

J.R. Ward the Black Dagger Brotherhood Novels 1-4

Dark Lover
Lover Eternal
Lover Awakened
Lover Revealed

J. R. Ward



A SIGNET ECLIPSE BOOK

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DARK LOVER

*A Novel of the Black
Dagger Brotherhood*

J. R. Ward



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A dangerous passion...

Wrath walked into the hall, feeling particularly ferocious. Man, Beth had better be alive and well. Or God help whoever had hurt her.

And if she'd decided to avoid him? That didn't matter. Her body was about to need something only he could provide her. So sooner or later she would come around. Or she would die.

He thought of the soft skin of her neck. Felt the sensation of his tongue stroking over the vein that ran up from her heart.

His fangs elongated as if she were before him. As if he could sink his teeth into her and drink.

Wrath closed his eyes as his body began to shake. His stomach, full with food, turned into a bottomless, achy pit.

He tried to remember the last time he'd fed. It has been a while, but surely not that long ago?

He forced himself to calm down. Get control. It was like trying to slow down a train with a hand brake, but eventually a cooling stream of sanity replaced the whacked-out, bloodlust spins.

As he came back to reality he felt uneasy, his instincts crying out for airtime.

That female was dangerous to him. If she could affect him like this without even being in the damn room, she might just be his *pyrocant*....

Praise for Dark Lover

“An awesome, instantly addictive debut novel. It’s a midnight whirlwind of dangerous characters and mesmerizing erotic romance. The Black Dagger Brotherhood owns me now. Dark fantasy lovers, you just got served.”

—Lynn Viehl, author of *If Angels Burn*

“J. R. Ward has created a wonderful cast of characters, with a sexy, tormented, to-die-for hero and the spirited woman who proves his soul mate. What a fabulous treat for romance readers!”

—Nicole Jordan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wicked Fantasy*

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Dedicated to:
You, with awe and love.
Thank you for coming and finding me.
And for showing me the way.
It was the ride of a lifetime,
the best I've ever had.

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Thank you so very much: Karen Solem, Kara Cesare, Claire Zion, Kara Welsh, Rose Hilliard.

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With love to my family.

Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns

Black Dagger Brotherhood (pr. n.) Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, brothers possess immense physical and mental strength as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the brotherhood upon nomination by the brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.

blood slave (n.) Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has largely been discontinued, though it has not been outlawed.

the Chosen (n.) Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males, but can be mated to warriors at the Scribe Virgin's direction to propagate their class. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the brotherhood, but that practice has been abandoned by the brothers.

doggen (n.) Member of the servant class within the vampire world. *Doggens* have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but

they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years.

the Fade (pr. n.) Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.

First Family (pr. n.) The king and queen of the vampires, and any children they may have.

hellren (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.

leelan (n.) A term of endearment loosely translated as “dearest one.”

Lessening Society (pr. n.) Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species.

lesser (n.) De-souled human who targets vampires for extermination as a member of the Lessening Society. *Lessers* must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, blushless, and pale-eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter into which their heart was placed after it was removed.

needing period (n.) Female vampire’s time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female’s transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.

the Omega (pr. n.) Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the

vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers, though not the power of creation.

princeps (n.) Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgin's Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.

pyrocan (n.) Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.

rythe (n.) Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender who presents him or herself without defenses.

the Scribe Virgin (pr. n.) Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.

shellan (n.) Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.

the Tomb (pr. n.) Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of *lessers*. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against brothers. No one may enter except for members of the brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction.

transition (n.) Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, they must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and are unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.

vampire (n.) Member of a species separate from that of *Homo sapiens*. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires may not "convert" humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short-term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upwards of a thousand years, or in some cases, even longer.

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Chapter One

Darius looked around the club, taking in the teeming, half-naked bodies on the dance floor. Screamer's was packed tonight, full of women wearing leather and men who looked like they had advanced degrees in violent crime.

Darius and his companion fit right in.

Except they actually were killers.

"So you're really going to do this?" Tohrment asked him.

Darius glanced across the shallow table. The other vampire's eyes met his own. "Yeah. I am."

Tohrment nursed his Scotch and smiled grimly. Only the very tips of his fangs showed. "You're crazy, D."

"You should know."

Tohrment tilted his glass in deference. "But you're raising the bar. You want to take an innocent girl, who has no idea what the hell she's getting into, and put her transition in the hands of someone like Wrath. That's whacked."

"He isn't evil. In spite of the way he looks." Darius finished his beer.

"And show a little respect."

"I respect the hell out of him. But it's a bad idea."

"I need him."

"You sure about that?"

A woman wearing a micromini, thigh-high boots, and a bustier made of chains trolled by their table. Her eyes glittered from behind two pounds of mascara, and she worked her walk as if her hips were double-jointed.

Darius gave her a pass. Sex was not on his mind tonight.

"She's my *daughter*, Tohr."

"She's a half-breed, *D*. And you know how he feels about humans."

Tohrment shook his head. "My great-great-grandmother was one, and you don't see me yakking that up around him."

Darius lifted his hand to catch their waitress's eye and pointed at his empty bottle and Tohrment's nearly dry glass. "I'm not going to let another one of my children die. Not if there's a possibility I can save her. And anyway, there's no telling whether she'll even go through the change. She could end up living a happy life, never knowing about my side. It's happened before."

And he hoped his daughter would be spared. Because if she went through her transition, if she came out alive on the other side as a vampire, she was going to be hunted as they all were.

"Darius, if he does it at all, he'll do it because he owes you. Not because he wants to."

"I'll take him any way I can get him."

"But what are you giving her? He's about as nurturing as a sawed-off, and that first time can be rough, even if you've been prepared. Which she hasn't."

"I'm going to talk to her."

"And how's that going to go? You're just going to walk up to her and say, 'Hey, I know you've never seen me before, but I'm your dad. Oh, and guess what? You've won the evolutionary lottery: You're a vampire. Let's go to Disneyland!'"

"I hate you right now."

Tohrment leaned forward, his thick shoulders shifting under black leather. "You know I got your back. I'm just thinking you should reconsider." There was a heavy pause. "Maybe I could do it."

Darius shot him a dry look. "You want to try and get back into your house after the fact? Wellsie will stake you through the heart and leave you for the sun, my friend."

Tohrment winced. "Good point."

"And then she'll come looking for me."

Both males shuddered.

"Besides..." Darius leaned back as the waitress put their drinks down. He waited until she left, even though hard-core rap was pumping all around them. "Besides, we're living in dangerous times. If something happens to me
—"

"*I'll take care of her.*"

Darius clapped his friend on the shoulder. "I know you will."

"But Wrath is better." There was no jealousy in the remark. It was a

statement of fact.

“There’s no one like him.”

“And thank God for that,” Tohrment said with a half smile.

Their band of brothers, a tight circle of strong-backed warriors who traded information and fought together, were of the same opinion. Wrath was off the chain when it came to the business of vengeance, and he hunted their enemies with a single-minded purpose that bordered on the insane. He was the last of his line, the only purebred vampire left on the planet, and though his race revered him as its king, he despised his status.

It was almost tragic that he was the best bet Darius’s half-breed daughter had of surviving. Wrath’s blood, so strong, so untainted, would increase the chances of her getting through the transition if it hit her. But Tohrment wasn’t off the mark. It was like turning a virgin over to a thug.

With a sudden rush, the crowd shifted, people backing into each other. They were making way for someone. Or something.

“Shit. Here he comes,” Tohrment muttered. He tossed back his Scotch, swallowing it whole. “No offense, but I’m outtie. This is not a conversation I need to be a part of.”

Darius watched the sea of humans split as they steered clear of an imposing, dark shadow that towered over them. The flight response was a good survival reflex.

Wrath was six feet, six inches of pure terror dressed in leather. His hair was long and black, falling straight from a widow’s peak. Wraparound sunglasses hid eyes that no one had ever seen revealed. Shoulders were twice the size of most males’. With a face that was both aristocratic and brutal, he looked like the king he was by birthright and the solider he’d become by destiny.

And that wave of menace rolling ahead of him was one hell of a calling card.

As the cool hatred hit Darius, he tilted his fresh beer back and drank deeply.

He hoped to God he was doing the right thing.

Beth Randall looked up as her editor leaned his hip on her desk. His eyes went straight to the vee of her shirt.

“Working late again,” he murmured.

“Hey, Dick.”

Shouldn’t you be getting home to your wife and two kids? she mentally added.

“What are you doing?”

“Editing a piece for Tony.”

“You know, there are other ways of impressing me.”

Yeah, she could just imagine.

“Did you read my e-mail, Dick? I went down to the police station this afternoon and talked with José and Ricky. They swear a gun dealer’s moved into town. They’ve found two modified Magnums on drug dealers.”

Dick reached out to pat her shoulder, stroking it as he took his hand back. “You just keep working the blotter. Let the big boys worry about the violent crimes. We wouldn’t want anything to happen to that pretty face of yours.”

He smiled, eyes growing hooded as his gaze lingered on her lips.

That stare routine had gotten old three years ago, she thought. Right after she’d started working for him.

A paper bag. What she needed was a paper bag to pull over her head whenever she talked with him. Maybe with a picture of Mrs. Dick taped to the front.

“Would you like me to give you a ride home?” he asked.

Only if it were raining thumbtacks and hairpins, you lech.

“No, thanks.” Beth turned back to her computer screen and hoped he’d take the hint.

Eventually he wandered off, probably heading for the bar across the street that most of the reporters hit before going home. Caldwell, New York, wasn’t exactly a hotbed of opportunity for any journalist, but Dick’s big boys sure liked keeping up the appearance of carrying a heavy social burden. They relished cozying up to the bar at Charlie’s and talking about the days when they’d worked at bigger, more important papers. For the most part they were just like Dick: middle-aged, middle-of-the-road men who were competent, but not extraordinary at what they did. Caldwell was big enough and close enough to New York City to have the nasty business of violent crimes, drug busts, and prostitution, so they were kept busy. But the *Caldwell Courier Journal* was not the *Times*, and none of them was ever going to win a Pulitzer.

It was rather sad.

Yeah, well, look in the mirror, Beth thought. She was just a beat reporter.

She'd never even worked at a national-level paper. So when she was in her fifties, unless things changed, she'd have to be at a free press polishing classifieds to have a shot at reflected glory from her *CCJ* days.

She reached for the bag of M & M's she'd been nursing. The damn thing was empty. Again.

She should probably just go home. And pick up some Chinese down the street.

On her way out of the newsroom, which was an open space cut up into cubicles by flimsy gray partitions, she hit her buddy Tony's stash of Twinkies. Tony ate all the time. For him, there was no breakfast, lunch, and dinner: Consumption was a binary proposition. If he was awake, something was going into his mouth, and to keep himself supplied, his desk was a treasure trove of caloric depravity.

She peeled off the cellophane and couldn't believe she was biting into the artificial swill as she hit the lights and walked down the stairwell to Trade Street. Outside, the heat of July was a physical barrier between her and her apartment. Twelve straight blocks of hot and humid. Fortunately, the Chinese restaurant was halfway home and heavily air-conditioned. With any luck they'd be busy tonight, so she'd get to wait a while in the coolness.

When she was finished with the Twinkie, she flipped open her phone, hit speed dial, and put in an order for beef with broccoli. As she walked along, she looked at the familiar, grim landmarks. Along this stretch of Trade Street, there were only bars, strip clubs, and the occasional tattoo parlor. The Chinese food place and the Tex-Mex buffet were the only two restaurants. The rest of the buildings, which had been used as offices in the twenties, when downtown had been thriving, were vacant. She knew every crack in the sidewalk; she could time the traffic lights. And the patois of sounds drifting out of open doors and windows offered no surprises either.

McGrider's Bar was playing blues; Zero Sum had bleating techno coming out of its glass entrance; and the karaoke machines were fired up at Ruben's. Most of the places were reputable enough, but there were a couple she stayed away from on principle. Screamer's in particular catered to a scary-ass clientele. That was one door she wouldn't go through without a police escort.

As she measured the distance to the Chinese restaurant, a wave of fatigue hit her. God, it was humid. The air was so heavy she felt as if she were breathing water.

She had a feeling the exhaustion wasn't just about the weather. She'd

been pooped for weeks, and suspected she was dancing with depression. Her job was going nowhere. She was living in a place she didn't care about. She had few friends, no lover, and no romantic prospects. If she looked ahead ten years and pictured herself staying put in Caldwell with Dick and the big boys, she only saw more of the same routine: getting up, going to work, trying to make a difference, failing, going home alone.

Maybe she just needed out. Out of Caldwell. Out of the CCJ. Out of the electronic family of her alarm clock and the phone on her desk and the TV that kept her dreams away while she slept.

God knew there was nothing keeping her in town but habit. She hadn't spoken to any of her foster parents for years, so they wouldn't miss her. And the few friends she had were busy with their own families.

When she heard a leering whistle behind her, she rolled her eyes. That was the problem with working near the bars. On occasion you picked up gawkers.

The catcalls came next, and then, sure enough, two guys crossed the street at a jog and came after her. She looked around. She was heading away from the bars and into the long stretch of vacant buildings before the restaurants. The night was thick and dark, but at least there were streetlights and the occasional car passing.

"I like your black hair," the big one said as he fell into step beside her.
"Mind if I touch it?"

Beth knew better than to stop. They looked like college frat boys out for the summer, which meant they were just going to be annoying, but she didn't want to take any chances. Besides, the Chinese place was only five blocks up.

She reached into her purse anyway, searching for her pepper spray.

"You need a ride somewhere?" the big guy asked. "My car's not far. Seriously, how 'bout you come with us? We could go for a little ride."

He grinned and winked at his buddy, as if the smooth rap was definitely going to get him laid. The crony laughed and circled her, his thin blond hair flopping as he skipped.

"Let's ride her!" the blond said.

Damn it, where was her spray?

The big one reached out, touching her hair, and she looked at him good and hard. With his polo shirt and his khaki shorts, he was BMOC handsome. Real all-American material.

When he smiled at her, she sped up, focusing on the dim neon glow of the

Chinese place's sign. She was praying someone else would walk by, but heat had driven the pedestrian traffic indoors. There was no one around.

"You want to tell me your name?" all-American asked.

Her heart started banging in her chest. The spray was in her other bag.

Four more blocks.

"Maybe I'll just pick a name for you. Let me think...How's pussycat sound?"

The blond giggled.

She swallowed and took out her cell phone, just in case she needed to call 911.

Stay calm. Keep it together.

She pictured how good the rush of air-conditioning in the restaurant was going to feel as she went inside. Maybe she'd wait and call a cab, just to make sure she got home without being further harassed by them.

"Come on, pussycat," all-American cooed. "I know you're going to like me."

Only three more blocks...

Just as she stepped off the curb to cross Tenth Street, he grabbed her around the waist. Her feet popped off the ground, and as he dragged her backward, he covered her mouth with a heavy palm. She fought like a madwoman, kicking and punching, and when she reached behind and belted him in the eye, his grip slipped. She lunged away from him, legs driving her heels hard into the pavement, breath trapped in her throat. A car went by out on Trade Street, and she yelled as its headlights flared.

But then he got her again.

"You're going to beg for it, bitch," all-American said in her ear as he put her in a choke hold. He wrenched her neck around until she thought it was going to snap and pulled her deeper into the shadows. She could smell his sweat and the college-boy cologne he wore, could hear the high-pitched laughter of his friend.

An alley. They were taking her into an alley.

Her stomach heaved, bile stinging her throat, and she jerked her body around furiously, trying to get free. Panic made her strong. But he was stronger.

He pushed her behind a Dumpster and pressed his body into hers. She drove her elbow into his ribs and kicked some more.

"Goddamn it, get her arms!"

She got in one good heel punch to the blond's shins before he caught her wrists and held them over her head.

"Come on, bitch, you're going to like this," all-American growled, trying to get his knee between her legs.

He ground her back against the building's brick wall, holding her in place by the throat. He had to use his other hand to rip open her shirt, and as soon as her mouth was free, she screamed. He slapped her hard, and she felt her lip split open. Blood rushed onto her tongue, pain stunning her.

"You do that again and I'm cutting your tongue out." All-American's eyes boiled with hate and lust as he shoved up the white lace of her bra and exposed her breasts. "Hell, I think I'll do that anyway."

"Hey, are those real?" the blond asked, as if she would answer him.

His buddy grabbed one of her nipples and pulled. She winced, tears making her vision swim. Or maybe her eyesight was going because she was hyperventilating.

All-American laughed. "I think she's natural. But you can find out for yourself when I'm finished."

As the blond giggled, some deep part of her brain kicked into gear and refused to let this happen. She forced herself to stop fighting and reached back to her self-defense training. Except for her heavy breathing, her body went still, and it took all-American a minute to notice.

"You want to play nice?" he said, eyeing her with suspicion.

She nodded slowly.

"Good." He leaned in, his breath filling her nose. She fought not to cringe at the rank smell of stale cigarettes and beer. "But if you scream again, I'm going to stab you. Do you understand me?"

She nodded once more.

"Let her go."

The blond dropped her wrists and giggled, moving around them as if he were looking for the best angle.

All-American's hands were rough on her skin as he fondled her, and she held Tony's Twinkie down by force of will, her gag reflex pumping her throat. Even though she loathed the sensation of the palms pushing into her breasts, she reached for the fly of his pants. He was still holding her by the neck, and she was having trouble breathing, but the moment she touched his privates, he moaned and his grip loosened.

With a hard jam of her hand, she grabbed his balls, twisted as hard as she

could, and kneed him in the nose as he crumbled. Adrenaline shot through her, and for a split second she wished his buddy would come at her instead of staring at her stupidly.

“Fuck you!” she screamed at them both.

Beth bolted out of the alley, holding her shirt together as she ran, and she didn’t stop until she was at the door to her apartment building. Her hands were shaking so badly she could barely get her key in the locks. And it wasn’t until she stood in front of her mirror in the bathroom that she realized tears were pouring down her face.

Butch O’Neal looked up when the police radio under the dash of his unmarked patrol car went off. There was a male victim, down but breathing, in an alley not so far away.

Butch checked his watch. A little after ten o’clock, which meant the fun was just getting started. It was a Friday night in the early part of July, so the college turks were still fresh out of school and aching to compete in the Stupid Olympics. He figured the guy had either been mugged or taught a lesson.

He hoped it was the latter.

Butch grabbed the handset and told Dispatch he’d head over even though he was a homicide detective, not a beat cop. He had two cases he was working right now, one floater in the Hudson River and a hit-and-run, but there was always room for something else. As far as he was concerned, the more time away from home, the better. The dirty dishes in his sink and the wrinkled sheets on his bed were not going to miss him.

He hit the siren and the gas and thought, *Let’s hear it for the boys of summer.*

Chapter Two

Walking through Screamer's, Wrath sneered as the crowd tripped over itself to get out of his way. Fear and a morbid, lusty curiosity wafted out of their pores. He breathed in the rank odor.

Cattle. All of them.

From behind his dark glasses, his eyes strained against the dim lights, and he shut his lids. His vision was so bad that he was just as comfortable with total blindness. Focusing on his hearing, he sorted through the beats of the music, isolating the shuffling of feet, the whisper of words, the sound of another glass hitting the floor. If he ran into something, he didn't care. Whether it was a chair, a table, a human, he'd just walk over the damn thing.

He sensed Darius clearly because his was the only body in the place that wasn't reeking of panic.

Although even the warrior was on edge tonight.

Wrath opened his eyes when he stood in front of the other vampire. Darius was a blurry shape, his dark coloring and black clothes the only information Wrath's vision gave him.

"Where'd Tohrment go?" he asked as he caught a whiff of Scotch.

"He's taking a breather. Thanks for coming."

Wrath lowered himself into a chair. He stared straight ahead and watched the crowd gradually swallow up the path he'd made.

He waited.

The pounding beat of Ludacris faded into old-school Cypress Hill.

This was going to be good. Darius was a real straight shooter who knew Wrath couldn't stand having his time wasted. If there was silence, something was up.

Darius tipped back his beer, then let out a deep breath. "My lord—"

"If you want something from me, don't lead with that," Wrath drawled,

sensing a waitress approach them. He had the impression of big breasts and a strip of flesh between her tight shirt and her short skirt.

“You need a drink?” she asked slowly.

He was tempted to suggest she lay herself on the table and let him go to work on her carotid. Human blood wouldn’t keep him alive for long, but it sure as hell tasted better than watered-down alcohol.

“Not right now,” he said. His tight smile spiked her anxiety and gave her a shot of lust at the same time. He took her scent into his lungs.

Not interested, he thought.

The waitress nodded, but didn’t move away. She kept staring at him, her short blond hair a halo in the darkness around her face. Spellbound, she seemed to have forgotten her own name, much less her job.

And how annoying was that.

Darius shifted impatiently.

“That’s all,” he muttered. “We’re good.”

As she backed up, getting lost in the crowd, Wrath heard Darius clear his throat. “Thanks for coming.”

“You already said that.”

“Yeah. Right. Ah, you and I go way back.”

“We do.”

“We’ve fought some damn good fights together. Cut down a lot of *lessers*.”

Wrath nodded. The Black Dagger Brotherhood had been protecting the race against the Lessening Society for generations. There was Darius. Tohrment. The four others. The brothers were vastly outnumbered by *lessers*, de-souled humans who served a nasty-ass master, the Omega. But Wrath and his warriors managed to hold their own.

And then some.

Darius cleared his throat. “After all these years—”

“D, you’ve got to cut to the point. Marissa needs to do a little business tonight.”

“Do you want to use your room at my place again? You know I don’t let anyone else stay there.” Darius let out an awkward laugh. “No doubt her brother would prefer you not show up at his house.”

Wrath crossed his arms over his chest, pushing the table out with his boot to give himself a little more room.

He didn’t give a crap that Marissa’s brother had delicate sensibilities and

was offended by the life Wrath lived. Havers was a snob and a dilettante who had his head up his ass. He was totally incapable of understanding the kind of enemies the race had and what it took to defend the population.

And just because the dear boy was offended, Wrath wasn't going to play dandy while civilians were getting slaughtered. He needed to be in the field with his warriors, not taking up space on some throne. So Havers could shove it.

Although Marissa shouldn't have to deal with her brother's attitude.

"I just might take you up on that offer."

"Good."

"Now talk."

"I have a daughter."

Wrath slowly turned his head. "Since when?"

"A while."

"Who's the mother?"

"You don't know her. And she...ah, she died."

Darius's sorrow rose up around him, the acrid smell of old pain cutting through the stench of human sweat, alcohol, and sex in the club.

"How old is she?" Wrath demanded. He had a feeling where this might be headed.

"Twenty-five."

Wrath cursed under his breath. "Don't ask me, Darius. Don't ask me to do it."

"I have to. My lord, your blood is—"

"Call me that again and I'll close your mouth for you. Permanently."

"You don't understand. She's—"

Wrath started to get up. Darius's hand grasped his forearm and then was quickly removed.

"She's half-human."

"Jesus Christ—"

"So she might not survive the transition if she goes through it. Look, if you help her, at least she has a chance of living. Your blood is so strong, it would increase the likelihood of her making it through the change as a half-breed. I'm not asking you to take her on as a *shellan*. Or to protect her, because I can do that. I'm just trying to...Please. My other sons are dead. She's all that could be left of me. And I...Her mother is one I loved."

If it had been anyone else, Wrath would have used his favorite pair of

words: *fuck* and *off*. As far as he was concerned, there were only two good positions for a human. A female on her back. And a male facedown and not breathing.

But Darius was almost a friend. Or would have been one, if Wrath had let him get close.

As Wrath stood up, he closed his eyes. Hatred washed through him, directed into the center of his own chest. He despised himself for walking away, but he just wasn't the kind of male who could help some poor half-breed through such a painful and dangerous time. Gentleness and mercy were not in his makeup.

"I can't do it. Not even for you."

Darius's agony hit him in a great swell, and Wrath actually swayed under the emotion's force. He squeezed the vampire's shoulder.

"If you really love her, do her a favor. Ask someone else."

Wrath turned and stalked out of the bar. On his way to the door he wiped the memory of himself from every human cerebral cortex in the place. The strong ones would think they had dreamed him. The weak ones wouldn't remember him at all.

Out on the street, he headed for a dark corner behind Screamer's so that he could dematerialize. He passed a woman deep throating some guy in the shadows, a bum who'd collapsed in a stupor, a drug dealer arguing on a cell phone about the going price for crack.

Wrath knew the moment he was followed. And who it was. The sweet smell of baby powder was a dead giveaway.

He smiled widely, opened his leather jacket, and took out one of his *hira shuriken*. The stainless-steel throwing star felt comfortable in his palm. Three ounces of death ready to hit the airwaves.

With the weapon in his hand, Wrath didn't change his stride, even though he wanted to rush into the shadows. He was spoiling for a fight after shutting down Darius, and the Lessening Society member behind him had perfect fucking timing.

Killing the soulless human was just what he needed to take the edge off.

As he drew the *lesser* into the dense darkness, Wrath's body primed for the fight, his heart pumping steadily, the muscles in his arms and thighs twitching in anticipation. His ears picked up the sound of a gun being cocked, and he triangulated the weapon's aim. It was pointed at the back of his head.

In a fluid motion, he wheeled around just as the bullet exploded out of the

muzzle. He ducked and threw the star, which flashed silver and twirled in a deadly arc. It caught the *lesser* right in the neck, splitting his throat open before continuing on its path into the darkness. The gun dropped to the ground, clattering across the asphalt.

The *lesser* grabbed his neck with both hands and fell to his knees.

Wrath walked over and went through its pockets. He took the wallet and the cell phone he found and put them into his jacket.

And then he withdrew a long, black-bladed knife from his chest holster. He was disappointed the fight hadn't lasted longer, but going by the dark, curly hair and relatively inept attack, this was a new recruit. With a quick thrust, he pushed the *lesser* onto its back, flipped the weapon in the air, and caught the handle with a swipe of his palm. The blade plunged into flesh, cut through bone, reached the black void where the heart had been.

With a strangled sound, the *lesser* disintegrated in a flash of light.

Wrath wiped the blade off on his leather pants, slipped it back where it belonged, and stood up. He looked around. And then dematerialized himself.

Darius had a third beer. A couple of Goth lovelies dropped by, looking for a chance to help him forget his troubles. He passed on the invites.

He left the bar and walked over to his BMW 650i, which was parked illegally in the alley behind the club. Like any vampire worth his salt, he could dematerialize at will and travel over vast distances, but that was a hard trick to pull off if you had to carry anything heavy. And not something you wanted to do in public.

Besides, a fine car was a joy to behold.

Darius got into the Beemer and shut the door. From out of the sky rain started to fall, dappling the windshield with fat tears.

He wasn't out of options. The talk of Marissa's brother had gotten him thinking. Havers was a physician, a dedicated healer of the race. Maybe he could help. It was certainly worth a try.

Distracted with plans, Darius put the key in the ignition and twisted. The starter wheezed. He turned the key again and then had a terrible premonition as he heard a rhythmic clicking.

The bomb, which had been attached to the undercarriage of the car and hardwired into the electrical system, went off.

As his body was incinerated by a blast of white heat, his last thought was

of the daughter who had yet to meet him. And now never would.

Chapter Three

Beth took a forty-five-minute shower, used half a bottle of body wash, and nearly melted the cheap wallpaper off the bathroom walls because she kept the water so hot. She dried off, threw on her bathrobe, and tried not to catch another shot of her reflection in the mirror. Her lip was a mess.

She stepped out into her cramped studio apartment. The air conditioner had died a couple of weeks ago, so the room was nearly as smothering as the bathroom. She eyed her two windows and the sliding door that led out to a wilted courtyard. She wanted to open them all, but checked the locks instead.

Even though her nerves were shot, at least her body was rebounding fast. Her appetite had returned with a vengeance, as if it were pissed at the diversion of dinner, and she went around to her galley kitchen. The chicken leftovers from four nights ago even seemed inviting, but when she cracked the foil package, she caught a whiff of sweat socks. She pitched the load and tossed a Lean Cuisine into the microwave. She ate the macaroni and cheese standing up, holding the little plastic tray in her palm with a pot holder. It wasn't enough, didn't even make a dent in her hunger, so she had another one.

The idea of putting on twenty pounds in one night was damned appealing; it really was. She couldn't help the way her face looked, but she was willing to bet that Neanderthal misogynist attacker of hers preferred his victims with a tight ass.

She blinked her eyes, trying to get his face out of her mind. God, she could still feel his hands, those awful, heavy palms bruising her breasts.

She needed to file a report. She should go down to the station.

Except she didn't want to leave her apartment. At least not until morning.

She went over to the futon she used as a couch and a bed and curled her legs in tight to her body. Her stomach was doing a slow churn job on the mac

and cheese, waves of nausea followed by marching rows of shivers passing over her skin.

A soft meow brought her head up.

“Hey, Boo,” she said, wiggling her fingers listlessly. The poor guy had run for cover when she’d come through the door tearing her clothes off and throwing them across the room.

Meowing again, the black cat padded over. His wide green eyes looked worried as he leaped into her lap with grace.

“Sorry about the drama,” she murmured, making room for him.

He rubbed his head against her shoulder, purring. His body was warm, his weight grounding. She didn’t know how long she sat there stroking his fine, soft fur, but when the phone rang, she jumped.

As she reached for the receiver, she managed to keep pace with the petting. Years of living with Boo had honed her cat/phone coordination skills to perfection.

“Hello?” she said, thinking it was past midnight, which ruled out telemarketers and suggested either work or some sicko crank-calling her.

“Yo, B-lady. Get your dancing shoes on. Some guy’s car blew up outside of Screamer’s. With him in it.”

Beth closed her eyes and wanted to weep. José de la Cruz was one of the city’s police detectives, but he was also a friend of sorts.

As were most of the men and women in blue, come to think of it. Because she spent so much time at the station, she’d gotten to know them all pretty well, although José was one of her favorites

“Hey, you there?”

Tell him. Tell him what happened. Just open your mouth.

Shame and remembered horror tightened her vocal cords.

“I’m here, José.” She pushed her dark hair out of her face and cleared her throat. “I can’t come tonight.”

“Yeah, right. When you ever turn down a good tip?” He laughed easily.
“Oh, but take it smooth. Hard-ass is on the case.”

Hard-ass was Homicide Detective Brian O’Neal, better known as Butch. Or just plain *sir*.

“I really can’t...make it tonight.”

“You getting busy with someone?” Curiosity spiked his voice. José was married. Happily. But she knew down at the station that they all speculated about her. A woman who looked like her without a man? Something had to

be up. "Well, are you?"

"God, no. No."

There was a stretch of silence as her friend's cop radar obviously kicked in. "What's up?"

"I'm fine. Just tired. I'll come to the station tomorrow."

She'd file the report then. Tomorrow she'd be strong enough to go through what had happened without breaking down.

"Do I need to do a drive-by?"

"No, but thanks. I'm okay."

She hung up.

Fifteen minutes later she was in a pair of freshly laundered jeans and a floppy shirt that covered her butt and then some. She called for a cab. Before she left she rummaged through her closet until she found her other purse. She grabbed the pepper spray and held it hard in her hand as she stepped out of her apartment.

In the two miles between her front door and the bomb scene, she was going to find her voice. And she was going to tell José everything.

As much as she hated the idea of reliving the attack, she wasn't going to let that asshole walk free and do the same thing to someone else. And even if he was never caught, at least she would have done her part to try to nail him.

Wrath materialized in the drawing room of Darius's house.

Damn, he'd forgotten how well the vampire lived.

Even though D was a warrior, he had the tastes of an aristocrat and it made sense. He'd started life as a highborn *princeps*, and fine living was still of value to him. His nineteenth-century mansion was well cared for, filled with antiques and works of art. It was also secure as a bank vault.

But the drawing room's soft yellow walls hurt Wrath's eyes.

"What a pleasant surprise, my lord."

Fritz, the butler, came in from the front hall and bowed deeply while shutting off the lights to ease Wrath's squint. As usual, the old male was dressed in black livery. He'd been with Darius for about a hundred or so years and was a *doggen*, which meant he could go out in the day but aged faster than vampires did. His subspecies had been serving aristocrats and warriors for millennia.

“Will you be with us for long, my lord?”

Wrath shook his head. Not if he could help it. “Hour, tops.”

“Your room is ready. Should you need me, I am here.” Fritz bent at the waist again and walked backward out of the room, closing the double doors behind him.

Wrath went over to a seven-foot-tall portrait of what he’d been told was a French king. He put his hand on the right side of the heavy gold frame, and the canvas pivoted to reveal a dark stone hall lit with gas lamps.

Stepping inside, he took a set of stairs deep into the earth. At the bottom landing there were two doors. One went to Darius’s sumptuous quarters. The other opened to what Wrath supposed was a home away from home for him. Most days he slept in a warehouse in New York City, in an interior room made out of steel with a lock system along the lines of Fort Knox’s.

But he would never invite Marissa there. Or even any of the brothers. His privacy was precious.

As he stepped inside, candles mounted into the walls flared around the room at his will. Their golden glow barely made headway against the darkness. In deference to Wrath’s eyesight, Darius had painted the walls and twenty-foot-high ceiling black. In one corner there was a massive bed with black satin sheets and a thicket of pillows. Across the way was a leather couch, a wide-screen TV, and a door that opened into a black marble bathroom. There was also a closet full of weapons and clothes.

For some reason, Darius was always bugging him to stay at the mansion. It was a goddamned mystery. There wasn’t a defense issue, because Darius could handle himself. And the idea that a vampire like D would be lonely was ludicrous.

Wrath sensed Marissa before she came into the room. The scent of the ocean, a clean breeze, preceded her.

Let’s get this over with, he thought. He was itching to get back to the streets. He’d had only a taste of battle, and tonight he wanted to gorge himself.

He turned around.

As Marissa bowed her slight body to him, he sensed devotion and uneasiness weaving together in the air around her.

“My lord,” she said.

From what little he could see, she was wearing some kind of flowing white chiffon thing, and her long blond hair cascaded over her shoulders and

down her back. He knew she dressed to try to please him, and he wished like hell she wouldn't make the effort.

He took off his leather jacket and the chest holster he carried his daggers in.

Damn his parents. Why had they given him a female like her? So... fragile.

Then again, considering the shape he'd been in before his transition, maybe they'd worried anyone sturdier would have hurt him.

Wrath flexed his arms, his biceps curling up thick, one shoulder cracking from the force.

If they could only see him now. Their little boy had turned into a righteous, cold killer.

Probably better they were dead, he thought. They wouldn't have approved of what he'd become.

Then again, if they'd been allowed to live into old age, he would have been different.

Marissa shifted nervously. "I'm sorry to disturb you. But I cannot wait any longer."

Wrath headed for the bathroom. "You need me, I come."

He turned on the water and rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt. With steam rising from the rush of the faucet, he cleaned the grime, sweat, and death from his hands. Then he worked the bar of soap up his arms, covering with suds the ritualistic tattoos that ran down the insides of his forearms. He rinsed, dried himself, and walked over to the couch. He sat and waited, grinding his teeth.

They'd been doing this for how long? Centuries. But every time it took Marissa a while before she could approach him. If it had been anyone else, his patience would have snapped within moments, but he cut her some slack.

Truth was, he felt sorry for her because she'd been forced to become his *shellan*. He'd told her time and again that he'd release her of their covenant, free her to find a true mate, one who would not only kill anything that threatened her, but would love her, too.

Funny thing was, Marissa wouldn't give up on him, as fragile as she might be. He figured she probably feared no other female would have him, that none would feed the beast when he needed it and then their race would lose their strongest line. Their king. Their leader who wasn't willing to lead.

Yeah, he was one hell of a catch. He stayed away from her unless he had

to drink, which wasn't often because of his lineage. She never knew where he was or what he was doing. She passed the long days alone in her brother's house, sacrificing her life to keep alive the last purebred vampire, the only one with not a single drop of human blood in him.

Frankly, he didn't know how she stood it—or him.

Abruptly, he felt like cursing. Tonight was stacking up to be a real party for his ego. Darius. Now her.

Wrath's eyes followed her as she moved around the room, circling him, getting closer. He forced his face to relax, kept his breathing even, made his body still. This was the hardest part of being with her. He panicked at not being free to move, and he knew when she started to feed, the choking sensation would get worse.

"You have been busy, my lord?" she said softly.

He nodded, thinking that if he was lucky, he was going to get even busier before dawn came.

Marissa finally stood before him, and he could feel her hunger cutting through her uneasiness. He sensed her desire, too. She wanted him, but he blocked out that particular emotion of hers.

There was no way he was going to have sex with her. He couldn't imagine putting Marissa through the things he'd done to other female bodies. And he'd never wanted her that way. Not even in the beginning.

"Come here," he said, gesturing with his hand. He dropped his forearm on his thigh, wrist up. "You're starving. You shouldn't wait so long to call on me."

Marissa lowered herself to the floor at his knees, her gown pooling around her body and his feet. Her fingers were warm on his skin as she softly ran her hand over his tattoos, stroking the black characters that detailed his lineage in the old language. She was close enough so he caught the movement of her mouth opening, her fangs flashing white before she sank them into his vein.

Wrath closed his eyes, laying his head back as she drank. The panic came on him fast and hard. He curled his free arm around the edge of the couch, his muscles straining as he gripped the corner to keep his body in place. Calm, he needed to stay calm. It was going to be over soon, and then he'd be free.

When Marissa lifted her head ten minutes later, he bolted upright and walked off the anxiety, feeling a sick relief that he could now move around. As soon as he had his shit together, he went over to her. She was replete,

absorbing the strength that came to her as their blood mixed. He didn't like the look of her lying on the floor, so he picked her up and was thinking about calling Fritz to take her back to her brother's house when there was a rhythmic knock on the door.

Wrath glared across the room, carried her to the bed, and laid her down.

"Thank you, my lord," she murmured. "I will take myself home."

He paused. And then pulled a sheet over her legs before walking over and cracking open the door.

Fritz was all jazzed up about something.

Wrath slid outside, closing the door tight. He was about to ask what the hell would warrant the disruption when the butler's scent permeated his irritation.

He knew without asking that death had paid another visit.

And Darius was gone.

"Master—"

"How?" he growled. The pain he would deal with later. First he needed details.

"Ah, the car..." Clearly the butler was having trouble holding it together, his voice reedy and thin as his old body. "A bomb, my lord. The car. Outside of the club. Tohrment called. He saw it happen."

Wrath thought of the *lesser* he'd taken down. He wished he knew whether it had been the one who'd done the deed.

The bastards had no honor anymore. At least their precursors, going back for centuries, had fought like warriors. This new breed were cowards who hid behind technology.

"Call the brotherhood," he ground out. "Tell them to come now."

"Yes, of course. And master? Darius asked me to give this to you"—the butler held something out—"if you were not with him when he died."

Wrath took the envelope and went back into the chamber, having no compassion to offer Fritz or anyone else. Marissa was gone, which was good for her.

He tucked Darius's last missive into the waistband of his leather pants.

And let his rage out.

The candles exploded and fell to the floor as a whirlwind of viciousness swirled around him, growing tighter, faster, darker until the furniture flipped off the floor and traveled in a circle around him. He leaned back his head and roared.

Chapter Four

By the time Beth's cab dropped her off outside of Screamer's, the crime scene was alive. Lights flashed blue and white from the squad cars that blocked off access to the alley. The bomb squad's boxy, armored vehicle had shown up. Cops milled around, both uniformed and plainclothed. And the requisite crowd of drunken kibitzers had set up shop at the action's periphery, smoking and talking.

In her time as a reporter, she'd found that murder was a community event in Caldwell. Well, certainly for everyone except the man or woman who'd actually done the dying. For the victim, she had to imagine death was an alone kind of thing, even if he or she were staring into the face of the killer. Some bridges you crossed on your own, no matter who drove you to the edge.

Beth brought her sleeve up to her mouth. The smell of burned metal, a tangy chemical sting, filled her nose.

"Hey, Beth!" One of the cops motioned her over. "If you want a closer look, go through Screamer's to the back. There's a corridor—"

"Actually, I'm here to see José. Is he around?"

The cop craned his neck, searching the crowd. "He was here a minute ago. Maybe he headed back to the station. Ricky! You see José?"

Butch O'Neal stepped in front of her, silencing the other cop with a dark look. "Isn't this a surprise."

Beth stepped back. Hard-ass was a lot of man. Big body, deep voice, attitude to spare. She supposed a lot of women must be attracted to him, because God knew he was a looker in that rough, tough kind of way. But Beth had never felt a spark.

Not that she ever did when it came to men.

"So, Randall, what's doing?" He popped a piece of gum in his mouth,

wadding up the foil into a tight little ball. His jaw went to work like he was frustrated, not so much chewing as grinding.

“I’m here for José. Not for the scene.”

“Sure you are.” His gaze narrowed on her face. With his dark brows and deep-set eyes, he always looked a little angry, but abruptly his expression got worse. “Would you come with me for a sec?”

“I really want José—”

Her arm was taken in a tight grip.

“Just come over here.” Butch backed her into a secluded corner of the alley, away from the commotion. “What the hell happened to your face?”

She put her hand up and covered her split lip. She must still be in shock, because she’d forgotten all about it.

“Let me repeat the question,” he said. “What the *hell* happened to you?”

“I, ah...” Her throat closed up. “I was...”

She was *not* going to cry. Not in front of Hard-ass.

“I want José.”

“He’s not here, so you can’t have him. Now talk.” Butch braced his arms on either side of her body, as if he sensed she might run. He was only a couple of inches taller than she was, but he had at least seventy pounds of muscle on her.

Fear kicked in like an ice pick punching through her chest, but she’d had quite enough of being physically bullied tonight.

“Back off, O’Neal.” She put her palms squarely on his chest and pushed. He moved. A little.

“Beth, tell—”

“If you don’t let me go”—her eyes held his—“I’m going to do an exposé on your interrogation techniques. You know, the ones that require X rays and casts after you’re through?”

His eyes narrowed again. And then he pulled his arms away from her body, holding his hands up as if he were surrendering.

“Fine.” He left her and went back into the fray.

She collapsed against the building, feeling as if her legs were never going to work right again. She looked down, trying to gather her strength, and squinted at something metal. She bent her knees, getting down on her haunches. It was a martial-arts throwing star.

“Hey, Ricky!” she called out. The cop came loping over, and she pointed to the ground. “Evidence.”

She left him to do his job and hurried out to Trade Street to catch a cab. She just couldn't keep it together any longer.

Tomorrow she would file an official report with José. First thing in the morning.

When Wrath reappeared in the drawing room, he was back in control. His weapons were strapped on, and his jacket was heavy in his hand, filled with the throwing stars and knives he liked to use.

Tohrment was the first of the brotherhood to arrive. His eyes were all fired up, pain and vengeance making the dark blue glow so vividly even Wrath caught the flash of color.

As Tohr settled back against one of Darius's yellow walls, Vishous came into the room. The goatee he'd recently grown made him seem even more sinister than usual, although the tattoo around his left eye was what really put him into ominous territory. Tonight his Red Sox hat was pulled down tight so the complex markings on his temple barely showed. As always, his black driving glove, used to keep his left hand from inadvertently making contact with anyone, was in place.

Which was a good thing. A goddamned public service.

Rhage followed, his cocky attitude dialed down in deference to what had brought the brothers together. Rhage was a towering male, big, powerful, stronger than all the other warriors. He was also a sex legend in the vampire world, Hollywood beautiful with the drive to rival a barnful of stallions. Females, vampire and human alike, would trample their own young to get at him.

At least until they got a peek at his dark side. When Rhage's beast came out, everyone, the brothers included, looked for shelter and took up praying.

Phury was the last, walking through the front door with his limp barely noticeable. His prosthetic lower leg had recently been updated, and he was sporting a state-of-the-art titanium-and-carbon composite number now. The combination of rods, joints, and bolts was screwed into the base of his right shitkicker.

With his fantastic mane of multicolored hair, Phury should have been in Hollywood's league with the ladies, but he'd stuck solid to his vow of celibacy. There was room for one and only one love in his life, and it had been slowly killing him for years.

“Where’s your twin, man?” Wrath asked.

“Z’s on his way.”

That Zsadist was late was no big surprise. Z was one giant, violent fuck-you to the world. A walking, sometimes talking, usually cursing SOB who took hatred, especially toward females, to new levels. Fortunately, between his scarred face and his skull-trimmed hair, he looked as scary as he was, so folks tended to get out of his way.

Stolen from his family as an infant, he’d ended up a blood slave, and his abuse at the hands of his mistress had been brutal on every level. It had taken Phury almost a century to find his twin, and Z had been tortured to within an inch of death before the rescue.

A fall into the salty ocean had sealed Zsadist’s wounds into his skin, and in addition to the maze of scars, he still bore the tattoos of a slave. As well as various piercings he’d added himself.

Just because he liked the feel of pain.

Hands down, Z was the most dangerous of the brothers. After what he’d been put through, he didn’t give a shit about anything or anyone. Including his twin.

Even Wrath watched his back around that warrior.

Yeah, the Black Dagger Brotherhood was a hell of a group. All that stood between the civilian vampire population and the *lessers*.

Crossing his arms, Wrath looked around the room, taking each one of them in, seeing their strengths but mostly their curses.

With Darius’s death, he was reminded that though his warriors were hitting the society’s legions of slayers hard, there were so few of the brothers going against an inexhaustible, self-generating pool of *lessers*.

Because God knew there were plenty of humans with an interest and aptitude for murder.

The numbers were simply not in the race’s favor. He couldn’t escape the fact that vampires didn’t live forever and that brothers could be killed and that the balance could be thrown off in an instant. In favor of the race’s enemies.

Hell, the shift had happened already. Ever since the Omega had created the Lessening Society aeons ago, vampire numbers had shrunk until now there were only a few enclaves of population left. Their kind was flirting with extinction. Even though the brothers were deadly fine at what they did.

If Wrath had been a different kind of king, one like his father, who

wanted to be the adored, revered paterfamilias to the species, maybe the future would have seemed more promising. But the son wasn't as the father had been. Wrath was a fighter, not a leader, better on his feet with a dagger in his hand than sitting around being adored.

He refocused on the brothers. As the warriors stared back at him, they were looking to him for direction. And their deference made him edgy.

"I'm taking Darius's death as a personal attack," he said.

There was a low grunt of approval from the brothers.

Wrath took out the wallet and cell phone he'd liberated from the Lessening Society member he'd killed. "I took these off a *lesser* earlier tonight behind Screamer's. Some of you mind doing the honors?"

He tossed them into the air. Phury caught both and passed the phone to Vishous.

Wrath started pacing. "We need to go raiding again."

"Damn straight," Rhage growled. There was a metallic shifting and then the sound of a knife being driven into a table. "We need to get them where they train. Where they *live*."

Which meant the brothers were going to have to do some recon. Members of the Lessening Society weren't stupid. They changed their centers of operation regularly, constantly moving their recruiting and training facilities from place to place. Because of this, the vampire warriors typically found it more efficient to make themselves targets and fight what came after them.

Occasionally the brotherhood had gone on raids before, killing dozens of *lessers* in one evening as a pack. That kind of offensive tactic was rare, however. Full-scale attacks were efficient, but they were also a tricky proposition. Big battles tended to attract the attention of human police, and keeping a low profile was in everyone's interest.

"There's a driver's license," Phury muttered. "I'll scope the address. It's local."

"What's the name?" Wrath demanded.

"Robert Strauss."

Vishous cursed as he examined the phone. "There's not much here. Some shit in the call log, some speed dials. I'll hit the computer and find out who's been calling and what's been dialed."

Wrath gritted his teeth. Impatience and rage were a hell of a cocktail to swallow. "I don't need to tell you to work fast. There's no way to know whether the *lesser* I picked off tonight was the one who did it, so I'm

thinking we need to do a clean sweep of this whole area. Kill them all no matter how messy it gets.”

The front door swung open, and Zsadist strode into the house.

Wrath glared. “Nice of you to show up, Z. Busy tonight with the females?”

“How about you get off my dick?” Zsadist went over to the corner, staying away from the rest.

“Where you going to be, my lord?” Tohrment asked smoothly.

Good old Tohr. Always trying to keep the peace, whether by distraction, intervention, or flat-out bullying.

“Here. I’m going to stay here. If the *lesser* who nailed Darius is alive and interested in playing some more, I want to be available and easy to find.”

After the warriors left, Wrath pulled on his jacket. In the process Darius’s envelope poked him in the side, and he took it from his waistband. There was a strip of ink on the front, which he assumed was his name. He cracked open the flap. As he drew out a creamy piece of paper, a photograph fluttered to the ground. He picked it up and had the vague impression of long dark hair. A female.

Wrath stared at the paper. The writing ran together, a meaningless, blurry scrawl he had no hope of deciphering no matter how hard he squinted.

“Fritz!” he called out.

The butler came rushing in.

“Read this.”

Fritz took the sheet and bent his head, falling into silence.

“Aloud,” Wrath bit out.

“Oh. My apologies, master.” Fritz cleared his throat. “If I haven’t spoken to you already, ask Tohrment for details. Eleven eighty-eight Redd Avenue, apartment one-B. Her name is Elizabeth Randall. P.S. The house and Fritz are yours if she doesn’t survive to adulthood. Sorry it had to end so soon. D.”

“Son of a bitch,” Wrath muttered.

Chapter Five

Beth had changed into her nocturnal wardrobe of boxers and a T-shirt, and was pulling the futon out flat when Boo began to meow at the sliding glass door. The cat paced in a tight circle, eyes trained on something outside.

“Are you trying to get at Mrs. Di Gio’s tabby again? We did that once and it didn’t go well, remember?”

A pounding on her front door brought her head around and kick-started her heart.

She walked over and put her eye to the peephole. When she saw who it was, she rolled over and pressed her back against the cheap wood panels.

The pounding started again.

“I know you’re in there,” Hard-ass said. “And I’m going to keep this up.”

She flipped the locks and threw open the door. Before she could tell him to go to hell, he barged past her.

Boo lifted his back and hissed.

“Pleased to meet you, too, Panther Boy.” Butch’s deep drawl seemed totally out of place in her apartment.

“How did you get into the lobby?” she said as she shut the door.

“I picked the lock.”

“Was there any particular reason you chose this building to break into, Detective?”

He shrugged and sat down in her tattered wing chair. “Thought I’d visit a friend.”

“So why are you bothering me?”

“Nice place you got,” he said, looking at her stuff.

“You’re such a liar.”

“Hey, at least it’s all clean. Which is more than I can say about my own hovel.” His dark, hazel eyes went to her face and stayed there. “Now, let’s

talk about what happened when you left work tonight, shall we?"

She crossed her arms over her chest.

He chuckled softly. "Man, what's José got that I don't?"

"You want a pen and some paper? It's quite a list."

"Ouch. You're cold, you know that?" His tone was amused. "Tell me, do you only like the unavailable ones?"

"Look, I'm exhausted—"

"Yeah, you left work late. Nine forty-five-ish. I talked to your boss. Dick said you were still at your desk when he went to Charlie's. You walked home, didn't you? Down Trade Street. Just like I'll bet you do every night. And you were alone. For a while."

Beth swallowed as a soft sound brought her eyes to the sliding glass door. Boo was back to his pacing and meowing, his eyes reaching out into the darkness.

"Now, are you going to tell me what happened when you hit the intersection of Trade and Tenth?" His eyes softened.

"How do you know—"

"Just talk to me. And I promise, I'll make sure that motherfucker gets it right good."

Wrath stood in the still night, staring at the shape of Darius's daughter. She was tall for a human female, and her hair was black, but that was all his eyes could tell him. He breathed in, but he couldn't catch her scent. Her doors and windows were shut, and the wind blowing from the west carried the fruity decay of trash.

He could hear the drone of her voice through the closed door, however. She was talking to someone. A man whom she apparently didn't trust or didn't like, because her words were clipped short.

"I'll make this as easy on you as I can," the guy was saying.

Wrath watched as she walked over and looked outside through the glass door. She was staring right at him, but he knew she couldn't see him. He was deep in the shadows.

She opened the door and put her head out, blocking a cat's exit with her foot.

Wrath felt his breath catch as her scent came to him. She smelled positively beautiful. Like a rich flower. Night-blooming roses, maybe. He

dragged more air into his lungs and closed his eyes as his body reacted, his blood stirring. Darius had been right; she was nearing her transition. He could smell it on her. Half-breed or not, she was going to go through the change.

She slid the screen in place and turned back to the man. Her voice was much clearer with the door open, and Wrath liked the husky sound of it.

“They came at me from across the street. There were two of them. The taller one pulled me into the alley and...”

Wrath snapped to attention.

“I tried to fight him off. I really did. But he was bigger than me, and then his friend pinned my arms.” Her breath hic-cupped. “He told me he’d cut out my tongue if I screamed, and I thought he was going to kill me, I really did. Then he ripped open my shirt and pushed up my bra. I came so close to being...But I got free and ran. He had blue eyes, brown hair, and an earring, a square cut diamond, in his left ear. He was wearing a dark blue polo shirt and khaki shorts. I didn’t get a good look at his shoes. His friend was blond, short hair, no earrings, dressed in a white T-shirt that had the name of that local band, Tomato Eater, on it.”

The man got up and went to her. He put his arm around her and tried to hug her against his chest, but she pulled away and put distance between them.

“Do you really think you’ll be able to get him?” she said.

The man nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

Butch left Beth Randall’s apartment in a foul mood.

Seeing a woman who’d been clocked in the face was not a part of his job he liked. And in Beth’s case he found it particularly disturbing, because he’d known her for a while and he was kind of attracted to her. The fact that she was an unusually beautiful woman didn’t make it any more egregious. But her swollen lip and the bruises around her throat were glaring defects within the otherwise perfection of her features.

Beth Randall was flat-out, hands-down gorgeous. She had long, thick black hair, impossibly bright blue eyes, skin like pale cream, a mouth just made for a man’s kiss. And she was built. Long legs, small waist, perfectly proportioned breasts.

The men at the station were all in love with her, and Butch had to give her props: She never used her attractiveness to get inside information from the boys. And she kept everything professional. She never dated any of them,

even though most would have given their left nut just to hold her hand.

One thing was for sure: Her attacker had made a hell of a mistake when he'd picked her. The entire police force was going to be gunning for that fool when they found out who he was.

And Butch had a big mouth.

He got into his unmarked car and drove to the St. Francis Hospital complex across town. He parked at the curb in front of the emergency room and went inside.

The guard at the revolving door smiled at him. "You heading for the morgue, Detective?"

"Naw. Just visiting a friend."

The man nodded him through.

Butch walked past the ER's waiting room with its plastic plants, dog-eared magazines, and anxious people. Pushing open a set of double doors, he headed into the sterile, white, clinical environment. He nodded to the nurses and docs he knew as he went to the triage desk.

"Hey, Doug, you know that guy we brought in with the busted nose?"

The attending looked up from a chart he was reading. "Yeah, he's about to be released. He's in the back, room twenty-eight." The internist let out a little laugh. "I tell ya, that nose of his was the least of his problems. He's not going to be singing low notes for a while."

"Thanks, buddy. By the way, how's the wife?"

"Good. She's due in a week."

"Let me know how it goes."

Butch headed for the back. Before walking into room twenty-eight, he looked up and down the hall. It was quiet. There were no medical personnel around, no visitors, no patients.

He opened the door and put his head inside.

Billy Riddle looked up from the bed. There was a white bandage running under his nose like the thing was holding his brains in. "What's up, Officer? You find the guy who got me? I'm about to be released and I'd feel better knowing you had him in custody."

Butch shut the door and quietly flipped its lock.

He was smiling as he crossed the room eyeing the square cut sparkler in the guy's left lobe. "How's the nose, Billy boy?"

"Good. And the nurse was a piece of ass—"

Butch grabbed the front of the punk's blue polo shirt and yanked him to

his feet. Then he slammed Beth's attacker against the wall so hard the machinery behind the bed wobbled.

Butch put his face so close they could have kissed. "Did you have fun tonight?"

Wide blue eyes met his. "What are you talking—"

Butch slammed him again. "I've got a positive ID on you. From the woman who you tried to rape."

"That wasn't me!"

"The hell it wasn't. And given your little threat about her tongue and your knife, I might even have enough to send you to Dannemora. You ever have a boyfriend before, Billy? I bet you're going to be popular. Nice white boy like you."

The guy went pale as the walls. "I didn't touch her!"

"Tell you what, Billy. If you're honest with me, and if you tell me where your buddy is, you might actually walk out of here. Otherwise I'm going to take you down to the station on a stretcher."

Billy seemed to consider the deal for a moment. And then the words came out of his mouth fast. "She wanted it! She was begging me—"

Butch brought up his knee and pressed it into Billy's crotch. A high-pitched yelp cut through the air. "Is that why you're going to have to piss sitting down for the next week?"

As the punk started babbling, Butch dropped him and watched him slide down onto the floor. When Billy saw the handcuffs come out, the whining got louder.

Butch flipped him over roughly and was none too gentle as he pulled the guy's wrists together. He clipped the cuffs in place. "You're under arrest. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney—"

"Do you have any idea who my father is!" Billy yelled, as if he'd gotten a second wind. "He's going to have your badge!"

"If you can't afford one, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights as I've stated them?"

"Fuck you!"

Butch palmed the back of the guy's head and pressed that busted nose into the linoleum. "Do you understand these rights as I've stated them?"

Billy moaned and nodded, leaving a smear of fresh blood on the floor.

"Good. Now let's get your paperwork done. I'd hate not to follow proper

police procedure.”

Chapter Six

“**B**oo! Would you cut that out?” Beth punched her pillow and rolled over so she faced the cat.

He looked at her and meowed. In the glow from the kitchen light she’d left on, she saw him paw at the glass door.

“Not likely, Boo-man. You’re a house cat. House. Cat. Trust me, the big outdoors isn’t as grand as it seems.”

She closed her eyes, and when the next plaintive meow came, she cursed and threw off her sheet. She went to the door and stared outside.

That was when she saw the man. He was standing against the back wall of the courtyard, a dark shape much larger than the other, familiar shadows cast by the trash bins and the moss-covered picnic table.

With shaking hands she checked the lock on the door and then went to her windows. Both were locked as well. She pulled the shades down, grabbed her portable phone, and went back to stand over Boo.

The man had moved.

Shit!

He was coming toward her. She checked the lock on the door again and backed away, catching the edge of the futon with her foot. As she tumbled into space, the phone fell out of her hand and bounced away. She hit the mattress hard, head bobbing on her neck from the impact.

Impossibly, the door slid open as if the lock had never been turned, as if she’d never clicked it into place.

Still flat on her back, she pumped her legs wildly, knotting the sheets as she pushed her body away from him. He was tremendous, his shoulders wide as I beams, his legs as thick as her torso. She couldn’t see his face, but the menace coming off him was like a gun aimed at her chest.

She whimpered as she rolled over on to the floor and crawled away from

him, her knees and palms squeaking against the hardwood. His footsteps behind her landed like thunder, getting louder. Cowering like an animal, blinded by fear, she knocked into her hall table and felt no pain at all.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she begged for mercy and reached for the front door—

Beth woke up, mouth open, a terrible noise shattering the dawn's silence.

It was her. She was screaming at the top of her lungs.

She clamped her lips together, and sure enough her ears stopped hurting. Shuffling out of bed, she went to the sliding door and greeted the sun's first rays with a relief so sweet she got light-headed. As her heart slowed, she took a deep breath and checked the door.

The lock was in place. The courtyard was empty. Everything was normal.

She laughed tightly. Of course she'd have a bad dream after what had happened last night. She was probably going to have the heebie-jeebies for a while.

She turned and headed for the shower. She felt half-dead, but the last place she wanted to be was alone in her apartment. She craved the bustle of the newsroom, wanted to be around all of its people, and phones, and papers. She'd feel safer there.

She was about to step into the bathroom when a lick of pain shot through her foot. She cocked her knee and picked a piece of pottery out of the tough skin of her heel. Bending down, she found the bowl she kept on the hall table in pieces on the floor.

Frowning, she cleaned up the mess.

She must have knocked the thing off when she'd first come home after the attack.

As Wrath walked down into the earth under Darius's mansion, exhaustion followed. He closed and locked the door behind him, disarmed, and drew out a battered trunk from the closet. Flipping the lid back, he grunted as he lifted up a slab of black marble. It was four feet square and four inches thick, and he put it down in the middle of the room. He went back to the trunk, picked up a velvet bag, and tossed it on the bed.

Stripping down, he showered and shaved, then walked back into the room naked. He grabbed the bag, untied the satin ribbon at its neck, and poured out the rough-cut, pebble-sized diamonds onto the slab. The empty satchel fell

from his hand and floated down to the floor.

Wrath bowed his head and spoke the words of his mother tongue, the syllables rising and falling with his breath as he paid tribute to his dead. When he finished speaking, he knelt down onto the slab, feeling the stones cut into his flesh. He settled his weight back on his heels, placed his palms on his thighs, and closed his eyes.

The death ritual required him to pass the day without moving, to bear the pain, to bleed in memory of his friend.

In his mind he saw Darius's daughter.

He shouldn't have gone inside of her home like that. He'd scared her half to death, when all he'd wanted to do was introduce himself and explain why she was going to need him soon. He'd also planned to tell her he was going after that human male who'd fucked with her.

Yeah, he'd handled it beautifully. Smooth as gravel.

The moment he'd come inside, she'd bolted in terror and he'd had to strip her memories and put her in a light trance to calm her down. After he'd laid her out on her bed, he'd meant to leave right away, but he hadn't been able to. He'd stood over her, measuring the blurry contrast between her black hair and her white pillowcase, breathing in her scent.

Feeling a sexual stirring in his gut.

Before he'd left, he'd made sure her doors and windows were locked. And then he'd looked back at her one more time. He'd thought of her father.

Wrath focused on the ache that was already setting up shop in his thighs.

As his blood turned the marble red, he saw his dead warrior's face and felt the tie they'd shared in life.

He had to honor his brother's last request. He owed the male at least that for all the years they'd served the race together.

Half-human or not, Darius's daughter was never going to walk the night unprotected again. And she wasn't going to go through her transition alone.

God help her.

Butch finished processing Billy Riddle around six A.M. The guy was offended by the class of drug dealers and thugs he'd been put into the holding cell with, so Butch was careful to make as many typographical errors as possible on his reports. And what would you know, Central Processing kept getting confused about exactly which forms needed to be filled out.

And then the printers had gone on the fritz. All twenty-three of them.

Still, Riddle wasn't long for the station house. His father was indeed a powerful man, a U.S. senator. So some fancy lawyer was going to get Billy sprung quicker than shit through a goose. Probably in the next hour.

'Cause that was the criminal justice system for you. Money talked, and creeps walked.

Not that Butch was bitter or anything.

As he walked out to the lobby, he ran into one of their regular overnight guests. Cherry Pie had evidently just been released from the women's side. Her real name was Mary Mulcahy, and from what Butch had heard, she'd been working the streets for about two years.

"Hey, there, Detective," she purred. Her red lipstick had pooled into the corners of her mouth, and her black eyeliner was smudged. She would have been pretty, he thought, if she put the crack pipe down and slept for about a month straight. "You going home alone?"

"As always." He held the door open for her as they went outside.

"Don't your left hand get tired after a while?"

Butch laughed as they both paused and looked up at the sky.

"So how you been, Cherry?"

"I'm always good."

She put a cigarette between her teeth and lit it while eyeing him.

"You know, your palms ever get too hairy, you could call me. I'd do you for free, 'cause you sure are a handsome SOB. But don't tell Big Daddy I said so."

She blew out a cloud of smoke and absently fingered her ragged left ear. The top half was missing.

Man, that pimp of hers was a rabid dog.

They started down the concrete steps.

"You check out that program I told you about?" Butch asked as they reached the sidewalk. He was helping a friend start up a prostitute support group that would encourage women to get free of the pimps and out of the life.

"Oh, yeah, sure. Good stuff." She flashed him a smile. "I'll see you later."

"Take care of yourself."

She turned away and slapped her right butt cheek with her palm. "Just think, this could be yours."

Butch watched her sashay down the street for a little while. And then he got into an unmarked car and, on impulse, drove across town, back to the Screamer's neighborhood. He pulled up in front of McGrider's. About fifteen minutes later a woman in a tight pair of blue jeans and a black belly shirt came out of the joint. She blinked myopically at the brightening light.

When she caught sight of his car, she fluffed her auburn hair and walked over to him. He put the window down and she leaned in, kissing him on the lips.

"I haven't seen you for a while. You lonely, Butch?" she said against his mouth.

She smelled like dried beer and maraschino cherries, every bartender's perfume at the end of a long night.

"Get in," he said.

She went around the front of the car and slid beside him. They talked about how her night had been as he drove out to the river. She was disappointed that the tips had been light again. And her feet were killing her from running back and forth behind the bar.

He parked under the span bridge that crossed the Hudson River and linked Caldwell's two halves. He made sure they were far enough away from the homeless men lying in beds of rags. There was no reason to have an audience.

And he had to give Abby credit: She was fast. She had his pants undone and was working his erection with a good stroke before he even had the engine off. As he pushed the seat back, she straddled him and nuzzled his neck. He looked past her kinky, permed hair and out to the water.

The sunlight was so beautiful, he thought, as it dappled over the surface of the river.

"Do you love me, baby?" she whispered in his ear.

"Yeah, sure." He smoothed her hair back and looked into her eyes. They were vacant. He could have been any man, and that was why their relationship worked.

His heart was as empty as her stare.

Chapter Seven

As Mr. X crossed the parking lot and headed for the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy, he caught a whiff of the Dunkin' Donuts across the street. That smell, that gorgeous, thick smell of flour and sugar and hot oil, was heavy in the morning air. He looked over his shoulder, watching as a man emerged with two white-and-pink boxes under his arm and a huge travel mug of coffee in his other hand.

That would be a nice way to start the morning, Mr. X thought.

Mr. X stepped up onto the sidewalk that ran beneath the academy's red-and-gold awning. He paused, reaching down and picking up a stray plastic cup. Its previous owner had been careful to keep an inch of soda in the bottom so his or her cigarette butts could enjoy floating around while they waited for someone else to throw them away. He pitched the nasty swill in the trash and unlocked the doors to the academy.

The Lessening Society had turned a corner in the war last night, and he was the one who had done the deed. Darius had been a powerhouse of a vampire, a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. One hell of a trophy.

It was a damn shame there was nothing left of the corpse to mount on a wall, but Mr. X's bomb had performed adequately and then some. He'd been at home, listening to his police scanner, when the report had come in. The op was everything he had planned it to be, perfectly executed, perfectly anonymous.

Perfectly deadly.

He tried to recall the last time a member of the brotherhood had been taken out. Well before he'd joined the society decades ago, certainly. And he'd expected to get a few pats on the back, not that such accolades motivated him. He'd figured he might even get a bonus out of it, maybe an expansion of his sphere of influence, maybe a greater geographic radius in

which to work.

But the reward...the reward was more than he'd expected.

The Omega had paid him a visit an hour before dawn. And conferred upon him all the rights and privileges of *Fore-lesser*.

Leader of the Lessening Society.

It was an awesome responsibility. And exactly what Mr. X had been angling for.

Power granted was the only form of praise he was interested in.

Walking with long strides, he headed for his office. The first classes would start at nine, and there was plenty of time for him to lay down some of the new rules for his subordinates in the society.

His first instinct after the Omega had left was to send an announcement out, but that would have been unwise. A leader gathered his thoughts before he spoke; he did not rush to the podium to be adored. Ego, after all, was the root of evil.

So instead of crowing like a fool, he'd gone outside and sat down in a lawn chair, looking over the meadow behind his house. In the dawn's nascent glow, he'd reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of his organization and allowed his instincts to show him the way to manage both. From the tangle of images and thoughts, patterns had emerged, the future becoming clear.

Sitting behind his desk now, he signed on to the society's secured Web site and made it clear that a change in leadership had occurred. He ordered all *lessers* to come to the academy at four P.M. that afternoon, knowing that some would have to travel, but none was farther away than an eight-hour car ride. Anyone who did not show up would be excised from the society and hunted down like a dog.

Gathering the *lessers* together in one place was rare. At this time their numbers hovered in the fifty to sixty range, depending on the number of kills the brotherhood got in on any given night and the number of new recruits that were brought into service. The society's members were all in and around New England. This concentration in the northeastern United States was dictated by the prevalence of vampires in the area. If that population moved, so would the society.

As had been the way throughout the generations of the war.

Mr. X was aware that getting the *lessers* to Caldwell for an audience was critical. Although he knew most of them, and some of them rather well, he needed for them to see him and hear him and measure him. Especially as he

redirected their focus.

Calling the meeting in the daylight was also important, as it would ensure they weren't ambushed by the brotherhood. And he could easily pass it off to the academy's human employees as a seminar on martial-arts technique. They would hold the gathering in the large conference room in the basement and lock the doors so they wouldn't be intruded upon.

Before he signed off, he posted an account of his elimination of Darius, because he wanted the slayers to have it in writing. He detailed the kind of bomb he'd used, the way to manufacture one from scratch, and the method for hardwiring the detonator into a car's ignition system. It was so easy once the thing was set. All you needed to do was arm it, and then the next time the engine was started, anyone in the car was turned to ash.

For that split second of payoff, he'd tracked the warrior Darius for a year, watching him, learning the rhythms of his life. And then two days ago, Mr. X had broken into the Greene Brothers BMW dealership when the vampire had sent his 6-series in for service. The bomb had been set, and then last night Mr. X had walked by the car and activated the detonator with a radio transmitter without missing a step.

The long, concentrated effort to set up the elimination was not something he shared. He wanted his *lessers* to believe he was able to execute such a flawless move on a whim. Image and perception played important roles in the creation of a power base, and he wanted to start building his command credibility right away.

After signing off, he leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. Ever since he'd joined the society, the focus had been on reducing the vampire population through civilian eliminations. This would remain his overall goal, of course, but his first decree would be a change in strategy. The key to winning the war was taking out the brotherhood. Without those six warriors, the civilians would be naked against the *lessers*, undefended.

The tactic was not a new one. It had been attempted in generations past and discarded numerous times when the brothers had proven either too aggressive or too elusive to be taken out. But with Darius's death, the society had momentum.

And they had to do something differently. As it stood now, the brotherhood was cutting down hundreds of *lessers* every year, requiring the ranks to be fed with new, inexperienced slayers. Recruits were trouble. They were hard to find, hard to induct into the society, and not as effective as

seasoned members of the society.

This constant need to bring in new men led to a critical weakness for the society. Training centers like the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy served an important purpose in identifying and enlisting humans to join the ranks, but they were also points of exposure. Avoiding interference by the human police—and protecting against a siege by the brotherhood—required constant vigilance and frequent relocation. The moving around from place to place was disruptive, but how else could the society stay stocked and yet the centers of operation not be ambushed?

Mr. X shook his head. At some point he was going to need a second in command, though he wouldn't bring one on for a while.

Fortunately, nothing he was going to do was particularly complex. It was all basic military strategy. Marshal your forces. Coordinate them. Acquire information on the enemy. Advance in a logical, disciplined manner.

He was marshaling his forces this afternoon.

As for coordination, he was going to arrange them into squadrons. And he was going to insist the slayers start meeting with him regularly in small groups.

As for information? If they were going to take out the brotherhood, they needed to know where to find the brothers. This would be difficult, though not impossible. Those warriors were a cagey, suspicious lot who kept to themselves, but the civilian vampire population did have some contact with them. After all, the brothers had to feed, and it couldn't be off one another. They required female blood.

And females, even if most of them were sheltered like precious art, had brothers and fathers who could be persuaded to talk. With the proper incentive, the males would reveal where their womenfolk went and who they saw. And then the brotherhood would be revealed.

This was the key to his overall strategy: A coordinated program of capture and motivation, focused on civilian males and the rare female who was out and about, would eventually lead to the brothers. It had to. Either because the brothers became incensed that the civilians were being used so roughly and came out with all daggers flashing. Or because someone talked and their locations were divulged.

The best outcome would be to find out where the warriors spent their days. Taking them down while the sun was shining, when they were at their most vulnerable, was the course of action with the highest probability of

success and the lowest likelihood of society fatalities.

All things considered, killing civilian vampires was only slightly more difficult than knocking out your average human. They bled if you cut them, and their hearts stopped beating if you shot them, and if you got them into the sunlight they burned up.

Killing a member of the brotherhood was a very different proposition. They were monstrously strong, highly trained, and they healed up fast, a subspecies all their own. You had one shot with a warrior. If you didn't make it mortal, you were not making it home.

Mr. X stood up from the desk, taking a moment to study his reflection in the office's window. Pale hair, pale skin, pale eyes. Before he'd joined the society he'd been a redhead. Now he couldn't remember what he'd looked like anymore.

But he was very clear about his future. And the society's.

He locked the door behind him and went down the tiled hall to the main arena, waiting by the entrance, nodding at the students as they came inside for their jujitsu lesson. This was his favorite class, a group of young men, ages eighteen to twenty-four, who showed a lot of promise. As the fleet of guys in white, belted jujitsu *gis* bowed their heads to him and addressed him as sensei, Mr. X measured each one, noticing the way their eyes moved, the way they carried their bodies, how their moods seemed.

With his students lined up and prepared to spar, he continued to look them over, always keeping an eye out for potential recruits to the society. He was searching for just the right combination of physical strength, mental acuity, and unchanneled hatred.

When he'd been approached to join the Lessening Society in the 1950s, he'd been a seventeen-year-old greaser in a juvenile delinquent program. The year before he'd stabbed his father in the chest after the bastard had knocked him one too many times in the head with a beer bottle. He'd hoped to kill the man, but unfortunately his father had survived and lived long enough to go home and kill Mr. X's mother.

But at least dear old Dad had had the sense to blow his own head all over the wall with a shotgun afterward. Mr. X had found the body on a visit home, right before he'd been caught and thrown into the system.

On that day, as he'd stood over his father's corpse, Mr. X had learned that screaming at the dead wasn't even remotely satisfying. There was, after all, nothing to be taken from someone who was already gone.

Considering who'd sired him, it was no accident that violence and hatred were thick in Mr. X's blood. And killing vampires was one of the few socially acceptable outlets for a murder streak like his. The military was a bore. Too many rules, and you had to wait until an enemy was declared before you could get to work. And serial killing was too small-scale.

The society was different. He had everything he'd ever wanted. Unlimited funds. The chance to kill every time the sun went down. And, of course, there was that all-important opportunity to mold the next generation.

So he'd had to sell his soul to get in. That was not a problem. After what his father had done to him, there hadn't been much of it left anyway.

In his mind, he'd definitely come out on the money side of the trade. He was guaranteed to be young and in perfect health until the day he died. And his death would be predicated not on some biological failure, like cancer or heart disease, but on his own ability to keep himself in one piece.

Thanks to the Omega, he was physically superior to humans, his eyesight was perfect, and he got to do what he liked best. The impotence had bothered him a little at the beginning, but he'd gotten used to that. And the not eating or drinking...well, it wasn't as if he'd been a gourmand anyway.

Besides, making blood run was better than food or sex any day.

When the door to the arena opened abruptly, he shot a glare over his shoulder. It was Billy Riddle, and the guy had two black eyes and a bandaged nose.

Mr. X cocked an eyebrow. "You sitting out today, Riddle?"

"Yes, sensei." Billy bowed his head. "But I wanted to come anyway."

"Good man." Mr. X put his arm around Riddle's shoulders. "I like your commitment. Tell you what—you want to put them through their paces during the warm-up?"

Billy bowed deeply, his broad back going nearly parallel to the floor.
"Sensei."

"Go to it." He clapped the guy on the shoulder. "And don't take it easy on them."

Billy looked up, his eyes flashing.

Mr. X nodded. "Glad to see you get the point, son."

When Beth walked out of her building, she frowned at the unmarked police car parked across the street. José got out and jogged over to her.

“I heard what happened.” His eyes lingered on her mouth. “How you feelin’?”

“Better.”

“Come on, I’m giving you a ride to work.”

“Thanks, but I want to walk.” José’s jaw set like he wanted to argue, so she reached out and touched his forearm. “I won’t let this scare me so badly that I can’t live my life. I’ve got to walk by that alley at some point, and I’d rather do it for the first time in the morning, when there’s plenty of light.”

He nodded. “Fine. But you’re going to call a cab at night or you’re going to get one of us to pick you up.”

“José—”

“Glad you see it our way.” He walked back across the street. “Oh, and I don’t suppose you’ve heard what Butch O’Neal did last night?”

She almost didn’t want to ask. “What?”

“He paid a little visit to that punk. I understand the guy had to get his nose set again after our good detective was finished with him.” José opened the car door and dropped down into the seat. “Now, are we gonna be seeing you today?”

“Yeah, I want to know more about that car bomb.”

“Thought so. See you in a few.” He waved and peeled away from the curb.

But by three in the afternoon, she still hadn’t made it to the police station. Everyone in the office had wanted to hear about her ordeal, and then Tony had insisted they go out for a big lunch. After rolling herself back into her cubicle, she’d spent the afternoon chewing on Tums and dallying with her e-mail.

She knew she had work she needed to be doing, but finishing up the article she was drafting on those handguns the cops had found was just not happening. Not that she was under any kind of deadline. It wasn’t as if Dick was in a big hurry to give her front-page space in the Metro section.

No, what he gave her was editorial work. The two latest pieces he’d dropped on her desk had both been drafted by the big boys, and Dick wanted her to fact-check them. Adhering to the standards he’d gotten familiar with at the *New York Times* by being a stickler for accuracy was actually one of his strengths. But it was a shame he didn’t care about sweat equity. No matter

how many red marks she made, she had yet to get a shared byline on a big boy article.

It was nearly six when she finished editing the articles, and as she dropped them in Dick's in box, she thought about skipping the trip to the police station altogether. Butch had taken her statement last night, and there was nothing more she needed to do about her case. More to the point, she was uncomfortable with the idea of being under the same roof with her attacker, even if he was in a holding cell.

Plus she was exhausted.

"Beth!"

She winced at the sound of Dick's voice.

"Can't talk, I'm going to the station," she called out over her shoulder, thinking the avoidance strategy wouldn't put him off for long, but at least she wouldn't have to deal with the guy tonight.

And she did want to know more about that bomb.

She bolted from the office and walked six blocks to the east. The station house was typical of 1960s-era muni-architecture. Two stories, rambling, modern for its time, with plenty of pale gray cement and lots of narrow windows. It was aging with no grace whatsoever. Black streaks ran down its flanks as if it were bleeding from a wound in the roof, and the inside looked terminal as well. Nothing but nasty, chalky green linoleum, fake-wood-paneled walls, and chipped brown trim. After forty years of cleaning, the heartiest of dirt had moved into every crack and fissure, and the grime wasn't coming out without a spray gun or some toothbrush action.

And maybe a vacate order from the court.

The cops were really good to her when she arrived. As soon as she set foot in the building, they started fussing over her. After talking them down off the walls while trying not to get teary eyed, she went to dispatch and chatted with a couple of the boys behind the counter. They'd had a few folks brought in for soliciting or dealing, but otherwise it had been a quiet day. She was about to leave when Butch came through the back door.

He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a button-down and had a red windbreaker in his hand. Her eyes lingered on the way his holster crossed over his wide shoulders, the black butt of his gun flashing as his arms swung with his gait. His dark hair was damp, as if he were just starting his day.

Which, considering how busy he'd been the night before, was probably the truth.

He came right up to her. "You got time to talk?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I do."

They walked into one of the interrogation rooms.

"Just so you know, the cameras and the mikes are off," he said.

"Isn't that how you usually work?"

He smiled and sat down at the table. Linked his hands together. "Thought you should know that Billy Riddle is out on bail. He was sprung early this morning."

She took a seat. "His name's Billy Riddle? You're kidding me."

Butch shook his head. "He's eighteen. No priors as an adult, but I hacked into his juvie file and he's been a busy boy. Sexual assault, stalking, some petty theft. His dad's a big shot, so the guy's got one hell of a lawyer, but I talked to the DA. She's going to try to plea him hard so you won't have to testify."

"I'll take the stand if I have to."

"Good girl." Butch cleared his throat. "So how you doing?"

"I'm fine." She wasn't about to have Hard-ass play Dr. Phil on her. There was something about the radiant toughness of Butch O'Neal that made her want to appear strong. "Now, about that car bomb. I hear it was probably plastics, and the detonating mechanism was blown sky-high. Sounds like a professional hit."

"You eat yet tonight?"

She frowned. "No."

And considering what she'd pulled down at lunch, she should be skipping breakfast tomorrow morning, too.

Butch got to his feet. "Good. I was just going to hit Tullah's."

He walked over to the door and held it open for her.

She stayed put. "I'm not having dinner with you."

"Suit yourself. Guess you don't want to hear about what we found across the alley from that car, then."

The door slowly eased shut behind him.

She was not going to fall for this. She was not going to—

Beth leaped out of the chair and went after him.

Chapter Eight

Standing in her pristine cream-and-white bedroom, Marissa was unsure of herself.

As Wrath's *shellan*, she could feel his pain and knew by its strength that he must have lost another of his warrior brothers.

If they'd had a normal relationship, there would be no question. She would go to him and try to ease his suffering. She would talk with him or hold him or cry with him. Warm him with her body.

Because that was what *shellans* did for their mates. What they got in return, too.

She glanced at the Tiffany clock on her bedside table.

He'd be heading off into the night soon. If she wanted to catch him she'd better do it now.

Marissa hesitated, not willing to fool herself. She wasn't going to be welcome.

She wished it were easier to support him, wished she knew what he needed from her. Once, a long time ago, she'd spoken with his brother Tohrment's *shellan*, hoping Wellsie could offer some hint as to what to do. How to behave. How to make Wrath see her as worthy of him.

After all, Wellsie had what Marissa wanted. A true mate. A male who came home to her. Who laughed and cried and shared his life with her. Who held her.

A male who stayed with her during those torturous, mercifully rare times when she was fertile. Who eased her terrible cravings with his body for as long as the needing period lasted.

Wrath did none of that for or with her. Especially not the last part. As it was, Marissa had to go to her brother for relief of her needing. Havers would put her out cold, tranquilizing her until the urges passed. The practice

embarrassed them both.

She'd so hoped that Wellsie could help, but the conversation had been a disaster. The other female's pained looks and carefully couched replies had burned them both, pointing out everything Marissa didn't have.

God, she was so alone.

She closed her eyes, feeling Wrath's pain again.

She had to try to reach him. Because he was hurting. And because what else was there to her life other than him?

She sensed that he was in Darius's mansion. Taking a deep breath, she dematerialized.

Wrath slowly eased off his knees and stood up, hearing his vertebrae crack back into place. He brushed the diamonds off his shins.

There was a knock on the door, and he allowed it to open, thinking it was Fritz.

When he smelled the ocean, he tightened his lips.

"What brings you here, Marissa?" he said without turning to her. He went to the bathroom and covered himself with a towel.

"Let me wash you, my lord," she murmured. "I'll take care of your skin. I can—"

"I'm fine."

He was a fast healer. By the end of the night the cuts would barely be discernible.

Wrath walked over to the closet and looked through the clothes. He took out a black long-sleeved shirt, a pair of leather pants, and—jeez, what was this? Oh, not fucking likely. He was not going to fight in BVDs. He'd go commando before he got caught dead in those things.

The first thing he had to do was make contact with Darius's daughter. He knew he was almost out of time, because her transition was coming quick. And then he had to link up with Vishous and Phury to find out what was up with that dead *lesser*'s leftovers.

He was about to drop the towel to get ready to roll, when it occurred to him Marissa was still in the room.

He looked over at her.

"Go home, Marissa," he said.

Her head dropped. "My lord, I can feel your p—"

“I’m perfectly fine.”

She hesitated a moment. And then quietly disappeared.

Ten minutes later he came up to the drawing room.

“Fritz?” he called out.

“Yes, master?” The butler seemed pleased to have been summoned.

“Do you have some red smokes on hand?”

“Of course.”

Fritz went across to an antique mahogany box. He brought the thing over, opening the lid and angling the contents outward.

Wrath took a couple of the hand-rolled cigarillos.

“If you have a taste for them, I’ll get more.”

“Don’t bother. This is enough.” Wrath wasn’t into drugging, but he was willing to put the smokes to good use tonight.

“Will you be needing something to eat before you go out?”

Wrath shook his head.

“Perhaps when you return?” Fritz’s voice grew small as he closed the lid.

Wrath was about to shut the old male down when he thought of Darius. D would have treated Fritz better. “Okay. Yeah. Thanks.”

The butler’s shoulders squared off with purpose.

Good God, he seemed to be smiling, Wrath thought.

“I shall make you lamb, master. How do you like your meat cooked?”

“Rare.”

“And I’ll wash your other clothes. Shall I also order you a new set of leathers?”

“Don’t—” Wrath shut his mouth. “Sure. That’d be great. And, ah, could you get me some boxers? Black? XXL?”

“With pleasure.”

Wrath turned away and headed for the door.

How the hell had he found himself with a servant?

“Master?”

“Yeah?” he growled.

“Take care of yourself out there.”

Wrath paused and looked over his shoulder. Fritz seemed to be cradling the box against his chest.

It was goddamned weird having someone waiting for him to come home, Wrath thought.

He left the mansion and walked down the long drive to the tree-lined

street. Lightning streaked across the sky, a promise of the storm that he could smell brewing to the south.

Where the hell was Darius's daughter right now?

He'd try her apartment first.

After Wrath materialized in the courtyard behind her place, he looked into her windows and returned her cat's purr of welcome with one of his own. She wasn't inside, so Wrath took a seat on the picnic table. He'd give her an hour or so, and then he was going to have to find the brothers. He could always come back at the end of the night, although given how things had gone the first time he'd come into her place, he figured waking her up at four A.M. wasn't the smartest move.

He took off his sunglasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

How was he going to explain what was about to happen to her? And what she'd have to do to live through the change?

He had a feeling she wasn't going to be too happy about the news flashes.

Wrath thought back to his own transition. What a goddamned mess that had been. He hadn't been prepared either, because his parents had always wanted to shelter him, and they'd died before they'd told him what to expect.

His memories came back with a terrible clarity.

London in the late seventeenth century had been a brutal place, especially for someone who was all alone in the world. His parents had been slaughtered in front of him two years before, and he'd run from his species, thinking his cowardice on that awful night was a shame only he should bear.

Whereas in vampire society he'd been nurtured and protected as the future king, he'd found the world of humans to be based largely on a physical meritocracy. For someone built as he'd been before he went through his change, that had meant he'd been on the bottom of the social rung. He'd been whip-thin then, scrawny and weak, and easy prey for human boys looking for fun. Over the course of his time in London's slums, he'd been beaten so many times he'd grown used to parts of him not working right. It was nothing new to have a leg that wouldn't bend because the kneecap had been stoned. Or to have an arm that was useless because it'd been popped out of his shoulder as he'd been dragged behind a horse.

He'd been living off garbage, squeaking by on the edge of starvation, when he'd finally found work as a servant in a merchant's stable. Wrath had cleaned shoes and saddles and bridles until the skin on his hands had cracked, but at least he'd been fed. His pallet had been in the stables, on the second-

floor hayloft. It was softer than the ground he'd grown used to, but he'd never known when he'd be woken up with a kick to the ribs because some stable boy wanted to bed down a maid or two.

Back then he'd still been able to be out in the sunshine, and the dawn was the only thing in his pitiful existence that he looked forward to. To feel the warmth on his face, to draw the sweet mist into his lungs, to relish the light—these pleasures were the only ones he had, and they were dear to him. His eyesight, impaired from birth, had been poor back then but far, far better than it was now. He could still remember with aching clarity what the sun had looked like.

He'd been at the merchant's for nearly a year when everything had been turned upside down.

The night the change had come upon him, he'd fallen into his nest of hay, utterly exhausted. He'd been feeling sickly lately, struggling through his work, but that was nothing new.

The pain, when it hit, had racked his weak body, starting in his abdomen and radiating outward until the tips of his fingers, his toes, the ends of every piece of hair on his head had screamed. No broken bone, no concussion, no fever or beating had even come close. He'd curled into a ball, eyes straining against the agony, breath coming in bursts. He'd been convinced he was going to die, and he'd prayed for the darkness. He'd only wanted some peace, an end to the suffering.

And then a beautiful blond waif had appeared before him.

She was an angel sent to carry him to the other side. He'd been convinced of it.

Like the pathetic wretch he was, he'd begged her for mercy. He'd reached out to the apparition, and when he'd felt her touch, he knew the end was near. As she'd called him by name, he'd tried to smile at her in gratitude, but his lips hadn't been working. She'd told him she was the one who had been promised to him, who had taken a sip of his blood when he was a small boy so she would always know where to find him when the transition hit. She'd said she was there to save him.

And then Marissa had scored her wrist with her own fangs and held the wound to his mouth.

He'd drunk desperately, but the pain hadn't stopped. It only changed. He'd felt his joints popping out of shape, his bones shifting in horrible waves of snapping. His muscles had strained and then split open, and his skull had

felt as if it were going to burst. As his eyes had bulged, his sight had receded, and then all he'd had was his hearing.

His rasping, guttural breath had hurt his throat as he'd tried to hang on. He'd blacked out at some point, finally, only to wake up to a fresh agony. The sunlight he'd loved so much was streaming through the gaps in the barn's clapboards, pale shafts of gold. A strip had landed on his arm, and the smell of burning flesh was terrifying. He'd snapped his arm back and looked around himself in a panic. He hadn't been able to see anything but vague shapes. Blinded in the light, he'd lurched to his feet, only to find himself falling facedown in the hay. His body hadn't acted at all like his own, and it had taken him two tries before he could stand, wobbling on his legs like a foal.

He'd known that he needed to find shelter from the daylight, and he'd dragged himself to where the loft's ladder should have been. He'd miscalculated, however, and had plunged down the hay shaft. Lying in a daze, he'd figured he might be able to make it to the grain cellar. If he went down there, he'd be in darkness.

He'd flailed around the barn, banging into stalls and tripping over tack, trying to stay out of the sunlight while controlling his unruly arms and legs. As he'd headed for the back of the barn, his head had struck a beam he'd always easily walked under. Blood had run into his eyes.

Right after that, one of the stable hands had come in, demanding to know who Wrath was. Wrath had turned to the familiar voice, thinking maybe he could get help. He'd reached out and started to speak, but his voice hadn't sounded like his own.

And then he'd heard a pitchfork coming through the air at him in a vicious stab. He'd meant only to deflect the blow, but when he'd grabbed the handle and pushed at it, he'd sent the stable hand smashing into a stall door. The man had let out a screech of fear and run off, no doubt looking for reinforcements.

Wrath had finally found the cellar. He'd taken out two huge bags of oats and put them next to the door so no one would have to come in during the day. Exhausted, hurting, blood dripping off his chin, he'd crawled inside and settled his bare back against the earthen wall. He'd drawn his knees up to his chest, aware that his thighs were four times the size they'd been the day before. Closing his eyes, he'd rested his cheek on his forearms and shivered, fighting not to disgrace himself by crying. He'd stayed awake all day long,

listening to the footsteps above him, the stamping of the horses, the patter of talk. He'd been terrified someone would open the double doors and expose him. And glad that Marissa had gone so she wasn't exposed to the threat from humans.

Coming back to the present, Wrath heard Darius's daughter walk into her apartment. A light came on.

Beth tossed her keys down on the hall table. The quick meal with Hard-ass had been surprisingly easy. And he'd given her some other details about the bombing. They'd found one of those modified Magnums in the alley. And Butch had mentioned the martial-arts throwing star she'd pointed out to Ricky. The CSI folks were working on the weapons, trying to get any prints or fibers or other evidence off them. The gun didn't appear to offer much, but the star, not surprisingly, had blood on it, which they were putting through DNA analysis. As for the bomb, the police were thinking it was a drug-related hit. The BMW had been sighted before, parked in the same spot behind the club. And Screamer's was a hotbed for dealers who were very particular about their territories.

She stretched and changed into a pair of boxers. It was another hot night, and as she pulled out the futon, she really wished the air conditioner were still working. She turned the box fan on and fed Boo, who, as soon as he'd polished off his Fancy Feast, took up pacing in front of the sliding door.

"We're not going to be doing this again, are we?"

Lightning flashed, and she went over and slid back the glass door, moving the screen into place and locking it. She'd leave the thing open for only a little bit—the night air smelled good for once. Not a whiff of garbage.

But man, it was hot.

She ducked into the bathroom. After taking out her contacts, brushing her teeth, and scrubbing her face, she ran a washcloth under some cold water and rubbed the back of her neck. Cool rivulets ran down her skin, and she welcomed the shivers as she walked back out.

She frowned. There was the strangest scent in the air. Something rich and spicy...

She went over to the screen and sniffed a couple of times. As she breathed in, she felt the tension in her shoulders ease.

And then she saw that Boo had sat down on his haunches and was purring

as if he were welcoming someone he knew.

What the...

The man from her dream was on the other side of the screen.

Beth leaped back and dropped the washcloth, dimly hearing the fleshy flop when it hit the floor.

The screen slid open. In spite of the fact that she'd locked it.

And that wonderful smell got thicker as he stepped into her home.

She panicked, but found she couldn't move.

Oh, man, he was colossal. If her apartment was small to begin with, he turned it into a shoe box. And all that black leather just seemed to make him bigger. He had to be six-feet-six, two seventy-five at least.

Wait a minute.

What was she doing, measuring him for a suit? Running, she should be running. She should be making a break for the other door, running like hell.

But all she could do was stare at him.

He was wearing a biker jacket in spite of the heat, and his long legs were covered in leather as well. He had steel-toed shitkicker boots on, and he moved like a predator.

Beth craned her neck to look up at his face.

God, he was *gorgeous*.

His jaw was a straight shot of bone, his lips full, the hollows under his cheeks casting heavy shadows. His hair was straight and black, falling to his shoulders from a widow's peak, and he had the shadow of a dark beard. The black sunglasses he wore, wraparounds that fit his carved face perfectly, made him look like a hit man.

As if all that menace wouldn't have given him away as a killer.

He was smoking some kind of thin, reddish cigar, and he took a long drag, the end flaring bright orange. He blew out a cloud of that fragrant smoke, and as it hit her nostrils, her body loosened even further.

He must be coming to kill her, she thought. She didn't know what she'd done to deserve a hit, but as he breathed out another drag of whatever he was smoking, she could barely remember where she was.

Her body swayed as he closed the distance between them. She was terrified of what was going to happen when he reached her, but noticed, absurdly, that Boo was purring and wrapping himself in and around the man's ankles.

That cat was a traitor. And if by some miracle she lived through the night,

he was getting downgraded to Tender Vittles.

Beth's neck jacked back up as she met the man's steady, feral gaze. She couldn't see the color of his eyes through the glasses, but his stare burned.

And then the extraordinary happened. As he stopped in front of her, she felt a blast of pure, unadulterated lust. For the first time in her life her body got wickedly hot. Hot and wet.

Her core bloomed for him.

It was chemistry, she thought numbly. Pure, raw, animal chemistry.

Whatever he had, she wanted.

"I thought we'd try this again," he said.

His voice was low, a deep rumble in his solid chest. He had the sliver of an accent, but she couldn't place it.

"Who are you?" she breathed in a whisper.

"I'm here for you."

Dizziness made her reach out for the wall.

"For me? Where—" Confusion closed her mouth. "Where are you going to take me?"

To the bridge? Where he'd toss her body into the river?

His hand crossed the distance between their bodies, and he took her chin between his forefinger and thumb. He tilted her face to one side.

"Are you going to kill me fast?" she mumbled. "Or slow?"

"No killing. Protection."

As his head bent down, she told herself she should fight him off in spite of his words. She needed to get those arms of hers working, her legs, too. Trouble was, she didn't really want to push him away. She took a deep breath.

Good heavens, he smelled fantastic. Fresh, clean sweat. A dark, masculine musk. That smoke.

His lips touched her neck, and she heard him inhale. The leather of his jacket creaked as his lungs were filled and his chest expanded.

"You're almost ready," he said softly. "And it's coming fast."

If the *it* he was referring to had anything to do with their getting naked, she was totally on board with the plan. My God, this had to be what people talked about when they waxed poetic about sex. She didn't question the need to have him inside of her. She only knew that she was going to die if he didn't take his pants off. Now.

Beth reached out, curious to touch him, but when she let go of the wall

she started to fall. In what seemed like one motion, he put the cigarillo between those cruel lips of his and caught her easily. As he swept her off the floor, she leaned into him, not even bothering to put up a pretense of fighting. He handled her as if she were weightless, crossing the room in two strides.

When he laid her down on the futon his hair fell forward, and she lifted her hand, touching the black waves. They were thick, soft. She put her palm on his face, and though he seemed surprised, he didn't pull back.

God, everything about him radiated sex, from the strength in his body to the way he moved to the smell of his skin. He was like no man she'd ever come across before. And her body knew it just as clearly as her mind did.

"Kiss me," she said.

He hovered above her, a silent menace.

On impulse her hands went to the lapels of his jacket, and she tried to pull him down to her mouth.

He captured both her wrists in one of his hands. "Easy."

Easy? She didn't want easy. Easy was *not* part of the plan.

She struggled against his hold, and when she couldn't get free she arched her back. Her breasts strained against her T-shirt, and she rubbed her thighs together, anticipating what it would feel like to have him between them.

If he'd only put his hands—

"Sweet Jesus," he muttered.

She smiled up at him, relishing the sudden hunger in his face. "Touch me."

The stranger started shaking his head. As if he were trying to clear it.

She opened her lips and moaned in frustration.

"Pull up my shirt." She arched again, offering her body to him, dying to know if there was something even hotter inside of her, something he could bring out with his hands. "Do it."

He took the cigarillo from his mouth. His eyebrows were drawn tight, and she had some vague thought that she should be terrified. Instead, she brought her knees up and lifted her hips off the futon. She imagined him kissing the insides of her thighs, finding her sex with his mouth. Licking her.

Another moan boiled out of her mouth.

Wrath was dumbfounded.

And he wasn't a vampire who got struck stupid very often.

Holy shit.

This half-human was the hottest thing he'd ever gotten anywhere near. And he'd cozied up to a lightning strike once or twice before.

It was the red smoke. That had to be it. And the stuff must be getting to him, too, because he was more than ready to take her.

He eyed the cigarillo.

Well, that's some damn good rationalizing, he thought. Too bad the shit was a relaxant, not an aphrodisiac.

She groaned again, her body undulating in a sexy wave, her legs opening wide. The scent of her arousal hit him hard as a body shot. God, he would have been sent to his knees if he hadn't already been sitting down.

"Touch me," she moaned.

Wrath's blood pumped as if he were in a flat-out run, his erection throbbing like it had its own heartbeat.

"That's not what I'm here for," he said.

"Touch me anyway."

He knew he should say no. This wasn't fair to her. And they needed to talk.

Maybe he should come back later in the night.

She arched up, pushing against the hand he'd clamped around her wrists. As her breasts strained against her T-shirt, he had to close his eyes.

Time to go. It was really time to—

Except he couldn't leave without at least having a taste.

Yeah, but he was a selfish bastard if he laid one finger on her. A nasty selfish bastard to take any of what she was offering in the haze of smoke.

With a curse, Wrath opened his eyes.

Man, he was so cold. Cold down to his marrow. And she was hot. Hot enough to make that ice go away, at least for a little while.

And it had been so long for him.

He willed the lights in the room off. Then he used his mind to close the back door, usher the cat into the bathroom, and slide home every lock in the apartment.

He carefully balanced the cigarillo on the edge of the table next to them and let her wrists go. Her hands grabbed his jacket, trying to push it back from his shoulders. He wrenches the thing off, and as it hit the floor with a thud, she laughed with satisfaction. His holster of daggers followed, but he kept that within reach of the futon.

Wrath bent down over her. Her breath was sweet and minty as he captured her lips with his mouth. When he felt her flinch, he pulled back immediately. Frowning, he touched the side of her mouth.

“Forget it,” she told him, pulling at his shoulders.

The hell he would. God help that human who’d hurt her. Wrath was going to rip the guy’s limbs off and leave him to bleed out in the street.

He dropped a soft kiss to the healing bruise and then drew his tongue down her neck. This time when she thrust her breasts out, he slid his hand under her thin shirt and onto her smooth, warm skin. Her belly was flat, and he spanned it with his hand, filling the space between her hip bones. Greedy to know the rest of her, he peeled her shirt off and tossed it aside. Her bra was pale in color, and he traced the edges of it with his fingertips before cupping the creamy swells with his hands. Her breasts filled his palms, her nipples tight buds underneath the soft satin.

Wrath’s control snapped.

He bared his fangs, let out a hiss, and bit through the bra’s front closure. The thing snapped back, and he latched onto one of her nipples with his lips, drawing it into his mouth. As he suckled, he shifted his body and stretched out on top of her, falling in between her legs. She absorbed his weight with a throaty sigh.

Her hands came between them as she reached for the front of his shirt, but he didn’t have the patience to let her undress him. He lifted up and ripped the material off his body, popping buttons and sending them scattering across the floor. When he came back down, her breasts hit the wall of his chest and her body surged under his.

He wanted to kiss her mouth again, but he was way past anything soft and gentle, so he worshiped her breasts with his tongue and then moved down to her belly. When he got to the waistband of her boxers, he drew them off her long, smooth legs.

Wrath felt something in his head pop as her scent reached him in a fresh wave. He was perilously close to orgasm already, his release poised in his shaft, his body shaking with the need to take her. He put his hand between her thighs. She was so wet and hot that he growled.

Crazed though he was, he had to taste her before he invaded her.

Drawing off his sunglasses, he put them next to the cigarillo before pressing kisses over her hips and across the tops of her thighs. Her hands tangled in his hair as she urged him exactly where he was headed.

He kissed her softest skin, drawing her core into his mouth, and she came over and over again for him until he couldn't fight his own need any longer. He pulled back, shrugged out of his pants, and covered her with his body once more.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, and he hissed as her heat burned his erection.

He used what was left of his strength to pull back and look down into her face.

"Don't stop," she breathed. "I want to feel you inside me."

Wrath dropped his head into the fragrant hollow of her neck. And slowly drew his hips back. The tip of his erection slid into place beautifully, and he sheathed himself in her body with one powerful stroke.

He let out a bellow of ecstasy.

Heaven. Now he knew what heaven was like.

Chapter Nine

In his bedroom, Mr. X changed into black cargo pants and pulled on a black nylon shirt. He was satisfied by the way the meeting with the society had gone this afternoon. Every single *lesser* had shown up. Most of them had fallen into line well enough. A few were going to be trouble. And a small number of them had tried sucking up.

Which had gotten them nowhere.

At the conclusion of the session, he'd chosen twenty-eight more to stay in the Caldwell area, based on what he knew about their reputations and the impressions he had of them up close. Twelve of this group were on the very top of their game, and those he'd split equally into two prime squadrons. The other sixteen he'd cut into four groups of secondaries.

None of them liked the arrangement. They were used to working on their own, and the primes in particular resented being tied down. Tough. The advantage to the squadron orientation was that he could assign different parts of the city to them, establish quotas, and monitor performance more closely.

The rest he'd sent back to their outposts.

Now that he had his troops aligned and assigned, he was going to focus on the information-gathering procedure. He had an idea as to how to make it work, one he was going to beta test this evening.

Before he headed out for the night, he tossed his pit bulls two pounds of raw hamburger apiece. He liked to keep them hungry, so they were fed every other day. He'd had the dogs, both males, for about five years, and he chained them on opposite sides of his house, one in front, one in back. It was a logical arrangement from a defense perspective, but there was also the matter of expediency. He'd tied them up together once and they'd gone for each other's throats.

He picked up his bag, locked the house, and walked across his lawn. The

ranch was an early-seventies nightmare of fake-brick siding and he'd purposely kept the outside ugly. He needed to fit in, and the rural neighborhood's price point wasn't breaking a hundred thousand anytime soon.

Besides, the house was immaterial. The land was what mattered. Ten acres, so he had privacy. Plus there was an old barn in back that was surrounded by trees. He'd turned that into his workshop, and the buffer of oaks and maples was going to be important.

After all, screams could carry.

He fingered his ring of keys until he got to the right one. Because he was going to be working tonight, he was leaving his only extravagance, a black Hummer, in the garage. The four-year-old Chrysler Town & Country minivan was much better cover, and it took him ten minutes to drive the POS downtown.

Caldwell's Whore Valley was a stretch of three dimly lit, trash-strewn blocks over by the suspension bridge. Traffic was heavy tonight down the corridor of iniquity, and he pulled over to watch the action under a broken light. Cars meandered the dark street, brake lights flaring as drivers inspected what was working the pavement. In the thick summer heat, the girls were out in a big way, tottering in their mile-high shoes, their breasts and asses barely covered by easy-access clothing.

Mr. X zipped open his bag, taking out a hypodermic needle filled with heroin and a hunting knife. He hid both in the door and put the passenger-side window down before easing into the flow of cars.

He was just one of many, he thought. Another schmo, trying to get a little. "You lookin' for a date?" he heard one of the whores call out.

"Wanna ride?" another said, shaking her ass like it was a can of paint.

On the second pass, he found what he was looking for, a blonde with long legs and a big rack.

Just the kind of whore he would have bought for himself if he'd still had an operational phallus.

He was going to enjoy this, Mr. X thought as he hit the brakes. Killing what he couldn't have anymore carried its own special satisfaction.

"Hey, sugar," she said, coming over. She put her forearms on the door and leaned in through the window. She smelled like cinnamon gum and sweaty perfume. "How you doin' tonight?"

"I could be better. What's it going to cost me to buy a smile?"

She eyed the inside of the car, his clothes. "Fifty will get you off good. Any way you like."

"That's too much." But he was just playing. She was the one he wanted.

"Forty?"

"Let me see your tits."

She flashed him.

He smiled, unlocking the doors. "What's your name?"

"Cherry Pie. But you can call me anything you like."

Mr. X drove them around the corner to a secluded spot under the bridge.

He tossed the money down on the floor at her feet, and when she bent over to pick it up, he drove the needle into the back of her neck and pushed the plunger home. Moments later she slumped like a rag doll.

Mr. X smiled and moved her back against the seat so she was sitting up. Then he tossed the needle out the window, where it joined about a dozen others, and put the van in drive.

In his underground clinic, Havers looked up from his microscope, startled out of his concentration. The grandfather clock was chiming in the corner of his lab, telling him it was time for the evening repast, but he didn't want to stop working. He put his eye back to the scope, wondering if he'd imagined what he saw. After all, desperation could be affecting his objectivity.

But no, the blood cells were living.

Breath left his lungs on a shudder.

His race was almost free.

He was almost free.

Finally, stored blood that was still viable.

As a physician, his hands had always been tied when it came to treating patients surgically and addressing certain labor and delivery complications. Real-time transfusions from vampire to vampire were possible, but as their race was scattered and their numbers small, it could be hard to find donors in a timely manner.

For centuries he'd wanted to establish a blood bank. The trouble was, vampire blood was highly unstable, and storage of it outside the body had always been impossible. Air, that life-sustaining, invisible curtain blanketing the earth, was one cause of the problem, and it didn't take a lot of those molecules to contaminate a sample. Just one or two and the plasma

disintegrated, leaving the red and white blood cells to fend for themselves. Which, of course, they couldn't do.

At first it didn't make sense to him. There was oxygen in blood. That was why it was red after leaving the lungs. The discrepancy had led him to some fascinating discoveries about vampire pulmonary function, but had ultimately gotten him no closer to his objective.

He'd tried drawing the blood and channeling it immediately into an airtight container. This most obvious solution didn't work. The disintegration occurred anyway, just at a decelerated pace. This had suggested there was another factor at work, something inherent in the corporal environment that was missing when the blood was removed from the body. He'd tried isolating samples in warmth, in cold. In suspensions of saline or human plasma.

Frustration had kept his mind burning through the permutations of his experiments. He ran more tests and tried different approaches. Retried. Walked away from the project. Came back to it.

Decades passed. And more decades.

And then personal tragedy gave him a very intimate reason to solve the problem. Following the deaths in childbirth of his *shellan* and infant son a little over two years ago, he'd become obsessed and had started from scratch.

His own need to feed was the driver.

He usually needed to drink only every six months, because his bloodline was strong. After his beautiful Evangeline's death, he'd waited as long as he could, until he had taken to his bed with the pain of the hunger. When he'd finally asked for help, he'd hated the fact that he wanted to live badly enough to drink from another female. And he'd allowed himself to consider the feeding only because he'd been convinced that it wouldn't be as it had been with Evangeline. Surely he wouldn't betray her memory by taking pleasure in someone else's blood.

There were so many whom he had helped that it wasn't hard to find a female willing to offer herself. He'd chosen a friend who was unmated and had hoped he'd be able to keep his sadness and humiliation to himself.

It had turned out to be a nightmare. He'd held back for so long that as soon as he'd smelled blood, the predator in him had come out. He'd attacked his friend and drunk so hard, he'd had to stitch up her wrist afterward.

He'd nearly bitten her hand off.

His actions flew in the face of his notions of himself. He'd always been a gentleman, a scholar, a healer. A male not subject to the base desires of his

race.

But then, he'd always been well fed.

And the terrible truth was, he'd relished the taste of that blood. The smooth, warm flow down his throat, the roaring strength that came afterward.

He'd felt pleasure. And he'd only wanted more.

The shame had made him retch. And he'd vowed never to drink of another's vein again.

It was a promise he'd kept, though as a result he'd grown weak, so weak that focusing his mind was like herding a fog bank. His starvation was a constant ache in his belly. And his body, craving sustenance that food couldn't give it, had cannibalized itself to keep him alive. He'd lost so much weight his clothes hung off of him like bags, his face turning haggard and gray.

But the state he was in had shown him the way.

The solution was obvious.

You had to feed that which was hungry.

An airtight process coupled with a sufficient quantity of human blood and he had his living cells.

Under the microscope, he watched as the vampire cells, larger and more irregularly shaped compared to the human ones, slowly consumed what he had given them. The human count was decreasing in the sample, and when it was extinguished he was willing to bet the viability of the vampire component would dwindle down to nothing.

All he had to do was conduct a clinical trial. He would extract a pint from a female, mix with it an appropriate proportion of human blood, and then transfuse himself.

If everything went well, he would set up a donor and storage program. Patients would be saved. And those who chose to forgo the intimacy of drinking could live their lives in peace.

Havers looked up from the microscope, suddenly aware that he'd been staring at the cells for twenty minutes. The salad course for luncheon would be waiting on the table upstairs for him.

He removed his white coat and walked through the clinic, pausing to talk to some of his nursing staff and a couple of patients. The facility took up about six thousand square feet and was hidden deep in the earth beneath his mansion. There were three ORs, a fleet of recovery and examination rooms, the lab, his office, and a waiting area with a separate access to the street. He

saw about a thousand patients a year, and made house calls for birthing and other emergencies as needed.

Although as the population had dwindled, so had his practice.

Compared to humans, vampires had tremendous advantages when it came to health. Their bodies healed fast. They were not subject to diseases such as cancer, diabetes, or HIV. But lord help you if you had an accident at high noon. No one could get to you. Vampires also died during their transitions or right afterward. And fertility was another tremendous problem. Even if conception was successful, females frequently did not survive childbirth, either from blood loss or soaring preeclampsia. Stillborns were common, and infant mortality was through the roof.

For the sick, injured, or dying, human doctors were not a good option, even though the two species shared much of the same anatomy. If a human physician ordered a CBC on some blood from a vampire, they would find all sorts of anomalies and imagine they had something worthy of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. It was best to avoid that kind of attention.

On occasion, however, a patient would end up at a human hospital, a problem that was on the rise since the advent of 911 and fast-response ambulances. If a vampire was hurt badly enough to lose consciousness away from home, he was in danger of being picked up and taken in to a human ER. Getting him out of a facility against medical advice was always a struggle.

Havers wasn't arrogant, but he knew he was the best doctor his species had. He'd gone through Harvard Medical School twice, once in the late 1800s and then again in the 1980s. He'd stated on his application in both instances that he was disabled, and HMS had permitted him special allowances. He hadn't been able to attend the lectures because they'd taken place during the day, but his *doggen* had been allowed to take notes and hand in his examinations. Havers had read all the texts, corresponded with the professors, and even attended seminars and talks that were scheduled at night.

He'd always loved school.

When he got upstairs, he wasn't surprised to see that Marissa had not come down to the dining room. Even though luncheon was served at one A.M. every night.

He went to her rooms.

"Marissa?" he said at the door. He knocked once. "Marissa, it's time to eat."

Havers stuck his head inside. Light from the chandelier in the hall drifted

in, cutting a golden slice through the blackness. The draperies were still down across the windows, and she hadn't turned any of the lamps on.

"Marissa, darling?"

"I'm not hungry."

Havers stepped through the door. He could make out her canopy bed and the small swell of her body under the covers.

"But you missed luncheon last night. As well as dinner."

"I'll come down later."

He shut his eyes, concluding that she'd been to feed the night before. Every time she saw Wrath, she would retreat into herself for days afterward.

He thought of the living cells down in his lab.

Wrath might be their race's king by birth, and he might have the purest blood of them all, but the warrior was a bastard. He seemed totally unconcerned with what he was doing to Marissa. Or perhaps he didn't even know how much his cruelty affected her.

It was hard to decide which was the worse crime.

"I've made some important progress," Havers said, going over to the bed and sitting down. "I'm going to set you free."

"From what?"

"That...assassin."

"Don't talk about him like that."

He gritted his teeth. "Marissa—"

"I don't want to be free of him."

"How can you say that? He treats you with no respect. I hate the idea of that brute feeding off you in some back alley—"

"We go to Darius's. He has a room there."

The idea that she was being exposed to another of those warriors didn't make him any happier. They were all frightening, and a few were downright horrific.

He knew the Black Dagger Brotherhood was a necessary evil to defend the race, and he knew he should be grateful for their protection. Except he couldn't feel anything save dread at their existence. The fact that the world was dangerous enough, the race's enemies powerful enough, so as to mandate the likes of those warriors was tragic.

"You don't have to do this to yourself."

Marissa rolled over, turning her back to him. "Leave me."

Havers planted his hands on his knees and pushed himself to his feet. His

memories of Marissa before she'd begun to service their dreadful king were so very dim. He could recall only bits and pieces of the way she'd been, and he feared the joyous, smiling young female was forever lost now.

And what was in her place? A somber, subdued shadow who floated around his house, pining for a male who treated her with no regard whatsoever.

"I hope you will reconsider luncheon," Havers said softly. "I would love to have your company."

He shut the door quietly and went down the ornate, curving staircase. The dining room table was set as he liked it, with a full complement of china, glassware, and silver. He sat down at the head of the glossy table, and one of his *doggen* came in to serve him some wine.

Looking down at the plate of Bibb lettuce before him, he forced a smile. "Karolyn, this salad is lovely."

Karolyn bowed her head, eyes glowing from his praise. "I went to a farm stand today just to find the right leaves for you."

"Well, I most certainly appreciate the effort." Havers cut into the delicate greens as she left him alone in the beautiful room.

He thought of his sister, curled up in her bed.

Havers was a healer by nature and profession, a male who had marked his entire life in service to others. But if Wrath were ever injured enough to come and see him, Havers would be tempted to let that monster bleed out.

Or kill him on the OR table with a slip of the scalpel.

Chapter Ten

Beth eased into consciousness slowly. It was like surfacing from a perfectly performed swan dive. There was a glow in her body, a satisfaction as she emerged from the buffered world of sleep.

Something was on her forehead.

Her eyelids flipped open. Long male fingers were moving down the bridge of her nose. They drifted across her cheek and then over to her jaw.

There was enough ambient light coming from the kitchen that she could dimly make out the man lying with her.

His concentration was fierce as he explored her face. His eyes were closed, arching brows drawn down, thick lashes against his high, regal cheekbones. He was on his side, his shoulders a mountain blocking her view to the glass door.

Good lord, he was huge. And stacked.

His upper arms were the size of her thighs. His abdomen was ribbed as if he were smuggling paint rollers under his skin. His legs were thick and cored. And his sex was as big and magnificent as the rest of him.

When he'd first come up against her naked and she'd had a chance to touch him, she'd been shocked. He had no hair on his torso or arms and legs at all. Just smooth skin over hard muscle.

She wondered why he shaved all over, even down there. Maybe he was some kind of bodybuilder.

Although why he'd go the Full Monty with a razor was a mystery.

Her memories of what had happened between them were fuzzy. She couldn't quite recall how he'd come into her apartment. Or what he'd said to her. But everything they'd done horizontally was vivid as hell.

Which made sense, since he'd given her the first orgasms she'd ever had. The fingertips rounded her chin and came up to her lips. He brushed her

lower one with his thumb.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered. His subtle accent made him roll the *R* over his tongue, almost as if he were purring.

Well, that stands to reason, she thought. When he touched her, she felt beautiful.

His mouth came down on hers, but he wasn’t looking for anything. The kiss was not a demand. It was closer to a thank-you.

Somewhere in the room, a cell phone went off. The ring wasn’t hers.

He moved so fast she jumped. One moment he was by her side; the next he was at his jacket. He flipped open the phone.

“Yeah?” The voice that had told her she was beautiful was gone. Now he growled.

She pulled a sheet around her chest.

“We’ll meet at D’s. Give me ten.”

He hung up the phone, put it back in the jacket, and picked up the pants he’d been wearing. The threat of re-dressing brought back some reality.

God, had she really just had sex—really, really good, mind-blowing sex—with a complete stranger?

“What’s your name?” she asked.

As he pulled black leather up his thighs, she caught a terrific shot of his ass.

“Wrath.” He went over to the table and got his sunglasses. When he sat down next to her, they were in place. “I’ve got to go. I might not get back tonight, but I’ll try.”

She didn’t want him to leave. She liked the feel of his body taking up more than its fair share of her futon.

She reached up to him, but took her hand back. She didn’t want to seem needy.

“No, touch me,” he said, bending his body down, giving her all the access she could ask for.

She put her palm on his chest. His skin was warm, his heart surging in an even pump. She noticed he had a circular-shaped scar on his left pectoral.

“I need to know something, Wrath.” His name felt good on her tongue even if it was an odd one. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He smiled a little, as if he liked her suspicion. “I’m here to take care of you, Elizabeth.”

Well, he certainly had.

“Beth. I go by Beth.”

He inclined his head. “Beth.”

He stood up and reached for his shirt. He ran his hands down the front of it, as if feeling for buttons.

He wasn’t going to find many, she thought. Most of them were on her floor.

“You got a wastepaper basket around here?” he asked, as if realizing the same thing.

“Over there. In the corner.”

“Where?”

She stood up, keeping the sheet around her, and took the shirt. Throwing it out seemed like a lost opportunity.

When she looked at him again, he’d pulled a black holster on over his naked skin. Two daggers crisscrossed in the middle of his chest, handles down.

Oddly, as she looked at his weapons, they calmed her. The idea that there was a logical explanation to his appearance was a relief.

“Was it Butch?”

“Butch?”

“Who put you up to guard duty.”

He pulled on his jacket, the heft of it widening his shoulders even more. The leather was as dark as his hair, one lapel embossed with an intricate design in black thread.

“The man who attacked you last night,” he said. “He was a stranger?”

“Yes.” She brought her arms around herself.

“Were the police good to you?”

“They’re always good to me.”

“Have they told you his name?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I couldn’t believe it either. When Butch told me I thought he was joking. Billy Riddle sounds more like a Sesame Street character than a rapist, but he clearly had an MO and some practice—”

She stopped. Wrath’s face had gone so vicious, she stepped back.

Jesus, if Butch was tough on perps, this guy was about two feet ahead of deadly, she thought.

But then his expression changed, as if he’d buried his emotions because he knew they scared her a little. He walked over to the bathroom and opened the door. Boo leaped up into his arms, and a low, rhythmic purring sound cut

through the heavy air.

Except that sure wasn't her cat.

The throaty reverberation was coming out of the man as he held her pet in his arms. Boo ate up the attention, rubbing his head into the wide palm that was stroking him.

"I'm going to give you my cell phone number, Beth. You need to call me if you feel threatened in any way." He put the cat down and recited a bunch of digits. Made her repeat them until she had them memorized. "If I don't see you tonight, I want you to come to eight sixteen Wallace Avenue tomorrow morning. I'll explain everything."

And then he just looked at her.

"Come here," he said.

Her body obeyed before her mind checked in with a command to move.

As she got close to him, he put one arm around her waist and pulled her against his hard body. His lips came down hot and hungry on hers as he buried his other hand in her hair. Through his leather pants, she could feel he was ready for sex again.

And she was ready to have him.

When he lifted his head, he ran his hand leisurely over her collarbone.

"This wasn't supposed to be part of it."

"Is Wrath your first or last name?"

"Both." He put a kiss on the side of her neck, sucking at her skin. She let her head fall back, and his tongue traveled up the smooth column. "Beth?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't worry about Billy Riddle. He's going to get what's coming to him."

He kissed her quickly and then walked out through the sliding glass door. She put her hand up to her neck where he'd licked her. The skin tingled. Beth hurried to the window and pulled up the shade.

He was already gone.

Wrath materialized in Darius's drawing room.

He hadn't expected the evening to take him where it had, and the extra layer of complication wasn't going to help the situation.

She was Darius's daughter. She was about to have her whole world turned upside down. And worse, she'd been the victim of a sexual assault the

night before, for Christ's sake.

If he'd been a gentleman, he'd have left her alone.

Yeah, and when was the last time he'd lived up to his pedigree?

Rhage appeared in front of him. The vampire was wearing a long black trench coat over his leathers, and the contrast with his fair-haired beauty was no doubt a stunner. It was well-known that the brother used his looks against the opposite sex mercilessly, and that after a night of fighting, his favorite way to wind down was with a female. Or two.

If sex were food, Rhage would have been morbidly obese.

But he wasn't just a pretty face. The warrior was the best fighter the brotherhood had, the strongest, the quickest, the surest. Born with an overload of physical power, he preferred to meet *lessers* bare-handed, saving the daggers only for the end. Maintained that it was the only way to get any job satisfaction. Otherwise, the fights didn't last long enough.

Of all the brothers, Hollywood was the one the young males in the species talked about, worshiped, wanted to be. Except that was because his fan club only saw the glossy surface and the smooth moves.

Rhage was cursed. Literally. He'd gotten himself in some serious trouble right after his transition. And the Scribe Virgin, that mystical force of nature who oversaw the species from the Fade, had given him one hell of a punishment. Two hundred years of aversion therapy that kicked in whenever he didn't keep himself calm.

You had to feel sorry for the poor bastard.

"How we doing tonight?" Rhage asked.

Wrath closed his eyes briefly. A blurry image of Beth's body arching, caught as he'd looked up from between her legs, sliced through him. As he pictured himself tasting her again, his hands curled into fists, his knuckles cracking.

I'm hungry, he thought.

"I'm good to go," he said.

"Hold up. What's that?" Rhage demanded.

"What's what?"

"That expression on your face. And Christ, where's your shirt?"

"Shut up."

"What the...I'll be damned." Rhage laughed. "You got some grind tonight, didn't you?"

Beth was not a grind. No way, and not only because she was Darius's

daughter.

“Zip it, Rhage. I’m not in the mood.”

“Hey, I’m the last one to criticize. But I gotta ask, was she any good? Because you don’t look particularly relaxed, my brother. Maybe I need to teach her a few things and then have her give you a try again—”

Wrath calmly introduced Rhage’s back to the wall, almost taking out a mirror with the male’s shoulders. “You will shut the shut up or you will be six inches shorter. Your pick, Hollywood.”

His brother was just playing, but there was something un-holy about taking that experience with Beth and getting it anywhere near Rhage’s sex life.

And maybe Wrath was feeling just a little possessive.

“Have we made our choice?” he drawled.

“I’m feeling you.” The other vampire grinned, his teeth a flash of white in his striking face. “But come on, lighten up. You don’t usually waste time with the females, and I’m just glad to know you got off, that’s all.”

Wrath let go.

“Although Jesus, she couldn’t have been all that—”

Wrath unsheathed a dagger and buried the thing into the wall an inch from Rhage’s skull. The sound of steel punching through plaster had a nice ring to it, he thought.

“You do not push me on this one. Got it?”

The brother nodded slowly as the dagger handle vibrated next to his ear. “Ah, yeah. I’m thinking we’re clear on that.”

Tohrment’s voice cut through the tension. “Whoa! Rhage, you been poppin’ shit again?”

Wrath stayed still for one more moment, just to make sure the message had gotten through. Then he yanked the knife out of the wall and stepped back, prowling around the room as the other brothers arrived.

When Vishous came in, Wrath took the warrior aside. “I want you to do me a favor.”

“Name it.”

“Human male. Billy Riddle. I want you to work your computer magic. I need to know where he lives.”

V stroked his goatee. “He in town?”

“I think so.”

“Consider it done, my lord.”

When they were all there, even Zsadist, who'd graced them with being on time, Wrath got the ball rolling.

"What do we have from Strauss's phone, V?"

Vishous whipped off his Sox cap and dragged a hand through his dark hair. He spoke as he repositioned the hat. "Our boy liked to hang with muscleheads, military wannabes, and Jackie Chan fans. We've got calls to Gold's Gym, a paintball arena, two martial-arts places. Oh, and he liked cars. There was a mechanics shop in the log, too."

"Any personals?"

"Couple. One to a landline that was disconnected two days ago. The others were cellular, untraceable, not local. I tried them all repeatedly and no one picked up. Ain't caller ID a bitch?"

"You check his priors online?"

"Yeah. Typical juvie shit with a violent edge. He fits the *lesser* profile perfectly."

"What about his home?" Wrath looked over his shoulder at the twins.

Phury glanced at his brother and then did all the talking. "Three-room apartment over the river. Lived alone. Didn't have a lot of shit. Couple of guns under the bed. Some silver ammo. Kevlar vest. Porn collection he obviously wasn't using anymore."

"Did you grab his jar?"

"Yeah. It's back at my place. I'll take it to the tomb later tonight."

"Good." Wrath regarded the group. "We split up. Case the businesses. I want to get inside those buildings. We're looking for their center of ops in this area."

He paired up the brothers, taking Vishous with him. He told the twins to go to Gold's and the paintball arena. Gave Tohr and Rhage the martial-arts joints. He and Vishous were going to scope out the mechanics shop, and he hoped they'd get lucky.

Because if someone were going to wire a bomb to a car, wouldn't a hydraulic lift be handy?

Before they all left, Hollywood came over, looking un-characteristically serious.

"Wrath, man, you know I can be an asshole," Rhage said. "Didn't mean to offend. Not going there again."

Wrath smiled. The thing with Rhage was, he had piss-poor impulse control. Which explained both his fly mouth and his sex addiction.

And the problem was bad enough when he was himself. Forget about the minute the curse flipped his psycho switch and the beast came roaring to life.

“I’m serious, man,” the vampire said.

Wrath clapped his brother on the shoulder. On the whole, though, the SOB was a total keeper. “Forgiven, forgotten.”

“Feel free to hammer me anytime.”

“Believe me, I do.”

Mr. X drove to an alley downtown that was unlit and open to streets at both ends. After parking the minivan face out behind a Dumpster, he threw Cherry Pie over his shoulder and walked twenty yards away from the car. She moaned a little as she bounced on his back, as if she didn’t want her high disturbed by movement.

He laid her out on the ground, and she didn’t fight him as he slit her throat. He watched for a moment as her glossy blood seeped from her neck. In the darkness it looked like Quaker State motor oil. He put his finger down, getting some on the tip. His nose detected all manner of disease, and he wondered if she’d known she had an advanced case of hep C. He figured he was doing her a favor, sparing her an unpleasant, creeping death.

Not that killing her would have bothered him had she been perfectly healthy.

He wiped his finger on the edge of her skirt and then moved away to a pile of debris. An old mattress was just the ticket. Propping it up against the brick, he settled into the juncture, unbothered by the stinky, sweaty smell of the thing. He took out his dart gun and waited.

Fresh blood brought out civilian vampires like crows to roadkill.

And sure enough, not long thereafter a figure appeared at the end of the alley. It looked left and right and then rushed forward. Mr. X knew that what approached had to be who he was after. Cherry was well concealed in the darkness. There was nothing to draw anyone in her direction except for the subtle scent of her blood, something human noses could never have picked up.

The young male was greedy in his thirst, and he fell upon Cherry like someone had laid out a buffet for him. Busy drinking, he was taken by surprise when the first dart popped out of the gun and went into his shoulder. His immediate instinct was to protect his food, so he hauled Cherry’s body

behind some mangled trash cans.

When the second dart hit him, he wheeled around and leaped up, eyes trained on the mattress.

Mr. X tensed, but the male came forward with more aggression than competence. His body was disorganized in its movements, suggesting he was still learning how to control his limbs after his transition.

Two more darts didn't slow him down. Clearly the Demosedan, a horse tranquilizer, wasn't enough to do the job. Forced to engage the male in a fight, Mr. X stunned him easily by kicking him in the head. The male let out a howl of pain as he went down to the dirty asphalt.

The commotion attracted attention.

Fortunately, it was only two *lessers*, not curious humans or, even more annoying, the police. The *lessers* stopped at the end of the alley and, after quick consultation, moved in to investigate.

Mr. X cursed. He was not prepared to reveal himself or what he was doing. He needed to work the kinks out of the information-gathering strategy before he came forward with it and assigned his *lessers* roles. After all, a leader should never delegate that which he had not done before and done well.

There was also a matter of self-interest. There was no telling who among the slayers might try to go around him to the Omega, either copping the idea as his own or bitching about preliminary failures. God knew the Omega was always receptive to initiative and new directions. And would have benefited from some Ritalin when it came to loyalty.

Even more to the point, the Omega's version of a pink slip was quick and horrific. As Mr. X's former superior had learned three nights ago.

Mr. X plucked out the darts from the body. He would have preferred killing the vampire, but there wasn't enough time. Leaving the male still moaning on the ground, Mr. X sprinted down the alley, sticking to the wall. He kept the minivan's headlights off until he'd slid into traffic.

Chapter Eleven

Beth's alarm clock went off, and she slapped it into silence. The buzzing was redundant. She'd been up for at least an hour, her mind humming like a lawn mower. With the dawn's arrival the hot night's mystery had faded, and she was forced to face what she had done.

Unprotected sex with a total stranger was one hell of a wake-up call.

What had she been thinking? She'd never done that before. She'd always been safe. Thank God she was on the pill to regulate her sporadic periods, but as for the other implications, her stomach rolled.

When she saw him again she'd ask him if he was clean, and pray the answer was the one she wanted to hear. As well as honest.

Maybe if she'd had more dating practice, she would have had some protection ready. But when was the last time she'd slept with anyone? A long time. Longer than the shelf life of a box of condoms.

The extended dry spell in her sex life was as much from lack of interest as any kind of morals thing. Men just weren't that high on her list of priorities. They ranked somewhere down around getting her teeth cleaned and having her car serviced. And she didn't have a car anymore.

She'd often wondered if there was something wrong with her, especially as she watched couples walk by on the street hand in hand. Most people her age were dating wildly, trying to find altar material. Not her. She just hadn't had any burning desire to be with a man, and had even considered the possibility that she was a lesbian. Trouble was, she wasn't attracted to women.

So last night had been a revelation.

She stretched, a delicious tightness coiled in her thighs. Closing her eyes, she felt him inside of her, his thickness surging and retreating until that final moment when his body had convulsed into hers with a powerful rush, his

arms crushing her against him.

Her body arched involuntarily, the fantasy strong enough to have her throbbing between her legs. Echoes of those orgasms made her bite her lip.

With a groan she got to her feet and headed for the bathroom. When she saw the shirt he'd ripped off his chest in the wastebasket, she picked it up and held it to her nose. The black fabric smelled like him.

The throbbing got worse.

How did he and Butch know each other?

Was he on the force? She'd never seen him before, but there were a number of them she didn't know.

Vice, she thought. He must be a vice cop. Or maybe a SWAT team leader.

Because he was definitely the kind of man who looked for trouble and served asses up on a plate when he found it.

Feeling as if she were sixteen, she shoved the shirt under her pillow. And then saw the bra he'd taken off her on the floor. Good lord, the front had been cut apart, sliced by something sharp.

Weird.

After a quick shower, and a faster breakfast of two oatmeal cookies, a handful of Pepperidge Farm goldfish, and a juice box, she walked down to the office. She'd been in her cube staring at her screen saver for a half hour when her phone rang. It was José.

"We had another busy night," he said, yawning.

"Bomb?"

"Nope. Dead body. Prostitute was found with her throat cut over on Third and Trade. If you come down to the station you can see the pictures, read the reports. Off the record, of course."

She was out on the street two minutes after she'd hung up the phone. She figured she'd hit the station first and then head over to the Wallace Avenue address.

She couldn't pretend she wasn't aching to see her midnight visitor again.

As she walked to the precinct house, the morning sun was unmercifully bright, and she dug into her purse for her shades. When they weren't enough to cut the sting, she shielded her eyes with her hand. It was a relief to get inside the cool, dim police station.

José wasn't in his office, but she found Butch coming out of his.

He smiled at her dryly, the corners of his hazel eyes wrinkling. "We have

to stop meeting like this.”

“Heard you have a new case.”

“I’m sure you have.”

“Care to comment, Detective?”

“We issued a statement this morning.”

“Which no doubt said absolutely nothing. Come on, can’t you spare a few words for me?”

“Not if we’re on the record.”

“How about off?”

He took a piece of gum out of his pocket and methodically unwrapped it, folding the pale slice into his mouth and biting down. She seemed to remember him smoking at some point, but hadn’t seen him lighting up recently. Which probably explained all that Wrigley’s.

“Off the record, O’Neal,” she prompted. “I swear.”

He nodded his head over his shoulder. “We need a closed door then.”

His office was about the size of her cubicle at the paper, but at least it had a door and a window. His furniture was not as good as hers, though. His desk was an old wooden one that looked as if it had been used as a carpenter’s workbench. There were hunks out of the top, and the varnish was so scratched it absorbed the fluorescent light as if thirsty.

He tossed a file at her before sitting down. “She was found behind a bunch of trash cans. Most of her blood ended up in the sewer, but the coroner thinks he found traces of heroin in her system. She’d had sex that evening, but that’s not exactly news.”

“Oh, my God, this is Mary,” Beth said, looking at a gruesome picture and sinking into a chair.

“Twenty-one years old.” Butch cursed under his breath. “What a fucking waste.”

“I know her.”

“From the station?”

“Growing up. We were in the same foster home for a little while. Afterward, I’d run into her sometimes. Usually here.”

Mary Mulcahy had been a beautiful little girl. She’d been in the home with Beth for only about a year before she’d been sent back to her birth mother. Two years later she was back in state custody after having been left alone for a week at the age of seven. She’d said she’d lived on raw flour after the rest of the food had run out.

“I’d heard you’d been in the system,” Butch said, getting thoughtful as he looked at her. “Mind if I ask why?”

“Why do you think? No parents.” She closed the file and slid it onto the desk. “Did you find a weapon?”

His eyes narrowed, but not unkindly. He seemed to be debating whether to take her lead and let the subject drop.

“Weapon?” she prompted.

“Another throwing star. Had traces of blood on it, but not hers. We also found some powdered residue in two different places, as if someone had lit off flares and put them on the ground. Hard to imagine the killer’d want to draw attention to the body, though.”

“You think what happened to Mary and the car bomb are related?”

He shrugged, a careless lift of his broad shoulders. “Maybe. But if someone was really doing a payback on Big Daddy, they’d have hit higher up the food chain than her. They’d have gone after the pimp himself.”

Beth closed her eyes, envisioning Mary as a five-year-old, a headless Barbie doll in a tattered dress tucked under her arm.

“Then again,” Butch said, “maybe this is just getting started.”

She heard his chair move and looked up as he came around the desk to her.

“You got any plans for dinner tonight?” he asked.

“Dinner?”

“Yeah. You and me.”

Hard-ass was asking her out? Again?

Beth stood, wanting to be on an equal footing with him. “Ah, yes—no, I mean, thanks, but no.”

Even if they didn’t have a professional relationship of sorts, she had other things in mind. Imagine that. Keeping her calendar open just in case the man in leather wanted to see her tonight as well as this morning.

Damn, one good lay and she thought they had a thing going? She needed to get real.

Butch smiled cynically. “Someday I’m going to figure out why you don’t like me.”

“I do like you. You don’t take shit from anyone, and even though I don’t approve of your methods, I can’t pretend I didn’t like the fact that you broke Billy Riddle’s nose again.”

The harsh planes of Butch’s face softened. As his eyes bored into hers,

she thought she must be crazy for not being attracted to him.

“And thanks for sending your friend over last night,” she said, putting her bag up on her shoulder. “Although I have to admit, he scared the hell out of me at first.”

Right before the man had showed her exactly what the highest and best use for the human body was.

Butch frowned. “Friend?”

“You know. The one who looks like some kind of Goth nightmare. Tell me, he’s vice, isn’t he?”

“What the hell are you talking about? I didn’t send anyone over to your place.”

All the blood drained out of her head.

And the growing suspicion and alarm on Butch’s face kept her from trying to jog his memory.

She headed for the door. “My mistake.”

Butch grabbed her arm. “Who the hell was at your apartment last night?”

She wished she knew.

“No one. Like I said, my mistake. I’ll see you later.”

She rushed through the lobby, her heart beating triple time. As she burst outside, she winced when the sun hit her face.

One thing was clear: There was no way she was going to meet that man this morning, even though 816 Wallace Avenue was in the best part of the city and it was broad daylight.

By four that afternoon, Wrath was about to explode.

He hadn’t been able to get back to Beth’s the night before.

And she hadn’t shown this morning.

Her failure to come to him meant one of two things: Something had happened to her or she was blowing him off.

He checked the braille clock with his fingertips. Sundown was still hours away.

Goddamned summer days. Too long. Way too long.

He stalked to the bathroom, splashed his face with water, and braced his arms on the marble counter. In the glow from the candle set next to the sink, he stared at himself, seeing nothing more than an indistinct rush of black hair, two smudgy eyebrows, and the outline of his face.

He was exhausted. He hadn't slept all day, and the night before had been a train wreck.

Except for the part with Beth. That had been...

He cursed and towed off.

God, what the hell was wrong with him? Being inside of that female was the worst of all the shit that had gone down last night. Courtesy of that stunning little interlude, his mind was wandering, his body was in a perpetual state of arousal, and his mood was in the crapper.

At least the latter was SOP for him.

Man, last night had been a total disaster.

After leaving the brothers, he and Vishous had gone across town to check out the mechanics shop. It was closed up tight as a tick, and after scoping the outside and breaking in, they'd determined it wasn't used as a center. The decrepit building was too small above ground for one thing, and there was no hidden basement that they could find. Also, the neighborhood wasn't prime. There were a couple of all-night diners around, one of which was frequented by the cops. Too much exposure.

He and Vishous were heading back to Darius's, via a quick detour through Screamer's to satisfy V's craving for Grey Goose, when they walked into a problem.

That was when things had gone from bad into the FUBAR zip code.

In an alley, a civilian vampire was gravely wounded, with two *lessers* about to finish the job on him. Killing the *lessers* had taken some time because they were both well experienced, and the other vampire was dead when the fighting was over.

The young male had been toyed with cruelly, his body a pincushion of shallow stabs. Going by the raw patches on his knees and the gravel in his palms, he'd tried to drag himself away a number of times. There'd been fresh human blood around his mouth and the smell of it in the air, too, but they couldn't stick around to check out the female he'd bitten.

Company had been coming.

Right after the *lessers* had poofed to their royal reward, the sound of cop sirens had broken out, an acoustic rash that meant someone had called 911 after having heard the fighting or seen the flashes of light. They'd barely had time to get gone with the corpse in Vishous's Escalade.

Back at Darius's, V had searched the body. In the male's wallet there had been a slip of paper with the old language's characters on it. Name, address,

age. He'd been six months out from his transition. So damn young.

An hour before dawn, they'd taken the body to the very edge of town, to a good-looking house set way back in the woods. An older civilian couple had answered the door, and their terror at finding two warriors on the other side had smelled like burning garbage to Wrath. When they'd confirmed that they had a son, Vishous had gone back to the car and picked up the remains. The father had burst from the doorway, going for his boy, taking him from Vishous's arms. Wrath had caught the mother as she'd crumpled.

The fact that the death had been avenged had calmed the father a little. But it hadn't felt like enough. Not to Wrath.

He would see all *lessers* dead before he could rest.

Wrath closed his eyes, listening to the beat of Jay-Z's *The Black Album*, trying to let go of the night before.

A rhythmic knocking broke through the music, and he willed the door open. "What's up, Fritz?"

The butler came in carrying a silver tray. "I took the liberty of preparing a repast for you, master."

Fritz put the food down on the low table in front of the couch. As he lifted the top off a covered dish, Wrath caught a whiff of herbed chicken.

Come to think of it, he was hungry.

He went over and sat down, picking up a heavy silver fork. He eyed the flatware. "Man, Darius liked expensive shit, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, master. Only the best for my *princeps*."

The butler hovered as Wrath focused on getting some of the meat off the bone with the utensils. Fine motor skills were just not his bag, and he ended up picking the leg off the plate.

"Do you like the chicken, master?"

Wrath nodded as he chewed. "You're damned handy with the stove."

"I'm so glad you've decided to stay here."

"Not for long. But don't worry, you'll have someone to look after."

Wrath pushed the fork into what looked like mashed potatoes. It was rice, and the stuff scattered. He cursed and tried to marshal some on the tines with his forefinger. "And she'll be a hell of a lot easier to live with than I am."

"I rather like looking after you. And master, I won't prepare the rice again. I'll also make sure your meat is cut up. I didn't think."

Wrath wiped his mouth with a linen napkin. "Fritz, don't waste your time trying to please me."

There was a soft laugh. “Darius was so very right about you, master.”

“That I’m a miserable son of a bitch? Yeah, he was a perceptive one, all right.” Wrath chased a piece of broccoli around with the fork. Damn it, he hated eating, especially if someone was watching him. “Never could figure out why he wanted me to come stay here so badly. No one could be that starved for company.”

“It was for you.”

Wrath narrowed his eyes behind his sunglasses. “Really.”

“He worried that you were so alone. Living by yourself. No real *shellan*, no *doggen*. He used to say that your isolation was a self-imposed punishment.”

“Well, it’s not.” Wrath’s voice sliced through the butler’s gentle tone. “And if you want to stay here, you’ll keep the psych theories to yourself, got it?”

Fritz jerked as if he’d been hit. He bent at the waist and started backing out of the room. “My apologies, master. It was grossly inappropriate of me to address you as I did.”

The door closed quietly.

Wrath leaned back against the sofa, Darius’s fork gripped in his hand.

Ah, Christ. That damn *doggen* was enough to drive a saint crazy.

And he was not lonely. Never had been.

Vengeance was one hell of a roommate.

Mr. X eyed the two students sparring with each other. They were well matched in size, both eighteen years old and built strong, but he knew which one was going to win.

Sure enough, a side kick came out fast and hard, putting the receiver on his back.

Mr. X called an end to the match and said nothing more as the victor reached out and helped the loser struggle to his feet. The show of courtesy was irritating, and he felt like punishing them both.

The first code of the society was clear: That which you put on the ground, you kicked until it ceased to move. It was just that simple.

Still, this was class, not the real world. And the parents who were letting their sons dabble in violence would have had something to say if their precious children came home fit to be buried.

As the two students bowed to him, the loser's face was brilliant red, and not just from exertion. Mr. X let the class stare, knowing that shame and embarrassment were important parts of the corrective process.

He nodded at the victor.

"Fine job. Next time you bring him down faster though, right?" He turned to the loser. He passed his eyes from the guy's head to his feet, noting the heaving breaths, the tremble in the legs. "You know where to go."

The loser blinked rapidly as he walked over to the glass wall that looked out to the lobby. As required, he stood facing the clear panels, head up high so everyone who entered the building could see his face. If he brushed the tears off his cheeks, he would have to repeat the discipline during the next session.

Mr. X separated the class and began to put them through their exercises. He watched them, correcting stances and arm positions, but his mind was on other things.

Last night had been less than perfect. Far less.

Back home, his police scanner had informed him when the prostitute's body had been found sometime after three A.M. There had been no mention of the vampire. Perhaps the *lessers* had taken the civilian away to toy with him.

It was a shame things hadn't gone the way he'd hoped, and he wanted to get back out into the field. Using a newly slain human female as bait was going to work fine. But the tranquilizer darts needed to be calibrated better. He'd started with a relatively low dose, concerned about killing the civilian before he could work him over. Clearly the strength of the drug needed to be increased.

Tonight was a bust, though.

Mr. X eyed the loser.

This evening was all about recruiting. The ranks needed to be filled out a little following the disintegration of that new recruit two nights ago.

Back centuries ago, when there were many more vampires, the society had had hundreds of members, spread far and wide over the European continent as well as in the fledgling settlements in North America. Now that the vampire population had dwindled, however, so had the ranks of the society. It was a matter of practicality. A bored, inactive *lesser* was a bad thing. Chosen specifically for their capacity for violence, their murderous impulses couldn't be put on ice just because there weren't enough targets to go around. Quite a number of them had had to be put down for killing other

lessers in competition for superiority in the ranks, an aggressive response more likely to occur if there was too little work. Or just as bad, they'd started taking out humans for sport.

The former was a disgrace and an inconvenience. The latter was unacceptable. It wasn't that the Omega was concerned with human fatalities. Quite the contrary. But using discretion, moving in the shadows, killing swiftly and returning to the darkness, these were the tenets of slayers. Human attention was bad news, and nothing got the Homo sapiens stirred up more than a bunch of dead people.

Which was another reason why new recruits were tricky. They tended to have more hatred than focus. Seasoning was critical so that the secret nature of the aeons-old war between vampires and the society could be preserved.

Still, their ranks needed to be filled.

He eyed the loser and smiled, looking forward to the evening.

Shortly before seven o'clock, Mr. X drove out to the suburbs, easily locating 3461 Pillar Street. He put the Hummer in park and waited, passing the time by memorizing the split-level's details. It was typical Middle America. Twenty-four hundred square feet, sitting smack-dab in the center of a tiny lot with one big tree. Neighbors were close enough to be able to read the writing on the kids' cereal boxes in the morning and the labels on the adults' domestic beer cans at night.

Happy, clean living. At least from the outside.

The screen door swung open, and the loser from this afternoon's class bounded out as if he were getting free of a sinking ship. Mom followed, lingering on the front step and regarding the SUV in front of her house as though it were a bomb ready to go off.

Mr. X put down the window and waved. She returned the greeting after a moment.

Loser leaped into the Hummer, eyes shining with greed as he looked over the leather seats and the dials on the dashboard.

"Evening," Mr. X said as he hit the gas.

The kid fumbled to get his hands up and bow his head. "Sensei."

Mr. X smiled. "Glad you could make yourself available."

"Yeah, well, my mother is a pain in my ass." Loser was trying to be cool, punching the curse words hard.

"You shouldn't talk about her like that."

Loser had a moment's confusion as he was forced to recalibrate his

tough-guy act. “Ah, she wants me home by eleven. It’s a weeknight, and I gotta go to work in the morning.”

“We’ll make sure you’re back by then.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the other side of town. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

A little later Mr. X pulled into a long, curving driveway that wound among spotlit specimen trees and ancient-looking marble sculptures. There were boxwood topiaries on the grounds, too, standing like decorations on a green marzipan cake. A camel, an elephant, a bear. The clipping had been done by an expert, so there was no question as to what each one was.

Talk about upkeep, Mr. X thought.

“Wow.” Loser gave his neck a workout looking left and right. “What’s this? A park? Look, at that! It’s a lion. You know, I think I want to be a vet. I think that would be cool. You know, saving animals.”

Loser had been in the car for less than twenty minutes, and Mr. X was ready to see the last of him. The guy was like lint in food: an irritation that made you want to spit.

And not only because he said *you know* constantly.

They came around a turn, and a great brick mansion was revealed.

Billy Riddle was out front, leaning against a white column. His blue jeans hung low on his hips, flashing the waistband of his underwear, and he was working a set of keys in his hand, whipping them around on a string. He straightened when he caught sight of the Hummer, a smile pulling at the bandage on his nose.

Loser shifted in the seat like he’d been set up.

Billy headed for the front passenger door, moving his muscular body with ease. When he saw Loser sitting there, he glowered, nailing the other guy with a vicious stare. Loser unclipped the seat belt and reached for the handle.

“No,” Mr. X said. “Billy will sit behind you.”

Loser settled back against the seat, picking his lip.

When Loser didn’t vacate shotgun, Billy yanked open the rear door and slid in. He met Mr. X’s eyes in the mirror, and the hostility changed to respect.

“Sensei.”

“Billy, how are you this evening?”

“Good.”

“Fine, fine. Do me a favor and pull your pants up.”

Billy jacked his waistband as his eyes shifted to the back of Loser's head. He looked as if he wanted to drill a hole in it, and going by Loser's twitchy fingers, the other guy knew it.

Mr. X smiled.

Chemistry is everything, he thought.

Chapter Twelve

Beth leaned back in her chair, stretching her arms out. Her computer screen glowed.

Boy, the Internet was handy.

According to the title search she'd performed online, 816 Wallace Avenue was owned by a man named Fritz Perlmutter. He'd bought the property in 1978 for a little over \$200,000. When she'd Googled the Perlmutter name, she'd found a number of people with *F* as a first initial, but none of them lived in Caldwell. After checking some of the government databases and coming up with nothing worth a damn, she had Tony do some hacking.

It turned out Fritz was a clean-living, law-abiding kind of guy. His credit report sparkled. He'd never had any trouble with the IRS or the police. Never been married, either. And he was a member of the private client group of the local bank, which meant he had plenty of money. But that was about all Tony could find.

Doing the math, she figured the fine and upstanding Mr. Perlmutter must be in his seventies.

Why the hell would someone like him hang out with her midnight marauder?

Maybe the address wasn't legit.

Now there'd be a shocker. Guy dressed in black leather and dripping with weapons giving out false info? You don't say.

Still, 816 Wallace and Fritz Perlmutter was all she had to go on.

Going through the *Caldwell Courier Journal's* archives, she'd found a couple of articles on the house. The mansion was on the National Register of Historic Places, as a fantastic example of the Federal style, and there were some stories and op-eds about the work that had been done on it immediately

after Mr. Perlmutter had taken possession. Evidently the local historical association had been dying to get inside the house for years to see what had changed, but Mr. Perlmutter had declined all requests. In the letters to the editor, the simmering frustration of the history buffs had been mixed with grudging approval at the accuracy of the exterior restorations.

As she reread an op-ed, Beth popped a Tums in her mouth and crunched it into a powder that filled the creases in her molars. Her stomach was sour again. And she was hungry. Great combination.

Maybe it was frustration. Essentially, she knew nothing more than she had when she started.

And the cell phone number the man had given her? Untraceable.

In the information vacuum, she was even more determined to stay away from Wallace Avenue. And feeling the echo of a need to go to confession.

She checked the time. Almost seven o'clock.

Given her hunger, she decided to go eat. Better to skip Our Lady and take nourishment of the physical variety.

Leaning to one side, she looked around the wall of her cubicle. Tony was already gone.

She really didn't want to be alone.

On a crazy impulse she picked up the phone and dialed the station.
“Ricky? It’s Beth. Is Detective O’Neal around? Okay, thanks. No, no message. No, I—Please don’t page him. It’s nothing important.”

Just as well. Hard-ass was not really the uncomplicated company she was looking for.

She stared down at her watch, getting lost in the second hand’s crawl around the dial. The evening hours stretched ahead of her like an obstacle course, the hours to be dodged and surmounted.

Hopefully with speed.

Maybe she’d grab some food and go see a movie afterward. Anything to delay going back to her apartment. Come to think of it, she should probably stay at a motel somewhere.

In the event that man came looking for her again.

She’d just logged off her computer when her phone rang. She picked it up on the second ring.

“Heard you were looking for me.”

Butch O’Neal’s voice was a gravel pit, she thought. In a good way.

“Um. Yeah.” She pushed her hair back over her shoulder. “You still free

for dinner?"

His laugh was a low rumble. "I'll be in front of the paper in fifteen."

He hung up before she could slide in a properly nonchalant, this-is-just-about-food comment.

After sundown Wrath walked into the kitchen, carrying the silver tray with the remnants of his meal on it. Typical of Darius, everything was the best of the best here, too. Industrial stainless-steel appliances. Plenty of cupboards and granite counter space. Lots of windows.

Too many lights.

Fritz was at the sink, scrubbing at something. He looked over his shoulder. "Master, you didn't need to bring that back."

"Yeah, I did." Wrath put the tray down on a counter and leaned into his arms.

Fritz shut off the water. "Was there something you needed?"

Well, for starters, he'd like to not be such a dickhead.

"Fritz, your job here is solid. Just wanted you to know that."

"Thank you, master." The butler's voice was very quiet. "I don't know what I would do if I didn't have someone to take care of. And I think of this as my home."

"It is. For as long as you want it to be."

Wrath turned and headed for the door. He was almost out of the room when Fritz spoke up.

"This is your home, too, master."

He shook his head. "Already got a place to sleep. Don't need another."

Wrath walked into the hall, feeling particularly ferocious. Man, Beth had better be alive and well. Or God help whoever had hurt her.

And if she'd decided to avoid him? That didn't matter. Her body was about to need something only he could provide her. So sooner or later she would come around. Or she would die.

He thought of the soft skin of her neck. Felt the sensation of his tongue stroking over the vein that ran up from her heart.

His fangs elongated as if she were before him. As if he could sink his teeth into her and drink.

Wrath closed his eyes as his body began to shake. His stomach, full with food, turned into a bottomless, achy pit.

He tried to remember the last time he'd fed. It had been a while, but surely not that long ago?

He forced himself to calm down. Get control. It was like trying to slow down a train with a hand brake, but eventually a cooling stream of sanity replaced the whacked-out, bloodlust spins.

As he came back to reality he felt uneasy, his instincts crying out for airtime.

That female was dangerous to him. If she could affect him like this without even being in the damn room, she might just be his *pyrocant*.

His detonator, so to speak. The express-lane EZ Pass to his self-destruction.

Wrath dragged a hand through his hair. How goddamned ironic that he wanted her like no other female.

But maybe it wasn't irony. Maybe that was precisely how the *pyrocant* system worked. The urge to cozy up to what could annihilate you ensured the damn thing got a chance to go to work on your ass.

After all, what kind of fun would it be if you could easily avoid your inner hand grenade?

Damn him. He needed to get Beth off his plate of responsibilities. Fast. As soon as she was through her transition, he was going to put her in the hands of an appropriate male. A civilian.

In gory flashback, he pictured that young male's bloody, beaten body.

How the hell would a civilian keep her safe?

He didn't know the answer to that one. But what other option was there? He wasn't going to keep her.

Maybe he could give her to one of his brothers.

Yeah, and who would he pick out of that bunch? Rhage? Who'd just add her to his fuck pool, or worse, eat her by mistake? V with all his problems?

Zsadist?

And did he really think he could handle knowing one of his warriors was doing her?

Not fucking likely.

God, he was tired.

Vishous materialized in front of him. The vampire was running without his baseball cap tonight, and Wrath could dimly make out the complex markings around his left eye.

"Found Billy Riddle." V lit up one of his hand-rolled cigarettes, his

gloved fingers steady. When he exhaled, the fragrance of Turkish tobacco perfumed the air. “He was arrested for sexual assault forty-eight hours ago. Lives with his daddy, who happens to be a U.S. senator.”

“High-profile background.”

“Hard to get higher. And I took the liberty of doing some research. Billy boy’s been in and out of trouble as a juvenile. Violent stuff. Sexual shit. Got to imagine daddy’s campaign manager loves the fact that the guy’s hit eighteen. Everything Billy pulls now is public record.”

“You nail a street address?”

“Yeah.” Vishous grinned. “You gonna put a hurt on the guy?”

“Like you read about.”

“So let’s go.”

Wrath shook his head. “I’ll meet you and the rest of the brothers back here later tonight. I’ve got to go somewhere first.”

He could feel V’s eyes sharpen, the vampire’s fierce intellect churning over the situation. Among the brothers, Vishous had the most raw brainpower, but he paid for the privilege.

Man, Wrath sure had his own demons, and they were no walk in the park, but he wouldn’t have wanted Vishous’s cross to bear. Seeing what had yet to come was a terrible burden.

V drew on the hand-rolled and exhaled slowly. “I dreamed of you last night.”

Wrath stiffened. He’d been kind of waiting for this. “I don’t want to know, brother. I really don’t.”

The vampire nodded. “Just remember something, okay?”

“Shoot.”

“Two guards tortured will happily fight each other.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Dinner was great,” Beth said as Butch pulled up in front of her building.

He thoroughly agreed. She was smart and funny and sit-forward-in-your-chair beautiful. And if he stepped out of line, she never failed to knock him back where he should be.

So she was also incredibly sexy.

He put the car in park, but didn’t turn the engine off. He figured killing the ignition would make it look like he wanted to be invited in.

Which he did, of course. But he didn’t want her to feel awkward if that wasn’t where she saw things heading.

Well, wasn’t he turning into a nice guy.

“You sound surprised you enjoyed yourself,” he said.

“I am, a little.”

Butch ran his eyes over her, starting with her knees that were just barely showing under the hem of her skirt. From the dashboard’s glow, he could make out the lovely lines of her body, her long, exquisite neck, her perfect, perfect lips. He wanted to kiss her, here in this dim light, in the front seat of his unmarked, just like they were teenagers.

Then he wanted to go inside her apartment with her. And not come out again until morning.

“So thanks,” she said, flashing him a smile and reaching for the door.

“Wait.”

He moved quickly, so that she wouldn’t have time to think and neither would he. He took her face in his hands and put his mouth on hers.

Wrath materialized in the courtyard behind Beth’s apartment and felt a prickling across his skin.

She was close by. But there were no lights on in her place.

Following a hunch, he walked around the side of the building. There was a nondescript American sedan parked in front. She was inside of it.

Wrath went down to the sidewalk and, as if he were just taking a stroll in the shadows, passed by the car.

He stopped dead.

His useless eyes worked well enough to tell him that some guy was all over her. As if the potent sexual craving of the male human wouldn't have tipped him off.

For God's sake, he could smell the bastard's lust through the sedan's glass and steel.

Wrath lunged forward. His first instinct was to rip the car door off and kill whoever had his hands on her. Just pull the guy out and tear his throat open.

But at the last second he spun away and forced himself back into the darkness.

Son of a bitch. He was literally seeing red, he was so worked up.

That some other male was kissing those lips, feeling that body under his hands...

A low growl vibrated through his chest and out his mouth.

She's mine.

He cursed. Yeah, and in what parallel universe was he living in? She was his temporary responsibility, not his *shellan*. She could be with whomever she wished. Wherever. Whenever.

But God, the idea that she might actually like what the guy was doing to her, that she might prefer the taste of the human's kiss, was enough to make Wrath's temples pound.

Welcome to the wonderful world of jealousy, he thought. *For the price of admission, you get a splitting headache, a nearly irresistible urge to commit murder, and an inferiority complex.*

Yippee.

Man, he couldn't wait to get his life back. The second she was through her transition, he was going to get the hell out of town. And pretend he'd never, ever met Darius's daughter.

Butch O'Neal was one hell of a kisser.

His lips were firm, but deliciously soft. Not coming on too strong, but letting her know he was prepared to take her to bed and show her he meant business.

And he smelled good up close, a mix of aftershave and fresh laundry. She reached up with her hands. His shoulders were wide and strong under her palms, his body drawn in a tight arch toward hers. He was all coiled power, and in that moment she wanted to be attracted to him. She honestly did.

Except she just didn't feel that sweet rush of desperation, that wild hunger. Not like she had the night before with...

Now was a hell of a time to be thinking about that other man.

When Butch pulled back, his eyes were hooded. "I'm not doing it for you, am I?"

She laughed softly. Leave it to Hard-ass. Blunt as always.

"You know how to kiss, O'Neal, I'll give you that. So it's not for lack of technique."

He returned to his side of the seat and shook his head. "Thanks a hell of a lot."

But he didn't seem terribly hurt.

And now that she was thinking more clearly, she was glad there was no spark on her end. If she had liked him, if she had wanted to be with him, he would have broken her heart. She was sure of it. In ten years, if he made it that long, he was going to implode from the stress, the ugliness, the sorrow of his job. It was eating him alive already. Every year he was wound a little tighter, and no one, but no one, was going to pull him out of that tailspin.

"Careful there, Randall," he said. "It's bad enough knowing I don't turn you on. But that pity on your face is a real ass burner."

"Sorry." She smiled at him.

"Mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What's up with you and men? Do you, ah, do you like them? Us, I mean?"

She laughed, thinking of what she'd done last night with that stranger. The question of her sexual orientation had certainly been laid to rest. Buried good and hard.

"Yeah, I like men."

"Did someone do a number on you? You know, hurt you?"

Beth shook her head. "I just like to keep to myself."

He looked down at the steering wheel, running his hand around the circumference. "That's a damn shame. Because you're terrific. You really are." He cleared his throat as if he'd made himself feel uncomfortable.

Sheepish. Good lord, Hard-ass was actually sheepish.

On impulse, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You're pretty fantastic yourself."

"Yeah. I know." He shot her his trademark mocking grin. "Now get your butt inside that building. It's late."

Butch watched as Beth crossed in front of his headlights, her hair flowing over her shoulders.

She was the real deal, he thought. A genuinely good woman.

And man, she knew exactly what his drill was. That look of sadness in her eyes just now meant she saw the early grave that was waiting for him.

So it was just as well there was no chemistry for her. Otherwise he might try to talk her into falling in love with him just so he didn't go to hell all by his lonesome.

He put the car in gear, but kept his foot on the brake as she went up the steps to the front lobby. She had her hand on the door and was shooting him a wave when something moved in the shadows beside the building.

He flipped the engine back into park.

There was a man dressed in black heading around to the rear.

Butch got out of the car and jogged silently across the side lawn.

Chapter Fourteen

Wrath's sole focus was getting to Beth. So it wasn't until he was halfway across the courtyard that he heard the human behind him.

"Police! Halt!"

And then there was that all-too-familiar sound of a gun being cocked at him.

"Let me see your hands!"

Wrath caught the man's scent and smiled. Lust had been replaced with aggression, and the fighting urge was as strong as the sexual one had been. The guy was full of juice tonight.

"I said, halt and hands!"

Wrath stopped and reached into his jacket for one of the stars. Cop or not, he was going to drop the human, put a nice little slice through his artery.

But then Beth threw open the slider.

He smelled her instantly, and wouldn't you know it, he got a hard-on.

"Hands!"

"What's going on?" Beth demanded.

"Get back in the house," the human barked. "Hands, asshole! Or I'll put a window in the back of your skull."

By this time the cop was no more than ten feet away and closing fast. Wrath lifted his palms. He wasn't about to kill in front of Beth. Besides, that gun was going to be at point-blank range in another three seconds. And not even he could survive a hit that tight.

"O'Neal—"

"Beth, get the *fuck* out of here!"

A heavy hand clamped down on Wrath's shoulder. He let the cop push him against the building.

"You want to tell me what you're doing waltzing around this place?" the

human ordered.

“Out for a walk,” Wrath said. “And you?”

The cop grabbed one and then the other of Wrath’s arms and pulled them back. The cuffs went on quickly. The guy was an old pro with the metal.

Wrath looked over at Beth. From what he could tell, she had her arms linked tightly across her chest. Fear thickened the air around her, turning it into a blanket that covered her from head to foot.

Isn’t this going well, he thought. She was scared to death of him again.

“Do not look at her,” the cop said, pushing Wrath’s face toward the wall. “What’s your name?”

“Wrath,” Beth answered. “He told me it was Wrath.”

The human actually snarled at her. “Do you have a hearing problem, sweetheart? Get out of here.”

“I want to know who he is, too.”

“I’ll phone in a fucking report tomorrow morning, how’s that?”

Wrath growled. He couldn’t deny that getting her inside was a damn good idea. But he did not appreciate the way the cop was talking to her.

The human reached inside Wrath’s jacket and started pulling out weapons. Three throwing stars, a switchblade, a handgun, a length of chain.

“Jesus Christ,” the cop muttered as he dropped the steel links on the ground with the rest of the load. “You got some ID? Or wasn’t there enough room in here for a wallet, considering you’re carrying about thirty pounds of concealed weapons?”

When the cop found a thick wad of cash, he cursed again. “Am I going to find drugs, too, or have you sold out for tonight?”

Wrath allowed himself to be spun around and slammed back against the bricks. While his two daggers were stripped from their holster, he stared down at the cop, thinking how much he was going to enjoy ripping that thick throat open with his teeth. He leaned forward, leading with his head. He couldn’t help it.

“O’Neal, be careful!” Beth said, as if she’d read his mind.

The cop pressed his gun muzzle into Wrath’s neck. “So how about a name?”

“Are you arresting me?”

“Yeah. I am.”

“For what?”

“Let me think. Trespassing. Concealed weapons. Do you have a permit

for that handgun? I'm betting no. Oh, and thanks to all these throwing stars, I'm thinking murder, too. Yeah, that should do it."

"Murder?" Beth whispered.

"Your name?" the cop demanded, glaring up at him.

Wrath smiled tightly. "You must be clairvoyant."

"Scuse me?"

"About the murder charge." Wrath laughed softly and dropped his voice.

"You ever been inside a body bag, Officer?"

Rage, pure and vibrant, came out of the man's pores. "Don't threaten me."

"I'm not."

The left hook came through the air fast as a baseball, and Wrath did nothing to avoid it. The cop's meaty fist caught the side of his jaw and kicked his head back. A sunburst of pain exploded in his face.

"Butch! Stop it!"

Beth ran forward, as if she intended to put herself between them, but the cop held her off, strong-arming her.

"Jesus, you're a pain in the ass! You want to get hurt?" the human said, pushing her away.

Wrath spat out blood. "He's right. Go inside."

'Cause this was going to get ugly.

Thanks to catching a blurry eyeful of that makeout session, he didn't like the cop to begin with. But if the guy addressed Beth one more time in that tone of voice, Wrath was going to show the man's front teeth the joy of liberation. And *then* he was going to kill the son of a bitch.

"Go on, Beth," he said.

"Shut up!" the cop yelled at him.

"You going to hit me again if I don't?"

The cop crawled up into his face. "No, I'm going to shoot you."

"Fine with me. I like bullet wounds." Wrath lowered his voice. "Just not in front of her."

"Fuck you."

But the cop covered the weapons and cash by throwing his coat over them. Then he grabbed Wrath's arm and started walking.

Beth felt as though she were going to be sick as Butch led Wrath away.

Aggression was flowing between the men like battery acid, and even though Wrath was handcuffed and being held at gun-point, she wasn't exactly sure Butch was safe. She had a feeling that Wrath was letting himself get taken into custody.

But Butch must know that, she thought. Otherwise he would have holstered his weapon instead of having its muzzle pressed up against that temple.

She knew Butch was tough on criminals, but was he crazy enough to kill one?

Going by the deadly expression on his face, she had to think that was a big yes. And he might just get away with it. Violent ends came to those who lived hard lives, and Wrath was clearly not a white-collar law abider. If he turned up with a bullet in his head in some back alley, or floating facedown in the river, who would be surprised?

Giving in to a shrill instinct, she ran around the side of the building.

Butch was marching toward his car as if he were carrying an unstable load, and she rushed to catch up with them.

"Wait. I need to ask him a question."

"You want to know his shoe size or something?" Butch snapped.

"Fourteen," Wrath drawled.

"I'll remember that at Christmas, asshole."

Beth leaped in front of them so both men had to stop or run her over. She stared up into Wrath's face. "Why did you come to find me?"

She could have sworn that his gaze softened behind his sunglasses. "I don't want it to come out like this."

Butch shoved her away with a heavy hand. "I have an idea. Why don't you let me do my job?"

"*Don't touch her*," Wrath snarled.

"Yeah, I'm going to listen to you." Butch yanked the other man forward.

When they got to the car, Butch wrenched open the rear door and pushed Wrath's towering weight down.

"Who are you!" she yelled.

Wrath looked at her, his body becoming perfectly still in spite of the fact that Butch was all over him.

"Your father sent me," he said distinctly. And then he got into the backseat.

Beth stopped breathing.

She was dimly aware of Butch slamming the door and running around to the driver's side.

“Wait!” she called out.

But the car was already in gear, tires leaving strips of rubber on the asphalt.

Chapter Fifteen

Butch picked up his handset and asked Dispatch to get someone over to the courtyard immediately to pick up the weapons and cash that were under his coat. As he drove, he kept one eye on the road and the other in the rearview mirror. The suspect stared back, a slight smile on his evil-looking face.

Jesus, the guy was huge. He took up most of the backseat, his head bent at an angle so it didn't smack the roof as they sped over potholes.

Butch couldn't wait to get him out of the damn car.

Less than five minutes later, he pulled off Trade Street and into the parking lot of the station, driving up as close to the back entrance as possible. He got out and opened the rear door.

"Let's play nice, shall we?" he said as he grabbed the guy's arm.

The man rose to his feet. Butch gave him a yank.

But the suspect stepped backward, away from the station.

"Wrong way." Butch threw his anchor out, digging his heels into the pavement and pulling hard.

The suspect was inexorable. He just kept backing up, dragging Butch along with him.

"You think I won't shoot you?" Butch demanded as he reached for his gun.

And then it was all over.

Butch had never seen anyone move that fast. One second the guy had his arms behind his back; the next, the handcuffs were on the ground.

And with total economy of movement, Butch was disarmed, put in a blistering choke hold, and hauled into the shadows.

The darkness swallowed them. As Butch fought back, he realized he was in the thin alley between the station and the office building next door. It was only about five feet wide, but some sixty feet long. And it was unlit. With no

windows.

When Butch was spun around and slammed into the bricks, what little breath he'd been able to steal got kicked out of his lungs in a rush. Inconceivably, he was lifted off the ground, the man holding him by the neck with only one hand.

"You should have stayed out of it, Officer," the man said in a deep, accented growl. "You should have gone along on your way and let her come to me."

Butch clawed at the iron hold. The massive hand locked around his throat was squeezing the life right out of him. He gagged, desperate for air. His vision went checkerboard, consciousness slipping out of his grasp.

He knew without a doubt that there'd be no walking away from this one. He was going to be carried out of the alley inside of a bag. Just like the man had promised.

A minute later he stopped resisting altogether, his arms dropping and hanging loose. He wanted to fight. He had the will to fight. But no longer the strength.

And as for death? He was okay with it. He was going to die in the line of duty, albeit like an idiot, because he hadn't asked for backup. Still, it was better and quicker than ending up in a hospital bed with some nasty, slow growing disease. And more honorable than shooting himself. Which was something Butch had contemplated once or twice before.

With his last lick of life, he forced his eyes to focus on the man's face. The expression staring back at him was one of total control.

The guy's done this before, Butch thought. *And he's very comfortable with murder.*

God, Beth.

What the hell would a man like this do to Beth?

Wrath felt the cop's body go limp. He was still alive, but barely.

The human's total lack of fear was remarkable. The cop had been pissed to get jumped, and he'd fought back admirably, but he'd never been scared. And now that the Fade was upon him, he was resigned to his death. Maybe almost relieved by it.

Damn. Wrath could imagine feeling the same way.

And it was a shame to kill someone who was able to die as a warrior

would. Without fear or hesitation. Such males were few and far between, be they vampires or humans.

The cop's mouth started moving. He was trying to speak. Wrath leaned down.

“Don’t...hurt...her.”

Wrath found himself answering, “I’m here to save her.”

“No!” A voice rang out down the alley.

Wrath turned his head. Beth was running toward them.

“Let him go!”

He loosened his grip on the cop’s throat. He wasn’t going to kill the guy in front of her. He needed her to trust him more than he wanted to help the cop meet his maker.

As Beth skidded to a halt, Wrath dropped his hand, and the human fell to the ground. Tortured gasping sounds and hoarse gagging rang out in the shadows.

Beth knelt over the heaving policeman, glaring upward. “You almost killed him!”

Wrath cursed, knowing he had to get the hell out of there. Other cops were bound to show up.

He looked down to the other end of the alley.

“Where do you think you’re going!” Her voice was scissor-sharp with anger.

“You want me to stick around so I can get arrested again?”

“You deserve to get thrown in jail!”

With a lurch the cop tried to stand up, but his legs buckled. Still, he pushed Beth’s hands away when she reached for him.

Wrath needed to find a dark corner so he could dematerialize. If nearly killing someone had shaken Beth, pulling the disappearing act in front of her would only seal the deal on freaking her out.

He turned away. Began to stride off. He didn’t like the idea of leaving her, but what else could he do? If he got his ass shot and killed, who would look after her? And he couldn’t let himself get thrown in jail. Those cells had steel bars, which meant when dawn came, he couldn’t dematerialize to safety. Faced with those two outcomes, if a bunch of cops tried to apprehend him right now, he’d have to slaughter them all.

And then what would she think of him?

“Stop right there!” she yelled.

He kept going, and her footfalls sounded out as she came running.

“I said, stop!” She grabbed onto his arm and pulled hard.

He glared at her, frustrated by the way things had gone down. Courtesy of his song and dance with her buddy, she was terrified of him, and that was going to make taking care of her a bitch. He doubted he had time to bring her around again so she would willingly go anywhere with him. Which meant he might even have to resort to taking her against her will when her transition hit. And that wasn’t going to be fun for either one of them.

As her scent drifted up into his nose, he knew she was perilously close to the change.

Maybe he needed to take her with him now.

Wrath glanced around. He couldn’t very well throw her over his shoulder here, just fifteen yards from the back of the police station. Not in full view of that damned cop.

No, he was going to have to come right before dawn and abduct her. And then he’d chain her in Darius’s chamber if he had to, because it was either that or she was going to die.

“Why the hell did you lie!” she yelled. “You didn’t know my father.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Liar,” she spat. “You’re a killer and a liar.”

“At least you got the first part right.”

Her eyes widened, horror dawning on her face. “Those throwing stars... in your pockets. You murdered Mary. Didn’t you?”

He frowned. “I haven’t killed any women.”

“So I’m right about the second part, too.”

Wrath eyed the cop, who was still down for the count, but gaining ground.

Damn it, he thought. What if Beth didn’t have until dawn? What if she took off and he couldn’t find her?

He lowered his voice. “You’ve been really hungry lately, haven’t you?”

She jerked back. “What?”

“Hungry, but not gaining any weight. And tired. So very tired. Your eyes have been stinging, too, especially in the daytime, right?” He leaned forward. “You’re looking at raw meat and wondering what it tastes like. Your teeth, the upper ones in front, have been sore. Your joints ache, and your skin feels tight. And it’s getting tighter.”

She blinked, mouth falling open.

Behind her the cop lurched to his feet, wobbled, and did an ass plant back on the ground. Wrath spoke faster.

“You feel like you don’t belong, don’t you? Like everyone else is moving at a different, slower speed. You think you’re abnormal, separate, apart. Restless. You sense that something is coming, something monumental, but you don’t know what it is or how to stop it. You lie awake, afraid of your dreams, lost in familiar surroundings.” He paused. “You’ve had little or no sex drive whatsoever, but men find you incredibly attractive. Those orgasms I gave you last night were the first ones you’ve ever had.”

It was all the things he could remember about existing in the human world before his transition.

She stared at him. Dumbfounded.

“If you want to know what the hell’s happening to you, you need to come with me now. You’re about to get sick, Beth. And I’m the only one who can help you.”

She took a step backward. Looked at the cop, who seemed to be considering the merits of lying down.

Wrath held up his hands. “I’m not going to hurt you. I promise. If I were going to kill you, I could have done it last night in ten different ways, right?”

Her head turned back to him, and he closed his eyes as he sensed her remembering exactly what he had done to her. Her desire was a sweet saturation in his nostrils before the scent was quickly cut off.

“You were going to kill Butch just now.”

Actually, he wasn’t so sure about that. A good opponent was hard to find.
“I didn’t.”

“You could have.”

“Does it really matter? He’s still breathing.”

“Only because I came.”

Wrath growled, playing the best card he had. “I’ll take you to your father’s house.”

Her eyes popped and then narrowed with suspicion.

She glanced over at the cop again. Now he was back up on his feet, one hand braced against the wall, head hanging as if it were too heavy for his neck.

“My father, huh?” Her voice was dripping with disbelief. And just enough curiosity so that he knew he had her.

“We’re out of time here, Beth.”

There was a long silence.
The cop lifted his head and looked down the alley.
In another minute or two the guy was going to try to make another arrest.
His determination was palpable.
“I’m leaving now,” Wrath said. “Come with me.”
Her grip tightened on her purse. “Just so we’re clear, I do not trust you.”
He nodded. “Why would you?”
“And those orgasms weren’t my first.”
“Then why were you so surprised to be having them?” he said softly.
“Hurry,” she muttered, turning away from the officer. “We can get a taxi
out on Trade. I didn’t ask the one that got me here to wait.”

Chapter Sixteen

As she sped down the alley, Beth knew she was gambling with her life. There was a serious chance she was being played. By a killer.

Except how did he know all those things she was feeling?

Before she turned the corner, she looked back at Butch. He was reaching out to her, one hand extended. She couldn't see his face for the shadows, but his desperate yearning crossed the distance between them. She hesitated, losing the rhythm of her steps.

Wrath took her arm. "Beth. Come on."

Heaven help her, she started running again.

The minute they got out to Trade, she hailed a passing cab. Thank God, it stopped on a dime. They jumped in, and Wrath gave out an address a couple blocks over from the one he'd told her on Wallace Avenue. Obviously as an evasion technique.

He must have a lot of those, she thought.

As the cab took off, she felt him look across the seat at her.

"That cop," he said. "Does he mean something to you?"

She grabbed her cell phone from her purse and dialed the front desk down at the station.

"I asked you a question." Wrath's tone was sharp.

"Go to hell." When Ricky's voice came through, she took a deep breath.
"Is José there?"

It didn't take more than a minute for the other detective to be found, and he was already out the door to find Butch as she ended the call. José hadn't asked many questions, but she knew they were going to come later. And just how was she going to explain to him why she'd run off with a suspect?

That made her an accomplice for aiding and abetting, didn't it?

Beth put her phone back in her purse. Her hands were shaking, and she

felt light-headed. She just couldn't catch her breath either, even though the cab was air-conditioned and blissfully cool. She cracked the window. The breeze was hot and damp as it blew through her hair.

What had she done? To her body last night. To her life right now.

What was next? Setting her apartment on fire?

She hated that Wrath had dangled the one carrot she couldn't resist in front of her. That he was obviously a criminal. That he terrified her, but she still got hot thinking about how he'd kissed her.

And she despised the fact that he knew those were her first orgasms.

"Drop us off here," Wrath told the driver ten minutes later.

Beth paid with a twenty-dollar bill, thinking they were lucky she had the cash on her. Wrath's money, that big bank roll of the stuff, was on the ground in her backyard. So it wasn't like he could cover the fare.

Was she really going home with this man?

The taxi left, and they walked down a perfectly kept sidewalk in a well-maintained, ritzy neighborhood. It was an absurd switch in scenery. From the violence in that back alley, to rolling lawns and flower beds.

She was willing to bet the people who lived in these houses had never run from the police.

She glanced back at Wrath, who was slightly behind her. He was scanning around them as if he were looking to get jumped, although how he could see anything with those black glasses on, she had no idea. She just didn't get why he wore them. Aside from compromising his vision, those flashy lenses were a serious identifying feature. If anyone clapped their eyes on him, they'd be able to describe him accurately in a heartbeat.

Not that the long black hair and the sheer size of him wouldn't have done the job well enough.

She turned her head away. The sound of his boots hitting the concrete behind her was like fists thudding on a solid door.

"So the cop." Wrath's voice was close, deep. "Is he your lover?"

Beth almost laughed. God, he sounded jealous.

"I'm not going to answer that."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have to. I don't know you, I don't owe you."

"You got to know me pretty damn well last night," he said in a low growl. "And I got to know you very well."

Let's not go there, she thought, getting instantly wet between her legs.

God, the things that man could do with his tongue.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at a well-kept Colonial. Lights glowed in various windows, making it look inviting and somehow familiar. Probably because homey-looking places were universal. And universally appealing.

She could use a week in one right about now.

“Last night was a mistake,” she said.

“Didn’t feel that way to me.”

“Then you felt wrong. You felt *all* wrong.”

He reached for her before she even sensed he’d moved. She was walking along and then she was in his arms. One of his hands clamped onto the base of her neck. The other pulled her hips tight against him. His erection was a thick rope on her belly.

She closed her eyes. Every inch of her skin came alive, her temperature soaring. She hated the reaction to him, but like the man, she had no control over it.

She waited for his mouth to come down on hers, except he didn’t kiss her. He bent his lips to her ear instead.

“Don’t trust me. Don’t like me. I could give a shit. But don’t you *ever* lie to me.” He took a deep breath, as if he were drawing her into him. “I can smell the sex coming off you right now. I could take you down on this sidewalk and be up that skirt of yours in a heartbeat. And you wouldn’t fight me, would you?”

No, she probably wouldn’t.

Because she was an *idiot*. Who evidently had a death wish.

His lips brushed the side of her neck. And then his tongue licked her skin lightly. “Now, we can be civilized and wait until we get home. Or we can get down to it right here. Either way, I’m dying to come inside of you again, and you’re not going to say no.”

Beth gripped his shoulders through his leather jacket. She was supposed to push him away, but she didn’t. She brought him closer, arching her breasts to his chest.

A sound of male desperation broke free of him, halfway between a groan of satisfaction and a dark plea.

Ha, she thought, regaining some power.

She broke their contact with grim satisfaction. “The only thing that makes this god-awful situation remotely bearable is the fact that you want me

more.”

She kicked her chin up and started walking. She could actually feel his eyes on her body as he followed, as if he were touching her with his hands.

“You’re right,” he said. “I would kill to have you.”

Beth wheeled around, pointing a finger at him. “So that was it. You saw Butch and me kissing in the car. Didn’t you?”

Wrath cocked an eyebrow at her. Smiled tightly. Didn’t answer.

“Is that why you attacked him?”

“I was merely resisting arrest.”

“Yeah, that’s what it looked like,” she muttered. “So did you? Did you see him kiss me?”

Wrath closed the space between their bodies, menace flowing out of him. “Yeah, I saw. And I *hated* that he was touching you. Does knowing that get you off? Do you want to nail me a good one and tell me he’s a better lover than I am? It would be a lie, but it would still hurt like hell.”

“Why do you care so much?” she demanded. “You and I spent one night together. Not even! It was a couple of hours.”

He clamped his jaw shut. She knew his teeth were grinding by the way the hollows under his cheekbones moved. And she was glad he was wearing the sunglasses. She had a feeling his eyes would have scared the hell out of her.

When a car passed by on the street, she remembered he was a fugitive from the police, and technically so was she. What the hell were they doing, arguing on the sidewalk...like lovers?

“Look, Wrath, I don’t want to be arrested tonight.” Like she’d ever thought those words would come out of her mouth? “Let’s just keep going. Before someone finds us.”

She turned, but he took her arm in a sure grip.

“You don’t know this yet,” he said grimly. “But you are *mine*.”

For a split second, she swayed toward him.

But then she shook her head. She put her hands up to her face, trying to shut him out.

She felt marked, and the crazy thing was, she didn’t really mind. Because she wanted him, too.

Which was not going to win her any prizes in the mental health department.

God, she needed to take another shot at the last couple of days. If she

could only go back forty-eight hours, back to when she was sitting at her desk with Dick doing his leering-boss routine.

She'd do two things differently. She'd order a cab instead of walking home, so she never met up with Billy Riddle. And the instant she went into her apartment, she'd pack some clothes and go to a motel. So when this leather-clad, drug-lord lothario came looking for her she wouldn't have been found.

She just wanted her pathetic, boring life back. And how ridiculous was that? Considering she'd thought that getting out of it was the only way to save herself only a little while ago.

"Beth." His voice had lost most of its edge. "Look at me."

She shook her head, only to have her hands peeled back from her eyes.

"You're going to be okay."

"Yeah, right. There's probably a warrant being issued for my arrest at this very moment. I'm running around in the dark with the likes of you. And this is all happening because I'm so desperate to know my dead parents, I'm willing to put my life in danger on the *remote* chance I could learn something about them. I'm telling you, it's one hell of trip from where I am to 'okay.'"

His fingertip stroked down her cheek. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to let anything hurt you."

She rubbed her forehead, wondering whether she was ever going to feel normal again. "God, I wish you'd never shown up at my back door. I wish I'd never seen your face."

He dropped his hand.

"We're almost there," he said tersely.

Butch gave up trying to stand and sank to the ground.

He sat there for a while, just breathing in and out. He couldn't seem to move.

It wasn't because his head hurt, although it did. And it wasn't because his legs felt weak, although they did.

He was ashamed.

Getting beaten by a bigger man wasn't the problem, although his ego had certainly taken one on the chin.

No, it was the knowledge that he'd screwed up and endangered a young woman's life. When he'd called about the weapons pickup, he should have

had two officers waiting for him at the door to the station. He'd known that suspect was especially dangerous, but he'd been sure he could handle it himself.

Yeah, well, he'd handled jack shit. He'd had his ass kicked. And now Beth was in the company of a killer.

God only knew what would become of her.

Butch closed his eyes and put his chin down on his knee. His throat was killing him, but it was his head that he was really worried about. The damn thing wasn't working right. His thoughts were incoherent, his cognitive processes shot to hell. Maybe he'd gone without oxygen long enough to get brain-fry.

He tried to pull it together, but only managed to sink deeper into the fog.

And then, because his masochistic side had terrific timing, the past reared its thorny skull.

Out of the messy jumble of images clanging around his mind, one popped forward that brought tears to his eyes. A young girl, no more than fifteen. Getting into an unfamiliar car. Waving at him from the window as she disappeared down their street.

His older sister. Janie.

Her body had been found in the woods behind the local baseball field the following morning. She'd been raped, beaten, and strangled. Not in that order.

After she'd been abducted, Butch had stopped sleeping through the night. Two decades later, he still hadn't picked up the habit again.

He thought of Beth, looking over her shoulder as she'd run away with the suspect. The fact she'd disappeared with that killer was the only thing that got Butch to plant his feet on the ground and drag his body toward the station.

"Yo! O'Neal!" José came pounding down the alley. "What happened to you?"

"We need to get out an APB." Was that his voice? It sounded hoarse, like he'd been to a football game and screamed for two hours. "White male, six-six, two seventy. Dressed in black leather, wearing sunglasses, shoulder-length dark hair." Butch threw out a hand, steadyng himself against the building. "Suspect not armed. Only because I stripped him. He'll be restocked within the hour, no doubt."

When he stepped forward, he swayed.

“Jesus.” José grabbed his arm, holding him up.

Butch tried not to lean on the guy, but he needed the help. He couldn’t make his legs move right.

“And a white female.” His voice cracked. “Five-nine, long black hair. Wearing a blue skirt and a white button-down.” He paused. “Beth.”

“I know. She called.” José’s face tightened. “I didn’t ask for details. From the sound of her voice, she wasn’t about to give me any.”

Butch’s knees wobbled.

“Whoa, Detective.” José hoisted him up. “We’re going to take this slow.”

The instant they came through the station’s back door, Butch weaved. “I need to go look for her.”

“Let’s just chill on this bench.”

“No...”

José loosened his hold, and Butch went down like a piano.

Just as half the freaking precinct came up in a rush. The fleet of concerned guys in dark blue and badges made him feel pathetic.

“I’m fine,” he snapped. Then he had to put his head between his knees.

How could he have let this happen?

If Beth turned up dead in the morning...

“Detective?” José got down on his haunches, putting his face in Butch’s line of sight. “We’ve called an ambulance.”

“Don’t need one. Is the APB out?”

“Yeah, Ricky’s doing it right now.”

Butch brought his head up. Slowly.

“Man, what happened to your neck?” José breathed.

“It was used to hold my body off the ground.” He swallowed a couple of times. “Did the weapons get picked up from the address I called in?”

“Yeah. We got ‘em and the cash. Who the hell is this guy?”

“I have no fucking clue.”

Chapter Seventeen

Wrath walked up the front steps of Darius's house. The door swung open before he could reach the brass handle.

Fritz was on the other side. "Master, I didn't know you were—"

The *doggen* froze as he saw Beth.

Yeah, you know who she is, Wrath thought. *But let's be cool.*

She was jumpy enough as it was.

"Fritz, I'd like you to meet Beth Randall." The butler kept staring. "You going to let us in?"

Fritz bent down low and bowed his head. "Of course, master. Ms. Randall, it is an honor to finally meet you in person."

Beth seemed taken aback, but managed a smile as the *doggen* straightened and moved from the doorway.

When she stuck her hand out, Fritz gasped and looked to Wrath for permission.

"Go ahead," Wrath muttered as he shut the front door. He never could understand the strict traditions of the *doggens*.

Fritz reached out reverently, clasping her palm in both of his and dropping his forehead to their joined hands. Words in the old language were spoken in a quiet rush.

Beth was clearly astonished. But then she had no way of knowing that by offering her hand to him, she had paid him the highest honor of his species. As the daughter of a *princeps*, she was a high-bred aristocrat in their world.

Fritz was going to be glowing for days.

"We'll be in my chamber," Wrath said when the contact was broken.

The *doggen* hesitated. "Master, Rhage is here. He had a...little accident."

Wrath cursed. "Where is he?"

"In the downstairs bathroom."

“Needle and thread?”

“In there with him.”

“Who’s Rhage?” Beth asked as they started down the hall.

Wrath paused by the drawing room. “You wait here.”

But she followed when he walked on.

He turned around, pointing over her shoulder. “That wasn’t a request.”

“And I’m not waiting anywhere.”

“Damn it, do as I say.”

“No.” The word was spoken without heat. She defied him with total calmness and strength of purpose.

As if he were no more an obstacle in her path than a throw rug.

“Jesus Christ. Fine, lose your dinner.”

As he stalked down to the bathroom, he could smell the blood all the way out in the hall. This was a nasty one, and he really wished Beth weren’t so hell-bent on seeing for herself.

He pushed the door open, and Rhage looked up. The vampire’s arm was hanging over the sink. There was blood everywhere, a dark pool on the floor, a little pond on the counter.

“Rhage, man, what’s up?”

“Sliced and diced. *Lesser* got me a good one, right through a vein, down to the bone. I’m leaking like a sieve.”

In a blurry composite, Wrath caught the movement of Rhage’s hand going down to his shoulder and up into the air. Down to his shoulder, up into the air.

“Did you get him?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Oh...my...God,” Beth said. “Oh, dear God. Is he stitching—”

“Hey, who’s the cutie?” Rhage said, pausing on the up-stroke.

There was a strangled sound, and Wrath moved, blocking Beth’s view with his body.

“Need help?” he asked, even though both he and his brother knew he had nothing to offer. He couldn’t see well enough to close his own wounds, much less someone else’s. The fact that he had to rely on his brothers or Fritz to tend to him was a weakness he despised.

“No, thanks.” Rhage laughed. “I’m a good little sewer, as you know firsthand. Now who’s your friend?”

“Beth Randall, this is Rhage. An associate of mine. Rhage, this is Beth,

and she doesn't do movie stars, got it?"

"Loud and clear." Rhage leaned to one side, trying to see around Wrath.
"Nice to meet you, Beth."

"Are you sure you don't want to go to a hospital?" she said weakly.

"Nah. This one's just messy. When you can use your large intestine as a belt loop, that's when you hit the pros."

A croaking sound came out of Beth's mouth.

"I'm going to take her downstairs," Wrath said.

"Oh, yes, please," she murmured. "I'd really like to go down...stairs."

He put his arm around her, and he knew how affected she was by the way she melted into his body. It felt so good to have her relying on him for strength.

Too good, actually.

"You cool?" Wrath said to his brother.

"Damn straight. I'm leaving as soon as this is done. Got three jars to collect."

"Nice tally."

"Would have been more if this little gift hadn't come by air mail. No wonder you like those stars so much." Rhage moved his hand around, as if he were tying a knot. "You should know Tohr and the twins are"—he grabbed a pair of scissors off the counter and snipped the thread—"continuing our work from last night. They should be back in a couple hours to report in, just as you asked."

"Tell them to knock first."

Rhage nodded and had the sense not to follow up with any commentary.

As Wrath led Beth down the hall, he found himself stroking her shoulder. Her back. Then he curled his hand around her waist, his fingers sinking into her soft flesh. She fit well against him, her head coming up to his chest, resting on his pectoral as they moved together.

Too comfortable. Too familiar, he thought. Way too good.

He held on to her anyway.

And even as he did, he wished he could take back what he'd said to her on that sidewalk. About her being his.

Because that wasn't true. He didn't want to take her as his *shellan*. He'd been worked up, jealous. Picturing that cop's hands all over her. Pissed off that he hadn't killed the human after all. The words had slipped out.

Ah, hell. The female did something to his brain. Somehow managed to

unplug his well-developed self-control and put him in touch with his inner fricking psycho.

It was a connection he wanted to avoid.

After all, fits of insanity were Rhage's specialty.

And the brothers didn't need another hair-trigger loose cannon in the group.

Beth closed her eyes and leaned against Wrath, trying to shut out the picture of that gaping wound. The effort was like blocking sunlight with her hands: Parts of the image kept seeping through. All that bright red, shiny blood, the raw, dark pink muscle, the shocking white of bone. And that needle. Puncturing the skin, pulling the flesh out to a point, breaking through with the black thread—

She opened her eyes.

Open was better.

No matter what the man said, that was no little scrape he was dealing with. He needed to go to the hospital. And she would have argued the point more strenuously, except she'd been a little busy trying to convince her pad thai to stay put.

Besides, that guy seemed pretty darned competent at fixing himself up.

He was also one hell of a looker. Even though the gore was distracting, she couldn't help but notice his dazzling face and body. Short blond hair, iridescent blue eyes, a face that belonged on the big screen. He'd been dressed as Wrath was, in black leather pants and shitkickers, but his shirt had been cast aside. The muscles of his upper torso had stood out in sharp relief beneath the overhead light, an impressive display of strength. And the multicolored tattoo of a dragon that covered his whole back was a total stunner.

But then, it wasn't as if Wrath were going to hang out with some scrawny tax accountant-looking nancy.

Drug dealers. They were clearly drug dealers. Guns, weapons, huge amounts of cash. And who else got into a knife fight and played doctor on themselves?

She recalled that the man had borne the same circular-shaped scar on his chest that Wrath did.

They must be in a gang, she thought. Or the mob.

She suddenly needed some space, and Wrath let her go as they walked into a lemon-colored room. Her feet slowed. The place looked like a museum or something she'd expect to see in *Architectural Digest*. Thick, pale drapery framed wide windows, rich oil paintings gleamed from the walls, objets d'art were tastefully arranged. She glanced down at the carpet. The thing was probably worth more than her apartment.

Maybe they didn't just deal in crack, X, and heroin, she thought. Maybe they worked the antiques black market as well.

Now there was a combo you didn't run across very often.

"This is nice," she murmured, fingering an antique box. "Very nice."

She eyed Wrath when she got no response. He was standing just inside the room, arms folded across his pecs, at the ready even though he was home.

But then, when did he ever relax? she thought.

"Have you always been a collector?" she asked, trying to buy some time so her nerves could settle. She walked over to a Hudson River School painting. Good lord, it was a Thomas Cole. Probably worth hundreds of thousands. "This is beautiful."

She glanced over her shoulder. He was focused on her, paying no attention to the painting. And there was no expression of pride or ownership on his face.

Which was not the way someone looked when their things were admired.

"This is not your house," she said.

"Your father lived here."

Yeah, sure.

But what the hell. She'd come this far. She might as well play along.

"Then he obviously had plenty of money. What did he do for a living?"

Wrath walked across the room, toward an exquisite, full-length portrait of what looked like a king.

"Come with me."

"What? You want me to walk through that wall—"

He pushed one side of the painting, and it swiveled outward to reveal a dark corridor.

"Oh," she said.

He gestured with his arm. "After you."

Beth approached carefully. The glow of gas lanterns flickered over black stone. She leaned in, seeing a set of stairs that disappeared around a turn far below.

“What’s down there?”

“A place where we can talk.”

“Why don’t we stay up here?”

“Because you’re going to want to do this privately. And my brothers are likely to show up soon.”

“Your brothers?”

“Yes.”

“How many of them are there?”

“Five, now. And you’re stalling. Go on. Nothing will hurt you down there, I promise.”

Uh-huh. Sure.

But she put her foot over the gilded edge of the frame. And stepped into the darkness.

Chapter Eighteen

Beth took a deep breath and hesitantly put her hands out to the stone walls. The air wasn't musty; there was no creepy coating of moisture on anything; it was just very, very dark. She went down the stairs slowly, feeling her way. The lanterns were more like fireflies, lights unto themselves rather than illumination for someone using the stairwell.

And then she reached the bottom. To the right there was an open door, and she caught the warm glow of candlelight.

The room was just like the passageway: black walled, dimly lit, but clean. The candles were soothing as they flickered at their posts. While she put her purse down on the coffee table, she wondered if Wrath slept here.

God knew the bed was big enough for him.

And were those black satin sheets?

She figured he'd taken a lot of women down to this lair of his. And it didn't take a genius to figure out what happened once he closed the door.

A lock clicked into place, and her heart seized up.

"So about my father," she said briskly.

Wrath walked past her, taking off his jacket. He was wearing a muscle shirt under it, and she couldn't ignore the raw power of his arms, his biceps and triceps rippling as he put the leather aside. The tattoos running down his inner forearms flashed as he peeled the empty holster from his shoulders.

He went into the bathroom and she heard water splashing. When he came back out, he was drying his face with a towel. He put his sunglasses on before looking at her.

"You're father, Darius, was a worthy male." Wrath casually tossed the towel back into the bathroom and walked over to the couch. He sat forward, elbows on his knees. "He was an aristocrat from the old country before he became a warrior. He's...he *was* my friend. My brother in the work I do."

Brother. He kept using that word.

They were in the Mafia. Definitely.

Wrath smiled a little, as if remembering something that pleased him. “D had skills. He was fast on his feet, smart as hell, good with a knife. But he was cultured. A gentleman. He spoke eight languages. Studied everything from world religions to art history to philosophy. He could talk your ear off about Wall Street and then tell you why the Sistine Chapel ceiling is actually a Mannerist work, not from the Renaissance.”

Wrath leaned back, running a hefty arm across the top of the sofa. His knees fell out to the sides, his thighs spreading.

He looked damn comfortable as he pushed his long black hair back.

Sexy as hell.

“Darius never lost his temper, no matter how nasty things got. He just stuck to the job at hand until it was finished. He died with the full respect of his brothers.”

Wrath actually seemed to miss her father. Or whatever man he was channeling for the purpose of...

What exactly was he trying to pull here? she wondered. Where did it get him to throw out this crap?

Well, she was in his bedroom, wasn’t she?

“And Fritz tells me he loved you very deeply.”

Beth pursed her lips. “Assuming I even buy any of this, I’ve got to wonder. If my father cared so much, why didn’t he bother to introduce himself to me?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, it’s really hard to walk up to your daughter, stick your hand out, and say your name. Real tough stuff.” She walked across the room, only to find herself next to the bed. She quickly paced elsewhere. “And what’s up with the warrior rhetoric? Was he in the mob, too?”

“Mob? We’re not the mob, Beth.”

“So you’re just freelance killers as well as drug dealers? Hmm...Come to think of it, diversification is probably a good business strategy. And you need a lot of cash to keep up a house like this. As well as fill it full of art that belongs in the Met.”

“Darius inherited his money and he was very good at taking care of it.” Wrath leaned his head back, as if he were looking up at the house. “As his daughter, all of this is yours now.”

She narrowed her eyes. "Oh, really."

He nodded.

What a crock, she thought.

"So where's the will? Where's some executor ready to pass papers? Wait, let me guess, the estate's been in probate. For the last thirty years." She rubbed her aching eyes. "You know, Wrath, you don't have to lie to get me in bed. As much as I'm ashamed of myself, all you have to do is ask."

She took a deep, sad breath. Until now she hadn't realized that a small part of her had believed she'd get some answers. Finally.

Then again, desperation could make a fool out of anyone.

"Look, I'm going to take off. This was just—"

Wrath was in front of her faster than she could blink. "I can't let you go."

Fear licked her heart, but she put up a good front. "You can't *make* me stay."

His hands lifted to her face. She jerked back, but he wouldn't let go.

The pad of his thumb stroked her cheek. Whenever he got too close, she became spellbound and it happened again. She felt her body swaying toward his.

"I'm not lying to you," he said. "Your father sent me to you because you're going to need my help. Trust me."

She yanked away. "I don't want to hear that word on your lips."

Here he was, a criminal who'd almost killed a cop in front of her, and he was expecting her to buy a line of bull that she knew was false.

While he was stroking her face like a lover.

He must think she was a moron.

"Look, I've seen my records." Her voice didn't waver. "My birth certificate lists my father as unknown, but there was a note in the file. My mother told a nurse in the delivery room that he'd passed away. She was unable to disclose a name because she went into shock from blood loss thereafter and died herself."

"I'm sorry, but that's just not what happened."

"You're sorry. Yeah, I bet you are."

"I'm not playing games—"

"The hell you aren't! God, to think for even a moment that I might know one of them, even secondhand..." She stared at him with disgust. "You are so cruel."

He swore, a nasty, frustrated sound. "I don't know how to get you to

believe me.”

“Don’t bother trying. You have no credibility.” She grabbed her purse. “Hell, it’s probably better this way. I would almost rather he’d died than know that he was a criminal. Or that we’d lived in the same town all my life but he never came to see me, wasn’t even curious enough to know what I looked like.”

“He knew.” Wrath’s voice was very near again. “He knew you.”

She spun around. He was so close he overwhelmed her with his size.

Beth leaped away. “Stop this right now.”

“He knew you.”

“Stop saying that!”

“*Your father knew you,*” Wrath shouted.

“Then why didn’t he want me?” she yelled back.

Wrath winced. “He did. He watched over you. All your life he was never far away.”

She closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around herself. She couldn’t believe she was tempted to fall under his spell again.

“Beth, look at me. Please.”

She lifted her lids.

“Give me your hand,” he said. “Give it to me.”

When she didn’t respond, he placed her palm on his chest, over his heart.

“On my honor. I have not lied to you.”

He became utterly still, as if giving her a chance to read every nuance of his face and his body.

Could this be the truth? she wondered.

“He loved you, Beth.”

Don’t believe this. Don’t believe this. Don’t—

“Then why didn’t he come for me?” she whispered.

“He hoped you wouldn’t have to know him. That you’d be spared the kind of life he lived.” Wrath stared down at her. “And he ran out of time.”

There was a long silence.

“Who was my father?” she breathed.

“He was as I am.”

And then Wrath opened his mouth.

Fangs. He had fangs.

Her skin shrank in horror. She shoved him away. “You bastard!”

“Beth, listen to me—”

“So you can tell me you’re a fucking *vampire*?” She lunged at him, punching his chest with her hands. “You sick bastard! You sick...*bastard!* If you want to role-play your fantasies, do it with someone else.”

“Your father—”

She slapped him, hard. Right across the face.

“Do *not* go there. Don’t even try it.” Her hand stung, and she tucked it in against her belly. She wanted to cry. Because she was hurting. Because she’d tried to hurt him back and he seemed utterly unaffected by the fact that she’d hit him.

“God, you almost had me, you really did,” she moaned. “But then you had to take it one step too far and flash those fake teeth.”

“They’re real. Look closely.”

More candles came on in the room, lit by no one.

Her breath left her in a rush. Abruptly, she had the sense that nothing was as it seemed. The rules were off. Reality was sliding into a different realm.

She raced across the room.

He met her at the door and she crouched, as if she had a prayer of keeping him away from her.

“Don’t come near me.” She grabbed for the handle. Threw her whole body into it. The thing wouldn’t budge.

Panic ran like gasoline through her veins.

“Beth—”

“Let me go!” The door handle cut into the skin of her palms as she wrenched it.

When his hand came down on her shoulder, she screamed. “Don’t touch me!”

She leaped away from him. Careened around the room. He tracked her, coming at her slowly, inexorably.

“I’m going to help you.”

“Leave me alone!”

She dashed around him and dove for the door. This time it opened before she even got to the handle.

As if he’d willed it so.

She looked back at him in horror. “This isn’t real.”

She bolted up the stairs, tripping only once. When she tried to work the latch on the painting, she broke a nail, but eventually got it open. She ran through the drawing room. Burst out of the house and—

Wrath was there, standing on the front lawn.
Beth skidded to a halt.
Terror flooded her body, fright and disbelief seizing her heart in a fist.
Her mind slipped into madness.
“No!” She took off, running in any direction as long as it was away from him.
She felt him following her, and she threw her legs out harder and faster.
She ran until she couldn’t breathe, until she was blinded by exhaustion and her thighs were screaming. She ran flat-out and still he followed.
She fell down onto grass, sobbing.
Curling into a ball, as if to shield herself from blows, she wept.
When he picked her up she didn’t fight him.
What was the use? If this was a dream, she would wake up eventually.
And if it was the truth...
She was going to need him to explain a hell of a lot more than just her father’s life.

As Wrath carried Beth back down to the chamber, fear and confusion poured out of her in waves of distress. He laid her down on the bed and yanked the top sheet free so he could wrap her up. Then he went to the couch and sat down, thinking she’d appreciate the space.
Eventually she shifted around, and he felt her eyes on him.
“I’m waiting to wake up. To have the alarm go off,” she said hoarsely.
“But it’s not going to, is it?”
He shook his head.
“How is this possible? How...” She cleared her throat. “Vampires?”
“We’re just a different species.”
“Bloodsuckers. Killers.”
“Try persecuted minority. Which was why your father was hoping you wouldn’t go through the change.”
“Change?”
He nodded grimly.
“Oh, God.” She clamped her hand over her mouth as if she were going to be sick. “Don’t tell me I’m going to...”
A shock wave of panic came out of her, creating a breeze through the room that reached him in a cool rush. He couldn’t bear her anguish and

wanted to do something to ease her. Except compassion wasn't among his strengths.

If only there were something he could fight for her.

Yeah, well, there was nothing at the moment. Nothing. The truth wasn't a target he could eliminate. And it wasn't her enemy, even though it hurt her. It just...was.

He stood up and approached the bed. When she didn't shrink away from him, he sat down. The tears she shed smelled like spring rain.

"What's going to happen to me?" she murmured.

The desperation in her voice suggested she was talking to God, not him. But he answered anyway.

"Your change is coming fast. It hits all of us sometime around our twenty-fifth birthday. I'll teach you how to take care of yourself. I'll show you what to do."

"Good God..."

"After you go through it, you're going to need to drink."

She choked and jerked upright. "I'm not *killing* anyone!"

"It's not like that. You need the blood of a male vampire. That's all."

"That's all," she repeated in a dead tone.

"We don't prey on humans. That's an old wives' tale."

"You've never taken a...human?"

"Not to drink from them," he hedged. "There are some vampires who do, but the strength doesn't last long. To thrive, we need to feed off our own race."

"You make it all sound so normal."

"It is."

She fell silent. And then, as if it just dawned on her, "You're going to let me—"

"You're going to drink from me. When it's time."

She let out a strangled sound, like she'd wanted to cry out, but her gag reflex had kicked in.

"Beth, I know this is hard—"

"You do not."

"—because I had to go through it, too."

She looked at him. "Did you learn you were one out of the blue also?"

It wasn't a challenge. More like she was hoping she had common ground with someone. Anyone.

“I knew who my parents were,” he said, “but they were dead by the time my transition hit. I was alone. I didn’t know what to expect. So I know what the confusion feels like.”

Her body fell back against the pillows. “Was my mother one, too?”

“She was human, from what Darius told me. Vampires have been known to breed with them, although it’s rare for the infants to survive.”

“Can I stop the change? Can I stop this from happening?”

He shook his head.

“Does it hurt?”

“You’re going to feel—”

“Not me. Will I hurt you?”

Wrath swallowed his surprise. No one worried about him. Vampires and humans alike feared him. His race worshiped him. But none were ever concerned for him. He didn’t know how to handle the sentiment.

“No. It won’t hurt me.”

“Could I kill you?”

“I won’t let you.”

“Promise?” she said urgently, sitting up and gripping his forearm.

He couldn’t believe he was taking a vow to protect himself. At her request.

“I promise you.” He reached his hand out to cover hers, but stopped before he made contact.

“When will it happen?”

“I can’t tell you that for sure. But soon.”

She let go, settling against the pillows. Then she curled on her side away from him.

“Maybe I’ll wake up,” she murmured. “Maybe I’ll still wake up.”

Chapter Nineteen

Butch drank his first Scotch in one swallow. Big mistake. His throat was raw, and it felt like he'd French-kissed a blowtorch. As soon as he stopped coughing, he ordered another from Abby.

"We're going to find her," José said, putting his beer down.

The other detective was sticking to the light stuff, but then José had to go home to his family. Butch, on the other hand, was free to behave as badly as he wished.

José played with his mug, twisting it around in circles on the bar. "You shouldn't blame yourself, Detective."

Butch laughed and threw back Scotch number two. "Yeah, there's a huge list of people who were in my car with that suspect." He lifted his finger to get Abby's attention. "I'm dry again."

"Not for long." She jiggled right over with the single-malt, smiling at him while she tipped the bottle into his glass.

José shifted in his bar stool as if he didn't approve of Butch's Scotch velocity and the effort of keeping his lip zipped was making him squirm.

As Abby went over to another customer, Butch glanced at José.

"I'm going to get ugly wasted tonight. You shouldn't stick around."

José popped some peanuts into his mouth. "I'm not leaving you here."

"I'll cab it home."

"Naw. I'll hang until you're through. Then I'll drag you back to your apartment. Watch you throw up for an hour. Push you into bed. Before I leave I'll get the coffee machine set up. Aspirin will be right next to the sugar bowl."

"I don't have a sugar bowl."

"So it'll be next to the bag."

Butch smiled. "You'd have made a great wife, José."

“That’s what mine tells me.”

They were silent until Abby poured number four.

“The throwing stars I peeled off that suspect,” Butch said. “Where do we stand with them?”

“Same as the ones we found at the car bomb and around Cherry’s body. Typhoons. Three-point-one ounces of four-forty stainless steel. Four-inch diameter. Removable center weight. You can get ‘em off the Internet for about twelve bucks a pop or buy them through martial-arts academies. And no, there were no prints.”

“The other weapons?”

“Flashy set of knives. The boys in the lab got a real hard-on for them. Composite metal, diamond hard, beautifully made by hand. No identifying manufacturer. Gun was your standard nine-millimeter Beretta, model 92G-SD. Real well cared for, and naturally the serial number had been etched off. The freaky thing was the bullets. Never seen anything like ‘em. Hollow, filled with some kind of liquid. The boys think it’s just water. But why would someone do that?”

“You gotta be kidding me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And no prints.”

“Nope.”

“On anything.”

“Nope.” José finished the bowl of peanuts and trolled his hand to get Abby’s eye for more. “That suspect’s slick. Neat as a pin. A real professional. Wanna bet he’s moved up north from the Big Apple? He doesn’t sound Caldwell home-grown.”

“Tell me that while I was wasting time with those damn EMTs we checked with the NYPD.”

Abby came over with more nuts and more Scotch.

“We’re doing ballistics on the gun, just to see if there are any unusual characteristics,” José said evenly. “Checking the money to see if it’s hot. First thing in the morning we’ll give the New York boys everything we got, but it’s not going to be much.”

Butch cursed as he watched the bowl get refilled.

“If anything happens to Beth...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“We’ll find them.” José paused. “And God help him if he hurts her.”

Yeah, Butch would personally go after the guy.

“God help him,” he vowed, making room in his glass for another shot.

Wrath was exhausted as he sat on the couch and waited for Beth to speak again. His body felt as though it were sinking in on itself, his bones weakening under their burden of flesh and muscle.

As he replayed the scene in the station house’s alley, he realized he hadn’t stripped the cop of his memory. Which meant the police were going to be looking for him with an accurate description.

Damn it. He’d been so caught up in the fricking drama, he’d forgotten to protect himself.

He was getting sloppy. And sloppy was dangerous.

“How did you know about the orgasms?” Beth asked abruptly.

He stiffened. And so did his cock, just at hearing the word leave her lips.

Moving his body around to make some room in his pants, he wondered if he could avoid answering her. He didn’t want to talk right now about the sex they’d had. Not with her lying in that bed. Mere feet away from him.

He thought of her skin. Soft. Smooth. Warm.

“How did you know?” she prompted.

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Was it different with you because you’re not... you’re a...Hell, I can’t even say the word.”

“Maybe.” He brought his palms together, linking his fingers tight. “I don’t know.”

Because it had been different for him, too, even though technically she was still a human.

“He’s not my lover. Butch. The cop. He’s not.”

Wrath felt his breath ease out of him. “I’m glad.”

“So if you see him again, don’t kill him.”

“Okay.”

There was a long pause, and then he heard her shifting around on the bed. The satin sheets made a soft sound as she moved.

He pictured her thighs rubbing against each other and then saw himself opening them with his hands. Nudging them farther apart with his head. Kissing a path down to where he so desperately wanted to be.

He swallowed, his skin turning into shrink-wrap.

“Wrath?”

“Yeah.”

“You really didn’t mean to sleep with me last night, did you?”

Hazy images of her had him closing his eyes. “No, I didn’t.”

“So why did you?”

How could he not have? he thought, jaw clenching. He’d been powerless to leave her alone.

“Wrath?”

“Because I had to,” he replied, stretching his arms, trying to find some ease. His heart thundered in his chest, his instincts coming alive, as if he were in battle. He could hear the breath leave her lips, her heart as it pumped, her blood as it flowed.

“Why?” she whispered.

He should go. He should leave her alone.

“Tell me why.”

“You made me realize how cold I am.”

More shifting on the bed.

“I liked warming you,” she said huskily. “I liked the feel of you.”

Dark hunger curled in his gut, cramping up his stomach.

Wrath stopped breathing. Waited to see if it would pass. The gnawing sensation grew stronger.

Shit, that sinful need wasn’t just about sex. It was about blood.

Hers.

He stood up quickly and put more space between them. He definitely needed to get out of here. Hit the streets. Find a fight.

And he needed to feed.

“Look, I’ve got to take off. But I want you to crash here.”

“Don’t go.”

“I have to.”

“Why?”

His mouth opened, his fangs throbbing as they elongated.

And his teeth weren’t the only thing demanding to be used. His erection was a painful, rigid length straining against his fly. He felt himself get stretched between the two needs. Sex. Blood.

Both hers.

“Are you running away?” she whispered. It was mostly a question. Only a little bit of a taunt.

“Be careful, Beth.”

“Why?”

“I’m about to crack over here.”

She got off the bed and came to him. Her hand landed squarely on his chest, right above his heart. And then her other one wrapped around his waist.

He hissed as she stepped into his body.

But at least the sexual need cut through his other hunger.

“Are you going to tell me no?” she asked.

“I don’t want to take advantage of you,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You’ve been through enough tonight.”

She gripped his shoulders. “I’m angry. Scared. Confused. I want you to make love to me until I don’t feel, until I’m numb. If anything, I’d be using you.” She looked down. “God that sounds awful.”

The hell it did. He was more than willing to be used like that by her.

He tilted her chin up with his forefinger. Even though her rich scent told him exactly what her body needed from him, he wished he could see her face clearly.

“Don’t leave,” she whispered.

He didn’t want to, but his bloodlust put her in danger. She needed to be strong for her change. And he was thirsty enough to drain her dry.

Her hand left his waist. And found his erection.

His body jerked wildly, breath slamming into his lungs. His gasp shattered the silence in the room.

“You want me,” she said. “And I want you to take me.”

She rubbed her palm over his length, the friction passing with aching clarity through the second skin of his leathers.

Just sex. He could do it. He could hold back the other need. He could.

But was he willing to bet her life on his control?

“Don’t say no, Wrath.”

And then she lifted up onto her tiptoes and put her lips to his.

Game over, he thought, crushing her to him.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth as he grabbed her hips and ground himself into her hand. Her moan of satisfaction cranked him even higher, and as her nails bit into his back, he loved the little bursts of pain he felt because they meant she was as hungry as he was.

He had her on the bed and under him in a flash of movement, and he pushed up her skirt and tore off her panties with vicious impatience. He

didn't treat her blouse or bra any better. There would be time to savor later. Now was all about raw sex.

While he worked her breasts with his mouth, her hands were rough as she pulled his shirt from his chest. He left her only long enough to undo his pants and spring his erection. Then he linked his forearm behind one of her knees, stretched her leg up, and plunged himself into her body.

He heard her gasp at his powerful entry, and her slick heat grabbed onto him, pulsating as she came. He froze in place, absorbing the sensation of her release, feeling her core stroke him.

An overwhelming, possessive instinct flashed through him.

With dread, he realized he wanted to mark her. Mark her as his. He wanted that special scent all over her so no other male would come near her. So that they would know whom she belonged to. So that they would fear the repercussions of wanting to possess her for themselves.

Except he knew he had no right to do that. She wasn't his.

He felt her body go still underneath him, and he looked down.

"Wrath?" she whispered. "Wrath, what's wrong?"

He made a move to pull out of her, but she caught his face in her hands.

"Are you all right?"

The concern for him in her voice was what did it.

With an awesome surge, his body leaped out of reach of his mind. Before he could think any further, before he could stop, he propped himself up on his arms and pounded into her, taking her hard, drilling her. The bed's headboard banged against the wall to the beat of his thrusts, and she grabbed onto his straining wrists, trying to hold herself in place.

A low sound shot through the room, growing louder and louder, until he realized the growl was coming from him. As a fevered heat broke out all over his skin, his nose registered that dark fragrance of possession.

He was powerless to stop himself.

His lips peeled off his teeth as his muscles churned and his hips thrashed against her. Drenched in sweat, head spinning, mindless, breathless, he took everything she was offering him. Took it and demanded more, becoming an animal as she became one, too, until they were nothing but wildness.

He came violently, filling her up, pumping into her, his orgasm going on and on and on, until he realized she was climaxing right along with him, the two of them holding on to each other for dear life against shattering waves of passion.

It was the most perfect union he'd ever known.

And then everything turned into a nightmare.

As the last shudder left his body and went into hers, at that moment when he was finally spent, the balance of his desires was thrown. His bloodlust surged forward in a wicked, consuming rush, as powerful as the lust had been.

He bared his teeth and went for her neck, for the vein deliciously close to the surface of her pale skin. His fangs were about to sink deep, his throat dry with thirst for her, his gut spasming with a starvation that cut to his soul, when he pulled himself up short, horrified by what he was about to do.

He pushed himself away from her, scrambling across the bed until he fell to the floor, landing on his ass.

"Wrath?" In alarm she started for him.

"No!"

The hunger for her blood was too strong, the instinct undeniable. If she got too close...

He moaned, trying to swallow. His throat was like sandpaper. Sweat broke out all over him again, but this time it was in a sickening flush.

"What happened? What did I do?"

Wrath crawled backward, his body aching, his skin on fire. The smell of her sex on him was like a whip against his self-control.

"Beth, leave me. I've got to..."

But she was still coming at him. His body slammed into the couch.

"Get the fuck back!" He bared his fangs and hissed loudly. "You get any closer and I'm going to bite you, got it?"

She stopped immediately. Terror clouded the air between them, but then she shook her head.

"You wouldn't hurt me," she said with a conviction that struck him as dangerously naive.

He struggled to speak. "Get dressed. Go upstairs. Ask Fritz to take you home. I'll send someone to watch over you."

He was panting now, the pain ripping through his stomach, almost as bad as it had been that first night of his transition. He'd never needed Marissa like this.

Jesus. What was happening to him?

"I don't want to leave."

"You have to. I'll send someone to keep you safe until I can get back to

you.”

His thighs shook, the muscles straining against the hold he’d clamped down on his body. His mind and his physical needs had declared war, had marched onto the battlefield with swords drawn. And he knew which one was going to win if she didn’t get away from him.

“Beth, *please*. It hurts. And I don’t know how long I can hold myself back.”

She hesitated. And then yanked her clothes on.

She went to the door and looked back at him.

“*Go*.”

And she did.

Chapter Twenty

It was a little after nine when Mr. X hit the drive-through at McDonald's. "I'm glad you both liked the movie. And I have in mind something else tonight, although we'll have to be quick about it. One of you needs to be home by eleven."

Billy cursed under his breath as they pulled up in front of the lit menu. He ordered twice as much as Loser did. Loser offered to pay for his share.

"That's all right. My treat," Mr. X said. "Just don't spill anything."

While Billy ate and Loser played with his food, Mr. X drove them over to the War Zone. The laser-tag place was pickup central for the under-eighteen crowd, its dim interior perfect for obscuring both acne as well as pathetic adolescent yearning. The sprawling one-story was hopping tonight, filled with twitchy teenage boys and the bored, overdressed girls they were trying to impress.

Mr. X got three guns and target halters, passing one to each of the guys. Billy was ready to go in under a minute, his weapon resting in his hands easily as if it were an extension of his arms.

Mr. X eyed Loser, who was still trying to get the halter straps to fit his shoulders. The guy looked miserable, his lower lip slack as his fingers worked the plastic catches. Billy watched him, too. As if Loser were food.

"So I thought we'd have a little friendly competition," Mr. X said when they finally stepped through the turnstiles. "See which one of you can hit the other the most."

As they entered the fighting arena, Mr. X's eyes quickly adjusted to the velvet blackness and the neon flashes from other players. The space was large enough for the thirty or so who were dancing around the obstacles, laughing and shouting as they fired beams of light.

"Let's split up," Mr. X said.

While Loser blinked myopically, Billy took off, moving with the swiftness of an animal. A moment later the sensor in the middle of Loser's chest went off. The guy looked down at it as if he didn't know what had happened.

Billy retreated into the darkness.

"Better take cover, son," Mr. X murmured.

Mr. X stayed out of their way while watching everything they did. Billy hit Loser over and over again from countless angles, shifting in and out of the obstacles, coming fast, now slow, then shooting from far away. Loser's confusion and anxiety ratcheted up every time the light on his chest flashed, and desperation made him move with childlike uncoordination. He dropped his gun. Tripped over his own feet. Knocked his shoulder into a barrier.

Billy was resplendent. Though his target was failing, weakening, he showed no mercy. Even when Loser dropped his gun to his side and leaned up against a wall with exhaustion, Billy hit him again.

And then took off into the shadows.

This time Mr. X followed Billy, tracking the guy's movements with a purpose other than measuring performance. Riddle was fast, shifting around the foam obstacles, doubling back to where Loser was so he could ambush from behind.

Mr. X anticipated where Billy was headed. With a quick shift to the right, he put himself in Riddle's path.

And shot Billy at point-blank range.

Billy looked down in shock at his chest. It was the first time his receptor had gone off.

"Pretty good job tonight," Mr. X said. "You played the game well, son. Until just now."

Billy's eyes lifted, his hand coming to rest over the blinking target. Over his heart.

"Sensei." The word was spoken like a lover, with a lover's awe and adoration.

Beth wasn't about to ask the butler for a ride, because she was too shaken to carry on a polite conversation with anyone. As she walked down to the street, she took out her cell phone to call a cab. She was dialing when the purr of a car engine brought her head up.

The butler got out of the Mercedes and bowed his head. “Master called me. He would like me to take you home, mistress. And I...I would like to drive you.”

He was so earnest, almost hopeful, as if she’d be doing him a favor if she let him take care of her. But she needed some space. After everything that had happened, she was rattling around in her own head.

“Thank you, but no.” She forced a smile. “I’m just going to...”

The man’s face fell. He looked like a dog who’d been whipped.

Where good manners failed her, guilt stepped up to the plate.

“Ah, okay.”

Before he could come around the car, she opened the passenger-side door and slid into the front seat. The butler seemed flustered at her initiative, but recovered quickly, that beaming smile back on his wrinkled face.

As he got behind the wheel and put the engine in gear, she said, “I live at _____”

“Oh, I know where you live. We’ve always known where you were. First at St. Francis Hospital in the neonatal intensive care unit. Then you went home with the nurse. We had hoped she would keep you, but the hospital made her give you back. Then you went into the system. We didn’t like that. First you were assigned to the McWilliamses on Elmwood Avenue, but you became ill and went back into the hospital with pneumonia.”

He put the blinker on and turned left at a stop sign.

She could barely breathe, she was listening so hard.

“After that you were sent to the Ryans, but there were too many children. And then you went to the Goldrichs, who lived in that split-level off Raleigh Street. We thought the Goldrichs were going to keep you, but then she got pregnant. Finally to that orphanage. We hated when you were there, because they didn’t let you out to play enough.”

“You keep saying ‘we’,” she whispered, afraid to believe. Wanting to.

“Yes. Your father and I.”

Beth covered her mouth with the back of her hand, her eyes capturing the butler’s profile as if it were something she could keep.

“He knew me?”

“Oh, yes, mistress. All along. Kindergarten and elementary school and high school.” His eyes met hers. “We were so proud of you when you went to college on that academic scholarship. I was there when you graduated. I took pictures so your father could see.”

“He knew me.” She tried the words out, feeling like she must be talking about someone else’s parent.

The butler looked across the seat and smiled. “We have every column you’ve ever written. Even the ones you wrote in high school and college. When you started at the *Caldwell Courier Journal*, your father refused to go to sleep in the morning until after I brought the paper to him. No matter how hard his night had been, he wouldn’t rest until he read what you wrote. He was so proud of you.”

She fumbled through her bag, trying to find a Kleenex.

“Here,” the butler said, handing her a small package of tissues.

Beth blew her nose as delicately as she could.

“Mistress, you must understand how hard it was for him to stay away from you. It was just that he knew it would be dangerous to get too close. Families of warriors need to be guarded carefully, and you were unprotected because you were raised human. He’d also hoped you’d be spared the transition.”

“Did you know my mother?”

“Not well. They weren’t together long. She disappeared shortly after they started seeing each other because she found out he was not a human. She didn’t tell him she was pregnant, and it wasn’t until she was about to give birth that she reached out to him. I think she was scared of what she was bringing into the world. Unfortunately she went into labor and was taken to a human hospital before we could get to her. But you should know that he loved her. Very deeply.”

Beth absorbed the information, her mind soaking it up, filling in holes.

“My father and Wrath, they were close?”

The butler hesitated. “Your father loved Wrath. We all do. He is our lord. Our king. That is why your father sent him to you. And you mustn’t fear him. He will not hurt you.”

“I know that.”

When her apartment building came into view, she wished she had more time with the butler.

“And here we are,” he said. “Eleven eighty-eight Redd Avenue, apartment one-B. Although I have to say, neither your father nor I approved of the fact that you’re living in a ground-floor unit.”

The car came to a stop. She didn’t want to get out.

“May I ask you more? Later?” she said.

“Oh, mistress, yes. Please. There is so much I want to tell you.” He got out of the car, but she was already shutting her door by the time he came around to her.

She thought about putting out her hand and thanking him formally. Instead she threw her arms around the little old man and hugged him.

After Beth left the chamber, Wrath’s thirst called out for her and then stung him hard, as if it knew he was the one who had sent her away.

He pulled up his pants and dragged himself to the phone, calling Fritz, then Tohrment. His voice kept cracking, and he had to repeat himself to be understood.

As soon as he hung up with Tohr, the dry heaves started. He staggered to the bathroom, calling out for Marissa with his mind. He lurched over the toilet, but there was nothing much in his stomach.

He’d waited too long, he thought. Ignored the signals his body had been giving him for quite some time. And then Beth had come along, and his internal chemistry had taken another series of hits. No wonder he was crazed.

Marissa’s scent drifted in from the chamber.

“My lord?” she called out.

“I need...”

Beth, he thought, hallucinating. He saw her in front of him, heard her voice in his head. He put his hand out. Touched nothing.

“My lord? Shall I come to you?” Marissa asked from the other room.

Wrath wiped the sweat from his face and came out, weaving like a drunk. He reached blindly into the air, pitching forward.

“Wrath!” Marissa rushed to him.

He let himself fall onto the bed, taking her down with him. Her body came up against his.

He felt Beth’s.

And his face landed in sheets that were marked with Beth’s scent. As he took a deep breath to try to stabilize himself, all he smelled was Beth.

“My lord, you need to feed.” Marissa’s voice came from far away, as if she were out in the stairway.

He looked to the sound and saw nothing. He was totally blind now.

Marissa’s voice grew curiously strong. “My lord, here. Take my wrist. Now.”

Warm skin was in his palm. He opened his mouth, but couldn't get his arms to work properly. He reached out, touched a shoulder, a collarbone, the curve of a neck.

Beth.

The hunger took over, and he reared up across the female body. With a roar he sank his teeth into the soft flesh above an artery. He drank deep and hard, seeing visions of the dark-haired woman who was his, picturing her giving herself to him, imagining it was her in his arms.

Marissa gasped.

Wrath's arms were nearly snapping her in half, his massive body a cage around hers as he drank. For the first time she felt every hard line of him.

Including what she realized must be an erection, something she'd never been anywhere near before.

The possibilities were exciting. And terrifying.

She went limp and tried to breathe. This was what she'd always wanted from him, though his passion was shocking. But what could she expect? He was a full-blooded male. A warrior.

And he'd finally realized he needed her.

Satisfaction took the place of any discomfort, and she tentatively ran her hands over his wide, bare shoulders, a liberty she'd never taken before. He made a sound deep in his throat, as if he wanted her to do more. With delicious pleasure she sank her hands into his hair. It was so soft. Who could have guessed? Such a hard male, but oh, how soft the dark waves were. Like her satin dresses.

Marissa wanted to see into his mind, an invasion she'd never risked for fear of his taking offense. But now everything was different. Maybe he would even kiss her after he finished. Make love to her. Maybe she could stay with him now. She would like to live at Darius's with him. Or wherever. It didn't matter.

She closed her eyes and reached out to his thoughts.

Only to see the female he was really thinking of. The *human* female.

It was a dark-haired beauty with her eyes half-closed. She was on her back, breasts exposed. His fingers were caressing her tight, pink nipples as he kissed the skin of her stomach, moving downward.

Marissa dropped the image as if it were broken glass.

Wrath wasn't here with her now. It wasn't her neck he was drinking from. It wasn't her body he was drawing hard into his.

And that erection wasn't because of her.

Wasn't for her.

As he sucked at her neck, his thick arms crushing her against him, Marissa cried out at the unfairness.

Of her hopes. Of her love. Of him.

How fitting that he was draining her. And how she wished he would finish the job. Drink her dry. Let her die.

It had taken her years and years, aeons, to realize the truth.

He never had been hers. He never would be.

God, she had nothing now that the fantasy was gone.

Chapter Twenty-one

Beth put her purse down on the hall table, said hello to Boo, and went into the bathroom. She eyed the shower, but decided against having one. Even though her stiff body could have used some time under a hot spray, she loved the lingering smell of Wrath on her skin. It was a wonderful, erotic perfume, a dark spice. Like nothing she'd ever come across before, nothing she could possibly forget.

Turning on the sink, she cleaned up, exquisitely sensitive and more than a little tender between her legs. Not that she cared about the ache. Wrath could do that to her anytime he wanted.

He was...

No words came to mind. Just an image of him releasing into her, his massive, sweat-covered shoulders and chest seizing up as he gave himself to her. As he branded her as his.

Which was what it had seemed like. She felt as though she'd been dominated and imprinted by a man. Taken.

And she wanted that again. Wanted him now.

But she shook her head, thinking that the unprotected sex had to stop. Bad enough it had been twice. Next time they were going to be safe.

On her way out of the bath, she caught her reflection in the mirror and stopped moving. She bent at the waist, bringing her face closer to the glass.

She still looked exactly as she had this morning. But she felt like a stranger.

Opening her mouth, she examined her teeth. When she probed the two canines in front, sure enough, they were sore.

Dear God, who was she? *What* was she?

She thought about Wrath, after they'd been together. Pushing himself away from her, his half-naked body straining, his muscles looking as if they

were going to break through his skin. When he'd bared his teeth, his fangs had been longer than when she'd first seen them. As if they'd grown.

His beautiful face had been contorted with agony.

Was that what she was in for?

A rapping noise came from the other room, as though someone was knocking on a window. She heard Boo meow in welcome.

Beth put her head cautiously around the doorjamb.

There was someone at the slider. Someone big.

"Wrath?" She rushed over and opened the door before she really looked.

When she saw what was on the other side, she wished she'd checked more carefully first.

It wasn't Wrath, although the man looked a little like him. Black hair was cut short. Harsh face. Intense dark blue eyes. A whole lot of leather.

His nostrils flared and he frowned, staring at her hard. But then he seemed to catch himself.

"Beth?" His voice was deep, but friendly. And as the man smiled, fangs were revealed.

She didn't even jump.

Damn, she was getting used to the weirdness already.

"I'm Tohrment, a friend of Wrath's." The guy stuck his hand out. "You can call me Tohr."

She shook it, not sure what to say.

"I'm here to hang for a while. I'll just be outside if you need anything."

The man...vampire—shit, whatever he was—turned away and headed for the picnic table.

"Wait," she said. "Why don't you...Please come in."

He shrugged. "Okay."

As he stepped through the door, Boo meowed loudly and pawed at the man's shitkickers. The two greeted each other like long-lost friends, and when the vampire straightened, his leather jacket fell open. Daggers. Just like Wrath's. And she had a feeling that the kind of weapons Butch had peeled off Wrath were hiding in this man's pockets, too.

"Would you like something to drink?" She winced. *Not blood. Please don't say blood.*

He grinned at her, as if he knew what she was thinking. "You got any beer?"

Beer? He drank beer?

“Ah, yeah. Actually, I think I do.” She disappeared into the kitchen. Brought back two Sam Adamses. She needed a belt right about now, too.

After all, she was playing hostess to a vampire. Her father had been a vampire.

Her lover *was* a vampire.

She tilted the beer back and drank hard.

Tohrment laughed softly. “Long night?”

“You have no idea,” she replied, wiping her mouth.

“Oh, I might.” The vampire sat down in her wing chair, his big body overflowing the arms and dwarfing the high back. “I’m glad I finally met you. Your father talked about you a lot.”

“He did?”

“He was so damn proud of you. And you’ve got to know—he stayed away to protect you, not because he didn’t love you.”

“That’s what Fritz said. Wrath, too.”

“How’re you getting along with him?”

“Wrath?”

“Yeah.”

She felt a blush hit her cheeks and headed to the kitchen so he didn’t catch her reaction. She grabbed a bag of cookies from the top of the fridge and put some on a plate.

“He’s...he’s...How do I put it?” She tried to think of a good answer.

“Actually, I think I know.”

She came back and held out the plate. “Would you like some?”

“Oatmeal raisin,” he said, taking three. “My favorite.”

“You know, I thought vampires only drank blood.”

“Nah. Necessary nutrients in it, but we need food, too.”

“How about garlic?”

“Bring it on.” He leaned back in the chair, munching happily. “I love the stuff roasted with a little olive oil.”

Jeez. The guy was almost easygoing, she thought.

No, that wasn’t right. His sharp eyes kept scanning the windows and the glass door, as if he were monitoring the periphery. She knew without a doubt that if he didn’t like something he saw, he was going to be out of that chair in a heartbeat. And it wouldn’t be to check locks. It’d be to attack.

He put another cookie in his mouth.

But at least he was relaxing to be around. Relatively speaking.

“You’re not like Wrath,” she blurted.

“No one’s like Wrath.”

“Yeah.” She bit into her own cookie and sat down on the futon.

“He’s a force of nature,” Tohr said, tilting back his beer. “And he’s deadly, no mistaking that. But there’s no one who will take better care of you, assuming he chooses to do so. Which he has with you.”

“How do you know?” she whispered, wondering what Wrath had told him.

Tohr cleared his throat, a flush hitting his cheeks. “He’s marked you.”

She frowned, looking down at herself.

“I can smell it,” Tohr said. “The warning’s all over you.”

“Warning?”

“As if you were his *shellan*.”

“His what?”

“His mate. That scent on your skin sends a powerful message to other males.”

So she’d been right. About the sex they’d had and what it meant.

That really shouldn’t please me as much as it does, she thought.

“You don’t mind it, do you?” Tohr said. “Being his.”

She didn’t want to answer that. On one level she wanted to be Wrath’s. On another, she felt much safer being as she had always been. On her own.

“Do you have one?” she asked. “A mate?”

The vampire’s face lit with devotion. “Her name’s Wellsie. We were promised to each other before our transitions. It was dumb luck that we fell in love. Truth is, if I’d met her on the street, I would have chosen her. How’s that for fate?”

“Occasionally it works for us,” she murmured.

“Yeah. Some males take more than one *shellan*, but I can’t imagine ever being with another female. Which is evidently why Wrath called me.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Sorry?”

“The other brothers, they have females they drink from, but they don’t have any emotional ties. There’d be nothing to prevent them—” He stopped and bit into another cookie. “Well, given that you’re...”

“I’m what?” She felt as though she hardly knew herself. And she was willing to even take hints from strangers at this point.

“Beautiful. Wrath wouldn’t have wanted to put you in any of the others’ care, because if they’d been tempted to make a move on you, there would be

serious trouble.” Tohr shrugged. “Well, and a couple of the brothers are just flat-out dangerous. You wouldn’t want to leave any female alone with them, at least not one you cared about.”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to meet any of the brothers.

Wait a minute, she thought.

“Does Wrath have a *shellan* already?” she asked.

Tohr finished his beer. “I think you’d better talk to him about that.”

Which was not a no.

A sick feeling of disappointment set up shop in the middle of her chest, and she went back into the kitchen.

Damn. She was getting emotional over Wrath. They’d had sex twice, and already her head was a mess.

This one is going to hurt, she thought as she cracked open another beer. When things went sour between them, it was going to hurt like hell.

Notwithstanding the whole turning-into-a-vampire thing.

Oh, God.

“More munchies?” she called out.

“That would be great.”

“Beer?”

“Naw. I’m good.”

She brought the bag in from the kitchen, and they were silent as they polished off the cookies. Even the broken ones at the bottom.

“You got anything else around here to eat?” he asked.

She stood, feeling peckish herself. “I’ll see what I can dig up.”

“You have cable?” He nodded toward her TV.

She tossed him the clicker. “Sure do. And if I remember, there’s a Godzilla marathon on TBS tonight.”

“Sweet,” the vampire said, kicking his legs out. “I always root for the monster.”

She smiled at him. “Me, too.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Butch woke up because someone was driving a gutter spike into his head.

He cracked open one eye.

No, that was the phone ringing.

He picked up the receiver and put it in the vicinity of his ear. “Yeah?”

“Good morning, sunshine.” José’s voice brought back the spike.

“Time?” he croaked.

“Eleven o’clock. Thought you’d want to know that Beth just called here looking for you. She sounded okay.”

Butch’s body went limp with relief. “Guy?”

“Didn’t mention him. But she did say she wanted to talk with you sometime today. I canceled the APB on her because she was calling from home.”

Butch sat up.

And then lay right back down.

He wasn’t going anywhere for a while.

“Not feeling too good,” he muttered.

“I figured that. Which is why I told her you’d be tied up until this afternoon. Just so you know, I left your place at seven this morning.”

Ah, Christ.

Butch tried the whole vertical thing again, forcing himself to stay upright. The room swam. He was still drunk as shit. And he had a hangover.

Talk about multitasking.

“Coming in now.”

“I wouldn’t do that. The captain’s gunning for your ass. Internal Affairs showed up here asking about you and Billy Riddle.”

“Riddle? Why?”

“Come on, Detective.”

Yeah, he knew why.

“Listen, you’re in no condition to run into the captain.” José’s voice was even, pragmatic. “You need to sober up. Get your shit together. Come in later. I’ll cover for you.”

“Thanks.”

“And I left the aspirin next to the phone with a tall glass of water. Figured you weren’t going to be able to make it to the coffeepot. Take three, turn your ringer off, and sleep. If anything exciting happens, I’ll come and get you.”

“I love you, honey.”

“So buy me a mink and a nice pair of earrings for our anniversary.”

“You got it.”

He hung up the phone after two tries and closed his eyes. Just a little more sleep. And then he might feel like a human again.

Beth scribbled her last edit on a piece about a rash of identity thefts. The article looked like it was bleeding, it had so many corrections and she saw a trend setting in. Dick’s big boys were getting sloppier and sloppier as they relied on her. And it wasn’t just background mistakes; now they were making grammatical and structural errors. As if they’d never heard of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

She didn’t mind line editing when she was collaborating. As long as the person who’d drafted the article had done even a modest amount of proofreading.

Beth put the article in her out box and focused on her computer screen. She called up a file she’d been in and out of all day long.

Okay, what else did she want to know?

She reviewed her list of questions.

Will I be able to go outside during the day? How often will I have to feed? How long will I live?

Her fingers flew over the keyboard.

Who are you fighting?

And then, *Do you have a...*

What was that word? Shellan?

She typed *wife* instead.

God, she cringed at what Wrath’s answer might be. And even if he didn’t have one, who did he feed from?

And what would that feel like? To have him unleash his hunger on her?

She knew instinctively it would be the same as the sex. Half-savage. All-consuming. Probably leaving her bruised and weak.

As well as in a state of total bliss.

“Hard at work, Randall?” Dick drawled.

She changed screens so her e-mail account showed. “Always.”

“You know, I heard a rumor about you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Heard you went out with that homicide detective, O’Neal. Twice.”

“So?”

Dick leaned over her desk. She was wearing a loose crew-neck shirt, so there was little for him to see. He straightened.

“So good job. Work a little magic on him. See what you can get. We could do a cover story on police brutality with him as the poster child. Keep this up, Randall, and I might be persuaded to promote you.”

Dick sauntered off, obviously enjoying his role as dispenser of patronage.
What an ass.

Her phone rang, and she barked her name into the receiver.

There was a pause. “Mistress? Are you all right?”

The butler.

“Sorry—and yes, I’m fine.” She put her head down on her free hand. After dealing with the likes of Wrath and Tohr, Dick’s pasty version of male arrogance seemed absurd.

“If there’s anything I can do...”

“No, no, I’m okay.” She laughed. “It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before.”

“Well, I probably shouldn’t be calling”—Fritz’s voice dropped to a whisper—“but I didn’t want you to be unprepared. Master has requested a special dinner tonight. For you and he, alone. I thought perhaps I would pick you up and we would find you a dress.”

“A dress?”

For a date kind of thing with Wrath?

The idea struck her as a terrific one, but then she reminded herself to be careful about reading romance into things. She didn’t really know the lay of the landscape.

Or who else he was laying, as it were.

“Mistress, I know this is presumptuous of me. He’s going to call you himself—”

At that moment the second line on her phone started to ring.

“I just wanted you to be ready for tonight.”

Caller ID flashed the number Wrath had made her memorize. She grinned like an idiot.

“I would love to get a dress. I would absolutely love to.”

“Good. We shall go to the Galleria. They have a Brooks Brothers there as well. Master has put in a request for clothing. I believe he wants to look his best for you as well.”

As she hung up, that stupid smile stuck to her face like glue.

Wrath left a message on Beth’s voice mail and rolled over in bed, reaching out for the braille clock. Three in the afternoon. He’d slept for about six hours, which was more than usual, but what his body typically needed after a feeding.

God, he wished she were with him.

Tohr had called at dawn with a report. The two of them had stayed up all night watching Godzilla movies, and by the sound of the male’s voice, he was half in love with her.

Which Wrath simultaneously understood and resented the hell out of.

But man, he’d made the right call sending Tohr over. Rhage definitely would have come on to her, and then Wrath would have had to break something of the brother’s. An arm, maybe a leg. Maybe both. And Vishous, while he didn’t have Hollywood’s outrageous good looks, had plenty of pimp juice. Phury’s vow of celibacy was strong, but why put him in the path of temptation?

Zsadist?

He hadn’t even considered that option. The scar down that brother’s face would have scared the shit out of her. Hell, even Wrath could see the damn thing. And mortal terror in a female was Z’s favorite turn-on. He got off on it like most males favored crap from Victoria’s Secret.

No, Tohr would be on sentry duty if the need ever arose again.

Wrath stretched. Feeling the satin sheets against his naked skin made him yearn for Beth. Now that he’d fed, his body felt stronger than ever, as though his bones were shafts of carbon and his muscles were steel cables. He was

back to himself again, and the whole lot of him was itching to be used hard.

Except he bitterly regretted what had happened with Marissa.

He thought back to the night. As soon as he'd lifted his head from her neck, he knew he'd nearly killed her. And not from drinking too much.

She'd pushed herself away, her body shaking from misery as she'd floundered off the bed.

"Marissa—"

"My lord, I release you. From the covenant. You are free of me."

He'd cursed, feeling like hell for what he'd done to her.

"I don't understand your anger," she'd said weakly. "This is what you have always wanted, and I grant it to you now."

"I never wanted—"

"Me," she'd whispered. "I know."

"Marissa—"

"Please don't say the words. I couldn't bear to hear the truth from your lips, even though I know it well. You have always been ashamed to be tied to me."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I disgust you."

"What?"

"Do you think I haven't noticed? You can't wait to be free of me. I drink and then you bolt up, as if you've had to force yourself to endure my presence." She'd started to sob then. "I've always tried to be clean when I come to you. I spend hours soaking in the tub, washing myself. But I cannot find the dirt that you see."

"Marissa, stop. Just stop. It isn't about you."

"Yes, I know. I saw the female. In your mind." She'd let out a shudder.

"I'm sorry," he'd said. "And you have never disgusted me. You're beautiful—"

"Don't say that. Not now." Marissa's voice had hardened then. "If anything, just be sorry that it took this long for me to see what has always been true."

"I will still protect you," he'd vowed.

"No, you won't. I'm no longer your concern. Not that I've ever been."

And then she'd left, the fresh scent of the ocean lingering a moment before dissipating.

Wrath rubbed his eyes. He was determined to make it up to her somehow.

He wasn't sure exactly how he'd pull that off, considering the hell she'd been put through. But he wasn't prepared to have her drift off into the ether thinking that she'd been utterly nothing to him. Or that he'd found her in some way unclean.

He'd never loved her, true. But he hadn't wanted to hurt her, which was why he'd told her to leave him so often. If she pulled out, if she made it clear she didn't want him, she would still be able to hold her head up in the catty aristocratic circle she was from. In her class, a *shellan* who was rejected by her mate was perceived as damaged goods.

Now that she had left him, she'd be spared any ignominy. And he had a feeling that when word got out, no one would be surprised.

Funny, he'd never really considered how he and Marissa would part, perhaps because after all these centuries, he'd assumed they never would. But he'd certainly never expected it to be because he was forming some kind of attachment to another female.

And that was what was happening. With Beth. After marking her last night as he had, he couldn't pretend he wasn't getting emotionally tied to her.

He cursed out loud, knowing enough about male vampire behavior and psychology to realize he was in trouble. Hell, they were both in trouble now.

A bonded male was a dangerous thing.

Especially when he was going to have to leave his female.

And give her into the keeping of another.

Trying to push the implications out of his mind, Wrath reached for the phone and dialed upstairs, thinking he needed something to eat. When there was no answer, he assumed Fritz must have gone to the store to buy food.

Good thing. Wrath had asked the brothers to come later in the evening, and they liked to eat big. It was time to reconnoiter, catch up with their investigations.

The need to avenge Darius burned.

And the closer Wrath got to Beth, the hotter the fire.

Chapter Twenty-three

Butch walked out of the captain's office. His holster felt too light without his gun in it. Wallet was too flat without his badge. It was like being naked.

"What happened?" José asked.

"I'm taking a vacation."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Butch started down the hall. "Did the NYPD have anything on that suspect?"

José grabbed his arm and pulled him into an interrogation room. "What happened?"

"I'm suspended without pay, pending the conclusion of an internal investigation. Which we both know is going to find that I acted with inappropriate force."

José buried a hand in his hair. "I told you to back off those suspects, man."

"That Riddle guy deserved worse."

"Not the point."

"Funny, that's what the captain said."

Butch walked over to the two-way mirror and looked at himself. God, he was getting old. Or maybe he was just tired of the only job he'd ever wanted to do.

Police brutality. Screw that. He was a protector of the innocent, not some self-impressed skull-cracker who got off on being a tough guy. The trouble was, there were just too many rules favoring criminals. The victims whose lives were shattered by violence should be half so lucky.

"I don't belong here anyway," he said softly.

"What?"

There was just no place for men like him in the world anymore, he

thought.

Butch turned around. "So. The NYPD. What did we find out?"

José stared at him for a long time. "Suspended from the force, huh?"

"At least until they officially can me."

José put his hands on his hips and looked down, shaking his head as if he were remonstrating with his shoes. But he answered.

"*Nada.* It's like he came out of nowhere."

Butch cursed. "Those stars. I know you can get them on the Web, but they can be bought locally, right?"

"Yeah, through martial-arts academies."

"We've got a couple of those in town."

José nodded slowly.

Butch took his keys out of his pocket. "I'll see ya."

"Hold up—we already sent someone out to ask around. Both academies said they don't remember anyone buying them who fit the suspect's description."

"Thanks for the tip." Butch started for the door.

"Detective. Yo, *O'Neal*." José grabbed Butch's forearm. "Damn it, will you stop for a minute?"

Butch glared over his shoulder. "Is this where you warn me to stay out of police business? 'Cause you might as well save the speech."

"Christ, Butch, I'm not your enemy." José's dark brown eyes were penetrating. "The boys and I are behind you. As far as we're concerned, you do what you need to do, and you've never been wrong. Anyone you've knocked around has deserved it. But maybe you've just been lucky, you know? What if you'd hurt someone who wasn't—"

"Cut the preacher routine. I'm not interested." He clamped his hand on the doorknob.

José squeezed hard. "You're off the force, *O'Neal*. And going half-cocked into an investigation you've been removed from won't bring Janie back."

Butch expelled his breath like he'd been punched. "You want to kick me in the nuts now, too?"

José removed his hand, looking as if he were throwing in the towel. "I'm sorry. But you gotta know that getting deeper in the weeds is only going to screw you. It's not going to help your sister. It's never helped her."

Butch slowly shook his head. "Shit. I know that."

“You sure?”

Yeah, he was. He’d really liked hurting Billy Riddle, and that was about vengeance for what had been done to Beth. It had nothing to do with bringing his sister back to life. Janie was gone. And she’d been gone for a long, long time.

Still, José’s sad eyes made him feel like he had a terminal illness.

“It’s gonna be fine,” he found himself saying. Although he didn’t really believe it.

“Just don’t...don’t push your luck out there, Detective.”

Butch threw open the door. “Pushing’s all I know how to do, José.”

Mr. X leaned back in his office chair, thinking about the night ahead. He was ready to try again, even though the downtown area was hot right now, what with the car bombing and the discovery of the whore’s body. Trolling for vampires in the vicinity of Screamer’s was going to be risky, but the risk of being caught added to the challenge.

Even more to the point, however, if you wanted to catch a shark, you didn’t fish in freshwater. He had to go to where the vampires were.

Anticipation shot through him.

He’d been brushing up on his torture techniques. And this morning, before leaving for the academy, he’d visited the workspace he’d set up in his barn. His tools were gathered and gleaming: a dentist’s drill set; knives of various sizes; a ball-peen hammer and a chisel; a Sawzall.

A melon baller. For the eyes.

The trick was, of course, walking that fine line between pain and death. Pain you could stretch out for hours, days. Death was the ultimate off switch.

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” he said.

It was the receptionist, the jacked woman who had arms big as a man’s and no breasts to speak of. Her contradictions never ceased to amaze him. In spite of the fact that a raging case of penis envy caused her to take steroids and pump iron like a gorilla, she insisted on wearing makeup. And doing her hair. In her cropped T-shirt and leggings, she looked like a bad drag queen.

She disgusted him.

You should always know who you are, he thought. *And who you aren’t.* “A guy’s here to speak with you.” Her voice was about an octave and a

half too low. "O'Neal, I think that's the name. Acts like a cop, but didn't pop a badge."

"Tell him I'll be right out." *You freak of nature*, he added to himself.

Still, Mr. X had to laugh as the door shut behind her. Him. Whatever.

Here he was, a man with no soul who killed vampires, and he was calling her a freak?

Yeah, well, at least he had a purpose. And a plan.

She was just going to Gold's Gym again tonight. Right after she got rid of her five-o'clock shadow.

It was a little before six when Butch pulled the unmarked up in front of Beth's building. He'd have to return the vehicle eventually, but suspended wasn't fired. The captain was going to have to ask for the damn car back.

He'd gone to both martial-arts academies and talked with the directors. One guy had been obnoxious. Your typical ass-kiss-craving, self-defense lunatic who'd convinced himself he was actually Asian. In spite of the fact that he was as white as Butch was.

The other man had been just plain weird. He'd looked like a 1950s milkman, with blond hair that had obviously been hit with some pomade and a bright, annoying smile that had missed its Pepsodent ad by nearly half a century. The guy had bent over to be helpful, but something was off. Butch's bullshit detector had spiked a serious woody the minute Mr. May-berry had opened his mouth.

And the guy had smelled like a sissy, besides.

Butch leaped up Beth's front steps and rang her buzzer. He'd left her a voice mail at work and at home telling her he was coming over. He was about to hit the button again when he saw her through the glass door, coming into the lobby.

Goddamn.

She had on a wraparound black dress that just about brought his headache back, it was so perfect for her. The vee in front dipped down and showed a little of her breasts. The tight waist set off her slim hips beautifully. And the slit up one side showed a flash of thigh with every step she took. Her heels were tall, making her ankles look fragile and lovely.

She looked up from the purse she'd been rummaging around in and seemed surprised to see him.

Her hair was up. He thought about what it would be like to take it down.
She opened the door. "Butch."

"Hi." He felt tongue-tied as a kid.

"I got your messages," she said softly.

He stepped back so she could come outside. "You got time to talk?"

Even though he knew what her answer was going to be.

"Ah, not right now."

"Where are you going?"

"I have a date."

"With whom?"

She met his eyes with such deliberate calmness, he knew the next thing she said was going to be a lie.

"No one special."

Yeah, right.

"What happened to the man last night, Beth? Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

Her eyes never wavered from his. "If you'll excuse me—"

He gripped her arm. "Do not go to him."

The low sound of an engine filled the silence between them. A large black Mercedes with tinted windows pulled up. Real drug-lord time.

"Ah, fuck, Beth." He squeezed her arm, desperate to get her attention.

"Don't do this. You're aiding and abetting a suspect."

"Let go of me, Butch."

"He's dangerous."

"And you aren't?"

He dropped his hold.

"Tomorrow," she said, stepping back. "We'll talk tomorrow. Meet me here after work."

Getting frantic, he put his body in her path. "Beth, I can't let you—"

"Are you going to arrest me?"

Not as a cop, he couldn't. Not unless he was reinstated to the force.

"No. I won't take you in."

"Thank you."

"I'm not doing it as a favor," he said bitterly as she walked around him.

"Beth, please."

She paused. "Nothing is as it seems."

“I don’t know. I’ve got a pretty fucking clear picture. You’re protecting a killer, and there’s a serious chance you’re going to get stuffed into a pine box. Do you understand what this guy is? I’ve seen his face up close. When his hand was around my neck and he was squeezing the life right out of me. A man like that has murder in his blood. It’s his nature. How can you go to him? Hell, how can you let him walk the streets?”

“He’s not like that.”

But the words were phrased as a question.

The car door opened, and a little old man in a tuxedo got out.

“Mistress, is there a difficulty?” the man asked her solicitously, while at the same time shooting Butch the evil eye.

“No, Fritz. No problem.” She smiled, but it was a shaky one. “Tomorrow, Butch.”

“If you live that long.”

She paled, but rushed down the stairs, sliding into the car.

After a moment Butch got into his. And trailed them.

When Havers heard footsteps coming toward the dining room, he looked up from his plate with a frown. He’d been hoping to make it through his meal without an interruption.

But it wasn’t one of the *doggen* coming in with news that a patient had arrived to be treated.

“Marissa!” He rose from his chair.

She marshaled a smile for him. “I thought I would come down. I’m tired of spending so much time in my room.”

“I’m very pleased to have your company.”

As she came up to the table, he pulled out her chair. He was happy that he’d insisted her place was always set, even after he’d lost hope she would join him. And tonight it seemed as though she was making an effort with more than just coming to eat. She was wearing a beautiful dress made of black silk that had a jacket with a stiff, stand-up collar. Her hair was down around her shoulders, flashing spun gold in the candlelight. She looked lovely, and he felt a flush of animosity. It was a total insult that Wrath couldn’t appreciate all she had to offer, that this exquisite female of noble blood was not good enough for him.

Other than for use as a feeding trough.

"How is your work?" she asked as she was served wine by one *doggen*. A plate of food was set in front of her by another. "Thank you, Phillip. Karolyn, this looks wonderful."

She picked up a fork and gently prodded the roast beef.

Good heavens, Havers thought. This was almost normal.

"My work? Fine. Actually better than fine. As I mentioned, I've had a bit of a breakthrough. Feeding may soon be a thing of the past." He lifted his glass and drank. The burgundy should have been a perfect accompaniment to the beef, but it tasted off to him. Everything on his plate was sour on his tongue as well. "I transfused myself with stored blood this afternoon, and I feel fine."

Actually, that was a bit of an overstatement. He didn't feel sick, but something wasn't right. That normal rush of strength had yet to hit him.

"Oh, Havers," she said softly. "You still miss Evangeline, don't you?"

"Painfully. And the drinking is simply not...agreeable to me."

No, he would no longer stay alive the old-fashioned way. From now on it would be clinical. A sterilized needle in his arm, hooking him up to a bag.

"I'm so very sorry," Marissa said.

Havers reached out, laying his palm faceup on the table. "Thank you."

She put her hand in his. "And I'm sorry that I've been so...preoccupied. But it will be better now."

"Yes," he said urgently. Wrath was just the kind of barbarian who would want to continue to drink from the vein, but at least Marissa could be spared the indignity. "You could try the transfusion as well. It will free you, too."

She took her hand back and reached for her wineglass. As she lifted the burgundy to her mouth, she spilled some on her jacket.

"Oh, bother," she muttered, brushing the wine off the silk. "I'm terribly uncoordinated, aren't I?"

She removed the jacket and laid it on the empty chair next to her.

"You know, Havers, I would like to try it. Drinking is no longer palatable to me, either."

A delicious relief, a feeling of possibility, overtook him. The sensation seemed wholly unfamiliar because he hadn't felt it in so very long. The idea that something might change for the better had become a foreign concept to him.

"Truly?" he whispered.

She nodded, pushing her hair over her shoulder and picking up her fork.

“Yes, truly.”

And then he saw the marks on her neck.

Two inflamed puncture wounds. A red blaze where she had been sucked. Purple contusions on the skin of her collarbone where she’d been gripped by a heavy hand.

Horror curdled his appetite, blurred his vision.

“How could he have treated you so roughly?” Havers breathed.

Marissa’s hand went to her neck before she quickly pulled some hair forward. “It’s nothing. Truly, it’s not...anything.”

His eyes stayed in place as he continued to see clearly what she had hidden.

“Havers, please. Let’s just eat.” She picked up her fork again, as if she were prepared to demonstrate exactly how one did that. “Come now. Eat with me.”

“How can I?” He threw down his silverware.

“Because it’s over.”

“What is?”

“I have broken the covenant with Wrath. I am no longer his *shellan*. I will see him no more.”

Havers could only stare for a moment. “Why? What has changed?”

“He has found a female he wants.”

Anger congealed in Havers’s veins. “And just who does he prefer to you?”

“You do not know her.”

“I know all females of our class. Who is it?” he demanded.

“She is not of our class.”

“She is one of the Scribe Virgin’s Chosen, then?” In the vampire social hierarchy, they were the only ones above a female of the aristocracy.

“No. She is human. Or at least half-human, from what I could tell from his thoughts about her.”

Havers turned to stone in his chair. Human. A *human*?

Marissa had been forsaken for a...*Homo sapiens*?

“Has the Scribe Virgin been contacted?” he asked in a brittle voice.

“That is his duty, not mine. But make no mistake, he will go to her. It is...over.”

Marissa took a small piece of beef and put it between her lips. She chewed carefully, as if she’d forgotten how. Or perhaps the humiliation she

was obviously feeling made it difficult to swallow.

Havers gripped the arms of his chair. His sister, his beautiful, pure sister, had been ignored. Used. Brutalized as well.

And all that was left of her mating with their king was the shame of being cast aside for a human.

Her love had never meant anything to Wrath. Neither had her body or her impeccable bloodlines.

And now the warrior had done away with her honor.

The hell it was over.

Chapter Twenty-four

Wrath pulled on the Brooks Brothers jacket. It was tight in the shoulders, but he was hard to fit, and he'd given Fritz no notice.

Then again, the thing could have been custom-tailored and he would still have felt shackled. He was much more comfortable in leather and weapons than this worsted-wool crap.

He walked into the bathroom and squinted at himself. The suit was black. So was the shirt. That was all he could really see.

Good God, he probably looked like a lawyer.

He stripped off the jacket and put it on the marble counter. Pulling his hair back with impatient hands, he tied the length with a strap of leather.

Where was Fritz? The *doggen* had left to get Beth nearly an hour ago. The two of them should be back by now, but the house above still felt empty.

Ah, hell. Even if the butler had been gone for only a minute and a half, Wrath would have been restless. He was pumped to see Beth, itchy and distracted. All he could think about was burying his face in her hair as he drove the hardest part of himself deep inside her body.

God, those sounds she made when she came for him.

He glanced at his reflection. Put the jacket back on.

But sex wasn't everything. He wanted to treat her with respect, not just throw her on her back. He wanted to slow down. Eat with her. Talk with her. Hell, he wanted to give her what females liked: a little TLC.

He tried out a smile. Widened it. His cheeks felt like they were going to crack.

Yeah, okay, so he wasn't exactly Hallmark-card material. But he could pull off some romance. Couldn't he?

He rubbed his jaw. What the hell did he know about romance?

Abruptly, he felt like a fool.

No, it was worse than that. The fancy new suit exposed him, and the truth he saw was a nasty surprise.

He was changing himself for a female. For no other reason than to try to please her.

This was bonding at work, he thought. This was precisely why he never should have marked her, why he never, ever should have let himself get that close.

He reminded himself yet again that when she was through her transition, he was finished with her. He would go back to his life. And she would...

God, why did he feel like he'd been shot through the chest?

"Wrath, man?" Tohrment's voice boomed through the chamber.

The sound of his brother's baritone was a relief, bringing Wrath back to center.

He stepped out into the bedroom and scowled when he heard his brother's low whistle.

"Look at you," Tohr said, moving around him.

"Bite me."

"No, thanks. I prefer the females." The brother laughed. "Although I have to say you clean up nice."

Wrath crossed his arms over his chest, but the jacket pulled so tightly he worried he was going to split the seam in the back. He dropped his hands.

"You're here why?"

"I called your cell and you didn't answer. You said you wanted us all to meet here tonight. When?"

"I'm busy until one."

"One?" Tohr drawled.

Wrath planted his hands on his hips. A feeling of deep uneasiness, like someone had broken into his home, sneaked up on him.

This was so wrong, he thought. The date. With Beth.

But it was too damn late to cancel.

"Make that midnight," he said.

"I'll tell the brothers to be ready then."

He had a feeling Tohr was sporting a little grin, but the vampire's voice was steady. There was a pause.

"Yo, Wrath?"

"What."

"She's as beautiful as you think she is. Just thought you'd want to know."

If any other male had said that, Wrath would have given the idiot a nose job. And even though it was Tohr, his temperature still rose. He didn't like being reminded how irresistible she was. It made him think about the male she'd end up with for life.

"You got a point or are you just shooting your lip off?"

It wasn't an invitation to elaborate, but Tohr marched right through the opening anyway. "You're way into her."

He should have stuck with "Fuck you" as a response, Wrath thought.

"And I think she feels the same way," Tohr tacked on.

Oh, great. That made him feel better. Like he might end up breaking her heart or something.

Man, this date thing was a *really* bad idea. Just where did he think he was taking them with all the hearts-and-flowers shit?

Wrath bared his fangs. "I'm only hanging in until she goes through the change. That's it."

"Yeah, sure." When Wrath growled deep in his throat, the other vampire shrugged. "I've never seen you dress for a female before."

"She's Darius's daughter. You want me to be like Zsadist with one of his whores?"

"Dear God, no. And damn, I wish he'd stop that. But I like what I'm seeing with you and Beth. You've been alone for too long."

"That's your opinion."

"And others'."

Sweat broke out across Wrath's forehead.

Tohr's honesty made him feel trapped. As did the fact that he was only supposed to be protecting Beth, but instead was busy trying to make her feel as if she were more special to him than she really was.

"Don't you have somewhere you need to be?" he demanded.

"Nope."

"Just my luck."

Desperate to move around, he walked over to the couch and picked up his biker jacket. He needed to restock it with weapons, and since Tohr didn't seem in a big hurry to get his ass in gear, the distraction was better than screaming.

"The night Darius died," Tohr said, "he told me you'd turned him down when he asked you to take care of her."

Wrath opened the closet and reached into a storage bin full of throwing

stars, daggers, and chains. He made his selections with rough hands. “So?”

“What changed your mind?”

Wrath clapped his molars together, biting down hard, a breath away from lashing out.

“He’s dead. I owe him.”

“You owed him when he was alive, too.”

Wrath whirled around. “Do you have any other business with me? If not, get the hell out of here.”

Tohr lifted his hands. “Easy, brother.”

“Fuck easy. I’m not talking about her with you or anyone else. Got it? And keep your mouth shut with the brothers, too.”

“Okay, okay.” Tohr backed over to the door. “But do yourself a favor. Cop to what’s going on with that female. An unacknowledged weakness is deadly.”

Wrath growled and leaned into his attack pose, upper body jutting forward on his hips. “Weakness? This coming from a male who’s dumb enough to love his *shellan*? You gotta be kidding me.”

There was a long silence.

And then Tohr said softly, “I’m lucky to have found love. I thank the Scribe Virgin every day that Wellsie is in my life.”

Wrath’s temper surged, set off by something he couldn’t put his finger on. “You’re *pathetic*.”

Tohr hissed. “And you’ve been dead for hundreds of years. You’re just too mean to find a grave and lie down.”

Wrath threw the leather jacket to the floor. “At least I’m not pussy-whipped.”

“Nice. Fucking. Suit.”

Wrath crossed the distance between them in two strides, and the other vampire met the approach head-on. Tohrment was a big male, with thick shoulders and long, powerful arms. Menace pulsated between them.

Wrath grinned coldly, his fangs lengthening. “If you spent half the amount of time defending our race that you do chasing after that female of yours, we might not have lost Darius. Ever think of that?”

Anguish came out of the brother like blood from a chest wound, and the vampire’s white-hot agony thickened the air. Wrath drew in the scent, taking the burn of misery down deep into his lungs, into his very soul. The knowledge that he’d laid out a male of honor and courage with such a low

blow filled him with self-loathing. And while he waited for Tohr to attack, he welcomed the inner hatred as an old friend.

“I can’t believe you said that.” Tohr’s voice throbbed. “You need to—”
“I don’t want any of your worthless advice.”

“Fuck you.” Tohr knocked him a good one in the shoulder. “You’re gonna get it anyway. You’d better learn who your enemies really are, you arrogant asshole. Before you’re standing alone.”

Wrath barely heard the door slam shut. The voice screaming in his head that he was a worthless piece of shit overrode just about everything else.

He drew in a great breath and emptied his lungs with a vicious yell. The sound vibrated around the room, rattling the doors, the loose weapons, the mirror in the bathroom. Candles flared wildly in response, their flames licking up the walls, greedy to get free of their wicks and destroy what they could. He roared until his throat felt as if it were going to tear apart, until his chest burned.

When he finally closed his mouth, he felt no relief. Just remorse.

He marched over to the closet and took out a nine-millimeter Beretta. After he loaded it, he tucked the gun into the waistband of his slacks at the small of his back. Then he headed for the door and took the stairs two at time, his thighs eating up the distance to the first floor.

Stepping into the drawing room, he listened. The silence was probably a good thing for everybody. He needed to get ahold of himself.

Prowling around the house, he stopped at the dining room table. It had been set as he’d asked. Two places at one end. Crystal and silver. Candles.

And he’d called his brother pathetic?

If it hadn’t been all Darius’s priceless crap, he’d have swept the table clean with his arm. His hand shot out, as if it were ready to follow through on the impulse anyway, but the jacket confined him. He gripped the lapels, prepared to rip the thing off his back and burn it, but the front door opened. He wheeled around.

There she was. Coming across the threshold. Walking into the hall.

Wrath’s hands dropped to his sides.

She was dressed in black. Her hair was up. She smelled...like night-blooming roses. He breathed in through his nose, his body hardening, his instincts demanding that he get her under him.

But then her emotions hit him. She was wary, nervous. He could sense her mistrust with clarity, and he took perverse satisfaction as she hesitated to

look at him.

His temper returned, nice and sharp.

Fritz was busy closing the door, but the *doggen*'s happiness was obvious in the air around him, shimmering like sunshine. "I've put out some wine in the drawing room. I'll serve the first course in about thirty minutes, shall I?"

"No," Wrath commanded. "We'll sit down now."

Fritz seemed confused, but then clearly caught the drift of Wrath's emotions.

"As you wish, master. Right away." The butler disappeared as though something were on fire in the kitchen.

Wrath stared at Beth.

She took a step back. Probably because he was glaring.

"You look...different," she said. "In those clothes."

"If you think they've civilized me, don't be fooled."

"I'm not."

"Good. Now let's get this over with."

Wrath went into the dining room, thinking she'd follow if she wanted. And if she chose not to, hell, it was probably for the better. He wasn't in a big hurry to get trapped at the table anyway.

Chapter Twenty-five

Beth watched Wrath saunter away as if he didn't give a rat's ass whether or not she ate with him.

If she hadn't been having second thoughts herself, she would have been totally insulted. He'd invited her to dinner. So why was he all bent out of joint when she showed up? She was tempted to hightail it right back out the front door.

Except she followed because she felt like she had no choice. There were so many things she wanted to know, things only he could explain.

Although as God was her witness, if there were any way to get the information from someone else, she would have.

As he walked in front of her, she shot a glare at the back of his head and tried to ignore his powerful stride. The latter was an abject failure. He just moved too superbly. With each sharp impact of his heel, his shoulders shifted under the expensive jacket, counterbalancing the thrust of his legs. As his arms swung loosely, she knew that his thighs were clenching and releasing with every step. She pictured him naked, his muscles flexing under his skin.

Butch's voice bounced around in her head. *A man like that has murder in his blood. It's his nature.*

And yet Wrath had sent her away last night when he'd been a danger to her.

She told herself to forget attempting to reconcile the contradictions. She was just trying to read tea leaves with all the mental aerobics. She needed to go with her gut, and her gut said Wrath was the only help she had.

As she stepped into the dining room, the beautiful table that had been set for them was a surprise. There were flowers in the center, tuberoses and orchids. And ivory candles. And gleaming china and silver.

Wrath went around and pulled out a chair, waiting for her to sit in it.

Looming over the thing.

God, he looked fantastic in the suit. And the open collar of his shirt showed off his throat, the black silk making his skin look tanned. Too bad he was flat-out pissed. His face was as harsh as his temper, and with his hair pulled back, the aggressive thrust of his jaw was even more prominent.

Something had set him off. Big-time.

Perfect date material, she thought. A vampire with the social equivalent of road rage.

She approached cautiously. As he slid the seat under her, she could have sworn he bent down to her hair and inhaled deeply.

“Why were you so late?” he demanded while sitting at the head of the table. When she didn’t answer, he cocked an eyebrow at her, the dark arch rising over the rim of his black sunglasses. “Did Fritz have to talk you into coming?”

To give herself something to do, she took her napkin and unfolded it in her lap. “It was nothing like that.”

“So tell me what it was.”

“Butch followed us. We had to wait until we got free of him.”

She sensed the space around Wrath darkening as if his anger sucked the light right out of the air.

Fritz came in with two small plates of salad. He put them down.

“Wine?” he asked.

Wrath nodded.

After the butler had finished pouring and left, she picked up a heavy silver fork and forced herself to eat.

“Why are you afraid of me now?” Wrath’s voice was sardonic, as if he were bored by her fear.

She jabbed at the greens. “Hmmm. Could it be because you look like you want to strangle someone?”

“You walked into this house scared of me again. Before you even saw me, you were frightened. I want to know why.”

She kept her eyes on her plate. “Maybe I was reminded that last night you almost killed a friend of mine.”

“Christ, not that again.”

“You asked,” she shot back. “Don’t get mad if you don’t like my answer.”

Wrath wiped his mouth impatiently. “I didn’t kill him, did I?”

“Only because I stopped you.”

“And that bothers you? Most people like to be heroes.”

She put her fork down. “You know what? I don’t want to be here with you right now.”

He kept eating. “So why did you come?”

“Because you asked me to!”

“Believe me, I can handle the rejection.” As if she were of no concern to him whatsoever.

“This was a mistake.” She put her napkin down next to her plate and stood.

He cursed. “Sit down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Let me amend that. Sit down and shut up.”

She gaped at him. “You arrogant ass—”

“Someone’s already called me that tonight, thank you very much.”

Fritz picked that moment to breeze in with some warm rolls.

She glared at Wrath and pretended she was only reaching across the table for the wine bottle. She wasn’t about to march off in front of Fritz. And besides, she suddenly felt like sticking around.

So she could yell at Wrath a little longer.

When they were alone again, she hissed, “Where do you get off talking to me like that?”

He took a final bite of salad, placed his fork on the edge of his plate, and dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin. Like he’d been trained by Emily Post herself.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” he said. “You need me. So get over your hangups about what I *might* have done to that cop. Your good buddy Butch is still above ground, right? So what’s the problem?”

Beth stared at him, trying to read through his sunglasses, searching for some softness, something she could connect to. But the dark lenses shut her out of his eyes completely, and the tight lines of his face gave her nothing to go on.

“How can life mean so little to you?” she wondered aloud.

The smile he gave her was cold. “How can death mean so much to *you*?”

Beth sank back in her chair. Cringed from him, was more like it. She couldn’t believe she’d made love—no, had sex—with him. He was utterly callous.

Abruptly, her heart hurt. Not because he was being hard on her, but because she was disappointed. She'd really wanted him to be different than he appeared. She'd wanted to believe the flashes of warmth he'd shown her were as big a part of him as those hard edges.

She rubbed the raw patch at her sternum. "I'd really like to go, if you don't mind."

There was a long pause.

"Ah, hell..." he muttered, letting out his breath. "This isn't right."

"No, it isn't."

"I thought that you deserved...I don't know. A date. Or something. Something normal." He laughed harshly as she looked at him with surprise. "Dumb idea, I know. I should stick to what I'm good at. I'd be better off teaching you how to kill."

Underneath his thick pride, she sensed a kernel of something else. Insecurity? No, that wasn't it. Naturally with him, it would be more intense.

Self-hatred.

Fritz came in, picked up their salad plates, and reappeared with soup. It was cold vichyssoise. *Interesting*, she thought absently. Usually it was soup first, then salad, wasn't it? But then, she had to imagine vampires had lots of different social traditions. Like the men having more than one woman.

Her stomach lurched. She wasn't going to think of that. She simply refused to.

"Look, just so you know," Wrath said as he picked up his spoon, "I fight to protect, not because I've got a jones for murder. But I've killed thousands. Thousands, Beth. Do you understand? So if you want me to pretend I'm not comfortable with death, I can't do that for you. I just can't."

"Thousands?" she mumbled, overwhelmed.

He nodded.

"Who in God's name are you fighting?"

"Bastards who would kill you as soon as you go through the transition."

"Vampire hunters?"

"Lessers. Humans who have traded their souls to the Omega in return for a free reign of terror."

"Who—or what—is the Omega?" As she spoke the word, the candles flickered wildly, as if tormented by invisible hands.

Wrath hesitated. He actually seemed uncomfortable with the subject. He, who wasn't afraid of anything.

“You mean the devil?” she prompted.

“Worse. You can’t compare them. One’s just a metaphor. The other’s very, very real. Fortunately, the Omega has a counterpart, the Scribe Virgin.” He smiled wryly. “Well, maybe *fortunately* is too strong a word. But there is a balance.”

“God and Lucifer.”

“Maybe according to your lexicon. Our legend has it that vampires were created by the Scribe Virgin as her one and only legacy, as her chosen children. The Omega resented her ability to generate life, and he despised the special powers she gave to the species. The Lessening Society was his defensive response. He uses humans because he is incapable of creation and because they are a readily available source of aggression.”

This is just too strange, she thought. Trading souls. The undead. The stuff just didn’t exist in the real world.

Then again, she was having dinner with a vampire. So was anything really all that impossible?

She thought of the gorgeous blond man who’d stitched himself up.

“You have others who fight with you, right?”

“My brothers.” He took a drink from his wineglass. “As soon as the vampires recognized they were under siege, the strongest and most powerful males were weeded out. Trained to fight. Turned loose against the *lessers*. Those warriors were then bred to the strongest females over generations until a separate subspecies of vampires emerged. The most powerful of this class were indoctrinated into the Black Dagger Brotherhood.”

“Are you brothers by blood?”

He smiled tightly. “In a matter of speaking.”

His face shuttered, as if the matter were private. She had the sense that he would say no more about the brotherhood, but she was still curious about the war he was fighting.

Especially because she was about to turn into one of those he protected.

“So it’s humans you kill.”

“Yes, although they’re basically dead already. In order to give his fighters the longevity and strength they would need to fight us, the Omega had to strip them of their souls.” Distaste flickered across his harsh features. “Not that having a soul ever prevented a human from coming after us.”

“You don’t like...us, do you?”

“First of all, half of what’s in your veins is from your father’s side. And

secondly, why would I like humans? They beat the crap out of me before my transition, and the only reason they don't fuck with me now is because I scare the hell out of them. And if it got widely known that vampires existed? They'd come after us even if they weren't in the society. Humans are threatened by anything different, and their response is to fight. They're bullies, picking on the weak, cowering from the strong." Wrath shook his head. "Besides, they irritate me. Look at how their folklore portrays our species. There's Dracula, for Christ's sake, an evil bloodsucker who preys on the defenseless. There's piss-poor B movies and porn. And don't get me started on the whole Halloween thing. Plastic fangs. Black capes. The only things the idiots got right are that we drink blood and that we can't go out in the daylight. The rest is bullshit, fabricated to alienate us and stimulate fear in the masses. Or just as offensive, the fiction is used to create some kind of mystique for bored humans who think the dark side is a fun place to visit."

"But you don't really hunt us, right?"

"Don't use that word. It's *them*, Beth. Not *us*. You are not wholly human right now, and soon you won't be human at all." He paused. "And no, I don't hunt them. But if they get in my way, they've got a serious problem."

She considered what he'd said, trying to ignore the panic that rose every time she thought about the transition she was supposedly about to go through.

"When you went after Butch like that... Surely he's not a...whatever, a *lesser*."

"He tried to keep me from you." Wrath's jaw clenched. "I will level anyone and anything before I'd let that happen. And whether he's your lover or not, if he does it again—"

"You promised me you wouldn't kill him."

"I won't take him out. But I'm not going to go easy on him."

Something worth giving Hard-ass a heads-up on, she thought.

"Why aren't you eating?" Wrath demanded. "You need food."

She looked down. Food? Her life was suddenly a Stephen King novel and he was worried about her diet?

"Eat." He nodded at her bowl. "You want to be as strong as possible for the change."

Beth picked up her spoon, just to get him off her back. The soup tasted like Elmer's glue even though she imagined it was perfectly made, perfectly seasoned.

"You're armed right now, aren't you?" she asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“Do you ever put down your weapons?”

“No.”

“But when we were...” She shut her mouth before the words *making love* popped out.

He leaned forward. “There’s always something within my reach. Even when I take you.”

Beth swallowed. Hot thoughts warred with the horrible realization that he was either paranoid or evil was truly always close.

And damn, she thought. Wrath was a lot of things. But he sure wasn’t the hysterical type.

There was a long silence between them, until Fritz cleared the soup bowls and brought in plates of lamb. She noticed that Wrath’s meat had been cut up for him into bite-sized pieces. *Odd,* she thought.

“I have something I want to show you after dinner.” He picked up his fork, and it took him two tries to spear some meat with the tines.

And that was when she realized he wasn’t even bothering to look at his plate. His gaze was focused down the table.

A chill went through her. Something was very off.

She looked carefully at the sunglasses he wore.

She remembered his fingertips searching her face that first night they were together, as if he’d been trying to see her through touch. And then thought of the fact that he always wore those lenses, as if he weren’t just blocking out light, but covering his eyes.

“Wrath?” she said softly.

He reached out for his wineglass, his hand not closing around it until the crystal hit his palm.

“What?” He brought the glass to his lips, but put it back down. “Fritz? We need red.”

“Right here, master.” Fritz came in with another bottle. “Mistress?”

“Ah, yes, thank you.”

When the door to the kitchen flapped shut, Wrath said, “You have something else to ask me?”

She cleared her throat. She had to be reading into things. Desperate to find a weakness in him, she was now trying to convince herself that he was blind.

If she were smart, and that was seriously debatable, she’d quickly run

through her list of questions. And then go home.

“Beth?”

“Yeah...ah, so it’s true you can’t go out during the day?”

“Vampires do not do sunlight.”

“What happens?”

“Second-to third-degree burns will immediately pop up upon exposure. Incineration occurs not long afterward. The sun is not something you want to screw with.”

“But I can go outside now.”

“You haven’t gone through the change. Although who knows? Afterward you might still be able to tolerate it. It’s different for people who have a human parent. Vampire characteristics can be diluted.” He took a drink from his glass, licking his lips. “Then again, you’re going to go through the transition, so Darius’s blood is strong in your veins.”

“How often will I have to...feed?”

“In the beginning, fairly frequently. Maybe twice, three times a month. Although again, there’s no way of knowing.”

“After you help me through the first time, how will I be able to find a man who I can drink—”

Wrath’s growl stopped her. When she looked up, she shrank into the chair. He was back to being pissed.

“I’ll take care of finding you someone,” he said, his accent thicker than usual. “Until then, you will use me.”

“Hopefully that won’t be for long,” she muttered, thinking that he didn’t look happy about getting stuck with her.

His mouth curled as he looked her way. “So eager for someone else?”

“No, I just thought that...”

“What? You thought what?” His tone was hard, hard as the stare shooting out from behind the sunglasses.

The fact that he clearly didn’t want to be tied to her was difficult to put into words. The rejection hurt even though she’d no doubt be better off without him.

“I...ah, Tohr said you were the king of the vampires. I kind of figure that would make you busy.”

“My boy’s got to learn to zip it.”

“Is it true? That you’re the king?”

“No,” he snapped.

Well, if that wasn't a door getting slammed in her face.

"Are you married? I mean, do you have a mate? Or two?" she said quickly, figuring she might as well let it all fly. His mood was already back in black. It wasn't like she could make it worse.

"Christ. No."

Well, that was a relief of sorts. Although it was clear what he thought of relationships.

She took a sip of wine. "Do you have a woman in your life at all?"

"No."

"So who do you feed from?"

Long silence. Not an encouraging one.

"There was someone."

"Was?"

"Was."

"Since when?"

"Recently." He shrugged. "We were never close. It was a bad match."

"Who do you go to now?"

"God, you really are a reporter, aren't you?"

"Who?" she pushed.

He looked at her for a long time. And then his face changed, the aggression seeming to bleed out of him. His fork came gently down to his plate and his other hand was placed palm up on the table. "Ah, hell."

In spite of his curse, the air suddenly seemed softer.

She didn't trust the change in his mood at first, but then he whipped off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes. When he put the lenses back in place, she watched his chest expand, as if he were collecting himself.

"God, Beth, I think I wanted it to be you. In spite of the fact that I'm not going to be around for long after your change." He shook his head. "Man, I am one stupid SOB."

Beth blinked, feeling a kind of sexual heat that he would drink her blood to survive.

"But don't worry," he said. "That's not going to happen. And I'll find you another male fast."

He pushed his plate away, food left half-eaten on the china.

"When was the last time you fed?" she asked, thinking of the powerful craving she'd watched him battle.

"Last night."

Pressure in her chest made her feel as if her lungs were clogged. “But you didn’t bite me.”

“It was after you left.”

She pictured him with another woman in his arms. When she reached for her wineglass, her hand shook.

Wow. Her emotions were breaking all kinds of land speed records tonight. She’d been terrified, pissed off, insanely jealous.

She had to wonder what was next.

Happiness, she had a feeling, probably wasn’t it.

Chapter Twenty-six

Beth put the wineglass back down, wishing she had more control over herself.

“You don’t like that, do you?” Wrath said in a low voice.

“What?”

“Me drinking from another female.”

She laughed darkly, despising herself. Him. The whole situation. “You want to rub my nose in it?”

“No.” He paused. “The idea you will someday score another male’s skin with your teeth and take his blood inside of you makes me want to stab something.”

Beth stared at him.

So why don’t you stay with me? she thought.

Wrath shook his head. “But I can’t let myself think like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you cannot be mine. No matter what I said before.”

Fritz came in, cleared, and then served dessert. Whole strawberries on a gold-rimmed plate. Some chocolate sauce on the side to dip them in. A little cookie.

Normally, Beth would have polished the lot of it off in high gear, but she was too shaken to eat.

“You don’t like strawberries?” Wrath asked as he put one into his mouth. His bright white teeth bit through the red flesh.

She shrugged, forcing herself to look away from him. “I do.”

“Here.” He picked a berry off his plate and leaned toward her. “Let me feed you.”

His long fingers held the stem firmly, his arm poised in the air.

She wanted to take what he offered. “I can feed myself.”

“Yes, you can,” he said softly. “But that’s not the point.”

“Did you have sex with her?” she asked.

His eyebrows flickered. “Last night?”

She nodded. “When you feed, do you make love to her?”

“No. And let me answer your next question. I’m not sleeping with anyone but you right now.”

Right now, she thought.

Beth looked down at her hands, feeling stupidly hurt.

“Let me feed you,” he murmured. “Please.”

Oh, grow up, she told herself. They were adults. They were tremendous in bed together, and that was more than she’d ever had from a man before. Was she really going to walk away just because she was going to lose him?

Besides, even if he promised her a rosy future, a man like him wasn’t going to stick around. He was a fighter who ran with a pack of guys just like himself. Home-and-hearth stuff would be boring as hell to him.

She had him now. She wanted him now.

Beth tilted forward in her chair, opened her mouth, and put her lips around the strawberry, taking it whole. Wrath’s nostrils flared as he watched her bite down. When some of the sweet juice escaped and dripped onto her chin, he hissed.

“I want to lick that off,” he muttered under his breath. He reached forward and took hold of her jaw. Lifted his napkin.

She put her hand on his. “Use your mouth.”

A low sound, from deep inside his chest, cut through the room.

Wrath leaned toward her, tilting his head. She caught a flash of his fangs as his lips opened and his tongue came out. He stroked the juice from her skin and then pulled away.

He stared at her. She looked back at him. The candles flickered.

“Come with me,” he said, holding out his hand.

Beth didn’t hesitate. She put her palm against his and let herself get drawn up from the table. He took her into the drawing room, over to the picture and through the wall. Down the stone staircase they went, his presence immense in the darkness.

When they got to the bottom landing, he led her into his chamber, and she looked at the bed. It had been made, the pillows neatly lined up against the headboard, the satin sheets smooth as still water. Her body flushed as she remembered what it had felt like to have him on top of her, moving inside of

her.

They were headed there again, she thought. And she couldn't wait.

A deep growl made her look over her shoulder. Wrath's gaze was leveled on her as if she were a target.

He'd read her thoughts. He knew what she wanted. And he was prepared to deliver.

He walked up to her, and she heard the door shut and lock. She looked around, wondering if there was someone else in the room. There wasn't.

His hand went to her neck, and he angled her head back with his thumb. "I've wanted to kiss you all night long."

She braced herself for a hard one, ready for all he could give her, except that when his lips came down on hers they were languorous. She could feel the passion in the taut lines of his body, but he clearly refused to be hurried. When he lifted his head, he smiled at her.

She was totally used to the fangs, she thought.

"We're going to take this slow tonight," he said.

But she stopped him before he kissed her again. "Wait. I have something I have to...Do you have any condoms?"

He frowned. "No. Why?"

"Why? Ever hear of safe sex?"

"I don't carry those kinds of diseases, and you can't give me anything."

"How do you know?"

"Vampires are not susceptible to human viruses."

"So you can have sex all you want? Without worrying about anything?"

When he nodded, she found herself feeling a little ill. God, how many women he must have—

"And you're not fertile," he said.

"How do you know that?"

"Trust me. We'd both know if you were. Besides, you won't have your first needing for another five years or so after the change. And even when you're in it, conception isn't guaranteed because—"

"Hold on. What's this needing thing?"

"Females are fertile only every ten years or so. Which is a blessing."

"Why?"

He cleared his throat. Actually seemed a little embarrassed. "It's a dangerous time. All males respond on some level if they're in the vicinity of a female in her need. They can't help themselves. Fights can break out. And

the female, she, ah...the cravings are intense. Or so I've heard."

"You don't have children?"

He shook his head. Then frowned. "God."

"What?"

"To think of you going through the needing." His body swayed, as if he'd closed his eyes. "To be the one you used."

Sexual heat came out of him in a rush. She could actually feel a hot gust move the air.

"How long does it last?" she asked in a husky voice.

"Two days. If the female is...serviced well and fed properly, she rebounds quickly."

"And the man?"

"The male's totally used up when it's over. Milked dry. Drained of blood, too. It takes longer for him to recover, but I've never heard one complain. Ever." There was a pause. "I'd love to be the one who relieves you."

Abruptly, he stepped back. She felt a cold draft as his mood changed and the shifting heat dissipated.

"But that will be some other male's duty. And privilege."

His cell phone started ringing.

As he tore it out of his inner pocket with a snarl, she felt for whoever it was.

"*What?*" There was a pause.

She headed for the bathroom to give him some privacy. And because she needed a little herself. The images in her head were enough to make her dizzy. Two days. Of nothing but him?

When she came back out, Wrath was sitting on the couch, elbows on his knees, brooding. He'd taken off his jacket, and his shoulders looked very wide in that black shirt. As she approached, she caught a glimpse of a handgun under the coat and shivered a little.

He looked up as she sat beside him. She wished she could read him better and blamed the dark lenses. Reaching out to his face, she stroked the harsh cut of his cheek, the strong length of his jaw. His mouth opened slightly, as if her touch made him short of breath.

"I want to see your eyes," she said.

He pulled back a little. "No."

"Why not?"

"Why do you care what they look like?"

She frowned. "You can be hard to read with those glasses on. And right now I wouldn't mind knowing what you're thinking."

Or feeling, even more important.

Finally, he shrugged. "Suit yourself."

When he made no move to take off the lenses, she reached up to the temple pieces and slid the sunglasses from his face. His eyelids were down, his lashes dark against his skin. He didn't open his eyes.

"Won't you show me?"

His jaw tightened.

She looked at the glasses. When she lifted them to the candlelight, she could barely see through them at all, they were so dark.

"You're blind, aren't you?" she said softly.

His lips curled back, but not in a smile. "Worried that I can't take care of you now?"

She wasn't surprised by the hostility. She imagined a man like him would hate any weakness he had.

"No, I'm not worried about that at all. But I would still like to see your eyes."

With a flash of movement, Wrath dragged her across his lap, holding her off balance so it was only the strength of his arms that kept her from hitting the floor. His mouth was set in a grim line.

Slowly, he lifted his lids.

Beth gasped.

His irises were the most extraordinary color. A luminescent pale green, so pale they were almost white. Framed by his thick, dark lashes, set deeply beneath his brows, his eyes gleamed like they were lit from inside his skull, all but popping out of his face like lightbulbs.

Then she noticed his pupils. They were all wrong. Tiny, unfocused pinpricks of black.

She caressed his face. "Your eyes are beautiful."

"Useless."

"Beautiful."

She watched as he scanned her face. He was straining, as if trying to get his vision to work.

"Have they always been like this?" she whispered.

"I was born visually impaired. My sight got worse after my transition and will probably degenerate even more as I age."

“So you can see something?”

“Yeah.” His hand lifted to her hair. When waves of it landed on her shoulder, she realized he was picking the pins out of her chignon. “I know I like your hair down, for instance. And I know you are very beautiful.”

His fingers traced the contours of her face, then brushed lightly down her neck to her collarbone. They kept going, marking a path between her breasts.

Her heart pounded. Her thoughts slowed down. The world receded until there was only Wrath.

“Sight is seriously overrated, though,” he murmured, flattening his palm over her sternum. The weight was heavy. Warm. A foretaste of what his body would feel like pressing hers down into the mattress. “Touch, taste, smell, hearing. The other four senses are just as important.”

He leaned forward, nuzzled her neck, and she felt a soft scratching. *His fangs*, she thought. Running up her throat.

She wanted him to bite her.

Wrath breathed in deeply. “You have a perfume to your skin that makes me hard. Instantly. All I have to do is smell you.”

She arched in his arms, rubbing herself against his thighs, thrusting her breasts up. Her head fell back, and she let out a little moan.

“God, I love that sound,” he said, moving his hand up to the base of her throat. “Make it for me again, Beth.”

He sucked her neck. She obliged.

“That’s it,” he groaned. “Sweet heaven, that is so it.”

His fingers started traveling again, this time over to the tie on her dress. He loosened the bow.

“I wouldn’t let Fritz change the sheets.”

“What?” she mumbled.

“On the bed. After you left. I wanted to smell you when I lay down in them.”

The front of her dress slid open, and cool air hit her skin as his hand drifted up her rib cage. When he got to her bra, he drew a circle around the edges of one lace cup, gradually working his way inward until he brushed against her nipple.

Her body jerked, and she grabbed onto his shoulder. His muscles were rock solid from holding her off balance. She looked up into his fearsome, magnificent face.

His eyes literally glowed, the irises throwing off light that cast her breasts

in shadows. The promise of raw, pounding sex and his ferocious hunger for her were obvious in the grinding of his jaw. The heat coming off his tremendous body. The tension in his legs and chest.

But he was utterly in control of himself. And her.

“You know, I’ve been too greedy with you,” he said, bringing his head down to her collarbone. He bit her lightly, not breaking her skin. Then his tongue licked over the spot, stroking, satin smooth. He moved lower, to her breastbone. “I really haven’t taken you properly yet.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she said roughly.

He laughed with a deep rumble, his breath warm and moist over her skin. He kissed up the top of her breast, and then he took her nipple into his mouth, through the lace. She arched again, feeling like a dam had broken between her legs.

His head lifted, a smile of anticipation pulling at his mouth.

He gently slid the bra strap down and peeled the lace away. Her nipple puckered even more for him, and she watched as his dark head went down to her pale skin. His tongue, glossy and pink, came out of his mouth and licked her.

As her thighs parted without any demand from him, he laughed again, a thick, male sound of satisfaction.

His hand slipped in between the folds of her dress, brushing against her hip, moving slowly over to her lower belly. He found the edge of her panties and slid his forefinger underneath the lace. Just a little.

He moved that fingertip back and forth, a sensuous tickle inches from where she wanted it to be. Needed it to be.

“More,” she demanded. “I want more.”

“And you’ll get it.” His whole hand disappeared under the black lace. She cried out as he came into contact with her hot, wet core. “But Beth?”

She was barely conscious. Completely consumed by his touch. “Umm?”

“Do you want to know what you taste like?” he said against her breast.

One long finger dipped into her body. As if he wanted her to know he wasn’t talking about her mouth.

She gripped his back through his silk shirt, scoring him with her nails.

“Peaches,” he said, shifting her body, moving downward with his mouth, kissing the skin of her stomach. “Like eating peaches. Silky flesh on my lips and tongue as I suck. Smooth and sweet down the back of my throat when I swallow.”

She moaned, close to orgasm and far, far away from sanity.

With a quick motion, he scooped her up and carried her over to the bed. As he laid her down, he parted her legs with his head and put his mouth over the black lace between her thighs.

She gasped and pushed her hands into his hair, only to get tangled up. He yanked away the leather tie. Black waves fell down across her belly, like the flutter of a hawk's wings.

"Just like peaches," he said, stripping off her panties. "And I love peaches."

That eerie, beautiful illumination from his eyes washed over her body. And then he lowered his head again.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Havers went down into his lab and paced around, loafers slapping against the white linoleum tile. After two trips around the room, he came to rest in front of his workstation. He stroked the graceful enameled neck of his microscope. Looked up at the fleets of glass beakers and the battalions of vials on the shelves overhead. He heard the humming of refrigerators, the droning purr of the ventilation unit in the ceiling. Caught the lingering, medicinal specter of Lysol disinfectant.

The scientific environment reminded him of his intellectual pursuits.

Of the pride he took in the strength of his mind.

He considered himself civilized. Capable of shelving his emotions. Good at responding logically to stimuli. But this hatred, this anger was not something he could sit with. The feeling was too violent, too energizing.

Plans spun in his head, plans involving bloodshed.

Except who was he kidding? If he raised so much as a Swiss army knife at Wrath, he was the one who'd be left bleeding.

He needed someone who knew how to kill. Someone who could get close to the warrior.

When the solution came to him, it was obvious. He knew just whom to go to and where to find him.

Havers turned to the door, satisfaction bringing a smile to his lips.

But when he caught his reflection in the mirror over the deep-bellied lab sink, he froze. His shifty eyes were too bright, too eager. The nasty grin was one he'd never worn before. The fevered flush on his face was in anticipation of a vile result.

He didn't recognize himself in the mask of vengeance.

He hated the way he looked.

"Oh, God."

How could he even think such things? He was a physician. A healer. He'd devoted himself to saving lives, not taking them.

Marissa had said it was over. She'd broken the covenant. She wasn't going to see Wrath again.

Yet didn't she still deserve to be avenged for the way she'd been treated?

And now was the time to strike. The approach to Wrath was uncluttered by the threat that Marissa might get caught in the crossfire.

Havers felt a shudder go through him, and he assumed it was horror at the magnitude of what he was considering. But then his body lurched, and he had to reach out to steady himself. Vertigo threw the world around him into a blender, and he tumbled over to a chair.

Wrenching free the knot of his bow tie, he struggled to breathe.

The blood, he thought. The transfusion.

It wasn't working.

In despair, he fell from the chair to his knees. Brought to the ground by his failure, he closed his eyes and let himself sink into blackness.

Wrath rolled onto his side and took Beth with him, keeping them joined. With his erection still twitching inside of her, he brushed her hair back. It was damp with her delicate sweat.

Mine.

As he kissed her lips, he noted with satisfaction that she was still breathing hard.

He'd made love to her properly, he thought. Slow and deliberate.

"Will you stay?" he asked.

She laughed huskily. "I'm not sure I can walk right now. So, yeah, I think lying here is a good option."

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "I'll return just before dawn."

As he withdrew from the warm cocoon of her body, she looked up. "Where are you going?"

"I'm meeting with my brothers and then we're going out."

He left the bed and went to the closet, dressing in his leathers, pulling his holster onto his shoulders. He slipped in a dagger on each side and grabbed his jacket.

