



# Reluctant Partnerships

*A Partnership in Blood novel*

ARIEL TACHNA

Readers love ARIEL TACHNA's  
*Partnership in Blood* novels

"I absolutely love this series."

—Romance Junkies

"I've thoroughly enjoyed the premise for these books and the characters, and recommend them to any reader who enjoys paranormal fantasy; especially those involving vampires, wizards and magic."

—Literary Nymphs Reviews

"...an amazingly well written series that I know that paranormal romantics will enjoy."

—Night Owl Reviews

"[Reparation in Blood] is action packed and full of fascinating and amazing characters. A worthwhile read and fitting end to the series."

—Bitten by Books

"This series is definitely for anyone looking for a new twist on Vampires, and who likes a bit of angst and a bit of adventure mixed into their romance."

—Dark Diva Reviews

"Ariel Tachna has created a truly original version of the vampire archetype..."

—Steve Williams, Suite 101

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

## NOVELS BY ARIEL TACHNA

The Inventor's Companion  
The Matelot  
Once in a Lifetime  
Overdrive  
Out of the Fire  
Seducing C.C.  
A Summer Place

### THE PARTNERSHIP IN BLOOD NOVELS

Alliance in Blood  
Covenant in Blood  
Conflict in Blood  
Reparation in Blood  
Perilous Partnership  
Reluctant Partnerships

WITH NICKI BENNETT

All For One  
Checkmate  
Hot Cargo  
Her Two Dads

WITH MADELEINE URBAN

Sutcliffe Cove

## NOVELLAS BY ARIEL TACHNA

Healing in His Wings  
Rediscovery  
Rose Among the Ruins  
Why Nileas Loved the Sea

WITH NICKI BENNETT

Something About Harry  
Tying the Knot

### THE EXPLORING LIMITS SERIES

Book 1: Exploring Limits  
Book 2: Stretching Limits  
Book 3: Refining Limits  
Book 4: Breaking Limits  
Book 5: Transcending Limits  
Book 6: No Limits

AVAILABLE AT DREAMSPINNER PRESS

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

# Reluctant Partnerships

*A Partnership in Blood novel*

ARIEL TACHNA



*Dreamspinner Press*

Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
382 NE 191st Street #88329  
Miami, FL 33179-3899, USA  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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

Reluctant Partnerships  
Copyright © 2011 by Ariel Tachna

Cover Art by Catt Ford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press, 382 NE 191st Street #88329, Miami, FL 33179-3899, USA  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61372-164-3

Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition  
October 2011

eBook edition available  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61372-165-0

To She Who Must Be Obeyed,  
who commands my muses far better  
than I have ever done.

## Chapter 1

PASCALE rubbed at her eyes. She had enjoyed her visit with Stéphanie and Rémy. Dinner had been wonderful as always, and they had been as in love with each other as ever. Sometimes Pascale thought it would be easier to stop torturing herself instead of going to see them, so happy and snug in their little house when she was all alone, but she would never do that to Stéphanie. They had been friends for too long.

With a sigh, she pulled into her garage, dreading the empty bed that waited for her. Maybe tomorrow she would meet someone. Maybe the woman of her dreams was out there right now, as miserable as she was.

She snorted at the maudlin turn her thoughts had taken. All the wishful thinking in the world would not make those dreams a reality. She grabbed her purse out of the passenger seat and headed inside.

As she reached for the doorknob, hard hands grabbed her from behind, one covering her mouth, the other around her throat, constricting her breathing. She tried to scream, to fight, to flee, but her attacker was too strong. Panic roiled through her as he dragged her toward the other door, the one that led outside to her yard. She forced herself to go limp, hoping he would take what he wanted and leave her alone.

She shuddered when she felt lips on her neck and prayed he did not intend to rape her. Then his mouth opened, biting down hard, breaking skin and drawing blood. She struggled again despite her best intentions, but her feeble thrashing did no good against his strength. It became harder and harder to breathe, to keep her eyes open, to think, like a shroud being drawn across her senses.

*Dear God, don't let me die.*

ADÈLE ROUGIER took a deep breath and steeled herself for the evening to come before getting out of her car at l'Institut Marcel Chavinier.

“Adèle, I see you made it, if a little bit late.”

Adèle summoned a smile for Thierry Dumont, an old friend and one of the faculty at l’Institut. “What are you doing out here?” she asked as she kissed both his cheeks in greeting. “I would’ve expected you to be inside with Raymond and the others.”

“I was finishing up some repairs on the grange,” Thierry explained. “I needed a shower.”

“How’s that coming?” Adèle asked. Even in the fading September light, Adèle could see the difference in the grange. She had watched Thierry, his partner Sebastien, and a dedicated group of craftsmen transform the old monastery in Dommartin from near ruins a year ago, with only part of the abbey itself and the abbot’s lodge in any usable condition, to a thriving research institute dedicated to exploring the partnerships between wizard and vampire, as well as other issues related to the magical community.

“We’re making progress,” Thierry said, starting toward the abbey. Adèle fell in step beside him. “We’ve patched the roof completely. Bertrand started laying pipe so we can get water there as well. I’m not sure what Raymond plans to use it for, but he wants it solid, with heat and running water.”

“You really like it here, don’t you?” Adèle asked, struggling as she always did to reconcile the image of Thierry here at l’Institut, acting as primary caretaker and guardian of the buildings, with the shrewd, calculating captain he had been during l’*émeutte des Sorciers*.

“I do,” Thierry said, ushering her into the scriptorium, where twenty-five people sat around a large table.

“You’ve done fabulous work. Your affinity to stone really shines through.” Adèle had seen the condition of the property before Thierry had begun making repairs, his magic fusing stone to stone once more. It made the beauty of the buildings around her all the more impressive.

“We all have our own strengths,” Thierry replied with typical modesty. “Your affinity to fire gives you an edge when it comes to the excitement of your detective work. We all did what we had to during the war, but the pace of life here at l’Institut suits me in a way your job never would.”

“How did this week’s seminar go?” Adèle asked softly, hanging back by the door. If she went farther inside, Raymond Payet, director of l’Institut, would see her and ask her again if she wanted to try to find a



new partner, the central purpose of the educational seminars and indeed of l'Institut itself. With everything they had learned about the partnerships they had created so swiftly and naively at the height of the war, Adèle agreed with the logic of explaining the commitment to people before they created such a bond. She even understood Raymond's insistence that she join them for dinner at least once a week, preferably on Sunday at the end of that week's seminar, so he could make sure she was not suffering any ill effects from the separation from her own late partner, Jude Leighton. Jude had been destroyed during an attack on l'Institut six months before.

If she went inside, Raymond would certainly try once again to convince her to form a new partnership. She had yet to convince him that her partnership had not been the deep, life-changing relationship most of the partnerships had become.

From just outside the door, Adèle watched as one of the wizards cast a cleansing spell on the hands of the ten vampires sitting on one side of the table. The ink marks on all ten hands disappeared, to some sighs of disappointment and perhaps one or two expressions of relief. None of the vampires was the partner of that wizard, nor of any of the others who might have tested their magic that night. If they had been, the ink would have stayed on their hands, untouched by the wizard's magic.

"Adèle, you've arrived just in time."

Adèle cursed under her breath. "Bonsoir, Raymond."

"Come see if any of the vampires is your partner," Raymond urged.

"Not tonight," she demurred.

Raymond looked like he was about to argue, but Jean Bellaiche, his partner and co-director of l'Institut, intervened. "Dinner will be ready in the réfectoire if everyone would care to adjourn. We'll join you there in a moment."

The wizards and vampires who had come to l'Institut for the educational seminar filed out, leaving Adèle alone with Raymond, Jean, and Thierry. "Leighton is gone," Raymond began. "There's no reason you couldn't form a new partnership."

Adèle sighed. "Besides the fact that I don't want another one?" she asked. "I had enough of that with Jude."

She knew Raymond did not believe her, but she felt only relief at not wondering when her bastard former partner would show up on her

doorstep and grab her, demanding blood and sex and submission. Raymond was too in love with his partner to understand that her own partnership had been the opposite. Even seeing how Jude had treated her at times, Raymond could not truly comprehend the depths of Leighton's cruel, crude, callous disregard for Adèle.

"Leighton was an anomaly," Raymond insisted. "A new partnership wouldn't be that way."

"I know you believe that," Adèle replied, "but that doesn't make me any more interested in taking the risk. Let's go. Dinner's ready and people are waiting on us."

Raymond pulled a face but gave in to her logic and Jean's guiding hand.

Adèle wished, not for the first time, that she could find a way out of the weekly dinners, but work had not cooperated this week, and with no case to use as an excuse, she had given in to the guilt she felt at brushing off Raymond's concern. They had all seen the grief that had overtaken Blair Nichols, the one vampire she knew of who had lost his partner during the war, after Laurent Copé's death. Their partnership had been more like Raymond and Jean's or Thierry and Sebastien's, a true match of hearts and spirits that would have developed into a formidable bond if Laurent had not died in one of Serrier's attacks. She had lost sight of Blair after the war ended, making her wonder if Raymond importuned the vampire the same way or if Jean had reined his partner in on that score.

"I worry about you," Raymond said as they took their seats at the head table where Raymond always insisted Adèle sit. She might not be on the faculty at l'Institut, but she was a veteran of l'émeute des Sorciers like Raymond and the others on the staff, not to mention their friend. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," Adèle said as she did every week. She suspected it would be easier on Raymond if she was pining away from Leighton's loss. He would understand that emotion because it would be his own reaction if anything ever happened to Jean. She shuddered to think of that. She might have hated her own partner, but she recognized the devotion between the partners around her. "Are Alain and Orlando here tonight?"

It was a diversionary tactic, but it worked. "They should be, although they said they'd probably be late. They're in Paris at a meeting," Raymond said. "Did you need them for something?"

“No,” Adèle said. “I just hadn’t seen them in a couple of weeks. You’re not the only one who likes to keep up with his friends.”

Raymond flushed. “Am I really that intolerable?”

“I know you want what’s best for me,” Adèle replied. Now if they could only agree on what that was. Raymond wanted her to find another partner, or rather, the researcher in him wanted to know if it was possible for a wizard who had lost her partner to find another one. “So did you have any matches this week?”

“None,” Raymond said with a frustrated grimace. “More weeks than not, we don’t. It seemed so easy that first morning at the gare de Lyon. Not the meeting itself—that was incredibly awkward—but the partnerships. I don’t understand why we have so little success now.”

“A smaller pool to choose from, for one thing,” Adèle suggested. “Ten wizards and vampires a week instead of the four hundred people we gathered at the gare de Lyon. And not all of the wizards and vampires each week choose to try for a partnership. Even those who do decide to try but don’t meet a partner leave with good intentions of coming back to try again in subsequent weeks, but you know most of them get busy with their lives and forget as many weeks as they remember. Without the pressure of the war to add urgency to the mix, people put it off. Or maybe they change their minds once they’re away and have time to reflect. If we’d known then what we know now, I probably wouldn’t have let Jude feed from me that first time.”

“Really?” Raymond asked.

“Okay, maybe I would have because of the war,” Adèle admitted, “but Jude and I rubbed each other the wrong way from the moment we first spoke. He looked at the bite marks on my arm and judged me for it even though he knew why they were there. He never stopped judging me.” Out of habit, she ran her fingers across the upper swell of her left breast where even now, she bore the scars of his fangs. Realizing what she was doing, she jerked her hand away quickly, hoping Raymond had not noticed. She had healed the other marks he left on her body, but she kept the one set of scars as a reminder of the mistake she had made once so she would not make it again.

Sebastien Noyer, Thierry’s partner, joined them at the table before Raymond could reply to that, his hand trailing across the back of Thierry’s neck as he passed. Adèle smiled at the open gesture of affection between the two men. She knew partnerships could be positive and productive. She had only to look at Sebastien and Thierry

or Jean and Raymond to see it. Unfortunately, her own partnership had been nothing but a nightmare.

“Bonsoir, Sebastien,” she said, drawing Sebastien’s attention from his partner to the social niceties he had ignored in favor of greeting the lover he had left perhaps ten minutes earlier.

“Adèle, I didn’t see you come in,” Sebastien said, greeting her as Thierry had done.

“I just arrived a few minutes ago,” she said.

“You’re late tonight,” Sebastien teased. “Did a case keep you?”

“Paperwork,” Adèle said. It was even mostly true. She could have done it earlier in the day, but she had been working on it at the time she normally would have left to come to dinner.

“You work too hard,” Raymond said, drawing a snort of disbelief from Adèle. That was a case of the pot calling the kettle black if ever there was one. “You need someone to make you relax.”

“I don’t need anyone to *make* me do anything,” Adèle retorted, hackles rising. “It was that kind of condescending attitude that made me hate Leighton so much. I didn’t take it from him, even if I understood where his attitude came from. I’m certainly not going to take it from you!”

A reverent murmur went through the room, forestalling the rest of Adèle’s rant, although from Raymond’s contrite look, he would have apologized before it went any further. Alain Magnier and Orlando St. Clair had arrived. To Adèle, they were friends, fellow veterans, and more proof of how good a partnership could be, but she had spent enough time around vampires not involved in l’émeute des Sorciers to know how they were viewed by the wider vampire community. The brand on Alain’s neck, proof of a different kind of bond, set them apart and gave Orlando near mythical standing within vampire society. As striking as they were together, Orlando dark and slender, Alain fair and broader through the shoulders, Adèle suspected they would turn heads even if they did not have the Aveu de Sang to set them apart.

When they reached the head table, they greeted everyone, ending with Adèle, before taking their seats. “How did the meeting with Anne-Marie go?” Raymond asked.

“She said to tell you that you could have your job back whenever you wanted it,” Alain said with a grin.

“Oh, no,” Raymond said. “I served my time as president of l’ANS. That’s her problem now.”

They all laughed, Adèle included. L’Association Nationale de Sorcellerie, the non-profit organization that campaigned for the rights of all magical beings, had fallen into Raymond’s hands at the retirement of the previous president, Marcel Chavinier. Raymond had, in turn, retired from the post with the opening of l’Institut six months earlier. Anne-Marie Valour, his successor, was doing a good job from what Adèle could see, but she tried to give Raymond the job back at least once a month.

YAWNING, Adèle drove toward home, her thoughts all in turmoil. So far she had resisted Raymond’s blandishments to try her magic on the vampires who completed l’Institut’s educational seminars, but sometimes, especially on nights like tonight, when the partners around her seemed in a particularly affectionate mood, she wondered what her life might be like now if she had paired with someone different. It would always be her choice. Raymond could not coerce her into creating a new partnership bond. The whole point of having the seminars was to make both sides aware of the commitment entailed in forming a partnership, but she also knew he could not understand—not really—why she would not want it again, knowing what it meant. How could he, when Jean worshiped the ground he walked on, a feeling he clearly returned?

In the darkness and silence of her own bedroom, she could admit that she had not hated every minute of it. Most of it, but not all of it. Leighton, damn his black soul, had known how to touch her like none of her previous lovers had dared. She had fought him—and left him—because his attitude toward her was intolerable.

Shaking her head at her wandering thoughts, she yawned again, focusing on the road in front of her. As she rounded a bend, the beams of her headlights caught the slender form of a woman perched precariously on the edge of a bridge across one of le Morvan’s many ravines. Slamming on the brakes, Adèle grabbed her wand, jumping from the car and casting a spell on the woman to keep her from jumping. The woman’s arms continued to move wildly. Adèle cursed under her breath. She had felt the magic leave her. The spell had gone where she intended, but it hadn’t worked.

Stomach churning, Adèle recognized the irony that she had just been thinking of the only other person her magic hadn't worked on, but she did not have time to worry over the implications at the moment. She could not let the woman jump. Changing her tactics, she cast a spell on the bridge itself, raising a barrier between the woman and the ravine. "Come down," Adèle urged. "No matter what it is you think is so bad, it isn't worth killing yourself."

"I'm already dead," the woman shouted back. "The fucker killed me and then instead of letting me die, he forced his blood down my throat and made me into a monster."

"Who?" Adèle asked, walking slowly toward the woman. "Who hurt you?"

"I don't know his name. He appeared out of the darkness, grabbing me as I opened the door to my house." The words came out in short gasps. Adèle wished she could see better in the darkness, the headlights from her car creating crazy shadows.

"He dragged me behind the garage and bit me."

Adèle could sympathize with that feeling. Jude had grabbed her and dragged her into alleys, empty rooms, and any other private place he could find to feed from her whether she agreed or not.

"I could feel myself getting weaker and weaker, and then instead of letting me go, he tore open his wrist and forced his blood down my throat."

Adèle shuddered. She had seen the strength of the vampires during the war. This slight woman who barely passed Adèle's shoulder would have had no chance against one of them.

"When I woke up, he told me I was a vampire and I'd need to find someone to feed from so I didn't starve. I don't want to be a monster like him!"

"Calm down," Adèle said soothingly, hiding her shock. She had learned enough about vampires over the past two years to know the mysterious vampire's behavior fell well outside the norm of accepted behavior within that community. She had no idea what, under French law, she could charge a vampire with for a non-consensual turning, but she knew without a doubt what the reaction of the vampire leadership would be. She moved closer, keeping her hands out in front of her where the other woman could see them. "You aren't a monster, no matter what he did to you. What's your name?"

"You don't know what he turned me into!" the woman wailed, completely ignoring Adèle's question.

"You told me he turned you into a vampire," the wizard said, struggling to hold on to her calm. "That doesn't make you a monster."

"But he drank my blood. He took my life!"

Adèle rolled her eyes. She wondered if the woman was always this melodramatic. "And gave you a different kind of life. Look, I know it's a change, a huge one, but I know some people who can help you."

"They can make me human again?"

"Nobody can do that," Adèle said apologetically, "but they can help you learn to live with your new situation. I have some friends who are vampires, decent ones, not like the one who turned you without your permission. I can take you to them if you want. We can be there in twenty minutes. At least listen to what they have to say. If they can't convince you, it will be dawn in an hour or so. A lot of what you hear about vampires isn't true, but that part is. If you really can't deal with your new existence after you've talked to Jean and Sebastien, all you have to do is walk outside once the sun is up. It will be over in a matter of seconds."

"They won't... hurt me?" the woman asked, stepping away from the edge of the bridge.

"What else can they do to you that you weren't going to do to yourself?" Adèle asked, stepping closer. "Come on. It's cold. You'll be warmer in the car."

"I don't even feel it," the woman said.

"There you go," Adèle joked. "An advantage to being a vampire, because I'm freezing standing out here."

"Why are you helping me?"

"It's what I do," Adèle said, pulling out her badge. "Detective Adèle Rougier at your service."

"Enchantée, Detective."

"And you are?"

"I'm sorry," the woman apologized. "I'm Pascale Auboussu."

Adèle had to suppress a shudder at hearing the first name of the dark wizard who had wreaked so much havoc in Paris before the Milice de Sorcellerie finally cornered and killed him. That wasn't this Pascale's fault, Adèle reminded herself. Here in the country, she had

probably been only marginally aware of what many saw as a magical problem. Most people outside of Paris had never registered that the loss of the war would have disrupted everyone's lives and instituted an absolute rule the likes of which had not been seen in France since the days of Louis XIV. Taking a deep breath, Adèle let it go. She had more pressing problems. Like a potential partner who was newly turned and had no idea of anything. "Let's go, Pascale. Time's passing. We need to get you somewhere safe before sunrise."

In the dim glow of the car's dome light, Adèle got a better look at the woman she had rescued. Pascale was petite, blonde, and slender, the opposite of Adèle's height, dark hair, and curvaceous figure. Snarling at catching herself staring, she reminded herself firmly that she didn't want another partner, and even if she did, she liked men. Given her own experience and what she had observed, indeed what l'Institut was teaching during its seminars, anyone entering into a partnership needed to expect and accept it becoming personal, even sexual.

Even if she were interested—which she most certainly was not—asking Pascale to think about a partnership only hours after she was turned into a vampire was ludicrous. Better to leave her with Jean and forget she had ever laid eyes on the vampire. Pascale certainly would not know. Jean and Raymond would insist she participate in a seminar, but she would either find another partner or else continue to function as an unpaired vampire, and Adèle could go about her comfortable existence much as she had the past six months.

Now if she could only believe that.

The wards at l'Institut parted easily to let her in, since she had set all of them when Raymond first hatched this crazy scheme. Adèle smiled at the memory, but despite her doubts as she first prepared the wards, Raymond's "crazy scheme" had worked. More vampires and wizards flocked to l'Institut each week for the educational seminars, and the research they were doing had gained international attention.

Climbing out of the car, Adèle was surprised not to see Raymond. A moment later, a very rumpled Thierry came into the courtyard. "What are you doing back?"

"Where's Jean?" Adèle asked. "I found a newly turned vampire trying to commit suicide on my way home tonight. I stopped that, but she's lost and more than a little upset at the moment."

Thierry ran his hand through his short blond hair. "Let me get Sebastien. At least he can talk to her vampire to vampire."



“Where’s Jean?” Adèle repeated.

“He and Raymond went back to Paris for the night and tomorrow,” Thierry said. “Something about meeting with Anne-Marie Valour. Apparently she had questions Alain and Orlando couldn’t answer.”

Adèle nodded as Thierry went back inside the old abbot’s lodge that had been converted into living quarters for the full-time staff at l’Institut. Jean and Raymond had the actual abbot’s quarters. Thierry and Sebastien had rooms there, as did Alain and Orlando and a few others who presented regularly at the seminars. The participants stayed in the monks’ cells in the main building, where they could interact more easily.

Thierry returned a few minutes later, Sebastien at his side. The dark-haired vampire could not have been more Thierry’s opposite, slender where Thierry was broad-shouldered, dark where Thierry was fair, but Adèle had seen the strength of their partnership too many times to doubt they belonged together.

“What’s this about a newly turned vampire?” Sebastien asked.

“She’s in the car,” Adèle said, “but go gently with her. Apparently her maker didn’t give her a choice, and she’s wishing she were dead.”

“Didn’t give....” Sebastien’s face tightened. “There are names for people like that.”

“What name?” Adèle asked.

“*Extorris* if he isn’t careful,” Sebastien said.

Adèle recognized the word, although she had been only peripherally involved in the trial and execution of Edouard Couthon, the rogue vampire who had killed several human victims before participating in Orlando’s capture and torture during the war. Vampire justice had been swift and merciless.

“I thought that applied only in the case of a vampire hurting another vampire or an *Avoué* or something like that.”

“The vampire turned her, then abandoned her,” Sebastien said. “If you hadn’t found her, she would have destroyed herself. That sounds like hurting a vampire to me. What’s her name?”

“Pascale.”

Adèle winced as she said the name, sharing a pained look with Thierry. It would take more than two years of peace to get used to hearing that name without reacting when it had been a source of terror

for the past four years. Two years of fighting, of watching people around her get hurt and sometimes die because of the evil of one man.

“He’ll calm her down,” Thierry said as Sebastien walked toward Adèle’s car. “He’s one of the most matter-of-fact vampires I know.”

“It’s Sunday night,” Adèle reminded Thierry. “There’s no one here for her to feed from.”

“We’ll have to take her to Paris,” Thierry agreed. “Angelique will help her, I’m sure. L’Institut can pay for it until she gets acclimated to her new situation.”

At the car, Sebastien slipped into the driver’s seat. “Bonsoir, Pascale. I’m Sebastien. Adèle tells me you had a bit of a surprise tonight. How long ago did the vampire bite you?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Pascale said, her voice heavy with emotion. “Sometime between ten and eleven, because I was coming home from a friend’s house when he grabbed me outside my house. I didn’t fight him, hoping he’d take what he wanted and let me go.”

“He did,” Sebastien said. “He just took more than you thought. So if that’s the case, it’s been almost seven hours, and you have to be starving.”

“I won’t do to someone else what he did to me!” Pascale protested.

“You don’t have to,” Sebastien assured her. “See that man talking with Adèle?”

Pascale nodded.

“That’s Thierry. He’s my partner. I’ve been feeding from him for getting close to two years now, and he’s as healthy as ever. Healthier in some ways. He’s certainly stronger than he was when we met.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What the vampire who turned you did was unforgivable, but it doesn’t have to be that way. With a bit of experience and a chance to learn control, you can feed as much as you need to without hurting anyone,” Sebastien explained. “If you’re willing, I’d suggest we go to Paris and see a friend of mine. She runs a restaurant for vampires. All the different flavors of blood you could possibly want.”

“So... what?” Pascale said, her stomach churning at the thought of more blood in her mouth. Even upset as she was, she understood what Sebastien was trying to do, but nothing could make this new life appealing. “I give him what he wanted and live this way?”

“Your other choice is to end your existence,” Sebastien said philosophically. “I’ve known a few vampires who made that decision, heard tales of a few more, but for the most part, we keep finding reasons to stay around a little longer.”

“How old are you?”

“About five hundred years old,” Sebastien said with a grin. “I’m told the years have been kind to me.”

“We’ll never get to Paris before dawn,” Pascale said, “and Adèle said I couldn’t be out in daylight.”

“Adèle obviously neglected to mention a few things,” Sebastien said with a short laugh. “Thierry, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure,” Thierry said, coming to the car. “What do you need?”

“Can you send my new friend to place Pigalle? I’ll get Adèle to send me too. Pascale needs to meet Angelique.”

“Of course,” Thierry said, drawing his wand. “Relax,” he told Pascale. “This will feel a little odd, but it won’t hurt.”

With a flick of his wrist, she disappeared. Sebastien dropped a quick kiss on Thierry’s mouth before calling for Adèle to send him to Paris as well. Moments later, he reappeared on place Pigalle, the Moulin Rouge to his left and Sang Froid, Angelique Bouaddi’s establishment, to his right.

“I don’t understand,” Pascale said again.

“Thierry and Adèle are wizards,” Sebastien explained. “Come on. Sunrise is getting closer. It won’t hurt me, but the same isn’t true for you.”

“Why won’t it hurt you?” Pascale asked, hurrying to keep up with Sebastien’s long strides.

“Because Thierry is a wizard,” Sebastien replied. “I promise to explain everything I can, but first you need to get inside and you need to feed.”

Sebastien held open the door to Sang Froid for Pascale.

“Sebastien, what are you doing here?” Angelique asked, summoned by the chime above the door.

Sebastien kissed Angelique on each cheek. “You’re looking lovely as ever, chérie. This is Pascale. Pascale, Angelique Bouaddi, proprietress of Sang Froid.”

“Enchantée,” Pascale said.

“Indeed,” Angelique replied. “What’s your pleasure?”

“She doesn’t know,” Sebastien said. “She was turned earlier tonight and then abandoned by her maker. Adèle found her and brought her to l’Institut, but Thierry is the only human in residence at the moment, and I didn’t feel like sharing.”

“Oh, ma pauvre,” Angelique fussed, wrapping her arm around Pascale’s shoulders. “Come inside and let me take care of you. Go away, Sebastien. This is girl talk.”

“As if you wouldn’t have the same talk with a male vampire,” Sebastien laughed.

“Of course I would, but that doesn’t mean Pascale wants you to hear her secrets,” Angelique scolded. “Go away. I’ll take care of her.”

“Is David around, by any chance?” Sebastien asked. “Because if he isn’t, I’m stuck here until Thierry sends someone looking for me.”

“Don’t terrorize my staff,” Angelique said. “David is asleep, but I’ll have him send you home when he wakes up. He had a bad case yesterday. I won’t disturb him if it’s not an emergency.”

“Can I use your phone, then, so Thierry knows that I’ve been delayed?” Sebastien asked. He respected Angelique’s protectiveness. David worked as a child advocate in custody and abuse cases. Sebastien suspected all of his cases were tough ones.

“It’s behind the desk,” Angelique said with a wave of her hand as she guided Pascale out of the main room and into her parlor-cum-office. “Now that the men are gone, we can talk.”

“Talk about what?” Pascale asked nervously.

“Which of my lovely employees will provide the blood you need tonight,” Angelique said. “You are hungry, aren’t you?”

“Ravenous,” Pascale said, “but how am I supposed to choose? Does one person’s blood taste different from another’s?”

“You aren’t supposed to choose,” Angelique said. “Not without some experience. I, on the other hand, have centuries of experience to share with you, and over a hundred years of matching vampires with my employees. And yes, the taste of blood varies from person to person. I’m sure we can find someone who appeals. Male or female?”

“Female,” Pascale replied immediately. “Well, as a rule, anyway.”

“Female it is,” Angelique said without blinking an eye. “Your age, younger, older?”

“How is this supposed to help?”

“Because what you prefer in a person generally carries over to what you will prefer in their blood,” Angelique explained patiently. “Answer the question.”

“Older,” Pascale whispered. “Not a lot, but a few years anyway.”

“Femme or butch?”

Pascale hesitated, not sure she was comfortable discussing such things with a woman she barely knew.

Angelique laughed at her shyness. “I lived in a harem, dear,” she said, holding up her henna-covered hands. “There is nothing about sex and sexual preferences that I haven’t seen and probably lived. You don’t need to be embarrassed with me.”

“Not butch,” Pascale said. “I don’t want someone masculine, but someone who can take charge and take care of me. I’m not the aggressor.”

“That may change a little now that you’re a vampire,” Angelique said, “but for now, any preferences in coloring?”

“Dark,” Pascale said. “Someone like you, if you weren’t a vampire.”

Angelique laughed. “Oh, darling, they stopped making them like me centuries ago, but I’ll find someone who suits. Let me show you to a room.”

“A room?”

“Feeding is very personal, very intimate,” Angelique explained. “As a rule, vampires feed in private. Since this is your first time, I’ll be there to help you find your balance. Your maker should have done this, but since he... she?”

“He.”

“Since he didn’t do his duty, I will take his place gladly.”

Angelique led Pascale to a finely appointed sitting room, furnished with two love seats and a chaise longue. “Make yourself comfortable. Take off your coat, your shoes, too, if you want. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Angelique left Pascale alone, shutting the door behind her. Pascale started toward the shuttered window, wondering what time it was, but the heat coming through the closed volets nearly burned her. She jerked

her hand away, seeing the grey cast to her skin and feeling the painful tingling along her arm. “What nightmare have I walked into?”

Angelique returned a few minutes later with a beautiful, busty woman in tow, exactly the kind of woman Pascale might have flirted with when she came to the city. Exactly the kind who never gave her the time of day. “Pascale, this is Isabelle. Isabelle, the vampire I told you about.”

“Welcome to Sang Froid,” Isabelle said, holding out her hand. Pascale took it uncertainly, her eyes fixed on the pulse at the woman’s wrist. Her mouth watered. She could practically taste the blood flowing beneath the surface.

“Gently now,” Angelique said. “You can’t simply dive in. Have a seat on one of the couches where you’ll be comfortable.”

Pascale frowned. This was the part where her shyness always kicked in and she lost her nerve. She took a seat as Angelique instructed, wondering how she was supposed to make small talk while the urge to bite, anywhere she could, was nearly overwhelming.

“Take her hand again,” Angelique instructed. “Lick the skin of her wrist. You should always prepare the place you intend to bite. Your saliva will numb the area a little so the bite hurts less, and afterward, you lick the whole area again to help her heal faster.”

Pascale breathed a huge sigh of relief, lifting Isabelle’s wrist to her mouth and licking over the lightly perfumed skin. The smell went to her head, evoking an odd tingling in her mouth, then a sharp pain.

“Look at me,” Angelique said.

Pascale turned her head.

“Show me your teeth.”

Confused, Pascale smiled.

“Good, your fangs dropped on their own. Sometimes new vampires have a problem with that, and then it gets complicated. You can bite her now.”

Pascale looked up at Isabelle.

“Go ahead,” Isabelle said with a friendly smile. “I’m a willing participant in this.”

“You enjoy it?” Pascale asked, caught by the smile.

“Very much,” Isabelle said. “It’s a good job, and I’ve grown to crave the feeling of a vampire’s fangs in my skin.”

Bemused, Pascale lifted Isabelle's arm to her lips, biting into the skin.

"Harder," Isabelle said. "Your fangs are sharp, but you have to push them deep enough to draw blood."

Pascale pressed harder, feeling the sudden give in the other woman's skin as her fangs pierced deep. Blood flooded her mouth, surprising her. She almost choked as she tried to find the rhythm that would allow her to swallow.

Next to her, Angelique kept a close eye on Isabelle. The woman was one of her longest-term employees. She would know when she reached a critical level and Pascale needed to stop. The vampire herself would learn to identify that moment in time, but not tonight, with the need of her turning burning through her. Angelique suspected it would take two or three feedings to satisfy her completely.

When Isabelle nodded, Angelique tapped Pascale's shoulder. "That's enough," she said.

Pascale gripped Isabelle's hand tighter.

Angelique tapped a little harder. "Pascale, you need to let her go now."

Pascale ignored her.

Grabbing Pascale's hands, Angelique forced them away from Isabelle's wrist. The moment her hand was free, Isabelle snatched it back.

Pascale spun to face Angelique, her eyes wild. "I wasn't done."

"No, but Isabelle is," Angelique said mildly. Her superior age guaranteed she could restrain Pascale if she needed to, but usually her calm demeanor did the trick.

"I'm still hungry!" Pascale shouted.

"And Isabelle's sending someone else in," Angelique said, "but you have to get control of yourself. You said you didn't want to do what he did to you, but if you don't control the beast driving you to feed, you will do exactly that, intentionally or not."

"How?"

"You probably can't control yourself now," Angelique said honestly. "You're newly turned and the blood hunger is driving you hard. After you've sated yourself and rested, we will talk again and I'll teach you some techniques."

They repeated the process twice more before Pascale let go of a donor's wrist voluntarily. "There is a bedroom down the hall where you can rest today," Angelique said. "You'll be hungry again tonight, but we will talk some more before then."

"I don't think I can rest," Pascale said. "I'm on edge."

"That's a side effect of feeding," Angelique agreed. "With a willing partner, the fastest way to ease that restlessness is a round of hot, sweaty sex. Unfortunately, that isn't on offer here. I don't run a sex shop."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"There's a vibrator in the drawer, still in its package," Angelique said. "It's yours if you want it."

"Why are you being so helpful?" Pascale demanded.

"Because Sebastien asked me to, because every vampire should have guidance when they're turned, because you remind me of a girl in the harem, because this is what I do," Angelique replied. "Take your pick."

"Are you sure you won't join me?" Pascale asked, the blood rushing through her system emboldening her.

"You are temptation itself, but I have a lover," Angelique said, "one whom I am not willing to give up. Before I can do anything, I would have to talk with him, and he will have already left for the day."

"A vampire?"

"No, a wizard."

"Another wizard? I'd never met one in my life until tonight and now they're everywhere!"

"You're a vampire now, a magical creature," Angelique reminded her. "Wizards are about to be a large part of your life, at least until you're ready to be on your own again, and perhaps even after that. I predict you have about twelve hours before Raymond and Jean descend on you, and that's only because they'll wait for sundown before they disturb you."

"Who are they?" Pascale asked.

Angelique laughed. "The two most charismatic men you'll ever meet. Either one of them is enough to turn a woman's head. Together...." She shook her head and laughed again. "More relevantly, they're the chef de la Cour of Paris and his Consort, as well as the directors of l'Institut Marcel Chavinier."



“None of which tells me anything,” Pascale reminded her.

“Rest,” Angelique insisted. “The sun is up and you’re about to be very twitchy unless you’re somewhere dark and enclosed. You’ll be safe in the bedroom as long as you stay away from the volets, but you’ll rest better if you close the bed curtains too.”

Pascale wanted to argue, but Angelique was implacable, showing her into the small, well-appointed bedroom, offering her a nightgown if she wanted, and closing the door firmly behind her. Pascale checked the handle the moment she was gone. The door was unlocked. She could leave if she wanted, the room, anyway. The sun outside would keep her from leaving the building.

The thought surprised her. Sometime in the past hour, she had recovered her equilibrium and her desire to live, even in this altered state. She had no idea what it really meant to be a “magical creature” as Angelique had said, but she had fed without hurting the people who helped her. She could exist this way without becoming a monster. It would be different, but perhaps it would not be horrible. Suddenly exhausted, she climbed into bed, drawing the bed curtains as Angelique had suggested. Cocooned in darkness, she closed her eyes and let dreams take her.

## Chapter 2

“ABOUT time you got back,” Thierry said when Jean and Raymond returned to l’Institut the following evening. “What’s the point of having cell phones if I can’t reach you when I need you?”

“You’ve done enough seminars to be able to welcome everyone without us,” Raymond reminded him.

“That wasn’t the reason I was calling,” Thierry said. “A woman was attacked last night by a vampire.”

“Where?” Jean demanded, all levity gone from his voice.

“I don’t know all the details. Adèle said to call her when you got in. She’s the one who found the woman.”

“Where is she now?” Jean asked.

“In Paris, at Sang Froid.”

“She was turned,” Jean said, his voice cold.

Thierry nodded.

“Putain de merde,” Jean cursed. “Angelique will take good care of her—thank you for arranging that—but we have a problem if there’s a vampire turning people against their will.”

“We only know of the one case,” Raymond reminded him. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t find the culprit, but it could be an isolated incident.”

“Unless it is a newly turned vampire realizing too late that he was killing his victim, it was intentional,” Jean explained, “and if he did it once, he’ll almost certainly do it again.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because there’s something addicting about the feeling of bestowing life and death, the tightrope you have to walk to drain someone enough to turn them without killing them first.”

“You sound like you know from experience.”

Jean flushed. “I’ve never turned anyone against their will, but early in my new existence, I turned several vampires. All of them were

willing, but there were enough of them that people in the neighborhood started whispering about a fiend in the darkness. That earned me a visit from monsieur Lombard, who ordered me to stop for at least fifty years. If I did, I could stay where I was. If I didn't, he'd be forced to send me to some other Cour because I would be a threat to his. Paris is the only home I've ever known. Leaving it was not an option I wanted to consider."

"And after fifty years?"

"I'd mastered my need again," Jean said. "I've turned only one person since then. Even at the height of my madness, I only turned people willingly, but I searched them out, offering it to every person I fed from, hoping they would say yes, that they would *all* say yes. If the vampire is far enough gone to turn someone against their will, he or she won't stop now."

"So what do we do?" Raymond asked. "We can't sit by and let it happen."

"No, but we also can't go rushing in without thought," Jean said. "You are no longer president of l'ANS, and I am out of my territory here. Furthermore, what he did, while clearly wrong, is not actually illegal because this is the first time it has happened since French law took us and vampire situations into account. I almost wish you hadn't resigned, because this is going to require some complicated legislation, and your successor doesn't have your way with words."

"We'll have to give her those words, then," Raymond said, "because I'm far too happy as director of l'Institut and your Consort to consider going back. Even for this. We'll have to talk to Adèle, but perhaps the vampire can be charged with assault. I don't know the details, of course, but even if the woman gave her consent for him to feed, turning her without her permission would be an assault on her person."

"It's pointless to speculate," Thierry said. "Call Adèle. She said she was going to sleep a bit before she started investigating. She may have caught the vampire by now."

"She'd have called if she did," Jean said.

"Your phone's been off all day long," Thierry snapped.

"She would have called you if she couldn't reach us," Raymond said, "because she knows we'll come back here for the welcome dinner tonight. We can call her now, but we can't miss dinner, or I can't,

anyway. I don't have the excuse of being president of l'ANS to drag me away from my job anymore."

The comment surprised a snort from both Thierry and Jean. They shared an amused glance, both remembering Raymond's struggle to balance the two sets of responsibilities before he decided he had to choose.

"We can still call her before dinner," Jean said. "She might be willing to update us on the phone and save us all a trip."

"We'll use the speaker phone in the office," Raymond said. "That way we can all join in the discussion."

"It's about time you called," Adèle snapped when she answered the phone.

"We didn't know you needed us to call until about five minutes ago," Raymond said soothingly. "Thierry filled us in on what he could. Tell us what you've learned today."

"Pascale Auboussu, twenty-six years old, female, lives alone in Château-Chinon," Adèle recited. Jean stroked Raymond's back when his lover flinched at the name. His fingers lingered on the mark of their Aveu de Sang that covered the older, more sinister mark Pascal Serrier had left there at the start of the war. "She said she was attacked outside her home between ten and eleven o'clock last night, dragged behind the garage, bitten, and drained before the vampire forced his blood down her throat and turned her without her consent. I've been by her house, and the signs of struggle are there, but nothing I can use as evidence. No fibers, no clean shoe prints, no blood. He's either really efficient, really paranoid, or both."

"Any idea where she might have been to attract a vampire?" Raymond asked. "Maybe she ran into him at a club, flirted with him, and then he decided she was interested in more, regardless of her feelings on the matter."

"I haven't had a chance to interview her that closely," Adèle replied. "Sebastien took her to Paris, to Sang Froid, so she could feed. I thought I'd wait until sunset and then go speak with her again."

"Wait until after tonight's dinner if you can," Jean requested. "We'd like to go with you, but we have to be here for this."

"Call me when it's done," Adèle suggested. "I'll pop over to l'Institut and we can all go together."

A long pause followed. “She was scared, convinced she’d been turned into a monster. Sebastien got her calmed down a little, but if we don’t handle this well, we could end up with a pile of ashes instead of a witness.”

“Sebastien left her with Angelique, right?” Jean verified.

“As far as I know,” Adèle said.

“Angelique will make sure she makes it through the day,” Jean said, “and that’s the hardest part. The longer she goes on as a vampire, the harder it will be to end her existence simply because it’s different than what came before.”

“We need to go,” Raymond interrupted. “Dinner’s about to start, and we have a special guest tonight. It wouldn’t be right to miss it.”

“Call me when it’s over,” Adèle repeated. “I’ll have my cell on.”

Hanging up the phone, Raymond looked at Jean. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

“Oui,” Jean replied. “As bad as anything the *extorris* did, almost as bad as Serrier.”

“If it isn’t your territory, whose is it?” Raymond asked. “We chose Dommartin in part because it’s outside the jurisdiction of any Cour.”

“Autun is the closest Cour,” Jean said. “At least Denis Langlois is more reasonable than Renaud was.”

“Do we need to call him as well?” Raymond asked. “I could go to Autun to get him. My magic will work on him.”

“Let’s get through dinner first,” Jean said after a moment’s reflection. “Adèle will wait for our call. Pascale isn’t going anywhere without Angelique, and Denis isn’t expecting us to call, so he won’t care if we finish with dinner first. Martin Delacroix’s arrival is a huge coup for l’Institut. We don’t want to jeopardize his entire sabbatical over this. If this goes well, he could be key to expanding the partnership network out of Europe and into North America. As much as my ingrained sense of responsibility says we need to check on the new vampire, this is more important.”

Raymond reminded himself the vampire was in good hands where she was. She could wait another few hours and indeed would probably be more amenable to conversation after she had time to feed again. He had learned the futility of trying to discuss anything with his partner when Jean was hungry, not that Jean had been hungry very often since they had made their Aveu de Sang six months earlier. The magical

bond that prohibited Jean from feeding from any other mortal also allowed him to feed from Raymond without any danger to Raymond's system. The fang marks over Raymond's left pectoral had not healed in months. If Raymond had his way, they never would.

"Shall we go down, then?" he asked instead of continuing the discussion. "Alain and Orlando shouldn't have to welcome everyone alone."

"Are they even here tonight?" Jean asked as they left the office and started across the courtyard to the réfectoire. "I thought I heard Orlando say something about contractors starting work on their house this week."

"That starts on Wednesday," Raymond replied. "They'll be around tonight and tomorrow for the history lesson with the wizards. Sebastien and Thierry offered to do that with the vampires so they don't have to deal with their Aveu de Sang skewing perceptions, and then Alain and Orlando will be off until Sunday and the end of seminar dinner."

"What are they having done?"

"You'll have to ask them that," Raymond said. "Alain started waxing poetic about different kinds of wood and flooring and faux finishes and lost me completely. I know they aren't that far along, but I don't know what they're actually doing right now."

"I still can't believe they bought a house in the country after living in Paris for so long," Jean said. "And they're obviously loving every minute of fixing it up. I haven't ever seen Orlando this happy, except I keep saying that and he keeps getting happier."

Raymond paused outside the door to the réfectoire. "I think an Aveu de Sang does that to a man."

Jean grinned and kissed his Avoué. "I think it might."

Jean was tempted to linger, but their guests waited. Pulling back with the whispered promise of more when they were finally alone, he pushed open the door, allowing his Consort to precede him into the room. In other circumstances, their positions would have been reversed, but Raymond was the director of l'Institut. Here, he was the senior one, not Jean.

Every head turned at their entry, silence settling across the room.

"Bonsoir, everyone," Raymond said, his voice resounding in the cavernous space. "Welcome to l'Institut Marcel Chavinier. I hope everything has been to your satisfaction so far. Tonight is your chance

to mingle, to catch up with old friends and perhaps make new ones. We're looking forward to a busy, productive week."

"Monsieur Payet?"

"Please, call me Raymond," Raymond said to the man who addressed him. "We are not a formal bunch here at l'Institut."

"That's a relief," the other man said. "My colleagues in Canada all warned me about how formal and stiff the French were. I didn't want to offend, of course, but I will admit to being a first-name person myself."

"Martin, I assume?" Raymond asked, amused at the other man's ramblings. The Canadian wizard's accent gave away his identity as clearly as if he wore a tag proclaiming his name and origin. He was nearly as tall as Raymond, though easily ten years younger. His light brown hair was short and somewhat tousled, like he had run his fingers through it more than once, but his smile was infectious, lighting his hazel eyes from inside.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry, Martin Delacroix. I'm very excited about my chance to come study and research here at l'Institut. I've always been fascinated with the way magic works in the other magical races, but my studies have been almost entirely theoretical. In Canada, anyway, they have little use for vampires."

"You will find that here as well, in many cases," Raymond said, "but the vampires—some of them, anyway—have decided we are not as bad as all that."

Next to him, Jean smothered an inelegant snort. "The vampires you will meet here at l'Institut fall into two categories," he said. "Those who have chosen to form partnerships with wizards and those interested in forming those partnerships. We've had a few complete our seminar and decide not to go farther into the process, but only perhaps one in twenty. They wouldn't be here if they weren't at least willing to listen and learn."

"My partner, Jean Bellaiche," Raymond added, "speaking of vampires who have stuck around."

"Call me Jean," Jean said, shaking Martin's hand. "We're looking forward to working with you this year."

"Have you met Alain, Orlando, Sebastien, and Thierry yet?" Raymond asked. "Sebastien and Thierry are here full time. Alain and Orlando are part-time, but they're part of our faculty as well."

"I'm not sure," Martin said honestly. "I've met so many people so quickly, and names are not my forte."

"Alain is the blond wizard standing next to the slender, dark-haired vampire," Raymond said, pointing toward Alain and Orlando. "They split their time between Paris and their new home in Pouilly-en-Auxois. They were the first to discover the partnership bond that can exist between the right vampire and wizard."

"Are they researchers?" Martin asked.

Raymond could not stop the laugh that escaped.

"No," Jean said, answering for Raymond, "they're lovers."

"Is that typical?" Martin asked.

"It isn't atypical," Raymond replied, still chuckling at the thought of Alain and Orlando as researchers. "The partnerships work through the exchange of blood, and that is a very intimate experience for both participants. Repeated feedings over time create a more personal relationship almost by default. It isn't a requirement, though, if that's what you're asking. I do know partners, both now and from the war, who have chosen to keep their relationship purely functional. That does seem to require a conscious decision and constant diligence, however, so we're careful to make it clear to our seminar participants the very real possibility of a magical partnership bringing them a life partner."

"Forgive me if I'm being overly inquisitive, but are you...?"

Raymond smiled. "In this context, I'm the director of l'Institut, but in Paris, I am the Consort of the chef de la Cour. Yes, our relationship is personal as well as professional."

Raymond didn't mention the brand on his back, but Jean's hand found it unerringly, covering it with a casual touch that Raymond knew was anything but casual.

"I feel like I should start taking notes already," Martin said. "So much information!"

"We thought you might like to sit through this week's seminar as a participant," Raymond said. "It's the quickest, most organized way to cover all the material we have at the moment. Once you're up to speed, we can discuss the areas of research already going on at l'Institut as well as those we'd like to develop, and you can decide where you'd best fit in."



“That sounds like a reasonable plan,” Martin agreed. “All my training doesn’t do me any good without a base of information to draw on.”

“Were your rooms to your satisfaction?” Jean asked. “We’re fairly remote, so we try and have space available for everyone here.”

“They’re wonderful,” Martin said. “I’ve met madame Naizot and her daughters, and they all made me promise to let them know if I needed anything.”

“They are most efficient,” Raymond said with a smile. “L’Institut has become the largest employer in Dommartin, much to the delight of the locals who no longer have to drive to neighboring towns and cities to work. And it would seem dinner is ready. Would you join us at the faculty table?”

AFTER dinner, the wizards, for the most part, retired to their rooms, leaving the vampires to start their first session, a history of the partnerships.

“Would it be all right if I attended that session?” Martin asked Raymond.

“I suppose, but you’ll have the same information in your session tomorrow.”

“Yes, but I won’t hear the questions and answers that were important to the vampires,” Martin explained. “I know how wizards think. I need to learn how vampires think, what their culture values and discounts.”

“You make us sound like some foreign species,” Jean said with a laugh. “You will find we aren’t so different from you.”

“No offense intended,” Martin apologized, flushing at being called on his insensitive choice of words. “I tend not to think before I speak. Vampires have a longevity humans, even wizards, can’t come close to attaining. You’ve seen things we only studied in books. You have a culture that reflects that, whether you think about it in those terms or not. I want to see those values reflected in the conversation. It will help me understand and perhaps avoid other gaffes later.”

“I don’t see why it would be a problem,” Raymond said, “unless you think the vampires will be uncomfortable with Martin there.”

“No more uncomfortable than they already are being here,” Jean replied. “One quick lesson about vampires, Martin. They are far less trusting of their own kind than of outsiders because outsiders can’t do much to them. Another vampire, on the other hand, is always a threat as much as an ally.”

“They call it *le Jeu des Cours*,” Raymond added, “a constant game of one-upmanship to keep their status. Only Orlando is outside of it because of his relationship with Alain.”

“What is special about him? Other vampires have partners.”

“Other vampires don’t have *Avoués*,” Jean replied. “It’s an extra bond between them that has nothing to do with Alain being a wizard. It’s a vampire custom whose origins have long since been forgotten. Orlando is the only vampire in France, as far as I know, with a publicly acknowledged *Avoué*. For as long as Alain lives, Orlando is exempt from *le Jeu des Cours*.”

“You’d think more vampires would have one,” Martin commented, “if the advantages are so great.”

“So is the cost,” Jean replied. “An *Avoué* cannot be turned. A vampire and his *Avoué* cannot be separated for more than a few days while the *Avoué* lives. It can be a challenging life.”

Martin’s busy brain needed no more than that to see the irony of the bond: a lifetime together followed by an eternity of separation. “The vampires are leaving. I will see you at breakfast.”

Jean and Raymond shook Martin’s hand and let him follow the vampires to their first meeting.

“Impressions?” Raymond asked when they were alone.

“He’ll have to learn to curb his tongue if he doesn’t want to offend his subjects,” Jean said, “but he seems an interesting and intelligent man. What did you think of him?”

“He reminds me of myself ten years ago,” Raymond replied, “all eager enthusiasm and lust for learning. He was spared the horrors of the war that stole some of that from me, although I was never as gregarious as he is. I was always too lost in a book.”

Jean chuckled. “I’ve never noticed that about you.”

Raymond grinned. “You’re more interesting than any book.”

Jean’s tender smile left Raymond weak in the knees with the desire to pull his vampire across the courtyard and up the stairs to the abbot’s

quarters, where they could be alone and reaffirm their bond, but responsibility nagged.

"We should call Adèle and figure out what we're going to tell Denis," Raymond said with a sigh of regret. Jean had fed before they left Paris to return to l'Institut, and even if he hadn't, their Aveu de Sang gave him the ability to go longer between feedings than other vampires.

Jean must have sensed his conflicted emotions, because a surge of lust and longing swept through their bond. "There will be time for us after we've seen to the new vampire," Jean said aloud, leaving Raymond to extrapolate the rest.

"I'll call Adèle," Raymond said. "You should call Denis so I don't do something to cause you to lose face in le Jeu des Cours."

Jean's hand settled on Raymond's back, guiding him out of the main building toward the abbot's lodge. His Consort had promised to support him in any way possible, but despite nearly two years of association, Jean doubted Raymond fully understood how much his mere presence at Jean's side added to Jean's status within his Cour and with the other chefs de la Cour. The chefs de la Cour would not normally meet for another twelve months, but Jean knew having a lover, a partner of Raymond's status, would only help when that happened. And if it happened early because of the weekend's events, Raymond's presence would be even more beneficial. "I'll call him, but you have only ever added to my standing. Will you be able to go to Autun to get him if he wants to join us?"

"Yes, as soon as I get off the phone with Adèle," Raymond said. "If he wants to go, tell him I'll be there in ten minutes. That should give me time to make the call and change into something warmer."

The late September days were still warm, but the temperatures dropped at night, making Raymond's short-sleeved shirt too lightweight for their evening's outings. Jean would not be bothered by the temperature until it got far colder than this, and even then, his sensitivity would never match Raymond's. His vampire nature saw to that.

Letting Raymond go change, Jean went into the office they shared and searched out Denis Langlois's phone number from their records. While he was on better terms with the new chef de la Cour of Autun than he had been with the previous one, he would not go so far as to call them friends. Friendly colleagues, perhaps, but nothing more.

Jean's life was wrapped up in l'Institut, the Cour parisienne, and Raymond. Denis was focused on consolidating power after his coup in Autun six months ago. Jean remembered those days from his own rise to power in the Cour parisienne, several hundred years ago, and he had stepped into the place of a retiring chef de la Cour rather than toppling one, as Denis had done. Even then, he had fought for the first several years to retain his role.

Regardless of Denis's potentially precarious position, he needed to know what was happening. Château-Chinon might be too small to have its own Cour, but it was close enough to Autun for events there to affect him.

"Allô?"

"Bonsoir, Denis. It's Jean Bellaiche from l'Institut. How are you this evening?"

"I suspect I'm about to be not well at all if you're calling me out of the blue this way," Denis replied.

Jean chuckled. "I wish I could make a liar out of you, but we've gotten wind of a problem that I thought you should be aware of."

"What problem?"

"There's a vampire turning people against their will," Jean said. "We saved one of his victims from committing suicide early this morning. There may be more, but even if there aren't yet, there will be."

"Merde," Denis muttered. "Where did this happen?"

"Château-Chinon," Jean replied. "Raymond and I are getting ready to head to Paris to talk with the woman. Adèle Rougier—I don't know if you remember her: tall, dark hair, cop out of Château-Chinon—found her and got her to Sang Froid to feed, so I haven't actually spoken with her yet. I thought you might like to come along."

"And how am I supposed to get to Paris at this hour of the night?" Denis asked.

"Raymond offered to come get you in about ten minutes," Jean said. "He can pop into Autun, bring you back here to meet up with Adèle and myself, and then all four of us can go to Paris together. Raymond will, of course, take you home once we've spoken to the woman and decided what to do next."

"You realize this is going to create chaos in the Cours all around Bourgogne if we don't find whoever did this quickly," Denis said.

“The thought had occurred to me,” Jean replied with a bitter laugh. “My hope is she’ll have gotten enough of a glimpse of the vampire who turned her that one of us will recognize him. If we know who we’re hunting, it will speed things up.”

“Ten minutes, then?”

“I’ll have him come to your house,” Jean said. “Meet him in the garden.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Hanging up the phone, Jean leaned back in the chair, eyes closed as he turned over the possible repercussions of the current situation. Perhaps there would not be many if Pascale could help them identify the vampire in question and they could catch the man quickly, but Jean had not held onto his position as chef de la Cour by burying his head in the sand. He had to be prepared for the worst-case scenario.

The true worst-case scenario would be a revocation of the civil rights legislation that gave vampires the same protection as mortals under French law. Jean doubted it would come to that as long as they could prove this was an isolated event or series of events carried out by one individual, a single serial killer out of control rather than vampire society being ungovernable. If they caught the vampire relatively quickly, and especially if he and Denis were visibly involved in the hunt, they would hopefully be able to avoid the kind of mass hysteria that often accompanied serial killers. If they could not catch him quickly or if he claimed a large number of victims, Jean worried that public opinion would drive the vampires back into hiding even if the laws still said they were protected.

“Stop brooding,” Raymond said from the doorway. “You’re worrying over scenarios that may never come to pass. Let’s go talk to the new vampire and see what we can learn. We’ll worry about hypotheticals after that.”

Jean summoned a smile and rose from his seat. “I love you, you know. You always know exactly what to say.”

“It’s a gift,” Raymond joked. “Do I need to go to Autun?”

