

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric photograph of two women. The woman in the foreground has long, vibrant red hair and striking green eyes. She has a small, bloody wound on her lower lip and is looking directly at the viewer with a subtle, enigmatic smile. Her hand is placed on the shoulder of the second woman. The second woman, seen from the back, has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing a ring on her finger. The background is a misty, wooded area with tall, thin trees. The title 'WITCH'S MAGIC' is written in a large, glowing, blue, stylized font at the top, with a bright light flare on each letter. Below it, the subtitle 'Book Four of the Winslow Witches of Salem' is written in a smaller, similar glowing font. At the bottom, the author's name 'Tabitha Shay' is also written in the same glowing, blue font.

WITCH'S MAGIC

Book Four of the Winslow Witches of Salem

Tabitha Shay

Witch's Magic

Book Four of the Winstow Witches of Salem

Witches, werewolves, and vampires—an un-precedented alliance between the species.

Prince of Darkness: The realm of Vampyre is on the brink of a devastating war. In order to save his covens from total annihilation and claim his right to be king, Prince Valerian Radu must find a mate immediately and breed her. However, convincing the feisty witch, Shasta LaVeau, she's First Bride material is a war in itself—Shasta has but one thought on her mind—drive a stake through his black heart!

Princess of Light: In Shasta's opinion, the only good vampire is a staked vampire. Half-witch, half-werewolf, she leaves the borders of Ru-Noc to save her best friend, Princess Kali, from the evil fangs of Valerian, only to fall under the hypnotic spell of the sexy vampire.

Witch's Magic—where four realms collide—and there can only be one winner!

Tabitha Shay

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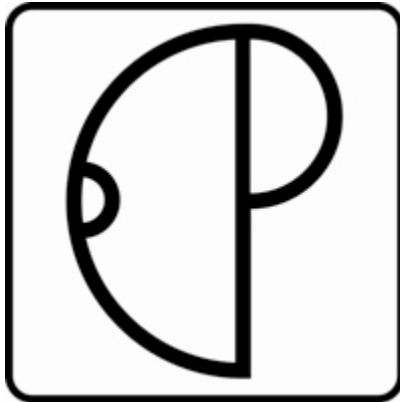


Witch's Magic

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Book Four of the Winstow Witches of Salem

Tabitha Shay



Tabitha Shay

Also by Tabitha Shay:

The Winstow Witches of Salem Series...

Book One: Witch's Brew

Book Two: Witch's Heart

Book Three: Witch's Moon

Witch's Magic

Tabitha Shay as Jaydyn Chelcee:

The Montana Men Series...

Book One: In the Arms of Danger

Book Two: No Holds Barred

Coming Soon

Book Three: Too Close to the Fire

Zabitha Shay

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Candace Clayton, who is always there to lend a helping hand, and even though I can't see her, I know she does it with a smile.

Dedication

To my sisters, Dale Darneal, Debbie Shackelford, Sandy Hale and Priscilla Watts...for the good times, the bad times, and the many times you were my only fans and audience.

Note to the Reader

In the back of this book, you will find a glossary of terms to use as a companion to the *Winslow Witches of Salem* series.

Witch's Magic

*Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.*

~Edna St. Vincent Millay

Prologue

We are in Transylvania, and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things.

*~Dracula
(Bram Stoker)*

*Transylvania
Anghel Crypt
Resting Place of Dracula
Mortal Realm*

A *Do Not Disturb* sign swung from an old, rusty chain at the foot of his coffin. He knew it was there.

By the gods, he'd hung it himself before retiring at least five centuries ago.

So why am I being disturbed? Damned illiterates, can't they read? How was a creature supposed to rest if...?

I said wake up! I need your help.

Annoyed at the rude intrusion blasting his mind and interrupting his most private thoughts, Count Dracula snorted. *I hoped it was merely indigestion giving me heartburn or the wind rattling my chain, but truly, do I hear an upstart who dares to enter my sanctum? Go away!*

He had not walked among his clan in many centuries. And there was good reason. The world held no surprises. No happiness. No romance. Chivalry was as good as dead. Buried. Well, dead, maybe not buried. He shuddered at the thought of being under all that dirt. And by the gods,

he was the most chivalrous being he knew.

Still, it was downright depressing. There were no more knights in shining armor. No damsels in distress. No Rapunzels with thick ropes of hair to toss out a tower window and her one true love scale the wall to rescue her from the evildoer. No unicorns. The last dragon was slain right before he decided he'd had enough of the world.

He'd seen and done it all to the point of boredom; to avoid spending useless years with nothing better to do with his time than to suck and fuck, he took to his coffin centuries early. To be content a vampire needed challenge. Romance. Sex. Oh yeah, lots of the hot stuff.

Brutal honesty forced him to admit he was glad he no longer spent time with his clan, but he hadn't exactly resigned his position of Ruler of the *Ancient Tribunal*. It was more like he'd materialized into a bat one night and winged his way off the job, leaving an abrupt message he'd had enough. He'd planned to spend the next several millennia in the sacred *Sleep of the Druze*, an ancient sleep, and one only the very eldest achieved.

He hadn't obtained his goal...yet.

The only thing he craved was peace. Rest. Quiet. He had no need to feed, except when the hunger became too much to ignore. He was perfectly happy snatching a bothersome rat when one ventured too close to his coffin. Then he had a quickie snack and went back to sleep.

Rats were good. Dammit, they were!

They might not be hardy, filling or nutritious, but they contained enough blood to sustain life...for a few weeks at a time.

Being one of the Ancients, his need for rest was much more crucial than his need to feed. At his age, all he wanted to do was prop up his feet, so to speak. Yes, peace and quiet was all he craved now. Well, and the occasional female. Two. Three.

No one had dared to disturb him...until now.

So who was this, this *person* who called to him? A voice he did not recognize. Not surprising. It had been a long time since he'd mentally connected with anyone. He'd pretty much forgotten the sound of speech.

He stirred inside the raggedy satin-lined coffin hidden in a decaying old crypt, all but lost by the passage of time. The only ones who knew where he slumbered were the two other members of the *Ancient Tribunal*. So how had the upstart rapping on his coffin dug him up?

Get up!

Dracula cocked an ear. Nope, he didn't have a clue who was silently yelling at him. It wasn't an Ancient who summoned, but one of the Children, one of the Young Ones.

Annoyance surged through his veins, veins dried and withered to threads from lack of sustenance. Waking an Ancient who had not fed thoroughly for years was strictly forbidden to the Young Ones. It created a danger for all who came near him for several hours.

There were rules, and reasons for those rules. If awakened in a state of extreme hunger, he'd attack and feed until he drained the person dry; then he'd go for the next, and the next, until he was engorged.

Gluttony was a shameful act for his kind. He'd die from embarrassment if discovered devouring his food, that is, if the undead weren't already in that precarious state.

It was imperative he be awakened slowly.

Nourished slowly.

Regain his strength slowly.

And it was extremely vital at least four females awaited him when he rose. Everyone knew a vampire who'd *Druze*-slept woke violently horny.

You dare break the laws of our people? Disobey my orders? Ignore my sign? Disturb my slumber?

Yes! Now, get up!

Stop knocking on my coffin! I'm at rest. I need my rest. Go away, upstart.

I need your help, your wisdom, your guidance.

Do I know you?

Don't pretend you don't know who I am, Grandfather. You might be Ancient, but there's nothing wrong with your memory.

Huh?

And don't pretend you're deaf. I know your hearing is acute. You can hear a pin drop three miles away.

Huh! Do you have four females waiting for me?

No. You don't have time to fuck.

No time to fuck? Incredulous, Dracula's eyes popped open. Aw, shit! There are two spiders doing 'it' on the ceiling of my coffin! He shuddered. You know what that means? I'll be sharing my sleeping quarters with hundreds of their little bastards. I detest the creatures. Always moving in and taking over a fellow's home. I suppose that means I must give up my bed.

He cleared his throat. *Son, listen to me very closely. One must always make time to fuck. Spiders do.*

"Filthy vermin. Freeloaders. Go find your own house!" He slapped at

Witch's Magic

the ill-mannered eight-legged arachnids doing the 'nasty' above his head.

I'm not your son. And no, there is no time. A war comes, a terrible war.

You woke me because of a lousy war? Pish! There have always been wars. There will always be wars.

Not like this one.

A sigh. What is different about this one? Nothing. Don't you recall your bloody ancestor and all his wars? Do you have any idea how many people I impaled? Now those were the good old days. Chop. Chop. They got in the way, up on the pike they went. I made damn certain of it. Just thinking about it makes me tired. Let me go back to sleep. There will be casualties, son. There are always casualties. We live. Some die. Others do not. Our kind goes on...if we breed. To breed we must fuck! No time to fuck, my ass! I want to talk to the person who schooled you. He didn't teach you a thing. Who was he?

You.

Oh.

There's no time for sex, Grandfather. Not this time. There's no time to waste. We are too few.

Uh-huh, that's from not fucking!

For the gods' sake, this war might see the end of our kind.

A snort. Why do you think such nonsense?

Because this war isn't simply battles amongst our own, but one that will include the forces from all realms: Vampyre, Demon, Witch and Were. Only the gods know which other realms might become involved. I'm afraid it's only the beginning. You must rise.

I don't want to rise.

You've slept long enough, Grandfather. Get up. I can't do this by myself. Get up. Now!

All right! Stop ordering me to get up. No need to get snappy. How do you know this war comes?

I've seen it in visions.

Visions? If you've seen it in visions, then when will it come? I could sleep until...

No. Get up. Now!

A drawn-out suffering sigh.

When will it begin?

It has already begun...

Chapter One

I don't like vampires. I'm going to take a stand and say they're not good.

~Xander

(Buffy, the Vampire Slayer)

Kingdom of Ru-Noc

Bela-Longaria

Wing Academy

Immortal Realm

Beltane

Shasta LaVeau thrived on danger. Her brothers frequently declared she was an adrenaline junkie. As she raced around her bedchamber flinging things aside in a slapdash manner, the adrenaline flooding her veins gave her an all-time high. She figured her brothers' declaration was true, but she couldn't help being excited. She was going to the mortal realm!

Shasta eyed the growing pile of supplies on her bed she wanted to take with her on this unexpected journey to the human world and made a quick list in her mind.

Garlic? Check.

Holy water? Check.

Hammer? Check.

Stakes? You bet.

Quickly she shoved the bundles of dried garlic bulbs into a plastic sack and stuffed them in the bottom of her bag. She tightened the lid on the flask of holy water and tossed it on top of the garlic. *Woo hoo!* She

was leaving soon, and nothing could stop her.

Shasta completed her checklist, then summoned the brooms, her own and the two specialty traveling brooms she'd leased to carry her luggage. She'd booked a double-broom flight so she wouldn't be jammed on her own besom. The three brooms lined up midair and waited. The two rentals were plain, ordinary switch brooms, but her broom was the latest up-to-date red-and-blue Stream-Lined Besom. It was extraordinary and dashed through the air like a fuel-injected *Jabber Engine Jetskey*. The speed was comparable to the humans' jets she'd learned about in class.

Now, to get everything loaded.

Shasta reached for the stakes, paused, and eyed them thoughtfully. Were they sharp enough? Was four enough? She wrinkled her nose. They might get messy if she had to use them more than once. Heck. Decisions, decisions.

She pressed a hand to her breast. Her heart fluttered with excitement. Her pulse pounded. She figured if she took the time to look at herself in a mirror, her eyes would glow in that special way only a half witch, half Were's eyes flamed at passionate moments.

Passionate moment? Shasta giggled and pinched herself to see if she was dreaming. Nope. This was definitely a passionate moment. Oh, gods. How her best friend, Princess Kali, would laugh.

Shasta shook her head. Giving Kali an artificial cock for her birthday last All Hallows' Eve, along with the hand-written instructions on what it was for and how to use it had had them both in stitches.

Kali clamped a hand over her mouth and fell into a fit of giggles when she unwrapped the present and read the instructions. "Oh, yeah, like you'd know how to use Fred."

Shasta grinned. "And what makes you think I don't?"

She'd nearly swallowed her tongue when Kali stuck that silly name on the twelve-inch instrument of pleasure. As young witches approaching their first season to mate, they were both afflicted with curiosity about mating. It was ironic her first passionate moment didn't involve getting naked with the opposite sex or getting acquainted with the multiple uses of a Fred.

"Ha! Like I don't know you?"

Shasta ignored the stab of fear she felt for her friend. Being held hostage by Captain Koran couldn't be much fun. He was so cold and unfriendly. Still, she knew deep in her heart the captain cared about Kali.

He wouldn't harm her, not deliberately, but it was mating season for witches, the greatest time when a witch ran the risk of losing her soul while mating.

The captain would not dare steal Kali's soul! Shasta had to believe that and refused to worry about it anymore.

Instead, she chose to let the excitement of packing for her visit to the mortal realm bubble through her veins. Honestly, she felt like clicking her heels in the air, but she was a half-breed, and half bloods tended to lose control of their magic and their spells rebounded. "No use creating problems."

It wasn't always easy being a half-breed, and being a hybrid of two immortal species was different from being an *Impure*, a witch who was half human and shunned by witches and *wakens* alike.

Shasta sighed. Most of the time she had the best of both worlds, but sometimes it had its disadvantages. The oddest things happened at the most unexpected moments.

Right now she had other, more important things to occupy her thoughts.

Yes! At last she was going to visit a realm she'd only ever studied at the academy and heard tales about from her brothers.

This was going to be a season of firsts.

For the first time in her life, she'd see a human, explore a new realm without her brothers there to protect her. She'd experience new scents. Get a sense of why mortals feared her kind. She'd have the opportunity to sample new foods.

And she was going to stake vampires in their lair, at least one.

What an adventure!

Of course her brothers would shit rocks if they discovered she'd left the academy and where she was, but until they did she intended to make the most of her journey.

Shasta looked around the room that had been her home for the last two years. Princess Kali and she had shared the same wing at the all-girls academy from day one. The fact they were both the only daughters of royal families and smothered by their brothers' over protectiveness drew them together. They bonded, becoming more like sisters than best friends. Much as she adored her cousin Willow, she felt closer to Kali.

And Princess Kali was missing!

Well, maybe not exactly missing. She knew Captain Koran T had taken Kali, but he did so against Kali's will. No one was kidnapping her

friend and getting away with it, not even the incredibly handsome Captain Koran T of the Royal Elite Palace Guard. She didn't care if the captain did have the hots for Kali and would protect her with his life; Shasta wanted to see for herself the princess was safe.

She tossed clothes willy-nilly into another bag, which even she had to admit was her usual style. She was always in a hurry and flew on the very edge of her broomstick. This time she had a legitimate excuse for packing harum-scarum. Kali needed her to come to the rescue, snatch her from the clutches of the horny, sexy *waken* captain.

Personally, she didn't understand why her best friend didn't jump the male witch's bones and be done with it, have her wicked way with him. He was smokin', maybe a bit of a bully when it came to Kali, but still hot.

Pinky, Shasta's miniature Oriental pot-bellied pig, raced into the room and came to a screeching halt when he spied the brooms hovering in the air. "Where you go, Missy Shasta? You tell Pinky right now what you plotting. Pinky know velly well you up to no good thing. You always up to no good."

Knowing she was guilty as charged, Shasta flinched at his accusation. She paused to eyeball the odd-looking familiar who'd been especially purchased for her by her elder brother Creed. Pinky was descended from a rare breed of pig whose coarse hair nearly dragged on the ground. One could barely see his slanted eyes and short snout for the fringe of bangs falling across his face. The pig was a dazzling hot pink and sparkled like fairy dust.

She should have known Pinky would root around until he discovered she was up to something. Nothing escaped the magical *Futhar's* notice. "I'm going to rescue Princess Kali from Captain Koran. He took her to the mortal realm. I intend to rectify the problem."

Pinky shuddered. "*Mortal* realm? Smelly creatures live there. My friend Dinka, she takes me there to watch movie 'bout a spider named Charlotte and a funny-looking hairless pig. Best you stay out of Captain's business, Missy Shasta, and remain at academy. Brothers be velly upset if you whisk off to mortal realm without permission and their protection."

She shook her head. "You know my brothers will never give their consent for me to go there."

"Zackly my point."

"Zackly *my* point. I'm not asking them. I'm a grown woman now. My first season approaches. You know what that means?"

Pinky nodded. "It mean you gonna get laid by either a smokin' hot *waken* or a sexy, virile Were. Maybe both. Be big with baby by All Hallows' Eve."

"Noo! That's not what I meant. It means I'll be changing at the first full moon. When that happens..."

"Yes. Yes. Pinky velly aware, know you will grow long snout, sharp claws and howl at the moon."

"You make it sound so...so...unromantic."

"It velly unromantic. What romantic about shaggy fur and sharp tooth?"

"Never mind, Pinky, it doesn't matter. Nothing is stopping me from helping my friend. She'd rescue me if I needed it."

Pinky snorted. "Then take Willow with you."

"Willow? No! Uncle Wolfen would be furious if I dragged Willow along with me to the mortal realm."

"Your uncle be velly angry you leave little cousin here alone, defenseless. You 'posed to look after her. Make certain no *waken* get him hands on her."

"One, Willow is far from defenseless. She's already mastered the technique of cloaking, something even I haven't learned yet. Two, I don't think it's the *waken's* hands Uncle is worried about. Besides, it will be centuries before Willow is mature enough to mate. She's only ten."

"Ten in human years, fifteen in wolf years, she plenty old enough in Were realm to be tagged by a future mate. You know velly well this is possible."

"She remains here alone. It's the lesser of two evils. Principal Wing will make certain no harm comes to Willow. I'm not taking Willow with me. She's too young. Besides, Willow is much too timid. She'd faint at the sight of a human."

"Willow not timid. She quiet. Study hard. Something you should do. You head for bad disaster, Missy Shasta. I report to Master Creed his baby sister head for big, big, velly big dilemma. Velly big trouble you make change by full moon in mortal realm and you snack on human. Human discover Weres ackly exist; they hunt you down like maddened dog."

Shasta gasped and shoved a strand of vibrant red hair from her eyes. "Don't you dare tell my brothers, Pinky. You're *my* familiar. Your loyalty

is to me."

Pinky blinked. "Your brother give me stickly orders. I better off tell him if you head for velly big trouble. He say will stuff my mouth with apple if I don't tell."

"And I will have smoked pork chops if you do."

"Clazy Were flamlee," Pinky complained. "I cooked meat either way I go."

"That's right. Besides, you're coming with me." She grabbed the little pig and stuffed him inside the bag.

Pinky squealed like he'd been stuck with a sharp knife. "Let me out,

Missy. It stink in here. Raunchy garlic! *Gag. Gag.* Pinky can't breathe. *Gasp. Gasp.* Pinky be good, not tell mean elder brother *nothing*. *Arg. Choke. Choke.*"

"You aren't supposed to *say* the words, Pinky. You're supposed to *feel* them."

"What words, Missy?"

"*Choke. Choke. Gasp. Gasp. Gag. Gag.* They're feelings and sounds, not words spoken for special effects."

"Oh. Pinky not know this dumb thing. Learn about special effects from Dinka movies. Thought they be mighty damn good. Pinky promise not tale-tattle. No wanna go to scary, stinky mortal-hell realm; velly bad things happen there."

Shasta tore open the bag and peeked inside. "What bad things?"

"Bad things like human hang witch people and they not believe in

Weres, and...and they grill little, helpless pigs over open fire pit. Humans shoot you if you change into Were, and they will eat little Pinky's toes. I ask you, what normal 'bout pickling pig's feet? Besides that, their sky is velly strange color, and mean bugs and critters named snakes hurt witches and Weres. One such nasty snake bite *Waken Sage* on him cock. He nearly left with dead dick."

"How do you know this?"

"Which part, Missy Shasta?"

"The part about Sage and his dead dick."

