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MALCOLM, THE HEAD of the Church of Eternal Life, the vampire church, sat across from me. Malcolm had never been in my office before. In fact, the last time I'd seen him, he'd accused me of doing black magic and being a whore. I'd also killed one of his members on church grounds, in front of him and the rest of his congregation. The dead vamp had been a serial killer. I'd had a court order of execution, but still, it hadn't made Malcolm and me buddies.

I sat behind my desk, sipping coffee from my newest Christmas-themed mug: a little girl sat on Santa's lap saying, "Define good." I worked hard every year to find the most offensive mug I could so that Bert, our business manager, could throw a fit. This year's mug was tame by my usual standards. It had become one of my holiday traditions. I'd at least dressed for the season in a red skirt and jacket over a thin silk sweater—very festive, for me. I had a new gun in my shoulder holster. A friend of mine had finally persuaded me to give up my Browning Hi-Power for something that fit my hand a little better and had a smoother profile. The Hi-Power was at home in the gun safe, and the Browning Dual Mode was in the holster. I felt like I was cheating but at least I was still a Browning girl.

Once upon a time, I'd thought Malcolm handsome, but that had been when his vampire tricks worked on me. Without vampire wiles

to cloud my perception, I could see that his bone structure was too rough, almost as if it hadn't quite gotten smoothed out before they put that pale skin on it. His hair was cut short and had a little curl to it, because to take the curl out of it he'd have had to shave it. The hair was a bright, bright canary yellow. That's what blond hair does if you take it out of the sun for a few hundred years. He looked at me with his blue eyes and smiled, and the smile filled his face with personality. That same personality that made his Sunday morning television program such a hit. It wasn't magic, it was just him. Charisma, for lack of a better word. There was force to Malcolm that had nothing to do with vampire powers and everything to do with who he was, not what he was. He'd have been a leader and a mover of men even if he'd been alive.

The smile softened his features, filled his face with a zeal that was both compelling and frightening. He was a true believer, head of a church of true believers. The whole idea of a vampire church still creeped me out, but it was the fastest-growing denomination in the country.

"I was surprised to see your name in my appointment book, Malcolm," I said, finally.

"I understand that, Ms. Blake. I am almost equally surprised to be here."

"Fine, we're both surprised. Why are you here?"

"I suspect you have, or will soon have, a warrant of execution for a member of my church."

I managed to keep my face blank, but felt the stiffness in my shoulders. He'd see the reaction, and he'd know what it meant. Master vampires don't miss much. "You have a lot of members, Malcolm; could you narrow it down a little? Who exactly are we talking about?"

"Don't be coy, Ms. Blake."

"I'm not being coy."

"You're trying to imply that you have a warrant for more than one of my vampires. I do not believe it, and neither do you."

I should have felt insulted, because I wasn't lying. Two of his up-standing vamps had been very naughty. "If your vampires were fully blood-oathed to you, you'd know I was telling the truth, because you'd be able to enforce your moral code in entirely new ways."

"A blood oath is not a guarantee of absolute control, Ms. Blake."

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“No, but it’s a start.”

A blood oath was what a vamp took when he joined a new vampire group, a new kiss. He literally took blood from the Master of the City. It meant the master had a lot more control over him, and the lesser vamps gained in power, too. If their master was powerful enough. A weak master wasn’t much help, but Jean-Claude, St. Louis’s Master of the City and my sweetie, wasn’t weak. Of course, the master gained power from the oath, as well. The more powerful a vamp they could oath, the more they gained. Like so many vampire powers, it was a two-way street.

“I do not want to enforce my moral code. I want my people to choose to be good people,” Malcolm said.

“Until your congregation is blood-oathed to some master vampire, they are loose cannons, Malcolm. You control them by force of personality and morality. Vampires only understand fear, and power.”

“You are the lover of at least two vampires, Ms. Blake. How can you say that?”

I shrugged. “Maybe because I *am* dating two vampires.”

“If that is what being Jean-Claude’s human servant has taught you, Ms. Blake, then it is sad things he is teaching you.”

“He is the Master of the City of St. Louis, Malcolm, not you. You, and your church, go unmolested by his tolerance.”

“I go unmolested because the Church grew powerful under the previous Master of the City, and by the time Jean-Claude rose to power, we were hundreds. He did not have the power to bring me and my people to heel.”