"Fritz will be here," he said. "If you need anything, pick up the phone and dial star forty. It'll ring upstairs."

She wrapped a sheet around herself and rose from the bed.

“Wrath.” She touched his arm. “Stay.”

He dipped down for a quick kiss. “I’m coming back.”

“Are you going to fight?”

“Yes.”

“But how can you? You’re...” She stopped.

“And I’ve been blind for three hundred years.”

Her breath sucked in. “You’re that old?”

He had to laugh. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’ve got to say you’re holding up just fine.” Her smile faded.

“How long will I live?”

A shot of cold dread hit him, stealing a couple of heartbeats from his chest.

What if she didn’t make it through the transition?

Wrath felt his stomach lurch. He, who was all chummy with the Grim Reaper, suddenly got cracked in the gut with some base mortal fear.

But she was going to make it, right? *Right?*

He realized he was looking at the ceiling, and wondered who the hell he was talking to. The Scribe Virgin?

“Wrath?”

He yanked Beth against him, holding her tight, as if he could physically bar her from her fate if it was a bad one.

“Wrath,” she said into his shoulder. “Wrath, honey, I can’t...I can’t breathe.”

He loosened his hold immediately and looked down into her eyes, trying to force his to focus. The strain pulled the skin of his temples tight.

“Wrath? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“That’s because I don’t know the answer.”

She seemed taken aback, but then arched up onto her tiptoes. She kissed his lips. “Well, however long I’ve got, I wish you would stay with me tonight.”

There was a pounding on the door.

“Yo, Wrath?” Rhage’s voice carried through the steel. “We’re all here.”

Beth stepped back, wrapping her arms around herself. He could sense she was closing up on him again.

He was tempted to lock her in, but he couldn't bear to keep her as a prisoner. And his instincts told him that however much she might wish things were different, she was resigned to her fate, as well as his role in it. She was also safe from the *lessers* at this point, as they would see her only as a human.

"Will you be here when I get back?" he asked, drawing on his jacket.

"I don't know."

"If you leave, I need to know where to find you."

"Why?"

"The change, Beth. The change. Look, it'll be safer if you stay."

"Maybe."

He kept his curse to himself. He wasn't going to beg.

"The other door out in the hall," he said. "It opens into your father's bedroom. I thought you might like to go in there."

Wrath left before he embarrassed himself.

Warriors did not beg. They rarely even asked. They took what they wanted and killed for it if they had to.

But he really hoped she'd be there when he got back. He liked the thought of her sleeping in his bed.

Beth went into the bathroom and took a shower, letting the hot water soothe her nerves. When she got out, she dried off and noticed a black robe hanging on a hook. She put it on.

She sniffed the lapels and closed her eyes. Wrath's smell was all over it, a combination of soap and aftershave and...

Male vampire.

Good lord. Was she actually living this?

She walked out into the chamber. Wrath had left the closet open, and she went over to look at his clothes. What she found was a cache of weapons that petrified her.

She eyed the door that led out into the stairwell. She thought about leaving, but as much as she wanted to go, she knew Wrath was right. Staying was safer.

And her father's bedroom was an enticement.

She would go there and hope that whatever she found didn't give her palpitations. God knew, her lover was providing one shock after another.

As she stepped out onto the bottom landing, she pulled the lapels of the robe closer together. The gas lanterns flickered, making the walls seem alive as she stared at the door across the way. Before she lost her nerve, she walked over, grabbed its handle, and pushed.

Darkness greeted her on the other side, a wall of black that suggested either a bottomless pit or an infinite space. She reached past the jamb and patted the wall, hoping she'd hit a light switch and not something that would bite her.

No luck on the switch. But a minute later her hand was still attached to her arm.

Stepping into the void, she moved slowly to the left until her body hit something big. Given the clapping of brass pulls, and the smell of lemon wax, she figured the thing was probably a highboy. She kept going, feeling her way around until she found a lamp.

It came on with a clicking sound, and she blinked at the glow. The lamp's base was a fine Oriental vase, and the table under it was made of mahogany, and very ornate. No doubt the room was done in the same fabulous style as the upstairs.

When her eyes adjusted, she looked around.

"Oh...my...God."

There were pictures of her everywhere. Black-and-whites, close-ups, colored ones. She was all ages, from infancy through childhood and into her teens. In college. One was very recent, having been taken while she was leaving the *Caldwell Courier Journal's* office. She remembered that day. It had been the first snowfall of the winter, and she'd been laughing as she'd looked up at the sky.

Eight months ago.

The idea that she had missed knowing her father by a margin of seasons struck her as tragic.

When had he died? How had he lived?

One thing was clear: He had great taste. Great style. And he obviously liked the finer things. Her father's vast private space was resplendent. The walls were a deep red that set off another spectacular collection of Hudson River School landscapes set in gilt frames. The floor was covered with blue, red, and gold Oriental rugs that glowed like stained glass. But the bed was the most magnificent thing in the room. It was a massive, hand-carved antique with dark red velvet drapes hanging from a canopy. On the bedside table to

the left, there was a lamp and yet another picture of her. On the right, there was a clock, a book, and a glass.

He'd slept on that side.

She went over and picked up the hardcover. It was in French. Underneath the book there was a magazine. *Forbes*.

She put them back and then looked at the glass. There was still an inch of water in it.

Either someone was sleeping here...or her father had died very recently.

She looked around, searching for clothes or a suitcase that would suggest a guest. The mahogany desk across the room caught her eye. She went over and sat in its thronelike chair, getting swamped by carved arms. Next to the leather blotter there was a small stack of papers. They were bills for the house. Electric. Phone. Cable. All in Fritz's name.

So...normal. She had the same things on her desk.

Beth eyed the glass on the bedside table.

His life had been abruptly interrupted, she thought.

Feeling like an interloper, but unable to resist, she pulled open the shallow drawer under the desktop. Montblanc pens, binder clips, a stapler. She slid it back into place, then reached down and looked into a larger drawer. It was full of files. She picked one out. They were financial records—

Holy shit. Her father was loaded. Really loaded.

She glanced at another page. As in millions and millions and millions loaded.

She put the file back and shut the drawer.

Certainly explained the house. The art. The car. The butler.

Next to a phone there was a picture of her in a silver frame. She picked it up, trying to imagine him looking at it.

Where was a photo of him? she wondered.

Could you even take a photograph of a vampire?

She went around the room again, looking in each of the frames. Just her. Just her. Just...

Beth bent down.

And with a shaky hand reached out for a gold frame.

Inside was a black-and-white picture of a dark-haired woman looking shyly into the camera. Her hand was on her face, as if she were embarrassed.

Those eyes, Beth thought with wonder. She'd been staring at an identical pair in the mirror every day of her life.

Her mother.

She brushed her forefinger down the glass.

Sitting blindly on the bed, she brought the picture as close as her eyes would bear without her vision blurring. As if proximity to the image would close the distance of time and circumstance, bringing her to the lovely woman in the frame.

Her mother.

Chapter Twenty-eight

This was more like it, Mr. X thought as he humped an unconscious civilian vampire up onto his shoulder. He carried the male quickly through the alley, opened the back of the minivan, and laid his prey down like a sack of potatoes. He was careful to tuck a black wool blanket over his cargo.

He knew his procurement system would work, and upgrading the strength of the tranquilizer from Demosedan to Acepromazine had made the difference. His instinct of using horse tranqs instead of sedatives calibrated for humans had been correct. The vampire had still required two darts of the Acepro before he went down.

Mr. X looked over his shoulder before getting behind the wheel. The prostitute he'd killed was lying across a storm drain, her heroin-saturated blood seeping into the sewage system. The dear girl had even helped him with the needle. Of course, she hadn't been expecting 100 percent pure H.

Or having enough of it pumped into her vein to put a moose into a deep nod.

The police would find her by morning, but he'd been very neat, just like before. Latex gloves. Hat pulled down over his hair. Densely woven nylon clothes that should leave no fibers.

And God knew, she hadn't struggled at all.

Mr. X calmly started the engine and eased out onto Trade Street.

A fine shine of anticipatory sweat broke out above his upper lip. The arousal, all the adrenaline pumping through him, made him miss the days when he could still have sex. Even if the vampire had no information to give, the rest of the evening was going to be enjoyable

He'd start with the hammer, he thought.

No, the dental drill would be better. Under the fingernails.

That should wake the male right up. After all, there was no sense

torturing the unconscious. Like kicking a corpse, that would just be an aerobic workout, and even then, only a mild one. He should know.

Considering what he'd done to his father's body when he'd found it.

From the back he heard a flopping sound. He glanced over his shoulder. The vampire was moving under the blanket.

Good. He was alive.

Mr. X looked back out to the road and frowned. Leaning forward in his seat, he gripped the wheel.

Up ahead, there was the flare of brake lights.

Cars were stopped in a line. A bunch of orange cones were set out. And blue and white flashes announced a police presence.

An accident?

No. A roadblock. Two cops with flashlights looking into cars. A sign that read, INTOXICATION CHECKPOINT.

Mr. X hit his brakes. He reached into his black bag, took out the dart gun, and fired another two into the vampire to keep the noise down. With the windows darkened and the black blanket as cover, they had a shot at making it through. As long as the male didn't move.

When it was Mr. X's turn, he put the window down as the cop approached. The man's flashlight hit the dashboard, casting a glow.

"Evening, Officer." Mr. X assumed a pleasant expression.

"You been drinking tonight, sir?" The cop was your basic middle-aged nobody. Doughy around the middle. Fuzzy mustache that needed a better trim job. Gray hair poofing out from under his hat like a weed. He had all the aspects of a sheep-dog except for the flea collar and the tail.

"No, Officer, I have not."

"Hey, I know you."

"Do you?" Mr. X smiled more broadly while eyeing the man's throat. Frustration made him think of the knife he had in the car door. He reached down and ran his finger over the handle, soothing himself.

"Yeah, you teach jujitsu to my son." When the cop leaned back, his flashlight swung to the side, hitting the black bag in the passenger seat.
"Darryl, come meet Phillie's sensei."

While the other cop ambled over, Mr. X checked to make sure the bag was zipped up. No sense flashing the dart gun or the nine-millimeter Glock he had inside of it.

For a good five minutes, he made nice-nice with the boys in blue while

fantasizing about the ways he could shut them up.

When he finally put the minivan in gear, he discovered the knife was in his hand and almost in his lap.

He had some serious aggression to work off.

Wrath stared hard at the blurry contours of the single-story commercial building. For the past two hours, he and Rhage had been watching the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy, waiting to see if it got any nocturnal action. The facility was located at the far end of a strip mall, on the edge of a stretch of woods. Rhage, who had cased the place the night before, estimated it was about twenty thousand square feet in size.

Plenty big enough to be a center for the *lessers*.

The parking lot ran down the front of the academy, and there were about ten to fifteen spaces on one side. There were two entrances. Double glass doors in front. Side ingress with no window. From their vantage point in the woods, they could see both the empty lot and the ways in and out of the building.

The other sites had been dead ends. The Gold's Gym hadn't yielded anything other than a revolving membership of steak-heads. It closed at midnight, opened at five A.M., and had been quiet for the past couple of nights. The paintball arena was the same, just an empty building from the moment it closed its doors. The best bets were the two academies, and Vishous and the twins were across town at the other one.

Although *lessers* could go out in the day, they did their hunting at night because that was when their targets moved around. As dawn got close, the society's recruitment and training centers were often used as places to congregate, but not always. Also, because the *lessers* shifted locales frequently, one spot could be hot for a month or a season or a year and then be deserted.

As Darius had been dead for only a few days, Wrath was hoping the society hadn't moved on yet.

He felt for his watch. "Damn it, it's almost three."

Rhage shifted against the tree he was behind. "So I guess Tohr isn't showing up tonight."

Wrath shrugged, hoping like hell the subject would get dropped.

It didn't.

“That’s not like him.” Rhage paused. “But you’re not surprised.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Why?”

Wrath cracked his knuckles. “I took a piece out of him. When I shouldn’t have.”

“I’m not gonna ask.”

“Wise of you.” And then for some absurd reason, he tacked on, “I need to apologize to him.”

“That’ll be a surprise.”

“Am I that awful?”

“No,” Rhage said without his usual bravado. “You’re just not wrong that often.”

Candor was a surprise coming from Hollywood.

“Well, I sure as hell did a number on Tohr.”

Rhage clapped him on the back. “Lemme tell you, as someone who offends folks regularly, there ain’t much that can’t be fixed.”

“I brought Wellsie into it.”

“Not a good idea.”

“And how he feels about her.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“Why?”

“Because I...”

Because he’d felt like an idiot trying to pull off even a sliver of what Tohrment had managed to do so successfully for two centuries. In spite of Tohr’s calling as a warrior, he’d sustained a relationship with a female of worth. And it was a good, strong, loving union. He was the only one of the brothers who’d been able to do that.

Wrath thought about Beth. Pictured her coming up to him, asking him to stay.

Man, he was desperate to find her in his bed when he got home. And not because he wanted to take her. It was because then he could sleep beside her. Rest a little, knowing that she was safe and with him.

Ah, hell. He had a terrible feeling he was going to have to stick around that female. For a while.

“Because?” Rhage prompted.

Wrath’s nose tingled. A faint whiff of sweetness, like baby powder,

floated by on the breeze.

“Get out your welcome mat,” he said, opening his jacket.

“How many?” Rhage asked, pivoting around.

The sounds of sticks snapping and leaves rustling softly broke the night. Got louder.

“Three. At least.”

“Yee-haw.”

The *lessers* were coming straight at them, through a clearing in the woods. They were loud, talking and walking without care, until one of them stopped. The other two pulled up, shut up.

“Evening, boys,” Rhage said, sauntering out into the open.

Wrath took the stealth approach. As the *lessers* circled his brother, crouching, drawing knives, Wrath skirted around the edge of the trees.

Then he reached out of the shadows and plucked one of the *lessers* off the ground, starting the fight. He slit its throat, but there was no time to polish off the kill. Rhage had engaged two, but the third was about to nail the brother in the head with a baseball bat.

Wrath fell upon the undead Sammy Sousa, taking it down to the ground and stabbing it in the throat. Juicy, strangled noises bubbled up into the air. Wrath looked around, in case there were more or his brother needed help.

Rhage was doing just fine.

Even to Wrath’s poor eyesight, the warrior was a thing of beauty when he fought. All fists and kicks. Rapid motion. Animal reflexes. Power and endurance. He was a master of hand-to-hand combat, and the *lessers* hit the ground again and again, the length of time it took them to get up growing longer and longer.

Wrath went back to the first *lesser* and knelt over the body. It writhed as he went through its pockets and took all the ID he could find.

He was about to stab it in the chest when he heard a shotgun go off.

Chapter Twenty-nine

“So Butch, you gonna hang around until I get off tonight?” Abby smiled as she poured him another Scotch.

“Maybe.” He didn’t want to, but after a couple more he might change his mind. Assuming he could still get it up while he was drunk.

With a shift to the left, she looked behind him at another guy, shooting the man a little wink while flashing some cleavage.

Covering her bases. Probably a good idea.

Butch’s cell phone vibrated on his belt, and he grabbed it. “Yeah?”

“We’ve got another dead prostitute,” José said. “Thought you’d want to know.”

“Where?” He leaped off the bar stool like he had somewhere to go. Then sat back down, slowly.

“Trade and Fifth. But don’t come over. Where are you?”

“McGrider’s.”

“Ten minutes?”

“I’ll be here.”

Butch pushed the Scotch away as frustration tore through him.

Was this how he was going to end up? Getting drunk every night? Maybe working a PI or a security job until he got fired for being a derelict? Living alone in that two-room apartment until his liver kicked it?

He’d never been one for plans, but maybe it was time he made some.

“You didn’t like that one?” Abby said, framing the shot glass with her breasts.

Reflexively, he reached for the damn thing, brought it to his lips, and tossed it back.

“That’s my man.”

But when she went to pour him another, he covered the top with his hand.

“I think I’m done tonight.”

“Yeah, right.” She smiled when he shook his head. “Well, you know where to find me.”

Yeah, unfortunately.

José took longer than ten minutes. It was a good half hour before Butch saw the detective cutting through the crowd of drinkers, a grim figure in his casual clothes.

“Do we know her?” Butch asked before the man could sit down.

“Another one of Big Daddy’s. Carla Rizzoli. A.k.a. Candy.”

“Same MO?”

José ordered a vodka straight up. “Yup. Throat slit, blood everywhere. There was some residue on her lips like she’d been foaming at the mouth.”

“H?”

“Probably. The medical examiner’s going to do the autopsy first thing tomorrow.”

“Anything found at the scene?”

“A dart. Like you’d shoot an animal with. We’re having it analyzed.” José polished off the vodka with a quick tilt of his head. “And I heard Big Daddy’s pissed. He’s looking for revenge.”

“Yeah, well, hopefully he’ll take it out on Beth’s boyfriend. Maybe a war will drive that bastard out of hiding.” Butch set his elbows onto the bar. Rubbed his achy eyes. “Goddamn it, I can’t believe she’s protecting him.”

“Man, I never saw that one coming. She finally picks someone—”

“And he’s a total lowlife.”

José looked over. “We’re going to have to call her in.”

“I figured.” Butch focused his eyes by squinting. “Listen, I’m supposed to meet her tomorrow. Give me a crack at her first, will ya?”

“I can’t do that, O’Neal. You’re not—”

“Yeah, you can. You just schedule her for the day after.”

“The investigation is moving forward—”

“Please.” Butch couldn’t believe he was begging. “Come on, José. I’ve got a better shot than anyone at getting through to her.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because she watched him almost kill me.”

José looked down at the grotty bar top. “You’ve got one day. And nobody’d better find out, because the captain will have my head. Then no matter what, I gotta interrogate her at the station.”

Butch nodded while Abby came dancing back over with a Scotch bottle in one hand and a liter of vodka in the other.

“You’re looking dry, boys,” she said with a giggle. The message in her lusty smile and her vacant eyes was getting louder, more desperate, as the night crawled to an end.

Butch thought of his empty wallet. His empty holster. His empty apartment.

“I gotta get out of her,” he muttered, sliding off the stool. “I mean, here.”

Wrath’s arm absorbed the shotgun’s load, and the impact twisted his torso like rope. He went with the force of the hit, spinning to the ground, but he didn’t stay down. Moving fast and low, he got the hell out of the way, not giving the shooter a chance to nail him again.

The fifth *lesser* had come out of nowhere. And it was packing a heavy load in that sawed-off.

Behind a pine tree, Wrath quickly took stock of the injury. Nothing too deep. Some skin and muscle stripped off his biceps. Bone was intact. He could still fight.

He took out a throwing star and stepped into the open.

And that was when a tremendous flash of light illuminated the clearing.

He leaped back into the shadows. “Aw, *Christ!*”

Now they were all in for it. The beast was coming out of Rhage. And the shit was going to hit the fan.

Rhage’s eyes glowed white as headlights as his body mutated in a ghastly display of tearing and ruptures. Something horrible took his place, its scales glistening in the moonlight, its claws slicing through the air. The *lessers* didn’t know what hit them as the creature attacked with a full set of fangs, going after them until their blood ran down its huge chest in a river.

Wrath stayed back. He’d seen this before, and the beast didn’t need help. Hell, if you got too close, you were liable to get a body trim.

When it was all over, the creature let out a howl so loud, the trees bowed away, their branches blown asunder.

The slaughter was absolute. There was no hope of getting any identification off the *lessers* because there were no bodies. Even their clothes had been consumed.

Wrath stepped into the clearing.

The creature swung around, panting.

Wrath kept his voice low and his hands at his sides. Rhage was in there somewhere, but until he came out again, you couldn't assume the beast would remember who the brothers were.

"We're cool," Wrath said. "You and me, we've done this before."

The beast's chest pumped up and down, nostrils quivering as it sniffed the air. Glowing eyes fixated on the blood running down Wrath's arm. A snort came out. The claws lifted.

"Forget it. You did your thing. You're fed. Now, let's have Rhage back."

The great head shook back and forth, but its scales started to vibrate. A high-pitched protest breached the creature's throat, and then there was another flash.

Rhage fell naked to the ground, landing face-first in the dirt.

Wrath ran over and dropped to his knees, reaching out. The warrior's skin was slick with sweat, and he was shaking like a newborn in the cold.

Rhage shifted at the touch. Tried to lift his head. Failed.

Wrath took the brother's hand and squeezed it. The burn on reentry was always a bitch.

"Relax, Hollywood, you're good. You're doing good." He took off his jacket and gently covered his brother. "You're just going to hang here and let me take care of you, dig?"

Rhage mumbled something and curled into a ball.

Wrath flipped open his cell phone and dialed. "Vishous? We need a car. Now. You're kidding me. No, I gotta move our boy. We just had a visit from his other side. But you tell Zsadist not to fuck around."

He hung up and looked at Rhage.

"Hate this," the brother said.

"I know." Wrath moved the sticky, blood-soaked hair out of the vampire's face. "We're going to get you home."

"Didn't like seeing you shot."

Wrath smiled softly. "Clearly."

Beth stirred, burrowing deeper into the pillow.

Something wasn't right.

She opened her eyes just as a deep male voice broke the silence. "What the fuck do we have here?"

She bolted upright. Looked frantically to the sound.

The man towering over her had black, lifeless eyes. A harsh face with a jagged scar running down it. Hair that was practically shaved it was so short. And long, white fangs that were bared.

She screamed.

He smiled. "My favorite sound in all the world."

She clamped a hand over her mouth.

God, that scar. It ran down his forehead, over his nose, across his cheek, and back around to his mouth. The tail end of the *S* distorted his upper lip, pulling one side into a permanent sneer.

"Admiring my artwork?" he drawled. "You should see the rest of me."

Her eyes darted to his broad chest. He was wearing a skintight, long-sleeved black shirt. On both his pecs, small rings were evident beneath the material, as if he had his nipples pierced. As she looked back up at his face, she saw he had a black band tattooed around his neck and a plug in his left earlobe.

"Pretty, aren't I?" His cold stare was the stuff of nightmares, of dark places where no hope could be found, of hell itself.

Forget the scar, she thought. Those eyes were the scariest thing about him.

And they were fixated on her as if he were sizing her up for a shroud. Or for some sex.

She moved her body away from him. Started looking around for something she could use as a weapon.

"What, you don't like me?"

Beth eyed the door, and he laughed.

"Think you can run fast enough?" he said, pulling the bottom of his shirt free from the leather pants he had on. His hands moved to his fly. "I'm damn sure you can't."

"Get away from her, Zsadist."

Wrath's voice was a sweet relief. Until she saw that he had no shirt on and his arm was in a sling.

He barely looked at her. "Time to go, Z."

Zsadist smiled coldly. "Not willing to share the female?"

"You only like it if you pay for it."

"So I'll flip her a twenty. Assuming she lives through the sex."

Wrath kept coming at the other vampire, until they stood nose-to-nose.

The air crackled around them, supercharged by their aggression.

“You’re not touching her, Z. You’re not looking at her. You’re going to say good-night and walk the fuck out of here.” Wrath removed the sling, exposing a bandage on his biceps. There was a red blush in the center as if he were bleeding, but he looked ready to take on the other man.

“Bet you’re pissed you needed a ride home tonight,” Zsadist said. “And that I was the closest one with a car.”

“Don’t make me regret it more.”

Zsadist took a step to the left, and Wrath went with him, using his body to shield her.

Zsadist chuckled, a deep, evil rumble. “You’re actually willing to fight for a human?”

“She’s Darius’s daughter.”

Zsadist’s head snapped to the side, those black pits of his probing her features. After a moment, there was a subtle softening in his brutal face, a drop in the sneer. And then he made a point to tuck in his shirt while looking her in the eye. As if he were apologizing.

Wrath did not step off, however.

“What’s your name?” Zsadist asked her.

“Her name’s Beth.” Wrath put his head into the path of Zsadist’s vision. “And you’re leaving.”

There was a long pause.

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever.”

Zsadist strode over to the door, moving with the same lethal prowl Wrath did. Before he left, he stopped and looked back.

He must have been truly handsome once, Beth thought. Although it wasn’t the scar that made him unattractive. It was the hellfire inside of him.

“Nice to meet you. Beth.”

She let her breath out as the door closed and the locks flipped into place.

“Are you okay?” Wrath asked. She could feel his eyes running over her body, and then he gently put his hands on her. “He didn’t...he didn’t touch you, did he? I heard you scream.”

“No. No, he just scared me. I woke up and he was in the room.”

Wrath sat down on the bed, still passing his palms over her as if he didn’t believe she was okay. When he seemed satisfied, he pushed his hair back. His hands were shaking.

“You’re hurt,” she said. “What happened?”

He put his good arm around her and pulled her against his chest. “It’s nothing.”

“Then why do you need a sling? And a bandage? And why are you still bleeding?”

“Shhh.” He put his chin on the top of her head. She could feel his body trembling.

“Are you ill?” she asked.

“I just have to hold you for a minute. Okay?”

“Absolutely.”

As soon as his body calmed, she pulled away. “What’s the matter?”

He took her face in his hands. Pressed his lips to hers. “I couldn’t bear it if he’d...taken you away from me.”

“That guy? Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere with him.” And then she realized Wrath wasn’t talking about a date. “You think he was going to kill me?”

Not that she couldn’t see how that might have been possible. So cold. Those eyes had been so cold.

Instead of answering, Wrath’s mouth came down on hers. She stopped him.

“Who is he? And what happened to him?”

“I don’t want you near Z again. Ever.” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. His touch was tender. His voice was not. “Are you listening to me?”

She nodded. “But what—”

“He walks into a room and I’m in the house, you come and find me. If I’m not around, you lock yourself in one of these rooms down here. The walls are made of steel, so he can’t materialize inside. And don’t ever touch him. Not even inadvertently.”

“Is he a warrior?”

“Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Yeah, but it would help if I knew a little more.”

“He’s one of the brothers, but he’s nearly soulless. Unfortunately, we need him.”

“Why, if he’s so dangerous? Or is it only toward women?”

“He hates everyone. Except maybe his twin.”

“Oh, great. There are two like him?”

“Thank God for Phury. He’s the only one who can get through to Z, although even then, it’s not a sure thing.” Wrath kissed her forehead. “I don’t

want to scare you, but I need you to take this seriously. Zsadist's an animal, but I think he respected your father, so he may leave you alone. I just can't take any chances with him. Or you. Promise me that you'll stay away from him."

"Okay." She closed her eyes and leaned into Wrath. His arm came around her, but then he shifted back.

"Come on." He pulled her up to her feet. "Come to my chamber."

When they walked into Wrath's room, Beth heard the shower shut off. A moment later, the door opened.

The warrior she'd met before, the movie-star-handsome one who'd been stitching himself up, came out slowly. He had a towel wrapped around his waist, and his hair was dripping. He moved as if he were eighty, as if every muscle in his body hurt.

Good lord, she thought. He didn't look at all well, and there was something way wrong with his stomach. It was swollen, like he'd swallowed a basketball. Unsure what to make of his midsection, she wondered whether his wound was infected. He looked feverish.

She glanced at his shoulder and frowned when she could barely see a mark. It was as if the injury had occurred months ago.

"Rhage, man, how we feeling?" Wrath asked, leaving her side.

"Belly hurts."

"Yeah. I can imagine."

Rhage swayed as he looked around the room, eyes barely open. "Going home. Where my clothes?"

"You lost them." Wrath put his good arm around his brother's waist. "And you're not leaving, you're crashing in D's room."

"Am not."

"Don't start. And we're not waltzing here. Will you lean on me, for Christ's sake?"

The other man sagged, and Wrath's back muscles tightened as he absorbed the weight. The two of them slowly made their way out to the landing and then into her father's chamber. She stayed at a discreet distance, watching as Wrath helped Rhage slide into bed.

As the warrior leaned back against the pillows, his eyes squeezed shut. His hand moved to his stomach, but he winced and let it fall to the side, as if the slightest pressure were torture.

"Feel sick."

“Yeah, indigestion’s a bitch.”

“Do you want some Tums?” Beth blurted out. “Alka-Seltzer?”

Both vampires looked over at her, and she felt as if she’d intruded on the moment.

Of all the stupid things—

“Yeah,” Rhage muttered as Wrath nodded.

Beth walked back to her purse and decided on Alka-Seltzer because it had aspirin in it for his aches. She went into Wrath’s bathroom, grabbed a glass, and did the plop-plop, fizz-fizz thing.

When she returned to her father’s bedside, she offered the glass to Wrath. He shook his head.

“You’ll spill less than I will.”

She flushed. It was so easy to forget he couldn’t really see.

She leaned over Rhage, but couldn’t reach his mouth. Hiking up the robe, she climbed onto the mattress and knelt next to him. She felt awkward being so close to a naked, virile man in front of Wrath.

Considering what had happened to Butch.

But come on, Wrath had nothing to worry about here. No matter how sexy the other vampire was, she didn’t feel any heat as she sidled up to the guy.

And he sure as hell wasn’t about to come on to her. Not given the kind of shape he was in.

She gently lifted Rhage’s head and put the edge of the glass to his beautifully shaped lips. It took him five minutes to sip the liquid down. When he was finished, she started to get off the bed. She didn’t get far. With a great lurch, he pitched over onto his side and put his head in her lap, throwing one muscular arm around behind her.

He was seeking comfort.

Beth didn’t know what she could really do for him, but she put the glass aside and stroked his back, running her hand over his fearsome tattoo. She murmured things she wished someone had whispered to her when she felt ill. Hummed a little for him.

After a while, the tension left his skin and bones. He began breathing deeply.

When she was sure he was out cold, she carefully extracted herself from his grasp. As she turned to meet Wrath’s gaze, she braced herself. Surely he’d know there was nothing—

Shock stilled her.
Wrath wasn't mad. Far from it.
“Thank you,” he said hoarsely. The bow of his head was almost humble.
“Thank you for caring for my brother.”
He took his sunglasses off.
And looked at her with total adoration.

Chapter Thirty

Mr. X tossed the Sawzall on to his workbench and wiped his hands on a towel.

Well, hell, he thought. The damn vampire was dead.

He'd tried everything to wake the male up, even the chisel, and he'd made a mess out of his barn in the process. There was vampire blood all over the place.

At least cleanup was easy.

Mr. X walked over to the double doors and threw them open. Straight ahead, the sun was coming up over the far ridge, lovely gold light spilling across the landscape. He stood back as the interior of the barn was illuminated.

The vampire's body exploded into flames, the pool of blood underneath the table going up in a cloud of smoke. A soft morning breeze carried the stench of incinerated flesh away.

Mr. X stepped into the morning glow, looking at the mist that hung over the back meadow. He wasn't prepared to declare failure. The plan would have worked if he hadn't come up to those cops and had to plow the extra darts into his captive. He just needed to get back out there again.

His jones for torture had a serious case of the blue balls.

For the time being, though, he had to cool it with the prostitutes. Those fool cops were a good reminder that he wasn't working in a vacuum. That he could be caught.

Not that getting tangled up with the law would be anything other than an inconvenience. But he prided himself on the smoothness of his operations.

Which was why he'd chosen the whores as bait. First, he figured if one or two turned up dead, it wouldn't cause an uproar. They were less likely to have family mourning them, so there wouldn't be added pressure on the

police to nail a suspect. As for the inevitable investigation, there was a ready pool of suspects, thanks to the pimps and lowlifes who worked the back alleys. There were plenty for the police to chose from and chase after.

But that didn't mean he could get sloppy. Or overuse Whore Valley.

He went back in the barn, put his tools away, and headed for the house. He checked his messages before going to shower.

There were several.

The most important of which was from Billy Riddle. Evidently, the guy had had a disturbing interaction the night before and had called just after one A.M.

It was good that he was seeking comfort, Mr. X thought. And probably time that they had a conversation about his future.

An hour later, Mr. X drove to the academy, opened its doors, and left them unlocked.

The *lessers* he'd ordered to report in started to arrive shortly thereafter. He could hear them talking in the hall next to his office, their voices low. The moment he came up to them, they quieted down, looking at him. Dressed in black fatigues, their faces grim, there was only one whose coloring had yet to fade. Mr. O's brunette brush cut stood out, as did his dark brown eyes.

The longer a *lesser* stayed in the society, the more he lost his individual physical characteristics. The browns, the blacks, the reds of the hair turned to a pale ash; the tints of yellow or crimson or tan in the skin blanched out to a blushless white. The process typically took about a decade, although he had yet to see any strands of blond appear around O's face.

He did a quick head count. As all of the members of his two prime squadrons were there, he locked the academy's outside door and escorted the group into the basement. Their boots were loud and sharp on the metal stairwell, a drumroll of the power in their bodies.

Mr. X had set up the war room as nothing special, nothing unusual. Just a regular old classroom with twelve chairs, a chalkboard, a TV, and a podium in front.

The unremarkable decor wasn't just subterfuge. He didn't want any high-tech distractions. Group dynamics were the purpose and focus of these meetings.

"So tell me about last night," he said, eyeing the slayers. "How did it go?"

He listened to the reports, unimpressed with the excuses. There had been

two kills the night before. He'd given them a quota of ten.

And it was a disgrace that O, who was so new, had been responsible for both deaths.

Mr. X crossed his arms over his chest. "What's the problem?"

"We couldn't find any," Mr. M said.

"I found one last night," Mr. X snapped. "Quite easily, I might add. And Mr. O found two."

"Well, the rest of us couldn't." M looked at the others. "The numbers in this area have thinned."

"The problem is not geography," a voice muttered from the back.

Mr. X's eyes shifted through the *lessers*, focusing on O's dark head in the back of the room. He was not surprised that the slayer had spoken up.

O was proving to be one of the best they had, even though he was a new recruit. With terrific reflexes and stamina, he was a great fighter, but like all powerful things, he was hard to control. Which was why Mr. X had put him in with others who had centuries of experience. O was liable to dominate any group made up of individuals even remotely inferior to himself.

"Would you care to elaborate, Mr. O?" Mr. X was not at all interested in the man's opinion. But he was very prepared to show up the new recruit in front of the others.

O shrugged carelessly, and his drawl was just short of insulting. "The problem is motivation. There are no consequences for failure."

"And what exactly would you suggest?" Mr. X asked.

O reached forward, grabbed M by the hair, and slit the other man's throat with a knife.

The other *lessers* leaped away, crouching into attack positions, even as O sat back down and calmly wiped his blade off with his fingers.

Mr. X bared his teeth. And then got himself under control.

He walked across the room to M. The *lesser* was still alive, gasping for breath, trying to stem the blood loss with his hands.

Mr. X knelt down. "The rest of you will leave. Now. We will reconvene tomorrow morning, when you will have better news for me. Mr. O, you stay."

When O defied the order and made a move to get up, Mr. X froze the man in the chair, stealing control of the large muscles in his body. O seemed momentarily shocked, clearly trying to fight the hold that was on his arms and legs.

It was a battle he wouldn't win. The Omega always provided a few extra

benefits to the *Fore-lesser*. This kind of mental dominion over fellow slayers was one of them.

As soon as the room had emptied, Mr. X took out a knife and stabbed M in the chest. There was flare of light and then a popping sound as the *lesser* disintegrated.

Mr. X glared up at O from the floor. “If you ever pull something like that again, I will turn you over to the Omega.”

“No, you won’t.” In spite of his being at another’s mercy, O’s arrogance was unchecked. “You wouldn’t want to look as if you can’t control your own men.”

Mr. X stood up.

“Careful, O. You underestimate the Omega’s affection for sacrifices. If I were to give you to him as a gift, he would be most grateful.” Mr. X walked over and ran a finger down O’s cheek. “If I were to tie you down and call him to you, he would enjoy unwrapping you. And I would enjoy watching it.”

O snapped his head back, more angry than frightened. “Don’t touch me.”

“I’m your leader. I can do anything I want with you.” Mr. X clamped a hand on O’s jaw and forced his thumb in between the man’s lips and teeth. He jerked the *lesser*’s face forward. “So mind your manners, don’t ever take another society member out without my express permission, and we’ll get along fine.”

O’s brown eyes burned.

“Now what do you say to me?” Mr. X murmured, reaching out and stroking the man’s hair back. The color was a deep, rich chocolate.

O mumbled.

“I didn’t hear you.” Mr. X pressed his thumb into the soft, fleshy plot under O’s tongue, digging in until tears formed in the other man’s eyes. When he removed his grip, he ran a quick, wet caress over O’s lower lip. “I said, I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes, sensei.”

“Good boy.”

Chapter Thirty-one

Marissa could not get comfortable in her bed. No matter which way she turned or where she put the pillows, she was irritated.

Somehow, her mattress had been filled with rocks, and her sheets had turned into sandpaper.

Throwing back the covers, she went over to the bank of windows that were shuttered and covered in thick satin drapery. She wanted some fresh air, but there would be no opening them. It was morning.

As she settled onto her chaise longue, she covered her bare feet with the hem of her silk nightgown.

Wrath.

She couldn't stop thinking about him. And every time another image of them together came to mind, she wanted to curse. Which was shocking.

She was the docile one. The lovely one. All female perfection and gentleness. Anger went totally against her nature.

Except the more she thought of Wrath, the more she wanted to punch something.

Assuming she could make a fist.

She glanced down at her hand. Yup, she could. Though it was pathetically small.

Especially compared to his.

God, she'd endured so much. And he had no appreciation of how difficult her life had been.

Being the untouched spinster *shellan* of the most powerful vampire of them all was hell on earth. Her failures as a female had burned out any sense of self-worth she'd had. The isolation had preyed on her sanity. The embarrassment at living with her brother because she had no home of her own had stung.

And she'd been horrified to be stared at by others and talked about behind her back. She was very aware that she was a constant topic of conversation, envied, pitied, spied upon, the stuff of fable. She knew young females were told of her story, although whether it was as warning or inducement, she didn't want to know.

Wrath was totally unaware of how she'd suffered.

Part of that fault she had to lay at her own feet. Playing the good little female had felt like the right thing to do, the only way to be worthy, the only chance at finally sharing a life with him.

Except how had it turned out?

With him finding a dark-haired human he cared about more.

God, the payoff for all her efforts went beyond not fair and right into cruel.

And she wasn't the only one who'd suffered. Havers had been worried sick about her for centuries.

Wrath, on the other hand, had always been just fine. And he was no doubt doing just fine right now. In all likelihood he was, at this very moment, lying naked with that female. Putting that hard length at his hips to good use.

Marissa closed her eyes.

She thought about being pulled against his body, held in those crushing arms, consumed by him. She'd been too shocked to feel much heat. There'd been so much of him, all over her, his hands tangling in her hair, his mouth sucking hard at her throat. And that thick rod of his had scared her a little.

Which was ironic.

She'd dreamed about what it would be like for so long. To be taken by him. To leave her virginal state behind and know what it was to have a male inside.

Whenever she'd imagined them together, her body had always warmed, her skin had tingled. But the reality had been overwhelming. She'd been totally unprepared, and she wished it had lasted longer and been a little less intense. She had a feeling she would have liked it if he'd gone more slowly.

But then, he hadn't been thinking of her.

Marissa recurled her hand, making that fist again.

She didn't want him back. What she wanted was for him to have a taste of the pain she'd been through.

Wrath put his arms around Beth and drew her close, looking at Rhage over the top of her head. Watching her ease the male's suffering had broken down all sorts of barriers.

Care for his brothers, care for him, he thought. It was the oldest code in the warrior class.

"Come to my bed," he whispered in her ear.

She let him take her hand and lead her to his room. Once inside, he shut and locked the door and extinguished all the candles but one. Then he pulled the sash of the robe she wore free and stripped the satin from her shoulders. Her naked skin gleamed in the light of the single wick that burned.

He took his leather pants off. And then they were lying together.

He didn't want sex from her. Not now. He just wanted to share some comfort. He wanted her warm skin against his, her breath brushing lightly over his chest, her heart beating mere inches from his own. And he wanted to give her the same kind of peace back.

He stroked her long, silky hair and breathed deeply.

"Wrath?" Her voice was lovely in the dim quiet, and he liked the vibration of her throat against his pecs.

"Yeah." He kissed the top of her head.

"Who did you lose?" She shifted, putting her chin on his chest.

"Lose?"

"Who did the *lessers* take from you?"

The question seemed out of the blue. And then it didn't. She'd seen the aftereffects of a fight. Somehow knew that he fought not only for his race, but for himself.

It was a long time before he could answer. "My parents."

He felt her emotions shift from curiosity to sorrow. "I'm sorry."

There was a long silence.

"What happened?"

Now that was an interesting question, he thought. Because there were two versions. In vampire lore, that bloody night had taken on all sorts of heroic implications, being heralded as the birth of a great warrior. The fiction wasn't his doing. His people needed to believe in him, so they created that which sustained their misplaced faith.

He alone knew the truth.

"Wrath?"

His eyes went to the hazy beauty of her face. It was difficult to deny the

gentle tone she used. She wanted to offer him compassion, and for some godforsaken reason, he wanted it from her.

“It was before my transition,” he murmured. “A long time ago.”

His hand paused on her hair, the memories coming back gruesome and vivid.

“We thought as the First Family we were safe from the *lessers*. Our homes were well defended, well hidden in the forests, and we moved all the time.”

He found that if he continued to smooth her hair, he could keep talking.

“It was winter. A cold night in February. One of our servants betrayed our location. The *lessers* came in a pack of fifteen or twenty and slaughtered their way through our estate before breaching our stone battlements. I’ll never forget the sound when they pounded on the door to our private quarters. My father shouted for his weapons while forcing me into a crawl space. He locked me inside just before they broke through the door with a battering ram. He was good with a sword, but there were so many of them.”

Beth’s hands came to his face. He dimly heard soft words falling from her lips.

Wrath closed his eyes, seeing the ghastly images that still had the power to rip him from sleep. “They massacred the servants before killing my parents. I saw it all through a knothole in the wood. As I said, my eyes were better back then.”

“Wrath—”

“While it was happening, they made so much noise, no one heard me screaming.” He shuddered. “And I fought to get free. I pushed against the latch, but it was solid and I was weak. I tore at the wood, scratched at it until my fingernails splintered and bled. I kicked with my feet....” His body responded to the remembered horror of being confined, his breath growing ragged, his skin breaking out in a cold sweat. “After they left, my father tried to drag himself over to me. They had stabbed him in the heart, and he was... He gave out two feet from the crawl space, reaching for me. I kept calling his name over and over again until I lost my voice. I begged for him to live even as I watched the light in his eyes dim and then go out. I was trapped there for hours with their bodies, watching the pools of blood get bigger. Some civilian vampires came the following night and let me out.”

He felt a soothing stroke down his shoulder, and he brought Beth’s hand to his mouth, kissing the skin of her palm.

“Before the *lessers* left, they pulled back all the tapestries from the windows. The moment the sun rose and came into the room, all the bodies burned up. I had nothing to bury.”

He felt something hit his face. A tear. Beth’s.

He reached out and stroked her cheek. “No crying.”

Though he cherished her for her sympathy.

“Why not?”

“It changes nothing. I cried while I watched, and still they all died.” He turned on his side and gathered her close. “If only I could have...I still have dreams about that night. I was such a coward. I should have been out there with my father, fighting.”

“But you would have been killed.”

“As a male should. Protecting his own. That’s honorable. Instead I was sniveling in a crawl space.” He hissed with disgust.

“How old were you?”

“Twenty-two.”

She frowned, as if she’d assumed he’d been much younger. “You said it was before your transition?”

“Yeah.”

“So what were you like then?” She smoothed his hair back. “It’s hard to imagine you fitting in a crawl space, the size you are now.”

“I was different.”

“You said you were weak.”

“I was.”

“So maybe you needed to be protected.”

“No.” His temper flared. “A male protects. Never the other way around.” Abruptly, she backed off.

As the silence stretched between them, he knew she was thinking through his actions. Shame made him remove his hands from her body. He rolled away, onto his back.

He never should have said a thing.

He could just imagine what she thought of him now. After all, how could she not be revolted by his failure? By the reality that he’d been weak when his family had needed him most?

With a shrinking feeling, he wondered if she’d still want him. If she’d still welcome him into her slick heat. Or would that be gone for her? Now that she knew?

He waited for her to put her clothes on and leave.

She stayed in the bed.

But of course she did, he thought. She understood that her transition was coming no matter what, and she needed his blood. It was a matter of necessity.

He heard her sigh in the darkness. As if she were giving up on something up.

He wasn't sure how long they lay together, side by side but not touching. It must have been hours. He fell asleep briefly, only to wake up when Beth shifted against him, her bare leg moving over his.

A jolt of lust went through him, but he beat it back savagely.

Her hand brushed over his chest. Drifted down his stomach and across his hip. He held his breath as he got hard in a rush, his erection achingly close to where she was touching him.

Her body moved nearer to his, her breasts caressing his ribs, her core rubbing on his thigh.

Maybe she was still asleep.

And then she took him into her hand.

Wrath moaned, arching his back.

Her fingers were steady as she stroked him.

He went for her instinctively, craving what she seemed to be offering, but she stopped him. Rising to her knees, she pressed him down to the mattress with her palms on his shoulders.

"This time is for you," she whispered, kissing him softly.

He could barely speak. "You still want...me?"

Confusion spiked her brows. "Why wouldn't I?"

With a pathetic groan of relief and gratitude, Wrath lurched for her again. Except she didn't let him get anywhere near her body. She pushed him back down and gripped his wrists, bringing his arms over his head.

She kissed his neck. "When we were together last, you were very... generous. You deserve the same kind of treatment."

"But your pleasure is mine." His voice was rough. "You can't know how much I like to make you come."

"I'm not so sure about that." He felt her shift, and then her hand brushed against his erection. He bowed off the mattress, a low sound rumbling up through his chest. "I might have some idea."

"You don't have to do this," he said hoarsely, fighting once more to touch

her.

She leaned into his wrists forcefully, holding him still. “Relax. Let me be in control.”

Wrath could only stare up in disbelief and breathless anticipation as she pressed her lips to his.

“I want to do you,” she whispered.

In a silky rush, her tongue entered his mouth. Penetrated him. Slid in and out as if she were fucking him.

His whole body went rigid.

With each one of her thrusts, she got farther inside of him, into his skin and his brain. Into his heart. She was possessing him, taking him. Leaving her mark on him.

When she left his mouth, she moved down his body. She licked his neck. Sucked his nipples. Raked her nails gently across his belly. Tested his hip bones with her teeth.

He gripped the headboard and pulled, making the whole bed frame shift and creak in protest.

Waves of stinging heat made him feel as if he were going to pass out. Sweat bloomed over his skin. His heart hammered so hard it started skipping beats.

Words fell from his lips, a stream of consciousness spoken in the old language, a guttural expression of what she was doing to him, how beautiful she was to him.

The second she took his erection into her mouth, he nearly came. He cried out, body spasming. She pulled back, gave him time to settle.

And then she put him through torture.

She knew just when to bring it on, just when to pause. The combination of her wet mouth at his thick tip and her hands moving up and down his shaft was a one-two punch he could barely withstand. She brought him to the brink over and over again until he was reduced to begging.

Finally, she straddled his hips and hovered above him. He looked down between their bodies. Her thighs were wide open over his swollen, throbbing erection, and he almost lost it.

“Take me,” he moaned. “God, *please*.”

She slid him inside of her, and his whole body felt the sensation. Tight, wet, hot, she enveloped him. She began to move in a slow, pumping rhythm, and he didn’t last long. When he came, he felt like he’d been ripped in two,

the bursts of energy creating a shock wave that went through the room, shaking the furniture, blowing out the candle.

On the slow float back to earth, he realized it was the first time anyone had ever taken such care to pleasure him.

He wanted to weep that she would still have him at all.

Beth smiled in the darkness at the sound Wrath made as his body rocked under hers. The force of his orgasm took her over the edge, and she fell onto his heaving chest as her own delicious waves took her breath away.

Afraid that she was too heavy, she made a move to get off him, but he stopped her, holding on to her hips. He spoke to her in a beautiful tumble of sounds she didn't understand.

"What?"

"Stay just where you are," he said in English.

She settled onto his body, relaxing completely.

She wondered what he'd said to her as she'd made love to him, but the tone of his voice, reverent, praising, told her a lot. Whatever he'd uttered, they'd been a lover's words.

"Your language is beautiful," she said.

"There are no words worthy of you."

His voice sounded different. He felt different to her.

No barriers, she thought. There were no barriers between them right now. That deadly guard, that ever-watchful, predatory defense of his was gone.

Unexpectedly, she felt herself growing protective of him.

It was odd, feeling that way about someone so much more physically powerful than herself. But he needed safeguarding. She could sense the vulnerability in him in this quiet moment, in this dense darkness. His heart was almost in her reach.

God, that horrific story of his family's deaths.

"Wrath?"

"Hmm?"

She wanted to thank him for telling her. But she didn't want to ruin the fragile communion between them.

"Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?" she said.

He chuckled. "Warriors are not beautiful."

"You are. To me. You are utterly beautiful."

He stopped breathing. And then moved her off of him. With a quick motion, he left the bed, and moments later there was a soft light on in the bathroom. She heard water running.

She should have known it wasn't going to last. But she wanted to cry at the loss, anyway.

Beth fumbled around for her clothes, found them, dressed.

When he came out of the bathroom, she was heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Work. I don't know what time it is, but I usually get in around nine, so I'm sure I'm late."

She couldn't see very well, but eventually found the door.

"I don't want you to go." Wrath was right next to her, his voice making her jump.

"I have a life. I need to get back to it."

"Your life is here."

"No, it isn't."

Her hands felt around for the locks, but she couldn't budge them, even when she threw her body into the effort.

"Are you going to let me out of here?" she muttered.

"Beth." He took her hands in his, forcing her to stop. Candles flared to life, as if he wanted her to see him. "I'm sorry I can't be...easier to get along with."

She pulled away. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. I wanted you to know how I felt. That's all."

"And I find it hard to believe that I don't disgust you."

Beth stared at him in disbelief. "Good God, why would I?"

"Because you know what happened."

"With your parents?" Her mouth fell open. "Let me get this straight. You think I'm going to be disgusted because you were forced to endure the slaughter of your mother and father?"

"I did nothing to save them," he bit out.

"You were *locked* in."

"I was a coward."

"You were *not*." Getting pissed at the man probably wasn't fair, but why couldn't he see the past more clearly? "How can you say—"

"I stopped screaming!" His voice ricocheted around the room, startling her.

“What?” she whispered.

“I stopped screaming. After they were finished with my parents and the *doggen*, I stopped screaming. The *lessers* were looking through our quarters. They were searching for *me*. And I stayed quiet. I clamped my hand over my mouth. I prayed they wouldn’t find me.”

“Of course you did,” she said gently. “You wanted to live.”

“No,” he shot back. “I was *afraid* of dying.”

She wanted to reach out to him, except she was certain he would pull away.

“Wrath, can’t you see? You were a victim as much as they were. The only reason you’re here today is because your father loved you enough to keep you safe. You stayed silent because you wanted to survive. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I was a coward.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You’d just seen your parents murdered!” She shook her head, frustration making her tone sharp. “I’m telling you, you need to reexamine what happened. You’ve let those horrible hours mark you, and who could blame you for that, but you’re looking at it all wrong. *All* wrong. Put down this warrior-honor crap and give yourself a break!”

Silence.

Ah, hell. Now, she’d done it. The guy opens up to her and she throws his shame back at him. Way to encourage intimacy.

“Wrath, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

He cut her off. Both his voice and his face were like stone.

“No one has ever spoken to me as you just did.”

Shit.

“I’m really sorry. I just can’t understand why—”

Wrath dragged her into his arms and hugged her hard, talking in that other language again. When he pulled back, he ended the monologue with something like *leelan*.

“Is that vampire talk for *bitch*?” she asked.

“No. Far from it.” He kissed her. “Let’s just say I respect the hell out of you. Even though I can’t agree with your take on my past.”

She put her hand on his neck, giving his head a little shake. “You will, however, accept the fact that what happened doesn’t in any way change my opinion of you. Although I do feel tremendous sorrow for you and for your family and what you all had to endure.”

Long pause.

“Wrath? You will repeat after me. ‘Yes, Beth, I understand and will trust your honesty about your feelings for me.’” She shook his neck again. “Let’s say it together.” Another pause. “Now, not later.”

“Yes,” he gritted out.

God, if those lips of his were any tighter, they’d snap off his front teeth.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Beth.”

“I trust you to be honest with me about how you feel.’ Come on. Say it.”

He grumbled his way through the words.

“Good man.”

“You’re tough, you know that?”

“I’d better be if I’m going to hang around with you.”

Abruptly, he took her face into his hands. “I want that,” he said fiercely.

“What?”

“For you to be around.”

Her breath caught. A tenuous hope took fire in her chest. “Really?”

He closed his glowing eyes and shook his head. “Yeah. It’s fucking stupid. It’s crazy. It’s dangerous.”

“So it’ll fit right into your life script.”

He laughed and looked down at her. “Yeah, pretty much.”

God, his eyes were breaking her heart, they were so tender.

“Beth, I want to stay with you, but you have to understand, you’ll be a target. And I don’t know how to keep you safe enough. I don’t know how the hell to—”

“We’ll figure it out,” she said. “We can do it together.”

He kissed her. Long. Slowly. With precious care.

“So you’ll stay now?” he asked.

“No. I really do need to get to work.”

“I don’t want you to go.” His hand cupped her chin. “I hate that I can’t be with you outside during the day.”

But the locks sprang free and the door opened.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

“You will be back before dusk.” It wasn’t a request, not by a long shot.

“I’ll be back sometime after sunset.”

He growled.

“And I promise to call if anything weird happens.” She rolled her eyes.

Man, she was going to have to recalibrate her standards for that word. “I mean, *weirder*

“I don’t like this.”

“I’ll be careful.” She kissed him and then headed up the stairs. She could still feel his eyes on her as she pushed open the painting and stepped into the drawing room.

Chapter Thirty-two

Beth went to her apartment, fed Boo, and got into the office just after noon. For once, she wasn't famished, and she worked through lunch. Well, sort of. She couldn't really concentrate and mostly engineered a rotation of the paper piles on her desk.

Butch left her two messages during the day, confirming they were going to rendezvous at her apartment around eight.

By four o'clock, she decided to cancel her meeting with him.

Nothing good could come out of it. There was no way she was turning Wrath over to the police, and if she thought Hard-ass was going to go easy on her because he liked her and they were in her home, she was just lying to herself.

Still, she wasn't going to put her head in the sand. She knew she was going to be called in for questioning. How could she not be? As long as Wrath was a suspect, she was on the hot seat. She needed to get herself a good lawyer and wait to be called down to the station.

On her way back from a trip to the copier, she glanced out a window. The late-afternoon sky was cloudy, with the promise of thunderstorms hanging in the creamy, thick air. She had to look away. Her eyes ached, and the discomfort didn't fade as she blinked repeatedly.

Back at her desk, she popped two aspirin and called the station house looking for Butch. When she was told by Ricky that he'd been put on administrative leave, she demanded to talk to José. He got right on the phone.

"Butch's suspension. When did it happen?" she asked.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Are they going to fire him?"

"Off the record? Probably."

So Butch wasn't going to show up at her place after all.

“Where are you, B-lady?” José asked.

“Work.”

“You lying to me?” His voice was more sad than confrontational.

“Check your caller ID.”

José let out a long sigh. “I need to bring you in.”

“I know. Can you give me some time to get a lawyer?”

“You think you’re going to need one?”

“Yeah.”

José cursed. “You gotta get away from that man.”

“I’ll call you later.”

“Another prostitute was killed last night. Same MO.”

The news gave her a moment of pause. She couldn’t have said what Wrath had been doing when he’d been out. But what possible purpose could a dead prostitute have for him?

Make that two dead prostitutes.

Anxiety spiked, making her temples throb.

Except she just couldn’t see Wrath slitting some poor, defenseless woman’s throat and leaving her to die in an alley. He was lethal, not evil. And though he operated outside of the law, she didn’t imagine he’d take the life of someone who hadn’t threatened him. Especially after what had happened to his parents.

“Listen, Beth,” José said. “I don’t need to tell you how serious this situation is. That man is our prime suspect for three murders, and obstruction of justice is a serious charge. It’ll kill me, but I will put you behind bars.”

“He didn’t murder anyone last night.” Her stomach rolled.

“So you admit you know where he is.”

“I gotta go, José.”

“Beth, please don’t protect him. He’s dangerous—”

“He did not kill those women.”

“That’s your opinion.”

“You’ve been a good friend, José.”

“Goddamn it.” He added a couple of words in Spanish. “Get that lawyer fast, Beth.”

She hung up the phone, grabbed her purse, and shut down her computer. The last thing she wanted was for José to come to her office and take her away in handcuffs. She needed to go home, pick up some clothes, and get to Wrath’s as soon as she could.

Maybe they could just disappear together. It might be their only choice. Because sooner or later the police would find them in Caldwell.

As she walked out onto Trade Street, her belly was in knots, and the heat sucked the energy right out of her. The minute she walked into her apartment, she poured some ice-cold water into a glass, but as she tried to drink it, her intestines cramped up. Maybe she had a stomach bug. She popped two Tums and thought of Rhage. She might have picked up something from him.

God, her eyes were killing her.

And even though she knew she needed to start packing, she got out of her work clothes, put on a T-shirt and shorts, and sat down on the futon. She only meant to take a little breather, but once she was off her feet, she couldn't seem to get her body moving again.

Sluggishly, like the channels in her brain were clogging up, she pictured Wrath's injury. He'd never told her how he'd gotten hurt. What if he'd attacked the prostitute and the woman had fought back?

Beth pressed her fingers to her temples as a wave of nausea brought bile into her throat. Lights flickered in front of her eyes.

No, this wasn't the flu. She was coming down with the Godzilla of migraines.

Wrath dialed his phone again.

Tohrment was obviously using caller ID and avoiding his ass.

Hell. He sucked at apologies, but he really wanted to get this one out on the table. Because it was going to be a doozy.

He took the cell phone with him to bed and leaned back against the headboard. He wanted to call Beth. Just to hear her voice.

Yeah, and he'd thought he was just going to waltz away after her transition? He could barely stand being away from her for a couple of *hours*.

Man, he had it bad for that female. He couldn't believe what had come out of his mouth when she'd been making love to him. And then he'd topped off the simpering praise by calling her his *leelan* before she left.

He might as well admit it. He was probably falling in love.

And if that wasn't enough of a shocker, she was half-human. As well as Darius's daughter.

But how could he not adore her? She was so strong, with a will to match his own. He thought of her standing up to him, confronting him about his

past. Few would have dared, and he knew where she got her courage from. Her father probably would have done the same thing.

When his cell phone went off, he flipped it open. “Yeah?”

“We got issues.” It was Vishous. “I just read the paper. Another dead prostitute. In an alley. Bled out.”

“So?”

“I hacked into the coroner’s database. In both cases, the females had had their necks chewed on.”

“Shit. Zsadist.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. I keep telling him he’s got to pull back. You have to talk with him.”

“Tonight. Tell the brothers to come here first. I’m going to set him straight in front of everyone.”

“Good plan. Then the rest of us can peel your hands from his throat when he mouths off.”

“Hey, you know where Tohr is? I can’t reach him.”

“No idea, but I’ll go to his house on the way over to D’s if you want.”

“Do that. He needs to be here tonight.” Wrath hung up.

Damn it. Someone was going to have to put a muzzle on Zsadist.

Or a dagger in his chest.

Butch let the car roll to a stop. He had no real hope Beth was going to be at the apartment, but he went to the lobby door and hit the buzzer anyway. No answer.

Surprise, surprise.

He walked around the side of the apartment building and through the courtyard. It was after dark, so he was not encouraged by her lights being off. He cupped his hands and leaned into the sliding glass door.

“Beth! Oh, God! Sweet Jesus!”

Her body was facedown on the floor, one arm extended in front of her toward a phone that was just out of reach. Her legs were sprawled, as if she’d been writhing in pain.

“No!” He pounded on the glass.

She moved a little, as if she’d heard him.

Butch went over to a window, whipped off his shoe, and pushed his hand deep inside the sole. He punched at the glass until it cracked and then

shattered. As he reached in to free the lock, he cut himself, but he didn't care if he lost an arm getting to her. He threw his body inside and knocked over a table as he lunged forward.

"Beth! Can you hear me?"

She opened her mouth. Worked it slowly. No words came out.

He looked for blood and found none, so he gingerly rolled her onto her back. She was pale as a grave marker, clammy, barely conscious. When she opened her eyes, her pupils were totally dilated.

He extended her arms, searching for track marks. There were none, but he wasn't about to waste time stripping off her shoes and checking between her toes.

Butch flipped open his cell phone and dialed 911.

When the service picked up, he didn't wait for the greeting. "I have a probable drug overdose."

Beth's hand fluttered up, and she started to shake her head. She was trying to bat the phone away.

"Baby, be still. I'm going to take care—"

The operator's voice cut him off. "Sir? Hello?"

"Take me to Wrath," Beth moaned.

"Fuck him."

"Excuse me?" the operator said. "Sir, can you tell me what's happening?"

"Drug overdose. I think it's heroin. Her pupils are fixed and dilated. She hasn't vomited yet—"

"Wrath, I need to go to Wrath."

"—but she's going in and out of consciousness—"

And then Beth jerked up from the floor and snatched the phone out of his hand. "I'm going to die...."

"The hell you are!" he yelled.

She gripped the front of his shirt. Her body shook, sweat staining the front of her T-shirt. "*I need him.*"

Butch stared into her eyes.

He'd been wrong. So very wrong. This wasn't an OD. It was withdrawal.

He shook his head. "Baby, no."

"*Please. I need him. Going to die.*" Suddenly, she jackknifed into the fetal position, like a wave of pain had snapped her in half. The cell phone skittered out of her hand, out of reach. "Butch...please."

Fuck. She looked bad. As in death's-doorstep bad.

If he took her to an ER, she might die on the way over or while waiting to be treated. And methadone was meant to ease cravings, not pull an addict out of a free fall.

Fuck.

“Help me.”

“Goddamn him,” Butch said. “How far away?”

“Wallace.”

“Avenue?”

She nodded.

Butch couldn’t allow himself to think. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her out through the courtyard.

He was *so* going to nail that bastard.

Wrath crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall in the drawing room. The brothers stood around, waiting for him to speak.

And Tohr was there, though from the minute he’d come through the door with Vishous, he’d refused to meet Wrath’s eyes.

Fine, Wrath thought. *We’ll just do this in public.*

“My brothers, we’ve got two pieces of business.” He stared at Tohr’s face. “I have gravely injured one of you. Accordingly, I offer Tohrment a *rythe*.”

Tohr snapped to attention. The brothers likewise were surprised.

It was an unprecedented action, and he knew it. A *rythe* was essentially a free shot, and the one to whom it was offered could choose the weapon. Fist, dagger, gun, chains. It was a ritual way of assuaging honor, both for the offended and the offender. Both could be cleansed.

The shock in the room didn’t come from the act itself. The brothers were quite familiar with the ritual. Given their aggressive natures, every one of them at some time or another had offended the hell out of someone else.

But Wrath, for all his sins, had never offered a *rythe* before. Because according to vampire law, anyone who raised an arm or weapon to him could be condemned to die.

“In front of these witnesses, hear me now,” he said loudly and clearly. “I absolve you of the repercussions. Do you accept?”

Tohr’s head went down. He put his hands in the pockets of his leathers and slowly shook his head. “I cannot strike you, my lord.”

“And you cannot forgive me, can you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can’t blame you for that.” But man, he wished Tohr had accepted. They needed to be healed. “I will offer again at another time.”

“And I will ever decline.”

“So be it.” Wrath pegged Zsadist with a dark glare. “Now about your goddamned love life.”

Z, who’d been standing behind his twin, sauntered forward. “If anyone nailed Darius’s daughter, it was you, not me. What’s the problem?”

A couple of the brothers muttered curses under their breath.

Wrath bared his fangs.

“I’m going to let that pass, Z. But only because I know how much you like to get hit, and I’m not in the mood to make you happy.” He straightened, in case the brother lunged. “I want you to chill with the whores. Or at the very least, clean up after yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We don’t need the heat.”

Zsadist glanced back at Phury, who said, “The bodies. The cops found them.”

“What bodies?”

Wrath shook his head. “Christ, Z. Do you think the cops are going to let two dead women left to bleed out in alleys slide?”

Zsadist came forward, getting so close their chests touched. “I don’t know dick about that. Smell me. I’m telling the truth.”

Wrath breathed deep. He caught the scent of outrage, a tangy flare in his nose like someone had blasted him with citrus air freshener. But there was no anxiety, no emotional subterfuge.

Trouble was, Z not only was a black-souled cutthroat, he was an accomplished liar.

“I know you too well,” Wrath said softly, “to believe any word you say.”

Z started to growl, and Phury moved fast, wrapping a thick forearm around his twin’s neck and hauling the brother back.

“Easy, Z,” Phury said.

Zsadist grabbed onto his twin’s wrist and yanked free. He glowed with hatred. “One of these days, *my lord*, I’m going to—”

A noise like cannonballs hitting a wall cut him off.

Someone was pounding the holy hell out of the front door.

The brothers left the drawing room and went to the foyer in a group. The sounds of weapons being drawn and cocked followed their heavy footfalls.

Wrath checked the video monitor that was mounted on the wall.

When he saw Beth in the cop's arms, he stopped breathing. He threw open the front door and grabbed for her body as the man rushed inside.

This is it, he thought. She was in the transition.

The cop was vibrating with anger as Beth's weight was transferred between them. "You goddamn son of a bitch. How can you do this to her?"

Wrath didn't bother responding. Cradling Beth in his arms, he strode quickly through the knot of brothers. He could feel their astonishment, but he wasn't about to stop and explain.

"Nobody kills the human but me," he barked. "And he does not leave this house until I come back."

Wrath sped into the drawing room. Pushed the painting aside. Ran down the stairs as fast as he could go.

Time was of the essence.

Butch watched the drug dealer disappear with Beth. Her head bounced as they rushed away, her hair a silken flag trailing behind them.

For a moment, he was utterly immobilized, caught between wanting to scream and needing to cry.

The waste. The horrible waste.

Then he heard the door shut and lock behind him. And realized he was surrounded by five of the meanest, biggest bastards he'd ever seen.

A hand landed on his shoulder like an anvil. "How'd you like to stay for dinner?"

Butch looked up. The guy was wearing a baseball cap and had some kind of marking—was that a tattoo, on his face?

"How'd you like to *be* dinner?" said another one, who looked like some kind of model.

Anger returned to Butch, thickening his muscles, strengthening his bones. He jacked up his pants.

These boys wanna play? he thought. *Fine. We'll fucking dance.*

To show he wasn't afraid, he met each of them in the eye. The two who'd spoken. A relatively normal-looking one who was hanging back. Another guy with an outrageous mane of hair, the kind of stuff women would pay

hundreds for at some ritzy salon.

And then the last man.

Butch stared at the scarred face. Black eyes glared back.

This fella, he thought, was the one to really watch out for.

With a deliberate shrug, he stepped free of the hold on his shoulder.

“Tell me something, boys,” he drawled. “Do you wear that leather to turn each other on? I mean, is it a dick thing with you all?”

Butch got slammed so hard against the door that his back teeth rattled.

The model shoved his perfect face into Butch’s. “I’d watch your mouth, if I were you.”

“Why bother, when you’re keeping an eye on it for me? You gonna kiss me now?”

A growl like none Butch had ever heard came out of the guy.

“Okay, okay.” The one who seemed the most normal came forward.

“Back off, Rhage. Hey, come on. Let’s relax.”

It took a minute before the model let go.

“That’s right. We’re cool,” Mr. Normal muttered, clapping his buddy on the back before looking at Butch. “Do yourself a favor and shut the hell up.”

Butch shrugged. “Blondie’s dying to get his hands on me. I can’t help it.”

The guy launched back at Butch, and Mr. Normal rolled his eyes, letting his friend go this time.

The fist that came sailing at jaw level snapped Butch’s head to one side. As the pain hit, Butch let his own rage fly. The fear for Beth, the pent-up hatred of these lowlifes, the frustration about his job, all of it came out of him. He tackled the bigger man, taking him down onto the floor.

The guy was momentarily surprised, as if he hadn’t expected Butch’s speed or strength, and Butch took advantage of the hesitation. He clocked Blondie in the mouth as payback and then grabbed the guy’s throat.

One second later, Butch was flat on his back with the man sitting on his chest like a parked car.

The guy took Butch’s face into his hand and squeezed, crunching the features together. It was nearly impossible to breathe, and Butch panted shallowly.

“Maybe I’ll find your wife,” the guy said, “and do her a couple of times. How’s that sound?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Then I’m coming after your girlfriend.”

Butch dragged in some air. "Got no woman."

"So if the chicks won't do you, what makes you think I'd want to?"

"Was hoping to piss you off."

Stunning electric-blue eyes narrowed.

They had to be contacts, Butch thought. No one really had peepers that color.

"Now why'd you want to do that?" Blondie asked.

"If I attacked first"—Butch hauled more breath into his lungs—"your boys wouldn't have let us fight. Would've killed me first. Before I had a chance at you."

Blondie loosened his grip a little and laughed as he stripped Butch of his wallet, keys, and cell phone.

"You know, I kind of like this big dummy," the guy drawled.

Someone cleared a throat. Rather officially.

Blondie leaped to his feet, and Butch rolled over, gasping. When he looked up, he was convinced he was hallucinating.

Standing in the hall was a little old man dressed in livery. Holding a silver tray. "Pardon me, gentlemen. Dinner will be served in about fifteen minutes."

"Hey, are those the spinach crepes I like so much?" Blondie said, going for the tray.

"Yes, Sire."

"Hot damn."

The other men clustered around the butler, taking what he offered. Along with cocktail napkins. Like they didn't want to drop anything on the floor.

What the hell was this?

"Might I ask a favor?" the butler said.

Mr. Normal nodded with vigor. "Bring out another tray of these and we'll kill anything you want for you."

Yeah, guess the guy wasn't really normal. Just relatively so.

The butler smiled as if touched. "If you're going to bloody the human, would you be good enough to do it in the backyard?"

"No problem." Mr. Normal popped another crepe in his mouth. "Damn, Rhage, you're right. These are awesome."

Chapter Thirty-three

Wrath was getting desperate. He couldn't get Beth to come around.

And her skin was getting colder by the moment.

He shook her on the bed again. "Beth! Beth! Can you hear me?"

Her hands twitched, but he had a feeling the spasms were involuntary. He put his ear down to her mouth. Air was still coming out, but the intervals were alarmingly long. And the force of the exhale was alarmingly weak.

"Damn it!" He bared his wrist and was about to score himself with his fangs when he realized he wanted to hold her if she was able to drink.

When she was able to drink.

He stripped off his holster, pulled out a dagger, and removed his shirt. He felt around his neck until he found his jugular. Placing the point of his knife against his skin, he cut himself. Blood came out in an obliging rush.

He took his fingertip, got it wet, and brought it to her lips. When he dipped it inside her mouth, her tongue did not respond.

"Beth," he whispered. "Come back to me."

He brought more of his blood to her.

"Damn it, don't you die!" Candles flared in the room. "I love you, *damn you!* *Goddamn you, don't you let go!*"

Her skin was turning blue now; even he could see the color change.

Frantic prayers fell from his lips, ancient ones in the old language. Ones he'd assumed he'd forgotten.

She wasn't moving. She was far too still.

The Fade was upon her.

Wrath screamed in fury and grabbed her body. He shook her until her hair tangled. "Beth! *I will not let you go! I will come after you before I let you...*"

A moan came out of him, and he pulled her against him. As he rocked her

cold body back and forth, his blind eyes stared at the black wall before him.

Marissa took special care as she got dressed, determined to go down to the first meal of the night looking her best. After reviewing her wardrobe, she chose a long gown made of cream-colored chiffon. She'd purchased it the season before from the Givenchy collection, but had never worn it. The bodice was tighter and a little more revealing than she usually favored, though the Empire waist ensured that the overall effect was entirely modest.

She brushed out her hair, leaving it free to fall over her shoulders. It was so long now, reaching her hips.

The sight of it brought Wrath to mind. He'd once mentioned its softness, so she'd grown it out under the assumption that the more of it there was, the more he'd like it. And the more he'd like her.

Maybe she would cut off the blond waves. Hack them free of her head.

Her anger, which had simmered down, flared again.

Abruptly, Marissa came to a decision. She was through keeping everything inside. It was time to share.

But then she pictured Wrath's towering height. His cold, hard features. That awesome presence of his. Could she really confront him?

She'd never know if she didn't try. And she wasn't about to let him waltz off into whatever future waited for him without speaking her mind.

She glanced at her Tiffany clock. If she didn't show for dinner and then help out in the clinic as she'd promised, Havers would be suspicious. Better to wait until later in the night to go to Wrath. She had sensed he was staying at Darius's. She would go there.

And she would bide her time until he came home.

Some things were worth waiting for.

"Thanks for meeting me, sensei."

"Billy, how are you?" Mr. X put aside the menu he'd been idly looking at. "I was worried when I got your call. And then you didn't make it to class."

As Riddle slid into the booth, he didn't look so hot. His eyes were still black and blue, and exhaustion hung off his face like loose skin.

"Someone's after me, sensei." Billy crossed his arms over his chest. There was a pause, as if he wasn't sure how far to go with the story.

“This have something to do with your nose?”

“Maybe. I dunno.”

“Well, I’m glad you came to me, son.”

Another pause.

“You can trust me, Billy.”

Riddle sucked in a breath, as if he were about to dive into a pool. “My dad’s in D.C., as usual. So last night I had a few friends over. We were smoking some blunts—”

“You shouldn’t do that. Illegal drugs are bad news.”

Billy shifted uncomfortably, fiddling with the platinum chain around his neck. “I know.”

“Go on.”

“So me and my friends were by the pool, and one wants to go hit it with his girlfriend. I tell them they can use the cabana, but when they go over, the door’s locked. I go up to get the key from the house, and when I’m walking back, a guy steps in front of me, like from out of nowhere. He was fuck—er, freakin’ huge. Long black hair. Dressed in leather—”

The waitress came hopping over. “What can I getcha—”

“Later,” Mr. X snapped.

As she disappeared in a huff, he nodded to Billy.

Riddle grabbed Mr. X’s glass of water and drank. “Anyway, he scared the hell out of me. He was looking at me like he wanted to have me for lunch. But then my friend calls out, because he’s wondering where I am with the key. The man said my name and then just kind of disappeared, right as my friend came up the lawn.” Billy shook his head. “Thing is, I don’t know how he got over the wall. My dad put one all around the back of the grounds last year because he’s been getting terrorist threats or something. It’s, like, twelve feet tall. And the house was all locked up in front with the security system on.”

Mr. X looked down at Billy’s hands. They were gripped tightly together.

“I...ah, I’m kinda scared, sensei.”

“You should be.”

Riddle looked vaguely nauseated at having his fears confirmed.

“So, Billy. I want to know. You ever kill something?”

Riddle frowned at the abrupt change of subject. “What are you talking about?”

“You know. A bird. Squirrel. Maybe a cat or a dog?”

“No, sensei.”

“No?” Mr. X leveled his eyes on Billy’s. “I got no time for liars, son.”

Billy cleared his throat. “Yeah. Maybe. When I was younger.”

“How’d that make you feel?”

A flush crept up Billy’s neck. His hands came apart. “*Nada.* I didn’t feel anything.”

“Come on, Billy. You’ve got to trust me.”

Billy’s eyes flashed. “Okay. Maybe I liked it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Riddle drew out the word.

“Good.” Mr. X lifted his hand and caught the waitress’s eye. She took her time coming over. “We’ll talk about that man later. First, I want you to tell me about your father.”

“My dad?”

“You ready to order now?” the waitress said in a snotty tone.

“What do you want, Billy? It’s on me.”

Riddle recited half the menu.

When the waitress left, Mr. X prompted him. “Your dad?”

Billy shrugged. “I don’t see him a lot. But he’s...you know...whatever. A dad. I mean, who cares what he’s like?”

“Listen, Billy.” Mr. X leaned forward. “I know you ran away from home three times before you turned twelve. I know your father sent you to prep school the minute your mom was in the ground. And I know when you got yourself kicked out of Northfield Mount Hermon, he packed you off to Groton, and when you were tossed out of there, he put you in a military academy. It sounds to me like he’s been trying to get rid of you for the last decade.”

“He’s busy.”

“And you’ve been a lot to handle, haven’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“So would I be right in assuming that you and Daddy Dearest don’t have some kind of *Leave It to Beaver* thing going?” Mr. X waited. “Tell me the truth.”

“I hate him,” Riddle blurted.

“Why?”

Billy crossed his arms over his chest again. His eyes went cold.

“Why do you hate him, son?”

“Because he breathes.”

Chapter Thirty-four

Beth stared off into a vast white distance. She was in some kind of dreamscape, with hazy edges that suggested there was no end to what was before her.

A lone figure, lit from behind, approached out of the vapor. She sensed that it was male, whatever it was, and she didn't feel threatened. She felt as if she knew him.

"Father?" she whispered, not sure whether she meant her own or God Himself.

The man was still quite far away, but his hand lifted in greeting, as if he'd heard her.

She stepped forward, but her mouth was suddenly flooded with a taste she didn't recognize. She put her fingertips to her lips. When she looked down at them, she saw red.

The figure dropped his hand. As if he knew what the stain meant.

Beth slammed back into her body. It was like being catapulted and landing on gravel. Everything hurt.

She cried out. As her mouth opened, she got a rush of that taste. She swallowed reflexively.

Something miraculous happened. Like a balloon reinflating, her skin filled with life. Her senses came alive.

She blindly grabbed onto something hard. Latched on to the source of the taste.

Wrath felt Beth jerk like she'd been electrocuted. And then she started to

drink at his neck with great, urgent pulls of her mouth. Her arms tightened around his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh.

His roar was one of triumph as he eased back on the bed, lying down so the blood flow would be better. He kept his head to one side, exposing his neck to her, and she crawled up onto his chest, her hair spilling all over him. The wet sound of her sucking, the knowledge he was giving her life, gave him a monstrous hard-on.

He held her loosely, stroking her arms. Encouraging her to take more of him. Take all that she needed.

Much later, Beth lifted her head. Licked her lips. Opened her eyes.

Wrath was staring up at her.

And he had a gaping wound in his neck.

“Oh, God...what have I done to you?” She reached to stanch the blood seeping from his vein.

He grabbed her hands and brought them to his lips. “Will you have me as your *hellren*?”

“What?” Her mind was having difficulty turning over.

“Marry me.”

She looked at the hole in his throat and her stomach lurched. “I-I...”

The pain came hard and fast. Tackling her. Taking her into a shadow box of agony. She doubled over, rolling onto the mattress.

Wrath shot up and cradled her in his lap.

“Am I dying...?” she moaned.

“Oh, no, *leelan*. You’re not. This will pass,” he whispered. “But it’s not going to be fun.”

Her entire digestive tract convulsed in waves, and she flopped over onto her back. She could barely make out Wrath’s face through the pain, but his eyes were wide with worry. He took her hand in his and she squeezed as the next blast of torture overtook her.

Her vision dimmed. Came back. Dimmed again.

Sweat dripped from her body, soaking the sheets. She gritted her teeth and arched. Turned this way and then another. Trying to escape.

She didn’t know how long it lasted. Hours. Days.

Wrath stayed with her the whole time.

Wrath took his first deep breath sometime after three A.M.
Finally, she was still.
And not dead still. Calm still.
She'd been so brave. She'd taken the pain with no whimpering, no crying. Even he had begged for his transition to be over.
A croak came out of her.
“What, my *leelan*?” He put his head down to her mouth.
“Shower.”
“Right.”
He left the bed, got the water started, and came back for her. Gently lifting her into his arms, he carried her to the bathroom. She couldn't stand, so he sat her on the marble counter, stripped her clothes off, and then picked her up again.
He stepped under the water, shielding her body with his back. He wanted to see if the change in temperature and humidity was unpleasant for her. When she didn't protest, he let the rush hit her feet first in case the sensation was too much. Gradually, he eased her under the showerhead.
She seemed to like the water, craning her neck and opening her mouth.
He saw her fangs, and they were beautiful to him. Bright white. Sharply pointed. He remembered the sensation of her drinking.
Wrath pulled her against him for a moment, just hugging her. And then he dropped her feet to the ground and held her body with one arm. With his free hand, he picked up a jar of shampoo and squeezed a little on the top of her head. He rubbed her hair into a lather and then rinsed it clean. With a bar of soap, he gently massaged her skin as best he could without dropping her and then made sure every last suds was washed off.
Scooping her up into his arms again, he shut off the water, got out, and grabbed a towel. He wrapped her up and put her back on the counter, propping her against the wall and the mirror. Carefully, he blotted the water from her hair, her face, her neck, her arms. Then her feet, calves, and knees.
Her skin was going to be hypersensitive for a while. Her eyes and hearing, too.
During her transition, he'd watched for signs that her body was changing and had seen none. She was the same height as before. She fit the same way against him. He wondered if she'd even be able to go out during the day.
“Thank you,” she whispered.

He kissed her and carried her to the sofa. Then he stripped the bed of the wet sheets and mattress pad. He struggled with remaking it. He had a tough time finding the other set of sheets, and getting them on right was hard as hell for him. When he was finally finished, he picked her up and settled her against the fresh satin.

Her deep sigh was the best compliment he'd ever been paid.

Wrath knelt by the side of the bed, suddenly aware that his leather pants and his shitkickers were soaking wet.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He kissed her forehead. “Yes what, my *leelan*? ”

“I will marry you.”

Chapter Thirty-five

Butch paced around the drawing room again, stopping at the fireplace. He looked down at the logs that were banked in the hearth. He imagined how nice a fire would be in there during the winter. How you could sit on the silk couches and watch the flickering flames. How that butler would serve you hot toddies or something.

What the hell was that bunch of thugs doing in a place like this?

From down the hall, he heard the sounds of the men. They'd been in what he assumed must be a dining room for hours, just running their mouths. At least their choice of dinner music was appropriate. Hard-core rap thumped through the house, 2Pac, Jay-Z, D-12. Occasionally, he heard shouts of laughter over the beats. Taunts of the macho variety.

He eyed the front door for the one millionth time.

When the men had shoved him into the drawing room and then headed down the hall a lifetime ago, his first thought was of escaping, even if he had to put a chair through a window. He'd call José. Bring the whole station house to their front door.

But before he could act on the impulse, a voice had filled his ear. "I hope you decide to run."

Butch had spun around, crouching. The skull-trimmed, scarred one was right next to him, though he hadn't heard the guy move.

"Go 'head.' Those freaky-ass black eyes had stared at Butch with the dead intensity of a shark. "Crack open that door. Run your little heart out. Run fast, run smart, call for help. Just know that I'll come after you. Like a hearse."

"Zsadist, leave him alone." The guy with the great hair had stuck his head out into the room. "Wrath wants the human alive. For the time being."

The scarred man had spared Butch one last look. "Try it. Just try it. I'd

rather hunt you down than eat dinner with them.”

Then he’d sauntered out.

Threat notwithstanding, Butch had cased what he could see of the house. There wasn’t a phone that he could find, and judging by the security system panel he’d spied in the front hall, all the windows and doors in the place had to be wired for sound. Busting out discreetly wasn’t an option.

And he didn’t want to leave Beth behind.

God, if she died...

Butch inhaled. Frowned.

What the hell was that?

The tropics. He smelled the ocean.

He turned around.

A breathtaking woman was standing in the doorway. Waif-like, elegant, she was dressed in a filmy gown, and her gorgeous blond hair drifted to her hips in waves. Her face was all delicate perfection, her eyes the pale blue color of sea glass.

She took a step back, as if in fear of him.

“No,” he said, lurching forward, thinking of the men in the room down the hall. “Don’t go back there.”

She looked around, as if she wanted to call for help.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said quickly.

“How do I know that?”

She had a subtle accent. Like all of them did. Maybe Russian?

He held his hands out, palms up, to show he didn’t have a weapon. “I’m a cop.”

Yeah, okay, so that was no longer exactly true, but he wanted to reassure her.

She gathered the skirt of her dress up, as if she were going to take off.

Hell, he shouldn’t have used the C-word. If she was the moll of one of them, then she was even more likely to bolt if she thought he was the law.

“I’m not here in an official capacity,” he said. “No gun, no badge.”

Abruptly, she dropped the gown, and her shoulders straightened as if she were drafting her courage into service. She came forward a little, moving fluidly, gracefully. Butch kept his mouth shut and tried to look smaller than he actually was, less threatening.

“He doesn’t normally let your kind be around,” she said.

Yeah, he could imagine cops didn’t hang out too often in this house. “I’m

waiting for...a friend."

Her head tilted to the side. As she got closer, her beauty nearly blinded him. Her facial structure was the stuff of fashion magazines, her body the kind of long, lovely sweep he imagined trotted down runways. And that perfume she wore. It got into his nose, into his brain. She smelled so good his eyes watered.

She was unreal, he thought. So pure. So clean.

He felt like he should brush his teeth and shave before saying one more word to her.

What the hell was she doing hanging out with those lowlifes?

Butch's heart cramped with the idea of how useful she'd be to them. *Dear God.* On the sex market, you could get thousands and thousands and thousands for just an hour with a woman like this one.

No wonder the house was so well tricked out.

Marissa was leery of the human, especially considering his size. She'd heard so many stories about them. How they hated the vampire race. How they hunted her species.

But this one seemed to be taking great pains not to frighten her. He didn't move; he barely breathed. All he did was stare at her.

Which was unnerving, and not only because she wasn't used to being looked at. His hazel eyes gleamed out of his harsh face, missing nothing, taking in all of her.

He was smart, this one. Smart and...sad.

"What's your name?" he asked quietly.

She liked his voice. Deep and low. Rough around the edges, as if he were perpetually a little hoarse.

She was getting very close to him now, just feet away, so she stopped.

"Marissa. I am called Marissa."

"Butch." He touched his broad chest. "Er...Brian. O'Neal. People call me Butch, though."

He stuck his hand out. Then retracted it, rubbed it vigorously on his pant leg, and offered it again.

She lost her nerve. Touching him was too much, and she took a step back.

He dropped his hand slowly, not looking at all surprised that she'd rejected him.

And still, he stared.

"What are you looking at?" She brought her hands up to the bodice of the gown, covering herself.

A flush ran up his neck and into his cheeks. "Sorry. You're probably sick of men gawking at you."

Marissa shook her head. "No males look at me."

"I find that very hard to believe."

It was true. They were all terrified of what Wrath might do.

God, if those others had only known how little she'd been wanted.

"Because..." The human's voice trailed off. "Man, you are so...totally...beautiful."

And then he cleared his throat, like he wished he could take the words back.

She tilted her head, considering him. There was something she couldn't decipher in his tone. An achy pitch.

He dug his hand into his thick, dark hair. "And I'm going to shut up now. Before I make you feel even more uncomfortable."

His eyes stayed on her face.

They were really nice eyes, she thought. So warm. And they held a lonely yearning as he looked at her. As if he couldn't have something he wanted.

She knew all about that.

The human laughed, a burst of sound that came from deep inside his chest. "And how 'bout I try not to stare? That'd be good." He crammed his hands in the pockets of his pants and focused on the floor. "Look at me. Not staring. Not staring at all. Hey, this is a nice rug. You ever notice it before?"

Marissa smiled in a small way and took a step closer to him. "I think I like the way you look at me."

Those hazel eyes snapped back to her face.

"I'm just not used to it," she explained. Her hand went to her neck, but she dropped it.

"Man, you cannot be real," the human said softly.

"Why not?"

"You just can't."

She laughed a little. "Well, I am."

He cleared his throat again. Offered her a lopsided grin. "Mind if I ask you to prove it?"

"How?"

“Can I touch your hair?”

Her first thought was to back away again. But then, why should she? She was tied to no male. If this human wanted to touch her, why couldn’t he?

Especially because she kind of wanted him to.

She dropped her head down so some of her hair fell forward. She thought about holding a section out to him. But no. She would let him come closer.

And the human did.

His hand was big as it reached out, and her breath caught, but he didn’t go for the blond wave hanging in front of her. Instead, his fingertips made contact with a lock resting on her shoulder.

She felt a blast of heat through her skin, as though he’d touched her with a lit match. In no time, the sensation traveled throughout her body, as if she’d spiked a fever.

What was this?

The human’s finger moved her hair aside, and then his whole hand brushed against her shoulder. His palm was warm. Solid. Strong.

She lifted her eyes to him.

“I can’t breathe,” she whispered.

Butch nearly fell over.

Good God, he thought. She wanted him.

And her innocent amazement at his touch was better than the best sex he’d ever had.

His body shot into overdrive, his erection straining his jeans, demanding to get out.

But this couldn’t be real, he thought. She had to be playing him. No one looked like she did, and hung out with those boys, without knowing every trick in the book. And pulling a lot of them on her back.

He watched as she took an unsteady breath. And then licked her lips. The tip of her tongue was pink.

Sweet Jesus.

She might only be a fantastic actress. She might only be the best whore anyone had ever come across. But as she looked up at him, she had him in the palm of her hand. He was buying what she was selling in a big fricking way.

He let his finger run up the side of her neck. Her skin was so soft, so pale, he was afraid he’d leave a mark just by touching her.

“Do you live here?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I live with my brother.”

He was relieved. “That’s good.”

He brushed her cheek lightly. Stared at her mouth.

What would she taste like?

His eyes dipped lower, to her breasts. They seemed to have swelled and were pushing against the bodice of her fine gown.

Her voice was tremulous. “You look at me as if you’re thirsty.”

Oh, God. She had that right. He was parched.

“Except I thought humans didn’t feed?” she said.

Butch frowned. She had an odd way with words, but then English was clearly her second language.

His fingers moved over to her mouth. He paused, wondering if she would pull away if he touched her lips. *Probably*, he thought. Just to keep the game going.

“Your name,” she said. “It’s Butch?”

He nodded.

“What are you thirsty for, Butch?” she whispered.

His eyes slammed shut as his body swayed.

“Butch?” she said. “Did I hurt you just now?”

Yeah, only if you consider raging lust a kind of pain, he thought.

Chapter Thirty-six

Wrath got out of bed and drew on a fresh set of leathers and a black T-shirt.

Beth was sleeping soundly on her side. When he went over and kissed her, she stirred.

"I'm going upstairs," he said, stroking her cheek. "But I'm not leaving the house."

She nodded, brushed her lips against his palm, and sank back down into the healing rest she needed so badly.

Wrath put on his sunglasses, locked the door behind him, and mounted the stairs. He knew there was a stupid, satisfied grin on his face and that his brothers were going to ride him hard for it.

But what the hell did he care?

He was taking a true *shellan*. He was going to be mated. And they could kiss his ass.

He pushed open the painting and stepped into the drawing room.

He couldn't believe what he saw.

Marissa in a long creamy gown. The cop in front of her, stroking her face, evidently poleaxed. All around them, the delicious scent of sex in the air.

And then Rhage burst into the room, dagger drawn. The brother was clearly ready to field dress the human for touching what he presumed was Wrath's *shellan*.

"Take your hands—"

Wrath leaped forward. "Rhage! Hold up!"

The brother caught himself as Butch and Marissa looked around frantically.

Rhage smiled and tossed the dagger across the room at Wrath. "Go for it, my lord. He deserves death for putting his hand to her, but can we play with him a little first?"

Wrath caught the knife. "Go back to the table, Hollywood."

"Ah, come on. You know it's better with an audience."

Wrath smirked. "Only for you, my brother. Now leave us."

He threw the dagger back and Rhage sheathed it while leaving. "Man, Wrath, you can be a real buzz kill, you know that? A total fucking buzz kill."

Wrath looked over at Marissa and the cop. He had to approve of the way the human was using his body to protect her.

Maybe the guy was more than just a good opponent.

Butch glared at the suspect and put his arms out, trying to corral Marissa. She refused to stay behind him. Actually sidestepped his body, placing hers in front.

Like she was protecting him?

He grabbed her thin arm, but she resisted.

As that black-haired murderer came forward, she addressed the man sharply and they started talking in a language Butch didn't recognize. She grew heated. The man nodded a lot. Gradually she calmed.

And then the man put his hand on her shoulder and turned his head to look at Butch.

Good God, the guy's neck had a raw wound on one side, like something had chewed on him.

The man spoke. Marissa's reply was hesitant, but then she repeated it in a stronger tone.

"So be it," the bastard said, smiling tightly.

Marissa moved so she was standing side by side with Butch. She looked at him and blushed.

Something had been decided. Something—

With a quick movement, the man grabbed Butch's throat.

Marissa screamed. "Wrath!"

Ah, shit, not this again, Butch thought as he struggled.

"She seems to be intrigued by you," the murderer said in Butch's ear. "So I'm going to let you keep breathing. But you hurt her and I'll skin you alive."

Marissa was talking rapidly in that foreign language, cursing the man, no doubt.

"We understand each other?" the man demanded.

Butch narrowed his eyes on those sunglasses. "She's got nothing to fear

from me.”

“Keep it that way.”

“You’re another story, however.”

The man let go. Straightened Butch’s shirt. Smiled.

Butch frowned.

Man, there was something seriously wrong with that guy’s teeth.

“Where’s Beth?” Butch demanded.

“She’s safe. And healthy.”

“No thanks to you.”

“Thanks only to me.”

“Then you’ve got some weird-ass ways of defining those words. I want to see her for myself.”

“Later. And only if she wants to see you.”

Butch’s anger flared, and the bastard seemed to sense the surge in his body.

“Watch it, cop. You’re in my world now.”

Yeah, fuck you, buddy.

Butch was about to open his mouth when he felt something grab onto his arm. He looked down. Fear was shining in Marissa’s eyes.

“Butch, please,” she whispered. “Don’t.”

The suspect nodded.

“You be polite, and you stay with her,” the man said, voice softening as he looked at Marissa. “She’s happy to have your company, and she deserves a good shot of happy. We’ll see about Beth. Later.”

Mr. X took Billy back to the Riddle estate after they’d driven around the city for hours, talking.

Billy’s past was perfect, and not just because of the violence he’d perpetrated on others. His father was just the kind of male role model Mr. X liked to see. A total, raving lunatic with a God complex. The man was a former NFL player, big, aggressive and competitive, and he’d ridden Billy since birth.

Nothing the son ever did was good enough. Mr. X’s personal favorite was the story of Billy’s mother’s death. The woman had fallen into the pool after drinking too much one afternoon, and Billy had found her floating facedown. He’d pulled her out of the water and attempted CPR before calling 911. At

the hospital, as the toe-tagged body had been wheeled to the morgue, the distinguished senator from the great state of New York had suggested his son had killed her. Evidently, Billy should have known to get an ambulance on the scene first rather making a half-assed attempt to play paramedic himself.

Mr. X didn't question the merits of matricide. It was just that in Billy's case, the kid had been trained as a lifeguard and had actually tried to save the woman.

"I hate this house," Riddle muttered, staring up at the beautifully lit bricks and columns and shutters.

"Too bad you're on all those waiting lists. College would have gotten you out."

"Yeah, well, I might have gotten in to one or two. If he hadn't forced me to apply to only Ivies."

"So what are you going to do?"

Billy shrugged. "He wants me to move out. Get a job. It's just...I don't know where I can go."

"Tell me something, Billy, you got a girlfriend?"

He smiled, a little half pull at the corners of his lips. "I got a couple."

Yes, Mr. X could imagine the guy did, handsome as he was. "Someone special?"

Billy's eyes slid over. "They're good for getting off. But they're all over me. Calling and shit, wanting to know where I am, what I'm doing. They want too much, and I, ah..."

"You what?"

Billy's eyes narrowed.

"Go on, son. There's isn't anything you can't tell me."

"I, ah, I like them better when they're hard to get...." He cleared his throat. "Actually, I like it when they're trying to get away."

"You like to catch them?"

"I like to take them. You know what I mean?"

Mr. X nodded, thinking that was one more vote in Riddle's favor. No ties to family. No ties to a girlfriend. And his sexual dysfunction would be taken care of during the induction ceremony.

Riddle grabbed for the door handle. "Anyway, thanks, sensei. This was really great."

"Billy."

Riddle paused, glancing back expectantly. "Yes, sensei?"

“What if you came to work for me?”

Riddle’s eyes flared. “You mean at the academy?”

“Sort of. Let me tell you a little about what you would be doing and then you can think it over.”

Chapter Thirty-seven

Beth rolled over, looking for Wrath, and then remembered that he'd gone upstairs.

She sat up, bracing herself in case the pain came back. When nothing hurt, she got to her feet. She was naked, and she looked down at her body. Everything seemed the same. She did a little jig. Seemed to work okay, too.

Except she couldn't see very well.

She went into the bathroom. Removed her contacts. And saw perfectly.

Well, there's one benefit.

Whoa. Fangs. She had fangs.

She leaned in, prodded them a little. Eating with those puppies was going to take some getting used to, she thought.

On impulse, she brought up her hands, turned her fingers into claws. Hissed.

Cool.

Halloween was going to be a real kick in the pants from now on.

She brushed out her hair, pulled on Wrath's robe, and headed for the stairs. When she got to the top, she wasn't breathless at all.

And wasn't this going to make her workouts a snap?

As she stepped out of the painting, she saw Butch sitting across the sofa from a stunning blonde. In the distance, she heard male voices and heavy music.

Butch looked up.

"Beth!" He rushed over, wrapping her in a bear hug. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Truly, I'm fine." Which was amazing, considering what she'd felt like earlier.

Butch pulled back, taking her face in his hands. He stared at her eyes. Frowned. "You don't look high."

“Why would I be?”

He shook his head sadly. “Don’t hide it from me. I brought you here, remember?”

“I shall go,” the blonde said, getting up.

Butch immediately turned to her. “No. Don’t.”

He went back to the couch. As he looked down at the woman, his expression was unlike any Beth had ever seen on his face. He was clearly enthralled.

“Marissa, I want you to meet my *friend*”—he emphasized the word—“Beth Randall. Beth, this is Marissa.”

Beth lifted a hand. “Hello.”

The blonde stared across the room, scrutinizing Beth from head to foot.

“You are Wrath’s female,” Marissa said with a kind of awe. As if Beth had pulled off some great feat. “The one he wants.”

Beth felt her cheeks warm. “Ah, yeah. I guess I am.”

There was an awkward silence. Butch looked back and forth between the two of them, frowning like he wanted in on the secret.

Yeah, well, Beth wanted to know what it was, too.

“Do you know where Wrath is?” she asked.

Butch scowled, as if he didn’t want her near the man. “He’s in the dining room.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen, Beth. We need to—”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He took a deep breath, blowing it out in a slow hiss.

“Somehow, I thought that’s what you would say.” He looked at the blonde. “But if you need me, I, ah...I’ll be here.”

She smiled to herself as Butch sat back down with the woman.

As she went out to the hall, the sound of men talking and the deep rumble of rap music got louder.

“So what’d you do to the *lesser*?” a male voice said.

“I lit his cigarette with a sawed-off,” another one answered. “He didn’t come down for breakfast, you feel me?”

There was a loud chorus of laughter. A couple of bangs, like heavy fists hitting a table.

She pulled the lapels of the robe closer together. It probably would’ve been smart to get dressed first, but she hadn’t wanted to wait to see Wrath.

She rounded the corner.

The instant she appeared in the doorway, all talk ceased. Heads turned; eyes stared. Hard-core rap expanded to fill the silence, bass thumping, lyrics chanting.

My God. She'd never seen so many big men in leather before in her life.

She took a step backward just as Wrath shot to his feet from the head of the table. He came at her, looking intense. No doubt she'd interrupted some kind of sacred guy time.

She tried to think of something to say to him. He was probably going to want to play it cool in front of his brothers, do that whole I'm-a-tough-guy, this-broad-is-just-a—

Wrath wrapped his whole body around hers, putting his face in her hair.

"*My leelan,*" he whispered in her ear. He ran his hands up and down her back. "*My beautiful leelan.*"

He pulled away and kissed her on the lips. His smile was tender as he smoothed her hair.

Beth grinned. Evidently, her man didn't have a problem with public displays of affection. Good to know.

She tilted her head, looking around his shoulder.

And they were definitely in public. The men were gaping. Positively gaping.

She nearly laughed. Seeing a bunch of guys who looked like violent offenders sitting around a table set with silver and china was incongruous enough. But having them be so totally flabbergasted seemed downright absurd.

"You want to introduce me?" she said, nodding at the group.

Wrath put his arm around her shoulders, tucking her against him.

"This is the Black Dagger Brotherhood. My fellow warriors. My brothers." He nodded to the blindingly handsome one. "Rhage, you know. Tohr also. The one with the goatee and the Sox hat is Vishous. The Rapunzel over there is Phury." Wrath's voice dropped to a snarl. "And Zsadist has already introduced himself."

The two she'd spent some time with smiled at her. The others nodded, except for the scarred one. He just stared.

That guy had a twin, she recalled. But she'd have been hard-pressed to pick out his real brother.

Though the one with the absolutely delicious hair and the fantastic yellow

eyes did look a little like him.

“Gentlemen,” Wrath said. “This is Beth.”

And then he switched over to that language she didn’t understand.

When he ended, there was an audible gasp.

He looked down, smiling. “Do you need anything? Are you hungry, *leelan?*”

She put her hand on her stomach. “You know, I am. I have the weirdest craving for bacon and chocolate. Go figure.”

“I will serve you. Sit down.” He indicated his chair and then headed off through a swinging door.

She eyed the men.

Great. Here she was, naked in a bathrobe, alone with well over a thousand pounds of vampire. Pulling off the nonchalant thing was impossible, so she just headed over for Wrath’s seat. She didn’t get far.

There was a loud scraping noise as five chairs slid backward. The men rose as a unit. And started coming for her.

She looked to the faces of the two she knew, but their grave expressions weren’t encouraging.

And then the knives came out.

With a metallic *whoosh*, five black daggers were unsheathed.

She backed up frantically, hands in front of herself. She slammed into a wall and was about to scream for Wrath when the men dropped down on bended knees in a circle around her. In a single movement, as if they’d been choreographed, they buried the daggers into the floor at her feet and bowed their heads. The great *whoomp* of sound as steel met wood seemed both a pledge and a battle cry.

The handles of the knives vibrated.

The rap music continued to pound.

They seemed to be waiting for some kind of response from her.

“Umm. Thank you,” she said.

The men’s heads lifted. Etched into the harsh planes of their faces was total reverence. Even the scarred one had a respectful expression.

And then Wrath came in with a squeeze bottle of Hershey’s syrup.

“Bacon’s on the way.” He smiled. “Hey, they like you.”

“And thank God for that,” she murmured, looking down at the daggers.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Marissa smiled, thinking that the human got more handsome the longer she was around him. “So you protect your kind for a living. That is good.”

He shifted beside her on the couch. “Well, actually, I don’t know what I’m going to do now. I have a feeling I’m about to be between jobs.”

The chiming of a clock made her wonder how much time they’d spent together. And when the sun was coming up. “What time is it?”

“Just after four A.M.”

“I must go.”

“When can I see you again?”

She stood. “I don’t know.”

“Can we have dinner?” He leaped up. “Lunch? What are you doing tomorrow?”

She had to laugh. “I don’t know.”

She’d never been pursued before. It was nice.

“Ah, hell,” he muttered. “I’m blowing it with this overeager sh—stuff, aren’t I?” He put his hands on his hips and stared at the carpet as if disgusted with himself.

She stepped forward. His head snapped up.

“I would touch you now,” she said softly. “Before I go.”

His eyes flared.

“May I? Butch?”

“Anywhere,” he breathed.

She lifted her hand, thinking she would just put it on his shoulder. But his lips fascinated her. She’d watched them move while he enunciated his words and wondered what they felt like.

“Your mouth,” she said. “It’s rather...”

“What?” His voice was hoarse.

“Lovely.”

She put her fingertip on his lower lip. His gasp drew air over her skin, and when he exhaled on a shudder, it came back warm and moist.

“You’re soft,” she said, brushing her forefinger back and forth.

He closed his eyes.

His body was throwing off the most intoxicating scent. She’d caught the heady fragrance the moment he’d first seen her. Now, it saturated the air.

Curious, she slipped her finger into his mouth. His eyes flipped open.

She felt his front teeth, finding the absence of fangs odd. When she went in farther, it was slick, wet, warm.

Slowly, his lips closed around her finger. And then his tongue ran around the tip in a circle.

A surge went through her body. “Oh...”

Her breasts tingled at the tips, and something was happening between her legs. She felt achy. Hungry.

“I want...” She didn’t know what to say next.

He covered her hand with his and pulled his head back, sucking the length of her finger until it popped out of his mouth. With his eyes boring into hers, he turned her palm over, licked the center of it with his tongue, and pressed his lips to her skin.

She leaned into him.

“What do you want?” he asked in a low voice. “Tell me, baby. Tell me what you want.”

“I...don’t know. I’ve never felt this before.”

Her answer seemed to crack the spell. His face grew dark, and he dropped her hand. A curse, soft and vile, floated out of him as he put some space between them.

Marissa’s eyes burned at his rejection. “Have I displeased you?”

God knew, it was something she seemed to excel at when it came to males.

“Displeased? No, you’re doing just fine. You’re a real pro.” He pushed a hand through his hair. He seemed to be struggling with himself, as if he were trying to get back to normal from some faraway place. “It’s just that the innocent act is freaking me out a little.”

“Act?”

“You know, the doe-eyed-virgin routine.”

She stepped forward while trying to frame a response, but he held out his

hands. "That's close enough right now."

"Why?"

"Please, baby. Give it a rest."

Her face fell. "You make no sense."

"Oh, *really*," he said. "Look, you can turn me on just standing there. You don't have to pretend you're something you're not. And I...ah, I don't have a problem with what you do. I'm not going to arrest you for it, either."

"Why would you arrest me?"

As he rolled his eyes, she had no clue what he was talking about.

"I will go now," she said abruptly. His aggravation was growing with each passing moment.

"Wait." He reached out and took her arm. The instant he made contact, he dropped his hand. "I still want to see you."

She frowned, eyeing the hand he'd touched her with. He was rubbing the thing like he wanted to get rid of a sensation.

"Why?" she asked. "You obviously don't like the feel of me right now."

"Uh-huh. Yeah, sure." He regarded her cynically. "Look, how much is it going to cost me to get you to play normal?"

She glared back at him. Before she'd had it out with Wrath, she might have just skulked off. But no more.

"I don't understand you," she said.

"Whatever, baby. Tell me, are some guys so hard up to pop cherries that they actually buy this act?"

Marissa didn't understand all the vernacular he used, but the gist of what he was thinking finally got through to her. Appalled, she threw her spine into a straight line.

"I beg your pardon!"

He stared at her, jaw set hard. Then he exhaled.

"Ah, hell." He rubbed his face with his hand. "Look, forget it, okay? Let's just forget we ever met—"

"I have *never* been taken. My *hellren* did not favor my company. So I have not once been kissed or touched or even held by a male who felt passion for me. But I am not...I am not unworthy." Her voice quavered at the end. "I've just never been wanted before."

His eyes went wide, like she'd slapped him or something.

She looked away. "And I've never touched a male," she whispered. "I just don't know what to do."

The human let out a long breath, as if all the oxygen in his body were being expelled.

"Holy Mary, mother of God," he murmured. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. I'm...I'm a total asshole, and I totally misjudged you."

His horror at what he'd said to her was so palpable, she smiled a little.
"You truly mean that."

"Hell, yeah. I mean, yes, I do. I hope I haven't completely offended you. Well, how could I not have? Jesus Christ...I'm very sorry." He looked positively pale.

She put her hand on his arm. "I forgive you."

He laughed in disbelief. "You shouldn't. You should stay pissed at me for a while. At least a week, maybe a month. Probably longer. I was way out of line."

"But I don't want to be angry at you."

There was a long pause. "Will you still see me tomorrow?"

"Yes."

He seemed stunned by his good fortune. "Really? Man, you're going for sainthood, you know that?" He reached out and stroked her cheek with his fingertip. "Where, baby? Where's good for you?"

She thought for a moment. Havers would have a fit if he knew she was seeing a human.

"Here. I will meet you here. Tomorrow night."

He smiled. "Good. Now, how're you getting home? Do you need a ride? A taxi?"

"No, I will do that myself."

"Wait—before you go." He moved toward her. That lovely scent of his hit her nose and she breathed him in. "Can I kiss you good-night? Even though I don't deserve it?"

Per custom, she offered him the back of her hand.

He took it and pulled her forward. That throbbing in her blood and between her legs came back.

"Close your eyes," he whispered.

She did as he'd said.

His lips softly brushed her forehead. Then her temple.

Her mouth opened as the sweet suffocation returned.

"You could never displease me," he said in his gravelly voice.

And then his lips touched her cheek.

She waited for more. When nothing came, she opened her eyes. He was staring down at her remotely.

“Go,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She nodded. And dematerialized right out of his hand.

Butch shouted and leaped back. “*Shit!*”

He looked at his hand. He could still feel her palm against his. Still smell her perfume.

But she was goddamned gone. Poof. One minute in front of him and then the next...

Beth came running into the room. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not fucking okay,” he snapped.

The suspect strode in. “Where’s Marissa?”

“How should I know! She fucking disappeared! In front...She was...I held her hand and then she—” He sounded like a frantic idiot and clapped his trap shut.

But why wouldn’t he be freaked out? He liked the laws of physics just as he knew them. Gravity keeping everything on the flipping planet where it should be. $E = mc^2$ telling him how fast he could get to a bar.

People not poofing the hell out of a goddamned room.

“May I tell him?” Beth asked her man.

The suspect shrugged. “Usually I’d say no, because it’s better they don’t know. But considering what he saw—”

“Tell me what? That you’re a bunch of—”

“Vampires,” Beth murmured.

Butch looked at her, annoyed. “Yeah, right. Try that one again, sweetheart.”

But then she started talking, telling him things he couldn’t believe.

When Beth fell silent, he could only stare at her. His instincts were telling him she wasn’t lying. But it was all just too hard to accept.

“I don’t believe this,” he said to her.

“It was hard for me to comprehend, too.”

“I’ll bet.”

He paced around the room, wishing he had a drink. The two of them just stared at him.

Finally, he stopped in front of Beth. “Open your mouth.”

He heard a low, nasty sound behind him just as a cold draft hit him in the back.

“Wrath, it’s okay,” Beth said. “Calm down.”

She parted her lips, revealing two long canines that had very certainly not been there before. Butch felt his knees wobble as he reached out to touch her teeth.

A thick hand clamped on his arm, tight enough to bend the bones in his wrist.

“Don’t even think about it,” Beth’s man growled.

“Let him go,” she commanded gently, though she didn’t offer her mouth again after the guy had released his grip. “They’re real, Butch. This whole thing...it’s all real.”

Butch looked up at the suspect. “So you’re actually a vampire, is that it?”

“You’d better believe it, cop.” The big, dark bastard smiled, flashing a monstrous set of fangs.

Now that’s some serious hardware, Butch thought.

“Did you bite her and turn her into one?”

“Doesn’t work that way. You’re either born our kind or you’re not.”

Well, weren’t all those Dracula fans going to be bummed? No two-pronged conversions.

Butch let himself fall down onto the sofa. “Did you kill those women? To drink their...”

“Blood? No. What’s in human veins wouldn’t keep me alive for long.”

“So you’re telling me you had nothing to do with those deaths? I mean, we found throwing stars at the scenes that match the ones you were packing the night I arrested you.”

“I didn’t kill them, cop.”

“How about the one in the car?”

The guy shook his head. “My prey is not human. What I fight’s got nothing to do with your world. And the bomb? We lost one of ours in it.”

Beth made a quick, hard sound. “My father,” she whispered.

The man drew her into his arms. “Yeah. And we’re looking for the bastard who did it.”

“Any idea who pushed the button?” Butch asked, the cop in him coming out.

The guy shrugged. “We got a bead on something. But that’s our business, not yours.”

Yeah, and Butch had no reason to ask anyway. Because he wasn't on the force.

The guy stroked Beth's back and shook his head. "I won't lie to you, cop. Occasionally, a human gets in the way of what we do. And if anyone threatens our race, I will kill them, no matter who or what they are. But I'm not going to tolerate human casualties the same way I used to, and not just because it risks our exposure." He pressed a kiss onto Beth's mouth, meeting her eyes.

At that point, the rest of the gang members filed into the room. Their cold stares made Butch feel like a bug under glass. Or a roast beef about to be carved up.

Mr. Normal stepped forward and offered him a Scotch bottle. "You look like you could use some."

Yeah, you think?

Butch took a swig. "Thanks."

"So can we kill him now?" said the one with the goatee and the baseball hat.

Beth's man spoke harshly. "Back off, V."

"Why? He's just a human."

"And my *shellan* is half-human. The man doesn't die just because he's not one of us."

"Jesus, you've changed your tune."

"So you need to catch up, *brother*."

Butch got to his feet. If his death was going to be debated, he wanted in on the discussion.

"I appreciate the support," he said to Beth's boy. "But I don't need it."

He went over to the guy with the hat, discreetly switching his grip on the bottle's neck in case he had to crack the damn thing over a head. He moved in tight, so their noses were almost touching. He could feel the vampire heating up, priming for a fight.

"I'm happy to take you on, asshole," Butch said. "I'll probably end up losing, but I fight dirty, so I'll make you hurt while you kill me." Then he eyed the guy's hat. "Though I hate clocking the shit out of another Red Sox fan."

There was a shout of laughter from behind him. Someone said, "This is gonna be fun to watch."

The guy in front of Butch narrowed his eyes into slits. "You true about

the Sox?”

“Born and raised in Southie. Haven’t stopped grinning since ’04.”

There was a long pause.

The vampire snorted. “I don’t like humans.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not too crazy about you bloodsuckers.”

Another stretch of silence.

The guy stroked his goatee. “What do you call twenty guys watching the World Series?”

“The New York Yankees,” Butch replied.

The vampire laughed in a loud burst, whipped the baseball cap off his head, and slapped it on his thigh. Just like that, the tension was broken.

Butch let out a long breath, feeling like he’d just been missed by an eighteen-wheeler. As he took another swig from the bottle, he decided it had been one weird fucking night.

“Tell me that Curt Schilling was not a god,” the vampire said.

There was a collective groan from the other men. One of them muttered, “If he starts going on about Varitek, I’m outta here.”

“Schilling was a true warrior,” Butch said, taking another hit of the single-malt. When he offered the Scotch to the vampire, the guy grabbed the bottle and took a hard pull.

“Amen to that,” the vampire said.

Chapter Thirty-nine

When Marissa walked into her bedroom, she took a little spin, feeling her gown splay out around her.

“Where have you been?”

She stopped midtwirl. The dress came to a heel in a swirling rush.

Havers was sitting on the chaise, his face in shadow. “I asked, *where were you?*”

“Please don’t take that tone—”

“You saw the brute.”

“He’s not a—”

“Do not defend him to me!”

She wasn’t going to. She was going to tell her brother that Wrath had listened to her recriminations and accepted all blame for the past. That he’d apologized and his regret had been tangible. That although his words couldn’t make up for what had happened, she felt that she had been heard.

And that even if her former *hellren* was the reason she’d gone to Darius’s, he wasn’t why she’d stayed.

“Havers, please. Things are much different.” After all, Wrath had told her he was to be mated. And she had...met someone. “You must hear me out.”

“No, I mustn’t. I know that you go to him still. That is enough.”

Havers got off the chaise, moving without his usual grace. As he stepped into the light, she was horrified. His skin was gray, his cheeks hollow. He’d been getting thinner and thinner of late. Now, he looked like a skeleton.

“You are ill,” she whispered.

“I am perfectly well.”

“The transfusion didn’t work, did it?”

“Do not try to change the subject!” He glared at her. “God, I never thought it would come to this. I never thought you would hide from me.”

“I have hidden nothing!”

“You told me you had broken the covenant.”

“I did.”

“You *lie*.”

“Havers, listen to me—”

“No longer!” He did not meet her eyes as he opened the door. “You are all I have left, Marissa. Do not ask me to politely sit aside and play witness your destruction.”

“Havers!”

The door slammed.

With grim determination, she ran out to the hall. “Havers!”

He was already at the head of the stairs, and he refused to look back at her. His hand slashed violently in the air behind him, as if he were dismissing her.

She went back to her room and sat down at her dressing table. It was a long while before she could take a full breath.

Havers’s anger was understandable, but frightening because of its intensity and rarity. She’d never seen her brother in such a state. It was clear there would be no reasoning with him until he calmed down.

Tomorrow she would talk with him. She would explain everything, even the new male she had met.

She looked at herself in the mirror and thought of how the human had touched her. She brought her hand up, feeling again the sensation of him sucking her finger. She wanted more of him.

Her fangs elongated slightly.

What would his blood taste like?

After settling Beth in her father’s bed, Wrath went to his chamber and dressed himself in a white shirt and long, baggy white pants. He grabbed a string of enormous black pearls out of an ebony box and knelt on the floor next to his bed, settling back on his heels. He put the necklace on, laid his hands palms-up on his thighs, and closed his eyes.

As he marshaled his breath, his senses came alive. He could hear Beth shifting in the bed across the hall, sighing as she burrowed into the pillows. The rest of the house was fairly quiet, only subtle vibrations coming down to him. As some of the brothers were crashing in the upstairs bedrooms, male

feet were moving around.

He was willing to bet Butch and V were still talking baseball.

Wrath had to smile. That human was a trip. One of the most aggressive men he'd ever come across.

And as for Marissa liking the cop? Well, they'd all just have to see where that went. Having any kind of relationship with someone of the other species was dangerous. Sure, the brothers slept with a lot of human women, but those were one night only, so the memories were easy to erase. Once emotions got involved, and time passed, it was harder to do a good scrub job on the human brain. Things lingered. Surfaced later. Got people into trouble.

Hell, maybe Marissa was just going to play with the guy and then suck him dry. Which was fine. But until either she killed him or took him for her own, Wrath was going to watch the situation carefully.

Wrath harnessed his thoughts and started to chant in the old language, using the sounds to wipe out his cognitive processes. He was rusty at first, tripping over words. The last time he'd said the prayers, he'd been nineteen or twenty years old. Memories of his father sitting next to him and telling him what to say were a seductive diversion, but he forced his mind to be blank.

The pearls began to warm against his chest.

And then he found himself in a courtyard. The Italianate architecture was white; the marble fountain, the marble columns, the marble floor, all had a pale glow to them. The only splash of color came from a flock of songbirds sitting in a white tree.

He stopped praying and got to his feet.

"It has been a long time, warrior." The regal female voice came from behind him.

He turned around.

The diminutive figure approaching him was completely draped in black silk. Her head and face were covered, her hands and feet, everything. She glided over to him, not walking, just moving through the still air. Her presence made him uneasy.

Wrath bowed his head. "Scribe Virgin, how are you?"

"More to the point, how fare you, warrior? You have come seeking change, have you not?"

He nodded. "I—"

"You wish the covenant with Marissa to be broken. You have found another and you would take her as your *shellan*."

“Yes.”

“This female you want. She is the daughter of your brother Darius, who is in the Fade.”

“Have you seen him?”

She laughed slightly. “Do not make inquiries of me. I let your first question slide because you were being polite, but remember your manners, warrior.”

Shit.

“My apologies, Scribe Virgin.”

“I grant you and Marissa freedom from your covenant.”

“Thank you.”

There was a long pause.

He waited for her ruling on the second part of his request. He sure as hell wasn’t going to ask.

“Tell me something, warrior. Do you think your species is unworthy?”

He frowned and then quickly smoothed his face into neutral. The Scribe Virgin wasn’t going to put up with being glowered at.

“Well, warrior?”

He had no idea where she was going with this. “My species is a fierce and proud race.”

“I didn’t ask you for a statement of definition. I asked you what you *thought* of them.”

“I protect them with my life.”

“And yet you will not lead your people. So I can only surmise that you do not value them and therefore fight because you like to or because you wish to die. Which is it?”

This time he let his frown stay in place. “My race survives because of what the brothers and I do.”

“Barely. In fact, its numbers dwindle. It does not thrive. The only localized colony is the one that settled on the United States’ East Coast. And even they live isolated from one another. There are no communities. The festivals are no longer held. Rituals are observed privately, if at all. There is no one to mediate disputes, no one to give them hope. And the Black Dagger Brotherhood is cursed. There are none left in it who do not suffer.”

“The brothers have their...problems. But they are strong.”

“And should be stronger.” She shook her head. “You have failed your bloodline, warrior. You have failed your purpose. So tell me, why should I

grant your wish to take the half-breed as queen?” The Scribe Virgin’s robes moved as if she were shaking her head. “Better that you continue to merely service her with your staff than to have your people saddled with yet another meaningless figurehead. Go now, warrior. We are finished.”

“I would have a word in my defense,” he said, gritting his teeth.

“And I would deny you.” She turned away.

“*I beg of your mercy.*” He hated saying the words, and he guessed by the sound of her laugh that she knew it.

The Scribe Virgin came back to him.

When she spoke, her tone was hard, hard as the black lines of her robe against all the white marble. “If you’re going to beg, warrior, do it properly. Get on your knees.”

Wrath forced his body down to the ground, hating her.

“I rather like you like this,” she murmured, back to being relatively pleasant. “Now, what were you saying?”

He swallowed the hostile words in his throat, forcing himself to affect an even temper that was an absolute lie. “I love her. I want to honor her, not just have her to warm my bed.”

“So treat her well. But there is no need to have a ceremony.”

“I disagree.” He tacked on, “Respectfully.”

There was a long pause.

“You have sought no counsel from me over these centuries.”

He lifted his head. “Is that what bothers you?”

“Do not question me!” she snapped. “Or I will have that half-breed taken from you faster than your next breath.”

Wrath put his head down and ground his fists into the marble.

He waited.

Waited so long, he was tempted to look and see if she had gone.

“I will require a favor,” she said.

“Name it.”

“You will lead your people.”

Wrath looked up, his throat squeezing shut. He couldn’t save his parents, he could barely do right by Beth, and the Scribe Virgin wanted him to be responsible for his whole goddamned race?

“What say you, warrior?”

Yeah, like *no* was an option. “As you wish, Scribe Virgin.”

“That is my command, warrior. It is not my wish and not the favor I will

ask of you, either.” She let out an exasperated noise. “Do get to your feet. Those knuckles of yours are bleeding on my marble.”

He stood and leveled his eyes on her. He stayed silent, figuring she was probably going to lay some more conditions on him.

She addressed him sharply. “You have no wish to be king. That is obvious. But it is your birth obligation, and it is about time you lived up to your legacy.”

Wrath dragged a hand through his hair, creeping anxiety tensing his muscles.

The Scribe Virgin’s voice softened. A little. “Worry not, warrior. I will not leave you to find your way alone. You will come to me and I will help you. Being your counsel is part of my purpose.”

Which was a good thing, because he was going to need the help. He had no clue how to rule. He could kill a hundred different ways, handle himself in any kind of battle, keep his head cool when the goddamned world was on fire. But ask him to address a thousand of his people in a crowd? His stomach rolled.

“Warrior?”

“Yeah, you’ll be hearing from me.”

“But that’s still not the favor you owe.”

“What is—” He brushed a hand through his hair. “I take that back.”

She laughed softly. “You always did learn fast.”

“I’d better.” If he were going to be king.

The Scribe Virgin floated closer to him, and he smelled lilacs. “Put your hand out.”

He did.

The black folds shifted as her arm came up. Something fell into his hand. A ring. A heavy gold ring set with a ruby the size of walnut. It was so hot he almost had to drop the thing.

The Saturnine Ruby.

“You will give her this from me. And I will attend the ceremony.”

Wrath gripped the gift so hard, it bit into his palm. “You honor us.”

“Yes, but I have another purpose in coming.”

“The favor.”

She laughed. “Good one. A question posed in the form of a statement. You will, of course, not be surprised when I do not indulge you. Go now, warrior. Go to your female. Let us hope she is a good choice for you.”

The figure turned and moved away.

“Scribe Virgin?”

“We are through.”

“Thank you.”

She paused by the fountain.

Black folds shifted as she reached out to the tumbling water. When the silk fell back, a blinding light was revealed, as if her bones glowed and her skin were translucent. The moment she touched the water, a rainbow sprang from the contact, filling the white courtyard.

Wrath hissed in shock as his vision suddenly cleared. The courtyard, the columns, the colors, *her*, all of it came into sharp focus. He latched onto the rainbow. Yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, green. The jewellike colors were so brilliant, they sliced through the air, and yet their vivid beauty didn’t hurt him. He drank in the sight, wrapped his mind around it, held on to it.

The Scribe Virgin faced him, dropping her hand. Instantly, the colors vanished and his vision faded again.

She’d given him a small gift, he realized. Just as she’d put the ring in his hand for Beth.

“You are right,” she said softly. “I had hoped to be closer to you. Your father and I, we were bonded, and these lonely centuries have been long and hard. No one worshiping, no one chanting, no history to be kept. I am useless. Forgotten.

“But far worse,” she went on, “I see the future, and it is grim. The survival of the race is not ensured. You will not be able to do this alone, warrior.”

“I’ll learn to ask for help.”

She nodded. “We will start anew, you and I. And we will work together, as it should be.”

“As it should be,” he murmured, trying out the words.

“I will come to you and your brothers tonight,” she said. “And the ceremony will be performed accordingly. We will set you into a covenant that is right, warrior, and we will do it in the right way. Assuming the female will have you.”

He had a feeling the Scribe Virgin was smiling.

“My father told me your name,” he said. “I would use it, if you wish.”

“Do.”

“We’ll see you then, Analisse. And the preparations will be made.”

Chapter Forty

Mr. X watched Billy Riddle walk into the office. Riddle was dressed in a dark blue polo shirt and a pair of khaki shorts, looking tanned, healthy, strong.

Strapping, to use an old-fashioned word from Mr. X's youth.

"Sensei." Billy bowed his head.

"How are you doing, son?"

"I've thought it over."

Mr. X waited for the answer, surprised by how much he cared about what it was going to be.

"I want to work for you."

Mr. X smiled. "That's good, son. That's real good."

"So what do I have to do? Are there papers I have to fill out for the academy?"

"It's a bit more involved than that. And the academy isn't really going to be your employer."

"But I thought you said—"

"Billy, there are a few more things you're going to have to understand. And there's the little detail of an initiation."

"You mean hazing? Because that's no problem. I've been through a couple already. For football."

"It's a little more hard-core than that, I'm afraid. But don't worry, I got through it and I know you'll do fine. I'll tell you what you have to bring with you, and I'll be by your side. The whole time."

After all, watching the Omega go to work was not something to be missed.

"Sensei, I, ah..." Riddle cleared his throat. "I just want you to know, I'm not going to let you down."

Mr. X smiled slowly, thinking this was the very best part of his job.

He stood up and approached Billy. Putting a hand on Riddle's shoulder, he squeezed the bones and stared into the wide blue eyes that met his.

Billy slipped nicely into a trance.

Mr. X leaned forward and carefully removed Riddle's diamond earring. Then he took the soft lobe between his thumb and forefinger, massaging it.

His voice was low and quiet.

"I want you to call and tell your father that you are moving out, effective immediately. Tell him that you've found a job and that you are going into an intensive training program."

Mr. X took off Riddle's stainless-steel Rolex and then pulled the collar of the guy's shirt open. He reached inside, following the platinum chain Billy wore around to the back. He released the necklace, sliding the links free until he captured them in his palm. The metal was warm from lying against skin.

"When you speak with your father, you will remain calm no matter what he says to you. You will reassure him that your future is a promising one and that you have been chosen out of many applicants for a very important role. You will tell him that he may always reach you on your cell phone, but that it will be impossible for him to see you, as you will be traveling."

Mr. X ran his hand over Billy's chest, feeling the pads of muscle, the warmth of life, the hum of youth. Such power in this body, he thought. Such marvelous force.

"You will not mention the academy. You will not reveal my identity. And you will not tell him that you are coming to live with me." Mr. X spoke right into Billy's ear. "You will tell your father that you are sorry for all the evil things you did. You will tell him that you love him. And then I will pick you up and take you away."

As Billy breathed deeply in peaceful surrender, Mr. X remembered his own induction ceremony. For a brief, passing instant, he wished that he'd thought more carefully about the offer he'd accepted decades ago.

He'd be an old man now. An old man with grandchildren, maybe, if he'd ever found a woman he could have stood to be around for any length of time. And he would have had an average life, maybe worked at one of the paper mills or at a gas station. He would have been one of a hundred million other anonymous men who were bitched at by their wives and who drank with their buddies and who passed their precious days in a haze of ambient dissatisfaction because they were nothing special.

But he would have been alive.

Looking into Billy's vivid blue eyes, Mr. X wondered whether he had in fact come out on the money side of the exchange. Because he was no longer his own man. He was a servant of the Omega's whims. The top servant, as it were, but a servant nonetheless.

And he would never be mourned.

Either because he never stopped breathing...or because no one would miss him after he took his last lungful.

He frowned.

Not that any of that mattered, however, because there was no going back. Which was something Riddle was going to learn firsthand tonight.

Mr. X released Riddle's mind and body.

"So are we clear?" he said softly.

Billy nodded, dazed. He looked down at himself, as if wondering what had happened.

"Good, now give me your cell phone." After Billy had handed the thing over, Mr. X smiled. "What do you say to me, son?"

"Yes, sensei."

Chapter Forty-one

Beth woke up in Wrath's bed. Sometime during the day, he must have come and carried her to his chamber.

His chest was against her back. His arm was snaked around her body. His hand was between her legs.

His erection, heavy and hot, lay against her hip.

She rolled over. His eyes were shut, his breathing deep and slow. She smiled, thinking that even in his sleep, he wanted her.

"I love you," she whispered.

His lids flipped open. It was like getting hit with spotlights.

"What, *leelan*? Are you all right?" And then he snatched his hand back, as if he had just realized where it was. "Sorry. I, ah... You're probably not ready to...so soon after..."

She took his hand and guided it between her thighs, pressing his fingers against herself.

His fangs came down on his lower lip as he took a sharp breath.

"I'm more than ready for you," she murmured, taking his thick length into her palm.

When he moaned and moved toward her, she actually felt his heart beating, his blood rushing, his lungs as they filled. It was the oddest thing. She could sense exactly how much he wanted her, and not just because she was stroking his arousal.

And when he moved his fingers, sliding into her, her own body responded, and she could feel him getting even more turned on. Each kiss, each caress, every lick and shiver, was magnified.

Wrath forced them to take it slowly. When she would have straddled him, he put her on her back and pleasured her even though his own body was raging for a release. He was so gentle with her, so loving.

Finally, he was poised over her open thighs, his great arms supporting his weight above her. His long dark hair fell around her, mingling with her own.

"I wish I could see your face clearly," he said, frowning as if trying to focus his eyes. "Just once, I wish..."

She put her hands on his cheeks, feeling the rough stubble of his beard growth.

"I'll tell you what you'd see," she murmured. "I love you. That's what you'd see."

He closed his eyes and smiled. The expression transformed his face. He glowed.

"Ah, *leelan*, you please me no end."

He kissed her. And slowly entered her body with his. When he had filled her, stretched her out, joined them completely, he became still. He spoke in his language and then hers.

The "I love you, wife" made her beam back at him.

Butch flopped around, half-awake. The bed wasn't his. The thing was a twin, not a king. And the pillows weren't his. They were supersoft, as if his head were on Wonder bread. Sheets were likewise way too fine.

But the snoring beside him really confirmed it. He was definitely not at home.

He opened his eyes. Thick draperies were down over the windows, but the glow from a light in the bathroom was enough for him to see some things. The room was decked out in high-class everything. Antiques, paintings, fancy-schmancy wallpaper.

He looked to the snoring. In the other twin bed, a man was sound asleep, dark head buried in a pillow, sheets and blankets pulled up to his chin.

Everything came back.

Vishous. His new buddy.

Fellow Red Sox fan. Wicked smart IT guy.

Fucking vampire.

Butch put a hand to his forehead. There'd been many times that he'd rolled over and been unnerved by who was next to him.

But this was a goddamned chart topper.

How'd they...That's right. They'd crashed after kicking Tohr's bottle of Scotch.

Tohr. Short for Tohrment.

God, he even knew their names. Rhage. Phury. And that scary-ass Zsadist guy.

Yeah, no Tom, Dick, and Harry names for the vampire types.

But come on, could you actually imagine some lethal bloodsucker named Howard? Eugene?

Oh, no, Wallie, please don't bite my—

Holy Christ, he was totally losing it.

What time was it?

“Yo, cop, what time is it?” Vishous asked, groggy.

Butch reached for the bedside table. Next to his watch was a Red Sox hat, a gold lighter, and a black driving glove.

“Five thirty.”

“Cool.” The vampire rolled away. “Don’t crack the drapes for another two hours. Or I’m up in flames and my brothers will leave you shitting in a bag.”

Butch smiled. Vampires or not, he understood these guys. They spoke his language. Related to the world like he did. He felt comfortable around them.

It was damn eerie.

“You’re smiling,” Vishous said.

“How’d you know?”

“I’m damn handy with emotions. You one of those annoying, cheerful-in-the-morning types?”

“Hell, no. And this isn’t morning.”

“It is to me, cop.” Vishous turned onto his side and looked at Butch.

“You know, you handled yourself last night. Don’t know many humans who would have taken on Rhage or me. Much less in front of all the brothers.”

“Ah, now, don’t get all mushy on me. We ain’t dating.” Except the truth was, Butch was kind of moved by the respect.

But then Vishous narrowed his eyes. His intellect was so fierce, getting assessed by him was like being plucked naked and sandblasted.

“You got one hell of a death wish.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, maybe,” Butch said. He waited to be asked why. When the inquiry didn’t come, he was surprised.

“We all do,” Vishous murmured. “That’s why I’m not asking for details.”

They were silent for a moment.

Vishous’s eyes narrowed again. “You’re not going back to your old life,

cop. You know that, right? Because you've seen too much of us. We wouldn't be able to scrub your memories clean enough."

"You telling me to pick out a casket?"

"Hope not. But it's not my call. Depends a lot on you." There was a pause. "You don't have much to go back to, do you?"

Butch looked up at the ceiling.

When the brothers had let him check his messages this morning, there'd been only one. It had been the captain, telling him to come in for the results of Internal's investigation.

Yeah, like that was an appointment he needed to keep. He knew damn well what the outcome would be. He was going to be fired and served up as a sacrificial lamb to combat the image of police brutality. Or he was going to be put out to pasture at a desk job.

As for his family? Ma and Pop, bless them, were still in their row house in Southie, surrounded by the surviving sons and daughters they loved so much. Though still mourning Janie, they were happy in their retirement years. And Butch's brothers and sisters were so busy having babies, raising babies, and thinking about having more babies, that they were totally tied up with their family obligations. In the O'Neal clan, Butch was just a footnote. The Dark One Who Had Failed to Procreate.

Friends? José was the only one he could even remotely consider a friend. Abby wasn't even that. She was just a screw every now and again.

And after meeting Marissa last night, he'd lost his interest in casual sex.

He glanced over at the vampire. "Naw, I don't have anything."

"I know what that feels like." Vishous rustled around as if he were trying to get comfortable. When he settled on his back, he threw one heavy arm over his eyes.

Butch frowned as he caught sight of the vampire's left hand. It was covered with tattoos, dense, intricate designs that ran down the back of it, onto the palm, and around each finger. It must have hurt like a bitch to have done.

"V?"

"Yeah?"

"What's doing with the tats?"

"I didn't pester you about your curse, cop." Vishous put the arm away. "If I'm not up by eight, wake me, true?"

"Yeah. True." Butch closed his eyes.

Chapter Forty-two

In the chamber downstairs, Beth turned off the shower, reached for a towel, and clunked her new engagement ring on the marble counter.

“Oh, not good. *Really* not good...” She cradled her hand, thinking she was lucky Wrath was upstairs checking on preparations for the ceremony. Although maybe that cracking sound had carried to the first floor.

She braced herself before she looked down, convinced she’d either knocked the ruby loose or taken a hunk out of the stone. But it was fine.

Not that she was in a big hurry to bash it around again. Never one for rings, she was going to have to get used to wearing the thing.

Would that all of life’s little adjustments be so hard, she thought wryly. *Fiancé slides a priceless hunk of geology on your finger. What a bummer.*

She had to smile as she dried off. Wrath had been so proud to put that ring on her. He’d told her it was a gift from someone whom she’d meet tonight.

At her wedding.

She paused with the towel. God, that word. Wedding.

Who’d have ever thought she’d—

Someone knocked on the chamber door.

“Hello, Beth? Are you in there?” The unfamiliar female voice was muffled.

Beth drew on Wrath’s robe and went over, but didn’t open the door.

“Yes?”

“It’s Wellsie. I’m Tohr’s *shellan*. I thought you might like someone to help you get through tonight, and I’ve brought a gown for you, in case you don’t have one already. Well, I’m also just your average nosy female, so I wanted to meet you.”

Beth cracked the door.

Whoa.

There was nothing average about Wellsie. She had flame red hair, a face like a Greco-Roman goddess, and an aura of total self-possession. Her bright blue gown set off her coloring like an autumn sky over changing leaves.

“Ah, hi,” Beth said.

“Hi, yourself.” Wellsie’s sherry-colored eyes were shrewd without being cold. Especially as she started to smile. “Aren’t you gorgeous. No wonder Wrath fell as hard as he did.”

“Would you like to come in?”

Wellsie marched into the room, carrying a long flat box and a big bag. She gave off an air of being in charge, but somehow, she didn’t seem pushy.

“Tohr almost didn’t tell me what was going on. He and Wrath are in a thing.”

“Thing?”

Wellsie rolled her eyes, shut the door from across the room, and put the box down on the coffee table.

“Males like them, they get all riled up and take a hunk out of each other every once in a while. It’s inevitable. Tohr won’t tell me what it’s all about, but I can guess. Honor, prowess on the field, or us, their females.” Wellsie flipped open the box, revealing folds of red satin. “They’re good-hearted, our boys. But they can blow their stacks and say something stupid every now and again.”

She turned and smiled. “Enough of them. Are you ready for this?”

Beth was normally reticent around strangers. But this straight-talking woman with the no-nonsense eyes felt like someone worth taking a gamble on.

“Maybe not.” Beth laughed. “I mean, I haven’t known Wrath for long, but he feels like he’s mine. I’m going with my gut on this. Not my head.”

“I was the same way with Tohr.” Wellsie’s face softened. “Took one look at him and I knew I was done for.”

Her hand absently went to her stomach.

She’s pregnant, Beth thought. “When are you due?”

Wellsie flushed, but it seemed to be out of anxiety more than happiness.

“Long time. A year. If I can hold it.” She bent down and took out the gown. “So would you like to try this on? We’re almost the same size.”

The dress was an antique, with black beading over lace on the bodice and a tremendous waterfall of a skirt. The red satin positively smoldered, catching

the light from the candles and holding the glow deep within its folds.

“That’s...spectacular.” Beth reached out and stroked the skirting.

“My mother had it made for me. I was mated in it almost two hundred years ago. We can skip the corset if you want, but I brought the petticoats. They’re such fun. And listen, if you don’t like it or have something else you were planning to wear, I will absolutely not take offense.”

“Are you crazy? Like I’m going to turn that down so I can get married in my shorts?”

Beth gathered up the dress and nearly ran to the bathroom. Stepping into the gown was like stepping back in time, and when she came back out into the chamber, she couldn’t stop herself from fluffing the skirt. It was a little tight in the bodice, but she didn’t care if she never took a full breath.

“You look great,” Wellsie said.

“Yeah, because this is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever had on. Can you do the last buttons up the back?”

Wellsie’s fingers were cool and quick. When she was finished, she tilted her head to one side, clasping her hands together. “You do it justice. The whole red-and-black combo really works with your hair. Wrath’s going to pass out when he sees you.”

“Are you sure you want to lend it to me?” What if she spilled on the thing?

“Clothes are meant to be worn. And that gown hasn’t been on a body since 1814.” Wellsie checked her diamond watch. “I’m going to go upstairs and see how the prep’s coming. Fritz is probably going to need help. The brothers sure know how to eat, but their kitchen skills are deplorable. You’d think they’d be better with knives, considering what they do for a living.”

Beth turned around. “Give me a hand undoing these buttons and I’ll go with you.”

After helping her out of the dress, Wellsie hesitated.

“Listen, Beth...I’m happy for you. I truly am. But I feel like I should be honest. Having one of these males as a mate isn’t easy. I hope you’ll call me if you need someone to vent to.”

“Thanks,” Beth said, thinking she actually might do that. She could see Wellsie giving good advice. Probably because the woman looked like she had everything under control in her own life. She just seemed so...competent.

Wellsie smiled. “And maybe I’ll be able to call you once in a while, too. God, I’ve waited so long to have someone to talk to who understands.”

“None of the other brothers have wives, right?”

“You and I are it, dearie.”

Beth smiled. “So we’d better stick together.”

Wrath went upstairs, wondering who’d slept where. He knocked on one of the guest room doors, and Butch answered. The human was drying his hair with a towel. Had another wrapped around his waist.

“You know where V is?” Wrath asked.

“Yeah, he’s shaving.” The cop nodded over his shoulder and stepped aside.

“You need me, boss?” V called out from the bathroom.

Wrath chuckled. “Well, isn’t this cozy.”

The “fuck off” came from both of them as Vishous sauntered into the bedroom, boxers hanging low on his hips. His cheeks were white, and he was dragging an old-fashioned razor across his jawbone. Both his hands were bare.

Oh, man. V’s left hand was actually in the breeze, its sacred tattoos spelling out the dire consequences if anyone came into contact with it. Wrath wondered whether the human had any conception what V could do with that thing.

Probably not, or the cop wouldn’t be so damned relaxed dancing around the room half-naked.

“So, V,” Wrath said, “there’s a little issue I need to settle before I’m mated.”

Usually he worked alone, but if he was going to take care of Billy Riddle, he wanted Vishous as backup. Humans didn’t obligingly disintegrate when you stabbed them, but his brother’s left hand would take care of the body. Work of a moment and that corpse would be ether.

V grinned. “Give me five and I’m ready.”

“Good deal.” Wrath could feel Butch’s eyes on him. Clearly, the guy wanted to know what was up. “You don’t want to get tangled in this one, cop. Especially given your vocation.”

“I’m off the force. Just so you know.”

Interesting, Wrath thought. “Mind telling me why?”

“I broke a suspect’s nose.”

“In a fight?”

“During questioning.”

Somehow that was not a surprise. “Now why’d you do that?”

“He tried to rape your future wife, vampire. I wasn’t inclined to be gentle when he said she was asking for it.”

Wrath felt a growl come out of his throat. The sound was like a living thing as it rose up from his gut. “Billy Riddle.”

“Beth told you about the guy?”

Wrath stalked to the door. “Haul ass, V,” he snapped.

When he got downstairs, he sensed Beth’s presence and found her coming through the painting. He walked up and put his arms around her, hugging her fiercely. He would have her avenged before they were joined. She deserved no less from her *hellren*.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

He nodded against her hair and then looked at Tohr’s *shellan*. “Hey, Wellsie. Good of you to come.”

The female smiled. “I thought she deserved some support.”

“And I’m glad you’re here.” He pulled back from Beth long enough to kiss Wellsie on the hand.

Vishous strode into the room, fully armed. “Wrath, man, we off?”

“Where are you going?” Beth asked.

“I need to take care of something.” He ran his hand down her arm. “The other brothers are staying here to help get things ready. The ceremony will start at midnight, and I’ll be back before then.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but then glanced at Wellsie. Something seemed to pass between the two females.

“Be safe,” Beth finally said to him. “Please.”

“Don’t worry.” He kissed her long and slow. “I love you, *leelan*.”

“What does that word mean?”

“Something close to ‘dearest one’.” He picked his jacket off a chair and gave her one more peck on the lips before leaving.

Chapter Forty-three

Butch combed his hair, slapped on a little cologne, and slipped into a suit that wasn't his. Just as the medicine cabinet in the bathroom was lined with different aftershaves and shaving creams, the closets were full of brand-new men's clothes of various large sizes. All top-drawer, designer stuff.

He'd never worn Gucci before.

And though he didn't like being a mooch, he just couldn't see Marissa in the same clothes he'd been wearing last night. Even if they'd been particularly sharp—and they weren't—he was sure they now smelled like a bar: V's Turkish tobacco and booze combined.

He wanted to be fresh as a daisy for her. He really did.

Butch took a turn in front of a full-length mirror, feeling like a pansy, but unable to help himself. The black pinstripe fit him well. The bright white, open-collared shirt made his tan come out. And the sweet pair of Ferragamo loafers he'd found in a box were just the right amount of flash.

He was almost handsome, he thought. As long as she didn't look too closely at his bloodshot eyes.

The four hours of sleep and all that Scotch showed.

A soft rapping noise sounded.

Feeling like a poser and hoping it wasn't one of the brothers, he opened the door.

The butler looked up with a smile. "Sire, you look quite dashing. Fine choices, fine choices."

Butch shrugged, fussing with the shirt collar. "Yeah, well."

"But you need a handkerchief in your breast pocket. May I?"

"Ah, sure."

The little old man buzzed right over to a bureau, pulled out a drawer, and rifled around. "This should be perfect."

His knobby hands worked the white square into some kind of origami masterpiece and stuffed the thing into place on Butch's chest.

"Now, you are ready for your guest. She is here. Are you receiving?"
Receiving? "Hell, yeah."

As they went out into the hall, the butler laughed softly.

"I look stupid, don't I?" Butch said.

Fritz's face grew serious. "No, not at all, sire. I was just thinking how much Darius would have enjoyed all this. He liked a full house."

"Who's Dar—"

"Butch?"

Marissa's voice brought them both to a halt. She was at the head of the stairs, and she took Butch's breath away. Her hair was up high on her head, and her gown was a pale pink sheath. Her shy pleasure at seeing him made his chest swell.

"Hey, baby." He walked forward, aware that the butler was beaming with delight.

She fidgeted with her dress, as if she were a little nervous. "I probably should have waited downstairs. But everyone's so busy. I felt like I was in the way."

"You want to hang up here for a while?"

She nodded. "If you don't mind. It's quieter."

The butler chimed in. "There's a second-floor sitting porch. Just go down the hall. It's at the end."

Butch offered her his arm. "That okay with you?"

She slipped her hand through his elbow. As her eyes skittered away from his, her blush was enchanting. "Yes. Yes, it is."

So she wanted to be alone with him.

This was a good sign, Butch thought.

As Beth carried a heaping platter of crudités into the dining room, she decided that Fritz and Wellsie could have run a small country together. They had the brothers racing around, setting the dining room table, putting fresh candles out, helping with the food. And God only knew what was happening in Wrath's chamber. The ceremony was going to take place there, and Rhage had been down in the room for an hour.

Beth put the platter on the sideboard and headed back into the kitchen.

She found Fritz struggling to reach a large crystal bowl high up in the cupboard.

“Here, let me get that.”

“Oh, thank you, mistress.”

She put it down on the counter and then watched as he filled it with salt.
That's some serious hypertension right there, she thought.

“Beth?” Wellsie called out. “Can you go into the pantry and grab three jars of peach preserves for the ham basting?”

Beth went inside the boxy little room and flipped on the light switch. Cans and jars ran from floor to ceiling in an overwhelming array of options. She was looking for the peach section when she heard the door open.

“Fritz, do you know—”

She pivoted around. And slammed right into Zsadist’s hard body.

He hissed, and they both leaped back as the door shut them in together.

He closed his eyes as if in pain, his lips drawing back from his fangs and teeth.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, trying to move farther away. There wasn’t much room, and there was no escape. He was standing in front of the door. “I didn’t see you. I’m really sorry.”

He was wearing another tight long-sleeved shirt, so as his hands curled into fists, the flexing of his arms and then his shoulders was obvious. He was big to begin with, but the power in his body made him seem huge.

His lids opened. When those black eyes touched her face, she cringed.

Cold. So very cold.

“Christ, I know I’m ugly,” he snapped. “But don’t fear me. I’m not a total savage.”

Then he grabbed something and left.

Beth sagged against the jars and cans, looking up at the empty space he’d left on the shelf. Chutney. He’d taken chutney.

“Beth, did you find—” Wellsie stopped short in the doorway. “What happened?”

“Nothing. It was...nothing.”

Wellsie gave her a level stare while adjusting the apron over her blue dress. “You’re lying to me, but it’s your mating day, so I’ll let you get away with it.” She located the jam and took down some jars. “Hey, why don’t you go to your father’s room and have a lie-down? Rhage has finished, so you can take a deep breath down there. You need to pamper yourself a little before

you're mated."

"You know, I think that's a good idea."

Butch leaned back in the wicker rocker, crossing his legs and pushing at the floor with one foot. The chair made a creaking sound.

In the distance, heat lightning flashed. The night smelled of the garden down below.

And of the sea.

Across the shallow porch, Marissa tilted her head back to scan the sky. A slight summer breeze touched the tendrils of hair around her face.

He decided he could look at her for a lifetime and not get enough.

"Butch?"

"Sorry. What was that?"

"I said, you look quite beautiful in that suit."

"This old thing? I just threw it on."

She laughed, exactly as he'd meant her to, but as the sound tingled his ears, he grew serious.

"You're the beautiful one."

Her hand went up to her neck. She didn't seem to know how to handle compliments, as though she hadn't gotten many of them.

He found that so hard to believe.

"I did my hair for you," she said. "I thought maybe you would like it this way."

"I like it any way. All ways."

She smiled. "I chose this dress for you, too."

"I like it. But you know something, Marissa? You don't have to try with me."

Her eyes dipped down. "I'm used to trying."

"So get unused to it. You're perfect."

She beamed. Absolutely beamed. And all he could do was stare.

The breeze picked up a little, sweeping her chiffon skirting around the graceful curve of her hips. And suddenly he wasn't just thinking about how lovely she was.

Butch nearly laughed. He'd never considered lust the kind of thing that could ruin a moment, but his body's needs were something he wouldn't mind shelving for the night. Or even longer. He really wanted to treat her right. She

was a woman worthy of being worshiped and held and made happy.

Butch frowned. Yeah, and just how would he be able to do that? The happy part, that was. He was confident he had the worshiping and the holding down pat.

It was just...a virgin vampire was a category of female he knew absolutely nothing about.

“Marissa, you know I’m not one of your kind, don’t you?”

She nodded. “From the moment I first saw you.”

“And that doesn’t”—*turn you off?*—“bother you?”

“No. I like the way I feel around you.”

“And how’s that?” he asked, getting quiet.

“I feel safe. I feel pretty.” She paused and eyed his lips. “And sometimes other things.”

“Like what?” In spite of his good intentions, he really wanted to hear about the other things.

“I get hot. Especially here”—she touched her breasts—“and here.” Her hands brushed over the juncture between her thighs.

Butch saw double, his heart kicked so hard. As he blew out a lungful of hot air, he was sure his head was going to explode.

“Do you feel anything?” she asked.

“You better believe it.”

His voice sounded Scotch-raw. *Which is what desperation will do to a guy.*

Marissa crossed the porch, coming toward him. “I would kiss you now. If you wouldn’t mind.”

Wouldn’t mind? He was willing to beg just to keep looking at her.

He uncrossed his legs and sat up, thinking that the fact someone could walk in on them at any time would help keep him in check. He was about to get to his feet when she knelt in front of him.

And moved her body right between his legs.

“Whoa. Easy there.” He stopped her before she came in contact with his erection. He wasn’t sure she was ready for that. Hell, he wasn’t sure *he* was ready for that. “If we’re going to...We need to take this slow. I want it to be good for you.”

She smiled, and he caught sight of the tips of her fangs. His erection throbbed.

Now who’d have thought that’d be a turn-on?

“I dreamt of doing this last night,” she murmured.

Butch cleared his throat. “Did you?”

“I imagined that you came to my bed. You bent over me.”

Oh, God, he could just picture that. Except in his fantasy they were both naked.

“You were naked,” she whispered, leaning into him. “And so was I. Your mouth was hard on mine. You tasted tangy, like Scotch. I liked it.” Her lips hovered mere inches from his. “I liked you.”

Holy heaven. He was actually about to come. And they hadn’t even kissed yet.

She moved to close the distance, but he held her off at the last moment. She was too much for him. Too lovely. Too sexy. Way, way too innocent.

God, he’d let down so many people over the course of his life. He didn’t want to add her to the list.

And she deserved a prince for her first. Not some washed-up ex-cop, wearing someone else’s gigolo armor. He had no idea how vampires ran their private lives. But he was damn sure she could do a hell of a lot better than him.

“Marissa?”

“Hmmm?” Her eyes didn’t stray from his lips. In spite of her inexperience, she looked like she was ready to devour him.

And he wanted to be eaten.

“Do you not desire to?” she whispered, pulling back. Looking worried. “Butch?”

“Oh, no, baby. Not that. Never that.”

He shifted his hands from her shoulders up to her neck, holding her head steady. Then he tilted his to one side and put his lips right on her mouth.

She gasped, drawing his breath into her lungs, taking something of him inside of her. He rumbled in satisfaction, but kept control, stroking her mouth gently, caressing her softly. When she swayed toward him, he traced the outside of her lips with his tongue.

She was going to taste so sweet, he thought, preparing to go deeper while still keeping a chain on himself.

But Marissa jumped the gun. She captured his tongue with her mouth and sucked on it.

Butch groaned, his hips jerking up from the chair.

She broke off the kiss. “You didn’t like that? I liked it when you did that

to my finger last night.”

He yanked at his collar. Where the hell was all the air in this part of North America?

“Butch?”

“I liked it,” he said in a guttural croak. “Trust me. I *really* liked it.”

“Then I would do it again.”

She lunged forward and took his mouth in a blazing kiss, pressing him back into the wicker, hitting him like a ton of bricks. He was in such shock, all he could do was grip the chair’s arms. Her onslaught was powerful. Erotic. Hotter than Hades. She practically crawled onto his chest as she explored his mouth, and he braced his body, throwing his weight into his palms.

Suddenly, there was a loud snapping sound.

And then he rolled onto the floor with her.

“What the f—” Butch lifted his left hand. And up came the wicker arm he’d taken hold of.

He’d ripped the side off the chair.

“You okay?” he said breathlessly, tossing the thing away.

“Oh, yes.” She smiled up at him. Her dress was caught in his legs. And her body was tight against him. Almost where he needed it to be.

As he looked at her, he was ready for it all, ready to get under that dress, part her thighs with his hips, and bury himself in her heat until they were both totally lost.

Except in his current state, he was liable to take her hard, not make love to her properly. And he was crazed enough to do it here, on the porch, in the open.

So it was way time for a break.

“Let’s get you off the floor,” he said roughly.

Marissa moved faster than he did, practically springing to her feet. When she held her hand out to help him up, he took it to humor her. Only to find himself plucked from the floor as if he weighed no more than a newspaper.

He smiled as he brushed off his jacket. “You’re stronger than you look.”

She seemed embarrassed and took care to check her dress. “Not really.”

“That’s not a bad thing, Marissa.”

Her eyes came back to his and then slowly drifted down his body.

With a shot of embarrassment, he realized his raging erection made a tent out of his pants. He turned away so he could rearrange himself.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” He faced her, wondering if his pulse was ever going to slow down.

Man, he wasn’t going to need a stress test anytime soon. If his heart could get through a kiss from her, he could probably run a marathon.

While dragging a car behind him.

Sideways to the road.

“I liked that,” she said.

He had to laugh. “So did I. But it’s hard to believe you’re a vir—”

Butch slammed his mouth closed. Rubbed his thumb over his eyebrows.

No wonder he didn’t date. He had the social skills of a chimp.

“Just so you know,” he muttered, “I put my foot in it sometimes. But I’ll work on this for you.”

“Foot in it?”

“Blurt shit out. Stuff. I mean...Hell.” He looked to the door. “Listen, how about we head down and see what’s doing with the party?”

Because if he stayed up here one minute longer, he was going to be all over her.

“Butch?”

He glanced back at her. “Yeah, baby?”

Her eyes flashed, and she licked her lips. “I want more of you.”

Butch stopped breathing. And wondered if she was thinking about his blood.

Looking into her beautiful face, he relived what it felt like to get pushed back into that chair. And he imagined that instead of kissing him, she was sinking those pearly white fangs of hers deep into his neck.

He could think of no better way to go than in her arms.

“Whatever you want of me,” he murmured, “you can have.”

Chapter Forty-four

Wrath watched as Billy Riddle walked out of the mansion and struck a pose against the columns in front. The guy put down a duffel bag and looked up at the sky.

“Perfect,” Wrath said to Vishous. “Enough time to kill him and get back.”

But before he and V stepped out of the shadows, a black Hummer came up the circular drive. As it passed them, the sweet smell of baby powder floated out one of its windows.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Wrath murmured.

“That’s a *lesser*, my brother.”

“And what do you want to bet he’s doing some recruiting?”

“Good candidate.”

Billy hopped inside, and the SUV began to move.

“We should have taken my car,” V hissed. “Then we could have followed them.”

“There’s no time for a trail. The Scribe Virgin’s showing up at midnight. We do this now. Here.”

Wrath leaped in front of the Hummer, planting his hands on the hood and pushing the SUV to a stop. He glared through the front windshield while Vishous approached from the lateral, sidling up to the driver’s door.

Wrath smiled as the engine was put in park. Inside, he could detect both fear and anticipation. He knew which one was Billy Riddle’s. The guy was edgy. The *lesser*, on the other hand, was ready to fight.

But there was something else. Something that didn’t feel quite right.

Wrath quickly glanced around. “Watch yourself, V.”

The roar of a car engine broke through the night, and the whole lot of them got blasted with headlights.

A nondescript American sedan heaved to a stop, and two men jumped out

with guns drawn.

“State police. Put your hands up. You in the car. Get out.”

Wrath watched the driver’s-side door. What emerged was big and intense. And under the scent of baby powder, the *lesser* stank of evil.

As the society member lifted his hands, it stared at the insignia on Wrath’s jacket. “My God. I thought you were a myth. The Blind King.”

Wrath bared his fangs. “Nothing you’ve heard about me is a myth.”

The *lesser*’s eyes flashed. “I’m positively inspired.”

“And I’m heartbroken that we gotta split now. But we’ll be seeing you and that new recruit again. Soon.”

Wrath nodded to Vishous, swept clean the memories of the humans, and dematerialized.

Mr. X was in awe.

The Blind King lived.

There had been stories circulating for centuries about him, legends really, but there hadn’t been a confirmed sighting since Mr. X had joined the society. In fact, rumors had even abounded that the regal warrior had died, extrapolations based primarily on the disintegration of vampire society.

But no, the king was alive.

Good God. Now that would be a prize to lay at the Omega’s altar.

“I told you he was coming,” Billy was saying to the staties. “He’s my martial-arts teacher. Why did you pull us over?”

The officers holstered their guns, focusing on Mr. X.

“May I see some identification, sir?” one of them asked.

Mr. X smiled and handed over his driver’s license. “Billy and I are just going out for dinner. Maybe a movie.”

The man studied the picture and then his face. “Mr. Xavier, here’s your license back. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Not a problem, Officer.”

Mr. X and Billy got back into the Hummer.

Riddle cursed. “They’re such idiots. Why did they stop us?”

Because we got jumped by two vampires, Mr. X thought. *You just don’t remember it, and neither do those two guys with the badges.*

Tricky mind games. Tricky, tricky.

“What are the state police doing here?” Mr. X asked as he put the SUV in

gear.

“My dad got another terrorist threat, and he’s decided to leave D.C. for a little while. He’s coming home tonight, and they’ll be crawling all over the place until he goes back to the capital.”

“Did you talk with your father?”

“Yeah. He actually seemed relieved.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Billy reached into his duffel bag. “I got what you said I needed.”

He held up a wide-necked ceramic jar with a lid.

“That’s good, Billy. Perfect size.”

“What’s going in it?”

Mr. X smiled. “You’ll find out. Are you hungry?”

“Naw. Too pumped for food.” Billy clapped his palms together and squeezed, flexing his muscles. “Just so you know, I don’t crack easy. Whatever goes down tonight, I’ll stay tight.”

We’ll just see about that, Mr. X thought as he headed for his house. They were going to do the ceremony in the barn, and the torture table was going to be a big help. He could tie Billy down easier that way.

As the city dissolved and the farm country eased up around the road, Mr. X found himself smiling.

The Blind King.

In Caldwell.

Mr. X glanced over at Riddle.

In Caldwell and looking for Billy.

Now why would that be?

Chapter Forty-five

Beth was back in The Dress. And loving it.

“I don’t have shoes,” she said.

Wellsie took another hairpin out of her mouth and slid it into Beth’s chignon.

“You’re not supposed to be wearing any. Okay, let me see how you look.” Wellsie smiled as Beth danced around her father’s bedroom, red satin skirting flaring like fire around her.

“I’m going to cry.” Wellsie covered her mouth with her hand. “I know it. As soon as he sees you, I’m going to start crying. You’re just too beautiful, and this is the first happy thing since...I don’t know when.”

Beth stopped, the gown fluttering to rest. “Thank you. For everything.”

Wellsie shook her head. “Don’t be nice to me, or I’ll start with the tears right now.”

“I mean it. I feel like...I don’t know, I’m marrying into a family. And I’ve never really had one before.”

Wellsie’s nose reddened. “We are your family. You’re one of us. Now stop it, will you? Before you get me going.”

Someone pounded on the door.

“Is everything okay in there?” came a male voice from the other side.

Wellsie went over and put her head out, keeping the door mostly shut. “Yes, Tohr. Are the brothers all lined up?”

“What the—Have you been crying?” Tohrment demanded. “Are you all right? Dear God, is it the baby?”

“Tohr, relax. I’m a female, I cry at matings. It’s in the job description.”

There was the sound of a kiss.

“I just don’t want anything to upset you, *leelan*.”

“Then tell me the brothers are ready.”

“We are.”

“Good. I’ll bring her out.”

“*Leelan?*”

“What?”

There were low words spoken in their beautiful language.

“Yes, Tohr,” Wellsie whispered. “And after two hundred years, I’d mate you again. In spite of the fact that you snore and you leave your weapons all over our bedroom.”

The door shut, and Wellsie turned around. “They’re ready for you. Shall we?”

Beth tugged at the bodice. Looked down at her ruby ring. “I never thought I’d do this.”

“Life is full of wonderful surprises, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is.”

They walked out of her father’s bedroom and into Wrath’s chamber.

All the furniture had been emptied out, and where the bed had been, Wrath’s brothers were lined up against the wall. They were a magnificent sight, wearing identical black satin jackets and loose pants with jeweled daggers hanging on their hips.

There was a collective inhale as the assembly noticed her. The brothers shifted, looked down. Looked back at her. Bashful smiles actually broke out across those harsh faces.

Well, except for Zsadist’s. He glanced at her once and then just stared at the floor.

Butch, Marissa, and Fritz stood to one side. She gave them a little wave. Fritz took out a handkerchief.

And there was someone else in the room.

A tiny person draped in black from head to toe. Even the face was covered.

Beth frowned. Under the folds of black, there was a pool of light on the floor. As if the figure were glowing.

But where was Wrath?

Wellsie led her over until she was standing in front of the men. The one with the gorgeous hair, Phury, stepped forward.

Beth glanced down, trying to collect herself, and noticed that he had a prosthesis where one foot should have been.

She looked up into his yellow eyes, not wanting to stare. When he smiled,

she found herself calming a little.

His voice was rich, his words evenly spoken. “We’re going to do as much of this in English as we can, so you’ll understand. Are you ready to start?”

She nodded.

“My lord, come forward,” he called out.

Beth looked over her shoulder.

Wrath materialized in the hall doorway, and she put her hand to her mouth. He was resplendent, wearing a sashed black robe that was embroidered with dark thread. A long, gold-handled dagger hung at his side, and there was a circle of rubies set in some kind of matte-finished metal on his head.

As he strode forward, moving with the grace she loved, his hair flared in waves that fell past his thick shoulders.

He looked at no one but her.

When he was standing before her, he whispered, “You take my breath away.”

She started to cry.

Wrath’s face was worried as he reached out. “*Leelan*, what’s the matter?”

Beth shook her head and felt Wellsie tuck a Kleenex into her hand.

“She’s fine,” the woman said. “Trust me, she’s fine. Aren’t you?”

Beth nodded and blotted under her eyes. “Yes.”

Wrath touched her cheek. “We can stop this.”

“No!” she shot back. “I love you, and we’re going to get married. Right now.”

Some of the brothers laughed softly. “Guess we’re straight on that,” one of them said with respect in his voice.

When she was under control again, Wrath looked over at Phury and nodded.

“We’re going to make the presentation to the Scribe Virgin first,” the brother said.

Wrath took her hand and led her over to the robed figure. “Scribe Virgin, this is Elizabeth, daughter of the Black Dagger warrior Darius, granddaughter of the *princeps* Marklon, great-granddaughter of the *princeps* Horusman....”

The list went on for a while. When Wrath fell silent, Beth impulsively reached out to the figure, offering her hand.

There was a shout of alarm and Wrath grabbed her arm, hauling her back. Several of the brothers leaped forward.

“That’s my fault,” Wrath said, splaying his arms out as if to protect her. “I didn’t adequately prepare her. She meant no offense.”

A laugh—low, warm, and feminine—came out of the robes. “Fear not, warrior. She’s fine. Come here, female.”

Wrath moved aside, but stayed close.

Beth approached the figure, worried about every move she made. She could feel herself being surveyed.

“This male asks that you accept him as your *hellren*, child. Would you have him as your own if he is worthy?”

“Oh, yes.” Beth looked at Wrath. He was still tense. “Yes, I will.”

The figure nodded. “Warrior, this female will consider you. Will you prove yourself for her?”

“I will.” Wrath’s deep voice carried throughout the room.

“Will you sacrifice yourself for her?”

“I will.”

“Will you defend her against those who would seek to harm her?”

“I will.”

“Give me your hand, child.”

Beth reached out tentatively.

“Palm up,” Wrath whispered.

She flipped her wrist. The folds moved and covered her hand. She felt an odd tingling, like a low-level electrical charge.

“Warrior.”

Wrath put his hand out, and it too was obscured by the black robe.

Suddenly, warmth surrounded her, enveloped her. She looked at Wrath. He was smiling back at her.

“Ah,” the figure said. “This is a good mating. A very good mating.”

Their hands were dropped, and then Wrath had his arms around her and was kissing her.

People started to clap. Someone blew a nose.

Beth held on to her new husband as hard as she could. It was done. It was real. They were—

“Almost finished, *leelan*.”

Wrath stepped back, pulling the sash on his robe free. He took the garment off, revealing his bare chest.

Wellsie came up and took Beth’s hand. “It’s going to be okay. Just breathe with me.”

Beth glanced around nervously as Wrath knelt before his brothers and dropped his head. Fritz brought over a small table with the crystal bowl full of salt, a pitcher of water, and a small lacquer box on it.

Phury stood over Wrath. "My lord, what is the name of your *shellan*?"

"She is called Elizabeth."

With a rasping sound, Phury unsheathed his black dagger.

And bent down over Wrath's bare back.

Beth gasped and lunged forward as the blade descended. "No—"

Wellsie held her in place. "Stay here."

"What is he—"

"You're mating a warrior," Wellsie whispered fiercely. "Let him have his honor in front of his brothers."

"No!"

"Listen to me—Wrath is giving his body, himself, to you. All of it is yours now. That's the purpose of the ceremony."

Phury stepped back, and Beth caught a trickle of blood running down Wrath's side.

Vishous came forward. "What is the name of your *shellan*?"

"She is called Elizabeth."

As the brother leaned down, Beth shut her eyes and squeezed Wellsie's hand hard. "He doesn't need to do this to prove himself to me."

"Do you love him?" Wellsie demanded.

"Yes."

"Then you must accept his ways."

Zsadist stepped forward next.

"Easy, Z," Phury said softly, staying close beside his twin.

Oh, God, not more.

The brothers came forward again and again, asking him the question.

When they were finished, Phury took the pitcher of water and poured it into the bowl of salt. Then he dumped the thick, briny liquid on Wrath's back.

Beth weaved on her feet as she watched his muscles spasm. She couldn't imagine the agony, but except for bearing down onto the floor, Wrath didn't cry out. As he endured the pain, his brothers growled their approval.

Phury bent down and opened the lacquer box, taking out a pristine white cloth. He dried the wounds, then rolled the material up and put it back inside.

"Rise, my lord," he said.

Wrath stood. Across his shoulders, in an arch of Old English letters, was

her name in his skin.

Phury presented Wrath with the box. “Take this to your *shellan* as a symbol of your strength, so she will know that you are worthy of her and that your body, your heart, and your soul are now hers to command.”

Wrath turned around. As he came toward her, she anxiously scanned his face. He was fine. Better than fine. He was positively glowing with love.

Dropping to his knees before her, he bowed his head and held up the box.

“Will you take me as your own?” he asked, looking at her over the top of the sunglasses. His pale, blind eyes were sparkling.

Her hands shook as she accepted the box from him. “Yes. I will.”

Wrath rose, and she threw her arms around him, careful not to reach too far up his back.

A chant began with the brothers, a low beat of words she didn’t understand.

“Are you okay?” he said into her ear.

She nodded, wondering why couldn’t she have been named Mary. Or Sue.

But no, she had to be nine-letter Elizabeth.

“Can we not do that again?” she asked, burying her head into his shoulder.

Wrath laughed softly. “You’d better brace yourself if we have children.”

The chanting grew louder, deep male voices pumping.

She looked to the brothers, the tall, fierce men who were now a part of her life. Wrath pivoted and put his arm around her. Together, they swayed to the rhythm that swelled, filling the air. The brothers were as one as they paid homage in their language, a single powerful entity.

But then, in a high, keening call, one voice broke out, lifting above the others, shooting higher and higher. The sound of the tenor was so clear, so pure, it brought shivers to the skin, a yearning warmth to the chest. The sweet notes blew the ceiling off with their glory, turning the chamber into a cathedral, the brothers into a tabernacle.

Bringing the very heavens close enough to touch.

It was Zsadist.

His eyes closed, his head back, his mouth wide open, he sang.

The scarred one, the soulless one, had the voice of an angel.

Chapter Forty-six

During the wedding dinner, Butch went easy on the alcohol. It wasn't hard. He was too busy enjoying Marissa's company.

As well as watching Beth with her new husband. God, she was so happy. And that mean-ass-looking vampire she'd signed on for was just the same. He wouldn't let go of her, couldn't stop staring at her. All night long, he'd had her sitting on his lap at the table, feeding her from his hand while he stroked her neck.

As the party wound down, Marissa stood up from her chair. "I have to go back to my brother's. He's expecting me for dinner, actually."

So that was why she hadn't eaten anything.

Butch frowned, not wanting her to go. "When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow night?"

Damn, that was forever.

He put his napkin down. "Well, I'll be here. Waiting for you."

Jeez, talk about whipped, he thought.

Marissa said her good-byes, and then disappeared.

Butch reached for his wineglass and tried to pretend his hand wasn't shaking. The whole blood/fang thing he could almost handle. The poofing stuff was going to take some time.

Ten minutes later, he realized he was sitting at the table alone.

He had no interest in going home. In the space of a day, he'd managed to shelve his real life, just push it into a corner of his mind. And like a gadget that had been broken, he had no interest in pulling it back out, examining it, using it again.

He looked around at all the chairs and thought of the people—er, vampires—who'd filled them.

He was an outsider in their world. An interloper.

Although it wasn't like being the odd man out was a new one for him. The other cops had been good guys, but he'd never been more than work-tight with them, even José. He'd never gone over to the de la Cruzes' for dinner or anything.

As he stared at the empty plates and the half-full wineglasses, he realized he had nowhere to go. Nowhere he wanted to be. The isolation had never bothered him before. Actually, it had made him feel safer somehow. So it was kind of funny that being on his own didn't seem like such a great thing now.

"Yo, cop. We're heading for Screamer's. You wanna come?"

Butch looked up at the doorway. Vishous was in the hall with Rhage and Phury behind him. The vampires had expectant looks on their faces, like they honestly wanted to hang with him.

Butch found himself grinning like the new kid who didn't have to sit alone at lunch after all.

"Yeah, I could do with a bar crawl."

As he stood up, he wondered if he should get casual. The brothers had changed into leathers, but he was loath to let the suit go. He loved the thing.

Screw it. He liked the threads; he was going to wear the threads. Even if they weren't really him.

Butch buttoned the jacket, smoothing it down over his chest. He checked to make sure the handkerchief was still in a perfect fold.

"Come on, cop, you're fabulous," Rhage said with a burning smile. "And I'm itching for some company, know what I mean?"

Yeah, he could guess.

Butch came around the table. "'Cept I gotta warn you boys. Some folks I sent up the river, they hang at Screamer's. Might get ugly."

Rhage clapped him on the back. "Why do you think we want you to come?"

"Hell, yeah." V grinned and pulled his Sox cap down low. "Bar fight's a perfect chaser to some Grey Goose."

Butch rolled his eyes and then looked at Phury seriously. "Where's your boy?"

Phury stiffened. "Z's not coming."

Good. Butch had no problem going out with the others. He was sure that if they were going to kill him, he'd be in the ground by now. But that Zsadist guy...you had to wonder when he was going to lose it. And what he was

going to take out with him when he did.

But man, he could sing.

As they headed to the front door, Butch murmured, “Helluva set of pipes on that SOB. Some serious beautiful.”

The brothers nodded, and Rhage slipped a meaty arm around Phury’s shoulders. Phury’s head dipped down low for a moment, as if he were carrying something heavy and was desperate to give his back a rest.

They went outside, heading toward a black Escalade ESV. Its lights flashed when the security system was disarmed.

“Oh, damn. I forgot.” Butch pulled up short. The vampires stopped and looked at him. “Shotgun!”

As he bolted around the car, Phury and Rhage snapped into gear while cursing him to hell and back. On the other side, he got an argument, but his hand was on the door, and he wasn’t budging.

“Humans ride in the back!”

“On the hood!”

“Listen, bloodsuckers, I called it—”

“V, I’m going to bite him!”

Vishous’s laughter cut through the thick night air as he slid behind the steering wheel. His first move was to crank the stereo so loud, the entire SUV pulsed.

Notorious BIG’s “Hypnotize.”

And they could hear Biggie in Montreal, Butch thought as he climbed in.

“Damn, my brother,” Rhage said, getting into the back. “This a new system?”

“Worship me, gentlemen.” V lit a hand-rolled. Flipped the gold lighter shut. “And I might let you play with the buttons.”

“That’d almost be worth the ass-kissing.”

The headlights came on.

And Zsadist walked into the beams.

Phury immediately opened his door and made room. “You gonna bounce with us, after all?”

Zsadist gave Butch a nasty stare as he slid into the back, but Butch didn’t take it personally. The vampire didn’t look happy to see any of the others, either.

V threw them into reverse and gunned it.

The conversation kept up in spite of the music, but the atmosphere had

changed.

Which made sense, considering there was now a live grenade in the car.

Butch glanced back at Zsadist. Black eyes glittered in return. The smile on the vampire's face was greedy for sin and ready for evil.

Havers lowered his fork as Marissa entered the dining room. He'd been worried when she was not at the table, but afraid to check her rooms. In his current frame of mind, he wouldn't have handled her being gone at all well.

"Forgive my tardiness," she said, kissing him on the cheek. She settled into her chair like a bird, arranging herself and her dress with grace. "I'm hoping we can talk."

What was that smell on her? he wondered.

"This lamb looks wonderful," she murmured as Karolyn brought in another plate of food.

Aftershave, he thought. His sister smelled like aftershave. She had been with a male.

"Where did you spend the evening?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Darius's."

He laid his napkin on the table and got to his feet. His rage was so complete, it rendered him curiously numb.

"Havers, why are you leaving?"

"As you can see, I am finished eating. I bid you good rest, sister."

She grabbed his hand. "Won't you stay?"

"I have something to take care of."

"Surely it can wait." Her eyes implored him.

"No, no longer."

Havers went into the front hall, taking pride in how calm he was. Shoring up his nerve, he dematerialized.

As he took shape again, he shuddered.

Parts of downtown were foul. Truly foul.

The alley he'd chosen was right next to one of the clubs, Screamer's. He'd heard from some of the civilian vampires whom he had treated that the brothers frequented the place. As he considered the human crowd waiting to get in, he could see why. They were an aggressive herd, reeking of lust. Depravity.

Up to the brothers' low standards for companionship, no doubt.

Havers started to lean back against the building, but thought better of it. The bricks were filthy and dripping with some kind of condensation. He could well imagine what kind of culture might be running on the slime.

He looked up and down the alley. Sooner or later, he would find what he was looking for.

Or it would find him.

Mr. X locked his front door and stepped out into the night. He was pleased with the way the ceremony had gone. Billy had been shocked as hell, to say the least, but he'd pressed through the initiation. Especially when he'd learned it was either that or he was going to be killed on the table.

God, the expression on Billy's face when he'd seen the Omega had been priceless. Nobody expected evil to look like that, and you could almost be fooled. Well, at least until the Omega's gaze fell upon you. Then you got a taste of your own death.

A little sip with the promise of a whole six-pack.

When it was over, Mr. X had carried Billy to the house, and Riddle was resting in the guest room. Kind of. He was throwing up right now, and that would last for the next couple of hours, while the Omega's blood subjugated what had been pumping in Billy's veins for his eighteen years of life. Riddle also had a chest wound. The raw gash ran from his throat down to his sternum, the skin having been soldered shut by the Omega's fingertip. That was going to hurt like hell, at least until the morning. By nightfall tomorrow, however, he'd be strong enough to go out.

Mr. X got in the Hummer and headed south. He'd told one of the prime squadrons to cover the downtown area, and he wanted to watch them in action. He hated to admit it, but perhaps Mr. O had a point about motivation. Besides, he needed to see how the group functioned in a battle situation. With Mr. M's demise, he was toying with letting Riddle fill out the ranks, eventually, but he wanted a sense of the squadron's current dynamics before he made any decisions.

Billy also needed to be assessed. Having trained him in the martial arts, Mr. X was confident in Riddle's fighting skills. He just wasn't sure how the guy would react to his first kill. Mr. X suspected it would be with excitement, but you never knew. He certainly hoped Riddle would make him proud.

Mr. X smiled, amending himself.

He hoped Mr. R would make him proud.

Havers was getting antsy. The night-dwelling humans presented no threat to him, but he couldn't stomach their vices. In the back of the alley, two were necking, or perhaps going even further, and one was smoking crack. Between the grunting and the sickening smell, Havers was dying to get home.

"Well, aren't you the fancy one."

Havers shrank back. The human female in front of him was dressed for sex, a narrow spandex strip covering her breasts, her skirt so high it barely covered her crotch.

A walking advertisement for penile implantation. His skin crawled.

"You looking for a date?" she asked, running a hand over her stomach, and then through her greasy short hair.

"No, thank you." He walked backward, going deeper into the alley.

"Thank you very much. No."

"And a gentleman, too."

Good lord, she was going to touch him.

He put his hands up. Kept moving away. The farther he got down the alley, the louder the music became, as if he were getting close to a back door.

"Please leave me," he said as some god-awful, obscenity-laden song flared.

Suddenly, the woman paled and took off as if she were running from a crime scene.

"What the hell are you doing here?" The male voice behind him was a dark, nasty one.

Havers turned around slowly. His heart started to pound. "Zsadist."

Chapter Forty-seven

Wrath had no interest in whoever was pounding on the door of his chamber. He had his arm wrapped around his *shellan*'s waist and his head tucked into her neck. He was going nowhere unless someone was half-dead.

“Damn it.” He shot out of bed, grabbed his sunglasses, and stalked naked across the room.

“Wrath, don’t hurt them,” Beth said with amusement. “If they’re bothering you tonight, they probably have a good reason.”

He took a deep breath before throwing open the door. “You’d better be bleeding—” He frowned. “Tohr.”

“We have a problem, my lord.”

Wrath cursed and nodded, but didn’t invite the brother in. Beth was naked in that bed.

He pointed across the hall. “Wait there.”

Wrath threw on some boxers, kissed Beth, and locked his chamber. Then he went into Darius’s room.

“What’s up, brother?” He wasn’t happy about the interruption, or that some type of shit had wings and was airborne. But it was good that Tohr had come. Maybe things were thawing between them.

Tohr leaned back against D’s desk. “I went to Screamer’s to meet the brothers. I got there late.”

“So you missed Rhage working out some chick in a dark corner? Pity.”

“I saw Havers in an alley.”

Wrath frowned. “What was the good doctor doing in that part of town?”

“Asking Zsadist to kill you.”

Wrath quietly closed the door. “You heard this? Clearly?”

“I did. There was a lot of money on the table.”

“What was Z’s response?”

“He said he’d do it for free. I left and came here immediately in case he moved on you right away. You know how he works. He’s not going to take his time about it.”

“Yeah, he’s efficient. It’s one of his strengths.”

“And we’ve only got a half hour until daybreak. Not enough to do anything offensively tonight unless he shows up here in the next ten minutes.”

Wrath looked at the floor, putting his hands on his hips. By vampire law, Z was now under a death sentence for threatening the king’s life.

“He’ll have to be put down for this.” And if the brotherhood didn’t take care of the job, the Scribe Virgin would.

Man, Phury. The brother was not going to take this well.

“This is gonna kill Phury,” Tohr murmured.

“I know.”

And then Wrath thought of Marissa. Havers was also dead for all intents and purposes, and the loss of him was going to rip her apart.

He shook his head, dreading that he was going to have to kill someone she loved so much after everything she’d been through already as his *shellan*.

“The brotherhood needs to be told,” he said, finally. “I will call them.”

Tohr pushed off the edge of the desk. “Listen, do you want Beth to come stay with me and Wellsie until this is finished? She might be safer at our house.”

Wrath glanced up. “Thanks, Tohr. I would. I’ll send her over as soon as the sun sets tonight.”

Tohrment nodded and walked to the door.

“Tohr?”

The brother looked over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Before I mated Beth, I was sorry for what I said to you. About you and Wellsie and how devoted you are to her. Now...I, ah, I understand firsthand. Beth is everything to me. More important even than the brotherhood.” Wrath cleared his throat, unable to go on.

Tohr came forward and put his hand out. “You are forgiven, my lord.”

Wrath grabbed the outstretched palm and yanked his brother into his arms. They clapped each other on the back hard.

“And Tohr? I want you to know something, but you’ve got keep it from the brothers for now. After Darius’s death is avenged, I’m stepping aside.”

Tohr frowned. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not fighting anymore.”

“What the hell? Like you’re taking up knitting or something?” Tohr pushed a hand through his short hair. “How are we going to—”

“I want you to lead the brothers.”

Tohr’s mouth fell open. “What?”

“There has to be a total reconfiguration of the brotherhood. I want them centralized and run like a military unit, no more of this fighting-alone crap. And we need to recruit. I want soldiers. I want whole battalions of soldiers and training facilities, the best of everything.” Wrath eyed him steadily. “You’re the only one who can do the job. You’re the most levelheaded and stable of them.”

Tohr shook his head. “I can’t...Christ, I can’t do that. I’m sorry—”

“I’m not asking you. I’m telling you. And when I announce it at my first forum, it’s law.”

Tohr let out his breath in a low hiss. “My lord?”

“Yeah, well. I’ve been a rotten king. Actually, I haven’t done the job at all. But that’s going to change now. everything’s going to change. We’re going to build us a civilization, my brother. Or rather, rebuild one.”

Tohr’s eyes glistened, and he looked away, casually rubbing under them with his thumbs. As if there were nothing much going on, just a little irritation. He cleared his throat. “You’re ascending to the throne.”

“Yeah.”

Tohr dropped to the floor on one knee. Bowed his head.

“Thank God,” he said hoarsely. “Our race is whole again. You’re going to lead us.”

Wrath felt sick. This was exactly what he didn’t want. He simply couldn’t bear the potential for tragedy inherent in his being responsible for so many. Didn’t Tohr know he wasn’t good enough? Wasn’t strong enough? He’d let his parents die, had acted as a feeble weakling, not a worthy male. What had truly changed?

Only his body. Not his soul.

He wanted to walk away from his birth burden, just leave...

Tohr shuddered. “So long...We have waited so long for you to save us.”

Wrath shut his eyes. The desperate relief in his brother’s voice told him how badly a king was needed. How hopeless so many were. And as long as Wrath was alive, by law no one else could fulfill the role.

Tentatively, he reached out and placed his hand on Tohr’s lowered head.

The weight of what lay ahead of him, of them all, was too immense to comprehend.

“We’re going to save the race together,” he murmured. “All of us.”

Hours later, Beth woke up hungry. Slipping free of Wrath’s heavy arm, she put on a T-shirt and drew his robe around herself.

“Where are you off to, *leelan*?” Wrath’s voice was deep, lazy, relaxed. She heard his shoulder crack, as it did when he stretched.

Considering the number of times he’d made love to her, she was surprised he could move at all.

“I’m just going to get something to eat.”

“Call for Fritz.”

“He did quite enough last night and deserves the rest. I’ll be right back.”

“Beth”—Wrath’s voice was sharp—“it’s five in the afternoon. The sun is still out.”

She paused. “You said I might be able to go out during the day, though.”

“It’s theoretically possible—”

“So I might as well find out now.”

She was at the door when Wrath flashed in front of her. His eyes were fierce.

“You don’t need to know at this moment.”

“It’s no big deal. I’ll just head up—”

“You’re going nowhere,” he growled, his massive body throwing off all kinds of aggression. “I forbid you to leave this room.”

Beth closed her mouth slowly.

Forbid me? He forbids me?

We’re going to have to nip this one right in the bud, she thought, sticking her finger in his face.

“Back off, Wrath, and wipe that word from your vocabulary when you’re speaking with me. We may be married, but I’m not going to be ordered around like a child by you. Are we clear on this?”

Wrath closed his eyes. Worry bled through the harsh lines of his face.

“Hey, it’s going to be fine,” she said, stepping into his body. She hefted up his arms so they were around her shoulders. “I’ll just duck my head out into the drawing room. If anything happens, I’ll come right back down. Okay?”

He gripped her, holding her tight. “I hate that I can’t be with you.”

“You’re not going to be able to protect me from everything.”

The growl came back.

She kissed the underside of his chin and hit the stairs before he started arguing again. When she got to the top landing, she paused with her hand on the painting.

Down below, she heard the sound of a cell phone ringing. Wrath stayed in the doorway of the chamber, looking up at her.

She pushed the painting open a crack. Light pierced the darkness.

Down below, she heard him curse and shut the door.

Wrath glared at his cell phone until it went silent.

He paced. He sat on the couch. He paced some more.

And then the door opened. Beth was smiling.

“I’m good to go,” she said.

He rushed over, feeling her skin. It was cool, healthy. “Did it burn at all? Did you feel hot?”

“No. The brightness hurt my eyes when I went outside—”

“*You went outside?*”

“Yeah. Whoa.” Beth grabbed for his arm as his knees went out. “Dear God, you’re pale. Here, lie down.”

He did as he was told.

Holy Christ. She’d gone outside in broad daylight. His Beth had waltzed outside into the sunlight. Where he wouldn’t have been able to reach her at all. At least if she’d stuck to the drawing room, he might have had a chance....

She could have been incinerated.

Cool hands brushed some hair out of his eye. “Wrath, I’m fine.”

He looked up into her face. “I feel like I’m going to pass out.”

“Which is physiologically improbable. Because you’re lying down.”

“Damn, *leelan*. I love you so much I’m scaring the crap out of myself.”

When she pressed her lips to his, he put his hand on her neck, holding her in place. “I don’t think I can live without you.”

“Hopefully, you won’t have to. Now tell me something. What’s your word for husband?”

“*Hellren*, I suppose. The short version is just *hell*.”

She laughed softly. "Go figure."

His cell phone started ringing again. He bared his fangs at the damn thing.

"Answer it while I hit the kitchen," she said. "Do you want anything?"

"You."

"You already have me."

"And thank God for that."

He watched Beth leave, catching the sway of her hips and thinking that when she came back down, he wanted to take her again. He just couldn't get enough. Giving that female pleasure was the first addiction he'd ever had.

He grabbed the cell phone and didn't bother checking caller ID. "*What.*" There was a pause.

And then Zsadist's growl shot into his ear. "Aren't you full of the warm fuzzies. Mating day not going so good?"

Well, now. This was going to be interesting.

"You got something on your mind, Z?"

"I understand you called the brothers early this morning. Every one of them except me. You lost my number? Yeah, that has to be it."

"I know exactly how to reach you."

Z let out a frustrated breath. "Man, I get tired of being treated like a dog. I really do."

"Then don't act like one."

"Screw you."

"Yeah, you know what, Z? We've reached the end of the line, you and I."

"And what's brought this on?" Z laughed harshly. "Actually, save it. I don't care, and hey, we don't have time to shoot the shit anyway, do we? You gotta get back to your female, and I didn't call you to bitch about being out of the loop."

"So why are you on my phone?"

"You need to know something."

"From you?" Wrath drawled.

"Yeah, from me," Z hissed back. "Marissa's brother wants your head on a stick. And he was willing to pay me a couple million to do it. Later."

The phone went dead.

Wrath dropped his cell on the bed and massaged his forehead.

It would be nice to believe Z had called because he wanted to. Because maybe he'd made a commitment that he didn't want to keep. Because maybe

he'd finally found his conscience after a hundred or so years of total immorality.

Except he'd waited for hours, which meant Phury had probably worn him down. Talked him into fessing up. How else could Z have known that the brothers had been spoken with?

Wrath grabbed the phone and dialed Phury's number. "Your twin just called here."

"He did?" Total relief marked the brother's voice.

"You're not going to be able to save him this time, Phury."

"I didn't tell him you knew. Wrath, you gotta believe me."

"What I believe is that you'd do anything to take care of him."

"Listen to me, man. You gave me a direct order to say nothing, and I obeyed. It was hard as hell for me, but I said nothing. Z came to you on his own."

"Then why did he know the others had been called?"

"My phone rang and his didn't. He was guessing."

Wrath shut his eyes. "I gotta take him out, you know that. The Scribe Virgin will demand nothing less for his treason."

"He can't help that he was approached. He told you what happened. If anyone deserves to die, it's Havers."

"And he will. But your twin accepted an offer to kill me. If he can do that once, he can do it again. And maybe next time he won't come forward after you work him over, you feel me?"

"On my honor, he called you on his own."

"Phury, man, I'd like to believe you. But you shot your own leg off to save him once. When it comes to your twin, you will do and say anything."

Phury's voice vibrated. "Don't do it, Wrath. I beg you. Z's been better lately."

"What about those dead women, brother?"

"You know it's the only way he'll feed. He has to stay alive somehow. And in spite of the rumors, he's never killed the humans he feeds from before. I don't know what happened with those two prostitutes."

Wrath cursed.

"My lord, he doesn't deserve to die for something he hasn't done. This isn't fair."

Wrath closed his eyes. Finally, he said, "Bring him with you tonight. I'll give him an opportunity to speak in front of the brotherhood."

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Don’t be grateful. Just because he opens his mouth, it doesn’t mean he’ll be saved.”

Wrath turned the phone off.

He sure as hell wasn’t granting the audience for Zsadist’s sake. It was for Phury. They needed him in the brotherhood, and Wrath had a feeling the warrior wouldn’t stay unless he felt as if his twin had been dealt with properly. And even then, he might bolt anyway.

Wrath thought about Zsadist, picturing the male in his mind.

Havers had picked the right assassin. It was well-known that Z wasn’t tied to anyone or anything, so the good doctor was right to assume the warrior wouldn’t have a problem betraying the brotherhood. It was also clear to any observer that Z was one of the few males on the planet lethal enough to kill Wrath.

There was just one thing that was off. Z didn’t care about material possessions. As a slave, he’d never had any. As a warrior, he’d never wanted any. So it was hard to believe that money would motivate him.

Then again, he was perfectly capable of killing for fun.

Wrath froze as his nose started to tingle.

Frowning, he went over to one of the vents that brought fresh air into the chamber. He drew in a great breath.

A *lesser* was on the property.

The same one who’d been in the Hummer at Billy Riddle’s house.

Beth put some leftover filet mignon and a little horseradish sauce between two slices of bread. As she bit down, she was in total heaven. Food just tasted better.

While she ate, she looked out the kitchen window at a maple tree. Its dark green leaves were totally lifeless. Summer still. There wasn’t a breath of wind, as if the air itself had heat exhaustion.

No, something was moving.

A man was coming through the hedge, approaching the house from the property next door. Her skin prickled in warning.

Which was ridiculous. The guy had on a gray Caldwell Gas & Electric uniform and was carrying a clipboard in one hand. He didn’t look particularly threatening, what with his pale hair and his relaxed demeanor. He was big,

but he moved casually, just another bored meter reader who was wishing he had a desk job because of all the heat.

The phone on the wall rang and she jumped.

She reached over and picked up, still keeping her eyes on the man. He stopped as he saw her.

“Hello?” she said into the receiver. The CG&E guy started walking again, coming up to the back door.

“Beth, get down here now,” Wrath barked.

At that moment, the meter man looked through the kitchen door’s glass panels. Their eyes met. He smiled and lifted his hand.

Chills went over her flesh.

He’s not alive, she thought. She wasn’t sure how she knew it; she just did.

She dropped the phone and ran.

There was a crashing noise behind her as the back door splintered, and then she heard popping sounds. Something hit her in the shoulder with a sting. And then she felt another prick of pain.

Her body began to slow.

She fell facedown onto the kitchen tile.

Wrath yelled as he felt Beth hit the floor. Bolting up the stairwell, he burst into the drawing room.

The sun hit his skin and burned like a chemical spill, forcing him back into the darkness. He flashed down to his chamber, picked up the phone, and called upstairs. It rang and rang and rang.

His breath pumped in and out of his mouth, his chest moving in a series of rough contractions.

Trapped. He was trapped. He was trapped downstairs while she was...

He let out a roar that was her name.

He could sense her aura dimming. She was being taken away, taken somewhere away from him.

Fury poured out of his heart, a black, deep freeze that made the mirror in the bathroom fracture in a series of cracking sounds.

Fritz picked up. “We’ve been broken into! Butch is—”

“Get me the cop!” Wrath screamed.

Butch came on the line a moment later. He was breathless. “I couldn’t

catch whoever it was—”

“Did you see Beth?”

“Isn’t she with you?”

Wrath let out another roar, feeling the walls press in around him. He was utterly helpless, caged by the sunlight that washed over the earth above him.

He forced himself to breathe deeply. Only managed one breath before he went back to panting.

“Cop, I need you. I need...you.”

Chapter Forty-eight

Mr. X floored the minivan. He couldn't believe it.

He absolutely couldn't believe it.

He had the queen. He had abducted the queen.

This was the chance of a *lesser's* lifetime. And it had happened so smoothly, as if it was all meant to be.

When he'd approached the house, he'd merely been on a scouting mission. It had seemed far too coincidental that the address the vampire had given him last night in the alley was the same as that of the warrior he'd blown up. After all, why would the Blind King hang around the mansion of a dead warrior?

Assuming it had to be a setup, Mr. X had fully armed himself and gone to Darius's before dark. He'd wanted to survey the house's exterior, see if any of the upstairs windows were blacked out, and check the cars in the drive.

But then he'd noticed the dark-haired woman in the kitchen. With the Saturnine Ruby on her finger. The queen's ring.

Mr. X still couldn't fathom why she was able to go around in the daylight. Unless she was part human. Although what were the chances of that?

At any rate, he hadn't hesitated. Even though he hadn't planned on infiltrating the place, he'd broken down the door, surprised and grateful when the security system didn't go off. The woman had been quick on her feet, but not quick enough, and the darts had worked perfectly now that he'd calibrated the dosage correctly.

He glanced into the back.

She was out cold on the minivan's floor.

This evening was going to be intense. There was no doubt that her male would come after her. And because the Blind King's blood was surely in her

veins, he'd be able to find his mate no matter where Mr. X took her.

Thank God it was still daylight and he had time to fortify his barn.

And he was tempted to call in for reinforcements. Though he was confident in his skills, he knew what the Blind King was capable of. Total destruction of the property, a complete razing of the house, the barn, and everything in them, would be the very least of it.

The problem was, if Mr. X summoned other members, he'd have to pierce the veil of his infallibility.

Besides, he did have his new recruit.

No, he would do this without a lot of hangers-on. Anything that drew breath could be killed, even that warrior. And Mr. X was willing to bet that, with the female as a bargaining chip, he had some serious leverage.

Undoubtedly, the king would trade himself for the safety of his queen.

Mr. X chuckled. Mr. R was going to have one hell of a first night.

Butch left the chamber and ran up to the guest room he and Vishous had crashed in again.

V was pacing, trapped on the second floor because there was no way to get downstairs without being hit with light. Clearly, the mansion was meant for use as a private residence, not as a battle station.

And the defect was a serious problem in this kind of emergency.

“What’s happening?” V demanded.

“Your man Wrath’s in one hell of a state, but he managed to tell me about the guy you met in the Hummer last night. That blond sounds like an instructor I met a couple of days ago at a local martial-arts academy. I’m heading there now.”

Butch grabbed for the keys to the unmarked.

“Take this, man.” Vishous threw something into the air.

Butch caught the gun with a swipe of his hand. Checked the chamber. The Beretta was fully loaded, but with nothing he’d ever seen before.

“What the hell kind of bullets are these?” They were black and transparent at the tips, gleaming like they had oil inside.

“You’re not going after a human, cop. If one of those *lessers* comes at you, you shoot them in the chest, got it? Don’t pussyfoot around, even if it’s broad daylight. You go right for their chest.”

Butch looked up. He knew he was crossing a line if he took the gun,

going over to another side of the world.

“How will I know them, V?”

“They smell sweet, like baby powder, and they’ll look right through you, right into your soul. They tend to have pale hair, eyes, and skin, but not always.”

Butch tucked the semiautomatic into his waistband. And put his old life into the ground permanently.

Funny, the decision was an easy one.

“You clear on this, cop?” Vishous clapped him on the arm.

“Yeah.”

As Butch bolted for the door, V said something in a foreign language.

“What?” Butch asked.

“Just aim straight, true?”

“I’ve never missed yet.”

Chapter Forty-nine

Marissa couldn't wait to see Butch. She'd been thinking about him all day long, and it was finally time to go to him.

Except even though she was in a rush, she was going to stop on her way out and speak with Havers. She'd waited for him to come back home the night before, passing the time by helping out the nurses in the clinic and then reading in her room. Finally, she'd given up and left him a note on his bed, asking him to come find her when he got in. He hadn't stopped by, however.

And this failure of communication had gone on long enough.

She went to the door of her bedroom, surprised when it wouldn't open. She frowned. The handle wouldn't move. She tried again, jiggling the thing, then throwing her strength into the brass. It was jammed or locked.

And her bedroom walls were lined with steel, so she couldn't dematerialize.

"Hello!" she called out, banging on the door. "Hello! Havers! Someone! Would someone kindly let me out? Hello!"

She eventually gave up, a chill condensing in her chest.

As soon as she fell silent, Havers's voice drifted into her room, as if he'd been waiting on the other side the whole time.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way."

"Havers, what are you doing?" she said against the door panels.

"I have no other choice. I can't have you going to him anymore."

She made sure her words were loud and clear. "Listen to me. Wrath is the not the reason I've gone out. He's been mated to someone whom he loves, and I feel no ill will toward him. I've...I've met a male. Someone I like. Someone who wants me."

There was a long silence.

"Havers?" She hit the door with her fist. "Havers! Did you hear what I

said? Wrath is mated, and I've forgiven him. I wasn't with him."

When her brother finally spoke, he sounded as though someone were choking him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't give me a chance to! I've tried for the last two nights!" She banged the door again. "Now let me out. I'm supposed to meet my... someone at Darius's."

Havers whispered something.

"What?" she demanded. "What did you say?"

"I can't have you going there."

As the anguish in his voice snuffed out her anger, the back of her neck grew tight with alarm. "Why not?"

"It's no longer safe in that house. I...Dear God."

Marissa splayed her hands out flat. "Havers, what did you do?"

There was only more silence.

"Havers! Tell me what you have done!"

Beth felt something hit her face hard. A hand. Someone had slapped her.

With a groggy jerk, she opened her eyes. She was in a barn. Strapped down to a table with metal bands around her wrists and ankles.

And Billy Riddle was standing over her. "Wake up, bitch."

She struggled, straining against the cuffs. As he watched her, his eyes lingered on her breasts and his mouth pressed into a tight line.

"Mr. R?" Another male voice. "You do recall that you're out of the rape business."

"Yeah. I know." Billy's glare got worse. "Makes me want to hurt her just thinking about it."

The blond-haired man who'd abducted her came into Beth's line of sight. He had a shotgun on each shoulder, muzzles up.

"I'll let you kill her, how's that? She can be your first."

Billy smiled. "Thanks, sensei."

The blond man turned toward the barn's double doors. They were wide open, revealing the dimming light in the sky.

"Mr. R, we need to keep focused," he said. "I want these guns loaded and lined up with boxes of ammo on that work-table. We should put out knives, too. And go get the can of gasoline from the garage as well as the butane blow torch that's next to the Hummer."

Billy slapped her one more time. And then did as he was told.

Beth's mind turned over slowly. The drugs were still in her system, making everything seem like a dream, but with every breath she took, the fog was lifting. And she was getting stronger.

Wrath's violence was so deep, so vicious that it put frost on the walls of his chamber, and his breath came out in cloud bursts. The candles flickered slowly in the dense air, throwing off light, but no measurable heat.

He'd always known he was capable of great rage. But what he would bring down on those who had taken Beth from him would be for the history books.

There was a knock on the door. "Wrath?"

It was the cop, and Wrath willed the door open. The human seemed momentarily thrown by the temperature in the room.

"I...ah, I went to the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy. Guy's name is Joseph Xavier. No one's seen him today. He called in and got a replacement for his classes. They told me where he lived, and I did a drive-by. Condo on the west side of town. I broke in. It was clean. Too clean. Nothing in the fridge, nothing in the garage. No mail, no magazines. No toothpaste in the bathroom. No evidence that someone pulled out in a hurry, either. He may own it, but he doesn't live there."

Wrath was having a hard time concentrating. All he could think about was getting free of this godforsaken hole in the earth and locating Beth. Once he was outside, he'd sense her. His blood running through her veins was like a GPS chip. He'd be able to find her anywhere on the planet.

He grabbed his cell phone and dialed. As Butch made a move to go, Wrath said, "Don't leave."

The cop settled on the leather couch, eyes alert, body calm. Ready for anything.

When Tohrment's voice came through, Wrath pulled the trigger on the brotherhood. "At ten o'clock tonight, you will take the brothers and you will go to the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy. You will infiltrate and search the place, and then you will throw the security alarm. You will wait until the *lessers* arrive and then you will slaughter them and burn the building to the ground. Do you understand me? Ashes, Tohr. I want fucking ashes."

There was no hesitation. "Yes, my lord."

“Watch Zsadist. Keep him with you at all times, even if you have to chain him to your side.” Wrath glanced over at Butch. “The cop will monitor the building from now until sundown. If he sees anything of significance, he will call you.”

Butch nodded, already getting to his feet and heading to the door. “I’m on it,” he said over his shoulder.

There was a pause on the cell. “My lord, do you need us to help you find
___”

“I will take care of our queen.”

Chapter Fifty

For the next hour, Beth watched her two captors run around as if they were convinced Wrath was coming at any minute. Except how would he know where she was? It wasn't like the blond guy had left a ransom note. Or at least, not that she'd been aware of.

Pulling against the metal bands once more, she looked across the barn. The sun was just going down, the shadows long on the grass and the gravel drive. As Billy shut the double doors, she caught a last glance of the darkening sky and then watched as he slid home a series of thick bolts on the doors.

Wrath would absolutely look for her. She had no doubt of that. But surely it would take hours for him to find her, and she wasn't sure she had that kind of time left. Billy Riddle stared at her body with such hatred, she had to believe he would snap. Sooner rather than later.

"And now we wait," the blond man said, checking his watch. "It shouldn't be long. I want you armed. Put a gun on your belt and strap a knife on your ankle."

Billy was only too happy to gear up, and he had a lot to choose from. There were enough semiautomatics, shot guns, and sharp blades to outfit an army unit.

As he picked up a six-inch hunting knife, he turned and looked at her. Her palms, clammy before, ran wet with sweat.

He took a step forward.

Beth frowned, looking to the right just as the other two did. What was that sound?

Some kind of rumble. Thunder? A train?

Whatever it was, it was getting louder.

And then she heard an odd tinkling noise, like wind chimes. She glanced

across the barn. On the table where the ammunition was laid out, loose bullets were jumping around, knocking into one another.

Billy stared at his leader. "What the hell is that?"

The man took a deep breath as the temperature dropped a good twenty or thirty degrees.

"Get ready, Billy."

By now, the sound was a roar. And the barn was shaking so violently, dust from the rafters was falling, a fine snow that clouded the air.

Billy reached up to cover his head.

The barn doors splintered apart, blown open by a cold blast of fury. The whole building swayed under the force of the impact, beams and boards shifting, groaning.

Wrath filled the doorway, the air around him warping with vengeance, with menace, with the promise of death. Beth felt his eyes on her, and then a booming battle roar came out of him, so loud it hurt her ears.

From then on, Wrath reigned.

In a movement so fast her eyes couldn't track it, he went at the blond, grabbing the man and hammering him into a stall door. The blond wasn't even stunned and nailed Wrath with a hard uppercut to the jaw. The two battered and rammed and hit each other, slamming into walls, knocking out windows, breaking tables. In spite of the weapons they carried, they stuck with hand-to-hand combat, their faces harsh, their lips peeled back, their tremendous bodies doing damage and being injured by turns.

She didn't want to watch, but she couldn't turn away.

Especially as Billy grabbed a knife and launched himself onto Wrath's back. With a vicious twist, Wrath peeled the guy off of him and pitched Billy into the air. Riddle's body flew across the space to the other end of the barn, landing in a pile of arms and legs.

Billy struggled to his feet, dazed. Blood streamed down his face.

Wrath took tremendous kicks to the body, but he didn't slow. And he was able to hold the blond off long enough to flip open one of the metal bands that held Beth's wrists in place. She went to work on the opposite side, freeing her other hand.

"The dogs! Let loose the dogs," the blond man cried out.

Billy staggered from the barn. A moment later, two pit bulls came shooting around the corner.

They went right for Wrath's ankles, just as the blond unsheathed a knife.

Beth freed both her feet and popped off the table.

“Run!” Wrath yelled to her, ripping one dog off his leg while blocking a blow to the face.

Screw that, she thought, picking up the first thing she found. It was a ball-peen hammer.

Beth went after the blond man just as Wrath lost his balance and went down. Lifting the hammer as high as she could, she threw every ounce of strength that she had into the damn thing. And brought it down square on the back of the blond’s head.

There was a crack of bone and a burst of blood.

And then one of the dogs wheeled around and bit her in the thigh.

She screamed as its teeth tore through her skin and sank into her muscles.

Wrath tossed the *lesser*’s body off him and leaped to his feet.

One of the dogs was on Beth, its mouth around her upper leg. The animal was trying to roll her on to the ground so it could go for her throat. Wrath lunged forward only to pause. If he pulled the dog free, the thing was liable to take a whole hunk of her thigh with him when it went.

Vishous’s voice came to Wrath in a rush: *Two guards tortured will fight each other.*

Wrath tore the dog off his own ankle and threw it at the one that was attacking Beth. The other animal was knocked free. And the two pit bulls went after each other.

Wrath ran over as she fell. She was bleeding. “Beth—”

A shotgun went off.

Wrath heard a high whistle and felt his neck burn as though he’d been hit with a torch.

Beth screamed as he wheeled around. Billy Riddle repositioned the gun on his shoulder.

Fury made Wrath forget everything. He stalked toward the new recruit, not stopping even when the shotgun was up and pointed at his chest. Billy pulled the trigger, and Wrath moved to one side before diving forward. He took the *lesser*’s neck in his teeth and ripped it open. Then he snapped Billy’s head around until it cracked loose.

Wrath turned around to go back to Beth.

But fell to his knees instead.

Confused, he looked down at himself. There was a hole the size of a melon in his abdomen.

“Wrath!” Beth limped over.

“I’m...hit, *leelan*.”

“Oh, God.” She ripped the robe from her body, stuffing it against his stomach. “Where’s your phone?”

He lifted one hand feebly as he fell over on his side. “Pocket.”

She grabbed the cell and dialed the house. “Butch? Butch! Help! Wrath’s been shot in the belly! I—I don’t know where we are—”

“Route 22,” Wrath murmured. “Ranch house with a black Hummer in front.”

Beth repeated his words, pressing the robe into his wound. “We’re in the barn. Come fast! He’s bleeding.”

A low growl came from the left.

Wrath looked over just as Beth did. The surviving pit bull, bloodied, but still angry, was advancing.

Beth didn’t hesitate. She unsheathed one of Wrath’s daggers and crouched.

“Just get here, Butch. Now.” She flipped the phone shut and dropped it. “Come on, you ugly-ass dog. Come on!”

The dog circled, and Wrath could feel himself being eyed. For some reason the animal wanted him, maybe because he was bleeding so badly. Beth moved with the pit bull, arms held wide.

Her voice throbbed. “You want some of him? You’re going to have to get through me.”

The dog leaped at Beth, and as if she’d been trained to kill, she got down low and plunged the knife up into the animal’s chest cavity. The thing dropped like a stone.

She left the knife in place and scrambled back. She was shaking so badly, her hands were like birds as she lifted the cloth at his stomach.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he whispered, smelling her tears.

“Oh, Wrath.” She grabbed his hand, gripping it hard. “You’re in shock.”

“Yeah, probably. I can’t see you, where are you?”

“I’m here.” She put his fingers to her face. “Can you feel me?”

Barely, but it was enough to keep him going.

“I wish you were pregnant,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t want you to be alone.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Ask Tohr and Wellsie to take you in.”

“No.”

“Promise me.”

“I will not,” she said fiercely. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She was so wrong about that, he thought. He could feel himself slipping away.

“I love you, *leelan*.”

Beth started to sob. Her strangled cries were the last sound he heard as he fought against the tide and lost.

Beth didn’t look up when the cell phone started ringing.

“Wrath?” she said again. “Wrath...”

She put her ear to his chest. His heart was still working, but the beats were faint, and he was breathing, though slowly. She was desperate to help him, except she couldn’t do CPR. Not until his vitals crashed.

“Oh, God...”

The phone kept ringing.

She grabbed it off the dirt floor, trying to ignore the spreading pool of blood around Wrath’s body. “What!”

“Beth! It’s Butch. I’m with V. He and I are going to be there soon, but he needs to talk to you.”

There was a whirring noise in the background, as if a car engine was screaming.

Vishous’s voice was intense. “Beth, here’s what you need to do. Do you have a knife?”

She eyed the remaining dagger on Wrath’s chest. “Yes.”

“Get it. I want you to cut your wrist. Do it vertically down the forearm, not horizontally, otherwise you’ll just hit bone. Then put it to his mouth. It’s his best chance of surviving until we can get him help.” There was a pause.

“Put the phone down, honey, and get the knife. I’ll talk you through it.”

Beth reached over and extracted the blade from Wrath’s holster. She didn’t hesitate to slice her left wrist open. The pain made her gasp, but she didn’t dwell on the burning as she put the wound to Wrath’s mouth. She picked up the phone with her free hand.

“He’s not drinking.”

“You’ve already cut yourself? Good girl.”
“He’s not...he’s not swallowing.”
“Hopefully some’s getting down the back of his throat.”
“He’s bleeding from there, too.”
“Jesus...I’m driving as fast as I can.”

Butch spotted the Hummer. “Over there!”

Vishous drove right across the lawn, and they leaped from the car, punch running for the barn.

Butch couldn’t believe the scene inside. A couple of slaughtered dogs. Blood everywhere. One *really* dead body—Jesus, that was Billy Riddle.

And then he saw Beth.

She was wearing a long T-shirt that was covered with blood and dirt, her eyes gone mad as she knelt by Wrath’s body with one wrist to his lips. When she noticed them, she hissed and brought up her knife, prepared to fight.

Vishous went forward, but Butch grabbed his arm. “Let me go first.”

Slowly, Butch stepped over to her. “Beth? Beth, you know who we are.”

But the closer he got to Wrath, the crazier her eyes became. She pulled her wrist away from the man’s mouth, ready to defend him.

“Easy, girl. We’re not going to hurt him. Beth, it’s me.”

She blinked. “Butch?”

“Yeah, baby. It’s me and Vishous.”

She dropped the knife and started to cry.

“Okay, it’s okay.” He tried to get her into his arms, but she dropped back down to Wrath. “No, baby. Let V look at him, okay? Come on, it’ll just take a minute.”

She allowed herself to be pulled back. As Butch tore off his shirt and wrapped it around her waist, he nodded to V.

Vishous dropped to Wrath’s side. When he looked up from the other vampire’s stomach, his lips were tight.

Beth sank down, putting her wrist back in place. “He’ll be all right, won’t he? We’ll just move him to a doctor. To a hospital. Right? Vishous, right?” Desperation made her shrill.

And then suddenly, they weren’t alone.

Marissa and a distinguished, frantic-looking man appeared out of nowhere.

The guy went to Wrath's body and lifted the wad of blood-soaked satin.
"We've got to get him to my OR."

"My car's on the front lawn," V said. "I'll come back and finish things when he's safe."

The man cursed as he examined the neck wound. He looked at Beth.
"Your blood's not strong enough. Marissa, get over here."

Beth was fighting back tears as she lifted her wrist from Wrath's mouth and looked up at the blond woman.

Marissa hesitated. "Are you okay with my feeding him?"

Beth offered Wrath's dagger handle first. "I don't care who he drinks from if it will save him."

Marissa cut herself easily, as if she'd done it many times before. Then she lifted Wrath's head up and pressed the wound to his mouth.

His body jolted like it had been hooked up to a car battery.

"All right, let's move him," said the man who'd taken charge. "Marissa, you keep that wrist right where it is."

Beth took Wrath's hand as the men got him up off the barn floor. They carried him as gently as they could over to Vishous's SUV, laying him out flat in the back. Marissa and Beth got in with Wrath as Butch and Vishous took the front seat. The other man disappeared.

As the Escalade roared over the back roads, Beth stroked Wrath's arm, up and down his tattoos. The skin was cold.

"You love him so very much," Marissa murmured.

Beth looked up. "Is he drinking?"

"I don't know."

Chapter Fifty-one

In the surgical suite's anteroom, Havers snapped off his latex gloves and threw them into a bio-trash container. His back ached after having spent hours leaning over Wrath, stitching up sections of the warrior's intestine and fixing the wound in his neck.

"Will he live?" Marissa asked as she came out of the OR. She was weak from all the blood she'd given. Pale, but intense.

"We'll know soon enough. I hope so."

"As do I." She walked past him, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Marissa—"

"I know you are sorry. But I am not the one to whom you should offer your regrets. You might start with Beth. If ever she is ready to hear you."

As the door slid shut with a hiss, Havers closed his eyes.

Oh, dear God, the pain in his chest. The pain of deeds that could never be undone.

Havers sagged against the wall, pulling the surgical cap off his head.

Thankfully, the Blind King had a true warrior's constitution. He was stout of body, fierce of will. Although he wouldn't have survived without Marissa's nearly pure blood.

Or, Havers suspected, the presence of his dark-haired *shellan*. Beth, as she was called, had stayed by his side throughout the operation. And even though the warrior had been unconscious, his head had stayed turned toward her. She'd spoken to him for hours, until she had only a hoarse whisper left.

And she was still in there with him now, though she was so exhausted she could barely sit up. She'd refused to let her own wounds be examined, and she wouldn't eat.

She just stayed with her *hellren*.

With a lurch, Havers went over to the deep prep sinks. He gripped the

stainless-steel gunnels and stared at the drains. He felt like throwing up, but his stomach was empty.

The brothers were outside. Waiting for news from him.

And they knew what he had done.

Before Havers had gone in to operate, Tohrment had grabbed him around the throat. If Wrath died on the table, the warrior had vowed, the brothers were going to string Havers up by the feet and beat him with their bare fists until he bled out. Right in his own house.

No doubt Zsadist had told them everything.

God, if only I could go back to that alley, Havers thought. *If only I hadn't gone there at all.*

And he should have known never to approach a member of the brotherhood with such a treasonous request. Not even the soulless one.

After he'd made the offer to Zsadist, the brother had stared down at him with those terrifying black eyes, and Havers had immediately realized he'd made a mistake. Zsadist might have been full of hate, but he wasn't a traitor against his king, and he was offended that he'd been asked.

"I'll kill for free," Zsadist had growled. "But only if I were going after you. Get out of my sight before I get out my knife."

Rattled, Havers had rushed away, only to find himself being tracked by what he'd assumed must be a *lesser*. It was the first time he'd ever been close to one of the undead, and it was a surprise that the society member was so fair of hair and skin. Still, the thing was pure evil and ready to kill. Trapped in a corner in the alley, scared out of mind, Havers had started talking, as much to get the job he wanted done as to keep himself from getting slain. The *lesser* had been skeptical at first, but Havers had always been persuasive, and the word *king*, used liberally, had gotten its attention. Information had changed hands. The *lesser* had walked off. And the die was cast.

Havers breathed deeply, bracing himself to go out into the hall.

At least he could pledge to the brothers that he'd done the best he could with the surgery.

Although that hadn't been because he'd wanted to save his own life. Such an acquittal was impossible. He was going to be put to death for what he'd done; it was just a question of when.

No, in the OR, he'd performed to the best of his ability because it was the only way he could make up for the atrocity he'd committed. And because those five heavily armed males and that fierce human man waiting outside

had looked like their hearts were breaking.

But neither of those had been his truest motivator.

He'd been galvanized most by the burning pain in that dark-haired Beth's eyes. He knew well that horrified, impotent expression. He'd been wearing it himself as he'd watched his *shellan* die.

Havers washed his face and went out into the hall. The brothers and the human looked up at him.

"He has survived the surgery. Now, we have to see if he holds on."

Havers went over to Tohrment. "Do you want to take me now?"

The warrior stared down at him with hard, violent eyes. "We'll keep you alive to care for him. And then he can kill you himself."

Havers nodded and heard a soft crying sound. He looked over to see Marissa clasping a hand to her mouth.

He was about to go over when the human male stepped in front of her. The man hesitated before holding out a handkerchief. She took what he offered and then walked away from them all.

Beth put her head down on the far corner of Wrath's pillow. He'd been transferred to a hospital bed from the operating table, though he was not going to be moved into a normal patient room. Havers had decided to keep him in the OR in case he needed to be operated on again on an emergency basis.

The white-walled facility was cold, but someone had put a heavy fleece on her. Evidently, they'd also wrapped a blanket around the bottom half of her body, too. She couldn't remember who had been so kind.

As she heard a clicking sound, she glanced over at the mountain of machines Wrath was hooked up to. She measured each one of them without having much idea what the readouts meant. Provided that none of the alarms were going off, she had to imagine it was okay.

The sound came again.

She looked down at Wrath. And shot to her feet.

He was trying to talk, but his mouth was so dry, his tongue was thick.

"Shhh." She gripped his hand. Put her face in his line of vision in case he opened his eyes. "I'm right here."

His fingers twitched in hers. And then he faded away again.

God, he looked like hell. Pale as the ceramic tiles on the OR's floor. Eyes

sunk deep into his skull.

He had a thick bandage on his throat. His belly was wrapped in gauze and cotton pads, with drains leading out of the wound. There was an IV pumping fluids and painkillers into his arm and a catheter bag hanging off the bedside. A tangle of EKG wires were stuck on his chest, and an oxygen sensor was clipped onto his middle finger.

But he was alive. For now.

And he'd stirred to consciousness, even if it was just for a moment.

It was like that for the next two days. He would surface and sink, surface and sink, as if he had to keep checking that she was with him before he went back to the herculean job of healing his body.

Eventually, she had to sleep, so the brothers brought in a more comfortable chair, and someone gave her a pillow and a blanket. She woke up an hour later, still clutching Wrath's hand.

She ate when she was forced to, because Tohrment or Wellsie demanded that she did. And she took a shower in the anteroom. Quickly. When she got back, Wrath's legs and arms were flailing wildly and Wellsie had called for Havers.

The instant Beth took Wrath's hand, he calmed right down.

She didn't know how long the waiting would go on. But every time he came back to her, she drew a little strength.

She could wait. For an eternity, she could wait for him.

Wrath's mind came back online in a rush of activity. One minute he wasn't aware of anything; the next, his circuits started firing again. He didn't know where he was, and his eyelids were too heavy to open, so he did a quick scan of his body. Lower half felt okay, toes moved, legs were still attached. *Whoa, ouch.* His stomach felt like it had been punched with a tire iron. But his chest was solid. Neck was burning. Head was achy. Arms were good. Hands—

Beth.

He was used to feeling her palm against his. Where was she?

His eyes flipped open.

She was right beside him, sitting in a chair, her head down on the bed as if she were asleep. His first thought was that he shouldn't wake her up. She was obviously exhausted.

But he wanted to touch her. Needed to.

He tried to reach out with his free hand, but his arm felt like it weighed four hundred pounds. He struggled, willing the limb across his body, dragging it over the bedcovers inch by inch. He didn't know how long it took. Maybe hours.

But then he finally touched a lock of her hair. The silken feel of it was a miracle.

He was alive, and so was she.

Wrath started to cry.

The instant Beth felt the bed shudder, she woke up in a panic. The first thing she saw was Wrath's hand. His fingers were wrapped around a long strand of her hair.

She looked up at his face. Tears were rolling out of his eyes.

"Wrath! Oh, love." She leaned up to him, smoothed his hair back. He was totally distressed. "Are you hurting?"

He opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He started to panic, his eyes peeling open until the whites showed.

"Easy, love, take it easy. Just relax," she said. "I want you to squeeze my hand, once for yes, twice for no. Are you in pain?"

No.

She gently stroked the tears from his whiskered cheeks. "Are you sure?"

Yes.

"Do you want me to get Havers?"

No.

"Do you need anything?"

Yes.

"Food? Drink? Blood?"

No.

He began to get agitated, his pale, wild eyes imploring her.

"Shhh, it's okay." She kissed his forehead. "Just calm down. We'll figure out what you need. We've got plenty of time."

His eyes fixated on their linked hands and came back to her face. Then his gaze locked on their hands and returned again.

"Me?" she whispered. "You need me?"

He squeezed and wouldn't stop.

“Oh, Wrath... You have me. We’re together, love.”

Tears poured out of him in a mad rush, his chest quaking from the sobs, his breathing jagged and raw.

She took his face in his hands, trying to soothe him. “It’s all right. I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going to leave you. I promise you. Oh, love...”

Eventually he relaxed a little. The tears slowed.

A croak came out of his mouth.

“What?” She leaned down.

“Wanted to... save you.”

“You did. Wrath, you did save me.”

His lips trembled. “Love. You.”

She kissed him gently on the mouth. “I love you, too.”

“You. Go. Sleep. Now.”

And then he closed his eyes from exhaustion.

Her vision went blurry as she put her hand over her mouth and started to smile. Her beautiful warrior was back. And trying to order her around from his hospital bed.

Wrath sighed and seemed to sink into sleep.

When she was sure he was resting peacefully, she stretched, thinking the brothers would appreciate knowing that he’d woken up and been well enough to talk a little. Maybe she could find a phone and call the house.

When she peered into the hall, she couldn’t believe what she saw.

Right in front of the OR’s door, in a great, breathing barrier, the brothers and Butch were sprawled out on the floor. The men were fast asleep, looking as exhausted as she felt. Vishous and Butch were propped up against the wall next to each other, a little TV and two guns between them. Rhage was flat on his back, snoring softly, with dagger in hand. Tohrment had his head balanced on his knees. Phury was lying on his side, clutching a throwing star to his chest as if it soothed him.

Where was Zsadist?

“I’m over here,” he said quietly.

She jumped and looked to her right. Zsadist was fully armed, gun strapped on his hip, daggers crossed over his chest, length of chain shifting in his hand. His glittering black eyes regarded her steadily.

“It’s my turn to stand guard. We’ve been taking shifts.”

“Is it so dangerous here?”

He frowned. “You don’t know?”

“What?”

He shrugged and looked down the hall. One way, then the other. Scanning.

“The brotherhood protects what is ours.” His eyes refocused on her. “We would never leave you or him undefended.”

She sensed he was evading, but wasn’t about to press. All that mattered was that she and Wrath were safe as her husband’s body healed.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Zsadist looked down quickly.

How he hides from any warmth, she thought.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Four in the afternoon. It’s Thursday, by the way.” Zsadist brushed a hand over his skull trim. “So, ah, how’s he doing?”

“He woke up.”

“I knew he’d live.”

“Did you?”

His lip lifted in a snarl, as if he were going to make some kind of crack. But then he seemed to catch himself. He stared at her, his scarred face remote.

“Yeah, Beth. I really did. No shotgun’s ever going to keep him from you.”

And then Zsadist’s eyes shifted away.

The others started to stir. A moment later, they were all on their feet, staring down at her. Butch, she noted, seemed right at home with the vampires.

“How’s he feeling?” Tohr asked.

“Good enough to try to tell me what to do.”

The brothers laughed in a rush. The sound was one of relief. Of pride. Of love.

“Either of you need anything?” Tohr asked.

Beth looked at their faces. Each one was expectant. As if they hoped she would give them something to do.

This really is my family, she thought.

“I think we’re okay.” Beth smiled. “And I’m sure he’s going to want to see all of you soon.”

“What about you?” Tohr asked. “How’re you holding up? You want to take a break?”

She shook her head and pushed open the OR's door. "Until he can walk out of here on his own two feet, I'm not leaving that bedside."

As the door closed behind Beth, Butch heard Vishous whistle under his breath.

"That is one fine female, true?" V said.

There was a low, affirmative grumble.

"And someone you do not want to mess with," the brother continued.

"Man, you should have seen her when we came into that barn. She was standing over his body, ready to take the cop and me on with her bare hands if she had to. Like Wrath was her cub, you feel me?"

"Wonder if she has a sister?" Rhage asked.

Phury laughed. "You wouldn't know what to do with yourself if you ran into a female of worth."

"This coming from you, Celibate?" But then Hollywood rubbed the stubble on his chin, as if considering the ways of the universe. "Ah, hell, Phury, you're probably right. Still, a male can dream."

"He sure can," V murmured.

Butch thought of Marissa. He kept hoping she would come down, but he hadn't seen her since she'd left the morning after the surgery. She'd looked so drawn, so distracted, but it wasn't as if she didn't have enough on her mind. Her brother's death was coming soon. Sooner still as Wrath recovered.

Butch wanted to go to her, but wasn't sure if she'd welcome his company. He just didn't know her well enough. They'd had so little time together.

Was he a curiosity? Some fresh blood she wanted to taste? Something more?

Butch looked down the hallway, as if he could call her into being.

God, he ached to see her. If only to know she was okay.

Chapter Fifty-two

A couple of days later, Wrath struggled to sit up before the brothers came in. He didn't want them to see him flat on his back. The IV running into his arm and all the machines behind him were bad enough.

But at least the catheter had been out since yesterday. And he'd managed to shave himself and take a shower. Having his hair clean was a beautiful thing.

"What are you doing?" Beth demanded as she caught him moving around.

"Sitting up—"

"Oh, no, you don't." She grabbed the bed's remote and tilted up the head.

"Ah, hell, *leelan*, now I'm just lying down while sitting up."

"You're fine." She bent over to tuck the sheets in, and he caught sight of the curve of her breast. His body swelled. In the right place.

But the rush made him think of the scene he'd walked in on at that barn. Of her latched down to that table. He didn't care that *lessers* couldn't get it up.

He caught her hand. "*Leelan?*"

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you're all right?" They'd talked about what had happened, but still he worried.

"I told you. My thigh's healing up—"

"Not just the physical stuff," he said, wanting to kill Billy Riddle all over again.

Her face clouded for an instant. "I told you, I'll be fine. Because I refuse to have it any other way."

"You're so brave. So resilient. You amaze me."

She smiled at him and leaned down for a quick kiss.

He held her in place, talking against her lips. “And thank you for saving my life. Not just back in that barn. But for all the rest of my days and nights.”

He kissed her a little more deeply and was happy to hear her gasp of pleasure. The sound brought his erection back to life, and he brushed his fingertips over her collarbone.

“How ‘bout you hop on up here with me?”

“I don’t think you’re quite ready for that yet.”

“Wanna bet?” He took her hand and put it under the hospital sheets.

Her throaty laugh as she gripped him gently was yet another marvel. Just like her constant presence in his room, her fierce protection of him, her love, her strength.

She was everything to him. His whole world. He’d gone from being blasé about his death to being desperate to live. For her. For them. For their future.

“What do you say we give it another day?” she said.

“An hour.”

“Until you can sit up on your own.”

“Deal.”

Thank God he was a fast healer.

Her hand left his body. “Should I let the brothers in?”

“Yeah.” He took a deep breath. “Wait. I want you to know what I’m going to say.”

He tugged her down, so she sat on the edge of the bed.

“I’m leaving the brotherhood.”

She closed her eyes as if she didn’t want him to see how relieved she was. “Truly?”

“Yeah. I’ve asked Tohr to be in charge. But I’m not taking a vacation. I have to start ruling our kind, Beth. And I need you to do it with me.”

Her lids flipped open.

He touched her face. “We’re talking king and queen time. And I’m going to be honest with you. I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve got some ideas, but I’m going to need your help.”

“Anything,” she said. “Anything for you.”

Wrath could only stare at her in wonder.

God, she really knocked him out. Here she was, ready to take on the world with him even though he was flat on his ass in a hospital bed. Her faith in him was astounding.

“Have I told you that I love you, *leelan*?”

“About five minutes ago. But I never get tired of hearing it.”

He kissed her. “Get the brothers. Tell Butch to wait in the hall. But I want you to stay while I talk to them.”

She let the warriors in and then came back to his side.

The brotherhood walked up to the bed cautiously. Although he’d had a brief meeting with Tohr that morning, this was the first time he’d seen the rest of his warriors, and the first time they’d seen him. There was a lot of shallow coughing, like there were lumps being cleared out of throats. He knew what that felt like. He had a knot in his own.

“My brothers—”

At that moment, Havers came through the door. He stopped dead in his tracks.

“Ah, the good doctor,” Wrath said. “Come in. We’ve got some unfinished business, you and I.”

Havers had been in and out of the OR with regularity, but Wrath hadn’t felt up to dealing with the situation until now.

“It’s time,” he commanded.

Havers took a deep breath and walked up to the bed. He bowed his head.
“My lord.”

“I understand you tried to have me killed.”

To the male’s credit, he didn’t try to run. He didn’t prevaricate. And although his sorrow and his regret were clear, he did not argue for leniency.

“Yes, I did, my lord. I was the one who approached him.” He pointed to Zsadist. “And, when it was clear your brother would not betray you, the lesser.”

Wrath nodded, having already talked to Tohr about what had really gone down that night. Tohr had caught only part of Z’s response.

“My lord, you should know that your brother was ready to kill me just for asking him.”

Wrath eyed Zsadist, who was staring at the doctor like he wanted to mount the male’s head on a wall. “Yeah, I heard that didn’t go over too well. Z, I owe you an apology.”

The warrior shrugged. “Don’t bother. They bore me.”

Wrath smiled, thinking that was so like Z. Pissed off no matter the circumstance.

Havers looked around at the brothers. “Here in front of these witnesses, I accept the sentence of death.”

Wrath stared hard at the doctor. And thought of all those years the male's sister had suffered. Even though Wrath had never intended for her life to be so grueling, the outcome had been his fault.

"Marissa was the reason, wasn't she?" Wrath said.

Havers nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"Then I'm not going to kill you. You did it because of the way I treated your loved one. Vengeance is something I can understand."

Havers seemed to wobble from shock. Then he dropped the chart he was holding and collapsed by the bed, grabbing Wrath's hand and putting his forehead on it. "My lord. Your mercy knows no bounds."

"Yeah, the hell it doesn't. I am giving you your life as a gift to your sister. If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I'm coming after you with a dagger. We clear?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Now leave us. You can poke and prod me later. But knock before you come in, got it?"

"Yes, my lord."

As Havers scooted out the door, Wrath kissed Beth's hand. "Just in case we're busy," he whispered to her.

A low, collective chuckle filled the room.

He glared at the brothers to shut them up and then made his pronouncement. He knew he'd shocked the hell out of his warriors when there was a long silence.

"So are you down with Tohr, or what?" he asked the group.

"Yeah," Rhage said. "I can deal."

Vishous and Phury nodded.

"Z?"

The warrior rolled his black eyes. "Come on, man. What does it matter to me? You, Tohr. Britney Spears."

Wrath laughed. "Was that a joke, Z? After all this time, have you finally found your sense of humor? Hell, you're giving me another reason to live."

Z flushed and snarled a little while the others chided him.

Wrath took a deep breath. "And my brothers, there's something else. I'm ascending to the throne. As I've told Tohr, we need to rebuild. We need to revive the race."

The brothers stared. And then one by one, they came up to the bed and swore their fealty in the old language, taking his hand, kissing the inside of

his wrist. Their grave reverence shook him, moved him.

The Scribe Virgin was right, he thought. These were his people. How could he not lead them?

When the warriors were finished with their oaths, he looked at Vishous. “Did you get the jars of the two *lessers* from that barn?”

V frowned. “There was only one. The recruit that you and I met the night of your mating. I went back and stabbed the body while you were being operated on. Got his jar from the house.”

Wrath shook his head. “There were two. There were definitely two. The other one was the *lesser* who was driving that Hummer.”

“You sure he went down?”

“He was on the ground with a blow to the head.” Abruptly, Wrath sensed Beth’s disquiet and squeezed her hand. “Enough, we’ll talk about this later.”

“No, it’s all right—” she began.

“Later.” He kissed the back of her hand and stroked it across his cheek. Holding on to her eyes with his own, he tried to reassure her, hating the world he’d brought her into.

When she smiled at him, Wrath tugged her down for a quick kiss and then looked back at the brothers.

“One more thing,” he said. “You’re going to move in together. I want the brotherhood in one place. At least for the next couple of years.”

Tohr winced. “Man, Wellsie’s going to hate that. We just finished installing her dream kitchen.”

“We’ll work out something for you two. Especially because there’s a child on the way. But the rest of you are going to be roommates.”

There were grumbles. Serious grumbles.

“Hey, it could be worse,” he said. “I could make you live with me.”

“Good point,” Rhage said. “Man, Beth, if you ever need a break from him
—”

Wrath growled.

“What I was *gonna* say,” Hollywood drawled, “was that she could move in with all of us for a while. We’ll always take care of her.”

Wrath glanced up at Beth. God, she was so beautiful. His partner. His lover. His queen.

He smiled, unable to look away from her eyes. “Leave us, gentlemen. I want to be alone with my *shellan*.”

As the brothers filed out, they were laughing with masculine

appreciation. As if they knew exactly what was on his mind.

Wrath struggled on the bed, trying to force himself upright so that he bore the weight of his upper body on his hips.

Beth watched him the whole time, refusing to help.

When he was steady, he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He could feel her skin already.

“Wrath,” she said with warning as he beamed at her.

“Come on up here, *leelan*. A deal’s a deal.”

Even if all he could do was hold her, he just needed her in his arms.

Chapter Fifty-three

José de la Cruz shook the arson investigator's hand. "Thanks. I look forward to your written report."

The man shook his head as he glanced back at the charred remains of the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy. "Never seen anything like this. You'd swear some kind of nuclear bomb went off. Frankly, I don't know what to put in the file."

José watched the man walk over to his county truck and drive off.

"You going back to the station?" Ricky asked while getting into his own squad car.

"Not right now. I gotta head across town."

Ricky waved and headed out.

Alone at the site, José took a deep breath. The smell of the fire was pungent, even four days later.

As he headed to his unmarked, he looked down at his shoes. They were pale gray from the twelve inches of soot that covered the site. The stuff was more volcano ash than anything left behind by a normal fire. And the ruins were odd, too. Usually parts of a structure survived, no matter how hot the flames. Here, nothing remained. The building had been razed to the ground.

Like the arson investigator, he'd never seen anything of the sort.

José got behind the wheel, stuck the key in the ignition, and put the car in gear. He drove eight miles to the east, into a grit-tier part of town. A series of unimpressive apartment buildings appeared, urban weeds that grew up from the concrete and asphalt ground.

He stopped in front of one. Put the car in park. Turned off the engine. It was a long time before he could force himself out of the car.

Steeling his nerves, he walked over to the front entrance. A couple was coming out, and they held the door open for him. After going up three flights

of stairs, he headed down a ratty hall with carpeting that was flat and brown from having borne thousands of footsteps.

The door he was looking for had been repainted so many times, its sunken panels were almost flush.

He knocked, but did not expect any answer.

Picking the lock was the work of a moment. He pushed the door open.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. A body left for four or five days would smell by now, even in the air-conditioning.

But there was nothing.

“Butch?” he called out.

He closed the door behind him. The couch was covered with the sports sections of the *CCJ* and the *New York Post* from the previous week. There were empty beer cans on the table. In the kitchen, there were dishes in the sink. More empties on the counter.

José went into the bedroom. All he found was a bed with messy sheets and a lot of clothes on the floor.

He paused by the bathroom door. It was closed.

His heart started pounding.

Pushing it open, he fully expected to find a body hanging from the showerhead.

But there was nothing.

Homicide Detective Butch O’Neal had disappeared. Without a trace.

Chapter Fifty-four

Darius looked around himself. The peaceful mist of the Fade had dissolved, revealing a courtyard of white marble. From a fountain in the center, water fell in a twinkling dance, catching the diffused light and sending it back out in flashes. Songbirds called sweetly, as if both welcoming him and announcing his arrival.

So this place actually exists, he thought.

“Good day, Darius, son of Marklon.”

He dropped to his knees without turning around and lowered his head.
“Scribe Virgin. You honor me with an audience.”

She laughed softly. As she stepped in front of him, the hem of her black robes came into his view. The glow spilling out from under the silk was as bright as direct sunlight.

“Darius, how could I refuse? It is the first congregation you have ever asked for.” He felt something brush his shoulder, and the hair on the back of his head tingled. “Rise, now. I would see your face.”

He got to his feet, towering over the slight figure. He kept his hands clasped in front of him.

“So the Fade is not to your liking, *princeps?*” she asked. “And you want me to send you back?”

“I humbly tender such a request, if it would not offend. I have waited the required period. I would see my daughter. Just once. If it would not offend.”

The Scribe Virgin laughed again. “I must say, you make a better presentation than your king. Quite a way with words that warrior has not.”

There was a pause.

He used the time to think of his brothers.

How he missed Wrath. Missed them all.

But the one he wanted to see was Beth.

“She is mated,” the Scribe Virgin said abruptly. “Your daughter, she is taken by a worthy male.”

He closed his eyes, knowing not to question. Dying to hear. Hoping his Elizabeth would be happy with whatever mate she had chosen.

The Scribe Virgin seemed delighted at his silence. “Look at you, ne’er a query in sight. Such control you have. And for your etiquette, I would tell you what you pine to know. It is to Wrath. Who is ascending. Your daughter is queen.”

Darius dropped his head, not wanting to reveal his emotions, not wanting her to see his tears. Perhaps she would think he was weak.

“Oh, *princeps*,” the Scribe Virgin said softly. “Such joy and sadness in your breast. Tell me, the company of your sons in the Fade is not enough to feed your heart?”

“I feel as if I have left her behind.”

“She is no longer alone.”

“That is good.”

There was a pause. “And still you wish to see her?”

He nodded.

The Scribe Virgin moved away, over to the collection of birds that sat, trilling and happy, on a white tree with white blooms.

“What do you wish for, *princeps*? Are you seeking a visitation? Something quick? In her dreams?”

“If that would not offend.” He kept his words formal because she deserved the reverence. And because he hoped it would sway her.

The black robes moved and a glowing hand emerged. One of the birds, a chickadee, hopped onto her finger.

“You were killed in a dishonorable fashion,” she said, stroking the tiny bird’s chest. “And after having served the race well for centuries. You were an honorable *princeps* and a fine warrior.”

“That my deeds pleased you gives me great reward.”

“Indeed.” She whistled to the bird. The bird whistled back, as if answering. “What say you, *princeps*, if I were to offer more than you have asked for?”

Darius’s heart beat faster. “I would say yes.”

“Without knowing the gift? Or the sacrifice?”

“I trust in you.”

“And why could you not be king?” she asked wryly, putting the bird

back. She faced him. “Here is what I offer you. Life anew. An intersection with your daughter. A chance to fight once more.”

“Scribe Virgin...” He went down to the floor again. “I accept, knowing I do not deserve such favors.”

“I will not hold you to that answer. Here is what you will sacrifice. You will have no conscious memory of her. You will not be as you are now. And I require one token of faculty.”

He didn’t know what the last one was, but he wasn’t about to ask.

“I accept.”

“Are you sure? Do you not want time to consider this further?”

“Thank you, Scribe Virgin. But my choice is made.”

“So be it.”

She came over to him and those ghostly hands emerged from the black robe. At the same time, the veil over her face lifted of its own accord. The light was so blinding he could see nothing of her features.

As she took hold of his jaw and the back of his head, he trembled in the face of her strength. She could have crushed him on a whim.

“I give you life anew, Darius, son of Marklon. May you find what you seek in this incarnation.”

She pressed her lips to his, and he felt the same shock he had when he’d died. All his molecules exploding, his body splintering into air, his soul set free and soaring.

Chapter Fifty-five

Mr. X opened his eyes and saw a bunch of hazy, vertical lines. Bars?

No, they were chair legs.

He was lying on a rough pine floor. Sprawled out on his stomach. Under a table.

He lifted his chin and his vision went blurry again. *God, my head aches like it was cracked wide open—*

Everything came back. Fighting the Blind King. Getting hit by the female with something hard. Falling down.

While the Blind King had struggled with his gunshot wounds, and the female had been focused on her mate, Mr. X had crawled away to the minivan. He'd driven even farther out of town, to the mountains at Caldwell's very edge. By some miracle, he'd found his cabin in the dark and had barely managed to get himself inside before collapsing.

God only knew how long he'd been out cold.

Small windows in the log walls let in the early dawn glow. Was it the morning after? Somehow, he didn't think it was. He felt as if he'd lost days.

Moving his arm around carefully, he reached for the back of his head. The injury was raw, but closing.

With concentration and effort, he managed to drag himself upright so he was leaning against the table. He actually felt a little better with his head elevated.

He was lucky. *Lessers* could be permanently incapacitated from serious blows or gunshots. Not dead, but ruined. Over the decades, he'd found a number of his fellow members flopping around in hidden places, rotting, unable to heal back into fighting shape, too weak to stab themselves into oblivion.

He looked at his hands. They had the dried blood of the Blind King on

them and dirt from the barn's floor.

He had no regrets that he'd run from the scene. Sometimes, the best move a leader could make was to disengage from battle. When casualties were too high, and loss was virtually assured, the intelligent maneuver was to withdraw and fight another day.

Mr. X dropped his arms. He was going to need more time to recover, but he had to get hold of his men. Leadership vacuums in the Society were dangerous. Particularly for the *Fore-lesser* in charge.

The door to the cabin swung open and he looked up, wondering how he would defend himself before realizing it was too close to daylight for the intruder to be a vampire.

What filled the jambs made his black blood run cold.

The Omega.

"I've come to help you recover," it said with a smile.

As the door shut, Mr. X's body trembled.

Help from the Omega was more terrifying than any death sentence.

Epilogue

“The Tomb’s mansion. I’m telling you, that’s where we should go,” Tohr said, as he stabbed some roast beef off the silver tray Fritz held out to him. “Thanks, man.”

Beth looked over at Wrath, thinking that in the month since he’d been shot, he’d fully recovered. He was healthy and strong. Formidable as always. Arrogant. Loving. Impossible and irresistible.

As he settled back in his chair at the head of the table, he reached for her hand, stroking her palm with his thumb.

She smiled at him.

They’d been living in her father’s house while he recovered, working on plans for the future. And every night, the brotherhood came for dinner. Fritz was beside himself with glee from all the people coming and going.

“You know, that’s a damn good idea,” V said. “I could really wire that place tight. It’s isolated enough on that mountain. And built of stone, so it’s fireproof. If we throw some retractable metal shutters across all the windows, we could move around during the day. Which was a critical weakness in this house when...” He stopped. “And doesn’t it have extensive underground rooms? We could use them for training.”

Rhage nodded. “The place is also big enough. We could all live there without killing each other.”

“That depends more on your mouth than any floorplan,” Phury said with a grin. The warrior shifted in his chair, making room for Boo on his lap.

“What do you think?” Tohr asked Wrath.

“It’s not my call. As those buildings and facilities were Darius’s holdings, they have now passed to Beth.” Wrath looked at her. “*Leelan?* Would you consider letting the brothers use one of your houses?”

One of her houses. *Her* houses. As someone who’d never even owned an

apartment, she was having a little trouble coming to terms with everything that was now hers. And it wasn't only real estate. Art. Land. Cars. Jewelry. And the money she controlled was insane.

Fortunately, V and Phury were sharing their in-depth knowledge about the stock market with her. As well as teaching her about the ins and outs of bonds. T-bills. Gold. Commodities. They were amazingly good with money.

And very, very good to her.

She looked down the table at the men. "Whatever the brotherhood needs, they can have."

There was a rumble of gratitude, and wineglasses were lifted to her in salute. Zsadist left his on the table, but nodded in her direction.

She glanced at Wrath. "Except don't you think that we should live there, too?"

"You'd want to do that?" he asked. "Most females would prefer their own place."

"It is mine, remember? Besides, these are your closest advisers, the people you trust more than any others. Why would you want to be separated from them?"

"Hold up," Rhage said. "I thought we'd agreed we wouldn't have to live with him."

Wrath shot a glare at Hollywood and then looked back at her. "You're sure about this, *leelan*?"

"There's safety in numbers, right?"

He nodded. "But more exposure, too."

"We'd be in very good company, though. There is nobody I'd rather have protecting us than these wonderful men."

"Scuse me," Rhage interjected. "Is everyone else here in love with her?"

"Hell, yeah," V said, tipping his Red Sox hat. "Totally."

Phury nodded. "And if she lives with us, we get to keep the cat."

Wrath kissed her and looked at Tohr. "Guess we've got ourselves a home."

"And Fritz will come, too," Beth said, as the butler walked into the room. "Won't you? Please?"

The butler seemed tickled pink to be included, and he eyed the brothers with happiness. "Anywhere for you and the king, mistress. And the more to care for, the better."

"Well, we're going to have to get you some help."

V spoke up, addressing Wrath. “Listen, about the cop. What do you want to do with him?”

“Are you asking because he’s a friend of yours or a threat to us?”

“Both.”

“Why do I have a feeling you’re going to suggest something?”

“Because I am. He should come with us.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I have dreamed of him.”

The table fell silent.

“Done,” Wrath said. “But dreams or not, he bears watching.”

V nodded. “I will accept that responsibility.”

As the brothers started to make plans, Beth stared at her husband’s hand in hers, feeling an absurd urge to cry.

“*Leelan?*” Wrath said softly. “You okay?”

She nodded, marveling that he could read her so easily.

“I’m very okay.” She smiled at him. “You know something, right before I met you I was looking for an adventure.”

“Were you?”

“And I got more than that. I got a past and a future. A whole...life. Sometimes I don’t know how to handle the good fortune. I just don’t know what to do with it all.”

“Funny, I feel the same way.” Wrath took her face in his hands and put his lips on hers. “And that’s why I kiss you so often, *leelan*.”

She put her arms around his wide shoulders and nuzzled his lips with her mouth.

“Oh, man,” Rhage said. “Are we going to have to watch them smooch all the time?”

“You should be so lucky,” V muttered.

“Yeah.” Rhage sighed. “All I want is one good female. But I guess I’ll settle for quantity until I find her. Life just sucks, doesn’t it?”

There was a rolling swell of laughter. Someone pitched a napkin.

Fritz brought in dessert.

“Please, if you would,” the butler said, “no throwing the linens. Peaches, anyone?”

About the Author

J. R. Ward lives in the South with her incredibly supportive husband and her beloved golden retriever. After graduating from law school, she began working in health care in Boston and spent many years as chief of staff of one of the premier academic medical centers in the nation. Writing has always been her passion, and her idea of heaven is a whole day of nothing but her computer, her dog, and her coffeepot.

Visit her and the Brotherhood at www.jrward.com.

LOVER ETERNAL

*A Novel of the Black
Dagger Brotherhood*

J. R. Ward



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“This is the first installment in what promises to be a spectacular new series. Ms. Ward has created an edgy, dangerous, and sexy band of brothers that will rock your world.... If *Dark Lover* is any indication of what readers have in store, Ms. Ward will have us begging for more. Lovers of the genre will not want to miss this talented new author!”

—The Best Reviews

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Dedicated to: *You*.

In the beginning, we didn't hit it off, did we?

But then I realized the truth about you and I fell in love.

Thank you for letting me see through your eyes and
walk awhile in your boots.

You are just so...beautiful.

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Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns

Black Dagger Brotherhood (pr. n.) Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, brothers possess immense physical and mental strength as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the brotherhood upon nomination by the brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.

blood slave (n.) Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has largely been discontinued, though it has not been outlawed.

the Chosen (n.) Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males, but can be mated to brothers at the Scribe Virgin's direction to propagate their class. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the brotherhood, but that practice has been abandoned by the brothers.

doggen (n.) Member of the servant class within the vampire world. *Doggen*

have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years.

the Fade (pr. n.) Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.

First Family (pr. n.) The king and queen of the vampires, and any children they may have.

hellren (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.

leelan (adj.) A term of endearment loosely translated as “dearest one.”

Lessening Society (pr. n.) Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species.

lesser (n.) De-souled human who as a member of the Lessening Society targets vampires for extermination. *Lessers* must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, blushless, and pale-eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter into which their heart was placed after it was removed.

needing period (n.) Female vampire's time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female's transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.

the Omega (pr. n.) Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers, though not the power of creation.

princeps (n.) Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgin's Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.

pyrocan (n.) Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.

rythe (n.) Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him-or herself without defenses.

the Scribe Virgin (pr. n.) Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.

shellan (n.) Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.

the Tomb (pr. n.) Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of *lessers*. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against brothers. No one may enter except for members of the brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction.

transition (n.) Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, they must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and are unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.

vampire (n.) Member of a species separate from that of *Homo sapiens*. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot "convert" humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short-term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years, or in some cases even longer.

wahlker (n.) An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are revered for their travails.

Chapter One

“Ah, hell, V, you’re *killing* me.” Butch O’Neal mined through his sock drawer, looking for black silk, finding white cotton.

No, wait. He pulled out one dress sock. Not exactly a triumph.

“If I were killing you, cop, footwear’d be the last thing on your mind.”

Butch glanced over at his roommate. His fellow Red Sox fan. His...well, one of his two best friends.

Both of whom, as it turned out, happened to be vampires.

Fresh from the shower, Vishous had a towel wrapped around his waist, his chest muscles and thick arms out on display. He was pulling on a black leather driving glove, covering up his tattooed left hand.

“Do you have to go for my dress blacks?”

V grinned, fangs flashing in the midst of his goatee. “They feel good.”

“Why don’t you ask Fritz to get you some?”

“He’s too busy feeding your jones for clothes, man.”

Okay, so maybe Butch had recently gotten in touch with his inner Versace, and who’ve thought he’d had it in him, but how hard could it be to get an extra dozen silkies in the house?

“I’ll ask him for you.”

“Aren’t you a gentleman.” V pushed back his dark hair. The tattoos at his left temple made an appearance and then were covered up again. “You need the Escalade tonight?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Butch stuffed his feet into Gucci loafers, bareback.

“So you’re going to see Marissa?”

Butch nodded. “I need to know. One way or the other.”

And he had a feeling it was going to be *the other*.

“She’s a good female.”

She sure the hell was, which was probably why she wasn’t returning his calls. Ex-cops who liked Scotch weren’t exactly good relationship material for women, human or vampire. And the fact that he wasn’t one of her kind didn’t help the situation.

“Well, cop, Rhage and I’ll be throwing back a few at One Eye. You come and find us when you’re done—”

Banging, like someone was hitting the front door with a battering ram, brought their heads around.

V hiked up the towel. “Goddamn it, flyboy is going to have to learn how to use a doorbell.”

“You try talking to him. He doesn’t listen to me.”

“Rhage doesn’t listen to anyone.” V jogged down the hall.

As the thundering dried up, Butch went over to his ever-expanding tie collection. He chose a pale blue Brioni, popped the collar of his white button-down, and slipped the silk around his neck. As he strolled out to the living room, he could hear Rhage and V talking over 2Pac’s “RU still down?”.

Butch had to laugh. Man, his life had taken him to a lot of places, most of them ugly, but he’d never thought he’d end up living with six warrior vampires. Or being on the fringes of their fight to protect their dwindling, hidden species. Somehow, though, he belonged with the Black Dagger Brotherhood. And he and Vishous and Rhage were an awesome threesome.

Rhage lived in the mansion across the courtyard with the rest of the Brotherhood, but the troika hung out in the gatehouse, where V and Butch crashed. The Pit, as the place was now known, was sweet digs compared to the hovels Butch had lived in. He and V had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a galley kitchen, and a living room that was decorated in a win-some, postmodern, Frat-House-Basement style: a pair of leather couches, plasma-screen high-def TV, foosball table, gym bags everywhere.

As Butch stepped into the main room, he got a load of Rhage’s ensemble for the night: Black leather trench coat fell from his shoulders to his ankles. Black wife-beater was tucked into leathers. Shitkickers topped him out at six-eight or so. In the getup, the vampire was flat-out, drop-dead gorgeous. Even to a certified hetero like Butch.

The son of a bitch actually bent the laws of physics, he was so attractive. Blond hair was cut short in the back and left longer in the front. Teal-blue eyes were the color of Bahamas seawater. And that face made Brad Pitt look like a candidate for *The Swan*.

But he was no mama's boy, in spite of being a charmer. Something dark and lethal seethed behind the flashy exterior, and you knew it the minute you saw him. He gave off the vibe of a guy who'd smile while he set the record straight with his fists, even if he was spitting his own teeth out while he took care of business.

"What's doing, Hollywood?" Butch asked.

Rhage smiled, revealing a splendid set of pearly whites with those long canines. "Time to go out, cop."

"Damn, vampire, didn't you get enough last night? That redhead looked like serious stuff. And so did her sister."

"You know me. Always hungry."

Yeah, well, fortunately for Rhage, there was an endless stream of women more than happy to oblige his needs. And sweet Jesus, the guy had them. Didn't drink. Didn't smoke. But he ran through the ladies like nothing Butch had ever seen.

And it wasn't like Butch knew a lot of choirboys.

Rhage looked over at V. "Go get dressed, man. Unless you were thinking of hitting One Eye in a towel?"

"Quit clocking me, my brother."

"Then gitcha ass moving."

Vishous stood up from behind a table weighed down with enough computer equipment to give Bill Gates a hard-on. From this command center, V ran the security and monitoring systems for the Brotherhood's compound, including the main house, the underground training facility, the Tomb and their Pit, as well as the system of underground tunnels that connected the buildings. He controlled everything: the retractable steel shutters that were installed over every window; the locks on the steel doors; the temperatures in the rooms; the lights; the security cameras; the gates.

V had set up the whole kit and caboodle by himself before the Brotherhood had moved in three weeks ago. The buildings and tunnels had already been up since the early 1900s, but they'd been unused for the most part. After events in July, however, the decision was made to consolidate the Brotherhood's operations, and they'd all come here.

As V went to his bedroom, Rhage took a Tootsie Roll Pop out of his pocket, ripped off the red paper, and put the thing in his mouth. Butch could feel the guy staring. And he wasn't surprised when the brother started in on him.

"So I can't believe you're getting all dolled up for a trip to One Eye, cop. I mean, this is heavy-duty, even for you. The tie, the cuff links—those are all new, right?"

Butch smoothed the Brioni down his chest and reached for the Tom Ford jacket that matched his black slacks. He didn't want to go into the Marissa thing. Just skirting around the subject with V had been enough. Besides, what could he say?

She blew my doors off when I met her, but she's been avoiding me for the past three weeks. So instead of taking the hint, I'm heading over to beg like a desperate loser.

Yeah, he really wanted to trot that out in front of Mr. Perfect, even if the guy was a good buddy.

Rhage rolled the lollipop around in his mouth. "Tell me something. Why do you bother with the clothes, man? You don't do anything with your mojo. I mean, I see you turn down females at the bar all the time. You saving yourself for marriage?"

"Yup. That's right. Got myself tied in a knot until I walk down that aisle."

"Come on, I really am curious. Are you holding it for someone?" When there was only silence, the vampire laughed softly. "Do I know her?"

Butch narrowed his eyes, weighing whether the conversation would be over faster if he kept his mouth shut. Probably not. Once Rhage got started, he didn't quit until he decided he was finished. He talked the same way he killed.

Rhage shook his head ruefully. "Doesn't she want you?"

"We're going to find out tonight."

Butch checked his cash level. Sixteen years as a homicide detective hadn't lined his pockets with much to speak of. Now that he was hanging with the Brotherhood? He had so much of the green, he couldn't possibly spend it fast enough.

"You're lucky, cop."

Butch glanced over. "How you figure?"

"I've always wondered what it would be like to settle down with a female

of worth.”

Butch laughed. The guy was a sex god, an erotic legend in his race. V had said that stories about Rhage were passed from father to son when the time was right. The idea that he’d downshift into being someone’s husband was absurd.

“Okay, Hollywood, what’s the punch line? Come on, hit me with it.”

Rhage winced and looked away.

Holy hell, the guy had been serious. “Whoa. Listen, I didn’t mean to—”

“Nah, it’s cool.” The smile reappeared, but the eyes were flat. He sauntered over to the wastebasket and dropped the lollipop stick in the trash. “Now, can we get out of here? I’m tired of waiting for you boys.”

Mary Luce pulled into her garage, shut off her Civic, and stared at the snow shovels hanging on pegs in front of her.

She was tired, although her day hadn’t been strenuous. Answering phones and filing papers at a law office just wasn’t taxing, physically or mentally. So she really shouldn’t be exhausted.

But maybe that was the point. She wasn’t being challenged, so she was wilting.

Could it be time to go back to the kids? After all, it was what she was trained for. What she loved. What nourished her. Working with her autistic patients and helping them find ways of communicating had brought her all kinds of rewards, personally and professionally. And the two-year hiatus had not been her choice.

Maybe she should call the center, see if they had an opening. Even if they didn’t, she could volunteer until something became available.

Yes, tomorrow she would do that. There was no reason to wait.

Mary grabbed her purse and got out of the car. As the garage door trundled shut, she went around to the front of her house and picked up the mail. Flipping through bills, she paused to test the chilly October night with her nose. Her sinuses hummed. Autumn had swept out the dregs of summer a good month ago, the change of seasons ushered in on the back of a cold rush of air from Canada.

She loved the fall. And upstate New York did it proud, in her opinion.

Caldwell, New York, the town she was born and would most likely die in, was more than an hour north of Manhattan, so it was technically considered “upstate.” Split in half by the Hudson River, the Caldie, as it was

known by natives, was every midsize city in America. Wealthy parts, poor parts, nasty parts, normal parts. Wal-Marts and Targets and McDonald'ses. Museums and libraries. Suburban malls strangling a faded downtown. Three hospitals, two community colleges, and a bronze statue of George Washington in the park.

She tilted her head back and looked at the stars, thinking that it would never occur to her to leave. Whether that spoke of loyalty or lack of imagination, she wasn't sure.

Maybe it was her house, she thought as she headed for her front door. The converted barn was situated on the edge of an old farmhouse property, and she'd put in an offer fifteen minutes after she'd gone through it with a real estate agent. Inside, the spaces were cozy and small. It was...lovely.

Which was why she'd bought it four years ago, right after the death of her mother. She'd needed lovely then, as well as a complete change of scenery. Her barn was everything her childhood home had not been. Here, the pine floorboards were the color of honey, varnished clear, not stained. Her furniture was from Crate and Barrel, all fresh, nothing worn or old. The throw rugs were sisal, short-napped and trimmed with suede. And everything from the slipcovers to the drapes to the walls to the ceilings was creamy white.

Her aversion to darkness had been her interior decorator. And hey, if it's all a variation on beige, the stuff matches, right?

She put her keys and her purse down in the kitchen and grabbed the phone. She was told that *You have...two...new messages.*

"Hey, Mary, it's Bill. Listen, I'm going to take you up on your offer. If you could cover me at the hotline tonight for an hour or so that would be great. Unless I hear from you, I'll assume you're still free. Thanks again."

She deleted it with a *beep*.

"Mary, this is Dr. Della Croce's office. We'd like you to come in as a follow-up to your quarterly physical. Would you please call to schedule an appointment when you get this message? We'll accommodate you. Thanks, Mary."

Mary put the phone down.

The shaking started in her knees and worked its way up into the muscles in her thighs. When it hit her stomach, she considered running for the bathroom.

Follow-up. We'll accommodate you.

It's back, she thought. The leukemia was back.

Chapter Two

“**W**hat the hell are we going to tell him? He’s coming here in twenty minutes!”

Mr. O regarded his colleague’s theatrics with a bored stare, thinking that if the *lesser* did any more hopping up and down, the idiot would qualify as a pogo stick.

Goddamn, but E was a fuckup. Why his sponsor had brought him into the Lessening Society in the first place was a mystery. The man had little drive. No focus. And no stomach for their new direction in the war against the vampire race.

“What are we going—”

“We aren’t going to tell him anything,” O said as he looked around the basement. Knives, razors, and hammers were scattered out of order on the cheap sideboard in the corner. There were pools of blood here and there, but not under the table, where they belonged. And mixed in with the red was a glossy black, thanks to E’s flesh wounds.

“But the vampire escaped before we got any information out of him!”

“Thanks for the recap.”

The two of them had just started working the male over when O went out on an assist. By the time he got back, E had lost control of the vampire, been sliced in a couple of places, and was all by his little lonesome bleeding in a corner.

That prick boss of theirs was going to be shit-wild, and even though O

despised the man, he and Mr. X had one thing in common: Sloppiness was for crap.

O watched E dance around a little more, finding in the jerky movements the solution to both an immediate problem and a longer-term one. As O smiled, E, the fool, seemed relieved.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” O murmured. “I’ll tell him we took the body out and left it for the sun in the woods. No big deal.”

“You’ll talk to him?”

“Sure, man. You’d better take off, though. He’s going to be pissed.”

E nodded and bolted for the door. “Later.”

Yeah, say good-night, motherfucker, O thought as he started to clean up the basement.

The shitty little house they were working in was unremarkable from the street, sandwiched between a burned-out shell that had once been a barbecue restaurant and a condemned rooming house. This part of town, a mix of squalid residential and lowbrow commercial, was perfect for them. Around here, folks didn’t go out after dark, gun pops were as common as car alarms, and nobody said nothing if someone let out a scream or two.

Also, coming and going from the site was easy. Thanks to the neighborhood hardies, all of the streetlights had been shot out and the ambient glow from other buildings was negligible. As an added benefit, the house had an exterior bulkhead entry into its basement. Carrying a fully loaded body bag in and out was no problem.

Although even if someone saw something, it would be the work of a moment to eliminate the exposure. No big surprise to the community, either. White trash had a way of finding their graves. Along with wife beating and beer sucking, dying was probably their only other core competency.

O picked up a knife and wiped E’s black blood off the blade.

The basement was not big and the ceiling was low, but there was enough room for the old table they used as a workstation and the battered sideboard they kept their instruments on. Still, O didn’t think it was the right facility. It was impossible to safely and securely store a vampire here, and this meant they lost an important tool of persuasion. Time wore down mental and physical faculties. If leveraged correctly, the passage of days was as powerful as anything you could break a bone with.

What O wanted was something out in the woods, something big enough so he could keep his captives over a period of time. As vampires went up in

smoke with the dawn, they had to be kept protected from the sun. But if you just locked them in a room, you ran the risk of their dematerializing right out of your hands. He needed something steel to cage them....

Up above, the back door shut and footsteps came down the stairs.

Mr. X walked under a naked bulb.

The *Fore-lesser* was about six-four and built like a linebacker. As with all slayers who'd been in the Society for a long time, he'd paled out. His hair and skin were the color of flour, and his irises were as clear and colorless as window glass. Like O, he was dressed in standard-issue *lesser* gear: black cargo pants and a black turtleneck with weapons hidden under a leather jacket.

"So tell me, Mr. O, how goes your work?"

As if the chaos in the basement wasn't explanation enough.

"Am I in charge of this house?" O demanded.

Mr. X walked casually over to the sideboard and picked up a chisel. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"So am I permitted to ensure that this"—he moved his hand around the disorder—"doesn't happen again?"

"What did happen?"

"The details are boring. A civilian escaped."

"Will it survive?"

"I don't know."

"Were you here when it happened?"

"No."

"Tell me everything." Mr. X smiled as silence stretched out. "You know, Mr. O, your loyalty could get you in trouble. Don't you want me to punish the right person?"

"I want to take care of it myself."

"I'm sure you do. Except if you don't tell me, I might have to take the cost of failure out of your hide anyway. Is that worth it?"

"If I'm allowed to do what I will with the responsible party, yeah."

Mr. X laughed. "I can only imagine what that might be."

O waited, watching the chisel's sharp head catch light as Mr. X walked around the room.

"I paired you with the wrong man, didn't I?" Mr. X murmured as he picked a set of handcuffs off the floor. He dropped them on the sideboard. "I thought Mr. E might rise to your level. He didn't. And I'm glad you came to

me first before you disciplined him. We both know how much you like to work independently. And how much it pisses me off.”

Mr. X looked over his shoulder, dead eyes fixed on O. “In light of all this, particularly because you approached me first, you can have Mr. E.”

“I want to do it with an audience.”

“Your squadron?”

“And others.”

“Trying to prove yourself again?”

“Setting a higher standard.”

Mr. X smiled coldly. “You are an arrogant little bastard, aren’t you?”

“I’m as tall as you are.”

Suddenly, O found himself unable to move his arms or legs. Mr. X had pulled this paralyzing shit before, so it wasn’t entirely unexpected. But the guy still had the chisel in his hand and he was coming closer.

O fought the hold, sweat breaking out as he struggled and got nowhere.

Mr. X leaned in so their chests were touching. O felt something brush against his ass.

“Have fun, son,” the man whispered into O’s ear. “But do yourself a favor. Remember that however long your pants are, you’re not me. I’ll see you later.”

The man strode out of the basement. The door upstairs opened and shut.

As soon as O could move, he reached into his back pocket.

Mr. X had given him the chisel.

Rhage stepped from the Escalade and scanned the darkness around One Eye, hoping a couple of *lessers* would jump out at them. He didn’t expect to get lucky. He and Vishous had trolled for hours tonight, and they’d gotten a whole lot of nothing. Not even a sighting. It was damn eerie.

And to someone like Rhage, who depended on fighting for personal reasons, it was also frustrating as hell.

Like all things, though, the war between the Lessening Society and the vampires went in cycles, and they were currently in a downturn. Which made sense. Back in July, the Black Dagger Brotherhood had taken out the Society’s local recruitment center along with about ten of their best men. Clearly, the *lessers* were reconnoitering.

Thank God, there were other ways to burn off his edge.

He looked at the sprawling nest of depravity that was the Brotherhood’s

current R & R hangout. One Eye was on the edge of town, so the folks inside were bikers and guys who worked construction, tough types who tended toward the redneck rather than the slick persuasion. The bar was your standard-issue watering hole. Single-story building surrounded by a collar of asphalt. Trucks, American sedans, and Harleys parked in the spots. From tiny windows, beer signs glowed red, blue, and yellow, the logos Coors and Bud Light and Michelob.

No Coronas or Heinekens for these boys.

As he shut the car door, his body was humming, his skin prickling, his thick muscles twitching. He stretched out his arms, trying to buy himself a little relief. He wasn't surprised when it made no difference. His curse was throwing its weight around, taking him into dangerous territory. If he didn't get some kind of release soon, he was going to have a serious problem. Hell, he was going to *be* a serious problem.

Thank you very much, Scribe Virgin.

Bad enough that he'd been born a live wire with too much physical power, a fuckup with a gift of strength he hadn't appreciated or harnessed. But then he'd pissed off the mystical female who lorded over their race. Man, she'd been only too happy to put down another layer of crap on the compost heap he'd been born with. Now, if he didn't blow off steam on a regular basis, he turned deadly.

Fighting and sex were the only two releases that brought him down, and he used them like a diabetic with insulin. A steady stream of both helped keep him level, but they didn't always do the trick. And when he lost it, things got nasty for everyone, himself included.

God, he was tired of being stuck inside his body, managing its demands, trying not to fall into a brutal oblivion. Sure, his stunner of a face and the strength were all fine and good. But he would have traded both to a scrawny, ugly mo'fo, if it would have gotten him some peace. Hell, he couldn't even remember what serenity was like. He couldn't even remember who he was.

The disintegration of himself had started up pretty quick. After only a couple of years into the curse, he'd stopped hoping for any true relief and simply tried to get by without hurting anyone. That was when he'd started to die on the inside, and now, over a hundred years later, he was mostly numb, nothing more than glossy window dressing and empty charm.

On every level that counted, he'd given up trying to pretend he was anything but a menace. Because the truth was, no one was safe when he was

around. And that was what really killed him, even more than the physical stuff he had to go through when the curse came out of him. He lived in fear of hurting one of his brothers. And, as of about a month ago, Butch.

Rhage walked around the SUV and looked through the windshield at the human male. God, who'd have thought he'd ever be tight with a Homo sapiens?

“We going to see you later, cop?”

Butch shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“Good luck, man.”

“It’ll be what it is.”

Rhage swore softly as the Escalade took off and he and Vishous walked across the parking lot.

“Who is she, V? One of us?”

“Marissa.”

“Marissa? As in Wrath’s former *shellan*?” Rhage shook his head. “Oh, man, I need details. V, you gotta hook me.”

“I don’t ride him about it. And neither should you.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

V didn’t reply as they came up to the bar’s front entrance.

“Oh, right. You already know, don’t you?” Rhage said. “You know what’s going to happen.”

V merely lifted his shoulders and reached for the door.

Rhage planted his hand on the wood, stopping him. “Hey, V, you ever dream of me? You ever see my future?”

Vishous swiveled his head around. In the neon glow of a Coors sign, his left eye, the one with the tattoos around it, went all black. The pupil just expanded until it ate up the iris and the white part, until there was nothing but a hole.

It was like staring into infinity. Or maybe into the Fade as you died.

“Do you really want to know?” the brother said.

Rhage let his hand drop to his side. “Only one thing I care about. Am I going to live long enough to get away from my curse? You know, find a slice of calm?”

The door flew open and a drunken man lurched out like a truck with a broken axle. The guy headed for the bushes, threw up, and then lay facedown on the asphalt.

Death was one sure way to find peace, Rhage thought. And everyone

died. Even vampires. Eventually.

He didn't meet his brother's eyes again. "Scratch it, V. I don't want to know."

He'd been cursed once already and still had another ninety-one years before he was free. Ninety-one years, eight months, four days until his punishment was over and the beast would no longer be a part of him. Why should he volunteer for a cosmic whammy like knowing he wouldn't live long enough to be free of the damn thing?

"Rhage."

"What?"

"I'll tell you this. Your destiny's coming for you. And she's coming soon."

Rhage laughed. "Oh, yeah? What's the female like? I prefer them—"

"She's a virgin."

A chill shot down Rhage's spine and nailed him in the ass. "You're kidding, right?"

"Look in my eye. Do you think I'm jerking you off?"

V paused for a moment and then opened the door, releasing the smell of beer and human bodies along with the pulse of an old Guns N' Roses song.

As they went inside, Rhage muttered, "You're some freaky shit, my brother. You really are."

Chapter Three

Pavlov had a point, Mary thought while she drove downtown. Her panic reaction to the message from Dr. Della Croce's office was a trained one, not something logical. "Further tests" could be a lot of things. Just because she associated any kind of news from a physician with catastrophe didn't mean she could see into the future. She had no idea what, if anything, was wrong. After all, she'd been in remission for close to two years and she felt well enough. Sure, she got tired, but who didn't? Her job and volunteer work kept her busy.

First thing in the morning she'd call for the appointment. For now she was just going to work the beginning of Bill's shift at the suicide hotline.

As the anxiety backed off a little, she took a deep breath. The next twenty-four hours were going to be an endurance test, with her nerves turning her body into a trampoline and her mind into a whirlpool. The trick was waiting through the panic phases and then shoring up her strength when the fear lightened up.

She parked the Civic in an open lot on Tenth Street and walked quickly toward a worn-out six-story building. This was the dingy part of town, the residue of an effort back in the seventies to professionalize a nine-square-block area of what was then a "bad neighborhood." The optimism hadn't worked, and now boarded-up office space mixed with low-rent housing.

She paused at the entrance and waved to the two cops passing by in a patrol car.

The headquarters of the Suicide Prevention Hotline were on the second floor in the front, and she glanced up at the glowing windows. Her first contact with the nonprofit had been as a caller. Three years later, she manned a phone every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. She also covered holidays and relieved people when they needed it.

No one knew she'd ever dialed in. No one knew she'd had leukemia. And if she had to go back to war with her blood, she was going to keep that to herself as well.

Having watched her mother die, she didn't want anyone standing over her bed weeping. She already knew the impotent rage that came when saving grace didn't heel on command. She had no interest in a replay of the theatrics while she was fighting for breath and swimming in a sea of failing organs.

Okay. Nerves were back.

Mary heard a shuffle over to the left and caught a flash of movement, as if someone had ducked out of sight behind the building. Snapping to attention, she punched a code into a lock, went inside, and climbed the stairs. When she got to the second floor, she buzzed the intercom for entrance into the hotline's offices.

As she walked past the reception desk, she waved to the executive director, Rhonda Knute, who was on the phone. Then she nodded to Nan, Stuart, and Lola, who were on deck tonight, and settled into a vacant cubicle. After making sure she had plenty of intake forms, a couple of pens, and the hotline's intervention reference book, she took a bottle of water out of her purse.

Almost immediately one of her phone lines rang, and she checked the screen for caller ID. She knew the number. And the police had told her it was a pay phone. Downtown.

It was her caller.

The phone rang a second time and she picked up, following the hotline's script. "Suicide Prevention Hotline, this is Mary. How may I help you?"

Silence. Not even breathing.

Dimly, she heard the hum of a car engine flare and then fade in the background. According to the police's audit of incoming calls, the person always phoned from the street and varied his location so he couldn't be traced.

"This is Mary. How may I help you?" She dropped her voice and broke protocol. "I know it's you, and I'm glad you're reaching out tonight again.

But please, can't you tell me your name or what's wrong?"

She waited. The phone went dead.

"Another one of yours?" Rhonda asked, taking a sip from a mug of herbal tea.

Mary hung up. "How did you know?"

The woman nodded across her shoulder. "I heard a lot of rings out there, but no one got farther than the greeting. Then all of a sudden you were hunched over your phone."

"Yeah, well—"

"Listen, the cops got back to me today. There's nothing they can do short of assigning details to every pay phone in town, and they're not willing to go that far at this point."

"I told you. I don't feel like I'm in danger."

"You don't know that you're not."

"Come on, Rhonda, this has been going on for nine months now, right? If they were going to jump me, they would have already. And I really want to help—"

"That's another thing I'm concerned about. You clearly feel like protecting whoever the caller is. You're getting too personal."

"No, I'm not. They're calling here for a reason, and I know I can take care of them."

"Mary, stop. Listen to yourself." Rhonda pulled a chair over and lowered her voice as she sat down. "This is...hard for me to say. But I think you need a break."

Mary recoiled. "From what?"

"You're here too much."

"I work the same number of days as everyone else."

"But you stay here for hours after your shift is through, and you cover for people all the time. You're too involved. I know you're substituting for Bill right now, but when he comes I want you to leave. And I don't want you back here for a couple of weeks. You need some perspective. This is hard, draining work, and you have to have a proper distance from it."

"Not now, Rhonda. Please, not now. I need to be here now more than ever."

Rhonda gently squeezed Mary's tense hand. "This isn't an appropriate place for you to work out your own issues, and you know that. You're one of the best volunteers I've got, and I want you to come back. But only after

you've had some time to clear your head."

"I may not have that kind of time," Mary whispered under her breath.

"What?"

Mary shook herself and forced a smile. "Nothing. Of course, you're right. I'll leave as soon as Bill comes in."

Bill arrived about an hour later, and Mary was out of the building in two minutes. When she got home, she shut her door and leaned back against the wood panels, listening to all the silence. The horrible, crushing silence.

God, she wanted to go back to the hotline's offices. She needed to hear the soft voices of the other volunteers. And the phones ringing. And the drone of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling...

Because with no distractions, her mind flushed up terrible images: Hospital beds. Needles. Bags of drugs hanging next to her. In an awful mental snapshot, she saw her head bald and her skin gray and her eyes sunken until she didn't look like herself, until she *wasn't* herself.

And she remembered what it felt like to cease being a person. After the doctors started treating her with chemo, she'd quickly sunk into the fragile underclass of the sick, the dying, becoming nothing more than a pitiful, scary reminder of other people's mortality, a poster child for the terminal nature of life.

Mary darted across the living room, shot through the kitchen, and threw open the slider. As she burst out into the night, fear had her gasping for breath, but the shock of frosty air slowed her lungs down.

You don't know that anything's wrong. You don't know what it is....

She repeated the mantra, trying to pitch a net on the thrashing panic as she headed for the pool.

The Lucite in-ground was no more than a big hot tub, and its water, thickened and slowed by the cold, looked like black oil in the moonlight. She sat down, took off her shoes and socks, and dangled her feet in the icy depths. She kept them submerged even when they numbed, wishing she had the gumption to jump in and swim down to the grate at the bottom. If she held on to the thing for long enough, she might be able to anesthetize herself completely.

She thought of her mother. And how Cissy Luce had died in her own bed in the house the two of them had always called home.

Everything about that bedroom was still so clear: The way the light had

come through the lace curtains and landed on things in a snowflake pattern. Those pale yellow walls and the off-white wall-to-wall rug. That comforter her mother had loved, the one with the little pink roses on a cream background. The smell of nutmeg and ginger from a dish of potpourri. The crucifix above the curving headboard and the big Madonna icon on the floor in the corner.

The memories burned, so Mary forced herself to see the room as it had been after everything was over, the illness, the dying, the cleaning up, the selling of the house. She saw it right before she'd moved out. Neat. Tidy. Her mother's Catholic crutches packed away, the faint shadow left by the cross on the wall covered by a framed Andrew Wyeth print.

The tears wouldn't stay put. They came slowly, relentlessly, falling into the water. She watched them hit the surface and disappear.

When she looked up, she was not alone.

Mary leaped to her feet and stumbled back, but stopped herself, wiping her eyes. It was just a boy. A teenage boy. Dark-haired, pale-skinned. So thin he was emaciated, so beautiful he didn't look human.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, not particularly afraid. It was hard to be scared of anything that angelic. "Who are you?"

He just shook his head.

"Are you lost?" He sure looked it. And it was too cold for him to be out just in the jeans and T-shirt he was wearing. "What's your name?"

He lifted a hand to his throat and moved it back and forth while shaking his head. As if he were a foreigner and frustrated by the language barrier.

"Do you speak English?"

He nodded and then his hands started flying around. American Sign Language. He was using ASL.

Mary reached back to her old life, when she'd trained her autistic patients to use their hands to communicate.

Do you read lips or can you hear? she signed back at him.

He froze, as if her understanding him had been the last thing he'd expected.

I can hear very well. I just can't talk.

Mary stared at him for a long moment. "You are the caller."

He hesitated. Then nodded his head. *I never meant to scare you. And I don't call to annoy you. I just...like to know you're there. But there's nothing weird to it, honest. I swear.*

His eyes met hers steadily.

“I believe you.” Except what did she do now? The hotline prohibited contact with callers.

Yeah, well, she wasn’t about to kick the poor kid off her property.

“You want something to eat?”

He shook his head. *Maybe I could just sit with you awhile? I’ll stay on the other side of the pool.*

As if he were used to people telling him to get away from them.

“No,” she said. He nodded once and turned away. “I mean, sit down here. Next to me.”

He came at her slowly, as if expecting her to change her mind. When all she did was sit down and put her feet back in the pool, he took off a pair of ratty sneakers, rolled up his baggy pants, and picked a spot about three feet from her.

God, he was so small.

He slipped his feet in the water and smiled.

It’s cold, he signed.

“You want a sweater?”

He shook his head and moved his feet in circles.

“What’s your name?”

John Matthew.

Mary smiled, thinking they had something in common. “Two New Testament prophets.”

The nuns gave it to me.

“Nuns?”

There was a long pause, as if he were debating what to tell her.

“You were in an orphanage?” she prompted gently. She recalled that there was still one in town, run by Our Lady of Mercy.

I was born in a bathroom stall in a bus station. The janitor who found me took me to Our Lady. The nuns thought up the name.

She kept her wince to herself. “Ah, where do you live now? Were you adopted?”

He shook his head.

“Foster parents?” Please, God, let there be foster parents. Nice foster parents. Who kept him warm and fed. Good people who told him he mattered even if his parents had deserted him.

When he didn’t reply, she eyed his old clothes, and the older expression

on his face. He didn't look as if he'd known a lot of nice.

Finally, his hands moved. *My place is on Tenth Street.*

Which meant he was either a poacher living in a condemned building or a tenant in a rat-infested hovel. How he managed to be so clean was a miracle.

"You live around the hotline's offices, don't you? Which was how you knew I was on this evening even though it wasn't my shift."

He nodded. *My apartment is across the street. I watch you come and go, but not in a sneaky way. I guess I think of you as a friend. When I called the first time...you know, it was on a whim or something. You answered...and I liked the way your voice sounded.*

He had beautiful hands, she thought. Like a girl's. Graceful. Delicate.

"And you followed me home tonight?"

Pretty much every night. I have a bike, and you're a slow driver. I figure if I watch over you, you'll be safer. You stay so late, and that's not a good part of town for a woman to be alone in. Even if she's in a car.

Mary shook her head, thinking he was an odd one. He looked like a child, but his words were those of a man. And all things considered, she probably should be creeped out. This kid latching on to her, thinking he was some kind of protector even though it looked as if he were the one who needed to be rescued.

Tell me why you were crying just now, he signed.

His eyes were very direct, and it was eerie to have an adult male stare anchored by a child's face.

"Because I might be out of time," she blurted.

"Mary? Are you up for a visit?"

Mary looked over her right shoulder. Bella, her only neighbor, had walked across the two acre meadow that ran between their properties and was standing on the edge of the lawn.

"Hey, Bella. Ah, come meet John."

Bella glided up to the pool. The woman had moved into the big old farmhouse a year ago and they'd taken to talking at night. At six feet tall, and with a mane of dark waves that fell to the small of her back, Bella was a total knockout. Her face was so beautiful it had taken Mary months to stop staring, and the woman's body was right off the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit edition.

So naturally John was looking awestruck.

Mary wondered idly what it would be like to get that reception from a

man, even a prepubescent one. She'd never been beautiful, falling instead into that vast category of women who were neither bad-looking nor good-looking. And that had been before chemo had done a number on her hair and skin.

Bella leaned down with a slight smile and offered her hand to the boy.
“Hi.”

John reached up and touched her briefly, as if he weren't sure she was real. Funny, Mary had often felt the same way about the woman. There was something too...much about her. She just seemed larger than life, more vivid than the other people Mary ran into. Certainly more gorgeous.

Although Bella sure didn't act the part of the femme fatale. She was quiet and unassuming and she lived alone, apparently working as a writer. Mary never saw her in the daytime, and no one ever seemed to come or go out of the old farmhouse.

John looked at Mary, his hands moving. *Do you want me to leave?*

Then, as if anticipating her answer, he pulled his feet from the water.

She put her hand on his shoulder, trying to ignore the sharp thrust of bone just under his shirt.

“No. Stay.”

Bella took off her running shoes and socks and flicked her toes over the surface of the water. “Yeah, come on, John. Stay with us.”

Chapter Four

Rhage saw the first one he wanted tonight. She was a blond human female, all sexed-up and ready to go. Like the rest of her kind in the bar, she'd been throwing him signals: Flashing her ass. Fluffing her teased hair.

"Find something you like?" V said dryly.

Rhage nodded and crooked his finger at the female. She came when called. He liked that in a human.

He was tracking the shift of her hips when his view was blocked by another tight female body. He looked up and forced his eyes not to roll.

Caith was one of his kind, and beautiful enough with her black hair and those dark eyes. But she was a Brother chaser, always sniffing around, offering herself. He had the sense she saw them as prizes, something to brag about. And how irritating was that.

As far as he was concerned, she put the *itch* in *bitch*.

"Hey, Vishous," she said in a low, sexy voice.

"Evenin', Caith." V took a sip of his Grey Goose. "What up?"

"Wondering what you're doing."

Rhage looked around Caith's hips. Thank God the blonde wasn't put off by a little competition. She was still coming toward the table.

"You going to say hello, Rhage?" Caith prompted.

"Only if you get out of the way. You're blocking my view."

The female laughed. "Another of your cast of thousands. How lucky she is."

“You wish, Caith.”

“Yes, I do.” Her eyes, predatory and hot, glided over him. “Maybe you’d like to hang with Vishous and me?”

As she reached out to stroke his hair, he caught her wrist. “Don’t even try it.”

“How is it you’ll do so many humans and deny me?”

“Just not interested.”

She leaned down, talking into his ear. “You should try me sometime.”

He jerked her away from him, tightening his hand on her bones.

“That’s right, Rhage, squeeze harder. I like it when it hurts.” He let go immediately, and she smiled while rubbing her wrist. “So are you busy, V?”

“I’m settling in right now. But maybe a little later.”

“You know where to find me.”

When she left, Rhage glanced over at his brother. “I don’t know how you can stand her.”

V tossed back his vodka, watching the female with hooded eyes. “She has her attributes.”

The blonde arrived, stopping in front of Rhage and striking a little pose. He put both hands on her hips and pulled her forward so she straddled his thighs.

“Hi,” she said, moving against his hold. She was busy looking him over, sizing up his clothes, eyeing the heavy gold Rolex peeking out from under his trench coat’s sleeve. The calculation in her eyes was as cold as the center of his chest.

God, if he could have left he would have; he was so sick of this shit. But his body needed the release, demanded it. He could feel his drive rising, and as always, that god-awful burn left his dead heart in the dust.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Tiffany.”

“Nice to meet you, Tiffany,” he said, lying.

Less than ten miles away, at Mary’s pool in her backyard, she, John, and Bella were having a surprisingly jolly time.

Mary laughed out loud and looked at John. “You’re not serious.”

It’s true. I shuttled back and forth between the theaters.

“What did he say?” Bella asked, grinning.

“He saw *The Matrix* four times the day it opened.”

The woman laughed. "John, I'm sorry to break this to you, but that's pathetic."

He beamed at her, blushing a little.

"Did you get into the whole *Lord of the Rings* thing, too?" she asked.

He shook his head, signed, and looked expectantly at Mary.

"He says he likes martial arts," she translated. "Not elves."

"Can't blame him there. That whole hairy feet thing? Can't do it."

A gust of wind came up, teasing fallen leaves into the pool. As they floated by, John reached out and grabbed one.

"What's that on your wrist?" Mary asked.

John held his arm out so she could inspect the leather bracelet. There were orderly markings on it, some kind of cross between hieroglyphics and Chinese characters.

"That's gorgeous."

I made it.

"May I see?" Bella asked, leaning over. Her smile disintegrated and her eyes narrowed on John's face. "Where did you get this?"

"He says he made it."

"Where did you say you're from?"

John retracted his arm, clearly a little unnerved by Bella's sudden focus.

"He lives here," Mary said. "He was born here."

"Where are his parents?"

Mary faced her friend, wondering why Bella was so intense. "He doesn't have any."

"None?"

"He told me he grew up in the foster-care system, right, John?"

John nodded and cradled his arm against his stomach, protecting the bracelet.

"Those markings," Bella prompted. "Do you know what they mean?"

The boy shook his head and then winced and rubbed his temples. After a moment, his hands signed slowly.

"He says they don't mean anything," Mary murmured. "He just dreams of them and he likes the way they look. Bella, ease off, okay?"

The woman seemed to catch herself. "Sorry. I...ah, I'm really sorry."

Mary glanced at John and tried to take the pressure off him. "So what other movies do you like?"

Bella got to her feet and shoved on her running shoes. Without the socks.

“Will you guys excuse me for a moment? I’ll be right back.”

Before Mary could say anything, the woman jogged across the meadow. When she was out of earshot, John looked up at Mary. He was still wincing.

I should go now.

“Does your head hurt?”

John pushed his knuckles into the space between his eyebrows. *I feel like I just ate ice cream really fast.*

“When did you have dinner?”

He shrugged. *I don’t know.*

Poor kid was probably hypoglycemic. “Listen, why don’t you come inside and eat with me? Last thing I had was takeout for lunch, and that was about eight hours ago.”

His pride was obvious in the firm shake of his head. *I’m not hungry.*

“Then will you sit with me while I have a late dinner?” Maybe she could entice him to eat that way.

John stood up and held out his hand as if to help her to her feet. She took his small palm and leaned on him just enough so he’d feel some of her weight. Together they headed for her back door, shoes in hand, bare feet leaving wet prints on the chilly flagstone around the pool.

Bella burst into her kitchen and stalled out. She’d had no particular plan when she’d taken off. She just knew she had to do something.

John was a problem. A serious problem.

She couldn’t believe she hadn’t recognized him for what he was right off the bat. Then again, he hadn’t gone through the change yet. And why would a vampire be hanging out in Mary’s backyard?

Bella nearly laughed. She hung out in Mary’s backyard. So why couldn’t others like her do the same?

Putting her hands on her hips, she stared at the floor. What the hell was she going to do? When she’d searched John’s conscious mind, she’d found nothing about his race, his people, his traditions. The boy didn’t know a thing, had no idea who he really was or what he was going to turn into. And he honestly didn’t know what those symbols meant.

She did. They spelled out TEHRROR in the Old Language. A warrior’s name.

How was it possible he’d been lost to the human world? And how long did he have before his transition hit? He looked as if he was in his early

twenties, which meant he had a year or two. But if she was wrong, if he was closer to twenty-five, he could be in immediate danger. If he didn't have a female vampire to help him through the change, he was going to die.

Her first thought was to call her brother. Rehvenge always knew what to do about everything. The problem was, once that male got involved in a situation, he took over completely. And he tended to scare the hell of everyone.

Havers—she could ask Havers for help. As a physician, he could tell how long the boy had before the transition. And maybe John could stay at the clinic until his future was clearer.

Yeah, except he wasn't sick. He was a pretransition male, so he was physically weak, but she'd sensed no illness in him. And Havers ran a medical facility, not some kind of rooming house.

Besides, what about that name? It was a warrior's—
Bingo.

She went out of the kitchen and into the sitting room, heading for the address book she kept on her desk. In the back, on the last page, she'd written a number that had been circulating for the last ten years or so. Rumor had it, that if you called, you could reach the Black Dagger Brotherhood. The race's warriors.

They would want to know there was a boy with one of their names left to fend for himself. Maybe they would take John in.

Her palms were sweaty as she picked up the phone, and she half expected either for the number not to go through or to have it answered by someone telling her to go to hell. Instead, all she got was an electronic voice repeating what she had dialed and then a beep.

"I...ah, my name is Bella. I'm looking for the Brotherhood. I need... help." She left her number and hung up, thinking less was more. If she was misinformed, she didn't want to leave a detailed message on some human's voice mail.

She looked out a window, seeing the meadow and the glow of Mary's house in the distance. She had no idea how long it would take for someone to get back to her, if at all. She should probably go back and find out where the kid lived. And how he knew Mary.

God, Mary. That awful disease was back. Bella had sensed its return and had been debating how to handle what she knew when Mary had mentioned she was going in for her quarterly physical. That had been a couple of days

ago, and tonight Bella had planned to ask how things had gone. Maybe she could help the female in some small way.

Moving quickly, she went back to the French doors that faced the meadow. She'd find out more about John and—

The phone rang.

So soon? Couldn't be.

She reached across the counter and picked up the kitchen's extension.
“Hello?”

“Bella?” The male voice was low. Commanding.

“Yes.”

“You called us.”

Holy Moses, it worked.

She cleared her throat. Like any civilian, she knew all about the Brotherhood: their names, their reputations, their triumphs and legends. But she'd never actually met one. And it was a little hard to believe she was talking to a warrior in her kitchen.

So get to the point, she told herself.

“I, ah, I have an issue.” She explained to the male what she knew about John.

There was silence for a moment. “Tomorrow night you will bring him to us.”

Oh, man. Just how would she pull that off?

“Ah, he doesn't speak. He can hear, but he needs a translator to be understood.”

“Then bring one with him.”

She wondered how Mary would feel about getting tangled up in their world. “The female he's using tonight is a human.”

“We'll take care of her memory.”

“How do I get to you?”

“We will send a car for you. At nine o'clock.”

“My address is—”

“We know where you live.”

As the phone went dead, she shivered a little.

Okay. Now she just had to get John and Mary to agree to see the Brotherhood.

When she got back to Mary's barn, John was sitting at the kitchen table while the female ate some soup. They both looked up as she approached, and

she tried to be casual as she sat down. She waited a little bit before throwing the ball out.

“So, John, I know some folks who are into the martial arts.” Which wasn’t exactly a lie. She’d heard the brothers were good at all kinds of fighting. “And I was wondering, would you have any interest in meeting them?”

John cocked his head and moved his hands around while looking at Mary.

“He wants to know why. For training?”

“Maybe.”

John signed some more.

Mary wiped her mouth. “He says that he can’t afford the cost of training. And that he’s too small.”

“If it were free would he go?” God, what was she doing, promising things she couldn’t deliver? Heaven knew what the Brotherhood would do with him. “Listen, Mary, I can take him to a place where he can meet...tell him it’s a place where master fighters hang out. He could talk to them. Get to know them. He might like to—”

John tugged on Mary’s sleeve, signed some, and then stared at Bella.

“He wants to remind you that he can hear perfectly well.”

Bella looked at John. “I’m sorry.”

He nodded, accepting the apology.

“Just come meet them tomorrow,” she said. “What do you have to lose?”

John shrugged and made a graceful movement with his hand.

Mary smiled. “He says okay.”

“And you’ll have to come, too. To translate.”

Mary seemed taken aback, but then stared at the boy. “What time?”

“Nine o’clock,” Bella replied.

“I’m sorry, I’ll be working then.”

“At night. Nine o’clock at night.”

Chapter Five

Butch walked into One Eye feeling like someone had pulled the stoppers out of a number of his internal organs. Marissa had refused to see him, and though he wasn't surprised, it still hurt like a bitch.

So it was time for some Scotch therapy.

After sidestepping a drunken bouncer, a knot of floozies, and a pair of arm wrestlers, Butch found the troika's regular table. Rhage was in the far corner behind it, up against the wall with a brunette. V was nowhere in sight, but a glass filled with Grey Goose and a knotted drink stirrer were in front of a chair.

Butch was two shots in and not feeling much better when Vishous came out from the back. His shirt was untucked and wrinkled at the bottom, and right on his heels was a black-haired woman. V waved her off when he saw Butch.

"Hey, cop," the brother said as he sat down.

Butch tipped his shot glass. "What's doing?"

"How—"

"No go."

"Aw, hell, man. I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

V's phone went off and he cocked it open. The vampire said two words, put the thing back in his pocket, and reached for his coat.

"That was Wrath. We've got to be back at the house in a half hour."

Butch thought about sitting and drinking alone. That plan had *bad idea* written all over it. “You want to poof it or ride back with me?”

“We got time to drive.”

Butch tossed the Escalade’s keys across the table. “Bring the car around. I’ll grab Hollywood.”

He got up and headed for the dark corner. Rhage’s trench coat was flared out around the brunette’s body. God only knew how far things had gone underneath.

“Rhage, buddy. We gotta bounce.”

The vampire lifted his head, all tight lips and narrowed eyes.

Butch held his hands up. “I’m not cock-blocking for kicks and giggles. The mother ship called.”

With a curse, Rhage stepped back. The brunette’s clothes were disarranged and she was panting, but they hadn’t gotten to showtime yet. Hollywood’s leathers were all where they should be.

As Rhage retreated, the woman grabbed at him as if realizing the orgasm of her life was about to walk out the door. With a smooth movement, he passed his hand in front of her face and she froze. Then she looked down at herself as if trying to figure out how she’d come to be so aroused.

Rhage turned away with a glower, but by the time he and Butch were outside, he was shaking his head ruefully.

“Cop, listen, I’m sorry if I gave you the evil eye back there. I get a little...focused.”

Butch clapped him on the shoulder. “No problem.”

“Hey, how did your female—”

“Not a chance.”

“Damn, Butch. That rots.”

They piled into the Escalade and headed north, following Route 22 deeper into the countryside. They were going at quite a clip, Trick Daddy’s *Thug Matrimony* thumping like a jackhammer, when V hit the brakes. In a clearing, back about a hundred yards from the road, there was something hanging from a tree.

No, someone was in the process of hanging something from a tree. With an audience of pale-haired, black-clothed tough guys watching.

“*Lessers*,” V muttered, easing off onto the shoulder.

Before they came to a full stop, Rhage exploded out of the car, running flat-out toward the group.

Vishous looked across the front seat. "Cop, you might want to stay—"

"Fuck you, V."

"You armed with one of mine?"

"No, I'm going out there naked." Butch grabbed a Glock out from under the seat, flipping off the semi's safety as he and Vishous jumped to the ground.

Butch had seen only two *lessers* before, and they freaked him out. They looked like men, they moved and talked like men, but they weren't alive. One look in their eyes and you knew the slayers were empty vessels, the soul gone somewhere else. And they stank to high heaven.

But then again, he never could stand the smell of baby powder.

Out in the clearing, the *lessers* assumed attack positions and reached into their jackets as Rhage covered the yards of meadow grass like a freight train. He fell upon the group in some kind of suicidal surge, no weapon drawn.

Jesus, the guy was nuts. At least one of those slayers had taken out a handgun.

Butch leveled the Glock and tracked the action, but couldn't get a clean shot. And then he realized he didn't need to play back-up.

Rhage handled the *lessers* by himself, all animal strength and reflexes. He was ripping some kind of martial-arts hybrid, his trench coat flaring out behind him as he kicked heads and punched torsos. He was deadly beautiful in the moonlight, his face twisted into a snarl, his big body pummeling the tar out of those *lessers*.

A holler lit off to the right and Butch wheeled around. V had taken down a *lesser* who'd tried to run, and the brother was all over the damn thing like white on rice.

Leaving the *Fight Club* stuff to the vampires, Butch headed over to the tree. Strung up from a thick branch was the body of another *lesser*. The thing had been worked over but good.

Butch loosened the rope and lowered the body, checking over his shoulder because the smacks and grunts of fighting were suddenly louder. Three more *lessers* had joined the fray, but he wasn't worried about his boys.