"Oh, him cock, it recover velly fine, Missy. He and Missy Hannah make the hot whoopee. Now they gonna have velly fine baby boy All Hallows' Eve."

"Where do you learn all this stuff?"

"Dinka. She hopping encyclopedia. She croak out everything she

learn, spread the good word. She acquire so much knowledge, her little green brain swell like balloon. So do her tummy from all the eggs that lying bastard, Herman, the cowboy frog, fertilize in her belly."

"What? Who's Herman?"

"Lying mortal bastard, sex-fiend cowboy frog." Pinky clamped his front foot over his mouth. "Uh-oh. Pinky not 'posed to let slip Dinka gonna have half-breed tadpoles any day. She velly upset with her studly cowboy bullfrog. She say Herman lie 'bout having the *whooshy-whooshy*. He just interested in getting between her hot green legs, and now that he seduced her and stole her innocence, him take off with younger female bullfrog. Dinka heartbroken. She swear Herman not going to touch her again, that he caught her at moment of weakness, and she believe him lies about *whooshy-whooshy*."

"*Whooshy-whooshy?*"

"Yeah. You know *whooshy-whooshy*? Herman lie, say him sterile, not able to fertilize her eggs, but him nail Dinka good. She say him jump her bones all night like maddened, sex-starved maniac, and each time him swear him love her and not able to give her babies, but now she gonna have hundreds of baby Dinka tadpoles. "

"Good grief!"

"Zackly. No matter she fall for tricky, lying, mortal frog, *Waken Sage's Futhar*, she still velly smart for a frog. She tell me everything about stinky human world. It bad, bad, velly bad place to visit, and she velly right."

"Gods! Then we just have to be very careful and not get caught by humans." Grinning, Shasta shoved an extra pair of socks into the bag and slammed it shut on Pinky's rebellious squeal.

"*Squee!* Let me out, Missy. Pinky gonna squeal on young Missy for sure. Velly pissed off at young Missy."

Dragging a crate out of the closet, Shasta ignored the pig's threats and searched through her stash of weapons. Knife, gun, screwdriver—a lady never knew when she might need a handy screwdriver—nail file—a must, in case her claws needed shaping...magic dust...

Oh yeah, definitely the magic dust.

A witch simply could not fly to Transylvania without the necessary items to protect herself. Why in Samhain's name Captain Koran T stole the princess away to Transylvania was beyond her understanding.

The vampires chose to dwell in the mortal realm for the obvious reasons— food, and plenty of it. Forget the vampires! Werewolves avoided humans when possible, but witches and *wakens* were terrified of humans.

They avoided contact with mortals at all costs. It didn't make sense for Captain Koran T to swish Kali off to the mortal world.

Although the captain had laid false trails and covered their scents, Shasta hadn't allowed it to deter her. It had taken her some time, but a Were had a keen sense of smell. She'd finally picked up their trail and found where it ended at the border of the immortal realm.

Shasta couldn't believe her nose. She'd been stunned to discover Captain Koran had crossed the border into the mortal realm with Kali. Her friend must be terrified trapped in Transylvania where covens and covens of vampires coexisted with those awful *things*...humans.

Princess Kali was likely shuddering in her sleep.

It wasn't right.

Besides, Shasta trusted vampires less than she trusted humans. Vampires and Weres were natural enemies. Male vampires used all kinds of ways to enthrall females. Their bite. Their gaze. Their sexual intensity. One was simply defenseless. Oh yeah, definitely, Kali could be in serious trouble. Why, some stray vampire might bite her and change her into a night creature.

Shasta eyed the grappling hook and rope on her closet shelf, nodded, and placed it alongside the stakes. If she was going to rescue Kali from the evil clutches of Captain Koran T and Prince Valerian Radu, vampire, and the darkest soulless creature she knew existed, then she might have to scale the castle wall.

Just in case, she tossed another stake on the bed.

A lady couldn't be too careful.

Chapter Two

All of us are God's creatures...just some are more creature than others.

~Anonymous Quote

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

She came to him mostly in dreams, but sometimes she appeared in visions. No matter which way she came to him, her appearance was always distorted, but somehow, he knew she had the face of an angel.

Deep in the bowels of Radu Castle, Prince Valerian moved restlessly in his bed, the disturbing dreams overshadowing his mind. In dreams, her figure was a silken blur behind his lids, yet he knew she was petite, curvy, with full, luscious breasts, a tiny waist that flared into slender hips and fragile-boned.

A wealth of vibrant red hair tumbled past her waist to the curves of her hips...She stirred him as no other.

Although he couldn't see the finer details of her face, he heard her voice. It wasn't the voice of an angel—not the voice he'd imagined going with her face and figure and to the female who captivated him—but one filled with mischievousness and bubbly laughter.

It was those sweet musical notes of her delight in the most ordinary things that drew him as surely as if he'd been entrapped by the *Razure* of his kind. The merriment that rang in her laughter was like sunshine drenching his body—something he could only imagine or dream about

since he'd been born Vampyre and had never seen the sun.

Yes, he'd watched dawn's early light streak across the sky, the beautiful beginnings of a day, but quick refuge from the scorching heat was a necessary part of his life. He carefully lusted for the red-hot glowing star from behind the heavy protection of drapes—even that hurt. With the weakest hint of sunlight, blood poured from his eyes. His skin blistered from the faintest kiss from the bright golden orb.

But her laughter was soft sunny warmth upon his face. It replaced the promise of sunlight and was something that had been missing from his life...forever. When he heard her voice, her joy, his body tightened until the ache in the front of his jeans nearly forced him to his knees. He thought he might go insane with the want of her.

As in mortal life, nothing remained the same in the immortal world of Vampyre either. Things had changed in the last few days. So that now, no matter how or when she appeared, her image felt stronger in his mind. Sharper. Each night when he searched for her, each tormented day when he slept the sleep of the undead alone, lonely, he knew she was out there somewhere.

She haunted him. Intrigued him. Annoyed him.

And yet he arose nightly with an aching hard-on. His body trembled with need. His pulse hammered in his skull. He had to find her. His mate! His beloved. His *enemy*! For she was surely that above all else. His enemy.

She was close. He knew it! So close, he smelled her. His nostrils flared. He knew her scent, a special blend from the Orient, the bouquet of a distant world with concentrated Arabian perfumes, the rare mixture of Bulgarian rose, soft amber, finest Indian Agarwood. All alien fragrances in his world, but it thrilled the mind with its exotic feel and contour and left him with the sensation of somehow journeying into a different dimension.

She intoxicated him with her mystique scent, captured and held him as no other female ever could or would again.

Valerian Radu shifted in his slumber and moaned. His unique scents of sandalwood and musk heated and blended with hers. The hot fragrances rose around his head, then settled over him and oozed into the pores of his skin. They slowly saturated him, smothering and hot, and it complemented her elite fragrances that stole over him in a medley of deliciously blended scents.

He stirred, restless. His hips rose and fell in a mating union that took place only in his mind. In his sleep, his skin felt tight and burned through every layer. His cock stretched and ached with need. His mouth felt hot and dry. He groaned, licked his dry lips and tasted her on his tongue. His shaft lengthened even more, the broad tip sensitive and painful against his pants. He might be lost in sleep, lost in the arms of a dream woman, but he knew his seed was going to spew from him.

That wasn't good.

Such a thing happened only at *Rushing*, when the need to mate swelled hot and fast. It was upon him, and when the *Rushing* took over the male vampire, he became a sexual beast. He turned cunning, lethal and deadly in his intent to fuck and breed his mate and keep her, no matter the cost.

Nothing or no one stood between him and his chosen First Bride. Not even the Bride. And the only way a male in *Rushing* walked away from her was with the certain knowledge another male had already bred her.

The need to mate was an absolute necessity. The male vampire became ruthless in his determination to leave his seed growing. *Rushing* was one of the few times a male vampire's semen was viable, and Mother Nature took over to ensure the continuation of their species.

It was both a brutal time and an exciting time.

He'd need to find his mate quickly and breed her because *Rushing* happened once a century, and only when the male matured into *Crowning*—full adulthood—did he stand the chance of producing an heir. *Rushing* lasted for but a single month, so it was a crucial event in the Vampire world.

In his dreams Valerian touched her satin skin, amazed at how soft and warm she was beneath the pads of his fingers. She laughed, a pure, tinkling sound, like the sweetest of music on the wind. In his dream, she lay down slowly beside him, sleek and naked, her breasts achingly full and inviting. Her vibrant red hair fell all around him, long and silken and like ribbons of fire streaking across the black satin sheets on his king-sized bed.

He inhaled and drew her scent deep into his lungs. No female had ever captured his attention as this one. He knew what she tasted like, felt like beneath his thrusting hips.

And because he knew these things, he could no longer sex another woman. No longer feed or even find sustenance in a chalice of warm wine.

Valerian turned in his sleep, lips moving silently, hips thrusting wildly. His fingers worked down his zipper and he took his cock in hand. He stroked it with one large paw. Release was imminent. And something he desperately needed.

This female was dangerous for him, and still he was mesmerized by her charm, lured by her innocence, but captivated in the throes of passion by the sensual woman she was.

She rose above him, graceful as a flame. His fingers itched to touch the shiny, vibrant curls falling down her slender back. The rich, lively color of her hair reminded him of autumn leaves. He crushed a handful of the fiery strands between his fingers, fascinated with the silken feel of it. Breathtaking.

His balls tightened beneath his rapid strokes. His fangs exploded through his gums so forcefully his mouth hurt. His seed burst free just as hard and violently. A torrent of wet heat jetted on and on, spilling into the square of satin he held in his free hand. Valerian's body shook. His balls squeezed in rebellion, and still he pumped semen, the quantity of his release another positive sign he was in *Rushing*.

Yes, his mate was in as much danger from him as he was from her. She wanted to kill him, intended to kill him...and he waited impatiently for her attack. Silently he vowed his next release would be inside her. When she came near him, he'd not only taste her blood, but she'd take his. He'd mount her, claim her and make her his First Bride.

"You're mine," he whispered. "Mine."

His fingers itched to cup the back of her head, draw her close and touch her tender nape. He wanted to trace the intriguing curve of her throat, lightly scrape her flesh with his fangs and taste her blood.

In his dream her gaze locked with his, held his, as if she had the power to enthrall him.

He knew better.

She wasn't Vampyre.

No. She wasn't Vampyre. She was Vampyre slayer!

And she'd come to exterminate him as if he was nothing more than a rodent.

No matter how fierce the terror that gripped his heart, she lured him to her with the lush forest-green beauty of her eyes. He could drown in her eyes. Her soft lips looked so tempting. Dying would be nothing compared to the taste of her mouth, her breasts. She was everything, and

Zabitha Shay

yet...she was nothing. A mist he couldn't touch. A ghostly veil he couldn't see through. He had no idea who she was or how to find her.

What world did she exist in?

Did she even exist anywhere but in his mind? His dreams? His visions?

Valerian kicked off the cover, reached for her, determined to claim her, own her, if only in his dreams. He wanted her closer. Needed her closer.

Your name, what is it?

She arched a silken brow. *That is for you to discover, if you can.*

Tell me, for it is I who owns you.

Her laughter rang out, the sweet, sweet melody that had the power to make his heart jump and skip a beat.

Tell me, love, for I think I shall die if I do not learn it this day.

You are already of the undead. How can you die?

Even immortals have weaknesses, my love. My heart beats. My blood rushes like liquid fire through my veins, but I find I am at your mercy. Your name? Please?

Silence.

Come to me. I'm waiting. Do not torment me so. I've waited centuries for you.

And you will wait centuries more. I'm not so foolish as to give myself into the keeping of a vampire.

I need you, more than you could ever imagine. My time dwindles. Come to me. Save the wretch that I am.

He sent the silent commands on the wind, but it was lost between his world and hers.

Or perhaps not.

Soft laughter filled his head. He smiled, drawn ever deeper under her sweet, ethereal spell.

You laugh at me? Do you know who I am?

I know what you are. And I will not come to you.

Yet she was suddenly there, standing over him.

Her beautiful green eyes locked with his. He'd never felt so much joy, or so utterly defenseless, as when long, slender fingers worked the buttons free on his silk shirt. He could do nothing but lie there and watch her fold back the sides, reveal his chest, leave his heart at risk.

She scraped his right nipple with a long fingernail. "So sexy," she whispered. "I want to taste you."

"Taste me, then. Do what you will."

Oh, to feel her naked beneath his body, feel his cock push through the hot, velvety muscles of her feminine channel, each layer surrounding his aching shaft until he was buried deep within her honeyed sheath.

It wasn't to be.

From the look on her face, she wasn't here for him to sex her. No. The deadly intent in her eyes was easy to read. The ugly thing she held in her small hands looked ominous. Potentially lethal. Scary as hell!

His pulse jumped, pounded fiercely. Sweat dampened his face. This was it then. The end. "No!" The word slipped past his lips from deep within his undead body, a furious growl of denial that she would do this terrible thing to him.

His heart squeezed out the next painful beat.

"You said do what I will. I will this."

You cannot do this!

I can. I will.

Terror clenched his muscles. Before where he'd been restless, now Valerian remained stone still, paralyzed as if he'd been bitten by a *Shun-Rock Spider* from his home world of Pi-Ram.

He knew what came next. The horror of it froze him as nothing else.

Then she committed the worst act of his nightmare, the one that sent chills down his icy flesh and solidified his already sluggish blood. She placed the sharp-tipped wooden stake on his bared chest, directly over his heart. Her laughter was no longer happy or sweet, sunny or warm, but cold and cruel and ruthless. He saw no mercy in her lovely eyes, only merciless determination.

The needlepoint tip pierced his flesh. His mouth flew open with the shock of it. So sharp. So sharp! Valerian tried to scream, but no sound moved past his lips. The pain crushed, as if his chest was weighted with stone. His heart raced at such a high speed, he thought it might explode.

Frozen in a place somewhere between his world and hers, he couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. Held captive by the magnetic force of her cruel gaze, he watched the hammer swing down, felt the deadly stake pierce his chest and drive through his heart.

Stark terror held him in its ugly grip as his blood flowed around the stake and streamed in scarlet ribbons down his bare chest.

"*Ahhhh!*" The sound of his shock and fear filled his lair and bounced off the stone walls. The large black bats clinging to the ceiling fluttered

restlessly at the pain-filled cry of their master.

Valerian Radu, Prince of Vampyre, bravest of the brave and noble leader of his Clan Sector, raised straight up in the center of his king-sized bed yelling at the top of his lungs. “*Ahhhh!* Don’t. You can’t!” He swatted furiously at his chest.

An anguished cry rose from the back of his throat. His vision hazed with the red heat of his kind, a red heat that left him nearly blind to his surroundings and smudged his mind.

He sprang off the bed and glided toward the stone ceiling, circled the great chamber from high above before lowering himself to the floor. Ragged breaths tore from his lungs. He pressed a hand to his racing heart, commanded it to slow its fierce beating before it burst and he bled all over his bedroom. The sound of his nightmarish yells faded. Slowly, his vision and mind cleared.

A dream. It was only a dream. Calm down. Breathe. Slow, deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale. The dream. It felt so real. The agony of having his heart pierced felt fucking real! The female’s voice. Her laughter.

All of it closed around him, tighter and tighter.

She is coming for me.

No! She can’t harm me. She can’t penetrate the protective barriers I have around the castle walls.

But what if she does? What if...

He materialized instantly to the Great Weapons Hall and searched until he found a thicker double-breasted plate of armor. He removed the single-breasted plate he wore and replaced it with the other.

Shaken, Valerian returned to his lair to finish his day’s slumber. He stretched out on his bed, tried to relax. Anxiously, he rapped the breastplates beneath his shirt with his knuckles, making certain they were in place and his heart protected.

“Let her try to penetrate *that* with her pointed stake!”

The lethargy rapidly took him under, but his sleep remained disturbed, filled with dreams of a beautiful redhead bent on killing him.

She was coming for him. He knew it.

She intended to kill him.

He’d have to make certain she didn’t.

Valerian snorted. He’d make certain all right. The redhead was going down, and he intended to be on top of her and inside her when she did.

In his sleep, Valerian smiled.

Come to me, Wildfire...if you dare.

Chapter Three

I love the night. It's the only time I feel really alive.

~Helen Chandler
(Dracula, 1931)

*Romania
Outskirts of Village Pyre
Vlad Salt Mine
Mortal Realm*

Brasov Radu, identical twin to Prince Valerian, retracted his fangs from the young female's cold white throat and wiped the last drops of her blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

She sagged against his chest as lifeless as his flaccid cock now that he'd had his fill of her. Slowly, he stepped back from her, unconcerned that she'd just drawn her final breath. Her nude body slid to the floor at his feet. As naked as she was, he stared at her with unblinking, merciless eyes, then leaned over her.

Brasov snickered. "Ahh, life was so sweet, wasn't it? Thanks for the fuck and the yummy nourishment."

A chain with a pretty gold heart outlined with glittering diamonds hung around her neck and nestled between her perky breasts. Breasts he'd suckled the last two nights and enjoyed at his leisure. Curious, he toyed with the heart, eyeing the double A's outlined with rubies and locked together in the center of the heart. A for Amee, he recalled.

"Amee Marie Cole." A lovely name for the beautiful young woman who'd left America and gone to Paris to study art, then decided to hike around Europe instead.

"Should have stayed in Paris, sweetheart. When little girls journey to Transylvania to play with bad males, see what happens? You get exactly what you ask for."

Brasov ripped the chain off her neck and studied the locked A's. Who did the second A stand for? Damn, he should have asked her, but he'd been kind of busy. Ah, well, the necklace made a wonderful memento of the little beauty and sweetened the fact she'd surrendered her virginity to him without hesitation.

Carelessly, he tossed the chain on his bed and arched a silken brow at the ugly puncture wounds on beautiful Amee's bruised throat. He hadn't been gentle with her. Fuck gentle! Compassion was his brother's way.

Brasov had no patience for taking his time to woo his prey. When he buried his cock in Amee for the last time this night, he sank his fangs deep and ripped into her jugular like a crazed and starved *Changeling*. Fucking her had felt delicious. Sucking her had felt even better.

He looked at the multiple bite marks that covered her body and licked his lips. Too numerous to count, but then, that was the vampire way in a sexual haze. Besides, some of the bites were in quite intimate places.

Of course he'd known from the moment he saw her at the Inn he was going to drain every drop of her blood with the final feeding, but pain was also something he liked to inflict. It made his cock that much harder, his release that much stronger.

A trail of thick, clotting blood oozed from her throat and crusted between her breasts. "Oh, yes, I thoroughly enjoyed you, my little beauty. Too bad I didn't have time to savor you longer, but alas, duty calls."

Her empty, wide-eyed stare reflected the flickering flames from the hundreds of candles strewn about his bedchamber. Death glazed her lovely blue eyes, leaving them dull, no longer flirty or laughing. Or daring. He shrugged. She'd flirted with him in the tavern at *Dracula's Inn* in Village Pyre. She hadn't realized he'd used the power of the *Razure* to command her.

When she hurried down the hall past the ladies room, he followed her, a shadow in the dimly lit passage. She hadn't hesitated to do his

bidding. He guided her through the rear exit and into the dark, secluded alley. She laughed, unafraid and welcoming him into her arms, until she saw his fangs.

"What are you?" she cried, backing away. "I want to go back inside."

"Too late for that. You should have stayed at your table. Not that it would have made a difference. I would have had you there. But here we have the illusion of privacy."

"What do you want?" Those were the last words she spoke.

He cast a cloak of thick fog around them and pounced like a ravenous wolf. Brasov rode her to the ground, lashing her throat with the sharp tips of his fangs until he could sink them deeply into her vein. He fed and fed, until she no longer struggled beneath him, until her breasts stopped heaving and she stopped trying to draw in a breath...until all the fight drained from her.

Then he lifted her into his arms and melted away with her. Brasov took her to his home, to his bedchamber deep in the bowels of the Vlad Salt Mine, where he fed from her again and again.

