pierre persuaded the pilots to return us to the airport."

Gabriel summoned officers to take the pilots into custody while Hugh arranged Danamara's move to the other plane. "Your luggage is all aboard. Keven and Brand are going with you by order of the Vampire Lords. They have charged us with guarding Danamara." Hugh stared down at her with a puzzled frown marring his face. "Evidently, there's something very special about your female *alpheli* although no one's willing to share exact information."

As the medics boarded the plane with a stretcher, Pierre offered Julian his hand. "We need to hurry if we are going to arrive at Nightwinds before morning."

The squeal of brakes drew their attention to the tarmac outside the plane. Six black clad men jumped from a black Hummer and proceeded to unload their gear from the back

compartment. Scowling at the display, Hugh confronted their leader just as they lined up with military correctness at the foot of the stairs. "Who the hell are you?"

"Major Volkov, reporting."

"Major *Wolf*?" Hugh's eyebrows shot up. "What possible business do the wolves have with us?"

"We are contracted by the Vampire Lords for the protection of the female *alpheli* Danamara Higgins." Stunned silence fell over the assemblage. "In as much as her safety is dependent on the survival of her mates, we are also contracted for their protection and will accompany and deliver them to the Vampire Lords at Locarno."

In the quiet, the ringer on Hugh's cell phone was particularly strident. He glanced at the ID before answering. After listening for a full five minutes, he muttered an "understood" and disconnected. "The wolf team will take charge of the *alpheli* security effective immediately. Keven and Brand are relieved of their responsibilities."

"Our orders, sir." With a commendable lack of expression, the Major offered a neatly folded sheaf of papers for Hugh's perusal.

"Thank you," Hugh replied dryly. "Miss Higgins is ready for transfer to the plane."

Major Volkov saluted briskly and snapped out orders that his team rushed to carry out. "We will take good care of her and her mates," he assured Hugh while two of his men immediately vanished inside the plane on a mission of their own. The other three carefully supervised Danamara's transfer to the new plane. Ignoring the drama on the field, Pierre and Julian accompanied their *alpheli*, refusing to let her out of their sight. In a remarkably short time, the replacement plane was taxiing from the field, leaving more questions than answers behind them.

On the plane, the wolf medic carefully checked his patient while her mates kept a close eye on him. Finally, he stowed his stethoscope in his bag and sighed. "She's going to be fine, gentlemen."

Pierre and Julian exchanged alarmed glances before Pierre turned to the medic. "How do you know that? And why the stethoscope? We don't have a discernable heartbeat."

The medic sat down in the seat next to Danamara's stretcher. "*She* does. That's one of the reasons the Vampire Lords are so anxious for the healers at Nightwinds to examine her."

"They want to *study* her?" Julian yelled. "Hell, no. She's not some guinea pig."

"No, but possibly she's the answer to the questions your species has about *alphelis*."

Pierre unsnapped his seat belt and jumped to his feet. “What questions? What’s so important that they’re willing to abduct us?”

“Blood intoxication. The possibility of pregnancy. The *alpheli* rarity. And most of all, they want to know why *alpheli* trios even exist. Only three trios have ever been mentioned in all the records at Locarno.” The medic crossed his arms over his chest. “The healers suspect your lady here only partially converted. Maybe she’s a hybrid—if so, there are implications for my race, too. Did you know that one of those trios held a converted wolf? My people and the Vampire Lords want to know exactly how that happened. It’s not supposed to be possible, you know.”

“Fuck.” Pierre flopped back in his chair in shock.

“All vampires want those questions answered,” the medic said quietly.

“That’s why we’re suddenly so important? What does this have to do with the greater conspiracy Gabriel mentioned?” Pierre muttered angrily.

Julian leaned forward, taking Pierre’s hand in his. “This is separate, I think.”

“Not quite.”

They turned to stare up at Major Volkov who’d silently arrived during their conversation with the medic. “No?” Julian queried. “Why do you say that?”

“Power. Never forget that knowledge is power. And your greater conspiracy is essentially a struggle for power. So whoever captures and holds you and your *alphelis* will gain an immense boost politically—even if they don’t actually acquire any answers. Timing is everything.” Volkov sat down in the remaining seat next to Pierre. “Hence our assignment to guard you until further notice.”

“Surely your assignment will be complete when we reach Nightwinds?” Julian demanded, but he didn’t like the expression on Volkov’s face. He was nearly positive he wasn’t going to like the answer, either.

“No. We will be staying with you inside your suite. I know that will limit your...privacy, but we will have to do our best. At least, there is very little that will shock or distract my team.” Major Volkov smiled at Pierre and Julian. “That is why we were chosen.”

The hint of dawn tinged the mountains surrounding them as their plane landed at Locarno. Bitterly cold damp air hinted at the snowstorm forecasted for later in the day as Pierre and Julian wearily walked down the steps and headed for the large windowless van that would take them to Nightwinds. Behind them, their guardians carefully transported Danamara’s

stretcher. When all were safely inside the van, Volkov closed the doors before joining the driver in the front.

The man was a stranger, a human rather than the wolf driver carefully chosen for the mission. Immediately the major tapped out the alarm signal before casually placing his pistol in the driver's crotch. "Whatever your plan was," he said calmly, "it's been changed. Drive straight out the gate."

"They'll kill us." The driver's hands trembled as he placed them on the steering wheel.

"They may try."

"You don't understand."

"I understand more than you think. What are they holding over you?" Pulling his cell phone from his pocket, Volkov punched in a series of numbers and letters with his thumb.

"They have my family."

"Name?" Volkov inquired as he tapped out more numbers and letters.

"Eckstein. Lars Eckstein."

Watching a series of numbers scroll across his screen, the major absently nodded. "All right, Mr. Eckstein, we'll see what we can do for your family. Drive straight out the gate."

So began the harrowing drive up the mountains to Nightwinds accompanied by the undulating echoes of wolves howling in the dark forbidding forests lining the narrow road. The intermittent rattling pop of gunfire punctuated the early dawn light.

His eyes constantly on the move and expecting an attack momentarily, Volkov was ready for any distraction such as the avalanche of debris that shot into the road, blocking off most of the way. Lars jerked the steering wheel to the side, avoiding the worst of the stones and wood strewn on the pavement as the van bumped over the snow covered shoulder.

Cold air streamed in the cab as Volkov rolled down the window, after coolly punching in new lines of code. "Keep moving, Lars. They've located your family." High on the mountain the rat-a-tat-tat of rapid fire echoed back from the rocky peaks.

Riding in the concealment of the sturdy van body, Julian and Pierre crouched on each side of Danamara, fiercely fighting the growing lure of sleep. "You don't have to worry," the young medic assured them. "The body of the van is bullet proof, the doors are time locked unless we override them, and our escort will accompany us into the courtyard at Nightwinds."

"All of that might be true. But none of your team are bonded to Danamara as we are," Julian pointed out. "She isn't more important to them than life."

"You might be surprised," came the cryptic reply as the van jostled from side to side before straightening out in a smoother run.

Julian longed for a dark room, a warm bed to share with Danamara and Pierre, and the peace of sleep. Oh, he knew such peace would be an illusion, but he was willing to accept the pipedream in exchange for a few hours of rest.

The low grind of the engine dropped to a deeper gear as the van growled up a steep incline, slowing perceptibly before it leveled off and picked up speed. Unhindered they sped along the high mountain highway. Julian finally relaxed enough to breathe as he silently squeezed Pierre's hand. He knew they were finally rolling across the Nightwinds Valley under the protection of the Vampire Lords.

Abruptly, the van turned sharply to the right, slowed to a halt and the engine cut off. The man guarding the door intently studied the string of letters and numbers scrolling across his cell phone screen then gave an approving nod. "We're clear and secured."

The wide doors swung open revealing an empty dark space redolent with the scents of engine oil and gasoline. *A garage*, Julian decided as he stepped down from the van. Moving quickly enough to satisfy even the perennially impatient Pierre, the small group headed for the nearby elevator, crowded aboard, and shot down several levels before the elevator abruptly halted. The doors swooshed open on a wide brightly lit corridor where four men waited in respectful anticipation.

One stepped forward immediately and bowed his head as he said, "Welcome to Schloss Nightwinds. We are honored by your presence."

Recognizing the men as *togersi*, the race who had long served the Vampire Lords, Julian replied courteously, "Thank you. We are pleased to be with you."

"If you will come this way, we'll go to your suite at once. I am Jerg, your butler. The others are the staff assigned to your suite." After a swift covert assessment of the weary group still waiting in the elevator, Jerg led the way down the hall at a brisk trot. Within moments, they entered a large reception room with a snapping, crackling fire in the huge open hearth.

Jerg continued straight into the bedroom. "The healers have been apprised of your arrival. If you are willing, Willow the senior healer would like to do a quick assessment of Miss Higgins."

"No," Pierre snapped out.

"Five minutes," Julian amended. "We are exhausted and it is well past dawn."

"As you wish," Jerg replied. "In the meantime, we will deal with the rest of your retinue."

Pierre immediately started stripping off his clothing while Julian shooed the medic from the room before unwinding Danamara from her blanket cocoon. Naked at last, Pierre breathed deeply before joining Julian as they finished removing her coverings. "Shower?" Pierre suggested as he noted the faint bloody smears from Gregori.

"After the healer has been and gone." In an uncharacteristic move, Julian shifted uncertainly before shoving his hands in his coat pockets.