“Denis will be waiting for you in his garden in about ten minutes.”

“Good,” Raymond said. “Adèle is on her way. Should I come back here or meet you in Paris?”

“Come back here,” Jean decided. “That way we can reintroduce Adèle and Denis before we go to Sang Froid.”

Raymond nodded and stole a kiss before drawing his wand and disappearing with a murmured incantation. Jean knew the wand was more of an affectation than a necessity, but since his accident six months ago, Raymond had only used wandless magic if he had to, rather than as a matter of course, as he had often done before. It was, as far as Jean could tell, the only lingering consequence of the roof collapse that had destroyed Adèle's partner and nearly killed Raymond. Jean said another silent prayer of thanksgiving for his lover's survival as he waited for Adèle to arrive and Raymond to return.

## Chapter 3

DENIS LANGLOIS had discovered many things in the six months since he took the Cour autunoise from Renaud, but he had yet to get used to the presence of wizards in his life. He had overthrown Renaud in part because of his attitude toward l'Institut Marcel Chavinier and Jean Bellaiche's mission to integrate vampires more fully into French society, but Denis had not realized at the time how completely integrated Bellaiche and many of the Parisian vampires had become. Unlike Renaud, Denis did not question their right to make that choice or to offer the same choice to anyone who chose to make it, but Denis had to admit he was not completely comfortable with it himself.

He rarely seemed to have a choice, though. He had attended the seminar at l'Institut as a way of setting his leadership apart from Renaud's, but everything he had heard raised his hackles. He had buried a lover too recently in vampire terms to be comfortable accepting another yet, and from all he had heard, taking a partner was tantamount to taking a lover. It seemed to work for those involved in partnerships. Denis had been happy with Noël for long enough to recognize that sentiment on the faces and in the demeanors of others. He had no doubt that Bellaiche and Payet belonged together, and St. Clair and his Avoué were so smitten with each other that Denis wondered how St. Clair would survive the man's death.

Denis had barely survived Noël's death without the putative power of a partnership, much less an Aveu de Sang, to bind them.

Glancing at the clock, he realized it was time to meet Payet. He switched off the lights and went down to the door, standing in the portico to wait for Payet materialize. Denis had no idea how magic worked in that respect, but he had no desire to have the wizard appear on top of him.

A shimmer in the air was Denis's only warning, and then Payet appeared, striding toward the door. "I'm here," Denis said, stepping out of the shadows. "I didn't want to be in your way."

"You wouldn't have been," Payet replied, shaking Denis's hand in greeting. "Shall we go? Jean and Adèle are waiting for us at l'Institut."

Denis signaled his agreement, stomach clenching as Payet cast another displacement spell to take them back to l'Institut Marcel Chavinier. The sensation reminded him of riding a fast elevator, that almost vertigo that came with moving too fast. He stumbled despite his best efforts, scowling as Payet reached out a hand to steady him. He hated showing any weakness in front of other vampires, and of course Bellaiche stood in the courtyard of l'Institut along with a woman Denis assumed was Adèle Rougier. Assured again of his balance, he took a step forward to shake Bellaiche's hand. He leaned forward to give Adèle the traditional kisses on both cheeks, but her glare dissuaded him. He offered his hand instead.

"Denis, you remember Adèle," Jean said, amused at the interplay. "Adèle, Denis is the vampire most likely to be able to help us identify our rogue. Chances are, the rogue is from this area, and Denis is the chef de la Cour in Autun."

"Nice to meet you again," Adèle said with a nod. "Shall we go? My captain is anxious to have this case solved."

"As are we," Denis said. "Legislation aside, it's going to take more than eighteen months before people stop looking at vampires askance, and something like this doesn't help. The sooner we catch the vampire responsible, the better for all of us."

"So you share Jean's opinion that he'll continue?" Adèle asked.

"I don't want to interrupt," Jean said, seeing the shiver that went through Raymond as they stood in the cool night air, "but it's hardly warm outside. Perhaps we could continue this conversation at Sang Froid, where it's likely to be far more comfortable."

Adèle was in no rush to get to Paris. She would do her job, but she had no intention of getting more involved than that with the woman whose resistance to her magic marked her as Adèle's partner. She had learned her lesson the first time around. Arguing would only draw attention to her hesitation, though, and she had no intention of



explaining anything to Jean or Raymond. They would not understand. "Let's go, then."

Without waiting for a reply, she cast the displacement spell, taking Jean with her since Raymond's magic would not work on his partner.

"Is something bothering you?" Jean asked the moment they appeared in Paris. "You're even pricklier than usual."

"I already don't like this case," Adèle said sharply. "There's no physical evidence, so it will all depend on the testimony of our new vampire, and she was barely coherent last night. I don't see her being a very convincing witness if it ever gets as far as a trial. Do vampires even have fingerprints?"

"We have them, yes," Jean replied, "but we rarely leave them. We don't sweat any more than we cry, so unless the vampire we're chasing had recently put lotion on his hands, there would be nothing to leave a mark."

Raymond and Denis appeared next to them. Jean could feel Raymond's concern through their bond. The connection between them did not allow him to read his lover's thoughts, but as in tune as they were, he could often guess from the situation and Raymond's emotions. He shook his head slightly, answering the silent question. Whatever was bothering Adèle, she had not seen fit to share it with him.

"Let's go inside," Jean said. They had more pressing matters than whatever might be on Adèle's mind.

To Jean's surprise, Angelique was not in the entrance parlor of Sang Froid when they came in. Her manager, François Roche, greeted them instead. "We're honored tonight," François joked. "The chef de la Cour, his Consort, Mademoiselle Rougier, and a vampire I don't know."

"This is Denis Langlois," Jean said, "chef de la Cour of Autun."

"How can we be of service?" François asked with a respectful nod in Denis's direction.

"We need to speak with the vampire Sebastien brought here last night," Adèle said. "She's our only witness in the crime of her turning, but she wasn't coherent enough to give me much in the way of details last night. I'm hoping Angelique has her calmed down by now."

“Why don’t you wait in Angelique’s office?” François proposed, opening the door to let them enter. “I’ll let her know you’re here. She actually went to check on Pascale a few minutes ago because she had not come down yet.”

“This is an office?” Denis asked, looking around the room that, aside from the desk against one wall, was more suited to a harem than a business.

“You’ll understand once you meet Angelique,” Raymond said with a grin. “Don’t let the appearance of her office fool you. She’s as shrewd a businesswoman as you’ll ever meet. She simply chooses to run her business in surroundings that are comfortable for her.”

Angelique came in a moment later, Pascale following somewhat more timidly behind her.

“I have a full house, it would seem,” Angelique said, kissing Jean, Raymond, and Adèle on the cheeks. “And an unfamiliar face. Angelique Bouaddi.”

“Denis Langlois,” Denis said, offering Angelique his hand.

“Ah, the new chef de la Cour,” Angelique said. “I wondered when I would have the honor.”

“Angelique prides herself on being indispensable,” Jean said, his eyes twinkling as he teased his old friend.

“Always a snack for a hungry vampire,” Angelique agreed with a wink. “I doubt you came calling just to amuse me. I don’t have much in the way of chairs, but if you aren’t comfortable on the divans, I can have François bring something in from the parlor.” As she spoke, she moved to the divan and settled onto it with the ease of long familiarity. Her loose skirts draped around her legs as she pulled them up next to her. “Please, be at home.”

Denis watched as the three he had come to Paris with mirrored Angelique’s pose, obviously familiar with the routine. The blonde who had come in with Angelique, presumably the newly turned vampire, looked as ill at ease as Denis felt, finally taking a seat near Angelique’s feet as if she drew comfort from the other woman’s presence. Denis chose the one chair in the room, at the desk, and sat on it instead.

“How are you doing this evening, Pascale?” Adèle asked, ending the badinage and getting down to business. Knowing the other woman could be her partner if she allowed it left her tense and irritable,

although she tried to keep it under control for the sake of getting as much information out of the witness as possible.

"I'm doing better, thank you," Pascale said, her voice steadier than it had been the night before. Adèle breathed a sigh of relief. She had no interest in dealing with more hysterics. "Angelique has been very kind to me."

"Angelique is good at that," Adèle agreed. "I'm hoping now that you've had a chance to calm down and to eat that we can talk a bit more about what happened and maybe jog loose some memories that will help us catch the vampire who turned you."

Pascale nodded, keeping her eyes focused on Adèle, the only other person in the room she knew besides Angelique. She knew the name of the young vampire who did not look like he was more than twenty, despite the air of command he carried about him. She assumed the other two men, somewhat older, in their midthirties to look at them, were Jean and Raymond, who Angelique had said would come to visit her. She had no idea which was which, but the quick glance she had given them confirmed Angelique's assessment of them. They radiated charm and charisma in a way that would be hard to resist. She did not claim to understand the sparks of annoyance she felt from the detective, but at least it was an emotion she could deal with. "I don't know what else I can tell you," she said, taking a breath to steady her nerves, "but I will tell you all I know."

Adèle pulled out a small notebook from the pocket of her coat, fumbling for a pen. Not finding one, she muttered a spell under her breath, her wand transforming into a pen. "You'll have to change it back when I'm done," she told Raymond. "I can't do wandless magic."

"You could have simply asked for a pen," Angelique chided gently.

Adèle glared at the vampire for a moment. "You said you were attacked as you were coming home last night, correct?"

"Yes," Pascale said. "I'd had dinner with a friend and her husband at their house. It was a work night, so I didn't stay late. I think it was around ten when I left, although I don't know exactly what time. They live in Lucenay-l'Évêque, so it takes forty minutes or so to get back to Château-Chinon, even in the middle of the night."

"There might be less traffic, but there's also less light out in the country, so you have to drive a little slower," Adèle agreed. "So you

got home around ten forty-five, maybe eleven. You grabbed your purse, got out of the car, maybe a little distracted, thinking about work, not really paying attention to your surroundings.” She had seen it more times than she could count, a woman attacked in a parking lot or side street because she was not aware of what was going on around her.

“No,” Pascale said. “I drove into the garage and shut it before I got out of the car. I don’t know if he was already inside or if he managed to get inside as I was driving through, but I’m not stupid. I pay attention to safety.”

Adèle grudgingly revised her opinion of the woman sitting at Angelique’s feet. “Was the timing right?”

“I didn’t look at the clock when I drove in, but yes, about right,” Pascale agreed. “I closed the door, got out of the car, and started toward the house. The garage connects, but there’s also a door to the garden, because I keep tools and things there as well.”

Adèle had seen it when she checked the crime scene. It had still been standing open.

“You said before that he dragged you behind the garage. Did he say anything? Give any indication what he wanted from you?”

“No,” Pascale said, “not then. He covered my mouth so I couldn’t scream, his other hand around my throat, constricting my air partially. I could still breathe a little, but with difficulty. I didn’t fight. He was obviously so much stronger than I was. When he got me back outside, he released my throat, pulled my head to the side, and bit me.” She fingered the spot on her neck, though the wounds had closed with her turning.

“Feeding is often sexual for a vampire,” Jean interjected. “Did he touch you at all?”

“Only to hold me in place,” Pascale replied, a blush staining her pale cheeks at the memory of feeding the night before. “Once he bit me, he put one arm around my waist, but he didn’t grope me or anything.”

Jean nodded and fell silent again, waiting for Adèle to continue.

“You said he didn’t give any indication then of what he wanted from you, but he said something later?” Adèle verified.

“Yes,” Pascale said. “After I woke up, after he... turned me, he said I was a vampire now and that I’d need to find a human to feed from. Then he said he’d be back for me when he was ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“He didn’t say,” Pascale replied, “and he disappeared before I could ask. Honestly, I don’t know if I would have. I was a little upset at the time.”

“Understandably upset,” Angelique soothed. “If you had asked to be turned, that would be one thing, but turning someone against their will is tantamount to rape, Adèle, perhaps even worse. He took something infinitely precious, and nothing can give that back.”

“You don’t have to convince me of that,” Adèle said placatingly, “but I don’t make the laws. For that you’ll need to talk to those two.”

“I don’t make the laws either,” Raymond reminded her, “and now that I’m no longer president of I’ANS, I’m not even in a position to propose any.”

“Mon œil,” Adèle shot back. “If you went to any but the most conservative legislators and explained the situation and the need, they’d sponsor a bill you gave them in a heartbeat. You may not wear the mantle anymore, but no one has forgotten you in the few months since you resigned. You have far more pull than your successor.”

“That may be,” Raymond allowed, “but that doesn’t mean I should use it. It’s not fair to Anne-Marie if I do.”

“It’s not fair to Pascale and anyone this bastard has turned if you don’t,” Adèle disagreed. “Did you get a glimpse of him at all?” she asked Pascale. “Anything to give us an idea who he is?”

“No,” Pascale said. “He stayed behind me the whole time, and it was dark, just a little bit of moonlight. I think he had dark hair, but so does every man in this room, not to mention half the men in France or more.”

“Was there anything about him that struck you? Did he wear any jewelry? Anything like that?” Adèle asked.

“His voice,” Pascale said slowly. “He had a very distinctive voice. Very deep for one thing, but... I don’t even know the right word. Slurred, maybe, not like an accent, but like he wasn’t quite saying all the sounds in the words. I’d know it if I heard it again for sure.”

It did not give Adèle anything to go on for a search, but if they brought in a suspect later, it might be enough for Pascale to add her weight to the evidence. “Can you think of anywhere you might have been that would have drawn the attention of a vampire? A night club? A bar? Anywhere you’ve gone in the evenings recently where you might have had an odd encounter with a man?”

“I don’t generally pay much attention to men,” Pascale said, “and I don’t go out much either. I’m a computer geek, or I was. I’m not really into the social scene.”

“Do you play a lot of online games?” Adèle asked. “Maybe he found you that way.”

“One or two,” Pascale said, “but I’m a computer programmer. I know how to cover my tracks to make sure nobody follows me home.”

Someone had followed her home anyway.

“Thank you,” Adèle said. “If you think of anything else, no matter how small or insignificant it might be, please let me know. Jean and Raymond know how to get in touch with me.”

“I can’t think of anything else now,” Pascale said, “but if I do, I’ll let you know. I want him caught and punished. Is that all? Can I go now?”

“Are you getting hungry again?” Angelique asked immediately.

Flushing again, Pascale nodded.

“I imagine Jean and Raymond want to talk to you as well, but I’m sure Jean remembers what it’s like to be newly turned,” Angelique said smoothly.

“If you would rejoin us when you’re done?” Jean asked, not happy with the delay but not willing to argue with Angelique over it, not with another chef de la Cour, even a new one, in the room. “You can’t impose on Angelique’s generosity forever. We’ll need to discuss your options.”

“François is in the parlor,” Angelique said to Pascale by way of dismissal. “He’ll take care of you while I finish up with everyone here.”

Pascale panicked a little at the thought of feeding without Angelique’s supervision, but she straightened her spine and promised

herself she would be worthy of Angelique's trust. "I'll see everyone in a few minutes, then."

When she was gone, Angelique gave the others a hard stare. "You will not upset her when she comes back. She has coped remarkably well last night and today. She does not need to be hassled."

"No one wants to hassle her," Jean promised. "We want to catch the vampire who did this to her, which is why Adèle asked all the questions she did, and we want to help her adjust to her new existence so we don't lose her. Did you get anything you can use, Adèle?"

"A window of time so we can check alibis if we get a suspect," Adèle said. "And the possibility that she might be able to identify him if we can get enough evidence to put him in a lineup and let her hear his voice. What troubles me is his comment about coming back for her when he was ready. I'm not a vampire, so I know I don't think like one, but that sounds ominous to me."

"I had the same reaction," Denis said, speaking for the first time since Adèle had begun the interview. "I haven't turned many vampires because I never felt the need to feed from anyone other than Noël until he died, and by then I knew better than to turn people randomly, but it seems odd that he would turn her deliberately and then leave with a promise to return later. Not in a few minutes to help her, but 'when he was ready'."

"So what do you think it means?"

"I think it means our vampire, whoever he is, has an agenda," Denis said. "He changed her for a reason. It may have nothing to do with her personally, or it may be very personal—I can't judge that from one comment—but he has a goal in mind with what he's doing."

"Which is all the more reason to think he'll act again," Jean concurred. "And we're still working under the assumption that this is the first person he's turned."

"You don't think we would have heard if there were other cases?"

"You wouldn't have heard about this one if I hadn't been driving by," Adèle reminded them. "She was trying to jump off a bridge. If the fall didn't kill her, dawn would have in a matter of an hour or two. Enough of the leaves have fallen that the cover of the trees wouldn't have protected her."

“I didn’t see her last night,” Jean said, “but she seemed fairly in control tonight, like she’s beginning to adjust. It might not be a bad idea to have Orlando talk to her eventually. He was turned against his will as well. It could be some comfort to her to know she can recover from that.”

“We talked some last night,” Angelique said. “It will take time for her to adjust. I can still remember how hard it was for me to adjust, and I was changed voluntarily by a maker who stayed by my side for years.”

“Yes, turning is always difficult,” Jean agreed. The memory of the man he had killed by accident the night he was turned still haunted him. “We’ll have to help her make the best of her new existence.”



## Chapter 4

A TENTATIVE knock interrupted their conversation. Angelique rose from her divan with the elegance of centuries of practice, opening the door to allow Pascale to enter. “You weren’t gone long,” Angelique observed, putting a protective arm around Pascale’s shoulders. “Did you take enough?”

“Enough for now,” Pascale replied, leaning into the embrace and the safety it represented. She wanted to believe the others were no threat, particularly since Angelique had welcomed them as friends, but she did not know them yet, and she had always been slow to trust. The experiences of the past two days had only added to that. “I didn’t want to keep everyone waiting on me.”

“Everyone here understands the needs of vampires,” Angelique assured her. “Raymond is Jean’s Consort as well as his partner. Adèle has no partner now, but she has been around vampires enough to know our needs. And Jean and Denis are vampires like us. No one was disturbed by your departure.”

“Join us again,” Jean invited, rising as well and offering his hand to Pascale. “I know this has been a terrible shock for you, but have you given any thought to what you will do now?”

“What can I do?” Pascale asked, hopelessness swamping her again. She fought the urge to cry only to discover that no matter how strong the urge, her eyes stayed dry. “I’m a prisoner of the sun, dependent on Angelique’s generosity for food. I don’t see a lot of options.”

Silently, Jean cursed the vampire who had created this situation. He should have been here to guide her, should have prepared her for the reality of her new existence and helped her find solutions. “There are always options. You must now decide which ones to take. Angelique introduced us all, but I imagine half of it went over your head with no one to explain all our titles to you.”

“It is all a little overwhelming,” Pascale admitted. She let Angelique lead her back to the divan where she had perched before. “I

think I caught everyone's names, but the titles mean little to me, other than Detective Rougier, but that's a human title."

"Vampires tend to be loners," Jean said, "so we don't form tight societies comparable to werewolf packs, for instance, but we do have some societal structure. Any city with a vampire population of any size has a chef de la Cour, la Cour being the rest of the vampires. I am that vampire for Paris. Denis is the chef de la Cour for Autun. The closest equivalent in human terms would be to compare me to the mayor, but even that is deceptive. Beyond the most basic of inviolate laws, I lead more by example and influence than by command, and unlike a mayor, I hold my position through that influence. If another vampire chose to challenge me, I would have to fight to retain my position."

Raymond chuckled softly at that image. Not that he wanted to see Jean have to fight another vampire, but the one time he had witnessed it, his lover's superior age and strength had made him untouchable.

"Paris is a large city and a large Cour," Denis said, "but in the smaller towns, we tend to be a closer group, if only because there are fewer of us. I took power from a dictatorial chef de la Cour six months ago, somewhat to everyone's surprise, given how much younger I was than the vampire I challenged, but he had grown complacent."

"Age confers strength among vampires," Raymond said, taking pity on the confused look on Pascale's face. "Regardless of the age a vampire was when he or she was turned, the number of years spent as a vampire is what determines their status and power within the Cour." That, too, was a simplification, but Raymond would leave explanations of le Jeu des Cours to the vampires. "Jean was turned in the year 911, which makes him an old vampire indeed."

"Whereas I was turned in 1918, which makes me little more than a child in the eyes of most vampires," Denis revealed. "Fortunately for me, looks can be deceiving."

Jean's eyes widened at the revelation. He had not realized how recently Denis had been turned. It made his rise to power in Autun even more impressive. That was a discussion best saved for later, though. Pascale needed explanations, not politics.

"All of that is very interesting," Pascale said, "but I don't see how any of it helps me."

"It doesn't help you directly," Jean agreed, "but hopefully it lets you see that you have people of influence on your side. You mentioned

working with computers. Do you have to go into an office, or could you work from home?"

"I work remotely most days," Pascale said. "Occasionally I'll go into the office for a meeting or something."

"That won't be possible now unless the meeting is during the dark hours, but your abilities as a programmer haven't changed," Jean told her. "There's no reason you couldn't continue to work from home, even during the daytime, as long as you work in a room with no direct sunlight. You may find you prefer to work at night, if your employer doesn't care which hours you work, but one way or another, you don't have to give up your job as long as you can telecommute to the occasional meeting."

"I'm sure I could," Pascale said, her voice lighter as one of her concerns lifted. "Other people do. That takes care of my income, but what about feeding? If I'm at home in Château-Chinon, I can't come here to feed."

"Most vampires don't come here," Angelique said, "certainly not most vampires outside of Paris. Most vampires have to hunt for their food. It's a question of knowing the right places to look and the right way to entice willing prey."

Pascale was equal parts aroused and horrified by the images Angelique's words conjured in her mind. Thoughts of bodies entwined in a lover's embrace warred with memories of the terror she had felt at being bitten.

"I know it must seem like the worst thing in the world to be bitten by a vampire," Raymond said softly, "but I promise there are plenty of people who think otherwise." He pulled down the rolled collar of his sweater to reveal the fang marks on his neck, thankful Jean had fed recently enough that they were still visible. The Aveu de Sang sped his healing so much that most bite marks were gone in a matter of hours after Jean finished feeding. Only the ones on his chest, the ones Raymond had not allowed to close since the night he and Jean finally admitted their feelings, remained for more than a few hours.

"The woman I fed from last night said she was willing, but this is her job," Pascale said slowly. "It isn't your job. You don't work here."

"No," Raymond agreed. "I run l'Institut Marcel Chavinier in Dommartin."

"But you want vampires to feed from you."

Jean could not stop the instinctive growl of protest at the thought of any other vampire coming anywhere near Raymond. Before he could say anything, Raymond's love surged through their bond, soothing him. "Not vampires," Raymond said. "One vampire. But yes, I want Jean to feed from me. Angelique mentioned when she introduced us that I'm his Consort and his partner. Those aren't meaningless honorifics. We are as committed to each other as it is possible for two people to be, and his feeding is part of that."

"The same is true for my partner, David," Angelique said, "and for Sebastien's partner, Thierry. I don't know if you met Thierry last night, but Sebastien brought you here. Not every vampire has a lover, and not every vampire who has a lover has a partner in the magical sense of the word, but you are not the only one aware of the intimacy when you feed. The person you're drawing blood from feels it as well. It can be a very alluring experience, one people are often willing to repeat if the first vampire to feed from them does it right."

"That's not something I can even begin to comprehend," Pascale admitted. "I know it must be true for there to be so many examples, but I wouldn't know where to start in finding someone like that for myself."

"If what you want is a partnership like Raymond and I have, or like Angelique and David or Sebastien and Thierry, you'll need to come back to l'Institut with us," Jean said. "Where Adèle brought you last night. One of the many things we do at l'Institut is educational seminars for vampires and wizards who are interested in forming a partnership."

"Jean Bellaiche," Angelique snapped, "you are not going to whisk Pascale off to the country and send her off into a partnership without preparing her properly for being a vampire. Give me a couple of weeks to finish educating her properly. Take your Consort back to Dommartin and leave Pascale with me. I'll call you in a few weeks to let you know how she's doing and whether she's even interested in coming to l'Institut."

"You're hardly the only vampire who could teach her to hunt," Jean replied sharply. "Even if she found a partner immediately, which still only happens rarely, she'd have to hunt until the end of the seminar. I wasn't planning on abandoning her the way you make it sound."

"I think I'd rather stay in Paris for a few weeks," Pascale said, scooting closer to Angelique on the divan as if the others would try to

forcibly remove her. "No offense, monsieur, but I don't really know you, and Angelique has been very helpful since I got here. I'd be far more comfortable staying here."

"Then it's all settled," Angelique said. "Adèle, take Jean home so he isn't stuck here without his partner. Denis, it was lovely to meet you. I assume Raymond will see you home. Pascale, find your coat. We're going out."

Before the other four could blink, Angelique had ushered them back out into the parlor and returned to her office, the door shutting behind her with an audible snick.

"Did she just kick us out?" Denis asked, looking at Jean in bemusement.

"The only reason she isn't chef de la Cour of Paris is because she doesn't want to be," Jean said with a shake of his head. "There is no standing against that woman when she makes up her mind about something. Adèle, I hope you got what you needed, because we won't get any more tonight."

"I only stayed through the second part of the conversation because you wouldn't have had a way back to l'Institut otherwise," Adèle replied, her stomach churning with the lie. She pushed that thought aside for later, when she was alone and did not have to worry about giving away her inner turmoil. Raymond was far too perceptive, and Adèle had no desire to provoke questions she could not answer. "I didn't get anything near what I need to catch this guy, but I don't think she has anything else to tell me, so I'll make do with what I have and keep an eye and an ear out for other victims. Any criminal activity in all of the Yonne that appears to have magical aspects already gets referred to me, so it won't surprise anyone to have me ask them to refer turnings to me as well."

"Let's go back to l'Institut," Jean proposed. "Denis, do you have time to stay and chat for a bit, or do you need to go straight home?"

"I have time," Denis said. "We have quite a bit to talk about, because catching this vampire will not be enough, and we cannot simply dispense vampire justice and be done with it anymore."

"Certes," Jean agreed. "Raymond, Adèle, if you will oblige?"

"As soon as Raymond fixes my wand," Adèle chuckled.

Raymond shook his head and undid the spell Adèle had used to change her wand into a pen so she could take notes. That done, he turned his magic on Denis, taking them both back to l'Institut.

Wand restored, Adèle followed suit, appearing in the courtyard of l'Institut seconds later, Jean at her side.

"If you don't need me for this conversation," Adèle said, "I should get home. Tomorrow is a work day for me, and the fact that it's after midnight now won't matter in the morning."

"Go home," Jean said. "If anything comes out of the conversation that you need to know, we'll call during the day tomorrow, late enough that we're sure you'll be awake and at work."

"Thanks," Adèle said. "Denis, Raymond." She cast another displacement spell before they could answer her.

"Was she even touchier than usual tonight?" Raymond asked.

"Yes," Jean replied, "but that's a worry for another time. Denis, I usually have a glass of cognac with Raymond in the evening. Would you care to join us?"

"I haven't had cognac since I was turned," Denis said with a laugh. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt." The alcohol would have no effect on him, and while he would not taste it with any clarity, it would do him no harm.

"It doesn't hurt at all," Jean agreed, "and it's better than making Raymond drink alone."

Raymond led them inside and up to the suite of rooms he and Jean used when they were in residence. He left Jean to pour the cognac while he went into the bedroom to hang up his coat, closing the door behind him on his way back out into the sitting room. He and Jean often invited the other faculty of the l'Institut to join them for a drink, but their bedroom, both here and at their apartment in Paris, was private.

Taking a seat, he sipped the cognac and waited for Jean to begin the discussion. He might have an idea of the implications of the last two nights' events, but he preferred to let Jean take the lead. He was no longer president of l'ANS.

Jean took a sip of his cognac as well. "This isn't what you usually drink," he said immediately, turning to Raymond. "When did you change brands?"

“You can taste the cognac?” Denis asked in surprise. “How is that possible?”

“Yes,” Raymond echoed, “how is that possible?”

Jean looked down at the liquor in the glass and then back at the other two men in the room. “I have no idea, but yes, I can taste it.”

“When did you start noticing it?” Raymond asked.

“I didn’t,” Jean said. “I hadn’t noticed it until tonight. Honestly, I didn’t even think about it tonight until Denis pointed it out.”

“Something else to add to our agenda,” Raymond said with a sigh. “I swear we end up with ten new questions for every answer we find, but that can wait until tomorrow. We didn’t invite Denis up here to talk about our research. You have more important things to talk about.”

“You’re right, of course,” Jean said, turning back to Denis. “Do you have any idea who we’re chasing here? Did anything Pascale say tonight give you a hint, even the smallest thing?”

“Not really,” Denis said. “A distinctive voice, but that’s hard to quantify. Many people have distinctive voices. I would recognize your voice instantly, for example, because of the odd way you say certain words. I’ve noticed it especially with very old vampires. Renaud was another perfect example. I don’t know that he’s quite your contemporary, but he’s certainly centuries old. Pascale could identify her attacker again because of that, but we can’t go searching based on it. We’ll need more than that before we can start hunting. I think for now we should focus our attention on what this means to us and how to deal with from a public relations standpoint. If people start to associate one vampire’s bad behavior with all vampires, we could be in for a rough ride.”

“And now that the war has been over for two years, people are starting to forget how instrumental vampires were in winning it,” Raymond added. “That was enough to avoid tarring all vampires with Couthon’s crimes. We have to find a way to do that again.”

“I think our best strategy will be to lead the outcry against him,” Jean said. “Turning a mortal isn’t against vampire law. Turning a mortal without permission isn’t even expressly against vampire law, although perhaps we won’t mention that. But turning a vampire and then abandoning her definitely qualifies as endangering another vampire, even if you don’t go into what his actions will do to the rest of us if he isn’t stopped. If we make it clear to the public that we are

outraged by his actions, if we declare him *extorris* under our law, we at least are seen to side with law and order.”

“Can we declare an unknown vampire *extorris*?” Denis asked. “How do we enforce it when we can’t even tell the members of our Cours who it is?”

“If nothing else, maybe telling them he’s outcast will be enough to give our vampire second thoughts about his course of action,” Jean said. “If we catch him, then we can identify him. It’s not about our Cours anyway. It’s about the general public.”

“Then there’s the issue of what charges Adèle can bring against him if we do catch him,” Raymond added. “Turning someone into a vampire without their consent isn’t illegal. I don’t think anyone other than maybe the vampire who did it would consider it a good thing, but there is no law on the books declaring it a crime, and until there is, he could only be accused of attacking her. That’s the other first step in this process. We need to get a law on the books to cover this situation so that when he’s arrested, we can charge him with his true crime. The question is where it fits on the scale of offenses, because it isn’t simply a matter of saying it’s illegal to change a person against their will. There will need to be a punishment, or range of punishments, established for the perpetrator of the crime.”

“Certainly assault,” Jean said, “but not homicide.”

“Not even involuntary homicide,” Denis agreed. “Not if the person is turned. They aren’t dead if they’re turned. Undead, but not dead. There is a difference.”

“Obviously,” Raymond said with a chuckle, “since you’re both here talking with me right now. So can we raise it to the level of rape, or do we have to stop at assault?”

“More importantly, is the sentence that might be a deterrent for a mortal sufficient deterrent for a vampire?” Jean asked. “Five years, ten years, even twenty years, is nothing to a vampire compared to that same time for a mortal.”

“Twenty years for one turning seems reasonable,” Denis said. “I’m not a legal expert, so I don’t know what the comparable crime would be, but because we’re dealing with vampires, each additional non-consensual turning would be an additional twenty years. Sequential sentences instead of concurrent.”



“I don’t know what the equivalent crime would be either,” Raymond said, “but we can find out. It looks like we’ll be taking another trip to Paris. You’re welcome to come if you’d like, Denis, although the legislators we work with have gotten used to Jean being able to go about in daylight. We could see about setting up an evening meeting if you want to attend.”

“I don’t need to meet with the legislators,” Denis said, “and indeed since the criminal is most likely from my Cour, if he belongs to any Cour, I think it would serve us all best if I have a word with them instead of going to Paris.”

“I’ll take you home, then,” Raymond said, setting aside his cognac. “Let us know if you learn anything useful, of course, and we’ll keep you updated on any progress with the legislative agenda.”

Raymond and Denis disappeared with a wave of Raymond’s wand. Jean took another sip of his cognac and waited for his lover to return.

## Chapter 5

IN A matter of minutes, Raymond reappeared in the sitting room.

“So it isn’t the worst thing in the world to be bitten by a vampire?” Jean drawled, stalking across the room to his lover’s side.

“No, it isn’t,” Raymond replied, hiding his smile. He had deliberately kept his words neutral in talking to Pascale earlier, not wanting to scare her with the possibility of a commitment she would have no way to process. There would be time to broach the subject of l’Institut and partnerships later, when she had recovered from her turning. “In fact, it might even be slightly more than tolerable.”

“Tolera—” Jean’s control snapped, his hands tugging at Raymond’s clothes. A whispered spell sent them to the floor, leaving Raymond gloriously naked and, Jean noticed, fully aroused. As always since their Aveu de Sang, their bodies were totally in sync. “In the bedroom. Now.”

Raymond considered casting another spell to move into the bedroom, but that would deny him the ability to tempt Jean even more as he walked naked across the room. He doubted the fang marks Jean had left on his backside while they were in Paris Sunday night were still visible, but their absence would drive Jean nearly as wild as their presence, his lover’s need to stake a claim almost as overwhelming as Raymond’s desire to be covered in the proof of Jean’s devotion. Raymond reached the bedroom door, looking back over his shoulder. “Are you going to stand there all night, or are you going to join me?”

In less than the blink of an eye, Jean reached Raymond’s side, crowding him through the door and onto the bed. His fangs dropped as he tore off his own clothing, needing blood—Raymond’s blood—now. The moment he was naked, he pounced, bearing Raymond back onto the bed and sheathing his fangs in his lover’s willing flesh. It did not matter where he bit, though they both had their favorite spots. For now he would settle for the taste of Raymond’s blood augmenting the passion he could already feel through their bond.

Raymond's hands burrowed into Jean's shoulder-length hair, stroking his scalp as he sucked on the patch of skin right above Raymond's navel. "Feels so good," Raymond whispered. They did not need the words, but Raymond gave them to his vampire anyway.

Jean lifted his head, blood coating his fangs. "What would feel best?"

Everything felt best as far as Raymond was concerned, but he enjoyed teasing his lover on occasion. Lifting his hips, he bumped his cock against Jean's chin, knowing it was the one place Jean would never bite him.

"Vieux con," Jean muttered, feeling his fangs retract without conscious thought. The Aveu de Sang that bound them made it impossible for him to hurt his lover. Raymond wanted Jean's mouth on his cock, so his fangs pulled back to make that possible, Jean's desire to feed irrelevant in the face of his wizard's request. He lowered his head, taking the rigid shaft in his mouth, licking and teasing the head until Raymond's fabled self-mastery cracked and he squirmed on the bed. Deciding he liked driving his controlled lover wild, Jean stroked the tip of one long finger over Raymond's drawn-up sac and then lower to tap against his entrance.

"Putain." Raymond's hips bucked up into the tantalizing touch, the motion driving his cock deeper into Jean's mouth. He had set out to tease his lover, but that had backfired spectacularly. With Jean between his legs, he was completely at the vampire's mercy.

Not that he minded.

Grabbing the bottle of lube they kept by the bed, he dropped it on the sheet next to Jean's hand. "Fuck me already."

"You mean you didn't get enough of that this weekend?" Jean teased, lifting his head. The moment Raymond's cock left his mouth, Jean's fangs reappeared, his need for blood held at bay only by his inability to hurt his lover.

"I'll never get enough of you," Raymond swore. He ran his hand up his own chest, lingering over the bite mark on his chest.

Immediately Jean pushed his hand aside, covering the mark with his lips and then deepening it with his fangs. Raymond gasped as Jean sucked at his chest, the movement of his lips drawing blood and stimulating Raymond's nipple at the same time. Desperate now for the final connection between them, he covered Jean's cock with lube and

guided the shaft to his entrance. He could feel Jean's hesitation through their bond, but Raymond ignored it. They had made love often enough last night and earlier today that his body would stretch easily.

Jean sensed his reassurance, working his way slowly into Raymond's body. It seemed to take forever, but neither of them cared for the passing of time. They cared only for the joining of mind, body, and spirit that only existed when they made love this way.

When Jean was fully seated, Raymond's hands settled on his hips. "Don't move yet," he said. "Stay right there, so deep inside me I can feel you all the way up to my heart."

Jean froze at the husky request. Outside this room, he and Raymond were mostly equals, with Jean occasionally the ascendant one before the Cour of Paris, but in their bedroom, Jean was a slave to Raymond's desires. If Raymond wanted to draw out their lovemaking so that he came from Jean's fangs against his heart, Jean would make it so.

Raymond's eyes closed as Jean stilled within him, only his mouth still working as he drew more and more blood into his mouth. Raymond did not worry about how much Jean took—the Aveu de Sang protected him from overfeeding. Instead he concentrated on the incredibly erotic feeling of Jean's fangs in his flesh and Jean's cock in his arse. He swore he could feel it pulse inside him in time to the pounding of his own heart. Jean had explained once that a vampire's heart beat in time with the heart of the person he had fed from most recently until the next time he fed. Given that Jean would feed from no other while Raymond lived, the beating of their hearts was as entwined as the rest of their lives.

Passion built in Raymond's gut as he focused on the regular pull of Jean's fangs. Each time Jean sucked blood into his mouth, Raymond swore he could feel him penetrate deeper until he was sure Jean would touch his heart with the razor-sharp canines. His head spun as his hands dug into the muscles of Jean's shoulders. He tried to hold back a little longer, but his body had learned too well to associate Jean feeding with the explosive lust between them. Desire built and built, spiraling through him and out across his bond with Jean, only to rush back, augmented by Jean's need, until nothing existed but that moment in time and space, their bodies as linked as their minds and hearts.

Jean tasted the moment when Raymond's control shattered, when anything else ceased to exist, even before he felt the hot splash of the wizard's release between their bodies. The taste of Raymond's climax

in his blood followed by the sweet rush of satiation set fire to Jean as well, his orgasm spooling through him and out of him to fill his lover's body with proof of his adoration. He gentled his suckling, his fangs resting in Raymond's chest as his softening cock rested in Raymond's passage, letting the moment of communion stretch.

Finally, though, he had to lift his head, licking quickly at the bite marks to close them.

"Not that I'm complaining, because you know I'm not, but what brought that on tonight?" Raymond asked. "After last night and this afternoon, I expected it to be a couple of days before you were hungry again."

"I'm always hungry for you," Jean said. "I just usually control it better than I did tonight."

"You know I'm perfectly happy with you not controlling it," Raymond reminded him with a smile. "This has you worried, doesn't it?"

Jean nodded. "It could undo all our hard work over the past two years to convince people of vampires' right to be treated fairly and our ability to live within the confines of the law."

"That's what you have to make people understand," Raymond said. "That he isn't living within the confines of the law, human or vampire, and that vampires are as upset about his behavior as mortals will be when they learn about it. It will be an uphill battle, no doubt about it, but that doesn't mean it's one we have to lose. I need to sleep a little and then we'll go see Anne-Marie again and get the legal people at l'ANS started on legislation we can propose. We'll deal with this the same way we've dealt with everything else since the alliance began."

Jean smiled, the simple reminder reassuring him. "Together."

ADÈLE let herself into her house in Château-Chinon, resetting the wards and locking the door behind her. She tossed her keys and wand in the basket she kept by the door so she wouldn't have to search for them in the morning and stretched, her back arching as she reached toward the ceiling. Her whole body hurt from the tension of being in the same room with Pascale and not letting anyone see the turmoil. The stretches helped, but they would not relax her enough for her to sleep.

Pulling the pins from the chignon that kept her long hair confined during the day, she shook it out, feeling that bit of tension leave her as well. She walked slowly through the small house to the bathroom, turning the hot water on full and closing the door to keep the heat inside. She would soak until she was wrinkled and then go to bed.

And forget about the woman in Paris who could be her partner if Adèle would let her.

Stripping down, she climbed in the tub, hissing as the hot water hit her chilled skin. It would be time to turn the heat on soon, and then another long, cold winter. Every winter she swore she would move to Provence, but she never did. No matter how much she cursed the cold weather, this was home in a way no other place had ever been.

Settling into the water, she closed her eyes and wondered how she had managed to be the one driving along the road from Dommartin to Château-Chinon at exactly the right—or wrong—moment to find Pascale. Any of the wizards associated with the now-defunct Milice de Sorcellerie would have done the same thing she had done, but none of them would have had to worry about the consequences, because they all had partners. They would have calmed Pascale down, taken her back to l’Institut or on to Paris to see Angelique, and gone home to their partners. Instead, Adèle had to be the one to find her. Adèle, who did not have a partner to go home to. Adèle, who had hated having a partner the first time around.

“I don’t want another partner, damn it,” she muttered, dunking her head beneath the water so she could wash her hair. “The one I had the first time was bad enough.”

Jude had been gone for six months, mostly out of her life for a year before that, and yet she still tensed when she saw a shadow across a doorway, expecting to hear his voice drawling, “Hello, pussy” in greeting before he grabbed her.

She shuddered in disgust at herself as she felt her body react to the mere thought of him touching her. If only her body had reacted with the same disgust as her mind, she might have been able to deal with him, but even as he had spewed filth at her, he had aroused her as none of her previous lovers had ever done.

Even with a partner she had hated, the partnership had turned sexual. Adèle had no illusions a new partnership would be any less so. She had nothing against sex, but she liked men, and her potential new partner was most definitely not a man. She might have said that would

make it easier to keep her partnership on a functional level only, but she had seen what happened with Sebastien and Thierry. She was not in Thierry's confidence, so perhaps he had been bisexual before meeting Sebastien and she had simply been unaware of it, but one way or another, he had gone from being married to being partnered with Sebastien. She had seen them together during the war and since then. They showed all the same hallmarks of a deeper relationship that she had remarked in Alain and Orlando or Jean and Raymond. She had never been invited into their quarters at l'Institut, where they lived full-time now, but she doubted she would find more than one bed if she were.

She could not care less about what they did in the privacy of their own rooms. Their relationship was their business, but she had no interest in copying it. She had never looked at women in any kind of sexual manner. Sure, she could see why men would find certain women more attractive than others or say whether an outfit was flattering on another woman, but that was hardly the same as wanting to take one to her bed.

She liked men.

"This is getting me nowhere," she muttered with a sigh. Scrubbing quickly, she got out of the bath and dried off, wrapping her hair in a thick towel to blot some of the water out before blowing it dry. As she dressed, she tried to imagine sharing her house with another woman. Two sets of toiletries on the edge of the tub, two brushes, two hairdryers, two nightgowns instead of one. She could list the changes, but she could not fathom making them. She had never shared her house with anyone. She had never met anyone she wanted to share her life with that way, certainly not her former partner, yet if she accepted that she had a new partner, she had to be open to those changes.

As set in her ways as she was, she could make those changes if she had the right incentive, if she met the right man. And therein lay the rub. On the rare occasions she imagined a relationship, it had always been with a man.

Adèle had little patience with her own sex most of the time, finding far too many of them melodramatic, weepy, or weak. She could think of a few exceptions. Magali Ducassé, the wizard who had always stayed behind at the end of a battle to mop up, was possibly the deadliest wizard Adèle knew, and given some of the things Adèle had seen during l'émeute des Sorciers, that was saying something.

Angelique Bouaddi at Sang Froid had always struck Adèle as being a shrewd entrepreneur who ran her business with an iron fist despite her ultra-feminine appearance. If Angelique had been her partner rather than David's, Adèle might not have hesitated as much. She could picture a functioning partnership with a woman like Angelique, intelligent, savvy, wily, even, and not afraid to go after what she wanted.

Magali was not a vampire, so a partnership with her was out of the question, but Adèle had worked with her during the war and had found that collaboration to be nearly seamless. If Magali were a vampire, Adèle thought perhaps they could make something of a partnership as well.

Adèle could not claim to know Pascale well, but nothing in what she had seen of the newly turned vampire gave her any reason to respect the other woman. Being turned was a life-changing experience. Adèle understood that, but she did not understand the impulse to self-destruction. She had never been one to bemoan what could not be changed, choosing to work through the challenges in her life and to come out stronger on the other side. Pascale's histrionics were exactly the kind of display that made Adèle roll her eyes and dismiss a person from her esteem. She would never be able to make a partnership work with someone like that, male or female. She would lose patience and shout, as she was wont to do, and Pascale would wail and storm out, and that would be the end of it.

Better never to begin.

RAYMOND went to the réfectoire for breakfast the next morning, leaving Jean in their rooms busily contacting other chefs de la Cour. Halfway through the night, Jean had left their bed to pace the sitting room. Raymond had given up luring him back to bed when even walking into the room naked had not gotten his lover's attention. It drove home the gravity of the situation with the nonconsensual turning far more than anything else could have done. Jean had never passed up a chance to ravish him before, even when they were still pretending their relationship was only functional.

After breakfast, Raymond would call Anne-Marie Valour, his replacement as president of l'ANS, and set up a meeting with her to



discuss the situation and the legislation, but no one would be at the office this early.

To his surprise, Martin Delacroix sat at one of the tables nursing a cup of coffee. "Good morning," Raymond said, bringing his own coffee and croissants to the table. "I didn't expect to see you awake this morning."

"I haven't been to sleep," Martin admitted. "My mind is racing too fast to relax."

"Would it help to talk about it?" Raymond asked. "I have a few things to do this morning, but nothing that can't wait an hour or two. We could go to my office and hash things out."

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind?" Martin asked. "I don't want to take you away from your responsibilities."

"I don't mind," Raymond said. "Alain and Orlando can handle the morning's session by themselves. They've done it plenty of times now, and while I'm slated to present this afternoon, I hope we can settle your mind in less than five hours."

"I hope so too," Martin said with a laugh. "I'd like to sleep at some point. Coffee and adrenaline are only good for so long."

Raymond did not add his own suggestion for pushing his limits past their normal range. During the war, Jean feeding from him had often allowed him to stretch his waking hours into longer days than should have been possible, but Raymond had no intention of sharing his lover with anyone. Not that Jean could feed from any other mortal, even if he wanted to or Raymond agreed. The brand on Raymond's back saw to that.

"If you don't mind me eating while we talk, we can go now," Raymond said. "The sooner we get started, the sooner you can sleep."

Martin nodded and followed Raymond through the building to the director's office that he and Jean shared, more because Jean had a tendency to end up wherever Raymond was working anyway. It had happened when Raymond was president of l'ANS, and it happened even more now.

"So what's on your mind?" Raymond asked, taking a seat in one of the armchairs and gesturing for Martin to make himself comfortable in either the other one or on the couch.

"I read up on l'émeute des Sorciers before I came," Martin began slowly, "every scrap of news I could find. I studied all the conventional

wisdom about vampires. I wanted to arrive having done my homework. I walked out of the session last night feeling like I knew nothing at all.”

“There is a difference between reading about something and living it,” Raymond agreed, “or talking with people who lived it. Thierry is quite a compelling speaker when he starts on the topic of the war and the desperation that led to the alliance.”

“Did Serrier truly believe he could establish and maintain a magical oligarchy?” Martin asked. “That’s madness.”

“No more so than Hitler and his Aryan race,” Raymond replied. “Serrier went mad before the end. I wasn’t there when he was killed during the final battle. I was elsewhere, helping Jean deal with a rogue vampire, but from what I heard of those final moments, there’s no doubt he had left the realm of sanity some time before. When he first started his campaign, though, he was using very different rhetoric. He started with the restrictions on the use of magic that many wizards felt—and still feel—are unnecessarily limited. By the time his madness became clear, a lot of wizards were in too deep to get out. In fact, I’m only aware of two who did so successfully. He killed the others.”

“How to win friends and influence people,” Martin said with a shake of his head. “And the magical equilibrium was dangerously out of balance. You’d think wizards from other countries would have noticed and helped.”

“I have a theory on that,” Raymond said, “although I have no real way of testing it. The local equilibrium was completely haywire, but I’m not sure how widespread that was outside of France other than the typhoon that hit la Réunion. I was too busy at the time fighting a war to check beyond that, and now it’s too late. And honestly, the last thing we wanted was to drag more wizards into our fight, because we risked losing as many to Serrier as we recruited to our side. We needed local people who we could convince of the negative ramifications of Serrier winning. The vampires were the logical choice.”

“Why?”

“In hindsight, the answer to that is why we’re here, but we didn’t know any of that at the time,” Raymond said with a laugh. “At the time, we had to weigh the weaknesses of each of the magical races against their strengths. Vampires are limited by daylight unless they have a wizard partner—something else we didn’t know at the time—but they are fast, strong, ruthless, and most importantly, they were willing to help us.”

“The vampires during the session didn’t seem particularly trusting,” Martin observed. “How in the world did you convince them to help?”

“Chance, mostly,” Raymond admitted. “If Marcel—Général Chavinier, the former president of l’ANS, leader of the Milice de Sorcellerie, and the man for whom l’Institut is named—if Marcel had chosen a different emissary, I don’t know that we would have been successful. For that matter, I don’t know if the alliance would have happened if Jean had sent someone else to the meeting. Alain and Orlando met the first time, Orlando tasted Alain’s blood to verify he was telling the truth, and the rest is history. Their instant connection to each other gave them each the incentive to press for cooperation, not just initially, but for weeks into the alliance. I can’t count the number of times Orlando, especially, shouted that we would never be successful if we fought each other instead of fighting Serrier.”

“So they knew they were partners immediately?” Martin verified.

“Not in those terms,” Raymond replied. “You have to remember we didn’t know anything about the magical exchange we’ve dubbed a partnership. We went looking for allies in a war. We found them, but we found so much more as well. Even now, two years later, we’re still discovering ramifications of the relationships we created. At the time, we knew nothing. Orlando knew he felt something special when he fed from Alain. Alain knew he felt more than he could have imagined possible when Orlando bit him. That led them to make a commitment to each other, the Aveu de Sang we mentioned last night, but we still had no idea what the lesser partnership commitment involved. The Aveu de Sang was between them. It was only later, as the partnerships spread and began to deepen, that we realized there was far more to a partnership than the exchange of blood and the protection from sunlight for the vampires.”

“Within months of forming the alliance, Serrier was dead and the Milice was victorious,” Martin commented. “There was obviously a whole lot more going on beneath the surface.”

“We didn’t realize it until nearly the last days of the war, but every wizard with a partner was getting stronger every time his vampire fed,” Raymond explained. “We knew about the short-term effects before then, but not that it was cumulative. By the time the war ended, that increase had been going on for months. Serrier was still a powerful wizard, but alone, he couldn’t have stood against any pair. He certainly couldn’t stand against Marcel and his partner.”

"I didn't realize the general had a partner," Martin interrupted.

"He does and he doesn't," Raymond explained. "There is a vampire who could be his partner, but that vampire lives in seclusion and chooses not to feed from Marcel. He was at the final battle, though, augmenting Marcel's strength as he faced Serrier."

"So it is possible to have a partnership and not have it take over your life," Martin said.

"Maybe," Raymond replied, "but they spent a matter of hours together. Monsieur Lombard fed twice, maybe three times in that span of time. To my knowledge, while they still meet to discuss politics and who knows what else, there has been no exchange of blood between them since then. While Alain and Orlando's bond was instantaneous, that doesn't always seem to be the case. Certainly the bond grows stronger with repeated exposure. Even most of us who have embraced our partners now took more than a few days—and a few feedings—to make that decision. Marcel may see his partner on a regular basis, but without the exchange of blood, there's no exchange of magic and nothing to strengthen the bond."

"So does the bond fade over time if the partners are separated?" Martin asked.

"The only case of separation we're aware of was Adèle Rougier and her partner Jude Leighton," Raymond said. "Adèle chose not to continue their partnership after the war ended, a decision Jude did not agree with. By the time the war ended, though, their partnership had formed, however imperfectly. Leighton was destroyed in an accident at l'Institut six months ago, but at the time, he showed no lessening of interest in Adèle. She refuses to talk about her relationship with him, and since it's no longer an issue, I haven't forced the matter."

"That could be something worth investigating," Martin mused aloud.

"I know of one other pair that would be willing to be separated," Raymond offered, "if that's what you decide you want to look into. Another option would be to work on the increase in magical strength. We have intake numbers for wizards who have been through the seminar here, and we have post-war numbers for the wizards who formed their partnerships during the alliance. We have no idea what the limits are, or indeed if there are limits or other parameters for the increases. We haven't had time to examine the data we have, much less set up any active experiments to test it."

A yawn forestalled Martin's answer. "Perhaps I should get some sleep and think some more about it later," he said. "I'll leave you to your day. I'm hoping a short nap will set me right and I can attend the afternoon session with the wizards, since I haven't met any of them yet."

"Sleep well," Raymond said, "and I'll look for you this afternoon."

Martin nodded and left Raymond alone in his office.

Raymond finished his coffee and picked up the phone to call Fabienne, his former assistant, who worked for Anne-Marie Valour now. She would understand the importance of his call and find a way to work him into the president's busy schedule.

## Chapter 6

DENIS waited in the shadows outside the musée Rolin, where he had directed the other vampires in the Cour to meet. Autun was not a large city, not by Parisian standards, and the Cour was similarly small, but while Denis could have invited the full complement of vampires to his home, he wanted the more formal setting for a meeting of such importance. At barely ninety years old, he was little more than a baby in the eyes of many vampires. His successful bid to take the Cour d'Autun from a much older, established vampire mitigated his age to a certain extent, but only to a certain extent. Only time and effective leadership would do the rest. Time he did not have at the moment.

To that end, he had taken great pains with his appearance tonight, doing everything he could to play down his age and highlight his authority. The black three-piece suit he wore fit perfectly, the austere lines making him appear taller, the somber color and conservative cut a throwback to the time of his turning but also a subtle declaration of his authority. He kept his black hair short, slicked into submission rather than tumbled around his face as it would be if he let it grow. The look appealed at times, but not when he faced a possibly hostile Cour. Tonight it was all about control of himself and of the others.

He kept count as the vampires slowly arrived. He did not expect all forty members of the Cour to attend, but he hoped for a majority at least. When the count reached twenty-eight and he saw no one else moving in the night, he made his entrance. Never mind that he had arrived well before any of them. He was the chef de la Cour. Le Jeu des Cours dictated he wait for no one.

The other vampires stood in groups of twos and threes around the room, mostly in silence. They turned as Denis walked to the front of the room. He faced them, keenly aware of his youthful appearance and relatively young age, but they had chosen to put their trust in him six months ago when he had challenged Renaud for leadership of the Cour. He would have to hope that trust continued a little longer.

“Bonsoir, chers amis,” Denis said by way of greeting. “Thank you for coming out tonight with as little explanation as I provided. I know you have little reason to trust my leadership yet, but I would not have convened the Cour if it weren’t a matter of importance.” He was taking a risk, acknowledging the short duration of his tenure as chef de la Cour, but it was on everyone’s mind, he was certain. If he put it out in the open, they could not blindside him with it later.

“I received a call last night from Jean Bellaiche, the chef de la Cour of Paris, who is, as some of you know, very involved with l’Institut Marcel Chavinier in Dommartin. He called because he had gotten word of a newly turned vampire from Château-Chinon.”

“You summoned us to tell us there’s a new vampire?” Auguste Chambertin, one of the prickliest vampires in Autun, demanded. Denis had known to expect a challenge from that quarter. Auguste had challenged Renaud the same way every time the Cour gathered. The vampire did not want to be chef de la Cour himself, but he had no patience for any other leader either. “What a waste of time!”

“No, I summoned you because the new vampire was turned against her will,” Denis replied, keeping his voice level despite the roil of anger at being challenged so soon. Expecting it did not make it any easier when it happened. He knew the way le Jeu des Cours worked. He had used it on Renaud, challenging him subtly in gatherings such as this, slowly undermining his authority until he was positioned within the eyes of the Cour as the logical successor for a man who had lost their confidence. Now he had to play the game to keep his position, and any show of anger or discomfiture would weaken him in the eyes of his peers. “She didn’t see her attacker, and I am not accusing any of you, before you jump to another false conclusion. However, the actions of the vampire who did turn her put us all at risk. I’m not asking any of you to account for your whereabouts Sunday evening. I’m not investigating the crime because that is the purview of the local police, who have been notified and who are working on the case. If they come to me for more assistance than I’ve already given, though, I will give them all the information in my possession.”

“What are you threatening?”