She obeyed him like a mindless zombie when he ordered her to undress.

Tears slid down her pale cheeks as her clothes drifted away—silky blouse, trim jeans, white, lacy, virginal bra that cupped nice, firm breasts, a white thong that hid nothing from his hungry gaze. Everything faded as the red haze settled over his mind. Everything...but her.

He was on her and in her. A smug smile settled on Brasov's lips. He hadn't given her time to grasp his intent. While he fucked her, he fed at his leisure, sinking his fangs into her breasts and belly. She screamed her release beneath his thrusting hips, clawed his back as he pumped his hot seed inside her. Brasov didn't remember how many times he fucked her, but he knew dawn streaked across the sky before he pulled out of her.

Exhausted, they slept away the day.

Yeah, she'd had her uses. The second night, he nibbled hungrily between her thighs, slaked his immediate needs, and now he was finished with her.

Brasov massaged his soft balls and groaned. Ah yes, her blood had heated the sperm inside the spongy sacs. Life! His seed burst with ripe fertility. He was ready to breed a female, his chosen First Bride.

He cleansed himself of the dead female's scent and blood and dressed.

Dawn was still a few hours away. Tonight he intended to claim his First Bride. This time he'd not play mind games like he had with Princess Kali. This time he'd fuck his Bride and plant his seed in her belly. *Rushing* was upon him. His body quivered with the need to claim a Bride.

Brasov had laid his plans well for this night.

Last night, about an hour before he met Amee, he'd spotted a beautiful red-haired female checking into *Dracula's Inn*. He decided then he wanted her for a Bride. Tonight he was going to sink his fangs deep into her throat, sink his cock just as deep into her hot pussy and leave his son filling her belly.

Taking a moment to adjust the black silk cloak around his shoulders, he eyed the useless female crumpled on the stone floor. It was a blasted nuisance dealing with *Changelings*, but a necessary one. In a few minutes, she'd awaken starving. He didn't want her getting in his way tonight.

Shit, already she stirred. Her arms and hands twitched like a rejuvenated corpse. Fangs, incredibly long, shot through her gums. She groaned and twitched again. Brasov rolled his eyes. He'd have to deal with her before he left.

Grabbing her by the hair, he dragged her across the distance of the room where a set of manacles were suspended from the stone wall. Brasov ignored the dagger-like fangs she sank into his arm and clamped the iron cuffs around her wrists.

She screamed and kicked at him.

Losing his temper, he backhanded her, knocking her to the white, salty floor. "Stop biting me, bitch, or I'll toss you in the fireplace and let you burn."

She stilled. Her eyes, once a lovely blue, burned red. "I'm hungry!"

"And you will stay hungry. You are food for my Bride. But most of all, you are not important, so if you don't want me to set a torch to you, behave, and when my Bride is hungry, you will give her blood."

"I will die if she is ravenous."

"Yes. But darling, you are expendable. Besides, you're already dead."

She snarled. The female raked long, sharp talons down his left cheek and snapped her new incisors at him.

Brasov laughed and stood up. "Behave while I'm gone."

"I'm not expendable!"

"You are what I say you are." He arched a disinterested brow at her screams. That was the thing about new *Changelings*; they were too weak

to fight off the older, more experienced vampire, and they tended to scream their displeasures.

"Make me your First Bride."

He brushed off his hands and laughed. "Where did you get the idea I might want you for a Bride?"

"You...you..."

"Ah, you think because I fucked you, it meant something. That I wanted to keep you? You were a good fuck, but sorry, baby, I really have no desire for a permanent relationship with you. I wanted you for a source of food for my Bride. Fucking you was icing on the cake."

Brasov glided from the underground chamber that was his lair and made his way to the surface. He had a plan, a damn good one. If it meant ending Valerian's life, so be it. Never would he allow his brother to be crowned king of Vampyre.

A few mornings ago, he'd cut off Mari's tongue and staked Valerian's fucking partner in the sun and watched her roast. Brasov hadn't actually believed she was a threat, or that Val would risk changing her or impregnating her. For one thing, half the deed was already done. He himself had been mating with Val's female for a long time.

He'd turned her, too, but he'd never intended to keep her. He didn't want her, but he'd enjoyed fucking her simply because she belonged to his brother. The thrill of staking her in the sun, knowing Val couldn't save her, had given him supreme pleasure.

One day at a time, he intended to take everything his brother held dear and destroy it. Soon he was going to stake Val in the sun and watch him fry.

To say he detested his twin was putting it mildly. Never had he ever measured up to Valerian. His entire life, everything had been about Val. Val, the firstborn son. Val, the prince. Val, the future king. Val, the terrific lover. Val, the wise, who controlled how much the clan fed.

No matter what *he* did, he always came up short in comparison.

No more.

His plans were made. "I will be king."

The female at the Inn, whose name eluded him, was now his chosen First Bride. As soon as she conceived his child, he'd present her before the council of the *Ancient Tribunal*. The Ancients would have to accept that he'd done his duty where Valerian had failed and therefore *he* deserved to be crowned king of Vampyre.

Sorina Amanar, Rennie Amanar's beautiful granddaughter, was Bride two. He'd claim her tomorrow night, as soon as he made certain his First Bride carried his heir.

Then there was Princess Kali. He wasn't finished with her.

In the beginning, Kali had been his first choice. He'd come so close in succeeding, in taking her from Captain Koran T. Because of Valerian's interference, he'd lost the princess to the *waken* captain. She and Captain Koran fled Transylvania yesterday morning, but he knew where they'd gone.

He was no longer interested in making Kali his First Bride, but he had her punishment all planned. She'd betrayed him with Captain Koran.

They might have fled, but *his* scent was on Kali.

He'd exchanged blood with her twice. When he was ready, he'd find her no matter where she was, and she'd become food for his Brides.

She only thought she'd escaped. When the time was right, he'd go after her, bring her back to Transylvania.

He'd make her regret the day she gave herself to Koran. She and the babe she carried were as good as dead. When the time was right, he'd stake Princess Kali in the sun for his new Brides to watch and understand, if they ever betrayed him, what he'd do to them.

Brasov worked his way through the dark alleys in Village Pyre. He entered the Inn where he'd picked up the lovely Ameer the night before, but the redhead with the teasing green eyes and beautiful laugh was nowhere to be found.

He clenched his fists in rage. She was here, somewhere. He had to find her room. Brasov headed to the desk where a young clerk watched him.

The clerk's dark eyes flickered nervously. "May I help you?"

"The redhead, what room is she in?"

"I'm not allowed to give out that information."

Brasov locked one hand around the young man's throat and dragged him halfway across the top of the counter. "Which room?"

"Twenty. She's in room twenty, third floor."

Brasov slowly released him and straightened the clerk's ruffled shirt. "That's better. Have a nice night."

He turned on his heel and left the Inn. Now he knew where she was, he could take his time stealing her out of her room.

His chosen First Bride. How exciting.

The future mother of his heir.

Witch's Magic

His queen.

His mate.

No one was getting in his way this time.

Chapter Four

I don't react as a wolf would...I react as a wolf would if she was whisked out of her body, born a human baby and raised in human society for eighteen years.

~Anonymous

*Romania
Village Pyre
Dracula's Inn
Mortal Realm*

Shasta paced the floor of her small room at *Dracula's Inn*. She'd rented the room in Village Pyre the evening before. Anxious to see a bit of the village and track down her quarry, she'd explored the countryside earlier in the day.

She'd learned the lay of the land and located Valerian Radu's castle at the edge of the Transylvanian border a few miles away. The castle lay to the south and at the base of the beautiful snowcapped Carpathian Mountains, a region frequently known as the Land of Vampyres, Land of Fangs, Handsome Bloodsuckers, and tragically, a land where young, beautiful females frequently vanished without a trace.

The Village Pyre region was too isolated for major authorities to investigate the disappearances. Even if they attempted, they, too, vanished without a trace. When she asked questions about Valerian, the locals crossed their hearts and warned her away from the castle.

A young male clerk at the desk had flirted shamelessly with her, but

he'd been quite serious when he insisted she buy a cross, wear it and stay indoors after dark.

He explained that lately there had been a rash of attacks on young women. Most believed Prince Valerian was somehow involved with the strange happenings since he was the accepted ruler in the area.

Shasta didn't know why they bothered with warnings. It was impossible to get inside the castle. There were so many wards around it, it was ridiculous. Ha! One might be justified in thinking the vampire feared a stake through the heart.

Well, there were wards around the outer walls, but she bet Prince Valerian hadn't allowed for the fact someone might scale the castle wall. She was just the person to climb over it...come daylight.

Restless, she was ready for action, but the sun was going down. She wasn't fool enough to go out in the cold and start hunting vampires in the dark. She'd end up the main course on the menu.

Shasta paused and eyed Pinky. "Is that a cross around your neck?"

Pinky flinched because anything pertaining to the mortal's religion was *so* not their religion. Not that Weres or witches had anything against mortal beliefs, it just wasn't the witch world's way in believing, or the Were's.

"Yes, Missy, although I'm not a religious pig, and I'm a magical creature, and oh, damn, the cross kind of burns, but Pinky afraid vampire might hurt him worse. Missy need wear a cross, too. Good juju magic."

"What's the matter with you? You know a witch or Were can't wear a cross. We have our own religions. Mortals believe in one true God, nothing wrong with that. We all have a right to our beliefs, but witches and Weres believe in many gods, so we can't wear a cross for just one. Why, I wouldn't know which of the witch gods a single cross represented. It would only piss off all the other gods, anyway." She paused, biting her lip. "Did you get a spare cross, Pinky?"

Pinky grinned. "I did, Missy."

He dug in his pocket and pulled out the dainty cross with a delicate gold chain and held it out to her.

Shasta drew it over her head. "Stop grinning, Pinky. It's temporary. What are you scared of, anyway? We've been here a night and a day and about to go into our second night and we haven't seen a single vampire."

"Then why Missy wear cross?"

"Well, you know...just in case. I think all that vampire crap is a bunch of hoopla to pull in tourists, but it's best to play it safe. If it means wearing a cross, then..." —she shrugged—"there's nothing wrong with wearing a cross. Humans believe, so why not me?"

Pinky shuddered. "Missy best hope we keep right on not seeing bloodsuckers. Pinky wanna go home."

"We aren't going home, not until I've managed to get inside that crumbling old castle. Did you see the disrepair? How could anyone, even a vampire, live in such squalid conditions? It's a disgrace. That castle needs a woman's touch."

"Don't be getting ideas. It best you leave vamp-man alone. I hear velly bad things about evil vampire in area who feeds and feeds for the pleasure of the kill. They call him Mr. Rogue Vampire. The villagers be very frightened. If this be Missy's vamp-man, you headed for velly big trouble. You be Mrs. Rogue Vampiress 'fore you know it."

"He's not my vamp-man."

"Pinky not care. Pinky velly upset Missy force him on this bad, velly bad trip. Gonna tell Master Creed. He be velly pissed at you, too."

"You aren't telling Creed anything. Swear it, or I'll cut out your tongue! Worse, I'll donate your feet to the pickle plant."

"*Squee!*" Pinky looked at her through his thick fringe of bangs. "They have pickling plant here?"

"Yes!"

"You lie! Missy lie when it suits her purpose. Pinky refuse to swear any word. Do your worst. Go ahead, pickle my feet."

"I will!"

"*Squee!* Pinky velly upset. Pissed at Missy. *Warning. Warning.* Velly pissed. *Gag. Gag. Puke. Puke.*"

Shasta shook her head and returned to nibbling on her thumbnail. Flying all the way to Romania on her broom from the Wing Academy had been one hell of a trip. She still had flight-lag. Still felt a bit disoriented. All she wanted to do was sleep.

She'd slept through last night once they arrived and secured a room, and most of today. The entire day, her sleep had been disturbed by a male's voice calling to her. She hadn't answered, because she knew it was simply the flight-lag causing her to imagine it.

Shasta eyed the three brooms standing in the far corner. Like Pinky, they hadn't stopped trembling since they discovered where they were flying to. The brooms could be spiteful when they weren't happy, and

they hadn't been happy for several hours now. In flight, they kept trying to turn back to the academy.

She'd finally had to threaten to set fire to their switches if they didn't obey her commands. Oh, they'd obeyed, all right. They'd given Pinky and her one hell of a ride as punishment, zooming through the air like streaking banshees. *She* wasn't too happy with their display of rebellion.

Poor Pinky squealed the entire trip...upside down on the broom.

When she finally set him free inside their room, he climbed onto the bed, keeled over and lay there panting. "Arrrg. Pinky sooo sick. That worst, velly worst trip little Pinky ever take in his young, velly young life. Gag. Gag."

The brooms had nothing to say. That had to be a first. They were never shy about their wants or displeasures. Here in the vampire realm, they weren't quite so demonstrative.

Pinky broke the utter silence after making several correct gag sounds. "Pinky not riding either of those devil brooms home." He sniffed his anger.

"Of course not, Pinky," she soothed. "You can ride with me when we go home."

"Pinky gonna stuff Missy inside bag and give run for her money. Have broom fly upside down all the way home. Spin young Missy on her ass. Missy be velly sick. Ha. Ha."

"Hush up, Pinky. I need to think. It wasn't my fault the broom flew upside down."

"Yeah, Missy need think velly hard. Missy know brothers gonna have wild-eyed fit when they discover you skip academy lessons, hare off to mortal realm and face all kinds of dangers. Velly upset. And if not Missy's fault, then whose fault is it broom give Pinky nightmare ride from hell? Gag. Gag."

"For the gods' sake, will you stop saying gag like it's some kind of word?"

"It is some kind of word."

"Yes, but..." Her words trailed away. "Okay, it's a word." Shasta couldn't deny all of Pinky's misery was her fault. "I'm sorry, Pinky. I swear I'll never get you into trouble again. Maybe."

"Ha! Pinky know velly well Missy always gonna be in trouble, and when she in trouble, so be Pinky."

Shasta sighed. She supposed the little pig was right. Too often her

brothers rescued her from scrapes, especially when she was a young child growing up. She had a tendency to leap first, look later.

But her three elder brothers had been her guardian, father, and mother her entire life. She knew they loved her, even if she did feel a bit stifled by their over-protectiveness at times. Any one of them would lay down his life for her as she would for them, but they needed to realize she was on the brink of changing. They had to understand she was an adult now, or she would be at the next full moon. She was fully capable of making her own decisions. That was why she hadn't told them she was on a mission to rescue Kali. She knew they'd have a howling fit.

For sure, Creed would forbid her to go to the mortal realm. Ransom and Bane would take his side. They always took his side. This time, she'd made her own decision. There was nothing her brothers could do about it. Even if they discovered where she was, it wasn't as if they could muzzle her and force her home. Shasta frowned. At least she didn't think they'd go to such extremes.

But if they managed to get her home, they'd immediately post guards around her house on Na-Cyl, the werewolf realm, and make certain she didn't escape to get into trouble.

"Too late now." She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and eyed her baggage on the double-sized bed.

She was in the mortal world, and if trouble found her, well, then, she was prepared. So far, she hadn't seen one thing that looked dangerous or laudable enough to be labeled "trouble-worthy." She flung up her arms, disgust tightening her lips. "Where are all the vampires, Pinky? Where are the monsters? The zombies? *The Night of the Living Dead?*"

"Pinky not know. Pinky not wanna see bloodsucking creatures."

"Well I want action! I want to rescue Kali. Now!"

"Pinky say slow down and make good plan. Missy can't simply storm the castle gate."

For her best friend, Princess Kali of Ru-Noc, she'd risk everything, her life, her brothers' rage, the chance she might not get to make the change when the full moon rose. The princess deserved to be saved from the ruthless Captain Koran, and as far as she knew, Kali might be in terrible danger, maybe even dead.

It was bad enough the *waken* guard had the nerve to take the princess to the mortal world, but worse, he'd taken her to the part of the world where most vampires lived. He might as well have served her up on a smorgasbord. Koran had taken her friend to a cruel vampire's castle.

Shasta paused and frowned. Okay, so she didn't know for certain the vampire was cruel, but no matter, he was a bloodsucker, a vein popper, maybe even an artery popper.

For certain, he was Vampyre! She was Were.

She was here in the Vampyre realm, and the two species did not mix well. It sickened her that the vampire race saw everything as food. She mentally shrugged and faced facts. She couldn't deny when her race changed into Were form, they sort of saw most things as food, too, but that was different. Wasn't it?

No matter, vampires did not get on with her kind, at least not the half of her kind that was Lycanthrope.

Shasta prided herself on being one of the few of her species, half witch, half Lycan. Being raised Lycan, she was still a part of both worlds of magic. Sometimes it was a fine line she walked to remember she grew up Were, and it was the race she loved best and claimed the most.

She had family in both realms, but the sad truth was, she knew little about her witch heritage, other than the fact her mother had been a witch. Shasta often found herself wondering if her mother had lived, would she have had equal training in both races?

However, her mother had been murdered by a Lycan female who coveted the Na-Cyl throne. Tha was beheaded for murdering Arra, Queen of Were. Baden, Shasta's father, heartbroken at the loss of his beautiful queen, took his life a week later, leaving Shasta and her three brothers orphans.

Creed inherited the throne and all the new problems created by the Were clan losing a leader they all loved and grieved for. She knew her brother had no choice but to make quick decisions to hold the crumbling clan together. His personal life was put on hold when he accepted the crown. She felt there were times when Creed was very lonely and yearned for a mate.

Recently, he'd paid a visit to the witch realm and came back with a deadly wound from a silver-tipped arrow. He'd barely survived the serious injury, but Creed had been excited when he returned to Na-Cyl. She'd heard him tell Bane, the younger brother, he knew who the mother of his future queen was.

Creed, spotting Shasta eavesdropping, clammed up instantly, but she thought his future mate was a witch.

Witches and Lycans got along great, but it was uncommon for their

two species to mate. It wasn't a forbidden law, just a line rarely crossed by either species. It was extremely rare for a male Lycan to go outside his race of females to mate, simply because a male Lycan, though he could mate with a female of another race, couldn't give her babies without converting her first. No conversion, no heirs. And begetting heirs, especially for a king, was extremely important.

Few females were willing to go through the slow, painful process of the ritual conversion. Only the Lycan males knew the ritual, and it was a highly guarded secret among them.

Shasta cringed. She was a mix of two races. Which species it was safest for her to mate with was questionable. Not just the mating, conception was a risk as well. No one knew which of the male species could impregnate her or even if either of them could. The children she might one day conceive and deliver could very well not survive. If they did, they could be an abomination, so deformed they would have to be put down.

Most Lycan males desired a quick mating with her. Mate, yes, but they wouldn't choose her for a lifetime mate. The risk of their offspring being abnormal, plus half-breeds, wasn't something the Lycan male was willing to risk. So yeah, they played tag with her, but they didn't mark her.

Every time she went home for a visit, she received wolf whistles. Howls. Some bayed outside her bedroom window in an attempt to lure her into the moonlight so they could hump her. When the moon was full, the males summoned her. Her refusal to mate with them only pissed them off. Some howled to her in broad daylight, sending her a message he was willing to mate with her. Right then.

It was extremely rare for a male to change in the daylight hours, but some did when they caught her scent. Some had even pounced on her, taking her to the ground. It mattered not if she was ready or willing. If it weren't for her brothers, she might already be bred, but not mated.

Her last visit home had been a disaster. Not realizing the males were already stimulated by her mating scent, she'd left Creed's home and walked to the small village of Wolfe Bayne Hollow. She'd barely reached the grocery store when Forge, one of the local male Weres who'd tried to mate with her numerous times, spotted her. He clamped his fingers around her arm and guided her away from the little general store.

"What are you doing? Let go my arm, Forge. You have no right to touch me."