"Get undressed, Julian. I'm sure the healer has seen a naked man or two in her time." Pierre placed his hands on Julian's shoulders, tugging at the heavy coat. "Come on. You're so tired you're stupid with it."

Yielding to Pierre's urging, Julian shrugged out of his coat. Tossing it aside, Pierre nudged his lover until he turned to face him. After brushing his lips over Julian's, Pierre swiftly unbuttoned the shirt Julian wore, his face twisting in distaste at the blood smeared on the pale blue fabric. "I wish Gregori was still around so I could whip his sorry ass for hitting Danamara." He stripped the shirt off, throwing it in the corner with suppressed violence before reaching for the belt and zipper on Julian's trousers. Seconds later, he was crouched at Julian's feet removing his shoes and socks before slipping the trousers off.

When Julian shakily grasped his lover's shoulder, Pierre leaped to his feet tugging him into his embrace. "You should have told that damn healer to wait until later."

"That damn healer wouldn't have made the request if it wasn't important," a feminine voice tartly informed them.

Pierre turned his head to glare at the woman. "Well make it snappy. We're tired, filthy, and worried about Dani."

Moving to the side of the bed with unhurried grace, the healer assured him, "My examination will only take a moment. Why don't you two get the bath prepared while I make sure your woman is all right? By the time you are ready, I'll be finished."

They watched as she gently placed her hands on Danamara's chest. Her dark shoulder length hair fell forward in a silky curtain shielding her face as her dumpy jeans and sweatshirt clad body bent over her patient. "Ahhh. Yes, she's going to be fine."

The healer straightened and turned to face them. "What? You're still here? I'm finished and the bath isn't ready yet."

Abruptly, Pierre seemed to snap to his senses. He nudged Julian toward bathroom. "We're going, we're going." In the bathroom, as he closed the toilet lid and encouraged Julian to sit down

while he started the water thundering into the huge tub, he felt a sharp prick on his fingertip. "Keep an eye on the water while I go back for Dani," he directed, suddenly suspicious at the healer's eagerness to get rid of them. When he walked back out into the bedroom, she was collecting a pipette of blood from Danamara's finger. "What are you doing?"

"Collecting a blood sample," she said calmly. "We suspect your *alpheli* may carry shifter blood. She is the first *alpheli* we've had access to. We will also want samples of blood from you and Julian."

"Get away from her." Pierre stalked over to the bed and elbowed the healer aside as he slid his arms beneath Danamara, lifting her to rest against his chest. "What will this ultimately tell you? Will it make her any less our *alpheli*? Will it make any material differences for all the other vampires out there?"

"We don't know," Willow admitted. "How can we know until we find out how she's different from the other vampires? Would you deny us this opportunity?"

"I would certainly deny you the right to treat her as though she's a lab rat. I banish you and all other healers from this suite until you are specifically asked to come here." Pierre turned his back on her. "Get out. Jerg, escort the healer out. And don't admit any others without our express permission."

He went into the bathroom, kicking the door shut behind him with his foot. His appearance with Danamara snapped Julian from his foggy depression. He stood up at once, holding on to the sink as he moved to the side of the tub and bent to test the water before turning it off.

"Can you get in the tub on your own or do you need help?" Pierre asked worriedly.

"I can do it."

"All right. You get in first. Then I'll follow with Danamara. Aren't we a sorry bunch? A two-bit fledgling wouldn't have any trouble with us now," Pierre muttered as he watched Julian carefully, ready to call for assistance if necessary.

"A two-bit fledgling would be out cold already because the sun's up." Gritting his teeth, Julian sat on the low bench that ran the circumference of the deep tub. "Why the hell do I hurt everywhere?"

"I think we're feeling some of Danamara's pain," Pierre replied softly as he settled next to Julian. "Here, take her legs. Maybe as the heat eases some of her muscles and joints, it will help us too."

"Why do you think that?" Julian inquired as he tenderly stretched Danamara's legs across his thighs.

"Because I felt the needle prick when the healer took her blood."

"Fuck. Is that what that jab was? Did you throw her out?"

"Yeah, I did. I also instructed Jerg to keep them out. All of them." Cuddling Danamara's head on his shoulder, Pierre slid down so they were mostly underwater. "Prop your feet up on the bench, Julian. We're going to soak a few minutes. And then we're going to dry off and fall into bed."

"Just tell me how you're still functioning," Julian mumbled.

"Major Volkov offered me a quick feed while you were watching Danamara."

"Wolf blood? It must be as potent as the stories say."

"It is. He wanted to make sure at least one of us was able to make it past dawn. But time's about to run out for me, too." Pierre lightly brushed his fingers over Danamara's skin, making sure the blood smears were rinsed away. "Okay. Time for us to go to bed before we fall asleep where we are and drown. That would certainly save our enemies the effort."

Unsuccessfully stifling a chuckle, Julian helped shift Danamara's legs back to Pierre's lap before he climbed from the tub and retrieved the bath sheets. Shaking one out, he held it ready to wrap around Danamara as Pierre lifted her from the tub. "Wrap a towel around yourself and sit back down," Pierre directed. "You can hold Dani while I dry off. Then once I have her settled I'll come back to help you."

Shaking his head, Julian observed, "We are just pitiful. Thank goodness no one is in here to see just how pitiful we are. I feel like I'm drunk."

"Well remember what I said. We're feeling what Danamara is feeling. Now we know. If we want to feel drunk all we have to do is let her kill another vampire."

"She's had blood intoxication before. I never felt like this," Julian protested.

"Yeah. But she never killed a vampire before. And we weren't this tired before, either."

"Damn vampire."

Pierre finished drying himself and Danamara before taking her from Julian. "I'll be right back. Just wait a minute."

"Yeah, yeah. I heard you. I feel like a wimp," Julian said morosely.

"Well, you might feel like a wimp, but try to remember that you're *my* wimp. And I want you in one piece." He carried Danamara to the bed, depositing her in the middle, and went back

for Julian. Together they staggered to the wide bed and crawled in, cuddling up to their sleeping *alpheli*, one on each side. Julian was dead to the world before Pierre had the covers straightened out. With a soft sigh, he turned out the dim light next to the bed and slid into sleep.

Chapter Twelve

“What the fuck happened?” Donal demanded coldly. “I furnished all the information you needed. Yet, I’m informed my sister and her two lovers arrived safely at the sanctuary at Locarno.”

The man standing in front of the desk bowed his head. “According to our reports, your sister attacked Gregori, drained him, and in the ensuing confusion, the others were able to retake control of the plane.” His hands slowly curled into fists. “When they moved to the new plane, our men were prevented from joining them. A security team sent by the vampire lords replaced the entire staff, including the pilots. We were lucky to retrieve the knife, though Brand had no opportunity to use it.”

“Repeatedly, I’ve provided information and assistance, not to mention payment for the so-called best assassins. My sister, a mere fledgling, still lives. The assassins are all dead. What does this suggest to you?”

“Uh...we need better assassins?” his visitor ventured.

“Get out.”

The soft command was so full of menace the visitor struggled to control his bladder. “Yes, sir,” he whispered, backing away as quickly as he could. Suddenly, he turned and bolted for the door, stumbling in his desperate haste. His brain didn’t have time to process the faint cough of the silenced weapon before the slug cut his spinal cord at the base of his neck.

Donal pressed the button on the desk next to his knee. When the bookcase across the room silently opened, two men walked through the opening. Donal indicated the visitor’s body.

“Clean up the mess. And make the arrangements for our flight to Locarno. We leave immediately. I will take care of my sister and her lovers myself. Alert the cartel units. We rip the blood-sucking bastards to shreds at dawn.”

While the men removed the dead man's body, Donal scanned the reports pouring in from the cartels spread around the globe. There were disturbing persistent speculations of various other paranormal species joining with the vampires. Even more disquieting was the rumor that rogue vampires were turning on their cartel colleagues, cutting them down without warning. Absently, he drummed his fingers on the desk as he considered the new reports.

Angrily, he pounded the desk as he realized the danger his sister posed to his plans. If that fucker Rick was still alive, he would have taken his head just because of his stupidity in turning Danamara. Without her bumbling interference, Donal was confident he could have dealt with Julian. After all, the tribunal overlords had proven ridiculously easy to take out. It was months before anyone even missed them.

And then, Rick turned Danamara and left her to die. *That was the beginning*, Donal raged. *That was when things started falling apart*. Well, he wasn't going to lose everything just because his sister was a two-bit whore who would spread her legs for anyone who came along.

He shut down his computer and locked his desk. Tomorrow at dawn, the world would see a new age—an age with no bloodsuckers.

* * * *

Looking down from his apartment window on the dark deserted street, Gabriel contemplated the chaotic events of the night as he wondered at the strange turn his life had taken. Less than a month ago, he'd never met a vampire or werewolf or any of the other less savory things that went bump in the night.

Now, *he* was one of them. Worse yet, he was involved in a war with minimal preparation and training, not to mention the absolute absence of political savvy he needed to tell the good guys from the bad. His big hands curled into fists as he thought of the newest bewildered and frightened female fledglings he'd interviewed with Charlie. Fortunately, each had been adopted by caring mentors, but they had major adjustments ahead of them.

After closing the blinds, Gabriel switched on the dim light he left on during the day. When Julian's building burned down, Pierre had offered him a safe haven, pointing out the danger he was in because of his connection to Julian. Reluctantly, Gabriel had accepted the realities of his new life. Maintaining his old apartment for appearances, he packed up the few belongings he treasured and moved to the safe haven, a suite of rooms located deep underground.