He knelt down to the slayer in front of him and started going through its pockets. He was pulling out a wallet when a gun went off with an awful popping sound. Rhage hit the ground. Flat on his back.

Butch didn't think twice. He shifted into firing position and aimed at the *lesser* who was about to plow another slug into Rhage. The Glock's trigger

never got pulled. From out of nowhere, there was a brilliant flash of white, like a nuke had gone off. Night turned to day as everything in the clearing was illuminated: the autumnal trees, the fighting, the flat space.

As the brilliance receded, someone came running at Butch. When he recognized V, he lowered the gun.

“Cop! Get in the fucking car!” The vampire was hauling ass, legs pumping like he was about to get served.

“What about Rhage—”

Butch didn’t get the rest of the sentence out. V hit him like a piledriver, doing a grab and drag that ended only when they were both in the Escalade and the doors were shut.

Butch turned on the brother. “We’re not leaving Rhage out there!”

A mighty roar split the night, and Butch slowly turned his head.

In the clearing he saw a creature. Some eight feet tall, it was built along the lines of a dragon, with teeth like a T. rex and a slashing pair of front claws. The thing flickered in the moonlight, its powerful body and tail covered with iridescent purple and lime-green scales.

“What the hell is that?” Butch whispered, fumbling to make sure the door was locked.

“Rhage in a really bad mood.”

The monster let loose another howl and went after the *lessers* as though they were toys. And it...*Good Lord*. There wasn’t going to be anything left of the slayers. Not even bones.

Butch felt himself beginning to hyperventilate.

Dimly, he heard the sound of a lighter being teed off, and he glanced across the seat. V’s face caught and held the flare of yellow as he lit a hand-rolled with shaky hands. When the brother exhaled, the tang of Turkish tobacco filled the air.

“Since when has he...” Butch turned back to the creature feature playing in the clearing. And totally lost his train of thought.

“Rhage pissed off the Scribe Virgin, so she cursed him. Gave him two hundred years of hell. Anytime he gets too worked up, presto-change-o. Pain can set it off. Anger. Physical frustration, if you feel me.”

Butch cocked an eyebrow. And to think he’d gotten between that guy and a woman he wanted. Never pulling that kind of stupidity again.

As the carnage continued, Butch began to feel as if he were watching the Sci-Fi Channel with the sound on mute. Man, this kind of violence was out of

even his league. In all his years as a homicide detective, he'd seen plenty of dead bodies, some of which had been hard-core gruesome. But he'd never witnessed a slaughter in live action before, and oddly, the shock of it removed the experience from reality.

Thank God.

Although he had to admit the beast was a smooth mover. The way it spun that *lesser* up into the air and caught the slayer with its...

"Does it happen often?" he asked.

"Often enough. That's why he goes for the sex. Keeps him calm. I'll tell you this, you don't screw around with the beast. It doesn't know who's a friend and who's lunch. All we can do is wait around until Rhage comes back and then take care of him."

Something bounced on the hood of the Escalade with a bang. Oh, God, was that a head? No, a boot. Maybe the creature didn't like the taste of rubber.

"Take care of him?" Butch murmured.

"How'd you like it if every bone in your body was broken? He goes through a change when that thing comes out, and as it leaves, he gets nailed again."

In short order, the clearing was empty of *lessers*. With another deafening roar, the beast wheeled around as if looking for more to consume. Finding no other slayers, its eyes focused on the Escalade.

"Can it get into the car?" Butch asked.

"If it really wants to. Fortunately, it can't be very hungry."

"Yeah, well...what if it's got room for Jell-o," Butch muttered.

The beast shook its head, black mane tossing in the moonlight. Then it howled and charged at them, running on two legs. The pounding of its stride called thunder and tremors out of the earth.

Butch checked the door lock one more time. Then thought about being a pansy and maybe hitting the floor.

The creature stopped right next to the SUV and fell into a crouch. It was close enough so its breath fogged Butch's window on the exhale, and up close, the thing was hideous. White narrowed eyes. Snarling jowls. And the full set of fangs in its gaping mouth was right out of a fever nightmare. Black blood ran down its chest like crude oil.

The beast lifted its muscled forelegs.

Jesus, those claws were like daggers. Made Freddie Krueger's set of fun

and games look like pipe cleaners.

But Rhage was in there. Somewhere.

Butch put his hand to the window, as if he could reach the brother.

The creature cocked its head, white eyes blinking. Abruptly it heaved a great breath, and then the massive body started to shake. A high, piercing cry came out of its throat, cracking through the night. There was another flash of brilliance. And then Rhage was lying naked on the ground.

Butch threw open the car door and knelt by his friend.

Rhage shook uncontrollably on the dirt and grass, his skin clammy, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth moving slowly. There was black blood all over his face, in his hair, down his chest. His stomach was horribly distended. And there was a small hole in his shoulder where the bullet had hit him.

Butch yanked off his jacket and put it over the vampire. Leaning down, he tried to catch the words that were being mumbled. "What was that?"

"Hurt? You...V?"

"Nah, we're doing good."

Rhage seemed to relax a little. "Take me home.... Please...get me home."

"Don't you worry about a thing. We're gonna take care of you."

O moved fast across the clearing, heading away from the slaughter, running low to the ground. His truck was parked down the road, about a mile away. He figured he had another three to four minutes before he got to it, and so far nothing was chasing him.

He'd taken off the instant that flash of light had ripped through the clearing, knowing damn well that nothing good came after a sparkler like that. He'd figured it was either nerve gas or the precursor to one fuck of an explosion, but then he'd heard a roar. As he'd looked over his shoulder, he'd stopped dead. Something had been doing a number on his fellow *lessers*, picking them off like flies.

A creature. From out of nowhere.

He hadn't watched for long, and as he ran now, O glanced back once again to make sure he wasn't being followed. The path behind was still clear, and up ahead he saw the truck. When he got to it, he threw himself inside, cranked the engine over, and hit the gas.

First order of business was to separate from the scene. A massacre like that was going to attract attention, either because of what it looked and

sounded like while it was happening or because of what was left when it was over. Second was to reconnoiter. Mr. X was going to be split-personality pissed at this. O's squadron of primes was gone, and the other *lessers* that he'd invited to watch E's discipline were dead, too. Six slayers in little over a half hour.

And goddamn it, he didn't know much about the monster who'd done the damage. They'd been hanging E's body in the tree when the Escalade had pulled over to the side of the road. A blond warrior had gotten out, so big, so fast, he was obviously a member of the Brotherhood. There had been another male with him, also incredibly lethal, as well as a human, although Christ only knew what that guy had been doing with the two brothers.

The fight had gone on for about eight or nine minutes. O had taken on the blond, had punched him a number of times with no measurable effect on the vampire's stamina or strength. The two of them had been deep in hand-to-hand when one of the other *lessers* had fired a gun. O had ducked and rolled, nearly getting shot himself. When he'd looked up, the vampire was clutching his shoulder and falling backward.

O had lunged for him, wanting to have the kill, but as he sprang forward, the *lesser* with the gun had tried to get at the vampire himself. The idiot had tripped on O's leg and knocked both of them to the ground. Then that light had gone off and the monster had appeared. Was it possible that the thing had come out of the blond warrior somehow? Man, what a secret weapon that would be.

O pictured the warrior, recalling every aspect of the male from his eyes to his face to the clothes he wore and the way he moved. Having a good description of the fair-haired brother was critical for use in the Society's interrogations. Specific questions posed to captives were more likely to lead to good answers.

And information on the brothers was what they were looking for. After decades of just knocking off civilians, the *lessers* were now targeting the Brotherhood specifically. Without those warriors, the vampire race would be completely vulnerable, and the slayers could finally finish their job eradicating the species.

O pulled into the parking lot of the local laser-tag place, thinking that the only good thing about the evening had been when he'd killed E slowly. Taking out his irritation on the slayer's body had been like drinking a cool beer on a hot summer day. Satisfying. Calming.

But what had happened afterward had put him right back on edge.

O flipped open his phone and hit speed dial. There was no reason to wait until he got home to make a report. Mr. X's reaction was going to be worse if he thought the news had been delayed.

"We've had a situation," he said when the call was answered.

Five minutes later he hung up, turned the truck around, and headed back to the rural part of town.

Mr. X had demanded an audience. At his private cabin in the woods.

Chapter Six

Rhage could see only shadows, as his eyes were incapable of focusing or processing much light. He hated the loss of faculty and did his best to track the two big shapes moving around him. When hands gripped under his armpits and latched onto his ankles, he groaned.

“Easy there, Rhage, we’re just gonna lift you for a sec, true?” V said.

A fireball of pain shot through his body as he was taken up off the ground and carried around to the back of the Escalade. They laid him down. Doors shut. The engine turned over with a low purr.

He was so cold his teeth knocked together, and he tried to draw whatever was across his shoulders closer. He couldn’t make his hands work, but someone pulled what he assumed was a jacket more tightly around him.

“Just hang in there, big guy.”

Butch. It was Butch.

Rhage struggled to speak, hating the foul taste in his mouth.

“Nah, relax, Hollywood. You’re cool. V and I are going to get you home.”

The car started to move, bumping up and down as if it were getting off the shoulder and onto the road. He moaned like a sissy, but he couldn’t help it. His body felt as though it had been beaten all over with a baseball bat. A bat with a spike on the end.

And the bone and muscle aches were a minor problem compared to his stomach. He was praying he’d make it back to the house before he threw up

in V's car, but there was no guarantee he'd hold out that long. His salivary glands were working overtime, so he had to swallow repeatedly. Which made his gag reflex fire up. Which spurred on the churning nausea. Which made him want to...

Trying to pull himself out the spiral, he breathed slowly through his nose.
“How we doing there, Hollywood?”
“Promise me. Shower. First thing.”
“You got it, buddy.”

Rhage figured he must have passed out, because he came awake as he was being hauled from the car. He heard familiar voices. V's. Butch's. A deep growl that could only be Wrath.

He lost consciousness again. When he came back, something cold was against his back.

“Can you stand up for me?” Butch asked.

Rhage gave it a shot and was grateful when his thighs accepted his weight. And now that he was out of the car, the nausea was a little better.

His ears caught a sweet chiming noise, and a moment later a warm rush fell over his body.

“How we doing, Rhage? Too hot?” Butch's voice. Up close.

The cop was in the shower with him. And he smelled Turkish tobacco. V must be in the bathroom, too.

“Hollywood? This too hot for you?”

“No.” He reached around for the soap, fumbling. “Can't see.”

“Just as well. No reason for you to know what we look like naked together. Frankly, I'm traumatized enough for the both of us.”

Rhage smiled a little as a washcloth scrubbed over his face, neck, chest.

God, that felt fantastic. He craned his head back, letting the soap and water wash away the remnants of the beast's doing.

Too soon the shower was off. A towel was wrapped around his hips while another one dried him off.

“There anything else we can do for you before you get horizontal?” Butch asked.

“Alka-Seltzer. Cabinet.”

“V, fire up some of that shit, would you?” Butch's arm came around Rhage's waist. “Lean on me, buddy. Yeah, that's right—*whoa*. Damn, we've got to stop feeding you.”

Rhage let himself be led across the marble floor and onto the carpet in the

bedroom.

“All right, big guy, down you go.”

Oh, yeah. Bed. Bed was good.

“And look who’s here. It’s Nurse Vishous.”

Rhage felt his head get tilted up and then a glass was put to his lips.

When he’d taken all he could, he collapsed against the pillows. He was about to pass out again when he heard Butch’s hushed voice.

“At least the bullet went through him clean. But, man, he doesn’t look good.”

V answered quietly. “He’ll be all right in a day or so. He recovers quickly from anything, but it’s still tough.”

“That creature was something else.”

“He worries a lot about it coming out.” There was the rasp of a lighter and then a fresh waft of that wonderful tobacco. “He tries not to show how afraid of it he is. Gotta keep up that glossy front and all. But he’s terrified of hurting someone.”

“First question he asked when he came back was whether you and I were okay.”

Rhage tried to force himself to sleep. The black void was a hell of a lot better than listening to his friends pity him.

Ninety-one years, eight months, four days. And then he would be free.

Mary was desperate to get to sleep. She closed her eyes. Did the deep breathing thing. Relaxed her toes one by one. Ran through all the telephone numbers she knew. None of it worked.

She rolled over and stared at the ceiling. When her mind kicked up an image of John, she was grateful. The boy was better than so many other subjects she could dwell on.

She couldn’t believe he was twenty-three, although the more she thought about him, it did seem possible. *Matrix* fixation aside, he was incredibly mature. Old, really.

When it had come time for him to go, she’d insisted on driving him back to his apartment. Bella had asked to come, too, so the three of them had gone downtown with his bike sticking out of the back of the Civic. Leaving the boy in front of that miserable apartment building had been hard. She’d almost begged him to come home with her.

But at least he’d agreed to be at Bella’s tomorrow night. And maybe the

martial-arts academy would open some doors for him. She had a feeling he didn't have many friends, and thought Bella was sweet to make the effort on his behalf.

With a little grin, Mary pictured the way John had looked at the other woman. Such shy admiration. And Bella handled the attention gracefully, though she was no doubt used to those kind of stares. Probably got them all the time.

For a moment Mary indulged herself and imagined looking out at the world through Bella's flawless eyes. And walking on Bella's flawless legs. And swinging Bella's flawless hair over a shoulder.

The fantasizing was a good diversion. She decided she'd go to New York City and strut down Fifth Avenue wearing something fabulous. No, the beach. She'd head for the beach in a black bikini. Hell, maybe a black bikini with a *thong*.

Okay, this was getting a little creepy.

Still, it would have been great, just once, to have a man stare at her with total adoration. To have him be...*enthralled*. Yes, that was the word. She would have loved for a man to be enthralled by her.

Except it was never going to happen. That time in her life, of youth and beauty and dewy sexuality, had passed. Had never been, actually. And now she was a nothing-special thirty-one-year-old who'd led a very hard life, thanks to the cancer.

Mary groaned. Oh, this was great. She wasn't panicking, but she was knee-deep in self-pity. And the shit was like sludge, clingy and disgusting.

She clicked on the light and reached for *Vanity Fair* with grim resolve. *Dominick Dunne, take me away*, she thought.

Chapter Seven

After Rhage fell asleep, Butch walked with V down the hall to Wrath's private study. Usually Butch didn't hang around for Brotherhood business, but Vishous was going to report on what they'd found on the way home, and Butch was the only one who'd gotten a look at the *lesser* in the tree.

As he came through the door, he had the same reaction he always did to the Versailles decor: It just didn't fit. All the gold curlicue things on the walls and the paintings of little fat boys with wings on the ceiling and the flimsy, fancy furniture. The place looked like a hangout for those old-fashioned, powdered-wig French guys. Not a war room for a bunch of heavy-duty fighters.

But whatever. The Brotherhood had moved into the mansion because it was convenient and secure, not because they liked the way it was tricked up.

He picked a chair with spindly legs and tried to sit down without letting all of his weight go. As he settled in, he shot a nod to Tohrment, who was on the silk-covered couch across the way. The vampire took up most of the piece of furniture, his big body sprawled across the powder-blue cushions. His military-cut black hair and his thick shoulders pronounced him a hard-ass, but that navy-blue gaze of his told another story.

Underneath all the warrior tough stuff, Tohr was a really nice guy. And surprisingly empathic, considering he kicked around the undead for a living. He was the official leader of the Brotherhood since Wrath had ascended to the throne two months ago, and the only fighter who didn't live at the

mansion. Tohr's *shellan*, Wellsie, was expecting their first child and not about to move in with a bunch of single guys. And who could blame her?

"So I guess you boys had some fun on the way home," Tohr said to Vishous.

"Yeah, Rhage really let loose," V replied as he poured himself a shot of vodka from the wet bar.

Phury came in next and nodded hello. Butch liked the brother a lot, even though they didn't have much in common. Well, except for their wardrobe fetish, although even there they differed. Butch's clotheshorse routine was a fresh coat of paint on a cheap house. Phury's style and masculine elegance were down to the bone. He was lethal, there was no doubt about it, but he had a metrosexual vibe to him.

The refined-gentleman impression wasn't just a result of his sharp duds, like the black cashmere sweater and fine twill slacks he was sporting right now. The brother had the most amazing head of hair Butch had ever seen. The long, thick waves of blond and red and brown were outrageously beautiful, even for a woman. And his odd yellow eyes, that shone bright as gold in the sunshine, added to his whole deal.

Why he was celibate was a total mystery.

As Phury went over to the bar and poured himself a glass of port, his limp was barely noticeable. Butch had heard that the guy's lower leg had been lost somewhere along the line. He had an artificial limb now, and evidently it didn't hinder him on the battlefield in the slightest.

Butch glanced over as someone else came into the room.

Unfortunately, Phury's twin had decided to show up on time, but at least Zsadist went to the far corner and stayed away from everyone. This was just fine with Butch, because that bastard made him jumpy.

Z's scarred face and glossy black eyes were just the tip of the iceberg for freakiness. The skull-trimmed hair, the tats around his neck and wrists, the piercings: He was a total package of menace and had the high-octane hatred to back up the impression he made. In law enforcement slang, he was a triple threat, that one. Stone cold. Mean as a snake. And unpredictable as hell.

Apparently Zsadist had been abducted from his family as an infant and sold into some kind of slavery. The hundred or so years he'd spent in captivity had sucked out anything even remotely human—er, vampire—in him. He was nothing but dark emotions trapped in a ruined skin now. And if you knew what was good for you, you stayed the hell out of his way.

From out in the hall there was the sound of heavy footfalls. The brothers got quiet, and a moment later Wrath filled the doorway.

Wrath was a huge, dark-haired, cruel-lipped nightmare of a guy. He wore black wraparound shades all the time, lots of leather, and was about the last person on the planet anyone would want to screw with.

The hard-ass also happened to be the first on Butch's list of men to have at his back. He and Wrath had forged a bond on the night Wrath had been shot getting his wife back from the *lessers*. Butch had helped out, and that was that. They were tight.

Wrath entered the room like he owned the whole world. The brother was total emperor material, which made sense, because that was what he was. The Blind King. The last pure-bred vampire left on the planet. The ruler of his race.

Wrath glanced in Butch's direction. "You took good care of Rhage tonight. I appreciate it."

"He'd have done the same for me."

"Yeah, he would've." Wrath went behind the desk and sat down, crossing his arms over his chest. "Here's what we got. Havers had a trauma case come in tonight. Civilian male. Beat to shit, barely conscious. Before he died, he told Havers that he'd been worked over by the *lessers*. They wanted to know about the Brotherhood, where we lived, what he knew about us."

"Another one," Tohr murmured.

"Yeah. I think we're seeing a shift in the Lessening Society's strategy. The male described a place specifically set up for rough interrogation. Unfortunately, he died before he could give a location." Wrath pegged Vishous with a stare. "V, I want you to go to the civilian's family and tell them that the death will be avenged. Phury, get over to Havers's and talk to the nurse who caught most of what the male said. See if you can get a bead on where they had him and how he escaped. I'm not going to have those bastards using my civilians as scratching posts."

"They're working over their own kind, too," V interjected. "We found a *lesser* being strung up in a tree on the way home. Surrounded by his friends."

"What did they do to the guy?"

Butch spoke up. "Plenty. He wasn't breathing anymore and then some. Do they take out their own a lot?"

"No. They don't."

"Then it's a hell of a coincidence, don't you think? Civilian gets free of a

torture camp tonight. *Lesser* shows up looking like a pincushion.”

“I’m with you there, cop.” Wrath turned to V. “You get any info off those *lessers*? Or did Rhage clean house?”

V shook his head. “Everything was gone.”

“Not exactly.” Butch reached into his pocket and took out the wallet he’d removed from the treed *lesser*. “I got this off the one they turned on.” He rifled through and found the driver’s license. “Gary Essen. Hey, he lived in my old building. Just goes to show, you never know about your neighbors.”

“I’ll search the apartment,” Tohr said.

As Butch tossed the wallet over, the brothers got up, ready to leave.

Tohr spoke before anyone took off. “There’s one other thing. Got a phone call tonight. Civilian female found a young male out on his own. He had the name Tehrror on him. I told her to bring him to the training center tomorrow night.”

“Interesting,” Wrath said.

“He doesn’t speak, and his translator’s coming with him. It’s a human, by the way.” Tohr smiled and put the *lesser*’s wallet in the back pocket of his leathers. “But don’t worry about it. We’ll scrub her memories.”

As Mr. X opened up his cabin’s front door, his mood was not improved by Mr. O’s affect. The *lesser* on the other side was looking steady, unflappable. Humility would have gotten him further, but any form of weakness or submission was not in the man’s nature. Yet.

Mr. X motioned his subordinate in. “You know something, this confession-of-failure thing we’ve got going on is not working for me. And I should have known not to trust you. You mind explaining why you killed your squadron?”

Mr. O pivoted around. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t try to hide behind lies, it’s annoying.” Mr. X shut the door.

“I didn’t kill them.”

“But a creature did? Please, Mr. O. You could at least be more original. Better yet, blame it on the Brotherhood. That would be more plausible.”

Mr. X walked across the cabin’s main room, keeping quiet for a while so his subordinate could get good and worked up. He idly checked his laptop and then glanced around his private quarters. The place was rustic, the furniture sparse, the seventy-five surrounding acres a good buffer. The toilet didn’t work, but as *lessers* didn’t eat, that kind of facility was unnecessary.

The shower ran just fine, however.

And until they settled on another recruitment center, this humble outpost was the society's headquarters.

"I told you exactly what I saw," Mr. O said, breaking the silence tightly.
"Why would I lie?"

"The *why* is irrelevant to me." Mr. X casually opened the door to the bedroom. The hinges creaked. "You should know that I sent a squadron to the scene while you were driving out here. They reported that there was nothing left of the bodies, so I assume you stabbed them into the great unknown. And they confirmed that there had been one hell of fight, a lot of blood. I can imagine how your squadron fought against you. You must have been spectacular to win."

"If I'd killed them like that, why are my clothes mostly clean?"

"You changed before coming here. You're not stupid." Mr. X positioned himself in the bedroom's doorway. "So here's where we are, Mr. O. You are a pain in the ass, and the question I need to ask myself is whether you're worth all this aggravation. Those were Primes you killed out there. Seasoned *lessers*. Do you know how long—"

"I didn't kill them—"

Mr. X took two easy steps forward and coldcocked Mr. O in the jaw. The other man went down to the floor.

Mr. X put his boot on the side Mr. O's face, pinning him. "Let's quit it with that, okay? What I was saying was, do you have any idea how long it takes to make a Prime? Decades, centuries. You managed to wipe out three of them in one night. Which brings you to a total of four, counting Mr. M, who you sliced without my permission. And then there were the Betas you slayed tonight, as well."

Mr. O was spitting mad, his eyes glaring up from around the Timberland's sole. Mr. X leaned into his foot until those lids were wide, no longer narrow.

"So, again, I have to ask myself, are you worth it? You're only three years into the society. You're strong, you're effective, but you're proving impossible to control. I put you with Primes because I assumed you'd fall in line with their level of excellence and temper yourself. Instead, you killed them."

Mr. X felt his blood rise and reminded himself that anger was not appropriate for a leader. Calm, levelheaded domination worked best. He took

a deep breath before speaking again.

“You took out some of our best assets tonight. And it is going to stop, Mr. O. Right now.”

Mr. X lifted his boot. The other *lesser* immediately sprang up from the floor.

Just as Mr. O was about to speak, an odd, discordant hum weaved through the night. He looked toward the sound.

Mr. X smiled. “Now if you don’t mind, get the hell into that bedroom.”

Mr. O crouched into an attack pose. “What’s that?”

“It’s time for a little behavior modification. A little punishment, too. So get into the bedroom.”

By now the sound was so loud it was more a vibration of the air than something ears could register.

Mr. O shouted, “I told you the truth.”

“Into the bedroom. The time for talking’s passed.” Mr. X glanced over his shoulder, in the direction of the hum. “Oh, for chrissakes.”

He froze the large muscles in the other *lesser*’s body and manhandled Mr. O into the other room, shoving him down on the bed.

The front door burst wide open.

Mr. O’s eyes bulged as he took in the Omega. “Oh...God...no...”

Mr. X tidied up the man’s clothes, straightening the jacket and the shirt. For good measure, he smoothed all that dark brown hair down and kissed Mr. O’s forehead, as if he were a child.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Mr. X murmured, “I’m going to leave the two of you alone.”

Mr. X took the back door out of the cabin. He was just getting into his car when the screams started.

Chapter Eight

“Ah, Bella, I think our ride is here.” Mary let the curtain fall back into place. “Either that or a third-world dictator is lost in Caldwell.”

John headed for the window. Wow, he signed. *Check out that Mercedes. Those blackened windows look bulletproof.*

The three of them left Bella’s house and walked over to the sedan. A little old man, dressed in black livery, got out of the driver’s side and came around to greet them. Incongruously, he was a cheery sort, all smiles. With the loose skin on his face, his long earlobes, and all those jowls, he looked like he was melting, though his radiant happiness suggested disintegration was a fine state to be in.

“I am Fritz,” he said, bowing low. “Please allow me to drive you.”

He opened the rear door and Bella slid inside first. John was next, and when Mary was settled back against the seat, Fritz closed the door. A second later they were on the road.

As the Mercedes glided along, Mary tried to see where they were going, except the windows were too dark. She assumed they were headed north, but who knew?

“Where is this place, Bella?” she asked.

“It’s not far.” But the woman didn’t sound all that confident. In fact, she’d been on edge since Mary and John had shown up.

“Do you know where we’re being taken?”

“Oh, sure.” The woman smiled and looked at John. “We’re going to meet

some of the most amazing males you've ever seen."

Mary's instincts knocked around in her chest, sending all kinds of tread-carefully signals. God, she wished she'd taken her own car.

Twenty minutes later, the Mercedes slowed to a stop. Inched forward. Stopped again. This happened at regular intervals a number of times. Then Fritz put down his window and spoke into some kind of intercom. They cruised along a little farther, then came to a stop. The engine was turned off.

Mary reached for the door. It was locked.

America's Most Wanted, *here we come*, she thought. She could just imagine their pictures on the TV, victims of violent crime.

But the driver let them out immediately, still with that smile on his face.
"Won't you follow me?"

As Mary got out, she looked around. They were in some kind of underground parking lot, except there were no other cars. Just two small buses, like the kind you took around an airport.

They stuck close to Fritz and went through a pair of thick metal doors that opened into a maze of fluorescent-lit corridors. Thank God the guy seemed to know where he was going. There were branches splitting off in all directions with no rational plan, as if the place had been designed to get people lost and keep them that way.

Except someone would always know where you were, she thought. Every ten yards there was a pod set into the ceiling. She'd seen them before in malls, and the hospital had them, too. Surveillance cameras.

Finally they were shown into a small room with a two-sided mirror, a metal table, and five metal chairs. A small camera was mounted in the corner opposite the door. It was exactly like a police interrogation room, or what one must be like according to the sets on *NYPD Blue*.

"You will not have to wait long," Fritz said with a little bow. As he ducked out, the door eased shut of its own volition.

Mary went over and tried the handle, surprised to find it released easily. Then again, whoever was in charge here clearly didn't have to worry about losing track of their visitors.

She looked over at Bella. "You mind telling me what this place is?"

"It's a facility."

"A facility."

"You know, for training."

Yeah, but for what kind of training? "Are these folks of yours with the

government or something?"

"Oh, no. No."

John signed, *This doesn't look like a martial-arts academy.*

Yeah, no kidding.

"What did he say?" Bella asked.

"He's as curious as I am."

Mary turned back to the door, opened it, and stuck her head out into the hall. When she heard a rhythmic sound, she stepped from the room, but didn't wander.

Footsteps. No, a shuffling. *What the—*

A tall blond man dressed in a black muscle shirt and leather pants lurched around a corner. He was unsteady on his bare feet, with one hand on the wall and his eyes focused downward. He seemed to be watching the floor carefully, as if he were relying on his depth perception to balance himself.

He looked drunk or maybe sick, but...good lord, he was beautiful. In fact, his face was so dazzling she had to blink a couple of times. Perfectly square jaw. Full lips. High cheekbones. Broad forehead. Hair was thick and wavy, lighter in the front, darker in the back where it was cut short.

And his body was just as spectacular as his head. Big-boned. Thickly muscled. No fat. His skin was golden even under the fluorescent lights.

Suddenly he looked at her. His eyes were an electric teal blue, so bright, so vivid, they were almost neon. And they stared right through her.

Mary sank back just the same and thought the lack of response wasn't a surprise. Men like him didn't notice women like her. It was a fact of nature.

She should just go back into the room. There was no sense in watching him not acknowledge her as he passed. Trouble was, the closer he got, the more mesmerized she became.

God, he really was...beautiful.

Rhage felt like holy hell as he weaved down the corridor. Every time the beast came out of him and his vision headed off for a little vacation, his eyes took their own sweet time in getting back to work. The body didn't want to play, either, his legs and arms hanging like heavy weights off his torso, not exactly useless, but damn close.

And his stomach was still off. The very idea of food made him nauseous.

But he'd had it with being stuck in his room. Twelve hours flat on his back was enough wasted time. He was determined to get to the training

center's gym, hop on a recumbent bike, and loosen himself up a little—

He stopped, tensing. He couldn't see much, but he knew for sure he was not alone in the hall. Whoever it was stood close beside him, to his left. And it was a stranger.

He spun around and yanked the figure out of a doorway, grabbing it by the throat, forcing the body into the opposite wall. Too late he realized it was a female, and the high-pitched gasp shamed him. He quickly eased up on his grip, but he did not let go.

The slender neck under his palm was warm, soft. Her pulse was frantic, blood racing through the veins that came up from her heart. He leaned down and drew a breath through his nose. Only to jerk back.

Jesus Christ, she was a human. And she was sick, maybe dying.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you get in here?"

There was no answer, just quick breathing. She was utterly terrified of him, the smell of her fear like wood smoke in his nose.

He softened his voice. "I'm not going to hurt you. But you don't belong here, and I want to know who you are."

Her throat undulated under his hand, as if she were swallowing "My name...my name is Mary. I'm here with a friend."

Rhage stopped breathing. His heart skipped a beat and then slowed.

"Say that again," he whispered.

"Ah, my name is Mary Luce. I'm a friend of Bella's.... We came here with a boy, with John Matthew. We were invited."

Rhage shivered, a balmy rush blooming out all over his skin. The musical lilt of her voice, the rhythm of her speech, the sound of her words, it all spread through him, calming him, comforting him. Chaining him sweetly.

He closed his eyes. "Say something else."

"What?" she asked, baffled.

"Talk. Talk to me. I want to hear your voice again."

She was silent, and he was about to demand that she speak when she said, "You don't look well. Do you need a doctor?"

He found himself swaying. The words didn't matter. It was her sound: low, soft, a quiet brushing in his ears. He felt as if he were being stroked on the inside of his skin.

"More," he said, twisting his palm around to the front of her neck so he could feel the vibrations in her throat better.

"Could you...could you please let go of me?"

“No.” He brought his other arm up. She was wearing some kind of fleece, and he moved the collar aside, putting his hand on her shoulder so she couldn’t get away from him. “Talk.”

She started to struggle. “You’re crowding me.”

“I know. *Talk.*”

“Oh, for God’s sake, what do you want me to say?”

Even exasperated, her voice was beautiful. “Anything.”

“Fine. Get your hand off my throat and let me go or I’m going to knee you where it counts.”

He laughed. Then sank his lower body into her, trapping her with his thighs and hips. She stiffened against him, but he got an ample feel of her. She was built lean, though there was no doubt she was a female. Her breasts hit his chest, her hips cushioned his, her stomach was soft.

“Keep talking,” he said in her ear. God, she smelled good. Clean. Fresh. Like lemon.

When she pushed against him, he leaned his full weight into her. Her breath came out in a rush.

“Please,” he murmured.

Her chest moved against his as if she were inhaling. “I...er, I have nothing to say. Except get off of me.”

He smiled, careful to keep his mouth closed. There was no sense showing off his fangs, especially if she didn’t know what he was.

“So say that.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Say nothing. Over and over and over again. Do it.”

She bristled, the scent of fear replaced by a sharp spice, like fresh, pungent mint from a garden. She was annoyed now.

“Say it,” he commanded, needing to feel more of what she did to him.

“Fine. Nothing. Nothing.” Abruptly she laughed, and the sound shot right through to his spine, burning him. “Nothing, nothing. *No-thing. No-thing.* Noooooooothing. There, is that good enough for you? Will you let me go now?”

“No.”

She fought against him again, creating a delicious friction between their bodies. And he knew the moment when her anxiety and irritation turned to something hot. He smelled her arousal, a lovely sweetening in the air, and his body answered her call.

He got hard as a diamond.

“Talk to me, Mary.” He moved his hips in a slow circle against her, rubbing his erection on her belly, increasing his ache and her heat.

After a moment the tension eased out of her, softening her against the thrust of his muscles and his arousal. Her hands flattened on his waist. And then slowly slid around to the small of his back, as if she were unsure why she was responding to him the way she was.

He arched against her, to show his approval and encourage her to touch more of him. When her palms moved up his spine, he growled low in his throat and dropped his head down so his ear was closer to her mouth. He wanted to give her another word to say, something like *luscious* or *whisper* or *strawberry*.

Hell, *antidisestablishmentarianism* would do it.

The effect she had on him was druglike, a tantalizing combination of sexual need and profound ease. Like he was having an orgasm and falling into a peaceful sleep at the same time. It was like nothing he’d ever felt before.

A chill shot through him, sucking the warmth out of his body.

He snapped his head back as he thought about what Vishous had said to him.

“Are you a virgin?” Rhage demanded.

The stiffness in her body returned, like cement setting solid. She shoved hard against him, moving him not one inch.

“I *beg* your pardon. What kind of question is that?”

Anxiety tightened his hand on her shoulder. “Have you ever been taken by a male? *Answer the question.*”

Her lovely voice turned high, frightened. “Yes. Yes, I’ve had...a lover.”

Disappointment loosened his grip. But relief was right on its heels.

All things considered, he wasn’t sure he needed to meet his destiny this ten minutes.

Besides, even if she wasn’t his fate, this human female was extraordinary...something special.

Something he had to have.

Mary took a deep breath as the hold on her throat relaxed.

Be careful what you ask for, she thought, remembering how she’d wanted a man to be enthralled by her.

God, this was so not what she’d expected the experience to be like. She

was utterly overwhelmed. By the male body pressing into her. By the promise of sex seething out of him. By the lethal power he could wield if he decided to squeeze her neck again.

“Tell me where you live,” the man said.

When she didn’t answer, he undulated his hips, that massive erection moving, circling, pressing into her stomach.

Mary shut her eyes. And tried not to wonder what it would feel like if he were inside of her while he was doing that.

His head came down and his lips brushed the side of her neck. Nuzzled her. “Where do you live?”

She felt a soft, moist stroke. God, his tongue. Running up her throat.

“You’re going to tell me eventually,” he murmured. “But take your time. I’m not in a big hurry right now.”

His hips left her briefly, returning as his thigh pushed between her legs and brushed against her core. The hand at the base of her neck swept down to her sternum, coming to rest between her breasts.

“Your heart is beating fast, Mary.”

“Th—that’s because I’m frightened.”

“Fear isn’t the only thing you’re feeling. Why don’t you check out what your hands are up to?”

Shoot. They were high on his biceps. And they were gripping him, pulling him closer. Her nails were digging into his skin.

When she let go of him, he frowned. “I like the way that feels. Don’t stop.”

The door opened behind them.

“Mary? Are you oka—Oh...my God.” Bella’s words trailed off.

Mary braced herself as the man twisted his torso and looked at Bella. His eyes squinted, flicked up and down, and then came back to Mary.

“Your friend’s worried about you,” he said softly. “You can tell her she shouldn’t be.”

Mary tried to get loose and wasn’t surprised when he mastered the jerky movements easily.

“I have an idea,” she muttered. “Why don’t you let me go, and then I won’t have to reassure her?”

A dry male voice cut through the hall. “Rhage, that female wasn’t brought here for your pleasure, and this isn’t One Eye, my brother. No sex in the hall.”

Mary tried to turn her head, but the hand between her breasts slid up her throat and took her chin, stopping her. Teal blue eyes bored into hers.

"I'm going to ignore them both. If you do the same, we can make them disappear."

"Rhage, let her go." A sharp torrent of words followed, spoken in a language she didn't understand.

While the tirade went on, the blond's brilliant gaze stayed on her, his thumb running gently back and forth along her jaw. He was lazy, affectionate, but when he replied to the other man, his voice was hard and aggressive, as powerful as his body. Another series of words came back, this time less combative. Like the other guy was trying to reason with him.

Abruptly the blond let her go and stepped back. The absence of his warm, heavy body was a curious shock.

"See you later, Mary." He brushed her cheek with his forefinger and then turned from her.

Feeling weak in the knees, she sagged against the wall as he staggered away, steadyng himself by throwing his arm out to the side.

God, when he'd had her at his mercy, she'd forgotten he was ill.

"Where's the boy?" the other male voice demanded.

Mary looked to her left. The guy was big and dressed in black leather, with a military haircut and a shrewd pair of navy-blue eyes.

A soldier, she thought, somehow put at ease by him.

"The boy?" he prompted.

"John's in there," Bella replied.

"Then let's get to it."

The man opened the door and leaned against it so she and Bella had to squeeze past him. He paid no attention to them as they went by, but stared at John instead. John looked right back at him, eyes narrowed as if he were trying to place the soldier.

When they were all sitting at the table, the man nodded to Bella. "You were the one who called."

"Yes. And this is Mary Luce. And John. John Matthew."

"I'm Tohrment." He refocused on John. "How you doing, son?"

John signed, and Mary had to clear her throat before translating. "He says, 'Fine, sir. How are you?'"

"I'm all right." The man smiled a little and then glanced at Bella. "I want you to wait in the hall. I'll talk to you after I speak with him."

Bella hesitated.

“That isn’t a request,” he said in a level voice.

After Bella left, the guy turned his chair toward John, leaned back in it, and kicked his long legs out. “So tell me, son, where did you grow up?”

John moved his hands, and Mary said, “Here in town. First in an orphanage, then with a couple sets of foster parents.”

“You know anything about your mom or dad?”

John shook his head.

“Bella told me you had a bracelet with some designs on it. Would you show it to me?”

John pulled up his sleeve and extended his arm. The man’s hand engulfed the boy’s wrist.

“That’s real nice, son. You make it?”

John nodded.

“And where’d you get the idea for the design?”

John extracted himself from the soldier’s grip and started to sign. When he stopped, Mary said, “He dreams of the pattern.”

“Yeah? Mind if I ask what your dreams are like?” The man returned to his casual pose in the chair, but his eyes were narrow.

Screw martial-arts training, Mary thought. This wasn’t about some karate lessons. This was an interrogation.

As John hesitated, she wanted to grab the kid and march out, but she had a feeling the boy would fight her. He was utterly absorbed by the man, intense and intent.

“It’s all right, son. Whatever it is, it’s okay.”

John lifted his hands, and Mary spoke as he signed.

“Er...he’s in a dark place. Kneeling in front of an altar. Behind it, he sees writing on the wall, hundreds of lines of writing in black stone—John, wait, slow down. I can’t translate when you go so fast.” Mary concentrated on the boy’s hands. “He says in the dream he keeps going over and touching a strip of writing that looks like this.”

The man frowned.

When John looked down, as if embarrassed, the soldier said, “Don’t you worry, son, we’re cool. Is there anything else you can think of about yourself that strikes you as odd? Things that maybe make you different from other folks?”

Mary shifted in her chair, really uncomfortable with the way things were

going. John was clearly going to answer any question put to him, but for God's sake, they didn't know who this man was. And Bella, though she'd made the introduction, had been obviously uncomfortable.

Mary lifted her hands, about to sign a warning to John, when the kid unbuttoned his shirt. He opened one side, flashing a circular scar above his left pectoral.

The man leaned forward, studied the marking, and then moved back.
"Where did you get that?"

The boy's hands flew around in front of him.

"He says he was born with it."

"Is there anything else?" the man asked.

John glanced over at Mary. He took a deep breath and signed, *I dream of blood. Of fangs. Of...biting.*

Mary felt her eyes widen before she could stop herself.

John looked at her anxiously. *Don't worry, Mary. I'm not a sicko or anything. I was terrified when the dreams first came to me, and it's not like I can control what my brain does, you know.*

"Yeah, I know," she said, reaching out and squeezing his hand.

"What did he say?" the man asked.

"That last part was meant for me."

She inhaled deeply. And went back to translating.

Chapter Nine

Bella leaned back against the wall in the corridor and started braiding pieces of her hair, something she did when she was nervous.

She'd heard members of the Brotherhood were almost a separate species, but she'd never thought that was true. Until now. Those two males were not just colossal on a physical scale; they radiated dominance and aggression. Hell, they made her brother look like an amateur in the hard-ass department, and Rehvenge was the toughest thing she'd ever come across.

Dear God, what had she done in bringing Mary and John here? She was a little less concerned for the boy, but what about Mary? The way that blond warrior had acted around her was flat-out trouble. You could have boiled an ocean with the kind of lust he'd thrown off, and members of the Black Dagger Brotherhood were not used to being denied. From what she'd heard, when they wanted a female, they took her.

Thankfully, they weren't known to rape, although going by what she'd seen just now, they wouldn't have to. Those warrior's bodies were made for sex. Mating with one of them, being possessed by all that strength, would be an extraordinary experience.

Although Mary, as a human, might very well not feel that way.

Bella looked up and down the hall, restless, tense. There was no one around, and if she had to stand still any longer she was going to have a headful of cornrows. She shook out her hair, picked a random direction, and meandered. When she caught the sound of a rhythmic pounding in the

distance, she followed the thumping to a pair of metal doors. She opened one side and walked through.

The gymnasium was the size of a pro-basketball court, its wooden floor varnished to a high gloss. Bright blue mats were laid out here and there and caged fluorescent lights dangled from the high ceiling. A balcony with stadium seating jutted out on the left, and beneath the overhang, a series of punching bags was strung up.

A magnificent male was beating the crap out of one of them, his back to her. Dancing on the balls of his feet, light as a breeze, he threw punch after punch, ducking, hitting, driving the heavy bag forward with his force so the thing hung at an angle.

She couldn't see his face, but he had to be attractive. His skull-trimmed hair was light brown, and he wore a skintight black turtleneck and a pair of loose black nylon workout pants. A holster crisscrossed over his broad back.

The door clicked shut behind her.

With a swipe of his arm, the male whipped a black-bladed dagger out and buried it into the bag. He ripped the thing open, sand and padding pouring down in a rush onto the mat. And then he spun around.

Bella clapped a hand over her mouth. His face was scarred, as if someone had tried to cut it in half with a knife. The thick line started at his forehead, went down the bridge of his nose, and curved over his cheek. It ended at the side of his mouth, distorting his upper lip.

Narrowed eyes, black and cold as night, took her in and then widened ever so slightly. He seemed nonplussed, his big body unmoving save for the deep breaths he took.

The male wanted her, she thought. And was unsure what to do about it.

Except just like that, the speculation and odd confusion were buried. What took their place was an icy anger that scared the hell out of her. Keeping her eyes on him, she backed into the door and pumped the release bar. When she got nowhere, she had a feeling he was trapping her inside.

The male watched her struggle for a moment and then came after her. As he stalked across the mats, he flipped his dagger into the air and caught it by the handle. Flipped it up, snatched it back. Up and down.

"Don't know what you're doing here," he said in a low voice. "Other than fucking up my workout."

As those eyes went over her face and body, his hostility was palpable, but he was also throwing off raw heat, a kind of sexual menace she really

shouldn't have been captivated by.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know..."

"Didn't know what, female?"

God, he was so close now. And he was so much bigger than her.

She flattened herself against the door. "I'm sorry—"

The male punched his hands into the metal on either side of her head. She eyed the knife he was holding, but then forgot all about the weapon as he leaned into her. He stopped just before their bodies touched.

Bella took a deep breath, smelling him. His scent was more like a fire in her nose than anything she could name. And she responded to it, warming, wanting.

"You're sorry," he said, titling his head to the side and focusing on her neck. When he smiled, his fangs were long and very white. "Yeah, I bet you are."

"I am very sorry."

"So prove it."

"How?" she croaked.

"Get on your hands and knees. I'll take your apology from there."

A door on the other side of the gymnasium burst open.

"Oh, Christ...Let her go!" Another male, this one with a long head of hair, jogged across the vast floor. "Hands off, Z. Right now."

The scarred male leaned down to her, putting that misshapen mouth close to her ear. Something pressed into her sternum, over her heart. His fingertip.

"You just got saved, female."

He stepped around her and went out the door, just as the other male came up to her.

"Are you okay?"

Bella eyed the decimated punching bag. She couldn't seem to breathe, although whether that was from fear or something altogether sexual, she wasn't sure. Probably a combination of both.

"Yes, I think so. Who was that?"

The male opened the door and led her back to the interrogation room without answering her question. "Do yourself a favor and stay here, okay?"

Good advice, she thought, as she was left by herself.

Chapter Ten

Rhage came awake with a jolt. As he looked at the clock on his bedside table, he was psyched when he could focus his eyes and read the thing. Then pissed off when he saw what time it was.

Where the hell was Tohr? He'd promised to call as soon as he was done with the human female, but that had been more than six hours ago.

Rhage reached for the phone and dialed Tohr's cell. When he got voice mail, he cursed and hung up.

As he got out of bed, he stretched carefully. He was sore and sick to his stomach, but able to move a lot better. A quick shower and a fresh set of leathers had him feeling even more himself, and he headed for Wrath's study. Dawn was coming soon, and if Tohr wasn't answering his phone, he was probably doing a download to the king before he went home.

The room's double doors were open, and lo and behold, Tohrment was wearing a track in the Aubusson carpet, pacing while talking to Wrath.

"Just who I was looking for," Rhage drawled.

Tohr glanced over. "I was coming to your room next."

"Sure you were. What's doing, Wrath?"

The Blind King smiled. "Glad to see you're getting back to fighting form, Hollywood."

"Oh, I'm ready, all right." Rhage stared at Tohr. "You got something to tell me?"

"Not really."

“You’re saying you don’t know where the human lives?”

“I don’t know if you need to go see her, how about that?”

Wrath leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the desk. His enormous shitkickers made the delicate thing look like a footstool.

He smiled. “One of you steakheads want to bring me up to speed?”

“Private biz,” Rhage murmured. “Nothing special.”

“The hell it is.” Tohr turned to Wrath. “Our boy over here seems to want to get to know the kid’s human translator better.”

Wrath shook his head. “Oh, no, you don’t, Hollywood. Lie down with some other female. God knows, there’s enough of them out there for you.” He nodded at Tohr. “As I was saying, I’ve got no objection to the boy joining the first class of trainees, provided you verify his background. And that human needs to be checked out, too. If the kid disappears all of a sudden, I don’t want her causing trouble.”

“I’ll take care of her,” Rhage said. When they both gave him a look, he shrugged. “Either you let me or I’ll follow whoever does. One way or the other, I will find that female.”

Tohr’s brows turned his forehead into a plow field. “Will you back off, my brother? Assuming the boy comes here, there’s too close a connection with that human. Just drop it.”

“Sorry. I want her.”

“Christ. You can be a real pain in the ass, you know that? No impulse control, but totally single-minded. Helluva combination.”

“Look, one way or the other, I’m going to have her. Now do you want me to check her out while I do it or not?”

When Tohr rubbed his eyes, and Wrath cursed, Rhage knew he’d won.

“Fine,” Tohr muttered. “Find out her background and her connection to the kid and then do what you will with her. But at the end of it, you strip her memories and you don’t see her again. Do you hear me? You wipe yourself out of her when you’re finished and you *do not* see her again.”

“Deal.”

Tohr flipped open his cell and punched a few buttons. “I’m text-messaging the human’s number to you.”

“And her friend’s.”

“You’re going to do her, too?”

“Just give it to me, Tohr.”

Bella was getting into bed for the day when the phone rang. She picked it up, hoping it wasn't her brother. She hated when he checked to make sure she was at home when night receded. Like she might be out screwing males or something.

"Hello?" she said.

"You will call Mary and you will tell her to meet me tonight for dinner."

Bella bolted upright. *The blond warrior.*

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes...but what do you want with her?" As if she didn't already know.

"Call her now. Tell her that I am a friend of yours and she'll enjoy herself. It will be better that way."

"Better than what?"

"My breaking into her house to get to her. Which is what I'll do, if I have to."

Bella closed her eyes and saw Mary against that wall, the male looming over her as he held her in place. He was coming after her for one and only one reason: to release all that sex in his body. Release it into her.

"Oh, God...please don't hurt her. She's not one of us. And she's ill."

"I know. I'm not going to harm her."

Bella put her head in her hand, wondering just how a hard male like him would know what hurt and what didn't.

"Warrior...she doesn't know about our race. She's—I beg you, don't—"

"She won't remember me after it's done."

Like that was supposed to make her feel less awful? As it was, she felt like she was serving Mary up on a platter.

"You can't stop me, female. But you can make it easier on your friend. Think about it. She'll feel safer if she meets me in a public place. She won't know what I am. It will be as normal as it can be for her."

Bella hated being pushed around, hated the sense that she was betraying Mary's friendship.

"I wish I'd never brought her along," she muttered.

"I don't." There was a pause. "She has an...unusual way about her."

"What if she denies you?"

"She won't."

"But if she does?"

"That's her choice. She won't be forced. I swear to you."

Bella let her hand drop to her throat, tangling a finger in the Diamonds by

the Yard chain she always wore.

“Where?” she said with dejection. “Where should she meet you?”

“Where do humans meet for normal dates?”

How the hell would she know? Except then she remembered Mary saying something about a colleague of hers meeting a man.... What was the name of the place?

“TGI Friday’s,” she said. “There’s one in Lucas Square.”

“Fine. Tell her eight o’clock tonight.”

“What name do I give her?”

“Tell her it’s...Hal. Hal E. Wood.”

“Warrior?”

“Yeah?”

“Please...”

His voice actually softened. “Don’t worry, Bella. I’ll treat her well.”

The phone went dead.

In Mr. X’s cabin deep in the woods, O slowly sat up on the bed, easing himself to the vertical. He brushed his hands across his wet cheeks.

The Omega had left only an hour ago, and O’s body was still leaking out of several places, wounds and otherwise. He wasn’t sure he was up to moving, but he had to get the hell away from this bedroom.

When he tried to stand his vision spun wildly, so he sat down. Through the little window across the room, he saw dawn breaking, the warm glow splintered by the boughs of pine trees. He hadn’t expected the punishment to last a whole day. And had been sure at many points that he wouldn’t make it through.

The Omega had taken him to places inside of himself that he’d been shocked to find he had. Places of fear and self-loathing. Of utter humiliation and degradation. And now, in the aftermath, he felt as if he had no skin, as if he were totally open and exposed, a raw laceration that just happened to be breathing.

The door opened. Mr. X’s shoulders filled the frame. “How are we doing?”

O covered himself with a blanket and then opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He coughed a few times. “I...made it.”

“I was hoping you would.”

For O, it was difficult to see the man dressed in regular clothes, holding a

clipboard, looking as if he were ready to start another productive workday. Compared to where O had spent the last twenty-four hours, the normalcy seemed fake and vaguely threatening.

Mr. X smiled a little. "So, you and I are going to strike a deal. You get in line and stay there, and that won't happen again."

O was too exhausted to argue. The fight in him would come back—he knew it would—but right now all he wanted was soap and hot water. And some time alone.

"What do you say to me?" Mr. X demanded.

"Yes, sensei." O didn't care what he had to do, what he had to say. He just had to get away from the bed...the room...the cabin.

"There are some clothes in the closet. You good enough to drive?"

"Yeah. Yeah...I'm fine."

O pictured the shower at his house, all creamy tile and white grout. Clean. So very clean. And he would be, too, when he got out of it.

"I want you to do yourself a favor, Mr. O. When you go about your work, remember what all that felt like. Call it up, keep it fresh in your mind, and take it out on your subjects. I may be irritated by your initiative, but I would despise you if you went soft on me. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sensei."

Mr. X turned away, but then glanced over his shoulder. "I think I know why the Omega let you survive. As he left, he was quite complimentary. I know he'd like to see you again. Shall I tell him you'd welcome his visits?"

O made a strangled sound. He couldn't help it.

Mr. X laughed softly. "Perhaps not."

Chapter Eleven

Mary parked in the TGI Friday's lot. Looking around at the cars and minivans, she wondered how the hell she'd agreed to meet some man for dinner. Close as she could recall, Bella had phoned and talked her into it this morning, but damned if she could remember any of the particulars.

Then again, she wasn't retaining much. Tomorrow morning she was going to the doctor's for the follow-up, and with that hanging over her, she was in a daze. Take last night, for instance. She could have sworn she went somewhere with John and Bella, except the evening was a total black hole. Work was the same. She'd gone through the motions at the law office today, making simple mistakes and staring into space.

As she got out of the Civic, she tightened herself up mentally as best she could. She owed the poor man she was meeting an effort to be alert, but other than that, she didn't feel any pressure. She'd made it clear to Bella this was friends only. Split the check. Nice to meet you; see you later.

Which would have been her attitude even if she hadn't been distracted by the whole Russian roulette medical lottery hanging over her head. Aside from the fact that she might be sick again, she was way out of practice with the whole dating thing and not looking to get back in shape. Who needed the drama? Most single guys in their early thirties were still looking for fun or they would have been married already, and she was the antifun, buzz-kill type. Serious by nature, with some hard-core experience.

And she didn't look like a party, either. The unremarkable hair growing

out of her head was pulled back tight and cinched in a scrunchie. The creamy Irish knit sweater she had on was baggy and warm. Her khakis were comfortable, and her flats were brown and scuffed at the toes. She probably looked like the mother she would never be.

When she walked into the restaurant, she found the hostess and was led to a booth in the back corner. As she put her purse down, she smelled green peppers and onions and looked up. A waitress whipped by with a sizzling iron plate.

The restaurant was busy, a great cacophony rising up from all the life in the place. While waiters danced around with trays of steaming food or piles of used dishes, families and couples and groups of friends laughed, talked, argued. The mad chaos struck her as more awesome than ordinary, and sitting by herself she felt utterly separate, a poser among the real people.

They all had happy futures. She had...more doctor's appointments to go to.

With a curse, she clipped her emotions into place, trimming off the panic and catastrophizing, leaving behind nothing but a resolve not to dwell on Dr. Della Croce tonight.

Mary thought of topiaries and smiled a little, just as a harried waitress came up to the table. The woman put down a plastic glass of water, spilling some.

“You waiting for someone?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You want a drink?”

“This is fine. Thanks.”

As the waitress took off, Mary sipped the water, tasted metal, and pushed the glass away. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a flurry of movement at the front door.

Holy...Wow.

A man had walked into the restaurant. A really, really...*very* fine man.

He was blond. Movie-star beautiful. And monumental in a black leather trench coat. His shoulders were broad as the door he'd come through, his legs so long he was taller than anyone in the place. And as he strode through the knot of people at the entrance, the other men looked down or away or at their watches, as if they knew they couldn't measure up to what he had going on.

Mary frowned, feeling like she'd seen him somewhere before.

Yeah, it's called the big screen, she told herself. Maybe there was a

movie being shot here in town.

The man stepped up to the hostess and ran his eyes over the woman as if trying her on for size. The redhead blinked up at him in stunned disbelief, but then clearly her estrogen receptors came to the rescue. She pulled her hair forward, as if she wanted to make sure he noticed the stuff, and then kicked out her hip as if she'd popped the thing out of joint.

Don't worry, Mary thought. He sees you, honey.

As the two of them started coming through the restaurant, the man surveyed every table, and Mary wondered who he was eating with.

Aha. Two booths away there was a blonde seated alone. Her fuzzy blue sweater was skintight, the angora shrink-wrap showing off a dazzling display of assets. And the woman was radiating anticipation as she watched him come through the restaurant.

Bingo. Ken and Barbie.

Well, not really Ken. As the guy walked along, there was something about him that wasn't WASPy handsome in spite of his amazing looks. Something...animalistic. He just didn't carry himself as other people did.

Actually, he moved like a predator, thick shoulders rolling with his gait, head turning, scanning. She had the discomforting sense that if he wanted to, he could wipe out everyone in the place with his bare hands.

Calling on her willpower, Mary forced herself to stare into her water glass. She didn't want to be like all the other gawking fools.

Oh, hell, she had to look up again.

He'd bypassed the blonde and was standing in front of a brunette directly across the aisle. The woman was smiling broadly. Which seemed only reasonable.

"Hey," he said.

Well, what do you know. Voice was spectacular, too. A deep, resonant drawl.

"Hi, yourself."

The man's tone sharpened. "You are not Mary."

Mary tensed. *Oh, no.*

"I'll be anyone you want."

"I'm looking for Mary Luce."

Oh...shit.

Mary cleared her throat, wishing she were anywhere else, anyone else. "I'm...ah, I'm Mary."

The man turned around. As vivid, teal blue eyes bored into her, his big body stiffened.

Mary looked down quickly, jabbing the straw into her water.

Not what you were expecting, am I? she thought.

As silence stretched out, clearly he was searching for a socially acceptable excuse to cut and run.

God, how could Bella have humiliated her like this?

Rhage stopped breathing and just took the human in. Oh, she was lovely. Nothing he'd expected, but lovely nonetheless.

Her skin was pale and smooth, like fine ivory stationery. The bones of her face were equally delicate, her jaw a graceful arch running from her ears to her chin, her cheeks high and tinted with a natural blush. Her neck was long and slender, like her hands and probably her legs. Her deep brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

She wore no makeup, he couldn't detect any perfume, and the only jewelry she had on was a pair of tiny pearl earrings. Her off-white sweater was bulky and loose, and he was willing to bet her pants were also baggy.

There was absolutely nothing about her that courted notice. She wasn't anything like the females he went for. And she held his attention like a marching band.

"Hello, Mary," he said softly.

He was hoping she would look back up at him, because he hadn't been able to catch enough of her eyes. And he couldn't wait to hear her voice again. The two words she'd spoken had been so quiet and not nearly enough.

He stuck his hand out, itching to touch her. "I'm Hal."

She let his palm hang between them as she reached for her purse and started to scootch her way out of the booth.

He planted himself in her path. "Where are you going?"

"Look, it's okay. I won't tell Bella. We'll just pretend we had dinner."

Rhage closed his eyes and tuned out the background noise so he could absorb the sound of her voice. His body stirred and calmed, weaved a little. And then he realized what she'd said.

"Why would we lie? We are going to have dinner together."

Her lips tightened, but at least she stopped trying to escape.

When he was sure she wasn't going to bolt, he sat down and tried to get his legs to fit under the table. As she looked at him, he stopped shifting his

knees around.

Dear God. Her eyes didn't match the gentle lilt of her voice at all. They belonged to a warrior.

Gunmetal gray, surrounded by lashes the color of her hair, they were grave, serious, reminding him of males who had fought and survived battle. They were staggeringly beautiful in their strength.

His voice vibrated. "I am so going to...have dinner with you."

Those eyes flared and then narrowed. "Have you always done charity work?"

"Excuse me?"

A waitress came over and slowly put down a glass of water in front of him. He could smell the female's lusty response to his face and his body and it annoyed him.

"Hi, I'm Amber," she said. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Water is fine. Mary, do you want anything else?"

"No, thanks."

The waitress stepped a little closer to him. "Can I tell you about our specials?"

"All right."

As the list went on and on, Rhage didn't look away from Mary. She was hiding her eyes from him, damn it.

The waitress cleared her throat. A couple of times. "You sure I can't get you a beer? Or maybe something with a little more kick? How about a shot __?"

"We're fine, and you can come back later for the order. Thanks."

Amber took the hint.

When they were alone, Mary said, "Really, let's just end—"

"Have I given you any indication that I don't want to eat with you?"

She put a hand on top of the menu in front of her, tracing the picture of a plate of ribs. Abruptly she pushed the thing away. "You keep staring at me."

"Males do that." *When they find a female they want*, he added to himself.

"Yeah, well, not to me they don't. I can imagine how seriously underwhelmed you are, but I don't need you focusing on the particulars, know what I mean? And I'm really not interested in enduring an hour of you taking one for the team."

God, that voice. She was doing it to him again, his skin flaring with shivers and then settling down, loosening. He took a deep breath, trying to

catch some of her natural, lemony scent.

As silence cropped up between them, he nudged her menu back at her. “Decide what you’re going to order, unless you just want to sit there while I eat.”

“I can leave anytime I want.”

“True. But you won’t.”

“Oh, and why’s that?” Her eyes flashed, and his body lit up like a football stadium.

“You’re not going to bail because you like Bella too much to embarrass her by walking out on me. And unlike you, I will tell her you ditched me.”

Mary frowned. “Blackmail?”

“Persuasion.”

She slowly opened the menu and glanced at it. “You’re still staring at me.”

“I know.”

“Would you mind looking somewhere else? The menu, that brunette across the aisle. There’s a blonde two booths back, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“You don’t ever wear perfume, do you?”

Her eyes flipped up to his. “No, I don’t.”

“May I?” He nodded to one of her hands.

“Excuse me?”

He couldn’t very well tell her he wanted to smell her skin up close. “Considering we’re having dinner and all, seems only civil to shake hands, doesn’t it? And even though you shut me down the first time I tried to be polite, I’m willing to give it another shot.”

When she didn’t answer, he reached across the table and took her hand into his. Before she could react, he pulled her arm forward, bent down, and pressed his lips to her knuckles. He breathed in deeply.

His body’s response to her scent was immediate. His erection punched at the fly of his leathers, straining, pushing. He shifted around to make some more room in his pants.

God, he couldn’t wait to get her home alone.

Chapter Twelve

Mary stopped breathing as Hal released her hand.

Maybe she was dreaming. Yeah, that had to be it. Because he was too gorgeous. Too sexy. And way too focused on her to be real.

The waitress came back, getting as close to Hal as she could without actually being in his lap. And wouldn't you know it, the woman had freshened her lip gloss. That mouth of hers looked like it had had an oil change with something called Fresh Pink. Or Curious Coral. Or something equally ridiculous.

Mary shook her head, surprised she was being so bitchy.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asked Hal.

He glanced across the table and lifted an eyebrow. Mary shook her head and started flipping through the menu.

"Okay, whadda we got here," he said, opening his own. "Let's have the Chicken Alfredo. The NY strip, rare. And a cheeseburger, also rare. Double on the fries. And some nachos. Yeah, I want the nachos with everything on them. Double that, too, will you?"

Mary could only stare as he closed the menu and waited.

The waitress looked a little awkward. "Is all that for both you and your sister?"

As if family obligation was the only reason a man like him would be out with a woman like her. *Oh, man...*

"No, that's for me. And she's my date, not my sister. Mary?"

“I...ah, I’ll just have a Caesar salad, whenever his”—*feeding trough?*
—“dinner comes.”

The waitress took the menus and left.

“So, Mary, tell me a little about yourself.”

“Why don’t we just make it about you?”

“Because then I won’t hear you talk.”

Mary stiffened, something bubbling below the surface of her consciousness.

Talk. I want to hear your voice.

Say nothing. Over and over and over again. Do it.

She could have sworn this man had said those things to her, but she’d never met him before. God knew, she would have remembered that.

“What do you do for a living?” he prompted.

“Er...I’m an executive assistant.”

“Where?”

“A law firm here in town.”

“But you did something else, didn’t you?”

She wondered how much Bella had told him. God, she hoped the woman hadn’t brought up the illness. Maybe that was why he was staying.

“Mary?”

“I used to work with kids.”

“Teacher?”

“Therapist.”

“Head or body?”

“Both. I was a rehab specialist for autistic children.”

“What got you started in it?”

“Do we have to do this?”

“Do what?”

“All the let’s-pretend-to-get-to-know-you stuff.”

He frowned, leaning back as the waitress put a huge plate of nachos on the table.

The woman bent down to his ear. “Shhh, don’t tell anyone. I stole these from another order. They can wait, and you look very hungry.”

Hal nodded, smiled, but seemed uninterested.

She had to give him credit for being polite, Mary thought. Now that he was sitting across the table from her, he didn’t seem to notice any other women at all.

He offered the plate to her. When she shook her head, he popped a nacho in his mouth.

“I’m not surprised small talk annoys you,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

“You’ve been through too much.”

She frowned. “What exactly did Bella tell you about me?”

“Nothing much.”

“So how do you know I’ve been through anything?”

“It’s in your eyes.”

Oh, hell. He was smart, too. Talk about the total package.

“But I hate to break it to you,” he said, making fast but neat work of the nachos, “I don’t care if you’re annoyed. I want to know what got you interested in that line of work, and you’re going to tell me.”

“You are arrogant.”

“Surprise, surprise.” He smiled tightly. “And you’re avoiding my question. What got you started in it?”

The answer was her mother’s struggle with muscular dystrophy. After seeing what her mom went through, helping other people find ways around their limitations had been a calling. Maybe even a way to work off some guilt at being healthy when her mother had been so compromised.

And then Mary had gotten hit with some serious compromises herself.

Funny, the first thing she’d thought of when she’d been diagnosed was that it wasn’t fair. She’d watched her mother do the disease thing, had suffered right alongside. So why was the universe requiring her to know firsthand the kind of pain she’d witnessed? It was right then and there that she’d realized there was no quota on misery for people, no quantifiable threshold that once reached, got you miraculously taken out of the distress pool.

“I never wanted to do anything else,” she hedged.

“Then why did you stop?”

“My life changed.”

Thankfully, he didn’t follow up on that one. “Did you like working with handicapped kids?”

“They’re not...they weren’t handicapped.”

“Sorry,” he said, clearly meaning it.

The sincerity in his voice popped the lid off her reserve in a way compliments or smiles never would have.

“They’re just different. They experience the world in a different way. Normal is just what’s average, it’s not necessarily the only way of being, or living—” She stopped, noticing he’d closed his eyes. “Am I boring you?”

His lids lifted slowly. “I love to hear you talk.”

Mary swallowed a gasp. His eyes were neon, glowing, iridescent.

Those had to be contacts, she thought. People’s eyes just didn’t come in that teal color.

“Different doesn’t bother you, does it?” he murmured.

“No.”

“That’s good.”

For some reason, she found herself smiling at him.

“I was right,” he whispered.

“About what?”

“You’re lovely when you smile.”

Mary looked away.

“What’s the matter?”

“Please don’t put on the charm. I’d rather deal with small talk.”

“I’m honest, not charming. Just ask my brothers. I’m constantly putting my foot in my mouth.”

There were more of him? Boy, that’d be a hell of a family Christmas card. “How many brothers do you have?”

“Five. Now. We lost one.” He took a long drink of water, as if he didn’t want her to see his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Thanks. It’s still fresh. And I miss him like hell.”

The waitress arrived with a heavy tray. When the plates were lined up in front of him and Mary’s salad was down on the table, the woman lingered until Hal thanked her pointedly.

He went for the Alfredo first. He sank his fork into the tangle of fettuccine, twisted until a knot of pasta was on the tines, and carried the noodles to his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully and added some salt. He tested the strip steak next. Shook on a little pepper. Then he picked up the cheeseburger. It was halfway to his mouth when he frowned and put it back down. He used his fork and knife to take a bite.

He ate like a total gentleman. With an almost dainty air.

Abruptly, he looked at her. “What?”

“Sorry, I, ah...” She picked at her salad. And promptly went back to

watching him eat.

“You keep staring at me and I’m going to blush,” he drawled.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I like your eyes on me.”

Mary’s body shimmered to life. And she responded with total grace by launching a crouton into her lap.

“So what are you looking at?” he asked.

She used her napkin to dab at the dressing skid on her pants. “Your table manners. They’re very good.”

“Food is to be savored.”

She wondered what else he enjoyed like that. Slowly. Thoroughly. God, she could just imagine the kind of love life he had. He’d be amazing in bed. That big body, that golden skin, those long, tapered fingers...

Mary’s throat went dry and she made a grab for her glass. “But do you always...eat so much?”

“Actually, the stomach’s off. I’m taking it easy.” He shook a little more salt on the fettuccine. “So you used to work with autistic children, but now you’re at a law firm. What else do you do with your time? Hobbies? Interests?”

“I like to cook.”

“Really? I like to eat.”

She frowned, trying not to imagine him sitting at her table.

“You’re irritated again.”

She waved her hand around. “I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are. Don’t like the idea of cooking something for me, do you?”

His unfettered honesty made her think she could tell him anything and he’d respond with exactly what he thought and felt. Good or bad.

“Hal, do you have any kind of filter between your brain and your mouth?”

“Not really.” He finished the Alfredo and moved the plate aside. The steak was up next. “So what about your parents?”

She took a deep breath. “My mother died about four years ago. My father was killed when I was two in a wrong-place-wrong-time kind of thing.”

He paused. “That’s hard. Losing both of them.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Both of mine are gone, too. But at least they made it to old age. Do you

have sisters? Brothers?"

"No. It was just me and my mother. And now only me."

There was a long silence. "So how do you know John?"

"John...oh, John Matthew? Did Bella tell you about him?"

"After a fashion."

"I don't know him all that well. He just kind of came into my life recently. I think he's a special kid, a kind one, even though I get the sense things haven't been easy for him."

"You know his parents?"

"He told me he doesn't have any."

"You know where he lives?"

"I know the area of town. It's not a very good one."

"Do you want to save him, Mary?"

What an odd question, she thought.

"I don't think he needs to be saved, but I'd like to be his friend.

Truthfully, I barely know him. He just showed up at my house one night."

Hal nodded, as if she'd given him an answer he'd wanted.

"How do you know Bella?" she asked.

"Don't you like your salad?"

She looked down her plate. "I'm not hungry."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes."

As soon as he'd finished his burger and fries, he reached over for the small menu by the salt and pepper shakers.

"Is dessert more to your liking?" he asked.

"Not tonight."

"You should eat more."

"I had a big lunch."

"No, you didn't."

Mary crossed her arms over her chest. "How would you know?"

"I can sense your hunger."

She stopped breathing. God, those eyes of his were gleaming again. So blue, so bright, the color endless, like the sea. An ocean to swim in. To drown in. To die in.

"How do you know I'm...hungry?" she said, feeling as if the world were slipping away.

His voice dropped until it was almost a purr. "I'm right, aren't I? So why

does it matter how?"

Fortunately, the waitress arrived to pick up the dishes and broke the moment. By the time Hal had ordered an apple crisp, some kind of brownie thing, and a cup of coffee, Mary felt like she was back on the planet.

"So what do you do for a living?" she asked.

"This and that."

"Acting? Modeling?"

He laughed. "No. I may be decorative, but I prefer to be useful."

"And how are you useful?"

"I guess you could say I'm a soldier."

"You're in the military?"

"Kind of."

Well, that would explain the deadly air. The physical confidence. The sharpness in his eyes.

"What branch?" Marines, she thought. Or maybe a SEAL. He was that hard.

Hal's face tightened up. "Just another soldier."

From out of nowhere, a cloud of perfume invaded Mary's nose. It was the redhead hostess sweeping up to the table.

"Was everything okay?" As Hal looked over, you could practically hear the woman sizzle.

"Fine, thanks," he said.

"Good." She slipped something onto the table. A napkin. With a number and a name on it.

As the woman flashed her eyes and sauntered off, Mary looked down at her hands. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her purse.

Time to go, she thought. For some reason she didn't want to watch Hal put that napkin in his pocket. Even though he had every right to do so.

"Well, this has been...interesting," she said. She picked up her bag and shuffled out of the booth.

"Why are you leaving?" His frown made him look like true military material, taking him very far away from the sexy male pinup stuff.

Unease flickered in her chest. "I'm tired. But, thanks, Hal. This has been...Well, thanks."

As she tried to get by him, he took her hand, stroking her inner wrist with his thumb. "Stay while I eat my dessert."

She looked away from his perfect face and his broad shoulders. The

brunette across the aisle was getting to her feet and eyeing him, a business card in her hand.

Mary leaned down. "I'm sure you'll find plenty of others to keep you company. In fact, one's headed your way right now. I'd say good luck with her, but she looks like a sure thing."

Mary made a beeline for the exit. The chilly air and the relative silence were a relief after the crush of people, except as she approached her car, she had the eerie sense she wasn't alone. She glanced over her shoulder.

Hal was right behind her, even though she'd left him in the restaurant. She wheeled around, heart pounding like it wanted out of her ribs.

"Jesus! What are you doing?"

"Walking you to your car."

"I...ah. Don't bother."

"Too late. This Civic is yours, right?"

"How did you—"

"The lights flashed as you unlocked it."

She moved away from him, but as she backed up, Hal came forward. When she bumped against her car, she put her hands out.

"Stop."

"Don't be scared of me."

"Then don't crowd me."

She turned away from him and went for the door handle. His hand shot out, clamping on the seam between the window and the roof.

Yeah, she was going to get behind the wheel. When he let her.

"Mary?" His deep voice was right next to her head, and she jumped.

She felt the raw seduction of him and imagined his body as a cage locked around her. With a treasonous shift, her fear changed into something wanton and needy.

"Let me go," she whispered.

"Not yet."

She heard him take a deep breath, as if he were smelling her, and then her ears were flooded by a rhythmic pumping sound, as though he were purring. Her body loosened, heated, opened between her legs as if it was prepared to accept him inside.

Good God, she had to get away from him.

She grabbed onto his forearm and pushed. Which got her nowhere.

"Mary?"

“What?” she snapped, resentful because she was turned on when she should have been petrified. For God’s sake, he was a stranger, a big, pushy stranger, and she was a woman alone with no one to miss her if she didn’t make it home.

“Thank you for not bailing on me.”

“You’re welcome. Now how about letting me leave?”

“As soon as you let me kiss you good-night.”

Mary had to open her mouth to get enough air into her lungs.

“Why?” she asked hoarsely. “Why would you want to do that?”

His hands fell onto her shoulders and turned her around. He towered over her, blocking out the glow from the restaurant, the lights in the parking lot, the stars far above.

“Just let me kiss you, Mary.” His hands slid up her throat and on to the sides of her face. “Only once. Okay?”

“No, it’s not okay,” she whispered as he tilted her head back.

His lips descended and her mouth trembled. It had been so long since she’d been kissed. And never by a man like him.

The contact was soft, gentle. Unexpected, given the size of him.

And just as a blast of heat licked over her breasts and landed between her legs, she heard a hiss.

Hal stumbled back and looked at her strangely. With a jerky movement, his heavy arms crossed over his chest, as if he were holding on to himself.

“Hal?”

He said nothing, just stood there, staring. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was shaken.

“Hal, are you all right?”

He shook his head once.

Then he walked away, disappearing into the darkness beyond the parking lot.

Chapter Thirteen

Rhage materialized in the courtyard between the Pit and the mansion.

He couldn't put an exact bead on the sensation inside his skin, but it was some kind of low-level buzz in his muscles and bones, like the vibration of a tuning fork. What he did know for sure was that he'd never felt the hum before. And that it had kicked off the moment his mouth had touched Mary's.

Since anything new and different with his body was bad, he'd immediately gotten the hell away from her, and not being around the female seemed to help. Trouble was, now that the feeling was fading, his body's need for release was causing him to twitch. Which wasn't fair. After the beast came out, he usually got at least a few days off.

He checked his watch.

Damn it, he wanted to go out hunting for *lessers* to take himself down a notch or two, but since Tohr had taken over command of the Brotherhood, new rules had been laid out. After changing, Rhage was supposed to cool his jets for a couple days until he was back on all burners. With Darius's death this past summer, the number of brothers had been reduced to six, and then Wrath had ascended to the throne, so they were just five now. The race couldn't afford to lose another warrior.

The forced R & R made sense, but he hated being told what to do. And he couldn't stand not being out in the field, especially when he needed to drain off some juice.

Taking a set of keys from his coat, he went over to his souped-up GTO.

The car came awake with a roar, and a minute and a half later he was out on the open road. He didn't know which direction he was headed in. Didn't care.

Mary. That kiss.

God, her mouth had been unbelievably sweet as it trembled under his, so sweet he'd wanted to part her lips with his tongue and slide inside of her. Slide and retreat and come back again for another taste. And then do the same with his body between her legs.

Except he'd had to stop. Whatever that hum was, it got him wired, so it was dangerous. The damn reaction didn't make sense, though. Mary calmed him, brought him some ease. Sure, he wanted her, and that was going to wire him out, but it shouldn't be enough to get him dangerous.

Ah, hell. Maybe he'd misinterpreted the response. Maybe that current had been sexual attraction of a more profound sort than he was used to.... Which was typically nothing but the urge to come just so his body was less likely to flip out on him.

He thought about the females he'd had. There had been countless numbers of them, all nameless, faceless bodies he'd released into, not one of them a source of real pleasure for him. He'd touched them and kissed them only because unless they got off too, he felt like a total user.

Shit, he felt like a user anyway. He *was* a user.

So even if he hadn't been thrown by the buzz from kissing Mary, he still would have left her in that parking lot. With her lovely voice and her warrior eyes and her trembling mouth, Mary could not be just another screw. Taking her, even if she was willing, seemed like a violation of something pure. Something better than he was.

His cell phone rang and he took it out of his pocket. As he checked caller ID, he cursed, but answered the thing anyway. "Hey, Tohr. I was going to call you."

"I just saw your car peel out of here. Are you meeting the human female now?"

"I already did."

"That was quick. She must have treated you right."

Rhage ground his teeth. For once he had no quick comeback. "I talked to her about the kid. We've got no problem there. She likes him, she feels badly for him, but if he disappeared, she wouldn't cause a problem. She only met him recently."

"Good job, Hollywood. So where you headed now?"

“Just driving.”

Tohr’s voice softened. “You hate not being able to fight, don’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Of course, but don’t worry, tomorrow night will come soon enough, and you’ll be back in action. In the meantime, you could work off a little more of that sauce of yours at One Eye.” Tohr chuckled. “By the way, I heard about the sisters you did two nights ago, one right after another. Man, you’re amazing, you know that?”

“Yeah, Tohr, can I ask you a favor?”

“Anything, my brother.”

“Could you not...ride me about the females?” Rhage took a deep breath. “Because the truth is, I hate it, I really do.”

He meant to stop there, but suddenly the words were coming out and he couldn’t shut up.

“I hate the anonymity of it. I hate the way my chest aches afterward. I hate the smells on my body and in my hair when I get home. But most of all, I hate the fact that I’m going to have to do it again because if I don’t, I could end up hurting one of you guys or some innocent bystander.” He exhaled through his mouth. “And those two sisters you’re so impressed with? See, here’s the thing. I only pick the ones who don’t give a shit who they’re with, because otherwise it’s not fair. Those two bar chippies checked out my watch and my roll and figured I was a pimp trophy. The fucking was about as intimate as a car accident. And tonight? You’re going home to Wellsie. I’m going home alone. Just like I did yesterday. Just like I’m going to do the day after. The whoring isn’t fun for me, and it’s been killing me for years, so please give it a rest, dig?”

There was a long silence. “Jesus...I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I had no idea
—”

“Yeah, ah...” He really needed to stop this conversation. “Look, I gotta go. I gotta...go. Later.”

“No, wait, Rhage—”

Rhage turned his phone off and pulled over to the side of the road. As he looked around, he realized he was out in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but the forest for company. He put his head down on the steering wheel.

Visions of Mary came to him. And he realized he’d neglected to scrub her memories.

Neglected? *Yeah, right.* He hadn’t cleaned her out because he wanted to

see her again. And he wanted her to remember him.

Oh, man... This was bad stuff. All the way around.

Chapter Fourteen

Mary flopped over in bed and pushed the covers and blankets off with her feet. Half-asleep, she splayed her legs out to try to cool down.

Damn it, had she left the thermostat on too high—

Horrible suspicion shot her into consciousness, her mind coming to attention on a wave of dread.

Low-grade fever. She had a low-grade fever.

Oh, hell... She knew the feel of it too well, the flush, the dry heat, the joint aches. And the clock said 4:18 A.M. Which, when she'd been sick before, was about the time her temperature liked to flare up.

Reaching overhead, she cracked open the window behind her bed. Cold air took the invitation to heart and rushed inside, cooling her, calming her. The fever broke soon afterward, a sheen of sweat announcing its retreat.

Maybe she was just coming down with a cold. People with her medical history did get normal sicknesses like the rest of the world. Really.

Except either way, rhinovirus or recurrence, there'd be no going back to sleep. She pulled a fleece on over her T-shirt and boxers and went downstairs. On her way to the kitchen, she turned on every light switch she passed until all the dark corners in the house were illuminated.

Destination: her coffeepot. There was no question that answering some office e-mail and getting ready for the break of the Columbus Day long weekend was better than lying in bed and counting the time before her doctor's appointment.

Which was in five and a half hours, by the way.

God, she hated the waiting.

She filled the Krups machine with water and went into the cupboard for the coffee can. It was nearly empty, so she took out her backup supply and the handheld can opener and—

She was not alone.

Mary leaned forward, looking out the window above the sink. With no exterior lights on she couldn't see anything, so she went around to the slider and flipped the switch next to the door.

"Good Lord!"

A massive black shape was on the other side of the glass.

Mary scrambled for the phone, but stopped when she saw the flash of blond hair.

Hal lifted his hand in greeting.

"Hey." His voice was muffled through the glass.

Mary wrapped her arms around her stomach. "What are you doing here?"

His wide shoulders shrugged. "Wanted to see you."

"Why? And why now?"

Another shrug. "Seemed like a good idea."

"Are you deranged?"

"Yes."

She almost smiled. And then reminded herself that she had no close neighbors and he was practically the size of her house.

"How did you find me?" Maybe Bella had told him where she lived.

"Can I come in? Or maybe you could come out, if you'd feel more comfortable that way?"

"Hal, it's four thirty in the morning."

"I know. But you're awake and so am I."

God, he was so big in all that black leather, and with his face mostly in shadow he was more menacing than beautiful.

And she was actually considering opening the door? Clearly she was also deranged.

"Look, Hal, I don't think it's a good idea."

He stared at her through the glass. "Maybe we can just talk this way, then?"

Mary stared at him, dumbfounded. The guy was willing to hang around, locked out of her house like a criminal, just so they could chat?

"Hal, no offense, but there are about a hundred thousand women in this zip code who would not only let you into their homes, but would take you to bed. Why don't you go find one of them and leave me alone?"

"They aren't you."

The darkness falling across his face made his eyes impossible to read. But his tone of voice was so damn sincere.

In the long pause that followed, she tried to convince herself not to let him inside.

"Mary, if I wanted to hurt you, I could do it in an instant. You could lock every door and every window and I'd still get inside. All I want is...to talk to you some more."

She eyed the width of his shoulders. He had a point about the breaking and entering. And she had a feeling that if she told him the best she could do was a closed door between them, he would pull up one of her lawn chairs and sit down on the terrace.

She unlatched the slider, opened it, and stepped back. "Just explain something to me."

He smiled tightly as he came in. "Shoot."

"Why aren't you with a woman who wants you?" Hal flinched. "What I mean is, those women tonight at the restaurant, they were all over you. Why aren't you having—"crazy hot sex—"er...fun with one of them?"

"I'd rather be here talking with you than inside one of those females."

She recoiled a little at his candor, and then realized he wasn't being crude, just bluntly honest.

Well, at least she had one thing right: When he'd walked away after that soft kiss, she'd assumed it was because he hadn't felt any heat. Evidently she'd hit the nail on the head. He wasn't here for sex, and she told herself it was good he didn't lust after her. Almost believed it, too.

"I was about to make some coffee, would you like some?"

He nodded and started wandering around the living room, taking note of her things. Against all of her white furniture and cream walls, his black clothes and heavy build were ominous, but then she looked at his face. He was wearing a silly little grin, as if he were happy just to be inside her house. Kind of like an animal who'd been chained in the yard and finally allowed indoors.

"You want to take off your coat?" she said.

He slid the leather from his shoulders and tossed it over to her sofa. The

thing landed with a dull thump, crushing the cushions.

What the hell was in those pockets? she wondered.

But then she looked at his body and forgot all about the stupid coat. He was wearing a black T-shirt that showed off a powerful set of arms. His chest was wide and well defined, his stomach tight enough so she could see his six-pack even through the shirt. His legs were long, his thighs thick—

“Do you like what you see?” he asked in a low, quiet voice.

Yeah, right. She was *so* not answering that one.

She headed for the kitchen. “How strong do you like your coffee?”

Picking up the can opener, she pierced the Hills Bros lid and started cranking like there was no tomorrow. The top fell loose into the grounds and she reached inside to pick it out.

“I asked you a question,” he said, right next to her ear.

She jerked and sliced her thumb open on the metal. With a groan, she brought her hand up and looked at the cut. It was deep, bleeding.

Hal cursed. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’ll live.”

She turned on the faucet, but before she could get her hand under the rush he gripped her wrist.

“Let me see.” Without giving her a chance to protest, he bent down over her finger. “That’s a bad one.”

He put her thumb in his mouth and sucked gently.

Mary gasped. The warm, wet, pulling sensation paralyzed her. And then she felt the sweep of his tongue. When he released her, she could only stare at him.

“Oh...Mary,” he said sadly.

She was too shocked to wonder about his change of mood. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why?”

Because it felt so good. “How do you know I don’t have HIV or something?”

His shoulders lifted. “Wouldn’t matter if you did.”

She paled, thinking he was positive and she’d just let him put an open cut into his mouth.

“And no, Mary, I don’t have the disease.”

“Then why wouldn’t it—”

“I just wanted to make it better. See? No more bleeding.”

She looked down at her thumb. The cut was sealed up. Partially healed.
How the hell—

“Now are you going to answer me?” Hal said, as if deliberately cutting off the questions she was about to ask.

As she glanced up, she noticed his eyes were doing that glow thing, the teal blue taking on an otherworldly, hypnotic sheen.

“What was the question?” she murmured.

“Does my body please you?”

She tightened her lips. Man, if he got off on hearing women say he was beautiful, he was going home disappointed.

“And what would you do if it didn’t?” she shot back.

“I would cover myself.”

“Yeah, right.”

He cocked his head to the side, as if thinking he’d read her wrong. Then he headed out to the living room where his coat was.

Good lord, he was serious.

“Hal, come back. You don’t have to...I, ah, I like your body just fine.”

He smiled as he returned to her. “I’m glad. I want to please you.”

Fine, dandy, she thought. Then lose the shirt, peel off those leather pants, and lie down on my tile. We’ll take turns being on the bottom.

Cursing herself, she went back to making the coffee. As she spooned grounds into the machine, she could feel Hal looking at her. And hear him take deep breaths, as if he were smelling her. And sensed he was...inching nearer all the time.

The forerunners of panic threaded through her body. He was too close. Too big. Too...beautiful. And the heat and lust he called out of her were too powerful.

When the pot was on, she backed away from him.

“Why don’t you want me to please you?” he said.

“Stop using that word.” Because when he said *please*, all she could think about was sex.

“Mary.” His voice was deep, resonant. Penetrating. “I want to—”

She covered her ears. Suddenly there was way too much of him in her house. In her head.

“This was a bad idea. I think you should go.”

She felt a big hand land lightly on her shoulder.

Mary stepped out of his reach, choking up. He was health and vitality and

raw sex and a hundred other things she couldn't have. He was so totally alive, and she was...most likely sick again.

Mary went over to the slider and opened it. "Leave, okay? Please just leave."

"I don't want to."

"Get out. *Please.*" But he merely stared at her. "Christ, you're like a stray dog I can't get rid of. Why don't you go pester someone else?"

Hal's powerful body stiffened. For a moment it seemed like he was going to say something harsh, but then he picked up his coat. As he swung the leather around his shoulders and went for the door, he didn't look at her.

Oh, great. Now she felt awful.

"Hal. Hal, wait." She grabbed his hand. "I'm sorry. Hal—"

"Don't call me that," he snapped.

When he shrugged off her grip, she stepped in his way. And really wished she hadn't. His eyes were utterly cold. Chips of aqua-colored glass.

The words he spoke were sharp-edged. "I'm sorry I offended you. I can imagine it's a big goddamned burden to have someone want to get to know you."

"Hal—"

He pushed her aside easily. "You say that one more time and I'm going to put a fist through the wall."

He strode outside, walking into the woods that ran down the left edge of her property.

On impulse, Mary shoved her feet into a pair of running shoes, grabbed a jacket, and shot through the slider. She ran across the lawn, calling out for him. When she got to the forest's edge, she paused.

There were no branches snapping, no twigs cracking, no sounds of a big man walking. But he'd gone in this direction. Hadn't he?

"Hal?" she called out.

It was a long while before she turned and went back inside.

Chapter Fifteen

“**Y**ou did well tonight, Mr. O.”

O stepped out of the shed behind the cabin, thinking Mr. X’s approval was such bullshit. He kept the irritation to himself, though. He was barely a day out of the Omega’s clutches and not really in the mood to get all worked up.

“But the male didn’t tell us anything,” he muttered.

“That’s because he didn’t know anything.”

O paused. In the dim dawn, Mr. X’s white face glowed like a night-light.

“Excuse me, sensei?”

“I worked him over myself before you got here. I had to be sure I could depend on you, but didn’t want to waste an opportunity in the event you were no longer solid.”

Which explained the male’s condition. O had assumed the vampire had just fought hard when he’d been abducted.

Wasted time, wasted effort, O thought, getting out his car keys.

“You got any more tests for me?” *You prick.*

“Not right now.” Mr. X checked his watch. “Your new squadron should be here soon, so put those keys away. Let’s go inside.”

O’s revulsion at being anywhere near the cabin made him lose feeling in his feet. The damn things went totally numb on him.

But he smiled. “Lead on, sensei.”

When they were indoors, he went directly to the bedroom and propped

himself against the doorjamb. Even though his lungs had turned into cotton balls, he kept his cool. If he'd avoided the space, Mr. X would have thought of a reason to send him into it. The bastard knew that poking fresh wounds was the only way to determine the extent of the healing or the festering.

While slayers filed into the cabin, O took stock of them. He didn't recognize a single one, but then the longer a member was in the Society, the more anonymous he became. With hair, skin, and eye colors fading to pale, eventually a *lesser* just looked like a *lesser*.

As the other men checked him out, they glared at his dark hair. In the Society new recruits were at the bottom of the ladder, and it was unusual for one to be included in a group of seasoned men. *Yeah, well, fuck that.* O met each of them in the eye, making it clear that if they wanted to take him on he was more than happy to return the goddamned favor.

Faced with the possibility of physical confrontation, he came alive. It was like waking up after a good night's sleep, and he relished the surges of aggression, the good old need to dominate. It assured him that he was as he had always been. That the Omega hadn't taken his core away, after all.

The meeting didn't last long, and it was standard stuff. Introductions. A reminder that every morning, each one of them had to check in via e-mail. There was also a refreshment of the persuasion strategy and some quotas for capture and killing.

When it was over, O was the first to head for the door. Mr. X stepped in front of him.

"You will stay."

Those pale eyes held on to his, watching, waiting to see a flash of fear.

O nodded once and spread his stance. "Sure, sensei. Whatever you like."

From over Mr. X's shoulder, O watched the others head out in the manner of strangers. No talking, eyes straight ahead, bodies not touching even casually. Clearly none of them knew one another, so they must have been called in from different districts. Which meant Mr. X was reaching down into the ranks.

As the door closed behind the last man, O's skin tingled with panic, but he held himself rock still.

Mr. X looked him up and down. Then walked over to the laptop on the kitchen table and fired the thing up. Almost as an afterthought, he said, "I'm putting you in charge of both squadrons. I want them trained in the persuasion techniques we use. I want them working as units." He looked up

from the glowing screen. “And I want them to remain breathing, do you understand?”

O frowned. “Why didn’t you announce this while they were here?”

“Don’t tell me you need that kind of help?”

The mocking tone had O’s eyes narrowing. “I can handle them just fine.”

“You’d better.”

“We done?”

“Never. But you can go.”

O started for the door, except he knew the moment he got to it there would be something more. As he put his hand on the knob, he found himself pausing.

“There something you want to say to me?” Mr. X murmured. “I thought you were leaving.”

O glanced across the room and pulled something out of his ass to justify his hesitation. “We can’t use the house downtown anymore for persuasion, not since that vampire escaped. We need another facility in addition to the one behind here.”

“I’m aware of that. Or did you think I was sending you out to look at land for no reason?”

So that was the plan. “The acreage I checked out yesterday wasn’t right. Too much swamp, and too many roads intersect around it. Do you have any other parcels in mind?”

“I’ll e-mail the Multiple Listings to you. And until I decide where we will build, you’ll bring the captives here.”

“There’s not enough room in the shed for an audience.”

“I’m talking about the bedroom. It’s quite large. As you know.”

O swallowed and kept his voice smooth. “If you want me to teach, I’ll need more space than that.”

“You will come here until we build. That clear enough for you, or do you want a diagram?”

Fine. He’d deal.

O opened the door.

“Mr. O, I believe you have forgotten something.”

Jesus. Now he knew what people meant when they said their skin crawled.

“Yes, sensei?”

“I want you to thank me for the promotion.”

"Thank you, sensei," O said with a tight jaw.

"Don't disappointment me, son."

Yeah, fuck you, daddy.

O bowed a little and left quickly. It felt good to get in his truck and drive away. Better than good. It felt like a goddamned liberation.

On the way to his house, O pulled into a CVS. It didn't take him long to find what he needed, and ten minutes later he shut his front door and deactivated his security alarm. His place was a tiny two-story in a not-so-hot residential section of town, and the location provided good cover. Most of his neighbors were elderly, and those who weren't were green-carders who worked two and three jobs. No one bothered him.

As he walked upstairs to the bedroom, the sound of his footsteps echoing up from the bare floors and bouncing off the empty walls was oddly comforting. Still, the house wasn't a home and never had been. The thing was a barrack. A mattress and a Barcalounger were all he had for furniture. Blinds hung in front of every piece of glass, blocking any view. Closets were stocked with weapons and uniforms. The kitchen was completely empty, the appliances unused since he'd moved in.

He stripped and took a gun into the bathroom along with the white plastic CVS bag. Leaning in toward the mirror, he parted his hair. His roots were showing about an eighth of an inch of pale.

The change had started about a year ago. First a few hairs, right on top, then a whole patch that spread from front to back. His temples had held out the longest, though now even they were fading.

Clairol Hydrience No. 48 Sable Cove took care of the problem, got him back to brown. He'd started with Hair Color for Men, but soon discovered that the shit for women worked better and lasted longer.

He popped open the box and didn't bother with the clear plastic gloves. Emptying the tube into the squeeze bottle, he shook the stuff up and threaded it through to his scalp in sections. He hated the chemical smell. The maintenance. The skunk stripe. But the idea of paling out repulsed him.

Why *lessers* lost their pigmentation over time was an unknown. Or at least, he'd never asked. The *whys* didn't matter to him. He just didn't want to be lost in a great anonymity with the others.

He put down the squeeze bottle and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked like a total idiot, brown grease slathered all over his head. Jesus Christ, what was he turning into?

Well, wasn't that a stupid question. The deed was long done, and it was too late for regrets.

Man, on the night of his initiation, when he'd traded a part of himself for the chance to kill for years and years and years, he'd thought he'd known what he was giving up and what he was getting in return. The deal had seemed more than fair.

And for three years, it had continued to strike him as a good one. The impotence hadn't bothered him much, because the woman he wanted was dead. The not eating and drinking had taken some getting used to, but he'd never been a big chowhound or a drunk. And he'd been eager to lose his old identity, because the police were looking for him.

The plus side had seemed tremendous. The strength had been more than he'd expected. He'd been one hell of a skull-cracker when he'd worked as a bouncer back in Sioux City. But after the Omega was through doing his thing, O had inhuman tensile power in his arms, legs, and chest, and he'd liked using it.

Another bonus was the financial freedom. The Society gave him everything he needed to do his job, covering the costs of his house, his truck, his weapons and clothes, his electronic toys. He was utterly free to hunt his prey.

Or he had been for the first couple of years. When Mr. X had taken command, that autonomy had come to an end. Now there were check-ins. Squadrons. Quotas.

Visits with the Omega.

O got in the shower and washed the crap out of his hair. As he towed off, he went back to the mirror and peered at his face. His irises, once brown like his hair, were turning gray.

In another year or so, everything that used to be him would be gone.

He cleared his throat. "My name is David Ormond. David. Ormond. Son of Bob and Lilly. Ormond. Ormond."

God, the name sounded weird as it left his mouth. And in his head, he heard Mr. X's voice referring to him as Mr. O.

A tremendous emotion swelled in him, panic and sorrow combined. He wanted to go back. He wanted...to go back, to undo, to erase. The deal for his soul had only seemed good. In reality, it was a special kind of hell. He was a living, breathing, killing ghost. No longer a man, but a thing.

O dressed with trembling hands and jumped into his truck. By the time he

was downtown, he was no longer thinking logically. He parked on Trade Street and started walking the alleys. It took some time before he found what he was looking for.

A whore with long, dark hair. Who, as long as she didn't flash her teeth, looked a little like his Jennifer had.

He slipped her fifty bucks and took her behind a Dumpster.

"I want you to call me David," he said.

"Sure thing." She smiled as she undid her coat and flashed her bare chest.
"What do you want to call—"

He clamped a hand over her mouth and started to squeeze. He didn't stop until her eyes were popping.

"Say my name," he commanded.

O released his grip and waited. When all she did was hyperventilate, he took out his knife and pressed it into her throat.

"*Say my name.*"

"David," she whispered.

"Tell me that you love me." When she hesitated, he pricked the skin of her neck with the tip of the blade. Her blood welled up and slid down the shiny metal. "Say it."

Her sloppy breasts, so unlike Jennifer's, pumped up and down. "I...I love you."

He closed his eyes. The voice was all wrong.

This just wasn't giving him what he needed.

O's anger rose to an uncontrollable level.

Chapter Sixteen

Rhage heaved the barbell up from his chest, teeth bared, body shaking, sweat pouring off him.

“That’s ten,” Butch called out.

Rhage set the load back on the stand above him, hearing the thing groan as the weights rattled and fell still.

“Add another fifty.”

Butch leaned over the bar. “You got five-twenty-five on there already, my man.”

“And I *need* another fifty.”

Hazel eyes narrowed. “Easy, Hollywood. You want to shred your pecs, that’s your business. But don’t take my head off.”

“Sorry.” He sat up and shook out his burning arms. It was nine in the morning, and he and the cop had been in the weight room since seven. There wasn’t one part of his body that wasn’t on fire, but quitting was a long way off. He was shooting for the kind of physical exhaustion that went into the bone.

“Are we there yet?” he muttered.

“Let me tighten the clamps. Okay, good to go.”

Rhage laid back down, hoisted the barbell off the stand, and let it rest on his chest. He marshaled his breathing before pumping the weight.

Stray. Dog.

Stray. Dog.

Stray. Dog.

He controlled the load until the last two reps, when Butch had to step in and spot.

“You finished?” Butch asked as he helped settle the bar on the stand.

Rhage sat up and panted, resting his forearms on his knees. “One more set of reps after this break.”

Butch came around in front, twisting the shirt he’d taken off into a rope. Thanks to all the lifting they’d been doing, the male’s chest and arm muscles were thickening up, and he hadn’t been small to begin with. He couldn’t pull the kind of iron Rhage did, but for a human, the guy was a bulldozer.

“You’re getting into some kind of shape, cop.”

“Aw, come on, now.” Butch grinned. “Don’t let that shower we took go to your head.”

Rhage fired a towel at the male. “Just pointing out your beer gut’s gone.”

“It was a Scotch pot. And I don’t miss it.” Butch ran a hand over his six-pack. “Now, tell me something. Why are you beating the crap out of yourself this morning?”

“You have much interest in talking about Marissa?”

The human’s face tightened up. “Not particularly.”

“So you can understand if I don’t have a lot to say.”

Butch’s dark brows rose. “You’ve got a woman? As in, one specific woman?”

“I thought we weren’t talking about females.”

The cop crossed his arms and frowned. Kind of like he was assessing a blackjack hand and trying to decide whether to take another hit from the dealer.

He spoke fast and hard. “I’ve got it bad for Marissa. She won’t see me. That’s it, the whole story. Now tell me about your nightmare.”

Rhage had to smile. “The idea I’m not the only one on the skids is a relief.”

“That tells me nothing. I want details.”

“The female threw me out of her house early this morning after doing a job on my ego.”

“What kind of hatchet did she use?”

“An unflattering comparison between me and a free-agent canine.”

“Ouch.” Butch twisted the shirt in the other direction. “So naturally, you’re dying to see her again.”

“Pretty much.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“I know.”

“But I can almost beat that.” The cop shook his head. “Last night, I... ah...I drove out to Marissa’s brother’s house. I don’t even know how the Escalade got there. I mean, the last thing I need is to run into her, you feel me?”

“Let me guess. You waited around in hopes of catching a—”

“In the bushes, Rhage. I sat in the bushes. Under her bedroom window.”

“Wow. That’s...”

“Yeah. In my old life I could have arrested me for stalking. Look, maybe we should change the topic.”

“Great idea. Finish the update about that civilian male who escaped from the *lessers*.”

Butch leaned back against the concrete wall, crossing one arm over his chest and pulling it into a stretch. “So Phury talked with the nurse who’d treated him. The guy was pretty well gone, but he managed to tell her that they were asking questions about you brothers. Where you live. How you get around. The victim didn’t give a specific address where he’d been worked over, but it has to be somewhere downtown, because that’s where he was found, and God knew he couldn’t have gotten far. Oh, and he kept mumbling letters. *X. O. E.*”

“That’s how *lessers* refer to themselves.”

“Catchy. Very 007.” Butch went to work on his other arm, his shoulder cracking. “Anyway, I peeled a wallet off the *lesser* who’d been strung up in that tree, and Tohr went over to the guy’s place. It had been cleaned out, like they knew he was gone.”

“Was the jar there?”

“Tohr said no.”

“Then they’d definitely been by.”

“What’s in those things anyway?”

“The heart.”

“Nasty. But better than other parts of the anatomy, considering someone told me they can’t get it up.” Butch dropped his arms and sucked his teeth, a little thinking noise released from his mouth. “You know, all this is starting to make sense. Remember those dead prostitutes I investigated in the back alleys this summer? The ones with the bite marks on their necks and the

heroin in their blood?”

“Zsadist’s girlfriends, man. It’s the way he feeds. Humans only, although how he stays alive on that weak blood is a mystery.”

“He said he didn’t do it.”

Rhage rolled his eyes. “And you think you can believe him?”

“But if we take him at his word—Hey, just humor me, Hollywood. If we believe him, then I have another explanation.”

“What’s that?”

“Bait. If you wanted to abduct a vampire, how do you do it? Put out food, man. Put it out, wait until one comes, drug them, and drag them wherever you want. I found darts at the scenes, like the kind you’d tranquilize an animal with.”

“Jesus.”

“And get this. I was listening to the police scanner this morning. Another prostitute was found dead in an alley, close to where the others were killed. I had V hack into the police server, and the online report noted that her throat had been slashed.”

“You tell Wrath and Tohr all this?”

“No.”

“You should.”

The human shifted. “I don’t know how much to get involved, you know? I mean, I don’t want to stick my nose where it shouldn’t be. I’m not one of you.”

“But you belong with us. Or at least that’s what V said.”

Butch frowned. “He did?”

“Yeah. That’s why we brought you here with us instead of...well, you know.”

“Putting me in the ground?” The human cocked a half smile.

Rhage cleared his throat. “Not that any of us would have enjoyed that. Well, except for Z. Actually, no, he doesn’t enjoy anything.... The truth is, cop, you’ve kind of grown on—”

Tohrment’s voice cut him off. “Jesus Christ, Hollywood!”

The male stalked into the weight room like a bull. And of all the Brotherhood, he was the levelheaded one. So something was on fire.

“What’s up, my brother?” Rhage asked.

“Got a little message for you in the general mailbox. From that human. Mary.” Tohr planted his hands on his hips, upper body jutting forward. “Why

the hell does she remember you? And how does she have our number?”

“I didn’t tell her how to call us.”

“And you didn’t scrub her memory, either. What the good goddamn are you thinking?”

“She’s not going to be a problem.”

“She already is. She’s on our phone.”

“Relax, man—”

Tohr jabbed a finger at him. “You fix her before I have to, you feel me?”

Rhage was off the bench and up his brother’s face in the blink of an eye. “No one goes near her, not unless they want to deal with me. This includes you.”

Tohr’s navy-blue eyes narrowed. They both knew who was going to win if they got down to it. No one could take Rhage in hand-to-hand; it was a proven fact. And he was prepared to beat a no-touch commitment out of Tohrment if he had to. Right here, right now.

Tohr spoke in a grim tone. “I want you to take a deep breath and step off from me, Hollywood.”

When Rhage didn’t move, footsteps smacked across the mats and Butch’s arm went around his waist.

“Why don’t you cool off a little, big guy,” Butch drawled. “Let’s just break up this party, okay?”

Rhage allowed himself to get pulled back, but he kept his eyes on Tohr’s. Tension crackled in the air.

“What’s going on here?” Tohr demanded.

Rhage stepped free of Butch and paced around the weight room, winding in and out of the barbells on the floor and all the benches.

“Nothing. There’s nothing going on. She doesn’t know what I am and I don’t know how she got the number. Maybe that civilian female gave it to her.”

“Look at me, my brother. Rhage, stop where you are and look at me.”

Rhage halted and shifted his eyes.

“Why didn’t you scrub her? You know once their memories are long-term, you can’t get them clean enough. Why didn’t you do it when you had the chance?” As silence stretched out between them, Tohr shook his head.

“Do not tell me you are getting involved with her.”

“Whatever, man.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Christ, my brother...what are you thinking? You

know you shouldn't get tangled up with a human, and especially not with her because of the boy." Tohr's gaze sharpened. "I'm giving you an order. Again. I want you to scrub yourself from that female's memories, and I don't want you to see her anymore."

"I told you, she doesn't know what I am—"

"Are you trying to negotiate with me on this? You can't be that stupid."

Rhage shot his brother a nasty look. "And you really don't want me up in your grille again. This time, I won't let the cop peel me off."

"You kiss her with that mouth of yours yet? Whatcha tell her about your fangs, Hollywood?" As Rhage closed his eyes and cursed, Tohr's tone eased up. "Be real. She's a complication we don't need, and she's trouble for you because you chose her over a command from me. I'm not doing this to bust your balls, Rhage. It's safer for everybody. Safer for her. You will do this, my brother."

Safer for her.

Rhage leaned down and grabbed his ankles. He stretched his hamstrings so hard, he nearly pulled them off the backs of his legs.

Safer for Mary.

"I'll take care of it," he said finally.

"Ms. Luce? Please come with me."

Mary looked up and didn't recognize the nurse. The woman seemed really young in her loose pink uniform, was probably right out of school. And she got younger as she smiled because of the dimples.

"Ms. Luce?" She shifted the voluminous file in her arms.

Mary put her purse strap on her shoulder, got to her feet, and followed the woman out of the waiting room. They went halfway down a long, buff-colored hall and paused in front of a check-in station.

"I'm just going to weigh you and take your temperature." The nurse smiled again and got even more points for being good with the scale and the thermometer. She was quick. Friendly.

"You've lost some weight, Ms. Luce," she said, while making a note in the file. "How's your eating?"

"The same."

"We're down here on the left."

The examination rooms were all alike. Framed Monet poster and a little window with drawn blinds. Desk with pamphlets and a computer. Exam table

with a piece of white paper stretched over it. Sink area with various supplies. Red biohazard container in the corner.

Mary felt like throwing up.

“Dr. Della Croce said she wanted to take your vitals.” The nurse handed over a neatly folded square of fabric. “If you’ll put this on, she’ll be right in.”

The gowns were all the same, too. Thin, soft cotton, blue with a small pink pattern. There were two sets of ties. She was never sure whether she was putting the damn things on right, whether the slit should go in the front or the back. She chose the front today.

When she was finished changing, Mary slid up onto the table and dangled her feet off the edge. It was chilly without her clothes, and she looked at them, all neatly arranged on the chair next to the desk. She would have paid good money to get back in them.

With a chime and a whistle, her cell phone went off in her purse. She dropped back down to the floor and padded over in her socks.

She didn’t recognize the number as she checked caller ID and answered out of hope. “Hello?”

“Mary.”

The sound of the rich male voice made her sag with relief. She’d been so sure Hal wouldn’t return her call.

“Hi. Hi, Hal. Thanks for calling.” She looked around for a place to sit that wasn’t on the exam table. Moving her clothes to her lap, she eased into the chair. “Look, I’m really sorry about last night. I just—”

There was a knock and then the nurse poked her head in. “Excuse me, did you release your bone scans from last July to us?”

“Yes. They should be in my record.” When the nurse shut the door, Mary said, “Sorry.”

“Where are you?”

“I, ah...” She cleared her throat. “It’s not important. I just wanted you to know how bad I felt about what I said to you.”

There was a long silence.

“I just panicked,” she said.

“Why?”

“You make me...I don’t know, you’re just...” Mary fiddled with the edge of the gown. The words tumbled out. “I’ve got cancer, Hal. I mean, I’ve had it and it might be back.”

“I know.”

“So Bella told you.” Mary waited for him to confirm it; when he didn’t she took a deep breath. “I’m not using the leukemia as an excuse for the way I behaved. It’s just...I’m in a weird place right now. My emotions are bouncing all over and having you in my house”—*being totally attracted to you*—“it triggered something and I lashed out.”

“I understand.”

Somehow, she felt as though he did.

But God, his silences were a killer. She began to feel like a fool for keeping him on the line.

“Anyway, that’s all I wanted to say.”

“I’ll pick you up tonight at eight. Your house.”

She gripped the phone. God, she wanted to see him so badly. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

From outside the door of the exam room, Dr. Della Croce’s voice rose and fell in concert with the nurse’s.

“And Mary?”

“Yes?”

“Wear your hair down for me.”

There was a knock and the doctor came in.

“All right. I will,” Mary said before hanging up. “Hey, Susan.”

“Hi, Mary.” As Dr. Della Croce crossed the shallow room, she smiled and her brown eyes crinkled at the corners. She was about fifty, with thick white hair that was squared off at her jawline.

The doctor sat down behind the desk and crossed her legs. As she took a moment to collect herself, Mary shook her head.

“I hate it when I’m right,” she muttered.

“About what?”

“It’s back, isn’t it.”

There was a slight pause. “I’m sorry, Mary.”

Chapter Seventeen

Mary didn't go to work. Instead she drove home, stripped, and got into bed. A quick call to the office and she had the rest of the day as well as the following week off. She was going to need the time. After the long Columbus Day weekend she was going in for a variety of tests and second opinions, and then she and Dr. Della Croce were going to meet and discuss options.

The weird thing was, Mary wasn't surprised. She'd always known in her heart that they'd browbeaten the disease into a retreat, not a surrender.

Or maybe she was just in shock and being sick felt familiar.

When she thought about what she was facing, what scared her wasn't the pain; it was the loss of time. How long until they got it back under control? How long would the next respite last? When could she get back to her life?

She refused to think there was an alternative to remission. She wasn't going to go there.

Turning over onto her side, she stared at the wall across the room and thought of her mother. She saw her mom rolling a rosary through her fingertips, murmuring words of devotion while lying in bed. The combination of the rubbing and the whispering had helped her find an ease beyond that which the morphine was able to give her. Because somehow, even in the midst of her curse, even at the apex of the pain and fear, her mother had believed in miracles.

Mary had wanted to ask her mom if she actually thought she'd be saved, and not in the metaphorical sense, but in a practical way. Had Cissy truly

believed that if she said the right words and had the right objects around her that she would be cured, that she would walk again, live again?

The questions were never posed. That kind of inquiry would have been cruel, and Mary had known the answer anyway. She'd had the sense that her mother had waited for a temporal redemption right up until the very end.

But then, maybe Mary had just projected what she would have wished for. To her, saving grace meant you got to live out your life like a normal person: You were healthy and strong, and the prospect of death was just some far-off, barely acknowledged hypothetical. A debt to be paid off in a future you couldn't imagine.

Perhaps her mother had looked at it in a different way, but one thing was for sure: Her outcome hadn't changed. The prayers hadn't saved her.

Mary closed her eyes, and exhaustion sucked her down. As she was swallowed whole, she was grateful for the temporary emptiness. She slept for hours, fading in and out of consciousness, flopping around on the bed.

At seven o'clock she woke up and reached for the phone, dialing the number Bella had given her to reach Hal. She hung up without leaving a message. Canceling was probably the right thing to do, because she wasn't going to be great company, but damn it, she was feeling selfish. She wanted to see him. Hal made her feel alive, and right now she was desperate for that buzz.

After a quick shower, she threw on a skirt and a turtleneck. In the full-length mirror on the bathroom door both were looser than they had been, and she thought about the scale this morning at the doctor's. She should probably eat like Hal tonight, because God knew there was no reason to diet right now. If she was facing another round of chemo, she should be packing on the pounds.

The thought froze her in place.

She drew her hands through her hair, pulling it out from her scalp, letting it seep through her fingers and fall to her shoulders. So unremarkable in all its brownness, she thought. And so unimportant in the larger scheme of things.

The idea of losing it made her want to weep.

With a grim expression, she gathered the lengths together, twisted them into a knot, and clipped them into place.

She was out her front door and waiting in her driveway a few minutes later. The cold was a shock, and she realized she'd forgotten to put on a coat. She went back inside, grabbed a black wool jacket, and lost her keys in the

process.

Where were her keys? Had she left her keys in the—

Yup, keys were in the door.

She shut herself out of the house, turned the lock, and pitched the metal tangle into her coat pocket.

While waiting, she thought of Hal.

Wear your hair down for me.

All right.

She freed the barrette and finger-combed the stuff as best she could. And then she fell still.

The night was so quiet, she thought. And this was why she loved living in farm country; she had no neighbors except for Bella.

Which reminded her: She'd meant to call and report in on the date, but hadn't felt up to it. Tomorrow. She would talk to Bella tomorrow. And report on two dates.

A sedan turned onto the lane about a half mile away, accelerating in a low growl she heard clearly. If it hadn't been for the two headlights, she'd have assumed a Harley was coming up her road.

As the deep-purple muscle car stopped in front of her, she thought it looked like a GTO of some sort. Glossy, noisy, flashy...it was totally fitting for a man who was into speed and comfortable with attention.

Hal got out from the driver's side and walked around the hood. He was in a suit, a very sharp black suit with an open-collared black shirt underneath. His hair was brushed back from his face, falling in thick, gold chunks to the nape of his neck. He looked like a fantasy, sexy and powerful and mysterious.

Except his expression sure wasn't daydream material. His eyes were narrow, his lips and jaw tight.

Still, he smiled a little as he came up to her. "You wore your hair down."

"I said I would."

He lifted his hand as if to touch her, but hesitated. "You ready to go?"

"Where are you taking us?"

"I made reservations at Excel." He dropped his arm and looked away, becoming silent, unmoving.

Oh...hell.

"Hal, are you sure you want to do this? You're clearly a little off tonight. Frankly, so am I."

He stepped away and stared at the pavement, grinding his jaw.

"We could just do it some other time," she said, figuring he was too much of a nice guy to leave without some kind of rain check. "It's no big—"

He moved so fast she couldn't track him. One moment he was a couple feet away from her; the next he was up against her body. He took her face in his hands and put his lips on hers. With their mouths locked, he looked her right in the eye.

There was no passion in him, just a grim intent that turned the gesture into some kind of vow.

When he let her go, she stumbled back. And fell right on her ass.

"Ah, damn, Mary, I'm sorry." He knelt down. "Are you okay?"

She nodded even though she wasn't. She felt gauche and ridiculous all sprawled out on the grass.

"You sure you're all right?"

"Yes." Ignoring the hand he offered, she got up and brushed bits of lawn off herself. Thank God her skirt was brown and the ground dry.

"Let's just go to dinner, Mary. Come on."

One big hand slid around to her nape, and he led her by the neck to the car, giving her no choice but to follow.

Although it wasn't like the concept of fighting him occurred to her. She was overwhelmed by a whole lot of things, him most among them, and she was too tired to put up any resistance. Besides, something had passed between them in that instant their mouths had met. She had no idea what it was or what it meant, but a bond was there.

Hal opened the passenger door and helped her inside the car. When he slid into the driver's seat, she looked around at the pristine interior to avoid getting caught up in his profile.

The GTO growled as he put it in first gear and they shot down her little road to the stop sign at Route 22. He looked both ways and then accelerated to the right, the sound of the engine rising and falling like breath as he shifted again and again until they were cruising.

"This is a spectacular car," she said.

"Thanks. My brother did it over for me. Tohr loves cars."

"How old is your brother?"

Hal smiled tightly. "Old enough."

"Older than you?"

"Yup."

“Are you the youngest?”

“No, but it’s not like that. We’re not brothers because we were born of the same female.”

God, he had such a weird way of putting words together sometimes.

“Were you adopted into the same family?”

He shook his head. “Are you cold?”

“Ah, no.” She glanced at her hands. They were dug into her lap so deeply, her shoulders were hunched forward. Which explained why he thought she was chilly. She tried to loosen up. “I’m just fine.”

She looked out the windshield. The double yellow line down the center of the road glowed in the headlights. And the forest crowded up to the edge of the asphalt. In the darkness, the tunnel illusion was hypnotic, making her feel as if Route 22 went on forever.

“How fast does this car go?” she murmured.

“Very fast.”

“Show me.”

She felt his eyes dart across the seat. Then he down-shifted, hit the gas, and sent them into orbit.

The engine roared like a living thing, the car vibrating as the trees blurred into a black wall. They went faster and faster, but Hal remained in complete control as they hugged the turns tightly, weaving in and out of their lane.

When he started to slow, she put her hand on his hard thigh. “Don’t stop.”

He hesitated for only a moment. Then he reached forward and turned on the stereo. “Dream Weaver,” that seventies anthem, flooded the inside of the car at earsplitting levels. He stomped on the accelerator and the car exploded, carrying them at breakneck speed down the empty, endless road.

Mary put her window down, letting the air rush in. The blast tangled in her hair and chilled her cheeks and woke her out of the numbness she’d been in since she’d left the doctor’s. She started laughing, and even though she could hear the edge of hysteria in her voice, she didn’t care. She stuck her head out into the cold, screaming wind.

And let the man and the car carry her away.

Mr. X eyed his two new prime squadrons as they marched into the cabin for another meeting. The *lessers*’ bodies absorbed the free space, shrinking the size of the room and satisfying him that he had enough muscle to cover the front line. He’d ordered them to come back for the usual updating

reasons, but he also wanted to see in person how they'd reacted to the news that Mr. O was now in charge of them.

Mr. O was the last inside, and the man went directly to the doorway of the bedroom, leaning against the jamb casually, his arms over his chest. His eyes were sharp, but there was a reserve to him now, a reticence that was far more useful than his anger had been. It seemed as though the dangerous puppy had been brought to heel, and if the trend continued, they were both in luck. Mr. X needed a second in command.

With the losses they'd sustained of late, he had to concentrate on recruiting, and that was a full-time job. Picking the right candidates, bringing them on board, breaking them in—each step in the process required focus and dedicated resources. But while he was refilling the society's ranks, he couldn't allow the abduction and persuasion strategy he'd laid out to lose momentum. And anarchy among the slayers was not something he would tolerate.

On a lot of levels, O had good qualifications for being a right-hand man. He was committed, ruthless, efficient, clear-headed: an agent of power who motivated others by fear. If the Omega had managed to suck the rebellion out of him, he was close to perfect.

Time to get the meeting started. "Mr. O, tell the others about the properties."

The *lesser* started in on his report about the two tracts of land he'd visited during the day. Mr. X had already decided to purchase both for cash. And while those transactions were closing, he was going to order the squads to erect a persuasion center on seventy-five rural acres that were already owned by the Society. Mr. O would ultimately be in charge of the place, but because Mr. U had overseen building projects in Connecticut, he'd headline the center's construction phase.

The objectives of the assignment would include speed and suitability. The Society needed other places to work, sites that were isolated, secure, and calibrated for their work. And they needed them now.

When Mr. O fell silent, Mr. X delegated the new center's erection to him and Mr. U and then ordered the men out to the streets for the evening.

Mr. O lingered.

"Do we have some business?" Mr. X asked. "Did something else go wrong?"

Those brown eyes flared, but Mr. O didn't snap. More proof of

improvement.

“I want to build some storage units in the new facility.”

“For what? Our purpose is not to keep the vampires as pets.”

“I expect to have more than one subject at a time, and I want to keep them for as long as I can. But I need something they can’t dematerialize out of, and it has to shield them from sunshine.”

“What do you have in mind?”

The solution Mr. O detailed was not only feasible, but cost-effective.

“Do it,” Mr. X said, smiling.

Chapter Eighteen

When Rhage pulled into the Excel parking lot, he drove right past the car attendants. Even if the GTO didn't have a finicky clutch, he wasn't about to leave his keys with someone else. Not with the kind of weapons and ammo he had in the trunk.

He picked a spot around back, one that was right next to the side door. When he flipped off the ignition, he reached for his seat belt and...

And did nothing with it. He just sat there, hand on the clip.

"Hal?"

He closed his eyes. God, he'd give anything just to hear her say his real name once. And he wanted...damn, he wanted her naked in his bed, her head on his pillow, her body between his sheets. He wanted to take her in private, just the two of them. No witnesses, no half-assed shield of his trench coat. Nothing public, no quickie hallway/bathroom action.

He wanted her nails in his back and her tongue in his mouth and her hips rocking under his until he came so hard he saw stars. Then he wanted to sleep with her in his arms afterward. And wake up and eat and make love again. And talk in the dark about things both stupid and serious—

Oh, God. He was bonding with her. The bonding thing was happening.

He'd heard with males that it could be like this. Fast. Intense. Nothing logical. Just powerful, primordial instincts taking over, one of the strongest being the urge to physically possess her and mark her in the process so that other males would know she had a mate. And would stay the fuck away from

her.

He glanced over at her body. And realized he would kill any member of his sex who tried to touch her, be with her, love her.

Rhage rubbed his eyes. Yup, that whole marking urge was definitely at work.

And it wasn't his only problem. The odd hum was back in his body, egged on by the explicit images of her flashing through his head and the smell of her scent and the soft sound of her breathing.

And the rush of her blood.

He wanted to taste her...drink from her.

Mary turned toward him. "Hal, are you—"

His voice was like sandpaper. "I need to tell you something."

I'm a vampire. I'm a warrior. I'm a dangerous beast.

At the end of this evening, you aren't going to remember you ever met me.

And the idea of not even being a memory of yours makes me feel like I've been stabbed in the chest.

"Hal? What is it?"

Tohr's words echoed in his head. *It's safer. For her.*

"Nothing," he said, releasing the belt and getting out of the car. "It's nothing."

He went around and opened her door, holding out his hand to help her up. As she put her palm against his, he lowered his lids. Seeing her arms and legs uncoil made his muscles twitch and a soft growl come up into his throat.

And damn him, instead of stepping out of her way, he let her come up close so their bodies were almost touching. The vibration under his skin grew tighter and stronger along with his roaring lust for her. He knew he should look away because surely his irises were glowing a little. But he couldn't.

"Hal?" she said thinly. "Your eyes..."

He closed his lids. "Sorry. Let's go inside—"

She pulled her hand from his. "I don't think I want to have dinner."

His first impulse was to argue, but he didn't want to bully her. Besides, the less time they spent together, the less there was to erase.

Hell, he should have just scrubbed her the moment he drove up to her house.

"I'll take you home."

"No, I mean, will you walk with me a little? Through the park over there?

I just don't feel like getting stuck at a table. I'm too...restless."

Rhage shoved the car keys into his pocket. "I'd love to."

As they meandered out onto the grass and walked beneath a canopy of colored leaves, he scanned the environs. There was nothing dangerous around, no threats he could sense. He glanced upward. A half-moon dangled in the sky.

She laughed a little. "I would never do this normally. You know, go out into the park at night. But with you? I don't worry about getting mugged."

"Good. You shouldn't." Because he would slice up anything that tried to harm her, human or vampire or undead.

"It seems wrong," she murmured. "Being outdoors in the dark, I mean. It feels a little illicit and a little scary. My mother always warned me about going places at night."

She stopped, tilted her head back, and stared upward. Slowly she extended her arm to the sky with her hand out flat. She closed one eye.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Holding the moon in my palm."

He bent down and followed the length of her arm with his gaze. "Yeah, you are."

As he straightened, he slid his hands around her waist and pulled her back against his body. After a moment's stiffness, she relaxed and dropped her hand.

God, he loved her scent. So clean and fresh, with that slight hint of citrus.

"You were at the doctor's when I called today," he said.

"Yes, I was."

"What are they going to do for you?"

She broke away and started walking again. He fell into step with her, allowing her to pick the pace.

"What did they tell you, Mary?"

"We don't have to talk about all that."

"Why not?"

"You're going against type," she said lightly. "Playboys aren't supposed to handle the unattractive parts of life well."

He thought of his beast. "I'm used to unattractive, trust me."

Mary stopped again, shaking her head. "You know, something isn't right about all this."

"Good point. I should be holding your hand while we walk."

He reached out, only to have her pull away. “I’m serious, Hal. Why are you doing this? Being with me?”

“You’re going to give me a complex. What’s wrong with wanting to spend a little time with you?”

“You need me to spell it out? I’m an average-looking woman who’s got a below-average life span. You’re beautiful. Healthy. Strong—”

Telling himself he was ten kinds of stupid, he stepped in front of her and put his hands on the base of her neck. He was going to kiss her again, even though he shouldn’t. And it wasn’t going to be the kind he’d laid on her in front of her house.

As he lowered his head, the strange vibration in his body intensified, but he didn’t stop. The hell he was going to let his body dictate to him tonight. Clamping down on the hum, he muscled the feeling around by force of will. When he managed to suppress it some, he was relieved.

And determined to get inside her, even if it was only his tongue in her mouth.

Mary stared up into Rhage’s electric blue eyes. She could swear they were blazing in the darkness, that teal light was actually coming out of them. She’d sensed a similar thing back in the parking lot.

The hair on the nape of her neck stood up.

“Don’t worry about the glow,” he said softly, as if he’d read her mind. “It’s nothing.”

“I don’t understand you,” she whispered.

“Don’t try to.”

He closed the distance between them, dipping low. His lips were soft as suede against hers, lingering, clinging. His tongue came out and stroked over her mouth.

“Open for me, Mary. Let me in.”

He licked at her until she parted for him. As his tongue slid into her, the velvet thrust hit her right between the thighs, and she eased into his body, heat spearing her as her breasts met his chest. She grabbed onto his shoulders, trying to get closer to all that muscle and warmth.

She succeeded for only a moment. Abruptly, he put a space between their bodies, though he kept in contact with her lips. She wondered whether he still kissed her to hide the fact that he’d retreated. Or maybe he was just trying to cool her out a little, like she was too aggressive or something?

She turned her head to the side.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “You’re into this.”

“Yeah, well, not enough for the both of us.”

He stopped her from stepping away by refusing to let go of her neck.

“I don’t want to stop, Mary.” His thumbs caressed the skin of her throat and then pressed into her jaw and angled her head back. “I want to get you hot. Hot enough so you don’t feel anything but me. So you don’t think of anything but what I’m doing to you. I want you liquid.”

He dropped and took her mouth, going in deep, taking her over. He searched all her corners until there was no interior place he hadn’t explored. Then he changed the kiss, retreating and advancing, a rhythmic penetration that got her wetter and even more ready for him.

“That’s it, Mary,” he said against her lips. “Let yourself go. God, I can smell your passion... You are *exquisite*.”

His hands drifted down, going under the lapels of her coat, on to her collarbones. Good lord, she was lost to him. If he’d told her to lose her clothes, she would have stripped. If he’d told her to get on the ground and spread her legs, she would have hit the grass for him. Anything. Anything he wanted, just as long as he never stopped kissing her.

“I’m going to touch you,” he said. “Not enough, not nearly enough. But a little...”

His fingers moved over her cashmere turtleneck, going lower and lower and—

Her body jerked as he found both of her tight nipples.

“So ready for me,” he murmured, plucking them. “I wish I could take them into my mouth. I want to suckle on you, Mary. Would you let me do that?”

His palms flattened and he took the weight of her breasts.

“Would you, Mary, if we were alone? If we were in a nice warm bed? If you were naked for me? Would you let me taste these?” When she nodded, he smiled fiercely. “Yeah, you would. Where else would you like my mouth?”

He kissed her hard when she didn’t answer. “*Tell me.*”

Her breath left in a wordless rush. She couldn’t think, couldn’t speak.

He took her hand and put it around one of his.

“Then show me, Mary,” he said into her ear. “Show me where you want me to go. Lead me. Go on. Do it.”

Unable to stop herself, she took his palm and put it on her neck. In a slow sweep, she brought it back to her breast. He purred his approval and kissed the side of her jaw.

“Yeah, there. We know you want me to go there. Where else?”

Mindless, out of control, she drew his hand down to her stomach. Then over to her hip.

“Good. That’s good.” When she hesitated, he whispered, “Don’t stop, Mary. Keep going. Show me where you want me to go.”

Before she lost her nerve, she put his hand between her legs. Her loose skirt gave way, letting him in, and a moan broke out of her at the feel of his palm flat against her core.

“Oh, yeah, Mary. That’s right.” He rubbed her and she gripped his thick biceps, her head falling back. “God, you’re burning alive. Are you wet for me, Mary? I think you are. I think you’re covered with honey....”

Needing to touch him, she shoved her hands into his jacket and onto his waist, feeling the raw, somewhat frightening power of his body. But before she could get far, he pulled her arms out and held her wrists in one hand. He clearly wasn’t stopping, though. He pressed her backward with his chest, until she felt the solid trunk of a tree against her shoulder blades.

“Mary, let me make you feel good.” Through her skirt, his fingers probed and found the pleasure spot. “I want to make you come. Right here, right now.”

As she cried out, she realized she was on the verge of orgasm and he was utterly detached, an engineer of her lust who felt nothing himself: His breathing was even, his voice was steady, his body was unaffected.

“No,” she groaned.

Hal’s hand stopped the rubbing. “What?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Instantly, he backed off. And while he stood calmly in front of her, she tried to catch her breath.

His easy acquiescence hurt, but she wondered why he’d done what he had. Maybe he got off on the control. Hell, making some woman pant all over herself must be a terrific power trip. And it would explain why he wanted to be with her and not those sexy types. A not-so-attractive woman would be easier to remain distant from.

Shame constricted her chest.

"I want to go back," she said, about to start crying. "I want to go home."

He took a deep breath. "Mary—"

"If you even think of apologizing, I'm going to be sick—"

Suddenly, Hal frowned, and she started to sneeze.

God, for some reason, her nose was tingling like all get out. Something was in the air. Sweet. Like laundry detergent. Or baby powder, maybe?

Hal's hand bit into her upper arm. "Get on the ground. Right now."

"Why? What's—"

"*Get on the ground.*" He shoved her down to her knees. "Keep your head covered."

Wheeling around, he planted himself in front of her, feet wide apart, hands up in front of his chest. From between his legs, she watched two men come out from a stand of maple trees. They were dressed in black fatigues, their pale skin and hair gleaming in the moonlight. The menace they threw off made her realize how far into the park she and Hal had wandered.

She fumbled around in her purse for her cell phone and tried to convince herself she was overreacting.

Yeah, right.

The men split apart and attacked Hal from both sides, coming fast and low over the ground. She shouted in alarm, but Hal...holy Moses, did Hal know what he was doing. He lunged to the right and grabbed one of them by the arm, flipping the guy on to the ground. Before the man could get up, Hal stomped on his chest, nailing him down. The other attacker ended up in a choke hold, kicking and thrashing, gasping for air, getting nowhere fast.

Grim, deadly, Hal was in control of himself, at ease in the violence. And his cold, calm expression disturbed the hell out of her, even as she was grateful he'd saved them.

She found her phone and started dialing 911, thinking he could clearly hold the two while the police came.

She heard a sickening crack.

Mary looked up. The man who'd been in the choke hold fell to the ground, his head hanging from his neck at a totally wrong angle. He did not move.

She scrambled to her feet. "What have you done!"

Hal took a long, black-bladed knife out of somewhere and loomed over the man he'd had his boot on. The guy was scrambling across the ground to

get away.

“No!” She jumped in front of Hal.

“Get back.” His voice was eerie. Flat. Totally unconcerned.

She took hold of his arm. “Stop it!”

“I have to finish—”

“I’m not going to let you kill another—”

Someone grabbed her roughly by the hair and whipped her off her feet. Just as another man in black attacked Hal.

Pain shot through her head and neck and then she landed on her back, hard. The impact knocked the breath out of her, and stars burst into her vision like firecrackers. She was struggling to get air into her lungs when her arms were wrenched up and she was dragged away. Fast.

Her body banged against the ground, her teeth clapping together. She lifted her head even though it sent needles up and down her spine. What she saw was a horrible relief. Hal was throwing yet another lifeless body onto the grass and coming after her at a dead run. His thighs ate up the distance, jacket flaring out behind him, dagger in his hand. His eyes were a screaming blue in the night, like xenon headlights on a car, and his big body was nothing but death waiting for a place to happen.

Thank God.

But then another man launched himself onto Hal’s back.

As Hal fought off the guy, Mary called on her self-defense training, twisting herself until her attacker had to reposition his grip. When she felt his fingers loosen, she yanked as hard as she could. He turned and recaptured her quickly, but with a less sure hold. She pulled again, forcing him to stop and pivot around.

She cringed, ready to get hit, but hoped at least she’d allowed Hal some time to catch up.

Except there was no blow coming down at her. Instead a howl of pain erupted from the man, and her abductor fell on her, a heavy, smothering weight. Panic and terror gave her the strength to heave him off.

His body rolled over limply. Hal’s dagger was through the man’s left eye.

Too shocked to scream, Mary surged to her feet and took off as fast as she could go. She was sure she would be caught again, convinced she was going to die.

But then the glow from the lights of the restaurant finally came into view. When she felt the parking lot’s asphalt underfoot, she wanted to weep in

gratitude.

Until she saw Hal in front of her. As if he'd appeared out of nowhere.

She skidded to a halt, panting, dizzy, unable to comprehend how he'd gotten back before her. As her knees gave out, she caught herself on a random car.

"Come on, let's go," he said roughly.

In a cold rush, she remembered the snap of a man's neck. And the black blade through the attacker's eye. And Hal's calm, vicious control.

Hal was...death. Death in a beautiful package.

"Get away from me." She tripped over her own feet and he reached out for her. "No! Don't touch me."

"Mary—"

"*Stay away from me.*" She backed toward the restaurant, hands raised to ward him off. For what little good that would do against him.

Hal tracked her, moving with powerful shifts of his arms and legs.

"Listen to me—"

"I need..." She cleared her throat. "I need to call the police."

"No, you don't."

"We were attacked! And you...killed someone. People. You killed people. I want to call the—"

"This is private business. The cops can't protect you. I can."

She stopped, a nasty shot of truth putting who he was into sharp focus. Everything made sense. The menace he hid behind the charm. His utter lack of fear as they got jumped. His determination not to involve the police. God, the fact that he'd cracked a man's head loose with such ease, like he'd done it before.

Hal didn't want her to call 911 because he was on the other side of the law. No less a thug than the men who'd gone after them.

She grabbed under her arm to hold her purse, about to make another run for it. And realized her bag was gone.

Hal cursed, quick and hard. "You lost your purse, didn't you?" He looked around. "Listen, Mary, you need to come with me."

"The hell I do."

She made a break for the restaurant, but Hal leaped in front of her, blocking the way, taking her arms.

"I'll scream!" She eyed the parking-lot attendants. They were probably thirty yards away. "I'll scream my head off."

“You’re life’s in danger, but I can protect you. Trust me.”

“*I don’t know you.*”

“Yes, you do.”

“Oh, you’re right. You’re handsome, so you can’t possibly be evil.”

He jabbed his finger toward the park. “I saved you out there. You wouldn’t be alive right now if it weren’t for me.”

“Fine. Thanks a hell of a lot. Now leave me alone!”

“I don’t want to do this,” he muttered. “I really don’t.”

“Do what!”

He passed his hand in front of her face.

And suddenly she couldn’t remember what she was so teed off about.

Chapter Nineteen

Standing in front of Mary, her memories at his mercy, Rhage told himself to finish the job. Just wipe himself from her like a stain.

Yeah, and how was that going to work for them?

He'd left at least one, maybe two of the *lessers* alive in the park when he'd had to go after her. If those SOBs nabbed her purse, and he could only assume they had, she was in the crosshairs. The Society was already abducting civilians who knew nothing about the Brotherhood; she'd actually been *seen* with him.

But what the hell did he do now? He couldn't leave her alone at her house because her address would be on her driver's license and it would be the first place the *lessers* would go. Taking her to a hotel wasn't an option, because there'd be no way to be sure she'd stay put: She wouldn't understand why she needed to keep away from home because she wasn't going to remember the attack.

What he wanted to do was take her back to the mansion, at least until he could figure out how to handle this shit storm. Trouble was, sooner or later someone would find out she was in his room, and that would be bad news for everyone. Even if Tohr's command to scrub her didn't stand, humans were prohibited from their world: Too dangerous. The last thing the Brotherhood needed was for the race's existence and the secret war with the *lessers* to get out among Homo sapiens.

Yeah, but he was responsible for Mary's life. And rules were meant to be

bent....

Maybe he could get Wrath to allow her in. Wrath's *shellan* was half-human, and ever since the two had gotten together, the Blind King had softened on the subject of females. And Tohr couldn't override the king. No one could.

Except while Rhage tried to make his case, Mary needed to be kept safe.

He thought about her house. It was off the beaten path, so if the shit hit the fan he could defend her without worrying about a lot of interference from the human police. And he had plenty of weapons in his car. He could get her settled, protect her if need be, and call Wrath.

Rhage released her mind, cutting off her memories just after they'd gotten out of the car. She wouldn't even remember their kisses.

Which, all things considered, was a good thing. Damn him. He'd pushed her too far, too fast, and he'd almost cracked himself. While his mouth and hands were on her, that hum in his body had risen to a scream. Especially when she'd taken his palm and put it between her thighs.

"Hal?" Mary stared up at him in confusion. "What's going on?"

He felt god-awful as he looked into her wide eyes and finished burying the images in her mind. He'd scrubbed clean the memories of countless human females before and never thought twice about it. But with Mary, he felt like he was taking something from her. Invading her privacy. Betraying her.

He dragged a hand through his hair, grabbing onto a hunk and wanting to pull the stuff right out of his head. "So you'd rather skip dinner and go back to your place? That's fine with me. I could use some chill time."

"Good, but...I feel like there's something else we have to do." She looked down at herself and started brushing off grass. "Although considering what I did to this skirt as we left my house, I probably shouldn't be out in public anyway. You know, I thought I got all the lawn stuff off—Wait a minute, where's my purse?"

"Maybe you left it in the car."

"No, I—Oh, God." She began to shake uncontrollably, her breaths getting rapid, shallow. Her eyes became frantic. "Hal, I'm sorry, I...I need...Oh, hell."

It was the adrenaline racing through her system. Her mind might be calm, but her body was still flooded with fear.

"Come here," he said, taking her against his body. "Let me hold you until

it passes.”

As he murmured to her, he kept her hands in front so they didn’t find the remaining dagger under his arm or the nine-millimeter Beretta at the small of his back. His eyes darted around, searching the shadows of the park to the right and the restaurant to the left. He was desperate to get her in the car.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she said against his chest. “I haven’t had a panic attack in a long time.”

“You don’t worry about that.” When she stopped trembling, he pulled back. “Let’s go.”

He hurried her over to the GTO and felt better as he put the thing in gear and peeled out of the parking lot.

Mary looked all around the car.

“Shoot. My purse isn’t here. I must have left it at home. I’m a forgetful mess today.” She leaned back against the seat and searched her pockets. “Aha! At least I have my keys, though.”

The trip out of town was fast, uneventful. As he brought the GTO to a stop in front of her house, Mary covered up a yawn and reached for the door. He put his hand on her arm.

“Let me be a gentleman and get that for you.”

She smiled and dropped her eyes as if she wasn’t used to men fussing over her.

Rhage got out. While he sniffed the air, he used his eyes and ears to penetrate the darkness. Nothing. A whole lot of nothing.

On his way around the back of the car, he popped the trunk, took out a large duffel bag, and paused again. Everything was quiet, including his hair-trigger senses.

As he opened Mary’s door, she frowned at what was hanging off his shoulder.

He shook his head. “I don’t think I’m spending the night or anything. I just noticed my trunk lock is broken and I don’t want to leave this unattended. Or out in plain sight.”

Goddamn, he hated lying to her. It literally turned his stomach.

Mary shrugged and walked to her front door. “Must be something important inside that thing.”

Yeah, only enough firepower to level a ten-story office building. And it still didn’t feel like enough to protect her.

She seemed awkward as she unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

He let her roam from room to room, turning on lights and working off her nervousness, but he stuck right by her. As he followed, he visually checked the doors and windows. They were all locked. The place was secure, at least on the ground floor.

“Would you like something to eat?” she asked.

“Nah, I’m good.”

“I’m not hungry either.”

“What’s upstairs?”

“Um...my bedroom.”

“Will you show it to me?” He needed to go through the second story.

“Maybe later. I mean, do you really have to see it? Er...oh...hell.” She stopped pacing and stared at him, hands on her hips. “I’m going to be up front with you. I’ve never had a man in this house. And I’m rusty at the hospitality thing.”

He dropped the duffel. Even though he was battle-ready and tense as a cat, he had enough mental energy left over to get sapped out on her. The fact that another male hadn’t been in her private space pleased him so much his chest sang.

“I think you’re doing just fine,” he murmured. He reached out and stroked her cheek with his thumb, thinking about what he wanted to do with her up in that bedroom.

Immediately his body started cranking over, that weird inner burn condensing along his spine.

He forced his hand to fall to his side. “I have to make a quick phone call. Mind if I use the upstairs for privacy?”

“Of course. I’ll...wait here.”

“It won’t take long.”

As he jogged up to her bedroom, he took his cell phone out of his pocket. The case of the damn thing was cracked, probably from one of the *lessers*’ side kicks, but it still dialed out. When he got Wrath’s voice mail, he left a short message and prayed like hell he got a call back soon.

After doing a quick assessment of the upstairs, he came back down. Mary was on her couch, legs tucked under her.

“So what are we watching?” he asked, searching the doors and windows for pale faces.

“Why are you looking around this place like it’s a back alley?”

“Sorry. Old habit.”

“You must have been in one hell of a military unit.”

“What do you want to watch?” He went over to the shelves where her DVDs were all lined up.

“You pick. I’m going to go change into something...” She flushed. “Well, to be honest, something more comfortable. And that doesn’t have grass on it.”

To make sure she was safe, he waited at the bottom of the stairs as she moved around her bedroom. When she started for the first floor again, he beat feet back over to the bookshelves.

One look at the movie collection and he knew he was in trouble. There were a lot of foreign titles, some deeply sincere American ones. A couple of golden oldies like *An Affair to Remember*. *Casa-fucking-blanca*.

Absolutely nothing by Sam Raimi or Roger Corman. Hadn’t she heard of the *Evil Dead* series? Wait, there was a hope. He pulled a sheath out. *Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie des Grauens*. The 1922 classic German vampire movie.

“Found something you like?” she said.

“Yeah.” He glanced over his shoulder.

Oh...man. She was dressed for love, as far as he was concerned: Flannel pajama bottoms with stars and moons on them. Little white T-shirt. Floppy suede moccasins.

She tugged at the shirt’s hem, trying to pull it down farther. “I thought about putting on jeans, but I’m tired, and this is what I wear to bed...er, to relax in. You know, nothing fancy.”

“I like you in all that,” he said with a low voice. “You look comfortable.”

Yeah, to hell with that. She looked *edible*.

Once he had the movie up and rolling, he grabbed the duffel bag, brought it over to the couch, and sat down at the end opposite from her. He stretched out, trying to pretend for her benefit that every muscle in his body wasn’t tight. Truth was, he was strung out. Between waiting for a *lesser* to break in, praying that Wrath would call at any moment, and wanting to kiss his way up the inside of her thighs, he was a living, breathing steel cable.

“You can put your feet on the coffee table, if you want,” she said.

“I’m cool.” He reached over and turned off the lamp to his left, hoping she’d fall asleep. At least then he could move around and keep an eye on the exterior without getting her riled up.

Fifteen minutes into the movie, she said, “I’m sorry, but I’m fading over

here.”

He glanced at her. Her hair was fanned over her shoulders and she’d curled up into herself. Her skin was luminous and a little flushed in the flicker of the TV, her eyelids droopy.

This was how she would look when she woke up in the morning, he thought.

“Let yourself go, Mary. I’m going to stay a little longer, though, okay?”

She tugged a soft cream throw blanket over herself. “Yes, of course. But, um, Hal—”

“Wait. Would you please call me by my...other name?”

“Okay, what is it?”

“Rhage.”

She frowned. “Rhage?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah, sure. Is that like a nickname or something?”

He closed his eyes. “Yeah.”

“Well, Rhage...Thank you for tonight. For being so flexible, I mean.”

He cursed quietly, thinking she should slap him instead of feel grateful. He’d nearly gotten her killed. She was now a target for the *lessers*. And if she knew half the things he wanted to do to her body, she’d probably lock herself in the bathroom.

“It’s okay, you know,” she murmured.

“What is?”

“I know you just want to be friends.”

Friends?

She laughed tightly. “I mean, I don’t want you to think I misinterpreted that kiss when you picked me up. I know it wasn’t...you know. Anyway, you don’t have to worry about me getting the wrong idea.”

“Why do you think I’m concerned you might?”

“You’re sitting on the other end of this couch stiff as a board. Like you’re afraid I’m going to jump you.”

He heard a noise outside and his eyes shot to the window on the right. But it was just a leaf blowing up against the glass.

“I didn’t mean to make you feel awkward,” she blurted. “I just wanted to...you know, reassure you.”

“Mary, I don’t know what to say.” Because the truth would terrify her. And he’d lied to her enough already.

“Don’t say anything. I probably shouldn’t have brought it up. All I meant was, I’m glad you’re here. As a friend. I really liked that ride in your car. And I like just hanging out. I don’t need more from you, honestly. You’re really good friend material.”

Rhage sucked in a breath. In all his adult life, no female had ever called him a friend. Or valued his company for something other than sex.

In the Old Language, he whispered, “*I am barren of words, my female. For no sounds from my mouth are worthy of your hearing.*”

“What language is that?”

“The one I was born speaking.”

She tilted her head, considering him. “It’s almost French, but not quite. There’s something Slavic in there. Is it Hungarian or something?”

He nodded. “Basically.”

“What did you say?”

“I like being here with you, too.”

She smiled and put her head down.

As soon as he knew she was out, he unzipped the duffel and double-checked that the guns inside of it were loaded. Then he walked through her house, turning off every light. When it was pitch-dark, his eyes adjusted and his senses heightened even further.

He scanned the woods behind her house. And the meadow to the right. And the big farmhouse in the distance. And the street out front.

He listened, tracking the footfalls of animals across the grass and noting the wind as it brushed against the barn’s wooden clapboards. As the temperature dropped outside, he sifted through the creaks of the house, testing, probing for a break-in. He prowled around, going from room to room, until he thought he was going to explode.

He checked his cell phone. It was on, with the ringer activated. And the thing was receiving a signal.

He cursed. Walked around some more.

The movie ended. He started it over in case she woke up and wanted to know why he was still there. Then he took another trip around the first floor.

When he was back in the living room, he rubbed his brow and felt sweat. Her house was warmer than he was used to, or maybe he was just pumped. Either way, he was hot, so he took off his jacket and put his weapons and the cell phone just inside the duffel bag.

As he rolled up his sleeves, he stood over her and measured her slow,

even breaths. She was so small on that couch, smaller still with those strong, gray warrior eyes hidden behind lids and lashes. He sat down next to her and gently shifted her body so she was nestled in the crook of his arm.

Next to his brawn, she was tiny.

She stirred, lifted her head. "Rhage?"

"Go back to sleep," he whispered, urging her against his chest. "Just let me hold you. That's all I'm going to do."

He absorbed her sigh through his skin and closed his eyes as her arm went around his waist, her hand tucking into his side.

Quiet.

Everything was so quiet. Quiet in the house. Quiet out of doors.

He had a stupid impulse to wake her up and reposition her just so he could feel her ease against him once more.

Instead, he focused on her breathing, matching the draw and push of his own lungs to hers.

So...peaceful.

And quiet.

Chapter Twenty

As John Matthew left Moe's Diner, where he worked as a busboy, he was worried about Mary. She'd missed her Thursday shift at the hotline, which was very unusual, and he hoped she was in tonight. As it was twelve thirty now, she had a half hour left before she took off, so he was sure to catch her. Assuming she'd showed.

Walking as fast as he could, he covered the six dirty blocks to his apartment in about ten minutes. And though the trip home was nothing special, his building was full of fun and games. When he came up to the front doorway, he heard some men arguing with the imprecision of drunks, their insults loose, colorful, and inconsistent. A woman yelled something over pounding music. The seething male response she got back was the kind he associated with folks who were armed.

John shot through the lobby and up the chipped stairs, locking himself in his studio with quick twists of his hands.

His place was small and probably five years away from being condemned. The floors were half linoleum and half carpet, and the two were trading identities. The linoleum was fraying to the point that it was developing a kind of nap, and the rug had stiffened into something close to hardwood.

Windows were opaque with grime, which was actually a good thing, because it meant he didn't need shades. The shower worked and so did the basin in the bathroom, but the kitchen sink had been clogged since the day

he'd moved in. He'd tried to get the thing open with some Drano, but when that didn't work, he'd decided against getting into the pipes. He didn't want to know what had been shoved down that throat.

As he always did when he got home on Fridays, he wrenched open a window and looked across the street. The Suicide Prevention Hotline offices were glowing, but Mary wasn't at the desk she used.

John frowned. Maybe she wasn't feeling well. She'd seemed really exhausted when he'd gone to her house.

Tomorrow, he decided, he'd ride over to where she lived and check on her.

God, he was so glad he'd finally gotten the courage up to approach her. She was so nice, even nicer in person than over the phone. And the fact that she knew ASL? How was that for fate?

Shutting the window, he went over to the refrigerator and released the bungee cord that kept the door shut. Inside were four six-packs of vanilla Ensure. He took two cans out, then stretched the cord back into place. He figured his apartment was the only one in the building that wasn't infested with bugs, and it was only because he didn't keep any real food around. He just couldn't stomach the stuff.

Sitting down on his mattress, he leaned against the wall. The restaurant had been busy, and his shoulders were aching something awful.

Cautiously sipping from the first can, and hoping his belly gave him a break tonight, he picked up the newest issue of *Muscle & Fitness*. Which he'd already read twice.

He stared at the cover. The guy on the front was bulging in his tanned skin, a swollen, overstuffed package of biceps, triceps, pecs, and abs. To amplify the he-man look, he had a beautiful girl in a bright yellow bikini wrapped around him like a ribbon.

John had been reading up on weight lifters for years and had saved for months to buy a small iron set. He worked the metal six days a week. And had nothing to show for it. No matter how hard he pumped, or how desperately he wanted to get bigger, he hadn't put on any muscle.

Part of the problem was his diet. Those Ensures were about all he could handle without getting sick, and they didn't have a ton of calories in them. The trouble wasn't just food-related, though. His genetics were a bitch. At the age of twenty-three, he was five feet, six inches tall, 102 pounds. He didn't need to shave. Had no hair on his body. Had never had an erection.

Unmanly. Weak. Worst of all, unchanging. He'd been this size and this way for the past ten years.

The sameness of his existence wore him down, exhausted him, drained him. He'd lost hope he was ever going to turn into a man, and the acceptance of reality had aged him. He felt ancient in his little body, as if his head didn't belong stuck atop the rest of him.

But he did get some relief. He loved going to sleep. In his dreams he saw himself fighting and he was strong, he was sure, he was...a man. At night, while his eyes were closed, he was fearsome with a dagger in his hand, a killer who did what he was so very good at for a noble reason. And he wasn't alone in his work. He had the company of other men like himself, fighters and brothers, loyal to the death.

And in his visions, he made love to women, beautiful women who made strange sounds as he entered their bodies. Sometimes there were more than one with him, and he took them hard because they wanted it like that and that was what he wanted, too. His lovers would grab onto his back, scratching at his skin as they shuddered and bucked underneath his crashing hips. With roars of triumph, he would let himself go, his body contracting and spilling into the wet heat they offered him. And after he came, in shocking acts of depravity, he drank their blood and they drank from him and the wild frenzy left white sheets red. Finally, when the needs were spent and the fury and cravings were over, he held them gently and they looked up at him with glowing, adoring eyes. Peace and harmony came and were welcomed as benedictions.

Unfortunately, he kept waking up in the morning.

In real life, he couldn't hope to defeat or defend anyone, not the way he was built. And he'd never even kissed a woman. Never had the chance. The opposite sex had two reactions to him: The older ones wanted to treat him like a child and the younger ones looked right through him. Both responses hurt, the former for underscoring his weakness, the latter for stealing any hope that he would find someone to care for.

Which was why he wanted a woman. He had this tremendous need to protect, to shelter, to guard. A calling with no conceivable outlet.

Besides, what woman would ever want him? He was so damned scrawny. His jeans hung off of his legs. His shirt pooled in the concave pit that ran between his ribs and his hips. His feet were the size of a ten-year-old boy's.

John could feel the frustration building in him, but he didn't know what

he was getting upset about. Sure, he liked women. And he wanted to touch them because their skin seemed so delicate and they smelled good. But it wasn't like he'd ever been aroused, even if he woke up in the middle of one of his dreams. He was a total freak. Suspended somewhere between male and female, neither one nor the other. A hermaphrodite without the odd equipment.

One thing was for sure, though. He definitely wasn't into men. Enough of them had come after him over the years, pushing money or drugs or threats at him, trying to get him to blow them in bathrooms or cars. He'd always managed to get away, somehow.

Well, *always* until this past winter. Back in January, one had trapped him at gunpoint in the stairwell of the previous building he'd lived in.

After that, he'd moved and started carrying his own handgun.

He'd also called the Suicide Prevention Hotline.

That had been ten months ago, and he still couldn't stand the feel of his jeans against his skin. He'd have thrown all four pairs out if he could have afforded to. Instead, he'd burned the ones he'd had on that night and taken to wearing long johns underneath his pants, even in the summer.

So no, he didn't like men at all.

Maybe that was another reason he responded to women like he did. He knew how they felt, being a target because they had something someone more powerful wanted to take from them.

Not that he was about to bond with someone over his experience or anything. He had no intention of sharing what had happened to him in that stairwell with anybody. He couldn't imagine telling the tale.

But God, what if a woman asked whether he'd ever been with somebody? He wouldn't know how to answer that.

A heavy knock hit his door.

John sat up in a rush, reaching under his pillow for his gun. He released the safety with a flick of his finger.

The knocking came again.

Leveling the weapon at the door, he waited for a shoulder to hit the wood and splinter it.

"John?" It was a male voice, low-pitched and powerful. "John, I know you're in there. My name is Tohr. You met me two nights ago."

John frowned and then winced as his temples stung. Abruptly, like someone had uncorked a floodgate, he remembered going somewhere

underground. And meeting a tall man in leather. With Mary and Bella.

As the memories hit, something stirred even deeper in him. On the level of his dreams. Something old...

“I’ve come to talk to you. Will you let me in?”

With the gun in his hand, John went to the door and opened it, keeping the chain in place. He craned his head up, way up, to meet the man’s navy blue eyes. A word came to mind, one he didn’t understand.

Brother.

“You want to put the safety back on that gun, son?”

John shook his head, caught between the strange memory echo in his head and what was in front of him: a man of death in leather.

“Okay. Just watch where you point it. You don’t look real comfortable handling that thing, and I don’t want the inconvenience of having a hole in me.” The man looked at the chain. “You going to let me in?”

From two doors down, a volley of yelling rose to a crescendo and ended with the sound of breaking glass.

“Come on, son. Little privacy’s a good thing.”

John reached deep into his chest and felt around his instincts for any sense of true danger. He found none, in spite of the fact that the man was big and hard and undoubtedly armed. Someone like him just had to be packing.

John slipped the chain free and stepped back, lowering the gun.

The man shut the door behind him. “You remember meeting me, right?”

John nodded, wondering why his memories had returned in such a rush. And why a splitting headache had come with them.

“And you remember what we talked about. About the training we offer?”

John flipped the weapon’s safety into place. He recalled everything, and the curiosity that had struck him then came back. As well as a fierce yearning.

“So how’d you like to join up and work with us? And before you say you’re not big enough, I know a lot of guys who are your size. In fact, we have a class of males coming in who are just like you.”

Keeping his eyes on the stranger, John put the gun in his back pocket and went over to his bed. He grabbed a pad of paper and a Bic pen, and wrote: *I don’t have \$.*

When he flashed the pad, the man read the words. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

John scribbled, *Yeah, I do*, and turned the paper around.

“I run the place and I need some help with administrative stuff. You could work the cost off. You know anything about computers?”

John shook his head, feeling like an idiot. All he knew how to do was pick up plates and glasses and wash them. And this guy didn’t need a busboy.

“Well, we got a brother who knows the damn things like the back of his hand. He’ll teach you.” The man smiled a little. “You’ll work. You’ll train. S’all good. And I’ve talked to my *shellan*. She’d be real happy if you stayed with us while you’re in school.”

John lowered his lids, growing wary. This sounded like a lifeboat in a lot of ways. But how come this guy wanted to save him?

“You want to know why I’m doing this?”

When John nodded, the man took off his coat and unbuttoned the top half of his shirt. He pulled the thing open, exposing his left pectoral.

John’s eyes latched on to the circular scar that was revealed.

As he put his hand on his own chest, sweat broke out across his forehead. He had the oddest sense that something momentous was sliding into place.

“You’re one of us, son. It’s time you came home to your family.”

John stopped breathing, a strange thought shooting through his head: *At last, I’ve been found.*

But then reality rushed forward, sucking the joy out of his chest.

Miracles just didn’t happen to him. His good luck had dried up before he’d even been aware he’d had any. Or maybe it was more like he’d been bypassed by fortune. Either way, this man in black leather, coming from out of nowhere, offering him an escape hatch from the hellhole he lived in, was too good to be true.

“You want more time to think?”

John shook his head and stepped back, writing, *I want to stay here.*

The man frowned when he read the words. “Listen, son, you’re at a dangerous point in your life.”

No shit. He’d invited this guy inside, knowing no one would come if he screamed for help. He felt around for his gun.

“Okay, take it easy. Tell you what. Can you whistle?”

John nodded.

“Here’s a number where you can reach me. You whistle into the phone and I’ll know it’s you.” The guy handed him a little card. “I’ll give you a couple of days. You call if you change your mind. If you don’t, don’t worry about it. You won’t remember a thing.”

John had no idea what to make of that comment, so he just stared at the etched black numbers, getting lost in all the possibilities and improbabilities. When he glanced up again, the man was gone.

God, he hadn't even heard the door open and shut.

Chapter Twenty-one

Mary shot out of sleep with a complete body spasm.

A deep-throated yell thundered through her living room, shattering the early morning quiet. She bolted upright, but was shoved onto her side again. Then the whole sofa pitched away from the wall.

In the gray light of dawn, she saw Rhage's duffel. His suit coat.

And realized he'd jumped behind the couch.

"The drapes!" he shouted. "Shut the drapes!"

The pain in his voice cut through her confusion and sent her racing around the room. She covered every window until the only light coming in was through the kitchen's doorway.

"And that door, too..." His voice cracked. "The one into the other room."

She shut the thing quickly. It was now utterly dark except for the glow of the TV.

"Does your bathroom have a window in it?" he asked roughly.

"No, no, it doesn't. Rhage, what's wrong?" She started to lean over the edge of the sofa.

"Don't come near me." The words were strangled. And followed by a juicy curse.

"Are you all right?"

"Just let me...catch my breath. I need you to leave me alone right now."

She came around the corner of the sofa anyway. In the dimness, she could just vaguely make out the big shape of him.

"What's wrong, Rhage?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah, obviously." Damn it, she hated the tough-guy routine. "It's the sunlight, right? You're allergic to it?"

He laughed harshly. "You could say that. Mary, stop. Don't come back here."

"Why not?"

"I don't want you to see me."

She reached over and clicked on the lamp nearest to her. A hissing sound shot through the room.

As her eyes adjusted, she saw that Rhage was flat on his back, one arm cradled against his chest, the other over his eyes. A nasty-looking burn had taken root on the skin exposed by the sleeves he'd rolled up. He was grimacing in pain, his lips peeled back from his—

Her blood went cold.

Fangs.

Two long canine incisors were lodged among his upper teeth.

He had fangs.

She must have gasped because he muttered, "I told you not to look."

"Jesus Christ," she whispered. "Tell me those are fake."

"They aren't."

She pinwheeled backward until she hit the wall. *Holy...good God.*

"What...are you?" she choked out.

"No sunlight. Funky choppers." He inhaled raggedly. "Take a guess."

"No...that isn't..."

He groaned and then she heard a shuffle, as if he were moving around. "Could you please shut that lamp off? My retinas got toasted and they need some time to recover."

She reached forward and clicked the switch, then snapped her hand back. Wrapping her arms around herself, she listened to the hoarse sounds he made as he breathed.

Time passed. He didn't say anything further. Didn't sit up and laugh and take out a fake set of teeth. Didn't tell her that he was Napoleon's best friend or John the Baptist or Elvis, like some kind of crazy lunatic.

He also didn't fly up into the air and try and bite her. Didn't turn into a bat, either.

Oh, come on, she thought. She couldn't be taking him seriously, could she?

Except he *was* different. Fundamentally unlike any man she'd ever met. What if...

He moaned softly. From the glow of the TV, she saw his boot poke out from behind the couch.

She couldn't make sense of what he thought he was, but she knew he was suffering now. And she wasn't going to leave him on her floor in agony if there was something she could do for him.

“How can I help you?” she said.

There was a pause. Like she’d surprised him.

“Could you bring me some ice cream? No nuts or chips if you have it. And a towel.”

When she came back with a bowlful, she could hear him struggling to sit up.

“Let me come to you,” she said.

He went still. “Aren’t you afraid of me now?”

Considering he was either delusional or a vampire, she should be terrified.

“Would a candle be too much light?” she asked, ignoring the question.

“Because I won’t be able to see at all back there.”

“Probably not. Mary, I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

She put the ice cream down, lit one of her larger votives, and rested it on the table next to the couch. In the flickering glow she took in his big body. And the arm still over his eyes. And the burns. He wasn’t grimacing anymore, but his mouth was slightly open.

So she could just see the tips of his fangs.

“I know you won’t hurt me,” she murmured, while she picked up the bowl. “You’ve had enough chances to already.”

Draping herself over the back of the sofa, she spooned up some of the ice cream and leaned down toward him.

“Here. Open wide. Häagen-Dazs vanilla.”

“It’s not to eat. The protein in the milk and the cold will help the burns heal.”

There was no way she could reach where he’d been scalded, so she pulled the couch back farther and sat on the floor next to him. Working the ice cream into a thick soup, she used her fingers to smooth some of it over his inflamed, blistered skin. He flinched, flashing those canines, and she had a moment’s pause.

He was *not* a vampire. Couldn’t be.

“Yes, I really am one,” he murmured.

She stopped breathing. “Can you read minds?”

“No, but I know you’re staring at me, and I can imagine how I’d feel if I were you. Look, we’re a different species, that’s all. Nothing freaky, just... different.”

Okay, she thought, putting more of the ice cream on his burns. Let’s try

this whole thing on for size.

Here she was with a vampire. A horror icon. A six-foot-eight, 280-pound horror icon with a set of teeth on him like a Doberman pinscher.

Could it be true? And why did she believe him when he said he wouldn't hurt her? She must be out of her mind.

Rhage groaned in relief. "It's working. Thank God."

Well, for one thing, he was too busy hurting right now to be much of a threat. It was going to take him weeks to recover from these burns.

She dipped her fingers into the bowl and carried more of the Häagen-Dazs to his arm. On her third round, she had to lean down close to make sure she was seeing right. His skin was absorbing the ice cream as if it were a salve, and he was healing. Right in front of her eyes.

"That feels so much better," he said softly. "Thank you."

He removed his arm from his forehead. Half his face and neck were brilliant red.

"Do you want me to do this part, too?" She indicated the burned area.

His uncanny teal blue eyes opened. They were wary as he looked up at her. "Please. If you don't mind."

While he watched her, she put her fingers into the bowl and then reached out to him. Her hands shook just a little as she worked the stuff over his cheek first.

God, his lashes were thick. Thick and dark blond. And his skin was soft, though his beard had grown in some overnight. He had a great nose. Straight as an arrow. And his lips were perfect. Big enough to fit the size of his face. Dark pink. The lower one was larger.

She went back for more and covered his jaw. Then she moved down his neck, passing over the thick cords of muscle that ran from his shoulders up to the base of his skull.

When she felt something brush her shoulder, she glanced over. His fingers were stroking the ends of her hair.

Anxiety spiked. She jerked back.

Rhage dropped his hand, not surprised she rejected him.

"Sorry," he muttered, closing his eyes.

With nothing to look at, he was acutely aware of her gentle fingers as they moved over his skin. And she was so close to him, close enough that her

scent was all he could smell. As the pain from the sun exposure faded, his body began to burn up in a different way.

He opened his eyes, keeping the lids low. Watching. Wanting.

When she was finished, she put the bowl aside and regarded him directly. “Let’s assume that I believe you are a...you’re different. Why didn’t you bite me when you had the chance? I mean, those fangs aren’t just for decoration, right?”

Her body was tense, as if she were prepared to bolt at any minute, but she wasn’t giving in to her fear. And she had helped him when he needed it, even though she was scared.

God, courage was a turn-on.

“I feed from females of my own species. Not humans.”

Her eyes flared. “Are there a lot of you?”

“Enough. Not as many as there used to be. We’re hunted for extinction.”

Which reminded him: He was separated from his weapons by about six yards and a couch. He tried to get up, but the weakness in his body made his movements slow and uncoordinated.

Goddamned sun, he thought. Suck the life right out of you.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“My duffel. Just bring it around so it’s at my feet.”

She stood up and disappeared around the couch. He heard a thud and then the sound of the bag being dragged across the floor.

“Good lord, what is in here?” She came back into view. As she dropped the handles, they fell to the sides.

He hoped like hell she didn’t look in there.

“Listen, Mary...we’ve got a problem.” He forced his upper body off the floor, bracing his arms.

The probability of a *lesser* attacking her house now was low. Although the slayers could go out in sunlight, they worked at night and needed to trance-out to replenish their strength. Most of the time they were quiet during the day.

But he hadn’t heard back from Wrath. And evening would come eventually.

Mary stared down at him, her expression grave. “Do you need to be underground? Because we can get you into the old grain cellar. The door to it is through the kitchen, but I could hang quilts over the sliders—Shoot, there are skylights. Maybe we could cover you in something. You’d probably be

safer down there.”

Rhage let his head fall back so that all he saw was the ceiling.

Here was this human female, who wasn’t half his weight, who was ill, who’d just found out she had a vampire in her house—and she was worried about protecting him.

“Rhage?” She came over and knelt beside him. “I can help get you down —”

Before he could think, he took her hand, pressed his lips to her palm, and then put it on his heart.

Her fear swirled in the air, the sharp, smoky smell mixing with her delicious natural scent. But she didn’t pull away this time, and the fight-or-flight cocktail didn’t last long.

“You don’t need to worry,” she said softly. “I won’t let anyone get to you today. You’re safe.”

Ah, hell. She was melting him. She really was.

He cleared his throat. “Thanks. But it’s you I’m worried about. Mary, last night we were attacked in the park. You lost your purse, and I have to assume my enemies got it.”

Tension shot down her arm, traveled through her palm, and hit him in his chest. As her anxiety spiked, he wished there was some way of bearing the fear for her, taking it into himself.

She shook her head. “I don’t remember any attack.”

“I hid your memories.”

“What do you mean, ‘hid’?”

He reached into her mind and released the events of the night before.

Mary gasped and put her hands to her head, blinking in rapid succession. He knew he had to explain quickly. It wasn’t going to take her long to process everything and jump to the conclusion that he was a killer worth running from.

“Mary, I needed to get you home so I could protect you while I waited for word from my brothers.” Which still hadn’t come through, goddamn it.

“Those men who attacked us, they aren’t human, and they’re very good at what they do.”

She settled onto the floor with no grace, as if her knees had given out. Her eyes were wide and sightless while she shook her head.

“You killed two of them,” she said in a dead voice. “You snapped the neck of one. And the other you...”

Rhage cursed. "I'm sorry that I got you tangled up in all this. I'm sorry that you're in danger now. And I'm sorry I stripped your memories—"

She pegged him with hard eyes. "Don't do that again."

He wished he could make her that promise. "I won't unless I have to in order to save you. You know a lot about me now, and that puts you at risk."

"Have you taken any other memories from me?"

"We met at the training center. You came with John and Bella."

"How long ago?"

"Couple days. I can give you those back, as well."

"Wait a minute." She frowned. "Why didn't you just make me forget all about you before now? You know, take everything."

As if she would have preferred that.

"I was going to. Last night. After dinner."

She looked away. "And you didn't because of what happened in the park?"

"And because..." God, just how far did he want to go with this? Did he really want her to know how much he was feeling her? No, he thought. She was looking totally shell-shocked. Now was hardly the time to come clean with the happy news that a male vampire had bonded with her. "Because it's an invasion of your privacy."

In the silence that followed, he could see her working over the events, the implications, the reality of the situation. And then her body let off the sweet scent of arousal. She was remembering how he'd kissed her.

Abruptly, she winced and frowned. And the fragrance was cut off.

"Ah, Mary, in the park, when I was keeping away from you while we—"

She held her hand up, stopping him. "All I want to talk about is what we do now."

Her gray eyes met his and didn't waver. She was, he realized, ready for anything.

"God...you're amazing, Mary."

Her brows lifted. "Why?"

"You're handling all this shit really well. Especially the part about what I am."

She tucked a piece of hair behind her ears and studied his face. "You know something? It's not that big a surprise. Well, it is, but...I knew you were different from the moment I first saw you. I didn't know you were a... Do you call yourselves vampires?"

He nodded.

“Vampire,” she said, as if trying the word out. “You haven’t hurt me or scared me. Well, not really. And...you know, I’ve been clinically dead at least twice. Once when I went into cardiac arrest while they were giving me a bone-marrow transplant. Once when I came down with pneumonia and my lungs filled up with fluid. I, ah, I’m not sure where I went or why I came back, but there was something on the other side. Not heaven with the clouds and the angels and all that jazz. Just a white light. I didn’t know what it was the first time. The second, I just went right into it. I don’t know why I came back—”

She flushed and stopped talking, as if embarrassed by what she’d revealed.

“You have been to the Fade,” he murmured, awed.

“The Fade?”

He nodded. “At least, that’s what we call it.”

She shook her head, clearly unwilling to go further with the subject. “Anyway, there’s a lot we don’t understand about this world. That vampires exist? It’s just one more thing.”

When he didn’t say anything for a while, she glanced at him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You are a *wahlker*,” he said, feeling as if he should stand up and bow to her, as was custom.

“A *wahlker*?”

“Someone who has been to the other side and returned. Where I come from, that is a title of distinction.”

A cell phone’s bleating turned both of their heads. The sound was coming from inside the duffel.

“Could you hand me that bag?” he asked.

She leaned over and tried to lift it. Couldn’t. “Why don’t I just give you the phone?”

“No.” He struggled to his knees. “Just let me—”

“Rhage, I’ll get it—”

“*Mary, stop,*” he commanded. “I don’t want you going in there.”

She recoiled from the thing, as if it were carrying snakes.

With a lurch he put his hand inside. As soon as he found the phone, he cocked it and put it up to his ear.

“Yeah?” he barked, while partially zipping the duffel shut.

“Are you okay?” Tohr said. “And where the hell are you?”

“I’m fine. Just not at home.”

“No shit. When you didn’t meet Butch down at the gym, and he couldn’t find you in the main house, he got worried and called me. Do you need a pickup?”

“No. I’m cool where I am.”

“And where’s that?”

“I called Wrath last night and he didn’t get back to me. He around?”

“He and Beth went down to his place in the city for some private time. Now where are you?” When there was no quick answer, the brother’s voice dropped lower. “Rhage, what the hell’s going on?”

“Just tell Wrath I’m looking for him.”

Tohr cursed. “Are you sure you don’t need a pickup? I can send a couple of the *doggen* out with a lead-lined body bag.”

“Nah, I’m good.” He wasn’t going anywhere without Mary. “Later, man.”

“Rhage—”

He hung up and the phone rang again immediately. After checking caller ID, he let Tohr go into voice mail. He was putting the thing down next to him on the floor when his stomach let out a grumble.

“Would you like me to get you something to eat?” Mary asked.

He looked at her for a moment, stunned. And then had to remind himself she didn’t know the intimacy she was offering. Still, the idea that she would honor him with food she had prepared with her own hands left him breathless.

“Close your eyes for me,” he said.

She stiffened. But she lowered her lids.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips softly to hers.

Those gray eyes popped wide open, but he pulled back before she could.

“I would love it if you would feed me. Thank you.”

Chapter Twenty-two

As the sun came up, O riffled through the building sketches that covered U's kitchen table. He spun one around.

"This is what I want. How fast can we get it up?"

"Quick. Site's out in the middle of nowhere, and the facility's not going to be hooked to any municipal utilities, so there's no need for a building permit. Putting together the wall supports and throwing some exterior clapboards on a fifteen-hundred-square-foot space won't take long. Installing the storage facilities for the captives shouldn't be a problem. As for the shower, we can divert the nearby stream easily and install a pump to provide running water. Supplies like hardware and tools are all generic and I've kept the board lengths standard size to reduce the amount of cutting. Gas-powered generator on site will provide electricity for the saws and nail guns. It'll also give us light if we want it. We'll keep that long-term."

"Give me the number of days."

"With a crew of five guys, I can have a roof over your head in forty-eight hours. Provided I can work them into the ground and the supplies come in on time."

"I'm going to hold you to two days, then."

"I'll start getting what we need from Home Depot and Lowe's this morning. I'll split the supply orders between the two. And we're going to need a small bulldozer, one of those Toro Dingos with the interchangeable bucket and hoe setup. I know where we can rent one."

“Good. This is all good.”

O leaned back to stretch his arms and idly parted the drapes. U’s house was an anonymous split-level deep in soccer-mom territory. This was the part of Caldwell with streets named Elmwood and Spruce Knoll and Pine Notch, where kids rode their bikes on the sidewalks and dinner was on the table at six every night.

All the happy-happy, joy-joy made O’s skin crawl. He wanted to torch the houses. Put salt on the lawns. Chop the trees down. Level the place until it couldn’t resurface. The impulse went so deep it surprised him. He had no problem with destruction of property, but he was a killer, not a vandal. He couldn’t figure out why he gave a shit.

“I want to use your truck,” U was saying. “I’m going to rent a trailer to hitch on. Between the two, I’ll be able to take delivery on the boards and roofing supplies in batches. No reason for the Home Depot folks to know where we are.”

“And the stuff for the storage units?”

“I know exactly what you’re looking for and where to find it.”

An electronic beeping sounded.

“What the hell’s that?” O asked.

“Reminder for the nine-A.M. check-in.” U took out a BlackBerry, his blunt fingers flying over the little keyboard. “You want me to e-mail your status for you?”

“Yeah.” O focused on U. The *lesser* had been in the society for 175 years. He was pale as paper. Calm and sharp as a tack. Not as aggressive as some, but steady.

“You’re an asset, U.”

U cocked a smile and looked up from the BlackBerry. “I know. And I like to be used. Speaking of which, who are you going to give me for a crew?”

“We’re going to use both prime squadrons.”

“You’re taking all of us off-line for two nights?”

“And days. We’ll sleep in shifts at the site.”

“Fine.” U looked back down at the thing in his hand, fingering a little wheel on the right side of it. “Oh...shit. Mr. X is not going to like this.”

O narrowed his eyes. “Oh, yeah?”

“It’s a blast e-mail to the Beta squadrons. I’m still on the list, I guess.”

“And?”

“A bunch of Betas were hunting last night and ran into one of the Brotherhood in the park. Of the five of them, three are unaccounted for. Get this, the warrior was with a human female.”

“Sometimes they have sex with them.”

“Yeah. Lucky bastards.”

Mary stood over the stove thinking of the way Rhage had just looked at her. She couldn’t figure out why offering to cook him breakfast was such a big deal, but he’d acted as if she’d given him a tremendous gift.

She flipped the omelet over and headed for the refrigerator. Taking out a plastic container of cut fruit, she spooned all there was into a bowl. It didn’t look like enough, so she grabbed a banana and sliced it on top.

As she put the knife down, she touched her lips. There had been nothing sexual about the kiss he’d given her behind the couch; it had been all about gratitude. And the mouth-on-mouth action in the park had been deeper, but the distance on his side was the same. The passion had been one-sided. Hers.

Did vampires even sleep with humans? Maybe that was why he held back, instead of it being some kind of power play.

Except what about the hostess at TGI Friday’s? He’d definitely sized that woman up, and not because he’d wanted to buy her a dress. So clearly his kind had no problem being with another species. What he had no interest in was being with her.

Friends. Just friends.

When the omelet was finished and the toast buttered, she rolled a fork up in a napkin, tucked the twist under her elbow, and took the plate and the bowl into the living room. She quickly shut the door behind her and turned to the couch.

Whoa.

Rhage had taken his shirt off and was leaning back against the wall, inspecting his burns. In the glow of candlelight, she got a serious look at his heavy shoulders, his powerful arms, his chest. His stomach. The skin over all that muscle he was carrying was golden, hairless.

Trying to keep it together, she put what she was carrying on the floor next to him and sat down a few feet over. To stop herself from staring at his body, she glanced at his face. He was looking down at the food, not moving, not speaking.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked,” she said.

His eyes flipped up to hers and he shifted so he was facing her. The frontal view was even more spectacular than the profile. His shoulders were broad enough to fill the space between the couch and the wall. And the star-shaped scar over his left pectoral was sexy as hell, like some kind of brand on his skin.

After a good beat or two of him just staring at her, she reached for the plate. “I’ll get you something else—”

His hand shot out and gripped her wrist. He stroked her skin with his thumb. “I love it.”

“You haven’t tasted the—”

“You made it. That’s enough.” He picked the fork out of the napkin, the muscles and tendons in his forearm working. “Mary?”

“Hm?”

“I would feed you now.” As he spoke, his stomach let out a howl.

“That’s okay. I’ll get something for myself...Ah, why are you frowning like that?”

He rubbed his eyebrows, as if ironing out his expression. “Sorry. You couldn’t know.”

“Know what?”

“Where I come from, when a male offers to feed a female from his hand, it is a way of showing respect. Respect and...affection.”

“But you’re hungry.”

He brought the plate a little closer and tore off a corner of the toast. Then he cut a perfect square out of the omelet and placed it on top.

“Mary, eat from my hand. Take from me.”

He leaned forward, extending his long arm. His teal eyes were hypnotic, calling her, pulling her forward, opening her mouth. As she put her lips around the food she had cooked for him, he growled in approval. And after she swallowed, he came toward her again, another piece of toast suspended between his fingertips.

“Shouldn’t you have something?” she said.

“Not until you are full.”

“What if I eat it all?”

“Nothing would please me more than to know you are well fed.”

Friends, she told herself. Just friends.

“Mary, eat for me.” His insistence had her opening her mouth again. His eyes stayed on her lips after she’d closed them.

Jesus. This didn't feel like friends.

As she chewed, Rhage picked through the bowl of fruit with his fingertip. He finally chose a slice of cantaloupe and held it out to her. She took the piece whole, a little juice escaping down the side of her mouth. She reached up with the back of her hand, but he stopped her, lifting the napkin, brushing it over her skin.

"I'm finished."

"No, you're not. I can feel your hunger." This time half a strawberry came toward her. "Open for me, Mary."

He fed her choice morsels, watching her with a primordial satisfaction that was unlike anything she'd seen before.

When she couldn't take another bite, he made quick work of what was left, and the moment he was done she picked up the plate and headed to the kitchen. She made him another omelet, filled a bowl full of cereal, and gave him the last of her bananas.

His smile was radiant as she laid it all out in front of him. "How you honor me with this."

As he ate in that methodical, tidy way of his, she closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the wall. She was getting tired more and more easily and felt a stab of cold terror because now she knew why. God, she dreaded finding out what the doctors were going to do to her after all the tests were in.

When she opened her eyes, Rhage's face was right in front of hers.

She jerked back, banging against the wall. "I, ah, I didn't even hear you move."

Crouched on all fours like an animal about to spring, he had one arm on either side of her legs, his massive shoulders bunched up from bearing the weight of his torso. This close, he was huge. And showing a lot of skin. And smelling really good, like dark spices.

"Mary, I would thank you, if you would let me."

"How?" she croaked.

He tilted his head to the side and put his lips on hers. As she gasped, his tongue penetrated her mouth and stroked her own. When he shifted back to assess her reaction, his eyes glowed with the promise of ecstasy, the kind that would boil her bone marrow.

She cleared her throat. "You're...welcome."

"I would do that again, Mary. Will you let me?"

“A simple thank-you is fine. Really, I—”

His lips cut her off and then his tongue took over again, invading, taking, caressing. As heat roared in her body, Mary gave up the fight and savored the mad lust, the pounding in her chest, the aching at her breasts and between her legs.

Oh, God. It had been so long. And it had never been like this.

Rhage let out a low purr, as if he’d sensed her arousal. She felt his tongue retract, and then he took her lower lip between his—

Fangs. Those were fangs nipping at her flesh.

Fear threaded through her passion and thickened it, adding a dangerous edge that opened her even further. She put her hands on his arms. God, he was so hard, so strong. He’d be so heavy on top of her.

“Will you let me lay with you?” he asked.

Mary closed her eyes, imagining them going beyond the kissing to a place where they’d be naked together. She hadn’t been with a man since well before her illness. And a lot about her body had changed since then.

She also didn’t know where his desire to be with her was coming from. Friends didn’t have sex. Not in her book, anyway.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure—”

Rhage’s mouth fit over hers again briefly. “I just want to lie down next to you. Okay?”

Literal translation...right. Except as she stared at him, she couldn’t ignore the differences between them. She was breathless. He was calm. She was dizzy. He was clear-sighted.

She was hot. He was...not.

Abruptly Rhage sat back against the wall and pulled the blanket that hung off the couch into his lap. She wondered for a split second if he was hiding an erection.

Yeah, right. More likely he was cold because he was half-naked.

“Did you suddenly remember what I am?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Is that what turned you off?”

She remembered those fangs of his on her lip. The idea that he was a vampire turned her on. “No.”

“Then why did you shut down? Mary?” His eyes bored into hers. “Mary, will you tell me what’s going on?”

His confusion as he stared at her was appalling. Did he think she

wouldn't mind being a pity fuck?

"Rhage, I appreciate the lengths you're willing to go to in the name of friendship, but don't do me any favors, okay?"

"You like what I do to you. I can feel it. I can smell it."

"For chrissakes, do you get off on making me feel ashamed of myself? Because I'll tell you, having a man get me all hot and bothered while he might as well be reading a newspaper doesn't feel good on my end. God... you're really sick, you know that?"

That neon gaze narrowed in offense. "You think I don't want you."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I've missed all that lust on your side. Yeah, you're *really* hot for me."

She couldn't believe how fast he moved. One minute he was sitting back against the wall, looking at her. The next he had her down on the floor, underneath him. His thigh shoved her legs apart and then his hips drove into her core. What came against her was a thick, hard length.

His hand tangled in her hair and pulled, arching her up against him. He dropped his mouth to her ear.

"You feel that, Mary?" He rubbed his arousal in tight circles, stroking her, making her bloom for him. "You feel me? What does this mean?"

She gasped for air. She was so wet now, her body ready for him to drive deep into her.

"Tell me what it means, Mary." When she didn't answer, he sucked her neck until it stung and then took her earlobe between his teeth. Little punishments. "I want you to say it. So I know you're clear on how I feel."

His free hand dipped under her butt, tucked her closer, and then his erection pushed into her, hitting the right place. She could feel the head of him probing through his pants and her pajama bottoms.

"Say it, Mary."

He surged forward again and she groaned. "You want me."

"And let's just make sure you remember that, shall we?"

He released her hair and took her lips with a raw edge. He was all over her, inside her mouth, on top of her body, his heat and his male smell and his tremendous erection promising her one hell of a wild, erotic ride.

But then he rolled off of her and went back to where he'd been against the wall. Just like that, he was under control again. His breathing even. His body still.

She struggled to sit up, trying to remember how to use her arms and legs.

“I’m not a man, Mary, even though parts of me look like one. What you just had is nothing compared to what I want to do to you. I want my head between your legs so I can lick you until you scream my name. Then I want to mount you like an animal and look into your eyes as I come inside of you. And after that? I want to take you every way there is. I want to do you from behind. I want to screw you standing up, against the wall. I want you to sit on my hips and ride me until I can’t breathe.” His stare was level, brutal in its honesty. “Except none of that’s going to happen. If I felt you less, it would be different, easier. But you do something weird to my body, so totally controlled is the only way I can be with you. Otherwise I’m liable to lose it, and the last thing I want to do is scare the hell out of you. Or worse, hurt you.”

Visions swam in her head, visions of everything he had described, and her body wept anew for him. He took a deep breath and growled softly, like he’d caught the scent of her sex and relished it.

“Oh, Mary. Will you let me pleasure you? Will you let me take that sweet arousal of yours where it wants to go?”

She wanted to say yes, but the logistics of what he was suggesting hit her hard: getting naked, in front of him, in the candlelight. No one but doctors and nurses knew what had been left behind on her body after the disease had retreated. And she couldn’t help thinking of those sexy women she’d seen come on to him.

“I’m not what you’re used to,” she said softly. “I’m not...beautiful.” He frowned, but she shook her head. “Trust me on this one.”

Rhage prowled over to her, those shoulders rolling like a lion’s. “Let me show you how beautiful you are. Nicely. Slowly. Nothing rough. I’ll be a perfect gentleman, I promise.”

His lips parted and she caught a glance of the tips of his fangs. Then his mouth was on hers and, God, he was fantastic, all drugging sweeps of lips and tongue. With a moan, she wound her arms around his neck, digging her fingers into his scalp.

As he laid her down on the floor, she braced herself for his weight. Instead he stretched out next to her and smoothed her hair back.

“Slowly,” he murmured. “Gently.”

He kissed her again, and it was a while before his long fingers went to the bottom of her T-shirt. As he pushed the thing up, she tried to concentrate on what he was doing to her mouth, forcing herself not to think about what he

was revealing. But when he tugged the fabric over her head, cool air hit her breasts. She brought her hands up to cover them and closed her eyes, praying it was dark enough so he couldn't see much of her.

A fingertip brushed the base of her neck, where her tracheotomy scar was. Then it lingered on the puckered spots on her chest where catheters had been plugged in. He pulled down the waistband of her pajama bottoms until all the punch holes in her stomach from the feeding tubes were revealed. Then he found the insertion site for her bone-marrow transplant on her hip.

She couldn't stand it any longer. She sat up and grabbed for the shirt to shield herself.

"Oh, no, Mary. Don't stop this." He captured her hands and kissed them. Then he tugged at the shirt. "Won't you let me look at you?"

She turned her head away as he took her cover from her. Her bare breasts rose and fell as his eyes took her in.

Then Rhage kissed each and every scar.

She trembled no matter how much she tried to hold still. Her body had been pumped full of poison. Left with holes and scars and rough spots. Rendered infertile. And here was this beautiful man worshiping it as if everything she had borne was worthy of reverence.

When he looked up and smiled at her, she burst into tears. The sobs came out hard as punches, tearing at her chest and throat, squeezing her ribs. She covered her face with her hands, wishing she had the strength to go into another room.

While she cried, Rhage held her against his chest, cradling her, rocking her back and forth. She had no idea how long it took before she wore herself out, but eventually the weeping slowed and she became aware that he was talking to her. The syllables and cadence were completely unfamiliar and the words indecipherable. But the tone...the tone was lovely.

And his kindness was a temptation she shrank from.

She could not rely on him for comfort, not even in this moment. Her life depended on her keeping it together, and there was a slippery slope to tears. If she started crying now, she wasn't going to stop in the days and weeks ahead. God knew, the hard inner core of her had been the only thing that had gotten her through the last time she'd been sick. If she lost that resolve, she had no power whatsoever against the disease.

Mary wiped her eyes.

Not again, she thought. She would not lose it in front of him again.

Clearing her throat, she tried to smile. “So. How’s that for a buzz kill?”

He said something in the other language and then shook his head and switched into English. “You cry all you want.”

“I don’t want to cry.” She looked at his bare chest.

No, what she wanted right now was to have sex with him. With the weeping jag finished, her body was responding to his again. And given that he’d seen the worst of her scars and didn’t seem turned off, she felt more comfortable.

“Any chance you still want to kiss me after all that?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Without allowing herself to think, she grabbed onto his shoulders and pulled him down to her mouth. He held back for a moment, as if surprised by her strength, but then he kissed her deep and long, as if he understood what she needed from him. In a matter of moments he had her totally naked, pajama bottoms gone, socks gone, panties tossed aside.

He stroked her from head to thigh with his hands, and she moved with him, surging, arching, feeling the bare skin of his chest against her breasts and stomach while the smooth fabric of his expensive pants rubbed like body oil over her legs. She was aching and light-headed as he nuzzled her neck and nibbled on her collarbone, working his way down to her breasts. She lifted her head and watched as his tongue came out and ran a circle around one nipple before he took it into his mouth. As he suckled her, his hand slid up her inner thigh.

And then he was touching her core. She heaved under him, breath shooting out of her lungs in a rush.

He groaned, his chest vibrating against hers as he made the sound.

“Sweet Mary, you’re just as I imagined. Soft...drenched.” His voice was rough, hard, giving her an idea how much control he was using to keep himself in lockdown. “Open your legs wider for me. A little more. That’s it, Mary. That’s so...oh, yeah.”

He slipped a finger and then two inside of her.

It had been a long time, but her body knew where it was headed. Panting, holding onto his shoulders with her nails, Mary watched him lick her breast as he moved his hand in and out of her body, his thumb rubbing in just the right place on the downstroke. In a flash of lightning she exploded, the force of the release pitching her headlong into a void where only pulsing and white heat existed.

When she came back down, Rhage's heavy-lidded eyes were grave, his face tight and dark. He was like a total stranger, utterly removed from her.

She reached for the throw blanket to cover up with, figuring the shirt wouldn't do but half the job. The movement made her aware that his fingers still penetrated her.

"You are so beautiful," he said gruffly.

The B-word made her feel even more uncomfortable. "Let me up."

"Mary—"

"This is just too awkward." She struggled, and the shifting of her body only made her feel more of him.

"Mary, look at me."

She glared at him, frustrated.

In slow motion, he withdrew his hand from between her legs and brought the two glistening fingers to his mouth. His lips parted, and in a savoring draw he sucked off her slick passion. When he swallowed, he closed his glowing eyes.

"You're unbelievably beautiful."

Her breath froze. And then redoubled as he moved down her body, putting his hands on the inside of her thighs. She tensed as he tried to open her legs.

"Don't stop me, Mary." He kissed her navel and then her hip, spreading her wide. "I need more of you in my mouth, down my throat."

"Rhage, I—Oh, God."

His tongue was a warm stroke right up her center, reeking havoc on her nervous system. He lifted his head and looked at her. And then he dropped back down and licked her again.

"You kill me," he said, breath brushing where she ached. He rubbed his face on her, his beard growth a soft rasp as he bathed in her core.

She closed her eyes, feeling like she was going to fly apart.

Rhage nuzzled her and then captured her hot flesh with his lips, sucking, then tugging, now flicking with his tongue. As she arched up off the floor, one of his hands went to the small of her back, and the other landed on her lower belly. He held her in place as he worked her, keeping her body from jerking away from his mouth as she thrashed.

"Look at me, Mary. Look at what I'm doing."

When she did, she caught a glimpse of his pink tongue licking free from the top of her cleft and that was that. The release shattered her, but he just

kept going. There seemed to be no end to his focus or his technique.

Finally she reached out to him, needing that thick length of his to fill her up. He resisted easily and then did something sinful with his fangs. As she came apart again, he watched her orgasm, his brilliant teal blue eyes staring up from between her legs, casting shadows, they were so bright. After it was over, she said his name as a hoarse question.

In a fluid motion he got to his feet and backed away from her. When he turned around, her breath came out in a hiss.

A magnificent, multicolored tattoo covered his entire back. The design was that of a dragon, a fearsome creature with five-clawed limbs and a twisting, powerful body. From its resting place, the beast stared out, as if it were actually seeing through its white eyes. And while Rhage paced around, the thing moved with the undulations of muscles and skin, shifting, seething.

Like it wanted out, she thought.

Feeling a draft, Mary pulled the blanket around her body. When she looked up, Rhage was way across the room.

And still, that tattoo stared at her.

Chapter Twenty-three

Rhage stalked around the living room, trying to work off the burn. It had been hard enough to keep his body in check before he'd put his mouth on her. Now that his tongue knew her taste, his spine was on fire, the burn spreading out to every muscle he had. His skin tingled all over, itching so badly he wanted to take sandpaper to it.

As he rubbed his arms, his hands shook uncontrollably.

God, he had to get away from the scent of her sex. The sight of her. The knowledge that he could take her right now because she'd let him.

"Mary, I have to be alone for a little while." He glanced at the bathroom door. "I'm going to go in there. If anyone comes to the house or you hear anything unusual, I want you to get me immediately. But I won't be long."

He didn't look at her as he closed the door.

In the mirror over the sink, his pupils glowed white in the darkness.

Oh, Jesus, he couldn't let himself change. If the beast got loose...

Terror for Mary's safety sent his heart on a sprint that only made the situation worse.

Fuck. What was he going to do? And why was this happening? Why—

Stop it. Just stop the thinking. Stop the panic. Get your internal engine back into idle. Then you can worry all you want.

He put the toilet lid down and sat on it, resting his hands on his knees. He forced his muscles to relax then focused on his lungs. Drawing in breath through his nose and exhaling out his mouth, he concentrated on keeping his

respiration good and slow.

In and out with the breath. In and out with the breath.

The world receded until all sounds and sights and smells were shut out and there was only his breath.

Only his breath.

Only his breath.

Only his...

When he'd calmed down, he opened his eyes and lifted his hands. The trembling was gone. And a quick check in the mirror showed that his pupils were black again. He propped his arms on the sink and sagged into them.

Ever since he'd been cursed, sex had been a predictable tool that helped him deal with the beast. When he took a female, he'd become stimulated enough to make it to the release he needed, but the arousal never rose to the level where the beast was triggered. Not by a long shot.

With Mary, though, all bets were off. He didn't think he could control himself enough to enter her, much less make it to orgasm. That damn vibration she called out of him shot his sex drive straight into danger land.

He took a deep breath. The only saving grace appeared to be that he could get himself back under wraps quickly. If he got away from her, if he marshaled his nervous system, he was able to beat the feeling down to a manageable intensity. *Thank God.*

Rhage used the toilet, then washed his face in the sink and dried off with a hand towel. When he opened the door, he braced himself. He had a feeling that when he saw Mary again, the feeling would return a little.

It did.

She was sitting on the couch dressed in khakis and a fleece. The candlelight amplified the anxiety in her face.

"Hey," he said.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He rubbed his jaw. "Sorry about that. Sometimes I need a minute."

Her eyes widened.

"What?" he asked.

"It's almost six. You've been in there for nearly eight hours."

Rhage cursed. So much for a quick fix. "I didn't know I was gone for that long."

"I, ah, I checked in on you once or twice. I was worried...Anyway,

someone called for you. Roth?”

“Wrath?”

“That’s the name. Your phone kept ringing and ringing. Eventually I answered it.” She looked down at her hands. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am now.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. The exhale did nothing to ease the set of her shoulders.

“Mary, I...” Damn it, what exactly could he tell her that wasn’t going to make things harder for her?

“It’s okay. Whatever happened, it’s okay.”

He came over to the couch and sat down next to her.

“Listen, Mary, I want you to come with me tonight. I want to take you somewhere that I know you’ll be safe. The *lessers*, those things in the park, are probably gunning for you, and they’ll look here first. You’re a target now because you were with me.”

“Where would we go?”

“I want you to stay with me.” Assuming Wrath let them in the door. “It’s too dangerous for you here, and if the slayers are going to come for you, it’s going to be soon. We’re talking tonight. Come with me for a few days until we figure out what to do.”

Longer-term solutions evaded him at the moment, but he would find them. She’d become his responsibility when he got her mixed up in his world, and he wasn’t going to leave her undefended.

“Trust me on this. Just a couple days.”

Mary packed a bag, thinking she was crazy. Heading to God knew where. With a vampire.

But the thing about Rhage was, she had faith in him. He was too honest to lie and too smart to underestimate the threat. Besides, her appointments with the specialists didn’t start up until Wednesday afternoon. And she’d taken the week off from work as well as been discharged from the hotline. There was nothing she would miss.

When she came back down to the living room, he turned toward her, swinging the duffel over one shoulder. She eyed his black suit jacket, seeing bulges in it she hadn’t thought were significant before.

“Are you armed?” she asked.

He nodded.

“With what?” When he just looked at her, Mary shook her head. “You’re right. Probably better that I don’t know. Let’s go.”

They drove in silence down Route 22 into the dead zone between Caldwell’s rural edges and the beginnings of the next large town. This was hilly, woodland country with nothing but long stretches of forest between the occasional rotting double-wide at the side of the road. There were no streetlights, few cars, and a lot of deer.

About twenty minutes after they’d left her house, he turned off onto a cramped one-laner that took them on a gradual ascent. She scanned what the headlights revealed, but couldn’t discern where they were. Oddly, there didn’t seem to be any identifying features to the forest or the road. In fact, the landscape had a fuzzy quality to it, a buffering that she couldn’t explain and couldn’t override no matter how much she blinked.

From out of nowhere a set of black iron gates appeared.

As Mary jumped in her seat, Rhage hit a garage door opener, and the heavy gates split in half, allowing them just enough space to squeeze through. Immediately they confronted another set. He put down his window and punched a code into an intercom. A pleasant voice welcomed him and he looked up and to the left, nodding to a security camera.

The second pair of gates parted and Rhage accelerated up a long, ascending drive. When they rounded a corner, a twenty-foot-tall masonry wall materialized in the same conjured-up manner of the first gateway. After going under an archway and passing through yet another set of barricades, they came into a courtyard with a fountain in the middle.

To the right, there was a four-story mansion made of gray stone, the kind of place you’d see in promos for horror films: Gothic, gloomy, oppressive, with more shadows than a person felt safe being around. Across the way, there was a small, one-story house with the same Wes Craven feel.

Six cars, mostly of expensive European flavors, were parked in an orderly fashion. Rhage plugged the GTO into a spot between an Escalade and a Mercedes.

Mary got out and craned her neck up at the mansion. She felt as though she were being watched, and she was. From the roof, gargoyles stared down at her, and so did security cameras.

Rhage came over, her overnight bag in his hand. His mouth was tight, his eyes intense.

“I’m going to take care of you. You know that, right?” As she nodded, he

smiled a little. “It’s going to be fine, but I want you to stick close by me. I don’t want us separated. That clear? You stay with me no matter what happens.”

Reassurance coupled with a command, she thought. This was not going to be fine.

They walked up to a pair of weathered bronze doors and he opened one side. After they’d stepped into a windowless vestibule, the great panel clamped shut with a reverberation that came up through her shoes. Directly ahead there was another massive set of doors, these made of wood and carved with symbols. Rhage punched a code into a keypad and there was the shifting sound of a lock coming free. He took her arm firmly and opened the second door into a vast foyer.

Mary gasped. How...*magical!*

The lobby was a rainbow of color, as unexpected as a garden blooming in a cave. Green malachite columns alternated with ones made of claret marble, the lengths rising up from a multi-hued mosaic floor. The walls were brilliant yellow and hung with gold-framed mirrors and crystal-strung sconces. The ceiling, three stories up, was a masterpiece of artwork and gold leafing, the scenes depicting heroes and horses and angels. And up ahead, centered among all the grandeur, was a broad staircase that ascended to a balconied second floor.

It was Russian-tsar beautiful...but the sounds of the place were not exactly formal and elegant. From the room on the left, hard-core rap music pumped and deep male voices carried. Pool balls cracked into each other. Someone yelled, “Go long, cop!”

A football sailed into the foyer and a muscular man came shooting out after it. He leaped up and just had his hands on the thing when an even bigger guy with a lion’s mane of hair slammed into him. The two of them went down to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, sliding hard into the wall.

“I got you good, cop.”

“But you don’t have the ball yet, vampire.”

Grunts, laughter, and juicy curses carried up to that ornate ceiling as the men fought for the football, flipping each other over, sitting on each other’s chests. Two more huge guys in black leather jogged out to check on the action. And then a little old man dressed in tails emerged from the right, carrying a bouquet of fresh flowers in a crystal vase. The butler stepped around the wrestling match with an indulgent smile.

Then everything went silent as they all noticed her at once.

Rhage shuffled her behind his body.

“Son of a bitch,” someone said.

One of the men came at Rhage like a tank. His dark hair was clipped into a military brush cut, and Mary had the oddest sense she’d seen him before.

“What the *hell* are you doing?”

Rhage spread his stance, dropped her bag, and brought his hands up to chest level. “Where’s Wrath?”

“I asked you a question,” the other guy snapped. “What are you doing, bringing her here?”

“I need Wrath.”

“I told you to get rid of her. Or do you expect one of us to do your job?”

Rhage met the man chin-to-chin. “Careful, Tohr. Don’t make me hurt you.”

Mary glanced behind her. The door to the vestibule was still open. And right now waiting in the car while Rhage sorted things out seemed like a really good idea. Stick-together rule notwithstanding.

As she backed away, she kept her eyes on him. Until she bumped against something hard.

She wheeled around. Looked up. And lost her voice.

What was blocking her escape had a scarred face, black eyes, and an aura of stone-cold anger.

Before she could bolt in fear, he took her arm and spun her away from the door.

“Don’t even think about running.” Flashing long fangs, he measured her body. “Funny, you’re not his usual type. But you’re alive and pants-pissing terrified. So you’ll do fine for me.”

Mary screamed.

Every head in the foyer turned. Rhage lunged for her, pulling her away, bringing her tight against his body. He spoke harshly, in the language she didn’t understand.

The scarred man narrowed his eyes. “Easy there, Hollywood. Just keeping your little plaything in the house. You going to share her or be selfish like you usually are?”

Rhage looked as if he were about to lash out when a woman’s voice cut him off.

“Oh, for God’s sake, boys! You’re scaring her.”

Mary glanced around Rhage's chest and saw a woman coming down the stairway. She looked completely normal: Long black hair, blue jeans, white turtleneck. A black cat was purring like a sewing machine in her arms. As she marched through the thicket of men, they all got out of her way.

"Rhage, we're glad you made it home safely. And Wrath is coming down in a minute." She pointed to the room the men had come out of. "The rest of you head back in there. Go on, now. If you're going to crack some balls, do it on the pool table. Dinner's in a half hour. Butch, take the football with you, okay?"

She shooed them from the foyer like they weren't hard-nosed badasses. The only guy who stayed was the one with the brush cut.

He was calmer now as he looked at Rhage. "This is going to have repercussions, my brother."

Rhage's face hardened and they broke into their secret language.

The black-haired woman came up to Mary, all the while stroking the cat's throat. "Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay. I'm Beth, by the way. And this is Boo."

Mary took a deep breath, instinctively trusting this lone feminine outpost in what was a jungle of testosterone.

"Mary. Mary Luce."

Beth offered her the petting hand and smiled.

More fangs.

Mary felt the floor underneath her shift.

"I think she's going over," Beth shouted while reaching forward.

"Rhage!"

Strong arms came around her waist as her knees buckled.

The last thing she heard before blacking out was Rhage saying, "I'm taking her up to my room."

As Rhage laid Mary out on his bed, he willed on a soft light. Oh, God, what had he done, bringing her to the compound?

When she stirred and opened her eyes, he said, "You're safe here."

"Yeah, right."

"I'll make it safe for you, how about that?"

"Now I believe you." She smiled a little. "Sorry about going over like I did. I'm not usually a fainter."

"It's perfectly understandable. Look, I have to go meet with my brothers.

You see that steel lock on the door? I'm the only one who has a key, so you'll be secure here."

"Those guys were not happy to see me."

"That's their problem." He brushed her hair back, tucking it behind both her ears. He wanted to kiss her, but stood up instead.

She looked so right in his big bed, nestled in the mountain of pillows he insisted on sleeping with. He wanted her there tomorrow and the day after and...

This wasn't a mistake, he thought. This was right where she belonged.

"Rhage, why are you doing all this for me? I mean, you don't really owe me anything, and you hardly know me."

Because you're mine, he thought.

Keeping that little ditty to himself, he bent down and stroked her cheek with his forefinger. "This won't take long."

"Rhage—"

"Just let me take care of you. And don't worry about a thing."

He shut the door behind him and turned the lock before going down the hall. The brothers were waiting at the head of the stairs, Wrath at the front of the group. The king looked grim, black eyebrows buried behind his sunglasses.

"Where do you want to do this?" Rhage asked.

"My study."

After they'd filed into the formal room, Wrath went behind the desk and sat down. Tohr followed him, standing behind him and to his right. Phury and Z settled against a silk-covered wall. Vishous sat in one of the wing chairs next to the fireplace and lit up a hand-rolled.

Wrath shook his head. "Rhage, man, we got serious problems here. You violated a direct order. Twice. Then you drag a human into this house, which you know is forbidden—"

"She's in danger—"

Wrath slammed his fist into the desk, making the whole thing jump off the floor. "You *really* don't want to interrupt me right now."

Rhage worked his molars, grinding, biting. He forced the words of respect he usually offered freely. "I meant no offense, my lord."

"As I was saying, you disobeyed Tohr, and compounded the offense by showing up with a human. What the hell are you thinking? I mean, shit, you're not an idiot, in spite of how you're behaving. She's from the other

world, so she's rank exposure for us. And you have to know her memories are both long-term and traumatic by now. She is permanently compromised."

Rhage felt a growl condense in his chest and he just couldn't suck it back. The sound permeated the room like an odor. "She will not be killed over this."

"Yeah, see, that's not your call. You made it mine when you brought her onto our turf."

Rhage barred his fangs. "Then I'll leave. I'll leave with her."

Wrath's brows popped up over his wraparounds. "Now's not the time for threats, my brother."

"*Threats?* I'm dead fucking serious!" He calmed himself down by rubbing his face and trying to breathe. "Look, last night the two of us were jumped by multiple *lessers*. She got jacked and I left at least one of those slayers alive while trying to save her. She lost her purse in the process, and if any of those *lessers* survived, you know they've picked up the damn thing. Even if I wipe her memories clean, her house is not secure and I'm not going to let her be taken out by the Society. If she and I can't stay here, and the only way I can protect her is by disappearing with her, then that's what I'm going to do."

Wrath frowned. "You realize you're choosing a female over the Brotherhood."

Rhage exhaled. *Jesus.* He hadn't expected the situation to come down to that. But he guessed it had.

Unable to stay in place, he went over to one of the windows that ran from floor to ceiling. Looking outside, he saw the terraced gardens, the swimming pool, the vast rolling lawn. But he didn't focus on the manicured landscape. What he saw was the protection the compound offered.

Security lights illuminated the vista. Cameras mounted in trees recorded every passing moment. Motion sensors monitored each colorful leaf that fell to the ground. And if anyone tried to surmount that wall, they'd do a meet-and-greet with 240 volts of good night, Gracie.

This was the safest environment for Mary. Bar none.

"She's not just any female to me," he murmured. "I would have her as my *shellan*, if I could."

Someone cursed while several others inhaled sharply.

"You don't even know her," Tohr pointed out. "And she's a *human*."

"So."

Wrath's voice was low, insistent. "Rhage, man, don't pull out of the Brotherhood over this. We need you. The race needs you."

"Then it looks like she's staying here, doesn't it." When Wrath muttered something vile, Rhage turned to him. "If Beth were in danger, would you let anything stand in your way of protecting her? Even the Brotherhood?"

Wrath rose from the chair and came around the desk in a full stalk. He stopped when they were chest-to-chest.

"My Beth has nothing to do with the choices you've made or the situation you've put all of us in. Contact with humans is to be limited and on their territory only, you know that. And no one lives in this house except brothers and their *shellans*, if they have them."

"What about Butch?"

"He's the sole exception. And he's only allowed because V dreams of him."

"But Mary won't be here for forever."

"How you figure that? You think the Society's going to give up? You think humans will suddenly become tolerant as a race? Get real."

Rhage dropped his voice, but not his eyes. "She's sick, Wrath. She's got cancer. I want to take care of her, and not just because of this *lesser* nightmare."

There was a long silence.

"Shit, you've bonded with her." Wrath put a hand through his long hair. "For God's sake...You just met her, my brother."

"And how long did it take you to mark Beth as your own? Twenty-four hours? Oh, right, you waited two days. Yeah, good thing you gave it some time."

Wrath let out a short laugh. "You gotta keep bringing my *shellan* into it, don't you?"

"Look, my lord, Mary is...different to me. I'm not going to pretend I understand why. All I know is, she's a pounding in my chest that I can't ignore...hell, that I don't *want* to ignore. So the idea of leaving her at the mercy of the Society is simply not an option. When it comes to her, every protective instinct I have goes into overdrive and I can't push that shit aside. Even for the Brotherhood."

Rhage fell silent and minutes passed. Hours. Or maybe it was just a couple of heartbeats.

"If I allow her to stay here," Wrath said, "it's only because you see her as

your mate and only if she can keep her yap shut. And we still have to deal with the fact that you violated those orders from Tohr. I can't let that go. I've got to bring it to the Scribe Virgin."

Rhage sagged in relief. "I'll accept any repercussions."

"So be it." Wrath went back to the desk and sat down. "We've got some other things to talk about, my brothers. Tohr, you're up."

Tohrment came forward.

"Bad news. We heard from a civilian family. Male, ten years out of his transition, disappeared last night from the downtown area. I've sent a blast e-mail to the community informing everyone that they should use extra caution when going out and that anyone who's missing needs to be reported to us immediately. Also, Butch and I have been talking. The cop's got a good head on his shoulders. Any of you have a problem if I bring him in on a little of our business?" When there were a number of shaking heads, Tohr focused on Rhage. "Now tell us what happened last night in the park."

After Rhage left, and when she felt steady enough to stand, Mary slid off the bed and checked the door. It was locked and solid, so she felt fairly safe. When she saw a light switch to the left, she hit it, illuminating the room.

Holy...house of Windsor.

Silk drapery hung from the windows in swaths of red and gold. Satin and velvet adorned a huge antique Jacobean bed, the posts of which must have been made out of whole oak trunks. There was an Aubusson rug on the floor, oil paintings on the walls—

Good lord, was that *Madonna and Child* really a Rubens?

But it wasn't all Sotheby's stuff. There was a plasma-screen TV, enough stereo equipment to carry off a Super Bowl half-time show, a NASA-worthy computer. And an Xbox on the floor.

She wandered over to the bookshelves, where leather-bound volumes in foreign languages stood straight and proud. She scanned the titles with appreciation until she ran into a collection of DVDs.

Oh, the humanity.

The *Austin Powers* boxed set. *Aliens* and *Alien*. *Jaws*. All three *Naked Guns*. *Godzilla*. *Godzilla*... wait, the rest of this whole shelf was *Godzilla*. She went one lower. *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Well, at least he hadn't bothered with the sequels to those. *Caddy-shack*. The *Evil Dead* boxed set.

It was a wonder Rhage hadn't blinded himself with all that pop culture.

Mary went into the bathroom and flipped on the lights. A Jacuzzi the size of her living room was set into the marble floor.

Now that's a true thing of beauty, she thought.

She heard the door open and was relieved when Rhage called her name.

"I'm in here checking out your tub." She walked back to the bedroom.

"What happened?"

"Everything's cool."

You sure about that? she wanted to ask. Because he was tense and preoccupied as he went into a walk-in closet.

"Don't worry, you can stay here."

"But...?"

"No buts."

"Rhage, what's going on?"

"I need to go out with my brothers tonight." He came back without his suit coat on and led her over to the bed, pulling her down next to him as he sat. "The *doggen*, our servants, know you're here. They're incredibly loyal and friendly, nothing to be scared of. Fritz, who runs this house, will be bringing you up some food in a little bit. If you need anything, just ask him. I'll be back at dawn."

"Am I going to be locked in here until then?"

He shook his head and stood up.

"You're free to move around the house. No one will touch you." He took a piece of paper out of a leather box and wrote on it. "Here's my cell number. You call me if you need me and I can be back in a moment."

"You got a transporter hiding somewhere around here?"

Rhage looked at her and disappeared.

Not as in *left-the-room-really-fast* disappeared. But *poof!* disappeared.

Mary leaped off the bed, holding in a shout of alarm with her hand.

Rhage's arms came around her from behind. "In a moment."

She grabbed on to his wrists, squeezing the bones to make sure she wasn't hallucinating.

"That's a hell of trick." Her voice was thin. "What else do you have under your hat?"

"I can turn things on and off." The room plunged into darkness. "I can light candles." Two of them flared on his dresser. "And I'm handy with locks and stuff."

She heard the latch on the door click back and forth, and then the closet opened and shut.

“Oh, and I can do something really great with my tongue and a cherry stem.”

He dropped a kiss on the side of her neck and headed into the bathroom. The door shut and she heard the shower come on.

Mary stayed frozen in place, her mind skipping like a needle on an LP record. Eyeing the DVD collection, she decided there was something to be said for escapism. Especially when a person had had too much weirdness, too many reorientations to reality, too much...everything.

When Rhage came out a while later, shaved, smelling of soap, a towel around his hips, she was propped up on the bed, *Austin Powers Goldmember* on the TV.

“Hey, this is a classic.” He smiled and watched the screen.

She forgot all about the movie as she looked at those wide shoulders, the muscles of his arms, the towel following the form of his ass. And the tattoo. That twisting, fierce creature with the white eyes.

“‘*Twins, Basil, twins,*’” Rhage said with perfect timing and intonation.

He winked at her and went into the closet.

Against her better instincts, she followed after him, and leaned on one of the jambs, trying to look casual. Rhage’s back was to her as he pulled on a pair of black leather pants, commando. The tattoo moved with him as he did up the fly.

A soft sigh escaped her mouth. *What a man. Vampire. Whatever.*

He glanced over his shoulder. “You okay?”

Actually, she was feeling hot all over.

“Mary?”

“I’m fine and dandy.” Dropping her eyes, she took consuming interest in the collection of shoes lined up on the floor. “Actually I’m going to self-medicate with your movie collection until I’m in a culture coma.”

As he bent down to put his socks on, her eyes latched back onto his skin. All that bare, smooth, golden—

“About the sleeping arrangements,” he said. “I’ll just crash on the floor.”

But she wanted to be in that big bed with him, she thought.

“Don’t be silly, Rhage. We’re both adults. And that thing is wide enough to sleep six.”

He hesitated. “All right. I promise not to snore.”

And how about not keeping your hands to yourself, either?

He pulled on a black short-sleeved shirt and pushed his feet into a pair of shitkickers. Then he paused, eyeing a floor-to-ceiling metal cabinet that was set into the closet wall.

“Mary, why don’t you go back outside? I need a minute. Okay?”

She flushed and turned away. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to invade your privacy—”

He took her hand. “It’s not that. You just might not like what you see next.”

As if there was much left that could shock her after today?

“Go ahead,” she murmured. “Do...whatever.”

Rhage stroked her wrist with his thumb then opened the metal cabinet. He took out an empty black leather chest holster and put it on across his shoulders, securing it under his pecs. A wide belt was next, like the kind cops wore, but as with the holster, there was nothing in it.

He looked at her. And then brought out the weapons.

Two long, black-bladed daggers, which he sheathed at his chest, handles down. A shiny handgun that he checked for bullets with fast, sure movements before anchoring it at his hip. Flashing martial-arts stars and matte-black ammunition clips that he tucked into the belt. Another, smaller knife he hid somewhere.

He took his black leather trench coat off a hanger and swung it on, patting the pockets. He pulled out another handgun from the weapons cabinet and assessed it quickly before burying it in the leather folds. He put a few more throwing stars in the coat’s pockets. Added another dagger.

When he faced her, she backed away.

“Mary, don’t look at me like I’m a stranger. It’s still me under all this.”

She didn’t stop until she hit the bed. “You are a stranger,” she whispered. His face tightened and his voice grew flat. “I’ll be back before dawn.”

He left without any hesitation.

Mary didn’t know how long she sat and stared at the carpet. But when she looked up, she went over and grabbed the phone.

Chapter Twenty-four

Bella popped open her oven, took a peek at dinner, and gave up the fight.

What a mess.

She grabbed a pair of pot holders and extracted the meat loaf. The poor thing had cowered away from the sides of the pan, blackened on top, and developed drying cracks. It was inedible, better suited to the construction supply trade than to a dinner plate. A few dozen more of these and some mortar and she'd have that wall she wanted around her terrace.

As she shut the oven door with her hip, she could have sworn the high-end Viking stove was glaring at her. The animosity was mutual. When her brother had done over the farmhouse for her, he'd gotten her the best of everything, because that was the only way Rehvenge did things. The fact that she'd preferred the old-fashioned kitchen and the squeaky doors and the gentle aging of the place hadn't mattered. And God help her if she'd kicked up a fuss about the security measures. The only way Rehvenge had permitted her to move out was if he made her home fireproof, bulletproof, and impregnable as a museum.

Ah, the joys of having a bossy brother with a lockdown mentality.

She picked up the pan and was headed for the French doors to the backyard when the phone rang.

As she answered, she hoped it wasn't Rehvenge. "Hello?"

There was a pause. "Bella?"

"Mary! I called you earlier today. Hold on a sec, I've got to feed the

raccoons.” She put the phone on the table, shot out to the yard, dumped the load and headed back in. When the pan was in the sink, she picked up the receiver. “How are you?”

“Bella, I need to know something.” The human’s voice was strained.

“Anything, Mary. What’s wrong?”

“Are you...one of them?”

Bella sank down into a chair at her kitchen table. “You mean, am I different from you?”

“Uh-huh.”

Bella glanced over at her fish tank. Everything always looked so calm in there, she thought.

“Yes, Mary. Yes, I am different.”

There was a rush of breath on the line. “Oh, thank God.”

“Somehow, I didn’t think knowing that would be a relief.”

“It is. I...I really have to talk to someone. I’m so confused.”

“Confused about...” *Wait a minute.* Why were they even having this conversation? “Mary, how do you know about us?”

“Rhage told me. Well, showed me, too.”

“You mean he hasn’t wiped...You remember him?”

“I’m staying with him.”

“You’re what?”

“Here. At the house. With a bunch of men, vampires...God, that word...” The female cleared her throat. “I’m here with about five other guys just like him.”

Bella put her hand over her mouth. No one stayed with the Brotherhood. No one even knew where they lived. And this female was a *human*.

“Mary, how did you...how did this happen?”

When the story was all out, Bella was stunned.

“Hello? Bella?”

“Sorry, I...Are you okay?”

“I think so. I’m all right now, at least. Listen, I have to know. Why did you put the two of us together? Rhage and me?”

“He saw you and he...liked you. He promised me he wouldn’t hurt you, which was the only reason I agreed to set you up on that date.”

“When did he see me?”

“The night we took John to the training center. Or don’t you remember that?”

“No, I don’t, but Rhage told me I’d gone there. Is John...a vampire?”

“Yes, he is. His change is coming, which is why I got involved. He’ll die unless one of our kind is with him when the transition hits. He needs a female to drink from.”

“So that night, when you met him, you knew.”

“I did.” Bella chose her words carefully. “Mary, is the warrior treating you well? Is he...gentle with you?”

“He’s taking care of me. Protecting me. I have no idea why, though.”

Bella sighed, thinking she knew. Given the warrior’s fixation on the human, he had probably bonded with her.

“But I’ll be home soon,” the female said. “Just a couple of days.”

Bella wasn’t so sure about that. Mary was so much deeper in their world than she realized.

The smell of gas fumes was nasty, O thought as he maneuvered the Toro Dingo around in the dark.

“That’s good. We’re good to go,” U called out.

O shut the thing off and surveyed the area he’d carved from the forest. Flat, about forty-by-forty-feet square, it was the layout of the persuasion building plus room for them to work.

U stepped into the leveled area and addressed the assembled *lessers*.

“Let’s start getting the walls up. I want three sides raised. Leave one open.”

U motioned impatiently with his hand. “Come on. Move it.”

The men picked up frames made out of eight-foot-long two-by-fours and carried the things around.

The sound of an approaching vehicle stopped everyone, though the lack of headlights suggested it was another *lesser*. With their superior night vision, Society members were able to dance around in the dark as if it were high noon; whoever was behind that wheel dodging trees had the same acuity.

When Mr. X got out of the minivan, O went over.

“Sensei,” O said, bowing. He knew the bastard appreciated the respect and somehow pissing off the guy just wasn’t as fun as it used to be.

“Mr. O, it looks like you’re making progress.”

“Let me show you what we’re doing.”

They had to shout over the clapping of hammerheads, but there was no reason to worry about any of the noise. They were smack-dab in the middle of a seventy-five-acre plot of land about thirty minutes from Caldwell’s

downtown area. To the west of the property was a swamp that served as one of the Hudson River's flood zones. Covering the north and east was Big Notch Mountain, a pile of state-owned rock that climbers didn't favor because of its rattlesnake dens, and that tourists found all-around unappealing. The only point of exposure was from the south, but the rednecks who lived in the scattered, decaying farmhouses didn't seem like the type to wander.

"This looks good," Mr. X said. "Now where are you putting in the storage facilities?"

"Here." O stood over a section of ground. "We'll have the supplies in the morning. We should be ready to receive visitors in a day."

"You've done pretty well, son."

Goddamn it, O hated the *son* shit. He really did.

"Thank you, sensei," he said.

"Now walk me to my car." When they were a distance away from the work, Mr. X said, "Tell me something. Do you have much contact with the Betas?"

O made sure their eye contact didn't waver. "Not really."

"Have you seen any of them lately?"

Christ, where was the *Fore-lesser* going with this? "No."

"Not any time last night?"

"No, like I said, I don't hang with the Betas." O frowned. He knew that if he demanded an explanation, he'd just look defensive, but fuck it. "What's this about?"

"Those Betas we lost in the park last night had shown some promise. I'd hate to think you were slaughtering your competition."

"A brother—"

"Yes, a member of the Brotherhood attacked them. Right. Funny, though, the brothers always make sure they stab their kills so the bodies disintegrate. But last night, those Betas were left for dead. And hurt badly enough so they couldn't really respond to questions when they were found by their backup squad. So no one knows what happened."

"I wasn't in that park and you know it."

"Do I?"

"For chrissakes—"

"Watch your mouth. And watch yourself." Mr. X's pale eyes narrowed into slits. "You know who I'll call if I need to pull your choke chain again."

Now get back to work. I'll see you and the other primes at first light for your check-in."

"I thought that's why we had e-mail," O said through gritted teeth.

"It's in person from now on for you and your team."

When the minivan drove off, O stared into the night, listening to the crackling sounds of construction work. He should have been seething with anger. Instead he was just...tired.

God, he had no enthusiasm left for this job of his. And he couldn't even get worked up over Mr. X's bullshit.

The thrill was gone.

Mary glanced at the digital clock: 1:56. Dawn was still hours and hours away, and sleep was out of the question. All she pictured when she closed her eyes were those weapons hanging off Rhage's body.

She rolled over onto her back. The idea of not seeing him ever again was so disturbing, she refused to look into the feelings too closely. She just accepted them, bore them badly, and hoped for some relief.

God, she wished she could go back to when he'd left. She would have hugged him hard. And given him a stiff lecture about staying safe even though she knew nothing about fighting and he was, hopefully, a master at it. She just wanted him safe—

Suddenly the door was unlocked. As it swung open, Rhage's blond hair gleamed in the light from the hall.

Mary shot off the bed, crossed the room at a dead run, and threw herself at him.

"Whoa, what the..." His arm went around her and picked her up, keeping her with him as he came through the door and shut it. When he released her, she slid down his body. "You all right?"

As her feet hit the floor, she came back to reality.

"Mary?"

"Ah, yeah...yes, I'm okay." She stepped to the side. Looked around. Blushed like all hell. "I'm just...yeah, I'm just going to go back to bed now."

"Hold up, female." Rhage took off his trench coat, the chest holster, and the belt. "Get back over here. I like the way you welcome me home."

He opened his arms wide and she went into them, holding on hard, feeling him breathe. His body was so warm and he smelled wonderful, like fresh air and good clean sweat.

"I didn't expect you to be up," he murmured, running his hand up and down her spine.

"Couldn't sleep."

"I told you, you're safe here, Mary." His fingers found the base of her neck and massaged deeply. "Damn, you're tense. You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Really."

He stopped the rubbing. "Do you ever answer that question truthfully?"

"I just did." *Sort of.*

His hand resumed the stroking. "Will you promise me something?"

"What?"

"Will you let me know when you're not okay?" His voice became teasing. "I mean, I know you're tough, so I won't hold my breath for it or anything. You won't have to worry about killing me over this."

She laughed. "I promise."

He tilted her chin up with his finger, eyes grave. "I'm going to keep you to that." Then he dropped a kiss to her cheek. "Listen, I was going to head down to the kitchen and grab something to eat. You want to come with me? The house is quiet. The other brothers are still out."

"Sure. Let me change."

"Just put on one of my fleeces." He went over to the dresser and took out something soft, black, and the size of a tarp. "I like the idea of you wearing my clothes."

As he helped her into it, his smile was a very masculine expression of satisfaction. And possessiveness.

And damned if it didn't suit his face to a tee.

By the time they finished eating and were back upstairs in his room, Rhage was having trouble concentrating. The hum was roaring in full force, worse than ever before. And he was totally aroused, his body so hot he felt like his blood was going to dry out in his veins.

As Mary went over to the bed and settled in, he took a quick shower and wondered if he shouldn't give his erection a release before he came back out. The damn thing was hard, stiff, aching like a bitch, and the water rushing down his body made him think of Mary's hands on his skin. He palmed himself and remembered the feel of her moving against his mouth as he pleasured her soft secrets. He lasted, like, less than a minute.

When it was over, the empty orgasm just juiced him up more. It was like

his body knew the real thing was out in the bedroom and had no intention of being diverted.

Cursing, he stepped out and towed off, then headed for his closet. With a prayer for Fritz's attention to detail, he hunted around until he found —*thank you, God*—a set of pajamas he'd never put on before. He shrugged into them and then threw on the matching robe for good measure.

Rhage grimaced, feeling like he was wearing half the damn closet. But that was the point.

"Is the room too warm for you?" he asked, as he willed a candle to light and turned off the lamp.

"It's perfect."

Personally, he thought he was in the flipping tropics. And the temperature jacked higher as he approached the bed and sat on the opposite side from her.

"Listen, Mary, in about an hour, at four forty-five, you're going to hear the shutters closing for the day. They slide down on tracks over the windows. It's not that loud, but I don't want you to be startled."

"Thanks."

Rhage lay down on top of the comforter and crossed his feet at the ankles. Everything irritated him, the hot room, the PJs, the robe. Now he knew what presents felt like, all trussed up in paper and ribbons: itchy.

"Do you normally wear all that to bed?" she asked.

"Absolutely."

"Then why's the tag still on that robe?"

"In case I want another, I'll know what it is."

He turned on his side, away from her. Rolled back over so he stared at the ceiling again. A minute later, he tried his stomach.

"Rhage." Her voice was lovely in the dim quiet.

"What?"

"You sleep in the nude, right?"

"Ah, usually."

"Look, you can lose the clothes. It's not going to bother me."

"I didn't want you to feel...uncomfortable."

"What's making me uncomfortable is you flopping around on that side of the bed. I feel like a tossed salad over here."

He would have chuckled at her reasonable tone, but the hot pump between his legs sucked the humor right out of him.

Ah, hell, if he thought the getup he had on was going to keep him in

check, he was out of his mind. He wanted her so badly that short of chain mail, what he was or was not wearing wasn't going to make a lick of difference.

Keeping his back to her, he stood up and stripped. With some finessing, he managed to get himself under the covers without flashing her a glimpse of what the front of him was up to. That monstrous arousal was nothing she needed to know about.

He faced away from her, lying on his side.

"Can I touch it?" she asked.

His erection jerked, as if volunteering to be the "it." "Touch what?"

"The tattoo. I'd like to...touch it."

God, she was so close to him, and that voice of hers—that sweet, beautiful voice—was magic. But the hum in his body made him feel like he had a paint mixer in his belly.

When he stayed quiet, she murmured, "Never mind. I don't—"

"No. It's just..." *Shit.* He hated the distance in her tone. "Mary, it's okay. Do whatever you like."

He heard sheets brushing against sheets. Felt the mattress move a little. And then her fingertips brushed his shoulder. He kept his flinch to himself as best he could.

"Where did you get it done?" she whispered, tracing the curse's outline.
"The artwork is extraordinary."

His whole body tensed as he felt precisely where she was on the beast. She was going across its left foreleg now, and he knew it because he felt the corresponding tingle in his own limb.

Rhage closed his eyes, getting trapped between the pleasure of having her hand on him and the reality that he was flirting with disaster. The vibration, the burning—it was all rising, called out of darkest, most destructive core of him.

He inhaled through his teeth as she stroked the beast's flank.

"Your skin is so smooth," she said, running her palm down his spine.

Frozen in place, unable to breathe, he prayed for self-control.

"And...well, anyway." She pulled back. "I think it's beautiful."

He was on top of her before he knew he'd moved. And he wasn't a gentleman. He pushed his thigh between her legs, pinned her arms over her head, and found her mouth with his own. As she arched into him, he grabbed hold of her nightgown and yanked up hard. He was going to take her. At this

very moment and in his bed, just as he'd wanted to.

And she was going to be *perfect*.

Her thighs yielded to him, opening wide, and she urged him on, his name a hoarse moan leaving her lips. The sound lit off a violent shaking in him, one that dimmed his vision and sent pulses down his arms and legs. The taking of her consumed him, stripped him of whatever civilized lid there was on his instincts. He was raw, wild and...

On the verge of the scorching implosion that was the curse's calling card.

Terror gave him the strength he needed to leap off her and stumble across the room. He slammed into something. The wall.

"Rhage!"

Sinking down onto the floor, he put his trembling hands over his face, knowing his eyes were white. His body shook so badly his words came out in waves. "I'm out of my mind.... This is...Shit, I can't...I need to stay away from you."

"Why? I don't want you to stop—"

He talked right over her. "I'm starved for you, Mary. I'm so damn... hungry, but I can't have you. I won't take...you."

"Rhage," she snapped, as if trying to get through to him. "Why not?"

"You don't want me. Trust me, you really don't want me like that."

"The hell I don't."

He wasn't about to tell her he was a beast waiting to happen. So he chose to disgust her rather than scare her. "I've had eight different females this week alone."

There was a long pause. "Good...God."

"I don't want to lie to you. Ever. So let me be very clear. I've had a lot of anonymous sex. I've been with so many females, none of whom I've cared about. And I don't want you to ever think I'd use you like that."

Now that his pupils felt as though they were black again, he looked over at her.

"Tell me you practice safe sex," she muttered.

"When the females ask me to, I do."

Her eyes flared. "And when they don't?"

"I could no more get the common cold from one of them than I could HIV or hep C or any STD. And I'm not a carrier of those diseases, either. Human viruses don't affect us."

She pulled the sheets up around her shoulders. "How do you know you're

not getting them pregnant? Or can't humans and vampires..."

"Half-breeds are rare, but it does happen. And it's obvious to me when the females are fertile. I can smell it. If they are, or are close, I don't have sex with them, even using protection. My children, when I have them, will be born in safety in my world. And I will love their mother."

Mary's eyes skipped away, becoming fixed, haunted. He looked up to see what she was staring at. It was the Madonna and Child painting over the dresser.

"I'm glad you told me," she finally said. "But why does it have to be with strangers? Why can you be with someone you...Actually, don't answer that. It's none of my business."

"I'd rather be with you, Mary. Not being inside of you is...torture. I want you so badly I can't stand it." He blew out his breath. "But can you honestly tell me that you want me now? Although...hell, even if you did, there's still something else. The way you go to my head, it's like I told you before. I'm scared of losing control. You affect me differently than other females do."

There was another long silence. She broke it.

"Tell me again that you're miserable we're not sleeping together," she said dryly.

"I am utterly miserable. Achy. Hard all the time. Distracted and pissed off."

"Good." She laughed a little. "Boy, I'm a bitch, aren't I?"

"Not at all."

The room grew quiet. Eventually he lay down and curled onto his side, resting his head on his arm.

She sighed. "I don't expect you to sleep on the floor now."

"It's better this way."

"For chrissakes, Rhage, get up here."

His voice dropped to a low growl. "If I come back to that bed, there's no way I'm not going for that sweet spot between your legs. And it wouldn't be just my hands and my tongue this time. It would be right back to where we were. My body on top of yours, every thick inch of me desperate to get into you."

As he caught the luscious scent of her arousal, the air between them surged with sex. And inside his body, he turned back into a live wire.

"Mary, I'd better go. I'll come back after you're asleep."

He left before she could utter another word. As the door shut behind him,

he sagged against the wall in the corridor. Being out of the room helped. It was harder to catch her scent that way.

He heard a laugh and looked over to see Phury sauntering down the corridor.

“You look strung out, Hollywood. As well as really goddamned naked.”

Rhage covered himself with his hands. “I don’t know how you can take it.”

The brother stopped, swirling the mug of hot cider he carried. “Take what?”

“The celibacy.”

“Don’t tell me your female won’t have you?”

“That’s not the problem.”

“So why you out in this hall standing at full attention?”

“I, ah, don’t want to hurt her.”

Phury looked taken aback. “You’re a big one, but you’ve never injured a female. At least not that I’ve known.”

“No, it’s just...I want her so badly, I’m...I’m juiced, man.”

Phury’s yellow eyes narrowed. “You talking about your beast?”

Rhage looked away. “Yeah.”

The whistle that came out of the brother was grim. “Well...hell, you’d better take care of yourself. You want to pay her respect, that’s fine. But you keep yourself on the level or you’re *really* going to hurt her, you feel me? Find a fight, find some other females if you have to, but you make sure you’re calm. And if you need some red smoke, you come to me. I’ll give you some of my O-Zs, no problem.”

Rhage took a deep breath. “I’ll pass on the smokes right now. But can I borrow some sweats and a pair of Nikes? I’m going to try to run myself into exhaustion.”

Phury clapped him on the back. “Come on, my brother. I’m more than happy to cover your ass.”

Chapter Twenty-five

As the afternoon's light waned through the forest, O backed the Toro up, avoiding the pile of earth he'd created with it.

"You ready for the pipes?" U yelled out.

"Yeah. Drop one down. Let's see how it fits."

A composite-metal corrugated sewer pipe about three feet in diameter and seven feet long was lowered into the hole so it stood on its end. The thing fit perfectly.

"Let's get the other two in there," O said.

Twenty minutes later the three pipe sections were lined up. Using the Dingo, O pushed the dirt in while two other *lessers* held the pipes in place.

"Looking good," U said, walking around. "Looking damn good. But how do we get the civilians in and out?"

"Harness system." O shut off the Dingo and went over to peer inside one of the pipes. "You can buy them for rock climbing at Dick's Sporting Goods. We're strong enough to lift the civilians even if they're deadweight, and they'll be drugged, in pain, or exhausted, so they won't fight much."

"This was a great idea," U murmured. "But how do we cap them?"

"The lids will be metal mesh with a weight on the center." O glanced up, seeing blue sky. "How long do you think until the roof's on?"

"We'll get the last wall up right now. Then all we have to do is erect the rafters and drop in the skylights. The shingling won't take long, and the clapboards are already on the three walls we have now. I'll move the tools in

here, get a table, and we're rolling tomorrow night.”

“We'll have the shades for the skylights by then?”

“Yeah. And they're retractable so you'll be able to open and lower them.”

Man, those things were going to be handy. A little sunlight was the best maid a *lesser* could have. She comes in, flashes through the space, and *presto!*, no more vampire debris.

O nodded to his truck. “I'll take the Toro back to the rental place. You need anything from town?”

“Nope. We're good.”

On the way into Caldwell, with the piece of machinery in the bed of the F-150, O should have been in a good mood. The building was going well. His squadron was accepting his leadership. Mr. X hadn't brought up the Betas again. But instead he just felt...dead. And wasn't that ironic as hell for someone who hadn't been alive for three years?

He'd been like this once before.

Back in Sioux City, before he'd become a *lesser*, he'd hated his life. He'd squeaked through high school, and there'd been no money to send him to even a community college, so his career options had been limited. Working as a bouncer had called into service his size and mean streak, but it was only moderately amusing: The drunks didn't tend to fight back, and coldcocking the unconscious was no more engaging than beating a cow.

The only good thing had been meeting Jennifer. She'd saved him from the mindless tedium, and he'd loved her for it. She was drama, excitement, and unpredictability in the flat landscape of life. And whenever he'd go into one of his rages, she'd hit him right back, even though she was smaller and bled easier than he did. He'd never figured out whether she threw her punches because she was too dumb to know he'd always win in the end or if it was because she was so used to being beaten by her father. Either way, stupidity or habit, he took everything she could give him and then pounded her into the ground. Tending to her afterward, when his fire was out, had given him the most tender moments of his life.

But like all good things, she had come to an end. God, he missed her. She'd been the only one who understood how love and hate beat side by side in the chambers of his heart, the only one who could handle both at the same time. Thinking of her long, dark hair and her lean body, he missed her so much he could almost feel her beside him.

As he came into Caldwell proper, he thought of the prostitute he'd bought

the other morning. She'd ended up giving him what he'd needed after all, though she'd had to trade her life to do it. And while he drove along now, he scanned the sidewalks, looking for another release. Unfortunately, brunettes were harder to come by than blondes in the skin trade. Maybe he could buy a wig and tell the whores to put it on.

O thought about the number of people he'd taken out. The first person he'd killed had been in self-defense. The second had been a mistake. The third had been in cold blood. So by the time he'd come to the East Coast, running from the law, he'd known a little about death.

Back then, with Jennifer just gone, the pain in his chest had been a living thing, a mad dog that needed to stretch its legs before it destroyed him. Falling into the Society had been a miracle. It had saved him from tortured rootlessness, giving him a focus and a purpose and an outlet for the agony.

But now, somehow, all those benefits were gone and he felt empty. Just as he had five years ago in Sioux City, right before he'd run into Jennifer.

Well, almost the same, he thought, pulling up to the rental place.

Back then, he'd still been alive.

"Are you out of the tub?"

Mary laughed, put the phone to her other ear, and burrowed deeper into the pillows. It was sometime after four o'clock.

"Yes, Rhage."

She couldn't remember when she'd had a more luxurious day. Sleeping in. Food delivered with books and magazines. The Jacuzzi.

It was like being at a spa. Well, a spa where the phone rang all the time. She wouldn't count how many times he'd called her.

"Did Fritz bring you what I asked?"

"How did he find fresh strawberries like that in October?"

"We have our ways."

"And the flowers are beautiful." She eyed the bouquet full of roses and foxglove and delphinium and tulips. Spring and summer in a crystal vase.

"Thank you."

"I'm glad you like them. I wish I could have gone out and chosen them myself. I would have enjoyed finding you only the most perfect ones. I wanted them to be bright and smell good."

"Mission accomplished."

Male voices sounded in the background. Rhage's voice dimmed. "Hey,

cop, mind if I use your bedroom? I need some privacy.”

The response was muffled and then she heard a door shut.

“Hi,” Rhage said in a husky drawl. “Are you in bed?”

Her body stirred, heating up. “Yes.”

“I miss you.”

She opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

“You still there, Mary?” When she sighed, he said, “That doesn’t sound good. Am I getting too real for you?”

I’ve had eight different females this week alone.

Oh, God. She did not want to fall for him. Just could not let herself.

“Mary?”

“Just don’t...say things like that to me.”

“It’s how I feel.”

She didn’t respond. What could she say? That she felt the same way?

That she missed him even though she’d talked to him once every hour throughout the day? It was true, but not something she was happy about. He was too damned beautiful...and hell, he could put Wilt Chamberlain in the shade when it came to a list of lovers. So even if she were perfectly healthy, he was a recipe for disaster. Add to the situation what she was facing healthwise?

Getting emotionally attached to him was downright absurd.

As the silence stretched between them, he cursed. “We have a lot of business to take care of tonight. I don’t know when I’ll be back, but you know where to find me if you need me.”

As the phone connection was cut off, she felt just awful. And she knew the lectures about keeping distant were not really working.

Chapter Twenty-six

Rhage stomped his shitkicker into the ground and looked around the forest. Nothing. No sounds or smells of *lessers*. No evidence anyone had been through this quiet woodland spot for years. It had been the same for the other plots of land they'd visited.

"What the hell are we doing out here?" he muttered.

He knew the damn answer. Tohr had run across a *lesser* the night before on an isolated stretch of Route 22. The slayer had taken off into the forest on a dirtbike, but had lost a handy little piece of paper in the process: a list of large land parcels that were for sale on Caldwell's fringes.

Today, Butch and V had performed a search on all properties sold in the last twelve months in the city and surrounding burgs. About fifty sales of rural stretches of land had popped up. Rhage and V had visited five of them so far, and the twins were doing the same, covering others. Meanwhile, Butch was at the Pit, compiling the field reports, making a map, and looking for a pattern. It was going to take a couple of nights to get through all of the parcels, because patrols still had to be performed. And Mary's house had to be monitored.

Rhage paced around the woods, hoping some of the shadows would turn out to be *lessers*. He was beginning to hate tree branches. Goddamned teases as they blew in the wind.

"Where are those bastards?"

"Easy, Hollywood." V smoothed his goatee and tugged at his Sox hat.

“Man, you’re stoked tonight.”

Stoked didn’t cover it. He was nearly jumping out of his skin. He’d hoped staying away from Mary during the day would help, and he’d banked on finding a fight this evening. Had also counted on the exhaustion of sleep deprivation taking him down, too.

Yeah, well, no such luck on all fronts. He wanted Mary with an increasing desperation that no longer seemed tied to proximity. They hadn’t found any *lessers*. And coming up on forty-eight hours of no shut-eye was only making him more aggressive.

Worse, it was now three A.M. He was running out of time for the battle release he so desperately needed. *Damn it*—

“*Rhage.*” V waved his gloved hand in the air. “You with me here at all, my brother?”

“Sorry, what?” He rubbed his eyes. His face. His biceps. His skin itched so badly he felt like he was wearing an ant suit.

“You are seriously out of it.”

“Nah, I’m cool—”

“Then why’re you working your arms like that?”

Rhage dropped his hands. Only to start massaging his thighs.

“We’ve got to get you to One Eye,” V said softly. “You’re losing it. You need to have some sex.”

“Fuck that.”

“Phury told me how he found you out in the hall.”

“You guys are a bunch of old maids, for real.”

“If you won’t do your female, and you can’t find a fight, what’s your alternative?”

“It’s not supposed to be like this.” He moved his head around, trying to loosen his shoulders and neck. “This isn’t how it works. I just changed. It’s not supposed to come out again—”

“Supposed to in one hand, shit in the other, see what you get the most of. You’re in a bad space, my brother. And you know what you have to do to get out of it, true?”

When Mary heard the door open, she came awake with a groggy disorientation. Shoot, she had another night fever.

“*Rhage?*” she mumbled.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

His voice sounded like hell, she thought. And he'd left the door to the room open, so he probably wasn't staying for long. Maybe he was still angry at her from that last phone call.

From inside the closet, she heard the shifting of metal and some fabric flapping, as if he were pulling on a fresh shirt. When he came out, he went right back for the hallway, his trench coat billowing behind him. The idea that he would leave without saying good-bye was somehow shocking.

As he gripped the doorknob, he paused. Light from the hall fell on his bright hair and his broad shoulders. His face was in profile, in darkness.

"Where are you going?" she asked as she sat up.

There was a long silence. "Out."

Why did he seem so apologetic? she wondered. She didn't need a babysitter. If he had business to attend to...

"Oh...right. Women. He was going out after women.

Her chest cavity turned into a cold, damp pit, especially as she looked at the bouquet of flowers he'd given her. God, the idea of him touching someone else like she knew he could made her want to retch.

"Mary...I'm sorry."

She cleared her throat. "Don't be. There's nothing going on between us, so I don't expect you to change your habits for me."

"It's not a habit."

"Oh, right. Sorry. Addiction."

There was a long silence. "Mary, I...if there were another way—"

"To do what?" She swept her hand back and forth. "Don't answer that."

"Mary—"

"Don't, Rhage. It's none of my business. Just go."

"My cell phone will be on if you—"

"Yeah. I'm *really* going to call."

He stared at her for a heartbeat. And then his black shadow disappeared through the door.

Chapter Twenty-seven

John Matthew walked home from Moe's, trailing the three-thirty A.M. police patrol. He dreaded the hours until dawn. Sitting in his apartment was going to feel like being in a cage, but it was much too late for him to be out and about on the street. Still...God, he was so restless he could taste the agitation in his mouth. And the fact that there was no one he could talk to made him ache.

He really needed some advice. Ever since Tohrment had left him, he'd been scrambled in his head, debating whether or not he'd done the right thing. He kept telling himself he had, but the second-guessing wouldn't stop.

He wished he could find Mary. He'd gone to her house the night before, only to find it dark and locked up. And she hadn't been going to the hotline. It was as if she'd disappeared, and worrying about her was one more reason he was twitchy.

As he approached his building, he saw a truck parked in front. The bed was full of boxes, like someone was moving in.

What a weird time of night to do that, he thought, eyeing the load.

As he saw that there was no one around to stand guard, he hoped the owner came back soon. Otherwise, their stuff was going to get disappeared.

John went into his building and up the stairs, ignoring the cigarette butts and the empty beer cans and the crumpled potato-chip bags. When he stepped off onto the second floor, he squinted. Something was spilled all over the corridor. Deep red...

Blood.

Backing up into the stairwell, he stared at his door. There was a sunburst in the center of it, as if someone had had their head...But then he saw the broken dark green bottle. Red wine. It was just red wine. The drunken couple who lived next door had taken another fight out into the hall.

His shoulders eased.

“Scuse me,” someone said from above him.

He moved aside and looked up.

John’s body seized.

The big man standing over him was dressed in black camouflage pants and a leather jacket. His hair and skin were utterly white, and his pale eyes had an eerie shine to them.

Evil. Undead.

Enemy.

This was his enemy.

“Some kind of mess you got on this floor,” the guy said before narrowing his gaze on John. “Something wrong?”

John fiercely shook his head and dropped his eyes. His first instinct was to run to his apartment, but he didn’t want the guy knowing where he lived.

There was a deep chuckle. “You look a little pale there, buddy.”

John took off, shooting down the stairs and out into the street. He raced to the corner, took a left, and kept going. He ran and ran, until he couldn’t go any farther because he’d lost his breath. Squeezing himself into the juncture between a brick building and a Dumpster, he panted.

In his dreams, he fought pale men. Pale men in black clothes whose eyes were soulless.

My enemy.

He was shaking so badly he could barely get his hand into his pocket. Taking out a quarter, he gripped the thing so tightly it dug into his palm. When he had his breath back, he leaned out and peered up and down the alley. There was no one around, no sounds of heavy feet hitting the asphalt.

His enemy hadn’t recognized him.

John left the Dumpster’s sanctuary and walked quickly to the far corner.

The dented pay phone was covered with graffiti, but he knew it worked because he called Mary from it a lot. He put the quarter in the slot and punched out the number Tohrment had given him.

After one ring, voice mail kicked in with a robotic recitation of the numbers he’d dialed.

John waited for the beep. And whistled.

Chapter Twenty-eight

It was right before dawn when Mary heard male voices out in the hall. As the door opened, her heart skipped in her chest. Rhage filled the frame as another guy spoke.

“Man, that was one hell of a fight as we left the bar. You were a *demon* out there.”

“I know,” Rhage muttered.

“You’re incredible, Hollywood, and not just with the hand-to-hand. That female you—”

“Later, Phury.”

The door shut and the closet light came on. By the sound of clicks and metallic shifting, he was disarming. When he came out, he took a shuddering breath.

Mary faked being asleep as his footsteps hesitated by the foot of the bed and then headed for the bathroom. When she heard the shower come on, she imagined everything he was washing off of himself: Sex. Fighting.

Especially the sex.

She covered her face with her hands. Today she would go home. She would pack her things and walk out the door. He couldn’t make her stay; she wasn’t his responsibility just because he said so.

The water shut off.

The silence sucked all the air from the room, and she grew out of breath while holding herself in place. Gasping, suffocating...she threw the covers

back and bolted for the door. Her hands latched onto the knob and fought to free the lock, jerking, pulling, until her hair whipped around.

“Mary,” Rhage said from right behind her.

She jumped and wrestled harder with the door.

“Let me out. I have to get out.... I can’t stay here in this room with you. I can’t be here...with you.” She felt his hands come down on her shoulders.

“*Don’t touch me.*”

She careened around the room until she bounced into the far corner and realized there was nowhere to go and no way to get out. He was in front of the door, and she had a feeling he was keeping the locks in place.

Trapped, she linked her arms over her chest and propped herself up against the wall to keep standing. She didn’t know what she would do if he touched her again.

Rhage didn’t even try.

He sat on the bed, a towel around his hips, his hair damp. He dragged a hand down his face, across his jaw. He looked like hell, but his body was still the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. She pictured the hands of other women grabbing on to those powerful shoulders, just as she had. She saw him pleasuring other bodies as he had hers.

She was torn between wanting to thank God she hadn’t slept with him, and being pissed off that after all the women he’d done, he refused to have sex with her.

“How many?” she demanded, the words so hoarse they barely carried. “And tell me, was it good for you? I don’t have to ask whether they liked it. I know how talented you are.”

“Sweet...Mary,” he whispered. “If you’d let me hold you, I would. God, I would kill just to hold you right now.”

“You are *never* coming near me again. Now how many were there? Two? Four? A six-pack?”

“Do you really want the details?” His voice was soft, sad to the point of cracking. Abruptly his head dropped down and hung loosely from his neck. For all appearances, he looked like a ruined man. “I can’t...I’m not going out like that again. I’ll find another way.”

“Another way to get off?” she snapped. “You sure as hell won’t be sleeping with me, so are you thinking about using your hand, maybe?”

He took a deep breath. “That design. On my back? It’s part of me.”

“Whatever. I’m leaving here today.”

His head twisted toward her. "No, you aren't."

"Yes, I am."

"I'll give you this room. You won't have to see me. But you aren't going anywhere."

"How are you going to keep me from leaving? Lock me in here?"

"If that's what it takes, yeah."

She recoiled. "You can't be serious."

"When's your next doctor's appointment?"

"That is none of your business."

"When?"

The hard anger in his voice cooled her temper down a little. "Ah... Wednesday."

"I'll make sure you get to that."

She stared at him. "Why are you doing this to me?"

His shoulders rose and fell. "Because I love you."

"Excuse me?"

"I love you."

Mary's control evaporated under a blast of fury so great she was rendered speechless. He *loved* her? He didn't *know* her. And he'd been with another... Her outrage boiled over as she pictured him having sex with someone else.

Suddenly Rhage sprang off the bed and came at her, as if he felt her emotions and was energized by them.

"I know you're angry, scared, hurting. Take it out on me, Mary." He grabbed her waist to keep her from running, but didn't stop her from trying to shove him away. "Use me to bear your pain. Let me feel it in my skin. Hit me if you have to, Mary."

Damn her to hell, she was tempted to. Lashing out seemed like the only recourse for the kind of power surging through her body.

But she was not an animal. "No. Now let go of me!"

He took her wrist and she struggled against the hold, throwing her whole body into the fight until her shoulder felt like it was going to pop. Rhage stilled her easily and flipped her hand around so her rigid, curled fingertips faced him.

"Use me, Mary. Let me bear this for you." With a flash of movement, he raked his chest with her nails and then clamped his palms on either side of her face.

"Make me bleed for you...." His mouth stroked against hers. "Let your

anger go.”

God help her, she bit him. Right on his lower lip. She just sank her teeth into his flesh.

As something sinfully delicious hit her tongue, Rhage moaned with approval and pressed his body against hers. A buzz, like she’d had too much chocolate, hummed through her.

Mary cried out.

Horrified by what she’d done, scared of what she might do next, she fought to get away, but he held her in place, kissing her, telling her he loved her over and over again. The hard, hot length of his arousal pushed into her belly through the towel, and he rubbed himself against her, his body a sinuous, pumping promise of the sex she didn’t want, but needed until her insides were cramping.

She wanted him...even though she knew he’d fucked other women. Tonight.

“Oh, God...no...” She jerked her head to the side, but he caught her chin, bringing her back to center.

“Yes, Mary...” He kissed her frantically, tongue in her mouth. “I love you.”

Something inside of her snapped and she hurled him away, ducking out of his hold.

But instead of running for the door, she stared at him mercilessly.

Four scratches streaked down his chest. His lower lip was cut. He was panting, flushed.

She reached out and ripped the towel from his body.

Rhage was shockingly aroused, his erection straining, enormous.

And in the breathless moment between them, she despised all his smooth, perfectly hairless skin, his tight muscles, his fallen-angel beauty. Most of all, she loathed the proud length of him, that sexual tool he used so much.

And still, she wanted him.

If she’d been in her right mind, she would have backed away from Rhage. She would have locked herself in the bathroom. Hell, she would have been intimidated by the sheer size of him. But she was pissed off and out of control. She seized his hard flesh with one hand and took his balls in her other, both overflowing her palms. His head snapped backward, the cords in his neck straining, breath exploding from his mouth.

His voice vibrated, filled the room. “Do whatever it takes. Oh, God, I

love you.”

She led him to the bed roughly, letting go only so she could force him back on the mattress. He fell on the messy covers, his arms and legs splaying out as if he were giving himself to her with no reservations, no restrictions.

“Why now?” she asked bitterly. “Why are you willing to do me now? Or is this not about sex at all and only because you want me to draw more blood?”

“I’m dying to make love with you. And I can be with you at this moment because I’m level. I’m...spent.”

Oh, now there was a lovely thought.

She shook her head, but he cut her off. “You want me. So take the pleasure. Don’t think, just take your pleasure from me.”

Crazed with lust and anger and frustration, Mary yanked her nightgown up around her hips and straddled his thighs. But once she was on top of him, looking down into his face, she hesitated. Was she really going to do this? Take him? Use him for nothing more than getting off and getting back at him for something he had every right to do?

She started to move off of him.

In a quick surge, Rhage’s legs shot up under her, toppling her onto his chest. As she fell on him, his arms wrapped around her.

“You know what you want to do, Mary,” he said into her ear. “Don’t stop. Take what you need from me. Use me.”

Mary closed her eyes, turned off her brain, and let her body go.

Reaching between his thighs, she held him up and sat on him hard.

They both shouted as she took all of him, right to the pubic bone.

He was a tremendous presence in her body, stretching her until she thought she might tear. She breathed deeply and didn’t move, her thighs straining as the inside of her struggled to adjust to him.

“You’re so tight.” Rhage groaned. His lips stripped free of his teeth, his fangs flashing. “Oh...God, I feel you all over my body. *Mary*.”

His chest heaved and his abdomen clenched so hard the muscles threw shadows. As his hands squeezed her knees, his eyes dilated until there was hardly any blue left to them at all. And then his pupils flashed white.

Rhage’s face contorted with some kind of panic. But then he shook his head as if to clear it and assumed an expression of concentration. Slowly the centers of his eyes turned back to black, as if he’d willed them so.

Mary stopped focusing on him and started thinking about herself.

Not caring about anything except where their bodies met, she planted her hands on his shoulders and pulled up from him. The friction was electric, and the burst of pleasure she felt helped her accept him more easily. She slid down on his erection and came forward and then repeated the motions over and over again. Her rhythm was a slow glide, each descent stretching her, each rise coating him with her body's silky response.

With increasing dominance she rode him, taking what she wanted, the thickness and the heat and the length of him creating a wild, twisting knot of energy deep in her core. She opened her eyes and looked down at him.

Rhage was a picture of male ecstasy. A fine shine of sweat covered his broad chest and shoulders. His head was kicked back, his chin high, his blond hair falling on the pillow, his lips parted. He was watching her through lowered lids, eyes lingering on her face and her breasts and where they were joined.

As if he were utterly enthralled by her.

She squeezed her eyes closed and pushed his adoration from her mind. It was either that or lose touch with the orgasm she was so close to because the sight of him made her want to weep.

It didn't take long for her to explode. With a shattering blast, the release swept through her, robbing her of sight and hearing, of breath and heartbeat, until all she could do was collapse onto him.

As her breathing slowed, she became aware that he was stroking her back gently and whispering soft words to her.

In the aftermath she was ashamed, and tears stung her eyes.

No matter who else he'd been with tonight, he didn't deserve to be used, and that was exactly what she'd done. She'd been angry when it all started, and then she'd shut him out right before she came by refusing to look at him. She'd treated him like a sex toy.

"I'm sorry, Rhage. I'm...sorry..."

She moved to get off his hips and realized he was still thick inside of her. He hadn't even finished.

Oh, God, this was bad. The whole thing was bad.

Rhage's hands clamped on her thighs. "Don't ever regret that we were together."

She stared into his eyes. "I feel like I just violated you."

"I was more than willing. Mary, it's all right. Come here, let me kiss you."

“How can you stand to have me near you?”

“The only thing I can’t handle is your leaving.”

He took her wrists and urged her down to his mouth. As their lips met, he slid his arms all the way around her, holding her close. The change in position made her acutely aware that he was full to bursting, so hard she could feel the involuntary twitches of his arousal.

He rocked his hips gently against her, sweeping her hair back from her face with his big palms. “I won’t be able to withstand the burn for much longer. You take me so high, I’m licking the ceiling right now. But for as long as I’m able, as long as I can stay in control, I want to love your body with mine. However it starts. However it ends.”

He moved his hips up and down, pulling out, sliding in. She felt herself melting all around him. The pleasure was deep, endless. Terrifying.

“Did you kiss them tonight?” she asked roughly. “The women?”

“No, I didn’t kiss the female, I never do. And I hated it. I’m not doing it again, Mary. I’ll find another way to keep myself from getting out of hand while you’re in my life. I don’t want anyone but you.”

She let him roll her over. As he settled on top of her, the warm, heavy weight of him pressed into the cradle of her body where he was lodged. He kissed her tenderly, licking at her with his tongue, cherishing her with his lips. He was so gentle though he was immense inside of her and his body housed the kind of strength that could snap her in half.

“I won’t finish this if you don’t want me to,” he whispered into her neck. “I’ll pull out right now.”

She brought her hands up his back, feeling the shifting muscles and the expansion and compression of his ribs as he breathed. She inhaled deeply and caught a lovely, erotic scent. Dark, spicy, lush. Between her legs she felt an answering rush of wetness, as if the fragrance were a touch or a kiss.

“What is that wonderful smell?”

“Me,” he murmured against her mouth. “It’s what happens when a male bonds. I can’t help it. If you let me keep going, it will be all over your skin, your hair. Inside of you, too.”

With that, he thrust deeply. She arched up to the pleasure, letting the heat flow throughout her body.

“I can’t go through tonight again,” she moaned, more to herself than to him.

Falling completely still, he took her hand and placed it on his heart.

“Never again, Mary. I swear on my honor.”

His eyes were grave, the vow as good a one as she would get from any living thing. But the relief she felt at his pledge was trouble.

“I will not fall in love with you,” she said. “I can’t let myself. I won’t.”

“That’s all right. I’ll love you enough for the both of us.” He surged inside of her, filling her depths.

“You don’t know me.” She nipped at his shoulder and then sucked on his collarbone. The taste of his skin made her tongue sing, that special scent condensing in her mouth.

“Yeah, I do.” He pulled back, his eyes regarding her with an animal’s conviction and clarity. “I know you kept me safe when the sun was out and I was defenseless against it. I know you cared for me even though you were afraid. I know you fed me from your kitchen. I know you are a warrior, a survivor, a *wahlker*. And I know your voice is the loveliest sound my ears have ever heard.” He kissed her softly. “I know all about you, and everything I see is beautiful. Everything I see is mine.”

“I’m not yours,” she whispered.

The rejection didn’t faze him. “Fine. If I can’t have you, then you do the taking. Have all of me, part of me, a small piece, whatever you want. Just please, have something.”

She reached up to his face, stroking the perfect planes and angles of his cheeks and jawline.

“Don’t you fear pain?” she asked.

“No. But I’ll tell you what scares the hell out of me. Losing you.” He looked at her lips. “Now do you want me to pull out? Because I will.”

“No. Stay.” Mary kept her eyes open and brought his mouth to hers, slipping her tongue inside of him.

He trembled and started to move in a steady rhythm, penetrating and retreating, each time the thick head of him teetering on breaking their connection.

“You feel...so perfect,” he said, punctuating the words with his strokes. “I was made to...be inside of you.”

The luscious scent coming from his body intensified as his pumping did, until all she could feel was him, all she could smell was him, all she could taste was him.

She called out his name as she climaxed, and she felt him go over the edge with her, his body shuddering into hers, his release as powerful as his

thrusts had been, his orgasm pouring into her.

When he was still, he rolled them over so they were on their sides. He gathered her close, so close she could hear the great beating heart in his chest.

She shut her eyes and slept with an exhaustion to rival death.

Chapter Twenty-nine

That evening, as the sun fell and the shutters rose up from the windows, Mary decided she could get used to being pampered by Rhage. What she couldn't handle was any more food. She put her fingers on his wrist, stopping the forkload of mashed potatoes coming at her.

"No, I'm stuffed," she said as she lay back against the pillows. "My stomach's about to burst."

With a smile, he picked up the tray of dishes and put it on the bedside table, then sat down next to her again. He'd been gone for most of the day, working, she assumed, and she'd been grateful for the sleep she'd gotten. Her exhaustion was getting worse by the day, and she could feel herself sliding into sickness. Her body felt as if it were struggling to maintain its regular processes, little aches and pains cropping up all over. And the bruises were back: Black and blue marks were blooming under her skin at an alarming rate. Rhage had been horrified when he'd seen them, convinced he'd hurt her during sex. It had taken a lot of talking to get him to realize they weren't his fault.

Mary focused on Rhage, not wanting to think about the illness, or the doctor's appointment that was coming soon. God, he didn't look any better than she felt, although he was keyed up, not grinding to a halt. The poor man couldn't settle down. As he sat beside her on the bed, he was rubbing his thighs with his palms, looking like he had a case of poison ivy or the chicken pox. She was about to ask him what was wrong when he spoke up.

“Mary, will you let me do something for you?”

Even though sex should be the last thing on her mind, she eyed the biceps that stretched his black shirt. “Do I get to pick what it is?”

A soft growl came out of him. “You shouldn’t look at me like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to mount you when you do.”

“Don’t fight the feeling.”

Like the strike of dual matches, his pupils flashed white. It was the oddest thing. One moment they were black. The next, pale light was shining out of them.

“Why does that happen?” she asked.

His shoulders thickened as he bore down on his legs and braced himself. Abruptly he stood up and paced around. She could sense an energy coming off of him, out of him.

“Rhage?”

“You don’t need to worry about it.”

“That hard tone in your voice tells me maybe I should.”

He smiled at her and shook his head. “No. You don’t. About the favor. Our race has a physician, Havers. Will you let me give him access to your medical files? Maybe our science can help you.”

Mary frowned. A vampire doctor. Talk about exploring your alternative therapies.

Yeah, but what exactly did she have to lose?

“Okay. Except I don’t know how to get copies—”

“My brother, V, is a computer god. He can hack into anything, and most of your stuff should be online. All I need are names and places. Dates, too, if you have them.”

When he grabbed paper and a pen, she told him where she had been treated as well as the names of her doctors. After he’d written it all down, he stared at the piece of paper.

“What?” she asked.

“There are so many.” His eyes lifted to hers. “How bad was it, Mary?”

Her first impulse was to tell him the truth: that she’d had two rounds of chemo and a bone-marrow transplant and had just squeaked by. But then she thought about the night before, when her emotions had gotten so out of control. She was a box of dynamite right now and her disease was the best fuse around. The last thing she needed was to get tripped again, because

Christ knew nothing good had come of the last two times she'd lost it. The first she'd cried all over him. The second she'd...Well, biting his lip had been the least of it.

Shrugging, lying, hating herself, she murmured, "It was okay. I was just glad when it was over."

His eyes narrowed.

Just as someone pounded on the door.

Rhage's stare didn't waver, in spite of the urgent sound. "Someday you're going to learn to trust me."

"I do trust you."

"Bullshit. And here's a quick tip. I hate being lied to."

The heavy knocking started up again.

Rhage went over and opened the door, ready to tell whoever it was to screw off. He had a feeling he and Mary were about to get into an argument, and he wanted to get the thing over with.

Tohr was on the other side. Looking like he'd been hit with a stun gun.

"What the hell happened to you?" Rhage asked while stepping into the hall. He shut the door partway.

Tohr sniffed the air drifting out of the bedroom. "Jesus. You've marked her, haven't you?"

"You got a problem with that?"

"No, it makes this all easier in a way. The Scribe Virgin has spoken."

"Tell me."

"You should be with the rest of the brothers to hear—"

"Fuck that. I want to know now, Tohr."

When the brother finished speaking in the Old Language, Rhage took a deep breath. "Give me ten minutes."

Tohr nodded. "We're in Wrath's study."

Rhage went back into his room and shut the door. "Listen, Mary, I've got some business with my brothers. I might not be back tonight."

She stiffened and her eyes dropped away from his face.

"Mary, it's not females, I swear to you. Just promise me you'll be here when I get back." As she hesitated, he went over and stroked her cheek. "You said you don't have a doctor's appointment until Wednesday. What's another night? You could spend more time in the tub. You told me how much you like that."

She smiled a little. "You are a manipulator."

"I like to think of myself more as an outcome engineer."

"If I stay one more day, you're just going to try to talk me into another and another...."

He bent down and kissed her hard, wishing he had more time, wanting to be with her, inside of her, before he left. But hell, even if he'd had hours to spare, he wouldn't be able to do that. The tingling and the hum in him was about to vibrate his body into midair.

"I love you," he said. Then he pulled back, took off his watch, and put the Rolex in her hand. "Keep this for me."

He went over to the closet and shed his clothes. Way in the back, behind another two pairs of pajamas he was never going to use, he found his ceremonial black robe. He drew the heavy silk on over his naked skin and belted it with a thick strip of braided leather.

When he came out, Mary said, "You look like you're going to a monastery."

"Tell me you will be here when I come back."

After a moment, she nodded.

He pulled the robe's hood into place. "Good. That's good."

"Rhage, what's going on?"

"Just wait for me. Please, wait for me." As he got to the door, he took one last look at her in his bed.

This was their first good-bye that had teeth, their first separation where, when they were reunited, he'd feel the awful distance of time and experience. He knew tonight was going to be hard to get through. He just hoped that when he came out on the other side, the aftermath of the punishment didn't linger too long. And that she was still with him.

"I'll see you later, Mary," he said as he shut her in his room.

When he walked into Wrath's study, he closed the double doors behind himself. All the brothers were there, and no one was talking. The scent of unease permeated the room, smelling like rubbing alcohol.

Wrath came forward from behind the desk, looking as rigid as Tohr had. From behind his wraparound sunglasses, the king's stare was piercing, something felt, though not seen.

"Brother."

Rhage bowed his head. "My lord."

"You wear that robe as if you want to stay with us."

“Of course I do.”

Wrath nodded once. “Here is the pronouncement, then. The Scribe Virgin has determined that you offended the Brotherhood in both defying Tohr’s orders and by bringing a human onto our turf. I’ll be honest with you, Rhage, she wants to override my decision about Mary. She wants the human out.”

“You know where that leads.”

“I told her you were prepared to walk.”

“That probably cheered her up.” Rhage smirked. “She’s been trying to get rid of me for years.”

“Well, it’s your choice now, brother. If you want to remain with us, and if the human is to continue to be sheltered within these walls, the Scribe Virgin has demanded that you offer a *rythe*.”

The ritualistic way of assuaging offense was a logical punishment. When a *rythe* was tendered and accepted, the offender allowed the object of his insult free use of a weapon against him without putting up a defense. The offended could choose anything from a knife to a set of brass knuckles to a gun, provided the wound inflicted was not mortal.

“I so offer the *rythe*,” Rhage said.

“It must be one to each of us.”

There was a collective groan in the room. Someone muttered, “Fuck.”

“I so offer them.”

“Be it as you wish, brother.”

“But”—Rhage hardened his voice—“I offer them only on the understanding that if the ritual is observed, Mary stays for however long I want.”

“That was my agreement with the Scribe Virgin. And you should know she came around only after I told her you wanted to take the human as your *shellan*. I think Her Holiness was shocked you could even consider that kind of commitment.” Wrath looked over his shoulder. “Tohrment is to choose the weapon that all of us will use.”

“The tri-whip,” Tohr said in a low voice.

Oh, shit. This was going to hurt.

There were more mutters.

“So be it,” Wrath said.

“Except what about the beast?” Rhage asked. “It can come out when I’m in pain.”

“The Scribe Virgin will be there. She said she has a way of keeping it at

bay.”

But of course she would. She’d cooked the damn thing up in the first place.

“We’re going to do this tonight, right?” Rhage glanced around the room. “I mean, there’s no reason to wait.”

“We’ll go to the Tomb now.”

“Good. Let’s get it over with.”

Zsadist was the first to leave as the group got to their feet and worked out logistics in quiet tones. Tohr needed a robe, did someone have an extra one? Phury announced he’d bring the weapon. V offered the Escalade to take them all down together.

The latter was good thinking. They were going to need something to get him home in after the *rythe* was over.

“My brothers?” he said.

They all stopped talking, stopped moving. He looked at each one, noting the grim casts to their faces. They hated this, and he understood perfectly. Hurting any one of them would have been unbearable for him. It was much better to be on the receiving end.

“I have one request, my brothers. Don’t bring me back here, okay? When it’s over, take me somewhere else. I don’t want Mary to see me like that.”

Vishous spoke up. “You can stay at the Pit. Butch and I will take care of you.”

Rhage smiled. “Twice in a less than a week. You two could hire out as nursemaids after this.”

V clapped him on the shoulder and then left. Tohr followed, doing the same. Phury gave him a hug as he passed by.

Wrath paused on his way out.

When the king remained silent, Rhage squeezed the male’s bicep. “I know, my lord. I’d feel the same way if I were you. But I’m tough. I can take it.”

Wrath reached into the hood and took Rhage’s face into his palms, tilting it down. He kissed Rhage’s forehead and held the contact between them, a pledge of respect from the king to his warrior, a reaffirmation of their bond.

“I’m glad you’re staying with us,” Wrath said softly. “I would have hated to lose you.”

About fifteen minutes later, they reconvened down in the courtyard by the Escalade. The brothers were all barefoot and wearing black robes. With

the hoods up, it was hard to tell who was who, except for Phury. His prosthetic foot showed, and he had a bulging duffel bag slung over his shoulder. No doubt he'd thrown bandages and rolling tape into the thing as well as the weapon.

Everyone was silent as V drove them behind the house and into the mountain's thick beard of pines and hemlocks. The road was a single dirt lane, crowded by the evergreen trees.

As they shot along, Rhage couldn't stand the tense silence a minute longer.

"Oh, for God's sake, my brothers. You're not going to kill me. Could we lighten up a little?"

No one would look at him.

"V, put on some Luda or Fifty, will ya? All this quiet is boring."

Phury's laugh came out of the robe on the right. "Only you could try to turn this into a party."

"Well, hell, you've all wanted to nail me a good one for some shit I've popped, right? This is your lucky day." He clapped Phury on the thigh. "I mean, come on, my brother, I've ridden you for years about the no females. And Wrath, a couple months ago I needled you until you stabbed a wall. V, just the other day you threatened to use that hand of yours on me. Remember? When I told you what I thought about that goatee monstrosity?"

V chuckled. "I had to do something to shut you up. Every damn time I've run into you since I grew it, you ask me if I've French-kissed a tailpipe."

"And I'm still convinced you're doing my GTO, you bastard."

That got the ball rolling. Rhage stories started flying around until the voices were so loud, no one could hear anyone else.

As his brothers blew off steam, Rhage settled back against the seat, looking out into the night. He hoped like hell the Scribe Virgin knew what she was doing, because if his beast got loose in the Tomb, his brothers were in deep shit. And they just might have to kill him after all.

He frowned and looked around. He located Wrath behind him. Could tell who it was because the king's black diamond ring was on the male's middle finger.

Rhage arched back and whispered, "My lord, I beg of a favor."

Wrath leaned forward, his voice deep and even. "What do you need?"

"If I don't...make it through this, for whatever reason, I beg of you to watch over Mary."

The hood nodded. In the Old Language, the king said, “*As you wish, so I am sworn. I shall look upon her as I would my own blooded sister and caretake her as I would any female of mine own family.*”

Rhage exhaled. “That is good. That is...good.”

Soon enough, V parked the Escalade in a small clearing. They got out and stood around, listening, looking, sensing.

All things considered it was a nice evening, and this was a serene place to be. The breeze winding its way through the countless branches and trunks of the forest carried a pleasing smell of earth and pine. Overhead, a fat moon glowed through milky clouds.

When Wrath gave the signal, they walked a hundred yards over to a cave set into the mountain. The place looked like absolutely nothing special, even when you walked inside. You had to know what you were looking for to find the little seam in the wall in the back. If triggered correctly, a slab of stone slid open.

As they filed inside the cave’s inner belly, the wedge of rock closed behind them with a whisper. Torches mounted on the walls flickered gold as their flames breathed into the air, puffing and hissing.

The walk into the earth was a slow, easy descent on a rock floor that was cold beneath the feet. When they got to the bottom they disrobed, and a pair of cast-iron doors opened. The hall ahead was about fifty feet long and twenty feet high and covered with shelves.

On these racks, thousands of ceramic jars of various sizes and shapes reflected light. Each container held the heart of a *lesser*, the organ the Omega removed during the Society’s induction ceremony. During a *lesser*’s existence as a slayer, the jar was his only real personal possession, and if possible, the Brotherhood collected them after a kill.

At the end of the hall, there was another set of double doors. These were already open.

The Brotherhood’s sanctum sanctorum had been carved out of bedrock and veneered in black marble back in the early 1700s when the first migration from Europe had come across the ocean. The room was good-sized and had a ceiling of white stalactites that hung down like daggers. Massive candles, as thick as a male’s arm and as long as his leg, were plugged into black iron stations, their flames nearly as luminous as those of the torches.

Down in front there was a raised platform, accessed by a series of shallow steps. The altar on top was made out of a slab of limestone that had

been brought over from the Old Country, its great weight propped up horizontally by two rough-cut stone lintels. In the center of the thing was a skull.

Behind the altar, a flat wall was etched with the names of every brother there had ever been, back to the very first one whose cranium was on the altar. The inscriptions ran in panels that covered every inch of the surface, save for an unmarked stretch in the middle. This smooth portion was about six feet wide and ran the whole vertical of the marble expanse. In the midst of it, about five feet up from the floor, two thick pegs jutted out, positioned so a male could grip them and hold himself in place.

The air smelled so very familiar: damp earth and beeswax candles.

“Greetings, Brotherhood.”

They all turned to the female voice.

The Scribe Virgin was a tiny figure in the far corner, her black robes hovering above the floor. Nothing of her was visible, not even her face, but from underneath the draping black folds, light spilled out like water falling.

She floated toward them, stopping in front of Wrath. “Warrior.”

He bowed low. “Scribe Virgin.”

She greeted each one in turn, saving Rhage for last. “Rhage, son of Tohrture.”

“Scribe Virgin.” He inclined his head.

“How fare you?”

“I am well.” Or he would be, as soon as this was over.

“And you have been busy, have you not? Continuing to set new precedents, as is your affection. Pity they are not in laudable directions.” She laughed with an edge. “Somehow, it is no surprise we ended up here with you. You are aware, are you not, that this is the first *rythe* ever to be exchanged within the Brotherhood?”

Not exactly, he thought. Tohr had turned down one offered by Wrath back in July.

But it wasn’t like he was going to point that out to her.

“Warrior, are you prepared to accept what you have offered?”

“I am.” He chose his next words very carefully, because you didn’t pose a question to the Scribe Virgin. Not unless you wanted to eat your own ass. “I would beg of you that I do not hurt my brothers.”

Her voice grew hard. “You are perilously close to inquiry.”

“I mean no offense.”

That low, soft chuckle came again.

Man, he bet she was enjoying the hell out this. She'd never liked him, although it wasn't as if he could blame her. He'd given her antipathy plenty of reasons to breed.

"You mean no offense, warrior?" The robes moved as if she were shaking her head. "On the contrary, you never hesitate to offend to get what you wish, and that has always been your problem. It is also why we have been brought here together this night." She turned away. "You have the weapon?"

Phury put down the duffel, unzipped it, and took out the tri-whip. The two-foot-long handle was made of wood and covered with brown leather that had been darkened by the sweat of many hands. Out of the rod's tip, three lengths of blackened steel chain swung in the air. At the end of each of them there was a spiked dangler, like a pinecone with barbs.

The tri-whip was an ancient, vicious weapon, but Tohr had chosen wisely. In order for the ritual to be considered successful, the brothers could spare Rhage nothing either in the type of weapon they used or the way they put it to his skin. To give leniency would be to demean the integrity of the tradition, the regret he was offering, and the chance for a true cleansing.

"So be it," she said. "Proceed to the wall, Rhage, son of Tohrture."

He went forward, climbing the stairs two at a time. As he passed the altar, he gazed at the sacred skull, watching firelight lick over the eye sockets and the long fangs. Positioning himself against the black marble, he gripped the stone pegs and felt cold smoothness on his back.

The Scribe Virgin drifted up to him and lifted her arm. Her sleeve fell back, and a glow bright as a welder's arc was revealed, the stinging light vaguely shaped like a hand. A low-level electrical hum went through him, and he felt something shift inside his torso, as if his internal organs had been rearranged.

"You may begin the ritual."

The brothers lined up, their naked bodies gleaming with strength, their faces drawn into deep grooves. Wrath took the tri-whip from Phury and came forward first. As he moved, the weapon's links chimed with the sweetness of a bird's call.

"Brother," the king said softly.

"My lord."

Rhage stared into those sunglasses as Wrath started swinging the whip in a wide circle to build momentum. A droning sound started low and

crescendoed until the weapon came forward, slicing through the air. The chains hit Rhage's chest and then the barbs clawed into him, grabbing the air out of his lungs. As he bore down on the pegs, he kept his head up while his vision dimmed and then returned.

Tohr was next, his blow knocking the wind out of Rhage so that his knees sagged before they accepted his weight again. Vishous and Phury followed.

Each time, he met the pained eyes of his brothers in hopes of easing their anguish, but as Phury turned away, Rhage could no longer support his head. He let it fall on his shoulder and so caught sight of the blood running down his chest, over his thighs, and onto his feet. A pool was forming on the floor, reflecting the light of the candles, and staring at the red mess made him woozy. Determined to remain standing, he cocked his elbows so it was his joints and bones, not his muscles, that kept him in place.

When there was a lull, he became dimly aware of some kind of argument. He blinked several times before his eyes were clear enough to see.

Phury was holding out the whip and Zsadist was backing away from the thing in what seemed a lot like terror. Z's fisted hands were held up high and his nipple rings flashed in the firelight as he breathed far too heavily. The brother was the color of fog, his skin gray and unnaturally shiny.

Phury spoke gently and tried to take Zsadist's arm. Z pivoted wildly, but Phury stayed with him. As they moved in a grim dance, the whip marks covering Z's back shifted with his muscles.

This approach was going nowhere, Rhage thought. Zsadist was closing in on full panic, like a cornered animal. There had to be some other way to reach him.

Rhage took a deep breath and opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He tried again.

“Zsadist...” His reedy voice brought all eyes to the altar. “Finish it, Z.... Can’t...can’t hold myself up much longer.”

“No—”

Phury cut Zsadist off. “You have to—”

“No! Get the *fuck* away from me.”

Z bolted for the door, but the Scribe Virgin got there first, forcing him to spin out to a stop so he didn't run her over. Trapped in front of the diminutive figure, his legs trembled and his shoulders shook. She talked to him quietly, the words not carrying far enough for Rhage to decipher through his haze of pain.

Finally the Scribe Virgin motioned to Phury, who brought the weapon over to her. When she had it, she reached out, took Z's hand, and placed the leather-bound grip on his palm. She pointed to the altar and Zsadist dropped his head. A moment later he came up front with a lurching stride.

When Rhage looked at the brother, he almost suggested someone else do the deed for Z. Those black eyes were cracked open so wide, there was white all around the irises. And Zsadist kept swallowing, his throat working like it was keeping a scream down in his chest.

"S'okay, my brother," Rhage murmured. "But you need to finish. Now."

Z panted and swayed, sweat rolling into his eyes and down the scar on his face.

"Do it."

"Brother," Z whispered, lifting the whip over his shoulder.

He didn't swing it for momentum, probably couldn't have coordinated his arm that well at this point. But he was strong, and the weapon sang as it traveled through the air. The chains and danglers streaked across Rhage's stomach in a blaze of needles.

Rhage's knees gave out and he tried to catch himself with his arms, only to find that they too refused to hold him. He fell to his knees, palms landing in his own blood.

But at least it was over. He took long breaths, determined not to pass out.

Abruptly a rushing sound cut through the sanctuary, something like metal against metal. He didn't think much about it. He was busy talking to his stomach, trying to convince it that dry heaves were in fact not a really good plan.

When he was ready, he crawled on his hands and knees around the altar, taking a breather before he tackled the steps. As he glanced ahead, he saw that the brothers had lined up again. Rhage rubbed his eyes at what was before him, getting blood on his face.

This was not part of the ritual, he thought.

Each one of the brothers had a black dagger in his right hand. Wrath started the chant and the others carried it until their voices were loud shouts reverberating around the sanctorum. The buildup didn't stop until they were almost screaming, and then their voices cut off abruptly.

As a unit, they slashed their daggers across their upper chests.

Zsadist's cut was the deepest.

Chapter Thirty

Mary was downstairs in the billiard room, talking to Fritz about the history of the house, when the *doggen*'s ears picked up a sound she hadn't heard.

"That would be the sirens returning."

She went to one of the windows just as a pair of headlights swung around the courtyard.

The Escalade came to a stop, its doors opened, and the men got out. With the hoods on their robes down, she recognized them from the first night she'd come to the mansion. The guy with the goatee and the tattoos at one of his temples. The man with the spectacular hair. The scarred terror and the military officer. The only one she hadn't seen before was a man with long black hair and sunglasses.

God, their expressions were bleak. Maybe someone had been hurt.

She searched for Rhage, trying not to panic.

The group milled around and condensed at the back of the SUV just as someone came out of the gatehouse and held the door open. Mary recognized the guy between the jambs as the one who'd caught the football in the foyer.

With all of the big male bodies crowded in a tight circle at the rear of the Escalade, it was hard to tell what they were doing. But it seemed like some kind of heavy weight was being shifted among them....

A blond head of hair caught the light.

Rhage. Unconscious. And his body was being carried toward that open door.

Mary was out of the mansion before she realized she was running.

“Rhage! Stop! Wait!” Cold air streaked into her lungs. “Rhage!”

At the sound of her voice, he jerked and threw a limp hand out to her.

The men stopped. A couple of them cursed.

“Rhage!” She ground to a halt, kicking up pebbles. “What...oh...*lord*.”

There was blood on his face, and his eyes were unfocused from pain.

“Rhage...”

His mouth opened. Worked soundlessly.

One of the men said, “Shit, we might as well take him to his room now.”

“Of course you’ll take him there! Was he hurt fighting?”

No one answered her. They just changed direction and muscled Rhage through the mansion’s vestibule, across the foyer and up the stairs. After they’d laid him on his bed, the guy with the goatee and tattoos on his face smoothed Rhage’s hair back.

“Brother, maybe we could bring you something for the pain?”

Rhage’s voice was garbled. “Nothing. Better this way. You know rules. Mary...where’s Mary?”

She went to the bedside and took his slack hand. As she pressed her lips to his knuckles, she realized the robe was in perfect condition, with no rips or tears. Which meant he hadn’t had the thing on when he’d been hurt. And someone had put it back on him.

With a horrible intuition, she reached for the braided leather tie around his waist. She loosened it and pulled the edges of the robe open. From his collarbones to his hips he was covered with white bandages. And blood had welled through, a bright, shocking red.

Afraid to look, needing to know, she gently untaped one corner and lifted.

“Dear God.” She swayed and one of the brothers caught her. “How did this happen?”

When the group remained silent, she pushed whoever was holding her up away and looked at them all. They were unmoving, staring at Rhage....

And in as much pain as he was. *Sweet Jesus, they couldn’t have...*

The goateed one met her eyes.

They did.

“You did this,” she hissed. “You did this to him!”

“Yes,” said the one with the sunglasses. “And it’s none of your business.”

“You bastards.”

Rhage made a sound and then cleared his throat. “Leave us.”

“We’ll be back to check on you, Hollywood,” said the guy with long multicolored hair. “Do you need anything?”

“Other than a skin graft?” Rhage smiled a little and then winced as he shifted on the bed.

While the men went out the door, she glared at their strong backs. Those goddamned...*animals*.

“Mary?” Rhage murmured. “*Mary*.”

She tried to pull it together. Getting all worked up over those thugs wasn’t going to help Rhage right now.

She looked down at him, choked back her fury, and said, “Will you let me call that doctor you talked about? What was his name?”

“No.”

She wanted to tell him to lose the tough-guy-bearing-pain-nobly crap. But she knew he’d fight her, and an argument was the last thing he needed.

“Do you want the robe off or on?” she asked.

“Off. If you can stand the sight of me.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

She untied the leather belt and peeled the black silk off him, wanting to scream as he rolled back and forth to help her while grunting in pain. When they were finished getting the thing out from under him, blood seeped down his side.

That beautiful duvet was going to be ruined, she thought, not giving a shit.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood.” She rolled up the heavy robe.

“I know.” He closed his eyes, head sinking into the pillow. His naked body was going through a series of flickering seizures, the trembling in his thighs, stomach, and pectorals making the mattress jiggle.

She dumped the robe in the tub and came back. “Did they clean you before they dressed the wounds?”

“I don’t know.”

“I probably should check at some point.”

“Give me an hour. By then the bleeding will stop.” He took a deep breath and grimaced. “Mary...they had to.”

“What?” She leaned down.

“They had to do this. I don’t...” Another breath was followed by a groan. “Don’t be angry with them.”

Screw. That.

“Mary,” he said strongly, his dull eyes focusing on her. “I gave them no choice.”

“What did you do?”

“It’s over. And you are not to be angry with them.” His stare fuzzed out again.

As far as she was concerned, she could be anything the hell she wanted at those bastards.

“Mary?”

“Don’t worry.” She stroked his cheek, wishing she could wash the blood off of his face. When he flinched at the light contact, she pulled back. “Won’t you please let me get you something?”

“Just talk to me. Read to me....”

There were a few contemporary books on the shelves next to his DVD wasteland, and she went over to the hardcovers. She grabbed a Harry Potter, the second one, and pulled a chair up next to the bed. It was hard to concentrate at first because she kept measuring his respiration, but eventually she found a rhythm and so did he. His breathing slowed and the spasms stopped.

When he was asleep, she closed the book. His forehead was wrinkled, his lips pale and tight. She hated that the pain was with him even in the rest he’d found.

Mary felt the years peel away.

She saw her mother’s yellow bedroom. Smelled disinfectant. Heard labored, desperate breaths.

Here she was again, she thought. Another bedside. Another’s suffering. Helpless.

She looked around the room, eyes landing on the *Madonna and Child* over the dresser. In this context the painting was art, not icon, part of a museum-quality collection and used only as decoration.

So she didn’t have to hate the damn thing. And she wasn’t scared of it, either.

The Madonna statue in her mother’s room had been different. Mary had despised it, and the instant Cissy Luce’s body had left the house, that piece of plaster had been in the garage. Mary hadn’t had the heart to break it, but she’d wanted to.

The next morning she’d taken the thing to Our Lady and dropped it off. Same with the crucifix. As she’d driven out of the church’s parking lot, the

triumph she'd felt, the veritable *fuck you* to God, had been heady, the only good feeling that came to her for a long time. The rush hadn't lasted, though. When she'd returned to the house, all she'd seen was the shadow on the wall where the cross had been and the dust-free spot on the floor where the statue had stood.

Two years later, to the very day she'd dropped those objects of devotion off, she'd been diagnosed with leukemia.

Logically she knew she wasn't cursed because she'd dumped the things. There were 365 days to hit on the calendar, and like a ball on a roulette wheel, the announcement of her disease had had to land on one of them. In her heart, though, she sometimes believed otherwise. Which made her hate God even more.

Hell... He didn't have time to spare a miracle for her mother, who'd been faithful. But He went out of His way to punish a sinner like her. *Go figure.*

"You ease me," Rhage said.

Her eyes snapped to his. She cleared her head by taking his hand. "How are you?"

"Better. Your voice soothes me."

It had been the same with her mother, she thought. Her mother had liked the sound of her talking, too.

"You want something to drink?" she asked.

"What were you thinking about just now?"

"Nothing."

He closed his eyes.

"Would you like me to wash you?" she said.

When he shrugged, she went to the bathroom and came back with a warm, damp washcloth and a dry bath towel. She cleaned his face and gently worked around the edges of the bandages.

"I'm going to take these off, okay?"

He nodded and she carefully peeled the tape from his skin. She pulled the gauze and padding back.

Mary shuddered, bile rising up into her mouth.

He'd been whipped. It was the only explanation for the marks.

"Oh...Rhage." Tears clouded her eyes, but she didn't allow them to fall. "I'm just going to change the dressing. This is too...tender to wash yet. Do you have—"

"Bathroom. Floor-to-ceiling cupboard to the right of the mirror."

Standing in front of the cabinet, she was daunted by the supplies he kept on hand. Surgical kits. Plaster for broken bones. Bandages of all kinds. Tape. She took what she thought she'd need and went back to him. Ripping open sterile packs of twelve-inch gauze pads, she laid them on his chest and stomach and figured she'd just let them sit there. There was no way she could lift his torso off the mattress to wrap him up, and taping them all together would involve too much fiddling around.

As she patted down the lower left section of bandages, Rhage jerked. She glanced at him. "Did I hurt you?"

"Funny question."

"I'm sorry?"

His eyes flipped open, his stare hard. "You don't even know, do you?"

Clearly not. "Rhage, what do you need?"

"For you to talk to me."

"Okay. Let me finish here."

As soon as she was done, she opened up the book. He cursed.

Confused, she reached for his hand. "I don't know what you want."

"It's not that tough to figure out." His voice was weak but indignant.

"Christ, Mary, can you at least once let me in?"

There was a knock across the room. They both glared at the sound.

"I'll be right back," she said.

When she opened the door, the man with the goatee was on the other side. He had a silver tray weighed down with food balanced on one hand.

"I'm Vishous, by the way. Is he awake?"

"Hey, V," Rhage said.

Vishous walked right past her and put the meal on the dresser. As he headed for the bed, she wished she were as big as he was so she could keep him out of the room.

The guy propped his hip on the side of the mattress. "How you doing, Hollywood?"

"I'm okay."

"Pain fading yet?"

"Yeah."

"So you're healing up good."

"Can't happen fast enough for me." Rhage closed his eyes in exhaustion.

Vishous stared down at him for a moment, lips drawn thin. "I'll come back later, my brother. All right?"

“Thanks, man.”

The guy turned around and met her eyes, which couldn’t have been easy. At the moment, she was wishing he had a taste of the pain he’d inflicted. And she knew the desire for vengeance was showing in her face.

“Tough cookie, aren’t you?” Vishous murmured.

“If he’s your *brother*, why did you hurt him?”

“Mary, don’t,” Rhage cut in hoarsely. “I told you—”

“*You told me nothing.*” She squeezed her eyes shut. It was not fair to yell at him when he was flat on his back with a chest that looked like a grid map.

“Maybe we should just let it all out,” Vishous said.

Mary crossed her arms over her chest. “Now there’s an idea. Why don’t you tell me the whole damn thing? Help me understand why you did this to him.”

Rhage spoke up. “Mary, I don’t want you to—”

“So *tell me*. If you don’t want me to hate them, then explain this to me.”

Vishous looked over to the bed, and Rhage must have nodded or shrugged, because the man said, “He betrayed the Brotherhood to be with you. He had to make amends if he wanted to stay with us and keep you here.”

Mary stopped breathing. This was all for her? Because of her?

Oh, God. He’d allowed himself to be whipped raw for her....

I’ll make it safe for you, how about that?

She had absolutely no context for this kind of sacrifice. For the pain he was enduring for her. For what had been done to him by people who supposedly cared for him.

“I can’t...I feel a little light-headed. Will you excuse...”

She backed away, hoping to stumble into the bathroom, but Rhage struggled up on the bed, as if he were going to come after her.

“No, you stay there, Rhage.” She went back to him, sitting down in the chair and stroking his hair. “Stay where you are. Shh...Easy, big man.”

When he’d relaxed a little, she looked at Vishous. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Why would you?”

The vampire’s eyes were steady on hers, the silver depths somehow frightening. She focused on the tattoo that bled out onto his face for a moment and then glanced at Rhage. She brushed his hair with her fingertips and murmured until he slid back into sleep.

“Did it hurt you to do this to him?” she demanded softly, knowing

Vishous hadn't left. "Tell me it hurt you."

She heard a whispering of cloth. When she glanced over her shoulder, Vishous had taken off his shirt. On his muscular chest there was a fresh wound, a slice, as if a blade had cut into his skin.

"It killed each one of us."

"Good."

The vampire smiled rather fiercely. "You understand us better than you think. And that food is not just for him when he wants it. I brought it for you, too."

Yeah, well, she didn't want anything from them. "Thank you. I'll see that he eats."

Vishous paused on his way out. "Have you told him about your name?"

Her head snapped around. "What?"

"Rhage. Does he know?"

Shivers crept up the back of her neck. "Obviously he knows my name."

"No, the *why* of it. You might tell him." Vishous frowned. "And no, I didn't find out on the Internet. How could I?"

Good lord, that had been exactly what was going through her... "Do you read minds?"

"When I want to and sometimes when I have no choice." Vishous left, shutting the door quietly.

Rhage tried to roll over onto his side and woke up with a moan. "Mary?"

"I'm right here." She placed his hand between both of hers.

"What's the matter?" As he looked at her, his teal blue eyes were more alert than they had been. "Mary, please. Just once, tell me what's on your mind."

She hesitated. "Why didn't you just leave me behind? All this...wouldn't have happened."

"There is nothing I would not bear for your safety, for your life."

She shook her head. "I don't understand how you can feel so much for me."

"Yeah, you know what?" He smiled a little. "You've got to shelve this whole understanding thing."

"It's better than going on faith," she whispered, reaching up and running a hand through his blond waves. "Go back to sleep, big man. Every time you do, you seem to wake up miles ahead in the healing process."

"I'd rather look at you." But he shut his eyes. "I love it when you play

with my hair.”

He craned his neck, tilting away from her so she could reach more of it. Even his ears were beautiful, she thought.

Rhage’s chest rose and fell in a great sigh. After a while, she leaned back in the chair and kicked her legs out, propping her feet on one of the bed’s massive supports.

As the hours passed, the brothers stopped by to check on him and introduce themselves. Phury, the one with the great head of hair, came in with some warm cider, which she actually took. Wrath, the guy who wore dark sunglasses, and Beth, the woman whom she’d passed out in front of, also visited. Butch, the football catcher, came by, and so did Tohrment, who had that short brush cut.

Rhage slept a lot, but kept waking up whenever he tried to shift over onto his side. He would look at her as he moved around, as if taking strength from the sight of her, and she brought him water, stroked his face, fed him. They didn’t say much. The touching was enough.

Her eyelids were getting low, and she’d let her head fall back when there was another soft knocking. Probably Fritz with more food.

She stretched and went to the door.

“Come on in,” she said while she opened it.

The man with the scarred face was standing in the hall. As he stood stock-still, light fell on the sharp lines of him, drawing out his deep-set eyes, the skull under his supershort hair, that jagged scar, his hard jawline. He was wearing a loose turtleneck and pants that hung low on his hips. Both were black.

She immediately moved closer to the bed to protect Rhage, even though it was stupid to think she could fend off something as big as the vampire in the doorway.

Silence stretched out. She told herself he was probably just checking in as the others had and didn’t want to hurt his brother again. Except...he looked tight all over, his wide stance suggesting he might spring forward at any moment. And weirding her out even more was the fact that the vampire didn’t meet her stare, and he didn’t seem to be looking at Rhage, either. The guy’s cold, black gaze was ungrounded.

“Would you like to come in and see him?” she asked finally.

Those eyes shifted to hers.

Obsidian, she thought. They were like obsidian. Glossy. Bottomless.

Soulless.

She backed up farther and grabbed Rhage's hand. The vampire in the doorway smirked.

"You're looking a little ferocious there, female. You think I'm here to take another hunk out of him?" The voice was low, smooth. Resonant, really. And as detached and unrevealing as his pupils.

"Are you going to hurt him?"

"Silly question."

"Why's that?"

"You won't believe my answer, so you shouldn't ask."

There was more silence, and she measured him in the quiet. It dawned her that maybe he wasn't just aggressive. He was also awkward.

Maybe.

She kissed Rhage's hand and forced herself to step away. "I was going to take a shower. Will you sit with him while I'm gone?"

The vampire blinked as if she'd surprised him. "You gonna feel comfortable getting naked in that bathroom with me around?"

Not really.

She shrugged. "It's your choice. But I'm sure if he wakes up, he'd rather see you than be alone."

"You're going to turn the lights out on me then?"

"Are you coming or going?" When he didn't reply, she said, "Tonight must have been hell for you."

His distorted upper lip jerked into a snarl. "You're the only one who's ever assumed I don't get off hurting people. Are you the Mother Teresa type? All into seeing the good in big, wounded things or some shit?"

"You didn't volunteer for that scar on your face, did you? And I'm willing to bet you've got more below your jawline. So like I said, tonight must have been hell."

His eyes narrowed into slits, and a cold gust blew through the room, as if he'd pushed the air at her. "Careful, female. Courage can be dangerous."