I sipped coffee and thought about my next answer, because I couldn’t argue with him. He was probably right. “Regardless of how we got where we are, Malcolm, you have several hundred vampires in this city. Jean-Claude let you have them because he thought you were blood-oathing them. We learned in October that you aren’t. Which means that the vamps with you are cut off from an awful lot of their potential power. I’m okay with that, I guess. Their choice, if they understand that it is a choice, but no blood oath means that they are not mystically tied to anyone but the vamp that made them. You, I’m told, do the deed, most of the time. Though the church deacons do recruit sometimes.”

“How our church is organized is not your concern.”

“Yes,” I said, “it is.”

“Do you serve Jean-Claude now, when you say that, or is it as a federal marshal that you criticize me?” He narrowed those blue eyes. “I do not think the federal government knows or understands enough of vampires to care whether I blood-oath my people.”

“Blood-oathing lowers the chance of vamps doing things behind the back of the master.”

“Blood-oathing takes away their free will, Ms. Blake.”

“Maybe, but I’ve seen the damage they can do with their free will. A good Master of the City can guarantee that there is almost no crime among his people.”

“They are his slaves,” Malcolm said.

I shrugged and sat back in my chair. “Are you here to talk about the warrant, or to talk about the deadline Jean-Claude gave your church?”

“Both.”

“Jean-Claude has given you and your church members their choices, Malcolm. Either you blood-oath them, or Jean-Claude does. Or they can move to another city to be blood-oathed there, but it has to be done.”

“It is a choice of who they would be slaves to, Ms. Blake. It is no choice at all.”

“Jean-Claude was generous, Malcolm. By vampire law he could have just killed you and your entire congregation.”

“And how would the law, how would you, as a federal marshal, have felt about such slaughter?”

“Are you saying that my being a federal marshal limits Jean-Claude’s options?”

“He values your love, Anita, and you would not love a man that could slaughter my followers.”

“You don’t add yourself to that list—why?”

“You are a legal vampire executioner, Anita. If I broke human law, you would kill me yourself. You would not fault Jean-Claude for doing the same if I broke vampiric law.”

“You think I’d just let him kill you?”

“I think you would kill me for him, if you felt justified.”

A small part of me wanted to argue, but he was right. I’d been grandfathered in like most of the vamp executioners who had two or more years on the job and could pass the firearms test. The idea was,

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making us federal marshals was the quickest way to grant us the ability to cross state lines and to control us more. Crossing state lines and having a badge was great; I wasn't sure how controlled we were. Of course, I was the only vampire hunter who was also dating her Master of the City. Most saw it as a conflict of interest. Frankly, so did I, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

"You do not argue with me," Malcolm said.

"I can't decide if you think I'm a civilizing influence on Jean-Claude, or a bad one."

"I saw you once as his victim, Anita. Now I am no longer certain who is the victim, and who the victimizer."

"Should I be offended?"

He just looked at me.

"The last time I was in your church you called me evil, and accused me of black magic. You called Jean-Claude immoral, and me his whore, or something like that."

"You were trying to take away one of my people to be killed with no trial. You shot him to death on the church grounds."

"He was a serial killer. I had an order of execution for everyone involved in those crimes."

"All the vampires, you mean."

"Are you implying that humans or shapeshifters were involved?"

"No, but if they had been, you would never have been allowed to shoot them to death with the police helping you do it."

"I've had warrants for shapeshifters before."

"But those are rare, Anita, and there are no orders of execution for humans."

"The death penalty still exists, Malcolm."

"After a trial, and years of appeals, if you are human."

"What do you want from me, Malcolm?"

"I want justice."

"The law isn't about justice, Malcolm. It's about the law."

"She did not do the crime she is accused of, as our wandering brother Avery Seabrook was innocent of the crime you sought him for." He called any of his church group who joined Jean-Claude "wanderers." The fact that Avery, the vampire, had a last name meant he was very recently dead, and that he was an American vampire. Vampires normally only had one name, like Madonna or Cher, and only

one vamp per country could have that name. Duels were fought over the right to use names. Until now, until America. We had vampires with last names, unheard of.

"I cleared Avery. Legally, I didn't have to."

"No, you could have shot him dead, found out your mistake later, and suffered nothing under the law."

"I did not write this law, Malcolm, I just carry it out."

"Vampires did not write this law either, Anita."