Dawn would arrive soon. Gabriel went out, carefully locking the door behind him and headed for his new abode, curiously relieved to be safely buried away from the possibilities of fire

and sunlight during the day. Until he'd taken possession of his new suite, he truly hadn't acknowledged the uneasiness he felt in his old apartment.

Feeling like a coward pissed him off, but there were many new dangers connected to his life now. He took time to be grateful he had no hostages to fortune other than Julian and his *alphelis*. And he was very thankful they were finally safely at Nightwinds, guarded by the wolves. He ran softly down the stairs and out the lobby door to the vampire waiting to take him home. Hugh had assigned him his own bodyguard over his irritated objections, but Mike and Gabriel had reached an understanding without too much difficulty. At least Mike was willing to trust Gabriel's instincts when it came to things that affected his life as a cop.

The assault came at the last possible moment as he reached the shelter of the car. A hail of bullets peppered him from the shadowed alley. Hazily, he heard the order to "drop" and allowed his body to fall to the pavement. A *whoosh*, followed by an explosion and flames was the last thing he remembered.

When he woke, Mike was sitting next to his bed reading a thick paperback. His pale brown hair stood up in unruly spikes as though he'd spent considerable time combing it with his fingers. Gabriel peered into the shadowy corners, trying to remember where he was. Finally, he turned his head to meet Mike's rueful gaze and memories rushed through his mind.

"I hope you didn't start that book after we were attacked," he ventured rustily, noting Mike's finger holding his place more than halfway through the novel. "I would hate to think I've been here that long."

"Actually, this is the third book I've read since you decided you were bullet proof. Fortunately, they were terrible shots, so they mostly hit parts that weren't vital. You have a new part in your hair where a slug skimmed you but it should be gone before long. The doc removed twenty-seven slugs so he said to tell you that you're the new winner. The old record was nineteen."

"Swell," Gabriel said dryly. "How long have I been here?"

"A week. Your boss sent a message that you should quit milking your injuries and get back to work catching the bad guys." Mike's smile was shaky but game. "Hugh said to tell you he's assigned two more body guards to keep an eye on you since I obviously can't manage on my own." He stuck a sliver of paper in place in the book and set it on the night table.

"Did he give you a hard time?" Gabriel shifted uncomfortably and frowned. "It was a well planned ambush."

“Yeah, but Hugh was pissed that I let you go inside alone.”

“If you hadn’t, then we wouldn’t have had a chance. At least this way, you were there to offer a counter-attack,” Gabriel protested.

“Uh-huh. That’s the only reason Hugh didn’t ship me off to Outer Mongolia. In the meantime, once you’re finished healing, which I figure ought to be in a couple more days, the Vampire Lords at Locarno would like to see you.”

“Translated, that gobbledygook means it’s a command appearance. That ought to really make my boss happy.” Gabriel struggled to sit up, merely grunting a grudging acceptance as Mike leaped to his feet to help lever Gabriel to the side of the bed. Sitting there with his legs dangling over the side, he was appalled at his terrible weakness. “Fuck. I’m not sure I can even make it to the bathroom.”

“That would be why I’m here,” Mike pointed out. “It’s my job to keep you from denting your face.” He stopped to flash a quick glance at Gabriel’s expression. “Although, I’m not sure how anyone would know, what with that beaky hatchet nose and those sharp cheek bones. Are you sure someone hasn’t had a whack at you already?”

“Cute. Very cute. Wait until I’m back on my feet.”

“I’m scared. Really scared.” Mike plucked Gabriel from the bed and carried him into the bathroom without any visible stress. Setting him on his feet in front of the toilet, he asked, “Do you need me to stay with you?”

Fighting all the instincts that urged him to deny his weakness, Gabriel irritably nodded. “Just hold me up until I get this frigging half-assed gown out of the way. Why the fuck they insist on putting the damn thing on you when you’re unconscious, I’ll never know.”

With his teeth, Mike plucked the narrow tie at Gabriel’s neck, freeing the knot. “Take the damn thing off. I certainly won’t mind. It’s not the first time I’ve seen your dick.”

Fumbling with the gown, Gabriel stripped it off with shaking hands, dropping it to the floor. “What are you talking about?” he demanded querulously as he slumped down on the toilet seat.

Mike turned his back and shrugged. “Who do you think took care of your more personal needs all week? They’re short-handed here with all the new fledglings.”

“You touched my dick?”

“Yeah. And I liked it. So whatcha gonna do about it, Gabe?”

A heavy silence fell over the tiny room. Then Gabriel said, "I think I'll demand equal time."

Mike spun around and crouched in front of him, staring into Gabriel's eyes for an endless moment before blurting, "Son of a bitch. You play your cards close to your chest. When were you going to tell me?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I'm a cop, Mike. I have to be careful. And I thought I had lots of time. It didn't occur to me that I might not get the chance."

"Idiot. I nearly lost you. Vampire hearts are just like human hearts. They break, too."

In the reception room at Nightwinds, Major Volkov cocked his head to one side as he caught the infinitesimal click of the bedroom lamp. His charges were tougher than he'd anticipated. Even discounting his blood offering, the men had functioned much better than he had any reason to count on. After a week at Nightwinds, the healers still didn't have the answers they sought since Pierre and Julian had sternly limited their visits after Willow took Danamara's blood without permission but Volkov had some ideas of his own after observing her for the week.

For the last three nights, Danamara had divided her time between quietly embroidering and learning sword play and unarmed combat from her two incredibly stern taskmasters, Julian and Pierre. Every night after they wore her butt out, chasing her around the open space they'd cleared in the reception room, she was more than happy to curl up on a couch and work on an *Alpheli* Jointure piece with all their names and the date they discovered they were an Alpheli triad. So far, she'd completed the names and date in the center and started on an elaborate Celtic knotted border.

While she was busy with her needlework, Julian challenged Arne, their valet, to a game of backgammon. Both were avid cut-throat players, evenly matched. After playing the last three nights, they had each won three matches.

Game playing was too passive for Pierre. He cranked up the music and performed sword drills to Sousa marches. Once Julian and Arne finished their games, Julian joined Pierre challenging him to the most active sword drill he could devise. Then they decided Danamara had been sitting too long so they dragged her from the couch, placed her sword in her hand and wagered that she couldn't keep up with them.

In that, they were fair and far off. She danced as though she'd held a sword since she was three years old. Stunned at her sudden expertise they drilled her mercilessly until she pinned them both to the floor in a flurry of dazzling moves that left them gasping.

"Fuck. You've been holding out on us," Pierre accused.

"No." Jerg shook his head, staring down at the men in reproof. "It's the *alpheli* gift."

Stiffly clambering to his feet, Julian asked, "What the hell is the *alpheli* gift?"

Jerg went to the bar and poured them each a drink. Offering them the glasses, he smiled as he explained, "The *alpheli* gift is the vampires' most closely held secret. As far as the record keepers know, it is the only paranormal gift the vampires hold."

Pierre tossed back his drink. "And?"

"Whatever skills the oldest vampire has are passed on to the youngest *alpheli* each time they feed from you—a little bit each time." Jerg chuckled and added, "As most of the individuals in this room can attest, you feed your *alpheli* at least twice a day." He shrugged. "Since there are two of you to do so, she should receive the skill sets from both of you."

Volkov slapped his thigh and burst out laughing. "Hah. No wonder she pinned you."

Danamara calmly wiped down her sword and slid it in the leather sheathe. "I think I'll go soak in the hot tub." When Julian and Pierre opted to join her, no one was surprised. Even if they weren't under a form of house arrest for their own protection, their feelings for each other were clearly obvious.

When Volkov heard their lamp click off, he held a quick meeting with his men. The vampires and their guardians had all settled into a comfortable schedule but Volkov didn't want them to get too complacent. "Michel, this morning you'll take first watch in the bedroom. Arne, you'll take second watch, and Bertov, the third."

"Why are we still here?" Filippo inquired, mildly puzzled as he surveyed their surroundings. "Hell, these people are surrounded. We're underground. There are no windows. What's going to come in here?"

"They're vulnerable to almost anything that isn't a vampire," Volkov pointed out. "They're asleep. Everything else out there is awake. In addition to that, we already know there are rogue vampires who are willing to kill them if they are unsuccessful at abducting them."

"So who did they piss off?" Will asked.

"No one in particular. They just exist." Volkov shrugged his shoulders. "In effect, their very existence is disturbing the world around them. There are people who kill, not for any cause

or intelligent reason, but simply because they can't deal with anything they don't understand. In the case of our friends in the other room, they are a deeply disturbing anomaly in their world."

The young medic nodded. "And ours. Until they've been categorized and the mysteries solved, they'll continue to threaten the status quo." He stretched out on the rug in front of the fire. "I'll say one thing for them. Those men are dedicated to that woman. I don't think I've ever met anyone so determined to protect their mate."

"It's not one sided, Will. While suffering from blood intoxication, she still maintained enough determination to kill and drain an ancient vampire to protect *them*. That's quite a feat for a fledgling." Volkov chuckled softly as a new thought struck him. "They do say there's no wrath like the wrath of a woman protecting her loved ones. I guess Gregori forgot that."

"What's our place in all this?" Arne demanded impatiently. "I get that this is a job, but why us?"

"The lady may have a wolf or two somewhere in her background. If so, then that would have serious implications for us. The traditional wisdom assured us that wolves could not be turned into vampires. But at least one *alpheli* was a turned wolf in the past. If in fact, this female *alpheli* also carries wolf blood, then those beliefs we've always taken comfort in are false. And finding the triggers that allow such a conversion are incredibly important. The healers suspect that all *alphelis* have some wolf blood in their veins. If that's true, it could set off a frenzy of rogue vampires attacking our females in search of *alphelis*."