“Absolutely nothing if you weren’t the one to turn Pascale Auboussu against her will,” Denis replied, keeping his smile as hidden as he had his anger. If they felt threatened, then they still recognized his authority. By the time Denis had challenged Renaud, the former chef de

la Cour had resorted to wild threats of banishment or worse for anyone who did not follow his dictates. Army experience aside, Denis had never been one to yield easily to orders. “The vampire who did this is *extorris*, which is what I summoned you to announce. By his actions, he endangered not only the vampire he turned and abandoned, but also all vampires who do their best to function as law-abiding citizens. Bellaiche will make the same announcement to his Cour in Paris, although suspicion is far more likely to fall on us than on his Cour simply because of proximity. Our hope is that other chefs de la Cour will make the same announcement as well, but our decision stands regardless of their action or inaction on the matter. If a detective comes to ask you questions, I suggest you cooperate. Human justice may be less harsh than vampire justice, but they are far pickier about what you do to begin with.”

“And until you know who the *extorris* is?” Auguste demanded. Denis thought he heard a change in the other vampire’s tone. Auguste might still be making demands, but he had gone from being hostile to wanting Denis’s assurances. If Auguste had backed down, Denis was probably safe from a fight to hold onto his position.

“Until we know the identity of the *extorris*, I will defend all members of my Cour equally,” Denis said. “I will not have my Cour persecuted, but neither will I have innocent vampires endangered by the actions of someone who has stepped outside our laws. If you were not the one responsible for the involuntary turning, I will protect you with every ounce of authority in my position and every bit of cunning and strength I possess. We are not facing this alone. Already, l’ANS is drafting legislation to address the crime that was committed and to protect the rest of us from being tarred with the same brush. The same political force that ended l’*émeutte des Sorciers* and brought about the equality legislation that has improved things for all of us is working to make sure we don’t lose ground because of this now. We owe it to ourselves and to them to do nothing that would impede that process.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?”

“First, by giving all assistance we can to the authorities,” Denis said, meeting the eyes of every vampire in the room as he spoke. “Secondly, by showing a unified front in condemning the actions of the *extorris* in any setting where it comes up.”

“We have survived for centuries because we have always defended our own,” Auguste protested.



“We have,” Denis agreed, fully aware of his youth in comparison to the others in the room, not merely because he had been turned at nineteen, but because his turning outside Amiens at the height of World War I made him by far the youngest vampire in the room. “That mentality protected us for years. I don’t have the experience that some of you do, but I wasn’t turned yesterday either. I’m fully aware of our history. I’m also aware of what has changed in the past two years and why. We have rights we could never have imagined possessing because a few vampires dared to break our kind’s tradition of isolation and self-interest only, but if we handle this situation poorly, we could lose those rights as quickly as we gained them. Six months ago, you trusted me to challenge Renaud because you believed my leadership would better serve the Cour in these changing times. These events prove once again how important it is to be proactive in dealing with our new situation. If we wait for them to come to us, if we wait to defend ourselves after public opinion has turned against us, we will lose ground. Every one of you is thinking about le Jeu des Cours, but this isn’t about status within the Cour any longer. This is about our status in society as a whole. We are masters at turning things to our advantage. We have played this game among ourselves for centuries. The time has come to turn those skills outward to our advantage rather than fighting among ourselves.”

The room erupted in a rumble of mutters. Denis let them talk among themselves. Their lives were so steeped in le Jeu des Cours that the idea of setting it aside, even in the face of a common danger, would take some adjustment for many of the vampires.

“So what exactly do you propose?” Camille Faurie asked when the whispers died out.

“The man who did this, whether he is in this room or out doing who knows what, has forfeited the right to our protection,” Denis said. “Turning a human into a vampire is no crime, but Pascale Auboussu had no desire to be turned and no help once she was turned. When the detective found her, she was about to throw herself off a bridge. If the fall had not destroyed her, daylight undoubtedly would have. The vampire who created her and left her violated our most basic tenet of not harming another vampire. Do we at least agree on that matter?”

The others nodded with varying degrees of enthusiasm, but no one dissented.

“Then all I propose is separating ourselves from him,” Denis said, “not only privately in our internal declaration of him as *extorris* but

publicly. We need to denounce what he did every time we hear it mentioned. In my role as chef de la Cour, I will handle a public statement, but it isn't what I say on the news or in print that will sway people. It's hearing that average vampires are as horrified at what happened as they are."

"We've never talked about Cour business with mortals," Auguste reminded Denis.

"I'm not suggesting you bring it up," Denis said. "I'd be perfectly happy if no one not directly involved ever heard about what happened, but I don't expect that to be the case. I expect word to get out, and when it does, people will talk about how horrible it is. If you hear someone say something like that, agree with them. Make it clear you're a vampire and that you're as unhappy about it as they are. If you get the chance to mention that most vampires aren't like that one or that we're doing all we can to find him and bring him to justice, that's even better, but that isn't necessary. That's my job, and I'll do it. Are we in agreement?"

Denis let the silence stretch after his final question, standing with loose-limbed grace as he waited for the assent of his Cour or the next challenge. He had made his position clear. A challenge, if it came now, would be a physical one.

"Your plan could backfire on us," Camille said finally. "If we draw attention to our vampire natures and public opinion swings against us, the crazies will know exactly who we are and where to find us."

"I know that," Denis said, "and if it happens, it may mean leaving Autun for some period of time, but the risk of silence is greater. As long as we have protection under the law, we can fight back against the crazies, as you call them. If we lose that protection, we have nothing but our own wits."

"We have survived by those wits for centuries," Auguste said.

"We have, but never as openly or comfortably as we have in the past two years," Denis said. "Do you really want to go back?"

"No," Auguste said after a moment.

"No," Camille agreed.

"Then help me—help *us* keep our new rights by helping people see we aren't monsters," Denis entreated. "We all have stories to tell of how we were turned, of people we have turned rather than watch them die. Share those stories when you can. I think it would surprise people

if they realized a vampire came to me as I lay dying on a battlefield and offered to speed my passing if that was my wish or to give me a different kind of existence. When mortals had left me to die alone, a vampire offered kindness, companionship, and most importantly help, and all around me on the battlefield, other vampires did the same.”

“That is how people should be turned,” Camille said, her voice so soft Denis could barely hear her. He kept his face neutral, but inside he crowed with delight. He had won.

“Then tell people that,” he said just as softly. “They think we are damned. Let them see this other side of us. We won’t convince everyone, but if we can sway the majority, the others can go jump in a lake for all I care.”

THE meeting finally adjourned, Denis walked through the empty streets toward home. He needed to feed. Not desperately yet—he could wait until tomorrow night—but soon. Letting himself into the dark cottage he called home, he switched on a lamp and collapsed onto the nearest chair, heedless of his suit now that he was alone with no one to impress.

The meeting had gone better than he had feared it would. He had half expected to have to fight for his position before the night was over, but logic had won the day. He would have to talk to Bellaiche and see when they should schedule a press conference. They did not want to create panic instead of appeasing it, but Denis still thought a preemptive strike would serve them better than defensive action later.

That could wait until tomorrow night, though. He doubted Bellaiche had managed to meet with his own Cour yet, and until that occurred, the rogue vampire was only *extorris* in Autun, which was not much of a statement. Denis had no illusions as to his status among the other chefs de la Cour. Autun was too small, Denis was too young, and his leadership was too new for him to have any pull with the other chefs. Jean, on the other hand, as the chef de la Cour of the capital, as a vampire over a millennium old, as one of the heroes of l’*émeute des Sorciers* and one of the activists for equal rights, would be able to bring others around if this spread beyond le Morvan and they needed the help of the Congrès des chefs.

Denis sighed and rubbed his belly, hunger beginning to make itself felt. A quick glance at the clock showed he had two hours until dawn. He could go to Dommartin. During the week, Sang Froid kept business hours at an auxiliary location for the vampires at l'Institut, but that would only give him a short time to feed given the distance there and back. It was that or wait until tomorrow night, though. He could wait. He was not a newly turned vampire in need of constant blood.

He missed Noël. He missed the companionship, the ease of always having someone to feed from when he needed it. Not for the first time since Noël's death, he considered the advantages of finding another regular source of blood even if he did not invite that person into his home and his heart as he had with Noël. He was no monk. At times, he had found release in the arms of those he fed from since Noël's death, but none of them had touched him the way Noël had. Next to Noël's, their blood tasted flat, and that was why Denis rarely went back for more. His lover had spoiled him for everyone else. The strength of his character and his love had carried through their feeding, giving Denis a sense of well-being and satiation that he had not felt since the last time he had fed from Noël before his death. If he fed more often, perhaps he could recapture some of that sense of wellness, but he could work up no enthusiasm for that undertaking.

That did not stop him from dreaming, though. He had no particular interest in a partnership such as the ones he saw among the vampires and wizards he had met at l'Institut, but he did envy those vampires the companionship they had found with their partners. Other vampires had told him to give it time before he looked for a new companion. They assured him it was possible to find another intimate, even another love eventually, but everyone he had asked warned against rushing into something before he was ready. Looking at the picture of Noël on the table next to him, he knew he was not ready.

## Chapter 7

DAVID groaned as Angelique settled against him, having driven him to a mind-shattering orgasm as she fed and rode him to oblivion. He wanted to hold her, but the ties around his wrists made that impossible. Whispering a spell he could not have done a year ago, he released the ties and wrapped his arms around her slender shoulders.

“You’re getting better at that,” Angelique murmured. “I’ll have to find something more complicated to tie you up with before long.”

“I’m not about to say no to anything you suggest,” David said, thinking of all the ways he and Angelique had made love since the end of the war. He had never imagined some of the delights she had shown him. “But you know you don’t need to. I enjoy what you do to me far too much to actually try to get away.” He shifted on the bed, rubbing one hand over his smarting backside. “Although you could have picked a day when I didn’t have meetings all morning. Sitting down is going to be a bitch.”

Angelique grinned and kissed her wizard as she smacked his cooling arse one more time. He moaned and undulated against her so beautifully she was tempted to give him a few more swats, but it was nearly time for him to get ready for work. “I didn’t want you to forget about me during the day.”

“Like that’s going to happen,” David said with a laugh. “I didn’t need a spanking—thank you, by the way, it was wonderful—to make me think about you.”

“Yes, but this way you’ll think about me every time you shift on your chair,” Angelique said, nipping lightly at his lips, her fangs scoring the tender flesh lightly. “Have a good day at work, and I’ll reward you for your suffering when you get home.”

A myriad of possibilities raced through David’s mind as he wondered what the reward would be. A fresh batch of henna to restore the decorations that had faded since the last time he painted her? Or maybe she’d greet him in her choli and sheer harem pants and play concubine to his sultan? Or perhaps it would be their other favorite

fantasy, him a French noble slated for the guillotine and her a woman with the power to save him if he agreed to grant her sexual favors? Whichever reward she had in mind, one of those or something else, he was sure to enjoy it. "One of these days I'm going to make a fool of myself in front of my boss because I can't stop thinking about you," he said, cupping her breast and squeezing gently. "If I lose my job because of it, you have to promise to support me."

Angelique leaned into the tender touch. "Sang Froid does well enough to support both of us."

David knew the truth of that simply from the little luxuries that appeared all around them. Angelique had fussed over the fit of his suits for work when he first moved in with her, insisting on helping him find proper clothes. He had insisted on paying for those himself out of the money he had saved while fighting in the Milice, but his independence did not stop her from showering him with other luxuries. When he had complained last week about his watch not working, she had surprised him that evening with a far nicer watch than the one he had broken. When he protested, she had kissed him and reminded him that her money was hers to spend as she chose, even if that meant she spent it on him. A year ago, he might have argued, his sense of how a relationship should work warring with her independence. It was a battle he had lost gladly, his own antiquated notions no match for her determination. Their lives together had been much more pleasant since then.

"Don't forget Orlando is expecting you before you go to work this morning," Angelique said, stretching languidly with all the grace and sensuality of a cat waking from a nap. David was tempted to roll her beneath him and go another round, but he did not want to be late for work, and he had promised Angelique he would bring Orlando by to speak with her newest protégée.

"Can I take a shower first?" he teased.

"I suppose," Angelique said, "but only if you promise to scrub my back while you're at it."

"You're going to make me late for work," David warned. "Again."

"Perhaps, but you're so good at your job and you work so many extra hours that your boss can't complain."

David was not so sure about that, but he did not argue. He would not put it past Angelique to give his boss a piece of her mind, and no

one needed that. "Come on, then," he said, rising from the bed and offering her his hand. "Let's go."

She rose with the grace of a belly dancer, her hips swishing in a way guaranteed to make his body react as she walked ahead of him into the bathroom. He hissed out the breath he had been holding and resigned himself to being late. Again.

Half an hour later, bathed, dressed, and ravished, he kissed Angelique goodbye and cast the displacement spell to take him to Alain and Orlando's house in Pouilly-en-Auxois. Orlando waited for him in the courtyard, basking in the weak fall sunlight. "You look like a cat curled up in the sun," David said when Orlando opened his eyes to greet him.

"It's a pleasure I was denied for a very long time," Orlando said. "I take advantage of it now every chance I get. Not that I get much chance to sit down."

"I imagine not," David agreed. "Shall we go? I need to get to work after I take you to Paris."

"Let me just tell Alain I'm leaving," Orlando said, going to the door of the house and calling inside to his lover. When he closed the door, David cast the displacement spell to take them back to Sang Froid. Waiting only to make sure Orlando was steady on his feet, David cast a second spell, taking himself to work.

"Angelique?" Orlando called.

"In my office," Angelique called back. Orlando opened the door that stood ajar and joined her in the luxurious room. "Thank you for coming."

"You're welcome," Orlando said. "Your message said it was urgent."

"Has Jean told you at all about the vampire they found on Sunday?" Angelique asked.

"Not a lot," Orlando said, "but enough that I can guess why you called."

"I've tried to help her see how to survive as a vampire," Angelique said, ushering him out of the office and into the warren of rooms that made up her business, "but my turning was a voluntary one, a way to escape the harem that was my prison. I have no experience with what she is feeling right now."

“She’s scared,” Orlando said immediately, “or maybe with your help, she’s passed that stage already. She’s angry, bewildered, confused, with no idea how she’ll survive now in a world that has no place for her, or at least that’s the way she sees it.”

“I knew you would understand,” Angelique said. “Will you speak with her? I know you can’t fix her situation, but it might help her to see that it’s possible to have the kind of turning she did—and worse—and still recover to find happiness and peace.”

“I don’t know how much help I’ll be,” Orlando cautioned, “but I will share whatever wisdom I have.”

“She’s staying in one of my guest rooms,” Angelique said. “She’ll be ready to leave before long, I think, but I wanted to keep her close until I was sure she was ready. She’ll probably be more comfortable talking to you there.”

“She doesn’t have our protection from sunlight,” Orlando said with a nod. He remembered all too well the need to hunker down in a dark room and not move during the daylight hours, even to another darkened room. “I probably should explain that to her as well.”

“She’s seen some of it,” Angelique said, “both at l’Institut and here with me. I took her out to hunt last night, but I chose not to feed. On the way back, she asked me why, and I reminded her I had a partner. I don’t think she really understands what that entails yet.”

“But then neither do we,” Orlando said with a laugh. “I wonder how many of us would have formed partnerships if we’d known then what we know now.”

“Certainly not as many as did,” Angelique agreed, “but few of us regret it. Despite my rough start with David, I wouldn’t change it now.”

Angelique stopped outside a door and rapped lightly. “Pascale, there’s someone here I’d like you to meet.”

Pascale did not answer, but Angelique pushed the door open anyway. Orlando waited on the threshold, not wanting the vampire inside to feel outnumbered or uncomfortable. He was not surprised to see blankets draped over the windows, as if the closed volets did not provide enough protection. It had taken him months after Jean rescued him from Thurloe’s dungeon before he would stir from behind his closed bed curtains while the sun was above the horizon. He had overcome that paranoia long before he met Alain, even if he had still been forced to stay inside until his Avoué’s blood gave him immunity,



but it had taken time and much patience on Jean's part. Orlando would give Pascale the same time and space if she needed it.

"Pascale," Angelique said, lifting the covers completely hiding the body in the bed and peering beneath. "The volets are closed and you've covered them with blankets. The only light in the room is from the hallway, and it's from the light fixture, not from the sun. It's safe to come out. There's someone I want you to meet."

"It's all right, Angelique," Orlando said. "I have a better idea." He stepped inside and shut the door. "Now it's safe. There's no light, even from the hallway." Even his preternatural vision could barely penetrate the blackness, and he felt for the chair along the wall as much as he saw it there. Taking a seat, he added, "But there's also no reason Pascale can't stay safely under the duvet. We can talk even if she doesn't come out."

"I don't want to talk to anyone else," Pascale said, her voice muffled by the covers. "I've told them everything I remember."

"That isn't—"

"Angelique," Orlando interrupted, "why don't you go take care of business and let Pascale and me talk for a bit? This will be easier for both of us without anyone else around."

Angelique started to argue, but she decided against it. Orlando would never do anything to harm Pascale, and the conversation would probably do both of them some good. "I'll be in my office when you finish," Angelique said. "We can call Raymond or someone else at l'Institut to take you home when you're finished."

"Thanks," Orlando said. He had a suspicion he would need Alain's comforting presence by the time he finished talking with Pascale. Even more than two hundred years after he was turned and more than a century after Jean rescued him from his maker, the memories had the power to hurt. He waited for Angelique to leave, the snick of the latch and the return to darkness signaling her departure.

"Angelique didn't really introduce us," Orlando said into the silence of the room. "I'm Orlando St. Clair. You're Pascale, right?"

He thought he heard a muffled sound of assent, so he continued. "Did Angelique tell you I was coming or why?"

"No," Pascale replied, her voice a little clearer this time, as if she had peeked out from beneath the covers.

“A little about myself, then,” Orlando said. “I was a soldier in the British army on the eve of the revolution in the American colonies when a vampire named Thurloe saw me and decided he wanted me. He grabbed me as I left a pub one night, turned me without asking, and held me prisoner for over a century before Jean Bellaiche, the chef de la Cour here in Paris, rescued me.”

Orlando could say the words now, something he had still refused to do before meeting Alain, but nothing would ever make them come easily.

“Rescued you?” The covers rustled, making Orlando wonder if Pascale had sat up in bed.

“Thurloe was a twisted excuse for a vampire,” Orlando said, his voice bitter despite the intervening years. “He tortured people, human and vampire alike, for the pleasure of it. After he moved us to Paris because it became unwise to stay in London, Jean heard whispers of a vampire being held prisoner and abused. When he came to investigate, he found me trying to destroy myself because I couldn’t go on that way any longer. He convinced me I didn’t want to do that, put Thurloe on trial for the abuse, and took me under his wing.”

“You didn’t want to be a vampire either?” Pascale asked.

“I might have considered it if I’d been asked,” Orlando replied, “but he didn’t ask. He pulled me into an alley, knocked me out, and when I awoke, he had stripped me and bound me to a bed. By the time he was done with me, I was ready to die, but he had other plans for me.”

“That’s horrible,” Pascale said, switching on the lamp by the bed so Orlando could see her face for the first time. “What did you do?”

“There was nothing I could do,” Orlando said. “I was his prisoner until Jean found me. I considered ending my existence after Jean rescued me, but Jean always persuaded me to hold on a little longer.”

“What made you change your mind?” Pascale asked softly.

“A lot of little things more than one big thing,” Orlando replied, “but mostly Jean himself. He was a vampire. I hunted with him, so I knew he found people to feed from, but he never treated anyone the way Thurloe treated me. He showed me I could be a vampire without being a monster.”

“The way Angelique has shown me,” Pascale said slowly. “Do you ever wish it hadn’t happened?”

"I used to wish it," Orlando said. "Even after I stopped thinking about walking out into the sunlight, I wished none of it had ever happened. I will always regret the way of my turning, but I no longer regret that it happened."

"Why not?" Pascale asked.

Orlando's smile lit up the room. "I met Alain. If I hadn't been turned, I would almost certainly have died during the American Revolution like the majority of my fellow soldiers, but even if I had survived the war, I would have died of old age long before now, and I would have missed out on the most amazing relationship I could ever imagine."

"Alain?"

"Alain Magnier, my Avoué," Orlando explained. Even saying Alain's name sent a flush of warmth through Orlando. "Before you ask, an Aveu de Sang is a bond between a vampire and a mortal. Alain is my only source of sustenance, and I am the only vampire who will ever feed from him, but it's so much more than that. He is the other half of my heart and soul. Some days, I think he is my heart and soul. If I hadn't been turned, I would never have met him. Having him is worth what I suffered at Thurloe's hands."

"He sounds like a very special man," Pascale said. "I don't have anyone like that."

"Very few vampires do," Orlando admitted. "Even those who have a part-time or full-time lover rarely have an Avoué, but that isn't what I came to talk to you about. Jean and Angelique thought it might help you to talk to someone else who didn't choose to be turned. They mean well, but they don't understand."

"But you do."

"As much as anyone can," Orlando said. "I didn't choose the existence I now have any more than you did. The only difference is I've had a few years to get used to the idea and, more recently, a reason to be glad it happened."

"It's a gift to them," Pascale said slowly. "Jean, Angelique, all the other vampires I've met... they see being a vampire as a gift, a way to extend their lives far beyond mortal years. They don't see that to me it's a curse."

Orlando smiled sadly. "No, they don't see it that way. A vampire turned Jean after he'd been injured in a Viking attack. He would have

died from the injuries if he had refused the turning. For him, it was a choice between life and death. A different life than he had known before, but still a kind of life. For Angelique, it was a way to escape the prison of the harem where she would have died eventually, because no woman who enters a harem ever leaves unless she dies. For us, though, it wasn't a choice, but something forced upon us. It isn't necessarily sexual, although for my maker it was, but it is undeniably a violation of our humanity, our very souls. Nothing in their experience compares to that."

"So how do you recover?" Pascale asked seriously. "How do you stop hating the situation you're in and learn to live with it?"

"Day by day," Orlando replied. "I wish there were an easy answer for you, but it isn't something you get over. There is no cure except walking outside on a sunny day, and that's not nearly as easy to do as you think it should be. As soon as you can, find a way to return to your old life. If you can still do your job, go back to that. Arrange your house so you're protected from the daylight. Reconnect with your friends if you can. Some of them won't understand, but things are changing. The equal rights legislation and the vampires' contribution to ending the war have opened people's eyes to the fact that we might have a different kind of existence, but we aren't fundamentally evil simply because we're vampires."

"And if I can't do that?"

"Then connect with the magical community," Orlando said. "There are vampires, wizards, and other magical beings scattered throughout the country. I couldn't tell you how to find them other than through l'Institut, because I wasn't very good at following my own advice. I didn't have a choice when I was first turned, and by the time Jean saved me from Thurloe, I had no interest in anything other than being left alone to lick my wounds. Only since l'émeutte des Sorciers have I developed many connections outside of my friendship with Jean, but they have made all the difference in the world. Suddenly I have friends again, people I can depend on who accept me as I am and care about me anyway."

"Wizards keep coming up in conversation and in the lives of the vampires I meet," Pascale said. "What's that all about?"

"I'll give you the short answer," Orlando offered. "For the full answer, the easiest thing is to spend a week at l'Institut. That's what they do there: explain the partnerships to vampires and wizards."

“So the short answer.”

“The short answer is that the right combination of vampire and wizard offers both parties advantages. For vampires, it’s protection from sunlight and an increase in strength. For wizards, it’s more magical ability and more control over their magic,” Orlando said. “And for some of us, it’s the chance at happiness with a lover beyond our wildest dreams.”

“Your Alain.”

“Yes,” Orlando said, “or Angelique’s David, if you’ve met him. Jean and Raymond, Sebastien and Thierry. The list goes on. Not just magical partners, but partners of the heart. You shouldn’t rush into anything, because once you’ve fed from your partner the first time, your instincts will rush you as it is, but ultimately, for me, finding that partner made the difference between existing and living again. I’ll always be a vampire, but for the years of Alain’s life, I’ll be happy as well.”

## Chapter 8

ORLANDO refused Raymond's offer to accompany him home, not wanting to waste time with the small talk that would surely follow if Raymond went with him. Raymond would want to see the work they had done on the house, to hear about their plans, and normally Orlando would be happy to show him. He was incredibly proud of the work he and Alain were doing on their home and of the plans they were making to work as foster parents to children orphaned or displaced by the war.

Any other day, Orlando would have delighted in showing Raymond the improvements they had made to the tumble-down farmhouse they had purchased, but not today. Today he needed his lover, and that meant refusing Raymond's offer.

"I'll be fine," Orlando promised. "I've done enough displacements that I don't need an escort. Cast the spell."

Raymond did not look convinced, but he did not argue either, casting the displacement spell and sending Orlando to the courtyard of his home. Within seconds, the door opened and Alain came out, crossing to where Orlando stood and enfolding him in his arms. "I should have gone with you," Alain said.

"She wouldn't have been comfortable with that," Orlando said, his voice muffled by Alain's neck as he clung to his lover. "She was barely comfortable talking to me, and you didn't need to hear everything Thurloe did to me."

"I could have sat in Angelique's office," Alain said. "I would have been there when you finished."

"Raymond was already there when I got done talking to Pascale," Orlando said. "He sent me straight home, and we have privacy here. At Sang Froid, there are always people around."

"Do we need privacy?" Alain asked, his voice lightly teasing.

"We do," Orlando said, though he was sure Alain could already feel his need. "I need the reminder that you love me."

The words had barely left his mouth before Orlando felt a surge of love and desire through their bond, Alain's emotions written on Orlando's mind as clearly as his own. In silence, Alain led Orlando inside, closing and locking the door behind them, shutting out the rest of the world. For the next few hours, no one mattered but Orlando. Alain had fought too hard to bring his lover peace not to do everything in his power to restore Orlando's sense of well-being now.

"Do you trust me?" Alain asked, pushing aside the dark hair to nuzzle Orlando's neck.

"Yes," Orlando gasped, the feeling of Alain's lips on his neck proof of his words. The memory of Thurloe biting him had haunted him for so long that any reminder of that moment had been enough to kill his ardor until he finally broke the chains of that nightmare several months after he and Alain had made their *Aveu de Sang*.

"Then come upstairs to our room with me and let me make love to you," Alain requested. "Let me make you feel good again."

Orlando wanted to tell Alain that was not necessary, that being there in his wizard's arms was all it took to make him feel good, but Alain's lips closed over his, kissing him with such fervor that Orlando did not want to pull away even long enough to answer. Instead he backed toward the steps, drawing Alain with him, soft, needy sounds escaping as desire mounted between them, resonating through their bond in the ultimate feedback loop that more than once had left them both insensate by the time they finished making love.

He suspected he would need that tonight.

They stumbled up the steps to the master suite—or what would eventually be the master suite—on the second floor. At the moment, it was more of an open loft than a suite, but their bed graced the center of the room, and that was all that mattered for now. Orlando tugged at Alain's clothing, but Alain stilled his hands. "Trust me," he said again. "I know what you need."

"I need you," Orlando said.

"And you'll have me," Alain promised. "But you think you want to rush, and that isn't what you need."

"It isn't?" Orlando asked archly, but Alain was right. He needed a long, drawn-out session to restore his balance.

“No, it isn’t,” Alain said, pulling the sweater over Orlando’s head and tossing it in the general direction of the laundry hamper. “You’re going to lie down on our new bed and let me make love to you properly.”

“Still mostly dressed?” Orlando teased, relaxing into their banter. He glanced toward the antique bed they had found in a shop outside of Créancey and marveled again at their luck. The heavy wooden frame with its partial canopy looked out of place in the unfinished space that would be their bedroom, but the dark, carved wood would go perfectly with their plans for the suite when it was finished. He looked forward to a lifetime of sleeping in it with Alain on the mattress next to him.

“Some people have no patience,” Alain huffed, softening the words with a tender kiss. He unbuttoned Orlando’s shirt, sliding it off his shoulders and sending it to join the sweater on the floor. Instead of finishing the process of divesting his lover, he lingered over the smooth skin of Orlando’s chest, savoring every inch of his lover’s body. He and Orlando had made love in many different ways—slow, fast, tender, frantic, athletic, languid—and Alain treasured each one for the proof of their devotion to one another, but today only one way would do: as slow and tender as possible.

Orlando’s back arched into the loving caress as Alain licked and sucked at his skin. Memories of Thurloe’s abuse flitted through his mind, called up by his conversation with Pascale, but here with this man, they had no power to hurt him. The Aveu de Sang might not control Alain’s actions the way it controlled Orlando’s, but Orlando did not need that assurance to feel safe with Alain. He tasted his lover’s heart each time he fed: the wizard had no cruelty in his soul.

Alain’s lips closed over one dark nipple, sucking on it lightly, and all thought of anyone but his lover fled. He stroked his fingers through Alain’s short hair, loving the texture of the soft strands against his skin. He wanted to guide Alain’s head to the other side of his chest, but he recognized his lover’s mood through their bond. Alain’s determination was clear as day in his mind, so Orlando let it go. Alain had never been a selfish lover. Orlando would get what he wanted eventually. He simply had to wait long enough, a challenge in itself when Alain set out to drive him out of his mind with pleasure.

“Lie down,” Alain urged, pulling back to strip his own shirt and sweater over his head. “We’ll be more comfortable in bed.”



Orlando did as Alain suggested, smiling as Alain turned on the portable heater. Orlando would not feel the chill of the room, but Alain did not have a vampire's protection against the elements. Usually, they snuggled together under the covers. If Alain wanted the heater, it meant he wanted the freedom to look as well as touch, the duvet pushed to the bottom of the bed so nothing interfered with his ability to love Orlando thoroughly.

A quick spell followed, warming the sheets. Alain could not cast a spell directly on Orlando, one of the downsides of the partnerships, but his magic could work on Orlando indirectly, like in warming the bedding. "Pants on or off?" Orlando asked as he toed off his shoes and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Leave them on," Alain replied. "I want the pleasure of peeling them off of you later."

Orlando smiled indulgently and lay down on the bed, waiting for Alain to join him.

A few moments later—and several articles of clothing fewer—Alain climbed onto the bed next to him. Orlando could not resist, reaching out to stroke through the tangle of hair on Alain's chest, following it down over a tight stomach to the nest of hair at his groin. Alain groaned, but to Orlando's surprise, he let the vampire touch as he pleased. Usually when Alain took control as he had today, he batted Orlando's hand away whenever Orlando did anything that might speed up the proceedings or challenge Alain's control of the situation.

As much as Orlando enjoyed teasing Alain, as much as he sometimes needed to be the one in charge of their lovemaking, today he needed the oblivion that could only come from giving himself totally into his lover's hands. So after a few strokes of Alain's erection, he let his hand fall to his lover's thigh, maintaining the connection but returning control to Alain.

"Ça va, angel?" Alain asked, leaning down to kiss Orlando softly.

Orlando did not reply in words, his mouth opening beneath the kiss as he sucked lightly on Alain's tongue. He wrapped his arms around Alain's shoulders, drawing the wizard's heavier frame down on top of him. Once he would have panicked at being pinned to the bed, but beneath Alain's body, he felt shielded rather than smothered, Alain's broad back a barrier between him and the rest of the world. Alain

shifted, settling more comfortably atop Orlando. The hair on his chest rasped against Orlando's nipples, and he gasped into the kiss.

Alain lifted his head and grinned down at his lover. "Did you like that?" he teased, rubbing their torsos together again.

"Yes," Orlando hissed. "So much."

"Then I should do it again," Alain said, moving back and forth so slowly Orlando swore he could feel each individual hair as it tantalized his nipples. They tingled, adding to the growing ache in his loins. He wrapped his legs around Alain's hips, hoping the contact of cloth with skin would remind Alain he was still half dressed. Orlando had no real desire to rush their lovemaking, but he did want to get rid of the clothing between them.

Alain lifted off Orlando, wringing a moan of protest from him until he felt Alain's hands on his chest again. Strong fingers massaged the muscles, hard palms rubbing over his nipples with each motion, leaving Orlando gasping at the stimulation. He closed his eyes, the better to absorb all the delicious sensations. "Please," he whispered.

"Please what?" Alain asked, his hands pausing.

"Kiss me."

"Here?" Alain asked, swiping one thumb across Orlando's lower lip. "Or here?" His other thumb slid over Orlando's nipple.

"Either," Orlando moaned. "Both."

Alain chuckled. "Greedy," he said as he bent to suck on Orlando's lower lip, leaving it plump and glistening, a temptation nearly too great to ignore. He loved kissing Orlando, as much or more as he loved everything else they did together, but Orlando needed more than that today. He kissed his way down Orlando's neck to his collarbone and then to his chest. Settling his weight against Orlando and framing his lover's chest with his arms, he lowered his head to lick and suck and do everything he could to make Orlando feel good.

Orlando moaned softly as he undulated on the bed, the hot pressure of Alain's mouth driving all thought from his mind. He stretched his arms over his head to grasp the ornate curves of the headboard, his back arching into Alain's caress. Alain's fingers found his other nipple, tweaking the little bud to full tautness. Orlando's head tossed on the pillow as need swamped him. He pushed the feeling out through the bond, hoping it would encourage Alain to hurry, but all it did was elicit

a return wave of desire and a slight increase in the intensity of the caresses.

"I love you," Alain said, lifting his head to meet Orlando's darkened gaze.

Orlando had not doubted that since the first time Alain said it, so the intensity of the declaration struck him as odd. "I love you too."

Alain shook his head, not in denial of Orlando's words, but because the vampire did not understand the reason behind Alain's sudden need to say them. He reached for the button on Orlando's pants, wanting skin on skin now. "You went to Paris today, knowing what talking to the new vampire would do to you. You opened up and shared your own pain with her in an attempt to make her feel better about her situation. You are the bravest, strongest person I know."

He pulled Orlando's slacks and underwear free, leaving him as naked as Alain was, and covered his lover fully with his body. "I keep thinking I can't possibly love you more than I already do, and then you go and do something like this, and I fall in love with you all over again."

"All I did was talk to her," Orlando protested.

"No, you shared a part of yourself with her and gave her hope she might have a future after all," Alain disagreed.

"How do you know? You weren't even there."

"Because I know you," Alain insisted. "You agreed to talk to her, which means you did everything you could to help, even if that cost you."

"He can't hurt me anymore," Orlando said. "Jean destroyed him a century ago, and not even the memories can stand up to being loved by you."

"Then let me love you so well you'll never have a bad memory again."

It was exactly what Orlando needed.

"As long as you don't make me wait too long," Orlando agreed.

"I won't," Alain promised. He would draw this out as long as he could, but he would not make Orlando wait for it. As long as he kept himself under control, he could bring Orlando to release multiple times, the magic of the Aveu de Sang feeding the desire between them far

beyond normal physical limits. As long as one of them stayed aroused, the other would respond and keep responding. Alain intended for this to be one of those times.

Pushing back onto his knees, he nuzzled Orlando's iliac crease, inhaling the scent of musk and man. Orlando moaned above him, spreading his legs to give Alain access to his body.

Alain took his time, rubbing his face over Orlando's skin, but the need he could feel through their bond was too strong to ignore for long. He turned his head, licking his way up the long, slender shaft to the weeping tip. The flavor was as complex as the man, and Alain lingered there, sucking lightly as Orlando twisted and groaned his pleasure. Eventually, though, he wanted more. His lips drifted down Orlando's cock, his tongue cradling it as he relaxed his throat and took his lover deeper.

Orlando began to move beneath him in time with his bobbing head, the little noises he made driving Alain's need. He fondled Orlando's sac, working it in time with his mouth, hoping to wrest the first climax of the afternoon from his lover's body.

Desire bubbled up in Orlando's balls, fed by Alain's mouth and hands but also by Alain's palpable desire to feel Orlando come undone beneath him. Another time, perhaps, Orlando would have held back, but he needed the reaffirmation of Alain's love and their bond too much to delay now. When the head of his cock hit the back of Alain's throat and the wizard swallowed around him, Orlando let go, his climax flowing out of him in long, powerful waves.

Alain kept sucking, drawing out Orlando's orgasm as long as he could. When his lover lay replete beneath him finally, he urged Orlando to roll onto his stomach. Even now, he felt the twinge of anxiety, swiftly smothered, that passed through his vampire at the position. "Nothing you don't want," Alain murmured, kissing the curve of Orlando's arse.

Orlando knew that, but hearing the words eased his instinctive reaction nonetheless. Thurloe had always taken him from behind, the impersonal position adding to the sense of violation, but Alain would never violate Orlando's trust. He had proven it so many times that Orlando no longer questioned it. Whatever happened next, it would be as tender and loving and wonderful as everything else Alain did to Orlando's body.

"I trust you," Orlando said, relaxing onto the bed and giving his body over to Alain as fully as he had given his heart.

Alain breathed a sigh of relief. Orlando had always been the more dominant of the two of them, the combination of his vampire instincts and his past driving him to top most of the time, even now. Not that he ever refused if Alain asked to switch roles, but Alain asked only rarely. He nuzzled the skin of Orlando's buttocks, licking over them lightly in preparation for more. He did not think Orlando would refuse him, but this would be the first time he had asked to love Orlando this way, and anything that pushed Orlando's boundaries was always a cause of hesitation. That was why, nearly two years into their relationship, he had still never rimmed his lover.

He could feel Orlando's desire reawakening in response to his own, but his vampire had not yet reached the point of true need, and Alain wanted that before he tried something new. Kissing his way up Orlando's back, he spooned his lover against him, nuzzling the back of his neck and rolling him onto his side so he could continue the amorous assault.

The change in position settled Orlando's nerves. He loved the feeling of Alain wrapped around him from behind, although they slept with him behind Alain as often as the other way around. Lying as they were, he could feel Alain's erection nudging his backside, but that held no fear for him now. On the contrary, the thought of feeling the hard shaft inside him stirred his desire again. Determined to hurry Alain along, he rubbed his hips against Alain, groaning when Alain's cock slotted its way into his crease, riding against his entrance. "Now," he pleaded.

Alain smiled into Orlando's hair. "Soon," he promised, "but you have to come for me again first."

"Get me ready," Orlando proposed. "As worked up as you are, that's sure to set me off again."

Alain kissed Orlando's nape once more before working his way back down his lover's spine, licking each vertebra in turn, but he did not reach for the lube. He had other plans for opening his lover to him.

"Alain?"

"Trust me," Alain said once more, pressing a kiss to the top of Orlando's crease. He cupped the smooth globes, parting them enough

that he could blow across Orlando's hole. "Let me show you something new."

Orlando gasped his assent without hesitation. He had enjoyed everything Alain had shown him. He had no doubt he would enjoy whatever came next just as much. The gust of air across his entrance did nothing to prepare him for the sudden wetness of Alain's tongue against the sensitive patch of skin. He cried out in surprise, rolling onto his stomach. Alain followed, licking repeatedly over the puckered flesh. "Alain!"

"Do you want me to stop?" Alain asked, his lips moving against Orlando's skin as he spoke.

"No!"

"Then lie still and let me love you," Alain directed.

Orlando buried his face in the pillow and did as Alain said. Or tried, anyway. He quickly found staying still impossible with Alain's tongue spearing inside him. The facile muscle might not reach as far as Alain's fingers could, but Orlando did not need pressure on his prostate to grow painfully hard again. The thought of what Alain was doing to him was more than enough to spur on his need for release.

Alain felt the moment Orlando accepted what he was doing in his body's sudden laxness, but even more importantly, he felt the spike of lust in Orlando's mind, and that drove him to lavish as much attention on Orlando's ring as he could, licking and sucking and driving as deep as his tongue could go. He tugged on Orlando's hips, urging him up onto his knees so he could get a hand between the vampire's legs to find his resurgent erection. To his delight, it was hard and slick again with the proof of Orlando's enjoyment. He smeared the fluid over the shaft, using that to ease his strokes as he worked Orlando's cock in time to the thrusting of his tongue.

Orlando's moans grew more desperate as the sensual tension ratcheted up inside him, notch after notch, until he was desperate to come again. He wanted to take Alain with him, but their current positions left him with no way to reach his lover. "Close," he gasped, his voice breaking on the word.

Alain worked a finger inside Orlando's passage, the long digit reaching where his tongue could not. The pressure on Orlando's prostate was enough to trigger a second climax, his cock jerking in

Alain's hand. The surge of release battered Alain's control, but he forced down his own climax. He wanted to be inside Orlando when he finally let go.

The moment Orlando's tremors eased, Alain flipped him onto his back, reaching for the lube he had eschewed earlier. He coated his fingers, returning them to their berth inside his lover's body. Orlando trembled on the bed, his muscles quaking with the continued stimulation. "Once more," Alain demanded, "with me this time."

A soft sob escaped Orlando's throat as he pulled Alain on top of him. His body ached from the force of his first two climaxes, his heart pounding in time with Alain's, the beat so fast he could barely catch his breath. Alain covered him, Orlando's slighter body dwarfed beneath the wizard's heavier frame. Orlando parted his legs, wrapping them around Alain's hips and drawing him closer. "I want you inside me."

Alain nodded, transferring the last of the lube to his cock. "Are you ready?"

Orlando did not answer in words, tipping Alain's chin back instead so he could lick once across the brand that marked their Aveu de Sang before sheathing his fangs in Alain's neck. He cherished the gasp the penetration tore from Alain. He sucked hard, drawing life-giving blood that wreathed his senses once more in love and desire. Joined that way, it would not take either of them long to reach the pinnacle of passion. Orlando rocked his hips against Alain's, wanting to feel his lover inside him as they found their final release, but Alain would have to hurry, or Orlando would not be able to wait, not with Alain's arousal so strong in his blood.

Alain shared his urgency, slotting his cock into the waiting hole and forging deep. Orlando's fangs seemed to mimic the movement, driving deeper with every thrust of Alain's cock into Orlando's body. Head spinning with need, Alain released his grip on his control, letting his body take over as they raced toward the precipice.

And then they were flying, bodies, hearts, and minds entwined as their mutual release stole all consciousness from them.

When Alain could move again, he stroked Orlando's hair, not pulling away yet from the fangs that still pierced his neck. He would let Orlando effectuate that separation. He was far less likely to end up with torn skin that way. Sensing his thoughts, Orlando licked across the

marked skin once more as he pulled free, his saliva stopping the bleeding and speeding Alain's healing.

Free now to lift his head and look down into Orlando's somnolent eyes, Alain searched for any lingering worry or sadness, but he saw nothing but repletion. "Sleep now," he murmured, kissing Orlando and disengaging carefully. "I'll guard your dreams."



## Chapter 9

ALONE in her borrowed room after Orlando left, Pascale burrowed back under the covers, only her head peeking out from her nest, and stared at the ceiling, her thoughts all awhirl. She had been so sure she was the only one in her situation, the only one to view her new life as a curse, but from everything she had learned in talking to Orlando, she was not alone. Even more than that, she was not in nearly as bad a situation as he had been in. Despite her lack of choice in being turned, since then, everyone she had met had gone out of their way to help her, showing her how to function as a vampire, making sure she got enough blood without hurting anyone the way she was hurt, even arranging for Orlando to come and talk to her. She had been in limbo the past few days, trying to get her feet back underneath her, but she could not continue to rely on Angelique's generosity. If nothing else, the other vampire had a business to run, and letting Pascale feed for free indefinitely would not be good for business.

It was time to go home and pick up the threads of her old life.

She had no real idea of what she would be able to return to and what would have to change, but she was determined to find out and make adjustments where necessary. She would see if Angelique would be willing to help make arrangements for Pascale to return to Sang Froid if she could not find someone to feed from on her own in Château-Chinon. The town did not boast the same variety of clubs as Paris did, and Pascale did not want to starve into unconsciousness. Angelique had explained what happened to vampires who went too long without feeding and how they could be restored from that hibernation by the blood of their maker, but since they had no idea who her maker was, she could not afford to have that happen to her.

Once she knew she would have a fallback if she could not fend for herself in that respect, she would be able to deal with the rest. Her house in Château-Chinon was fairly new, and all the windows were covered with thick metal blinds that she could open or close with a remote from anywhere in the house. If she closed them fully, they

blocked the sun entirely, so she would be safe inside her house during the day. With online banking and shopping, she could manage most of her physical needs without ever leaving the house. She could work during the day if she needed to, blinds closed, or she could work at night if the project did not require the real-time participation of other computer programmers on her team. As long as she could telecommute to any meetings, she would be able to continue at her job, which meant she would have the money to stay in her house, to pay Angelique if she came to Paris to feed, to go out to see a movie at night, alone or with friends.

One of the vampires she had met the second night in Paris had mentioned being from Autun. Autun was only forty minutes away, so she could perhaps meet other vampires there as well and begin to integrate into this new society she now belonged to. If the drive became too much, she could even consider relocating to Autun. She liked Château-Chinon, but she had no ties there she could not break if she eventually preferred to be in Autun.

A knock at the door startled her. "Come in."

"You're obviously feeling better if you invited me in this time," Angelique said, coming into the room and shutting the door behind her. "Did you have a good chat with Orlando?"

"It was... enlightening," Pascale said slowly. "I can't even begin to imagine everything he's been through."

"And I'm quite sure he only told you half of it," Angelique said. "I'd be surprised if anyone knows all of it, honestly. He isn't one to complain about what can't be changed."

"I'm ready to go home," Pascale said. "Not right this minute, obviously, but tonight when it gets dark and it's safe for me to go out."

"Are you sure?" Angelique asked. "It's only been a few days. Usually a vampire stays with his or her maker for several months before striking out on their own."

"I can't keep living off your generosity," Pascale insisted. "I have to work in order to have the means to pay my bills, and while I could get my computer and work from here, that isn't fair to you."

"At least go to l'Institut Marcel Chavinier first," Angelique urged. "You'd be surrounded by vampires there, so you could learn anything else I might not have thought to tell you."

Pascale shook her head. "You've taught me the mechanics of feeding and hunting," she said. "I know to stay away from sunlight. Is there anything else that I have to know in order not to hurt myself by accident?"

"Fire and sunlight," Angelique said. "Those are the only two things that can truly harm us. A little exposure to either, a stray sunbeam or a candle flame, won't do any damage that feeding can't heal, but no more than that. No fire in the fireplace without someone else to tend it. No walks in the garden, even on a cloudy day. All the rest, about holy water and crucifixes and garlic, is old wives' tales."

"And if I got stuck and needed to feed but couldn't find anyone, if I called, would you find someone to help me get here so I could feed?" Pascale asked. "Since we don't know who my maker is to reanimate me if I went too long without feeding."

"If David can't come get you, I'll find someone who will," Angelique promised. "More than one wizard owes me a favor these days, but you don't have to come all the way to Paris except on Sundays. Sang Froid has a branch in Dommartin because of l'Institut and all the vampires who come to the seminars needing a way to feed while they're there. Actually, you wouldn't even have to call me. Adèle lives in Château-Chinon. She can take you wherever you need to go with a wave of her wand."

"I wouldn't want to impose," Pascale demurred. She had found the detective more than a little intimidating. Incredibly attractive, but definitely intimidating.

"And you shouldn't," Angelique agreed, "but in case of an emergency, she would be the closest wizard to you, at least of my acquaintance. There may be other wizards in Château-Chinon I haven't met yet. She gave you her card in case you thought of anything else related to the case. And I promise, she's not nearly as prickly as she appears on the surface, but she has no reason to trust vampires and plenty of reason not to. She had a partner during the war who treated her... badly. She tolerates those of us who have partners now, but she views every unpaired vampire as another threat."

"I couldn't ever be a threat to a woman like her," Pascale said. "Look at me. I'm all of a meter and a half. She has at least thirty centimeters on me."

"Her partner wasn't bigger than she is," Angelique said. "In fact, he was somewhat smaller, but he was a vampire. That gave him far more

strength than she possesses. She relies on her magic to protect her in situations when her physical prowess can't, but magic doesn't work on a wizard's partner. I really shouldn't say any more. I probably shouldn't have said even what I did, but if you're going to have to deal with her, you deserve to understand that much at least. She'll help you because that's what she does, but she may or may not be gracious about it."

"I'll keep that in mind," Pascale said. She could not completely stifle the disappointment she felt at hearing Adèle's partner had been male. It was still possible the wizard enjoyed the company of both genders, but the news was certainly not encouraging. "Thank you for all your help. I wouldn't have survived the past few days without you, and while I'm not ready to be happy I'm a vampire, I'm beginning to feel like I can live with it."

"Then it was worth it," Angelique said, enfolding Pascale in a fragrant embrace. The feminine scent and the press of soft breasts against her own stirred Pascale's interest, but Angelique had been clear about her feelings for her partner and her availability. Even so....

"Would it be all right if I came just to visit you sometimes?" Pascale asked softly. "I feel like you're my only friend right now."

"I'm always happy to have visitors," Angelique replied, pulling back a little and stroking the hair back from Pascale's face. "My partner was not the most adventurous of men, but I've convinced him to expand his horizons. You never know what he might agree to."

"I don't want a pity fuck," Pascale said.

Angelique laughed. "Oh, my dear, I can't offer you anything permanent, but I assure you, pity has nothing to do with it. All you need is a little self-confidence and you could have your pick of women. You're beautiful and sweet and absolutely adorable."

Pascale made a moue of disgust. "I'll take beautiful, if you really think so, but sweet and adorable just get me a pat on the head from the women who catch my eye."

"Then you've been going about it the wrong way," Angelique said. "Give me a few days to make some calls. I know some women who could all use some time to get together and enjoy themselves. I'll put together a girls' night out for us, and we'll find you a woman who appreciates you for who you are."

“Why are you being so nice to me? I know what you said that first night, but you can’t really expect me to believe you’re this generous with every newly turned vampire,” Pascale said. “The blood, the guidance, maybe, but arranging a night out, trying to boost my confidence this way... that’s far beyond any call of duty.”

“Because as dear to me as David is, he’s mortal,” Angelique said softly, her eyes sad though no tears could fall. “There’s a lot we don’t know, but a wizard can’t be turned. In a few years, he’ll be gone and I’ll be alone, and you are very much the kind of companion I would have chosen if I had not met him first.”

“So I’m supposed to wait in the wings until he dies?” Pascale asked. “What’s in that for me?”

“That isn’t at all what you’re supposed to do,” Angelique disagreed. “You’re supposed to go home, live your life, perhaps find a partner of your own, wizard or not. You’re supposed to experience everything you can and perhaps think of me kindly from time to time. Eventually, when David is gone, maybe I’ll come see you, maybe I won’t, but if I do and if you’re similarly unattached, maybe you’ll remember these days fondly and consent to keep me company in my grief. Vampires love slowly and rarely because it is hard to lose the ones we love. When we do love, it is with all we have, and losing that lover can be devastating. I’ve sat vigil with vampires who have lost lovers, and it is a long, painful process for them to recover. Most of them do, but not always. If nothing else, maybe you will sit vigil with me then because I helped you now.”

“If it’s so hard, why don’t vampires pair off among themselves?” Pascale asked. “They wouldn’t have to worry about losing their lovers that way.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Angelique agreed, “but that doesn’t seem to happen very often. I think it’s because of the feeding. We can’t feed from other vampires, but after a few years, sex and feeding become so tied together that it’s hard to do one without the other. Not impossible, but hard, and how would you feel if your lover had sex with someone else on a regular basis?”

“I see your point,” Pascale said. “Unless you could find someone who would take both of you to bed, even if only one of you fed. Or maybe two people to feed from and then sex with each other.”

“Like I said, not impossible,” Angelique agreed, “just complicated. If I met a vampire I cared about to that degree and who was willing to

work out the details, I wouldn't say no, but I have yet to develop that kind of relationship with another vampire. As a group, we tend not to play well together."

"But what about the Cours and all that?" Pascale asked.

"Attend a meeting of the Cour in Autun or here in Paris," Angelique said with a laugh. "You'll see what I mean then."

"Do you love David?" Pascale asked, changing the subject suddenly. The entire conversation had left her ill at ease, and she thought she knew why.

"He is... my partner," Angelique said after a moment. "I'm far too jaded to think in terms of love. While he lives, I will share his life and his bed. I've watched too many people sicken and die to commit to more than that. Why do you ask?"

"Because he isn't particularly old," Pascale said, "certainly not old enough for you to be thinking of what will happen after he dies. It feels like you're dismissing him already."

"He's thirty-five," Angelique said, "and I've been told wizards tend to live longer than the average mortal, but even if he lives for another hundred years, that's still a drop in the bucket. I was turned in the 1400s. I've lived six times that already. And most mortals live nothing like that long. For most mortals, from the time they're old enough to be of interest to me until the time they die is forty to fifty years. I might take a lover for more than a night, or even more than a year or two, but I can't let myself fall in love. I'd never survive."

"How do you stop it?"

"I lived in a different era," Angelique reminded Pascale. "The idea of falling in love, of spending my life with one person, was unheard of. I lived in a harem and served at the will of my master. He preferred fairer women, so I was one of the girls he offered to visiting lords. There was no pretense of love, no desire for it. I found companionship with the other girls, but that was all I expected. David gives me that same companionship now. I'm willing to accept his conventions of fidelity because they're important to him, but I'm also pragmatic enough to know I will be alone again sooner than I would like. Planning for that day makes me practical, not heartless."

"So you think I should avoid romantic entanglements with mortals?" Pascale asked. "That I should feed when and where I can and take my pleasure from that? It seems like a lonely existence."

“Why do you think I run Sang Froid?” Angelique asked in reply. “It guarantees a steady stream of people through my life. My employees rely on me for their livelihoods, and my customers rely on me to offer them the best selection of blood around. I never have to be alone if I don’t want to be.”

“Was that really enough before you met David?” Pascale challenged.

“It’s the one thing that will never leave me,” Angelique replied.

It was hardly an answer, but Pascale let it go. She did not know Angelique well enough to force the issue. It seemed like such an empty life to her. Not that her life had been full before she was turned, but she had lived in hope of meeting someone. She was only twenty-six. She had time to meet someone, or so she had always thought. Angelique’s attitude called that into question, but Pascale was not ready to give up on all her dreams. Orlando had not used the word “love” when he spoke of his *Avoué*, but Pascale had no doubt he felt it. He had not discouraged her from finding someone to share her life. Nor had he discouraged her from seeking companionship among other vampires.

Pascale had no idea who Angelique had in mind when she talked about a night out with “the girls,” but perhaps one of them would be a vampire like herself who would be open to forging a friendship. Pascale had felt an almost instant connection with Orlando, although he seemed so wrapped up in his *Avoué* that she did not know if he would have time for her. The other vampires she had met, again, while busy, had all seemed approachable despite Angelique’s warnings. She would simply have to make an effort if she wanted to keep her future from being empty.

“Will you help me go home tonight?” Pascale asked again. “I’d love to join you on the girls’ night, but I need to go home and get my feet under me again first.”

“You can’t go anywhere until it’s dark,” Angelique said, “but once the sun sets, I’ll ask David to take you back to l’Institut. From there, someone can drive you home. David can’t cast a spell to somewhere he’s never been unless he’s following someone else’s magical signature. They keep a car at l’Institut for situations where using magic is impractical.”

“Thank you,” Pascale said. “I’m sure you have lots to do, so I won’t keep you. I have a lot to think about.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Angelique said, “and I’ll bring David when it gets dark.”

Angelique closed the door behind her as she left, cocooning Pascale in the relative darkness of her room once more. Pascale took a deep breath and tried to order her thoughts. If she had a plan, maybe everything would seem less overwhelming.

Her first order of business had to be making sure she still had a job she could do in a way her boss would accept, and that meant explaining her new physical limitations. With the anti-discrimination laws that had passed two years ago, she did not have to worry about being fired because she was a vampire, but she still had to do her job or she could be fired for failing to meet the performance standards of her position.

She was not looking forward to that conversation, but she had a good relationship with her boss. She could tell Pauline what had happened and explain her physical limitations. Pauline would be shocked, of course, but Pascale was still shocked, and she was the one living with it. Pascale’s record was good enough that she hoped that would merit her some consideration when it came to adapting to her new situation.

Once that was done and Pascale was assured of having a way of making a living, she could think about her house and what changes she would need to make in order to stay there. She could cover the windows with blankets temporarily if she felt like the blinds did not give her enough protection, but she would prefer a solution that would not leave her feeling like a prisoner in her own home.

Not that she had any idea what those solutions would be, but she knew a few vampires now. Surely one of them could help her.

After that was finished, she could start thinking about the rest: her friends from before, the new vampires she had met, the women Angelique suggested she go out with. It helped as well knowing there was a branch of Sang Froid in Dommartin. Angelique would not be there, but it would guarantee Pascale a way to feed until she could begin to hunt on her own.

She also needed to make contact with the Cour in Autun. Autun was a bit of a drive, but she could still go there if she needed to. If nothing else, she wanted to know what the Cour entailed and whether it could help her with any of the adjustments she would have to make in order to survive as a vampire. That could wait a few days or even a few weeks, though. Dommartin was closer, and from what she could gather,



l'Institut had no shortage of vampires should she need immediate advice.

## Chapter 10

“I HAD a good day at work,” David said, wrapping his arms around Angelique from behind. “When do I get my reward?”