"That's true, but no human can mesmerize other humans so that they help in their own kidnappings. Humans can't fly off with their victims in their arms."

"And that justifies slaughtering us?"

I shrugged again. I was going to leave this argument alone because I'd begun to not like that part of my job. I didn't think vampires were monsters anymore; it made killing them harder. It made executing them when they couldn't fight back monstrous, with me as the monster.

"What do you want me to do, Malcolm? I have a warrant with Sally Hunter's name on it. Witnesses saw her leave Bev Leveto's apartment. Ms. Leveto died by vampire attack. I know it wasn't any of Jean-Claude's vampires. That leaves yours." Hell, I had her driver's license picture in the file with the warrant. I have to admit that having a picture to go with it made me feel more like an assassin. A picture so I'd get the right one.

"Are you so certain of that?"

I blinked at him, the slow blink that gave me time to think but didn't look like I was thinking furiously. "What are you trying to say, Malcolm? I'm not good at subtle; just tell me what you came to say."

"Something powerful, someone powerful, came to my church last week. They hid themselves. I could not find them in the new faces of my congregation, but I know that someone immensely powerful was there." He leaned forward, his calm exterior cracking around the edges. "Do you understand how powerful they would have to be for me to sense them, use all my powers to search the room for them, yet not be able to find them?"

I thought about it. Malcolm was no Master of the City, but he was probably one of the top five most powerful vampires in town. He'd be higher, if he weren't so terribly moral. It limited him in some ways.

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I licked my lips, careful of the lipstick, and nodded. "Did they want you to know they were there, or was that part an accident?"

He actually showed surprise for a moment before he got control of his face. He played human too much for the media; he was beginning to lose that stillness of features that the old ones have. "I don't know." Even his voice was no longer smooth.

"Did the vamp do it to taunt you, or was it arrogance?"

He shook his head. "I do not know."

I had a moment of revelation. "You came here because you think Jean-Claude should know, but you can't let your congregation see you going to the Master of the City. It would undermine your whole free-will thing."

He settled back into his chair, fighting to keep the anger off his face, and failing. He was even more scared than I thought, to be losing it this badly in front of someone he disliked. Hell, he'd come to me for help. He was desperate.

"But you can come to me, a federal marshal, and tell me. Because you know I'll tell Jean-Claude."

"Think what you like, Ms. Blake."

We weren't on a first-name basis anymore. I'd hit it on the head. "A big, bad vamp checks your church out. You aren't vampire enough to smoke him out, and you come to me, to Jean-Claude and all his immoral power structure. You come to the very people you say you hate."

He stood up. "The crime that Sally is accused of happened less than twenty-four hours after he, it, they came to my church. I do not think that is a coincidence."

"I'm not lying about the second order of execution, Malcolm. It's in my desk drawer, right now, with a driver's license picture of the vampire in question."

He sat back down. "What name is on it?"

"Why, so you can warn . . . them?" I'd almost said *her*, because it was another female vamp.

"My people are not perfect, Ms. Blake, but I believe that another vampire has come to town and is framing them."

"Why? Why would someone do that?"

"I don't know."

"No one has bothered Jean-Claude or his people."

"I know," Malcolm said.

“Without a true master, a true blood-oathed, mystically connected master, your congregation are just sheep waiting for the wolves to come get them.”

“Jean-Claude said as much a month ago.”

“Yeah, he did.”

“I thought at first that it was one of the new vampires who has joined Jean-Claude. One of the ones from Europe, but it is not. It is something more powerful than that. Or it is a group of vampires combining their powers through their master’s marks. I have felt such power only once before.”

“When?” I asked.

He shook his head. “We are forbidden to speak of it, on penalty of death. Only if they contact us directly can we break this silence.”

“It sounds like you’ve already been contacted,” I said.

He shook his head again. “They are tampering with me, and my people, because technically I am outside normal vampire law. Did Jean-Claude report to the council that my church had not blood-oathed any of its followers?”

I nodded. “Yes, he did.”

He put his big hands over his face and leaned over his knees, almost as if he felt faint. He whispered, “I feared as much.”

“Okay, Malcolm, you’re moving too fast for me here. What does Jean-Claude’s reporting to the council have to do with some group of powerful vamps messing with your church?”

He looked at me, but his eyes had gone gray with worry. “Tell him what I have told you. He will understand.”

“But I don’t.”