Forge, the leader of a small, restless pack in Wolfe Bayne Hollow, ignored her demands. "I have every right. I'm a male. You're a ripe female, ready to fuck. I smell your scent. It's time you started servicing the males and stopped teasing us. You've been twitching that pretty ass of yours in my direction for years. I'm ready to give you what you need. Time for you to pay up."

It hadn't done her any good to try to get free of Forge's grip on her arm. He guided her to the edge of town and into the woods that surrounded the village. Three other males, Petru, Vasile and Cezar, all males from his pack, waited for him there. Forge shoved her toward them. "Strip her. Hurry, before one of her brothers gets wind of what is happening and stops us from fucking her."

Sensing her change was upon her, the three males circled her. They yipped and howled softly. Immediately, they changed into Were form, shredding their clothes, towering over her at least seven foot in height, big as mountains, teeth long and sharp and saliva drooling from the tips. Their eyes glowed yellowish-red. Her heart pounded. Wicked-looking claws shot from the ends of their fingers. But it was their mating tools that held her fascinated gaze. Gods, she had no idea their shafts got so big when they changed into Were form.

Petru dared to get close enough to rake his claws across her bared breasts, leaving four deep furrows. He flipped her around and nudged her ass with his jutting cock. "I'm gonna fuck you good, Shasta."

"Petru," Forge growled. "I'm first. You three get what's left when I'm finished with her. But I'm warning you, it's gonna take time to get my fill. I've been waiting for her forever."

Shasta screamed. Forge backhanded her across the mouth, splitting her bottom lip. She tasted blood. Tears welled in her eyes.

"On your knees, bitch," Forge snapped. "Hell, I might get lucky and breed you, though I doubt a half-breed bitch like you can conceive. Still, it's way past time you started earning your keep."

Shasta backed away. "If you touch me, Creed will kill you."

"And if he doesn't, I will."

Ransom, her middle brother, stood alone at the edge of the circle of rogue Weres. He jerked off his shirt, parted the circle, and wrapped it around her bare shoulders, covering her breasts.

"She's ready for mating, Ransom," Forge snapped. "You have no right to stop us from taking her."

“No, she isn’t ready, especially for animals like you four who have no consideration for your partner. Even if Shasta was ready, she has the right to choose whom she mates with. I’m quite certain she doesn’t want any one of you touching her. Leave her alone. This is your last warning.”

Forge glared at Ransom. “If she was any other female besides your sister, you wouldn’t say a word.”

“But she is my sister, and this discussion is over. You touch her again, any one of you, and I’ll make you sorry for the day you were born.” Ransom turned his back on the four males and led her away. Once they were out of hearing, he squeezed her arm. “You okay? Did any one of those bastards mate with you?”

It was part of the mating ritual for the male Were to nip the female on her butt, but having several horny Weres bite her at once hadn’t been fun or exciting. It had been scary. Tears filled her eyes. “I’ll be all right. Thank you for saving me.”

Ransom grinned. “What are big brothers for? Hey, don’t cry now, sis. They’re just a bunch of horny Weres, and you’re a beautiful female. I can’t blame them for wanting you. They wouldn’t be normal if they didn’t.”

“They were trying to stimulate me into the change.”

“I know what the fuck they were doing and why. It wouldn’t have mattered to them if you changed or not. They’d have taken you, probably killed you after they were finished so you couldn’t tell Creed. Those four males have always been trouble, and they know you’re our weak link.”

“I’m sorry.”

Ransom slung an arm around her shoulder and hugged her. “You have nothing to be sorry for. You can’t help the fact you’re sexy and beautiful. The pack has always gone a little crazy around you, baby. Why do you think Creed allowed you to go away to the academy, although it nearly killed him to let you leave the safety of our home?”

“I didn’t know.” The one thing she knew for certain, she’d made an enemy that day.

Forge, the aggressive male Were, stared sullenly at her every time they met after that day. He wanted her. He’d been after her since they were teens. She didn’t trust him. He didn’t just want her, he wanted Creed’s crown, too. She had a feeling Forge was going to be big trouble in the future.

So far, none of the male Were’s attempts to stimulate her had worked,

and Creed, Ransom and Bane guarded her closely until the fall break was over and she returned to the academy.

She hadn't yet gone through her first cycle of change, but she knew with the next full moon, her Lycan blood would heat and thicken. Her bones would snap and pop and reshape, and she'd convert. She already felt the need to find a male.

Female Lycans mated beneath the glow of a full moon; changed or unchanged, it didn't matter. Their cycle for mating was most predominating at the time of the full moon, their chance to conceive at its highest zenith.

She'd always be half and half, but the Lycan strain would remain the most dominant during mating unless something cataclysmic happened to change it. Since her Lycan strain was the prevailing half, her chances of conceiving were higher with a Lycan male than with a *waken*. She hoped.

If she wanted a child, she'd need to return to Na-Cyl before the next full moon so she could mate with a Lycan male. She thought of Theis Marcdo. Theis was a little older than her. He'd always been shy and sweet around her. Perhaps she'd go to Theis and allow him to be first with her. Theis would be gentle. Shasta frowned. *Gentle*. Did she want gentle? Or did she want a touch of roughness, a bit of domineering? A male she couldn't rule or scare away?

The excitement and anticipation of making the change hummed through Shasta's blood. She knew in her heart she needed a strong male, not someone gentle or sweet. She looked forward to the great event of changing. Yet, she was also frightened.

The thing was her brothers were concerned with how her body was going to respond. There had never been a female Were who was half witch make the change. Her brothers had demanded that she return to Na-Cyl when her time to change neared. She'd agreed because she knew they were right and a number of things could go wrong.

She preferred to be around family and in her own realm when it happened. Although the time was close at hand, she had time. She wasn't about to let Captain Koran T get by with kidnapping Kali.

Shasta nibbled on her thumb as she returned to pacing the small room at *Dracula's Inn*. Ha! The eerie name didn't frighten her one bit. She was here, in the mortal realm, and nothing—neither man nor vampire—could stop her. She certainly knew there was no such person as Dracula.

He was a made-up boogeyman to frighten little children. Wasn't he?

"What Missy pacing about? Pinky velly upset at you!"

Shasta paused and glared at the familiar. "What are you squealing about now?"

"Humph!" Pinky stared at her, indignation in every stiff part of his miniature body. "Missy know velly well why Pinky pissed. Missy stuffed Pinky in stinking bag. Pinky smell like garlic. *Gag. Gag.*" He shuddered. "I go home right now and report to Creed. He be velly angry, velly angry with you."

Shasta wasn't the least repentant. She didn't care how upset her *Futhar* became. He wasn't reporting to her brother if she had to hog-tie him and stuff him back inside the bag. "You try to go home, and I'll feed you to a bloodthirsty vampire!"

"*Squee!*" The miniature pig ran under the bed. He poked his head out from underneath the dark blue dust ruffle. "Pinky be good. Pinky not want all his blood drained. *Scared. Scared.* Why we come here to this bad, velly bad place?"

"Because."

"That no answer, Missy Shasta. *Because* lousy, stinky reason and not one Master Creed accept. You know velly well Creed be velly upset with you. Not just Creed, but Ransom and Bane. They gonna raise hell you leave academy without they say so it okay."

"They'll get over it, Pinky."

"They might, but Pinky gonna be pissed long, velly long time. Just want Missy to know Pinky gonna stay velly angry. It not safe in vampire world. We get bit, all our blood be gone. *Zzzzip!* Down the hatch, the vampire guzzle 'til we dried up like grape in hot sun. We be like California raisin toasting on the beach."

"California raisin? For the gods' sake, what's a California raisin?"

"Little dried fruit snackie, look like tiny Pinky turd. Raisin from mortal realm, from Golden State."

"Golden State?"

"Dinka tell me all about the Golden State. She say hunky male movie star own state and has much fun and adventure in land of fruits and nuts."

"Fruits and nuts?"

"Pinky think Dinka mean land of milk and honey."

"Really, Pinky. You have to stop hanging out with Dinka. I think she makes up all this stuff."

Pinky gasped. "Dinka not tell lies! Besides, we in plenty trouble here if things go wrong. We be undead like zombie, sleep all day, hunt all night. Pinky no like hunt at night. Pinky no like taste of blood."

"You've drunk blood?"

"Don't remember. Don't think Pinky ever drink blood. Gag. Gag. Pinky not make velly good cannibal. Pinky just Pinky, helpless little piggy *Futhar*."

"I have news for you, my friend. *Futhars* are not helpless. Now get out from under the bed. You look silly peeping through the ruffles. You don't have to be scared. I've placed protection spells all around the perimeter of our room. Besides, a vampire cannot enter without an invitation."

"Humph!" Pinky stuck his short snout out a little farther from under the bed. "You sure 'bout such thing?"

"Of course."

"Pinky not trust Missy. Missy tell lies when it suit her. Pinky know if Missy get pissed, she stuff poor helpless piggy back in bag and shut him inside with smelly garlic. Gag. Gag."

"Don't be ridiculous. I hardly ever tell lies, and I never get mad at you."

Pinky snorted and crawled out from under the bed. "What if Missy Shasta's spells too weak to ward off determined bloody-thirsty vampire?"

"I'm not afraid of any vampire, Pinky. There's no reason at all for a vampire to come near us or even close to our room. This is only our second night here. How would a vampire even know we're here? It's not like we're all that noticeable."

"Pinky not have velly good answer to questions. But if vein popper should not know we here, then what that velly scary vampire with glowing red eyes doin' out on Missy's balcony looking through glass doors? He look like he wanna rip out Missy Shasta's heart."

"What?" Shasta whipped around and gasped. "Oh shit! Quick, Pinky, get me a stake and my hammer!"

Chapter Five

When you are dining with a demon, you got to have a long spoon.

~Navjot Singh Sidhu

Ru-Noc

Droth

Immortal Realm

Captain Koran T and Princess Kali stood at the edge of the magical forest that surrounded the royal palace in Droth. Koran raised his gaze to the lime green and lemon yellow sky. Home. He hadn't realized how much he missed the normalcy of his realm.

He slipped his arm around his mate's thickening waist and sighed. Gods, no matter what happened, his love for Kali was the one constant in his life. He couldn't wait to hold their son on All Hallows' Eve.

Kali smiled, revealing the sharp tips of her newly developed fangs. She flinched as a sunray shot toward them. Koran jerked her deeper into the shadows.

"Dawn is here," he said unnecessarily. "We must find you shelter soon."

"I'll never walk in sunlight again."

The sadness in her voice made his heart squeeze. "Stay in the deepest part of the forest. You'll be safe there, away from the sun's rays, until I can return."

Kali nodded and shivered. "How are you? Any side effects from the parasites infecting your blood?"

"I know they're there. My skin still itches, but Valerian removed a good portion of the evil worms when he drank my blood."

"The exchange of blood with him was a failure and he was damned lucky he wasn't infected. You will always have the parasites?"

His lips tightened. "Nothing more can be done without more transfers of blood. It is what it is."

"I'll transfer with you."

"No. I won't risk you or our son getting infected. Don't worry about me."

"But..."

"No! Do you think I'd do anything to put either of you at risk?"

"I believe you'd die for us, Koran, and I can't bear the thought of losing you, but sooner or later, I'll have to feed."

"And you will. I'm certain either of your brothers will allow you to feed from them. Don't worry about me. Worry about our son. He is well?" Koran gently massaged her belly. "He tells me he has fangs already."

Kali swallowed hard. "You are disappointed our son will be Vampyre instead of *waken*?"

"Disappointed? No. I love him as much as I love you. You both own my heart." He brushed a kiss against her mouth. "I must go. I need to know what happened at the palace."

Kali clung to him a moment longer. "Be careful. You have no idea what you're facing in there. Don't make yourself a target."

Koran nodded. "If I don't return in an hour, get out of here. Go to Sanctuary. Seek your brothers. Talon and Stry are surely there courting some pretty witch."

"I can't leave you behind."

He took her hand, eyed the topaz jewels encrusted on her fingernails. "These jewels are important. They are a part of whatever is happening. If I don't return, do as I said. Go to Sanctuary. Find help."

"Koran..."

"Listen to me, Kali. I don't know what's waiting in there. If I'm not back in an hour, I'll be dead. Please, do as I say and find your brothers. They will see to your safety."

"Even though I'm now Vampyre?"

"Because you are Vampyre, they will know you are vulnerable. They love you, *La-Scheme*. Promise you will do as I ask?"

She nodded.

Koran tilted her chin and searched her eyes. "Swear it."

"I swear."

"I'm sorry I failed you."

"It wasn't your failure, Koran. I should have listened to you. We'll pay the price for the rest of our lives."

"As long as you are a part of the rest of my life, I don't care about anything else. I don't care if we have to sleep the days away and live by night. I don't care if you have to drink blood every night to survive, as long as you survive."

Koran whirled and took off across the open stretch of ground toward the palace. He knew his mate watched with worried eyes. He knew she watched until he disappeared inside the palace.

Koran covered his nostrils with his palm. His eyes watered. His nose burned. The stench wafting inside the palace was corrosive enough to melt his socks. No wonder it was deserted.

He marched down the long hall of the palace, looking neither to his right nor his left. The hairs on his nape stood up. Someone or some *thing* watched. He knew, but he would not give whoever it was the satisfaction of acting cowardly. If they wanted him, he was wide open, but he'd damn well see them coming.

One thing he knew for certain, *wakens* no longer ruled the palace. The strong sulfuric odor was a sure giveaway. Demons! Their noxious scent burned the back of his throat and betrayed their presence.

Fury flooded his body. He clenched his fists at his sides. What the hell had happened while he was away?

Was this the reason King Darak and Queen Helayne ordered him to remove Princess Kali from the academy and take her to the mortal realm, to Valerian's castle? Had they known demons were on their way to take over the royal palace?

He needed answers. He needed them quickly.

Kali couldn't remain exposed outside for long, not even in the interior of the forest. It wasn't enough protection against the fierce sun when it was high in the sky.

Cautiously, he entered the chamber where the *Waken Guild* held their meetings. The round table was abandoned. No one sat upon the two

gilded thrones. Silence greeted him. Where the hell was the *Guild*? They always held court. Where were the king and queen? Were they all dead?

"Good morning, Trad."

Koran whipped around at the sound of MeLora's voice. "Mother." Dammit. He should have known she was involved. "I prefer Koran."

MeLora lifted a dark brow. "I prefer Trad. It's the name I gave you."

"I changed it, and I don't give a damn what you prefer. What are you doing here?"

"Tsk. Tsk." She yawned. "Must you be so hostile to your mother after all I've done for you?"

"After all you've done for me? What? Abandoning me when I was five years old, leaving me to starve?"

"You didn't starve. Look around you. I can make you king of Ru-Noc. I've secured it for you."

Koran snorted. "You've secured nothing for me. Don't pretend you did all this for me. You've never been a mother to me nor to any of us. I understand I'm not an only child as you've always told me."

"Ah, you've been talking to your father. He does love to brag about the children he's fathered with me. If you must know, you have two sisters. If you find them, don't get attached. I plan to dispose of them."

"What's the matter, Mother? Are they prettier than you? You enjoy wreaking pain and destruction. Do you always have to destroy everything beautiful?"

"Don't anger me, Trad. I haven't destroyed you...yet. However, since you've refused my offer to rule, you trespass. You're no longer captain here. Leave while you still can."

Koran narrowed his eyes. "Gods, I know you're evil, but I doubt you'd harm me."

MeLora licked her lips. "You think I care you're my son? Besides, Zebus is my mate. He'll kill you if he sees you here. He'd not allow you to come between his son and the crown."

"Zebus? You have taken a demon for a mate? Regardless that you're my mother, if I get the opportunity, I'll destroy you."

"Then I'll have to make certain you don't get the opportunity. Leave now. Just because you don't see them, doesn't mean they aren't here. Zebus left part of his army here. I am well guarded. The only reason you were allowed in is because I assured them you wouldn't harm me. You see, I carry Zebus' seed. He and his army are very protective of his son."

"I should have known you were behind the destruction. What have you done to the king and queen?"

MeLora stepped closer, the smile on her beautiful face twisted and evil. "They both met their fate."

"What have you done to Talon and Stry?"

She shrugged. "Stry has disappeared. I had nothing to do with it."

"You murdered him?"

"I told you, I had nothing to do with his disappearance. I believe he must be cowardly and has deserted everyone."

"There's nothing cowardly about Stry. Where's Talon?"

"Talon!" she spat. "He's claimed a mate. Saylym Winslow. She hasn't much longer to live."

Koran frowned. "What do you have against Talon's mate? You are with child. *Sheeaha*. And still, you want Talon?"

MeLora's perfect lips curved into an evil smile. "Yes. I want Talon. I've devised an excellent plan to win him from Saylym. When I'm finished with her, she will be dead, and Talon will be mine."

"Why? Why do you do all these things? Why do you want to hurt Talon and Saylym?"

"Talon made the mistake of refusing me. And for power, of course, for Ru-Noc. I am now queen. Talon will be my king."

"Queen of what? The dead? The damned? You've wrought nothing but destruction all your life. Talon isn't stupid. If anything happens to his mate, he'll know you're involved."

"Ah, but there's the rub, you see. I'm not going to touch Saylym." MeLora lifted her chin. "I merely planned the event that will take place, and I've only begun. I will burn Sanctuary to the ground before I'm finished, and I will destroy Talon and Saylym."

"Why?"

"Why? *Why*? I tire of your questions." She laughed. "Because I owe them. I owe them. I will see to it they are both punished."

"No, you won't."

"It's already too late. My plans will be set in motion soon. There's nothing you can do to stop me."

"I will stop you. I swear it."

"You propose to stop me? How?"

"Any way I can." Koran turned on his heel. "If it means meeting you in hell, I'll see you dead before I allow you to harm Talon or his new mate or allow you to burn Sanctuary."

Chapter Six

All good is hard. All evil is easy. Dying, losing, cheating, and mediocrity is easy. Stay away from easy.

~Scott Alexander

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm*

There had never been anything easy in Nyra Winters' life. Certainly this moment was not to be classified as one, either. Instead, she thought it might possibly be her worst.

Opening the door, she halted just inside the home of Talon and Saylym, her brother-in-law and youngest sister. "No," she whispered and pressed her trembling hands against her mouth.

The absolute silence told it all, but what she saw was so much worse than she'd expected. Grimly, she tightened her lips to halt the trembling that seized them. *Don't cry! There is no time for tears.*

Even though all the magical arrows Zebus' demon army shot had finally stopped whizzing through the air in search of targets, the ones lodged inside the victims still quivered with life and urgency. Some magick took hours to disappear, and some never did. The arrows needed time for the Black Magick to totally drain. Once that happened, their witless urge to hunt would fade.

Nyra bit her lip and paid no heed to the tears swimming in her eyes.

Gazing around, she couldn't believe the tragic scene. She pressed a hand to her aching heart and shook her head in denial. Wretched little cries escaped her throat no matter how hard she tried to hold them back. "Samhain, please, no." She clasped her stomach and doubled over. "Gods. Oh, gods."

Nausea whirled in her stomach like a cauldron of green slime. Such a horrible thing, Death. She couldn't bear this. No one should have to witness a thing like this. It had been bad enough to see her mother shot by her father and die over three hundred years ago.

This was worse. Much worse.

She'd never, ever thought anything could be more devastating than the night she watched Elsbeth, her mother, pass into the *Black Slumber*.

Horror gripped her soul at the terrible memory. She put that scene from her mind and looked around at the awful tragedy waiting before her. So many arrows. So much blood. Her family and others she held close to her heart, gone, wiped out in the cold, vicious attack by Zebus, his demon army and Black Drayke.

Her slender shoulders slumped. Overwhelmed by the devastation in front of her eyes, Nyra's knees buckled. She nearly collapsed to the floor, would have if not for the strong, muscular arm that clamped around her waist from behind her and supported her.

Her startled gaze shot to her waist. Nothing. There was no strong arm. No masculine fingers splayed across her belly, yet she felt it, felt his cool breath on her nape. By the gods, was she going insane?