"Oh, hell no," Fillipo blurted out as he jumped to his feet. "I have five sisters. No way in hell am I going to let some vamp attack them on the chance that he'll find his *alpheli*."

"The Vampire Lords have already warned the established wolf clans. But there are many lost wolves out there completely unaware of their heritage and the danger they're in. Even if the rogues didn't attack females protected by their clans, consider how many vulnerable women are walking around outside of those protections."

"That's why we're here. To protect our interest in this poor woman who was made a vampire against her will." Will sat up and looked around the suite. "Isn't it almost time for breakfast?"

"I think I heard one of the *togersi* mention they were going to fetch something from the main kitchen." Bertov strolled over to the door and cautiously peeked out into the corridor. "I believe they're about to make good on the offer," he informed them cheerfully. "A bunch of them at the other end of the hall are coming this way."

"That's not right." Volkov leaped up, jerking his weapon free. "Bar the doors. Jerg!" Volkov howled the butler's name as Bertov slammed the bars down across the door.

Almost instantly, Jerg appeared in the dining room door with a snowy white towel draped over his arm. "Breakfast is served," he announced reproachfully. "No need to shout."

"We're under assault. Are there cameras in the hallway?" Heavy thumps on the barred door emphasized his demand.

Immediately, Jerg nodded and rushed to the bookcase next to the hearth. "Come with me," he commanded as he pressed a button on the second shelf. The bookcase swung open, revealing a room lined with monitors.

"Will. Prepare our charges for transport." Volkov shot a quick glance at the banks of screens, noting the ones that showed empty corridors. "Jerg, I assume there is an escape tunnel built in?"

"Of course. And every set of doors in the suite is designed with bars to secure them against an internal assault." He gestured at the monitors where several revealed groups of armed men breaking down doors in the halls. "Have you seen everything you need?"

"Yeah. Shut them down." Volkov raced into the bedroom where Will and the other *togersi* were swiftly bundling the alpheli trio in snug silk sleeping cocoons before placing them on stretchers. Volkov located Julian and Pierre's swords and placed them on their chests before zipping the cocoons shut. Will found Danamara's graceful leaf-shaped sword on the dresser top. Hastily, he plucked it up and set it between Danamara's breasts before closing her cocoon. "That's good," Volkov muttered. "She's already demonstrated exactly what she can do with it."

Bertov raced into the bedroom with the last of the wolf team's packs, dumping them on the floor before he shut the door and punched the button that dropped the heavy bars in place. Team members shouldered on packs and checked weapons as they waited for Volkov's commands.

With an approving glance, Volkov noted every *togersi* was armed and ready to defend their charges. "Excellent. Jerg, you and your men lead the way with Will and Michel. The rest of us will guard the retreat."

Immediately, Jerg and Kyrt, the cook, lifted the stretcher bearing Julian and headed into the bathroom. Will and Michel followed them bearing Danamara and finally, the two remaining *togersi*, Maxin and Hadro carried Pierre. From their coordinated moves, Volkov had a notion that the four men's duties didn't normally entail cooking and cleaning.

The retreat went smoothly. Once they were all clear of the suite, Jerg halted the group for a brief consultation with Volkov. “The possibility of a retreat was anticipated,” he acknowledged. “The vampire lords did not wish to know details as *anyone* can be induced to talk—even a vampire. From this moment on, each step will be decided on the spot. You have three broad options. One will lead us deeper into the mountain. One will eventually end back at the garage where you initially entered Nightwinds. If we take the third, we will exit high on the mountain in the *togersi* stronghold.”

“The last one,” Volkov decided tersely.

“All right.” Jerg stretched out his hand to press on one of the bricks that lined the spotless tunnel. A wide section of the wall opened, revealing a new tunnel. “When the last of us are inside, press the black button on the wall. Once the door is closed, press the red button. That will bar and lock the mechanism in place.”

“Good enough. Lead on.”

Their group traveled through the tunnel for more than fifteen minutes before they reached a junction of three tunnels. Again Jerg paused and offered choices. “The right hand tunnel will lead to an exit on the lower slopes not too far from the airport. But I suggest that would not be very healthy for our charges.”

“No, you’re correct. What other options do we have?” Volkov demanded.

“If we go straight ahead, we’ll exit in the chapel at the *togersi* village. We would be safe there for the moment, but I suggest the left hand tunnel.”

“Why?”

“Because it will lead us to a vault where we can rest and obtain more appropriate weapons. My team is not armed heavily enough to fight off Nephilim and humans. For that matter, we don’t actually know for sure what other creatures have been enlisted in this battle.”

Volkov blinked at Jerg’s pointblank admission of his true status before he nodded his understanding. “The left hand tunnel, it is.”

“Very well.” Jerg flicked a finger towards the panel of buttons on the wall. “Lock up behind us. Every barrier we provide will slow them down until our *alpheli* trio is awake. As we’ve seen, they are formidable warriors.”

“Even the fledgling is not to be discounted,” Volkov reminded wryly. “She defeated Gregori Kozlov in defense of her mates—and then drained him dry.”

“Indeed. Clearly we must do what we can for them.” Jerg veered off to the left, leading them along another endless corridor lined with bricks.

Idly speculating about the number of bricks needed to line the maze of tunnels, not to mention the endless hours to complete the work, Volkov brought up the rear of their little party. Irritated with his failure to take the threat seriously, he contemplated the limited options left if they were to have a chance of survival. First of all, they needed to hold off the assault until the vampires were awake. According to his calculations, that meant keeping the assassins off their backs for another five hours, at least.

Diversions. They needed diversions to slow down their pursuers.

Chapter Thirteen

The plane tilted as it winged between the towering peaks surrounding Schloss Nightwinds. Gabriel shifted uncomfortably, wishing the flight was over already. Mike took Gabriel's hand in his, squeezing lightly. The reassurance soothed Gabriel's nerves, though he was still uneasy about such a public gesture. When they arrived at the airport together, Hugh had merely lifted an eyebrow and smiled. The other guardians on the flight had evinced no interest whatsoever in his relationship with Mike. Slowly, the realization was dawning that his life as a vampire offered an unreserved acceptance of his sexual preferences, an acceptance he'd never dreamed would be his. In the vampire society, he was free to be whomever he wished.

At midnight, the plane landed on a field of shadows. Instantly, the vampires on the plane seemed to hum with awareness that ramped up the moment Hugh's cell rang.

"Hugh Chastain." In the breathless silence, the vampires watched his face as he listened with a stone cold face. "Understood." He stowed his cell in his pocket and took a deep audible breath.

"Nightwinds is under siege. The security has been breached. Many of our brothers are dead. The vampire lords have escaped. The *alphelis* still live, though their position is not known. The enemy surrounds us. It is possible we could escape, but not likely." He took the time to meet the eyes of each of his companions. "I will ask no man or woman to go to a certain death. You must make your own peace with your decisions."

Gabe unsnapped his seatbelt and stood in the narrow aisle between the seats. "What are our options?"

"Minimal. We can stay on the plane and attempt a flight to another airport. We can split up, some remaining on the plane, some taking their chances with the enemy around us. Or we can all leave the plane, hoping that some survive to go to the aid of our *alphelis*."

Mike stood next to Gabriel and took his hand. "We will go. If nothing else, we will provide a diversion, drawing some of the enemy away from the *alphelis*."

"Mike," Gabriel protested.

"No. If we die, we die together."

"I don't think I like that scenario. I would rather have the one where we live together." A scatter of smiles spread through the vampires. "Whatever we do, it should be coordinated."

Slipping his hands in his pockets, Hugh nodded agreement. "How many want to stay?" With no show of hands, he shrugged. "Then we go. The question remains...how to survive long enough to reach our target? Time is running out. Who has tactical experience?"

Three men raised their hands, but two quickly deferred to the third, a long time veteran of several wars beginning with the Native American conflicts in the Old West. If anyone could put together a plan that would give them an edge, Mack Brennan likely was the man. And as it turned out, Mack was one of the few guardians present who had been to Nightwinds several times in recent years. At his suggestion, the pilots were enlisted in the plan.

Swiftly dividing his "troops" in three fairly even groups, Mack assigned each group the supervision of one of the volunteer tacticians. Then he outlined the plan for each group, making sure everyone understood the respective responsibilities of their own group. Checking his watch, he declared, "Time to go. If we wait any longer, we won't have time to run our play before sunrise. Grab your weapon of choice and get ready. Hugh, you're the last one off the plane. The pilots will be waiting for your signal."

In the bowels of Nightwinds, in the council chamber of the vampire lords, Donal fought to control his rage as he stared down at the bodies of the three vampire lords at his feet. Three out of fifteen. Three who volunteered to sacrifice their lives so that twelve might escape. The reports were filtering in from his men. The castle was empty.

The *alpheli* and their attendants were gone. The *togersi* who served in the castle had vanished. The empty echoes from the deserted halls and apartments provided mute testimony that all had fled.

There were disturbing indications of failed attacks and even outright defeats in the intermittent communications from the outside. Confusion reigned in the field with conflicting accounts of previously unknown paranormal races rising up in defense of the vampires. On the airfield outside town, silent wraiths in the woods had slaughtered his men in the dark from

behind their lines as the vampires attacked from the front. With nightfall, the vampires had arisen and joined their defenders.