“I have until New Year’s Day to give Jean-Claude my answer about the blood-oathing. He has been generous and patient, but there are those among the council that are neither of those things. I had hoped they would be proud of what I had accomplished. I thought it would please them, but I fear now that the council is not ready to see my brave new world of free will.”

“Free will is for humans, Malcolm. The preternatural community is about control.”

He stood again. “You have almost complete discretion on how the warrant is executed, Anita. Will you use some of that discretion to find the truth before you kill my followers?”



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I stood up. "I can't guarantee anything."

"I would not ask that. I ask only that you look for the truth before it is too late for Sally, and my other follower, whose name you will not even give me." He sighed. "I have not sent Sally running out of town; why would I warn the other?"

"You came through the door knowing Sally was in trouble. I'm not helping you figure the other bad guy out."

"It is a man, then?"

I just looked at him, glad that I could give full eye contact. It had always been so hard to do the tough stare back when I couldn't look a vamp in the eyes.

He straightened his shoulders as if only now aware that he was slumping. "You won't even give me that, will you? Please tell Jean-Claude what I have told you. I should have come to you immediately. I thought morals kept me from running to the very power structure I despise, but it wasn't morals, it was sin; the sin of pride. I hope that my pride has not cost more of my followers their lives." He went for the door.

I called after him. "Malcolm."

He turned.

"How big an emergency is this?"

"Big."

"Will a couple of hours make a difference?"

He thought about it. "Perhaps; why do you ask?"

"I won't be seeing Jean-Claude tonight. I just wanted to know if I should call him, give him a heads-up."

"Yes, by all means, give him his heads-up." He frowned at me. "Why would you not see your master tonight, Anita? Aren't you living with him?"

"Actually, no. I stay over at his place about half the week, but I've got my own place still."

"Will you be killing more of my kindred tonight?"

I shook my head.

"Then you will raise my other colder brethren. Whose blissful death will you disturb tonight, Anita? Whose zombie will you raise so some human can get their inheritance, or a wife can be consoled?"

"No zombies tonight," I said. I was too puzzled by his attitude on

the zombies to be insulted. I'd never heard a vampire claim any kinship with zombies, or ghouls, or anything but other vamps.

"Then what will keep you from your master's arms?"

"I've got a date, not that it's any of your business."

"But not a date with Jean-Claude, or Asher?"

I shook my head.

"Your wolf king then, Richard?"

I shook my head, again.

"For whom would you abandon those three, Anita? Ah, your leopard king, Micah."

"Wrong again."

"I am amazed that you are answering my questions."

"So am I, actually. I think it's because you keep calling me a whore, and I think I want to rub your face in it."

"What, the fact that you are a whore?" His face showed nothing when he said it.

"I knew you couldn't do it," I said.

"Do what, Ms. Blake?"

"I knew you couldn't play nice long enough to get my help. I knew if I kept at you, you'd get snotty and mean."

He gave a small bow, just from the neck. "I told you, Ms. Blake, my sin is pride."

"And what's my sin, Malcolm?"

"Do you want me to insult you, Ms. Blake?"

"I just want to hear you say it."

"Why?"

"Why not?" I said.

"Very well; your sin is lust, Ms. Blake, as it is the sin of your master and all his vampires."

I shook my head and felt that unpleasant smile curl my lips. The smile that left my eyes cold, and usually meant I was well and truly pissed. "That's not my sin, Malcolm, not the one nearest and dearest to my heart."

"And what would your sin be, Ms. Blake?"

"Wrath, Malcolm, it's wrath."

"Are you saying I've made you angry?"

"I'm always angry, Malcolm; you just gave me a target to focus it on."

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“Do you envy anyone, Ms. Blake?”

I thought about it, then shook my head. “Not really, no.”

“I will not ask about sloth; you work entirely too hard for that to be an issue. You are not greedy, nor a glutton. Are you prideful?”

“Sometimes,” I said.

“Wrath, lust, and pride, then?”

I nodded. “I guess, if we’re keeping score.”

“Oh, someone is keeping score, Ms. Blake, never doubt that.”

“I’m Christian, too, Malcolm.”

“Do you worry about getting into heaven, Ms. Blake?”

It was such an odd question that I answered it. “I did, for a while, but my faith still makes my cross glow. My prayers still have the power to chase the evil things away. God hasn’t forsaken me; it’s just that all the right-wing fundamentalist Christians want to believe he has. I’ve seen evil, Malcolm, real evil, and you aren’t that.”