She walked right up to him. "You know what? The whole shower thing is mostly a lie. I was trying to let you have some alone time with him, because it's obvious you're feeling bad or you wouldn't be standing in that doorway looking so damned torn. Take the offer or leave, but either way, I'd appreciate it if you don't try to scare me."

At this point, she didn't care if he lashed out at her. Then again, she was

running on nervous energy and the buzz that came with exhaustion, so she probably wasn't thinking clearly.

"So what's it going to be?" she demanded.

The vampire stepped inside and shut the door, the room growing colder with him in it. His menace was a tangible thing, and it reached out, brushing over her body like hands. As the lock slid into place with a click, she became afraid.

"I'm not trying," he said in a satin drawl.

"What?" she choked out.

"To scare you. You *are* scared." He smiled. His fangs were very long, longer than Rhage's. "I can smell your fear, female. Like wet paint, it tingles in the nose."

As Mary backed away, he came forward, tracking her.

"Hmm...and I like your scent. Liked it from the moment I first met you."

She moved faster, putting out her hand, hoping to feel the bed at any moment. Instead she got tangled in some of the heavy drapes by a window.

The scarred vampire cornered her. He didn't carry as much muscle on his bones as Rhage did, but there was no doubt he was lethal. His cold eyes told her all she needed to know about his ability to kill.

With a curse, Mary put her head down and surrendered. She could do nothing if he hurt her, and neither could Rhage in his condition. Damn it, she hated being helpless, but sometimes that was where life put you.

The vampire leaned down to her and she cringed.

He breathed in deeply and his exhale was a long sigh.

"Take your shower, female. I had no desire to hurt him earlier in the night, and nothing's changed. And I've got no interest in pulling a nasty on you, either. If anything happened to you, he'd be in greater agony than he's in now."

She sagged as he turned away, and she caught his wince as he looked at Rhage.

"What is your name?" she murmured.

He cocked an eyebrow at her and then went back to staring at his brother. "I'm the evil one, in case you haven't figured it out."

"I wanted your name, not your calling."

"Being a bastard's more of a compulsion, really. And it's Zsadist. I am Zsadist."

"Well...it's nice to meet you, Zsadist."

“So polite,” he mocked.

“Okay, how about this. Thank you for not killing him or me just now. That real enough for you?”

Zsadist glanced over his shoulder. His eyelids were like window blinds, allowing only slits of cold night to shine through. And with his skull-trimmed hair and that scar, he was the personification of violence: aggression, and pain anthropomorphized. Except as he looked at her through the candlelight, the slightest hint of warmth came through his face. It was so subtle she couldn’t define quite how she knew it was there.

“You,” he said softly, “are extraordinary.” Before she could say anything further, he held up his hand. “Go. Now. Leave me with my brother.”

Without another word, Mary went into the bathroom. She stayed in the shower for so long her fingers wrinkled and the steam in the air grew thick as cream. When she got out, she dressed in the same clothes she’d had on, because she’d neglected to bring new ones in with her. She opened the door to the bedroom quietly.

Zsadist was sitting on the bed, his broad shoulders caved in, his arms wrapped around his waist. Bent over Rhage’s sleeping body, he was curled down as close as possible without their actually touching. As he rocked himself back and forth, there was a faint, lilting song in the air.

The vampire was chanting, his voice rising and falling, skipping octaves, soaring high, falling low. Beautiful. Utterly beautiful. And Rhage was relaxed, resting peacefully in a way he hadn’t before.

She quickly crossed the room and went out in the hall, leaving the men alone.

Chapter Thirty-one

Rhage came awake sometime the following afternoon. The first thing he did was reach out blindly for Mary, but he stopped himself, not wanting the burn to kick in. He didn't feel strong enough to fight it.

Opening his eyes, he turned his head. She was there beside him in the bed, asleep on her stomach.

God, once again she'd taken care of him when he'd needed it. She'd been unflinching. Strong. Willing to face off against his brothers.

Love filled his heart, swelling it so much his breath stopped.

He put his hand to his chest and felt the bandages she'd put on him. Working carefully, he removed them one by one. The wounds looked good. They'd closed and no longer hurt. By tomorrow they would be nothing more than pink streaks, and the day after, they would be gone.

He thought about the stress his body had been under lately. The change. The surges around Mary. The sun exposure. The whipping. He was going to need to drink soon, and he wanted to do it before the hunger kicked in.

Feeding was something he was scrupulous about. Most of the brothers stretched out the hunger for as long as they could stand it, just because they didn't want to bother with the intimacy. He knew better than that. The last thing he needed was the beast with a case of bloodlust—

Wait a minute.

Rhage took a deep breath. There was the most amazing...emptiness in him. No background buzzing. No itchy drive. No burning. And this was even

though he was lying right next to Mary.

It was...only him in his body. Just himself. The Scribe Virgin's curse was gone.

But of course, he thought. She'd taken it from him temporarily so he could make it through the *rythe* without changing. And she was obviously giving him a respite so he could heal, too. He wondered how much longer the reprieve was going to last.

Rhage exhaled slowly, air easing out of his nose. As he sank into his skin, he reveled in the perfection of peace. The heavenly silence. The great roaring absence.

It had been a century.

Good God, he wanted to cry.

In case he did and Mary woke up, he put his hands over his eyes.

Did other people know how lucky they were to find moments like this? Moments of resounding quiet? He hadn't appreciated them before the curse, hadn't even noticed. Hell, if he'd been blessed with one, he'd probably just rolled over to go back to sleep.

"How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?"

At the sound of Mary's voice, he braced himself for a blast of energy. Nothing like that came. All he felt was a warm glow in his chest. Love unfettered with the chaos of his curse.

He rubbed his face and looked at her. Adored her so intensely in the quiet darkness that he was afraid of her.

"I need to be with you, Mary. Right now. I have to be inside of you."

"Then kiss me."

He pulled her body against him. She was wearing only a T-shirt, and he slid his hands underneath, spanning her lower back. He was already hard for her, ready to take her, but with nothing to fight down, stroking her was an exquisite pleasure.

"I need to love you," he said, throwing all the sheets and blankets from the bed. He wanted to see every part of her, touch every inch of her, and he didn't want anything in the way.

He pulled the shirt up and over her head and then willed candles to light around the room. She was resplendent in the golden glow, her head turned to the side as she looked up at him with her gray eyes. Her breasts were tight at the tips already, the swells creamy white under her pink nipples. Her stomach was flat, a little too flat, he thought, worrying about her. But her hips were

perfect and so were her sleek legs.

And the juncture below her navel, that sweetest piece...

"My Mary," he whispered, thinking about all the places he wanted to go on her.

As he straddled her legs, his sex jutted straight out of his body, heavy, proud, demanding. But before he could lean down to her skin, her hands found his length, and he shuddered, sweat breaking out all over him. Watching her touch him, he let himself go for just a moment, giving free rein to the purity of his desire, the uncontaminated ecstasy.

When she sat up, he didn't know where she was going. "Mary?"

Her lips parted and she took him into her mouth.

Rhage gasped and fell back on his arms. "Oh, my ...God."

With all the other females he'd had since the curse, he hadn't let any of them go down on him. He hadn't wanted it, hadn't liked them touching him above the waist, much less below it.

But this was Mary.

The suction and the warmth of her mouth, but most of all the knowledge that it was her, stole his strength, putting him at her mercy. Her eyes stared up at him, watching him as he swam in the pleasure she gave him. When he sank back against the mattress, collapsing, she crawled up his thighs, advancing. He cradled her head in his hands, arching into her mouth as she found a rhythm.

Right before he went over the edge, he shifted his hips away, not wanting to release yet.

"Come here," he said, pulling her up his stomach and chest, rolling her onto her back. "I'm going to be in you when I finish."

Kissing her, he put his hand on the column of her neck and swept down the center of her, stopping over her heart. It was beating fast, and he dropped down, pressing his lips to her sternum and then moving to her breast. He suckled her as he slid his arm around under her shoulder blades and lifted her closer to his mouth.

She made an incredible noise deep in her throat, a breathless gasp that brought his head up just so he could look at her face. Her eyes were closed, her teeth clenched. He kissed a path down to her navel, where he lingered and licked before moving to her hip. Urging her onto her stomach, he parted her legs and cupped her core with his palm. The silky wetness that coated his hand had him shaking as he kissed her hip and her lower back.

Slipping a finger into her, he bared his fangs and ran them up her spinal cord.

Mary moaned, her body curving to meet his teeth.

He stopped at her shoulder. Nudged her hair out of the way. And growled as he looked at her neck.

When she tensed, he whispered, “Don’t be scared, Mary. I won’t hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid.” She shifted her hips and clenched her wet heat around his hand.

Rhage hissed as lust ripped through him. He began to pant, but took comfort. There was no vibration, no god-awful hum. Just her and him. Together. Making love.

Though he did hunger for something else from her.

“Mary, forgive me.”

“For what?”

“I want to...drink from you,” he said into her ear.

She trembled, but he felt a warm rush where he penetrated her and knew the shakes were from pleasure.

“You really want to...do that?” she said.

“God, yes.” His mouth closed on the side of her throat. He sucked her skin, dying to do so much more. “I would love to be at your vein.”

“I’ve wondered what it would feel like.” Her voice was husky, thrilling. Good lord, was she going to let him? “Does it hurt?”

“Only a little in the beginning, but then it’s like...sex. You’d feel my pleasure as I took you into me. And I would be very careful. So very gentle.”

“I know you would.”

An erotic surge pounded through him and his fangs unsheathed. He could imagine sinking them into her neck. The sucking. The swallowing. The taste. And then there would be the communion of her doing the same to him. He would feed her well, let her take as much as she wanted—

Her doing the same?

Rhage pulled back. What the *hell* was he thinking? She was a human, for chrissakes. She didn’t feed.

He put his forehead down on her shoulder. And remembered that not only was she a human; she was ill. He licked his lips, trying to persuade his fangs to retract.

“Rhage? Are you going to...you know.”

“I think it’s safer not to.”

“Honestly, I’m not scared of it.”

“Oh, Mary, I know. You aren’t afraid of anything.” And her courage was part of the reason he’d bonded with her. But I’d rather love your body than take something it can’t afford to give me.”

In a quick series of moves he rose above her, pulled her hips off the mattress, and entered her from behind, sliding deep. Heat roared through him as she arched under his invasion, and he ran one of his arms between her breasts, holding on to her upper body. With his hand, he twisted her chin around so he could kiss her.

Her breath was hot and desperate in his mouth as he slowly extracted himself from her core. The surge back in made them both groan. She was so incredibly tight, squeezing him hard as a vise. He got in a couple more controlled thrusts and then his hips took over, moving of their own volition until he couldn’t keep contact with her lips anymore. His body pounded into hers, and he shifted his hands to her waist as he held on.

Her chest dropped down to the bed and her face turned to the side. Her lips were parted, her eyes closed. He let go of her torso and planted his fists in the mattress on either side of her shoulders. She was so small underneath him, dwarfed by the thickness of his forearms, but she took all of him, from tip to base, over and over again until he was lost.

From out of nowhere he felt a wonderful stinging in his hand. He looked down and saw that she’d curled around one of his arms and closed her mouth on the base of his thumb, biting.

“Harder, Mary,” he said hoarsely. “Oh, yeah. Bite...hard.”

The little burst of pain as her teeth sank into him shot his pleasure through the roof, taking him to the very verge of coming.

Except he didn’t want it to end.

He pulled out and quickly turned her over. As she landed on her back, her legs flopped to the sides as if she didn’t have the strength to hold them up. The sight of her open to him, glistening for him, swollen from him, nearly had him releasing all over her thighs. He dropped his head and kissed where he had been, tasting a little of himself, a little of that marking scent he was leaving all over her body.

She cried out wildly as she climaxed. And before her pulses faded, he shot up over her and plunged back inside.

She called his name, nails scoring his back.

He let himself go over the edge while looking into her wide, dazed eyes. With nothing to hold back, he came over and over again, pumping his flow into her. The orgasm kept going and he rode the waves that overtook him. The ecstasy seemed to have no end, and there was no stopping it.

Not that he would have if he'd had the power to.

Mary held on to Rhage as he shuddered once more, his body seizing, his breath coming out of him in a rush. He groaned deep in his chest, and she felt him jerk and release again inside of her.

It was a shattering kind of intimacy, she so calm, he in the throes of some kind of multiple orgasming. With her concentration undiminished by passion, she felt every small thing in his body as well as each heavy thrust. She knew exactly when another release was coming for him, could feel the trembling in his belly and thighs. It was happening now, his breath catching, his pecs and shoulders going tight along with his hips as he surged again.

He lifted his head this time, lips peeling off his fangs, eyes squeezed shut. His body contracted, all his muscles tensing, and then she felt the movement deep inside of her.

His eyes opened. They were glazed over.

"I'm sorry, Mary." Another spasm overtook him, and he did his best to talk through it. "Never...happened...before. Can't stop. *God damn.*"

He let out a guttural sound, a mixture of apology and ecstasy.

She smiled at him and ran her hands up his smooth back, feeling those thick muscles grab bone as his lower body drove into her again. She was saturated between her legs and deliciously hot from all the heat pouring off of him. That wonderful smell of his bond for her was thick in the air, the dark fragrance surrounding her.

He heaved himself up on his arms, making as though he were going to pull out.

"Where are you going?" She wrapped her legs around his hips.

"Crushing...you." His breath sucked in again on a hiss.

"I'm perfectly fine."

"Oh, Mary...I..." He arched again, chest coming forward, head falling back, neck straining, shoulders bulging. Good lord, he was gorgeous.

Abruptly he sagged, his body going completely limp on top of her. His deadweight was immense, more than she could bear and still breathe. Fortunately, he rolled away and tucked her against him. His heart thundered

in his chest, and she listened as it slowed.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked roughly.

“Not at all.”

He kissed her and withdrew, lurching into the bathroom. He came back with a towel, which he gently eased between her legs.

“Do you want me to start the shower?” he said. “I’ve, ah, kind of made a mess of you.”

“Hardly. And no, I just want to lie here.”

“I can’t explain why that happened.” He frowned as he pulled the covers and blankets back on the bed and over them both. “Although...well, maybe I do know.”

“Whatever the reason, you’re incredible.” She pressed her lips to his jawline. “Absolutely incredible.”

They lay together quietly for a while.

“Listen, Mary, my body’s been through a lot lately.”

“It sure has.”

“I’m going to need to...take care of myself.”

Something in his tone of voice was off, and she looked up at him. He was staring at the ceiling.

A chill shot through her. “How so?”

“I’m going to need to feed. From a female. Of my species.”

“Oh.” She thought of how his fangs had felt traveling up her spine. And remembered the shiver of anticipation when he’d nuzzled her neck. Shades of his night out had her pulling back. She couldn’t go through that again. Waiting in his bed, knowing that he was with another woman.

He took her hands in his. “Mary, I have to feed now so I can stay in control. And I want you to be with me when I do it. If it’s too difficult for you to watch, at least you can be in the same room. I don’t want there to be a question in your mind about what happens between myself and the female.”

“Who will you”—she cleared her throat—“drink from?”

“I’ve thought about that. I don’t want it to be with anyone I’ve had.”

So that should narrow the pool down to what, five women? Maybe six?

She shook her head, feeling like a bitch.

“I’m going to call on one of the Chosen.”

Tell me they are toothless hags, she thought. “What are they?”

“Primarily they serve the Scribe Virgin, our deity, but for a while they serviced unmated members of the Brotherhood for blood. In modern times

we haven't used them like that, but I'm going to contact them, see if something can be arranged."

"When?"

"As soon as possible. Perhaps tomorrow night."

"I'll be gone by then." As his expression went dark, she didn't give him a chance to speak. "It's time for me to go."

"The hell it is."

"Rhage, be realistic. Do you honestly expect me to just stay here with you forever?"

"That's what I want. So, yes."

"Has it occurred to you I miss my house, my things, my—"

"I'll have them moved here. Everything."

She shook her head. "I need to go home."

"It's not safe."

"Then we're going to have to make it safe. I'll install an alarm, learn to shoot, I don't know. But I have to get back to my life."

He closed his eyes.

"Rhage, look at me. *Look* at me." She squeezed his hand. "I have things I need to do. In my world."

His lips tightened into a slash. "Will you let me have Vishous install a security system?"

"Yes."

"And you will come stay here with me some days."

She took a deep breath. "What if I say no?"

"Then I'll come to you."

"I don't think—"

"I've told you before. Stop thinking."

His lips found hers, but before his tongue slipped inside and stole her ability to be logical, she pushed him back.

"Rhage, you know this isn't going anywhere. This...whatever it is between us. It's not. It can't."

He rolled over onto his back, putting an arm behind his head. As his jaw clenched, the cords of his neck stood out.

She hated this; she really did. But it was better to get it all out. "I appreciate everything you've done for me. The sacrifice to keep me safe—"

"Why did you get so upset the night I went out?"

"Excuse me?"

“Why did you care that I’d been with someone else? Or did you just feel like a little rough sex and needed to hide behind a reason for it?” His eyes shifted to hers. The blue was neon sharp, nearly too bright to look into. “Listen, the next time you want some hard grind, all you’ve got to do is ask. I can play it like that.”

“Oh, God. This anger was not what she’d wanted. “Rhage—”

“You know, I really got into it. I liked that domination shit you threw out. Liked the sadistic part, too. Tasting my blood on your lips after you bit my mouth? Huge turn-on.”

The cold tone of voice was awful. His flat, glowing eyes were worse.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But—”

“In fact, I’m getting hard right now, just thinking about it. Kind of surprising, considering how I spent the last twenty minutes.”

“What exactly do you think the future holds for us?”

“We’ll never know, will we. But you’ll stick around until nightfall, right? If only because you need me to take you home. So let me see if I can get myself tuned up again. I’d hate to waste your time.” He reached under the covers. “Damn, you’re good. I’m hard as a baseball bat.”

“Do you know what the next six months are going to be like for me?”

“No, and I’m not going to know, am I? So how about some sex. Since that’s all you want from me, and because I’m enough of a pathetic loser to take you any way I can get you, I guess I’d better hop to it.”

“Rhage!” she shouted, trying to get his attention.

“Mary!” he mocked. “I’m sorry, am I talking too much? You’d rather have my mouth doing something else, right? You want it on yours? No, your breasts. Wait, lower. Yeah, you like it lower, don’t you. And I know just how to do you right.”

She put her head in her hands. “I don’t want to leave you like this. Fighting.”

“But that’s not going to slow you down, is it? Not you, not superstrong Mary. No, you’re just going to go out into the world—”

“To be sick, Rhage! I’m leaving you to go be sick, okay? I’m going to the doctor’s tomorrow. There isn’t some huge party waiting for me when I get home.”

He stared at her. “Do you think I am so unworthy that I cannot attend to you?”

“What?”

“Will you not let me attend to you in your illness?”

She thought about how hard it had been for her to see him in pain and not be able to make the hurt go away.

“Why would you want do that?” she whispered.

Rhage’s mouth went lax, as if she’d struck him.

He shot out of bed. “Yeah, fuck you, Mary.”

He jabbed his legs into a pair of leather pants and snapped a shirt from the dresser.

“Get yourself packed, sweetheart. You won’t have to put up with a stray dog anymore.” He pushed his arms through the shirt’s sleeves and pulled it over his head. “I’ll get V to hardwire your house ASAP. It shouldn’t take him long, and until he’s done, you can sleep somewhere else. One of the *doggen* will show you to your new room.”

She leaped off the mattress, but before she could reach him, he pegged her with a hard look, stopping her dead.

“You know, Mary, I deserve this. I really do. I’ve done the same thing to so many, just walked away without giving a shit.” He opened the door.

“Although the females I screwed were lucky. At least they never remembered me. And man, I’d kill to forget about you right now, I really would.”

He didn’t slam the door on the way out. Just shut it firmly.

Chapter Thirty-two

O leaned over the civilian male and tightened the vise. He'd abducted the vampire in the alley next to Screamer's downtown, and so far the newly erected persuasion center was working perfectly. He was also making headway with the captive. Turned out the guy had a tangential connection to the Brotherhood.

Under normal circumstances, O should have been as close to a hard-on as he could get. Instead, as he watched the vampire's cold shakes and glassy, lolling eyes, he saw himself with the Omega. Under that heavy body. Powerless. Out of control. In pain.

The memories clogged his lungs with siltlike dread until he had to look away. As the vampire moaned, O felt like a pussy.

Christ, he had to get his shit together.

O cleared his throat. Sucked some air in. "And, ah...just how well does your sister know the Brotherhood?"

"She...has sex...with them."

"Where?"

"Don't know."

"You're going to have to do better than that." O hit the pressure some more.

The civilian yelled and his wild eyes bounced around the center's dim interior. He was getting close to passing out again, so O loosened the clamp.

"Where does she meet them?"

“Caith goes to all the bars.” The male coughed weakly. “Zero Sum. Screamer’s. She went to One Eye the other night.”

“One Eye?” Odd. That was out in the sticks.

“Can I please go home now? My parents are going to be—”

“I’m sure they are worried. And they should be.” O shook his head. “But I can’t let you go. Not yet.”

Not at all, but the vampire didn’t need to know that.

O reapplied the vise grip. “Now tell me, what was your sister’s name again?”

“Caith.”

“And which of the brothers does she fuck?”

“Know for sure...the one with the goatee. Vishous. She likes the blond warrior...but he’s not into her.”

The blond brother with the beast? “When did she see the blond last?”

A tumble of sounds came out.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you.”

The male struggled to speak, but suddenly his body seized up and his mouth gaped as if he were suffocating.

“Oh, come on,” O muttered. “It doesn’t hurt that badly.”

Shit, this vise action was just kindergarten stuff; they weren’t even close to anything lethal yet. Still, ten minutes later the vampire was dead, and O was standing over the body wondering what the hell had happened.

The door to the persuasion center opened and U strode in. “How we doing tonight?”

“This civilian kicked it, but damned if I know why. I was just getting started.”

O disengaged the vise from the vampire’s hand and tossed the thing where the other tools were. As he stared at the lifeless bag of skin on the table, he found himself suddenly, shockingly queasy.

“If you broke a bone, maybe he threw a clot.”

“What...huh? Oh, yeah. But wait, from just his finger? A thigh bone, I could believe, but I was working his hand.”

“Doesn’t matter. One can get sprung from anywhere. If it works its way to the lungs and gets lodged? Game over.”

“He was gasping for breath.”

“Probably what happened.”

“Bad timing, too. His sister is fucking the brothers, but I didn’t get much

out of him.”

“Home address?”

“No. The idiot had his wallet stolen right before I found him. He was drunk and got mugged in an alley. He did name some places, though. The usual clubs downtown, but also that hick bar, One Eye.”

U frowned as he took out his gun and checked the chamber. “You sure he wasn’t just talking to get you to stop? One Eye’s not far from here, and those bastard brothers are city dwellers, aren’t they? I mean, that’s where we find them.”

“That’s where they *let* us find them. God only knows where they live.” O shook his head at the body. “Damn it, he said something right before he died. I didn’t understand the words.”

“That language of theirs is a bitch. Wish we had a translator.”

“No kidding.”

U looked around. “So how’s the place working for you?”

Whatever, O thought.

“Perfect,” he said. “I had him in one of the holes for a while, waiting for him to come around. The halter system works just fine.” O flipped the vampire’s arm up onto its chest and tapped the stainless-steel slab the body was on. “And this table is a godsend. The drain holes, the restraints.”

“Yeah, I thought you’d like that. Stole it from a morgue.”

“Nice.”

U walked over to the fireproof closet they used to store ammunition.

“Mind if I take a few rounds?”

“That’s what they’re there for.”

U took out a palm-sized cardboard box marked REMINGTON. As he refilled his clips, he said, “So I heard that Mr. X put you in charge of this place.”

“He gave me the key, yeah.”

“Good. It’ll be run right.”

Of course, there had been a condition to the privilege. Mr. X had required that O move in, but the relocation did make some sense. If they were going to be keeping vampires over a period of days, someone had to monitor the captives.

O propped his hip against the table. “Mr. X is going to announce a new orientation of the Primes. Within each squadron we’ll be pairing up, and I get to pick first. I want you.”

U smiled as he closed the box of bullets. “I was a trapper up in Canada, did you know that? Back in the eighteen twenties. I like being in the field. Catching things.”

O nodded, thinking that before he’d lost his drive, he and U would have made a hell of a pair.

“So is it true about you and X?” U asked.

“Is what true?”

“That you met with the Omega recently?” When O’s eyes flickered at the name, U caught the reaction and, thank God, misread it. “Holy shit, you did see him. Are you going to be X’s second in command? Is that where all this is leading?”

O swallowed in spite of the nauseating whirl in his gut. “You’ll have to ask sensei.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m *really* gonna do that. Don’t know why you have to keep it a secret, though.”

As O didn’t know any more than the other *lesser* did, he had no choice.

Jesus. A little while ago, the idea of being second *Fore-lesser* would have elated him.

U headed for the door. “So when and where do you want me?”

“Here. Now.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“We’re going back downtown. I wanted to call the others in for a lesson tonight, but I seem to have lost my textbook.”

U inclined his head. “Let’s head for the library, then. And get us another.”

Rhage prayed for an outlet as he stalked the bar alleys downtown. In the cold rain he was a twitchy mess, anger and agony seething in his chest. Vishous had given up trying to talk to him two hours ago.

As they emerged on Trade Street once again, they paused next to the front door of Screamer’s. An impatient, shivering crowd was waiting to get into the club, and there were four civilian males mixed in with the humans.

“So I’ll try one last time, Hollywood.” V lit a hand-rolled and repositioned his Sox cap. “What’s up with all this quiet? You’re not still hurting from last night, are you?”

“Nah, I’m good to go.”

Rhage squinted into a dark corner of the alley.

Yeah, bullshit he was fine. His night vision was shot to hell, its acuity way off no matter how much he blinked. And his ears weren't working as well as they should, either. Normally he could hear sounds from almost a mile away, but now he was concentrating just to catch the chatter from the club's wait line.

Sure, he was upset at what had happened with Mary; getting shut out by the female you love will do that to a male. But these changes were physiological, not tied to emotional, crybaby crap.

And he knew what the problem was. The beast was not with him tonight.

It should have been a relief. Getting rid of the damn thing even temporarily was a blessing beyond measure. Except evidently he'd come to rely on the creature's flinchy instincts. God, the idea that he had a kind of symbiotic relationship with his curse was a flipping surprise, and so was the vulnerability he was now sporting. It wasn't that he doubted his hand-to-hand skills or his flash and slash with a dagger. It was more like his beast gave him information about his environment that he was used to relying on. Plus the ugly-ass thing was a terrific trump card. If all else failed, it would lay waste to their enemies.

"Well, what do you know," V said, nodding to the right.

A pair of *lessers* were coming down Trade Street, their white hair gleaming in the headlights of a passing car. Like puppets on the same string, their heads turned in unison toward him and Vishous. The two slowed. Stopped.

V dropped the cigarette, crushing it with his shitkicker. "A lot of damned witnesses for a fight."

The Society members seemed to realize this as well, making no move to attack. In the standoff, the odd etiquette in the war between the Brotherhood and the *lessers* played out. Discretion among Homo sapiens was critical to retaining the secrecy of both sides. The last thing any of them needed was to get into it with a throng of people watching.

While the brothers and the *lessers* glared at one another, the humans in their midst had no idea what was going on. The civilian vampires in the wait line, however, knew what was doing. They shuffled around in place, clearly thinking of running. Rhage pegged them with a hard look and slowly shook his head. The best place for those boys was in public, and he prayed like hell they got the message.

But of course, the four of them took off.

Those damn *lessers* smiled. And then sprinted after their prey like a couple of track-and-field stars.

Rhage and Vishous flipped into high gear, tearing off at a dead run.

Foolishly, the civilians headed down an alley. Maybe they were hoping to dematerialize. Maybe they were just scared stupid. Either way, they drastically increased the likelihood of their deaths. Back here, there were no humans around on account of the icy rain, and with no streetlights and no windows in the buildings, there was nothing to prevent the *lessers* from doing their job out in the open.

Rhage and V ran even harder, shitkickers pounding through puddles, spraying dirty water everywhere. As they closed the distance on the slayers, it looked as if they were going to take them down before the civilians were caught.

Rhage was about to grab the *lesser* on the right when a black truck cut into the alley up ahead, skidding on the wet asphalt and then finding traction. The thing slowed down just as the *lessers* caught one of the civilians. With a messy flip, the two slayers tossed the male into the back and then wheeled around, ready to fight.

“I get the truck,” Rhage shouted.

V took the slayers on as Rhage sprinted forward. The truck had slowed for the pickup, and its tires were spinning out, giving him an extra second or two. But just as he came up to the F-150, it took off again, shooting past him. With an awesome surge, he launched himself into the air, catching the lip of the bed just in the nick of time.

But his grip slipped on the wet metal. He was scrambling to get a better hold when the rear window slid open and a gun muzzle came out. He ducked, expecting to hear the sharp crack of a bullet discharging. Instead the civilian, who was trying to jump out, jerked and grabbed his shoulder. The male looked around in confusion and then fell in slow motion back into the bed.

The truck ripped free of Rhage’s fingers, and he twisted as he fell, landing faceup. As he bounced and skidded on the pavement, his leather coat saved him from getting shredded.

He leaped to his feet and watched the truck round a distant street corner. Cursing like a son of a bitch, he didn’t stick around to mourn the failure, but ran back to V. The fight was on and it was a good one, the slayers confident in their skills, far from their recruitments. V was holding his own, his dagger out and doing a number on the slayers.

Rhage fell upon the first *lesser* he got to, pissed off at losing the civilian to that truck, rank mad at the world because of Mary. He beat the holy hell out of the bastard with his fist, cracking bones, breaking through skin. Black blood kicked up into his own face, getting into his eyes. He didn't stop until V peeled him off and shoved him back against the alley wall.

"What the fuck are you doing!" Rhage had half a mind to go at V because the brother was blocking his access to the slayer.

V fisted the lapels of the trench coat and gave Rhage a good slam, as if trying to get him to focus. "The *lesser*'s not moving. Look at me, my brother. He's on the ground and he's staying there."

"I don't care!" He fought to get free, but V held him in place. Barely.

"Rhage? Come on, talk to me. What's going on? Where are you, brother?"

"I just need to kill it.... I need..." From out of nowhere, hysteria crept into his voice. "For what they do to...The civilians can't fight back.... I need to kill..." He was cracking up, but couldn't seem to stop the fracturing. "Oh, God, Mary, they want her...they're going to take her like they took that civilian, V. Ah, shit, my brother...What am I going to do to save her?"

"Shh. Easy there, Hollywood. Let's just cool out."

V clamped a hand on Rhage's neck and smoothed his thumb back and forth over Rhage's jugular. The hypnotic stroking brought him down first by inches, then by yards.

"Better?" V asked. "Yeah, better."

Rhage took a deep breath and walked around for a minute. Then he went back to the *lesser*'s body. He rifled through the pockets, finding a wallet, some cash, a gun.

Oh, this was good.

"Look what I got," he muttered. "Say hello to Mr. Black-Berry."

He tossed the device to V, who whistled under his breath. "Nice."

Rhage unsheathed one of his daggers and buried the black blade in the slayer's chest. With a pop and flash, the thing disintegrated, but he didn't feel like he'd done enough. He still wanted to roar and weep at the same time.

He and V did a quick patrol of the neighborhood. All was quiet. With any luck, the other three civilians had taken their asses home and were right now shivering from adrenaline overload in safety.

"I want those *lessers* 'jars," Rhage said. "You get anything off the one you took out?"

V waved a wallet. “Driver’s license says One Ninety-five LaCrosse Street. What’s in yours?”

Rhage went through it. “Nothing. No license. Why the hell did he carry—Huh. Now this is interesting.”

The three-by-five index card had been neatly folded in half. On the inside was an address not far from where they were.

“Let’s check this out before we head over to LaCrosse.”

Chapter Thirty-three

Mary packed up her overnight bag under Fritz's watchful eye. The butler was dying to help, shuffling from side to side, aching to do what he clearly felt was his job.

"I'm ready," she said finally, even though she wasn't.

Fritz smiled now that he had a purpose and led her around the balcony to a room that faced the gardens behind the mansion. She had to give him credit: He was incredibly discreet. If he thought it was odd that she was moving out of Rhage's room, he didn't show it, and he treated her with the same courtesy he always had.

When she was by herself, she thought about her options. She wanted to go home, but she wasn't stupid. Those things in the park had been deadly, and as badly as she needed her space, she wasn't about to get killed over a bid for independence. Besides, how long could it take to install a security system? Maybe that Vishous guy was working on it right now.

She thought about her appointment at the doctor's tomorrow afternoon. Rhage had told her he'd let her go to it, and even though he'd been pissed off as he'd left, she knew he wouldn't prevent her from going to the hospital. Fritz was probably going to take her, she thought. When he'd given her the house tour, he'd explained that he could go out in the daylight.

Mary glanced at her bag. As she was considering leaving for good, she knew she couldn't walk away while being at such raw odds with Rhage. Maybe the night out would calm him down. She was certainly feeling more

rational now herself.

She opened the bedroom's door wide enough so she could hear when he came home. And then she sat on the bed and waited.

It didn't take her long to get wobbly anxious, so she picked up the phone. When Bella answered, it was a relief to hear her friend's voice. They talked about nothing special for a little while. Then, when she felt up to it, she said she was coming home as soon as a security system was installed in her house. She was thankful Bella didn't press for details.

After a while, there was a long pause between them. "Ah, Mary, may I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Have you seen any of the other warriors?"

"Some, yes. But I don't know if I've run into all of them."

"Have you met the one who is...whose face is scarred?"

"That's Zsadist. His name is Zsadist."

"Oh. Ah, is he..."

"What?"

"Well, I've heard things about him. He has a dangerous reputation."

"Yeah, I can imagine. But you know, I'm not sure he's all bad. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason. Really."

At one A.M., John Matthew left Moe's and headed for home. Tohrment hadn't come. Maybe the man wasn't going to come. Maybe the chance to get away with him was lost.

Walking along in the cold night, John was frantic, his need to leave his building approaching evacuation levels. The fear was so bad, it was coming out in his dreams. He'd taken a nap before work, and his nightmares had been terrifying, filled with visions of white-haired men coming after him, and catching him, and taking him somewhere dark and underground.

As he approached the door to his studio, he had his key in hand and he didn't dawdle. He shot inside and closed himself in, locking everything: the two dead bolts, the chain. He wished he had one of those door poles that plugged into the floor.

He knew he should eat, but he didn't have the energy to deal with the Ensure so he sat on his bed, hoping his flagging strength would magically rebound. He was going to need it. Tomorrow he had to go out and start

looking for a new place to live. It was time to save himself.

But God, he wished he'd gone with Tohrment when he'd had the—

A knock sounded on the door. John looked up, hope and fear twisting into a rope in his chest.

“Son? It’s me, Tohrment. Open up.”

John rushed across the room, tore the locks back, and nearly threw himself at the man.

Tohrment’s brows came down over his navy-blue eyes. “What’s the matter, John? You got trouble?”

He wasn’t sure how much to say about the pale man he’d met in the stairwell, and in the end, decided to keep quiet. He wasn’t going to risk Tohrment’s changing his mind because the kid he was thinking of taking in was a paranoid psycho.

“Son?”

John went for his pad and pen while Tohrment shut the door.

I’m glad you came. Thank you.

Tohrment read the words. “Yeah, I would have gotten here sooner, but last night I had...business I needed to attend to. So have you thought about —”

John nodded and scribbled quickly. *I want to come with you.*

Tohrment smiled a little. “That’s good, son. That’s a good choice.”

John took a deep breath, beyond relieved.

“Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to come back tomorrow night and pick you up. I can’t take you home now because I’m out in the field until dawn.”

John swallowed fresh panic. *But come on*, he told himself. What was one more day?

Two hours before dawn, Rhage and Vishous went to the Tomb’s entrance. Rhage waited in the woods while V took inside the jar they’d found at the *lesser’s* place on LaCrosse.

The other address had proven to be an abandoned torture center. In the stuffy basement of the low-rent two-story, they’d found dust-covered instruments as well as a table and restraints. The place was a horrifying testimony to the Society’s change in strategy from fighting the brothers to snatching and hurting civilians. Both he and Vishous had been choked with vengeance as they’d left.

On the way back to the compound, they'd stopped at Mary's so V could scope the rooms and figure out what he'd need to wire the place up good and tight. Being there had been hell. Seeing her things. Remembering the first night he'd gone to find her. He hadn't been able to look at the couch at all because it reminded him of what he'd done to her body on the floor behind it.

All that felt like a lifetime ago.

Rhage cursed and resumed scanning the forest around the cave's mouth. When V came out, the two of them dematerialized to the main house's courtyard.

"Hey, Hollywood, Butch and I are going to One Eye for a nightcap. You want to come?"

Rhage looked up at the dark windows of his bedroom.

Even though a trip to One Eye left him cold, he knew he shouldn't be alone. With the way he was feeling, he was liable to go find Mary and make an ass out of himself by begging. Which would just be wasted humiliation. She'd made it clear where they stood, and she wasn't the kind of female who was open to persuasion. Besides, he was through playing the lovesick idiot.

For the most part.

"Yeah. I'll hang with you boys."

V's eyes flared as if he'd made the offer to be polite and hadn't expected a yes. "Okay. Good deal. We're leaving in fifteen. I need a shower."

"Me, too." He wanted to get the *lesser* blood off him.

As he walked through the mansion's vestibule and into the foyer, Fritz came out of the dining room.

The butler bowed deeply. "Good evening, sire. Your guest is here."

"Guest?"

"The Chosen's Directrix. She indicated you had called upon her."

Shit. He'd forgotten he'd put the request in, and it wasn't like he needed their services anymore. If Mary wasn't in his life, he didn't require any special feeding arrangements. He was free to go suck and fuck whoever he wanted. *Oh, joy.*

God, the idea of being with anyone but Mary made him shrivel in his pants.

"Sire? Are you receiving?"

He was about to say no, but then figured that was not a smooth move. Considering his past history with the Scribe Virgin, it wasn't wise to offend her special class of females.

“Tell her I’ll be with her in a few minutes.”

He jogged upstairs to his room, turned the shower on to warm up, and then called V. The brother didn’t seem surprised he was bailing on the trip to the bar.

Too bad it wasn’t for the reason Vishous obviously assumed.

Mary came awake because she heard talk drifting up from the foyer. It was Rhage’s voice. She’d recognize that deep rumble anywhere.

Slipping from the bed, she went to the gap she’d left in the door.

Rhage was coming up the stairs. His hair was damp, as if he’d just taken a shower, and he was dressed in a loose black shirt and baggy black pants. She was about to step into the hall when she saw he was not alone. The woman with him was tall and had a long blond braid of hair down her back. She was dressed in a filmy white gown, and together they looked like some kind of Goth wedding pair, he in all that black, she draped in that gossamer fabric. When they got to the head of the stairs, the woman paused, as if she didn’t know which way to turn. Rhage put his hand under her elbow and looked down at her solicitously, as if she were so fragile, she might crack a bone just getting to the second floor.

Mary watched them go into his room. The door shut behind them.

She went back over to the bed and got in it. Images came crashing down on her head. Rhage all over her body with his mouth and his hands. Rhage thanking her for feeding him. Rhage looking at her while he told her he loved her.

Yeah, he loved her all right. So much so that he was doing another woman across the hall.

The instant the thought streaked through her mind, she knew she was being unreasonable. She’d pushed him away. He’d taken the hint. She had no right to blame him for having sex with someone else.

She’d gotten exactly what she’d asked for.

He was letting her go.

Chapter Thirty-four

The following evening, just before nightfall, Rhage went to the gym as a matter of public service. When he finished with the weights, he got on the treadmill and started running. The first five miles flew by. By mile six, he'd polished off his water. When mile nine arrived, the ass-kicking started.

He increased the incline and fell back into his stride. His thighs were screaming, clenching, burning. His lungs were on fire. His feet and knees were aching.

Grabbing the shirt he'd taken off and hung on the console, he used the thing to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. He figured he was dehydrated as shit by now, but he wasn't getting off for water. He had every intention of going until he fell over.

To keep up the bruising pace, he lost himself in the music pounding through the speakers. Marilyn Manson, Nine Inch Nails, Nirvana. The stuff was loud enough to drown out the hum of the treadmill, the songs screeching through the weight room, vile, aggressive, deranged. Same as his frame of mind.

When the sound got cut off, he didn't bother looking around. He figured the stereo had kicked it or someone wanted to talk to him, and he wasn't interested in dealing with either.

Tohr stepped in front of the machine. The brother's expression had Rhage off the belt and punching the STOP release.

"What." He was breathing hard and did another scrub job on his face with

the shirt.

“She’s gone. Mary. She’s gone.”

Rhage froze with the wet wad under his chin. “What do you mean, gone?”

“Fritz waited for her in front of the hospital for three hours during her appointment. When he went inside, the clinic she hit was closed. He drove to her house. When she wasn’t there, he went back and searched the whole medical center.”

Temples pounding from fear instead of exertion, Rhage bit out, “Any signs of forced entry or violence at her house?”

“No.”

“Was her car in the garage?”

“Yes.”

“When did he last see her?”

“It was three o’clock when she went to the appointment. FYI, Fritz called you repeatedly, but kept getting voice mail on your cell.”

Rhage looked at his watch. It was just after six. Assuming sixty minutes or so for the doctor’s appointment, she’d been missing for two hours.

He found it hard to imagine that the *lessers* could have picked her up off the street. A far more likely scenario was that she went home and the slayers found her there. But, with no sign of a struggle at her house, there was a chance she wasn’t hurt.

Or maybe that was just blind hope talking.

Rhage leaped off the machine. “I need to get armed.”

Tohr shoved a bottle of water into his hand. “Drink this now. Phury’s bringing your gear. Meet him in the locker room.”

Rhage took off at a jog.

“The Brotherhood will help you find her,” Tohr called out.

Bella came upstairs at the break of night, throwing open the door to her kitchen with triumph. Now that the days were getting shorter, she had so much more time to be out and about. It was only six o’clock, but it was pitch-black. Lovely.

She was debating whether to have toast or fire up some pancakes when she saw lights on at the far edge of the meadow. Someone was in Mary’s house. Probably the warriors installing the security system.

Which meant that if she went over she might be able to see that scarred

male again.

Zsadist had been on her mind since she'd met him, to the point where her diary entries were filled with speculations about the male. He was just so... raw. And after having been cosseted for years by her brother, she was dying to get out and experience something wild.

And God knew, Zsadist's brute sexuality fit that bill.

She put on a coat and traded her slippers for a pair of running shoes. Jogging through the field grass, she slowed down as she approached Mary's backyard. The last thing she needed was to run into a *lesser*—

“Mary! What are you doing here?”

The human seemed dazed as she looked up from the lounge chair she was lying on. Even though it was cold, she was wearing only a sweater and jeans.

“Oh...hey, there. How are you?”

Bella sank down on her haunches beside the female. “Has Vishous finished?”

“With what?” Mary moved stiffly as she sat up. “Oh, the alarm. I don’t think so. Or at least, no one’s mentioned anything to me, and it all looks the same inside.”

“How long have you been out here?”

“Not long.” She rubbed her arms, then blew into her hands. “I was just watching the sunset.”

Bella glanced at the house, dread stirring. “Is Rhage picking you up soon?”

“Rhage isn’t coming for me.”

“Then one of the *doggen*?”

Mary winced as she got to her feet. “Jeez, it’s really cold.”

As she walked into her home like a zombie, Bella followed. “Mary, ah... you really shouldn’t stay here by yourself.”

“I know. I figured I was safe because it was daylight.”

“Did Rhage or one of the brothers tell you that *lessers* couldn’t be out in the sun? Because I’m not sure, but I think they can be.”

Mary shrugged. “They haven’t bothered me so far, but I’m not stupid. I’m heading to a hotel. I just have to pack a few things.”

Except instead of going upstairs, she wandered around the first floor of her house with an odd kind of dislocation.

She was in some kind of shock, Bella thought. But whatever the problem was, the two of them *really* needed to get the hell out of here.

“Mary, why don’t you come have dinner with me?” She eyed the back door. “And, you know, you could stay with me until Vishous finishes up here. My brother had my place all wired and everything. It even has an underground escape route. I’m very safe there, and it’s far enough away so that if the *lessers* come looking for you, they won’t assume you’re with me.”

She got ready for an argument, lining up counterpoints in her head.

“Okay, thanks,” Mary said. “Give me a minute.”

The female went upstairs and Bella paced around, wishing she had a weapon and knew how to use it.

When the human came down with a canvas tote bag five minutes later, Bella took a deep breath.

“How about a coat?” she said, when Mary went for the door without one.

“Yes. A coat.” Mary dropped the bag, walked over to a closet, and drew on a red parka.

As they crossed the meadow together, Bella tried to rush their pace.

“Moon’s almost full,” Mary said as they rustled through the grass.

“Yes, it is.”

“Listen, when we get to your place, I don’t want you calling Rhage or anything. He and I...we’ve gone our separate ways. So don’t bother him about me.”

Bella swallowed her surprise. “Doesn’t he know you’re gone?”

“No. And he’ll find out on his own. Okay?”

Bella agreed only to keep Mary’s feet moving. “Can I ask you one thing, though?”

“Of course.”

“Did he break it off or did you?”

Mary walked along in silence for a moment. “I did.”

“Um, did you, by any chance...Were the two of you intimate?”

“Did we have sex?” Mary shifted the L.L. Bean bag to her other hand.

“Yes, we did.”

“When you made love, did you notice a kind of fragrance coming from his skin? Something like dark spices and—”

“Why are you asking me this?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

They were almost at the farmhouse when Mary murmured, “It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever smelled.”

Bella kept her curse to herself. No matter what Mary thought, the blond

warrior would be coming for her. A bonded male did not let his mate go. Ever. And that was based on her experience with civilians.

She could only guess what a warrior would do if his female took off.

Rhage walked through each room in Mary's house. In her bath upstairs, he found the cabinet under the sink open. Lined up inside there were extra toiletries, like bars of soap, tubes of toothpaste, deodorant. There were gaps in the neat rows, as if she'd taken some.

She was staying somewhere else, he thought, glancing out the window. If it was a hotel he was probably screwed, because she'd be smart enough to register under a different name. Maybe he could try her work—

He focused on the farmhouse way across the meadow. Lights twinkled inside.

Would she have gone to Bella's?

Rhage went downstairs and locked up. A split second later he materialized on Bella's front porch and pounded on the door. When Bella answered, the female just stepped aside as if she'd expected him.

"She's upstairs."

"Where?"

"Front bedroom."

Rhage took the stairs two at a time. Only one door was closed, and he didn't knock, just opened it wide. Light from the hall spilled into the room.

Mary was sound asleep on an enormous brass bed, wearing a sweater and a pair of blue jeans he recognized. A patchwork quilt had been pulled over her legs, and she was half on her stomach, half on her side. She looked utterly exhausted.

His first instinct was to take her into his arms.

He stayed right where he was.

"Mary." He kept his voice impersonal. "Mary. Wake up."

Her eyelashes fluttered, but then she only sighed and moved her head a little.

"Mary."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

He went over to the bed and bounced on the mattress with his hands. That got her attention. She shot up, eyes petrified until she saw him.

And then she just looked confused.

"What are you doing here?" She pushed her hair out of her face.

“Yeah, maybe you want to answer that first?”

“I’m not at home.”

“No, you aren’t. You’re not where you need to be, either.”

She settled back against the pillows, and he became acutely aware of the dark circles under her eyes, the pale line of her lips...and the fact that she wasn’t fighting with him.

Don’t ask, he told himself.

Ah, hell. “What happened this afternoon?”

“I just needed some time alone.”

“I’m not talking about how you ditched Fritz. We’ll get to that later. I want to know about the doc’s.”

“Oh, yeah. That.”

He stared at her while she fiddled with the edge of the quilt. As she stayed silent, he wanted to scream. Throw things. Burn something down.

“Well?” he forced out.

“It wasn’t that I thought you were unworthy.”

What the hell was she talking about? Oh, yeah, that lovely little attending-her-when-she-was-ill conversation. Man, she was in full avoidance mode.

“How bad is it, Mary. And don’t even think about lying to me.”

Her eyes met his. “They want me to start chemo next week.”

Rhage exhaled slowly. Well, if that didn’t just peel the skin right off him.

He sat on the far edge of the bed and shut the door with his mind. “Will it work?”

“I think so. My doctor and I are going to meet again in a couple of days after she talks to some of her colleagues. The biggest question is how much more of the treatment I can handle, so they took blood to check my liver and kidneys. I told them I’ll take as much as they can give me.”

He rubbed his face with his palm. “Jesus Christ.”

“I watched my mother die,” she said softly. “It was awful. Seeing her lose her faculties and be in such pain. By the end she didn’t look like herself, she didn’t act like herself. She was gone except for the body that refused to quit its basic functions. I’m not saying that’s where I’m headed, but it’s going to be rough.”

Goddamn, his chest hurt. “And you don’t want me going through that?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t want that for either of us. I’d rather you remember me the way I am now. And I’d rather remember us the way we’ve been. I’m

going to need some happy places to go.”

“I want to be there for you.”

“And I don’t need that. I’m not going to have the energy to put up a front. And pain...pain makes people change.”

It sure the hell did. He felt like he’d aged about a century since he’d met her.

“Oh, Rhage...” When her voice wavered, she cleared it sharply. And he despised her for needing to be in control. “I’m going to...miss you.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. He knew if he tried to hold her she’d bolt from the room, so he grabbed on to the edge of the mattress. And squeezed.

“What am I doing?” She laughed awkwardly. “I’m sorry to burden you with all this. I know you’ve moved on and everything.”

“Moved on?” he ground out. “How you figure that?”

“The woman last night. Anyway—”

“What female?”

When she shook her head, he lost his temper. “God *damn* you, can you just answer my question without a fucking fight? Consider it a pity throw, a novelty. I’m leaving in a few minutes anyway, so you won’t have to worry about doing it again.”

As her shoulders sagged he felt like hell for yelling at her. But before he could apologize, she said, “I’m talking about the woman you took to bed last night. I...I waited for you. I wanted to tell you I was sorry.... I saw you go into your room with her. Look, I didn’t bring this up to guilt you or something.”

No, of course not. She didn’t want anything from him. Not his love. Not his support. Not his guilt. Not even the sex.

He shook his head, his voice going flat. He was so tired of explaining himself to her, but he did it out of reflex. “That was the Directrix of the Chosen. We were talking about my feeding, Mary. I wasn’t having sex with her.”

He looked down at the floor. Then let go of the bed and put his head in his hands.

There was a silence. “I’m sorry, Rhage.”

“Yeah. So am I.”

He heard a hiccupping noise and shuffled his fingers so he could see her face through a hole. But she wasn’t crying. No, not Mary. She was too strong

for that.

He wasn't, though. He had tears in his eyes.

Rhage cleared his throat and blinked a lot. When he glanced over at her again, she was staring at him with a tenderness and sorrow that made him violent.

Oh, great. Now she was pitying him because he was all sloppy and shit. Man, if he didn't love her as much as he did, he would have hated her at this moment.

He stood up. And made damn sure his voice was as tough as she was when he spoke. "That alarm system in your house will be wired to us. If it gets triggered, I'll"—he corrected himself—"one of us will come running. Vishous will contact you here when it's up and rolling."

As the silence stretched, he shrugged. "So...bye."

He walked out the door and did not allow himself to look back.

When he got downstairs, he found Bella in the living room. The instant the female saw his face, her eyes popped wide. Clearly he looked as god-awful as he felt.

"Thanks," he said, though he wasn't sure what he was thanking her for. "And just so you know, the Brotherhood is going to do drive-bys on your house. Even after she leaves."

"That's very kind of you."

He nodded and didn't dawdle. At this point it was all he could do to get himself out the door without splitting wide-open and howling like a baby.

As he walked away from the house and down the lawn a little, he had no idea what to do or where to go. He probably should call Tohr, find out where the other brothers were, link up with them.

Instead he stopped dead in his tracks. Ahead, the moon was rising just above the tree line, and it was full, a fat, luminescent disk in the cold, cloudless night. He extended his arm toward it and squeezed one eye shut. Angling his line of sight, he positioned the lunar glow in the cradle of his palm and held the apparition with care.

Dimly, he heard a pounding noise coming from inside of Bella's. Some kind of rhythmic beat.

Rhage glanced behind him as it got louder.

The front door flew open, and Mary shot out of the house, jumping off the porch, not even bothering with the steps to the ground. She ran over the frost-laden grass in her bare feet and threw herself at him, grabbing on to his

neck with both arms. She held him so tightly his spine cracked.

She was sobbing. Bawling. Crying so hard her whole body was shaking.

He didn't ask any questions, just wrapped himself around her.

"I'm not okay," she said hoarsely between breaths. "Rhage...I'm not okay."

He closed his eyes and held on tight.

Chapter Thirty-five

O lifted the mesh cover off the sewer pipe and shined a flashlight down into the hole. The young male inside was the one they'd caught the night before with the truck. The thing was alive, having survived the day. The storage facility had worked beautifully.

The center's door swung open. Mr. X walked in, all pounding boots and sharp eyes. "Did it live?"

O nodded and put the mesh cover back into place. "Yeah."

"Good."

"I was just going to take him out again."

"Not right now, you don't. I want you to visit these members." Mr. X handed over a piece of paper with seven addresses on it. "E-mail check-ins are efficient, but proving somewhat unreliable. I'm getting confirmations from these Betas, but when I talk to their squadrons, I hear reports that no one has seen them in days or longer."

Instinct told O to step carefully. Mr. X all but accused him of killing Betas in the park, and now the *Fore-lesser* wanted him to go check on them?

"There a problem, Mr. O?"

"No. No, problem."

"And another thing. I have three new recruits I'm bringing on. Their initiations are taking place over the next week and a half. Do you want to come? Watching from the sidelines provides quite a show."

O shook his head. "I'd better stay focused here."

Mr. X smiled. "Worried that the Omega might get distracted by your charms?"

"The Omega is not distracted by anything."

"You're so wrong about that. He can't stop talking about you."

O knew there was a good chance Mr. X was fucking with his head, but his body didn't have the same confidence. His knees loosened and he broke out in a cold sweat.

"I'll start on the list now," he said, going for his jacket and keys.

Mr. X's eyes glinted. "You do that, son, you run right along. I'm going to play with our visitor a little."

"Whatever you like. Sensei."

"So this is home now," Mary murmured when Rhage shut the door to their bedroom.

She felt his arms come around her waist, and he pulled her back against his body. As she glanced at the clock, she realized they'd left Bella's only an hour and a half ago, but her whole life had changed.

"Yeah, this is your home. Our home."

The three boxes lined up against the wall were full of her clothes, her favorite books, some DVDs, a few photos. With Vishous, Butch, and Fritz showing up to help her, it hadn't taken long to pack up some things, get them into V's Escalade, and be driven back to the mansion. Later she and Rhage would return to finish the job. And in the morning she was going to call the law office and quit. She was also getting a real estate agent to sell the barn.

God, she'd really gone and done it. Moved in with Rhage and given up on her old life completely.

"I should unpack."

Rhage took her hands and pulled her in the direction of the bed. "I want you to rest. You look too tired to even be standing."

While she stretched out, he took off his trench coat and removed his dagger holster and his gun belt. He eased down next to her, creating a dip in the mattress that sucked her right against him. All the lamps went out at once, the room plunging into ink.

"You sure you're ready for all this?" she said as her eyes adjusted to the ambient glow from the windows. "For all my...stuff?"

"Don't make me use the F-word again."

She laughed. "I won't. It's just—"

“Mary, I love you. I’m more than ready for all your stuff.”

She put her hand on his face and they were quiet for a time, just breathing together.

She was on the verge of falling asleep when he said, “Mary, about the arrangements for me to feed. While we were at your house, I called on the Chosen. Now that you’re back with me, I’ll need to use them.”

She stiffened. But hell, if she was going to be with a vampire, and he couldn’t live off her blood, they were going to have to deal with the problem somehow.

“When will you do it?”

“A female is supposed to be coming tonight, and as I said before, I’d like you to be with me. If you’d be comfortable with that.”

What would it look like? she wondered. Would he hold the woman in his arms and drink from her neck? God, even if he didn’t have sex with her, Mary wasn’t sure she could watch that.

He kissed her hand. “Trust me. It’ll be better this way.”

“If I don’t, ah, if I can’t handle it—”

“I won’t force you to watch. It’s just...there’s an unavoidable intimacy to it, and I think you and I will both be more comfortable if you were there. That way you know exactly what’s involved. There’s nothing hidden or shady about it.”

She nodded. “All right.”

He took a deep breath. “It’s a fact of life I can’t change.”

Mary ran her hand down his chest. “You know, even though it’s a little frightening, I wish it were me.”

“Oh, Mary, so do I.”

John checked his watch. Tohrment was coming for him in five minutes, so it was time to head downstairs. He grabbed his suitcase with both hands and headed for the door. He prayed he wouldn’t meet the pale man on the way or while he waited, but he wanted to meet Tohrment outside. It felt more equal, somehow.

When he got out to the curb, he looked up at the two windows he’d stared out of for so many hours. He was leaving the mattress and the barbell set behind, as well as his security deposit and last month’s rent for breaking his lease. He was going to have to pop back inside for his bike after Tohrment came, but other than that, he was free of the place.

He looked down the street, wondering which direction the man would come from. And what kind of car he drove. And where he lived. And who he was married to.

Shivering in the cold, John rechecked his watch. Nine o'clock on the dot.

A single light flared down to the right. He was pretty sure Tohrment wouldn't use a motorcycle to pick him up. But the fantasy of roaring off into the night was a good one.

As the Harley growled by, he looked across the street at the Suicide Prevention Hotline's offices. Mary had missed her Friday-and Saturday-night shifts as well, and he truly hoped she was just taking a vacation. As soon as he was settled, he would go see her again and make sure she was okay.

Except...wow, he had no clue where he was going. He was assuming he'd stay in the area, but who knew? Maybe he was going far away. Just imagine that, getting out of Caldwell. God, he'd like to make a fresh start. And he could always find a way to get to Mary, even if he had to take a bus.

Two more cars and a truck went by.

It had been so easy to pull out of his pathetic existence. No one at Moe's cared that he was leaving without notice because busboys were a dime a dozen. And it went without saying that nobody in his building would miss him. Likewise, his address book was clean as a whistle, no friends, no family to call.

Actually, he didn't even have an address book. And how lame was that?

John glanced down at himself, thinking how pitiful he must look. His sneakers were so dirty, the white parts had turned gray. His clothes were clean, but the jeans were two years old, and the button-down shirt, the best one he had, looked like a Goodwill reject. He didn't even have a jacket because his parka had been stolen last week from Moe's and he was going to have to save up before he could buy another one.

He wished he looked better.

Headlights swung quickly around the corner off Trade Street and then flashed upward, as if the car's driver were stomping on the accelerator. Which was not good. In this neighborhood, anyone barrel-assing along was usually running from the cops or something worse.

John stepped behind a dented mailbox, trying to get real inconspicuous, but the black Range Rover skidded to a stop in front of him. Darkened windows. Serious chrome rims. And G-Unit was banging inside, the rap music thumping loud enough to be heard around the block.

John grabbed his suitcase and headed for his building. Even if he ran into the pale man, it would be safer inside the lobby than anywhere near the drug dealer who sported that Rover. He was hustling for the door when the music fell silent.

“You ready, son?”

John turned at the sound of Tohrment’s voice. The man was coming around the hood of the car, and in the shadows he was all menace, a hulking figure that sane folks ran from.

“Son? You good to go?”

As Tohrment stepped into the weak light of a streetlamp, John’s eyes latched onto the man’s face. God, he’d forgotten how frightening the guy looked with that military-cut hair and that hard jaw.

Maybe this was a bad idea, John thought. A choice made out of fear of one thing that only got him deeper into another kind of trouble. He didn’t even know where he was going. And kids like him could end up in the river after they got into a car like that. With a man like this.

As if he sensed John’s indecision, Tohrment leaned back against the Rover and crossed his feet at the ankles.

“I don’t want you to feel forced, son. But I’ll tell you, my *shellan*’s cooked up a good meal, and I’m hungry. Maybe you come, you eat with us, you see the house. You can check us out. And we can even leave your stuff here. How’s that sound?”

The voice was quiet, even. Nonthreatening. But would the guy really pull out the badass if he wanted to get John in the car?

A cell phone went off. Tohrment reached inside his leather jacket and flipped it open.

“Yeah. Hey, no, I’m right here with him.” A small smile broke the line of the man’s lips. “We’re thinking it over. Yeah, I’ll tell him. Uh-huh. Okay. I will. Yeah, I’ll do that, too. Wellsie, I...I know. Look, I didn’t mean to leave it out—I won’t do it again. I promise. No...Yes, I really...Uh-huh. I’m sorry, *leelan*.”

It was the wife, John thought. And she was giving this tough guy a tongue-lashing. And the man was taking it.

“Okay. I love you. Bye.” Tohrment flipped the phone closed and put it in his pocket. When he focused on John again, he clearly respected his wife enough not to roll his eyes and make some macho, shithead comment about pesky women. “Wellsie says she’s really looking forward to meeting you.

She's hoping you'll stay with us."

Well...okay, then.

Listening to his instincts, which told him Tohrment represented safety regardless of what he looked like, John humped his luggage over to the car.

"This all you have?"

John flushed and nodded.

"You got nothing to be embarrassed about, son," Tohrment said softly.
"Not when you're with me."

The man reached out and took the suitcase like it weighed nothing, swinging it casually into the backseat.

As Tohrment went to the driver's side, John realized he'd forgotten the bike. He tapped on the Rover's hood to get the man's attention; then he pointed to the building and held up his index finger.

"You need a minute?"

John nodded and shot upstairs to his apartment. He had his bike, and was leaving the keys on the counter, when he paused and looked around. The reality of getting away from the studio made him recognize the squalor of the place. But still, it had been his for a short while, the best he could afford with what little he had. On impulse, he took a pen out of his back pocket, opened one of the flimsy cabinets, and wrote his name and the date on the wall inside.

Then he led his bike out into the hall, shut the door, and moved quickly down the stairwell.

Chapter Thirty-six

“Mary? Mary, wake up. She’s here.”

Mary felt her shoulder get nudged, and when she opened her eyes Rhage was staring down at her. He’d changed into some kind of white outfit, long-sleeved with loose pants.

She sat up, trying to pull it together. “Can I have a minute?”

“Absolutely.”

She went into the bathroom and rinsed off her face. With cold water dripping from her chin, she stared at her reflection. Her lover was about to drink blood. In front of her.

And that wasn’t even the weirdest part. She felt inadequate because what was feeding him wasn’t hers.

Not about to get pulled into that mental tailspin, she picked up a towel and dried off with a good scrub. There was no time to change out of her blue jeans and sweater. And nothing else she really wanted to wear, at any rate.

As she came out, Rhage was taking off his watch.

“You want me to hold that?” she asked, remembering the last time she’d babysat the Rolex.

He walked over and pressed the heavy weight into her palm. “Kiss me.”

She got up on her tiptoes as he leaned down. Their mouths met for a moment.

“Come on.” He took her hand and led her out into the hall. When she looked confused, he said, “I don’t want to do it in our bedroom. That’s our

space.”

He took her around the balcony to another guest room. When he opened the door, they went inside together.

Mary smelled roses first and then saw the woman in the corner. Her lush body was draped in a white wraparound gown, and her strawberry-blond hair was coiled up on her head. With the low, wide neckline of the dress and the chignon, her neck was as exposed as possible.

She smiled and bowed, speaking in that unfamiliar language.

“No,” Rhage said. “In English. We do this in English.”

“Of course, warrior.” The woman’s voice was high and pure, like a songbird’s call. Her eyes, pale green and lovely, lingered on Rhage’s face. “I am pleased to serve you.”

Mary shifted, trying to quell the urge to defend her turf. *Serve him?*

“What is your name, Chosen?” Rhage asked.

“I am Layla.” She bowed again. As she righted herself, her eyes traveled up Rhage’s body.

“This is Mary.” He put his arm around her shoulders. “She is my...”

“Girlfriend,” Mary said sharply.

Rhage’s mouth twitched. “She is my mate.”

“Of course, warrior.” The woman bowed again, this time toward Mary. When she lifted her face, she smiled warmly. “Mistress, it is my pleasure to serve you as well.”

Fine, good, Mary thought. Then how about dragging your skinny ass out of here and making sure your replacement is an ugly, two-toothed gorgon in a muumuu.

“Where would you like me?” Layla asked.

Rhage glanced around the room before focusing on the luxurious canopy bed. “There.”

Mary hid her wince. Oh, that was so not her first choice.

Layla went over as told, that silky dress swirling behind her. She sat down on the satin duvet, but when she shifted her legs up, Rhage shook his head.

“No. Stay sitting.”

Layla frowned, but didn’t argue. She smiled again as he took a step forward.

“Come on,” he said, pulling on Mary’s hand.

“This is close enough.”

He kissed her and went over to the woman, sinking to his knees in front of her. When her hands went to her gown as if she were going to undo it, Rhage stopped her.

"I drink from the wrist," he said. "And you are not to touch me."

Dismay played over Layla's features, widening her eyes. This time, when she inclined her head, it seemed out of shame, not deference. "I have been properly cleansed for your use. You may inspect me, should you wish."

Mary clamped a hand over her mouth. That this woman saw herself as nothing more than an object to be handled was appalling.

Rhage shook his head, clearly uncomfortable with the answer, too.

"Do you wish for another of us?" Layla said softly.

"I don't want any of this," he muttered.

"But why did you call upon the Chosen if you had no intention of availing yourself?"

"I didn't think it would be this difficult."

"Difficult?" Layla's voice deepened. "I beg your pardon, but I fail to see how I have inconvenienced you."

"It's not that, and I mean no offense. My Mary...she's human, and I cannot drink from her."

"So she will join us only in the pleasures of the bed. It will be my honor to administer to her there."

"Ah, yeah, that's not...She's not here to...Ah, the three of us are not going to—" Good lord, Rhage was blushing. "Mary is here because I will have no other female, but I must feed, do you understand?" Rhage cursed and got to his feet. "This isn't going to work. I don't feel right about this."

Layla's eyes flashed. "You say you must feed, but you are unable to take her vein. I am here. I am willing. It would please me to give to you what you need. Why should you feel uncomfortable? Or perhaps you want to wait longer? Until the hunger consumes you and the danger is upon your mate?"

Rhage shoved his hand into his hair. Grabbed a chunk. Pulled at it.

Layla crossed her legs, the gown splitting open to her thigh. She was a picture, sitting on that lush bed, so proper and yet so incredibly sexual.

"Have the traditions faded from your mind, warrior? I know it has been a long time, but how can you feel unsettled about my attending you? It is one of my duties, and I find great honor in it." Layla shook her head. "Or shall I say, I used to. We used to. The Chosen have suffered these centuries. None of the Brotherhood call upon us anymore, we are unwanted, unused. When you

finally reached out, we were so pleased.”

“I’m sorry.” Rhage glanced at Mary. “But I cannot—”

“It is her that you worry about most, is it not?” Layla murmured. “You worry what she will think if she sees you at my wrist.”

“She is not used to our ways.”

The woman held her hand out. “Mistress, come sit with me so he can look upon you while he drinks, so he can feel your touch and smell you, so that you will be a part of this. Otherwise he will refuse me, and then where will the two of you be?” When there was only silence and Mary stayed put, the woman motioned impatiently. “Surely you realize he will not drink otherwise. You must do this for him.”

“So this is it,” Tohrment said as he parked the Rover in front of a sleek, modern house.

They were in a section of town John was unfamiliar with, where the houses were set back from the street and far away from each other. There were lots of black iron gates and rolling lawns, and the trees weren’t just maples and oaks, but fancy kinds, the names of which he didn’t know.

John closed his eyes, wishing he weren’t wearing a shirt that had a missing button. Maybe if he kept his arm around his stomach, Tohrment’s wife wouldn’t notice.

God...what if they had kids? Who’d make fun of him...

Do you have children? John signed without thinking.

“What’s that, son?”

John fumbled in his pockets for some folded-up sheets of paper. When he found his Bic, he wrote quickly and turned the paper around.

Tohrment went very still and looked up at his house, that hard face tensing as if he were afraid of what was inside.

“We might have a child. In a little over a year. My Wellsie’s pregnant, but our females have a very difficult time in childbirth.” Tohrment shook his head, lips growing tight. “As you get older, you’ll learn to fear pregnancy. It’s a goddamn *shellan* robber. Frankly, I’d rather have no kids than lose her.” The man cleared his throat. “Anyway, let’s head in. We’ll eat, and then I’ll take you on a full tour of the training center.”

Tohrment hit the garage door opener and got out. While John tugged the suitcase from the backseat, the man took the ten-speed out of the rear. They walked into the garage and Tohrment flipped on the lights.

“I’m going to leave your bike here against the wall, okay?”

John nodded and looked around. There was a Volvo station wagon and... a 1960’s-era Corvette Sting Ray convertible.

John could only stare.

Tohrment laughed softly. “Why don’t you go over and say hello to her?”

John dropped his suitcase and walked up to the Vette in a daze of love. He reached out, wanting to stroke the smooth metal, but then took his hand back.

“No, touch her. She likes the attention.”

Oh, the car was beautiful. A shiny, metallic ice blue. And the top was down so he could see inside. The white seats were gorgeous. The steering wheel gleamed. The dashboard was all dials. He was willing to bet it sounded like thunder when the engine was started. Probably smelled like fresh oil when you put the heater on.

He glanced up at Tohrment, thinking his eyes were going pop. He wished he could talk, just to tell the man how special the car was.

“Yeah, she’s a looker, isn’t she? Restored her myself. I’m about to put her up on blocks for the winter, but maybe we’ll take her to the center tonight, how about that? It’s chilly, but we can pile on the coats.”

John beamed. And kept on grinning as the man’s heavy arm came around his thin shoulders.

“Let’s feed you, son.”

Tohrment picked up the suitcase and they headed for the door John’s bike was next to. As they walked into the house, the smell of Mexican food wafted, spicy and rich.

John’s nose was thrilled. His stomach rolled. Holy hell, he wasn’t going to be able to eat any of that kind of stuff. What if Tohrment’s wife got upset...?

A stunning redhead stepped into their paths. She was easily six feet tall, had skin as fine as white china, and was wearing a loose yellow dress. Her hair was just incredible, a flowing river of waves falling from the crown of her head way down her back.

John put an arm around his middle, hiding the buttonhole.

“How’s my *hellren*?” the woman said, lifting her mouth for Tohrment’s kiss.

“I’m good, *leelan*. Wellsie, this is John Matthew. John, this is my *shellan*.”

"Welcome, John." She offered her hand. "I'm so happy you'll be staying with us."

John shook her palm and quickly put his arm back in place.

"Come on, boys. Dinner's ready."

The kitchen was all cherry cupboards, granite counter-tops, and glossy black appliances. A round glass-and-iron table set with three places was in a windowed alcove. Everything looked brand-new.

"You two go sit," Wellsie said. "I'll bring the food."

He looked to the sink. It was white porcelain with a graceful brass faucet rising up high.

"You want to wash your hands?" she said. "Go right ahead."

There was a bar of soap in a little dish, and he was careful to clean everywhere, even under his fingernails. After he and Tohrment sat down, Wellsie came over with plates and bowls heaping with food. Enchiladas. Quesadillas. She went back for more.

"Now, that's what I'm talking about," Tohrment said as he served himself, piling his plate high. "Wellsie, this looks fantastic."

John eyed the display. There was nothing he could stomach on the table. Maybe he could just tell them he ate earlier....

Wellsie put a bowl down in front of him. It was filled with white rice that had some kind of pale sauce on it. The aroma was delicate, but appealing.

"This will ease your stomach. It's got ginger in it," she said. "And the sauce is high in fat, which will help you put on some weight. For your dessert, I've made banana pudding. It goes down easy and has lots of calories in it."

John stared at the food. She knew. She knew exactly what he couldn't eat. And what he could.

The bowl in front of him got blurry. He blinked quickly. Then frantically.

Squeezing his mouth shut, he tightened his hands in his lap until his knuckles cracked. He was *not* going to cry like a child. He refused to disgrace himself like that.

Wellsie's voice was quiet. "Tohr? You want to give us a minute?"

There was the sound of a chair moving back, and then John felt a solid hand on his shoulder. The weight lifted and heavy footfalls sounded out of the room.

"You can let go now. He's gone."

John closed his eyes and sagged, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Wellsie pulled a chair over to him. With slow, sweeping motions, she rubbed his back.

He felt so blessed that Tohrment had come and found him just in the nick of time. That this house he was going to stay in was so nice and clean. That Wellsie had made him something special, something his stomach could tolerate.

That they'd both let him have his pride.

John felt himself get pulled to one side and then he was being hugged. Rocked.

Parched, he soaked up the kindness.

A little later he lifted his head and felt a napkin get put in his hand. He wiped his face, threw his shoulders back, and looked at Wellsie.

She smiled. "Better?"

He nodded.

"I'm going to go get Tohr, okay?"

John nodded again and picked up a fork. When he tried the rice, he moaned. It didn't have much of a taste, but when it hit his stomach, instead of spasms he felt a wonderful loosening in his gut. It was as if the stuff had been specifically calibrated for what his digestive system needed.

He couldn't bear to look up as Tohrment and Wellsie sat back down, and he was relieved when they started talking about normal stuff. Errands. Friends. Plans.

He finished all the rice and looked over at the stove, wondering if there was more. Before he could ask, Wellsie took his bowl and brought it back refilled. He ate three servings. And some of the banana pudding. By the time he put his spoon down, he realized it was the first time in his life he'd ever been full.

He took a deep breath, leaned back in the chair, and closed his eyes, listening to the deep tones of Tohrment's voice and Wellsie's dulcet replies.

It was like a lullaby, he thought. Especially as they slipped into a language he didn't recognize.

"John?" Tohrment said.

He tried to sit up, but was so sleepy all he could do was open his eyes.

"How about I take you to your room so you can crash. We'll go to the center in a couple of days, okay? Give you a little time to adjust."

John nodded, thinking he didn't feel up to much more than a really good night's sleep.

Still, he carried his dish to the sink, rinsed it out, and put it in the dishwasher. When he went back to the table to help clear, Wellsie shook her head.

“No, I’ll take care of this. You go with Tohr.”

John got out his pen and paper. When he was finished writing, he turned the words to face Wellsie.

She laughed. “You are very welcome. And yes, I’ll show you how to make it.”

John nodded. And then narrowed his eyes.

Wellsie was smiling so widely that he saw some of her teeth. Two in the front were very long.

She closed her lips, as if catching herself. “Just go to sleep, John, and don’t worry about anything. There’ll be plenty of time to think tomorrow.”

He looked over at Tohrment, whose face was remote.

And that was when he knew. Knew without being told. He’d always been aware that he was different, and finally he was going to know why: These two lovely people were going to tell him what he was.

John thought of his dreams. Of the biting and the blood.

He had a feeling they weren’t his imagination.

They were his memories.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Mary stared at the Chosen's outstretched hand and then looked at Rhage. His face was grim, his body tense.

"Will you not help him?" Layla asked.

Taking a deep breath, Mary went forward and placed her palm against the one extended toward her.

Layla tugged her down and smiled a little. "I know you are nervous, but worry not, it will be over quickly. Then I will go and it will just be you and him. You can hold each other and banish me from your thoughts."

"How can you stand to be...used like this?" Mary said.

Layla frowned. "I am providing what is needed, not being used. And how can I not give to the Brotherhood? They protect us so that we may live. They give us our daughters so that our traditions may continue...or at least, they used to. Of late our numbers dwindle, because the brothers no longer come to us. We are in desperate need of children, but by law we may breed only with members of the Brotherhood." She glanced up at Rhage. "That is why I was selected tonight. I am close to my needing, and we had hoped that you would take me."

"I will not lie with you," Rhage said softly.

"I know. And still I will serve you."

Mary closed her eyes, imagining the kind of child Rhage could give a woman. As her hand found her flat stomach, she tried to picture growing swollen and heavy. The joy would be overwhelming; she was quite sure.

Because the pain of knowing that would never happen was tremendous.

“So, warrior, what will you do? Will you take what I am pleased to give? Or will you run the risk of hurting your mate?”

As Rhage hesitated, Mary realized the only solution they had was right in front of him. He needed to do this.

“Drink,” she commanded him.

He met her eyes. “Mary?”

“I want you to feed. Now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

There was a heartbeat of frozen silence. Then he dropped to the floor in front of Layla again. As he leaned forward, the woman lifted her sleeve and laid her arm down on her thigh. The veins on the inside of her wrist were pale blue underneath white skin.

Rhage reached for Mary’s hand as he opened his mouth. His fangs elongated, growing three times as long as usual. With a slight hissing sound, he bent down and put his mouth on Layla. The woman jerked and then relaxed.

Rhage’s thumb stroked over Mary’s wrist, his hand warm against hers. She couldn’t see exactly what he was doing, but the subtle movement of his head suggested sucking. When he squeezed her palm, she returned the gesture weakly. The whole experience was too foreign, and he was right: There was a shocking intimacy to it.

“Stroke him,” Layla whispered. “He’s about to stop, and it’s too soon. He hasn’t taken enough.”

Numbly, Mary reached out and put her free hand on his head. “It’s all right. I’m fine.”

When Rhage made a movement to sit back, as if he knew she was lying, she thought of everything he was willing to go through for her, everything he’d *been* through for her.

Mary held his head in place, pushing down. “Take your time. Really, everything’s okay.”

As she squeezed his palm, his shoulders eased up and he moved closer to her, shifting his body around. She parted her legs so that he could settle between them, his chest resting on her thigh, his broad back dwarfing her. She ran her hand through his blond hair, its thick, smooth waves sinking in between her fingers.

And all of a sudden, the whole thing wasn't that weird.

Even though she could feel the pulls he was taking on Layla's vein, Rhage's body against her own was familiar, and the rubbing on her wrist told her he was thinking of her while he was feeding. She looked over at Layla. The woman was watching him, but the concentration on her face was clinical.

Mary remembered what he'd said about the drinking: that if he bit her, she would feel his pleasure. Clearly there was none being exchanged between him and the Chosen. Both of their bodies were still, calm. Not in the throes of any kind of passion.

Layla's eyes shifted up and she smiled. "He's doing well. Just another minute or so."

Then it was done. Rhage lifted his head slightly and turned to Mary's body, easing into the cradle of her hips, putting his arms around her. He rested his face on her thigh, and though she couldn't see his expression, his muscles were slack, his breathing deep and even.

She glanced at Layla's wrist. There were two puncture wounds and a red blush, only a little trickle of blood.

"He'll need a little time to collect himself," Layla said as she licked herself and then rolled down her sleeve. She got to her feet.

Mary rubbed Rhage's back while looking at the woman. "Thank you."

"You are so very welcome."

"Will you come again when he needs you?"

"The two of you would want me? Me, specifically?"

Mary steeled herself against the woman's thrill. "Yes, I, ah, I think we would."

Layla absolutely glowed, her eyes alive with happiness.

"Mistress, it would be my honor." She bowed. "He knows how to summon me. Call upon me at any time."

The woman left the room with a spring in her step.

As the door shut, Mary bent down and kissed Rhage's shoulder. He stirred. Lifted his head a little. Then he rubbed his mouth with his palm, as if he didn't want her to see any blood that might be on him.

When he looked up at her, his eyelids were low, his bright teal gaze a little fuzzy.

"Hi," she said, stroking his hair back.

He smiled that special smile of his, the one that made him look like an angel. "Hi."

She touched his lower lip with her thumb. “Did she taste good?” When he hesitated, she said, “Be honest with me.”

“She did. But I would rather it have been you, and I thought of you the entire time. I imagined it was you.”

Mary leaned down and licked his mouth. As his eyes flared in surprise, she slid her tongue inside of him and caught a hint of the lingering flavor, a sweet red wine.

“Good,” she murmured against his lips. “I want you to think of me when you do that.”

He put his hands on the sides of her neck, his thumbs right over her veins. “Always.”

His mouth found hers and she grabbed onto his shoulders, urging him closer. As he pulled up the bottom of her sweater, she lifted her arms so he could get it off her and then let herself fall back on the bed. He took off her pants and her panties and then did away with his own clothes.

He loomed over her, picking her up with one arm and putting her farther back on the bed. His thigh came between her legs and then his body pressed hers into the mattress, that heavy arousal running up the very center of her. She undulated against him, stroking herself, stroking him.

His mouth moved urgently as they kissed, but he entered her slowly, parting her gently, stretching her, joining them together. He was thick and hard and heavenly and he moved languidly, deeply. That delicious dark scent came out of his skin, saturating her.

“I will have no other,” he said against her throat. “I will take none but you.”

Mary wrapped her legs around his hips, trying to have him so far inside that he could stay with her forever.

John followed Tohrment through the house. There were a lot of rooms, and all the furniture and decorations were really nice, really old. He paused by a painting of a mountain scene. A little brass nameplate on the gilt frame read Frederic Church. He wondered who that was and decided the guy was awfully good at what he did.

Down at the end of a hallway, Tohrment opened a door and turned on a light. “I put your suitcase in here already.”

John walked inside. The walls and ceiling were painted dark blue and there was a big bed with a sleek headboard and lots of fat pillows. There was

also a desk and a bureau. And a set of sliding glass doors that opened onto a terrace.

“Bathroom’s through here.” Tohrment turned on another light.

John put his head in and saw a whole lot of dark blue marble. The shower was glassed in and...wow, there were four heads for the water to come out.

“If you need anything Wellsie is here, and I’ll be back around four A.M. We go downstairs about that time every night. If you need us during the day, just pick up any phone and dial pound one. We’d be happy to see you anytime. Oh, and we have two *doggen*, or staff, who help out around here, Sal and Regine. Both of them know you’re with us now. They show up around five-ish. If you need to go out, just ask them to take you.”

John went over to the bed and touched a pillowcase. It was so soft, he could barely feel it.

“You’re going to be fine here, son. It might take some getting used to, but you’re going to be fine.”

John looked across the room. Shoring up his courage, he walked over to Tohrment and opened his mouth. Then he pointed up to the man.

“You sure you want to do this now?” Tohrment murmured.

When John nodded, Tohrment slowly parted his lips. And bared a set of fangs.

Oh...man. Oh...

John swallowed and put his fingers to his own mouth.

“Yeah, you’re going to get them, too. Sometime in the next couple of years.” Tohrment crossed the room and sat on the bed, plugging his elbows into his knees. “We go through the change around age twenty-five. After that you’re going to need to drink to survive. And I’m not talking about milk, son.”

John cocked his eyebrows, wondering from whom.

“We’ll find you a female to get you through the change, and I’ll tell you what to expect. It’s no party, but once you have it behind you, you’ll be so strong, you’ll think it was all worth it.”

John’s eyes flared as he measured Tohrment. Abruptly he spread his hands apart horizontally and lengthwise, then put his thumb to his own chest.

“Yeah, you’ll be my size, too.”

John mouthed the words *get out*.

“Really. That’s why the transition is a bitch. Your body goes through a big change in a period of hours. Afterward you’re going to have to relearn

things, how to walk, how to move.” Tohr looked down at himself. “These bodies of ours are hard to control at first.”

John absently rubbed his chest, where the circular scar was. Tohrment’s eyes tracked the movement.

“I have to be honest with you, son. There’s a lot we don’t know about you. For one thing, there’s no telling how much of us is in your blood. And we have no clue what line you descend from. As for that scar, I can’t explain it. You say you’ve had the thing all your life, and I believe you, but that marking is given, not something we’re born with.”

John took out his paper and wrote, *Everyone has it?*

“No. Just my brothers and me. That’s why Bella brought you to us.”

Who are you? John wrote.

“The Black Dagger Brotherhood. We’re warriors, son. We fight to keep the race alive, and that’s what we’re going to train you to do. The other males in your class will become soldiers, but you, with that marking, you may end up being one of us. I don’t know.” Tohrment rubbed the back of his neck. “Sometime soon I’m going to take you to meet Wrath. He’s the boss in charge, our king. I’d also like to have you checked out by our doctor, Havers. He might be able to get a read on your bloodline. Would that be cool with you?”

John nodded.

“I’m glad we found you, John. If we hadn’t you’d have died, because there would have been no one to give you what you needed.”

John went over and sat down next to Tohrment.

“You got anything you want to ask me?”

John nodded, but couldn’t marshal his thoughts into any coherent pattern.

“Tell you what, you think on it tonight. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

John was dimly aware that his head was nodding in response. Tohrment got up and walked to the door.

From out of nowhere a bullet of panic ricocheted through John’s chest. The idea of being alone seemed terrifying, even though he was in a pretty house, with kind people, in a very safe area. He just felt...so very small.

Tohrment’s shitkickers came into his line of sight.

“Hey, John, maybe I’ll hang for a while in here with you. You like that? We can channel surf.”

Thank you, he signed without thinking. *I feel a little weird.*

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Tohrment propped himself up on the pillows,

grabbed the remote, and turned on the TV. “Vishous, one of my brothers, wired this house. I think we get about seven hundred stations on this thing. What do you like to watch?”

John shrugged and shuffled back against the headboard.

Tohrment clicked around until he found *Terminator 2*. “You like?”

John whistled softly through his teeth and nodded.

“Yeah, me, too. This is a classic, and Linda Hamilton is hot.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

Rhage slept late, very late, and what woke him up was bad news. The restlessness, the awful itch, was alive inside of him again. The Scribe Virgin's reprieve was over. The beast was back.

He opened his eyes and saw Mary's hair on his pillow. And the curve of her neck. And her naked back.

He broke out in a sweat, an erection popping up quick as a heartbeat.

He thought of the way they had come together after the feeding. And then again when they'd returned to their room. He'd reached for her twice more during the day, feeling bad about making the demands because he'd been all over her so much. Still, each time she'd smiled up at him and welcomed him inside, even though she must have been exhausted and probably a little sore.

And he wanted her again right now, but with a pounding need that was different than he'd felt before. This hunger was savage, as if he'd never had her at all or hadn't seen her for months. As he fought the urge, his hands curled up on themselves, fingers tingling, skin tightening. He was completely strung out, the very bones in him vibrating.

He got out of bed and headed for the shower. By the time he came back, he'd regained some control, but then he saw that Mary had kicked the covers off of herself. She was gloriously naked as she lay on her stomach, her beautiful ass a temptation that ate at him.

"Can I get you something from the kitchen?" he asked hoarsely.

"Sleep," she murmured, turning over onto her back. Her pink-tipped

breasts tightened as the air hit them.

Oh, sweet Jesus... Wait, something was off here. Her face was flushed like she had windburn, and her legs were sawing on top of the mattress.

He went over and put his hand on her forehead. She was hot and dry.

“Mary, I think you have a fever.”

“Low-level. Not unusual.”

Fear put a chill on his craving to take her. “You want me to get you some aspirin?”

“Just need to sleep through it.”

“Do you want me to stay with you?”

She opened her eyes. He hated the dull look in them. “No, this happens. Honestly, I’m all right. I just need to sleep it off.”

Rhage stayed with her awhile longer and then pulled on some black nylon warm-ups and a T-shirt. Before he left, he stared at her. He could barely stand her having a slight fever. What the hell was it going to be like when she got really sick?

Havers. He hadn’t heard back from Havers yet, and the doctor should have had access to her files for long enough. Rhage picked up his cell phone and went out in the hall.

The conversation with the doctor didn’t last long, because there was nothing the male could do for her. As vampires did not get cancer, he hadn’t focused on the disease and neither had any of his colleagues.

Rhage was about to hang up when the other male said, “Forgive me, sire, as I do not wish to pry. But have you...are you aware of how extensive her treatments were?”

“I know there were a lot of them.”

“Do you realize how intense they were, though? If the leukemia has returned, her options may well be limited—”

“Thanks for looking at her records. I appreciate it.” Like he needed confirmation of how serious the situation was?

“Wait...Please know that I am here to help in any way I can. Even though I cannot be of aid with regard to the chemotherapy, we have the drug formularies for a lot of the pain medications and various other things she was on before. I can help ease her and watch over her, even though she will receive her treatments in a human hospital. You must call me.”

“I will. And...thanks, Havers.”

After he hung up, he went to Wrath’s study, but the room was empty so

he turned to go downstairs. Maybe Wrath and Beth were grabbing something to eat.

From out of thin air, a wall of leather topped with a head of long black hair materialized in front of him. Wrath's sunglasses were silver wraparounds today.

"Looking for me?" the king said.

"Hey. Yeah. Mary's moved in. Permanently."

"So I heard. Fritz said she brought some stuff with her."

"Uh-huh. Listen, do you mind if I have a little shindig here tonight? I want Mary to see her friend Bella, and I was thinking the Brotherhood could play nice. You know, suit up and all. Maybe Wellsie could come, too. Mary has me, but she needs to be around some other folks. I don't want her feeling like she's isolated."

"Damn good idea. Beth wanted us to go to the city tonight, but—"

"Don't change your plans. This is just real casual."

"Well, my *shellan* was looking forward to getting away. She kind of likes having me to herself. And I, ah, I really like it when she has me that way, you feel me?"

Rhage smiled a little as Wrath's body released a blast of heat. "Yeah. I do."

There was a pause. The king said, "My brother, is there something else?"

"Ah, yeah. Mary's going to be very ill soon. I'll go out nightly with the brothers for as long as I can, but when things get hard—"

"Of course. You do what you have to do."

"Thanks, man."

Wrath shook his head. "You know something—you're a male of worth. You really are."

"Yeah, well, just keep it to yourself. I've got a reputation as an egocentric asshole to protect."

"Tohr, I could see doing this. Phury, absolutely. Maybe V."

Rhage frowned. "You make it sound like it's a sacrifice, for chrissakes. I love her."

"That is the sacrifice. You love her even though you know she's leaving unto the Fade."

"She's not *going* anywhere." Rhage bit down on his molars. "She'll be fine. It'll be rough, but she *will* be fine."

"Forgive me." Wrath bowed his head. "Of course she will."

Rhage looked down. He didn't know what to do with the apology because he only had experience in offering them. And besides, anytime he thought about Mary dying, he felt like he had a blowtorch in his chest cavity.

"Later, my lord," he said, wanting to leave before he disgraced himself by becoming emotional.

Except as he glanced up, it was into Wrath's eyes for the very first time. The king never took his sunglasses off. Ever.

Rhage stopped breathing, focusing on the iridescent, silver-green irises staring back at him. There were no pupils really, just two little dots of black. And the warmth in those blind, glowing circles was shocking.

"You make me proud to call you brother," Wrath said.

Rhage felt heavy arms come around him as he was pulled against a solid chest. He tensed, but then let himself hang on to Wrath's massive shoulders.

"Wrath?"

"Yeah?"

Rhage opened his mouth to speak, but lost his voice.

Wrath replied into the silence, "We are all going to be there for you. So you're going to ask for help when you need it. And if the time comes, she will be afforded a full Fade ceremony, as the *shellan* of a warrior deserves."

Rhage squeezed his eyes shut. "Thank you...my lord."

Later that night Mary stood in their bathroom, brushing her hair out and blowing it dry. When she was finished, she looked at herself in the mirror and smoothed down the brunette waves. They were soft under her fingers, and in this light the color did have a little gold and red in it.

She refused to think of going bald again. Just put the thought right out of her mind. God knew, there'd be time to dwell on it when it actually happened.

"You're still as beautiful as you were yesterday," Rhage said as he got out of the shower. While he towed off, he came up behind her and blew her reflection a kiss.

She smiled. "Thank you so much for inviting Bella and John over. She's become such a good friend, and I've been worried about him."

"I don't want you to lose touch with people just because you're here. Besides, the Brotherhood needs to play civilized every once in a while. It's good for us."

"You know, Tohrment and Wellsie are so kind to take John in."

“They’re the best, those two.”

As Rhage left the bath, the eyes of his tattoo stared out at her. The effect was eerie, she thought, but not exactly unpleasant. It was kind of like being watched by a guard dog who really wanted you to pet him.

She went over and sat on the edge of the bed. “Hey, I’m sorry if I kept you awake this morning. I toss and turn a lot when the fevers come.”

Rhage came out of the closet, zipping up a pair of black pants. “You didn’t bother me at all. But can we do anything about them?”

“Not really. I’ll go into another bedroom if it bothers you.” She laughed at the look he gave her. “Okay, I won’t be doing that.”

“About Havers. I was hoping there’d be something we could do for you.”

“Don’t worry. And I appreciate your trying.”

“When are you going to see your oncologist again?”

“Soon, but no more talking about that, okay? Tonight, it’s all about life. I feel good, and I’m not wasting one damned minute of it.”

Rhage’s mouth lifted at the corners, his eyes glowing with approval, respect.

And she’d thought for even a moment about shutting him out? *Idiot.*

She smiled back at him, looking forward to the end of the evening, when they could be alone together. In the dark. With nothing between them.

When he disappeared into the closet, she went after him, thinking they had a few minutes before the party began so maybe they could get a headstart. While he stared at the dress shirts that were lined up on hangers, she put her hand on his back, right on the beast’s shoulder.

Rhage flinched and stepped away.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

As she circled around him, he kept turning away, the two of them trading places a couple of times.

“Rhage—”

“We need to hurry or we’re going to be late.” His voice was a little hoarse, his pecs twitching.

“What’s wrong with your back?”

He peeled a shirt off a hanger and pulled it on, buttoning the thing quickly. “Back’s fine.”

Rhage gave her a peck on the cheek and quickly squeaked by her. Out in the bedroom he opened the door that led into the hall and then picked up his watch from the dresser and put the thing on his wrist. His fingers trembled as

he did up the clasp.

Just as she was going to ask him what was wrong, Phury appeared in the doorway.

“Hey, my brother, Mary,” the man said with a smile. “You want to go down together?”

Mary hid her frustration. And decided if there had to be an interruption, she couldn’t think of a better-looking one. Phury’s glorious, multicolored hair was fanned out around his broad shoulders, and he was dressed to kill. In the proverbial sense. His suit was blue-black and subtly pin-striped, and his pale pink shirt showed off his thick throat and ridiculously good coloring. His loafers were slick as hell, his French cuffs were anchored with heavy gold links, and he was sporting a diamond pinkie ring.

The brother was total *GQ* material. And Bella and he would look really good together, she thought.

“Tell me, Phury, have you met Bella yet?”

The guy fiddled with the handkerchief in his breast pocket, even though the thing wasn’t out of place. “Yeah, I met her. The night you and the boy came to the center.”

“She’s coming this evening.”

“I, ah, I know.”

“And she’s not seeing anyone right now.”

Boy, that blush really did it, she thought. Phury was adorable.

“He’s not interested,” Rhage said while clipping a handgun to the small of his back.

Mary shot her man a dirty look, which he missed as he pulled on his jacket.

“But you’re single, too,” she said to Phury. “Aren’t you?”

“Oh, he’s single, all right.”

“Rhage, how about you let him answer? So Phury, if both of you are free, why don’t you ask her to have dinner sometime?”

Phury smoothed his lapels, blushing even more. “Yeah, I don’t know about that.”

“She’s really fabulous—”

Rhage shook his head and ushered her out into the hall. “Leave it alone, Mary. Come on.”

Halfway down the stairs, she pulled Rhage to a stop. As Phury got ahead of them, she whispered, “Give it a break, will you? Bella and he might enjoy

each other.”

“The only thing Bella would get out of Phury is conversation.”

“What the—”

“He doesn’t do females.”

“He’s gay?”

“No, but don’t push Bella on him, okay? It isn’t fair to either one of them.”

Mary’s eyes shot to Phury, who’d just stepped onto the foyer’s mosaic floor. Even with his slight limp, he had the swagger of a man who had all of his parts in working order. But maybe that was just an illusion. Maybe he’d been injured while fighting.

“Is he, you know, impotent?”

“Not as far as I know. He’s celibate.”

God, what a waste, she thought, eyeing the way the man moved.

“So he’s in some kind of religious order?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“With Phury, all roads lead back to his twin, Zsadist. And yes, I know they don’t look alike.” Rhage gave her a little nudge and she started down the stairs again.

“Why does Phury limp?”

“He has a prosthesis. He lost half his left leg.”

“Good lord, how?”

“He shot it off.”

Mary stopped. “*What?* Did it happen by mistake?”

“Nope, on purpose. Mary, come on, we can finish this later.” He took her hand and pulled her forward.

Bella stepped through the mansion’s vestibule with the *doggen* who’d driven her to the compound. As she looked around, she was stunned. Her family owned a grand house, but it was nothing like this. This was...royal living. Which she supposed made sense, because the Blind King and his queen made their residence here.

“Welcome, Bella,” a deep male voice said.

She turned and saw the brother with the multicolored hair, the one who had interrupted her and Zsadist that night at the training center.

“I’m Phury. We met before. At the gym.”

"Warrior," she said, bowing fully. It was hard not to be in awe of the brothers, especially one like this. So big. So...Was that hair for real?

"We're glad you could come." He smiled at her, his yellow eyes warm. "Here, let me help you with your coat."

When it was off, she looped the thing over her arm. "I can't believe I'm here, to tell you the truth. Mary! Hi!"

The two of them embraced and then they talked with Phury. Before long Bella was completely comfortable around the warrior. There was just something so calm and trustworthy about him, and those eyes were a knockout. They were honest-to-God yellow.

Attractive as he was, though, she was looking for the scarred brother. While keeping up with the conversation, she discreetly scanned the vast, colorful foyer. Zsadist was nowhere around. Maybe he was skipping the party. He didn't seem like the social type; that was for sure.

As Mary left to be with Rhage, Bella was determined not to feel let down. For God's sake, she had no business chasing after the likes of Zsadist, anyway.

"So, Phury," she said. "May I...I know this is rude, but I just have to touch your hair." She reached up before he could say no and captured some of the blond and red waves, rubbing the thick lengths in her hand. "How gorgeous. The colors are amazing. And...oh, it smells so good. What kind of shampoo do you use?"

She looked into his eyes, expecting him to make some kind of light comment. Instead he was frozen stiff. Wasn't even blinking as he stared down at her.

And she suddenly realized that Rhage was staring at her from a doorway with an expression of shock on his face. And so was another warrior with a goatee. And a large human male. And...

Well, the party had kind of ground to a halt, hadn't it?

She dropped her hand and whispered, "I'm so sorry. I just did something horribly improper, didn't I?"

Phury snapped out of whatever trance he'd been in. "No. It's all right."

"Then why is everyone looking at me?"

"They're not used to seeing me with...that is, no females...ah..." Phury took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Bella, you didn't do anything wrong. Seriously. And don't worry about my brothers, okay? They're just jealous because they want you touching their hair."

But something was still seriously off with him, and she wasn't surprised when he excused himself a moment later.

A *doggen* stepped in front of her. "Forgive me, madam, I should have taken your coat earlier."

"Oh, thank you."

After she dropped it into the male's hands, she realized the party had migrated into what looked like a billiard room. She was about to head over when she felt a cold draft coming from somewhere behind her. Had the front doors blown open?

She turned around.

Zsadist was in a dim corner by the vestibule, staring at her from the shadows. He was dressed in the same kind of black turtleneck and loose black pants he'd worn the last time she'd seen him, and just as before, his night eyes were feral. Sexual.

Oh, yes, she thought as she flushed. This was why she had come. She'd had to see this male again.

Taking a deep breath, she went up to him.

"Hello." When he said nothing, she forced a little smile. "Lovely evening, isn't it?"

"Did you like the feel of my twin?"

That was his *twin*? How could the two of them... Well, there was a resemblance. If she imagined Zsadist's scar gone and his hair grown out.

"I asked you a question, female. Did his hair feel good to you?" Black eyes traveled down her body, tracing the lines of the silk blouse and the tight skirt she wore. When they returned to her face, they lingered on her mouth.

"You gonna answer me, female?"

"Bella," she murmured automatically. "Please call me Bella."

Zsadist's stare grew hooded. "Do you think my brother's beautiful?"

"Ah...he's handsome, yes."

"Handsome. Yeah, that's the word. Tell me something, do you want him badly enough to lie with me?"

Heat bloomed in her, a fire lit by the words he spoke and the way he stared at her with sex in his eyes. But then she realized what he'd said.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand—"

"My twin's celibate from his tongue to his toes. So I'm afraid I'm the closest you'll ever get to Phury." He made a clucking sound. "But I'm a poor substitute, aren't I?"

Bella put her hand up to her neck, drowning in images of being under Zsadist's body while he moved inside of her. What would that be like? To be taken by him? The reckless part of her was desperate to know.

Oh, God. Just thinking about it made her shake.

Zsadist laughed coolly.

"Have I shocked you? Sorry. Just trying to help you out of your rock and hard place. Wanting something you can't have must be a bitch." His eyes latched on to her throat. "Myself, I've never had that problem."

As she swallowed, he tracked the movement. "Problem?" she whispered.

"What I want, I take."

Yes, she thought. *You certainly do, don't you.*

In a burning rush, she imagined him looking down at her while their bodies were merged, his face inches from her own. The fantasy had her lifting her arm. She wanted to run her fingertip down that scar until it got to his mouth. Just to know the feel of him.

With a quick jerk to the side, Zsadist dodged the contact, eyes flaring as if she'd shocked him. The expression was buried fast.

In a flat, cold voice he said, "Careful there, female. I bite."

"Will you ever say my name?"

"How about a drink, Bella?" Phury interjected. He took her elbow. "The bar's over here in the billiard room."

"Yeah, take her away," Zsadist drawled. "You're such a good hero, brother. Always saving somebody. And you should know, she thinks you're handsome."

Phury's face tightened, but he said nothing as he led her across the foyer.

When she looked back, Zsadist was gone.

Phury gave her arm a tug to get her attention. "You need to stay away from him." When she didn't respond, the warrior pulled her into a corner and gripped her shoulders. "My twin's not broken. He's ruined. Do you understand the difference? With broken, maybe you can fix things. Ruined? All you can do is wait to bury him."

Her mouth opened slightly. "That's so...callous."

"That's reality. If he dies before I do, it will kill me. But that doesn't change what he is."

She pointedly separated herself from the male. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks."

"Bella—"

“You were going to get me a drink?”

Chapter Thirty-nine

O parallel-parked in front of the towering apartment building. The monolithic eyesore was one of Caldwell's high-rise, luxe setups, an attempt by some developers to turn the riverbank around. C's apartment was on the twenty-sixth floor facing the water.

Pretentious. Seriously pretentious.

Most *lessers* lived in shitholes because the Society believed in putting its money where its war was. C got away with the flashy style because he could afford it. He'd been a trustafarian before he'd joined in the seventies, and he'd somehow kept his money. The guy was an unusual combination: a dilettante with serial-killer tendencies.

As it was after ten there was no doorman, and picking the electronic lock on the lobby door was the work of a moment. O took the steel-and-glass elevator to the twenty-seventh floor and walked down one flight of stairs, more out of habit than necessity. There was no reason to think anyone would give a crap who he was or where he was going. Besides, the building was a ghost town this time of night, the Euro-trash residents out doing Ecstasy and coke at Zero Sum downtown.

He knocked on C's door.

This was the fifth address he'd visited on Mr. X's list of unaccounted-for members and the first of tonight's forays. The evening before, he'd had good success. One of the slayers had been out of state, having decided on his own to help out a buddy in D.C. Two of the AWOLs, who were roommates, had

been injured from getting into a fight with each other; they were healing up and would be back online within a couple of days. The final *lesser* had been a perfectly healthy SOB who'd just been watching the tube and lying around. Well, perfectly healthy, that was, until he'd sustained an unfortunate accident as O was leaving. It would be a good week before he was up and running again, but the visit had certainly clarified his priorities.

Funny how a couple of cracked kneecaps could do that to a guy.

O knocked again on C's door and then picked the lock. When he opened the door, he recoiled. *Oh, shit.* The place smelled bad. Like rotting garbage.

He headed for the kitchen.

No, that wasn't trash. That was C.

The *lesser* was facedown on the floor, a dried pool of black blood around him. Within reach of his hand, there were some bandages and a needle and thread, as if he'd tried to fix himself up. Next to the first-aid stuff was his BlackBerry and the keypad was covered with his blood. A woman's purse, also stained, sat on the other side of him.

O rolled C over. The slayer's neck had been slashed, a good deep cut. And given the way the skin had been cauterized, the slice had been made by one of the Brotherhood's nasty black daggers. Man, whatever they had in that metal was like battery acid on a *lesser* wound.

C's throat was working, kicking out guttural sounds, proving that you could in fact be a little bit dead. When he brought up his hand, there was a knife in it. A few shallow cuts marked his shirt, as if he'd tried to stab himself in the chest but had lacked the strength to get the job done.

"You're in bad shape, my man," O said, taking the blade away. He sat back on his heels, watching the guy flail around in slow motion. Lying on his back like that, arms and legs moving uselessly, he was like a june bug about to give up the ghost.

O glanced at the purse.

"You taking up an alternative lifestyle, C?" He picked the thing up and went through the contents. Bottle of medicine. Tissues. Tampon. Cell phone.

Hello, wallet.

He took out the driver's license. Brown hair. Gray eyes. Impossible to tell whether the female was a vampire or a human. Address was out Route 22 in the sticks.

"Tell me if I get this right," O said. "You and one of those brothers went head-to-head. The warrior had a female with him. You escaped after being

knifed and took this purse so you could finish the job on the male's lady friend. Trouble was, your wounds were too severe and you've been lying here ever since you got home. How'm I doing?"

O tossed the wallet into the bag and looked down at the man. C's eyes were rolling around, loose marbles in his deflating bag of a head.

"You know, C, if it were up to me, I'd just leave you here. I don't know if you're aware of this, but when we poof it out of existence, we go back to the Omega. Believe me, what you're going to find on the other side with him is going to make the way you feel now seem like a fucking vacation." O looked around. "Unfortunately, you're stinking up the place. Some human's going to come in, and then we've got us a problem."

O picked up the knife, gripping the handle hard. As he lifted it above his shoulder, C's relief brought all those body struggles to a standstill.

"You really shouldn't feel better about this," O said softly.

He sank the blade into the *lesser*'s chest. There was a flash of light and a popping sound. And C was gone.

O picked up the purse and headed out.

Mary walked over to Rhage, keeping her hand behind her back while she waited for the right moment. He was in the middle of a game of pool, he and Butch beating the tar out of V and Phury.

As she watched them play, she decided she really liked the brothers. Even Zsadist, with all his brooding. They were so good to her, treating her with a kind of respect and reverence she wasn't sure what she'd done to deserve.

Rhage winked at her as he leaned over the table and lined up his stick.

"It's the way you care for him," someone said in her ear.

She jerked in her shoes. Vishous was right behind her.

"What are you talking about?"

"That's why we adore you. And before you tell me to quit reading your mind, I didn't mean to catch the thought. It was just too loud to tune out." The vampire took a swallow from a squat glass of vodka. "But that's why we accept you. When you treat him well, you honor each one of us."

Rhage looked up and frowned. As soon as he took his shot, he came around the table to her and pointedly nudged V out of the way with his body.

Vishous laughed. "Relax, Hollywood. She's only got eyes for you."

Rhage grunted and tucked her into his side. "You just remember that and your arms and legs will stay right where they are."

“You know, you were never the possessive type before.”

“That’s because I never had something I wanted to keep. You’re up at the table, my brother.”

As V put his drink down and got serious about the game, Mary stuck her hand out. From her fingertips, a cherry dangled.

“I want to see your other trick,” she said. “You told me you could do something great with your tongue and a cherry stem.”

He laughed. “Come on—”

“What? No trick?”

His smile was slow. “You just watch my mouth go to work, female.”

Looking at her from under hooded lids, Rhage bent down to her hand. His tongue came out and captured the cherry, pulling it between his lips. He chewed and then shook his head as he swallowed.

“Not quite there,” he murmured.

“What?”

“Your secrets are so much sweeter.”

Flushing, she covered her eyes with her hand.

Oh, sure. Now he wants to get sexy, she thought.

As she took a deep breath, she caught the erotic, dark fragrance he threw off whenever he wanted to be inside her. She lifted her hand and peeked at him.

He was staring at her with total absorption. And the centers of his eyes were as white and gleaming as fresh snow.

Mary stopped breathing.

Something else is in there, she thought. There was...something else looking through his stare at her.

Phury came up, smiling. “Go get a room, Hollywood, if you’re going to be like this. The rest of us don’t need to be reminded of all you have.”

He clapped his palm on Rhage’s shoulder.

Rhage wheeled around and snapped at his brother’s hand with his teeth. The sound of his jaws clamping shut was loud enough to suck the conversation out of the room.

Phury leaped back, yanking his arm away. “Jesus Christ, Rhage! What’s your—*Shit.* Your eyes, man. They’ve turned.”

Rhage paled and then stumbled away, squinting and blinking. “I’m sorry. Hell, Phury, I didn’t even know I was—”

All around the room, the men put down whatever was in their hands and

came at him, circling him.

“How close are you to the change?” Phury asked.

“Clear the females out,” someone commanded. “Get them upstairs.”

As the sound of people leaving filled the air, Vishous squeezed Mary’s arm. “Come with me.”

“No.” She struggled. “Stop it. I want to stay with him.”

Rhage glanced over at her, and immediately that odd, fixated look came back. Then his white eyes shifted to Vishous. Rhage’s lips paled off his teeth and he growled, loud as a lion.

“V, man, let go of her. *Right now*,” Phury said.

Vishous dropped his hold, but whispered to her, “You need to get out of here.”

Screw that, she thought.

“Rhage?” she said softly. “Rhage, what’s going on?”

He shook his head and broke their eye contact, backing himself up against the marble fireplace. Sweat gleamed on his face as he grabbed on to the stone, and he strained as if he were trying to lift the whole damn mantelpiece off the wall.

Time slowed to a crawl as he battled with himself, chest pumping, arms and legs trembling. It was a long while before he sagged and the tension left his body. Whatever the fight had been, he’d won. But not by much.

As he looked up, his eyes were back to normal, but he was pasty as hell.

“I’m sorry, my brothers,” he mumbled. Then he glanced at her and opened his mouth. Instead of speaking, he hung his head as if ashamed.

Mary walked through the barrier of male bodies and put her hands on his face.

As he gasped in surprise, she kissed him on the mouth. “Let’s see the cherry thing. Come on.”

The men standing around them were stunned; she could feel it in their stares. Rhage was shaken, too. But when she just looked at him pointedly, he started chewing, working the stem over with his teeth.

She glanced back at the warriors. “He’s fine. We’re fine. Go back to doing whatever, okay? He needs a minute, and all you guys staring at him like this isn’t helping.”

Phury laughed a little and walked over to the pool table. “You know, she’s fabulous.”

V picked up his cue and his glass. “Yeah. True.”

As the party resumed, and Bella and Wellsie came back, Mary stroked Rhage's face and neck. He seemed to have trouble looking her in the eye.

"Are you okay?" she said softly.

"I'm so sorry—"

"Cut out the sorry bit. Whatever that is, you can't help it, right?"

He nodded.

"So there's no sorry."

She wanted to know what had just happened, but not here, not now.

Sometimes, pretending to be normal was the very best antidote to weirdness. Fake-it-until-you-make-it was more than psychobabble bullshit.

"Mary, I don't want you to fear me."

For a moment, she watched his mouth and jaw work the stem.

"I'm not afraid. V and Phury might have been in a little trouble, but you wouldn't have hurt me. No way. I'm not sure how I know that, I just do."

He took a deep breath. "God, I love you. I really, really love you."

And then he smiled.

She laughed in a loud crack that brought every head in the room around.

The cherry stem was tied neatly around one of his fangs.

Chapter Forty

Bella was staring, and it had to stop.

Except she couldn't help herself. Zsadist was the only thing she could see.

Not that he was really involved in the party. Except for when that episode with Rhage had happened, Zsadist stayed away from them all. He talked to no one. Drank nothing. Ate nothing. He was a statue over by one of the long windows, and the stillness in him was fascinating. He didn't even seem to be breathing. Only his eyes moved.

And always to get away from hers.

Bella gave them both a break by heading over for some more wine. The billiard room was a dark, luxurious space, covered in forest-green silk wallpaper and festooned with black-and-gold satin drapes. Over in the corner where the bar was set up, the shadows were even thicker, and she took shelter in them.

Maybe she could be more discreet if she watched him from here.

Over the past few days she'd asked around and heard every Zsadist story there was. The rumors were downright gruesome, especially the ones about him and females. People said he killed her sex for sport, but it was hard not to wonder how much of that was lore. A male who looked as dangerous as he did, people were bound to talk. Her brother was the same way. She'd heard whispers about Rehvenge for years, and God knew, all of them were false.

There was just no way all the chatter about Zsadist was accurate. For

heaven's sake, folks maintained he lived off the blood of human prostitutes. That wasn't even physiologically possible, not unless he drank every other night. And even then, how could he be as strong as he was with that weak sustenance?

Bella turned from the bar and scanned the room. Zsadist was gone.

She glanced out into the foyer. She hadn't even seen him leave. Perhaps he'd dematerialized—

"Looking for me?"

She jumped and twisted her head around. Zsadist was right behind her, rubbing a Granny Smith apple on his shirt. As he lifted it to his mouth, he eyed her throat.

"Zsadist..."

"You know, for a female of the aristocracy, you're pretty damn rude." He bared his fangs and bit through the bright green flesh with a crack. "Didn't your mother ever tell you it's not polite to stare?"

She watched him chew, his jaw working in circles. God, just looking at his lips made her breathless. "I don't mean to offend you."

"Well, you are. And I think you're upsetting my dear twin while you're at it."

"What?"

Zsadist's eyes lingered on her face, then drifted over her hair. He took another hunk out of the apple. "Phury likes you. I think he might even be attracted to you, which is a first, at least since I've known him. He doesn't get distracted by females."

Funny, she hadn't gotten that vibe at all. Then again, she'd been focused on Zsadist.

"I don't think Phury's—"

"He keeps watching you. While you're looking at me, he's staring at you. And it's not because he's worried about you. His eyes are on your body, female." Zsadist tilted his head to the side. "You know, maybe I was wrong. Maybe you are the one who'll shake him out of his celibacy. Shit, you're beautiful enough, and he ain't dead."

She flushed. "Zsadist, you should know that I, ah, I find you—"

"Revolting, right? Kind of like a good car accident." He bit off some more apple. "I can understand the fascination, but you need to be taking those eyes elsewhere. Look at Phury from now on, we clear?"

"I want to look at you. I like to look at you."

His eyes narrowed. "No, you don't."

"Yes. I do."

"No one likes to look at me. Not even I do."

"You're not ugly, Zsadist."

He laughed, deliberately running a fingertip down his scar. "Now, there's a ringing endorsement. As well as a blatant fucking lie."

"I find you mesmerizing. I can't get you out of my mind. I want to be with you."

Zsadist frowned, falling still. "Be with me exactly how?"

"You know. Be with you." She blushed a brilliant red, but figured she had nothing to lose. "I want to...lay with you."

Zsadist backed up so fast he hit the bar. And as the liquor bottles rattled, she knew for certain the stories about him were false. This was no female-killer. If anything, he seemed petrified by the thought that she was sexually attracted to him.

She opened her mouth, but he cut her off.

"You stay away from me, female," he said, pitching the half-eaten apple into the trash. "If you don't, there's no telling what I might do to defend myself."

"From what? I'm no threat to you."

"No, but I can goddamn guarantee I'm hazardous to your health. There's a very good reason why people stay away from me."

He walked out of the room.

Bella looked at all the people around the pool table. Everyone was focused on the game. Which was perfect. She didn't want any of them to talk her out of what she was about to do.

She put her glass of wine down and slipped from the billiard room. As she came into the lobby, Zsadist was going upstairs. After giving him some time to get ahead of her, she took the steps quickly, moving silently up to the second floor. When she got to the top, she caught sight of the heel of his shitkicker disappearing around a corner. She jogged swiftly over the carpet, keeping a distance as he headed down a corridor that led away from the balcony and the foyer below.

Zsadist paused. She ducked behind a marble sculpture.

When she leaned out, he was gone. She walked to where she'd seen him and found a door slightly ajar. She stuck her head in. The room was pitch-dark, the light from the hall making little headway into the blackness. And it

was freezing cold, as if the heat wasn't just off for the night, but hadn't been turned on since summer's warmth had faded.

Her eyes adjusted. There was a broad, sumptuous bed, dripping with heavy crimson velvet. The other furniture was equally lavish, although there was something odd in the corner on the floor. A pallet of blankets. And a skull.

Bella was yanked inside by the arm.

The door slammed shut and the room plunged into total darkness. Quick as a gasp, she was spun around and pushed face-first into the wall. Candles flared.

"What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

She tried to catch her breath, but with Zsadist's forearm pressed into the middle of her back, she couldn't squeeze much air into her lungs.

"I, ah, I...thought we could talk."

"Really. Is that what you want to do up here? Talk."

"Yes, I thought—"

His hand clamped on the back of her neck. "I don't talk with females who are dumb enough to come after me. But I'll show you what I am willing to do to them."

His put a thick arm around her stomach, popped her hips out from the wall, and pushed her head down. Off balance, she braced herself by holding on to a piece of molding.

His arousal came against her core. Breath exploded out of her lungs.

As heat licked between her legs, his chest brushed her back. He pulled her blouse out from her skirt and slipped his hand onto her belly, spanning it with his long fingers and wide palm.

"A female like you should be with another aristocrat. Or are the scars and the reputation part of my appeal?" When she didn't answer, because she was breathless, he muttered, "Yeah, of course that's it."

In one swift movement he shoved her bra up and captured her breast. Caught in an onslaught of raw lust, she hissed and jerked. He laughed a little.

"Too fast?" He took her nipple between his fingers and rolled it, pleasure and pain combining. She cried out. "This too rough for you? I'll try to control myself better, but, you know, I'm a savage. Which is why you want this, right?"

But it wasn't too fast or too rough. God help her, she liked it. She wanted it hard and now, and she wanted it with him. She wanted to break the rules,

wanted the danger and thrill, wanted the wild heat and the power of him. And she was so ready, especially as he pushed her skirt over her hips. All he had to do was move her thong over and he could sink in deep.

Except she wanted to see him when he penetrated her. And she wanted to touch his body, too. She started to stand up, but he kept her down, leaning on her neck, holding her in place.

“Sorry, I’m a one-trick pony. I only do it this way.”

She struggled, dying to kiss him. “Zsadist—”

“It’s a little late to have second thoughts.” His voice was a sensuous growl in her ear. “For some reason, I want to fuck you. Badly. So do us both a favor and grit your teeth. I won’t take long.”

His hand left her breast, shot between her legs, and found her core.

Zsadist froze.

Instinctively she moved her hips, rubbing herself against his fingers, feeling a wonderful friction—

He leaped back. “Get out of here.”

Disorientated, fiercely aroused, she swayed as she righted herself. “What?”

Zsadist went over to the door, threw it open and stared at the floor. When she didn’t move, he roared, “Get out!”

“Why—”

“God, you make me sick.”

Bella felt all the blood leave her face. She pulled her skirt down and fumbled with the blouse and bra. Then she bolted out of the room.

Zsadist slammed the door shut and ran for the bathroom. Popping the toilet seat, he bent over and threw up the apple he’d eaten.

As he hit the flusher, he sank to the floor, shaky and queased out. He tried taking some deep breaths, but all he could smell was Bella. Her lovely, inexplicable arousal was on his fingers. He whipped off his turtleneck and wrapped it around his hand, needing to dim the scent.

God, the satin perfection of her. The gorgeous fragrance of her passion. All that luscious rain.

No female had been wet for him for a hundred years. Not since his time as a blood slave. And back then...he hadn’t wanted it, had learned to fear that very arousal.

He tried to focus his mind on the present, tried to keep himself in his

bathroom, but the past sucked him down....

He was back in the cell, shackled, his body not his own. He felt the Mistress's hands, smelled the salve she had to put on him before she could get the erection she needed. And then she was riding him, pumping until she got off. After that, the biting and the drinking assaulted him as she fed from his veins.

It all came back. The rapes. The humiliation. The decades of abuse until he lost any conception of time, until he was nothing, all but dead except for the incessant beating of his heart and the rote suck and push of his lungs.

He heard a weird sound. Realized he was moaning.

Oh...Bella.

He wiped his forehead on his biceps. Bella. God, she made him so ashamed of his scars and his ugliness, his ruined appearance and his black, nasty nature.

At the party she'd effortlessly talked to his brothers and the females, smiling, laughing. She had a charm and an easiness about her that spoke of the comfortable life she'd led. She'd probably never known a mean word or an unkind deed. She'd certainly never shown cruelty or harshness to another. She was a female of worth, not at all like the trashy, angry humans he'd been drinking from.

He hadn't believed her when she'd told him she wanted to lie with him, but she had. That was what all her silky wetness had meant. Females could lie about a lot of things, but not that. Never that.

Zsadist shuddered. When he'd had her bent over and was touching her breasts, he'd planned on stopping in spite of what he'd said. He'd figured he'd scare her into leaving him alone, overwhelm her a little before sending her along her way.

Except she actually had wanted him.

He replayed what it had been like to dive in between her thighs. She'd been so...soft. So incredibly warm and smooth and slick. The first he had touched who had been like that for him. He'd had no idea what to do, but then from out of his confusion, the Mistress had come back to him. He'd seen her face and felt her body on top of his.

The Mistress had always been turned-on when she'd come to him, and she'd taken great pains to make sure he knew it, though she'd never made him touch her with his hands. She'd been smart. After everything she'd done to him, if he'd been able to get at her, he'd have torn her apart like a rabid

animal, and they'd both known it. The caged danger he'd represented had thrilled her.

He thought of Bella's attraction to him. It was based on the same thing, wasn't it? Power-trip sex. The shackled savage used for pleasure.

Or in Bella's case, the dangerous male used for adventure.

His stomach heaved again and he lurched over the toilet.

"I thought you were just being cruel," Bella said from behind him. "I didn't know I actually made you sick."

Fuck. He hadn't locked the door.

It had never dawned on him she'd come back.

Bella wrapped her arms around herself. Of all the things she could have dreamed up, this pushed the fiction envelope. Zsadist was sprawled half-naked in front of a toilet, his shirt wrapped around his hand, the dry heaves making him twitch.

While he cursed, she stared at his body. *Dear lord, his back.* The broad expanse was streaked with scars, evidence of a past whipping that, like his face, had somehow not healed smoothly. Although how that had happened she couldn't guess.

"Why are you in my room again?" he asked, voice echoing around the porcelain rim.

"I, ah, I wanted to yell at you."

"Mind if I finish throwing up first?" Water rushed and gurgled as he flushed.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, this is just loads of fun."

She came into the bathroom and had a brief impression that it was very clean, very white, and totally impersonal.

In the blink of an eye, Zsadist was up on his feet and facing her.

She swallowed a gasp.

Though clearly powerful, his muscles stood out in stark relief, the individual fibers striated and visible. For a warrior, for any male, he was thin, too thin. Frankly he was close to starving. And he was scarred on the front, though only in two places; over his left pectoral and on his right shoulder. Both his nipples were pierced, silver hoops with little balls catching the light as he breathed in and out.

But none of that was what stunned her. The thick black bands tattooed

around his neck and wrists were the shocker.

“Why do you bear the markings of a blood slave?” she whispered.

“Do the math.”

“But that’s...”

“Not supposed to happen to someone like me?”

“Well, yes. You are a warrior. A noble.”

“Fate is a cruel bitch.”

Her heart opened wide for him, and everything she’d thought about him changed. He was no longer a thrill, but a male she wanted to ease. Comfort. Hold. On impulse, she took a step toward him.

His black eyes narrowed. “You really don’t want to come near me, female. Especially not now.”

She didn’t listen. As she closed the distance between them, he backed away until he got caught in the corner between the glass shower door and the wall.

“What the hell are you doing?”

She didn’t answer, because she wasn’t sure.

“Back off,” he snapped. He opened his mouth, his fangs elongating to the size of a tiger’s.

That gave her some pause. “But maybe I can—”

“Save me or some shit? Oh, right. In your fantasy, this is the part where I’m supposed to be transfixed by your eyes. Give my beastly self up into the arms of a virgin.”

“I’m not a virgin.”

“Well, good for you.”

She reached out her hand, wanting to put it on his chest. Right over his heart.

He shrank from her, flattening himself against the marble. As sweat broke out all over him, he craned his neck away and his face squeezed into a wince. His chest pumped up and down, nipple rings flashing silver.

His voice thinned out until it was barely a sound. “Don’t touch me. I can’t...I can’t stand to be touched, okay? It hurts.”

Bella stopped.

“Why?” she said softly. “Why does it—”

“Just get the fuck out of here, *please*.” He could barely get the words out. “I’m about to destroy something. And I don’t want it to be you.”

“You won’t hurt me.”

He closed his eyes. "Goddamn. What is it with you refined types? Are you bred to get off on torturing people?"

"Good lord, no. I just want to help you."

"*Liar,*" he spat, eyes popping open. "You're such a liar. You don't want to help me, you want to poke the rattlesnake with a stick just to see what it does."

"That's not true. At least...not now."

His gaze went cold, soulless. And his voice lost all intonation. "You want me? Fine. You can fucking have me."

Zsadist lunged at her. He took her down to the floor, rolled her over onto her stomach, and dragged her hands behind her back. The marble was cold against her face as his knees jackknifed her legs apart. There was a ripping sound. Her thong.

She went numb. Her thoughts couldn't keep up with the pace of his actions, and neither could her emotions. But her body knew what it wanted. Angry or not, she would take him in.

The weight of him left her briefly, and she heard the sound of a zipper. Then he was lying on her with nothing between his tremendous erection and her core. But he didn't thrust. He just panted as he froze in place, his breath a loud rush in her ear, so loud...Was he sobbing?

His head dropped down onto her nape. Then he rolled off her, covering her up as he left her body. Lying on his back, he put his arms across his face.

"Oh, God," he moaned, "...Bella."

She wanted to reach out to him, but he was so tense she didn't dare. With an uneasy lurch she got to her feet and stared down at him. Zsadist's pants were around his thighs, his sex no longer erect.

Jesus, his body was in rough shape. His stomach was hollow. His hip bones jutted out of his skin. He must indeed only drink from humans, she thought. And not eat much at all.

She focused on the tattooed bands covering his wrist and neck. And the scars.

Ruined. Not broken.

Although she was ashamed to admit it now, the darkness in him had been the largest part of his allure. It was such an anomaly, a contrast to what she'd known from life. It had made him dangerous. Exciting. Sexy. But that was a fantasy. This was real.

He suffered. And there was nothing sexy or thrilling about that.

She picked up a towel and went over to him, laying it gently across his exposed flesh. He jumped and then clutched it to himself. As he looked up at her, the whites of his eyes were bloodshot, but he wasn't crying. Maybe she'd been mistaken about the sobbing.

"Please...leave me," he said.

"I wish—"

"Go. Now. No wishing, no hoping. No nothing. Just leave. And don't ever come near me again. Swear it. *Swear it.*"

"I...I promise."

Bella hurried out through his bedroom. When she was down the hall far enough, she paused and finger-combed her hair, trying to smooth it down. She could feel the thong up around her waist and left it there. She had no place to put the thing if she took it off.

Downstairs the party was still in full swing, and she felt out of place, drained. She went over to Mary, said her goodbyes, and looked around for a *doggen* to take her home.

But then Zsadist came into the room. He'd changed into white nylon workout clothes and had a black bag in his hand. Without looking at her at all, he walked up behind Phury, who was a couple feet away.

When Phury turned around and saw the bag, he recoiled.

"No, Z. I don't want—"

"Either you do it, brother, or I'll find someone else who will."

Zsadist held out the bag.

Phury stared at it. When he took the thing, his hand shook.

The two of them left together.

Chapter Forty-one

Mary put the empty platter down next to the sink and handed Rhage a tray so they could gather empties together. Now that the party was over, everyone was helping clean up.

As they went out into the foyer, she said, “I’m so glad Wellsie and Tohr have taken John in. And I would have loved to see him tonight, but I’m happy to know he’s in good hands.”

“Tohr told me the poor kid can’t get out of bed, he’s so exhausted. All he’s been doing is sleeping and eating. Hey, by the way, I think you’re right. Phury kind of digs Bella. He spent a lot of time looking her over. I’ve never seen him do that before.”

“But after what you said about—”

As they passed the grand staircase, a hidden door underneath it opened.

Zsadist came out. His face was battered, his workout shirt shredded. There was blood on him.

“Oh, shit,” Rhage muttered.

The brother passed them, glassy black eyes not tracking. His small smile of satisfaction seemed totally out of context, like he’d had a good meal or maybe some sex instead of getting the holy hell beaten out of him. He went upstairs slowly, one leg not bending right.

“I had better go clean up Phury.” Rhage gave the tray to Mary and kissed her lightly. “I might be a while.”

“Why would Phury...Oh...God.”

“Only because he was forced to. That’s the only reason, Mary.”

“Well...take as long as you need.”

But before he reached the passageway, Phury came out wearing exercise gear. He looked as spent as Zsadist was, except he didn’t have a mark on him. No, that wasn’t right. His knuckles were bruised and cracked. And there were smudges of blood on his chest.

“Hey, man,” Rhage said.

Phury looked around and seemed startled to find himself where he was.

Rhage stepped in front of him. “My brother?”

Shell-shocked eyes focused. “Hey.”

“You want to go upstairs? Hang out a little?”

“Oh, yeah, no. I’m fine.” His eyes skipped to Mary. Glanced away. “I, ah, I’m fine. Yeah. Really. Party’s ended, I guess?”

Rhage took the bag. Phury’s pale pink shirt was sticking out of it, caught in the zipper.

“Come on, let’s go up together.”

“You should stay with your female.”

“She understands. We go together, my brother.”

Phury’s shoulders sank into his torso. “Yeah, okay. Yeah, I don’t...I’d rather not be by myself right now.”

When Rhage finally got back to his and Mary’s room he knew she’d be asleep, so he closed the door silently.

There was a candle burning on the nightstand, and in the glow he saw that the bed was a mess. Mary had pushed the comforter off and scattered the pillows around. She was lying on her back, a lovely cream nightgown twisted around her waist, riding up on her thighs.

He’d never seen the silk before, knew that she’d worn it because she’d wanted tonight to be special. The sight of her cranked him up, and even though the vibration made him burn, he knelt by her side of the bed. He needed to be close to her.

He didn’t know how Phury kept going, especially on nights like this. The brother’s one and only love had wanted to bleed, had demanded pain and punishment. So Phury had done what he’d been asked to do, accepting the transfer of misery. Z was no doubt sleeping it off. Phury would be rattling around in his own skin for days.

He was such a good male, loyal, strong, devoted to Z. But working off

the guilt over all that had happened to Zsadist was killing him.

God, how could anyone deal with beating the one they loved because that was what the person wanted?

"You smell good," Mary murmured, curling onto her side and looking at him. "Like a Starbucks."

"It's the red smoke. Phury lit up something fierce, but I don't blame him." Rhage took her hand and frowned. "You have another fever."

"It just broke. I feel much better." She kissed his wrist. "How's Phury?"

"A mess."

"Does Zsadist make him do that a lot?"

"No. I don't know what set it off tonight."

"I'm so sorry for both of them. But mostly for Phury."

He smiled at her, loving her for the way she cared about his brothers.

Mary sat up slowly, shifting her legs around so they hung off the bed. Her nightgown had a lace bodice, and through the pattern he could see her breasts. His thighs tightened and he closed his eyes.

It was hell. Wanting to be with her. Being scared of what his body would do. And he wasn't even thinking just about sex. He needed to hold her.

Her hands rose to his face. When her thumb brushed over his mouth, his lips opened of their own accord, a subversive invitation she accepted. She bent down and kissed him, her tongue penetrating, taking what he knew he should not be offering.

"Hmm. You taste good."

He'd smoked some with Phury, knowing he was coming back to her, hoping that the relaxant might take him down a little. He couldn't handle a repeat of what had happened in the billiard room.

"I want you, Rhage." She shifted, opening her legs, pulling his body against her.

Swirling energy condensed along his spine and radiated outward, punching into his hands and feet, making his nails sing with pain and his hair tingle.

He leaned back. "Listen, Mary..."

She smiled and swept the nightgown over her head, tossing it so the thing fell to the floor in a swirl. Her naked skin in the candlelight tangled him up. He couldn't move.

"Love me, Rhage." She took his hands and put them to her breasts. Even as he told himself not to touch her, he cupped the swells, thumbs smoothing

over her nipples. She arched her back. “Oh, yes. Like that.”

He went for her neck, licking up her vein. He wanted to drink from her so badly, especially as she held his head in place as if that was what she wanted, too. It wasn’t that he needed to feed. He wanted her in his body, in his blood. He wanted to be sustained by her, live off of her. He wished she could do the same with him.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled back, trying to take him down on the mattress. God help him, he let her. She was under him now, smelling of the arousal she had for him.

Rhage closed his eyes. He couldn’t deny her. He couldn’t stop the rush inside of him. Trapped between the two, he kissed her and prayed.

Something wasn’t right, Mary thought.

Rhage was staying out of reach. When she wanted to take his shirt off, he didn’t let her get to the buttons. When she tried to touch his erection, he moved his hips away. Even as he suckled her breasts and swept his hand between her legs, it was as if he were making love to her from a distance.

“Rhage...” Her voice broke as she felt his lips on her navel. “Rhage, what’s wrong?”

His big hands parted her legs wide, his mouth going to the inside of her thigh. He nipped at her, his fangs teasing, never hurting.

“Rhage, stop for a minute...”

He put his mouth on her sex, pulling her between his lips, sucking, moving back and forth, savoring. She bowed off the bed at the sight of his blond head dipped low, his bunched shoulders under her knees, her legs so pale and thin against the massive backdrop of him.

She was going to be totally lost in another second.

Grabbing a hunk of his hair, she yanked him away from her.

His teal blue eyes shimmered with sexual power as he breathed through open, glossy lips. Deliberately he took the lower one between his teeth and sucked on it. Then his tongue did a long, slow lick of the upper one.

She closed her eyes, swelling, melting.

“What’s the problem?” she croaked.

“Wasn’t aware there was one.” He brushed her core with his knuckles, rubbing sensitive skin. “You don’t like this?”

“Of course I do.”

His thumb started going in circles. “So let me get back to what I was

doing.”

Before he could drop his head and put that tongue on her again, she clamped her legs shut around his hand as best she could.

“Why can’t I touch you?” she asked.

“We are touching.” He moved his fingers. “I’m right here.”

Oh, God, could she get any hotter? “No, you’re not.”

She tried to withdraw from him and sit up, but his free arm shot out. His palm landed on her chest, pushing her back down onto the bed.

“I’m not finished,” he said in a deep rumble.

“I want to touch your body.”

His gaze flared brightly. But then just like that, the glow was gone and a quick emotion passed over his face. Fear? She couldn’t tell, because he lowered his head. He kissed the top of her thigh, nuzzling her with his cheek, his jaw, his mouth.

“There’s nothing like your heat, your taste, your softness. Let me pleasure you, Mary.”

The words gave her a chill. She’d heard them before. Back in the beginning.

His lips moved to the inside of her leg, closer to home.

“No. Stop it, Rhage.” He did. “One-sided isn’t sexy to me. I don’t want you servicing me. I want to be *with* you.”

His mouth tightened, and he got off the bed with a sharp surge. Was he going to leave her?

But he just knelt on the floor, arms braced on the mattress, head hanging off his shoulders. Collecting himself.

She stretched out her leg, touching his forearm with her foot.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to say no,” she murmured.

He looked up at her. From the low position of his head, his eyes were mere slits in his face, spitting out brilliant beams of neon blue.

Arching her body, she shifted her leg, giving him a little flash of what she knew he wanted so badly.

She held her breath.

In one mighty, fluid movement, Rhage sprang up from the floor and leaped on top of her, landing between her thighs. He undid his pants and—

Oh, thank you, God.

She came immediately, clenching on to all that hardness in waves. When the thundering receded, she felt him shaking above her, inside of her. She

was about to tell him to let go of his self-control when she realized restraint wasn't the problem. He was having some kind of miniseizure, every muscle in his body spasming.

"Rhage?" She looked up into his face.

His eyes were glowing white.

In an attempt to calm him, she ran her hands up his back, only to feel something on his skin. A raised pattern. Lines, almost.

"Rhage, there's something on your—"

He vaulted off her and went straight for the door.

"Rhage?" She grabbed the nightgown and threw it on as she went after him.

Out in the hall he paused to put his pants back together, and Mary nearly screamed. The tattoo was alive. The thing had lifted up from his back, the design throwing shadows.

And it moved even though he was still. The great dragon seethed as it stared right at her, the head and eyes trained on her as its body undulated.

Looking for a way out.

"Rhage!"

He took off like a bullet, going down to the foyer and disappearing through the hidden door under the stairs.

Rhage didn't stop running until he was well inside the training facility. When he got to the locker room, he punched open the doors and went to the communal shower. Turning on one of the showerheads, he slid down the tile and sat under a spray of cold water.

It was all so terribly clear. The vibrations. The humming. Always around Mary, especially if she was aroused.

God, he didn't know why he hadn't figured it out before. Maybe he'd just wanted to avoid the truth.

Being with Mary was different because...he wasn't the only one who wanted to make love to her.

The beast wanted her, too.

The beast wanted out so it could take her.

Chapter Forty-two

When Bella got home she couldn't settle down. After writing for an hour in her diary, she changed into some jeans and a sweatshirt and put her parka on. Outside, flurries were falling in a disorganized rush, swirling in eddies of cold air.

Zipping up the parka, she walked into the taller, rougher grass of the meadow.

Zsadist. She couldn't close her eyes and not see him lying on his back in that bathroom.

Ruined. Not broken.

She stopped and watched the snow.

She'd given him her word that she wouldn't bother him, but she didn't want to keep the promise. God help her, she wanted to try again with him....

In the distance she noticed someone walking around Mary's house. Bella stiffened in fear, but then saw the dark hair, so she knew it wasn't a *lesser*.

Vishous was obviously working on the security-alarm installation. She waved to him and headed over.

After having talked with V at the party, she liked him tremendously. He had the kind of smarts that usually sucked the social skills right out of a vampire, but with that warrior, you had the whole package. He was sexy, all-knowing, powerful, the kind of male that made you think of having babies just to keep his DNA in the gene pool.

She wondered why he wore that black leather glove. And what the tattoos

on the side of his face were about. Maybe she'd ask about those, if it seemed okay.

"I thought you wouldn't have to finish now," she called out as she came up onto the terrace. "What with Mary—"

The dark-haired figure that stepped in front of her was not Vishous. And it was not alive.

"Jennifer?" the *lesser* said in awe.

For a split second Bella froze. Then she turned and ran, moving fast over the ground. She didn't stumble; she didn't falter. She was quick and she was sure as she crossed the meadow, even though she was terrified. If she could make it to her house, she could lock the *lesser* out. By the time he broke in through the glass, she'd be down in the basement where no one could get in. She'd call Rehvenge and take the underground tunnel to the other side of the property.

The *lesser* was behind her—she could hear the pounding of his stride and the rustle of his clothes—but he wasn't closing as they tore across the crispy, frosted grass. Training her eyes on the cheerful lights in her house, she reached down into her muscles for more speed.

The first shot of pain hit her in the thigh. The second in the middle of her back, through the parka.

Her legs slowed and her feet became flippers of enormous size. Then the distance she had to close got greater, stretched to infinity, but she kept going anyway. By the time she made it to her back door, she was weaving. Somehow she got inside, but she struggled to engage the lock with fingers that had gone boneless.

As she wheeled away and lurched for the basement, the sound of the French doors being kicked in was oddly quiet, as if it were happening somewhere far, far away.

A hand closed on her shoulder.

The fighting urge came up strong in her and she hauled off and smashed the *lesser* in the face with her closed fist. He was momentarily stunned and then he hit her back, sending her spinning to the ground. He rolled her over and hit her again, his open palm clapping on her cheekbone, kicking her head back against the floor.

She felt nothing. Not the slap, not her skull's impact. Which was good because she wasn't distracted as she bit him in the arm.

Flailing around together, they knocked into the kitchen table, scattering

the chairs. She got free by grabbing one of the things and knocking him in the chest with it. Disorientated, panting, she crawled away.

Her body gave out at the foot of the basement stairs.

Lying there, she was conscious, but incapable of movement. She had a vague thought that something was dripping into her eyes. Probably her own blood, maybe some of the *lesser*'s.

Her scope of vision swung around as she was turned over.

She looked into the *lesser*'s face. Dark hair, pale brown eyes.

Good God.

The slayer was crying as he lifted her from the floor and cradled her in his arms. The last thing she was aware of was the sight of his tears falling to her face.

She felt absolutely nothing.

O carefully lifted the female out of the cab of his truck. He wished like hell he hadn't agreed to give up his own place so he could live at the persuasion center. He would have preferred to keep her away from the other *lessers*, but then again, if she were here he'd be able to make sure she didn't escape. And if any other slayer got near her...well, that's what they made knives for.

As he carried the female through the door, he looked down at her face. She was so like his Jennifer. Different-colored eyes, but that heart-shaped face. The thick, dark hair. And the body—lean, perfectly proportioned.

Actually, she was more beautiful than Jennifer had been. And she hit harder, too.

He laid the female on the table and fingered the bruise on her cheek, the split lip, the marks on her throat. The fighting had been tremendous: all-out, nothing spared, no stopping until he won and held her spent body in his arms.

Staring at the vampire, he thought back to the past. He'd always been afraid he'd be the one to kill Jennifer, that some night all the hitting would cross the line. Instead he'd ended up murdering the drunk driver who'd nailed her car head-on. The bastard had been liquored up at five in the afternoon, and she'd just been coming home from work.

Taking her killer out had been easy. He'd found where the guy had lived and had waited for him to come home shit-faced. Then he'd beaten the man's head in with a tire iron and pushed him down the stairs. With the body cooling, O had driven north and east, all the way across the country.

Where he'd fallen into the Society.

A car pulled up outside. Quickly he picked up the female and carried her over to the holes. After slipping a halter around her chest, he opened the lid of one and dropped her inside.

"You got another?" U asked as he came inside.

"Yeah." O made a show of looking into the other hole, at the male Mr. X had worked on the night before. The civilian was shifting in the pipe, making little scared, mewing noises.

"So let's get to work on the fresh capture," U said.

O put his boot on the cover over the female. "This one is mine. Anyone touches her and I will skin them with my teeth."

"Her? Excellent. Sensei will be psyched."

"You say nothing to him about this. We clear?"

U frowned, then shrugged. "Sure. Whatever, man. But you know he's going to find out sooner or later. When he does, just don't think it came from me."

O could actually see U keeping the secret, and on impulse he gave the slayer the address of the converted barn he'd been breaking into. A little boon in exchange for the *lesser*'s integrity.

"The name of the female who lives there is Mary Luce. She was seen with a brother. Go get her, my man."

U nodded. "Will do, but it's close to dawn and I need to crash. I've been up for two nights too long, and I'm getting weak."

"Tomorrow then. Now leave us."

U cocked his head and glanced down at the pipe hole. "Us?"

"Get the fuck out of here, U."

U took off and O listened as the sound of the *lesser*'s car faded.

Satisfied, he look down at the mesh cover. And couldn't stop smiling.

Chapter Forty-three

Rhage did not return to the main house until five in the afternoon. As he walked through the tunnel, he made no sound. He'd taken his shoes off because they'd been soggy and then forgotten where he'd left them.

He was a live wire, the burn in him a roar he couldn't get rid of no matter how exhausted he was or how much weight he lifted or how far he ran. At this point, not that he'd even consider it, he couldn't imagine that having sex with a hundred different females would bring him down.

There was no escape for him, but he had to talk to Mary. He dreaded telling her he'd been condemned a century ago and had no idea how to explain that the beast wanted to have sex with her. But she needed to know why he stayed away.

He braced himself and opened their bedroom door. She wasn't there.

He went downstairs and found Fritz in the kitchen.

"Have you seen Mary?" he asked, doing his best to keep his voice level.

"Yes, sire. She departed."

Rhage's blood went glacial. "Where was she headed?"

"She didn't say."

"Did she take anything with her? Purse? Overnight bag?"

"A book. A bagel. A parka."

Outside. Rhage hit the underground tunnel and was at the Pit in half a minute. He pounded on the door.

Vishous took his damn time answering and was sporting boxer shorts and

bed head when he did. “What the—”

“Mary’s out of the house. By herself. I need to find her.”

V went from rubbing his eyes and looking cranked-off to being totally focused. He went to his computer, called up every exterior image he had, and found her curled up in the sun right against the mansion’s front doors. Which was smart. If anything came at her, she’d be able to get into the vestibule in the work of a moment.

Rhage took a deep breath. “How do you get this thing to move in closer?”

“Hit zoom in the upper right-hand corner with the mouse.”

Rhage zeroed in. She was feeding a couple of sparrows, throwing little pieces of her bagel at them. Every once in a while she’d lift her head and look around. The smile on her face was a private one, just a slight lift to her lips.

He touched the screen, brushing his fingertip against her face. “You know, you were wrong, my brother.”

“Was I?”

“She is my destiny.”

“Did I say she wasn’t?”

Rhage looked across all the computer equipment, focusing on V’s tattooed eye. “I am not her first lover. You told me my fate was a virgin. So you were wrong.”

“I am never wrong.”

Rhage frowned, rejecting out of hand the idea that some other female would mean more to him or would take Mary’s place in his heart.

Man, fuck fate if it was going to try to make him love someone else. And to hell with V’s prognostications.

“Must be nice to know it all,” he muttered. “Or at least think you do.”

As he turned and headed for the tunnel, his arm was gripped hard.

V’s diamond eyes, usually so calm, were narrow and pissed off. “When I say I’m never wrong, I’m not on an ego trip. Seeing the future is a goddamned curse, my brother. You think I like knowing how everyone’s going to die?”

Rhage recoiled and Vishous smiled coldly. “Yeah, chew on that. And then realize the only thing I don’t know is the *when*, so I can’t save any of you. Now, you want to tell me why I should showboat about this curse of mine?”

“Oh, God...my brother. I’m sorry....”

V blew out his breath. “S’all right. Look, how about you go get with your

female? She's been thinking about you all afternoon. No offense, but I'm getting tired of hearing her voice in my head."

Mary leaned back against the great brass doors and looked up. Overhead, the sky was a brilliant expanse of blue, the air dry and crisp after the previous night's unseasonably early snowfall. Before the sun set, she wanted to walk the grounds, but the warmth coming through her parka made her lethargic. Or maybe it was just exhaustion. She hadn't been able to sleep after Rhage left their room, had spent all day long hoping he'd come back.

She had no idea what had happened last night. Wasn't even sure that she'd seen what she thought she had. For chrissakes, tattoos did not levitate off someone's skin. And they did not move. At least, not in her world.

Rhage wasn't the only reason for insomnia, though. It was time to find out what the doctors were going to do to her. The appointment with Dr. Della Croce was tomorrow, and when it was over, she was going to know how bad the treatments were going to be.

God... She wanted to talk to Rhage about all that. To try to get him prepared.

As the sun dipped below the tree line, a chill sank into her. Standing up, she stretched and then went through the first of the doors into the vestibule. When those had closed, she showed her face to a camera and the inner set opened.

Rhage was sitting on the floor right next to the entrance. He got up slowly. "Hi. I've been waiting for you."

She smiled awkwardly, shifting her book back and forth between her hands. "I wanted to tell you where I was. But you'd left your cell phone behind when you—"

"Mary, listen, about last night—"

"Wait, before we start on that." She held up her hand. Took a deep breath. "I'm going to the hospital tomorrow. For the consultation before treatment starts."

His frown went so deep, his eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead. "Which hospital?"

"Saint Francis."

"What time?"

"In the afternoon."

"I want someone to go with you."

“A *doggen*?”

He shook his head. “Butch. The cop’s good with a gun, and I don’t want you unprotected. Look, can we go upstairs?”

She nodded and he took her hand, leading her up to the second floor. When they were in their bedroom, he paced incessantly while she sat on the bed.

As they talked about the doctor’s appointment, it turned out preparing him was more like preparing herself. And then they were silent.

“Rhage, explain to me what happened last night.” As he hesitated, she said, “Whatever it is, we’ll get through it. You can tell me anything.”

He stopped. Faced her. “I’m dangerous.”

She frowned. “No, you aren’t.”

“You know what’s all over my back?”

With a chill, she thought about the tattoo moving—

Hold up, she told herself. It hadn’t done that. He’d been breathing hard or something, and that was why the thing had appeared to have shifted positions.

“Mary, it’s part of me. The beast. It’s *inside* of me.” He rubbed his chest and then his arms. Now his thighs. “I try to control it as best I can. But it...I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t know what to do. Even now, being around you, I’m...Christ, I’m a fucking mess.”

As he held out hands that trembled, he did look totally strung out.

“Part of the reason why I have to fight is that combat brings me down,” he said. “And it’s what the females were about. I took them because the release helped keep the beast at bay. Except now that I can’t have sex, I’m unstable. That’s why, last night, I almost lost it. Twice.”

“Wait a...What are you talking about? You have me. Make love with me.”

“I can’t let that happen anymore,” he said through gritted teeth. “I can’t...lay with you anymore.”

Stunned, she just stared at him. “You mean, you won’t be with me at all? Ever again?”

He shook his head. “Never.”

“What the hell? You want me.” Her eyes flicked down to the thick bulge in his pants. “I can see you’re hard. I can smell the need you have for me.”

Suddenly his eyes stopped blinking and flashed white.

“Why do your eyes change?” she whispered.

“Because it...comes alive.”

As she fell silent, he began to breathe in a strange rhythm. Two draws in, one long exhale. Two short gasps, one slow blow.

She struggled to come to grips with what he was saying. And failed, for the most part. He must mean that he had some kind of hard-core alter ego, she thought.

“Mary, I can’t...lay with you because...when I’m with you it wants out.”
Two more quick breaths. “It wants...”

“What, exactly?”

“It wants you.” He backed away from her. “Mary, it wants to...be inside of you. Do you understand what I’m saying? My other side wants to *take* you. I...I have to go now.”

“Wait!” He stopped at the door. Their eyes met. “So let him have me.”

Rhage’s mouth dropped open. “Are you insane?”

No, she wasn’t. They’d had sex with a desperation that had bordered on violence. She’d felt his hard thrusts before. If this other personality of his was tough, she figured she could handle it.

“Just let yourself go. It’s all right.”

Two short gasps. One long sigh. “Mary, you don’t know...what the fuck you are saying.”

She tried to make light of it. “What are you going to do? Eat me?”

When he just stared at her with those white eyes, she went cold. Jesus, maybe he had a point.

But she was definitely insane.

“We’ll tie you down,” she said.

He shook his head as he tripped over his feet and grabbed the doorknob.
“I don’t want to chance it.”

“Wait! Do you know for sure what will happen?”

“No.” He scratched his neck and shoulders, twitching.

“Is there a possibility you’ll just have the release you need?”

“Maybe.”

“So we’ll try it. I’ll run if...well, if something weird happens. Rhage, let me do this for us. Besides, what’s the alternative? I move out? We don’t see each other? We never have sex again? I mean, come on, you’re so itchy right now you’re about to jump out of your skin.”

Fear flooded into his face, tightening his mouth, widening his eyes.

Shame followed on its heels, a terrible, gut-wrenching misery that carried her

across the room to him. She took his hands, feeling them shake.

“I hate to see you like this, Rhage.” When he started to speak, she cut him off. “Look, you know what we’re dealing with here. I don’t. Do what you have to do to secure yourself and we’ll...see what happens.”

He stared down at her. She wanted to press him, but had a feeling that would only push him in the opposite direction.

“Let me go talk to V,” he said finally.

“Chains,” Rhage repeated, while standing in the middle of the Pit’s living room.

V looked over the top of his computer screen. “Like what kind?”

“The ones you’d tow a car with.”

Butch came in from the kitchen, Bud in one hand, sandwich in the other. “Hey, big man. S’up?”

“I want the two of you to chain me to my bed.”

“Kinky.”

“So do we have something we can use, V?”

Vishous repositioned his Sox hat. “The garage. I think there are some in the garage. But Rhage, man, what are you thinking?”

“I need to...be with Mary. But I don’t want to go through the—” He stopped. Exhaled. “I’m afraid of changing. Too juiced.”

V’s pale eyes narrowed. “And you gave up the other females, didn’t you?”

Rhage nodded. “I only want Mary. I couldn’t even get hard for anyone else at this point.”

“Ah, shit, man,” Vishous said under his breath.

“Why’s monogamy a bad thing?” Butch asked as he sat down and popped open the can of beer. “I mean, that’s a damn fine woman you got. Mary’s good people.”

V shook his head. “Remember what you saw in that clearing, cop? How’d you like that anywhere near a female you loved?”

Butch put down the Bud without drinking from it. His eyes traveled over Rhage’s body.

“We’re going to need a shitload of steel,” the human muttered.

Chapter Forty-four

O was getting nervous. The female still wasn't fully conscious, and it had been eighteen hours. Those darts had been calibrated for a male, but she should be up by now.

He worried that he'd given her a concussion.

God, this was just as it had been before. He and Jennifer would fight, and afterward, he'd get all nervous that he'd done some serious damage. While he'd cleaned her up, he'd always carefully tended her wounds, searching for broken bones and deep cuts. And as soon as he was sure she was okay, he'd made love to her even if she was still out of it. Coming while he was on top of her, on the heels of the relief of knowing he hadn't taken things too far, had always been the best kind of release.

He wished he could make love with the female he'd abducted.

O walked over to the hole she was in. He took off the mesh plate, clicked on a flashlight, and trained the beam inside. She was crumpled at the bottom, sagging against the pipe.

He wanted to take her out. Hold her. Kiss her and feel her skin against his. He wanted to come inside of her. But all *lessers* were impotent. The Omega, that bastard, was a jealous master.

O replaced the cover and prowled around, thinking about the night and day he'd spent with the Omega and the depression he'd been in since then. Funny—now that he had that female, his mind had cleared up and a new commitment energized him.

He knew it wasn't Jennifer in that hole, but the vampire was so close to what had been taken from him, and he wasn't going to be picky. He'd accept the gift he'd been given and guard it well.

This time no one was going to take his woman from him. *No one.*

As the shutters lifted for the night, Zsadist got off his pallet and walked naked around the room he stayed in.

What had happened last night with Bella was killing him. He wanted to find her and apologize, but how was that going to go?

Sorry I jumped you like animal. And you don't make me sick. Really.

God, he was *such* an asshole.

He closed his eyes and remembered being up against the wall by the shower while she reached out to his bare chest. Her fingers had been long and elegant, with pretty, unpolished nails at the tips. Her touch would have been light, he suspected. Light and warm.

He should have kept himself together. If he had, he would have known just once as a free male what it felt like to have a female's soft hand on his skin. As a slave he'd been touched too often, and always against his will, but freed...

And it wouldn't have been just any hand. It would have been Bella's.

Her palm would have landed on his chest, between his pecs, and maybe she would have stroked him a little bit. He might have liked that, if she'd gone slowly. Yeah, the more he thought about it, the more he could see himself maybe liking that—

Ah, what the hell was he going on about? The ability to tolerate intimacy of any kind had been raped out of him years ago. And anyway, he had no business entertaining fantasies of a female like Bella. He wasn't worthy even of the angry human whores he was forced to feed from.

Zsadist opened his eyes and dropped the bullshit. The kindest thing he could do for Bella, the best way to make amends, was to be sure she never saw him again, even inadvertently.

Although he would see her. Every night he would visit her house and make sure she was okay. It was a dangerous time now for civilians, and she needed to be watched over. He would just stay in the shadows while he did it.

The thought of protecting her eased him.

He couldn't trust himself to be with her. But he had absolute faith in his ability to keep her safe, no matter how many *lessers* he had to eat alive.

Chapter Forty-five

Mary paced along the second-floor balcony, just outside the bedroom door. She hadn't been able to watch Butch and V go to work with all those chains. And it was hard to know whether the two of them preparing Rhage to have sex with her was erotic as hell or downright scary.

The door opened.

Butch's eyes bounced around, not meeting hers. "He's ready."

Vishous came out lighting a hand-rolled. He took a deep drag. "We're going to hang around here in the hall. In case you need us."

Her first instinct was to tell them to go away. How creepy was it that they'd be right outside while she and Rhage were having sex? Privacy, after all, was a state of mind as well as a secluded, intimate place.

But then she thought of the amount of steel they'd gone in there with. That load of hardware hadn't been at all what she'd expected. Some rope, maybe. Handcuffs. But not the kind of stuff you'd lift an engine block off the ground with.

"Are you sure you have to wait?" she said.

They both nodded.

"Trust us on this one," Butch muttered.

Mary went into the room and closed the door. Candles were lit on either side of the bed, and Rhage was lying naked on the mattress, his arms angled up over his head, his legs spread to the point that they were stretched. Chains wrapped around his wrists and ankles and then looped about the bed's heavy

oak supports.

Rhage lifted his head, teal blue eyes piercing the dimness. “You sure about this?”

Actually, no, she wasn’t. “You look uncomfortable.”

“It’s not bad.” His head fell back. “Although I’m glad those are bedposts and not horses heading off in four different directions.”

She eyed his colossal body, sprawled out for her like some kind of sexual sacrifice.

Holy...Moses. Was this real? Was she really going to—

Stop it, she told herself. *Don’t keep him there any longer than you have to. And once this is over, and he knows everything’s fine, you won’t have to do it again.*

Mary kicked her shoes free, whipped her fleece and turtleneck over her head, and stripped out of her jeans.

Rhage’s head rose again. As she took off her bra and her panties, his sex stirred. Lengthened. She watched him transform for her, hardening, thickening, growing. The arousal brought a flush to his face and a mist of sweat to his beautiful, hairless skin.

“Mary...” His pupils went white and he started to purr, gyrating his hips. The erection moved on top of his stomach, the head of it reaching his belly button and then some. With a sudden rush, his forearms shot up and pulled at the bonds. Chains rattled, shifted.

“Are you okay?” she said.

“Oh, God, Mary. I’m...we’re hungry. We are...starving for you.”

Shoring up her courage, she went over to the bed. She bent down and kissed him on the mouth, then she got up on the mattress. Got up on him.

As she straddled his hips, he writhed under her in waves.

Taking him into her hand, she tried to get him inside. She couldn’t do it on the first try. He was too big and she wasn’t ready and it hurt. She gave it another shot and grimaced.

“You aren’t primed for me,” Rhage said, arching as she put his blunt head against her core one more time. He made some kind of wild, humming sound.

“It’ll be fine, let me just—”

“Come here.” As he spoke, his voice changed. Deepened. “Kiss me, Mary.”

She dropped down onto his chest and took his mouth, trying to will herself to get turned on. It didn’t work.

He broke off the contact, as if sensing her lack of arousal.

“Come up higher on me.” Chains stirred, the metallic sound almost a chime. “Give me your breast. Bring it to my mouth.”

She shimmied up and dropped her nipple to his lips. The instant she felt a gentle sucking, her body responded. She closed her eyes, relieved as heat took hold.

Rhage seemed to recognize the change in her, because the purring sound he made grew louder, a beautiful *twrring* in the air. As he caressed her with his lips, his body moved in a great surge under her, his chest rising and then his neck and his head kicking back. Sweat bloomed anew on his skin, the scent of his need for her filling the air with spice.

“Mary, let me taste you.” His voice was so low now that his words distorted. “Your sweetness. Between your legs. Let me taste you.”

She looked down and two gleaming white orbs stared up at her. There was a hypnotic quality to them, an erotic persuasion she couldn’t deny, even though she knew it wasn’t just Rhage she was with.

She crawled up his body, stopping when she was at his chest. The intimacy was somehow shocking, especially with him tied down.

“Closer, Mary.” Even the way he said her name was not the same. “Come closer to my mouth.”

She moved above him awkwardly, trying to accommodate the position he was in. She ended up with one knee on his chest and the other over his opposite shoulder. He craned his neck and twisted his head, rising to meet her flesh, capturing her with his lips.

His moan vibrated into her core, and she planted a hand on the wall. The pleasure stole her inhibitions completely, rendering her a servant to the sex as he licked and sucked at her. As her body responded in a rush of wetness, there was a sharp sound followed by a groan as the chains were pulled tight and the bed frame’s wood protested. Rhage’s great arms were strained against the bonds that held him, his muscles rigid, his fingers spread wide and curled into clawlike points.

“That’s it,” he said between her legs. “I can feel you...coming.”

His voice sank down and disappeared into a growl.

Her release shot through her and she fell over, sinking onto the bed, her leg dragging across his face before falling onto his neck at the ankle. As soon as her pulses faded, she looked at him. His white, unblinking eyes were wide with wonder and awe. He was utterly captivated by her as he lay there,

breathing in that pattern of two beats in followed by one long release.

“Take me now, Mary.” The words were deep, warped. Not Rhage’s.

But she didn’t feel scared or as if she were betraying him.

Whatever had come out of him, it wasn’t malevolent and it wasn’t entirely unfamiliar either. She’d sensed this...thing in him all along and knew it was nothing she needed to be frightened of. And as she met his eyes now, it was as it had been in the billiard room, a separate presence looking at her, but Rhage just the same.

She moved down him and took him inside her body, fitting him perfectly. His hips surged, and another high call came out of his throat as he began pumping. The thrusts went in and out of her, a delicious pounding slide that came up with increasing force. To keep from getting bucked off, she braced herself on all fours and tried to stay stable.

The keening sound got louder as he went wild, slapping his hips against her, trembling all over. Urgency grew and grew, building, a storm coming, about to hit. Suddenly he bowed off the mattress, the bed squealing as his arms and legs contracted. His eyelids peeled back and white light pierced the room, making it as bright as high noon. Deep inside she felt the contractions of his climax, and the sensations kicked off another orgasm for her, taking her over the edge.

She fell onto his chest when it was over, and they were both still except for the breathing, hers normal, his in that odd rhythm.

She lifted her head and stared into his face. White eyes burned as they focused on her with total adoration.

“My Mary,” the voice said.

And then a low-level electrical shock flowed through her body and charged the air. Every light came on in the room, flooding the space with illumination. She gasped and glanced around, but the surge left as quickly as it came. Just like that, the energy was gone. She looked down.

Rhage’s eyes were normal again, the teal color shining.

“Mary?” he said in a dazed, indistinct voice.

She had to take a few breaths before speaking. “You’re back.”

“And you’re okay.” He lifted his arms, flexed his fingers. “I didn’t change.”

“What do you mean, change?”

“I didn’t...I could see you while it was with me. You were hazy, but I knew you weren’t getting hurt. It’s the first time I’ve ever remembered

anything.”

She didn’t know what to make of that, but saw that the chains had rubbed his skin raw. “Can I let you go?”

“Yeah. Please.”

Getting him undone took some time. When he was free, he massaged his wrists and ankles and watched her carefully, as if reassuring himself she was okay.

She looked around for a robe. “I’d better go tell Butch and V it’s safe to leave.”

“I’ll do it.” He went over to the bedroom door and stuck his head out.

As he spoke with the men, she looked at the tattoo on his back. She could have sworn it was smiling at her.

God, she was nuts. She really was.

She hopped up on the bed and pulled the blankets over herself.

Rhage shut the door and leaned back against it. He still looked tense, in spite of the release he’d had. “After all that...are you finally afraid of me?”

“No.”

“Aren’t you afraid of...it?”

She held her arms out. “Come here. I want to hold you. You look like you’ve got a case of the rattles.”

He approached the bed slowly, as if he didn’t want her to feel stalked or something. She motioned with her hands, urging him to hurry up.

Rhage lay down beside her, but didn’t reach for her.

After a heartbeat she went for him, wrapping her body around his, running her hands over him. When she brushed against his side, catching the edge of the dragon’s tail, Rhage flinched and shifted.

He didn’t want her anywhere near the tattoo, she thought.

“Roll over,” she said. “Onto your stomach.”

When he shook his head, she pushed at his shoulders. It was like trying to move a grand piano.

“Roll over, damn it. Come on, Rhage.”

He complied with no grace whatsoever, cursing and flopping onto his belly.

She ran her hand right down his spine, right over the dragon.

Rhage’s muscles contracted in random order. No, not random. They were the parts of his body that corresponded to where she was touching the tattoo.

How extraordinary.

She stroked his back some more, feeling as if the ink were rising up to meet her palm like a cat.

“Are you ever going to want to be with me again?” Rhage said stiffly. He turned his face to the side so he could see her. Except he didn’t look up.

She lingered on the beast’s mouth, tracing the line of its lips with her fingertip. Rhage’s own set parted as if he were feeling her touch.

“Why wouldn’t I want to be with you?”

“That was a little weird, wasn’t it?”

She laughed. “Weird? I’m sleeping in a mansion full of vampires. I’ve fallen in love with a—”

Mary stopped. *Oh, God.* What had just come out of her mouth?

Rhage pushed his upper body off the bed, twisting his chest around so he could look at her. “What did you just say?”

She hadn’t meant for it to happen, she thought. The falling or the telling. But she would take neither of them back.

“I’m not sure,” she murmured, taking in the brute strength of his shoulders and arms. “But I think it was something along the lines of ‘I love you.’ Yeah, that was it. I, ah, I love you.”

Now, that was lame. She could do a hell of a lot better.

Mary grabbed his face, planted a good hard one on his mouth, and looked him straight in the eye.

“I love you, Rhage. I love you something fierce.”

Those heavy arms wrapped around her and he buried his head in her neck. “I didn’t think you ever would.”

“Am I that hardheaded?”

“No. I’m that undeserving.”

Mary pulled back and glared at him. “I don’t want to hear you say that again. You are the very best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Even with the beast?”

Beast? Sure, she’d sensed something else was in him. But a beast? Still, Rhage was looking so worried, she humored him.

“Yeah, even with him as well. Only can we do it without all the metal next time? I’m very confident that you won’t hurt me.”

“Yeah, I think we can lose the chains.”

Mary urged him back into the crook of her neck and found herself focusing on the *Madonna and Child* across the room.

“You are the oddest miracle,” she whispered to him, looking at the

picture.

“What?” he said into her throat.

“Nothing.” She kissed the top of his blond head and went back to staring at the Madonna.

Chapter Forty-six

Bella took a deep breath and smelled dirt.

God, her head hurt. And her knees were killing her. They were jammed against something hard. And cold.

Her eyes flew open. Darkness. Blackness. Blindness.

She tried to lift a hand, but her elbow ran into a bumpy wall. There was another wall at her back and in front of her and to the sides. She banged around in the small space, panicking. Opening her mouth until it gaped, she found she couldn't breathe. There was no air, only the smell of damp earth, clogging...nose...she—

Screamed.

And something above her moved. Light blinded her as she looked up.

“Ready to come out?” a man’s voice said softly.

It all came back: the race for her house across the meadow, the fight with the *lesser*, the blacking out.

With a quick jerk she was lifted by a chest harness from what she realized was a pipe in the ground. As she looked around in terror, she had no idea where she was. The room was not large and the walls were unfinished. There were no windows, just two skylights in the low ceiling, which were both covered with black cloth. Three bald lightbulbs hung from wires. The place smelled sweet, a combination of fresh pine boards and the *lesser*’s baby-powder scent.

When she saw a stainless-steel table and dozens of knives and hammers,

she trembled so badly she started to cough.

“Don’t worry about all that,” the *lesser* said. “That’s not for you as long as you behave.”

His hands burrowed into her hair and fanned it out over her shoulders. “You’re going to take a shower now, and you’re going to wash this. You’re going to wash this for me.”

He reached over and picked up a bundle of clothes. As he pressed them into her arms, she realized they were her own.

“If you’re good, you get to put these on. But not until we get you clean.” He pushed her toward an open door, just as a cell phone started to ring. “Into the shower. Now.”

Too disoriented and petrified to argue, she stumbled into an unfinished bathroom that had no toilet. Like a drone, she shut herself in and turned the water on with hands that shook. When she pivoted around, she saw the *lesser* had opened the door and was watching her.

He put his hand over the bottom of the cell phone. “Take off the clothes. Now.”

She glanced over at the knives. Bile rose in her throat as she stripped. When she was finished, she covered herself with her hands and shivered.

The *lesser* hung up and put the phone down. “You do not hide from me. Drop your arms.”

She backed up, shaking her head numbly.

“Drop them.”

“Please, don’t—”

He took two steps forward and slapped her across the face, sending her into the wall. Then he grabbed her.

“Look at me. *Look at me.*” His eyes glittered with excitement as she met his stare. “God, it is so good to have you back.”

He put his arms around her, holding her close. The sweet smell of him overwhelmed her.

Butch was one hell of an escort, Mary thought as they departed the Saint Francis oncology suite. Wearing a black wool coat, a 1940s-style hat, and a terrific pair of aviator sunglasses, he looked like a very chic hit man.

Which was not deceiving. She knew he was armed to the teeth, because Rhage had inspected the man’s weapons before he’d let the two of them out of the house.

“You need anything before we go back?” Butch asked when they were outside.

“No, thanks. Let’s head home.”

The afternoon had been grueling and inconclusive. Dr. Della Croce was still conferring with her partners and had ordered Mary to have an MRI as well as another physical. More blood had been drawn also because the team wanted to recheck a couple of liver functions.

God, she hated that she was going to have to come back tomorrow and had yet another night of not knowing to go through. As she and Butch went over to the open lot and got into the Mercedes, she was that horrible combination of wired and tired. What she really needed to do was go to bed, but she was so anxious, sleep was not in her future.

“Actually, Butch, will you take me by my house on the way home? I want to pick up some medicine I left there.” Those low-dose sleeping pills were going to come in handy.

“I’d like to avoid heading over there if we could. Any chance you could pick up what you want at a CVS or something?”

“They’re prescription.”

He frowned. “All right. But you make it quick, and I’m coming in with you.”

Fifteen minutes later they parked in her driveway. In the golden glow of the setting sun, her place looked deserted. There were leaves blown up against the front door, her chrysanthemums were half-dead, and there was a tree limb down in the yard.

She hoped whoever bought it would love the place as much as she had.

When she walked into the house, a cold gust shot through the living room, and it turned out that the window over the kitchen sink was cracked about three inches. As she shut it, she assumed V must have left it open when he’d come over to work on the alarm system before she’d moved out. She locked the thing and then went upstairs to get the Ambien.

Before they left, she paused at the rear sliding door and looked at her backyard. The pool was covered with a patina of leaves, the surface dull. The meadow beyond was an undulation of pale grass—

Something was flashing over at Bella’s house.

Her instincts flared. “Butch, do you mind if we check that out?”

“Not a chance. I need to get you home.”

She slid the door back.

“Mary, it’s not safe.”

“And that’s Bella’s. There shouldn’t be anything moving at her house this time of day. Come on.”

“You can call her from the car.”

“I’ll do it from here.” A moment later she hung up and headed back for the door. “No answer. I’m going over.”

“The hell you are—Mary, hold up! Christ, don’t make me throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of here.”

“You pull something like that and I’ll tell Rhage you had your hands all over me.”

Butch’s eyes flared. “Jesus, you’re as bad a manipulator as he is.”

“Not quite, but I’m learning. Now, are you coming with me or am I going it alone?”

He let out a juicy curse and palmed a gun. “I don’t like this.”

“Duly noted. Look, we’ll just make sure she’s okay. Shouldn’t take more than ten minutes.”

They walked through the meadow, Butch scanning the field with hard eyes. As they got closer to the farmhouse, she could see Bella’s back French door swinging in the wind and catching the sun’s last rays.

“Stay tight with me, okay?” Butch said as they walked onto the lawn.

The door bounced open again.

“Oh, shit,” he muttered.

Its brass lock had been splintered and several panes had been broken.

They stepped cautiously inside.

“Oh, my God,” Mary breathed.

Chairs were strewn about the kitchen along with broken plates and mugs and a shattered lamp. Burn marks streaked the floor and so did some kind of black, inklike substance.

As she bent down to look at the oily smears, Butch said, “Don’t get near that stuff. It’s the blood of a *lesser*.”

She closed her eyes. Those things in the park had Bella.

“Her bedroom in the basement?” he asked.

“That’s what she told me.”

They jogged down to the cellar and found the double doors to her room wide-open. A few of her dresser drawers had been thrown about, and it looked as if some of her clothes had been taken. Which didn’t make a whole lot of sense.

Butch flipped open his cell phone as they went back up to the kitchen.

“V? We’ve had a break-in. Bella’s.” He eyed the black stains on a cracked chair. “She put up a good fight. But I think she’s been taken by the *lessers*.”

As Rhage pulled on a set of leathers, he pinned the cell phone between his shoulder and his ear. “Cop? Let me talk to Mary.”

There was a shuffling sound and then he heard, “Hello? Rhage?”

“Hey, my female, you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Her voice was shaky as hell, but what a fricking relief just to hear it.

“I’m coming for you.” He grabbed his chest holster as he pushed his feet into his shitkickers. “Sun’s just going down now, so I’ll be right there.”

He wanted her safe and at home. While he and the brothers went after those assholes.

“Rhage...Oh, God, Rhage, what are they going to do to her?”

“I don’t know.” Which was a lie. He knew exactly what they were doing to Bella. God help her. “Listen, I realize you’re worried about her. But right now I need you to focus on yourself. I want you on Butch like a screw cap, understand?”

Because it was faster for Rhage to dematerialize to her than have the cop drive her home to him. But he hated her being so exposed.

As he inserted his daggers into the holster, he realized there was only silence coming over the phone. “Mary? Did you hear what I said? Think about yourself. Stay next to Butch.”

“I’m right beside him.”

“Good. Keep it that way. And don’t worry, one way or the other we’ll get Bella back. I love you.” He hung up and pulled on the heavy weight of his trench coat.

As he shot out into the hall, he ran into Phury, who was in leather and fully armed.

“What the fuck is going on?” Zsadist came down the corridor. “I get this hot and bothered message from V about a female—”

“Bella’s been taken by the *lessers*,” Rhage said, checking his Glock.

A cold draft came out of Z like a blast. “*What did you say?*”

Rhage frowned at the brother’s intensity. “Bella. Mary’s friend.”

“*When?*”

“Don’t know. Butch and Mary are at her house—”

Just like that, Zsadist was gone.

Rhage and Phury were right behind him, dematerializing to Bella’s. The three of them ran up the farmhouse’s front steps together.

Mary was in the kitchen, right by Butch who was checking out something on the floor. Rhage thundered over and grabbed on to her, holding her against him so hard their bones met.

“I’m going to take you home,” he murmured into her hair.

“Mercedes’s back at her place,” Butch said as he rose from the black stains he’d been looking at. He tossed a set of keys at Rhage.

Phury cursed while righting a chair. “What’ve we got?”

The cop shook his head. “I think they took her alive, based on this pattern of scorched streaks to the door. Her blood trail burned up when the sun hit it —”

Even before Butch stopped short and glanced at Mary, Rhage started for the door with her. The last thing she needed was to hear the god-awful details.

The cop continued, “Besides, she’s no use to them dead—Zsadist? You okay, man?”

In passing, Rhage glanced over his shoulder at Z.

Z was in a shaking fury, his face twitching along the scar under his left eye. Hell, he looked as if he were going to blow up, except it was hard to believe the capture of a female would matter one way or the other to him.

Rhage paused. “Z, what’s doing?”

The brother turned away as if he didn’t want to be seen, then leaned closer to the window he was in front of. With a low growl, he dematerialized.

Rhage glanced outside. All he could see was Mary’s barn across the field.

“Let’s go,” he said to her. “I want you out of here.”

She nodded and he gripped her arm, leading her from the house. They said nothing as they walked quickly through the grass.

Just as they stepped onto her lawn, glass shattered with a crash.

Something—someone—was thrown out of Mary’s house. Right through the slider.

As the body bounced on the terrace, Zsadist jumped through the opening, fangs bared, face contoured with aggression. He launched himself onto the lesser, catching the thing by the hair and lifting its torso off the ground.

“Where is she?” the brother snarled. When the thing didn’t answer, Z

switched his hold and bit it on the shoulder, right through its leather coat. The slayer howled in pain.

Rhage didn't stick around to watch the show. He raced Mary around the side of the house, only to run into two more *lessers*. Forcing her behind him, he protected her with his body while he went for his gun. Just as he got it into firing position, popping sounds rang out from the right of him. Bullets whizzed by his ear and pinged into the house and hit him in the arm and the thigh and...

He'd never been so glad to have the beast emerge. He threw himself into the vortex with a roar, embracing the change, welcoming the flash of heat and the explosion of his muscles and bones.

As a blast of energy came out of Rhage, Mary was thrown against the house, her head snapping back and banging into the clapboards. She slid to the ground, dimly aware of a huge presence taking Rhage's place.

There were sounds of more gunshots, screams, a deafening roar. Dragging herself over the ground, she hid behind a juniper bush just as someone turned the outdoor lights on.

Holy...Christ.

It was the tattoo come to life: a dragonlike creature covered with iridescent purple and lime-green scales. The thing had a slashing tail with barbs, long yellow claws, and a wild black mane. She couldn't see the face, but the sounds it was making were horrific.

And the beast was deadly, making quick work of the *lessers*.

She covered her head with her arms, unable to watch. She hoped like hell the beast wouldn't notice her, and that if it did, it would remember who she was.

More roaring. Another scream. A terrible grinding crunch.

From the back of the house, she heard a rapid splatter of gunshots.

Someone yelled, "Zsadist! Stop! We need them alive!"

The fighting went on and on and probably lasted only five or ten minutes. And then there was just the sound of breathing. Two breaths in. One slow breath out.

She looked up. The beast was looming over the bush she hid behind, that steady white gaze trained on her. Its face was huge, its jaw carrying a shark's load of teeth, its mane falling over its broad forehead. Black blood ran down its chest.

“Where is she? Where’s Mary?” V’s voice traveled from around the corner. “Mary? Oh...shit.”

The beast’s head whipped around as Vishous and Zsadist pulled up short. “I’ll distract it,” Zsadist said. “You get her out of the way.”

The beast turned on the brothers and positioned itself in an attack stance, claws up, head forward, tail waving steadily. The muscles in its hindquarters quivered.

Zsadist kept coming as V started to close in on where she was.

The beast snarled and snapped its jaws.

Z cursed in its direction. “Yeah, what you gonna do to me that hasn’t already been done?”

Mary shot to her feet. “Zsadist! Don’t!”

Her voice froze everything like a tableau: Zsadist walking forward. The beast preparing to lunge. Vishous sidling up to her. All three of them looked at her for a split second. And then refocused on one another, going right back to the collision course they’d been on.

“Will you two get out of here!” she hissed. “Someone’s going to get hurt. You’re just pissing it off!”

“Mary, we need to get you out of its way.” V’s tone was that awful *let’s-be-reasonable* one men pulled out at traffic accidents.

“It won’t hurt me, but it’s about to tear the two of you apart. Back off!”

No one was listening to her.

“God, spare me from heroes,” she muttered. “Back the fuck off!”

That got their attention. The two brothers stopped moving. And the beast looked over its shoulder.

“Hey,” she murmured, stepping out from behind the bush. “It’s me. Mary.”

The great dragon’s head shook up and down like a horse’s, its mane flashing black. The massive body swung a little toward her.

The beast was beautiful, she thought. Beautiful in the way a cobra was, its ugliness overshadowed by graceful, shifting movements and a predatory intelligence you had to respect.

“You are really huge, you know that?” She kept her voice low as she approached it slowly, remembering how Rhage liked her to talk to him. “And you did an excellent job keeping those *lessers* from me. Thank you.”

When she was right next to the beast, the jaws opened and it called out to the sky while keeping its eyes on her. Abruptly the great head lowered, as if it

were seeking her touch. She reached out, stroking smooth scales, feeling the great tensile strength in the thickness of its neck and shoulder.

“You are scary as hell up close, you really are. But you feel nice. I didn’t think your skin would be so soft or warm.”

Those white eyes flickered to the left and narrowed, its lips curling up into a snarl.

“Tell me someone isn’t coming closer,” she said without varying her tone or turning away. She kept her eyes locked on that huge face.

“Butch, hang back, man,” V muttered. “She’s talking him down.”

The beast growled low in its throat.

“Hey, now, don’t bother with them,” she said. “They’re not going to do anything to either one of us. Besides, haven’t you had enough tonight?”

The creature heaved a great breath.

“Yeah, you’re done,” she murmured, stroking under the mane. Heavy muscles ran in great ropes under the skin. There was no fat, nothing but power.

It eyed the vampires once again.

“No, they’re nothing you and I need to worry about. You just stand right here with me and—”

Without warning, the beast whirled around and knocked her to ground with its tail. It leaped into the air at her house, crashing its upper body through a window.

A *lesser* was pulled out into the night, and the beast’s roar of outrage was cut off as it took the slayer between its jaws.

Mary tucked into a ball, shielding herself from the tail’s barbs. She covered her ears and closed her eyes, cutting off the juicy sounds and the horrible sight of the killing.

Moments later she felt her body being nudged. The beast was pushing at her with its nose.

She rolled over and looked up into its white eyes. “I’m fine. But we’re going to have to work on your table manners.”

The beast purred and stretched out on the ground next to her, resting its head between its forelegs. There was a brilliant flash of light and then Rhage appeared in the same position. Covered in black blood, he shivered in the cold.

She shrugged out of her coat as the brothers ran over. Each one of the men took their jackets off and laid them down on Rhage, too.

“Mary?” he croaked.

“I’m right here. Everyone’s fine. The two of you saved me.”

Chapter Forty-seven

Butch wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen the whole thing for himself. Mary had turned that raging beast into a pet.

Jesus, that woman had some kind of way about her. And courage, too. After seeing that nasty-looking piece of work *eat* those slayers in front of her, she'd stood up in front of the damn thing and actually touched it. He wouldn't have had those kind of *cojones*.

Mary looked up from Rhage's body. "Will some of you help me get him to the car?"

Butch went right over, taking Rhage's legs while V and Zsadist each picked up an arm. They carried him around to the Mercedes and muscled the brother into the backseat.

"I can't drive him home," Mary said. "I don't know the way."

V went to the driver's-side door. "I'll take you guys. Cop, I'll be back in twenty."

"Be careful with them," Butch murmured. When he turned, Phury and Tohr were staring at him with an expectation he was used to.

Without even noticing, he slid right back into homicide detective land and took control.

"Let me tell you what I know so far." He led the two to the back of Mary's house and pointed at a pattern of black patches on the ground. "You see these burned marks in the turf? Bella was taken by the *lesser* and carried across the field from her place to here. She was bleeding, and when the sun

came out her trail of blood incinerated and left this pattern on the ground. And why did he have to take her through the meadow? I think the slayer came looking for Mary and somehow ran into Bella on this piece of property. Bella tore off for her house and he had to bring her back, probably because he'd parked his car here. Follow me, boys."

He went around the side of the house and down to the street where there was a Ford Explorer parked at the curb.

"Bella was, for them, a lucky mistake, and they came back tonight to finish the job by getting Mary. V, I want you to run this car's plates, okay?" Butch eyed the sky. Light snow flurries were coming down. "With this shit falling, the integrity of the outdoor scenes is disintegrating, but I think we know what we can from the exteriors. Let me go through the SUV while you boys clean up the bodies of those *lessers*. I don't need to tell you to take anything you can off them, wallets, BlackBerrys, cell phones. Give it all to V when he comes back so he can take the stuff to the Pit. And stay out of both houses until I clear the scenes."

As the brothers got to work, Butch went through the Explorer with a fine-toothed comb. By the time he was finished, the vampires had finished poofing the *lessers*.

"SUV's clean as a whistle, but it's registered to a guy named Ustead." He handed the registration card to Phury. "Probably a false identity, but would one of you boys check out the address anyway? I'm heading back to Bella's to finish up there."

Tohr checked his watch. "We'll check this Ustead's place out, then go do our civilian sweeps. Unless you need help?"

"No, it's better if I go it alone."

The brother paused. "What about some cover, cop? Because the *lessers* might show up again. None of the ones here got away, but when those boys don't check in, some of their buddies could come back for a look-see."

"I can handle myself." He took out his gun and checked it. "But I spent my clip. Can I borrow another?"

Phury held out a Beretta. "Take this and start fresh."

And Tohr wouldn't leave until Butch accepted one of his Glocks as well.

Tucking one gun into his holster and keeping the other in his hand, Butch took off across the meadow at a jog. His body was primed and pumped, and he covered the distance in no time at all, barely breaking a sweat. As he ran, his mind was sharp as the night air, churning over lists of things to follow up

on and theories about where Bella might have been taken.

As he ran up to the back of the farmhouse, he caught a flash of movement inside. He flattened against the wall next to the broken French door and eased the Beretta's safety off. From inside the kitchen there was the sound of crunching glass, like popcorn on a stove. Someone was walking around. Someone big.

Butch waited until whoever it was got closer; then he jumped into the doorway, aiming the gun at chest level.

"It's just me, cop," Z muttered.

Butch swung the muzzle to the ceiling. "Christ, I could have shot you."

But Z didn't seem to care that he'd almost been plugged. He just leaned down and fished around some dish shards with his fingertip.

Butch took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He wasn't going to ask Zsadist to leave. There was no point in getting into an argument with him, and besides, the brother was acting totally weird, kind of like he was in a stupor. The dead calm in him was eerie as hell.

Z picked something off the floor.

"What is it?" Butch asked.

"Nothing."

"Try not to disturb the scene, okay?"

As Butch looked around, he cursed to himself. He wanted his old partner from the force, José. He wanted his whole Homicide team. He wanted his CSI folks back in the lab.

He allowed himself a couple seconds of black frustration and then got to work. Starting at the busted French doors, he was prepared to go through every inch of the house, even if it took him until dawn.

Mary brought out another round of Alka-Seltzer from the bathroom. Rhage was lying on their bed, breathing slowly, more than a little green around the gills.

After he drank the stuff, he looked up at her. His face tensed and his eyes grew leery, worried.

"Mary...I wish you hadn't seen all that."

"Shh. Just rest for a little while, okay? There's time to talk later."

She got undressed and slid in next to him. The moment she was between the sheets, he curled himself around her, his big body a living blanket.

Lying next to him, all safe and secure, made her think of Bella.

Mary's chest constricted and her eyes squeezed shut. If she believed in God at all, she would have prayed right now. Instead she just hoped as hard as she could.

Sleep came eventually. Until hours later, when Rhage let out a mighty yell.

"*Mary! Mary, run!*"

He began flailing around with his arms. With a lunge, she dove between them, putting herself against his chest, holding him down, talking to him. When his hands still scrambled, she captured them and put his palms to her face.

"I'm okay. I'm right here."

"Oh, thank God...Mary." He stroked her cheeks. "I can't see very well."

In the candlelight, she looked down into his unfocused eyes.

"How long does the recovery take?" she asked.

"Day or two." He frowned and then stretched his legs. "Actually, I'm not as stiff as I usually am. Stomach's a mess, but the aches aren't bad at all. After I change—"

He stopped, jaw going rigid. Then he loosened his hold on her as if he didn't want her to feel trapped.

"Don't worry," she murmured. "I'm not afraid of you even though I know what's in you."

"Hell, Mary...I didn't want you to ever see it." He shook his head. "It's just so awful. The whole thing is awful."

"I'm not so sure about that. I went right up to it, actually. The beast. I was as close as you and I are now."

Rhage's eyes shut. "Shit, Mary, you shouldn't have done that."

"Yeah, well, either I did or the creature would have eaten V and Zsadist. Literally. But don't worry, your beast and I get along just fine."

"Don't do that again."

"The hell I won't. You can't control it. The brothers can't handle it. But that thing listens to me. Like it or not, the two of you need me."

"But isn't it...ugly?"

"No. Not to me." She pressed a kiss to his chest. "It's fearsome and terrifying and powerful and awe-inspiring. And if anyone ever tried to get at me, that thing would wipe out a neighborhood. How could a girl not be charmed? Besides, after seeing those *lessers* in action, I'm grateful for it. I feel safe. Between you and the dragon, I don't have to worry."

When she looked up at him with a smile, Rhage was blinking rapidly.

“Oh, Rhage...it’s okay. Don’t be—”

“I thought if you knew what it looked like,” he said hoarsely, “you wouldn’t be able to see me anymore. All you’d remember is some horrible monster.”

She kissed him and wiped a tear off his face. “It’s a part of you, not all of you or all of what you are. And I love you. With it or without it.”

He gathered her close and tucked her head into his neck. When he let out a deep sigh, she said, “Were you born with it?”

“No. It’s a punishment.”

“For what?”

“I killed a bird.”

Mary glanced at him, thinking that seemed a little extreme.

Rhage smoothed her hair back. “I did a lot more than that, but killing a bird was what finally tipped the scales.”

“Will you tell me?”

He paused for a long while. “When I was young, right after my transition, I was...uncontrollable. I had all this energy and strength and I was stupid with how I used it. Not mean, just...dumb. Showing off. Picking fights. And I, ah, I slept with a lot of females, females who I shouldn’t have taken because they were the *shellans* of other males. I never did it to piss off their *hellrens*, but I took what they offered. I took...everything I was offered. I drank, I smoked opium, fell into laudanum...I’m glad you didn’t know me then.

“That went on for twenty, thirty years. I was a disaster waiting for a coastline, and sure enough I met a female. I wanted her, but she was coy, and the more she teased me, the more I was determined to have her. It wasn’t until I was inducted into the Brotherhood that she came around. Weapons turned her on. Warriors turned her on. She only wanted to be with brothers. One night I took her out into the forest and showed her my daggers and my guns. She was playing with my rifle. God, I can remember the look of it in her hands, it was one of those flintlock ones they were making in the early eighteen hundreds.”

1800s? Good God, how old was he? Mary wondered.

“Anyway, it went off in her hand and I heard something hit the ground. It was a barn owl. One of those lovely white barn owls. I can still see the red stain as its blood seeped onto its feathers. When I picked up the bird and felt

its light weight in my hands, I realized that carelessness was a form of cruelty. See, I'd always told myself that because I meant no harm, anything that happened wasn't my fault. At that moment, though, I knew I was wrong. If I hadn't given the female my gun, the bird wouldn't have been shot. I was responsible even though I didn't pull the trigger."

He cleared his throat. "The owl was such an innocent thing. So fragile and small compared to me as it bled and died. I felt...wretched, and I was thinking about where to bury it, when the Scribe Virgin came to me. She was livid. *Livid*. She loves birds to begin with, and the barn owl is her sacred symbol, but of course the death was only part of it. She took the body from my palms and breathed life back into the bird, sending it off into the night sky. The relief when that bird flew away was tremendous. I felt as if the slate had been wiped clean. I was free, cleansed. But then the Scribe Virgin turned on me. She cursed me, and since then, anytime I get out of control, the beast comes out. In a way, it's really the perfect punishment. It's taught me to regulate my energy, my moods. It's taught me to respect the consequences of all my actions. Helped me understand the power in my body in a way I never would have otherwise."

He laughed a little. "The Scribe Virgin hates me, but she did me one hell of a favor. Anyway...that's the awful why of it. I killed a bird and got the beast. Simple and complicated by turns, right?"

Rhage's chest expanded as he took in a great breath. She could feel his remorse as clearly as if it were her own.

"By turns. Indeed," she murmured, stroking his shoulder.

"The good news is that in another ninety-one years or so, it's over." He frowned, as if considering the prospect. "The beast will be gone."

Funny, he looked a little worried.

"You'll miss it, won't you?" she said.

"No. No, I...It'll be a relief. Really."

Except that frown stayed in place.

Chapter Forty-eight

Around nine the next morning, Rhage stretched in bed and was surprised to feel like himself. He'd never recovered so fast before and had a feeling it was because he hadn't fought the change. Maybe that was the trick. Just go with it.

Mary came out of the bathroom with a load of towels in her arms and headed into the closet to drop them down the chute. She looked tired, grim. Which made sense. They'd spent a lot of the morning talking about Bella, and though he'd done his best to reassure her, they both knew the situation was bad.

And then there was another reason for her to be worried.

"I want to come to the doctor's with you today," he said.

She came back out into the room. "You're awake."

"Yeah. And I want to come with you."

As she walked over to him, she had that tight look she got whenever she was going to argue.

He jumped the gun on the most obvious objection. "Switch the appointment to late in the day. Sun goes down by five thirty now."

"Rhage—"

Anxiety made his voice hard. "Do it."

She put her hands on her hips. "I don't appreciate your pushing me around."

"Let me rephrase myself. Change the appointment, please." But he didn't

ease up on his tone in the slightest. When she got the news, whatever it was, he was going to be by her side.

She reached for the phone, all the while cursing under her breath. When she hung up, she seemed surprised. "Ah, Dr. Della Croce will see me...us...tonight at six."

"Good. And I'm sorry about being such a hard-ass. I just have to be with you when you hear. I need to be a part of this as much as I can."

She shook her head and bent down to pick a shirt up from the floor. "You are the sweetest thug I've ever known."

As he watched her body move, he felt himself harden.

Inside, the beast shifted as well, but there was a curious calm to the sensation. It was no big rush of energy, just a slow burn, as if the creature were content to share his body, not take it over. A communion, not a domination.

Probably because the thing knew that the only way to be with Mary was through Rhage's form.

She kept going around the room, tidying up. "What are you looking at?"
"You."

Sweeping her hair back, she laughed. "So your sight's returning."

"Among other things. Come here, Mary. I want to kiss you."

"Oh, sure. Make up for being a bully by plying me with your body."

"I'll use any asset I've got."

He threw the sheets and duvet off himself and swept his hand down his chest, over his stomach. Lower. Her eyes widened when he took his heavy erection in his palm. As he stroked himself, the scent of her arousal bloomed like a bouquet in the room.

"Come over here, Mary." He twisted his hips. "I'm not sure I'm doing this right. It feels so much better when you touch me."

"You are incorrigible."

"Just looking for some instruction."

"Like you need that," she muttered, taking off her sweater.

They made love in an unhurried, glorious way. But when he held her afterward, he couldn't go to sleep. Neither could she.

That night Mary tried to breathe normally as they took the elevator up to the hospital's sixth floor. Saint Francis was quieter in the evening, but still teeming with people.

The receptionist let them in and then left, pulling a cherry-red coat on as she locked the door behind her. Five minutes later Dr. Della Croce entered the waiting room.

The woman almost managed to hide her double take at Rhage. Even though he was dressed like a civilian, in slacks and a black knit turtleneck, that leather trench coat was still something to see falling from those broad shoulders.

Well, and Rhage was...Rhage. Unbearably beautiful.

The doctor smiled. "Ah, hi, Mary, would you come down to my office? Or will it be the two of you?"

"Both of us. This is Rhage. My—"

"Mate," he said loud and clearly.

Dr. Della Croce's eyebrows shot up, and Mary had to smile in spite of all the tension in her body.

The three of them went down the hall, past the doors of the exam rooms and the scales in the little alcoves and the computer stations. There was no small talk. No chatty, how's-the-weather, gee-the-holidays-are-coming-up-fast kind of stuff. The doctor knew Mary hated social chatter.

Something Rhage had picked up on at TGI Friday's on their first date.

God, that felt like years ago, Mary thought. And who could have foreseen they'd end up here together?

Dr. Della Croce's office was cluttered with neat piles of papers and files and books. Diplomas from Smith and Harvard hung on the wall, but the thing that Mary had always found most reassuring was the line of thriving African violets on the windowsill.

She and Rhage sat down as the doctor went behind her desk.

Before the woman was in her chair, Mary said, "So what are you giving me, and how much can I handle?"

Dr. Della Croce looked up over the medical records and the pens and the binder clips and the phone on her desk.

"I spoke with my colleagues here as well as two other specialists. We've reviewed your records and the results from yesterday's—"

"I'm sure you have. Now tell me where we are."

The other woman took off her glasses and inhaled deeply. "I think you should get your affairs in order, Mary. There's nothing we can do for you."

At four thirty in the morning, Rhage left the hospital in an absolute daze.

He'd never expected to go home without Mary.

She'd been admitted for a blood transfusion, and because evidently those night fevers and the exhaustion were also tied to the beginnings of pancreatitis. If things improved she'd be released the next morning, but no one was making any commitments.

The cancer was strong: Its presence had multiplied even in the short time between when she'd had her quarterly checkup a week ago and when the blood test had been taken the day before. And Dr. Della Croce and the specialists all agreed: Because of the treatments Mary had already been through, they couldn't give her any more chemo. Her liver was shot and just couldn't handle the chemical load.

God. He'd been prepared for one hell of fight. And a whole lot of suffering, particularly on her part. But never death. And not so fast.

They only had a matter of months. Springtime. Maybe summer.

Rhage materialized in the courtyard of the main house and headed for the Pit. He couldn't bear to go back to his and Mary's room by himself. Not yet.

Except as he stood in front of Butch and V's door, he didn't knock. Instead he looked over his shoulder at the facade of the main house and thought of Mary feeding the birds. He pictured her there, on the steps, that lovely smile on her face, the sunshine in her hair.

Sweet Jesus. What was he going to do without her?

He thought of the strength and resolve in her eyes after he'd fed from another female in front of her. Of the way she loved him even though she'd seen the beast. Of her quiet, shattering beauty and her laugh and her gunmetal gray eyes.

Mostly he thought of her the night she'd torn out of Bella's, running out into the coldness on her bare feet, running out into his arms, telling him that she wasn't okay.... Finally turning to him for help.

He felt something on his face.

Aw, fuck. Was he crying?

Yup.

And he didn't care that he was going soft.

He looked down at the pebbles in the driveway and was struck by the absurd thought that they were very white in the floodlights. And so was the stuccoed retaining wall that ran around the courtyard. And so was the fountain in the center that had been drained for winter—

He froze. Then his eyes peeled open.

He slowly pivoted toward the mansion, lifting his head up to the window of their room.

Purpose galvanized him and carried him into the vestibule at a dead run.

Mary lay in the hospital bed and tried to smile at Butch, who was sitting in a chair in the corner with his hat and sunglasses on. He'd come as soon as Rhage had left, to guard her and keep her safe until nightfall.

"You don't have to be social," Butch said softly, as if he knew she was struggling to be polite. "You just do your thing."

She nodded and looked out the window. The IV in her arm wasn't bad; it didn't hurt or anything. Then again, she was so numb they could have hammered nails into her veins and she probably wouldn't have felt a thing.

Holy hell. The end had finally come. The inescapable reality of dying was finally upon her. No outs this time. Nothing to be done, no battle to be waged. Death was no longer an abstract concept, but a very real, impending event.

She felt no peace. No acceptance. All she had was...rage.

She didn't want to go. Didn't want to leave the man she loved. Didn't want to give up the messy chaos of life.

Just stop this, she thought. *Someone...just stop this.*

She closed her eyes.

As everything went dark, she saw Rhage's face. And in her mind she touched his cheek with her hand and felt the warmth of his skin, the strong bones underneath. Words started marching through her head, coming from someplace she didn't recognize, going...nowhere, she supposed.

Don't make me go. Don't make me leave him. Please...

God, just let me stay here with him and love him a little longer. I promise not to waste the moments. I'll hold him and never let him go.... God, please. Just stop this....

Mary started to cry as she realized she was praying, praying with everything she had, throwing her heart open, begging. As she called out to something she didn't even believe in, an odd revelation came to her in the midst of the desperation.

So this was why her mother had believed. Cissy hadn't wanted to get off the carnival ride, hadn't wanted the carousel to stop turning, hadn't wanted to leave...Mary. The impending separation from love, more than the ending of life, had kept all that faith alive. It was the hope of having a little more time

to love that had made her mother hold crosses, and look to the faces of statues, and cast words up into the air.

And why had those prayers focused heavenward? Well, it kind of made sense, didn't it? Even when there were no more options for the body, the heart's wishes find a way out, and as with all warmth, love rises. Besides, the will to fly was in the nature of the soul, so its home had to be up above. And gifts did come from the sky, like spring rain and summer breezes and fall sun and winter snow.

Mary opened her eyes. After blinking her vision clear, she focused on the dawn's nascent glow behind the city's nest of buildings.

Please...God.

Let me stay here with him.

Don't make me go away.

Chapter Forty-nine

Rhage raced into the house, whipping off his trench coat as he pounded through the foyer and up the stairs. Inside their room he ditched his watch and changed into a white silk shirt and pants. After grabbing a lacquered box from the top shelf of the closet, he went to the center of the bedroom and got down on his knees. He opened the box, took out a string of marble-sized black pearls, and put the necklace on.

He sat back on his heels, laid his hands palm up on his thighs, and closed his eyes.

Slowing down his breathing, he sank into the position until his bones, not his muscles, held him in place. He swept his mind clean as best he could and then waited, begging to be seen by the only thing that might save Mary.

The pearls warmed against his skin.

When he opened his eyes he was in a brilliant courtyard of white marble. The fountain here was working splendidly, the water sparkling as it went up into the air and came down into the basin. A white tree with white blossoms was in the corner, the songbirds trilling on its branches the only splashes of color in the place.

“To what do I owe this pleasure,” the Scribe Virgin said from behind him. “You have surely not come about your beast. There is quite some time left on that, as I recall.”

Rhage remained on his knees, his head bowed, his tongue tied. He found that he didn’t know where to begin.

“Such silence,” the Scribe Virgin murmured. “Unusual for you.”

“I would choose my words carefully.”

“Wise, warrior. Very wise. Given what you have come here for.”

“You know?”

“No questions,” she snapped. “Truly, I am getting tired of having to remind the Brotherhood of this. Perhaps when you return you will recall such etiquette to the others.”

“My apologies.”

The edge of her black robes came into his vision. “Lift your head, warrior. Look at me.”

He took a deep breath and complied.

“You are in such pain,” she said softly. “I can feel your burden.”

“My heart bleeds.”

“For this human female of yours.”

He nodded. “I would ask that you save her, if it would not offend.”

The Scribe Virgin turned away from him. Then she floated over the marble, taking a slow turn around the courtyard.

He had no idea what she was thinking. Or whether she was even considering what he’d requested. For all he knew she was out for a little exercise. Or about to walk away from him.

“That I would not do, warrior,” she said as she read his mind. “In spite of our differences, I would not desert you in that manner. Tell me something—what if saving your female meant you would never be free of the beast? What if having her live meant you must remain in your curse until you go unto the Fade?”

“I would happily keep it within me.”

“You hate it.”

“I love her.”

“Well, well. Clearly you do.”

Hope fired in his chest. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if they had struck a deal, if Mary could live now. But he wasn’t going to risk tipping the balance of the negotiation by pissing the Scribe Virgin off with another question.

She smoothed her way over to him. “You have changed quite a bit since we had our last private meeting in that forest. And I believe this is the first selfless thing you have ever done.”

He exhaled, a sweet relief singing in his veins. “There is nothing I would

not do for her, nothing I would not sacrifice.”

“Fortunate for you, in a way,” the Scribe Virgin murmured. “Because in addition to keeping the beast within you, I require you to give up your Mary.”

Rhage jerked, convinced he hadn’t heard right.

“Yes, warrior. You understand me perfectly.”

A death chill went through him, stealing his breath.

“Here is what I offer you,” she said. “I can take her out of the continuum of her fate, making her whole and healthy. She will grow no older, she will never be ill, she will decide when she wishes to go unto the Fade. And I will give her the choice to accept the gift. However, as I present the proposal, she will not know of you, and whether or not she consents, you and your world will be ever unknown to her. Likewise, she will not be known by any of those whom she has met, *lessers* included. You will be the only one who remembers her. And if ever you approach her, she will die. Immediately.”

Rhage swayed and fell forward, catching himself with his hands. It was a long time before he could squeeze any words from his throat.

“You truly hate me.”

A mild electrical shock went through him, and he realized the Scribe Virgin had touched him on the shoulder.

“No, warrior. I love you, my child. The punishment of the beast was to teach you to control yourself, to learn your limits, to focus inward.”

He lifted his eyes to her, not caring what she saw in them: hatred, pain, the urge to lash out.

His voice trembled. “You are taking my life from me.”

“That is the point,” she said in an impossibly gentle tone. “It is yin and yang, warrior. Your life, metaphorically, for hers, in fact. Balance must be kept, sacrifices must be made if gifts are given. If I am to save the human for you, there must be a profound pledge on your part. Yin and yang.”

He put his head down.

And screamed. Screamed until the blood rushed into his face and stung. Until his eyes watered and all but popped out of his skull. Until his voice cracked and faded into hoarseness.

When he was finished, he focused his eyes. The Scribe Virgin was kneeling in front of him, her robes spilling out all around her, a pool of black on the white marble.

“Warrior, I would spare you this if I could.”

God, he almost believed that. Her voice was so hollow.

“Do it,” he said roughly. “Give her the choice. I would rather she live long and happily without knowing me than die now.”

“So be it.”

“But I beg of you...let me say good-bye. One last goodbye.”

The Scribe Virgin shook her head.

Pain ripped through him, slicing him until he wouldn’t have been surprised to find his body bleeding.

“I beg—”

“It is now or not.”

Rhage shuddered. Closed his eyes. Felt death come to him as surely as if his heart had stopped beating.

“Then it is now,” he whispered.

Chapter Fifty

Butch's first stop when he got home from the hospital was the mansion's upstairs study. He had no idea why Rhage had called and told him to leave Mary's room. His impulse had been to argue with the brother, but the sound of the guy's voice had been freaky, so he'd left it alone.

The Brotherhood was waiting in Wrath's room, all grim and focused. And they were waiting for him. As Butch stared at them all, he felt as if he were about to make a report to the department, and after a couple months of sitting on his ass, it was good to be back on the job.

Though he was damn sorry his skills were needed.

"Where's Rhage?" Wrath asked. "Someone go get him."

Phury disappeared. When he came back he left the door open. "My man's in the shower. He'll be right with us."

Wrath looked across his desk at Butch. "So what do we know?"

"Not much, although I'm encouraged by one thing. Some of Bella's clothes were gone. She was a neat type, so I could tell it was just jeans and nightgowns, not the kind of stuff she might have taken to a dry cleaners or something. It gives me hope they might want her alive for a while." Butch heard the door shut behind him and figured Rhage had come in. "Anyway, both sites, Mary's and Bella's, were pretty clean, although I'm going to do one more sweep—"

Butch realized nobody was listening to him. He turned around.

A ghost had walked into the room. A ghost who looked a lot like Rhage.

The brother was dressed in white and had some kind of scarf wrapped around his throat. There were white binds on both his wrists, too. All his drinking points, Butch thought.

“When did she go unto the Fade?” Wrath asked.

Rhage just shook his head and went over to one of the windows. He stared out of it even though the shutters were down and he couldn’t see anything.

Butch, who was floored by the death that had apparently come so fast, didn’t know whether to continue or not. He glanced at Wrath, who shook his head and then got to his feet.

“Rhage? My brother? What can we do for you?”

Rhage looked over his shoulder. He stared at each one of the males in the room, ending on Wrath. “I can’t go out tonight.”

“Of course not. And we will stay in and mourn with you.”

“No,” Rhage said sharply. “Bella’s out there. Find her. Don’t let her... go.”

“But is there anything we can do for you?”

“I can’t...I find that I can’t concentrate. On anything. I can’t really...”

Rhage’s eyes drifted to Zsadist. “How do you live with it? All the anger. The pain. The...”

Z shifted uneasily and stared at the floor.

Rhage turned his back to the group.

The silence in the room stretched out.

And then with a slow, halting walk, Zsadist went over to Rhage. When he was standing next to the brother, he didn’t say a word, didn’t lift a hand, didn’t make a sound. He just crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his shoulder into Rhage’s.

Rhage jerked as if surprised. The two men looked at each other. And then both stared out the obscured window.

“Continue,” Rhage commanded in a dead voice.

Wrath sat back down behind the desk. And Butch started to speak again.

By eight o’clock that night, Zsadist was finished at Bella’s.

He poured the last bucket of suds out in the kitchen sink and then put the container and the mop away in the closet next to the garage door.

Her house was now clean and everything was back where it needed to be. When she came home, all she would see was a whole lot of normal.

He fingered the small chain with little diamonds in it that was at his throat. He'd found the thing on the floor the night before, and after he'd fixed the broken link he'd put it on. It barely went around his neck.

He scanned the kitchen one more time and then took the stairs down to her bedroom. He'd refolded her clothes neatly. Slid the dresser drawers back in place. Lined up her perfume bottles again on the vanity. Vacuumed.

Now he opened her closet and touched her blouses and sweaters and dresses. He leaned in and breathed deeply. He could smell her, and the scent made his chest burn.

Those fucking bastards were going to bleed for her. He was going to tear them apart with his bare hands until their black blood ran over him like a waterfall.

With vengeance throbbing in his veins, he went over to her bed and sat down. Moving slowly, as if he might crash the frame, he lay back and put his head on her pillows. There was a spiral-bound book on top of the duvet and he picked it up. Her handwriting filled the pages.

He was illiterate, so he couldn't understand the words, but they were beautifully composed, her penmanship curling into a lovely pattern over the paper.

On a random page, he caught the one word that he could read.

Zsadist.

She'd written his name. He flipped through the journal, looking closely. She'd written his name a lot recently. He cringed as he imagined the content.

Closing the book, he returned it to the precise spot it had been in. Then he glanced to the right. There was a hair ribbon on the bed stand, as if she'd whipped the thing off before getting into bed. He picked it up and wound the black satin through his fingers.

Butch appeared at the base of the stairs.

Z shot up off the bed as if he'd been caught doing something wrong. Which, of course, he had been. He shouldn't be all over Bella's private space.

But at least Butch didn't seem any more comfortable than he was at their meeting.

"What the hell are you doing here, cop?"

"I wanted to look at the scene again. But I see you're handy with a paper towel."

Zsadist glared across the room. "Why do you care about all this? What's the abduction of one of our females to you?"

“It matters.”

“In our world. Not yours.”

The cop frowned. “Scuse me, Z, but given your reputation, what’s all this to you?”

“Just doing my job.”

“Yeah, right. Then why are you marking time on her bed? Why’d you spend hours cleaning up her house? And why are you holding that ribbon so tight your knuckles are white?”

Z looked down at his hand and slowly released his grip. Then he pegged the human with a stare.

“Don’t fuck with me, cop. You won’t like what comes back at you.”

Butch cursed. “Look, I just want to help find her, Z. I gotta...It means something to me, okay? I don’t like women getting brutalized. I got some nasty personal history with this kind of shit.”

Zsadist pushed the strip of satin into his pocket and circled the human, closing in on him. Butch sank into a defensive position, waiting for the attack.

Z stopped dead in front of the guy. “The *lessers* have probably killed her already, haven’t they?”

“Maybe.”

“Probably.”

Z leaned forward and took a deep breath. He could smell no fear coming out of the human even though his big body was tense and ready to fight. This was good. The cop was going to need some balls if he really wanted to play in the Brotherhood’s sandbox of hell.

“Tell me something,” Z muttered. “Will you help me slaughter the *lessers* that took her? You got the stomach for that, cop? Because...straight up, I’m going to go crazy over this.”

Butch’s hazel eyes narrowed. “They take from you, they take from me.”

“I’m nothing to you.”

“You’re wrong about that. The Brotherhood’s been good to me, and I stick with my boys, you feel me?”

Z measured the male. The aura Butch threw off was all business. Down-to-the-blood business.

“I don’t do gratitude,” Z said.

“I know.”

Z braced himself and extended his hand. He felt the need to seal the pact

between them, even though he was going to hate the sensation. Luckily, though, the human's grip was gentle. Like he knew how hard the contact was for Z to handle.

"We go after them together," the cop said as they dropped their arms.
Z nodded. And the two of them headed upstairs.

Chapter Fifty-one

Mary waved as the big Mercedes eased to a stop in front of the hospital. She jogged over at such a clip that Fritz was just getting out of the driver's side as she jumped into the car.

"Thanks, Fritz! Listen, I've called Rhage six times and he's not answering his cell. Is everything okay?"

"All is well. I saw your sire this afternoon."

She beamed at the *doggen*. "Good! And as it's eight o'clock, it's still early for him to have gone out."

Fritz put the car in drive and gently eased into traffic. "Is there anything you require—"

She reached across the seat, threw her arms around the little old man, and kissed him on the cheek. "Take me home fast, Fritz. Faster than you've ever gone before. Break every traffic law."

"Madam?"

"You heard me. As fast as you can!"

Fritz was all flustered from the attention, but he recovered quickly and punched the gas.

Mary put her seat belt on and then popped the visor down and looked at herself in the little lighted mirror. Her hands were shaking as she put them to her cheeks, and giggles broke out of her mouth, especially as the car careened around a corner and she was thrown against the door.

When sirens sounded, she laughed even harder.

"I beg your pardon, madam." The *doggen* glanced over at her. "But I must evade the police and this might get rather bumpy."

"Blow their doors off, Fritz."

The *doggen* flipped something and all the lights in and outside the car were extinguished. Then the Mercedes let out a roar that reminded her of that ride in the GTO with Rhage through the mountains.

Well, except they'd had headlights then.

She grabbed on to the seat-belt strap and shouted over the din of squealing tires, "Tell me you have perfect night vision or something!"

Fritz smiled at her calmly, as if they were just chatting it up in the kitchen. "Oh, yes, madam. Perfect."

With a jerk to the left he swerved around a minivan and then shot down an alley. Slamming on the brakes to avoid hitting a pedestrian, he nailed the gas pedal to the floor again as soon as he had a clear path down the narrow street. Darting out the other side, he cut off a taxi, dodged a bus. Even made an SUV the size of the *QE II* think twice before pulling out in front of him.

The old guy was an artist behind the wheel.

Okay, an artist in a Jackson Pollock kind of way, sure, but amazing nonetheless.

And then he shot into a parking spot. Right on the main drag. Just like that.

The chorus of sirens got so loud she had to yell. "Fritz, they're going to _____"

Two police cars sped right by them.

"One more moment, madam."

Another cop car went flying down the street.

Fritz eased out and continued at a brisk pace.

"Nice trick, Fritz."

"With no offense to you, madam, human minds are rather easily manipulated."

As they sped along, she laughed and fidgeted and tapped her fingers on the armrest. The trip seemed to take forever.

When they got to the compound's first set of double gates, she was practically vibrating, she was so excited. And the moment they pulled up in front of the house, she bolted from the car, not even bothering to shut the door.

"Thanks, Fritz!" she called out over her shoulder.

“You’re welcome, madam!” he shouted back.

She burst through the vestibule and bounded up the grand staircase. As she took the corner at the top, going at a dead run, her purse swung out and clipped a lamp. She doubled back and righted the thing before it crashed.

She was laughing out loud as she burst into their bedroom—

Mary careened to a halt.

In the center of the room Rhage was naked and kneeling in a trance on some kind of black slab. He had white binds tied around his neck and wrists. And there was blood dripping onto the rug, though she couldn’t see where it was coming from.

His face looked as if he’d aged decades since she’d seen him.

“Rhage?”

His eyes slowly opened. They were opaque, dull. He blinked at her and frowned.

“Rhage? Rhage, what’s going on?”

Her voice seemed to snap him to attention.

“What are you—” He stopped. Then shook his head as if he were trying to clear a vision. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m cured! I’m a miracle!”

As she ran to him, he leaped out of the way, holding his hands up and glancing around frantically. “Get out! She’ll kill you! She’ll take it all back! Oh, God, get away from me!”

Mary stopped dead. “What are you talking about?”

“You took the gift, didn’t you!”

“How do you...how do you know about that weird dream?”

“Did you take the gift!”

Jesus. Rhage had lost it completely. Shaking, naked, he was bleeding from his shins and white as limestone.

“Calm down, Rhage.” Boy, this was so not how she’d pictured this conversation going. “I don’t know about any gift. But listen to this! I fell asleep while I was getting another MRI and something happened to the machine. It exploded or something, I guess, I don’t know, they said there was some flash of light. Anyway, when they took me back upstairs, they drew some blood and everything was perfect. Perfect! I’m clean! No one has any idea what happened. It’s like the leukemia just disappeared and my liver fixed itself. They’re calling me a medical miracle!”

Happiness poured through her. Until Rhage grabbed her hands and

squeezed so hard he hurt her.

“You need to leave. Now. You can’t know me. You have to go. Don’t ever come back here again.”

“What?”

He started pushing her out of the room, and then dragged her when she resisted.

“What are you doing? Rhage, I don’t—”

“You have to go!”

“Warrior, you can stop now.”

The wry female voice halted them both.

Mary looked over his shoulder. A small figure covered in black was in the corner of the room, light glowing from underneath the flowing robe.

“My dream,” Mary whispered. “You were the woman in my dream.”

Rhage’s arms crushed her as they went around her body, and then he thrust her away from him.

“I did not not go to her, Scribe Virgin. I swear, I didn’t—”

“Be at ease, warrior. I know you kept the bargain.” The small figure floated over to them, not walking, just moving through the room. “And all is well. You just left out one small detail about the situation, something I did not know until I approached her.”

“What?”

“You failed to tell me she could no longer bear children.”

Rhage looked at Mary. “I didn’t know.”

Mary nodded and wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s true. I’m infertile. From the treatments.”

The black robes shifted. “Come here, female. I will touch you now.”

Mary stepped forward in a daze as a glowing hand appeared from the silk. The meeting of their palms resulted in a warm electrification.

The woman’s voice was low and strong. “I regret that your ability to bring forward life has been taken from you. The joy of my creation sustains me always, and I take great sorrow that you will never hold flesh of your flesh in your arms, that you will not see your own eyes staring at you from the face of another, that you will never mix the essential nature of yourself with the male you love. What you have lost is enough of a sacrifice. To take the warrior from you as well...that is too much. As I told you, I give you life eternal until you decide to go unto the Fade of your own volition. And I have a feeling that choice shall be made when it is this warrior’s turn to leave the

earth.”

Mary’s hand was released. And all the joy she’d felt drained out of her. She wanted to cry.

“Oh, hell,” she said. “I’m still dreaming, aren’t I? This is all just a dream. I should have known....”

Low, feminine laughter came out of the robes. “Go to your warrior, female. Feel the warmth of his body and know this is real.”

Mary turned. Rhage was staring at the figure in disbelief as well.

She stepped up to him, wrapped her arms around him, heard his heart beating in his chest.

The black figure disappeared, and Rhage started speaking in the Old Language, words falling from his mouth so fast she couldn’t have understood them even if they’d been in English.

Prayers, she thought—he was praying.

When he finally stopped, he looked down at her. “Let me kiss you, Mary.”

“Wait, will you please tell me what just happened? And who she is?”

“Later. I can’t...I’m not thinking clearly right now. Actually, I’d better go lie down for a minute. I feel like I’m going to faint, and I don’t want to fall on you.”

She threw his heavy arm over her shoulder and grabbed him around the waist. When he leaned on her, she grunted from the weight.

As soon as Rhage was lying down flat, he tore off the white sashes at his wrists and neck. It was then that she saw that sparkles were mixed with the blood on his shins. She eyed the black slab. There were chips on it, like glass. Or diamonds? God, he’d been kneeling on them. No wonder he’d been cut raw.

“What were you doing?” she asked.

“Mourning.”

“Why?”

“Later.” He pulled her down on top of him and held her hard.

Feeling his body under hers, she wondered whether it was possible for miracles to actually happen. And not as in the I’ve-just-had-some-really-good-luck kind, but the mystical, incomprehensible variety. She thought of the doctors racing around with her blood work and her charts. Felt the shock of electricity going through her arm and into her chest as the black-robed figure had touched her.

And she thought about the desperate prayers she'd thrown to the sky. Yes, Mary decided. Miracles did actually happen in the world. She started laughing and crying at the same time and drank in Rhage's soothing response to the outburst.

A little later she said, "Only my mother could have believed this." "Believed what?"

"My mother was a good Catholic. She had faith in God and salvation and eternal life." She kissed his neck. "So she would have believed in all this instantly. And she would have been convinced the mother of God had been under those black robes just now."

"Actually, that was the Scribe Virgin. Who's a lot of things, but not Jesus's mom. At least, not as far as our lexicon goes."

She lifted her head. "You know, my mother always told me I'd be saved whether I believed in God or not. She was convinced I couldn't get away from the Grace because of what she named me. She used say that every time someone called out for me or wrote my name or thought about me, I was protected."

"Your name?"

"Mary. She named me after the Virgin Mary."

Rhage's breath caught. And then he laughed softly.

"What's so funny?"

His eyes were a bright, shining teal blue. "Just that V...well, Vishous is never wrong. Oh, Mary, my beautiful virgin, will you let me love you for as long as I live? And when I go unto the Fade, will you come with me?"

"Yes." She stroked his cheek. "But does it bother you that I can't have your children?"

"Not in the slightest. I have you, that's all that matters."

"You know," she murmured, "there's always adoption. Do vampires ever adopt?"

"Just ask Tohrment and Wellsie. I can already tell they think of John as their own." Rhage smiled. "You want a baby, I'll get you one. And you know, I might be okay as a dad."

"I think you'll be more than okay."

When she bent down to kiss him, he stopped her. "Ah, there's just one other thing."

"What?"

"Well, we're stuck with the beast. I kind of bargained with the Scribe

Virgin—”

Mary pulled back. “You bargained?”

“I had to do something to save you.”

She stared at him, stunned, and then closed her eyes. He had set the wheels in motion; he had saved her.

“Mary, I had to trade something—”

She kissed him hard. “Oh, God, I love you,” she breathed.

“Even if it means you’re going to have to live with the beast? Because the curse is perpetual now. Set in stone. Forever.”

“I told you, that’s fine with me.” She smiled. “I mean, come on. He’s kind of cute, in a Godzilla sort of way. And I’ll look at it as a two-for-one kind of deal.”

Rhage’s eyes flashed white as he rolled her over and put his mouth on the side of her neck.

“I’m glad you like him,” he murmured, his hands tugging up her shirt.

“Because the two of us are yours. For as long as you’ll have us.”

“That would be eternally,” she said as she let herself go.

And reveled in all the love.

LOVER AWAKENED

*A Novel of the Black
Dagger Brotherhood*

J. R. Ward



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Dark Lover
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Dedicated to: *You*.
There will never be another like you.
For me...you are the one.
Yeah, I don't have enough words for this....

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With love to my family.

Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns

ahvenge (v.) Act of mortal retribution, carried out typically by a male loved one.

Black Dagger Brotherhood (pr. n.) Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, Brothers possess immense physical and mental strength as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings (for the most part), and are inducted into the Brotherhood upon nomination by the Brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds (e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.).

blood slave (n.) Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has largely been discontinued, though it has not been outlawed.

the Chosen (n.) Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males, but can be mated to Brothers at the Scribe Virgin's direction to propagate their class. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the Brotherhood,

but that practice has been abandoned by the Brothers.

cohntehst (n.) Conflict between two males competing for the right to be a female's mate.

doggen (n.) Member of the servant class within the vampire world. *Doggen* have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years.

the Fade (pr. n.) Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.

First Family (pr. n.) The king and queen of the vampires, and any children they may have.

ghardian (n.) Custodian of an individual. There are varying degrees of *ghardians*, with the most powerful being that of a **secluded** female.

glymera (n.) The social core of the aristocracy, roughly equivalent to Regency England's ton.

hellren (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.

leelan (adj.) A term of endearment loosely translated as "dearest one."

Lessening Society (pr. n.) Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species.

lesser (n.) De-souled human who targets vampires for extermination as a member of the Lessening Society. **Lessers** must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, blushless, and pale-eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter into which their heart was placed after it was removed.

mahmen (n.) Mother. Used both as an identifier and a term of affection.

nalla (adj.) A term of endearment meaning “beloved.”

needing period (n.) Female vampire’s time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female’s transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.

the Omega (pr. n.) Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers, though not the power of creation.

princeps (n.) Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgin’s Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.

pyrocant (n.) Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.

rythe (n.) Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him-or herself without defenses.

the Scribe Virgin (pr. n.) Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.

seclusion (n.) Status conferred by the king upon a female of the aristocracy as a result of a petition by the female's family. Places the female under the sole direction of her **ghardian**, typically the eldest male in her household. Her **ghardian** then has the legal right to determine all aspects of her life, restricting at will any and all interactions she has with the world.

shellan (n.) Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.

sympath (n.) Species within the vampire race characterized by the ability and desire to manipulate emotions in others (for the purposes of an energy exchange), among other traits. Historically, they have been discriminated against and during certain eras hunted by vampires. They are near to extinction.

tahll (adj.) A term of endearment loosely translated as “darling.”

the Tomb (pr. n.) Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of *lessers*. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against Brothers. No one may enter except for members of the Brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction.

transition (n.) Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, they must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and are unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.

vampire (n.) Member of a species separate from that of *Homo sapiens*. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot "convert" humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short-term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years, or in some cases even longer.

wahlker (n.) An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are revered for their travails.

whard (n.) Equivalent of a godfather or godmother to an individual.

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Chapter One

“Goddamn it, Zsadist! Don’t jump—”

Phury’s voice barely carried over the sound of the car crash in front of them. And didn’t stop his twin from leaping free of the Escalade while the thing was going fifty miles an hour.

“V, he’s out! One-eighty us!”

Phury’s shoulder slammed against the window as Vishous sent the SUV into a controlled skid. The headlights swung around and caught Z rolling on the snow-covered asphalt in a ball. Split second later he sprang to his feet and hauled ass, gunning for the steaming, crumpled sedan that now had a pine tree for a hood ornament.

Phury kept an eye on his twin and went for his seat belt. The *lessers* they’d chased out to Caldwell’s rural edges might have just had their ride screwed by the laws of physics, but that didn’t mean they were out of commission. Those undead bastards were durable.

As the Escalade heaved to a stop, Phury popped his door while going for his Beretta. No telling how many *lessers* were in the car or what kind of munitions they had. The vampire race’s enemies traveled in packs and were always armed—**Holy hell!** Three of the pale-haired slayers got out, and only the driver looked wobbly.

The goat-fuck odds didn’t slow Z down. Suicidal maniac that he was, he headed right for the undead triangle with nothing but a black dagger in his hand.

Phury tore across the road, hearing Vishous pound it out behind him. Except they weren’t needed.

As silent flurries swirled in the air, and the sweet smell of pine mingled

with leaking gas from the busted car, Z took down all three *lessers* with just the knife. He sliced the ten-dons behind their knees so they couldn't run, broke their arms so they couldn't fight back, and dragged them across the ground until they were lined up like gruesome dolls.

Took four and a half minutes tops, including stripping them of their IDs. Then Zsadist paused to catch his breath. As he looked down at the oil spill of black blood smudged across the white snow, steam rose from his shoulders, a curiously gentle mist teased by the cold wind.

Phury holstered the Beretta on his hip and felt nauseous, like he'd hammered a six-pack of bacon grease. Rubbing his sternum, he looked left, then right. Route 22 was dead quiet this time of night and this far outside of Caldwell proper. Human witnesses were unlikely. Deer didn't count.

He knew what was coming next. Knew better than to try to stop it.

Zsadist knelt down over one of the *lessers*, his scarred face distorted with hatred, his ruined upper lip curled back, his fangs long as a tiger's. With his skull-trimmed hair and the hollows under his cheekbones, he looked like the Grim Reaper; and like death, he was comfortable working in the cold. Wearing only a black turtleneck and loose black pants, he was more armed than dressed: The Black Dagger Brotherhood's signature blade holster crisscrossed over his chest, and two more knives were strapped on his thighs. He also sported a gun belt with two SIG Sausers.

Not that he ever used the nine-millimeters, though. He liked to get personal when he killed. Actually, it was the only time he ever got close to anyone.

Z grabbed the *lesser* by the lapels of its leather jacket and jerked the slayer's torso off the ground, getting mouth-to-mouth tight.

"Where is the female?" When there was no answer other than an evil laugh, Z coldcocked the slayer. The crack echoed through the trees, a stark sound like a branch snapping in half. "*Where is the female?*"

The slayer's mocking grin jacked Z's rage so high he became his own arctic circle. The air around his body grew magnetically charged and colder than the night. Snowflakes no longer fell anywhere near him, as if they disintegrated in the force of his anger.

Phury heard a soft rasp and glanced over his shoulder. Vishous was lighting up a hand-rolled, the tattoos around his left temple and the goatee around his mouth getting highlighted in the orange glow.

At the sound of another fist pop, V took a deep drag and shifted his

diamond eyes over. “You okay there, Phury?”

No, he wasn’t. Z’s savage nature had always been the stuff of a morality tale, but lately he’d become so violent he was hard to watch in action. The bottomless, soulless pit of him had been on a rampage ever since Bella had been abducted by the *lessers*.

And still they hadn’t found her. The Brothers had no leads, no info, no nothing. Even with Z’s hard-core questioning.

Phury was a mess about the abduction. He hadn’t known Bella for long, but she’d been so lovely, a female of worth from the highest level of aristocracy within the race. Though to him she’d been more than her lineage. So much more. She’d reached beyond his vow of celibacy to the male beneath the discipline, stirring up something deep. He was as desperate as Zsadist to find her, but after six weeks, he’d lost faith that she’d survived. The *lessers* were torturing vampires for information on the Brotherhood, and like all civilians, she’d known little about the Brothers. Surely she would have been killed by now.

His only hope was that she hadn’t endured days and days of hell before she went unto the Fade.

“What did you do with the female?” Zsadist growled to the next slayer. When all that came back at him was a “Fuck you,” Z pulled a Tyson and bit the bastard.

Why Zsadist cared about a missing civilian female, no one in the Brotherhood could understand. He was known for his misogyny...hell, he was feared for it. Why Bella mattered to him was anyone’s guess. Then again, no one, not even Phury, as his twin, could predict the male’s reactions.

While echoes of Z’s brutal work cut through the isolation of the forest, Phury felt himself cracking under the interrogation even as the *lessers* stayed strong and gave up no information.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” he said under his breath.

Zsadist was the only thing he had in his life other than the Brotherhood’s mission to protect the race against the *lessers*. Every day Phury slept alone, if he slept at all. Food gave him little pleasure. Females were out because of his celibacy. And every second he was worried about what Zsadist would pull next and who would get hurt in the process. He felt like he was dying from a thousand cuts, slowly bleeding out. A target by proxy for all his twin’s murderous intent.

V reached out with a gloved hand and clasped Phury's throat. "Look at me, my man."

Phury glanced over and cringed. The brother's left eye, the one with the tattoos around it, dilated until there was nothing but a black void.

"Vishous, no...I don't..." *Shit.* He didn't need to hear about the future right now. Didn't know how he would handle the fact that things were only going to get worse.

"The snow falls slowly tonight," V said, rubbing his thumb back and forth over a thick jugular vein.

Phury blinked as an odd calm came over him, his heart slowing to the rhythm of his brother's thumb. "What?"

"The snow...it falls so slowly."

"Yes...yes, it does."

"And we've had a lot of snow this year, haven't we?"

"Uh...yes."

"Yeah...lot of snow, and there's going to be more. Tonight. Tomorrow. Next month. Next year. The stuff comes when it comes and falls where it will."

"That's right," Phury said softly. "There's no stopping it."

"Not unless you're the ground." The thumb stopped. "My brother, you don't look like the earth to me. You're not stopping him. Ever."

A series of pops and flashes broke out as Z stabbed the *lessers* in the chest and the bodies disintegrated. Then there was only the hiss from the shattered car's radiator and the heavy pump of Z's breathing.

Like a wraith he rose from the blackened ground, the blood of *lessers* streaking his face and his forearms. His aura was a shimmering haze of violence that warped the scenery behind him, the forest beyond him wavy and indistinct where it bracketed his body.

"I'm going downtown," he said, wiping his blade on his thigh, "to look for more."

Right before Mr. O went back out hunting for vampires, he released the clip from his nine-millimeter Smith & Wesson and eyed the inside of the barrel. The gun was overdue for a cleaning, and so was his Glock. He had other shit he wanted to do, but only an idiot let his heat degrade. Hell, *lessers* had to be on top of their weapons. The Black Dagger Brotherhood was not

the kind of target you wanted to get sloppy with.

He walked across the persuasion center, making a little detour around the autopsy table they used for their work. The one-room layout had no insulation and a dirt floor, but because there were no windows, the wind was mostly kept out. There was a cot that he slept on. A shower. No toilet or kitchen because *lessers* didn't eat. Place still smelled of fresh boards, because they'd built it only a month and a half ago. Also smelled of the kerosene heater they used to warm it up.

The only finished fixture was the shelving that ran from dirt to rafters down one whole forty-foot-long wall. Their tools were laid out, nice and neat, on the various levels: knives, vises, pliers, hammers, Sawzalls. If something could rip a scream out of a throat, they had it.

But the place wasn't just for torture; it was also used for storage. Keeping vampires over time was a challenge, because they could poof! on you if they were able to calm themselves and concentrate. Steel prevented them from pulling the disappearing act, but a cell with bars wouldn't have sheltered the things from sunlight, and building a solid-steel room was impractical. What worked nicely, though, was a corrugated-metal sewer pipe set vertically into the ground. Or three of them, as the case was.

O was so tempted to go over to the storage units, except he knew that if he did he wouldn't make it back out into the field, and he had quotas to meet. Being the *Fore-lesser*'s second in command gave him some extra benes, like having the run of this place. But if he was going to protect his privacy, he had to dial in an adequate performance.

Which meant taking care of his weapons, even when he'd rather be doing other things. He pushed a first-aid kit out of the way, grabbed the gun cleaning box, and pulled a stool over to the autopsy table.

The only door in the place swung open without a knock. O glared over his shoulder, but when he saw who it was, he forced the pissed-off expression to bleed out of his puss. Mr. X was not welcome, but the Lessening Society's tough-ass in charge could hardly be denied. If only for reasons of self-preservation.

Standing under a bald lightbulb, the *Fore-lesser* was not a good opponent if you were looking to stay in one piece. At six foot four, he was built like a car: square and hard. And like all members of the Society who were long past their initiation, he was paled-out. His white skin never blushed and didn't get windburned. His hair was the color of a spider's web. Eyes were the light

gray of an overcast sky and just as glowless and flat.

With a casual stroll, Mr. X started looking around the place, not measuring the order of objects, but searching. “I was told you just got another one.”

O put the cleaning rod down and counted the weapons he had on his body. Throwing knife at his right thigh. Glock at the small of his back. He wished he had more. “I picked him up downtown about forty-five minutes ago outside of ZeroSum. He’s in one of the holes, coming around.”

“Good work.”

“I’m planning on going out again. Right now.”

“Are you?” Mr. X paused in front of the shelving and picked up a serrated hunting knife. “You know, I’ve heard something that’s pretty goddamned alarming.”

O kept his yap shut and moved his hand onto his thigh, closer to the butt of his blade.

“Not going to ask me what it is?” the *Fore-lesser* said as he walked over to the three storage units in the earth. “Maybe that’s because you already know the secret.”

O palmed his knife as Mr. X lingered over the mesh metal plates that covered the tops of the sewer pipes. He didn’t give a shit about the first two captives. The third was no one’s business but his.

“No vacancies, Mr. O?” The tip of Mr. X’s combat boot nudged at one of the sets of ropes that disappeared down into each of the holes. “I thought you killed off two after they had nothing worthwhile to say.”

“I did.”

“So with the civilian you caught tonight, there should be one empty pipe. Instead, you’re jam-packed.”

“I caught another.”

“When?”

“Last night.”

“You are lying.” Mr. X kicked off the mesh cover of the third unit.

O’s first impulse was to surge to his feet, take two running strides, and punch his knife into Mr. X’s throat. But he wouldn’t make it that far. The *Fore-lesser* had a nifty trick of freezing his subordinates in place. All he had to do was look at you.

So O stayed put, shaking from the effort of keeping his ass on the stool. Mr. X took a penlight out of his pocket, clicked it on, and angled the

beam into the hole. As a muffled squeak came out, his eyes peeled wide.
“Jesus Christ, it really is a female! Why the hell wasn’t I told?”

O slowly rose to his feet, letting the knife hang by his thigh in the folds of his cargo pants. His grip on the handle was steady, sure. “She’s new,” he said.

“That’s not what I hear.”

In quick strides, Mr. X went to the bathroom and threw back the clear plastic shower curtain. With a curse, he kicked the bottles of girlie shampoo and baby oil that were lined up in the corner. Then he marched over to the ammunition supply closet and pulled out the ice chest that was hidden behind it. He upended the thing so the food inside hit the floor. As *lessers* didn’t chew and swallow, that was as clear a confession as any.

Mr. X’s pale face was furious. “You’ve been keeping a *pet*, haven’t you?”

O considered his plausible denials while he measured the distance between them. “She’s valuable. I use her in my interrogations.”

“How?”

“Males of the species don’t like to see a female hurt. She’s an inducement.”

Mr. X’s eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t you tell me about her?”

“This is my center. You gave it to me to run as I want.” And when he found the fucker who’d squealed, he was going to peel the bastard’s skin off in strips. “I take care of business here, and you know it. How I do the job shouldn’t matter to you.”

“I should have been told.” Abruptly, Mr. X went still. “You thinking of doing something with that knife in your hand, son?”

Yeah, Dad, as a matter of fact I am. “Am I in charge here or not?”

As Mr. X shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet, O primed for a collision.

Except his cell phone went off. The first ring was shrill in the tense air, like a scream. The second seemed less of an intrusion. The third was no BFD.

As their head-on got derailed, it dawned on O that he wasn’t thinking clearly. He was a big guy and a damn good fighter, but he was no match for Mr. X’s tricks. And if O got himself injured or killed, who would take care of his wife?

“Answer it,” Mr. X commanded. “And put it on speakerphone.”

The news was from another Prime. Three *lessers* had been eliminated at

the side of the road only two miles away. Their car had been found wrapped around a tree trunk, and the burn spots of their disintegrations had scorched the snow.

Son of a bitch. The Black Dagger Brotherhood. Again.

As O ended the call, Mr. X said, “Look, do you want to fight with me or do you want to go to work? One way will get you killed for sure and right now. It’s your choice.”

“Am I in charge here?”

“As long as you get me what I need.”

“I’ve been bringing plenty of civilians in here.”

“But it’s not like they’re saying much.”

O went over and slid the mesh top back on the third hole, making sure he could see Mr. X the whole time. Then he put his combat boot on the cover and met the *Fore-lesser* in the eye.

“I can’t help it if the Brotherhood keeps themselves secret from their own species.”

“Maybe you just need to focus a little harder.”

Do not tell him to fuck off, O thought. Fail this test of wills and your female is dog food.

As O tried to rein in his temper, Mr. X smiled. “Your restraint would be more admirable if it weren’t the only appropriate response. Now about tonight. The Brothers will go for the jars of those slayers they wiped out. Get over to Mr. H’s house ASAP and get his. I’ll assign someone to A’s place, and I’ll cover D’s myself.”

Mr. X paused at the door. “About that female. If you use her as a tool, that’s fine. But if you’re keeping her for any other reason, we’ve got a problem. You go soft and I’ll feed you to the Omega piece by piece.”

O didn’t even shudder. He’d lived through the Omega’s tortures once, and he figured he could do it again. For his woman he would go through anything.

“Now, what do you say to me?” the *Fore-lesser* demanded.

“Yes, sensei.”

As O waited for Mr. X’s car to get gone, his heart was going off like a nail gun. He wanted to take his woman out and feel her against him, except then he’d never leave. To try and calm himself, he quickly cleaned his S&W and armed up. It didn’t really help, but at least his hands had stopped shaking by the time he was through.

On his way to the door he picked up the keys to his truck and engaged the motion detector over the third hole. That techno prop was a real ass-saver. If the infrared laser was broken, a triangulated gun system would go off, and whoever got curious would have a serious case of the leaks.

O hesitated before leaving. God, he wanted to hold her. The thought of losing his woman, even in the hypothetical, made him mental. That female vampire...she was his reason for living now. Not the Society. Not the killing.

"I'm going out, wife, so be good." He waited. "I'll come back soon and then we'll wash you." When there was no answer, he said, "Wife?"

O swallowed compulsively. Even though he told himself he should be a man, he couldn't make himself leave without hearing her voice.

"Don't send me out with no good-bye."

Silence.

Pain seeped into his heart, making the love he felt for her soar. He took a deep breath, the delicious weight of despair settling into his chest. He'd thought he'd known love before he'd become a *lesser*. He'd thought that Jennifer, the woman he'd fucked and fought with for years, had been special. But he'd been such a naive fool. Now he knew what passion really was. His captive female was the burning pain that made him feel like a man again. She was the soul that replaced the one he'd given to the Omega. Through her he lived, though he was undead.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, wife."

Bella sagged inside the hole as she heard the door shut. The fact that the *lesser* was going out off-kilter because she hadn't answered him pleased her. So the madness was complete now, wasn't it?

Funny that this insanity was the death that awaited her. From the moment she'd woken up in the pipe however many weeks ago, she'd assumed her demise was going to be of the conventional, broken-body variety. But no, hers was the death of self. As her body lingered in relative health, the inside of her was no longer living.

The psychosis had taken its time getting a hold on her, and like corporeal illness, there had been stages. At first she'd been too petrified to think of anything except how the torture would feel. But then days passed and nothing like that happened. Yes, the *lesser* struck her, and his eyes on her body were revolting, but he didn't do to her what he did to others of her species. Nor did

he rape her.

In response, her thoughts had gradually shifted, her spirits reviving as she'd grown hopeful that she'd be rescued. This phoenix period had lasted longer. A whole week, maybe, though it was hard to measure the passage of days.

But then she'd begun the irreversible slide, and what had sucked her down was the *lesser* himself. It had taken her a while to realize it, but she had a bizarre power over her captor, and after some time had passed, she'd started using it. At first she pushed him to test boundaries. Later she tormented him for no other reason than that she hated him and wanted to make him hurt.

For some reason the *lesser* who had taken her...loved her. With all his heart. He yelled at her sometimes, and he did terrify her when he was in one of his moods, but the harder she was on him, the better he treated her. When she withheld her eyes from him, he'd go into a tailspin of anxiety. When he brought her gifts and she refused them, he wept. With increasing fervor, he worried over her and begged for her attention and curled up against her, and when she shut him out, he crumbled.

Toying with his emotions was her whole, hateful world, and the cruelty that fed her was killing her. Once she'd been a living thing, a daughter, a sister...a *someone*.... Now she was hardening, setting like concrete in the midst of her nightmare. Embalmed.

Dear Virgin in the Fade, she knew he wasn't ever going to let her go. And sure as if he'd killed her outright, he'd taken her future. All she had now was just this god-awful, infinite present. With him.

Panic, an emotion she hadn't felt for a while, surged into her chest.

Desperate to go back to the numbness, she concentrated on how cold it was in the earth. The *lesser* kept her dressed in clothes he had taken from her own drawers and closet, and she was insulated by long johns and fleeces and warm socks and boots. Except, even with all that, the chill was relentless, sneaking through the layers, burrowing into her bones, turning her marrow into an icy slush.

Her thoughts shifted to her farmhouse, where she had lived for such a short time. She remembered the cheery fires she'd made herself in the hearth in the living room and the happiness she'd felt to be on her own.... These were bad visions, bad memories. They reminded her of her old life, of her mother...of her brother.

God, Rehvenge. Rehv had driven her crazy with all his domineering

behavior, but he'd been right. If she'd stayed with the family, she never would have met Mary, the human who had lived next door. And she never would have crossed the meadow between their houses that night to make sure everything was okay. And she never would have run into the *lesser*...so she never would have ended up both dead and breathing.

She wondered how long her brother had looked for her. Had he given up by now? Probably. Not even Rehv could keep going for so long without hope.

She bet he'd looked for her, but she was glad in a way that he hadn't found her. Although he was a highly aggressive male, he was a civilian, and liable to get hurt if he came to rescue her. Those *lessers* were strong. Cruel and powerful. No, to get her back it would take something equal to the monster that held her.

An image of Zsadist came to mind, clear as a photograph. She saw his savage black eyes. The scar that ran down his face and distorted his upper lip. The tattooed blood-slave bands around his throat and wrists. She remembered the whip marks on his back. And the piercings that hung from his nipples. And his muscled, too-lean body.

She thought of his vicious, uncompromising will and all of his high-test hatred. He was terrifying, a horror of her species. Ruined, not broken, in the words of his twin. But that was what would have made him such a good savior. He alone was a match for the *lesser* who'd taken her. Zsadist's kind of brutality was probably the only thing that could have gotten her out, though she knew better than to think that he'd ever try to find her. She was just some civilian whom he'd met twice.

And the second time, he'd made her swear she would never come near him again.

Fear closed in on her, and she tried to bridle the emotion by telling herself that Rehvenge was still searching for her. And that he would call upon the Brotherhood if he found any clues as to where she was. Then maybe Zsadist would come after her, because he was required to, as part of his job.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?" The shaky male voice was muted, the tone tinny.

It was the newest captive, she thought. They always tried to reach out in the beginning.

Bella cleared her throat. "I am...here."

There was a pause. "Oh, my God...are you the female that was taken?

Are you...Bella?"

Hearing her name was a shock. Hell, the *lesser* had been calling her *wife* for so long, she'd almost forgotten she'd gone by something else. "Yes...yes, I am."

"You're still alive."

Well, her heart was still beating, at any rate. "Do I know you?"

"I-I went to your funeral. With my parents, Ralstam and Jilling."

Bella started to tremble. Her mother and her brother...had put her to rest. But then, of course they would have. Her mother was deeply religious, a great believer in the Old Traditions. Once she was convinced her daughter was dead, she would have insisted on the proper ceremony so that Bella could enter the Fade.

Oh...God. Thinking they'd given up and knowing they had were two such different things. No one was coming after her. Ever.

She heard something weird. And realized she was sobbing.

"I'm going to escape," the male said with force. "And I'll take you with me."

Bella let her knees give out, and she slid down the ribbed wall of the pipe until she was lodged at the bottom. Now she really was dead, wasn't she? Dead and buried.

How horribly appropriate that she was stuck in the earth.

Chapter Two

Zsadist's shitkickers carried him through an alley off Trade Street, the heavy soles stomping apart frozen slush puddles and crushing through the icy ripples of tire treads. It was pitch-dark, because there were no windows in the brick buildings on either side of him and the clouds had shut out the moon. Yet as he walked alone, his night vision was perfect, penetrating everything. Just like his rage.

Black blood. What he needed was more black blood. He needed it on his hands and kicking up into his face and splattering onto his clothes. He needed oceans of it to run onto the ground and seep into the earth. To honor Bella's memory, he would make the slayers bleed, each death his offering to her.

He knew she no longer lived, knew in his heart she must have been killed in a gruesome way. So why did he always start off asking those bastards where she was? Hell, he didn't know. It was just the first thing that came out of his mouth, no matter how many times he told himself she was gone.

And he was going to keep asking those fuckers questions. He wanted to know the *where* and *how* and *with what* they'd gotten her. The information would only eat at him, but he needed to know. *Had* to know. And one of them was going to talk eventually.

Z stopped. Sniffed the air. Prayed for the sweet smell of baby powder to drift into his nose. Goddamn it, he couldn't stand this...not knowing any longer.

But then he laughed in a nasty crack. Yeah, the hell he couldn't take it. Thanks to his hundred years of careful training with the Mistress, there was no level of shit he hadn't survived. Physical pain, mental anguish, cringing depths of humiliation and degradation, hopelessness, helplessness: *Been*

there, sweated that.

So he could survive this.

He looked up at the sky, and as his head shifted back he swayed. With a quick hand he steadied himself against a Dumpster, then took a deep breath and waited to see if the drunken sensation passed. No luck.

Feeding time. Again.

Cursing, he hoped he could squeeze out another night or two. Sure, he'd been dragging his body around by force of will the last couple of weeks, but that was nothing unusual. And tonight he just didn't want to deal with the bloodlust.

Come on, come on...focus, asshole.

He forced himself to keep going, stalking the downtown alleys, weaving in and out of the dangerous urban maze of Caldwell, New York's club and drug scene.

By three A.M., he was so blood-hungry he felt stoned, and that was the only reason he gave in. He couldn't stomach the disassociation, the numbness in his body. It reminded him too much of the opium stupors he'd been forced into as a blood slave.

Walking as quickly as he could, he headed for ZeroSum, the Brotherhood's current downtown hangout. The bouncers let him bypass the wait line, easy access being one of the perks of folks who dropped the kind of cash the Brothers did. Hell, Phury's red smoke habit alone was worth a couple grand a month, and V and Butch only liked the buzz that came from top-shelf booze. Then there were Z's own regular purchases.

The club was hot and dark inside, a kind of humid, tropical cave with techno music twirling in the air. Humans crowded the dance floor, sucking on lollipop rings, guzzling water, sweating while they moved with pulsing pastel lasers. All around, bodies were up against the walls, paired off or in triplicate, writhing, touching.

Z headed for the VIP lounge, and the human horde gave way before him, parting like velvet cloth torn open. Though high on X and coke, those overheated bodies still had enough survival instinct to spot him as a coffin waiting to happen.

In the way back, a bouncer with a buzz cut let him into the best real estate in the club. Here, in relative quiet, twenty tables with banquet seating were spaced far apart, with only the black marble tops spotlit from the ceiling. The Brotherhood's booth was right by the fire exit, and he wasn't surprised to see

Vishous and Butch there with shot glasses in front of them. Phury's martini glass was sitting all alone.

The two roommates didn't look glad to see him. No...they seemed resigned to his arrival, like they'd been hoping to take a load off and he'd just thrown them both an engine block.

"Where is he?" Z asked, nodding at his twin's martini.

"Making a red smoke buy in the back," Butch said. "Ran out of O-Zs."

Z sat down on the left and leaned back, taking himself out of the light falling on the glossy table. As he glanced around, he recognized the faces of meaningless strangers. The VIP section had a hardcore of regulars, but none of the big spenders interacted much beyond their tight groups. In fact, the whole club was permeated by a "don't ask, don't tell" vibe, which was one of the reasons the Brothers came here. Even though ZeroSum was owned by a vampire, they needed to keep a low profile about who they were.

Over the last century or so, the Black Dagger Brotherhood had become secretive about their identities within the race. There were rumors, of course, and civilians knew a few of their names, but everything was kept on the QT. The subterfuge had started when the race had fragmented about a century ago and tragically, trust had become an issue within the species. But now, though, there was another reason. The *lessers* were torturing civilians for information on the Brotherhood, so it was imperative to keep on the down-low.

As a result, the few vampires who worked this club weren't sure the big males in leather who sucked back drinks and dropped bills were Black Dagger members. And fortunately, social custom, if not the way the Brothers looked, prevented questions.

Zsadist shifted in the booth, impatient. He hated the club; he really did. Hated having so many bodies so close to his. Hated the noise. The smells.

In a chatty tangle, a trio of human females approached the Brothers' table. The three of them were working tonight, though what they were serving up didn't fit in a glass. These were your typical high-class hookers: hair extensions, fake breasts, faces molded by plastic surgeons, clothes out of a spray can. There were a lot of their kind of movable feast in the club, particularly in the VIP section. The Reverend, who owned and ran ZeroSum, believed in product diversification as a business strategy, offering their bodies as well as the alcohol and the drugs. The vampire also loaned money and had a team of bookies and did God knew what else from his back office in service to his mostly human clientele.

As the three prostitutes smiled and talked, they presented themselves for a buy. But none of them were what Z was looking for, and V and Butch didn't pick them up either. Two minutes later, the women headed off to the next booth.

Z was goddamned hungry, but he had one nonnegotiable when it came to feeding.

"Hey, daddies," another woman said. "Any of you looking for some company?"

He glanced up. This human female had a hard face to match her hard body. Clothes were black leather. Eyes were glassy. Hair was short.

Fucking perfect.

Z put his hand into the pool of light on the table, lifted two fingers, then rapped twice on the marble with his knuckles. As Butch and V started shifting in the seat, their tension annoyed him.

The female smiled. "Well, all right."

Zsadist leaned forward and uncoiled to his full height, his face becoming illuminated by the spotlight. The whore's expression froze solid as she took a step back.

At that moment Phury came out of a door to the left, his spectacular mane of hair reflecting the shifting lights. Right behind him was a hard-ass male vampire with a mohawk: the Reverend.

As the two came up to the table, the owner of the club smiled tightly. Eyes the color of amethysts missed nothing about the prostitute's hesitation. "Evening, gentlemen. You going somewhere, Lisa?"

Lisa's bravado came back with a vengeance. "Wherever he wants, boss."

"Right answer."

Enough with the yakkies, Z thought. "Outside. Now."

He pushed open the fire door and followed her into the alley behind the club. The December wind blew through the loose jacket he'd put on to cover his weapons, but he didn't care about the cold, and neither did Lisa. Even though the icy gusts teased her cropped hair and she was close to naked, she faced him without shivering, chin up.

Now that she'd committed herself, she was ready for him. A real professional.

"We do it here," he said, stepping into the shadows. He took two one-hundred-dollar bills from his pocket and held them out. Her fingers crushed them before she disappeared the cash into her leather skirt.

“How do you want it?” she asked, sidling up to him, reaching for his shoulders.

He spun her around to the brick wall, face-first. “I do the touching. Not you.”

Her body tensed and her fear tingled in his nose, a sulfurous sting. But her voice was strong. “Watch it, asshole. I come back with bruises and he’ll hunt you down like an animal.”

“Don’t worry. You’re going to walk away from this just fine.”

But she was still scared. And he was blessedly numb to the emotion.

Usually fright in a female was the only thing that could turn him on, the only way the *it* in his pants would get hard. Lately, though, the trigger wasn’t working, which was just fine with him. He despised the response of that thing behind his zipper, and because most females were scared shitless of him, the *it* got aroused a hell of a lot more often than he wanted. Not at all would have been better. Shit, he was probably the only male on the planet who wanted to be impotent.

“Tilt your head to the side,” he said. “Ear to your shoulder.”

Slowly she complied, exposing her neck to him. This was why he’d chosen her. Short hair meant he wouldn’t have to touch anything to clear his way. He hated having to put his hands on them anywhere.

As he stared at her throat, his thirst rose and his fangs elongated. God, he was dry enough to drain her.

“What are you going to do?” she snapped. “Bite me?”

“Yeah.”

He struck quickly and held her in place as she thrashed. To make it easier on her, he calmed her with his mind, relaxing her, giving her a kind of high she was no doubt very familiar with. While she settled down, he swallowed as much as he could without gagging, tasting the coke and alcohol in her blood as well as the antibiotics she was on.

When he was finished, he licked the puncture marks so the healing process would get its groove on and she wouldn’t bleed out. Then he popped her collar to hide the bite, cleaned himself from her memory, and sent her back into the club.

Alone again, he sagged against the bricks. Human blood was so weak, it barely got him what he needed, but he wasn’t about to drink from females of his own species. Not again. Ever.

He looked up at the sky. The clouds that had brought the flurries earlier

were gone, and between the buildings he could see a slice of the clear pincushion of stars. The constellations told him he had only two hours left to be out.

When he had the strength, he closed his eyes and dematerialized to the only place he wanted to be.

Thank God there was still enough time to go there. To be there.

Chapter Three

John Matthew moaned and rolled over in his bed onto his back.

The woman followed his lead, her naked breasts pressing down on his broad, bare chest. With an erotic smile, she reached down between his legs and found his heavy ache. He kicked his head back and moaned as she stood his erection up and sat down on it. While he gripped her knees, she fell into a good, slow ride.

Oh, yeah...

With one hand she played with herself; with the other she tantalized him, sweeping her palm over her breasts and up to her neck, taking her long, platinum blond hair with her as she went. Her hand moved higher to her face, and then her arm was over her head, a graceful arc of flesh and bone. She arched back and her breasts pushed out, the hard tips dis-tended, rosy. Her skin was so pale it looked like fresh snow.

“Warrior,” she said, grinding. “Can you handle this?”

Handle it? Damn straight, he could. And just so they were clear on who was handling what, he grabbed her thighs and thrust his hips up until she cried out.

When he retreated, she smiled down at him, working against him faster and faster. She was slick and she was tight, and his erection was in heaven.

“Warrior, can you handle this?” Her voice was deeper now from the exertion.

“Hell, yeah,” he growled. Man, the second he came, he was going to flip her over and pound into her all over again.

“Can you handle this?” She pumped even harder, milking him. With her arm still over her head, she was riding him like a bull, bucking against him.

This was *great* sex...awesome, incredible, great—

Her words began to warp, distort...fall below the register of a female.

“Can you handle this?”

John felt a chill. Something was off here. Something was way off....

“Can you handle this? Can you handle this?” Suddenly a man’s voice was coming out of her throat, a man’s voice was sneering at him. “*Can you can handle this?*”

John struggled to throw her off, but she was clamped on to him, and the fucking wouldn’t stop.

“Do you think you can handle this? Do-you-think-you-can-handle-this? *Doyouthinkyoucanhandlethis?*” The male voice was screaming now, roaring out of the female’s face.

The knife came at John from over her head—only she was a man now, a man with white skin and pale hair and eyes the color of fog. As the blade flashed silver, John reached up to block it, but his arm wasn’t heavy with muscle anymore. It was thin, emaciated.

“*Can you handle this, warrior?*”

With a graceful slice, the dagger landed square in the middle of his chest. A blazing pain lit off from where it penetrated him, the violent burning sluicing through his body, ricocheting around inside of his skin until he was alive with agony. He gasped for breath and choked on his own blood, choked and gagged until he could get nothing into his lungs. Flailing around, he fought against the death that was coming for him—

“John! John! Wake up!”

His eyes popped wide. His first thought was that his face hurt, though he had no idea why, because he’d been stabbed in the chest. Then he realized his mouth was stretched open, accommodating what would have been a scream if he’d been born with a voice box. As it was, all he was doing was letting out a steady stream of air.

Then he felt the hands...hands were pinning his arms. Terror returned, and in what was for him an awesome surge, he threw his little body off the bed. He landed face-first, his cheek skidding on the low-napped carpet.

“John! It’s me, Wellsie.”

Reality came back at the sound of the name, shaking him free of the hysteria like a slap.

Oh, God... It was okay. He was okay. He was alive.

He launched himself into Wellsie’s arms and buried his face in her long

red hair.

"It's all right." She pulled him into her lap and stroked his back. "You're home. You're safe."

Home. Safe. Yes, after only six weeks this was home...the first he'd ever had after growing up in Our Lady's orphanage and then living in hovels since he was sixteen. Wellsie and Tohrment's was home.

And he wasn't just safe here; he was understood. Hell, he'd learned the truth about himself. Until Tohrment had come and found him, he hadn't known why he'd always been different from other people or why he was so scrawny and weak. But male vampires were like that before they went through the transition. Even Tohr, who was a full-fledged member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood, had apparently been small.

Wellsie tilted John's head up. "Can you tell me what it was?"

He shook his head and burrowed deeper into her, holding on to her so hard he was surprised she could still breathe.

Zsadist materialized in front of Bella's farmhouse and cursed. Someone had been in the place again. There were fresh tire tracks through the powdered snow in the driveway and footprints to the door. *Ah, shit...* There were a lot of footprints, so many back and forth to whatever car had been parked there that it looked as if things were being moved out.

This made him anxious, like little bits of her were disappearing.

Holy hell. If her family dismantled the house, he didn't know where he would go to be with her anymore.

With a hard eye, he stared at the front porch and the long windows of the living room. Maybe he should pack up some of her stuff for himself. It would be a bastard thing to do, but then, he wasn't above being a thief.

Once again, he wondered about her family. He knew they were aristocrats of the highest social order, but that was about it, and he didn't want to meet them to find out more. Even on his best day, he was shit-awful with people, but the situation with Bella made him dangerous, not just nasty. No, Tohrment was the liaison with her blood ties, and Z was always careful not to run into them.

He went around the back of the house, entered through the kitchen, and turned off the security alarm. As he did every night, he checked on her fish first. Flakes of food were scattered across the top of the water, evidence that

someone had already taken care of them. He was pissed off that he'd been robbed of the opportunity.

Truth was, he thought of her house as his space now. He'd cleaned it up after she'd been abducted. He'd watered the plants and taken care of the fish. He'd walked the floors and the stairs and stared out of the windows and sat on every chair and sofa and bed. Hell, he'd already decided to buy the damn thing when her family sold it. Though he'd never had a house before or many personal possessions, these walls and this roof and the shit sheltered inside—he would own it all. A shrine to her.

Z made a quick trip through the house, cataloging the things that had been removed. It wasn't much. A painting and a silver dish from the living room and a mirror from the front hall. He was curious why those particular objects had been chosen and wanted them back where they belonged.

As he came into the kitchen again, he pictured the room after she'd been abducted, all the blood, the glass shards, the busted chairs and china. His eyes went down to a black streak of rubber on the pine floor. He could guess how it had been made. Bella struggling against the *lesser*, being dragged, the sole of her shoe squeaking as it left a trail.

Anger crawled around his chest on all fours until he was panting from the ugly, familiar feeling. Except...Christ, the whole thing didn't make sense: him searching for her and obsessing over her shit and walking around her house. They hadn't been friends. Hell, they hadn't even been acquaintances. And he hadn't been nice to her on the two occasions he'd met her.

Man, he regretted that. During those few moments he'd had with her, he wished he hadn't been so...Well, not throwing up after he'd found out she was aroused by him would have been a good fricking start. Except there'd been no way to suck back the response. No female other than that sick bitch mistress of his had ever been wet for him, so he sure as hell didn't associate slick female flesh with anything good.

As he remembered Bella being up against his body, he still wondered why she'd wanted to lay with him. His face was a goddamned mess. His body wasn't much better, at least not on the back. And his reputation made Jack the Ripper look like a Boy Scout. Damn it, he was angry at everyone and everything all the time. She'd been beautiful and soft and kind, a regal, aristocratic female from a privileged background.

Oh, but their contradictions had been the point, hadn't they? He'd been the change-of-pace male for her. The walk on the wild side. The savage

creature who would shock her out of her nice little life for an hour or two. And even though it had hurt to be reduced to precisely what he was, he'd still thought she was...lovely.

From behind him, he heard a grandfather clock start to chime. Five o'clock.

The front door to the house opened with a creak.

In a soundless rush, Z unsheathed a black dagger from his chest and flattened himself against the wall. He angled his head so he had a view down the hall to the foyer.

Butch held up his hands as he walked inside. "Just me, Z."

Zsadist lowered the blade, then put it back in its holster.

The former homicide detective was an anomaly in their world, the only human who'd ever been let into the Brotherhood's inner circle. Butch was V's roommate, Rhage's lifting partner in the gym, Phury's clothes-whore buddy. And for reasons of his own, he was obsessed with Bella's abduction, so he had some shit in common with Z, too.

"What up, cop?"

"You heading back to the compound?" The guy's question might have been framed as an inquiry, but it was more like a suggestion.

"Not right now."

"Close to daylight."

"Whatever. Phury send you for me?"

"My choice. When you didn't come back from what you paid for, I figured you might end up here."

Z crossed his arms over his chest. "You worried I killed that female I took into the alley?"

"Nope. Saw her working the club before I left."

"So why am I looking at you right now?"

As the male glanced down like he was putting words together in his head, his weight moved back and forth in those expensive loafers he liked. Then he unbuttoned his fancy black cashmere coat.

Ah...so Butch was a messenger. "Spit it out, cop."

The human rubbed his thumb over his eyebrow. "You know Tohr's been talking to Bella's family, right? And that her brother's a real hothead? Well, he knows someone's coming in here. He can tell because of the security system. Every time it's shut off or turned on, he gets a signal. He wants the visits to stop, Z."

Zsadist bared his fangs. "Tough."
"He's going to put up guards."
"Why the hell does he care?"
"Come on, man, it's his sister's place."
Son of a bitch. "I want to buy the house."
"That's a no-go, Z. Tohr said the family's not putting it on the market anytime soon. They want to keep it."

Z ground his molars for a moment. "Cop, do yourself a favor and get out of here."

"Rather drive you home. Damn close to daybreak."

"Yeah, I really need a human telling me that."

Butch cursed on an exhale. "Fine, go crispy if you want. Just don't come back here again. Her family's been through enough."

As soon as the front door shut, Z felt a flush come over his body, like someone had wrapped him up tight in an electric blanket and cranked the dial. Sweat broke out on his face and his chest, and his stomach rolled. He lifted his hands. The palms were wet and the fingers sported a fine tremble.

Physiological signs of stress, he thought.

He was clearly having an emotional reaction, although damned if he knew what it was. All he picked up on were the ancillary symptoms. Inside of himself there was nothing, no feeling that he could identify.

He looked around and wanted to set fire to the farmhouse, just burn the thing down to the ground so no one could have it. Better than knowing he couldn't go in anymore.

Trouble was, torching her place was like hurting her.

So if he couldn't leave a pile of ashes behind, he wanted to take something. As he thought about what he could carry with him and still dematerialize, he put his hand up to the slender chain stretched tight around his throat.

The necklace with its tiny inset diamonds was hers. He'd found the thing in the rubble the night after she'd been abducted, on the terra-cotta floor under her kitchen table. He'd cleaned her blood off of it, fixed the broken clasp, and had worn it ever since.

And diamonds were eternal, weren't they? They lasted forever. Just like his memories of her.

Before Zsadist left, he took one last look at the fish tank. The food was almost gone now, snipped off the surface by little gaping mouths, mouths that

came at it from the underside.

John didn't know how long he stayed in Wellsie's arms, but it took him a while to get back to reality. When he finally pulled back, she smiled at him.

"Sure you don't want to tell me about the nightmare?"

John's hands started moving, and she stared at them hard because she was just learning American Sign Language. He knew he was going too fast, so he leaned over and picked up one of his pads and a pen from the bedside table.

It was nothing. I'm okay now. Thanks for waking me up, though.

"You want to go back to bed?"

He nodded. It seemed as if he'd done nothing except sleep and eat for the last month and a half, but there was no end to his hunger or his exhaustion. Then again, he had twenty-three years of starvation and insomnia to make up for.

He slid between the sheets, and then Wellsie eased down beside him. Her pregnancy didn't show that much if she was standing, but when she was sitting there was a subtle swell under her loose shirt.

"You want me to put the light on in your bathroom?"

He shook his head. That would only make him feel more like a pansy, and right now his ego had pretty much taken all the shriveling up it could handle.

"I'm just going to be at my desk in the study, okay?"

As she left, he felt bad that he was kind of relieved, but with the panic gone he was ashamed of himself. A man didn't act like he had just now. A man would have fought the pale-haired demon in the dream and won. And even if he'd been terrified, a man wouldn't have cowered and shook like a five-year-old when he woke up.

Then again, John wasn't a man. At least not yet. Tohr had said the change wouldn't come to him until he was closer to twenty-five, and he couldn't wait for the next two years to pass. Because even though he now understood why he was only five feet, six inches tall and 112 pounds, it was still tough. He hated facing his bony body every day in the mirror. Hated wearing boy-sized clothes though he could legally drive and vote and drink. Cringed at the fact that he'd never had an erection, even when he woke up from one of his erotic dreams. And he'd never even kissed a woman, either.

No, he just didn't feel like much in the masculine department all the way

around. Especially given what had happened to him almost a year ago. God, the anniversary of that attack was coming up, wasn't it? With a wince he tried not to think of that dirty stairwell or the man who'd held a knife to his throat or those horrible moments when something irretrievable had been taken from him: His innocence violated, gone forever.

Forcing his mind out of that tailspin, he told himself that at least he was no longer hopeless. Sometime soon he would change into a man.

Itchy from thinking about the future, he threw the covers off and went to his closet. As he opened the double doors, he was still unused to the display. He'd never owned this many pants and shirts and fleeces in his whole life, but here they were, so fresh and new...all their zippers working, no buttons missing, no fraying, no tears at the seams. He even had a pair of Nike Air Shox.

He took out a fleece and pulled it on, then pushed his spindly legs into a pair of khakis. In the bathroom he washed his hands and face and combed his dark hair. Then he headed for the kitchen, walking through rooms that had clean, modern lines but were decorated with Italian Renaissance furniture, textiles, and art. He stopped when he heard Wellsie's voice coming out of the study.

"...some kind of nightmare. I mean, Tohr, he was terrified.... No, he fudged when I asked him what it was, and I didn't press. I think it's time he sees Havers. Yes...Uh-huh. He should meet Wrath first. Okay. I love you, my *hellren*. What? God, Tohr, I feel the same way. I don't know how we ever lived without him. He is such a blessing."

John leaned against the wall in the hall and closed his eyes. Funny, he felt the same way about them.

Chapter Four

It was hours later, or at least it seemed like hours, when Bella awoke to the sound of the mesh plate sliding back. The sweet smell of the *lesser* drifted down to her, overpowering the pungent, damp earth.

“Hello, wife.” The harness around her torso tightened as he lifted her out.

One look into his pale brown eyes and she knew now was not the time to push any limits. He was wired, his smile way too excited. And unbalanced was not good with him.

Just as her feet hit the floor, he jerked the harness so she fell against him.
“I said hello, wife.”

“Hello, David.”

He closed his eyes. He loved it when she said his name. “I have something for you.”

He left the straps on her and led her over to the stainless-steel table in the center of the room. When he handcuffed her to the thing, she knew it must be dark out still. He got lax about restraining her only during the day, when she couldn’t run.

The *lesser* went out the door and left it open wide. Shuffling and grunting noises followed, and then he came back dragging a groggy civilian vampire. The male’s head rolled on his shoulders as if it were on a loose hinge, his feet trailing behind at the toes. He was dressed in what had been nice black slacks and a cashmere sweater, but now the clothes were torn and wet and blood-marked.

With a moan choking in her throat, Bella backed away until her tether prevented her from going any farther. She couldn’t watch the torture; she just couldn’t.

The *lesser* muscled the male over to the table and laid him out flat on it. Chains were looped with efficiency around his wrists and ankles, and the links were secured with metal clips. As soon as the civilian's hazy eyes latched on to the shelves with the tools, he began to panic. He pulled against his steel binds, making them rattle against the metal table.

Bella met the vampire's blue eyes. He was terrified, and she wanted to reassure him, but she knew that wasn't smart. The *lesser* was watching her reaction, waiting.

And then he took out a knife.

The vampire on the table screamed as the slayer leaned over him. But all David did was yank up the male's sweater and slit it open, exposing his chest and throat.

Though Bella tried to fight it, bloodlust stirred in her gut. It had been a long time since she'd fed, maybe months, and all the stress she'd been under meant her body needed badly what only drinking from the opposite sex could give her.

The *lesser* took her arm and pulled her around, the handcuff sliding down the table's rail with her.

"I figured you must be thirsty by now." The slayer reached out and rubbed her mouth with his thumb. "So I got this for you to feed from."

Her eyes rounded.

"That's right. He's just for you. A present. He's fresh, young. Better than the two I have in the holes now. And we can keep him as long as he serves you." The *lesser* pushed her upper lip off her teeth. "Goddamn...look at those fangs getting longer. Hungry, aren't you, wife?"

His hand clamped on the back of her neck and he kissed her, licking at her with his tongue. Somehow she kept her gag reflex down until he lifted his head.

"I've always wondered what this looks like," he said, eyes roaming around her face. "Is it going to turn me on? I'm not sure whether I want it to or not. I think I like you pure. But you've got to do this, right? Or you're going to die."

He pushed her head down toward the male's throat. When she resisted, the *lesser* laughed softly and spoke into her ear.

"That's my girl. If you'd gone willingly to him, I think I would've beaten you out of jealousy." He stroked her hair with his free hand. "Now drink."

Bella looked into the vampire's eyes. *Oh, God...*

The male had stopped struggling and was staring up at her, his eyes about to pop out of his skull. Hungry though she was, she couldn't bear the idea of taking from him.

The *lesser* gripped her neck hard, and his voice got nasty. "You better drink from him. I went to a lot of fucking trouble to get this for you."

She opened her mouth, her tongue like sandpaper from the thirst. "No..."

The *lesser* put the knife up to her eyes. "One way or the other he's going to bleed in the next minute and a half. If I go to work on him, he's not going to last long. So maybe you want to try, *wife*?"

Tears speared her eyes at the violation she would perpetrate.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered to the chained male.

Her head was yanked back, and the *lesser*'s palm came at her face from the left. The slap snapped her upper body around, and the slayer grabbed a chunk of her hair to keep her from falling. He pulled hard, arching her against him. She had no idea where the knife he'd had went.

"You do not apologize to that." He clapped his hand on her chin, digging his fingertips into the hollows under her cheekbones. "I'm the only one you worry about. We clear? I said, *are we clear?*"

"Yes," she gasped.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, David."

He took her free arm and bent it behind her back. Pain shot into her shoulder. "Tell me you love me."

From out of nowhere, anger lit off a firestorm in her chest. She would never say that word to him. *Never*.

"Tell me you love me," he yelled, blasting the demand into her face.

Her eyes flashed and she bared her fangs. The instant she did his excitement shot out of control, his body starting to tremble, his breath falling into a fast pant. He was instantly primed to fight her, aroused for the battle, ready as if he were erect for sex. This was the part of the relationship he lived for. He *loved* to fight her. Had told her that his former woman hadn't been as strong as she was, hadn't been able to last as long before passing out.

"*Tell me you love me.*"

"I. Despise. You."

As he lifted his hand and made a fist out of it, she glared up at him, steady, calm, ready to take the hit. They stayed like that for a long time, their bodies suspended in twins arcs like a heart, tied by the strings of violence that

ran between them. In the background the civilian male on the table whimpered.

Suddenly the *lesser*'s arms shot around her and he buried his face in her neck. "I love you," he said. "I love you so much.... I can't live without you —"

"Holy shit," someone said.

The *lesser* and Bella both looked to the voice. The persuasion center's door was wide-open and a pale-haired slayer was stopped dead in its jamb.

The guy started laughing and then said the three words that triggered everything that followed: "I'm gonna tell."

David went after the other *lesser* at a dead run, chasing him outside.

Bella didn't hesitate as the first cracks of the fight rang out. She went to work on the chains that bound the civilian's right wrist, flipping the clips free, unraveling the links. Neither of them said a word as she freed his hand and then started on his right ankle. As soon as he could, the male worked as fast as she did, frantically stripping the left side of himself. The second he was free, he popped off the table and looked at the steel handcuffs that tied her.

"You can't save me," she said. "He has the only keys."

"I can't believe you're still alive. I heard about you—"

"Go, go on—"

"He'll kill you."

"No, he won't." He was just going to make her wish she were dead. "Go! That fight isn't going to last forever."

"I'll come back for you."

"Just get home." When he opened his mouth, she said, "Shut the hell up and focus. If you can, tell my family I'm not dead. Go!"

The male had tears in his eyes as he closed them. He took two long breaths...and dematerialized.

Bella started shaking so badly she fell down on the floor, her arm stretching over her head from where it was handcuffed to the table.

The noises of the fight outside abruptly stopped. There was a silence and then a flash of light and a popping sound. She knew without a doubt that her *lesser* had won.

Oh, God... This was going to be bad. This was going to be a very, very bad day.

Zsadist stood on Bella's snow-covered lawn until the last possible moment, and then he dematerialized to the dreary, Gothic monster the Brotherhood all lived in. The mansion looked like something out of a horror movie, all gargoyles and shadows and leaded-glass windows. In front of the mountain of stone there was a courtyard full of cars, as well as a gatehouse that was Butch and V's crash pad. A twenty-foot-tall wall encased the compound, and there was a double-gated entry as well as a number of nasty surprises set up to deter unwanted visitors.

Z walked over to the main house's steel-cored doors and opened one side of them. Stepping into the vestibule, he punched in a code on a keypad and was granted access immediately. He grimaced as he emerged into the foyer. The soaring space with its jewel-toned colors and its gold leafing and its wild, mosaic floor was like that crowded bar: too much stimulation.

To his right, he heard the sounds of a full dining room: the soft clinking of silver on china, indistinct words from Beth, a chuckle from Wrath...then Rhage's bass voice cutting in. There was a pause, probably because Hollywood was making a face, and then everyone's laughter mingled, spilling out like gleaming marbles across a clean floor.

He wasn't interested in tangling with his brothers, much less eating with them. They'd all know by now that he'd been booted from Bella's house like a felon for marking too much time there. Few secrets got kept within the Brotherhood.

Z hit the grand staircase, taking the steps two at a time. The faster he went the more muted the meal's noises became, and the quiet suited him. At the top of the stairs he headed left and then went down a long hallway marked by Greco-Roman statuary. The marble athletes and warriors were illuminated by recessed lighting, their white marble arms and legs and chests forming a pattern against the bloodred wall. If you walked fast enough, it was like going by pedestrians when you were in a car, the rhythm of the statues' bodies animating what in fact did not move.

The room he slept in was at the end of the corridor, and as he opened the door he hit a wall of cold. He never turned on the heat or the air-conditioning, just like he never slept in the bed or used the phone or put anything in the antique bureaus. The closet was the only thing he needed, and he went there to disarm. His weapons and ammo were kept in the fireproof cabinet in the back, and his four shirts and three sets of leathers hung closely together. With nothing much in the walk-in, he often thought of bones as he went inside, all

the empty hangers and brass rods looking spindly and fragile.

He stripped and showered. He was hungry for food, but he liked to keep himself that way. The pang of starvation, the dry yearning of thirst...these denials that were within his control always eased him. Hell, if he could pull off not sleeping, he'd take that away from himself, too. And the goddamned bloodlust...

He wanted to be clean. On the inside.

When he got out of the shower he ran a buzz razor over his head to keep his hair tight to his skull and then did a quick shave. Naked, chilled, logy from the feeding, he went over to his pallet on the floor. As he stood above the two folded blankets that offered as much cushioning as a pair of Band-Aids, he thought of Bella's bed. Hers had been queen-sized and all white. White pillowcases and sheets, big, white Wonder bread comforter, a white poodlelike throw at the foot of it.

He'd lain on her bed. Often. Had liked to think he could smell her in it. Sometimes he'd even rolled around on top, the softness giving way under his hard body. It was almost as if she had touched him then, and better than if she actually had. He couldn't stand to have anyone put their hands to him... though he wished he'd let Bella find a piece of his flesh just once. With her, he might have been able to handle it.

His eyes shifted to the skull that sat on the floor next to the pallet. The eye sockets were black holes, and he pictured the iris-and-pupil combination that had once stared out at him. Between the teeth there was a strip of black leather about two inches wide. Traditionally words of devotion to the deceased were inscribed on it, but the strap these jaws bit down on was blank.

As he lay down, he put his head next to the thing and the past came back, the year 1802....

The slave came partially awake. He was flat on his back and he ached all over, though he couldn't think of why...until he remembered going into his transition the night before. For hours he'd been crippled by the pain of his muscles sprouting, his bones thickening, his body transforming into something huge.

Strange...verily, his neck and his wrists hurt in a differing way.

He opened his eyes. The ceiling was far above him and marked with thin black bars inset into stone. When he turned his head, he saw an oak door with more bars running vertically down its thick planks. On the wall, too,

there were strips of steel...In the dungeon. He was in the dungeon, but why? And he'd best get to his duties before...

He tried to sit up, but his forearms and shins were pinned down. Eyes going wide, he jerked—

“Mind y’self!” It was the blacksmith. And he was tattooing black bands on the slave’s drinking points.

Oh, dear Virgin in the Fade, no. Not this...

The slave fought against the holds, and the other male looked up, annoyed. “Settle! I’ll not be whipped for a fault that’d be not mine own.”

“I beg of you...” The slave’s voice didn’t sound right. It was too deep. “Have mercy.”

He heard a soft, female laugh. The Mistress of the household had entered the cell, her long gown of white silk trailing behind her on the stone floor, her blond hair down around her shoulders.

The slave dropped his eyes as was appropriate and realized he was wholly unclothed. Flushing, embarrassed, he wished he were covered.

“You wake,” she said, approaching him.

He couldn’t fathom why she had come to see one of such lowly station as himself. He was a mere kitchen boy, someone beneath even the maids who cleaned her privy quarters.

“Look at me,” the Mistress commanded.

He did as he was told, though it went against everything he’d ever known. He had never been allowed to meet her stare before.

What he saw in it was a shock. She was looking at him in a way no female had ever regarded him. Greed marked the refined bones of her face, her dark gaze glowing with some kind of intent he couldn’t discern.

“Yellow eyes,” she murmured. “How rare. How beautiful.”

Her hand landed on the slave’s bare thigh. He twitched at the contact, feeling uneasy. This was wrong, he thought. She shouldn’t be touching him there.

“What a magnificent surprise you’ve presented. Rest assured, I have fed well the one who brought you to my attention.”

“Mistress...I would beg you to let me go to work.”

“Oh, you will.” Her hand drifted across the juncture of his pelvis, where his thighs met his hips. He jumped and heard the blacksmith’s soft curse.

“And what a boon for me. My blood slave fell prey to an unfortunate accident this day. As soon as his quarters are renewed, you shall be moved into them.”

The slave lost his breath. He'd known of the male she'd kept locked up, for he'd brought food to the cell. Sometimes, as he'd left the tray with the guards, he'd heard strange sounds coming out from behind the heavy door....

His fear must have registered on the Mistress, because she leaned over him, getting close enough so he could smell her perfumed skin. She laughed softly, as if she had taken a taste of his fright and the dish had pleased her.

"In truth, I cannot wait to have you." As she turned to leave, she glared at the blacksmith. "Mind what I said or I shall have you sent unto the dawn. Not one misstep with that needle. His skin is far too perfect to mar."

The tattooing was finished soon thereafter, and the blacksmith took the one candle with him, leaving the slave tied down on the table in the darkness.

He shook from despair and horror as his new station became real. He was now the lowest of the low, kept alive solely to feed another...and only the Virgin knew what else awaited him.

It was a long while before the door opened again and candlelight showed him that his future had arrived: the Mistress in a black robe with two males known for their love of their own sex.

"Cleanse him for me," she ordered.

The Mistress watched as the slave was washed and oiled, and she moved around his body as the candlelight did, ever shifting, never still. The slave trembled, hating the sensation of the males' hands on his face, his chest, his privates. He was fearful that one or both would try to take him in an un-holy way.

When they were finished, the taller of them said, "Shall we attempt him for you, Mistress?"

"I shall keep him for myself this night."

She dropped her robe and lithely got up onto the table, straddling the slave. Her hands sought his private flesh, and as she stroked him he was aware of the other males taking themselves in hand. When the slave remained flaccid, she covered him with her lips. The sounds in the room were horrific, the moans of the males and the Mistress's mouth sucking and smacking.

The humiliation was complete as the slave started to cry, tears seeping out of the corners of his eyes, falling down his temples, landing in his ears. He had never been touched between his legs before. As a pretransition male, his body had not been ready for or capable of mating, though that hadn't kept him from looking forward to someday being with a female. He'd always imagined that the joining would be wondrous, for in the slave quarters he

had seen the pleasure act on occasion.

But now...to have the intimacy happening in this way, he was ashamed that he had dared to want something.

Abruptly, the Mistress released him and slapped him across the face. The palm print stung on his cheek as she got off the table.

"Bring me the salve," she snapped. "That thing of his knows not its function."

One of the males came forward to the table with a small pot. The slave felt someone put a slippery hand on him, he wasn't sure who, and then there was a burning sensation. As a curious weight settled in his groin, he felt something shift on his thigh and then slowly move across his stomach.

"Oh...good Virgin in the Fade," one of the males said.

"Such size," the other breathed. "He would o'er-spill the depths of a well."

The Mistress's voice was likewise amazed. "'Tis enormous."

The slave lifted his head. There was a mighty swollen thing lying on his belly, the likes of which he had never seen before.

He lay back down against the table as the Mistress mounted his hips. This time he felt something engulf him, something wet. He put his head up again. She was astride him and he was...inside of her body. She moved against him, pumping up and down, panting. He was dimly aware that the other males in the room were moaning again, the guttural sounds growing louder as she moved faster and faster. And then there were shouts, hers, theirs.

The Mistress collapsed against the slave's chest. While she still breathed heavily, she said, "Hold his head down."

One of the males put a palm on the slave's forehead and then stroked the slave's hair with his free hand. "So lovely. So soft. And look at all the colors."

The Mistress buried her face in the slave's neck and bit him. He cried out at the sting and the taking. He'd seen males and females drink from one another before, and it had always seemed...right. But this hurt and made him dizzy, and the harder she pulled at his vein, the more light-headed he became.

He must have passed out, because when he woke up she was lifting her head and licking her lips. She climbed off him, robed herself, and the three of them left him alone in the dark. Moments later guards whom he recognized entered.

The other males refused to look upon him, though he had been on friendly terms with them before because he had rendered them their ale. Now, though, they kept their eyes averted and didn't speak. As he glanced down at his body, he was ashamed that whatever salve had been put on him was still working, that his private staff was still stiff and thick.

The gloss on it nauseated him.

He desperately wanted to tell the males that it wasn't his fault, that he was trying to will the flesh down, but he was too mortified to speak as the guards released his arms and ankles from the table. When he stood up he sagged, because he'd been stretched out flat on his back for hours and was only a day past his transition. No one helped him as he struggled to stay upright, and he knew it was because they didn't want to touch him, didn't want to be near him now. He went to cover himself, but they shackled him in a practiced manner so he didn't have a free hand.

The shame got worse as he had to walk down the hall. He could feel the heavy weight at his hips bouncing with his footfalls, bobbing obscenely. Tears welled and slid down his cheeks, and one of the guards snorted with disgust.

The slave was taken to a different part of the castle, to another solid-walled room with inlaid steel bars. This one had a bed platform and a proper chamber pot and a rug and torches set high up on the walls. As he was brought in, so were food and water, the victuals left by a fellow kitchen boy he'd known all of his life. The pretransition male also refused to look at him.

The slave's hands were released and he was locked in.

Bereft and trembling, he went over to a corner and sat on the floor. He cradled his body gently, for no one else would, and tried to be kind to this newly transitioned form of his...a form that had been used in a way that was so wrong.

As he rocked back and forth, he worried for his future. He'd never had any rights, any learning, any identity. But at least before he'd been free to move around. And his body and his blood had been his own.

The remembered sensation of those hands on his skin brought up a wave of nausea. He looked down at his privates and realized he could still smell the Mistress on himself. He wondered how long the swelling would last.

And what would happen when she came back for him.

Zsadist rubbed his face and rolled over. She'd come back for him, all right. And she'd never come alone.

He closed his eyes against the recollections and tried to will himself to sleep. The last thing that flashed through his mind was a picture of Bella's farmhouse in its snow-covered meadow.

God, that place was so very empty, deserted though it was filled with things. With Bella's disappearance it had been stripped of its most important function: Though it was still a sound structure and capable of keeping out wind and weather and strangers, it was no longer a home.

Soulless.

In a way, her farmhouse was just like him.

Chapter Five

Dawn had arrived by the time Butch O’Neal pulled the Escalade into the courtyard. As he got out, he could hear G-Unit bumping at the Pit, so he knew his roommate was in. V had to have his rap music; the shit was like air to him. Said those bass beats helped keep the intrusions of other people’s thoughts down to a manageable level.

Butch walked over to the door and punched in a code. A lock popped and he stepped into a vestibule, where he did another check-in. Vampires were big on double door systems. That way you never worried about someone flooding your house with sunlight, because one of the buggers was always closed.

The gatehouse, a.k.a. the Pit, was nothing too fancy, just a living room, galley kitchen, and two bed/bath combos. But he liked it, and he liked the vampire he lived with. He and his roomie were tight as...well, brothers.

As he walked into the main room, the black leather couches were empty, but SportsCenter was on the plasma-screen TV, and the chocolaty scent of red smoke was all around. So Phury was in the house, or had just left.

“Hello, Lucy,” Butch called out.

The two Brothers came from the back. Both were still dressed in their fighting clothes, the leathers and the shitkickers making them look exactly like the killers they were.

“You seem tired, cop,” Vishous said.

“Actually, I feel strung out.”

Butch eyed the blunt at Phury’s mouth. Even though he’d put his drugging days long behind him, tonight he almost caved and asked for a hit of that red smoke. Thing was, he already had two addictions so he was kind

of busy.

Yeah, sucking back Scotch and pining after a female vampire who didn't want him were about all he had time for. Besides, there was no reason to screw with a system that worked. The lovelorn crap fueled the boozing, and whenever he was drunk, he missed Marissa even more, so then he'd want to do another shot.... And there you had it. One hell of a merry-go-round. Even made the room spin, too.

"You talk to Z?" Phury asked.

Butch stripped off his cashmere coat and hung it in the closet. "Yeah. He wasn't happy."

"Is he going to stay away from there?"

"I think so. Well, assuming he didn't burn the place down after he kicked me out. He had that special little twinkle in his eye as I left. You know, the one that makes your balls get tight when you're standing next to him?"

Phury dragged a hand through his outrageous hair. The stuff fell down past his shoulders, all blond and red and brown waves. He was a handsome Joe without it; with that mane, he was...okay, fine, the brother was beautiful. Not that Butch went that way, but the guy was better-looking than a lot of women. Dressed better than most of the ladies, too, when he wasn't in his ass-kicking clothes.

Man, it was a good thing he fought like a nasty bastard or he might have been taken for a nancy.

Phury sucked in a deep breath. "Thanks for dealing with—"

A phone rang on a desk full of computer equipment.

"Outside line," V murmured, going over to his IT command center.

Vishous was the resident computer genius in the Brotherhood—actually, he was the resident genius on everything—and he was in charge of communications and security at the compound. He ran it all from the Four Toys, as he called his quartet of PCs.

Toys...yeah, right. Butch didn't know jack about computers, but if those suckers were toys, then they were in the Department of Defense's playground, too.

While V waited for the call to dump into voice mail, Butch glanced at Phury. "So, have I shown you my new Marc Jacobs suit?"

"Did that come in already?"

"Yeah, Fritz brought it over earlier and fitted it."

"Sweet."

As they went back to the bedrooms, Butch had to laugh. He was as guilty as Phury when it came to being a metrosexual thread humper. Funny, he hadn't given a shit about his clothes when he'd been a cop. Now that he was with the Brothers, he was working his walk in haute couture and loving it. So, like Phury, he was lucky he fought dirty.

The Brother was fondling yards of fine black wool on a hanger and making appropriate "ahhhing" sounds when V came in.

"Bella's alive."

Butch and Phury whipped their heads around as the suit landed on the floor in a heap.

"Civilian male was abducted from the alley behind ZeroSum tonight and taken to a place way out in the woods for the purpose of feeding Bella. He saw her. Talked with her. Somehow she let him go."

"Tell me he can find the place again," Butch breathed, aware of a suffocating urgency. And he wasn't the only one on instant alert. Phury looked so intense he didn't seem capable of speech.

"Yeah. He marked his way out, dematerializing two hundred yards at a time until he reached Route 22. He's e-mailing me the trail on a map. Damn smart for a civilian."

Butch ran out to the living room, heading for his coat and the keys to the Escalade. He hadn't taken off his holster, so his Glock was still strapped under his arm.

Except V got between him and the door. "Where you going, my man?"

"Has that map come through your e-mail yet?"

"Stop."

Butch glared at his roommate. "You can't go out during the day. I can. Why the hell should we wait?"

"Cop"—V's voice grew soft—"this is Brotherhood business. You're not going in on this."

Butch stalled. *Ah, yes, shut down again.*

Sure, he could work around their periphery, do some crime scene analysis, get his gray matter churning over tactical problems. But when the fighting started, the Brothers always kept him off the field.

"Goddamn it, V—"

"No. You're not handling this. Forget it."

It was two hours later before Phury had enough information to go to his twin's room. He figured there was no point in getting Zsadist agitated with a half-story, and it had taken a while for the plan to jell.

When he knocked and there wasn't an answer, he stepped inside and winced. The room was cold as a meat locker.

"Zsadist?"

Z lay on a couple of folded blankets in the far corner, his naked body drawn up tightly against the chill in the room. There was a sumptuous bed not more than ten feet away from him, but it had never been used. Z slept on the floor always, no matter where he had lived.

Phury walked over and knelt down beside his twin. He wasn't going to touch the male, especially when he would be caught unaware. Z was likely to come to on the attack.

My God, Phury thought. Asleep like this, all his anger banked, Z was almost frail.

Hell, take back the *almost*. Zsadist had always been so damned thin, so terribly lean. Now, though, he was just big bones and veins. When had this happened? *Christ*, back during Rhage's *rythe*, they'd all been naked in the Tomb, and Z certainly hadn't looked like a skeleton. That had been only about six weeks ago.

Right before Bella's abduction...

"Zsadist? Wake up, my brother."

Z stirred, black eyes opening slowly. Usually he came awake in a rush and at the slightest noise, but he'd fed, so he was sluggish.

"She's been found," Phury said. "Bella's been found. She was alive as of early this morning."

Z blinked a couple of times, as if he weren't sure whether he was dreaming. Then he hefted his torso off the pallet. His nipple rings caught the light from the hall while he rubbed his face.

"What did you say?" he asked in a gravel voice.

"We have a bead on where Bella is. And confirmation that she's alive."

Z grew more alert, his consciousness moving like a train, gathering speed, creating power with its momentum. With every second the force of him was coming back, the vicious vitality surging until he no longer looked weak at all.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"In a one-room house in the woods. A civilian male got loose because she

helped him escape.”

Z sprang to his feet, landing in a lithe punch to the floor. “How do I get to her?”

“The male who escaped e-mailed V the directions. But—”

Z headed for his closet. “Get a map for me.”

“It’s noontime, my brother.”

Z stopped. Abruptly, a blast of cold came out of his body, making the temperature of the room feel balmy. And those black eyes were dangerous as hammer claws when they flashed over his shoulder.

“So send the cop. Send Butch.”

“Tohr won’t let him—”

“Fuck that! The human goes.”

“Zsadist—stop. Think. Butch wouldn’t have any backup, and there could be multiple *lessers* at the location. You want to risk her getting killed in a botched rescue attempt?”

“The cop can handle himself.”

“He’s good, but he’s only a human. We can’t send him in there.”

Z bared his fangs. “Maybe Tohr is more worried the guy will get pinched and squeal about us on one of their tables.”

“Come on, Z, Butch knows shit. He knows a lot of shit about us. So of course that’s part of it.”

“But if she helped a captive escape, what the hell do you think those *lessers* are doing to her right now!”

“If a pack of us go at sundown, we’re more likely to get her out alive. You know that. We have to wait.”

Z stood there naked, breathing deeply, his eyes narrow slits of rank hatred. When he finally spoke, his voice was a nasty growl.

“Tohr better pray to God she’s still alive when I find her tonight. Or I will have his fucking head, brother or no brother.”

Phury shifted his eyes to the skull on the floor, thinking that Z had already proven how good he was at decapitation.

“Did you hear me, brother?” the male snapped.

Phury nodded. Man, he had a bad feeling about how this was going to play out. He really did.

Chapter Six

As O drove his F-150 truck along Route 22, the waning four-o'clock sun stung his eyes and he felt as if he were hungover. Yeah...along with the headache, he had the same body crawls he used to get after a night of boozing, the little tremors flickering just under his skin like worms.

The long line of regret he was towing behind him also reminded him of his drinking days. Like when he'd woken up next to an ugly woman he despised, but had fucked anyway. The whole thing was just like that...only much, much worse.

He shifted his hands on the steering wheel. His knuckles were busted open and he knew he had scratches on his neck. As images of the day blinded him, his stomach heaved. He was disgusted by the things he'd done to his woman.

Well, now he was disgusted. When he'd been doing them...he'd been righteous.

Christ, he should have been more careful. She was a living thing, after all.... Shit, what if he'd gone too far? *Oh, man...* He should never have let himself do those things. The trouble was, as soon as he'd seen that she'd freed the male he'd brought her, he'd lost it. Just splintered into shrapnel that had torn right through her.

He lifted his foot from the gas. He wanted to go back and take her out of her pipe and reassure himself that she was still breathing. Except there wasn't enough time before the meeting of the Primes started.

As he stomped on the accelerator, he knew he wouldn't be able to leave her once he saw her anyway, and then the *Fore-lesser* would come looking for him. And that would be a problem. The persuasion center was a mess.

Goddamn it...

O slowed and wrenched the wheel to the right, the truck lurching off Route 22 onto a one-lane dirt road.

Mr. X's cabin, also the Lessening Society's HQ, was smack in the middle of a seventy-five-acre forest, completely isolated. The place was nothing more than a small log setup with a dark green shingled roof and an outbuilding about half the size behind it. As O pulled up, there were seven cars and trucks parked in a loose configuration, all of them domestic, most of them at least four years old.

O walked inside the cabin and saw he was the last to show. Ten other Primes were packed into the shallow interior space, their pale faces grim, their bodies broad and heavy with muscle. These were the Lessening Society's strongest men, the ones who had been in it the longest. O was the only exception when it came to time served. He had just three years since his induction, and none of them liked him because he was new.

Not that they got a vote. He was as tough as any Prime and had proved it. *Jealous fuckers...* Man, he was never going to be like them, just cattle for the Omega. He couldn't believe the idiots prided themselves on their paling out over time and losing their identities. He fought against the fading. He colored his hair to keep it the dark brown it had always been, and he dreaded the gradual lightening of his irises. He did not want to look like them.

"You're late," Mr. X said. The *Fore-lesser* leaned back against a refrigerator that wasn't plugged in, his pale eyes latching onto the scratches all over O's neck. "Been fighting?"

"You know how those Brothers are." O found a place to stand across the way. Though he nodded to his partner, U, he didn't acknowledge anyone else.

The *Fore-lesser* continued to look at him. "Has anyone seen Mr. M?"

Fuck, O thought. That *lesser* he'd taken out for walking in on him and his wife would have to be accounted for.

"O? You got something to say?"

From the left, U spoke up. "I saw M. Right before dawn. Fighting with a Brother downtown."

As Mr. X shifted his stare to the left, O was cold-shit shocked at the lie.

"You saw him with your own eyes?"

The other *lesser*'s voice was steady. "Yeah. I did."

"Any chance you're protecting O?"

Wasn't that the question to ask? *Lessers* were cutthroats, always jockeying with one another for position. Even among partners there was little loyalty.

"U?"

The guy's pale head went back and forth. "He's on his own. Why would I risk my skin for his?"

Clearly that was some logic Mr. X felt he could trust, because he went on with the meeting. After the quotas for kill and capture were assigned, the group broke up.

O went over to his partner. "I have to go back to the center for a minute before we go out. I want you to follow me."

He had to find out why U had saved his ass, and he wasn't worried about the other *lesser* seeing the shape the place had been left in. U wouldn't cause trouble. He wasn't particularly aggressive or an independent thinker, more operator than innovator.

Which made it even more weird that he'd taken the initiative he had.

Zsadist stared at the grandfather clock in the mansion's foyer. By the position of the hands he knew he had eight minutes before the sun was officially down. Thank God it was winter and the nights were long.

He eyed the double doors and knew just where he was going as soon as he could get through them. He'd memorized the location the civilian male had given them. Was going to dematerialize and be there in the blink of an eye.

Seven minutes.

It would be better to wait until the sky was all dark, but fuck that. The instant that godforsaken fireball slipped over the edge of the horizon, he was out. To hell with it if he ended up with a bitch of a tan.

Six minutes.

He rechecked the daggers on his chest. Took the SIG Sauer out of the holster at his right hip and ran through it one more time, then did the same for the one that was on the left. He felt for the throwing knife at the small of his back and the six-inch blade he had on his thigh.

Five minutes.