Angelique laughed and turned in her partner’s embrace, kissing him lightly as she rubbed the arse she had spanked that morning. David barely even hissed. “As soon as you take Pascale to l’Institut so she can go home. It’ll be dark in half an hour. You can take her then.”

“You mean I’m supposed to wait?” David said with a teasing pout.

“We’ll need far more than half an hour for your reward,” Angelique purred. “Take a shower and unwind now. You can pop her down to l’Institut when you’re done and then I’ll give you my undivided attention for the rest of the evening.”

David grinned. “I can’t wait.”

“Maybe you should eat too,” Angelique added, releasing him and walking toward the foyer of Sang Froid. “You’ll need your strength.”

David groaned in anticipation. The revolution role-play, then. He had yet to figure out how a scenario that was ostensibly all about her always ended up being all about him, but he was not about to argue. Not when it always ended with him coming so hard he could barely breathe.

He showered and changed quickly, all the while wondering exactly which “sexual favors” Madame Defarge would demand in exchange for escape from the guillotine tonight. The last time they had played this scene, she had drizzled honey all over her body and demanded he lick her clean. Then she had returned the favor.

When he was dressed again, he checked the position of the sun, deciding he still had a few minutes before he could take Pascale down to l’Institut. His impatience aside, he did not want to do anything that might endanger her. He took a few minutes to heat up the seafood risotto Angelique had made two days before. He felt bad sometimes that she cooked for him as often as she did when she could not even eat it, but she insisted she enjoyed it. He never asked and always made a

point of thanking her profusely when she did cook, but he did not refuse when she did. Not when it was this good.

By the time he finished eating and cleaning up, the sun had set, so he knocked on the door to the room Pascale had been using.

“Are you ready to head out?” he asked when she answered.

“Yes,” Pascale said. “It’s not like I had anything with me when I arrived.”

“I know you’ll be glad to be home,” David said. “I’ll take you as far as l’Institut, and they’ll make arrangements from there.”

“Yes, that’s what Angelique said,” Pascale replied. “Thank you for helping me.”

“You’re welcome,” David said. “Shall we go?”

Pascale nodded, and David cast the displacement spell, taking both of them to the courtyard of l’Institut. “Let’s go inside,” David said. “We’ll find Jean and Raymond, and they can figure out how to get you home from here.”

David led her inside to the director’s office. The door was closed, but he could hear voices inside. He knocked and entered at Raymond’s terse summons.

“I’ve brought Pascale back,” David said. “Angelique told me you’d take care of getting her home from here.”

“Yes, I talked to her about it earlier today,” Raymond said. “Welcome to l’Institut Marcel Chavinier, Pascale. David, will you stay for dinner?”

“I ate already, but thank you,” David demurred. “I should get back. Angelique is waiting for me.”

“Don’t keep her waiting,” Jean said. “We’ll take care of Pascale from here.”

David cast a second displacement spell, leaving Pascale alone in the office with Jean, Raymond, and Adèle.

“Have a seat,” Raymond said. “Jean was just going over some names with Adèle in the hope of narrowing the list of suspects in your case.”

“Really?” Pascale asked. “I didn’t really expect you to catch him. I gave you little enough to go on.”

“That’s what I thought at first,” Adèle said, hiding her discomfort at being in the same room as the new vampire, “but I kept thinking about

what you'd said about his voice being similar to Jean's. Any linguist will tell you that you can place a person's home by the way they speak. It occurred to me you might be able to place a vampire's time of birth the same way. If your attacker sounded similar to Jean, it could be because he is a contemporary of Jean's. And that means we can at least narrow down the list of vampires somewhat."

"You met Sebastien when you first came here," Jean said. "Do you remember him?"

"Yes," Pascale said. "He helped get me to Paris."

"Did his voice remind you at all of the vampire who attacked you?" Jean asked.

"No," Pascale said, "not like yours does."

"So that gives us an outer limit on when the vampire was turned," Jean told Adèle. "Somewhere before 1500, since Sebastien was turned early in the sixteenth century. The farther back you go, the fewer vampires there are to choose from. I can only think of a few dozen in France who predate my turning. Once you get to the time of Sebastien's turning, the numbers increase. Not dramatically, but enough that it would be harder to narrow down. Since we can leave out everyone who postdates his turning, though, it's a large but hopefully manageable list."

"Particularly when we eliminate those who weren't likely to be in the area on Sunday," Adèle said. "Monsieur Lombard, for example. When did he last leave his house, never mind Paris?"

"Not recently," Jean agreed, "although he goes out more often than he used to. You might check with Denis Langlois about that list as well. Those are the vampires I know, but I don't know his Cour nearly as well as he does. He might be able to add some names."

"I'll do that," Adèle said. "I should go."

"Wait," Jean said, "take Pascale with you. You've been to her house, so you can cast a displacement spell and send her home instead of Raymond having to drive her."

Adèle gritted her teeth in frustration. She had hoped to avoid this situation until she had more time to wrap her head around possibly having a new, *female* partner, but Jean had given her no choice. "I can't," she said. "My magic didn't work on her when I tried to stop her from jumping off the bridge."

"What?" Raymond said. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

“Because it’s none of anyone’s damn business,” Adèle snapped. “How many times do I have to tell you I don’t want another partner?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts,” Adèle interrupted. “I don’t want another partner. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have vampires to investigate.”

She cast a displacement spell and disappeared before Jean or Raymond could say anything else.

“Sorry about that,” Raymond said to Pascale. “She’s prickly at the best of times.”

“It’s fine,” Pascale said, mind reeling as she tried to take in the implications of what had just happened. “Angelique told me Adèle hadn’t had a good experience with her first partner, and she doesn’t know me. She had no reason to believe I’d be any different.”

“Oh, she has plenty of reasons to believe you’d be different,” Jean said. “For one thing, you’re a contemporary of hers rather than hundreds of years old and refusing to accept that times have changed, but she’s too stubborn to see it. She’ll come around.”

“Do I get a say in the matter?” Pascale asked. “I mean, you just said she’s prickly at the best of times. Maybe I don’t want the hassle of dealing with someone like that.”

“She *is* prickly,” Raymond said. “There’s no denying that, but that doesn’t make her a bad person or a bad partner. She’s one of the most determined, hardworking, fair-minded wizards I know. She hides beneath that gruff exterior because she believes that’s the only way she’ll get the respect of her generally older, generally male colleagues on the police force. If you can win her trust, she’ll show you her softer side.”

“I’ve talked to Angelique, so I have some idea of what it means to have a partner and why that trust would be so important,” Pascale said, “but what if Adèle continues to refuse to have anything to do with me? Does that mean I can’t find a partner until after she dies?”

“I don’t know,” Raymond said. “We’ve had vampires and wizards match and then choose not to form a partnership, but everything is still so new that we don’t know if they’ll be able to match with someone else, because only a small percentage of vampires and wizards who have completed the seminars have found partners at all. Maybe fifteen percent. The rest have either chosen not to try for a match, haven’t found a match, or haven’t taken the final step of becoming partners.

There's still so much we don't know about what allows a partnership to form. We know how, but not why."

"So I guess I'll go through a seminar to decide if I want to have a partnership, with Adèle or with someone else, and then take my chances," Pascale said.

"After you've done that, if you decide you do want a partnership, we can always try to persuade Adèle to reconsider," Raymond said. "I can't order her to do it, and I wouldn't even if I could, because that's what landed her in a partnership she didn't want the last time around. We didn't know what we were getting into, or we wouldn't have rushed into them then. But that doesn't mean we can't try reasoning with her."

Pascale nodded. "I need to go home," she said slowly. "I need to sleep in my own bed and wear my own clothes and feel like myself again. Angelique said I could use the branch of Sang Froid in Dommartin until I get used to hunting on my own."

"Some vampires never hunt," Jean added. "Some always use Angelique's services. You won't have grocery bills anymore, so you can use your grocery budget at Sang Froid if you choose to go that route instead of hunting."

It made sense, and Pascale suspected she would go that route more often than not. She was not aggressive as a rule, and while she had hunted successfully with Angelique at her side guiding her and shoring up her confidence, Pascale doubted she would fare nearly as well on her own. If she had a regular lover she could feed from, that would be different, but she did not, and now that she was a vampire, she would have even more trouble finding one than she had before. Unless Adèle changed her mind.

"Would it be too much of an imposition to ask someone to drive me home?" Pascale said, not comfortable sharing her thoughts with the two men in the room. They wanted to help, but she did not know them well enough to confide in them the way she suspected everyone else did. They had that air about them, but everything was still too new and uncertain for her to trust anything or anyone.

"I'll drive you," Raymond said. "That way I'll know where you live so I can use magic to take you there later."

"Thank you," Pascale said. "It will be good to be home again."

HALF an hour later, alone in her house, Pascale walked around the familiar rooms, trying to feel at home once again. Everything felt strange, though, as if she were seeing it all through new eyes. Perhaps she was, she mused as she fingered the jewelry box her mother had given her. She supposed she should be glad her mother was not around to see what she had become. Deeply devout, her mother would have had trouble accepting this change in Pascale's nature. More than once, she had listened to her mother rant about magic being the devil's own handiwork. It was not an opinion Pascale shared, but it was one she had given up trying to change in her mother.

Having walked into the kitchen, she opened the cupboards mechanically, staring at the items inside. She would have to see if Secours catholique could send someone by to pick up a donation, because otherwise it would all go to waste. She had no idea if she could still consume any of the food, but she already knew it would not provide any nourishment.

The big windows she had so coveted when she first saw the house let in the moonlight, a subtle reminder of the danger they now posed. Even knowing moonlight would not hurt her, she suddenly felt exposed with the volets opened. Grabbing the remote, she pressed the button to close all the blinds in the house, cocooning her safely in darkness.

That brought her thoughts squarely back to the revelation she had been trying to avoid dwelling on: Adèle and the potential partnership between them.

The idea of having some degree of normalcy in her life again appealed. Being able to move in the daylight, while it went against all her new instincts, would allow her to attend meetings at work and keep her job more easily. Not having to hunt would save her from the awkwardness of approaching potential donors only to be rebuffed as she had been too many times in her life when she had approached someone who interested her. Most importantly, having someone to share her life and help her adjust to all the changes in her body and her abilities would be a great comfort. The only problem with that image was her inability to envision Adèle being comforting. Adèle had tried to reassure her the night Pascale was turned, taking her to l'Institut, assuring her she was not a monster, but Pascale had not felt safe until she was in Paris with Angelique. Of course, Adèle's realization of their potential partnership that night might have influenced her attitude and actions, but her comments tonight did not give Pascale any hope that

the intervening days had changed Adèle's reaction to the situation. Adèle had no desire for another partner, end of discussion, which left Pascale in limbo again. She could try to persuade Adèle to give her a chance, but that seemed a venture doomed to failure with the wizard's previous partner having spoiled the idea of partnerships for her. She could try to find a different partner, if that was possible, but Raymond and Jean did not seem to have much hope for that.

With a sigh, she fell back on the safety of routine, walking upstairs to her bedroom and getting ready for bed. She was not going to solve this problem tonight, and she had other, more pressing matters to deal with first, like making sure she still had a job and that her employer would work around her new limitations. Once she was sure she could survive on her own, she would think about finding a partner.

ADÈLE knocked on the door of the building she had identified as the residence of Denis Langlois. She hoped he was in, but she was prepared to wait if he was not. Anything was better than returning home, where her thoughts would chase her out of bed or follow her into her dreams if she managed to sleep.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, monsieur Langlois," Adèle said, "but I was hoping you could go over a list of names with me to see if there are any I've missed or any I've included incorrectly."

"This relates to the turning the other night?" Denis asked.

"Yes, the victim commented on her attacker's voice being distinctive, much like Jean's in accent, though not in pitch," Adèle explained. "We're hoping to use that to narrow down the list of possible suspects based on when a vampire was turned. Jean suggested I talk to you, since you're more familiar with the vampires in this area than he is."

"I have the records," Denis said, "although my predecessor was not always meticulous about updating them. Depending on when a vampire was turned or came to Autun, I may not have records. I've been trying to fill in the missing information, but I've only been in my position for six months."

"Yes, I remember hearing about your accession to the role," Adèle said. "Right in the middle of the attacks at l'Institut. I should have



come then to introduce myself and to congratulate you, but I was a little tied up with that investigation.”

“What years are you looking for?” Denis asked.

“Before 1500,” Adèle said. “We don’t have a beginning date, although Jean was turned in the year 911, and she said the accent was the same, so the closer to that date someone was turned, the more likely they are to have the same accent.”

“That predates Renaud’s reign as chef de la Cour,” Denis said, “so unless an older vampire came to Autun later, we should have complete records.”

He led Adèle into the library and pulled out a huge leather-bound sheaf of vellum pages. “The records of the Cour d’Autun,” Denis said. “Before 1500, you say? Let’s start there and work backward.”

They spent the next hour checking records against Adèle’s list. Many of the vampires inscribed on the pages were no longer extant, driving home to Adèle the desolation of their solitary existences, but by the time they reached the beginning of the genealogies, she had added ten names to her list, including that of the former chef de la Cour.

“My understanding is that he was pretty vehemently opposed to l’Institut,” Adèle said as she wrote Renaud’s name at the bottom of her list. “Could he have something to do with this?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Denis said, “but I don’t see any connection between l’Institut and turning that poor woman against her will. Certainly Renaud didn’t want l’Institut in Dommartin and would have been happy not to have it exist anywhere, but he lost that battle when he lost the Cour because of his attitude. I haven’t seen him since he lost our fight, so I don’t even know if he’s still in the area.”

“Could he still be in the area without your knowledge?” Adèle asked.

“I’m sure he could be,” Denis replied. “Being chef de la Cour doesn’t give me some magical ability to sense other vampires. It’s somewhere between an elected position and a military one. I won my role by force and hold it through a combination of guile and strength, but I was the one who fought Renaud by the will of the other members of the Cour. As long as Renaud didn’t do anything to draw attention to himself, he could be next door and I wouldn’t know it.”

“And I can’t do a seeking spell on him without his blood, so that’s no help,” Adèle said, thinking of the challenges they had faced in

creating repères for the vampires during the war, when everyone had carried a link to the locator map with them while on duty. “If you see him, I’d like to speak with him. Now what about the others on the list? Do you know of any reason why any of them would attack someone the way Pascale was attacked?”

Denis examined the list. “Auguste is a crotchety old vampire with more opinions than sense sometimes, but he seemed far more concerned with protecting the Cour and our new rights than with defending himself. Well, that and not involving mortals in vampire business, but he came around to the realization that he couldn’t have his rights and no involvement with mortals at the same time. The others live largely in retirement except to hunt. I suppose Pascale’s turning could have been a hunting accident, but a vampire of this age should have had the sense and the experience to stop before that happened, and a newly turned vampire wouldn’t have had the right accent. I’m sorry I’m not more help.”

“I appreciate you taking the time you have,” Adèle replied. “I may be back with more questions as I try to narrow down my list of suspects further. For all we know, it wasn’t a local vampire who did this.”

## Chapter 11

TWO days later, Denis arrived at l'Institut for a meeting with Jean and Raymond to discuss the legislative options and to make a plan for the public relations nightmare that was sure to follow.

He nodded his thanks to Alain as he walked into Jean and Raymond's office, surprised to see a third person already there, someone he did not know.

"Bonsoir, Denis," Raymond said, offering his hand. He had learned not to expect either of the vampires to speak first. If one of them had not been a chef de la Cour, that one would have unbent enough to acknowledge the other's presence without prompting, but between two chefs de la Cour, even allied ones, that tension never fully went away. "I don't believe you've met Martin yet."

"No, I haven't," Denis said, turning his attention to the third occupant of the room. The man rose and offered his hand as well. Denis took it, his gaze raking over the other man's body. They were of a height, a little less than two meters, but Martin was considerably broader through the shoulders than Denis, a man's body rather than the body of a nineteen-year-old boy. Denis might have lived more than a man's lifetime, but his body had not aged since his changing on the battlefields of Amiens. Laughing hazel eyes topped Martin's high cheekbones and narrow chin, bringing a matching smile to Denis's lips. "Denis Langlois, chef de la Cour d'Autun."

"Martin Delacroix," Martin said. "I'm on sabbatical from Canada for the year."

*Another wizard, then,* Denis thought, not sure he wanted yet another wizard in his life. This one, though, stirred something in him he had not felt since Noël died. "Enchantée," Denis said, the word more than merely lip service for once. "What will you be doing here at l'Institut?"

"That's what I was just discussing with Raymond and Jean," Martin answered. "I'm a researcher as well and fascinated by the partnerships. Do you have a partner?"

"I haven't been fortunate enough to find one yet," Denis replied, glossing over the fact that he had made no real effort to find one either. He thought he saw amusement on Jean's and Raymond's faces, but he ignored them. He had fed from his share of mortals since Noël's death, but he had not felt this immediate resonance with another person since the moment he first laid eyes on the man who became his lover until age and infirmity stole him away. If Jean and Raymond chose to find amusement in his reaction, Denis would point out their own obvious infatuation with each other in reply. People in glass houses.... "What about you?"

"I'm not looking for a partner," Martin said immediately. "I'm only here for a year. If I did find a partner, I'd want it to be with a Canadian vampire. I've enjoyed my few days here so far, but Montréal is home. That said, I find the idea of the partnerships fascinating. To be so much the center of each other's worlds and to create such a symbiotic relationship is something most people can only dream of, no matter what they purport to feel for each other. But you came for business, not to listen to me wax poetic on a subject I'm only beginning to explore. I should leave you three to talk."

"Please stay," Denis said. "As an outsider, you might have some insight we'll miss because we're so caught up in the situation."

"If you're sure," Martin said, glancing at Raymond and Jean, who nodded their agreement. He returned to his seat, his eyes following Denis despite himself. The vampire was striking, as much for the dichotomy between his apparent youth and his commanding presence as for his looks, though with his short dark hair slicked back from his forehead, his appearance was striking as well. It was his eyes that held Martin's attention, though, his gaze laser sharp as he focused on the matter that had brought him to l'Institut.

"I met with my Cour," Denis began. "They're understandably concerned and not entirely convinced our policy of denouncing the *extorris* will work, but no one challenged the banishment of the man, whoever he is."

"I met with mine as well," Jean replied, "to much the same reaction, although the Parisian vampires are somewhat more used to following my lead than perhaps yours are."

Denis laughed. "I would imagine that's very true, since the vampires in Autun have had only six months to accept my leadership. Even if I were your age, they wouldn't be used to me yet. At my age,

half of them are still convinced it was a mistake to send me to face Renaud. What about the legislation? Have you made any progress on that?"

"We met with Anne-Marie Valour, the new president of l'ANS, and her staff," Raymond replied. "They are drafting a proposed bill to make nonconsensual turning a crime on the same level as aggravated rape. Obviously in Pascale's case, there was no sexual contact, but the attack on her was penetrative, and the consequences as serious or worse than the consequences of a rape. The law requests double the time of incarceration, since as a vampire, the perpetrator would have a much longer lifespan and so twenty years would be relatively little, but the staff warned us we might have to compromise on that aspect."

"As long as it's a crime, I'm less concerned about the penalty," Denis said. "Our problem right now is being able to cast the *extorris* as a criminal. We can find his behavior abhorrent, but being able to point out that we proposed legislation to make his actions a crime will go a long way toward proving our point."

"What penalty would he face under vampire law?" Martin interrupted. "I don't know the word *extorris*, but it's obviously a term in vampire society for someone who has passed outside the norms of accepted behavior. So what would happen to him if vampires judged him?"

"Vampires see it from a different perspective," Denis replied. "He isn't *extorris* because he turned Pascale, even against her will. He's *extorris* because he abandoned her. If Detective Rougier hadn't found her, she would have been destroyed, and that constitutes harming another vampire, which is against all the tenets of vampire society."

"That doesn't answer my question," Martin asked. "What penalty would he face?"

"Given that Detective Rougier did find her in time, probably banishment from the Cour," Denis replied. "The three outcomes of a *judicium*, a vampire trial, are banishment, incarceration, or extinction. If she had not survived, he would certainly have been sentenced to extinction as well. And before you say it, I know banishment doesn't sound like much of a consequence, but while vampires are not a communal race the way a werewolf pack is, we do rely on the Cour for our livelihoods. That's changing somewhat now that we are more integrated into French society, but being excluded from vampire society often resulted in a vampire being destroyed either because he

was caught or because he no longer had a place to seek refuge from the sun.”

“And before you decide that’s too harsh a punishment,” Jean added, “we lived in fear for millennia of being found and destroyed by the mortals around us. A vampire who endangers that cannot be allowed around other vampires. We agreed when the antidiscrimination legislation passed two years ago to honor French law now, so the label of *extorris* is more about communicating our opinion on the situation to the Cours than it is a judgment. There will be no *judicium* for this vampire. He will face his crimes under French law.”

“Is that good or bad?”

Denis shrugged. “Some of both, probably. The threat of extinction is gone, since France doesn’t have the death penalty, but the advantages to vampire society as a whole make that threat less of an issue now. In theory, anyway, we don’t have to worry about one person’s bad judgment leading to racial cleansing like we used to fear. As long as the antidiscrimination legislation holds.”

“Do you really think it won’t?” Martin asked.

“I think it will,” Denis said, “but I also think we’re in for some rough times if we don’t catch this guy quickly. There’s a difference between equal rights on paper and in the way people act, and for people who weren’t in Paris during the war, the assistance the vampires gave isn’t nearly as obvious. When the legislation passed, I heard people in Autun wondering what the big deal was because Autun is small enough that Serrier didn’t ever attack there. If we can spin it well, we should be safe, but if panic sets in, I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“You know you and your Cour are always welcome here,” Raymond offered, “should it come to that. Adèle’s wards will hold, and there are always wizards here to shore them up if they start to give. It might be a little crowded depending on how widespread the panic grows, but we can squeeze a lot of people into the different buildings if we have to.”

“Merci,” Denis said with a nod of his head. “I hope it won’t come to that, but it’s nice to know the option exists should we need it. Have you given any more thought to a public relations campaign?”

“A little,” Jean said, “but the introduction of the legislation should be the first step unless word somehow gets out before that. We want to

start strong, showing we're already dealing with the situation instead of simply talking about it."

"Do you have a timeline for the bill being introduced?" Denis asked.

"Hopefully within a couple of weeks," Jean said. "It's been almost a week since Pascale was turned, and there haven't been any other attacks, at least not that have come to our attention. As long as it's an isolated case, there isn't any rush. We'll propose the legislation without even mentioning her and let it go at that. If it comes to light or if there are additional attacks, then we can start defending ourselves."

"If you think that's best," Denis agreed, the unease he felt at being surrounded by wizards finally pushing him to withdraw. "Could someone take me home?"

"I haven't been to your house, so I can't take you all the way there," Martin volunteered before Raymond could speak, "but I can take you to Autun at least. And if you'll show me where you live, I'll be able to help in the future. Since I'll be on staff here for a year, I should get familiar enough to help out with everything I can, not just my research."

"You don't have to do that," Raymond said.

"I know, but I'd like to," Martin replied. "It'll do me good to go for a walk." He rose and checked to make sure he had his wand. "If you don't mind, that is, Denis."

"One wizard's magic is the same as another's," Denis said, though he looked forward to having a moment to talk to Martin alone.

"Until you find your partner," Jean said with an indulgent smile. "And then you discover how very different one wizard's magic can be. Ask any partnered vampire if you don't believe me."

Denis resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He had no doubt Jean was right. Every partnered vampire he had talked to confirmed it to greater or lesser degree. But that did not mean Denis wanted the experience for himself, not when it risked becoming so all-consuming. Jean was already well established in his Cour and among the other chefs de la Cour. Denis had more pressing concerns than searching for a partner who might or might not exist and then trying to navigate the shoals of a new relationship even more fraught for the magical symbiosis that seemed to push the two partners together with nearly irresistible force.

"Shall we go?" Martin asked.

The four men walked outside to the open courtyard. The walls would not keep the magic from passing through, but Raymond had noticed on more than one occasion how much that seemed to disconcert many of the vampires. He had made it a habit to go outside unless the situation was urgent or the vampire with him was one he knew well. Martin cast the displacement spell, disappearing instantly, but Denis remained in the courtyard.

“C’est quoi, cette connerie?” Denis muttered under his breath. He glared at the amusement on Jean’s face. “I don’t have time for this.”

“No one said you had to do anything about it,” Jean said as Martin reappeared next to them.

“What happened?” Martin asked.

“Your magic didn’t work,” Raymond said. “It would seem you’ve found your partner even before you completed the seminar. Before either of you panic, remember that what you do with the information is entirely up to you. You don’t ever have to see each other again if that’s what you decide to do. And even if you decide to get a little better acquainted before going forward, as long as Denis does not feed, you are both still free to walk away. The bond cannot form without the exchange of blood.”

Denis nodded slowly, searching Martin’s face before turning back to Raymond. “If you could send me home, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Raymond said, drawing his wand. “We’ll be in touch if anything changes.”

“As will I,” Denis said. Good manners insisted he acknowledge his partner in some way before he left. “Martin, it was nice to meet you.”

Martin offered his hand. “Nice to meet you as well.”

Denis almost wished he could avoid shaking Martin’s hand, but that would be rude, and Martin did not deserve that. He had no more interest in being Denis’s partner than Denis had in being his partner. Denis ignored the tingle of awareness that slithered up his arm as their skin connected. He pushed all thoughts of lingering and getting better acquainted with Martin aside with deliberate determination. He did not have time for complications. “I’m ready.”

Raymond cast the displacement spell, sending Denis home.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Martin said when Denis was gone.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Raymond offered.



“What is there to talk about?” Martin said with a lightness he did not feel. “Denis was quite clear about not having an interest in forming a partnership, and my presence here in France is only temporary. As interesting as he seems, there’s no future in any relationship between us, so it’s better not to begin.”

“He is an interesting case,” Jean replied, not sure he agreed with Martin’s assessment of the situation. With the options available because of Martin’s magic, distance was not the issue it could have been. “For a vampire, he’s very young, only a little over ninety years since he was turned, not to mention how young he looks because of his age when he was turned. Yet he took the Cour autunoise from a vampire who is nearly my contemporary. Age confers strength among vampires. Even with the support of the Cour behind him, he should not have been able to win that battle, and yet he did.”

“So what makes him different?” Martin asked.

“Damned if I know,” Jean replied with a shake of his head. “I couldn’t figure it out six months ago when it happened, and I haven’t figured it out since then. Granted, I haven’t really studied the situation—I’ve had a few more pressing problems to deal with—but I’ve never heard of anything like it. If it were Auguste or Camille or one of the older vampires, I wouldn’t have been terribly surprised at the news. Renaud was a bit of a tyrant, and his replacement was very much the will of the Cour. That approval would have given strength to the coup attempt, but for a ninety-year-old vampire to defeat a nine-hundred-year-old vampire who, to my knowledge, wasn’t injured or otherwise impaired, is unprecedented.”

“Is strength directly proportional to age? Should Renaud have been ten times stronger than Denis?” Martin asked curiously.

“Not directly proportional, no,” Jean replied. “If I were to fight Renaud, it would be a fairly even match. My eleven hundred years and his nine hundred are close enough not to make that much difference. But I wouldn’t want to fight monsieur Lombard, who is almost twice my age. I have no doubt I would lose that battle.”

“I’m not so sure you would,” Raymond disagreed. “You’re stronger now than you were two years ago because of our partnership. We haven’t tested exactly how much, but I noticed it when we were clearing the rubble after the first episode of vandalism last winter. You moved far more by yourself than you were able to do when we went to La Réunion after the typhoon eighteen months before.”

"I still don't think I'll test it," Jean said with a rueful grin. "There are certain people it doesn't do to alienate."

"That's not the point," Raymond said. "The point is that other things besides age can influence a vampire's strength."

"Yes, but Denis doesn't have a partnership," Martin said. "Unless he had a partner who didn't survive the war?"

"No, he wasn't involved with the war effort," Jean said. "As he said, it didn't spread out to Autun, but something obviously happened, either to strengthen him or to weaken Renaud. I don't understand what, but whatever it was, it was enough to convince me Denis is a vampire worth watching."

"It would benefit you if he had a partner, wouldn't it?" Martin asked.

Jean shrugged. "Perhaps. He is the closest chef de la Cour to l'Institut, certainly, but we already have his good will in that regard. He participated in one of our seminars and has allowed and even encouraged the members of his Cour to do the same. That's far more than his predecessor ever did. The Cours are mostly independent other than the Congrès des chefs, a periodic gathering of all the chefs de la Cour, but I am well enough established among my peers that I'm not worried about all the changes in my life since the last gathering. If anything, I'm in a position to strengthen Denis more than the other way around."

"When is the next Congrès des chefs?" Martin asked.

"In about a year," Jean replied.

"So not soon enough for that to have any impact on the current situation," Martin decided.

"Not unless we convened early," Jean agreed. "I'm not sure whether that would be a help or a hindrance, though. I don't really see the other chefs de la Cour being comfortable with the spotlight of meeting early in response to this kind of threat. Then again, that may be what it takes. I suppose we'll deal with that if it happens."

Martin nodded. "That makes sense. Thank you for including me in the discussion tonight. It was most enlightening. I should probably retire. Tomorrow will be another long day, and then on Sunday it will be time to start thinking about my research."

Jean and Raymond let him go. "That complicates matters," Raymond said when they were alone. "Even with all our attempts to

smooth things over, this makes two unplanned partnerships in less than a week.”

“No, it makes two unplanned potential partnerships,” Jean replied. “None of the people involved have to go forward with anything. That’s the point of l’Institut and the seminars. Pascale hasn’t completed a seminar yet, but the others know what it will mean if they decide to go forward. And if they decide not to, that’s a victory for the process as well. It means we’ve done what we intended to do and helped people make an informed decision.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Raymond said. “It just seems... sad.”

“You’re such a romantic,” Jean teased.

“You’ll never find anyone to believe it,” Raymond retorted.

Jean smiled. “I don’t need to find anyone to believe it. It’s enough to know it myself. Now come inside. I’m of a mind to prove how much of a romantic I am.”

“How much of a sex fiend, you mean?” Raymond said with a laugh.

Jean grinned. “I haven’t heard you complaining yet.”

Jean would never hear him complaining about that, but Raymond would not swell his lover’s ego by saying that aloud. Jean knew anyway.

ALONE in his room in the Hostellerie, Martin undressed slowly, trying to take everything he had learned over the past week and apply it to his own life. The idea of a partnership fascinated him. It had even before he came to l’Institut on sabbatical. As a child, he had read an old legend about soul mates, and the concept had stayed with him ever since, even when rational thinking insisted he dismiss it as the legend it was. He had started a career in magical research, always with the niggling notion that the obscure legend must have had some basis in fact at some point in the past. He had not shared that notion with his advisors or colleagues, not wanting to be laughed out of the room, but when he first heard of the partnerships forming in France, he had immediately searched out more information and started putting together a proposal to come to France to study. The creation of l’Institut had sped up that process, and here he was, on the cusp of pursuing his childhood obsession in a real-world application.

The possibility of finding someone who could augment his magic and who knew what else had tempted him from the start, but he had intended to return home and pursue it there, hopefully setting up a satellite campus of l'Institut Marcel Chavinier where he could continue his research and perhaps find a partner of his own. He had not realized exactly how involved the relationship was, but nothing he had heard dissuaded him from the theory. Obviously it would depend on his partner once the time came to move from theory into practice, but he had seen the success stories all around him, and even the few cautionary tales had only convinced him that the solution was a bit of common sense rather than avoidance of the issue entirely.

He had not counted on finding a partner in France before his sabbatical had even truly begun. Nor had he counted on his partner being uninterested in exploring what they might build between them.

Climbing into bed, he pondered the implications of what had happened that evening in the courtyard. From the little everyone understood of the partnership bond, once it was established, death was the only way to break it, but he and Denis had not formed a partnership yet. They had the potential to create one, but until blood actually passed between them, it was only potential. The question remained whether Martin could form that bond with someone else, or if the potential for a partnership was enough to keep him from matching with anyone else as long as Denis lived. He could not force the vampire to accept him as a partner, of course, but if Denis continued to refuse and Martin did not find another partner, he would always wonder if Denis was the reason why.

It would be an interesting question to explore, but given the percentage of bonds Raymond reported having formed since l'Institut opened, Martin was not sure a lack of additional matches would be conclusive. It could simply mean he had not found the right person yet. From what Raymond had said, everyone who had found a potential partner at l'Institut had gone on to form a bond, those who were not interested choosing not to participate in the matching process. That would seemingly make him and Denis the exception. He would have to ask Raymond if Denis had ever participated in the matching process or if he had declined at the end of his seminar participation. If he had, Martin would respect that. However intrigued he was by the vampire and by their society as a whole, Martin could see the pitfalls for a couple who was less than fully committed to their bond.

He closed his eyes, determined to put the thought of Denis Langlois out of his mind completely so he could rest. He had other things to worry about than a vampire who had no interest in a partnership with him or with anyone else.

DENIS paced the courtyard outside his building in Autun, restless energy keeping him from returning inside. A partner. He had a partner, if he chose to reach out his hand and take one.

It was more complicated than that, of course, with Martin not seeming interested in forming a bond, but Denis had seen others say the same, only to change their tune quickly after discovering they did have a partner. He had wondered at the part of vampire nature that seemed to drive vampires to seek company in their solitude even knowing it would lead to inevitable loss. He excused his relationship with Noël as ignorance. He had fed from Noël the night he was turned and had not fed from anyone else until Noël was too close to death to sustain him any longer. All the blood he had consumed since then had tasted flat in comparison. He credited the lack of emotion in the exchange with the difference. Even the first night, when he did not know Noël, he had tasted interest and desire in the man's blood, though he had not known how to read it at the time. As their relationship deepened, the interest and desire had expanded to include an unending devotion that Denis mirrored to the depths of his being. More than once, he had tried to convince Noël to become a vampire, but his lover had resisted, insisting it would change their relationship beyond recognition. Denis had finally accepted that. He had eased Noël's passing much as his own maker, Luc Cabalet, had offered to do for him on the battlefield outside Amiens where he had been left for dead. Denis had chosen to be changed rather than to die, but he had accepted Noël's choice in the end.

Noël had been gone nearly thirty years, but the passing of time had not eased the loss in any appreciable way. Denis still looked for him at odd times, turning to say something to the lover who had been there for over sixty years and suddenly was not. The thought of having someone else there instead both thrilled and horrified him. Unlike most vampires, he had not broken all but functional ties with the mortal world when he was turned, his relationship with Noël keeping him firmly planted in the world he should have left behind. When Noël

died, Denis had suddenly found himself alone without the support of a maker and friend to guide him through the adjustment he had not made when he was first turned, unsatisfied by impersonal feedings and yet unwilling to enter a new relationship out of respect for his lover's memory. As far as Denis knew, Luc still resided in Amiens as their chef de la Cour, but having disregarded the man's advice about relationships with mortals upon his turning, Denis had felt awkward about approaching him for more help. As far as Denis knew, Luc did not even know Noël had died, although surely he must have presumed, given the passage of time and Noël's age when Denis was first turned. Denis had finally changed apartments, realizing he would never be able to move on as long as he was surrounded by memories of Noël.

It had not helped at all.

Noël was no longer the issue, he reminded himself silently. His lover would have a few choice things to say about Denis's continued isolation, for that matter. A year or two to grieve, perhaps, but Noël would demand to know what he thought he was doing, sitting on his arse thirty years later moping and lonely instead of finding someone else to fill the gaping hole in his routine. Noël would demand to know why he had not taken Martin's outstretched hand at l'Institut tonight and never let go.

Denis had no answer for the ghost of his dead lover. He had rejected the thought of a partner out of hand, sure he could never find someone to take Noël's place in his heart. He was still not sure he could find someone, but suddenly instead of a faceless, nameless potential partner at some unspecified time in the future, Denis had a name, a face, and a reality in front of him. Granted, Martin had expressed no more interest than Denis had, but that might not be set in stone.

The thought caught him off guard, the sense of betraying Noël's memory so strong it nearly took him to his knees. He needed to talk to someone who would understand, not about the partnership, perhaps, but at least about having and losing a lover. He could not ask any of the vampires in his Cour without losing ground in le Jeu des Cours, not that he knew of any relationships in their past. He considered the vampires at l'Institut, but while he would not lose as much face with them as with the members of his own Cour, he still did not know any of them well enough to decide who to ask. He would have to ask Luc. They had lost touch after Denis returned to Autun when Noël stepped down as mayor of Amiens sixty years ago, but they had been friendly up until

that time, certainly enough for Denis to have noted Luc's grief at Fabien's untimely death at the beginning of World War II.

He could approach Luc not as one chef de la Cour to another, but as one vampire to his maker, the only place le Jeu des Cours did not reign supreme, and maybe he could get some advice to help him make up his mind.

## Chapter 12

“IN WHAT world is this a good idea?” Adèle muttered as she put the finishing touches on her makeup. Angelique had called her on Friday night insisting she come to Paris for a night out with “the girls.” Immediately suspicious, Adèle had demanded to know who else Angelique had invited, sure word of her potential partnership with Pascale had made the rounds by now, but Angelique had only listed Magali Ducassé, Caroline Bontoux, and Mireille Fournier. Even if they had heard the news, Magali would not pressure Adèle into anything given how supportive she had been of Adèle during the fiasco with Leighton, and the last Adèle had heard, Caroline and Mireille were so wrapped up in each other they would not have time for meddling anyway.

Finally satisfied with her appearance, Adèle grabbed her purse and her wand and cast a spell to take herself to Sang Froid. She arrived in the foyer seconds later to find Angelique and Magali already there. Caroline and Mireille were nowhere in sight.

“Don’t you look stunning!” Angelique said, gliding across the room to kiss Adèle on both cheeks. “We’ll turn heads tonight for sure.”

Adèle brushed her hands self-consciously over the lines of the bright red dress she had picked for the evening. It had seemed like a good idea when she was getting dressed—a bright color to lift her mood and make her feel powerful—but suddenly, looking at the more subdued black and grey dresses Magali and Angelique wore, she felt loud instead of elegant. “Maybe I should go home and change,” she equivocated.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Angelique insisted. “You look amazing. Every man and woman in the room will want you.”

The comment, surely intended to ease Adèle’s nerves, only added to her unease. She could deal with men wanting her. She had no idea what to do about women wanting her.

If Pascale even would after her outburst the other night.



The thought shocked her to the core. She was not interested in women! Not in any kind of sexual way.

Before she could pursue the thought, Caroline and Mireille arrived, Caroline's hand on Mireille's elbow as the vampire guided her sightless partner into the room.

"Bonsoir, Caroline," Adèle said with a smile she knew Caroline could not see. She had learned early on to make sure to speak whenever Caroline entered a room so the woman would know who was there and where they were.

"Bonsoir," Magali and Angelique echoed.

"Bonsoir," Caroline replied, approaching each of them in turn at Mireille's side. If Adèle had not known Caroline could not see her, she would never have guessed, as Caroline met each of them in turn for kisses on each cheek.

"Are we all here?" Mireille asked, greeting each of the others in turn.

"We are," Angelique said. "I thought we would have dinner for our wizards and then go out dancing. We can all use a little lightness after the last few days."

"I don't dance much these days," Caroline said, her laugh light despite the seriousness of her situation.

"I don't see why not," Angelique said, gesturing for the other women to precede her out the door. "A chance to be as close to your partner as you want, to rest completely in her arms with no one to care."

Caroline's smile was brilliant. "I don't need a dance floor for that, but we'll see how the evening goes."

Adèle could not explain the unexpected surge of jealousy she felt at watching the flush rise up Mireille's cheeks. She did not want another partnership, much less with a woman who had no idea how to handle herself as a vampire or in any kind of stressful situation.

Adèle found she could not take her eyes off the two women as dinner went on. Caroline coped with her blindness through a combination of magic and Mireille's help, but Adèle had grown mostly used to that in the times she had seen the other wizard since the end of l'émeute des Sorciers. What fascinated her was the way Caroline's eyes seemed vacant except when she looked at Mireille. When someone else spoke, Caroline's head turned in the right direction, but

her eyes never seemed to find the right place. When Mireille spoke, Caroline's eyes fixed directly on her partner's face as if not even her blindness could mute her fascination with her partner.

That was unsettling enough, but as Adèle kept watching, she began to notice other little things: the way their hands seemed to drift together, fingers twining together, or the way their shoulders always seemed to be almost touching.

Excusing herself, she rose from the table, suddenly flushed and aroused by the idea of them together.

Alone in the restroom, she wet a paper towel and rubbed it over the back of her neck beneath the fall of long black hair, trying to cool the sudden heat in her body.

"Adèle?"

Stifling a curse, Adèle tossed the paper towel and turned to face Angelique. "Yes?"

"Are you all right? You've been quiet all night, and you don't look like you feel very well," Angelique asked.

"Can you keep a secret?" Adèle asked. Not that it was really a secret, but she already felt the silent weight of Raymond knowing about Pascale. She did not want it to become common knowledge.

"Secrets are my business," Angelique replied. "What's bothering you?"

"My magic doesn't work on the vampire who was turned last week," Adèle said.

"But that's wonderful," Angelique exclaimed. "This is your chance at a proper partnership."

"There are a couple of problems with that," Adèle scoffed. "First, I don't really want another partnership, proper or not, but even if I did, I like men."

Angelique chuckled, the sound low and husky and far too unsettling for Adèle's already fraught nerves. "Open your mind a little," Angelique urged. "Life is a banquet. Why would you deny yourself half the flavors on the table?"

"Because they aren't to my taste," Adèle retorted.

"How do you know?" Angelique purred, stepping so close Adèle could smell her perfume and all but feel her breathing. "Have you ever tried? Have you ever had a woman take the time to explore your body? Men can be delightful creatures, but they're still men. A woman,

though, knows what makes other women tick. She knows how to seduce in a way a man never will, no matter how much he might adore his lover.”

Adèle’s skepticism showed on her face, prompting Angelique to step even closer until their bodies touched, her breasts pressing against Adèle’s. “I could show you.”

Adèle tried to take a step back, equal parts aroused and horrified by the proposition. “What about David? You can’t tell me he’d agree to that.”

“He wouldn’t agree to me feeding from you,” Angelique replied, “but I could persuade him to allow the rest.”

Adèle shook her head even as her nipples tightened in desire. She could not believe she was seriously considering Angelique’s proposal. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she gasped. “I have to work with him.”

“The war is over,” Angelique reminded her, running her henna-painted hands up Adèle’s arms, stopping just short of touching the sides of her breasts. “You haven’t seen him in ages. You’re making excuses. If you don’t want to, simply say the word and I’ll forget we ever had this conversation, but don’t lie to yourself. There’s a sweet, scared woman waiting for you in Château-Chinon. She’s ripe for the picking, for *your* picking, if you’ll just stretch out your hand for her to take.”

“I don’t want a sweet, scared anything,” Adèle insisted, escaping Angelique’s grasp and struggling to catch her breath. “That’s the problem. If you were my partner, I might think differently about it, but I need someone who can be my partner, not a weight around my neck.”

Angelique shook her head sadly. “We would kill each other in a matter of days, although what a way to go! Pascale isn’t weak, despite what you think. She’s over her head without enough guidance, but she isn’t stupid and she isn’t sniveling. You need to get to know her instead of judging her for her reaction to a traumatic situation. Think about it, Adèle. With a man, you fight to keep your identity. He’s the top by virtue of his cock. With another woman, the roles are more fluid. You won’t have to fight Pascale for control of your lovemaking. She’ll give it to you gladly.”

“It’s not just about the sex,” Adèle retorted, seduced despite herself by the images Angelique’s words conjured up.

Angelique laughed. "It's always about the sex, but since you seem to think otherwise, tell me what else it could possibly be about."

Adèle waited too long to reply.

"You see what you're doing, don't you?" Angelique challenged into Adèle's silence. "You fight so hard to prove that being a woman doesn't make you weak, that it doesn't make you less capable than your male counterparts, yet you make the assumption about women that you assume every man makes about you. You aren't weak. You've proven that hundreds of times. Stop trying to make everyone else prove it. It isn't fair to you, and it sure as hell isn't fair to Pascale. Does she know?"

"About the partnership?" Adèle verified. "Yes, she knows."

"And what does she think about it?"

"I don't know," Adèle admitted. "I didn't wait around to find out."

"Of all the stupid, insensitive things! I should turn you over my knee, but you'd probably like it," Angelique snapped.

"How did I suddenly become the bad guy here?" Adèle protested. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"You haven't done anything right either," Angelique replied. "Think about how you'd feel if you were in Pascale's shoes. Yes, I know, you're a big strong wizard who couldn't possibly be hurt the way Pascale was hurt, but you're also a woman. Somewhere under that mannish exterior you put on for the world, there's a woman's heart. Maybe you should try listening to it occasionally before you miss what might be the best thing to ever happen to you."

The derisive tone of Angelique's voice cut deep as she turned on her heel and left Adèle alone in the restroom. Adèle stared at her reflection in the mirror, trying to reconcile the vision in the glass with Angelique's words. A chill racked her as she realized what she had done. Even though she had dressed for an evening out, everything about her attire proclaimed her superiority, her strength. The sleeveless cut of her dress showed off her muscular arms and broad shoulders, almost too strong and broad for a woman, and the deep neckline drew attention to her breasts as if daring anyone to challenge her right to display herself as she chose. The short skirt emphasized her height and the power in her legs. No one seeing her would mistake her for a man, not with her figure, but no one seeing her would ever accuse her of

being approachable either. She was too sharp around the edges, a man-eater, a man's man, except that she was a woman.

Suddenly sick to her stomach, she rubbed her arms, trying to shake off the sense of having missed her chance. The warble of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Rougier," she snapped.

"I'm sorry to disturb you on your night off, Detective, but the captain said I should call you anyway."

"What's happening?" Adèle asked, relieved to have something to focus on besides her own shortcomings.

"We got a call of a man running through town screaming. When we followed up on it, he said he was attacked by a vampire and turned."

"Take him to l'Institut Marcel Chavinier outside of Dommartin," Adèle directed. "I'll meet you there momentarily."

"Yes, Detective."

Adèle snapped her phone shut and let work distract her. She returned to the table, where the others were just finishing their meals. "I'm sorry to do this to you, but I just got called on a case," she explained. "Another case like Pascale's. They're taking the new vampire to l'Institut. Angelique, we'll probably have to impose on you again if the man hasn't managed to feed on his own yet."

"Of course," Angelique said. "I'll let François know to expect you. Perhaps Sebastien or Jean will stay with him to guide him, since I'm out for the evening."

Adèle started to insist, but while she had agreed to being pulled into work even on her time off when she signed up for the police force, Angelique had not. "I'll ask them," she said. "Bonsoir, Caroline. Magali, Mireille."

A quick displacement spell took her to l'Institut. Raymond appeared in the courtyard moments after she did. "Adèle, we weren't expecting you tonight. Much less attired for a night on the town," he said with a low whistle.

"I got a call from one of the officers in Château-Chinon," Adèle explained, ignoring his look. "They found another new vampire. They're bringing him here."

"Another one?" Raymond verified.

"A man this time," Adèle said. "That's all I know, but I thought we could control the situation best here."

"I agree," Raymond said. "Come inside where it's warmer and I'll get Jean. I should warn you, Pascale Auboussu is here. She came to ask about enrolling in next week's seminar. You don't have to see her if you don't want to, but I didn't want to spring her presence on you with no warning."

"I'm perfectly capable of behaving civilly," Adèle snapped, the thought of encountering the vampire dressed as she was and off-kilter from her conversation with Angelique making her curt. She took a deep breath and summoned a smile. "Truly."

Raymond chuckled. "If you say so."

They passed beneath the arched doorway to the main abbey building and into the office Raymond and Jean shared. No surprise to Adèle, Jean sat in one of the armchairs near the merrily crackling fireplace while Pascale sat on the small settee across from him. "Adèle, to what do we owe this pleasure?" Jean asked as she came in.

"I wish it were a pleasure visit," she replied with a short nod in Pascale's direction. "We have another victim of the rogue vampire. I got a call while I was out with friends in Paris. They're bringing the man here."

Almost before she had finished speaking, the bell sounded from the gated entrance to l'Institut.

"I'll go let them in," Raymond offered. "You're not dressed for the weather."

Adèle shrugged. "One of the benefits of magical transportation. I don't have to go outside."

Raymond chuckled as he went to open the gate.

"What do you know about this victim?" Jean asked.

"Only that it's a man this time," Adèle replied. "Pascale, you don't have to stay for this if you'd rather go."

"No," Pascale said softly, "I'll stay. I might be able to help. If nothing else, I know like no one else what he's been through."

"As you wish," Adèle replied with feigned insouciance. She wanted to order Pascale home, but she had no justification for that other than her own uncomfortable awareness of the other woman's presence. "Jean, does Raymond have a coat I could borrow? It really is too cold to be outside for long without one."

"It's on the coat tree behind the door," Jean said. "Once again, he forgot to put it on before he left."

Adèle retrieved the long winter coat, wrapping it gratefully around her as they went back outside to greet the officers who had found the newest victim.

“Merde,” Adèle cursed under her breath when she saw the man in the back of the patrol car. “Jean, we may have a problem here.”

“We already have a problem,” Jean reminded her.

“No, a bigger problem,” Adèle said. “That’s Pierre Ganet.”

“That doesn’t mean anything to me,” Jean replied.

“He’s a local homeless man, perfectly harmless,” Adèle insisted, “and if he remembers to take his medicine, he is a sweet, gentle man, but when he doesn’t have his medicine, he ends up pretty much incoherent. I have no idea what we’ll be able to get out of him.”

The officers stepped out of the car before she could say more. Their uniforms were torn and dirty. “What happened?” Adèle exclaimed.

“He attacked us,” one of them explained. “Snarling and snapping and trying to bite us. I’ve never seen anything like it. We managed to get cuffs on him and stuff him into the back of the car, but he struggled the entire way here. It’s like he’s lost all connection with reason.”

“Let him out of the car and step back,” Jean requested.

The officers looked skeptical, but Adèle nodded, so they opened the door, backing away instantly. Pierre’s head came into the light as he leaned forward, looking around like a cornered animal seeking an escape route. “Pierre,” she called softly, “it’s Detective Rougier from Château-Chinon. You remember me, don’t you?”

Pierre blinked a couple of times as if the moonlight was too bright for him before his eyes focused on Adèle. He did not speak, but he calmed slightly at the sight of her.

“Can you tell me what happened to you?”

With a wordless howl, he lunged at her, fangs bared. She stumbled backward, the heels of her shoes tangling in the hem of Raymond’s coat, as Jean grabbed the new vampire and pulled him off her. “Raymond!”

The words of a binding spell cut through the night, immobilizing Pierre in Jean’s hold.

“Are you all right?” Pascale asked, helping Adèle to her feet again.

“I’m fine,” Adèle replied. “Embarrassed, but fine. Thank you. Okay, somebody tell me what the hell just happened here.”

"He's been like this since we found him," the officer said. "One minute he's cowering in a corner, the next he's lunging at the nearest warm body."

"He needs blood," Jean explained. "He won't attack Pascale or me because we're vampires. He might go for Raymond, but he sees you as an easier target because you're female. Or maybe because he knows you."

"Will feeding calm him down?" Adèle asked. "I realize I haven't been around a lot of newly turned vampires, but I've never seen a vampire act like this before."

"There's no way to know for sure," Jean said, his mind racing. "When a vampire is turned, the hunger for blood is incredible. Most of the time, the rational side of the person can control the beast inside long enough to feed and sate the need, but that beast lingers, always looking for a way out. It's one of the reasons vampires tend to be solitary creatures. One slip, and any one of us could turn into the same mindless creature that just attacked you. The older we get, the more control we have, but even an ancient vampire still has to deal with the impulse."

"The hint of danger overlaid by the veneer of the strength required to control the beast can be very attractive, though," Raymond said with a grin for Jean. Sobering, he looked at the newly turned vampire bound by his spell. "That doesn't help us with this one. I can keep him bound, but that doesn't solve his problem or help Adèle's investigation."

"And the longer he goes without feeding, the harder it will be to bring him back," Jean agreed. "I suppose we could take him to Paris. If we keep him bound except for his head so he can feed and if we supervise him, we should be able to keep him from hurting anyone else."

"This is ridiculous," Adèle muttered. "Take him inside. He can feed from me. We already know he isn't my partner, and if you're both there, you can get him off of me even if he catches me off guard again."

"I want to be there as well," Pascale insisted, the idea of someone else feeding from Adèle enough to send a roil of angry jealousy through her. Adèle was *her* partner, *hers* to protect if something went wrong. The thought caught her off guard, but the sense of rightness was too strong to deny.

"Are you sure you want to see this?" Jean asked, not entirely sure of the wisdom of Pascale watching someone else feed from Adèle. He



would destroy anyone who even attempted to feed from Raymond. Then again, Adèle and Pascale had not even begun a partnership, much less the sacred bond that linked him to Raymond.

“Yes,” Pascale said with more determination than she felt, but if something went wrong, she wanted to be there. She had no idea what she could do about it if it did, but she needed to know rather than pacing nervously outside.

“Thank you, officers,” Adèle said, taking pity on the two cops. “We’ll handle it from here, and I’ll make sure to note your dedication in my report.”

As the police returned to their car, Adèle drew her wand. “*Levez*,” she said, lifting Pierre’s frozen body and propelling it back inside before her.

Once they were safely enclosed in Jean’s office again, Adèle removed Raymond’s coat and the bracelet around her wrist. “I’m ready.”

“Not yet,” Jean said. “Let me get Sebastien and Orlando too.”

“Why?” Adèle demanded.

“Because I don’t trust this situation at all,” Jean replied. “Crazed as he is, I don’t know what he’s capable of. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“With you here plus Raymond’s magic and my own, I don’t see what could possibly happen,” Adèle insisted, but Jean was implacable.

After he had left, Raymond gestured for Adèle to sit. “Jean would deny it if he heard me say it aloud, but he lives in fear of his ‘beast’, as he calls it, escaping his control. Seeing a vampire with no control over his inner urges has shaken him. If the safeguard of a few extra vampires makes him more comfortable, give it to him. Even after two years, he forgets sometimes how powerful magic can be. He’s used to relying on his own strength, not on mine, even now. It isn’t worth the fight.”

“Very well,” Adèle agreed, glancing quickly at Pascale. She had thought the woman’s hysterics on their first meeting over the top, but now, seeing the madness inside Pierre and hearing that every vampire lived with that, controlling it constantly, she grudgingly revised her opinion. Pascale had not lunged at her wildly as Pierre had, trying to take by force what Adèle would certainly not have given willingly. Even in those first few moments in the tight confines of Adèle’s car after they met, when her lust for blood must have been unbelievable,

Pascale had been upset, but not out of control, not like Pierre. Perhaps Pascale was not as weak as she had first appeared.

Jean returned a few minutes later with Orlando and Sebastien. "I made Thierry and Alain stay at dinner," he told Adèle. "They wanted to come help too."

"Thank you," Adèle said. "This is already too much of an audience."

"If he showed any sign of awareness or control, I wouldn't do this," Jean assured her, "but I wouldn't risk a stranger alone with him as he is right now. I certainly won't risk you."

"I know that," Adèle said, touched at the concern everyone was showing on her behalf. "Let's see if this will help him. Raymond, can you free just his head so he can move to feed without being able to attack me again?"

"Let's find out," Raymond said, recasting the binding spell. The moment Pierre's head was free, he snarled at everyone in the room, clearly focusing in on Adèle again.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Raymond asked.

"No," Adèle admitted, "but I'm the only one here without a partner to protest if I let him do this. It'll be fine." She lifted her wrist to Pierre's mouth. Even with Raymond's spell holding his arms immobile, she could see his muscles strain as he tried to lunge for her, to grab and hold and not let go. His fangs hurt as they scored her flesh and then plunged deep with no preparation, but she gritted her teeth and bore the pain. If she could help the usually harmless man regain his equilibrium, it would be worth the momentary discomfort, and if she could not, at least they would know they had tried. Turning her head from the sight of Pierre's head bent over her wrist, Adèle met Pascale's eyes, the hard expression enough to make her want to apologize.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It's nothing compared to what my partner did to me." Out of habit, her free hand caressed the scars barely hidden beneath the plunging neckline of her dress. Suddenly lightheaded, she swayed slightly on her feet.

"Get him off her," Jean snapped. Sebastien grabbed Pierre's hair, forcing his head away from Adèle's wrist as Jean supported one of her elbows and Pascale reached for the other, all anger gone as she hovered over Adèle protectively. "Sit down now, Adèle."

“What’s happening?” Adèle asked, the lightheadedness continuing even after she collapsed on the settee.