The bitter taste of defeat was as ashes on his tongue. Determination coalesced as he accepted the scope of his failure. He had his escape plans in place, but there was one final task he faced before he implemented his plans. Danamara and her lovers *would* die at his hand before he left Locarno.

Donal studied the enormous map on the wall of the council room. Where, where would Danamara go? His eyes lit on the *togersi* village near the summit. There. *Callenheim*. With grim concentration, he traced the route, memorizing the route markers. He recalled seeing snowmobiles in the garage when they entered. If he used one until he reached the valley where the village was located, he could make the rest of the way on foot. Once he pinpointed Danamara's location, he was pretty sure he could kill her. Even a vampire would have trouble surviving an explosion.

In the underground safe haven, while Volkov and Jerg talked strategy with the rest of the group, Will and Maxin searched for the weapons and supplies the teams needed. When they discovered the cache of uniforms, Will seized them with a soft, "Ah-hah."

Sending him a dubious glance, Maxin asked, "Why do we need uniforms?"

"We didn't bring any clothes for the vampires. What are they supposed to do? Fight in their altotogethers? Aside from the fact that it's distracting, where do you stow your extra ammo?"

With a slight smile, Maxin pointed out, "You have to admit they would also be distracting for the opposition—especially, the woman."

"I'm pretty sure Pierre and Julian wouldn't go for that at all. They're very possessive and protective." Will selected a shirt and held it up to judge it for size. "This might be small enough for Danamara. Now to find some pants, though what the hell we're going to do for shoes, I can't imagine. From what I've heard, Danamara is going to start thinking she'll never own anything again. So far, she's pretty much lost everything."

"Why?" Maxin asked absently as he stalked over to the storage lockers lining the wall and opened them one after the other.

"She's been on the run since she was changed. Someone sure wants her dead." Will joined Maxin, standing with his hands on his hips as he surveyed the odd contents. "Who on earth is going to need a horn?" he demanded.

“You might be surprised. In the correct hands, that horn can be heard twenty miles away because of the echo. In the last century it was used as the call to arms.” Maxin picked it up and examined it closely. “I bet it will still work.” Setting it with the pile of things they’d accumulated, he moved to the next locker. “Hiking boots.”

Will peered over Maxin’s shoulder. “Any small ones?”

“How small?”

“Heck if I know. Hang on a sec. I’ll go measure her foot.” Will went over to the stretchers and unzipped the cocoon on the middle one at the bottom, revealing Danamara’s bare feet. He turned away, searching his pockets for something to measure her foot. His head whipped up at the sound of ripping silk and he found himself confronting the glittering tip of a sharp sword.

“What the hell are you doing?” From his expression, Pierre was not a happy vampire.

“Measuring her feet. I’m trying to find a pair of shoes for her. We had to leave the suite in a hurry,” Will explained with iron calm.

“Why?”

“Nightwinds is under attack. The vampire lords have escaped. We’re working on our own exit strategy.” Volkov had joined them at the first indication that Pierre was awake.

Shoving the remnants of the sleeping bag to the side, Pierre leaped to his feet. “Did you happen to locate any clothing besides shoes?”

Maxin offered him a folded pair of pants and a shirt. “Try these on for size.”

While Pierre was jerking on the pants, Julian inhaled sharply and then his eyes blinked open. His gaze roamed around the room before settling on Pierre. “What is going on? Why are we here?”

“They had to move us while we were asleep,” Pierre explained as he tucked his shirt in his pants before zipping them up. “It seems that Nightwinds isn’t quite the refuge we thought it would be.”

Will nodded toward the open storage locker. “Pick a pair of shoes.”

Unzipping his cocoon, Julian spread it open, grabbed his sword and sat up, yawning as he took in the huge room. “I cannot tell you how irritating it is to wake up someplace other than where you went to sleep. In this case, though, I appreciate the change of venue.” Climbing to his feet, he accepted his own pile of clothing from Maxin. “Thanks. Did you find something for Danamara to wear? She’ll be awake shortly.”

Maxin tossed a shirt and pants on Julian's stretcher. "We're still looking for shoes, but we've located other gear for you and Pierre."

"What's the plan?" Julian asked Volkov as he dressed.

Volkov shrugged. "Partly, we're winging it. Our general plan is to end up at the *togersi* compound. But that's subject to change. Jerg suggested our stop here so we could rest and resupply."

Pierre plucked a pair of boots from the locker and checked the size. "These should do for me. So, do we know if help is on the way? Or are we on our own?"

"I suspect we're pretty much on our own, other than the *togersi*. If the rogues discover they are supporting us, the villagers will have their hands full defending themselves. The sooner we are on our way, the better I'll feel. We've been here too long." Volkov shook his head. "We lost contact with the others in the castle almost immediately. And there's been no word from the outside."

"It's always good to know where you stand." Julian tied his boot strings and straightened up. "What do we have to eat or drink?"

"Black coffee." Will trotted over to the kitchenette to fill two mugs.

Maxin and Jerg finished surveying the storage lockers, finally concluding there was little else that was going to be of service to them. Their hope for winter clothing for the *alphelis* was dashed. Finally, Maxin pulled some extra shirts from the uniform locker and tossed them on Julian's stretcher. "That's the best we can do. Double up on the shirts."

"We'll manage," Pierre assured him. When Danamara moaned and stirred in her sleep, he went at once to her stretcher and unzipped her coverlet.

She stared up at him in bewilderment. "Where are we?"

"Not in Kansas anymore," he teased as he gently lifted the sword resting on her chest, laying it on Julian's stretcher with the other things.

While the others politely turned away, Julian snatched up one of the shirts and handed it to Danamara. "Time to get dressed," he announced abruptly.

Her eyes flickered around the room, taking in the men who were talking quietly among themselves. "Oh." Sitting up, she thrust her arms in the sleeves of the shirt Pierre held up for her. "Since we're not in Kansas, where are we?"

"On the run," Julian replied softly. "Apparently, sometime last night, our quarters were attacked."

Yawning she buttoned up the shirt and climbed to her feet with Pierre's help. "Do you get the idea that someone out there doesn't like us much?"

"It's a notion that's slowly taking hold," Pierre admitted as he held her pants out.

Clutching his shoulder for balance, she stepped into them before zipping them up. The length wasn't bad, but the waist was baggy. Even shoving the shirt inside didn't help much. "Do we have something I can use for a belt?" she inquired as she anchored the pants with one hand.

"I have a roll of gauze," Will offered. "It should be long enough to thread through the loops and tie in a bow." He rummaged in his bag, located the roll and tossed it to Pierre.

"Thank you. I appreciate it." Taking the roll, she did as he suggested, ending with enough to tie a sturdy bow front and center at her waist. "This will work."

Within the hour, they were once again on the move, rearmed and alert for trouble. Jerg led the way through the tunnels, pausing at each intersection to offer them choices. Two hours after dusk, they stealthily filtered into the small chapel at Callenheim, the *togersi* village, appalled at the sounds of conflict in the square outside. Maxin and Hadro departed on a recon mission while the others waited in tense silence punctuated by the soft gurgling from Danamara's stomach.

Unable to stand it any longer, Volkov finally whispered fiercely, "Feed her."

"No. They don't dare," Danamara protested. "If they do, I'll be a terrible liability. I'm fine."

"How about a power bar?" Filippo offered. "Would that help?"

"Give it to her." Irritably, Volkov peered through a cracked window, his unease growing as the minutes stretched out. Surely Maxin and Hadro should have returned by now.

Then the front door creaked and Maxin was staggering through the narrow opening. Kyr caught him before he collapsed to the floor, easing him down as Will crouched over him, trying to determine where the blood was coming from.

"What happened?" Julian asked as he knelt next to Will.

"The village is overrun. Hadro is dead. We were attacked by Nephilim near the school." Gasping, he struggled to share as much information as he could while Will worked desperately to stanch the blood that pooled beneath him.

When Will regretfully shook his head, Jerg fought threatening tears as Julian immediately made the traditional invitation all *togersi* were offered in such circumstances, "Maxin, my friend, will you become my son?"

"Master, I respectfully decline," Maxin whispered. "I will remain with my people." Bright blood bubbled on his lips as his heart stopped.

Gently, Will closed his eyes as he slumped over the man whose companionship he'd enjoyed in the last few hours. "He's gone."

In the heavy silence Kyrt went to Maxin's pack and pulled out the ancient horn. "I will go now. It is time to summon the warriors," he said angrily. "I will go now. And then I will seek out our enemies until I can fight no more."

The creak of the door was the only sign of his departure. While the rest of the group prepared for battle, Jerg helped Will move Maxin's body to the altar at the front of the chapel. Then as the long mournful strains of the horn echoed back from the peaks, they sallied forth in defense of their friends and neighbors, in defense of their right to live.

Torches flared in the night wind casting strange shadows and flickering orange light in the bloody churned snow. At the first intersection, the group split, as Volkov with all his men crept toward the school while Will and his vampire charges moved into the woods, heading for the airport. All were aware of the importance of the *alphelis* survival even at such a terrible cost. Swords in hands, they fled down the mountain, silently moving from one patch of shadow to the next always parallel to the trail.

The ambush came as they were crossing a frozen, snow-covered creek. His sword swirling in a mad dance, Pierre slashed a wide swath of the attackers, opening a gap for their retreat back up the mountain. Above them anguished howls were rebounding from the peaks. Behind them, the snarls and clash of battle hinted at a surprise attack on the ambushers. Julian, bringing up the rear paused to listen to the strident screams.