I'm real. At least as real as you need me to be at this moment.

The whisper of icy air touched her throat. Her ear. A voice ethereal, distant, and utterly cold in her head. "Who are you?"

Who I am isn't important. Fear not. All is not lost. I know not your name, witch, only that trouble hounds the wakens. I've observed you. Although you have not wreaked this hell on the wakens, you interfere in things that are not your concern. I know your powers. You will save some, though it might anger King Titan. Don't think to continue your meddling. This one time, I'll step out of your way. I grant you permission to save but a few.

Nyra wobbled. By the gods, who was this invisible person keeping her from falling on her face?

Strength, female, glean my power while you may. You will need it in the days to come.

Gently, he tugged her against his wide chest. She felt the width of it, the potency, the *zing* of pure supremacy in his hold on her. He could

Witch's Magic

crush her, easily. For her, he held back. "You're so cold. I fear you lack the substance of life, the warmth."

Fear me not, witch. I'm not here to collect you today. I will not harm you. Your time has not yet come.

"Who are you?"

Nyra tried to look behind her, see who supported her, but the grip on her waist tightened.

Do not look upon me, for I am that which destroys all creation. He whispered a list of names in her ear. Those are the ones I grant you the privilege to save.

Tears streamed down her face. "I want to save them all."

No. Do not ask for more than I am willing to give. Do not defy me, witch, or I promise, you'll regret the day you were born. You've already impeded, changed things that are not your concern. Death visits everybody...eventually.

Abruptly his support vanished. She stumbled, then caught herself. She was alone. Nyra turned unsteadily, her knees shaky, but there was no one there except a wall of unpleasantly cold mist. The icy vapor floated over her and lingered on her skin, chilling her to the bone.

Gods, what had just happened?

Nyra held out her arm. Her skin lacked color. Just being in close contact with Death had drained life from her body. She inhaled deeply, drawing fresh air into her lungs. She repeated the action again and again until her skin pinked and the chill left her body.

Nyra shuddered. Had Death truly paid her a visit? Supported her, to prevent her falling? No way. Her imagination had to be running wild. She was surrounded by the dead. Death. Blood. Yeah, her mind was playing tricks on her.

Utter quiet loomed like a silent ghost inside the icy house. No one moved.

Katch, her and Saylym's beloved grandfather and the High Wizard of Ru-Noc, lay slumped across the long table where Talon's extended family took their meals. She couldn't count the number of arrows that protruded from Katch's back. Papa Saul and Teek, Talon's grandfather and uncle, lay crumpled on the floor. Their blood stained the new rug the prince had installed a few days earlier.

"Nyra?"

Nyra jolted and clutched her heart at the unexpected intrusion of Topaz's unsteady voice behind her. She whirled, only to still at the sight of Maxine with dozens of arrows in her lifeless body. "Oh, Topaz," she

said in a tearful voice. "Oh, gods. I can't bear this. I can't."

The *Futhar* tomcat carried the Persian female in his arms. His orange and black fur glistened with dark crimson stains. He crumpled at Nyra's feet, dropping to his knees and bowing his head over Maxine's little body.

Nyra's eyes misted at the tortured sound of Topaz's ragged sobs.

"She's gone," he whispered, looking up and blinking tear-filled eyes.

He looked so lost, it was all she could do to keep from giving in to the urge to break down and bawl.

"We just-just discovered we...love each other...and I-I've lost her. Our babies..." His voice cracked. His drenched eyes widened. "Nyra, your tears are crimson!"

"Yes. I know."

"But that means...your heart is bleeding? You must sit down or..."

Her lips trembled. "I'm all right, Topaz. I'll be all right." She looked at him, pity in her heart. "I...can't save her for you, Topaz. I can't save your Maxine or your babies. I'm sorry."

Topaz nodded. "I know..." His voice broke. "I knew." He placed Maxine's lifeless body on the black leather sofa and brushed away the tears soaking his face. He leaned down and pressed a tiny kiss to her soft, furry belly. "My babies, my little girls... I'm sorry, little daughters," he whispered. "I'm so sorry. I love you, babies. I always loved you."

"I have to check on the others," Nyra said in a shaky voice. "Forgive me, Topaz, for not being able to save Maxine and your daughters."

Topaz straightened and nodded. "There's nothing to forgive. This isn't your fault, Nyra. I think everyone is dead, even the *Futhars* on the top floor."

"Who is up there?"

"I-I'm not sure. Vox, Rune, Banjo, Dinka. I can't think who else."

Nyra rolled up her sleeves, drew in a deep breath and slowly pushed open the bedroom door where she knew Saylym had given birth only moments before.

"Samhain," she cried and leaned shakily against the door facing. "This is bad, Topaz."

"It's bad outside, too. Sage and Queen Helayne are dead. I saw their bodies on my way here. And Kallibus."

"Kallibus?"

"Yes. I don't think he was part of this, Nyra. He's lying beside Queen Helayne, gravely injured with an athame in his kidney."

Witch's Magic

"No, it wasn't Kallibus. It was his brother, Zebus, and Black Drayke. I just didn't realize they also attacked Kallibus." Nyra swallowed hard. "I don't possess enough magic to go around." But she knew in her heart King Titan had reached out to her through his son Dym, and with his warning he'd also given her strength. "Goddess Divine, please, I need your wisdom. Help me! I beg you."

How did one choose *who* to let live, who to let go, when *every* single life was precious to her? There was no choice. She'd been given a list of names. Those were the ones Death was willing to return to her. If she defied him, he'd take her life.

"My powers have been limited, Topaz. King Titan commands."

"I know. I saw Death standing behind you, talking to you."

Nyra gasped. "You saw him? You actually saw him?"

"Only a faint outline. He was mostly a blur."

"What did he look like?"

"Scary. When he turned and saw me, his eyes were like two black holes in a watery, skeletal face. I had the impression he was fiercely protective of you or..."

"Or what?"

"Fiercely possessive."

"Possessive? Why would Death feel possessive of me? I've never had contact with him until now. You must be mistaken."

"All I know is he looked as if he was ready to kill. I don't know if his desire was to kill you or keep you safe. What I do know is you don't want to meet him face-to-face, Nyra."

"I know that." Nyra bowed her head and whispered a prayer to the gods, but she had a feeling they weren't listening.

Chapter Seven

I have never met a vampire personally, but I don't know what might happen tomorrow.

~Bela Lugosi

*Romania
Village Pyre
Mortal Realm*

Shasta hurried over to her bed, ripped open the bag where she kept her arsenal for slaying vampires and dragged out a stake and hammer. She turned, weapons in hand, and faced the red-eyed vein popper floating eerily outside her balcony door. "Leave here, bloodsucker! You're not welcome. Go!"

"No. No, Missy, it no good to challenge bad, velly bad, ruthless vein popper vampire. Velly, velly big mistake. Oh, Missy, little Pinky gonna faint for sure. Velly big mistake to challenge. Look at him fangs. Gigantic vein poppers they be. *Scared. Scared.*"

Shasta flung her hair out of her eyes and slanted a fierce look at Pinky. "It velly, velly big mistake *not* to challenge. Do you see the size of those claws?"

"Pinky see velly well. Long, ugly nails, sharp, velly sharp, will rip out Missy's heart. Pinky need get Master Creed."

"Don't you dare leave me here alone!"

"Let me in!" The vampire howled with rage and raked his long talons

across the glass.

Shasta winced. The high-pitched screech of the claws across the glass raised the hair at her nape. Deep grooves appeared in the glass. "Leave here, vampire. You're not welcome."

"Invite me in. I promise you pleasure. I'll sex you like you've never been sexed before."

"Ha! That wouldn't be hard to do." Shasta shifted her weight from foot to foot and shook the stake at the angry parasite on her balcony. "I've never been sexed before at all. I'm not likely to start with an ugly-ass leech like you. Go away!"

"Welcome me inside. Ask me freely to cross through the balcony doors. I promise you thrills and delight."

"Vampires are nothing but liars," she yelled. "You receive no welcome here. You are *not* invited inside. Go, before I lose my patience and run this stake through your evil heart!"

"Look at me. Look into my eyes."

"Look into my eyes? Huh! You think that mumbo-jumbo shit will work on me? Bull!" Shasta lifted her face, locked her gaze with the vampire's and felt her will instantly slip away. She swallowed hard. "Na...no..."

"Don't look, Missy!" Pinky squealed in warning. "*Squee!* Don't look. Sure as you look, Pinky will have to witness evil, bloodsucking mosquito sex you. Oooh, that just be velly ugly site to see."

"I'm not looking."

"You looking. Pinky see it in your dazed eyes. Look away, Missy, or you not have no blood left come morning. You be undead zombie. Then Pinky have to stick stake through Missy's undead beating heart. *Barf. Barf.*"

"I can't look away. Shit! He's not leaving, either."

"Come to me, Shasta LaVeau."

"Oh, *shymeta*, he knows my name, Pinky," she squeaked.

Pinky gasped. "Missy! You no use dirty word like that."

"What word? *Shymeta?*"

"Yes, that word. Velly bad word. Missy can't say ugly witch swear words."

"I just said 'shit,' Pinky, ugly human word, and you didn't object."

"That cause 'shit' *mortal* word, not count for bad word for witch kind. Missy not say '*shymeta*' again, or Pinky tell Creed him baby sister need

mouth cleansing."

"Oh, for the gods' sake, my gaze is held prisoner by a leech, and you're worried about my language? Cover your ears! And if you tell Creed I said '*shymeta*,' I'll pickle your feet myself."

"You have the will to look away, Missy. Look at me now and not at ugly bloodsucker."

Shasta turned her gaze on Pinky. "How did you do that? You broke his spell over me."

"*Look at me,*" the vampire screamed. Rage and frustration at losing control over her rang in his voice. The glass in the balcony doors cracked. Shasta flinched.

"Samhain, Pinky. What will I do if he breaks the glass?"

"You still not invite him in. Even if glass shatter, him can't enter room without invite. Is vampire law."

"How do you know?"

"Pinky don't know for sure, but think it vampire law."

"*Look at me!*"

Shasta squared her shoulders, swallowed hard and eyed the vampire. She was careful not to meet his eyes. She supposed it must be embarrassing for a badass vamp not to maintain control over his chosen victim. "Ha!" She shifted back and forth again. "I will not look at you, vampire, and I will not invite you in. The balcony glass is covered in chains of garlic in here. If you try to enter, you will cook. Go! Now," she ordered.

The vampire screeched with fury. "I will make you pay for turning me away." He pounded on the glass. The cracks spread, spider webbing in all directions. Shasta bit her lower lip. The panes would shatter if he didn't stop hitting them with his fists.

Sending her one last fulminating glare, he turned and leaped into the air.

Pinky bolted to her side. "Did you see that, Missy? Him changed into some kind of flying creature right in front of our eyes. Big, ugly flying creature with sharp, velly sharp teeth."

"I saw, Pinky. He changed into a fucking bat. Poor bats, he'll give them a bad name."

"Him good and gone now, Missy?"

"Yes. He's gone. See, I told you the garlic would drive him away. And as long as I don't invite him in, he can't come inside. Right?"

"Pinky think is right."

Witch's Magic

"Even if he breaks the glass, he can't step across the portal. Right?"

"Missy said so. Pinky think it right. Missy say is so, must be right. Right?"

"Of course. All right, then. We're safe, safe and sound."

"Missy sound very certain-sure."

"Missy is very sure...sort of."

"How Missy know this *shymeta* true?"

"I don't know for sure. You said it's true. I believe you."

"Pinky not say is true. Missy say is true. What little Pinky know? Pinky dumb pig. Missy should not take Pinky's word. I dumb, dumb piggy."

"You aren't dumb. Don't worry, Pinky. We're safe. I know it."

"You not know for sure before? Now you think just because Pinky say we safe, we safe? *Squee!* Pinky gonna kill young Missy!"

"He's gone, Pinky. You can open your eyes now."

"Pinky kept one eye open whole time. What we do now, Missy? We have long, long, velly long night ahead of us. Bloodsucker leave velly pissed off."

"I know. Did you see his fangs? They had to be at least an inch. Damn scary."

"Yes, velly damn scary. Vampire might return. He want to sex you velly bad."

Shasta tossed the stake and hammer on the bed and smirked. "I think you might be right."

"You say Pinky right? You been saying that velly too much in past few minutes. Pinky might not be right."

"I trust your judgment, Pinky."

"Humph, that be a first."

"Yeah, well, don't let it go to your head. We just might be in serious danger here."

Pinky sighed. "Zackly what Pinky been telling young Missy all along. We be in bad, velly bad trouble."

Chapter Eight

A vampire lives in a constant state of desire and disgust. His nature often revolts him, but he doesn't have the will to deny his indulgences. There's the killing, but there's also the pleasure, the sensuality, the lust. The sheer ecstasy of it all.

*~Forever Knight
(Stranger Than Fiction)*

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Valerian Radu's eyelids twitched as soon as the sun sank behind the snowcapped Carpathian Mountains. The instinct to awaken once the sun was down was as natural as breathing, as normal as the beat of his heart kicking in and the blood pumping into his dehydrated organs and veins.

The nightly ritual of rejuvenation was as old as time itself. Awaken. Rise. Feed. Wait for daylight. Slumber. Panic he wouldn't awaken. Fear someone would drive a stake through his heart while he slumbered. Repeat.

And through it all, the incessant hunger, the need to feed. Rampant desire. The compelling urgency to breed his female.

Raw hunger stabbed at his belly, sharp, fierce. His fangs burst through his gums, then slowly retracted. The constant hunger was worse than torture, but feeding was no longer an option. If he didn't locate his

mate soon and drink from her, starvation was likely. His stomach grumbled. A painful hollowness left a huge void in his gut. He felt drained, as if what little fluid he had left barely flowed. His heart pumped frantically in an attempt to keep the essential organs fed.

If he kept this up, he'd have to give up finding the female and descend into the *Sleep of the Druze* or he'd perish. Slowly, Val opened his eyes and rubbed the area surrounding his heart that was a constant ache these evenings.

Another day of dreams. Nightmares. *Daymares*? His lips twitched at the silent question. At least he still had a sense of humor. Definitely, daymares. Wild dreams about the beautiful redhead who stirred his body. Who defied him with her utter silence and who stood over him with stake and hammer in hand, the sharp tip poised directly over his heart.

Why did she want to kill him so badly?

Quickly losing his sense of humor, Val ripped off the double-breasted plate of armor and shoved it aside. He was sick to death of wearing the thing. It itched, and the damn thing weighed a ton. He was tired of cowering like a weakling. Hell, she wasn't even real. How could he fear a figment of his imagination? His dreams? No more. He was done with wearing the armor.

He picked up the armor, studied it. And cringed. But what if...

If she arrived when he was vulnerable, the breastplates would protect him. He'd survived another day without a pointy-tipped thing hammered through his heart. Perhaps he should keep wearing it when he slumbered. Depressed, Val wondered just how much longer his survival depended on the breastplates.

Valerian rose from his bed and, with a flick of his wrist, cleansed his body in the magical fashion of vampires and dressed in dark jeans, a black sleeveless tee shirt and black boots. Black enhanced the darkness of his species. It allowed him to blend into shadows when he hunted, not that he needed the extra help. He could render himself invisible when necessary, but black added a bit of sinister mystique, a bit of fear when needed.

He rubbed a hand slowly across his six-pack midriff. At least his physique was still intact. Of course, when all he had was time and plenty of it to exercise, it was no problem remaining in shape. His body hadn't started wasting away yet from lack of nourishment. He might not see his

reflection in a mirror, but he didn't think he looked too bad for a man who'd lived more centuries than he wanted to remember.

Valerian cocked an ear. Rennie Amanar, his servant, moved about above. Val materialized into the dining room. Rennie was just placing a chalice of spiced wine on the table. The old man had been a faithful servant and friend of his family for years, just as his father before him and up through the ages.

Rennie lifted his head and smiled. "Good evening, Master. Did you have a pleasant day sleeping?"

"Good evening, Rennie, and no, I did not."

"More dreams?"

"Daymares. That woman is going to be the death of me."

Rennie frowned. "You must find her, Master. The realm of Vampyre cannot afford to lose you. The very idea of Brasov as ruler is an abomination."

Valerian gave a slight nod. "The others will be here tomorrow night. We'll figure out a way then to bring Brasov and his clan of *Changelings* under control."

"Who will be coming, Master?"

"Ciprian Costica Drakulya and Dragomir Flaviu and their most trusted men."

"Ah, so I will need to prepare seven underground chambers for them? The usual?"

"Yes. They will be here until after the *Rushing* has passed and we go before the Ancients to present our First Brides. You will need to prepare my grandfather's suite, too."

"Your grandfather? Yes, Master. It will be an honor to see his rooms are ready. Let us hope, Master, all the princes find their First Bride this season."

"Yes." Valerian sighed. "It is most urgent we do. Have you heard any rumors in the village?"

"Rumors, Master?"

"About Brasov or what he plans?"

Rennie gave an indelicate snort. "That one is evil through and through. He plans a war. He wants to see you dead, Master."

Valerian nodded. "Brasov cannot comprehend that he would feel my death as if he died himself. He has no idea just how such a thing will affect him."

Sadness filled his heart. There was no way to avoid this war with his

brother. Brasov grew stronger every night, his determination limitless. He didn't hesitate to turn males from the village to build his army of *Changeling* vampires. He murdered every young female he crossed paths with simply because he was pissed over the fact he hadn't managed to keep Princess Kali.

As soon as Brasov chose another First Bride, he'd impregnate her. If Brasov presented a Bride before the Ancients who carried his heir and Valerian didn't, then the Elders would have little choice but to make Brasov king of Vampyre.

The Ancients saw only what they wanted to see. They would only perceive that *he* failed in his duty to secure a Bride and heir. They wouldn't listen to the facts or pay heed to any warnings that if Brasov was crowned king, then there would be a bloodbath that would lead to famine.

His species would have no choice but to invade other realms to find food, just as they had done here. The worlds left to them to invade were immortal and those realms would not tolerate a Vampyre invasion without fighting back. More battles. Bloodshed. Death and destruction. No doubt, it was going to get messy.

Valerian glided across the dining room to the long table. He didn't know why he always gravitated to the Great Dining Hall. Maybe it was because he'd shared several pleasant hours in the room with Koran and Kali.

Or maybe it was the family atmosphere. He'd always thought of the dining room as a place for family time, a room where his children would one day laugh, share the latest news with him and his mate or share a glass of spiced wine, defy the utter loneliness of their world. He couldn't stop yearning for all this. Dammit. He wanted a family.

Flames instantly burst to life as he moved smoothly past the wide fireplace. For a moment, he paused to study the enormous hearth. It was big enough to set a king-sized bed inside or roast several slabs of beef, not that he ate human food, but there were the occasional guests who required meat. There was something manly about the massive fireplace.

There were several candelabras scattered about the room. They ignited with a flick of his wrist and left the sprawling dining area doused in eerie shadows. Elongated silhouettes in the shapes of bats and wolves crept across the stone surface of the walls.

And why not? Some of his best friends were bats and wolves. He

listened to the wolves' wild, joyous music coming from the woods. All was well in the forest this night. So far.

Valerian sat down at the long dinner table. A blood-red runner filled the length. He eyed the silver candelabras placed at both ends. The flickering flames added a touch of warmth. Friendly. Homey. Val glanced around, disheartened. It wasn't a home. It was a place where he slept. Alone. Always alone. He trusted few. The list of those he could depend upon to remain loyal and protect his back, join forces if it became necessary was short.

The Vampyre princes from the neighboring clans would follow his leadership as crowned king of the region: Prince Dragomir Flaviu and his younger brother, Dragos, dwelled to the west in Moldova. Prince Ciprian Costica Drakulya and his younger brother, Dracul, guarded his eastern borders from Serbia. These vampire males were his most trusted allies. From them he gained Fane Marku, Dragomir's best friend, and Nandru Ilie and Dorin Liviu, Ciprian's two best friends.