“He took too much,” Jean explained. “Even with us all watching, he reached the point of his feeding being dangerous to you. Just sit still for a moment while I send for something for you to eat and drink. It will help steady you.”

“Did it help him to feed?” Adèle asked. “Did it make any difference?”

“It didn’t seem like it,” Sebastien replied as Jean went to order Adèle’s food. “We’ll give him a few more minutes and then see if he’s calmed down at all.”

“What do we do if he doesn’t?” Raymond inquired.

“I don’t know that there’s anything you can do,” Sebastien answered. “Jean might have some ideas.”

“If we can find out what medications he was on, maybe those will help him,” Adèle suggested. “The first thing we always did if we found him wandering around talking to himself or otherwise acting out of control was to take him to his doctor for a new batch of meds.”

“It’s possible, I suppose,” Sebastien said, “although many substances no longer have the same effect on us they once did. Alcohol, for example, does nothing to our metabolism.”

“That’s not completely true,” Orlando said. “If I drink wine, it has no effect on me, but if Alain drinks wine, I feel it. Not as strongly as if I had drunk the same amount before I was turned, but I can feel it for a time.”

“So we would have to get the drugs into the bloodstream of someone Pierre would then feed from?” Adèle verified. “That could be tricky. I don’t know exactly what he was on, but I’m pretty sure they were some high-powered antipsychotics. Not something a doctor would prescribe for someone who didn’t need it.”

“We’ve talked about the idea of donor blood in other contexts,” Raymond commented. “If we had a liter of blood, we could possibly inject the drugs in the blood before he fed, but I have no idea how long it would take to get the dosage right or how long the effects would last. It would hardly be an ideal situation.”

“Turning him loose as he was when he got here tonight is no solution either,” Adèle pointed out. “The way he lunged for me, he’s a danger to society. He could kill someone without even realizing what

he's doing, and that would be detrimental to everyone concerned." She rose out of habit, intending to pace the room as she worked through the situation in her mind, but she had forgotten the lightheadedness from Pierre's feeding.

Pascale steadied her before she could fall. "You can discuss this later or you can discuss it without Adèle, but she's about to fall over. Raymond, surely there's a room where she can lie down for a bit."

"I'm fine," Adèle said, trying to pull away.

"I'll believe that when you can say it like you mean it," Pascale retorted. "I don't know you as well as the others do, but they're all nodding like they agree with me. Rest for an hour or two and then you can solve all the world's problems again."

"We had a cancellation at this week's seminar," Raymond interjected. "There's an empty room right down the hall. You can rest there for as long as you need."

"I'm not an invalid," Adèle complained as Raymond led her and Pascale to the indicated room.

"No, you're not," Pascale agreed, following Adèle into the room. "You're a strong, stubborn woman who obviously needs someone to look out for her because you're too strong and too stubborn to admit weakness when it strikes. Now lie down before I make you lie down."

Adèle almost asked how Pascale thought she would make Adèle do anything, but as weak as she was, she doubted she could even summon enough magic to cast a displacement spell. Deciding not to argue, Adèle subsided onto the bed, plumping the pillow up so it supported her back. Dressed as she was, she refused to lie down with Pascale present. She did lean back against the pillow and close her eyes, though, something she never would have done in Jude's presence.

"I don't know what he did to you," Pascale said, breaking the silence, "but I'm not him."

"I know you aren't," Adèle agreed, not opening her eyes, "but you have to understand that I won't go back to the way I had to live while he was alive."

"How did you have to live?" Pascale asked, hackles rising at the thought of anyone hurting Adèle.

"Always looking over my shoulder," Adèle said. "Always worried about when he'd grab me again. He might not have turned me, because

he had a reason to want me alive, and besides, wizards can't be turned, but he didn't give me any more choice than your maker gave you."

"And you think I would do that after all I've been through?" Pascale demanded, beginning to get angry.

"No," Adèle said, finally opening her eyes. "I don't think you would intend to do anything of the sort, but you have no idea the kind of power a partnership can bring to bear. If we do this, it won't be a matter of choosing. We'll end up in this relationship with no way out. I'm a bitch on a good day, Pascale. Jude was a bastard, but I wasn't any angel either."

"Do I get a choice in this?" Pascale asked. "You just decide you don't want this and that's it? How is that fair?"

"You don't even know what *this* is," Adèle replied tiredly. "You've been a vampire for a week. You've never been around wizards. You've met Angelique and maybe David, Jean and Raymond, a couple of the others, but you have no concept of what a partnership entails. I've watched it take over people's lives. I've watched them change in front of my eyes, it felt like. Maybe most of those changes were for the better, but they weren't for me, because I changed too. When I think about how I acted with Jude... I won't go back to that."

Hearing Adèle admit to the kind of fear Pascale could not even imagine the confident detective feeling gave her the strength to close her fingers over Adèle's. "Maybe I don't know what it entails, but I know how to find out, and maybe this time around, the changes will be right. For both of us."

Adèle looked down at the slender fingers closing over hers. "I don't know if I can give you what you need."

Pascale shrugged. "Let me go through the seminar first, and then we can discuss giving each other what we want. I'm not asking for a commitment, just a chance."

"I don't have any experience with women."

"I don't have any experience with being a vampire. We'll figure it out together. I may not know much, but I'm not blind. I've seen the way the vampires and wizards around here lean on each other. You can't tell me they all had it easy. They've made it work. Surely we can too."

"Not tonight," Adèle said, pulling her hand back slowly. "After you've finished the seminar, we can talk about it again."

Pascale nodded and retreated from the room, leaving Adèle alone with her tumultuous thoughts. She must have dozed, because when she opened her eyes again, Magali sat next to her bed, a book in hand. A tray full of steaming food rested on the bedside table.

"You should eat something," Magali said, not looking up from her book.

"How do you do that?" Adèle demanded irritably even as she reached for the tray. "You didn't look up and I didn't move except to open my eyes."

"Your breathing changed," Magali replied, looking up. "You're in an even fouler mood than usual. What's bothering you?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Adèle said with a frown as she started to eat.

"You're a lot of things, but you've never been one to exaggerate," Magali replied. "Tell me. I'll believe you."

Adèle considered refusing, but she had a lot of respect for Magali, and perhaps it would help to have the perspective of another female wizard. "I found a new partner."

"You don't sound like that's good news."

"You know what Jude was like," Adèle reminded her.

"Yes, I do. I also know what Luc and Jean and Orlando and a whole lot of others are like," Magali replied. "Most of them aren't like Jude."

"I know that, but it's more than that. It's the way the partnerships seem to take over everyone's lives," Adèle explained. "You uprooted your life and moved to Amiens. Thierry went from being married, even if they were separated, to having a male lover. That makes me incredibly uncomfortable."

"I didn't peg you as being homophobic."

"I'm not uncomfortable that he has a male lover," Adèle retorted. "I'm uncomfortable that the partnership changed him that fundamentally. I don't want some external force driving me. It's like there's nothing left now but the partnership."

"That may be true for some partnerships," Magali allowed. "Alain and Orlando, for example, but you're judging all partnerships by a few. Yes, I moved to Amiens, but I'm a wizard. It doesn't matter where I live. I can be anywhere I want in a matter of a few waves of my wand. Luc feeds from me when he's hungry and fucks me when one of us is

horny, but I'm not in love with him nor he with me. We have a partnership, not a love match."

"Does he feed elsewhere?" Adèle asked.

"I haven't asked him and he hasn't said," Magali replied. "Furthermore, I'm not going to ask him. And he doesn't ask what I do on the nights he doesn't come to my room."

"What about on the nights he comes and you aren't there?" Adèle asked.

"I try to tell him ahead of time when I'll be out, like tonight," Magali explained, "and he tries to tell me ahead of time when to expect him, like last night. Occasionally that doesn't work, but it hasn't been a problem for the most part. We're both adults and we act like it."

"So you think I should give it another try?" Adèle asked.

"I think that's entirely between you and your new partner," Magali replied, "but whatever you decide, don't go into it expecting it to be a repeat of what happened with Jude. Go into it with an idea of what you're willing to have it be—both of you, not just you—and make that plan work. There's no wild magic from a *Rite d'équilibre* gone wrong to force your hand this time. It's possible for a vampire to feed without having sex. It's possible to have sex with a vampire without feeding. It's possible to do both without it taking over your life. You simply have to decide what you want."

## Chapter 13

“WHAT’S this about a vampire attacking Adèle?” Martin asked, coming into Raymond and Jean’s office.

“A rabid vampire,” Jean said with a sigh, “or the equivalent thereof, since vampires don’t get rabies. From what Adèle told us about the man, I’m sure the same vampire who turned Pascale also turned Pierre, the one who attacked Adèle, because any responsible vampire wouldn’t have offered the choice to be turned to someone as delusional as Pierre appears to be, and yet Pierre was turned. My guess would be the *extorris* gave Pierre no more choice than he gave Pascale.”

“Delusional?”

“He’s a vagrant on pretty serious anti-psychotic drugs,” Raymond explained. “Without those, he’s completely out of his mind.”

“And the drugs won’t work on a vampire,” Martin postulated.

“Not directly,” Raymond agreed. “We’re working on getting some donor blood and some of the drugs so we can try mixing the drugs in the blood to see if that works.”

“Has anyone contacted Denis Langlois?” Martin asked, his pulse picking up at the thought of his potential partner. “He should probably be involved in this too, shouldn’t he?”

“Thierry has gone to get him,” Raymond replied. “He should be here any moment.”

“Another one?” Denis demanded, striding into the room with far more authority than a man of his apparent youth could ever have managed. Martin could not squelch the instinctive appreciation of the fine figure Denis cut in his slim suit, his hair slicked back from his forehead as always.

“Another one,” Jean confirmed, “except that we have even less to go on with this one than we did with the first. The man was mostly mad before he was turned, and his turning has apparently unhinged what little of his mind remained.”



“Putain,” Denis cursed under his breath. “Just what we need. Another vampire incapable of controlling himself.”

“There might be hope for this one if we can figure out how to get his meds into him,” Martin offered. The idea was not his, but he could not resist the need to have those laser-sharp eyes focused on him, if only for a moment.

“And you have an idea how this might work?”

“Raymond had the idea, actually,” honesty compelled Martin to reply, “but I’m a researcher. I could conduct the trials to get the balance right. It would be one less thing for Raymond to have to worry about.”

“You can’t do it alone,” Jean insisted. “He’s too dangerous for you to be alone with him. You need another vampire, preferably two, with you any time you’re with him. If he breaks free, he could kill you before you knew even what happened.”

“Can you do wandless magic?” Raymond interjected.

Martin shook his head. “That isn’t a skill I’ve mastered.”

“Then you need two vampires or a vampire and a wizard at all times,” Raymond insisted. “He fought my magic so hard earlier I had to reinforce the spell. If he were to break free and knock your wand away, you would be completely at his mercy.”

Martin had observed Raymond over the week he had been at l’Institut. He had seen the way the other wizard used magic, seen the casual acceptance among the other faculty wizards of the magnitude of Raymond’s strength, but he had also seen the surprise on the faces of some of the wizards there for the seminar. If the vampire had tested the limits of Raymond’s magic, Martin had no illusions how his own spells would fare. “I will take your advice. Do you have any suggestions for who I should ask?”

“I should be there,” Denis broke in. “If he’s from this area, that would make him part of my Cour if he can be helped. If nothing else, I should know what to do for him so I can help him again if it becomes necessary.”

“According to Adèle’s account of his ability to monitor his own condition before he was turned, I’d say that will very likely become necessary,” Jean said, “so it makes sense for you to know how to help him. I’m sure we can find someone else, vampire or wizard, to complete the team.”

“It wouldn’t even need to be the same person every time,” Martin said. “If Denis and I are doing the experiments, the third person is just a safety net. Not that I don’t think it’s a good precaution, but that person wouldn’t have to follow the logic of the changes we make in how we try to get the drugs into the vampire’s system.”

“I take it you’ve found your research question,” Raymond said with a chuckle. “You sound like me when I get excited about something. Fortunately I have an understanding partner. I think that was the hardest thing for Jean to get used to: the way I get lost in my research and forget everything else.”

“No, the hardest part was the way you refuse to take care of yourself,” Jean retorted, but his smile was teasing. “Remember that if you end up partnered with Martin,” he added, turning to Denis. “They get so caught up in what they’re doing they forget to eat, and then you go to feed from them and make them sick because of it.”

“That hasn’t happened in months,” Raymond protested.

Jean arched an eyebrow at him. “There’s a reason for that.”

There was, of course, even if it was not the reason everyone else in the room would guess. Raymond swore he could feel the mark on his back tingle as a wave of love surged through the link between them. Bound as they were, Jean could feed as much as he wanted without hurting Raymond in any way.

“I drag him out of his office for three meals a day,” Jean added for Martin’s and Denis’s benefit.

“To answer your question, Raymond,” Martin said, laughing at the interplay between the two men, “I think it would be both interesting and useful to work on this as my project, at least in the short term. I don’t know that it would fill an entire year, but it obviously needs to be done, and I’m in a position to do it.”

“Your help will be greatly appreciated,” Raymond said. “We can take you both upstairs to where we left Pierre after we tried letting him feed to see if that would help. He did calm down a little, but certainly not enough for us to consider him rational or in control. I’ll stay with you tonight. We’ll find someone else starting tomorrow.”

Raymond led them upstairs to a room very similar to the one Adèle occupied, two former monks’ cells that had been opened up to form temporary lodging for seminar participants. The room was not fancy, but the bed and armoire were nicely refinished antiques, and the

mattress was new and comfortable. Not that the current occupant of the room had tested it from what Raymond could tell. The covers were still smooth on the bed from where madame Naizot and her daughters had prepared it for guests. Pierre huddled in the corner farthest from the windows, as if the glass itself were a threat to him.

It took a moment after they all entered the room for Pierre to react, his head lifting slowly as he sniffed the air like an animal scenting blood. He turned to look at them, his eyes coming into slow focus on the pulse on Raymond's neck. Faster than the eye could track, he lunged, only to be met halfway by a force even his addled brain realized he could not overcome. He slumped back to the floor, his head bowed in complete submission.

"Do not ever touch him," Jean hissed in his ear. "He is mine and I will suffer none to harm him."

Pierre whimpered in fear and agreement. Jean straightened and nodded to Martin. "You see what I mean about him being dangerous."

"I couldn't have cast a spell fast enough to stop him," Martin agreed. "Even if I'd had my wand ready and was expecting the attack, I don't think I could have gotten the words out."

"He won't get past me," Denis assured Martin. "I may not have Jean's longevity, but I'm faster and more cunning than any newly turned vampire, even one completely ruled by his instincts."

He crossed the room and knelt down next to Pierre, his fingers forcing the other vampire to look up at him. "Don't think that because I look young, I'm any less of a danger to you. You will not touch Martin either."

"He is yours?" The words were so rough Denis could barely understand them.

"He is."

Martin might have taken umbrage with the claim, since they had made no pact between them, but seeing how quickly the vampire could move had shaken him. If perpetuating the fiction of Denis's claim protected him from attack, Martin would say or do whatever it took.

"That's the first time he's said anything coherent," Raymond murmured at Martin's shoulder. "It would seem that even his beast responds to vampire authority."

"I'm not above using that if it lets us help him and keeps me safe in the process," Martin agreed. "The question is whether it will be enough to keep him stable over longer periods of time."

"Or when Jean and Denis aren't around to enforce their authority."

"I think I'll make sure one of them is always around," Martin replied with a shudder. "I have no desire to be attacked."

"How do you feel about being claimed?" Raymond asked, his voice low enough not to carry to the vampires across the room.

"He said it to warn Pierre off," Martin said, dismissing Raymond's concern. "He doesn't really mean it."

"Don't be too sure," Raymond warned. "Vampires may say things in the heat of the moment, but some words are never used lightly. 'Mine' is one of them."

"Surely I get a say in this too," Martin protested.

"Of course you do," Raymond replied. "I didn't mean you had to form a partnership. I only meant that if he said it, even to protect you, a part of him already believes it. How you go forward with that information is entirely up to the two of you."

Martin frowned, but he pushed the concerns aside for now. He could discuss it with Denis later, when they were alone and Martin had had time to think. For the moment, he needed to focus on helping the vampire currently cowering on the floor. "I hate the thought of this, but how long can he be locked in here?"

"In terms of how long l'Institut is willing to house him or in terms of his sanity?"

"Both," Martin replied.

"L'Institut is a non-profit organization. We can keep him here as long as he needs to be here. As far as how long he can be confined before it starts making his condition worse, I haven't the slightest idea," Raymond said. "Jean? Did you hear Martin's question?"

"For a normal vampire, I would say a few days, a week at the most," Jean replied. "Not that vampires haven't gone longer than that, cooped up in a room, but usually the need to feed drives us outside sooner than that. If Pierre can feed, that time could probably be extended somewhat, but the walls will start to close in around him. If we can get him stable enough, though, a walk around the courtyard at night could be enough to steady him. It's the confinement that's the problem. I still don't know how Orlando stayed sane."

“Has he fed tonight?” Martin asked.

“Yes, Adèle volunteered, hoping feeding would stabilize him somewhat,” Raymond replied. “It didn’t work as well as we’d hoped. He didn’t regain control of himself even after taking almost too much, but at least it obviates his need for blood tonight.”

“When will he need to feed again?”

“Newly turned as he is, tomorrow night would be ideal,” Denis said. “The night after at the latest.”

Martin nodded, calculating time and what would need to be done to get the medicines they would need. “If we miscalculate the dose and he gets too much, could it kill him?”

“I don’t think so,” Jean said after a moment. “We can ingest anything we want, but only blood nourishes us. I drink a brandy with Raymond in the evenings without feeling any effect from the alcohol. Sometimes I will eat dinner to keep others from being uncomfortable in my presence. Again, no effect. As Orlando mentioned, if Raymond has had a lot to drink, I can feel the afterimage of the alcohol, but not enough to impair me. I don’t think you need to worry about damaging him with medications. Not being able to get enough into him to make a difference is far more likely to be your problem.”

“Let’s go back downstairs,” Denis suggested. “He already fed tonight, so we can’t do anything now anyway. This door does lock so he can’t get out, right?”

“Not usually,” Raymond said, “but magic is an amazing thing. I’ve put a spell on the door so it can only be opened from the outside, or from the inside by a wizard.”

He led them back outside. “Martin, unless you need us, Jean and I have a few more things to take care of before we call it a night.”

“No, it’s fine,” Martin said, his mind already racing with possibilities. “The only thing would be to find a source of donor blood. If I have other questions only you can answer, I’ll make a note of them and we can discuss it tomorrow.”

“I’ve already contacted the blood bank about that,” Raymond replied. “Fortunately blood type doesn’t matter, so they’ve agreed to supply a liter of blood every three days, which is what Jean said Pierre would need to be in reasonably good shape as far as his hunger is concerned. Bonne soirée.”

Martin nodded absently as Jean and Raymond took their leave, his mind racing as he played with scenarios. He was so lost in his thoughts that he ran right into Denis. "I'm sorry. When I get involved in a research question, I can lose track of everything else around me."

"Is there any reason for me to stay, then?" Denis asked. "If all you're doing is planning out medicine regimes, I won't be much help."

"It can wait," Martin said, shaking himself out of his thoughts. "I actually wanted to talk to you for a moment."

"As long as I can get home before dawn, I have time," Denis replied.

"Raymond was kind enough to provide a suite of rooms in the Hostellerie for me since I'll be here for a year," Martin explained. "We wouldn't be disturbed there."

"Are we worried about being disturbed?" Denis asked, a smile teasing around his lips.

Martin shrugged. "Maybe not, but it will be more comfortable than the réfectoire or one of the labs."

"Lead the way."

They crossed the courtyard to the Hostellerie, the building the monks would have used for visiting guests of note. L'Institut had converted it into quarters for the staff, each suite consisting of a bedroom, bathroom, study, and sitting room. Martin's was decorated in soft beiges and warm reds, giving it a welcoming masculine feel that had appealed to him from the start.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" Denis asked when they were seated.

"Our partnership or lack of one," Martin said slowly. "What you said to Pierre tonight. I didn't come to France looking for complications."

"I wasn't aware you'd found any," Denis replied coolly. "I haven't—I won't pressure you into anything. I made a decision when I was turned that I would always be in control of my instincts, not the other way around. If you don't want a partnership, I certainly won't force you into one."

"That isn't what you said the other night," Martin said. "Not about pressuring me. That didn't come out right. The other night, you said

you didn't want a partner either. Now you seem to be suggesting you'd be interested if I were."

"Vampires live a very long time," Denis said with a sigh. "It gets tiresome, always being alone. A part of me sees a partnership as a way to avoid that for a time. When I completed my seminar, I didn't go through the matching process. I told myself I didn't need a partner and that with my leadership in the Cour so new, I didn't have time to devote to one. I've deliberately avoided coming back to l'Institut on Sundays so I wouldn't get swept up into a match without meaning to. And then your magic didn't work on me. I didn't ask for a partner, but it would seem I have one anyway, and there's a part of me that wants it despite everything else."

A curl of warmth spread through Martin's chest at the realization that Denis was not as unaffected as he appeared. "So what happens now?"

"Nothing," Denis said. "You don't want a partner. You're going back to Canada at the end of a year. There's nothing else to say."

"So that's it? We just ignore the fact that we could be partners?" Martin demanded, not entirely sure where his belligerence was coming from. He had spent a lot of time thinking about the complications of distance and responsibilities, but obstacles could be overcome with planning and dedication. He was a scientist, used to working odd hours and being alone because no one would put up with his crazy schedule, but a part of him yearned for someone to share his life, a partner to celebrate his successes with him and console him in his defeats. "What about the benefits? What about—"

"What about the fact that you live in Canada and I live in Autun?" Denis interrupted. "I'll be the first to admit I don't know much about the partnerships beyond what I learned in the seminar and what I've observed in the wizards and vampires around me, but this isn't a temporary thing. We'd be fools to walk into it blindly. You hardly know me. You can't tell me you're ready to upend your life because of me."

"No, I can't," Martin replied, more calmly than he felt, "but I'm not ready to walk away without exploring the possibilities simply because it's complicated. I'm a wizard. Distances are not the hurdle to me that they are to most people. Yes, I have a job in Canada, but that doesn't mean I couldn't look for another job. Yes, you have a home here in

Autun, but that doesn't mean you couldn't spend part of the year in Montréal. There could be very workable solutions to the obstacles to our partnership if we take the time to find them."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I don't know," Martin said, running his hand through his already mussed hair, "but I heard you tell Pierre not to touch me. It doesn't require a PhD or a trained observer to see how pivotal the partnerships are to the people here at l'Institut, and when you said that, I had this sudden flash of longing. I'm not saying we should rush in blindly, but would it be so terrible to get better acquainted, to see if there could be something worth fighting for between us?"

Denis could think of plenty of reasons why it would be terrible, not the least because he already knew what it felt like to bury a lover. He did not regret his time with Noël, only the fact that it had ended. Martin was a young man, far younger than Noël had been when he and Denis had started their relationship, and he was a wizard, so he would live longer, but separation would inevitably come. "Let me think about it," he said finally. "It's a lot to consider."

"Will you still come back tomorrow to help with Pierre?" Martin asked. "Even if you haven't made your decision, tonight proved I can't deal with him alone."

"Whatever I decide, I'll still help with Pierre," Denis confirmed, the thought of the new vampire lunging for Martin the way he had lunged for Raymond enough to send a chill down Denis's back.

"I'll show you out," Martin said, trying to hide his disappointment. He told himself the reaction was irrational, but it did not help. He had gambled and lost.

Martin walked Denis out to his car, nodding politely as the vampire unlocked it and climbed in. He did not wait to watch Denis drive away. That felt far too final.

Alone finally, Denis pulled out his cell phone and made the call he had thought several times about making since learning he had a potential partner.

"Allô?"

"Luc Cabalet?"

"Yes, this is Cabalet."



“This is Denis Langlois. I don’t know if you remember me.”

“Of course I do,” Luc’s voice said through the line. “I haven’t heard from you in years. How are you doing?”

“As well as can be expected,” Denis replied. “I was hoping you might have a few minutes for an old protégé in the next few days. I need some advice and didn’t know who else to turn to.”

“You’re in Autun, right?” Luc asked.

“Well, not right this moment, but yes, I live in Autun,” Denis replied.

“My partner is in Dommartin, apparently,” Luc said. “I could have her pop over and pick you up on her way back tonight.”

“Your... partner?” Denis repeated. “As in a wizard partner?”

“Yes,” Luc replied. “I take it you’re aware of l’Institut Marcel Chavinier.”

“I’m actually there right now,” Denis said. “That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Stay right where you are,” Luc instructed. “I’ll call Magali and have her bring you home with her from l’Institut. She called to say she’d be late. Something about a wizard being attacked by a vampire.”

“I’ll fill you in when I get there,” Denis promised. “That’s a small part of what I wanted to talk to you about, one chef de la Cour to another, but mostly it’s about my... partner. Potential partner, I guess I should say.”

“This sounds like an interesting conversation,” Luc said, his amusement carrying through the connection. “Wait for Magali in the foyer of the main hall. I don’t know how long she’ll be, but I’ll remind her you can’t go out in sunlight.”

He hung up before Denis could say thank you or goodbye, but Denis was not that surprised. Luc had never been overly concerned with formality.

Stepping back out of his car, he went inside to wait for Magali, hoping she would know to look for him, since he had never met her before. A few minutes later, a tall, statuesque blonde entered the hall. “Denis Langlois?

“Yes, I’m Denis.”

"I'm Magali Ducassé, Luc Cabalet's partner. He asked me to bring you back to Amiens with me."

"If it's not too much trouble," Denis replied.

"No trouble at all," Magali assured him. "A flick of my wand and a simple spell and we're off."

"And you'll be able to send me back here when Luc and I have finished talking?" Denis verified.

"Of course," Magali said. "I can probably even send you home if you can give me enough detail."

"My car's here," Denis demurred.

"Shall we go, then?"

Denis nodded and braced himself for the odd sensation of the displacement spell. Within seconds, he was once again in the salon where he had spent the first few hours after his turning. "Good to see you again, Denis," Luc said, offering his hand.

Denis shook it. "And you as well. I see nothing has changed since the last time I was here."

"Not quite nothing," Luc said with a nod toward Magali. "Will you excuse us, Magali? Denis has some concerns of a personal nature. I wouldn't want him to feel uncomfortable discussing them."

"Of course," Magali said. "I'll be in my room when Denis is ready to return to l'Institut."

She withdrew, leaving the two men alone. "I have to admit, I'm having trouble imagining you with a partner," Denis said when she was gone. "After Fabien was killed, you always swore you'd never commit to any one mortal again."

"Fabien was special," Luc agreed, thinking of the young man who had been his lover during World War I and in the years following before he was killed at the start of World War II. "Magali is... different. She is both more and less than what Fabien was to me."

"In what sense?"

"When Fabien and I first met, he saw me as an older, dashing gentleman with sophisticated tastes and enough money to indulge those tastes, even during the war," Luc explained. "He did not even know I was a vampire until several months after we began our liaison. By the

time I first fed from him, he was so smitten he would have accepted anything if it meant we could be together. With Magali, the reverse was true. The relationship started out as functional, practical. Neither of us has any illusions of being in love with the other. Her blood lets me function in daylight, it adds to my strength, but while I enjoy her company outside of feeding and while I enjoy her blood when I do feed, I'm not taken with her the way I was with Fabien."

"That explains how she is less," Denis said, thinking of Noël and how much he had loved the man. "How is she more?"

"Fabien's blood was never enough," Luc explained. "I couldn't feed from him exclusively. Even if I never slept with any of the others, I fed from them. With Magali, I don't have to go anywhere else unless I choose to."

"And do you choose to?"

"Yes," Luc replied, "if only to prove that I can. But you didn't come here to talk about my partner. What can I do for you?"

"I didn't know you had a partner when I called," Denis said, "but that's what I need to talk about. As I said before, I apparently have a partner if I want one. There's a wizard at l'Institut visiting from Canada, and his magic doesn't work on me. I went through a seminar, so I know how a partnership works—"

"You know how their partnerships work," Luc interrupted. "Don't misunderstand. I have nothing but respect for Bellaiche and the others in Paris and at l'Institut, and I don't think they're deliberately misleading anyone, but they're basing their seminar on their experiences. An Aveu de Sang, and how many couples who were caught in a burst of wild magic that apparently couldn't be resisted. Those of us like Magali and myself, who weren't part of that, have partnerships without having all-encompassing bonds."

"Do you have all the benefits?"

"All the benefits?" Luc repeated. "I couldn't say, but Magali's blood protects me from sunlight, and I am undoubtedly stronger now than I was before I started feeding from her. If I haven't put her on a pedestal and made her the center of my life, that's our choice, and believe me, she would make my life hell if I tried to do that to her."

Denis chuckled. "Independent, is she?"

“You have no idea,” Luc said with a smile. “I don’t know that I’ve been much help to you, but now you know there’s a path between all and nothing.”

“How do you walk it?” Denis asked. “How do you keep it from becoming all-consuming?”

“You make that choice,” Luc said with a shrug. “Every time you feed. Every time you fuck, if you let it go that far. You talk about it and set the ground rules. Magali and I don’t sleep together. She lives here, but she has her own room, and she returns there every night even if she comes to my room first. I sleep in my own bed even if I feed from her in her bed first. If she had been local when our partnership formed, she probably would not even live here. She’s talked, a couple of times, about finding an apartment of her own, although she hasn’t done anything about it as far as I know.”

“Martin is from Canada,” Denis said slowly. “He doesn’t seem disturbed by my gender, and you know I’m not bothered by his, so that’s one obstacle out of the way, but that seems to be the only one. He’s here for a year with plans to return home at the end of that time. I’m tied to Autun.”

“I see your problem,” Luc said slowly. “I know Magali pops from here to Paris to Dommartin like it’s nothing, but I have no concept of whether that would be possible from Canada, assuming he’s willing to make that commute, of course. That would be a question for a wizard. How committed are you to your Cour? You’re young for the role.”

Denis shrugged. “It just sort of happened that way. Renaud had to go, and I was willing to do it.”

“That could well be your solution, then,” Luc said. “If the handover of power is voluntary, you could choose any vampire in the Cour to take your place.”

“I would have to be sure Renaud isn’t waiting in the wings to take back over if I step down,” Denis mused aloud.

“Have you seen him since you took power?”

“No, but I haven’t heard of him being anywhere else either,” Denis replied. “I’m still half convinced he’s waiting for a moment of weakness to challenge me. It’s only been six months.”

“Would he find any support within the Cour?”

“No, he’d have to recruit support from out—merde!”

“What?” Luc asked sharply.

“Nothing,” Denis said, not ready yet to share the idea that had suddenly occurred to him. He would have to think it over before he was ready to share this particular thought. “Thank you for your time tonight. I’m sure I’ll see you at the Congrès des chefs, if not before. Could you ask Magali to send me back to l’Institut?”

“If you need help,” Luc offered, “call me. Yes, I’m another chef de la Cour, but first and foremost, I’m your maker. If there’s any vampire you can trust, I’m it.”

“I know,” Denis said. “That’s why I called to talk to you about the partnerships. This might be nothing, but if it isn’t, you’ll be among the first to know.”

## Chapter 14

PASCALE summoned a shy smile for the wizard who arrived on her doorstep to fetch her for the seminar at l'Institut. She had offered to drive, but Raymond had shooed aside her concerns, assuring her that all the vampires would arrive with a magical escort and that way she would not have to worry about standing out from the crowd. She suspected no amount of magic on Raymond's part could stop that from happening, but she had agreed to prolong the inevitable moment when the others realized she was *different*. She ought to be used to the feeling after all the times it had happened in her life, from the first time a classmate realized she was gay to the stilted conference call at work on Friday as she tried to explain to her coworkers why she could no longer attend meetings in person. It had yet to get easier. "I hope I haven't brought too much," she said when the wizard approached.

The man glanced down at the bag at her feet. "I've seen people bring more. I'm Alain, by the way."

"Orlando's Alain?" Pascale asked, flushing when she realized how that had come out. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded, but I spoke with Orlando last week, and he was very kind. He couldn't say enough wonderful things about you."

Alain chuckled. "I can think of far worse things you could say about me than to describe me as Orlando's. Yes, I am Orlando's Avoué. Are you ready to go?"

Pascale nodded, bracing herself for the disorienting displacement to l'Institut. To her surprise, the sensation was not nearly as strong as she had expected. "Either you're really good at this or I'm getting used to being whisked around by wizards."

Alain smiled. "Let's get you inside. Madame Naizot will show you to your room."

Pascale followed him inside as he handed her off to the matronly woman who escorted her to one of the monks' cells, transformed much as the one Adèle had rested in the night before. Pascale pushed aside all thought of her potential partner. She needed to concentrate on the

seminar this week. She could think about Adèle next week, when she had a better sense of what she was getting into.

She took a few minutes to unpack, needing the time to settle her nerves. When everything was set out to her satisfaction, she wandered out of the room toward the réfectoire. A number of people had already gathered there, but no one she knew. Feeling horribly out of place, she hung back against one wall, hoping eventually someone she knew would come in and introduce her around.

“Are you hiding from someone, or is the wall really that interesting?”

Surprised to be addressed, Pascale looked up at the young, almost androgynous man who stood before her. “Justin Molinière. And you are?”

“Pascale Auboussu. Are you here for the seminar?”

“I’m actually here to present some of the seminars,” Justin replied. “My partner Catherine and I are substituting for two of the usual presenters who are on vacation. This month is the second anniversary of the alliance, and I know a number of couples who consider this their anniversary month.”

“You don’t?” Pascale asked.

“We do,” Justin said, “but we celebrated last week. The date was less important to us than the commemoration. So what brings you here? Anything in particular?”

“A chance at a normal life again,” Pascale said. “Adjusting to being a vampire has not been easy for me.”

“It’s not an easy adjustment,” Justin agreed. “How long have you been a vampire?”

“A week.”

“A week?” Justin repeated. “That’s the blink of an eye. If you’ve adjusted at all, you’re doing better than most vampires I’ve seen after their turning.”

“I COMPLETELY forgot it was the first day of the new seminar,” Denis said when he arrived at l’Institut. “I would have waited until tomorrow otherwise.”

“Yes, things are a little crazy around here today,” Martin agreed. “I’m still getting used to the rhythm of life here. Not that I’m teaching any of the seminars since I don’t really have anything to add to the discussion at this point, but just the comings and goings of all the participants hasn’t become routine for me yet.”

“If you’re focusing your research on Pierre, you probably won’t have a lot to contribute,” Denis said. “Unless we manage to get him a lot more stable than he was last night, I’d be afraid to let him form a partnership. He wouldn’t be able to function as half of a whole without endangering his partner.”

“Yes, one of the things they stressed repeatedly when I went through the seminar is how careful both partners have to be not to let the vampire overfeed. That’s fine if the vampire is in control, but if the vampire isn’t, he could easily overpower his partner and do serious harm.”

Denis nodded. “Are you planning on trying anything tonight to help him?”

“I had thought to wait until tomorrow, since he fed yesterday and you said three days would be sufficient,” Martin replied. “Do you disagree?”

“Not with that,” Denis said, “but I want to talk to him if we can get him at all coherent. I had a thought about the case last night as I was talking with Luc Cabalet from Amiens.”

“Oh? Adèle will be interested to hear that,” Martin replied.

“I’d like to talk to Pierre about it first,” Denis said. “I could be completely off the mark. In fact, I’m mostly convinced I am, except I can’t let it go.”

“Well, let’s go talk to Pierre,” Martin suggested. “Maybe he’ll say something that’ll tip you over one way or the other.”

“Once we get inside the room, put a barrier between you and him so he can’t get to you,” Denis requested.

“He won’t try anything after yesterday,” Martin said, his voice full of confidence.

“You don’t know that,” Denis insisted. “Yesterday he was capable of talking. Today he might not have that much lucidity, and if he’s truly out of control, I want more between you and him than just me.”

“What do you really think he’s going to do to me?” Martin asked, not wanting Denis to see him as less than capable. Despite the visceral



thrill of hearing Denis claim him the night before, Martin was used to being the one in control, the one protecting rather than being protected. “He’s half my size, underfed from the looks of him—”

“He’s a vampire,” Denis interrupted, annoyed at Martin’s comments when Pierre had proven the night before how wrong such assumptions were. He knew Martin’s type: always in control, always the most powerful. He could imagine Martin struggling with the realization that it would be different if he took up with a vampire. “Size doesn’t matter. He could overpower a man twice his size.”

Martin still looked skeptical enough that Denis’s temper snapped. He grabbed the wizard’s shoulders, pinning him hard against the wall. “Get away from me,” he demanded. “I’m even smaller than Pierre. You think you can get away from him. Get away from me.”

Martin struggled, his body rubbing against Denis’s, the friction enflaming Denis’s senses. He forced the awareness down, determined to stay in control of his instincts, but his fangs dropped despite his best intentions. “Pierre would have drained you half dry by now,” he ground out. “Put the barrier in place.”

“You wouldn’t let it come to that,” Martin replied, subsiding against the wall, the cessation of tension as tempting to Denis as the struggle had been. “I may not know much about vampires, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that they don’t share.”

Denis yearned to prove that point, to drive his fangs deep into Martin’s neck and stake his claim in a way no vampire, even one as newly turned as Pierre, would misunderstand. He held back, though, because biting Martin would set off a chain reaction he was not entirely sure he was ready to deal with. “No, we don’t,” Denis agreed, “but that isn’t the point. Put the barrier in place.”

Martin nodded his agreement, so Denis stepped back, releasing his hold. They walked the rest of the way to Pierre’s chamber in silence. Denis insisted on going inside first. Martin rolled his eyes but did not argue.

Pierre lifted his head from his knees as they walked in, but he did not rise from the bed. Denis shot Martin a sharp look, waiting until Martin had lifted his wand and cast a spell before moving closer to Pierre. “Did you see who attacked you?” Denis began without preamble.

"It was dark," Pierre replied, his voice hollow, as if he were somewhere else and only barely aware of what he was saying.

"I know it was," Denis agreed, sitting on the bed next to Pierre, "but you must have seen something. Some hint of who it might have been. Anything. The color of his hair, a piece of jewelry he wore, anything he might have said to you. I know you remember, Pierre. You just have to tell us."

Martin had no idea what Denis really expected Pierre to say, but Denis simply sat down at Pierre's side and waited.

"Come back for me," Pierre crooned. "He said he'd make me immortal and when he came back for me, I'd thank him for it."

"Why?" Denis pressed. "What did he want?"

"Thank him for it," Pierre said, rocking back and forth on the bed, his arms around his bent knees, his chin tucked down against them. "Thank him for it. Do whatever he wants. Come back for me."

"Did you see him at all?" Denis insisted. "Anything?"

"Come back for me."

"He doesn't know anything, Denis," Martin interrupted from behind the ward. "Even if he did, you couldn't trust what he's saying. Look at him. He's completely cracked beneath the stress of being turned."

"Did he say what he'd do when he came back for you?" Denis asked, ignoring Martin.

"Never be hungry, never be cold," Pierre said, looking up at Denis. "Hungry! I'm hungry!"

"We'll get you something to eat," Denis promised. "Just answer my question. What did he say about coming back for you?"

"Hungry!"

Cursing under his breath, Denis returned to Martin's side, the ward unable to keep him out because Martin had cast it. "We aren't going to get anything else out of him until after he's fed. Have we gotten any donor blood?"

"We hadn't earlier, but we could check again," Martin said. "You were driving at something with him. What are you thinking?"

"I'll tell you when we get somewhere safe," Denis said, ushering Martin toward the door. "As hungry as he is, I don't trust him around you even with your ward in place."

Tempted as Martin was to argue the effectiveness of his magic, Pierre's rocking and babbling left him far too unsettled. He cast the spell to open the door, releasing the ward as he passed over the threshold. The moment the ward fell, Pierre lunged at them. Martin slammed the door shut, heart pounding as he listened to the angry screaming coming through the door. "Maybe you were right."

Denis shook his head. "There are many things I don't know, but I do know vampires. He doesn't actually need to feed again yet, but as weak as his mind is, he can't control those urges the way a more mature vampire would be able to do. Let's go back to your rooms, if you don't mind. I want to talk to you."

"About?" Martin asked, leading the way toward his room in the Hostellerie. He shivered slightly as they crossed the courtyard. The temperatures were still warmer than they would have been at home, but he had left his sweater in one of the classrooms, and his thin shirt did little to protect him from the cool night breeze.

"About Pierre and who might have turned him and Pascale," Denis said. "I went to Amiens last night to speak with another chef de la Cour about something else entirely, and a thought occurred to me. It's far-fetched, but I can't seem to shake the feeling I'm on to something."

Martin released the lock to his rooms with a quick spell and opened the door. Denis followed him inside and took a seat in the armchair, leaving the love seat for Martin. Martin made himself comfortable and waited for Denis to continue.

"I was talking to Luc Cabalet last night about Guy Renaud, the vampire I replaced as chef de la Cour," Denis explained. "He asked if I'd heard from Renaud and whether Renaud still had any support within the Cour in Autun, whether Renaud could take power back if I stepped down."

"Wait, why are you stepping down?" Martin interrupted.

"I'm not," Denis replied. "Luc wanted to know what would happen if I did, that's all. I told him no one within the Cour would support Renaud. That's how I took power from him in the first place, but the way I answered him, just coincidentally, you understand, was that Renaud would have to recruit support from outside the Cour in order to take back power. I know it's far-fetched, but what if Renaud is turning people with the idea of creating supporters for himself?"

“He isn’t doing a very good job if that’s the case,” Martin said. “Pascale wants nothing to do with her maker, whether it’s Renaud or someone else, and Pierre isn’t in any shape to be of help to anyone.”

“I told you it was far-fetched,” Denis agreed, “but I can’t seem to shake the idea, and Pierre talked about his maker expecting him to be grateful.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s Renaud,” Martin pointed out.

“No, it doesn’t, but it doesn’t rule him out either. Renaud is from the right time period to have the accent Pascale identified. There’s nothing to prove it is him, but there’s nothing to rule him out either.”

“But couldn’t that be true of a large number of vampires?” Martin asked. “I mean, I heard Adèle talking about the number of vampires she’d have to talk to after Pascale was turned, and we don’t have anything other than the day of the week in Pierre’s case. Hardly enough to bring them in to talk with Pascale. If we work in the opposite direction, if we start by assuming it’s Renaud, is there any way we could identify him or rule him out? Besides checking his alibi, of course.”

“He was a glass smith before he was turned,” Denis said. “His hands were covered in pock marks from exploding glass and sparks from the fire.”

“I thought all that sort of thing healed when a vampire was turned,” Martin said. “How did he still have the marks?”

“Fresh marks will heal, like the bullet wounds that would have taken my life if Luc hadn’t turned me,” Denis explained, “but if the wounds were made and healed before the turning, the scars won’t disappear. Renaud was in his thirties when he was turned, long enough to have accumulated a few scars from his profession. I’d hoped Pierre saw them, but I’m afraid if I ask him about it directly, he’ll give me the answer he thinks I want rather than answering truthfully.”

“We should ask Pascale about it,” Martin proposed. “She’s here at l’Institut this week for the seminar. I know she said she didn’t see anything, but she might not have thought about that kind of detail being important. If we bring it up, it might jog her memory.”

“Of course, even if she did see something to identify him, we still have to find him,” Denis said. “He went missing six months ago, after I took the Cour from him.”

"You and others have mentioned that a couple of times, but everyone else knows what happened, so they never discuss details," Martin said. "Why did you overthrow him?"

"Because he was stuck in the past, refusing to allow any of the vampires in Autun to participate with l'Institut," Denis replied. "Refusing to deal with the changes brought about by the equal rights legislation. Making life difficult for the rest of us with his antiquated ways. Not that many of my Cour have formed partnerships, but quite a few of them have participated in the seminars. More importantly, they now feel like they have a choice."

"You couldn't have simply changed Cours?" Martin asked.

"I suppose we could have applied for entrance into the Cour de Paris," Denis replied, "but Autun is home for us, not Paris, and if we tried to stay in Autun but leave the Cour, Renaud could have made life very difficult for us. It was easier to replace him with someone capable of seeing reason. The others picked me to attempt it, and with their support, I succeeded."

It had not been quite that simple, of course, but Denis saw no reason to rehash the grueling fight that had left both him and Renaud bleeding profusely. Denis had been at the end of his strength, sure he was about to lose the fight, the protection of the Cour, and perhaps even his existence, when Renaud had suddenly slunk from the field, admitting defeat. He almost hoped they could prove that Renaud was the one responsible for turning Pascale and Pierre so he could stop worrying about the former chef de la Cour returning to challenge him once more.

"I'm glad you did," Martin said. "I might not have met you otherwise."

"Are you still serious about considering a partnership?" Denis asked on impulse.

"I'm certainly open to discussing our options," Martin replied. "Why? Have you changed your mind?"

"I told you I went to Amiens to talk with the vampire who turned me," Denis said slowly. "I didn't tell you why I wanted to talk to him. When he turned me, he had a lover he very much adored. That lover was killed at the beginning of World War II. I wanted to talk to him about recovering from that kind of loss."

“Did you lose someone as well?”

“I did. Noël was the first person I ever fed from after I was turned, and indeed the only one until his death thirty years ago,” Denis revealed. “I cared deeply for him, and a part of me feels guilty even considering a partnership with him so recently gone.”

“Thirty years is hardly recent,” Martin said. “I don’t mean to sound callous, but you’re allowed to move on with your life.”

“I am, but thirty years is much less to a vampire than to a mortal,” Denis reminded him. “Even to a vampire as young as I am. It isn’t in our nature to love easily, but when we do, we love completely, and it takes a long time to let that go.”

“Did your maker have any advice for you?” Martin asked.

“He is of the opinion that a partnership doesn’t have to be the center of one’s life if the people involved choose to keep the relationship on a less personal footing,” Denis replied.

“The instructors here seem to think that’s quite a hard line to walk,” Martin said.

“Luc didn’t say it was hard per se, but he did agree it was a constant choice to step back and keep things on that level,” Denis agreed. “He doesn’t feed only from his partner, unlike most of the pairs I’ve talked to. They don’t share a room or a bed or a life, really, except for the feeding.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Martin asked. “That we should try something like that, with me here at l’Institut and you in Autun, and you come see me or call me to come see you a few times a week so you can feed without anything else?”

“Not really,” Denis said, the impersonal description far less appealing than it should have been. “I mean, I’m not opposed to that if that’s what you want. I guess what I’m really saying is that maybe we should take the time to get better acquainted so we can see what kind of compatibility we have. If we think we could function as partners, we could establish a set of ground rules that would allow us to be apart at times so you could return home. We could decide what degree of intimacy we’re comfortable with and keep it at that level instead of sliding headlong into a love affair that maybe neither of us wants.”

“Okay, so how do we do that?” Martin asked.

Denis shrugged. "We work together to help Pierre, if that's possible, and to find the vampire who turned him so other people aren't hurt the same way. We get to know each other and see where that leads us. Maybe the answer will be nowhere. Maybe we'll spend a few weeks together and realize we couldn't possibly function as partners on any level. And maybe the answer will be that we find something worth compromising to keep it going."

Martin nodded. "I can live with that. I'll make sure we have donor blood for tomorrow night so Pierre can feed, if nothing else. Hopefully I'll be able to get the drugs to test that as well, but I don't know how that will go."

"It's not necessarily about success," Denis said. "It's about knowing we tried everything in our power to help him. If he's beyond aid, we'll figure out what to do then."

"You don't think it will work, do you?" Martin asked.

Denis shrugged. "Not easily or consistently, no. The dosing will be problematic at the best of times, and if he misses a dose and gets out of control, he could kill dozens of people before we realized what was happening and could stop him. I don't really know what other options there are, but I don't see this as a viable long-term solution."

"Is it worth trying at all, then?" Martin asked.

"I think it is," Denis said. "For one thing, I could be wrong. I'm not a doctor or a scientist. I'm not an expert on magic of any kind, even the kind that animates us. I know what I've learned about my nature from my own experience over the past ninety-odd years, but that doesn't mean I know everything. Jean seemed to think it might work, and he's had far longer to study vampire nature than I have. I'd like him to be right. I'd like to be able to send Pierre off into the world, secure in his ability to control his baser instincts and to come in at set intervals for treatment. I'm not holding my breath, though."

"Are there other things we could do to help him?" Martin asked. "Magical things, maybe. A spell that would help him control his madness or at least his actions."

"Is there such a spell?" Denis asked.

"There are binding spells and the Forçage, which can make someone do something against their will," Martin replied. "Thierry and Sebastien talked about the wild magic that triggered a deepening of so

many of the partnerships during the war, which again influenced behavior. Not that I'd recommend setting loose another maelstrom of wild magic, but if it happened then, in theory we could make it happen in a more controlled setting. The problem would be how to test it without endangering people because it didn't work on Pierre."

"I'd volunteer to be your test subject, but your magic doesn't work on me," Denis said. "Could we ask another vampire to volunteer, perhaps?"

"Perhaps." Martin rose from his seat to pace the room. "We know the drugs worked on Pierre before he was turned, at least when he remembered to take them, so if we can make them work on him as a vampire, we're relatively assured of him being functional."

"But was he functional?" Denis asked, his eyes following Martin as he strode back and forth, his long limbs full of harnessed power. Despite the seriousness of their conversation, Denis could not stop the thrill of appreciation that this man could be his partner if he was willing to make it work. "Really functional? From what I understand, he was still homeless, still 'un clochard'. He wasn't hurting anyone, even when he forgot his medicine, but I'm not sure I'd call that functional."

"So maybe we should go the magical route first," Martin mused, running his hand through his hair as he concentrated. "I can use a Forçage to make someone do something. I wonder if I could cast it in such a way that I keep someone from doing something. I could cast it so he can't feed while the spell is in effect and then remove it temporarily when it comes time for him to feed. That would keep him from attacking someone the way he attacked Adèle or Raymond last night."

"That might work," Denis said, "if you can tailor the spell correctly."

"I guess I have some research to do, then," Martin said with a smile. "I haven't had a chance to explore l'Institut's library yet, but it's supposed to be one of the most complete magical libraries in the world."

"How did they manage that?" Denis asked. "L'Institut has only been open for nine months."

"My understanding is they combined Raymond's personal library with Jean's personal library as well as loaned copies from the library of



Jean's predecessor," Martin explained, "and since l'Institut is one of a kind at the moment, there really isn't anywhere else with a more comprehensive selection."

"Then we'd better get started."

"You don't have to help," Martin demurred.

"Two of us can search faster than one alone," Denis insisted. "Lead the way."

## Chapter 15

THREE days into the seminar, Pascale reached the information overload stage. Leaving the abbey, she wandered into the courtyard, the cool breeze no deterrent now that she was a vampire. A few hardy flowers still held on in the flower beds that lined the area, the ground equally strewn with fallen petals and crackling leaves. The moon was bright above her head, giving her plenty of light to see by, but she had been amazed to discover how little light she now needed to make out every detail, often far more than she would have noticed even in full daylight before she was turned.

“How are you settling in?”

She looked up to see Justin Molinière, the vampire who had welcomed her on Monday evening at the start of the session. “It’s a lot to take in all at once,” Pascale admitted. “I had to come out here so I could sit and think.”

“And now I’ve come and disturbed you,” Justin apologized. “Should I leave you alone?”

“It’s fine,” Pascale said. “I’m going around in circles in my head anyway.”

“Would it help to talk about it?” Justin offered. “I can’t promise I have all the answers, but I probably have a few anyway.”

“It’s not so much questions as it is decisions to make,” Pascale explained. “Pros and cons and how all of this affects me or how it could affect me if I choose to go forward.”

“There’s always the chance you won’t find a partner,” Justin said. “Completing a seminar isn’t a guarantee of finding a partner.”

“I already have a partner,” Pascale said. “That’s why I decided to do the seminar in the first place.”

“Ah, I see,” Justin replied. “So you’re weighing everything you’ve heard against the personality of an actual person instead of just in theory.”

“Yes, and not just a partner, but a reluctant one,” Pascale agreed. “It isn’t just a question of me deciding but also of her.”

“Her decision is hers to make,” Justin said. “You can’t worry about what she wants right now. You have to decide what’s right for you. If your decisions differ, then you can discuss it, but until you know what’s best for you, it’s too easy to fall into the trap of giving in to someone else’s desires.”

“How do I decide?”

“What’s going through your mind right now?” Justin asked. “Don’t censor it for me. Just tell me.”

“I’m a little freaked out,” Pascale admitted. “I’m looking at this major commitment, the kind I dreamed about maybe making someday before I was turned, eventually, after I’d lived with someone for a few years, and suddenly I’m hearing that the first time I bite Adèle, it will happen whether I want it to or not. Where’s my choice in the matter?”

“Your choice is in choosing to bite her or not,” Justin said, “but that isn’t what you’re really asking. You’re wondering why her instead of someone easier to get along with, someone of the opposite sex maybe, or maybe someone older or younger or blonde instead of brunette.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly,” Pascale agreed. “I didn’t choose Adèle, and she certainly didn’t choose me. How are we supposed to make a go of it when we’re so totally different?”

“I wish I could tell you that magic is never wrong,” Justin said, “but while her magic’s ineffectiveness on you proves she’s your partner, it doesn’t mean she’ll be a good one for you. She and her previous partner were oil and water, and we’ve seen some others who didn’t click the way most partners have. It’s definitely uncomfortable when that happens.”

“You clicked with your partner, obviously.”

“I did,” Justin said, “although we had some rough spots too. We worked through them like you do in any relationship.”

“I guess it would help if I felt like we could have a relationship, but right now, I don’t feel like she wants one,” Pascale said.

“There are partnerships where the relationship is only magical,” Justin reminded her. “Not many, and it seems to be a lot of work to keep them from becoming personal, but it is possible. Taking advantage of her blood so you’re protected from sunlight, letting that strengthen you over time... that’s not a bad thing.”

"A little selfish," Pascale said.

"Not really," Justin disagreed. "Not when she gets stronger at the same time. If she didn't get anything out of it, that would be different, but Catherine, my partner, says she can do things now she never thought she'd be able to do. Her magical abilities were barely within the average range before we became partners, and now she's above average. She still can't compete with Raymond or Alain or a few of the others, but those wizards were so much stronger than her to begin with that it isn't a fair comparison. She's certainly stronger than most unpaired wizards these days."

"Will that hold true if we don't become lovers?"

"Apparently," Justin replied. "Catherine says she started getting stronger almost right away, although she didn't realize it until later, and even pairs I've talked to who are less wrapped up in each other seem to notice the increase. It might not be as significant an increase as in the case of other couples, but there is one in every case I'm aware of."

"Thank you," Pascale said. "You've given me a lot to think about."

"We can keep talking if you'd like," Justin offered.

"I appreciate it, but this is something I have to work out for myself."

"I'll be around all week if you change your mind," Justin said. "You don't have to go through this alone. If you're not comfortable talking to me, we can find someone else."

"It's not that," Pascale promised. "It's more that I don't even know where to start. Maybe I'll go for a walk. I can always make a list of questions and ask you about them tomorrow night."

"Just be careful if you pass outside the wards," Justin said. "Vampires aren't the only things that go bump in the night."

"What do you really think they could do to me?" Pascale asked. "I've already been turned."

"Being a vampire protects you from many things," Justin agreed, "but being eviscerated by a werewolf wouldn't be one of them."

"There haven't been wolves in le Morvan for years," Pascale scoffed.

"Not wolves," Justin agreed, "but it's the full moon tomorrow. Werewolves need space to run. The parc naturel would be the perfect place for them."

“I won’t go far,” Pascale promised, “but I feel like the walls are closing in around me. I’ve got to get some fresh air if nothing else.”

Justin nodded and let her go.

Pascale walked toward the lake that bordered l’Institut on one side, simply moving out of the courtyard giving her a feeling of freedom she had not had since she was turned. The breeze eddied around her ankles and blew her hair in her face. She brushed it away but did not bother going back for a band to confine it. Glancing upward, she watched the clouds skitter across the face of the moon and hoped it would storm. She would relish the power of lightning arcing through the air, something to make her feel alive again.

She stood there for uncounted minutes, content to rest her mind and body, to simply be outside on a windy fall night, part of a larger world instead of isolated with her petty problems. In that moment, she knew the path she would take. She still feared the possibility of being trapped in the magical equivalent of a loveless marriage, and she worried about Adèle’s need to control everything around her, but the combined lures of sunlight, of a partnership, of a normal life were too strong. She could work on convincing Adèle of her own quiet strength. No, she did not have the wizard’s physical presence or confident demeanor, but that did not make her weak. It made her different. Adèle would come to recognize that eventually if they spent enough time together. The woman was a detective. She was observant enough to see what was in front of her. It perturbed Pascale to be partnered with a woman who had never shown any interest in women before now, but even that was not an insurmountable obstacle. They did not have to engage in a sexual relationship if Adèle truly could not adjust to it. Pascale could feed from Adèle and find release elsewhere if the need became too great. Angelique had assured her hunting would grow easier with time.