"Come on," Pierre called urgently. "If they're reinforcements, the survivors will have to catch up."

On they forged through the deep snow, retracing their tracks back up to Callenheim. The crack of a shot was almost simultaneous to Will tumbling in a nest of stones at the edge of a small clearing. Nearly without pause, Pierre scooped him up, draping him over his shoulder as they raced across the clearing and dove back into the dubious shelter of the thick woods.

Abruptly, Pierre veered off to the left. Gamely, Danamara and Julian followed him into a narrow gap between two towering stones. Once inside, Julian unslung his pack, rummaging through the unfamiliar contents until his hand closed around a flashlight. Flicking it on, he flashed

it around the small opening, halting when the rays revealed an ancient wooden door, rotted and overgrown. "What do you think?"

"It can't be worse than where we are now," Pierre pointed out dryly.

Handing the flashlight to Danamara, Julian examined the door more closely as she provided light. Suddenly he muttered, "Got it." and seized a hidden bolt, tugging sharply. The door slowly grated open, scraping through the damp dirt and leaves on the ground.

Repossessing his flashlight, Julian examined the new opening with care. "It's an old retreat," he concluded. "In the old days, priests and hermits often kept retreats where they went to meditate." He shined the light on a tiny brazier with a coal bucket next to it. "Heat—if we can get it to light."

"In," Pierre said curtly. "Time to explore later. As long as it doesn't have any current occupants, I'll be happy."

Danamara caught the glimpse of a primitive broom in the dim light. After checking it for spider webs, she used it to sweep the area near the brazier free of debris so Pierre had a place to lay Will down. "Is he dead?" she inquired anxiously.

"No. I suspect he hit his head when he fell. Let's get the brazier lit and then we'll have a look." Pierre stretched Will out on the floor while Julian located some tinder and small sticks to help light the brazier.

Danamara, keeping a wary eye on the outer opening, was the first to realize they had company. "*Gabriel?*" she exclaimed.

Flashing a quick glance at Gabriel and his companions, Pierre said, "I would guess you were the bunch behind us at the creek?"

"We were," Gabriel admitted as he wiped a trickle of blood from his cheek. He stared down at the young man lying on the ground. "Dead?"

"No." Pierre's fingers grazed a lump on his head, drawing a moan from Will though he showed no other sign of consciousness. "As I thought. He hit his head when he fell.

A broad-shouldered man peered over Gabriel's shoulder. "Well, I don't want to tell you your business, but there's blood leaking from his leg."

Pierre nodded. "That would be why he fell. There was a shot right before he tumbled into the rocks." He surveyed the weary group that crowded in their tiny shelter. "I don't suppose any of you is a doctor?"

"I'm a doctor. Do you have any supplies?" a tall lanky vampire in the back volunteered.

Surrendering Will to the care of the new man, Pierre dragged Will's pack to his side. "This young man is our medic."

"Then he's in luck."

While Pierre and the doctor worked on Will, Gabriel and Julian exchanged updates.

"How many were on the plane?" Julian inquired quietly.

"One hundred and seventeen."

"And you're all that's left?"

"Hugh stayed behind with five men. The rest of us headed up the mountain. As far as we know, we're the only survivors." Gabriel gestured at each of his group. "Mike, Chloe, Artemis, Bob, Eli, and that's Henry taking care of your man."

"The rest of our group is up at Callenheim, the *togersi* village. The Nephilim attacked before we arrived slaughtering everyone they could find. Major Volkov sent us off with Will in the hopes we would get away, but that doesn't appear to be in the cards." Julian's shoulders jerked in a light shrug. "When we were ambushed we headed back up the mountain."

In the hushed silence Danamara's stomach growled and gurgled. Tugging her on his lap, Julian bared his throat and commanded, "Feed."

Finally, at the point where she could no longer resist, she snuggled closer, slipping her fangs in his soft skin and fed. As she sucked greedily at his throat, he held her tightly, wondering if he was going to lose his *alphelis* after waiting so long for them.

Gabriel rested his weapon on his shoulder. "What's the plan then?"

Pierre shared a long look with Julian before he replied, "Danamara will stay here with Will while the rest of us go back to Callenheim and defeat the Nephilim. There isn't any other choice. If they win, we may as well go back to our caves and underground dungeons."

Danamara's head jerked up. "No," she protested.

"Yes." Julian pressed her down until her lips rested in the warm hollow of his throat. "Feed."

"You did this on purpose," she accused tearfully.

"I did," he admitted. "Now feed. Time is running out. I want to know you are safe with Will when we leave."

Hot tears ran down her cheeks as she sucked his soft skin, certain Pierre and he were going to their deaths. She fought the lassitude that crept over her as she fed, until finally she lost the battle with sleep.

When he was certain she slept, Julian stood up with her in his arms and carried her over to where Will was finally showing signs of consciousness. Depositing her on the ground next to Will, Julian stood up and stared down at her through tear-blurred eyes.

Pierre pulled him into a tight embrace. "She will be okay here with Will."

"I know." Julian knuckled a tear from his rough whiskery cheek. "I know. Let's get out of here while I can still leave her."

"You lead the way. I'll bring up the rear." Pierre nudged him toward the shadowy entrance. "Go on, Julian."

When Julian and the other vampires were gone, Pierre squatted down next to Will and tapped his cheek very gently. "Time to wake up, Will."

Will's eyes fluttered open. "What the hell happened?"

"You caught a slug in your thigh. It's been removed. When you were hit you took a header in the rocks. The doc said you should be okay."

"right." Will frowned as his eyes moved across the ceiling. "Where the fuck are we?"

"According to Julian, it's a hermit's cave. Listen up."

"Yeah?"

"I have to leave. Danamara's asleep. I want you to keep an eye on her."

"What?"

Clearly alarmed, Will tried to sit up, but Pierre easily restrained her. "I have to go, Will. Stay here. Keep our *alpheli* here. That is your charge from Julian and me."

For a moment Will maintained a stubborn silence, but at last he nodded his head. "All right. I'll take care of her."

"Good. We're counting on you." In a blur of movement, Pierre was gone.

Chapter Fourteen

The tick of the burning charcoal was the sole sound in the deserted shelter. One chunk popped loudly, and fell through the grill to the bottom of the brazier. Will stared at the rocky ceiling, wondering how he was supposed to protect a blood drunk vampire from her enemies when he couldn't even protect himself. Panting and groaning, he sat up next to Danamara. After a quick glance around, he spied an upended chunk of log that someone in the past had evidently used as a seat. It took a while, but he eventually made it to the log, crawling and cursing. With a final effort, he dragged himself up to sit down.

Using his rifle, he snagged the strap on his bag and tugged it over next to him. First things first. Wolves healed very fast, but they still felt pain. His leg was on fire and there was something he could do about that right away. He found the bottle of specially developed pain meds the wolves used and swallowed three of the tablets, chasing them with a drink from his water bottle. It would be a very good thing if he had time for them to actually start working, he thought, but he certainly wasn't going to count on that happening.

Time passed. An occasional howl or scream would reach the depths of the silent hideout, jerking him to full awareness for a short while. With a shocking unexpected shriek, Danamara sat straight up, her eyes opened wide and filled with horror. Before Will could react, she was on her feet, brandishing her sword as she headed for the doorway.

"Danamara," he bellowed as he scrambled to stand up. "Wait."

She turned in the doorway, fangs fully extended. "They're dying. Pierre and Julian are dying."

"Wait, dammit. I'll come with you."

The madness slowly faded from her eyes, though the urgency remained as she took a long look at her companion. Lifting her wrist to her mouth, she ripped a small opening and offered it to him. "We don't have time to wait for you to heal. Feed."

Scowling, he obeyed, knowing he would require very little from such a potent source as a vampire *alpheli*. Her fiery essence exploded on his tongue as he sucked gently, very careful not to hurt her. When he lifted his head, their eyes met and held as he slowly, deliberately nipped the skin on his own wrist and offered it to her. "It seems only fair, *kinswoman*, that I should return the favor," he said quietly. "I have a notion that just a sip will clear up the rest of your blood intoxication."

"You're sure?" she whispered wistfully.

"Oh, yes. I'm sure. Your wolf heritage explains your tendency to blood intoxication. Now feed."

She accepted his offering, sucking tentatively at first, then more eagerly for a few more seconds before withdrawing with a last lingering pass of her tongue to seal the wound. "What does it mean?" she asked as she straightened up and moved back.

"It means we better go rescue your mates." Shouldering his bag, he caught up his rifle, pointing it toward the door. "Lead on. We're running out of time."

Will was certain he would never forget the horrific journey up the mountain guarding Danamara's back. Intermittent flashes of light and bright explosions lit the dark bitterly cold woods as they waded through the deep snow. They'd had a brief argument when Will wanted to follow in the broken path of the others, but Danamara prevailed when she stubbornly insisted that would more likely leave them open to an ambush.

She stopped so suddenly he nearly fell on her. "What?" he whispered.

"There, in the tree line." Taking in a deep breath, she sampled the scents swirling around them. "Will, I think that's my brother."

"Why would he be here?" Will watched the man intently for a few moments before jerking Danamara back into the shelter of a pile of boulders. "Down."

"What?" she demanded with a bare thread of sound.

"He's stringing explosives."

She was storming up the hill before he could stop her. Shaking his head, he floundered in her wake, marveling at the power and speed she exhibited. If they all survived, her mates were going to need all the good luck and wishes they could muster if they were going to control her.