He was very much afraid after his friends arrived, he'd have to send them into battle. Soon he had to choose a prince to guard his southern border in Bulgaria. He was considering Dragos. The older vampire had a good head on his shoulders. The only reason he hadn't assigned him to Bulgaria before now was because he knew the brothers would hate to be so far apart. He understood the concept of losing family. He'd lost his only brother when Brasov chose to overfeed on humans and challenge his right to be king.

Scowling, Val secretly admitted he not only needed, but he wanted a mate. He wanted his First Bride. Children. To hear the sound of all three of his Brides' laughter, his children running through the Great Halls of the castle, to know he'd secured an heir with his First Bride, well, it was a duty he could no longer risk delaying.

He'd waited centuries for it to happen, and now the time was here. He had to find his chosen First Bride. And she wasn't making it easy for him.

Before he located her and claimed her, he wished he had time to fix up the falling-down castle. No female would want to live in the genteel crumbling squalor and disrepair the castle had fallen into, but he could only accomplish so much in the hours he was awake. It would be plain stupid and a great risk to allow strangers to traipse through his home in the daylight hours, prowling, making discoveries best left undiscovered, all in the name of carpentry.

Witch's Magic

Rennie, his male servant, distracted him from his thoughts by setting the chalice of spiced wine in front of him. "Thank you, Rennie, but I'm not thirsty."

"You must have sustenance, Master. Try to drink, at least a little."

Valerian toyed with the stem of the pewter chalice. "I'll try." But he knew before he spoke the words he couldn't swallow even a tiny sip.

His thoughts returned to the castle and the challenge he faced. Overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the amount of work necessary to make it habitable for his First Bride—if he ever found her—Val rested his chin on his fingertips and leaned back in the throne-like chair. He closed his eyes and very gently probed the night.

His words flew through the glass-paned double doors behind him and out into the dark, into the forest. The wind picked them up and carried them away. Through the skeletal branches of the trees they raced, absorbing the distant shadows, flying over hills and valleys, villages and frozen streams, near and far, seeking his female.

Nothing.

Where was she?

Are you there?

Silence. Nothing but absolute quiet.

Disgusted with his desperation, Valerian shifted impatiently. Of course there was no reply. The wind could not bring back to him that which was not there. When would he ever accept the fact she wasn't real?

Never! He had to believe she existed.

If he gave up, he lost his one chance for happiness. A family. The crown. Brasov would see to it he was never crowned king of Vampyre based on the fact he hadn't produced an heir and no one could remember which of them had been born first. He had no doubts that, even now, Brasov was securing an heir. His brother would stop at nothing to gain the crown.

Val rubbed a hand across his brow. He owed it to his people to keep them safe from Brasov and his evil plans. Safe from the defiled vampire army his brother was recklessly creating.

I implore you, female, answer me. Are you there?

I'm here.

Val jumped and knocked over the chalice of red wine at the sound of the female's impatient voice in his head. Holy fuck! She was real! And she wasn't very far away or he'd never have linked minds with her this

quickly.

He surged to his feet, excited. "Rennie," he shouted. "Come quickly. I spilled the wine."

"I'm here, Master. I'll take care of the stain. Not to worry."

"I found her, Rennie. She is real. Real. And close."

The servant smiled. "I'm happy for you, Master. It will be nice to hear the sound of little feet in the castle again. You will breed her quickly?"

"Without delay."

Amazingly, acute hunger ripped through his veins, dousing his body with fire. His fangs erupted through his gums. He sank them deeply into his wrist to satisfy the urgent need to suck.

"Master, you must go to her. You need her, but I can feed you for now."

Valerian lifted his head and dismissed the servant with a wave of his hand. "Go home, Rennie."

"But, Master, I hate to leave you and you so hungry. Besides, I wouldn't mind if you changed me."

"No, Rennie. You do not want to become what I am. I'm all right. I slake my hunger but temporarily. She is the only one who can satisfy my needs now. Go home. Give my love to your lovely wife and granddaughter."

Rennie nodded. "I will. Good night, Master."

Valerian swallowed hard and returned to his wrist to quench his thirst. Nights of going without nourishment and sex slammed into his hard body. His cock stretched, swelled and hammered against his zipper like a wounded beast. Desire raged, fierce and sizzling, and he hadn't even seen his mate yet. It licked at his insides, raced to his groin, filled his sacs and engorged his cock. The broad head of his stiff shaft felt like it was going to explode. Shit. He had to find her. Soon. He had to plant his seed before it was too late and his entire world fell into ruin.

Where are you? Tell me! I will come to you immediately.

Teasing laughter floated in his head. *Ha! I bet you'd like to know where I am. Get out of my head, vampire! I want nothing from you.*

Oh, but I want something from you.

Besides my blood?

Well, I, uh, want that, too.

Yeah, that's what I thought. What else do you want?

An heir.

Silence. It stretched endlessly.

Witch's Magic

You have nothing to say?

I will not give you an heir.

You will.

I won't. Go away!

Come to me. We'll discuss it.

I will not come to you. Stop summoning me as if you think I have no free will of my own.

Valerian smiled. Your will is to do my bidding.

Ha! You don't know me very well.

I don't know you at all, but I will, in every way. What is your name?

Another long silence. Impatiently, Val adjusted the front of his jeans and eased back into the chair. His fingers tightened on the chair arms. He winced when the wood splintered beneath his fingertips. Patience was not his forte. He wanted to know everything about his First Bride. Now.

Do not defy me, woman. Answer me.

Understand...vampire, I answer because I choose to, not because you demand I do so.

And your name is...?

Pushy, aren't you?

He clamped back the urge to snarl. *You have no idea just how hard I can push. Tell me your name. Now.* Her huff of temper carried plainly on the wind. He grinned. His Bride was going to be a challenge. *I think you require taming, little red-hair.*

He felt her utter stillness.

How do you know the color of my hair?

Lucky guess. You possess a temper. I figured you have the hair color to match it. Am I right?

No. I'm blonde.

I think not.

Soft laughter. You don't believe me?

Should I?

You'll just have to wait and see. Her voice invited. He liked that.

While I'm waiting, tell me your name before I go crazy here.

Shasta.

Just Shasta? Surely there is more?

That is all you need to know, vampire.

Very well. I need not know your last name. It isn't important anyway, since you will be taking my name. Come to me, Shasta. I will make you my First Bride

this night.

First bride? How many brides are you allowed?

Three. As I said, you will be the First Bride.

And the last. I will not share my mate with other females.

Her mate? Valerian arched a brow, pleased she'd accepted him for her mate, even if it was unconsciously. *It is the way of my people. Three Brides. Three children conceived in one breeding season. But you are the Bride who will give me my heir and future king. The other Brides will insure my bloodline continues by giving me other children.*

It is not my way. One mate. One child conceived in a season. One delivered. Presto, your heir.

Presto? Valerian snickered. Sounds like a pressure cooker.

You think of me as an incubator.

No, that isn't how I think of you at all.

One bride, vampire, that is the way it is in my world. My future mate is mine. I will not share. My way or the highway, as humans are fond of saying. And if my mate wants more than one child, we'll discuss it. It isn't his decision alone.

I'll think about it.

It isn't your decision either, but you think all you want. I'm afraid I'm not First Bride material. Find another to carry your seed, to produce your heir, your next king. You're warped if you think I'm going to be the first of three brides.

Woman, you are whatever I say you are, and you will obey me! Always!

Ha! Don't get huffy with me. I obey no one. Not even a mouthy, uppity vampire who's a pompous ass and thinks too highly of himself. Who do you think you are? Do you honestly think you're a prince? A king? I think not! Three brides, my ass! You're a sex maniac. Who are you?

Both brows lifted. Sex maniac? Val laughed. Uppity vampire? By the gods, he'd been called a lot of things over the centuries, but no one had ever called him uppity or mouthy, and he *was* a prince. Soon to be king, but for some reason, he didn't think his sweet little Bride believed him or was even impressed.

I told you my name. What is yours?

Does it matter who I am? Come to me, Bride.

Silence. It stretched and stretched...His patience snapped. *Are you going to talk to me or not!*

Not.

Laughter bubbled up from inside him and spilled over, echoing through the castle. *By the gods, woman, you are going to drive me to laughter. I assure you, I'm a very somber vampire, and being gleeful does not become me.*

Witch's Magic

Now entertain me by talking to me. I like the sound of your voice.

Not until you tell me your name.

Valerian Radu. Happy now?

A groan. *Oh, shit! You are a prince.*

He laughed. Laughter. It was becoming a habit. *I am? Oh, yes. I am. At the risk of repeating myself, as your prince, future king and future mate, come to me.*

You are neither my prince nor my future anything. Leave me alone. I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Scoot over, Pinky, and stop hogging the covers.

Val stiffened. All amusement drained from his face. *You are not alone?*

Of course I'm not alone.

Pinky...is a male?

Yes.

Fury stabbed through him. His eyes felt as if they were going to combust. He knew they glowed red; he felt the intense heat. His fangs burst through his gums. *Get rid of him! Now!*

A gasp, then a giggle. *Ooh, poor Pinky. You want me to dump the sweet fellow?*

Get rid of him, or I swear I'll make him sorry he ever shared your bed.

Laughter. *You sound like a jealous lover.*

I'm a possessive lover. I don't share what belongs to me.

Hmmm. We see eye to eye. No three brides. Ever.

Valerian's lips twitched. He shook his head. *Clever. I see your point. I guess we do see eye to eye. All right. One Bride. You. Come to me willingly. I will sex you better than you've ever been sexed.*

Oh, brother. What is it with you vampires and your promises of great sex? I'm afraid you'll have to get in line. I've already had that offer tonight.

Val stiffened. *What? Who? Another vampire? Did you accept the offer to be sexed?*

Yes. Another vampire. No, I did not let him 'sex' me.

Do you know his name?

Brasov Radu. Is he a relative of yours? I hope not. Man, he's one ugly fucker.

Ugly? Shit. He and Brasov were identical twins. Did he touch you? Bite you?

Of course not.

There's no 'of course not' to it. Did you invite him in?

No.

Where are you?

Dracula's Inn, Village Pyre.

Val heard her soft gasp and frowned. She hadn't meant to tell him where she was staying. He smiled. He would have found her, no matter what, this mouthy female who would be his First Bride, his only Bride. Gods, a lifetime with her would keep him on his toes. He couldn't wait to meet her, to take on the challenge of taming her.

Shasta?

What?

Amusement filled his soul. She definitely sounded put out. *You're certain? Certain he did not come in?*

Yes.

How do you know he did not enter your room?

Because I have garlic around the balcony doorway to ward away creatures like you.

He snorted. *And you think this will stop a vampire from entering?*

Yes.

Dawn approaches. I don't have time to come to you tonight.

That's all right, vampire, you go to sleep. I'm coming to you. Today.

Valerian frowned. *No. Do not come to the castle.*

I'm afraid I must.

Do not. It's dangerous. It's crumbling away in places. And Shasta?

Yes?

Yeah, hold on to that one word, and get rid of the male in your bed, or I'll rip out his throat and leave him to bleed like a stuck pig. I'll visit you when the sun goes down upon this day. Invite me inside.

Laughter. You mean the word 'no'? You are not invited, and you cannot cross the garlic.

You are certain Brasov did not bite you?

Don't you think I'd know if it happened?

No.

He did not enter my room. He did not bite me.

I want to check you for myself. Tonight. Remove the garlic. It offers you no protection. I will get inside.

Ha! You're welcome to try.

For a vampire, that was as good as an invitation.

Chapter Nine

Gentlemen, we are dealing with the undead.

~Van Helsing
(Dracula, 1931)

*Romania
Village Pyre
Mortal Realm*

Brasov Radu, younger twin to the ruling Prince of Vampyre, Valerian Radu, melted beneath the crack of the door and entered Sorina Amanar's bedroom. Not in the best of moods after his defeat by his chosen First Bride, Brasov materialized into solid form and stared at the sleeping young woman.

Sorina. He'd had the hots for Sorina for a long time, at least, the hots for her blood. Petite, blonde, luscious mouth he couldn't wait to feel sucking his cock, nice, firm breasts, and big brown eyes. He supposed she had a certain appeal sexually, too.

Sorina would make a lovely Bride.

She moved restlessly, aware of him even in her sleep, as she should be. He'd marked her as his two nights ago. He hadn't fucked her yet, but he saw no reason to wait any longer. He didn't like strong-willed females like the witch at the Inn. That female would be hard to control. Still, he liked the occasional challenge, and he just might go for her another time.

For now, Sorina would make a much better First Bride. She was compliant. He could easily mold her to do his bidding without the mouthy retorts he'd received from the female at *Dracula's Inn*. He didn't have time for defiant females, not now. Sorina would do as she was told, obey his every order. Yes, Sorina pleased him.

Wake up! he commanded silently, sullenly. Furious the female at the Inn had refused to do his bidding, he'd make certain someone paid for her rebellion. "Wake up, Sorina! Now!"

Sorina's eyes popped open and filled with alarm. "My lord? How may I serve you?"

She sounded nervous, frightened, but she knew why he was here. "Remove your gown."

Brasov watched her slip the thin nightgown over her shoulders and toss it aside. Yeah, she knew he was here to claim her for his mate, to breed her. "I want a son, Sorina. You will please me by accepting me inside you and conceiving my heir."

"Yes, my lord."

Rage and frustration chewed at him. *Yes, my lord. How may I serve you?* Samhain, deep inside he couldn't stand weakness. It bored him to death, and gods knew it was hard to die when one was already the undead. He hadn't intended Sorina to be his First Bride, nor did he want her for the First.

He might detest defiance and strength in a female as much as he detested weakness, but the truth was he needed a strong mate. The female who conceived his heir and became his queen had to be able to work beside him and control his clan. Sorina was not strong enough to do that.

The choice was no longer his.

He didn't understand what powers the witch at *Dracula's Inn* possessed that she could resist his commands. Resist *him*. But she had, and he had no time to unravel the mystery.

Ah well, change of plans. Revenge could be worked out later. He'd make damn sure she paid for denying him entrance. Paid for refusing to become his mate and bear his heir.

However, at this moment business took precedence over rage, spite and frustration. If he was going to produce an heir before Valerian, he couldn't wait any longer. Once the beauty before him served her purpose, First Brides were as easily disposed of as socks.

This night, Sorina would take and hold his seed in her womb, bear

him an heir. It's all he required of her. She was young, beautiful, and he'd already exchanged blood with her twice. No more waiting or biding his time. He was finished playing around searching for the perfect First Bride.

Although Sorina wasn't his first chosen Bride, neither was the female at the Inn. He'd lost Princess Kali to the *waken* Captain Koran T.

Brasov chose Sorina for a Bride, not because she appealed to him on an uncontrollable sensual level, although it would be no great hardship to fuck her, but he selected her because she was the granddaughter of Rennie Amanar, Valerian's faithful servant.

Brasov smiled. Any way to wound Val pleased him greatly. Tonight, he'd complete the ritual, and Sorina would be beyond his brother and the old man's reach. There was nothing Val could do to save Sorina once she conceived his heir. Not even the Ancients dared come between a male vampire and his Brides.

Valerian came between Kali and him.

Brasov's fury knew no bounds.

Yes, Sorina would appease his anger, but one day, he'd kill Val for his interference with the princess. Before that day, he wanted to destroy or take everything Valerian held dear or claimed.

Brasov glided closer to Sorina. His head snapped around, and he stilled when he heard the soft rumble of voices coming from the front of the house. Sorina's grandparents!

He emitted a low growl. They should have been in bed hours ago. He would tolerate no interference this night. Brasov spewed curses, waved his hands slowly and wove invisible barriers across the bedroom door and the wall between Sorina's bedroom and the living room.

No one would hear what took place in this room for the next several hours. Brasov stripped off his clothes and crawled onto the bed. "Sorina. You will yield your body to me without a struggle. You will give me your blood, and in its place, I will give you my son."

She stared blankly into the distance, her eyes fixed just over his right shoulder. "I am in love, my lord, with a young man from the village."

"And this interests me because...?"

"I-I love him."

He gripped her jaw between his fingers and snarled. "Has he fucked you?"

"No, my lord! He has not!"

He pressed a kiss against her throat just below her ear. "Then I care not for this man or your besotted feelings for him. You belong to me, Sorina, and no other. You will never allow this male to touch you."

"Yes, my lord."

Brasov settled heavily between her legs.

"Please, my lord, I beg you, leave me be."

He laid a finger across her lips. "Shh. I intend to please, Sorina...myself." Brasov smiled, felt his fangs erupt through his gums, and because he was pissed at Sorina for daring to love another, he sank them brutally hard and deep and fed in ravenous gulps.

When at least he raised his head, his face felt flush with victory, for not only was Sorina a person Valerian cherished, but he'd also stolen her from another male.

Her weak struggles and faint whimpers annoyed him. He smashed her face with his fist once, twice, and snarled, "Shut up! I detest sniveling females."

A large bruise darkened her left cheek. Her bottom lip bled, and her left eye swelled shut. Tears slipped down her pale face. Her face looked waxen in the soft glow of moonlight shining through her bedroom window. Slowly, Brasov raked a sharp claw across his chest. "You will feed from me now."

Her lips trembled. "My lord, do not make me do this unholy thing. I love another."

Brasov smiled, icy hatred burning in his eyes. "What is his name? This male you love?"

"Stephan."

"I've never heard of a Stephan from the village. What is his last name?"

"I don't know, my lord."

"Yet, you love him?"

Brasov pressed her mouth against his chest. "If you wish for Stephan to live another night, drink from me, Sorina. Now."

Sorina pressed her mouth against his chest and suckled.

"Yes. That is the way. Take it. Take my blood. Drink deeply, Sorina. With my blood, I claim you for my First Bride. With the mingling of our blood, we are. Our lives are bound together for eternity until one of us dies."

Sorina drew a sharp breath and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I feel so strange."

"Lie back," Brasov ordered.

She laid back, her long blonde curls fanning across the blood-red pillowcase. Brasov smiled. "Open your thighs and accept me willingly into your body."

Sorina parted her legs in invitation. Brasov arched a brow and nudged her legs wider. In one swift motion, he surged inside her, covering her screams with his mouth as he tore through her maidenhead. Ah...virgins were such a nuisance, but he did so enjoy deflowering them.

Slowly, slowly, they floated to the ceiling. Locked together in the vampire's mating ritual, their heartbeats grew slower and slower. Throughout the long night, he remained joined with her. It was nearly dawn before Brasov spilled inside her for the final time. They floated down to the surface of the bed, and he released her from the vampire's *Razure*.

"It is done, my beautiful Sorina. My sweet Bride, you have made me very happy, my love. My son fills your belly. At sunrise, you will die. Tonight, you will awaken. Come to me at the Vlad Salt Mine. I will feed you. Do not feed from any other. There, you will remain in seclusion until it is time to present you to the Ancients. After that, you will give birth to my son."

"Yes, my lord."

"Now, I'm off to find this mysterious Stephan before daybreak strikes."

"Stephan?" Her voice rose on a hysterical note.

"Yes. This wonderful village man you're so in love with. You did not think I'd allow him to live. Did you?"

Chapter Ten

Attempts to create heaven on earth invariably produce hell.

~Karl Popper

Romania

Village Pyre

Dracula's Inn

Mortal Realm

In spite of the fact the first veins of daylight smudged the deep purple sky, Valerian melted into a bat and winged off toward *Dracula's Inn*. With only moments before full dawn struck, he knew he had to hurry, but he couldn't resist risking his wings getting scorched. It was worth the pain of a few blisters if he could see what his chosen First Bride looked like.

One quick look, he promised himself; then he'd return to the castle, to his bed, content. Perhaps far from satisfied...but at least happy as possible for the time being. As he flew toward the small village, his heart soared. His mate. At last, she was here. *Here*. Real.