He smiled, and it was gentle, and almost embarrassed. “Have I come to you for absolution, Ms. Blake?”

“I don’t think I’m the one to give you absolution.”

“I would like a priest to hear my sins before I die, Ms. Blake, but none will come near me. They are holy, and the very trappings of their calling will burst into flames in my presence.”

“Not true. The holy items only go off if the true believer panics, or if you try vampire powers on them.”

He blinked at me, and I realized his eyes held unshed tears, shimmering in the overhead lights. “Is this true, Ms. Blake?”

“I promise it is.” His attitude was beginning to make me afraid for him. I didn’t want to be afraid for Malcolm. I had enough people in my life that I cared for enough to worry about; I did not need to add the undead Billy Graham to my list.

“Do you know any priests that might be willing to hear a very long confession?”

“I might, though I don’t know if they’re allowed to give you absolution, since technically in the eyes of the Church you’re already dead. You have ties to a lot of the religious community, Malcolm; surely one of the other leaders would be willing.”

“I do not want to ask them, Anita. I do not want them to know my sins. I would rather . . .” He hesitated, then spoke, but I was pretty sure

it wasn't the sentence he started to use. "Quietly, I would rather it be done quietly."

"Why the sudden need for confession and absolution?"

"I am still a believer, Ms. Blake; being a vampire has not changed that. I wish to die absolved of my sins."

"Why are you expecting to die?"

"Tell Jean-Claude what I have told you about the stranger or strangers in my church. Tell him about my desire for a priest to hear my confession. He will understand."

"Malcolm . . ."

He kept walking, but stopped with his hand on the door. "I take back what I said, Ms. Blake, I am not sorry I came. I am only sorry I did not come days ago." With that he walked out and closed the door softly behind him.

I sat down at my desk and called Jean-Claude. I had no idea what was going on, but something was up, something big. Something bad.

## 2

I CALLED JEAN-CLAUDE'S strip club, Guilty Pleasures, first. He'd gone back to being manager there since he had enough vampires to help run the other businesses. Of course, I didn't get Jean-Claude on the phone first thing. One of the employees answered and informed me that he was on stage. I told them I'd call back, and yes, it was important, so have him call me ASAP.

I hung up and stared at the phone. What was my sweetie doing while I sat in my office a few miles away? I pictured all that long dark hair, the pale perfection of his face, and I was thinking too hard. I could feel him. Feel the woman in his arms as she clung to him. He held her face between his hands to keep the kiss from getting out of hand, to keep her from shredding her own lips against the sharp points of his fangs. I felt her eagerness. Saw inside her mind, that she wanted him to take her here and now on the stage in front of everyone. She didn't care; she just wanted him.

Jean-Claude fed on that desire, that need. He fed on it, as other vampires fed on blood. Half-naked waiters came onto the stage to help pry her, gently, from him. They helped her back to her seat, while she cried, cried for what she could not have. She had paid for a kiss, and she'd gotten that, but Jean-Claude always left you wanting more. I should know.

He spoke like some seductive wind through my mind, “*Ma petite*, what are you doing here?”

“Thinking too hard,” I whispered to the empty office, but he heard me.

He smiled with at least two different types of lipstick smeared around his mouth. “You entered my mind while I fed the *ardeur* and it did not rise in you; you have been practicing.”

“Yeah.” It felt weird saying it out loud in the empty, dim office, especially because I could hear the hum and murmur of the club around him. The women clamoring to be next, waving their cash for him to choose them.

“I must choose a few more; then we may talk.”

“Use the phone,” I said. “I’m at the office.”

He laughed, and the sound echoed through me, shivered down my skin, made things low in my body tighten. I drew away from him, closed the metaphysical links between us enough so I wouldn’t get sucked back into his act. Then I tried to think about something else, anything else. If I’d known enough about baseball, I’d have thought about that, but that wasn’t my sport. Jean-Claude didn’t strip, but he did feed off the crowd’s sexual energy. In another century he’d have been called an incubus, a demon that fed on lust. The thought almost pulled me back to him, but I thought, *Think about legal stuff, the law*. Something. In this century he just had to put a disclaimer in several prominent places in the club stating, “Warning: Vampire powers will be part of the entertainment. There are no exceptions. By being inside the club, you give permission for the legal use of vampire powers upon yourself and anyone with you.”