Z cocked his head to the side, cracking his neck to loosen it up.

Four minutes.

Fuck this. He was going now—

“You’ll fry,” Phury said from behind him.

Z closed his eyes. His impulse was to lash out, and the urge grew irresistible as Phury kept talking.

“Z, my man, how’re you going to help her if you fall flat on your face and start steaming?”

“Do you get off being a buzz kill? Or does it just come natural?” As Z glared over his shoulder, he had a sudden memory of that one night Bella had come to the mansion. Phury had seemed so taken by her, and Z remembered the two of them standing together and talking, right where his boots were planted now. He’d watched them from the shadows, wanting her as she’d smiled and laughed with his twin.

Z’s voice got sharper. “I’d think you’d want to get her back, being that she was all into you and shit, thinking you were handsome. Or...maybe you want her to stay gone because of that. Did your vow of celibacy get shaken, my brother?”

As Phury winced, Z’s instinct for weakness jumped into the opening. “We all saw you checking her out that night she came here. You were looking, weren’t you? Yeah, you were, and not just at her face. Did you wonder how she’d feel underneath you? Did you get all nervous about breaking that nosex promise to yourself?”

Phury’s mouth thinned into a slash, and Z hoped the male’s response was a nasty one. He wanted something hard to come back at him. Maybe they could even go at it for the remaining three minutes.

But there was only silence.

“Nothing to say to me?” Z glanced at the clock. “Just as well. It’s time to go—”

“I bleed for her. The same as you do.”

Z looked back at his twin, witnessing the pain on the male’s face from a long distance, as if he were staring through a pair of binoculars. He had a passing thought that he should feel something, some kind of shame or sorrow for forcing Phury to give up that intimate, sad revelation.

Without a word, Zsadist dematerialized.

He triangulated his reappearance to a wooded area about one hundred yards away from where the civilian male said he’d escaped from. As Z took form, the fading light in the sky blinded him and made him feel like he’d volunteered for an acid facial. He ignored the burning and headed in a

northeasterly direction, jogging over the snow-covered ground.

And then there it was, in the middle of the woods, about a hundred feet from a stream: a single-story houselike structure with a black Ford F-150 and a nondescript silver Taurus parked off to one side. Z sidled up to the structure, staying behind the trunks of pine trees, moving quietly in the snow as he worked the building's periphery. It had no windows and only one door. Through the thin walls he could hear movement, talking.

He took out one of his SIGs, flipped off the safety, and considered his options. Dematerializing inside was a dumb move, because he didn't know the interior layout. And his only other alternative, though satisfying, wasn't that strategic either: Kicking the door down and going in shooting was damn appealing, but as suicidal as he was, he wasn't going to risk Bella's life by lighting the place up.

Except then, miracle of miracles, a *lesser* came out of the building, the door shutting with a smack. Moments later a second one followed, and then there was the *beep-beep* of a security alarm activating.

Z's first instinct was to shoot them both in the head, but he held his finger to the side of the trigger. If the slayers had reactivated the alarm, there was a good chance no one else was in-house, and his chances of getting Bella out had just improved. But what if that was SOP on exit regardless of whether the place was empty? Then all he'd do is announce his presence and set off a shit storm.

He watched the two *lessers* as they got in the truck. One had brown hair, which usually meant the slayer was a new recruit, but this guy didn't act like a FNG: He was sure in his boots and doing the talking. His pale-haired buddy was the one sporting the bobble-head nod.

The engine started up and the truck backed around, packing the snow under its tires. Without headlights, the F-150 headed down a barely-there lane through the trees.

Letting those two bastards drive off into the sunset was an exercise in bondage, with Z turning the large muscles of his body into iron ropes over his bones. It was either that or he'd be on the truck's hood, smashing his fist through the windshield, pulling the SOBs out by their hair so he could bite them.

As the sound of the truck faded, Z listened hard to the silence that followed. When he heard nothing, he went back to wanting to blast through the door, but he thought about the alarm and checked his watch. V would be

on site in about a minute and a half.

It would kill him. But he would wait.

While he twitched in his shitkickers, he became aware of a smell, something.... He sniffed the air. There was propane around, somewhere close. Probably feeding that generator around the back. And kerosene from a heater. But there was something else, some kind of smoky, burning...He looked at his hands, wondering if he was on fire and hadn't noticed. No.

What the hell?

His bones went cold as he realized what it was. His boots were planted in the middle of a scorched patch of earth, one about the size of a body. Something had been incinerated right where he was standing—within the last twelve hours, by the scent of it.

Oh...God. Had they left her out for the sun?

Z eased down on his haunches, putting his free hand on the withered ground. He imagined Bella lying there when the sun came out, imagined her feeling ten thousand times more pain than he had as he'd just materialized.

The blackened spot got blurry.

He scrubbed his face and then stared at his palm. There was wetness on it. Tears?

He searched his chest for what he was feeling, but all that came to him was information about his body. His torso was swaying because his muscles were weak. He was light-headed and vaguely nauseous. But that was it. There were no emotions for him.

He rubbed his sternum and was about to do another sweep with his hands when a pair of shitkickers came into his line of sight.

He looked up into Phury's face. The thing was a mask, all frozen and pasty.

"Was it her?" he croaked, kneeling down.

Z lurched backward, just barely managing to keep his gun out of the snow. He couldn't be anywhere near someone right now, especially Phury.

In a messy scramble, he got to his feet. "Vishous here yet?"

"Right behind you, my brother," V whispered.

"There's..." He cleared his throat. Rubbed his face on his forearm. "There's a security alarm. I think the place is clear, because two slayers just left, but I'm not sure."

"I'm on the alarm."

Z caught a number of scents all of a sudden and glanced behind him. The

whole of the Brotherhood was there, even Wrath, who as king was not supposed to be in the field. They were all armed. They had all come to get her back.

The group lined up flat against the house as V used a pick on the door lock. His Glock went in first. When there was no reaction, he slipped inside and closed himself in. A moment later there was one long beep. He opened the door.

“Good to go.”

Z rushed forward, practically mowing down the male.

His eyes penetrated the dim corners of the single room. The place was a mess, with shit scattered all over the floor. Clothes...knives and handcuffs and...shampoo bottles? And what the fuck was that? God, a disemboweled first-aid kit, its gauze and tape bleeding out of the ruined lid. The thing looked like it had been stomped on until it had opened.

Heart pounding in his chest, sweat blooming all over him, he looked for Bella and saw only inanimate objects: A wall of shelving that held nightmarish instruments. A cot. A fireproof metal closet the size of a car. An autopsy table with four sets of steel chains hanging off its corners...and blood smudged on its smooth surface.

Random thoughts fired through Z’s brain. She was dead. That burned oval proved it. Except what if that had just been another captive? What if she’d been moved or something?

As his brothers hung back, like they knew better than to get in his way, Z went over to the fireproof closet, keeping his gun in hand. He wrenched the doors off, just grabbed onto the metal panels and bent them until the hinges broke. He tossed the heavy sections away, hearing them clatter and bang.

Guns. Ammunition. Plastic explosives.

The arsenal of their enemies.

He went into the bathroom. Nothing but a stall shower and a bucket with a toilet seat on it.

“She’s not here, my brother,” Phury said.

In a fit of rage Z launched himself at the autopsy table, picking it up with one hand and throwing it into a wall. In midflight, a length of chain came back at him, catching him in the shoulder, nailing him to the bone.

And then he heard it. A soft whimpering sound.

His head snapped around to the left.

In the corner, on the ground, there were three cylindrical metal lips

protruding from the earth, and they were capped by mesh plates that were the dark brown color of the dirt floor. Which explained why he hadn't noticed them.

He went over and kicked off one of the covers. The whimpering got louder.

Suddenly light-headed, he fell to his knees. "Bella?"

Gibberish rose from the earth to answer him, and he dropped his gun. How was he going to...? Ropes—there were ropes coming out of what looked like a sewer pipe. He grabbed onto them and pulled gently.

What emerged was a dirty, bloody male, about ten years out of his transition. The civilian was naked and shivering, his lips blue, his eyes rolling around.

Z dragged him free, and Rhage wrapped his leather trench coat around the male.

"Get him out of here," someone said as Hollywood sliced the ropes.

"Can you dematerialize?" another brother asked the male.

Z paid no attention to the conversation. He went for the next hole, but there were no ropes leading down into it, and his nose detected no scent. The thing was empty.

He was stepping over to the third when the captive yelled, "No! Th-that one's booby-trapped!"

Z froze. "How?"

Through chattering teeth, the civilian said, "I d-don't know. I just heard the *l-lesser* warn one of his m-men about it."

Before Z could ask, Rhage started walking the room. "Got a gun over here. Business end pointed in that direction." There were the sounds of metal clicks and shifting. "It's not armed. Anymore."

Z looked above the hole. Mounted on the exposed rafters of the roof, about fifteen feet from the floor, there was a small device. "V, what have we got up there?"

"Laser eye. You break it, it probably triggers the—"

"Hold up," Rhage said. "I got another gun to empty out here."

V stroked his goatee. "There must be a remote-control activator, although the guy probably took it with him. That's what I would do." He squinted up at the ceiling. "That particular model runs on lithium batteries. So it's not like we could kill the generator to turn it off. And they're tricky to disarm."

Z glanced around for something he could use to push the plate off and

thought of the bathroom. He went inside, whipped the shower curtain down, and brought the pole it had hung from back.

“Everyone clear out.”

Rhage spoke sharply. “Z, man, I don’t know that I’ve found all the—”

“Take the civilian with you.” When no one moved, he cursed. “We don’t have time to fuck around, and if someone’s getting shot it’s going to be me. Jesus Christ, will you brothers *leave*? ”

When the place was cleared out, Z approached the hole. Standing with his back to one of the guns that had been removed, so that he would have been in its line of fire, he nudged the cover off with the pole. A gunshot rang out with a popping sound.

Z caught the slug in his left calf. The searing impact brought him down on one knee, but he ignored it and dragged himself to the neck of the pipe. He took hold of the ropes that led down into the earth and began to pull.

The first thing he saw was her hair. Bella’s long, beautiful mahogany hair was all around her, a veil over her face and shoulders.

He sagged and lost his vision, partly passing out, but even through the full-body wobble, he kept pulling. Abruptly the effort became easier... because there were hands helping him...other hands on the rope, other hands laying her gently on the floor.

Dressed in a sheer nightgown that was stained with her blood, she wasn’t moving, but she was breathing. He carefully pushed her hair back from her face....

Zsadist’s blood pressure took a nosedive. “Oh, sweet Jesus...oh, sweet Jesus...oh, sweet—”

“What did they do...” Whoever had spoken couldn’t find the words to finish.

Throats cleared. A couple of coughs were smothered. Or maybe they were gags.

Z gathered her in his arms and just...hugged her. He had to get her out, but he couldn’t move for what had been done to her. Blinking, dizzy, screaming inside, he rocked her gently back and forth. Words fell from his mouth, lamentations for her in the Old Language.

Phury sank down to his knees. “Zsadist? We have to take her away from here.”

Focus came to Z in a rush, and suddenly all he could think about was moving her to the mansion. He sliced the harness off her torso, then struggled

to his feet with her in his arms. When he tried to walk, his left leg gave out and he stumbled. For a split second he couldn't think of why.

"Let me take her," Phury said, putting out his hands. "You've been shot." Zsadist shook his head and brushed by his twin, limping.

He took Bella out to the Taurus that was still parked in front of the building. Holding her against his chest, he broke the driver's-side window with his fist, then craned his arm inside and unlocked everything while the alarm went crazy. Opening the rear door, he leaned down and put her on the seat. When he bent her legs slightly to make them fit, the nightgown rode up and he winced. She had bruises. A lot of them.

As the alarm ran out of steam, he said, "Someone give me a jacket."

The second he held his hand out behind him, leather hit his palm. He draped her carefully in what he realized was Phury's coat, and then he shut her in and got behind the wheel.

The last thing he heard was a command from Wrath. "V, get out that hand of yours. This place needs to be torched."

Reaching under the dash, Z hot-wired the sedan and sped from the scene like a bat out of hell.

O pulled his truck over to the curb on a dark section of Tenth Street. "I still don't get why you lied."

"If you got yourself sent home to the Omega, where would that leave us? You're one of the strongest slayers we've got."

O glanced over with distaste. "You're such a company man, aren't you?" "I take pride in our work."

"How nineteen-fifties, Howdy Doody of you."

"Yeah, and that shit saved your ass, so be grateful."

Whatever. He had better things to worry about than U's gung ho pep rally crap.

He and U got out of the truck. ZeroSum and Screamer's and Snuff'd were down a couple blocks, and though it was cold, there were lines waiting to get into the clubs. Some of the shivering masses were undoubtedly vampires, and even if they weren't, the night would be busy. There were always fights with the Brothers to get down with.

O hit the security alarm, stuffed the keys into his pocket...and stopped dead in the middle of Tenth Street. He literally couldn't move.

His wife...Jesus, his wife really hadn't looked well when he'd left with U.

O grabbed the front of his black turtleneck, feeling like he couldn't breathe. He didn't care about the pain she was enduring; she'd brought that on herself. But he couldn't bear it if she died, if she left him.... What if she was dying right now?

"What's the matter?" U asked.

O fished around for the car keys, anxiety sizzling in his veins. "I've got to go."

"You're bailing? We missed quota last night—"

"I just have to go back to the center for a sec. L's over on Fifth Street hunting. Hang with him. I'll find you in thirty."

O didn't wait for an answer. He hopped in the truck and sped out of town, taking Route 22 through Caldwell's rural sprawl. He was about fifteen minutes away from the persuasion center when he saw the flashing tangle of a cop car convention up ahead. He cursed and hit the brakes, hoping it was just an accident.

But no, in the intervening time since he'd left, the goddamned police had set up another one of their intoxication checkpoints. Two squad cars were parked on either side of Route 22, and orange cones and flares ran up the middle of the road. On the right, there was a reflective sign announcing the Caldwell Police Department's Safety First program.

Holy Christ, like they had to do this here? In the middle of nowhere? Why weren't they downtown, near the bars? Then again, people from the shit burg next to Caldwell did have to drive home after club-hopping in the big city....

There was one car in front of him, a minivan, and O drummed his fingers on top of the steering wheel. He had half a mind to pull out his Smith & Wesson and pop both the cop and the driver to their royal reward. Just for slowing him up.

A car approached from the opposite direction, and O looked across the road. The unremarkable Ford Taurus stopped with a little squeak of the brakes, its headlights milky and dim.

Man, those lame-ass cars were a dime a dozen, but that was why U had chosen the make and model for his own ride. Fitting in with the general human population was critical to keeping the war with the vampires secret.

As the policeman approached the POS, O thought it was weird that the

driver's window was already down on a cold night like this. Then he got a gander at the guy behind the wheel. *Holy shit.* Bastard had a scar as thick as a finger running down his face. And a gauge in his earlobe. Maybe the car was stolen.

The cop obviously had the same idea, because his hand was on the butt of his gun as he bent over to address the driver. And the shit really went down when the badge trained his flashlight into the backseat. Abruptly his body jerked like he'd been nailed between the eyes, and he reached for his shoulder, going for what was probably his transmitter. Except the driver stuck his head out the window and stared up at the officer. There was a frozen moment between them.

Then the policeman dropped his arm and casually waved the Taurus through without even checking the driver's ID.

O glared at the cop doing duty on O's side of the road. The fucker was still detaining the soccer-mom special in front like the minivan was full of drug dealers. Meanwhile, the guy's buddy across the way was letting what looked like a serial killer go through without so much as a *hi-how-are-ya*. It was like getting in the wrong lane at a tollbooth.

Finally O pulled up. He was as civil as he could be, and a couple minutes later he was hitting the gas. He'd gone about five miles when a brilliant flash of light broke out over the landscape to the right. About where the persuasion center was.

He thought of the kerosene heater. The one that leaked.

O floored the accelerator. His woman was stuck in the ground.... If there was a fire...

He cut into the forest and sped under the pine trees, bumping up and down, his head smacking the roof while he tried to hang onto the steering wheel. He reassured himself that up ahead there was no orange glow from a blaze. If there had been an explosion, there would be flames, smoke....

His headlights swung around. The persuasion center was gone. Eliminated. Ash.

O punched into the brake to keep the truck from smashing into a tree. Then he looked around the forest to make sure he was in the right place. When it was clear he was, he leaped out and threw himself to the ground.

Grabbing handfuls of dust, he waded around in the residue until the shit got in his nose and his mouth and covered his body like a robe. He found bits of melted metal, but nothing larger than his palm.

Through the roaring in his mind, he remembered seeing this odd ghostly powder before.

O tilted his head back and hurled his voice to the heavens. He had no idea what left his mouth. All he knew was that the Brotherhood had done this. Because the same thing had happened to the *lessers*' martial-arts academy six months ago.

Dust...ashes...gone. And they had taken his wife.

Oh, God... Had she been alive when they'd found her? Or had they taken her body with them? Was she dead?

This was his fault; this was all his fault. He'd been so hell-bent on punishing her, he'd missed the implications of that civilian getting loose. The male had gone to the Brotherhood and told them where she was, and they had come at the first shades of night and taken her away.

O wiped desperate tears out of his eyes. And then he stopped breathing. He swiveled his head around, taking in the landscape. U's silver Ford Taurus was gone.

The checkpoint. The fucking checkpoint. That scary-ass man behind the wheel had in fact been no man at all. He'd been a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Had to be. And O's wife had been in the back, either barely breathing or dead. That was why the cop had freaked out. He'd seen her as he'd looked into the rear of the car, but the Brother had brainwashed him into letting the Taurus through.

O lurched into the truck and hammered the accelerator, driving east, heading for U's place.

The Taurus had a LoJack system.

Which meant with the right computer equipment, he could find that POS anywhere.

Chapter Seven

Bella had some vague thought that she was in a car. Except how was that possible? She must be hallucinating.

No...it really sounded like a car, with that steady hum of an engine. And it felt like a car, a subtle vibration that at times condensed into a bump as something in the road went under the tires.

She tried to open her eyes, found she couldn't, and tried again. As the effort exhausted her, she gave up. God, she was tired...like she had the flu. Ached all over, too, especially at her head and stomach. And she was nauseated. She tried to remember what had happened, how she'd gotten free, *if* she was free. But all she had was an image of the *lesser* who loved her coming through the door, covered in black blood. The rest was fog.

Patting her hand around, she found something covering her shoulders and pulled it closer. Leather. And it smelled...not at all like the cloying sweetness of a *lesser*. It was the scent of a male of her race. She took more breaths in through her nose. When she caught the baby-powder scent of the slayers, she was confused until she pressed her nose into the seat. Yes, in the upholstery. This was a *lesser's* car. But then why was a male vampire's sweat on what she was wearing? And there was something else, another smell...a dark musk with an evergreen spice.

Bella started to tremble. She remembered the scent well, remembered it from the first time she had gone to the Brotherhood's training compound, remembered it from later, when she had been to their mansion.

Zsadist. Zsadist was in the car with her.

Her heart pounded. She struggled to open her eyes, but either her lids refused to obey or maybe they were already open and it was just too dark for

her to see.

Am I rescued? she asked. *Did you come for me, Zsadist?*

Except no sound came out of her mouth, though she moved her lips. She formed the words again, forcing air through her voice box. A hoarse groan was released, nothing more.

Why weren't her eyes working?

She started to thrash around and then heard the sweetest sound that had ever reached her ears.

"I got you, Bella." Zsadist's voice. Low. Full of strength. "You're safe. You're out of there. And you're never going back."

He had come for her. He had come for her....

She started to sob. The car seemed to slow, but then their speed redoubled.

Her relief was so great, she slid into blackness.

Zsadist kicked open the door to his room, busting the lock mechanism clean off. The crack of sound was loud, and Bella stirred in his arms, moaning. He froze as her head turned from side to side in the crook of his arm.

This was good, he thought. This was very good.

"Come on, Bella, come back to me. Wake up." But she didn't regain consciousness.

He went over to his pallet and laid her down where he slept. When he glanced up, Wrath and Phury were in his doorway, the two huge males blocking out most of the light from the hall.

"She needs to go to Havers's," Wrath said. "She needs to be treated."

"Havers can do what he has to here. She's not leaving this room."

Z ignored the long silence that followed, totally caught up in watching Bella breathe. Her chest was going up and down in a regular pump, but it seemed so shallow.

Phury's sigh was one he'd know anywhere. "Zsadist—"

"Forget it. He'll see her here. And no one is touching her without my permission or my presence." When he glared up at his brothers, Wrath and Phury seemed totally dumbfounded. "For chrissakes, you want me to say it in the Old Language in case you two forgot English? She goes *nowhere*."

With a curse, Wrath flipped open his cell phone and spoke fast and hard.

When he closed the thing, he said, “Fritz is already in town, and he’s going to pick the doctor up. They’ll be here in twenty.”

Z nodded and looked at Bella’s eyelids. He wished he could be the one to take care of what had been done to them. He wanted her to be relieved now. *Oh, God...* How she must have suffered.

He became aware that Phury had come over, and he didn’t like it as the brother knelt down. Z’s instinct was to barricade Bella’s body with his own, preventing his twin, Wrath, the doctor, *any* male from seeing her. He didn’t understand the impulse, didn’t know its origin, but it was so strong he nearly launched himself at Phury’s neck.

And then his twin reached out his hand as if to touch her ankle. Z’s lips peeled off his fangs, a growl launching out of his mouth.

Phury’s head snapped up. “Why are you acting like this?”

She’s mine, Z thought.

Except the instant the conviction came to him, he pushed it aside. What the fuck *was* he doing?

“She’s hurt,” he muttered. “Just don’t mess with her, okay?”

Havers arrived fifteen minutes later. The tall, thin doctor had a black leather suitcase in his hand and looked like he was ready to do his business. But as he came forward, Z sprang up and intercepted the male into the wall. Havers’s pale eyes popped wide behind his tortoiseshell glasses, and his case clattered to the floor.

Wrath cursed. “Jesus Christ—”

Z ignored the hands trying to pull him off and pegged the doctor with a glare. “You treat her better than you would your own blood. She suffers one unnecessary flinch and I will take it out of your hide a hundred times over.”

Havers’s slender body trembled, his mouth working silently.

Phury gave a good pull and got nowhere. “Z, go easy—”

“Stay out of this,” he snapped. “We clear, Doctor?”

“Yes...yes, sire.” When Z released him, Havers coughed and pulled at his bow tie. Then frowned. “Sire...? You bleed. Your leg—”

“You don’t worry about me. You worry about her. Now.”

The male nodded, fumbled with his suitcase, and went over to the pallet. As he got down on his knees beside Bella, Z willed lights on in the room.

Havers’s harsh inhalation was probably as close to a curse as the refined male could get. Under his breath he murmured in the Old Language, “To do this to a female...merciful Fade.”

“Take the stitches out,” Z demanded, looming over the physician.

“First the exam. I have to see if there are more serious injuries.”

Havers opened up his case and pulled out a stethoscope, a blood-pressure cuff, and a penlight. He checked her heart rate and breathing, looked into her ears and nose, took her BP. When he opened her mouth she winced a little, but then he lifted her head and she began to struggle in earnest.

Just as Zsadist lunged at the doctor, Phury’s heavy arm clamped around Z’s chest and jerked him back. “He’s not hurting her and you know it.”

Z fought the hold, hating the sensation of Phury’s body against him. But when his twin didn’t let up, he knew it was for the best. He was on a hair trigger, and taking out the doctor would be a stupid move. Hell, he probably shouldn’t be armed right now.

Phury was obviously thinking along similar lines. He removed Z’s daggers from their chest holster and handed them to Wrath. The guns were taken as well.

Havers looked up and seemed greatly relieved that weapons were gone. “I...ah, I’m going to give her some light pain medication. Her respiration and pulse rate are strong enough so she’ll handle it fine, and it will make the rest of the examination and what follows easier for her to tolerate. Okay?”

It wasn’t until Z nodded that the doctor administered a shot. When the tension in Bella’s body eased, the doctor took out a pair of scissors and went to the bottom of the bloodied nightgown she had on.

As he lifted up the hem, Z felt a red rage. “Stop!”

The doctor braced himself for a blow to the head, but all Z did was meet Phury’s stare and then Wrath’s. “Neither of you is to look at her naked. Close your eyes or turn around.”

Both stared at him for a moment. Then Wrath offered his back and Phury lowered his lids, though he kept his hold on Z’s chest strong.

Zsadist stared hard at the doctor. “If you’re going to remove her clothing, you cover her with something.”

“What shall I use?”

“A towel from the bathroom.”

“I’ll get it,” Wrath said. After he handed one over, he resumed his post facing the door.

Havers spread the towel over Bella’s body and then cut the nightgown along one side. He glanced up before lifting anything. “I’m going to need to see all of her. And I’m going to have to touch her belly.”

“What for?”

“I have to palpate her internal organs to determine whether any are swollen from trauma or infection.”

“Make it quick.”

Havers pulled the towel aside—

Z swayed against his twin’s hard body. “Oh...*nalla*.” His voice cracked. “Oh, sweet Jesus...*nalla*.”

Something was scratched into the skin on her stomach in what looked like three-inch block letters in English. As he was illiterate, he didn’t know what it said, but he had a horrible feeling....

“What does it read?” he hissed.

Havers cleared his throat. “It is a name. David. It says ‘David.’”

Wrath growled. “*In her skin?* That animal—”

Z cut his king off. “I will kill that *lesser*. So help me God, I will chew on his bones.”

Havers inspected the cuts, his hands light and careful. “You must see that no salt gets anywhere near these. Otherwise the scars will heal as is.”

“No shit.” As if he didn’t have experience with how wounds became permanent.

Havers covered her up and went to her feet, inspecting them and then her calves. He pushed the nightgown out of the way as he went to her knees. Then he moved one of her legs out to the side, parting her thighs.

Z surged forward, dragging Phury with him. “What the fuck are you doing!”

Havers whipped back his hands, holding them up over his head. “I need to perform an internal exam. In the event she has been...violated.”

With a quick move, Wrath stepped in front of Z and clamped his arms around Z’s waist. Through the sunglasses, the king’s stare burned. “Let him do it, Z. It’s better for her if he does.”

Zsadist couldn’t watch. He dropped his head down into Wrath’s neck, getting lost in the male’s long black hair. The hard bodies of his brothers were sandwiching him, but he was too horrified to panic at the contact. He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed deeply, the scents of Phury and Wrath invading his nose.

He heard a rustling noise, as if the doctor were searching around in that suitcase of his. Then there were two snapping sounds, as though the male were pulling on gloves. A shifting of metal against metal. Some whispering

noises. Then...silence. No, not really. Little noises. Then a couple of clicks.

Z reminded himself that all *lessers* were impotent. But he could just imagine how they made up for the deficiency.

He trembled for her until his teeth chattered.

Chapter Eight

John Matthew looked across the Range Rover's front seat. Tohr was preoccupied as they went deep into the rural part of Caldwell, and though John was scared to meet Wrath, the king, he was more worried about all this quiet. He couldn't understand what was wrong. Bella had been saved. She was safe now. So everyone should be happy, right? Except when Tohr had come home to pick John up, he'd wrapped his arms around Wellsie in the kitchen and stayed there a long time. His words, low and in the Old Language, had come out of what sounded like a choked throat.

John wanted to know the details of what had happened, but it was hard to pry in the car in the dark, what with him having to sign or write. And Tohr didn't look like he was into talking.

"Here we are," Tohr said.

With a quick swing to the right he shot them onto a cramped dirt road, and John realized he suddenly couldn't really see anything out the windows. There was an odd haze to the wintry forest around them, a buffering that made him vaguely nauseous.

From out of nowhere a huge gate materialized from the foggy landscape, and they skidded to a halt. There was another set of gates right beyond it, and as they entered the space in between, they were caged like a bull in a cattle chute. Tohr put down his window, entered some kind of code on an intercom pad, and they were free to go out the other side into a...

Jesus, what is this?

An underground tunnel. And as they headed down into the earth on a steady decent, several more gates appeared, the barricades getting more and more fortified until the last one. This was the biggest of them all, a shiny steel

monster that had a HIGH VOLTAGE sign smack-dab in the middle. Tohr looked up into a security camera, and then there was a clicking noise. The gates slid apart.

Before they went forward, John tapped Tohr's forearm to get the man's attention. *Is this where the Brothers live?* he signed slowly.

"Sort of. I'm taking you through the training center first and then we'll go to the mansion." Tohr hit the gas. "When classes start you'll come here Monday through Friday. Bus will pick you up in front of our house at four o'clock. My brother Phury's on site, so he's covering the early classes." At John's look, Tohr explained, "The compound is all interconnected underground. I'll show you how to access the tunnel system that links the buildings together, but you keep it to yourself. Anyone who shows up uninvited somewhere is going to have a serious problem. Your classmates are not welcome, you feel me?"

John nodded as they pulled into the parking area he remembered from a night long ago. God, it felt like a hundred years had passed since he'd come here with Mary and Bella.

He and Tohr got out of the Range Rover. *Who will I be training with?*

"A dozen other males about your age. They all have some warrior blood in their veins, which is why we chose them. Training will last through your transitions and then quite a while afterward, until we think you're ready to go out in the field."

They walked up to a pair of metal doors that Tohr opened wide. On the other side was a corridor that seemed to go on forever. As they went along Tohr showed off a classroom, the gym, a weight room, then a locker room. The male stopped when he got to a door made of frosted glass.

"This is where I hang when I'm not home or in the field."

John walked in. The room was pretty empty and very unremarkable. The desk was metal and covered with computer equipment, phones, and papers. File cabinets lined the back wall. There were only two places to sit, if you assumed flipping the wastepaper basket over was not an option. One chair was standard-issue office equipment, over in the corner. The other was behind the desk and hump-ugly: a ragged, avocado green leather monstrosity with dog-eared corners, a sagging seat, and a set of legs that gave new meaning to the word *sturdy*.

Tohr put his hand on the thing's high back. "Can you believe Wellsie made me get rid of this?"

John nodded and signed, *Yes, I can.*

Tohr smiled and walked over to a floor-to-ceiling cabinet. When he opened the door and punched in a series of numbers on a keypad, the back of the thing released outward into a dim kind of passageway.

“Here we go.”

John stepped inside even though he couldn’t see much.

A metal tunnel. Wide enough to fit three people walking side by side, and so tall there was some space above even Tohr’s head. Lights were set into ceiling every ten feet or so, but they didn’t carry far through the darkness.

This is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen, John thought as they started walking.

The sound of Tohr’s shitkickers rebounded off the smooth, steel walls, and so did his deep voice.

“Look, about meeting Wrath. I don’t want you to worry. He’s intense, but he’s nothing to fear. And don’t be freaked out by the sunglasses. He’s nearly blind and hypersensitive to light, so he has to wear them. But even though he can’t see, he’s going to read you like a book anyway. He’ll know your emotions clear as day.”

A little later, a shallow staircase appeared to the left, leading up to a door and another keypad. Tohr stopped and pointed down the tunnel, which continued forever, as far as John could tell.

“If you keep going straight here, you’ll be at the gatehouse in another hundred and fifty yards.”

Tohr went up the flight of stairs, hit the keypad, and threw open the door. Bright light flooded in, like water released from a dam.

John looked up, an odd feeling ringing in his chest. He had the weirdest sense he was dreaming.

“S all good, son.” Tohr smiled, his harsh face softening a little.
“Nothing’s going to hurt you up there. Trust me.”

“Okay, it’s done,” Havers said.

Zsadist opened his eyes, seeing only Wrath’s thick black hair. “Has she been...?”

“She’s just fine. No signs of forcible intercourse or trauma of any kind.” There was a snapping sound, as if the doctor were removing his gloves.

Zsadist sagged and his brothers accepted his weight. When he finally

lifted his head, he saw that Havers had removed the bloody nightgown, put Bella's towel back in place, and was pulling on a fresh pair of gloves. The male leaned over his case, took out a pair of needle-nose scissors and some tweezers, then looked up.

"I'll do her eyes now, all right?" When Z nodded, the doctor held up the instruments. "Be of care, sire. You startle me and I could blind her with these. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. Just don't hurt—"

"She won't feel a thing. I promise you."

This Z watched, and it took forever. He had some vague thought halfway through that he wasn't holding himself up anymore. Phury and Wrath were keeping him on his feet, his head lolling on the side of Wrath's massive shoulder as he stared down.

"Last one," Havers murmured. "Okay. The sutures are out."

All the males in the room took deep breaths, even the doctor, and then Havers went back to his supplies and picked up a tube. He smoothed some ointment onto Bella's lids; then he packed up his suitcase.

As the physician got to his feet, Zsadist broke away from his brothers and walked around a little bit. Wrath and Phury stretched their arms.

"Her injuries are painful, but not life-threatening at this point," Havers said. "They will heal by tomorrow or the day after, provided they are left alone. She is malnourished and she needs to feed. If she's staying in this room, you need to turn up the heat and move her to the bed. Food and drink should be brought in for when she comes around. And there's one other thing. On the internal exam, I found..." His eyes bounced between Wrath and Phury, then settled on Zsadist. "Something of a personal nature."

Zsadist went over to the doctor. "What?"

Havers drew him into the corner and spoke softly.

Z was stunned speechless when the male was finished. "You sure?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know. But fairly soon."

Z looked down at Bella. *Oh, Christ...*

"Now, I am assuming you have aspirin or Motrin in the house?"

Z had no clue; he never took pain meds. He glanced at Phury.

"Yes, we do," the brother said.

"Let her take them. And I'll give you something stronger as backup in

case they don't work well enough."

Havers took out a small glass bottle that had a red rubber seal as a top and palmed two hypodermic syringes that were in sterile packs. He wrote on a little pad, then handed the paper and the supplies to Z.

"If it's daytime and she's in a great deal of pain when she wakes up, you may give her a shot of this according to my directions. It's the same morphine I just gave her, but you must mind the dosage information. Call me if you have questions or you want me to walk you through the injection procedure. Otherwise, if the sun is down, I'll come and give her the shot myself." Havers glanced down at Z's leg. "Would you like for me to examine your wound?"

"Can I bathe her?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Now?"

"Yes." Havers frowned. "But, sire, your leg..."

Z walked into his bathroom, cranked the Jacuzzi's faucets, and stuck his hand under the rush. He waited until it was warm enough; then he went back for her.

By this time, the doctor had gone, but Mary, Rhage's female, was in the bedroom's doorway, wanting to see Bella. Phury and Wrath talked to her briefly and shook their heads. She left, looking stricken.

As the door shut, Z knelt down next to the pallet and started to pick Bella up.

"Hold it, Z." Wrath's voice was hard. "Her family should be caring for her."

Z stopped and thought of whoever had fed her fish. God...this was probably not right. Keeping her here, away from those who had proper cause to attend her in her pain. But the idea of letting her go out into the world was unbearable. He'd only just found her....

"She'll go to them tomorrow," he said. "Tonight and today she stays here."

Wrath shook his head. "It's not—"

"You think she's ready to travel like this?" Z snapped. "Leave the female alone. Have Tohr call her family and tell them she will be given over to them at nightfall tomorrow. Right now she needs a bath and some sleep."

Wrath's lips tightened. There was a long silence. "Then she goes to another room, Z. She's not staying with you."

Zsadist rose to his feet and walked over to the king, getting all up in the male's grille. "You just try and move her."

"For chrissakes, Z," Phury barked. "Back off—"

Wrath leaned forward until their noses almost touched. "Careful, Z. You know damn well that threatening me won't just get you cracked in the jaw."

Yeah, they'd been through it over the summer. Legally Z could be executed under the old rules of conduct if he pushed this much further. The king's life was valued over all others'.

Not that Z gave a shit at the moment.

"You think I care about a death sentence? *Please.*" He narrowed his eyes. "But I'll tell you this. Whether you decide to go majesty all over my ass or not, it'll take you at least a day to condemn me with the Scribe Virgin. So Bella's still sleeping here tonight."

He walked back to her and picked her up as carefully as he could while making sure the towel stayed where it needed to be. Without looking at Wrath or his twin, he swept her into the bathroom and kicked the door shut behind him.

The tub was already halfway filled, so he kept a hold on her as he leaned down and checked the temperature. Perfect. He lowered her into the water and then stretched her arms over the sides so she was braced up.

The towel quickly dampened and fused with her body. He saw clearly the gentle swells of her breasts, the small rib cage, the flat expanse of her stomach. As the water rose, the hem of the towel floated loose and flirted with the tops of her thighs.

Z's heart kicked in his chest and he felt like a lecher, staring at her when she was hurt and out of it. Hoping to shield her from his eyes and wanting to give her the modesty she deserved, he went to the cabinet to find some bubble bath. There was nothing except bath salts, and he sure as hell wasn't using them.

He was about to turn back to her when he was struck by how big the mirror over the sink was. He didn't want her to see what she looked like, because the less she knew about what had been done, the better. He covered the glass with two large towels, tucking the thick terry cloth behind the frame.

When he returned to her, she'd slid down into the water, but at least the top of the towel was still sticking to her shoulders and basically staying in place. He took hold of her under one of her arms and hitched her up, then

grabbed a washcloth. The instant he started washing the side of her neck, she thrashed around, the water splashing up onto him. Low, panicky noises came out of her mouth, and they didn't stop even after he'd put the little towel aside.

Talk to her, you idiot.

"Bella...Bella, it's all right. You're okay."

She fell still and frowned. Then her eyes opened slightly and she started to blink a lot. When she tried to wipe at her lids, he took her hands away from her face.

"No. That's medicine. Leave it there."

She froze. Cleared her throat until she could speak. "Where...where am I?"

Her voice, groggy and hoarse as it was, sounded beautiful to him.

"You're with..." Me. "You're with the Brotherhood. You're safe."

As her glassy, unfocused eyes moved around, he leaned up to a switch on the wall and dimmed the lights. Even though she was delirious and no doubt mostly blind from the ointment, he didn't want her to see him. The last thing she needed to worry about was what would happen if her scars didn't heal smoothly.

When she dropped her arms into the water and braced her feet against the tub's base, he cut the faucet off and sat back on his heels. He wasn't good at touching people, so it wasn't a big surprise that she couldn't stand his hands on her. But goddamn, he had no idea what to do to relieve her. She looked miserable—way past crying and into numb agony.

"You're safe..." he murmured, though he doubted she believed it. He wouldn't have if he'd been her.

"Is Zsadist here?"

He frowned, not knowing what to make of that. "Yeah, I'm right here."

"You are?"

"Right here. Right beside you." He reached out awkwardly and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

And then she seemed to slide into a delirium. She mumbled, making little sounds that might have been words, and jerked around. Z grabbed another towel, rolled it up, and put it under her head so she wouldn't bump it against the hard edge of the Jacuzzi.

He racked his brain for what he could do to help her, and because it was the only thing he could think of, he hummed a little. When that seemed to

calm her, he began to sing softly, choosing an Old Language hymn to the Scribe Virgin, one about blue skies and white owls and green fields of grass.

Gradually Bella went lax and took a deep breath. Closing her eyes, she eased back against the towel pillow he'd made for her.

As his singing was the only comfort he could give her, he sang.

Phury stared down at the pallet where Bella had just lain, thinking that the torn nightgown she'd had on made him ill. Then his eyes shifted to the skull on the floor to the left. The female skull.

"I can't allow this," Wrath said as the sound of running water got cut off in the bathroom.

"Z's not going to hurt her," Phury muttered. "Look at the way he treats her. Christ, he's acting like a bonded male."

"What if his mood changes? You want Bella on that list of females he's killed?"

"He'll hit the ceiling if we take her away."

"Tough shit—"

The two of them froze. Then they both slowly looked toward the bathroom door. The sound coming from the other side was soft, rhythmic. As if someone were...

"What the hell?" Wrath murmured.

Phury couldn't believe it either. "He's singing to her."

Even muted, the purity and beauty of Zsadist's voice were striking. His tenor had always been like that. On the rare occasions he sang, the sounds that came out of his mouth were stunners, capable of making time grind to a halt and then slide into infinity.

"God...damn." Wrath pushed his sunglasses up on to his forehead and rubbed his eyes. "Watch him, Phury. Watch him well."

"Don't I always? Look, I have to go to Havers's myself tonight, but only long enough to get my prosthesis refitted. I'll have Rhage keep an eye on things until I get back."

"You do that. We're not going to lose that female on our watch, we clear? Jesus Christ...that twin of yours would drive anyone right off a cliff, you know that?" Wrath stalked out of the room.

Phury looked back down to the pallet and imagined Bella lying there next to Zsadist. This was all wrong. Z didn't know a fricking thing about warmth.

And that poor female had spent the last six weeks in the cold ground.

It should be me in there with her. Washing her. Easing her. Caring for her.

Mine, he thought, glaring at the door the singing was coming out of.

Phury started for the bathroom, suddenly pissed off beyond belief. The territorial anger lit his chest up like a bonfire, teeing off a blaze of power that roared in his body. He clamped his hand on the doorknob—and heard that beautiful tenor changing tune.

Phury stood there, shaking. As his anger slid into a yearning that frightened him, he put his forehead on the jamb. *Oh, God...no.*

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to find another explanation for his behavior. There wasn't one. And he and Zsadist were twins, after all.

So it would make sense that they would want the same female. That they would end up...bonding with the same female.

He cursed.

Holy shit, this was trouble—of the bury-your-dead variety. Two bonded males tied to the same female were a lethal combination to begin with. Make that two warriors and you had the potential for serious injury. Vampires were animals, after all. They walked and talked and were capable of higher reasoning, but fundamentally they were animals. So there were some instincts that even the smartest brain couldn't override.

Good thing he wasn't quite there yet. He was attracted to Bella and he wanted her, but he hadn't descended into the deep possessiveness that was the calling card of a bonded male. And he hadn't caught the bonding scent coming off of Z, so maybe there was hope.

They'd both have to get away from Bella, though. Warriors, probably because of their aggressive natures, bonded hard and quick. So hopefully she would leave soon and go back to her family, where she belonged.

Phury peeled his hand off the doorknob and backed out of the room. Like a zombie he walked downstairs and headed outside to the courtyard. He wanted the cold to slap some clear thinking into him. Except all it did was make his skin tight.

He was about to light a blunt of red smoke when he noticed that the Ford Taurus, the one Z had hot-wired and driven Bella home in, was parked in front of the mansion. It was still running, forgotten in all the drama.

Yeah, that was not the kind of lawn sculpture they needed. God only knew what kind of tracking device was in it.

Phury got into the sedan, threw the thing into gear, and headed out.

Chapter Nine

As John stepped free of the underground tunnel, he was momentarily blinded by brightness. And then his eyesight adjusted. *Oh, my God. It's beautiful.*

The vast lobby was rainbow vivid, so colorful he felt like his retinas couldn't take it all in. From the green and red marble columns to the multihued mosaic floor to the gold leafing everywhere to the—

Holy Michelangelo, look at that ceiling.

Three stories up, paintings of angels and clouds and warriors on great horses covered an expanse that seemed as big as a football field. And there was more.... All around the second floor there was a gold-leaved balcony that had panels inset with similar depictions. Then there was the grand staircase with its own ornate balustrade.

The proportions of the space were perfect. The colors luscious. The art sublime. And it wasn't Donald Trump rent-a-royalty. Even John, who didn't know anything about style, had this funny sense that what he was looking at was the real deal. The person who had built this mansion and decorated it knew his stuff and had the money to buy top-drawer everything: a true aristocrat.

"Sweet, isn't it? My brother D built this place in 1914." Tohr put his hands on his hips as he glanced around, then cleared his throat briskly.
"Yeah, he had fabulous taste. The best of the best for him."

John measured Tohr's face carefully. He'd never heard that tone of voice come out of the man before. Such sadness...

Tohr smiled and urged John forward with a hand to the shoulder. "Don't look at me like that. I feel like an unwrapped sausage when you do."

They headed for the second floor, walking up dark red carpeting so lush it

was like stepping on a mattress. When John got to the top, he looked over the balcony at the lobby's floor design. The mosaics coalesced into a spectacular depiction of a fruit tree in full bloom.

"Apples play a role in our rituals," Tohr said. "Or at least, they do when we observe them. Not a lot of that's been going on lately, but Wrath's convening the first winter solstice ceremony in a hundred or so years."

That's what Wellsie's been working on, right? John signed.

"Yeah. She's handling a lot of the logistics. The race is hungry to get back to the rituals, and it's about time."

When John didn't look away from the splendor, Tohr said, "Son? Wrath's waiting for us."

John nodded and followed, going across the landing to a set of double doors marked with some kind of seal. Tohr was just lifting his hand to knock when the brass handles turned and the interior was revealed. Except no one was on the other side. So how had the things opened?

John glanced in. The room was cornflower blue and reminded him of pictures from a history book. It was French, wasn't it? With all the curlicues and fancy furnishings—

John suddenly had trouble swallowing.

"My Lord," Tohr said, bowing and then walking forward.

John just stood there in the doorway. Behind a spectacular French desk that was way too pretty and way too little for him, there was a massive man with shoulders bigger than even Tohr's. Long black hair fell straight from a widow's peak, and that face...the hard composite of it spelled out donot-fuck-with-me. God, the wraparound sunglasses made him look positively cruel.

"John?" Tohr said.

John went to Tohr's side and hid a little. Yeah, it was a pansy thing to do, but he'd never felt smaller or more dispensable in his life. Hell, next to the power of the guy in front of them, he was almost convinced he didn't actually exist.

The king shifted in his chair, leaning onto the desk.

"Come here, son." The voice was low and accented, the *r* stretching out quite a while before its word ended.

"Go on." Tohr gave him a nudge when he didn't move. "It's all right."

John stumbled over his feet, making it across the room with absolutely no finesse. He halted in front of the desk as if he were a rock that had rolled to a

stop.

The king rose and kept rising until he seemed tall as an office building. Wrath had to be six-foot-seven or more, and the black clothes he wore, particularly the leathers, made him even larger.

“Come behind here.”

John glanced back to make sure Tohr was still in the room.

“It’s okay, son,” the king said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

John moved around, his heart beating like a mouse’s. As he tilted his head and looked up, the king’s arm stretched out. The insides of it, from wrist to elbow, were covered with black tattoos. And the designs were like the ones John had seen in his dreams, the ones he’d put on the bracelet he wore....

“I’m Wrath,” the man said. There was a pause. “You want to shake my hand, son?”

Oh, right. John reached out, half expecting his bones to be crushed. Instead he just felt steady warmth as they made contact.

“That name on your bracelet,” Wrath said. “It’s Tehrror. Do you want to go by that or John?”

John panicked and glanced back at Tohr, because he didn’t know what he wanted and didn’t know how to communicate that to the king.

“Easy, son.” Wrath laughed softly. “You can decide later.”

The king’s face suddenly snapped to the side, as if he’d focused on something out in the hall. Just as abruptly a smile stretched his hard lips into an expression of total reverence.

“*Leelan,*” Wrath breathed.

“Sorry I’m late.” The female voice was low and lovely. “Mary and I are so worried about Bella. We’re trying to figure out how to help her.”

“You two will find a way. Come meet John.”

John turned to the door and looked at a woman—

White light suddenly took the place of his vision, just wiped out everything he saw. It was like being hit with a halogen beam. He blinked, blinked, blinked.... And then from out of the infinite nothing, he saw the woman again. She was dark-haired, with eyes that reminded him of someone he’d loved.... No, not reminded...hers were the eyes of his...What? Of his *what?*

John swayed. Heard voices coming at him from a distance.

On the inside of him, in his chest, down deep in the chambers of his beating heart, he felt a splintering, like he’d split in half. He was losing her...

he was losing the dark-haired woman...he was...

He felt his mouth go wide, working as if he were trying to speak, but then spasms overtook him, jerking through his little body, flopping him off the soles of his feet, sending him tumbling to the ground.

Zsadist knew it was time to get Bella out of the tub, because she'd been in it for almost an hour and her skin was prunning up. Except then he glanced through the water at the towel he kept pulling into place over her body.

Shit...getting her out with that thing on was going to get messy.

With a wince, he reached over and pulled it off.

Looking away quickly, he slung the wet load to the floor and grabbed a dry one, which he put right next to the tub. Gritting his teeth, he leaned forward and pushed his arms into the water, going for her body. His eyes ended up right on the level of her breasts.

Oh, God... They were perfect. Creamy white with little pink tips. And the water flirted with her nipples, teasing them with rippling kisses that made them glisten.

He squeezed his lids shut, pulled his arms out of the tub, and sat back on his heels. When he was ready to try again, he focused on the wall ahead and arched over...only to feel a quick shot of pain at his hips. He looked down, confused.

There was a swollen bulge in his pants. The *it* was so hard, a tent had popped out of the front of his warm-ups. Clearly the thing had gotten squeezed against the side of the tub when he'd leaned over, and that was what the stinger was about.

Cursing, he pushed the *it* around with the heel of his hand, hating the feel of the heavy weight, the way the hard length got tangled in his sweats, the fact that he had to deal with it at all. Except no matter how much he tried, he couldn't get the thing arranged right, at least not without putting his hand inside and working it around, which he was damn well not going to do. Eventually he gave up and left the erection caught at an angle, twisted and hurting.

Served the bastard right.

Zsadist took a deep breath, slid his arms into the water, and wrapped them under Bella's body. He lifted her out, shocked anew at how light she was; then he propped her against the marble wall using the outside of his hip

and a hand on her collarbone. He picked up the towel he'd left on the Jacuzzi's edge, but before he put it around her, his eyes shifted to the letters on the skin of her stomach.

Something odd lurched in his chest, a heavy weight.... No, it was a descending sensation, as if he were falling down, though he was on a level. He was astonished. It had been so long since anything had broken through the anger or the numbness. He had a feeling he was...sad?

Whatever. She had goose bumps, was covered in them. So now was not the time to get all into himself.

He wrapped her up and carried her to the bed. Shoving the comforter aside, he laid her out flat, taking the damp towel off of her. As he covered her with the sheets and blankets, he caught sight of her belly again.

That weird tilting sensation came back, like his heart had taken a gondola ride into his gut. Or maybe his thighs.

He tucked her in and then went to the thermostat. Facing the dial, looking at numbers and writing he didn't understand, he had no idea what to turn it to. He moved the little pointer from all the way to the left to somewhere right of center, but he wasn't sure exactly what he'd done.

He glanced over to the bureau. The two syringes and the glass vial of morphine were sitting where Havers had left them. Z went over, picked up a needle, the drug, and the dosage instructions, then paused before leaving the room. Bella was so still in that bed, so small against all the pillows.

He imagined her in that pipe in the ground. Frightened. In pain. Cold. Then he imagined the *lesser* doing what he'd done to her, holding her down while she struggled and screamed.

This time Z knew what he felt.

Vengeance. Icy cold vengeance. So much of it the shit ran straight into infinity.

Chapter Ten

John woke up on the floor with Tohr by his side and Wrath staring down at him.

Where was the dark-haired woman? In a rush he tried to sit up, but heavy hands held him in place.

“Just chill for a little longer, my man,” Tohr said.

John craned his neck around and there she was, looking anxious by the door. The moment he saw her, every neuron in his brain started to fire, and the white light came back. He began to shake, his body knocking against the floor.

“Shit, he’s doing it again,” Tohr muttered, bearing down to try and control the seizure.

As John felt himself getting sucked under, he threw a hand toward the dark-haired woman, trying to get to her, straining.

“What do you need, son?” Tohr’s voice above him was fading in and out like a radio station with static. “We’ll get it for you....”

The woman...

“Go to him, *leelan*,” Wrath said. “Take his hand.”

The dark-haired woman came forward, and the instant their palms touched everything went black.

When he came to again, Tohr was talking. “...going to take him to see Havers anyway. Hey, son. You’re back.”

John sat up, head swimming. He put his hands to his face, as if that would help him stay conscious, and looked to the doorway. Where was she? He had to...He didn’t know what he had to do. But it was something. Something involving her...

He signed frantically.

"She's gone, son," Wrath said. "We're going to keep you two apart until we have an idea of what's doing."

John looked at Tohr and signed slowly. Tohr translated, "He says he needs to take care of her."

Wrath laughed softly. "I think I've got a handle on that job, son. That's my mate, my *shellan*, your queen."

For some reason John relaxed at that piece of news, and gradually he recalibrated back to normal. Fifteen minutes later he got to his feet.

Wrath pegged Tohr with a hard stare. "I want to talk strategy with you, so I need you here. Phury's going to the clinic tonight, though. Why doesn't he take the boy?"

Tohr hesitated and looked at John. "That okay with you, son? My brother's a good guy. All around."

John nodded. He'd already caused enough problems by checking out on the floor like he had a case of the vapors. After that stunt, he was *way* into being user-friendly.

God, what had it been about that woman? Now that she was gone, he couldn't remember what the big deal was. He couldn't even recall her face. It was like he had a snapshot case of amnesia.

"Let me take you down to my brother's room."

John put his hand on Tohr's arm. When he was finished signing, he looked at Wrath.

Tohr smiled. "John said it was an honor to meet you."

"Good to meet you, too, son." The king returned to the desk and sat down. "And Tohr? When you come back, have Vishous with you."

"No problem."

O kicked the side of U's Taurus so hard, his boot left a dent in the quarter panel.

The damn shit box was parked at the side of the road in the sticks. On a random, nothing-special part of Route 14, twenty-five miles away from downtown.

It had taken him a good hour of sitting in front of U's computer to find the car, because the LoJack signal had been blocked for God only knew what reason. When the damn responder finally popped up on the screen, the

Taurus had been moving swiftly. If O had had backup, he'd have made someone stay glued to the computer while he hit the truck and went after the sedan. But U was hunting downtown, and pulling him or anyone else off patrol would have caused a lot of attention.

And O already had trouble...trouble that was back again as his cell phone rang for the eight hundredth time. The thing had started going off about twenty minutes ago, and ever since then the calls had been nonstop. He took the Nokia out of his leather jacket. Caller ID showed the number as untraceable. Probably U, or worse, Mr. X.

Word must already be out that the center had been incinerated.

When the cell shut up, O dialed U's number. As soon as it was answered, O said, "You looking for me?"

"Christ, what happened out there? Mr. X said the place is gone!"

"I don't know what went down."

"But you were there, right? You said you were going there."

"You tell Mr. X that?"

"Yeah. And listen, you better watch yourself. The *Fore-lesser* is pissed off and looking for you."

O leaned against the cold body of the Taurus. *Holy hell*. He didn't have time for this. His wife was somewhere away from him, either breathing or being buried, and regardless of what state she was in, he needed to get her back. Then he had to go after that scarred Brother who'd stolen her and put that ugly bastard into the ground. Hard.

"O? You there?"

Goddamn it... Maybe he should have fixed it up so it looked like he'd died in the blast. He could have left the truck at the site and walked out through the woods. Yeah, but then what? He'd have no money, no vehicle, and no backup against the Brotherhood as he went after the one with the scar. He'd be an AWOL *lesser*, which meant that if anyone figured out his disappearing act, he'd be hunted down like a dog by the whole Society.

"O?"

"I honestly don't know what happened. When I got there, it was dust."

"Mr. X thinks you torched the place."

"Of course he does. The assumption's convenient for him, even though I had no motive. Look, I'll call you later."

He clipped the phone shut and shoved it into his jacket. Then he took the thing back out and turned it off.

As he rubbed his face, he couldn't feel anything at all, and it wasn't because of the cold.

Man, he was in deep shit. Mr. X was going to need to blame someone for that ash pile, and O was going to be it. If he wasn't put to death on the spot, the punishment lined up for him was going to be severe. God knew the last time he'd been reprimanded, he'd nearly died under the Omega. *Damn it...* What were his options?

When the solution came to him, his body shuddered. But the tactician in him rejoiced.

The first step was getting access to the Society's scrolls before Mr. X found him. This meant he needed an Internet connection. Which meant he was going back to U's.

John left Wrath's study and walked down the hall to the left, sticking close to Tohr. There were doors every thirty feet or so running opposite the balcony, as if the place were a hotel. How many people lived here?

Tohr stopped and knocked on one of them. When there was no answer he knocked again and said, "Phury, man, you got a sec?"

"You looking for me?" came a deep voice from behind them.

A man with a whole lot of nice-looking hair was coming down the corridor. The stuff on his head was all kinds of different colors, falling down his back in waves. He smiled at John, then looked at Tohr.

"Hey, my brother," Tohr said. The two of them switched over to the Old Language as the guy opened the door.

John looked into the bedroom. There was a huge, antique canopied bed with pillows lined up on a carved headboard. Lots of fancy decorator stuff. Place smelled like a Starbucks.

The man with the hair switched to English and looked down with a smile. "John, I'm Phury. Guess we're both going to the doc's tonight."

Tohr put his hand on John's shoulder. "So I'll see you later, okay? You have my cell phone number. You just text-message me if you need something."

John nodded and watched Tohr stride off. Seeing those broad shoulders recede made him feel very alone.

At least until Phury said quietly, "Don't worry. He's never far, and I'll take good care of you."

John glanced up into warm yellow eyes. Wow...the things were the color of goldfinches. As he found himself relaxing, he connected the name.

Phury...This was the guy who was going to be doing some of the teaching.

Good, John thought.

“Come on in. I just got back from a little errand.”

As John breached the doorway, the smoky, coffee smell grew heavier.

“You ever been to Havers’s before?”

John shook his head and spotted an armchair by a window. He went over and sat in the thing.

“Well, don’t worry about it. We’ll make sure you’re treated right. So I guess they’re going to try to get a bead on your bloodline?”

John nodded. Tohr had said that he was getting blood drawn and having a physical. Both of which were probably a good idea, given the stop, drop, and shiver he’d just pulled in Wrath’s office.

He took out his pad and wrote, *Why are you going to the doctor’s?*

Phury came over and looked at the scribbles. With an easy shift of his big body, he propped one huge shitkicker on the edge of the chair. John leaned away as the man pulled up his leathers a little.

Oh, my God... His lower leg was made up of a series of rods and bolts.

John reached out to feel the shiny metal, then looked up. He didn’t realize he was touching his own throat until Phury smiled.

“Yeah, I know all about what it’s like to be missing a part.”

John glanced back at the artificial limb and cocked his head.

“How’d it happen?” When John nodded, Phury hesitated and then said, “I shot it off.”

The door flew open and a hard male voice cut through the room. “I need to know—”

John shifted his eyes as the words died off. Then he cringed back in the chair.

The man in the doorway was scarred, his face distorted by a slash that ran right down the middle of it. But that wasn’t what made John want to shrink out of sight. The black eyes in that ruined visage were like the shadows of a deserted house, full of things that probably would hurt you.

And to top it all off, the guy had fresh blood on his pant leg and left shitkicker.

That vicious gaze narrowed and hit John’s face like a blast of cold air.

“What are you looking at?”

Phury lowered his leg. “Z—”

“I asked you a question, boy.”

John fumbled with his pad. He wrote fast and flashed the page to the other man, but somehow that just made the situation worse.

That misshapen upper lip pulled up, revealing tremendous fangs. “Yeah, whatever, kid.”

“Back off, Z,” Phury cut in. “He has no voice. He can’t talk.” Phury tilted the pad his way. “He apologizes.”

John resisted the urge to hide behind the chair as he got raked over visually. But then the aggression radiating from the guy eased up.

“You can’t talk at all?”

John shook his head.

“Well, I can’t read. So we’re SOL, you and me.”

John worked his Bic quickly. As he showed the pad to Phury, the male with the black stare frowned. “What did the kid write?”

“He says that’s okay. He’s a good listener. You can do the talking.”

Those soulless eyes shifted away. “Got nothing to say. Now what the hell do I set a thermostat at?”

“Ah, seventy degrees.” Phury went across the room. “The dial should be here. See?”

“I didn’t turn it up enough.”

“And you’ve got to make sure this switch on the bottom of the unit is all the way over to the right. Otherwise, no matter what the dial is on, the heat won’t kick in.”

“Yeah...okay. And can you tell me what this says?”

Phury looked down at a square piece of paper. “It’s the dosage information for the shot.”

“No shit. So what do I do?”

“Is she uncomfortable?”

“Not right now, but I want you to fill this up for me and tell me what to do. I need one dose ready to go in case Havers can’t get here fast enough.”

Phury took the vial and unwrapped the needle. “Okay.”

“Do it right.” When Phury was finished with the syringe, he recapped it and the two spoke for a while in the Old Language. Then the scary guy asked, “How long will you be gone?”

“Maybe an hour.”

“Do me a favor first, then. Lose that sedan I brought her back in.”

“I already did.”

The scarred man nodded and left, the door closing with a clap.

Phury put his hands on his hips and stared at the floor. Then he went over to a mahogany box on a bureau and took out what looked like a blunt. Holding the hand-rolled between his thumb and forefinger, he lit it and breathed in deep, keeping the inhale down, closing his eyes. When he exhaled, the smoke smelled like roasting coffee beans and hot chocolate combined. Delicious.

As John’s muscles relaxed, he wondered what the stuff was. Not marijuana, certainly. But it wasn’t just a cigarette.

Who is he? John wrote, and showed the pad.

“Zsadist. My twin.” Phury laughed a little when John’s mouth went slack. “Yeah, I know, we don’t look much alike. At least, not anymore. Listen, he’s a little touchy, so you might want to give him some space.”

No shit, John thought.

Phury slipped on a shoulder holster and popped a gun in on one side and a black-bladed dagger on the other. He went into a closet and came back wearing a black leather peacoat.

He put the joint or whatever it was out in a silver ashtray next to the bed.
“All right, let’s go.”

Chapter Eleven

Zsadist was quiet as he stole back into his room. After he fixed the thermostat and put the medicine on the bureau, he went over to the bed and leaned against the wall, staying in the shadows. He became suspended in time as he loomed over Bella and measured the slight rise and fall of the covers that marked her breathing. He could feel the minutes dripping into hours, and yet he could not move even as his legs grew numb.

In the candlelight he watched her skin heal right in front of his eyes. It was miraculous, the bruises fading from her face, the swelling around her eyes draining away, the cuts disappearing. Thanks to the deep sleep she was in, her body was throwing off the damage, and as her beauty was revealed once again, he was so damned grateful. In the lofty circles she ran in, a female with imperfections of any kind would be shunned. Aristocrats were like that.

He pictured his twin's unmarred, handsome face and knew Phury should be the one taking care of her. Phury was perfect savior material, and it was obvious he was into her. Plus she would like to wake up to a male like that. Any female would.

So why the hell didn't he just pick her up and put her in Phury's bed? Right now.

But he couldn't move. And as he stared down at her while she lay on pillows he'd never used, between sheets he'd never turned back for himself, he remembered the past...

Months had gone by since the slave first awoke in captivity. And in this time there was not anything that had not been done to him, in him, or on him,

and there was a predictable rhythm to the abuse.

The Mistress was fascinated by his privates and felt the need to display them to other males she favored. She would bring these strangers into the cell, get out the salve, and show him off like a prized horse. He knew she did it to make the others insecure, for he could see the delight in her eyes as the males shook their heads in awe.

When the inevitable violations started up, the slave did his best to release himself from his skin and bones. It was so much more bearable when he could rise up into the air, rise higher and higher until he bounced along the ceiling, a cloud of himself. If he was lucky, he could transform entirely and just float along, watching them from above, playing witness to someone else's humiliation and pain and degradation. But it didn't always work. Sometimes he couldn't free himself, and was forced to endure.

The Mistress always had to use the salve on him, and of late he'd noticed something strange: Even when he was trapped in his body and everything being done to him was vivid, even as the sounds and the smells burrowed like rats into his brain, there was a curious displacement below his waist. Whatever he felt down there registered as an echo, as something removed from the rest of him. It was odd, but he was grateful. Any kind of numbing was good.

Whenever he was left alone, he worked at learning to control his huge, posttransition muscles and bones. This he succeeded at, and he'd attacked the guards a number of times, totally unrepentant about his acts of aggression. Verily, he no longer felt like he knew the males who watched over him and who found such disgust in their duty: Their faces were familiar to him in the manner of dream figures, naught but hazy leftovers from a wretched life he should have enjoyed more.

Each time he'd struck out he'd been beaten for hours—although only on the palms and the soles of his feet, because the Mistress liked him kept pleasing to the eye. As a result of his offensives, he was now guarded by a revolving squad of warriors, all of whom wore chain mail if they came inside his cell. Moreover, the bedding platform was now fitted with restraints that could be sprung from outside, so that after he'd been used, the guards didn't have to endanger their lives letting him go. And when the Mistress wanted to come calling, he was drugged into submission either through his food or by blow darts that would be shot through a slot in the door.

The days passed slowly. He was focused on finding the weakness in the

guards and on removing himself as much as he could from the depravity... when for all intents and purposes he died. And died so hard that even when he was out from under the Mistress, he would never truly live again.

The slave was eating in his cell, trying to keep his strength up for the next opening within the guards, when he saw the sliding panel on the door shift open and a hollow tube protrude. He leaped up, though there was no cover to be had, and felt the first sting in his neck. He pulled out the dart as quickly as he could, but he was hit with another and then another until his body grew heavy.

He woke up on the bedding, shackled.

The Mistress was sitting right next to him, her head down, her hair shielding her face. As if she knew he had found consciousness, her eyes shifted to his.

“I am to be mated.”

Oh, sweet Virgin in the Fade...The words he'd longed to hear. He would be free now, for she would need no blood slave if she had a hellren. He could go back to his duties in the kitchen....

The slave forced himself to address her with respect, although to him she was no female of worth. “Mistress, will you let me go?”

There was only silence.

“Please let me go,” he said raggedly. Considering all he had been through, to throw his pride out for the possibility of being free was an easy sacrifice. “I beg you, Mistress. Release me of this confinement.”

When she looked at him, tears were in her eyes. “I find that I cannot.... I have to keep you. I must keep you.”

He started to struggle, and the harder he fought the binds the more the look of love overtook her face.

“You are so magnificent,” she said, reaching down to touch him between his legs. Her face was wistful...nearly worshipful. “Ne’er have I seen such a male as you. Would that you were not so far beneath me—I would show your face in my court as my consort.”

He saw her arm moving slowly up and down and knew that she must be working that rope of flesh that interested her so. Mercifully, he could feel it not.

“Let me go....”

“You never harden without the salve,” she murmured in a sad voice. “And you never find completion. Why is that?”

She stroked him harder now until he felt a burning down where she was touching him. Frustration bled into her eyes, darkening them.

“Why? Why do you not want me?” When he stayed silent, she yanked at his male staff. “I am beautiful.”

“Only to others,” he said before he could catch the words.

Her breath stopped, as if he had choked her with his very hand. Then her eyes slid up his stomach and his chest to his face. They were still glossy with tears, but rage also filled them.

The Mistress rose from the bed and stared down at him. Then she slapped him so hard she must have hurt her palm. As he spit out blood, he wondered if one of his teeth wasn’t leaving with it.

While her eyes bored into his, he thought for sure she was going to have him killed, and a calmness came over him. At least the suffering would be over then. Death...death would be glorious.

Abruptly she smiled at him, as if she knew his thoughts, as if she’d reached into him and taken them out of him, as if she’d stolen them just as she had laid larceny to his body.

“No, I shall not be sending you unto the Fade.”

She leaned down and kissed one of his nipples, then sucked it into her mouth. Her hand drifted over his ribs, then onto his belly.

Her tongue flicked yet and still over his flesh. “You grow gaunt. You need to feed, do you not?”

She worked her way down his body, kissing and sucking. And then it happened quickly. The salve. Her getting up on top of him. That hideous merging of their bodies.

When he closed his eyes and turned his head, she slapped him once... twice...many more times. But he refused to look at her, and she was not strong enough to force his face around, even when she grabbed onto one of his ears.

As he denied her his eyes, her weeping grew as loud as the slap of her flesh against his hips. When it was over, she left in a swirl of silk, and not long thereafter the chains were released.

The slave eased himself up on one forearm and wiped his mouth. Looking down at his blood on his hand, he was surprised that it was still red. He felt so soiled, it wouldn’t have been a shock to find it some kind of rusted brown.

He rolled off the bed, still groggy from the darts, and found the corner that he always went to. He sat with his back to the juncture of the walls and

curled his legs up against his chest so his heels were tight to his male parts.

Sometime later he heard a struggle outside his cell, and then the guards pushed a small female inside. She fell in a heap, but launched herself at the door as it closed.

“Why?” she yelled. “Why am I punished?”

The slave rose to his feet, not knowing what to do. He hadn’t seen a female other than the Mistress since he’d woken up in captivity. This one was a maid of some sort. He remembered her from before....

Blood hunger rose in him as he caught her scent. After all the Mistress had done to him, he couldn’t see her as someone to drink from, but this diminutive female was different. He was suddenly dying of thirst, his body’s needs coming out in a chorus of shouts and demands. He took lurching steps toward the maid, feeling nothing but instinct.

The female pounded on the door, but then seemed to realize she was not alone. When she turned around and saw who she was locked in with, she screamed.

The slave was nearly overcome by his drinking urge, but he forced himself away from her and scrambled back to where he had been. He crouched down, wrapping his arms around his trembling, naked body to keep it in place. Turning his face to the wall, he tried to breathe...and found himself on the verge of weeping over the animal he had been reduced to.

After a while the female stopped screaming, and after even longer she said, “’Tis truly you, is it not? The boy from the kitchen. The one who carried ale.”

He nodded without looking at her.

“I had heard rumors you had been taken here, but I...I believed the others who said you’d died during your transition.” There was a pause. “You are so large. Like a warrior. Why is that?”

He had no idea. He didn’t even know what he looked like, as there wasn’t a mirror in the cell.

The female cautiously approached him. When he looked up at her, she was eyeing his tattooed bands.

“Truly, what is done to you here?” she whispered. “They say...terrible things are done to the male who dwells within this place.”

When he said nothing, she sat beside him and softly touched his arm. He flinched at the contact and then realized he was soothed by it.

“I am here to feed you, am I not? That is why I was brought here.” After

a moment she peeled his hand free from his leg and put her wrist into his palm. “You must drink.”

He wept then, wept from the generosity of her, from the kindness, from the feel of her gentle hand as it rubbed over his shoulder...the only touch he had welcomed in...forever.

Finally she pressed her wrist to his mouth. Though his fangs unsheathed and he craved her, he did naught but kiss her tender skin and refuse. How could he take from her what was regularly taken from him? She was offering, but she was forced into it, a prisoner of the Mistress just as he was.

The guards came in later. When they found her cradling him, they seemed shocked, but they were not rough with her. As she left she looked at the slave, concern on her face.

Moments later the darts came at him, so many through the door it was as if he were pelted with gravel. As he slid into oblivion, he thought vaguely that the frantic nature of the attack didn’t bode well.

When he awoke, the Mistress was standing over him, furious. There was something in her hand, but he couldn’t see what it was.

“Think you too good for the gifts I give you?”

The door opened and the young female’s limp body was brought in. As the guards let go, she flopped onto the floor like so many rags. Dead.

The slave screamed in fury, the roar rebounding off the stone cell walls, magnifying to an earsplitting thunder. He strained against the steel bands until they cut him to the bone, until one of the posts cracked with a squeal... and still he roared.

The guards backed away. Even the Mistress seemed unsure of the fury she’d released. But as always, it was not long before she took control.

“Leave us,” she shouted to the guards.

She waited until the slave wore himself out. Then she leaned over him, only to grow pale.

“Your eyes,” she whispered, staring down at him. “Your eyes...”

She appeared to be momentarily frightened of him, but then she cloaked herself in a regal forbearance.

“The females I present you with? You will drink from them.” She glanced over at the maid’s lifeless body. “And you’d best not let them comfort you, or I shall do that again. You are mine and no one else’s.”

“I will not drink,” he shouted at her. “Ever!”

She stepped back. “Do not be ridiculous, slave.”

He bared his fangs and hissed. “Look upon me, Mistress. Watch as I wither!” He screamed the last word at her, his booming voice filling the room. As she went rigid with fury, the door flew open and guards came in with swords drawn.

“Leave us,” she snarled at them, her face red, her body shaking.

She lifted her hand up and a whip came with it. Slashing her arm down, she brought the weapon across the slave’s chest. His flesh broke and bled, and he laughed at her.

“Again,” he hollered. “Do that again. I felt it not, you are so weak!”

Some dam had burst within him, and the words would not stop.... He railed against her as she whipped him until the bedding platform flowed with what had been in his veins. When finally she could lift her arm no more, she was panting and blood-splattered and sweating. He was focused, icy, calm in spite of the pain. Though he was the one who had been beaten, she was the one who had broken first.

Her head fell downward as if in submission while she dragged breath through her white lips.

“Guard,” she said hoarsely “Guard!”

The door opened. The uniformed male who ran in faltered when he saw what had been done, the soldier blanching and teetering in his boots.

“Hold his head.” The Mistress’s voice was reedy as she dropped the whip. “Hold his head, I say. Now.”

The guard stumbled over, slipping on the slick floor. Then the slave felt a meaty hand clap onto his forehead.

The Mistress leaned over the slave’s body, still breathing hard. “You are not...permitted...to die.”

Her hand found his male flesh and then dipped down underneath it to the twin weights below. She squeezed and twisted, making his whole body spasm. As he cried out, she bit her wrist, held it over his open mouth, and bled into him.

Z backed away from the bed. He didn’t want to think of the Mistress in Bella’s presence...as if all that evil could escape his mind and endanger her as she slept and healed.

He went over to his pallet and realized he was curiously tired. Exhausted, actually.

As he stretched out on the floor, his leg throbbed like a bitch.

God, he'd forgotten he'd been shot. He stripped out of his shitkickers and pants and willed a candle to light beside him. Cocking his leg around, he inspected the wound on his calf. There was both an entrance and an exit hole, so he knew the bullet had passed through. He'd live.

He extinguished the candle with his breath, draped his pants over his hips, and lay back. Opening himself up to the pain in his body, he became a basin for the agony, catching all the nuances of his aches and stings—

He heard an odd noise, like a small cry. The sound was repeated, and then Bella began to struggle on the bed, the sheets rustling as if she were flailing around.

He shot up from the floor and went around to her, just as her head tilted toward him and her eyes opened.

She blinked, looked up at his face...and screamed.

Chapter Twelve

“You want something to eat, my man?” Phury said to John as they walked into the mansion. The kid looked worn-out, but then anyone would. Getting poked and prodded at was hard work. Phury was a little wiped himself.

As John shook his head and the vestibule’s door clamped shut, Tohr came jogging down the staircase looking very much like a nervous father. And this was in spite of the fact that Phury had called in a report on the way home.

The visit to Havers’s had been all good, for the most part. Seizure notwithstanding, John was healthy, and the results on his bloodline test would be available soon. With luck, they would get a bead on his ancestry, and that would help John find his kin. So there was no cause for worry.

Still, Tohr put his arm around the boy’s shoulders and the kid sagged. Some kind of wordless, eyeball-to-eyeball communication took place, and the brother said, “I think I’ll take you home.”

John nodded and signed something. Tohr looked up. “He says he forgot to ask you how your leg is.”

Phury brought up his knee and knocked on his calf. “Better, thanks. You take care, John, okay?”

He watched as the two of them disappeared through the door under the stairwell.

What a good kid, he thought. And thank God they’d found him before his transition—

A female scream ripped into the lobby, as if the sound were alive and had taken a nosedive off the balcony.

Phury’s spine turned to ice. *Bella.*

He bolted up to the second floor and pounded down the hall of statues.

When he threw open Zsadist's door, light spilled into the room and the scene was instantly carved into memory: Bella on the bed, cowering against the headboard, sheets clenched to her throat. Z crouched in front of her, hands up, naked from the waist down.

Phury lost it and launched himself at Zsadist, grabbing his twin by the throat and throwing him against the wall.

"What is wrong with you!" he yelled as he crashed Z into the plaster.
"You fucking animal!"

Z didn't fight back as he was slammed again. And all he said was, "Take her away. Take her somewhere else."

Rhage and Wrath burst into the room. Both started talking, but Phury couldn't hear anything for the roar between his ears. He'd never hated Z before. Had cut his twin slack for all he'd endured. But going after Bella...

"You sick fuck," Phury hissed. He nailed that hard body to the wall once more. "You sick fuck...God, you *disgust* me."

Z merely stared back, his black eyes like asphalt, opaque and flat.

Suddenly Rhage's massive arms clamped around them, gathering them up into a bone-crushing bear hug. In a whisper, the brother said, "Bella doesn't need this right now, boys."

Phury dropped his hold and pushed himself free. Yanking his coat back into place, he snapped, "Get him out of here until we move her."

God, he was shaking so badly he was almost hyperventilating. And the anger wouldn't quit, even as Z left voluntarily, with Rhage tight on his heels.

Phury cleared his throat and glanced at Wrath. "My lord, will you give me leave to attend to her in private?"

"Yeah, I will." Wrath's voice was a nasty growl as he headed for the door. "And we'll make sure Z doesn't come back for a while."

Phury looked over at Bella. She was trembling as she blinked and wiped at her eyes. When he approached her, she shrank back against the pillows.

"Bella, it's Phury."

Her body relaxed a little. "Phury?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"I can't see." Her voice quavered like hell. "I can't..."

"I know, it's just the medicine. Let me get something to clean it off."

He went into the bathroom and came back with a damp cloth, figuring she needed to get a look at her surroundings more than she had to have the ointment.

She flinched as he took her chin in his palm.

“Easy, Bella...” When he put the cloth up to her eyes, she struggled, then clawed at him. “No, no...put your hands down. I’ll get it off.”

“Phury?” she said hoarsely. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, it’s me.” He sat down on the edge of the bed. “You’re at the Brotherhood’s compound. You were brought here about seven hours ago. Your family’s been notified that you’re safe, and as soon as you want to, you can call them.”

When she put her hand on his arm, he froze. With a tentative touch, she felt her way up to his shoulder to his neck, then touched his face and finally his hair. She smiled a little when she felt the thick waves and then she brought some of it to her nose. She breathed in deep and put her other hand on his leg.

“It truly is you. I remember the smell of your shampoo.”

The closeness and the contact sizzled through Phury’s clothes and skin, going straight into his blood. He felt like a total bastard to feel anything sexual, but he couldn’t stop his body. Especially as she patted her way down his long hair until she was touching his pectorals.

His lips opened, his breath getting short. He wanted to drag her against his chest and hold her tight. Not for sex, though it was true his body wanted that from her. No, right now he just needed to feel her warmth and reassure himself that she was alive.

“Let me take care of your eyes,” he said. *Jesus*, his voice was deep.

When she nodded, he carefully wiped at her lids. “How’s that?”

She blinked. Smiled a little. Put her hand on his face.

“I can see you better now.” But then she frowned. “How did I get out of there? I can’t remember anything except...I let the other civilian go and David came back. And then there was a car ride. Or was that a dream? I dreamt that Zsadist saved me. Did he?”

Phury was not up to talking about his twin, even tangentially. He rose to his feet and put the washcloth on the nightstand. “Come on, let’s get you to your room.”

“Where am I now?” She looked around, and then her mouth parted. “This is Zsadist’s room.”

How the hell did she know that? “Let’s go.”

“Where is he? Where’s Zsadist?” Urgency threaded through her voice. “I need to see him. I need—”

“I’m going to take you to your room—”

“No! I want to stay—”

She was so agitated now he decided to stop trying to talk to her. He pulled back the sheets so he could help her up—

Shit, she was naked. He yanked the covers back into place.

“Ah, sorry...” He pushed a hand into his hair. *Oh, God...* The graceful lines of her body were something he was never going to forget. “Let me... um, let me get you something to wear.”

He went to Z’s closet and was stunned by how empty it was. There wasn’t even a robe to cover her with, and he’d be goddamned if he’d put her in one of his twin’s fighting shirts. He took off his leather peacoat and walked over to her again.

“I’ll turn my back while you put this on. We’ll find you a robe—”

“Don’t take me away from him.” Her voice cracked from pleading. “Please. That must have been him standing over the bed. I didn’t know it, I couldn’t see. But it must have been him.”

It sure as hell was. And the bastard had been naked as sin and ready to jump her. Considering all she’d been through, the near-miss was a total cringer. *Man...* Years ago Phury had caught Z having sex in a back alley with a whore. It hadn’t been pretty, and the idea of Bella’s being subjected to that made him ill.

“Put on the coat.” Phury turned away. “You are not staying here.” When he finally heard the bedding move, and the creak of leather, he took a deep breath. “Are you decent?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to go.”

He looked over his shoulder. She was dwarfed by the coat he wore all the time, her long mahogany hair falling around her shoulders, the ends curled as if they’d gotten wet and had dried without being brushed. He imagined her in a tub, with clean water rushing over her pale skin.

And then he saw Zsadist looming over her, watching her with those soulless black eyes, wanting to fuck her, probably only because she was scared. Yeah, her fear would be the turn-on for him. It was well-known that terror in a female cranked him up more than anything lovely or warm or worthy.

Get her out of here, Phury thought. *Right now.*

His voice became unsteady. “Can you walk?”

“I’m light-headed.”

“I’ll carry you.” He approached her, on some level unable to believe he was going to put his arms around her body. But then it was happening.... He slid his hand around her waist and reached down, taking her behind her knees. Her weight barely registered, his muscles accepting her easily.

As he started for the door she eased into him, laying her head on his shoulder, taking some of his shirt into her hand.

Oh...Sweet Virgin. This felt so right.

Phury carried her down the hall to the other side of the house, to the room next to his.

John was on autopilot as he and Tohr left the training facility and walked across the parking area where they’d left the Range Rover. Their footsteps echoed up to the low concrete ceiling, bouncing through the empty space.

“I know you have to go back for the result,” Tohr said as they got into the SUV. “I’ll go with you that time, no matter what’s happening.”

Actually, John kind of wished he could take himself.

“What’s the matter, son? Are you upset that I didn’t take you tonight?”

John put his hand on Tohr’s arm and shook his head vigorously.

“Okay, just wanted to make sure.”

John looked away, wishing he’d never gone to the doctor’s. Or that at least when he’d been there, he’d kept his mouth shut. *Holy hell.* He shouldn’t have said a word about what had happened to him almost a year ago. Trouble was, after all the questions about his health, he’d been in answering mode. So when the doctor had asked about his sexual history, he’d alluded to the thing back in January. Question. Answer. Just like all the others...sort of.

For a moment it had been a relief. He’d never gone to a doctor or anything afterward, and in the back of his mind he’d always worried that he should have. At least by coming forward, he’d figured he could get a full checkup and really be done with the attack. Instead, the doctor had started in on him about therapy and the necessity of talking about the experience.

Like he wanted to relive it? He’d spent months burying the damn thing, so no way was he digging up that rotting corpse. It had taken too much effort to put it in the ground.

“Son? What’s doing?”

Like hell he was going to see some therapist. Past trauma. *Screw that.*

John took out his pad and wrote, *Just tired.*

“You sure?”

He nodded and looked at Tohr so the man would think he wasn’t lying. Meanwhile he was withering in his own skin. What the hell would Tohr think if he knew what had happened? Real men did not allow that to be done to them no matter what kind of weapon was at their throats.

John wrote, *Next time I want to go to Havers’s alone, okay?*

Tohr frowned. “Ah...that’s not really smart, son. You need a guard.”

Then it needs to be someone else. Not you.

John couldn’t look at Tohr when he flashed the paper. There was a long silence.

Tohr’s voice became very low. “Okay. That’s...ah, that’s fine. Maybe Butch can take you.”

John closed his eyes and exhaled. Whoever this Butch was would work for him.

Tohr started the car. “It’s whatever you want, John.”

John. Not son.

As they headed out, all he could think was, *Dear God, please don’t let Tohr ever find out.*

Chapter Thirteen

As Bella hung up the phone, she had a passing thought that what was going on inside her chest was so explosive, she was going to shatter at any moment. There was just no way her brittle bones and her fragile skin could hold in the kind of emotion she was feeling.

In desperation she looked around the room, seeing the vague, blurry outlines of oil paintings and antique furniture and lamps made from Oriental vases and...Phury staring at her from a chaise longue.

She reminded herself that, like her mother, she was a lady. So she should at least pretend to have some self-control. She cleared her throat. "Thank you for staying while I made that call to my family."

"Of course."

"My mother was...greatly relieved to hear my voice."

"I can imagine."

Well, at least her mother had spoken words of relief. Her affect had been as smooth and calm as always. God...the female was ever the still-watered pond, unshaken by earthly events no matter how grim. And all because of her devotion to the Scribe Virgin. To *mahmen*, everything happened for a reason...yet nothing ever seemed particularly important.

"My mother...is greatly relieved. She..." Bella stopped. She'd already said those words, hadn't she? "*Mahmen* was...she really was...she was relieved."

But it would have helped if she had at least choked up. Or shown anything but the beatific acceptance of the spiritually enlightened. For chrissakes, the female had buried her daughter and then been witness to a resurrection. You'd think that would call for some kind of emotional reaction.

Instead it was as if they'd just spoken yesterday, and nothing of the past six weeks had occurred.

Bella glanced back down at the phone. Wrapped her arms around her stomach.

With no warning whatsoever, she cracked wide-open. The sobs came out of her like sneezes: fast, hard, shocking in their ferocity.

The bed dipped, and strong arms came around her. She fought the pull, thinking that a warrior wouldn't want to deal with such sloppy weakness.

"Forgive me...."

"It's okay, Bella. Lean on me."

Oh, hell... She collapsed against Phury, wrapping her arms around his tight waist. His long, beautiful hair tickled her nose and smelled good and felt wonderful under her cheek. She burrowed into it, breathing deep.

When she finally calmed down she felt lighter, but not in a good way. The angry emotions had filled her out, given her contours and weight. Now, because her skin was nothing more than a sieve, she was leaching out, becoming air...becoming nothing.

She didn't want to disappear.

She inhaled and broke free of Phury's embrace. Blinking rapidly, she tried to focus her eyes, but the blurriness from the ointment persisted. God, what had that *lesser* done to her? She had a feeling it had been bad....

She reached up to her eyelids. "What did he do to me?"

Phury just shook his head.

"Was it that ugly?"

"It's over. You're safe. That's all that matters."

None of it feels over to me, she thought.

But then Phury smiled, his yellow stare impossibly tender, a balm that soothed her. "Would it be easier if you were at home? Because if you want, we can find a way to get you there, even though the dawn's coming very soon."

Bella pictured her mother and couldn't imagine being in the same house with that female. Not right now. And even more to the point, there was Rehvenge. If her brother saw her with any kind of injury he'd go crazy, and the last thing she needed was him on the warpath against the *lessers*. She wanted the violence to stop. As far as she was concerned, David could go to hell right this minute; she just didn't want anyone she loved risking their lives to send him there.

"No, I don't want to go home. Not until I'm completely healed. And I'm so very tired...." Her voice drifted off as she glanced at the pillows.

After a moment Phury got up. "I'm right next door if you need me."

"Would you like your coat back?"

"Oh, yeah...let me see if there's a robe in here." He disappeared into a closet and came back with black satin draped over his forearm. "Fritz stocks these guest rooms for males, so this is probably going to be too big."

She took the robe and he turned away. When she shrugged out of his heavy leather coat the air chilled her, so she quickly wrapped the satin around herself.

"Okay," she said, grateful for his discretion.

As he pivoted back to her, she put the leather into his hands.

"I'm always saying thank-you to you, aren't I?" she murmured.

He looked at her for a long time. Then in slow motion, he lifted his coat to his face and breathed in deeply.

"You're..." His voice trailed off. Then he dropped the leather to his side and an odd expression hit his face.

Actually, no, that wasn't an expression. It was a mask. He'd gone into hiding.

"Phury?"

"I'm glad you're with us. Try to get some sleep. And eat some of what I brought you, if you can."

The door shut behind him without a sound.

The drive back to Tohr's house was awkward, and John spent the time staring out the side window. Tohr's cell phone rang twice. Both conversations were in the Old Language, and the name Zsadist kept reappearing.

When they pulled into the driveway there was an unfamiliar car parked in it. A red Volkswagen Jetta. Yet Tohr didn't seem surprised as he eased past the thing and went into the garage.

He killed the Range Rover's engine and opened his door. "By the way, classes start the day after tomorrow."

John looked up from undoing his seat belt. *So soon?* he signed.

"We had the last trainee sign up tonight. We're good to go."

The two of them walked in silence through the garage. Tohr was in front,

his big shoulders moving with the long steps he took. The man's head was down, as if he were looking for cracks in the concrete floor.

John stopped and whistled.

Tohr slowed, then halted. "Yeah?" he said quietly.

John took out his pad, scribbled something, and held it out.

Tohr's brows came down as he read. "There's nothing to be sorry for. Whatever makes you feel comfortable."

John reached out and squeezed the man's biceps. Tohr shook his head.

"It's all right. Come on, I don't want you to catch cold out here." The man glanced over when John didn't move. "Ah, hell...I'm just...I'm there for you. That's all."

John put his pen to the paper. *I don't doubt that for a moment. Ever.*

"Good. You shouldn't. Straight up, I feel like I'm your..." There was a pause as Tohr rubbed his thumb back and forth across his forehead. "Look, I don't want to crowd you. Let's go inside."

Before John could beg him to finish the sentence, Tohr opened the door into the house. Wellsie's voice drifted out...and so did another woman's. John frowned as he came around the corner into the kitchen. And then stopped dead as a blond female looked over her shoulder.

Oh...wow.

Her hair was cut off at her jawline and her eyes were the color of new leaves. Those hip-hugger jeans she was wearing were so short-waisted...God, he could see her belly button and about an inch of flesh underneath. And her black turtleneck was...Well, he could tell exactly how perfect her body was, put it like that.

Wellsie grinned. "You guys got here just in time. John, this is my cousin Sarelle. Sarelle, this is John."

"Hi, John." The female smiled.

Fangs. Oh, yeah. Look at those fangs... Something traveled like a hot breeze over his skin, leaving him tingling from head to foot. Out of confusion, he opened his mouth. Then thought, *uh-huh, right.* As if anything was coming out of his useless piehole?

While flushing to all hell and gone, he lifted his hand in a wave.

"Sarelle's helping me with the winter festival," Wellsie said, "and she's going to stay for a bite to eat before dawn breaks. Why don't you two set the table?"

As Sarelle smiled again, that funny tingling thing got so strong, he felt as

if he were levitating.

“John? You want to help set the table?” Wellsie prompted.

He nodded. And tried to remember where the knives and forks were.

O’s headlights swung across the front of Mr. X’s cabin. The *Fore-lesser*’s everyman minivan was parked right next to the door. O stopped his truck behind the Town & Country, blocking it in.

As he got out and the cold air shot into his lungs, he was aware that he was in the zone. In spite of what he was about to do, his emotions lay like smooth feathers over his chest, all arranged, nothing out of place. His body was just as unruffled, moving with its power checked, a gun ready to fire.

The scrolls had taken a long time to wade through, but he’d found what he needed. He knew what had to happen.

He opened the cabin’s door without knocking.

Mr. X looked up from the kitchen table. His face was impassive, showing no frown, no sneer, no aggression of any kind. No surprise, either.

So they were both in the zone.

Without a word, the *Fore-lesser* rose, one hand going around to his back. O knew what was there, and he smiled as he unsheathed his own knife.

“So, Mr. O—”

“I’m ready for a promotion.”

“Excuse me?”

O turned his blade on himself, putting the tip to his sternum. With a two-handed jabbing motion, he stabbed his own chest.

The last thing he saw before the great white inferno crisped the shit out of him was the shock on Mr. X’s face. Shock that quickly shifted to terror as the man figured out where O was going. And what O was going to do when he got there.

Chapter Fourteen

Lying in bed, Bella listened to the quiet sounds around her: male voices down the hall, low-pitched, rhythmic...the wind outside pushing against the mansion, capricious, uneven...the creak of a floorboard, quick, high-pitched.

She forced herself to close her eyes.

A minute or so later she was up and pacing around, the Oriental on the floor soft under her bare feet. None of her elegant surroundings made sense, and she felt like she had to awkwardly transcribe what she was seeing. The normalcy, the safety she was steeping in seemed like another language, one she had forgotten how to speak or read. Or was this a dream?

In the corner of the room the grandfather clock chimed five A.M. How long had she been free, exactly? How long since the Brothers had come for her and taken her from the earth back into the air? Eight hours now? Maybe, except it felt like minutes. Or maybe it felt like years?

The fuzzy quality of time was like her blurry vision, insulating her, scaring her.

She pulled the silk robe around her more tightly. This was all wrong. She should be rejoicing. After God only knew how many weeks in that pipe in the ground with that *lesser* standing over her, she should be weeping with sweet relief. Instead everything around her felt fake and insubstantial, as if she were in a life-size dollhouse filled with papier-mâché fakes.

She paused in front of a window and realized that only one thing felt real. And she wished she were with him.

Zsadist must have been the one who had come to the side of the bed as she'd first woken up. She'd been dreaming of being back in the hole, back with the *lesser*. When she'd opened her eyes, all she'd seen was a massive

black shape standing over her, and for a moment she hadn't been able to separate reality from nightmare.

She was still having trouble with that.

God, she wanted to go to Zsadist now, wanted to return to his room. But in the middle of all the chaos after she'd screamed, he hadn't prevented her from leaving him, had he? Maybe he preferred her elsewhere.

Bella ordered her feet to start moving again and she made herself a little track: around the foot of the gigantic bed, over to the chaise, quick loop by the windows, then a big scenic swing past the highboy and the door to the hall and the old-fashioned writing desk. The home stretch took her by the fireplace and the bookshelves.

More pacing. More pacing. More pacing.

Eventually she went into the bathroom. She didn't stop in front of the mirror; didn't want to know what her face looked like. What she was after was some hot water. She wanted to take a hundred showers, a thousand baths. She wanted to strip off the first layer of her skin and shave off the hair that *lesser* had loved so much and clip her nails and clean her ears and scrub the soles of her feet.

She fired up the showerhead. When the spray was warm, she dropped the robe and stepped under the water. The second the rush hit her back, she covered herself out of instinct, one arm over her breasts, one hand shielding the apex of her thighs...until she realized she didn't have to hide. She was alone. She had privacy here.

She straightened and forced her hands to her sides, feeling like it had been forever since she'd been allowed to wash in private. The *lesser* had always been there, staring, or worse, helping.

Thank God, he'd never tried to have sex with her. Rape had been one of her greatest fears in the beginning. She'd been terrified, sure he was going to force her, but then she'd discovered he was impotent. No matter how hard he stared at her, his body had always remained flaccid.

With a shudder, she reached to the side for the bar of soap, lathered her hands, and ran them over her arms. She sudsed up her neck and then across her shoulders and worked her way down....

Bella frowned and bent forward. There was something on her belly... faded scratches. Scratches that...*Oh, God.* That was a *D*, wasn't it? And the next...that was an *A*. Then a *V* and an *I* and another *D*.

Bella dropped the bar of soap and covered her stomach with her hands,

falling back against the tile. His name was on her body. In her skin. Like a gruesome parody of her species' highest mating ritual. She truly was his wife....

Stumbling from the shower, slipping on the marble floor, she grabbed a towel and wrapped herself up. Grabbed another and did the same. She would have gone for three, four...five, if she'd found more.

Shaky, nauseous, she went up to the mirror that was fogged over. Taking a deep breath, she rubbed her elbow across the condensation. And looked at herself.

John wiped his mouth and somehow managed to drop his napkin. Cursing to himself, he bent down to pick it up...and so did Sarelle, who got to the thing first. He mouthed the words *thank you* when she handed it to him.

"You're welcome," she said.

Boy, he loved her voice. And he loved the way she smelled like lavender body lotion. And he loved her long, thin hands.

But he'd hated dinner. Wellsie and Tohr had done all the talking for him, giving Sarelle a glossed-over version of his life. What little he'd written on his pad had seemed like stupid filler.

As his head came up to level, Wellsie was smiling at him. But then she cleared her throat, as if trying to play it cool.

"So, as I was saying, a couple of females from the aristocracy used to run the winter solstice ceremony back in the Old Country. Bella's mother was one of them, as a matter of fact. I want to check in with them. Make sure we don't forget anything."

John let the conversation amble along, not paying too much attention until Sarelle said, "Well, I guess I'd better get going. It's thirty-five minutes to dawn. My parents will have a conniption."

She pushed her chair out, and John stood up as everyone else did. While good-byes were said, he found himself fading into the background. At least until Sarelle looked right at him.

"Would you walk me out?" she asked.

His eyes shot to the front door. Walk her out? To her car?

In a sudden rush, some kind of raw male instinct flooded his chest, so powerful he shook a little. Abruptly his palm started to tickle, and he looked down at it, feeling as though there were something in it, that he was holding

something...so he could protect her.

Sarelle cleared her throat. "Okay...um..."

John realized she was waiting for him and snapped out of his little trance. Stepping forward, he indicated with his hand the way to the front door.

As they went outside, she said, "So are you psyched to train?"

John nodded and found his eyes roaming the environs, searching the shadows. He felt himself tense up, and that right palm of his started to hum again. He wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for. He just knew he had to keep her safe at all costs.

Keys jingled as her hand came out of her pocket.

"I think my friend is going to be in your class. He was supposed to sign up tonight." She unlocked the car door. "Anyway, you know why I'm really here, don't you?"

He shook his head.

"I think they want you to feed from me. When your transition hits."

John coughed from shock, sure that his eyeballs had popped out of his skull and were rolling down the driveway.

"Sorry." She smiled. "Guess they didn't tell you."

Yeah, he would have remembered that conversation.

"I'm cool with it," she said. "Are you?"

Oh. My. God.

"John?" She cleared her throat. "Tell you what. Do you have something I can write on?"

Numbly, he shook his head. He'd left his pad in the house. *Idiot.*

"Give me your hand." When he reached out, she got a pen from somewhere and bent over his palm. The nub ran across his skin smoothly. "That's my e-mail address and my IM info. I'll be online in about an hour. Messie me, okay? We'll talk."

He looked at what she'd written. Just stared at it.

She shrugged a little. "I mean, you don't have to or anything. Just...you know. I thought we could get to know each other that way." She paused, as if waiting for a response. "Um...whatever. No pressure. I mean—"

He grabbed her hand, whipped the pen out of it, and flattened her palm.

I want to talk to you, he wrote.

Then he looked straight into her eyes and did the most amazing, ballsy thing.

He smiled at her.

Chapter Fifteen

As dawn came and shutters went down over the windows, Bella drew on the black robe and bolted out of the bedroom she'd been given. With quick eyes, she checked up and down the hallway. No witnesses. *Good.* Closing the door quietly, she glided over the Persian runner, making no sound at all. When she got to the head of the grand staircase she paused, trying to remember which way to go.

The corridor with the statues, she thought, remembering another trip down that long stretch so many, many weeks ago.

She walked fast and then ran, clutching the lapels of the robe and holding the slit on the bottom closed over her thighs. She passed statues and doors, until she got to the end and stopped in front of the last pair. She didn't bother to collect herself, because she was uncollectible. Loose, ungrounded, in danger of disintegration—there was no collecting anything. She knocked loudly.

Through the door came, "Fuck off. I've crashed."

She turned the knob and pushed. Light from the hall barged in, slicing a pie wedge out of the darkness. As the glow hit Zsadist, he sat up on a pallet of blankets in the far corner. He was naked, his muscles flexing into ridges under his skin, his nipple rings flashing silver. His face, with that scar, was a billboard for the rankly pissed-off male.

"I said, *fuck o*—Bella?" He covered himself with his hands. "Jesus Christ. What are you doing?"

Good question, she thought as her courage dimmed. "Can...can I stay here with you?"

He frowned. "What are you—No, you can't."

He grabbed something off the floor and held it in front of his hips as he stood up. With no apologies for her stare, she drank in the sight of him: the tattooed slave bands around his wrists and neck, the gauge in his left earlobe, his obsidian eyes, his skull-trimmed hair. His body was as starkly lean as she remembered, all striated muscles and hard-cut veins and evident bones. Raw power emanated from him like a scent.

“Bella, get out of here, okay? This is not the place for you.”

She ignored the command in his eyes and his tone, because although her bravery was gone, desperation gave her the strength she needed.

Now her voice no longer faltered. “When I was so out of it in the car, you were behind the wheel, weren’t you?” He didn’t respond, but she didn’t need him to. “Yes, you were. That was you. You spoke to me. You were the one who came for me, weren’t you?”

He flushed. “The Brotherhood came for you.”

“But you drove me away. And you brought me here first. To your room.” She looked at the luxurious bed. The covers were thrown back, the pillow dented from where her head had lain. “Let me stay.”

“Look, you need to be safe—”

“I am safe with you. You saved me. You won’t let that *lesser* get me again.”

“No one can touch you here. This place is wired like the goddamned Pentagon.”

“Please—”

“No,” he snapped. “Now get the hell out of here.”

She started to shake. “I can’t be alone. Please let me stay with you. I need to...” She needed him specifically, but didn’t think he’d respond well to that. “I need to be with someone.”

“Then Phury’s more what you’re looking for.”

“No, he’s not.” She wanted the male in front of her. For all his brutality, she trusted him instinctually.

Zsadist ran his hand over his head. A number of times. Then his chest expanded.

“Don’t make me go,” she whispered.

When he cursed, she exhaled in relief, figuring that was as close to a yes as she was going to get.

“I have to put some pants on,” he muttered.

Bella stepped inside and closed the door, lowering her eyes for only a

moment. When she looked up again, he'd turned away and was pulling a pair of black nylon sweats up his thighs.

His back, with its streaks of scars, flexed as he bent over. Seeing the cruel pattern, she was struck with the need to know exactly what he'd been through. All of it. Each and every lash. She'd heard the rumors about him; she wanted his truth.

He'd survived what had been done to him. Maybe so could she.

He turned around. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes, Phury brought me food."

A flicker of expression passed over his face, but it was gone so fast she couldn't read it.

"Are you in pain?"

"Not particularly."

He walked over to the bed and plumped up the pillows. Then he stood to one side, looking down at the floor.

"Get in."

As she came forward she wanted to throw her arms around him, and he stiffened, as though he'd read her mind. God, she knew he didn't like to be touched, had learned that the hard way. But she wanted to get close anyway.

Please look at me, she thought.

She was just about to ask him to when she noticed he had something around his throat.

"My necklace," she breathed. "You're wearing my necklace."

She reached out to it, but he flinched away. With a quick movement he took off the fragile gold chain with its little diamonds and dropped the thing in her hand.

"Here. Take it back."

She looked down. Diamonds by the Yard. By Tiffany. She'd worn it for years...her staple piece of jewelry. The thing had been so much a part of her, she'd always felt naked without it on. Now the fragile links seemed totally foreign to her.

It was warm, she thought, fingering a diamond. Warm from his skin.

"I want you to keep it," she blurted.

"No."

"But—"

"Enough with the talk. Get in or get out of here."

She put the necklace into the pocket of the robe and glanced at him. His

eyes were locked on the floor, and as he breathed his nipple rings caught the light.

Look at me, she thought.

Except he didn't, so she got into the bed. When he leaned down she scootched over to make room for him, but all he did was pull the covers over her and then go back to the corner, to the pallet on the floor.

Bella stared at the ceiling for a few minutes. Then she grabbed a pillow, slid out of the bed, and went over to him.

"What are you doing?" His voice was high. Alarmed.

She dropped her pillow and lay down, easing onto the floor beside his big body. His scent was so much stronger now, smelling of evergreen and distilled male power. Seeking the heat of him, she inched closer until her forehead hit the back of his arm. He was so hard, like a stone wall, but he was warm, and her body relaxed. Next to him she was able to feel the weight of her own bones, the hard floor underneath her, the currents in the room as the heat came on. Through his presence, she connected to the world around her again.

More. Closer.

She pushed herself forward until she was flush against the side of him, from breast to heel.

He shifted away with a jerk, moving back until he hit the wall.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, pushing herself up to him again. "I need this from you. My body needs"—you—"something warm."

Abruptly he leaped to his feet.

Oh, no. He was going to kick her out—

"Come on," he said gruffly. "We're going to the bed. I can't stand the idea of you on the floor."

Whoever said you couldn't sell something twice had never met the Omega.

O rolled over onto his stomach and propped his body up on weak arms. The retching was easier like this. Gravity helped.

As he gagged, he remembered the first little deal he'd made with the father of all *lessers*. On the night of O's induction into the Lessening Society, he'd traded his soul, along with his blood and heart, to become an immortal, sanctioned, supported killer.

And now he'd done another trade. Mr. X was no more. O was now the *Fore-lesser*.

Unfortunately, O was also now the Omega's bitch.

He tried to lift his head. When he did the room spun, but he was too exhausted to bother getting more nauseated. Or maybe there was nothing left on the downside in that department.

The cabin. He was in Mr. X's cabin. And going by the light, it was past dawn. As he blinked in the weak glow, he looked down at himself. He was naked. Marked with bruises. And he hated the taste in his mouth.

Shower. He needed a shower.

O dragged himself off the floor using a chair and the edge of the table. As he stood, his legs made him think of lava lamps for some insane reason. Probably because both were liquid inside.

His left knee gave out and he collapsed into the seat. While he wrapped his arms around himself, he decided the wash-off could wait.

Man...the world was new again, wasn't it? And he'd learned so many things during the course of his promotion. Before his change in status, he hadn't known the *Fore-lesser* was much more than just the leader of the slayers. In fact, the Omega was trapped on the other side and needed a conduit to get temporal. The number one *lesser* was the beacon the Omega used to find his way during the crossover. All the *Fore-lesser* had to do was open up the channel and make like a lighthouse.

And there were serious benes to being the *lesser* in charge. Benes that made that body-freeze technique Mr. X had used look like child's play.

Mr. X...good old sensei. O laughed. However shitty he felt this morning, Mr. X felt worse. Guaranteed.

Things had gone so smoothly after that blade-in-the-chest routine. When O had landed at the Omega's feet, he'd made his case for a regime change. He'd pointed out that the Society's ranks were dropping in number, especially among Primes. The Brothers were getting stronger. The Blind King had ascended. Mr. X was not holding a strong front.

And all of that was true. But none of it was what cinched the deal.

No, the closing had happened on account of the Omega's whim for O.

In the Society's history, there had been some instances when the Omega had taken a personal interest, if you could call it that, in a specific *lesser*. It wasn't the boon you'd think. The Omega's affections were intense and short-lived, and the breakups were gruesome, according to the rumors. But O was

willing to beg and pretend and lie to get what he needed, and the Omega had taken what was offered.

What a horrible way to kill a couple of hours. But so worth it.

He wondered idly what was happening to Mr. X right now. When O had been released the Omega had been about to call the other slayer home, and it must have happened already. The former *Fore-lesser*'s weapons were on the table, his cell phone and BlackBerry, too. And there was a scorched starburst over there by the front door.

O glanced up at the digital clock across the room. Even though he felt like roadkill, it was time to motivate. He picked up Mr. X's phone, dialed, and held the thing to his ear.

"Yeah, sensei?" U answered.

"Been a change in leadership. I want you to be my second in command."

Silence. Then: "Holy shit. What happened to Mr. X?"

"He's eating his pink slip right now. So are you in?"

"Ah, yeah. Sure. I'm your boy."

"You're in charge of the check-ins from now on. No reason to do it in person. E-mail's fine. And I'm keeping the squads as is. Primes in pairs. Betas in groups of four. Get the announcement out about Mr. X. Then get your ass here to the cabin."

O hung up. He didn't give a shit about the Society. Couldn't care less about the stupid war with the vampires. He had two objectives: Get his woman back dead or alive. And kill the scarred Brother who'd taken her.

As he stood up, he happened to look down at his body, at his limp maleness. A horrible thought snaked through his mind.

Vampires, unlike *lessers*, were not impotent.

He pictured his beautiful, pure wife...saw her naked, her hair all over her pale shoulders, the elegant curves of her slender body catching the light. Gorgeous. Perfect, perfect, perfect. Utterly feminine.

Something to be worshiped and possessed. But never fucked. A Madonna.

Except anything with a cock would want that. Vampire, human, *lesser*. Anything.

Violence threaded through him, and abruptly he hoped she was dead. Because if that ugly bastard had tried to have sex with her...man, O was going to castrate that brother with a spoon before killing him.

And God help her if she enjoyed it.

Chapter Sixteen

When Phury woke up, it was three fifteen in the afternoon. He'd slept like crap, still so pissed off at what had happened the night before that his adrenal glands were working overtime. Which was hardly conducive to shut-eye.

He reached for a blunt and lit it. As he drew the red smoke into his lungs and held on tight, he tried not to imagine going to Zsadist's room and waking the brother up with a jaw shot. But the fantasy was righteous appealing.

Goddamn it, he couldn't believe Z had tried to take Bella like that, and actually hated his twin for the depravity. Hated himself, too, for being stupidly surprised. For so long he'd been sure that something had survived Z's slavery...that some small flicker of a soul was left in the male. After last night? No more doubts about his twin's cruel nature. None.

And, shit, the real ass burner was knowing he'd let Bella down. He should never have left her in Z's bedroom. Couldn't stand that he'd sacrificed her safety for his need to believe.

Bella...

He thought about how she'd allowed him to hold her. In those fleeting moments he'd felt powerful, capable of protecting her against an army of *lessers*. For that short time, she'd transformed him into a true male, one who was needed and served a purpose.

What a revelation to be something other than a reactive half-wit chasing after a destructive, suicidal madman.

He'd desperately wanted to stay the night with her, and he'd left only because it was the right thing to do. She was exhausted, but more than that—and in spite of his vow of celibacy—he was untrustworthy. He'd wanted to succor her with his body. He'd wanted to worship her and make her whole

with his skin and bones.

But he couldn't think like that.

Phury inhaled deeply on the blunt, his breath going in with a hiss.

Keeping the smoke inside him, he felt the tension ease out of his shoulders. As the calm came over him, he eyed his stash. It was running low already, and as much as he hated going to see the Reverend, he needed more.

Yeah, considering how he was feeling toward Z, he was going to need a lot more. Red smoke was just a mild muscle relaxant, really, nothing like marijuana or any of the dangerous stuff. But he relied on the blunts to keep him level, like other folks used cocktails. If he didn't have to go to the Reverend to get the stuff, he'd say that it was a perfectly harmless pastime.

Perfectly harmless and the only ease he had in life.

When he was finished with the hand-rolled, he stabbed the little end in an ashtray and got out of bed. After he attached his prosthesis, he went into the bathroom to shower and shave; then he pulled on a pair of slacks and one of his silk shirts. He pushed his real foot and then the one he couldn't feel into a pair of Cole Haan loafers.

He checked himself in the mirror. Smoothed his hair down a little. Took a deep breath.

He went to the bedroom next to his and knocked softly. When there was no answer he tried again, and then opened the door. The bed was mussed, but empty, and she wasn't in the bathroom.

As he walked back out to the hall, alarm rang in his ears. Before he knew it he was in a jog, then a run. He raced past the head of the stairway and pounded down the statuary corridor. He didn't bother knocking on Z's door, just threw it open.

Phury stopped dead.

His first thought was that Zsadist was going to fall off the bed. The brother's body was on top of the comforter and right on the edge of the mattress, as far over as possible. *Jesus...* The position looked uncomfortable as hell. Z's arms were wrapped around his bare chest as if he were holding himself together, and his legs were bent and twisted to the side with the knees hanging in midair.

But his head was turned in the opposite direction. Toward Bella. And those distorted lips were parted ever so slightly instead of sneering. And his brows, usually drawn down in aggression, were loose, relaxed.

His expression was one of somnolent awe.

Bella's face was tilted up to the male beside her, her expression as peaceful as nightfall. And her body was cuddled up next to Z's, as close as all the sheets and blankets she was under would let her get. Hell, it was obvious that if she could have been wrapped around him, she would have been. And it was just as obvious that Z had tried to get away from her until he could go no farther.

Phury cursed softly. Whatever had been going on the night before, the situation had not been about Z pulling a nasty on her. No way. Not with what the pair of them looked like now.

He closed his eyes. Shut the door.

Like a total lunatic, he briefly considered going back in and fighting Zsadist for the right to lie next to her. He could see himself throwing the hand-to-hand around, having an old-fashioned *cohntehst* with his twin over who was allowed to have her.

But this was not the Old Country. And females had the right to choose who they sought out. Who they slept beside. Who they mated with.

And she had known where Phury stayed. He'd told her his room was right next door. If she had wanted to, she could have turned to him.

Z became aware of the oddest sensation as he came out of sleep: He was warm. Not overheated, just...warm. Had he forgotten to turn the heat off again after Bella had left? Must be it. Except he noticed something else. He wasn't on the pallet. And he had pants on, didn't he? He moved his legs around, trying to pin that one down, thinking that he always slept naked. As his warm-ups shifted, he realized the *it* was hard. Hard and heavy. *What the f*

His eyes popped open. *Bella*. He was on the bed with Bella.

He jerked away from her—

And fell off the mattress, landing on his ass.

Instantly she scrambled after him. "Zsadist?"

As she leaned over the side, the robe she was wearing fell open and his eyes latched onto the breast that was exposed. She was just as perfect as she'd been in the tub, her pale skin so smooth and her little nipple so pink.... God, he knew the other one was just the same, but for some reason he needed to see it anyway.

"Zsadist?" She stretched down farther, her hair slipping off her shoulder

and pouring over the edge of the bed, a gorgeous fall of deep mahogany.

The *it* between his thighs strained. Pulsed with the beat of his heart.

He jacked his knees up and clamped his thighs together, not wanting her to see.

“Your robe,” he said roughly. “Close it. Please.”

She glanced down and then dragged the lapels together, blushing. *Oh, hell...* Now her cheeks were as pink as her nipple, he thought.

“Will you come back to bed?” she asked.

The very well buried, decent part of him pointed out that wasn’t a good idea.

“Please?” she whispered, tucking her hair behind her ear.

He measured the arch of her body and the black satin that barred her skin from his stare and her wide, sapphire blue eyes and the slender column of her throat.

No...it *really* was not a good idea to get near her right now.

“Move over,” he said.

As she shuffled back, he glanced down at the tent between his legs. Christ, that goddamn thing in there was huge; he looked like he had another arm in his pants. And hiding a log like that would require scaffolding.

He eyed the bed. In a smooth movement he hopped between the sheets.

Which was an *achingly* bad idea. The moment he was underneath, she molded herself to his hard edges until she was another blanket. A soft, warm, breathing...

Z panicked. There was so much of her against him that he didn’t know what to do. He wanted to shove her away. He wanted her even closer. He wanted...*Oh, man.* He wanted to mount her. He wanted to take her. He wanted to fuck her.

The instinct was so strong he saw himself doing the deed: rolling her onto her stomach, pulling her hips off the bed, rearing up behind her. He imagined pushing the *it* inside of her and pumping with his hips—

God, he was *loathsome*. To want to take that dirty thing and force it into her? He might as well shove a toilet brush in her mouth.

“You tremble...” she said. “Are you cold?”

She shifted even closer to him, and he felt her breast, soft and warm, on the back of his forearm. The *it* twitched wildly, popping against his pants.

Shit. He had a feeling that punch action meant he was dangerously aroused.

Yeah, ya think? Hell, the bastard was throbbing, and the balls under the thing ached, and he was having visions of rutting on her like a bull. Except a female's fear was the only thing that got it hard, and she wasn't scared. So what was he responding to?

"Zsadist?" she said softly.

"What?"

The four words she spoke next turned his chest into a cinder block and made his blood freeze up solid. But at least all that other crap went away.

When Phury's door opened without any warning, his hands froze on the T-shirt he was pulling over his head.

Zsadist stood between the jambs, naked to the waist, black eyes burning.

Phury cursed softly. "I'm glad you came. About last night...I owe you an apology."

"I don't want to hear it. Come with me."

"Z, I was wrong to—"

"Come. With. Me."

Phury yanked the shirt hem down and checked his watch. "I have to teach class in a half hour."

"This won't take long."

"Ah...well, okay."

As he followed Z down the hall, he figured they could get through the apology on the road.

"Look, Zsadist, I'm really sorry about last night." His twin's silence was not a surprise. "I jumped to the wrong conclusion. About you and Bella." Z walked even faster. "I should have known you wouldn't hurt her. I would offer you a *rythe*."

Zsadist stopped and glared over his shoulder. "What the hell for?"

"I offended you. Last night."

"No, you didn't."

Phury could only shake his head. "Zsadist—"

"I am sick. I am disgusting. I can't be trusted. Just because you've got half a brain and have figured that out doesn't mean you need to stroke my ass with this apology bullshit."

Phury's mouth dropped. "Jesus...Z. You're not—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, will you get the lead out?"

Z marched down to his room and opened his door.

Bella sat up on the bed, gathering the lapels of the silk robe close to her neck. She seemed totally confused. And too beautiful for words.

Phury looked back and forth between her and Z. Then he focused on his twin. “What is this?”

Z’s black eyes stuck to the floor. “Go to her.”

“Excuse me?”

“She needs to feed.”

Bella made a choked noise, like she’d swallowed a gasp. “No, wait, Zsadist, I want...you.”

“You can’t have me.”

“But I want—”

“Tough. I’m out of here.”

Phury felt himself get shoved into the room and then the door slammed shut. In the silence that followed, he wasn’t sure whether he wanted to scream with triumph or...just plain scream.

He took a deep breath and glanced at the bed. Bella was curled up on herself, her knees to her chest.

Good God, he’d never let a female drink from him before. As a celibate, he hadn’t wanted to risk it. With his sexual urges and his warrior blood, he’d always been afraid that if he let a female take his vein, he’d become overwhelmed and try to get inside her. And if it was Bella, he’d find it even harder to stay in neutral.

But she needed to drink. Besides, what good was a vow if it was easy to uphold? This could be his crucible, his chance to prove his discipline under the most extreme circumstances.

He cleared his throat. “I would offer myself to you.”

As Bella’s eyes lifted to his, his skin got too small for his skeleton. Which was what rejection did to a male. Just shriveled you right up.

He looked away and thought of Zsadist, who he could sense was right outside the room. “He may not be able to do this. You are aware of his... background, aren’t you?”

“Is it too cruel of me to ask?” Her voice was full of strain, deepened by her conflict. “Is it?”

Probably, he thought.

“It would be better if you used someone else.” *God, why can’t you take me? Why can’t you need me instead?* “I don’t think it would be appropriate to

ask Wrath or Rhage, as they are mated. Maybe I could get V—”

“No...I need Zsadist.” Her hand shook as she brought it to her mouth.
“I’m so sorry.”

So was he. “Wait here.”

When he stepped out into the hall, he found Z just beyond the door. The male’s head was in his hands, his shoulders caved in.

“Is it over with so fast?” he asked, dropping his arms.

“No. It didn’t happen.”

Z frowned and looked over. “Why not? You gotta do it, man. You heard Havers—”

“She wants you.”

“—so will you go in there and open a vein—”

“She’ll only have you.”

“She needs it, so just—”

Phury raised his voice. “I won’t feed her!”

Z’s mouth clamped shut and his black eyes narrowed. “Fuck you. You will do this for me.”

“No, I won’t.” *Because she won’t let me.*

Z surged forward, locking a vise grip on Phury’s shoulder. “Then you will do this for her. Because it’s the best thing for her and because you’re feeling her and because you want to. Do this for *her*.”

Christ. He would kill to. He was dying to go back into Z’s bedroom. Rip off his clothes. Fall onto the mattress. And have Bella crawl up his chest and sink her teeth into his neck and straddle him, taking him inside of herself both between her lips and between her thighs.

Z’s nostrils flared. “God...I can smell how badly you want to do this. So go. Be with her, feed her.”

Phury’s voice cracked. “She won’t have me, Z. She wants—”

“She doesn’t know what she wants. She’s coming out of hell.”

“You are the one. For her, you are the one.” As Zsadist’s eyes slid to the closed door, Phury pushed, even though it killed him. “Listen to what I’m saying, my brother. She wants you. And you can do this for her.”

“The hell I can.”

“Z, do it.”

That skull-trimmed head shook back and forth. “Come on, the shit in my veins is corroded. You know that.”

“No, it isn’t.”

With a snarl, Z leaned back and held out his wrists, flashing the blood-slave bands tattooed at his pulse points. “You want her biting through these? Can you stand the thought of her mouth on them? Because I sure as hell can’t.”

“Zsadist?” Bella’s voice drifted over. Without their noticing, she’d gotten up and opened the door.

As Z’s eyes squeezed shut, Phury whispered, “You are the one she wants.”

Z’s reply was barely audible. “I’m contaminated. My blood will kill her.”

“No. It won’t.”

“Please...Zsadist,” Bella said.

The sound of the humble, yearning request turned Phury’s ribs into a cage of ice, and he watched, frozen, numbed out, as Z slowly turned to her.

Bella stepped back a little, keeping her eyes on him.

Minutes became days...decades...centuries. And then Zsadist walked over and went inside. The door closed.

Phury was blind as he pivoted away and went down the corridor.

Wasn’t there someplace he needed to be?

Class. Yes, he was going to...to teach class now.

Chapter Seventeen

At ten after four, John climbed up into a shuttle bus lugging his duffel bag along with him.

“Hello, sire,” the *doggen* behind the wheel said cheerfully. “Welcome.”

John nodded and looked at the twelve guys who were seated in pairs and staring at him.

Whoa. Really not feeling the love here, fellas, he thought.

He took the empty seat behind the driver.

As the bus started to move, a partition came down so that the trainees were locked in the back together and none of them could see out the front. John shuffled around so he sat sideways. Keeping an eye on what was happening behind him seemed like a good idea.

The windows were all darkened, but the running lights on the floor and ceiling were bright enough so he could get a bead on his classmates. They were all like him, thin and small, though they had different hair colors, some blond, some dark. One was a redhead. Like John, they were all dressed in white martial-arts *jis*. And they all had the same duffel at their feet, a black nylon Nike bag big enough to fit a change of clothes and a lot of food. Each of them had a backpack, too, and he guessed they had the same stuff in it that he had in his: a notebook and some pens, a cell phone, a calculator. Tohr had sent out a list of required supplies.

John tucked his pack in close to his stomach and felt himself getting stared at. It helped to think about all the numbers he could text-message, so he repeated them in his head over and over again. Home. Wellsie’s cell. Tohr’s cell. The Brotherhood’s number. Sarelle’s...

Thinking of her made him smile. They’d spent hours online last night.

Man, IM'ing, once he got the hang of it, was the perfect way to communicate with her. With them both typing words, he felt like they were equals. And if he'd liked her over dinner, he was really into her now.

"What's your name?"

John looked over a couple of seats. A guy with long blond hair and a diamond earring had spoken up.

At least they're using English, John thought.

As he unzipped the pack and took out a notebook, the guy said, "Hello? You deaf or something?"

John wrote his name and turned the pad around.

"John? What the hell kind of name is that? And why are you writing?"

Oh, man... This school thing was going to suck.

"What's your problem? Can't talk?"

John met the guy right in the eye. The laws of probability mandated that within every group, there was one alpha-male pain in the ass, and this towhead with the sparkler in his earlobe was clearly it.

John shook his head to answer the question.

"You can't speak? At all?" The guy raised his voice as if to make sure everyone heard. "What the hell are you doing training to be a soldier if you can't talk?"

You don't fight with words, do you? John wrote.

"Yeah, and all those muscles you're popping are *really* scary."

So are yours, he wanted to scribble.

"Why do you have a human name?" This question came from the redhead in the seat behind him.

John wrote, *Raised by them*, and then turned the pad around.

"Huh. Well, I'm Blaylock. John...wow, weird."

On impulse, John pulled up his sleeve and flashed the bracelet he'd made, the one with the characters he'd dreamed about on it.

Blaylock leaned over. Then his pale blue eyes shot up. "His real name's Tehrror."

Whispers. Lots of whispers.

John retracted his arm and eased back against the window again. He wished he'd kept his sleeve down. What the hell were they thinking now?

After a moment Blaylock pulled a polite one and introduced the others. They all had odd names. The blond's was Lash. And how fricking appropriate was that?

“Tehrror...” Blaylock murmured. “That’s a very old name. That’s a real warrior’s name.”

John frowned. And even though it would be better to get himself off these boys’ high-def wide-screen, he wrote, *Isn’t yours? And the rest of theirs?*

Blaylock shook his head. “We have some warrior blood in us, which is why we were chosen to come train, but none of us has a name like that. What line are you descended from? God...are you bred from the Brotherhood?”

John frowned. It had never dawned on him that he could be related to the Brothers.

“Guess he’s too good to answer you,” Lash said.

John let that one pass. He knew he was tripping all kinds of social wires, setting off land mines right and left, what with his names and the raised-by-humans thing and his inability to talk. He had a feeling this school day was going to be one hell of an endurance test, so he might as well save his energy.

The trip lasted about fifteen minutes, with the last five or so involving a lot of stopping and going, which meant they were going through the gate system into the training compound.

When the bus halted and the partition retracted, John shouldered his duffel and his backpack and got out first. The underground parking facility was just as it had been last night: still no cars, just another shuttle bus like the one they’d come in. He stood off to the side and watched the others mill about, a flock of white *jis*. Their nattering voices reminded him of the sound of pigeon wings clapping.

The center’s doors swung open, and the group got good and transfixed.

But Phury could do that to a crowd. With his spectacular hair and his big body in black, he was enough to make anyone freeze.

“Hey, John,” he said, lifting his hand. “What’s doing?”

The guys turned and stared at him.

He smiled up at Phury. Then got busy trying to fade into the background.

Bella watched Zsadist pace around the bedroom. He reminded her of how she’d felt the night before when she’d sought him out: Caged. Miserable. Pushed too hard.

Why the hell was she forcing this?

As she opened her mouth to call the whole thing off, Zsadist stopped in front of the bathroom door.

“I need a minute,” he said. Then shut himself away.

At a loss, she went over and sat on the bed, expecting him to be right back out. When the shower came on and stayed on, she fell into a churning introspection.

She tried to picture herself going back to her family’s house and walking through those familiar rooms and sitting in chairs and opening doors and sleeping in her childhood bed. It felt all wrong, like she’d be a ghost in that place she knew so well.

And how would she deal with her mother and her brother? And the *glymera*?

In the aristocratic world she’d been disgraced before she’d been abducted. Now she would be shunned outright. Being handled by a *lesser*... trapped in the ground...The aristocracy didn’t handle that kind of ugliness well, and they would blame her. Hell, that was probably why her mother had been so reserved.

God, Bella thought. What was the rest of her life going to be like now?

As dread choked her, the only thing that held her together was the thought of staying in this room and sleeping for days with Zsadist right next to her. He was the cold that made her condense into herself again. And the heat that stopped her from shivering.

He was the killer who made her safe.

More time...more time with him first. Then maybe she could face the outside world.

She frowned, realizing he’d been in the shower for quite a while.

Her eyes shifted to the pallet in the far corner. How did he sleep there night after night? The floor would be so hard on his back, and there was no pillow for his head. No covers to pull up against the chill, either.

She focused on the skull beside the folded blankets. The black leather strap between the teeth proclaimed it as one he had loved. Obviously he had been mated, though she hadn’t heard that in the rumors about him. Had his *shellan* gone unto the Fade of natural causes or had she been taken from him? Was that why he was so angry?

Bella looked toward the bathroom. What was he doing in there?

She went over and knocked. When there was no answer, she opened the door slowly. A cold rush shot out and she jerked back.

Bracing herself, she leaned into the freezing air. “Zsadist?”

Through the glass door of the shower, she saw him sitting under an ice-

cold spray of water. He was rocking back and forth, moaning, scrubbing his wrists with a washcloth.

“*Zsadist!*” She ran over and pushed the glass aside. Fumbling with the fixtures, she turned off the water. “What are you doing?”

He looked up at her with wild, crazy eyes as he kept rocking and scrubbing, rocking and scrubbing. The skin around the black-tattooed bands was brilliant red, completely raw.

“*Zsadist?*” She struggled to keep her tone gentle and steady. “What are you doing?”

“I...I can’t get clean. I don’t want you to get dirty, too.” He lifted his wrist and blood oozed down his forearm. “See? Look at the dirt. It’s all over me. Inside of me.”

His voice alarmed her even more than what he’d done to himself, his words carrying the eerie, groundless logic of insanity.

Bella picked up a towel, stepped inside the stall, and fell into a crouch. Capturing his hands, she took the washcloth from him.

As she carefully dried off his ragged flesh, she said, “You are clean.”

“Oh, no, I’m not. I’m really not.” His voice started to rise, a terrible momentum growing. “I’m filthy. I am so very dirty. I am dirty, dirty....” Now he babbled, the words running together, the volume lifting until hysteria pinged off the tiles and filled the bathroom. “Can you see the dirt? I see it everywhere. It coats me. It seals me in. I can feel it on my skin—”

“Shh. Let me...just...”

Keeping an eye on him, as if he were going to...God, she didn’t even know what...she grabbed blindly for another towel and dragged it into the shower. With a reach around his big shoulders, she draped him in it, but when she tried to pull him into her arms, he shrank back.

“*Don’t touch me,*” he rasped. “You’ll get it on you.”

She sank down to her knees in front of him, her silk robe catching the water, drinking it up. She didn’t even notice the cold.

Jesus... He looked like someone who’d been in a shipwreck: his eyes wide and demented, his soaked sweatpants clinging to the muscles of his legs, the skin of his chest covered in goose bumps. His lips were blue and his teeth chattered.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. And she wanted to reassure him that there was no dirt on him, but knew that would just set him off again.

As water dripped from the showerhead onto the tile, the rhythmic sound

was loud as a snare drum between them. In between the beats, she found herself remembering the night she'd followed him up to this room...the night when he'd touched her aroused body. Ten minutes after he had she'd found him curled over the toilet, throwing up because he'd put his hand on her.

I'm filthy. I am so very dirty. I am dirty, dirty....

Clarity came to her in the shifting way of a nightmare, cleaving into consciousness with chilling illumination, showing her something ugly. It was obvious he'd been beaten as a blood slave, and she'd assumed that was why he didn't like to be touched. Except getting hit, however painful and frightening, didn't make you feel dirty.

But sexual abuse would do it.

His black eyes suddenly focused on her face. As if he'd felt the conclusion that had found her.

Driven by sympathy, she leaned in toward him, but the anger that bled into his face stopped her.

"Christ, female," he snapped. "Will you cover yourself?"

She glanced down. Her robe was open to her waist, the swells of her breasts showing. She yanked the lapels together.

In the tight silence it was hard to meet his stare, so she focused on his shoulder...then followed the line of muscle to his collarbone, to the base of his neck. Her eyes drifted up his thick throat...to the vein that pumped just under his skin.

Hunger shot through her, making her fangs elongate. *Oh, hell.* Like she needed bloodlust right now?

"Why do you want me?" he muttered, clearly sensing her need. "You're better than this."

"You are—"

"I know what I am."

"You are not dirty."

"Damn it, Bella—"

"And I only want you. Look, I'm really sorry, and we don't have to—"

"You know what? No more talking. I'm tired of the talking." He stretched his arm out on his knee, wrist up, and his black eyes became devoid of any emotion, even anger. "It's your funeral, female. Do it if you want."

Time stopped as she stared at what he grudgingly offered. God help them both, but she was going to have him. With a quick move she arched over his vein and scored him cleanly. Though it must have hurt, he didn't jerk at all.

The instant his blood hit her tongue, she moaned in bliss. She'd fed from aristocrats before, but never from a male of the warrior class, and certainly never, ever a member of the Brotherhood. His taste was a delicious roar in her mouth, an invasion, an epic, screaming blast, and then she swallowed. The torrent of his power ripped through her, a forest fire in the marrow of her bones, an explosion that pumped into her heart in a glorious rush of strength.

She trembled so badly she almost lost contact with his wrist and had to grab onto his forearm to steady herself. She drank in great, greedy pulls, starved not just for the strength, but for him, for this male.

For her, he was...the one.

Chapter Eighteen

Zsadist fought to keep still as Bella fed. He didn't want to disturb her, but with every pull on his vein he was getting closer to losing it. The Mistress was the only one who'd ever fed from him, and the memories of those violations were as sharp as the fangs buried in his wrist now. Fear came to him, hard and vivid, no shadow of the past anymore, now a very present panic.

Holy shit... He was going totally light-headed here. About to black out like a stone-cold sissy.

In a desperate attempt to bring himself back to center, he focused on Bella's dark hair. There was a lock of it close to his free hand, and the strand gleamed in the shower's overhead light, so lovely, so thick, so different from the Mistress's blond.

God, Bella's hair looked really soft.... If he'd had the nerve, he would bury his hand—no, his whole face—in those mahogany waves. Could he handle that? he wondered. Being so close to a female? Or would he choke when even more fear hit him?

If it was Bella, he thought he might be able to do it.

Yeah...he'd really like his face there, in her hair. Maybe he would burrow through it and find his way to her neck and he would...press a kiss to her throat. Just real softly. Yeah...and then he might move up and brush his lips against her cheek. Maybe she would let him do that. He wouldn't go near her mouth. He couldn't imagine she'd want to be that close to his scar and his upper lip was all fucked up anyway. Besides, he didn't know how to kiss. The Mistress and her minions had known enough to keep away from his fangs. And afterward he'd never wanted to get that tight with a female.

Bella paused and tilted her head, her sapphire blue eyes shifting up to his, checking to make sure he was okay.

The concern bit into his pride. Christ, to think he was so weak that he couldn't handle feeding a female...and what a cringer to realize she knew this while she was at his vein. Even worse, there had been that expression on her face a few moments ago, that dawning horror that meant she'd figured out what else he'd been used for as slave besides his blood.

He couldn't stand her sympathy, didn't want those worried looks, wasn't interested in being coddled and stroked. He opened his mouth, ready to take her head off, but somehow the anger got lost on the trip between his gut and his throat.

"It's okay," he said roughly. "Rock steady up here. Rock steady."

The relief in those eyes of hers was another slap in the ass.

As she started drinking again, he thought, *I hate this.*

Well...some of it he hated. Okay, the shit in his head he hated. But as the gentle pulls on his wrist continued, he realized he kind of liked them.

At least until he thought about what she was swallowing. Dirty blood...rusted blood...corroded, infected, nasty blood. Man, he just couldn't fathom why she'd turned down Phury. The male was perfect inside and out. Yet here she was on cold, hard tile, biting through a slave band with him. Why did she...

Zsadist shut his eyes. No doubt after all she'd been through, she figured she deserved no better than someone who was polluted. That *lesser* had probably torn the self-respect right out of her.

Man, as God was his witness, he was going to have that bastard's last breath squeezing out between his palms.

With a sigh, Bella released his wrist and eased back against the shower wall, her lids low, her body limp. The silk of the dressing down was wet and it clung to her legs, outlining her thighs, her hips...the juncture in their midst.

As the *it* in his pants thickened in a rush, he wanted to cut the thing off.

Her eyes lifted to his. He half expected her to go into seizures or something, and he tried not to think of all that ugliness she'd swallowed.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Thank you," she said huskily. "Thank you for letting me—"

"Yeah, you can stop that." God, he wished he'd protected her from himself. The Mistress's very essence pumped through him, the echoes of that female's cruelty trapped within the endless circuit of his arteries and veins,

going around and around his body. And Bella had just taken some of that poison into her gut.

He should have fought harder against this.

“I’m going to carry you to the bed,” he said.

When she didn’t object, he picked her up, took her out of the shower, and paused by the sink to grab a towel for her.

“The mirror,” she murmured. “You covered the mirror. Why?”

He didn’t answer her as he headed for the bedroom, couldn’t bear to talk about the horrible things she’d endured.

“Do I look so bad to you?” she whispered into his shoulder.

When he got to the bed, he set her on her feet. “The robe is wet. You should take it off. Use this to dry if you want.”

She took the towel and started to loosen the tie at her waist. He quickly turned around, listening to a rush of cloth, some flapping, then the shifting of sheets.

As she settled in, some very base, ancient core of him demanded that he lay with her now. And not as in hold her. He wanted to be inside of her, moving...releasing. Somehow that seemed like the right thing to do, to give her not just the blood in his veins but the completion of the sexual act, too.

Which was *totally* fucked up.

He dragged a hand over his hair, wondering where the hell that bad idea had come from. Man, he had to get away from her—

Well, that was going to happen soon, wasn’t it. She was leaving tonight. Leaving to go home.

His instincts went nuts, making him want to fight to make her stay in his bed. But screw that stupid, primeval core of him. He needed to go do his job. He needed to go out and find that one particular *lesser* and slaughter the fucker for her. That was what he had to do.

Z headed for the closet, pulled on a shirt, and armed up. As he grabbed for his chest holster, he considered asking her for a description of the slayer who’d taken her. Except he didn’t want to traumatize her...No, he would get Tohr to ask, because the brother would handle that kind of thing well. When she was returned to her family tonight, he would have Tohr talk to her then.

“I’m heading out,” Z said as he buckled the leather dagger holder across his ribs. “You want me to have Fritz bring you food before you go?”

When there was no answer, he looked around the doorjamb. She was on her side, watching him.

Another wave of heavy-handed instinct pounded through him.

He wanted to see her eat. After the sex, after he came inside of her, he wanted to have her eat food he'd brought her, and he wanted her to take the stuff from his hand. Hell, he wanted to go out and kill something for her, bring the meat back, cook it himself, and feed her until she was full. Then he wanted to lie beside her with a dagger in his hand, protecting her as she slept.

He ducked back into the closet. Man, he was going crazy. Straight-up *loco*.

"I'll have him bring you something," he said.

He checked the blades on his two black daggers, testing them on the inside of his forearm, slicing into his skin. As the pain tingled into his brain, he stared at the puncture marks Bella had left on his wrist.

Shaking himself back into focus, he put his gun holster around his hips and ran through his twin SIG Sauers. Both nine-millimeters had full bullet loads, and there were another two clips of hollow tips on the belt. He slipped a throwing knife into a buckle at the small of his back and made sure he had some *hira shuriken* with him. Shitkickers were next. Light windbreaker to cover the portable arsenal was last.

When he came out, Bella was still looking up at him from the bed. Her eyes were so blue. Blue as sapphires. Blue as night. Blue as—

"Zsadist?"

He fought the urge to smack himself. "Yeah?"

"Am I ugly to you?" As he recoiled, she put her hands over her face. "Never mind."

While she hid from him, he thought of the very first moment he'd seen her, back when she'd surprised him in the gym so many weeks ago. She'd astounded him then, struck him dead-stupid in his boots, and she still had that effect on his brain. It was like he had an off switch that only she had the remote to.

He cleared his throat. "You are as you have always been to me."

He turned away, only to hear a sob. Then another. And another.

He looked over his shoulder. "Bella...holy hell..."

"I'm sorry," she said into her palms. "I'm s-sorry. Just go. I'm f-fine.... I'm sorry, I'm fine."

As he went over and sat on the edge of the bed, he wished he had the gift of words. "You've got nothing to be sorry for."

"I've invaded your room, your b-bed. Forced you to sleep next me. M-

made you give me your vein. I'm so...sorry." She took a deep breath and collected herself, but even still her despair lingered, carrying the earthy scent of raindrops on a hot sidewalk. "I know I should leave here, I know you don't want me here, but I just need...I can't go to my farmhouse. The *lesser* took me from there, so I can't stand the idea of going back. And I don't want to be with my family. They won't understand what's going on for me right now, and I don't have the energy to explain. I just need some time, I need some way to get what is in my head out of it, but I can't be alone. Even though I don't want to see anyone except..."

As she petered out, he said, "You stay here for as long as you want."

She started sobbing again. *Damn it.* That was the wrong thing to say.

"Bella...I..." What was he supposed to do?

Reach out to her, asshole. Take her hand, you piece of shit.

He couldn't do it. "You want me to move out? Give you some space?"

More crying, somewhere in the middle of which she mumbled, "I need you."

God, if he'd heard that right, he pitied her.

"Bella, stop crying. Stop crying and look at me." Eventually she took a deep breath and wiped her face. When he was sure he had her attention, he said, "You don't worry about anything. You're staying here as long as you want to. Are we clear?"

She just stared at him.

"Nod for me, so I know you heard that." When she did, he stood up.

"And I'm the last thing you need. So you just drop that bullshit right now."

"But I—"

He headed for the door. "I'll be back before dawn. Fritz knows how to find me—er, all of us."

After leaving her, Z strode down the corridor of statues, hung a louie, and shot past Wrath's study and the grand staircase. Three doors down he knocked. No answer. He knocked again.

He headed downstairs and found what he was looking for in the kitchen.

Mary, Rhage's female, was peeling potatoes. A lot of potatoes. Like, an army load of them. Her gray eyes lifted and her paring knife stilled on an Idaho golden. She glanced around, as if figuring he must be looking for someone else. Or maybe she just hoped she wasn't alone with him.

"Could you put this off for a while?" Z said, nodding at the pile.

"Um, sure. Rhage can always eat something else. Besides, Fritz is having

a concoction that I was going to cook, anyway. What...ah, what do you need?"

"Not me. Bella. She could use a friend right now."

Mary put the knife and the half-naked potato down. "I'm so anxious to see her."

"She's in my room." Z pivoted around, already thinking about which alleys to hit downtown.

"Zsadist?"

He stopped with his hand on the butler's door. "What."

"You're taking very good care of her."

He thought of the blood he'd let her swallow. And the urge he had to orgasm in her body.

"Not really," he said over his shoulder.

Sometimes you have to start at the beginning, O thought as he jogged through the forest.

About three hundred yards from where he'd parked the truck, the trees gave way to a flat meadow. He stopped while still hidden among the pines.

Across the white blanket of snow was the farmhouse where he had first found his wife, and in the fading light of day her home was all Norman Rockwell, Hallmark-card, Middle America perfect. The only thing that was missing was some smoke coming out of the redbrick chimney.

He took out his binocs and scanned the area, then focused on the house. All the tire tracks in the driveway and the footprints to the door made him worry that the place had changed hands and movers had come. But there was still furniture inside, furniture he recognized from when he'd been in there with her.

He dropped the binocs, letting them hang around his neck, and crouched down. He would wait for her here. If she was alive, either she would go to her house or whoever was taking care of her would come for some of her things. If she was dead, someone would start moving her shit out.

At least, he hoped something like that would happen. He had nothing else to go on, didn't know her name or her family's whereabouts. Couldn't guess where else she might be. His only other option was to go out and question civilians about her. As no other female had been abducted lately, surely she'd have been a topic of conversation within her race. Trouble was, that route

could take weeks...months. And information from persuasive techniques wasn't always solid.

No, watching her house was more likely to get him results. He would sit and wait until someone tipped a hand and led him back to her. Maybe his job would get even easier and that scarred brother would be the one who showed.

That would be just about perfect.

O settled back on his heels, ignoring the cold wind.

God...he hoped she was alive.

Chapter Nineteen

John kept his head down and tried to pull it together.

The locker room was filled with steam and voices and the snapping of wet towels on bare butts. The trainees had ditched their sweaty and were showering before they took a food break and then hit the classroom part of the session.

It was all standard guy stuff, except John so did not want to get naked. Even though they were all his size, this was straight out of every high school nightmare he'd ridden out until he'd quit the system when he was sixteen. And right now he was just too flat-out exhausted to deal with the scene.

He figured it was about midnight by now, but he felt as though it were four A.M.... like, the day after tomorrow. Training had been grueling for him. None of the other guys was strong, but all of them could keep up with the stances Phury and then Tohr introduced. Hell, a few were even naturals. John was a mess. His feet were slow, his hands were always in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he had no physical coordination. Man, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find his balance. His body was like a shifting, lurching bag of water; if he moved in one direction, the whole thing flopped over on him.

"You'd better hurry," Blaylock said. "We've only got eight more minutes."

John eyed the shower's doorway. The jets were still on but there was no one in it as far as he could see. He stripped out of the and the jockstrap and walked quickly into the—

Shit. Lash was in the corner. Like he'd been waiting.

"Hey, big man," the guy drawled. "Really showed us a thing or two out

—”

Lash stopped talking and just stared at John’s chest.

“You little kiss-ass,” he snapped. And then stormed out of the shower.

John looked down at the circular mark over his left pectoral, the one he’d been born with...the one that Tohr had told him members of the Brotherhood received on their initiations.

Terrific. Now he could add that birthmark to the growing list of stuff he didn’t want to hear about from his classmates.

When he came out of the shower with a towel around his waist, all the guys, even Blaylock, were standing together. While they looked him over as a solid, silent unit, he wondered whether vampires had pack instincts, like wolves or dogs.

As they continued to stare at him, he thought, *Um, yeah. That would be a big affirmative.*

John ducked his head and went to his locker, desperate for the day to be over.

Around three A.M., Phury walked quickly down Tenth Street to ZeroSum. Butch was waiting outside the club’s glass-and-chrome entrance, lounging casually in spite of the cold. In his full-length cashmere coat and with his Red Sox hat pulled down low, he looked good. Anonymous, but good.

“What’s doing?” Butch asked as they clapped palms.

“Night was for crap on the *lesser* side. No one found any. Hey, man, thanks for company, I need it.”

“No problem.” Butch tugged his Sox cap down even more. Like the Brothers, he kept a low profile. As a homicide detective, he’d helped send a number of drug-trade folks to jail, so it was better for him not to be too conspicuous.

Inside the club, the techno music was annoying. So were the flashing lights and all the humans. But Phury had his reasons for coming, and Butch was being polite. Sort of.

“This place is just too frickin’ precious,” the cop said, eyeing a guy dressed in a hot pink leisure suit with makeup to match. “Give me rednecks and home-grown beer any day of the week over this X-culture bullshit.”

When they got to the VIP section, the satin rope was lowered immediately so they could pass.

Phury nodded to the bouncer, then looked at Butch. "I won't take long."

"You know where to find me."

As the cop went for their table, Phury walked to the back of the high-ticket area, stopping in front of the two Moors who guarded the Reverend's private door.

"I'll tell him you're here," the one on the left said.

A split second later Phury was let in. The office was a cave, dimly lit with a low ceiling, and the vampire behind the desk dominated the space, especially as he got to his feet.

The Reverend was a jacked-up six foot six, and the tight mohawk he wore his hair in suited him as well as his fancy-ass Italian threads did. His face was pitiless and intelligent, placing him rightfully in the dangerous business he was in. His eyes, though...his eyes didn't fit. They were curiously beautiful, the color of amethysts, a deep purple that glowed.

"Back so soon?" the male said, his voice low, deep, harder than usual.

Get the product, then get a move on, Phury thought.

He took out his roll and peeled off three large. He fanned out the thousand-dollar bills on top of the chrome desk. "Twice the usual. And I want it quartered."

The Reverend smiled coolly and swiveled his head to the left. "Rally, get the male what he needs. And pad those O-Zs." A minion came out of the darkness and scooted through a pocket door in the far corner of the room.

When they were alone, the Reverend came around the desk slowly, moving like he had oil in his veins, all sinuous power. As he circled, he closed in enough to have Phury slip his hand into his coat and find one of his guns.

"Sure we can't interest you in something more hard-core?" the Reverend said. "That red smoke is for low dosers."

"If I wanted something else, I'd ask for it."

The vampire stopped beside him. So very close.

Phury frowned. "There a problem?"

"You have beautiful hair, you know that? It's like a female's. All those different colors." The Reverend's voice was strangely hypnotic, his purple eyes purely cunning. "Speaking of females, I hear you don't take advantage of what's offered by my ladies here. That true?"

"Why do you care?"

"Just want to make sure your needs are served. Customer satisfaction is

so damned important.” The male moved even closer and nodded at Phury’s arm, the one that disappeared into his coat. “Your hand’s on a gun butt right now, isn’t it? Afraid of me?”

“Just want to make sure I can take care of you.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. In case you need a little Glock-to-mouth resuscitation.”

The Reverend grinned, his fangs flashing. “You know, I’ve heard this rumor...about a member of the Brotherhood who’s celibate. Yeah, go figure, a warrior who abstains. And I’ve heard a few other things about this male. He’s down to one leg. Has a scarred sociopath for a twin. You wouldn’t by any chance know of such a Brother?”

Phury shook his head. “Nope.”

“Huh. Funny, I’ve seen you hanging around with a guy who looks like he’s wearing a Halloween mask. Actually, I’ve seen you with a couple of big males who kind of fit some descriptions I’ve heard. You don’t suppose—”

“Do me a favor and get me my leaves. I’ll be outside waiting.” Phury turned away. He was in a bad mood to begin with: frustrated that he hadn’t found a fight, bleeding inside over being shut down by Bella. Now was not the time for conflict. He was on his last fucking nerve.

“Are you celibate because you like males?”

Phury glared over his shoulder. “What is with you tonight? You’re always shifty, but right now you’re also being a real asshole.”

“You know, maybe you just need to get laid. I don’t traffic in the males, but I’m sure we could find you one who’d be obliging.”

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Phury snapped. He surged across the office, took the Reverend by his Gucci lapels, and nailed him into the wall.

Phury leaned on the guy’s chest. “Why are you picking a fight with me?”

“You going to kiss me before the sex?” the Reverend murmured, still playing. “I mean, it’s the least you can do, considering we only know each other professionally. Or aren’t you into foreplay?”

“Fuck you.”

“Now there’s an original comeback. I would have expected something a little more interesting from you.”

“Fine. How’s this?”

Phury laid a hard one on the male’s mouth, the kiss a punch between faces, not anything even remotely sexual. And he did it only to wipe the

expression off the bastard's face. It worked. The Reverend stiffened and growled, and Phury knew he'd called the guy's bluff. But just to make sure the lesson was learned, he clipped the male's lower lip with a fang.

The instant blood hit his tongue, Phury yanked back, his mouth falling open. Through his shock, he breathed, "Well, what do you know, sin-eater."

At the sound of the word the Reverend cut all the bullshit, getting good and dead serious. In the silence he seemed to be considering his plausible denials.

Phury shook his head. "Don't even try. I can taste it."

Amethyst eyes narrowed. "The politically correct term is *sympath*."

Phury's hands tightened on the male out of reflex. *Holy shit.* A *sympath*. Here in Caldwell and living among the species. Trying to pass itself off as just another civilian.

Man, this was crucial information. The last thing Wrath needed was another civil war in the race.

"I should point something out," the Reverend said softly. "You turn me in and you're going to lose your supplier. Think about it. Where're you going to get what you need if I'm out of the picture?"

Phury stared into those purple eyes, still running through the implications. He was going to tell the Brothers as soon as he got home, and he was going to watch the Reverend closely. As for turning the guy in...The discrimination *sympaths* had faced throughout history had always struck him as unfair—provided they didn't start pulling shit out of their trick bags. And the Reverend had been running the club for at least five years with no problems linked to *sympath* behavior.

"We're going to strike a little deal," Phury said, glaring hard into that violet stare. "I keep quiet and you stay on the down-low. You also don't try to fuck with me again. I'm not going to roll over for you sucking on my emotions, which was what you were doing right now, wasn't it? You wanted me irate because you were hungry for the feeling."

The Reverend's mouth opened just as the door to the office swung wide. A female vampire barged in, only to stop dead as she saw what was undoubtedly a picture: two male bodies close together, the Reverend's lip bleeding, blood on Phury's mouth.

"Get the hell out of here," the Reverend snapped.

The female backed away so quickly she tripped and slammed her elbow into the doorjamb.

“So do we have a deal?” Phury bit out after she left.

“If you admit you’re a Brother.”

“I’m not.”

The Reverend’s eyes flashed. “Just so you know, I don’t believe you.”

Phury had the sudden notion that it was no accident the Brotherhood thing had come up tonight. He leaned into the male. Hard. “Wonder how you’d fare if your identity got out?”

“We”—the Reverend dragged in a breath—“have a deal.”

Butch looked up as the woman he’d sent to check on Phury came back. Usually the buys were over and done with quickly, but it had been a good twenty minutes.

“My boy in there still?” Butch asked, noting absently that she was rubbing her elbow like it hurt.

“Oh, he’s in there, all right.” As she shot him a tight smile, he abruptly realized she was a vampire. That little grin thing was a move they all pulled when they were out among humans.

And she was kind of attractive, he supposed, what with the long blond hair and the black leather at her breasts and hips. As she slid into the booth next to him, he caught her scent and thought idly of sex for the first time in... well, since he’d met Marissa over the summer.

He took a long drink, finishing the Scotch in his glass. Then he glanced at the female’s breasts. Yeah, sex was on his mind, but more as a physical reflex than anything else. The interest was nothing like it had been with Marissa. Then the need had been...consuming. Reverent. Important.

The female beside him shot him a look as if she knew the direction of his thoughts. “Your friend might be in there for a while.”

“Yeah?”

“They were just starting to get down to it.”

“The buy?”

“The sex.”

Butch’s head whipped up and he locked eyes with her. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, whoops...” She frowned. “Are you two together or something?”

“No, we’re not together,” he snapped. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Yeah, I didn’t really think you were like that. You dress well, but you

don't give off that kind of vibe."

"And my buddy's not into men, either."

"You sure about that?"

He thought about the celibacy and started to wonder.

Whatever. He needed another drink; he did not need to get into Phury's biz. Lifting his arm, he waved to a waitress, who rushed over.

"Another double Scotch," he said. To be polite, he turned to the female next to him. "You want something?"

Her hand landed on his thigh. "As a matter of fact, I do. But she can't give it to me."

As the waitress left, Butch leaned back in the booth, stretching both arms out, opening himself. The female took the invite, leaning into him, moving that hand south. His body stirred, its first sign of life in months, and he had some passing thought that maybe he could get Marissa out of his head if he had some sex.

While the female stroked him through his pants, he watched her with clinical interest. He knew where this was headed. He'd end up doing her in one of the private bathrooms over there. Would take maybe ten minutes, if that. He'd get her off, do his business, then beat feet to get away from her.

God, he'd pulled that quickie routine hundreds of times over the course of his life. And it was really just masturbation disguised as sex. No big deal.

He thought of Marissa...and felt his tear ducts sting.

The female next to him moved so that her breasts were on his arm. "Let's go to the back, daddy."

He put his hand over hers at his crotch and she made some kind of purring noise in his ear. At least until he removed her palm.

"I'm sorry. I can't."

The female pulled away and looked at him as if he had to be playing her. Butch stared right back.

He wasn't prepared to say he was never going to have sex again. And he sure as shit didn't understand why Marissa had gotten to him as much as she had. All he knew was that his old pattern of balling random women wasn't doing it for him. Tonight.

Abruptly Phury's voice cut through the ambient noise of the club. "Hey, cop, you want to stay or go?"

Butch glanced up. There was a slight pause as he speculated about his friend.

The Brother's yellow eyes narrowed. "What's doing, cop?"
"I'm ready to go," Butch said, smoothing over the awkward moment.
As he got up, Phury gave the blond a hard look. A real keep-your-yap-shut special.

Wow, Butch thought as they headed for the door. So Phury really was gay.

Chapter Twenty

Bella woke up hours later to a soft scraping sound. She glanced over to a window and watched as its steel shutter came down. Dawn must be close.

Anxiety tingled in her chest, and she looked at the door. She wanted Zsadist to come through it, wanted to clap her eyes on him and reassure herself he was in one piece. Even though he'd seemed back to normal when he'd left, she'd put him through a lot.

She rolled over onto her back and thought about Mary showing up. How had Zsadist known she'd needed a friend? And God, the fact that he'd gone to Mary and—

The bedroom door opened wide without any warning.

Bella sat up in a rush, pulling the covers to her throat. But then Zsadist's shadow was a stunning relief.

"It's just me," he said gruffly. As he came inside, he was carrying a tray, and there was something on his shoulder. A duffel bag. "You mind if I hit the lights?"

"Hi..." *I'm so glad you're home safe.* "Not at all."

He called to life several candles, and she blinked in the sudden glow.

"I brought you some things from your house." He put the tray of food on the bedside table and opened up the bag. "I got you clothes and a parka. The bottle of shampoo that was in your shower. A brush. Shoes. Socks to keep your feet warm. Your diary, too—don't worry, I haven't read it or anything."

"I'd be surprised if you had. You're more trustworthy than that."

"No, I'm illiterate."

Her eyes flared.

"Anyway"—his voice was hard as his jawline—"I figured you'd want

some of your own stuff.”

As he put the duffel next to her on the bed, she just stared up at him until, overwhelmed, she reached out to take his hand. When he flinched back, she flushed and looked at what he’d brought her.

God...she was nervous about seeing her things. Especially the diary.

Except it turned out to be comforting to pull out her favorite red sweater, put the thing to her nose, and catch a whiff of the perfume she’d always worn. And...yes, the brush, *her* brush, the one she liked with the broad, square head and metal bristles. She grabbed her shampoo, popped the top, and inhaled. *Ahhh...Biolage.* Nothing like the scent of what the *lesser* had made her use.

“Thank you.” Her voice trembled as she took out her journal. “Thank you so much.”

She stroked her diary’s leather cover. She would not open it. Not now. But soon...

She glanced up at Zsadist. “Will you...will you take me back to my house?”

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“I’m frightened to go there, but I probably should.”

“You just tell me when.”

Gathering her courage, suddenly interested in getting one of the big “firsts” out of the way, she said, “When light falls this evening. I want to go then.”

“Okay, we will.” He pointed at the tray. “Now eat.”

Ignoring the food, she watched him go into the closet and disarm. He was careful with his weapons, checking them thoroughly, and she wondered where he had been...what he had done. Though his hands were clean, there was black blood on his forearms.

He had killed tonight.

She supposed she should feel some kind of triumph that a *lesser* had been taken down. But as Zsadist walked over to the bathroom with a pair of sweats draped over his arm, she was more interested in his well-being.

And also...his body. He moved like an animal in the best sense of the word, all latent power and sleek strides. The sex that had stirred in her the very first time she’d seen him rocked her again. She wanted him.

As the bathroom door shut and the shower started to run, she rubbed her eyes and decided she was out of her mind. The male pulled away at the threat

of her hand on his arm. Did she actually think he'd want to lay with her?

Disgusted with herself, she looked over at the food. It was some kind of herbed chicken with roasted potatoes and squash. There was a glass of water and a glass of white wine, as well as two bright green Granny Smith apples and a piece of carrot cake. She picked up a fork and pushed the chicken around. She wanted to eat what was on the plate only because he'd been thoughtful enough to bring it to her.

When Zsadist came out of the bathroom with only the nylon sweats on, she froze and couldn't stop staring. His nipple rings caught the candlelight, and so did the hard muscles of his stomach and arms. Along with the star-shaped mark of the Brotherhood, his bare chest had a fresh, livid scratch across it and a bruise.

"Are you injured?"

He came over and measured the plate. "You haven't eaten much."

She didn't reply as her eyes got caught on the curving hip bones that rose above the low waistband of the sweats. God...just a little lower and she would be able to see everything.

Abruptly she remembered him scrubbing himself raw because he thought he was filthy. She swallowed, wondering what had been done to him, to his sex. Wanting him as she did seemed...inappropriate. Invasive. Not that it changed the way she felt.

"I'm not terribly hungry," she murmured.

He pushed the tray closer to her. "Eat anyway."

When she started in on the chicken again, he took the two apples and walked across the room. He bit into one and sank down to the floor, sitting cross-legged with his eyes lowered. One arm settled across his stomach as he chewed.

"Did you have dinner downstairs?" she asked.

He shook his head and took another hunk out of the apple, the crack ricocheting around the room.

"Is that all you'll have?" When he shrugged, she muttered, "And you're telling me to eat?"

"Yeah, I am. So why don't you get back to work there, female."

"You don't like chicken?"

"I don't like food." His eyes never wavered from the floor, but his voice got pushier. "Now eat."

"Why don't you like food?"

“Can’t trust it,” he said tightly. “Unless you make it yourself, or can see it whole, you don’t know what’s in it.”

“Why do you think someone would tamper—”

“Have I mentioned how much I don’t like talking?”

“Will you sleep beside me tonight?” She blurted out the request, figuring she’d better get her answer before he shut up completely.

His brows flickered. “You really want that?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then, yeah. I will.”

As he polished off the two apples and she cleaned the plate, the silence wasn’t exactly easy, but it didn’t crackle, either. After she was finished with the carrot cake, she went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth. By the time she came back, he was working the last apple core with his fangs, picking off the little bits of flesh that were left.

She couldn’t imagine how he fought on such a diet. Surely he must eat more.

And she felt like she should say something, but instead slid into bed and curled up, waiting for him. As minutes ticked by, and all he did was surgically trim that apple, she couldn’t stand the tension.

Enough, she thought. She really should go somewhere else in the house. She was using him as a crutch, and that wasn’t fair.

She reached out to throw the covers back just as he uncoiled from the floor. As he walked to the bed, she froze. He dropped the apple cores next to her plate, then picked up the napkin she had used to wipe her own mouth. After rubbing his hands with the thing, he took the tray and carried it out of the room, setting it right outside the door.

When he came back he went to the other side of the bed, and the mattress dipped down as he stretched out on top of the duvet. Crossing his arms over his chest and his feet at the ankles, he shut his eyes.

One by one the candles went out around the room. When there was just a single wick that burned, he said, “I’ll leave that going so you can see.”

She looked at him. “Zsadist?”

“Yeah?”

“When I was...” She cleared her throat. “When I was in that hole in the ground, I thought of you. I wanted you to come for me. I knew you could get me out.”

His brows went down even though his lids were lowered. “I thought of

you, too.”

“You did?” His chin moved up and down, and still she said, “Really?”

“Yeah. Some days...you were all I could think of.”

Bella felt her eyes stretch wide. She rolled toward him and propped her head up on one arm.

“Seriously?” When he didn’t reply, she had to press. “Why?”

His big chest expanded and he blew out his breath. “Wanted to get you back. That’s all.”

Oh...so he’d just been doing his job.

Bella dropped her arm and turned away from him. “Well...thank you for coming for me.”

In the silence she watched the candle burn on the nightstand. The tear-shaped flame undulated, so lovely, so graceful....

Zsadist’s voice was quiet. “I hated the idea that you were frightened and alone. That someone had hurt you. I couldn’t...let it go.”

Bella stopped breathing and glanced over her shoulder.

“I didn’t sleep for those six weeks,” he murmured. “All I could see when I shut my eyes was you, calling out for help.”

God, even though his face was harsh, his voice was so soft and beautiful, like the candle flame.

His head swiveled toward her and his eyes opened. His black stare was full of emotion. “I didn’t know how you could have survived that long. I was so sure you were dead. But then we found the place and I lifted you out of that hole. When I saw what he’d done to you...”

Bella slowly turned over, not wanting to startle him into a retreat. “I don’t remember any of it.”

“Good, that’s good.”

“Someday...I’m going to need to know. Will you tell me?”

He closed his eyes. “If you really have to have the details.”

They were silent for a time, and then he shifted toward her, rolling onto his side. “I hate to ask you this, but what did he look like? Can you remember anything specific about him?”

Plenty, she thought. Too much.

“He, ah, he colored his hair brown.”

“What?”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure he did. Every week or so he’d go into the bathroom and I could smell the chemicals. And he’d get rooty in between. A

little line of white right at his scalp.”

“But I thought paling out was good because it meant they’d been in the Society longer.”

“I don’t know. I think he had...or has...a position of power. From what I could hear from the hole, the other *lessers* were careful around him. And they called him ‘O.’”

“Anything else?”

She shivered, going back into the nightmare. “He loved me.”

A growl vibrated out of Zsadist, low and nasty. She liked the sound of it. It made her feel protected. Gave her the strength to keep talking.

“The *lesser*, he said he...loved me, and he did. He was obsessed with me.” She released a breath slowly, trying to calm her fluttering heart. “In the beginning I was terrified of him, but after a while I used his feelings against him. I wanted to hurt him.”

“Did you?”

“Sometimes, yes. I made him...cry.”

Zsadist’s expression took on the oddest cast. As if he were...envious. “What did that feel like?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Because it was good?”

“I don’t want you to think I’m cruel.”

“Cruelty is different from retaliation.”

In a warrior’s world, she imagined that was true. “I’m not sure I agree.”

His black eyes narrowed. “There are those who would *ahvenge* you. You know that, right?”

She thought about him going out into the night to hunt the *lesser* and couldn’t bear the idea that he would get hurt. Then she pictured her brother, all angry and prideful, ready to tear into the slayer, too.

“No...I don’t want you doing that. You or Rehvenge or anyone else.”

A draft shot through the room, like a window had been thrown open. She looked around and realized the frigid wave had come out of Zsadist’s body.

“Do you have a mate?” he asked abruptly.

“Why do you...Oh, no, Rehvenge is my brother. Not my mate.”

Those big shoulders eased up. But then he frowned. “Have you ever?”

“Had a mate? For a little while I did. But things didn’t work out.”

“Why?”

“Because of my brother.” She paused. “Actually, that’s not true. But

when the male couldn't stand up to Rehv, I lost a lot of respect for him. And then...then the guy let the details of our relationship out to the *glymera* and things got...complicated."

Actually, they got awful. The male's reputation had stayed intact, of course, whereas hers got shredded to pieces. Maybe that was why she was so attracted to Zsadist. He didn't care what anyone thought of him. There was no subterfuge, no courtly manners to hide his thoughts and instincts. He was honest, and that candor, even if it just served to reveal his anger, made it safe to trust him.

"Were you two..." His voice trailed off.

"Were we what?"

"Lovers?" In a harsh rush, Zsadist cursed. "Never mind, that's none of my—"

"Ah, yes, we were. Rehv found out, and that was when the problems started. You know how the aristocracy is. A female who lays with someone she's not mated to? You'd swear she was tainted for life. I mean, I've always wished I'd been born a civilian. But you can't opt out of your bloodline, can you?"

"Did you love the male?"

"I thought so. But...no." She thought of the skull next to Zsadist's pallet. "Have you ever been in love?"

The corner of his mouth lifted into a snarl. "What the fuck do you think?"

As she recoiled, he closed his eyes. "Sorry. I mean, no. That would be no."

So why did he keep that skull? Whose was it? She was about to ask when he cut the question off. "Your brother thinks he's going after that *lesser*?"

"Undoubtedly. Rehvenge is...Well, he's been head of my household since my father died when I was very young, and Rehv is very aggressive. Extremely so."

"Well, you tell him to sit tight. I'm going to *ahvenge* you."

Her eyes shot to Zsadist's. "No."

"Yes."

"But I don't want you to." She couldn't live with herself if he got killed in the process.

"And I can't stop myself." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Christ...I can't breathe for knowing that bastard is out there. He has to die."

Fear and gratitude and something altogether warm squeezed her chest. On

impulse, she leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

He jerked back with a hiss, eyes wider than if she'd slapped him.

Oh, hell. Why had she done that? "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I—"

"No, it's cool. We're cool." He rolled onto his back and lifted his hand to his mouth. His fingers rubbed back and forth across his lips, like he was wiping her off him.

When she sighed good and hard, he said, "What's the matter?"

"Am I so distasteful?"

He dropped his arm. "No."

What a lie. "Maybe I'll get you a washcloth, how about that?"

When she would have shot out of bed, his hand clamped on her arm.
"That was my first kiss, okay? I just didn't expect it."

Bella stopped breathing. How was that possible?

"Oh, for chrissakes, don't look at me like that." He let go and went back to staring at the ceiling.

His first kiss... "Zsadist?"

"What."

"Will you let me do that again?"

There was a long, long pause. She inched over to him, pushing her body through the sheets and blankets.

"I won't touch you anywhere else. Just my lips. On yours."

Turn your head, she willed him. *Turn your head and look at me.*

And then he did.

She didn't wait for an engraved invitation or for him to change his mind. She pressed her lips to his lightly, then hovered over his mouth. When he stayed where he was, she dipped down again and this time stroked at him. His breath sucked in.

"Zsadist?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Relax your mouth for me."

Careful not to crowd him, she propped herself up on her forearms and got in close again. His lips were shockingly soft except for where the upper one was scarred. To make sure he knew the imperfection didn't matter to her, she deliberately attended to that place, returning there again and again.

And then it happened: He kissed her back. It was just the slightest movement of his mouth, but she felt it all the way to her core. When he did it again, she praised him by moaning a little and letting him take the lead.

God, he was so tentative, feeling his way across her mouth with the most gentle of brushings. He kissed her sweetly and with care, tasting like apples and male spice. And the contact between them, though light and slow, was enough to have her aching.

When she sneaked her tongue out and licked him, he pulled away sharply. "I don't know what I'm doing here."

"Yes, you do." She leaned in to keep the connection. "You really do."

"But—"

She quieted him with her mouth, and it wasn't long before he was back in the game. This time when her tongue stroked over him he opened his lips, and his own met hers, slick and warm. A slow twirl started...and then he was in her mouth, pushing against her, seeking.

She felt the sex stir in him, the heat and urgency in his big body growing. She was hungry for him to reach out and drag her against him. When he didn't, she eased back and looked at him. His cheeks were flaming, his eyes glittering. He was hungry for her, but he made no move to get closer. And he wouldn't, either.

"I want to touch you," she said.

But as she brought her hand up, he stiffened and gripped her wrist hard. Fear hovered just below the surface of him; she could sense it weaving through his body, making him tense. She waited for him to make up his mind, not about to push him on this.

His hold slowly loosened. "Just...go slow."

"I promise."

She started with his arm, running her fingertips up and down his smooth, hairless skin. His eyes tracked the movement with a suspicion she took no offense at, and his muscles twitched, flickering as she passed. She stroked him slowly, letting him get used to her touch, and when she was sure he was comfortable, she leaned down and put her lips on his biceps. His shoulder. His collarbone. The top of his pectoral.

She was heading for his pierced nipple.

When she was close to the silver ring with the little ball, she glanced up at him. His eyes were wide, so wide the whites showed all around his black irises.

"I want to kiss you here," she said. "All right?"

He nodded and licked his lips.

The moment her mouth made contact, his body jerked like someone had

yanked all of his arms and legs at once. She didn't stop. She sucked the piercing in and twirled her tongue around it.

Zsadist moaned, the low sound a great rumble in his chest; then he inhaled with a hiss. His head pitched back into the pillow, but he kept it at an angle so he could keep watching her.

When she flicked the silver hoop, then tugged on it a little, he arched off the bed, one leg bending up, his heel digging into the mattress. She tickled his nipple again and then again until he balled the comforter in his fists.

"Oh...fuck, Bella..." He was breathing in a hard, raw rhythm, heat radiating out of him. "What are you doing to me?"

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Either that or do it harder."

"How about a little more?"

"Yeah...a little more."

She worked him with her mouth, playing with the ring, driving him until his hips started to swivel.

When she looked down his body, she lost her rhythm. His erection was massive as it pushed up against the thin nylon of his warm-ups, and she saw all of it: the blunt head with its graceful ridge, the thick shaft, the twin weights below.

Good Lord. He was...huge.

She went utterly wet between her thighs and shifted her gaze to meet his. His eyelids were still peeled back and his mouth open as awe and shock and hunger warred in his face.

She reached up and pushed her thumb between his lips. "Suck me."

He latched on with a great pull, watching her as she kept going. A frenzy was taking hold of him; she could sense it. The lust was building in him, turning him into a powder keg, and holy hell, she wanted him. She wanted him to explode all over her. Inside of her.

She released his nipple, pulled her thumb out of his mouth, and reared up to thrust her tongue between his lips. At the invasion he groaned wildly, his great body bucking against the hold he kept on the covers.

She wanted him to let go and touch her, but she couldn't wait. This first time, she would have to take control. She pushed the covers away, slid her upper body onto his chest, and threw her leg over his hips.

The instant her weight came on top of him, he went stiff and stopped kissing her back.

“Zsadist?”

He threw her off of him with so much force, she bounced on the mattress.

Zsadist bolted from the bed, panting and whacked-out, his body trapped between the past and the present, stretched thin between the two.

Part of him wanted more of what Bella was doing to him. Hell, he was dying to keep exploring his first taste of arousal. The sensations were incredible. A revelation. The only thing good he'd felt in...forever.

Dear Virgin in the Fade, no wonder males killed to protect their mates.

Except he couldn't bear having a female on top of him, even if it was Bella, and the wild panic pounding through him right now was dangerous. What if he lashed out at her? For God's sake, he'd already thrown her across the damn bed.

He glanced at her. She looked so achingly beautiful in the tangled sheets and scattered pillows. But he was terrified of her, and because of that, terrified *for* her. The touching and the kissing, however much he'd been into them in the beginning, were too much of a trigger for him. And he couldn't put himself in a position where he got this upset when he was around her.

“We're not going there again,” he said. “That shit's not happening.”

“You liked it.” Her voice was soft but strong. “I could feel your blood race under my hands.”

“No arguments.”

“Your body's hard for me.”

“Do you want to get hurt?” As she tightened her hold on a pillow, he pressed harder. “Because, straight up, sex and I only go one way, and it's nothing you want to be a part of.”

“I liked the way you kissed me. I want to lay with you. Make love with you.”

“Make love? *Make love?*” He spread his arms out. “Bella...all I've got to offer you is fucking. You won't like it, and frankly I won't like doing it to you. You're so much better than that.”

“I felt your lips on mine. They were gentle—”

“Oh, *please*—”

“Shut up and let me finish!”

Z's mouth dropped open, sure as if she'd booted him in the ass. No one ever took that tone of voice with him. The anomaly alone would have gotten

his attention, but the fact that it was her stunned him out.

Bella pushed her hair over her shoulder. “If you don’t want to be with me, fine. Just say so. But don’t hide behind wanting to protect me. You think I don’t know the sex would be rough with you?”

“Is that why you want it?” he asked in a dead voice. “You think you only deserve to be hurt now, after the *lesser*?”

She frowned. “Not at all. But if that’s the only way I can have you, then that’s how I’ll take you.”

He ran his hand back and forth over his skull trim, hoping the friction might get his brain to work.

“I think you’re confused.” He looked down at the floor. “You have no idea what you’re saying right now.”

“You arrogant bastard,” she snapped.

Z’s head shot up. Well, that was slap in the ass number two.... “Excuse me?”

“Do us both a favor and don’t try to think for me, okay? Because you’re going to get it wrong every damn time.” With that, she marched into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Zsadist blinked a couple of times. *What the hell just happened?*

He looked around the room as if the furniture or maybe the drapes could help him out. Then his acute hearing tuned in to a quiet sound. She was... crying.

With a curse he went over to the bathroom. He didn’t knock, just turned the knob and went inside. She was standing next to the shower, arms crossed, tears pooling in her sapphire eyes.

Oh...God. What was a male supposed to do in this situation?

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “If I...uh, hurt your feelings or something.”

She glared at him. “I’m not hurt. I’m pissed off and sexually frustrated.”

His head snapped back on his spine. *Well...then. Okaaaaay.*

Man, he was going to need a neck brace after this conversation.

“I’ll say it again, Zsadist. If you’re not into laying with me, that’s okay, but do not try to tell me I don’t know what I want.”

Z planted his palms on his hip bones and looked down at the marble tile. *Don’t say a thing, asshole. Just keep your mouth—*

“It’s not that,” he blurted. As the words floated out into the air, he cursed himself. Talking was bad. Talking was a real piss-poor idea....

“It’s not what? You mean you want me?”

He thought of the *it* that was still trying to claw a way out of his pants. She had eyes. She could see the damn thing. “You know I do.”

“So if I’m willing to take it...hard...” She paused, and he had a feeling she was blushing. “Then why can’t we be together?”

His breath shortened until his lungs burned and his heart pounded. He felt as if he were looking over the edge of a ravine. Good Lord, he wasn’t actually going to tell her? Was he?

His stomach rolled as the words came out. “She was always on top. The Mistress. When she...came to me, she was always on top. You, uh, you rolled over onto my chest and...yeah, that doesn’t work for me.”

He rubbed his face, as much to try to hide from her as to relieve the headache he suddenly had.

He heard breath being exhaled. Realized it was hers.

“Zsadist, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know—”

“Yeah...fuck...maybe you can forget I said that.” God, he needed to get away from her before that mouth of his got flapping again. “Look, I’m going to—”

“What did she do to you?” Bella’s voice was thin as a hair.

He shot her a hard look. *Oh, not likely*, he thought.

She took a step toward him. “Zsadist, did she...have you against your will?”

He turned away. “I’m going to the gym. I’ll see you later.”

“Wait—”

“*Later*, Bella. I can’t...do this.”

On his way out, he grabbed his Nikes and his MP3 player.

A good, long run was just what he needed right now. A long...run. So what if it got him exactly nowhere. At least he could have the sweaty illusion he was getting away from himself.

Chapter Twenty-one

Phury looked across the mansion's pool table with disgust while Butch measured his shot. Something was off with the human, but as the cop sank three balls with one cue stroke, it sure as hell wasn't his game.

"Jesus, Butch. Four wins in a row. Remind me why I bother playing with you?"

"Because hope springs eternal." Butch tossed back the tail end of his Scotch. "You want another game?"

"Why not. My odds can't get worse."

"You rack while I get a refill."

As Phury collected the balls from the pockets, he realized what the problem was. Every time he turned away, Butch got to staring at him.

"You have something on your mind, cop?"

The male poured himself a couple of fingers of Lagavulin, then took a long drink from his glass. "Not particularly."

"Liar. You've been giving me the hairy eyeball since we got back from ZeroSum. Why don't you get real and spill it."

Butch's hazel eyes met his glare head-on. "You gay, my man?"

Phury dropped the eight ball and dimly heard it bouncing on the marble floor. "What? Why would you—"

"I heard you were getting close with the Reverend." As Phury cursed, Butch picked up the black ball and sent it rolling back over the green felt. "Look, I'm cool if you are. I honestly don't give a rat's ass who you're into. But I would like to know."

Oh, this is just great, Phury thought. Not only was he pining after the female who wanted his twin; now he was supposedly dating a frickin'

sympath.

That female who'd walked in on him and the Reverend clearly had a big mouth and...*Christ*. Butch must have already told Vishous. The two were like an old mated couple, no secrets between them. And V would squeal to Rhage. And once Rhage knew, you might as well have popped the news flash on the Reuters wire.

"Phury?"

"No, I'm not gay."

"Don't feel like you need to hide it or anything."

"I wouldn't. I'm just not."

"You bi, then?"

"Butch, drop it. If any of the Brothers are down with the kinky shit, it's your roommate." At the cop's bug-eyed look, he muttered, "Come on, you have to know about V by now. You live with him."

"Obviously not—Oh, hey, Bella."

Phury wheeled around. Bella was standing on the threshold of the room, dressed in that black satin robe. He could not look away from her. The glow of health was back in her lovely face, the bruises gone, her beauty revealed. She was...astonishing.

"Hello," she said. "Phury, do you think I could talk with you for a moment? After you're finished?"

"Butch, you mind if we take a breather?"

"That's cool. See you later, Bella."

As the cop left, Phury put his pool cue away with unnecessary precision, sliding the slick, blond wood into the wall rack. "You look well. How do you feel?"

"Better. Much better."

Because she'd fed from Zsadist.

"So...what's going on?" he asked, trying not to imagine her at his twin's vein.

Without replying, she went over to the French doors, the robe trailing across the marble floor behind her like a shadow. As she walked, the ends of her hair brushed against the small of her back and moved with the sway of her hips. Hunger hit him hard, and he prayed she didn't catch the scent.

"Oh, Phury, look at the moon, it's almost full." Her hand went to the glass and lingered on the pane. "I wish I could..."

"You want to go outside now? I could get you a coat."

She smiled at him over her shoulder. "I have no shoes."

"I'll bring you those, too. Stay here."

In no time he came back with a pair of fur-lined boots and a Victorian cape that Fritz, homing pigeon that he was, had pulled out of some closet.

"You work fast," Bella said as he draped the bloodred velvet around her shoulders.

He knelt in front of her. "Let me get these on you."

She lifted one knee, and as he slid the boot on her foot, he tried not to notice how soft the skin of her ankle was. Or how much her scent tantalized him. Or how he could just part the robe out of the way and...

"Now the other one," he said hoarsely.

When he had her booted up he opened the door, and they walked out together, crunching through the snow that covered the terrace. At the lawn's edge she tugged the cape in tight around her and looked up. Her breath left her mouth in puffs of white, and the wind teased the red velvet around her body, as if stroking the cloth.

"Dawn is not far," she said.

"Coming soon."

He wondered what she wanted to talk about, but then her face grew serious and he knew why she'd come. Zsadist. Of course.

"I want to ask you about him," she murmured. "Your twin."

"What do you want to know?"

"How did he become a slave?"

Oh, God... He didn't want to talk about the past.

"Phury? Will you tell me? I would ask him, but..."

Ah, hell. There was no good reason not to answer her. "A nursemaid took him. She sneaked him out of the household when he was seven months old. We couldn't find them anywhere, and as far as I was able to find out, she died two years later. He was sold into slavery at that point by whoever found him."

"That must have been so hard on your whole family."

"The worst. A death with no body to bury."

"And when...when he was a blood slave..." She took a deep breath. "Do you know what happened to him?"

Phury rubbed the back of his neck. As he hesitated, she said, "I'm not talking about the scars or the forced feedings. I want to know about...what else might have been done to him."

“Look, Bella—”

“I need to know.”

“Why?” Even though he knew the answer. She wanted to lay with Z, had probably already tried to. That was the *why* of it.

“I just have to know.”

“You should ask him.”

“He won’t tell me, you know he won’t.” She put her hand on his forearm. “Please. Help me understand him.”

Phury stayed quiet, telling himself it was because he was respecting Z’s privacy, and that was mostly true. Only the smallest part of him didn’t want to help land Z in her bed.

Bella squeezed his arm. “He said he was tied down. And that he can’t stand to have a female on top when—” She stopped. “What was done to him?”

Holy shit. Zsadist had talked about his captivity with her?

Phury cursed softly. “He was used for more than just his vein. But that’s all I’m going to say.”

“Oh, God.” Her body sagged. “I just needed to hear it from someone. I needed to know for sure.”

As a cold gust of wind came up, he took a deep breath and still felt suffocated. “You should go in before you get cold.”

She nodded and started for the house. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I’m going to have a smoke first. Go on now.”

He didn’t watch her head into the house, but heard the door click shut.

Putting his hands in his pockets he looked out over the rolling white lawn. Then he closed his eyes and saw the past.

As soon as Phury went through his transition, he searched to find his twin, canvassing the Old Country, seeking out households that were wealthy enough to have servants. Over time he heard a repeated rumor that there was a warrior-sized male being kept by a female high up within the glymera. But he wasn’t able to pin it down.

Which made sense. Back then, in the early nineteenth century, the species was still relatively cohesive, and the old rules and social customs remained strong. If anyone had been found harboring a warrior as a blood slave, they would have faced death under the law. That was why he had to be discreet in

his quest. If he'd demanded a congregation of the aristocracy and put out a call for his twin's return, or if he was caught trying to find Zsadist, he might as well put a dagger in the male's chest: Killing Zsadist and disposing of the body would be the captor's best and only defense.

By the late 1800s, he'd almost given up hope. His parents had both died of natural causes by then. Vampire society had fragmented in the Old Country, and the first of the migrations to America had begun. He was rootless, roaming Europe, chasing after whispers and innuendoes...when suddenly he found what he'd been looking for.

He was on English soil the night it happened. He'd gone to a gathering of his kind at a castle on the cliffs of Dover. Standing in a darkened corner of the ballroom, he overheard two males speaking of the hostess. They said she had an incredibly endowed blood slave and that she liked to be watched and sometimes even shared him.

Phury had courted the female starting that very night.

He wasn't worried that his face would give him away, even though he and Zsadist were identical twins. First of all, his clothes were those of a wealthy male, and no one would suspect someone of his station to be coming after a slave that had been rightfully purchased on the market as a small child. And second, he was always careful to keep disguised. He grew a short beard to dull his features, and he hid his eyes behind dark spectacles, which he explained away by claiming his vision was poor.

Her name had been Catronia. An aristocrat of wealth, she was mated to a half-breed merchant who conducted business in the human world. Evidently she was alone a lot, as her hellren traveled extensively, but the rumor was she'd had the blood slave before her mating.

Phury asked to be welcomed into her household, and as he was well-read and attentive, she permitted him to a room despite the fact that he was vague about his lineage. Courts were full of posers, and she was attracted to him, so she was obviously willing to overlook certain formalities. But she was cautious, too. Weeks passed, and though she spent a lot of time with him, she never took him to the slave she was said to possess.

Every chance he had he searched the grounds and the buildings, hoping to find his twin in a hidden cell of some kind. The problem was, there were eyes everywhere, and Catronia kept him busy. Whenever her hellren departed, which was often, she would come to Phury's quarters, and the more he evaded her hands, the more she wanted him.

Time...time was all it took. Time and her inability to resist showing off her prize, her toy, her slave. One evening right before dawn, she asked him to her bedroom for the first time. The secret entrance he had been searching for had been located in her antechamber, in the back of her wardrobe. Together they went down a vast, steep staircase.

Phury could still remember the thick oak door at the bottom swinging open, and the sight of the male chained naked, legs spread, on a tapestry-covered bedding platform.

Zsadist had been staring at the ceiling, his hair so long it fell onto the stone floor. He was clean shaven and oiled, as if he'd been prepared for her sport, and he smelled of expensive spices. The female went right to him and caressed him lovingly, those rapacious brown eyes of hers stamping ownership all over his body.

Phury's hand had gone for the dagger at his side before he'd known what he was doing. As if sensing the motion, Zsadist's head had slowly turned, and his dead black eyes had crossed the distance between them. There was no flash of recognition. Just seething hatred.

Shock and sorrow had rolled through Phury, but he'd kept focused, looking for the way out. There was another door across the cell, but that one had no knob or handle, just a little slot about five feet from the floor. He'd thought maybe he could break thr—

Catronia began to touch his brother intimately. She had some kind of salve on her hands, and as she stroked his twin's manhood, she was saying hateful things about what the size of him would be like. Phury bared his fangs at her and lifted the dagger.

The door across the way suddenly swung open. On the other side was an effete court male wearing an ermine-trimmed robe. He was frantic as he announced that Catronia's hellren had returned unexpectedly and was searching for her. Rumors about her and Phury had evidently reached the male's ears.

Phury crouched down, prepared to kill the female and her court-man. But the sound of pounding feet, many of them, echoed into the room.

The hellren came pounding down the secret stairs, he and his private guard spilling into the room. The male had seemed flabbergasted, was clearly unaware that she had a blood slave. Catronia started speaking, but he slapped her so hard she ricocheted off the stone walls.

Chaos exploded. The private guard went after Phury. The hellren went

after Zsadist with a knife.

Killing the court's soldiers was a long and bloody process, and by the time Phury could get free of the hand-to-hand, there was no sign of Zsadist, just a bloody trail out of the cell.

Phury took off down the corridor, running through the underground of the castle, following the red streaks. When he emerged from the keep it was nearly dawn, so he knew he had to find Zsadist with alacrity. As he paused to get his bearings, he heard a rhythmic noise snapping through the air.

A whipping.

Over to the right, Zsadist had been strung up from a tree on the cliff, and against the vast backdrop of the sea, he was being whipped raw.

Phury attacked the three guards who were lashing his twin. Though the males fought hard, he was in a wild fury. He slaughtered them and then released Zsadist, only to see more guards coming out of the bulkhead in a block of five.

With the sun about to rise, and the glow burning his skin, Phury knew there was no time left. He slung Zsadist over his shoulders, grabbed one of the pistols the guards had been armed with, and shoved the weapon into his belt. Then he eyed the cliff and the ocean below. Not the best route to freedom, but far better than trying to fight his way toward the castle. He started running, hoping to launch them far enough out so that they fell into the ocean.

A throwing dagger caught him in the thigh, and he stumbled.

There was no catching his balance or stopping his momentum. He and Zsadist tumbled over the lip of the cliff and skidded down the rock face until Phury's boot got caught in a crevice. As his body was yanked to a halt, he scrambled to hold on to Zsadist, knowing damn well that the male was out cold and going to drown if he fell into the water unattended.

Zsadist's blood-slick skin slid out of Phury's grip, slipped free—

He caught his twin's wrist at the last second and squeezed hard. There was a massive jerk as the male's heavy body was stopped, and pain ricocheted up Phury's leg. His vision faded. Came back. Faded again. He could feel Zsadist's body dangling in midair, a perilous sway that challenged his hold unmercifully.

The guards peered over the edge and then measured the gathering light, shielding their eyes. They laughed, sheathed their weapons, and left him and Zsadist for dead.

As the sun gathered on the horizon, Phury's strength quickly drained, and he knew he couldn't hold Zsadist for long. The light was awful, burning, adding to the agony he already felt. And no matter how hard he pulled his leg, his ankle remained trapped.

He fumbled for the pistol, pulling it free of his waistband. With a deep breath, he aimed the muzzle at his leg.

He shot himself below the knee. Twice. The pain was astounding, a fireball in his body, and he dropped the gun. Gritting his teeth, he'd planted his free foot into the cliff and pushed with everything he had in him. He screamed as his leg splintered and came apart.

And then there was the yawning void of empty air.

The ocean had been cold, but it had shocked him into consciousness and sealed up his wound, keeping him from bleeding out. Dizzy, nauseous, desperate, he'd forced his head above the choppy waves, his death grip on Zsadist the only constant. Dragging his twin into his arms, keeping the male's head above water, Phury swam to shore.

Blessedly, there was a cave entrance not far from where they'd taken the plunge, and he used his last reserve of strength to get the two of them toward the dark mouth. After dragging himself and Zsadist from the water, he was all but blind as he went as far into the cave as he could. A curve in the natural architecture was what saved them, giving them the darkness they needed.

In the back, away from the sun, he sheltered them behind large rocks. Gathering Zsadist into his arms to conserve their body heat, he stared ahead into the blackness, utterly lost.

Phury rubbed his eyes. God, the image of Zsadist chained on that bedding platform...

Ever since the rescue he'd had a repeating nightmare, one that never failed to be a fresh horror each time his subconscious coughed it up. The dream was always the same: Him racing down those hidden stairs and throwing open the door. Zsadist tied down. Catronia in the corner, laughing. As soon as Phury was in the cell, Z would turn his head and his black, lifeless eyes would look up from out of an unscarred face. In a hard voice he would say, "Leave me here. I want to stay...here."

That was Phury's cue to wake up in a cold sweat.

"What's doing, my man?"

Butch's voice was jarring, but welcome. Phury scrubbed his face, then glanced over his shoulder. "Just enjoying the view."

“Lemme give you a tip. That’s what you do on a tropical beach, not standing out in this kind of cold. Look, come eat with us, okay? Rhage wants pancakes, so Mary’s backed a dump truck full of Bisquick into the kitchen. Fritz is about to levitate, he’s so worried about not being able to help.”

“Yeah. Good deal.” As they headed inside, Phury said, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

Phury paused by the pool table and picked up the eight ball. “When you worked in homicide, you saw a lot of fucked-up people, right? People who’d lost their husbands or their wives...sons or daughters.” When Butch nodded, he said, “Did you ever find out what happened to them? I mean, the ones who were left behind. Do you know if they ever got over the shit?”

Butch rubbed his thumb over his eyebrow. “I don’t know.”

“Yeah, I guess you don’t really follow up—”

“But I can tell you I never did.”

“You mean the sight of those bodies you worked on stuck with you?”

The human shook his head. “You forgot sisters. Brothers and sisters.”

“What?”

“People lose husbands, wives, sons, daughters...and sisters and brothers. I lost a sister when I was twelve. Two boys took her behind the baseball diamond at school and used her and beat her until they killed her. I never got over it.”

“Jesus—” Phury stopped, realizing they were not alone.

Zsadist stood bare-chested in the doorway to the room. He was flushed with sweat from his head to his Nikes, like he’d run for miles down in the gym.

As Phury stared at his twin, he felt a familiar sinking sensation. It was always like that, as if Z were some kind of low-pressure zone.

Zsadist’s voice was hard. “I want both of you to come with me at nightfall.”

“Where to?” Butch asked.

“Bella wants to go to her house, and I’m not taking her there without backup. I need a car in case she wants to take some of her shit with her when she leaves, and I want someone to case the place before we land there. The bennie is that there’s an escape tunnel out from the basement if things get rough. I checked through it last night when I went to pick up a few things for her.”

“I’m good to go,” Butch said.

Zsadist’s eyes shifted across the room. “You, too, Phury?”

After a moment, Phury nodded. “Yeah. Me, too.”

Chapter Twenty-two

That night, as the moon lifted higher in the sky, O eased up from the ground with a groan. He'd been waiting on the edge of the meadow since the sun went down four hours ago, hoping that someone would show at the farmhouse...only there was nothing. And there hadn't been for the past two days. Well, he thought he'd seen something before dawn this past morning, some kind of shadow moving around inside the place, but whatever it was, he'd caught it just once and then not again.

He wished like hell he could use all the Society's resources to go after his wife. If he sent out every *lesser* he had...Except he might as well take a gun to his head. Someone would blab to the Omega that focus had been diverted to one inconsequential female. And then there would be big problems.

He checked his watch and cursed. Speaking of the Omega...

O had a command performance with the master tonight and no choice but to keep the damn date. Staying viable as a slayer was the only way to get his woman back, and he wasn't going to risk getting poofed out of existence because he'd spaced a meeting.

He took out his phone and called in three Betas to watch the farmhouse. As the spot was a known place of congregation for vampires, at least he had an excuse to assign the detail.

Twenty minutes later the slayers came through the woods, the sound of their jogging boots muffled by the snow. The trio of big-boned men were just out of their initiations, so their hair was still dark and their skin ruddy from the cold. They were clearly thrilled to be used and ready to fight, but O told them they were to watch and monitor only. If anyone showed up, they weren't to attack until whoever it was tried to leave, and then any vampires

were to be taken alive, male or female. No exceptions. The way O figured it, if he were his woman's family, he'd send feelers out first before letting her dematerialize anywhere near the house. And if she was dead and her relatives were moving her things out, then he wanted her kin captured in working order so he could find her grave.

After making it clear the Betas' heads were on the line, O went through the forest to his truck, which was hidden in a stand of pines. As he came out onto Route 22, he saw that the *lessers* had parked the Explorer they'd come in right on the road less than half a mile from the turnoff to the farmhouse's lane.

He called the idiots and told them to use their fucking heads and get that car good and concealed. Then he drove to the cabin. As he went along, images of his woman flickered through his mind, dimming his eyes to the road in front of him. He saw her at her loveliest, in the shower with wet hair and skin. She was especially pure like that....

But then the visions shifted. He saw her naked on her back, underneath that ugly-ass vampire who'd taken her away. The male was touching her... kissing her...pumping inside of her.... And she liked it. The bitch liked it. Her head was back and she was moaning and coming like a slut and wanting more.

O's hands curled around the steering wheel until his knuckles nearly popped out of his skin. He tried to calm himself, but his anger was a pit bull on a paper chain.

He knew then with absolute clarity that if she wasn't dead already, he was going to kill her when he found her. All he had to do was picture her with the Brother who'd stolen her and his higher reasoning clicked off completely.

And didn't that put O in a bind. Living without her would be horrible, and though going out in a suicidal rush after she died had a lot of appeal, pulling a stunt like that would just land him with the Omega for eternity. *Lessers*, after all, went back to the master if they were extinguished.

But then a thought occurred to him. He imagined his woman many years from now, her skin paled out, her hair blonder, her eyes the color of clouds. A *lesser* just like him. The solution was so perfect, his foot slipped from the accelerator, and the truck coasted to a stop right in the middle of Route 22.

She would be his forever that way.

As midnight neared, Bella put on a pair of her old blue jeans and that thick red sweater she liked so much. Then she went into the bathroom, pulled the two towels down from the mirror, and looked at herself. Her reflection was of the female she had always seen staring back at her: Blue eyes. High cheeks. Biggish lips. Lots of dark brown hair.

She lifted the edge of the sweater and peeked at her stomach. The skin there was flawless, no longer bearing the *lesser*'s name. She smoothed her hand over where the letters had been.

“You ready?” Zsadist asked.

She glanced up into the mirror. He loomed behind her, dressed in black, weapons hanging off his body. His coal eyes were pegged on the skin she exposed.

“The scars have healed,” she said. “In just forty-eight hours.”

“Yeah. And I’m glad.”

“I’m scared to go to my house.”

“Phury and Butch are coming with us. You’ve got plenty of protection.”

“I know....” She lowered the sweater. “It’s just...what if I can’t bear to go inside?”

“Then we try again another night. However long it takes.” He held out her parka.

Shrugging into the thing, she said, “You have better things to do than watch over me.”

“Not right now I don’t. Give me your hand.”

Her fingers trembled as she reached out. She had some vague thought that it was the first time he’d asked her to touch him, and she hoped the contact would lead to an embrace.

But he wasn’t interested in hugging. He put a small gun in her hand without even brushing her skin.

She recoiled in distaste. “No, I—”

“Hold it like—”

“Wait a minute, I don’t—”

“—this.” He positioned the little butt against her palm. “Here’s the safety. On. Off. Got it? On...off. You need to be in tight to kill with this, but it’s loaded with two bullets that will slow a *lesser* down long enough so you can get away. Just point and pull the trigger twice. You don’t need to cock it or anything. And aim for the torso, it’ll be a bigger target.”

“I don’t want this.”

“And I don’t want you to have it. But it’s better than sending you in light.”

She shook her head and closed her eyes. So ugly this business of life sometimes was.

“Bella? Bella, look at me.” When she did, he said, “Keep that in the outside pocket of your coat on the right side. You want it in your business hand if you have to use it.” She opened her mouth and he talked right over her. “You’re going to stay with Butch and Phury. And as long as you’re with them, it is *extremely* unlikely you will need to use that.”

“Where will you be?”

“Around.” As he turned away, she noticed he had a knife at the small of his back—in addition to the two daggers on his chest, and the pair of guns on his hips. She wondered how many other weapons he had on him that she couldn’t see.

He stopped in the doorway, head hanging low. “I’m going to make sure you don’t have to take out that gun, Bella. I promise you. But I can’t have you unarmed.”

She took a deep breath. And slipped the little piece of metal into her coat pocket.

Out in the hall Phury was waiting, leaning against the balcony. He was also dressed for fighting, with guns and those daggers all over him, a deadly calm radiating from his body. When she smiled at him, he nodded and drew on his black leather coat.

Zsadist’s cell phone rang and he flipped it open. “You there, cop? What’s doing?” When he hung up, he nodded. “Good to go.”

The three of them walked down to the foyer and then out into the courtyard. In the cold air both males palmed guns, and then all of them dematerialized.

Bella took form on her front porch, facing the glossy red door with its brass knocker. She could feel Zsadist and Phury behind her, two huge male bodies full of tension. Footsteps sounded and she looked over her shoulder. Butch was coming up onto the porch. His gun was drawn, too.

The idea of taking her time and easing into her house struck her as dangerous and selfish. She unlocked the door with her mind, then walked in.

The place still smelled the same...a combination of the lemon floor wax she used on the wide pine boards and the rosemary candles she liked to burn.

When she heard the door shut and the security alarm get turned off, she

glanced back. Butch and Phury were tight on her heels, but Zsadist was nowhere to be seen.

She knew he hadn't left them. But she wished he were inside with her.

She took a deep breath and looked around her living room. Without any lights on, she only saw familiar shadows and shapes, more the pattern of the furniture and the walls than anything else.

"Everything seems...God, exactly the same."

Although there was a blank spot over her writing desk. A mirror was gone, a mirror that she and her mother had picked out together in Manhattan about a decade ago. Rehvenge had always liked it. Had he taken the thing? She wasn't sure whether to be touched or offended.

When she reached out to turn a lamp on, Butch stopped her. "No lights. Sorry."

She nodded. Walking deeper into the farmhouse, seeing more of her things, she felt as though she were among friends of long acquaintance whom she hadn't seen in years. It was delightful and sad. A relief most of all. She'd been so sure she would get upset....

She stopped when she got to the dining room. Beyond the wide archway at the far end was the kitchen. Dread coiled in her gut.

Steeling herself, she walked into the other space and halted. As she saw everything so neat and unbroken, she remembered the violence that had taken place.

"Someone's cleaned it up," she whispered.

"Zsadist." Butch stepped by her, gun up at chest level, eyes scanning around.

"He...did all this?" She motioned her hand in a sweep.

"The night after you were taken. He spent hours here. Downstairs is neat as a pin, too."

She tried to imagine Zsadist with a mop and bucket, getting rid of the bloodstains and the glass shards.

Why? she wondered.

Butch shrugged. "He said it was personal."

Had she spoken out loud? "Did he explain...why that was?"

As the human shook his head, she was aware of Phury pointedly taking interest in the outdoors.

"You want to go to your bedroom?" Butch asked.

When she nodded, Phury said, "I'm staying up here."

Down in the basement she found everything in order, arranged...clean. She opened her closet, went through her dresser drawers, wandered around her bathroom. Small things captivated her. A bottle of perfume. A magazine dated from before the abduction. A candle she could remember lighting next to the claw-foot tub.

Lingering, touching, sliding back into place in some profound way, she wanted to spend hours...days. But she could feel Butch's increasing strain.

"I think I've seen enough for tonight," she said, wishing she could stay longer.

Butch went first as they headed back to the first floor. When he came into the kitchen, he looked at Phury. "She's ready to head out."

Phury flipped open his phone. There was a pause. "Z, time to go. Start the car for the cop."

As Butch shut the cellar door, Bella went over to her fish tank and peered in. She wondered if she would ever live at the farmhouse again. And had a feeling she wouldn't.

"Do you want to take anything with you?" Butch asked.

"No, I think—"

A gunshot rang outside, the hollow popping noise muffled.

Butch grabbed her and hauled her back against his body. "Stay quiet," he said in her ear.

"Out front," Phury hissed as he fell into a crouch. He pointed his gun down the hall at the door they'd come in through.

Another gunshot. And another. Getting closer. Coming around the house.

"We're out the tunnel," Butch whispered as he muscled her around and pushed her toward the basement door.

Phury tracked the sounds with his gun muzzle. "I got your back."

Just as Butch's hand fell on the cellar door's knob, time compressed into fractals of seconds, then collapsed into nonsense.

The French door behind them smashed open, the wood frame splintering, the glass shattering.

Zsadist took the whole thing out with his back as he was pushed through the thing by some tremendous force. As he landed on the kitchen floor, his skull jacked back and hit the tile so hard it sounded like another gun had gone off. Then, with a horrible yell, the *lesser* that had thrown him through the door leaped on his chest and the two of them slid across the room, heading right for the cellar stairs.

Zsadist was rock-still under the slayer. Dazed? Dead?

Bella screamed as Butch yanked her out of the way. The only place to go was against the stove, and he shoved her in that direction, shielding her with his body. Only now they were trapped in the kitchen.

Phury and Butch both leveled guns at the tangle of arms and legs on the floor, but the slayer didn't care. The undead lifted his fist and punched Zsadist in the head.

"No!" she roared.

Except, strangely, the hit seemed to wake Zsadist up. Or maybe her voice had done the trick. His black eyes flipped open and an evil expression came over his face. With a quick thrust he clamped his hands under the *lesser*'s armpits and twisted so hard, the slayer's torso contorted into a vicious arch.

In a flash Zsadist was on top, straddling the *lesser*. He grabbed hold of the slayer's right arm and stretched it into a bone-cracking bad angle. Then he jammed his thumb under the undead's chin so far you couldn't see half the finger and bared long fangs that glistened white and deadly. He bit the *lesser* in the neck, right through the esophageal column.

The slayer hollered in pain, thrashing wildly between his legs. And that was only the beginning. Zsadist tore his prey apart. When the thing no longer moved, he paused while panting and pushed his fingers into the *lesser*'s dark hair, splitting a section wide, clearly looking for white roots.

But she could have told him it wasn't David. Assuming she could find her voice.

Zsadist cursed and caught his breath, but stayed crouched over his kill, looking for signs of life. As if he wanted to keep going.

And then he frowned and glanced up, clearly realizing the battle was over and there had been witnesses.

Oh...Jesus. His face was marked with the black blood of the *lesser*, and more of the stain covered his chest and hands.

His black eyes shifted to hers. They were bright. Shiny. Just like the blood he'd spilled to defend her. And he quickly looked away, as if he wanted to hide the satisfaction he'd gotten from the kill.

"The other two are finished," he said, still breathing hard. He pulled out the bottom of his shirt and wiped his face.

Phury headed for the hallway. "Where are they? Front lawn?"

"Try the Omega's front door. I stabbed them both." Zsadist looked at Butch. "Take her home. Now. She's too shocked out to dematerialize. And

Phury, you go with them. I want a call the moment she puts a foot in the foyer, we clear?"

"What about you?" Butch said, even as he was moving her around the dead *lesser*.

Zsadist stood up and unsheathed a dagger. "I'll poof this one and wait for others to come. When these fuckers don't check in, there'll be more."

"We'll be back."

"I don't care what you do as long as you get her home. So quit talking and start driving."

Bella reached out to him, though she wasn't sure why. She was horrified by what he had done and by what he looked like now, all bruised and beaten, his own blood running down his clothes along with the slayers'.

Zsadist slashed a hand through the air, dismissing her. "Get her the hell out of here."

John leaped from the bus, so damned relieved to be home he almost fell all over himself. Man, if the first two days of training were anything to go by, the next couple years were going to be hell.

As he came in the front door, he whistled.

Wellsie's voice drifted out of her study. "Hi! How'd it go today?"

While he took off his coat, he blew two quick whistles, which was kind of an *okay, fine, all righty* type of thing.

"Good. Hey, Havers is coming in an hour."

John headed for her study and paused in the doorway. Sitting at her desk, Wellsie was surrounded by a collection of old books, most of which were laid open. The sight of all those splayed, bound pages reminded him of eager dogs on their backs, waiting for belly attention.

She smiled. "You look tired."

I'm going to crash for a while before Havers comes, he signed.

"You sure you're okay?"

Absolutely. He smiled to give the fib some juice. He hated lying to her, but he didn't want to go into his failures. In another sixteen hours he was going to have to have them out on display again. He needed a break, and no doubt they were exhausted, too, from having had so much airtime.

"I'll wake you up when the doctor gets here."

Thanks.

As he turned away, she said, “I hope you know that no matter what that test says, we’ll deal with it.”

He glanced at her. So she was worried about the results, too.

In a quick rush he went over and hugged her, then headed for his room. He didn’t even put his laundry in the chute, just dropped his bags and lay on the bed. Man, the cumulative effects of eight hours of derision was enough to make him want to sleep for a week.

Except all he could think about was Havers’s visit. God, what if it was all a mistake? What if he wasn’t going to turn into something fantastic and powerful? What if his visions at night were nothing more than an overactive Dracula fixation?

What if he was mostly human?

It would kind of make sense. Even though the training was just beginning, it was clear he wasn’t like the other pretransitions in the class. He flat-out sucked at anything physical and was weaker than the other guys. Maybe practice would help, although he doubted it.

John closed his eyes and hoped for a good dream. A dream that would place him in a big body, a dream that would have him strong and...

Tohr’s voice woke him up. “Havers is here.”

John yawned and stretched and tried to hide from the sympathy on Tohr’s face. That was the other nightmare about training: He had to screw up in front of Tohr all the time.

“How you are you doing, son—I mean, John?”

John shook his head and signed, *I’m fine, but I would rather be son to you.*

Tohr smiled. “Good. That’s how I want it, too. Now come on, let’s rip this Band-Aid off about the tests, okay?”

John followed Tohr to the living room. Havers was sitting on the couch, looking like a professor with his tortoiseshell glasses and herringbone jacket and red bow tie.

“Hello, John,” he said.

John lifted a hand and sat in the wing chair closest to Wellsie.

“So I have the results of your blood test.” Havers took a piece of paper out of the inside of his sport coat. “It took me a little longer, because there was an anomaly I didn’t expect.”

John glanced at Tohr. Then Wellsie. Jesus... What if he was wholly human? What would they do to him? Would he have to leave—

"John, you are a full-bred warrior. There is only the barest trace of nonspecies blood in you at all."

Tohr laughed in a loud burst and clapped his hands together. "Hot damn! That's great!"

John started to grin and kept going until his lips totally disappeared into a smile.

"But there's something else." Havers pushed his glasses up higher on his nose. "You are of the line of Darius of Marklon. So close you could be his son. So close...you must be his son."

A stony silence overtook the room.

John looked back and forth between Tohr and Wellsie. The two were frozen solid. Was this good news? Bad news? Who was Darius? Going by their expressions, maybe the guy was a criminal or something....

Tohr burst up from the sofa and took John into his arms, squeezing so hard the two became one. Gasping for air, feet dangling, John looked over at Wellsie. She had both hands over her mouth, and tears were rolling down her face.

Abruptly Tohr let go and stepped back. He coughed a little, eyes shimmering. "Well...what do you know."

The man cleared his throat a number of times. Rubbed his face. Looked a little woozy.

Who is Darius? John signed as he sat down again.

Tohr smiled slowly. "He was my best friend, my brother in the fighting, my...I can't wait to tell you all about him. And this means you have a sister."

Who?

"Beth, our queen. Wrath's *shellan*—"

"Yes, about her," Havers said, looking at John. "I don't understand the reaction you had to her. Your CAT scans are all fine, so too your EKG, your CBC. I believe you when you say she was what caused the seizures, though I have no idea why that would be. I'd like you to stay away from her for a while so we can see if it happens in another environment, okay?"

John nodded, though he wanted to see the woman again, especially if he was related to her. A sister. How cool...

"Now, about the other issue," Havers said pointedly.

Wellsie leaned forward and put her hand on John's knee. "Havers has something he wants to talk to you about."

John frowned. *What?* he signed slowly.

The doctor smiled, trying to be all reassuring. “I’d like you to see that therapist.”

John went cold. In a panic, he searched Wellsie’s face, then Tohr’s, wondering how much the doctor might have told them about what had happened to him a year ago.

Why would I go? he signed. I’m fine.

Wellsie’s reply was level. “It’s just to help you make the transition to your new world.”

“And your first appointment is tomorrow evening,” Havers said, tipping his head down. He stared into John’s face over the top of the horn-rims, and the message in his eyes was: *Either you go or I’ll tell them the real reason why you have to.*

John was outmaneuvered, and that pissed him off. But he figured it was better to submit to compassionate blackmail than to have Tohr and Wellsie know anything about what had been done to him.

Okay. I’ll do it.

“I’ll take you,” Tohr said quickly. Then he frowned. “I mean...we can find someone to take you—Butch will take you.”

John’s face burned. Yeah, he didn’t want Tohr anywhere near the therapist gig. No way.

The front doorbell rang.

Wellsie grinned. “Oh, good. That’s Sarelle. She’s come over to work on the solstice festival. John, maybe you’d like to help us?”

Sarelle was here again? She hadn’t mentioned that when they’d IM’d last night.

“John? Do you want to work with Sarelle?”

He nodded and tried to keep it cool, although his body had lit up like a neon sign. He was positively tingling. *Yeah. I can do that.*

He put his hands in his lap and looked down at them, trying to keep his smile to himself.

Chapter Twenty-three

Bella was damn well coming home. Tonight.

Rehvenge was not the kind of male who handled frustration well under the best of circumstances. So he was *beyond* through waiting to have his sister back where she needed to be. Goddamn it, he was not just her brother, he was her *ghardian*, and that meant he had rights.

As he yanked on his full-length sable coat, the fur swirled around his big body, then fell to rest at his ankles. The suit he was wearing was black and by Ermenegildo Zegna. The twin nine-millimeter handguns under his arms were by Heckler & Koch.

“Rehvenge, please don’t do this.”

He looked at his mother. Madalina was standing beneath the chandelier in the hall, the picture of aristocracy with her regal bearing and her diamonds and her satin gown. The only thing out of place was the worry on her face, and that wasn’t because the tension clashed with her Harry Winston and haute couture. She never got upset. Ever.

He took a deep breath. He was more likely to calm her down if he didn’t show his infamous temper, but more to the point, in his current frame of mind he was liable to shred her where she stood, and that wasn’t fair.

“She will come home this way,” he said.

His mother’s graceful hand lifted to her throat, a sure sign she was caught between what she wanted and what she thought was right. “But it’s so extreme.”

“You want her sleeping in her own bed? You want her where she should be?” His voice started to punch through the air. “Or do you want her staying with the Brotherhood? Those are warriors, *mahmen*. Bloodthirsty, blood-

hungry *warriors*. You think they would hesitate to take a female? And you know damn well by law the Blind King can lay with whatever female he chooses. You want her in that kind of environment? I don't."

As his *mahmen* stepped back, he realized he was yelling at her. He sucked in another deep breath.

"But, Rehvenge, I spoke with her. She doesn't want to come home yet. And they are males of honor. In the Old Country—"

"We don't even know who's in the Brotherhood anymore."

"They saved her."

"Then they can give her back to her family. For God's sake, she's a female of the aristocracy. You think the *glymera* will accept her after this? She's already had that one affair."

And what a mess that had been. The male had been totally unworthy of her, a crumbling idiot, and yet the bastard had managed to walk away from the split without talk. Bella, on the other hand, had been whispered about for months, and though she'd tried to pretend it hadn't bothered her, Rehv knew it had.

He hated the aristocracy they were stuck in, he really did.

He shook his head, pissed off at himself. "She should never have moved out of this house. I should never have allowed that."

And as soon as he got her back, she was *never* going to be allowed out again without his approval. He was going to have her anointed as a *secluded* female. Her blood was pure enough to justify it, and frankly she should have been one all along. Once that was done, the Brotherhood was legally required to render her back to Rehvenge's care, and thereafter she would not be able to leave the house without his permission. And there was more. Any male who wanted to see her would have to go through him as head of her household, and he was going to deny every single one of the sons of bitches. He'd failed to protect his sister once. He wasn't going to let that happen again.

Rehv checked his watch even though he knew he was late for his business. He would make the petition for *seclusion* to the king from his office. It was odd to do something so ancient and traditional through e-mail, but that was the way of things now.

"Rehvenge..."

"What."

"You will drive her away."

"Not possible. Once I take care of this, she'll have nowhere else to go but

here."

He reached for his cane and paused. His mother looked so miserable, he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"You don't worry about a thing, *mahmen*. I'm going to fix it so she never gets hurt again. Why don't you ready the house for her? You could take her mourning cloth down."

Madalina shook her head. In a reverent voice she said, "Not until she walks over the threshold. It would offend the Scribe Virgin to assume her safe return."

He held back a curse. His mother's devotion to the Mother of the Race was legendary. Hell, she should have been a member of the Chosen with all her prayers and her rules and her flinching fear that one word askance would bring certain doom.

But whatever. It was her spiritual cage, not his.

"As you wish," he said, leaning on his cane and turning away.

He moved slowly through the house, relying on the different kinds of floorings to tell him which room he was in. There was marble in the hall, a swirling Persian carpet in the dining room, wide-planked hardwood in the kitchen. He used his sight to tell him that his feet were landing squarely and that it was safe for him to put his weight on them. He carried the cane in case he misjudged and lost balance.

As he went out into the garage, he held on to the door frame before putting one foot and then the other down the four steps. After sliding into his bulletproof Bentley, he hit the garage door opener and waited for a clear shot out.

Goddamn it. He wished like hell he knew who those Brothers were and where they lived. He'd go there, blast through the door, and drag Bella away from them.

When he could see the driveway behind him, he threw the sedan in reverse and nailed the gas so hard the tires squealed. Now that he was behind the wheel, he could move at the speed he wanted to. Fast. Nimble. Free of caution.

The long lawn was a blur as he gunned down the winding drive to the gates, which were set back from the street. He suffered a quick pause while the things opened; then he tore out onto Thorne Avenue and proceeded down one of the wealthiest streets in Caldwell.

To keep his family safe and never lacking for anything, he worked at

despicable things. But he was good at what he did, and his mother and his sister deserved the kind of life they had. He would give them anything they wanted, fulfill any whim they had. Things had been too hard on them for too long....

Yeah, the death of his father had been the first gift he'd given them, the first of many ways he'd improved their lives and kept them out of harm's way. And he wasn't stopping the trend now.

Rehv was going at a clip and heading for downtown when the base of his skull began to tingle. He tried to ignore the sensation, but in a matter of moments it condensed into a tight grip, as if a vise had been clamped around the top of his spine. He lifted his foot from the accelerator and waited for the feeling to pass.

Then it happened.

With a stab of pain his vision went to shades of red, like he'd pulled a transparent veil over his face: The headlights of oncoming cars were neon pink, the road a dull rust, the sky a claret like burgundy wine. He checked the clock on the dash, the numbers of which were now a ruby glow.

Shit. This was all wrong. This shouldn't be hap—

He blinked and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, his depth perception was gone.

Yeah, the hell this isn't happening. And he wasn't going to make it downtown.

He wrenched the wheel to the right and pulled over into a strip mall, the one where the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy had been before it burned down. He killed the Bentley's lights and drove behind the long, narrow buildings, parking flush with the bricks so that if he had to drive off fast, all he had to do was hit the gas.

Leaving the engine running, he shrugged out of the sable coat, stripped off his suit jacket, then rolled up his left sleeve. Through the red haze, he reached into his glove compartment and took out a hypodermic syringe and a length of rubber tubing. His hands were shaking so badly he dropped the needle and had to stretch down and pick it up off the floor.

He patted his jacket pockets until he found the glass vial of the neuromodulator dopamine. He put the thing on the dash.

It took two tries to open the hypodermic's sterile packet, and then he nearly broke the needle off getting it through the rubber top on the dopamine lid. When the syringe was loaded, he wrapped the rubber tubing around his

biceps using one hand and his teeth; then he tried to find a vein. Because he was working in a flat visual field, everything was complicated.

He just couldn't see well enough. All he had in front of him was...red.

Red...red...red... The word shot around his mind, banging on the inside of his skull. Red was the color of panic. Red was the color of desperation. Red was the color of his self-hatred.

Red was not the color of his blood. Not right now, at any rate.

Snapping himself to attention, he fingered his forearm and looked for an internal launching pad for the drug, a superhighway that would bring the shit up to the receptors in his brain. Except his veins were collapsing.

He felt nothing as he pushed the needle in, which was reassuring. But then it came...a little sting at the injection site. The numbness he preserved himself in was about to end.

As he hunted around under his skin for a usable vein, he started to feel things in his body: The sensation of his weight in the car's leather seat. The heat blowing on his ankles. The fast air moving in and out of his mouth, drying his tongue.

Terror had him shoving the plunger down and releasing the rubber tourniquet. God only knew if he'd had the right place.

Heart pounding, he stared at the clock.

"Come on," he muttered, starting to rock in the driver's seat. "Come on... kick in."

Red was the color of his lies. He was trapped in a world of red. And one of these days the dopamine wasn't going to work. He'd be lost in the red forever.

The clock changed numbers. One minute passed.

"Oh, shit..." He rubbed his eyes as if that might bring back the depth in his vision and the normal spectrum of color.

His cell phone rang and he ignored it.

"Please..." He hated the pleading in his voice, but he couldn't pretend to be strong. "I don't want to lose me...."

All at once his vision returned, the red draining from his visual field, the three-dimensional perspective returning. It was like the evil had been sucked out of him and his body numbed up, its sensations evaporating until all he knew were the thoughts in his head. With the drug, he became a moving, breathing, talking bag that blessedly had only four senses to worry about now that touch had been medicated to the back burner.

He collapsed against the seat. The stress around Bella's abduction and rescue had gotten to him. That was why the attack had hit him so hard and fast. And maybe he needed to adjust the dosage again. He'd go to Havers and check about that.

It was a while before he was able to put the car in drive. As he eased out from behind the strip mall and slipped into traffic, he told himself he was just one more sedan in a long line of cars. Anonymous. Just like everyone else.

The lie eased him somewhat...and increased his loneliness.

At a stoplight, he checked the message that had been left for him.

Bella's security alarm had been turned off for an hour or so and had just come back on. Someone had been in her house again.

Zsadist found the black Ford Explorer parked in the woods about three hundred yards away from the entrance to Bella's mile-long driveway. The only reason he'd run across the thing was because he'd been scouring the area, too restless to go home, too dangerous to be in the company of anyone else.

A set of footprints in the snow headed in the direction of the farmhouse.

He cupped his hands and looked in the car's windows. The security alarm was engaged.

Had to be those *lessers*' ride. He could smell the sweet scent of them all over it. But with only one set of tracks, maybe the driver had dropped his buddies off, then hidden it? Or maybe the SUV had had to be moved from somewhere else?

Whatever. The Society would be back for its property. And wouldn't it be sweet to know where the hell it ended up? But how could he trail the damn thing?

He put his hands on his hips...and happened to look down at his gun belt.

As he unclipped his cell phone, he thought fondly of Vishous, that tech-savvy son of a bitch.

Necessity, mother, invention.

He dematerialized under the SUV so he left a minimal amount of tracks in the snow. As his weight was absorbed by his back, he winced. Man, he was going to pay for that little trip through the French door. And for the knock on the head. But he'd survived worse.

He took out a penlight and looked around the undercarriage, trying to

pick the right spot. He needed somewhere fairly large, and it couldn't be near the exhaust system, because even in this cold, that kind of heat could be a problem. Of course, he'd have much preferred to get into the Explorer and tuck the phone under a seat, but the SUV's alarm system was a complication. If it were tripped he might not be able to reengage it, so the *lessers* would know someone had been in the car.

As if the punched-out window wouldn't be a clue.

Goddamn it... He should have gone through those *lessers*' pockets before stabbing them into oblivion. One of those bastards had had the keys. Except he'd been so pissed off, he'd moved too fast.

Z cursed, thinking of the way Bella had looked at him after he'd chewed up that slayer in front of her. Her eyes had been wide in her pale face, her mouth loose with shock at what he'd done.

The thing was, the Brotherhood's business of protecting the race was a nasty one. It was messy and ugly and sometimes deranged. Always bloody. And on top of all that, she had seen the killing lust in him. Somehow, he was willing to bet that was what disturbed her the most.

Focus, dumb ass. Come on, get out of your head.

Z poked around some more, shifting under the Explorer. Finally he found what he was looking for: a little cave in the undercarriage. He shrugged out of his windbreaker, wrapped the phone up, and shoved the wad in the hole. He tested the jury-rig to make sure it was in there good and tight, then dematerialized out from under the SUV.

He knew the setup wasn't going to last long under there, but it was so much better than nothing. And now Vishous would be able to track the Explorer from home, because that little silver-bullet Nokia had a GPS chip in it.

Z flashed over to the edge of the meadow so he could see the back of the farmhouse. He'd done an okay patch job on the busted kitchen door. Fortunately the frame of the thing had still been intact, so he'd been able to close it and reengage the alarm sensors. Then he'd found a plastic tarp in the garage and covered up the monster hole.

Fixed, but not really.

Funny...he didn't think he'd be any more successful if he tried to rehab Bella's opinion of him. But—*goddamn it*—he didn't want to be a savage to her.

In the distance, two headlights turned off Route 22 and shined down the

long private lane. The car slowed as it came up to Bella's house, then pulled into her driveway.

Was that a Bentley? Z thought. Sure looked like it.

Man, an expensive car like that? Had to be a member of Bella's family. No doubt they'd been notified that the security alarm had been off for a while and then been turned back on about ten minutes ago.

Shit. Now was not a good time for someone to do a look-see walk-through. Given Z's luck, the *lessers* would pick right this moment to come back for their SUV—and decide to do a drive-by of the farmhouse for kicks and giggles.

Cursing under his breath, he waited for one of the Bentley's doors to open...except no one got out of the car and the engine stayed idling. This was good. As long as the alarm was activated, maybe they wouldn't think to go inside. Because the kitchen was a mess.

Z sniffed the cold air, but couldn't catch a scent. Instinct told him, though, that it was a male inside the sedan. Her brother? Most likely. He'd be the one who'd check out the scene.

That's right, buddy. Look at the front windows. See? Nothing's wrong. No one's in the house. Now do us both a favor and get the fuck out of here.

The sedan stayed put for what seemed like five hours. Then it backed out, did a K-turn in the street, and took off.

Z grabbed a deep breath of air. *Christ...* His nerves were too tight tonight.

Time passed. As he stood alone among the pines, he stared at Bella's house. And wondered if she'd be scared of him now.

The wind picked up, the cold getting rough with him and bleeding into his bones. With desperation, he embraced the pain that came with it.

Chapter Twenty-four

John stared across the desk in the study. Sarelle's head was down as she leafed through one of the ancient books, her short blond hair hanging in her face so that her chin was all he could see. The two of them had spent hours making a list of incantations for the solstice festival. Meanwhile, Wellsie was in the kitchen, ordering supplies for the ceremony.

As Sarelle turned another page, he thought she had really pretty hands.

"Okay," she said. "I think that's the last one."

Her eyes flashed up to his and it was like getting struck by lightning: a shock of heat and then a spacey disorientation. Plus he would have believed he glowed in the dark now, too.

She smiled and closed the book. Then there was a long silence. "So...um, I guess my friend Lash is in your training class."

Lash was her friend? *Oh, terrific.*

"Yeah...and he says you have the mark of the Brotherhood on your chest." When John didn't respond, she said, "Do you?"

John shrugged and scribbled on the edge of the list he'd made.

"Can I see it?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. Like he wanted her to get a load of his scrawny chest? Or that birthmark that had proven to be such a pain in the ass?

"I don't think you did it yourself, like they do," she said quickly. "And, I mean, it's not like I want to inspect it or something. I don't even know what one is supposed to look like. I'm just curious."

She moved her chair closer to his and he caught a whiff of the perfume she wore...or maybe it wasn't perfume. Maybe it was just...her.

"Which side is it on?"

As if his hand belonged to her, he patted his left pectoral.

“Unbutton your shirt a little.” She leaned over to the side, her head angled so she could look at his chest. “John? Can I please see it?”

He glanced at the doorway. Wellsie was still talking on the phone in the kitchen, so she probably wasn’t going to come barging in or anything. But the study still seemed way public.

Oh...God. Was he really going to do this?

“John? I just want to...see.”

Okay, he *was* going to do this.

He stood up and nodded at the doorway. Without a word Sarelle followed right behind him, going all the way down the hall, all the way into his bedroom.

After they stepped inside, he shut the door most of the way and reached for the top button of his shirt. He willed his hands to be steady by vowing to saw them off if they embarrassed him. The threat seemed to work, because he unbuttoned the shirt down to his stomach without much trouble. He stretched the left side open and looked away.

When he felt a light touch on his skin, he jumped.

“Sorry, my hands are cold.” Sarelle blew on her fingertips, then went back to his chest.

Good God. Something was happening in his body, some kind of wild shifting inside his skin. His breath grew short, strangled. He opened his mouth so he could get more air in.

“That is *really* cool.”

He was disappointed when she dropped her hand. But then she smiled at him.

“So do you think you might want to go out sometime? You know, we could go to the laser-tag place. That could be cool. Or maybe the movies.”

John nodded like the dummy he was.

“Good.”

Their eyes met. She was so pretty, she made him dizzy.

“Do you want to kiss me?” she whispered.

John’s eyes cracked open. Like a balloon had popped behind his head.

“Because I’d like you to.” She licked her lips a little. “I really would.”

Whoa...Chance of a lifetime, right here, right now, he thought.

Do not pass out. Passing out would be a total buzz kill.

John quickly called on every movie he’d ever seen...and got no help at

all. As a horror fan, he was just swamped by visions of Godzilla stomping across Tokyo and of Jaws chewing on the ass end of the *Orca*. *Big help.*

He thought of the mechanics. *Head tilt. Lean forward. Make the contact.*

Sarelle glanced around, flushing. “If you don’t want to, that’s cool. I just thought...”

“John?” Wellsie’s voice came from down the hall. And got closer as she kept talking. “Sarelle? Where are you guys?”

He winced. Before he lost his nerve, he grabbed Sarelle’s hand, pulled her forward, and planted a good one right on her mouth, his lips tight against hers. No tongue, but there wasn’t time, and he’d probably need to call 911 after something like that anyway. As it was, he was practically hyperventilating.

Then he pushed her back. And worried about how he’d done.

He risked a look. *Oh...* Her smile was radiant.

He thought his chest would explode with happiness.

He was just dropping his hand as Wellsie stuck her head in the door. “I need to go to—ah...I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you two...”

John tried to marshal a nothing-special smile and then noticed that Wellsie’s eyes were fixated on his chest. He looked down. His shirt was wide-open.

Scrambling to button the damn thing up just made the situation worse, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I’d better go,” Sarelle said easily. “My *mahmen* wanted me home early. John, I’ll be on the computer later, okay? We’ll figure out what movie to go see or whatever. Night, Wellsie.”

As Sarelle walked down toward the living room, he couldn’t resist glancing around Wellsie. He watched as Sarelle took her coat out of the hall closet, put it on, and got her keys from her pocket. Moments later the muted sound of the front door closing drifted down the hall.

There was a long silence. Then Wellsie laughed and pushed back some of her red hair.

“I, ah, I have no idea how to handle this,” she said. “Except to say that I like her a lot and she has good taste in males.”

John rubbed his face, aware that he was the color of a tomato.

I’m going to go for a walk, he signed.

“Well, Tohr just called. He was going to swing by the house and pick you up. Thought you might want to hang with him at the training center, since

he's got some admin work to do. Anyway, it's your choice to stay or not. And I'm off to a *Princeps* Council meeting."

He nodded as Wellsie started to turn away.

"Ah, John?" She paused and looked over her shoulder. "Your shirt's... um, it's buttoned up kind of off-kilter."

He glanced down. And started to laugh. Even though he made no sound he just had to let his joy out, and Wellsie smiled, obviously happy for him. As he did the buttons up the right way, he had never loved the woman more.

Bella spent the hours after she returned to the mansion sitting up in Zsadist's bed with her diary in her lap. She didn't do anything with the journal at first, too caught up in what had happened at her house.

Jesus... She couldn't say she was surprised that Zsadist was every bit the menace she'd thought he was. And he'd saved her, hadn't he? If that *lesser* he'd killed had gotten its hands on her, she would have ended up back in a hole in the ground.

The trouble was, she couldn't decide whether what he'd done was evidence of his strength or his brutality.

As she decided it was probably both, she worried about whether he was okay. He'd been hurt and yet he was still out there, probably trying to find more slayers. *God...* What if he—

What if. What if... She was going to drive herself crazy if she kept this up.

Desperate for something else to focus on, she leafed through what she'd written in her journal over the past year. Zsadist's name had played a prominent role in the entries right before she'd been abducted. She'd been so obsessed by him, and couldn't say that had changed. Matter of fact, her feelings were so strong for him now, even after what he'd done tonight, that she wondered if she didn't...

Love him. *Oh...man.*

Suddenly she couldn't be alone, not with that realization shooting around her head. She brushed her teeth and her hair and made a go for the first floor, hoping she'd run into someone. Except halfway down the stairs, she heard voices from the dining room and came to a halt. The last meal of the night was in progress, but the idea of joining all the Brothers and Mary and Beth seemed overwhelming. Besides, wouldn't Zsadist be there? And how could she face him without giving herself away? No way that male was going to

deal well with her loving him. No way.

Ah, hell. She was going to have to see him sooner or later. And hiding wasn't her thing.

But when she got to the bottom of the staircase and stepped off onto the foyer's mosaic floor, she realized she'd forgotten to put any shoes on. How could she go into the king and queen's dining room with bare feet?

She looked back up at the second floor and became utterly exhausted. Too tired to go up and come down again, too embarrassed to go forward, she just listened to the sounds of the meal: Male and female voices chatted and laughed. A wine bottle was uncorked with a pop. Someone thanked Fritz for bringing out more lamb.

She looked down at her naked feet, thinking she was such a fool. A shattered fool. She was lost because of what the *lesser* had done to her. And shaky because of what she'd seen Zsadist do tonight. And so alone after realizing what she felt for that male.

She was about to throw in the towel and go back upstairs when something brushed against her leg. She jumped and looked down, meeting the jade green eyes of a black cat. The feline blinked, purred at her, and rubbed its head against the skin of her ankle.

Bending at the waist, she stroked its fur with unsteady hands. The animal was incomparably elegant, all lean lines and graceful, sliding movements. And for no good reason, her eyes got blurry. The more emotional she got, the closer she and the cat became, until she was sitting on the last step of the staircase and the animal had crawled into her lap.

"His name is Boo."

Bella gasped and looked up. Phury was standing in front of her, a towering male no longer dressed in war clothes, but now in cashmere and wool. He had a napkin in his hand, as if he'd just gotten up from the table, and he smelled really good, like he'd recently showered and shaved. Staring at him, she became aware that all the talk and sounds of eating had bled from the air, leaving a silence that told her everyone knew she'd come downstairs and gotten stuck on the periphery.

Phury knelt down and pressed his linen napkin into her hand. Which was how she realized there were tears running down her cheeks.

"Won't you come join us?" he said softly.

She blotted her face while still holding on to the cat. "Any chance I can take him in with me?"

“Absolutely. Boo is always welcome at our table. And so are you.”

“I don’t have shoes on.”

“We don’t care.” He held out his hand. “Come on, Bella. Come join us.”

Zsadist walked into the foyer, so cold and stiff he shuffled along. He’d wanted to stay until the very dawn at the farmhouse, but his body hadn’t fared well in the frigid air.

Even though he wasn’t going to eat, he headed for the dining room, only to stop in the shadows. Bella was at the table, sitting next to Phury. There was a plate of food in front of her, but she was paying more attention to the cat in her lap. She was petting Boo, and didn’t miss a stroke as she looked up at something Phury said. She smiled, and when her head dropped again, Phury’s eyes stayed on her profile as if he were drinking her in.

Z walked quickly over to the stairs, not about to fall into that scene. He was almost free when Tohr emerged from the hidden door below the first landing. The brother looked grim, but then he never was a party.

“Hey, Z, hold up.”

Zsadist cursed, and not under his breath. He had no interest in getting waylaid by some policy-and-procedure shit, and that was all Tohr talked about lately. The guy was cracking down on the Brotherhood, organizing shifts, trying to turn four loose cannons like V, Phury, Rhage, and Z into soldiers. No wonder he always looked like his head hurt.

“Zsadist, I said, wait.”

“Not now—”

“Yeah, now. Bella’s brother sent a request to Wrath. Asking that she be assigned *sehculsion* status with him as her *whard*.”

Oh, shit. If that happened, Bella was as good as gone. Hell, she was as good as luggage. Not even the Brotherhood could keep her from her *whard*.

“Z? Did you hear what I said?”

Nod your head, asshole, he told himself.

He barely managed a chin dip. “But why are you telling me this?”

Tohr’s mouth tightened. “You want to front like she’s nothing to you? Fine. Just thought you’d want to know.”

Tohr headed for the dining room.

Z gripped the banister and rubbed his chest, feeling like someone had replaced the oxygen in his lungs with tar. He looked up the stairs and

wondered if Bella would come back to his room before she left. She would have to, because her diary was there. She could leave her clothes behind, but not that journal. Unless, of course, she'd moved out already.

God... How would he tell her good-bye?

Man, there was one conversation to bail on. He couldn't imagine what he'd say to her, especially after she'd seen him do his nasty magic all over that slayer.

Z went into the library, picked up one of the phones there, and dialed Vishous's cell number by its pattern on the buttons. He heard the ring through the receiver as well as from across the foyer. When V answered, he told the Brother about the Explorer and the cell phone and the undercarriage antics.

"I'm on it," V said. "But where are you? There's a funky echo on the phone."

"Call me if that car moves. I'll be in the gym." He hung up and headed for the underground tunnel.

He figured he could scrounge up some clothes down in the locker room and run himself into a state of utter depletion. When his thighs were screaming and his calves had turned to stone and his throat was sore from the gasping, the pain would clear his mind, cleanse him.... He craved the hurt more than he craved food.

When he got to the locker room, he went to the cubicle assigned to him and pulled out his Air Shox and a pair of running shorts. He preferred going shirtless anyway, especially if he was alone.

He'd disarmed and was about to strip down when he heard something moving around the lockers. Tracking the sound in silence, he stepped out into the path of—a half-pint stranger.

There was a metal bang as that little body slammed into one of the locker banks.

Shit. It was the kid. What was his name? John something. And John-boy looked as if he was going to faint as he stared up with bugged-out, glassy eyes.

Z glared down from his full height. His mood was utterly vicious at the moment, black and cold as space, and yet somehow, ripping the kid a new asshole for doing nothing wrong wasn't appealing.

"Get out of here, kid."

John fumbled with something. A pad and pen. As he put the two together,

Z shook his head.

“Yeah, I don’t read, remember? Look, just go. Tohr’s up at the house.”

Z turned away and yanked off his shirt. When he heard a gasp, he looked over his shoulder. John’s eyes were on his back.

“Christ, kid...get the fuck out of here.”

As Z heard the patter of feet leaving, he ditched his pants, threw on the black soccer shorts, and sat on the bench. He picked his Nikes up by the laces and let them dangle between his knees. As he stared at the running shoes, he had some stupid thought about how many times he’d shoved his feet into them and punished his body on the very treadmill he was headed for. Then he thought about how many times he’d deliberately gotten himself hurt in fights with the *lessers*. And how many times he’d asked Phury to beat him.

No, not asked. Demanded. There had been times when he’d demanded that his twin hit him over and over again until his scarred face swelled up and the pounding ache in his bones was all he knew. In truth, he didn’t like having Phury involved. He’d have preferred the pain to be private and would have done the damage himself if he’d been able to. But it was hard to coldcock yourself with any force.

Z slowly lowered the running shoes to the floor and leaned back against the locker, thinking about where his twin was. Up in the dining room. Next to Bella.

His eyes drifted to the phone that was mounted on the locker room wall. Maybe he should call up to the house.

A low whistle sounded right next to him. He flipped his eyes to the left and frowned.

The kid was there with a water bottle in his hand, and he came forward tentatively, his arm stretched way out in front of him, his head tilted away. Kind of like he was cozying up to a panther and hoped to leave the experience with his limbs still attached.

John placed the Poland Spring bottle about three feet from Z on the bench. Then he turned and ran away.

Z stared at the door the kid tore out of. As the thing eased shut, he thought about other doors in the compound. The front ones of the mansion, specifically.

God. Bella would be leaving soon, too. She might even be leaving now. Right this very minute.

Chapter Twenty-five

“Apples? What the fuck do I care about apples?” O yelled into his cell phone. He was ready to crack heads, he was so pissed off, and U was nattering on about goddamn *fruit*? “I just told you we’ve got three dead Betas. *Three* of them.”

“But tonight there were fifty bushels of apples bought from four different _____”

O had to start pacing around the cabin. It was either that or so help him he was going to hunt down U just to burn off his edge.

As soon as O had returned from the Omega he’d gone to the farmhouse, only to find two scorch marks on the lawn as well as the busted-up back door. Looking through a window into the kitchen, he’d seen black blood all over the place and another burn mark on the tile.

Damn it to hell, he thought, picturing the scene again. He knew a Brother had done the work, because given the mess in the kitchen, the *lesser* who’d been finished off on that floor had been shredded before he’d been stabbed.

Had his wife been with the warrior at the time? Or had the visit been about her family trying to move her stuff out and a Brother had just been guarding them?

Goddamn those Betas. Those three lousy-ass, weak-balled, useless mother *fuckers* of his had gotten themselves killed, so he’d never have answers. And whether his wife had been there not, sure as hell if she were alive she wasn’t going back there anytime soon, thanks to the fighting that had gone down.

U’s bullshit came back into focus. “...the shortest day of the year, December twenty-first, is coming up next week. The winter solstice is—”

“I have an idea,” O snapped. “Why don’t you cut the calendar crap. I want you to go to that farmhouse and pick up that Explorer those Betas left behind in the woods. Then—”

“Listen to what I’m saying. Apples are used in the solstice ceremony to honor the Scribe Virgin.”

Those two words, *Scribe* and *Virgin*, got O’s attention. “How do you know this?”

“I’ve been around for two hundred years,” U said dryly. “The festival hasn’t been held for...Christ, I don’t know, a century maybe. The apples are supposed to represent the anticipation of spring. Seeds, growth, that kind of renewal shit.”

“What type of festival are we talking about?”

“In the past hundreds of them gathered, and I guess they did some chanting, some ritual stuff. I don’t really know. Anyway, for years we’ve been monitoring certain buying patterns in the local marketplace during specific times of the year. Apples in December. Raw sugarcane in April. It’s been more out of habit than anything else, because those vampires have been so damn quiet.”

O leaned back against the cabin’s door. “But now their king has ascended. So they’re firing up the old ways.”

“And you’ve got to love the ISBN system. Much more efficient than just asking around, which is what we used to have to do. As I said before, a huge load of Granny Smith apples has been purchased at various locales. Like they’re spreading the orders around.”

“So you’re saying that in a week a bunch of vampires are going to get together in one place. Do a little song-and-dance thing. Pray to the Scribe Virgin.”

“Yes.”

“Do they eat the apples?”

“That’s what my understanding is.”

O rubbed the back of his neck. He’d been reticent about bringing up the whole turning-his-wife-into-a-lesser thing during his session with the Omega. He needed to find out if she was alive first, and then he had to work up some spin for the concept. Obviously, the potentially insurmountable problem was that she was a vampire, and the only counterpoint he could make on that was that she’d be the ultimate secret weapon. A female of their own species? The Brotherhood would never see that coming....

Although, of course, that was just rationale for the Omega. His wife would never fight anyone but him.

Yeah, the proposal was going to be a hard sell, but one thing he had going for him was that the Omega was open to flattery. So wouldn't a big, splashy sacrifice in his honor do wonders to soften him up?

U was still talking. "...thinking was that I could check out the markets..."

As U droned on, O started thinking about poison. A whole lot of poison. A vat of the stuff.

Poisoned apples. How Snow White was that?

"O? You there?"

"Yeah."

"So I'm going to go to the markets and find out when—"

"Not right now you're not. Lemme tell you what you're going to do."

As Bella left Wrath's study she was shaking with rage, and neither the king nor Tohr tried to stop her or talk sense into her. Which proved they were highly intelligent males.

She pounded down the hall in her bare feet to Zsadist's room, and after she slammed the door shut, she went for the phone as if the thing were a weapon. She dialed her brother's cell.

Rehvenge picked up and snapped, "Who are you and how did you get this number?"

"Don't you dare do this to me."

There was a long silence. Then: "Bella...I—Hold on a second." A shuffling sound came through the phone; then he said in a cutting voice, "He'd better get over here right now. We clear? If I have to go after him, he's not going to like it." Rehvenge cleared his throat as he came back on. "Bella, where are you? Let me come pick you up. Or have one of the warriors take you to our house and I'll meet you there."

"You think I'm coming *anywhere* near you now?"

"It's better than the alternative," he said grimly.

"And what's that?"

"The Brothers forcibly returning you to me."

"Why are you doing—"

"*Why am I doing this?*" His voice sank into the deep, demanding bass she was so used to. "Do you have any idea what the last six weeks have been

like for me? Knowing that you were in the hands of those goddamned things? Knowing that I put my sister...my mother's daughter...in that place?"

"It was not your fault—"

"You should have been home!"

As always, the sandblast of Rehv's fury shook her, and she was reminded that on some basic level her brother had always scared her a little.

But then she heard him take a deep breath. And another. Then a curious desperation crept into his words. "Christ, Bella...just come home. *Mahmen* and I, we need you here. We miss you. We...I need to see you to believe you're really okay."

Ah, yes... Now the other side of him, the one she actually loved. The protector. The provider. The tenderhearted, gruff male who had always given her everything she had ever needed.

The temptation to submit to him was strong. But then she pictured herself never being allowed out of the house again. Which was something he was damn well capable of doing to her.

"Will you rescind the *seclusion* request?"

"We'll talk about it when you're sleeping in your own bed again."

Bella gripped the phone. "That means no, doesn't it?" There was a pause. "Hello? Rehvenge?"

"I just want you home."

"Yes or no, Rehv. Tell me now."

"Our mother can't live through something like this again."

"And you think I can?" she shot back. "Excuse me, but *mahmen* wasn't the one who ended up with a *lesser's* name carved into her stomach!"

The instant the words left her mouth, she cursed. Yeah, that kind of happy little detail was *really* going to bring him around. *Way to negotiate.*

"Rehvenge—"

His voice went utterly cold. "I want you home."

"I've just been in captivity, I'm not volunteering for jail."

"And just what are you going to do about it?"

"Keep pushing me around and you'll find out."

She ended the call and slammed the cordless unit down on the bedside table. *Goddamn him!*

On a crazy impulse, she grabbed the receiver and spun around, ready to hurl it across the room.

"Zsadist!" She fumbled with the phone, catching it, holding it against her

chest.

Standing silently next to the door, Zsadist was wearing running shorts and no shirt...and for some absurd reason she noticed that he didn't have shoes on either.

"Throw it if you want," he said.

"No. I...ah...no." She turned away and put the thing back on its little stand, taking two tries to get it in right.

Before she faced Zsadist again, she thought of him crouched over that *lesser*, beating it to death.... But then she remembered him bringing her things from her house...and taking her there...and letting her have his vein though he'd cracked wide-open at the invasion. As she pivoted around toward him, she was tangled in the net of him, caught between the kindness and the cruelty.

He broke the silence. "I don't want you running half-cocked into the night because of what your brother's up to. And don't tell me that isn't what you're thinking."

Damn, he was smart. "But you know what he wants to do to me."

"Yeah."

"And by law the Brotherhood will have to give me up, so I can't stay here. You think I like the only option I've got?"

Except where would she go?

"What's so bad about heading home?"

She glared at him. "Yeah, I really want to be treated like an incompetent, like a child, like...an object my brother *owns*. That works for me. Totally."

Zsadist ran a hand over his skull trim. The movement flexed his biceps so they squeezed up thick. "Makes sense to get families under one roof. It's a dangerous time for civilians."

Oh, man... The last thing she needed right now was him agreeing with her brother.

"Dangerous time for *lessers*, too," she muttered. "Going by what you did to that one tonight."

Zsadist's eyes narrowed. "If you want me to apologize for that, I won't."

"Of course you wouldn't," she snapped. "You don't apologize for anything."

He shook his head slowly. "You want to pick a fight with someone, you're talking to the wrong male, Bella. I won't go there with you."

"Why not? You excel at being pissed off."

The silence that followed made her want to scream at him. She was going after his anger, something he gave freely to all comers, and she couldn't figure out why the hell he was showing self-control when it came to her.

He cocked an eyebrow, as if he knew what she was thinking.

"Ah, hell," she breathed. "I'm just needling you, aren't I? Sorry."

He shrugged. "Rock and a hard place makes anyone crazy. Don't sweat it."

She sat down on the bed. The idea of running off alone was ludicrous, but she refused to live under Rehvenge's control.

"You got any suggestions?" she asked softly. When she raised her eyes, Zsadist was looking at the floor.

He was so self-contained leaning back against the wall like that. With his long, lean body, he looked like a flesh-colored crack in the plaster, a fissure that had opened up in the very structure of the room.

"Give me five minutes," he said. He walked out, still shirtless.

Bella let herself fall back on the mattress, thinking that five minutes wasn't going to help the situation. What she needed was a different brother waiting for her at home.

Dear, sweet Scribe Virgin... Getting away from the *lessers* should have made things better. Instead, her life still seemed totally out of her control.

Granted, she could pick her own shampoo now, though.

She lifted her head. Through the bathroom door she saw the shower and imagined herself standing under a rush of hot water. That would be good. Relaxing. Refreshing. Plus she could cry out her frustration without embarrassment there.

She got up, went into the bath, and cranked on the water. The sound of the rush hitting the marble was soothing, and so was the warm spray as she got under it. She didn't end up crying. Just hung her head and let the water run down her body.

When she finally stepped out, she noticed that the door to the bedroom had been shut.

Zsadist was probably back.

Wrapping a towel around herself, she had no hope whatsoever that he'd found a solution.

Chapter Twenty-six

When the bathroom door opened, Z looked over and kept his curse to himself. Bella was rosy from head to foot, her hair knotted up high on her head. She smelled like that fancy French soap Fritz insisted on buying. And that towel wrapped around her body just made him think how easy it would be to get her totally naked.

One pull. That was all he'd need.

"Wrath's agreed to be temporarily unreachable," he said. "Which is only a delay of forty-eight hours or so. Talk to your brother. See if you can bring him around. Otherwise Wrath has to respond, and he can't really say no, given your bloodline."

Bella hitched the towel up a little higher. "Okay...thank you. Thank you for making the effort."

He nodded and eyed the door, thinking it was back to plan A: running himself into the ground. Either that or having Phury go at him.

Except instead of leaving, he put his hands on his hips. "I am sorry for something."

"What? Oh...Why?"

"I'm sorry that you had to see what I did to that slayer." He lifted his hand, then dropped it, resisting the urge to rub his head raw. "When I said I won't apologize for it, I meant I never regret killing those bastards. But I didn't...I don't like you having those images in your head. I'd take them from you if I could. I'd take all of this from you...bear it all for you. I'm so... fucking sorry this happened to you, Bella. Yeah, I'm just sorry about the whole thing, including...me."

This was his good-bye to her, he realized. And he was running out of

steam, so he hurried his last words.

“You’re a female of worth.” He hung his head. “And I know that you’ll find...”

A mate, he finished to himself. Yeah, a female like her would most certainly find a mate. In fact, there was one in this very house who not only wanted her, but was right for her. Phury was just around the corner, as a matter of fact.

Z looked up, intending to beat feet out of the room—and jerked back against the door.

Bella was right in front of him. As he caught her scent up close, his heart went jackrabbit on him, doing some kind of flutter thing that got him light-headed.

“Is it true you cleaned up my house?” she said.

Oh, man... The only answer he had to that was too revealing.

“Is it?”

“Yeah, I did that.”

“I’m going to hug you now.”

Z stiffened, but before he could get himself out of the way, her arms wrapped around his waist and her head came up against his bare chest.

He stood in her embrace without moving, without breathing, without returning it...All he could do was feel her body. She was a tall female, but he had a good six inches on her. And even though he was thin for a warrior, he carried at least seventy pounds more on his bones than she did. And still she overwhelmed him.

God, she smelled good.

She made a little noise, like a sigh, and burrowed into his body even more. Her breasts pressed against his torso, and as he looked down, the curve of her nape was too damn tempting. Then there was the *it* problem. That godforsaken thing was hardening, swelling, lengthening. Fast.

He put his hands up to her shoulders, hovering just above her skin.
“Yeah, ah, Bella...I’ve got to go.”

“Why?” Closer. She came closer. Her hips moved against his, and he gritted his teeth as their lower bodies made full contact.

Shit, she had to be feeling that thing between his legs. How could she miss it? The stiff was pushing into her belly, and it wasn’t like the flipping shorts could hide the bastard.

“Why do you have to go?” she whispered, her breath brushing over his

pecs.

“Because...”

When he let the word drift, she murmured, “You know, I like these.”

“Like what?”

She touched one of his nipple rings. “These.”

He coughed a little. “I, ah...I did them myself.”

“They’re beautiful on you.” She stepped back and dropped the towel.

Z swayed. She was so damned beautiful, those breasts and that flat stomach and those hips.... And that graceful little slit between her legs that he saw with shattering clarity. The few humans he’d been with had hair there, but she was of his kind, so she was utterly bare, achingly smooth.

“I really have to go,” he said hoarsely.

“Don’t run.”

“I have to. If I stay...”

“Lay with me,” she said, easing up against him once more. She pulled the tie in her hair out, and dark waves spilled all over both of them.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, trying not to get buried by her scent. In a gritty voice, he said, “Do you just want to get fucked, Bella? Because that’s all I’ve got in me.”

“You have so much more—”

“I do not.”

“You’ve been kind to me. You’ve taken care of me. You’ve washed me and held me—”

“You don’t want me inside of you.”

“You already are, Zsadist. Your blood is in me.”

There was a long silence. “Do you know my reputation?”

She frowned. “That’s not relevant—”

“What do people say about me, Bella? Come on, I want to hear it from you. So I know you get it.” Her despair was palpable as he pushed her, but he had to snap her out of whatever daze she was in. “I know you must have heard about me. Gossip reaches even your social level. *What do they say?*”

“Some...some think you kill females for sport. But I don’t believe—”

“Do you know how I got that rep?”

Bella covered her breasts and stepped back, shaking her head. He bent down and handed her the towel, then pointed to the skull in the corner.

“I murdered that female. Now tell me, do you want to be taken by a male who could do something like that? Who could hurt a female like that? You

want that kind of bastard on top of you, pumping into your body?”

“It was her,” Bella whispered. “You went back and killed your mistress, didn’t you?”

Z shuddered. “For a while I thought it could make me whole.”

“It didn’t.”

“No shit.” He brushed by her and walked around, pressure building in him until he opened his mouth and the words just shot out. “A couple of years after I got out, I heard she...shit, I heard she had another male in that cell. I...I traveled for two days straight and snuck in close to dawn.” Z shook his head. He didn’t want to talk, he really didn’t, but his mouth just kept moving. “Christ...he was so young, so *young*, just like I was when she got me. And I didn’t have any intention of killing her, but she came down right as I was leaving with the slave. When I looked at her...I knew if I didn’t strike, she was going to call for her guards. I also knew that eventually she would take another male and chain him down there and make him...Ah, fuck. Why the hell am I telling you this?”

“I love you.”

Z squeezed his eyes shut. “Don’t be a tragedy, Bella.”

He left the room in a rush, but couldn’t go more than fifteen feet down the hall.

She loved him. *She loved him?*

Bullshit. She *thought* she loved him. And as soon as she got back to the real world, she was going to realize that. Christ, she’d come out of a horrific situation and was living in a bubble here at the compound. None of this was her life, and she was spending too much time with him.

And yet...God, he wanted to be with her. Wanted to lie side by side and kiss her. Wanted to do even more than that. Wanted...to do it all to her, the kissing and the touching and the sucking and the licking. But where exactly did he think all that was going to lead to? Even if he could get past the idea of penetrating her for the sex, he didn’t want to risk coming inside of her.

Not that he’d ever done that with any female. Hell, he’d never ejaculated under any circumstances. When he’d been a blood slave, it wasn’t as if he’d ever been sexually excited. And afterward, when he was with those few whores he’d bought and fucked, he hadn’t been after an orgasm. Those anonymous interludes were just experiments to see whether sex was as bad as it always had been for him.

As for masturbating, he couldn’t stand touching the damn thing to take a

piss, much less when it stood up for attention. And he'd never wanted to relieve himself, never been all that aroused, even when the *it* was hard.

Man, he was so whacked with the sex shit. Like there was a short in his brain.

Actually, he had a lot of them, didn't he?

He thought about all the holes in him, the blank places, the voids where others felt things. When it came down to it, he was really just a screen, more empty than solid, his emotions blowing through him, only the anger catching and holding.

Except that wasn't entirely true, was it? Bella made him feel things. When she had kissed him on the bed before, she had made him feel...hot and hungry. Very male. Sexual, for the first time in his life.

From out of a sharp desperation, some echo of what he'd been before the Mistress had had him started looking for airtime. He found himself wanting again that feeling he'd gotten from kissing Bella. And he wanted to crank her up, too. He wanted her gasping and breathless and starved.

It wasn't fair to her...but he was a son of a bitch, and he was greedy for what she'd given him before. And she would be leaving soon. He had this one day now.

Zsadist opened the door and went back inside.

Bella was lying in the bed and obviously surprised he was back. As she sat up, the sight of her brought back a lick of decency. How the hell could he be with her? God, she was so...beautiful, and he was nasty, a nasty bastard.

His momentum lost, he stalled in the middle of the room. *Prove you're not a bastard by bailing*, he thought. *But explain yourself first.*

"I want to be with you, Bella, and not to fuck you, either." As she started to say something, he silenced her by holding up his hand. "Please, just listen to me. I want to be with you, but I don't think I've got it in me to give you what you need. I'm not the right male for you, and this is definitely the wrong time."

He released his breath, thinking he was such an asshole. Here he was telling her no, playing the gentleman...while in his mind he was yanking back those sheets and replacing them with a blanket of his own skin.

The thing hanging from the front of his hips pounded like a jackhammer.

What would she taste like, he wondered, in that soft, sweet place between her legs?

"Come over here, Zsadist." She opened the covers, baring herself to him.

“Stop thinking. Come to bed.”

“I...” Words he’d never spoken to anyone hovered on his lips, a confession of sorts, a treacherous unveiling. He looked away and let them go for no good reason he could think of. “Bella, when I was a slave things were...ah, things were done to me. Sexual shit.” He should stop. Right now. “There were males, Bella. Against my will, there were males.”

He heard a little gasping sound.

This was good, he thought, even as he cringed. Maybe he could get her to save herself by revolting her. Because what female could stand being with a male who’d had that kind of thing done to him? Not the heroic ideal. Not by a long shot.

He cleared his throat and stared a hole right through the floor. “Look, I’m not...I don’t want your pity. The reason I’m telling you this is not to sap you out. It’s just...I’m scrambled. It’s like my wires are all crossed when it comes to the whole...you know, the fucking thing. I want you, but it’s not right. You shouldn’t be with me. You’re cleaner than that.”

There was a long silence. *Ah, shit...* He had to look at her. The moment he did, she rose from the bed as if she’d been waiting for him to lift his eyes. She walked to him naked, nothing on her skin except the candlelight from the single wick that burned.

“Kiss me,” she whispered in the dimness. “Just kiss me.”

“God...what is wrong with you?” As she winced, he said, “I mean, why? Of all the males you could have, why me?”

“I want you.” She put her hand on his chest. “It’s a natural, normal response to the opposite sex, isn’t it?”

“I’m not normal.”

“I know. But you’re not dirty or contaminated or unworthy.” She took his shaking hands and placed them on her shoulders.

Her skin was so fine, the idea of marring it in any way froze him. So did the image of him pushing the *it* into her. Except he didn’t have to involve the lower half of his body, did he? This could be all about her.

Oh, yeah, he thought. This could be for her.

He turned her around and drew her back against his body. With slow sweeps he ran his hands up and down the curves of her waist and hips. When she arched her spine and sighed, he could see the tips of her breasts over her shoulder. He wanted to touch her there...and realized he could. He moved his hands over her rib cage, feeling up the pattern of delicate bones until his

palms enveloped her breasts. Her head kicked back farther and her mouth parted.

As she opened for him like that, he had a screaming instinct to get inside of her any way he could. On reflex, he licked his upper lip while he rolled one of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger. He imagined himself thrusting his tongue into her mouth, going in between her teeth and fangs, taking her in that way.

Like she knew what he was thinking, she tried to turn and face him, but it seemed too close somehow...too real that she was giving herself to him, that she was going to let someone like him do intimate, erotic things to her body. He stopped her by grabbing her hips and pulling her hard into his thighs. He ground his teeth at the feel of her ass against that stiff thing straining his shorts.

“Zsadist...let me kiss you.” She tried to turn around again and he stopped her.

As she struggled in his hold, he kept her in place easily. “It’ll be better for you this way. If you can’t see me, it’ll be better.”

“No, it won’t.”

He put his head down on her shoulder. “If I could just get Phury for you...I used to look like him once. You could pretend it’s me.”

She yanked her body free of his hands. “But it wouldn’t be. And it’s you I want.”

As she looked at him with feminine expectation, he realized they were headed for the bed right behind her. And they were going to get down to it. But, God...he had no idea how to make her feel good. He might as well have been a virgin for all the shit he knew about pleasuring a female.

With that happy little revelation, he thought about the other male she’d had, that aristocrat who undoubtedly knew so much more about sex than he did. From out of nowhere, he was struck by a totally irrational urge to hunt down her previous lover and bleed him out.

Oh...hell. He closed his eyes. *Oh...shit.*

“What?” she asked.

This kind of violent, territorial impulse was characteristic of a bonded male. The hallmark of one, actually.

Z lifted his arm, put his nose to his bicep, and breathed in deep.... The bonding scent was coming out of his skin. It was faint, probably only recognizable to him, but it was there.

Shit. Now what was he going to do?

Unfortunately, his instincts answered. As his body roared, he picked her up and headed for the bed.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Bella stared at Zsadist's face while he carried her across the room. His black eyes were narrowed into slits, a dark, erotic greed glittering in them. As he put her on the bed and looked down at her body, she had the distinct thought that he was going to eat her alive.

Except he just loomed over her.

"Arch your back for me," he demanded.

Okay...not what she expected.

"Arch your back, Bella."

Feeling oddly exposed, she did as he asked, craning her body off the mattress. As she moved on the bed, she glanced at the front of his shorts. His erection gave a mighty jerk, and the idea that it was going to be inside of her soon helped loosen her up.

He reached down and brushed one of her nipples with his knuckle. "I want this in my mouth."

A delicious greed of her own took root. "Then kiss—"

"Shh." His knuckle traveled in between her breasts and down her stomach. He stopped when he got to her belly button. Took his forefinger and ran a little circle around her navel. Then paused.

"Don't stop," she moaned.

He didn't. He went lower until he brushed across the top of her cleft. She bit her lip and eyed his body, that huge, warrior frame with all that stark, hard muscle. *God...* She was really getting ready for him.

"Zsadist—"

"I'm going to want to go down on you. And I won't be able to stop myself." With his free hand he rubbed his lips, as if he were imagining the

act. "You prepared to let me do that?"

"Yes..."

He fingered the distorted side of his mouth as he stroked her slit. "Wish I had something better-looking to offer you. Because you're going to be perfect down there. I know it."

She hated the shame that came through his pride. "I think you're—"

"You've got one last chance to tell me no, Bella. If you don't right now, I'm going to be all over you. No stopping, and I don't think I can be gentle about it."

She held her arms out to him. He nodded once, as if they'd made some kind of pact, and then went to the end of the bed.

"Spread your legs. I want to see you."

A nervous flush came over her.

He shook his head. "Too late, Bella. Now...it's too late. Show me."

Slowly she cocked one of her knees up and gradually revealed herself.

His face melted, the tension and the harshness bleeding out of him.

"Oh...God..." he whispered. "You're...beautiful."

Leaning down onto his arms, he prowled up the bed to her body, his eyes fixated on her secret skin as if he'd never seen anything like it. When he got in range, wide hands smoothed their way up the insides of her thighs, opening them even farther.

But then he frowned and looked up at her. "Wait, I'm supposed to kiss you on the mouth first, aren't I? I mean, males start at the top and work their way down, don't they?"

What an odd question...like he'd never done this at all?

Before she could reply he began to move back, so she sat up and captured his face in her hands.

"You can do whatever you like to me."

His eyes flashed and he held his position for a split second.

Then he lunged at her, taking her down onto the bed. His tongue shot into her mouth and his hands tangled in her hair, pulling on her, arching her, trapping her head. The hunger in him was ferocious, a warrior's thick-blooded need for sex. He was going to take her with all the strength he had, and she was going to be sore when he was through using her. Sore and utterly blissed out. She couldn't wait.

Suddenly, he stopped and pulled back from her mouth. He was breathing deeply and had a flush on his cheeks as he looked her in the eye.

And then he smiled at her.

She was so surprised she didn't know what to do. She'd never seen that expression on his face before, and the lift in his mouth did away with the distortion in his upper lip, showing off his gleaming teeth and fangs.

"I like this," he said. "You underneath me... You feel good. You're soft and warm. Do I weigh too much? Here, let me..."

As he propped himself up on his arms, his arousal pressed into her core and his grin faded quick as a gasp. It was as if he didn't like the sensation, but how could that be? He was aroused. She could feel his erection.

With a lithe move he repositioned himself so her legs were closed and his knees were on either side of them. She couldn't guess what had happened, but wherever he'd gone in his head was not a good place.

"You're perfect on top of me," she said to distract him. "Except for one thing."

"What?"

"You've stopped. And lose the shorts."

His weight came down on her immediately and his mouth went to the side of her neck. As he nipped at her skin, she pushed her head back into the pillow and bared the column of her throat. Gripping the back of his head, she urged him against her vein.

"Oh, yes..." she moaned, wanting him to feed.

He made a noise that was a no, but before the rejection could ripple through her, he was kissing his way down to her collarbone.

"I want to latch onto your breast," he said against her skin.

"Do it."

"You need to know something first."

"What?"

He lifted his head. "The night you came here...when I bathed you? I did my best not to look at you. I really did. I covered you with a towel even though you were in the water."

"That was kind—"

"But when I took you out...I saw these." His hand captured one of her breasts. "I couldn't help it. I swear. I tried to allow you your modesty, but you were...I couldn't stop my eyes. Your nipple was tight from the chill of the air. So small and pink. Lovely."

He moved his thumb back and forth across her hard tip, scrambling her mind.

“It’s all right,” she mumbled.

“It wasn’t. You were defenseless and I was wrong to look at you.”

“No, you—”

He shifted, and his erection pressed into the top of her thighs. “This happened.”

“What hap—Oh, you got aroused?”

His mouth tightened. “Yeah. I couldn’t stop it.”

She smiled a little. “But you didn’t do anything, right?”

“No.”

“So it’s okay.” She arched her back and watched as his eyes clung to her breasts. “Kiss me, Zsadist. Right where you’re looking. Right now.”

His lips parted, and his tongue led the way as he dipped down. His mouth was warm on her flesh, and so very tentative, kissing, then sucking her nipple inside. He tugged, then ran a languid circle around her, then drew her in again...and all the while his hands stroked her waist and her hips and her legs.

How ironic that he’d worried he wouldn’t be gentle. Far from brutal, he was positively reverent as he suckled, his lashes down against his cheek as he savored her, his face worshipful and rapt.

“Christ,” he murmured, moving to her other breast. “I had no idea it would be like this.”

“How...so?” *Oh, God...* His mouth...

“I could tongue you forever.”

She grasped his head with her hands, pulling him closer. And it took some wriggling, but she managed to split her legs and get one out from under him so that he was almost lying in the cradle of her body. She was dying to feel his arousal, except he just hovered over her.

When he pulled back she protested, but then his hands went to the insides of her thighs and he moved down her body. As he spread her legs, the mattress began to quiver underneath her.

Zsadist’s whole body shook as he looked at her. “You’re so delicate... and you glisten.”

The first stroke of his finger down her core nearly threw her over the edge. As she let out a hoarse sound, his eyes flashed to hers and he cursed. “Goddamn it, I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m trying to be careful—”

She grabbed his hand before he could take it away. “More...”

He looked doubtful for a moment. Then he touched her again. “You’re

perfect. And God, you're soft. I've got to know..."

He leaned down, his shoulders bunching up hard. She felt a velvet brush. His lips.

This time when she jacked up off the bed and said his name, he just pressed another kiss to her again, and then there was the wet stroke of his tongue. As he lifted his head and swallowed, the growl of ecstasy he made stopped her heart in her chest. Their eyes met.

"Oh...Jesus...you're delicious," he said, going back down with his mouth.

He stretched out on the bed, looping his arms under her knees and overflowing the space between her thighs...a male who wasn't going anywhere for a long while. His breath was hot and needy, his mouth hungry and desperate. He explored her with an erotic compulsion, licking and probing with his tongue, sucking with his lips.

When her hips bucked, one of his arms moved across her stomach, holding her in place. She lurched again and he paused without lifting his head.

"Are you okay?" he asked, raspy voice muffled, words vibrating into her core.

"Please..." It was the only thing that came to mind.

He pulled back a little, and all she could do was look at his glossy lips and think of where they had been.

"Bella, I don't think I can stop. There's this...roar in my head telling me to keep my mouth on you. How can I make this...okay for you?"

"Make me...finish me," she said hoarsely.

He blinked as if she'd surprised him. "How do I make you come?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing. Only faster."

He was a quick study as he figured out what made her go wild, and he was ruthless once he discovered how to give her an orgasm. He drove her hard, watching her as she shattered apart once, twice...many times. It was as if he fed from her pleasure and was insatiable.

When he finally lifted his head, she was limp.

He looked at her gravely. "Thank you."

"God...I'm the one who should be saying that."

He shook his head. "You let an animal into the most beautiful part of you. I'm the one with the gratitude."

He pushed away from her body, that flush of arousal still in his cheeks.

That erection still straining.

She held her arms out to him. “Where are you going? We’re not done.”

As he hesitated, she remembered. She rolled over onto her stomach and braced herself up on all fours, a shameless offer. When he didn’t move, she looked back at him. He’d closed his eyes as if in pain, and that confused her.

“I know you only do it this way,” she said softly. “That’s what you told me. It’s okay with me. Really.” There was a long silence. “Zsadist, I want to finish this between us. I want to know you...like this.”

He rubbed his face. She thought he was going to leave, but then he shifted around so he was behind her. His hands fell lightly on her hips and he urged her to one side, onto her back.

“But you only—”

“Not with you.” His voice was rough. “Not like that with you.”

She opened her legs, ready for him, but he just sat back on his heels.

His breath left on a shudder. “Let me get a condom.”

“Why? I’m not fertile now, so you don’t need one. And I want you to... finish.”

His brows dropped low over his black eyes.

“Zsadist...this hasn’t been enough for me. I want to be with you.”

She was about to reach for him when he rose up onto his knees and brought his hands to the front of his running shorts. He fumbled with the drawstring and then pulled the elastic waistband out and down, revealing himself.

Bella swallowed hard.

His arousal was *enormous*. A perfectly beautiful, rock-solid aberration of nature.

Holy...Moses. Would he even fit?

His hands trembled as he hooked the shorts under the twin weights below his erection. Then he leaned over her body, positioning himself at her core.

When she put her hand out to stroke him, he jerked away. “No!” As she recoiled, he cursed. “I’m sorry.... Look, just let me take care of it.”

He moved his hips forward and she felt the head of him, blunt and hot, against her. His hand came behind one of her knees and he stretched her leg up; then he pushed inside a little, then a little farther. As sweat bloomed over his entire body, a dark scent reached her nose. For a moment, she wondered if...

No, he couldn’t be bonding with her. It wasn’t in his nature.

"God...you're tight," he croaked. "Oh...*Bella*, I don't want to tear you up."

"Keep going. Just be slow."

Her body surged under the pressure and the stretching. Even as ready as she was he was an invasion, but she loved it, especially as his breath exploded out of his chest and he shuddered. When he was all the way in, his mouth fell open, his fangs elongating from the pleasure he felt.

She ran her hands up his shoulders, feeling the muscles and the warmth of him.

"This all right?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Bella pressed a kiss to the side of his neck and swiveled her hips. He hissed.

"Make love to me," she said.

He moaned and started to move like a great wave on top of her, that thick, hard part of him stroking the inside of her.

"Oh, shit..." He dropped his head into her neck. His rhythm intensified, his breath shooting out of him, rushing into her ear. "Bella...shit, I'm scared...but I can't...stop...."

With a groan he propped himself up on his arms and let his hips swing freely, each thrust nailing against her, pushing her farther up on the bed. She grabbed for his wrists to hold her body in place under the onslaught. As he pounded, she could feel herself getting near the edge again, and the faster he went, the closer she got.

Her orgasm slammed into her core, then raced throughout her body, the force of it stretching her out so she was infinitely long and infinitely wide. The sensations lasted forever, the contractions of her inner muscles grabbing onto the part of him that penetrated her.

When she was back in her own skin again, she realized he was unmoving, completely frozen above her. Blinking away tears, she looked into his face. The hard angles of it were tense, and so was the rest of his body.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked tightly. "You cried out. Loudly."

She touched his face. "Not from pain."

"Thank God." His shoulders eased as he exhaled. "I couldn't bear to hurt you like this."

He kissed her softly. And then he withdrew and got off the bed, yanking up the shorts as he went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Bella frowned. Had he finished? He'd seemed fully erect as he'd

withdrawn.

She slid out of bed and looked down. When there was nothing on the inside of her thighs, she drew on the robe and went after him, not even bothering to knock.

Zsadist's arms were propped on the sink, his head hanging low. He was breathing uneasily and looked fevered, his skin slick, his stance unnaturally stiff.

"What, *nalla*," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She stopped, unsure she'd heard him right. But she had.... *Beloved*. He'd called her *beloved*.

"Why didn't you..." She couldn't seem to get the rest of the words out.
"Why did you stop before you..."

When he just shook his head, she went over to him and turned him around. Through the shorts she could see that his arousal was throbbing, painfully rigid. In fact, he looked as if his whole body ached.

"Let me ease you," she said, reaching for him.

He backed up against the marble wall between the shower and the sink.
"No, don't...Bella—"

She gathered the robe in her hands and started to kneel down at his feet.

"No!" He dragged her up his body.

She met him right in the eye and went for his waistband. "Let me do this for you."

He grabbed her hands and squeezed her wrists until they hurt.

"I want to do this, Zsadist," she said with strength. "Let me take care of you."

There was a long silence, and she spent the time measuring the sorrow and the yearning and the fear in his eyes. A chill shot through her. She couldn't believe the leap of logic her mind was taking, but she had a really vivid impression that he'd never let himself orgasm before. Or was she just jumping to conclusions?

Whatever. It wasn't like she was about to ask him. He was teetering on the brink of bolting, and if she said or did the wrong thing, he was going to tear out of the room.

"Zsadist, I won't hurt you. And you can be in control. We'll stop if it doesn't feel right. You can trust me."

It was a long time before his grip loosened on her wrists. And then finally he let go and set her back from his body. Haltingly, he pulled down the

shorts.

That arousal shot out into the space between them.

“Just hold on to it,” he said with a cracked voice.

“You. I’ll hold on to you.”

When she wrapped her palms around him he let out a moan, and his head fell back. God, he was hard. Hard as iron, yet surrounded by skin soft as his lips.

“You’re—”

“Shh,” he cut in. “No...talking. I can’t...No talking.”

He began to move in her grip. Slowly at first, and then with increasing urgency. He took her face in his hands and kissed her, and then his body completely took over with a wild pumping. He was going crazy, shooting higher and higher, his chest and hips so beautiful as he moved in that ancient male surging motion. Faster...faster...jerking back and forth...

Except then he reached some kind of plateau. He was straining, the cords of his neck nearly breaking through his skin, his body covered with sweat. But he couldn’t seem to let go.

He stopped, panting. “This isn’t going to work.”

“Just relax. Relax and let it happen—”

“No. I need...” He took one of her hands and placed it on the sac below his arousal. “Squeeze. Squeeze hard.”

Bella’s eyes flashed up to his face. “What? I don’t want to hurt you—”

He wrapped his hand around hers like a vise and twisted their grips until he cried out. Then he held her other wrist, keeping her palm against his erection.

She struggled against him, fighting to stop the pain he was inflicting on himself, but he was pumping again. And the harder she tried to pull away, the more he crushed her hand to that most tender place on a male. Her eyes went wide and unblinking at the pain of the act, the agony he must be—

Zsadist shouted, his loud bark ricocheting around the marble until she was sure everyone in the mansion must have heard him. Then she felt the mighty jerks of his release, hot pulses dampening her hands and the front of her robe.

He sagged onto her shoulders, his massive body falling all over her. He was breathing like a freight train, his muscles quivering, his big body trembling with aftershocks. When he released his hand from hers, she had to peel her palm from his testicles.

Bella was cold to the bone as she bore the weight of him.

Something ugly had sprouted between them just now, some kind of sexual evil that blurred the distinction between pleasure and pain. And though it made her cruel, she wanted to get away from him. She wanted to run from the cringing awareness that she had hurt him because he'd made her and he had orgasmed because of it.

Except then his breath caught on a sob. Or at least seemed

She held her breath, listening. The soft sound came again, and she felt his shoulders quake.

Oh, my God. He was crying....

She wrapped her arms around him, reminding herself that he hadn't asked to be tortured as he'd been. Nor had he volunteered for the aftereffects.

She tried to lift his head to kiss him, but he fought against her, drawing her close, hiding in her hair. She cradled him, holding him and soothing him as he struggled to mask the fact that he wept. Eventually he pulled back and scrubbed his face with his palms. He refused to meet her eyes as he reached over and turned the shower on.

With a quick yank he stripped the robe from her body, then wadded it up and threw it into the trash.

“Wait, I like that robe—”

“I’ll buy you a new one.”

He urged her under the water. When she fought him he picked her up easily, put her in the spray, and began to soap her hands with undisguised panic.

“Zsadist, stop it.” She pulled away, but he caught her. “I’m not dirty—Zsadist, stop. I don’t need to be cleaned because you—”

He closed his eyes. “Please...I have to do this. I can’t leave you all...covered with that stuff.”

“Zsadist,” she snapped. “Look at me.” When he did, she said, “This is not necessary.”

“I don’t know what else to do.”

“Come back to bed with me.” She shut off the water. “Hold me. Let me hold you. That’s the only thing you need to do.”

And frankly, she needed it, too. She was rattled to the core.

She put a towel around herself and pulled him into the bedroom. When they were under the covers together, she curled herself around him, but she was as stiff as he was. She’d thought proximity would help. It didn’t.

After a long while his voice came through the darkness. “If I had known how it had to be, I never would have allowed that to happen.”

She turned her face up to his. “Was that the first time you ever came?”

The silence wasn’t a surprise. That he eventually answered her was.

“Yeah.”

“You’ve never...pleasured yourself?” she whispered, even though she knew the answer. *God...* What those years as a blood slave must have been like. All that abuse...She wanted to weep for him but knew he would feel awkward about it.

He exhaled. “I don’t like to touch it at all. Frankly, I hate the fact that it was inside of you. I want you to be in a tub right now, surrounded by bleach.”

“I loved being with you. I’m glad we laid together.” It was only what had come later that she’d had difficulty with. “But about what happened in the bathroom—”

“I don’t want you to be a part of that. I don’t want you doing that to me so I...do that all over you.”

“I liked giving you an orgasm. It’s just...I care for you too much to hurt you. Maybe we could try—”

He pulled away. “I’m sorry...I have to...I’m going to V’s. I’ve got some work to do.”

She grabbed his arm. “What if I told you I thought you were beautiful?”

“I’d say you were riding a pity wave and it would piss me off.”

“I’m not feeling sorry for you. I wish you’d finished inside of me, and I think you’re gorgeous when you’re aroused. You’re thick and long, and I was dying to touch you. I still am. And I want to take you in my mouth. How about that?”

He shrugged out of her hold and got to his feet. With quick, jabbing motions, he got dressed. “If you need to cast that sex in a different light so you can deal with it, that’s fine. But you’re lying to yourself right now. In no time at all you’re going to wake up to the fact that you’re still a female of worth. And then you’re going to regret the shit out of laying with me.”

“I will not.”

“Wait for it.”

He was out the door before she could find the proper words to throw back at him.

Bella crossed her arms over her chest and seethed with frustration. Then she kicked off the covers. Damn, but it was hot in this room. Or maybe she

was so worked up, she'd screwed with her internal chemistry.

Unable to stay in bed, she dressed and went down the hall of statues. She didn't care where she ended up; she just had to get out and walk off some of this heat.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Zsadist stopped in the underground tunnel, halfway between the main house and Vishous and Butch's place.

When he looked behind himself there was nothing but a row of ceiling lights. In front of him there was more of the same, a strip of glowing patches that went on and on. The door he'd entered from and the door he would exit out of were both unseen to him.

Well, wasn't this a perfect fucking metaphor for life.

He settled against the steel wall of the tunnel, feeling trapped in spite of the fact that he was held by nothing and no one.

Oh, but that was bullshit. Bella was trapping him. Chaining him. Tying him up with her beautiful body and her kind heart and that misplaced chimera of love that glowed in her sapphire eyes. Trapped...He was so trapped.

With a sudden shift, his mind latched onto the night Phury finally got him away from the slavery.

When the Mistress had shown up with yet another male, the slave had been disinterested. After ten decades the eyes of other males no longer bothered him, and the rapes and the invasions had no new horrors to teach him. His existence was an even-keeled stretch of hell, the only real torture resting in the infinite nature of his captivity.

But then he'd sensed something odd. Something...different. He'd turned his head and looked at the stranger. His first thought was that the male was huge and dressed with expense, so he had to be a warrior. His next was that the yellow eyes staring at him held a shocking misery. Verily, the stranger

standing in the doorway had paled until his skin was waxy.

When the smell of the salve assaulted the slave's nose, he went back to looking at the ceiling, uninterested in what would happen next. Yet as his manhood was manipulated, a wave of emotion surged in the room. He looked back to the male who was standing just inside the cell. The slave frowned. The warrior was reaching for a dagger and looking at the Mistress as if he were going to kill—

The other door burst open and one of the courtmen spoke with panic. Suddenly the cell was filled with guards and weapons and anger. The Mistress was grabbed roughly by the male at the front of the group and slapped so hard she hit the stone wall. Then the male went for the slave, unsheathing a knife. The slave screamed as he saw the blade come at his face. A searing pain cut through his forehead and nose and cheek; then blackness claimed him.

When the slave came to consciousness, he was hanging by his neck, the weight of his arms and legs and torso choking the life right out of him. His mental reappearance was as if his body knew his last breath was coming and had awoken him on the off chance his brain could help. A sorry attempt at rescue, he thought.

Dear Virgin, shouldn't he feel pain? And he wondered if he had been splashed with water, for his skin was wet. Then he realized something thick was dripping into his eyes. His blood. He was covered in his own blood.

And what was all that noise around him? Swords? Fighting?

While choking he lifted his eyes, and for a split second all manner of suffocation left him. The sea. He was looking out at the vast sea. Joy soared for a moment...and then his vision swam from lack of air. His lids flickered and he sagged, though he was grateful that he'd seen the ocean once more before he died. He pondered vaguely whether the Fade would be anything like that vast horizon, an infinite expanse that was both unknowable and a home.

Just as he saw a shining white light before him, the pressure at his throat ceased and his body was handled roughly. There were shouts and jerky movements, then a jarring, bouncing ride that ended abruptly. Along the way, agony bloomed all over him, rushing into his bones, beating at him with dull, pounding fists.

Two shots from a gun. Grunts of pain that were not his own. And then a scream and a blast of wind on his back. Falling...he was in the air, falling...

*Oh, God, the ocean. Panic spread through him. The salt—
He felt the hard cushion of the water for only a moment before the
sensation of the sea hitting his raw skin overloaded his mind. He blacked out.*

*When he came to once more, his body was nothing more than a loose
sack holding in aches. He realized dimly that he was freezing cold on one
side, moderately warm on the other, and he moved to see if he could. As soon
as he did, he felt the warmth against him shift in response.... He was in an
embrace. A male was against the back of him.*

*The slave shoved the hard body away from his own and dragged himself
through the dirt. His blurry vision showed him the way, pulling a boulder out
of the blackness, giving him something to hide behind. When he was sheltered
he breathed through the discomfort of his vitals, smelling the brine of the sea
and the wretched decay of dead fish.*

And as well a tinny scent. A sharp, tinny...

*He peered around the edge of the rock. Though his eyes were weak, he
was able to pick out the form of the male who had come into the cell with the
Mistress. The warrior was sitting up against the wall now, his long hair
hanging in strings down his thick shoulders. His fancy clothes were torn, and
his yellow stare aglow with sorrow.*

*That was the other smell, the slave thought. That sad emotion the male
was feeling had a scent.*

*As the slave sniffed again he felt an odd pulling in his face, and he lifted
his fingertips up to his cheek. There was a groove, a rigid line in his skin....
He followed it up to his forehead. Then down to his lip. And remembered the
knife blade coming at him. Remembered screaming as it cut.*

The slave started to shiver and wrapped his arms around himself.

*“We should warm each other,” the warrior said. “Truly, that is all I was
doing. I have no...designs upon you. I would but ease you if I could.”*

*Except all the Mistress’s males had wanted to be with the slave. That was
why she brought them. She liked to watch, too....*

*Yet then the slave remembered the warrior raising that dagger, looking
as if he were going to gut the Mistress like a pig.*

The slave opened his mouth and asked hoarsely, “Who are you, sire?”

*His mouth didn’t work as it had before, and his words were garbled. He
tried again, but the warrior cut him off.*

*“I heard your inquiry.” The tinny smell of sadness got stronger until it
overrode even the fishy stench. “I am Phury. I am...your brother.”*

“Nay.” The slave shook his head. “Verily, I have no family. Sire.”

“No, I’m not...” The male cleared his throat. “I am not sire to you. And you have always had a family. You were taken from us. I have searched for you for a century.”

“I fear you wrong.”

The warrior shifted as if he were going to get up, and the slave jerked back, dropping his eyes and covering his head with his arms. He couldn’t bear to be beaten again, even if he deserved it for his insubordination.

Quickly, he said in his now messy way, “I mean not to offend, sire. I offer only my respect to your better station.”

“Sweet Virgin above.” A strangled noise came from across the cave. “I will not strike you. You are safe.... With me, you are safe. You are found, my brother.”

The slave shook his head again, unable to hear any of it, because he suddenly realized what was going to happen at nightfall, what had to happen. He was the property of the Mistress, which meant he would have to be given back.

“I beg of you,” he moaned, “do not return me unto her. Kill me now.... Do not render me returned to her.”

“I shall kill us both before I allow you to tarry there once more.”

The slave looked up. The warrior’s yellow eyes were burning through the darkness.

The slave stared into the glow for a passing time. And then he remembered, long, long ago, when he’d first awoken from his transition in capture. The Mistress had told him she loved his eyes...his canary yellow eyes.

Among his species, there were very few with irises of bright gold.

The words and the actions of the warrior began to penetrate. Why ever would a stranger fight to get him free?

The warrior shifted, winced, and picked up one of his thighs.

The male’s lower leg was gone.

The slave’s eyes grew wide at the lost limb. How had the warrior saved them both in the water with that injury? He must have struggled simply to keep himself afloat. Why had he not just let the slave go?

Only a blood tie could engender that kind of selflessness.

*“You are my brother?” the slave mumbled through his ruined lip.
“Verily, I am blood to you?”*

“Aye. I am your twin.”

The slave started to shake. “Untruth.”

“Truth.”

A curious dread set upon the slave, chilling him. He curled up into himself in spite of the raw flesh that covered him from head to foot. It had never occurred to him that he was other than a slave, that he might have had a chance to live differently...live as a male, not as property.

The slave rocked back and forth in the dirt. When he stopped, he looked once again at the warrior. What of his family? Why had this happened? Who was he? And...

“Do you know if I had a name?” the slave whispered. “Was I ever given a name?”

The warrior drew a ragged breath, as if every one of his ribs were broken.

“Your name is Zsadist.” The warrior’s breathing shortened and shortened until he choked out his words. “You are the son...of Ahgony, a great warrior. You are the beloved of our...mother, Naseen.”

The warrior let out a wretched sob and dropped his head into his hands. While he wept, the slave watched.

Zsadist shook his head, remembering those silent hours that had followed. Phury and he had spent most of the time just staring at each other. They’d both been in rough shape, but Phury was the stronger of them even with his missing limb. He’d gathered driftwood and strands of seaweed and cobbled the stuff together into a rickety, unreliable raft. When the sun had gone down they had dragged themselves into the ocean and had floated down the coastline to freedom.

Freedom.

Yeah, right. He wasn’t free; never had been. Those lost years had stayed with him, the anger over what he’d been cheated of and what had been done to him more alive than he was.

He heard Bella saying that she loved him. And he wanted to scream at something.

*Instead, he started for the Pit. He had nothing worthy of her except his vengeance, so he was damn well going to get back to work. He would see all the *lessers* crushed before him, stacked in the snow like logs, a testament to*

the only thing he could offer her.

And as for the one who had taken her, the one who had hurt her, there was a special death waiting for him. Z had no love to give anyone. But the hatred he had he would channel for Bella until the last breath left his lungs.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Phury lit a blunt and eyed the sixteen cans of Aqua Net that were lined up on Butch and V's coffee table. "What's doing with the hair spray? You boys going drag on us?"

Butch held up the length of PVC pipe he was punching a hole in. "Potato launcher, my man. Big fun."

"Excuse me?"

"Didn't you ever go to summer camp?"

"Basket weaving and woodcarving are for humans. No offense, but we have better things to teach our youngs."

"Ha! You haven't lived until you've gone on a midnight panty raid. Anyway, you put the potato in this end, you fill up the bottom with spray—"

"And then you light it," V cut in from his bedroom. He came out in a robe, rubbing a towel on his wet hair. "Makes a great noise."

"Great noise," Butch echoed.

Phury looked at his brother. "V, you've done this before?"

"Yeah, last night. But the launcher jammed up."

Butch cursed. "Potato was too big. Damn Idaho bakers. We're leading with red skins tonight. It's going to be great. Of course, trajectory can be a bitch—"

"But it's really just like golf," V said, dropping the towel across a chair. He pulled a glove over his right hand, covering the sacred tattoos that marked the thing from palm to fingertip and all across the back. "I mean, you gotta think of your arc in the air—"

Butch nodded up a storm. "Yeah, it's just like golf. Wind plays a big role
—"

“Huge.”

Phury smoked along as they finished each other’s sentences for another couple minutes. After a while he felt compelled to mention, “The two of you are spending way too much time together, you feel me?”

V shook his head at the cop. “The brother has no appreciation for this kind of thing. Never has.”

“Then we aim for his room.”

“True that. And it faces the garden—”

“So we don’t have to work around the cars in the courtyard. Excellent.”

The door from the tunnel swung open, and all three of them turned around.

Zsadist was in the doorway...and Bella’s scent was all over him. Along with the sultry spice of sex. As well as the faintest hint of the bonding mark.

Phury stiffened and took a deep drag. *Oh, God...* They’d been together.

Man, the urge to race up to the house and check that she was still breathing was nearly irresistible. So was the desire to rub his chest until the aching hole in it disappeared.

His twin had had the very thing Phury was yearning for.

“Has that SUV moved?” Z said to Vishous.

V went around to the computers and punched a few keys. “Nope.”

“Show me.”

As Zsadist walked over and bent down, V pointed at a screen. “There it is. If it hits the road, I can track the path.”

“Do you know how to break into one of those Explorers without setting off the alarm?”

“Please. It’s just a car. If it’s still there at nightfall, I’ll get you in like Flynn.”

Z straightened. “I need a new phone.”

Vishous opened a desk drawer, took one out, and double-checked it.

“You’re good to go. I’ll text-message everyone your new number.”

“Call me if that thing moves.”

As Zsadist turned his back on them, Phury took another drag and held the breath in tight. The door to the tunnel shut solidly.

Without even realizing what he was doing, Phury stabbed out the hand-rolled and went after his twin.

In the tunnel, Z halted when he heard another set of footsteps. As the male pivoted around, the light overhead picked out the hollows under his

cheekbones and the blunt cut of his jaw and the line of the scar.

“What?” he asked, his deep voice echoing. Then he frowned. “Let me guess. This is about Bella.”

Phury stopped. “Maybe.”

“Definitely.” Z’s eyes flicked downward and stayed on the tunnel’s floor. “You can smell her on me, can’t you.”

In the long silence between them, Phury wished desperately that he had a blunt between his lips.

“I just need to know...is she all right after you...laid with her?”

Z crossed his arms over his chest. “Yeah. And don’t worry, she’s not going to want to do that again.”

Oh, God. “Why?”

“I made her...” Z’s distorted lip thinned. “Whatever.”

“What? What did you do?”

“I made her hurt me.” As Phury recoiled, Z laughed with a low, sad sound. “Yeah, you don’t need to get all protective. She’s not coming near me again.”

“How...What happened?”

“Uh-huh, right. Let me count all the ways you and I aren’t going there.”

Suddenly, without any warning, Z focused on Phury’s face. The force of the stare was a surprise, because the male rarely looked anyone in the eye. “Straight up, my brother, I know how you’re feeling her and I...ah, I hope that when things cool out a little, maybe you can...be with her or something.”

Was he insane? Phury thought. Was he fucking *insane*?

“How the hell would that work, Z? You’ve bonded with her.”

Zsadist rubbed his skull trim. “Not really.”

“Bullshit.”

“It doesn’t matter, how about that? Pretty damn soon she’s going to snap out of this post-traumatic whatever she’s got going on and she’s going to want someone real.”

Phury shook his head, knowing damn well that a bonded male didn’t give up his feelings for his female. Not unless he died.

“Z, you’re crazy. How can you say you want me to be with her? It’ll kill you.”

Zsadist’s face changed and the expression was a shocker. *Such sorrow*, Phury thought. Of a depth that seemed impossible.

And then the male came forward. Phury braced himself for...God, he had

no idea what was coming at him.

When Z's hand lifted, it was not in anger or with violence. And as Phury felt his twin's palm land lightly on his face, he couldn't remember the last time Z had touched him with any gentleness. Or touched him at all.

Zsadist's voice was low and quiet as his thumb went back and forth on an unmarred cheek.

"You are the male I might have been. You are the potential I had and lost. You are the honor and the strength and the kindness she needs. You'll take care of her. I *want* you to take care of her." Zsadist dropped his hand. "It will be a good mating for her. With you as her *hellren*, she can hold her head up high. She can be proud to be seen with you at her side. She'll be socially invincible. The *glymera* won't be able to touch her."

Temptation swirled and condensed and became instinct in Phury. But what about his twin?

"Oh, God...Z. How could you stomach the idea that I was with her?"

Instantly all the softness was gone. "Whether it's you or someone else, the pain is the same. Besides, you think I'm not used to hurting?" Z's lips curled into a nasty little smile. "For me, it's home sweet home, my brother."

Phury thought of Bella and how she'd refused his vein. "But don't you think she gets a vote in all this?"

"She'll see the light. She's not stupid. Not by a long shot." Z turned away and started walking. Then he stopped. Without looking back he said, "There's another reason I want you to have her."

"Is this one going to make sense?"

"You should be happy." Phury stopped breathing while Zsadist murmured, "You live less than half a life. You always have. She would care for you, and that...that would be good. I would like that for you."

Before Phury could say something, Z cut him off. "Do you remember back in that cave...after you got me out? You know, that day we sat together waiting for the sun to go down?"

"Yes," he whispered, measuring his twin's back.

"That place smelled like hell, didn't it? Do you remember that? The fish?"

"I remember everything."

"You know, I can still picture you against the cave wall, your hair all matted, your clothes wet and stained with blood. You looked like shit." Z laughed in a short burst. "I looked worse, I'm sure. Anyway...you said you

would ease me, if you could.”

“I did.”

There was a long silence. Then a cold blast came out of Z’s body, and he looked over his shoulder. His black eyes were glacial, his face dark as hell’s groundless shadows.

“I’m past being eased. Ever. But sure as shit there’s hope for you. So you take that female you want so badly. Take her and talk some sense into her. I’d throw her out of my room if I could, but she just won’t leave.”

Z strode away, his shitkickers pounding into the ground.

Hours later Bella was walking around the mansion. She’d passed some of the night with Beth and Mary, and their friendship had been appreciated. But now all was quiet, because the Brothers and everyone else had gone to bed. It was only her and Boo roaming the halls as the day passed, the cat at her side as if he knew she needed company.

God, she was exhausted, so tired she could barely stand up, and she was achy, too. Trouble was, there was a restlessness that animated her body; her internal engine refused to go into idle.

As a flush went through her, like someone had put a hair dryer to every inch of her skin, she figured she must be getting sick, although she didn’t know how. She’d been with the *lessers* for six weeks, and it wasn’t as if she could pick up a virus from them. And none of the Brothers or their *shellans* were ill. Maybe it was just emotional.

Yeah, you think?

She went around a corner and paused, realizing she’d found her way back to the statue corridor. She wondered if Zsadist was in the room now.

And was disappointed when she opened the door and he wasn’t.

That male was like an addiction, she realized. Not good for her, but not something she could let go of.

“Time for bed, Boo.”

The cat gave her a meow, as if he were relinquishing his escort duties, and then trotted off down the hall, silent as falling snow and just as graceful.

Bella shut the door just as another hot flash tackled her. Yanking off her fleece she went over to open a window, but of course the shutters were down: It was two in the afternoon. Desperate to cool off, she headed for the shower and stood under the cold water for God only knew how long. She felt even

worse when she got out, her skin prickly, her head heavy.

Wrapping a towel around herself, she went to the bed and rearranged the messy covers. Before she got in she eyed the phone and thought she should call her brother. They needed to meet face-to-face, and they needed to do it soon, because Wrath's grace period wasn't going to last for long. And as Rehv never slept, he would be up.

Except, as another rolling wave of heat went through her, she knew she could not deal with her brother now. She'd wait until nightfall, after she got some rest. When the sun went down she would call Rehvenge and meet him somewhere neutral and public. And she would persuade him to cut the crap.

She sat down on the mattress edge and felt an odd pressure between her legs.

The sex with Zsadist, she thought. It had been so long since she'd taken a male inside. And her only other lover hadn't been built like that. Hadn't moved like that.

Images of Zsadist poised over her, his face tight and dark, his body straining and hard, sent a reverberation through her that left her trembling. In a rush, a sharp sensation speared her core exactly as if he were penetrating her again, a combination of honey and acid flooding her veins.

She frowned, dropped the towel, and looked down at her body. Her breasts seemed much larger than normal, the tips a deeper pink. Remnants of Zsadist's mouth? *Absolutely.*

With a curse, she lay down and pulled a sheet over herself. More heat boiled in her body, and she rolled over onto her stomach. Scissored her legs apart. Tried to cool herself down. The aching just seemed to get sharper, though.

As the snow started falling in earnest and the afternoon light began to fade a little, O drove his truck south on Route 22. When he got to the right spot he pulled over and looked at U.

"The Explorer is a hundred yards straight back from here. Get it the hell out of those woods. Then start buying those supplies we need and nail down those delivery dates. I want those apples tracked and I want that arsenic ready."

"Fine." U unclipped the seat belt. "But, listen, you need to address the Society. It's customary for the *Fore-lesser*—"

“Whatever.”

O looked out the windshield, watching the wipers flip the snowflakes around. Now that he had U all over this solstice festival bullshit, he was back to racking his brain for answers to his main problem: How the hell was he going to find his wife now?

“But the *Fore-lesser* always addresses the membership when he first takes over.”

Christ, U’s voice was beginning to really bug the shit out of him. And so was the guy’s by-the-book mentality.

“O, you need to—”

“Shut the fuck up, man. I’m not interested in meetings.”

“Okay.” U drew the word out, his disapproval obvious. “So where do you want the squadrons?”

“Where do you think? Downtown.”

“If they find civilians between fights with the Brothers, do you want the teams to go for captives or just kills? And are we going to build another persuasion center?”

“I don’t care.”

“But we need...” U’s voice droned on.

How was he going to find her? Where would she—

“O.”

O glared across the interior of the truck, ready to explode. “*What.*”

U’s mouth did the fish thing for a moment. Opening. Closing. “*Nothing.*”

“That’s right. No more anything from your ass. Now get the hell out of my truck and get busy doing something other than yak at me.”

He hit the gas the second U’s boots hit the gravel. But he didn’t go far. He turned off onto the farmhouse’s lane and did some recon of his wife’s place.

No tracks in the fresh snow. No lights on. Desereted.

Goddamn those Betas.

O turned around and headed downtown. His eyes were dry from lack of sleep, but he wasn’t about to waste night hours on recharging. *Fuck that.*

Man... If he didn’t get to kill something tonight, he was going to go mad.

Chapter Thirty

Zsadist spent the day in the training facility. He worked the punching bag bare-knuckled. Lifted. Ran. Lifted some more. Practiced with his daggers. When he got back to the main house it was almost four, and he was ready to go out hunting.

The moment he set foot into the foyer, he stopped. Something was off.

He looked around the lobby. Glanced up to the second floor. Listened for weird sounds. When he sniffed the air, all he could smell was the breakfast that was being served in the dining room, and he went there, convinced something was wrong, but unable to tie down what it was. He found the Brothers seated and oddly quiet, though Mary and Beth were eating and talking with ease. Bella was nowhere to be seen.