For the hell of it, and because he was happy, he performed a few aerial acrobatics, tumbling through the air, nose-diving, flipping wing over wing. Gods, no doubt she was going to be a handful. He didn't care. He couldn't wait to claim her. She was a challenge to his masculine ego. He loved it. She easily matched wits with him. Her spirit and feistiness tested him. She dared him to do his worst. And oh boy, did he intend to

accept her challenge.

He grinned. She had no idea what his worst could be, but by the gods, he was not taking any chances of Brasov claiming her first. He had to put his mark on her. The claiming was an absolute necessity, and once placed on his chosen First Bride, for a male vampire it was as binding as a mortal's wedding vows.

Plus, he was dying to see if she was as beautiful as his visions of her. He couldn't rest until he saw her, touched her, if only for a second.

Val swooped onto the balcony and changed quickly to solid form. He blinked, ignoring the sting in his eyes from the faint rays of the sun. He turned to look through the balcony windows. *Please, he begged silently, let her be real. Let her be. I need her.*

His heart beat with anticipation. His eyes searched greedily through the dim shadows. There she was! His breath lodged in his chest and his mouth went dry.

Stretched along beside her, snoring loudly, was a tiny pink pig. Val laughed softly. Pinky. His shoulders shook with silent laughter. Pinky was a pig! A *Futhar*.

The little minx! Shasta had incited his jealousy over a *Futhar*, one of magic's most harmless creatures. She must have thoroughly enjoyed his heated response to her sharing her bed with the sweet-natured creature.

And there she lay, curled into a small knot on the side of the bed. His eyes feasted on her. In her restlessness, she'd flung off the dark blue comforter. He drank in her beauty, admired the luscious curves of her pale breasts spilling in abundance over the silk hugging her slender body.

Gods, what was she wearing? Better yet, what was she *not* wearing? The silk thing that clung to her body was in two pieces. The burnt-orange top was nothing but netted lace.

Valerian swallowed hard at the plain view of her navel, her full breasts. He couldn't wait to dip his tongue inside her belly button, suckle her coral-colored nipples. Her hair was thick and long and matched the color of her lacy top. The bottom was black and hugged her crotch as if it had died and gone to...

Shit. Val curled his fingers into his palms, ignored the savage pain of his claws digging into his flesh. She was real. Sexy and beautiful.

And she belonged to him.

Without hesitation, he sent the *Futhar* into a deep sleep. He

commanded Shasta not to awaken, but to be aware of him in her dreams. He slipped inside the room, past the ridiculous barrier of the dried garlic bulb necklace, past her refusal to invite him into her room and accepted the weak invitation she'd innocently given him.

You're welcome to try.

Success!

Ho, but it had taken very little trying on his part. To a vampire, an invitation was always in the way he chose to interpret words. You're welcome said it all.

Val stood beside Shasta's bed and watched her breathe. By the gods, she was beautiful. His gaze took in the neat row of stakes lined up on her bedside table. Beautiful—but deadly. She had every intention of killing him and any other vampire she happened upon. A flask of holy water stood beside the stakes and a tiny gold cross on a dainty chain. He shook his head. She was all set to slay any vampire she came across. He wondered if she truly believed she was prepared.

She might succeed in an attempt to kill him, but vampires weren't easily disposed of. Long before she figured that out, he'd already have made her his in every sense of the word.

Valerian settled his long frame beside her on the side of the bed...glided a fingertip up one smooth thigh to the edge of the wispy bikini bottom. The black silk fell away at his command. His throat went dry at the sight of the nest of auburn curls.

Her spicy scent teased his nostrils. His cock rose instantly, ready to play. He desperately wanted to sex her. Shit. He jerked the sheet across her hips. He couldn't take advantage of her while she slept under his spell. Not full advantage. That wouldn't be right. He wanted her, but he could wait for their physical union...not long, but...

Slowly, he inhaled a shaky breath and glided his fingertip up and down the smooth flesh above the slopes of her breasts, fascinated by the feel of her soft skin beneath the pad of his finger.

Such beauty. Her exotic scent settled over him, the sultry wave of her heat, the spice. His manhood jerked in a wild spasm, hot, hard and intense behind his zipper. Oh, how he wanted her. But not now, not here, not with daylight mere moments away. There was no time. No time. When he possessed her, he would not do so in a hurry.

Unable to stop himself, he lowered the cover again. Val leaned over her and slid his tongue along the inside of her thigh. There, he paused near the sultry heat that drew him like a magnet. He nuzzled the nest of

curls, inhaling her intoxicating scent. His fingers dug into the soft skin of her belly. Val smothered a groan. Damn. Damn the sun for cutting his time short.

Shasta moved restlessly in her sleep. *Open for me, little one*, he silently commanded. *Let me in. Let me touch you.*

She shifted, parted her thighs and lifted her hips in wanton invitation. He smelled her need for a male. Valerian was tempted to taste her. Gods, was he tempted. He leaned back, damning the ache in his groin. His mouth hurt from holding back the need to free his fangs. "Soon, sweetheart, I'll take care of both our needs. There will be no greater ecstasy than when we are joined and become one. But for now...a taste, a small sample for me, and brief sexual relief for you. To our future, darling."

Valerian flinched at the incredible pain of his fangs bursting through his gums. His eyes burned, shimmered with the heat of lust. Slowly, he sank the razor-sharp tips into the flesh of Shasta's inner thigh and suckled deeply. He retracted them, sank them again and suckled. Retracted. Sank. Suckled. With each bite, Shasta groaned and arched her hips in wanton need.

Val repeated the process until the letter of his first name was bitten into her flesh. His mark forever burned into her skin. His possession. His First Bride.

His mind hazed with red desire with the *Rushing* as he sank his fangs deeply for the last time. His balls throbbed. Her blood soared through his veins, rich, warm, rushing, rushing, flooding him with her heat, her heart, her spirit.

Valerian drank and drank, unable to stop as he'd intended, unable to maintain the rigid control he needed. Unused to the quantity of life-giving nectar he'd stolen from Shasta, dull pain burned like a black hole in his stomach, reminding him he was on the verge of overindulging. He retracted his fangs and lifted his head. His chest heaved. His hands shook. He licked his lips. The sweet taste of her blood was like wine upon his tongue. He wanted more. Desperately wanted more.

He rubbed a hand up and down his aching cock, but the pressure garnered there refused to be eased with a mere stroke of his hand. Besides, other needs were more important at the moment.

Quickly, he ripped apart his shirt, lifted Shasta into his arms and drew a sharp fingernail across his bare chest. He burrowed his words

deep inside Shasta's sleeping mind and wrapped them together in sexual need, sultry desire. Hers. Not his. *You need me, darling. Feed from me, my love. Feed as I command.*

A tiny whimper escaped her lips. She turned her face aside, yet her fingers curled into his chest, sifted lazily through his chest hair. She stroked the flat male nipples, leaned forward and dragged her tongue along the seam of the deep cut.

Yes, my love. Feed, darling.

He pressed her face tighter against his chest, closed his eyes and savored her warm mouth upon his flesh. The gentle movement of her lips as she suckled was sheer ecstasy. He didn't release her from the sexual spell until he knew she'd taken enough of his ancient blood for an exchange.

Val withdrew a gold ring from his pocket, the same ring his father had placed on his mother's hand when she became his First Bride, a ring with a big chocolate diamond in the center that matched the one on his right ring finger. He slipped the ring off his right finger and slid it on his left. Then he pushed the smaller one onto Shasta's left finger. "With my blood, I claim you for my First Bride. With the mingling of our blood, we are. Our lives are bound together for eternity, until one of us dies."

The minute he spoke the vows, the rings tightened around their fingers, binding them as one, never to be removed until one of them died.

Shasta's eyes flew open, but he knew she did not see him, was not aware she lay in his arms, half naked. Her eyes, such a deep emerald green, glowed with yellow and peridot striations. Sparks. Mating sparks. He'd seen those same sparks in Kali's eyes, only different colors. In Koran's. Witch sparks.

Val released a deep breath and shuddered. It was done. He knew from the response in her glowing eyes they were melded as one. No matter what, from this day he'd always know where she was.

The ceremonial words wove their magical pattern around them like invisible chains. She could never escape him, just as he could never escape her. "Lay back, my love. I want to pleasure you before I take my leave."

She complied, her head relaxing back against the pillow covered in a dark blue case. Valerian leaned over her and brushed a kiss against her mouth. Shasta parted her lips willingly, seeking to deepen the kiss. She touched her tongue to his. There was nothing hesitant about her

response, and he knew without doubt she was ready to mate with him. Ready for a male. Dammit. He couldn't stay. The threat of the sun denied him this opportunity to complete their binding vows.

He heard her soft hiss of need; then she slid her fingers in his hair and held him closer. The kiss deepened. Lips melded. Tongues mated. Valerian felt his breath catch in his lungs. He hadn't anticipated her carnal response, or that he would be the one to fall under her spell. Gods, he ached to make her his in every way. *No time*, his mind screamed. *No time*.

Valerian slowly released her mouth. She whimpered, tried to pull his mouth back to hers. "Shh, shh. Easy, love. I know you have needs. Relax, sweetheart."

He walked a trail of butterfly kisses down her abdomen. She arched her hips, silently begging him to complete the ritual. Gently, he coaxed her legs apart and buried his face against the sweet curls. Val probed her damp channel with the tip of his tongue, then slowly explored the honeyed depths. Her hips moved faster, her groans of pleasure louder.

Valerian gave her clit a long, slow lick, then another and another, until she mewled with pleasure. He felt her wild shudders and knew she'd crested and spilled over the edge. Shasta's soft screams of relief assured him he'd satisfied her immediate needs.

He lifted his head, saw her eyes had returned to the deep green shade that was normal for her. Her lids grew heavy. She sighed softly.

"That's good, darling. You'll be okay, love. Sleep. Sleep through the long day that rushes to separate us. Tonight, the darkness will unite us, allow us to become one."

Valerian looked to the east. The sun. Damn the eternal sun. It was upon him. By the gods, he didn't want to leave her like this, vulnerable. Alone. Weak. He wanted to sleep beside her, hold her in his arms next to his heart.

He had no choice but to go.

Rising to his feet, he pulled the cover over her and sent her into a deep slumber. "Rest, my darling."

Val materialized, barely escaping the first rays of sun shooting through the balcony glass. He took solid form in his bedchamber deep underground, below the castle. His hands trembled as he stripped away his bloody shirt. Fuck! He'd forgotten to seal the wound on his chest.

Had he sealed the wounds on Shasta's thigh?

Zabitha Shay

Made the bite marks invisible to her eyes?

He'd been so excited. He couldn't remember what he'd done.

He only remembered the delicious taste of her blood, the sensual smell of her body needing a male and how it excited him and ignited a fire deep in his blood. He had no time to debate what he'd left undone. Already, the debilitating lethargy that struck his kind at daybreak ensnared him in its ruthless hold.

His eyes felt gritty. His eyelids grew heavier and heavier.

Valerian collapsed on the side of the bed. His armor. He must put on his armor. He reached for the heavy breastplate and pulled it on. His mind thickened. He fell back on the pillows and closed his eyes. All his strength drained away, leaving him as vulnerable as Shasta. Val licked the taste of Shasta off his lips and moaned his pleasure. He yawned, his eyelids growing heavier and heavier.

She would sleep away the daylight hours, his most vulnerable time. But he knew there would come a day when she'd come for him. The next few days and nights were going to be difficult for both of them. He drifted deeper into the darkness of his mind.

If he left any proof behind that he'd bitten her, when she awoke and discovered she'd been marked, she'd be furious. He prayed his command for her to sleep held, else she would come to him if she awakened. Come to him. Invade his home.

And she would drive one of those sharp-tipped stakes through his heart.

Chapter Eleven

Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.

~Mahatma Gandhi

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Nyra wiped tears from her face and hurried inside the bedroom where her sister Saylym had been delivered of precious twin boys right before the demon attack. The babies had to be taken care of first. Rejuvenated first. Although stillborn and tiny, if she used her magic on them in time, their chance of reviving increased.

Topaz followed behind her. "What can I do to help?"

"Go upstairs. Bring me the *Futhars*. I need to see which of them I can save, and I don't have time to run all over the place. Hurry."

Topaz took off.

Nyra slipped off her magical cloak and set it aside.

"Saylym?" Nyra heard a faint groan in response. "Saylym!" She eyed the bed, searching. Her sister was buried beneath Talon. The prince had shielded Saylym the best he could by spreading his body over hers. Four arrows were in his back. Eerily still, Nyra saw no signs of breathing in her sister's mate.

"I can't move." Saylym sounded strained, weak. "I think there's an arrow in me. Gods, it burns like fire."

"Don't try to move," Nyra ordered. "One of the arrows penetrated Talon's shoulder and into you."

"I can't see. Is Talon all right?"

"He will be." Nyra braced herself against what she knew was going to be a difficult task. Slowly, one by one, she removed the arrows from Talon's back until there was only one left. "You ready?" she asked Saylym. "Hold on, honey. It's going to hurt like hell."

Nyra pulled on the arrow, slowly drawing on the shaft until she removed the thing completely. She flung it across the room with the others.

"Nyra?"

Nyra looked over her shoulder at the feminine voice behind her. "Hannah?"

Hannah Miller, Sage's new mate, was sitting in the corner where Nyra had flung the arrows. "Oh, Hannah, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there. Did I strike you with an arrow?"

"No, but there's one in my arm. I'm pinned to the wall."

"Okay, don't try to move. It only causes the tip of the arrow to burrow deeper. I'll help you in just a minute. Is your baby all right? Are you cramping or anything?"

"I'm fine, but I-I don't know where Sage is or if he's okay."

Nyra swallowed back her fear. She knew exactly where Sage was and the shape he was in. "He'll be back soon, honey. Just hang in there. He's with Helayne."

Hannah's violet-blue eyes glistened with unshed tears. "He's not fine, or he'd be here with me. Nothing short of his death would keep him away from me and our son."

Nyra bit her lip. "I'm sorry."

Hannah closed her eyes wearily. "It's okay. I know you were trying to keep me from worrying. You'll make everything right. Won't you?"

Nyra bowed her head and let her dark hair shield her face. "Yes, of course. I will."

"Hannah," Saylym cried. "Thank the gods you're still alive. I'm so sorry this happened."

Hannah's voice sounded as faint as Saylym's. "It's not your fault. Where's Eldora? My range of vision is pretty limited where I'm at."

"Mum," Saylym called. "Nyra, where is she?"

"Stop your fretting, child. I'm under the bed."

Nyra got on her hands and knees, lifted the vivid orange dust ruffle and looked under the bed. "Eldora, give me your hand. I'll help you out from under there."

"I can't move. My hair is caught in the bedsprings. Saul. I need Saul. Is he all right?"

Nyra bit her lip. "I don't know."

"Oh, child, you don't have to spare this old witch's feelings. I feel the loss in my heart."

Nyra's eyes welled with tears and sympathy. "I'm so sorry. I can't bring him back for you."

Eldora sniffed. Even though full-blooded witches couldn't cry, her heart bled tears. Nyra didn't know Eldora very well, but the old lady had raised Saylym as her own daughter and for that kindness, Nyra loved her.

Eldora patted Nyra's hand as she reached for her. "We had our days, child, Saul and I. They came and went, but we had our days. They were glorious. He was the one great love of my life. My only regret is that I wasn't fertile to give him a son."

Nyra gently untangled the strand of Eldora's white hair caught in the springs. "If I could, I'd save your Saul for you. I know he loved you regardless of your inability to conceive."

Eldora nodded. "I know that, child, just as I know your heart is filled with nothing but kindness. It always has been. A witch has but one great love in her lifetime. Yours will come for you soon."

"Mine?" Nyra blinked. "Here, let me help you."

Nyra grasped Eldora's hand and helped her slide from underneath the bed.

"Gods," Saylym cried. "I know how Creed felt now when he was shot by that silver-tipped arrow. Magical arrows suck the big one."

A strained laugh escaped Nyra as she stood up and brushed off her black dress. She helped Eldora to a chair and turned back to Saylym. "Yes, they do."

"Talon, will he be okay?"

"Certainly, I will not contemplate anything else."

"Samhain, but I love him, Nyra. He's my heart, my soul, my everything."

"Yes, your one great love."

Saylym blinked. "He is that and more. He's so good to me, and I failed him."

"Failed him?"

"I lost his sons."

"It wasn't your fault, baby."

"Where is everyone?"

Nyra gently brushed strands of hair from her sister's face. "Go to sleep, and rest for now. Everyone else will be here shortly." *I hope. Please, Goddess of Life. Do not let me fail my family any more than I already have.*

"My sons? You can breathe life back into them? You possess this magic?"

"Yes." Nyra ignored her sister's soft sobs of gratitude and concentrated on the twin boys lying on the bed.

Gabe and Dylan, the spitting image of their father, were pale and still as the death that claimed them. Nyra lifted Gabe in her arms. "Okay, little guy, make me the happiest aunt in witch-world. Breathe." She cupped her palm over the infant's heart. A circle of light, bright and dazzling shot from her fingertips and into the tiny body of her nephew.

She heard a soft gasp, a mewling cry; tiny fingers twitched. "Breathe, Gabe. I command you, draw air into your lungs and live!"

A sharp gasp, a louder cry and Gabe opened his eyes, kicked his scrawny baby legs and let out a wail.

"Oh, gods." Saylym wept. "He's alive. Alive."

"Yes." Nyra wrapped the baby in a blanket and placed him on the bed beside Saylym. "Now, Dylan, do not let your aunt down." *And the others. All the ones I'm allowed to save. Only the ones Death granted me. I must remember that and not overstep my boundaries.*

Nyra squeezed her eyes shut and uttered a prayer to the Goddess of Life. She didn't know if she could obey Death's orders, for her heart commanded she save everyone. And if she did, Death would surely come for her, just as he'd promised.

Chapter Twelve

He may not enter anywhere at the first, unless there be some one of the household who bid him to come, though afterwards he can come as he please.

~Bram Stoker
(Dracula)

*Romania
Village Pyre
Dracula's Inn
Mortal Realm*

Purple fingers of late evening shadows bled across the darkening sky and had settled inside Shasta's room when she awoke. She blinked, rubbed a hand over her face and wondered why she felt so groggy and tired.

Lifting her head, she moaned and let it fall back on the pillow. Damn, she'd slept the day away. Another fifteen minutes and full darkness would be upon them. She frowned. She couldn't believe she'd slept so many hours or the wild dreams she'd had. Talk about some kinky sex. Whew!

She turned her head and looked at the darkening sky. What in the world? She was never this inactive. Why did she feel so disoriented and too weak to hold up her head?

And why did she feel as if her soul had been wrenched away and bound to another? As if she was no longer a separate being?

Travel lag. It had to be the long journey to distant realms.
Was the tiredness never going away?

She dragged herself up on the side of the bed and cupped the sides of her head. Shards of pain shot through her skull. Shasta rubbed her aching temples and suppressed a moan. She tried to swallow, but her throat felt as dry as the desert on Na-Cyl. Extreme thirst punched her in the gut.

Shasta clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from gagging. Her stomach swirled and whirled and rebelled at the thought of water or anything else going into it.

It took her a moment to realize the scrap of black silk lying on the floor at the tip of her toes was the bikini panties she'd worn to sleep in. She picked up the scrap of lace, mystified as to how it ended up on the floor. That must have been some wicked dream. Too bad she didn't remember all of it.

Shasta clutched the black silk to her bosom and forced herself to get off the bed. Lazing about wasn't going to accomplish one darned thing. She had to get moving. Already, she'd lost two days. Enough was enough! She'd come here to this crazy realm to find her friend. That was exactly what she was going to do.