The new laws that had helped make vamps legal hadn’t really caught up to everything they could do. You couldn’t do one-on-one mind control, though mass hypnosis was okay, because the call wasn’t as deep, or as complete. One-on-one mind control meant the vampire could call people out of their beds, force them to come to the vampire. Mass hypnosis didn’t work that way, or that was the theory. A vamp couldn’t drink blood without getting the donor’s permission first. You couldn’t use vamp powers to get sex. Beyond that, the law stated that you had to notify humans in your place of business, and beyond that the law got really vague. The last no-no about no vamp powers for sex had been added only last year. It was treated like a date-rape drug, for legal purposes. Except that a vampire convicted of its use was sen-

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tenced to death, not trial or jail. Malcolm was right about the double standard. Vampires were people under the law, but they didn't get all the rights that the rest of the American citizenry got. Of course, most of the rest of the citizens couldn't tear iron bars from their sockets and use mind control to wipe people's memories. They'd been deemed too dangerous for jail after a few bloody, and very messy, escapes.

So my job as vamp executioner had been invented. I don't mean to make it sound like I was the first one with the job. I wasn't. The ones who took the job first were people who had been slaying vampires when they were still illegal, so you could kill them on sight with no legal problems. The government had actually yanked the credentials of some people who'd had a hard time understanding that they had to wait for a warrant of execution before killing anyone. They'd finally had to put one of the old-style vamp hunters in jail. He was still in jail five years later. That had sent the message they wanted.

I'd come in at the tail end of the old school, but mostly I had never killed a vampire that hadn't been covered by legal paperwork.

I glanced at my watch. I still had enough time to run home, change into date clothes, get Nathaniel, and make the movie.

The phone rang, and I jumped. Nervous, who me? "Hello?" I made it a question.

"*Ma petite*, what is wrong?" That smooth voice eased over the phone like a hand caressing down my skin. It wasn't sexual this time; it was calming. He'd picked up my nervousness. In the middle of feeding the *ardeur*, he'd missed it.

"Malcolm came to see me."

"About the blood-oathing?"

"Yes, and no," I said.

"Why yes, and no, *ma petite*?"

I told him what Malcolm had told me. Somewhere in the middle of the talk, he shut down the metaphysical link between us, shut it down so hard and so tight that I couldn't feel anything from him. We could share each other's dreams, but if we shielded hard enough, we could shut each other out. But it took work, and we didn't do it often lately. The silence when I finished was so complete that I had to ask, "Jean-Claude, you still there? I can't even hear you breathing."

"I do not have to breathe, *ma petite*, as well you know."

"It's just a saying," I said.

He sighed then, and the sound of it shivered over my skin. This time it was sexual. He could use some of his powers on me and still shield like a son of a bitch. I couldn't. When I shielded that tight, I was cut off from a lot of my abilities. "Stop that. Don't try to distract me with your voice. What is it that Malcolm can't speak of without being killed?"

"You will not like my answer, *ma petite*."

"Just tell me."

"I cannot tell you. I am under the same vow as Malcolm, as all the vampires everywhere are."

"All vampires?"

"*Oui*."

"What, or who, could force an oath like that from all of you?" I thought about it for a second, then answered my own question. "The vampire council, of course, your ruling body."

"*Oui*."

"So you aren't going to tell me anything about what's happening?"

"I cannot, *ma petite*."

"Well, that is just frustrating as hell."

"You have no idea how frustrating, *ma petite*."

"I am your human servant; doesn't that make me privy to all your secrets?"

"Ah, but this is not my secret."

"What does that mean, not your secret?"

"It means, *ma petite*, that I cannot discuss this with you unless I am given permission."

"How do you get permission?"

"Pray that I am never able to answer that question, *ma petite*."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that, if I am able to speak about this openly, then we will have been contacted, and we do not wish to be contacted by this."

"*This*, a thing, not a person?"

"I will say no more."

I knew I could push against his shields, and sometimes crack them. I thought about it, and it was as if he read my mind, and maybe he had.

"Please, *ma petite*, do not push me on this."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad, but I think it is not our bad. I believe Malcolm will come to vampire justice for his crimes, whether we do it or not."



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"So whatever, or whoever, this is, is hunting Malcolm?"

"Perhaps. It is certainly he and his congregation that have the attention."