He had little interest in food, but he headed for the empty seat next to Vishous anyway. As he sat down his body felt tight, and he knew it was from the heavy exercise he'd pulled during the day.

"Has that Explorer moved?" he asked his brother.

"Not up until I came here to eat. I'll check it as soon as I get back, but don't worry. The computer will track whatever route it takes even if I'm not there. We'll be able to see the path."

"You sure?"

Vishous sent him a dry look. "Yeah. I am. Designed the program myself."

Z nodded, then put a hand under his chin and cracked his neck. Man, he was stiff.

A second later, Fritz came by with two shiny apples and a knife. After thanking the butler, Z went to work on one of the Granny Smiths. While

peeling the thing, he rearranged his body in the chair. Shit...his legs felt funny, and so did his lower back. Maybe he'd pushed it too hard? He shifted in his seat again, then refocused on the apple, turning it around and around in his hand, keeping the blade tight to the white flesh. He was almost through when he realized he was crossing and uncrossing his legs under the table like a fricking Rockette.

He glanced at the other males. V was flipping the top of his lighter open and closed and tapping his foot. Rhage was massaging his shoulder. Now his upper arm. Now his right pectoral. Phury was pushing his coffee cup around in circles and chewing his lower lip and drumming his fingers. Wrath was rolling his head on his neck, left, right, back, forth, tense as a high-voltage line. Butch seemed twitchy, too.

None of them, not even Rhage, had eaten a thing.

But Mary and Beth were normal enough as they stood up to clear their plates. They started laughing and arguing with Fritz that they should help him bring out more coffee and fruit.

The females had just left the room when the first wave of energy pushed through the house. The invisible surge went straight to the thing between Zsadist's legs, hardening it instantly. He stiffened and saw that the Brothers and Butch had all frozen, too, as if each one were wondering whether what he'd felt was right.

A moment later a second wave hit. The *it* in Z's pants thickened up even more, quick as the curse that left his mouth.

"Holy shit," someone said with a groan.

"This can't be happening," another growled.

The butler's door swung open and Beth came in, a tray of cut fruit in her hands. "Mary's bringing in more coffee—"

Wrath stood up so fast, his chair fell back and landed on the floor. He stalked over to Beth, whipped the tray out of her hands, and tossed it carelessly on the table. As cut strawberries and pieces of cantaloupe bounced off the silver and landed on the mahogany, Beth shot him a glare.

"Wrath, what the—"

He pulled her against his body, kissing her deep and hard, bending her back as if he were going to crawl up inside of her right in front of the Brotherhood. Without breaking their mouths apart, he picked her up by her waist and held her by the ass. Beth laughed softly and locked her legs around his hips. The king's face was buried in his *leelan*'s neck as he strode out of

the room.

Another surge reverberated through the house, rocking the male bodies in the room. Zsadist gripped the edge of the table, and he wasn't the only one. Vishous's knuckles were white with how hard he was holding on to the thing.

Bella...it must be Bella. Had to be. Bella had gone into her needing.

Havers had warned him, Z thought. When the doctor had done the internal exam on her, he'd said she'd seemed close to her fertile time.

Holy hell. A female in her need. In a house with six males.

It was only a matter of time before the Brothers got raw from their sexual instincts. And the danger to everyone became very real.

When Mary walked through the butler's door, Rhage went after her like a tank, tearing the coffeepot out of her hand and pitching it on the sideboard so it skidded and sloshed. He pushed her up against the wall and covered her with his body, his head dropping down, his erotic purring so loud it made the crystal on the chandelier tinkle. Mary's shocked gasp was followed by a very feminine sigh.

Rhage had her up in his arms and out of the room in a flash.

Butch looked down at his lap and then up at the rest of them. "Listen, I don't mean to get nasty, but is everyone else...ah..."

"Yes," V said through tight lips.

"You want to tell me what the hell is happening here?"

"Bella's gone into her needing," V said, throwing down his napkin.
"Christ. How long before nightfall?"

Phury checked his watch. "Almost two hours."

"We'll be a mess by then. Tell me you have some red smoke."

"Yeah, plenty."

"Butch, do yourself a favor and get off the property fast. The Pit is not going to be far enough away from her. I didn't think humans would respond, but since you are, you'd better go before you get sucked in."

Another assault hit them, and Z collapsed back against the chair, his hips surging involuntarily. He heard the groans of the others and realized they were in deep shit. No matter how civilized they pretended to be, males couldn't help but respond to a female in her fertile time, and their sexual urges would increase as the needing progressed and strengthened.

If it weren't daylight they could have saved themselves by getting away. But they were trapped in the compound, and by the time it was dark enough for them to get out, it would be too late. After prolonged exposure, males

would instinctually resist leaving the female's vicinity. No matter what their brains told them, their bodies would fight the call to get away, and if they did depart from her, they would suffer withdrawal pangs that were worse than their cravings. Wrath and Rhage had outlets for their response, but the rest of the Brothers were in trouble. Their only hope was to numb themselves out.

And Bella...*Oh, God...* She was going to hurt more than all of them combined.

V rose from the table, steadying himself on the back of his chair. "Come on, Phury. We need to start smoking up. Now. Z, you're going to her, right?"

Zsadist shut his eyes.

"Z? Z, you're going to serve her—*right?*"

John looked up from the kitchen table as the phone rang. Sal and Regin, the family's *doggen*, were out getting groceries. He picked up the call.

"John, that you?" It was Tohr on the downstairs line.

John whistled and took another bite of his white rice and ginger sauce.

"Listen, school's canceled for today. I'm calling all the families now."

John lowered his fork and whistled an ascending note.

"There's a...complication at the compound. But we should be back on tomorrow or the night after. We'll see how things go. In light of this, we've moved up your appointment at Havers's. Butch is going to come get you right now, okay?"

John whistled twice, in little short puffs.

"Good...he's a human, but he's cool. I trust him." The doorbell rang.
"That's probably him—yeah, that's Butch. I can see him on the video monitor. Listen, John...about this therapist business. If it creeps you out, you don't have to go back, okay? I won't let anyone make you."

John sighed into the phone and thought, *Thank you.*

Tohr laughed softly. "Yeah, I'm not much for the emotive crap either—Ouch! Wellsie, what the hell?"

There was a rapid conversation in the Old Language.

"Anyway," Tohr said into the phone. "You text-message me when it's done, okay?"

John whistled twice, hung up, and put his dish and fork into the washer.

Therapist...training...Neither one was something to look forward to, but all things being equal, he'd take whatever shrink he was going to see over

Lash any day. Hell, at least the appointment with the doc wouldn't last more than sixty minutes. Lash he had to deal with for hours.

On the way out he picked up his jacket and his notebook. As he opened the door the big human on the front stoop smiled down at him.

"Hey, J-man. I'm Butch. Butch O'Neal. Your taxi."

Whoa. This Butch O'Neal was...well, the man was dressed like a *GQ* model, for one thing. Under a black cashmere coat he had on a fancy pinstriped suit, an awesome red tie, a bright white shirt. His dark hair was pushed off his forehead in a casual, finger-brushed way that totally rocked out. And his shoes...wow. Gucci, really Gucci...black leather, red-and-green band, shiny gold stuff.

Funny, he wasn't handsome, not in a Mr. Perfect kind of way, at least. The guy had a nose that had clearly been busted once or three times, and his hazel eyes were too shrewd and too exhausted to be classified as attractive. But he was like a cocked gun: He had a steely intelligence and a dangerous power about him that you respected. Because the combination was a flat-out killer, literally.

"John? We cool here?"

John whistled and stuck out his hand. They shook and Butch smiled again.

"So you good to go?" the man asked a little more gently. Like he'd been told John had to go back to Havers's to "talk to someone."

God... Was everyone going to know?

While John shut the door, he imagined the guys in his training class finding out, and wanted to throw up.

He and Butch walked over to a black Escalade with darkened windows and some serious chrome on the wheels. Inside, the car was warm and smelled like leather and the awesome aftershave Butch was wearing.

They took off and Butch hit the stereo, Mystikal pumping through the car. As John looked out the window at the flurries and the peach light that was bleeding from the sky, he really wished he were going anywhere else. Well, except to class.

"So, John," Butch said, "I'm not going to front. I know why you're heading to the clinic, and I wanna tell you, I've had to go to the shrink, too."

When John looked over with surprise, the man nodded. "Yeah, when I was on the police force. I was a homicide detective for ten years, and in homicide you see some pretty f'ed up stuff. There was always some deeply

sincere guy with granny glasses and a steno pad bugging me to talk. I hated it.”

John took a deep breath, oddly reassured that the guy hadn’t liked the experience any more than he was going to.

“But the funny thing was...” Butch came to a stop sign and hit a directional signal. A second later he shot out into traffic. “The funny thing was...I think it helped. Not when I was sitting across from Dr. Earnest, the share-your-feelings superhero. Frankly, I wanted to bolt the entire time, my skin crawled so bad. It was just...afterward, I’d think about what we’d talked about. And, you know, he had some valid points. It kind of cooled me out, even though I’d thought I was fine. So it was all good.”

John cocked his head to one side.

“What did I see?” Butch murmured. The man was silent for a long time. It wasn’t until they pulled into another very ritzy neighborhood that he answered. “Nothing special, son. Nothing special.”

Butch turned into a driveway, stopped at a pair of gates, and put down the window. After he hit an intercom button and said his name, they were allowed to pass.

When the Escalade was parked behind a stuccoed mansion the size of a high school, John opened his door. As he met Butch on the other side of the SUV, he realized the guy had taken out a handgun: The thing was in his grip and hanging by his thigh, barely noticeable.

John had seen this trick before. Phury had armed himself in a similar way when the two of them had gone to the clinic a couple of nights ago. Weren’t the Brothers safe here?

John looked around. Everything seemed really normal, for a big-money estate.

Maybe the Brothers weren’t safe anywhere.

Butch took John’s arm and walked quickly to a solid-steel door, all the while scanning the ten-car garage behind the house, the oak trees on the periphery, the two other cars parked by what looked like a kitchen entrance. John jogged to keep up.

When they were at the back door Butch showed his face to a camera, and the steel panels in front of them made a clicking noise, then slid back. They went into a vestibule, the doors closed behind them, and then a freight elevator opened up. They took it down one level and stepped out.

Standing in front of them was a nurse John recognized from before. As

she smiled and welcomed them, Butch put the handgun away in a holster under his left arm.

The nurse swept her hand toward a hallway. “Petrilla is waiting.”

Squeezing his notebook, John took a deep breath and followed the woman, feeling as if he were going to the gallows.

Z stopped in front of his bedroom door. He was just going to check on Bella and then he was going to make a beeline for Phury’s room and get himself good and stoned. He hated any kind of drugged-out feeling, but anything was better than this raging urge to have sex.

He cracked the door and sagged against the jamb. The fragrance in the room was like a garden in full bloom, the loveliest thing that had ever shot up the inside of his nose.

The front of his pants pounded, the *it* screaming to get out.

“Bella?” he said into the darkness.

When he heard a moan, he went inside, closing the door behind him.

Oh, God. The perfume of her... He started to growl deep in the back of his throat, and his fingers cranked into claws. His feet took over, marching him to the bed, his instincts leaving his mind behind.

Bella was writhing on top of the mattress, tangled in the sheets. When she saw him she cried out, but then she settled down, as if she’d willed herself calm.

“I’m okay.” She rolled over onto her stomach, her thighs rubbing together as she pulled the duvet over her body. “I’m...really...It’s going to be—”

Another shock wave came out of her, so strong it pushed him back as she jackknifed into a ball.

“Go,” she groaned. “Worse...when you’re here. Oh...God...”

As she let out a ragged curse, Z stumbled back to the door even though his body roared for him to stay.

Getting himself out into the corridor was like hauling a mastiff off a target, and once he shut the door he raced for Phury’s.

From all the way down the hall of statues he could smell what his twin and V were lighting up. And when he burst inside the bedroom, the blanket of smoke was already thick as fog.

Vishous and Phury were on the bed, thick blunts between their fingers, mouths tight, bodies straining.

“What the hell are you doing here?” V demanded.

“Give me some,” he said, nodding at the mahogany box between them.

“Why have you left her?” V sucked in hard, the hand-rolled’s orange tip glowing bright. “The needing hasn’t passed.”

“She said it was worse when I was there.” Z leaned over his twin and grabbed a blunt. He had trouble lighting the thing because his hands were shaking so badly.

“How’s that possible?”

“Do I look like I have any experience with this shit?”

“But it’s supposed to get better if a male’s with her.” V scrubbed his face, then looked over in disbelief. “Wait a minute—you didn’t lay with her, did you? Z...? Z, answer the fucking question.”

“No, I didn’t,” he snapped, aware that Phury was very, very quiet.

“How could you leave that poor female unserved in her condition?”

“She said she was okay.”

“Yeah, well, it’s just getting started. She’s not going to be okay. The only way to relieve the pain is if a male finishes inside of her, you feel me? You can’t leave her like that. It’s cruel.”

Z paced over to one of the windows. The shutters were still down for the day, and he thought of the sun, that great, bright jailer. God, he wished he could get out of the house. He felt like a trap was closing in on him, and the urge to run was almost as bad as the lust he was crippled with.

He thought of Phury, who was keeping his eyes down and not saying a word.

Now’s your chance, Z thought. Just send your twin down the hall to her. Send him in to service her in her need.

Go on. Tell him to leave this room and go to yours and take off his clothes and cover her with his body.

Oh...God...

Vishous’s voice cut through his self-torture, the tone gratingly reasonable. “Zsadist, it’s wrong and you know it, true? You can’t do this to her, she’s—”

“How ’bout you back the fuck off, my brother.”

There was a short silence. “Okay, I’ll take care of her.”

Z’s head whipped around just as Vishous stabbed out his hand-rolled and got to his feet. As he hiked up his leathers, his arousal was obvious.

Zsadist launched himself across the room so fast, he didn’t even feel his

feet. He tackled Vishous down to the floor and clamped his hands around his brother's thick throat. As his fangs shot out of his upper jaw like knives, he bared them with a hiss.

“You go near her and I’ll kill you.”

There was a mad scramble behind him, no doubt Phury rushing to separate them, but V put the kibosh on any rescue attempt.

“Phury! No!” V dragged some air in. “Between me...and him.”

Vishous’s diamond eyes were sharp as he looked up, and though he was struggling for breath, his voice was as forceful as always.

“Relax, Zsadist...you dumb fuck....” Deep breath. “I’m going nowhere.... Just needed to get your attention. Now loosen...your grip.”

Z eased his hold, but didn’t get off the brother.

Vishous inhaled with a big suck. A couple of times. “You feel your flow right now, Z? You feel that territorial urge? You’ve bonded with her.”

Z wanted to deny it, but that was tough to do, considering the linebacker routine he’d just pulled. And the fact that he still had his hands around the male’s throat.

V’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Your path out of hell is waiting for you. She’s down that hall, man. Don’t be a fool. Go to her. It’ll take care of both of you.”

Z swung his leg up and dismounted, letting himself roll onto the floor. To avoid thinking about paths out and females and sex, he wondered idly what had happened to the blunt he’d been smoking. Glancing over at the window, he found he’d had the decency to balance it on the sill before he’d launched at Vishous like a rocket.

Well, wasn’t he a gentleman.

“She can heal you,” V said.

“I’m not looking to be healed. Besides, I don’t want to get her pregnant, you feel me? What a fucking mess that would be.”

“Is it her first time?”

“I don’t know.”

“If it is, the chances are practically zero.”

“‘Practically’ isn’t good enough. What else can ease her?”

Phury spoke up from the bed. “You’ve still got the morphine, right? You know, that syringe I prepared from what Havers left? So use it. I’ve heard that’s what unmated females do.”

V sat up, balancing his thick arms on his knees. As he pushed his hair

back, the sprawling tattoo at his right temple flashed. “It won’t completely take care of the problem, but sure as shit it’s better than nothing.”

Another shock wave of heat rippled through the air. The three of them groaned and were momentarily incapacitated, their bodies whacking out, straining, wanting to go where they were needed, where they could be used to ease a female’s pain.

As soon as Z was able to, he got to his feet. As he left, Vishous was climbing back onto Phury’s bed and lighting up again.

When Z was back at the other end of the house, he braced himself before he reentered his room. Opening the door he didn’t dare look in her direction as he forced his body over to the bureau.

He found the syringes and picked up the one Phury had filled. Taking a deep breath, he turned around, only to discover that the bed was empty.

“Bella?” He walked over. “Bella, where...”

He found her crumpled on the floor, a pillow between her legs, her body trembling.

She started to sob as he knelt beside her. “It hurts....”

“Oh, God...I know, *nalla*.” He brushed her hair out of her eyes. “I’ll take care of you.”

“Please...it hurts so badly.” She rolled over, her breasts tight and bright red at the tips.... Beautiful. Irresistible. “It hurts. It hurts so badly. Zsadist, it won’t stop. It’s getting worse. It h—”

In a massive surge, she undulated wildly, a blast of energy coming out of her body. The strength of the hormones she emitted blinded him, and he got so caught up in his body’s beastly response that he didn’t feel anything... even as she grabbed his forearm with enough force to bend his bones.

When the peak faded, he wondered if she’d broken his wrist. It wasn’t that he cared about the pain; he would take any of that she needed to give him. But if she was hanging onto him that desperately, he could just imagine what she was going through in her insides.

With a wince, he realized she’d bit her lower lip hard enough to make it bleed. He wiped the blood off her mouth with his thumb. Then had to rub the stuff on his pant leg so he didn’t lap it up and want more.

“*Nalla...*” He looked at the syringe in his hand.

Do it, he said to himself. *Drug her. Take the hurt away.*

“Bella, I need to know something.”

“What?” she moaned.

“Is this your first time?”

She nodded her head. “I didn’t know it would be this bad—Oh, God...”

Her body spasmed again, her legs crushing the pillow.

He glanced back at the syringe. Better than nothing was not good enough for her, but his releasing into her seemed like a sacrilege. Goddamn it, his ejaculations were the worse of the two piss-poor options she had, but biologically speaking, he could do more for her than the morphine.

Z reached up and put the needle on the bedside table. Then he stood and kicked off his boots while he peeled his shirt over his head. He unzipped his fly, springing that hideous, aching length, and stepped out of his leathers.

He needed pain to orgasm, but he wasn’t worried about that. Hell, he could hurt himself enough to trigger a release. That was why he had fangs, right?

Bella was writhing in misery as he picked her up and laid her out on the bed. She was so magnificent against the pillows, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted, her skin glowing from the needing. But she was in such pain.

“Shhh...easy,” he whispered as he got on top of the bed. On top of her.

As their naked skin brushed, she moaned and bit into her lip again. This time he bent down and licked the fresh blood off her mouth. The taste of it, the electric tingle on his tongue, thrilled him. Scared him. Reminded him that he’d been living off weak sustenance for over a century.

With a curse he shoved all his stupid fucking baggage out of the way and focused on Bella. Her legs were sawing underneath him, and he had to force them wide with his hands, then pin them with his thighs. When he touched her core with his hand, he was shocked. She was on fire, drenched, swollen. She cried out, and the orgasm that followed relieved her struggles a little, her arms and legs going still, her breathing getting less harsh.

Maybe this was going to be easier than he thought. Maybe Vishous was wrong about her needing a male inside. In which case, he could just go down on her over and over again. Man, he would *love* to do that for a day. The first time he had put his mouth to her hadn’t lasted nearly long enough.

He eyed his clothes. Probably should have kept them on—

The force of energy that came out of her then was so great, he was actually pushed upright from her body, as if invisible hands had punched at his torso. She screamed in misery as he hovered in midair above her. When the surge passed he fell back on top of her. The orgasm had obviously made the situation worse, and now she was weeping so hard tears no longer fell

from her eyes. All she had was a case of the dry heaves as she twisted and contorted beneath him.

“Lie still, *nalla*,” he said frantically. “Let me put it in you.”

But she was too far gone to hear him. He had to muscle her to keep her in place, pushing down on her collarbone with a forearm while he forced one of her legs up and to the side. He tried to position the *it* for penetration by moving his hips, but couldn’t manage to get the angle right. Even trapped under his superior strength and weight, she still managed to flail around.

With a nasty curse Z reached between his legs and grabbed the thing he needed to use on her. He guided the bastard to her threshold and then thrust hard, joining them deep. They both yelled.

And then he dropped his head and held on for dear life, getting lost in the sensation of her tight, slick sex. His body took over, his hips moving like pistons, the punishing, grinding rhythm creating a mighty pressure in his balls and a burning in his lower belly.

Oh, God... A release was coming for him. Just as it had in the bathroom when she’d held on as he pumped. Only hotter. Wilder. Out of control.

“Oh, Jesus!” he hollered.

Their bodies were slapping together and he was mostly blind and he was sweating all over her and the bonding scent was a screaming roar in his nose.... And then she called his name and seized up under him. Her core grabbed onto him in spasms that milked him until—*Oh, shit, God, no*—

On reflex he tried to pull out, but the orgasm tackled him from behind, shooting up his spine and nailing him in the back of the head just as he felt the release bullet out of his body into hers. And the damn thing didn’t stop. He came in great waves, pouring into her, filling her up. There was nothing he could do to stop the eruptions even though he knew what he was spilling into her.

When the last shudder left him, he lifted his head. Bella’s eyes were closed, her breathing even, the deep grooves in her face gone.

Her hands ran up his ribs and onto his shoulders, and she turned her face into his bicep with a sigh. The quiet in the room, in her body, was jarring. So was the fact that he’d ejaculated only because she’d made him feel...good.

Good? No, that didn’t go far enough. She’d made him feel...alive. Awakened.

Z touched her hair, spreading the dark waves across a creamy pillow. There had been no pain for him, for his body. Just pleasure. A miracle...

Except then he became aware of the wetness where they were joined.

The implications of what he'd done in her made him twitchy, and he couldn't fight the compulsion to clean her up. He pulled out and quickly headed for the bathroom, where he grabbed a washcloth. When he returned to the bed, though, she'd started to undulate again, the need in her rising. He looked down at himself and watched the thing that hung from his groin grow hard and long in response.

"Zsadist..." she moaned. "It's...back."

He put the washcloth aside and mounted her again, but before he pushed into her he looked at her glassy eyes and had an attack of conscience. How whacked was it that he was greedy for more when the consequences were so ugly for her? Good God, he'd ejaculated into her, and the shit was all over her beautiful parts and the smooth skin of her thighs and—

"I can drug you," he said. "I can make you feel no pain and you won't have me inside you. I can help you without hurting you."

He stared down at her, waiting for her answer, caught between her biology and his reality.

Chapter Thirty-one

Butch was a wired-out mess as he peeled off his coat and took a seat in the doctor's waiting room.

Good thing night had just fallen and any vampire clientele had yet to show up. Some alone time was what he needed. At least until he pulled himself together.

Thing was, this happy little clinic was located in the basement of Havers's mansion. Which meant Butch was now, at this very moment, in the same house as the guy's sister. Yup...Marissa, the female vampire he wanted like no one else on the planet, was under the same roof he was.

Man, this obsession with her was a new and different nightmare. He'd never had a case of the sweats like this for a woman before, and he couldn't say he recommended it. Nothing but a pain in the ass. And the chest.

Back in September, when he'd come to see her and she'd shut him down without even doing a face-to-face, he'd sworn he'd never bother her again. And he hadn't. Technically. Those drive-bys he'd done since, those pathetic, sissy drive-bys where the Escalade somehow found itself going by this very house, those weren't really bothering her. Because she didn't know about them.

He was so pathetic. But as long as she had no idea how whipped he was, he could almost handle it. Which was why he was on edge tonight. He didn't want to be caught hanging out in the clinic in case she thought he was after her. After all, a man had to have his pride. At least, as far as the outside world could see.

He checked his watch. A whopping thirteen minutes had passed. He figured this session with the shrink was an hour, so his Patek Philippe's long

hand had to take forty-seven more trips around before he could stuff the kid back in the car and bust on out of here.

“Would you like some coffee?” a female voice said.

He looked up. A nurse dressed in a white uniform was standing in front of him. She looked young, especially as she fiddled with one of her sleeves. She also seemed desperate to do something.

“Yeah, sure. Coffee’d be good.”

She smiled broadly, her fangs showing. “How do you like it?”

“Black. Black’s fine. Thanks.”

The whisper of her soft-soled shoes faded while she went down the corridor.

Butch unbuttoned his double-breasted jacket and leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees. The Valentino suit he’d put on before coming was one of his favorites. So was the Hermès tie around his neck. And the Gucci loafers on his feet.

If he got busted by Marissa, he’d figured he might as well look as good as he ever did.

“Do you want me to drug you?”

Bella focused on Zsadist’s face as he loomed above her. His black eyes were mere slits, and he had that beautiful flush of arousal on his stark cheekbones. He was heavy on top of her, and as the needing rose again she thought of him releasing inside of her. She’d felt a wondrous, cooling ease as soon as he’d started to come, the first relief she’d had since the symptoms of the needing had started a couple of hours ago.

But the drive was back now.

“Would you like me to put you out, Bella?”

Maybe it would be better if he drugged her. This was going to be a long night, and from what she understood, it would only get harder and more intense as the hours churned. Was it really fair of her to ask that he stay?

Something soft stroked her cheek. His thumb, brushing over her skin.

“I won’t leave you,” he said. “No matter how long, no matter how many times. I’ll serve you and let you take my vein until it’s over. I will not abandon you.”

Staring up into his face, she knew without asking that this would be their only time together. The resolve was in his eyes. She could see it clearly.

One night and no other.

Abruptly he lifted his body from hers and reached for the bedside table. His tremendous erection stood out straight from his hips, and just as he came back with a syringe, she grasped his hard flesh.

He hissed and swayed before catching himself by throwing a hand down to the mattress.

“You,” she whispered. “Not the drug. I want you.”

He dropped the needle on the floor and kissed her, spreading her thighs with his knees. She guided him into her body and felt a glorious rush as he filled her. With a mighty swell her pleasure rose and then broke into two separate needs, one for his sex, one for his blood. Her fangs elongated as she eyed the thick vein at the side of his neck.

As if he sensed what she needed, he twisted his body around so he could stay inside of her while giving her access to his throat.

“Feed,” he said hoarsely, his body moving into her and pulling back.
“Take what you need.”

She bit him without hesitation, piercing right through the slave band, going deep into his skin. As his taste hit her tongue, she heard a roar leave him. And then the strength and the power of him washed over her, through her.

O fell still over his captive, unsure he’d heard right.

The vampire he’d caught downtown and brought to the shed behind the cabin was strapped to the table, a butterfly mounted. He’d captured the male only with plans to work out his frustration. He’d never imagined he’d learn anything useful.

“What was that?” O put his ear down closer to the civilian’s mouth.

“She is called...Bella. The one...the female who was taken...her name...Bella.”

O straightened, a heady, balmy bloom flowing across his skin. “Do you know if she’s alive?”

“I thought she was dead.” The civilian coughed weakly. “She’s been gone so long.”

“Where does her family live?” When there was no immediate answer, O did something guaranteed to open the male’s mouth. After the scream faded, O said, “Where is her family?”

"I don't know. I...don't honestly know. Her family...I don't know.... I don't know...."

Babble, babble, babble. The civilian slid into the diarrhea-of-the-mouth stage of interrogation, becoming all but useless.

O slapped the thing into silence. "Address. I want an address."

When there was no reply, he provided another source of encouragement. The male gasped under the fresh onslaught, and then blurted, "Twenty-seven Formann Lane."

O's heart started pumping, but he leaned over the vampire casually. "I'm going to go there right now. If you've told the truth I'll set you free. If you haven't I'll kill you slowly as soon as I get back. Now, do you want to change anything?"

The civilian's eyes darted away. Came back.

"Hello?" O said. "You hear me?"

To hurry the civilian up, he applied pressure to a sensitive area. The thing yelped like a dog.

"Tell me," O said softly. "And I'll let you go. This will all stop."

The male's face squeezed into itself, his mouth peeling up and revealing gritted teeth. A tear snaked down his bruised cheek. Though there was the temptation to add another shot of agony as inducement, O decided not to upset the battle between conscience and self-preservation.

"Twenty-seven Thorne."

"Avenue, right?"

"Yes."

O wiped off the tear. Then slit the civilian's throat wide-open.

"You are such a liar," he said as the vampire bled out.

O didn't hang around, just grabbed his jacket full of weapons and left. He was damn sure the addresses were nothing. That was the problem with persuasion. You really couldn't trust the information you got.

He'd check out whatever was there on both streets, but he was clearly being jerked around.

Waste of fucking time.

Chapter Thirty-two

Butch swirled the last inch of coffee around the bottom of the mug, thinking that the stuff was the color of Scotch. As he tossed the cold swill back, he wished it were some high-test Lagavulin.

He checked his watch. Six minutes till seven. God, he hoped the session was only an hour. If everything went smooth, he could drop John at Tohr and Wellsie's and be sitting on his couch with a shot glass at his elbow before *CSI* came on.

He winced. No wonder Marissa wouldn't see him. What a frickin' catch. High-functioning alcoholic living in a world that wasn't his own.

Yay. Let's beat feet for the altar.

As he pictured himself at home, he had a passing thought about V's warning to get away from the compound. Trouble was, being out at a bar or on the streets alone was not a good plan, not with the mood he was in. He was as raw as the weather.

A few minutes later, voices drifted down the corridor, and John came around the corner with an older woman. The poor kid looked like he'd been pulled through a ringer. His hair was standing up like weeds, as if he'd been shoving his hands into it, and his eyes were glued to the floor. That notebook was clutched to his chest as though the thing were a bulletproof vest.

"So we'll see about the next appointment, John," the female said softly. "After you've thought about it."

John didn't respond, and Butch forgot about all his own whiny crap. Whatever had come out in that office was still out, and the boy needed a buddy. He put his arm around the kid tentatively, and when John leaned into him, all of Butch's protective instincts reared up and snarled. He didn't care

that the therapist looked like Mary Poppins; he wanted to yell at her for upsetting the little guy.

“John?” she said. “You’ll get back in touch with me about the next—”

“Yeah, we’ll call you,” Butch muttered. *Uh-huh, right.*

“I told him there was no rush. But I do think he should come again.”

Butch glanced over at the woman, thoroughly annoyed.... only to have her eyes scare the shit out of him. They were so damned serious, so very grave. What the hell had gone down in that session?

Butch looked at the top of John’s head. “Let’s go, J-man.”

John didn’t move, so Butch gave him a little push, and led the way out of the clinic, his arm still on the kid’s thin shoulders. When they got to the car John climbed into the seat, but didn’t put his belt on. He just stared straight ahead.

Butch shut his door and locked the SUV up tight. Then he turned and stared at John.

“I’m not even going to ask what’s doing. The only thing I need to know is where you want to go. You feel like heading home, I’ll take you to Tohr and Wellsie’s. You want to hang at the Pit with me, we’ll go over to the compound. You just want to drive, I’ll take you to Canada and back. I’m up for anything, so you just say the word. And if you don’t want to decide now, I’ll tool around town until you figure it out.”

John’s little chest expanded and then contracted. He flipped open the notebook and took out his pen. There was a pause, and then he wrote something and flipped the paper around to Butch.

1189 Seventh Street.

Butch frowned. That was a really shitty part of town.

He opened his mouth to ask why there of all places, but then shut his yap. The kid had clearly had enough questions thrown at him tonight. Besides, Butch was armed, and it was where John wanted to go. A promise was a promise.

“Okay, buddy. Seventh Street coming up.”

But drive around for a while first, the kid wrote.

“No problem. We’ll just chill.”

Butch started the engine. Just as he put the Escalade into reverse, he saw a flash of something behind them. A car was pulling up to the back of the mansion, a very large, very expensive Bentley. He hit the brakes so it could pass and—

Forgot how to breathe.

Marissa came out of the house from a side door. Her hip-length blond hair blew in the wind, and she huddled into the black cape she was wearing. Moving quickly across the back parking lot, she dodged chunks of snow, leaping from asphalt spot to asphalt spot.

The security lights picked up the refined lines of her face and her gorgeous pale hair and her perfectly white skin. He remembered what it had felt like to kiss her, that one time he had, and his chest stung like his lungs were being crushed. Overcome, he wanted to rush out of the car, throw himself down in the slush, and beg like the dog he was.

Except she was heading for the Bentley. He watched as the door opened for her, as if the driver had leaned across and popped the handle. When the lights came on in the interior Butch couldn't see much, only enough to tell him that it was a man, or male, who was behind the wheel. Shoulders that big didn't come on female bodies.

Marissa gathered her cape with her hands and slid inside, shutting the door.

The light went off.

Dimly Butch heard some kind of shuffling next to him, and he glanced at John. The kid had shrunk back against the far window and was looking across the seats with fear in his eyes. That was when Butch realized he had palmed his gun and was growling.

Totally creeped out by the insane reaction, he took his foot off the Escalade's brake and stomped on the gas pedal.

"Don't worry, son. Nothing doing."

As he spun them around he looked in the rearview mirror at the Bentley. It was moving now, doing its own turn in the parking lot. With a grim curse Butch tore off down the driveway, his hands gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles stung.

Rehvenge frowned as Marissa got into his Bentley. God, he'd forgotten how beautiful she was. And she smelled just as good...the clean scent of the ocean filling his nose.

"Why won't you let me come to the front door?" he said, taking in her fair hair and her flawless skin. "You should have let me pick you up properly."

“You know how Havers is.” The door shut with a solid sound. “He’ll want us mated.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“And you’re not the same way with your sister?”

“No comment.”

As he waited for an Escalade to clear out of the parking lot, Marissa laid a hand on his sable sleeve. “I know I said this before, but I’m so sorry for everything that happened to Bella. How is she?”

How the hell would he know? “I’d rather not talk about her. No offense, but I’m just... Yeah, I don’t want to go there.”

“Rehv, tonight doesn’t have to happen. I know you’ve been through a lot, and frankly I was surprised you would see me at all.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m glad you called on me.” He reached out and squeezed her hand. The bones under her skin were so delicate that he reminded himself he was going to have to be very gentle with her. She was not what he was used to.

As he drove them downtown, he could sense her nerves tightening. “It’s going to be all right. I really am cool that you called.”

“I’m rather embarrassed, actually. I just don’t know what to do.”

“We’ll take it slow.”

“I’ve only ever been with Wrath.”

“I know. That’s why I wanted to pick you up in the car. I thought you’d be too nervous to dematerialize.”

“I am.”

As they came up to a stoplight, he smiled at her. “I’m going to take good care of you.”

Her pale blue eyes looked over at him. “You are a good male, Rehvence.”

He ignored that miscalculation and concentrated on the traffic.

Twenty minutes later they were stepping out of a high-tech elevator and into the vestibule of his penthouse apartment. His place took up half of the thirty-story building’s top floor, overlooking the Hudson River and all of Caldwell. With the vast blocks of windows, he never used the place during the day. But it was perfect for the night.

He kept the lights low and waited as Marissa walked around and looked at things a decorator had bought for his lair. He didn’t care about the stuff or the views or the fancy gadgets. He cared about the privacy from his family.

Bella had never been here, and neither had their mother. In fact, neither knew he had the penthouse.

As if realizing she was wasting time, Marissa turned and faced him. Under the lights her beauty was absolutely stunning, and he was grateful for the extra hit of dopamine he'd pumped into his system about an hour ago. In *sympaths*, the drug had an opposite effect than when it was administered to humans or vampires. The chemical increased certain neurotransmitter activity and reception, ensuring that the *sympath* patient could feel no pleasure, no... nothing. With Rehv's sense of touch gone, his brain could better control the rest of his impulses.

Which was the only reason Marissa was safe to be alone with him, considering what they were going to do.

Rehv removed his coat, then walked over to her, relying on his cane more than usual because he could not take his eyes off her. Balancing the staff against his thighs, he slowly undid the bow that held her cape together. She stared down at his hands, trembling as he slid the folds of black wool from her shoulders. He smiled as he slung the weight over a chair. Her dress was the kind of thing his mother would wear and exactly what he wished his sister would put on more often: a pale blue satin gown that was fitted perfectly. It was Dior. It had to be.

“Come here, Marissa.”

He drew her over to a leather sofa and pulled her down beside him. In the glow from the windows, her blond hair was like a shawl of silk, and he took some between his fingers. Her hunger was so strong, he could feel it clearly.

“You’ve waited for a long time, haven’t you?”

She nodded and looked at her hands. They were knotted together in her lap, ivory against the light blue satin.

“How long?”

“Months,” she whispered.

“Then you’ll need a lot, won’t you?” As she blushed, he pushed her. “Won’t you, Marissa?”

“Yes,” she breathed, obviously uncomfortable with her hunger.

Rehv smiled fiercely. It was good to be around a female of worth. Her modesty and her gentleness were damned appealing.

He took off his jacket and unknotted his tie. He’d been prepared to offer her his wrist, but now that she was in front of him, he wanted her at his neck. It had been forever since he’d allowed a female to feed from him, and he was

surprised by how excited he was at the prospect.

He popped the buttons of his collar and undid the rest of them, all the way down his chest. With a surge of anticipation he yanked the shirt free and opened it wide.

Her eyes went round as she looked at his bare chest and his tattoos.

“I didn’t know you were marked,” she murmured, her voice shaking along with her body.

He eased himself back into the sofa, spreading his arms out, bringing one of his legs up. “Come here, Marissa. Take what you need.”

She looked at his wrist, which was covered by a French cuff.

“No,” he said. “This is the way I want you to do it. At my throat. It’s the only thing I ask.”

As she hesitated, he knew the rumors about her were true. She was indeed untouched by any male. And the purity of her was...something to be taken.

He squeezed his eyes shut as the darkness in him shifted and breathed, a beast locked in a cage of medication. Christ, maybe this wasn’t a good idea.

But then she was moving on him slowly, crawling up his body, her smell so like the ocean’s. He cracked his eyelids to see her face and knew he was helpless to stop the feeding. And he was not going to miss this; he had to let a few sensations come to him. Slipping loose his discipline, he opened the channel to his sense of touch, and it received with greed even with the drug, all kinds of heady information surging through the dopamine fog.

The satin of her gown was soft against his skin, and he felt the warmth of her body mingling with his own heat. Her slight weight was braced on his shoulder and...yes, her knee was between his thighs.

Her mouth parted and her fangs unsheathed.

For a split second the evil in him howled, and he called on his mind in a panic. Thank the Virgin, the damn thing came to the rescue, the rational side of him rushing forward, chaining his instincts, quieting the very sexual need to dominate her.

She wobbled as she leaned down toward his throat, unsteady as she held herself above him.

“Lie on me,” he said in a guttural voice. “Lay yourself...upon me.”

With a wince she let the lower half of her body sink into the cradle of his hips. Clearly she was worried about bumping up against an erection, and when she encountered nothing of the sort she glanced between their bodies, as if thinking she’d hit the wrong place.

"You don't have to worry about that," he murmured, running his hands up her slender arms. "Not from me." Her relief was so palpable he was offended. "Would laying with me be such a chore?"

"Oh, no, Rehvenge. No." She glanced down at the thick muscles of his chest. "You are...quite lovely. It's just...there is another. For me, there is another."

"You still love Wrath."

She shook her head. "No, but I cannot think of the one I want. Not... now."

Rehv tilted her chin up. "What kind of idiot wouldn't feed you when you needed it?"

"Please. No more talk like that." Abruptly, her eyes fixated on his neck and dilated.

"Such hunger," he growled, thrilled to be used. "Go ahead. And don't worry about being gentle. Take me. The harder the better."

Marissa bared her fangs and bit him. The two sharp penetrations shot through the drug haze, and the sweet pain speared into his body. As he moaned, he thought that he'd never been grateful for his impotence before, but he was now. If his cock had worked at all, sure as hell he'd have pushed that gown out of the way, parted her legs, and had her nice and deep as she fed.

Almost immediately she pulled back and licked at her lips.

"I'm going to taste different from Wrath," he said, counting on the fact that because she'd fed from only one male, she wouldn't know exactly why his blood hit her tongue in an odd way. Actually, her inexperience had been the only reason he'd been able to help her. Any other female who'd been around a little would know too much. "Go on, take some more. You'll get used to it."

Her head dropped again and he felt the tingling sting of another bite.

He wrapped his heavy arms around her fragile back and hugged her close as he shut his eyes. It had been so long since he'd held anyone, and though he couldn't afford to let in much of the experience, he found it sublime.

As she sucked at his vein, he had the absurd impulse to cry.

O eased up on the truck's accelerator and glided past another high stone wall.

Damn, the houses were huge on Thorne Avenue. Well, not that you could see the mansions from the street. He just assumed that with hedges and ramparts like these, there weren't a lot of split-levels and Cape Cods going on.

When this particular barricade split to allow for a driveway, he hit the brakes. To the left there was a little brass plaque that read, 27 THORNE AVENUE. He leaned forward, stretching for a look beyond, but with the drive and the wall disappearing into the darkness, he couldn't tell what was on the other side.

On a what-the-hell whim, he turned in and proceeded down the lane. A good hundred yards from the street there was a towering set of black gates, and he stopped, noting the cameras mounted on the top of them and the intercom system and the air of keep-out.

Well...this was interesting. The other address had been for shit, just an average house in an average neighborhood with humans in the living room watching TV. But whatever was behind a setup like this was big business.

Now he was curious.

Although infiltrating these barriers would require a coordinated strategy and some careful execution. And the last thing he needed was the inconvenience of tangling with the police just because he'd broken into some highflier's McMansion.

But why would that vampire have pulled this address out of his ass to save himself?

Then O saw something weird: a black ribbon tied to the gate. No, two of them, one on each side, waving in the wind.

Like they were for mourning?

Fixated by his own dread, he got out of the truck and crunched over the ice, heading for the ribbon on the right. It was mounted seven feet off the ground, so he had to stretch up his arm to finger it.

"Are you dead, wife?" he whispered. He dropped his hand and looked through the gates into the black night beyond.

He went back to the truck and reversed down the driveway. He needed to get past that wall. Had to find someplace to dump the F-150.

Five minutes later he was cursing. *Damn it*. There was nowhere to park on Thorne that wasn't totally conspicuous. The street was nothing but walls, with barely any shoulder. *Fucking rich people*.

O hit the gas and looked left. Right. Maybe he could leave the truck down

at the bottom of the hill and jog up from the main drag. It was a half mile at an incline, but he could cover the distance quickly enough. The streetlights he'd have to pass under were a bitch, of course, but it wasn't like anyone living on this road could see out from their ivory towers.

His cell phone went off and he answered it with a nasty, "What."

U's voice, which he was beginning to hate, was tense. "We've got a problem. Two *lessers* were arrested by the police."

O squeezed his eyes shut. "What the hell did they do?"

"They were taking down a civilian vampire and an unmarked patrol car went by. Two policemen engaged the slayers and more cops showed up. The *lessers* were taken into custody, and I got the call just now from one of them."

"So bail them out," O snapped. "Why are you calling me?"

There was a pause. Then U's tone had the stench of *well, duh* all over it. "Because *you* need to know this. Listen, they were packing plenty of concealed weapons, none of which they had permits for, all of which had come off the black market, with no serial numbers on the barrels. No way they're going to get bail in the morning. No public defender is that good. You need to get them out."

O scanned left and right and then turned around in a driveway the size of a football field. Yeah, there was definitely no-place to park around here. He had to go down to where Thorne Avenue dumped out on Bellman Road and leave the truck in that little village.

"O?"

"I have things I have to do."

U coughed as if he were choking back a boatload of pissed-off. "No offense, but I can't imagine anything's as important as this. What if those slayers get into a fight in general holding? You want black blood flowing so that some EMT type figures out they're not human? You have to contact the Omega and get him to call those two home."

"You do it." O accelerated even though he was headed down the hill now.

"*What?*"

"Reach out and touch the Omega." He came to a rolling stop at the bottom of Thorne and picked left. There were all kinds of cutie-pie, homey-ass shops on the street, and he parked in front of one called Kitty's Attic.

"O...That kind of request needs to come from the *Fore-lesser*. You know that."

O paused before turning off the ignition.

Terrific. Just what he wanted. More quality time with the bastard master. Goddamn it. He couldn't live with not knowing the fate of his woman any longer. There wasn't time for this Society bullshit.

"O?"

He put his head down on the steering wheel. Banged it a couple of times.

On the other hand, if that contact with the humans down at the police station exploded in his face, the Omega was going to come looking for him. And then where would he be?

"Fine. I'll go see him now." He cursed as he put the truck in gear. Before he pulled out he looked up Thorne Avenue again.

"And O, I have a concern about the membership. You need to meet with the slayers. Things are slipping."

"You're handling the check-ins."

"They want to see you. They're questioning your leadership."

"U, you know what they say about messengers, right?"

"Excuse me?"

"Too much bad news will get you shot." He turned off the phone and flipped it shut. Then hit the gas.

Chapter Thirty-three

As Phury sat on his bed, he was so strung out from the need to have sex, he could barely pour himself another shot of vodka. The bottle shook, the glass shook. Hell, the whole mattress was shaking.

He looked at Vishous, who was leaning back against the headboard beside him. The brother was just as twitchy and miserable as he nodded his head to 50 Cent's *The Massacre*.

Five hours into Bella's fertile time and they were both a mess, their bodies mostly instinct, their minds mostly fog. The compulsion to stay at the mansion couldn't be overridden, the needing pulling them in tight, paralyzing them. Thank God for the red smoke and the Grey Goose. The numbing out helped a lot.

Though not with everything. Phury tried not to think about what was going on in Z's room. Because when the brother hadn't come back, it was obvious that his body was being used, not the morphine.

Dear God... the two of them. Together. Over and over again...

"How you doing?" V asked.

"Bout the same as you, my man." He took a deep drink from his glass, his body swimming, lost, drowning in the erotic sensations trapped under his skin. He eyed the bathroom.

He was about to get up and head for a little privacy again when Vishous said, "I think I'm in trouble."

Phury had to laugh. "This won't last forever."

"No, I mean...I think there's something wrong. With me."

Phury narrowed his eyes. His brother's face looked strained, but otherwise it was the same as always. Handsome lines, goatee around the

mouth, swirling tattoos at the right temple. Those diamond eyes were sharp, undimmed even by the Grey Goose, the blunts, the needing. Their superblack centers shined with a vast, incomprehensible intelligence, a genius so powerful it was unnerving.

“Like what kind of trouble, V?”

“I, ah...” Vishous cleared his throat. “Only Butch knows this. You don’t tell anyone else, true?”

“Yeah. No problem.”

V stroked his goatee. “My visions have dried up.”

“You mean you can’t see—”

“What’s coming. Yeah. I’m getting nothing anymore. The last thing I received was about three days ago, right before Z went after Bella. I saw them together. In that Ford Taurus. Coming here. After that, there’s been... nothing.”

“You ever have something like this happen before?”

“No, and I’m not getting anyone’s thoughts anymore, either. It’s like the whole thing dried up on me.”

Abruptly the brother’s tension seemed to have nothing to do with the needing. He seemed rigid from...fear. *Holy shit.* Vishous was scared. And the anomaly was downright jarring. Of all the brothers, V was the one who never was afraid. It was like he’d been born without fear receptors in his brain.

“Maybe it’s just temporary,” Phury said. “Or you think maybe Havers could help?”

“This isn’t about physiology.” V finished the vodka in his glass and held out his hand. “Don’t hog the Goose, my brother.”

Phury passed him the bottle. “Maybe you could talk to...”

But who? Where could V, who knew everything, go for answers?

Vishous shook his head. “I don’t want...I don’t want to talk about this, actually. Forget I said anything.” As he poured, his face closed up tight, a house battened down. “I’m sure it will come back. I mean, yeah. It will.”

He put the bottle on the table next to him and held up his gloved hand. “After all, this godforsaken thing still glows like a lamp. And until I lose this whacked-out night-light of mine, I figure I’m still normal. Well...normal for me.”

They fell silent for a while, Phury looking into his glass, V staring into his, the rap in the background beating, thumping, switching to G-Unit.

Phury cleared his throat. “Can I ask you about them?”

“About who?”

“Bella. Bella and Zsadist.”

V cursed. “I’m not a crystal ball, you know. And I hate telling fortunes.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. Forget it.”

There was a long pause. Then Vishous muttered, “I don’t know what’s going to happen to them. I don’t know because I just can’t...see anymore.”

As Butch got out of the Escalade, he looked up at the grungy apartment building and wondered again why in the hell John had wanted to come here. Seventh Street was nasty and dangerous.

“This it?”

When the boy nodded, Butch activated the security alarm on the SUV. He wasn’t particularly worried about the thing being stripped while they were gone. Folks around here would be convinced one of their dealers was inside. Or someone even more picky about their shit who’d be packing heat.

John walked up to the tenement’s door and pushed. The thing opened with a squeal. No locks. Big surprise. As Butch followed, he put his hand inside his suit coat so he could get at his gun if he needed to.

John went left down a long corridor. The place smelled like old cigarette smoke and moldy decay and was almost as cold as the great outdoors. The in-house residents were like rats: unseen, only heard, on the other side of thin walls.

Down at the end the boy pushed open a fire door.

A staircase jogged up to the right. The steps had been worn down to the particleboard, and there was the sound of dripping water from somewhere a couple of flights up.

John put his hand on a banister that was screwed loosely into the wall, and he went up slowly until he got to the landing between the second and third floors. Up above, the fluorescent light that was sunk into the ceiling was in its death-rattle stage, the tubes flickering as if desperately trying to keep up a useful life.

John stared at the cracked linoleum on the floor, then looked up at the window. Starburst patterns covered the thing as if it had been pummeled with bottles. The only reason the grimy glass hadn’t broken was because it was embedded with chicken wire.

From the floor above there was a splatter of curses, a kind of verbal

shotgun that was undoubtedly the beginning of a fight. Butch was about to suggest that they get out of Dodge when John turned away of his own accord and started jogging down the stairs.

They were back in the Escalade and heading out of the bad part of town less than a minute and a half later.

Butch came to a stop at a traffic light. "Where to?"

John wrote and then flashed the pad.

"Home it is," Butch murmured, still having no idea why the kid had wanted to visit that stairwell.

John said a passing hello to Wellsie when he came into the house and then took off for his room. He was grateful that she seemed to understand he needed some space. After he shut his door he dropped his notebook on the bed, shrugged out of his coat, and immediately headed for the shower. While the water was heating up, he stripped out of his clothes. Once he was under the spray, he stopped shaking.

When he came back out, he put on a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, then eyed his laptop on the desk. He sat down in front of it, thinking that maybe he should write something. The therapist had suggested it.

God... Talking to her about what had happened to him had been almost as bad as living through the experience the first time. And he hadn't meant to be as candid as he'd been. It was just...about twenty minutes into the session, he'd cracked and his hand had started scribbling and he hadn't been able to stop once the story had begun.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember what the man who'd cornered him had looked like. Only a vague picture came to mind, but he remembered the knife clearly. It had been a five-inch, double-sided switchblade with a point on it sharp as a scream.

He ran his forefinger over the mouse square on the laptop and the Windows XP screen saver blinked off. His e-mail account had a fresh message in it. From Sarelle. He read the thing three times before trying to reply.

In the end, he sent her back: *Hey, Sarelle, tomorrow night's not going to work for me. I'm really sorry. I'll get back with you sometime. TTYL, John.*

He really...didn't want to see her again. Not for a while, at any rate. He didn't want to see any females except for Wellsie and Mary and Beth and

Bella. There was going to be nothing even remotely sexual in his life until he came to terms with what had been done to him almost a year ago.

He moved out of Hotmail and opened a fresh document in Microsoft Word.

He rested his fingers on the keyboard for only a moment. And then they started to fly.

Chapter Thirty-four

Zsadist dragged his head over to the side and looked at the clock. Ten in the morning. Ten...ten o'clock. How many hours? Sixteen...

He closed his eyes, so exhausted he could barely breathe. He was flat on his back, legs splayed out, arms lying wherever. He'd been in that position since he'd rolled off Bella maybe an hour ago.

He felt like it had been a year since he'd come back into the room the night before. His neck and wrists burned from the number of times she'd fed from him, and the thing between his legs was sore. The air around them was saturated with the bonding scent, and the sheets were wet with a combination of his blood and the other thing she had needed from him.

He wouldn't have traded a moment of it.

As he closed his eyes, he wondered if he could sleep now. He was starved for food and blood, so hungry not even his penchant for keeping himself on edge could override the needs. But he couldn't move.

When he felt a hand brush over his lower belly, he peeled his lids apart to look at Bella. The hormones were rising in her again, and the response she called from him answered, the *it* growing hard once more.

Zsadist struggled to roll over so he could go where he needed to be, but he was too weak. Bella shifted against him and he tried to lift himself again, but his head weighed a thousand pounds.

Reaching out, he grabbed her arm and pulled her on top of him. As her thighs parted over his hips, she looked at him in shock and began to scramble off.

"'S okay," he croaked. He cleared his throat, but it didn't help with all the gravel. "I know it's you."

Her lips came down on his and he kissed her back even though he couldn't lift his arms to hold her to him. God, how he loved kissing her. He loved feeling her mouth against his, loved having her right up close all in his face, loved her breath in his lungs, loved...her? Was that what had happened in the night? Had he fallen?

The bonding scent that was all over the both of them gave him his answer. And the realization should have shocked him, but he was too tired to bother to fight it.

Bella eased up and slid the *it* inside of her. As beat as he was, he groaned in ecstasy. The feel of her was something he couldn't get enough of, and he knew it wasn't because of her needing.

She rode him, planting her hands on his pecs and finding a rhythm with her hips because he couldn't thrust anymore with his. He felt himself gearing up for another explosion, especially as he watched her breasts sway with her movements.

"You are so beautiful," he said in his hoarse voice.

She paused to bend down and kiss him again, her dark hair falling around him, a gentle shelter. When she straightened, he marveled at the sight of her. She was glowing with health and vitality from everything he had given her, a resplendent female who he...

Loved. Yes, loved.

That was the thought that shot through his brain as he came inside of her again.

Bella collapsed on top of him, exhaled in a shudder, and suddenly the needing was over. The roaring female energy just drifted out of the room, a storm that had passed. Sighing in relief, she shifted off of him, separating her gorgeous sex from his thing. As the *it* flopped lifeless on his belly, he felt the cold of the room on that flesh, so unappealing compared to her warmth.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes..." she whispered, settling on her side, already easing into sleep.
"Yes, Zsadist...yes."

She was going to need food, he thought. He needed to go get her food.

Gathering his will, he took a deep breath, and another and another...and finally forced his upper body off the bed. His head swam wildly, the furniture and the floor and the walls spinning, trading places, until he wasn't sure whether he was on the ceiling or not.

The vertigo got worse as he shifted his legs off the mattress, and when he

stood his balance deserted him completely. He fell into the wall, slamming into the thing, and had to hold himself up by clinging to some drapes.

When he was ready, he pushed free and leaned down to her. Lifting her up in his arms was a struggle, but his need to care for her was stronger than the exhaustion. He took her to his pallet and laid her down, then covered her with the comforter they'd long ago shoved to the floor. He was turning away when she took his arm.

"You have to feed," she said, trying to draw him close. "Come to my throat."

God, he was tempted.

"I'll be back," he said, stumbling to his feet. He lurched over to the closet and drew on a pair of boxers. Then he stripped the bed of the sheets and mattress pad and left.

Phury opened his eyes and realized he couldn't breathe.

Which made sense, he supposed. His face was mashed into a wad of blankets. He moved his mouth and nose free of the jam-up and tried to get his eyes to focus. The first thing he saw, about six inches from his head, was an ashtray full of dead blunts. On the floor.

What the hell? Oh... He was hanging off the foot of the mattress.

When he heard a groan, he shoved himself up, turned his head around—and came face-to-face with one of Vishous's feet. Beyond the size-fourteen was Butch's thigh.

Phury had to laugh, and that brought the cop's groggy gaze up out of a pillow. The human looked over himself and then Phury. He blinked a couple of times, like he was hoping to wake up for real.

"Oh, man," he said with more gravel than voice. Then he glanced at Vishous, who was passed out next to him. "Oh...*man*, this is too weird."

"Get over yourself, cop. You're not that attractive."

"Fair enough." He scrubbed his face. "But that doesn't mean I'm all into waking up with two men."

"V told you not to come back."

"True. That was my bad call."

Talk about a long night. Eventually, when even the feel of clothing against their skin had gotten to be too much, they'd lost any pretense of modesty. It had just been a matter of enduring the need: lighting up red

smoke after red smoke, hitting the Scotch or the vodka, slipping into the bathroom alone to relieve themselves privately.

“So is it over?” Butch asked. “Tell me it’s over.”

Phury shuffled off the bed. “Yeah. I think so.”

He picked up a sheet and pitched it at Butch, who covered himself and Vishous. V didn’t even twitch. He was sleeping like the dead on his stomach, his eyes squeezed shut, a soft snore coming out of his mouth.

The cop cursed and rearranged his body, propping a pillow up against the headboard and leaning back. He rubbed his hair until it stood straight off his head and yawned so wide Phury heard the guy’s jaw crack.

“Damn, vampire, I never thought I’d say this, but I have absolutely no interest in sex. Thank God.”

Phury pulled on a pair of nylon warm-ups. “You want food? I’m going to make a kitchen trip.”

Butch’s eyes blissed out. “You’re actually going to bring it up here? As in, I don’t have to move?”

“You’re going to owe me, but yeah, I’m willing to deliver.”

“You are a god.”

Phury put on a T-shirt. “What do you want?”

“Whatever’s in the kitchen. Hell, make yourself really useful and drag that refrigerator on up here. I’m starved.”

Phury went downstairs to the kitchen and was about to start foraging when he heard sounds coming from the laundry room. He went over and pushed the door open.

Zsadist was cramming sheets into the washer.

And dear Virgin in the Fade, he looked like hell. His stomach was a shrunken hole; his hips stood out from his skin like tent posts; his rib cage looked like a plow field. He must have lost ten, fifteen pounds overnight. And—*holy hell*—his neck and wrists were chewed raw. But...he smelled of beautiful dark spices, and there was a peace about him, so deep and unlikely Phury wondered if his senses were playing tricks on him.

“My brother?” he said.

Z didn’t look up. “Do you know how to work this thing?”

“Ah, yeah. You put some of that stuff in the box in and you move that dial around—Here, let me help.”

Z finished stuffing the belly of the washer and then stepped back, his eyes still locked on the floor. When the machine was filling up with water, Z

muttered a thank-you and headed into the kitchen.

Phury followed, his heart in his throat. He wanted to ask if everything was okay, and not just with Bella.

He was trying to choose his words carefully when Z took a roasted turkey out of the refrigerator, tore the leg off, and bit into it. He chewed desperately, cleaning the meat from the bone as fast as he could, and the moment he was done he ripped the other drumstick free and did the same thing.

Jesus... The brother never took meat. Then again, he'd never been through a night like last night before. None of them had.

Z could feel Phury's eyes on him, and would have stopped eating if he could have. He hated people looking at him, especially when he was chewing on something, but he just couldn't get the food in fast enough.

He kept shoving stuff in his face as he took out a knife and a plate and started slicing off thin shavings of the turkey breast. He was careful to take only the very best parts of the meat for Bella. The odd bits, the corners, the stuff close to the core, that he ate himself, as it was not as good.

What else would she need? He wanted her to eat calorically dense things. And drink—he should bring her something to drink. He went back to the refrigerator and began making a pile of leftovers for review. He would choose carefully, taking to her only what was worthy of her tongue.

“Zsadist?”

God, he'd forgotten that Phury was still kicking around.

“Yeah,” he said as he cracked a Tupperware bowl.

The mashed potatoes inside looked okay, though he really would have preferred bringing her some that he'd made. Not that he knew how to do that. Christ, he couldn't read, couldn't work a damn washing machine, couldn't cook.

He had to let her go so she could find a male who had half a brain.

“I don't mean to pry,” Phury said.

“Yeah, you do.” He took a loaf of Fritz's homemade sourdough bread out of the cupboard and squeezed the thing with his fingers. It was soft, but he sniffed at it anyway. Good, it was fresh enough for her.

“Is she okay? Are...you?”

“We're fine.”

“What was it like?” Phury coughed a little. “I mean, I want to know not

because it was Bella. It's just...I've heard a lot of rumors and I don't know what to believe."

Z took some mashed potatoes and put them on the plate with the turkey; then he spooned on wild rice and covered the lot with a good dose of gravy. He threw the heavy load into the microwave, glad this was one machine he knew how to work.

As he watched the food go around, he thought about his twin's question and remembered the feel of Bella getting up on his hips. That joining, of the dozens they'd had during the night, was the one that stuck out the most. She had been so lovely on top of him, especially as she'd kissed him....

Throughout the needing, but mostly during that particular union, she'd chipped away at the past's hold on him, marking him with something good. He would treasure the warmth she'd given him for the rest of his days.

The microwave dinged and he realized Phury was still waiting for an answer.

Z put the food on a tray and grabbed some silverware so he could feed her properly.

As he turned and headed out of the room, he murmured, "She is more beautiful than I have words for." He lifted his eyes to Phury's. "And last night I was blessed beyond measure to serve her."

For some reason, the brother recoiled in shock and reached out. "Zsadist, your—"

"I have to bring my *nalla* her food. I'll see you later."

"Wait! Zsadist! Your—"

Z just shook his head and kept on going.

Chapter Thirty-five

Why didn't you show me this as soon as I got home?"

Rehvenge asked his *doggen*. As the servant flushed with shame and horror, he reached out to the poor male. "It's okay. Never mind."

"Master, I came to you when I realized you had returned for the day. But you were sleeping for once. I wasn't sure what the image was, and I didn't want to disturb you. You never rest."

Yeah, the feeding with Marissa had put him out like a light. First time he'd closed his eyes and lost consciousness in...God, whenever. But this was trouble.

Rehv sat down in front of the computer screen and replayed the digital file. It was the same as the first time he'd seen it: A man with dark hair and black clothes parking in front of the gates. Getting out of a truck. Coming forward to touch the mourning ribbons that had been tied on the iron bars.

Rehv increased the zoom until he saw the man's face clearly. Unremarkable, neither handsome nor ugly. But the body that went with it was big. And that jacket looked as if it was either padded or covering some weapons.

Rehv froze the image and did a copy on the date/time reading in the lower right-hand corner. He switched screens, calling up the files from the other camera that monitored the front gate, the heat-sensing one. With a quick paste action, he got the recording from that piece of equipment at exactly the same moment in time.

And what do you know. Body temperature of that "man" was in the fifties. A *lesser*.

Rehv switched screens again and got in real tight on the slayer's face

while the killer looked at those ribbons. Sadness, fear...anger. None of which were anonymous emotions; all of which were tied to something personal. Something lost.

So this was the bastard who took Bella. And he was coming back for her.

Rehv wasn't surprised the *lesser* had found the house. Bella's capture had been news within the species, and the family's address had never been hidden from the race...in fact, with *mahmen*'s spiritual advising, the Thorne Avenue mansion was well-known. All it would take would be the capture of one civilian who knew where they lived.

The real question was, Why hadn't the slayer come through the gates?

God. What time was it? Four in the afternoon. *Shit.*

"That is a *lesser*," Rehv said, punching his cane into the floor and rising quickly. "So we evacuate the house right now. You will find Lahni immediately and tell her the mistress must be dressed. Then you will take them both through the tunnel and drive them to the safe house in the van."

The *doggen* blanched. "Master, I had no idea that it was a—"

Rehv put a hand on the male's shoulder to quell the wheel-spin panic. "You did well with what you knew. But move quickly now. Go get Lahni."

Rehv walked as quickly as he could to his mother's bedroom.

"*Mahmen?*" he said as he opened her door. "*Mahmen*, wake up."

His mother sat up in her bed of silken sheets, her white hair coiled in a cap for the day. "But it's...it is the afternoon still. Why—"

"Lahni is coming to help you dress."

"Dear Virgin, Rehvenge. Why?"

"You are leaving this house."

"What—"

"Now, *mahmen*. I'll explain later." He kissed both her cheeks as her maid came in. "Ah, good. Lahni, you will dress your mistress fast."

"Yes, master," the *doggen* said with a bow.

"Rehvenge! What is—"

"Hurry. Leave with the *doggen*. I'll call you."

As his mother cried out his name, he went down to his private quarters and shut the doors so he wouldn't hear her. He picked up the phone and dialed the Brotherhood's number despising what he had to do. But Bella's safety had to come first. After he left a message that made his throat sting, he went to his walk-in closet.

Right now the mansion was sealed up tight for the daylight hours, so

there was no way a *lesser* could get in. The shutters covering the windows and doors were bullet-and fireproof and the house was made of stone walls that were two feet thick. To top it off, there were enough cameras and security alarms so he'd know if anyone so much as sneezed on his property. But he wanted his *mahmen* out anyway.

Plus, as soon as darkness fell, he was going to open up the iron gates and roll out the welcome mat. He wanted that *lesser* inside.

Rehv stripped out of his mink robe and put on a pair of black pants and a thick turtleneck sweater. He wouldn't get out the weapons until his mother was gone. If she wasn't totally hysterical already, seeing him covered with metal was going to throw her right over the edge.

Before he went back to check on the progress of the evac, he glanced at the locked cabinet in his closet. It was getting time for his afternoon dopamine dose. *How perfect.*

Smiling, he left his room without injecting himself, ready to bring all his senses out to play.

As the shutters lifted for the night, Zsadist lay on his side next to Bella, watching her sleep. She was on her back, tight in the crook of his arm, her head at his chest level. No sheets or blankets covered her naked body, because she was still radiating heat from the remnants of the needing.

When he'd returned after his trip to the kitchen, she'd eaten from his hand and then snoozed as he'd made up the bed with fresh linens. They'd lain together in the pitch-dark ever since.

He moved his hand from her upper thigh to the underside of her breast and brushed at her nipple with his forefinger. He'd been like this for hours, petting her, humming to her. Though he was so tired his lids were at half-mast, the calm between them was better than any rest he could have gotten if he'd shut his eyes.

As she stirred against him her hip brushed his, and he was surprised as the urge to take her rose. By now he figured he'd be done with that for a while.

He leaned back and looked down his body. Through the slit in the front of his boxers, the head of that thing he'd used on her had escaped, and as the shaft lengthened, the blunt tip pushed out farther and farther.

Feeling as if he were breaking some kind of law, he took the finger that

had been running circles around Bella's nipple and poked at the erection. It was stiff, so it moved right back into place.

He closed his eyes and, with a wince, captured the arousal in his palm. When he stroked it he was surprised at how the soft skin slid over the hard core. And the sensations were weird. Not unpleasant, really. Actually, they kind of reminded him of being inside of Bella, only not that good. Not by a long shot.

God, he was such a sissy. Afraid of his own...dick. Cock? Penis? What the hell should he call it? What did normal males call themselves? Okay, George wasn't an option. But somehow referring to it as...*it*, just didn't seem right anymore.

Now that they'd shaken hands, so to speak.

He let go of the thing and slid his palm under the waistband of the boxers. He was queased out and nervous, but figured he had to finish the Lewis-and-Clark routine. He didn't know when he'd have the heart to do this again.

He shuffled the...*dick*, yeah, he'd start with just calling it *dick*...around so it was inside, but out of the way, and then touched the balls underneath. He felt a shock ride up the erection's shaft, and the tip tingled.

That felt kind of nice.

He frowned as he explored for the first time what the good Virgin had given him. Funny that all of it had been attached to him, hanging off of him, for so long and yet he'd never done what young, post-transition males no doubt spent whole days doing.

As he brushed over the balls again, they got tighter and the dick got even harder. Sensations boiled in his lower body, and images of Bella popped into his mind, images of the two of them having sex, of him stretching her legs up and going deep into her. He recalled with bone-aching clarity what she felt like beneath him, what that channel of hers did to him, how tight she was....

The whole thing started to snowball, the pictures in his mind, the rolling currents of energy spreading out from where his hand was. His breath grew short. His mouth parted. His body did some kind of surge thing, his hips jerking forward. On impulse, he rolled over on to his back and shoved the boxers down.

And then he realized what he was doing. Was he jerking off? Next to Bella? God, he was a *nasty* bastard.

Disgusted with himself, he released his hand and started yanking the boxers back up—

“Don’t stop,” Bella said softly.

A frigid blast shot down Z’s spine. *Busted.*

His eyes went to hers as the blood hit his face.

But she just smiled at him and stroked his arm. “You’re so beautiful. The way you arched just now. Finish it, Zsadist. I know that’s what you want to do, and you have nothing to be embarrassed by. You’re beautiful when you touch yourself.” She kissed his bicep, her eyes going to the tent of his boxers. “Finish it,” she whispered. “Let me see you finish.”

Feeling like an anxious fool, but curiously unable to stop himself, he sat up and got naked.

Bella made a little noise of approval as he lay down again. Taking strength from her, he slowly slid his hand down his stomach, feeling the ridges of his muscles and the smooth, hairless skin that covered them. He didn’t really expect to be able to continue—

Holy shit. The thing was so hard, he could feel his heartbeat drumming through it.

He stared into Bella’s deep blue eyes as he moved his palm up and down. Starbursts of pleasure began to shoot off and flow through his body. God... having her watch worked for him, even though it shouldn’t have. When he’d been watched before—

No, the past was not welcome here. If he lingered on what had happened a century ago, he was going to lose this moment with Bella.

With a shove and a slam he locked away the memories of what had been done to him in front of an audience. *Bella’s eyes...see them. Be in them. Drown in them.*

Her gaze was so lovely, shining up at him with warmth, holding him as if he were in her arms. He looked at her lips. Her breasts. Her stomach...The gathering need in his blood took a geometric leap, exploding so that every inch of him felt an erotic tension.

Bella’s eyes drifted down. As she watched him work it, she took her bottom lip between her teeth. Her fangs were two little white daggers, and he wanted them in his skin again. He wanted her sucking on him.

“Bella...” he groaned. Fuck, he was *really* into this.

He cocked one of his legs up, moaning in the back of his throat as he moved his hand faster and then concentrated the motion at the tip. A second later he lost it. He cried out as his head punched back into the pillow and his spine curved up to the ceiling. Warm jets hit his chest and belly, and the

rhythmic releases went on for a time as he finished himself off. He stopped when the head was too sensitive to touch anymore.

He was breathing hard and dizzy as hell as he leaned to the side and kissed her. When he pulled back, her eyes showed how clearly she read him. She knew that she'd helped him through this first time. Yet somehow she wasn't looking at him with pity. She didn't seem to care that he was a lame-ass who up until now hadn't been able to bear touching himself.

He opened his mouth. "I l—"

A knock cut off the declaration he had no business making.

"Do *not* open that door," he barked, wiping himself off with the boxers. He kissed Bella and pulled a sheet over her before going across the room.

He braced his shoulder against the door, as if whoever was on the other side might crash into the room. It was a stupid impulse, but there was no way anyone was going to see Bella in her postneeding glow. That was for him only.

"What," he said.

Phury's voice was muffled. "The Explorer you shoved your phone into moved last night. Went to the supermarkets where Wellsie's been buying the apples for the solstice festival. We've canceled the orders, but we've got to reconnoiter. The Brotherhood's meeting in Wrath's study in ten minutes."

Z closed his eyes and leaned his forehead on the wood. Real life was back.

"Zsadist? Did you hear me?"

He glanced at Bella, thinking their time together was over. And going by the way she gathered the sheets to her chin as if she were cold, she knew it too.

God...this hurts, he thought. He actually felt it...hurt.

"I'll be right there," he said.

Dropping his eyes from Bella, he turned and headed for the shower.

Chapter Thirty-six

While night fell, O was enraged as he stalked around the cabin and gathered up the ammo he needed. He'd gotten back only a half hour ago, and the last day had been for shit. First he'd gone to the Omega and received one fuck of a tongue-lashing. Literally. The master had been ripping pissed about the two *lessers* who had been arrested, as if it were all O's fault that those incompetents had gotten cuffed and stuffed.

After the Omega was through with his first wave of sharing, the bastard master had pulled the slayers out of the human world, retracting his hold on them as if they were dogs on a leash. Interestingly, it wasn't that easy for him. Calling members of the Society home was not a flick-of-the-wrist kind of thing, and the weakness was something to remember.

Not that the frailty had lasted. Man, O had no doubt those two *lessers* were ruining the day they had traded their souls. The Omega had started in on them immediately, and the scene was right out of a Clive Barker movie. And the thing was, the slayers were undead, so the punishment could go on and on until the Omega got bored.

He'd looked very focused as O had taken off.

The return to the temporal world had been a total buzz kill. In O's absence, an insurgency of Betas had taken root. A squadron of them, all four, had gotten bored and decided to attack some other *lessers*, a kind of hunt-and-kill game that resulted in a number of Society casualties. U's increasingly frantic voice mails, left over the course of six hours, were the kind of updates that made a man want to scream.

Goddamn it. U was a total failure as a second in command. He hadn't been able to control the Beta battles, and a human had been slaughtered

during the violence. O didn't give a shit about the dead guy, but what he'd worried about was the body. The last thing they needed was the cops getting involved. Again.

So O had gone to the scene and gotten his hands dirty getting rid of the frickin' corpse; then he'd pissed away a couple of hours identifying the rogue Betas and paying each of them a visit. He'd wanted to kill them, but if there were any more vacancies in the Society's ranks, he was going to have another problem with the master.

By the time he'd finished beating the crap out of that quartet of idiots, which had been only a half an hour ago, he was in a total rage. And that was when U had called with the happy news that all the apple orders that had been put in for the solstice festival had been canceled. And why were all those buys offed? Because somehow the vampires had figured out they were being tracked.

Yeah, U was righteous on the stealth job. *Right.*

So the mass-murder tribute to the Omega had gone out the window. So O had nothing to butter the master up. So if his wife was alive, it was going to be harder to make her a *lesser*.

O had lost it at that point. Had screamed at U on the phone. Let loose all kinds of obscenities. And U had taken the on-air whipping like a pussy, getting quiet, hunkering down. The silence had driven O insane, but then he'd always hated it when people didn't fight back.

Christ. He'd thought U was stable, but in reality the bastard was weak, and O was sick of it. He knew he needed to put a knife in U's chest, and he was going to, but he'd had it with the distractions.

Fuck the Society and U and the Betas and the Omega. He had work to do that mattered.

O grabbed the truck's keys and left the cabin. He was going directly to 27 Thorne Avenue and he was going to get inside of that mansion. Maybe it was desperation talking, but he was certain the answer he was looking for was behind those iron gates.

Finally, he was going to find out the where and why of his wife.

O was almost at the F-150 when his neck started to hum, no doubt from all that screaming at U. He ignored the sensation and got behind the wheel. As he headed out, he pulled at the collar of his shirt, then coughed a couple of times, trying to loosen things up. *Shit.* This felt weird.

Half a mile later he was gasping for breath. Grabbing his throat, choking,

he wrenched the steering wheel to the right and stomped on the brakes. Punching open the door, he stumbled out. The cold air brought him a second or two of relief and then he was back to the suffocation.

O went down on his knees. As he fell face-first in the snow, his vision flickered on and off like a broken lamp. And then went out.

As Zsadist walked down the hall to Wrath's study, his mind was sharp though his body was slow. When he stepped into the room the brothers were all there, and the group fell silent. Ignoring the bunch of them, he kept his eyes on the floor and went over to the corner he usually propped himself up in. He heard someone clear a throat to get the ball rolling. Probably Wrath.

Tohrment spoke. "Bella's brother called. He's tabled the *seclusion* request and asked that she stay here for a couple of days."

Z jacked his head up. "Why?"

"He didn't give a reason—" Tohr's eyes narrowed on Z's face. "Oh...my God."

The others in the room glanced over, and there were a couple of low gasps. Then the Brotherhood and Butch just stared at him.

"What the fuck are you looking at?"

Phury pointed to the antique mirror hanging on the wall next to the double doors. "See for yourself."

Zsadist marched across the room, ready to give them all hell. Bella was what mattered—

His mouth went lax at his reflection. With a shaky hand he reached out to the eyes in the old-fashioned leaded glass. His irises were no longer black. They were yellow. Just like his twin's.

"Phury?" he said softly. "Phury...what's happened to me?"

As the male came up behind him, the brother's face appeared right beside Z's. And then Wrath's dark reflection showed up in the mirror, all long hair and sunglasses. Then Rhage's star-fallen beauty. And Vishous's Sox cap. And Tohrment's brush cut. And Butch's busted nose.

One by one they reached out and touched him, their big hands landing gently on his shoulders.

"Welcome back, my brother," Phury whispered.

Zsadist stared at the males who were behind him. And had the oddest thought that if he were to let himself go limp and fall backward...they would

catch him.

Shortly after Zsadist left, Bella walked out of his bedroom and went in search of him. She'd been about to call her brother and arrange for a meeting when she realized she had to take care of her lover before she got wrapped up in her family drama again.

Finally Zsadist needed something from her. And badly, too. He'd been nearly drained after his time with her, and she knew exactly how starved he was, knew just how desperate he was to feed. With so much of his blood in her veins, she could sense his hunger vividly, and she also knew, too, precisely where he was in the house. All she had to do was reach out her senses and she could feel him, find him.

Bella followed his pulse down the corridor of statues, around the corner, and toward the open double doors at the head of the stairs. Angry male voices boiled out of the study, and Zsadist's was one of them.

"The hell you're going out tonight," someone shouted.

Zsadist's tone was downright evil. "Don't try to order me around, Tohr. It just pisses me off and wastes your time."

"Look at yourself—you're a fucking skeleton! Unless you feed, you're staying in."

Bella came into the room just as Zsadist said, "Try to keep me here and see where it lands you, *brother*."

With all of the Brotherhood looking on, the two males were nose-to-nose, eyes locked, fangs bared.

Jesus, she thought. Such aggression.

But...Tohrment was right. She hadn't been able to see in the darkness of the bedroom, but here in the light Zsadist looked half-dead. The bones of his skull were pushing through his skin; his T-shirt was hanging from his body; his pants were sagging. His black eyes were intense as always, but the rest of him was in rough shape.

Tohrment shook his head. "Be reasonable—"

"I would see Bella *ahvenged*. That is *totally* reasonable."

"No, it isn't," she said. Her interjection brought all the heads her way.

As Zsadist looked at her, his irises changed color, flashing from the angry black she was used to into a glowing, incandescent yellow.

"Your eyes," she whispered. "What's happened to your—"

Wrath cut in. “Bella, your brother has asked that you stay here a little longer.”

Her surprise was so great, she looked away from Zsadist. “What, my lord?”

“He doesn’t want me to rule on your *seclusion* right now, and he wants you to remain here.”

“Why?”

“No idea. Maybe you could ask him.”

God, as if things aren’t confusing enough. She glanced back at Zsadist, but he was focused on a window across the room.

“You are, of course, welcome to stay,” Wrath said.

As Zsadist stiffened, she wondered how true that was.

“I don’t want to be *ahvenged*,” she said loudly. When Zsadist’s head whipped around, she spoke directly to him. “I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me. But I don’t want anyone hurt trying to get at the *lesser* who kept me. Especially not you.”

His brows cranked down on his eyes. “That is not your call.”

“The hell it’s not.” As she pictured him going to fight, terror overrode everything. “God, Zsadist...I don’t want to be responsible for your going out and getting yourself killed.”

“That *lesser*’s going to end up pine-boxing it, not me.”

“You can’t be serious! Dear Virgin, look at you. You can’t possibly fight. You’re so weak.”

There was a collective hiss in the room, and Zsadist’s eyes went black.

Oh...shit. Bella put her hand over her mouth. Weak. She’d called him weak. In front of the whole Brotherhood.

There was no greater insult. To merely insinuate that a male couldn’t handle himself with strength was unforgivable in the warrior class, no matter the basis. But to come flat out and say so, in front of witnesses, was a complete social castration, an irrevocable condemnation of his worth as a male.

Bella rushed over. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Zsadist lifted his arms out of her reach. “Get away from me.”

She put her hand back to her mouth as he stepped around her like she was a grenade. He headed out the door and his footsteps receded down the hall. When she was able, she met the disapproving eyes of his brothers.

“I will apologize to him immediately. And hear this now, I do not doubt

his courage or his strength. I worry over him because...”

Say it to them, she thought. Surely they would understand.

“I love him.”

Abruptly the tension in the room eased. Well, most of it. Phury turned away and went to the fire, leaning up against the mantel. His head dipped down as if he wanted to be in the flames.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Wrath said. “He needs it. Now go find him and apologize.”

On her way out of the study, Tohrment stepped in front of her and gave her a level look. “Try to feed him while you’re at it, okay?”

“I’m praying he’ll let me.”

Chapter Thirty-seven

Rehvenge prowled around his house, going from room to room with a restless, punching stride. His visual field was red, his senses alive, his cane left behind hours ago. No longer cold as he always was, he'd ditched the turtleneck, hanging his weapons on his bare skin. He felt all of his body, reveled in all the power of his muscles and bones. And there were other things, too. Things he hadn't experienced in...

God, it had been a decade since he'd let himself get this far gone, and because this was engineered, a deliberate recession into the madness, he felt in control—which was probably a dangerous fallacy, but he didn't give a shit. He was...liberated. And he wanted to fight his enemy with a desperation that was downright sexual.

So he was also frustrated as hell.

He looked out one of the library's windows. He'd left the front gate wide-open, trying to encourage visitors. Nothing. *Nada. Zilch.*

The grandfather clock chimed twelve times.

He'd been so sure the *lesser* would show, but no one had come through the gate, up the drive, to the house. And according to the periphery's security cameras, the cars that had passed by on the street were only those indigenous to the neighborhood: multiple Mercedes, a Maybach, several Lexus SUVs, four BMWs.

Goddamn it. He wanted that slayer, badly enough to scream, and the urge to fight, to *ahvenge* his family, to protect his turf, made sense. His bloodline reached back into the warrior elite on his mother's side, and aggression ran thick in him; it always had. Add to his core nature the anger about his sister and the fact that he'd had to rush his *mahmen* out of her home in broad

fucking daylight, and he was a powder keg.

He thought of the Brotherhood. He would have been a good candidate for them, if they'd been recruiting before his transition.... Except who the hell knew what they did anymore? They'd gone underground as the vampire civilization had crumbled, becoming this hidden enclave, protecting themselves more than the race they were sworn to defend.

Hell, he couldn't help thinking that if they'd been more focused on their job and less on themselves, they could have prevented Bella's abduction. Or found her right away.

Fresh anger stirring, he continued to walk through the house in a random pattern, looking out of windows and doors, checking monitors. Eventually he decided the aimless waiting was bullshit. He was just going to lose his mind wandering around here all night, and he had business to take care of downtown. If he set the alarms and they were triggered, he could dematerialize in the blink of an eye.

When he got up to his room, he went to his closet and paused in front of the locked cabinet in the back. Going to work unmedicated was not an option, even if it meant he had to use a gun instead of hand-to-hand on the *lesser* if the bastard showed up.

Rehv took out a vial of dopamine as well as his syringe and tourniquet. As he prepared the needle and wrapped the rubber tube around his upper arm, he stared at the clear fluid he was about to pump into his vein. Havers had mentioned that at this kind of high dose, paranoia was a side effect in some vampires. And Rehv had been doubling up the prescribed load for...Jesus, ever since Bella had been abducted. So maybe he was losing it.

But then he thought about the body temperature of that thing that had stopped in front of the gates. Fifty degrees wasn't alive. Not for humans.

He injected himself and waited until his vision came back and his body went away. Then he dressed warmly, grabbed his cane, and headed out.

Zsadist stalked into ZeroSum, totally aware of Phury's silent worry looming behind him like a damp fog. Good thing he found his twin easy to ignore, or all that despair would have sucked him down.

Weak. You're so weak.

Yeah, well, he was going to take care of that.

"Give me twenty minutes," he told Phury. "Then meet me outside in the

alley.”

He didn’t waste any time. He picked a working human whore who had her hair up in a chignon, gave her two hundred dollars, then practically pushed her out of the club. She didn’t seem to care about his face or his size or the way he moved her around. Her eyes were not tracking at all, she was so high.

When they were out in the alley, she laughed too loudly.

“How do you want it?” she said, doing a little dance in her skyscraper heels. She stumbled, then put her hands up over her head and stretched in the cold. “You look like you take it rough. Which is fine with me.”

He spun her to face the bricks and held her in place by the back of her neck. As she giggled and pretended to struggle, he restrained her and thought of the countless human females he’d sucked over the years. How clean did he get their memories? Did they wake up from nightmares of him when their subconscious stirred?

User, he thought. He was a user. Just like the Mistress.

The only difference was, he had no choice.

Or did he? He could have used Bella tonight; she’d wanted him to. But if he fed off her, it was only going to be harder for both of them to let go. And that was where they were headed. She didn’t want to be *avenged*. He could not rest while that *lesser* took up space on the earth.....

More than that, though, he couldn’t bear to watch Bella destroy herself by trying to love a male she shouldn’t. He had to get her to walk away from him. He wanted her to be happy and safe, he wanted a thousand years of her waking up with a peaceful smile on her face. He wanted her well mated, with a male she could take pride in.

In spite of the bonding he had for her, he wanted her to know joy more than he wanted her with him.

The prostitute wiggled. “We going to do this or what, daddy? ’Cause I’m getting kind of excited.”

Z bared his fangs and reared back, prepared to strike.

“Zsadist—no!”

Bella’s voice brought his head around. She was standing in the middle of the alley, about fifteen feet away. Her eyes were horrified, her mouth open.

“No,” she said hoarsely. “Don’t...do it.”

His first impulse was to get her the hell back to the house and then yell at her for leaving. His second was that he had his chance to sever ties between

them. It would be a surgical maneuver, involving a lot of pain, but she would heal from the amputation. Even if he wouldn't.

The whore looked over, then laughed, a high, happy trill. "Is she going to watch? 'Cause that'll cost you fifty bucks extra."

Bella put her hand up to her throat as Zsadist held the human between his body and the brick wall of a building. The pain in her chest was so great she couldn't breathe. To see him so close to another female...a human, a prostitute at that...and for the purpose of feeding? After all they had shared last night?

"Please," she said. "Use me. Take me. *Don't* do this."

He spun the female around so the two of them were facing front; then he clamped an arm across the woman's chest. The prostitute laughed and undulated against him, rubbing her body into his, her hips moving in a sinuous twist.

Bella put her hands out into the frigid air. "I love you. I didn't mean to insult you in front of the Brothers. *Please* don't do this to get back at me."

Zsadist's eyes locked on hers. Misery shone in them, an utter desolation, but he bared his fangs...then sank them into the woman's neck. Bella cried out as he swallowed; the human female laughed again with a lilting, wild sound.

Bella staggered back. And still his eyes didn't move from hers, even as he repositioned his bite and drank harder. Unable to watch for a moment longer, she dematerialized to the only place she could think of.

Her family's house.

Chapter Thirty-eight

“The Reverend wants to see you.”

Phury looked up from the glass of seltzer he’d ordered. One of ZeroSum’s bouncer mountains was looming over him, the Moor oozing a quiet threat.

“Any particular reason?”

“You’re a valued customer.”

“So he should leave me alone.”

“Is that a no?”

Phury cocked an eyebrow. “Yeah, that’s a *no*.”

The Moor disappeared and came back with reinforcements: Two guys as big as he was. “The Reverend wants to see you.”

“Yeah, you told me.”

“Now.”

The only reason Phury slid out of the booth was because the trio seemed ready to carry him off, and he didn’t need the kind of attention that would come when he smacked them around.

The moment he walked into the Reverend’s office, he knew the male was in a dangerous frame of mind. Not that that was a news flash.

“Leave us,” the vampire murmured from behind his desk.

As the room emptied out, he sat back in his chair, violet eyes shrewd. Instinct had Phury easing one hand behind his back, close to the dagger he carried on his belt.

“So I’ve been thinking about our last meeting,” the Reverend said, making a temple out of his long fingers. The light over him picked out his high cheekbones and his hard jaw and his heavy shoulders. His mohawk had

been trimmed, the black stripe no more than two inches off his skull.
“Yeah...I’ve been thinking about the fact that you know my little secret. I’m feeling exposed.”

Phury stayed silent, wondering where in the hell this was going.

The Reverend pushed back his chair and crossed his legs, ankle on his knee. His expensive suit fell open, revealing his broad chest. “You can imagine how I feel. How it keeps me up.”

“Try some Ambien. That’ll knock you out.”

“Or I could light up a lot of red smoke. Just like you, right?” The male ran a hand over his mohawk, lips lifting into a sly grin. “Yeah, I really don’t feel safe.”

What a lie that was. The guy kept himself surrounded by Moors who were as smart as they were lethal. And he was definitely someone who could handle himself. Besides, *sympathets* had advantages in conflict that no one else did.

The Reverend stopped smiling. “I was thinking maybe you could cop to your secret. Then we’d be even.”

“Don’t have one.”

“Bullshit...*Brother*.” The Reverend’s mouth pulled up at the corners again, but his eyes were a cold purple. “Because you *are* a member of the Brotherhood. You and those big males you come in here with. The one with the goatee who drinks my vodka. The guy with the fucked-up face who sucks my whores. Don’t know what to say about that human you hang with, but whatever.”

Phury stared hard across the desk. “You’ve just violated every social custom our species has. But then, why should I expect good behavior out of a drug dealer?”

“And users always lie. So the question was pointless anyway, wasn’t it?”

“Tread carefully, my man,” Phury said in a low voice.

“Or you’ll what? You saying you’re a Brother, so I’d better shape up before you hurt me?”

“Health should never be taken for granted.”

“Why won’t you admit it? Or are you Brothers afraid that the race you fail will rebel? Are you hiding from all of us because of the shitty job you’ve been doing lately?”

Phury turned away. “Don’t know what you’re talking to me for.”

“About the red smoke.” The Reverend’s voice was bladed like a knife.

“I’ve just run out of it.”

A flicker of unease tightened Phury’s chest. He looked over his shoulder. “There are other dealers.”

“Have fun finding them.”

Phury put his hand on the doorknob. When it refused to turn, he glanced back across the room. The Reverend was watching him, still as a cat. And trapping him in the office with his will.

Phury tightened his grip and pulled, tearing the piece of brass right off. As the door lolled open, he tossed the knob onto the Reverend’s desk.

“Guess you’re going to have to fix this.”

He took two steps before a hand grabbed onto his arm. The Reverend’s face was hard as stone, and so was his grip. With the blink of a violet eye, something flared between them, some kind of exchange...a current....

From out of nowhere, Phury felt an overwhelming tide of guilt, like someone had popped the lid off all his deepest concerns and his fears for the future of the race. He had to respond to it, couldn’t bear the pressure.

Riding the wave, he found himself saying in a rush, “We live and die for our kind. The species is our first and only concern. We fight every night and count the jars of the *lessers* we kill. Stealth is the way we protect the civilians. The less they know about us, the safer they are. That is why we disappeared.”

As soon as the words left him, he cursed.

Goddamn it, you could never trust a sympath, he thought. Or the feelings you had while you were around them.

“Let go of me, sin-eater,” he gritted. “And stay the fuck out of my head.”

The hard grip dissolved and the Reverend bowed a little, a measure of respect that was a shocker. “Well, what do you know, warrior. A shipment of red smoke just came in.”

The male brushed by and walked slowly into the crowd, his mohawk, his thick shoulders, his aura getting lost in the people whose addictions he fed.

Bella took form in front of her family’s home. The exterior lights were off, which was strange, but she was crying, so it wasn’t like she would have seen much anyway. She let herself in, turned off the security alarm, and stood in the foyer.

How could Zsadist do that to her? For all it hurt, he might as well have

had sex in front of her. God, she'd always known he could be cruel, but that went too far, even for him....

Except it wasn't about retaliation for the social slight, was it? No, that was too petty. She suspected he'd bitten that human for a declarative break. Because he wanted to send a message, a totally incontrovertible message that Bella wasn't welcome in his life.

Well, it worked.

Deflated, defeated, she glanced around her family's front hall. Everything was the same. The blue silk wallpaper, the black marble floor, the sparkling chandelier overhead. It was like stepping back in time. She'd grown up in this house, the last young her mother would ever bear, the cosseted sister of a brother who loved her, the daughter of a father she'd never known....

Wait a minute. It was quiet. Way too quiet.

"*Mahmen?* Lahni?" Silence. She wiped her tears away. "Lahni?"

Where were the *doggen*? And her mother? She knew Rehv would be out doing whatever he did during the nights, so she didn't expect to see him. But the others were always home.

Bella walked over to the curving staircase and called out, "*Mahmen?*"

She went upstairs and jogged down to her mother's bedroom. The sheets on the bed were thrown back, all a mess...something the *doggen* would never have allowed normally. With a feeling of dread she went down the hall to Rehvenge's room. His bed was also disheveled, the Frette sheets and the heaps and heaps of fur comforters he always used thrown to one side. The disorder was unheard-of.

The house was not safe. That was why Rehv had insisted she stay with the Brotherhood.

Bella rushed out into the hall and ran down the stairs. She needed to be outdoors to dematerialize, because the walls of the mansion were all inlaid with steel.

She tore out of the front door...and didn't know where she could go. Not even she knew the address of her brother's safe house, and that was where he would have taken *mahmen* and the *doggen*. And she wasn't about to waste time calling him, not in the house.

There was no choice. She was heartbroken, she was angry, she was exhausted, and the idea of going back to the Brotherhood's compound made all of that worse. But she wasn't about to be stupid. She closed her eyes and disappeared back to the Brothers' mansion.

Zsadist finished quickly with the whore, then focused on Bella. Because his blood was in her, he could sense her materializing somewhere to the south and east. He triangulated her destination to the area of Bellman Road and Thorne Avenue: a very ritzy neighborhood. Obviously she had gone to her family's house.

His instincts fired up, because that call from her brother had been too weird. Chances were, something was going down over there. Why else would the male want her staying with the Brotherhood after he'd been about to slap a *seclusion* on her?

Just as Z was going to go get her, he sensed her traveling again. This time she landed outside the Brotherhood's mansion. And she stayed there.

Thank God. He didn't have to worry about her safety for the time being.

Abruptly, the club's side door opened, and Phury came out looking decidedly stark. "You feed?"

"Yeah."

"So you should go home and wait for the strength to kick in."

"Already has." *Sort of.*

"Z—"

Phury stopped talking, and both of them whipped their heads around toward Trade Street. At the alley's throat, three white-haired men dressed in black were walking past in I-formation. The *lessers* were staring straight ahead as if they'd found a target and were closing in.

Without a word spoken, Z and Phury took off at a silent jog, moving lightly across the fresh-packed snow. When they got to Trade Street it turned out the *lessers* hadn't found a victim but were meeting up with another pack of their kind—two of which had brown hair.

Z put his palm on one of his dagger handles and trained his eyes on the pair with the dark heads. Dear Virgin in the Fade, let one of them be what he was looking for.

"Hold up, Z," Phury hissed while taking out his cell. "You stay put and I'll get reinforcements."

"How 'bout you call"—he unsheathed the dagger—"while I kill."

Z took off, keeping the knife by his thigh, because this was a high-exposure area with humans around.

The *lessers* spotted him immediately, and they fell into attack posture, their knees bending, their arms coming up. To corral the bastards, he jogged

in a fat circle around them, and they flowed with him, turning, coalescing into a triangle that faced him. When he backed into the shadows, they followed as a unit.

After darkness had swallowed them all, Zsadist lifted his black dagger high, bared his fangs, and attacked. He prayed like hell that when the violent song and dance was over one of the two dark-haired *lessers* had white roots at his scalp.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Dawn was just arriving as U walked up to the cabin and opened the door. He slowed as he stepped inside, wanting to savor the moment. The headquarters were his. He had become the *Fore-lesser*. O was no more.

U couldn't believe he'd gone and done it. He couldn't believe he'd had the balls to petition the Omega for a change of leadership. And he really couldn't believe that the master had agreed with him and called O home.

It wasn't in U's nature to lead, but he couldn't see that he had a choice. After everything that had happened yesterday with the rogue Betas and the arrests and the insurgencies, total anarchy among the slayers was coming fast and hard. Meanwhile, O was doing jack shit at the top. He'd even seemed annoyed that he had to do his job.

U had been put back against a wall. He'd been in the Society for almost two centuries, and he was damned if he was going to see the thing devolve into a loose confederation of sloppy, disorganized contract killers who occasionally went after vampires. For God's sake, they were already forgetting who their target was supposed to be, and it had been three fucking days since O had let things slide.

No, the Society had to be run with a focused, heavy hand in the temporal realm. So O had to be replaced.

U sat down at the rough table and fired up the laptop. First thing on deck was to call a general assembly and make a show of strength. That was the one thing O had done right. The other *lessers* had feared him.

U called up a list of Betas to find one to sacrifice as an example, but before he got far, he was IM'd with a nasty news flash. Last night a bloody fight had taken place downtown. Two members of the Brotherhood against

seven slayers. Fortunately, it looked as if both the Brothers had been hurt. But only one of the *lessers* had survived, so more Society members were lost.

Man, recruiting was going to be paramount. But how the hell was he going to find the time? He had to gather the reins first.

U rubbed his eyes, thinking of the work in front of him.

Welcome to the job of Fore-lesser, he thought as he began to dial his cell.

Bella glared up at Rhage, not caring that the male had a hundred and fifty pounds and eight inches on her.

Unfortunately, the Brother didn't seem to mind that she was pissed off. And he didn't budge from the bedroom door he was blocking.

"But I want to see him."

"Now's not the best time, Bella."

"How seriously is he hurt?"

"This is Brotherhood business," Rhage said gently. "Leave it alone. We'll let you know what happens."

"Oh, sure you will. Just like you all told me he was injured. For God's sake, I had to find out from *Fritz*."

At that moment, the bedroom door swung open.

Zsadist was as grim as she'd ever seen him, and he was marked up badly. One of his eyes was swollen shut, his lip was split, and his arm was in a sling. Little random cuts were all over his neck and skull, like he'd bounced on pebbles or something.

As she winced, he glanced at her. His eyes flashed from black to yellow, but then he just looked at Rhage and spoke quickly.

"Phury's finally resting." He nodded in Bella's direction. "If she's come to sit by him, let her. He'll be eased by her presence."

Zsadist turned away. As he walked down the hall, he limped, his left leg dragging behind as if his thigh wasn't working right.

With a curse Bella went after him, even though she had no idea why she bothered. He would accept nothing from her, not her blood or her love... certainly not her sympathy. He didn't want a damn thing from her.

Well, except for her to go away.

Before she caught up with him, Zsadist stopped abruptly and glanced back at her. "If Phury needs to feed, will you let him take your vein?"

She froze. Not only did he drink from another, but he found it easy to

share her with his twin. Work of a moment, nothing special. Christ, was she so disposable? Had nothing they'd shared meant something to him?

"Will you let him?" Zsadist's newly yellow eyes narrowed on her face. "Bella?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I'll take care of him."

"Thank you."

"I think I despise you right now."

"It's about time."

She pivoted on her heel, ready to go striding back to Phury's room, when Zsadist said softly, "Have you bled yet?"

Oh, terrific, another cringer. He wanted to know if he'd gotten her pregnant. Would no doubt be relieved when he heard the good news he hadn't.

She glared at him over her shoulder. "I've been cramping. You have nothing to worry about."

He nodded.

Before he could get away, she bit out, "Tell me something. If I were with young, would you mate me?"

"I would provide for you and your babe until another male did."

"My babe...as if it wouldn't be half yours?" When he said nothing, she had to push. "Would you not even acknowledge it?"

His only response was to cross his arms over his chest.

She shook her head. "Holy hell...you really are cold to the bone, aren't you."

He stared at her for a long time. "I've never asked you for anything, have I?"

"Oh, no. You've never done that." She let out a hard laugh. "God forbid you open yourself up for that."

"Take care of Phury. He needs it. So do you."

"Don't you *dare* tell me what I need."

She didn't wait for a response. She marched down the hall to Phury's doorway, shoved Rhage out of the way, and shut herself in with Zsadist's twin. She was so pissed off that it took her a second to realize she was in the dark and that the room smelled like red smoke, a lovely, chocolaty scent.

"Who's there?" Phury said hoarsely from the bed.

She cleared her throat. "Bella."

A ragged sigh rose into the air. "Hi."

“Hi. How are you feeling?”

“Downright perky, thanks for asking.”

She smiled a little until she came up to him. With her night vision, she saw that he was lying on top of the covers with only a pair of boxers on. He had a gauze pad around his belly and was covered with bruises. And—oh, God—his leg...

“Don’t worry,” he said dryly. “I haven’t had that foot-and-shin combo for over a century. And I really am okay. Just some aesthetic damage.”

“Then why are you wearing that bandage like a sash?”

“It makes my ass look smaller.”

She laughed. She’d expected him to be half-dead, and he did look like he’d been in a hell of a fight. But he wasn’t on death’s door.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

“I got hit in the side.”

“With what?”

“A knife.”

Now, that made her sway. Maybe he only seemed okay.

“I’m fine, Bella. Honestly. In another six hours I’m going to be ready to go back out.” There was a short silence. “What’s doing? Are you all right?”

“Just wanted to see how you are.”

“Well...I’m fine.”

“And, ah...do you need to feed?”

He stiffened, then abruptly reached for the comforter, pulling it over his hips. She wondered why he was acting like he had something to hide.... *Oh, right. Whoa.*

For the first time she assessed him as a male. He really was beautiful, with all that gorgeous, lush hair and a face that was classically handsome. His body was spectacular, layered with the kind of heavy muscle his twin lacked. But no matter how good he looked, he wasn’t the male for her.

It was a pity, she thought. For both of them. God, how she hated hurting him.

“Do you?” she said. “Need to feed?”

“Are you offering?”

She swallowed. “Yes. I am. So would you...May I give you my vein?”

A dark fragrance permeated the room, so strong it eclipsed the red-smoke aroma: The smell was the thick, rich scent of a male’s hunger. Phury’s hunger for her.

Bella closed her eyes and prayed that if he accepted, she could get through it without crying.

As the sun went down later in the day, Rehvenge stared at the funeral drapes hanging off his sister's portrait. When his cell phone rang he looked at the caller ID and flipped it open.

"Hello, Bella," he said softly.

"How did you know—"

"It was you? Untraceable number. Very untraceable, if this phone can't locate the source." At least she was still safe at the Brotherhood's compound, he thought. Wherever that was. "I'm glad you called."

"I went home last night."

Rehv's hand crushed the phone. "Last night? What the hell! I didn't want you going—"

Sobs came through the phone, great, wretched sobs. The misery stole his words, his anger, his breath.

"Bella? What's wrong? Bella? *Bella!*" Oh, Jesus... "Did one of those Brothers hurt you?"

"No." She took a deep breath. "And don't yell at me. I can't bear it. I'm through with you and the yelling. No more."

He dragged air into his lungs, clamping down on his temper. "What happened?"

"When can I come home?"

"Talk to me."

Silence stretched out between them. Clearly his sister didn't trust him anymore. *Shit...* Could he blame her?

"Bella, please. I'm sorry.... Just talk to me." When there was no response, he said, "Have I..." He cleared his throat. "Have I so damaged things between us?"

"When can I come home?"

"Bella—"

"Answer the question, brother mine."

"I don't know."

"Then I want to go to the safe house."

"You can't. I told you long ago, if there's trouble, I don't want you and *mahmen* in the same place. Now, why do you want to leave there? Only a day

ago you didn't want to be anywhere else."

There was a long pause. "I went through my needing."

Rehv felt the air leak out of his lungs and get trapped in his chest cavity. He closed his eyes. "Were you with one of them?"

"Yes."

Sitting down was a damn good idea right about now, but there was no chair close enough. He leaned on his cane and lowered himself to his knees on the Aubusson carpet. Right in front of her portrait. "Are you...well?"

"Yes."

"And he's claimed you."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"He doesn't want me."

Rehv bared his fangs. "Are you pregnant?"

"No."

Thank God. "Who was it?"

"I wouldn't tell you that to save my life, Rehv. Now, I'd like to leave here."

Christ... Her in her needing in a compound full of males...full of thick-blooded warriors. And the Blind King—*shit*. "Bella, tell me it was only one who serviced you. Tell me it was only one and that he didn't hurt you."

"Why? Because you're afraid of having a slut for a sister? Afraid of the *glymera* shunning me again?"

"Fuck the *glymera*. It's because I love you...and I can't bear the thought of you being used by the Brotherhood when you were so vulnerable."

A pause followed. As he waited, his throat burned so badly, he felt as though he'd swallowed a box of thumbtacks.

"There was only one, and I love him," she said. "You might as well know that he gave me a choice between him and being drugged unconscious. I picked him. But I will never tell you his name. Frankly, I don't want to ever speak of him again. Now, when can I come home?"

Okay. This was good. At least he could get her away from there.

"Just let me find a place that's secure. Call me in thirty minutes."

"Wait, Rehvenge, I want you to rescind the *seclusion* request. If you do that, I will voluntarily submit to a security detail whenever I go out, if that makes you feel safer. Is that a fair trade?"

He put his hand over his eyes.

“Rehvenge? You say you love me. Prove it. Rescind that request, and I promise we’ll work together.... Rehvenge?”

He dropped his arm and looked up at the painting of her. So beautiful, so pure. He would keep her that way always if he could, but she wasn’t a child any longer. And she was proving far more resilient and strong than he could have imagined. To have lived through what she did, to have survived...

“All right...I’ll take it back.”

“And I will call you in a half hour.”

Chapter Forty

Night fell and the light bled from the cabin. U hadn't moved from the computer all day. Between e-mails and his cell phone, he'd tracked down the twenty-eight slayers remaining in Caldwell and scheduled a general-assembly meeting for midnight. At that time he was going to reorder them into squadrons and assign a five-man task force on recruiting.

Following tonight's meeting, he was putting only two Beta squadrons downtown. Civilian vampires weren't showing up at the bars the way they used to, because too many of their kind had been pinched from that vicinity for persuasion. It was time to shift focus elsewhere.

After some thought, he'd decided to send the rest of his men out into the residential areas. Vampires were active at night. In their homes. It was really a question of finding them among the humans—

"You are such a little shit."

U burst up from his chair.

O stood naked in the doorway to the cabin. His chest was covered in claw marks, as if something had held on to him hard, and his face was swollen, his hair a mess. He looked well used and pissed off.

And as he shut the two of them in with a crack, U was unable to move: None of his large muscles fell into the defensive crouch he was screaming for, and this told him all he needed to know about who was *Fore-lesser* now. Only the top slayer had this kind of physical control over his subordinates.

"You forgot two important things." O casually withdrew a knife from a holster that hung on the wall. "One, the Omega is very fickle. And two, he has a personal taste for me. It really didn't take me long to work my way back into the fold."

As that knife came toward him, U struggled, tried to run, wanted to scream.

“So say good night, U. And give the Omega a big fat ‘hello’ when you see him. He’s expecting you.”

Six o’clock. Almost time to go.

Bella looked around the guest room she was in and figured she’d packed up everything she’d brought with her. She hadn’t had much to begin with, and anyway, she’d moved it all from Zsadist’s room the night before. Most of it had already been in an L.L. Bean bag.

Fritz would be coming for her things any minute, and he would drive the stuff to Havers and Marissa’s. Thank God the brother-and-sister pair were willing to grant Rehvenge a favor and take her in. Their mansion, and the clinic, were a real stronghold. Even Rehv was satisfied she’d be safe.

Then at six thirty she was going to dematerialize over there, and Rehv would meet her.

Compulsively she went into the bathroom and checked behind the shower curtain again to make sure she had her shampoo. Yup, nothing there. And there was nothing of hers left in the bedroom. Or in the house at all, for that matter. When she left, no one would know she’d ever been at the mansion. No one would...

Oh, Christ. Shut up with that, she thought.

There was a knock on the door. She walked over and pulled the thing open. “Hi, Fritz, my bag is on the—”

Zsadist was standing in the hall, dressed for fighting. Leathers. Guns. Blades.

She jumped back. “What are you doing here?”

He came into the room, saying nothing. But Jesus, he looked ready to pounce on something.

“I don’t need an armed guard,” Bella said, trying to keep cool. “I mean, if that’s what this is all about. I’m going to dematerialize there, and the clinic is perfectly safe.”

Zsadist didn’t speak a word. Just stared at her, all power and male strength.

“Did you come to loom at me?” she snapped. “Or is there a point to this?”

When he shut the door behind him, her heart started to pound. Especially as she heard the lock turn.

She backed up until she was against the bed. “What do you want, Zsadist?”

He came forward as if he was stalking her, his yellow eyes fixated. His body was all coiled tension, and suddenly it didn’t take a genius to figure out what kind of release he was looking for.

“Do *not* tell me you came here to mate.”

“All right, I won’t.” His voice was nothing but a deep, purring growl.

She put her hand out. Yeah, like that was going to make a difference. He could take her if he wanted to whether she said yes or not. Only...like an idiot she wouldn’t turn him away. Even after all the crap he’d pulled, she still wanted him. *Goddamn it.*

“I’m not having sex with you.”

“I’m not here for me,” he said, coming up to her.

Oh, God. His scent...his body...so close. She was *such* a fool.

“Get away from me. I don’t want you anymore.”

“Yes, you do. I can smell it.” He reached out and touched her neck, running his forefinger down her jugular. “And I can feel it pounding in this vein.”

“I will hate you if you do this.”

“You hate me already.”

If only that were true...“Zsadist, there is no way I will lay with you.”

He bent down so that his mouth was at her ear. “I’m not asking you for that.”

“So what do you want?” She shoved against his shoulders. Got nowhere. “Damn you, why are you doing this?”

“Because I just came from my twin’s room.”

“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t let him drink from you.” Zsadist’s mouth brushed against her neck. Then he pulled back and stared down at her. “You will never accept him, will you? You will never be with Phury, no matter how right he is for you socially, personally.”

“Zsadist, for chrissakes, just leave me alone—”

“You will not have my twin. So you’re never coming back here, are you?”

She exhaled in a rush. “No, I’m not.”

“And that’s why I had to come.”

Rage boiled in her, rising to meet the desire for his sex. “I don’t get it. You have taken *every* opportunity to push me away. Remember that little episode in the alley last night? You drank from her to get me to walk, didn’t you? It wasn’t about that comment I made.”

“Bella—”

“And then you wanted me to be with your *brother*. Look, I know you don’t love me, but you’re well aware of how I feel about you. Do you have any conception what it’s like to have the male you love tell you to *feed* someone else?”

He dropped his hand. Stepped away.

“You’re right.” He rubbed his face. “I shouldn’t be here, but I couldn’t let you go without...In the back of my mind I always figured you’d be back. You know, to be with Phury. I always thought that I would see you again, even if it was from a distance.”

So help her, God, she was sick of this. “Why the *hell* would you care if you saw me?”

He just shook his head and turned for the door. Which made her nearly violent.

“Answer me! Why do you care if I don’t ever come back?” He had his hand on the knob as she screamed at him, “*Why do you care?*”

“*I don’t!*”

She launched herself across the room, intending to hit him, claw him, make him hurt, she was so frustrated. But he wheeled around, and instead of slapping him she grabbed his head and dragged his mouth to hers. His arms snapped around her, holding her hard enough so she couldn’t breathe. As his tongue shot into her mouth, he picked her up and headed for the bed.

Desperate, angry sex was a bad idea. A very bad idea.

They were tangled on the mattress in a split second. He had her jeans off and was about to bite through her panties when a knock sounded on the door.

Fritz’s voice came through the panels, pleasant and respectful. “Madam, if your bags are ready—”

“Not now, Fritz,” Zsadist said in a guttural voice. He bared his fangs, shredded the silk between her thighs, and licked up the center of her.

“*Fuck...*”

His tongue went down again and he lapped at her, moaning. She bit her lip to keep from crying out and held on to his head, gyrating her hips.

“Oh, master, I beg your pardon. I thought you were at the training center
___”

“*Later, Fritz.*”

“But of course. How long would you—”

The rest of the *doggen*’s words were cut off as Zsadist’s erotic growl told Fritz everything he needed to know. And probably a little more.

“Oh...my goodness. Forgive me, master. I will not return for her things until I, ah...see you.”

Zsadist’s tongue swirled around as his hands clamped on her thighs. He drove her hard, all the time whispering hot, starved things against her secret flesh. She pushed herself against his mouth, arching up. He was so raw, so voracious...she shattered apart. He teased the orgasm out for the longest time, keeping it going as if he were desperate not to have it fade.

The stillness afterward chilled her as much as his mouth’s release of her core. He rose up from between her legs, his hand wiping across his lips. As he looked down at her, he licked his palm, catching every last bit of what he’d removed from his face.

“You’re going to stop now, aren’t you,” she said roughly.

“I told you. I didn’t come here for sex. I only wanted this. I only wanted to have you against my mouth one last time.”

“You selfish bastard.” And how ironic was it to be calling him that for *not* fucking her. *God...* This was just awful.

As she reached for her jeans, he made a low sound in the back of his throat. “You think I wouldn’t kill to be inside of you this very second?”

“Go to hell, Zsadist. Go there right—”

He moved fast as a lightning strike, taking her down hard to the bed, tackling her with his weight.

“I am in hell,” he hissed, pushing his hips into her. He swiveled them against her core, that massive erection pushing into the soft place he’d just had with his mouth. With a curse, he pulled back, unzipped his leathers...and thrust into her, stretching her so wide it almost hurt. She cried out at the invasion, but tilted her hips up so he could go in even farther.

Zsadist grabbed her knees and stretched her legs up, balling her under him; then he pounded against her, his warrior body sparing her nothing. She held on to his neck, drawing blood, lost in the grinding rhythm. This was how she’d always thought it would be with him. Hard, heavy, wild...raw. As she orgasmed again, he came with a roar, crashing into her. Hot jets filled her,

then spilled out onto her thighs as he kept pumping.

When he finally collapsed onto her, he released her legs and breathed against her neck.

“Oh, God...I didn’t mean for that to happen,” he said finally.

“I am very sure about that.” She pushed him aside and sat up, more tired than she’d been in her whole life. “I have to meet my brother soon. I want you to leave.”

He cursed, an aching, hollow sound. Then he handed over her pants, though he didn’t let them go. He looked at her for a long while, and like a fool she waited for him to tell her what she wanted to hear: *I’m sorry I hurt you, I love you, don’t go.*

After a moment he dropped his hand and stood up, arranging himself, zipping up his pants. He went to the door, moving with that lethal grace he’d always walked with. As he looked over his shoulder, she realized they’d made love while he’d been fully armed. Fully dressed, too.

Oh, but that had only been sex, hadn’t it.

His voice was low. “I’m sorry—”

“Do *not* say that to me right now.”

“Then...thank you, Bella...for...everything. Yeah, really. I...thank you.”

And just like that he was gone.

John stayed behind in the gym as the rest of the class filed out to hit the locker room. It was seven at night, but he could have sworn it was three in the morning. What a day. Training had started at noon, because the Brotherhood wanted to go out early, and there had been hours of classwork on tactics and computer technology taught by two Brothers named Vishous and Rhage. Then Tohr had arrived right at sundown and the ass-kicking had started. The three-hour workout had been brutal. Running laps. Jujitsu. More hand-to-hand weapons training, including an introduction to nunchakus, or nunchucks.

Those two wooden sticks connected by a chain were a nightmare for John, exposing all his weaknesses, especially his god-awful hand-to-eye coordination. But he wasn’t about to give up. As the other guys left to go shower, he went back to the equipment room and picked up one of the sets. He figured he’d practice until the bus came and then shower at home.

He started spinning the nunchucks slowly at his side, the whirling sound

oddly relaxing. Gradually increasing the velocity, he set them flying at a clip and then switched them to his left. Took them back. Again and again, until the sweat was once more coming out on his skin. Again and again and—

And he clonked the shit out of himself. Right on the head.

The blow made him weak in the knees, and after fighting the sag for a moment, he let himself sink down. Bracing himself with his arm, he put a hand to his left temple. Stars. Definitely seeing stars.

In the midst of all his blinking, soft laughter drifted up from behind him. The satisfaction of the sound told him who it was, but he had to look anyway. Glancing under his arm, he saw Lash standing about five feet away. The guy's pale hair was wet, his street clothes sleek, his smile cool.

“You are such a loser.”

John refocused on the mat, not really caring that Lash had caught him nailing himself in the brain. The guy had already seen that in class, so there was no new humiliation here.

God... If he could only get his eyes to clear. He shook his head, stretched his neck...and saw another pair of nunchucks on the mat. Had Lash thrown them at him?

“No one likes you, John. Why don’t you just leave? Oh, wait. That would mean you couldn’t chase after the Brothers. Then what would you do all day?”

The guy’s laughter cut off abruptly as a deep voice snarled, “You don’t move, blondie, except to breathe.”

A huge hand appeared in John’s face and he looked up. Zsadist was standing over him, dressed in full war gear.

John grabbed hold of what was in front of him out of reflex and was pulled up easily from the floor.

Zsadist’s black eyes were narrow, shimmering with anger. “The bus is ready, so get your shit. I’ll meet you outside of the locker room.”

John hustled across the mats, thinking that when a male like Zsadist told you to do something, you did it fast. When he got to the door, though, he had to glance back.

Zsadist had Lash around the neck and had lifted the guy off the mat so his feet dangled. The warrior’s voice was graveyard cold. “I saw you put him on the ground, and I’d kill you right now for it, except I’m not interested in dealing with your parents. So listen good, boy. You ever do something like that again, I’m going to thumb out your eyes and feed them to you. We

clear?"

In response, Lash's mouth worked like a one-way valve. Air went in. Nothing came out. And then he pissed in his pants.

"I'll take that as a yes." Zsadist dropped him.

John didn't stick around. He ran to the locker room, grabbed his duffel, and was out in the hall a moment later.

Zsadist was waiting for him. "Come on."

John followed the Brother out into the parking lot to the van, all along wondering how he could thank the male. But then Zsadist paused by the bus and all but shoved him inside. Then he boarded the thing himself.

Every one of the trainees cringed back into their seats. Especially when Zsadist unsheathed one of his daggers.

"We sit here," he said to John, pointing the weapon's black blade to the first bench seat.

Yeah, okay. Right. Here is good.

John squeezed up against the window as Zsadist took an apple out of his pocket and lowered himself down.

"We're waiting for one more," Zsadist told the driver. "And John and I will be your last stop."

The *doggen* bowed low behind the wheel. "Of course, sire. As you wish."

Lash slowly came into the van, the red streak around his throat a stain on his pale skin. When he saw Zsadist, he stumbled.

"You're wasting our time, boy," Zsadist said while sliding the knife under the apple's skin. "Sit your ass down."

Lash did as he was told.

As the van took off, no one said a thing. Especially as the partition closed and they were all locked in the back together.

Zsadist peeled the Granny Smith in one long strip, the skin inching down until it reached the floor of the van. When he was finished, he draped the green ribbon over his knee, then cleaved off a slice of white flesh and held it out to John on the blade. John took the piece with his fingers and ate it while Zsadist cut a hunk for himself and carried it to his mouth on the knife. They alternated until the apple was nothing but a skinny core.

Zsadist took the skin and what was left and threw them in the little trash bag by the partition. Then he wiped the blade on his leathers and started to flip it into the air and catch it. He kept this up the whole ride to town. When they got to the first dropoff, there was a long hesitation after the partition

opened. And then two of the guys shuffled by quickly.

Zsadist's black eyes followed them, and he stared hard, as if he were memorizing their faces. And all the time with the blade, up and down, the black metal flashing, the big palm catching it in the same place on the handle after every toss—even when he was looking at the guys.

This happened at each stop. Until John and he were alone.

As the partition closed, Zsadist slid the dagger into his chest holster. Then he moved to the seat across the aisle and leaned back against the window, shutting his eyes.

John knew better than to think the male was asleep, because his breathing didn't change and he didn't relax at all. He just didn't want to interact.

John took out his pad and pen. He wrote neatly, folded the paper, and held it in his hand. He had to say thank-you. Even if Zsadist couldn't read, he had to say something.

When the van stopped and the partition opened, John left the paper on Zsadist's seat, not even trying to give it to the warrior. And he made sure he didn't look up as he hit the steps and headed across the road. He did stop on the front lawn to watch the van leave, though, snow falling on his head and shoulders and duffel.

As the bus disappeared into the gathering storm, Zsadist was revealed standing across the street. The Brother flashed the note, holding it up in the air between his first and middle fingers. Then he nodded once, put it in his back pocket, and dematerialized.

John kept staring at the spot where Zsadist had been. Thick bundles of flakes filled up the footprints the male's shitkickers had left.

With a rumble the garage door opened behind him, and the Range Rover reversed its way over. Wellsie put the window down. Her red hair was coiled up high on her head, and she was wearing a black ski parka. The heater inside the car was going full blast, a dull roar almost as loud as the engine.

"Hi, John." She reached out her hand and he laid his palm on hers.
"Listen, was that Zsadist I just saw?"

John nodded.

"What was he doing here?"

John dropped his duffel and signed, *He rode home on the bus with me.*

Wellsie frowned. "I'd like you to stay away from him, okay? He's...not right in a lot of ways. Do you know what I mean?"

Actually, John wasn't so sure about that. Yeah, the guy was enough to

make you think fondly of the bogeyman sometimes, but clearly he wasn't all bad.

"Anyway, I'm off to pick up Sarelle. We've run into a snag with the festival and lost all our apples. She and I are going to make the rounds of some spiritual folks, see what we can do about this so close to the date. Do you want to come?"

John shook his head. *I don't want to get behind in Tactics.*

"Okay." Wellsie smiled at him. "I left you some rice and ginger sauce in the fridge."

Thank you! I'm starved.

"I figured you would be. See you soon."

He waved at her while she backed down the rest of the driveway and took off. As he headed for the house, he noticed absently how the chains Tohr had put on the Rover made sharp gouges in the fresh snow.

Chapter Forty-one

“Stop here.” O opened the Explorer’s door before the SUV even came to a halt at the base of Thorne Avenue. He angled a quick look up the hill, then shot the Beta behind the wheel a real wake-your-ass-up stare.

“I want you to circle this neighborhood until I call you. Then I want you to come to number twenty-seven. Don’t head into the driveway, keep going. There’s a corner in the stone wall about fifty yards later. That’s where I want you.” As the Beta nodded, O snapped, “You fuck this up and I’ll put you under the Omega’s feet.”

He didn’t wait for the slayer to throw out some kind of bullshit, have-confidence-in-me babble. He hit the pavement and ran up the road’s gradual incline. As he jogged he was a mobile arsenal, his body weighed down by the weapons and explosives he’d hung on himself as if he were a paramilitary Christmas tree.

He went past number twenty-seven’s twin pillars and eyed the driveway that disappeared between them. Fifty yards later he was at the juncture of the stucco wall where he’d told the fool Beta to pick him up. He took three running strides and leaped into the air, all Michael Jordan and shit as he went for the top lip of the ten-foot wall.

He closed the distance with no problem, but then his hands made contact. The blast of electricity that shot through his body was a real hair curler. If he’d been human still he’d have been toasted, and even as a slayer, the jolt was enough to leave him breathless as he pulled himself up and then plunged down the other side.

Security lights flared, and he took shelter behind a maple tree, taking out his muzzled gun. If attack dogs came at him he was ready to pop them, and

he waited for the barking. There was none. And there was no rush of lights going on in the mansion or the pounding feet of security guards either.

While he waited a minute longer, he assessed the place. Back of the house was grand, all red bricks and white trim and sprawling terraces with second-floor porches. Garden was a pip, too. *God...* The annual upkeep on a monster spread like this was probably more than average folks made in a decade.

Time to close in. He moved across the lawn toward the house in a crouch, running in a cramped shuffle with his gun up in front. When he got in tight with the bricks, he was elated. The window he was next to was fitted with tracks that ran down its long sides, and on the top of the thing there was a discreetly disguised boxy transom.

Steel retractable shutters. And there was a set on every window and door, it looked like.

In the Northeast, where you didn't have to worry about tropical storms and hurricanes, there was only one kind of homeowner who threw those puppies over every slice of glass: the kind who needed to be protected from the sun.

Vampires lived here.

The shutters were up because it was night, and O looked inside the house. It was dark, which wasn't encouraging, but he was going in anyway.

The question was how to do the breaking and entering. It went without saying that the place was alarmed up the ass and wired for sound. And he was willing to bet that anyone who ran electric current around the top of their fence wasn't going to ADT it. This was going to be some sophisticated technology.

He decided his best move was cutting the power, so he went hunting for the main electrical line into the mansion. He found the utilities spinal cord around the back of the six-car garage, nestled in an enclave of HVAC shit that included three air-conditioning units, an exhaust blower, and a backup generator. The main power line's thick, metal-encased vein came up through the earth and split, plugging into a series of four meters that were whizzing along.

He put a short-fused load of C4 plastic explosive right at the trunk and then rigged another setup like that at the nerve center of the generator. Stepping behind the garage, he triggered both remotely. Two pops broke out, and the flare of light and the smoke faded quickly.

He waited to see if anyone came running. No one did. On impulse he peered into a couple of the garage bays. Two were empty; the others had very nice cars in them, so nice he couldn't even tell what kind one of them was.

With the juice cut off, he jogged around and cased the front of the house, skirting behind the boxwood hedge that ran down the facade. A set of French doors was perfect for entry. He put his gloved fist through one pane, shattering the glass, and then sprang the lock. As soon as he stepped inside, he started to reclose the door. It was critical that the contacts for the security alarm were in their proper place if an alternative generator kicked in—*Holy... Moses.*

Those were lithium-powered electrodes on the doors...which meant the contacts didn't run on a current. And—*shit*—he was standing right in the middle of a laser beam. *Jesus.* This was very high-tech...as in Museum of Fine Arts, the White House, the pope's bedroom high-tech.

The only reason he'd gotten into the house at all was because someone had wanted him to.

He listened. Total silence. A trap?

O stayed frozen, barely breathing, for a little longer and then made sure his gun was good to go before he silently walked through a bunch of rooms that were right out of some glossy magazine. As he went he wanted to slash the paintings on the walls and yank down the chandeliers and break the spindly legs of the fancy tables and chairs. He wanted to burn the drapes. He wanted to shit on the floors. He wanted to ruin it because it was beautiful, and because if his woman had ever lived here, it meant she was *way* better than he was.

He rounded a corner into some kind of living room and stopped dead.

Up on the wall, in an ornate gilded frame, was a portrait of his wife...and the thing was draped with black silk. Below the painting, on a marble-topped table, there was a gold chalice turned upside down and a square of white cloth with three rows of ten little stones. Twenty-nine were rubies. The last one, in the lower left-hand corner, was black.

The ritual was different from the Christian shit he'd lived with as a human, but this was a memorial to his wife.

O's intestines turned into snakes, seething and hissing in his lower belly. He thought about throwing up.

His woman was dead.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Phury muttered as he limped around his room. His side hurt like a bitch, and he was trying to get ready to go out, and Butch’s mother-hen impression wasn’t helping.

The cop shook his head. “You need to go to the doctor, big guy.”

The fact that the human had a point burned Phury’s ass even more. “No, I don’t.”

“If you were going to spend the day on the couch, maybe. But fighting? Come on, man. If Tohr knew you were going out like this he’d have your head on a stick.”

True. “I’ll be fine. Just have to warm up.”

“Yeah, stretching’s really going to help that hole in your liver. Matter of fact, maybe I can get you some Ben-Gay and we’ll just massage the shit out of it. Good plan.”

Phury glared across the room. Butch cocked an eyebrow.

“You’re pissing me off, cop.”

“You don’t say. Hey, how about this...you can yell at me while I drive you to Havers’s.”

“I don’t need an escort.”

“But if I take you, I’ll know you went.” Butch dragged out the Escalade’s keys from his pocket and dangled them in the air. “Besides, I’m a good taxi. Just ask John.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Well...in the words of Vishous, want in one hand, shit in the other—see what you get the most of.”

Rehvenge parked the Bentley in front of Havers and Marissa’s and walked carefully up to the grand door. He lifted the heavy lion’s-head knocker and let it fall, the sound reverberating. Immediately he was welcomed by a *doggen* and led into a parlor.

Marissa stood up from a silk couch, and he bowed to her while telling the butler he would keep his coat. When they were alone Marissa rushed over, her hands held out, her long, pale yellow gown trailing after her like mist. He captured both her palms and kissed them.

“Rehv...I’m so glad you called us. We want to help.”

“I appreciate your taking Bella in.”

“She’s welcome to stay for however long she needs. Although I wish you

would tell us what's wrong."

"Just dangerous times."

"True." She frowned and looked around his shoulder. "Is she not with you?"

"Meeting me here. It shouldn't be long." He checked his watch. "Yeah... I'm early."

He pulled Marissa over to the couch, and as they sat down the folds of his sable coat fell across her feet. She reached out and stroked the fur, smiling a little. They were silent for a time.

He was anxious to see Bella, he realized. Actually, he was...nervous.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, wanting to focus on something else.

"Oh, you mean, after..." Marissa blushed. "Fine. Very well. I...thank you."

He really liked her way. So soft and gentle. So shy and self-effacing, though she was one of the rare beauties of his species, and everyone knew it. Man, how Wrath had held himself back from her was anyone's guess.

"Will you come to me again?" Rehv said in a low voice. "Will you let me feed you again?"

"Yes," she replied, lowering her eyes. "If you will allow me."

"I can't wait," he growled. As her eyes flipped up to his, he forced himself to smile even though he didn't really feel like it. He wanted to do other things with his mouth at the moment, none of which would have put her at ease. Thank God for the dopamine, he thought. "Don't worry, *tahly*. Just the drinking, I know."

She assessed him then nodded. "And if you...if you need to feed..."

Rehv lowered his chin and stared at her from underneath his lids, erotic images flashing through his mind. She pulled back, clearly alarmed by his expression, and he wasn't surprised. No way she could handle the kind of sick shit he was into.

Rehv lifted his head back to level. "That's a generous offer, *tahly*. But we'll keep this one-sided."

As relief showed on her face his cell phone started to ring, and he took the thing out to check caller ID. His heart kicked up. It was the security monitoring people for his house. "Excuse me just a moment."

After he heard the report that an intruder had breached the wall, engaged a number of motion detectors in the backyard, and knocked out the power, Rehv told his people to turn all the interior alarms off. He wanted whoever

was there to stay.

As soon as he saw Bella, he was heading straight for home.

“Something wrong?” Marissa asked while he clipped the phone shut.

“Oh, no. Not at all.” *Quite the contrary.*

When the front door knocker sounded, Rehvenge stiffened.

A *doggen* passed in front of the parlor’s doorway to go answer it.

“Would you like me to leave you two alone?” Marissa said.

The mansion’s big door opened and closed. Soft voices were traded, one that of the *doggen*, the other...Bella’s.

Rehv pushed into his cane and slowly rose to his feet as Bella appeared in the doorway. She was wearing blue jeans and a black parka, and her long hair was shiny on her shoulders. She looked...alive...healthy. But age showed in her face, new lines of stress and worry bracketing her mouth.

He expected her to race into his arms, but she just stared at him... insulated, unreachable. Or maybe she was just so numb after all she’d been through, she had no reactions left to show the world.

Rehvenge’s eyes watered as he plugged his cane into the floor and went to her, rushing, though he couldn’t feel the fine rug beneath his shoes. He caught the shock on her face as he pulled her against him.

Sweet Virgin. He wished he could feel the embrace he was giving her. Then it dawned on him that he didn’t know if she was hugging him back. He didn’t want to force her. He made himself let go.

As he dropped his arms, she clung to him, not moving away, but staying close. He embraced her again.

“Oh...God, Rehvenge...” She shuddered.

“I love you, sister mine,” he said weakly, unashamed in the moment for being less of a male than he should be.

Chapter Forty-two

O walked right out the brick mansion's front door and he left the thing wide-open behind him. As he wandered down the driveway, snow swirled in the cold wind.

The sight of that portrait was an echo in his brain that wouldn't let up, wouldn't fade. He had killed his woman. Beaten her so badly she'd died. God...he should have taken her to a doctor. Or maybe if that scarred Brother hadn't stolen her, maybe she would have lived.... Maybe she'd died because she'd transported.

So had O killed her? Or would she have lived if she'd been allowed to stay with him? What if—*Oh, fuck it.* The search for the sequence of truth was bullshit. She was dead and he had nothing to bury because that bastard Brother had taken her from him. Period.

Abruptly, he caught the lights of a car up ahead. As he got a little closer, he saw that a black SUV had stopped before the gates.

That goddamned Beta. What the hell was he doing? O hadn't called the slayer for a pickup, and that was the wrong place—Wait, the car was a Range Rover, not an Explorer.

O jogged through the snow, staying in the shadows. He was a couple of yards away from the gate when the Rover's window came down.

He heard a female voice say, "With everything that's been going on about Bella, I don't know if her mother will be receiving. But we can at least give it a try."

O stepped up to the gates and took out his gun, hiding behind one of the pillars. He saw a flash of red hair as the female behind the wheel leaned out and rang the intercom. Beside her there was another female in the passenger

seat, a short-haired blond. That one said something and the redhead smiled a little, revealing fangs.

As she pressed the intercom again, O spoke loudly. “Nobody’s home.”

The redhead looked up, and he leveled his Smith & Wesson at her.

“Sarelle, *run!*” she screamed.

O pulled the trigger.

John was deep in tactics, and ready to put his head through a plate-glass window from the brain strain, when someone knocked on his door. He whistled without looking up from the textbook.

“Hey, son,” Tohr said. “How’s the studying?”

John stretched his arms over his head, then signed, *Better than the physical training.*

“You don’t worry about that. It’ll come.”

Maybe.

“No, really. I was the same way before my transition. All over the place. Trust me, it gets better.”

John smiled. *So, you’re home early.*

“Actually, I was going to go to the center and get some admin work done there. You wanna hang? You could study in my office.”

John nodded and grabbed a fleece, then packed up his books. A change of scenery would be good. He was sleepy, and he still had another twenty-two pages to go through: Getting away from his bed was a great idea.

They were heading down the hall when Tohr suddenly swayed and banged into the wall. His hand went to his heart and he seemed to struggle for breath.

John grabbed for him, alarmed by the Brother’s coloring. He’d gone positively gray.

“I’m cool....” Tohr rubbed his sternum. Winced. Took a couple of deep draws through his mouth. “No, I’m...I just got a pain or something. Probably the stuff I ate from Taco Hell on the way home. I’m okay.”

Except the man was pasty and sickly as they stepped into the garage and went over to the Volvo.

“I made Wellsie take the Range Rover tonight,” Tohr said as they got in her car. “I put the chains on it for her. I hate her driving in the snow.” He seemed to be talking for the sake of talking, the words fast, pressurized. “She

thinks I'm overprotective."

Are you sure we should be going out? John signed. *You look sick.*

Tohr hesitated before starting the station wagon, all the while rubbing his chest under his leather jacket. "Oh, yeah, no. I'll be fine. It's no big deal."

Butch watched Havers go to work on Phury, the doctor's hands steady and sure as they removed the bandage.

Phury was clearly not charmed about his role as patient. Sitting on top of the examination table, his shirt off, his huge body dominating the little room, he had a glower on him like an ogre. Right out of the Brothers Grimm.

"This hasn't healed as it should," Havers pronounced. "You said you were hurt last night, correct? So this should all be scar tissue. Instead it's barely closed."

Butch shot Phury a big old I-told-you-so stare.

The Brother mouthed back, *Bite me*, then muttered, "It's okay."

"No, sire, it's not. When was the last time you fed?"

"I don't know. A while." Phury craned around and looked at the wound. He frowned, as though he were surprised by how bad it looked.

"You need to feed." The doctor ripped open a gauze pack and covered the slice. After he taped the thick white square in place, he said, "And you should do it tonight."

Havers snapped off his gloves, stuffed them in a biohazard container, and made a note in his chart. He hesitated by the door. "Is there someone you could go to now?"

Phury shook his head while he put on his shirt. "I'll deal with it. Thanks, Doc."

When they were alone, Butch said, "Where'm I taking you, big man?"

"Downtown. Time to hunt."

"Yeah, right. You heard the man with the stethoscope. Or do you think he was playing you?"

Phury slid off the exam table, his shitkickers landing with a boom. He turned away, going for his dagger holster.

"Look, cop, it takes time for me to get someone lined up," he said.

"Because I'm not...because of the way I am, I only like to go to certain females, and I have to talk with them first. You know, see if they're willing to let me take their vein. Celibacy is complicated."

"Then you make the calls now. You're in no shape to fight, and you know it."

"So use me."

Butch and Phury both wheeled toward the doorway. Bella was standing in it.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," she said. "The door was open and I was walking by. My, ah...brother just left."

Butch glanced at Phury. The male was still as a photograph.

"What's changed?" Phury asked in a voice that had gone hoarse.

"Nothing. I still want to help you. So I'm giving you another opportunity to accept."

"You couldn't have gone through it twelve hours ago."

"Yes, I could have. You were the one who said no."

"You would have wept through the whole thing."

Whoa. This was way personal.

Butch eased over to the door. "I'll go wait out—"

"Stay, cop," Phury said. "If you don't mind."

Butch cursed and looked around. There was a chair right next to the exit. He lowered his butt into it and tried to make like an inanimate object.

"Did Zsadist—"

Bella cut Phury's question off. "This is about you. Not him."

There was a long silence. And then the air was permeated by something like dark spices, the scent emanating from Phury's body.

As if the fragrance were an answer of some kind, Bella came into the room, shut the door, and started to roll up her sleeve.

Butch glanced at Phury and saw that the guy was trembling, his eyes glowing like the sun, his body...Well, he was obviously getting aroused, put it like that.

Okay, time to go...

"Cop, I need you to stay while we do this." Phury's voice was more like a growl.

Butch groaned, even though he knew damn well why the Brother wouldn't want to be alone with that female right now. He was throwing off erotic heat like a stallion.

"Butch?"

"Yeah, I'll stay." Even though he wasn't going to watch. No way. For some reason that seemed like being on the fifty-yard line while Phury had

sex.

With a curse, Butch leaned onto his knees, put his hand up to his forehead, and looked down at his Ferragamos.

There was the scratchy sound, as if the tissue paper on the exam table was shifting because someone was getting up on the thing. Then a whisper of cloth.

Silence.

Shit. He had to look.

Butch took a peek and then couldn't have peeled his eyes away to save his life. Bella was up on the table, her legs dangling over the side, her exposed inner wrist on her thigh. Phury was staring at her with hunger and an awful, cursed love on his face as he eased down onto his knees before her. With hands that shook, he took hold of her palm and her upper forearm and bared his fangs. The damn things were huge now, long enough to keep him from closing his mouth all the way.

With a hiss, he lowered his head to Bella's arm. She twitched all over as he struck, though her dull eyes just stared straight ahead at the wall. Then Phury jerked, released, and looked up at her.

That was quick.

"Why did you stop?" Bella asked.

"Because you're—"

Phury glanced over at Butch. Who flushed and looked down at his loafers again.

The Brother whispered, "Have you bled yet?"

Butch winced. *Oh, yeah.* This was way awkward.

"Bella, do you think you're pregnant?"

Holy shit—this was awkward.

"Would you like me to leave?" Butch asked, hoping they would kick him out.

When they both said no, he went back to watching his shoes.

"I'm not," Bella said. "I'm really not...you know. I mean, I'm... cramping, okay? Next thing is bleeding and then it's all over."

"Havers needs to check you out."

"Do you want to drink or not?"

More silence. Then another hiss. Followed by a low moan.

Butch glanced over. Phury was crowding Bella's wrist, her slender arm buried in a cage of his body as he took greedy pulls. Bella was looking down

at him. After a moment she took her hand and put it on his multicolored hair. Her touch was tender. Her eyes shimmered with tears.

Butch got up from the chair and slipped out the door, leaving them to their business. The sad intimacy of what was passing between them needed to be private.

Outside the room, he eased against the wall, somehow still caught up in the drama though he wasn't watching it anymore.

"Hello, Butch."

He snapped his head around. Marissa was standing at the other end of the hall.

Good Lord.

As she walked over to him he could smell her, that clean ocean scent drilling into his nose, into his brain, into his blood. Her hair was up and she was wearing a yellow gown with an empire waist.

Jesus... Most blondes would have looked half dead in the color. She was radiant.

He cleared his throat. "Hey, Marissa. What's doing?"

"You look well."

"Thanks." She looked fantastic, but he kept his mouth shut about that.

Man, it's just like getting stabbed, he thought. *Yeah...* Seeing this female and getting nailed with six inches of steel in the breastbone were just different faces of the same nasty coin.

Shit. All he could picture was her getting into that Bentley with that male.

"How have you been?" she asked.

How had he been? He'd been a mooning idiot for the past five months.

"Good. Real good."

"Butch, I—"

He smiled at her and straightened. "Listen, can you do me a favor? I'm going to go wait in the car. Will you let Phury know when he surfaces? Thanks." He smoothed his tie down and buttoned his suit jacket, then pulled his overcoat together. "Take care, Marissa."

He made a beeline for the elevator.

"Butch, wait."

God help him, his feet stopped.

"How...have you been?" she said.

He considered turning around, but refused to let himself get sucked in. "Like I said, Jim Dandy, thanks for asking. Take care of yourself, Marissa."

Shit. He'd just said that, hadn't he?

"I want to..." She stopped. "Would you call on me? Sometime?"

That had him pivoting around. *Oh, sweet Mary, mother of God...* She was so beautiful. Grace Kelly beautiful. And with her Victorian speech and her genteel manner, she made him feel like a total loser, all babbles and shuffles in spite of his expensive clothes.

"Butch? Maybe you could...call on me."

"Why would I do that?"

She flushed and seemed to wilt. "I had hoped..."

"Hoped what?"

"That perhaps..."

"What?"

"You might call on me. If you had some time. Perhaps you could come... calling."

Christ. He'd already done that and she'd refused to see him. No way he was volunteering for another crash course in ego bashing. This woman, female...whatever...was totally capable of whipping his ass, and he didn't need more of that kind of rash, thank you very much. Besides, Mr. Bentley was showing up at her back door.

At that thought, an evil, very male part of him wondered if she was still the untouched virgin she'd been when he'd met her over the summer.

Probably not. Even if she was still shy, now that she was away from Wrath she must have taken a lover. Hell, Butch knew firsthand the kind of kiss she could lay on a man; there had been only that one time, but she'd had him tearing the arm off a chair, he got so cranked. So, yeah...she'd definitely found a man. Maybe a couple. And she'd show them a hell of a ride.

As she opened her perfect, pink, godforsaken rosebud of a mouth again, he cut her off. "No, I'm not going to call on you. But I do mean what I said. I hope you...take care of yourself."

Okay, that was three times with the little phrase. He needed to hit the road before he sported a fourth.

Butch strode over to the elevator. By some miracle the thing opened the moment he punched the *up* button. He stepped inside and kept his eyes from her.

As the doors closed, he thought she might have said his name one last time. But knowing him, he was just imagining it. Because he really wished she—

Oh, shut up, O'Neal. Just shut up and drop it.

When he strode out of the clinic, he was walking so fast, he was practically running.

Chapter Forty-three

Zsadist tracked the lone pale-haired *lesser* into the maze of downtown alleys. The slayer was moving quickly in the falling snow, alert, scanning, looking for prey among the straggling bar riders who were out in the cold in their club clothes.

Behind him Z was light over the ground, running on the balls of his feet, keeping close but not too close. Dawn was coming fast and hard, and even though he was skimming the edge of night right now, he wanted this kill. All he needed was to get the slayer away from prying, human eyes....

The right moment came as the *lesser* slowed and considered the intersection between Eighth and Trade Street. It was just a pause, a short internal debate on whether to go left or right.

Zsadist struck fast, materializing right behind the slayer, wrapping an arm around the bastard's neck, and pulling him into the darkness. The *lesser* fought back, and the struggle sounded like flags flapping in the wind as two male bodies thrashed and jackets and pants whipped around in the cold air. The *lesser* was on the ground within moments, and Z looked into its eyes as he lifted his dagger. He plunged the black blade into a thick chest. The pop and flare faded quickly.

As Z stood up, there was no satisfaction at all. He was on a violent kind of autopilot. Ready, willing, and able to kill, but moving in a dream state.

Bella was all that was on his mind. Actually, it went deeper than that. The absence of her was a tangible weight hanging from his body: He missed her with a crippling kind of desperation.

Ah, yes. So the rumors were true. A bonded male without his female might as well be dead. He'd heard that piece of bullshit before and never

believed it. Now he was living the hard-core truth.

His cell phone rang and he answered the thing, because that was what you did when it went off. He had no real interest in who was on the other end.

“Z, my man,” Vishous said. “Got a really weird message in the general voice mail. Some guy wanting to speak with you.”

“He asked for me by name?”

“Actually, he was a little hard to follow because he was so wired, but he mentioned your scar.”

Bella’s brother? Z wondered. Although now that she was back out in the world, what would that male have to bitch about?

Well...other than the fact that his sister had been serviced in her need and there was no mating ceremony on the calendar. Yeah, that was something a brother would get pissed over.

“What’s the callback number?”

Vishous recited the pattern of digits. “And he left the name Ormond.”

Guess Bella’s big, bad older bro wasn’t it. “Ormond? That’s a human name.”

“Couldn’t tell you. So you might want to take this careful.”

Z hung up, dialed slowly, and waited, hoping he’d managed to hit the right numbers.

When the call was answered, there was no hello on the other end of the line. Just a low male voice that said, “Out of my network and untraceable. So it must be you, Brother.”

“And you are?”

“I want to meet you in person.”

“Sorry, I’m not into dating.”

“Yeah, I can imagine with that face of yours you don’t have much luck there. But I don’t want you for sex.”

“I’m so relieved. Now who the fuck are you?”

“My first name is David. Ring any bells?”

Fury clouded Z’s vision until all he saw were the marks on Bella’s stomach. He squeezed the phone until he heard the thing squeak, but he was through with the hotheaded stuff.

Forcing his voice into a drawl, he said, “Fraid not, Davy. But refresh my memory.”

“You took what is mine.”

“I steal your wallet? I would have remembered that.”

“My woman!” the *lesser* screamed.

Every marking instinct in Z’s body fired off at once, and there was no holding back the growl that came out of his mouth. He whipped the phone away from his face until the sound faded.

“...too close to dawn.”

“What was that?” Z said with a nasty edge. “Bad connection.”

“You think this is a fucking joke?” the *lesser* spat.

“Easy, there, wouldn’t want you to throw an embolism.”

The slayer panted with fury, but then got himself under control. “I want to meet you at nightfall. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, you and I, and I don’t want to be rushed by dawn. Besides, I’ve been busy the last few hours and I need a break. I took out one of your females, a nice-looking redhead. Popped her a good one. Buh-bye.”

Now Z’s growl got into the phone. The slayer laughed. “You Brothers are so protective, aren’t you. Well, how about this. I got myself another one. Another female. I persuaded her to give me that number I dialed to find you. She was really forthcoming. Cute little blonde, too.”

Z’s hand went to one of his dagger handles. “Where do you want to meet?”

There was a pause. “First the terms. Naturally I want you to come alone, and here’s how we’re going to make sure that happens.” Z heard a female moan in the background. “Any of my associates catch your Brothers around and this one gets sliced up. All it will take is a phone call. And they will do it slowly.”

Zsadist shut his eyes. He’d so had it with death and suffering and pain. His own and others’. That poor female...“Where?”

“Six-o’clock showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Lucas Square. You sit in the back. I’ll find you.”

The phone went dead, only to ring again immediately.

Now V’s voice was strangled. “We have a situation. Bella’s brother found Wellsie shot in his driveway. Get back home, Z. Right now.”

John watched from across the desk as Tohr hung up the phone. The man’s hands were shaking so badly the receiver rattled in its cradle.

“She probably forgot to turn that cell on. Lemme try the house again.” Tohr picked up. Dialed quickly. Flubbed the numbers so he had to start over.

And all the while he was rubbing at the center of his chest, his shirt in disarray.

As Tohr stared into space, frozen as their home phone rang, John heard footfalls coming down the hallway to the office. A horrible feeling went through him like a fever's bloom. He glanced at the door, then shifted his eyes to Tohr again.

Tohr obviously heard the heavy pounding, too. In slow motion he let the receiver fall to the desk, the sound of the ringing over the open line loud in the room. His eyes fixated on the door, his hands gripping the arms of his chair.

As the knob turned, voice mail kicked in and the sound of Wellsie's voice came out of the receiver. "Hi, this is Wellsie and Tohr. We can't get to the phone right now...."

Every one of the Brothers was out in the hall. And Wrath was in front of the grim, silent group.

There was a clatter and John looked back at Tohr. The man had jacked up onto his feet and knocked his chair over. He was trembling from head to foot, sweating through his shirt in great patches under his arms.

"My brother," Wrath said. There was a helpless tone to his voice, one totally at odds with his fierce face. And that powerlessness was terrifying.

Tohr moaned and grabbed at his sternum, rubbing in fast, desperate circles. "You...can't be here. Not all of you." He put one hand out as if to push them all away and then he backed up. Except there was nowhere to go. He banged against a file cabinet. "Wrath, don't...my lord, please, don't...oh, God. Don't say it. Don't tell me...."

"I'm so sorry...."

Tohr started to rock back and forth, arms going around his middle as if he were going to throw up. His short breaths went in so fast he began to hiccup, and he didn't seem to exhale at all.

John burst into tears.

He didn't mean to. But reality was dawning and the horror was too hard to bear. He dropped his head in his hands, and all he could think about was Wellsie backing out of the driveway like it was just another day.

When a big hand pulled him up out of the chair and he was held against a chest, he thought it was one of the Brothers. But it was Tohr. Tohr was holding him hard, clinging.

The male started to murmur like a crazy man, his words fast and

incomprehensible until they finally coalesced into some kind of meaning. “Why wasn’t I called? Why didn’t Havers call me? He should have called me.... Oh, God, the baby took her.... I knew we shouldn’t have gotten her pregnant....”

Abruptly everything changed in the room, as if someone had turned up the lights or maybe the heat. John felt the shift in the air first, and then Tohr’s words dried up as he obviously sensed it, too.

Tohr’s arms loosened. “Wrath? It was...the baby, right?”

“Get the boy out of here.”

John shook his head and held on to Tohr’s waist with a death grip.

“How did she die, Wrath?” Tohrment’s voice went flat and his hands fell from John. “You tell me now. Right fucking now.”

“Get the kid out of here,” Wrath barked at Phury.

John fought as Phury grabbed him around the waist and picked him up off the floor. At the same time Vishous and Rhage positioned themselves on either side of Tohr. The door closed.

Outside of the office, Phury put John down and held him in place. There was a moment or two of silence...and then a raw scream shattered the air as sure as if the oxygen were a solid.

The burst of energy that followed was so strong it shattered the glass door. Shards splintered and sprayed out while Phury sheltered John from the shrapnel.

One by one down both lengths of the hall, the fluorescent ceiling lights exploded, flashing bright and leaving streamers of sparks to bleed down from the fixtures. Energy vibrated up through the concrete floor, leaving cracks that ran into the cinder-block walls.

Through the busted door John saw a whirlwind in the office, and the Brothers were backing away from it, arms in front of their faces. Pieces of furniture whipped around a black hole in the center of the room, one that was vaguely shaped like Tohr’s head and body.

There was another unearthly howl and then the inky void disappeared, the furniture came crashing down, the trembling in the floor stopped. Papers fluttered to a gentle rest over the chaos like snow over a traffic accident.

Tohrment was gone.

John pushed himself out of Phury’s arms and ran into the office. As the Brothers looked on, his mouth opened and he screamed without making a sound:

Father...father...father!

Chapter Forty-four

Some days lasted forever, Phury thought much later. And when the sun went down, there was still no end to them.

As the shutters lifted for the evening, he took a seat on a spindly sofa and looked across Wrath's study at Zsadist. The other Brothers were just as speechless as he was.

Z had just dropped another bomb in what was already a blitz zone of blowups. First there had been Tohr, Wellsie, and that young female. Now this.

"Jesus, Z..." Wrath rubbed his eyes and shook his head. "You didn't think to mention this before now?"

"We've had other shit to deal with. Besides, I'm meeting with the slayer by myself no matter what you say. It's really not up for discussion."

"Z, man...I can't let you do that."

Phury braced for his twin's reaction. As did the others in the room. They were all exhausted, but knowing Z, he'd have enough juice left over to hit the fan.

The brother just shrugged. "The *lesser* wants me, and I want to take care of him. For Bella. For Tohr. Besides, what about the female hostage? I can't not go, and backup's not an option."

"My brother, you'd be walking into your coffin."

"So I'll do a hell of a lot of damage before they take me out."

Wrath crossed his arms over his chest. "No, Z, I can't let you go."

"They'll kill that female."

"There's another way to handle this. We just need to figure out what it is."

There was a heartbeat of a pause. Then Z said, “I want everyone out of this room so I can talk to Wrath. Except you, Phury. You stay.”

Butch, Vishous, and Rhage looked around at one another, then focused on the king. When he nodded once, they left.

Z shut the door behind them and stayed with his back to the thing. “You can’t stop me. I am *ahvenging* my *shellan*. I am *ahvenging* the *shellan* of my brother. You have no standing to prevent me. This is my right as a warrior.”

Wrath cursed. “You never mated her.”

“I don’t need a ceremony to know she’s my *shellan*.”

“Z—”

“And what about Tohr? Are you saying he’s not my brother? Because you were there the night I was brought into the Black Dagger Brotherhood. You know Tohrment is flesh of my flesh now. I own the right to *ahvenge* him as well.”

Wrath leaned back in his chair, his weight making the thing creak in protest. “Christ, Zsadist, I’m not saying you can’t go. I just don’t want you to go alone.”

Phury looked back and forth between the two of them. He’d never seen Zsadist so calm. The brother was focused to the point of stone, nothing but clear-sighted eyes and deadly purpose. If it weren’t so eerie, it would have been remarkable.

“I didn’t make up the rules of this scenario,” Z said.

“You’ll die if you go by yourself.”

“Well...I’m kind of ready to get off the ride.”

Phury felt his skin get tight all over.

“Excuse me?” Wrath hissed.

Z stepped away from the door and walked through the dainty French room. He stopped in front of the fire, and the flames ricocheted off his ruined face. “I’m ready to end things.”

“What the hell are you—”

“I want to go out like this, and I want to take that *lesser* with me when I do. Real blaze-of-glory shit. Up in flames with mine enemy.”

Wrath’s mouth went lax. “Are you asking me to sanction your suicide?”

Z’s head went back and forth. “No, because short of chaining me, you aren’t going to keep me from showing up at that movie theater tonight. What I’m asking you to do is make sure no one else gets hurt. I want you to command the others, especially him”—Z looked pointedly at Phury—“to stay

away.”

Wrath took off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes again. When he looked up, his pale green irises glowed, the disks like floodlights in his face.

“There’s been too much death in the Brotherhood. Don’t do this.”

“Have to. Going to. So order the others to stay away.”

There was a long, tense silence. Then Wrath gave the only answer he had. “So be it.”

With the wheels set in motion for Z’s death, Phury leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. He thought of the taste of Bella’s blood, and that very special spice his tongue had detected.

“I’m sorry.”

As he felt Wrath and Z look over at him, he realized he’d spoken out loud. He got to his feet. “I’m sorry, will you both excuse me?”

Zsadist frowned. “Wait. I need something from you.”

Phury stared at his twin’s face, tracing the scar that intersected it, absorbing the nuances in a way he never had before. “Name it.”

“Promise me you will not leave the Brotherhood after I’m gone.” Z pointed to Wrath. “And do it over his ring.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Phury frowned. “Why?”

“I don’t want you to be alone.”

Phury stared long and hard at Z, thinking about the patterns of both their lives. Man, the two of them really had been cursed, although the *why* of it was a total unknown. Maybe it was just bad luck, although he’d like to think there was a reason.

Logic...logic was better than a capricious fate that screwed you hard.

“I drank from her,” he said abruptly. “Bella. I drank from her last night when I went to Havers’s. Still feel like having someone watch over me?”

Zsadist closed his eyes. Like a cold draft, a wave of despair came out of him and passed through the room. “I’m glad you did. Now are you going to give me your word?”

“Come on, Z—”

“All I want is your vow. Nothing else.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

Christ, fine.

Phury walked over to Wrath, got down on bended knee, and hovered over

the king's ring. In the Old Language, he said, "So long as I breathe, I shall remain within the Brotherhood. I humbly offer this vow, that it may be acceptable to thine ears, my lord."

"It is acceptable," Wrath replied. "Tender your lips to mine ring and seal the words upon your honor."

Phury kissed the king's black diamond and rose again. "Now, if the drama's over, I'm out of here."

Except when he got to the door, he stopped and looked back into Wrath's face. "Have I ever told you how honored I've been to serve you?"

Wrath recoiled a little. "Ah, no, but—"

"It really has been an honor." As the king's eyes narrowed, Phury smiled a little. "Don't know why that suddenly struck me. Probably the view of you from your feet just now."

Phury left and was glad when he ran into Vishous and Butch outside the study.

"Hey, boys." He touched them briefly on the shoulders. "The two of you are quite a pair, you know that? Our resident genius and a human pool shark. Who'd've thought?" As the two of them looked at him oddly, he asked, "Rhage go to his room?"

When they nodded, he went over and knocked on Hollywood's door. Rhage answered and Phury smiled, putting his hand up to that thick neck. "Hey, my brother."

He must have paused for a little too long, because Rhage's eyes got shrewd. "What's doing, Phury?"

"Nothing." He dropped his hand. "Just a drive-by. You take care of that female of yours, you feel me? Lucky, lucky...you are a very lucky male. Later."

Phury went to his room, wishing that Tohr were around...wishing that they knew where the brother was. As he mourned for the male he armed himself, then checked the hall. He could hear the Brotherhood talking in Wrath's study.

To avoid them he dematerialized to the corridor of statues and went into the room next to Zsadist's. After shutting the door, he headed for the bath and flipped on the light. He stared at his reflection in the mirror.

Unsheathing one of his daggers, he grabbed a thick hunk of his hair and took the blade to it, cutting through the waves. He did this over and over again, letting the reds and the blonds and the browns fall to the floor in

chunks that covered his shitkickers. When the stuff was about an inch long all the way around, he grabbed a can of shaving cream from the vanity, lathered up his skull, and took a razor out from under the sink.

When he was bald he wiped the residue off his scalp and brushed off his shirt. His neck itched from some of the hairs that had fallen into his collar, and his head felt too light. He rubbed his hand over his scalp, leaned into the mirror, and looked at himself.

Then he took the dagger and put it point-first to his forehead.

With a hand that shook, he drew the knife down the center of his face, ending with an S-curve at his upper lip. Blood welled and dripped down. He wiped it off with a clean white towel.

Zsadist armed himself with care. When he was ready he stepped out of his closet. The bedroom was dark, and he walked through it out of habit more than sight, heading for the pool of light spilling out of the bathroom. He went to the sink, turned it on, and bent down over the rushing water, cupping the cold torrent in his hands. He splashed his face and rubbed his eyes. Drank a little from what he held between his palms.

When he went to dry off, he sensed that Phury had come into the bedroom and was moving around, though he couldn't see the male.

"Phury...I was going to come find you before I left."

With a towel under his chin, Z looked at his reflection in the mirror, seeing his new yellow eyes. He thought of the arc of his life and knew most of it was for shit. But there had been two things that hadn't been. One female. And one male.

"I love you," he said in a rough voice, realizing it was the first time he'd ever said the words to his twin. "Just wanted to get that out."

Phury stepped in behind him.

Z recoiled in horror at his twin's reflection. No hair. Scar down his face. Eyes flat and lifeless.

"Oh, sweet Virgin," Z breathed. "What the *fuck* did you do to yourself...?"

"I love you, too, my brother." Phury raised his arm. In his hand was a hypodermic syringe, one of the two that had been left for Bella. "And you need to live."

Zsadist spun around just as his twin's arm swung down. The needle

caught Z in the neck and he felt the rush of morphine go right into his jugular. Screaming, he grabbed onto Phury's shoulders. As the drug kicked in, he sagged and felt himself get eased onto the floor.

Phury knelt beside him and stroked his face. "I've only ever had you to live for. If you die I have nothing. I'm utterly lost. And you are needed here."

Zsadist tried to reach out, but couldn't lift his arms as Phury stood up.

"God, Z, I keep thinking this tragedy of ours is going to be over. But it just keeps going, doesn't it?"

Zsadist blacked out to the sound of his twin's boots heading from the room.

Chapter Forty-five

John lay on the bed, curled on his side, staring into the dark.

The room he'd been given in the Brotherhoods' mansion was luxurious and anonymous and made him feel no better or worse.

From somewhere in the corner, he heard a clock chime once, twice, three times.... He kept counting the low, rhythmic tones until he got up to six. Rolling over onto his back, he considered the fact that in another six hours it would be the start of a new day. Midnight. No longer Tuesday, but Wednesday.

He thought of the days and weeks and months and years of his life, time that he owned because he'd experienced it and therefore could lay claim to its passage.

How arbitrary, this distinction of time. How like humans—and vampires—to have to cut the infinite down to something they could believe they controlled.

What a crock. You didn't control anything in your life. And neither did anyone else in theirs.

God, if only there was a way to do that. Or at least be able to do some things over. How wonderful would it be if he could just hit a rewind button and then edit the hell out of the past day? That way he wouldn't have to feel as he did now.

He groaned and turned onto his stomach. This pain was...unparalleled, a revelation of the worst kind.

His despair was like an illness, affecting his whole body, making him shiver though he was not cold, tossing his stomach though it was empty, causing aches to bloom in his joints and his chest. He'd never considered

emotional devastation to be an affliction, but it was one, and he knew he was going to be ill from it for quite some time.

God... He should have gone with Wellsie, instead of staying home to work on tactics. If he'd been in that car, maybe he could have saved her...Or maybe he'd just be dead too?

Well, that would be better than this existence. Even if there was nothing in the afterlife, even if you just blacked out and that was it, surely that would be better than this.

Wellsie...gone, gone. Her body, it was ashes. From what John had overheard, Vishous had laid his right hand upon her at the scene and then taken what was left behind. A formal Fade ceremony, whatever that was, would be performed, except no one could do that without Tohr.

And Tohr was gone, too. Disappeared. Perhaps dead? It had been so close to dawn when he'd taken off.... In fact, maybe that had been the point. Maybe he'd just run out into the light so he could be with Wellsie's spirit.

Gone, gone...everything seemed gone.

Sarelle...lost to the *lessers* now, too. Lost before he had really known her. Zsadist was going to try to get her back, but who knew what would happen?

John pictured Wellsie's face and her red hair and her little pregnant bump. He saw Tohr's brush cut and his navy blue eyes and his broad shoulders in black leather. He imagined Sarelle poring over those old texts, her blond cap of hair hanging forward, her long, pretty hands working the pages.

The temptation to start with the tears again rose, and John sat up quickly, forcing the urge to level off. He was through with the crying. He would not weep again for any of them. Tears were utterly useless, a weakness not worthy of their memories.

Strength would be his offering to them. Power his eulogy. Vengeance the prayer at their graves.

John got off the bed, used the bathroom, then dressed, slipping his feet into the Nikes Wellsie had bought for him. Within moments he was downstairs, going through the secret door that led into the underground tunnel. He walked quickly down the steel labyrinth, eyes straight ahead, arms swinging in a soldier's precise rhythm.

When he stepped through the back of the closet and out into Tohr's office, he saw that the mess had been cleaned up: The desk was back where it

had been before, and the ugly-ass green chair was tucked in behind it. The papers and the pens and the files and everything were tidied up. Even the computer and the phone were where they should be, though both had been broken into pieces the night before. They must be new ones....

Order had been restored, and the three-dimensional lie worked for him.

He went to the gym and flipped on the cage lights in the ceiling. There were no classes today because of everything that had happened, and he wondered with Tohr gone whether the training would stop altogether.

John jogged across the mats to the equipment room, his sneakers smacking against the tough blue skins. From the knife cabinet he took out two daggers and then snagged a chest holster small enough to fit him. Once the weapons were strapped on, he went to the center of the gym.

Just as Tohr had taught him, he began by lowering his head.

And then he palmed the daggers and started to work them, clothing himself in anger against his enemy, picturing all the *lessers* he was going to kill.

Phury walked into the theater and took a seat in the back. The place was crowded, chatty, filled with young twosomes and legions of frat boys. He heard hushed voices and some that were loud. Listened to laughter and candy getting unwrapped, and slurping and munching.

When the movie came up the houselights dimmed, and everyone started yelling out lines.

He knew when the *lesser* approached. Could smell the sweetness in the air, even through the popcorn and the girlie perfumes emanating from the dating pairs.

A cell phone appeared in front of his face. "Take it. Put it up to your ear." Phury did and heard harsh breaths on the line.

The crowd in the theater yelled, "Damn it, Janet, let's go screw!"

The *lesser*'s voice came from right behind his head. "Tell her you're going to come with me without a problem. Promise her that she'll live because you're going to do what you're told. And do it in English so I can understand you."

Phury spoke into the phone, the exact string of words he used unknown to him. All he tracked was the fact that the female started sobbing.

The *lesser* yanked the phone back. "Now put these on."

Steel handcuffs dropped in his lap. He cuffed himself and waited.

“You see that exit to the right? That’s where we’re headed. You’re going first and there’s a truck waiting just outside. You’re getting in the passenger-side door. The whole time I’m right behind you with the phone to my mouth. You fuck with me, or I see any of your Brothers, and I’m going to have her slaughtered. Oh, and FYI, there’s a knife at her throat so there’s no time delay. We clear?”

Phury nodded.

“Now stand up and get moving.”

Phury rose to his feet and headed for the door. As he walked along he realized he’d had some thought of coming out of this alive. He was vicious good with weapons, and he’d packed a few in hidden places. But this *lesser* was smart, hog-tying him, trapping him with the life of that civilian female.

As Phury kicked open the theater’s side door, he knew without a doubt that he was kissing his ass good-bye tonight.

Zsadist came to by force of will, reaching out through the drug haze and grabbing onto consciousness. With a groan he dragged himself across the bath’s marble floor and onto the rug in the bedroom. Clawing his way across the carpet, pushing with his feet, he barely had the strength to will the door open when he got to it.

As soon as he was in the hall of statues, he tried to yell. At first it was only hoarse whispers, but then he got a holler out. And another. And another.

The pounding, running footsteps made him dizzy with relief.

Wrath and Rhage knelt by him and rolled him over. He cut through their questions, unable to follow all the words. “Phury...gone...Phury...gone...”

When his stomach heaved, he lurched back onto his side and threw up. The voiding helped, making him feel a little more clearheaded after it stopped.

“Have to find him...”

Wrath and Rhage were still firing questions, talking fast, and Z thought they were probably the cause of all the buzzing in his ears. Either that or his head was about to explode.

As he pushed his face off the carpet his vision spun, and he thanked God that dose of morphine had been calibrated for Bella’s weight. Because he was a mess.

His gut spasmed and he vomited again, losing it all over the rug. *Shit...*
He never had been able to handle opiates.

More feet pounding down the hall. More voices. Someone wiping his mouth with a wet cloth. Fritz. When Z's throat started working up another round of gags, a wastepaper basket was shoved in his face.

"Thank you," he said as he threw up again.

With every heave, his mind was coming back online, his body, too. He stuffed two fingers down his throat to keep himself going. The faster he got that drug out of his system, the sooner he could go after Phury.

That heroic motherfucker...God. He was going to kill his twin for this, he really was. Phury was the one who was supposed to live.

But where the hell had he been taken? And how to find him? The movie theater was the starting place, but they wouldn't have stayed there long.

Zsadist started to do the dry-heave thing, because there was nothing left in his stomach. It was in the middle of the retching that the only solution came to him, and when it did, his stomach rolled from something other than the drug. The way to his twin violated every instinct he had.

More pounding down the hall. Vishous's voice. A civilian emergency. A family of six trapped in their house, surrounded by *lessers*.

Z lifted his head. Then his torso. Then he was up on his feet. His will, ever the only saving grace he had, came to the rescue again. It threw off more of the drug, focused him, cleared him out better than the vomiting.

"I'll get Phury," he told his brothers. "You go take care of business."

There was a brief pause. Then Wrath said, "So be it."

Chapter Forty-six

Bella sat in a Louis XIV chair, her legs crossed at the ankles, her hands in her lap. A blaze crackled in a marble fireplace to the left, and there was a cup of Earl Grey tea at her elbow. Marissa was across the way on a delicate sofa, drawing a strand of yellow silk up through an embroidery mesh. There was no sound to the movement.

Bella thought she was going to scream—

She leaped up, energized by instinct. Zsadist...Zsadist was close by.

“What is it?” Marissa said.

Pounding on the front door lit off like a drum, and a moment later Zsadist came into the parlor. He was dressed for his business, guns on his hips, daggers strapped on his chest. The *doggen* right on his heels looked scared stiff of him.

“Leave us,” Marissa was told. “And take your servant with you.”

As the female hesitated, Bella cleared her throat. “It’s okay. It’s...Go.”

Marissa inclined her head. “I won’t be far.”

Bella held herself in place as they were left alone.

“I need you,” Zsadist said.

She narrowed her eyes. God, those words she had wanted to hear. How cruel that they came so late. “For what.”

“Phury took your vein.”

“Yes.”

“I need you to find him.”

“Is he missing?”

“Your blood is in his veins. I need you—”

“To find him. I heard that. Tell me why.” The brief pause that followed

chilled her.

“The *lesser* has him. David has him.”

Her breath left her lungs. Her heart stopped. “How...?”

“I don’t have time to explain.” Zsadist came forward, looking as if he was going to take her hands, but then he stopped. “Please. You’re the only one who can get me to him, because your blood is in him.”

“Of course...of course I’ll find him for you.”

It was the chain of blood ties, she thought. She could locate Phury anywhere because he’d fed from her. And after she’d been at Zsadist’s throat, he would be able to track her for the same reason.

He put his face right into hers. “I want you to get within fifty yards of him, no closer, we clear? And then you’re dematerializing right back here.”

She looked him in the eye. “I won’t let you down.”

“I wish there were another way to find him.”

Oh, that hurt. “No doubt you do.”

She left the parlor and got her coat, then stood in the foyer. She closed her eyes and reached out into the air, piercing first the walls of the entryway she was in, then the outer structure of Havers’s house. Her mind cast out over the shrubs and the lawn and cut through other trees and houses.... Through cars and trucks and buildings and across parks and rivers and streams. Out farther still to the farmland and the mountains...

When she found Phury’s energy source, a screaming pain assaulted her, as if that were what he felt. As she swayed, Zsadist gripped her arm.

She pushed him away. “I’ve got him. Oh, God...he’s—”

Zsadist grabbed her arm again and squeezed. “Fifty yards. No closer. Are we clear?”

“Yes. Now let me go.”

She went out the front door, dematerialized, and took form about twenty yards away from a small cabin in the woods.

She felt Zsadist take shape at her elbow. “Go,” he hissed. “Get out of here.”

“But—”

“If you want to help, leave so I don’t have to worry about you. Go.”

Bella took one last look into his face and dematerialized.

Zsadist sidled up to the log cabin, grateful for the cold air that helped him

throw off a little more of the morphine. As he flattened himself against a rough-hewn wall, he unsheathed a dagger and peered into one of the windows. There was nothing inside, just some rustic, shitty furniture and a computer setup.

Panic washed through him, a cold rain in his blood.

And then he heard the sound...a thump. Then another.

There was a smaller outbuilding with no windows about twenty-five yards back. He jogged over and listened for only a split second. Then he traded his knife for a Beretta and kicked down the door.

The sight before him was out of his own past: A male chained to a table, pounded raw. A demented psychopath standing over the victim.

Phury lifted his battered face, blood glistening on his swollen lips and beat-to-hell nose. The *lesser* with the brass knuckles whirled around and seemed momentarily confused.

Zsadist aimed his gun at the fucker, but the slayer was right in front of Phury: The slightest miscalculation and the bullet was going to drill into his twin. Z dropped the muzzle, squeezed the trigger, and nailed the *lesser* in the leg, shattering his knee. The bastard screamed and dropped to the floor.

Z went for him. Except just as he got a hold on the undead, another popping sound went off.

The blaze of pain shot through Z's shoulder. He knew he'd been plugged a good one, but he couldn't think about that right now. He focused on getting control over the *lesser*'s gun, which was the same thing the SOB was trying to do to Z's Sig. They struggled on the floor, each trying to get a grip on the other in spite of the blood that was oiling them up. Punches were thrown and hands grabbed and legs thrashed. Both guns were lost in the grappling.

About four minutes into the fight Z's strength started to flag with alarming speed. Then he was on the bottom, the *lesser* sitting on his chest. Z gave a push, willing his body to throw the weight on it off, but though his mind gave the command, for once his limbs refused to obey. He glanced at his shoulder. He was bleeding out, no doubt because that slug had hit an artery. And that shot of morphine didn't help.

In the lull of the fighting, the *lesser* was panting and wincing, like his leg was killing him. "Who...the fuck...are you?"

"The one...you want," Z shot back, breathing just as hard. *Shit...* He had to work to keep his vision from phasing out. "I'm the one...who took her...from you."

“How...do...I know that?”

“I watched the scars...on her stomach heal. Until your mark...on her disappeared.”

The *lesser* froze.

Now would have been an excellent time to get the upper hand, except Z was too spent.

“She’s dead,” the slayer whispered.

“No.”

“Her portrait—”

“She lives. Breathes. And you will...never find her again.”

The slayer’s mouth opened and a primal scream of fury came out like a blast.

In the midst of the noise Z calmed down. Suddenly breathing was easy. Or maybe he’d just stopped altogether. He watched as the slayer moved in slo-mo, unsheathing one of Z’s black daggers and lifting the thing overhead with both hands.

Zsadist tracked his thoughts carefully because he wanted to know what his last one was going to be. He thought of Phury and wanted to weep, because no doubt his twin wouldn’t last long. *God*. He’d always failed that male, hadn’t he...?

And then he thought of Bella. Tears came to his eyes as images of her flickered through his mind...so vivid, so clear...until from over the *lesser*’s shoulder, a vision of her appeared. She was so real, it was as if she were actually standing in the doorway.

“I love you,” he whispered as his own blade came down toward his chest.

“David,” her voice commanded.

The *lesser*’s whole body jerked around, the dagger’s trajectory getting transferred so it landed in the floorboards next to Z’s upper arm.

“David, come here.”

The *lesser* lurched to his feet as Bella held her arm out.

“You were dead,” the *lesser* said, voice cracking.

“No.”

“I went to your house.... I saw the portrait. Oh, God...” The *lesser* started to cry as he limped closer and closer to her, black blood trailing after him. “I thought I’d killed you.”

“You didn’t. Come here.”

Z tried desperately to work his mouth, gripped by an awful suspicion that

this was no vision. He started to yell, but it came out as a moan. And then the *lesser* was in Bella's arms and weeping openly.

Z watched as her hand came around and went up onto the slayer's back. In it was the little handgun, the one he'd given her before they'd gone to her house.

Oh, Sweet Virgin...No!

Bella was in a state of weird calm as she brought the gun higher and higher. Moving slowly, she kept murmuring words that soothed until the barrel was on a level with David's skull. She leaned back, and as he lifted his head to meet her eyes, he brought his ear right to the muzzle.

"I love you," he said.

She pulled the trigger.

The explosion kicked her hand out and spun her arm away, throwing her off balance. As the sound faded she heard a thud and looked down. The *lesser* was on his side, still blinking. She'd expected his head to blow up or something, but there was just a neat little hole at his temple.

Nausea hit her hard, but she ignored it, stepping over the body and going to Zsadist.

Oh, God. There was blood everywhere.

"Bella..." His hands lifted off the ground and his mouth worked slowly.

She cut him off by reaching for his chest holster and taking the remaining dagger from him. "I need to do it in his sternum, right?"

Ah, hell. Her voice was as bad as her body. Wobbly. Weak.

"Run...get...out of—"

"In the heart, right? Or he's not dead. Zsadist, answer me!"

When he nodded, she went over to the *lesser* and pushed him onto his back with her foot. His eyes were staring up at her, and she knew she was going to be seeing them in her nightmares for years to come. Grabbing the knife with both hands, she put it up over her head, and plunged it down. The resistance the blade met sickened her to the point of gagging, but the popping sound and the flash of light were a closure of sorts.

She let herself fall back and hit the floor, but two breaths were all she could spare. She went to Zsadist, tearing off her coat and fleece. She wrapped the pullover around his shoulder, then stripped off her belt, looped it around the thick wad, and cinched it up tight to keep it in place.

The whole time Zsadist struggled against her, urging her to run, to leave them.

“Shut up,” she told him, and bit into her own wrist. “Drink this or die, your choice. But make up your mind quick, because I need to check on Phury and then I’ve got to get the two of you out of here.”

She held her arm out to him, right over his mouth. Her blood welled and dripped onto his closed lips.

“You bastard,” she whispered. “Do you hate me so much—”

He lifted his head and latched onto her vein, his cold mouth telling her all she needed to know about how close to death he was. He drank slowly at first and then with increasing greed. Little sounds came out of him, sounds at odds with his big warrior body. He sounded as if he were mewing, a starved cat at a font of milk.

When he let his head fall back, his eyes closed with satiation. Her blood seeped into him; she watched him breathe through his open mouth. But there was no time to stare. She raced across the shed to Phury. He was unconscious, chained to the table, bloody as hell. But his chest was going up and down.

Damn it. Those steel chains had Master locks dangling from them. She was going to have to cut him free with something. She went over to the left, to a horrific selection of tools—

And that was when she saw the body in the corner. A young female with short blond hair.

Tears welled and flowed as she checked to make sure the girl was dead. When it was obvious she had passed unto the Fade, Bella swiped her own eyes clear and forced herself to focus. She needed to get the living out of here; they were her first priority. Afterward...one of the Brothers could come back and...

Oh...God...oh...God...oh...God.

Shuddering, close to hysterical, she picked up a Sawzall, fired the thing up, and made quick work of Phury’s restraints. When he didn’t come around after all the shrill noise, she got terrified again.

She looked at Zsadist, who had fought to get his upper body off the floor.

“I’m going to go get that truck by the cabin,” she said. “You stay here and conserve your strength. I need you to help me move Phury. He’s out cold. And the girl...” Her voice choked up. “We’ll have to leave her....”

Bella ran across the snow to the cabin, desperately hoping to find the

truck's keys, trying hard not to think what she would do if she didn't.

Merciful Virgin, they were on a hook by the door. She grabbed them, raced for the F-150, started the damn thing, and gunned it around to the shed. A quick skidding turn and she backed it bed-first to the doorway.

She was just getting out of the driver's side when she saw Zsadist weaving like a drunk between the jambs. Phury was in his arms, and Zsadist wasn't going to last long holding up all that weight. She popped the lip on the bed and the two fell in, all tangled limbs and blood. She shoved at their bodies with her feet, then jumped up and pulled them farther back by their belts.

When they were in far enough, she threw one leg over the gunwale of the truck and hopped to the ground. She slammed the lip shut and met Zsadist's eyes.

"Bella." His voice was a mere whisper, just a movement of his lips backed up by a sigh of sadness. "I don't want this for you. All this... ugliness."

She turned away from him. A moment later she hit the gas.

The one-lane road that led away from the cabin was her only option, and she prayed she didn't meet anyone on the way. When she came out onto Route 22, she said a prayer of thanks to the Scribe Virgin and headed for Havers's at a dead run.

Tilting the rearview mirror, she looked into the truck bed. It must have been freezing back there, but she didn't dare slow down.

Maybe the cold would slow the blood loss for both of them.

Oh...God.

Phury was aware of an icy wind blowing over his bare skin and across his bald head. He moaned and curled up into himself. God, he was cold. Was this what you had to go through to make it into the Fade? Then thank the Virgin it only happened once.

Something moved against him. Arms...there were arms coming around him, arms that took him in close to a kind of warmth. Shivering, he gave himself up to whoever it was who held him so gently.

What was that noise? Close to his ear...a sound other than the roaring wind.

Singing. Someone was singing to him.

Phury smiled a little. How perfect. The angels that were taking him unto the Fade truly did have beautiful voices.

He thought of Zsadist and compared the lovely melody he heard now with the ones he had listened to in real life.

Yes, Zsadist had had a voice like an angel, as it turned out. He truly had.

Chapter Forty-seven

When Zsadist came awake, his first instinct was to sit up.

Bad fucking idea. His shoulder let out a holler and nailed him with a shot of pain so intense, he blacked out again.

Round two.

This time when he woke up at least he remembered what not to do. He turned his head slowly instead of trying to get vertical. Where the hell was he? The place seemed halfway between a guest bedroom and a hospital setup —Havers. He was at Havers's clinic.

And someone was sitting in the shadows across the unfamiliar room.

“Bella?” he croaked.

“Sorry.” Butch leaned forward, into the light. “Just me.”

“Where is she?” Man, he was hoarse. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine.”

“Where...where is she?”

“She’s...ah, she’s leaving town, Z. Actually I think she’s already gone.”

Zsadist closed his eyes. Considered briefly the merits of passing out again.

He couldn’t blame her for getting away, though. Christ, the situations she’d been put in. Not the least of which was killing that *lesser*. It was better that she get far away from Caldwell.

Although he ached all over from the loss.

He cleared his throat. “Phury? Is he—”

“Right next door. Bunged up, but okay. The two of you have been out to lunch for a couple of days.”

“Tohr?”

“No one has any idea where he is. It’s like he vanished.” The cop blew out his breath. “John’s supposed to be staying at the mansion, but we can’t get him out of the training center. He’s been sleeping in Tohr’s office. Any other updates you want?” As Z shook his head, the cop got to his feet. “I’ll leave you alone now. I just assumed you’d feel better knowing where things stood.”

“Thanks...Butch.”

The cop’s eyes flared at the sound of his name, making Z realize he’d never used it with the guy before.

“Sure,” the human said. “No problem.”

As the door eased shut, Zsadist sat up. While his head spun he yanked the monitors off his chest and his forefinger. Alarms started to go off, and he silenced them by pushing over the stand of machinery that was next to the bed. The tangle of monitors unplugged itself on the way to the floor and shut up.

He yanked the catheter out with a grimace and looked at the IV going into his forearm. He was about to rip it from his vein, but then figured chilling on that move might be smart. God only knew what was pumping into him. Maybe he needed it.

He stood up and his body felt like a beanbag, all loose inside his skin. The IV pole made a good walker, though, so he hit the hallway. As he started for the room beside his, nurses came running from all directions. He shrugged them off and pushed open the first door he got to.

Phury was lying on the king-size bed, lines plugged into him as if he were a switchboard.

The male’s head turned. “Z...what are you doing up?”

“Giving the medical staff a workout.” He shut the door and weaved into the room, heading for the bed. “They’re pretty damn fast, actually.”

“You shouldn’t be—”

“Shut up and move over.”

Phury looked startled as hell, but he pushed himself to the far side as Z heaved his exhausted body up onto the mattress. When he lay back against the pillows, the two of them let out identical sighs.

Z rubbed his eyes. “You’re ugly without all that hair, you know.”

“That mean you’re going to grow some?”

“Nah. My beauty-queen days are over.”

Phury chuckled. Then there was a long silence.

In the quiet, Zsadist kept picturing what it had been like to go into that lesser's shed and see Phury strapped to that table, his hair gone, his face beat to shit. Having to witness his twin's pain had been...an agony.

Z cleared his throat. "I shouldn't have used you like I did."

The bed wiggled as if Phury had jerked his head around. "What?"

"When I wanted to...hurt. I shouldn't have made you beat me."

There was no reply, and Z turned for a look, watching as Phury covered his eyes with his hands.

"That was cruel of me," Z said into the dim, tense air between them.

"I hated doing that to you."

"I know, and I knew it when I made you hit me until I bled. That I fed off your misery was the cruellest part. I'm never going to ask you to do that again."

Phury's bare chest rose and fell. "I'd rather it be me than anyone else. So when you need it, you let me know. I'll do it."

"Christ, Phury—"

"What? It's the only way you'll let me take care of you. The only way you'll let me touch you."

Now Z was the one covering stinging eyes with a forearm. He had to cough a couple of times before speaking. "Look, no more saving me, my brother, okay? That's over now. Finished. It's time for you to let go."

There was no reply. So Z glanced over again—just as a tear slid down Phury's cheek.

"Ah...fuck," Z muttered.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Another tear rolled out of Phury's eye. "God...damn. I'm leaking."

"Okay, brace yourself."

Phury scrubbed his face with his palms. "Why?"

"Because...I think I'm going to try to hug you."

Phury's hands dropped and he looked over with an absurd expression.

Feeling like an utter ass, Z pushed himself over to his twin. "Lift up your head, damn it." Phury craned his neck. Z slid his arm underneath. The two of them froze in the unnatural positions. "You know, this was a hell of a lot easier when you were out cold in the back of that truck."

"That was you?"

"You think it was Santa Claus or some shit?"

Z's hackles were rising all over the place. God... He was really exposed

here. What the hell was he doing?

“I thought you were an angel,” Phury said softly as he laid his head back onto Z’s arm. “When you sang to me, I thought you were seeing me safely unto the Fade.”

“I’m no angel.” He reached up and smoothed his hand over Phury’s cheek, sweeping the wetness away. Then he closed the male’s eyelids with his fingertips.

“I’m tired,” Phury murmured. “So...tired.”

Z stared at his twin’s face for what felt like the very first time. The bruises were already healing, the swelling going down, the jagged cut he’d given himself fading. What was revealed were lines of exhaustion and strain, not much of an improvement.

“You’ve been tired for centuries, Phury. It’s time to let go of me.”

“Don’t think I can.”

Zsadist inhaled deeply. “That night I was taken from the family...No, don’t look at me. It’s too...close. I can’t breathe when you do.... Christ, just close your eyes, okay?” Z coughed some more, little chuffing sounds that were the only reason he could speak through his tight throat. “That night, it wasn’t your fault you didn’t get snatched. And you can’t make up for the fact that you were lucky and I wasn’t. I want you to stop looking after me.”

Phury’s breath shuddered out of him. “Do you...do you have any idea what it felt like to see you in that cell, naked and chained and...to know what that female had done to you for so long?”

“Phury—”

“I know it all, Z. I know everything that happened to you. I heard about it from males who...had been there. Before I knew it was you that they spoke of, I heard the stories.”

Zsadist swallowed, though he’d gone queasy. “I had always hoped that you didn’t know. Had prayed that you—”

“So you’ve got to understand why I die for you every day. Your pain is mine.”

“No, it isn’t. Swear to me you will stop this.”

“I can’t.”

Z closed his eyes. As they lay together, he wanted to beg for forgiveness for all the shitty things he’d done since Phury had gotten him free...and he wanted to yell at his twin for being such a damn hero. But mostly he wanted to give all those wasted years back to Phury. The male deserved so much

more than he had gotten out of life.

“Well, you’re giving me no alternative, then.”

Phury’s head jerked off Z’s arm. “If you kill yourself—”

“I guess I’d better take a stab at not giving you as much to worry about.”

Z felt Phury’s whole body go limp. “Oh...Jesus.”

“Don’t know how it’ll work out, though. My instincts...they’ve been honed for anger, you know. I’m probably always going to be a quick trigger.”

“Oh, Jesus...”

“But you know, maybe I could work on that. Or something. Fuck, I don’t know. Probably not.”

“Oh...Jesus. I’ll help you. Any way I can.”

Z shook his head. “No. I don’t want help. I need to do this myself.”

They were quiet for a time.

“My arm’s falling asleep,” Z said.

Phury lifted his head and Zsadist took the limb back, but he didn’t move away.

Right before Bella left, she went to the room Zsadist had been given. She’d been delaying her departure for days, telling herself it wasn’t because she was waiting for him to come around. Which was a lie.

The door was slightly ajar, so she knocked on the jamb. She wondered what he would say when she just walked right in. Probably nothing.

“Come in,” a female said.

Bella stepped into the room. The bed was empty, and a splintered tree of monitoring equipment was lying on its side as if it were dead. A nurse was picking pieces of it off the floor and putting them into a trash can. Clearly Zsadist was up and around.

The nurse smiled. “Are you looking for him? He’s next door with his brother.”

“Thank you.”

Bella went one room farther down and knocked quietly. When there was no response, she went inside.

The two of them were lying back-to-back, so tightly against each other it was as if their spines were fused. Their arms and legs were curled up in identical positions, their chins tucked into their chests. She imagined them in their mother’s womb like that, resting together, innocent of all the horrors

that waited for them on the outside.

Odd to think her blood was in both of them. It was her only legacy to the pair, the only thing she was leaving behind.

Without warning Zsadist's eyes flipped open. The yellow-gold glow was such a surprise, she jumped.

"Bella..." He reached for her. "Bella—"

She took a step back. "I came to say good-bye."

As he dropped his hand, she had to look away.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "Somewhere safe?"

"Yes." She was heading down the coast, to Charleston in South Carolina, to extended family who were more than happy to take her in. "It's going to be a new start for me. A new life."

"Good. This is good."

She closed her eyes. Just once...just once she would have liked to hear some regret in his voice while she was leaving. Then again, as this was their last good-bye, at least she wouldn't have to be disappointed anymore.

"You were so brave," he said. "I owe you my life. His, too. You are so... brave."

The hell she was. She was about to break down completely. "I hope you and Phury heal up fast. Yeah, I hope..."

There was a long silence. Then she took one last look at Zsadist's face. She knew then that even if she mated somewhere down the line, no male would ever take his place.

And as unromantic as it sounded, that just plain sucked. Sure, she was supposed to triumph over loss and all that. But she loved him and she wasn't going to end up with him, and all she wanted to do was get in a bed somewhere, turn the lights off, and just lie there. For, like, a century.

"I need you to know something," she said. "You told me that someday I would wake up and regret being with you. Well, I do. But not because of what the *glymera* would say." She crossed her arms over her chest. "After having been burned by high society once, I'm no longer afraid of the aristocracy, and I would have been proud...to stand at your side. But yes, I am sorry I was with you."

Because leaving him was a shattering blow. Worse than everything she'd gone through with the *lesser*.

All things considered, it would have been better not to know what she was missing.

Without another word she turned and left the room.

As dawn crept over the landscape, Butch walked into the Pit, took off his coat, and sat down on the leather sofa. SportsCenter was on mute. Kanye West's *Late Registration* was on surround sound.

V appeared in the kitchen's doorway, clearly just in from a night of fighting: He was shirtless and sporting a shiner, still in his leathers and shitkickers.

"How you doing?" Butch asked, eyeing another black-and-blue that was popping up on his roommate's shoulder.

"No better than you. You look beat, cop."

"For real." He let his head fall back. Watching over Z had seemed like the thing to do while the other Brothers had been out doing their job. But he was exhausted, even though all he'd done was park it in a chair for three days straight.

"I've got something to perk you up. Here."

Butch shook his head as a wineglass appeared in front of his face. "You know I don't drink red."

"Try it."

"Nah, I need a shower and then something with a little more bite in it."

Butch planted his hands into his knees and started to get up.

Vishous stepped in the way. "You need this. Trust me."

Butch let his ass sink back down as he took the glass. He sniffed at the wine. Drank some. "Not bad. Little thick, but not bad. Is this a merlot?"

"Not really."

He tilted his head back and swallowed seriously. The wine was strong, burning its way to his stomach, making him a little light-headed. Which made him wonder when the last time he'd eaten had been.

As he sucked back the last inch, he frowned. Vishous was watching him far too closely.

"V? Something wrong?" He put the glass on a table and cocked an eyebrow.

"No...no, everything's cool. Everything's going to be cool now."

Butch thought about his roommate's troubles of late. "Hey, I meant to ask about your visions. They still gone?"

"Well, I had one about ten minutes ago. So maybe they're back."

"That'd be good. I don't like to see you all freaked out."

"You're all right, cop. You know that?" Vishous smiled and pushed a hand through his hair. As his arm dropped, Butch caught sight of the Brother's wrist. On the inside of it there was a fresh red cut. Like, one that had been made minutes ago.

Butch looked at the wineglass. A horrible suspicion carried his eyes to his roommate's drinking point again.

"Jesus...Christ. V, what...what did you do?" He shot to his feet just as the first spasm overtook his stomach. "Oh, God...Vishous."

He ran for his toilet to throw up, but he didn't make it that far. As soon as he flew into his room V tackled him from behind, taking him down onto the bed. When he started to gag, Vishous flipped him over onto his back and pushed the heel of his hand up against Butch's chin, keeping his mouth shut.

"Don't fight it," V said roughly. "Keep it down. You need to keep it down."

Butch's gut heaved and he choked on the shit that shot up into his throat. Panicked, nauseated, unable to breathe, he shoved against the heavy body that straddled him and managed to knock Vishous off to the side. But before he could get free, V grabbed him from behind and forced his jaw shut again.

"Keep...it...down..." V groaned as they struggled on the bed.

Butch felt a thick leg come around and trap his thighs. The wrestling move worked. He couldn't move. He fought anyway.

The spasms and the nausea intensified until he thought his eyes were going to burst. Then there was an explosion in his gut, and sparks started flowing throughout his body...sparks that lit off a tingling...now a hum. He fell still, the fight going out of him as he absorbed the sensations.

V's hold eased up and he took his hand away, though he kept an arm around Butch's chest. "That's right.... Just breathe through it. You're doing fine."

The hum was rising now, turning into something like sex, but not really.... No, it definitely wasn't anything erotic, but his body didn't know the difference. He hardened, the erection pushing against his slacks, his body suddenly raging with heat. He arched back, a moan coming out of his mouth.

"That's right," V said into his ear. "Don't fight it. Let it wash through you."

Butch's hips swiveled of their own accord, and he moaned again. He was hot as the center of the sun, his skin hypersensitive, his vision gone.... And

then the roaring in his gut shifted up to his heart. In a flash all his veins lit up like they had gasoline in them, the whole inside of him becoming a network of fire, growing hotter and hotter. Sweat poured off him as his body gyrated and jerked, and he threw his head back against Vishous's shoulder. Hoarse sounds broke out of his mouth.

"I'm...going...to die."

V's voice was right there with him, seeing him through.

"You gotta stay with me, my man. Keep breathing. This isn't going to last long."

Just when Butch thought he couldn't handle any more of the inferno, an eighteen-wheeler orgasm overtook him. As the top of his cock blew off, Vishous held him through the convulsions, speaking in the Old Language. And then it was over. A storm passed.

Panting, weak, Butch shuddered in the aftermath as V eased off the bed and covered him with a blanket.

"Why..." Butch said like a drunk. "Why, V?"

Vishous's face appeared in front of his. Both of the Brother's diamond eyes glowed...until the left one suddenly went all black, the pupil expanding until the iris and the white part became nothing but an infinite hole.

"The *why* of it...I don't know. But I saw that you were to drink from me. It was either that or you were going into the ground." V reached out and smoothed Butch's hair back. "Sleep. You'll feel fine by nightfall because you lived through it."

"That could have...*killed* me?" Well, shit, yeah. He'd assumed he was going to die.

"I wouldn't have given it to you if I weren't sure you'd make it. Close your eyes, now. Let yourself go, true?" Vishous headed out, but paused in the doorway.

As the Brother looked back, Butch felt the oddest sensation...a bond flowing between them, something more tangible than the air between their bodies. Forged in the oven he'd just been in, deep as the blood in his veins...a miracle connection.

My brother, Butch thought.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you, cop."

And Butch knew that was absolutely true, though he really didn't appreciate being blindsided. Then again, if he'd known what was in that glass, he never would have swallowed the shit. No frickin' way.

“What does this make me?” he asked softly.

“Nothing that you weren’t before. You’re still just a human.”

Butch sighed in relief. “Listen, man, do me a favor. Warn me before you pull another stunt like that. I’d rather choose.” Then he smiled a little. “And we still ain’t dating.”

V laughed in a short burst. “Go to sleep, roomie. You can kick my ass for this later.”

“I will.”

As the Brother’s broad back disappeared down the hall, Butch closed his eyes.

Still just a human...Just...a...human.

Sleep claimed him like a prize.

Chapter Forty-eight

The following evening Zsadist pulled a fresh set of leathers over his thighs. He was stiff, but he felt incredibly strong, and he knew it was Bella's blood still nourishing him, giving him his full power, making him whole.

He cleared his throat as he buttoned his fly, trying not to cry over her like a sissy. "Thanks for bringing these, cop."

Butch nodded. "No problem. You going to try and poof it home? Because I got the Escalade if you don't feel up to it."

Z yanked a black turtleneck over his head, shoved his feet into his shitkickers, and stalled out.

"Z? Z, my man?"

He looked over at the cop. Blinked a couple of times. "Sorry, what?"

"You want to ride with me?"

Z focused on Butch for the first time since the male had come into the room ten minutes ago. He was about to answer the human's question when his instincts fired up. Cocking his head, he sniffed a little. Stared at the man. *What the fuck...?*

"Cop, where have you been since I saw you last?"

"Nowhere."

"You smell different."

Butch flushed. "New aftershave."

"No. No, that's not—"

"So do you want a ride?" Butch's hazels hardened as if he wasn't going to go a single inch further on the subject.

Z shrugged. "Okay, yeah. And let's get Phury. We'll both go with you."

Fifteen minutes later they were pulling away from the clinic. On the way

to the mansion Z sat in the back of the Escalade and stared at the passing winter landscape. It was snowing again, the flakes streaking horizontally as the SUV sped down Route 22. From the front seats, he could hear Phury and Butch talking in low tones, but they sounded far, far away. Actually, everything felt that way...out of focus, out of context....

"Home sweet home, gentlemen," Butch said as they pulled into the compound's courtyard.

Jesus. They were back already?

The three of them got out and headed for the mansion, the fresh snow squeaking under their boots. As soon as they walked into the foyer the females of the house came at them. Or rather, came at Phury. Mary and Beth threw their arms around the Brother, their voices a lovely chorus of welcome.

As Phury wrapped the females up in his arms, Z stepped back into the shadows. He watched covertly, wondering what it would feel like to be in that knot of limbs, wishing there were a welcome-home for him.

There was an awkward pause as Mary and Beth glanced over at him from Phury's embrace. The females quickly looked away, avoiding his eyes.

"So, Wrath is upstairs," Beth said, "waiting for you guys with the Brothers."

"Any word about Tohr?" Phury asked.

"No, and it's killing everyone. John, too."

"I'll go see the kid later."

Mary and Beth gave Phury a final squeeze; then he and Butch headed for the stairs. Z followed.

"Zsadist?"

He looked over his shoulder at the sound of Beth's voice. She was standing with her arms over her chest, and Mary was right by her side, looking similarly tense.

"We're glad you made it back," the queen said.

Z frowned, knowing that couldn't be true. He didn't imagine they liked having him around.

Mary spoke up. "I lit a candle for you. I prayed that you would come home safely."

A candle...lit for him? Only for him? As the blood hit his face, he felt pathetic that the kindness meant so much.

"Thank you." He bowed to them and then rushed up the stairs, sure he was the color of a ruby. *God...* Maybe he'd get better at the whole relating

thing. Someday.

Except when he walked into Wrath's study and felt the eyes of his Brothers all over him, he thought, *Maybe not*. He couldn't stand the scrutiny; it was too much when he was this raw. As his hands started to shake, he shoved them into his pockets and went to his usual corner, far away from the others.

"I don't want anyone going out to fight tonight," Wrath announced. "We're all too much in our heads right now to be effective. And I want you boys back in the house by four A.M. As soon as the sun rises we'll be in mourning for Wellsie all day long, so I want you fed and watered before we get down to that. As for her Fade ceremony, we can't perform it without Tohr, so that's on hold."

"I can't believe no one knows where he's gone," Phury said.

Vishous lit up a hand-rolled. "I go to his house every night, and still there's no sign of him. His *doggen* haven't seen him or heard from him. He left his daggers. His weapons. His clothes. The cars. He could be anywhere."

"What about the training?" Phury asked. "Do we keep it up?"

Wrath shook his head. "I'd like to, but we're damn shorthanded, and I don't want to overwork you. Especially because you need time to recover—"

"I can help," Z interjected.

All heads turned in his direction. The disbelief on their faces would have been a laugh riot if it hadn't stung as much as it did.

He cleared his throat. "I mean, Phury would be in charge, and he'd have to do the classroom shit because I can't read. But I'm good with a knife, you know. Fists, too. Guns. Explosives. I could help with the physical training and the weapons parts." When there was no response, he looked down. "Yeah, or maybe not. It's cool. Whatever."

The silence that followed made him itchy as hell. He shuffled his legs around. Eyed the door.

Fuck me, he thought. He should have kept his yap shut.

"I think that would be great," Wrath said slowly. "But are you sure you'd be into it?"

Z shrugged. "I could try."

More quiet. "Okay...so be it. And thanks for manning up."

"Sure. Ah, no problem."

When they broke a half hour later, Z was the first to leave the study. He didn't want to talk to the brothers about what he'd volunteered to do or how

he was feeling. He knew they were all curious about him, probably looking for signs that he'd been redeemed or some shit.

He went back to his room to arm himself. He had a hard task in front of him, a long, hard task, and he wanted to get it over with.

Except as he went for the weapons cabinet inside his closet, his eyes latched onto the black satin robe Bella had worn so often. Days ago, he'd thrown it in the trash in the bathroom, but Fritz had obviously picked it out and hung it back up. Z leaned forward and touched the thing, then took it off the hanger, draped it over his arm, and stroked the smooth cloth. He brought it to his nose and breathed deep, catching both her scent and the smell of his bonding for her.

He was about to put the thing back when he caught sight of something flashing as it fell onto the floor at his feet. He bent down. Bella's little necklace. Left behind.

He fingered the fragile chain for a while, just watching the diamonds sparkle; then he put it on and got out his weapons. As he stepped back into the bedroom he meant to leave right away, but his eyes caught sight of the Mistress's skull sitting next to his pallet.

Crossing the room, he knelt in front of the thing and stared into the eye sockets.

A moment later he went to the bathroom, grabbed a towel, and headed back for the skull. Draping the thing in terry cloth, he picked it up and moved fast, racewalking and then jogging down the hall of statues. He took the grand staircase to the first floor, cut through the dining room and the butler's pantry, then crossed the kitchen.

The basement stairs were way in the back, and he didn't turn the light on as he took them downward. As he descended, the roaring sound of the mansion's old-fashioned coal-burning furnace got louder.

Approaching the great iron beast he felt its warmth, as if the thing were alive and fevered. He leaned down and looked through the little glass window in the hutch. Orange flames licked and gnawed at the coal they'd been given, always hungry for more food. He flipped the latch, opened the door, and got a blast in the face. Without hesitating he tossed the skull in with the towel.

He didn't wait around to watch it burn, just turned and headed back upstairs.

When he got to the foyer he paused, then walked up to the second floor. At the head of the stairs he took a right, went down the hall, and knocked on

one of the doors.

Rhage opened the thing, a towel around his waist. He seemed surprised to see who it was. "Hey, my brother."

"Can I talk to Mary for a minute?"

Hollywood frowned, but said over his shoulder, "Mary, Z wants to see you."

Mary was pulling a silk dressing gown closed and tying it with a sash as she came to the door. "Hi."

"You mind if I do this in private?" Z said, glancing at Rhage.

As the brother's eyebrows got real low, Z thought, Yeah, bonded males didn't like their females alone with anyone else. Especially not him.

He rubbed his skull trim. "It'll just be here in the hall. Won't take long."

Mary stepped between them and nudged her *hellren* back into the room. "It's all right, Rhage. Go finish getting the tub ready."

Rhage's eyes flashed white as his beast checked in with its own bonded reaction. There was a weighty pause; then Mary was kissed soundly on the throat and the door shut.

"What is it?" she asked. Z could smell her fear of him, but she met him in the eye.

He always had liked her, he thought. "I heard you taught autistic kids."

"Ah...yes, I did."

"Were they slow at learning things?"

She frowned. "Well, yes. Sometimes."

"Did that..." He cleared his throat. "Did that get on your nerves? I mean, did you get frustrated with them?"

"No. If I got disappointed at all, it was with myself for not figuring out the way they needed to learn."

While he nodded, he had to look away from her gray eyes. He focused on the door panel next to her head.

"Why do you ask, Zsadist?"

He took a deep breath and then threw himself off a ledge. When he was finished speaking, he risked a glance at her.

Her hand was over her mouth and her eyes were so kind they were like sunlight on him. "Oh, Zsadist, yes...Yes, I will."

Phury shook his head as he got into the Escalade. "It has to be ZeroSum."

He so needed to go there tonight.

"Figured as much," V said as he slid behind the wheel and Butch hopped in the back.

As they made the trip into town, the three of them were totally silent. Not even music was banging in the car.

So much death, so much loss, Phury thought. Wellsie. That young female, Sarelle, whose body V had returned to her parents.

And Tohr's disappearance was like a death, too. So was Bella's.

The agony of it all made him think about Z. He wanted to believe that Zsadist was on the road to some kind of recovery or something. But the idea that that male could turn himself around was completely baseless. It was only a matter of time before the brother's need for pain came back and shit started to unravel again.

Phury rubbed his face. He felt a thousand years old tonight, he really did, but he was also wired and twitchy...traumatized on the inside, though his skin had healed. He just could not keep it together. He needed help.

Twenty minutes later, Vishous pulled up to the back of ZeroSum and parked the SUV illegally. The bouncers let them in right away, and the three of them went for the VIP section. Phury ordered a martini, and when it came he finished it in one long swallow.

Help. He needed help. He needed double-barreled help...or he was going to explode.

"Scuse me, boys," he murmured. He headed for the back, for the Reverend's office. The two huge Moors nodded to him, and one spoke into his watch. A second later they let him through.

Phury walked into the cave and focused on the Reverend. The male was sitting behind his desk dressed in a pristine pin-striped suit, more businessman than pusher.

The Reverend smirked a little. "Where the hell is all that beautiful hair?"

Phury glanced behind himself, to make sure the outside door was closed. Then he took out three Benjis. "I want some H."

The Reverend's violet eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"Heroin."

"You sure about that?"

No, Phury thought. "Yes," he said.

The Reverend ran his hand back and forth over his cropped mohawk. Then he leaned forward and pressed a button on his intercom.

"Rally, I want three hundred worth of Queen up here. Make sure it's fine-granule." The Reverend eased back in his chair. "Straight up, I don't think you should take that kind of powder home with you. You don't need that shit."

"Not that I'd take any direction from you, but you told me I should go hard-core."

"I retract that comment."

"I thought *sympaths* didn't have a conscience."

"I'm half my mother's boy, too. So I have a little."

"Aren't you lucky."

The Reverend's chin dipped down, and his eyes flashed pure, purple evil for a split second. Then he smiled. "No...all the rest of you are fortunate."

Rally arrived moments later, and the transaction didn't take long. The folded packet fit neatly in Phury's inside breast pocket.

As he was leaving the Reverend said, "That stuff is very pure. Dead pure. You can sprinkle it in your blunt or melt it and shoot up. But a word of advice. It will be safer for you to smoke it. You'll have more control over the dose."

"So familiar with your products."

"Oh, I never use any of this toxic waste. It'll kill ya. But I hear from folks about what works. And what'll give you a toe tag."

The reality of what he was doing shimmered across Phury's skin on a nasty little tickle. But by the time he got back to the Brotherhood's table he couldn't wait to go home. He wanted to numb out completely. He wanted the deep nod that he'd heard heroin gave. And he knew he'd bought enough of the drug to take him to heavenly hell a couple of times.

"What's the matter with you?" Butch asked him. "You can't sit still tonight."

"Nothing doing." As he put his hand inside his pocket and felt for what he'd bought, he started tapping his foot under the table.

I am a junkie, he realized.

Except he didn't have enough left in him to care. Death was everywhere around him, the stench of sorrow and failure polluting the air he breathed. He needed off the crazy train for a little while, even if it meant getting on another kind of sick ride.

Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, Butch and V didn't last long at the club, and they were all home a little after midnight. As they walked into the

vestibule Phury was cracking his knuckles, a flush breaking out under his clothes. He couldn't wait to be alone.

"You wanna eat?" Vishous said, yawning.

"Damn straight," Butch said. Then he glanced over as V walked off for the kitchen. "Phury, you with us for some chow?"

"Nah, I'll see you later." As he hit the stairs he could feel the male's eyes on him.

"Yo, Phury," Butch called out.

Phury cursed and looked over his shoulder. A little of his manic drive bled out as the cop's knowing eyes burned up at him.

Butch knew, he thought. Somehow the guy knew what he was up to.

"You sure you don't want to eat with us," the human said in a level voice.

Phury didn't even have to think. Or maybe he refused to let himself.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"Careful, my man. Some things are damn hard to undo."

Phury thought of Z. Of himself. Of the shitty future he had little interest in slogging through.

"Don't I know it," he said, and took off.

When he got to his room he shut the door and dropped his leather coat on a chair. He took the packet out, grabbed some red smoke and a rolling paper, and doctored up a blunt. He didn't even consider shooting up. It was just too close to addict status.

At least for this first time.

He licked the edge of the rolling paper, pressed the joint up tight, then went over to his bed and sat back against the pillows. He picked up his lighter, flicked it so the flame leaped to life, and leaned into the orange glow, the hand-rolled between his lips.

The knock on his door pissed him off. *Fucking Butch.*

He clicked off the lighter. "What?"

When there was no answer, he kept the dutchy with him and pounded across the room. He threw open the door.

John stumbled backward.

Phury took a deep breath. Then another. *Chill.* He had to chill.

"What's doing, son?" he asked, stroking the blunt with his forefinger.

John brought up his pad, wrote a few lines, and turned the thing around. *I'm sorry to bother you. I need someone to help me with my jujitsu positions, and you're so good at them.*

"Oh...yeah. Ah, not tonight, John. I'm sorry. I'm...busy."

The kid nodded. After a pause, John waved good-bye. Turned away.

Phury shut the door, locked it, and went right back for the bed. He flicked the lighter on again, put the blunt between his lips—

Just as the flame hit the tip of the hand-rolled, he froze.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't...He started gasping. As his palms grew wet, sweat broke out above his upper lip and under his armpits and all down his chest.

What the fuck was he doing? What the fuck was he doing?

Junkie...junkie motherfucker. Low-life junkie...motherfucker. To bring *heroin* into the king's house? To be lighting the shit up in the *Brotherhood's* compound? To be polluting himself because he was too weak to fucking deal?

Hell, no, he would not do this. He would not disgrace his brothers, his king, like this. Bad enough he was addicted to the red smoke. But H?

Shaking from head to toe, Phury ran for the bureau, picked up the packet, and bolted for the bathroom. He flushed the blunt and the heroin down and flushed again. And again.

Stumbling out of his room, he raced over the hallway's runner.

John was halfway down the grand staircase when Phury burst around the corner and all but fell down the steps. He caught up to the boy and dragged him into his arms so hard, those fragile bones must have bent.

Dropping his head onto the kid's shoulder, Phury shuddered. "Oh, God...thank you. Thank you, thank you..."

Little arms came around him. Little hands patted his back.

When Phury finally pulled away, he had to wipe his eyes. "I think tonight's a great night to work on your stances. Yeah. It's a really good time for me, too. Come on."

As the kid looked at him...his eyes suddenly seemed eerily knowing. And then John's mouth worked, moving slowly, forming words that had impact even if they didn't have sound.

You are in a prison with no bars. I worry about you.

Phury blinked, caught in an odd kind of time warp. Someone else had said those very things to him.... Just last summer.

The vestibule's door opened, breaking the moment. As Phury and John both jumped at the sound, Zsadist came into the foyer.

The brother looked beat as he glanced up the stairs. "Oh, hey, Phury.

John.”

Phury rubbed his neck, trying to come back from whatever déjà vu slice of weirdness had just happened with John.

“So, Z, ah, where you coming from?”

“A little trip. A little trip far away. What’s doing?”

“We’re going to go work on John’s positions in the gym.”

Z shut the door. “How about I join you? Or...maybe I should put it this way. Can I join you?”

Phury could only stare. John seemed likewise surprised, but at least the kid had the good grace to nod his head.

Phury shook himself into focus. “Yeah, of course, my brother. Come with us. You’re always...welcome.”

Zsadist crossed the brilliant mosaic floor. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

The three of them headed for the underground passageway.

As they walked to the training center Phury glanced at John and thought that sometimes it took only a hairbreadth between cars to avoid a mortal accident.

Sometimes your whole life could hinge on a fraction of an inch. Or the beat of a nanosecond. Or the knock on a door.

Kind of made a male believe in the divine. It really did.

Chapter Forty-nine

Two months later...

Bella materialized in the front of the Brotherhood's mansion and looked up at the dour gray facade. She had never expected to return. But fate had other plans for her.

She opened the outer door and stepped into the vestibule. As she hit the intercom and showed her face to the camera, she felt as if she were in some kind of dream.

Fritz opened the doors wide and bowed with a smile. "Madam! How nice to see you."

"Hi." She stepped inside and shook her head when he tried to take her coat. "I won't be long. I'm just here to talk to Zsadist. For a minute."

"But of course. Master is over here. Please to follow me?" Fritz led her across the foyer to a set of double doors, all the while chatting along merrily, updating her on things like what they'd all done for New Year's.

But the *doggen* paused before opening the way into the library. "Begging your pardon, madam, but you seem... Would you care to announce yourself? When you are ready?"

"Oh, Fritz, how well you know me. I would love a minute to myself."

He nodded and smiled and disappeared.

She took a deep breath and listened to the voices and footsteps in the house. Some were low enough and loud enough to belong to the Brothers, and she glanced at her watch. Seven o'clock at night. They would be getting ready to go out.

She wondered how Phury was. And whether Tohr had returned yet. And

how John was.

Stalling...she was stalling.

Now or never, she thought, grabbing onto a brass handle and twisting. One half of the door gave way soundlessly.

Her breath caught as she looked inside the library.

Zsadist was sitting at a table, bent down low over a piece of paper, a thin pencil in his heavy fist. Mary was next to him, and between the two of them there was a book open.

“Remember the hard consonants,” Mary said, pointing to the book. “Check. Catch. The *k* and *c* in those words sound close, but aren’t the same. Try again.”

Zsadist put a hand up to his skull trim. In a low voice he said something that didn’t carry. And then his pencil moved on the paper.

“That’s good!” Mary put her hand on his bicep. “You’ve got it.”

Zsadist looked up and smiled. Then his head whipped around toward Bella and he lost the expression.

Oh, good Virgin in the Fade, she thought as she drank in the sight of him. She still loved him. She knew it down to her gut—

Wait a minute...What the...hell? His face was really different. Something had changed. Not the scar, but something was different.

Whatever. Get this over with so you can get going.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” she said. “I was wondering if I could talk to Zsadist.”

She was vaguely aware of Mary getting up and coming over, of the two of them hugging, of the female leaving and shutting the door behind her.

“Hi,” Zsadist said. Then slowly rose to his feet.

Bella’s eyes widened, and she took a step back. “My...God. You’re *huge*.”

He put a hand to his thick pec. “Um...yeah. I’ve put on about eighty pounds. Havers...Havers said I’m probably not going to gain much more. But I’m about two-seventy now.”

So that was the change in his face. His cheeks were not hollow anymore, his features no longer so stark, his eyes not sunken. He looked...almost handsome, actually. And much more like Phury.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Yeah, so, Rhage and I...we’ve been eating together.”

Jesus... They certainly had. Zsadist’s body was nothing like she

remembered. His shoulders were massive and corded with muscles she could see under the tight black T-shirt he was wearing. His biceps were three times the size they'd been, and his forearms were big enough now to fit the size of his hands. And his stomach...his belly was ribbed with strength, and his leathers were stretched over heavy, roped thighs.

"You've been feeding, too," she murmured. And instantly wished she could take the words back. As well as the tone of censure.

It was none of her business whose vein he took, though it hurt to imagine him with one of their kind—and surely that was who he was drinking from. Human blood couldn't possibly have been responsible for this kind of growth.

His hand fell from his chest back to his side. "Rhage has a member of the Chosen he uses because he can't take Mary's vein for sustenance. I've been feeding from her, too." There was a pause. "You look well."

"Thank you."

Another long pause. "Um...Bella, why have you come? Not that I mind
___"

"I have to talk to you."

He didn't seem to know what to say to that.

"So what are you doing?" she asked, pointing to the papers on the desk. This was also none of her business, but she was hopelessly stalling again. Tongue-tied. Lost.

"I'm learning to read."

Her eyes flared. "Oh...wow. How's it going?"

"Good. Slow. But I'm working at it." He glanced down at the papers. "Mary's patient with me."

Silence. Long silence. God, now that she was in front of him, she just couldn't find the words.

"I went to Charleston," he said.

"What?" He'd come to see her there?

"It took a while to find you, but I did. I went the first night I was out of Havers's."

"I never knew."

"I didn't want you to."

"Oh." She took a deep breath, pain doing a quicksilver dance under every inch of her skin. *Time to jump off the cliff*, she thought. "Listen, Zsadist, I came to tell you—"

"I didn't want to see you until I was finished." As his yellow eyes stared at her, something changed in the air between them.

"With what?" she whispered.

He looked down at the pencil in his hand. "Me."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't understand—"

"I wanted to give you back this." He pulled her necklace out of his pocket. "I was going to leave it with you that first night, but then I thought... Well, anyway, I wore it until I couldn't get it around my throat anymore. Now I just carry it around."

Bella's breath left her, just eased out of her mouth until she was empty of air. Meanwhile he started to rub the top of his head, his biceps and chest so big now, they pulled his shirt until it strained at the seams.

"The necklace was a good excuse," he murmured.

"For what?"

"I thought maybe I could go to Charleston and show up at your front door to give this back and maybe...you might let me in. Or something. I was worried that another male would court you, so I've been trying to go as fast as I could. I mean, I figured maybe if I could read, and if I took a little better care of myself, and if I tried to stop being such a mean-ass motherfucker..." He shook his head. "But don't misunderstand. It's not like I expected you to be happy to see me. I was just...you know, hoping...coffee. Tea. Chance to talk. Or some shit. Friends, maybe. Except if you had a male, he wouldn't allow that. So, yeah, that's why I've been hurrying."

His yellow eyes lifted to hers. He was wincing, as if he were afraid of what might be showing on her face.

"Friends?" she said.

"Yeah...I mean, I wouldn't disgrace you by asking for more than that. I know that you regret...Anyway, I just couldn't let you go without...Yeah, so...friends."

Holy...Moses. He'd come looking for her. With the intent of coming back and reaching out to her.

Man, this was completely outside any scenario she'd imagined as she'd prepared to talk to him.

"I...What are you saying, Zsadist?" she stammered, even though she'd heard every word.

He glanced back down at the pencil in his hand and then turned to the table. Flipping the spiral notebook to a new page, he bent way over and

labored on top of the paper for quite a while. Then he ripped the sheet free.

His hand was shaking as he held it out. "It's messy."

Bella took the paper. In a child's uneven block letters there were three words:

I LOVE YOU

Her lips flattened tight as her eyes stung. The handwriting got wavy and then disappeared.

"Maybe you can't read it," he said in a small voice. "I can do it over."

She shook her head. "I can read it just fine. It's...beautiful."

"I don't expect anything back. I mean...I know that you don't...feel that for me anymore. But I wanted you to know. It's important that you knew. And if there's any chance we could be together...I can't stop my job with the Brotherhood. But I can promise that I'll be so much more careful with myself—" He frowned and stopped talking. "Shit. What am I saying? I promised myself I wouldn't put you in this position—"

She crushed the paper to her heart, then launched herself at him, hitting his chest so hard he stumbled back. As his arms came around her with hesitation, as if he didn't have any idea what she was doing or why, she wept openly.

In all her preparations for this meeting, the one thing she had never considered was that the two of them might have some sort of future.

When he tilted up her chin and looked down at her she tried to smile, but the crazy hope she felt was too heavy and joyous a burden.

"I didn't mean to make you cry—"

"Oh, God...Zsadist, I love you."

His eyes flared so wide, his brows nearly hit his hairline. "What...?"

"I love you."

"Say that again."

"I love you."

"Again...please," he whispered. "I need to hear it...again."

"I love you...."

His response was to start praying to the Scribe Virgin in the Old Language.

Holding Bella tight, burying his face in her hair, he gave thanks with such

eloquence she started to weep all over again.

When the last laudation had been murmured he switched back into English. "I was dead until you found me, though I breathed. I was sightless, though I could see. And then you came...and I was awakened."

She touched his face. In slow motion he closed the distance between their mouths, pressing the softest of kisses on her lips.

How sweetly he came to her, she thought. Even with his bulk and his power, he came to her...sweetly.

Then he pulled back. "But wait, why are you here? I mean, I'm glad you ___"

"I'm having your young."

He frowned. Opened his mouth. Shut it and shook his head. "I'm sorry... what did you say?"

"I carry your young." This time there was no response from him at all. "You're going to be a father." Still nothing. "I'm pregnant."

Okay, she was running out of ways to tell him. *God*—what if he didn't want this?

Zsadist started to sway in his shitkickers and the blood ran out of his face. "You carry my young within you?"

"Yes. I'm—"

Suddenly he gripped her arms hard. "Are you all right? Did Havers say you're all right?"

"So far. I'm a little young, but maybe that'll work to my advantage when the time to deliver comes. Havers said the baby is well and I'm under no restrictions...well, except I'm not allowed to dematerialize after my sixth month. And, ah..." Blushing...she was seriously blushing now. "I won't be able to have sex or be fed from after the fourteenth one until the birth. Which should be around month eighteen."

When the doctor had given her those warnings, she'd thought she'd never have to worry about either of those things. But maybe now...

Zsadist was nodding, but he really didn't look well. "I can take care of you."

"I know you will. And you're going to keep me safe." She said this because she knew he would worry about that.

"You will stay here with me?"

She smiled. "I would love to."

"Will you mate me?"

“Are you asking?”

“Yes.”

Except he still looked green. He was literally the color of mint ice cream. And these rote words of his were beginning to freak her out. “Zsadist...are you okay about this? Um...you don’t have to mate me, if you don’t—”

“Where is your brother?”

The question startled her. “Rehvenge? Ah...home, I guess.”

“We go to him. Now.” Zsadist took her hand and dragged her out into the foyer.

“Zsadist—”

“We will get his consent and we will be mated this night. And we will go in V’s car. I don’t want you dematerializing again.”

Zsadist was pulling her to the door so fast, she was having to run. “Wait, Havers said I could until month—”

“I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Zsadist, that’s not necessary.”

Suddenly he stopped. “Are you sure you want my young?”

“Oh, yes. Oh, dear Virgin, yes. Even more now...” She smiled up at him. Took his hand. Placed it on her lower belly. “You’re going to be a wonderful father.”

And that was when he fell over in a dead faint.

Zsadist opened his eyes to find Bella looking down at him with love shining out of her face. All around his periphery there were other members of the household, but she was the only one he saw.

“Hi, there,” she said softly.

He reached up and touched her face. He was not going to cry. He was not

Oh, to hell with it.

He smiled up at her as the tears started rolling. “I hope...I hope it’s a little girl who looks just like—”

His voice cut out. And then, yeah, like a complete flipping nancy, he broke down totally and wept like an idiot. In front of all the Brothers. And Butch. And Beth. And Mary. He was no doubt horrifying Bella with his weakness, but he couldn’t help himself. This was the first time in his whole life that he had ever felt...blessed. Fortunate. Lucky. This moment, this

perfect, shimmering moment in time, this one, sublime moment where he was flat on his back in the foyer, with his beloved Bella, and the young inside her, and the Brotherhood around him...this was his very luckiest day.

When his pathetic sobbing dried up, Rhage knelt down, grinning so wide his perfect cheeks were about to split. "We came running when your noggin cracked into the floor. Put 'er there, daddy-o. Can I teach the little bugger how to fight?"

Hollywood held out his hand, and as Zsadist took hold of it to shake, Wrath got down on his haunches. "Congratulations, my brother. May blessings from the Virgin be upon you and your *shellan* and your young."

By the time Vishous and Butch offered their laudatory words, Z was sitting up. Mopping up. God, he was such a pansy, crying all over himself. *Shit.* Good thing none of them seemed to mind.

As he took a deep breath, he looked around for Phury...and there his twin was.

In the two months since Phury's night out with that *lesser*, his hair had already grown down to his jawline, and the scar he'd put on his face was long gone. But his eyes were flat and sad. And they were sadder now, too.

Phury came forward and everyone got quiet.

"I should like to be an uncle," he said quietly. "I'm so happy for you, Z. You too...Bella."

Zsadist grabbed for Phury's palm and squeezed so hard he could feel his twin's bones. "You're going to be a fine uncle."

"And perhaps the *ghardian*?" Bella volunteered.

Phury bowed his head. "I would be honored to be the young's *ghardian*."

Fritz bustled in with a silver tray of slender glass flutes. The *doggen* was glowing and all atwitter with happiness. "To toast the occasion."

Voices mixed and mingled and glasses were passed and laughter sounded. Zsadist looked at Bella as someone put a flute in his hand.

I love you, he mouthed. She smiled back at him and pressed something into his hand. Her necklace.

"You keep this on you always," she whispered. "For good luck."

He kissed her hand. "Always."

Abruptly Wrath rose to his towering height, lifted up his champagne, and tilted back his head. In a tremendous, booming voice, he hollered so loud, you could have sworn the walls of the mansion shook.

"*To the young!*"

Everyone shot to their feet, raised their glasses, and yelled at the top of their lungs, “*To the young!*”

Ah, yes... Surely their chorus of voices was bold and deafening enough to carry to the Scribe Virgin’s sacred ears. Which was precisely as tradition demanded.

What a true and proper toast, Z thought as he tugged Bella down to kiss her on the mouth.

“*To the young!*” the household all shouted once more.

“To you,” he said against Bella’s lips. “*Nalla.*”

Chapter Fifty

“Yeah, well, I could have done without the passing-out part,” Z muttered as he pulled into the driveway of the safe house Bella’s family was living in. “And that whole bawling-my-eyes-red routine, too. Definitely could have lost that one. Christ.”

“I thought you were very sweet.”

With a groan he killed the engine, palmed his SIG Sauer, and went around to help her from the Escalade. *Damn it.* She already had the door open and was stepping out into the snow.

“Wait for me,” he barked, grabbing for her arm.

She shot him a level stare. “Zsadist, if you keep treating me like a wineglass, I’m going to go nuts over the next sixteen months.”

“Listen, female, I don’t want you slipping on this ice. You’re wearing high heels.”

“Oh, for the love of the Virgin...”

He shut her car door, kissed her quickly, then put his arm around her waist and led her up the front walkway of a big, Tudor-style house. He scanned the snow-covered yard, his trigger finger itchy as hell.

“Zsadist, I want you to put the gun away before you meet my brother.”

“No problem. We’ll be in the house by then.”

“We’re not going to get jumped here. We’re out in the middle of nowhere.”

“If you think I’m taking even the slightest chance with you and my young, you are out of your mind.”

He knew he was being overbearing as hell, but he couldn’t help it. He was a bonded male. With his *pregnant* female. There were few things on the

planet more aggressive or dangerous. And those bastards were called hurricanes and tornadoes.

Bella didn't argue with him. Instead she smiled and covered the hard hand on her waist with one of her own. "I guess you should be careful what you ask for."

"What do you mean?" He moved her in front of him as they came up to the door, blocking her with his body. He hated the porch light. It made them too conspicuous.

As he turned the thing off with his mind, she laughed. "I always wanted you for a bonded male."

He kissed the side of her neck. "Well, you got your wish. I'm deep bonded. Way deep bonded. Deep, deep, ultra—"

As he leaned forward and hit the brass knocker, his body came into full contact with hers. She made a little purring sound in the back of her throat and rubbed herself against him. He froze.

Oh, God. Oh...no, he was instantly erect. All it had taken was that one little move of hers and he had a big, flipping—

The door swung open. He expected to see a *doggen* on the other side. Instead there was a tall, slender female with white hair, a long black gown, and a whole lot of diamonds.

Crap. Bella's mother. Z hid the gun in the holster at the small of his back and made sure his double-breasted jacket was buttoned all the way down. Then he linked his hands together right in front of his zipper.

He'd dressed as conservatively as possible, in the first suit he'd ever worn. And he was even plugged into a pair of fancy-dancy loafers. He'd wanted to wear a turtleneck to cover up the slave band at his throat, but Bella had nixed that, and he supposed she was right. There was no hiding what he'd been, and there shouldn't be. Besides, no matter what he was dressed like, and even though he was a member of the Brotherhood, the *glymera* would never accept him—not just because he'd been used as a blood slave, but because of what he looked like.

Thing was, though, Bella had no use for them, and neither did he. Although he was going to try to put on a polite show for her family.

Bella went forward. "*Mahmen.*"

As she and her mother embraced formally, Z came into the house, shut the door, and looked around. The manse was formal and wealthy, befitting the aristocracy, but he didn't give a shit about the drapes and the wallpaper.

What he approved of was the lithium-powered security contacts on all the windows. And the laser receptors in the doorways. And the motion detectors on the ceiling. Huge points for all of that. Huge.

Bella stepped back. She was stiff around her mother, and he could see why. It was clear from the gown and all those sparklers that the female was a hard-core aristocrat. And aristocrats tended to be about as cozy as a snowdrift.

“Mahmen, this is Zsadist. My mate.”

Z braced himself as her mother took him in from head to foot. Once. Twice...and yeah, a third time.

Oh, man... This was going to be a really long evening.

Then he wondered if the female knew he'd gotten her daughter pregnant, too.

Bella's mother came forward and he waited for her to reach a hand out. She didn't offer him a thing. Instead her eyes watered.

Great. Now what did he do?

Her mother fell to his feet, her black gown pooling around those fancy loafers he wore. “Warrior, thank you. Thank you for bringing my Bella home.”

Zsadist stared at the female for a heartbeat and a half. Then he leaned down and lifted her gently off the floor. As he held her awkwardly, he looked at Bella...who was sporting the kind of expression folks usually reserved for feats of magic. A big *what the hell*, laced with wonderment.

As her mother stepped away and blotted carefully under her eyes, Bella cleared her throat and asked, “Where's Rehvenge?”

“I'm right here.”

The deep voice drifted in from a darkened room, and Zsadist glanced to the left as a huge male with a cane—

Shit. Oh...shit. This was so not happening.

The Reverend. Bella's brother was that mohawked, violet-eyed, hard-ass drug dealer...who, according to Phury, was at least half *sympath*.

What a flipping nightmare. Technically the Brotherhood should be running his ass out of town. Instead Z was looking to mate into the guy's family. God, did Bella even know what her brother was? And not just the drug-dealer part...

Z glanced at her. *Probably not*, his instincts told him. On both accounts.

“Rehvenge, this is...Zsadist,” she said.

Z looked at the male again. The pair of deep purples staring back at him were unwavering, but beneath the calm there was a flicker of the same kind of *holy hell* that Z was feeling. *Man...* exactly how was all this going to play out?

“Rehv?” Bella murmured. “Um...Zsadist?”

The Reverend smiled coolly. “So, are you going to mate my sister now that you’ve knocked her up? Or is this just a social call?”

The two females let out gasps, and Zsadist felt his eyes flash black. As he pointedly drew Bella to his side, he itched to bare his fangs. He was going to do his best not to embarrass anyone, but if flyboy with the mouth peeled off any more one-liners like that, Z was going to drag Bella’s brother outside and beat an apology out of him for upsetting the ladies.

He was damn proud of himself when he only hissed a little. “Yeah, I am going to mate her. You drop the tough act, civilian, and we might invite you to the ceremony. Otherwise you’re off the list.”

The Reverend’s eyes flared. But then he abruptly laughed. “Easy, there, brother. Just want to make sure my sister is taken care of.”

The male put his hand out. Zsadist met the big palm halfway.

“That’s brother-in-law, to you. And she will be, don’t you worry about that.”

Epilogue

Twenty months later...

Oh...the agony. This training was going to kill him. Sure, he wanted to get into the Brotherhood, or at least be one of their soldiers, but how could anyone survive this?

As time was finally called, the new pretransition candidate sagged because the class on hand-to-hand was finally over. But he didn't dare show any more weakness than that.

Like all the trainees he was terrified and in awe of their teacher, a great, scarred warrior, a full member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Rumors abounded about the male: that he ate *lessers* after he killed them; that he murdered females for sport; that his scars were his doing just because he liked pain....

That he'd killed recruits for making mistakes.

"Hit the showers," the warrior said, his deep voice filling the gym. "Bus is waiting for you. We start tomorrow, four sharp. So sleep up good tonight."

The trainee ran out with the others and was grateful to hit the showers. *God...* At least the rest of his class were just as relieved and sore. They were all like cows at this point, just standing under the spray, barely blinking, stupid from exhaustion.

Thank the good Virgin, he wouldn't have to go back onto those godforsaken blue mats for another sixteen hours.

Except as he went to put on his street clothes, he realized he'd forgotten his sweatshirt. With a cringe he shot down the hall and sneaked back into the

gym....

The trainee stopped dead.

The teacher was across the way, shirtless and sparring with a punching bag, his nipple rings flashing as he danced around his target. *Dear Virgin in the Fade...* He bore the marks of a blood slave, and scars ran all the way down his back. But, man, he could move. He had incredible strength and agility and power. Deadly. Very deadly. Totally deadly.

The trainee knew he should leave, but he was unable to look away. He'd never seen anything snap out so fast or strike so hard as the male's fists. Obviously, the rumors about the instructor were all true. He was a flat-out killer.

With a metal clank, a door opened at the other end of the gym, and the sound of a newborn's cries echoed up into the high ceiling. The warrior stopped in midpunch and wheeled around as a lovely female carrying a young in a pink blanket came over to him. His face softened, positively melted.

"Sorry to bother you," the female said over the wailing. "But she wants her daddy."

The warrior kissed the female as he took the small young into his heavy arms, cradling the newborn against his bare chest. The baby girl reached her tiny hands up and around his neck, then settled into his skin, calming instantly.

The warrior turned and looked across the mats, pegging the new trainee with a level stare. "Bus is coming soon, son. You better hurry."

Then he winked, and he turned away, putting his hand on the female's waist, pulling her close to him, kissing her again on the mouth.

The recruit stared at the warrior's back, seeing what had been hidden by all that vicious movement. Over some of his scars there were two names in the Old Language in his skin, one on top of the other.

Bella... And Nalla.

LOVER REVEALED

*A Novel of the Black
Dagger Brotherhood*

J. R. Ward

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Man, you had me at *Hard-ass*, you really did.
But then there was your *Here's looking at you, kid...*
Mad love to you.

With immense gratitude to the readers
of the Black Dagger Brotherhood
and a shout out to the Cellies—
what couch are we on now?

Thank you so very much:
Karen Solem, Kara Cesare, Claire Zion, Kara Welsh.

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To DLB: Remember ya mummy loves you. Always. To NTM: The thing I
love most about you-know-where is...you. I'm just so lucky to know you.

As always, with thanks to my Executive Committee: Sue Grafton, Dr. Jessica
Andersen, Betsey Vaughan. And with much respect to the incomparable
Suzanne Brockmann.

With love to my Boat, my family, and my writer friends.

Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns

ahvenge v. Act of mortal retribution, carried out typically by a male loved one.

Black Dagger Brotherhood pr n. Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, Brothers possess immense physical and mental strength as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the Brotherhood upon nomination by the Brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.

blood slave n. Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has largely been discontinued, though it has not been outlawed.

the Chosen pr n. Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males but can be mated to Brothers at the Scribe Virgin's direction to propagate their class. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the Brotherhood, but that practice has been abandoned by the Brothers.

cohntehst n. Conflict between two males competing for the right to be a female's mate.

Dhunhd pr n. Hell.

doggen n. Member of the servant class within the vampire world. *Doggen* have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years.

the Fade pr n. Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.

First Family pr n. The king and queen of the vampires and any children they may have.

ghardian n. Custodian of an individual. There are varying degrees of *ghardians*, with the most powerful being that of a *secluded* female, known as a *whard*.

glymera n. The social core of the aristocracy, roughly equivalent to Regency England's *ton*.

hellren n. Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.

leahdyre n. A person of power and influence.

leelan adj.; n. A term of endearment loosely translated as “dearest one.”

Lessening Society pr n. Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species.

lesser n. De-souled human who targets vampires for extermination as a member of the Lessening Society. *Lessers* must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, blushless, and pale-eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter,

into which their heart was placed after it was removed.

lheage n. A term of respect used by a sexual submissive to refer to her dominant.

mahmen n. Mother. Used both as an identifier and a term of affection.

mhis n. The masking of a given physical environment; the creation of a field of illusion.

nalla (f.) or ***nallum*** (m.) n. Beloved.

needing period n. Female vampire's time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female's transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.

newling n. A virgin.

the Omega pr n. Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers, though not the power of creation.

phearsom adj. Term referring to the potency of a male's sexual organs. Literal translation something close to "worthy of entering a female."

princeps n. Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgin's Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.

pyrocant n. Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.

rythe n. Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended

another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him-or herself without defenses.

the Scribe Virgin pr n. Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.

seclusion n. Status conferred by the king upon a female as a result of a petition by the female's family. Places the female under the sole direction of her *whard*, typically the eldest male in her household. Her *whard* then has the legal right to determine all manner of her life, restricting at will any and all interactions she has with the world.

shellan n. Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.

sympath n. Subspecies within the vampire world characterized by the ability and desire to manipulate emotions in others (for the purposes of an energy exchange), among other traits. Historically, they have been discriminated against and during certain eras hunted by vampires. They are near to extinction.

the Tomb pr n. Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of *lessers*. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against Brothers. No one may enter except for members of the Brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction.

trahyner n. Word used between males of mutual respect and affection. Translated loosely as "beloved friend."

transition n. Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, they must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and are unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular.

Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.

vampire n. Member of a species separate from that of *Homo sapiens*. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot “convert” humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years or in some cases even longer.

wahlker n. An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are revered for their travails.

whard n. Custodian of a *secluded* female.

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Chapter One

“What if I told you I had a fantasy?”

Butch O’Neal put his Scotch down and eyed the blonde who’d spoken to him. Against the backdrop of ZeroSum’s VIP area, she was something else, dressed in white patent leather strips, a cross between Barbie and Barbarella. It was hard to know if she was one of the club’s professionals or not. The Reverend only trafficked in the best, but maybe she was a model for *FHM* or *Maxim*.

She planted her hands on the marble tabletop and leaned in toward him. Her breasts were perfect, the very best money could buy. And her smile was radiant, a promise of acts done with knee pads. Paid or not, this was a woman who got plenty of vitamin D and liked it.

“Well, daddy?” she said over the trippy techno music. “Want to make my dream come true?”

He shot her a hard smile. Sure as hell, she was going to make someone very happy tonight. Probably a busload of someones. But he wasn’t going to be riding that double-decker.

“Sorry, you need to go taste the rainbow somewhere else.”

Her total lack of reaction sealed the deal on her professional status. With a vacant smile, she floated over to the next table and pulled the same lean and gleam.

Butch tilted his head back and swallowed the inch of Lagavulin left in his glass. His next move was to flag down a waitress. She didn’t come over, just nodded and beat feet for the bar to get him another.

It was almost three A.M., so the rest of the troika were going to show up in a half hour. Vishous and Rhage were out hunting *lessers*, those soulless bastards that killed their kind, but the two vampires were probably going to

come in for a landing disappointed. The secret war between their species and the Lessening Society had been quiet all January and February, with few slayers out and around. This was good news for the race's civilian population. Cause for concern for the Black Dagger Brotherhood.

"Hello, cop." The low male voice came from right behind Butch's head.

Butch smiled. That sound always made him think of night fog, the kind that hides what's going to kill you. Good thing he liked the dark side.

"Evening, Reverend," he said without turning around.

"I knew you were going to turn her down."

"You a mind reader?"

"Sometimes."

Butch glanced over his shoulder. The Reverend was poised in the shadows, amethyst eyes glowing, mohawk trimmed tight to his skull. His black suit was sweet: Valentino. Butch had one just like it.

Although in the Reverend's case the worsted wool had been bought with the guy's own money. The Reverend, a.k.a. Rehvenge, a.k.a. brother of Z's *shellan*, Bella, owned ZeroSum and took a cut of everything that went down. Hell, with all the depravity for sale in the club, he had a forest worth of green funneling into his piggy bank at the end of every night.

"Nah, she just wasn't for you." The Reverend slid into the booth, smoothing his perfectly knotted Versace necktie. "And I know why you said no."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You don't like blondes."

Not anymore he didn't. "Maybe I just wasn't into her."

"I know what you want."

As Butch's newest Scotch arrived, he gave it a quick vertical workout.
"Do you now?"

"It's my job. Trust me."

"No offense, but I'd rather not about this."

"Tell you what, cop." The Reverend leaned in close and he smelled fantastic. Then again, Cool Water by Davidoff was an oldie but goodie. "I'll help you anyway."

Butch clapped a hand on the male's heavy shoulder. "Only interested in bartenders, buddy. Good Samaritans give me the scratch."

"Sometimes only the opposite will do."

"Then we're SOL." Butch nodded out at the half-naked crowd writhing

on hits of X and coke. “Everyone looks the same around here.”

Funny, during his years in the Caldwell Police Department, ZeroSum had been an enigma to him. Everyone knew the place was a drug hole and a sex pool. But no one at the CPD had been able to pin down enough probable cause to get a search warrant—even though you could walk in any night of the week and see dozens of legal infractions, most of them happening in tandem.

But now that Butch was hanging with the Brotherhood, he knew why. The Reverend had lots of little tricks in his bag when it came to changing people’s perceptions of events and circumstances. As a vampire, he could scrub clean the memories of any human, manipulate security cameras, dematerialize at will. The guy and his biz were a moving target that never moved.

“Tell me something,” Butch said, “how have you managed to keep your aristocratic family from knowing about this little night job you got going on?”

The Reverend smiled so that only the tips of his fangs showed. “Tell me something, how did a human get so tight with the Brotherhood?”

Butch tipped his glass in deference. “Sometimes fate takes you in fucked-up directions.”

“So true, human. So very true.” As Butch’s cell phone went off, the Reverend got up. “I’ll send you over something.”

“Unless it’s Scotch I don’t want it, my man.”

“You’re going to take that back.”

“Doubt it.” Butch took out his Motorola Razr and flipped it open. “What up, V? Where are you?”

Vishous was breathing like a racehorse with the dull roar of wind distortion backing him up: a symphony of ass hauling. “Shit, cop. We got problems.”

Butch’s adrenaline kicked in, lighting him up like a Christmas tree. “Where are you?”

“Out in the burbs with a situation. The damn slayers have started hunting civilians in their homes.”

Butch leaped to his feet. “I’m coming—”

“The hell you are. You stay put. I only called so you wouldn’t think we were dead when we didn’t show. Later.”

The connection cut off.

Butch sank back down in the booth. From the table next to him, a group of people let out a loud, happy burst, some shared joke teeing their laughter off like birds flushed into the open air.

Butch looked into his glass. Six months ago he'd had nothing in his life. No woman. No family he was close to. No home to speak of. And his job as a homicide detective had been eating him alive. Then he'd gotten canned for police brutality. Fallen in with the Brotherhood through a bizarre series of events. Met the one and only woman who'd ever awed him stupid. Also had a total wardrobe makeover.

At least that last one was in the good category and had stayed there.

For a while the change had been a great mask of reality, but lately he'd noticed that for all the differences, he was right where he'd always been: no more alive than when he'd been rotting in his old life. Still on the outside looking in.

Sucking back his Lag, he thought of Marissa and pictured her hip-length blond hair. Her pale skin. Her light blue eyes. Her fangs.

Yeah, no blondes for him. He couldn't go even remotely sexual with the pale-haired types.

Ah, hell, screw the Clairol chart. It wasn't like any woman in this club or on the face of the planet could come close to Marissa. She had been pure in the manner of a crystal, refracting the light, and life around her improved, enlivened, colored with her grace.

Shit. He was such a sap.

Except, man, she'd been so lovely. For the short time when she'd seemed to be attracted to him, he'd hoped they might get something off the ground. But then she'd up and disappeared. Which of course proved she was smart. He didn't have much to offer a female like her and not because he was just a human. He was treading water on the fringes of the Brotherhood's world, unable to fight at their side because of what he was, unable to go back to the human world because he knew too much. And the only way out of this deserted middle ground was with a toe tag.

Now was he a real eHarmony contender or what?

With another rush of happy-happy-joy-joy, the group next door let off a fresh buckshot of hilarity and Butch glanced over. At the center of the party was a little blond guy in a slick suit. He looked fifteen, but he'd been a regular in the VIP section for the past month, throwing cash around like it was confetti.

Obviously, the guy made up for his physical deficiencies through the use of his wallet. Another example of green being golden.

Butch finished his Scotch, fingered for the waitress, then looked at the bottom of his glass. Shit. After four doubles, he didn't feel buzzed at all, which told him how well his tolerance was faring. Clearly, he was a varsity alcoholic now, no more of that training at the junior levels thing.

And when the realization didn't bother him, he realized he'd stopped treading water. Now he was sinking.

Well, wasn't he a party tonight.

"The Reverend says you need a friend."

Butch didn't bother glancing up at the woman. "No, thanks."

"Why don't you look at me first?"

"Tell your boss I appreciate his—" Butch glanced up and clapped his mouth shut.

He recognized the woman immediately, but then again, ZeroSum's head of security was pretty damn unforgettable. Six feet tall, easy. Hair jet-black and cut like a man's. Eyes the dark gray color of a shotgun barrel. With the wife-beater she had on, she was popping the upper body of an athlete, all muscles, veins, and no fat. The vibe she gave off was that she could break bones and enjoy it, and absently he looked at her hands. Long-fingered. Strong. The kind that could do damage.

Holy hell...he would like to be hurt. Tonight he would like to hurt on the outside for a change.

The woman smiled a little, like she knew what he was thinking, and he caught a glimpse of fangs. Ah...so she was not woman. She was female. She was vampire.

The Reverend had been right, that bastard. This one would do, because she was everything Marissa wasn't. And because she was the kind of anonymous sex Butch had had all his adult life. And because she was just the sort of pain he was looking for and hadn't known it.

As he slipped a hand into his Ralph Lauren Black Label suit, the female shook her head. "I don't work it for cash. Ever. Consider it a favor for a friend."

"I don't know you."

"You're not the friend I'm talking about."

Butch looked over her shoulder and saw Rehvenge staring across the VIP section. The male shot back a very self-satisfied smile, then disappeared into

his private office.

“He’s a very good friend of mine,” the female murmured.

“Oh, really. What’s your name?”

“Not important.” She held out her hand. “Come on, Butch, a.k.a. Brian, last name O’Neal. Come back with me. Forget for a while whatever makes you hammer those shots of Lagavulin. I promise you, all that self-destruction will be waiting for you when you get back.”

Man, he really wasn’t psyched about how much she had on him. “Why don’t you tell me your name first.”

“Tonight you can call me Sympathy. How ’bout that.”

He eyed her from bangs to boots. She was wearing leather pants. No surprise. “You happen to have two heads there, Sympathy?”

She laughed, a low, rich sound. “No, and I’m not a she-male, either. Yours isn’t the only sex that can be strong.”

He stared hard into her cast-iron eyes. Then looked back at the private bathrooms. God...this was so familiar. A quickie with a stranger, a meaningless crash between two bodies. This shit had been the cash-and-carry of his sex life since he could remember—except he didn’t recall ever feeling this kind of sick despair before.

Whatever. Was he really going to stay celibate until he kicked it when his liver corroded? Just because a female he didn’t deserve didn’t want him?

He glanced down at his pants. His body was willing. At least that part of the math added up.

Butch slid out of the booth, his chest as cold as winter pavement. “Let’s go.”

On a lovely tremble of violins, the chamber orchestra glided into a waltz and Marissa watched the glittering crowd coalesce in the ballroom. All around her, males and females came together, hands linking, bodies meeting, stares locking. The mingling of dozens of different variations on the bonding scent filled the air with a rich spice.

She breathed in through her lips, trying not to smell so much of it.

Escape proved futile, however, which was the way things worked. Though the aristocracy prided itself on its manners and style, the *glymera* was, after all, still subject to the race’s biological truths: When males bonded, their possessiveness carried a scent. When females accepted their mates, they bore that dark fragrance on their skin with pride.

Or at least Marissa assumed it was with pride.

Of the hundred twenty-five vampires in her brother's ballroom, she was the only unmated female. There were a number of unmated males, but it wasn't as if they would ever ask her to dance. Better that those *princeps* sit out the waltzing or take their mothers or sisters to the floor than get anywhere near her.

No, she was forever unwanted, and as a couple twirled by right in front of her, she glanced down to be polite. Last thing she needed was for them to trip all over each other as they avoided looking her in the eye.

While her skin shriveled, she wasn't sure why tonight her status as shunned spectator seemed a special burden. For God's sake, no member of the *glymera* had met her stare for four hundred years and she was used to it: First she had been the Blind King's unwanted *shellan*. Now she was his *former* unwanted *shellan*, who had been passed over for his beloved half-breed queen.

Maybe she was finally exhausted with being on the outside.

Hands shaking, lips tight, she picked up the heavy skirt of her gown and made for the ballroom's grand archway. Salvation was just outside in the hall, and she pushed open the door to the mistresses' lounge with a prayer. The air that greeted her smelled of freesia and perfume and within the arms of its invisible embrace there was...only silence.

Thank the Scribe Virgin.

Her tension eased marginally as she went in and looked around. She'd always thought of this particular bathroom in her brother's mansion as a luxurious locker room for debutantes. Decorated in a vivid Russian czarist motif, the bloodred sitting and primping area was kitted out with ten matching vanities, each makeup station holding everything a female could want to improve her appearance. Extending out the back of the lounge were the private lavatory chambers, all of which were done in the scheme of a different Fabergé egg from her brother's extensive collection.

Perfectly feminine. Perfectly lovely.

Standing in the middle of it all, she wanted to scream.

Instead, she bit her lip and bent down to check her hair in one of the mirrors. The blond weight, which reached the small of her back when down, was arranged with watchmaker precision on the top of her head and the chignon was holding up well. Even after several hours, everything was still in place, the pearl strands woven in by her *doggen* exactly where they'd been

when she'd come down to the ball.

Then again, standing on the fringes hadn't really given the Marie Antoinette job a workout.

But her necklace was out of whack again. She jogged the multitiered pearl collar back into position so that its lowest drop, a Tahitian twenty-three-millimeter, pointed directly down into what little cleavage she had.

Her dove gray gown was vintage Balmain, one that she'd bought in Manhattan in the 1940s. Shoes were Stuart Weitzman and brand-new, not that anyone saw them under the floor-length skirt. Necklace, earrings, and cuffs were Tiffany, as always: When her father had discovered the great Louis Comfort in the late 1800s, the family had become loyal customers of the company and had stayed that way.

Which was the hallmark of the aristocracy, wasn't it? Constancy and quality in all things, change and defects to be greeted with glaring disapproval.

She straightened and backed up until she could see her whole self from across the room. The image staring back at her was ironic: Her reflection was of utter female flawlessness, an improbable beauty that seemed sculpted, not born. Tall and thin, her body was made up of delicate angles, and her face was absolutely sublime, a perfect combination of lips and eyes and cheeks and nose. The skin over it all was alabaster. The eyes were silver blue. The blood in her veins was among the very purest in the species.

Yet here she was. The forsaken female. The one left behind. The unwanted, defective, spinster virgin who not even a purebred warrior like Wrath had been able to bear sexually even *once*, if only to rid her of being a *newling*. And thanks to his repulsion, she was ever unmated, though she'd been with Wrath for what had seemed like forever. You had to have been taken to be considered someone's *shellan*.

Their end had been a surprise and no surprise at all. To anyone. Despite Wrath declaring that she had left him, the *glymera* knew the truth. She'd been untouched for centuries, never carrying the bonding scent from him, never spending a day alone with him. More to the point, no female would have left Wrath voluntarily. He was the Blind King, the last purebred vampire on the planet, a great warrior and a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. There was no higher than he.

The conclusion among the aristocracy? Something had to be wrong with her, most likely hidden beneath her clothes, and the deficiency was probably

sexual in nature. Why else would a full-blooded warrior have no erotic impulse toward her?

She took a deep breath. Then another. And another.

The scent of the fresh-cut flowers invaded her nose, the sweetness swelling, taking over, replacing the air...until it was only fragrance going down into her lungs. Her throat seemed to close up, as if to fight the onslaught, and she pulled at her necklace. Tight...it was so tight on her neck. And heavy...like hands choking her.... She opened her mouth to breathe, but it didn't help. Her lungs were clogged with the flower stench, coated by it... she was suffocating, drowning, though she was not in water...

On loose legs, she walked to the door, but she couldn't face those dancing couples, those people who defined who they were by ostracizing her. No, she couldn't let them see her...they would know how upset she was. They would see how hard this was for her. Then they would despise her even more.

Her eyes shot around the mistresses' lounge, skipping over everything, bouncing off all the mirrors. Frantically she tried to...what was she doing? Where could she...go—bedroom, upstairs.... She had to...oh, God...*she couldn't breathe*. She was going to die here, right here and now, from her throat closing up tight as a fist.

Havers...her brother...she needed to reach him. He was a doctor.... He would come and help her—but his birthday would be ruined. *Ruined...* because of her. Everything ruined because of her.... It was all her fault... everything. All the disgrace she bore was her fault.... Thank God her parents had been dead for centuries and hadn't seen her for what...she was...

Going to throw up. She was definitely going to throw up.

Hands shaking, legs like pudding, she lurched into one of the bathrooms and locked herself inside. On the way to the toilet, she fumbled with the sink, turning the water on to drown out her rasping breath in case someone came in. Then she fell to her knees and bent over the porcelain bowl.

She gagged and wretched, her throat working through the dry heaves, nothing coming up but air. Sweat broke out on her forehead and under her armpits and between her breasts. Head spinning, mouth gaping, she struggled for breath as thoughts of dying and having no one to help her, of ruining her brother's party, of being an abhorred object swarmed like bees...bees in her head, buzzing, stinging...causing the death...thoughts like bees...

Marissa started to cry, not because she thought she was going to die but because she knew she wasn't.

God, the panic attacks had been brutal these last few months, her anxiety a stalker with no solid form, whose persistence knew no exhaustion. And every time she had a meltdown, the experience was a fresh and horrible revelation.

Propping her head on her hand, she wept hoarsely, tears running down her face and getting trapped in the pearls and diamonds at her throat. She was so alone. Caged in a beautiful, wealthy, fancy nightmare where the bogeymen wore tuxedos and smoking jackets and the vultures swooped down on wings of satin and silk to peck out her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to get some control over her respiration. *Easy...easy now. You're okay. You've done this before.*

After a while, she looked down into the toilet. The bowl was solid gold and her tears made the surface of the water ripple as if sunlight shined within it. She became abruptly aware that the tile was hard beneath her knees. And her corset was biting into her rib cage. And her skin was clammy.

She lifted her head and glanced around. Well, what do you know. She'd picked her favorite private chamber to fall apart in, the one based on the Lilies of the Valley egg. As she sat draped over the toilet, she was surrounded by blush-pink walls hand-painted with bright green vines and little white flowers. The floor and counter and sink were pink marble veined with white and cream. The sconces were gold.

Very nice. Perfect background for an anxiety attack, really. But then, lately panic went with everything, didn't it? The new black.

Marissa pushed herself up from the floor, turned off the faucet, and collapsed into the little silk-covered chair in the corner. Her gown settled around her as if it were an animal stretching out now that the drama was over.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was blotchy, her nose red. Her makeup was ruined. Her hair was a ragged mess.

See, this was what she looked like on the inside, so no wonder the *glymera* despised her. Somehow they knew this was the truth of her.

God...maybe that was why Butch hadn't wanted her—

Oh, hell no. The last thing she needed was to think about him right now. What she had to do was straighten herself up as best she could and then scoot up to her bedroom. Sure, hiding was unattractive, but so was she.

Just as she reached up to her hair, she heard the outside door to the lounge open, the chamber music swelling, then easing off as it closed.

Great. Now she was trapped. But maybe it was only one female so she

didn't have to worry about being an eavesdropper.

"I can't believe I spilled on my shawl, Sanima."

Okay, so now she was an eavesdropper as well as a coward.

"It's barely noticeable," Sanima said. "Although thank the Virgin you caught it before anyone else did. We'll go in here together and use some water."

Marissa shook herself into focus. *Don't worry about them, just fix your hair. And for the Virgin's sake do something about that mascara. You look like a raccoon.*

She grabbed a washcloth and wet it quietly while the two females went into the little room across the way. Obviously, they left the door open—their voices were undimmed.

"But what if someone saw?"

"Shh...let's take the shawl off—oh, my Lord." There was a short laugh. "Your neck."

The younger female's voice dropped to an ecstatic hush. "It's Marlus. Ever since we were mated last month, he's been..."

Now the laughter was shared.

"Does he come to you often during the day?" Sanima's secretive tone was delighted.

"Oh, yes. When he said he wanted our bedrooms connected, I didn't know why. Now, I do. He's...insatiable. And he...he doesn't just want to feed."

Marissa stopped with the washcloth under her eye. Only once had she known a male's hunger for her. One kiss, only one...and she held the memory with care. She was going to her grave a virgin, and that brief meeting of mouths was all she would ever have of anything sexual.

Butch O'Neal. Butch had kissed her with—*Stop it.*

She went to work on the other side of her face.

"To be newly mated, how marvelous. Though you mustn't let anyone see these marks. Your skin is marred."

"That's why I rushed in here. What if someone told me to take off the wrap because of the wine I spilled?" This was said with the kind of horror usually reserved for accidents involving knives.

Although, given the *glymera*, Marissa could understand all too well wanting to avoid their attention.

Tossing the washcloth aside, she tried to rework her hair...and gave up

not thinking about Butch.

God, she would have loved having to hide his teeth marks from the eyes of the *glymera*. Would have loved to hold the delicious secret that under the civilized gowns she wore, her body had known his raw sex. And she would have loved to bear the scent of his bonding for her on her skin, emphasizing it, as mated females did, by choosing the perfect complementary perfume.

But none of that was going to happen. For one thing, humans didn't bond, from what she'd heard. And even if they did, Butch O'Neal had walked away from her the last time she'd seen him, so he wasn't interested in her anymore. Probably because he'd heard about her deficiencies. As he was close with the Brotherhood, no doubt he knew all kinds of things about her now.

"Is there someone in here?" Sanima said sharply.

Marissa cursed under her breath and figured she'd just sighed out loud. Giving up on her hair and her face, she opened the door. When she stepped out, both females looked down, which in this instance was a good thing. Her hair was a train wreck.

"Worry not. I will say nothing," she murmured. Because sex was never to be discussed in a public place. Or any private ones, really.

The two curtsied dutifully and did not reply while Marissa left.

As soon as she walked out of the lounge, she felt more glances sliding away from her, all eyes going elsewhere...especially those of the unmated males smoking cigars over in the corner.

Just before she turned her back on the ball, she caught Havers's stare through the crowd. He nodded and smiled sadly, as if he knew she couldn't stay a moment longer.

Dearest brother, she thought. He had always supported her, had never given any indication he was ashamed of how she had turned out. She would have loved him for their shared parents, but she adored him for his loyalty most of all.

With a last look at the *glymera* in all its glory, she went to her room. After a quick shower, she changed into a simpler floor-length dress and lower-heeled shoes, then went down the mansion's back stairs.

Untouched and unwanted she could deal with. If that was the fate the Scribe Virgin laid upon her, so be it. There were far worse lives to be led, and bemoaning what she lacked, considering all she had, was boring and selfish.

What she couldn't handle was being purposeless. Thank God that she had her position on the *Princeps* Council and that her seat was secure by virtue of

her bloodline. But there was also another way to leave a positive mark on her world.

As she keyed in a code and unlocked a steel door, she envied the couples dancing at the other end of the mansion and probably always would. Except that was not her destiny.

She had other paths to walk.

Chapter Two

Butch left ZeroSum at three forty-five, and though the Escalade was parked in the back, he headed in the opposite direction. He needed air. Jesus...he needed air.

The middle of March was still winter so far as upstate New York was concerned, and the night was meat-locker cold. As he walked alone down Trade Street, his breath left his mouth in white clouds and drifted over his shoulder. The chill and the isolation suited him: He was hot and crowded even though he'd left the club's crush of sweaty people behind.

As he went along, his Ferragamos hit hard against the sidewalk, the heels grinding the salt and sand on the little concrete strip between dirty snowbanks. In the background, muffled music thumped out of the other bars on Trade, though business hours were soon going to be over.

When he came up to McGrider's, he popped his collar and up'd his pace. He avoided the blues bar because the boys on the force hung out there and he didn't want to see them. Far as his former colleagues in the CPD knew, he'd up and disappeared, and that was the way he wanted to keep it.

Screamer's was next and hard-core rap pounded, turning the whole damn building into a bass extender. When he got to the far side of the club, he paused and looked down the alley that ran the length of the place.

It had all started here. His weird trip into the vampire world had started right here the previous July, with a car bomb he'd investigated at this site: a BMW blown to shit. A man ashed. No material evidence left behind except a couple of martial-arts throwing stars. The hit had been very professional, the kind of thing that sent a message, and shortly thereafter the bodies of the prostitutes had appeared in the alleys. Throats cut. Blood levels sky high with heroine. With more martial-arts weapons around.

He and his partner, José de la Cruz, had assumed the blast was a pimp-related turf toaster and the dead women payback, but soon enough he'd learned the whole story. Darius, a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood, had been taken out by his race's enemies, the *lessers*. And the murders of those prostitutes were part of a strategy by the Lessening Society to capture civilian vampires for questioning.

Man, back then he'd never have even guessed vampires existed. Much less drove \$90,000 BMWs. Or had sophisticated enemies.

Butch walked down the alley, right to the spot where the 650i had been blown to high heaven. There was still a black soot ring on the building from the bomb's heat and he reached out, putting fingertips on the cold brick.

It had all started here.

A gust of wind came up and flashed under his coat, lifting the fine cashmere, getting to the fancy suit underneath. Dropping his hand, he looked down at his clothes. Overcoat was Missoni, about five grand. Suit underneath, an RL Black Label, about three grand. Shoes were amateur night at a mere seven hundred bucks. Cuff links were Cartier and into the five-digit category. Watch was Patek Philippe. Twenty-five grand.

The two forty-millimeter Glocks under his pits were two grand a piece.

So he was sporting...Jesus Christ, about \$44,000 worth of Saks Fifth and Army/Navy. And this wasn't even the tip of the iceberg for his threads. He had two closets worth of the shit back at the compound...none of which he'd bought with his own cash. All of which had been purchased with Brotherhood green.

Shit...he dressed in clothes that weren't his. Lived in a house and ate food and watched a plasma screen TV...none of which were his. Drank Scotch he didn't pay for. Drove a sweet ride he didn't own. And what did he do in return? Not a whole hell of a lot. Every time action went down, the brothers kept him on the sidelines—

Footsteps rang out at the far end of the alley, pounding, pounding, getting closer. And there was more than one set.

Butch eased back into the shadows, slipping free the buttons on his coat and his suit jacket so he could get at his heat if he needed it. He had no intention of mixing up someone else's biz, but he wasn't the type to hang back if an innocent was getting cracked.

Guess the cop in him wasn't dead yet.

As the alley had only one open end, the track-and-fielders heading this

way were going to pass by him. Hoping to avoid any crossfire, he got tight with a Dumpster and waited to see what turned up.

Young guy flew by, terror on his face, his body all jerky panic. And then...well, what do you know, the two thugs in his trunk were pale haired. Big as houses. Smelling like baby powder.

Lessers. Going after a civilian.

Butch palmed one of his Glocks, speed-dialed V's cell phone, and took off in pursuit. As he ran, the call dumped into voice mail, so he just shoved his Razr back into his pocket.

When he caught up with the drama, the three were at the base of the alley, a loose knot of bad news. Now that the slayers had the civilian cornered, they were moving all lazy, closing in, backing off, smiling, toying. The civilian was shaking, eyes so wide the whites glowed in the dark.

Butch leveled his gun at the scene. "Hey, Blondies, how 'bout you show me your hands?"

The *lessers* stopped and looked at him. Man, it was like getting pegged with headlights, assuming you were a deer and the thing coming at you was a Peterbilt. Those undead bastards were pure power backed up by cold logic—a nasty combination, especially in duplicate.

"This isn't your business," the one on the left said.

"Yeah, that's what my roommate keeps telling me. But, see, I don't take direction real well."

He had to give the *lessers* credit; they were smart. One focused on him. The other closed in on the civilian, who looked as if he was way too scared to be able to dematerialize.

This is quickly going to become a hostage situation, Butch thought.

"Why don't you head out?" the bastard on the right said. "Better for you."

"Probably, but worse for him." Butch nodded toward the civilian.

An ice cube breeze shot down the alley, ruffling orphaned newspaper pages and empty plastic shopping bags. Butch's nose tingled and he shook his head, hating the smell.

"You know," he said, "this whole baby powder thing—how do you *lessers* stand it?"

The slayers' pale eyes traveled up and down him as if they couldn't figure out why he even knew the word. And then they both flipped into action. The *lesser* closest to the civilian made a grab and hauled the vampire against its chest, turning the hostage potential into a reality. At the same

moment, the other one lunged at Butch, moving quick as a blink.

Butch wasn't into getting rattled, though. He calmly angled the muzzle of the Glock and shot the steamrolling sonofabitch right in the chest. The second his bullet penetrated, a screech worthy of a banshee exploded out of the slayer's throat and the thing hit the ground like a bag of sand, immobilized.

Which was not the normal *lesser* response to getting plugged. Usually they could throw it off, but Butch was packing something special in his clip, thanks to the Brotherhood.

"What the fuck," the upright slayer breathed.

"Surprise, surprise, cocksucker. Got me some fancy lead."

The *lesser* snapped back to reality and hauled the civilian off the ground in a one-arm waist hold, using the vampire as a body shield.

Butch leveled the gun at the twosome. *Goddamn it. No shot. No shot at all.* "Let him go."

A muzzle emerged from under the civilian's armpit.

Butch dove for a shallow doorway as the first bullet ricocheted off the asphalt. Just as he took shelter, a second shot ripped through his thigh.

Fuuuuuck, welcome to roadkill-ville. His leg felt like it had a red-hot roofing spike drilled into it, the niche he was jammed into offered about as much protection as a lamppost and the *lesser* was moving into better shooting position.

Butch grabbed an empty Coors bottle and tossed it across the alley. As the *lesser*'s head popped around the civilian's shoulder to track the sound, Butch lit off four precisely targeted shots in a semicircle around the pair. The vampire panicked, just as expected, and became an unstable load. As he fell loose from the slayer's grip, Butch put a slug into the *lesser*'s shoulder, spinning the bastard away, landing him facefirst on the ground.

Great shot, but the undead was still moving, and sure as shit he was going to be on his feet in another minute and a half. Those special bullets were good, but the stun didn't last forever and it helped if you nailed a chest rather than an arm.

And what do you know. More problems.

Now that the civilian vampire was free, he'd caught his breath and started to scream.

Butch limped over, cursing through the pain in his leg. Jesus Christ, this male was making enough racket to bring in an entire police force—all the way from goddamned Manhattan.

Butch got up in the guy's face, pegging him with hard eyes. "I need you to stop yelling, okay? Listen to me. Stop. Yelling. Now." The vampire sputtered, then clammed up like his voice box's engine had run out of gas. "Good. I got two things I need from you. First, I want you to calm yourself so you can dematerialize. Do you understand what I'm saying? Breathe slow and deep—that's right. Nice. And I want you to cover your eyes now. Go on, cover them."

"How do you know—"

"Talking wasn't on your to-do list. Close your eyes and cover them. And keep breathing. Everything's going to be okay provided you get yourself out of this alley."

As the male clamped trembling hands over his eyes, Butch went over to the second slayer, who was lying facedown on the pavement. The thing had black blood oozing from its shoulder and little moans coming out of its mouth.

Butch grabbed a fistful of the *lesser*'s hair, tilted the thing's head off the asphalt, and put the Glock's muzzle in tight to the base of the skull. He pulled the trigger. As the top half of the bastard's face vaporized, its arms and legs twitched. Fell still.

But the job wasn't done. Both slayers needed to be stabbed in the chest to truly be dead. And Butch didn't have anything sharp and shiny on him.

He got out his cell phone and hit speed dial again as he rolled the slayer over with his foot. While V's cell started to ring, Butch went through the *lesser*'s pockets. He lifted a BlackBerry as well as a wallet—

"Fuck me," Butch breathed. The slayer had activated his phone, obviously calling for an assist. And through the open line, the sounds of heavy breathing and flapping clothes were a loud and clear sign that the backup brigade was coming fast.

Butch glanced at the vampire as V's phone continued to ring. "How we doin'? You look good. You look really calm and in control."

V, pick up the damn phone. V—

The vampire dropped his hands, and his eyes fell upon the slayer, whose forehead was now all over the brick wall on the right. "Oh...my God—"

Butch stood up, putting his body in the way. "You don't think about that."

The civilian's hand came out and pointed downward. "And you—you're shot."

“Yeah, you don’t worry about me, either. I need you to cool out and leave, my man.” *Like right fucking now.*

Just as V’s voice mail kicked in, the sound of boots pounding the pavement drifted down the alley. Butch shoved his phone in the vicinity of his pocket and ditched the clip out of the Glock. As he slammed in a fresh one, he was through with the hand-holding. “Dematerialize. Dematerialize now.”

“But—but—”

“Now! For fuck’s sake, get your ass out of here or you’re going home in a box.”

“Why are you doing this? You’re just a human—”

“I am so sick of hearing that. *Leave!*”

The vampire closed his eyes, breathed a word in the Old Language, and disappeared.

As the hellfire beat of the slayers got louder, Butch looked around for shelter, aware that his left shoe was soaking wet from his own blood. The shallow doorway was his only bet. Cursing again, he flattened himself in it and looked at what was coming at him.

“Oh, shit...” *Jesus God in heaven...*there were six of them.

Vishous knew what was about to happen next, and it was nothing he needed to be a part of. As a flash of brilliant white light turned the night to noontime, he spun away, shoving his shitkickers into the ground. And there was no reason to glance back when the great roar of the beast rumbled through the night. V knew the drill: Rhage had turned, the creature was loose, and the *lessers* they’d been fighting were about to be lunch. Pretty much business as usual...except for their current location: Caldwell High School’s football field.

Go, Bulldogs! Rah!

V pounded over to the bleachers and StairMastered them, taking himself to the top of CHS’s cheering section. Down below, on the fifty-yard line, the beast snatched a *lesser*, tossed the thing up into the air, and caught the undead between its teeth.

Vishous glanced around. The moon wasn’t out, which was great, but there were maybe twenty-five frickin’ houses around the high school. And the humans inside those split-levels and ranches and Middle America colonials had just woken up to a flare as bright as a nuclear explosion.

V cursed and whipped off the lead-lined driving glove that covered his right hand. As he put his arm out, the glow from his godforsaken palm's inner core illuminated the tattoos that ran from his fingertips to his wrist on both sides. Staring at the field, V concentrated on the beat of his heart, feeling the pump in his veins and getting into the pulse, the pulse, the pulse...

Buffering waves came out of his palm, something like heat waves rising off asphalt. Just as a couple of porch lights came on and front doors were opened and fathers of the household poked their heads out of their castles, the masking of *mhis* took over: The sights and the sounds of the fighting on the field were replaced with the nothing special illusion that all was well and as it should be.

From the bleachers, V used his night vision to watch the human men look around and wave to each other. When one smiled and shrugged, V could imagine the conversation.

Hey, Bob, you see that too?

Yeah, Gary. Big light. Huge.

Should we call the police?

Everything looks okay.

Yeah. Weird. Hey, you and Marilyn and the kids free this Saturday? We could do a mall crawl, maybe hit pizza afterward?

Great idea. I'll talk to Sue. 'Night.

'Night.

While the doors were shut and those men no doubt shuffled to the refridge for a night bite, Vishous kept up the masking.

The beast didn't take long. And didn't leave much uneaten. When it was finished, the scaled dragon looked around and as the thing spotted V, a growl rippled up to the bleachers, then ended in a snort.

"You finished, big guy?" V called down. "FYI, goalpost over there would work righteous as a toothpick."

Another snort. Then the creature lay down and Rhage appeared naked in its place on the black-soaked ground. As soon as the change was complete, V hauled it down the bleachers and jogged across the field.

"My brother?" Rhage groaned as he shivered in the snow.

"Yeah, Hollywood, it's me. I'm gonna get you home to Mary."

"Not as bad as it used to be."

"Good."

V whipped off his leather jacket and stretched it across Rhage's chest;

then he snagged his cell phone from a pocket. Two calls had come through from Butch's number and he hit back at the cop, needing a pickup fast. When there was no answer, V called the Pit and got voice mail.

*Holy hell...*Phury was at Havers's getting his prosthesis adjusted again. Wrath couldn't drive because of his blindness. No one had seen Tohrment for months. That left...Zsadist.

After a hundred years of dealing with that male, it was hard not to curse as the call went out. Z was not lifeboat material, not by a long shot; he was more like the sharks in the water. But what was the other option? Besides, at least the brother had been a little better since he'd gotten mated.

"Yeah," came the sharp answer.

"Hollywood expressed his inner Godzilla again. I need a car."

"Where are you?"

"Weston Road. Caldwell High School football field."

"I'll be there in ten. First aid?"

"No, we're both intact."

"Got it. Hang tight."

The connection ended and V looked at his phone. The idea that that scary-ass bastard could be relied upon was a surprise. Never would have seen that one coming...not that he saw anything anymore.

V put his good hand on Rhage's shoulder and looked up at the sky. An infinite, unknowable universe loomed above him, above them all, and for the first time, the vastness terrified him. But then, for the first time in his life he was flying without a net.

His visions were gone. Those snapshots of the future, those bullshit, invasive telecasts of what was coming, those pictures without dates that had kept him on edge ever since he could remember, were just gone. And so were the intrusions of other people's thoughts.

He'd always wanted to be alone in his head. How ironic that he found the silence deafening.

"V? We okay?"

He looked down at Rhage. The brother's perfect blond beauty was still blinding, even with all the *lesser* blood on his face. "Ride's coming soon. We'll get you home to your Mary."

Rhage started to mumble and V just let him go. Poor miserable guy. Curses were never a party.

Ten minutes later, Zsadist pulled right up onto the football field in his

twin's BMW, busting through a shrinking, dirty snowbank and mud-tracking it in. As the M5 came through the snow, V knew they were going to trash the leather in the backseat, but then Fritz, butler extraordinaire, could get stains out like you wouldn't believe.

Zsadist got out of the car and came around the hood. After a century of being half-starved by choice, he was now packing a good two hundred eighty-five pounds on his six-foot-six frame. The scar on his face remained obvious, and so did his tattooed slave bands, but thanks to his *shellan*, Bella, his eyes were no longer black pits of hatred. For the most part.

Without saying anything, the two of them manhandled Rhage over to the car and stuffed his massive body into the backseat.

"You poofing it home?" Z said as he got behind the wheel.

"Yeah, but I need to clear the scene." Which meant using his hand to fry-clean the *lesser* blood that was splattered everywhere.

"You want me to wait?"

"No, get our boy home. Mary's going to want to see him ASAP."

Zsadist scanned the vicinity with a quick head twist. "I'll wait."

"Z, it's cool. I won't stay here alone long."

That ruined lip lifted into a snarl. "If you're not at the compound by the time I get there, I'm coming for you."

The Beemer took off, back tires kicking up mud and snow.

Jesus, Z really was backup.

Ten minutes later V dematerialized to the compound, just as Zsadist was pulling in with Rhage. As Z took Hollywood inside, Vishous looked around at the cars parked in the courtyard. Where the hell was the Escalade? Butch should be back by now.

V took out his phone and hit speed dial. When he got voice mail, he said, "Hey, buddy, I'm home. Where are you, cop?"

As the two of them called each other constantly, he knew Butch would check in soon enough. Hell, maybe the guy was getting busy for the first time in recorded history. It was about time the sorry SOB shelved his obsession with Marissa and got a little sexual relief.

And speaking of relief... V measured the light in the sky. He figured he had about an hour and a half of darkness left, and man, he was twitchy as shit. There was something going on tonight, something bad in the air, but with his visions gone, he didn't know what it was. And the blank slate was making him mental.

He fired up his cell again and hit a number. When the ringing stopped, he didn't wait for a hello. "You will get ready for me now. You will wear what I bought for you. Your hair will be bound and off your neck."

He waited to hear the only three words he cared about and they came right away, the female voice saying, "Yes, my *lheage*."

V hung up and dematerialized.

Chapter Three

ZeroSum was doing excellent business lately, Rehvenge thought as he looked at the tallies. Cash flow was strong. There was growth in the sports booking receipts. Attendance was up. God, he'd owned the club for how long now? Five? Six years? And it was finally cranking enough income that he could take a deep breath.

It was a despicable way of making money, of course, what with the sex and the drugs and the booze and the betting. But he needed to support his *mahmen* and, up until recently, his sister, Bella. Then there was the blackmail overhead he had to cover.

Secrets could be so expensive to keep.

Rehv looked up as the door to his office opened. As his chief security officer came in, he could smell the lingering scent of O'Neal on her and he smiled a little. He liked being right. "Thanks for taking care of Butch."

Xhex's gray eyes were direct as always. "I wouldn't have if I hadn't wanted him."

"And I wouldn't have asked if I hadn't known that. Now, where are we?"

She sat down opposite his desk, her powerful body as hard as the marble he was resting his elbows on. "Nonconsensual sex in the mezzanine men's room. I took care of it. The woman is pressing charges."

"Was the guy walking after you were through with him?"

"Yeah, but he was wearing a new pair of earrings, if you know what I mean. I also found two minors on the premises and kicked them out. And one of the bouncers was taking kickbacks from the line, so I fired him."

"Anything else?"

"We had another OD."

"Shit. Not our product, though, right?"

“Nope. Outside junk.” She pulled a small cellophane bag out of the back pocket of her leathers and tossed it on his desk. “I managed to snag this before the EMTs arrived. I’m hiring some extra staff to deal with the situation.”

“Good. You find that freelancer, you bring his ass to me. I want to take care of him personally.”

“Will do.”

“You got anything more for me?”

In the silence that followed, Xhex leaned forward and linked her hands together. Her body was all tight muscle, nothing but hard angles except for her high, small breasts. She was deliciously hermaphroditic, although fully a female so far as he’d heard.

The cop should feel lucky, he thought. Xhex didn’t have sex that often, and then only when she found the male worthy.

She also didn’t waste time. Usually. “Xhex, talk.”

“I want to know something.”

Rehv eased back in his chair. “Is this going to piss me off?”

“Yup. Are you looking for a mate?”

As his eyes started to glow purple, he tilted his chin down and stared at her from under his brows. “Who said I was? And I want the name.”

“Deduction, not gossip. According to GPS records, your Bentley’s been by Havers’s a lot lately. I happen to know Marissa is unattached. She’s beautiful. Complicated. But you’ve never cared about the *glymera*. You thinking about mating her?”

“Not at all,” he lied.

“Good.” As Xhex’s eyes nailed into him, it was obvious she knew the truth. “Because it would be crazy for you to give it a shot. She’d find out about you—and I’m not talking about what goes down here. She’s a member of the *Princeps* Council, for chrissakes. If she knew you were a *sympath*, that would compromise both of us.”

Rehv rose to his feet and palmed his cane. “The Brotherhood already knows about me.”

“How?” Xhex breathed.

He thought about the little lip/fang thing he and the Brother, Phury, had shared and decided to keep that on the down-low. “They just do. And now that my sister’s mated to a Brother, I’m a member of the frickin’ family. So even if the *Princeps* Council found out, those warriors would keep them at

bay.”

Too bad his blackmailer was unaffected by the ways of the Normals. *Sympathists*, he was learning, made very bad enemies. No wonder his kind were hated.

“You sure about that?” Xhex said.

“It would kill Bella if I were sent to one of those colonies. You think that *hellren* of hers would stand for her being upset like that, especially as she’s *pregnant*? Z’s one mean-ass motherfucker and he is very protective of her. So, yeah, I’m sure.”

“She ever guessed about you?”

“No.” And though Zsadist knew, he wasn’t going to tell his mate. No way he’d put Bella in that position. Laws read that if you knew of a *sympath* you had to report him or her or face prosecution.

Rehv came around the desk, relying on his cane now that Xhex was the only one around. The dopamine he shot himself up with regularly kept the worst of the *sympath* urges at bay, enabling him to pass for a Normal. He wasn’t sure how Xhex managed it. Wasn’t sure he wanted to know. But the thing was, with his sense of touch gone, he had to use a cane or he was liable to fall. After all, depth perception got you only so far when you couldn’t feel your feet or legs.

“You don’t worry,” he said. “No one knows what either one of us are. And it’s going to stay that way.”

Gray eyes stared up at him. “Are you feeding her, Rehv.” Not a question. A demand. “Are you feeding Marissa?”

“That’s my business, not yours.”

She shot to her feet. “Goddamn you—we agreed. Twenty-five years ago when I had my little problem, we agreed. No mates. No feeding with Normals. What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m in control and this conversation is over.” He checked his watch. “And what do you know, it’s closing time and you need a break. The Moors can lock up.”

She glared at him for a moment. “I don’t leave until the job is done—”

“I’m telling you to go home, not being nice. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“No offense, but fuck you, Rehvvenge.”

She stalked over to the door, moving like the killer she was. As he watched her go, he was reminded that this security stuff for him was nothing compared to what she was capable of.

"Xhex," he said, "maybe we were wrong about the mating."

She sent an *are-you-stupid?* frown over her shoulder. "You shoot yourself up twice a day. You think Marissa wouldn't notice that eventually? How about the fact that you have to go to her brother the good doctor for the neuromodulator you rely on? Besides, what would an aristocrat like her say about all...this?" She swept her arm around his office. "We weren't wrong. You're just forgetting the *whys* of it all."

The door eased shut behind her and Rehv looked down at his numb body. He pictured Marissa, so pure and beautiful, so different from the other females he was around, so different from Xhex...who he fed from.

He wanted Marissa, was half in love with her at this point. And the male in him wanted to claim what was his even though his drugs made him impotent. Except surely he wouldn't hurt what he loved, even if his dark parts were out? Right?

He thought of her, wearing her lovely haute couture gowns, so properly dressed, so genteel, so...clean. The *glymera* was wrong about her. She wasn't defective; she was perfect.

He smiled, his body flushing up with a burn that only hard-core orgasms could douse. It was getting to be that time of the month, so she would be calling him soon. Yeah, she would need him again...soon. As his blood was diluted, she had to feed with gratifying frequency, and the last time had been almost three weeks ago.

She would be calling him within days. And he couldn't wait to be of service to her.

V got back to the Brotherhood's compound with minutes to spare, materializing just outside the gatehouse's front door. He'd hoped his kind of sex would have taken the edge off of him, but no, he was still bladed as shit.

He went through the Pit's vestibule and disarmed along the way, all tensed up and so ready for a shower to get the smell of the female off him. He should have been hungry; instead, all he wanted was some Grey Goose.

"Butch, my man!" he called out.

Silence.

V walked down the hall to the cop's bedroom. "You crashed?"

He pushed open the door. The king-sized bed was empty. So maybe the cop was up at the main house?

V jogged through the Pit and put his head out through the vestibule's

door. A quick glance around at the cars parked in the courtyard and his heart went snare drum on him. No Escalade. So Butch wasn't at the compound.

With the sky beginning to lighten off to the east, the glow of day stung V's eyes, so he ducked back into the house and sat down behind his bank of computers. Firing up the coordinates on the Escalade, he saw that the SUV was parked behind Screamer's.

Which was good. At least Butch wasn't wrapped around a tree—

V froze. Slowly, he pushed his hand into the back pocket of his leathers, a horrible feeling coming over him, hot and prickly like a rash. Flipping open the Razr, he accessed his voice mail. First message was a hang-up from Butch's number.

As the second message clicked on, the Pit's steel shutters started to come down for the day.

V frowned. There was only a hissing sound coming from the voice mail. But then a clatter had him yanking the phone away from his ear.

Now Butch's voice, hard, loud: "*Dematerialize. Dematerialize now.*"

A scared male: "*But—but—*"

"*Now! For fuck's sake, get your ass out of here...*" Sounds of muffled flapping.

"*Why are you doing this? You're just a human—*"

"*I am so sick of hearing that. Leave!*"

There was a metallic shifting, a gun being reloaded.

Butch's voice: "*Oh, shit...*"

Then all hell broke loose. Gunshots, grunts, thuds.

V leaped up from his desk so fast he knocked his chair over.

Only to realize he was trapped inside by daylight.

Chapter Four

The first thing Butch thought when he came around was that someone needed to turn that faucet off. The drip, drip, drip was annoying.

Then he cracked an eyelid and realized his own blood was pulling the Kohler routine. *Oh...right.* He'd been beaten and he was leaking.

This had been a long, long, very bad day. How many hours had he been interrogated? Twelve? Felt like a thousand.

He tried to take a deep breath, but some of his ribs were broken, so he picked hypoxia over more pain. Man, thanks to his captor's attentions, everything hurt like a motherfucker, but at least the *lesser* had sealed up that gunshot wound.

Just to keep the questioning going longer.

The only saving grace to the nightmare was that not one thing about the Brotherhood had passed his lips. Not a thing. Even when the slayer went to work on his fingernails and between his legs. Butch was going to die soon, but at least he could look Saint Peter in the eye and know he wasn't a squealer when he got to heaven.

Or had he died and gone to hell? Was that what all this was about? Given some of the shit he'd pulled on earth, he could see why he'd ended up in the devil's guesthouse. But then wouldn't his torturer have horns, like demons did?

Okay, he was flirting with Looney Tunes here.

He opened his eyes a little farther, figuring it was time to try to separate reality from mind-grinding nonsense. He had a feeling this was probably his last shot at consciousness, so he should make it count.

Vision was blurry. Hands...feet...yup, chained down. And he was still lying on something hard, a table. Room was...dark. Dirt smell meant he was probably in a basement. Bald lightbulb revealed...yeah, the torture tool kit.

He looked away from the spread of sharp things, shuddering.

What was that sound? A dim roar. Getting louder. Louder.

As soon as it was cut off, a door opened upstairs and Butch heard a man say in a muffled voice, “Master.”

Soft reply. Indistinct. Then a conversation, with one set of footsteps pacing around, causing dust to filter down from the floorboards. Eventually, another door squeaked open, and the stairs next to him started to creak.

Butch broke out in a cold sweat and lowered his eyelids. Through the cracks between his lashes, he watched what came at him.

First guy was the *lesser* who’d been working him out, the guy from over the summer, from the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy—Joseph Xavier was his name, if Butch remembered correctly. The other was draped from head to foot in a brilliant white robe, his face and hands completely covered. Looked like some kind of monk or priest.

Except that was no man of God under there. As Butch absorbed the person’s vibe, he couldn’t breathe from his repulsion. Whatever was hidden by that robe was distilled evil, the kind that mobilized serial killers and rapists and murderers and people who enjoyed beating their children: hatred and malevolence in an upright, solid form.

Butch’s fear level shot through the roof. He could handle being knocked around; the pain was bitch, but there was a definable end point marked by when his heart stopped beating. But whatever was hiding under that robe held mysteries of suffering the likes of which were biblical. And how did he know? His whole body was revolting, his instincts firing off to run, save himself...*pray*.

Words came to him, marching through his mind. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...*

The robed figure’s hood turned toward Butch with the boneless swivel of an owl’s head.

Butch slammed his lids shut and hurried through the Twenty-third Psalm. Faster...needed to get the words into his mind, faster. *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.... He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake...*

“This man is the one?” The voice that reverberated through the basement tripped Butch up, making him lose his rhythm: It was resonant and carried an echo, something out of a sci-fi movie with all that eerie distortion.

“His gun had the Brotherhood’s bullets in it.”

Get back to the Psalm. And do it faster. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*—

“I know you wake, human.” The echoing voice shot right into Butch’s ear. “Look upon me and know your captor’s master.”

Butch opened his eyes, turned his head, and swallowed compulsively. The face staring down into his was condensed blackness, a shadow come to life.

The Omega.

The Evil laughed a little. “So you know what I am, do you?” It straightened. “Given you anything, has he, *Fore-lesser*? ”

“I’m not finished.”

“Ah, so that is no. And you have worked him well, given how close to death he is. Yes, I can feel it coming to him. So close.” The Omega bent down again and inhaled the air over Butch’s body. “Yes, within the hour. Maybe less.”

“He’ll last as long as I want him to.”

“No, he won’t.” The Omega started to circle the table and Butch tracked the movement, terror getting tighter and tighter, strengthening in the centrifugal force of the Evil’s pacing. Around, around, around...Butch trembled so badly his teeth clapped together.

The shaking dried up the second the Omega came to a halt at the far end of the table. Shadowy hands lifted up, grasped the white robe’s hood, and pulled it off. Overhead, the bald lightbulb flickered as if its illumination were sucked in by the black form.

“You are letting him go,” the Omega said, that voice like a wave, filtered and enhanced by the air in turns. “You are leaving him out in the woods. You are telling the others to stay away from him.”

What? Butch thought.

“*What?*” the *Fore-lesser* said.

“The Brotherhood has among its weaknesses a paralyzing loyalty, do they not? Yes, paralyzing fidelity. They claim what is theirs. It is the animal in them.” The Omega held out its hand. “A knife, please. I am of a mind to make this human useful.”

“You just said he was going to die.”

“But I’m going to give him a little life, as it were. As well as a gift. *Knife.*”

Butch’s eyes cracked wide open as an eight-inch hunting number was

exchanged.

The Omega placed one hand on the table, put the blade to the tip of its finger, and bore down. There was a crack, like a carrot had been cut.

The Omega leaned over Butch. "Where to hide, where to hide..."

As the knife came up and hovered over Butch's abdomen, Butch screamed. And he was still screaming as a shallow slice was made into his belly. Then the Omega picked up the little part of itself, the black digit.

Butch fought, yanking against the binds. Horror had his eyes bulging until the pressure on his optic nerves blinded him.

The Omega inserted its fingertip into Butch's gut, then bent low and blew over the fresh cut. The skin sealed up, the flesh knitting together.

Immediately, Butch felt the rotting inside him, sensed the evil worming around, moving. He lifted his head. The skin around the cut was already turning gray.

Tears raced to his eyes. Seeped down his raw cheeks.

"Release him."

The *Fore-lesser* went to work on the chains, but when they were off, Butch realized he couldn't move. He was paralyzed.

"I will take him," the Omega said. "And he will survive and find his way back to the Brotherhood."

"They'll sense you."

"Perhaps, but they will take him."

"He'll tell them."

"No, because he won't remember me." The Omega's face tilted toward Butch. "You won't remember a thing."

As their stares met, Butch could feel the affinity between them, could sense the bond, the sameness. He wept for the violation of himself, but more for the Brotherhood. They would take him in. They would try to help him in whatever way they could.

And sure as the evil in him, he would end up betraying them.

Except maybe Vishous or the brothers wouldn't find him. How could they? And with no clothes on, surely he would die from exposure fast.

The Omega reached out and wiped the tears from one of Butch's cheeks. The shimmer of wetness was iridescent against those translucent black fingers, and Butch wanted what had come out of him back. Not to be. Lifting the hand to its mouth, the Evil savored Butch's pain and fear, licking... sucking.

Despair scrambled Butch's memory, but the faith he'd thought he'd foresworn spit out another line of the Psalm: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

But that was no longer possible now, was it? He had evil inside him, under his skin.

The Omega smiled, though Butch didn't know how he knew it. "Pity we don't have more time, as you are in a fragile state. But there will be opportunities for you and me in the future. What I claim as my own always comes back to me. Now, sleep."

And like a lamp being clicked off, Butch did.

"Answer the fucking question, Vishous."

V looked away from his king just as the grandfather clock in the corner of the study started to go off. It stopped at four chimes, so it was four in the afternoon. The Brotherhood had been in Wrath's command central all day long, prowling around the ridiculously elegant Louis XIV salon, saturating the delicate air of the place with their anger.

"Vishous," Wrath growled, "I'm waiting. How will you know how to find the cop? And why didn't you mention this before now?"

Because he'd known it was going to create problems, and their shopping cart of shit was already full.

As V tried to think of what he could say, he looked at his brothers. Phury was on the pale blue silk couch in front of the fireplace, his body dwarfing the piece of furniture, his multicolored hair now back down past his jawline. Z was behind his twin, up against the mantel, his eyes back to black because he was enraged. Rhage was by the door, his beautiful face set in a nasty expression, his shoulders twitching as if his inner beast was likewise rip shit pissed.

And then there was Wrath. Behind a dainty desk, the Blind King was all menace, his cruel visage set hard, his weak eyes hidden behind black-framed wraparounds. His heavy forearms, marked on the insides with tattoos of his pure-blooded lineage, were planted on a gold-embossed blotter.

That Tohr was not with the group was a gaping wound to all of them.

"V? Answer the question or so help me God I'll beat it out of you."

"I just know how to find him."

"What are you hiding?"

V went over to the bar, poured himself a couple fingers of Grey Goose, and hammered the shot. He swallowed a number of times and then let the words fly.

“I fed him.”

A chorus of inhales floated around the room. As Wrath rose in disbelief, V poured himself another hit of Goose.

“You did *what?*” The last word was bellowed.

“I had him drink some of me.”

“Vishous...” Wrath stalked around the desk, shitkickers hitting the floor like boulders. The king got face-to-face close. “He’s a male. He’s *human*. What the fuck were you thinking?”

More vodka. Definitely time for more Goose.

V swallowed the shot and poured number four. “With my blood in him, I can find him and that’s why I had him drink. I saw...that I was supposed to. So I did it, and I would do it again.”

Wrath wheeled away and paced around the room, hands cranked into fists. As the boss man walked off frustration, the rest of the Brotherhood looked over with curiosity.

“I did what I had to,” V snapped, throwing his glass back.

Wrath stopped by one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The thing was shuttered for the day, no light coming through. “Did he take your vein?”

“No.”

A couple of the brothers cleared their throats, like they were urging him to be honest.

V cursed and poured some more. “Oh, for God’s sake, it’s not like that with him. I gave him some in a glass. He didn’t know what he was drinking.”

“Shit, V,” Wrath muttered, “you could have killed him outright—”

“It was three months ago. He got through it, so there’s no harm done—”

Wrath’s voice rang out loud as an air strike. “You violated the law! Feeding a *human*? Christ! What am I supposed to do with this?”

“You want to serve me up to the Scribe Virgin, I’ll go willingly. But I want to be clear. First, I find Butch and bring him home, dead or alive.”

Wrath popped up his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes, a habit he’d developed lately when he got tired of the king shit. “If he was interrogated, he may have talked. We could be compromised.”

V looked down into his glass and slowly shook his head.

“He’d die before giving us up. I guarantee it.” He swallowed the vodka

and felt it slide down his throat. “My man is good like that.”

Chapter Five

Rehvenge had not seemed at all surprised when she called him, Marissa thought. But then, he'd always had this uncanny way of reading her.

Gathering up her black cloak, she stepped out the back of her brother's mansion. Night had just fallen, and she shivered, though not because of the cold. It was that horrible dream she'd had during the day. She'd been flying, flying across the landscape, flying over a frozen pond with pines on its far side, going farther past a ring of trees, until she'd slowed and peered downward. On the snowy ground, curled up and bleeding, she saw...*Butch*.

The urge to call the Brotherhood lingered as much as the images of the nightmare did. Except how stupid would she feel when the warriors called back all annoyed, just to tell her he was perfectly fine? They'd probably think she was stalking him. Except, God...that vision of him bleeding into the white-covered earth, that picture of him, helpless in the fetal position, haunted her.

It was only a dream, though. Merely...a dream.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself into a semblance of calm and dematerialized downtown to the terrace of a penthouse apartment some thirty stories up. As soon as she took form, Rehvenge slid open one of six glass doors.

He immediately frowned. "You're upset."

She forced a smile as she went over to him. "You know I'm always a little uncomfortable."

He pointed his gold engraved cane at her. "No, this is different."

God, she'd never known anyone so in tune with her emotions. "I'll be fine."

As he took her elbow and pulled her inside, a tropical warmth embraced

her. Rehv always had the temperature this high, and his floor length sable coat always stayed on until they got to the couch. She had no idea how he could stand the heat, but he seemed to crave it.

He shut the slider. "Marissa, I want to know what's doing."

"Nothing, really."

With a twist, she took off her cloak and draped it on a chrome-and-black chair. Three sides of the penthouse were made up of sheets of glass, and the sprawling view of Caldwell's two halves included the shimmering lights of downtown, the dark curve of the Hudson River, the stars over it all. Unlike the twinkling landscape, though, the decor was minimalist, all ebony and cream elegance...rather like Rehv, with his black mohawk and his golden skin and his perfect clothes.

Under different circumstances, she would have adored the penthouse.

Under different circumstances, she might have adored him.

Rehv's violet eyes narrowed as he leaned on his cane and came to her. He was a huge male, built like a Brother, and he had looming down pat, his handsome face hard. "Don't lie to me."

She smiled slightly. Males like him tended to be very protective, and though the two of them were not mated, she wasn't surprised he seemed ready to hunt something down on her behalf. "I had a disturbing dream this morning and haven't shaken it off yet. That's all."

As he measured her, she had the oddest sense he was sifting through her emotions, examining how they interconnected from the inside.

"Give me your hand," he said.

She reached out with no hesitation. He always observed the *glymera*'s formalities, and he hadn't yet greeted her as custom required. Except when their palms met, he didn't brush his lips across her knuckles. He put his thumb over her wrist and pushed down a little. Then even harder. Suddenly, as if he'd opened up some kind of drain, her feelings of fear and worry tunneled down her arm and out to him, pulled through by the contact.

"Rehvenge?" she whispered weakly.

The instant he let her go, the emotions came back, a wellspring no longer tapped.

"You won't be able to be with me tonight."

She flushed and rubbed the skin where he'd touched her. "Of course I will. It's...time."

To get them started, she went to the black leather couch they usually used

and stood beside it. After a moment, Rehvenge came over to her and took off his sable coat, slinging the fur out flat for them to lie on. Then he unbuttoned his black suit coat and removed it as well. His fine silk shirt, which seemed so very white, parted down the middle at his fingertips and then the heavy, hairless expense of his chest was revealed. Tattoos marked his pecs, two five-pointed stars in red ink, and there were more designs on his ribbed stomach.

As he sat down and eased back into the couch's arms, his muscles flexed. Looking up at her, his glowing amethyst stare drew her in, and so did his hand as he extended his arm and crooked his forefinger at her. "Come here, *tahllly*. I've got what you need."

She lifted the skirt of her gown and climbed between his legs. Rehv always insisted she take from his throat, but in the three times they had done this, he had never once been aroused. Which was a relief as well as a reminder. Wrath had never had an erection when he was near her either.

As she glanced down at Rehv's smooth-skinned male glory, the low-level hunger she had been feeling for the past few days hit hard. She put her palms on his pecs and arched over him, watching as he closed his eyes, tilted his chin to the side, and ran his hands up her arms. A soft groan left his lips, which was something he always did right before she struck. In another situation, she would have said it was anticipation, but she knew that wasn't true. His body was always flaccid, and she couldn't believe he liked being used that much.