If the women she chose were pale imitations of the one she wanted, no one would ever be any wiser. She refused to pine away over a woman who did not want her. She had more self-respect than that.

Feeling more confident now that she had a plan, she strolled along the lake. She would have to arrange to meet with Adèle to discuss her thoughts and to see what Adèle felt, but at least she knew her own mind.

The sudden echo of howls across the lake sent shivers down her spine. Deciding she had walked enough, she hurried back to the courtyard and inside.

“CAN we really expect the penal system to house and feed a vampire for twenty or forty years?” Raymond asked. “Even with only feeding every three days, that’s a lot of blood.”

“I know,” Jean said, “but unless the vampire feeds from the other inmates, I don’t see what choice we have. Shortening the sentence isn’t really an option. We want there to be a deterrent, and a few months or even a few years is nothing to a vampire. We can’t really force them into hibernation either because there’s no guarantee their makers will still be extant when their sentence is up, even if they are when the sentence begins. Accidents happen to vampires too.”

Raymond flinched at the reminder of his own part in Jude Leighton’s demise six months earlier. If he had not insisted Jude go with him as he investigated an intruder at l’Institut, the vampire might still be in existence. Before he could say anything else, a sharp scream interrupted them.

“What was that?” Raymond asked.

“I have no idea,” Jean said, getting to his feet, “but I think we need to find out.”

They ran down the hall and out into the courtyard to find Aimée Naizot, the daughter of their housekeeper, on her knees in the grass, her face buried in her hands as she shuddered and sobbed.

“Aimée, what’s wrong?” Raymond asked. “What happened?”

“The... the vampire, the one in the locked room,” Aimée said through her hiccupping sobs. “He got loose and tried... he tried to grab me.”

“Merde,” Jean cursed. “Where is he now?”

Aimée pointed wordlessly to a pile of ashes near the doorway. “I ran,” she said. “I know not all vampires are evil, but I was scared, and my grandmother always said you were safe from vampires in sunlight. I didn’t think. I just dashed outside. I didn’t think he’d follow me.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Raymond said soothingly. “You did what you needed to do to protect yourself, and that’s the most important thing. If you’d stayed inside with him, he would have hurt you, because he wasn’t in control of himself.”

“Where were you when you saw him?” Jean asked.

“At the top of the stairs that lead down to the kitchen,” Aimée said. “He was at the other end of the hall. He saw me and let out this noise... I don’t even know how to describe it. So I ran down the stairs as fast as I could and out the door.”

“Would someone have opened his door, not realizing who was inside?” Jean asked Raymond.

“I suppose it’s possible,” Raymond replied. “I set the ward on the door so he couldn’t get out, not so others couldn’t get in. If someone opened the door and didn’t close it, he could have gotten out, but I thought everyone knew not to open it.”

“Is there anyone here today who isn’t normally here? A substitute on the staff, maybe, who heard him pounding on the door and opened it, not realizing the situation?” Jean suggested.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Raymond said, “but as many people as work here in the kitchens and on the grounds, I suppose it’s possible.”

“But they shouldn’t have been upstairs,” Aimée said. “That doesn’t mean they weren’t, I guess, but no one but Maman, Chantal, and myself should have been up in those rooms. Oh, God, do you think he somehow tricked one of them into opening the door?”

“Stay here,” Jean ordered, his voice sharp. “I’ll check.”

Raymond almost asked what he thought could hurt them now that Pierre was gone, but if Pierre had indeed attacked Aimée’s mother or sister, she did not need to see the body. Jean’s passage would not disturb any magical signatures left behind, if there were any, so Raymond could check the spells later to see if they had been disturbed.

Jean returned a few minutes later. “I didn’t find your mother or sister in his room, so I’m sure they’re elsewhere on the grounds. I sent Thierry to look for them so you can see for yourself that they’re unharmed. Raymond, it looks like he—or someone—tore the door off its hinges.”

“You keep telling me vampires are incredibly strong,” Raymond said. “He couldn’t have made the handle turn or the latch release from the jamb with my magic locking it, but if he managed to break the metal on the hinges, I suppose he could have forced it enough to get out. Still, the amount of power that would take, you’d think we would have heard the noise.”

"You would think," Jean agreed. "You can go look if you want. Maybe you'll see something I missed, but it looked to me like pure brute force."

"I will in a minute," Raymond said, crossing the courtyard and kneeling next to the pile of ashes. He began to chant softly, air stirring around his shoulders, summoned by his words. Normally he would have a body as he began this rite, the air taking his breath in offering, but he directed the gentle breeze now across the pile of ash. Water came next, cleansing the vampire's remains for his return to the elements. He called fire, though the body was already consumed, to dry the ashes and ready the earth. Before he could cast the last part of the spell, Thierry knelt beside him, his voice joining the chant. Raymond turned control of the spell over to the other wizard, Thierry's affinity with earth allowing him to mingle the ashes into the ground below effortlessly, the soil responding to his call and enfolding the remains in its embrace: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

"Thank you," Raymond said to Thierry after they had released the magic. "I'll put a marker there later so everyone knows it's hallowed ground."

"I'll take care of it," Thierry insisted. "You need to find out what happened that he ended up a pile of dust in the first place."

Raymond nodded.

"Thank you," Jean said as Raymond stepped back. "You didn't have to do that for him."

"He wasn't evil," Raymond said. "You said yourself he should never have been turned. He didn't deserve to die the way he did, and he certainly didn't deserve to have his ashes scattered on the wind with no acknowledgment of his life or death."

"We'll need to call Adèle," Jean said. "Her case of involuntary turnings just took a more sinister turn."

"I'm not sure we can charge the vampire with his death," Raymond said. "He essentially committed suicide."

"He was responsible for creating the situation that led to Pierre's death," Jean insisted.

"I'm not sure that's the legal standard," Raymond warned, "but we'll notify Adèle and let her make that call. If nothing else, she needs to know she's minus a witness now."



"I'll call her if you'll let Martin know," Jean offered. "I'm not sure where he is at the moment."

"I'll find him," Raymond said. "I'm also going to check Pierre's room. I won't go in so Adèle can treat it as a crime scene if she wants, but I want to see how he got out."

Jean nodded in acknowledgment as he went back toward their office to call Adèle.

Raymond retraced the route Pierre had taken to his doom, up the stairs to the second story rooms and then down the hall to the one Pierre had occupied. A quick check of his spell showed the magic still intact, if precariously, given that the door now hung by the incantation alone. The wood around the hinges had shattered, the screws hanging drunkenly in their holes. Whatever force had torn the door open, it had been superhuman. Then again, Raymond had watched Jean throw a grown man across the street like he weighed nothing more than a golf ball. He had trusted the solidity of the stone and the thickness of the door to keep Pierre confined. If he ever had to confine another vampire, he would remember to use magic.

"So instead of a witness, I now have a dead body."

"Not even a body," Raymond said, acknowledging Adèle's arrival with a kiss on her cheek. "A pile of ashes. I know that's what happens when a vampire is exposed to sunlight. I saw it when we executed the *extorris* at the end of the war, but that doesn't make it any easier to look at the pile of ashes and know it was once a man."

"You saw your share of bodies during the war," Adèle said.

"I know, but this is different. Pierre didn't choose to be turned or to be in this situation," Raymond said.

"As if any of us really chose our paths in the war either," Adèle said. "We reacted to what was going on around us."

Raymond shrugged, uncomfortably aware of the scar on his back, covered now with a different, cherished mark. "Not all of us."

"Don't give me that bullshit," Adèle snapped. "If any of us chose our paths, it was you when you left Serrier and switched sides. Now, enough self-pity. Tell me what you did so I can figure out what Pierre did."

"You can see my spell there," Raymond said, pointing to the door knob. "I locked the door magically so he couldn't turn the handle from the inside. The spell held. The door apparently didn't."

“So there’s nothing to suggest that anyone broke in or was trying to harm him in any way,” Adèle concluded.

“Not given the damage to the door. Someone outside wouldn’t have needed to force it,” Raymond explained. “You’d need magic to get out, not to get in.”

“So anyone walking by could, in theory, have opened the door and let him out without a problem, but he could only get out himself by breaking down the door,” Adèle confirmed.

“Right. Aimée Naizot, the woman he was chasing when he ran outside, said she saw him in the hallway and fled immediately. She didn’t see anyone who might have let him out, and if someone had, the door would be open rather than hanging by my spell.”

“From what you’ve seen and heard, is there any reason to suspect any kind of foul play?” Adèle asked.

“No,” Raymond replied. “As much as Jean would like to lay this at the feet of Pierre’s maker, it seems to me a case of Pierre not having the self-preservation instincts to keep out of the sunlight. From what Jean has told me the few times we’ve discussed it, a vampire in full thrall of his bloodlust has about as much common sense as a lemming.”

“And Pierre didn’t have that much common sense when he was fully human and on all his medications,” Adèle said. “I see Jean’s point, but I don’t think we could get murder or even involuntary homicide given the time between Pierre’s turning and today. We could probably add a reckless endangerment charge, but I don’t know if it’s worth it given how much time he’s already facing for turning Pascale and Pierre in the first place.”

“It would make Jean feel better about the situation,” Raymond said, “which I realize is no one’s primary concern but mine.”

“In terms of actually making him feel better, you’re right,” Adèle agreed, “but if there’s some logic behind his feelings, something about that additional charge that would keep something like this from happening again, it could be a reason to consider it.”

“He hasn’t discussed it in those terms,” Raymond said, “but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. He’s been more focused on Pierre and the wrong done to him than on keeping it from happening again. He would like to think this is the isolated instance of one deranged vampire rather than something we really have to protect against in the longer term.”

“What do you think?”

"I think the reality is somewhere in between. Most of the vampires I know wouldn't do something like this, just like most of the people I know wouldn't commit murder," Raymond said, "but I'm enough a student of history to know there's nothing new under the sun. If one vampire can be twisted enough to turn people against their will, another one will be at some future point. But if the person is twisted enough to do something that vampires as a group agree is bad, I don't know if jail time will really deter them. That would be a question for the sociologists, not for me."

"So what do we do?"

"You keep trying to catch the bastard and I keep trying to keep Jean sane," Raymond said with a shrug. "What else can we do?"

"Adèle, Raymond, I heard Pierre got loose," Martin said, bounding up the stairs to join him.

"He's gone," Raymond said. "I buried his ashes where he fell."

"Merde," Martin swore. "And we finally felt like we were making progress with him. You should maybe talk to Denis, Adèle. He kept calling it a crazy theory, but I think he has an idea who might be behind the turnings."

"Why didn't he call me?"

"He was trying to get something, anything, out of Pierre that might corroborate his idea before he shared it with you," Martin explained. "Unfortunately, nothing Pierre said was conclusive, and Pascale didn't see the one detail that would prove his theory correct."

"Share it with me anyway," Adèle said. "Even if it's far-fetched, it's better than nothing, which is all I've got now."

"He thinks the former chef de la Cour in Autun, euh, Renard, I think his name was, is trying to build enough support to take back the Cour."

"Renaud," Raymond corrected.

"By turning vampires against their will?" Adèle said. "I don't see that building a lot of support."

"It's not a foolproof theory, but it would be a reason for their maker to come back for them," Martin replied, feeling the sudden urge to defend Denis despite his own earlier skepticism. "And it would tie in with what he apparently said to Pierre about Pierre thanking him. The issue isn't whether Pascale and Pierre feel grateful, but whether their maker thinks they'll feel grateful enough to help him. Denis said

Renaud was from the appropriate time period for his accent to be right. It's not a perfect theory, but nothing we know for a fact disproves it, and furthermore, no one has seen Renaud at all since the attacks began."

"Which could mean he's all the way to Russia by now," Adèle reminded him. "It's been six months. Even on foot and only traveling at night, he could be anywhere in Europe."

"He could be," Raymond said slowly, "but I'd be surprised if he is. I met him before Denis replaced him. Just once, to be sure, but he left quite an impression. You can talk to Denis and confirm this, but the Cour was his life from what I could tell. The way he chose to run it made life complicated when we first started l'Institut, but there's no doubt he would do anything to protect his Cour and his position."

"Even turn people against their will?"

Raymond shrugged. "I was a first-hand witness to the atrocities committed in the name of something I believed in before the atrocities started. It wouldn't be the first time someone has used the ends to justify means the rest of us would consider reprehensible."

"Then maybe we need to talk to this Renaud."

"Denis has been looking for him for the past three days," Martin said. "As far as I know, he hasn't had any luck."

"It's too late to try it with Pascale, but if he turns another victim and we get there first, we can try a tracing spell," Raymond said. "We used those sometimes during the war to track down Serrier's operatives. There's no guarantee it will work, since it's intrinsic rather than extrinsic magic, but it's worth a try. And if that doesn't work, we may be able to come up with some other way to trace him magically."

"I hate to wait for another victim. See if Jean has a better idea," Adèle said. "I need to talk to Denis and then I need to talk to Pascale."

## Chapter 16

“ADÈLE.”

Adèle tensed at hearing her name. “Bonsoir, Pascale.”

“Jean said you were here. He told me what happened to Pierre. As awful as it is, maybe it’s better this way. He wouldn’t have had any kind of life out of control the way he was.”

“I’d feel better about it if I thought it had been his choice,” Adèle said. “As it is, I don’t know if he ever realized it was dangerous to go outside.”

Pascale nodded. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“A few,” Adèle replied. “I’m waiting for Denis Langlois to get here. He has a theory.”

“He said that. I’m sorry I couldn’t help him, but I didn’t see the vampire’s hands when he turned me, or if I did, it was too dark to see if he had scars, but that wasn’t what I wanted to talk to you about. I’ve been thinking about our partnership, if we decide to go forward with it.”

Adèle’s tension mounted even more. “And what were you thinking?”

“I’m thinking it bears an unfortunate resemblance to an arranged marriage,” Pascale replied. “In an age before divorce.”

“Yes,” Adèle said with a sharp laugh, amazed that finally someone understood her concerns without her having to voice them, “and the fact that some people make them work doesn’t mean it’s easy.”

“So here’s my suggestion,” Pascale said. “There are benefits to a partnership for both of us. I get a freedom of movement I wouldn’t otherwise have, and you get an increase in magical strength. I need to feed every two to three days, but it wouldn’t have to always be from you. We have a weekly meeting at work, usually on Fridays, so if I could feed from you Thursday night, that would let me attend. Then the rest of the week, I’d be on my own.”

"That would only give you Friday and Saturday to be out in daylight," Adèle cautioned. "Is that enough?"

"I wouldn't say no to seeing you more often," Pascale admitted, "but I don't want this to be too much of an imposition on you either."

"It's not the feeding that's the imposition," Adèle said. "Fifteen minutes a few times a week is nothing. It's everything else."

"Yes, but we wouldn't do 'everything else'," Pascale said. "You'd come over and I'd feed or I'd come to your house and feed, and then I'd go home. A business arrangement, nothing else. I know it won't be easy, but if that's all the interaction we have, there's nothing to push us for more. During the war, from what I understand, the pairs were together hour after hour, day after day. They fought together. That's already personal. We won't have to do that. We'd agree on a schedule, work around each other's commitments, meet a few times a week, and that's it."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I'm not in love with you, Adèle. I don't know you that well, and I'm not your former partner with his Neolithic attitudes. I'm not going into this expecting it to be something it isn't, and I'm not going to change my mind because I see relationships around me growing deeper. I'm not Jude, and this isn't the same situation."

"All right," Adèle said, extending her arm.

"I thought you said you were expecting Denis shortly," Pascale said, her fangs dropping and her mouth watering despite her words. She pushed down the instinct to seize. *She* was in control, not her instincts. She would show Adèle she was strong enough to uphold her end of their bargain.

"I am, but he can wait," Adèle said. "This is more important."

Pascale swallowed hard. "If you're sure."

Adèle locked the door with a quick spell and a flick of her wand. "That way we won't be disturbed."

"They'll think we're..."

"They'll think it anyway the first time anyone sees bite marks on me," Adèle said with a shrug. "I can't do anything about their assumptions. Now are you going to feed or not? You're giving me a complex."

The locked door gave the moment a nearly unbearable sense of intimacy when Pascale knew it meant far less than it appeared. If things

had been different... but they were not, and Pascale refused to cry over spilt milk. Instead, she took Adèle's hand and lifted it to her lips, determined to be as matter-of-fact as possible about what they were about to do. That lasted until she caught the hint of perfume on Adèle's skin. She stifled a groan and made herself prepare Adèle's wrist, pushing aside her sudden desire to nuzzle Adèle's neck or the neckline of her blouse to see if she had dabbed perfume there as well.

The scent of Shalimar grew stronger as Adèle's skin heated, her pulse picking up at the touch of Pascale's tongue. Pascale's body reacted, her own skin flushing with hunger and desire, but she pushed those thoughts aside. No matter how much she might want to interpret Adèle's physical reactions as an invitation to greater intimacy, Pascale would not make the same mistake Adèle's former partner had made.

Letting her fangs drop all the way, Pascale punctured the skin beneath her lips, Adèle's blood rushing to the surface as she sucked lightly. She could taste the difference immediately in comparison to the blood she had taken from non-wizards. Adèle's blood had an effervescence the others had lacked, as if the magic inside her bubbled through her veins. Pascale swallowed slowly, letting the tingling feeling spread through her as more blood filled her mouth. She was tempted to rush, but she did not know when she would next get to feed from her partner, and she intended to savor every moment they had together.

Cognizant of her partner's limits, Pascale forced herself not to gorge. If the presenters at the seminar were correct, she would not need to. A normal amount of blood from Adèle would sustain her as much as draining a non-wizard dry.

As always happened when she fed, the sense of intimacy grew with each mouthful of blood, her body reacting as strongly as if Adèle had caressed her. Pascale knew not to expect that, not after their earlier conversation, but nothing could stop her breasts from tightening with the need to be touched.

Adèle forced herself to stay immobile as Pascale fed. Nothing in the vampire's demeanor reminded her in any way of Jude, only the pinch of fangs in her skin, but the twin impulses to pull away or to pull Pascale closer warred within Adèle nonetheless. She had hated the way Jude treated her, but the actual sensation of him—and now Pascale—feeding from her had not been unpleasant in itself. When she relaxed

and let go of the instinctive tension, she felt again how sensual it could be, Pascale's lips and tongue moving over her skin as she fed.

The awareness woke another memory. As conflicted as it still made her, Jude had known how to get her off, and that carried over now as well, her body reacting expectantly, tensing in anticipation of the rough touch, the confining hands. She focused on Pascale's blonde head, reminding herself she was with a different vampire now and that she never had to endure Jude's unwelcome touch again.

Pascale made no move to touch her beyond her hand and wrist, cradling the limb carefully, as if the contact between them was a gift. Perhaps it was for the newly turned vampire, Adèle realized. A chance at something akin to a normal life again, at least for the time Adèle's magic worked on her. It highlighted once more how wrong everything about her relationship with Jude had been from the very beginning. He had never seen her blood as a gift, but rather as something that was his by right, to demand when he felt like it with no regard for her feelings or wishes. She wondered idly what it would feel like to have that reverent touch elsewhere.

The thought was so foreign she nearly pulled away in shock, only the reluctance to have to explain her sudden withdrawal keeping her from snatching her hand back. She could not seriously be considering this. She liked men, for Christ's sake! A long, hard cock she could ride into oblivion. She sent a silent curse heavenward, as if her vitriol would have any impact on the magical influence that seemed to push her toward the woman feeding from her wrist.

A few moments later, Pascale withdrew her fangs, licking across the tiny incisions carefully. "Thank you," she said. "I know it couldn't have been easy for you to trust me that way."

Trusting Pascale would be far too easy if she kept on like this. "You're welcome," Adèle said roughly. "It may take some time for me to get used to a new partnership, but you aren't Jude, and if I had any doubts before now, your saying thank you put them to rest. He never thanked me for anything."

"Somehow I think I'm glad I never met him," Pascale said with a wry smile. "I would have had a thing or two to say to him about the way he treated you."

"I don't know that it would have made any difference," Adèle said, releasing the spell on the door with a wave of her wand, "but I appreciate the sentiment. I should see if Denis has arrived yet."



She reached the door before turning back. "Aren't you coming?"

Pascale's smile lit up the room, sending another little thrill through Adèle. Maybe this could work after all.

THEY found Denis in the office Martin had claimed as his over the course of the past week, the two men sitting close on the couch, their heads together as they talked.

Adèle cleared her throat, not wanting to interrupt a private moment. Both heads turned, but neither pulled away, reassuring her on that count. "Bonsoir, Denis. I assume Martin has brought you up to date on what happened with Pierre?"

"Yes," Denis said. "Terrible business. Martin also said he told you about my theory."

Adèle nodded. "How strongly do you feel about it? It feels somewhat far-fetched to me, but I don't know the vampire in question. Could he be delusional enough to think Pascale, Pierre, and any other vampires he might turn against their will would support him against you?"

"I'd love to say I was sure," Denis said, "but I'm not. It's totally outlandish, but it's not outside the realm of possibility either. Logic doesn't really apply where Renaud is concerned, or he wouldn't have been so hidebound in his reaction to l'Institut. I never heard the full story of his turning, but I could see him deciding that since he felt grateful to his maker for being turned, other vampires would feel the same, and since he considered being a vampire far superior to being mortal, others would have the same feelings after they were turned, even if they didn't have a choice."

"I'm no longer ready to throw myself off a bridge or walk out into the sunlight," Pascale said, the high of feeding from Adèle still coursing strongly through her body, "but if he expects me to be grateful to him for what he did, he needs to think again."

"I didn't say he was right," Denis reminded them. "I said I could see him believing it. It's all speculation. He's from the right time period. He's missing. He has a motive, albeit a twisted one. I can't prove it, since Pascale didn't see his hands and Pierre's ravings can't be trusted, not that he actually said anything to identify Renaud, only to tie

in with my theory that whoever did this expects gratitude from the ones who were turned.”

“I think Renaud and I should have a little chat,” Adèle declared. “You have no idea where to find him?”

“None,” Denis said. “His old address is empty and up for rent. I checked there already. I asked around the Cour, and no one admits to having seen him since I ousted him six months ago. Both of the known attacks have been in Château-Chinon. Could he have found a place there? Maybe he isn’t even trying to take back my Cour. Maybe he’s trying to create one of his own.”

“I can check on new leases in the area,” Adèle said. “What’s his full name?”

“Guy Renaud. He might not be using his name, though.”

“He probably isn’t,” Adèle agreed, “but a lot of people will use an alias that’s close to their real name. It makes it easier for them to remember. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“We’ll keep you abreast if we figure out a way to track him without a new victim,” Martin added. “And if you find a new victim, try a tracing spell as soon as you can. Short of catching him in the act, that will probably be our best chance of finding him.”

“Good. We’ll leave you to work then. Jean has my cell if you need to reach me,” Adèle said, guiding Pascale toward the door.

“That went better than I expected,” Denis said when they were alone again. “I expected her to blow me off.”

“I don’t know her that well,” Martin said, “but it seems to me any lead is better than no lead at all. If she finds Renaud and he has an alibi or his voice doesn’t match, she’s no worse off than she was before she talked to him. And if it turns out he is the one we’re looking for, she has an arrest instead of him being out there possibly hurting someone else.”

“She has a reputation,” Denis explained. “A real man-eater. That doesn’t mean she’s irrational or incapable of listening to a good idea just because it comes from a man, but she doesn’t let anyone off lightly either. Given how off the wall my idea is, I wasn’t sure how she’d react.”

Martin bristled at the thought of Adèle discounting Denis’s idea out of hand. Immediately, he wondered where the defensiveness had come from. If they had been partners, he might have understood it, but they

had not taken that step, had not really even contemplated it, and yet here he was, taking umbrage at a slight that had not even occurred because it would have affected Denis. Pushing that thought aside for later reflection, he focused on Denis instead. "Is there a chance Renaud will get word of this and come looking for you?"

Denis shrugged. "Anything is possible. I beat him once. If he comes after me, I'll beat him again."

"If he's alone," Martin said, "but what if he's managed to garner support somewhere?"

"Where?" Denis asked. "I'm not blowing you off, but none of my Cour has heard from him. If he had approached vampires in another Cour, that chef de la Cour would have heard of it and contacted me. We may not all be friends, but no chef de la Cour wants to face an unexpected challenge. It happens, of course, like when I challenged Renaud, but I don't think any of my Cour would welcome him back, so it would be in their best interest as well to tell me if he approached them."

"What about the vampires he's turning, if it's him, of course?" Martin asked.

"Pierre is a pile of ashes, and Pascale wants nothing to do with him," Denis reminded him. "I'm not seeing a lot of support there."

"And if he learned from his mistakes?" Martin insisted. "You said he didn't want anything to do with l'Institut. If he realizes Pascale has ended up completely involved with the vampires here, even if he doesn't realize what happened to Pierre yet, he might be a little more careful in how he deals with the next vampire he turns, actually taking the time to make sure that vampire is grateful to him. And if it doesn't get reported as a non-consensual turning, we wouldn't even know it had happened to have an idea of how many vampires he's recruited."

"If he wants the Cour of Autun back, it doesn't really matter," Denis said. "To take back the Cour, he would have to challenge me directly in front of the rest of the Cour. Even if he came with supporters, they would be newly turned. Our fight would be one on one, and if his supporters tried to intervene, they would be no match for Auguste or Camille or some of the ancient vampires in my Cour. In a fair fight, Renaud can't win, and if he fights dirty, he'll lose the Cour because he broke the rules."

"You sound so certain," Martin said. "What if he takes you out completely away from the Cour? What would happen in that vacuum of power?"

"If something were to happen to me," Denis said, "if I were to get caught in the sunlight or, I don't know, simply disappear, the Cour would devolve to whoever was strong enough to take and keep it, but it wouldn't be Renaud. The other members of the Cour would never stand for it."

"Does Renaud know that?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what Renaud knows and what he doesn't," Denis said with a sharp laugh, running a hand through his hair, messing it up for the first time Martin had ever seen. Wanting to be the one to leave him disheveled that way took Martin completely by surprise. "If I could read his mind, this whole situation might have been avoided in the first place."

"And then we never would have met." The words were out before Martin could stop them. He felt his cheeks flame at the admission, but it was too late to call them back.

"And that would have been a shame," Denis agreed, the smile he sent Martin enough to leave the wizard yearning for the right to touch.

Martin cleared his throat roughly. "So, ah, did you have any other ideas on how to track down Renaud? Anything in vampire lore that would help?"

"The only surefire way I know of for one vampire to track another is for the second vampire to drink the blood of the first vampire's most recent prey," Denis said, accepting the momentary change of subject. "That's how they rescued Orlando during the war, which is also how I know about it."

"I thought no vampire would feed from another vampire's *Avoué*," Martin said. "Or did I misunderstand?"

"No, you didn't misunderstand," Denis replied, "and under normal circumstances, you'd be right, but the way I heard the story told, it had reached a critical point, where if they didn't rescue Orlando, he wouldn't have survived to be rescued. Monsieur Lombard, the oldest vampire in France, hell, maybe the oldest vampire in the world at this point, took a few drops of blood from Alain's wrist onto his hand and used that to locate Orlando. Monsieur Lombard had an *Avoué* once upon a time as well, so I know he didn't do it lightly."

“Okay, so if that’s true, if you can trace a vampire by the last person he fed from, if we find a new victim, could you use that person’s blood to trace Renaud?” Martin asked. “Or would the fact that he or she has been turned mess up the magic?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Denis admitted. “You have to remember I didn’t even know about the ability to track a vampire that way until after I first came to l’Institut. We’d have to ask monsieur Lombard, and I’m not sure we want to beard that lion in its den.”

“He can’t be *that* imposing,” Martin said. “I mean, Jean is already how old, over a millennium, right?”

“Yes, Jean was turned in the year 911, but you don’t understand,” Denis said with a shake of his head. “Jean is an old vampire, but he’s also a very modern one, with all his contact with l’ANS and l’Institut and the wizards and all the rest. Monsieur Lombard is... different. I don’t even know how to explain it.”

“Would he help us if we asked?” Martin inquired.

“He might,” Denis replied, “or he might refuse to even see us. We’d just have to go to Paris and see.”

Martin nodded. “It’s too late tonight. We couldn’t guarantee that we could get you home before dawn, but maybe tomorrow night. I could talk to Raymond about arranging for someone to take you to Paris.”

“If you really think this is necessary,” Denis agreed, his reluctance obvious in his stance.

“Do you have another suggestion?” Martin asked. “I don’t want to force you into anything, but we’ve got a vampire out there endangering people, mortals and vampires alike. If we can figure out a way to stop him—and tracing him back from his victim would work whether it’s Renaud or someone else—I feel like we should do what it takes.”

“No, you’re right,” Denis said with a deep sigh. “You have to understand, though. I’ve been a vampire for ninety years. To you, that sounds like a long time, but to Jean, and especially to monsieur Lombard, I’m a baby. He may not even agree to meet with us.”

“We have to try,” Martin said.

“I know, but I don’t have to like it.”

“What’s the worst he can do?” Martin asked, his protective instincts coming to the fore at Denis’s continued reluctance. “Refuse to see us, right?”

"No, he can do worse than that. He can invite us in and then spend our entire audience with him subtly denigrating me for my age and inexperience," Denis said, "and if he really wants to make it bad, he can do so in front of other vampires, pretty much destroying me in le Jeu des Cours. I may be a chef de la Cour, but he's in a class by himself."

"Then maybe we shouldn't go after all," Martin equivocated. "I don't want you to lose face. We can keep searching in the library here. With all the resources Jean and Raymond have compiled, there's sure to be something in there about tracking a vampire."

"And we could spend weeks with no progress instead of a few hours talking with monsieur Lombard," Denis replied. "I'm being overly sensitive because of the way Renaud treated me when I challenged him for the Cour. Monsieur Lombard will probably be perfectly gracious to us."

"Could we ask Jean for advice? He must know monsieur Lombard fairly well, being the chef de la Cour parisienne. Unless asking puts you at a disadvantage where he's concerned?" Martin suggested.

"It does, but I'm already so far at a disadvantage where he's concerned that I'll never gain any ground," Denis said. "Fortunately he sees me as an improvement over my predecessor and so treats me as an equal in front of other vampires rather than as the child we all know I am."

"Will you stop saying that?" Martin snapped. "You're not a child, obviously, or you wouldn't be in control of a Cour. I'm not a vampire, but I know enough to realize your Cour wouldn't have chosen you to challenge Renaud and take his place if they didn't see something worthwhile in you. Monsieur Lombard can be as polite or as rude as he wants to be. We're there with a legitimate question about a real problem. If he chooses to be difficult, that's his failing, not ours."

"I'll talk to Jean before I leave," Denis said. "I should probably do that now, actually, since it's getting late. I have an hour's drive home."

"I'll talk to Raymond and call you to set up a time to pick you up for the trip to Paris tomorrow night," Martin said. He caught Denis's arm when the vampire started to leave the room. "You may be young by vampire standards, but that only makes what you've accomplished in Autun more impressive. Monsieur Lombard will recognize that. You'll see."

“I hope you’re right. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Martin let him go, wondering how a vampire with the confidence to challenge a much older, experienced vampire and win could have such little faith in himself outside that familiar arena. That was a problem for another time, though. For now, he had a trip to Paris to plan.

## Chapter 17

DENIS stood in the doorway of his building, watching the sky lighten above him. He had learned some time ago exactly how long he could stay there before the sunlight became dangerous to him. He was not flirting with death, not really. It was more the need to see, to experience in some small way what he had given up ninety years before to escape death. He did not regret giving his consent to Luc on the battlefield outside Amiens. He did not regret the years he had spent with Noël, but sometimes he missed the feel of sunshine on his face, the warmth of the rays chasing away the chill of the night.

His traitorous thoughts reminded him he could have that again, for a time at least, if he took the risk of a partnership with Martin. He had rejected it out of hand when it first came up because of his loyalty to Noël and because Martin would be leaving, but a part of him yearned for the companionship again.

He had thought Martin as disinterested as he where their partnership was concerned, but Martin had not reacted tonight like a disinterested party when they talked about Adèle or about monsieur Lombard. He had reacted the same way Noël always had when anyone denigrated Denis, including Denis himself.

The sky lightened to the point that Denis began to grow uncomfortable. He opened the door behind him and went inside, the darkness closing around him again. All it would take was feeding from Martin and he would not have to go inside. He could stay in the doorway or even walk out into the garden and soak up the sun's rays. As tempting as that thought was, it was not a reason to form a partnership, not when they were so much more complicated than the immediate benefits both parties drew from them. If Martin were in France to stay, if he were interested in a partnership, that might be different. Denis enjoyed the man's company, his quick intelligence, and his understated sense of humor. Not that they had a lot to joke about, but occasionally as they had worked in the library trying to help Pierre,



Martin would make a comment that left Denis smiling for hours just thinking about it.

Newly turned, Denis had preferred a man of maturity rather than someone his own age. Noël had been perfect for him, in his late thirties and already mayor of Amiens, a man of authority and position, the hints of gray at his temples only adding to his appeal. Denis's mother had always said he had an old soul. It might not have been true when he became a vampire at nineteen, but at one hundred and nine, he felt his age despite his appearance. It made Martin's youthful exuberance refreshing. Not that Martin was that much younger than some of the other wizards, in his late twenties instead of his mid- to late thirties like Raymond and most of the wizards at l'Institut, but those years, or perhaps not having lived through the war, made a difference. Martin seemed lighter, more energetic where the others were more settled.

Denis found that incredibly attractive.

Alone in his bedroom, with no one to see but himself, he could admit the attraction he felt. He had dismissed it as unrequited, but now he wondered. His feeding the night before notwithstanding, his fangs dropped now in response to his thoughts. He scowled at his reflection in the mirror as he undressed for bed. Feeding from Gilles satisfied a physical need, but neither of them had any illusions about what it meant. Denis had never asked what Gilles got out of it, but the man came when Denis called and then went happily home to his wife and children after Denis had fed. The blood sustained Denis without giving him any of the intimacy he had so craved with Noël. Until now, Denis had wanted it exactly that way, but it suddenly seemed empty.

Feeding from Martin would be nothing like that. It might not be exactly like feeding from Noël had been—no one's blood since then had come close to leaving Denis as satisfied in mind and body as Noël's had done—but it would be far more than feeding from Gilles or finding an anonymous body in a club somewhere when he needed release as well as sustenance.

He had sat through a seminar, had listened to the blunt assessment of how a partnered wizard and vampire reacted to each other. He had not even fed from Martin and he was already starting to react that way, seeking out the wizard's company, wanting his good opinion, imagining what it would be like to feed from him. The descriptions had ranged from feeling the magic surrounding the vampire like a blanket to the comfort of slipping into a familiar, well-worn jacket, the one that

fit like a glove because it had been donned so often. As Denis slid beneath the duvet on his bed, he let himself imagine Martin there beside him, magic surrounding Denis and protecting him from the sunlight.

Once he lifted the mental prohibition, the thoughts rushed at him relentlessly, of fangs sinking into the stubbled skin of Martin's neck, hands moving over the breadth of his shoulders, down his strong back to the trim hips and curved buttocks. The magic of the partnership would kick in then, making Martin a willing participant in his ravishment, his body yielding to Denis until neither of them knew where one ended and the other began.

Denis groaned, the lust coursing through him demanding release. He wished he could ignore it, but he needed to rest if he intended to speak with monsieur Lombard that evening, and as worked up as he was, he would never be able to rest without some relief. He slid his hand down his chest, taking his throbbing shaft in hand. He hated that the mere thought of feeding from his partner could cause this reaction, but he could not change it now. Stroking swiftly, he closed his eyes and summoned the vision of Noël's face the night they had met in Luc's salon in Amiens. They had connected instantly, something about Noël calling to the depths of Denis's being. They had not become lovers that night, although it had not been many nights later. That night, Noël had offered his blood, but the newness of it, the power of the connection, had done far more than satisfy Denis's need. It had wrung a climax out of him the likes of which he had never known before. Since then, yes, every time he and Noël made love, but not that night, when his prior experiences had been as a mortal.

Relaxing into the familiar safety of his memories, Denis shunted his hand faster along his slick cock. Then the image changed, Martin's face superimposed over Noël's. Denis tensed, but his body was too far gone to stop, his release spilling over his hand as the fantasy Martin leaned forward and kissed him.

"Merde," Denis cursed, curling around himself. He had no right to think about Martin that way. He had no right to betray Noël that way either. If he had simply fantasized about Martin, that would be one thing, but to have the image of Martin supplant cherished ones of Noël felt like the worst kind of infidelity. He dragged himself from bed and into the shower, needing to wash away the evidence of his cheating, all

sense of satiation gone. He had no idea how he would face Martin that night, but he would worry about that later.

MARTIN crossed the courtyard to the Hostellerie, surprised to see the sun up. His days and nights were so topsy-turvy after working with Denis and Pierre that he no longer had any sense of what time it was. He thought he still knew what day it was, but time had eluded him. Raymond had been in the réfectoire eating breakfast when Martin wandered in, so he and Martin had discussed the logistics of going to Paris to speak with monsieur Lombard. Raymond had been far more positive about the idea than Denis had been, reassuring Martin that perhaps the old vampire's reputation was exaggerated.

"I wouldn't say that," Raymond had said when Martin shared his thoughts. "He is without a doubt the most formidable, venerable vampire I have ever met, and I have met quite a few in the past two years. That said, he is not a cruel one. He may not agree to help, but if he refuses, he will do so politely. And he may agree right away. That doesn't mean he can help, but if anyone can, it will be him. He knew how to find Orlando when we had all but given up."

That was a problem for tonight, though, after Martin had slept. He was too exhausted right now to do anything except rest. His eyes could barely focus on his reflection in the mirror as he brushed his teeth before bed. He was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Dark images filled his dreams, heated visions of a faceless vampire hovering above him, fangs bared as he leaned down. He tried to pull away, but the vampire held him in place as his fangs pierced deep. Martin's back arched at the combination of pain and pleasure that accompanied the bite, his head tossing restlessly as he fought for control. Of himself, of the situation, of his dreams. It was not in his nature to lie back and passively accept a lover's touch without at least returning the pleasure he was receiving, but the vampire of his dreams had no interest in sharing control, keeping his hands pinned as he fed, his body moving over and then into Martin's with no respite from the steadily building sensations.

Gasping for air, Martin woke suddenly, his entire body trembling as he tried to separate dream from reality. His hand rubbed at his throat, finding it unmarked. So it had been a dream, all except the lingering

arousal. Martin had not seen Denis's face in the dream, but he knew Denis had been his faceless lover. He recognized the thin, wiry form, the apparent youth belied by the sureness of the vampire's touch. Denis had never touched Martin in any kind of intimate way, but Martin knew what it would be like, the lovemaking if not the feeding. He had talked to enough paired wizards to know they found it enjoyable, a slight pinch followed by the kind of connection most lovers only dreamed of knowing, even before they were joined in other ways than the vampire's fangs.

So now Martin had to decide how to interpret his dream: as prophecy, as premonition, or maybe wishful thinking. He knew what a partnership with Denis would entail, at least in terms of the exchange of blood, but what he had experienced in his dreams was far more potent than he had expected, even having gone through a seminar. Even now, the lingering arousal from the dream had him fully hard, aching for release, for the touch of a hand or the pinch of fangs in his neck. He shivered at the thought. When had being with a vampire gone from something to study to something to desire?

He had no idea how to answer that question, but it hardly mattered. Far more important was the question of what he intended to do about this epiphany. He had come to France to study, to learn as much as he could, and to take that information home to start his own version of l'Institut Marcel Chavinier and see if the effects were limited to France or if they could be replicated anywhere in the world. From the perspective of seeing if partnerships could form outside of France, his inclusion in one suggested it was possible, but he had found his partner with a French vampire, not one from home. Furthermore, he had found his partner in a vampire who was tied to his current home by responsibilities it would be hard to neglect. Yes, if Denis left, someone would rise to take his place, but Denis had shown no interest in leaving, and it would be unfair of Martin to ask it of him.

That left Martin with the question of whether he would be willing to either relocate to France or expend the magical and physical energy required to make the trip back and forth to Canada several times a week. If the presenters at the seminar were correct, the boost in magical strength he would gain from a partnership would cover the magical energy. He was not sure how his body would hold up to the physical exertion of constantly changing time zones, but as he weighed different options, he realized one thing for certain.

He was not ready to simply walk away from the partnership without seeing what could come of it. He was not ready to commit to it fully, but he wanted the chance to see how things would work with Denis on a personal as well as a professional level. Everything he had seen so far had impressed him. Denis had ambition, dedication, and a profound sense of justice that appealed to Martin deeply. They worked together easily on a professional level, but a partnership would be more than that. It would require a personal level as well. Even if they managed to keep the relationship from taking over their lives, Martin's dreams proved how intimate an act he already considered Denis feeding to be. Going into that relationship, that depth of intimacy without some reasonable assurance that they could make it work seemed the height of folly. That assurance could only come from spending time together outside of work, getting to know each other as people rather than as colleagues. Martin found he did not mind the idea of that at all.

Now he had to see if Denis felt the same way.

DESPITE his confidence during the afternoon, Martin had trouble meeting Denis's gaze when they met that evening for their trip to Paris. It had seemed so simple lying in bed, but actually proposing any step toward making his thoughts a reality tied his guts in knots. He found it easier to focus on the professional problem instead. "Raymond said he'd send you to Paris," Martin said, "and he gave me the number for l'ANS. He said we could call there when we're done and ask someone to send you back."

"I thought he wasn't associated with l'ANS anymore," Denis replied.

"He's no longer the president," Martin explained, "but l'Institut is an arm of l'ANS, so Raymond is still under their auspices. My impression is that everyone there is so in awe of him that they'd do whatever he asked even if he had no association with them anymore. As it is, though, what we're doing impacts l'ANS in the sense that we're trying to protect law-abiding vampires by catching the one who's endangering them."

"It must get tiresome having everyone in awe of you all the time," Denis mused aloud. "Is there anyone who says no to Raymond?"

“Jean does,” Martin said with a laugh, “any time Raymond tries to do anything dangerous or that would overextend himself. Beyond that, I’m not sure there is. Jean’s the same way, though. When was the last time anyone besides Raymond said no to him?”

“Renaud tried,” Denis said with an amused snort. “It cost him his Cour.”

“I thought you said that came from inside.”

“It did, but it happened because most of the vampires agreed with Jean’s perspective on the association between wizards and vampires, or at least wanted the chance to listen to Jean’s perspective,” Denis recounted. “Renaud refused to allow anyone from Autun to participate in the seminars and tried to stop them from establishing l’Institut here. He claimed Jean was horning in on his territory, as if Jean cared about the tiny little Cour in Autun.”

“As much as he’s here, I’m not sure he even cares all that much about the Cour in Paris,” Martin said.

Denis shook his head. “Don’t let him fool you. The only thing more important to Jean than his Cour is his Consort. The difference is that he is well established as chef de la Cour and is popular with his vampires. They see him, and rightly so, as the one who changed their situations for the better by pushing for the anti-discrimination laws. Even those who didn’t support the alliance actively have benefited from the laws. I would have a very hard time imagining anyone even thinking of replacing him right now. In a few hundred years when everyone has forgotten what it was like before, maybe, but not now.”

“I guess I never really thought about it that way,” Martin admitted. “So much of your experience, of everyone’s experiences here, really, are things I’ve only read about in the paper. L’émeute des Sorciers didn’t happen to me, you know?”

“I know,” Denis agreed. “It didn’t really happen to me either, not all the way out here in Autun, but the new laws have affected every vampire. We no longer have to hide in fear of being evicted or persecuted for our natures. When Noël moved with me to Autun, he opened a small bookstore. He never got rich off it, but the money let him feel he wasn’t dependent on me. After he died, I hid the fact that I owned it for fear I would lose the lease because I was a vampire. I don’t have to hide anymore. I still employ a manager to run it for me since I can’t be there during the day, but my name is on the paperwork now instead of Noël’s.”

"I can see that being a very powerful change," Martin agreed. A knock at the door to Martin's office interrupted their conversation. "That would be Raymond. Shall we go to Paris?"

Denis nodded as Martin opened the door and invited Raymond inside. "All set?" Raymond asked.

Both men gave their assent and Raymond cast the spell, sending them both to the park on the quai des Célestins. At this hour of the night, the park was deserted, guaranteeing them safe arrival and relative privacy. "L'île St-Louis is right across the river," Denis said with a wave of his hand. "Monsieur Lombard's house is on the island."

"When we have time, we should come back to Paris for an actual visit," Martin said as they walked across the pont Marie and onto l'île St-Louis. As they neared the address Jean had given them, a silver-haired man appeared on the doorstep.

"Where did he come from?" Denis muttered.

"Magic," Martin replied, feeling the traces of the other wizard's displacement spell skitter along his skin. "I don't know who he is, but that's what he is."

The man did not even knock, simply opening the door and walking inside. "And whoever he is, he's obviously sure of his welcome."

"Did I hear someone say that monsieur Lombard partnered temporarily with Général Chavinier during the war?" Denis asked.

Martin shook his head. "I wouldn't know. Too many unfamiliar names all at once when I went through the seminar. I retained the facts related to the partnerships, but not who paired with whom." Reaching the doorstep, they rapped on the heavy brass knocker. A few moments later, a slender redheaded woman opened the door.

"May I help you?"

"I'm Martin Delacroix and this is Denis Langlois, chef de la Cour of Autun," Martin said by way of introduction. "Raymond Payet from l'Institut said he would call to let monsieur Lombard to know to expect us."

"Yes, come in," the woman said. "I will tell him you're here. You can wait in the salon." She ushered them into a formal parlor lit by gas lamps and a low fire in the fireplace.

"He could leave us here cooling our heels for hours," Denis muttered.

"I could," a deep voice said from the other entrance to the parlor, "but that would not be polite."

Martin and Denis turned toward the sound as the source of the voice stepped into the light. Martin swallowed an instinctive gasp at his first sight of monsieur Lombard. The vampire was easily two meters tall, towering over Martin and Denis, his white hair pulled back into a tight queue at his neck, a full beard, neatly trimmed, covering the lower half of his face. At Martin's side, Denis tensed, but monsieur Lombard waved them toward the couch. "Sit and stop staring at me like you're afraid I'll have you for lunch. I've already fed this evening."

"Christophe, do stop terrorizing the children," the man Martin and Denis had seen arriving said, appearing at the vampire's side. "Marcel Chavinier, since I'm sure our host will forget to introduce me."

"Quit meddling in affairs that aren't your concern, Marcel," monsieur Lombard muttered, but he made no move to escort the wizard from the room.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Marcel insisted. "He's just grumpy tonight for some reason."

"I am *not* grumpy," monsieur Lombard fumed, but Marcel ignored him.

"So, Christophe said you needed his help," Marcel went on. "What seems to be the problem?"

Martin could not stop himself from searching what he could see of the other wizard's skin for bite marks, although he did not see how monsieur Lombard could have fed from the wizard in the short time between his arrival and theirs. He could find no visible marks. Glancing at Denis, he nodded for the vampire to explain.

Quickly, Denis brought the two men up to date on everything that had transpired with Pascale, Pierre, and the involuntary turnings.

"That's quite the conundrum," Marcel agreed.

"We were hoping monsieur Lombard might have some insight into how to track down our vampire," Martin added when Denis had finished his tale. "We heard how you helped find Orlando during the war."

"The problem is that while we might find the person he's fed from most recently if we find another newly turned vampire, we aren't sure that will work, since the person has been turned," Denis said.



"I see the problem," monsieur Lombard agreed. "I've never heard of anyone trying to track a vampire's maker that way, even a newly turned one, because usually a vampire's maker is right there with him or her until long after the new vampire has fed and that illusory magical bond is broken. Involuntary turnings are rare, as I'm sure you know."

"What about a tracing spell instead of a bite?" Marcel asked. "If you had a newly turned vampire and no wizard had cast a spell on that person yet, then the last person to do magic on them would be their maker. Could you track the vampire that way?"

"Would that kind of magic be detectable by our methods?" Martin answered. "It wouldn't be a spell."

"No, but it's definitely magic," Marcel insisted. "And while vampires can't cast spells the way a wizard can, they can do magic. When Orlando and Alain formed their Aveu de Sang, I could feel the moment they became magically bound, and when I explored the brand magically, I could sense the bond between them. I couldn't affect it, but I could tell it was there."

"There may be other options I haven't yet thought of as well," monsieur Lombard interjected. "My library is vast and my memory less than photographic."

"It's the curse of old men," Marcel said with a grin.

"Speak for yourself," monsieur Lombard snapped back. "I am in my prime."

Marcel's smile deepened. "I shall expect you to prove that assertion."

To Martin's surprise, monsieur Lombard chuckled. "It will be my very great pleasure. Gentlemen, if there is nothing else, it would appear I have a challenge to meet."

"No, nothing else," Denis said, rising immediately and pulling Martin with him. "Thank you for your help. You'll let Jean know if you think of anything else that might help us?"

"Of course," monsieur Lombard replied, already heading toward the door by which he had entered, herding Marcel ahead of him. "Mireille will show you out."

"That was...."

"Not what I expected," Denis agreed as they returned to the foyer where Mireille waited to walk them to the door.

She bid them a good evening and shut the door behind them, leaving them alone on the street outside. "It's still early," Martin said. "Do you want to stay in Paris for a while? I haven't actually made it up here since I came to France."

"I suppose we could find a café or something to sit and discuss what we learned," Denis replied.

That had not been quite what Martin had intended, but he let it slide for now. He could bring up more personal topics after they had finished discussing their meeting with monsieur Lombard.

They wandered off l'île St-Louis and down the rue St-Paul toward the place des Vosges. They found a likely looking bistro, large enough to serve dinner but not so large that it was crowded, and took a table in the back. To Martin's surprise, Denis ordered a meal as well.

"I thought vampires couldn't eat regular food," he said when the server had left.

"It doesn't do anything for us," Denis said, "but it doesn't hurt us either. I often ate with Noël so we could go out together. Everyone was more comfortable that way, me included. It's no hardship to do so now."

"You must have loved him very much."

"I did," Denis agreed. "I do. He'd fuss at me for being here with you and talking about him. He was never one to live in the past or the future. For him, only the present moment mattered. It was one of the things I loved about him. If he could speak with me now, I know he'd tell me he's been gone thirty years and that's long enough, that it's time to let him go, but that's easier said than done."

"And yet what is the alternative?" Martin asked seriously. "Decades or even centuries alone with anonymous encounters to see to your needs? Is it worth passing up a new companion out of devotion to someone who would give his blessing if he could?"

"By new companion, you mean yourself," Denis guessed.

Martin shrugged. "There would certainly be benefits to it for both of us."

"I didn't get 'benefits' from my relationship with Noël," Denis retorted. "I got a long, genuine love affair. If all you're offering is a business arrangement, just say so, but leave Noël out of it."

"I don't know what I'm proposing," Martin replied honestly. "We work well professionally. We've established that already. Maybe I'd

like a chance to see if we could work well together personally as well. Would it be so awful to spend some time with me talking about something other than whoever turned Pascale?"

"What about your sabbatical?" Denis asked. "What about your plans to return home?"

"Plans can change," Martin said with a shrug. "With the right incentive. I'm not suggesting you bite me tonight. I'm not ready for that, and you clearly aren't either. I just thought we could do things together. Dinner, a movie, dancing. Other things. Things couples do when they're trying to figure out if they can make it."

Denis nodded slowly. His body's betrayal last night had proven he found Martin attractive enough to consider a personal relationship. As with his vampire instincts, which urged him to pull the man into a dark corner and leave a mark on him no one would misunderstand, Denis would not allow his base desires to rule him, but he could have dinner with an attractive man without jumping him afterward. He could see a movie or even go dancing without it having to turn into something more. He *would* stay in control.

## Chapter 18

THREE days later, Adèle sat outside Pascale's house, waiting for the sun to drop far enough for the vampire to be able to open the door. She could have cast a displacement spell, but that seemed presumptuous given the relative formality of their partnership at the moment. She would not do to Pascale what Jude had done to her, showing up unannounced and unwelcome, demanding what he needed with no regard to her feelings on the matter. Not that she expected Pascale to refuse to feed if Adèle offered, but she would at least respect Pascale's home and not pop in without permission.

Seeing the sun fall beyond the tree line, Adèle climbed out of her car and knocked on Pascale's door. A minute later, Pascale opened it, gesturing for Adèle to come in as she spoke into the phone.

"Sorry, the doorbell just rang. What time did you want to meet?"

Adèle frowned as Pascale continued talking. She stuffed her keys in her jacket pocket and took it off, tossing it over the back of the couch.

"Yes, I should be done with this by then. I'll meet you around ten then." Pascale paused again, listening to the person on the other end of the line. "I can't wait to see you too. I'll call if I get away early. See you soon."

Adèle's frown deepened as Pascale hung up the phone. "Sorry about that. You're earlier than I expected."

"I can come back if it's a problem," Adèle offered.

"Not at all," Pascale replied. "I'm meeting a... friend tonight, so this suits me fine. I was going to take a shower before you got here so I'd be ready to go when we were finished, but this way I can feed quickly and then get ready without feeling rushed."

"Someone from work?" Adèle asked, curious despite herself.

"No," Pascale said, gesturing for Adèle to take a seat on the couch. "A woman from Dommartin. I met her when I went to the branch of Sang Froid there while I was at the seminar last week. We hit it off,

and, well... just because I'm feeding from you now doesn't mean I shouldn't have a life of my own."

"Of course not," Adèle replied automatically, everything inside her clenching at the thought of Pascale feeding from her only to leave soon thereafter for a date. Pascale was *her* partner, not this other woman's.

The vehemence of the thought shocked her. She had insisted from the moment she learned of Jude's demise that she did not want another partner. She had avoided telling anyone when she realized Pascale had the potential to be her partner. She had even refused to discuss a partnership with Pascale at first. Yet only a few days after letting Pascale feed for the first time, she was already feeling possessive. It had to stop.

"We should get this over with so you can meet your friend." The words tasted bitter in her throat, but she forced them out nonetheless. She and Pascale had agreed on a certain plan of action, and she would not be the one to violate that.

Pascale reached for Adèle's arm, the opposite one from the last time she had fed. Adèle let Pascale pull it to her lips, her tongue flicking over the skin in preparation. As had happened the first time Pascale fed, Adèle felt her body react to the teasing touch. She reminded herself Pascale was simply trying to keep from hurting her, but it made no difference in the way her skin tightened and her stomach clenched. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to relax. She had learned the hard way with Jude that fighting the sensation of the fangs sliding beneath her skin only made it hurt worse. Unlike with Jude, she did not need to fight Pascale. The vampire had a date with someone else. She would not be looking to Adèle for sex to go along with her feeding.

The thought sent bile rising up her throat. She looked at the blonde head bent over her arm, fangs in her wrist now as Pascale sucked carefully on her skin, drawing blood into her mouth. Adèle tried to imagine the woman Pascale would be meeting, but she had no idea what her partner's preferences were where a lover was concerned. Would she even consider Adèle attractive as a lover instead of a partner?

With a shake of her head, Adèle forced her thoughts away from those dangerous waters. She did not want to be Pascale's lover. She wanted a man in her life, not a woman who went into hysterics at the first sign of an emergency.

*Not a woman who cared for you when you were sick?* her conscience prodded.

Tensing more, Adèle shifted restlessly on the couch. Immediately Pascale disengaged. “Am I hurting you?”

“No, I’m fine,” Adèle said.

“Are you sure? The taste of your blood changed suddenly, like something was wrong,” Pascale said. “I can’t pick apart all the flavors the way a more experienced vampire can, but I can tell when something changes.”

“I said I’m fine,” Adèle snapped. “Did you take enough, or do you need more?”

“You don’t have to be churlish about it,” Pascale snapped back. “I know it’s a pain having to come here, but you agreed to this too.”

“I didn’t say anything about it being a pain,” Adèle retorted. “Don’t read things into my words that aren’t there.”

“Then tell me what’s wrong,” Pascale demanded.

“Nothing you can do anything about,” Adèle said tightly. “Finish feeding so you can get ready for your date and I can get back to my life.”

“I didn’t say it was a date.”

“You didn’t say it wasn’t,” Adèle replied.

“Now who’s jumping to conclusions?”

“I heard the way you were talking to your ‘friend’ on the phone,” Adèle said. “You don’t talk to friends that way. You were flirting. So you’ve got some trick on the side. There’s no reason to deny it. It’s not like we made any promises to each other outside feeding a few times a week.”