"Would whoever this is really frame Malcolm's people and set up me and the other vamp executioners to do their dirty work?"

"Perhaps. This legal status is very new. I know some of the older levels of vampire politics are puzzled by it. Perhaps some decided to use it to their own advantage."

"I had a case of that just two months ago, where one vamp framed another for a murder of a woman. I don't want to kill someone who's innocent."

"Is any vampire truly innocent?"

"Don't give me that fundamentalist shit, Jean-Claude."

"We are monsters, *ma petite*. You know that I believe that."

"Yeah, but you don't want us to go back to the bad ol' days and have it be open season on you guys."

"No, I do not want that." There was something in the dry tone of his voice.

"You're shielding so hard, I can't tell what you're feeling. You only shield this hard when you're scared, really scared."

"I am afraid that you will pick from my mind what I am forbidden to tell you. There is no, how do you say, fudging, on this . . . rule of law for us. If you learned this secret even in my mind, by accident, it might be grounds to slaughter both of us."

"What the hell is this secret?"

"I have told you all I can."

"Do I need to sleep at the Circus of the Damned with you tonight? Do we need to circle the wagons?"

He was quiet again, then finally said, "No, no."

"You don't sound sure."

"I think it would be a very bad thing for you to sleep with me tonight, *ma petite*. Sex and dreams are the times when shields drop, and you might learn what we cannot afford for you to know."

"Are you saying that I'm not going to see you until this is resolved?"

"No, no, *ma petite*, but not tonight. I will think about our situation and decide a course of action by tomorrow night."

"Course of action? What are the possibilities?"

"I dare not say."

"Damn it, Jean-Claude, talk to me." I was a little angry, but the tight feeling in my stomach was mostly fear.

"If all goes well, you will never learn this secret."

"But it's something that the council could have sent to kill Malcolm and destroy his church?"

"I cannot answer your questions."

"Won't, you mean."

"*Non, ma petite*, cannot. Has it not occurred to you that this could be a ploy of our enemies to give them an excuse under vampire law to destroy us?"

I suddenly felt cold. "No, it hadn't occurred to me."

"Think upon it, *ma petite*."

"You mean, they send something, so that if you tell me about it, then it, or they, can kill us. You think someone on the council is counting on the fact that we're so tightly bound metaphysically that you can't keep a secret this big from me. And if I find out, it won't just be Malcolm that they'll kill, but us, too."

"It is a thought, *ma petite*."

"A very twisty-turny, underhanded thought."

"Vampires are a very twisty-turny lot, *ma petite*. As for underhanded, they would think of it as clever."

"They can think what they like, but it's a coward's way."

"Oh, no, *ma petite*, we do not want anyone on the council to put their full attention in a challenge to me. That would also be a very bad thing."

"So, what? I meet Nathaniel for our date, and I pretend we haven't had this talk?"

"Something like that, yes."

"I can't pretend that I don't know something big and bad has come to town."

"If it is not hunting us, be grateful, and do not pick at it. I beg you, Anita, for the sake of all you love, do not seek an answer to this riddle." He'd called me by my real name; it was a bad sign.

"I can't just pretend nothing is happening, Jean-Claude. Aren't you even going to tell me to be more careful than normal?"

"You are always careful, *ma petite*. I never worry that any bad thing will catch you unaware. It is one of your charms for me that you can take care of yourself."

## THE HARLEQUIN

19

“Even against something bad enough to scare you and Malcolm this badly.”

“I trust you, *ma petite*. Do you trust me?”

That was a loaded question, but finally I said, “Yeah.”

“You do not sound certain.”

“I trust you, but . . . I don’t like secrets, and I do not trust the council. And I have a warrant of execution on a vamp who is probably innocent. I’ve got a second warrant coming by tomorrow. They are both members of the Church of Eternal Life. I may not agree with Malcolm’s philosophy, but his members usually stay away from killing offenses. If I get a warrant of execution for a third member of Malcolm’s church this week, then it’s a frame. The law, as written, doesn’t give me much wiggle room, Jean-Claude.”

“Actually, it gives you a great deal of wiggle room, *ma petite*.”

“Yeah, yeah, but if I don’t use the warrant in a timely manner, I may have to answer to my superiors. I’m a federal marshal now, and they can call me on the carpet and make me explain my actions.”

“Have they done that to any of the new marshals yet?”