She opened her mouth, her fangs elongating, extending downward from her upper jaw. Leaning into Rehv, she—

The image of Butch in the snow froze her, and she had to shake her head to refocus on Rehv's throat and her hunger.

Feed, she told herself. Take what he offers.

She tried again, only to stop with her mouth on his neck. As she squeezed her eyes shut in frustration, Rehv put his hand under her chin and lifted her head up.

"Who is he, *tahllly*?" Rehv's thumb stroked her bottom lip. "Who is this male you love who won't feed you? And I'm going to be totally insulted if you don't tell me."

"Oh, Rehvenge...it's no one you know."

"He is a fool."

"No. I am the fool."

With an unexpected surge, Rehv pulled her down to his mouth. She was

so shocked, she gasped, and in an erotic rush, his tongue entered her. He kissed her with skill, all smooth moves and sliding penetrations. She felt no arousal but could tell what kind of lover he would be: dominant, powerful... thorough.

When she pushed against his chest, he let her break the contact.

As Rehv eased back, his amethyst eyes glowed, a beautiful purple light pouring out of them, pouring into her. Though she felt no erection at his hips, the trembling that ran throughout his big, muscular body told her he was a male with sex on his mind and in his blood—and that he wanted to penetrate her.

“You look so surprised,” he drawled.

Considering the way most males regarded her, she was. “That was unexpected. Especially as I didn’t think you could—”

“I am capable of mating with a female.” His lids dropped, and for a moment he looked frightening. “Under certain circumstances.”

From out of nowhere, a shocking image shot into her brain: her naked on a bed with a sable blanket beneath her, Rehv naked and fully aroused, spreading her legs with his hips. On the inside of her thigh, she saw a bite mark, as if he’d fed from the vein there.

As she inhaled sharply and covered her eyes, the vision disappeared and he murmured, “My apologies, *tahllly*. I fear my fantasies are rather well developed. But don’t worry, we can just keep them in my head.”

“Dear God, Rehvenge, I never would have guessed. And maybe if things were different...”

“Fair enough.” He stared into her face and then shook his head. “I really want to meet this male of yours.”

“That’s the problem. He’s not mine.”

“Then like I said, he’s a fool.” Rehv touched her hair. “And hungry as you are, we’re going to have to do this another time, *tahllly*. That heart of yours isn’t going to allow it tonight.”

She pushed away from him and stood up, her eyes going to the windows and the glowing city. She wondered where Butch was and what he was doing, then looked back over at Rehv and wanted to know why in the hell she wasn’t attracted to him. He was beautiful in the ways of a warrior—potent, thick-blooded, strong...especially now, with his massive body sprawled on the sable-covered couch, his legs spread in blatant sexual invitation.

“I wish I wanted you, Rehv.”

He laughed dryly. “Funny, I know just what you mean.”

V pushed out through the mansion’s vestibule and stood in the courtyard. In the lee of the looming stone manse, he cast his mind out into the night, radar looking for a signal.

“You do *not* go in alone,” Rhage snarled at his ear. “You find the place they’re keeping him and you call us.”

When V didn’t reply, he was grabbed by the back of the neck and shaken like a rag doll. In spite of the fact that he was a jacked six-foot-six.

Rhage’s face pushed into his, all *no-fooling-around*. “Vishous. You hear me?”

“Yeah, whatever.” He shoved the male off him, only to become very aware that they were not alone. The rest of the Brotherhood was waiting, armed and angry, a cannon ready to be fired. Except...in the midst of all their aggression, they were looking over at him with worry. As the concern drove him nuts, he turned away.

V marshaled his mind and sifted through the night, trying to find the small echo of himself inside Butch. Penetrating the darkness, he searched across fields and mountains and frozen lakes and rushing streams...out...out...out—

Oh, God.

Butch was alive. Barely. And he was...north and east. Twelve, maybe fifteen miles away.

As V took out his Glock, an iron hand grabbed his arm. Rhage was back with a hard-on. “You do *not* take those *lessers* on alone.”

“I got it.”

“Swear to me,” Rhage snapped. Like he knew damn well V was thinking of rushing whoever held Butch and only calling for cleanup.

Except this was personal, not just about the war between the vampires and the Lessening Society. Those undead bastards had taken his—well, he didn’t know what Butch was to him specifically. But it ran deeper than anything he’d felt in a long time.

“Vishous—”

“I’ll call you when I’m good and fucking ready.” V dematerialized free of his brother’s hold.

Traveling in a loose scramble of molecules, he misted out into Caldwell’s rural farmland to a grove of woods beyond a pond that was still frozen. He

triangulated his reappearance about a hundred yards away from the signal he got from Butch, coming together crouched and ready for a fight.

Which was a good plan because, holy hell, he could feel *lessers* everywhere—

V frowned and held his breath. Moving slowly, he turned in a semicircle, searching with his eyes and his ears, not his instincts. There were no slayers around. There was *nothing* around. Not even a shack or a hunting lodge—

Abruptly, he shuddered. No, there was something in these woods, all right—a big-ass something, a condensed mark of malevolence, an evil that made him twitchy.

The Omega.

As he swiveled his head toward the dreadful concentration, a cold blast of wind nailed him in the face, like Mother Nature was urging him in the opposite direction.

Tough shit. He had to get his roommate out of here.

V ran toward what he could sense of Butch, his shitkickers punching through the crusty snow. Up ahead, the full moon shone brightly at the margin of a cloudless sky, but the presence of evil was so vivid V could have followed the way blindfolded. And shit, Butch was close to that blackness.

Fifty yards later, V saw the coyotes. They were circling something on the ground, growling not as if they were hungry but as if the pack was being threatened.

And whatever had captured their interest was of such magnitude they didn't even notice V's approach. To break them up, he pointed his gun overhead and let off a couple of rounds. The coyotes scattered and—

V skidded to a halt. As he looked at what was on the ground, he couldn't swallow. Which was fine, because his mouth went dry.

Butch was lying in the snow on his side, naked, beaten, blood all over him, face swollen and bruised. His thigh was bandaged, but whatever wound was under the gauze had bled through. None of that was the horror, however. Evil was all around the cop...all around...shit, *he* was the black, foul footprint V had sensed.

Oh, sweet Virgin in the Fade.

Vishous did a quick scan of the environs, then dropped to his knees and gently laid his gloved hand on his friend. As a painful zinger shot up his arm, V's instincts told him to bolt because what he'd laid his palm on was to be avoided at all costs. *Evil.*

“Butch, it’s me. Butch?”

With a groan, the cop stirred, a kind of hope flaring in his battered face, as if he’d lifted his head to the sun. But then the expression faded.

Dear Lord, the man’s eyes were frozen shut because he’d been crying and the tears hadn’t gotten far in the cold.

“Don’t worry, cop. I’m going to...” *Do what?* The male was about to die out here, but what the hell had been done to him? He was saturated by darkness.

Butch’s mouth opened. The hoarse sounds that came out might have been words, but they didn’t carry.

“Cop, don’t say anything. I’m going to take care of you—”

Butch shook his head and began to move. With pathetic weakness, he stretched out his arms and grabbed at the ground, trying to pull his broken body through the snow. Away from V.

“Butch, it’s me—”

“No...” The cop went all frantic, clawing, dragging himself. “Infected... don’t know how...infected...you can’t...take me. Don’t know why...”

V used his voice like a slap, making it sharp and loud.

“Butch! Stop it!”

The cop settled down, although whether it was because he was following orders or had run out of steam wasn’t clear.

“What the hell did they do to you, my man?” V whipped out a Mylar blanket from his jacket and put it around his roommate.

“Infected.” Butch awkwardly rolled onto his back and shoved the silver sheath down, his busted-up hand falling onto his belly. “In...fected.”

“What the fuck...”

There was a fist-sized black circle on the cop’s stomach, something like a bruise with highly defined edges. In the center of it, there seemed to be...a surgical scar.

“Shit.” They’d put something in him.

“Kill me.” Butch’s voice was a chilling rasp. “Kill me now. Infected. Something...inside. Growing...”

V sat back on his heels and grabbed at his hair. Forcing his emotions to the back burner, he put his mind to work and prayed that his overdose of gray matter would come to the rescue. Moments later, the conclusion he reached was radical but logical, and it focused him to the point of calmness. He unsheathed one of his black daggers with a perfectly steady hand and leaned

in to his roommate.

What shouldn't be in there needed to come out. And given the evil that it was, the extraction had to be done here, in neutral territory, rather than at home or in Havers's clinic. Plus, death was breathing down the cop's neck, and the sooner he was decontam'd the better.

"Butch, buddy, I want you to take a deep breath, then hold still. I'm going to—"

"Be of care, warrior."

V whirled around in a crouch. Right behind him, hovering above the ground, was the Scribe Virgin. As always she was pure power, her black robes unruffled by the wind, her face hidden, her voice clear as the night air.

Vishous opened his mouth, but she cut him off. "Before you o'erstep your bounds and render inquiry, I will tell you, no, I cannot help directly. This is a matter of the sort I must stay out of. However, I will say this. You would be wise to unveil the curse you detest. Handling what is within him will bring you closer to death than ever you have been. And no one could remove it save you." She smiled a little, as if she read his thoughts. "Yes, this moment now is part of the reason you dreamed of him in the beginning. But there is another *why* of which you may see in time."

"Will he live?"

"Get to work, warrior," she said in a hard tone. "You shall make more progress toward his salvation if you act rather than offend me."

V leaned down to Butch and moved fast, drawing the knife over the cop's belly. As a moan left the man's cracked lips, a gaping hole opened up.

"Oh, Jesus." There was something black cocooned in the flesh.

The Scribe Virgin's voice was closer now, as if she were right over his shoulder. "Unsheathe your hand, warrior, and be of speed about it. How quickly that spreads."

V shoved his dagger back into his chest holster and ripped his glove off. He reached down, then stopped. "Wait, I can't touch anyone with this."

"The infection will offer the human protection. Do it now, warrior, and as you make contact, visualize the white glow of your palm all around you, as if you are skinned by light."

Vishous brought his hand forward while imagining himself surrounded by a pure, radiant incandescence. The moment he made contact with the black piece, his body shuddered and bucked. The thing, whatever it was, disintegrated with a hiss and pop, but, oh, shit, he felt ill.

“Breathe,” the Scribe Virgin said. “Just breathe through it.”

Vishous swayed and caught himself on the ground, his head hanging off his shoulders, his throat starting to pump. “I think I’m going to be—”

Yeah, he got sick. And as the retching tackled him again and again, he felt himself get eased off his arms. The Scribe Virgin supported him through the vomiting, and when it was over, he sagged into her. For a moment he even thought she was stroking his hair.

Then from out of nowhere, his cell phone appeared in his good hand, and her voice was strong in his ear. “Go now, take this human, and trust that the seat of evil is in the soul, not the body. And you must bring back the jar of one of your enemies. Bring it to this place and use your hand upon it. Do this without delay.”

V nodded. Unsolicited advice from the Scribe Virgin was not the kind you left at the roadside.

“And, warrior, keep your shield of light in place around this human. Further, use your hand to heal him. He may yet die unless enough light enters his body and heart.”

V felt the power of her fade as another shot of nausea hit his gut. While he dealt with the lingering effects of touching that thing, he figured, Jesus, if he felt this bad, he couldn’t imagine how Butch was doing.

When the phone rang in his hand, he realized he’d been lying on his back in the snow for some time. “Hello?” he said, all groggy.

“Where are you? What’s happening?” Rhage’s bass holler was a relief.

“I have him. I have”—V eyed the bloody mess that was his roommate—“Jesus, I need a pickup. Oh, shit, Rhage”—V put his hand to his eyes and started to shake. “Rhage—what they did to him...”

The tone of his brother’s voice instantly gentled, as if the guy knew V had gone bye-bye. “Okay, just relax. Tell me, where are you?”

“Woods...I don’t know...” God, his brain had totally shorted out. “Can you pinpoint me on the GPS?”

A voice in the background, probably Phury, yelled, “Got him!”

“All right, V, we got you and we’re coming—”

“No, place is contaminated.” As Rhage started in with the *whats*, V cut the brother off. “Car. We need a car. I’m going to have to carry him out. I don’t want anyone else to come here.”

There was a long pause. “All right. Head straight north, my brother. About a half mile you’ll run into Route 22. We’ll be there waiting for you.”

“Call—” He had to clear his voice and wipe his eyes. “Call Havers. Tell him we’re bringing in a trauma case. And tell him that we need a quarantine.”

“Jesus...what the hell did they do to him?”

“Hurry, Rhage—wait! Bring a *lesser* jar with you.”

“Why?”

“No time to explain. Just make sure you have one.”

V shoved his phone into his pocket, stuffed his glowing hand back into its glove, and went to Butch. After making sure the Mylar blanket was in place, he gathered the cop in his arms and eased all that deadweight off the ground. Butch hissed with pain.

“This is going to be a rough ride,” V said, “but we gotta get you moving.”

Except then V frowned and looked at the ground. Butch wasn’t bleeding much anymore, but holy hell, what about the footprints tracking out through the snow? If a *lesser* happened to come back, he might catch them on the way out.

From out of nowhere, storm clouds rolled in and snow started to fall hard.

Damn, the Scribe Virgin was good.

As V headed off through what was now nearly a blizzard, he imagined a white light of protection around both him and the man in his arms.

“You came!”

Marissa smiled as she shut the door to the cheery, windowless patient room. On the hospital bed, looking small and fragile, was a seven-year-old female. By her side, looking only somewhat larger but much more breakable, was the young’s mother.

“I promised last night I would visit you again, didn’t I?”

When the young grinned, there was a black hole where her front tooth was missing. “But still, you came. And you look so pretty.”

“So do you.” Marissa sat on the bed and took the young’s hand. “How are you?”

“*Mahmen* and I have been watching *Dora the Explorer*.”

The mother smiled a little, but the expression didn’t touch much of her plain face or her eyes. Since the young had been brought in three days ago, the mother had seemed to be on some kind of numbed-out autopilot. Well, except when she jumped every time someone came into the room.

“*Mahmen* says that we can only stay here a little while longer. Is that true?”

The mother opened her mouth, but Marissa answered, “You don’t have to worry about leaving. We need to take care of your leg first.”

These were not wealthy civilians, probably couldn’t pay for any of this, but Havers never turned anyone away. And he wasn’t going to rush them out.

“*Mahmen* says that my leg is bad. Is that true?”

“Not for long.” Marissa glanced down at the blankets. Havers was going to operate on the compound fracture momentarily. Hopefully it would heal right.

“*Mahmen* says I’ll be in the green room for an hour. Can it be shorter than that?”

“My brother will keep you there only as long as he has to.”

Havers was going to replace her shinbone with a titanium rod, which was better than losing the limb but still a hard path. The young would need more operations as she grew, and going by the mother’s exhausted eyes, the female knew this was just the beginning.

“I’m not scared.” The young tucked her tattered stuffed tiger in closer to her neck. “Mastimon is coming with me. The nurse said he could.”

“Mastimon will protect you. He is fierce, as a tiger should be.”

“I told him not to eat anybody.”

“Wise of you.” Marissa reached into the skirting pocket of her pale pink gown and took out a leather box. “I have something for you.”

“A present?”

“Yes.” Marissa turned the box to face the young and opened it. Inside, there was a gold plate about the size of a tea saucer, and the precious object was buffed to a high shine, all mirror bright, gleaming like sunshine.

“That’s so pretty,” the child breathed.

“This is my wishing plate.” Marissa took it out and turned the thing over. “Do you see my initial on the back?”

The young squinted. “Yes. And look! There’s a letter like as in my name.”

“I had yours added. I’d like you to have this.”

There was a little gasp from the mother in the corner. Clearly she knew what all that gold was worth.

“Really?” the young said.

“Hold your hands out.” Marissa put the gold disk in the girl’s palms.

“Oh, it’s so heavy.”

“Do you know how these wishing plates work?” When the young shook

her head, Marissa took out a little piece of parchment and a fountain pen. “Think of a wish and I’ll write it down. While you sleep, the Scribe Virgin will come and read it.”

“If she doesn’t give you your wish, does that mean you’re bad?”

“Oh, no. It just means she has something better planned for you. So what would you like? It can be anything. Ice cream when you wake up. More *Dora*? ”

The little female frowned in concentration. “I want my *mahmen* to stop crying. She tries to pretend she doesn’t, but ever since I...fell down the stairs she’s been sad.”

Marissa swallowed, knowing full well the child hadn’t broken her leg like that. “I think that’s fine. I’ll write that down.”

Using the intricate characters of the Old Language, she penned in red ink: *If it would not offend, I would be grateful for my mahmen’s happiness.*

“There. How is it?”

“Perfect!”

“Now we fold it and leave it. Perhaps the Scribe Virgin will reply to you while you are in the operating—the green room.”

The child hugged her tiger closer. “I would like that.”

As a nurse came in, Marissa stood up. In a rush of heat, she felt a near-violent urge to protect the young, to shield her from what had happened at her home and what was about to happen in the OR.

Instead, Marissa looked at the mother. “This is going to be fine.”

When she went over and put her hand on a thin shoulder, the mother shuddered, then gripped Marissa’s palm hard.

“Tell me he can’t get in here,” the female said in a low voice. “If he finds us, he’ll kill us.”

Marissa whispered, “No one can get into the elevator without identifying themselves in front of a camera. The two of you are safe. I swear to it.”

When the female nodded, Marissa left so that the young could be sedated.

Outside the patient room, she leaned against the hallway wall and felt more heaving rage. The fact that those two were bearing the pain of a male’s violent temper was enough to make her want to learn how to shoot a gun.

And God, she couldn’t imagine setting that female and her young loose in the world because surely that *hellren* would find them when they left the clinic. Although most males put their mates higher than themselves, there had always been among the race a minority of abusers and the realities of

domestic violence were ugly and far-reaching.

A door shutting to the left brought her head up, and she saw Havers come walking down the hall, his head buried in a patient chart. Odd...his shoes were covered with little yellow plastic booties, the kind he always put on when he donned a hazmat suit.

"Have you been in the lab again, brother mine?" she asked.

His eyes shot up from the chart and he pushed his horn-rimmed glasses higher on his nose. His jaunty red bow tie was cocked at a bad angle. "Come again?"

She nodded at his feet with a smile. "The lab."

"Ah...yes. I have." He reached down and took the covers off his loafers, crushing the yellow plastic in his hand. "Marissa, would you do me the favor of returning to the house? I've asked the *Princeps* Council *leahdyre* and seven other members to dinner on Monday next. The menu must be perfect and I would talk to Karolyn myself, but I'm due in the OR."

"Of course." Except then Marissa frowned, aware that her brother was still as a statue. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, thank you. Go...go now. Do...yes, please go now."

She was tempted to pry, but she didn't want to keep him from the young's operation, so she kissed him on the cheek, straightened his bow tie, and walked away. When she reached the double doors that led into the reception area, though, something made her glance back.

Havers was stuffing what he'd been wearing on his feet into a biohazard bin, and his face was drawn into tight lines. With a deep breath, he braced himself, then pushed open the door to the surgical suite's anteroom.

Ah, she thought, so that's what it was. He was upset about operating on the young. And who could blame him?

Marissa turned back to the doors...then heard the boots.

She froze. Only one kind of male made that thunder when he approached.

Pivoting around, she saw Vishous striding down the hall, his dark head lowered, and behind him, Phury and Rhage were similar silent menaces. All three were dripping with weapons and weariness, and Vishous had dried blood on his leathers and his jacket. But why had they been in Havers's lab? That facility was the only thing back there, really.

The Brothers didn't notice her until they practically mowed her down. Coming to a stop as a group, their eyes quickly went elsewhere, no doubt because of her having fallen from Wrath's grace.

Dear Virgin, up close they looked truly awful. Sick, yet not unwell, if that made any sense.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked.

"Everything's cool," Vishous said in a hard voice. "'Scuse us."

The dream...Butch lying in the snow... "Is someone hurt? Is...Butch..."

Vishous just shrugged her off and stepped past her, punching open the doors into Reception. The other two offered stiff smiles, then did the same.

Following at a distance, she watched them walk by the nursing station to the access elevator. As they waited for the doors to open, Rhage reached out and put his hand on Vishous's shoulder, and the other Brother seemed to shudder.

The exchange made warning bells go off, and the instant the elevator doors closed Marissa headed for the wing of the clinic the three had originally come from. Moving quickly, she passed the sprawling, brilliantly lit lab, then put her head into the six older patient rooms. All of which were empty.

Why had the Brothers been here? Maybe just to talk to Havers?

On instinct, she went out to the front desk, logged on to the computer and scanned the admissions. Nothing about any of the Brothers or Butch came up, but that didn't mean a thing. The warriors were never entered into the system, and she had to imagine it would be the same for Butch if he were in-house. What she was after was how many beds were occupied of the thirty-five they had.

She got the number and did a quick walk around, scouting each room. Everything was accounted for. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Butch had not been admitted—unless he was in one of the other rooms in the main house. Sometimes patients who were VIPs stayed there.

Marissa picked up her skirts and hightailed it for the back stairs.

Butch curled into himself even though he wasn't cold, operating on the theory that if he could just bring his knees up high enough, the pain in his stomach would ease a little.

Yeah, right. The hot poker in his gut was not impressed by that plan.

He peeled his puffy eyelids apart, and after a lot of blinking and deep breathing, he came to the following conclusions: He was not dead. He was in a hospital. And shit that was no doubt keeping him alive was being pumped into his arm.

As he rolled over gingerly, he came to one more realization. His body had been used for a punching bag. Oh...and something nasty was in his belly, like his last meal had been rancid roast beef.

What the fuck had happened to him?

Only a vague series of snapshots came to mind: Vishous finding him in the woods. Him with a screaming instinct that the brother should leave him to die. Then some knife action and...something about that hand of V's, that glowing thing used to take out a vile piece of—

Butch lurched over onto his side and gagged just from the memory. There had been evil in his belly. Pure, undiluted malice, and the black horror had been spreading.

With shaking hands, he grabbed the hospital johnny he was wearing and yanked it up. "Oh...Jesus..."

There was a stain on the skin of his stomach, like the scorch mark of a fire that had been snuffed out. In desperation, he weeded through his sloppy brain, trying to remember how the scarring had gotten there and what it was, but he just came up with a big fat zero.

So like the detective he'd been before, he examined the scene—which in this case was his body. Lifting one of his hands, he saw that his fingernails were a mess, as if something like a file or some small nails had been hammered under a number of them. A deep breath told him his ribs were cracked. And going by his swollen eyes, he had to assume his face had partied with a lot of knuckles.

He had been tortured. Recently.

Reaching into his mind again, he panned for memories, trying to get back to the last place he'd been. ZeroSum. ZeroSum with...oh, God, that female. In the bathroom. Having hard-core, who-cares sex. Then he'd gone out and...*lessers*. Fighting with those *lessers*. Getting shot and then...

His recollections came to the end of their train track at that point. Just shot off the edge of reasoning into a pit of *huh, what?*

Had he squealed on the Brotherhood? Betrayed them? Had he given his nearest and dearest away?

And what the hell had been done to his belly? God, he felt like there was sludge in his veins thanks to whatever had festered there.

Letting himself go limp, he breathed through his mouth for a while. And found there was no peace to be had.

As if his brain didn't want to stop working, or maybe because it was

showing off, the thing kicked up random visions from the distant past. Birthdays with his dad glaring at him and his mom tense and smoking like a chimney. Christmases where his brothers and sisters got presents and he didn't.

Hot July nights that no fan could cool off, the heat driving his father into the cold beer. The Pabst Blue Ribbon driving his father into fist-cracking wake-up calls just for Butch.

Memories he hadn't thought of for years came back, all unwanted visitors. He saw his sisters and brothers, happy, shouting, playing on bright green grass. And remembered how he'd wished he could be among them instead of hanging back, the oddball who'd never fit in.

And then—Oh, God, no...not this memory.

Too late. He pictured himself as the twelve-year-old he'd been, scrawny and shaggy, standing at the curb in front of the O'Neal family row house in South Boston. It had been a clear, beautiful fall afternoon when he'd watched his sister Janie get into a red Chevy Chevette that had rainbow stripes down the side. With perfect recollection he saw her waving at him through the window in the back as the car drove off.

Now that the door to the nightmare was open, he couldn't stop the horror show. He recalled the police coming to the door that night and his mother's knees going out when they finished talking to her. He remembered the cops questioning him because he was the last person to see Janie alive. He heard his younger self telling the badges that he hadn't recognized the boys and had wanted to tell his sister not to get in.

Mostly, he saw his mother's eyes burning with a pain so great she had no tears.

Then flash forward twenty-plus years. God...when was the last time he'd spoken to or seen either of his parents? Or his brothers and sisters? Five years? Probably. Man, the family had been so relieved when he'd moved away and started missing holidays.

Yeah, around the Christmas table, everyone else had been part of the O'Neal family fabric and he'd been the stain. Eventually he'd stopped going home altogether, leaving them only phone numbers to reach him, numbers they never dialed.

So they wouldn't know if he died now, would they? Vishous no doubt knew everything about the O'Neal clan, down to their social security numbers and bank statements, but Butch had never spoken about them.

Would the Brotherhood call? What would they say?

Butch looked down at himself and knew there was a good chance he wasn't walking out of this room. His body looked a lot like those he'd seen in Homicide, the kind he investigated in the woods. Well, natch. That's where he'd been found. Discarded. Used. Left for dead.

Rather like Janie.

Exactly like Janie.

Closing his eyes, he floated away on the pain in his body. And from out of the swill of agony, he had a vision of Marissa from the first night he'd met her. The image was so vivid, he could almost smell the ocean scent of her and he saw exactly what had been: the filmy yellow gown she'd had on...the way her hair had looked, down over her shoulders...the lemon-colored sitting room they'd been in together.

To him, she was the unforgettable woman, the one he'd never had and never would but who nonetheless reached into the core of him.

Man, he was so fricking tired.

He opened his eyes and took action before he really knew what he was doing. Reaching up to his inner forearm, he peeled the clear plastic tape off the skin around the IV insertion site. Sliding the needle out of his vein was easier than he'd thought it would be, but then again, the rest of him hurt so bad, messing around with that little piece of hardware was a drop in the bucket.

If he'd had the strength, he'd have gone looking for something with a little more punch to off himself. But time—time was the weapon he was going to use because that's what he had at his disposal. And going by how shitty he felt, it wasn't going to take long. He could practically hear his organs coughing up their livelihoods.

Closing his eyes, he let go of everything, only dimly aware that alarms were going off in the machinery behind the bed. A fighter by nature, the ease with which he gave up was a surprise, but then a heavy tide of exhaustion crashed over him. He knew instinctually that this was not the exhaustion of sleep but rather of death, and he was glad that it came so fast.

Drifting free of everything, he imagined that he was at the start of a long, blinding hallway at the end of which was a door. Marissa was standing in front of the portal and as she smiled at him she opened the way into a white bedroom full of light.

His soul eased as he took a deep breath and began to walk forward. He'd

like to think he was going to heaven, in spite of all the bad things he'd done, so this made sense.

It wouldn't be paradise without her.

Chapter Six

Vishous stood in the clinic's parking lot and watched as Rhage and Phury pulled out in the black Mercedes. They were going to grab Butch's phone from the alley behind Screamer's, then pick up the Escalade from the ZeroSum lot and head home.

It went without saying that V wasn't going back into the field tonight. The remnants of the evil he'd handled lingered in his body, making him weak. But more than that, seeing Butch worked out and nearly dead had done some kind of inner damage. He had the sense that a part of him had become unhinged, that some inner escape hatch was hanging open and segments of him were fleeing the core.

Actually, he'd had this feeling for a while now, ever since his visions had left him. But this horror movie of a night made it so much worse.

Privacy. He needed to be alone. Except he couldn't stand the idea of going back to the Pit. The silence there, the empty couch where Butch always sat, the weighty knowledge that there was something missing, would be unbearable.

So he went to his undisclosed place. Taking form again thirty stories in the air, he materialized on the terrace of his penthouse at the Commodore. The wind was howling and it felt good, biting through his clothes, making him feel something other than the gaping hole in his chest.

He went to the terrace's edge. Bracing his arms against the ledge, he looked over the lip of the skyscraper, down to the streets below. There were cars. People going into the lobby. Someone reaching into a cab, paying the driver. So normal. So very normal...

Meanwhile, he was up here dying.

Butch was not going to make it. The Omega had been inside him; that

was the only explanation for what had been done to him. And although the evil had been taken out, its infection was beyond deadly and the harm was done.

V rubbed his face. What the hell was he going to do without that smart-ass, tough-talking, Scotch-sucking SOB? The rough bastard somehow smoothed the edges of life, probably because he was like sandpaper, a scratchy, persistent wrong-way-rub that left everything more even.

V turned away from the three-hundred-foot drop to the pavement. Going over to a door, he took a gold key out of his pocket and pushed it into the lock. The penthouse beyond was his private space, for his private... endeavors. And the scent of the female he'd had the night before lingered in the darkness.

At his will, black candles flared. The walls and the ceilings and the floors were black and the chromatic void absorbed the light, sucking it in, eating it up. The only true piece of furniture was a king-sized bed that was likewise covered in black satin sheets. But he didn't spend a lot of time on the mattress.

The rack was what he relied on. The rack with its hard tabletop and its restraints. And he also used the things hanging beside it: the leather straps, the lengths of cane, the ball gags, the collars and spikes, the whips—and always the masks. He had to have the females anonymous, had to cover their faces as he tied up their bodies. He didn't want to know them as anything more than the equipment for his deviant workouts.

Shit, he was depraved about sex and he knew it, but after trying out a lot of things, he'd finally found what worked for him. And fortunately there were females who liked what he did to them, craved it as he craved the release he got when he mastered them singly or in pairs.

Except...tonight as he looked at his equipment, his perversions made him feel dirty. Maybe because he never came here unless he was ready to use what he had, so he'd never given the place a look-see when his head was clear.

His cell phone's ring startled him. As he glanced at the number, he numbed out. Havers. "Is he dead?"

Havers's voice was all professional-doctor sensitive. Which was the tip-off that Butch was hanging by a spider's thread. "He coded, sire. He pulled the IV out and his vitals dipped. We brought him back, but I don't know how long he can keep going."

“Can you restrain him?”

“I did. But I want you to be prepared. He’s just a human—”

“No, he is *not*.”

“Oh...of course, sire, but I didn’t mean it like—”

“Shit. Look, I’m coming back. I want to be with him.”

“I would prefer you didn’t. He gets agitated whenever anyone’s in the room and that doesn’t help things. Right now he’s as stable as I can make him and as comfortable as possible.”

“I don’t want him dying alone.”

There was a pause. “Sire, we all die alone. Even if you were in the room with him, he would still leave unto the Fade...alone. He needs to be kept calm so his body can decide whether it’s going to revive. We’re doing everything we can for him.”

V put a hand over his eyes. In a small voice that he didn’t recognize, he said, “I don’t...I don’t want to lose him. I, ah...yeah, don’t know what I would do if he—” V coughed a little. “Fuck.”

“I shall care for him as mine own. Give him a day to try and stabilize.”

“Nightfall tomorrow, then. And you will call me if his condition gets worse.”

V hung up the phone and found himself staring at one of the lit candlewicks. Over its black wax torso, the captured little head of light weaved in the currents of the room.

The flame got him thinking. The bright yellow of it was...well, it was kind of like the color of blond hair, wasn’t it.

He whipped out his cell, deciding that Havers was wrong about the no-visitors thing. It just depended on who the visitor was.

As he dialed, he resented the only option he had. And knew that what he was doing probably wasn’t fair. Probably would cause a helluva lot of trouble, too. But when your best friend was doing the tombstone two-step with the Reaper, you kind of didn’t give a shit about a lot of things.

“Mistress?”

Marissa looked up from her brother’s desk. The seating chart for the *Princeps* dinner was in front of her, but she couldn’t concentrate. All that searching of the clinic and the house and she’d come up with nothing. Meanwhile, her senses were screaming that something was wrong.

She forced a smile for the *doggen* in the doorway. “Yes, Karolyn?”

The servant bowed. “A call for you. On line one.”

“Thank you.” The *doggen* inclined her head and left as Marissa picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“He’s in the room down by your brother’s lab.”

“Vishous?” She jumped to her feet. “What—?”

“Go through the door marked HOUSEKEEPING. There’s a panel to the right that you push open. Make sure you put on a hazmat suit before you go in to see him—”

Butch...dear God, *Butch*. “What—”

“Do you hear me? Put the suit on and keep it on.”

“What ha—”

“Car accident. Go. Now. He’s dying.”

Marissa dropped the phone and ran from Havers’s study, nearly mowing down Karolyn out in the hall.

“Mistress! What’s wrong?”

Marissa shot through the dining room, punched open the butler’s door, and stumbled into the kitchen. As she made the corner to the back stairs, she lost one of her high heels, so she kicked off the other and kept going in her stocking feet. At the bottom of the steps, she entered the security code to the rear entrance of the clinic and burst into the ER’s waiting room.

Nurses called out her name, but she ignored them as she raced for the lab’s corridor. Tearing past Havers’s laboratory, she found the door marked HOUSEKEEPING and slammed it open.

As she panted, she looked around at...nothing. Just mops and empty buckets and smocks. But Vishous had said—

Wait. There were faint marks on the floor, a little pattern of wear that suggested a hidden door opening and closing. She shoved the smocks out of the way and found a flat panel. Clawing with her nails, she forced it open and frowned. It was some kind of dimly lit monitoring room with a high-tech setup of computers and vitals readouts. Leaning in to the blue glow of one of the screens, she saw a hospital bed. On top of it, a male was lying spread-eagled and restrained with tubes and wires coming out of him. *Butch*.

She barged past the yellow hazmat suits and facial masks hanging next to the door and pushed into the room, the air lock breaking with a hiss.

“Virgin in the Fade...” Her hand went to her throat.

He was definitely dying. She could sense it. But there was something else—something frightening, something that set off her survival instincts sure as

if she were confronted by an attacker with a gun. Her body screamed for her to run, get out, save herself.

But her heart brought her to his bedside. “Oh...God.”

The hospital johnny left his arms and his legs bare, and it seemed as if he was bruised everywhere. And his face...good Lord, he was desperately battered.

As he made a groaning noise in the back of his throat, she reached out to take his hand—oh, no, not there, too. His blunt fingers were swollen at the tips, the skin purple, some of the nails missing.

She wanted to touch him, but there was no place that she could. “Butch?”

His body jerked at the sound of her voice and his eyes opened. Well, one of them did.

As he focused on her, a ghost of a smile pulled at his lips. “You’re back. I just...saw you at the door.” His voice was weak, a tinny echo of the bass it normally was. “I saw you then...lost...you. But here you are.”

She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and wondered which nurse he thought she was. “Butch—”

“Where did...the yellow dress go?” His words were garbled, his mouth not moving much, as if his jaw were broken. “You were so beautiful...in that yellow dress...”

Definitely a nurse. Those suits hanging next to the door were yellow—shoot. She hadn’t put one on, had she? Holy hell, if his immune system was compromised, she needed to protect him.

“Butch, I’m going to go out and get a—”

“No—don’t leave me...don’t go...” His hands started twisting in the binds, the leather restraints creaking. “Please...dear God...don’t leave me...”

“It’s okay, I’ll be right back.”

“No...woman I love...yellow dress...*don’t leave me...*”

Not knowing what else to do, she leaned down and softly laid her palm on his face. “I won’t leave you.”

He dragged his bruised cheek into her touch, his cracked lips brushing her skin as he whispered, “Promise me.”

“I—”

The air lock broke with a hiss and Marissa looked over her shoulder.

Havers burst into the room as if he’d been torpedoed inside. And through the yellow mask he wore, the horror in his stare was as obvious as a scream.

“Marissa!” He swayed in the protective suit he had on, his voice muffled

and frantic. “Sweet Virgin in the Fade, what are you—*you should have a hazmat on!*”

Butch started to struggle on the bed, and she lightly stroked his forearm. “Shh...I’m right here.” When he’d calmed a little, she said, “I’ll put one on right now—”

“You have no idea—oh, God!” Havers’s whole body shook. “You’re compromised now. You could be contaminated.”

“Contaminated?” She looked down at Butch.

“Surely you felt it when you came in!” Havers launched into all kinds of words, none of which she heard.

As her brother kept at it, her priorities realigned themselves, steel locking into steel. It didn’t matter that Butch had no idea who she was. If the mistaken identity kept him alive and fighting, that was all that mattered.

“Marissa, are you hearing me? You’re contam—”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Well, if I’m contaminated, then it looks like I’m staying with him, doesn’t it.”

Chapter Seven

John Matthew squared off at his target and tightened his grip on his blade. On the far side of the gym, across a sea of blue mats, there were three punching bags hanging from the bottom lip of the bleacher section. As he concentrated, the middle one became a *lesser* in his mind. He pictured the white hair and the pale eyes and the pasty skin that haunted his dreams, and he started to run, his bare feet slapping over thick plastic skin.

His little body had neither speed nor strength, but his will was enormous. And sometime in the next year or so, the rest of him would catch up to the power of his hatred.

He. Couldn't. Fucking. *Wait*. For his transition to hit.

Lifting his blade over his head, he opened his mouth to scream a war cry. Nothing came out, because he was a mute, but he imagined he was making a whole lot of noise.

As far as he was concerned, the *lessers* had killed his parents. Tohr and Wellsie had taken him in, told him what he really was, showed him the only love he'd known. When those bastard slayers had murdered her and Tohr had disappeared, John had been left with nothing but his revenge—revenge for them and the other innocent life that had been lost back in January.

John approached the bag running flat out, with his arm above his shoulder. At the last instant, he ducked into a ball, rolled on the mats, then shot up off the ground with the blade, hitting the bag from underneath. If it had been a real combat scenario, the knife would have gone into the *lesser*'s gut. Deep.

He twisted the hilt.

Then he sprang to his feet and spun around, imagining the undead falling to its knees, holding on to the hole in its abdomen. He stabbed the bag from

up top, seeing himself bury the blade in the back of the neck—

“John?”

He whirled around, panting.

The female who approached made him tremble—and not just because she'd surprised the shit out of him. It was Beth Randall, the half-breed queen, the female who was also his sister, or so blood tests proved. Strangely, whenever she was around, his head went on a little vacation, his brain seizing up, but at least he didn't pass out anymore. Which had been his first reaction to meeting her.

Beth came across the mats, a long, lean female dressed in jeans and a white turtleneck, her dark hair the exact color of his. As she came closer, he could smell Wrath's bonding scent on her, a dark perfume specific to her *hellren*. John suspected the marking happened through sex, as the spice was always strongest at First Meal when they came down from their bedroom.

“John, will you join us up at the house for the last meal of the night?”

I have to stay and practice, he signed in American Sign Language. Everyone in the household had learned ASL, and the concession to his weakness, to his lack of voice, irked him. He wished they didn't have to make any allowances for him. He wished he were normal.

“We'd like to see you. And you spend so much time here.”

Practice is important.

She eyed the blade in his hand. “So are other things.”

As he continued to stare at her, her dark blue eyes looked around the gym as if she were trying to find an appealing argument.

“Please, John, we're...I'm worried about you.”

At one time, three months ago, he would have loved to have heard those words from her. From anybody. But no more. He didn't want her concern. He wanted her to get out of his way.

When he shook his head, she took a deep breath. “All right. I'm going to leave more food in the office, okay? Please...eat.”

He inclined his head once, and when she lifted her hand as if to reach out, he stepped away. Without another word, she turned around and walked back across the blue mats.

When the door shut behind her, John jogged back to the far side of the gym and crouched to start running. As he took off once again, he lifted his blade high, rank hatred powering his arms and legs.

Mr. X flipped into action at high noon, walking into the garage of the house he recharged in, getting into the don't-notice-me minivan that disguised him among Caldwell's human traffic.

He had no interest in his assignment, but you acted when the master called in a command and you were the *Fore-lesser*. It was either that or you got canned, something Mr. X had been through once before and not enjoyed: Having the Omega slap a pink slip on you was about as much fun as eating a barbed-wire salad.

The fact that Mr. X was back on the flipping planet and in this role once again was still a shocker to him. But it seemed as if the master had grown tired of his revolving door of *Fore-lessers* and wanted to make one stick. As Mr. X had evidently been the best of the lot in the last fifty or sixty years, he'd been called into service for another round.

Reissued out of hell.

And so he was going to work today. As he pushed the key into the ignition and the Town & Country's anemic engine coughed over, he was utterly uninspired, no longer the leader he'd first been. But it was hard to get motivated in this kind of lose/lose situation. The Omega was going to get pissed off again and take it out on his number one. It was inevitable.

In bright noonday sun, Mr. X headed out of the fresh and perky subdivision, passing by Monopoly houses that had been built in the late 1990s. The things all shared a common architect, the gene pool of features locking the homes into cheap variations on duck-and-bunny adorable. Lot of front porches with insubstantial molding. Lot of plastic shutters. Lot of seasonal decorations, this time themed out on Easter.

Perfect hiding place for a *lesser*: a bramble of frazzled soccer moms and hassled midmanagement daddies.

Mr. X took Lily Lane out to Route 22, pausing at the STOP sign to the big road. Using a GPS tracker, he got a ballpark location on the place in the woods that the Omega had asked him to pay a visit to. Travel time to destination was twelve minutes and that was good. The master was all impatient, eager to see if his plan with that Trojan human had worked, all jonesing to know if the Brotherhood had taken their little pal back.

Mr. X thought about the guy, sure that the two of them had met before. But even as he wondered about the where and when of it, none of that mattered today. And it hadn't mattered when Mr. X had been working the tough bastard over, either.

Jesus, that had been a hard SOB. Not one word about the Brotherhood had passed the man's lips, no matter what was done to him. Mr. X had been impressed. Guy like that would have been quite an asset if they could have turned him.

Or maybe that had already happened. Maybe that human was one of them now.

A little later, Mr. X parked the Town & Country on Route 22's shoulder and hoofed it into the woods. Snow had fallen last night in some freak March storm, and it padded the pine boughs, like the trees had geared up to play football with each other. Kind of pretty, actually. If you were into the nature shit.

The farther he went through the forest, the less he needed the tracker because he could feel the master's essence, sure as if the Omega was up ahead. Maybe the human hadn't gotten picked up by the Brothers—

Well, what do you know.

As Mr. X emerged into a clearing, he saw a scorched circle on the ground. The heat that had flared there had been great enough to melt the snow and mud-up the ground for a time and the now refrozen earth showed the contours of the burst. All around, remnants of the Omega's presence lingered, like the stink of summer garbage long after the trash had been picked up.

He breathed in through his nose. Yup, there was something human in the mix, too.

Holy shit, they'd killed the guy. The Brotherhood had exterminated that human. Interesting. Except...why hadn't the Omega known the man was dead? Maybe there hadn't been enough in him to have him get called home to the master?

The Omega wasn't going to like this report. He was allergic to failure: it made him itchy. And itchy led to bad things for *Fore-lessers*.

Mr. X knelt down to the withered earth and envied the human. Lucky bastard. When a *lesser* bit it, what waited for him on the other side was an endless liquid misery, a horror bath that was every Christian's vision of hell times a thousand: After slayers were killed, they returned to the veins of the Omega's body, circling and recircling in an evil swill of other dead *lessers*, becoming the very blood the master put in you when you were inducted into the Society. And for these reconstituting slayers, there was no end to the burning cold or the driving starvation or the crushing pressure because you

remained conscious. For eternity.

Mr. X shuddered. An atheist in life, he hadn't thought of death as anything other than a dirt nap. Now, as a *lesser*, he knew exactly what was waiting for him when the master lost patience and "fired" him again.

And yet there was hope. Mr. X had found a little loophole, assuming the pieces fell together right.

By a stroke of luck, he might have found a way out of the Omega's world.

Chapter Eight

Butch took three long, trippy days to wake up and he resurfaced from his coma in the manner of a buoy, popping out of the depths of nothingness and wobbling on top of reality's lake of sights and sounds. Eventually, he put things together enough to understand that he was looking at a white wall in front of him and hearing a soft beeping in the background.

Hospital room. Right. And the ties on his arms and legs were now gone.

Just for kicks and giggles, he rolled over onto his back and pushed his head and shoulders off the bed. He kept himself upright because he liked the sensation of the room going around. It distracted him from his Whitman's Sampler of aches and pains.

Man, he'd had bizarre, wonderful dreams. Marissa at his bedside caring for him. Stroking his arm, his hair, his face. Whispering to him to stay with her. That voice of hers had been what kept him in his body, what kept him back from the white light that any idiot who'd seen *Poltergeist* knew was the afterlife. For her, he'd somehow hung on, and going by the steady, strong beat of his heart, he knew he was going to make it.

Except, of course, the dreams had all been a gyp. She wasn't here and now he was stuck in this bag of skin of his until the next badass thing took him down.

Goddamn it, just his rotten luck to have kept breathing.

He looked up at the IV pole. Eyeballed the catheter bag. Then glanced over at what appeared to be a bathroom. Shower. Oh, God, he'd give his left nut for a shower.

As he shifted his legs around, he was aware that what he was about to do was probably a very bad call. But he told himself, as he hung up the catheter bag next to his IV meds, that at least the room spins had mostly stopped.

A couple of deep breaths and he grabbed the IV pole to use as a cane. Feet hit the cold floor. Weight eased onto his legs. Knees buckled without hesitation.

As he fell back on the bed, he knew he wasn't going to make it to the bathroom. With no hope of hot water, he turned his head and eyed the shower with naked lust—

Butch inhaled like he'd been cracked on the back of the head.

Marissa lay sleeping on the floor in the corner of the room, curled up on her side. Her head rested on a pillow and a beautiful gown of pale blue chiffon spilled over her legs. Her hair, that incredible waterfall of pale blond, that medieval romance novel rush of waves, was all around her.

Holy shit. She had been with him. She had truly saved him.

His body had newfound strength as he stood and lurched across the linoleum. He wanted to kneel down but knew he'd probably get stuck on the floor, so he settled for standing over her.

Why was she here? Last thing he knew, she didn't want to have anything to do with him. Hell, she'd refused to see him back in September when he'd come to her hoping for...everything.

"Marissa?" His voice was shot to shit and he cleared his throat. "Marissa, wake up."

Her lashes flicked open and she snapped upright. Her eyes, those pale blue, sea-glass-colored eyes, shot to his. "You're going to fall!"

Just as his body swayed backward and he toppled off his heels, she leaped to her feet and caught him. In spite of her willowy body, she took all of his weight easily, reminding him that she was no human woman and was likely stronger than he was. As she helped him back onto the bed and pulled the sheets over him, the fact that he was weak as a child and she was treating him like one out of necessity bit into his pride.

"Why are you here?" he asked, his tone as sharp as his embarrassment.

When her eyes didn't meet his, he knew she also was uncomfortable with their situation. "Vishous told me you were hurt."

Ah, so V had guilted her into this Florence Nightingale routine. That bastard knew Butch was a simpering idiot for her and that the sound of her voice would do exactly what it did and bring him around. But it was a helluva position for her to be in, a reluctant rope to the proverbial lifeboat.

Butch grunted as he rearranged himself. And also from the knock his pride was taking.

“How do you feel?” she said.

“Better.” Comparatively. Then again, he could have been dragged under a bus and still been miles ahead of what the *lesser* had done to him. “So you don’t have to stay.”

Her hand drifted off the sheet and she took a slow breath, her breasts rising under the expensive bodice of her gown. As she wrapped her arms around herself, her body became an elegant s-curve.

He looked away, ashamed because part of him wanted to take advantage of her pity and keep her with him. “Marissa, you can go now, you know.”

“Actually, I can’t.”

He frowned and glanced back at her. “Why not.”

She paled, but then lifted her chin. “You’re under—”

There was a hiss and an alien walked into the room, the figure dressed in a yellow suit and a breathing mask. The face behind the molded plastic was female, but the features indistinct.

Butch looked back at Marissa with horror. “Why the *fuck* aren’t you wearing one of those getups?” He had no idea what kind of infection he had, but if it was bad enough that the medical staff was pulling a Silkwood, he had to imagine he was deadly.

Marissa cringed, making him feel like a total thug. “I...I’m just not.”

“Sire?” the nurse interrupted gently. “I’d like to take a blood sample if you don’t mind?”

He kicked out a forearm while still glaring at Marissa. “You were supposed to be wearing one of those when you came in, weren’t you? Weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Goddamn it,” he snapped. “Why didn’t you—”

As the nurse nailed him a good one in the crook of his elbow, Butch’s strength ran out of him like she’d popped the balloon of his energy with that needle of hers.

Dizziness slammed into him and his head fell back against the pillow. But he was still pissed off. “You should have one of those on.”

Marissa didn’t respond, just paced around.

In the silence, he glanced over at the little vial that was plugged into his vein. As the nurse swapped it for an empty one, he couldn’t help noticing that his blood seemed darker than usual. Much darker.

“Good God...what the hell’s coming out of me?”

"It's better than it was. Much so." The nurse smiled through the mask.

"Then what color was it before," he muttered, thinking the shit looked like brown sludge.

When the nurse was done, she shoved a thermometer under his tongue and checked the machines behind the bed. "I'll bring you some food."

"Has she eaten," he mumbled.

"Keep your mouth closed." There was a beeping noise and the nurse took the plastic-covered stick from his lips. "Much better. Now, is there anything you'd like?"

He thought of Marissa risking her life because of guilt. "Yeah, I want her to get out of here."

Marissa heard the words and stopped walking around. Easing back against the wall, she glanced down at herself and was surprised to find that her gown still fit her the same. She felt half her usual size. Small. Insubstantial.

As the nurse left, Butch's hazel eyes burned. "How long do you have to stay?"

"Until Havers tells me I can go."

"Are you sick?"

She shook her head.

"What are they treating me for?"

"Your injuries from the car accident. Which were extensive."

"Car accident?" He looked confused, then nodded at the IV as if he wanted to change the subject. "What's in there?"

She linked her arms over her chest and recited the antibiotics, the nutrients, the pain meds, and the anticoagulants he was on. "And Vishous comes in to help as well."

She thought of the Brother and his disarming diamond eyes and the tattoos at his temple...and his obvious dislike of her. He was the only one who came into the room without protective clothing on and he dropped by twice a day, at the beginning and the end of night.

"V's been here to visit?"

"He lays his hand above your belly. It eases you." The first time that warrior had stripped the sheets from Butch's body and pulled up the hospital johnny, she'd been speechless both at the intimate sight and the Brother's authority. But then she'd grown mute for another reason. Butch's belly

wound had been frightening—and then Vishous had scared her, too. He'd taken off the glove she'd always seen him wear, revealing a glowing hand that was tattooed front to back.

She'd been terrified about what would happen next, but Vishous just hovered that palm of his about three inches over Butch's belly. Even in the coma, Butch had sighed raggedly in relief.

Afterward, Vishous had rearranged the hospital johnny and the bedsheets and turned to her. He'd told her to close her eyes, and though she was scared of him, she did. Almost immediately a profound peace had come over her, as if she were bathed in white, calming light. He did that to her each time before he left, and she knew he was protecting her. Although she couldn't think of why, given that he clearly despised her.

She refocused on Butch and thought about his wounds. "You weren't in a car accident, were you?"

He closed his eyes. "I'm very tired."

As he shut her out, she sat on the bare floor and clasped her arms around her knees. Havers had wanted to bring things in like a cot or a comfortable chair, but she'd been concerned that if Butch's vitals crashed again, the medical staff wouldn't be able to get the necessary equipment to the bedside fast enough. Her brother hadn't disagreed.

After God only knew how many days of this, her back was stiff and her eyelids were like sandpaper, but she hadn't felt tired when she'd been fighting to keep Butch alive. Hell, she hadn't even noticed the passage of time, had always been surprised when food was brought in or the nurses or Havers came. Or Vishous arrived.

So far, she wasn't sick. Well, she had felt ill before Vishous stopped by for the first time. But ever since he'd started doing whatever he did with that hand of his, she'd been fine.

Marissa glanced up to the hospital bed. She was still curious why Vishous had called her to this room. Surely that warrior's hand was doing more good than she was.

As the machines beeped softly and the air blower came on up in the ceiling, her eyes drifted down the length of Butch's still body. A flush hit her face as she thought of what was underneath the covers.

She knew what every inch of him looked like now.

His skin was smooth over all his muscle and he was tattooed on the small of his back with black ink—a series of lines grouped in fours with each

bundle carrying a slash that ran at an angle. Twenty-five of them, if she added correctly, some having faded, as if made years ago. She wondered what they commemorated.

As for the front of him, the dusting of dark hair across his pectorals had been a surprise, as she hadn't known humans weren't bare-skinned as her kind were. He didn't have a lot of hair on his chest, though, and it narrowed quickly, becoming a thin line under his belly button.

And then...She was ashamed of herself, but she'd looked at his male sex. The hair at the juncture of his legs was dark and very dense, and from the midst, he had a thick stalk of flesh almost as wide as her wrist. What was below was a heavy, potent sack.

He was the first male she'd ever seen naked and the nudes from Art History just weren't the same as the real thing. He was beautifully made. Fascinating.

She let her head fall back and stared at the ceiling. How unattractive was it that she'd invaded his privacy? And how unattractive that her body stirred just remembering?

God, how much longer now before she could get out of here?

She absently fingered the fine fabric of her gown and tilted her head so she could look at the fall of pale blue chiffon. The lovely creation by Narciso Rodriguez should have been utterly comfortable, but her corset, which she wore always as was proper, was really starting to bug the hell out of her. The thing was, though, she wanted to look nice for Butch, even though he wouldn't care and not because he was ill. He just wasn't attracted to her anymore. Didn't want her around, either.

Still, she would continue to dress well when fresh clothes were brought in.

Pity that what she wore here had to go into the incinerator. What a shame to burn all those dresses.

Chapter Nine

That pale-haired fucker was back, Van Dean thought as he glanced through heavy chicken-wire fencing.

Third week in a row the guy'd come to Caldwell's fight underground. Against the cheering crowd around the fight cage he stood out like a neon sign, although Van wasn't clear exactly why.

As a knee made contact with his side, he refocused on what he was doing. Drawing back his bare fist, he snapped his arm out and connected with his opponent's face. Blood exploded from the guy's nose, a starburst of red that landed on the mat right before the man's body did.

Van planted his feet and stared down at his opponent, drops of his sweat landing on the guy's abs. There was no referee to stop Van from throwing more head punches. No rules to keep him from kicking this side of beef in the kidneys until the bastard needed dialysis for the rest of his life. And if there was even one twitch from that human throw rug, Van was going to let loose.

Bringing death with his bare hands was what the special part of him wanted to do, what the special part of him craved to do. Van had always been different, not just from his opponents but from everyone else he'd ever met: the seat of his soul was that of not merely a fighter but a warrior of the Roman kind. He wished he lived back in the times when you eviscerated your opponent when he fell before you...then you found his home and raped his wife and slaughtered his children. And after you looted his shit, you burned whatever was left down to the ground.

But he lived in the here and now. And there was another complication of late. The body holding in this special part was starting to age on him. His shoulder was killing him and so were his knees, though he made sure no one knew it, in or out of the fight cage.

Extending his arm to the side, he heard a pop and hid a wince. Meanwhile, the crowd of fifty roared and rattled the ten-foot-high chain-link fence. God, the fans loved him. Called him by his name. Wanted to see more of him.

They were largely irrelevant to his special part, though.

In the midst of the peanut gallery, he met the stare of the pale-haired man. Damn, those were some freaky eyes. Flat. No glow of life in them. And the guy wasn't cheering either.

Whatever.

Van nudged his opponent with his bare foot. The guy groaned but didn't open his eyes. Game over.

The fifty or so men around the cage went apeshit with approval.

Van sprang up to the lip of the fence and swung his two-hundred-pound body over the top. As he landed, the crowd roared louder but backed out of his path. When one of them had gotten in his way last week, flyboy had ended up spitting out a tooth.

The fighting "arena," such as it was, was in an abandoned underground parking garage, and the owner of the concrete wasteland brokered the matches. The whole thing was shady by def, with Van and his opponents nothing more than the human equivalent of fighting cocks. The pay was good, however, and so far there hadn't been any busts—although that was always an issue. Between the blood and the betting, the CPD badges wouldn't have been into the scene at all, so it was a private-membership-club kind of thing, and if you squealed you got tossed. Literally. The owner had a six-pack of thugs who kept shit in line.

Van went over to the money man, got his five hundred bucks and his jacket, then headed for his truck. His Hanes undershirt was bloodstained, but he didn't care. What he was worried about was his aching joints. And that left shoulder.

Fuck. Every week it seemed like it was taking more and more out of him to serve his special part and put the guys on the ground. Then again, he was getting up there. Thirty-nine was denture time in the fight world.

"Why did you stop?"

As he came up to his truck, Van looked into his driver's side windshield. He was not surprised that the pale-haired man had come after him. "I don't answer to fans, buddy."

"I'm not a fan."

Their eyes stayed locked together on the flat surface of the glass. “Then why you been coming to my fights so much?”

“Because I have a proposition for you.”

“I don’t want a manager.”

“I’m not one of those either.”

Van looked over his shoulder. The guy was big and carried himself like a fighter, all jacked shoulders and loose arms. Iron-pan hands on this one, the kind that could crank into a fist as big as a bowling ball.

So that was the deal, huh. “You want to get into the ring with me, you arrange it over there.” He pointed to the money man.

“Not after that either.”

Van turned around, thinking the twenty-questions thing was for shit. “So what do you want?”

“First I have to know why you stopped.”

“He was down.”

Annoyance flashed over the guy’s face. “So.”

“You know what? You’re beginning to piss me off.”

“Fine. I’m looking for a man who fits your description.”

Oh, that narrowed the field. Busted nose in a regular joe face with a military haircut. Snooze. “Lotta men look like me.”

Well, except for his right hand.

“Tell me something,” the guy asked, “did you have your appendix removed?”

Van narrowed his eyes and put his truck’s keys back in his pocket. “One of two things are about to happen and you get to pick. You walk away and I get into my ride. Or you keep talking and shit goes down. Your choice.”

The pale man got in close. Jesus, he smelled funny. Like...baby powder?

“Don’t threaten me, *boy*.” The voice was low and the body that backed up the words was coiled for action.

Well, well, well...what do you know. A real contender.

Van pushed his face even closer. “Then get to your fucking point.”

“Appendix?”

“Not anymore.”

The man smiled. Eased back. “How would you like a job?”

“I have one. And this.”

“Construction. Knocking strangers around for cash.”

“Honest work, both of them. And just how long have you been nosing

around my biz?”

“Long enough.” The guy stuck out his hand. “Joseph Xavier.”

Van let that palm hang out there. “Not interested in meeting you, Joe.”

“That’s Mr. Xavier to you, son. And surely you wouldn’t mind listening to a proposition.”

Van cocked his head to the side. “You know something, I’m a lot like a whore. I like to get paid by jerkoffs. So how about you palm me a benji, Joe, then we’ll see about your proposition.”

As the man just stared, Van felt an unexpected shot of fear. Man, something about this guy was not right.

The bastard’s voice was even lower as he spoke. “Say my name properly first, son.”

Whatever. For a hundred bucks, he’d flap his gums even for a freak like this. “Xavier.”

“That’s *Mr. Xavier*.” The guy smiled like a predator, all teeth, no jolly. “Say it, son.”

Some unknown impulse had Van opening his mouth.

Right before he let the words fly, he had a vivid memory of when he’d been sixteen years old and had taken a dive into the Hudson River. In midair, he’d seen the massive underwater stone he was going to hit and knew there would be no change in course. Sure enough, his head had made contact as if the collision had been preordained, as if there had been an invisible string around his neck and the rock had pulled him home. But it hadn’t been a bad thing, at least not right away. Immediately after the crack of impact, there had been a floating, a sweet, satisfied calm, as if destiny had been fulfilled. And he’d known instinctively that the sensation was a forerunner of death.

Funny, he had that same spacy disorientation now. And the same sense that this man with the paper-white skin was like death: inevitable and fated—and coming specifically for him.

“*Mr. Xavier*,” Van whispered.

When the hundred-dollar bill appeared in front of him, he reached forward with his four-fingered hand and took it.

But he knew he would have listened without the cash.

Hours later, Butch rolled over and the first thing he did was look for Marissa.

He found her sitting in the corner of the room, a book open next to her.

Her eyes weren't on the pages, though. She was staring at the pale linoleum tiles, tracing the pattern of flecks with one long, perfect finger.

She looked achingly sad and so beautiful that his eyes stung. God, the idea he could infect her or endanger her in any way made him want to slit his own throat.

"I wish you hadn't come in here," he croaked. As she winced, he thought about his choice of words. "What I mean is—"

"I know what you mean." Her voice hardened. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah." He struggled to push himself up. "But I'd really like a shower."

She got to her feet, rising like mist she was so graceful, and his breath caught as she walked to him. Man, that pale blue dress was the exact color of her eyes.

"Let me help you to the bath."

"No, I can do it."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "If you try to get to the bathroom on your own, you will fall and you will hurt yourself."

"Call a nurse, then. I don't want you to touch me."

She stared at him for a moment. Then blinked her eyes once. Twice.

"Will you excuse me for a moment?" she said in a level tone. "I need to use the lavatory. You can call the nurse by pushing that red button on the remote there."

She went into the bathroom and shut the door. Water started to run.

Butch reached for the little button pad, but stopped as the rush of the sink continued to bleed through the door. The sound was uninterrupted, not as if someone was washing their hands or their face or filling a glass.

And it continued, on and on.

With a grunt, he shuffled off the bed and stood up, hanging himself on the IV pole until the thing shook from the effort of keeping him upright. He put one foot in front of the other until he got to the bathroom door. He pressed his ear against the wood. All he could hear was water.

For some reason, he knocked softly. Then knocked again. He gave it one more shot, then turned the knob, even though he would embarrass the hell out of them both if she was using the facilities—

Marissa was on the toilet, as it turned out. But the seat was down.

And she was weeping. Shaking and weeping.

"Oh...Jesus, Marissa."

She let out a shriek, as if he were the last thing on the planet she wanted

to see. “Get out!”

He lurched in and sank to his knees in front of her. “Marissa...”

Burying her face in her hands, she snapped, “I would like some privacy, if you don’t mind.”

He reached over and shut the water off. As the basin emptied with a little gurgle, her muffled breathing took over where the sound of the faucet had left off.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You’ll leave soon. You’ll get out—”

“Shut up!” She dropped her hands long enough to glare at him. “Just go back to bed and call the nurse if you haven’t already.”

He sat back on his heels, woozy but determined. “I’m sorry you got trapped with me.”

“I bet you are.”

He frowned. “Marissa—”

The sound of the air lock being broken cut him off.

“Cop?” V’s voice was unmuffled by protective gear.

“Hold up,” Butch called out. Marissa didn’t need more of an audience.

“Where are you, cop? Something wrong?”

Butch meant to stand up. He really did. But when he grabbed onto the IV pole and pulled, his body gave out, just went right to rubber on him. Marissa tried to grab him, but he slid from her grasp, ending up sprawled on the bathroom tile, his cheek next to the seal around the toilet base. Dimly, he heard Marissa talking in urgent bursts. Then V’s goatee came into his line of sight.

Butch looked at his roommate...and shit, his vision got blurry, he was so happy to see the bastard. Vishous’s face was just the same, the dark bearding around his mouth right where it should be, the tattoos on the temple unchanged, those diamond-bright irises still glowing. Familiar, so familiar. Home and family wrapped up in a vampire package.

Butch didn’t let any tears fall, though. He was already hopelessly incapacitated next to a toilet, for chrissakes. Sapping out would be the cap to this gown of shame he’d pulled on.

Blinking fiercely, he said, “Where’s your fucking gear, man? You know, the yellow suit.”

V smiled, his eyes a little shiny as if he too were choked up.

“Don’t worry, I’m covered. So, I guess you’re back, true?”

“And ready to rock and roll.”

“Really.”

“For sure. I’m thinking about a future in contracting. Wanted to see how this bathroom was put together. Excellent tile work. You should check it.”

“How about I carry you back to bed?”

“I want to look at the sink pipes next.”

Respect and affection clearly drove V’s cool smirk. “At least let me help you up.”

“Nah, I can do it.” With a groan, Butch gave the vertical move a shot, but then eased back down onto the tile. Turned out lifting his head was a little overwhelming. But if they left him here long enough—a week, maybe ten days?

“Come on, cop. Cry uncle here and let me help.”

Butch was suddenly too tired to front. As he went totally limp, he was aware of Marissa staring at him and thought, man, could he look any weaker? Shit, the only saving grace was that there wasn’t a cold breeze on his butt.

Which suggested the hospital gown had stayed closed. Thank you, God.

V’s thick arms tunneled under him and then he was lifted easily. As they went forward, he refused to let his head rest on his friend’s shoulder, even though it gave him the sweats to keep the thing upright. When he was back on the bed, shivers racked his whole body and the room spun.

Before V straightened, Butch grabbed the male’s arm and whispered, “I need to talk to you. Alone.”

“What’s doing?” V said with equal quiet.

Butch looked over at Marissa, who was hovering in the corner.

With a flush, she glanced at the bathroom, then picked up two large paper bags. “I think I’ll take a shower. Will you excuse me?” She didn’t wait for a response, just disappeared into the loo.

As the door shut, V sat on the edge of the bed. “Talk to me.”

“What kind of danger is she in?”

“I’ve taken care of her and three days in, she seems fine. She can probably leave soon. We’re all pretty convinced by now there’s no cross-infection thing going on.”

“What’s she been exposed to? What was I exposed to?”

“You know you were with the *lessers*, true?”

Butch lifted one of his busted-up hands. “And here I thought I’d been to Elizabeth Arden.”

“Smart-ass. You were there about a day—”

Abruptly, he grabbed V's arm. "I didn't crack. No matter what they did to me, I didn't say a thing about the Brotherhood. I *swear*."

V put his hand over Butch's and squeezed. "I know you didn't, my man. I know you wouldn't."

"Good."

As they both let go, V's eyes went to Butch's fingertips, as if he were imagining what had been done to them. "What do you remember?"

"Only the feelings. The pain and the...dread. Fear. Pride...the pride is how I know I didn't squeal, how I know they didn't break me."

V nodded and drew a hand-rolled out of his pocket. Just before he lit up, he looked at the oxygen feed, cursed, and put the cig back. "Listen, buddy, I gotta ask...you okay in the head? I mean, going through something like that __"

"I'm cool. Always was too dumb to have PTSD or some shit, and besides, I've got no real memory of what went down. As long as Marissa can walk out of here okay, then, yeah, I'm fine." He scrubbed his face, feeling the itch of his beard growth, then dropped his arm. As his hand landed on his abdomen, he thought of the black wound. "You have any idea what they did to me?"

When V shook his head, Butch cursed. The guy was like a walking Google link, so him not knowing was a bad thing.

"But I'm on it, cop. I will find an answer for you, I promise." The brother nodded at Butch's stomach. "So how's it look?"

"Don't know. Been too busy being in a coma to worry about my six-pack."

"Mind if I?"

Butch shrugged and pushed the covers down. As V lifted up the hospital johnny, they both looked down at his belly. The skin was not right around the wound, all gray and puckered.

"Does it hurt?" V asked.

"Like a mother. Feels...cold. Like there's dry ice in my gut."

"Will you let me do something?"

"What?"

"Just a little healing thing I've been throwing at you."

"Sure." Except when V brought up his business hand and started talking off that glove, Butch recoiled. "What are you going to do with that thing?"

"Trust me, true?"

Butch barked a laugh. "Last time you said that I ended up with a vampire cocktail, remember?"

"Saved your ass. That's how I found you."

So that had been the *why* of it. "Well, then, fly me some of that hand."

Still, as V put the glowing thing close, Butch winced.

"Relax, cop. This isn't going to hurt."

"I've seen you toast a house with that bastard."

"Point taken. But the Firestarter routine isn't going down here."

V hovered his tattooed, glowing hand over the wound, and Butch let out a ragged groan of relief. It was as if warm, fresh water was pouring into the wound, then flowing over him, through him. Cleaning him out.

Butch's eyes rolled back in his head. "Oh...God...that feels good."

He went limp, and then he was floating, free of the pain, sliding into some kind of dream state. He let his body go, let himself go.

He could actually feel the healing, as if his body's regenerative processes had kicked into high gear. As seconds passed, as minutes went by, as time drifted into the infinite, he felt like whole days of rest and eating well and being at peace were coming and going, leapfrogging him from the battered state he was in to the miraculous gift of health.

Marissa tilted her head back and stood right under the showerhead, letting the water fall down her body. She felt shaken loose and thin-skinned, especially after watching Vishous carry Butch to the bed. The two of them were so close, the mutual bond clear in the way their eyes met and held.

After a long while, she got out, towed herself off roughly, then blew her hair dry. As she reached for a fresh set of undergarments, she looked at the corset and thought, the hell she was putting that on. She shoved it back into a bag, unable to bear having that iron grip around her rib cage right now.

As she put her peach gown on over her naked breasts, it felt strange, but she'd had it with being uncomfortable. At least for a little while. Besides, who would know?

She folded up the pale blue Rodriguez and put it into a biohazard bag along with her old underwear. Then she braced herself and opened the door out into the patient room.

Butch was sprawled on the bed, the hospital gown pushed up onto his chest, the sheets down around his hips. Vishous's glowing hand was resting about three inches above the blackened wound.

In the silence between the two males, she was an intruder. With nowhere to go.

“He’s asleep,” V grunted.

She cleared her throat, but couldn’t think of anything to say. After a long silence, she finally murmured, “Tell me...does his family know what’s happened?”

“Yeah. The Brotherhood all know.”

“No, I mean...his human family.”

“They are irrelevant.”

“But shouldn’t they be—”

V looked up with impatience, his diamond eyes hard and a little mean. For some reason, it occurred to her now just how fully armed he was with his black daggers crossing his thick chest.

Then again, his sharp expression went with the weapons.

“Butch’s ‘family’ doesn’t want him.” V’s voice was strident, as if the explanation were none of her business and he was elaborating just to shut her up. “So they are irrelevant. Now come over here. He needs you to be close to him.”

The contradiction between the Brother’s face and his command to come closer tangled her up. So did the reality that that hand was the biggest help.

“He most certainly does not need me or want me here,” she murmured. And wondered once again why the hell V had called her three nights ago.

“He’s worried about you. That’s why he wants you to go.”

She flushed. “Wrong, warrior.”

“I’m never wrong.” With a quick flash, those navy-rimmed white irises flipped up to her face. They were so frigid that she stepped back, but Vishous shook his head. “Come on, touch him. Let him feel you. He needs to know you’re here.”

She frowned, thinking the Brother was crazy. But she walked to the far side of the bed and reached out to stroke Butch’s hair. The instant she made contact, he turned his face toward her.

“See?” Vishous went back to staring at the wound. “He craves you.”

I wish he did, she thought.

“Do you really?”

She stiffened. “Please don’t read my mind. It’s rude.”

“I didn’t. You spoke out loud.”

Her hand faltered on Butch’s hair. “Oh. Sorry.”

They grew quiet, both focused on Butch. Then Vishous said in a hard tone, “Why’d you shut him down, Marissa? When he came to see you back in the fall, why’d you turn him away?”

She frowned. “He never came to see me.”

“Yeah, he did.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard what I said.”

As they locked eyes, it occurred to her that although Vishous was scary as all get out, he was not a liar. “When? When did he come to me?”

“He waited for a couple weeks after Wrath was shot. Then he went to your house. When he got back, he said you wouldn’t even come down in person. Man, that was a cold move, female. You knew he was feeling you, but you turned him away through a servant. *Nice.*”

“No...I never did that...He didn’t come, he...No one told me he—”

“Oh, *please.*”

“Do *not* take that tone with me, warrior.” As Vishous’s eyes shot to her face, she was too pissed off to care who or what he was. “At the end of last summer I was flat on my back with the flu, thanks to feeding Wrath too much and then working in the clinic. When I didn’t hear from Butch, I assumed he’d had second thoughts about us. As I...haven’t had a lot of luck with males, it took me a while to work up the nerve to approach him. When I did, three months ago here in the clinic, he made it clear he didn’t want to see me. So do me the favor of *not* blaming me for something I did *not* do.”

There was a long silence and then Vishous surprised the hell out of her.

He actually smiled at her a little. “Well, what do you know.”

Flustered, she looked down at Butch and resumed stroking his hair. “I swear to you, if I had known it was him, I would have dragged myself out of bed to answer that door myself.”

In a low voice Vishous murmured, “Good deal, female. Good...deal.”

In the silence that followed, she thought about the events of the previous summer. The convalescence she’d taken hadn’t been just about the flu. She’d been overwhelmed by her brother’s attempt on Wrath’s life—by the fact that Havers, ever the calm, even-tempered healer, had gone so far as to betray the king’s location to a *lesser*. Sure, Havers had done it to *avenge* her because of the way she had been cast aside for the queen, but that in no way excused the actions.

Dear Virgin in the Fade, Butch had tried to see her, but why hadn’t she

been told?

"I never knew you came," she murmured, smoothing his hair back.

Vishous removed his hand, and yanked up the sheet. "Close your eyes, Marissa. It's your turn."

She looked up. "I didn't know."

"I believe you. Now close."

After he had healed her, V walked over to the door, his big shoulders rolling with his gait.

At the air lock, he looked back over his shoulder. "Don't think I was the only reason he healed. You're his light, Marissa. Don't ever forget that." The Brother's eyes narrowed. "But here's something to keep in mind. You ever hurt him on purpose and I will consider you my enemy."

John Matthew sat in a classroom that was right out of Caldwell High School. There were seven long tables facing the blackboard, and all but one had a pair of trainees plugged into them.

John was alone in the back. Which was also just as it had been at CHS.

The difference between this class and the stuff he'd taken in school, though, was that now he took careful notes and stared up front like the chalkboard was running a *Die Hard* marathon.

Then again, geometry wasn't ever the subject on deck around here.

This afternoon, Zsadist was at the head of the class, pacing back and forth, talking about the chemical composition of C4 plastic explosives. The Brother was wearing one of his trademark black turtlenecks and a pair of loose nylon track pants. With that scar down his face, he looked exactly like he'd done what people said he had: killed females, desecrated *lessers*, attacked even his Brothers without provocation.

But the strange thing was, he was a helluva teacher.

"Now for detonators," he said. "Personally, I prefer the remote variety."

As John turned over a fresh page in his notebook, Z sketched a 3-D mechanism on the board, some kind of box with wiring circuits. Whenever the Brother drew, what he put up was so detailed and realistic you could almost reach out and touch the thing.

When there was a lull, John checked his watch. Another fifteen minutes, then it was time to have a light meal and hit the gym. He couldn't wait.

When he'd started school here, he'd hated the mixed martial arts training. Now he loved it. He was still last in the class in terms of technical skills, but

lately he'd more than made up for that in rage. And his aggression had caused a realignment in social dynamics.

Back in the beginning, three months ago, his classmates had ridiculed him. Accused him of sucking up to the Brothers. Derided him for his birthmark because it looked like the pectoral star scar of the Brotherhood. Now the other guys watched it around him. Well, everyone except for Lash. Lash still rode him, singling him out, cutting him down.

Not that John cared. He might be in this class with the rest of the trainees, he might technically be living in the compound with the Brothers, he might supposedly be linked to the Brotherhood by the blood of his father, but ever since he'd lost Tohr and Wellsie, he was a free agent so far as he was concerned. Bound to no one.

So the other folks in this room were nothing to him.

He shifted his stare to the back of Lash's head. The guy's long blond hair was in a ponytail that rested smoothly down a jacket made by some fancy designer. And how did John know about the designer thing? Because Lash always told everyone what he was wearing when he walked in for class.

Had also mentioned tonight that his new watch was iced out by Jacob the Jeweler.

John narrowed his eyes, getting juiced up just thinking about the sparring the two of them would do in the gym. As if the guy felt the heat, Lash turned, his diamond earring sparkling. His lips lifted into a nasty little smile, then pursed as he blew John a kiss.

"John?" Zsadist's voice was hard as a hammer. "Mind showing me some respect here?"

As John flushed and looked up front, Zsadist continued, tapping the board with a long forefinger. "Once a mech like this is activated it's triggered by a variety of things, sound frequency being the most common. You can call in from a cell phone, a computer, or use a radio signal."

Zsadist started drawing again, the scratch of chalk loud in the room.

"Here's another kind of detonator." Zsadist stepped back. "This one is typical of car bombs. You wire the action box into the car's electrical system. Once the bomb's armed, whenever the car's started, *tick, tick, boom*."

John's hand suddenly gripped his pen and he started to blink fast, feeling dizzy.

The redhead trainee named Blaylock asked, "Does it go off right away after ignition?"

“There’s a delay of a couple of seconds. I’d note also that because the car’s wiring has been redirected, the engine won’t catch. The driver will turn the key and hear nothing but a series of clicks.”

John’s brain began firing in a rapid, flickering sequence.

Rain...black rain on a car’s windshield.

A hand with a key in it, reaching forward toward a steering wheel column.

An engine turning over but failing to catch. A feeling of dread, that someone was lost. Then a bright light—

John flipped out of his chair and hit the ground, but he was unaware he’d gone into a seizure: Too busy screaming in his head, he didn’t feel a thing physically.

Someone was lost! Someone...was left behind. He’d left someone behind...

Chapter Ten

As dawn arrived and the steel shutters came down all around the mansion's billiards room, Vishous bit into an Arby's roast beef sandwich. Thing tasted like a phone book, through no fault of the ingredients.

At the soft smack of pool balls, he looked up. Beth, the queen, was just straightening from the felt.

"Nice shot," Rhage said as he lounged against a silk wall.

"Careful training." She walked around the table, sizing up her next stroke. When she leaned down again and braced the cue on her left hand, the queen's Saturnine Ruby flashed on her middle finger.

V wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "She's going to beat you again, Hollywood."

"Probably."

Except she didn't get the chance. Wrath plowed through the doorway, clearly in a mood. His long black hair, which was down almost to his leather-covered ass now, flared behind him, then came to rest on his thick back.

Beth put her cue down. "How is John?"

"Who the hell knows." Wrath went over and kissed her on the mouth, then on both sides of her neck over her veins. "He won't go to see Havers. Refuses to get anywhere near the clinic. Kid's asleep in Tohr's office now, just exhausted."

"What was the trigger for the seizure this time?"

"Z was doing a class on explosives. Kid just whacked out, ended up on the floor. Same as before, when he first saw you."

Beth wrapped her arms around Wrath's waist and leaned into her *hellren*'s body. Their black hair mixed together, his straight, hers wavy. God, Wrath's was so damn long now. But word had it that Beth liked the stuff so

he'd grown it out for her.

V wiped his mouth again. *Weird, how males do shit like that.*

Beth shook her head. "I wish John would come stay in the house with us. Sleeping in that chair, staying in the office...He spends so much time alone and he doesn't eat enough anymore. Plus Mary says he won't talk about what happened with Tohr and Wellsie at all. He just refuses to open up."

"I don't care what he talks about as long as he goes to the damn doctor."

Wrath's wraparound sunglasses shifted over to V. "And how's our other patient? Christ, I feel like we need an in-house physician around here."

V reached for the Arby's bag and took out sandwich number two. "Cop's healing up. I think he'll be out in a day or so."

"I want to know what the fuck was done to him. The Scribe Virgin's giving me nothing on this one. She's silent as stone."

"I started the research yesterday. Began with the *Chronicles*." Which were eighteen volumes in the Old Language of vampire history. God, talk about your wallbangers. The damn things were about as much fun as reading an inventory list for a hardware store. "If I don't find anything, there are some other places to check. Compendiums of oral tradition that were reduced to writing, that kind of shit. It is highly improbable that in our twenty thousand years of taking up space on the planet something like this hasn't happened before. I'm going to spend today working on it."

Because as usual there'd be no sleep for him. It had been over a week since he'd REM'd out, and there was no reason to think things were going to be any different this afternoon.

Holy hell...being up for eight days straight was not good for his brain wave activity. Without going into a dream state regularly, psychosis could easily take root and rewire your circuits. It was a wonder he hadn't lost it already.

"V?" Wrath said.

"Sorry? What?"

"You okay?"

Vishous bit into his roast beef and chewed. "Yeah, fine. Just fine."

When night fell some twelve hours later, Van Dean stopped his truck underneath a maple tree on a nice, tidy little street.

He did not like this situation.

The house on the other side of the shallow lawn wasn't trouble on the

surface, just another whatever Colonial in this whatever neighborhood. The problem was the number of cars parked in the driveway. Four of them.

He'd been told he was meeting Xavier one-on-one.

Van cased the place from inside his truck. Shades were all down. Only two lights on inside. Porch light was off.

But there was a lot on the line. Saying yes to this gig meant he could kick the construction shit to the curb, reducing the wear and tear on his body. And he could make more than he did now by double so he could save something to survive on when he couldn't fight anymore.

He got out and walked up to the front stoop. The ivy-themed welcome mat that he planted his boots on was just too frickin' creepy.

The door swung open before he hit the bell. Xavier was on the other side, all big and bleached-out looking. "You're late."

"And you said we'd be meeting alone."

"Worried you can't handle company?"

"Depends on what kind it is."

Xavier stepped to the right. "Why don't you get in here and find out?"

Van stayed on the mat. "Just so you know, I told my brother I was coming here. Address and everything."

"Which brother, the older or the younger?" Xavier smiled as Van narrowed his eyes. "Yes, we know about them. As you say, their addresses and everything."

Van put his hand into the pocket of his parka. The nine-millimeter he was packing slid into his palm like the thing was finding home.

Money, think about the money.

After a moment, he said, "We going to get down to it or keep yakking it up in this draft?"

"I'm not the one on the wrong side of the door, son."

Van came in, keeping an eye on Xavier. Inside, the place was cold, like the heat was down low or maybe the house was abandoned. The lack of furniture suggested the latter.

When Xavier reached into his back pocket, Van tensed up. And what came forward was a weapon of sorts: ten perfectly crisp hundred-dollar bills.

"So do we have a deal?" Xavier asked.

Van looked around. Then took the money and stashed it. "Yeah."

"Good. You start tonight." Xavier turned and walked to the back of the house.

Van followed, staying on high alert. Especially as they went down into the basement and he saw six more of Xavier standing around at the bottom of the stairs. The men were all tall, pale-haired, and smelling like old lady.

"Looks like you've got a few brothers of your own," Van said casually.

"They're not brothers. And don't use that word around here." Xavier glanced over at the hardasses. "These will be your trainees."

Moving under his own steam, but watched by a nurse in full hazmat dress, Butch got back into bed after having had his first shower and shave. The catheter and the IV were out and he'd managed to suck back a good meal. He'd also slept soundly for eleven out of the past twelve hours.

Man...he was beginning to feel human again, and the speed with which he was rebounding was a gift from God as far as he could tell.

"You did well, sire," the nurse said.

"Next stop, the Olympics." He pulled the sheets up himself.

After the nurse left, he glanced at Marissa. She was sitting on the cot that he'd insisted be brought in for her and her head was bent over the needlepoint she was doing. Ever since he'd woken up about an hour ago she'd been acting a little strange, as if she was on the verge of saying something that she couldn't quite manage to let out.

His eyes went from the bright crown of her head, to her delicate hands, to the peach gown that overflowed her makeshift bed...and then he eased his stare back up to the bodice of the dress. There were dainty buttons going all the way down the front. Like a hundred of them.

Butch shifted his legs around, feeling restless. And found himself wondering how long it would take him to slip each of those pearls loose.

His body stirred, the blood pooling between his legs, making him swell up hard.

Well, what do you know. He *really* was better.

And man, he was a sonofabitch.

He rolled away from her and closed his eyes.

Trouble was, with his lids down, all he saw was him kissing her on Darius's second-story porch last summer. Oh, shit, he remembered it clear as a photograph. He'd been sitting down and she'd been between his legs and his tongue had been in her mouth. They'd ended up on the floor when he broke the chair—

"Butch?"

He opened his eyes and jerked back. Marissa was right in front of him, her face on his level. In a panic, he glanced down to make sure the sheets hid what was doing between his thighs.

“Yeah?” he said with so much gravel he had to repeat himself. Christ, his voice box always had rough edges, his words perpetually a little hoarse, but if there was one sure thing that made that worse it was thinking about getting naked. Especially with her.

As her eyes scanned his face, he feared that she saw everything, right down to the core of him. Where his obsession with her was the strongest.

“Marissa, I think I should go to sleep now. You know, rest and all that.”

“Vishous said you came to see me. After Wrath was shot.”

Butch squeezed his lids shut again. His first thought was that he was going to drag his sorry ass out of bed, find his roommate, and beat the guy. Goddamn, V—

“I wasn’t told,” she said. As he looked at her and frowned, she shook her head. “I didn’t know you’d been by until Vishous told me last night. Who did you see when you came? What happened?”

She hadn’t known? “I, ah, a *doggen* answered the door. After she went upstairs, she said you weren’t receiving and you’d call. When you never did...I wasn’t going to stalk you or something.”

Well, okay...he’d stalked her a little. She’d just never known about it, thank God. Unless of course, V, that loose-lipped fool, had filled her in on that, too. *Bastard*.

“Butch, I got sick and I needed some time to regroup. But I wanted to see you. That’s why I asked you to come calling when I ran into you back in December. When you said no, I thought...well, you’d lost interest.”

She’d wanted to see him? Had she said that?

“Butch, I wanted to see you.”

Yeah, she had. Twice.

Well, now...didn’t that perk a guy up.

“Shit,” he breathed, meeting her eyes. “Do you have any idea how many times I drove past your house?”

“You did?”

“Practically every night. I was pathetic.” Hell, he still was.

“But you wanted me to leave this room. You were angry to see me here.”

“I was pissed—er, angry because you weren’t wearing a suit. And I assumed you’d gotten roped into being here.” With a shaky hand, he reached

out for a lock of her hair. God, it was so soft. “Vishous can be very persuasive. And I didn’t want your compassion or your pity to put you someplace you didn’t want to be.”

“I wanted to be here. I *want* to be here.” She grabbed his hand and squeezed.

In the *oh-my-God-this-has-to-be-Christmas* silence that followed, he struggled to reorder the last six months, to catch up with this reality they’d somehow missed. He wanted her. She wanted him. Was it true?

Felt true. Felt good. Felt...

He let incautious, desperate words fly. “I am pathetic over you, Marissa. Yeah, totally fuc—er...really pathetic. Over you.”

Her pale blue eyes teared up. “Me...too. For you.”

Butch wasn’t even aware of making the big move. But one moment they were separated by air. The next, he was putting his mouth on hers. When she gasped, he pulled back.

“Sorry—”

“No—I—I was just surprised,” she said, eyes on his lips. “I want you to...”

“Okay.” He tilted his head to the side and brushed her mouth. “Come closer to me.”

With a tug on her arm, he eased her onto the bed, then pulled her over so she was lying on top of him. The weight of her was little more than warm air and he loved it, especially as he was surrounded by her blond hair. Putting both hands to her face, he stared up at her.

As her lips parted in a gentle smile just for him, he saw the tips of her fangs. Oh, God, he had to get into her, had to penetrate her in some way, so he leaned up and led with his tongue. She moaned while he licked into her mouth and then they were kissing deep, his hands threading into her hair and cradling the back of her head. He spread his legs and her body eased between them, increasing the pressure where he was hard and thick and hot.

From out of nowhere, a question shot into his mind, one he had no right to ask, one that tripped him up and had him losing his rhythm. He pulled back from her.

“Butch, what is it?”

He stroked her mouth with his thumb, wondering if she’d had a man. In the nine months since he’d kissed her before, had she taken a lover? Maybe had more than one?

“Butch?”

“Nothing,” he said, even as a fierce possessive streak clawed into his chest.

He took her mouth again, and now he kissed her with an ownership he had no right to, one hand shooting down to the small of her back, pressing her into his arousal. He felt this urgent need to stake a claim on her so that anything male would know whose woman she was. Which was nuts.

Abruptly she jerked back. As she sniffed the air, she seemed confused. “Do human males bond?”

“Ah...we get emotional, sure.”

“No...bond.” She buried her face in his neck, inhaled, then started to rub her nose against his skin.

He gripped her hips, wondering just how far things were going to go. He wasn’t sure he had the strength for sex, even though he was totally erect. And he didn’t want to presume anything. But Jesus God in heaven he wanted it from her.

“I love the way you smell, Butch.”

“It’s probably the soap I just used.” As her fangs dragged up his neck, he groaned, “Oh, shit...don’t...stop...”

Chapter Eleven

Vishous came into the clinic and headed straight back to the quarantine room. No one at the nursing station questioned his right to barge on through, and as he went down the hall, the medical staff tripped over their own feet to get out of his way.

Smart. He was heavily armed and edgy as hell.

The day had been a wasteland. He hadn't found anything in the Chronicles that approached what had been done to Butch. Nothing in the Oral Histories either. And worse, he was sensing things in the future, parts of people's destinies realigning, but he could see nothing of what his instincts told him was happening. It was like watching theater with the curtain down: Every once in a while he would see the velvet drape move as a body brushed the far side or he would hear indistinct voices or the lighting would shift under the tasseled hem. But he knew no particulars, his gray cells shooting blanks.

He strode past Havers's lab and went into the housekeeping closet. As he stepped through the concealed door, he found the anteroom empty, the computers and the monitors carrying on their sentry duties alone.

V stopped dead.

On the glowing screen closest to him, he saw Marissa lying on the bed on top of Butch. The cop's arms were around her, his bare knees split wide to accommodate her body as the two of them moved against each other in waves. V couldn't see their faces, but it was obvious their mouths were fused and their tongues wrapped.

V rubbed his jaw, dimly aware that under his weapons and his leathers, his skin had grown hot. God...damn...Butch's palm was slowly sliding up Marissa's spine now, going under her profusion of blond hair, finding,

caressing the back of her neck.

The guy was totally sexed up, but he was so gentle with her. So tender.

V thought of the sex he'd had the night Butch had been taken. Nothing gentle about that. Which had been the point for both parties involved.

Butch shifted and rolled Marissa over, making a move to mount her. As he did, the hospital johnny broke open, the ties ripping free and revealing his strong back and powerful lower body. The tattoo at the base of his spine flexed as he pushed his hips through her skirts, trying to find home. And as he worked what was no doubt a rock-hard erection against her, her long, elegant hands snaked around and bit into his bare ass.

As she scored him with her nails, Butch's head lifted, no doubt to let out a moan.

Jesus, V could just hear the sound.... Yeah...he could hear it. And from out of nowhere an odd yearning feeling flickered through him. *Shit*. What exactly in this scenario did he want?

Butch's head dropped back down into Marissa's neck, and his hips started to surge and retract, then surge again. His spine undulated and his heavy shoulders shrugged and released as he found a rhythm that made V blink really quickly. And then not at all.

Marissa arched up, her chin lifting, her mouth opening. Christ, what a picture she was under her male, her hair strewn all over the pillows, some of it tangled around Butch's thick biceps. In her passion, in her vibrant peach gown, she was a sunrise, a dawn, a promise of warmth, and Butch was basking in what he was lucky enough to touch.

The anteroom's door opened and V wheeled around, blocking the monitor with his body.

Havers put Butch's medical chart down on a shelf and reached for a hazmat suit. "Good evening, sire. You've come to heal him again, have you?"

"Yeah..." V's voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "But now's not a good time."

Havers paused, suit in hand. "Is he resting?"

Not in the slightest. "Yeah. So you and I are going to leave him alone right now."

The doctor's brows shot up behind his horn-rimmed glasses. "I beg your pardon?"

V picked up the chart, shoved it at the doctor, then grabbed the suit and

hung it back up. "Later, doc."

"I—I need to do an examination. I think he may be ready to go home—"

"Great. But we're leaving."

Havers opened his mouth to argue and V got bored with the conversation. Clamping a hand on the doctor's shoulders, he looked into the male's eyes and willed him into agreement.

"Yes..." Havers murmured. "Later. T-tomorrow?"

"Yeah, tomorrow works."

As V frog-marched Marissa's brother back out into the hall, all he could think about were the images on that screen. So wrong of him to watch.

So wrong of him to...want.

Marissa was on fire.

Butch...good Lord, Butch. He was heavy on top of her and big, so big her legs were stretched wide beneath her gown to accommodate him. And the way he moved...the rhythm of his hips was making her crazy.

When he finally broke the kiss, he was breathing hard and his hazel eyes were full of sexual hunger, a rank male starvation. Maybe she should have been overwhelmed because she had no idea what she was doing. Instead, she felt powerful.

As silence stretched, she said, "Butch?" Though she wasn't exactly sure what she was asking for.

"Oh...God, baby." With a light brush, his hand went down her neck to her collarbone. He paused as he got to the top of her dress, clearly asking for permission to take off her gown.

Which cooled her down fast. Her breasts seemed average enough, but it wasn't as if she'd seen any other female's to compare. And she couldn't bear to catch the sort of disgust males of her kind had looked at her with. Not on Butch's face, and especially not if she were naked. That distaste had been hard enough to bear fully clothed and coming from males she didn't care about.

"It's okay," Butch said, removing his hand. "I don't want to push you."

He kissed her lightly and rolled off her, dragging a sheet over his hips as he eased onto his back. He covered his eyes with his forearm, his chest going up and down like he'd been running.

Marissa looked down at her bodice and realized she was clutching the fabric so hard her knuckles were white. "Butch?"

His arm dropped and his head turned on the pillow. His face was still swollen in places, one of his eyes still black and blue. And she noticed that his nose had been broken, but not recently. Yet to her he was beautiful.

“What, baby?”

“Have you...have you had many lovers?”

He frowned. Inhaled. Looked like he didn’t want to reply. “Yeah. Yeah, I have.”

Marissa’s lungs turned to concrete as she imagined him kissing other females, unclothing them, mating. She was willing to bet the vast majority of his lovers hadn’t been clueless virgins.

God, she was going to throw up.

“Which is another reason it’s good that we stop,” he said.

“How so?”

“I’m not saying it would have gone this far, but I would need a condom.”

Well, at least she knew what one of those was. “But why? I’m not fertile.”

The long pause didn’t inspire confidence. And neither did the way he cursed under his breath. “I haven’t always been careful.”

“With what?”

“Sex. I’ve had...a lot of sex with people who might not have been clean. And I did it without protection.” He flushed as if ashamed of himself, the color riding up his neck and slamming into his face. “So yeah, I’d need a condom with you. I don’t have any idea what I’m carrying.”

“Why weren’t you more careful with yourself?”

“Just didn’t give a sh—er, yeah...” He reached out and took a piece of her hair. As he carried it to his lips and kissed it, he said under his breath, “Now I wish I were a goddamned virgin.”

“I can’t catch human viruses.”

“I wasn’t just with humans, Marissa.”

Now she went completely cold. For some reason, if it was with females of his own species, with women, that struck her as different. But another vampire?

“Who?” she asked tightly.

“Somehow I don’t think you’d know her.” He dropped the strand of hair and put his arm back over his eyes. “God, I wish I could undo that. Undo a lot of things.”

Oh...Jesus. “It happened recently, didn’t it.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you...love her?”

He frowned and looked over at her. “God, no. I didn’t even know her—oh, shit, that sounds worse, doesn’t it.”

“Did you take her into your bed? Did you sleep beside her afterward?” *Why in the hell was she asking these questions?* It was like poking at a cut with a steak knife.

“No, it was in a club.” Shock must have shown on her face, because he cursed again. “Marissa, my life isn’t pretty. The way you’ve known me, being with the Brotherhood, dressed in fancy clothes...that’s not the way I lived before. And that’s really not who I am now.”

“Who are you, then?”

“No one you’d ever know. Even if I were a vampire, our paths would never cross. I’m a blue-collar kind of guy.” At her look of confusion, he said, “Lower-class.”

His tone was factual, as if he were reciting his height or weight.

“I don’t think of you as lower-class, Butch.”

“Like I said, you don’t really know me.”

“When I lie this close to you, when I smell your scent, when I hear your voice, I know everything that matters.” She looked down the length of him. “You are the male I want to mate with. That’s who you are.”

A dark, spicy scent came out of his skin in a rush, the kind of thing that were he a vampire she would have said was his bonding mark. As she drew it in through her nose, she took strength in the response.

With fingers that shook, she went to the first of the little buttons on her bodice.

He captured both her hands in one of his. “Don’t force yourself, Marissa. There are things I want from you, but I’m in no hurry.”

“But I want to. I want to be with you.” She pushed him away and started working at the buttons, except she didn’t get far because she was trembling so badly. “I think you’re going to have to do it.”

His breath went in on an erotic hiss. “You sure?”

“Yes.” When he hesitated, she nodded at the bodice. “Please. Get this off me.”

In slow succession, he freed each of the pearl buttons, his battered fingers sure, the dress opening little by little as he went. Without her corset on, her naked skin was revealed in the shallow V that formed.

As he got to the last one, her whole body started to quake.

“Marissa, you’re not okay with this.”

“It’s just...No male has ever seen me before.”

Butch went motionless. “You are still...”

“Untouched,” she said, hating the word.

Now his body trembled and that dark scent flowed from him even more strongly. “It wouldn’t have mattered if you weren’t. I need you to know that.”

She smiled a little. “I do. Now will you...” As his hands came up, she whispered, “Just be kind, all right?”

Butch frowned. “I’m going to love what I see because it’s you.” When she didn’t meet his eyes, he leaned forward. “Marissa, you’re beautiful to me.”

Impatient with herself, she gripped the bodice and bared her breasts. Closing her eyes, she found she couldn’t breathe.

“Marissa. You’re beautiful.”

She lifted her lids, bracing herself. Except he wasn’t staring at what she’d revealed.

“But you haven’t looked at me yet, have you?”

“I don’t need to.”

Tears speared into the corners of her eyes. “Please...just look.”

His eyes drifted downward and he inhaled sharply through his teeth, the hiss cutting through the room. Ah, hell, she knew there was something wrong

“Jesus, you’re perfect.” With a quick pass, his tongue licked over his lower lip. “May I touch you?”

Overwhelmed, she nodded with a jerk of the chin and his hand slipped under the bodice, smoothed up her rib cage and caressed the side of her breast, soft as a breath. She surged at the contact and then settled down. At least until he brushed her nipple with his thumb.

Then she arched involuntarily.

“You’re...very perfect,” he said in his hoarse voice. “You blind me.”

Butch’s head went down, his lips finding the skin at her sternum, then kissing the way up her breast. Her nipple gathered up on itself, straining for...yes, his mouth. *Oh...God, yes...his mouth.*

His eyes stared into hers as he latched on to the tip of her breast, pulling her between his lips. He sucked on her for a heartbeat before releasing and blowing across the glistening tip. Between her legs, she felt a warm rush.

“You okay?” he said. “This okay?”

“I didn’t know...they could feel like that.”

“No?” He brushed his lips over her nipple again. “Surely you’ve touched this beautiful place? No? Not ever?”

She couldn’t think straight. “Females in my class...we’re taught that we shouldn’t...do such things. Unless we are with a mate and even then...” God, what were they talking about?

“Ah...well, I’m here now, aren’t I?” His tongue came out and licked over her nipple. “Yeah, I’m here now. So give me your hand, Marissa.” When she did, he kissed her palm. “Let me show you what perfection feels like.”

He took her forefinger into his mouth and sucked on it, then popped it free and brought it to her distended nipple. He ran circles around the tip, touching her through her own hand.

She let her head fall back, but kept her eyes on his. “It’s so...”

“Soft and tight at the same time, isn’t it.” He lowered his mouth, covering her nipple and her fingertip, a smooth, licking warmth. “Feels good?”

“Yes...dear Virgin in the Fade, yes.”

His hand went to her other breast and rolled her nipple, then he massaged the swell beneath. He was so big looming over her, the hospital gown slipping from his bunched-up shoulders, his heavy arms clenched from holding himself above her body. As he switched sides and went to work on her other nipple, his dark hair brushed against her pale skin, soft and silky.

Lost in the heat and a growing restlessness, she didn’t notice as her skirts started moving...until they were up around her thighs.

As she stiffened, he asked against her breast, “Will you let me keep going a little farther? If I swear I’ll stop anytime you want?”

“Um...yes.”

His palm slid onto her bare knee, and she jerked, but when he went back to work on her breast, she forgot the fear. With slow, lazy circles, his hand went higher and higher until it slipped between her thighs—

Abruptly, she felt something spill out of her. In a panic, she clamped her legs together and pushed at him.

“What, baby?”

Blushing fiercely, she muttered, “I feel something...different...”

“Where? Down here?” He stroked her inner thigh.

As she nodded, his smile was slow, sexy. “Oh, really?” He kissed her, lingering with their mouths together. “Want to tell me what it is?” As she

flushed even more, his hand kept up the caressing. “What kind of different?”

“I’m...” She couldn’t say it.

His mouth shifted so it was next to her ear. “Are you wet?” When she nodded, he growled deep in his throat. “Wet is good...wet’s right where I want you to be.”

“It is? Why—”

With a smooth, quick move, he touched her panties between her legs, and they both jumped at the contact.

“Oh...God,” he groaned, his head dropping on her shoulder. “You’re so with me right now. You’re so right here with me.”

Butch’s erection pounded as he kept his hand on the warm, damp satin over Marissa’s core. He knew if he pushed the panties aside, he was going to dive into a whole lot of honey, but he didn’t want to shock her out of the moment.

Curling his fingers around her, he rubbed the heel of his palm against the top of her slit, right where it would feel best. As she gasped, her hips pushed forward, then followed his slow rhythm. Which naturally put him through the roof. To maintain control, he rolled his hips so his stomach was sitting on that arousal of his, trapping it against the mattress.

“Butch, I need...something...I...”

“Baby, have you ever—” Ah, hell, no way she’d ever pleasured herself. She’d been surprised at what her nipple felt like.

“What?”

“Never mind.” He eased off her core and stroked her panties, just running his fingertips over her. “I’m going to take care of you. Trust me, Marissa.”

He kissed her mouth, sucking at her lips, getting her lost. Then he slipped his hand under the lip of satin at her core—

“Oh...fuck,” he breathed, hoping she was too dazed to hear the curse.

She tried to pull back. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Easy, easy.” He held her in place by putting his thigh over her legs. And then worried that he might have orgasmed...given the rocket launch sensation that had just ridden up his shaft. “Baby, there’s nothing wrong. It’s just you’re...oh, God, you’re bare here.” He moved his hand, his fingers sliding into her folds...holy heaven, she was so smooth. So honeyed. So hot.

He was getting lost in all that slick flesh when her confusion registered through the haze. “You have no hair,” he said.

“Is that bad?”

He laughed. “It’s beautiful. It’s exciting to me.”

Exciting? Try explosive. All he wanted to do was crawl up under her skirt and lick at her and swallow and suck her off, but all that was definitely too far.

And shit, he was such a Neanderthal, but the idea he was the only one who’d put his hand where it was was erotic as hell.

“How’s this feel?” he asked, tuning things up a little.

“God...*Butch*.” She arched wildly on the bed, her head kicking back so that her neck bent in a lovely upward curve.

His eyes latched on to her throat, and the strangest instinct went through him: He wanted to bite her. And his mouth opened like he was prepared to do just that.

Cursing, he shrugged off the bizarre impulse.

“*Butch*...I ache.”

“I know, baby. I’m going to take care of that.” He latched on to her breast with his mouth and started to touch her seriously, finding a rhythm with the stroking, being careful to stay on the outside so she didn’t get thrown.

Turned out he was the one who got tossed. The friction and the feel of her and the scent of it all snowballed on him until he realized he was shadow-pumping her, pushing his hips into the mattress in tempo with his hand. As his head fell between her breasts because he couldn’t hold it up anymore, he knew he had to stop the cock massage he was giving himself. He needed to pay attention to her.

He looked up. Her eyes were wide and a little frightened. She was just on the verge and she was getting rattled.

“All right, baby, it’s okay.” He didn’t stop working between her legs.

“What’s happening to me?”

He put his mouth to her ear. “You’re about to come. Just let yourself feel it. I’m right here, I’ve got you. Hold on to me.”

Her hands bit into his arms and as her nails drew blood, he smiled, thinking that was so perfect.

Her hips tilted up sharply. “*Butch*...”

“That’s it. Come for me.”

“I can’t...I can’t...” She shook her head back and forth, getting trapped between what her body wanted and what her mind was having trouble assimilating. She was going to lose the momentum unless he did something

fast.

Without even thinking or knowing why it would help, he buried his face in her throat and bit her, right over her jugular. That was what did it. She cried out his name and started convulsing, her hips jerking, her body flexing all along her spine. With profound joy, he helped her ride the orgasm's pulses and he talked to her the whole time—although God only knew what he was saying.

When she'd come down, he lifted his head from her neck. Between her lips, he saw the tips of her fangs and was struck by a compulsion he couldn't fight. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and licked at the sharp points, feeling them rasp over his flesh. He wanted them in his skin...he wanted her to suck at him, fill her belly, live off of him.

He forced himself to stop and the retreat was so damn hollow. He strained from unmet needs and they weren't all sexual. He needed...things from her, things he didn't understand.

Her eyes opened. "I didn't know...it would be like that."

"Did you like it?"

Her smile was enough to make him forget his own name. "Oh, yes."

He kissed her gently, then rearranged her skirts and did up the buttons of her bodice, rewrapping the gift of her body. Easing her into the crook of his arm, he got good and comfortable. She was fading into sleep already and he was so damned content to watch her slide. It just seemed like the perfect thing to do, to stay awake while she rested, to watch over her.

Although for some reason, he wished he had a weapon.

"I can't keep my eyes open," she said.

"Don't even try."

He stroked some of her hair and thought, in spite of the fact that in about ten minutes he was going to have the worst case of blue balls known to mankind, that everything was right in his world.

Butch O'Neal, he thought, you have found your woman.

Chapter Twelve

“He does so look like his grandfather.”

Joyce O’Neal Rafferty leaned over the crib and tucked the blanket around her three-month-old son. This debate had been on going since his birth, and she was tired of it. Her son clearly took after her father.

“No, he looks like you.”

As Joyce felt her husband’s arms wrap around her middle, she fought the need to pull away. He didn’t seem to mind the baby weight, but it made her anxious as hell.

Hoping to get him focused elsewhere, she said, “So next Sunday you have a choice. You can either handle Sean by yourself or you can pick up Mother. What do you want to do?”

He dropped his hold on her. “Why can’t your father get her from the nursing home?”

“You know Dad. He doesn’t deal with her all that well, especially in the car. She’ll get agitated, he’ll get frustrated with her, and we’ll have a mess at the baptism when they get there.”

Mike’s chest rose and fell. “I think you better deal with your mother. Sean and I will be fine. Maybe one of your sisters can come with us?”

“Yeah. Colleen, maybe.”

They were silent a while, just watching Sean breathe.

Then Mike said, “Are you going to invite him?”

She wanted to curse. In the O’Neal family, there was only one “him.” Brian. Butch. The “him.” Of the six children Eddie and Odell O’Neal had had, two of them had been lost. Janie had been murdered, and Butch had basically disappeared after high school. The latter had been a blessing, the first a curse.

“He won’t come.”

“You should invite him anyway.”

“If he shows up, Mother will become unglued.”

Odell’s rapidly escalating dementia meant she sometimes thought Butch was dead and that was why he wasn’t around. Her other option for dealing with the loss was making up crazy stories about him. Like how he was running for mayor down in New York. Or how he was going to medical school. Or how he wasn’t his father’s son and that was why Eddie couldn’t stand him. All of which were nuts. The first two for obvious reasons and the third because while it was true Eddie had never liked Butch, it wasn’t because he was a bastard child. Eddie had never particularly liked any of his children.

“You should invite him anyway, Joyce. This is his family.”

“Not really.”

Last time she’d talked to her brother had been...God, at her wedding five years ago? And no one else had seen or heard much from him since then, either. Word in the family had it that her father had gotten a message from Butch back in...August? Yeah, end of summer. He’d given a number he could be reached at, but that was about it.

Sean let out a little whiffle through his nose.

“Joyce?”

“Oh, come on, he won’t show if I ask him.”

“So you get the credit for putting the offer out and won’t have to deal with him. Or maybe he’ll surprise you.”

“Mike, I’m not calling him. Who needs more drama in this family?” Like her mother being crazy *and* having Alzheimer’s wasn’t enough of a problem?

She made a show of checking her watch. “Hey, is *CSI* on?”

With determination, she pulled her husband out of the nursery, distracting him from things that were none of his business.

Marissa wasn’t sure what time it was when she woke up, but she knew she’d been asleep for a long while. As her eyes opened, she smiled. Butch was out cold and crowding her at her back, his thick thigh between her legs, his hand cupping her breast, his head in her neck.

As she rolled over slowly and faced him, her eyes drifted down his body. The sheet he’d pulled up earlier had slid off him, and underneath the thin hospital gown, something thick rested at his hips. Good Lord...an erection. He was aroused.

“What you looking at, baby?” Butch’s low voice was mostly gravel.

She jumped and glanced up. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

“I never went to sleep. Been watching you for hours.” He pulled the sheet back into place and smiled. “How you doing?”

“Good.”

“You want we call for some break—”

“Butch.” Exactly how was she going to put this? “Males do what you made me do, right? I mean, last night when you were touching me.”

He flushed and tugged at the sheet. “Yeah, we do. But you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Why?”

“Just don’t have to.”

“Would you let me look at you?” She nodded at his hips. “Down there?”

He coughed a little. “You want that?”

“Yes. God, yes...I want to touch you there.”

With a soft curse, he muttered, “What happens might shock you.”

“I was shocked when your hand was between my legs. Is it shocking like that? In that good kind of way?”

“Yeah.” His hips shifted, as if they’d rotated on the base of his spine.

“Jesus...Marissa.”

“I want you naked.” She sat up on her knees and reached for his johnny. “And I want to strip you.”

He took her hands in a hard grip. “I, ah...Marissa, do you have any idea what happens when a man comes? Because sure as shit, that’s going to happen if you start handling me. And it’s not going to take long.”

“I want to find out. With you.”

He closed his eyes. Took a deep breath. “Dear Lord in heaven.”

Lifting his upper body off the bed, he leaned forward so she could slip the two halves of the gown down his arms. Then he let himself fall back on the mattress and his body was revealed: the thick neck plugged into those broad shoulders...the heavy pads of his pectorals that were dusted with hair...the ribbed expanse of his belly...and...

She pulled back the sheet. Good God, his sex was...“It’s gotten so...huge.”

Butch barked out a laugh. “You say the nicest things.”

“I saw it when it was.... I didn’t know it got...”

She just couldn’t take her eyes off his erection as it lay against his belly.

His hard sex was the color of his lips and shockingly beautiful, the head blunt with a graceful ridge, the shaft perfectly round and very thick at the base. And the twin weights below were heavy, shameless, virile.

Maybe humans were larger than her kind?

“How do you like to be touched?”

“If it’s you, any way.”

“No, show me.”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and his chest expanded. When he lifted his lids, his mouth parted and he slowly eased his hand down his pecs and his belly. Moving one of his legs out to the side, he captured himself in his palm, fisting that dark pink flesh of his, his man hand broad enough to hold the thing. With a slow, smooth movement, he stroked his arousal, base to tip, riding the shaft.

“Or something like this,” he said hoarsely, keeping it up. “Good God, look at you.... I could come right now.”

“No.” She pushed his arm out of the way and the erection bounced stiffly on his stomach. “I want to make you do that.”

As she took hold of him, he groaned, his whole body undulating.

He was hot. He was hard. He was soft. He was so thick she couldn’t close her palm all the way around him.

Hesitant at first, she followed his example, running her grip up and down, marveling at how his satin skin slid over the stone core of him.

When he gritted his teeth, she stopped. “Is this all right?”

“Yeah...damn...” His chin tilted back, the veins in his neck popping. “More.”

She put her other hand on him, stacking her palms, moving them together. His mouth fell wide open, his eyes rolling back in his head, a sheen of sweat breaking out over his body.

“How does this feel, Butch?”

“I’m so close already.” He clamped his jaws together and breathed through teeth that were locked tight. But then he grabbed her hands, stilling them. “Wait! Not yet...”

His erection pulsed, kicking in their grips. A crystal drop appeared at the tip.

He took in a ragged breath. “Hold me out. Make me work for it, Marissa. The longer you burn me, the better the end will be.”

Using his gasps and the spasms of his muscles as a guide, she learned the

peaks and valleys of his erotic response, figured out when he was getting close and just how to suspend him at the tip of the sexual blade.

God, there was power in sex, and right now she had it all. He was defenseless, exposed...just as she'd been the night before. *She loved this.*

"Please...baby..." She loved that hoarse breathlessness. Loved the straining cords in his neck. Loved the command she had as she held him in her hand.

Which made her think. She let go and attended to his sack, sliding her hand under the weight of it, cupping him. With a curse, he knotted the sheets up in fists until his knuckles went white.

She kept going at him until he was twitchy and covered with sweat and shaking. Then she bent down and pressed her mouth to his. He gobbled her up, grabbing her neck and holding her against his lips, mumbling, kissing, thrusting with his tongue.

"Now?" she said in the midst of the kiss.

"Now."

Taking him in hand, she moved her palm faster and faster, until his face contorted into a beautiful mask of agony and his body grew tight as a cable.

"*Marissa...*" With no coordination, he grabbed the hospital gown and pulled it over his hips, shielding him from her eyes. Then she felt him jerk and shudder and something warm and thick came out of him in pulses, covering her hand. She knew instinctively not to lose her rhythm until it was over.

When his eyes finally opened, they were fuzzy. Satiated. Full of a worshiping warmth.

"I don't want to let go of you," she said.

"Then don't. Ever."

He was softening in her palm, a retreat from the hard staff he'd been. Kissing him, she took her hand out from under the hospital johnny and looked down, curious as to what had come out of him.

"I didn't know it would be black," she murmured with a little smile.

Horror flooded his face. "*Oh, Christ!*"

Havers walked down the hallway to the quarantine room.

On the way, he checked on the little female he'd operated on days before. She was healing well, but he worried about sending her and her mother back out into the world. That *hellren* was violent and there was a good chance they

would be back in the clinic again. But what could he do? He couldn't let them stay here indefinitely. He needed the bed.

He kept going, passing his laboratory, waving at a nurse who was processing various samples. When he got to the HOUSEKEEPING door, he hesitated.

He hated that Marissa was locked up with that human.

But the important thing was she hadn't been contaminated. According to the physical they'd done on her early yesterday, she was just fine, so her lapse in judgment evidently wasn't going to cost her her life.

And as for the human, he was going home. His last blood sample had been very close to normal and he was getting stronger at an astonishing rate, so it was time to get him the hell away from Marissa. Havers had already called the Brotherhood and told them to come get the man.

Butch O'Neal was dangerous, and not just because of the contamination issue. That human wanted Marissa—it was in his eyes. And that was unacceptable.

Havers shook his head, thinking that he'd tried to keep them apart back in the fall. At first, he'd assumed Marissa was going to drain the human and that would have been fine. But when it became obvious that she was pining for him in her illness, Havers had had to step in.

God, he'd hoped she'd find a true mate at some point, but certainly not an inferior, roughneck human. She needed someone worthy, though it was unlikely that would happen anytime soon, given the *glymera*'s opinion of her.

But maybe...well, he was aware of how Rehvenge watched her. Maybe that would work. Rehv was from very good bloodlines on both sides. He was a little...hard, perhaps, but he was appropriate in the eyes of society.

Perhaps that pairing should be encouraged? After all, she was untouched, as clean as the day she was birthed. And Rehvenge had money, lots of it, though no one knew how or why. Even more important, he was unswayed by the *glymera*'s opinions.

Yes, Havers thought. That would be a good pairing. The best she could hope for.

He pushed open the closet door, feeling a little better. That human was on the way out of the clinic, and no one had to know the two of them had been locked in together for days. His staff was blessedly discreet.

God, he could only imagine what the *glymera* would do to her if they knew she'd been in close contact with a human male. Marissa's tattered

reputation just couldn't withstand any more controversy, and frankly, Havers couldn't take it either. He was utterly exhausted by her social failures.

He loved her, but he was at the end of his rope.

Marissa had no idea why Butch was dragging her into the bathroom at a dead run.

“Butch! What are you doing?”

He cranked on the sink, forced her hands under the water, and grabbed for a bar of soap. As he washed her off, the panic in his face stretched his eyes and flattened his mouth.

“*What the hell is going on here!*”

Marissa and Butch both wheeled around to the doorway. Havers was standing in it without benefit of a hazmat suit—more furious than she'd ever seen him.

“Havers—”

Her brother cut her off by lunging forward and yanking her out of the bathroom.

“Stop it—ouch! Havers, that hurts!”

What happened next was too fast for her to track.

Havers was suddenly just...gone. One minute he was pulling at her and she was fighting against him, and the next Butch had him flattened facefirst against the wall.

Butch's voice was a nasty drawl. “I don't care if you're her brother. You don't handle her like that. *Ever.*” He pushed his forearm into the back of Havers's neck to emphasize the point.

“Butch, let him—”

“We clear?” Butch growled over her words. When her brother gasped and nodded, Butch released him, walked over to the bed, and calmly wrapped a sheet around his hips. As if he hadn't just manhandled a vampire.

Meanwhile, Havers stumbled and caught himself on the edge of the bed, his eyes crazed as he rearranged his glasses and glared at her. “I want you to leave this room. Now.”

“No.”

Havers's jaw went slack. “I beg your pardon?”

“I'm staying with Butch.”

“You most certainly are not!”

In the Old Language, she said, “*If he would have me, I would stand at his*

side as his shellan.”

Havers looked as if she'd slapped him: shocked and disgusted. “*And I would forbid you. Have you no nobility?*”

Butch cut off her reply. “You really should go, Marissa.”

She and Havers looked over at him. “Butch?” she said.

That harsh face she adored softened for a moment, but then grew grim. “If he'll let you out, you should go.”

And not come back, his expression said.

She glanced at her brother, heart starting to pound. “Leave us.” When Havers shook his head, she shouted, “*Get out of here!*”

There were times when female hysteria got everyone's attention, and this was one of them. Butch went quiet and Havers seemed nonplussed.

Then her brother's eyes shifted to Butch and narrowed into slits. “The Brotherhood are coming to pick you up, human. I called them and told them you are free to go.” Havers tossed Butch's medical chart on the bed as if he were giving up on the whole situation. “Don't come back here again. Ever.”

As her brother left, Marissa stared at Butch, but before she could get any words past her tight throat, he spoke.

“Baby, please understand. I'm not well. There's something still in me.”

“I'm not afraid of you.”

“I am.”

She linked her arms around her stomach. “What's going to happen if I leave here now? Between you and me?”

Bad question to ask, she thought in the silence between them.

“Butch—”

“I need to find out what was done to me.” He looked down and fingered the puckered black wound next to his belly button. “I need to know what's inside me. I want to be with you, but not like this. Not the way I am now.”

“I've been with you for four days and I'm fine. Why stop—”

“Go, Marissa.” His voice was haunted and sad. So were his eyes. “As soon as I can, I'll come find you.”

The hell you will, she thought.

Dear Virgin in the Fade, this was Wrath all over again, wasn't it. Her waiting, always waiting, while some male with better things to do was out into the world.

She'd already put in three hundred years of baseless anticipation.

“I'm not going to do that,” she murmured. With more force, she said,

"I'm not waiting anymore. Not even for you. Almost half my life is over now and I've wasted it sitting at home hoping that a male would come for me. I can't do that anymore...no matter how much I...care about you."

"I care about you, too. That's why I'm telling you to leave. I'm protecting you."

"You're...‘protecting’ me." She eyed him up and down, knowing damn well he'd been able to peel Havers off her only because Butch had had the element of surprise working for him and the male in question had been a civilian. If her brother were a fighter, Butch would have been leveled.

"You're *protecting* me? Christ, I could lift you over my head with one arm, Butch. There's nothing you can do physically that I can't do better. So don't do me any favors."

It was, of course, the perfectly wrong thing to say.

Butch's eyes shifted away and he crossed his arms over his chest, his lips narrowing flat.

Oh, God. "Butch, I don't mean that you're weak—"

"I'm very glad you reminded me of something."

Oh, God. "Of what."

His tight smile was ghastly. "I'm on the lower end of things on two counts. Socially and evolutionarily." He nodded to the door. "So...yeah, you go on, now. And you're absolutely right. Don't wait for me."

She started to reach out to him, but his cold, empty eyes held her back. Damn it, she'd blown it.

No, she told herself. There hadn't been anything to blow. Not if he was going to shut her out of the ugly parts of his life. Not if he was going to take off and leave her and maybe come back at some indefinable, probably-never point in time.

Marissa went to the door and had to look back at him once more. The image of him with that sheet wrapped around his hips, his chest bare, bruises still healing all over him...was one she was going to wish she could forget.

She walked out, the air lock sealing him in with a hiss.

Holy shit, Butch thought as he sagged down onto the floor. So this was what getting skinned alive felt like.

Scrubbing his jaw, he sat there staring into space, lost though he knew exactly what room he was in, alone with the remnants of the evil in him.

"Butch, my man."

He jerked his head up. Vishous was standing just inside the room and the brother was dressed for fighting, a big-ass, leather-wearing, stabbing machine. The Valentino garment bag dangling from his gloved hand seemed totally out of place, just as whacked as a butler toting an AK-47.

“Fuuuuck, Havers has got to be nuts to release you. You look like crap.”

“Bad day, s’all.” And there were going to be a lot more of those, so he should get used to it.

“Where’s Marissa?”

“She left.”

“Left?”

“Don’t make me say it again.”

“Oh. Hell.” Vishous took a deep breath and swung the bag onto the bed. “Well, got you some threads and a new cell phone—”

“It’s still in me, V. I can feel it. I can...taste it.”

V’s diamond eyes did a quick up and down. Then he came over and held out his hand. “Rest of you is healing up good. Healing up quick.”

Butch took his roommate’s palm and got pulled to his feet. “Maybe if I’m free of here we can figure this out together. Unless you’ve found—”

“Nothing yet. But I haven’t lost hope.”

“That makes one of us.”

Butch unzipped the bag, dropped the sheet, and dragged on some boxers. Then he punched his legs into a pair of black slacks and stuffed his arms into a silk shirt.

Putting on street clothes made him feel like a fraud because the truth was he was a patient, a freak, a nightmare. Jesus Christ...what had come out of him as he’d orgasmed? And Marissa...at least he’d washed her as soon as he could.

“Your levels look good,” V said as he read the chart Havers had tossed. “Everything seems back to normal.”

“I ejaculated about ten minutes ago and the stuff was black. So everything is *not* normal.”

Silence greeted that happy little announcement. Man, if he had hauled off and sucker-punched V, he would have gotten less of a shocked-out reaction.

“Oh, Christ,” Butch muttered, slipping his feet into his Gucci loafers and grabbing the black cashmere dress coat. “Let’s just go.”

As they went to the door, Butch glanced back at the bed. The sheets were still tangled from him and Marissa getting all over each other.

He cursed and walked out into a monitoring room, then V led the way through a little closet stocked with cleaning supplies. Outside, they went down a hall, past a lab, and came into the clinic proper, going by patient rooms. As he went, he looked inside each one until he stopped short.

Through the doorway he saw Marissa, sitting on the edge of a hospital bed, that peach gown all around her. She was holding the hand of a little girl and talking softly while an older female, probably the young's mother, looked on from the corner.

The mother was the one who glanced up. As she saw Butch and V, she retracted in on herself, bringing her pilled sweater closer to her body and dropping her eyes to the floor.

Butch swallowed hard and kept going.

They were at the bank of elevators, waiting for one, when he said, "V?"
"Yeah?"

"Even though it's nothing concrete, you have an idea of what was done to me, don't you?" He didn't look at his roommate. V didn't look at him.

"Maybe. But we're not alone here."

An electronic *ding* sounded and the doors opened. They rode up in silence.

When they'd walked out of the mansion and into the night, Butch said, "I bled black for a while, you know."

"They noted in your chart that the color came back."

Butch snagged V's arm and wheeled the male around. "Am I part *lesser* now?"

There. It was out on the table. His biggest fear, his reason for running from Marissa, the hell he was going to have to learn to live with.

V stared into his eyes. "No."

"How do we know?"

"Because I reject that conclusion."

Butch dropped his hold. "Dangerous to put your head in the sand, vampire. I could be your enemy now."

"Bull. Shit."

"Vishous, I could—"

V grabbed him by the lapels and yanked him up against his body. The brother was trembling from head to foot, his eyes glowing like crystals in the night. "*You are not my enemy.*"

Instantly pissed off, Butch gripped V's powerful shoulders, bunching up

the leather jacket in his fists. “*How do we know for sure.*”

V bared his fangs and hissed, his black eyebrows cranking down hard. Butch gave the aggression right back, hoping, praying, ready for them to start clocking each other. He was jonesing to hit and get hit back; he wanted blood all over the both of them.

For long moments, they stayed locked together, muscles straining, sweat blooming, right on the edge.

Then Vishous’s voice came out into the space between their faces, the cracked tone riding a panting, desperate breath and getting bucked off. “You are my only friend. Never my enemy.”

No telling who embraced who first, but the urge to beat the living shit out of the other guy bled from their bodies, leaving only the bond between them. They wound up tight together and stood for a time in the cold wind. When they stepped back, it was awkwardly and with embarrassment.

After some throat clearing on both sides, V took out a hand-rolled and lit it. As he exhaled, he said, “You’re not a *lesser*, cop. The heart is removed when that happens. Yours is still beating.”

“Maybe it was a partial job? Something that was interrupted?”

“That I can’t answer. I went through the race’s records, looking for something, anything. Didn’t find shit the first trip through, so I’m reading the Chronicles all over again. Hell, I’m even checking in the human world, looking for obscure shit on the Internet.” V blew out another cloud of Turkish smoke. “I’ll find out. Somehow, some way, I’ll find out.”

“Have you tried to see what’s coming?”

“You mean the future?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course I have.” V dropped the hand-rolled, crushed it with his shitkicker, then bent down and picked up the butt. As he slipped the deadie into his back pocket, he said, “But I’m still getting nothing. Shit...I need a drink.”

“Me, too. ZeroSum?”

“You sure you’re up for that?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“All right then, ZeroSum it is.”

They walked over to the Escalade and got in, Butch riding shotgun. After putting on his seat belt, his hand went to his stomach. His abdomen was hurting like a bitch now because he’d been mobile, but the pain didn’t matter.

Matter of fact, nothing really seemed to.

They were just pulling out of Havers's drive when V said, "By the way, you got a telephone call on the general line. Late last night. Guy named Mikey Rafferty."

Butch frowned. Why would one of his brothers-in-law be calling, especially that one? Of all his sisters and brothers, Joyce disliked him the most—which was really saying something, considering how the others felt. Had his father finally had the heart attack that had been waiting in the wings all these years?

"What did he say?"

"Baptizing a kid. Wanted you to know so you could show if you were into it. It's this Sunday."

Butch looked out the window. Another baby. Well, Joyce's first, but it was grandchild number...how many? Seven? No...eight.

As they drove along in silence, heading toward the city's urban hub, the lights from oncoming cars flared and faded. Houses were passed. Then stores. Then turn-of-the-century office buildings. Butch thought of all the people living and breathing in Caldwell.

"You ever want kids, V?"

"Nope. Not interested."

"I used to."

"No more?"

"Not gonna happen for me, but it doesn't matter. Plenty of O'Neals in this world now. Plenty."

Fifteen minutes later, they were downtown and parked behind ZeroSum, but he found it hard to get out of the Escalade. The familiarity of it all—the car, his roommate, his watering hole—unsettled him. Because even though it was just the same, he had changed.

Frustrated, cagey, he reached forward and got a Red Sox hat out of the glove compartment. As he put it on, he opened the door, telling himself he was being melodramatic and this was all business as usual.

The moment he stepped foot out of the SUV, he froze.

"Butch? What is it, my man?"

Well, wasn't that the million-dollar question. His body seemed to have turned into some kind of tuning fork. Energy was vibrating through him... drawing him...

He turned and started walking down Tenth Street, moving fast. He just

had to find out what it was, this magnet, this homing signal.

“Butch? Where you going, cop?”

When V grabbed his arm, Butch snapped free and broke into a jog, feeling like he was on the end of a rope and something was pulling him.

He was dimly aware of V jogging next to him and talking as if he'd gotten on his cell phone. “Rhage? I got me a situation here. Tenth Street. No, it's Butch.”

Butch began to run flat out, the cashmere coat flapping behind him. When Rhage's towering body materialized in his path from out of nowhere, he made a shift to get around the male.

Rhage jumped right in his way. “Butch, where you going?”

When the brother grabbed at him, Butch shoved Rhage back so hard the guy slammed against a brick building. “Don't touch me!”

Two hundred yards of hauling it later, he found what was calling him: Three *lessers* coming out of an alley.

Butch stopped. The slayers stopped. And there was a hideous moment of communion, one that brought tears to Butch's eyes as he recognized in them what was inside of him.

“Are you a new recruit?” one of them asked.

“Course he is,” another said. “And you missed check-in tonight, idiot.”

No...no...oh, God, no...

In a synchronized movement, the three slayers looked over his shoulder at what had to be V and Rhage coming around the corner. The *lessers* prepared to strike, falling into combat stance, bringing up their hands.

Butch took a step toward the trio. Then another.

“Butch...” The aching voice behind him was Vishous. “God...no.”

Chapter Thirteen

John shuffled his little body around and closed his eyes again. Wedged into the seat of a beat-up, ugly-ass, avocado green armchair, he smelled Tohr with every inhale he took: The decorator's nightmare had been the Brother's favorite possession and Wellsie's "*seatus non grata*." Exiled here to his office at the training center, Tohr had spent hours doing admin work in it while John studied.

John had used the thing as a bed since the killings.

Aggravated, he twisted himself around so his legs were draped over one arm and his head and shoulders were shoved back into the top half of the chair. He squeezed his eyes closed even harder and prayed for some rest. Trouble was, his blood was buzzing through his veins and his head was spinning with a whole lot of nothing specific, everything urgent bullshit.

God, class had ended two hours ago and he'd worked out even after the other trainees had left. Plus he hadn't slept well for a week. You'd think he'd be out like a light.

Then again, maybe he was still worked up over Lash. That SOB had been all over him about passing out in front of the whole class yesterday. Man, John hated that kid. He really did. That arrogant, rich, snarky—

"Open your eyes, boy, I know you're awake."

John went into a full-body jerk and nearly landed on the floor. As he hauled himself back up, he saw Zsadist in the doorway to the office, dressed in that uniform of skintight turtleneck and loose sweats.

The expression on the warrior's face was as hard as his body. "Listen up, because I'm not going to say this again."

John gripped the arms of the chair. He had a feeling what this was about.

"You don't want to go to Havers's, fine. But cut the shit. You're skipping

meals, you look like you haven't slept for days, and your attitude is beginning to irritate the fuck out of me."

Yeah, this wasn't like any parent/teacher conference John had ever had. And he wasn't taking the criticism well: Frustration swirled in his chest.

Z jabbed his forefinger across the room. "You stop marking Lash, we clear? Leave the fucker alone. And from now on, you come up to the house for meals."

John frowned, then reached for his pad so he'd be sure Z would understand what he wanted to say.

"Forget about a response, boy. I'm not interested." As John started to get downright pissed, Z smiled, revealing monstrous fangs. "And you know better than to get up in my grill, don't you."

John looked away, certain the Brother could break him in half without any effort at all. And resentful as hell about that fact.

"You will quit it with Lash, you feel me? Do *not* make me get involved with the two of you. Neither of you will like it. Nod so I know you understand."

John nodded, feeling ashamed. Angry. Exhausted.

Choking on all the aggression inside of him, he blew out a breath and rubbed his eyes. God, he'd been so calm all his life, maybe even timid. Why was everything setting him off lately?

"You're getting close to the change. That's the why of it."

John slowly lifted his head. He'd heard that right, hadn't he?

Am I? he signed.

"Yeah. That's why it is imperative that you learn how to control yourself. If you make it through the transition, you're going to come out the other side with a body capable of things that will floor you. I'm talking about raw physical strength. The brute kind. The kind that can kill. You think you got problem now? Wait'll you have to deal with handling that load. You need to learn your control *now*."

Zsadist turned away, but then paused and looked over his shoulder. Light fell on the scar that ran down his face and distorted his upper lip. "One last thing. Do you need someone to talk to? About...shit?"

Yeah, right, John thought. Over his dead body he was going back to Havers to see that therapist.

Which was why he refused to go get checked out. Last time he'd tangled with the race's physician, the guy had blackmailed him into a therapy session

he hadn't wanted, and he had no intention of repeating the Dr. Phil hour. With everything going on recently, he wasn't getting into his past again, so the only way he was going back to that clinic now was if he was bleeding out.

"John? You want to talk to someone?" When he shook his head, Z's eyes narrowed. "Fine. But you get the message about you and Lash, right?"

John looked down and nodded.

"Good. Now drag your ass up to the house. Fritz has made you dinner and I'm going to watch you eat it. And you *will* eat all of it. You need to be strong for the change."

Butch walked closer to the slayers and they weren't threatened by him at all. If anything, they were annoyed, like he wasn't doing his job.

"Behind you, dumb ass," the one in the middle said. "Your target's behind you. Two Brothers."

Butch circled around the *lessers*, reading their imprints instinctively. He sensed that the tallest one had been inducted within the last year or so: There was some trace of human still in him, although Butch wasn't sure how he knew this. The other two were far older in the Society and he was certain of this not just because their hair and skin had paled out.

He stopped when he was behind the three and stared through their big bodies at V and Rhage...who were looking like they'd watched a good friend die in their arms.

Butch knew exactly when the *lessers* were going to attack and he moved forward with them. Just as Rhage and V sank down into fighting stances, Butch grabbed the middle slayer around the neck and flipped him onto the ground.

The *lesser* hollered and Butch jumped on top of him, even though he knew he wasn't up to fighting. Sure enough, he was kicked off and the *lesser* took the driver's seat, sitting on him, choking him. The bastard was brutally strong and pissed off, nothing less than a sumo wrestler with rabies.

As Butch struggled to keep from getting his head ripped off his shoulders, he was dimly aware of a flash of light and a pop. And then another. Clearly, Rhage and V had cleaned house and Butch heard them pound it over. Thank God.

Except it was just as they arrived that the freak show started.

Butch looked deeply into the undead's eyes for the first time and something clicked into place, just locked the two of them up tight as if there

were iron bars encircling their bodies. As the slayer went utterly still, Butch felt this overwhelming urge to...well, he didn't know what. But the instinct was strong enough to have him opening his lips to breathe.

And that was when the inhaling started. Before he knew what he was doing, his lungs began to fill in one long, steady draw.

"No..." the slayer whispered, trembling.

Something passed between their mouths, some cloud of blackness leaving the *lesser* and getting drawn into Butch—

The connection was broken with a brutal attack from above. Vishous grabbed the slayer and yanked the undead free, throwing the thing against a building headfirst. Before the bastard could recover, V fell upon it, black blade slicing down.

As the spark and sizzle faded, Butch's arms fell limp against the asphalt. Then he rolled over onto his side and curled in on himself, arms linking tight against his stomach. His gut was killing him, but more to the point, he felt nauseous as shit, a nasty echo of what he'd struggled with when he'd been at his sickest.

A pair of shitkickers came into his line of sight, but he couldn't bear to look up and see either one of the brothers. He didn't know what the hell he had done or what had happened. All he knew was that he and the *lessers* were kin.

V's voice was as thin as Butch's skin. "Are you okay?"

Butch squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "Think it's best...that you get me out of here. And don't you dare take me home."

Vishous unlocked his penthouse and muscled Butch inside while Rhage held the door open. The three of them had taken the cargo elevator up the back of the building, which made sense. The cop was a dead load, weighing more than he looked like he did, as if the pull of gravity had singled him out for special attention.

They laid the cop flat on the bed and he eased over onto his side, bringing his knees up until they hit his chest.

There was a long stretch of silence, during which Butch seemed to pass out.

Like he was walking off anxiety, Rhage started pacing around, and shit, after that showdown, V was all up in his head, too. He lit up and inhaled hard.

Hollywood cleared his throat. “So, V...this is where you go with the females, huh.” The brother went over and fingered a pair of chains bolted into the black wall. “We heard stories, of course. Guess they’re all true.”

“Whatever.” V headed to his bar and poured a long/tall of Grey Goose. “We’ve got to hit those *lessers*’ houses tonight.”

Rhage nodded toward the bed. “What about him?”

Miracle of miracles, the cop lifted his head. “I’m not going anywhere right now. Trust me.”

V narrowed his eyes on his roommate. Butch’s face, which normally got all Irish ruddy if he exerted himself, was utterly blushless. And he smelled... faintly sweet. Like baby powder.

Jesus Christ. It was like being around those slayers had brought out something else in him—something Omega in him.

“V?” Rhage’s voice was soft. Real close. “You want to stay here? Or maybe take him back to Havers?”

“I’m fine,” Butch croaked.

A lie on so many levels, V thought.

He polished off his vodka and looked at Rhage. “I’m coming with you. Cop, we’ll be back and I’ll bring food, true?”

“No. No food. And don’t come back tonight. Just lock me in so I can’t get out and leave me.”

Fuck. “Cop, if you hang yourself in the bathroom, I swear I will kill you all over again, ya herd me?”

Dull hazels opened up. “I want to know what was done to me more than I want to off my ass. So don’t worry.”

Butch squeezed his lids shut again and after a moment, Vishous and Rhage walked out to the balcony. As V locked the doors, he realized he was more worried about keeping Butch inside than protecting the guy.

“Where we going?” he asked Rhage. Even though he was usually the one with the plans.

“First wallet has an address of Four five nine Wichita Street, Apartment C-four.”

“Let’s hit it.”

Chapter Fourteen

When Marissa opened the door to her bedroom, she felt like an intruder in her own space: A wiped-out, heartbroken, lost...stranger.

Looking around aimlessly, she thought, God, it was such a pretty white room, wasn't it? With its big canopied bed and its chaise lounge and antique dressers and side tables. Everything was so feminine, except for the art on the walls. Her collection of Albrecht Dürer woodcuts didn't match the rest of the décor, those stark lines and hard edges more fitting to a male's eyes and a male's things.

Except that the images spoke to her.

As she went over to look at one, she had a passing thought that Havers had always disapproved of them. He'd thought that Maxfield Parrish paintings of romantic, dreamy scenes were more appropriate for a female *Princeps*.

They never had agreed on art, had they? But he'd bought the woodcuts for her anyway because she'd loved them.

Forcing herself into action, she closed her door and went for the shower. She had little time before the regularly scheduled *Princeps* Council meeting tonight, and Havers always liked to arrive early.

As she stepped under the water, she thought how strange life was. When she'd been with Butch in that quarantine room, she'd forgotten all about the council and the *glymera* and...everything. But now, he was gone and it was all back to normal.

The return struck her as tragic.

After blowing her hair dry, she dressed in a teal Yves St. Laurent gown from the 1960s, then went to her jewelry cabinet and chose an important suite of diamonds. The stones were heavy and cold around her neck, the earrings

heavy on her lobes, the bracelet a lock on her wrist. As she stared at the flashing gems, she thought that females in the aristocracy were really just display mannequins for their families' wealth, weren't they.

Especially at *Princeps* Council meetings.

Going downstairs, she dreaded seeing Havers, but figured it would be good to get it over with. He wasn't in his study, so she headed for the kitchen, thinking he might be having a bite to eat before they left. Just as she was pushing her way into the butler's pantry she saw Karolyn coming out of the door to the basement. The *doggen* was carrying a heavy load of collapsed cardboard boxes.

"Here, let me help you," Marissa said, rushing forward.

"No, thank you...mistress." The servant flushed and looked away, but that was the way of the *doggen*. They hated accepting aid from those they served.

Marissa smiled gently. "You must be packing up the library for its new paint job. Oh! Which reminds me. I'm late right now, but we do need to talk about tomorrow evening's dinner menu."

Karolyn bowed very low. "Forgive me, but master indicated the party with the *princeps leahdyre* was canceled."

"When did he say this?"

"Just now, before he left for the Council."

"He's gone already?" Maybe he assumed she would want to rest. "I'd better hurry off then—Karolyn, are you all right? You don't look well."

The *doggen* bowed so deeply the boxes brushed the floor. "I am well, indeed, mistress. Thank you."

Marissa raced out of the house and dematerialized to the Tudor home of the current council *leahdyre*. As she knocked, she hoped Havers had cooled down. She could understand his anger considering what he'd walked in on, but he didn't have a thing to worry about. It wasn't like Butch was in her life or anything.

God, she felt like throwing up every time she thought about that.

She was let in by a *doggen* and shown to the library. As she walked into the meeting, none of the nineteen at the polished table acknowledged her presence. This was not unusual. What was different was that her brother did not lift his eyes. Nor was there even a seat saved for her on his right. Nor did he even come around and settle her in her chair.

Havers had not cooled down. Not in the slightest.

Well, no matter, she would talk to him after the meeting. Calm him. Reassure him, though it killed her, because she could have used some support from him right now.

She sat at the far end of the table, in the middle of three empty chairs. As the last male walked into the meeting, he froze as he saw that all the seats were taken save for those on either side of her. After an awkward pause, a *doggen* rushed in with another and the *princeps* squeezed in elsewhere.

The *leahdyre*, a distinguished pale-haired male of great bloodline, shuffled some papers around, rapped on the table with the tip of a gold pen, and cleared his throat. “I hereby call this meeting to order and I am tabling the agenda you have all received. One of the members of the council has drafted an eloquent appeal to the king, which I believe we should consider with alacrity.” He lifted a creamy piece of stationery and read from the thing. “In light of the brutal killing of the *Princeps* Wellesandra, mated of the Black Dagger warrior Tohrment son of Hharm and blooded daughter of the *Princeps* Relix, and in light of the abduction of the *Princeps* Bella, mated of the Black Dagger warrior Zsadist son of Ahgony and blooded daughter of the *Princeps* Rempoon and blooded sister of the *Princeps* Rehvenge, and in light of the numerous deaths of males from the *glymera* who have been taken in their youth by the Lessening Society, it is evident that the clear and present danger facing the species has grown more dire of late. Therefore, this council member respectfully seeks to resurrect the practice of mandatory *sehclusion* for all unmated females of the aristocracy such that the bloodlines of the race may be preserved. Further, as it is this council’s duty to safeguard all members of the species, this council member respectfully seeks to have this *sehclusion* practice extended to all class levels.”” The *leahdyre* looked up. “As per *Princeps* Council practice, we shall now entertain the motion with discussion.”

Warning bells went off in Marissa’s head as she looked around the room. Of the twenty-one council members present, six were females, but she was the only one to whom the writ would apply. Though she’d been Wrath’s *shellan*, he’d never taken her, so she qualified as unmated.

As a consensus of approval and support swelled in the library, Marissa stared at her brother. Havers would now have complete control of her. Well played of him, wasn’t it.

If he was her *ghardian*, she couldn’t leave the house without his permission. Couldn’t remain on the Council unless he agreed. Couldn’t go

anywhere or do anything because he would own her as his property, for all intents and purposes.

And there was no hope of Wrath turning down the recommendation if the *Princeps* Council voted yes on the motion. Given the way things were with the *lessers*, there was no rational standing for a veto, and although no one could unseat Wrath by law, a lack of confidence in his leadership could lead to civil unrest. Which was the last thing the race needed.

At least Rehvenge wasn't in the room, so they couldn't do anything tonight. The venerable laws of procedure for the *Princeps* Council provided that only representatives from the six original families could vote, but all of the Council had to be present for a motion to be passed. So even though the bloodlines were at the table, with Rehv not in attendance, there would be no resolution now.

While the Council enthusiastically discussed the proposal, Marissa shook her head. How could Havers have opened up this can of worms? And it was all for nothing because she and Butch O'Neal were...nothing. Damn it, she had to talk to her brother and get him to derail this ridiculous proposal. Yes, Wellesandra had been killed and that was beyond tragic, but forcing all females underground was a step backward.

A retreat into the dark ages when females were totally unseen and all but possessions.

With icy clarity, she pictured that mother and her young with the broken leg back at the clinic. Yes, this was not just repressive, it was dangerous if the wrong *hellren* was in charge of a household. Legally, no one had any recourse against a *secluded* female's *ghardian*. At his discretion, he could do whatever he wished to her.

Van Dean stood in another basement of another house in another part of Caldwell, a whistle between his lips as his eyes tracked the movements of the pale-haired men in front of him. The six "students" were in a line, knees bent, fists up. They were striking the empty air in front of them with blurring speed, alternating left and right, shifting their shoulders accordingly. The air was heavy with their sweet smell, but Van didn't notice that shit anymore.

He blew the whistle twice. As a unit, the six brought both hands up as if grabbing a man's head like a basketball, and then they slammed their right knees forward repeatedly. Van blew the whistle again and they switched legs.

He hated to admit it, because it meant he was over the hill, but training

men to fight was so much easier than going hand to hand in the ring. And he appreciated the break.

Plus he was good at the teaching, evidently. Although these gang members learned fast and hit hard, so he had something to work with.

And these were definitely gang members. Dressed the same. Colored their hair the same. Packed the same weapons. What was not so obvious was what they were about. These boys had the focus of military men; none of that sloppy bullshit most street thugs covered up with bravado and bullets. Hell, if he didn't know better he'd have assumed they were government: There were squads of them. They had top-notch gear. They were intense as shit. And there were a lot of them. He'd only been on board a week and he'd taught five classes a day, each filled with different guys. Hell, this was only his second trip through the park with this particular bunch of men.

Except why would the feds use someone like him to teach?

He blew the whistle for a long beat, stopping them all. "That's it for tonight."

The men broke ranks and went for their bags of gear. They said nothing. Didn't interact with each other. Didn't pull any of that macho, nut-busting routine that guys usually did when they were in a group.

As they filed out, Van went to his own bag and got his water bottle. Sucking back some, he thought about how he had to head across town now. He had a fight scheduled in an hour. No time to food up, but he wasn't that hungry anyway.

He put his windbreaker on, jogged up the basement steps, and did a quick tour of the house. Empty. No furniture. No eats. Nothing. And every single one of the other places had been exactly the same. Shells of houses that from the outside looked all cheery normal.

Fucking weird.

He went out the front, made sure he locked the door, and headed to his truck. The locations they met at had been different each day and he had a feeling they always would be. Every morning at seven A.M., he got a call with an address, and he stayed put when he got there, the men cycling through, the classes on mixed martial-arts fighting lasting two hours apiece. The schedule ran like clockwork.

Maybe they were paramilitary whack jobs.

"Evening, son."

Van froze then looked over the hood of his truck. A minivan was parked

across the street, and Xavier was leaning up against the thing as casual as the mommy-mommy who should have been driving the POS.

“What up?” Van said.

“You’re doing well with the men.” Xavier’s flat smile matched his flat, pale eyes.

“Thanks. I’m just leaving now.”

“Not yet.” Van’s skin prickled as the guy eased off the car and crossed the street. “So, son, I’ve been thinking you might want to become more closely involved with us.”

More closely involved, huh? “I’m not interested in crime. Sorry.”

“What makes you think what we do is criminal?”

“Come on, Xavier.” The guy hated it when he dropped the *Mr.* So he did it often. “I’ve done time once. It was boring.”

“Yes, that carjacking ring you fell into. I bet your brother had a lot to say about that, didn’t he? Oh—I don’t mean the one you did the stealing with. I’m talking about the law abider in the family. The clean one. Richard, isn’t it?”

Van frowned. “Tell you what. You don’t bring my family into this, I won’t drop a dime and turn in these houses you use to the CPD. I mean, cops would love to come for Sunday dinner, I’m damn sure. Wouldn’t need to ask ‘em over twice.”

As Xavier’s face became remote, Van thought, *Gotcha.*

But then the man just smiled. “And I’ll tell you what. I can give you something no one else can.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Undoubtedly.”

Van shook his head, unimpressed. “Isn’t this a little early to invite me in? What if I’m not trustworthy?”

“You will be.”

“Your faith in me is so fucking sweet. But the answer’s no. Sorry.”

He expected argument. All he got was a nod.

“As you wish.” Xavier turned and walked back to the minivan.

Weird, Van thought as he got into his truck. These boys were definitely weird.

But at least they paid on time. And well.

Across town, Vishous took form on the side lawn of a nicely kept

apartment building. Rhage was right behind him, materializing into flesh and blood in the shadows.

Shit, V thought. He wished he'd taken a moment for another smoke before he'd come here. He needed a cigarette. He needed...something.

"V, my brother, you okay?"

"Yeah. Perfect. Let's do this."

After pulling a little mind bend with the lock system, they walked in the front door. The inside of the place smelled like air freshener, a fake orange stench that coated the nostrils like paint.

They skipped the elevator because it was in use and hit the stairwell. When they got to the second floor, they headed past apartments C1 and C2 and C3. V kept his hand under his jacket and on his Glock, although he had a feeling the worst thing that could come at them would be a hall monitor. The place was neat as a pin and QVC cutesy-pie: Fake flower bouquets hung on doors. Welcome mats with hearts or ivy on them were on the floor outside each apartment. Framed inspirational pictures of pink and peach sunsets alternated with ones of fuzzy puppies and clueless kitties.

"Man," Rhage muttered, "someone hit this place with the Hallmark stick."

"Until it broke."

V stopped in front of the door marked c4 and willed the locks to shift.

"What are you doing?"

He and Rhage wheeled around.

Holy shit, it was one of the frickin' Golden Girls: Three feet high with a crown of kinky white on her head, the old lady was decked out in a bunchy quilted robe, like she was wearing her bed.

Trouble was, she had the eyes of a pit bull. "I asked you young men a question."

Rhage took over, which was good. He was better with the charm.

"Ma'am, we're just here visiting a friend."

"You know Dottie's grandson?"

"Ah, yes, ma'am. We do."

"Well, you look like you would." Which was evidently not a compliment. "I think he should move out, by the way. Dottie died four months ago and he doesn't fit in here."

And neither do you, those eyes tacked on.

"Oh, he's moving out." Rhage smiled pleasantly while keeping his lips

together. "Moved out, really. Yeah, tonight."

V cut in, "'Scuse me, I'll be right back."

As Rhage shot him a *don't-you-dare-leave-me-with-this-hot-potato* glare, V stepped inside and shut the door on his brother's face. If Rhage couldn't handle the biddy, he could just swipe her memories, although that would be a last resort. Older humans sometimes didn't deal well with the erasing, their brains no longer resilient enough to withstand the invasion.

So yeah, Hollywood and Dottie's neighbor were going to get tight while V cased the place.

With a sneer, he glanced around. Man, everything smelled of *lesser*. Sickly sweet. Like Butch.

Shit. Do not think about that.

He forced himself to focus on the apartment. Unlike most *lesser* pads, this one was furnished, though obviously by its former occupant. And Dottie's taste had run toward flower prints, doilies, and cat figurines. She fit *right* in with this building.

Chances were good the *lessers* had read about her passing in the paper and had copped her identity. Hell, maybe it even was her grandson camping out here after he'd been inducted into the Society.

V walked through the kitchen and out again, not surprised there was no food in the cabinets or the refrigerator. As he headed for the other half of the apartment, he thought it was so curious that the slayers didn't hide where they crashed. Hell, most died with ID on them that was accurate. Then again, they wanted to encourage conflicts—

Hello.

V went over to a pink and white desk where a Dell Inspiron 8600 was cracked open and running. He swiped his finger across the mouse and did a quick poke around. Encrypted files. Everything password protected up the wazoo. Blah, blah, blah...

Although *lessers* were all welcome mat about their cribs, they were very tight about their hardware. Most slayers had a compy at home, and the Lessening Society pulled a lot of the same protections and coding maneuvers that V did at the compound. So basically their shit was impenetrable.

Good thing he didn't know the meaning of *impenetrable*.

He clapped the Dell shut and unplugged the power line from the unit and the wall. He stuffed the electrical cord in his pocket, zipped up his jacket, and tucked the laptop in close to his chest. Then he went deeper into the

apartment. Bedroom looked like a chintz bomb had gone off with flower and frill shrapnel covering the mattress and the windows and the walls.

And then there it was. On a little table beside the bed, sitting next to a phone, a four-month-old issue of *Reader's Digest* and a colony of orange pill bottles: a ceramic jar about the size of a quart of milk.

He flipped open his phone and dialed Rhage. When the brother picked up, V said, "I'm outtie. I've got a laptop and the jar."

He hung up, palmed the ceramic container and held it tightly against the hard body of the laptop. Then he dematerialized to the Pit, thinking how handy it was that humans didn't line their walls with steel.

Chapter Fifteen

As Mr. X watched Van drive off, he knew the ask had come too soon. He should have waited until the guy was a little more hooked on the power trip he went on when he trained the slayers.

Except time was passing.

It wasn't that he was worried about the loophole closing. The prophecy hadn't said anything about that kind of thing. But the Omega had been righteous pissed when Mr. X had left him last. Hadn't taken at all well the news that the contaminated human had been offed by the Brothers in that clearing in the woods. So the stakes were mounting, and not in X's favor.

From out of nowhere, the center of his chest began to warm, and then he felt a beating where his heart once had been. The rhythmic pulse made him curse. Speak of the devil, the master was calling him.

Mr. X got into the minivan, started the thing up, and drove seven minutes across town to a shitty ranch house on a ratty lot in a bad neighborhood. Place still reeked like the meth lab it had been up until its former owner had been shot by a professional associate. Thanks to the lingering toxicity, the Society had gotten the digs at a discount.

Mr. X parked in the garage and waited until the door squeaked shut before getting out. After killing the security alarm he'd installed, he headed for the back bedroom.

As he went along, his skin was irritated and itchy, like he had a case of prickly heat all over his body. The longer he put off responding to the master, the worse it would get. Until he was crazed from the need to scratch at himself.

Settling on his knees and lowering his head, he didn't want to get anywhere near the Omega. The master had radar instincts and Mr. X's goals

were now his own, not the Society's. Problem was, when the *Fore-lesser* was called, he came as summoned. That was the deal.

As soon as Vishous walked into the Pit, he heard the quiet and hated it. Fortunately, within fifteen minutes of his cracking open that *lesser*'s laptop on his desk, there was a pounding on the door. He glanced at a monitor, then sprang the locks with his mind.

Rhage walked in munching on something, his hand shoved in a Ziploc bag. "Having any luck with Mr. Dell's fine product?"

"What are you eating?"

"The last of Mrs. Woolly's banana nut bread. It's awesome. Want some?"

V rolled his eyes and went back to the laptop. "No, but you could bring me a bottle of Goose and a glass from the kitchen."

"No problem." Rhage made the delivery, then leaned against the wall. "So you find anything in there?"

"Not yet."

When silence expanded until it crowded out the air in the Pit, V knew there was more to the visit than a check-in on the Dell.

Sure enough, Rhage said, "Listen, my brother—"

"I'm not much for company right now."

"I know. That's why they asked me to come."

V glanced over the top of the computer. "And who's 'they'?" Even though he knew.

"The Brotherhood's worried about you. You're getting damn tight, V. Twitchy as shit and don't deny it. Everyone's noticed."

"Oh, so Wrath asked you to come play Rorschach on me?"

"Direct order. But I was on my way over here anyway."

V rubbed his eyes. "I'm fine."

"It's okay if you aren't."

No, it really was not. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go through this PC."

"We going to see you at Last Meal?"

"Yeah. Sure." Right.

V fiddled with the mouse and kept scanning through the computer's file systems. As he stared at the screen, he noticed absently that his right eye, the one with the tats on its side, had started to flicker like the lid was shorting out.

Two massive fists knuckled down on the desk and Rhage leaned in tight.

“You come or I come for you.”

As Vishous glared up at his brother, Rhage’s teal gaze just stared back from his towering height and his mind-bending beauty.

Oh, so they were going to play chicken with the eyeballs, huh? *Well, fuck you*, V thought.

Except Vishous was the one who lost. Moments later, he looked down at the laptop, trying to make like he was just checking on something. “You need to back off, okay. Butch is my roommate, so of course I’m going to be bleeding for him. But it’s no big thing—”

“Phury told us. About your visions drying up.”

“*Christ.*” V burst out of his chair, pushed Rhage out of the way, and walked around. “That gum-flapping motherfu—”

“If it’s any consolation, Wrath didn’t really give him a choice.”

“So the king brass-knuckled it out of him?”

“Come on, V. When I’ve whacked out, you’ve been there for me. This is no different.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Because it’s you.”

“Bingo.” Man, V simply couldn’t talk about this shit. He, who spoke sixteen languages, just had no words for the mind-bending fear he had over the future: Butch’s. His own. The whole race’s. His visions of what was coming had always pissed him off, but they were a strange comfort, too. Even if he didn’t like what was around the bend, at least he’d never been surprised.

Rhage’s hand landed on his shoulder and he jumped. “Last Meal, Vishous. You show or I’m picking you up like mail, dig?”

“Yeah. Fine. Now get the fuck out of here.”

As soon as Rhage left, V went back to the laptop and sat down. Except instead of returning to IT land, he called Butch’s new phone.

The cop’s voice was all gravel. “Hey, V.”

“Hey.” V held his phone between his ear and his shoulder and poured himself some vodka. As the juice hit the glass, there was the sound of shuffling over the line, like Butch was rolling over in bed or maybe taking his jacket off.

They were silent for a long time, nothing but an open cellular connection.

And then V had to ask, “Did you want to be with them? You feel like you should be with the *lessers*? ”

“I don’t know.” Deep inhale. Long, slow exhale. “I won’t front. I recognized those bastards. Felt them. But when I was looking into the eyes of that slayer, I did want to destroy him.”

V lifted his glass. As he swallowed, the vodka burned down his throat in the nicest possible way. “How you feeling?”

“Not so hot. Queased out. Like I lost some ground.” More silence. “Is this what you dreamed of? Back in the beginning, when you said I was supposed to come with the Brotherhood...did you dream of me and the Omega?”

“No, I saw something else.”

Although with everything that was going down, he couldn’t see a path to what had been shown to him, couldn’t see it on a lot of levels: The vision had been of him naked and Butch wrapped around him, the two of them high up in the sky, entwined in the midst of a cold wind.

Jesus Christ, he was *deranged*. *Deranged and perverted*. “Look, I’ll come at sundown and hit you with a little hand action.”

“Good. That always helps.” Butch cleared his throat. “But V, I can’t sit here and just wait this out. I want to go on the offensive. What say we pick up a few *lessers* and work them over, get them to do some talking for a change.”

“Hard-core, cop.”

“You get a look at what they did to me? You think I’m worried about the frickin’ Geneva Convention?”

“Lemme talk to Wrath first.”

“Do it soon.”

“Today.”

“Good deal.” There was another long silence. “So...you got some tube in this place?”

“Flat screen’s up on the wall to the left of the bed. Remote’s...I don’t know where it is. I don’t usually...yeah, TV’s not on my mind when I’m there.”

“V, man, what is this setup?”

“Pretty self-explanatory, don’t you think?”

There was a little chuckle. “I guess this was what Phury was talking about, huh?”

“When he said what?”

“That you were into some kinky shit.”

V had a sudden vision of Butch on top of Marissa, the male’s body surging while she gripped his ass with her beautiful hands.

Then he saw Butch's head lift up and heard in his mind the hoarse, erotic moan that broke free of his roommate's lips.

Despising himself, Vishous hammered a shot of vodka and quickly poured another. "My sex life is private, Butch. So are my...unconventional interests."

"I hear ya. No one's biz but yours. One question, though."

"What."

"When the females tie you down, do they paint your toenails and shit? Or just do your makeup?" As V laughed in a loud crack, the cop said, "Wait... they tickle your pits with a feather, right?"

"Smart-ass."

"Hey, I'm just curious." Butch's own laughter faded. "Do you hurt them, though? I mean..."

More with the vodka. "It's all about consent. And I don't cross the line."

"Good. Little freaky for my Catholic ass, granted... 'cept, hey, it's whatever gets you off."

V swirled the Goose around in his glass. "So, cop, mind if I ask you something?"

"Fair's fair."

"Do you love her?"

After a while, Butch muttered, "Yeah. Fuck me, but yeah."

As the laptop's screen saver came on, V put his fingertip on the mouse square and interrupted the metastasizing pipes. "What's that feel like?"

There was a grunt as if Butch were rearranging himself and was stiff as a board. "Hell, right at this moment."

V played with the arrow on the screen, making it whip around the desktop. "You know...I like her with you. The two of you make sense to me."

"Except for the fact that I'm a blue-collar human who could be part *lesser*, I'd say I agree with you."

"You're not turning into a—"

"I took some of that slayer in me tonight. When I inhaled. I think that's why I smelled like one afterward. Not because we'd been fighting, but because some of the evil was—is—in me again."

V cursed, hoping like hell that wasn't the case. "We're going to figure this out, cop. I'm not going to leave you in the dark."

They hung up a little later and V stared at the laptop while swirling the

arrow around. He kept up the forefinger workout until he became thoroughly unimpressed with the time he was wasting.

As he stretched his arms over his head, he realized that the cursor had landed on RECYCLE BIN. Recycle...Recycle...*to reprocess in order to use again.*

What was it with Butch and the inhale thing? Now that V thought about it, when he'd pulled that *lesser* off the cop, he'd been aware he was breaking some kind of connection between them.

Restless, he took his Goose and glass and went over to the couches. As he sat down and swallowed some more, he looked at the pint of Lag that was on the coffee table.

V leaned forward and grabbed the Scotch. Unscrewing it, he lifted it to his lips and took a slug. Then he brought the Lag to the lip of his glass of vodka and poured. With low-lidded eyes, he watched the swirling combination, seeing the two blend, the vodka and the Scotch both diluted of their pure essence and yet stronger together.

V brought the combo to his lips, tilted his head back, and swallowed the whole damn thing. Then he eased back into the couch.

He was tired...way fucking tired...ti—

Sleep came to him so fast it was like getting slammed in the head. But the shut-eye didn't last long. The Dream, as he was coming to think of it, woke him up minutes later with its characteristic violence: He came to on a scream with a splitting feeling in his chest, as if someone were using a rib-spreader on him. As his heart skipped, then pounded, sweat broke out all over him.

Ripping his shirt open, he looked down at his body.

Everything was where it should be, no gaping wound to be seen. Except the feelings remained, the horrible pressure of being shot, the crushing doom that death had come upon him.

He breathed raggedly. And figured that was it for shut-eye.

He left the vodka behind and lurched over to his desk, determined to get good and intimate with that laptop.

When the *Princeps* Council broke up, Marissa was totally drained. Which made sense, as dawn was close. There had been a lot of discussion about the *seclusion* motion, none of the talk negative, all of it centered around the *lesser* threat. Clearly, when the vote was taken, not only would it pass, but if Wrath didn't issue a proclamation, the Council was going to look at it as

evidence that the king lacked commitment to the race.

Which was something Wrath's detractors were dying to have come to the forefront. Three hundred years of him passing on the throne had left a bitter taste in the mouths of some of the aristocracy, and they were after him.

Desperate to leave, Marissa waited and waited by the library's door, but Havers kept talking to the others. Eventually, she went outside and dematerialized back home, figuring she'd camp out in his bedroom if she had to in order to talk with him.

As she came in the front door of their mansion, she didn't call for Karolyn as she usually did, but went straight upstairs to her bedroom. Pushing the door open, she—

“Oh...my God.” Her room was...a ghost town.

Her walk-in closet was open and empty, not even a single hanger remaining. Her bed was stripped, her pillows gone, along with her sheets and blankets. All of the pictures were down. And cardboard boxes were stacked up against the far wall next to every piece of Louis Vuitton luggage she owned.

“What...” Her voice dried out as she went into the bathroom. The cabinets of which were all barren.

As she stumbled from the bath, Havers was standing by the bed.

“What is this?” She swept her arm around.

“You need to leave this house.”

At first all she could do was blink at him. “But I live here!”

He took out his wallet, removed a thick wad of bills, and spread them on the bureau. “Take this. And go.”

“All because of Butch?” she demanded. “And how's this going to work with that *seclusion* proposal you put to the council? *Ghardians* have to be around their—”

“I didn't propose the motion. And as for that human...” He shook his head. “Your life is your own. And seeing you with a naked human male who had just engaged in a sexual act—” Havers's voice cracked and he cleared his throat. “Go now. Live as you wish. But I will not sit back and watch you destroy yourself.”

“Havers, this is ridiculous—”

“I can't protect you from yourself.”

“Havers, Butch is not—”

“I threatened the king's life to *ahvenge* your honor!” The sound of his

voice ricocheted around the walls. “And then to find you with a human male! I—I can’t have you near me anymore. I don’t trust this anger you bring out in me. It triggers acts of such violence. It—” He shuddered and turned away. “I have told the *doggen* they are to deposit you wherever you wish to go, but after that, they will return to this household. You will have to find your own.”

Her body went completely numb. “I am still a member of the *Princeps* Council. You will have to see me there.”

“No, because I am not required to render you mine eyes. And you assume you will stay on the council, which is doubtful. Wrath will have no cause to deny the *seclusion* motion. You will be without a mate and I will not function as your *ghardian*, so you will have no one to grant permission for your presence to be out in the open. Not even your bloodline can override the law.”

Marissa’s jaw unhinged. Holy heaven...she would be a total social outcast. A veritable...no one. “How can you do this to me?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “I am tired of myself. Tired of fighting the urge to defend you from choices you make—”

“Choices! Living as a female in the aristocracy I have no choices!”

“Untrue. You could have been a proper mate to Wrath.”

“He didn’t want me! You knew that, you saw it with your own two eyes! That’s why you wanted to have him killed!”

“But now when I think on it, I wonder...why did he feel nothing for you? Perhaps you didn’t work hard enough to engage his interest.”

Marissa felt a raw fury. And the emotion grew hotter as her brother said, “And as for choices, you could have stayed out of that human’s hospital room. You chose to go in there. And you chose to...you could have...not layed with him.”

“Is that what this is about? For God’s sake, I’m still a virgin.”

“Now you lie.”

The three words snapped her out of her emotions. As the heat drained away, clarity came, and for the first time, she truly saw her brother: brilliant of mind, devoted to his patients, loving of his dead *shellan*...and utterly rigid. A male of science and order who liked rules and predictability and enjoyed a precise vision of life.

And he was clearly willing to protect that worldview at the cost of her future...her happiness...her very self.

“You are absolutely correct,” she said with a strange calm. “I do have to

go."

She glanced at the boxes that were filled with the clothes she'd worn and the things she'd bought. Then her eyes found him again. He was doing the same, staring at them as if measuring the life she'd led.

"I shall let you keep the Dürers, of course," he said.

"Of course," she whispered. "Good-bye, brother."

"I am Havers to you now. Not brother. And never again."

He dropped his head and walked out of the room.

In the silence that followed there was the temptation to fall on the bare mattress and cry. But there was no time. She had maybe an hour before light.

Dear Virgin, where would she go?

Chapter Sixteen

When Mr. X came back from meeting the Omega on the other side, he felt like he had heartburn. Which seemed logical, as he'd been fed his own ass.

The master had been teed up about a variety of things. He wanted more *lessers*, more vampires bleeding out, more progress, more...more...But the thing was, no matter what he was given, he would always be unsatisfied. Maybe that was his curse.

Whatever. The calculus of Mr. X's failure was up on the blackboard, the mathematical equation of his destruction outlined in chalk. The unknown in the algebra was time. How long before the Omega snapped and Mr. X got recalled for eternity?

Things needed to move faster with Van. That man had to get on board and in place ASAP.

Mr. X went over to his laptop and fired the Dell up. Sitting down next to the dried brown stain of a blood pool, he called up the Scrolls and found the relevant passage. The lines of the prophecy calmed him:

*There shall be one to bring the end before the master,
a fighter of modern time found in the seventh of the twenty-first,
and he shall be known in the numbers he bears:
One more than the compass he apperceives,
Though mere four points to make at his right,
Three lives has he,
Two scores on his fore,
and with a single black eye, in one well will he be birthed and die.*

Mr. X eased back against the wall, cracked his neck, and looked around. The stinky remnants of the meth lab, the filth in the place, the air of bad deeds done without remorse were like a party he didn't want to be at but couldn't leave. Just like the Lessening Society.

Except it was going to be okay. At least he'd spotted the *lesser* exit.

God, it had been so weird how he'd found Van Dean. X had gone to the ultimate fighting brawls to troll for new recruits and Van had immediately stood out from the others. There was just something special about him, something that elevated him above his opponents. And watching the guy move that first night, Mr. X had thought he'd spotted an important addition to the Society...until he'd noticed the missing finger.

He didn't like to bring in anyone with a physical defect.

But the more he saw Van fight, the more clear it was that an absent pinkie was no liability at all. Then a couple nights later he saw the tattoo. Van always fought with a T-shirt on, but at one point the thing got shoved up around his pecs. On his back, in black ink, an eye stared out from between his shoulder blades.

That had been what sent Mr. X into the Scrolls. The prophecy was buried deep in the text of the Lessening Society's handbook, an all-but-forgotten paragraph in the midst of the rules of induction. Fortunately, when Mr. X had become *Fore-lesser* the first time, he'd read the passages thoroughly enough to remember the damn thing was there.

As with the rest of the Scrolls, which had been translated into English in the 1930s, the wording of the prophecy was abstract. But if you were missing a finger on your right hand, then you had only four points to make. "Three lives" was childhood, adulthood, and then life in the Society. And according to the fight crowd, Van was homegrown, born in the city of Caldwell, which was also known as the Well.

But there was more. The man's instincts were twitchy as hell. All you had to do was watch him in that chicken-wire ring to know that north, south, east, and west were only part of what he was sensing: He had a rare talent for anticipating the way his opponent was going to move. It was the gift that set him apart.

The clincher, however, was the appendix removal. The word *score* could be construed in a variety of ways, but it very conceivably referred to scarring. And everyone had a belly button, so if you'd had your appendix removed as well, you'd have two scars on your "fore," wouldn't you?

Plus it was the right year to find him.

Mr. X reached for his cell phone and called one of his subordinates.

As the line rang, he was aware that he needed Van Dean, that modern fighter, that four-fingered bastard, more than anyone he'd met in his life. Or after his death.

When Marissa materialized in front of the dour gray mansion, she put her hand up to her throat and tilted her head back. God, so much stone rising from the earth, whole quarries stripped to gather the load. And so many leaded-glass windows, the diamond panes looking like bars. And then there was the twenty-foot-high retaining wall that wrapped around the courtyard and the grounds. And the security cameras. And the gates.

So secure. So cold.

The place was precisely as she'd expected it to be, a fortress not a home. And it was surrounded by a buffer of what in the Old Country was called *mhis* so that unless you were supposed to be here, your brain couldn't process the location well enough for you to find your way around. Hell, the only reason she'd made it to the Brotherhood's compound was because Wrath was inside. After three hundred years of living off his pure blood, she had so much of him in her that she could find him anywhere. Even through the *mhis*.

As she faced the mountain before her, her nape tingled like she was being stalked, and she looked over her shoulder. In the east, the light of day was gathering momentum, and the radiance made her eyes burn. She was almost out of time.

Hand still on her throat, she walked up to a pair of massive brass doors. There was no doorbell or knocker, so she tried one side. It opened, which was a shock—at least until she stood in the vestibule. Ah, here was where you were screened.

She put her face in front of a camera and waited. No doubt an alarm had gone off when she'd breached the first door, so someone would either come and let her in...or refuse her. In which case she was on to her second choice. At a dead run.

Rehvenge was the only other person she could have turned to, but he was complicated. His *mahmen* was a spiritual counselor of sorts to the *glymera* and would no doubt be highly offended by Marissa's presence.

With a prayer to the Scribe Virgin, she smoothed her hair with her palm. Maybe she'd gambled wrong, but she'd assumed that Wrath wouldn't turn

her away this close to dawn. For all she'd endured with him, she figured he could spare her one day under the cover of his roof. And he was a male of honor.

At least Butch didn't live with the Brotherhood as far as she knew. He'd stayed at another place somewhere else over the summer and she guessed he still had it. Hoped he did.

The heavy wooden doors ahead of her opened, and Fritz, the butler, seemed very surprised to see her. "Madam?" The elderly *doggen* bowed low. "Are you...expected?"

"No, I'm not." She was about as far away from *expected* as it got. "I, ah —"

"Fritz, who is it?" came a female voice.

As footsteps got closer, Marissa clasped her hands together and lowered her head.

Oh, Lord. Beth, the queen. It would have been so much better to see Wrath first. And now she could only assume this wasn't going to work out.

Surely her majesty would let her use the phone to call Rehvenge? God, did she even have time to dial?

The doors creaked open even wider. "Who is...*Marissa*?"

Marissa kept her eyes on the floor and curtsied, as was custom. "My queen."

"Fritz, will you excuse us?" A moment later Beth said, "Would you like to come in?"

Marissa hesitated, then stepped through the door. She had a peripheral sense of incredible color and warmth, but she couldn't lift her head to take it all in.

"How did you find us?" Beth asked.

"Your...*hellren's* blood lingers within me. I...I have come to him for a favor. I would speak to Wrath, if it would not offend?"

Marissa was shocked when her hand was grasped. "What's happened?"

When she lifted her eyes to the queen, she nearly gasped. Beth was so genuinely concerned, so worried. To be greeted with any kind of warmth was disarming, especially from this female who by all rights might be tempted to kick her out.

"Marissa, talk to me."

Where to start. "I am...ah, I am in need of a place to stay. I have nowhere to go. I have been cast out. I am—"

“Wait, slow down. Just slow down. What happened?”

Marissa took a deep breath and gave a condensed version of the story, one that avoided any mention of Butch. The words ran out of her like dirty water, spilling onto the brilliant mosaic floor, staining the beauty beneath her feet. The shame of the recounting stung her throat.

“So you will stay with us,” Beth pronounced when it was over.

“Just the one night.”

“For however long you want.” Beth squeezed Marissa’s hand. “However. Long.”

As Marissa shut her eyes and tried not to break down, she became dimly aware of a pounding sound, of heavy boots descending carpeted stairs.

Then Wrath’s deep voice filled the cavernous three-story foyer. “What the hell’s going on?”

“Marissa is moving in with us.”

While Marissa dropped into another curtsy, she was totally stripped of her pride, as vulnerable as if she were naked. To have nothing and throw yourself on the mercy of others was a strange kind of terror.

“Marissa, look at me.”

Wrath’s hard tone was utterly familiar, the one he’d always used with her, the one that had made her cringe for three centuries. In desperation, she eyed the open door to the vestibule even though she was by now officially out of time.

The wooden panels slammed shut as if the king had willed it so.

“Marissa, talk.”

“Back off, Wrath,” the queen snapped. “She’s been through too much tonight already. Havers threw her out.”

“What? Why?”

Beth made quick work of the story, and hearing it from a third party only increased Marissa’s humiliation. As her vision blurred, she struggled not to lose it.

And the battle was lost when Wrath said, “Jesus Christ, that idiot. Of course she stays here.”

With a shaking hand, she brushed under both eyes, capturing her tears and quickly rubbing them away between her fingertips.

“Marissa? Look at me.”

She lifted her head. God, Wrath was just the same, his face too cruel to be truly handsome, those wraparound sunglasses making him look even more

intimidating. Absently, she noted that his hair was much longer than when she'd known him, down nearly to the small of his back.

"I'm glad you came to us."

She cleared her throat. "I would be grateful for a short tenure here."

"Where are your things?"

"They're all packed up at my house—er, my brother's—I mean, Havers's house. I came back from the *Princeps* Council and everything I own was in boxes. But it can remain there until I figure out—"

"Fritz!" When the *doggen* came running in, Wrath said, "Go to Havers's and pick up her stuff. You better take the van and an extra set of arms."

Fritz bowed and took off, moving faster than you would think an old *doggen* could.

Marissa tried to find words. "I—I—"

"I'm going to show you to your room," Beth said. "You look like you're about to collapse."

The queen took Marissa over to the grand staircase, and as they went, Marissa glanced over her shoulder. Wrath had an utterly ruthless expression on his face, his jaw set like concrete.

She had to stop. "Are you sure?" she asked him.

His glower got worse. "That brother of yours has a real knack for pissing me off."

"I don't mean to inconvenience you—"

Wrath rolled right over her words. "This was about Butch, wasn't it. V told me that you went to the cop and pulled him through. Let me guess—Havers didn't appreciate you getting too tight with our human, right?"

Marissa could only nod.

"Like I said, your brother really pisses me off. Butch is our boy even if he isn't in the Brotherhood and anyone who cares for him cares for us. So you take up residence here for the rest of your natural goddamned life as far as I'm concerned." Wrath headed around the base of the stairs. " Fucking Havers. Fucking *idiot*. I'll go find V and let him know you're here. Butch isn't around, but V'll know where to find him."

"Oh—no, you don't have to—"

Wrath didn't stop, didn't even hesitate, reminding her that you didn't tell the king to do anything. Even if it was not to worry about something.

"Well," Beth murmured, "at least he's not armed right now."

"I'm surprised he cares this much."

“Are you kidding? It’s appalling. To turn you out right before dawn? Anyway, let’s get you settled.”

Marissa resisted the female’s gentle pull. “You welcome me so graciously. How can you be so—”

“Marissa.” Beth’s navy blue eyes were level. “You saved the man I love. When he was shot and my blood wasn’t strong enough, you kept him alive by giving him your wrist. So let’s be perfectly clear. There is absolutely *nothing* I wouldn’t do for you.”

As dawn arrived and light poured into the penthouse, Butch woke up fully aroused and in the process of grinding his hips into a twist of satin sheets. He was covered with sweat, his skin hypersensitized, his erection pulsing.

Groggy, confused as to what was reality and what he just hoped was real, he reached downward. Undid his belt. Burrowed through his slacks and his boxers.

Images of Marissa swirled in his head, half the fantasy he’d been so gloriously lost in, half memories of the feel of her. He fell into a rhythm with his hand, unsure whether he was the one who was doing the stroking.... Maybe it was her.... God, he wanted it to be her.

He closed his eyes and arched his back. *Oh, yeah. So good.*

Except then he woke up.

As he realized what he was doing, he became vicious. Angry with himself and so much of what was going on, he handled his sex roughly until he barked a curse and ejaculated. He couldn’t even call it an orgasm. More like his cock swore out loud.

With sickening dread, he braced himself and looked down at his hand.

Then just sagged from relief. At least something was back to normal.

After kicking out of his trousers and wiping up with the boxers, he went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Under the spray, all he could think about was Marissa. He missed her with a stinging hunger, a kind of craving pain that reminded him of when he’d quit smoking the year before.

And shit, no Nicoderm for this.

When he came out of the bath with a towel around his hips, his new cell phone was ringing. He fumbled around the pillows and finally found the thing.

“Yeah, V?” he rasped. Man, his voice was always shot to shit in the

morning and today was no different. He sounded like a car engine that wouldn't turn over.

Okay, so that was two normals in his favor.

"Marissa's moved in."

"What?" He sank down onto the mattress. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Havers kicked her out."

"Because of me?"

"Yup."

"*That bastard—*"

"She's here in the compound, so you don't worry about her safety. But she's rattled as hell." There was a long silence. "Cop? You there, my man?"

"Yeah." Butch fell back on the bed. Realized his thigh muscles were twitching with the need to get to her.

"So like I said, she's okay. You want me to bring her to you tonight?"

Butch put his hand up to his eyes. The idea that someone had hurt her in any way made him positively mental. To the point of violence.

"Butch? Hello?"

As Marissa settled into a canopied bed, she pulled the covers up to her neck and wished she weren't naked. Trouble was, she had no clothes.

God, even though no one would bother her here, being bare just...felt wrong. Scandalous, though no one would ever know.

She glanced around. The room she'd been given was lovely, done in a delphinium blue toile, with the pastoral scene of a lady and a kneeling suitor repeated on the walls, the drapes, the bedcovers, the chair.

Not exactly what she wanted to look at. The two French lovers crowded her, striking her as not visual but audible, a chaotic staccato of what she didn't have with Butch. Wouldn't ever have with Butch.

To solve the problem, she turned off the light and closed her eyes. And the ocular version of earplugs worked like a charm.

Dear Virgin, what a mess. And she had to wonder in what manner things were going to get worse. Fritz and two other *doggen* had gone over to her brother's—to *Havers's*—and she half expected them to come back with nothing. Maybe Havers would decide to just get rid of her things in the meantime. Like he'd done with her.

While she lay there in the dark, she sifted through the rubble of her life,

trying to see what was still usable and what she had to abandon as unsalvageable. All she found was depressing litter, a hodgepodge of unhappy memories that gave her no direction. She had absolutely no idea what she wanted to do or where she should go.

And didn't that make sense. She'd spent three centuries waiting and hoping for a male to notice her. Three centuries trying to fit in with the *glymera*. Three centuries working desperately to be someone's sister, someone's daughter, someone's mate. All those external expectations had been the laws of physics that had governed her life, more pervasive and grounding than gravity.

Except where had trying to meet them gotten her? Orphaned, unmated, and shunned.

All right, then, her first rule for the rest of her days: no more looking outside for definitions. She might not have any clue who she was, but better to be lost and searching than shoved into a social box by someone else.

The phone next to the bed rang and she jumped. After five rounds of chiming, she answered the thing only because it refused to stop going off. "Hello?"

"Madam?" A *doggen*. "You have a call from our master Butch. Are you receiving?"

Oh, great. So he'd heard.

"Madam?"

"Ah...yes, I am."

"Very well. And I've given him your direct dial. Please hold."

There was a click and then that telltale gravel voice. "Marissa? Are you okay?"

Not really, she thought, but it was none of his business. "Yes, thank you. Beth and Wrath have been very charitable to me."

"Listen, I want to see you."

"You do? Then may I assume that all your problems have magically disappeared? You must be thrilled to be back to normal. Congratulations."

He cursed. "I'm worried about you."

"Kind of you, but—"

"Marissa—"

"—we wouldn't want to endanger me, would we?"

"Listen, I just—"

"So you better stay away so I don't get hurt—"

“Damn you, Marissa. Goddamn this whole thing!”

She closed her eyes, mad at the world and at him and at her brother and herself. And with Butch getting angry, too, this conversation was a hand grenade about to go off.

In a low voice she said, “I appreciate you checking in on me, but I’m fine.”

“Shit...”

“Yes, I believe that covers the situation well. Good-bye, Butch.”

As she hung up the phone, she realized she was shaking all over.

The ringer went off again immediately and she glared at the bedside table. With a quick lean-and-grab, she reached over and yanked the cord out of the wall.

Shoving her body down through the sheets, she curled over on her side. There was no way she was going to go to sleep, but she shut her eyes anyway.

As she fumed in the dark, she came to a conclusion. Even though everything was...well, *shit*, to use Butch’s eloquent summation...she could say this at least: Being pissed off was better than having a panic attack.

Twenty minutes later, with his Sox cap pulled down low and a pair of sunglasses in place, Butch walked up to a dark green ’03 Honda Accord. He looked left and right. No one was in the alley. There were no windows on the buildings. No cars passing by on Ninth Street.

Bending down, he picked up a hunk of rock from the ground and punched a hole in the driver’s side window. As the alarm went apeshit, he stepped away from the sedan and melted into the shadows. No one came running. The noise died off.

He hadn’t stolen a car since he was sixteen and a juvenile delinquent in South Boston, but he was back in the groove now. He walked over calmly, popped the door, and got in. The sequence that came next was quick and efficient, proving that crime, like his Southie accent, was something he’d never quite lost: He ripped off the panel underneath the dash. Found the wires. Put the right two together and...*vroom*.

Butch knocked out the rest of the shattered glass with his elbow and took off at a leisurely roll. As his knees were nearly up to his chest, he reached down, hit the release and shoved the seat back as far as it could go. Propping his arm on the window, like he was just taking in the early spring air, he

leaned back, all casual.

When he got to the stop sign at the end of the alley, he hit the directional signal and came to a full-tire halt: Following traffic laws when you were in a stolen vehicle and had no ID on you was mission critical.

As he hung a louie and headed down Ninth, he felt bad for whatever Joe he'd just royally fucked over. Losing your wheels was not fun, and at the first stoplight he came to, he flipped open the glove compartment. Car was registered to one Sally Forrester. 1247 Barnstable Street.

He vowed to return the Honda to her ASAP and leave her a couple of grand to cover the inconvenience and the busted window.

Speaking of busted things...he tilted the rearview mirror toward himself. Oh, Christ, he was a train wreck. He needed a shave and his face was still a mess from the beatings. With a curse, he repositioned the glass so he didn't have to look at his road map of ugly.

Unfortunately, he still had a pretty clear picture of what was doing.

Heading out of town in Sally Forrester's Accord, sporting a puss like a punching bag, he got nailed with a good shot of self-awareness that he didn't appreciate. He'd always straddled that line between good and bad, had always been willing to bend the rules to suit his purposes. Hell, he'd cracked suspects around until they broke. Turned a blind eye on occasion if it would get him information on a case. Done drugs even after he'd joined the force—at least until he'd kicked his coke habit.

Only no-no's had been accepting bribes or sexual favors in the line of duty.

So, yeah, guess those two made him a hero.

And what was he doing now? Going after a female whose life was already a mess. Just so he could join the shit parade that was marching all over her.

Except he couldn't stop himself. After he'd called Marissa back on the phone over and over again, he'd been unable to keep himself from this road trip. Obsessed before, now he was possessed by her. He just had to see if she was all right and...well, hell, he was thinking maybe he could explain himself a little better.

There was one good thing, though. He truly seemed to be normal on the inside. Back at V's lair, he'd given himself a fresh slice in the arm with a knife because, hand-job results notwithstanding, he'd had to check his blood. The stuff had been red, thank God.

He took a deep breath—and then frowned. Putting his nose down to his bicep, he inhaled again. What the hell was this? Even with the wind rushing around in the car, and even through his clothes, he could smell something and no, not the cloying baby powder bullshit, which had fortunately faded. Now there was something else coming out of him.

Christ. Lately, it was like his body was a Glade PlugIn that couldn't make its mind up. But at least this spicy scent he liked—

Whoa. It couldn't be...No, it wasn't. Just wasn't. Right?

Absolutely not. He took out his cell phone and hit speed dial. As soon as he heard V's "hello," he said, "Heads up, I'm coming in."

There was a rasp and an inhale like Vishous had lit up. "I'm not surprised. But how are you getting here?"

"Sally Forrester's Honda."

"Whose?"

"No idea, I stole it. Look, I'm not pulling anything strange." Yeah, right. "Well, the *lesser* kind of strange. I just need to see Marissa."

There was a long silence. "I'll let you in through the gates. Hell, the *mhis* has kept those slayers off this property for seventy years, so it's not like they could track you here. And I don't believe you're coming after us. Unless I've got my head wedged?"

"Damn straight I'm not."

Butch repositioned the Sox cap, and as his wrist passed by his nose, he got another whiff of himself. "Ah, V...listen, there is something a little weird going down with me."

"What?"

"I smell like men's cologne."

"Good for you. Females dig that kind of thing."

"Vishous, I smell like Obsession for Men, only I'm not *wearing* any, you feel me?"

There was silence on the line. Then, "Humans don't bond."

"Oh, really. You want to tell that to my central nervous system and my sweat glands? They'd appreciate the news flash, I'm sure."

"You noticed it after you two were in that patient room together?"

"It's been worse since then, but I thought I smelled something like it one other time."

"When?"

"I watched her get into a car with a male."

“How long ago?”

“Like three months. Palmed a Glock when I saw it happen.”

Silence. “Butch, humans do not bond like we do.”

“I know.”

More silence. Then, “Any chance you were adopted?”

“No. And there are no fangs in the family, if that’s what you’re thinking. V, man, I drank some of you. Are you sure that I haven’t become—”

“Genetics is the only way. That bite/turning thing’s just bullshit folklore. Look, I’ll let you through the gates and we’ll talk after you see her. Oh, and check it. Wrath has no problem working over *lessers* to find out what happened to you. But he doesn’t want you involved.”

Butch’s hand cranked hard on the steering wheel. “Fuck. That. I spent hours earning the right for payback, V. I *bled* for the right to knock those assholes around and get my own answers.”

“Wrath—”

“Is a nice guy, but he ain’t my king. So he can lay down on this.”

“He just wants to protect you.”

“Tell him I don’t need the favor.”

V let off a foul-sounding line or two in the Old Language, then muttered, “Fine.”

“Thank you.”

“One last deet, cop. Marissa’s a guest of the Brotherhood’s. If she doesn’t want to see you, we’re going to haul your ass out, true?”

“If she doesn’t want to see me, I’ll leave on my own. I swear.”

Chapter Seventeen

When Marissa heard a knock on the door, she cracked her eyes open and checked the clock. Ten in the morning and she hadn't slept at all. God, she was exhausted.

But maybe it was Fritz with a report on her things. "Yes?"

The door opened to reveal a big dark shadow with a baseball hat.

She sat up, keeping the covers to her bare breasts. "Butch?"

"Hi." He removed the cap from his head, crushing it in one hand, scrubbing his hair around with the other.

She willed a candle to light. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah...I wanted to make sure you were okay in person. Plus your phone..." His eyebrows lifted as if he'd caught sight of the cord she'd ripped out of the wall. "Um, yeah...your phone isn't working. Mind if I come in for a minute?"

As she took a deep breath, all she smelled was him, the scent going in her nose and blooming all over her body.

Bastard, she thought. Irresistible bastard.

"Marissa, I won't crowd you, I promise. And I know you're pissed off. But can we just talk?"

"Fine," she said, shaking her head. "But don't think we're going to solve anything."

As he stepped forward, it dawned on her that this was a bad idea. If he wanted to talk, she should meet him downstairs. After all, he was very male. And she was very naked. And they were now...yup, shut in a bedroom together.

Good planning. Excellent work. Maybe she should jump out a window next.

Butch leaned back against the door he'd closed. "First, are you all right here?"

"Yes, I am." God, this was awkward. "Butch—"

"I'm sorry I got all Humphrey Bogart, big man on you." His bruised face assumed a wince. "It's not that I don't think you can take care of yourself. I'm absolutely scared shitless of myself and I can't handle the idea of you getting hurt."

Marissa stared at him. See, this was simply awful. This humble apology stuff was liable to get through to her if he kept it up. "Butch—"

"Wait, please—just hear me out. Hear me out and then I'll leave." He inhaled slowly, his big chest expanding under his fine black coat. "Keeping you away from me seems like the only way to make sure you're safe. But that's about me being dangerous, not you being weak. I know you don't need to be sheltered or have some kind of caretaker."

In the long silence that followed, she measured him. "So prove it, Butch. Tell me what really happened to you. There was no car accident, was there?"

He rubbed his eyes. "I got jacked by some *lessers*." As she gasped, he said quickly, "It was no big deal. Honestly—"

She put her hand up. "Stop. Give me all of it or none of it. I don't want half-truths. It demeans us both."

He cursed. Did some more eye scrubbing.

"Butch, talk or get out."

"Okay...okay." His hazel stare lifted to her face. "As far as we can figure, I was interrogated for twelve hours."

She gripped the sheets hard enough to numb out her fingers.
"Interrogated...how?"

"I don't remember much, but based on the damage, I'd say pretty standard stuff."

"Standard...stuff?"

"Electroshock, bare-knuckle punches, under-the-fingernails shit." As he stopped, she was very certain the list continued.

A wash of bile bubbled up her throat. "Oh...God..."

"Don't think about it. It's over. Done with."

Sweet Virgin in the Fade, how could he say that?

"Why—" She cleared her throat. And thought that she'd wanted the whole story so she damn well better show him she could handle it. "Why were you quarantined, then?"

“They put something in me.” He untucked his silk button-down and flashed his black abdominal scar. “V found me left for dead in the woods and took out whatever it was, but now I’m like...connected to the *lessers*.” As she stiffened, he dropped the shirt. “Yeah, the slayers, Marissa. The ones who are trying to exterminate your kind. So believe me when I tell you, my need to know what was done to me isn’t some kind of kumbaya, find-my-inner-self bullshit. Your enemies tampered with my body. They put something *inside* of me.”

“Are you...one of them?”

“I don’t want to be. And I don’t want to hurt you or anyone else. But see, this is the problem. There’s too much shit I don’t know.”

“Butch, let me help you.”

He cursed. “What if—”

“*What ifs* don’t cut it.” She took a deep breath. “I won’t lie. I’m scared. But I don’t want to turn my back on you and you’re a fool to try and make me.”

He shook his head, respect in his eyes. “You always been this courageous?”

“No. But it appears that for you, I guess I am. Are you going to let me in?”

“I want to. I feel like I need to.” But it was quite a while before he crossed the room. “Is it okay for me to sit next to you?”

When she nodded and moved over, he lowered himself onto the bed, the mattress dipping down from his weight, her body sliding into his. He stared at her for the longest time before reaching for her hand. God, his palm was so warm and big.

He bent down and brushed his lips over her knuckles, then rubbed his mouth back and forth. “I want to lie down next to you. Not for sex. Not for anything like that. Just—”

“Yes.”

As he stood up, she lifted the sheets, but he shook his head. “I stay on top.”

He took off his coat and stretched out beside her. Pulled her up close. Kissed the top of her head.

“You seem really tired,” he said in the candlelight.

“I feel really tired.”

“So sleep and let me watch over you.”

She wedged herself even more tightly against his big body and exhaled. It was so good just to rest her head on his chest and feel his warmth and smell him up close. He stroked her back slowly, and she fell asleep so fast she didn't realize she'd gone under until she felt the bed moving and woke up.

"Butch?"

"I've got to go talk with Vishous." He kissed the back of her hand. "You keep resting. I don't like how pale you are."

She smiled a little. "No caretaking."

"That was just a suggestion." His lips lifted on one side. "How about we meet before First Meal? I'll wait for you downstairs in the library."

When she nodded, he leaned down and ran his fingertip across her cheek. Then he glanced at her lips and the scent he was throwing off abruptly got stronger.

Their eyes locked.

It took less than a second before a craving lit off in her veins, a kind of burning, clenching need. Of their own accord, her eyes shifted from his face to his throat and her fangs began to throb as her reality shrunk to nothing but instinct: She wanted to pierce his thick vein. She wanted to feed from him. And she wanted him to have sex with her body while she did.

Bloodlust.

Oh, God. That's why she was so tired. She hadn't been able to feed from Rehvenge the other night, and then there had been all the stress of Butch being so ill, followed by his taking off. Plus the thing with Havers.

Not that the whys mattered at the moment. All she knew was the hunger.

Her lips parted and she started to reach forward—

Except what would happen if she drank from him?

Well, that was easy. She'd drain him dry trying to satisfy herself because his human blood was so weak. She would kill him.

But God, he would taste good.

She cut off the voice of the bloodlust, and in an act of iron will, put her arms under the sheets. "I'll see you tonight."

As Butch straightened, his eyes dulled and he put his hands over the front of his hips, like he was hiding an erection. Which naturally made the urge to grab him get even stronger.

"You take care of yourself, Marissa," he said in a low, sad tone.

He was at the door when she said, "Butch?"

"Yeah?"

“I don’t think of you as weak.”

He frowned as if wondering where that came from. “Neither do I. Sleep well, beautiful. I’ll see you soon.”

When she was alone, she waited for the hunger to pass and it did. Which gave her some hope. With everything that was going on right now, she would love to put feeding off for a little while. Getting so close to Rehvenge just seemed wrong.

Chapter Eighteen

Van drove downtown as night came rolling over Caldwell.

After getting off the highway, he took a half-assed access road to the river, easing his truck along a pothole-riddled strip that ran beneath the city's big bridge. Stopping under a pylon marked F-8 in orange spray paint, he got out and looked around.

Traffic overhead rushed by, semis bumping along with echoing thunder, cars letting off the occasional horn blast. Down here, at river level, the Hudson was almost as loud as the din from above. The day had been the first to carry a shot of spring warmth, and the water was flowing fast from the runoff of melting snow.

The dark gray rush looked like liquid asphalt. Smelled like dirt.

He scanned the area, instincts hackling up. Man, alone under the bridge was never a good place to be. Especially as daylight faded.

Fuck this, he shouldn't have come. He turned back to his truck.

Xavier stepped from the shadows. "Glad you made it, son."

Van sucked back his surprise. Shit, the guy was like some kind of ghost. "Why couldn't we do this over the phone?" Well, didn't that sound weak. "I got things I have to fucking do."

"I need you to help me with something."

"I told you I wasn't interested."

Xavier smiled a little. "Yes, you did, didn't you."

The sound of wheels on loose gravel percolated into Van's ears and he looked to the left. The Chrysler Town & Country, that gold-toned, utterly forgettable minivan, was pulling up right next to him.

Keeping his eyes on Xavier, Van put his hand in his pocket and slipped his finger into the trigger of his nine. If they were going to try and whack

him, they were going to get a lead fight.

“There’s something in the back for you, son. Go ahead. Open her up.”
There was a pause. “Afraid, Van?”

“Fuck that.” He walked over, ready to pull out his heat. But when he slid back the door, all he could do was recoil. His brother, Richard, was tied up with nylon rope, and had strips of duct tape over his mouth and his eyes.

“Jesus, Rich...” When he reached forward, he heard a gun get cocked and he looked up at the minivan’s driver. The pale-haired bastard behind the wheel was pointing what appeared to be a Smith & Wesson forty right in Van’s face.

“I’d like you to rethink my invitation,” Xavier said.

Behind the wheel of Sally Forrester’s Honda, Butch cursed as he took a left at a stoplight and saw a Caldwell PD patrol car parked at the Stewart’s on the corner of Framingham and Hollis. Holy hell. Driving around in a lifted car with two grand in cash did not make a guy feel relaxed.

Good thing he had backup. V was right on his ass in the Escalade as they headed to the Barnstable Road address.

Nine and a half minutes later, Butch found Sally’s little Cape Cod. After he killed the headlights and let the Accord roll to a stop, he broke the wire connection to cut off the engine. The house was dark, so he walked right up to the front door, shoved the envelope with the cash through the mail slot, and then beat feet across the road for the Escalade. He wasn’t worried about getting caught on this quiet street. If anyone asked questions, V would just do a mental Windex on them.

He was getting into the SUV when he froze, an odd feeling rushing through him.

For no apparent reason, his body started to ring—that was the only way he could describe it. Like there was a cell phone smack dead in the center of his chest.

Down the street...down the street. He had to go down the street.

Oh, God—*lessers* were there.

“What is it, cop?”

“I feel them. They’re close.”

“Game on, then.” Vishous slipped out from behind the wheel and they both shut their doors. As V hit the alarm, the Escalade’s lights flashed once. “Go with it, cop. Let’s see where this takes us.”

Butch started walking. Then fell into a jog.

Together they ran through the shadows of the peaceful subdivision, staying out of the pools of light thrown by porches and streetlamps. They cut through someone's backyard. Dodged around an aboveground pool. Sidled past a garage.

The neighborhood got shittier. Dogs barked in warning. A car passed by with no headlights on and rap thumping. And then an abandoned house. Followed by an empty lot. Until finally they came up to a decrepit two-story from the seventies that was surrounded by a nine-foot-high wooden fence.

"In here," Butch said, looking around for a gate.

"Give me your leg, cop."

As Butch grabbed the top of the fence and cocked his knee, V tossed him over the thing like he was the morning newspaper. He landed in a crouch.

There they were. Three *lessers*. Two of whom were dragging a male out of the house by his arms.

Butch went into an instant overboil. He was radioactive angry about what had been done to him, frustrated by his fears for Marissa, trapped by his human nature—and those slayers became the focal point of his aggression.

Except V materialized next to him and grabbed his shoulder. As Butch wheeled around to tell the brother to fuck off, Vishous hissed, "You can have at them. Just keep it quiet. We've got eyes everywhere and without Rhage around, I need to fight on all cylinders, true? So I can't pull off no *mhis*. I'm not going to be able to mask this one."

Butch stared at his roommate, realizing this was the first time he'd ever been given free rein to go fight. "Why are you letting me in now?"

"We gotta be sure whose side you're on," V said, unsheathing a dagger. "And this is how we'll know. So I'll take the two with the civilian and you hit the other one."

Butch nodded once, then sprang forward, aware of a great roaring between his ears and within his body. As he gunned for the *lesser* that was about to move in on the house, the thing turned like he heard the approach.

The bastard merely looked annoyed as Butch ran up on him. "About time you backups showed." The slayer pivoted away. "There are two females in here. The blonde's really fast, so I want her—"

Butch tackled the *lesser* from behind and made like a vise, clamping on to the fucker's head and shoulders. It was like mounting a rodeo horse. The slayer went shit wild and spun around, grabbing at Butch's legs and arms.

When that didn't work, the thing slammed the two of them back against the house hard enough to dent the aluminum siding.

Butch stayed locked on, his forearm tight against the *lesser*'s esophagus, his other hand on his straining wrist, pulling back. To get an even better hold, he linked his legs around the slayer's hips, crossed his ankles, and squeezed with his thighs.

It took a while, but asphyxia and exertion eventually slowed the undead down.

Except, holy hell, by the time the *lesser*'s knees started to wobble, Butch knew what a pinball felt like. He'd been knocked against the house's exterior, then its front doorjamb, and now they were in the hall and he was getting banged back and forth in the narrow space. His brains were pinging around the inside of his skull and his internal organs were like scrambled eggs, but, goddamn it, he was not letting go. The longer he kept the *lesser* occupied, the more chance those females had to escape—

Oh, shit, it was Tilt-A-Whirl time. The world spun and Butch hit the floor first, the *lesser* turtling over on top of him.

Bad place to be. Now he was the one who couldn't breathe.

He threw out a leg, kicked against the wall, and slid out from under, wrenching the *lesser*'s torso. Unfortunately, the bastard pulled a twist move, too, and the two of them started rolling around and around on the nasty orange carpet. Finally, Butch's strength wore out.

With little effort, the slayer flipped him over so they were face-to-face, then cranked Butch into a submission hold, immobilizing him.

Okay...now would be a great time for V to show up.

Except then the *lesser* looked down and met Butch's eyes, and everything just slowed down. Ground to a halt. Stopped. Dead.

Another kind of vise action bolted them together, but this was a locking of stares and Butch was the one in control, even though he was on the bottom of the body pile. The *lesser* became transfixed and Butch followed his instincts.

Which meant he opened his mouth and began to inhale slowly.

But he wasn't taking in air. He was taking in the slayer. Absorbing him. Consuming him. It was as before in the alley, but now no one stopped the process. Butch just kept sucking in an endless draw, a streaming black shadow passing from the *lesser*'s eyes and nose and mouth and going into Butch.

Who felt like a balloon filling up with smog. Who felt like he was assuming the mantle of the enemy.

When it was over, the slayer's body just disintegrated into ash, the fine mist of gray particles falling onto Butch's face, chest, and legs.

"Holy shit."

In utter despair, Butch shifted his eyes around. V was leaning in through the front door, holding on to the frame as if the house was the only thing keeping him standing.

"Oh, God." Butch rolled over onto his side, the ugly carpet scratchy on his cheek. He was wretchedly sick to his stomach, and his throat burned like he'd been hammering Scotch for hours. But worst, the evil was back in him, running through his veins.

As he breathed through his nose, he smelled baby powder. And he knew it was him, not remnants of the *lesser*.

"V..." he said with desperation, "what did I just do?"

"I don't know, cop. I have no idea."

Twenty minutes later, Vishous shut himself and his roommate in the Escalade and hit all the locks. As he dialed his cell phone and put it up to his ear, he eyed Butch. The cop was looking multifactorial ill in the passenger seat, like he was seasick and jet-lagged and coming down with the flu all at the same time. And he reeked of baby powder, as if he were sweating out the scent through every one of his pores.

While the phone rang, Vishous started the SUV, threw it into drive, and thought back to Butch working some kind of mojo shit on that *lesser*. To steal a phrase from the cop, *Holy Mary, Mother of God*.

Man...that suck job was a hell of a weapon. But the complications were legion.

V glanced over again. And realized it was to reassure him self that Butch wasn't eyeing him as a *lesser* would.

Fuck.

"Wrath?" V said as his call was answered. "Listen, I—shit...our boy here just consumed a *lesser*. No...not Rhage. Butch. Yes, *Butch*. What? No, I saw him...consume the thing. I don't know how, but the *lesser* disappeared into dust. No, no knife involved. He inhaled the damn thing. Look, just to be conservative, I'm going to take him to my place and let him sleep it off. Then I'm coming home, true? Right...No, I have no clue how he did it, but I'll

give you the blow-by-blow when I get to the compound. Yup. Right. Uh-huh. Oh, for God's—yes, I'm *fine* and quit asking me that. Later."

As he hung up and tossed the phone onto the dash, Butch's voice drifted over, all weak and hoarse. "I'm glad you're not taking me home."

"Wish I could, though." V took out a hand-rolled and lit it, drawing hard on the thing. As he blew smoke, he cracked one of the windows. "Jesus Christ, cop, how did you know you could do that?"

"I didn't." Butch coughed a little, like his throat was bothering him. "Lemme have one of your daggers."

V frowned and looked at his roommate. "Why?"

"Just give it to me." As V hesitated, Butch shook his head with sadness. "I'm not going to come after you with it. I swear on my mother."

They hit a red light and V shifted his seat belt out of the way so he could unsheathe one of his blades from his chest holster. He gave the weapon to Butch handle first, then checked the road ahead. When he glanced back over, Butch had shoved up his sleeve and was slicing himself on the inside of his forearm. They both stared at what came out.

"I'm bleeding black again."

"Well...not a surprise."

"I smell like one, too."

"Yeah." Man, V did not like the way the cop was fixated on that dagger. "How 'bout you give my blade back, buddy?"

Butch handed the thing over and V wiped the black steel on his leathers before resheathing the weapon.

Butch wrapped his arms around his middle. "I don't want to be anywhere around Marissa when I'm like this, okay?"

"No problem. I'll take care of everything."

"V?"

"What?"

"I will die rather than hurt you."

V's eyes shot across the space between them. The cop's face was grim and his hazels were dead serious, the words not a mere expression of thought but a vow: Butch O'Neal was prepared to take himself out of the game if shit got critical. And he was fully capable of doing the job.

V inhaled on his hand-rolled again and tried not to get even more attached to the human. "Hopefully it won't come to that."

Please, God, let it not come to that.

Chapter Nineteen

Marissa paced another circle around the Brotherhood's library and ended up back at the windows that looked out over the terrace and the pool.

The day must have been a warm one, she thought. There were patches in the snow that had melted through, revealing black slate at the terrace or brown ground over the lawn—

Oh, who the hell cared about the goddamned landscape.

Butch had left after First Meal, saying he had a quick errand to run. Which was fine. Dandy. A-okay. But that had been two hours ago.

She wheeled around as someone came into the room. “*Butch*—oh...it’s...you.”

Vishous stood in the archway, a full-blooded warrior framed by the extravagant gold-leaf molding around him.

Dear Virgin in the Fade...his expression was utterly blank, the kind of thing you put on your face when you had bad news to deliver.

“Tell me he is alive,” she said. “Save my life right here and now and tell me he is alive.”

“He is.”

Her knees buckled and she grabbed on to one of the wall-to-wall bookshelves. “But he isn’t coming, is he?”

“No.”

As they stared at each other, she noticed absently that he was wearing a fine white shirt with his black leathers: a Turnbull and Asser button-down. She recognized the cut. It was what Butch wore.

Marissa wrapped an arm around her waist, overwhelmed by Vishous even though he was all the way across the room. He seemed like such a dangerous male—and not because of the tattoos on his temple or the black goatee or that

fearsome body. The Brother was cold to the core, and someone that removed was capable of anything.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“He’s okay.”

“Then why isn’t he here?”

“It was just a quick fight.”

A...quick...fight. Her knees loosened again as memories of being at Butch’s bedside crashed over her. She saw him lying on hospital sheets in that johnny, beaten up, almost dying. Contaminated by something evil.

“I want to see him.”

“He’s not here.”

“Is he at my brother’s?”

“No.”

“And you’re not going to tell me where he is, are you?”

“He’s going to call you in a little bit.”

“Was it with the *lessers*?” When all Vishous did was continue to stare at her, her heart kicked into overdrive. She couldn’t bear for Butch to be involved in this war. Look what had already been done to him. “Goddamn it, tell me if it was with the slayers, you smug bastard.”

Only silence. Which of course answered the question. And also suggested that Vishous didn’t care whether or not she was pissed off at him.

Marissa gathered up her skirts and marched over to the warrior. Up close, she had to crane her neck to look at his face. God, those eyes, those diamond white eyes with the midnight blue lines around the irises. Cold. So very cold.

She did her best to hide her shiver, but he caught it. Tracked it in her shoulders.

“Scared of me, Marissa?” he said. “Exactly what do you think I’d do to you?”

She ignored that. “I don’t want Butch fighting.”

One black eyebrow cocked. “Not your call.”

“It’s too dangerous for him.”

“After tonight, I’m not so sure about that.”

The Brother’s hard smile made her take a step back, but anger saved her from a full-on retreat. “You remember that hospital bed? You saw what they did to him last time. I thought you cared about him.”

“If it turns out he’s an asset, and he’s willing, he will be used.”

“I don’t like the Brotherhood right now,” she blurted. “Or you.”

She started to go past him, but his hand shot out, grabbing her arm and jerking her close, holding her, though not hurting her. His eyes went over her face, her neck, then swept down her body.

And that was when she saw the fire in him. The volcanic heat. The interior inferno that was caged by all that glacial self-control.

“Let go of me,” she whispered, heart beating hard.

“I’m not surprised.” His reply was quiet...quiet as a sharp knife laid on a table.

“About w-what?”

“You’re a female of worth. So you shouldn’t like me.” Those glittering eyes narrowed on her face. “You know, you really are the great beauty of the species, aren’t you.”

“No...no, I am not—”

“Yeah, you are.” Vishous’s voice grew lower and lower, softer, until she wasn’t sure whether she was hearing it or he was in her mind. “Butch is a wise choice for you, female. He’ll take good care of you, if you let him. Will you, Marissa? Will you let him...take care of you?”

As those diamond eyes hypnotized her, she felt his thumb move over her wrist, shifting back and forth. Her heart rate gradually slowed to the lazy rhythm.

“Answer my question, Marissa.”

She swayed. “What...what did you ask?”

“Will you let him take you?” Vishous leaned down and put his mouth at her ear. “Will you take him inside of you?”

“Yes...” she breathed, aware they were talking about sex, but too seduced in the moment not to reply. “I will have him within me.”

That hard hand loosened, then stroked her arm, traveling over her skin warmly, strongly. He looked down at where he was touching her, an expression of deep concentration on his face. “Good. That’s good. The two of you are beautiful together. A fucking inspiration.”

The male turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

Disoriented, shocked, she stumbled over to the library’s doorway and saw Vishous going up the stairs, his heavy thighs eating the distance with no effort.

Without warning, he stopped and snapped his head her way. Her hand fluttered to her throat.

Vishous’s smile was as dark as his eyes were pale. “Come on, Marissa.

Did you really think I was going to kiss you?"

She gasped. That was exactly what had been going through her—

Vishous shook his head. "You're Butch's female and whether you end up with him or not, you always will be to me." He started up again. "Besides, you're not my type. Your skin's too soft."

V walked into Wrath's study and shut the double doors, thinking that little chat with Marissa had been disturbing as hell on a variety of levels. God, he hadn't gotten into anyone's thoughts for weeks now, but he'd read hers clear as day. Or maybe he'd just hazarded a guess. Hell, more likely the latter. Going by those saucer-wide eyes of hers, she'd clearly been convinced he was going to lay his mouth on her.

Wrong. The reason he'd stared at her was because she fascinated him, not attracted him. He wanted to know what it was about her that made Butch lay with her with such warmth and love. Was it something in her skin? Her bones? Her beauty? How did she do it?

How did she take Butch to a place where sex was communion?

V rubbed the center of his chest, aware of a piercing loneliness.

"Hello? My brother?" Wrath leaned onto his dainty desk, all heavy forearms and big hands. "You here to report or make like sculpture?"

"Yeah...sorry. Distracted."

Vishous lit up and replayed the fight, especially the final part when he'd watched a *lesser* disappear into the thin air, thanks to his roommate.

"God damn..." Wrath breathed.

V went to the fireplace and chucked the ass end of his hand-rolled into the flames. "Never seen anything like it."

"Is he okay?"

"Don't know. I'd take him to Havers to get checked out, but there's no going back to the clinic with the cop. Right now, he's at my place with his cell phone. He'll call me if things get ratty and I'll think of something."

Wrath's brows disappeared behind his mirrored wraparounds. "How confident are you that the *lessers* can't trace him?"

"Damn confident. In both cases, he's the one that went after them. It's like he smelled them or something. When he gets up close, they seem to recognize him, but it's always him engaging first."

Wrath looked down at the stacks of paper on his desk. "Don't like him out there alone. Don't like it at all."

There was a long pause and then V said, “I could go get him. Bring him home.”

Wrath took off his sunglasses. As he rubbed his eyes, the king’s ring, that massive black diamond, sparkled on his middle finger. “We got females here. One of whom is pregnant.”

“I could watch him. I could make sure he stays in the Pit. I could seal off the tunnel access.”

“Hell.” Those sunglasses got slid back on. “Go get him. Bring our boy home.”

For Van, the scariest part of his induction into the Lessening Society was not the physical conversion or the Omega or the involuntary nature of it all. Not that that shit wasn’t horrifying. It was. Jesus Christ...to know that evil actually existed and walked around and...did things to people? Yeah, huge wake-up call in a bad way.

But not the scariest part.

With a grunt, Van pushed himself up on the bare mattress he’d been on for God only knew how long. Staring down at his body, he extended his arm out from his shoulder socket, then curled it in tight.

No, the scariest part was the fact that when he’d finally stopped throwing up and managed to catch his breath, he couldn’t quite remember why he hadn’t wanted to join in the first place. Because the power was back in his body; the roar from his twenties was parked in his garage once again. Thanks to the Omega, he was returned to himself, no longer a faded, washed-up shadow of what he once had been. Sure, the means had been a mind bender of terror and disbelief. But the ends...were glorious.

He flexed his bicep again, just feeling the muscles and bones, loving them.

“You’re smiling,” Xavier said as he came into the room.

Van looked up. “I feel great. Really...fucking...great.”

Xavier’s eyes were distant. “Don’t let it go to your head. And listen up good. I want you to stay close to me. You never go anywhere without me. We clear?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Van shifted his legs off the bed. He couldn’t wait to run and see what that felt like.

As he stood, Xavier’s expression was odd. Frustration?

“What’s wrong?” Van asked.

“Your induction was so...average.”

Average? Getting your heart taken out and your blood exchanged for something that looked like tar didn’t count as average to him. And for chrissakes, Van wasn’t interested in this buzz-kill routine. The world was fresh and new again as far as he was concerned. He was reborn.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” he muttered.

“I’m not disappointed in you. Yet.” Xavier checked his watch. “Get dressed. We leave in five.”

Van went into the bathroom and stood over the toilet, only to realize he didn’t have to go. And he wasn’t thirsty or hungry either.

Okay, this was weird. It seemed unnatural not to follow his morning routine.

Leaning forward, he glanced at his reflection in the mirror above the sink. His features were the same, but his eyes were different.

With unease snaking through him, he rubbed his face with his palm to reassure himself that he was flesh and blood still. As he felt the bones of his skull through his thin skin, he thought of Richard.

Who was at home with his wife and two kids. Safe now.

Van would have no more contact with his family. Ever. But his brother’s life seemed like a fair trade. Fathers mattered.

Besides, look at all he’d gained for that sacrifice. His special part was back in business.

“You ready to go?” Xavier called from down the hall.

Van swallowed hard. Man, whatever he was caught up in was so much darker and deeper than just a criminal life. He was an agent of evil now, wasn’t he?

And that should have bothered him more.

Instead, he reveled in his power, ready to wield it. “Yeah. I am.”

Van smiled at his reflection, feeling as if his special destiny had been realized. And he was exactly who he needed to be.

Chapter Twenty

That following evening, Marissa was getting out of the shower when she heard the shutters lift for the night.

God, she was tired, but then it had been a busy day. Very busy.

Although the good thing was at least everything she'd had to do had kept her from obsessing about Butch. Well, mostly kept her mind off him. Okay, sometimes stopped her from thinking about him.

The fact that he'd been hurt by a *lesser* again was only part of her preoccupation. She wondered where he was and who was caring for him. Not her brother, obviously. But did Butch have someone else?

Had he spent the day with another female, being nursed by her?

Sure, Marissa had talked to him last night and he'd said all the right things: He'd reassured her he was okay. Hadn't lied about fighting with a *lesser*. Been up-front about not wanting to come see her until he felt more stable. And he'd told her he'd meet her at First Meal tonight.

She'd assumed if he'd been stilted, it was because he'd been rattled, and she didn't blame him. But it was only after they hung up that she realized everything she'd neglected to ask.

Disgusted with her insecurities, she marched over to the laundry chute and shoved her towel down the mouth of it. As she straightened, she got so dizzy she weaved on her bare feet and had to sink down into a crouch. It was either that or pass out cold.

Please let this need to feed pass. *Please*.

She breathed deeply until her head cleared, then slowly stood up and headed for the sink. As she cupped her hands under cold water and splashed her face, she knew she was going to have to go to Rehvenge. Just not tonight. Tonight she needed to be with Butch. She needed to see him up close and

reassure herself that he was okay. And she had to talk to him. He was the important thing, not her body.

When she felt steady enough, she got dressed in that teal YSL gown. God, she really hated wearing the thing now. It held such bad associations for her, as if the scene with her brother was a nasty smell that had permeated the dress's fabric.

The knock she'd been waiting for came at precisely six o'clock. Fritz was on the other side of the bedroom door, the old male smiling as he bowed.

"Good evening, mistress."

"Good evening. Do you have the papers?"

"As you asked."

She took the file he held out and went to a bureau, where she leafed through the documents and signed on several lines. As she closed the top of the folder, she laid her hand on it. "This is over so fast."

"We have good lawyers, don't we?"

She took a deep breath and handed the power of attorney and the rental papers back to him. Then she went to the bedside table and picked up the bracelet from the suite of diamonds she'd still had on when she'd arrived at the Brotherhood's compound. As she held the glittering length out to the *doggen*, she had a fleeting thought that her father had given her the set over a hundred years ago.

He would never have guessed how it would be used. Thank the Scribe Virgin.

The butler frowned. "Master does not approve."

"I know, but Wrath has been too kind to me already." The diamonds sparkled as they hung from her fingertips. "Fritz? Take the bracelet."

"Master really does not approve."

"He's not my *ghardian*. So it's not his call."

"He is king. Everything is his call." But Fritz took the piece of jewelry.

As he turned away, the *doggen* looked so stricken, she said, "Thank you for bringing me some of my undergarments and for dry-cleaning this gown. You are very thoughtful."

He brightened a little at a job well done. "Perhaps you should like me to retrieve a few of your dresses from your trunks?"

She looked down at the St. Laurent and shook her head. "I won't be here for long. Best to leave them packed."

"As you wish, mistress."

“Thank you, Fritz.”

He paused. “You should know that I have put fresh roses in the library for your rendezvous this evening with our master Butch. He asked me to get some for your pleasure. He asked me to ensure they were as lovely and pale a gold as your hair.”

She closed her eyes. “Thank you, Fritz.”

Butch rinsed out his razor, tapped it on the edge of his sink, and shut off the water. According to the mirror, the shave hadn’t helped much; in fact, it just showcased his bruises, which were now yellowing out. Crap. He wanted to look nice for Marissa, especially since last night had turned out to be such a mess.

As he stared at his reflection, he poked his front tooth, the one with the little chip out of it. Shit...if he wanted to look like he deserved her, he’d need plastic surgery, detox, and a full set of caps.

Whatever. He had other things to worry about if he was going to see her in ten minutes. She’d sounded like hell over the phone last night, and it looked like they were back to having distance between them. But at least she was willing to see his ass.

Which led to his big concern. He reached down and picked up a paring knife off the edge of the white sink. Extending his forearm, he—

“Cop, you’re going to be full of holes if you keep this up.”

Butch looked into the mirror. Behind him, V was leaning against the doorjamb, a glass of Goose and a cigarette in his hand. Turkish tobacco scented the air, pungent, masculine.

“Come on, V. I need to be sure. I know your hand works wonders, but...” He drew the blade over his skin, then closed his eyes, afraid of what was going to come out.

“It’s red, Butch. You’re okay.”

He glanced at the wet crimson streak. “How do I know for sure, though?”

“You don’t smell like a *lesser* anymore and you did last night.” V came into the bathroom. “And secondly...”

Before Butch knew what was doing, V grabbed his forearm, bent down, and licked the cut, sealing it up quick.

Butch yanked out of his roommate’s hold. “Jesus, V! What if that blood’s contaminated!”

“It’s fine. Just f—” With a boneless lurch, Vishous gasped and collapsed

against the wall, eyes rolling back in his head, body twitching.

“Oh, God...!” Butch reached out in horror—

Only to have V cut the seizure off and calmly take a drink from his glass. “You’re fine, cop. Tastes perfectly okay. Well, fine for human guy, which really ain’t my ‘tail of choice, you feel me?’”

Butch hauled back and nailed his roommate in the arm with his fist. And as the brother cursed, Butch popped him another one.

V glared and rubbed himself. “Christ, cop.”

“Suck it up, you deserve it.”

Butch pushed by the brother and headed for his closet. As he tried to figure out what to wear, he was rough with his clothes, shoving them around on their hangers.

He stopped. Closed his eyes. “What the fuck, V. Last night I was bleeding black. Now I’m not. Is my body some kind of *lesser*-processing plant?”

V eased onto the bed, leaning back against the headboard, resting his glass on his leather-clad thigh. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Man, he was so tired of feeling lost. “I thought you knew everything.”

“Not fair, Butch.”

“Shit...you’re right. I apologize.”

“Can we screw the ‘sorry’ part and let me hit you back instead?”

As they both laughed, Butch forced himself to pick a suit and ended up tossing a blue/black Zegna on the bed next to V. Then he fingered his ties. “I saw the Omega, didn’t I. That thing in me was part of him. He put part of himself in me.”

“Yeah. That’s what I think.”

Butch felt a sudden need to go to church and pray for his salvation. “No going back to normal for me, is there.”

“Probably not.”

Butch stared at his tie collection, getting swamped by the colors and the choices. As he stood frozen with indecision, for some reason he thought about his family in South Boston.

Talk about normal...and they were unchanging, too, so relentlessly the same. For the O’Neal clan, there had been one pivotal event, and that tragedy had thrown the chessboard of the family up in the air. When the pieces had fallen, they’d landed in glue: After Jane had been raped and murdered when she was fifteen, everyone had stayed in their places. And he was the

unforgiven outsider.

To cut off his train of thought, Butch pulled a bloodred Ferragamo from the rack. “So what’s on deck for you tonight, vampire?”

“I’m supposed to be off.”

“Good.”

“No, bad. You know I hate not fighting, true?”

“You’re strung too tight.”

“Hah.”

Butch glanced over his shoulder. “Do I need to remind you about this afternoon?”

V’s eyes dropped to his glass. “Nothing doing.”

“You woke up screaming so loud I thought you’d been shot. What the hell were you dreaming about?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t try and fade me, it’s annoying.”

V swirled the vodka around. Swallowed it. “Just a dream.”

“Bullshit. I’ve lived with you for nine months, buddy. You’re stone quiet if you sleep at all.”

“Whatever.”

Butch dropped his towel, pulled on a pair of black boxers and took a starched white button-down out of the closet. “You should let Wrath know what’s doing.”

“How about we don’t go there.”

Butch put on the shirt, buttoned it up, then snapped the pinstriped pants off their hanger. “All I’m saying—”

“Can it, cop.”

“God, you’re a tight-lipped bastard. Look, I’m here if you want to talk, okay?”

“Don’t hold your breath. But...’preciate it.” V cleared his throat. “By the way, I borrowed one of your shirts last night.”

“That’s cool. It’s you whoring my socks that pisses me off.”

“Didn’t want to see your girl in fighting clothes. Which is all I got.”

“She said you’d talked to her. I think you make her nervous.”

V said something that sounded like “I should.”

Butch looked over. “What did you say?”

“Nothing.” V shot up off the bed and headed for the door. “Listen, I’m going to go hang at my other place tonight. Being here by myself when

everyone's on the job makes me bat shit. You need me, come find me at the penthouse."

"V." As his roommate stopped and looked back, Butch said, "Thanks."

"For what?"

Butch lifted his forearm. "You know."

V shrugged. "Figured you'd feel better being around her that way."

John walked through the underground tunnel, his footsteps an echoing drumroll that made him feel how alone he was as nothing else could.

Well, alone except for his anger. That was with him always now, close as his own skin, coating him like his skin, too. Man, he couldn't wait for class to start tonight so he could let some of it out. He was twitching, overactivated, restless.

But maybe some of that was because, as he headed for the main house, he couldn't help remembering the first time he'd come this way with Tohr. He'd been so nervous then, and having the male next to him had been reassuring.

Happy fucking anniversary, John thought.

Three months ago tonight was when it had all gone down. Three months ago tonight, Wellsie's murder and Sarelle's murder and Tohr's disappearance had been dealt like bad-news Tarot cards. Bang. Bang. Bang.

And the aftermath had been a special kind of hell. For a couple of weeks following the tragedies, John had assumed Tohr would come back. He'd waited, hoped, prayed. But...nothing. No communication, no phone calls, no...nothing.

Tohr was dead. Had to be.

As John came up to the shallow set of stairs that led into the mansion, he could not bear to go through the hidden door into the foyer. He so wasn't interested in eating. Didn't want to see anyone. Didn't want to sit at the table. But sure as hell, Zsadist would come after him. The Brother had totally dragged him to the big house for meals the last couple of days. Which was embarrassing and pissed them both off.

John forced himself to go up the steps and into the mansion. To him, the foyer's blinding splash of color was an affront to the senses, no longer a feast for the eyes, and he headed for the dining room with his stare locked on the floor. When he walked under the grand arch, he saw that the table was set but not yet occupied. And he smelled roast lamb—Wrath's absolute favorite meal.

John's stomach rumbled with starvation, but he wasn't falling for it. Lately, however hungry he was, the instant he put food in his gut, even the kind specially made for a pre-trans, he got cramps. And he was supposed to eat more for the change? Yeah, right.

When he heard light, rushing footfalls, he turned his head. Someone was racing along the second-floor balcony.

Then laughter drifted down from above. Glorious feminine laughter.

He leaned out the archway and glanced at the grand staircase.

Bella appeared on the landing above, breathless, smiling, a black satin robe gathered in her hands. As she slowed at the head of the stairs, she looked over her shoulder, her thick dark hair swinging like a mane.

The pounding that came next was heavy and distant, growing louder until it was like boulders hitting the ground. Obviously, it was what she was waiting for. She let out a laugh, yanked her robe up even higher, and started down the stairs, bare feet skirting the steps as if she were floating. At the bottom, she hit the mosaic floor of the foyer and wheeled around just as Zsadist appeared in the second-story hallway.

The Brother spotted her and went straight for the balcony, pegging his hands into the rail, swinging his legs up and pushing himself straight off into thin air. He flew outward, body in a perfect swan dive—except he wasn't over water, he was two floors up over hard stone.

John's cry for help came out as a mute, sustained rush of air—

Which was cut off as Zsadist dematerialized at the height of the dive. He took form twenty feet in front of Bella, who watched the show with glowing happiness.

Meanwhile, John's heart pounded from shock...then pumped fast for a different reason.

Bella smiled up at her mate, her breath still hard, her hands still gripping the robe, her eyes heavy with invitation. And Zsadist came forward to answer her call, seeming to get even bigger as he stalked over to her. The Brother's bonding scent filled the foyer, just as his low, lionlike growl did. The male was all animal at the moment...a very sexual animal.

"You like to be chased, *nalla*," Z said in a voice so deep it distorted.

Bella's smile got even wider as she backed up into a corner. "Maybe."

"So run some more, why don't you." The words were dark and even John caught the erotic threat in them.

Bella took off, darting around her mate, going for the billiards room. Z

tracked her like prey, pivoting around, his eyes leveled on the female's streaming hair and graceful body. As his lips peeled off his fangs, the white canines elongated, protruding from his mouth. And they weren't the only response he had to his *shellan*.

At his hips, pressing into the front of his leathers, was an erection the size of a tree trunk.

Z shot John a quick glance and then went back to his hunt, disappearing into the room, that pumping growl getting louder. From out of the open doors, there came a delighted squeal, a scramble, a female's gasp, and then... nothing.

He'd caught her.

John put his hand on the wall, steadyng a lurch he hadn't realized he'd fallen into. As he thought about what they were doing, his body grew curiously loose and a little tingly. Like maybe something was waking up.

When Zsadist came out a moment later, he had Bella in his arms, her dark hair trailing down his shoulder as she lounged in the strength that held her. Her eyes were locked on Z's face while he looked where he was going, her hand stroking his chest, her lips curved in a private smile.

There was a bite mark on her neck, one that had very definitely not been there before, and Bella's satisfaction as she stared at the hunger in her *hellren*'s face was utterly compelling. John knew instinctively that Zsadist was going to finish two things upstairs: the mating and the feeding. The Brother was going to be at her throat and in between her legs. Probably at the same time.

God, John wanted that kind of connection.

Except what about his past? Even if he made it through his transition, how was he ever going to be that comfortable and confident with a female? Real males hadn't been through what he had, hadn't been forced at knifepoint into a hideous submission.

Hell, look at Zsadist. So strong, so powerful. Females went for that kind of thing, not weaklings like John. And there was no mistaking it. No matter how big John's body got, that's what he would always be: a weakling, marked forever by what had been done to him.

He turned away and went to the dining room table, sitting down alone in the midst of all the china and silver and crystal and candles.

But alone was okay, he decided.

Alone was safe.

Chapter Twenty-one

While Fritz went upstairs to get Marissa, Butch waited in the library and thought about what a good guy the *doggen* was. When Butch had asked for a favor, the old man had been thrilled to take care of the request. Even though it had been an odd thing to ask.

When the smell of an ocean breeze drifted into the room, Butch's body threw out an instantaneous and very noticeable response. As he turned around, he made sure his suit jacket was in place.

Oh, Christ, she was beautiful in that teal gown. "Hey, baby."

"Hello, Butch." Marissa's voice was quiet, her hand unsure as she smoothed her hair. "You look...well."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Thanks to V's healing palm.

There was a long silence. Then he said, "Is it okay if I greet you properly?"

When she nodded, he went over and took her hand. As he bent down and kissed her, her palm was cold as ice. Was she nervous? Or ill?

He frowned. "Marissa, you want to sit down for a minute before we go in to dinner?"

"Please."

He led her over to a silk-covered couch and noticed that she was unsteady as she gathered the skirting of her gown and sat down with him.

He tilted her head around. "Talk to me." When she didn't speak right away, he pushed. "Marissa...you've got something on your mind, right?"

There was an awkward pause. "I don't want you fighting with the Brotherhood."

So that's what it was. "Marissa, last night was unexpected. I don't fight. Truly."

“But V said if you were willing, they were going to use you.”

Whoa. News to him. Far as he knew, that thing the night before had been about testing his loyalty, not bringing him into the field as a regular gig.

“Listen, the brothers have spent the last nine months keeping me *out* of fights. I’m not getting involved with the *lessers*. That’s not my deal.”

Her tension eased. “I just can’t bear the thought of you being hurt like before.”

“You don’t worry about that. The Brotherhood does their thing, it’s got little to do with me.” He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “You got anything else you want to talk about, baby?”

“I do have a question.”

“Ask me anything.”

“I don’t know where you live.”

“Here. I live here.” At her confusion, he nodded toward the library’s open doors. “Across the courtyard in the gatehouse. I live with V.”

“Oh—so where were you last night?”

“Right over there. But I stayed put.”

She frowned. Then blurted, “Do you have other females?”

As if anyone could measure up to her? “No! Why do you ask?”

“We haven’t layed together and you are a male with obvious...needs. Even now, your body has changed, hardening, growing big.”

Crap. He’d tried to hide the erection, he really had. “Marissa—”

“Surely you need to be eased regularly. Your body is *phearsom*.”

That didn’t sound good. “What?”

“Potent and powerful. Worthy of entering a female.”

Butch closed his eyes, thinking Mr. Worthy was really rising to the occasion now. “Marissa, there’s no one but you. No one. How could there be?”

“Males of my kind may take more than one mate. I don’t know if humans —”

“I don’t. Not with you. I can’t imagine myself with another woman. I mean, could you see yourself with someone else?”

In the hesitation that followed, a blast of cold shot up his spine, racing from his ass right into the base of his skull. And while he freaked, she fiddled with her extravagant skirt. Shit, she was flushing, too.

“I don’t want to be with anyone else,” she said.

“What aren’t you telling me, Marissa?”

“There is someone I’ve been...around.”

Butch’s brain started to misfire, like his neuropathways had just blown apart and there were no more roads left in his gray matter. “‘Around,’ as in how?”

“It’s not romantic, Butch. I swear. He’s a friend, but he is a male, and that’s why I’m letting you know.” She put her hand to his face. “You’re the one I want.”

Staring into her solemn eyes, he couldn’t doubt the truth in what she said. But shit, he felt like he’d been two-by-foured. Which was ridiculous and petty and...oh, God...he totally couldn’t handle her being with someone else

Pull it together, O’Neal. Just yank your ass back to reality, buddy. Right now.

“Good,” he said. “I want to be the one for you. The only one.”

Shoving aside all his jealous-guy horseshit, he kissed her hand...and was alarmed by the tremors in it.

He smoothed her cold fingers out between his palms. “What’s going on with this shaking thing? Are you upset or are you sick? Do you need a doctor?”

She waved off his concern with none of her usual grace. “I can take care of it. Don’t worry.”

The hell he wouldn’t. Christ, she was totally weak here, her eyes dilated, her movements uncoordinated. Ill, definitely ill. “Why don’t I take you back upstairs, baby? It’ll kill me not to see you, but you don’t look as if you’re up to dinner. And I can bring you something to eat.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I was so hoping...Yes, I think that would be best.”

She stood up and swayed. As he caught her arm, he cursed that brother of hers. If she needed medical help, who would they take her to?

“Come on, baby. Lean on me.”

Taking it slow, he led her up to the second floor, then down past Rhage and Mary’s room, past Phury’s, and even farther, until they got to the corner suite she’d been given.

She put her hand on the brass knob. “I’m sorry, Butch. I wanted to spend time with you tonight. I thought I had more strength.”

“Can I please call a doctor?”

Her eyes were dazed but curiously unconcerned as she looked up into his

face. "It's nothing I can't handle on my own. And I'm going to be all right soon."

"Man...right now I want to caretake like you read about."

She smiled. "Not necessary, remember?"

"Does it count if I just do it to ease myself?"

"Yes."

As they stared at each other, he had a screaming thought flash through his pea brain: He loved this woman. He loved her to death.

And he wanted her to know it.

He stroked her cheek with his thumb and decided it was a crying shame he didn't have the gift of words. He wanted to say something smart and tender, to give the L-bomb a good intro. Except he just came up dry.

So he blurted out, with his typical lack of finesse, "I love you."

Marissa's eyes popped.

Oh, shit. Too much, too soon—

She threw her arms around his neck and held on hard, burying her head in his chest. As he wrapped his arms around her, and geared up to go full sap all over the place, voices drifted down the hall. Opening her door, he ushered her into the room, figuring they needed a little privacy.

As he took her to the bed and helped her lie down, he lined up all kinds of sissy words in his head, ready to romance it up. But before he could say anything, she grabbed his hand and squeezed so hard his bones bent.

"I love you, too, Butch."

The words made him forget how to breathe.

Totally knocked out, he sank down to his knees next to the bed and had to smile. "Now, why you want to go and do that, baby? I'd figured you as a smart female."

She laughed softly. "You know why."

"You pity me?"

"Because you are a male of worth."

He cleared his throat. "I'm really not."

"How can you say that?"

Well, let's see. He'd been canned from Homicide for busting the nose of a suspect. He'd fucked mostly whores and lowlifes. Shot and killed other men. Then, yeah, there was that former cokehead shit and the current and persistent Scotch sucking. Oh, and did he mention he'd been sort of suicidal since his sister's murder all those years ago?

Yup, he was worth something. But only a trip to a landfill.

Butch opened his mouth, about to spill the beans, but then stopped himself.

Shut your face, O'Neal. The woman tells you she loves you and she's more than you deserve. Don't ruin it with the ugly past routine. Start fresh, here and now, with her.

He rubbed his thumb over her flawless cheek. "I want to kiss you. You feel like letting me?"

As she hesitated, he couldn't say he blamed her. Last time they'd been together had been a mess with his body kicking out that nasty stuff and her brother walking in. Plus she was clearly tired now.

He pulled back. "I'm sorry—"

"It's not that I don't want to be with you. I do."

"You don't have to explain. And I'm happy to just be around you, even if I can't—" *Be inside of you.* "Even if we don't...you know, make love."

"I'm holding back because I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

Butch smiled fiercely, thinking if she ripped his back to shreds hanging on tight, that was perfectly fine with him. "Doesn't matter if I get hurt."

"It matters to me."

He started to get up. "That's sweet of you. Now, listen, I'll just bring you up some—"

"Wait." Her eyes glowed in the dimness. "Oh...God, Butch...Kiss me."

He stilled. Then sank back down to his knees. "I'll take it easy. I promise."

Leaning into her, he put his mouth on hers and brushed her lips. Good Lord, she was soft. Warm. Shit...he wanted in. But he wasn't going to push.

Except then she grabbed on to his shoulders and said, "More."

Praying for control, he stroked her mouth once again, then tried to ease back. She followed, keeping them linked...and before he could stop himself, he ran his tongue across her lower lip. With an erotic sigh, she opened herself and he had to slide inside, couldn't possibly turn down the opportunity to penetrate her.

As she tried to get even closer to him, he moved his torso up on the bed, pressing his chest into her. Which was not such a hot idea. The way her breasts absorbed his weight set off a five-alarm fire in his body, reminding him just how desperate a man could be when he had his woman horizontal.

"Baby, I should stop." Because in another minute he was going to have

her under him with that dress yanked up around her hips.

“No.” She slipped her hands under his jacket and slid it off of him. “Not yet.”

“Marissa, I’m getting raw here. Fast. And you don’t feel well—”

“Kiss me.” She dug her nails into his shoulders, the sting cutting through his fine shirt in a series of delicious little flares.

He growled and took her mouth a hell of a lot less gently.

Again, bad idea. The harder he kissed her, the harder she kissed back until their tongues were dueling and every muscle in him was twitching to mount her.

“I have to touch you,” he groaned, shifting his whole body up on the bed and swinging his leg over hers. He palmed her hip and squeezed, then moved his hand up onto her rib cage just below the swell of her breast.

Shit. He was so on the ledge right now.

“Do it,” she said into his mouth. “Touch me.”

As her back arched, he took what she offered, capturing her breast, stroking it through the silk bodice of the gown. With a gasp, she put her hand over his, holding him tighter to her.

“Butch...”

“Oh, shit, let me see you, baby. Can I see you?” Before she could respond, he captured her mouth, but the way she met his tongue gave him his answer. He sat her up and started in on the buttons down the back of her gown. His hands were clumsy, but by some miracle the satin parted.

Except there were so many other layers to get through. Goddamn it, her skin...he had to get to her skin.

Impatient, aroused, fixated, he stripped the front of the gown off her, then pushed the straps of her slip down so that the pale silk pooled at her waist. The white corset that was revealed was an erotic surprise and he ran his hands all over it, feeling the structure of its bones and the warmth of her body underneath. But then he couldn’t stand it any longer and all but tore the thing from her.

As her breasts were freed, her head fell back, the long, elegant lines of her neck and shoulders stretching out for him. Eyes on her face, Butch bent down to her and took one of her nipples with his mouth, suckling. Sweet heaven, he was going to come, she was so good. He was panting like a dog, already deranged from the sex, and they were nowhere near naked.

But she was right there with him, straining, hot, needy, her legs scissoring

under her skirts. Man, this whole situation was spiraling out of control, a combustion engine turning over faster and faster with every second. And he was powerless to stop.

“Can I take this off you?” Shit, his voice was totally gone. “This gown... the whole thing?”

“Yes...” The word was a groan, a frantic groan.

Unfortunately, the dress was a project and damn it, he didn’t have the patience to keep working all those buttons in the back of it. He ended up bunching the floor-length skirt at her hips and drawing a pair of whisper-thin white panties down her long, smooth legs. Then he ran his hands up the insides of her thighs, parting them.

As she tensed up, he stopped. “If you want me to back off, I will. In a heartbeat. But I just want to touch you again. And maybe...look at you.”

When she frowned, he started to pull down the dress. “It’s okay—”

“I’m not saying no. It’s just...oh, God...what if I’m unattractive there?”

Jesus, he could not comprehend why she’d ever worry about that. “Not possible. I already know you how perfect you are. I’ve felt you, remember?”

She took a deep breath.

“Marissa, I loved the feel of you. I really did. And I have a beautiful picture of you in my mind. I just want to know the reality.”

After a moment, she nodded. “All right...go ahead.”

Keeping their gazes locked, he swept his hand between her thighs and then...oh, yeah, that soft, secret place of hers. So slick and hot he swayed and dropped his mouth to her ear.

“You’re so beautiful here.” Her hips surged as he stroked her, his fingers light and slippery from her honey. “Mmm, yeah...I want to be inside of you. I want to put my”—the word *cock* was definitely too coarse, but that’s what he was thinking—“myself in you, baby. Right here. I want to be surrounded by all this, held in you tight. So you believe me when I say you’re beautiful? Marissa? Tell me what I want to hear.”

“Yes...” As he rubbed a little deeper, she shivered. “God...yes.”

“You want me to come inside of you someday?”

“Yes...”

“You want me to fill you up?”

“Yes...”

“Good, because that’s what I want.” He nipped at her earlobe. “I want to lose it deep in you and have you fist me as you come, too. Mmm...rub

yourself against my hand, let me feel you move for me. Oh, shit...that's nice. That's...work your core for me...oh, yeah..."

Shit, he had to stop talking. Because if she took direction any better he was going to explode.

Oh, screw it. "Marissa, spread your legs farther apart for me. Spread them wide. And don't stop what you're doing."

As she complied, he slowly, discreetly, shifted back and looked down her body. On the other side of yards of twisted, teal blue satin, her creamy thighs were split open, his hand disappearing between them, her hips rolling in a rhythm that made his cock pop in his pants.

Latching on to the closest breast, he gently smoothed one of her legs even wider. Then he moved all that skirting to the side, lifted his head and removed his hand. Down the flat plane of her stomach, past the dimple of her belly button, over the perfectly pale skin of her pelvic cradle, he saw the graceful little slit of her sex.

His whole body trembled. "So perfect," he whispered. "So...exquisite."

Enthralled, he moved down the bed and filled himself with the sight of her. Pink, glistening, delicate. And he was catching a contact high from her scent, his brain shorting out in a flickering series of sparks. "Oh...Jesus..."

"What's wrong?" Her knees snapped together.

"Not a thing." He pressed his lips to the top of her thigh and stroked her legs, trying to part them gently. "Never seen anything so beautiful."

Hell, *beautiful* didn't even cut it and he licked his mouth, his tongue desperate for so much more of that action. In an absent voice, he said, "God, baby, I want to go down on you so badly right now."

"Go down?"

He flushed at her confusion. "I...ah, I want to kiss you."

She smiled and sat up, taking his face between her hands. But when she tried to draw him to her, he shook his head.

"Not on your mouth this time." As she frowned, he eased his hand back between her thighs. "Here."

Her eyes flared so wide he wanted to curse. *Way to make her feel relaxed, O'Neal.*

"Why..." She cleared her throat. "Why would you want to do that?"

Good Lord, hadn't she ever heard of...well, of course not. Aristocrats probably had very polite, very missionary sex, and if they even knew about the oral stuff, they certainly would *never* tell their daughters about it. No

wonder she was shocked.

“Why, Butch?”

“Ah...because if I do it right, you’ll really enjoy it. And...yeah, so will I.”

He glanced down her body. Oh, God, would he enjoy it. Going down on a woman had never been something he’d *had* to do before. With her? He needed it. He craved it. When he thought about making love to her with his mouth, every square inch of him got hard.

“I just want to taste you so damned much.”

Her thighs relaxed a little. “Go...slowly?”

Holy shit, she was going to let him? He started to tremble. “I will, baby. And I’m going to make you feel good. I promise.”

He shifted farther down the mattress, staying to the side of her so she didn’t feel crowded. As he got closer to her core, his body whacked out on him even more and the small of his back got tight, just like it did right before he had an orgasm.

Man, he was so going to have to go slow. For the both of them.

“I love your scent, Marissa.” He kissed her belly button, then her hip, going downward inch by creamy inch. Lower...lower...until he finally pressed his closed mouth to the top of her cleft.

Which was great for him. The problem was she went totally rigid. And jumped as he laid his hand on her outer thigh.

He moved back up a little and rubbed his lips back and forth on her stomach. “I’m so lucky.”

“W-why?”

“How would you feel if someone trusted you like this? Trusted you with such a private thing?” He blew into her belly button, and she laughed a little as if the warm air tickled. “You honor me, you know that? You really do.”

He soothed her out with words and leisurely kisses that lingered a little longer and went a little lower each time. When she was ready, he swept his hand down the inside of her leg, clasped the back of her knee and gently separated her just a couple of inches for himself. He kissed her slit softly, again and again. Until the tension eased out of her.

Then he lowered his chin, opened his mouth, and licked her. She gasped and sat up.

“Butch...?” As if she were checking to make sure he knew what he’d done.

“Didn’t I tell you?” He bent down and lightly traced up her pink flesh with his tongue. “This is all about French kissing, baby.”

As he repeated the slow sweeps, her head fell back, and the tips of her breasts rose as her spine curled. Perfect. Just where he wanted her to be. Not worried about modesty or anything like that, just enjoying the feel of someone loving her like she deserved.

With a smile, he kept going, gradually dragging deeper and deeper until he got a real honest-to-God taste of her.

His eyes rolled back in his head as he swallowed. She was like nothing he’d ever pulled down his throat. The ocean and ripe melon and honey all together, a cocktail that made him want to weep from the perfection of it. More...he needed more. But goddamn, he had to put a choke hold on himself before he could keep going. He wanted to feast on her, and she wasn’t ready for that kind of gluttony.

As he took a little breather, she tilted her head up. “Is it over?”

“Not by a long shot.” Man, he loved that glassy, sexed-up look in her eyes. “Why don’t you lie back and let me do my thing. We’re just getting started here.”

As she relaxed a little, he looked down at her secrets, seeing the high gloss on the tender flesh, thinking there was going to be a whole lot more of that shine when he was through. He kissed her again, then lollipopped her, flattening his tongue out and trolling up nice and lazylike. Then he swept his mouth from side to side, nuzzling in farther, hearing her moan. With gentle pressure, he opened her thighs more and latched on to her, drawing on her core in a rhythmic sucking.

When she started to thrash, a buzzing lit off in his head, the shrill warning a Danger, Will Robinson from the civilized part of him that things were about to go meteoric. But he couldn’t quit, especially as she grabbed onto the sheets and arched up like she was going to come at any second.

“Feel good?” He tickled the top of her cleft, flicking over the most sensitive part. “You like this? You like me tonguing you? Or maybe you like this...” He sucked her into his mouth and she cried out. “Oh, yeah...God, my lips are covered with you...feel them, feel me...”

He took her hand and brought it to his mouth, moving her fingers back and forth, then licking them clean. She watched him with wide eyes, panting, nipples tight. He was pushing her hard and he knew it, but she was right there with him.

He bit her palm. “Tell me you want this. Tell me you want me.”

“I...” Her body undulated on the bed.

“*Tell me you want me.*” He nailed her harder with his teeth. Shit, he wasn’t sure why he needed to hear it from her so badly, but he did. “Say it.”

“I want you,” she gasped.

From out of nowhere, a dangerous, greedy lust slapped hold of him and his control shattered. With a dark sound that came from his gut, he clamped his hands on the insides of her thighs, split her wide and literally dove between her legs. As he fell upon her flesh, penetrating her with his tongue, finding a rhythm with his jaw, he was dimly aware of some kind of noise in the room, a growling.

Him? Couldn’t be. That was the sound of...an animal.

Marissa had been shocked by the act at first. The carnality of it. The sinful closeness, the scary vulnerability. But soon none of that mattered. Butch’s warm tongue was so erotic she could hardly bear the slick, slippery sensation of it—and couldn’t stand the idea that he’d ever stop what he was doing, either. Then he started sucking on her, sucking and swallowing and saying things that made her sex swell until the pleasure stung like pain.

But all that was nothing compared to when he let loose. With a surge of male need, his heavy hands held her down, his mouth, his tongue, his face going all over her...God, that sound coming out of him, that throaty, pumping purr...

She orgasmed wildly, the most shattering, beautiful thing she’d ever felt, her body arching into the liquid flashes of pleasure—

Except at the crest, the seething energy shifted, transformed, detonated.

Bloodlust roared along the sexual current between them, then pulled her down into a spiral of starvation. Hunger ripped through her civilized nature, shredding everything but the need to go for his neck, and she bared her fangs, ready to flip him over onto his back and strike at his jugular and drink hard—

She was going to kill him.

She cried out and struggled against his hold. “Oh, God...no!”

“What?”

Shoving at Butch’s shoulders, she hauled her body away from him, shooting off the side of the bed and falling to the floor. As he reached for her in confusion, she scrambled across the rug to the far corner, her dress dragging behind, the top hanging from her waist. When there was no farther

to go, she curled into a ball and held herself in place. As her body shook uncontrollably, the pain in her belly hit in waves, redoubling each time it returned.

Butch came after her, panicked. “*Marissa...?*”

“*No!*”

He hauled up short. His face was stricken, all the color run out of his skin. “I’m so sorry—dear God—”

“*You’ve got to go.*” As tears came up her throat, her voice went guttural.

“Sweet Jesus, I’m sorry...I’m so sorry...I didn’t mean to scare you...”

She tried to control her breathing so she could reassure him, but lost the fight: She was panting, crying. Her fangs throbbed. Her throat was dry. And all she could think of was launching herself onto his chest. Pushing him down on the floor. Closing her teeth on his neck.

God, the drinking. He would taste good. So good, she couldn’t imagine ever getting enough of him.

He tried to come close to her again. “I didn’t mean for things to go so far
___”

She leaped up, opened her mouth, and hissed at him. “Get out! For God’s sake, leave! Or I’m going to hurt you!”

She raced for the bathroom and locked herself in. As the sound of the door slamming shut faded, she skidded to a halt on the marble and caught the horrible sight of herself in the mirror. Her hair was tangled, her dress undone, her fangs showing white and long in her gaping mouth.

Out of control. Undignified. *Defective.*

She grabbed the first thing she saw, a heavy glass candleholder, and hauled it against the mirror. As her reflection shattered, she watched through bitter tears as the pieces of herself fell apart.

Chapter Twenty-two

Butch threw himself at the bathroom door and jerked the handle until his palm nearly tore open. On the other side he heard Marissa crying. Then a shattering noise.

He drove his shoulder into the wooden panels. “Marissa!”

He hit the door with his body again, but then stopped and listened. Wild fear bit into him when there was only silence. “Marissa?”

“Just go.” The quiet desperation in her voice made his eyes sting. “Just... go.”

He splayed his hand on the wood that separated them. “I’m so sorry.”

“Go...just go. Oh, God, you have to leave.”

“Marissa—”

“*I won’t come out until you’re gone. Go!*”

Feeling as if he were in a nightmare, he grabbed his jacket and stumbled out of the bedroom, all sloppy, loose-bodied, weak in the knees. Out in the hall, he sagged back against the wall and banged his head into the plaster.

Squeezing his eyes shut, all he could see was her cowering in the corner, her trembling body drawn in a defensive crouch, her gown hanging loose from her bare breasts as if it had been ripped off her.

Fuck. Him. She was a lovely virgin and he’d treated her like a whore, pushing her too far and too hard because he hadn’t been able to control himself. Christ, no matter how hot she burned, she wasn’t used to what a man wanted to do during sex. Or what happened when a man’s instincts took over. And even though he’d *known* all of that, he’d still held her down on that bed by the thighs, trapping her while he tongue-fucked her, for God’s sake.

Butch slammed the back of his skull into the wall again. Dear God, she’d been so scared, she’d even bared her fangs as if she had to protect herself

from him.

With a nasty curse, he tore off down the stairs, trying to outrun how much he despised himself, knowing he couldn't go that fast or that far.

When he hit the foyer, someone yelled, "Butch? Yo, Butch! You okay?"

He burst outside, jumped into the Escalade, and cranked the engine. All he wanted to do was apologize to her until he was hoarse, but he was the last person on the planet she wanted to see at the moment. And he didn't blame her.

He gunned the SUV for downtown, heading straight for V's place.

By the time he'd curbed the Escalade and was riding up the high-rise's elevator, he was about to take the bridge he was such a mess. He threw open V's door—

Shit!

In the glow of black candles, Vishous was bent over with his head down, his leather-clad hips driving back and forth, his bare shoulders and massive arms flexed up hard. Beneath him, a female was tied down on the table at the wrists and ankles, her body wrapped in leather except for the tips of her breasts and where V was slamming into her core. Even though there was a mask over her face and a ball gag in her mouth, Butch was pretty damn sure she was on the verge of an orgasm. She was making little mewling noises, begging for more even as tears streaked down her leather-covered cheeks.

When V's head lifted from the female's neck, his eyes were glowing and his fangs were long as...well, she might need stitches, put it that way.

"My bad," Butch blurted and ducked out of the penthouse.

He went back down for the Escalade in a daze and couldn't seem to think of anywhere to go once he got to the SUV. He just sat in the driver's seat, key in the ignition, hand on the gearshift...picturing Vishous feeding.

The glowing eyes. The long fangs. The sex.

Butch thought about how unconcerned Marissa had been that she was ill. And her voice popped into his head. *I can take care of it.* Then, *I don't want to hurt you.*

What if Marissa needed to feed? What if that was why she'd sent him away? She was a goddamned vampire, for chrissakes. Or did he think those beautiful fangs of hers were just for decoration?

He put his head down on the steering wheel. Oh, man, this was so unattractive. He had no business looking for other explanations. Besides, why hadn't she just asked if she could take some of him? He would have let her in

a heartbeat. Maybe even faster.

Hell, the mere thought of it gave him a massive hard-on. The idea that she would settle in at his neck and suck was a turn-on the likes of which he'd never come across before. He pictured her naked, sprawled on his chest, her face at his throat—

Careful, O'Neal. Be careful you're not just looking for an out here.

Except she had been aroused, hadn't she. He'd tasted it. In fact, when he'd gone hard-core on her, it had seemed as if that sweetness had flowed even more. But then why hadn't she just told him what was wrong?

Maybe she didn't want to drink from him. Maybe she figured because he was a human he couldn't take it.

Maybe because he was a human, he actually couldn't.

Yeah, fuck that. He'd rather die feeding her than know some other man was taking care of his woman. The idea of Marissa's mouth on someone else's neck, her breasts against someone else's chest, her smell in someone else's nose...her swallowing someone else's blood...

Mine.

The word shot through his head. And he became aware his hand had moved into his coat and found the trigger of his Glock.

Hitting the gas, he took off for ZeroSum, knowing his next move had to be calming down and ironing his head out. Homicidal jealousy directed at some male vampire was so not on his to-do list.

When his cell phone started ringing in his pocket, he palmed the Razr.
“Yeah?”

V's voice was low. “Sorry you had to walk in on that. I didn't expect you to come—”

“V, what happens when a vampire doesn't feed?”

There was a pause. “Nothing good. You get tired, real damn tired. And the hunger hurts. Think food poisoning. Waves of pain rolling through your gut. If you let it get too out of hand, you turn into an animal. It gets dangerous.”

“I've heard those stories about Zsadist, back before he got with Bella. He lived off humans, right? And I know for a fact those women didn't die. I'd see them back in the club after he was finished with them.”

“You thinking of your girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, you headed for a drink?”

“More than one.”

“I’ll meet you.”

When Butch pulled into ZeroSum’s parking lot, V was waiting by the side of the club, smoking a hand-rolled. Butch got out and triggered the Escalade’s alarm.

“Cop.”

“V.” Butch cleared his throat and tried not to think about what his roommate looked like feeding and having sex. He failed. All he saw was Vishous over that female, dominating her, pumping into her, his body moving like a piston.

Man, he was going to have to readjust his definition of hard-core, thanks to that eyeful.

V drew hard on his cigarette, then put it out on the heel of his shitkicker and slipped the butt into his back pocket. “You ready to go in?”

“Christ, yes.”

The bouncers let them bypass the wait line and then they walked through the club’s writhing, sweating, oversexed crowd to the VIP section. Within moments, and without an order, a waitress brought over a Lagavulin double and some Grey Goose.

As V’s phone went off and he started talking, Butch glanced around—only to stiffen with a curse. In the corner, in the dim shelter of some shadow, he saw that tall, muscled female. And Rehvenge’s head of security was watching him, her eyes burning like she wanted a repeat of the bathroom action they’d had.

Not going to happen.

Butch looked down into his glass as V clipped his phone shut. “That was Fritz. Message from Marissa to you.”

Butch’s head jacked up. “What she say?”

“She wants you to know that she’s okay. Said she needs to lay low for tonight, but she’ll be fine tomorrow. Said she doesn’t want you to worry and she...ah, she loves you and you didn’t do anything wrong when you did whatever you did.” He cleared his throat. “So what did you do? Or is that TMI?”

“Wicked TMI.” Butch tossed his drink back and held his empty glass up. The waitress came immediately.

As she took off to get him a freshie, he looked down at his hands. And felt V’s eyes boring into him.

“Butch, she’s going to need more than you can give her.”

“Zsadist survived on—”

“Z drank from a lot of different humans. You’re just the one. Thing is, because your blood is so weak, she’ll drain you in no time because she’ll have to do it so often.” V took a deep breath. “Look, she can use me if you want. You can even be there so you know what happens. Sex doesn’t have to be involved.”

Butch tilted his head and focused on his roommate’s jugular. Then he imagined Marissa at that thick neck, the two of them together. Intertwined.

“V, you know I love you like a brother, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You feed her and I’ll tear your fucking throat out.”

V smirked, then broke into a full smile. The grin was so wide he had to cover his fangs with the back of his gloved hand. “Nuff said, my man. And just as well. I’ve never let someone take my vein before.”

Butch frowned. “Never?”

“Nope. I’m a vascular virgin. Personally, I hate the idea of some female feeding off me.”

“Why?”

“Not my bag.” Butch opened his mouth and V held up his hand. “Enough. Just know I’m here if you change your mind and want to use me.”

Not going to happen, Butch thought. Ever.

Taking a deep breath, he thanked God for Marissa’s message. And he’d been right: She’d kicked him out because she needed to feed. That had to be it. Man, he was sorely tempted to head back home, except he wanted to respect her wishes and not behave like a stalker. Besides, tomorrow night, assuming this was about blood...well, then he had something for her, didn’t he.

She was going to drink from him.

When the waitress came back with more Scotch, Rehvenge showed up at the table with her. The male’s massive body blocked out the view of the crowd which meant Butch couldn’t see the guy’s security officer. Which meant he could take a deep breath.

“My people keeping you wet enough?” Rehv asked.

Butch nodded. “Very wet.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” The Reverend slid into the booth, his amethyst eyes scanning the VIP section. He looked good, his suit black, his

silk shirt black, his mohawk a dark cropped stripe that ran front to back on his skull. “So I want to share a little news.”

“You getting married?” Butch tossed back half the new Lag. “Where you registered? Crate and Bury ’Em?”

“Try Heckler and Koch.” The Reverend opened his jacket and flashed the butt of a forty.

“Nice little poodle shooter you got there, vampire.”

“Put a hell of a—”

V cut in. “You two are like watching tennis, and racquet sports bore me. What’s the news?”

Rehv looked at Butch. “He has such phenomenal people skills, doesn’t he.”

“Try living with him.”

The Reverend smirked, then grew serious. As he spoke, his mouth barely moved and his words didn’t carry far. “The *Princeps* Council met night before last. Issue was mandatory *seclusion* for all unmated females. The *leahdyre* wants a recommendation passed and submitted to Wrath ASAP.”

V whistled under his breath. “A lockdown.”

“Precisely. They’re using my sister’s abduction and Wellesandra’s death as the rationales. Which is some powerful shit, as it should be.” The Reverend locked eyes with V. “Word to your boss. The *glymera* is pissed off at these civilian losses all around town. This motion is their warning shot across Wrath’s bow and they are dead serious about passing it. The *leahdyre*’s all up in my grill because they can’t hold a vote unless every member of the council is in the room, and I’m a consistent no-show. I can put off the meeting for a little while, but not forever.” At that moment, a cell phone went off in the Reverend’s jacket and he took the thing out. “And what do you know, here’s Bella now. Hey, sister mine—” The male’s eyes flashed and his body shifted. “*Tahllly?*”

Butch frowned, getting the distinct impression that whoever was on that line was a female and not of the sister kind: Rehvenge’s body was suddenly throwing off heat like a banked fire.

Man, you had to wonder what kind of woman would tangle with a piece of work like the Reverend. Then again, V was obviously getting laid, so those kind of females were out there.

“Hold on, *tahllly*.” Rehv frowned and got to his feet. “Later, gentlemen. And drinks are on me tonight.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” V said.

“I’m such a model fucking citizen, aren’t I?” Rehv sauntered down to his office and shut himself away.

Butch shook his head. “So the Reverend’s got a chippie, huh?”

V grunted. “Pity that female.”

“For real.” As Butch’s stare drifted, he tensed up. That hard-ass female with the men’s haircut still had her eyes on him in the shadows.

“Did you do her, cop?” V asked softly.

“Who.” He kicked the tail end of the shot.

“You know exactly who I’m asking about.”

“None of your biz, roommate.”

As Marissa waited for Rehvenge’s voice to come back on the line, she wondered where he was. There was a din coming over the connection—music, voices. A party?

The noise cut off sharply, as if he’d closed a door. “*Tahly*, where are you? Or did Havers get his phones really encrypted?”

“I’m not at home.”

Silence. Then, “Are you where I think you are? Are you with the Brotherhood?”

“How did you know?”

He muttered something, then said, “Only one number on the planet this phone can’t trace, and it’s where my sister calls me from. Now you’re pulling the same no-show thing for an I.D. What the hell’s going on?”

She glossed over the situation, telling him only that she and Havers had argued and she’d needed somewhere to stay.

Rehv cursed. “You should have called me first. I want to take care of you.”

“It’s complicated. Your mother—”

“You don’t worry about her.” Rehv’s voice smoothed out into a purr. “Come stay with me, *tahly*. All you have to do is materialize to the penthouse and I’ll have you picked up.”

“Thank you, but no. I’m only going to be here long enough to get settled somewhere else.”

“Settled somewhere—what the hell? This stuff with your brother is permanent?”

“It’ll be fine. Listen, Rehvenge, I...need you. I need to try again to...”

She put her head in her hand. She hated using him, but who else could she go to? And Butch...God, Butch...she felt like she was betraying him. Except what was her alternative?

Rehvenge growled, "When, *tahllly*? When do you want me?"

"Now."

"Just go to—ah, hell, I've got to meet the *Princeps leahdyre*. And then I've got some work-related issues I have to take care of."

She gripped the phone. Waiting was bad. "Tomorrow, then?"

"At nightfall. Unless you want to come and stay at my home. Then we could have...all day long."

"I'll see you first thing tomorrow evening."

"I can't wait, *tahllly*."

After she hung up, she stretched out on the bed and sank into utter exhaustion, her body becoming indistinguishable from the sheets and blankets and pillows, just another inanimate object on top of the mattress.

Oh, hell...maybe waiting until tomorrow was better. She could rest up then talk to Butch and let him know what was going on. As long as she wasn't sexually charged, she should be able to control herself around him and this was one conversation that was better to have in person: If humans who were in love were anything like bonded male vampires, Butch wasn't going to handle the fact that she needed to be with someone else well.

With a sigh, she thought about Rehv. Then the *Princeps* Council. Then her sex in general.

God, even if that *seclusion* motion was defeated by some miracle, there really was no safe place for females to go if they were threatened at home, was there? With the disintegration of vampire society and all the fighting with the *lessers*, there were no social services for the race. No safety net. No one to help females and their young if the *hellren* in their house was violent. Or if the family turned the female away.

Good Lord, what would have happened to her if Beth and Wrath hadn't taken her in? Or if she didn't have Rehvenge?

She might well have died.

Down in the compound's training center, John was the first in the locker room after the in-class session was done. He changed quickly into his jockstrap and his *ji*, impatient for the fighting practice to begin.

"What's the hurry, John? Oh, wait, you like to get your ass kicked."

John looked over his shoulder. Lash was standing in front of an open locker, taking off a fancy silk shirt. His chest was no bigger than John's and his arms just as thin, but as the guy stared back, his eyes burned like he was the size of a bull.

John met that glare head-on, his body heating up. Man, he was jonesing for Lash to open his mouth and say something else. Just one more thing.

“You gonna pass out on us again, John? Like the pansy you are?”

Bingo.

John launched himself at the kid but didn't get far. Blaylock, the redhead, caught him and held him back, trying to derail the fight. But Lash didn't have any such deadweight. The bastard drew his fist back and threw a right hook so hard that John spun out of Blaylock's hold and hit the bank of lockers with a metal bang.

Stunned, breath knocked out of him, John reached out blindly.

Blaylock caught him again. “*Jesus Christ, Lash—*”

“What? He was coming at me.”

“Because you were *begging* for it.”

Lash's eyes narrowed. “What did you say?”

“You don't have to be such an asshole.”

As Lash pointed at Blaylock, his Jacob & Co. watch sparkled under the lights like it was a battery-powered twinkler.

“Careful, Blay. Playing on his team ain't such a hot idea.” The guy shook out his hand and dropped his pants. “Man, that felt good. How was it on your end, John-boy?”

John let that one go and pushed himself free. As his face throbbed to the beat of his heart, he thought of a car blinker for some absurd reason.

Oh, Lord...how bad was the damage? He stumbled over to the row of sinks, and in the long mirror that ran down the length of the wall, he got a look at his puss. Great. Just great. His chin and lip were already swelling.

Blaylock appeared behind him with a cold bottle of water. “Put this on it.”

John took the icy Aquafina and eased it onto his face. Then he closed his eyes to avoid seeing either himself or the redhead.

“You want me to tell Zsadist you're not training tonight?”

John shook his head.

“You sure?”

Ignoring the question, John gave the water back and walked out to the

gym. The other guys followed in a tense group, stomping over the blue mats and lining up next to him.

Zsadist came out of the Equipment Room, took one look at John's face and got good and pissed off. "Everyone put their hands out, palms down." He walked past each trainee until he stopped in front of Lash. "Nice knuckles. Over against the wall."

Lash sauntered across the gym, looking self-satisfied that he wasn't going to have to work out.

Zsadist stopped in front of John's hands. "Turn 'em over."

John did. There was a heartbeat of silence. Then Zsadist gripped John's chin and forced his head up. "Seeing double?"

John shook his head.

"Nauseous?"

John shook his head.

"This hurt?" Zsadist prodded the jaw a little.

John winced. Shook his head.

"Liar. But that's what I want to hear." Z stepped away and addressed the trainees. "Laps. Twenty. And each time you get to your classmate over there, you drop in front of him and do twenty push-ups. Marine style. Move it."

The groans were loud.

"Do I look like I care?" Zsadist whistled through his teeth. "*Move it.*"

John started off with the rest of them, thinking this was going to be a really long night. But at least Lash wasn't looking quite so pleased with himself...

Four hours later, it turned out John was right.

By the end of the session, they were all exhausted. Z not only ground them into the mats, he kept them longer than usual. Like, centuries longer than usual. The damn training was so grueling that not even John had the energy to keep practicing after they broke for the night. Instead, he went directly to Tohr's office and collapsed in the chair without even showering.

Curling his legs up tight, he figured he would just rest a minute, then go rinse off—

The door swung open. "You okay?" Zsadist demanded.

John didn't look over, just nodded.

"I'm recommending that Lash get kicked out of the program."

John jerked upright and started shaking his head.

"Whatever, John. That's the second time he's gone after you. Or do I

have to remind you of the nunchakus thing a few months back?”

No, John remembered. Shit, though.

With too much to say to be able to sign and have Z catch everything, he reached for his pad and wrote with extra neatness: *If he gets kicked out, I look weak to the others. I want to fight with these guys someday. How can they trust me if they think I'm a lightweight?*

He handed the pad to Zsadist, who held the pages with care in his big hands. The Brother's head dropped low and his brows crunched together, his distorted mouth moving a little as if he were sounding out each word.

When Z was finished, he tossed the pad on the desk. “I won’t have that little shit beating on you, John. Just won’t have it. But you got a point. I’ll slap Lash with some serious probation. But one more of these happy little episodes, and he’s out.”

Zsadist walked over to the closet where the tunnel access was hidden, then looked over his shoulder. “Listen up, John. I don’t want a free-for-all during training. So no going after the bastard even though he deserves it. You just keep your head down and your hands to yourself. Phury and I’ll watch him for you, okay?”

John looked away, thinking of how badly he’d wanted to clock Lash. How badly he still wanted to do that.

“John? We clear? No brawling.”

After a long moment, John nodded slowly.

And hoped he’d be able to keep his word.

Chapter Twenty-three

Hours and hours and hours later, Butch's ass was so numb he couldn't tell where the floor ended and his butt began. All day long, he'd been sitting in this hallway outside of Marissa's bedroom door. Like the dog he was.

He couldn't say it had been wasted time. He'd done a lot of thinking.

And had made a phone call that had been the right thing to do, though a cringer to get through: He'd bitten the bullet and called his sister Joyce.

Nothing had changed at home. Evidently his family back in South Boston still had no interest in having anything to do with him. And that didn't really bother him because it was the status quo. But it did make him feel bad for Marissa. She and her brother had been tight, so getting turned out by him must have been a truly nasty surprise.

"Master?"

Butch looked up. "Hey, Fritz."

"I have what you asked for." The *doggen* bowed low and held out a black velvet bag. "I believe it matches your specifications, but if it does not, I can find another."

"I'm sure it's perfect." Butch took the heavy satchel, split it open at the mouth, and poured the contents into his hand. The solid gold cross was three inches long and two inches wide, thick as a finger. Suspended at the end of a long, gold chain, it was exactly what he'd wanted and he put it around his neck with satisfaction.

The substantial weight was just as he'd hoped it would be, a tangible protection.

"Master, how is it?"

Butch smiled up at the *doggen*'s wrinkled face while unbuttoning his shirt and dropping the necklace inside. He felt the cross slide down his skin until it

lay right over his heart. “Like I said, perfect.”

Fritz beamed, bowed, and took off, just as the grandfather clock started chiming down at the other end of the corridor. Once, twice...six times.

The bedroom door in front of him swung open.

Marissa appeared before him as an apparition. After so many hours of thinking about her, his eyes were momentarily snowed, seeing her not as real but as a figment of his desperation, her dress ether not cloth, her hair a glorious golden aura, her face a haunting well of beauty. As he stared up at her, his heart transformed her into an icon from his Catholic childhood, the Madonna of salvation and love...and him her unworthy servant.

He dragged himself off the floor, his spine cracking as it supported his weight. “Marissa.”

Ah, shit, his emotions were all right there in his rusted-out voice, the pain, the sadness, the regret.

She held her hand up. “I meant what I said in that message last night. I loved being with you. Every moment. That wasn’t why you had to leave and I wish I could have explained myself better at the time. Butch, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, I know. But do you mind if we go down the hall for this?” Because he had no intention of having an audience, and no matter what she said, he figured she’d prefer not to be in a bedroom alone with him. She was tense as hell.

When she nodded, they headed to the sitting room at the end of the corridor, and on the way, he was stunned by how weak she was. She moved slowly, as if she couldn’t feel her legs, and she was terribly pale, nearly transparent from a lack of energy.

Once inside the peach and yellow room, she went over to the windows, away from him.

Her words were thin as breath as she spoke. “Butch, I don’t know how to say this...”

“I know what’s doing.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” He started toward her, arms out. “Don’t you know I would do anything—”

“Don’t come any closer.” She stepped back. “You’ve got to stay away from me.”

He dropped his hands. “You need to feed, don’t you?”

Her eyes widened. "How did you—"

"It's all right, baby." He smiled a little. "It's *very* all right. I talked with V."

"So you know what I've got to do? And you don't...mind?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine with it. More than fine."

"Oh, thank the Scribe Virgin." She lurched over to a sofa and sat down as if her knees had buckled. "I was so afraid you'd be offended. It'll be hard on me as well, but it's the only safe way. And I can't wait any longer. It has to be tonight."

When she patted the couch seat, he went over with relief and sat beside her, taking her hands in his. God, she was so cold.

"I'm really ready for this," he said, with thick anticipation. Man, he was suddenly dying to head back to her bedroom. "Let's go."

A curious expression crossed her face. "You want to watch?"

He stopped breathing. "Watch?"

"I, ah...I'm not sure that's a good idea."

As her words hit him, Butch became aware of a sinking feeling in his gut. Like someone had popped the stoppers on a number of his internal organs. "What are you talking about, *watch*?"

"When I'm with the male who lets me take his vein."

Abruptly, Marissa recoiled, giving him a good idea of what the expression on his face must be like.

Yeah, or maybe she was reacting to the fact that he'd started to growl.

"The other male," he said slowly, as he put it all together. "The one you told me you've been seeing. You've fed from him."

She nodded slowly. "Yes."

Butch jacked up to his feet. "Often?"

"Ah...four or five times."

"And he's an aristocrat, of course."

"Well, yes."

"And he'd make a socially acceptable mate for you, wouldn't he." Unlike a POS human. "Wouldn't he?"

"Butch, it isn't romantic. I swear."

Yeah, maybe on her side it wasn't. But it was damn hard to imagine any male not sexing her. The bastard would have to be impotent or some shit.

"He's into you, isn't he. Answer the question, Marissa. Flyboy with the superhero plasma...he wants you, doesn't he? *Doesn't he?*"

God, where the hell was this wild jealousy coming from?

“But he knows I don’t feel that way about him.”

“Has he kissed you?”

When she didn’t reply, Butch was very glad he didn’t know the Joe’s name and address. “You’re not using him anymore. You have me.”

“Butch, I can’t feed from you. I’ll take too—where are you going?”

He stalked across the room, shut the double doors, and locked them in together. As he came back at her, he tossed his black suit jacket on the floor and ripped open his shirt, the buttons popping off and flying everywhere. Falling to his knees in front of her, he tilted back his head and offered his throat, himself, to her.

“*You will use me.*”

There was a long silence. Then her scent, that gorgeous clean fragrance, intensified until it flooded the room. Her body began to shake, her mouth opening.

As her fangs unsheathed, he got an instant erection.

“Oh...yeah,” he said in a dark voice. “Take me. I need to feed you.”

“No,” she moaned, tears glowing in her cornflower blue eyes.

She made a move to get up, but he jumped at her, taking her by the shoulders, holding her down on the couch. He moved himself between her legs, bringing their bodies together, getting all up in her. While she trembled against him and pushed at him, he kept her close, nuzzling her, nipping her ear, sucking on her jaw. Before long, she stopped fighting to get away. And started gripping the two halves of his shirt to pull him in tighter.

“That’s right, baby,” he growled. “You grab on to me. Let me feel those fangs get into me deep. *I want it.*”

He palmed the back of her head and brought her mouth to his throat. As an arc of pure sexual power exploded between them, they both began to pant, her breath and tears hot on his skin.

But then she seemed to come to her senses. She struggled hard and he did his best to keep her in place, even though they were both going to end up with bruises. And even though he was ultimately going to lose the fight against her. As he was just a human, she was stronger, even though he outweighed her by well over a hundred pounds.

But hopefully she would give in and use him before his energy flagged.

“Marissa, please, *take me,*” he groaned, his voice hoarse from the struggle and now the begging.

“No...”

His heart broke as she sobbed, but he didn’t let her go. He couldn’t.
“Take what’s inside of me. I know I’m not good enough, but take me anyway
—”

“Don’t make me do this—”

“I have to.” God, he felt like crying with her.

“Butch...” Her body bucked and strained against his, their clothes flapping as they struggled. “I can’t hold back...for much longer...let me go...before I hurt you.”

“Never.”

It happened so fast. His name shot out of her on a yell and then he felt a searing blaze of pain at the side of his throat.

Her fangs sinking into his jugular.

“Oh...fuck...yes...!” He loosened his grip and cradled her as she latched on to his neck. He barked her name at the first erotic draw, the first hard suck on his vein, the first swallow for her. As she repositioned for a better angle, pleasure swamped him, sparks flowing all through his body as if he were orgasming. This was so the way it had to be. He needed her to take from him in order to live—

Marissa broke the contact and dematerialized, right out of his arms.

Butch fell headfirst into the empty air where she’d been, face-planting into the sofa cushions. In a messy scramble, he shoved himself to his feet and spun around. “Marissa! Marissa!”

He threw himself at the doors and clawed at the lock, but couldn’t get free.

Then he heard her broken, desperate voice on the other side. “I’ll kill you...God help me, but I’ll kill you...I want you too much.”

He pounded on the door. “Let me out!”

“I’m sorry—” Her voice cracked, then grew strong. And he feared her resolve more than anything else. “I’m so sorry. I’ll come to you afterward. After it is done.”

“Marissa, don’t do this—”

“I love you.”

He beat the wood with his fists. “I don’t care if I die! Don’t go to him!”

When the lock finally gave way, he burst into the hall and ran flat out for the staircase.

But by the time he threw open the mansion’s front door she was gone.

Across town, in the underground parking garage where the brokered fights took place, Van hopped into the chicken-wire cage and bounced on the balls of his feet. The drumbeat of him warming up echoed through the concrete levels, cutting off the silence.

Tonight there was no crowd, just three people. But he was juiced like it was standing room only.

Van was the one who'd suggested the locale to Mr. X, and he'd shown them how to break into the place. As he knew the schedule of fights, he'd been sure there wouldn't be anyone around this evening and a big part of him wanted to have his glory, his resurrection here in this ring, not in some anonymous basement somewhere.

He tried out some kicks, so very satisfied with his strength, then eyed his opponent. The other *lesser* was just as lit for the hand-to-hand as he was.

From the other side of the cage, Xavier barked, "You don't stop until it's over. And Mr. D, on the ground unmoving is not 'over,' we clear?"

Van nodded, already used to being called by his last initial.

"Good." Xavier's palms clapped together and the fight was Van and the other *lesser* circled each other, but Van had no intention of letting the slow-dance crap go on for long. He moved in first, throwing punches, forcing his opponent back against the cage. The guy took the bare-knuckled pounders like they were nothing more than spring rain on his cheeks and then tossed out a mean-ass right hook. The damn thing caught Van at an angle, splitting his lip open like an envelope.

It hurt, but the pain was good, a strengthener, something that focused him further. Van spun around and sent his foot out flying, a body bomb on the end of a steel chain. Sure as shit it took the *lesser* down, sprawling the guy flat. Van jumped on his opponent and cranked him into a submission hold, wrenching one arm back and around so the joints strained at the shoulder and elbow. Just a little tighter and he was going to pop this sucker right off—

The *lesser* pulled a smoothie, somehow nailing Van in the balls with his knee. Quick switch of positions and Van was on the bottom. Then another roll and they were up on their feet.

The fight went on and on, no time-outs, no breathers, the two of them battering the holy hell out of each other. It was flipping miraculous. Van felt like he could go for hours, no matter how beat up his body got. It was like he had an engine in him, a driving force, one that was not as dulled by

exhaustion or pain as his old self had been.

When the break in the action finally came, the tipping factor was Van's special...whatever it was. Though the two of them were identically matched for strength, Van was the master at this, and he saw the opening for the win. He popped the other slayer in the gut, nailing a liver shot that would have left a human opponent shitting in his shorts. Then he picked his opponent up and slammed him down onto the ring floor. As he mounted the body and looked down, Van's blood welled from the cuts around his eyes and dropped onto the guy's face like tears...black tears.

The color momentarily freaked Van out, and the other *lesser* took advantage of the lapse in focus by spinning him over onto his back.

Yeah, not happening, not this time. Van balled his fist and rammed it into the guy's temple at exactly the right force and the right place, knocking the *lesser* stupid. With a quick surge, Van kicked his opponent over, straddled the slayer's chest and repeated the punch over and over again, battering the skull until the bone helmet went soft. And he just kept going, sticking to the task until the very structure of the man's face let go, the head becoming a loose bag, his opponent dead and then some.

"Finish him!" Xavier called from the sidelines.

Van looked up, panting hard. "I just did."

"No...*finish him!*"

"How?"

"You should know what to do!" Xavier's pale eyes shined with an eerie desperation. "You must!"

Van wasn't clear on exactly how much deader he could make the guy, but he grabbed the *lesser* by the ears and twisted until the neck snapped. Then he eased off the body. Though he had no heart that beat anymore, his lungs burned and his body was deliciously logy from exertion...except the logy didn't last.

He started to laugh. Already the strength was returning to him, just pouring in from somewhere else as if he'd eaten and slept and recovered for days.

Xavier's boots landed hard in the ring and the *Fore-lesser* strode over, furious. "I told you to finish him, goddamn it."

"Uh-huh. Right." *Christ.* Xavier just had to suck the triumph out of the moment. "You think he's walking away from this?"

Xavier shook with rage as he took out a knife. "*I told you to finish him.*"

Van tensed up and leaped to his feet. But Xavier just bent over that messy, punching bag of a *lesser* and stabbed the thing in the chest. There was a flash of light and then...gone. Nothing but black smudges on the ring's tarmac.

Van backed up until he hit the fencing. "What the hell..."

From across the way, Xavier pointed the knife right at Van's chest. "I have expectations for you."

"Like...what?"

"You should be able to do that"—he jabbed toward the disintegration mark with the blade—"on your own."

"So give me a knife next round."

Xavier shook his head, a bizarre kind of panic flaring in his face. "Fuck!" He paced around, then muttered, "It's just going to take time. Let's go."

"What about the blood?" Man, that oily black stuff suddenly made him dizzy.

"Like I give a shit?" Xavier picked up the dead *lesser*'s duffel bag and left.

As Van followed him out of the parking garage, he found it really fucking annoying that Mr. X was playing it like this. The fight had been a good one and Van had won. He wanted to enjoy the feeling.

In strained silence, the two of them headed for the minivan, which was parked blocks away. As they went along, Van scrubbed his face with a towel and tried not to curse. When they got to the car, Xavier slid behind the wheel.

"Where are we going?" Van asked as he got in.

Xavier didn't answer, just started to drive, so Van stared out the windshield, wondering how he could get away from the guy. Not easily, he suspected.

As they passed by a new skyscraper that was going up, he eyed the men pulling the nightshift. Under electric lights, the union crews were all over the building like ants, and he envied them even though he'd hated doing what they did.

Man, if he were still one of them, he wouldn't be dealing with Mr. X's crap attitude.

On a whim, Van lifted his right hand and looked at his missing pinkie, remembering how he'd done it. So fucking stupid. He'd been at a construction site, cutting boards on a table saw, and decided to take the guards off the machine to make the process go faster. One lapse of focus later

and his finger had ended up flying through the air with the greatest of ease. The blood loss had seemed tremendous, the stuff leaking all over him, covering the saw's flat back, soaking into the ground. Red, not black.

Van put his hand to his chest and felt nothing beating behind his breastbone.

Anxiety trembled down the back of his neck, like spiders slipping under his collar. He glanced at Xavier, the only resource he had. "Are we alive?"

"No."

"But that guy was killed, right? So we must be alive."

Xavier's eyes shot across the seat. "We're not alive. Trust me."

"What happened to him, then?"

Exhaustion flared in Xavier's pale, dead stare, the drooping of his lids making him look like he was a million years old.

"What happened to him, Mr. X?"

The *Fore-lesser* didn't answer, just kept on driving.

Chapter Twenty-four

Marissa materialized on the terrace of Rehvenge's penthouse and nearly collapsed. As she lurched for the sliding door, he opened it wide.

"Marissa, good God." He shot his arm around her and pulled her inside.

Overcome with bloodlust, she gripped his biceps, the thirst in her so strong she was liable to bite him where he stood. To keep from ripping his throat open, she yanked out of his hold, but he caught her and spun her around.

"Come over here right now!" He all but threw her on the couch. "You're about to shock out on me."

As she hit the cushions in a heap, she knew he was right. Her body was wildly off balance, her head spinning, her hands and feet numb. Her stomach was an empty, grinding pit, her fangs throbbing, her throat dry as winter, hot as August.

But when he yanked his tie off and popped the buttons on his shirt, she mumbled, "Not at your throat. I can't bear that...not your—"

"You're too far gone for the wrist. You won't get enough and we're out of time."

As if on cue, her vision started to dim and she began to pass out. She heard him swear and then he pulled her on top of him, shoved her face in his neck and...

Biology took over. She bit him so hard she felt his big body jerk and she sucked at him with mindless instinct. With a great roar, his strength poured into her gut and spread out to her limbs and made her body come back to life.

As she swallowed with desperation, her tears flowed as thick as his blood.

Rehvenge held Marissa loosely, hating the starvation that rode her so hard. She was such a fragile, delicate thing. She should never be in this desperate state, and he ran his hands up and down her willowy back, trying to calm her. While she cried silently, he got pissed. Christ, what was wrong with that male she was so into? How could he force her to come to another?

Ten minutes later, she lifted her head. There was a little streak of blood on her lower lip and Rehv had to grab onto the sofa arm so he didn't lean up and lick it off.

With satiated grace but a face marked by tears, Marissa eased back against the leather cushions at the other end of the couch and cradled herself with her thin arms. She closed her eyes and he watched the color float back into her wet cheeks.

God, look at that hair of hers. So fine. So lush. So perfect. He wanted to be naked and unmedicated and hard as a stone, with those blond waves all over his body. And if he couldn't have all that, he wanted to kiss her. Right now.

Instead, he reached for his suit coat, grabbed his handkerchief, and leaned over to her. She jumped as he blotted her tears, and she took the linen square from him quickly.

He went back to his corner of the sofa. "Marissa, come stay with me. I want to take care of you."

In the silence that followed, he thought about where she was staying—and figured the male she wanted had to be at the Brotherhood's compound. "You're still in love with Wrath, aren't you."

Her eyes flipped open. "What?"

"You said you couldn't feed from the male you wanted. Wrath's mated now—"

"It's not him."

"Phury, then? As a celibate—"

"No, and I—I just can't talk about it, if you don't mind." She looked down at his handkerchief. "Rehvenge, I would really love some time alone. May I sit here for a little while? By myself?"

Even though he wasn't used to being dismissed, especially not from his own turf, he was so willing to cut her some slack. "Stay as long as you like, *tahly*. Just close the slider when you leave. I'll remote the alarm after you go."

As he put his suit coat on, he left his tie loose and his shirt collar open

because she'd chewed him raw and the bite marks were too tender to be covered. Not that he cared in the slightest.

"You are so kind to me," she said, staring at his loafers.

"Actually, I'm not."

"How can you say that? You never ask for anything in return—"

"Marissa, look at me. *Look at me.*" Dear Virgin in the Fade, she was beautiful. Especially with his blood in her. "Don't kid yourself. I still want you as my *shellan*. I want you naked in my bed. I want you swelling up with my young in your body. I want...yeah, the whole thing with you. I don't do this to be nice, I do it to get under your skin. I do it because I hope I can someday, somehow get you where I want you to be."

As her eyes peeled wide, he kept the rest to himself. No reason to air the fact that the *sympath* in him wanted to crawl around in her head and own every emotion she ever felt. Or share the reality that sex with him would be... complicated.

Ah, the joys of his nature. And his anomaly.

"But I want you to trust in something, Marissa. I won't ever cross the line if you don't want me to."

Besides, Xhex was probably right. Half-breeds like him did better going solo. Even if *sympaths* weren't discriminated against and could mate and live like Normals, they should never be with someone who was defenseless against their dark side.

He pulled on his floor-length sable coat. "This male of yours...he better get with the program. Damn fucking waste of a female of worth like you." Rehv grabbed his cane and headed for the door. "If you need me, call me."

Butch walked into ZeroSum, went back to the Brotherhood's table, and took off his Aquascutum raincoat. He was going to be here for a while. Which wasn't a news flash, was it? Hell, he should just pitch a damn pup tent and move in.

As the waitress came up with a Scotch, he said, "Any chance you can just bring me a bottle?"

"Sorry, I can't."

"Okay, come here." He crooked his finger at her. When she leaned down, he put a hundred-dollar bill on her tray. "This is just for you. I want you to keep me nice and pour'd."

"Absolutely."

Alone at the table, Butch reached up to his neck, his fingertips running over the puncture wounds. As he felt where he'd been bitten, he tried not to imagine what Marissa was doing right now to someone else. To an aristocrat. To a well-bred bastard who was better than him, platinum to his nickel. *Oh, God.*

Like a mantra, he repeated what V had said. That it didn't have to be sexual. That it was a biological imperative. That there was no choice. That it...didn't have to be sexual. He was hoping if he heard the litany often enough in his head, his emotions would calm the hell down so he could accept the necessity of what she had to do. After all, Marissa wasn't being cruel. She'd been as distraught as he was—

In a vivid flash, he saw her naked body and couldn't help but picture another man's hands smoothing over her breasts. Another man's lips traveling across her skin. Another man taking her virginity as he nourished her, his hard body moving on top of her, inside of her.

And all the while she was drinking...drinking until she had her fill, until she was sated, replete.

Taken care of. By someone else.

Butch hammered his double Lag.

Holy fuck. He was going to crack in half. He was going to fall apart, right here, right now, his raw insides spilling onto the floor, his vitals getting ground down under the feet of strangers along with fallen cocktail napkins and credit card receipts.

The waitress, bless her heart, came over with more Scotch.

As he picked up the second glass, he lectured himself: *O'Neal, get your sack together and grow some pride. Have some faith in her, too. She would never sleep with another man. She just wouldn't.*

But the sex was just part of it.

As he downed the Scotch, he realized there was another dimension to the nightmare. She was going to have to feed regularly, wasn't she. They were going to have to do this over and over again.

Fuck. He'd like to think he was a big enough man, a confident enough man, to handle all this, but he was possessive and selfish. And the next time she fed, they would be back where they were now, her in another man's arms, him drinking in a club alone on the verge of hanging himself. Only it would be worse. And the time after that, even more so. He loved her so much, so deeply, that he would destroy them both and it wouldn't take long.

Besides, what kind of future could they have? With the way he'd been pounding the Scotch lately, he probably only had another ten years left in his liver and her kind lived for centuries. He'd just be a footnote in her long life, a pothole on the road to her eventually finding a mate who was right for her, who could give her what she needed.

When the waitress brought him a third double, Butch held up his forefinger to keep her by his side. He downed the glass while she waited, gave it to her, and she went back to the bartender.

As she returned with number four, that scrawny blond Eurotrasher with his trio of thick-necked bodyguard types started waving for her attention from two tables over.

Christ, seemed like every damn night the kid was in this place. Or maybe it was just a little of the idiot went a long way.

"Hey!" the kid called out. "We need service over here. Get the lead out."

"I'll be right over," the waitress said.

"Now," the ass snapped. "Not later."

"I won't be gone long," she murmured to Butch.

As she went over to the punk, Butch watched as she got majorly harassed. Goddamned bigmouthed show-offs, all of them. And they weren't going to improve as the night went on.

Then again, neither was Butch.

"You look a little aggressive there, Butch O'Neal."

He squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, the female with the man's hair and the man's body was still in front of him.

"We going to have trouble with you tonight, Butch O'Neal?"

He wished she'd stop saying his name. "Nah, I'm good."

Her eyes flashed with an erotic light. "Oh, I know that. But let's get real. You going to be a problem tonight?"

"No."

She stared at him long and hard. Then smiled a little. "Well...I'll be watching you. So keep that in mind."

Chapter Twenty-five

Joyce O’Neal Rafferty met her husband at the door with the baby on her hip and a glare on her face. As Mike stood on the cold side of the welcome mat, he was clearly tired after pulling double shifts on the T, but she couldn’t have cared less. “I got a telephone call today from my brother. Butch. You told him about the baptism, didn’t you.”

Her husband kissed Sean, but didn’t try it with her. “Come on, honey—”
“This is not your business!”

Mike shut the door. “Why do you all hate him so much?”
“I am *not* going there with you.”

As she wheeled away, he said, “He didn’t kill your sister, Jo. He was twelve. What could he have done?”

She shifted her son in her arms and didn’t turn around. “This is not about Janie. Butch turned his back on the family years ago. His choice, got nothing to do with what happened.”

“Maybe all of you turned your back on him.”

She glared over her shoulder. “Why are you defending him?”

“He was my friend. Before I met and married you, he was my friend.”

“Some friend. When was the last time you heard from him?”

“Doesn’t matter. He was good to me when I knew him.”

“You are such a bleeding heart.” She headed for the stairs. “I’m going to feed Sean. I left you some dinner in the fridge.”

Joyce marched up to the second floor, and when she hit the top landing, she glared at the crucifix that hung on the wall. Turning away from the cross, she went into Sean’s room and sat down in the rocker by his crib. Baring her breast, she brought her son up and he latched on, his hand squeezing the flesh that was next to his face. As he fed, his little body was warm and pudgy with

health, his lashes down on his rosy cheeks.

Joyce took a number of deep breaths.

Crap. Now she felt bad for yelling. And for forsaking the Savior's cross. She said a Hail Mary and then tried to calm herself by counting Sean's perfect toes.

God...if anything happened to him, she would die, her heart would literally never beat the same way again. How had her mother done it? How had she lived through the loss of a child?

And Odell had lost two, hadn't she. First Janie. Then Butch. Thank God the woman's mind was going soft. The relief from bad memories must be a blessing.

Joyce stroked Sean's fine dark hair and realized that her mother had never even gotten to say good-bye to Janie. The body had been too ruined to fix up for an open casket, and Eddie O'Neal, as the father, had done the ID at the morgue.

God, on that horrible fall afternoon, if only Butch had followed through and run into the house and told a grown-up that Janie had just left...maybe they could have saved her. Janie hadn't been allowed to get in cars with boys and everyone knew the rules. Butch knew the rules. If only...

Ah, hell. Her husband was right. The whole family hated Butch. No wonder he'd taken off and all but disappeared.

With a whiffle, Sean's mouth went slack and his little hand eased up. But then he jerked awake again and got back with the program.

Talk about disappearing...Good Lord, her mother wasn't going to get a good-bye with Butch, either, was she? Her lucid moments were so few and far between. Even if Butch showed up at the church this Sunday, she might well not even recognize him.

Joyce heard her husband coming up the stairs, his footfalls slow.

"Mike?" she called out.

The man she loved and had married appeared in the doorway. He was developing a middle-aged belly, and he was losing the hair at the crown of his head even though he was only thirty-seven. But as she stared at him now, she saw his younger self: The high school jock. The friend of her older brother Butch. The hotshot football player that she'd had a crush on for years.

"Yeah?" he said.

"I'm sorry. For getting so pissed off."

He smiled a little. "It's some tough stuff. I understand."

“And you’re right. Butch probably should have been invited. I just—I want the day of the baptism to be pure, you know? Just—pure. It’s Sean’s beginning and I don’t want any shadows. Butch...he carries that shadow around and everyone would get tense, and with Mother being so sick, I don’t want to deal.”

“Did he say he was coming?”

“No. He...” She thought about the conversation. Funny, he’d sounded the same. Her brother had always had the strangest voice, so husky and hoarse. Like either his throat was deformed or there was too much that he wasn’t saying. “He said he was happy for us. Thanked you for the call. Said he hoped Mom and Dad were okay.”

Her husband glanced down at Sean, who had melted into sleep again. “Butch doesn’t know your mother’s ill, does he?”

“No.” In the beginning, when Odell had just been forgetful, Joyce and her sister had decided to wait until they knew what was wrong to tell Butch. But that had been two years ago, hadn’t it. And they knew what was wrong, didn’t they. Alzheimer’s.

God only knew how much longer Mother was going to be around. The disease was progressing relentlessly.

“I am a thief not to tell Butch,” she said softly. “Aren’t I.”

“I love you,” Mike murmured.

Her eyes watered as she looked from her son’s face up to his father’s. Michael Rafferty was a good man. A solid man. He was never going to be Hugh Jackman handsome or Bill Gates rich or King of England powerful. But he was hers and he was Sean’s and that was more than enough. Especially on nights like tonight, during conversations like this.

“I love you, too,” she said.

Vishous materialized behind ZeroSum and walked down the alley to the front of the club. When he saw the Escalade curbed on Tenth Street, he was relieved. Phury had said Butch had split from the mansion like Jeff Gordon and not because he was a happy guy.

V went into the club and headed straight for the VIP section. But he didn’t make it.

That female head of security stepped in front of him, her jacked body blocking his way. As he gave her a quick once-over, he wondered what it would be like to tie her up. She’d probably leave scars in the process, and

wouldn't that be a fun way to kill an hour or two.

"Your boy needs to leave," she said.

"He at our table?"

"Yeah, and you better get him out of here. Now."

"What's the damage?"

"None yet." They both took off for the VIP area. "But I don't want things to get that far, and we're right on the edge."

As they weeded in and out of the crowd, V glanced at those muscled arms of hers and thought about the job she had in the club. Hard-core for anyone, but especially a female. He had to wonder why she did it.

"Do you get off cracking males?" he said.

"Sometimes, but with O'Neal I prefer the sex."

V stopped dead.

The female glanced over her shoulder. "There a problem?"

"When did you do him?" Though he somehow knew it had been recently.

"The question is when I'll be with him again." She nodded toward the VIP checkpoint. "But it won't be tonight. Now go get him and haul him out of here."

V narrowed his eyes. "'Scuse the old-school, but Butch is OPP."

"Oh, really? Is that why he's in here almost every night getting faced? His mate must be a real darling."

"Don't go near him again."

The female's expression hardened. "Brother or not, you do *not* tell me to do anything."

V leaned in close and bared his fangs. "Like I said, you stay away from him."

For a split second, he thought they were going to go at it, he really did. He'd never thrown hand to hand with a female before, but this one...well, she didn't really seem female. Especially as she eyed his jaw like she was measuring her uppercut reach.

"You two want a room or a boxing ring?"

Vishous turned to see Rehvenge standing not three feet away, the male's amethyst eyes glowing in the dimness. Under the floodlights, that mohawk was as dark as the floor-length sable coat he wore.

"Do we have a problem?" Rehvenge glanced back and forth as he took off his fur and handed it to a bouncer.

"Not at all," V said. He glanced at the female. "Nothing doing, right?"

“Yeah,” she drawled, crossing her arms over her chest. “Nothing.”