“Because you couldn’t deal with the idea of being with a woman,” Pascale reminded her. “So don’t go acting jealous now because I found someone else. It’s not my fault you’re too insecure to consider other paths than the one you’ve always followed.”

“Insecure?” Adèle roared. “Why, you little—”

“Little what?” Pascale demanded, her voice rising in turn. “Little bitch? Maybe I am, but if so, it’s because you’re being completely irrational. I think you should leave now before we both say something we’ll regret.”

“Did you take enough?”

“What do you care?” Pascale shouted. “You don’t want me for anything other than the magical boost you get from my feeding.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” Adèle said helplessly. “Just because I like men, that doesn’t mean I want you to get hurt.”

“I can take care of myself,” Pascale said. “The door is behind you. You can show yourself out. I have a date to get ready for.”

She stormed out of the room before Adèle could stop her.

“Merde alors,” Adèle muttered as an interior door slammed shut. She could go after Pascale, try to talk through what had just happened rationally, but she was not feeling terribly rational at the moment, and from the continued sound of slamming doors, Pascale was in no better shape. Perhaps it would be better to leave and calm down before trying to talk to her partner. She could take a couple of days and sort through her feelings to decide what had happened tonight. Once she understood that, they could renegotiate if necessary. Either way, they would avoid a repeat of tonight’s uncomfortable scene.

Pulling on her coat, she returned to her car after casting a quick spell on the outer door to keep anyone from opening it from the outside, since Pascale had not come down to lock it behind her. Adèle might be pissed as hell at her partner at the moment, but she did not want anything to happen to her either.

Too worked up to go home and sleep, she debated her options. She could drop her car off at home and cast a displacement spell to go to Dijon or even to Paris. She could find a club where no one would care who she was and find a man to fuck. It would be mindless sex, but as worked up as she was, that was probably what she needed. Something to remind her what she liked about men and all the reasons why she could not possibly enjoy having a woman as a partner in any more than the magical sense of the word. Even if she had a few drinks, she would still be able to get home. The displacement spell came so naturally that she could manage it even when everything else was beyond her. She could get drunk, screw around, and be home no worse for the wear. If she stayed at home, she would end up imagining Pascale with her date, and that was simply unacceptable.

Yes, she would do that. Maybe Magali would even like to go with her.

Smiling again, she drove home and called the other wizard to suggest an evening out.

"I'm sorry, Adèle," Magali said. "I promised Luc I would stay home tonight. It's been five days since he fed from me, and he's getting restless cooped up in the house during the day. We could go tomorrow night."

"Don't worry about it," Adèle said. "Enjoy your time with your partner. We'll try again some other time."

"Be careful," Magali cautioned. "It's not safe to go out alone, even for a wizard."

"I'll be careful," Adèle said. "I'll call Catherine or Marie or someone to go with me. It's not like we don't have plenty of friends in Paris."

UNEXPECTEDLY eager, Martin popped into the courtyard of Denis's building. He had offered to arrange for someone to send Denis to Paris so they could go out there, but Denis had insisted they were not going on business for l'Institut or l'ANS and so they should not impose on the generosity of the other wizards. They could drive to Dijon in an hour and have plenty of options for a night out. Restaurants, movie theaters, clubs, whatever they decided they felt like doing, Dijon had, if not as many choices as Paris, certainly enough for them to find something they could agree on.

Martin had agreed because he could see Denis's point. He was not sure he shared the opinion in the sense that he would not have been asking l'Institut or l'ANS but Raymond, who he now considered a friend. It was not worth arguing over, though. They could use the time in the car on the way to Dijon to talk and decide what they wanted to do for the evening as well as discuss other things. In the two days since their dinner in Paris, Martin had discovered an insatiable need to know everything he could about Denis. After they agreed to give a personal relationship a chance, conversation had turned to what they had learned from monsieur Lombard and Général Chavinier.

It was not the conversation Martin wanted to have, but that had not changed the necessity of their situation. Not that they had come to any firm conclusions. The two men's suggestions coincided with ideas they had already discussed, so unless monsieur Lombard came up with something else from the depths of his library, they would have to hope



they found any new victims before they fed or before any other wizard cast a spell on them for whatever reason.

Martin rang the bell to Denis's apartment, waiting for the vampire to buzz him in. He hoped Denis would invite him in so he could see where his partner lived. The courtyard was typical of what he had seen since coming to France, a small open area surrounded by the walls of the square building. A few hardy flowers hung on in the protective shadows of the building, their color not yet faded by the change of seasons. As welcoming as the courtyard was, Martin really wanted to see Denis's apartment, since the courtyard was almost certainly maintained by the concierge rather than by the building's denizens. Denis's apartment itself would be a far more interesting testament to the man himself.

The door opened moments later and Denis stepped out into the courtyard, dashing Martin's hopes of seeing his apartment. "Shall we go? The sooner we get to Dijon, the more options we will have for our evening."

Martin agreed and followed Denis to his car, a little two-door Peugeot that barely looked big enough to hold four people. Then again, Martin wondered how often Denis had even a single passenger, much less three. Martin waited until they were out of Autun on the country roads before beginning a conversation. "So did you have something you wanted to do tonight?"

"Nothing in particular," Denis replied. "I imagine you'll want dinner. There are a couple of outstanding restaurants in Dijon and a plethora of good ones, so we have our choice depending on how much time and money we want to spend there. There are also several movie theaters and quite a few clubs or cafés where we could enjoy each other's company."

"I have no idea what's showing as far as movies go," Martin said, "and honestly I'd rather spend the time being with you than watching a movie screen. Other than seeing if we have the same tastes in film, I don't see how sitting in a dark theater for three hours helps us get better acquainted."

"That's fine with me," Denis replied. "I enjoy the cinema because it's a chance for me to see and experience so many things that are otherwise denied to me because of my vampire nature, but there is a movie theater in Autun, so I hardly need to drive into Dijon for that. A café, then, or would you rather go dancing?"

Martin was tempted by the idea of getting his hands on Denis as they danced, but a club would probably be crowded and noisy, precluding much in the way of conversation. "Why don't we have dinner and then see what time it is?" he proposed. "If it's still early, we can find a café that stays open late and sit there to talk. If not, maybe we could go back to your place and talk there."

"We could have stayed in Autun for that," Denis said with a chuckle. "Is there a reason we're driving an hour each way to Dijon?"

"Because you suggested it," Martin replied. "I don't know either city except from casual comments people have made. Raymond and Jean always turn toward Paris when they need anything they can't find in Dommartin, so I have very little sense of what either town has to offer."

"Autun is small, but we have our share of good restaurants, and if we aren't going to take advantage of Dijon's clubs or cinemas, we'd save time and gas eating in one of them."

"Let's turn around," Martin agreed. "We're not that far from town yet, certainly not far enough to make it simpler to go on."

"Are you sure?" Denis asked. "I wanted... well, I wanted to do something nice, since this is our first date and all, and the restaurants in Autun are good, but they aren't the same caliber as the ones in Dijon and—"

"And you don't need to take me to fancy restaurants to impress me," Martin interrupted. "The idea is to spend time with you, not go to fancy places."

The charmed smile on Denis's face made Martin glad of his answer. At the next wide spot in the road, Denis turned the car around, heading back to Autun. "It would be easier to leave the car at my apartment and simply walk to the restaurant, if you don't mind."

"Walking is fine," Martin replied. "I rarely drove anywhere in Montréal either. I'd take the subway or the buses and then walk. It was far easier than finding parking. Or if public transportation wasn't convenient, I'd use a displacement spell."

"Why not just always use a spell?" Denis asked curiously. "It seems like it would be easier."

"Because doing magic uses up a lot of energy," Martin explained. "Yes, I can do it, and in a pinch, I can do a lot of it, but it takes a toll. That's why the lure of greater magical strength is so strong for wizards,

especially those who use a lot of magic in their jobs. Not coming home from a day of work completely exhausted, only to have to turn around and do it again tomorrow, is a wonderful thing.”

“I guess I never thought of it that way,” Denis replied.

“There’s no reason you should have,” Martin assured him. “You haven’t had a partner, and you aren’t around wizards on a regular basis to have picked that up from conversation. It’s one of those things we all know and live with, so it’s not like we need to comment on it unless it’s been a particularly exhausting day, and even then, other wizards understand it without it even being mentioned. So what are our dinner choices?”

“In Autun, we’re pretty much limited to French country fare,” Denis warned. “I hope that’s all right.”

“It’s fine,” Martin said. “I love French food. Are there local specialties I should try?”

“Bœuf bourgignon,” Denis said immediately, “and of course a good bottle of Burgundy to go with it. There are regional cheeses and other specialties as well. The menus tend to vary from season to season and even night to night depending on what the chef can find fresh that day.”

“Sounds perfect,” Martin said. “I can’t wait.”

Dinner finished, Martin insisted on paying, since Denis had no need to eat. Denis had started to argue, but Martin refused to listen. “You can pay next time,” Martin said, knowing he would say the same thing every time they ate dinner together.

It had been an interesting experience, coming into the restaurant where Denis was clearly well known, at least to the owner. The man had shaken Denis’s hand, asked how he was doing, and chatted with him like a long-lost brother. When they were seated, he had brought Martin a menu, but not one for Denis, much to Martin’s surprise. Once Martin had ordered, Denis explained he had come here often with Noël and how the current owner had been a child and then a teenager, working in what had been his father’s restaurant at the time. Over the course of years, Noël had aged, but Denis had not, prompting an explanation. The owners had not kicked him out, much to his surprise, and now he came here any time he dined with a mortal because he did not have to hide his nature from the owners or spend money on food he

did not need simply so he could maintain appearances. In Paris, where he was unknown, it made sense that he would protect himself, but Martin found the confidence implicit in the decision not to order a real turn-on.

As the meal went on, Martin noticed the occasional glance from other patrons at Denis's empty setting while Martin dined on escargots, bœuf bourgignon, and fresh local cheeses, but for the most part, everyone minded their own business, leaving Denis and Martin to talk in peace. The empty table space had been a constant reminder of a different sort for Martin, the reminder that Denis could not seek sustenance anywhere but in the blood of a mortal, a service Martin might provide someday soon. The thought did nothing for his equilibrium.

The dispute over the check finally settled, they left the restaurant, walking back toward Denis's apartment. "Do you want to take a tour of town?" Denis asked.

"Maybe another night when it isn't quite so cold?" Martin said, shivering slightly as the breeze picked up and swirled up his pants legs. "I'm not dressed for a nighttime stroll."

"Then I'll just point out anything of interest we pass on the way back to my apartment," Denis agreed.

He led Martin through the narrow streets, pointing out the cathédrale St. Lazare as they passed. "It was built in the twelfth century," Denis explained, not pausing in their progress as he gave Martin a little history of the church. "Originally it was the chapel of the dukes of Burgundy, before they moved their palace to Dijon. It's one of the best examples of Romanesque architecture you'll see in the area."

"It's beautiful," Martin said. "I'll have to come back during the day so I can explore the inside."

"It's worth the visit," Denis agreed. "I haven't been inside during the day since I was a boy, obviously, but I remember even now, and I've visited at night since then. We had Noël's funeral Mass there."

"He was everything to you, wasn't he?" Martin asked, wondering if he was making a mistake thinking about having a relationship with a man who was so obviously still in love with his deceased lover.

"Yes," Denis replied honestly, "but he's been gone thirty years. Maybe it's time to move on."

"With me?" Martin asked.

"I think so," Denis said. "Slowly still. I don't know that I'm ready to feed from you yet, with all that entails, but I've enjoyed our time together more than I thought I could anymore. I thought that part of me had died with Noël. It hurts to wake it up, like when your foot falls asleep and it hurts to walk on it afterward."

"It's the feeding that bothers you most, isn't it?" Martin asked.

Denis nodded as he unlocked the door to the apartment building, gesturing for Martin to go inside. "Sex doesn't have to mean anything," Denis said, struggling to find the words to explain. "A physical release, nothing more. Feeding, on the other hand, is never completely impersonal." He led Martin up the stairs to his apartment. "It might be anonymous in the sense that I don't know the person's name, or it might be a paid transaction if I go to Sang Froid or somewhere like that, but it is never impersonal because I can taste so much of the other person in his or her blood. The only thing more intimate a vampire can do is to have sex while feeding. And adding the fact that feeding from you would not only be the incredibly intimate experience it always is, but would also set in motion a magical reaction that would bind us together pretty much for the rest of your life, makes it even more daunting."

Martin used the excuse of looking around Denis's apartment to give himself a moment to digest that information. Somehow he had imagined that Denis's hesitation stemmed, as his own had, from the sexual component many partnerships included. It had only now occurred to him where the true intimacy lay. "Nice place," he said, looking around the small apartment. The living room was warm and welcoming, an agreeable change to the wind outside. The furniture showed definite signs of wear along one arm of the couch and the ottoman next to one of the armchairs. Martin deliberately chose a different seat, not wanting to take Denis's favorite spot.

"Thank you," Denis said. "I moved in here after Noël died. I couldn't deal with staying in the house we had shared, and I didn't really need all that space either. Not for just me."

"Isn't it funny how two people take up more than twice the space of one person?" Martin asked. "Even if they share a bed, they just seem to need more room."

"They might share a bed, but they each need their own space," Denis agreed, "so while two roommates might get away with a two-bedroom apartment, a couple needs three so each has his or her own

room as well as the bedroom they share.” He joined Martin on the couch, sitting not in his usual spot, but close enough to Martin that their thighs touched. Martin’s breath caught in his throat as he looked into the vampire’s brown eyes, searching for some sense of what the other man was thinking.

Denis answered his question, lifting his hand to Martin’s cheek and tilting his head so their lips met. Martin gasped into the kiss. Denis took advantage of the momentary surprise, his tongue darting between Martin’s lips to press his claim. Startled, Martin pulled back. “You don’t kiss like that when it’s just about physical release.”

“No,” Denis admitted, “but I also don’t go out to dinner and spend hours talking about music and movies and everything else under the sun when it’s just about release. I’m not ready to feed from you with all that entails, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready for you to leave.”

“So what are you ready for?” Martin asked.

“That depends in part on you. If you don’t want to stay, I won’t force you,” Denis said.

“That isn’t what I asked,” Martin said. “What are *you* ready for?”

“I’m ready to find out if you look as good out of your clothes as you do in them,” Denis replied, lifting up onto his knees and bearing Martin back with him. “Now’s your chance to say no.”

Martin leaned back against the arm of the couch and pulled Denis’s head down for another kiss.

## Chapter 19

ADÈLE picked absently at the scabs on her wrist as she sat at her desk and stared out the window. In theory she was checking alibis for the vampires she had interviewed so far in connection with Pascale's turning, but she had completely lost her ability to focus on the notes in front of her. Her trip to Paris the evening before had been a complete bust. She had found a club, found a man, and convinced him to give her what she wanted, except that what she thought she wanted had not helped in the least.

The entire time she had been with the man—she had already forgotten his name—she could think of nothing but Pascale, wondering what her partner was doing, who she was with, if she cared about the woman or if it was the same kind of random hook-up as Adèle's. The man had asked when he could see Adèle again. She had declined to give him her number.

He had not been a bad lover, but he was not what she wanted, and therein lay the crux of her problem. She wanted Pascale, and that thought left her with the need to pace. She would never show that kind of weakness in the office where her colleagues could see it, so instead she sat at her desk picking at her wrist. When warm blood met her fingers instead of skin, she cursed under her breath, grabbed her jacket, and called to her boss through the station as she left that she was following up on a lead. The moment she was outside, she drew her wand and displaced herself to l'Institut.

"Where's Thierry?" she demanded of the first person she saw.

"He was working in the chapel the last time I saw him," the gardener answered. "Watch your step if you go in there. He's got the floor all torn up so he can fix something in the foundation."

Adèle crossed the courtyard to the monastery church, stopping in the doorway rather than going inside. As the gardener had warned, the floor was torn up in places, stones displaced in no pattern visible to her, but she had no doubt there was method to Thierry's madness. She had seen l'Institut before he started overseeing the repairs. He had done

amazing work in less than a year. Other than the one wing they had condemned after an explosion collapsed a large section, he had managed to renovate the entire abbey, the Hostellerie, and the abbot's lodge. The grange and the chapel were all that remained. Looking around, she caught sight of him near the altar, his hands pressed against the stone railing that had separated the clergy from the faithful when the chapel was still in use. She would not have blinked at him doing magic, but the sight of the slender man behind him, face buried against Thierry's neck, only added to the disconcertion she was feeling. She could not see Sebastien's fangs in Thierry's skin, but she could imagine it with uncomfortable ease, the long canines driving deep beneath the surface, seeking blood and increasing Thierry's magical strength exponentially. Her magic sparked around her, little goutts of flame, as she struggled to control the longing she felt at the sight of them, not only for the magical connection but for the tender strength of Sebastien's arms supporting Thierry's body as they worked. Even with Thierry's affinity to earth and his partner's help, the work he was doing had to be incredibly draining, but Adèle knew Thierry would not falter. Sebastien was there to make sure of it.

She cleared her throat, not wanting to speak and shatter the disturbing beauty of the sight. Sebastien lifted his head at the sound, acknowledging her with a nod before leaning back into Thierry. Adèle easily imagined him licking over the marks created by his fangs, staunching the bleeding and bringing Thierry back out of his elemental connection with the stones beneath his hands. She waited mostly patiently for Thierry to finish, to regain his external awareness, and to find his feet again without Sebastien's support.

Thierry turned in Sebastien's arms, his fingers stroking the vampire's cheek before he pulled away and walked toward Adèle. The unbearable intimacy in that gesture nearly sent her running for the hills. She ached with the conflicting needs warring inside her to maintain her independence and protect herself and to give in to her inexplicable desire to have Pascale look at her the way Sebastien looked at Thierry.

"I wasn't expecting you today, Adèle," Thierry said, kissing her cheeks in greeting. "Has there been another attack? Raymond and Jean are around somewhere."

"No, nothing like that," Adèle said, her voice terse as she struggled with the words that would not come. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

"All right. Let me just tell Sebastien where I'm going."



She waited while he returned down the nave to where Sebastien still stood. She could not hear the words that passed between them, but she did not need words to see the obvious affection in the way they leaned together, their shoulders nearly touching. A moment later, Thierry rejoined her at the back of the church. "We can go down by the lake if you want," Thierry suggested. "The sun's out today, and the wind seems to have stopped for the moment. It won't be warm, but it could be pleasant."

Adèle would have preferred an inside location where they could lock the door and ensure no one disturbed them, but she did not argue, following Thierry down to the edge of the lake that bordered one side of l'Institut's property.

"So what can I do for you?" Thierry asked when they had settled on a decorative wooden bench.

Adèle suddenly had no idea how to verbalize the feelings rushing through her. She rose from the bench, too wound up to sit still. "I found a new partner," she began, almost defensively.

"Yes, I'd heard that," Thierry said. "Raymond was glad to know it was possible. I know your first partnership wasn't exactly successful."

Adèle snorted. "You could say that. A nightmare would be a good way to describe it. I know nobody else understands it, but I certainly didn't cry when he was killed. I wouldn't have done it myself, tempting though the thought was at times, but I'm not sorry to be rid of the bastard."

"You know most partnerships aren't that way," Thierry reminded her. "For most of us, it's a wonderful thing. Hopefully, Pascale will be a better match for you."

Adèle hoped so too, which was part of the problem. "She'd be a better match if she were a he," Adèle muttered. "Doesn't it bother you that Sebastien is a man?"

The words resonated far too deeply with Thierry's early fears for his comfort. Taking refuge in sarcasm, he grinned. "It would be awfully hard for him to pound me into the mattress if he weren't."

"But you were married. You were straight," Adèle protested.

"I was," Thierry agreed. "Then I met Sebastien. Now I'm not. Not that it's any of your business."

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Adèle asked. “You met a vampire, he bit you a few times, and suddenly everything you think you know about your sexuality has changed.”

“You’re making this into a bigger deal than it is,” Thierry said, trying to remember what Alain had said to him when he expressed some of the same fears. “Attraction isn’t logical, and it isn’t predictable. Some men appeal to you and some don’t, right?”

“Of course,” Adèle said. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It has everything to do with this,” Thierry insisted. “Being with Sebastien isn’t about being gay or being bi or any other label. It’s about being with Sebastien. I’m not attracted to men. I’m attracted to him. Okay, the first few times we had sex, I had some things to learn and some awkward moments, but I had those the first few times I had sex with a woman too. We fit together on so many levels that his gender isn’t even an issue anymore.”

“So you’re saying I’m obsessing over nothing?”

“Look, I know it can be unsettling,” honesty compelled Thierry to admit. “I had a long talk with Alain about it too. He reminded me there’s no such thing as a love potion. A Forçage spell could push you into your partner’s bed, but it can’t make you feel anything while you’re there. If you’re attracted to your partner, you’re attracted to her—you, not some exterior magical force. Maybe you wouldn’t have given her a second look without the possibility of a partnership drawing your attention back to her, but nobody cast a spell on you to make you attracted to her. It doesn’t work that way, and if you’d take a step back and think about it rationally, you’d know that.”

“So you think I should stop fighting it and sleep with her?” Adèle asked.

“What are you fighting?” Thierry asked in reply.

“The sense that this is inevitable,” Adèle admitted.

“That’s not the right way to look at it,” Thierry insisted. “Yes, feeding creates intimacy. There’s no way around that, and repeated feeding creates even more intimacy, but that momentary intimacy doesn’t have to take over your life. So if you feel like it’s inevitable, maybe what you’re really doing is fighting yourself. If that’s the case, then you have to ask yourself why and if it’s really worth it. You know

no one in the magical community would criticize you for having a female partner.”

“I don’t work in the magical community,” Adèle reminded him, “and no, I’m not sure my colleagues would have a problem with it, but it’s one more thing that makes me different.”

“If any of them say anything, you can always remind them you’re the one who caught and kept the blonde bombshell, not them,” Thierry said. “That’ll shut them up fast.”

Adèle laughed despite herself. “Oh, God, they would have no idea how to respond to that.”

“You don’t have to rush into anything,” Thierry said, still smiling, “but don’t let something good pass you by because you’re too caught up in meaningless labels to grab it—or her—with both hands.”

“Thank you, Thierry,” Adèle said when she finally stopped laughing. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Marcel told you not to bury yourself out here in the country,” Thierry said, “although I don’t think he intended for all of us to come out here and keep you company. You aren’t alone with any of this, no matter how it might feel to you sometimes. I know you haven’t come more often because of Raymond’s meddling, but you don’t have to worry about that anymore. No matter what happens with your partner, we want to see you still.”

“I’ll still come for dinner,” Adèle promised. “Maybe not on Sundays so I’m not in the way for the matching ceremony, but I’ll still come.”

“There’s always room for one more. Now I should get back to work, unless there was something else?”

“No, nothing else,” Adèle said, embracing Thierry on impulse. “Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome.”

Thierry left her sitting on the bench and walked back to the chapel to see if Sebastien was still there. The building was empty, though, so Thierry crossed the courtyard to the Hostellerie. He found Sebastien sitting in the rooms they shared, a magazine open on his lap.

“Is Adèle all right?”

“She’s fine. A little freaked out over having a female partner,” Thierry replied. “For as strong and attractive a woman as she is, she has

an incredible number of insecurities. That's why I never approached her, even before I got together with Aleth."

The reminder of Thierry's late wife and of his staunch heterosexuality prior to meeting Sebastien brought back insecurities Sebastien thought he had laid to rest two years earlier. "Do you ever wish you had a different partner?"

"What?" Thierry exclaimed. "Sebastien, I love you. How many times have I told you that?"

"Too many to count," Sebastien replied, "but you would have had an easier time with a female partner."

"If Aleth was right, no woman would put up with me," Thierry retorted. "You've told me more than once that being turned didn't change your fundamental nature, so a female vampire wouldn't have any more patience with me than Aleth had. Believe me, I'm perfectly happy having you as my partner. I told Adèle and I'll tell you, there's no such thing as a love potion. If I'm here in your bed, getting off when you touch me, it's because I want to be here, because I love you, not because some magical resonance says my blood can protect you. You know that. You taste my desire and my love every time you feed from me, even if we're working rather than making love. I *know* you do."

"I do," Sebastien agreed, pulling Thierry into his arms. "And most of the time I don't even think about the fact that you were married before. She was already gone when we met, so it's not like she was any obstacle to our relationship, but hearing you talk so casually about being attracted to women threw me."

"I'm in love with you," Thierry said, "but that doesn't make me blind. I can look at Adèle and acknowledge that she's beautiful without needing to do anything about it. I spent the entire time she and I were talking about relationships wondering how soon I could come back here and make love with you. Believe me, I'm where I want to be."

Sebastien looked like he wanted to keep arguing, so Thierry silenced him the best way he knew how. He kissed him.

And kept kissing him until Sebastien relaxed backward onto the couch. And then kissed him some more, his hands flying over his lover's body, pushing clothes out of the way until he could find skin. Once he found it, he slowed down the frantic rush, lingering over the body beneath his, especially the attributes that marked Sebastien as male. He stroked the flat planes of Sebastien's chest, teasing at his

nipples until the vampire moaned into their kiss. "No woman has muscles like these," he said, kissing his way down Sebastien's neck to his chest.

"No, they have breasts instead," Sebastien joked.

"I like your muscles," Thierry declared, nipping at Sebastien's collarbone. "I don't have to worry about being gentle enough when I touch you. You always want more even when I forget to be tender."

"I want all of you," Sebastien agreed. "Rough or tender, as long as you're touching me I'm happy."

Thierry nuzzled Sebastien's chest. "I feel the same way. You have to know that. Tell me you know that."

"I know it," Sebastien promised. "I just get... insecure sometimes."

"Then let's see if I can reassure you," Thierry purred, pushing back enough to strip Sebastien's shirt from his shoulders. He tossed it aside, followed quickly by his own sweater and undershirt.

"I'm sure you can," Sebastien replied, his hands settling on Thierry's hips. "I love you."

"I love you too," Thierry said, scooting backward and opening Sebastien's pants. He lowered his head and nuzzled the vampire's erection through the cloth, inhaling the musky scent. "No woman smells the way you do either. My mouth waters every time I catch a whiff of you."

"God, Thierry, are you trying to kill me?" Sebastien demanded, the husky words adding to his desire.

"No, just make love to you."

"Then get on with it already."

Thierry chuckled as he shook his head, peeling Sebastien's underwear away so he could lick around the tip of Sebastien's cock. "Still think I'd rather be with a woman?" Thierry teased, sliding his lips over the crown and working his tongue beneath the foreskin.

Sebastien moaned in reply.

Thierry accepted that as agreement, settling in to lick and suck at his lover's erection like a favorite treat, moaning his appreciation each time a fresh spurt of fluid hit his tongue. He could tell Sebastien was trying to hold back, but he only sucked harder, determined to crack his lover's control. Finally Sebastien's hips drove up, pushing his cock deep into Thierry's mouth. Thierry swallowed around the tip once and

then pulled off. "As much as I love blowing you, that isn't how I want us to come tonight," he rasped. "*Retrouvez!*"

The spell that would have been impossible for him without a wand two years ago flowed easily now, the tube of lube from their bedroom appearing in his hand. He set it aside momentarily while he finished undressing his lover and himself. Done with patience and waiting, he prepped himself quickly before coating Sebastien's cock and settling down onto it. The stretch burned slightly, but he relished the sensation, proof of their connection. "No woman ever filled me the way you do."

"Stop talking," Sebastien ordered, pulling Thierry down into another incendiary kiss.

Thierry acceded to the kiss and the demand, his hips undulating slowly against Sebastien's, not really lifting and falling so much as grinding together in a languid, erotic lap dance designed to drive them both wild. Sebastien's tongue invaded his mouth, kissing him wildly as Thierry kept their movements slow and controlled. He ached to feel Sebastien's fangs piercing his flesh as well, but without an Aveu de Sang to protect him from overfeeding, he would have to wait at least a day, given how much Sebastien had taken in the church. Then again, maybe it was better this way. His offer of his body was not motivated by anything other than love and desire, not even by the partnership bond that sometimes seemed to dominate every aspect of their lives together.

The need to move grew harder to ignore, and his crouched position on the couch gave him little leverage. Dropping a foot to the cold stone floor, he lifted his hips, increasing his range of movement. Beneath him Sebastien moaned again, more loudly this time, his body in the same throes of ecstasy as Thierry's. They strained together, bodies arching and sliding as their hips moved, their lips never parting.

Thierry could feel his magic coalesce around him as the intensity of his need increased, more proof of the power of his devotion. When Sebastien angled his hips so his cock passed directly over Thierry's gland, Thierry lost control of his magic, the energy pouring out of him into the stone floor beneath his feet. As his orgasm continued to shake him like a rag doll, the outpouring of magic sent a tremor through the very bones of the building.

"What was that?" Sebastien gasped, breaking their kiss.

"Proof of how much I love you," Thierry joked. "That's what you call an earth-shaking climax."

Sebastien chuckled as he thrust up into Thierry once more, his own release overtaking him.

“Merde,” Thierry said on a deep breath as he felt Sebastien come inside him, coating his passage. “No woman—”

“Enough about women,” Sebastien interrupted. “I get it. You love me regardless of your past history. I’m sorry I let old insecurities get the better of me.”

“I’m glad you trusted me enough to tell me what was on your mind,” Thierry insisted. “I know how hard it is to admit to things like that.”

“This isn’t the first time it’s been an issue,” Sebastien explained. “More than once, I thought I’d found someone I could trust after Thibaut died, someone I could be with for a short time at least as comfort against the bleakness. And in every case since Thibaut’s death, the men I thought I could trust have left me for a woman. When you came in tonight talking about Adèle being attractive, my reaction had nothing to do with you and everything to do with having been burned in the past.”

“And with me having been married, you already knew I ‘preferred’ women before I met you,” Thierry finished. “I promise no one, woman or man, will ever take my interest away from you. I am yours for as long as I live, until age and infirmity make me useless to you.”

“You will never be useless to me,” Sebastien swore. “Even if it reaches a point where I have to feed from someone else because you cannot sustain me anymore, you will not be useless to me. I’m not with you because you let me bite you. I’m with you because I love you.”

“I love you too.”

## Chapter 20

MARTIN stared down at the notes he had taken in the margins of the seminar materials, thoughts, questions, highlighted phrases, anything to jog his memory later about elements of the partnership bond that caught his attention. When he had taken the notes, he had not known about Denis, about the partnership that might exist between them. At the time, it had been an intellectual curiosity, something to study and pick apart, not something to live.

Now if only he were actually living it instead of flirting around the edges of it.

He had enjoyed his date with Denis immensely. Dinner had been delicious, the conversation enjoyable, the list of similar interests far longer than their differences. They worked well together when the opportunity presented itself. The chemistry between them was explosive.

They had all the makings of a solid foundation for a partnership, far more than most of the pairs that had formed during *l'émeute des Sorciers*. Yet Denis had declined to bite him last night, and Martin did not know why.

He knew the reasons Denis gave aloud, but none of them, even the collection of them, seemed like a good enough rationale to ignore what was building between them. Denis had talked about sex being easy, and it had certainly felt easy enough when his cock slid down Denis's throat last night, but even that seemed off somehow, like Denis was using sex to deflect Martin's attention from something else. What, Martin had no idea, but something important.

With a sigh, he looked back down at his notes, trying to decide what problem he could work on to good effect for himself, for *l'Institut*, and for all the paired wizards and vampires.

He had made it halfway through his notes, condensing them into a list of problems, when a knock at his office door interrupted him.



“Denis, I didn’t expect to see you before this evening,” Martin said when he looked up and saw who was standing at his door. “Wait, how are you here?”

“I asked Raymond to bring me,” Denis explained. “Inside to inside, where there was no danger. I needed to see you.”

“You could have called me,” Martin said. “I would have come to you.”

“I know,” Denis said, “but after last night, I wasn’t sure I trusted myself to have you in my apartment again so soon.”

That addressed one of Martin’s concerns. No matter how oddly the evening had ended, Denis had been as affected by it as Martin had been. “You’re certainly welcome here at any time. Let me just close the volets so you can come inside.”

Denis waited at the door, safely out of the reach of the sunlight, as Martin twisted the knob to release the latches at the top and bottom and pulled open the side-by-side windows. He leaned out and grabbed the volets, fastening the bar across the middle so they would stay shut, before closing the window and latching it once more. “There, all safe. What can I do for you?”

“Mostly, I just wanted to see how you were,” Denis admitted.

“A little unsettled,” Martin replied. “Last night was confusing, to be honest. I mean, we talked about taking things slowly and then we ended up having sex.”

“I’m sorry about that. I shouldn’t have pushed for something you weren’t ready for.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t ready,” Martin said. “I’m a grown man, perfectly capable of saying no, and I don’t remember uttering that word once last night in your apartment, except maybe when you stopped. It just doesn’t add up for me.”

“And you like things to add up.”

“I’m a researcher,” Martin said with a shrug. “It’s what I do.” He gestured to his notes. “Or what I will be doing when I figure out what my subject will be for the year, now that Pierre is no longer around.”

“What are your options?” Denis asked, taking the seat on the opposite side of Martin’s desk. “I mean, I know the unknowns are as numerous as the givens where the partnerships are concerned, but some things are easier to research than others.”

“Definitely,” Martin agreed, relaxing into the routine of talking about work. “I was looking for something quantifiable, something for which there should be an answer. Granted, when magic is involved, the variables are sometimes more complicated than meets the eye, but something like how long the protection from sunlight lasts after a feeding is measurable even if it ends up varying from pair to pair.”

“Right,” Denis said, “and having that quantified, even if you have to give a range depending on other variables, could be very useful for new partners especially. I would imagine Jean or Orlando or Sebastien has a pretty good sense of how long the protection will last after two years even if they can’t count the actual hours or minutes.”

“Either that or they feed so often the protection never fades to begin with,” Martin said with a grin. “Every time I see Thierry, he has what looks like fresh bite marks on his neck. I don’t see them on Raymond quite as often, but they’re definitely there on a regular basis. And I’m quite certain the ones on Alain’s brand never heal.”

“And for an Avoué, that’s saying something,” Denis agreed. “Avoués heal faster than the average blood donor because their vampires always feed from them. It’s one of the perks of the job.”

“So that research question would probably be more for the inexperienced pairs,” Martin went on, “but that’s when it would be most crucial anyway, when the partnership is new enough for the people involved not to know what they’re doing. If a vampire goes outside too long after he last fed from his partner, he runs the risk of ending up like Pierre, and I have no idea if the protection wears off slowly or if it’s suddenly gone, poof, and so’s the vampire.”

“I don’t know about how the protection wears off, but I know how you can test it. I have shutters on all my windows, but occasionally the light will be just right so that a little light gets in. When that happens, I end up with a little burn, like you might get from grabbing a hot pan or if it’s more diffuse light, I end up with an ashy color to my skin until I feed again. You can use those symptoms to determine if the protection is still intact, if that’s what you decide to research,” Denis suggested.

“I’ll have to talk to Raymond,” Martin said, “in case he has something else in mind for me, but yes, I think so. I can start with some of the established pairs. I know not all of them are live-in partners the way the ones at l’Institut full time are. They might be willing to test the time issue more than the ones for whom the partnerships have become a way of life.”

Denis laughed. "You're probably right about that. I don't see Orlando being willing to go long enough between feedings for the protection of Alain's blood to wear off."

"I can advertise for research subjects," Martin said, sharing Denis's grin. "If nothing else, it could offer peace of mind to the people involved. They'll know without a doubt what the limits are after we're done, even if the personal limits vary from pair to pair. I guess I should go find Raymond and ask him what he thinks about it."

"Before you go," Denis said, catching Martin's hand as he rose and started toward the door, "I was hoping you'd have dinner with me again tonight. Sex afterward is purely optional."

Martin chuckled, even as the thought of getting his hands on Denis's body this time had him hardening in his pants. "As long as you let me explore you this time."

Denis's eyes darkened, sending another jolt of lust through Martin. "I think that can be arranged."

"We have"—Martin glanced at the clock—"about two hours until the sun sets. Let's go talk to Raymond, if we can find him safely for you, and then we can spend that time working on my research plan. Once it gets dark, we can go somewhere for dinner and then see what develops."

"THE sun is down."

At the words, Martin looked up sharply from the book he was reading on the influence of repetition on magical strength. "Are you really that in tune with the diurnal cycles?"

"Yes," Denis said. "Even when I'm inside, perfectly safe and away from any source of natural light, I can sense the sun, like ants crawling on my skin. I can ignore it and function as long as I'm out of the light, but I'm always aware of its presence when it's above the horizon."

"Hmm," Martin said. "I wonder if that fades with the partnerships or if the vampires who now move about so freely in the daytime simply ignore it as well. And if it doesn't fade, I wonder if there's anything we could do to mitigate it."

"We can ask Jean when we ask Raymond to send me to Dommartin for dinner," Denis suggested.

Raymond had given his approval to Martin's research project and offered whatever assistance he could in finding volunteers to test the time limits and the different variables. He had also offered to send Denis home, or wherever he needed to go, when he was ready.

"Maybe we should see if he and Jean would like to join us for dinner," Martin said. "That way we can share what we came up with and see if they have any other suggestions."

"Another time," Denis said, taking the book from Martin's hands and putting it back on the shelf. "I have plans for tonight that don't involve research or extra company. We can discuss research with them some other night."

"I might like the sound of that," Martin said, leaning back against the bookshelf. "Are you going to share those plans with me?"

"Maybe," Denis drawled. "What will give me if I tell you?"

Martin tipped his head back slowly, baring his neck. Denis's fangs dropped instantly, the need so urgent he nearly lost control, something he had never done, not even the night he was turned. Forcing down the beast raging for blood, he leaned forward and nuzzled Martin's neck. "You smell good," he murmured. "I like it."

Martin groaned in frustration at the touch that so nearly imitated the bite he desired without actually giving it to him. He started to ask, but Denis's lips covered his, stealing his breath and his brain. The kiss continued, deeper and deeper until Martin swore he could not breathe except through Denis's mouth. He took the liberty now he had not dared to take the first time they kissed, his fingers carding through the silky strands of Denis's black hair, mussing the perfect, slicked-back style. Denis leaned into his hands, rubbing against the attention like a cat, so Martin continued the caress, massaging the vampire's scalp in slow, repetitive circles.

"If you keep that up, we won't be going out tonight," Denis sighed.

"I wouldn't complain," Martin replied, "but we might want to take this somewhere a little more private."

"Your room is right across the courtyard," Denis reminded him. "We can be there in a couple of minutes."

"What are we waiting for?" Martin asked, the need to have Denis naked beneath his hands growing apace.

"Not a thing," Denis said, pulling away so they could retire to Martin's rooms.

They hurried across the courtyard with an urgency no one at l'Institut would have mistaken if anyone had seen them. Fortunately for Martin's peace of mind, they encountered no one in the halls of the abbey or the Hostellerie or in the courtyard. They tumbled into Martin's rooms, a tangle of limbs and clothing as Martin herded Denis through the sitting room into his bedroom. Only there did they slow down, Martin pulling Denis back into an embrace, his hands returning to their obsession with the vampire's hair.

"If I didn't know better, I might think you had a fetish," Denis teased, leaning into the firm caresses.

"If I didn't know better, I might think you shared it," Martin retorted, kissing along the line of Denis's jaw. "You're like a cat having his back scratched. I can practically hear you purring."

"Keep scratching that itch," Denis said. He had taken his ease with various people since Noël had died, but he had never allowed any of them to touch him the way Martin was touching him now. Like they were lovers.

Martin chuckled, spinning them around and bearing Denis down onto the bed. "I can think of a few other itches I'd like to scratch."

"Do tell," Denis teased, his hands mimicking Martin's as they played with the wizard's short, sandy-brown hair.

"You could bite me," Martin said.

"I could," Denis agreed, "but I won't. Not yet."

"Then when?" Martin demanded, pressing Denis into the mattress.

"When you need it as badly as I do," Denis replied, nipping at Martin's skin. "When waiting even a second longer will be more than you can stand."

Martin wanted to protest, but he recognized the tone of Denis's voice. He might not know the vampire all that well yet, but he had already learned to recognize the stubborn stance. He doubted he could want Denis any more strongly than he already did, but he would wait if that was what Denis insisted on. In the meantime, though, he fully intended to make Denis as needy for other things as he was.

Denis was only marginally surprised when Martin did not insist on being bitten. The wizard thought he wanted it, but he had not yet passed the point of no return, and until he did, Denis would keep his fangs to himself. His cock, on the other hand....

He hissed as Martin unbuckled his pants and slid a hand inside, encircling Denis's erection with a firm, cool grip. Lying back this way, letting someone else take the lead, went counter to every instinct Denis possessed, but Denis did not press for the upper hand. He had taken charge the night before, to their mutual pleasure, so tonight he would give that control to Martin. His partner might have accepted his attentions last night, but he had already realized it was not in Martin's nature to passively accept a lover's demands any more than it was in Denis's own nature. They would have to navigate those shoals carefully if they intended to make a relationship work. This was Denis's olive branch. Next time it would be Martin's turn to give.

Denis's fingers dug into the sheets as he lifted his hips, a silent offer for Martin to undress him. Martin tugged at his pants and underwear, pushing them down to Denis's knees without bothering to pull them the rest of the way off. The feeling of being trapped added to Denis's restlessness, but the hot tug of Martin's hand stilled his protest. He could do this. He could lie here and let Martin touch him without rolling the wizard beneath him and burying his cock or his fangs in the other man's body. He could give Martin this time, even if it cost him to stay in control.

The fingers providing a channel for him to fuck were too tempting to ignore, especially when Martin lowered his head and licked across the tip of Denis's cock as he thrust through Martin's grip. Denis groaned, his body already demanding release, but he fought it back, not wanting the moment to end.

He could feel Martin's pulse pounding against his cock, could see it beating in his throat. The need for blood nearly overwhelmed him as he struggled to contain himself, but he refused to give into it. Not yet. Not until he was sure that binding them together magically and permanently was the right choice to make. His body convulsed, his release spurting out of him as if holding back his desire to feed robbed him of his physical control.

Determined to regain the upper hand, he pushed Martin to his back, rising over the wizard and starting to undress him. Martin's hand returned to his head, playing over his hair before tugging his head down toward Martin's neck.

"I said no," Denis reminded him sharply, pulling away.

"You said not until I needed it as badly as you do," Martin countered, reaching for Denis again. "I need it."

Trembling with the desire to take what Martin offered, Denis rose to his feet, straightening his clothes. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?" Martin shouted. "I can see your fangs. You're a tease, that's what you are. A bloody fucking tease. You flirt and hint and even offer, but when it comes time to follow through, you back out."

"You have no idea what you're talking about!" Denis shouted back. "You're asking for things you don't understand because you think it might be fun or arousing or I don't know what. You're playing with fire and don't have the good sense to realize how badly you could get burned. You talk about making an unbreakable commitment with the same ease you talk about falling into bed. Having made a commitment to a lover once, let me tell you there's a world of difference, and that isn't something to do lightly. It isn't something to get over lightly."

"Get out," Martin said softly, his voice tight. "When you're done hiding behind the ghost of your dead lover, you know where to find me."

Denis looked like he wanted to argue, but after a moment, he nodded and turned, leaving Martin alone.

Slumping back against the pillows, Martin cursed under his breath. He was caught in a battle he could never win, because how could he fight a ghost, a man Denis had loved and lost?

Merde.

He would have to wait and hope Denis came back to him.

DENIS snuck through the corridors of the Hostellerie, not wanting anyone to see his disheveled state. He would have to let at least one wizard see him so he could get home, but he hoped to minimize the number of people who noticed him. He had nearly reached the door to the courtyard when it opened and Sebastien came in. "Oh, hello, Denis. I didn't realize you were here," Sebastien said.

"I'm not," Denis muttered. "I was just leaving."

"I didn't see your car. Do I need to find Thierry? He'd be glad to send you home," Sebastien offered. "Or you can come in for a chat, which it looks to me like you need even more than a displacement spell."

"I'm fine," Denis said.

"You don't look fine," Sebastien pressed. "You look halfway between ravished and miserable, and since Martin's rooms are upstairs, I'm guessing it's a little of both."

Denis flushed. "We, euh, we might have had a bit of a disagreement."

Sebastien chuckled. "And out of order with the sex," he surmised. "Come have a drink with me. Thierry will be a few more minutes at least. You can tell me what happened and maybe I can help. Thierry and I have had our share of arguments."

"He doesn't understand what it means to a vampire to feed from someone," Denis blurted out, giving in to the need to talk to someone. "He thinks it's the same as falling into bed with a lover."

Sebastien nodded. "He's equating it to the most intimate act he knows. It's not his fault he's never known anything more than sex. That's his problem. What's yours?"

"I had a lover," Denis said. "I met him the night I was turned. I tasted his blood that night and never wanted anyone else's until he died and I had no choice. He wouldn't let me turn him and he wouldn't let me make him my Avoué, insisting he didn't need that kind of promise between us, that he trusted me not to feed from anyone else even without the magical bond."

"How long ago did he die?" Sebastien asked, his heart aching a little even now when he thought about Thibaut, dead four hundred years ago. Thierry's unfailing presence at his side had eased the constant emptiness he had lived with since then, but nothing could erase it completely.

"Thirty years," Denis said.

Sebastien nodded. "You have to remember they're mortal. For them, thirty years is half a lifetime, certainly half their adult lifetime. Okay, perhaps not for the wizards who live somewhat longer than the average mortal, but even so, it's a large chunk of time to them. Even Thierry, who is as close to me as anyone has been besides my Avoué, doesn't see our relationship the same way I do. He loves me. I know he does, and I trust that love, but it's not the same for him. Our relationship may be the foundation he builds his life on, but he *is* my life. His blood sustains me. Nothing in his experience comes even close to that. If something were to happen to me, like happened to Adèle's



partner, he would grieve—I have no doubt of that—but he would reach a point where he could move on. It's not that easy for vampires, and there's no way to make a mortal understand that."

"So what do I do?" Denis asked.

"You have to decide that for yourself," Sebastien replied, "but the simple answer is you grieve until you're ready to move on. Their timetable, Martin's timetable, for that happening doesn't matter. When you're ready to move on, you'll know it."

"How did you know?"

"When the lure of Thierry's blood grew stronger than my longing for the one I'd lost," Sebastien replied honestly. "Maybe it's the magic in his blood. Maybe it's just the strength of the man himself. I don't really know, but there came a point when I asked myself what I had to lose by being with him, and the answer was nothing. Suddenly, holding onto a ghost wasn't worth it anymore. But it took me four hundred years and thousands of anonymous feedings to reach that point. Martin may not understand if you choose to let this opportunity pass you by, but no vampire who has ever lost a lover will question it. You have to do what's right for you, because once you've formed a partnership, it can't be undone."

## Chapter 21

MORE than a little nervous at what she was about to do, Adèle knocked on the door to Pascale's house. The wizard had spent the past two days mulling over her conversation with Thierry, trying to decide on a course of action. She hated feeling uncertain this way, and that had finally pushed her past her fears. Maybe it would be as big a disaster as her relationship with Jude had been, but maybe, just maybe, she would get lucky this time and find a partnership that could sustain her rather than drain her.

She summoned a smile when Pascale opened the door, a plain cotton robe wrapped tightly around her. "Hi," Adèle said, feeling unaccountably shy. "Would you like some company?"

"Adèle," Pascale said, her surprise clear in her voice. "I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow night."

"I know," Adèle said, "but I owe you an apology, and I've been thinking a lot about what you said and what Thierry said, and I'm hoping you'll give me another chance."

"Another chance at what?" Pascale asked, picking nervously at the collar of her robe.

Adèle reached out and captured the wandering fingers with her own. "A chance at a real partnership instead of the business relationship we both pretended to want."

"Pascale?"

Adèle peered over Pascale's shoulder into the house. A woman she had never seen before stood in the doorway that led down the hall to Pascale's bedroom. Adèle had never been down the hall, but the woman draped artfully against the doorjamb radiated familiar ease. Adèle's eyes narrowed as the strap of the woman's negligee slid off her shoulder, revealing a bite mark on the top of her breast.

"Deux secondes, Nicole," Pascale said. "I'll be right there." She turned back to Adèle. "This obviously isn't a good time. I'll see you

tomorrow evening and we can talk then.” She started to close the door, but Adèle wedged her foot against it.

“No,” she said, magic sparking around her dangerously, “you don’t get to do this. You don’t get to go in there and be with someone else and pretend we don’t matter.”

“You made it abundantly clear there is no ‘we’,” Pascale reminded her sharply. “You’re the one who told me how many times that you had no interest in women.”

“I don’t,” Adèle said, “but I seem to have developed quite a bit of interest in you. Get rid of your trick, and I’ll show you.”

“You really are something,” Pascale said with a disbelieving laugh. “You barge in here uninvited, interrupt my evening, and then expect me to just drop everything in gratitude because you’ve deigned to change your mind about our relationship. Forget that. I don’t need the heartache.”

“No heartache, I promise,” Adèle said, taking a step closer and touching Pascale’s cheek. “I’m not playing, and I’m not saying this because I’m jealous as hell that someone else is in my place in your bed or has your fang marks in far more intimate places than I do. I was stupid and blind and narrow-minded, none of which you deserve, but it was a little unsettling, suddenly finding everything I believed about myself turned on its ear. I’m a temperamental bitch at the best of times. That was more than I could handle, and I took it out on you.”

“So what are you saying?” Pascale asked, eyes still narrowed distrustfully.

“I’m saying I want a partnership with you,” Adèle replied. “A real one, however that develops. I want a chance at the happiness everyone else has found, and I’m sorry it took you finding someone else to make me see that.”

“Do I get a say in this?” Pascale demanded.

Adèle wanted to shout no, to pull Pascale into her arms and never let her go, but she would not do to the other woman what Jude had done to her. “Yes. You can tell me to leave right now and I will. You can tell me not to come back until tomorrow or the day after or next week. Just don’t tell me to never come back, because I’m not sure I can do that.”

Pascale nodded slowly. "You can come in. I have to talk to Nicole. Wait in the living room, and if you say one nasty word to her, I'll send you home instead of her."

"What are you going to tell her?" Adèle asked, heart pounding as she came inside.

"I'm going to tell her the truth," Pascale said. "She works for Angelique at Sang Froid. She knows about l'Institut and has some idea of what the partnerships entail. She won't be happy, but I didn't make any promises. Once she's gone, we'll talk."

That sounded ominous to Adèle, but she already knew she was here on sufferance. She reined in her temper and prepared to wait out the other woman's departure. Once the interloper was gone, she would show Pascale how sincere she was and how good they could be together.

The sound of a loud crash in the bedroom had her on her feet and halfway down the hall before she remembered Pascale's edict that she stay in the living room. "Pascale, is everything all right?"

The door at the end of the hall opened, and the woman Adèle had seen before, fully dressed now, came storming down the corridor. "She's all yours, the lying bitch."

Adèle's hand tightened around her wand as she fought the urge to cast something unpleasant in the other woman's direction, but a muffled sound, nearly a sob, drew her attention back to the bedroom. Knowing Pascale would probably yell at her for not listening, she walked to the doorway anyway. Pascale knelt on the floor, shards of glass on the floor around her.

"Wait," Adèle said, "don't cut yourself."

"She broke my grandmother's vase," Pascale said, looking up at Adèle helplessly. "I understand that she was angry, but why did she have to choose that?"

Adèle took another step into the room. "Maybe I can help," she offered. "If you trust me not to make a bigger mess of it."

"It's already broken," Pascale said. "What could you do to make it worse?"

Adèle smiled. "That's the attitude. You don't have shoes on, so don't get up until we're sure this works. I don't want you to cut your feet on the glass."

Pascale nodded, setting down the piece of glass she already had in her hand. “*Rassemblez!*” Adèle said, directing her magic at the shards of glass. Slowly the pieces reassembled into the form of a vase. Pascale reached for it, but Adèle stopped her. “I’m not done yet. I don’t have Thierry’s gift of reknitting stone. I’ll have to try refiring it. I’m not sure it will work, but it’s the best I can do. If you’ll let me, that is.”

“Your spell won’t hold it together?” Pascale asked.

“It will make it look pretty, but you couldn’t use it as a vase,” Adèle said. “The water would seep right through the cracks. If I fire it again, if that works, it will be remade.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“I can stop now,” Adèle said, “and you will have a pretty decoration to set on your shelf. If I try firing it and it works, you’ll have a functional vase again. If I try firing it and it doesn’t work, you may be left with nothing recognizable or usable. It’s entirely up to you.”

Pascale looked at the vase and back at Adèle. “I trust you.”

“Then come over here. The heat from the fire will be intense, and I don’t want you to get burned.”

Pascale joined Adèle in the doorway of the room. Closing her eyes, Adèle focused all her power on connecting with the elemental magic within her, drawing the fire from deep inside and channeling it around the vase. The heat was intense, but she ignored it, pouring all her power and all her concentration into surrounding and reforging the vase held in her magical grip.

The touch of Pascale’s hand on her arm drew her momentarily out of her magical trance, causing the temperature to drop. “Let me help.”

Adèle nodded, keeping her eyes on the inferno before her as Pascale moved in front of her. She nearly lost control of her magic when the vampire unbuttoned the blouse she was wearing enough to bare her collarbone. The flames wavered as Pascale’s fingers traced the scars on Adèle’s breast, her reminder of what Jude had been capable of.

“I’m not him,” Pascale said again, as if she could read Adèle’s thoughts. “I won’t treat you that way.”

“I know,” Adèle said hoarsely. “Bite me now. We have to finish the spell.”

Pascale nodded, leaning in and licking along Adèle’s collarbone until she found a place where she could drive her fangs between bones. The tickle of her tongue sent desire skittering along Adèle’s nerves, but

the moment her fangs penetrated, Adèle felt the incredible rush of magical symbiosis and bone-deep need she had known in her time with Jude, except that this time, she did not have to fight it. Suddenly the means to fix the vase seemed obvious, a simple wave of her hand. She set it gently on the shelf, releasing it from her magic, and let her hands fall to Pascale's waist. "It's done."

Pascale looked up, her fangs slipping free of Adèle's skin. "I'm not."

"Neither am I," Adèle said, lowering her head and covering Pascale's lips with her own. Another time she might have hesitated, either because of the blood on the vampire's lips or because she had never kissed a woman before, but the past few moments had broken all her reserves, leaving her prey to a need too great to ignore.

Pascale returned the embrace and the kiss eagerly, leaning against Adèle so that their bodies rubbed together. Pascale's fingers still covered the scar from Jude's fangs, but her hand settled against Adèle's breast now, cupping the swell in her palm. Adèle shivered at the unfamiliar, intimate touch, need growing apace. To her surprise, Pascale broke the kiss and took a step back, catching Adèle's hands. "We don't have to do this tonight. You came here so we could talk, not so I could drag you into bed."

"You could stop now?" Adèle asked incredulously, memories of Jude pinning her against any available surface to have his way with her coming back.

Pascale lifted their joined hands to her lips, kissing Adèle's knuckles softly. "I'm not him," she said one more time before releasing Adèle's hands and closing the buttons on her shirt. "Come in the living room with me. We'll talk like we said we would and we'll see what we see when we're done."

Desire simmering still, Adèle followed Pascale back into the living room, joining her on the couch where Pascale had fed from her twice before. Determined to begin as she intended to go on, Adèle sat close enough to Pascale that she could put her arms around the slighter woman, pulling her close. "We'll talk," she promised, "but will you let me hold you while we do?"

Pascale snuggled deeper into Adèle's embrace, perfectly content to curl up next to the woman who had haunted her dreams since the first night they met. "What happened?" she asked. "The last time we spoke, you stormed out of her declaring you weren't interested in women, and

now you're here, kissing me, holding me close, letting me bite you intimately."

"I stormed out of here and went to Paris, determined to forget about you," Adèle admitted, blushing at the memory. "It didn't work. So I went to talk to Thierry. He was married, had never been interested in men before he formed a partnership with Sebastien. Kind of the same situation I found myself in. I thought maybe he could give me some advice."

"Apparently he did," Pascale said, leaning up and kissing Adèle's jaw. "What did he say?"

"He reminded me that there's no such thing as a love potion," Adèle said. "If I'm attracted to you—and I think it's pretty obvious that I am—then I'm attracted to you. No external magical force made me feel this way. You made me feel this way. Yes, it's going to take some adjustment to my thinking, and yes, I'll probably do stupid shit because I'm not used to being with a woman, but I can take a chance on you and maybe find something special, or I can keep denying it and pass up what might be the chance of a lifetime. I may be temperamental, but I'm not stupid."

"I don't know," Pascale teased. "Some of the things you said the other night...."