He skidded to a stop in the small churned clearing where she stood over her brother, sword at the base of his neck, her anguished howls reverberating on the mountaintop.

Why didn't she finish the job? Donal was flat on the ground on his stomach, both arms outstretched in the snow. Then the grenades in each hand caught Will's eye. Approaching with caution, he noted both the pins were missing. But that wasn't what was holding her back. No, the sprawled bodies of her mates were the ultimate deterrent. Buried in Julian's chest was a knife with an intricately carved jade green handle. He recognized that knife from Volkov's briefings.

Bringing the butt of his rifle down in a crushing blow on Donal's head, he yelled, "Get the grenade." while he grabbed the nearest one, heaving it down the mountain, into the woods.

Rudely yanked from her grief-stricken rage, she snatched the grenade, throwing it after its mate with all her strength, right before Will flattened her with one leap. Fountains of snow, stones and debris rained down on them. After a moment, Will rolled to the side when she sharply elbowed him in the belly. Leaping to her feet, she swept up her sword and brought it down, severing Donal's head with one blow in her fury.

The explosions in the woods triggered a new wave of attack. Men poured from the woods across the moonlit meadow, their shouts competing with the rattling chatter of their weapons. Awed, Will stood back to back with Danamara as she wielded her sword in berserker frenzy, standing over her mates, fending off all attackers in her clear determination to take as many as possible before she joined her *alpheli* mates for eternity.

Her agonized wails rallied the weary defenders as nothing else could. Taking heart, they rose up in renewed fervor, coming to her defense in overwhelming numbers. The ancient wood wraiths, the weres, the weary vampires all joined in the crushing defeat, taking back their homes and the right to live their lives as they chose.

As dawn approached, Jerg straightened slowly, ignoring the terrible aches and pains as he surveyed the hell revealed on the torch-lit battleground. Already the reports were filtering in from around the world. When the vampire lords sent out the call to battle, the alliance vampires had responded to the summons, *Suzerain Anciens* and fledglings together, and engaged the enemy wherever they found them.

Sadly, he looked around him. So many lost. So many to mourn. But there were miracles to celebrate, too. Gabriel, searching for his lover had found Mike grievously injured but alive in a hollowed out tree trunk. Another small group of wounded survivors from the airfield had taken

refuge in a garden shed. Two *togersi* teachers had hidden in the woods with thirty-seven children. Another *togersi* family hid in their cellar.

For a second night the *togersi*, male and female, worked side by side with the wolves and other shifter clans as they raced to search the littered meadow and thick woods for any survivors they might have missed. Hastily they carried the vampires to shelter, wherever they discovered them—singly or in twos and threes—waiting for assistance as they huddled in animal dens and hidden caves, hiding from the coming sunrise. Healers rushed among the remaining tumbled bodies in the wide meadow, shouting, “Here!” when they found someone who still lived.

For the rest of their lives—and down through the ages—those who were present on the mountain and their descendents would carry the tale of Danamara, the shifter *alpheli* who stood over her mates, sword in hand as she fiercely fought for their survival and the survival of all who stood with her. The memory of her grief-stricken howls echoing from the sheer peaks sent a shudder down Jerg’s spine. He looked up at the first gray light outlining the peaks above him and nodded. Yes, he thought. The *alpheli* had come home.

That evening in the depths of Nightwinds, Danamara stubbornly resisted the urge to open her eyes. What possible reason was there for leaving her lonely bed? Julian and Pierre were dead, gone out of her life practically before she’d found them. She trembled at the thought of the endless lonely years stretching out before her.

No one wanted to live forever alone.

Angry tears rolled down her face. Why had Will saved her on the battlefield? Didn’t he *understand*? Without Pierre and Julian, there was no reason for her to live.

Where were the tears coming from? She could have sworn there were no more left. After the healers checked her over, they’d left her alone in the big bed to cry in peace. In the last two nights no one had disturbed her, respecting her right to grieve. Her eyes were swollen and sore. New tears stung like fire and her heart beat uncomfortably in her tight chest.

After the battle, she’d flung her sword away and fallen across the bodies of her *alphelis* yearning to join them, howling out her anger and grief until Gabriel had come, lifting her in his strong arms, and carried her down the rough path to the torch lit courtyard of the great Schloss.

Another rush of tears flooded her eyes as she recalled the huddled survivors, *togersi* and were, vampire and human, who lined the way, weeping—whether for her loss or their own, she didn’t know. God knew there was enough loss for all to share. Bitterly, she prayed Donal was

burning in the lowest of hells for the grief and death he'd inflicted on them. With a deep shuddering breath, she sought the temporary solace of sleep. An empty bed was the loneliest place on earth.

Hours later the heavy coverlet shifted as someone on her left moved closer. She stirred, vaguely annoyed at being disturbed. "Go away," she muttered as she pulled the pillow over her head.

"You know...she went to such lengths to save us, you would think she'd at least open her eyes and say hello," Pierre said mournfully.

On her right, another body sighed gustily. "Perhaps she doesn't love us anymore," Julian pointed out. "After all, we left her all alone in that cave. I suppose even the return of her embroidered angels won't be enough for her to forgive us."

Her eyes flashed open and she rolled to her side, frantically knuckling the sticky film from her eyelashes, positive she was hallucinating. "You're dead," she declared loudly.

"Not quite," Pierre protested as he carefully dabbed at her swollen eyelids with a warm washcloth. "Really, darling. Your eyes are a mess. What have you done to yourself?"

Julian took her hand in his and carried it to his lips. After gently kissing her fingers, he placed her hand on his bare chest. "It was a near thing," he admitted. "But we're distressingly hard to kill."

Shrieking with shocked joy, she flung the covers back and sat up, bouncing between them on the bed. "You're here. You're really here." Seizing Julian by his ears, she planted wild kisses all over his face before releasing him and turning to Pierre. "I can't believe it," she exclaimed before sprawling on top of him, her arms wrapped so tightly around his neck she threatened to strangle him.

Happily accepting her enthusiastic attentions, Pierre covered her lips with his, kissing her into silence as he nudged her back down in the tumbled bed. Abruptly, she planted a sharp elbow in his belly, struggling out from under him to sit up. Scowling at the two men, she demanded, "How did this happen? Why didn't someone tell me you were alive?"

"They didn't want you to get your hopes up?" Pierre offered hopefully.

"They didn't want you in the way, hindering our healing," Julian said bluntly.

"I wouldn't have been in the way." Crossing her arms over her bobbing breasts, she frowned as she recalled the terrible grief of the last two days. "They had no right to keep something like this from me. Do you know how many tears I shed over you? Do you?" She

reached over and poked Julian on his chest. "You were *alive* all the time I was down here crying my eyes out. Alive when I thought you were dead. My heart was *broken*." Tears filled her eyes. "How could you do that to me?"

"Now Danamara..."

She poked him harder, then flung herself into his arms. Burying her face in his throat, she sobbed uncontrollably.

"Beloved, you must stop. You will make yourself ill." Holding her in his arms, he shifted their position until they were stretched out in the bed.

Pierre snuggled up behind Danamara until she was firmly sandwiched between him and Julian. With their arms wrapped tightly around her, they waited as the sobs slowly subsided and stopped. Pierre nuzzled her ear with his lips. "Better?"

With a hiccup, she nodded though her face was still hidden.

"Are you going to forgive us for living?" he inquired soberly.

With a watery chuckle, she lifted her head. "I suppose so. Now that I have you back, it would be a sinful waste to not keep you." Teardrops glittered on her lashes as she sat up between them, surveying their bodies with intent interest. "What did the healers say?"

"We're as good as new," Pierre reported promptly.

"Better," Julian amended. "Wolves and bears lined up to feed us."

"Then what's this you were muttering about angels?"

Pierre reached up to cup her breast with a gentle hand. "Gerard was allowed to search your brother's house. He found your angels in your brother's office. They're packed in that box over in the corner."

"Really? I must remember to thank him." Thoughtfully, she tapped her chin. "So you're well enough for some making up? Are you sure? I wouldn't want to damage you right away."

"Why are we making up?" Pierre objected. "We didn't have an argument."

"You left me in a cave. Alone with a wolf. A *wounded* wolf. While. I. Was. Intoxicated."

Julian kicked the covers to the foot of the bed and tugged her down so his face was resting on her belly. After planting a kiss below her navel he moved steadily down until his mouth rested on her mound where he gave her a sharp nip.

"You disobeyed us," he said sternly.

Pierre leaned over and tweaked her nipple. "You were supposed to stay where you'd be safe." He moved to the other one, twisting it lightly. "You were not supposed to be in the fight."

"You were dying. Did you think I was going to just let it happen?" Scornfully, she struggled to free herself from their arms. Leaping from the bed, she turned to face them, her fists curled on her hips. "Don't you *ever* do that again."

The men sat up with Julian leaning back in Pierre's embrace. "She's quite a spitfire, isn't she?"

"Gonna be tough to tame," Pierre suggested. "Are we sure we want to keep her?"

"Oh, I think so. Finding another woman who would follow us up a mountain in the snow and dark could be difficult. Besides, I think she likes us."

Furious, she leaped back on the bed, landing on them with an *oomph*. Straddling their tangled bodies, she sat up with a little bounce. "I'll show you taming. You think you're in charge? Hell, no."