V pushed past the bouncers in front of the velvet rope and went straight for the Brotherhood’s table—*oh...man.*

Butch looked totally wasted and not just because he was drunk. His face was drawn in grim lines, his eyes half-closed. His tie was out of whack, his shirt partially unbuttoned...and there was a bite mark on his neck that had bled a little onto his collar.

And yup, he was spoiling for a fight, glaring at the rowdy table of highfliers two banquettes down. Shit, the cop was a hairbreadth away from jumping them, all coiled and ready to spring.

“Hey, my man.” V sat down real slowly, thinking no sudden movements was a good plan. “What up?”

Butch threw back his Scotch without looking away from the class-A asses next door. “How’re ya, V?”

“Good, good. So how many of those Lags you have?”

“Not enough. I’m still vertical.”

“You want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Not particularly.”

“You got bit, buddy.”

As the waitress came over and picked up the cop’s empty, Butch touched the bite wounds on his throat. “Only because I forced her. And she stopped. She won’t take me, not really. So she’s with someone else. Right now.”

“Shit.”

“That’s about the gist of it. As we’re sitting here, my woman is with another man. He’s an aristocrat, by the way. Did I mention that? A fancy-ass male is touching...yeah, anyway.... Whoever he is, he’s stronger than I am. He’s giving her what she needs. He’s feeding her. He’s—” Butch cut off the tailspin. “So how’s your night going?”

“I told you, the drinking doesn’t have to be sexual.”

“Oh, I know that.” The cop leaned back as his next drink arrived. “You want some Goose? No? Okay...I’ll hold it down for the both of us.” He hammered half the Scotch before the waitress even turned around. “It’s not just the sex. I can’t stand the idea of someone else’s blood in her. *I* want to feed her. *I* want to keep her alive.”

“That’s not logical, my man.”

“Fuck logic.” He looked down at the Scotch. “Jesus...didn’t we just do this?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I mean...We were just here last night. Same drink. Same table. Same... everything. It’s like I’m locked into this pattern and I’m sick of it. I’m sick of me.”

“How about I take you home?”

“Don’t want to go back to th—” Butch’s voice cut off and he stiffened in his seat, his shot glass lowering slowly to the table.

V went on red alert. Last time the cop had sported that fixated expression there had been *lessers* in the fucking bushes. Except as Vishous looked around, he saw no one special, just the Reverend walking into the VIP area and heading for his office.

“Butch? My man?”

Butch stood up from the table.

Then moved so fast, V had no time to catch him.

Chapter Twenty-six

Butch's body was out of his control and acting independently as he shot across the VIP section at Rehvenge. All he knew was that he'd caught Marissa's scent and tracked it over to the mohawk-sporting male. Next move was gunning for the guy like he was a felon.

He took the Reverend down hard, surprise working in his favor. As they hit the floor, the male's "What the fuck!" carried, and bouncers started homing in from all directions. Just before Butch got pulled off, he yanked Rehvenge's shirt collar open.

There they were. Puncture marks right on the guy's throat.

"No...shit, no..." Butch fought against the hard hands that grabbed at him, fought and kicked until somebody got in front of him, raised a fist and popped him one right in the face. As a bomb burst of pain went off in his left eye, he realized it was the female security guard who'd hit him.

Rehvenge plugged his cane into the floor and got up, his eyes a violent purple. "In my office. Now."

There was some conversation at that point, not that Butch was following much. The only thing he could focus on was the male in front of him and the evidence of the feeding. He pictured the guy's massive body underneath Marissa's, her face dropping down into his neck, her fangs piercing skin.

No doubt Rehvenge had satisfied her. No. Doubt.

"Why did it have to be you?" Butch yelled into the fray. "*I fucking like you. Why did it have to be you?*"

"Time to go." V cranked Butch into a headlock. "I'm taking you home."

"Not right now you aren't," Rehvenge snarled. "He took me down in *my* house. I want to know what the *fuck* was going through his head. And then you're gonna want to give me a good goddamn reason why I shouldn't cap

both his knees.”

Butch spoke up nice and loud. “*You fed her.*”

Rehvenge blinked. Lifted his hand to his neck. “Excuse me?”

Butch growled at the bite marks, his body trying to break free again. God, it was like there were two halves of him. One that made a little sense. And one that was completely off the curve. Guess which side was winning.

“Marissa,” he spat. “*You fed her.*”

Rehv’s eyes peeled wide. “You’re the one? You’re the one she’s in love with?”

“Yeah.”

Rehv sucked in a shocked breath. Then he rubbed his face and dragged his collar together, hiding the wounds. “Oh...hell. Oh...for fucking hell.” He turned away. “Vishous, get him gone and sober him up. Jesus Christ, the world is too goddamned small tonight, it really is.”

By this time, Butch’s knees were going rubber and the club was starting to spin like a top. Man, he was much more drunk than he’d thought, and that blow to the puss hadn’t helped.

Right before he passed out, he groaned, “*It should have been me. She should have used me...*”

Mr. X parked the minivan on an alley off Trade Street and got out. The city was gearing up for the night, the bars cranking their music and filling with the soon-to-be drunk and drugged.

Time to hunt for Brothers.

As Mr. X shut the door and adjusted his weapons, he looked over the Town & Country’s hood at Van.

Man, he was still disappointed as hell at the guy’s performance in the ring. Spooked, too. But then again, it was going to take a while for the power to coalesce. No *lesser* came out fresh from his initiation at full strength, and there was no reason to think that Van was any different just because he was the prophesied one.

Shit, though.

“How will I tell who’s a vampire?” Van asked.

Ah, yes. The job at hand. X cleared his throat. “The civilians will recognize you because they can smell you, and you’ll notice them when they get scared. As for the Brothers, there’s no mistaking them. They’re bigger and more aggressive than anything you’ve ever seen and they are first

strikers. They will come after you if they see you.”

They walked out onto Trade. The night was sharp as a slap, that combination of cold and damp that had always energized X to fight before. Now, though, his focus was different. He had to be out in the field because he was the *Fore-lesser*, but all he cared about was keeping him and Van on this side of reality until the guy matured into what he was.

They were about to duck into an alley when Mr. X stopped. Swiveling his head, he looked behind them. Then across the street.

“What is it—”

“Shut up.” Mr. X closed his eyes and let his instincts go to work. Calming down, zoning out, he stretched his mental feelers through the night.

The Omega was nearby.

He flipped his lids open, thinking that had to be bullshit, though. The master couldn’t come over to this side without the *Fore-lesser*.

And yet the Evil was close.

Mr. X pivoted around on his combat boot. As a car drove down Trade, he stared over its roof at ZeroSum, that techno club. The master was in there. Definitely.

Oh, shit, had there been a change in *Fore-lesser*?

No, Mr. X would have been called home in that case. So maybe the Omega had used someone else to cross over? Could that even happen?

Mr. X jogged across the street to the club and Van was tight behind him, clueless but ready for anything.

ZeroSum’s wait line was full of humans in flashy clothes, shivering and smoking and talking on cell phones. He paused. In the back...the master was around back.

Vishous pushed open ZeroSum’s fire door with his hip and muscled Butch over to the Escalade. As he stuffed the cop into the backseat like a heavy rug roll, he prayed the bastard didn’t wake up punching.

V was getting behind the wheel when he sensed something coming, his instincts flaring up, the ring-a-ding-ding setting off his adrenal gland. Although the Brotherhood didn’t run from conflict by nature or training, his sixth sense told him to get Butch the fuck away from the club. Now.

He started the engine and peeled out. Just as he came to the mouth of the alley, he saw a pair of men coming toward the SUV, one of which was pale-haired. *Lessers*. Except how had those two known to head back here?

V stomped on the gas. Got him and Butch good and ghost.

As soon as he was satisfied they weren't being followed, he glanced back at the cop. Out. Cold. Man, that female security chief packed one hell of a punch. Then again, so had all that Lagavulin.

Butch didn't move for the whole trip to the compound. In fact, it wasn't until V carried the guy into the Pit and laid him out on his bed that the cop opened his eyes.

"Room's spinning."

"I'll bet."

"Face hurts."

"Wait 'til you see it and you'll know why."

Butch closed his lids. "Thanks for bringing me home."

Vishous was about to help the guy out of his suit when the doorbell rang.

With a curse, he went to the front of the gatehouse and checked the security monitors at his desk. He wasn't surprised at who it was, but holy hell, Butch was not ready for primetime viewing right now.

V stepped into the vestibule and shut the door behind him before opening the outer one. As Marissa looked up at him, he could smell the sadness and the worry coming off her, the scent like dried roses.

Her voice was low. "I saw the Escalade pull up, so I know he's home now. I need to see him."

"Not tonight you don't. Come back tomorrow."

Her face hardened until it was like a marble depiction of her beauty. "I'm not leaving until he tells me to go."

"Marissa—"

Her eyes flashed. "Not until he tells me himself, warrior."

V measured her resolve and found she was packing with nothing lacking —kind of like that muscled head of security back at the club, just without the knuckles.

Well, wasn't this the night for female hard-asses.

V shook his head. "At least let me get him cleaned up, okay?"

Her eyes flared with panic. "Why would you have to?"

"Christ, Marissa. What did you think was going to happen when you fed from Rehvenge?"

Her mouth dropped open. "How did you know—"

"Butch went after him at the club."

"What? He...oh, God." Abruptly, her eyes narrowed. "You better let me

inside. Right this minute.”

V threw his hands up and muttered, “Fuck,” as he opened the door.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Marissa marched past Vishous, and the Brother got out of her way. Which proved he was as smart as his reputation held.

When she got to the doorway of Butch's room, she stopped. From the glow of the hall light, she saw him lying on the bed on his back. His suit was all out of joint and there was blood on his shirt. Blood on his face, too.

She walked over and had to cover her mouth with her hand. "Dear Virgin in the Fade..."

One of his eyes was swollen and going black and blue again, and there was a cut on the bridge of his nose, which explained the blood. And he smelled like fresh Scotch.

From the doorway, Vishous's voice was uncharacteristically gentle. "You should really come back tomorrow. He's going to be pissed as hell that you saw him like this."

"Exactly who did this to him? And so help me God, if you say it was just a quick fight, I'm going to scream."

"Like I said, he went after Rehvenge. And Rehv happens to have a lot of bodyguards."

"Those must be big males," she said numbly.

"Actually, the one who nailed him was a female."

"A female?" Oh, why the hell did the particulars matter. "Can you bring me a couple of towels and some hot soapy water?" She went to Butch's feet and pulled off his shoes. "I want to wash him."

After V walked down the hall, she stripped Butch down to his boxers then sat beside him. The heavy gold cross that lay on his chest was a surprise. In the earlier frenzy up in the sitting room, she hadn't paid much attention to the thing, but now she wondered where he'd gotten it.

She looked farther down, to the black scar on his belly. Which seemed no better, no worse.

When V showed up with a bowl of suds and a short stack of terry cloth, she said, "Put it all on this table where I can reach it, then leave us, please. And shut the door behind you."

There was a pause. Which made sense. You didn't order around a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood anywhere, much less in his own house. But her nerves were shot and her heart was breaking and she really didn't care what anyone thought of her.

It was her rule number one in action.

After a silent stretch, the things were placed where she wanted them and then the door clicked shut. Taking a deep breath, she wet one of the washcloths. As she touched Butch's face with it, he winced and muttered something.

"I'm so sorry, Butch...but it's over now." She returned the washcloth to the bowl, submerging it, then squeezing the excess water out. The dripping seemed very loud. "And nothing happened other than the feeding, I swear."

She got the blood off his face then stroked his hair, the thick waves damp from the washing. In response, he stirred and turned his face into her hand, but it was obvious he was dead drunk and not coming around.

"Are you going to believe me?" she whispered.

At any rate, she had proof. When she came to him a *newling*, he would know no other male had—

"I can smell him on you."

She jerked back at the harsh sound of his voice.

Butch's eyes opened slowly and they seemed black, not hazel. "I can smell him all over you. Because it wasn't from the wrist."

She didn't know how to respond. Especially as he focused on her mouth and said, "I saw the marks on his throat. And your scent was all over him, too."

When Butch reached out, she flinched. But all he did was stroke her cheek with his forefinger, light as a sigh.

"How long did it take?" he asked.

She stayed silent, instinct telling her the less he knew the better.

As he took his hand back, his face was hard and weary. Emotionless. "I believe you. About the sex."

"You don't look as if you do."

“Sorry, I’m a little distracted. I’m trying to convince myself I’m okay with tonight.”

She looked down at her hands. “It felt all wrong to me, too. I cried the whole time.”

Butch inhaled sharply, then all the tension went out of the air between them. He sat up and put his hands on her shoulders. “Oh, God...baby, I’m sorry I’m such a pain in the ass—”

“No, I’m sorry that I have to—”

“Shh, it’s not your fault. Marissa, this is not your fault—”

“It feels that way—”

“My deficiency, not yours.” His arms, those wonderful, heavy arms, slid around her and gathered her close to his bare chest. In return, she hung on to him for dear life.

As he kissed her temple, he murmured, “Not your fault. Ever. And I wish I could handle it better, I truly do. I don’t know why I’m having such a hard time with this.”

She pulled back abruptly, seized by an urgency she didn’t question. “Butch, lay with me. Mate with me. Now.”

“Oh...Marissa...I would love to, I really would.” He smoothed her hair gently. “But not like this. I’m drunk and your first time should be—”

She cut him off with her mouth, tasting the Scotch and the male in him while she pushed him down on the mattress. When she slid her hand between his legs, he groaned and hardened right in her palm.

“I need you in me,” she said roughly. “If not your blood, then your sex. In me. Now.”

She kissed him again and as his tongue shot into her mouth she knew she had him. And oh, he was so good. He rolled her over and swept his hand from her neck to her breasts, then followed the path with his lips. When he got to the bodice of her gown, he stopped and his face grew hard again. With a savage movement, he gripped the silk and ripped the front of the dress clean apart. And he didn’t stop at the waist. He kept going, his big hands and veined forearms working as he tore the satin right down the middle, all the way to the hem of the skirt.

“Take it off,” he demanded.

She stripped the remnants from her shoulders, and when she lifted her hips, he yanked the dress out from under her, wadded it up, and pitched it across the room.

Eyes fierce, he came back at her, shoved her slip up, and spread her thighs. Looking at her over her body, his voice raw, he said, “Never wear that thing again.”

As she nodded, he pushed her panties to the side and put his mouth right on her core. The orgasm he gave her was a claim staked, a mate’s marking, and he made her ride it out until she was limp and shaking.

Then he tenderly eased her legs back together. Though she was the one who’d had the release, he was so much more relaxed as he prowled up her body. In a daze from what he’d done to her, she was weak and unresisting as he stripped her naked and then got up and took off his boxers.

As she looked at the size of him and realized what was coming next, fear tickled the edges of her consciousness. But she was too blissed out to care much.

He was all male animal as he got back on the bed, his sex hard and thick, ready to penetrate. She opened her legs for him, except he lay beside her, not on top of her.

Now he went slowly. He kissed her long and sweet, his broad palm traveling to her breasts, touching her with care. Breathless, she curled her hands on to his shoulders and felt the muscles under his warm and supple skin bunch up as he stroked her hips, her thighs.

When he touched her between her legs, he was tender and unhurried, and it was a while before one of his fingers went inside of her. He stopped just as a strange internal tugging made her frown and move her hips back.

“Do you know what to expect?” he asked against her breast, his voice soft, low.

“Um...yes. I suppose.” But then she thought of the size of his erection. How in God’s name was it going to fit?

“I’ll be as gentle as I can, but this...is going to hurt you. I had hoped maybe—”

“I know that’s a part of it.” She’d heard that there was a slight twinge involved, but then a wondrous ecstasy. “I’m ready.”

He took back his hand and rolled on top of her, his body easing in between her legs.

Abruptly, everything came into sharp focus: the feel of his hot skin and the compression of his weight and the power in his muscles...and the pillow under her head and the mattress she was on and exactly how far her thighs were spread. She looked up at the ceiling. A swing of lights moved around

above them as if a car had just pulled up in the courtyard.

She went tense; she couldn't help it. Even though it was Butch and she loved him, the threat of the experience, the overwhelming nature of it, swamped her. Three hundred years and it had suddenly come down to here and now.

For some stupid reason, tears welled.

"Baby, we really don't have to do this." His thumbs wiped her cheeks and his hips pulled back as if he was going to get off.

"I don't want to stop." She grabbed on to the small of his back. "No—Butch, wait. I want this. I truly do."

He closed his eyes. Then dropped his head into her neck and worked his arms so they were all the way around her. Twisting to the side, he hugged her into his hard body and they stayed like that for a long time, his weight positioned so she could breathe, his arousal a hot, branding length on her thigh. She began to wonder if he was going to do anything at all.

Just as she was about to ask, he shifted and his hips fell solidly between her legs again.

He kissed her, a deep, drugging full-mouth seduction that got her burning until she was undulating under him, rubbing against his hips, trying to get closer to him.

And then it happened. He moved over a little to the left, and she felt his erection at her core, all hard and smooth. There was a broad, satin stroke and then some pressure. She went still, thinking about exactly what was pushing at her and where it wanted to go.

Butch swallowed hard enough for her to hear it and sweat broke out across his shoulders until it ran down his spine. As the pressure between her legs intensified, his breathing deepened until he was groaning on every exhale. When she winced in earnest, he abruptly backed off.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You're very tight."

"Well, you're very big."

He laughed in a burst. "Nicest things...you say the nicest things."

"Are you stopping?"

"Not unless you want me to."

When there wasn't any "no" coming from her, his body tensed up and the head of him found her entrance once again. His hand came up next to her face and he tucked her hair behind her ear.

"If you can, try and relax, Marissa. It'll go easier for you." He started a rocking motion, his hips easing into hers and retreating, a gentle to and fro. Except each time he tried to nudge in a fraction, her body resisted.

"You okay?" he said through gritted teeth.

She nodded even though she trembled. It all felt so strange, especially as they weren't making any real progress—

With a sudden slide he was in, slipping past some outer muscle until he came up against the barrier his finger had found. As she stiffened, Butch groaned and dropped his face into the pillow next to her head.

She smiled uneasily, the fullness in her unexpected. "I—ah, I feel like I should be asking whether you're all right."

"Are you kidding? I think I'm about to explode." He swallowed again, a desperate gulping. "But I hate the idea of hurting you."

"So let's get that part behind us."

She felt rather than saw his nod. "I love you."

With a quick jerk, he drew back his hips and sliced forward.

The pain was raw and fresh and she gasped, shoving against his shoulders to keep him from moving any farther in. Instinct had her body struggling under his, trying to find a way out or at the very least to get some distance.

Butch lifted his torso off her, and their bellies brushed while they both breathed hard. With his heavy cross swinging between them, she let out a raw curse. The pressure before had been mere discomfort. This wasn't. This hurt.

And she felt so invaded by him, taken over. God, that female chatter she'd overheard about how it was all lock-and-key wonderful, how the first time was magic, how everything was so easy—none of that was true for her.

Panic swelled. What if she really was broken on the inside? Was this the defect the males of the *glymera* had sensed? What if—

"Marissa?"

—she couldn't get through it at all? What if every time it hurt like this? Oh, Jesus...Butch was very male and he was very sexual. What if he went looking for other—

"Marissa, look at me."

She dragged her eyes to his face, but all she could pay attention to was the voice in her head. Oh, Jesus, it wasn't supposed to hurt this badly, was it? Oh, Jesus...she was defective...

"How you doing?" he said roughly. "Talk to me. Don't keep it inside."

"What if I can't stand it?" she blurted.

His expression went utterly bland, becoming a deliberate mask of calm. “I don’t imagine many women like their first time. That romantic version of losing your virginity is a lie.”

Or maybe it wasn’t. Maybe she was the problem.

The word *defect* raced around her head even faster, even louder.

“Marissa?”

“I wanted it to be beautiful,” she said with despair.

There was a horrible silence...during which all she knew was the strain of his erection in her body. Then Butch said, “I’m sorry you’re disappointed. But not all that surprised.”

He started to pull out, and that was when something changed. As he moved, the dragging sensation caused a tingle to go through her.

“Wait.” She grabbed on to his hips. “That’s not all there is to it, right?”

“Pretty much. Just gets more invasive, though.”

“Oh...but you haven’t finished—”

“I don’t need to anymore.”

When his erection slipped free of her, she felt curiously empty. Then he moved off her body and she grew instantly cold. As he flipped a comforter over her, she felt his arousal brush against her thigh for an instant. The shaft was wet and had softened.

He settled on his back next to her, resting both forearms over his face.

God...what a mess. And now that she’d caught her breath, she wanted to ask him to keep going, but she knew what he would say. The “no” was in the stiffness of his body.

While they lay side by side, she felt like she should say something.

“Butch—”

“I’m really tired and not at all coherent. Let’s just go to sleep, okay?” He rolled away, punched a pillow, and exhaled in a long, uneven breath.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Marissa woke up later, surprised she'd slept at all. But that was feeding for you. No matter what, she always had to take rest afterward.

In the dimness, she checked the red glow of an alarm clock. Four hours to dawn and she had things to do that she needed the night for.

She looked over her shoulder. Butch was on his back, his hand on his bare chest, his eyes flickering to and fro under his lids as he slept deeply. His beard had grown in, his hair was all over the place, and he looked a lot younger. Handsome, too, in his slumber.

Why couldn't it have worked out better for them, she wondered. If only she could have held on a little longer, given it more of a chance. And now she had to go.

She slipped out from under the comforter, and the air was chilly on her skin. Moving quietly, she gathered up her slip, her corset...panties, where were her panties—

Stopping short, she looked down with surprise. On the inside of one of her thighs, there was a trickling warmth—blood. From when he'd taken her.

"Come here," Butch said.

She nearly dropped her clothes. "I—ah, I didn't know you were awake."

He held his hand out and she went to him. When she got close to the bed, he snaked his arm behind her leg and pulled her onto the mattress so her weight was resting on one knee. Then he leaned into her and she gasped as she felt his tongue on her inner thigh. In a warm stroke, he went up to her core and kissed away the remnants of her virginity.

She wondered where he'd learned the tradition from. Couldn't imagine human males practiced it on the females they took for the first time.

Whereas for her kind, it was a sacred moment between mates.

Shoot, she wanted to cry again.

Butch released her and lay back down, watching her with eyes that gave nothing away. For some reason, she felt so very naked before him, even with her slip clutched to her breasts.

“Take my robe,” he said. “Put it on.”

“Where is it?”

“Closet. Hanging on the door.”

She turned around. His robe was deep red and marked with the scent of him, and she drew it on awkwardly. The heavy silk hung down to the floor and covered her feet, the tie so long she could have wrapped her waist four times with it.

She eyed the ruined dress on the floor.

“Leave it,” he said. “I’ll throw it out.”

She nodded. Went over to the door. Grabbed the handle.

What could she say to make this better? She felt as if she’d made a mess of everything: first her biological reality driving a wedge between them, then her sexual deficiency exposed.

“It’s okay, Marissa. You can just go. You don’t need to say anything.”

She dropped her head. “I’ll see you at First Meal?”

“Yeah...sure.”

In a numbed-out daze, she walked from the gatehouse to the mansion. When a *doggen* opened the vestibule’s innermost door, she picked up the bottom of Butch’s robe so she didn’t trip...and was reminded she had nothing to change into.

Time to talk to Fritz.

After she found the butler in the kitchen, she asked him for the way to the garage.

“Are you looking for your clothes, mistress? Why don’t I bring some up for you?”

“I’d rather go and pick out a few things myself.” As he anxiously glanced to a door on the right, she walked in that direction. “I promise to call if I need you.”

The *doggen* nodded, totally unpeased.

When she stepped into the garage, she stopped dead and wondered what the hell she’d walked into. There were no cars inside the six-bay space. No room for them. Good God...crates and crates and crates. No...not crates. Coffins? What was this?

“Mistress, your things are over here.” From behind her, Fritz’s voice was respectful but very firm, as if all those pine boxes were none of her business. “Please to follow me?”

He led her over to her four wardrobe trunks and her luggage and her boxes. “Are you sure I may not bring dresses up for you?”

“Yes.” She touched the brass lock on one of her Vuittons. “Would you... leave me?”

“Of course, mistress.”

She waited until she heard the door shut and then she freed the latch on the wardrobe trunk in front of her. As she pulled the two halves apart, skirts burst free, multihued, lush, beautiful. She remembered wearing the gowns to balls and *Princeps* Council meetings and her brother’s dinners and...

Her skin crawled.

She went to the next trunk. And the next. And the last. Then she started again with the first and went through each one again. And then again.

This was ridiculous. What did it matter what she wore? *Just pick something.*

She reached and grabbed...No, she’d had this on feeding from Rehvenge that first time. What about this one? No...that was the dress she’d worn at her brother’s birthday party. Then what about...

Marissa felt the anger come upon her like a fire. Fury blew into her, overheated her, blazed through her blood. She grabbed gowns randomly and yanked them from their padded hangers, searching for one that didn’t trigger a memory of being subjugated, caged, made fragile in fine cloth. She moved to another trunk and more dresses went flying, her hands wrenching, material ripping.

Tears began to flow and she wiped them away with impatience—until she couldn’t see anything and had to stop. She scrubbed her face with her hands, then dropped her arms, just standing in the midst of a rainbow mess.

It was then that she spied a door in the far corner.

And beyond it, through its glass panes, she saw...the back lawn.

Marissa stared out at the patchy snow. Then she looked to the left, at the riding mower parked next to the door—and the red can sitting on the floor next to it. Her eyes kept going, moving over weed whackers and bins of what looked like fertilizer until they landed on a gas grill, which had a little box resting on its lid.

She glanced at the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth

of haute couture.

It took her a good twenty minutes to drag each one of her gowns out into the backyard. And she was careful to include the corsets and the shawls in the pile as well. When she was finished, her clothes were ghostly in the moonlight, muted shadows of a life she would never go back to, a life of privilege...restriction...and gilded degradations.

She pulled out a sash from the tangle and went back into the garage with the pale pink strip of satin. Picking up the gas can, she grabbed the box of matches and didn't hesitate. She walked out to the priceless swirl of satins and silks, doused them with that clear, sweet accelerant, and positioned herself upwind as she took out a match.

She lit the sash. Then threw it.

The explosion was more than she'd expected, knocking her back, scorching her face, flaring into a great fireball.

As orange flames and black smoke rose, she screamed at the inferno.

Butch was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling, when the alarms started going off. Shooting himself out of bed, he pulled on some boxers and slammed into Vishous as the brother bolted out of his bedroom and into the hallway. Together they scrambled to the computers.

"Jesus Christ!" V barked. "There's a fire on the back lawn!"

Some sixth sense sent Butch out the door immediately. Running barefoot across the courtyard, not even feeling the cold air or the pebbles under his feet, he cut around the front of the main house and ran into the garage. *Oh, shit!* Through the windows on the far side, he could see a great orange fury in the backyard.

And then he heard the screams.

As he burst through the rear door, Butch was overcome by heat and the treacle smells of gasoline and burning cloth. And he wasn't half as close as the figure right in front of the inferno.

"Marissa!"

Her body was angled forward toward the fire, her mouth wide open, her shrill hollering cutting through the night as surely as the flames did. She was crazed, roaming around the periphery...now running.

No! The robe! She was going to trip—

With horror, he saw it happen. His long, bloodred robe twisted around one of her legs and tangled up her feet. Lurching forward, she started to fall

facefirst into the fire.

As panic hit Marissa's expression and her arms went out into thin air, everything went slo-mo: Butch ran hard, yet seemed not to move at all.

"No!" he screamed.

Just before she was lost to the flames, Wrath materialized behind her and scooped her up into his arms. Saving her.

Butch skidded to a halt, a paralytic weakness making his legs go jelly on him. With no air left in his lungs, he fell to the ground...just collapsed.

So he was on his knees, staring up as Wrath held Marissa in his arms and she sagged all over him.

"Thank God my brother got there in time," V muttered from somewhere close by.

Butch pushed himself to his feet, wobbling like he was on rocky ground.

"You okay?" V asked, reaching out.

"Yeah. Fine." Butch stumbled back to the garage and kept going, tripping through random doors, banging into walls. Where was he? Oh, inside the kitchen. Blindly, he looked around...and saw the butler's pantry. Pushing his way into the little room, he leaned back against the shelves and shut himself in with all the canned goods and the flour and the sugar.

His whole body started to shake until his teeth rattled, and his arms flapped like bird wings. God, all he could think about was Marissa burning. On fire. Helpless. In agony.

If it had been just him going for her, if Wrath hadn't somehow seen what was happening and dematerialized right to her, she would be dead now.

Butch wouldn't have been able to save her.

The thought naturally shot him right back to the past. With horrible precision, flashes of his sister getting in that car two and a half decades ago pinged around his skull. Shit, he hadn't been able to save Janie, either. Hadn't been able to pull her out of that Chevy Chevette in time.

Hell, maybe if Wrath had been around back then, the king could have rescued his sister, too.

Butch rubbed at his eyes, telling himself that the blurriness was just the aftereffects of all the smoke.

A half hour later, Marissa sat on the bed in the blue toile room, enveloped by a fog of mortification. Damn it, she'd taken her rule number one way too far.

“I’m so embarrassed.”

Wrath, who was standing in the doorway, shook his head. “You shouldn’t be.”

“Well, I am.” She tried to smile at him and missed the mark by a million miles. God, her face felt stiff, the skin tight from having been so close to all that heat. And her hair—her hair smelled like gas and smoke. So did the robe.

She shifted her eyes over to Butch. He was out in the hall, leaning back against the wall. He hadn’t said a thing since appearing there a few minutes ago and he didn’t look like he was coming into the room, either. He probably thought she was crazy. Hell, *she* thought she was crazy.

“I don’t know why I did that.”

“You’re under a lot of stress,” Wrath said, even though he wasn’t the one she was looking at.

“That’s no excuse.”

“Marissa, don’t take this the wrong way, but no one cares. We want you safe and well. We could give a shit about the lawn.”

When she just stared past Wrath at Butch, the king glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah, I think I’ll leave you two alone. Try and get some z’s, okay?”

As Wrath turned around, Butch said something that didn’t carry. In response, the king clapped a hand to the back of the man’s neck. More quiet words were shared.

After Wrath left, Butch came forward, but only as far as the doorway. “You going to be all right?”

“Ah, yes. After I have a shower.” And a lobotomy.

“Okay. I’m going back to the Pit.”

“Butch...I’m sorry I did what I did. It was just...I couldn’t find one gown that wasn’t contaminated with memories.”

“I can understand that.” Except clearly he didn’t. He looked completely numb, as if he’d unplugged himself from everything. Especially her. “So...take care of yourself, Marissa.”

She leaped to her feet as he backed away. “Butch?”

“You don’t worry about anything.”

What the hell did that mean?

She started to go after him, but Beth appeared in the doorway with a bundle in her hands. “Um, hi, you guys...Marissa, you have a minute?”

“Butch, don’t go.”

He nodded a greeting to Beth, then looked down the hall. "I need to sober up."

"Butch," Marissa said sharply, "are you saying good-bye here?"

He flashed her a haunting smile. "You're always going to be with me, baby."

He walked away slowly, like the floor was slippery under his feet.

Oh...Jesus...

Beth cleared her throat. "So, yeah, Wrath suggested you might like some clothes? I brought a few things if you'd like to try them on."

Marissa was desperate to go after Butch, but she'd already made a spectacle of herself tonight and he looked like he was in serious need of a break from the drama. Boy...she knew exactly how he felt, except for her there was no escape. Everywhere she went, there she was.

She looked at Beth, feeling like this was quite possibly the single worst twenty-four hours of her life. "Did Wrath mention that I burned my entire wardrobe?"

"Um...that did come up."

"I also left a crater in the lawn. It looks like a UFO landed. I can't believe he isn't upset with me."

The queen's smile was gentle. "The only thing he's not thrilled about is your giving Fritz that bracelet to sell."

"I can't have you two renting me somewhere to live."

"As a matter of fact, we wish you would just stay here."

"Oh...no, you've already been too kind. Actually, tonight, I'd planned... Well, before I got sidetracked by that gasoline and matches thing, I was going to go to my new place and look around. See what kind of furniture I'll need to buy."

Which would be everything.

Beth frowned. "About that rental house. Wrath wants Vishous to check out the security system before you move in. And chances are good that V will want to upgrade whatever is there."

"I don't think that's necessary—"

"Nonnegotiable. Don't even try it. Wrath wants you to stay here at least until that's done, okay? Marissa?"

She thought about Bella getting abducted. As much as independence was a good thing, there was no reason to be stupid. "Yes...I...all right. Thank you."

"So would you like to try on some clothes?" Beth nodded at what was in her arms. "I don't have many dresses, but Fritz can get you some."

"You know what?" Marissa eyed the blue jeans the queen had on. "I've never worn a pair of pants before."

"I've got two pairs here if you want to try them out."

Well, wasn't this a night for firsts. Sex. Arson. Pants. "I think I would like to..."

Except Marissa burst into tears. Just totally lost it. And the meltdown was so bad, all she could do was sit on the bed and weep.

When Beth shut the door and knelt in front of her, Marissa wiped up quickly. What a nightmare. "You are queen. You shouldn't be before me like this."

"I'm the queen, so I can do anything I want." Beth put the clothes aside. "What's wrong?"

Yeah, now there was a list.

"Marissa?"

"I think...I think I might need someone to talk to."

"Well, you have someone right here. You want to give me a shot?"

God, there was so much, but one thing mattered more than all the rest. "Fair warning, my queen, this is about an improper subject. Sex, actually. It's about...sex."

Beth eased back and arranged her long legs yoga style. "Hit me."

Marissa opened her mouth. Shut it. Opened it. "I was taught not to speak of this kind of thing."

Beth smiled. "Just you and me in this room. No one has to know."

Okay...deep breath time. "Ah...I was a virgin. Up until tonight."

"Oh." After a long pause, the queen said, "And?"

"I didn't..."

"Like it?" When she couldn't respond, Beth said, "I wasn't into it my first time, either."

Marissa looked up. "Really?"

"It was painful."

"You hurt, too?" When the female nodded, Marissa was stunned. Then a little relieved. "It wasn't all painful. I mean, what led up to it was...is amazing. Butch makes me...he's just so...the way he touches me, I get...Oh, God, I can't believe I'm talking like this. And I can't explain what it's like with him."

Beth chuckled. "That's all right. I know what you mean."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah." The queen's dark blue eyes glowed. "I know *exactly* what you mean."

Marissa smiled, then went back to the talking. "When it was time to... you know, when it happened, Butch was really gentle and all. And I wanted to like it, I honestly did. I was just overwhelmed and it was very painful. I think there's something wrong with me. Inside."

"There's nothing wrong with you, Marissa."

"But I...it really hurt." She wrapped her arms around her stomach. "Butch said most females have a difficult time with it in the beginning, but I just didn't...That's certainly not what the *glymera* says."

"No offense, because you're a part of the aristocracy, but I wouldn't take the *glymera*'s word on anything."

The queen probably had a point. "How did you get through it with Wrath when you...ah..."

"My first time wasn't with him."

"Oh." Marissa flushed red. "Pardon me, I didn't mean—"

"No problem. Actually I didn't like sex until Wrath. I'd been with two guys before him and just...whatever. I mean, I didn't understand what all the fuss was about. Frankly, though, even if Wrath had been my first, it probably wouldn't have been any easier given the size of his—" Now the queen was flushing. "Anyway...you know, sex is an invasion for the woman. Erotic and wonderful, but an invasion just the same, and it takes a little getting used to. And for some, the first time is quite painful. Butch will be patient with you. He'll—"

"He didn't finish. I got the impression he...couldn't."

"If he hurt you, I can understand why he'd want to stop."

Marissa threw up her arms. "God, I feel so damned ashamed. When it happened, my head got all tangled...I had all this stuff shooting through my brain. And before I left, I wanted to talk to him, but I couldn't find the words. I mean, I love him."

"Good. That's good." Beth took Marissa's hand. "And it's going to be all right, I promise you. You two just need to try it again. Now that the pain is over for you, you shouldn't have a problem."

Marissa stared into the queen's midnight blue eyes. And realized that in her whole life, no one had ever talked to her candidly about a problem she

had. In fact...she'd never had a friend before. And that's what the queen felt like. A...friend.

"You know something?" Marissa murmured.

"What?"

"You're very kind. I can see why Wrath has bonded with you so."

"Like I said before, I'd do anything to help you."

"You really have. Tonight...you totally have." Marissa cleared her throat.

"May I—ah, may I try the pants on?"

"Absolutely."

Marissa picked up the clothes, got a change of underwear from the bureau, and went into the bathroom.

When she came out, she had on a pair of slim black pants and a turtleneck. And she couldn't stop staring down at herself. Her body seemed so much smaller without all the skirting.

"How do they feel?" Beth asked.

"Odd. Light. Easy." Marissa walked around in her bare feet. "A little like I'm naked."

"You're thinner than I am, so they're a little baggy. But they look great."

Marissa went back into the bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror.
"I think I like them."

When Butch returned to the Pit, he lurched down to his suite and started the shower. He kept the lights off because he had no interest in seeing how drunk and freaked out he still was, and he got under the spray, even though it was cold, in the hopes that the Antarctic wash would help sober him up.

With rough hands, he worked himself over with a bar of soap, and when he got to his privates, he didn't look down. Couldn't bear it. He knew what he was washing off his body, and his chest burned at the thought of the blood that had been on the inside of Marissa's thighs.

Man...seeing that had been a killer. Then he'd shocked the shit out of himself by doing what he did. He had no idea why he'd put his mouth to her or where the idea had come from. It had just seemed like the thing to do.

Oh...hell. He couldn't think about all that.

Quick shampoo. Quick rinse. And then he was out. He didn't bother toweling off, just went dripping to his bed and sat down. The air was freezing cold on his wet skin, and the chill felt like a proper punishment as he rested his chin on his fist and stared across the room. In the dim glow coming under

the door, he saw the pile of clothes Marissa had taken off him earlier. Then that dress of hers on the floor.

He went back to looking at what he'd been wearing. That suit wasn't really his, was it. Neither was the shirt—or the socks or the loafers. Nothing he wore was his.

He glanced at the watch on his wrist. Took the thing off. Let it fall onto the carpet.

He didn't live in his own place. He didn't spend his own money. He had no job, no future. He was a well-kept pet, not a man. And as much as he loved Marissa, after what just happened on that back lawn, it was clear things couldn't work out between them. The relationship was flat-out destructive, especially for her: she was distraught, blaming herself for shit that wasn't her fault, suffering, and it was because of him. Goddamn it, she deserved so much better. She deserved...oh, shit, she deserved Rehvenge, that thick-blooded aristocrat. Rehv would be able to take care of her, give her what she needed, take her out socially, be her mate for centuries.

Butch got up, walked to the closet, and took out a Gucci duffel...then realized he didn't want to take anything of this life with him when he bailed.

Tossing the bag aside, he pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, shoved his feet into some running shoes, and found the old wallet and set of keys he'd brought with him when he moved in with Vishous. As he looked at the metal tangle on its simple silver ring, he remembered that back in September he hadn't bothered to do anything with his apartment. So after all this time, his landlord must have long ago busted in and cleared out his stuff. Which was fine. It wasn't like he wanted to go back there anyway.

Leaving the keys, he headed out of his room, only to realize he had no wheels. He glanced down at his feet. Looked like he was walking it down to Route 22, then hitching a ride from there.

He had no coherent plan for what he was going to do or where he would go. He knew only that he was leaving the brothers and Marissa and that was it. Well, he also knew that to make it stick, he was going to have to get out of Caldwell. Maybe he could head west or something.

When he walked into the living room, he was relieved V wasn't around. Saying good-bye to his roommate was nearly as awful as leaving his woman. So no reason to have that *bon voyage* convo.

Shit. What was the Brotherhood going to do about him pulling out? He knew a lot about them—*Whatever*. He couldn't stay, and if that meant action

had to be taken, it would sure as hell put him out of his misery.

And as for what the Omega did to him? Well, he didn't have much of an answer for the whole *lesser* thing. But at least he wouldn't have to worry about hurting the brothers or Marissa. Because he wasn't planning on ever seeing them again.

His hand was on the vestibule's doorknob when V said, "Where you going, cop?"

Butch swiveled his head around as V stepped out of the shadows of the kitchen.

"V...I'm leaving." Before there was a response, Butch shook his head. "If that means you have to kill me, just do it quick and bury me fast. And don't let Marissa know."

"Why you pulling out?"

"It's better this way, even if it means I'm dead. Hell, you'll be doing me a favor if you have to off me. I'm in love with a woman I can't really have. You and the Brotherhood are the only friends I've got and I'm giving you up, too. And what the fuck do I have out in the real world waiting for me? Nothing. I got no job. My family thinks I'm whacked. The only good thing is that I'll be on my own with my own kind."

V approached, a tall, menacing shadow.

Shit, maybe this would all be over with tonight. Right here. Right now.

"Butch, man, you can't get out. I told you from the beginning. No getting out."

"So like I just said...snuff me. Grab a dagger and do me. But hear me clear. I will not stay in this world as an outsider one more minute."

As their eyes met, Butch didn't even brace himself. He wasn't going to fight. He was going to go gently into the good night, carried there by his best friend's hand on a good, clean kill.

There were worse ways to go, he thought. Many, many worse ways.

Vishous's eyes narrowed. "There may be another way."

"Another...V, buddy, a set of plastic fangs ain't going to make this better."

"Do you trust me?" When there was only silence, V repeated, "Butch, do you trust me?"

"Yeah."

"Then give me an hour, cop. Let me see what I can do."

Chapter Twenty-nine

Time dragged and Butch prowled around the Pit while waiting for V to get back. Finally, unable to shake the Scotch haze and still dizzy as shit, he went in and lay down on his bed. As he closed his eyes, it was more to dim the light than with any hope of sleep.

Surrounded by a dense quiet, he thought about his sister Joyce and that new baby of hers. He knew where the baptism had been held today: Same place he'd been dipped. Same place all the O'Neals had been dipped.

Original sin washed away.

He put his hand on his stomach, on that black scar, and thought that evil had certainly come back for him, hadn't it. Ended up right inside of him.

Palming his cross, he fisted the gold until it cut into his skin, and decided he needed to go back to church. Regularly.

He was still gripping the crucifix when exhaustion took him by stealth, leaching his thoughts away, replacing them with a nothingness he would have been relieved by if he'd been conscious.

Sometime later, he woke up and glanced at the clock. He'd slept for two hours straight, and now he was in the hangover phase of things, his head one big, dull ache, his eyes supersensitive to the light coming in under the door. He rolled over and stretched, his spine cracking.

An eerie moan drifted down the hall.

"V?" he said.

Another moan.

"You okay there, V?"

From out of nowhere, there was a crashing noise, like something heavy had been dropped. Then choking sounds, the kind you made when you were too hurt to cry out and scared to death. Butch sprang off his bed and ran into

the living room.

“Jesus Christ!”

Vishous had thrown himself off the couch and landed facefirst on the coffee table, scattering bottles and glasses. As he flailed around, his eyes were squeezed shut and his mouth gaped with screams unvoiced.

“Vishous! Wake up!” Butch grabbed on to those heavy arms, only to realize V had taken his glove off: That god-awful hand of his was glowing like the sun, burning holes in the wood of the table and the leather of the couch.

“Fuck!” Butch leaped out of the strike zone as he nearly got swiped.

All he could do was call out Vishous’s name as the brother struggled in the grip of whatever monster held him. Finally, something got through. Maybe the sound of Butch’s voice. Maybe V knocked himself around hard enough to wake himself up.

As Vishous opened his eyes, he was panting and shivering, covered with fear sweat.

“My man?” When Butch knelt down and touched his friend on the shoulder, V shrank back, cowering. Which was the scariest part. “Hey...easy, you’re home. You’re safe.”

V’s stare, usually so cool and calm, was glassy. “Butch...oh, my God. Butch...the death. The death...The blood down the front of my shirt. A shirt of mine...”

“Okay, just go easy. We’re going to cool out here, big guy.” Butch clamped a hand under V’s right armpit and hoisted the brother back on the couch. Poor bastard flopped against the leather cushions like a rag doll. “Let’s get you a drink.”

Butch headed for the galley kitchen, picked up a fairly clean glass off the counter, and rinsed it out. He filled the thing with cold water, even though V would no doubt rather it be Goose.

When he came back, Vishous was lighting up a cigarette with hands that were like flags in the wind.

As V took the glass, Butch said, “You want something stronger?”

“Nah. This is good. Thanks, man.”

Butch sat down on the other end of the sofa. “V, I think it’s time we did something about this nightmare thing.”

“Not going there.” V inhaled deeply and let out a steady stream of smoke from his lips. “Besides, I’ve got good news. Kind of.”

Butch would rather have stayed on the V dreamland shit, but that was clearly not happening. “So talk. And you should have woken me up as soon as you—”

“Tried. You were out cold. Anyway...” Another exhale. This one more normal. “You know I’ve looked into your past, right?”

“I figured.”

“Had to know what was doing, if you were going to live with me—with us. I traced your blood back to Ireland. Lot of pasty-white bog people in your veins, cop.”

Butch got real still. “Did you find...anything else?”

“Not when I searched nine months ago. And not when I retraced you an hour ago.”

Oh. Buzz kill. Although, Christ, what was he thinking? He wasn’t a vampire. “So why are we talking about this?”

“You sure you don’t have any weird-ass stories in your family? Especially back in Europe? You know, some female in your line getting pinched at night? Maybe a pregnancy that came out of the blue? Like someone’s daughter who disappeared and maybe came back with a child?”

Actually, there hadn’t been a lot of O’Neal lore passed along. For his first twelve years, his mother had been busy raising six kids and working as a nurse. Then after Janie’s murder, Odell had been too shattered to carry stories. And his father? Yeah, right. Pulling nine to five for the telephone company and then hitting the night shift as a security guard didn’t make for a lot of quality chat time with the kidlets: When Eddie O’Neal had been home, he’d been drinking or asleep.

“I don’t know of anything.”

“Well, here’s the deal, Butch.” V inhaled, then talked through the smoke as he breathed out. “I want to see if you’ve got any of us in you.”

“Whoa. “But you know my family tree, right? And wouldn’t my blood tests at the clinic, or even throughout my life, have shown something?”

“Not necessarily and I have a very precise way of finding out. It’s called ancestor regression.” V brought up his glowing hand and clenched it into a fist. “Goddamn, I hate this thing. But this is how we do it.”

Butch eyed the scorched coffee table. “You’re going to torch me like kindling.”

“I’ll be able to channel it to the purpose. Not saying it will be fun for you, but it shouldn’t kill you. Bottom line? That shit with Marissa and the feeding

and the way you reacted to it? The fact that you're telling me you throw off scent around her? Plus god knows, you're aggressive enough. Who knows what we'll find."

Something warm tingled in Butch's chest. Something like hope. "And what if I have a vampire relative?"

"Then we might..." V took a very deep drag on the hand-rolled. "We might be able to turn you."

Holy. Shit. "I thought you couldn't do that."

V nodded over at a thigh-high stack of leather volumes by the computers. "There is something in the Chronicles. If you've got some of our blood in you, we can give it a shot. It's very risky, but we could try."

Man, Butch was so on board with that plan. "Let's do the regression. Now."

"Can't. Even if you have the DNA, we need to get clearance from the Scribe Virgin before we even think about jumpstarting any kind of change. That kind of shit is not to be done lightly, and there's the added complication of what the *lessers* did to you. If she won't allow us to proceed, it won't matter whether you've got relatives with fangs, and I don't want to put you through an ancestor regression if there's nothing we can do about it."

"How long until we know?"

"Wrath said he'd talk to her tonight."

"Jesus, V. I hope—"

"I want you to take some time and think about this. The regression is a bitch to go through. Your brain's going to stroke out on us and I understand the pain's no party. And you might want to talk to Marissa about it, also."

Butch thought of her. "Oh, I'll get through it. You don't worry about that."

"Don't get cocky—"

"I'm not. This has to work."

"Might well not, though." V stared at the lit tip of his hand-rolled. "Assuming you come out the other side of the regression okay, and we can find a living relative of yours to use to jump-start the change, you could die in the middle of the transition. There's only a small chance you'll survive."

"I'll do it."

V laughed in a short burst. "I can't decide whether you have serious balls or a death wish."

"Never underestimate the power of self-hatred, V. It's a hell of a

motivator. Besides, we both know what the only other option is.”

As their stares met, Butch knew V was thinking the same thing he was: No matter what the risks were, anything was better than Vishous having to kill him outright because he had to leave.

“I’m going to Marissa now.”

Butch paused on his way out the door to the tunnel. “You sure there isn’t something we can do about these dreams of yours?”

“You got enough on your plate.”

“I’m an excellent multitasker, buddy.”

“Go to your female, cop. Don’t worry about me.”

“You’re such a pain in the ass.”

“Said the SIG to the Glock.”

Butch cursed and hit the tunnel, trying not to be totally pumped. When he got to the big house, he went up to the second floor and passed by Wrath’s study. On impulse, he knocked on the jamb. After the king called out, Butch was in there maybe ten minutes tops before he went on to Marissa’s room.

He was about to knock when someone said, “She’s not there.”

He pivoted around and saw Beth coming out of the sitting room at the end of the hall, a vase of flowers in her hands.

“Where is Marissa?” he asked.

“She went with Rhage to check out her new place.”

“What new place?”

“She’s rented a house for herself. About seven miles from here.”

Shit. She was moving out. And she hadn’t even told him. “Exactly where is it?”

After Beth gave him the address and assured him the rental was safe, his first instinct was to race over there, but he canned that idea. Wrath was going to the Scribe Virgin right now. Maybe they could get the regression over with and there’d be good news to share on the other side.

“She’s coming back tonight, right?” Man, he wished she’d told him about the move out.

“Definitely. And Wrath is going to ask Vishous to work on the security system, so she’ll stay here until that’s done.” Beth frowned. “Hey...you don’t look so good. Why don’t you come down and get some food with me?”

He nodded, even though he had no idea what she’d said to him. “You know I love her, right?” he blurted, not sure why he was going there.

“Yes, I do. And she loves you.”

Then why didn't she talk to him?

Yeah, and just how easy had he made that for her lately? He'd freaked out about the feeding. Taken her virginity while he was drunk. Hurt her in the process. Christ.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "But I'll watch while you eat."

Back at the Pit, Vishous stepped out of the shower and yelped like a nancy, slamming back against the marble wall. Wrath was standing in the bathroom, a big leather-clad male the size of the goddamned Escalade.

"Christ, my lord. Scare a brother, why don't you."

"Little jumpy there, V, huh?" Wrath handed over a towel. "So I just came back from the Scribe Virgin."

V paused with the terry cloth under an arm. "What did she say?"

"She wouldn't see me."

"Goddamn it, why?" He wrapped up his hips.

"Some shit like 'wheels turning.' Who knows. One of the Chosen met me." Wrath's jaw went so tight it was a wonder he could talk at all.

"Anyway, I go back tomorrow night. Straight up, it doesn't look good."

As frustration spiked, V felt his eyelid start to flicker. "Shit."

"Yeah." There was a pause. "And while we're on the subject of crap, let's talk about you."

"Me?"

"You're strung tighter than cable and your eye's twitching."

"Yeah, because you just Friday-the-thirteenthed me." V pushed past the king and went into his bedroom.

As he put his glove on his hand, Wrath leaned against the jamb. "Look, Vishous..."

Oh, they were so not doing this. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are. So here's the deal. I'm giving you till the end of the week. If you haven't straightened up by then, I'm taking you out of rotation."

"What?"

"Vacation time. Can you say R&R, my brother?"

"Are you out of your mind? You realize we're down to four of us now with Tohr being gone, true? You can't afford to—"

"Lose you. Yeah, I know. And so you're not going to get killed because of whatever's going on in that head of yours. Or not going on, as is the case."

"Look, we're all on edge, what with—"

“Butch came by a little while ago. Told me about your repeating nightmare.”

“That cocksucker.” Man, he was going to pound his roommate into the ground like a stake for blabbing.

“He was right to tell me. You should have told me.”

V went over to his bureau, where his rolling papers and his tobacco were. He spun one up fast, needing something in his mouth. It was either plug himself up or keep swearing.

“You need to get checked out, V.”

“By who? Havers? No CAT scan or lab workup is going to tell me what’s wrong, because it’s not physical. Look, I’ll get it together.” He glanced over his shoulder and exhaled. “I’m the smart one, remember? I’ll figure this out.”

Wrath lowered his wraparounds, his pale green eyes burning like neon penlights. “You’ve got a week to fix this, or I’m going to the Scribe Virgin about you. Now get your ass dressed. I need to talk to you about something else involving the cop.”

As the king took off for the living room, V drew hard on his cigarette and then looked around for his ashtray. Goddamn it, he’d left the thing out front.

He was about to head to the living room when he looked at his hand. Bringing the gloved nightmare up to his mouth, he peeled the leather off with his teeth and stared at his radiant curse.

Shit. The illumination was getting brighter and brighter every day.

Holding his breath, he pressed the lit cigarette into his palm. As the flaming end met his skin, the white glow beneath flared even stronger, backlighting the tattooed warnings until they appeared to be in 3-D.

The hand-rolled was consumed in a burst of light, the sting tingling his nerve endings. When only dust remained, he blew it off into the air, watching the little cloud rush forward and disintegrate into nothing.

Marissa took a tour through the vacant house and ended up back in the living room, where she’d started. The place was much bigger than she’d thought, especially given the six underground bedroom suites. God, she’d taken the lease because it had seemed so much smaller than her brother’s—than Havers’s—but size was so relative. This Colonial felt huge. And very empty.

As she pictured herself moving in, she realized that she’d never actually been in a house alone before. Back home, there had always been servants and

Havers and patients and medical staff. And the Brotherhood's mansion was likewise full of people.

"Marissa?" Rhage's heavy boots came up behind her. "Time to go."

"I haven't measured the rooms yet."

"Have Fritz come back and do it."

She shook her head. "This is my house. I want to."

"Then there's always tomorrow night. But we have to get going now."

She took a last look around, then headed for the door. "Okay. Tomorrow."

They dematerialized back to the mansion, and as they came in through the vestibule, she could smell roast beef and hear talk drifting out of the dining room. Rhage smiled at her and started to disarm, stripping his dagger holster off his shoulders as he called out for Mary.

"Hey."

Marissa wheeled around. Butch was in the shadows of the billiards room, leaning on the pool table, a squat crystal glass in his hand. He was dressed in a fine suit and a pale blue tie...but as she stared at him, all she saw was him naked and propped up on his arms over her.

Just as heat swirled, his eyes shifted away. "You look different in pants."

"What—oh. They're Beth's."

He took a drink from his glass. "Heard you're renting a place."

"Yes, I've just come from—"

"Beth told me. So how much longer have you got here? A week? Less? Probably less, right."

"Probably. I was going to tell you, but I just rented it, and with all the other drama, I didn't have time to. I wasn't hiding it from you or anything." When he didn't reply, she said, "Butch? Are you—are we...okay?"

"Yeah." He looked down into his Scotch. "Or at least we're going to be."

"Butch...Look, about what happened—"

"You know I don't care about the fire."

"No, I mean...in your bedroom."

"The sex?"

She flushed and dropped her eyes. "I want to try it again."

When he said nothing, she glanced up.

His hazel stare was intense. "You know what I want? Just once, I want to be enough for you. Just...once."

"You are—"

He spread out his arms and glanced down at his body. “Not like this I’m not. But I’m going to make it so I can be. I’m going to take care of this problem of me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Will you let me escort you in to dinner?” As if to distract her, he came forward and offered her his arm. When she didn’t take it, he said, “Trust me, Marissa.”

After a long moment, she accepted his courtesy, thinking that at least he hadn’t pulled away from her. Which was what she could have sworn he’d been doing just after the fire.

“Hey, Butch. Hold up, my man.”

Both she and Butch looked over. Wrath was coming out of the hidden door underneath the stairs and Vishous was with him.

“Evening, Marissa,” the king said. “Cop, I need you a sec.”

Butch nodded. “What up?”

“Will you excuse us, Marissa?”

The expressions on the Brothers’ faces were bland, their bodies relaxed. And she didn’t buy the nothing special for an instant. But like she was going to hang around?

“I’ll wait for you at the table,” she told Butch.

She headed to the dining room, then paused and looked back. The three males were standing together, Vishous and Wrath towering over Butch as they did the talking. A surprised look hit Butch’s face, his brows lifting up into his forehead. Then he nodded and crossed his arms over his chest—like he was braced and ready to go.

Dread washed over her. Brotherhood business. She just knew it.

When Butch came to the table ten minutes later, she said, “What did Wrath and V talk to you about?”

He snapped his napkin loose of its folds and put the damask in his lap. “They want me go through Tohr’s house and pull a CSI. Try and see if the guy’s been back or left any clues as to where he’s gone.”

Oh. “That’s...good.”

“It’s what I did for a living for many years.”

“Is that all you’ll be doing?”

As a plate of food was set in front of him, he finished his Scotch. “Yup. Well...the brothers are going to start patrolling rural areas, so they’ve asked me to work up a route for them. I’m going to go with V and do that after

sundown tonight.”

She nodded, telling herself it was going to be fine. As long as he wasn’t fighting. As long as he didn’t—

“Marissa, what’s wrong?”

“I, ah, I just don’t want you to get hurt. I mean, you’re human and all and —”

“So today I need to do some research.”

Well...if that wasn’t a door getting shut on her. And if she pressed the point, she’d only make it sound like she thought he was totally weak.

“Research on what?”

He picked up his fork. “What happened to me. V’s already been through the Chronicles, but he said I could give it a shot, too.”

As she nodded, she realized they would not spend the day sleeping together, side by side, in his bed. Or hers.

She took a sip from her water glass and marveled at how you could sit so close to someone and still have him be totally far away from you.

Chapter Thirty

The following afternoon, John took a seat in the classroom, all impatient for things to get rolling. The schedule of classes ran on a three-days-on, one-day-off rotation, and he was ready to get back to work.

While he went through his notes on plastic explosives, the other trainees yakked it up as they came in and got settled, the horsing around business as usual...until everyone fell silent.

John glanced up. There was a man in the doorway, a man who looked a little unsteady, or maybe drunk. What the hell—

John's mouth went slack as he stared at the face and the red hair.
Blaylock. It was...Blaylock, only better.

The guy looked down and awkwardly walked to the back. Actually, he shuffled more than walked, as if he couldn't really control his arms and legs all that well. After he sat down, he moved his knees around under the table until they fit, then he hunched over as if trying to make himself look smaller.

Yeah, good luck on that. Jesus, he was...huge.

Holy crap. He had gone through the transition.

Zsadist walked into the classroom, shut the door, and glanced at Blaylock. Following a quick nod, Z went right into the teaching.

"Today we're going to do an intro to chemical warfare. We're talking tear gas, mustard gas—" The Brother paused. Then cursed as he obviously realized no one was paying any attention because they were all staring at Blay. "Well, shit. Blaylock, you want to tell them what it was like? We're not going to get anything done here until you do."

Blaylock turned beet red and shook his head, tucking his arms around his chest.

"Okay, trainees, shoot your eyes up here." They all looked at Z. "You

want to know what it's like, I'll tell you."

John got good and fixated. Z kept everything general, revealing nothing of himself, but it was all good information. And the more the Brother talked, the more John's body vibrated.

That's right, he told his blood and bones. Take notes and let's do this soon.

He was so ready to be a man.

Van got out of the Town & Country, shut the passenger-side door quietly, and stayed in the shadows. What he was looking at some hundred yards away reminded him of where he'd grown up: run-down house with a tar-paper roof and a rotting car in the side yard. The only difference was that this was in the middle of nowhere, and his neighborhood had been closer to town. But it was the same two steps up from poverty.

As he scanned the area, the first thing he noticed was an odd sound cutting through the night. It was a rhythmic hitting...like someone was chopping logs? No...it was closer to pounding. Someone was pounding on what was probably the back door of the house in front of him.

"This is your target for tonight," Mr. X said as two other *lessers* stepped out of the minivan. "The daylight details have been watching this place for the past week. No activity until after dark. Iron bars over the windows. Drapes are always drawn. Goal is capture, but kill if you think they're going to get away from you—"

Mr. X stopped and frowned. Then looked around.

Van did the same and saw nothing out of whack.

Until a black Cadillac Escalade came down the drive. With its tinted windows and its spinning chrome, the thing looked like it was worth more than the house. What the hell was it doing out here in the sticks?

"Get armed," Mr. X hissed. "Now."

Van drew his fancy new Smith & Wesson forty, feeling the weight fill his palm. As his body primed for the fight ahead, he was so ready to engage an opponent.

Except Mr. X pegged him with hard eyes. "You stay back. I do not want you to engage. Just watch."

You fucker, Van thought, dragging a hand through his dark hair. You miserable fucker.

"We clear?" Mr. X's face was deadly cold. "You do not go in."

The best Van could manage was a dip of the chin and he had to look away to keep from cursing out loud. Training his eyes on the SUV, he watched as the thing got to the end of the ratty little cul-de-sac and stopped.

Clearly, it was some kind of patrol. Not cops, though. At least, not human ones.

The Escalade's engine was cut and two men got out. One was relatively normal-sized, assuming you were talking about linebackers. The other guy was *enormous*.

Jesus Christ...a Brother. Had to be. And Xavier was right. That vampire was bigger than anything Van had ever seen—and he'd gone into the ring with some monster-sized mofo's in his day.

Just like that, the Brother was gone. *Poof!* into thin air. Before Van could ask what the holy hell that was about, the vampire's partner turned his head and stared right at Mr. X. Even though they were all in the shadows.

"Oh, my God..." Xavier breathed. "*He's alive.* And the master...is with..."

The *Fore-lesser* lurched forward and kept walking. Right into the moonlight. Right into the middle of the road.

What the fuck was he thinking?

Butch's body trembled as he looked at the pale-haired *lesser* who emerged from the darkness. No question, this was the one who'd worked him over: Even though Butch had no conscious memories of the torture, his body seemed to know who had done the damage, its recollection embedded in the very flesh that had been torn and bruised by the bastard.

Butch was so ready to have at the *Fore-lesser*.

Except the shit hit the fan before he ever had the chance.

From somewhere behind the house, a chain saw started up with a roar, then settled into a high, whining scream. And at that exact moment, a second pale-haired *lesser* stepped out from the woods with his gun aimed at Butch.

As the semiautomatic went off and bullets whizzed by his head, Butch palmed his own Glock and jammed for cover behind the Escalade. Once he had some shield, he returned the *hi-how-are-yas*, squeezing out rounds, his Glock kicking in his palm as he kept his vital organs out of the line of fire. When there was a breather in the exchange, he peered through bulletproof glass. The shooter was behind a rusted-out car carcass, no doubt reloading. Like Butch was.

And yet the first slayer, Butch's torturer, still hadn't armed himself. The guy was just standing in the middle of the road, staring at Butch.

Almost like eating lead would make his day.

So ready to fucking oblige, Butch leaned out around the SUV, pulled his trigger, and popped the guy right in the chest. With a grunt, the *Fore-lesser* staggered back, but he didn't go down. He seemed merely annoyed, throwing off the bullet's impact like it was nothing more than a bee sting.

Butch had no idea what to make of that, but now wasn't the time for wondering why his fancy bullets didn't slow that particular slayer down. Sticking his arm into the breeze, he started firing at the guy again, the shots kicking out of his muzzle in quick succession. Finally, the *lesser* yard-saled, falling backward in a sprawling heap—

Just as a slapping noise came from behind Butch, so loud he thought another gun was going off.

He swung around, two-fisting the Glock to keep it up in front and steady. *Oh, shit!*

A female with a child in her arms shot out of the house in a blind panic. And she had good reason to haul ass. Right on her heels was a hulking male with punishment on his face and a chain saw up over his shoulder. The lunatic was about to fall on the pair of them with that spinning blade, ready, willing, and able to kill.

Butch kicked up his gun muzzle two inches, aimed at the man's head, and pulled the trigger—

Right as Vishous appeared behind the guy, reaching for the saw.

"Fuck!" Butch tried to stop his forefinger from squeezing, but the gun bucked and the bullet flew—

And someone grabbed Butch around the throat: The second *lesser* with the gun had moved in fast.

Butch got flipped off his feet and slammed onto the hood of the Escalade like he was a baseball bat. On impact, he lost his Glock, the weapon bouncing away, metal on metal.

Fuck that, though. He shoved his hand into the pocket of his coat and felt for the switchblade he carried. Bless the damn thing's heart, it found his palm like it had come to a heel and he dragged his arm free. As the blade shot out, he jogged his torso to the left and stabbed the side of the slayer who held him down.

Howl of pain. Grip loosened.

Butch shoved hard against the chest above his, popping the *lesser* up off him. As the bastard hung in midair for a split second, Butch swung the knife in an arc. The switchblade streaked across the *lesser*'s throat, opening up a fountainhead of black blood.

Butch kicked the slayer to the ground and turned to the house.

Vishous was holding his own against the guy with the chain saw, avoiding the roaring blade while throwing body shots. Meanwhile, the female with the child was running like hell across the side yard while another, pale-haired *lesser* closed in from the right.

"Called for Rhage," V had the presence of mind to holler.

"Going for vic," Butch yelled as he took off. He ran flat out, his feet gouging into the ground, knees kicking up to his chest. He prayed he would get there in time, prayed he'd be fast enough.... *Please, just this once...*

He intercepted the *lesser* with a spectacular flying tackle. As they went down, he screamed for the female to keep going.

Gunshots went off somewhere, but he was too busy with a blurring struggle to care. He and the *lesser* rolled around in the patchy snow, punching and choking each other. He knew he was going to lose if they kept going like this, so out of desperation and some kind of driving instinct, he stopped fighting, let the slayer dominate him...and then locked stares with the undead.

That link, that horrible communion, that ironclad tie between them took root in an instant, rendering them both motionless. And with the bonding came an urge for Butch to consume.

He opened his mouth and began to inhale.

Chapter Thirty-one

Lying in the middle of the road, bleeding like a sieve, Mr. X kept his eye on the contaminated human who was supposed to be dead. The guy handled himself, especially as he took down a *lesser* in the side yard, but he was going to get overpowered. And sure enough, he did. As the slayer flipped him on his back, he was going to get slaughtered in—

Except then the pair of them froze, and the dynamic shifted, the rules of strength and weakness getting scrambled. The slayer might have been on top, but the human was in charge.

Mr. X became breathless. Something was happening over there... something...

But then a blond-haired Brother materialized out of thin air right beside the two. The warrior swooped down and tore the *lesser* off the human, breaking whatever link had been forged—

From out of the shadows, Van came over and blocked Mr. X's view. "How'd you like to get out of here?"

Probably the safest course. He was about to pass out. "Yeah...and move fast."

As Mr. X got picked up and rushed to the minivan, his head bobbed like a half-stuffed doll's, and he watched through the wobbles as the blond Brother disintegrated the other *lesser* then knelt to check on the human.

Such fucking heroes.

Mr. X let his eyes go lax. And thanked a God he didn't believe in that Van Dean was too much of a new recruit to know that *lessers* didn't take their injured back home with them. Usually, a damaged slayer was left where he fell either for the Brothers to stab him back to the Omega or for him to gradually rot.

Mr. X felt himself get shoved into the minivan, and then the engine started and they were off. Easing over onto his back, he felt around his chest, assessing the damage. He was going to recover. It would take time, but his body wasn't so hurt that it couldn't regenerate.

As Van hung a sharp right, X was thrown against the door.

At his grunt of pain, Van looked back. "Sorry."

"Fuck it. Get us gone."

As the engine grew louder again, Mr. X closed his eyes. Man, that human showing up alive and breathing? Serious trouble. Serious trouble. What had happened? And why didn't the Omega know that the human still lived? Especially because the guy reeked of the master's presence?

Shit, who knew the whys. The more important thing was, now that X was aware that the man lived, did he tell the Omega? Or would that little news flash be what triggered another change in leadership and got X condemned forever? He'd sworn to the master that the Brothers had taken that guy out. He'd look like an idiot when it turned out not to be true.

The thing was, he was alive and on this side now, and he had to keep himself here until Van Dean came into his power. So, no...there would be no report on the Trojan human.

But the man was a dangerous liability. One that had to be eliminated ASAP.

Butch lay stiff on the snowy ground, trying to catch his breath, still caught in whatever the hell happened when he and one of those *lessers* got tight.

As his stomach rolled, he wondered where Rhage was. After Hollywood had cut off the link to the *lesser* and killed the bastard, he'd headed into the woods to make sure there were no others around.

So it was probably a good idea to get vertical and re-armed in case more came.

As Butch pushed himself up on his arms, he saw the mother and child across the lawn. They were cowering by a shed, wrapped up together as tight as vines. Shit...he recognized them; he'd seen them at Havers's. These were the two Marissa had been sitting with the day he'd finally left the quarantine room.

Yeah, this was definitely the pair. The young had a cast on her lower leg. *Poor things*, he thought. Huddled as they were, they were like every

human victim he'd ever seen on the job, the characteristics of trauma transcending species lines: The mother's wide eyes and pale skin and shattered illusions that life was okay were exactly what he'd dealt with before.

He got to his feet and went over to them slowly.

"I'm a—" He almost said *police detective*. "I'm a friend. I know what you are and I'm going to take care of you."

The mother's dilated eyes lifted from her daughter's messy hair.

Keeping his voice level and not taking one step closer, he pointed to the Escalade. "I'd like you both to go sit in that car. I'll give you the keys so you're in control and can lock yourself in. Then I'm going to do a quick check-in with my partner, okay? After that, you're going to Havers's."

He waited as the female surveyed him with a calculation he was very familiar with: Would he hurt her or her child? she was wondering. Did she dare trust someone of the opposite sex? What were her other options?

Keeping her daughter tight in her arms, she struggled to her feet, then held her hand way out. He came over and put his keys in her palm, knowing that V had another set so they could still get in the Escalade if they had to.

In a flash, the female turned and ran, her child a heavy, jangling load.

As Butch watched them go, he knew that little girl's face was going to keep him up at night. Unlike her mother, she was totally calm. Like this kind of violence was business as usual.

With a curse, he jogged over to the house and shouted, "V, I'm coming in."

Vishous's voice drifted down from the second floor. "There's no one else in here. And I didn't get a plate on that minivan that took off."

Butch checked out the body in the doorway. Male vampire, looked thirty-four years old or so. Then again, they all did until they started to age.

With his foot, Butch nudged the guy's head. It was loose as a bow on a present.

V's shitkickers came down the stairs. "He still dead?"

"Yup. You got him good—shit, your neck's bleeding. Did I shoot you?"

V put his hand up to his throat, then looked at the blood on his palm. "Don't know. He and I went at it in the back of the house and he nailed me with the saw, so this could be from anything. Where's Rhage?"

"Right here." Hollywood walked in. "I went through the woods. All clear. What happened to the mother and the kid?"

Butch nodded to the front door. "In the Escalade. They should go to the clinic. Mom has fresh bruises."

"Let's you and I take them," V said. "Rhage, why don't you get back to the twins?"

"Good deal. They're heading downtown now to hunt. Be safe, you two."

As Rhage dematerialized, Butch said, "What do you want to do with the body?"

"Let's put it around back. Sun'll be up in a couple of hours and that'll take care of it."

The two of them picked up the male, walked him through the grungy house, and laid him out next to the rotting shell of a Barcalounger.

Butch paused and looked at the hacked-out rear door. "So this guy shows up and goes all Jack Nicholson on his wife and kid. Meanwhile, the *lessers* have been scoping out the place and lucky, lucky they pick tonight to attack."

"Bingo."

"You get many domestic problems like this?"

"In the Old Country, sure, but here I haven't heard of many."

"Maybe they're just not being reported."

V rubbed his right eye, which was twitching. "Maybe."

Yeah...maybe."

They went through what was left of the back door and locked it as best they could. On the way to the front exit, Butch saw a ratty stuffed animal in the corner of the living room, like it had been dropped there. He picked the tiger up, only to frown. The damn thing weighed a ton.

He tucked it under his arm, took out his cell phone, and made two quick calls as V worked on the front door to get it to shut. Then they walked over to the Escalade.

Butch cautiously approached the driver's side with his hands out, the tiger dangling from one palm. And Vishous went around the hood with the same nice-'n-easy routine, coming to a halt about three feet away from the passenger door. Neither of them moved.

The wind blew in from the north, a cold, wet rush that made Butch feel the aches from the fight.

After a moment, the locks in the car were released with a punching sound.

John couldn't stop staring at Blaylock. Especially in the shower. The

guy's body was huge now, muscles sprouting from all different places, fanning out from his spine, filling his legs and shoulders, jacking up his arms. Plus he was easily six inches taller. Christ, he had to be six-foot-four now.

But the thing was, he didn't look happy. He moved awkwardly, facing the tiled wall for most of the time he washed. And going by his flinching, the soap he used seemed to irritate him, or maybe his skin itself was the problem. Plus he kept trying to get under the spray, only to step back and adjust the temperature.

"You going to fall in love with him now, too? Brothers might get jealous."

John glared over at Lash. The guy was smiling as he washed his little chest, a thick diamond chain catching the suds.

"Yo, Blay, you better not drop that soap. John-boy over here's eyeing your meat like you read about."

Blaylock ignored the comment.

"Yo, Blay. You heard me? Or you daydreaming about John-boy on his knees?"

John stepped in front of Lash, blocking his view of the other guy.

"Oh, please, like you're going to protect him?" Lash eyed Blaylock. "Blay doesn't need protecting by anyone, does he. He's a biiiiiiig man now, aren't you, Blay? Tell me, if John here wants to get you off, you going to let him? Bet you will. Bet you can't wait for it. The two of you are going to make such a—"

John lunged forward, took Lash down to the wet tile, and...beat him senseless.

It was like he was on autopilot. He just hit the guy in the face over and over again, his fists riding a wave of anger until the shower floor ran bright red all the way to the drain. And no matter how many hands grabbed at John's shoulders, he ignored them and kept pounding.

Until suddenly he was airlifted off of Lash.

He fought whoever it was that held him, fought and scratched even as he was dimly aware that the rest of the class had shrunk back in fear.

And John kept fighting and screaming without making a sound as he was hauled out of the shower. Out of the locker room. Down the hall. He clawed and punched until he was thrown onto the blue mats of the gym floor and the breath got knocked from him.

For a moment, all he could do was stare up at the caged ceiling lights, but

when he realized he was being held down, the fight rushed back. Baring his teeth, he bit the thick wrist that was closest to his mouth.

Abruptly, he was flipped over onto his stomach and a huge weight gouged into his back.

“Wrath! No!”

The name registered only nominally. The queen’s voice even less so. John was beyond angry, burning uncontrollably, flailing around.

“You’re hurting him!”

“Stay out of this, Beth!” The king’s hard voice shot into John’s ear. “You finished yet, son? Or you want to go another round with those teeth of yours?”

John struggled even though he couldn’t move and his strength was flagging.

“Wrath, please let him up—”

“This is between him and me, *leelan*. I want you to go to the locker room and deal with the other half of this mess. That kid on the tile is going to have to be taken to Havers.”

There was a curse and then the sound of a door shutting.

Wrath’s voice came back right next to the side of John’s head. “You think popping one of those guys is going to make you a man?”

John heaved against the load on his back, not caring that it was the king. All that mattered, all that he felt, was the fury that ran through his veins.

“You think making that idiot with the fly mouth bleed is going to get you into the Brotherhood? Do you?”

John struggled harder. At least until a heavy hand landed on the back of his neck and his face had a communion with the floor mats.

“I don’t need thugs. I need soldiers. You want to know the difference? Soldiers think.” More pressure on his neck until John couldn’t even blink for the bug eyes he was sporting. “Soldiers *think*.”

All at once the weight was gone, and John took a heaving, sucking breath, the air dragging over his front teeth and hammering down his throat.

More breathing. More breathing.

“Get up.”

Fuck you, John thought. But he pushed at the mat. Unfortunately, his stupid, weak-ass body felt like it was chained to the floor. He literally couldn’t lift himself.

“Get up.”

Fuck you.

“What did you say to me?” John got yanked off the ground by the armpits and came face-to-face with the king. Who was savagely pissed off.

Fear struck John hard, the reality of how badly he’d lost it dawning on him.

Wrath bared fangs that seemed as long as John’s legs. “You think I can’t hear you just because you can’t talk?”

John’s feet dangled for a moment and then he was dropped. When his knees failed him, he crumpled to the mats.

Wrath stared down with contempt. “It’s a good goddamned thing Tohr isn’t around right now.”

Not fair, John wanted to yell. *Not fair.*

“You think Tohr would have been impressed by this?”

John thrust himself off the floor and wobbled to a stand, glaring up at Wrath.

Don’t say that name, he mouthed. *Don’t say his name.*

From out of nowhere, pain lanced through his temples. Then, in his mind, he heard Wrath’s voice saying the word *Tohrment* again and again. Clamping his hands over his ears, he tripped over his feet, backing away.

Wrath followed, coming forward, the name getting louder until it was a screaming, relentless, pounding chant. Then John saw the face, Tohr’s face, clear as if it were before him. The navy blue eyes. The short dark military hair. The hard features.

John opened his mouth and started to scream. No sound came out, but he kept at it until the crying took over. Swamped by heartache, missing the only father he’d known, he covered his eyes and hunched his shoulders, falling in on himself as he wept.

The instant he caved it all went away: His mind silenced. The vision disappeared.

Strong arms gathered him up.

John started screaming again, but now in agony, not anger. With nowhere to turn, he clutched at Wrath’s huge shoulders. All he wanted was the hurting to stop.... He wanted the painin him, the stuff he tried to bury deep, to go away. He was raw with emotion from the losses in his life and the tragedies of circumstance, nothing but bruises on the inside.

“Shit...” Wrath rocked him gently. “It’s all right, son. God...damn.”

Chapter Thirty-two

Marissa got out of the Mercedes then ducked back in. “Will you please wait, Fritz? I want to go to the rental house after this.”

“Of course, mistress.”

She turned and looked at the back entrance of Havers’s clinic, wondering whether he would even let her in.

“Marissa.”

She turned around. “Oh, God...Butch.” She ran over to the Escalade. “I’m so glad you called me. Are you okay? Are they?”

“Yeah. They’re getting checked out.”

“And you?”

“Fine. Just fine. I figured I’d wait outside, though, because...you know.”

Yes, Havers wouldn’t be too happy to see him. Probably wasn’t going to like running into her, either.

Marissa glanced toward the clinic’s back entrance. “The mother and child...they can’t go home after this, can they?”

“No way. The *lessers* know about the house, so it isn’t safe. And frankly, there wasn’t much there anyway.”

“What about the mother’s *hellren*? ”

“He’s been...taken care of.”

God, she shouldn’t feel relieved that there had been a death, but she was. At least until she thought of Butch in the field.

“I love you,” she blurted. “That’s why I don’t want to have you fighting. If I lost you for any reason, my life would be over.”

His eyes widened, and she realized they hadn’t spoken of love for what seemed like forever. But she was rule number one-ing this. She’d hated spending the daylight hours away from him, hated the distance between them,

and she wasn't letting it go on anymore on her side.

Butch stepped in close, his hands going to her face. "Christ, Marissa... you don't know what it means to hear you say that. I need to know that. Need to feel that."

He kissed her softly, whispering loving things against her mouth, and as she trembled, he held her with care. There were things still left awkwardly between them, but none of that mattered at the moment. She just needed to reconnect with him.

When he pulled back a little, she said, "I'm going to go inside, but will you wait? I'd like to show you my new house."

He ran his fingertip lightly down her cheek. Though his eyes grew sad, he said, "Yeah, I'll wait. And I would love to see where you're going to live."

"I won't be long."

She kissed him again and then headed off to the clinic entrance. As she felt like an intruder, it was a surprise to be admitted inside without a fuss, but she knew that didn't mean things were going to go smoothly. While she rode down in the elevator, she fiddled with her hair. She was nervous about seeing Havers. Would there be a scene?

When she walked into the waiting area, the nursing staff knew exactly what she'd come for and she was taken down to a patient room. She knocked on the door and stiffened.

Havers looked up from talking with the young in the cast and his face froze. As he seemed to lose track of the words he was speaking, he pushed up his glasses, then cleared his throat with a cough.

"You came!" the young called out to Marissa.

"Hi, there," she said, lifting her hand.

"If you'll excuse me," Havers murmured to the mother, "I'll get your discharge papers in order. But as I said, there's no hurry for you to leave."

Marissa stared at her brother as he came up to her, wondering whether he would even acknowledge her presence. And he did in a manner of speaking. His glance flicked over the pants she had on and he winced.

"Marissa."

"Havers."

"You look...well."

Nice enough words. But what he meant was she looked different. And he didn't approve. "I am well."

"If you'll excuse me."

As he left without waiting for a response, anger boiled up into her throat, but she didn't let the nasty words on her tongue fly. Instead, she went to the bedside and sat down. While she took the little female's hand, she tried to figure out what to say, but the young's singsong voice got there first.

"My father is dead," the child said factually. "My *mahmen* is scared. And we have nowhere to sleep if we leave here."

Marissa closed her eyes briefly, thanking the dear Scribe Virgin that at least she had an answer for one of those problems.

She looked over at the mother. "I know exactly where you should go. And I'm going to take you there soon."

The mother started to shake her head. "We have no money—"

"But I can pay rent," the young said, holding up her tattered tiger. She loosened the stitching on the back, dug her hand in and took out the wishing plate. "This is gold, right? So it's money...right?"

Marissa breathed in deeply and told herself not to cry. "No, that's a gift to you from me. And there is no rent to be paid. I have an empty home and it needs people to fill it." She glanced once again at the mother. "I would love it if you two would stay there with me as soon as my new house is ready."

When John finally went back to the locker room after his meltdown, he was all alone. Wrath had returned to the main house, Lash had been taken away to the clinic, and the other guys had gone home.

Which was good. In the resounding quiet, he took the longest shower of his life, just stood under the hot spray, letting the water run down him. His body felt achy. Sick.

Jesus Christ. Had he really bitten the king? Beaten a classmate?

John eased back against the tile. In spite of all the spray washing over him and the soap he'd used, nothing cleaned him off. He still seemed curiously...dirty. But then, disgrace and shame did make you feel like you were covered in pig shit.

Cursing, he looked down at the sparse muscles of his chest and the sunken pit of his stomach and the pointy knobs of his hips, looked past his utterly unimpressive sex to his little feet. Then followed the tile to the drain where Lash's blood had funneled out.

He could have killed the guy, he realized. He'd been that out of control.
"John?"

He jerked his head up. Zsadist was standing in the shower's entryway, his

face utterly impassive.

“You finish, you come up to the main house. We’ll be in Wrath’s study.”

John nodded and turned the water off. Chances were very good that he was going to be kicked out of the training program. Maybe out of the house. And he couldn’t blame them. But God, where would he go?

After Z left, John towed dry, put his clothes on, and went across the hall to Tohr’s office. He had to keep his eyes down as he passed through on his way to the tunnel. He couldn’t bear any of his memories of Tohrment right now. Not a single one.

Couple minutes later he was in the mansion’s foyer, staring up at the grand staircase. He climbed the red-carpeted steps slowly, feeling unbearably tired, and the exhaustion grew worse when he got to the top: The double doors to Wrath’s study were open and voices spilled out, the king’s and others’. How he would miss them all, he thought.

The first thing he noticed when he stepped into the room was Tohr’s chair. The ugly green monster had been moved and was now behind and to the left of the throne. Odd.

John walked forward and waited to be acknowledged.

Wrath was bent over a fancy little desk piled with papers, a magnifying glass in his hand apparently helping him to read. Z and Phury were flanking the king, one on either side, both leaning over the map Wrath was looking at.

“This is where we found the first torture camp,” Phury said, pointing to a big green stretch. “Here’s where Butch was found. Here’s where I was taken.”

“Big spread between them all,” Wrath muttered. “Lot of miles.”

“What we need is an airplane,” Z said. “Aerial review would be much more efficient.”

“True that.” Wrath shook his head. “But we’d have to watch it. Get too close to the ground and the FAA would crawl up our ass.”

John inched a little closer to the desk. Craned his neck.

In a smooth move, Wrath pushed the big sheet of paper forward as if he’d finished reviewing it. Or maybe...was encouraging John to take a peek. Except instead of staring at the topographical spread, John looked at the king’s forearm. The bite mark on that thick wrist mortified him and he stepped back.

Just as Beth walked in with a leather box of scrolls tied with red ribbons.

“Okay, Wrath, how about some briefing time. I’ve prioritized all these.”

Wrath leaned back as Beth put the box down. Then the king captured her face, kissing her on the mouth as well as both sides of her throat. “Thanks, *leelan*. Right now’s great, although V and Butch are coming by with Marissa. Oh shit, did I tell you the *Princeps* Council has a bright idea? Mandatory *seclusion* for all unmated females.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Fools haven’t passed it yet, but according to Rehvenge, the vote’s coming soon.” The king looked at Z and Phury. “You two check into the airplane situation. We got anyone who knows how to fly?”

Phury shrugged. “I used to. And we could bring V in on it—”

“Bring me in on what?” V said as he walked into the study.

Wrath looked around the twins. “Can you say Cessna, my brother?”

“Nice. We going airborne here?”

Butch and Marissa came in behind V. And they were holding hands.

John stepped to the side and just took it all in: Wrath falling deep into conversation with Beth while V and Butch and Marissa started talking among themselves and Phury and Z headed out.

Chaos. Movement. Purpose. This was the monarchy, the Brotherhood at work. And John felt privileged to be in the room...for however short a time he had left before they kicked his sorry ass to the curb.

Hoping maybe they’d forget he was around, he looked for a place to sit and eyed Tohr’s chair. Keeping on the sidelines, he walked over and lowered himself into the faded, torn leather. From here he could see everything: the top of Wrath’s desk and whatever was on it, the door where people came and went, every corner of the room.

John curled his legs under him and tilted forward, listening in as Beth and Wrath talked about the *Princeps* Council. Wow. They worked really great together. She was giving him excellent advice and the king was taking it.

As Wrath nodded at something she’d said, his long black hair slipped over his shoulder and fell onto the desk. He pushed it back, then eased to the side and opened a drawer, pulling out a spiral-bound steno pad and a pen. Without looking, he held them out behind him, right in front of John.

John took the gift with shaking hands.

“Well, *leelan*, that’s what you get when you deal with the *glymera*. A whole lot of crap.” Wrath shook his head and then looked up at V and Butch and Marissa. “So what’s up, you three?”

John dimly heard words exchanged, but he was too humbled to focus.

God, maybe the Brothers weren't kicking him out...maybe.

He tuned in again to hear Marissa say, "They have nowhere to go, so they're staying in the house I just rented. But, Wrath, they need long-term assistance and I fear there are others out there just like them—females with no one to help them, either because their mates were taken by the *lessers* or died of natural causes or, God forbid, their males are abusers. I wish there was some kind of program—"

"Yeah, we definitely need one. Along with about eight thousand other things." Wrath rubbed his eyes under his wraparounds, then looked back at Marissa. "Okay, I'm putting you in charge of this. Find out what the humans do for their kind. Figure out what we need for the race. Tell me what you require for money and staffing and facilities. Then go out and do it."

Marissa's mouth fell open. "My lord?"

Beth nodded. "That's a fabulous idea. And you know, Mary used to work with social services when she was a volunteer at the Suicide Prevention Hotline. You could start with her. I think she's really familiar with DSS."

"I...yes...I'll do that." Marissa looked at Butch and in response, the guy smiled, a slow, very male expression of respect. "Yes, I...I'll do it. I..." The female crossed the room in a daze, only to stop at the door. "Wait, my lord? I've never done anything like this before. I mean, I've worked at the clinic, but—"

"You're going to handle it just fine, Marissa. And, as a friend of mine told me once, you're going to ask for help when you need some. Got it?"

"Uh...yes, thank you."

"Lot of work ahead of you."

"Yes..." She curtsied, even though she was wearing pants.

Wrath smiled a little, then looked at Butch, who was going after his female. "Yo, cop, you and V and I are getting together tonight. It's a go. Be back here in an hour."

Butch seemed to pale. But then he nodded and took off with Vishous in tow.

As Wrath refocused on his *shellan*, John quickly scribbled something on the pad and held it out to Beth. After she read it aloud for the king, Wrath inclined his head.

"You go right ahead, son. And yeah, I know you're sorry. Apology accepted. But you sleep up here from now on. Don't care if it's in that chair or in a bed down the hall, you sleep here now." As John nodded, the king

said, “And one more thing. Every night at four A.M. you’re taking a walk with Zsadist.”

John blew a whistle in an ascending note.

“Why? Because I said so. Every night. Otherwise, you’re out of the training program and you’re out of here. Dig? Whistle twice if you understand me and agree to this.”

John did as he asked.

Then he awkwardly signed *thank you*. And left.

Chapter Thirty-three

Forty-five minutes later, Butch stood in the doorway to the kitchen, watching Marissa with Mary and John. The three were bent over a diagram explaining New York State's interlocking human services agencies. Mary was taking the case study approach to teaching Marissa how it all worked, and John had volunteered to be the case.

Jesus, the kid had had it rough. Born in the bathroom of a bus station. Picked up by a janitor and taken to the Catholic orphanage. Then housed with foster parents who didn't give a shit after Our Lady downscaled its program. And it got worse: Quitting school at sixteen. Running away from the system. Living in squalor while he supported himself as a busboy downtown. He was lucky to be alive.

And Marissa was clearly going to help kids like him.

As the discussion continued, Butch noticed that her voice changed. Deepened. Grew more direct. Her eyes sharpened and her questions got even sharper. She was, he realized, incredibly smart, and she was going to be good at this.

God, he loved her. And he wanted desperately to be what she needed. What she deserved.

As if on cue, he heard footsteps and smelled V's Turkish tobacco. "Wrath is waiting, cop."

Butch stared at his woman for a moment longer. "Let's do it."

Marissa looked up. "Butch? I would love to get your thoughts on a police force." She tapped the diagram. "I can see a lot of scenarios where we are going to need law enforcement intervention. Wrath is going to need to consider starting up some kind of civil guard."

"Anything you want, baby." His eyes memorized her face. "Just give me

a few, okay?"

Marissa nodded, smiled in a distracted way, and went back to her work.

Unable to resist, he walked over and touched her shoulder. When she glanced up, he kissed her on the mouth and whispered, "I love you."

As her eyes flared, he kissed her again and turned away. Man, he hoped like hell this ancestor regression turned up something other than a shitload of Irish whitebread.

He and Vishous walked upstairs to the study and found the frilly French room empty except for Wrath...who was standing in front of the fire, one thick arm on the mantel. The king looked like he had brain strain as he stared into the flames.

"My lord?" V said. "This still a good time?"

"Yeah." Wrath motioned them in, his black diamond ring flashing on his middle finger. "Shut the doors."

"You mind if I get a little muscle?" V nodded down the hall. "I want Rhage in here holding the cop."

"Fine." As Vishous left, Wrath stared at Butch with such intensity, his eyes were like torches burning behind his wraparounds. "I didn't expect the Scribe Virgin to let us do this."

"I'm glad she is." Way glad.

"You understand what you're signing on for here? This is going to hurt like a bitch and you could end up a vegetable on the other side."

"V's done the full disclosure. I'm good."

"Check you out," Wrath murmured with approval. "You're so tight about this."

"What are my choices if I want to know? None. So getting all up in my head is not going to help."

The double doors clicked shut and Butch looked across the study. Rhage had damp hair and was wearing beat-to-shit blue jeans, a black fleece, and no shoes or socks. Absurdly, Butch noticed that even the guy's feet were gorgeous. Yeah, no hairy-knuckled, nasty-nail action for Hollywood. Bastard was head-to-toe perfection.

"Man, cop," the brother said. "You really going to do this?"

As Butch nodded, Vishous stepped in front of him and started to take off his glove. "Need you to lose the shirt, buddy."

Butch stripped to the waist, tossing his Turnbull & Asser on the sofa. "Can I keep the cross on?"

“Yup, shouldn’t melt. Much.” V shoved his glove into his back pocket, then whipped his black belt from his hips and held the leather strap out to Rhage. “I want you to put this thing in his mouth and hold it in place so he doesn’t crack his teeth. But don’t make any contact with him. You’re going to get a sunburn anyway, being this close.”

Rhage stepped in behind, but the sound of knocking on the doors interrupted everything.

Marissa’s voice drifted through the wood panels. “Butch? Wrath?” More knocking. Getting louder. “My lord? Is there something going on?”

Wrath cocked an eyebrow at Butch.

Who replied, “Let me talk to her.”

As Wrath willed the doors open, Marissa burst into the room. She took one look at V’s ungloved hand and Butch’s bare chest and went white as snow.

“What are you doing to him?”

Butch walked up to her. “We’re going to find out if I have something of your kind in me.”

Her mouth fell open. Then she wheeled on Wrath. “Tell them no. Tell them they can’t do this. Tell them—”

“It’s his choice, Marissa.”

“It will kill him!”

“Marissa,” Butch said, “it’s worth the risk to find out about me.”

She pivoted toward him, her stare furious, positively glowing with light. There was a pause. Then she slapped him across the face.

“That is for not caring about yourself.” Without taking a breath, she slapped him again, another crack echoing into the ceiling. “And that is for not telling me what you were doing.”

Pain blazed in his cheek, throbbed to the beat of his heart.

“Can you boys give us a minute?” he said softly, eyes not leaving her pale face.

When the brothers disappeared, Butch tried to take her hands, but she snapped them back, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Marissa...this is the only way out I can see.”

“Way out of what?”

“There’s a chance I can be who you need me to be—”

“Who I *need* you to be? I need you to be yourself! And I need you to be alive!”

“This is not going to kill me.”

“Oh, and you’ve done it before, so you know that for sure? I’m so relieved.”

“I have to do this.”

“You do not—”

“Marissa,” he snapped. “You want to put yourself in my shoes? You want to try on for size the idea that you love me but I have to be with someone else, live off someone else, while you can do nothing about it, month after month, year after year? You want to think about what it’s like to know that you’re going to die first and leave me alone? You want to be a second-class citizen in the world I live in?”

“So you’re saying you’d rather be dead than be with me?”

“I told you, this isn’t going to—”

“But what comes next? You think I can’t follow the logic? If you find out you’ve got a vampire descendant, you mean to tell me you aren’t going to try something *truly* stupid?”

“I love you too much—”

“Goddamn it! If you loved me, you wouldn’t do this to yourself. If you loved me—” Marissa’s voice cracked. “If you loved me...”

Tears welled in her eyes, and with a jerky movement, she clamped her hands on her face and trembled. Just shook all over.

“Baby...it’s going to be all right.” Thank God, she let him put his arms around her. “Baby—”

“I am so angry at you right now,” she said into his chest. “You’re an arrogant, prideful fool who’s breaking my heart.”

“I’m a man who wants to take care of his woman.”

“Like I said...a goddamned fool. And you promised, no more protecting me by leaving me out.”

“I’m really sorry, I just wanted to tell you when it was over. And I trust V with my life, I truly do. I’m not going to kick it over this.” He tilted her face up and thumbed away her tears. “I just keep thinking about the future. I’m thirty-seven and I’ve led a hard-drinking, hard-smoking life. I could be dead in ten years, who knows?”

“And if you die now, I will have missed out on that decade. I want those years with you.”

“But I want centuries. Aeons. And I want you to stop feeding off of... Rehvenge.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I told you it’s not romantic—”

“On your side. But can you honestly say that he doesn’t want you?”

When she didn’t reply, he nodded. “That’s what I thought. I don’t blame him, but I don’t like it. Even though...shit, you probably should be with someone like him, someone from your class.”

“Butch, I don’t care about the *glymera* anymore. I’m shut out of that life now, and you know what? It’s for the better. In fact, I should thank Havers for forcing me to be independent. He did me a favor.”

“Yeah, well, no offense, but I still want to beat his ass.”

As he squeezed her harder, she sighed into his pecs. “What are they going to do if you have some of the race in you?”

“Let’s talk about that afterward.”

“No.” She pushed him back. “You do *not* shut me out. You want to do this for us? Then I get a vote, damn it. We talk about it *now*.”

He shoved a hand through his hair and braced himself. “They’re going to try and jump-start the change if I do.”

Her mouth opened slowly. “How?”

“V says he can do it.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t gotten that far.”

Marissa stared at him for a long time, and he knew she was tallying his fuckups. After a moment, she said, “You broke your promise to me by keeping me out of all this.”

“I... Yeah, I blew it.” He put his palm over his heart. “But I swear, Marissa, I was going to come to you once I knew whether we had a shot at it. I never had any intention of going into the transition without talking to you first. I swear.”

“I don’t want to lose you.”

“I don’t want to be lost.”

As she glanced at the door, silence expanded in the room until he could have sworn it became tangible, brushing against his skin like cold fog.

Finally, she said, “If you’re going to do the regression, I want to be in the room.”

Butch released his breath in a rush. “Come here, I need to hold you for a sec.”

Pulling her to him, he wrapped his body around hers. Her shoulders were stiff, but her arms gripped him around the waist. Hard.

“Butch?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not sorry I slapped you.”

He dropped his head into her neck. “I deserved it.”

As he pressed his lips to her skin, he breathed in deep, trying to hold her scent not just in his lungs but in his blood. When he pulled back, he looked at the vein running up her neck and thought, *Oh, God...please let me be something more than I am.*

“Let’s get this over with,” she said.

He kissed her and let Wrath, V, and Rhage back in.

“We going to do this?” Vishous asked.

“Yeah, we are.”

Butch shut the doors, and then he and V went back over to the fireplace.

As Rhage moved in from behind and went to slide the belt in place, Butch looked at Marissa. “It’s okay, baby. I love you.” Then he glanced at Wrath. As if the king read minds, he went over and stood next to her. Ready to catch her. Or hold her back.

V got real close, so close their chests almost touched. With care, he repositioned the cross so it hung down Butch’s back. “You good to go, cop?”

Butch nodded, finding as comfortable a bite as he could on the leather. He braced himself as V lifted an arm.

Except when his roommate’s palm landed on his bare chest all he felt was a warm weight. Butch frowned. This was it? This was fucking it? Scaring the shit out of Marissa for no good—

He looked down, pissed off.

Oh, wrong hand.

“I want you to relax for me, my man,” V said, slowly moving his palm in a circle, right over Butch’s heart. “Just take some deep breaths. The calmer you are, the better it will be for you.”

Funny choice of words. Exactly what Butch had said to Marissa when he’d—

Not wanting to get flustered, he dropped that thought and tried to loosen his shoulders. Got nowhere.

“Let’s just breathe together for a minute, cop. That’s it. In and out. Breathe with me. Yeah, good. We got all the time in the world.”

Butch closed his eyes and concentrated on the soothing sensation rubbing over his chest. The warmth. The rotating movement.

“There you go, cop. That’s nice. Feels good, true? Just chilling...”

The circling got slower and slower. And Butch’s breathing got deeper and easier. His heart began to pause before beats, the intervals between pumps growing longer and longer. And all the time with V’s voice...the lazy words seducing him, getting in his brain, trancing him out.

“Okay, Butch. Look at me. Show me those peepers of yours.”

Butch lifted heavy lids and swayed as he stared up into V’s face.

Then he tensed. The pupil of V’s right eye was expanding until there was nothing but blackness. No white part. No iris. What the f—

“Nah, it’s all good, Butch. You don’t worry about what you’re seeing. You just look inside of me. Come on, now. Look into me, Butch. Feel my hand on your chest. Good...now I want you to fall into me. Let yourself go. Fall...in...to...me...”

Butch fixated on the blackness and went back to focusing on the palm moving over his heart. From the corner of his eye, he saw the glowing hand come up, but he was too far gone to care. He was stumbling in the most marvelous, mild way, in the midst of a gentle trip through thin air, falling into Vishous...

Plunging into a void...

Of darkness...

Mr. X woke up and put his hand to his chest, feeling around for his wounds. He was satisfied with how fast they were healing, but he was far from his normal strength.

Lifting his head with care, he glanced at what had once been a cozy den for a nuclear family. Now that the Lessening Society was occupying the house, however, the room was just four walls, faded carpet, and wilted drapery.

Van walked in from the cheerful, empty kitchen and stopped dead. “You’re awake. Jesus, I thought I was going to have to dig a hole in the backyard.”

Mr. X coughed a little. “Bring me my laptop.”

When Van brought the thing in, Mr. X heaved himself up so he was leaning against the wall. From the Windows XP startup menu, he went into My Documents and opened a Word file titled “Operational Notes.” He scrolled down to the header marked “July” and panned through entries made nine months ago. There was one for each day, back from when he’d been

Fore-lesser the first time. Back when he'd given a shit.

As he searched, he was aware of Van hovering.

"We have a new purpose, you and I," Mr. X said absently.

"Oh, yeah?"

"That human we saw tonight. We're going to find him." X paused at the notes from the seventeenth of the month, but they didn't give him what he was after. "We're going to find that human, and we're going to take him out. Find him...take him out."

The guy had to die so that Mr. X's misread of the situation became fact and the Omega never knew his Trojan human hadn't been killed by the Brothers.

The actual assassination of the man would have to be carried out by another *lesser*, however. After this evening's showdown, Mr. X was taking himself out of the risk pool. He could not take a chance on another serious injury.

July...July...maybe he had the wrong month, but he could have sworn it was around then that a cop looking like that human had shown up at the Caldwell Martial Arts Academy, the Society's former HQ—ah...yes. Good record keeping was so helpful. And so was the fact that he'd demanded to see the guy's shield.

Mr. X spoke up. "His name is Brian O'Neal. CPD badge number eight five two. Address used to be over in the Cornwell Apartments, but I'm sure he's moved. Born Boston Hospital for Women, Boston, MA, to a Mr. Edward and a Mrs. Odell O'Neal." Mr. X glanced at Van and smiled a little. "What do you bet his parents are still in Boston?"

Chapter Thirty-four

Rain was falling onto Butch's face. Was he outside? Had to be.

Man...he must have passed out on some kind of bender or something. Because he was flat on his back and his head was nothing but 'slaw and the idea of opening his eyes was too much like work.

He should probably just lie here and wait a while. Yeah...he should just sleep for a little bit...

Except, holy hell, this rain was annoying. The shit tickled as it hit his cheeks and slid down into his neck. He lifted an arm to cover his face.

"He's coming around."

Whose deep voice was that? V's...yeah, and V was...his roommate? Or something. Yeah...roommate. He liked V a lot.

"Butch?" Now, a woman. A very scared woman. "Butch, can you hear me?"

Oh, he really knew her. She was...the love of his life...*Marissa*.

Butch's eyes lazied open, but he wasn't too sure what was reality and what was trippy nonsense. Until he saw his woman's face.

Marissa was bent over him and his head was in her lap. Her tears were what was falling on his face. And V...V was right next to her, down on his haunches, his mouth a thin, strained slash in the midst of his goatee.

Butch struggled to speak, but there was something in his mouth. As he batted at it, trying to get it out, Marissa went to help him.

"No, not yet," V said. "I think he's got a couple more in him."

More what?

From out of nowhere, Butch heard a scramble of feet.

He lifted his head a little and was surprised to find that he was the one making the noise. His shoes were flopping up and down, and he watched as

the spasms crawled up his legs. He tried to fight the progress, but the seizure took over, traveling into his hips and his torso, making his arms flap and his back slap against the floor.

He rode the wave as best he could, trying to hang on to consciousness until it was just impossible.

When he came back, he was dizzy.

"That one didn't last so long," Marissa said, smoothing his hair back.
"Butch, can you hear me?"

He nodded and tried to lift his arm to her. But then his feet started up with the Fred Astaire routine again.

Three more trips through the seizure park and the belt was finally taken out of his mouth. As he tried to speak, he realized how truly drunk he was. His brain was barely kicking over, he was so wasted. Except...hold up—he couldn't remember hitting the Scotch.

"Marissa," he mumbled, taking her hand. "Don't want to see you drink so much." Wait, not really what he'd been going for. "Ah...don't you see *me* drink so much...want."

Whatever. God...he was so confused.

V smiled a little, but it was the kind of falsey number doctors gave to patients who were about to throw up. "He's going to need something with sugar in it. Rhage, you got a lollipop on you?"

Butch looked over as a wicked handsome blond guy knelt down. "I know you," Butch said. "Hey...buddy."

"Hey, my man." Rhage reached into the pocket of his fleece and pulled out a Tootsie Pop. After ripping the wrapper off, he put the thing into Butch's mouth.

Butch groaned. Goddamn, that was the best thing he'd ever tasted in his whole life. Grape. Sweet. Ahhhh...

"Is he seizing again?" Marissa asked.

"I think he likes it," Rhage murmured. "That right, cop?"

Butch nodded and nearly lost the lollipop, so Rhage took control of the stick, holding it in place.

Man, they were so good to him. Marissa stroking his hair and holding his hand. V's palm a warm weight on his leg. Rhage making sure the Tootsie Pop stayed where it needed to be—

All of a sudden, higher reasoning and short-term memory came back in a rush, like his brain was being poured back into his skull. He wasn't drunk.

The regression. The ancestor regression. V's hand on his chest. The blackness.

"What was the result?" he asked, panicked. "V...what did you find out? What was—"

Everyone around him took a deep breath and someone muttered, *Thank God he's really back.*

At that moment, two steel-toed shitkickers approached from the right. Butch's eyes latched on to them, then rose higher, taking in a pair of leather-clad legs, then a huge body.

Wrath towered over them all.

The king reached up and removed his wraparounds, revealing brilliant, gleaming, pale green eyes. As they didn't appear to have pupils, the stare was like getting hit with a pair of klieg lights.

Wrath smiled broadly, his fangs so very white. "What's doing...cousin."

Butch frowned. "What...?"

"You've got some of me in you, cop." Wrath's smile stuck around as he slid his glasses back on. "'Course, I always knew you were a royal. Just didn't think it went past the pain-in-the-ass part, is all."

"Are you...serious?"

Wrath nodded. "You're of my line, Butch. One of mine."

As Butch's chest got tight, he braced himself for another seizure. And so did everyone else: Rhage took the lollipop out and reached for the belt. Marissa and V tensed up.

But what came out of him was a rush of laughter. A ridiculous, belly-rolling, tear-up, stupid-idiot wave of happy hysteria.

Butch laughed and laughed and kissed Marissa's hand. Then laughed some more.

Marissa felt the satisfaction and the excitement humming through Butch's body as he let loose. But when he beamed up at her, she couldn't share his joy.

He lost his smile. "Baby, it's going to be all right."

Vishous got to his feet. "Why don't we give you guys a minute alone?"

"Thank you," she said.

After the Brothers left, Butch sat up. "This is our chance—"

"If I asked, would you not do the transition?"

He froze. As if she'd slapped him again. "Marissa—"

“Would you?”

“Why don’t you want me with you?”

“I do. And I would choose the future we have now over a hypothetical cast of centuries any day. Can’t you understand that?”

He blew out a long breath, his jaw tightening. “Christ, I love you.”

Okay, so clearly he didn’t find her logic appealing. “Butch, if I asked you, would you not do it?”

When he didn’t reply, she covered her eyes, though she had no tears left in her.

“I love you,” he repeated. “So, yeah...if you asked me not to, I wouldn’t.”

She lowered her hand, her breath catching. “Swear to this. Here and now.”

“On my mother.”

“*Thank you...*” She pulled him into her arms. “Oh, God...thank you. And we can work through the...feeding issue. Mary and Rhage have. I just... Butch, we can have a good future.”

They were silent for a time, just sitting on the floor. Then from out of the blue, he said gruffly, “I have three brothers and a sister.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve never talked to you about my family. I have three brothers and one sister. Well, there had been two girls, but then we lost one.”

“Oh.” She sat back, thinking his tone was very odd.

And his hollow voice gave her the total creeps as he said, “My earliest memory is of my sister Joyce coming home from the hospital as an infant. I wanted to check her out, and I ran to her crib, but my father shoved me back so my older brother and sister could look at her. As I bounced off the wall, dad picked up my brother and lifted him so he could touch her. I’ll never forget my father’s voice...” Butch’s accent changed, the vowels flattening out. *“This here’s your sistah, Teddy. Yah gonna love’ah and take care’ahah.* I thought, what about me? I would like to love her and take care of her. I said, *Pa, I wanna help, too.* He didn’t even look at me.”

Marissa realized she was squeezing Butch’s hand so hard she must be bruising his bones, but he didn’t seem to notice. And she couldn’t loosen the hold.

“After that,” he went on, “I started watching my father and my mom, watching how they were different with the other kids. Main thing was on

Friday and Saturday nights. My father liked to drink, and I was the one he went for when he needed to knock something around.” When Marissa gasped, Butch shook his head with a total lack of regard. “No, it’s fine. It was good. I can suck back punches like you read about, thanks to him, and trust me, that’s come in handy. So anyway, one Fourth of July...Hell, I was almost twelve then...” He rubbed his jaw, his beard growth scratching. “Yeah, the Fourth of July came and we were doing the family thing out at my uncle’s on the Cape. My brother skims some beers from the cooler and he and his buddies go ’round back of the garage and crack them open. I hid in the bushes because I wanted to be invited in. You know...I hoped my brother would...” He cleared his throat. “When my father came looking for them, the other boys took off and my brother about crapped in his pants. My father just laughed. Told Teddy to make sure my mother never found out. Then dad saw me crouched down in the shrubs. He came over, hauled me up by the collar, and backhanded me so hard I spit blood.”

As Butch smiled in a hard way, she looked at the uneven edge of his front tooth.

“He told me it was for being a spy and a snitch. I swore to him I was just looking, I wasn’t going to tell no one. He clipped me again and called me a pervert. My brother...yeah, my brother just watched the whole thing happen. Didn’t say a word. And when I walked past my mother with my split lip and the chip out of my tooth, she just held my little sister Joyce closer and looked away.” He shook his head slowly. “Up at the house, I went to the bathroom and cleaned up, then headed for the room I was staying in. I didn’t give a shit about God, but I went down on my knees, clapped my little hands together, and prayed like a good Catholic should. I begged God that this not be my family. *Please* let this not be my family. *Please* let there be someplace else I can go...”

She had a feeling he didn’t know he’d switched into the present tense. Or that he’d reached up and was gripping the solid gold cross around his neck like his life depended on it.

His lips cracked into a half smile. “But God must have known I wasn’t sure about Him because nothing came of it. Then that fall my sister Janie was murdered.” As Marissa sucked in a breath, he pointed behind himself. “That’s the tattoo on my back. I count the years since she’s gone. I was the last one to see her alive, before she got in the car with those boys that just...desecrated her behind our high school.”

She reached for him. "Butch, I'm so—"

"No, let me get this out, okay? This shit's like a train, now that it's moving, I can't stop it." He dropped the cross and shoved his hand through his hair. "After Janie disappeared and they found her body, my father never touched me again. Wouldn't come near me. Wouldn't look at me. Didn't talk to me, either. My mom went crazy after a little while and they had to put her in a psych ward. It was right around then that I started drinking. I ran the streets. Did drugs. Got in fights. The family just limped along. I never understood the change in my dad, though. I mean...for years he beat me, then...nothing."

"I'm so glad he stopped hitting you."

"No difference to me. The waiting to get clipped was as bad as getting my ass slammed. And to not know why...but I did find out. At my oldest brother's bachelor party. I was like twenty by then and had moved from Southie—er—South Boston to here because I was starting as a cop with the CPD. Anyway, I went back home for the party. We were in some guy's house with a lot of strippers. My father was pounding the beers hard. I was doing lines of cocaine and sucking back Scotch. Party comes to an end and I'm buzzing out of control. I'd done a lot of coke...man, I was so fucking polluted that night. So...Dad's leaving...getting a ride home from someone, and suddenly I had to talk to the sonofabitch.

"I end up chasing him out into the street, but he's all ignoring me and shit. So in front of all the guys, I just grabbed him. I was beyond pissed. I started going off on him, about how I thought he'd been a real shitty father to me, how I was surprised he stopped cracking me because he liked it so much. I went on and on, until my old man finally looked into my face. I just froze. There was...total terror in his eyes. He was completely scared of me. Then he said, *I left yah alone 'cause I couldn't have yah killin' any more of m'children, could I?* I was all...*What the fuck?* He starts to cry and says, *Yah knew she was my favorite...yah knew and that's why yah put hah in that cah w' those boys. Yah did it, yah knew what would happen.*" Butch shook his head. "Man, everyone heard it. All the guys. My oldest brother, too...My father actually thought I'd had my sister murdered to get back at him."

Marissa tried to embrace him, but again he shrugged her off and took a deep breath. "I don't go home anymore. Ever. Last I heard, Ma and Pa were spending some time in Florida every year, but otherwise were still in the house I grew up in. Like, my sister Joyce, her baby was just baptized? The

only reason I knew about it was because her husband called me out of guilt.

“So here’s my deal, Marissa. I’ve had a piece missing all my life. I’ve always been different from other people, not just in my family but when I was working here on the CPD force, too. I never fit in...until I met the Brotherhood. I met your kind...and, shit, now I know why. I was a stranger among humans.” He cursed softly. “I wanted to go through the change not just for you, but for me. Because I felt like then...I could be who I’m supposed to be. I mean, hell, I’ve been living on the fringes all my life. I kind of wanted to know what being in the thick was like.”

In a powerful move, he got off the floor. “So that’s why I want...why I wanted to do this. It wasn’t just about you.”

He went over to a window and pushed aside the pale blue velvet drapery. As he stared out into the night, the glow from a lamp on the desk fell across the planes of his face, the heft of his shoulders, the thick pads of his chest. And the golden cross that lay over his heart.

God, how he yearned as he looked out of the window. Yearned so fiercely his eyes nearly glowed.

She thought of him the night she’d fed from Rehvenge. Saddened, hurt, paralyzed by biology.

Butch shrugged. “But...you know, sometimes you can’t have what you want. So you deal and move on.” He glanced back at her. “Like I said, you don’t want me to, I won’t.”

Chapter Thirty-five

Butch looked away from Marissa and stared back out into the darkness. Against the dense black screen of the night, he saw images of his family, clip art that made his eyes sting. Holy fuck, he'd never put the whole story into words before. Never expected to.

Not a pretty picture, the whole lot of it.

Which was another reason he'd wanted to go through the transition. He could have used another shot at life, and the change would have been like birth, wouldn't it? A new beginning, where he was something else, something...improved. And purified, too. A kind of baptism by blood.

And man, he hungered to wipe the slate clean, all of it: the stuff with his family, the things he'd done as an adult, that shit with the Omega and the *lessers*.

He winced, thinking he'd gotten so close. "Yeah...ah, I'm just going to tell Wrath and them this is not—"

"Butch, I—"

He cut her off by going to the door and opening it. As he looked out at the king and V, his chest burned. "Sorry, fellas. Change in plan—"

"What will you do to him?" Marissa's voice was loud and all hard edges as it cut through the air.

Butch glanced over his shoulder. Across the study, she looked as grim as he felt.

"Well?" she demanded. "What will you do to him?"

Wrath nodded to his left. "Vishous, you better field that one."

V's answer was factual, straight to the point. Horrific.

Hell, any plan that ended with "and then we pray" was not a trip to Disneyland.

“Where would you do it?” she asked.

“Down in the training center,” V replied. “The Equipment Room has a separate area for first aid and PT treatments.”

There was a long silence, during which Butch stared at Marissa. Surely, she couldn’t be—

“Okay,” she said. “Okay...when do we do it?”

Butch’s eyes popped. “Baby...?”

Her gaze stuck to Vishous. “When?”

“Tomorrow night. His chances will be better if he has a little time to recover from the regression.”

“Tomorrow night, then,” Marissa said, wrapping her arms around herself.

V nodded, then looked at Butch. “I imagine you two are going to want some privacy today. I’m going to crash here at the main house, so you have the Pit to yourselves.”

Butch was so stunned out, he couldn’t make sense of anything. “Marissa, are you—”

“Yes, I’m sure. And I’m terrified.” She walked past him, heading for the doorway. “Now, I’d like to go to the gatehouse if you don’t mind.”

He grabbed his shirt and went after her.

As they went along, he took her elbow...but had the sense that she was leading him.

When they got to the Pit, Butch could not read Marissa’s mood. She was quiet, but she’d marched across the courtyard like a soldier, nothing but strength and focus.

“I’d like a drink,” she said as he shut the door.

“Okay.” This at least he could handle. Assuming they had anything but hard liquor in the house.

He went into the kitchen and cracked the fridge. Oh, man...decaying bags of Taco Hell and Arby’s. Mustard packets. Two inches of milk that was now a solid. “I’m not sure what we’ve got. Um...water—”

“No, I want a *drink*.”

He looked up over the icebox door. “All...right. We have Scotch and vodka.”

“I’ll try the vodka.”

As he poured her some Grey Goose over ice, he watched her walk around. She checked out V’s computers. The Foosball table. The plasma

screen TV.

He went over to her. He wanted her in his arms; he gave her the glass.

She put it to her mouth, tilted her head back, took a long one...and coughed until her eyes watered. While she choked, he maneuvered her onto the couch and sat down next to her.

“Marissa—”

“Shut up.”

Okaaay. He clasped his hands together as she struggled with the Goose. After she got down about half an inch, she put the stuff on the coffee table with a grimace.

She tackled him so fast, Butch never saw it coming. One second he was staring at his tightly laced fingers. The next, he was pressed into the sofa and she was straddling him and...oh, God, her tongue was in his mouth.

She felt so damned good, but the vibe was all wrong. The desperation and the anger and the fear just weren’t appropriate background music. They were going to end up further apart if they kept going.

He held her back from him, even though his cock screamed in protest.

“Marissa—”

“I want to have sex.”

He closed his eyes. Christ, so did he. All night long. Except not like this.

He took a deep breath, trying to frame the words right...and when he opened his lids, she’d pulled off her turtleneck and was working the clasp of a black bra that totally knocked him out.

His hands tightened on her waist as those satin cups came off her and her nipples tightened in the chill. He leaned forward, ready to put his lips to the first piece of her he hit, when he stopped. He was not going to take her like this. The air was too hard between them.

He stopped her hands as they went to his pants. “Marissa...no.”

“Don’t say that.”

He sat up, putting her back from his body. “I love you.”

“Then don’t stop me.”

He shook his head. “I won’t do this. Not as we are now.”

She stared at him in disbelief. Then snatched her wrists out of his hold and turned her head from him.

“Marissa—”

She shrugged off his hands, batting them away. “I can’t believe this. Our one night together and you say no.”

“Let me...Christ...let me hold you. Come on, Marissa.”

She rubbed her eyes. Laughed in a tragic little burst. “I am destined to go to my grave a virgin, aren’t I? Sure, technically I’m not, but—”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t be with you.” She glanced over at him, tears glimmering on her lashes. “I just...Not with the anger. It’ll pollute the whole thing. I want it to be...special.”

So what if that line was right out of a high school playbook. It was the truth.

“Baby, why don’t we just go into my bedroom and lie down in the dark.” He handed her back the turtleneck and she put the thing to her breasts. “If we end up doing nothing but staring at the ceiling all night long, at least we’ll be together. And if something happens? It won’t be about pissed off and frustrated. Okay?”

She wiped off the two tears that had fallen. Pulled her shirt on over her head. Looked at the vodka she’d tried to drink.

He got to his feet and offered her his hand. “Come back with me.”

After a long moment, her palm met his and he pulled her up and took her down to his bedroom. When he shut the door, everything went pitch-black, so he clicked on the little lamp on the dresser. The low-watt bulb glowed like embers in a fireplace.

“Come here.” He drew her over to the bed, laid her down, and eased himself next to her so he was on his side and she on her back.

As he smoothed some of her hair out on the pillow, she closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath. Gradually, the tension loosened in her body.

“You’re right. That wouldn’t have gone well.”

“It isn’t because I don’t want you.” As he kissed her on the shoulder, she turned her face to his hand and pressed her lips to his palm.

“Are you scared?” she said. “About what’ll happen to you tomorrow?”

“No.” The only thing he worried about was her. He didn’t want her to watch him die. Prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

“Butch...about your human family. Do you want them to be told if you
___”

“Nope, there’s no need to tell them anything. And don’t talk like that. I’ll be fine.” *Please, God, let her not have to see me pass.*

“But won’t they care?” When he shook his head, her expression grew sad. “You should be mourned by your blood.”

“I will be. By the Brotherhood.” As her eyes watered, he kissed her. “And

no more about mourning. That's not part of the plan. Forget about it."

"I—"

"Shh. We're not going there. You and me are staying right here."

He lay his head down next to hers and continued running his hands through her beautiful blond hair. When her breathing grew deep and even, he shuffled a little closer, tucked her against his bare chest, and shut his eyes.

He must have fallen asleep as well, because a little later he woke up. In the best possible way.

He was kissing her throat and his hand was moving up her side, heading for her breast. He'd thrown a leg over both of hers, and his erection was pushed up against her hip. With a curse, he backed off, but she followed, staying with him until she was half on top of him.

Her eyes flipped open. "Oh..."

He swept his hands up to her face and pushed her hair back. Their eyes met.

Lifting his head off the pillow, he kissed her softly on the mouth. Once. Twice. And...again.

"Is...something happening?" she whispered.

"Yeah. I think something's happening."

He drew her back into a kiss, then entered her with his tongue, stroking against hers. As he kept at it, their bodies began to move together, mimicking the sex act, his hips advancing and retreating, hers absorbing him, rubbing against him.

There was no rush and he took it slowly, undressing her with care. When she was naked, he eased back and looked at her body.

Oh...God. All that soft female skin. Her perfect breasts with their nipples straining. Her secrets. And her face was the best of all: It showed no fear, just erotic anticipation.

Which meant he was going to finish this between them. If there had been a lick of doubt in her eyes, he would have just pleased her and left it at that. But she wanted the same thing he did, and he was certain there would be no pain for her this time.

Butch stood up and slipped off his loafers, the Guccis making a thunking sound one by one. She watched with wide eyes as his hands went to the waistband of his slacks and he popped the button, then unzipped. Boxers hit the floor with the pants and his erection shot straight out from his body. He covered himself with his hand, folding his cock against his belly, not wanting

her to get unnerved.

As he lay down, she rolled into him.

“Oh, God,” he breathed as their skin met.

“You’re so very naked,” she whispered against his shoulder.

He smiled into her hair. “So are you.”

She ran her hands up and down his sides, and he felt the heat in him go nuclear, especially as she slipped one arm between their bodies and her palm headed south. When she hit his lower belly, his erection pulsed with the desperate need to be touched, to be stroked, to be squeezed until it exploded.

But he captured her wrist and withdrew her hand. “Marissa, I want you to do something for me.”

“What?”

“Let me see you through this, okay? Let’s have this time be all about you.”

Before she could protest, he covered her mouth with his own.

Butch treated her with such exquisite care, Marissa thought. And with total restraint. Every touch was soft and gentle, every kiss was easy, unhurried. Even when his tongue was in her mouth and his hand was between her legs and she was going wild from the way he went after her, he was in control of himself.

So when he rolled over onto her and his thigh parted hers, she didn’t flinch or hesitate. Her body was ready to take him inside. She knew it by the slippery feel of his fingers when he’d touched her. Knew it from her hunger for his sex, too.

He settled his weight on her comfortably and that gloriously hard part of him burned her core as it brushed against her. With a shift, his shoulders bunched up and he put his hand down between their bodies. The head of him found the doorway to her.

Butch propped himself up on his thick arms and stared down into her eyes as he started with that light rocking motion she remembered from before. She deliberately relaxed herself, trying to get as loose as possible even as she became a little nervous.

“You’re so beautiful,” he groaned. “You okay?”

She ran her hands up his ribs, feeling all the heavy bones under his skin. “Yes.”

Pressure and release, pressure and release, a little deeper each time. She

closed her eyes, feeling his body moving on top of her, inside of her. This time the stretching, the way her interior yielded to him, the fullness, struck her as delicious, not scary. On instinct, she arched, and as her hips came back to level, she realized that his pelvis and hers had come together.

She lifted her head and looked down. He was all the way in.

“How does it feel? You all right?” Butch’s voice was ragged as his muscles flickered under sweat-soaked skin. And then his erection jerked.

A stinging pleasure lit off deep inside of her and she moaned. “Dear Virgin in the Fade...do that again. I can feel you when you do that.”

“I have a better idea.”

As he drew his hips back, she grabbed onto his shoulders to stop the gliding retreat. “No, don’t stop—”

He moved forward, pushing back into her flesh, filling her once more. Marissa’s eyes popped and she shuddered, especially as he went again with the retreat and the advance.

“Yes...” she said. “Better. This is even better.”

She watched him as he rode her so carefully, his pecs and his arms flexed up hard, his belly muscles curling and uncurling as his hips rolled into her and relented.

“Oh...Butch.” The vision of him, the feel of him. She closed her eyes so she could concentrate on every subtle thing.

God, she hadn’t expected sex to sound so erotic. With her lids closed, she heard the catch of his breath, the soft creaking of the bed, the rustle of the sheets as he repositioned one of his arms.

With every push and pull, she was getting hotter. And so was he. In no time, his slick skin went fever-baked and he began to breathe in short sucks of air.

“Marissa?”

“Yes...” she sighed.

She felt his hand go between their bodies. “Come for me, baby. I want to feel you come like this.”

He started in with a wicked, licking touch while keeping up with the slow pump. Within moments, lightning gathered in her core and exploded, blasting out all over her, the orgasm locking her onto him in a series of contractions.

“Oh...yeah,” he said hoarsely. “Grab onto me. That’s what I like...shit.”

When she finally went limp, she opened her eyes in a daze and found him looking at her with total awe...and more than a little concern.

“Was that all right?” he asked.

“Amazing.” The relief that bled into his face made her chest ache. And then she realized something. “Wait...what about you?”

He swallowed hard. “I would love to finish in you.”

“Then do it.”

“It’s not going to take me long,” he said under his breath.

As he began to move again, she went motionless and just absorbed the feel of him.

“Baby?” he said roughly. “This okay? You’re so still.”

“I want to know what your part is like.”

“Heaven,” he said into her ear. “With you, it’s heaven.”

He dropped down off his arms, his body hard and heavy as it began to churn above hers. She opened her legs as wide as they could go, her head moving up and down on the pillow from how he was pumping into her. God, he was strong.

With luscious propriety, she ran her hands across his bunched shoulders, then down his surging spine to the place that was hinging against her. She knew just when it was getting to be time for him. His rhythm became urgent, the distance of the thrusts getting tighter, the speed increasing. His whole body grew rigid within its range of movement, surging back and forth, no chance of stopping now.

Breath shot out of his mouth and brushed over her shoulder and the sweat beading on his skin wiped off onto hers. When his hand grabbed her hair and squeezed into a fist, she felt a lick of pain and didn’t care. Especially as his face lifted up and his eyes squeezed shut as if he were in exquisite agony.

Then he stopped breathing altogether. The veins popped at the sides of his neck as he threw his head back and roared. Deep inside, she felt his erection kicking, felt hot liquid shoot into her on spasms that shook his whole body.

He collapsed onto her, damp, overheated, gasping. His muscles twitching all over.

She wrapped her arms around him, her legs, too, and held him within her, cradling him.

How beautiful he was, she thought. How beautiful...all this was.

Chapter Thirty-six

Marissa came awake to the sounds of the shutters lifting for the night and the feel of hands stroking over her stomach, her breasts, her neck. She was on her side, with Butch tucked in tight against her back...and his hard planes of muscle were rocking in an erotic rhythm.

His erection was hot and it was searching her out, probing at the crease of her buttocks, wanting in. She reached behind and dug her fingers into his flank, urging him on, and he took the cue. Wordlessly, he rolled on top of her back, his body pushing her facefirst into the pillows. She shoved them out of the way so she could breathe as he split her legs open with his knees.

She moaned. Which evidently woke him up.

He jerked back as if he'd punched his arms into the bed. "Marissa...I... ah, I didn't mean to..."

When he retreated, she rose onto her knees, trying to keep contact with him. "Don't stop."

There was a moment of pause. "You must be sore."

"Not at all. Come back on me. Please."

His voice went all gravel and rasp. "Jesus...I'd hoped you'd want to do this again. And I'll go easy, I swear."

God, that rough sound was nice first thing in the evening.

His broad hand smoothed down her spine, and his mouth brushed the top of her hip, then her tailbone, then went lower, to the skin of her bottom. "You look so beautiful like this. I want to have you like this."

Her eyes flared. "You can do that?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll go deeper. You want to try?"

"Yes..."

He pulled her hips up farther and settled her weight on all fours, the bed

creaking while he repositioned their bodies. As he came in behind her, she looked through her legs. All she saw was his thick thighs and his heavy, hanging sack and his straining arousal. Her core went utterly wet, as if her body knew exactly what was coming.

His chest eased down over her back, and one of his hands appeared beside her head, planting into the mattress as a fist. His forearm flexed and the veins in it thickened as he leaned to the side and brought the head of his erection to the tender skin between her legs. With a little teasing brush, he worked himself back and forth along the outside of her and she knew he was looking at her sex while he did it.

Going by the way he started to shake, he really liked what he saw.

“Marissa...I want to—” He cut himself off with an indistinct curse.

“What?” She twisted a little so she could look up at him around her shoulder.

As he stared down at her, his eyes had that hard, intense gleam he seemed to get when he was serious about sex, but there was something else in them, a glowing need that had nothing to do with their bodies. Instead of explaining himself, he planted his other hand into the bed, eased onto her back and pushed his hips in tight without penetrating her. With a gasp, she dropped her head and watched his arousal shoot straight up through her legs. The tip stretched almost to her belly button.

God, now she knew why he liked to look. Because...yes, she liked the sight of him all aroused, too.

“What were you going to say?” she groaned.

“Baby...” His breath was hot on her neck, his voice a dark, driving demand in her ear. “Ah, shit, I can’t ask you like this.”

His mouth locked onto her shoulder, his teeth pressing into her skin. As she cried out, her elbows went lax, but he caught her before she fell into the mattress, holding her up with an arm between her breasts.

“Ask me...” she panted.

“I would...if I could stop this...but oh, God...”

He pulled back, then entered her, going just as deep as he’d said he would, the powerful surge making her arch her back and call out his name. He started in with that rhythm that drove her wild, but he was still gentle, moving with so much less power than she sensed he could.

She was loving the feel of him, that fullness, that stretching and gliding back, when it dawned on her that they were going to go to work on his body

within the hour.

What if this was their last time?

Tears pooled. Matted her lashes. Blinded her. And when he twisted her chin around so he could kiss her, he saw them.

“Don’t think about it,” he whispered against her mouth. “Stay with me in this moment. Stay right here with me.”

Remember this moment. Remember him here...

He pulled out, turned her over, and joined them face-to-face, brushing at her cheeks and kissing her as he kept up with the sex. They peaked at the same time, the pleasure so great, his head went loose on his neck as if he couldn’t hold it up any longer.

Afterward, he rolled onto his side and gathered her against his chest. As she listened to the thumping of his heart, she prayed the thing was as strong as it sounded.

“What were you going to say?” she whispered in the dimness.

“Will you be my wife?”

She lifted her head. His hazel eyes were dead serious and she had the feeling he was thinking the same thing she was: Why hadn’t they been mated sooner?

The single word left her on a sigh. “Yes...”

He kissed her softly. “I want to do it both ways. Your way and in a Catholic church. Would that be all right?”

She touched the cross he wore. “Absolutely.”

“I wish there was time to—”

The alarm clock started to go off. With a vicious move, he slapped it into silence.

“I guess we need to get up,” she said, moving away a little.

She didn’t get far. He pulled her back down to the bed, pinned her with his body, and slipped his hand between her legs.

“Butch—”

He kissed her full on and then said against her mouth, “Once more for you. Once more, Marissa.”

His gliding, talented fingers left her liquid, her skin and bones melting into him as his mouth went to her breast and he pulled her nipple between his lips. He drove her quickly out of control until she was flushed and gasping, arching into him, enthralled.

Urgent, electric pressure built up and then snapped free in a blaze of

current. With loving attention, he helped her ride out the orgasm as she skipped like a flat stone over water, hitting the surface of the pleasure and flying again, only to land and ricochet once more.

The whole time he was above her, watching her with hazel eyes that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

He was going to die tonight. She knew it with total certainty.

John sat in the back of the empty classroom, taking up space in the far corner at his regular, by-his-lonesome table. Training usually started at four, but Zsadist had sent out an e-mail saying classes would begin three hours later tonight. Which was fine. John had had the chance to watch Wrath in action longer.

As the clock ticked closer to seven, the other trainees filed in. Blaylock was last. He was still moving slowly, but he was talking more easily with the guys, kind of like he was getting used to himself. He took a seat up front, shuffling his long legs around to fit.

Abruptly, John realized someone was missing. Where was Lash? Good God...what if he'd died? But no—somebody would have passed that news along.

Down in front, Blaylock laughed at one of the other trainees, then bent over to put his backpack on the floor. As he came back to level, his eyes met John's across the room.

John flushed and looked away.

"Hey, John," Blaylock said, "you want to come sit with me?"

The whole class went quiet. John glanced up.

"View's better from here." Blaylock nodded to the blackboard.

Silence followed. The kind where the *Jeopardy!* theme plays in everyone's head.

Not knowing what else to do, John grabbed his books, walked down the aisle, and slid into the empty seat. As he parked it, conversation sprang up again while more books landed on the tables and papers rustled.

The clock overhead clicked, the hands showing seven on the dot. As there was still no Zsadist, the talk got even louder in the room, the guys yanking around in earnest now.

John ran his pen in circles on a blank page, feeling awkward as all get-out and wondering what the hell he was doing up front. Maybe it was a practical joke on him? Shit, he should have stayed—

"Thank you," Blaylock said quietly. "For throwing down for me yesterday."

Whoa...maybe this wasn't a joke.

John surreptitiously slid his notebook over so Blaylock could see it. Then he wrote, *I didn't mean to take it that far.*

"I know. And you won't have to do it again. I mean, I can handle him."

John eyed his classmate. *No doubt*, he wrote.

From over on the left, one of the guys started humming the *Star Trek* theme, for God only knew what reason. Others chimed in. Someone lit off with a William Shatner: "I don't know...why I have to...talk like this, Spock..."

In the midst of the chaos, the sound of heavy boots coming down the hall drifted into the room. God, it was like there was an army out in the corridor. With a frown, John looked up to see Wrath walking past the door to the classroom. Then Butch and Marissa went by next. Then Vishous.

What were they all so grim about? he wondered.

Blaylock cleared his throat. "So, John, you want to hang with me and Qhuinn tonight? We were going to chill at my house. Bang some beers. Nothing special."

John whipped his head around, then tried to camo his surprise. But wow. First time any of them had suggested meeting up after class.

Cool, John wrote as Zsadist finally came in and shut the door.

Downtown at the Caldwell police station, Van Dean smiled at the badge in front of him, making sure his face was showing a whole lot of No Big Deal. "I'm an old friend of Brian O'Neal's, that's who I am."

Homicide detective José de la Cruz measured him with smart brown eyes. "What did you say your name is?"

"Bob. Bobby O'Connor. I grew up in Southie with Brian. He moved away. I did, too. Then I came back east recently and someone told me he was working as a cop in Caldwell so I figured I'd drop by. But when I call the CPD main line? No Brian O'Neal. And all I got was the he-doesn't-work-here runaround."

"What makes you think showing up in person will change the answer?"

"I was hoping someone could tell me what happened to him. I called his parents in Southie. His father said he hadn't talked to Brian in a long time, but last he knew his son was still working as a cop. Look, man, I've got no

ulterior motive here. I just want some answers.”

De la Cruz took a long drink out of his black coffee mug. “O’Neal was put on administrative leave back in July. He did not return to the force.”

“That’s it?”

“Why don’t you give me a telephone number? If I remember anything else, I’ll call you.”

“Sure thing.” Van recited some random numbers, which de la Cruz wrote down. “Thanks, and I’d appreciate a call. Hey, you were his partner, right?”

The other man shook his head. “No. I wasn’t.”

“Oh, that’s what the guy at Dispatch said.”

De la Cruz picked up a file from his paper-ridden desk and opened it. “We’re done here.”

Van smiled a little. “Sure thing. Thanks again, detective.”

He was almost out the door when de la Cruz said, “By the way, I know you’re full of shit.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you were a friend of his, you’d have asked for him by the name Butch. Now gitcha ass out of my office and pray that I’m too busy to follow up on you.”

Shit. Busted. “Names change, detective.”

“Not his. Good-bye, Bobby O’Connor. Or whoever you are.”

Van left the office, knowing he was damn lucky you couldn’t get arrested just for asking questions about someone. Because sure as hell, de la Cruz would have cuffed him if the guy could have.

Bullshit, those two hadn’t been partners. Van had read about them in an article in the *Caldwell Courier Journal*. But it was obvious that if de la Cruz knew what had become of Brian...Butch...whatever O’Neal, the detective was a dead end on the info trail for Van. And then some.

Van beelined it out of the police station into a nasty March drizzle and jogged over to the minivan. Thanks to his legwork, he had a pretty clear idea of what had happened to O’Neal in the last nine months. Guy’s last known address was a one-bedroom in a who-cares apartment building a couple blocks over. Manager had said that when the mail piled up and rent wasn’t paid on time, they’d gone in there. The place had been full of furniture and stuff, but it had been clear no one had been keeping house for a while. What little food there was had rotted, and the cable and phone had been turned off for nonpayment. It was like O’Neal had just walked out one morning all

business as usual...and never come back.

Because he'd fallen into the vampire world.

Must be kind of like joining the Lessening Society, Van thought as he fired up the Town & Country. Once you were in, you cut all your ties. And never went back.

Except the guy was still in Caldwell.

And that meant sooner or later, O'Neal was going to get popped, and Van wanted to be the one to do it. It was time for an inaugural kill and that ex-cop would fit the bill as well as anything else with a heartbeat would.

Just like Mr. X had said. Find the guy. Take him out.

As Van came up to a stoplight, he frowned, thinking that drive to murder probably should have bothered him. Except ever since he'd been inducted into the Society, he seemed to have lost some of his...humanity. And more was getting up to go every day. He didn't even miss his brother anymore.

That should have bothered him, too, right? But it didn't.

Because he could feel a dark kind of power growing inside of him, taking up the space left by his soul's departure. Every day he was getting more... powerful.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Butch walked across the bright blue mats of the gym, his destination a steel door on the far side marked EQUIPMENT ROOM. Along the way, as he followed Wrath and V, he held on to Marissa's cold hand. He wanted to give her some kind of pep talk, but she was too smart for that old *it's-gonna-to-be-okay* thing. Bottom line was, no one knew what was going to happen, and trying to falsely reassure her was like training a floodlight on the free fall he was about to take.

At the end of the mats, V unlocked the reinforced door and they filed into a jungle of workout gear and caged weapons, heading back to the physical therapy/first aid suite. V let them in and hit the lights, fluorescent tubes flickering on in a chorus of hums.

The place was right out of an episode of *ER*, all white tiles and glass-front stainless-steel cabinets filled with vials and medical supplies. In the corner there was a whirlpool tub, a massage table, and a cardiac crash cart, but none of that registered much. Butch was primarily interested in the center of the room, where showtime was going to happen: Sitting like a stage waiting for Shakespeare, there was a gurney with some kind of a high-tech chandelier hanging over it. And underneath...a drain in the floor.

He tried to imagine himself up on that table under those lights. And felt like he was drowning.

As Wrath shut the door, Marissa said in a flat voice, "We should be doing this at Havers's clinic."

V shook his head. "No offense, but I wouldn't take Butch to your brother for a paper cut. And the fewer people who know about this, the better." He went over to the gurney and checked that the brake was engaged. "Besides, I'm a damn good medic. Butch, ditch the clothes and let's do this."

Butch stripped to his boxers, his skin goose-bumping all over. “Can we do something about the temperature in this meat locker?”

“Yup.” V walked over to the wall. “We want it warm in here for the first part. Then I’m going to throw the air-conditioning on hard-core and you’ll love me for it.”

Butch went to the gurney and popped his body up on the thing. As a hiss and a rush of toasty air came from overhead, he held his arms out for Marissa. After closing her eyes briefly, she came to him, and he took refuge in her body heat, hugging her hard. Her tears were slow and silent, and when he tried to talk to her, she just shook her head.

“Would you choose to be mated this day?”

Everyone in the room jerked around.

A diminutive figure in black robes had appeared in the corner out of nowhere. *The Scribe Virgin*.

Butch’s heart jackhammered. He’d seen her only once before, at Wrath and Beth’s mating ceremony, and she was now as she had been then: a presence to respect and fear, power incarnate, a force of nature.

Then he realized what she’d asked. “I would, yes.... Marissa?”

Marissa’s hands went down as if she were about to pick up the skirting of a gown she wasn’t wearing. Then she dropped her arms awkwardly, but still curtsied low and with grace. As she held the pose, she said, “If it would not offend, we would be honored beyond measure to be joined by Your Holiness.”

The Scribe Virgin came forward, her deep chuckle filling the room. As she laid her glowing hand on Marissa’s bowed head, she said, “Such manners, child. Your line has always had such perfect manners. Now come to your height and lift thine eyes unto me.” Marissa came out of the curtsy and looked up. As she did, Butch could have sworn the Scribe Virgin sighed a little. “Beautiful. Just beautiful. You are so exquisitely formed.”

Then the Scribe Virgin looked at Butch. Though there was an opaque black veil over her face, the impact of her stare made his skin tingle all over in warning. Like he was standing in the path of an impending lightning strike.

“What is your father’s name, human?”

“Eddie. Edward. O’Neal. But if you don’t mind, I’d rather not bring him into this, okay?”

Everyone in the room stiffened and V muttered, “Take it easy with the inquiry, cop. *Really* easy.”

“And why is that, human?” the Scribe Virgin asked. The word *human* was pronounced like the phrase *piece of shit*.

Butch shrugged. “He’s nothing to me.”

“Are humans always so dismissive of their lines?”

“My father and I have nothing to do with each other, that’s all.”

“Therefore blood ties mean little to you, yes?”

No, Butch thought, glancing over at Wrath. Blood ties were *everything*.

Butch looked back at the Scribe Virgin. “Do you have any idea how relieved—”

As Marissa gasped, V stepped in and slapped his gloved hand over Butch’s mouth, yanking him backward by the head and hissing in his ear, “Do you want to get fried like an egg here, buddy? No questions—”

“Ease from him, warrior,” the Scribe Virgin snapped. “This I wish to hear.”

V’s grip slid off his face. “Watch it.”

“Sorry about the question thing,” Butch said to the black robes. “But I just...I’m glad I know what’s in my veins. And honestly, if I die today, I’m grateful I finally know what I am.” He took Marissa’s hand. “And who I love. If this is where my life took me after all those years of being lost, I’d say my time here wasn’t wasted.”

There was a long silence. Then the Scribe Virgin said, “Do you regret that you leave behind your human family?”

“Nope. This is my family. Here with me now and elsewhere in the compound. Why would I need anything else?” The cursing in the room told him he’d thrown another question out there. “Yeah...ah, sorry—”

A soft feminine laugh came from under the robes. “You are rather fearless, human.”

“Or you could call it stupid.” As Wrath’s mouth fell open, Butch rubbed his face. “You know, I’m trying here. I really am. You know, to be respectful.”

“Your hand, human.”

He offered her his left, the one that was free.

“Palm up,” Wrath barked.

He flipped his hand over.

“Tell me, human,” the Scribe Virgin said, “if I asked for the one you hold this female with, would you offer it to me?”

“Yeah. I’d just reach over to her with the other guy.” As that little laugh

came again, he said, "You know, you sound like birds when you do that chuckle thing. It's nice."

Over to the left, Vishous put his head in his hands.

There was a long silence.

Butch took a deep breath. "Guess I'm not allowed to say that."

The Scribe Virgin reached up and slowly lifted the robes from her face.

Jesus...Christ... Butch squeezed Marissa's hand hard at what was revealed.

"You're an angel," he whispered.

Perfect lips lifted in a smile. "No. I am Myself."

"You're beautiful."

"I know." Her voice became authoritative again. "Your right palm, Butch O'Neal, descended of Wrath son of Wrath."

Butch let go of Marissa, regripped her with his left hand, and reached forward. When the Scribe Virgin touched him, he flinched. Though his bones weren't crushed, the awesome strength in her was merely shelved potential. She could grind him to powder on a whim.

The Scribe Virgin turned to Marissa. "Child, give me yours now."

The instant that connection was made, a warm current flooded Butch's body. At first he assumed it was because the heating system in the room was really cooking, but then he realized the rush was under his skin.

"Ah, yes. This is a very good mating," the Scribe Virgin pronounced. "And you have my permission to join for however long you have together." She dropped their hands and looked at Wrath. "The presentation to me is complete. If he lives, you shall finish the ceremony as soon as he is well enough."

The king bowed his head. "So be it."

The Scribe Virgin turned back to Butch. "Now, we shall see how strong you are."

"Wait," Butch said, thinking about the *glymera*. "Marissa's mated now, right? I mean, even if I die, she will have had a mate, right?"

"Death wish," V said under his breath. "Fucking Death Wish Boy we got over here."

The Scribe Virgin seemed flat-out amazed. "I should kill you now."

"I'm sorry, but this *matters*. I don't want her falling under that whole *seclusion* thing. I want her to be my widow so she doesn't have to worry about anyone else leading her life."

“Human, you are *astoundingly* arrogant,” the Scribe Virgin snapped. But then she smiled. “And totally unrepentant, aren’t you.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, I swear. I just need to know she’s taken care of.”

“Have you had use of her body? Have you taken her as a male does?”

“Yeah.” As Marissa turned bright pink, Butch tucked her face into his shoulder. “And it was...you know, with love.”

As he whispered something soothing to Marissa, the Scribe Virgin seemed touched, her voice turning almost kind. “Then she shall be as you say, your widow, and not fall under any provisions affecting unmated females.”

Butch sighed in relief and stroked Marissa’s back. “Thank God.”

“You know, human, if you learned some manners, you would fare well with me.”

“If I promise to work at it, will you help me live through what’s coming?”

The Scribe Virgin’s head fell back as she laughed in a loud burst. “No, I will not help you. But I find myself wishing you very well, human. Very well indeed.” Abruptly, she glared at Wrath, who was smiling and shaking his head. “Do not assume such leeway with etiquette applies to others who seek me out.”

Wrath ditched the grin. “I am well aware of what is proper, as are my brothers.”

“Good.” The robes shifted back into place, lifting up and going over her head without the help of hands. Just before her face was covered, she said, “You will wish to bring the queen to this room before you commence.”

And then the Scribe Virgin disappeared.

Vishous whistled between his teeth and wiped his brow with his forearm. “Butch, man, you are so lucky she liked you, true?”

Wrath flipped open his cell phone and started dialing. “Shit, I thought we were going to lose you before we even started—Beth? Hey, my *leelan*, could you come to the gym?”

Vishous grabbed a stainless-steel tray stand and wheeled it over to a cabinet. As he started putting things in sterile wraps on top, Butch shifted his legs around and stretched out on the gurney.

He stared up at Marissa. “Things don’t work out, I’ll wait for you in the Fade,” he said, not because he believed it but because he wanted to reassure

her.

She bent down and kissed him, then stayed with her cheek against his until V quietly cleared his throat. As Marissa stepped back, she began to speak in the Old Language, a soft rush of desperate words, a prayer that was more breath than voice.

V brought the tray stand up to the gurney, then went to Butch's feet. As the brother moved around, he had something in his hand, but he wasn't showing what it was, keeping his arm always out of sight. There was a metallic clank and the far end of the table tilted up. In the heat of the room, Butch felt the blood rush to his head.

"You ready?" V asked.

Butch stared at Marissa. "I feel like this is happening so fast, all of a sudden."

The door opened and Beth walked in. She said a soft hello and went to Wrath, who put his arms around her and drew her close.

Butch glanced back at Marissa, whose prayers had increased in speed until they were a blur of words. "I love you," he said. Then he looked at V. "Do it."

Vishous lifted his hand. There was a scalpel in it, and before Butch could track the movement, the blade cut into one of his wrists deeply. Twice. Blood welled, a bright, glistening red, and he grew nauseous as he watched it drip down his forearm.

An identical pair of burning cuts were made in his other wrist.

"Oh...Jesus." As his heart rate shot through the roof, the blood ran faster.

Fear came on him hard and he had to open his mouth so he could breathe.

Off in the distance, he heard voices, but he couldn't track them. And the room seemed to be receding. As reality warped and twisted, his eyes latched on to Marissa's face and pale blue eyes and white-blond hair.

He did his best to swallow the panic so he didn't scare her. "It's okay," he said. "It's okay...it's okay, I'm okay..."

Someone grabbed his ankles and he jerked in surprise...but it was just Wrath. And the king held him as V tilted the table even more so the blood ran out even faster. Then Vishous came around and gently eased Butch's arms off the table so they were hanging down. Closer to the drain.

"V?" Butch said. "Don't leave, okay?"

"Never." V brushed Butch's hair back with a gesture so tender it was out of place coming from a male.

Somehow everything got frightening. On some kind of survival reflex, Butch started to struggle, but V leaned on his shoulders, keeping him in place.

“Easy, cop. We’re all right here with you. Just relax if you can...”

Time stretched out. Time...God, time was passing, wasn’t it? People kept talking to him, but Marissa’s uneven voice was all he really heard...though as she was praying, he didn’t know what she was saying.

He lifted his head and looked down, but he couldn’t see his wrists anymore to track what was—

All of a sudden he started to shiver uncontrollably. “I’m c-cold.”

V nodded. “I know. Beth, turn the heat up some more, okay?”

Butch looked at Marissa, feeling helpless. “I’m getting c-colder.”

Her prayers stopped. “Can you feel my hand on your arm?” He nodded. “You feel how warm it is? Good...imagine it all over your body. I’m holding you...I’m hugging you. You’re against me. I’m against you.”

He smiled. He liked that.

But then his eyes fluttered, the sight of her flickering like she was a movie on a screen, and the projector was broken.

“Cold...turn heat up.” His skin prickled all over. His stomach felt like a lead balloon. His heart seemed to be twinkling in his chest, not beating anymore.

“Cold...” His teeth chattered, so very loud in his ears, but then he couldn’t hear anything. “Love...you...”

Marissa watched as the pool of Butch’s brilliant red blood grew bigger and bigger around the drain until she was standing in some of it. Oh, God... all his color had left him, his skin going paper white. He didn’t seem to be breathing anymore.

V came forward with a stethoscope and put it on Butch’s chest. “He’s close now. Beth, get over here. I need you.” He handed the stethoscope to the queen. “You listen to that heart of his. I want you to tell me when you don’t hear anything for ten seconds or more.” He pointed at the clock on the wall. “Track it by that third hand up there. Marissa, you come hold your boy’s ankles, true? Wrath is about to get busy.”

When she hesitated, V shook his head. “We need someone to keep him on the table and Wrath and I have to go to work. You’re still going to be with him, you can talk to him from there.”

She leaned down, kissed Butch's lips and told him she loved him. Then she replaced Wrath, taking over the job of keeping Butch's heavy body from sliding off the gurney onto the floor.

"Butch?" she said. "I'm right here, *nallum*. Can you feel me?" She squeezed the cold skin of his ankles. "I'm right here."

She kept talking to him calmly, though she was terrified about what was going to happen next. Especially when Vishous brought over the cardiac crash cart.

"You ready, Wrath?" the Brother asked.

"Where you want me?"

"Right here next to his chest." Vishous picked up a long, thin, sterile pack and ripped it open. The needle inside was about six inches in length and seemed thick as a pen. "How we doing with that heart rate, Beth?"

"Slowing down. God, it's so faint."

"Marissa? I'm going to ask you to get quiet so she can hear better, okay?"

Marissa shut her mouth and resumed praying in her head.

In the minutes that passed, they became a frozen tableau around Butch. The only thing that moved in the room was his blood as it dripped out of those deep wounds in his wrists and flowed down the drain. The soft *glug, glug, glug* in the floor made Marissa want to scream.

"It's still beating," Beth whispered.

"Here's what's going to happen," Vishous said, looking back and forth across Butch's body. "When Beth gives me the signal, I'm going to pop the table upright. While I work on Wrath, I want you two to seal up Butch's wrists. Seconds count. You need to close those wounds quick, we clear?"

They both nodded.

"Slower," Beth said. Her dark blue eyes narrowed on the clock and she lifted a hand to press one of the stethoscope's earpieces in tighter.

"Slower..."

Seconds suddenly stretched out into infinity, and Marissa flipped into some kind of autopilot, her fear and panic buried under a powerful focus that came out of nowhere.

Beth frowned. Bent down closer, as if that would help. "Now!"

V set the table to level and Marissa ran around to one of Butch's wrists as Beth dropped to the other one. While they sucked the wounds closed, V shoved that thick needle right into the crook of Wrath's arm.

"Everyone back away," V barked when he withdrew it from the king's

vein.

He shifted his grip on the syringe so he was holding it in his fist and leaned over Butch. With hurried movements, he felt around the sternum with his fingertips. Then he slammed that needle right into Butch's heart.

Marissa stumbled back as the plunger was depressed. Someone caught her. Wrath.

V extracted the syringe and tossed it on the table. Then he picked up the paddles of the crash cart and there was a juicing-up noise from the machine.

"Clear!" V shouted. And slapped the metal pads on Butch's chest.

Butch's torso jerked and V put his fingers to the male's jugular.

"Clear!" He hit Butch again.

Marissa sagged in Wrath's arms as Vishous threw the paddles onto the crash cart, pinched Butch's nostrils, and blew into his mouth twice. Then the Brother started chest compressions. As he performed CPR, he growled, his fangs bared as if he were pissed off at Butch.

Whose skin was now turning gray.

"...three...four...five..."

As V continued to count, Marissa struggled free. "Butch? Butch...don't leave...stay with us. Stay with me."

"...nine...ten." V pulled back, blew two breaths into Butch's mouth, then put his finger to the male's throat.

"Please, Butch," she begged.

V went for the stethoscope. Moved the disk around, searching. "Nothing. Fuck."

Chapter Thirty-eight

Two minutes later, Marissa grabbed V's shoulder when the Brother stopped CPR. "You can't quit!"

"I'm not. Give me your arm." When she did, Vishous cut through the skin of her wrist. "Over his mouth. Now."

Marissa rushed to Butch's head, pushed his lips and teeth apart and put the slice right to him as Vishous resumed chest compressions. She held her breath, praying that Butch would start to drink, hoping that some of her was getting into him and helping.

But, no...he was dead...Butch was dead—*Butch was dead—*

Someone was moaning. Her. Yes, she was making that noise.

Vishous paused and felt Butch's neck. Then fumbled for the stethoscope. He was putting the disk down when Marissa thought she saw Butch's chest move. Or maybe not.

"Butch?" she said.

"I got something." Vishous repositioned the disk. "Yeah...I got something—"

Butch's ribs expanded as he sucked a breath in through his nose. Then his mouth moved against her wrist.

She repositioned her arm so the wound fit better over his lips. "Butch?"

His chest inflated more deeply, his mouth backing off her vein as he drew air down into his lungs. There was a pause and then another breath. Deeper still...

"Butch? Can you—"

Butch's eyes popped open. And she went cold to the core.

The male she loved was not in that stare. There was nothing in it. Just blank hunger.

With a roar, he grabbed her arm, his grip so powerful she gasped. There was no escape as he latched on with his mouth and started drinking in ferocious pulls. Twisting on the table, he savaged her wrist, his eyes fixated, animalistic as he breathed through his nose and swallowed in great yanks.

Through the pain, she felt total, abject fear.

Tell me you're still in there, she thought. *Tell me you are still with us...*

It wasn't long before she became light-headed.

"He's taking too much," Vishous said, all urgent.

Before she could respond, she became aware of a scent in the room, a dark...yes, a bonding scent. Wrath's. Except why would he feel the need to establish his mating territory here and now?

She swayed and Vishous's hard fingers grabbed her upper arm. "Marissa, you're done."

But Butch was starving, mad from hunger. "No! No—"

"Let me take over."

Marissa's eyes shot to Beth...then focused on Wrath. Standing at his *shellan*'s side, Wrath's face was set in violent lines, his body coiled as if he were about to fight something.

"Marissa? Will you let me feed him?" Beth said.

Marissa looked at the queen. God, those words, those same words that had been spoken back in July...when Wrath's body had balanced on the edge of life and Marissa's vein had been what was needed.

"Will you, Marissa?"

As she nodded her head numbly, Wrath started to growl, his lips peeling off fangs that had elongated into white knives.

Oh, Lord, this was a very dangerous situation. Fully bonded males did not share. *Ever*. In fact, they would fight to the death before they let another male anywhere near their females when it came to feeding.

Beth looked up at her *hellren*. Before she said anything, Wrath bit out, "V, get your ass over here and hold me back."

As Vishous approached the king, he wished Rhage was with him.

Shit...this was a bad idea. A pure-blooded, bonded male vampire about to watch his *shellan* feed someone else. Holy hell, when the Scribe Virgin had suggested Beth come down, V had assumed it was for ceremonial purposes, not so she could be a vein. But what was the choice? Butch was going to suck Marissa dry and not have enough and there wasn't another female in the

house who could do the job: Mary was still human and Bella was pregnant.

Besides, like dealing with Rhage or Z would be any easier? For the beast, they'd need a tranq gun the size of a cannon and Z...well, *shit*.

Beth reached up and stroked her *hellren's* face. "Maybe you shouldn't watch."

Wrath grabbed her by the throat and kissed her hard. Then he brought up her wrist and scored her flesh, opening her vein.

"Go to him. Now." He pushed her away, then slammed his body back against the wall. "Vishous, you better fucking hold me. Or this is going to get ugly."

Wrath's awesome body was trembling, his muscles tensed up, his skin breaking out in a sweat. From behind his wraparounds, his eyes glowed with a light so fierce you could see it plainly.

V hurled himself at his king and met instant, straining resistance. Dear God, this was going to be like holding back a bull.

"Why don't...you leave?" V grunted as he worked to keep Wrath's body in place.

"Would have to...get past them...to get to the door. No...way."

V twisted his head and looked at the table.

Man, Marissa was going to be on the floor if she didn't get free of Butch. And the cop was going to fight like hell if that source of blood left his mouth.

"Beth!" V shouted as he and Wrath struggled. "Pinch the cop's nostrils. Pinch them hard and hold his forehead down. That's the only way you'll get him to release her."

When Beth grabbed Butch's nose, the cop made an inhuman noise, as if he knew what was coming. And his body jackknifed on the table like he was prepared to fight whoever was going to take his food away.

Oh, Christ, please don't let him attack Beth, V thought. Wrath was so lit he was liable to break free and kill the guy. *Please—*

The females handled it beautifully. Marissa yanked her wrist away and nailed Butch in the shoulders, punching into him, holding him down as Beth brought her wrist to his mouth. As that fresh vein came to him, Butch took to the new blood like a babe and moaned at the taste.

Which naturally caused Wrath to go apeshit.

The king's body lurched toward the table, Vishous getting dragged along.

"Marissa!" V shifted his grip so he was around Wrath's waist like a sash. "I need help over here!"

She looked over at Wrath...and she was good—damn, the female was good.

She undoubtedly wanted to be by Butch's side. Instead, she flashed over and rammed her body against the Wrath tangle that was about to unravel. The king stumbled back under the force of impact and V repositioned himself, his head torqued at a bad angle but his arms right where they needed to be, one up Wrath's back and locked on his neck, one around the waist. For kicks and giggles, V wrapped a leg through Wrath's thighs so if the male lunged forward again he would trip first.

As if on cue, Marissa did the same, entwining one of her legs with Wrath's and running an arm up the front of his chest.

Oh...shit. She was bleeding hard from that wrist of hers.

"Marissa...move your arm toward me..." V breathed deeply, muscles straining. "Marissa..."

She didn't appear to hear him. Was too busy watching what was happening on that gurney.

"Marissa...you're bleeding out. Lower your damn wrist."

She shifted her elbow and her arm dropped, but she really wasn't focused on herself.

Until V put his lips to her skin. Then she gasped and looked down.

Their eyes met. Hers were wide.

"Just to keep you from bleeding," he said against her wrist.

As Butch made a noise, she turned back to her mate.

And suddenly, time stopped for V in spite of the load he was holding back. He stared at Marissa's perfect profile as he licked the chewed mess of her wrist, sealing the wounds, easing the pain of them, starting the healing process. Compelled by something he didn't want to name, he ran his tongue over her skin again and again, tasting both her blood and...Butch's mouth.

Vishous repeated the licking more times than he had to. And on the last swipe, when he knew that he had to stop because he'd gone over the line already...when he knew he was going to lose control of Wrath unless he paid attention...on the last swipe, he looked out at Butch. And pressed his lips against the skin at his mouth in a kiss.

He had the strangest feeling he was saying good-bye to his roommate.

Butch woke up in a maelstrom. A whirlpool. A...blender.

There was a roaring throughout his body, something that sent every one

of his muscles into contraction. He was...drinking something. Something so good it brought tears to his eyes...something thick and lovely against the tongue, a dark wine. As he swallowed again and again, he thought dimly that he'd tasted something like it before. Not this exact vintage but—

His eyes flipped open and he nearly passed out.

Holy shit, he was *alive* and on the other side and...

Wait, this wasn't Marissa. There was black hair hanging down over his face.

He jerked his mouth out of the way. "*Marissa?*"

When he heard her reply, he looked to the sound of her voice. Only to recoil.

Good...God. Not exactly what he expected to see and not a welcome wagon to his new life, either. Not by a long shot.

Wrath was right out of a Saturday-night movie, a hulking, snarling vampire monster, fangs bared, eyes glowing. And he wanted at Butch.

The good news was that he was being held back by Vishous and Marissa. The bad news was that they seemed to be on the verge of losing control of him.

Butch looked up at Beth, who was sucking the wound at her wrist shut. "Oh...shit." He'd drunk a lot from her, hadn't he? Oh...*shit*.

He let his head fall back against the table. Wrath was going to kill him. Absolutely. When they let that boy go, the king was going to wipe the floor with him.

Butch was cursing and measuring the distance to the door as Beth walked up to the trio.

"Wrath?" In a lower voice she said, "Keep holding him."

Butch turned on his side and met Marissa's eyes, praying he wasn't about to lose his life now. And he was impatient to get close to his female, but this was one situation that needed to be diffused with care.

"Wrath?" Beth repeated.

Wrath's instincts were so fired up, she had to talk at him for a while to get him focused on her instead of Butch.

"It's over, okay?" She touched his face. "It's done, it's over."

With a moan of desperation, Wrath pressed his lips to her palm, then squeezed his eyes shut in agony. "Tell them...tell them to let go slowly. And Beth...Beth, I'm going to come at you. I can't...stop that. But it'll be better than killing him..."

“Yeah...much better,” Butch agreed.

Beth stepped back and braced herself. “Let him go.”

It was like turning a tiger loose. Marissa ducked and scrambled out of the way while Wrath threw Vishous off with such force the brother slammed into a cabinet.

In one coordinated launch, the king went for Beth and bit her on the throat. As she gasped and fell back in ecstasy, Wrath wheeled around and nailed Butch with pure murder in his eyes.

It was obvious the king drank now not for sustenance but to mark, and his bonding scent was a screaming warning that filled the room. As soon as he felt his point had been made, he picked his *shellan* up in his arms and left. There was no question where they were headed: nearest room with a door so he could get inside of her.

Butch reached out for Marissa, and she came to him in the manner of hope to the disaffected: an illuminating warmth, a promise of a future worth living, a loving benediction. As she bent over him and held on tight, he kissed her softly and spoke a whole lot of nonsense, the words leaving him in an uncontrolled, un-thought-out rush.

When they separated a little to breathe, he looked at Vishous. The brother was standing awkwardly next to the open door and staring down at the floor, his big body trembling ever so slightly.

“V?”

V’s diamond eyes lifted and he blinked quick. “Hey, man.”

As Butch reached out a hand, Vishous shook his head. “Glad you’re back, cop.”

“Fuck you, come here. V...gitcha ass over here.”

V shoved his hands in his pockets and slowly walked to the gurney. Marissa was the one who linked them, drawing Vishous’s arm up and out so Butch could reach the brother’s palm.

“You all right?” Butch asked, squeezing.

For a split second, his grip was returned. Then V stomped one of his shitkickers like a horse and broke the contact. “Yeah. Fine.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.”

V was so twitchy, Butch took pity on him and changed the subject. “So is it over? Is that it?”

V stroked his goatee and glanced at the clock. Then looked at Butch’s

body. "Let's wait another ten minutes."

Okay, fine. Butch passed the time running his hands up and down Marissa's arms. And shoulders. And face. And hair.

Eventually, V murmured, "I guess it is done."

Even though there was a curious disappointment in the brother's voice, Butch grinned. "Well, that wasn't too bad. Except for the dying part, of course. That wasn't..." He let the sentence drift and frowned.

"What is it?" Marissa said.

"I don't know. I—" Something was happening...something in his gut...

Vishous came over to the table. "What's going on, cop?"

"I..." The vast wave of pain came over him like a shroud of nails, wrapping around his body, cutting into him from every angle possible. He gasped under the onslaught, his vision conking out, then coming back. "Oh, shit. I'm dying..."

Vishous's face appeared in front of his. And the bastard was smiling...a big, fat Cheshire cat grin. "This is the change, my friend. Now...now you're turning."

"What the f—" He didn't get the word out. Red-hot agony became all he knew and he receded deep within himself, getting lost in the swirling torture. As it intensified even further, he hoped to pass out. No such luck.

After a hundred and fifty light-years of suffering, the popping started: The bones in his thighs were the first to snap and he howled, but there was no time to dwell on it because his upper arms were next. Then his shoulders. His spine...his lower legs...hands...feet...his skull screamed and his jaw ached. He rolled over...spit out two teeth...

Through the hurricane of the change, Marissa was with him, talking to him. He held on to her voice and the image of her in his head, the only thing steady in his world of suffering.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Way across town, in a very nice, very secluded house, John finished his first beer. And then his second. And his third. He was surprised his stomach could handle them, but they went down smooth and stayed that way.

Blaylock and Qhuinn were on the floor in front of the bed, locked in on a plasma-screen TV playing *sKillerz*, that kick-ass game that was everywhere. By some freak of nature, John had beaten them both, so they were battling for second place.

As John lounged back on Blaylock's comforter, he tipped the Corona bottle to his mouth, realized it was empty, and looked at the clock. Fritz would be picking him up in about twenty minutes and that might be a problem. He was buzzing. Hard.

It was really nice.

Blaylock laughed and keeled over onto the floor. "I can't believe you beat me, you bastard."

Qhuinn picked up his beer and gave Blay a little knock in the leg with the thing. "Sorry, big guy. But you suck."

John propped his head up on his hand, relishing the feel of being all pleasantly out of it and mellow. He'd been so pissed off for so long, he hadn't been able to remember what relaxed felt like.

Blay glanced over at him with a grin. "Of course, strong/silent up there is the real ass-kicker. I hate you, you know that?"

John smiled and flipped the guy off. As the two on the floor laughed, a BlackBerry sounded.

Qhuinn answered it. Did a lot of *Uh-huh*. Hung up. "Shit...Lash ain't coming back for a while. Seems like you"—the guy looked at John—"scared the shit out of him."

“Man, that kid always was an asshole,” Blay said.

“Straight up.”

They were quiet for a while, just listening to Too Short’s “Nasty.” Then Qhuinn got this intense look on his face.

His eyes, one blue, one green, narrowed. “Yo, Blay...so what was it like?”

Blay’s stare shot quickly to the ceiling. “Losing at *sKillerz* to you? A real buzz kill, thank you very much.”

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

With a curse, Blay reached over to a little refrigerator, took out another beer, and cracked it open. The guy had had seven and seemed sober as ever. Of course, he’d also eaten four McDonald’s Big Macs, two things of large fries, a chocolate milk shake, and two cherry pies. Plus a bag of Ruffles.

“Blay? Come on...what happened?”

Blaylock took a slug from the bottle and swallowed hard. “Nothing.”

“Fuck. You.”

“Okay, *fine*.” Blay took another draw. “I...ah, I wanted to die, okay. Was convinced I would. Then I...you know...” He cleared his throat. “I...ah, took her vein. And it got worse after that. A helluva lot worse.”

“Whose vein was it?”

“Jasim’s.”

“Whoa. She’s hot.”

“Whatever.” Blay leaned to the side, grabbed a sweatshirt, and pulled it over his hips. Like he had something worth covering up there.

Qhuinn tracked the movement. So did John.

“Did you have her, Blay?”

“No! Believe me, when the transition hits, sex is *not* on your mind.”

“But I’ve heard afterward—”

“No, I did not do it with her.”

“Okay, that’s cool.” But clearly Qhuinn thought his buddy was nuts. “So what about the change? What did it feel like?”

“I...I broke apart and came back together.” Blay drank deeply. “That’s it.”

Qhuinn flexed his little hands, then curled them into fists. “Do you feel different?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“Christ, Qhuinn—”

“What do you have to hide? We’re all going to go through it. I mean... shit, John, you’ve got to want to know, right?”

John looked at Blay and nodded, hoping like hell the two would keep talking.

In the quiet that followed, Blaylock stretched out his legs. Through the new blue jeans he had on, his heavy thigh muscles bunched and relaxed.

“So what do you feel like now?” Qhuinn prompted.

“Myself. Only...I don’t know, so much stronger.”

“Niiiiice.” Qhuinn laughed. “I can’t wait.”

Blaylock’s eyes shifted over. “It’s not something to look forward to. Trust me.”

Qhuinn shook his head. “You are so wrong about that.” There was a pause. “Do you get hard a lot now?”

Blay turned the color of a barn. “*What?*”

“Come on, you had to know that one was coming. So do you?” Silence stretched out. “Hello? Blay? Answer the question. Do you?”

Blay rubbed his face. “Um...yeah.”

“Often?”

“Yeah.”

“You work it, right? I mean...you must. So what’s that like?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? I’m not—”

“Just tell us once. We won’t ask you again. Swear. Right, John?”

John nodded slowly, aware he was holding his breath. He’d had dreams, erotic dreams, but that wasn’t the same as it actually happening. Or getting to hear about it firsthand.

Unfortunately, Blaylock seemed to have clammed up.

“Christ, Blay...what’s it like? *Please.* All my life I’ve been waiting for what you have. I can’t ask anyone else...I mean, like I’m going to my father with this shit? Just spit it out. What does it feel like to come?”

Blay picked at the label on his beer. “Powerful. That’s what it’s like. It’s just this...powerful rush that builds up and then...you explode and drift.”

Qhuinn’s eyes closed. “Man, I want that. I want to be male.”

God, that was exactly what John hungered for.

Blay chugged his Corona, then wiped his mouth. “Of course, now...now I want to do it with someone.”

Qhuinn cracked one of his half smiles. “What about Jasim?”

“Nah. Not my type. And we’re done with this. Conversation’s over.”

John glanced at the clock, then shuffled to the edge of the bed. With a quick scribble, he wrote on his pad and flashed it. Blay and Qhuinn both nodded.

“Good deal,” Blay said.

“You up for hanging tomorrow night?” Qhuinn asked.

John nodded and stood up—only to stumble and have to catch himself on the mattress.

Qhuinn laughed. “Look at you, punk. You’re faced.”

John just shrugged and concentrated on getting himself to the door. As he opened it, Blay said, “Yo, J?”

John glanced over his shoulder and cocked an eyebrow.

“Where can we learn that sign language thing?”

Qhuinn nodded and popped open another beer. “Yeah, where?”

John blinked. Then wrote on his pad, *The Internet. Search for American Sign Language.*

“Good deal. And you can help us, right?”

John nodded.

The two went back to the TV and fired up another game. As John shut the door, he heard them laughing and he started to smile. Only to feel the sting of disgrace.

Tohr and Wellsie were dead, he thought. He shouldn’t be...enjoying stuff. A real man wouldn’t get distracted from his goal, from his enemies...for nothing more than the company of friends.

John weaved down the hall, throwing one arm out to balance.

Trouble was...it felt so good to just be one of the guys. He had always wanted to have friends. Not a big group or anything. But a few, solid, strong...friends.

The kind you could rely on ’til death. Like brothers.

Marissa did not understand how Butch survived what happened to his body. It just seemed impossible. Except this was, evidently, what males went through, particularly warriors. And as he was of Wrath’s line, he definitely had that thick blood in him.

When it was over, hours later, Butch lay on the table in the now frigid room, just breathing. His skin was waxy and covered with sweat like he’d run twelve marathons. His feet hung off the far edge of the gurney. His shoulders

were nearly twice as big, and his boxers were stretched tight over his thighs.

His face comforted her, though. It was the same as it had been before, proportional with his new body, but the same. And when his eyes opened, they were the hazel she knew so well, with the spirit inside them that was his alone.

He was too dazed to speak, but he shivered, so she brought him a blanket and spread it over him. As the soft weight landed, he flinched as if his skin were too tender, but then he mouthed the words *I love you* and slid away into sleep.

Abruptly, she became more tired than she'd ever been in her life.

Vishous finished cleaning up the blood on the floor with a spray nozzle and said, "Let's eat."

"I don't want to leave him."

"I know. I asked Fritz to bring something to us and he left it just outside."

Marissa followed the Brother out into the Equipment Room and they each sat down on double-sized benches built out from the wall. They ate Fritz's little picnic munchies in the midst of racks of nunchakus and training daggers and swords and guns. The sandwiches were good and so were the apple juice and the oatmeal cookies.

After a while, Vishous lit a hand-rolled and leaned back. "He's going to be fine, you know."

"I can't see how he got through it."

"Mine was like that."

She stopped with a second ham sandwich on the way to her mouth.
"Really?"

"Worse, actually. I was smaller than him when it happened."

"He's the same on the inside, though, isn't he?"

"Yup, he's still your boy."

When she finished the sandwich, she put both her legs up on the bench and eased back against the wall. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Sealing me up." She held out her wrist.

His diamond gaze shifted away. "No problem."

In the quiet, her eyelids drooped and she shook herself to wake up.

"Nah, let yourself go," Vishous murmured. "I'll watch him and as soon as he comes around, I'll let you know. Go on...lie down."

She stretched out, then curled on her side. She didn't expect to sleep, but

shut her eyes anyway.

"Lift your head," Vishous said. When she did, he slid a rolled-up towel under her ear. "This is better for your neck."

"You're very kind."

"You kidding? Cop would kick my ass for letting you be uncomfortable."

She could have sworn Vishous brushed his hand down her hair, but then figured it was in her mind.

"What about you?" she said softly as he sat on the other bench. God, he had to be as tired as she was.

His smile was remote. "You don't worry about me, female. Just sleep."

Surprisingly, she did.

V watched Marissa pass out from exhaustion. Then he tilted his head and looked into the PT/first aid suite. From this angle he could see the soles of the cop's much larger feet. Man...Butch really was one of them now. A card-carrying, fanged-up, warrior male who looked like he was going to stand at about six-six, maybe six-seven. Wrath's bloodline was definitely in that boy—and V wondered if they were ever going to find out why.

The door to the Equipment Room swung open and Z walked in, with Phury right behind him.

"What happened?" the two of them asked in unison.

"Shhh." V nodded at Marissa. Then in a quiet voice he said, "See for yourself. He's in there."

The two went to the doorway. "Holy shit..." Phury breathed.

"That's a big one," Z muttered. Then he sniffed the air. "Why is Wrath's bonding scent all over this place—or is it me?"

V stood up. "Come outside to the gym, I don't want to wake either of them."

The three walked onto the blue mats and V shut the door most of the way behind them.

"So where is Wrath?" Phury asked as they sat down. "I thought he was here to witness the whole thing."

"He's busy." No doubt.

Z stared at the door. "That cop's big, V. That cop is really big."

"I know." V laid himself out flat on his back and took a drag. As he exhaled, he refused to look at his brothers.

"V, he's *really* big."

“Don’t even go there. It’s too early to know what he’s going to be like.”

Z rubbed over his skull trim. “I’m just saying. He’s—”

“I know.”

“And he’s got Wrath’s blood in him.”

“*I know.* But look, it’s too soon, Z. It’s just too soon. Besides, his mother isn’t a Chosen.”

Z’s yellow eyes grew annoyed. “Stupid fucking rule if you ask me.”

Chapter Forty

Butch woke up on the gurney in the midst of taking a deep breath in through his nose. He was...smelling something. Something that pleased him greatly. Something that made him hum with power. *Mine*, a voice said in his head.

He tried to shake the word off, but it just got louder. With every breath he took, the single syllable repeated in his brain until it was like the beat of his heart: Involuntary. The source of his very life. The seat of his soul.

With a groan, he sat up on the table, only to lurch off balance and nearly fall onto the floor. As he caught himself, he looked down at his arms. What the—no, this was wrong. These were not his arms—or...shit, his legs either. His thighs were *huge*.

This is not me, he thought.

Mine, came the voice again.

He looked around. God, everything in the clinical room was crystal clear, like his eyes were windows that had been wiped clean. And his ears...he looked up at the fluorescent lights. He could actually hear the electricity going through the tubes.

Mine.

He inhaled again. Marissa. That scent was Marissa. She was close by—

His mouth opened of its own accord, and he let out a deep, rhythmic purr that ended in a growled word: *Mine*.

His heart pounded as he realized the control tower in his head had been completely overtaken. No longer logical, he was being ruled by a possessive instinct that made what he'd felt toward Marissa before look like a passing fancy.

Mine!

He glanced down at his hips and got a load of what was doing in his now

way-too-small boxers. His cock had grown along with the rest of him, and it was punching out at the stretched-thin cotton. The thing twitched as he looked at it as if to get his attention.

Oh...God. His body wanted to mate. With Marissa. Now.

As if he'd called her name, she appeared in the doorway. "Butch?"

With no warning, he became a torpedo, his body aiming itself at her and shooting across the room. He took her down to the floor and kissed her hard, mounting her while he grabbed the front of her slacks and wrenched the zipper down. Grunting, straining, he peeled her pants off her smooth legs, spread her thighs roughly, and buried his face in her core.

As if he were a split personality, he watched himself act from a distance, seeing his hands shove her shirt up and capture her breasts while he tongued her. Then he was surging forward, baring fangs he somehow knew how to use and biting through the front of her bra. He kept trying to get himself to stop, but he was caught in some kind of centrifugal force, and Marissa...she was the axis he whirled around.

From the maelstrom, he groaned, "I'm sorry...oh, God...*I can't stop...*"

She grabbed on to his face...and stilled him completely. It was unbelievable and he didn't know how she did it, it was just...his body came to a total halt. Which made him realize she had the oddest control over him. If she said no, he would stop. On a dime. Period.

Except she wasn't putting the brakes on. Her eyes glowed with an erotic light. "Take me. Make me your female."

She tilted her hips to him, and his body shot right back into the frenzy. Rearing up, he ripped apart the waistband of his boxers and slammed into her with the things hanging open. He penetrated her so deep, stretched her so wide, he felt like she gloved every inch of him.

As she cried out and sank her nails into his ass, he went for it hard and fast. And while the sex raged, he felt the two halves of himself knitting together. While he pumped wildly, the voice he'd always known to be him and this new one that was talking at him became one.

He was looking into her face as he started to orgasm, and the ejaculations were like nothing he'd ever known. Sharper, more powerful, and they went on forever, as if he had an infinite supply of what he was filling her up with. And she was loving it, kicking her head back on the tile in pleasure, her legs tight around his hips, her core eating up everything he gave her.

When it was over, Butch collapsed, panting, sweating, dizzy. It was only

then that he noticed they fit together differently; his head was higher up on her, his hips demanded more room between her legs, his hands were bigger next to her face.

She kissed his shoulder. Licked at his skin. “Mmm...and you smell good, too.”

Yeah, he did. The dark spice that had come out of him before was now a vibrant scent in the room. And the marking was all over Marissa’s skin and hair...and it was inside of her, too.

Which was *right*. She was *his*.

He rolled off her. “Baby...I’m not sure why I had to do that.” Well, half of him wasn’t sure. The other half just wanted to do it to her again.

“I’m glad you did.” The smile she gave him was radiant. As brilliant as the noonday sun.

And the sight of it made him realize with satisfaction that he was also her man: It was a two-way street here. They belonged to each other.

“I love you, baby.”

She repeated the words, but then her smile slipped. “I was so afraid you would die.”

“But I didn’t. It’s over and done with and I’m on the other side. I’m with you on the other side.”

“I can’t go through that again.”

“You won’t have to.”

She relaxed some and stroked his face. Then frowned. “It’s a little cold in here, isn’t it?”

“Let’s get you dressed and back to the main house.” He reached out to bring her shirt down...and his eyes latched on to her breasts with their perfect pink nipples.

He grew hard again. Full to bursting. Desperate for another release.

That smile of hers reappeared. “Come back up on me, *nallum*. Let my body ease yours.”

She didn’t have to ask twice.

Outside the Equipment Room, V, Phury, and Zsadist stopped talking and listened. Going by the muted sounds, Butch was up and awake and...busy. As the brothers laughed, V shut the door all the way, thinking that he was very happy for that pair in there. Very...happy.

He and the twins continued to shoot the shit, with V lighting up on

occasion and ashing into an Aquafina bottle. An hour later, the door opened and Marissa and Butch appeared. Marissa was dressed in a martial-arts *ji*, Butch had a towel around his hips, and the bonding scent was all over them. They looked well used and very, very sated.

“Um...hey, guys,” the cop said, blushing. He looked good, but he wasn’t moving too well. In fact, he was using his female as a crutch.

V cracked a smile. “You look taller.”

“Yeah, I...ah, I’m not getting around so good. Is that normal?”

Phury nodded. “Definitely. Took me a long time to get used to the new body. You’ll have some control over it in a couple of days, but it’s going to be weird for a while.”

As the pair came forward, Marissa looked as if she was struggling under the weight of her male and Butch seemed wobbly, like he was trying not to lean on her as much as he really needed to.

V stood up. “You want help on the way back to the Pit?”

Butch nodded. “That’d be great. I’m about to fall on her.”

V got in at Butch’s side and propped the cop up. “Home, Jarvis?”

“God, yes. I would love a shower.”

Butch took Marissa’s hand, and the three of them headed slowly to the Pit.

The trip through the tunnel was silent except for Butch’s shuffling feet. And as they went along, V remembered coming out of his own transition, waking up tattooed with warnings all over his face and his hand and his private areas. At least Butch was safe, and he had people to protect him while his strength gathered.

V had been taken out and left for dead in the woods beyond a warrior camp.

Butch also had another thing going for him: a female of worth who loved him. Marissa was positively glowing at his side and V tried not to look at her too much...except he couldn’t stop. So warm, the way she stared at Butch. So very warm.

V had to wonder what that was like.

When they stepped into the Pit, Butch let out a ragged sigh. Clearly his energy had flagged completely by now, sweat breaking out across his forehead as he struggled to remain upright.

“How about your bed?” V said.

“No...shower. I need a shower.”

“Are you hungry?” Marissa asked.

“Yeah...oh, God, yeah. I want...bacon. Bacon and...”

“Chocolate,” V said wryly as he muscled the cop down to the guy’s suite.

“Oh...chocolate. Fuck, I would kill for that.” Butch frowned. “Except I don’t like chocolate.”

“You do now.” V kicked the bathroom door open and Marissa ducked into the shower and turned the water on.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“Pancakes. And waffles with syrup and butter. And eggs...”

V shot the female a look. “Just bring anything edible. He’d eat his own shoes at this point.”

“...and ice cream and turkey with stuffing...”

Marissa kissed Butch on the lips. “I’ll be right b—”

Butch grabbed her by the head and held her to his mouth with a moan. As a fresh flood of the bonding scent came out of him, he maneuvered her against the wall and pinned her with his body, hands traveling, hips pushing forward.

Ah, yes, V thought. The newly transitioned male. Butch was going to be throwing wood every fifteen minutes for a while.

Marissa laughed, utterly delighted with her mate. “Later. Food first.”

Butch settled back immediately, like she’d called his lust to a heel and it behaved because it wanted to be a good boy. As she left, the cop’s eyes followed her with rank hunger and adoration.

V shook his head. “You are a total sap.”

“Man, if I thought I loved her before...”

“The bonded male biz is some powerful shit.” V stripped Butch of his towel and shoved him under the water. “Or so I’ve heard.”

“Ow.” Butch glared up at the showerhead. “I don’t like this.”

“Skin’s going to be extra sensitive for a week or so. Holler if you need me.”

V was halfway down the hall when he heard a yelp. He hightailed it back, barging through the door. “What? What’s—”

“I’m going bald!”

V whipped back the shower curtain and frowned. “What are you talking about? You’ve still got your hair—”

“Not my head! My body, you idiot! I’m going bald!”

Vishous glanced down. Butch's torso and legs were shedding, a rush of dark brown fuzz pooling around the drain.

V started laughing. "Think of it this way. At least you won't have to worry about shaving your back as you get old, true? No manscaping for you."

He was not surprised when a bar of soap came firing at him.

Chapter Forty-one

It was a week later that Van learned something important about himself.

His humanity was gone.

As a moan echoed through the empty basement, he glanced at the civilian vampire who was strapped on a table. Mr. X was working the thing over and Van was watching. Like this was nothing more than someone getting a haircut.

He should have thought it was wrong. In all his years as a fighter, he'd inflicted a lot of pain on opponents, but he'd avoided hurting the innocent and had despised people who went after the weak. Now? His sole reaction to this base cruelty was annoyance...because it wasn't working. The only thing they'd learned about O'Neal was that a human fitting the man's description had been seen among males suspected to be Brothers in some of the clubs downtown—Screamer's and ZeroSum in particular. But they'd known all that already.

He was beginning to suspect the *Fore-lesser* was working out his frustrations at this point. Which was such a waste of time. Van wanted to go after vampires, not play armchair quarterback at a scene like this.

Except, shit, it wasn't like he'd had a shot at killing one of those bloodsuckers yet. Thanks to Mr. X keeping him off the field, all he'd taken out since joining the Lessening Society were other frickin' *lessers*. Every day, Mr. X lined him up against another one. And every day, Van beat his opponent into submission, then stabbed the guy. And every day, Mr. X got more and more wound up. It was like Van was letting the *Fore-lesser* down, although with a seven and oh record, it was hard to figure out precisely how.

As gurgling sounds drifted over on the blood-scented air, Van cursed under his breath.

“Am I boring you over there?” Mr. X snapped.

“Not at all. This is *really* great to watch.”

There was a short silence. Then a disgusted hiss. “Don’t be such a lightweight.”

“Whatever. I’m a fighter, man. I’m not into this captive-beating shit, especially when it’s not leading to anything.”

Those flat, pale eyes burned. “Go patrol with some of the others, then. Because if I have to look at you any longer, you’re going to find yourself on this table.”

“Finally.” Van headed for the stairs.

As his combat boot hit the first step, Mr. X spat, “Your weak stomach is such a disgrace.”

“My guts aren’t the problem here, trust me.” Van kept going.

Butch stepped off the treadmill in the gym and wiped the sweat off his face with his shirt. He’d just run eleven miles. In fifty minutes. Which would be a sustained pace of about a five-minute mile. Holy...shit.

“How you feel?” V asked from the bench press.

“Like Lee fucking Majors.”

There was a clang as nearly seven hundred pounds came to rest on the stand. “*Six Million Dollar Man* reference dates you, cop.”

“I grew up in the seventies. Sue me.” Butch sucked back some water, then looked to the doorway in a flash. His breath caught, and a split second later Marissa walked in.

God, she was gorgeous in black slacks and a cream jacket—businesslike yet feminine. And her pale eyes sparkled across the room.

“Thought I’d come by before I left for the night,” she said.

“Glad you did, baby.” He did the best he could to towel himself off as he went over to her, but she didn’t seem to mind him hot and sweaty. At all. Her palm cupped his chin as he bent down and said a hello against her mouth.

“You look good,” she whispered, running her hand down his neck and over his bare pecs. She traced his cross with light fingers. “Very good.”

“Do I.” He smiled as he hardened in his running shorts, remembering how an hour and a half ago he’d woken her up from the inside out. “Well, I’m not as good as you.”

“I could debate that.” He hissed as she stepped up against him.

With a growl, he ran through the layout of the training center in his mind,

trying to figure out where they could disappear for ten minutes. Um...yeah, there was a classroom nearby with a good lock on the door. Perfect.

He glanced over at V, about to throw his roommate an *I'll be right back*, when he was surprised to find the brother staring at the two of them, lids low, expression unreadable. Vishous looked away quickly.

"So, I have to go," Marissa said, stepping back. "Big night."

"You can't stay for just a little longer? Five minutes, maybe?"

"I would love to, but...no."

Wait a minute, he thought. There was something different about the way she was staring at him. In fact, her eyes were locked on the side of his neck and her mouth was slightly open. Then her tongue made a quick sweep of her lower lip, as if she were tasting something good. Or maybe wanting to taste something.

A bolt of mad lust shot through him.

"Baby?" he said roughly. "You need something from me?"

"Yes..." She stood up on her tiptoes and spoke into his ear. "I gave you so much when you were going through the transition that I'm a little weak. I need your vein."

Holy shit...what he'd been waiting for all along. *The chance to feed her.*

Butch grabbed her around the waist, popped her feet off the floor, and carried her toward the door like the weight room was on fire.

"Not yet, Butch." She laughed. "Put me down. You're barely a week out."

"No."

"Butch, put me down."

His body obeyed the command, even though his mind wanted to argue. "How much longer?"

"Soon."

"I'm strong now."

"I can wait a couple of days. And it's better if we do."

She kissed him and looked at her watch. The one she wore was his favorite from his collection, the Patek Philippe with the black alligator band. He loved the idea that she had it with her wherever she went.

"I'll be at Safe Place all night," she said. "We have a new female and two youngs arriving, and I want to be there when they check in. I'm also calling my first staff meeting. Mary's coming and we're going to do it together. So I probably won't be back until dawn."

"I'll be here." He caught her as she turned away and spun her back into his arms. "Be careful out there."

"I will."

He kissed her deep, wrapping his arms around her slender body. Man, he couldn't wait until she came back. And missed her the moment she left.

"I am a total sap," he said as the door closed.

"Told you." V got up off the bench press and picked up a pair of stacked one-hander weights. "Bonded males are a thing."

Butch shook his head and tried to refocus on what else he wanted to accomplish in the gym tonight. For the past seven days, while Marissa went off to her new job, he stayed at the compound and worked on how to handle this new body of his. The learning curve was steep. In the beginning, he'd had to figure out the most simple functions, like how to eat and how to write. Now, he was trying to get a sense of his physical limits to see when...if...he would break. The good news was, so far, everything worked. Well, almost everything. One of his hands was a little messed up, though not in any serious way.

And the fangs were fabulous.

As were the strength and endurance he now had. No matter how far or how hard he pushed himself in the gym, his body took the punishment and responded with growth. At meals, he ate like Rhage and Z, sucking back some five thousand calories every twenty-four hours...and even still, he was always hungry. Which made sense. He was packing on muscle like he was shooting 'roids.

Two open questions remained. Could he dematerialize? And could he handle sunlight? V had suggested holding off on both of those for a month or so, and that was fine. There was enough to worry about in the meantime.

"You're not quitting, right?" V asked as he looked up from the bicep curls he was doing. The weight in each of his hands was probably two seventy-five.

Butch could pull them that heavy now, too.

"Nah, I still got juice." He went over to an elliptical machine and got on to stretch his legs out.

Man, on the topic of juice...he was totally and completely sexed out. All the time. Marissa had moved into his bedroom at the Pit and he couldn't keep his hands off her. He felt so bad about it, and he tried to hide the need, but invariably she knew when he wanted her and she never turned him away,

even if it was only to finish him.

She really seemed to relish the sexual control she had over him. And so did he.

God, he was hardening again now. All he had to do was think of her and he was ready even if he'd already gone four, five times that day. And the thing was, what made his sex drive such a pleasure was that it wasn't just about needing a release. It was all about her. He wanted to be with her, inside of her, all around her: not sex for sex's sake, but...well...making love. To her.

Man, he was a total frickin' sap.

But, hell, why should he front? This had been the best week of his whole miserable life. He and Marissa were so good together—and not just in the sack. Aside from training himself in the gym, he'd spent a lot of time helping her with the social services project, and the common purpose had brought them even closer together.

The Safe Place, as she'd named the house, was ready to start running now. V had wired the Colonial up but good, and though there was still a lot to do, at least they could begin accepting folks in earnest. Right now there was just the mother and the child with the leg in a cast, but it sounded like there would be a lot more.

Man, throughout everything, all the changes, all the new things, all the challenges, Marissa was amazing. Smart. Capable. Compassionate. He'd decided his vampire nature, that previously buried part of him, had chosen his female very wisely.

Although he still had some guilt over mating her. He kept thinking about everything she'd walked away from—her brother, her old life, all that fancy *glymera* shit. He'd always felt like an orphan after leaving both his family and where he'd grown up behind, and he didn't want that for her. But he wasn't going to let her go.

Hopefully, they could finish the mating ceremony soon. V had said it wouldn't be a good idea cutting into him during the first week, which was fine, but they were going to do the carving ASAP. And then he and Marissa were going to walk down the aisle, too.

Funny, he'd started going to weekly midnight Mass all regularlike. Wearing his Sox cap, and keeping his head down, he sat in the back of Our Lady and stayed to himself as he reconnected with God and the Church. The services eased him immeasurably, in a way nothing else could.

Because the darkness was in him still. He was not alone in his skin.

Inside of him there was a shadow, something that lurked between the spaces of his ribs and the disks of his spine. He sensed it there always, shifting around, pacing, watching. Sometimes it actually looked out of his eyes, and that was when he feared himself the most.

But going to church helped. He liked to think the goodness in the air there seeped into him. Liked to believe that God listened to him. Needed to know that there was a strength outside of himself that would help him stay connected to his humanity and his soul. Because without that he would be dead though his heart still beat.

“Hey, cop?”

Without losing a stride on the elliptical, Butch looked over to the weight room’s door. Phury was standing in it, that amazing hair of his shining red, yellow, and brown under the fluorescent lights.

“What up, Phury?”

The brother came in, his limp hardly noticeable. “Wrath wants you to come to our meeting tonight before we go out.”

Butch glanced at V. Who was studiously lifting and keeping his eyes on the mats. “What for?”

“Just wants you there.”

“Okay.”

After Phury left, he said, “V, you know what’s doing about this?”

His roommate shrugged. “Just come to the meetings.”

“Meeting-s? Like every night?”

Vishous kept pumping, his biceps veining up hard-core under all the weight. “Yeah. Every night.”

Three hours later, Butch and Rhage headed out in the Escalade...and Butch wondered what the hell had happened. He was fully strapped in a black leather jacket with a Glock under each arm and an eight-inch hunting knife on his hip.

He was going in tonight as a fighter.

It was just a trial and he had to talk to Marissa, but he wanted this to work out. He wanted...yeah, he wanted to fight. And the brothers wanted him to as well. The bunch of them had talked it all through, especially the shit about his dark side. The bottom line was he was capable and he wanted to kill *lessers* and the Brotherhood needed more bodies on their side of the war. So they

were going to give it a shot.

As Rhage drove them downtown, Butch looked out the window and wished V wasn't off for the night. He would have liked his roommate to be with him for this maiden-voyage stuff, although at least Vishous was sitting it out because it was his turn to be on the rotation schedule, not because he was losing it. Hell, V seemed to be doing much better with the dreams; there hadn't been any more screams in the middle of the day.

"You ready for the field?" Rhage asked.

"Yeah." In fact, his body was roaring to be used, and used specifically like this, in battle.

About fifteen minutes later, Rhage parked behind Screamer's. As they got out and walked toward Tenth Street, Butch halted halfway down the alley and turned to the side of the building.

"Butch?"

Struck by a sense of his own history, he reached out and touched once again the blackened bomb burst pattern where Darius's car had blown up. Yeah...it had all started here last summer...at this place. And yet as he felt the scratchy, damp bricks under his palm, he knew the real beginning was right now. His true nature was uncovered now. He was who he needed to be...now.

"You okay, my man?"

"Full circle, Hollywood." He turned to his buddy. "Full circle." As the brother gave him a *Huh, what?* Butch smiled and started walking again.

"So how's this usually go down?" he said, as they came out on Tenth.

"On an average night, we cover a twenty-five-block radius twice. This is trolling, really. *Lessers* are looking for us, we're looking for them. We fight as soon as we—"

Butch stopped and his head swiveled around all by itself, his upper lip curling off his fancy new fangs.

"Rhage," he said softly.

The brother let out a low laugh of satisfaction. "Where are they, cop?"

Butch started gunning toward the signal he'd picked up on, and as he went along, he felt the raw force of his body. The damn thing was like a car with a performance engine in it, no longer a Ford but a Ferrari. And he let loose as he pounded down the dark street with Rhage on his tail, the two of them moving in harmony.

The two of them moving like killers.

Six blocks away they found three *lessers* confabbing it at the throat of an alleyway. As a unit, the slayers' heads turned and the second Butch locked eyes with them, he felt that horrible recognition flare. The linkup was immutable, marked by dread on his side and confusion on theirs: They seemed to recognize he was both one of them and a vampire.

In the dark, grungy alley, the battle bloomed like a summer thunderstorm, the violence coalescing, then exploding out in punches and kicks. Butch took head shots and body shots and ignored them all. Nothing hurt bad enough to care about, as if his skin were armor and his muscles were steel.

Eventually, he slammed one of the slayers on the ground, straddled the thing, and reached for the knife at his hip. But then he stopped, overcome by a need he couldn't fight. Leaving the blade where it was, he leaned down, got face-to-face, and took control with his stare. The *lesser*'s eyes popped in terror as Butch's mouth opened.

Rhage's voice came at him from a vast distance. "Butch? What are you doing? I got the other two, so all you need to do is stab that thing. Butch? *Stab him.*"

Butch just hovered over the *lesser*'s lips, feeling a surge of power that had nothing to do with his body and everything to do with the dark part in him. It started so slowly, the inhale almost gentle...and the breath went on forever, one steady draw that grew in strength until the blackness passed out of the *lesser* and into him, the transfer of the true essence of evil, the Omega's very nature. As Butch swallowed the vile black rush and felt it settle into his blood and bones, the *lesser* dissolved into a gray mist.

"*What the fuck?*" Rhage breathed.

Van stopped running at the entrance of the alley and followed an instinct that told him to melt into the shadows. He'd come prepared to fight, called in by a slayer who said some hand-to-hand with two Brothers was going down. But as he arrived now, he saw something he just knew wasn't right.

A tremendous vampire was on top of a *lesser*, the two locked stare to stare as he...shit, sucked the slayer into nothingness.

As a fall of ash floated down onto the dirty pavement, the blond Brother at the scene said, "*What the fuck?*"

At that moment, the vampire who'd done the consuming lifted his head and looked down the alley directly at Van, even though the darkness should have hidden his presence.

Holy shit... it was the one they were looking for. The cop. Van had seen the guy's picture on the Internet in those articles from the *CCJ*. Except he'd been human then and he sure as fuck wasn't now.

"There's another one," the vampire said in a hoarse, ragged voice. His arm lifted weakly and he pointed at Van. "Right there."

Van took off running, not about to get smoked up.

It was so time to find Mr. X about this.

Chapter Forty-two

About a half mile away, in his penthouse overlooking the river, Vishous picked up a fresh bottle of Grey Goose and cracked the thing open. As he poured himself another glass of hooch, he looked at the pair of empty one-liters that were on the bar.

They were going to get another friend. Real soon.

As rap music pounded, he took his crystal glass and the newly opened Goose and weaved his way over to the sliding glass door. With his mind, he willed the lock free and pushed the thing wide.

A cold blast hit him and he laughed at the sting as he stepped outside, surveyed the night sky, and drank deeply.

Such a good liar he was. Such a good one.

Everyone thought he was fine because he'd camo'd his little problems. He wore a Sox hat to hide the eye twitch. Set his wristwatch to go off every half hour to beat back the dream. Ate though he wasn't hungry. Laughed though he found nothing funny.

And he'd always smoked like a chimney.

He'd even gone so far as to flat-out front to Wrath. When the king had asked how he was doing, V had looked the brother right in the face and told him, in a thoughtful, reflective voice, that although he continued to "struggle" with falling to sleep, the nightmare was "gone" and he felt much more "stable."

Bullshit. He was a pane of glass with a million cracks in it. All he needed was one soft tap and he was going to shatter.

The fracture potential wasn't just about his lack of visions or his twelve-gauge dream. Sure, all that shit made it worse, but he knew he would be where he was even without that overlay.

Watching Butch with Marissa was killing him.

Hell, V didn't begrudge them their happiness or anything. He was damn glad it had worked out for the pair, and he was even starting to like Marissa a little. It just hurt to be around them.

The thing was...although it was totally inappropriate and creeped him out, he thought of Butch as...*his*. He'd brought that man into the world. He'd lived with him for months. He'd gone out to get the guy after the *lessers* had done their business all over him. And he'd healed him.

And it had been his hands that had turned him.

With a curse, Vishous weaved his way over to the four-foot-high wall that ran all the way around the penthouse's terrace. The Goose bottle made a little scraping noise as he put it down, and he swayed as he brought his glass up to his mouth. Oh...wait, he needed another refill. He palmed the vodka and spilled a little as he poured. Again with the quiet scraping noise as he set the Goose back on the ledge.

He drank the stuff down, then bent over and looked at the street thirty floors below. Vertigo grabbed him by the head and shook him until the world spun and from out of the twirling mess, he found the term for his particular brand of suffering. He was brokenhearted.

Shit...what a mess.

With a total absence of mirth, he laughed at himself, the hard sound getting sucked away by the gusting, bitter March wind.

He put a bare foot up on the cold stone. As he reached out to steady himself, he glanced down at his ungloved hand. And froze with terror.

"Oh...Jesus...no..."

Mr. X stared at Van. Then shook his head slowly. "What did you say?"

The two of them were standing in a wedge of shadow at the corner of Commerce and Fourth Street, and Mr. X was very glad they were alone. Because he couldn't believe what he was hearing and didn't want to look too stunned in front of any of the others.

Van shrugged. "He's a vampire. Looked like one. Acted like one. And recognized me immediately, although how he saw me I have no idea. But the slayer he took out? See, that was the weird thing. The guy just...vaporized. Not at all like what happens when you stab one of us. And the blond Brother was totally shocked. So does any of this kind of thing happen often?"

None of it happened often. Especially the part about a guy who had been

a human but now apparently had fangs. That shit just went against nature, and so did the inhalation routine.

“And they just let you go?” Mr. X said.

“The blond was all worried about his buddy.”

Loyalty. Christ. Always loyalty with those Brothers. “Did you notice anything about O’Neal? Other than that he seemed to have gone through the change?”

Maybe Van was just mistaken—

“Um...his hand was fucked up. Something’s wrong with Mr. X felt a tingle go through him, like his body was a bell that had been struck. He kept his voice deliberately calm. “What exactly was wrong?”

Van brought up his hand and curled the pinkie in tight to the palm. “It’s kind of bent like this. The little finger’s all stiff and curled up, like he can’t move it.”

“Which hand?”

“Ah...the right. Yeah, the right one.”

In a daze, Mr. X leaned back against the side of the Valu-rite Dry Cleaners building. And the prophecy came to him:

*There shall be one to bring the end before the master,
a fighter of modern time found in the seventh of the twenty-first,
and he shall be known in the numbers he bears:*

*One more than the compass he apperceives,
Though mere four points to make at his right,
Three lives has he,
Two scores on his fore,
and with a single black eye, in one well will he be birthed and die.*

Mr. X’s skin tightened all over. Shit. Shit.

If O’Neal could sense *lessers*, maybe that was the one more than the compass he apperceived. And the hand thing fit if he couldn’t point using his pinkie. But what about the extra scar—wait...the entryway where the Omega had put a part of himself into O’Neal...including his belly button that would be two scores. And maybe the black mark that had been left behind was the eye the Scrolls had mentioned. As for the born and die, O’Neal had been birthed in Caldwell as a vampire and would probably find his death here at

some point, too.

The equation added up, but the real kicker was not the math. It was that no one, but no one, had ever heard of a *lesser* being offed like that.

Mr. X focused on Van, realization sliding into place and realigning everything. “You are not the one.”

“You should have left me,” Butch said as he and Rhage pulled up outside of V’s building. “Left me and gone after that other *lesser*.”

“Yeah, right. You were looking like roadkill, and there were more slayers on the way, I guarantee it.” Rhage shook his head as they both got out. “You want me to walk you up? You’re still sporting that special dead-squirrel glow.”

“Yeah, whatever. Go back out and fight those fuckers.”

“I love it when you get all hard-core on me.” Rhage smiled a little, then grew serious. “Listen, about what hap—”

“That’s why I’m going to talk to V.”

“Good. V knows everything.” Rhage put the Escalade’s keys in Butch’s hand and gave him a squeeze on the shoulder. “Call me if you need me.”

After the brother disappeared into thin air, Butch went into the lobby, waved at the security guard, and grabbed an elevator. The ride up the building took forever and he passed the time feeling the evil in his veins. His blood was black again. He knew it. And he fucking *reeked* of baby powder.

When he stepped out, feeling like a leper, he heard music thumping. Ludacris’s *Chicken N Beer* was all over the place.

He pounded on the door. “V?”

No answer. Hell. He’d already barged in on the brother once—

For some reason, the door clicked and eased open half an inch. Butch pushed it wider, every cop instinct in him screaming while the rap grew louder.

“Vishous?” As he stepped inside, a cold breeze shot through the penthouse, barrelling in through an open sliding glass door. “Yo...V?”

Butch glanced at the bar. There were two empty bottles of Goose and three caps on the marble counter. Binge time.

Heading for the terrace, he expected to find V passed out on a lounger.

Instead, Butch walked into a whole lot of *heaven-help-us*: Vishous was up on the wall that ran around the building, naked, swaying in the wind and...glowing all over.

“Jesus Christ...V.”

The brother wheeled around, then stretched his radiant arms wide. With a crazed smile, he slowly turned in a circle. “Nice, huh? It’s all over me.” He lifted a bottle of Goose to his lips and swallowed good and hard. “Hey, do you think they’ll want to tie me down and tattoo every inch of my skin now?”

Butch slowly crossed the terrace. “V, man...how ’bout we get you down from there?”

“Why? I bet I’m smart enough to fly.” V glanced behind himself at the thirty-story drop. As he weaved back and forth in the wind, his illuminated body was startlingly beautiful. “Yeah, I’m so fucking smart I bet I can beat gravity. Wanna watch?”

“V...” *Shit.* “V, buddy, come down from there.”

Vishous looked over and abruptly seemed to sober up, his brows meeting in the middle. “You smell like a *lesser*, roommate.”

“I know.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’ll tell you if you come down.”

“Bribes, bribes...” V took another pull on the Goose. “I don’t want to come down, Butch. I want to fly...fly away.” He tilted his head back to the sky and lurched...then caught himself by swinging the bottle. “Oops. Almost fell.”

“Vishous...Jesus Christ—”

“So, cop...the Omega’s in you again. And your blood’s black inside your veins.” V pushed his hair out of his eyes, and the tats on his temple showed, all backlit by the glow under his skin. “And yet you’re not intrinsically evil. How did she put it? Ah...yes...the seat of evil is in the soul. And you...you, Butch O’Neal, have a good soul. Better than what’s in me.”

“Vishous, come down. Right now—”

“I liked you, cop. From the moment I met you. No...not the first moment. I wanted to kill you when I first met you. But then I liked you. A lot.” God, V’s expression was nothing Butch had ever seen before. Sad...affectionate...but most of all...yearning. “I watched you with her, Butch. I watched you...making love to her.”

“What?”

“Marissa. I saw you, on top of her, in the clinic.” V whipped his incandescent hand back and forth through the air. “It was wrong, I know, and I’m very sorry...but I couldn’t look away. You two were so beautiful

together and I wanted that...shit, whatever it was. I wanted to feel that. Yeah, just once...I wanted to know what it was like to have sex normally, to care about the person you were coming with.” He laughed in a horrible burst. “Well, what I want isn’t exactly normal, is it? Will you forgive me my perversion? Forgive me my embarrassing and shameful deprivation? Fuck... how I degrade us both...”

Butch was prepared to say absolutely anything to get his friend off that ledge, but he truly had the sense that V was horrified with himself. Which was so unnecessary. You couldn’t help the way you felt, and Butch wasn’t threatened by the revelation. He somehow wasn’t surprised, either.

“V, buddy, we’re cool. You and me...we’re cool.”

V lost that longing expression, his face turning into a cold mask that was utterly frightening given the situation. “You were the only friend I had.” More with that god-awful laugh. “Even though I had my brothers, you were the only one I was close to. I don’t do relationships well, you know. You were different, though.”

“V, it’s the same for me. But can we get you—”

“And you weren’t like those others, you never cared I was different. The others...they hated me because I was different. Not that it matters. They’re all dead now. Dead, dead...”

Butch had no idea what the hell V was talking about, but the content didn’t matter. The past tense being used was the problem.

“I am still your friend. Always your friend.”

“Always...funny word, always.” V started to bend at the knees, just barely keeping his balance as he sank into a crouch.

Butch moved forward.

“No, you don’t, cop. You stop right there.” V put the bottle of vodka down and traced his fingertips lightly over the neck of the thing. “This shit’s taken good care of me.”

“Why don’t we share some?”

“Nah. But you can have what’s left.” Vishous’s diamond eyes lifted up and the left one started to expand until it ate up all the white part. There was a long pause, then V laughed. “You know, I can’t see anything...even when I open myself up, even when I volunteer for it, I’m blind. I’m future-impaired.” He glanced at his body. “But I’m still a fucking nightlight. I’m like one of those goose lamps, you know, the kind you plug into the wall that glow?”

“V—”

“You’re a good Irishman, right?” When Butch nodded, V said, “Irish, Irish...let me think. Yeah...” Vishous’s eyes sobered, and in a voice that cracked, he said, “May the road rise to meet you. May the wind always be at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face and the rains fall soft upon your fields. And...my dearest friend...until we meet again may the Lord hold you in the palm of His hand.”

In one powerful surge, V sprang backward off the ledge into thin air.

Chapter Forty-three

“John, I need to talk to you.”

John looked up from Tohr’s chair as Wrath came into the study and shut the door. Going by how grim the king looked, this was very serious, whatever it was.

Putting aside his lesson on the Old Language, John braced himself. Oh, God, what if it was the news he’d dreaded hearing every day for the last three months?

Wrath came around the desk and moved the throne so it faced John. Then he sat down and took a deep breath.

Yeah, this is it. Tohr’s dead and they’ve found the body.

Wrath frowned. “I can smell your fear and sadness, son. And I can understand both, given the situation. The funeral is going to be in three days.”

John swallowed and wrapped his arms around his shoulders, feeling a black whirlwind spin around him and take the world away.

“Your classmate’s family has asked that all the trainees be present.”

John jerked his head up. *What?* he mouthed.

“Your classmate, Hhurt. He didn’t make it through his change. He died last night.”

So Tohr wasn’t dead?

John scrambled to pull himself back from one brink, only to find himself looking over the edge of another. One of the trainees had *died* from the change?

“I thought you’d heard already.”

John shook his head and pictured Hhurt. He hadn’t known the guy well at all, but still.

“Sometimes it happens, John. But I don’t want you to worry about it.

We're going to take good care of you.”

Someone had *died* during the transition? *Shit...*

There was a long silence. Then Wrath propped his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. As his glossy black hair slipped over his shoulder, it brushed his leather-clad thighs. “Listen, John, we need to start thinking about who’ll be there for you when you go through the change. You know, who will feed you.”

John thought of Sarelle, who the *lessers* had taken along with Wellsie. His heart clenched. She was supposed to have been the one he used.

“We can play this one of two ways, son. We can try to line someone up on the outside. Bella knows some families who have daughters and one of them...hell, one of them might even make a good mate for you.” As John’s body got tight, Wrath said, “I’ve got to be honest, though—I’m not really into that solution. It could be hard to get an outsider to you in time. Fritz would have to pick her up, and minutes count when the change comes. But if you want—”

John put his hand on Wrath’s tattooed forearm and shook his head. He didn’t know what his other option was, but he was damn sure he didn’t want to get near an available female. Without thinking, he signed, *No mate. What’s my other choice?*

“We could have you use a member of the Chosen.”

John cocked his head to the side.

“They’re the Scribe Virgin’s inner circle of females and they live on the other side. Rhage uses one, Layla, to feed from because he can’t live off Mary’s blood. Layla’s safe and we can have her here in the blink of an eye.”

John tapped Wrath’s forearm and nodded his head.

“You want to use her?”

Yeah, whoever she was.

“Okay. Good. Good deal, son. Her blood is very pure and that will help.”

John eased back into Tohr’s chair, dimly hearing the old leather creak. He thought of Blaylock and Butch, who had both survived the change...thought of Butch especially. The cop was so happy now. And big. And strong.

The transition was worth the risk, John told himself. Besides...like he had a choice?

Wrath went on, “I’ll go ask the directrix of the Chosen, but that’s just a formality. Funny, this is the way it used to be, warriors being brought into their power by those females. Shit, they’re going to be thrilled.” Wrath drew

a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his widow's peak. "You'll want to meet her, of course."

John nodded. Then got nervous.

"Oh, don't worry. Layla will like you. Hell, afterward, she'll even let you take her if you want to. The Chosen can be very good at initiating males like that. Some of them, like Layla, are trained for it."

John felt a stupid expression slap itself onto his face. Wrath wasn't talking about sex, was he?

"Yeah, sex. Depending on how hard the change is for you, you may end up wanting it right away." Wrath let out a wry chuckle. "Just ask Butch."

In response, John could only stare at the king and blink like a lighthouse.

"So there we have it." Wrath stood up and moved the massive throne back to the desk with no effort at all. Then he frowned. "What did you think I was coming to talk to you about?"

John dropped his head and absently stroked the arm of Tohr's chair.

"Did you think it was about Tohrment?"

The sound of the name made John's eyes burn and he refused to look up as Wrath sighed.

"You thought I was coming to tell you he was dead?"

John shrugged.

"Well...I don't believe he's gone unto the Fade."

John's stare shot up to those wraparounds.

"I can still feel this echo in my blood and it's him. When we lost Darius? I couldn't feel him anymore in my veins. So, yeah, I believe Tohr lives."

John felt a shot of relief, but then went back to smoothing the chair's arm.

"You think he doesn't care about you because he hasn't called or come back?"

John nodded.

"Look, son, when a bonded male loses his mate...he loses himself. It's the hardest separation you can imagine—harder, I've heard, than losing a young for a male. Your mate is your life. Beth's mine. If anything happened to her...yeah, as I said to Tohr once, I can't even go there in the hypothetical." Wrath reached out and put his hand on John's shoulder. "I'll tell you something. If Tohr comes back, it will be because of you. He felt as though you were his kid. Maybe he could walk away from the Brotherhood, but he won't be able to leave you behind. You have my word."

John's eyes welled, but he was not going to cry in front of the king. As he

set his spine along with his teeth, the tears dried in place, and Wrath nodded as if he approved of the effort.

“You are a male of worth, John, and you will make him proud. Now, I’m going to go see about Layla.”

The king went to the door, then looked back over his shoulder. “Z tells me the two of you go out every night. Good. I want you to keep that up.”

When Wrath left, John leaned back in the chair. God, those walks with Z were so strange. Nothing being said, just the two of them dressed in parkas, traipsing through the woods right before dawn came. He was still waiting for the Brother to ask questions, to poke and prod, to try and dig around the inside of his head. But there had been nothing like that yet. All it had been was the two of them, walking in silence beneath tall pines.

Funny, though...he’d come to rely on those little forays. And after this talk of Tohr, he was really going to need one tonight.

Butch was screaming his lungs raw as he raced across the terrace for the ledge. He threw himself at the lip and looked down, but couldn’t see anything because he was so far up and there were no lights on this side of the building. As for the sound of a body drop? God knew he was hollering loud enough to drown out that kind of distant *thunch*.

“*Vishous!*”

Oh, God...maybe if he got down there fast enough, he could...shit, get V to Havers—or something...*anything*. He wheeled around, ready to run to the elevator—

Vishous appeared before him as a glowing ghost, a perfect reflection of what the brother had been, an ethereal vision of Butch’s one true friend.

Butch stumbled, a pathetic wail coming out of his mouth. “V...”

“I couldn’t do it,” the ghost said.

Butch frowned. “V?”

“As much as I hate myself...I don’t want to die.”

Butch went cold. Then ran as white-hot as his roommate’s body.

“*You fucking bastard!*” Butch shot forward without thinking and grabbed Vishous by the throat. “You fucking...*bastard!* You scared the shit out of me!”

He hauled his arm back and cold-cocked V right in the face, his fist cracking against jawbone. As he braced himself for a return shot, he was absolutely livid. Instead of fighting back, though, V locked his arms around

Butch, put his head down, and just...crumpled. Shook all over. Trembled to the point of frailty.

Cursing the brother to hell and back, Butch absorbed Vishous's weight, holding the guy's naked, glowing body tight while the cold wind whirled around them both.

When he ran out of swear words, he said into V's ear, "You ever pull a stunt like that again, I'll kill you myself. We clear?"

"I'm losing my mind," V said against Butch's neck. "The one thing that's always saved me and I'm losing it...I've lost it...I'm gone. It's the only thing that's saved me and now I have nothing..."

As Butch squeezed harder, he became aware of an easing inside of himself, a sensation of relief and healing. Except he didn't think much about it because something hot and wet seeped into his collar. He had a feeling it was tears, but he didn't want to draw attention to what was doing. V was no doubt totally horrified by the show of weakness, assuming the guy was crying.

Butch put his hand on his roommate's nape and murmured, "I'll do the saving until you get your head back, how about that? I'll keep you safe."

When Vishous finally nodded, something dawned on Butch. Shit...he was up against the glow, a whole lot of the glow...but he wasn't on fire or in pain. In fact...yeah, he could feel the blackness in him seeping out of his skin and bones, leaching into the white light that was Vishous: That was the relief he'd noticed just now.

Except why wasn't he burning up?

From out of nowhere, a female voice said, "Because this is what shall be, the light and the dark together, two halves making a whole."

Butch and V yanked their heads around. The Scribe Virgin was floating above the terrace, her black robes unstirred despite the frigid gusts that blew all around.

"That is why you are not consumed," she said. "And that is why he saw you from the start." She smiled a little, though he didn't know how he knew it. "This is the reason destiny brought you to us, Butch, descended of Wrath son of Wrath. The Destroyer has arrived and you are he."

"Now the new era in the war begins."

Chapter Forty-four

Marissa nodded as she shifted her cell phone to her other ear and reviewed the order list on her desk. “That’s right. We need an industrial range, six burners minimum.”

Sensing someone in her doorway, she looked up. Only to have her mind go completely blank. “May I...ah, may I call you back?” She didn’t wait for a reply, just hit the END button. “Havers. How did you find us?”

Her brother bowed his head. He was dressed as usual, in a Burberry sport coat, gray slacks, and a bow tie. His horn-rimmed glasses were different from the ones she was used to seeing on him. And yet the same, too.

“My nursing staff told me where you were.”

She rose from her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “And you have come here why?”

Instead of answering, he looked around and she could imagine he wasn’t impressed. Her office was nothing more than a desk, a chair, a laptop computer, and a whole lot of hardwood floor. Well...and a thousand pieces of paper, each with something she needed to do on it. Havers’s study, on the other hand, was an Old World den of learning and distinction, the floors covered by Aubusson rugs, the walls hung with his diplomas from Harvard Medical School as well as a fraction of his Hudson River School landscape collection.

“Havers?”

“You have done great things at this facility.”

“We’re just getting started, and it’s a home, not a facility. Now why are you here?”

He cleared his throat. “I have come at the *Princeps* Council’s request. We are voting on the *seclusion* motion at the next meeting and the *leahdyre* said

he's been trying to reach you for the last week. You haven't returned the calls."

"I am busy, as you can see."

"But they cannot vote unless all of the membership is in the room."

"So they should remove me. In fact, I'm surprised they haven't figured out how to already."

"You are of the six founding bloodlines. You cannot be removed nor excused as things stand now."

"Ah, well, how inconvenient for them. You'll understand, however, if I'm not available that evening."

"I haven't told you a date."

"As I said, I'm unavailable."

"Marissa, if you disagree with the motion, you can make your stance clear during the testimony phase of the meeting. You can be heard."

"So all of you with voting rights are in favor?"

"It's important to keep females safe."

Marissa went cold. "And yet you turned me out of the only home I had thirty minutes before dawn. Does that mean you've changed your commitment to my sex? Or is it that you don't see me as female?"

He had the grace to flush. "I was highly emotional at the time."

"You seemed very calm to me."

"Marissa, I'm sorry—"

She cut him off with a slice of her hand. "Stop. I don't want to hear it."

"So be it. But you shouldn't impede the council just to get back at me."

As he fiddled with his bow tie, she caught a glimpse of the family's signet ring on his pinkie. God...how had they ended up like this? She could remember when Havers was born and she'd looked at him in their mother's arms. Such a sweet baby. Such a—

Marissa stiffened as something occurred to her. Then she quickly covered the shock that surely showed on her face. "All right. I'll go to the meeting."

Havers's shoulders eased and he told her the when and where. "Thank you. Thank you for this."

She smiled coolly. "You are so very welcome."

There was a long silence during which he eyed her pants and sweater and her desk of papers. "You seem very different."

"I am."

And she knew by the tight, awkward expression on his face that he had

remained the same. He would have so preferred her in the mold of the *glymera*: a female of grace presiding over a home of distinction. Well, tough luck. She was all about rule number one now: Right or wrong, she made the choices in her life. No one else did.

She picked up her phone. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"I would offer my services to you. The clinic's, I mean. Free of charge." He pushed his glasses up higher on his straight nose. "The females and their young who stay here will need medical care."

"Thank you. Thank you...for that."

"I will also tell the nursing staff to be on the lookout for signs of abuse. We will refer to you any cases we find."

"That would be most appreciated."

He inclined his head. "We are pleased to be of service."

As her cell phone went off, she said, "Good-bye, Havers."

His eyes widened and she realized it was the first time she'd ever dismissed him.

But then change was good...and he'd better get used to the new world order.

The phone rang again. "Shut the door behind you, if you don't mind."

After he left, she glance at her cell's caller ID and sighed in relief: Butch, and thank God for it. She so needed to hear his voice.

"Hi," she said. "You'll never believe who just—"

"Can you come home? Right now?"

Her hand closed tight on the phone. "What's wrong? Are you hurt—"

"I'm fine." His voice was way too level. Nothing but false calm. "Except I need you to come home. Now."

"I'm leaving this moment."

She grabbed her coat, shoved her phone into her pocket, and went looking for her one and only staff member.

When she found the older female *doggen*, she said, "I have to go."

"Mistress, you seem upset. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thank you. And I'll be back."

"I shall take care of everything in your stead."

She squeezed the female's hand and then hurried outside. Standing on the front lawn in the raw spring night, she struggled to calm herself enough to dematerialize. When it didn't work immediately, she thought she was going to have to call Fritz for a pickup: She was not only worried, she needed to

feed, so it was possible she wasn't going to be able to do it.

But then she felt herself go. As soon as she materialized in front of the Pit, she barged into the vestibule. Its inner lock sprang free before she even put her face in front of the camera, and Wrath was on the other side of the heavy panels of wood and steel.

"Where's Butch?" she demanded.

"I'm right here." Butch stepped into her line of sight, but didn't come near her.

In the stark silence that followed, Marissa walked in slowly, feeling as though the air had turned into a slush she had to fight her way through. Numbly, she heard Wrath shut the door, and from the corner of her eye she saw Vishous rise to his feet from behind his computers. As V walked around the desk, the three males traded looks.

Butch held out his hand. "Come here, Marissa."

When she took his palm, he led her to the computers and pointed to one of the monitors. Up on the screen was...text. A whole lot of dense text. Actually, there were two sections of documents, the field split down the middle.

"What is this?" she asked.

Butch gently sat her in the chair and stood behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. "Read the passage in italics."

"Which side?"

"Either. They're identical."

She frowned and ran her eyes over something that seemed almost a poem:

*There shall be one to bring the end before the master,
a fighter of modern time found in the seventh of the twenty-first,
and he shall be known in the numbers he bears:
One more than the compass he apperceives,
Though mere four points to make at his right,
Three lives has he,
Two scores on his fore,
and with a single black eye, in one well will he be birthed and die.*

Confused, she scanned what was around it, only to have horrible phrases

jump out at her: “Lessening Society,” “Induction,” “Master.” She looked up to the title on the page and shuddered.

“Dear God...this is about...*lessers*.”

As Butch heard the icy panic in her voice, he sank down on his knees beside her. “Marissa—”

“What the hell am I reading about here?”

Yeah, how to answer that one. He was still having a hard time coming to terms with it all himself. “It seems as though...I am this.” He tapped the smooth screen and then looked at his deformed pinkie, the one that was shriveled up tight to his palm...the one he couldn’t straighten...or point with.

Marissa shifted away from him warily. “And *this* is...what?”

Thank God V spoke up. “What you’re looking at is two different translations of the Lessening Society’s Scrolls. One we had from before. One is from a laptop that I confiscated from the slayers about ten days ago. The Scrolls are the handbook of the Society and the section you’re looking at is what we call the Destroyer Prophecy. We’ve known about it for generations, ever since the first copy of the Scrolls fell into our possession.”

As Marissa’s hand went to her throat, she was obviously getting the gist of where they were headed. She started shaking her head. “But it’s all riddles. Surely—”

“Butch has all the markers.” V lit up a hand-rolled and exhaled. “He can sense *lessers*, so that’s one more than north, south, east, or west he apperceives. His pinkie is misshapen from the transition, so he has only four fingers he can point with. He’s had three lives, childhood, adulthood, and now as a vampire, and you could argue he was birthed here in Caldwell when we turned him. But the real telltale is that scar on his belly. It’s the black eye and one of two scores on his forefront. Assuming you count his belly button as the first.”

She looked at Wrath. “So what does this mean?”

The king took a deep breath. “It means Butch is our very best weapon in the war.”

“How...” Marissa’s voice drifted.

“He can shortcut a *lesser*’s return to the Omega. See, during the induction, the Omega shares a part of himself with each slayer and that piece comes back to the master when the *lesser* is killed. As the Omega is a finite being, this return is critical. He needs to get back what he puts in them if he’s

to continue to populate his fighters.” Wrath nodded toward Butch. “The cop breaks that part of the cycle. So the more *lessers* Butch consumes, the weaker the Omega will become until there is, literally, nothing left of him. It’s like chipping away at a boulder.”

Marissa’s eyes slid back to Butch. “Consume exactly how?”

Oh, man, she wasn’t going to like this part. “I just...inhale them. Take them into me.”

The terror in her eyes killed him, it really did. “Won’t you become one, then? What stops you from being taken over?”

“I don’t know.” Butch settled back on his heels, terrified that she would bolt. Not that he’d blame her. “But Vishous helps me. In the way he healed me with his hand before.”

“How many times have you done...whatever to them?”

“Three. Including the one tonight.”

Her eyes squeezed shut. “And when did you first do it?”

“About two weeks ago.”

“So none of you know the long-term effects, do you?”

“But I’m okay—”

Marissa burst up from the chair and walked out from behind the desk, her eyes on the floor, her arms wrapped around herself. When she stopped in front of Wrath, it was to glare at him. “And you want to use him?”

“This is about the race’s very survival.”

“What about his?”

Butch got to his feet. “I want to be used, Marissa.”

She looked over at him with hard eyes. “May I remind you, you almost died from the Omega’s contamination?”

“That was different.”

“Was it? If you’re talking about putting more and more of that evil in your system again, exactly how is it different?”

“I told you, V helps me process it. It doesn’t stay with me.” He got no reply to that. She just stood stock-still in the middle of the room, so self-contained he didn’t know how to reach her. “Marissa...we’re talking about purpose. My purpose.”

“Funny, you told me in bed this morning that I was your life.”

“You are. But this is different.”

“Ah, yes, everything is different when you want it to be.” She shook her head. “You couldn’t save your sister, but now...now you have a shot at

saving thousands of vampires. Your hero complex must be thrilled.”

Butch bit down hard, jaw flexing. “That is a cheap shot.”

“But true.” Abruptly, she grew weary. “You know, I am really sick and tired of violence. And fighting. And people getting hurt. And you told me you weren’t going to get involved with this war.”

“I was human then—”

“Oh, please—”

“Marissa, you’ve seen what those *lessers* can do. You’ve been at your brother’s clinic when the bodies have been brought in. How can I not fight?”

“But you’re not just talking about hand-to-hand combat. You’re taking it to a whole different level. *Consuming* slayers. How can you be sure you won’t turn into one?”

From out of nowhere, fear sliced through him, and as her eyes narrowed on his face, he knew he didn’t hide the anxiety fast enough.

She shook her head. “You’re worried about that, too, aren’t you? You’re not certain you won’t turn into one of them.”

“Not true. I won’t lose myself. I know it.”

“Oh, really. Then why are you holding on to your cross like that, Butch?”

He glanced down. Shit, his hand was locked on the crucifix so tight his knuckles were white and his shirt was all bunched up. He forced himself to drop his arm.

Wrath’s voice cut in. “We need him, Marissa. The race needs him.”

“*What about his safety?*” She let out a sob, but then quickly smothered it. “I’m sorry, but I—I can’t smile and say Go get ‘em. I spent days under quarantine watching him—” She wheeled toward Butch. “Watching you nearly die. It almost killed me. And the thing is, back then it wasn’t your choice, but this...this is a choice, Butch.”

She had a point. But he couldn’t back down. He was what he was, and he had to believe he was strong enough not to fall into the darkness. “I don’t want to be a kept pet, Marissa. I want a purpose—”

“You have a pur—”

“—and that purpose is *not* going to be sitting at home waiting for you to get back from your life. I’m a man, not a piece of furniture.” When she just stared at him, he said, “I can’t sit on my hands when I know there’s something I can do to help the race—*my* race.” He went over to her. “Marissa _____”

“I can’t...I can’t do this.” She put her hands out of his reach and backed

up. "I've seen you almost die too many times. I won't...I can't do this, Butch. I can't live like that. I'm sorry, but you're on your own. I will not sit back and watch you destroy yourself."

She turned and walked out of the Pit.

Up at the main house, John waited in the library, feeling like he was about to jump out of his skin. As the clock chimed, he looked down at his little chest and the tie that was hanging off of his neck. He'd wanted to look nice, but the getup probably came across like he was posing for a school picture.

When he heard fast footsteps, he glanced up at the open double doors. Marissa walked by, heading for the staircase and looking desolate. Butch was tight on her heels, looking worse.

Oh, no...He hoped they would be okay. He liked them both so much.

When a door shut with a bang upstairs, he walked over to the diamond-pane windows and stared outside. As he put his hand up to the glass, he thought about what Wrath had said—that Tohr was alive, somewhere.

He so wanted to believe that.

"Sire?" When he turned at the sound of Fritz's voice, the old man smiled. "Your guest has arrived. Shall I show her in?"

John swallowed. Twice. Then nodded. Fritz disappeared and a moment later a woman appeared in the doorway. Without looking at John, she bowed to him and stayed parallel to the floor in supplication. She seemed to be about six feet tall and was wearing something like a white toga. Her blond hair was coiled on top of her head, and though he couldn't see her face now, the split-second eyeball he'd gotten of it stuck with him.

She was beyond beautiful. Straight into angel territory.

There was a long silence, during which all he could do was stare.

"Your grace," she said softly. "May I meet thine eyes?"

He opened his mouth. Then started to nod frantically.

Except she just stayed as she was. Well, duh, she couldn't see him. Shit.

"Your grace?" Now her voice wavered a little. "Perhaps...you would care for another of us?"

John went over to her and lifted his hand to touch her lightly. Um, where, though? That toga thing was low-cut and slit up the sleeves as well as down the front of the skirt...God, she smelled good.

He tapped her awkwardly on the shoulder, and she inhaled as if he'd

surprised her.

“Your grace?”

With a little pressure on her arm, he brought her upright. *Whoa...*her eyes were really green. Like summer grapes. Or the inside of a lime.

He gestured to his throat and then made a cutting motion with his hand.

Her perfect face tilted to the side. “You do not speak, your grace?”

He shook his head, a little surprised Wrath hadn’t mentioned it. Then again, the king had a lot of other things on his mind.

In response, Layla’s eyes positively glowed, and as she smiled, she knocked him out. Her teeth were perfect and her fangs were...incredibly lovely. “Your grace, the vow of silence is to be commended. Such self-discipline. You shall be a warrior of great power, you who have been bred from Darius son of Marklon’s line.”

Good Lord. She was seriously impressed by him. And hell, if she wanted to think he’d taken a vow, that was fine. No reason to tell her he had a defect.

“Perhaps you would like to have knowledge of me?” she said. “So that you are assured you shall have what you want when you are in need?”

He nodded and glanced over at the couch, thinking he was glad he’d brought a pad with him. Maybe they could sit there for a while and get to know one another—

When he looked back she was gloriously naked, the toga thing in a pool at her feet.

John felt his eyes bug out. Holy...*shit*.

“Do you approve, your grace?”

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph...Even if he’d had a voice box, he still would have been speechless.

“Your grace?”

As John started to nod, he thought, man, wait until he told Blaylock and Qhuinn about this.

Chapter Forty-five

The following evening, Marissa emerged from the basement rooms of Safe Place and tried to pretend that her world hadn't crashed and burned.

"Mastimon wants to talk to you," a little voice said.

Marissa turned around and saw the young with the leg cast. Forcing a smile, she crouched down and got eye to eye with the stuffed tiger. "Does he?"

"Yes. He says that you are not to be sad, because he is here to protect us. And he wants to hug you."

Marissa took the ratty toy and cradled it tight to her neck. "He is both fierce and kind."

"True. And you should keep him with you for now." The young's expression was all business. "I have to help *mahmen* prepare First Meal."

"I'll be careful of him."

With a solemn nod the young was off, pegging her half-pint crutches into the floor.

As Marissa held on to the tiger, she thought about what it had been like to pack up her few things and leave the Pit the night before. Butch had tried to talk her out of going, but the decision he'd made was in his eyes, so the words he'd spoken had made no difference.

The reality was, her love had not cured his death wish or his risk-taking personality. And as painful as the separation was, if she stayed with him, it would be untenable: nothing but night after night of waiting for the call to come that he was dead. Or even more tragic, that he had turned into something evil.

Plus, the more she thought about it, the more she didn't trust him to keep safe. Not after his suicide attempt in the clinic. And the regression he'd

voluteered for. And the transition he'd put himself through. And now the battling—the consuming of *lessers*. Yes, the outcomes had been positive so far, but the trend wasn't good: All she had to go on was a consistent pattern of self-abuse that she knew damn well sooner or later he was going to get seriously damaged by.

She loved him too much to watch him kill himself.

As tears came to her eyes, she wiped them away and stared into space. After a while, some kind of flickering thought, like an echo, flashed through the back of her mind. But whatever it was faded quickly.

Forcing herself to stand up, she was momentarily lost. She literally couldn't remember what she was doing or why she was in the hall. In the end, she headed for her office because there was always something waiting for her to do there.

One thing about being a former cop was you never lost your idiot radar.

Butch paused in the alley next to ZeroSum. Down the way, loitering at the club's emergency exit, was that half-pint, Euro-trash, flash-in-the-pan blond kid who'd made such a stink at the waitress last week. Next to him was one of his steakheads and the pair were lighting cigarettes.

Although why they were smoking it up out here in the cold didn't make a lot of sense.

Butch hung back and watched. Which of course gave him time to think. Which sucked, as usual. Man, anytime things got quiet, all he could see was Marissa getting into Fritz's Mercedes and that S600 disappearing through the gates.

With a curse, Butch rubbed the center of his chest and hoped like hell he found a *lesser*. He needed to fight something to take the edge off this perma-ache. Like *now*.

From off Trade Street, a car turned into the alley and came forward at a fast clip. As it flew past and stopped short at the club's side door, the black Infiniti was spinning enough chrome to qualify as a frickin' disco ball. And what do you know, Little Blond Dickhead sauntered over like this was an arranged meet-and-greet.

As the kid and the driver gum-flapped and palm-slapped, Butch couldn't tell exactly what was doing, but he was damn sure they weren't comparing cookie recipes.

When the Infiniti reversed it out, Butch stepped from the shadows,

figuring there was one way of knowing if his hunch was correct: Assume and see what came back at him. “Tell me you aren’t going to deal that shit inside? The Reverend hates freelancers.”

The little blond guy wheeled around, all righteous pissed. “Who the fuck are—” His words dried up. “Wait, I’ve seen you before...except...”

“Yeah, I got my chassis overhauled. I run better now. Lot better. So what are you—” Butch froze as he felt his instincts fire up.

Lessers. Close by. Shit.

“Boys,” he said calmly. “You need to take off now. And you can’t reenter through that door.”

Dickhead’s attitude came back online. “Who do you think you are?”

“Trust me on this and get your groove on. Now.”

“Fuck you, we can stand out here all night if we—” The punk froze, then blanched as a sweet smell rode down to them on a breeze. “Oh, my God...”

Hmmm, so Little Blond Dickhead was a pre-trans, not human. “Yeah, like I said. Get gone, kid.”

The pair took off, but they weren’t fast enough: A trio of *lessers* appeared at the open end of the alley, blocking their way.

Great. Just terrific.

Butch activated his newest wristwatch, sending out a beacon and coordinates. Within moments, V and Rhage materialized by his side.

“Use the strategy we agreed on,” Butch muttered. “I’ll sweep up.”

The two nodded their heads as the *lessers* closed in.

Rehvenge stood up from his desk and pulled on his sable coat. “Gotta bounce, Xhex. *Princeps* Council meeting. I’m dematerializing, so I don’t need the car, and I hope to be back in an hour. But before I go, what’s the status of that newest OD?”

“Off to the Saint Francis ER. He’s probably going to live.”

“And that rogue dealer?”

Xhex opened his door for him, like she was encouraging him to leave. “Still haven’t found him.”

Rehv cursed, reached for his cane, and headed over to her. “I am *not* happy about this sitch.”

“No kidding,” she muttered. “And here I thought you were down with it.”

He pegged her with a hard stare. “Don’t fuck around with me.”

“I’m not, boss,” she snapped back. “We’re doing everything we can. Do

you think I *like* calling nine-one-one for these fools?”

He took a deep breath and tried to chill his temper. Man, it had been a bad week at the club. Both of them were on short fuses, and the rest of the staff at ZeroSum were about to hang themselves in the bathroom from the tension.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m wound.”

She ran a hand over her man’s haircut. “Yeah...me, too.”

“What’s doing on your end?”

He didn’t expect her to answer. But she did. “You hear about the human? O’Neal?”

“Yeah. One of us. Who’d’ve thought, huh.” Rehv had yet to see the guy up close and personal, but Vishous had called with a heads-up on the miracle that had gone down.

Rehv honestly wished the cop well. He liked that bigmouthed man—er, male. But he was also very aware that his feeding days with Marissa had come to an end and so had any hope of mating her. The shit stung, it really did, even though linking up with her would have been a really bad idea.

“Is it true?” Xhex asked. “About him and Marissa?”

“Yeah, he’s not a free agent.”

The oddest expression filtered through Xhex’s features...sadness? Yeah, looked like it.

He frowned. “I didn’t know you were that into him.”

Instantly, she was back to herself, eyes sharp, face showing nothing but hard-ass. “Just because I liked banging him doesn’t mean I wanted him as a mate.”

“Fine, sure. Whatever.”

Her upper lip peeled off her fangs. “Do I look like the type who needs a male?”

“Nope, and thank God. The idea of you going soft violates the natural world order. Besides, you’re the only one I can feed from, so I need you unattached.” He passed by her. “I’ll see you in two hours, tops.”

“Rehvenge.” When he glanced back, she said, “I need you to stay single, too.”

Their stares locked. God, they were quite a pair, weren’t they. Two liars living among Normals...two snakes in the grass.

“Don’t worry,” he murmured. “I’m never taking a *shellan*. Marissa was... a flavor I wanted to taste. Never would have worked out long term.”

After Xhex nodded, as if they'd resealed their deal, Rehv left.

As he walked through the VIP section, he stuck to the shadows. He didn't like to be seen with his cane, and if he had to use it, he wanted people to think it was a vanity thing, so he tried not to rely on it too much. Which was a little dangerous considering his lack of balance.

He got to the side door, worked some mind magic with the alarm system, then popped the bar release. He stepped out, thinking he—

Holy Christ! There was a frickin' melee in the alley. *Lessers.* Brothers. Two civilians crouched and quivering in the middle. And big bad Butch O'Neal.

As the door clicked shut behind Rehv, he widened his stance and wondered why the hell the security cameras hadn't—oh, *mhis*. They were surrounded by *mhis*. Nice touch.

Standing on the sideline, he watched the fight, listening to the dull thuds of bodies hitting bodies, hearing the grunts and the shifting of metal, smelling the sweat and the blood of his race mixing with the baby powder sweetness of the slayers.

Damn, he wanted to play, too. And he couldn't see why he shouldn't.

When a *lesser* stumbled his way, he caught the bastard, slammed it up against the bricks, and smiled while looking into a pair of pale eyes. It had been so long since Rehv had killed something and the flip side of him missed the experience. Craved it. Man, the snuffing out of life was something the bad in him yearned for.

And he was going to feed his beast. Right here. Right now.

In spite of the dopamine in his system, Rehv's *sympath* abilities came at his beckoning, riding the crest of his aggression, suffusing his vision with the color red. Baring his fangs in a smile, he gave in to his sinister half with the ecstatic pleasure of an addict long deprived.

With invisible hands, he tunneled into the *lesser*'s brain, rooted around, and triggered all kinds of fun memories. It was like popping lids off soda bottles, and what bubbled out debilitated his prey, scrambling the *lesser* so badly it was rendered defenseless. God, such ugliness inside the bastard's head—this particular slayer had had a real sadistic streak, and as every single one of his nasty deeds and dirty abuses clouded his mind's eye, he started to scream, clapping his hands to his ears and falling to the ground.

Rehv brought up his cane and whipped off its outer casing, revealing a lethal length of steel, the blade red as his two-dimensional sight. But when he

got ready to stab, Butch grabbed his arm.

“This is where I come in.”

Rehv glared at the guy. “Fuck that, this is my kill—”

“No, it isn’t.” Butch went down to his knees beside the *lesser* and...

Rehv clamped his mouth shut and stared with fascination as Butch leaned over and started to suck something out of the slayer. Except there wasn’t time to enjoy the *Twilight Zone* episode. Another *lesser* came gunning for Butch, and Rehv had to leap back as Rhage took the thing down in a tackle.

Rehv heard more footsteps and faced off at yet another *lesser*. Good. This one *he* would handle, he thought with a hard grin.

Man, *sympaths* loved to fight, they really did. And he was no exception to his nature.

Mr. X pounded down the alley where the brawl was happening. Though he couldn’t see or hear anything, he sensed the buffering around the scene, so he knew this was the right place.

Van cursed from behind him. “What the hell is this? I can feel the fight
___”

“We’re about to penetrate the *mhis*. Get ready.”

The two kept running and hit what felt like a wall of cold water. As they burst through the barrier, the fight was revealed: Two Brothers. Six slayers. A couple of cowering civilians. A very large male in a full-length fur coat...and Butch O’Neal.

The former cop was just lifting himself up from the ground, looking sick as a dog and positively glowing with the master’s footprint. As Mr. X met O’Neal’s eyes, the *Fore-lesser* skidded to a halt, overcome by a sense of accord.

And irony of ironies, at that very instant when the connection was made, at that precise moment when there was an exchange of recognition, the Omega called from the other side.

Coincidence? Who cared. Mr. X pushed off the demand, ignoring the itching in his skin. “Van,” he said softly, “it’s time for you to show your stuff. Go get O’Neal.”

“About fucking time.” Van bolted for the newly born vampire, and the two of them squared off, circling each other in the manner of fighters. At least until Van stopped moving, becoming nothing more than a breathing statue.

Because Mr. X had willed it so.

Man, he had to smile as he caught the panicked expression on Van's face. Yeah, losing control of all your large-muscle groups certainly did freak a guy out, didn't it.

And O'Neal was surprised as well. He closed in with care, wary but obviously ready to take advantage of the freeze-frame Mr. X was imposing on his subordinate. The takedown happened fast. In a quick move, O'Neal put an armlock around Van's neck, flipped him over, and pinned him down to the ground.

Mr. X didn't give a shit about sacrificing an asset like Van. He needed to know what happened when—*holy shit!*

O'Neal...O'Neal had opened his mouth and was inhaling and...Van Dean was just sucked into nothingness, absorbed, swallowed, owned. Unto dust.

Relief flooded into Mr. X. Yes...yes, the prophecy was fulfilled. The prophecy had been realized in the skin of an Irishman who had been turned. *Thank you, God.*

Mr. X took a halting, desperate step forward. Now...now would be the peace he sought, his loophole realized, his freedom ensured. *O'Neal was the one.*

Except Mr. X was suddenly intercepted by a Brother who had a goatee and tattoos on his face. The big bastard came out of nowhere like a boulder, hitting X so hard his legs buckled. They started to fight, but X was terrified he'd be stabbed instead of consumed by O'Neal. So when another slayer jumped into the fray and grabbed the Brother, Mr. X disengaged and disappeared into the periphery.

The Omega's call was a screaming demand now, that god-awful tickling a roar across Mr. X's flesh, but he wasn't answering. He was going to get himself killed tonight. But only in the right way.

Butch lifted his head from his latest victim's ash pile and began to retch in horrid, full-torso heaves. His body felt as it had back when he'd just woken up in the clinic however long ago. Contaminated. Stained. Dirty beyond bleaching.

God...what if he'd taken in too much? What if he'd reached the point of no return?

As he vomited, he felt, though did not see, V come over. Forcing his head

up, Butch groaned, “Help me...”

“I’m going to, *trahyner*. Give me your hand.” As Butch held his palm up in despair, Vishous whipped off his glove and grabbed on good and hard. V’s energy, that beautiful, white light, poured down Butch’s arm and ripped through him in a blast, cleansing, renewing.

United by their clasped hands, they became again the two halves, the light and the dark. The Destroyer and the Savior. A whole.

Butch took all V had to give. And when it was over, he didn’t want to let go, afraid if the connection was broken the evil would somehow come back.

“You okay?” V said softly.

“I am now.” God, his voice was hoarse as hell from the inhaling. Maybe also from the gratitude.

V gave a yank and Butch shot upright to his feet. As he let himself fall back against the alley’s brick wall, he discovered the fighting was over.

“Nice work for a civilian,” Rhage said.

Butch glanced to the left, thinking the brother was talking to him, but then he saw Rehvenge. The male was slowly bending over and picking up a sheath from the ground. With an elegant move, he took the red-bladed sword in his hand and slid it home to the pummel. Ah...that cane was also a weapon.

“Thanks,” Rehv replied. Then his amethyst eyes shifted over to Butch.

As the two of them stared at each other, Butch realized they hadn’t really met up since the night Marissa had fed.

“Hey, man,” Butch said, putting his palm out.

Rehvenge walked over, leaning heavily on his cane. As the two of them shook, everyone took a deep breath.

“So, cop,” Rehv said, “mind if I ask what you were doing to those slayers?”

A whimpering sound cut off any reply, causing them all to look at the Dumpster across the way.

“You can come out, boys,” Rhage said. “Place is clear.”

The hotshot blond pre-trans and his rented meat shuffled into the light. Both of them looked like they’d been put through a dishwasher: they were damp with sweat in spite of the cold, their hair and clothes all messed up.

Rehvenge’s hard face registered surprise. “Lash, why aren’t you in training now? Your father’s going to have a shit fit that you were down here instead of—”

“He’s taking a hiatus from classes,” Rhage muttered dryly.

“To deal drugs,” Butch added. “Check his pockets.”

Rhage went in for some frisk action, and Lash was too shocked out to protest. The result was a wad of cash as big as the kid’s head and a handful of little cellophane packets.

Rehv’s eyes glowed with angry purple light. “Give that shit to me, Hollywood—the powder, not the green.” When Rhage handed the stuff over, Rehv cracked one of the packets, licked his pinkie, and stuck it inside. After he put his finger on his tongue, he grimaced and spat. Then he jabbed his cane at the kid. “You’re not welcome here anymore.”

That little news flash seemed to shake Lash out of his stupor. “Why not? It’s a free country.”

“First of all, this is *my* house, that’s why. Second, not that I need any other reason, the shit in those bags is contaminated and I’m willing to bet you’re responsible for the rash of ODs we’ve had lately. So like I said, you’re not welcome here anymore. I won’t have punks like you spoiling my stream of commerce.” Rehv stuffed the baggies in his coat pocket and glanced at Rhage. “What are you going to do with him?”

“Drive him home.”

Rehv smiled coldly. “How convenient for us all.”

Abruptly, Lash fell into whimper mode. “But we’re not going to tell my father—”

“Everything,” Rehvenge snapped. “Trust me, your daddy’s going to know fucking *everything*.”

Lash’s knees wobbled. And then the BMOC passed out cold.

Marissa walked into the *Princeps* Council meeting, not caring that for once everyone looked at her.

Then again, they’d never seen her in pants or with her hair pulled back in a ponytail. So surprise, surprise.

She took a seat, opened up her brand-new briefcase, and started going through applications for residence monitors. Although...she wasn’t really seeing anything. She was exhausted, not just from the work or the stress but because she really had to feed. Soon.

Oh, God. The idea of it made her sick with sadness, and she sank into thoughts of Butch. As she pictured him, that persistent, foggy echo in the back of her head returned. The thing was like a little bell chiming, reminding

her of...what?

A hand landed on her shoulder. As she jumped, Rehv sat down next to her.

“Just me.” His amethyst eyes passed over her face and her hair. “It’s good to see you.”

“You, too.” She smiled a little, then glanced away, wondering whether she would have to go back to using his vein. Ah...hell. Of course she would.

“What’s doing, *tahly*? You okay?” he asked smoothly. The question was so casual, she got the eerie sense he knew exactly how upset she was and somehow knew the cause. He’d always read her so well for some reason.

As she opened her mouth, the council *leahdyre*’s gavel pounded down at the other end of the glossy table. “I’d like to bring the meeting to order.”

The voices in the library dried up fast, and Rehv leaned back in his chair, a bored expression suffusing his hard face. With elegant, powerful hands, he folded his sable coat around his legs, overlapping the thing as if the room were thirty below, not a balmy seventy.

Marissa shut her briefcase and settled in, realizing that she’d assumed a similar pose to his, just without all the fur. *Good heavens*, she thought. *How times have changed*. Once she’d been terrified of these vampires. Utterly intimidated. Now, as she looked around at the exquisitely gowned females and the formally dressed males, she was just...bored by it all. Tonight, the *glymera* and the *Princeps* Council seemed like nothing more than an antiquated social nightmare no longer relevant to her life. Thank God.

The *leahdyre* smiled and nodded to a *doggen* who stepped forward. In the servant’s hands was a sheet of parchment stretched over an ebony board. Long streamers of silk ribbon hung from the document, the various colors reflecting each of the six originating families. Marissa’s line was pale blue.

The *leahdyre* looked around the table, his eyes studiously skipping over Marissa. “Now that we have the full council here, I would like to entertain the first order of business, said business to concern the passage of the recommendation to the king on the matter of mandatory *seclusion* for all unmated females. First, as per the rules of procedure, we will give leave for commentary from the nonvoting members herein this room.”

There was quick assent from everyone...except for Rehvenge. Who was very clear about how he felt.

In the pause following his terse rejection of the motion, Marissa could feel Havers’s stare on her. She kept her mouth shut.

“Well done, council,” the *leahdyre* said. “I shall now call the roll of the six voting *princeps*.” As each name was read, the corresponding *princeps* rose, gave the consent of his or her bloodline and affixed the seal of the family’s ring upon the parchment. This happened without a glitch five times. And then the last name was spoken. “Havers, blooded son of Wallen, blooded grandson of...”

As her brother rose from his chair, Marissa rapped her knuckles sharply on the table. All eyes shot to her. “Wrong name.”

The *leahdyre*’s eyes went so wide she was quite sure he could see behind himself. And he was so aghast at her interruption, he was speechless as she smiled a little and glanced at Havers. “You may sit down, physician,” she said.

“I beg your pardon,” the *leahdyre* stammered.

Marissa got to her feet. “It’s been so long since we’ve done one of these votes...not since Wrath’s father died.” She leaned forward on her hands as she pegged the *leahdyre*’s face with a level stare. “And back then, centuries ago, my father lived and cast our family’s vote. So obviously that is why you are confused.”

The *leahdyre* looked at Havers in a panic. “Perhaps you will inform your sister she is out of order—”

Marissa cut in. “I’m not his sister anymore, or so he’s told me. Though I believe we can all agree that blood lineage is immutable. As is the order of birth.” She smiled coolly. “It so happens that I was born eleven years before Havers. Which makes me older than he is. Which means he can sit down because as the eldest surviving member of my family, the vote from our bloodline is mine to cast. Or not. And in this case, it is most definitely...*not*.”

Chaos broke out. Absolute pandemonium.

In the midst of which, Rehv laughed and clapped his palms together. “Hot damn, girl. You are so the shit.”

Marissa took little joy in the power play, feeling more relieved than anything else. The vote had to be unanimous or that stupid motion was going nowhere. And thanks to her that was a big fat *nowhere*.

“Oh...my God,” someone said.

As if a drain opened in the center of the floor, all the noise was sucked out of the room. Marissa turned around.

Rhage was in the doorway of the library holding a pre-transition male by the scruff of the neck. Behind him were Vishous...and Butch.

Chapter Forty-six

Standing in the library's archway, Butch did his best not to flat-out stare at Marissa, but it was tough. Especially because she was sitting next to Rehvenge.

He tried to distract himself by looking around. The meeting she was in was full of highfliers. Christ, looked like a political summit, except for the fact that they were all dressed to the nines, especially the females. Man, Elizabeth Taylor's jewelry box had nothing on these chicks.

And then the drama bomb went off.

The guy at the head of the table looked over, saw Lash, and went corpse-white. Rising slowly, he seemed to have lost his voice. As had everyone else in the room.

"We need to talk, sire," Rhage said while giving Lash a shake. "About your boy's extracurricular activities."

Rehvenge stood up. "We sure as hell do."

This broke up the meeting like an axe to an ice block. Lash's dad whipped out of the library and hurried Rhage, Rehvenge, and the kid into a sitting room. Like he was utterly mortified. Meanwhile, the fancy types got up from the table and started to mill around. None of them looked happy, and most of them shot hard looks in Marissa's direction.

Which made Butch want to teach them how to show some respect. Until they were bleeding from the lesson.

As his fists cranked tight, his nostrils flared and he sifted through the air, finding Marissa's scent and absorbing it into every pore he had. Naturally, his body went apeshit being so near her, the damn thing heating up, getting urgent. Shit, it was all he could do to get his arms and legs to stay put. Especially as he felt her look at him.

When a cool breeze tunneled into the house, Butch realized the huge front door was still open from their arrival with the kid. As he looked out into the night, he knew it was better for him to go. Cleaner. Neater. Less dangerous, too, given how badly he wanted to grind these snobs for treating Marissa with coldness.

He walked out of the house and took a meander across the front lawn, strolling over the muddy spring ground for a while before doubling back toward the house. He stopped as he came up to the Escalade because he knew he was no longer alone.

Marissa stepped from behind the SUV. "Hello, Butch."

Jesus, she was so beautiful. Especially up close like this.

"Hey, Marissa." He put his hands in the pockets of his leather coat. And thought about how he missed her. Wanted her. Craved her. And not just for sex.

"Butch...I—"

Abruptly, he tensed, his eyes picking up on something that was coming across the lawn. A man...a white-haired man...a *lesser*.

"Shit," Butch hissed. In a rush, he grabbed Marissa and started hauling her back toward the house.

"What are you doing—" As soon as she saw the *lesser*, she stopped fighting him.

"Run," he commanded. "Run and tell Rhage and V to get their asses out here. And lock that fucking door." He gave her a shove and wheeled around, not taking a breath until he heard a heavy slam and then bolts being pushed home.

Well, what do you know. It was the *Fore-lesser* coming up the lawn.

Man, he wished he didn't have an audience. Because before he killed the guy, he really wanted to tear him apart as payback. Eye for an eye, so to speak.

As the bastard got closer, the slayer lifted his hands in surrender, but Butch didn't buy the act. Or the one-man gig. He let his instincts roam around, expecting to find a whole legion of slayers on the grounds. Surprisingly, there were none.

Still, he felt safer as V and Rhage materialized behind him, their bodies displacing the cold air.

"I think it's just him," Butch murmured, his body primed for a fight. "And I don't need to tell you this...but he's *mine*."

As the slayer came closer, Butch got ready to spring, but then shit got weird. Holy hell—he had to be seeing things. The *lesser* couldn't have tears flowing down his face, could he?

In an anguished voice, it said, "You, the cop. Take me...finish me. Please..."

"Don't trust this," Rhage said from the left.

The *lesser*'s eyes shifted to the brother and then returned to Butch. "I just want this over. I'm trapped...Please, kill me. It has to be you, though. Not them."

"My fucking pleasure," Butch muttered.

He lunged at the guy, expecting all manner of fight to come back at him, but the bastard put up no resistance at all, just landed on his back like a bag of sand.

"Thank you...thank you..." The freaky-ass gratitude ran out of the *lesser*'s mouth, a stream without end, marked with aching relief.

As Butch felt the urge to inhale come over him, he held on to the *Fore-lesser*'s throat and opened his mouth, acutely aware of the eyes of the *glymera* staring out from the Tudor mansion. Right as he started to draw, all he could think of was Marissa. He didn't want her to see what was going to happen next.

Except...nothing did. There was no exchange. Some kind of block was preventing the evil from being transferred.

The *Fore-lesser*'s eyes cracked wide in panic. "It worked...with the others. It worked! I saw you..."

Butch kept inhaling until it was clear that for whatever reason, this was one he couldn't consume. Maybe because it was the *Fore-lesser*? Who the fuck cared.

"With the others..." the *lesser* was babbling. "With the others, it worked..."

"Not with you apparently." Butch reached to his hip and unsheathed his knife. "Good thing there's another way." He hauled back, lifting the blade over his head.

The *lesser* screamed and started to flail. "No! He'll torture me! Noooooooooo—"

The hollering died right off as the slayer popped and fizzled.

Butch sighed in relief, glad he'd done the deed—

Only to have a wave of malice shoot through him, burning like the

extremes of cold and heat combined. As he gasped, nasty laughter bubbled up from out of nowhere and weaved through the night, the kind of disembodied sound that made a man think about his own coffin.

The Omega.

Butch grabbed for his cross through his shirt and sprang to his feet just as a static-filled apparition of the Evil appeared before him. Butch's body rebelled, but he didn't step back. Dimly, he felt Rhage and V close in tight with him, flanking him, protecting him.

"What is, cop?" V murmured. "What are you looking at?"

Shit, they couldn't see the Omega.

Before Butch could explain, the distinctive, echoing voice of the Evil weaved in and out of the wind, in and out of his head. "So you are the one, are you not? My...son, as it were."

"Never."

"Butch? Who are you talking to?" V said.

"Did I not sire you, then?" The Omega laughed some more. "Did I not give you part of me, then? Yes, I did. And you know what they say about me, don't you?"

"I don't want to know."

"You should." The Omega reached out a ghostly hand, and though it closed no distance between them, Butch felt it on his face. "I always claim what is *mine*. Son."

"Sorry, my Father position is already filled."

Butch dragged his cross out and let it dangle from its chain. Dimly, he thought he heard V curse, as if the brother had figured out what was going on, but his attention was only on what was in front of him.

The Omega looked at the heavy piece of gold. Then flicked his glance over Rhage and V and the house behind. "Trinkets don't impress me. Neither do the Brothers. Nor the sturdiest locks and doors."

"But I do."

The Omega's head whipped around.

The Scribe Virgin materialized behind him, totally unrobed and glowing like a supernova.

The Omega instantly changed shape, becoming a wormhole in the fabric of reality, no longer an apparition but a smoky black pit.

"Oh, shit," V barked, as if he and Rhage were now able to see everything. The Omega's voice emerged from its dark depths. "Sister, how fare thee

this night?"

"I command thee back to *Dhunhd*. Go thou, now." The glow of her intensified until it began to encase the Omega's sinkhole.

A nasty growl drifted free. "Think you that banishment cures my presence? How simple you are."

"Go thou, now." A stream of words flowed from her into the night, neither the Old Language nor any other tongue Butch had ever heard.

Just before the Omega disappeared, Butch felt the eyes of the Evil bore into him as that horrible voice echoed out, "Lo, how you inspire me, my son. And may I say you would be wise to search for your blood. Families should congregate."

Then the Omega disappeared in a flare of white. As did the Scribe Virgin.

Gone. Both of them. Nothing remaining except a bitterly cold wind that cleared the clouds from the sky like curtains ripped away by a savage hand.

Rhage cleared his throat. "Okay...I'm not sleeping for the next week and a half. How about you two?"

"You all right?" V asked Butch.

"Yeah." No.

Jesus Christ...he was not the Omega's son. Was he?

"No," V said. "You're not. He just wants to believe you are. And he wants you to think you are. But that doesn't make it true."

There was a long silence. Then Rhage's hand landed on Butch's shoulder. "Besides, you don't look a thing like him. I mean...hello? You're this beefy Irish white boy. He's like...bus exhaust or some shit."

Butch glanced over at Hollywood. "You're sick, you know that?"

"Yeah, but you love me, right? Come on. I know you feel me."

Butch was the first to start chuckling. Then the other two joined in, the weight of the heavy-duty, high-powered weird-out that had just happened draining away a little.

But as their laughter faded, Butch's hand went to his stomach.

Twisting around, he looked to the mansion, searching the pale, frightened faces on the other side of the leaded windows. Marissa was right in front, her brilliant blond hair reflected in the moonlight.

He closed his eyes and turned away. "I want to take the Escalade back. By myself." If he didn't get some time alone, he was going to scream. "But first, do we need to do anything about the *glymera* and everything they saw?"

"Wrath will definitely hear about this from them," V muttered. "But as

far as I'm concerned they're on their own. Besides, they can pay their therapists to work through this shit. Not our biz to calm them out."

After Rhage and V dematerialized back to the compound, Butch started for the Escalade. As he deactivated the SUV's security alarm, he heard someone running across the ground.

"Butch! Wait!"

He glanced over his shoulder. Marissa was jogging down toward him, and when she stopped, she was so close he could hear the blood in the chambers of her heart.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, running her eyes all over him.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Was that the Omega?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath, like she wanted to probe but knew he wasn't going to talk about what had happened with the Evil. Not with the way things were between them. "Ah, before it came, I saw you kill that slayer. Is that... that burst of light, is that what you—"

"No."

"Oh." She dropped her eyes to his hands. No...she was looking at the dagger on his hip. "You were out fighting, before you came here."

"Yeah."

"And you saved that boy...Lash, didn't you?"

He glanced at the SUV. Knew he was a thin inch away from throwing himself at her, hugging her hard, and begging her to come home with him. Like a total fucking idiot. "Look, I'm going to leave, Marissa. Take...care."

He walked around to the driver's side and got in. When she followed, he shut the door on her, but he didn't start the engine.

Shit, through the glass and steel of the Escalade, he could feel her as vividly as if she were against his chest.

"Butch..." The sound of his name was muffled. "I want to apologize for something I said to you."

He gripped the steering wheel and stared out the front windshield. Then like the sap he was, his hand popped the door and he pushed it open. "Why?"

"I'm sorry I brought the whole rescuing-your-sister thing into it. You know, back at the Pit. That was cruel."

"I...Shit, you had a good point. I have been trying to save people all my life because of Janie. So don't feel bad."

There was a long pause, and he sensed something strong coming out of her, something—ah, yes, her need to feed. She was starving for a vein.

And naturally, his body wanted to give her every single one he had. Natch.

To keep himself in the damn Escalade, he put his seat belt on, then took one last look at her face. It was taut with strain and...hunger. She was really fighting her need, trying to hide it so they could talk.

"I gotta go," he said. Like *now*.

"Yes...me, too." She flushed and stepped back, her eyes meeting his briefly and skirting away. "Anyway, I'll see you. Around."

She turned away and started walking quickly back up to the house. And guess who appeared in the doorway to meet her: Rehvenge.

Rehv...so strong...so powerful...so completely able to feed her.

Marissa didn't make it another yard.

Butch shot out of the SUV, grabbed her around the waist, and dragged her back to the car. Although it wasn't as if she fought him. In the slightest.

He popped the rear door of the Escalade and all but threw her inside. As he started to get in, he looked at Rehvenge. The guy's violet stare was glowing, like he had half a mind to get involved, but Butch nailed the male right in the eye and pointed at the guy's chest, the universal signal for *you-stay-right-there-buddy-and-you-get-to-keep-your-teeth*. Rehv's lips moved in a curse, but then he bowed his head and dematerialized.

Butch leaped into the back of the SUV, slammed the hatch, and was on top of Marissa before the ceiling light dimmed. It was crowded in the rear, his legs twisted at odd angles, his shoulder shoved against something, probably the back of a seat, whatever. He couldn't have cared less and neither did she. Marissa was all over him, wrapping her legs around his hips and opening her mouth to him as he brutally kissed her.

Butch flipped them over so she was on top, fisted a bunch of her hair, and yanked her right down to his throat. "*Bite!*" he snarled.

Holy fuck, did she ever.

He felt a searing pain as her fangs sliced into him, and as he was penetrated, his body jerked wildly, causing his flesh to tear even more. Oh, but it was good. So good. She was taking deep draws from his vein and the satisfaction of feeding her was a buzzing rush.

He pushed a palm between their bodies and cupped the heat at the center of her, rubbing at her core. As she let out a crazy moan, he shoved up her shirt with his other hand. God bless her, she broke the contact with his neck long enough to whip off her blouse and ditch her bra.

“The pants,” he said hoarsely. “Lose your pants.”

As she stripped awkwardly in the confined space, he undid his zipper and sprang his erection free. He didn’t dare touch the thing, he was so close to orgasm.

She mounted him fully naked, her pale blue eyes glowing, positively afire in the darkness. The red stain of his blood was on her lips and he rose up to kiss her mouth, then angled himself so as she sat down she hit his body just right. He kicked his head back as they joined and she pierced his neck on the other side. As his hips started going hard, she eased up on her knees so she was stable as she drank.

The orgasm shattered him.

But the moment it was over, he was ready to go again.

And he did.

Chapter Forty-seven

When Marissa had taken all she needed, she eased off Butch and lay next to him. He was on his back, staring up at the Escalade's ceiling, one hand resting on his chest. He breathed raggedly, his clothes all rumpled and misaligned, his shirt up around his pecs. His sex lay glistening and spent on his hard stomach, and his neck wounds were raw even after she'd licked them.

She'd used him with a savagery she hadn't thought she had in her, her needs driving them both into an absolute, primal frenzy. And now, in the aftermath, she could feel her body going to work on what he'd given her, her eyelids drooping a little.

So good. He'd been so good.

"Will you use me again?" Butch's voice, always full of gravel, was nearly gone.

Marissa closed her eyes, her chest hurting so badly she had trouble breathing.

"Because I want it to be me instead of him," he said.

Oh...so this was about an act of aggression directed toward Rehvenge, not about feeding her. She should have known. She'd seen the look Butch had given Rehv just before getting into the car. He obviously still held a grudge from before.

"Never mind," Butch said, putting himself back into his pants and zipping up. "None of my business."

She had no reply for him, but he didn't seem to expect one. He handed her her clothes, didn't look at her as she dressed, and the second her nakedness was covered, he opened the back door.

Cold air rushed in...and that was when she realized something. The

inside of the car smelled of passion and feeding—thick, heady fragrances that were enticing. But there was not one hint of the bonding scent. Not one hint.

She couldn't bear to glance back at him as she walked away.

It was close to dawn when Butch finally pulled into the compound's courtyard. After parking the Escalade between Rhage's deep purple GTO and Beth's Audi station wagon, he walked over to the Pit.

After he and Marissa had parted, he'd driven around the city for hours, following the paths of meaningless streets, passing by nonexistent houses, stopping at traffic lights when he remembered to. He'd come home only because daylight was going to flash over the land very soon and it just seemed like the thing to do.

He looked to the east, where the barest hint of radiance showed.

Walking out to the center of the courtyard, he sat on the edge of the fountain's marble pool and watched as the shutters came down over the windows of the main house and the Pit. He blinked a little at the glow in the sky. Then blinked a lot.

As his eyes started to burn, he thought about Marissa and remembered every single thing about her, from the shape of her face to the fall of her hair to the sound of her voice and the scent of her skin. Here in privacy, he let his feelings out, giving in to the aching love and the hateful yearning that refused to leave him be.

And what do you know, the bonding scent made an appearance once again. He'd somehow managed to withhold it when he'd been around her, feeling as though marking her wasn't fair. But here? Alone? No reason to hide.

As the sunrise gathered momentum, his cheeks flared with pain, like he had a sunburn, and his body twitched with alarm. He forced himself to stay because he needed to see the sun, but his thighs trembled from the urge to run, and he wasn't going to be able to hold them for long.

Shit...he was never going to catch daylight again, was he? And with Marissa out of his life, there would be no kind of sunshine for him. Ever.

The darkness owned him, didn't it.

He released the lock on himself because he had no choice, and the instant he did, his legs raced across the courtyard. Hurling his body through the Pit's vestibule, he slammed the innermost door and breathed roughly.

There was no rap music playing, but V's leather jacket was tossed on the

chair behind the computers, so he was around. Probably still at the big house doing a postgame wrap-up with Wrath.

As Butch stood by himself in the living room, the familiar urge to drink hit hard, and he could see no good reason not to give in. Dumping his coat and his weapons, he headed for the Scotch, poured himself a long/tall, and brought the bottle out with him from the kitchen. Going over to his favorite couch, he lifted the glass to his lips and while he swallowed, his eyes fell on the newest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. There was a picture of a baseball player on the cover and next to the guy's head, in big yellow print, was a single word: *HERO*.

Marissa was right. He did have a hero complex. But it wasn't about some kind of an ego trip. It was because maybe if he saved enough people he could be...forgiven.

That's what he was truly after: absolution.

Flashbacks from his younger years started to play like pay-per-view, except sure as shit this wasn't a movie he'd choose to order. And in the midst of the show, his eyes slid to the phone. There was only one person who could ease him about this stuff, and he doubted she would. But damn, if he could reach out and have his mother say, just once, that she forgave him for letting Janie get into that car...

Butch sat down on the leather sofa and put his Scotch aside.

He waited there for hours, until the clock said nine. And then he picked up the phone and dialed a number that started with the area code 617. His father answered.

The conversation was just as awful as Butch had thought it might be. The only thing worse? The news from home.

As he ended the call on the cordless, he saw that the total elapsed time, counting the six rings at the beginning, was one minute thirty-four seconds. And it was, he knew, likely the last time he would talk to Eddie O'Neal.

"What's doing, cop?"

He jumped and looked up at Vishous. Saw no reason to lie. "My mother's sick. For the past two years, apparently. Has Alzheimer's. Bad. Of course, no one thought to tell me. And I would never have known if I hadn't just called."

"Shit..." V came over and sat down. "You want to go see her?"

"Nope." Butch shook his head and picked up his Scotch. "Got no reason to. Those people aren't my business anymore."

Chapter Forty-eight

The following evening, Marissa shook the hand of her new residence director. The female was perfect for the position. Smart. Kind. Soft of voice. Trained in public health at NYU—the night school, of course.

“When would you like me to start?” the female said.

“How’s tonight sound?” Marissa replied wryly. When she got an enthusiastic nod in response, she smiled a little. “Great...Why don’t I show you to your office.”

When Marissa got back from the upstairs bedroom she’d assigned the director, she went to her laptop, logged in to Caldwell’s multiple listing service, and started looking at some other properties for sale within the community.

It wasn’t long before she saw nothing at all. Butch was a constant pressure on her chest, an invisible weight that made it hard to breathe. And if she wasn’t busy, memories of him consumed her.

“Mistress?”

She looked up at Safe Place’s *doggen*. “Yes, Phillipa?”

“Havers has referred a case to us. The female and her son are going to be driven here tomorrow after the young is stabilized, but the case history taken by the clinic’s nurse is going to be e-mailed over to you within the hour.”

“Thank you. Will you get a room ready for them downstairs?”

“Yes, mistress.” The *doggen* bowed and left.

So, Havers was keeping his word, wasn’t he.

Marissa frowned, that now perennial sense that she was missing something coming back to her. For some reason, an image of Havers came to mind and wouldn’t leave...and that’s what brought the shadowed thought to light.

From out of nowhere, she heard her own voice when she'd been talking to Butch: *I will not sit back and watch you destroy yourself.*

Good God. The exact words her brother had said to her when he'd kicked her out of the house. Oh, sweet Virgin Scribe, she was doing to Butch precisely what Havers had done to her: banishing him under the noble guise of prudent disapproval. Except wasn't the point really about saving herself from feeling scared and out of control because she loved him?

But what about his death wish?

The sight of him facing off against that *lesser* on the *leahdyre*'s front lawn came to her: Butch had been cautious in that situation. Careful. Not reckless. And he'd moved with skill, not a berserker's messy flailing.

Oh...hell, she thought. What if she'd been wrong? What if Butch could fight? What if he *should* fight?

Except what about the Evil? The Omega?

Well, the Scribe Virgin had interceded to protect Butch. And he had still been...Butch after the Omega had vanished. What if—

A knock sounded and she jumped to her feet. "My queen!"

Beth smiled from the doorway, lifting a hand. "Hi."

All tangled in her head, Marissa fell into a curtsy, which made Beth shake her head with a chuckle.

"Am I ever going to get you to cut that out?"

"Likely not...It's the burden of my upbringing." Marissa tried to concentrate. "Have you...ah, have you come to see what we've done here in the last—"

Bella and Mary appeared behind the queen.

"We want to talk with you," Beth said. "It's about Butch."

Butch stirred in his bed. Cracked open an eye. Cursed as he saw the clock. He'd overslept, probably because of how hard he'd gone the night before. Were three *lessers* too much in one night? Or maybe it had been feeding—

Oh, hell, no. He was *so* not thinking of that. Not remembering that. He rolled over onto his back—

And jacked right off the mattress. "Oh...fuck!"

Five figures in black hooded robes surrounded his bed.

Wrath's voice came first in the Old Language, then in English: "There is no going back from the question that shall be posed to you this night. You

shall be given it only once, and your answer will stand for the rest of the life you lead. Are you prepared to be asked?"

The Brotherhood. Holy Mary, Mother of God.

"Yes," Butch breathed, grabbing his cross.

"Then I shall say unto you now, Butch O'Neal descendant of mine own blood, and the blood of mine father, will you join us?"

Oh...shit. Was this real? A dream?

He looked at each one of the hooded figures. "Yes. Yes, I will join you."

A black robe was thrown at him. "Tender this to your skin, raising the hood unto your head. At all times, you shall say nothing unless spoken to. You shall keep your eyes on the ground. Your hands shall be clasped at the small of your back. Your bravery and the honor of the bloodline we share shall be measured in every action you take."

Butch stood up and pulled on the robe. Wished briefly he could hit the bathroom—

"You will be permitted to empty your body. Do it now."

When Butch came out, he made sure his head was down and his hands were linked behind him.

As a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, he knew it was Rhage's. No one else's palm weighed so much.

"Come with us now," Wrath said.

Butch was led out of the Pit and right into the Escalade, the SUV parked practically in the vestibule, as if they didn't want anyone to know what was happening.

After Butch slid into the back, the Escalade's engine turned over and many doors were shut. With a lurch, they slowly progressed through what he assumed was the courtyard until they started to bump along like they were heading over the back lawn and into the woods. No one said a thing, and in the silence he couldn't help wondering what the hell they were going to do to him. For sure this was not going to be a cakewalk.

Eventually the SUV stopped and everyone got out. Trying to follow the rules, Butch stepped to the side and stared at the ground, waiting for someone to lead him. Someone did while the Escalade was driven away.

As Butch shuffled forward he was able to see moonlight on the ground, but then the source of light was abruptly cut off and it became utterly dark. Were they in a cave? Yes...they were. The smell of damp earth filled his nose and beneath his bare feet he could feel small stones taking bites out of

his soles.

Some forty steps later he was jerked to a stop. There was a whispering sound and then more walking, now on a downward slope. Another stop. More quiet noises as if a well-oiled gate was being retracted.

Then warmth and light. A polished floor of...marble. Glossy black marble. As they continued along, he had the sense that they were processing through some high-ceilinged place because what little sounds they made reverberated upward and echoed. There was another pause, followed by lots of shifting of fabric...the brothers disrobing, he thought.

A hand clamped on the back of his neck and the deep growl of Wrath's voice shot into his ear. "You are unworthy to enter herein as you stand now. Nod your head."

Butch nodded.

"Say that you are unworthy."

"I am unworthy."

The Brotherhood's voices suddenly let out a loud, hard shout in the Old Language, as if in protest.

Wrath continued: "Though you are not worthy, you desire to become as such this night. Nod your head."

He nodded.

"Say that you wish to become worthy."

"I wish to become worthy."

Another shout in the Old Language, this time a cheer of support.

Wrath went on: "There is only one way to become worthy and it is the right and proper way. Flesh of our flesh. Nod your head."

He nodded.

"Say that you wish to become flesh of our flesh."

"I wish to become flesh of your flesh."

A low chanting started up, and Butch had the impression that a line had formed in front of and behind him. Without warning, they started to move, the back and forth surging motion mirrored by the cadence of powerful male voices. Butch struggled to get into the rhythm, bumping forward into what he suspected was Phury by the subtle scent of red smoke, then getting bumped from behind by what he knew was Vishous just because he knew. Shit, he was making a mess of the whole thing—

And then it happened. His body found the groove and he was moving with them...yes, they were all as one with the chanting and the movement,

back...forth...swaying left...then right...the voices, not the muscles of their thighs, carrying their feet forward.

Suddenly, there was an acoustic explosion, the sounds of the chanting fracturing and re-forming in a thousand different directions: They had entered a vast space.

A hand on his shoulder told him when to halt.

The chanting stopped as if unplugged, the sounds ricocheting for a while, then floating away.

He was taken by the arm and led forward.

At his side, Vishous said in a low voice, "Stairs."

Butch stumbled a little, then took the steps. When he got to a plateau, he was positioned by V, his body put...wherever it needed to be. As he settled into his stance, he had the sense he was right in front of something big, his toes up against what seemed to be a wall.

In the silence that followed, a bead of sweat dripped off his nose and landed right between his feet on the glossy floor.

V squeezed his shoulder as if in reassurance. Then stepped away.

"Who proposes this male?" the Scribe Virgin demanded.

"I, Vishous, son of the Black Dagger warrior known as the Bloodletter, do."

"Who rejects this male?" There was quiet. Thank God.

Now the Scribe Virgin's voice took on epic proportions, filling the space around them and every inch between Butch's ears until all he knew was the sound of the words she spoke. "On the basis of testimony from Wrath son of Wrath, and upon the proposal by Vishous, son of the Black Dagger warrior known as the Bloodletter, I find this male before me, Butch O'Neal, descended of Wrath son of Wrath, an appropriate nomination unto the Black Dagger Brotherhood. As it is within my power and discretion to do so, and as it is suitable for the protection of the race, I have waived the requirement of the maternal line in this case. You may begin."

Wrath spoke. "Turn him. Unveil him."

Butch was repositioned so he faced out, and Vishous removed the black robe. Then the brother slipped the gold cross around so it hung down Butch's back, and walked away.

"Lift thine eyes," Wrath ordered.

Butch's breath sucked in as he looked up.

He was standing on a black marble dais, staring out at a subterranean

cave lit by hundreds of black candles. In front of him there was an altar made of a huge stone lintel balanced on two squat posts...on top of which was an ancient skull. Beyond that, lined up before him, was the Brotherhood in all their glory, five males whose faces were solemn and whose bodies were strong.

Wrath broke ranks and came up to stand at the altar. “Step back against the wall and hold on to the pegs.”

Butch did as he was told, feeling smooth, cool stone against his shoulders and his ass as his hands fell onto two sturdy grips.

Wrath brought up his hand and it was...shit, it was covered by an antique silver glove that sported barbs at the knuckles. Inside the fist he was making was the handle of a black dagger.

Extending his arm, the king scored himself down the wrist and held the wound over the skull, the dome of which had a silver cup mounted in it. What flowed from Wrath’s vein was caught and held, a glossy red pool that captured the candlelight.

“My flesh,” Wrath said. Then he licked his wound closed, put the blade down, and approached Butch.

Butch swallowed hard.

Wrath clapped his palm on Butch’s jaw, shoved his head back and bit him in the neck, hard. Butch’s whole body spasmed and he gritted his teeth to keep from yelling out, his hands squeezing at the pegs until his wrists felt like they were going to snap. Then Wrath stepped back and wiped his mouth.

He smiled fiercely. “Your flesh.”

The king curled up a fist within the silver glove, hauled back his arm, and nailed Butch in the chest. The barbs sunk into his skin as air exploded out of his lungs, the raw sound leaping and bounding throughout the cave.

As he caught his breath, Rhage came up and took the glove. The brother performed the ritual just as Wrath had: cutting his wrist, holding it over the skull, speaking the same two words. After he sealed up his wound, he approached Butch. The next two words were mouthed and then Rhage’s hard-core fangs were piercing Butch’s throat, the bite positioned below Wrath’s. Rhage’s punch was fast and solid, right where Wrath had thrown his, on the left pec.

Next it was Phury. Followed by Zsadist.

By the time they were done, Butch’s neck felt so loose he was convinced his head was going to roll off his shoulders and bounce down the steps. And

he was dizzy from the poundings on his chest, blood running down his stomach onto his thighs from the wound.

Then it was V's turn.

Vishous came up onto the dais, his eyes down. He accepted the silver glove from Z and slipped it over the black leather he already wore on his hand. Then he scored himself with a quick flash of the black blade and stared at the skull as his blood dripped down into the basin, joining the others'.

"My flesh," he whispered.

He seemed to hesitate before turning to Butch. Then he pivoted and their eyes met. As candlelight flickered over V's hard face and got caught in his diamond irises, Butch felt his breath get tight: At that moment, his roommate looked as powerful as a god...and maybe even as beautiful.

Vishous stepped in close and slid his hand from Butch's shoulder to the back of his neck. "Your flesh," V breathed. Then he paused, as if asking for something.

Without thinking, Butch tilted his chin up, aware that he was offering himself, aware that he...oh, fuck. He stopped his thoughts, completely weirded out by the vibe that had sprung up from God only knew where.

In slow motion Vishous's dark head dropped down and there was a silken brush as his goatee moved against Butch's throat. With delicious precision, V's fangs pressed against the vein that ran up from Butch's heart, then slowly, inexorably, punched through skin. Their chests merged.

Butch closed his eyes and absorbed the feel of it all, the warmth of their bodies so close, the way V's hair felt soft on his jaw, the slide of a powerful male arm as it slipped around his waist. On their own accord, Butch's hands left the pegs and came to rest on V's hips, squeezing that hard flesh, bringing them together from head to foot. A tremor went through one of them. Or maybe...shit, it was more like they both shuddered.

And then it was done. Over with. Never to happen again.

Neither of them looked at the other as V broke away...and the parting was complete and irrevocable. A path that would not be walked. Ever.

V's hand snapped back and then connected with Butch's chest, the impact harder than all the others, even Rhage's. As Butch choked from the force of the punch, Vishous turned away and rejoined the Brotherhood's lineup.

After a moment, Wrath walked forward to the altar and picked up the skull, lifting it high, presenting it to the brothers. "This is the first of us. Hail

to him, the warrior who birthed the Brotherhood.”

As the brothers let out a war cry that filled the cave, Wrath turned to Butch.

“Drink and join us.”

Butch went for it with gusto, grabbing the skull, tilting his head back, pouring the blood right down his throat. The brothers chanted as he drank, their voices getting louder and louder, ringing out. He tasted each one of them. The raw power and majesty of Wrath. The vast strength of Rhage. The burning, protective loyalty of Phury. The cold savagery of Zsadist. The sharp cunning of Vishous.

The skull was taken from his hands and he was pushed back against the wall.

Wrath’s lips lifted darkly. “Better hold on to those pegs.”

Butch gripped them just as a wave of churning energy slammed into him. He bit down to keep from letting out a howl and was dimly aware of the brothers growling in approval. As the roar increased, his body began to buck against the pegs like he’d front-loaded his nose with a kilo of blow. Then everything whacked out on him, every neuron in his brain firing, every blood vessel and capillary filling. With heart pounding, head swimming, body straining, he—

Butch woke up on the altar, naked and curled on his side. There was a burning sensation on his chest, and when he put his hand to it, he felt something grainy. Salt?

As he blinked and looked around, he realized he was in front of a black marble wall etched with what must have been names in the Old Language. God, there were hundreds of them. Stunned by the sight, he sat up and pushed himself to his feet. When he stumbled forward, he somehow caught his balance before he would have touched what he knew was sacred.

Staring at the names, he was certain they had all been carved by the same hand, each one of them, because every symbol was of identical and loving quality.

Vishous had done this. Butch didn’t know how he knew—no, he did. There were these echoes in his head now...echoes of the lives of his...brothers? Yes...and all these males whose names he read were his...brothers. He somehow knew each of them now.

With wide eyes, he followed the columns of writing until...there...there

it was, down on the right. The one at the bottom of the line. The last one. Was it his?

He heard clapping and looked over his shoulder. The brothers were back in their robes, but the hoods were down. And they were beaming, positively beaming, even Z.

“That’s you,” Wrath said. “You shall be called the Black Dagger warrior *Dhestoyer*, descended of Wrath son of Wrath.”

“But you’ll always be Butch to us,” Rhage cut in. “As well as hard-ass. Smart-ass. Royal pain in the ass. You know, whatever the situation calls for. I think as long as there’s an ass in there, it’ll be accurate.”

“How about bass tard?” Z suggested.

“Nice. I feel that.”

They all started laughing and Butch’s robe appeared in front of him, held by Vishous’s gloved hand.

V did not meet his eyes as he said, “Here.”

Butch took the robe, but he didn’t want his roommate to run. He said with quiet urgency, “V?” Vishous’s brows arched, but his eyes stayed away.

“Vishous? Come on, man. You’re going to have to look at me sometime. V...?”

Vishous’s chest expanded...and his diamond stare slowly swung to Butch. There was a heartbeat of intensity. Then V reached out and repositioned the cross so it once again hung over Butch’s heart. “You did well, cop. Congratulations, true?”

“Thanks for putting me up for it...*trahyner*.” As V’s eyes flared, Butch said, “Yeah, I looked up what the word meant. ‘Beloved friend’ fits you perfect as far as I’m concerned.”

V flushed. Cleared his throat. “Good deal, cop. Good...deal.”

As Vishous walked off, Butch drew the robe on and looked down at his chest. The circular scar over his left pec was burned into his skin, a permanent marking, just like the one each of the brothers had. A symbol of the bond they shared.

He ran his fingertip over the sealed-up scar and salt granules fell free to the glossy floor. Then he looked to the wall and went over there. Crouching down, he touched the air above his name. His new name.

Now I am truly born, he thought. *Dhestoyer, descended of Wrath son of Wrath.*

His vision got blurry and he blinked fast, but his lids couldn’t keep up. As

the tears rolled down his cheeks, he quickly brushed them aside on his sleeve. And that was when he felt the hands on his shoulders. The brothers—*his* brothers—had surrounded him and he could feel them now, could actually... sense them.

Flesh of his flesh. As he was flesh of theirs.

Wrath cleared his throat, but still, the king's voice was slightly hoarse.
“You are the first inductee in seventy-five years. And you...you are worthy of the blood you and I share, Butch of mine blooded line.”

Butch let his head fall loose on his shoulders and he wept openly... though not out of happiness, as they must have assumed.

He wept at the hollowness he felt.

Because however wonderful this all was, it seemed empty to him.

Without his mate to share his life with, he was but a screen for events and circumstance to pass through. He was not even empty, for he was no vessel to hold even the thinnest of air.

He lived, though was not truly alive.

Chapter Forty-nine

On the way back to the mansion, everyone was full of energy and talking it up in the Escalade: Rhage was popping shit as usual. Wrath was laughing at him. Then V got to throwing back, and before long everyone was taking potshots at each other. As brothers do.

Butch settled himself deep in the bucket seat, aware that this homecoming, like the ceremony beforehand, was of such great joy for the Brotherhood. And even if he couldn't feel that, he was truly glad for them.

They parked in front of the mansion, and when Butch got out, the big house's vestibule doors swung wide and the Brotherhood formed an open circle behind him. The chanting started again, and they processed into the rainbow-colored foyer to great applause: The *doggen* were there waiting, all twenty of them, and in front of the servants were the three females of the compound dressed in breathtaking gowns. Beth was wearing the bloodred one she'd been married in, Mary was dressed in royal blue, and Bella was in shimmering silver.

Butch wanted Marissa there so badly, he couldn't stand to look at the *shellans* from the ache in his chest. He was about to make a desperate, pansy break for the Pit when the sea of bodies parted and...

Marissa was revealed in a gown of vibrant peach, the color so lovely and vivid he wondered if sunshine hadn't condensed in her very form. And the chanting stopped as she came forward. Confused, unable to understand the why of her appearance, Butch nonetheless reached for her.

Except she went down to her knees in front of him, the gown pooling all around her in great waves of satin.

Her voice was husky with emotion as she ducked her head. "I would offer you, warrior, this pledge of luck when you fight." She lifted her hands up and

in her palms was a thick braid of her hair tied on either end with pale blue ribbon. “It would be my pride to have you keep this on you in battle. It would be my pride to have my...*hellren* serve our race. If you still...would have me.”

Completely wiped out by the gesture, Butch eased down to the floor and lifted up her trembling chin. As he thumbed away her tears, he took the braid from her and cradled it to his heart. “Of course I would have you,” he whispered. “But what’s changed?”

She glanced back at the three females of the house in their majestic dress. Then in an equally quiet voice, she said, “I talked to some friends. Or rather, they talked to me.”

“Marissa...” It was all he could say.

As his voice seemed to have dried up, he kissed her, and while they embraced, a great cheer rose up into the vast foyer.

“I’m so sorry I was weak,” she whispered in his ear. “Beth and Mary and Bella came to see me. I’m never going to be at peace with the danger you face as a member of the Brotherhood. I’m going to worry every night. But they trust their males to be careful, and I...I believe you love me. I believe you wouldn’t leave me if you could help it. I...I believe you will be careful with yourself and that you will stop if the evil threatens to overwhelm you. If they can handle the fear of loss, so can I.”

He squeezed her even tighter. “I’ll be careful, I swear. *I swear.*”

They stayed on the floor, locked together, for a while. Then Butch lifted his head and looked at Wrath, who had taken Beth into his arms.

“So, brother,” Butch said. “You got a knife and some salt? Time to finish a certain mating, you feel me?”

“We’ve got you covered, my man.”

Fritz came forward with the same pitcher and bowl of Morton’s best that had been used at Wrath and Beth’s ceremony. And Rhage and Mary’s. And Zsadist and Bella’s.

As Butch looked into his *shellan*’s pale blue eyes, he murmured, “Darkness will never take me...because I have you. Light of my life, Marissa. That’s what you are.”

Chapter Fifty

The following evening, Marissa smiled as she looked up from her desk. Butch filled her office's doorway, his body so very big.

God, even though his neck was still healing from his induction, good Lord, he looked good. Strong. Powerful. Her mate.

"Hi," he said, flashing that chipped front tooth of his. As well as his fangs.

She smiled. "You're early."

"Couldn't stay away a moment longer." He came in and shut the door... and as he subtly turned the lock into place, her body heated up.

He walked around her desk and swiveled her chair to face him, then knelt down onto the floor. As he spread her thighs, he nestled in close, his bonding scent filling the air as he nuzzled her collarbone. With a sigh, she wrapped her arms around his heavy shoulders and kissed the soft skin behind his ear.

"How fare you, *hellren*?"

"Better now, wife."

While she held on to him, she shifted her eyes to her desk. There, amidst the papers and folders and pens, was a little white figurine. The exquisitely carved piece was a marble sculpture of a female sitting cross-legged with a double-bladed dagger in the palm of one hand, an owl on her opposite wrist.

Beth had had them made. One for Mary. One for Bella. One for Marissa. And the queen had kept one for herself. The dagger's significance was obvious. The white owl was a link to the Scribe Virgin, a symbol of prayers spoken for the safekeeping of their warrior mates.

The Brotherhood was strong, a unit, a powerful force in their world for good. And so too were the females. Strong. A unit. A powerful force for good in their world.

Banded together as tightly together as their warriors.

Butch lifted his head and looked up at her in total adoration. With the mating ceremony completed, and her name in his back, she had dominion over his body by both law and instinct, a control he willingly surrendered to her, lovingly surrendered to her. He was hers to command and it was, as the *glymera* had always said, beautiful to be truly mated.

Only thing those fools ever got right.

“Marissa, I want to take you to meet someone, okay?”

“Of course. Now?”

“No, tomorrow at nightfall.”

“All right. Who—”

He kissed her. “You’ll see.”

Looking deeply into his hazel eyes, she stroked back his thick, dark hair. Then traced his eyebrows with her thumbs. Ran a fingertip down his bumpy, broken-too-many-times nose. Tapped lightly on his chipped tooth.

“Kind of battle-worn, aren’t I?” he said. “But you know, with some plastic surgery and a couple caps, I could be a high-flier just like Rhage.”

Marissa glanced back at the figurine and thought about her life. And Butch’s.

She shook her head slowly and leaned in to kiss him. “I wouldn’t change a thing about you. Not one single thing.”

Epilogue

Joyce O’Neal Rafferty was in a rush and thoroughly bitched out as she headed into the nursing home. Baby Sean had spent all night throwing up and it had taken three hours of waiting at the pediatrician’s before the doctor could squeeze them in. Then Mike had left a message that he was working late, so he didn’t have time to go to the supermarket on the way home.

Goddamn it, they had nothing in the refrigerator or the cupboards for dinner.

Joyce hitched Sean up on her hip and raced down the corridor, dodging meal carts and a gang of wheelchairs. At least Sean was asleep now and hadn’t thrown up for hours. Dealing with a fussy, sick baby as well as her mother was more than Joyce could handle at once. Especially after a day like today.

She knocked on the door to her mother’s room, then went right in. Odell was sitting up in bed, leafing through a *Reader’s Digest*.

“Hey, Mom, how’re you feeling?” Joyce went over to the Naugahyde-covered wing chair by the window. As she sat down, the cushion squeaked. And so did Sean as he woke up.

“I’m good.” Odell’s smile was pleasant. Her eyes vacant as dark marbles.

Joyce checked her watch. She’d stay ten minutes, then hit Star Market on the way home.

“I had a visitor last night.”

“Did you, Mom?” And without a doubt, she was going to buy enough for a week straight. “Who was it?”

“Your brother.”

“Teddy was here?”

“Butch.”

Joyce froze. Then decided her mother was hallucinating. "That's nice, Mom."

"He came when no one was around. After dark. He brought his wife. She's so pretty. He said they're getting married in a church. I mean, they're already husband and wife, but it was in her religion. Funny...I never figured out what she was. Maybe a Lutheran?"

Definitely hallucinating. "That's good."

"He looks like his father now."

"Oh, yeah? I thought he was the only one who didn't take after Daddy."

"His father. Not yours."

Joyce frowned. "I'm sorry?"

Her mother assumed a dreamy expression and looked out the window.

"Did I ever tell you about the blizzard of '69?"

"Mom, go back to Butch—"

"We all got stuck at the hospital, us nurses along with the doctors. No one could come or go. I was there for two days. God, your father was so upset about having to care for the kids without me." Abruptly, Odell seemed years younger and sharp as a tack, her eyes clearing. "There was a surgeon there. Oh, he was just so...different from everyone else. He was the chief of surgery. He was very important. He was...beautiful and different and very important. Frightening, too. His eyes, I see them still in my dreams." Just as suddenly, all that enthusiasm evaporated and her mother deflated. "I was bad. I was a bad, bad wife."

"Mom..." Joyce shook her head. "What are you saying?"

Tears started to fall down Odell's lined face. "I went to confession when I got home. I prayed. I prayed so hard. But God punished me for my sins. Even the labor...the labor was terrible with Butch. I nearly died, I bled so badly. All my other births were fine. Not Butch's..."

Joyce squeezed Sean so hard, he started to wriggle in protest. As she loosened her hold and tried to soothe him, she whispered, "Go on. Mom... keep talking."

"Janie's death was my punishment for being unfaithful and carrying another man's child."

As Sean let out a wail, Joyce's head spun with a horrible, terrible suspicion that this was...

Oh, come on, what the hell was she thinking? Her mother was crazy. Not right in the head.

Too bad she looked really frickin' lucid right now.

Odell started nodding as if responding to a question someone had asked. "Oh, yes, I love Butch. Actually, I love him more than any of the rest of my children because he's special. Could never let that show, though. Their father bore too much of what I'd done. To favor Butch in any way would be an insult to Eddie and I couldn't...I won't embarrass my husband like that. Not after he stayed with me."

"Dad knows...?" In the silence that followed, things started falling into place, an ugly puzzle coming together. Shit...this was for real. *Of course Dad knew. That was why he hated Butch.*

Her mother grew wistful. "Butch looked so happy with his wife. And oh sweet Mary, she's beautiful. They are perfect for each other. She's special like his father was. Like Butch is. They're all so special. It was a shame they couldn't stay. He said...he said he'd come to say good-bye."

As Odell teared up, Joyce reached out and grabbed her mother's arm. "Mom, where did Butch go?"

Her mother glanced down at the hand that touched her. Then frowned a little. "I want a saltine. May I have a saltine?"

"Mom, look at me. Where did he go?" Although why that suddenly seemed important she wasn't sure.

Vacant eyes shifted over. "With cheese. I would like a saltine. With cheese."

"We were talking about Butch...Mom, concentrate."

God, the whole thing was all such a shock and yet no shock at all. Butch had always been different, hadn't he?

"Mom, where is Butch?"

"Butch? Oh, thank you for asking. He's doing so well...he looked so happy. I'm so glad he got married." Her mother blinked. "Who are you, by the way? Are you a nurse? I used to be a nurse..."

For a moment, Joyce almost pressed the issue.

But instead, as her mother kept babbling, she looked out the window and took a deep breath. Odell's mindless prattle suddenly seemed comforting. Yes...the whole thing was all nonsense. Only nonsense.

Let it go, Joyce told herself. Just let it go.

As Sean stopped crying and settled against her, Joyce hugged his warm little body. Amidst the nonsensical ramblings coming from the bed, she thought of how much she loved her baby boy. And always would.

She kissed his soft head. Family, after all, was the staff of life.
The very staff of life.