"Like I said, temperamental," Adèle said, "and I already apologized."

"No, you said you owed me an apology. You didn't actually say you were sorry," Pascale reminded her.

Adèle pushed Pascale backward onto the couch, pinning her in place as she hovered over the vampire. "I'm sorry, all right?" she all but shouted. "I was jealous, only I wasn't ready to admit it, even to myself, and tonight only made it worse. That woman came out in her skimpy little nightgown and I could see where you'd bitten her and it was all I could do not to hex her into next week."

"Can you really do that?" Pascale asked, twining her arms around Adèle's neck.

"Not literally," Adèle replied, nuzzling Pascale's neck in turn, "but I could have left her in a world of hurt."

"If you're angry at someone, you really should be angry at me, not at her," Pascale pointed out logically. "She didn't know about you until you arrived here tonight."

Adèle shrugged. “I wasn’t angry at her; I was jealous of her. And I can’t really be angry at you when, if I’d been more honest with myself, you wouldn’t have felt the need to see her in the first place.”

“So what happens now?” Pascale asked, her hands sliding down Adèle’s back to her waist. “I mean, as tempting as you are, I probably shouldn’t feed again yet. Between Nicole and then biting you while you fixed my vase—thank you, by the way—I’m probably close to the point of making myself sick if I take anymore.”

“You’re welcome for the vase,” Adèle replied. “I’ve never felt that kind of clarity when working with fire, not even with Jude. It was like all the mysteries of it suddenly disappeared. I’d already made up my mind when I came here tonight that I wanted to give a true partnership a try, but if I needed proof that this time was different, that was it.”

“Really?” Pascale asked shyly. “But he was a much more powerful vampire than I am and—”

“It’s not the age of the vampire that matters,” Adèle interrupted. “It’s the strength of the connection. There’s a lot we don’t know about the partnerships, but there’s no doubt that when Orlando feeds from Alain, his increase in power outstrips all the rest because of their Aveu de Sang. I hated Jude. The one time he fed from me to actually consciously increase my power, he kept touching me, distracting me. I lost control of the fire I’d summoned because it was too strong for me to handle even with his so-called help. What I did tonight with your vase was far more difficult, far more intricate than what I attempted with him, and yet I had no problem controlling the fire. I don’t know why he and I were paired in the first place when things were so very wrong between us from the beginning, but I do know that you’re already more of a partner to me than he ever could have been.”

“I’m glad we fit that way,” Pascale said, shifting beneath Adèle and drawing the wizard’s attention back to the press of body against body. “I like the idea of being your source of strength.”

Adèle closed her eyes, struggling against the ingrained habit of denying she needed any outside support. Pascale was not offering because she thought Adèle was weak. She was offering out of a sincere desire to build a relationship. Opening her eyes again, she gazed down into Pascale’s blue eyes. “Don’t make me go home tonight.”

Pascale’s arms tightened. “Only if you want to leave.”



Adèle doubted she would ever want to leave if Pascale was there to keep her company. “You know I’m not much of a catch, right?” Adèle felt compelled to say.

“Stop that,” Pascale said, her fingers digging into Adèle’s sides. “You keep saying these things about yourself, and I don’t like it. You’re strong and beautiful and loyal. So maybe you have a temper, but you controlled it tonight. And maybe you’re stubborn, but you thought things through and you saw reason eventually. Don’t put yourself down.”

Adèle flushed, feeling incredibly vulnerable. Pascale saw straight through her, it seemed, leaving Adèle feeling completely off balance. “I’ll try.”

“You’ll do more than try,” Pascale insisted, “because I’m going to correct you every time you say something self-deprecating until you stop doing it. Modesty is one thing, but not putting yourself down.” She pulled at the band holding Adèle’s hair back in a tight bun. “And another thing. When we’re home together, you should wear your hair down.”

Adèle shook her head, her dark hair falling over her shoulders and down around her face. Pascale combed her fingers through the long strands. “Yes, exactly like that.”

“When did you get so bossy?” Adèle teased, leaning into the caress. “What happened to the woman I stopped from jumping off a bridge?”

“Extenuating circumstances,” Pascale retorted. “I’m not usually quite that flaky.” She pushed at Adèle’s shoulders, urging her to sit up. “Is that really who you wanted?”

“No,” Adèle admitted, sitting up but pulling Pascale into her arms. “That was another of my hesitations, honestly. I didn’t want someone who would always be weepy or hysterical, but you haven’t been since that night, and I think you were entitled under the circumstances. This is just the first time you’ve been quite so emphatic. I didn’t expect that either.”

Pascale shrugged. “This is the first time you’ve been mine enough that I could say that kind of thing. If it really bothers you—”

“It doesn’t,” Adèle assured her, “although if you get to tell me what to do sometimes, then I get to do the same.”

“Like what?” Pascale asked.

“Like finding a more flattering robe,” Adèle said with a grin. “This one looks like a sack on you.”

“I put it on to answer the door, not to seduce a lover,” Pascale retorted. “Stay right there. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Adèle let the vampire go, toeing off the boots she wore and undoing the top button of the blouse Pascale had closed again after she finished the spell. Her fingers lingered over the marks left by Pascale’s fangs before drifting lower to the ones Jude had left. Looking around for her wand, she picked it up and touched it to the scars. All the reasons to keep them as a reminder had disappeared with her new partner’s kiss.

“*Soulagez*,” she whispered, watching as the scars slowly faded. She left the marks from Pascale’s fangs untouched. They would heal in time, but even if they did not, they were a reminder of a very different sort. She slid her wand into her coat pocket and waited for Pascale to return.

Moments later, Pascale reappeared in the doorway. Gone was the staid cotton robe, replaced by a satin kimono wrap that stopped mid-thigh. It hung open to reveal a figure-hugging satin slip in the palest of lavenders.

“I think it’s a good thing you didn’t answer the door dressed that way,” Adèle said, swallowing around the lump of need clogging her throat. She rose slowly and crossed the room to where Pascale stood. “I really would have hexed her if I’d known she saw you looking like this.”

Pascale smiled shyly. “You like it?”

Adèle traced the neckline of the gown over the top of Pascale’s breasts. “Yes, I like it, although I bet it looks even better tossed on the floor. Or maybe you’re the one who will look even better with it tossed on the floor.”

“Are you ready for that?” Pascale asked seriously. “I’m not saying no, because I’d love nothing more than to take you to bed and show you what you’ve been missing, but I’ll understand if that’s too much too fast.”

Adèle wanted to shrug and pretend she was not apprehensive, but she could not make herself lie to her partner. “Maybe we could take our time?”

Pascale pulled her head down for a kiss. “All the time you need,” she promised when she released Adèle’s lips. “Do you want to borrow

a nightgown? You'll be more comfortable in that than you would be completely dressed or undressed."

"I'm not sure your gowns will fit me," Adèle replied, resting her chin on the crown of Pascale's head.

Pascale chuckled. "All the better for me. The gowns probably won't fit, but one of my robes that's intended to be long will be mid-calf on you instead."

Adèle hesitated a moment longer. "I can try a gown for tonight, even if it's a little small, and then bring something from home tomorrow night. I didn't want to get my hopes up tonight."

Pascale smiled and took Adèle's hand, leading her toward the bedroom. "You can get your hopes up as high as you'd like. I ordered a nightgown from an online site, and when it got here, their sizing and mine disagreed, but it wasn't worth the hassle of sending it back to exchange it. Give me a second to find it." She dug in a drawer full of a froth of silk and satin, the sight making Adèle wonder if she could convince Pascale to model them all for her at some future point. A moment later, Pascale straightened, a Nile-green nightgown in hand. "The color even suits you. You can change in the bathroom if you'd rather not change in here."

Adèle took the garment and went into the bathroom. She stripped down to her underwear and pulled the nightgown over her head. It was short, barely brushing the tops of her thighs, and it was tighter around the bust than she usually wore, but she was covered, at least, and more comfortable than she would have been sleeping fully clothed. Taking a deep breath, she walked back into the bedroom, arms crossed over her chest protectively.

"Don't hide from me," Pascale said, kissing her gently and easing her arms down to her sides. "You're beautiful and I want to see you."

"The nightgown's a little tight," Adèle muttered.

Pascale smiled, taking a step back so she could admire her new lover more easily. The nightgown, which had reached mid-thigh on her, barely covered Adèle's hips, highlighting her legs, which seemed to go on forever, making Pascale want to feel them wrapped tightly around her as she nibbled her way up them or as she licked the wizard to climax. The gown clung to the dip of Adèle's waist and then drew tight again over her full breasts. Pascale's mouth watered as she imagined peeling the satin away and feasting on the taut nipples she could see

pressing against the fabric. “I’m not complaining.” She traced the swell of Adèle’s breast. “The other marks are gone.”

Adèle shrugged dismissively. “The reasons to remember him were gone, so there was no reason to leave the scars. I’d rather have your marks on me than his.”

Pascale leaned closer, running her lips over the skin where the scars had been. “It will be my pleasure,” she promised.

Adèle shivered at the provocative caress. Pascale’s lips were softer than most men’s, and her face had no hint of stubble to scratch tender skin, but other than that, the touch did not feel all that different from a man caressing her the same way. Perhaps being loved by Pascale would not feel so foreign after all.

## Chapter 22

DENIS stared morosely at the one photo of Noël he could not bring himself to put away, wishing he could drink himself into oblivion the way his mortal peers could do when in the grips of the kind of melancholy that had overtaken him since he left l'Institut three days ago. His mind and his heart warred with each other over what to do about Martin, whether to take the chance on a relationship. He had no more answers than he had had then, but he missed Martin terribly, and not just how he made Denis feel when they ended up in bed. He missed the man's sense of humor, his sharp intelligence, his seeking curiosity.

"I need to get over myself and accept this partnership, don't I?" he asked the picture as if it could answer him.

The sound of a crash in the courtyard startled him, but he ignored it. Someone's dog getting into the garbage cans, no doubt. He had returned to his contemplation of Noël's picture and his current conundrum when a shout followed another crash.

A shout that sounded suspiciously like Martin's voice.

Frowning, Denis crossed the room to the large window that opened onto his tiny second-story balcony. He pushed open the vertical panes and stepped out, looking for the origin of the noise, and felt his heart stop.

Martin lay on the ground, struggling weakly against a vampire who had him pinned and was feeding from his throat. With a scream of pure rage, Denis vaulted over the railing, the drop to the stones below nothing compared to his need to drag the interloper from his lover, his *partner*.

He hit the other vampire at a full run, knocking the man away from Martin. They rolled across the cobblestones, each vying for dominance. In the pale light of the moon, Denis caught sight of the attacker's face. "Renaud," he spat. "What are you doing here?"

Renaud ignored him, his hands reaching for Denis's throat. Denis broke their hold, springing away from Renaud's grasp. "Taking back what's mine," Renaud shouted.

"You and what army?" Denis demanded, looking around quickly to make sure no other vampires lurked in the shadows, but he saw only Martin, still lying prone on the ground.

Renaud did not answer, lunging at Denis instead. Denis dodged him, using the momentum to slam him into the wall, pinning him and forcing his arm behind his back. "Why did you attack Martin? He's done nothing to you, and I know he didn't give you permission."

"He's mortal. He's nothing," Renaud scoffed, slamming his head against Denis's, knocking the chef de la Cour back. Denis lifted his hand to his nose, scowling when it came away wet with blood.

"That kind of attitude will see us all staked in the sunlight," Denis warned, circling Renaud, looking for an opening. "How many people have you turned without their permission?"

"Two, ten, twenty?" Renaud taunted. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Tired of the game and conscious of Martin still not moving, Denis charged Renaud again, pushing him backward, his hand around the vampire's throat as he squeezed. He had to knock the other vampire unconscious or risk him escaping into the night as he went to tend to Martin. He needed to tend to Martin, but he could not let Renaud escape. This might be his only chance to capture the other vampire.

Renaud kned Denis in the stomach, knocking the breath from Denis's lungs and breaking his grip. Denis braced for another attack, but it did not come, Renaud disappearing into the night. Denis almost went after him, but the compulsion to check on Martin outweighed the desire to see justice done. Still coughing from Renaud's parting blow, Denis stumbled across the courtyard to Martin's side, feeling blindly for his pulse.

It beat weakly beneath his fingers, but with each pulse, more blood oozed from the multiple wounds on Martin's throat. Lowering his head, Denis licked at the wounds, knowing his saliva would help close them. The flavor of Martin's blood exploded onto his tongue so strongly he nearly gave in to the desire to feed for himself, but he could not take that risk, not when he had no idea how much Renaud had taken or why Martin was unconscious.

Convinced he had done all he could to seal the wounds, he dug through Martin's pockets in search of his cell phone. He dialed l'Institut the moment he found it.

"Bellaiche."

"Oh, Jean, thank God," Denis said. "Martin's been attacked. I need help."

"Where are you?" Jean said.

"The courtyard of my building," Denis replied. "I don't know why he was here, but I heard a noise and—"

"Tell me about it later," Jean said. "Does he need a doctor?"

"I think so," Denis said. "He's still breathing, but he isn't moving."

"Feed from him," Jean ordered.

"I can't," Denis said. "He was attacked by the *extorris*. I don't know how much Renaud took."

"Lightly," Jean said. "Enough that the partnership bond will kick in and help him."

"He isn't my partner," Denis insisted, though the taste of Martin's blood on his tongue assured him he had already crossed that line. To do more without Martin's permission....

"It's going to take time for us to get there," Jean said. "Raymond will know who to call, but it's going to be a few minutes, minutes Martin might not have. He's spent the past three days miserable because he didn't know how to make you understand how serious he was about you. Put the phone down and bite him. You aren't newly turned. You can monitor his well-being through his blood. Do it now. We'll be there as soon as we can."

The line went dead before Denis could say anything else.

"This is not the way I wanted our first time together to be," Denis whispered to Martin as he lifted the limp body in his arms and lowered his head to feed.

The few laps of Martin's blood Denis had taken to close the wounds in no way prepared him for the full banquet of Martin's blood when his fangs pierced flesh and he drank from the source. A feeling of strength and homecoming he had not known since Noël died flooded through him, the connection so strong that Denis wondered why he had ever questioned it. He forced himself not to gorge, knowing Martin was too weak for that. Instead, he focused on the connection between them that had slammed into place the moment his fangs broke skin. The

thready pulse worried him, but it did not weaken more, so Denis left his mouth in place, not actively feeding so much as nursing the fledgling bond between them.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Keeping Martin cradled protectively against him, he turned his head as much as he could. A woman he did not know approached first, followed immediately by Jean, Raymond, Alain, and Orlando.

“Constance is a doctor,” Raymond said as the woman knelt at Denis’s side. “She’s been studying how a partnership affects healing in injured wizards. Let her check him out.”

Denis lifted his head, giving the woman access to Martin’s chest and neck, but he did not move farther away than that.

“Renaud is the vampire we want,” Denis told the others. “I couldn’t go after him. I had to help Martin.”

“He could be anywhere by now,” Orlando said.

“You can track him,” Denis reminded them. “All you have to do is take a little of Martin’s blood. He fed minutes ago. Please, Jean. Don’t make me leave him.”

Jean looked at Raymond for a moment before kneeling next to Denis. “I can’t. His blood would make me sick.” Raymond’s hand settled on Jean’s shoulder. Jean reached up and squeezed it gently. “I made a promise I can’t break.”

“What promise?” Denis asked, looking from the brand on Alain’s neck to the unmarked skin of Raymond’s.

“I need to take him to Paris,” Constance interrupted. “He needs a transfusion, and he needs it now.”

“What do I do?” Denis asked Jean.

“You let Constance take him and take care of him, and you lead the rest of us after Renaud,” Jean said. “You can’t help with Martin’s treatment any more than you’ve already done, but you can help make sure no one else is attacked the same way.”

“Do it,” Denis said, looking at Constance.

“You know how to reach me,” Raymond reminded her.

She nodded and cast a spell, disappearing and taking Martin with her.

“What promise?” Denis asked again.



“Not all bonds are public ones,” Jean said simply, rising to his feet and offering Denis his hand. “Not all bonds need to be public ones.”

Understanding dawned slowly. Somewhere on Raymond’s body, hidden by clothes or magic, it did not matter which, Raymond had a brand to match the one on Alain’s neck, proof of the Aveu de Sang he and Jean had made.

“Let’s go,” Raymond said, uncomfortable with the scrutiny. Alain and Orlando knew, of course, but he and Jean had deliberately chosen not to tell anyone else, even their friends. He had never envisioned a scenario in which they would have to tell a near stranger, but it could not be helped. “The longer we wait, the harder he’ll be to track.”

“Can you sense him?” Jean asked. “I have no idea how monsieur Lombard did it except that he tasted Alain’s blood and led us to Orlando.”

“It’s like a pull in a certain direction,” Denis said, starting toward the gate. He glanced at Alain and Raymond. “Can you keep up?”

Jean laughed. “Magic makes ‘impossible’ such a relative term.”

Denis had no response for that, so he led them out of the courtyard in the direction he sensed Renaud’s presence. He only hoped the vampire would not try to grab some other victim to hide his trail. Then again, Denis had not known about the ability to trace a vampire this way until relatively recently, so perhaps Renaud was equally ignorant and would focus on hiding on a physical rather than on a magical plane.

They raced through the streets of Autun, heading toward the countryside that surrounded the town. “It’s going to be hard going if he gets out of the city,” Orlando said.

“For him as well as for us,” Denis replied. “For a while, I could feel him moving, but I think he’s gone to ground now. If we can keep him from realizing we’re coming, he’ll have no reason to leave his safe place.”

“If he doesn’t know we’re coming and we can figure out where he is, we can cast a magical net around his location,” Raymond offered. “We don’t have time to cast it so it only traps him, which means whoever goes after him will also be trapped until we release the spell, but you won’t have to worry about him slipping through your fingers again. Or we could wait for dawn to trap him completely.”

"I defeated him once before," Denis said. "I'll do it again. I don't need sunlight to trap him, and I don't want to wait that long to check on Martin."

"And this time you won't have to do it alone," Orlando added. "And don't argue. He endangered all of us with his actions. You and Jean named him *extorris*. I know he attacked your partner, not mine, but this is still our fight, all of us, not just yours."

"We want him to stand trial," Alain added. "All any of you have to do is lure him out so Raymond or I can get a binding spell on him. This doesn't have to be a fight to the death."

"And don't argue," Raymond finished. "Neither Alain nor I have any intention of watching our partners get hurt."

All three vampires scowled at the two wizards, but they did not argue. Denis slowed as he felt Renaud's presence grow stronger in his mind. He zeroed in finally on a small hut built into the side of the hill. "I think he's in there," Denis whispered.

Raymond and Alain nodded, moving to opposite sides of the building. At a look from Raymond, Alain began casting the net, sending his magic out to mesh with Raymond's. When the two spells had knitted together completely and Raymond could feel Alain's magic completely entwined with his, he gestured for the vampires to continue.

"Renaud!" Denis called. "You're surrounded. Come out now. If we have to come in and get you, it will go far worse for you."

"On what authority?" Renaud shouted.

"On the authority of the chefs de la Cour of Paris and Autun," Jean replied, his voice as harsh as Raymond had ever heard it, even at the *judicium* for the last vampire who had been declared *extorris*. "You're wanted for questioning in attacks on Pascale Auboussu, Pierre Ganet, and Martin Delacroix."

"I don't belong to the Cour of Paris, and I don't recognize the authority of the usurper in Autun," Renaud yelled back.

"In other words, he's going to turn this into a fight," Jean said, barely loud enough for the others to hear.

"Lure him out if you can," Raymond reminded them, not moving from where he held the net in place. "We don't want anyone getting hurt. You and Orlando could feed to heal quickly, but Denis is going to have to be careful with Martin for a while, and I definitely don't want

to open the can of worms that would be involved in getting Renaud enough blood to heal.”

That last comment drew Jean up short. “Can one of you hold the net alone and the other get close enough to cast a spell into the building?”

“Probably not,” Raymond said. “That’s a two-person spell, but if you can keep him from coming out the door, we can let the net drop and cast a spell in the window.”

“Do it,” Jean said as the three vampires approached the door and the window to keep Renaud ensnared within.

When Denis stood guard at the window and Jean and Orlando at the door, Raymond and Alain released the spell and started toward the house. The door exploded outward, hitting Jean and knocking him backward. Orlando lunged forward, blocking the way. Renaud plowed into him as he tried to escape, but Orlando grabbed him, pushing back against him with all his strength augmented by two years as Alain’s Avoué. He felt the brush of Alain’s magic as it surged around him and Renaud, the shouted spell betraying all the horror Alain felt at seeing Orlando attacked. Alain’s magic had no effect on Orlando, but it dropped Renaud to the ground, completely immobilized.

Then Alain was there, his foot pressing hard on Renaud’s chest. “No one touches my Avoué but me,” he spat.

“He didn’t hurt me, Alain,” Orlando said gently, stroking Alain’s arm before drawing him away. “He can’t hurt me.”

Alain took a step back, enough to look around at the others. Jean had one hand cradled against his nose as he fed from Raymond’s wrist. “The door broke it,” Raymond explained. “He’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

Alain nodded. “Shall I call Adèle? She’ll need to come arrest him officially.”

“Or we can bring him to her, if that would be easier,” Raymond offered. “I still have my repère, so she could go to l’Institut and then come here, but it would probably be faster for us to meet her in Château-Chinon at the police department.”

“I’ll ask,” Alain said, taking out his cell phone. He kept his arm snugly around Orlando’s waist as he waited for her to pick up. He was not about to let Orlando out of his reach until Renaud was safely behind magically reinforced bars.

“Since you have everything under control here,” Denis said when Jean released Raymond’s wrist, “I need to go to Paris. I need to see Martin, to make sure he’s going to be all right. Could one of you send me?”

“Adèle will want—”

“We’ll tell Adèle to come to the hospital to take your statement,” Jean interrupted his partner. “Send him there, Raymond. He won’t be any good to us until he’s seen for himself that Constance has worked her medical magic on his partner.”

“Thank you,” Denis said, bracing himself for the displacement spell.

Seconds later, he arrived in front of l’Hôtel-Dieu. Going inside, he gave Martin’s name at the desk and was directed to the waiting room outside intensive care. The woman at the desk assured him a nurse would help him find Martin’s doctors.

Denis hurried through the halls in the direction she indicated. He knew Martin was still alive because his heart beat in time with his partner’s, but that was all he could tell. Finding the intensive care unit, he asked at the desk again.

“Oh, yes,” the nurse said, “Dr. Alard said you would be coming by. Let me page her. She said you could visit the patient, but she wanted to talk to you first.”

Denis paced the waiting room impatiently as he struggled against the need to barge past the nurses’ station and find Martin’s room on his own. He reminded himself that they did not want to keep him out. They only wanted him to talk to the doctor first.

“Denis.” Constance’s warm voice drew Denis out of his thoughts.

“How is he?” Denis asked without preamble.

“Remarkably well,” Constance said. “Of course, the fact that you were there to feed from him right away improved his prognosis considerably. We transfused nine units of blood, which has also helped. We have him in intensive care for observation, but that’s mostly to make sure he doesn’t have any complications from the transfusion itself rather than because we’re worried about additional blood loss. The puncture wounds on his neck are of no danger by themselves. The other thing we’ll have to monitor over the next three days is his body’s production of blood cells to make sure his system is returning to normal.”

“So what does that mean in terms of his recovery?” Denis asked.

“It’s hard to predict exactly,” Constance said, “since usually when we have that kind of blood loss, there’s significant trauma to the body that has to heal as well, so that there’s the danger of additional bleeding and other complications. Martin doesn’t have any of that because of the way his blood loss occurred, so it will be entirely up to him. When his body is producing blood normally again and he’s past the stage of likely negative reactions to the transfusion, he can go home. Until then, he has to stay here so we can help him if there’s a problem.”

“So you’re telling me I can’t feed from him,” Denis surmised.

“On the contrary,” Constance said with a smile. “You have to limit what you take, but we’ll want you to take a few sips three times a day. The magic in your bond with him will speed his healing far faster than anything we can do.”

“We aren’t really partners,” Denis demurred. “I mean, the first time I bit him was earlier tonight.”

“Ah, that complicates matters,” Constance agreed. “He will make a full recovery without your help, albeit a slower one. I have no doubt of that. We can wait until he wakes up and you can talk before we add your biting him to his treatment regimen, if you prefer.”

Denis knew Martin would not argue against it. “How long do you expect him to stay unconscious?”

“Again, our usual experience doesn’t really apply here because his body has no trauma other than the blood loss,” Constance said, “but honestly there’s no reason why he shouldn’t wake up at any moment. You’re welcome to go sit with him if you’d like. It often helps patients regain consciousness if they hear the voices of their loved ones.”

“He’s not—”

“Your partner. Yes, I know. Go sit with him anyway,” Constance insisted. “You’ll both feel better for it. He’s in room 405.”

Denis walked down the hall to the indicated room, pushing open the door and stepping inside. Martin lay quiescent in the bed, attached to a variety of machines, but from what Denis could tell, they were all monitoring Martin’s condition rather than controlling it. The steady beep of the heart monitor reassured him as it pinged in time with Denis’s own heartbeat as well.

“We caught Renaud,” Denis said into the silence of the room, needing to fill it even if Martin could not hear him. “He tried to attack

Orlando, and that was the end of that. I don't need to tell you how Alain reacted. They're going to turn him over to Adèle, so you have to wake up so you can press charges. We think he's the same vampire who attacked Pascale and Pierre, although it will be harder to prove in Pierre's case unless Renaud confesses, but we know he attacked you. I would have killed him if he hadn't gotten away in the courtyard. Raymond and Alain wouldn't let me later, but he had no right to put his hands on you."

Martin's breathing seemed to speed up, so Denis clasped the wizard's hand in his own to provide an additional stimulus and kept talking. "I spoke with your doctor. She said if you'll wake up, you can go home in a few days. They just have to make sure you don't have any ill effects from the transfusion. They had to give you a lot of blood, and apparently there can be side effects from that. The doctor didn't say what kind of complications, and I didn't ask. I prefer to think you're going to get well with no problem. They think I can help with that if I bite you again. Not really feed from you—you're still too weak for that—but just take a little bit, enough to cause the partnership bond to kick in. I told her you had to wake up first. I bit you once without your express permission to save your life, but I won't do it again until I've had a chance to talk to you. I know you said you wanted it. I know you were angry because I wouldn't bite you earlier, but that doesn't mean I should take your consent for granted now."

Martin's eyes fluttered open. "Granted," he said, his voice hoarse. He coughed a couple of times, obviously uncomfortable.

Denis squeezed his hand. "Let me get a nurse. I don't know if you can have anything."

Martin nodded, the cough getting worse.

Denis stuck his head out the door, flagging down a passing nurse. "He's awake, but he can't stop coughing. Can I give him some water?"

The nurse came inside and checked Martin's chart quickly. "A few swallows," she said after a moment. "He isn't on any restrictions, but we still want to be careful."

Denis poured a glass of water and helped Martin drink a little. When that settled his coughing, the nurse withdrew.

"How much did you hear?" Denis asked, uncomfortable now that Martin was awake.

“Only the bit about not taking my consent for granted,” Martin replied, his voice still weak. “Should I have heard something else?”

“I was telling you what the doctor said,” Denis explained. “She thinks it will speed up your recovery if I bite you a couple of times each day until you’re well. I told her it would have to wait until you woke up and we could talk.”

Martin stretched out his arm, wrist upturned. “I’ve been trying to get you to bite me for a while now. I’m not about to say no now.”

Denis took the outstretched hand and kissed the smooth face of Martin’s wrist. “I think we’ll wait and talk to Constance first anyway, because I don’t want to do anything to set back your recovery. She said a couple of times a day, but she didn’t give me any other guidelines.”

“So call her in here and ask,” Martin said. “I want us to be partners.”

“We already are,” Denis admitted softly. “You were dying. I called Raymond in a panic because Renaud had attacked you. He told me to bite you. Not really to feed, but to let the magic of the bond kick in until help could arrive. I didn’t want to do it without your consent, but I couldn’t let you die.”

“I’m sorry I missed it,” Martin said with a crooked smile. “Call the doctor in and ask. I want to know what it feels like.”

Before Denis could get up to look for a doctor, the door opened and a man he did not know came in. “Good morning,” he said, glancing at the clock to make sure. “I’m Dr. Périssé. Dr. Alard is off duty, but she asked me to check on you, since I worked with wizards and vampires during the war. It’s not my area of expertise the way it is hers. I tend to do emergency medicine, but you’re a case the average doctor on call wouldn’t know how to handle.” He picked up the chart and glanced over it. “You’re awake, so that’s a good sign.”

He walked around the bed, checking Martin’s vitals on the equipment. “Everything looks good here. How long have you been awake?”

“Maybe ten minutes,” Martin replied. “A nurse came in and said I could have some water, and then we’ve been talking for a bit.”

Dr. Périssé nodded and looked at the chart again. “Constance says you’re partners?”

“Yes,” Denis replied, Martin’s approval giving him the courage to claim the relationship for the first time.

“Her notes say she wants you to try feeding lightly to see if it will speed Martin’s recovery,” the doctor went on.

“She mentioned that, but she didn’t say when or give me any other directions,” Denis replied, “and I didn’t want to set back Martin’s recovery by feeding too soon or anything.”

Dr. Périssé consulted his notes. “She has it scheduled for nine o’clock this morning unless other complications arise. She’s the expert on the medical side of partnerships, so I’m not going to argue with her. I don’t see any complications now, so I’ll be back in three hours to make sure everything is still stable and to give you the green light.”



## Chapter 23

“IT’S OVER,” Adèle said reassuringly as the officers dragged Renaud back into the cell. Not caring who might see, she wrapped her arms around her partner, drawing the slim woman against her and resting her cheek on the blonde head. She noticed a couple of surprised looks at her method of consoling a witness, but she ignored them. Pascale’s state of mind was far more important. “You don’t ever have to fear him again.”

“He’s insane, isn’t he?” Pascale asked, her voice muffled against Adèle’s breasts.

“Probably,” Adèle said, “but that’s not our concern. He’s off the streets, locked up where he can’t hurt anyone. I’ll have to interview Martin at some point, but they rushed him to the hospital for a transfusion, so I don’t have to go right away. He won’t be able to talk to me at the moment. Let me take you home.”

Pascale nodded, pulling away slightly, though she did not protest when Adèle threaded their fingers together. “Do you have time to stay with me for a few minutes?”

“For as long as you need me to,” Adèle promised. “They’ll charge Renaud with turning you now, and we can add charges for his attack on Martin later, after I’ve interviewed him. There’s no immediate urgency, since we can hold him because of his attack on you.”

They drove the few minutes to Pascale’s house in silence, Pascale’s hand resting on Adèle’s thigh the whole way. When they went inside, Pascale pressed close against Adèle with a shuddering breath. “I swore I wouldn’t let this upset me,” she muttered even as she clung to Adèle. “I swore he had hurt me for the last time.”

“Shhh,” Adèle soothed. “Facing an attacker later is never easy. You did far better than a lot of our witnesses.”

Pascale took another deep breath, the motion stirring air across Adèle’s skin above the neckline of her shirt. Even knowing Pascale

intended nothing by it, Adèle felt arousal skitter along her nerves at the thought of Pascale's mouth, Pascale's fangs, so close to her breasts. Then Pascale lifted her head, and Adèle revised her opinion of her partner's intentions. Flipping open the top two buttons of her blouse, she drew the fabric aside in silent offer, the marks already decorating her pale skin proof, if Pascale needed it, of her own eager desire.

"MARTIN, good to see you awake," Adèle said as she came into the hospital room, followed by Jean and Raymond. "How are you feeling?"

"A little wrung out still," Martin said, "but I ate breakfast, which they said was a good sign. If I understand correctly, I'm mostly here for observation until they're sure I'm not going to have some terrible reaction to the blood transfusion."

"Do you feel up to telling me what happened?" Adèle asked. "I have Raymond's and Jean's accounts, but since you were the one actually attacked, I do need to hear what happened from your perspective as well."

"I can talk," Martin said. "I don't know that they'll let me do much else, but I can certainly answer some questions."

"So you went to see Denis last night," Adèle prompted.

Martin nodded. "We hadn't seen each other in a few days, and we had things we needed to discuss. I decided it was time, but I didn't feel right just appearing in his apartment without asking, so I cast a displacement spell to the courtyard instead. I didn't see anyone when I arrived, but I wasn't really looking either. I was thinking about what I wanted to say to Denis, how to convince him to give our partnership a try. I'd almost reached the door when someone grabbed me. I tried to fight, but he was too strong, and I'd already put my wand away. I felt fangs and then nothing until I woke up here."

"I heard a noise," Denis went on, picking up the tale. "I almost ignored it, thinking it was somebody's dog in the trash, until I heard Martin cry out. As soon as I saw them, I knew what was happening. I don't know if Renaud was targeting Martin or me or simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he had attacked my partner. I managed to get him off Martin, but it was a choice between letting him get away and letting Martin die from blood loss."

“Jean and Raymond told me how you tracked him down,” Adèle said. “You made the right choice.”

“So what will happen to him now?” Martin asked.

“He’ll stand trial,” Adèle replied. “Pascale was with me when Raymond’s call came in, so she went with me and immediately identified his voice. That’s an eye witness for the attack on her and an eye witness for the attack on Martin. Even if we can’t prove he turned Pierre, we’ve got him cold on an involuntary turning and an attempted involuntary turning. He’s going away for a long time.”

“Which is a problem by itself,” Raymond said with a sigh, “because how do we feed him for that time, but that isn’t your concern. Your concern is getting well.”

“And my concern, if you’ll excuse me,” Adèle interrupted, “is to take this information back to the station so the attorneys can make their prosecutorial decisions. Martin, I hope you recover quickly.” She disappeared before Martin could reply.

“Was she less prickly than usual, or was I imagining things?” Martin asked.

“From the bite marks on her neck that she didn’t always manage to hide, I’d say she has a new partner and is happy with the situation,” Raymond said with a smile. “I told her she would be, if she’d just relax and let it happen.”

“And judging from the way Pascale hovered the entire time they were at the station, I’d say the feeling is mutual,” Jean added. “What did the doctors have to say about your prognosis?”

“They seem optimistic,” Martin said. “They want to keep me for a few days to make sure I don’t have complications, but that seems to be a precaution rather than a real fear.”

“Feed as often as they’ll let you,” Jean told Denis. “As backward as it still seems, it helps.”

“The doctor wrote it into her orders,” Denis said with a chuckle. “Bitten by partner at nine o’clock.”

“That’s an improvement over a year ago,” Raymond said, smiling at Jean. “A year ago, Jean had to fight to get near me when I was injured.”

“Constance has learned a few things since then,” Jean reminded him, “and you’re the one who suggested it.”

“It’s still nice to know things are getting better.”

“Speaking of things changing,” Denis said slowly, “is it possible for someone to be a wizard and not ever know it?”

“It’s pretty rare these days with all the outreach campaigns we do to help people understand the signs of their abilities manifesting,” Raymond replied. “Do you know someone you think might be a wizard?”

“Not now,” Denis said, “but feeding from Martin, the little bit I did, felt like feeding from Noël,” Denis explained. “I wondered if he might have been a wizard.”

“Fifty years ago, it probably happened more often than we realize even now,” Raymond replied. “If the person learned to suppress their abilities without knowing what they were doing, they might never have realized they were a wizard. What makes you think he was a wizard?”

“The way his blood tasted,” Denis replied. “I always thought the difference was because I loved him and didn’t love any of the people I fed from after he died, but when I fed from Martin, it was the same instantaneous connection I felt the first time I fed from Noël.”

“The same connection Alain and Orlando felt,” Jean mused aloud.

“And the one we didn’t,” Raymond said, “not the first time. It’s possible, given when you were turned and when you met him, that Noël was a wizard and didn’t know it.”

“I don’t suppose it really matters,” Denis replied. “It’s not like it can change anything about our time together.”

“It matters in the sense that your finding Martin lets us know it’s possible for vampires to find another partner if their current one dies,” Raymond said, “which is a reality most of them will eventually face, unless they end up in an unfortunate accident like Jude did. It’s a little more hope for the ones left behind.”

Jean wanted to argue, but Martin’s hospital room was not the place for that conversation. He settled for sending a wave of displeasure through the bond between them. “We should let Martin rest,” he said. “What time is Anne-Marie expecting us?”

“We’re supposed to be at l’ANS at nine,” Raymond said. “We should probably go so we aren’t late. Call us if either of you need anything. A change of clothes, Denis?”

“That would be wonderful, but no rush,” Denis replied. “After your meeting. I don’t want to make you late.”

“If you use Martin’s shower, his magic will work on your clothes,” Jean offered as they headed toward the door. “It won’t work while you’re wearing them, but it will if they’re sitting in a pile.”

Raymond pulled Jean out the door before Martin or Denis could reply.

“I think they’re playing matchmaker,” Martin said when they were alone.

“I think they don’t need to bother,” Denis replied, slipping his hand back into Martin’s. “When I saw Renaud attacking you, all I could think about was him getting to taste what I’d been too stupid to take when you offered it to me. I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“Do we have to wait for the doctor to come back before you bite me?” Martin asked, his voice husky. “You aren’t newly turned. You know how to control yourself.”

Before Denis could answer, before he could decide on an answer, Dr. Périssé came back into the room. “Has anything changed that I need to know about before we follow Constance’s orders?”

“Not a thing,” Martin said. “I’ve slept a little, but just a light doze. Honestly I feel pretty good, other than being tired.”

“That’s a good sign,” Dr. Périssé said. “Not being tired, but that you don’t feel bad other than that. Our bodies are usually pretty good at telling us when we have a problem if we slow down enough to listen. So I’m going to step outside, then, and give you some privacy. Monsieur Langlois, was it?” Denis nodded. “Only a few swallows. Since blood loss was our problem here, we don’t want to aggravate it. We just want to give your bond a chance to kick in and work its magic.”

Denis knew a few swallows would not be enough, but he would hold back and give Martin what he needed for now. The rest could come later, when Martin had been released from the hospital and they were alone in one apartment or the other.

Dr. Périssé withdrew, leaving them alone. Denis lowered his head, licking across the skin of Martin's wrist. Martin made a sound of protest, but Denis soothed him. "All I can take is a few swallows. It will be hard enough to control myself drinking from your wrist. If I bit your neck, I'd undo all of Constance's good work, because I wouldn't be able to stop."

"Then I guess we'll do it this way for now," Martin agreed, "but as soon as it's safe, I want it all."

"As soon as it's safe, I'll give it to you," Denis promised, licking Martin's skin one more time before letting his fangs slip beneath the surface. He swallowed the first mouthful, forcing himself not to suck deeply. He wanted to savor the first moment of communion, of Martin's awareness matching his own as he joined with his partner in the most intimate way he could.

"Go on," Martin urged. "We'll have other chances to draw it out later. I need to feel you moving in me."

Denis gave in, sucking hard on Martin's skin as he drove his fangs as deep as they would go. Another hot rush of blood filled his mouth, sending spikes of need through him along with the awareness of Martin that could only come when feeding from another person. He tasted an answering need in Martin's blood along with such determination that he finally set all his doubts aside. Whatever the future held, Martin was as committed to it as Denis was.

Taking one more swallow, he forced himself to withdraw, his pupils dilated and his face flushed. "We need to get you out of here," he said hoarsely. "I don't know how often I can do that without losing control."

"I don't know how often you can do that without me losing control," Martin agreed. "If you can't feed from me, you at least need to come here and kiss me."

Denis doubted that was any more conducive to staying in control than feeding was, but he was as helpless to resist this plea as he had been to resist the lure of Martin's blood. Their mouths lingered, sharing breath as before they had shared blood until a discreet cough at the door broke them apart.

Dr. Périssé did not comment on their embrace as he came in and recorded details on Martin's chart. "Everything looks normal," he

declared. "If nothing happens to change that, I think you should be able to go home tomorrow."

"That's good news," Martin said. "Not that I don't appreciate your care, but I'd rather be elsewhere."

Dr. Périssé smiled. "I'd rather all my patients were well enough to be elsewhere. Dr. Alard will be back on duty this afternoon, but in case she doesn't get here right away, the next note she left is for you to try biting your partner again at three o'clock. I'll be off service by then, but as long as nothing has changed in how you're feeling, Martin, I would say you don't need to wait for her. Just don't take more than you did a moment ago, Denis."

"Thank you, Doctor," Martin said.

When he had left again, Martin reached for Denis's hand. "I don't want you to think I'm trying to take Noël's place. If you want to talk about him or have pictures of him around or anything like that, I'm fine with it."

"That's hardly fair to you," Denis said.

"But you hadn't decided on a partnership," Martin reminded him. "You got dragged into one trying to save me. I know we were messing around before, but everything is different now that you've bitten me. If you don't want to—"

"Stop being silly," Denis interrupted. "Yes, I fed from you to save you and without discussing all the choices we'll have to make, but I wasn't forced into it. I knew what I was doing when I bit you the first time, and I did it knowing what the repercussions would be. I didn't realize Noël was my partner in the magical sense until I recognized the sensation of feeding from you as the same sensation I used to get feeding from him, but that doesn't change my mind. All we have to figure out now is where you're going when you leave the hospital and how we're going to deal with the distance from here to Canada when it comes time for you to go home."

MARTIN slowly followed Denis into his apartment. "You're sure you won't mind me being here? I can go back to l'Institut."

Denis hushed him with a soft kiss. "I certainly won't keep you here if you'd rather be there," he said, "but if you're asking my preference, then yes, I'm sure I don't mind."

Martin smiled, setting down the small bag of things Raymond had brought for him while he was in the hospital. It had only been two days, but it was nice to have his own clothes, his own toothbrush, his own pajamas to sleep in. Not that he really expected Denis to let him put them on tonight. The hospital had not provided the privacy to truly consummate their partnership, leaving them both on edge and painfully aware of all that had—and had not—passed between them since their first meeting.

Now that they were truly alone at last, Martin doubted either of them would be able to hold back much longer. The short therapeutic feedings in the hospital had left both of them desperate for a true union. Only the thought of Denis's previous partner held Martin back. "I'm not trying to take his place," he blurted out.

"You couldn't," Denis replied. "He had his place, and you have yours. He never lived here, if that's what you're worried about. I moved here after he died because I couldn't stay in our house without him. This apartment is mine and now yours, if you want it."

They had discussed plans repeatedly over the past two days, trying to avoid jumping each other in the hospital room. They had not come to any firm decisions. Martin still had most of his sabbatical left, which gave them time to explore options. On one of his visits, Raymond had not-so-casually mentioned that he was hoping to expand the research staff and would love to have Martin stay on long term. Martin had laughed and asked on what record, given that he had yet to actually start a project at l'Institut. Raymond had shrugged and assured him that would come in time.

Denis had offered to split their time between France and Canada if Martin did not want to stay on at l'Institut full time, suggesting they could spend the winters in France and the summers in Canada. While Denis was not as susceptible to the cold as a mortal, he had no real interest in experiencing a Canadian winter. Martin had considered the idea and then decided they could take their time and see what the year brought before making up their minds for good. At the moment, Martin had a hard time imagining not going home, but he had observed enough of the vampire-wizard pairs to know that in a year, his growing



connection to Denis might have changed that opinion. "I'll pack my bags and move them here the next time I go to l'Institut."

"When did Raymond say you should come back to work?" Denis asked, tugging Martin toward the bedroom.

"No sooner than next Monday," Martin replied, "but only if I felt up to it. If I need more time, he said I should take it."

"Good," Denis said. "That gives us a week to get better acquainted."

Martin chuckled. "How much better acquainted do you think we need to be?"

Denis toppled Martin onto the bed, following him down and pinning him there firmly. "I think I need to taste your climax in your blood." He nipped at Martin's neck. "I think I need to feel you coming with me inside you." He rocked his hips against Martin's groin. "I think I need to hear you begging and pleading for more of what only I can do to you."

"I think you need to hurry up," Martin replied, mussing Denis's hair as he pulled the vampire close for a kiss fraught with desperation. Denis returned the embrace with all the passion that had simmered in him since he had first tasted Martin's blood. That night, his fear had muted his desire. Since then, the necessity of limiting how much he took had kept him from relaxing into the feelings, but tonight he no longer had to hold back. He could relinquish his hold on his passion and show Martin what it truly meant to be paired with a vampire.

Neither of them had the patience for gentleness as rough, eager hands pulled clothes out of the way. Another time, Denis would linger and appreciate the curve of muscle, the expanse of skin across Martin's chest, the line of hair between his navel and his groin. Another time he would kiss and caress and devour the way Martin deserved, but tonight he needed skin and then he needed blood, and he could not wait any longer. Fortunately Martin seemed to feel the same way, his hands having already stripped away Denis's clothes.

Denis pinned the wandering limbs, the fear he had felt at nearly losing Martin still strong despite his partner's obvious recovery. There would be time later to let Martin return his caresses, perhaps even to let Martin take charge, but right now, Denis's control was balanced on the

edge of a knife. One push too hard and he would lose all power over the beast within him.

Hoping the taste of Martin's blood would calm him, Denis licked quickly across the skin of Martin's neck, feeling the pulse pounding beneath his tongue. His own heartbeat raced in time. Unable to wait a moment longer, he pierced Martin's flesh, his fangs sinking deep into his partner's body, hot blood rushing into his mouth, flooding his senses with Martin's eagerness and desire. Beneath him, the wizard's hard body arched against his, rubbing their cocks together and only adding to the sensual tension that built and built and built until Denis lost control of himself and his beast, his climax blindsiding him and leaving him wrung out and trembling on top of his recumbent lover.

Only the matching repletion he could taste in Martin's blood kept him from recoiling in shame.

"That wasn't exactly the way I imagined it going," Denis said, cheeks flushed with a combination of satiation and embarrassment.

"Shhh," Martin said. "You're killing the afterglow."

Denis subsided, letting the moment stretch, but eventually the stickiness between them grew uncomfortable. "I should get a rag to clean us up."

Martin's arms tightened around Denis's shoulders. "You should stay right here and let me lick you clean."

Denis groaned at the image, rolling onto his back when Martin nudged his hips. The instincts that had driven him to become the youngest chef de la Cour in France urged him to resist giving in to Martin, but he ignored them. Martin was no threat to him. To his sanity, maybe, as he took his time licking his way over Denis's slender body and down to his groin, but not to him or his position.

Denis stayed still for as long as he could stand it, but the need to touch Martin, to taste, to ravish, grew undeniable. Pulling his lover up for a kiss, he returned the favor, licking Martin clean and then lingering, sucking on his balls, nipping at his inner thighs, and generally doing everything he could think of to return Martin to fever pitch.

Or maybe not.

"Bite me for real," Martin said, pushing a tube of lube into Denis's hand. "Bite me while you make me ready."

Another time, Denis might have wondered where Martin found the lube, but now he was merely grateful for its presence. He slicked his fingers as he prepared Martin's skin for his fangs.

Martin shifted his other leg, making more room for Denis between his thighs. Denis took advantage of the new position, teasing the guardian ring as he teased the sensitive flesh of the crease where Martin's thigh and hip met. When Martin writhed on the bed and a moan escaped his throat, Denis smiled and sheathed his fangs and his fingers in one firm stroke, winning a sharp cry from his lover. He might have worried he was hurting Martin had he not tasted the mind-numbing pleasure in the wizard's blood.

Instead, he delved deep, fingers stroking over Martin's gland as his fangs probed the sensitive skin of his hip where the veins ran near the surface, and let the ebb and flow of pleasure in Martin's blood guide his movements.

Finally, Martin reached down and tugged on his hair. "If you keep that up, I'm going to come again, and I'm not sure I'll be good for a third round."

Denis thought that sounded like a challenge, but he would save it for another night when his own need was better controlled and he was sure he could wait the time it would take to rouse Martin again. Freeing his fangs, he licked the wounds closed, stealing a taste of fluid from Martin's cock as he passed on his way to his lover's mouth.

Martin's legs wrapped around Denis's hips, drawing him close. Denis shifted a little to fit his cock into the berth his fingers had prepared, leaning down to kiss Martin as he did. He would bite him again, because nothing tasted like an orgasm in a lover's blood, but the need had not grown urgent yet. He could afford to take his time, rocking slowly against Martin's groin as their lips met, parted, and met again.

Eventually the need grew more urgent and he released the mortal kiss in favor of another vampire kiss. Martin worked at l'Institut, surrounded by wizards and vampires steeped in the culture of the partnerships, so perhaps he would not mind multiple bite marks on his neck, but Denis had spent too many years conscious of leaving those he fed from as discreetly marked as possible, so he carefully slotted his fangs into the marks he had made earlier when he first bit Martin.

He could feel Martin's magic enveloping him as he fed, the same sense of warmth and homecoming he had always known when he fed from Noël and had never hoped to experience again. Pushing aside regret, he focused on the man in his bed now, the man who would share his bed and his existence for the next untold number of years if Denis had anything to say about it.

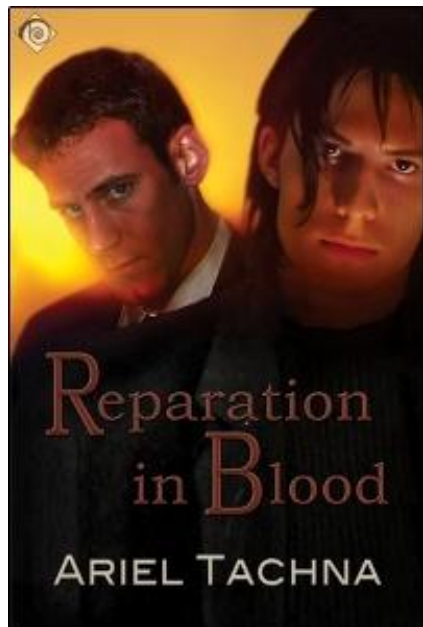
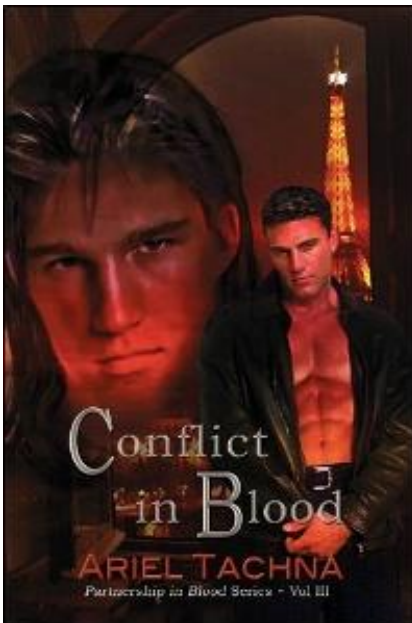
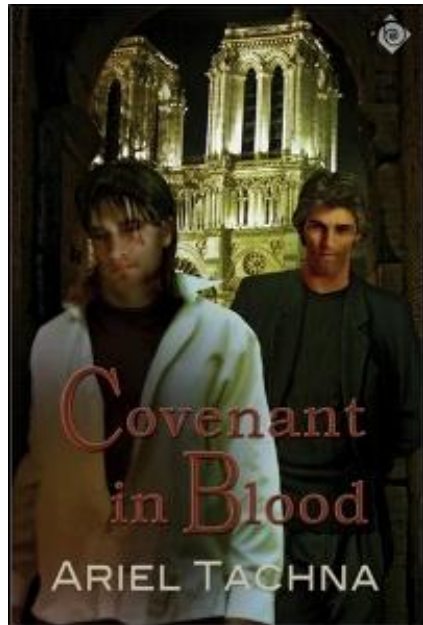
Their bodies moved in concert, striving for mutual fulfillment. Denis could taste it building in Martin's blood, a slower climb than the first time but no less inexorable, and when they crested together the second time, Denis tasted the same joy in Martin's blood that overflowed his own heart.

Denis had no idea what the next few months would bring, but he knew the most important thing for certain: he had found his partner.

ARIEL TACHNA lives outside of Houston with her husband, her daughter and son, and their cat. Before moving there, she traveled all over the world, having fallen in love with both France, where she found her husband, and India, where she dreams of retiring some day. She's bilingual with snippets of four other languages to her credit and is as in love with languages as she is with writing.

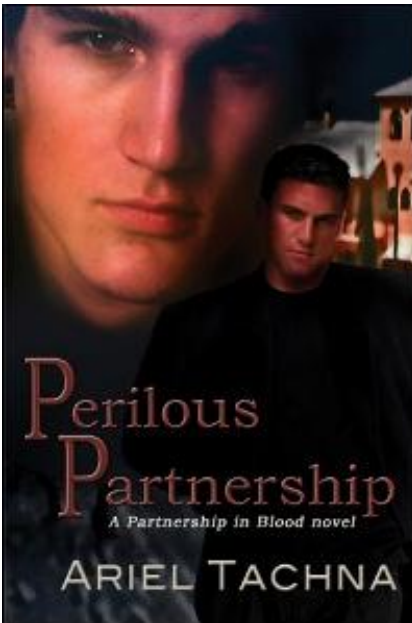
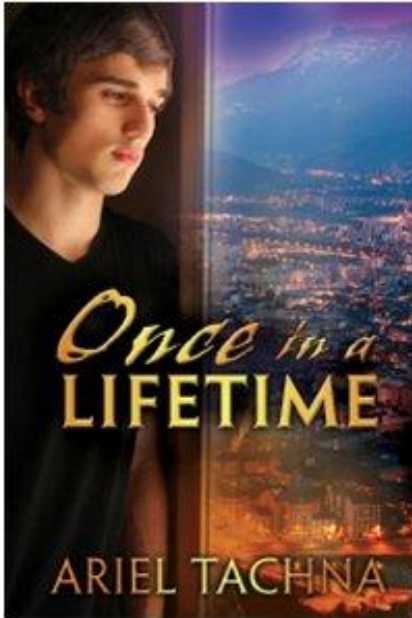
Visit Ariel's web site at <http://www.arieltachna.com/> and her blog at <http://arieltachna.livejournal.com/> .

Partnership in Blood by ARIEL TACHNA



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

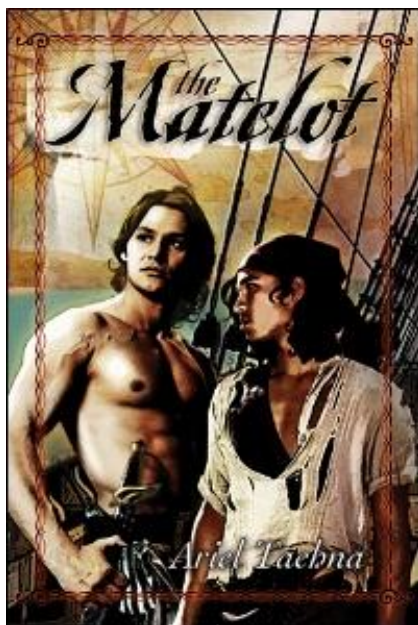
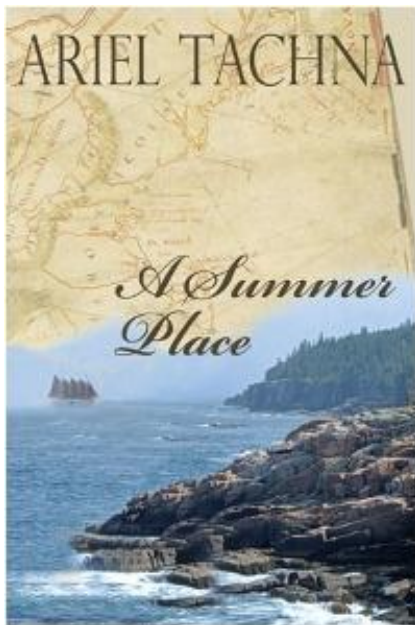
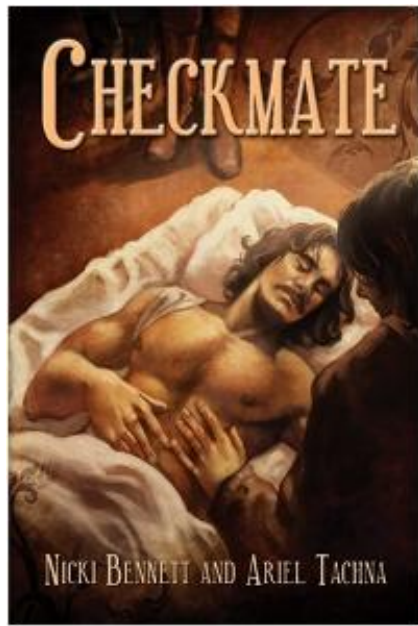
Also by Ariel Tachna



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>



Historical Romance by ARIEL TACHNA



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>





*Dreamspinner*  
Press

For more of the  
best M/M romance,  
visit

*Dreamspinner Press*

[www.dreamspinnerpress.com](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com)