With a twist, Pierre unseated her. One moment she was on top. The next, Julian was straddling her with his cock stretched between her breasts, the tip temptingly close to her chin. He'd captured her hands, holding them above her shoulders so she couldn't touch him. Pierre knelt between her spread legs draped over his wide shoulders. The broad head of his cock bobbed enticingly at the damp entrance to her pussy. "So," he demanded with breathless laughter, "now who's in charge?"

Slyly, she tilted her hips, capturing him in her slick heat. "I am," she taunted right before her tongue flicked out to lap at the tip of Julian's penis. "Mmmmm."

"Damn," Julian panted. "I think she's right."

"No, no, no. She can't be right. We're the ones on top." Pierre pressed forward, teasing her by giving her only part of his cock. Her pussy promptly clamped down, squeezing its prize in a warm grip that lured him onward. Thrusting powerfully, he filled her to the hilt. "Okay," he sighed. "She's in charge. When did this happen?"

Julian took a moment to answer. "Uh, I think it was that night back in the car when she invited you home with us."

Pierre understood Julian's hesitation completely when he peeked over Julian's shoulder and watched Danamara avidly suck Julian's cock. He was surprised Julian still had a mind. The sight inspired him so that he wrapped his arms around Julian's waist and grasped his lover's thick cock in his hand. Taking it in his strong fingers, he held it steady for Danamara. With his other hand, he pinched at Julian's painfully aroused nipples.

When Pierre leaned forward, his penis pressed deeper inside her wet heat. She moaned as she twined her legs over his shoulders, twisting her ankles together to hold him in place. She flexed her hips with wild abandon deliriously pursuing the fiery velvety sensations she received when his cock head rubbed the inside of her sensitive sheath. As climax crept closer, both hers and Pierre's, she eagerly sucked Julian's cock, fiercely determined that this time, this first time as a reunited trio, they would come together.

Her mates had no defense against her will. When her pussy contracted around Pierre's cock, milking it while she took Julian's cock in her tight throat, they came, meeting her clear demands to provide her the ultimate proof of their survival. Tumbling in a confused heap, they offered soft kisses and caresses while Danamara held them close as though she would never let go.

"I thought I would never hold you again," she confessed quietly. "Never kiss you. Never feel your cocks filling the empty places inside me. Never feel the touch of your hands and lips. I wanted to die with you."

"When Julian came into my life, I couldn't believe how blessed I was. He was more man than I dreamed I would ever have—a fairytale prince come true, only better. His touch aroused me unbearably. His embrace comforted me in the best and worst of times." She took Julian's hand, placing a tender kiss on his palm before twining her fingers with his.

"Then Pierre came along. I was positive I would never have Julian's love because his heart belonged to Pierre. But I didn't want to lose what I had with Julian so I determined to share him with Pierre. It seemed to me having some of Julian's love was better than none at all. I never expected, never dreamed that Pierre would take me in his heart, too."

Pierre softly kissed her lips. "You humble me with your love, darling. I've loved Julian forever, it seems. You were a surprise bonus, slipping into my heart almost before I realized you were there. I confess I was willing to accept your presence as long as it meant I could be with Julian. It was a tremendous shock to me when I realized how deeply you were buried in my heart and soul." He tugged Julian close enough he could kiss him with sweet content. "Now I have both of you, a blessing I'm sure I don't deserve."

Pursing his lips, Julian just shook his head as he studied his two *alpheli* mates. "I hope you don't expect me to get all mushy. I love you both. But I'm not going to prose on and on about how much. I propose to just show you, instead."

"Oh, yeah? How do you propose to do that?" Pierre teased.

With a wicked grin, Julian tilted his head back and looked meditatively at the ceiling. “Do you remember last week when I told you I’d shown you all the ways I knew to make love?”

“I remember,” Danamara whispered. Slipping her hands down, she searched for their cocks, gently petting them when she found them. “I remember *everything*. Are we going to do it all again?”

Julian tweaked her nipples before reaching out to playfully pinch Pierre’s. “I’m sure we’ll get around to it—after I show you the good stuff.” Hopping out of bed, he urged them to follow him with a beckoning finger. They went down the hall to a door that opened to reveal a room that was nearly the twin to Pierre’s roman bath. Nudging them inside, he firmly closed and locked the door.

“I lied,” he admitted shamelessly. “Now, let’s see...what shall we try first?”

About the Author

After working in various occupations, rearing four children, and moving over forty times, Anny has finally retired and settled in one place long enough to do the one thing she's longed to do—write. She happens to be fortunate enough to have a supportive spouse who encourages her to write, write, write! Or it could be that he's simply anxious for her to support him in the manner to which he's accustomed when *he* retires.

*Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing*

***The Virgin Pirate* by Temple Hogan**

Born to a life of piracy, Nellie Bouchard knows no other life, but she longs to find a world beyond the ruthless violence and danger. Her wish is fulfilled when she captures Lord Trey Carlyle. Mesmerized by his masculinity and raw sexuality, she insists he teach her the secrets between a man and woman. Long tropical nights and sun-drenched days aboard her ship allow him to show her every aspect of sexual encounters while she teaches him about love. But he's her captive and she's a pirate with a price on her head. Their future might mean separation...or death.

***Dragon's Blood* by Brynn Paulin**

For centuries, there have been legends of Vampires—the fault of one careless dragon. But humans only know part of the story. Walking amongst us are Dragons—shape-shifters who feed on blood.

Reluctant Dragon Elder Janos Aventech's vacation in New York is about to come to an abrupt end. Riding on the subway, he stumbles across a Dragon mate—one of the few human women with whom his people can unite and be truly happy. And his people's enemies are out to get her. As his attraction to this woman grows, he knows he must find her mate and see her safely into that man's arms. It's destined. But as every minute passes in her company, Janos begins to see he'll never willingly let her go, mate or not. If only she were *his* mate...

On the subway, Scarlett couldn't stop staring at him—then he turned crazy. When he essentially kidnaps her off the train, she knows she should be irate and terrified. Instead, she finds her initial attraction growing. But what's all this stuff he's spouting about mates and enemies? She only wants to return to her life, not get caught in the middle of a war. But it's too late for that. She's destined for a Dragon's bed, and in Janos' arms, she can only hope it's his.

***Red: A Seduction Tale* by Maddie James**

Garnet Boudreaux is going home. Not back to her nice little apartment in New York City, but to her childhood home in the bayou. She doesn't want to go, and isn't certain what will be waiting for her when she arrives. But standing there in the voodoo shop on Bourbon Street, in the middle of one helluva party, she's told by Madame Madeleine Dupuis that she has no choice. She presses two pouches into Garnet's hands, wraps a red cape around her, and tells her she must go—and go now—to see to her grandmother.

Max LeBlanc spies the lovely red-head across the street and knows in a heartbeat she is the one. A rougarou always knows when he's met his mate. Some may call him a lycanthrope, a werewolf

if you will, but in Cajun bayou lands he's known simply as *The Rougarou*. He'd waited several hundred years for this moment, and for her. There is nothing left for him to do but mark her and claim her as his mate. Soon.

***Immortal Curse* by Bronwyn Green**

Cursed by a witch, Ian O'Meara has been trapped between the world of the living and the spirit realm for the last hundred and fifty years. Annoyed by having his eternity interrupted by amateur ghost hunters, he reaches through the veil to Emma Boulton, knowing she can see and hear him even if the others can't. When he discovers she can also feel him, he decides Emma is the most exciting thing to happen to him in the last century. Suddenly, escaping his miserable curse isn't quite so appealing.

Much to her dismay, Emma has been able to see ghosts ever since she was a child. Most of the time she ignores them, but Ian makes that all but impossible. With his dark good looks and his brooding personality, he's a gothic novel hero come to life...so to speak. She knows she should help him toward the light, but the only place he seems to be interested in is her bed. Falling in love with the charming spirit is all too easy, but is a future together possible between the living and the dead?

***Ryland's Sacrifice* by Kim Dare**

Principles don't pay tuition fees. When Ryland's math scholarship disappears overnight, he has two choices. He can borrow money from fellow student Jason Burrows, who has very interesting ways of collecting debts. Or, he can volunteer to be thrown to the werelions.

One night spent playing the part of a willing human sacrifice will give him enough money to finish his PhD. It seems like a good deal—right up until the moment he finds himself naked, blindfolded, bound and surrounded by lions.

Available at Resplendence Publishing
The Hunt for the Elixir Series by Midnight Dupree

Blood Quest

The Assassin was sent to ensure that the Vampire Queen died, and to recover the Elixir that would restore his kind back to their glory. He endured years of training and sexual restraint in order to become the best at what he does.

He is on the hunt for the *Elixir of Life*.

Micah and Sasha are vampire servants to the Queen. When she is murdered they believe their lives are coming to an end as well, but the Queen has left them one special gift and a mission...

Winter's Blood

When Angelina's sister is kidnapped, she is forced to steal a much sought-after formula. Fortunately, fate has paired her with a handsome vampire who has promised to help save her beloved sibling.

Dante wants to break through the frozen barriers of Angelina's heart, and will do almost anything to accomplish his goal. But first, he and Angelina must fight the evil and keep the precious formula out of evil hands.

Will Dante and Angelina be successful in their quest? Or will the blood spilled be their own?

Blood Red Rose

With the threat of danger high, Eli's world is on the verge of being destroyed. The *Elixir of Life* is needed by the Other's now more than ever. Their assassin has Eli in his sights. Eli is ready for this threat, but he finds an unexpected, yet intriguing distraction.

Rose is a beautiful female vampire on the run and doesn't realize how much she will need Eli. Yet, in the end, will she need to save him?

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