“Not yet. But if I’ve got a warrant, and other murders with the same MO keep happening, I’ll need an explanation as to why I haven’t killed Sally Hunter. The police, whatever the flavor, won’t accept ‘it’s a secret’ as an answer if people keep dying.”

“How many humans are dead?”

“One victim per warrant, but if I hesitate on the warrants, will whoever this is escalate the violence and force my hand?”

“Possibly.”

“Possibly,” I said.

“*Oui*.”

“You know, this could get ugly really fast.”

“You have used your discretionary powers to get warrants vacated in the past. You saved our Avery.”

“He is not ‘our’ Avery.”

“He would be yours, if you would let him.” There was the faintest of tones in his voice.

“Are you jealous of Avery Seabrook? He’s like only two years dead.”

“Not jealous in the way you mean.”

“Then how?”

“It was my blood he drank when he took oath to me, *ma petite*, but

it is not me he watches. I should be his master, but I think if we both ordered him to do opposite things, I am not certain I would win the contest.”

“Are you saying that my hold on him is stronger than yours?”

“I am saying it is a possibility.”

It was my turn for silence. I was a necromancer, not just an animator of zombies, but a real, true necromancer. I could control more than just zombies. We were still trying to figure out how much more.

“Malcolm said he wasn’t sure which of us was victim and which victimizer anymore.”

“He is foolish, but not a fool.”

“I think I understood that,” I said.

“Then I will be plain. Go on your date with Nathaniel, celebrate your almost-anniversary. This is not our fight, not yet, perhaps not ever. Do not make it our fight, for it could be the death of everyone we love.”

“Oh, thanks, and with that cheery message, I’ll have no trouble going to the movies and enjoying myself.” Truthfully, I felt a little silly about the whole date tonight. Nathaniel wanted to celebrate our anniversary. The trouble was, we couldn’t agree on when our relationship changed from friends to more than friends. So, he’d chosen a date and called it our almost-anniversary. If I hadn’t been too embarrassed, I’d have picked the first time we had intercourse as the anniversary date. I just couldn’t figure out how to explain to friends why that date.

Jean-Claude sighed, and it wasn’t sexual this time, just frustrated, I think. “I wanted this almost-anniversary to go well, tonight, *ma petite*. Not just for your sake, and Nathaniel’s, but if he can work you through your reluctance to be romantic, then the rest of us might have a chance to celebrate special days with you, as well.”

“And what date would you pick as our anniversary?” I asked, in a voice thick with sarcasm.

“The first night we made love, for that is the night that you truly let yourself love me.”

“Damn it, you’ve thought about this.”

“Why does sentiment make you so uncomfortable, *ma petite*?”

I’d have loved to answer him, but I couldn’t. Truthfully, I wasn’t sure. “I don’t know, and I’m sorry that I’m such a pain in the ass. I’m sorry that I don’t let you and the rest of the guys do all the romantic gestures you want. I’m sorry that it’s so hard to be in love with me.”

## THE HARLEQUIN

21

"Now, you are being too hard on yourself."

"I'm scared, I'm angry, I'm frustrated, and I don't want to fight with you, because it's not your fault. But now, thanks to what you just said, I don't feel like I can cancel the date with Nathaniel tonight." I thought about what I'd just said. "You bastard, you did this on purpose. You manipulated me into keeping the date with Nathaniel."

"Perhaps, but you are his first real girlfriend, and he is twenty. It is important to him, this night."

"He's dating me, not you."

"*Oui*, but if all the men in your life are happy, you are happier, and it makes my life easier."

That made me laugh. "You bastard."

"And I did not lie, *ma petite*, I would love to celebrate once a year the first night you came to me. If your first attempt at a modest celebration fails, then the larger, more romantic gestures will never come to pass. I want them to come to pass."

I sighed and leaned my head against the phone receiver. I heard him saying, "*Ma petite, ma petite*, are you still there?"

I put the receiver back to my mouth and said, "I'm here. Not happy, but I'm here. I'll go, but there won't be time to change now."

"I am sure that Nathaniel would much rather you go on this almost-anniversary than that you are dressed a certain way."

"Spoken from the man who most often dresses me in fetish wear."

"Not as often as I would like." Before I could think of a comeback, he said, "*Je t'aime*," and hung up. *I love you*, in French, and he got off the phone while the getting was good.