First a shower, then she'd partake of a hot nutritious meal. No matter how much the thought of food sickened her, she was going to eat. Then she'd make plans. Yeah, she should have a plan. She couldn't just go out and attack vampires willy-nilly. After all, she was an unwelcome guest in their realm. It would go so much better if she chose her prey and stalked him, caught him when he was most vulnerable, then *wham!* Stake to heart, deed accomplished.

She stumbled awkwardly to the bathroom, ignoring the fact she limped. She figured her leg was asleep the way it tingled and ached. Once in the bathroom, Shasta splashed cold water on her face, brushed her long, tangled hair and paused while applying the toothbrush to her teeth.

"Holy hell! What the heck?" The toothbrush slipped from her fingers and landed in the sink. Shasta leaned closer to the square mirror in front of her and examined her incisors. Were they a tad longer? Sharper? She snapped her mouth shut and sighed. *Crap!* That's exactly what she looked like. *Gross!* She looked like something a stray cat had dragged up from the cemetery. Gods, she was pale as death. Maybe she was coming down with something. She felt her forehead. No fever. No, of course not,

she was letting her imagination run away with her just because she felt tired. There was nothing wrong with her.

Shasta ran her tongue over her incisors. Boy, they sure felt a smidgen longer and sharper. She glared at her face in the mirror. Egads! She really did look worse than day-old *shymeta*. Shifting from one bare foot to the other, she shivered as cold air brushed her naked butt.

"Ouch!" Sharp pain danced along the inside of her upper right leg like streaks of fire. "Crap! What now?" Swallowing past the dryness in her throat, Shasta eyeballed her inner right thigh and gasped. "What?" Her jaw dropped. "It couldn't be." She looked closer at the rows of puncture marks. "Ahhhhh! Merciful gods, I've been bitten! Not just bitten, branded."

Shasta twirled and ran into the bedroom. "Pinky, wake up," she screamed. "The son of a bitch snacked on me. He nibbled on me like I'm a gourmet meal, like he discovered a new delicacy. He bit me when I wasn't looking!" She paused long enough to catch her breath, then wailed, "The crazy fucker bit me right between my legs. Well, almost between my legs, real close to dessert. I bet the undead bastard thought he'd died and gone to pussy heaven! How dare he bite me so...so intimately. And-and, he left this!"

Shasta looked around wildly. No vampire in the room. None on the balcony. When had he bitten her? She hadn't gone to bed until almost dawn; surely he hadn't had time, not before the sun rose. Had he?

"Pinky," she said with a piercing cry. "Wake up! I can't believe it. He practically chewed his name into my thigh."

Pinky sat up on the side of the bed and yawned. "What wrong with Missy? Why Missy hopping up and down screaming like naked, raving lunatic? Ugh. Please, Missy, cover that thing up. Pinky not like seeing your tut-tut."

"Forget I'm naked."

"Pinky wish him could, but tut-tut velly one gross, ugly sight to little pig's eyes first thing in morning."

Shasta grabbed her robe off the foot of the bed and jerked it on. "There, happy now?"

"Pinky be velly happy if him go back to sleep. Velly tired."

"Get up! The vampire. The toothy bastard's been here. How could he come in? I have garlic. I have stakes. I-have-a-hammer! We have to go kill him. He trespassed."

Pinky shuddered. "We? *Squee!* Pinky no vampire slayer. Pinky just along for ride, not the kill. Which toothy bastard been to visit Missy? The velly ugly one or the one who been flirting in Missy's head? Pinky no wanna kill vampire. Velly frightened. Besides, it velly, velly dark outside. *Scared. Scared. Gag. Gag.*"

"For the love of the gods, will you stop repeating those infernal words? He *bit* me," she said angrily. "He turned me into a four-course meal and ate until he was full. I bet he's planning to come back for dessert. The bastard, of course he is."

"Him ate you four times?"

"Yes! No! Not like *that*. At least, I...I don't think like that. Oh, gods, he might have feasted like that."

"Like what?"

"Never mind. I don't know how many times he...he snacked, but once was one time too many. I'm not his personal food tray. I'm not his private banquet."

"Who Missy gonna stake?"

"*Valerian*. I know it was him. The toothy bastard left his initial in my leg, like I belong to him or something. V. R., Valerian Radu. He broke in here, took a bite out of me, then left like it was nothing to carve his initials into my thigh with his fangs. How could he just walk in here? I didn't invite him inside."

"Yes, Missy did."

"No, Missy didn't."

"Missy did. Pinky heard with him own two ears."

"When? I specifically told him he wasn't invited."

"But then you say him welcome to try and get inside. That wonderful invite in vampire language, same as opening door and say, Come on in and feast 'til heart's content. He walk past garlic to get to you. Him must want you velly much. Missy velly not smart when it come to vampire rules."

"Oh, shut up!"

Shasta grabbed a pair of jeans, a shirt and undies. "I'm getting dressed; then I'm going to the tavern and have dinner. I'll make my plans then. He can't just waltz in here and nibble on me, leave his initials on me like he's marked his spot or something."

"Pinky think initials of vampire on you velly significant. He welded you to him."

"Welded? What? You mean wedded? No. No way am I mated to a

vampire."

"Pinky think is true. Vampire welded you. Vampire vows very sacred, as binding as Were vows or any species' vows. You welded for life, Missy. Vows can't be broken except by death or vampire crumble to dust, same thing as death. Ooh, Creed gonna be sooo pissed him not at your welding to give you away."

"Shit! I am not wedded to a vampire."

"Pinky say you are, and Pinky never be wrong. You vampire's bride. He claimed you. See that fancy ring welded on your finger?"

Shasta gasped and tried pulling the ring off. "It won't come off, Pinky."

"Course not. Missy very much welded to vampire just like Pinky say to you. Vampire will be back to finish welding job, do the *whumpie-whumpie* with you, give you little toothy vampire baby who maybe resemble beady-eyed bat."

"That's impossible, Pinky. Vampires are dead. They can't make babies. Can they?"

"Yes. They can at certain times in their dead life. Pinky betting this is certain time in new mate's life. He gonna put him little fangy baby bat in you. Just wait and see. Him not fooling around, Missy. He welded you velly quick 'cause him wants you. Him welded you but good. Humph!"

"He can just *un-weld* me."

"Vampire not undo vows. Pinky say to you, vampire want you velly much. If Missy force him to unspeak vows, like I say, he will crumble away like being burned in morning sun. He not give you up. Ever."

"Well I don't want him."

"Missy have no choice now. She vampire bride, welded for better, for worse. Welded. Welded. Welded."

Shasta eyed a stake and the hammer. "We'll just see about that. I'm afraid dear Valerian is going to learn the worst part of being welded to me."

"Missy need be velly careful if going to vampire's lair. Dare not go at night; wait for daytime. Vampire might wake up when you near his coffin even in daylight. He be velly pissed you try to unweld with him by driving stake through his dead beating heart."

Shasta snorted. "He'll be upset all right. I just might carve my initials in his dead beating heart with the stake."

Pinky sighed. "Pinky 'fraid this soon gonna be one awful bloody

mess.”

“You bet your ass it is! I just hope he has the nerve to return tonight.” She picked up a stake and the hammer and shoved them in her big purse. “If he doesn’t want to die, he better be wearing a suit of armor!”

Chapter Thirteen

From the world of darkness I did loose demons and devils in the power of scorpions to torment.

~Charles Manson

*Ru-Noc
Droth
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

MeLora Haven, self-crowned bitch queen of Ru-Noc, clapped her hands with glee and laughed. She twirled around the bedchamber she now shared with her new mate, Zebus. She grinned at the demon, for the first time exultant with what he'd done to make her happy.

Zebus.

Her heart raced. Her pulse pounded with excitement. "Where are they?"

She launched herself at him. "Give them to me," she demanded. Now!"

Zebus pushed her away. "I don't have them yet, my love. Give it one hour."

"One hour!"

"The magic must have time to drain or else the arrows will attack us when we go in. You will have the emeralds. I promise you. I always keep my word. Now come here. I want to feel my son in your belly."

MeLora frowned. Secretly, she detested the babe Zebus had planted in her womb. Like his father, the demon babe was mean and cruel and unpredictable. The second babe in her belly, put there by King Darak before Zebus tore out the king's heart and burned it, rarely moved. The babe was being tortured by Yorbus, Zebus' unborn son. She didn't care about either babe, but given a choice, she'd much rather be delivered of Lucian than Yorbus.

Zebus frowned at her, and she wondered if he had the power to read her deepest thoughts.

"I know everything you think or feel, my love, and so does Yorbus. I also know of the new plan for me to kidnap Saylym for you. I must say, I totally agree. I might never have thought of it myself."

"She is still alive?"

Zebus grinned. "Saylym? Yes. Talon would have protected his mate even if it meant sacrificing his life."

"Then capture her. I want those emeralds off her fingers. I must have them! After you obtain them, kill her."

"Ah, you wish her dead. Whatever you wish, my love."

"That is my wish. I want her dead."

"A word of warning, my love, be very careful what you say and think about my son. It angers me that you choose not to love him. I will not tolerate you injuring Yorbus in any way. I will cut your belly open and take my son at the time of his birth and leave you to die."

Kick her, Yorbus, for her unacceptable thoughts about you. Kick her hard. Claw the other babe. Leave your mark on his face.

MeLora clutched her belly and doubled over. The demon inside her kicked and kicked until she dropped to her knees and curled into a fetal position. She felt Luc's tiny body jerk, his cry of pain as the demon scratched him. "Stop it, Zebus! Stop him!"

"When you assure him of your love, I will call him off. Tell him of your love for him. Now!"

"I love you, Yorbus. Please believe me. I love you very much."

"Tell him how you despise the other babe filling your womb. Tell him how you love it when he forces the babe into hiding. Tell him!"

"I...I love you, Yorbus, and I detest Luc. It pleases me when you injure him. Please, Zebus, call him off. It hurts."

All right, my son, she has learned her lesson, but anytime she thinks bad things about you or me, kick her, bite her and coat her womb with your acidic bile.

Witch's Magic

Yes, Father. And may I continue crowding this other babe who tries to take my space from me? I detest him.

I care not what you do to him. Rip out his heart for all I care.

I've tried that already, but he has some kind of magical shield around his heart. I cannot touch it.

I will think on that, see what I can do to remove the shield for you.

Thank you, Father. I look forward to the day I can kill him.

MeLora slowly rose to her feet and brushed her hair from her face with unsteady hands. "You swear it? I will have the emeralds?"

"Would I lie to you, my darling?"

"You're a demon."

"But you are my mate. I'll always be honest with you."

"But not kind?"

Zebus shrugged. "You bring your punishment upon yourself. I swear to you the emeralds are as good as yours. I will cut them off Saylym's fingers for you myself."

MeLora clapped her hands. "When? When will you capture her?"

Zebus shrugged. "Soon."

"You're sure you can get in and get her without being caught?"

"Of course. Most of Talon's family has been wiped out. They are dead."

"What? How? What did you do?"

"It isn't a big deal, my love, a small demon army, surprise attack and a few thousand magical arrows." He snapped his stubby fingers. "It was easy."

MeLora eyed the demon. "You did this alone?"

"No. Black Drayke helped me."

"Black Drayke? He cannot be trusted."

"Neither can you nor I. But for now, he wants what I have to give."

"What?"

"The throne of Ayrumus."

"You are willing to make him king of Ayrumus?"

"Never. But thinking he'd be given the kingdom, he stuck an athame in my brother's back. Kallibus is dead along with the bitch he planted his seed in, Queen Helayne. Stop asking questions and have a little faith in your mate. Come here, I've worked up an appetite with all this killing. I wanna fuck you."

MeLora lowered her gown and let it drop to the floor. "Yes, my lord. Then we shall go collect my emeralds."

Zabitha Shay

Zebus grinned and whisked his clothes off. He stroked his stiff cock. "I'll secure the emeralds, my darling, without your help, but first, I have a big present for you right here. Come, I have a most urgent need. Get on your knees and please your king, and your king will please you."

Chapter Fourteen

Life isn't fair. It's just fairer than death, that's all.

~William Goldman
(The Princess Bride)

*Mesquite, Texas
Mortal Realm*

Ann Michelle Cole stared blankly at the phone she'd just settled on its cradle and pondered the urgent situation. Her sister was missing! Dammit, why hadn't the police notified her?

Why hadn't Ameer remained in Paris?

Why did her headstrong sister have to go hiking in Transylvania?

Transylvania, for God's sake!

Who the hell hiked in the land of vampires?

Not that she believed in such nonsense, she didn't, but for Pete's sake, didn't Ameer possess an ounce of common sense? Didn't her sister realize it wasn't safe for a young woman alone?

It was bad enough Ameer wanted to live in Paris, but now, this, *this* damnable trip she'd insisted on taking so she could see the Carpathian Mountains was unacceptable.

Ann's brows furrowed. She hadn't had much luck dragging information about her sister from the manager at *Dracula's Inn*. He was reluctant to give personal information about one of the Inn's guests over the phone.

"If the young lady has more questions," he said, "I suggest you come to Village Pyre in Western Romania and ask them personally. That way you can supply proof you are who you say you are."

He sounded aloof, but somehow she'd managed to wheedle enough information that, according to him, Amee voluntarily left the tavern a few nights earlier with a male. She hadn't returned to the Inn.

"No, lady, I don't know the identity of the male. Men come and go. It isn't my job to keep track of females who rent rooms at the Inn, especially when they are of consenting age."

Ann heard his defensive tone, but ignored it. Dammit, her sister was missing. The least he could do was answer a few simple questions.

"No, the Inn's guests don't up and disappear all the time," he snapped. "Your sister is probably having a good time with the man. Not to worry, all her things are still in her room. The room is paid in full for another week. She'll show up."

"If I come there, will you allow me inside her room?"

"If you bring proof you're Miss Cole's sister, I'll let you into her room. I'll even let you stay in the room for the week, if it's what you want."

Yeah. Right. Ann saw that one coming all right. No way was that manager letting her into Amee's room without *her* parting with some green. The man had sounded too defensive and on edge.

What had her sister gotten into?

It wasn't the time of year people went hiking, so where on earth could Amee be? She'd tried for three days to contact her younger sister with no luck.

It wasn't like Amee not to let her know where she was or where she was headed. The last time she spoke to her sister, Amee was meeting a group of young students, and they were going to have drinks in the Inn's tavern.

Ann hadn't been happy with her sister's decision to go to Transylvania, but Amee was twenty-one. Her sister possessed a bit of a rebel streak. If she wanted to hike during a snowstorm, then she'd go hiking.

Ann's fingers caught in the delicate gold chain around her neck, an identical match to the necklace Amee wore. It had been the last Christmas presents from their parents before Steve and Ellen Cole were killed in an avalanche in Colorado eight years earlier. Amee had just turned thirteen, and Ann was in her first year of college.

Both their parents were only children, so there was no one to take them in, and if Ann hadn't been eighteen, the two of them would have been separated and Amee placed in foster care. Ann stood her ground against the authorities and kept Amee with her.

The A, lined with diamonds, bit into her fingers. She had to find her sister.

Ann blinked back tears when she thought of all the things that could have happened to her sister. Transylvania conjured up all sorts of spooky images. Bats, vampires, werewolves, but she knew it was all based on legends, folklore, movies, books, imagination, and designed to lure tourists.

She nibbled on her thumbnail and resumed pacing. Dammit, she hated traveling. *She* was the sister who liked to stay stateside. Sometimes her job required she travel to other countries, but at heart she was a small-town girl and was always glad to get back home.

Ann stopped pacing long enough to study her reflection in the dresser mirror. Worry lines creased her brow. She saw a woman in her late twenties, full-breasted, slim waist, trim hips, long legs encased in tight Wranglers. A little added height from her boot heels. A cowgirl at heart. She could stay on the back of a horse that didn't want her there. Her chocolate-brown eyes were wide with a fringe of thick, dark lashes. She thought her eyes were her best feature, not that there was anything wrong with her slender nose and full lips.

But her lips weren't perfect the way Amee's were. Ann sighed. The tiny scar above her top lip and to the right side of it was plainly visible where an assailant had cut her with a knife two years ago. She'd go to her grave with the scar, but for some reason, her lips were the first thing most males noticed about her.

At work, she frequently received ribald comments about her lips and suggestions what to do with them. She'd learned to turn a deaf ear.

She couldn't go through life filing sexual harassment against every single male who made a crude comment about her mouth. She thrust her fingers through her mop of unruly blonde curls and picked up the phone again. Quickly, she dialed Laura Bristol, her best friend's number.

"Laura? Hi. Is your passport up to date?"

Laura groaned. Ann always talked Laura into taking trips with her. "You know it is. Where are we going?"

Ann grinned. Laura had learned to give in gracefully. "How do you

feel about vampires?"

"Sexy. Hot. Especially if they look like that hunky Scottish actor, Gerard Butler, who played Dracula. Why?"

"We're going to Romania, to Transylvania."

"I'll start packing. When do we leave?"

"I booked a six a.m. flight. I'll pick you up at three."

Laura groaned. "Bring a tall cup of Starbucks, strong and black."

"Will do." Ann glanced around her tiny apartment after she cradled the phone. Nothing here she couldn't let go if she didn't come back. Her sister meant the world to her and was more important than any little treasures she'd collected for their home over the years. She'd stay in Romania forever if she had to.

Sighing, she marched over to her closet and dragged down the shoebox from the closet shelf and took out her passport. Thank God, she'd recently renewed it. Ann tossed it on the bed and reached for her suitcase in the back of the tiny closet.

For good measure, and just in case, she tossed her badge and gun on the bed. One never knew what doors might open when one flashed the official gold shield of an FBI agent, even in a foreign country.

Chapter Fifteen

I prefer to remain and protect those whom you would destroy.

~Van Helsing
(Dracula, 1937)

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Dawn was nearly at hand when Ciprian Costica Drakulya and his younger brother, Dracul, materialized inside the Great Hall at Radu Castle and joined Valerian and the rest of his guests. Valerian glanced at his friends – some of them relatives, like Ciprian and Dracul, his uncles.

He was grateful they were here.

Ciprian, long-boned, lean and mean as he was ancient, looked dark and sinister. Ciprian's brother, Dracul, centuries younger than both of them, handsome as hell, was an impossible flirt who set all the females' hearts aflutter. As a rule, Dracul was a shameless flirt who loved all the ladies. When he singled one out, he took his time courting her. He usually waited for several nights before he bit her or sexed her, building the sexual tension, then once he was sated, took off to the next lovely woman who captured his attention.

Dragomir Flaviu was a lot like Ciprian, tall, quiet, dark and dangerous. His younger brother, Dragos, was even worse. Dragos rarely sought female company, except to take what he needed, which was to

feed and a quick round of lusty sex. He had no time for courting and cared less if he broke a woman's heart. The older he grew, the less patience he had, and he frequently disappeared for years at a time.

Valerian suspected when Dragos found his mate, he'd fall hard. The other three males were close friends to all of them. Dragomir and Dragos were ancient cousins to Val. He wasn't certain exactly whom they descended from, other than they carried Dracula's blood, so they were definitely relatives. Fane Marku, Dorin Liviu and their only plant to monitor Brasov, Nandru Illie, were not directly descended from Dracula, but descendents from another ancient bloodline.

Nandru had volunteered to be the spy they needed to infiltrate Brasov's growing army. Valerian worried the younger vampire might slip up and it cost him his life, but his job was important. They needed whatever information Nandru could gather.

Ciprian's long strides ate up the distance between them. He accepted the chalice of wine Valerian poured for him and took a long draught. "Dawn is very close. Your female is sleeping as you have commanded her to do. You have chosen well. She'll make you a fine First Bride."

Valerian laughed. "She tells me she will be my only Bride."

"And you allow her to believe this thing?" Ciprian lifted a dark brow. A powerful vampire, he wasn't an Ancient, but he was still centuries older than Valerian. Ciprian believed in the old ways and adhered to the Ancients' laws.

Val shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Such a thing can only be decreed by the Ancients."

"I know, but first I have to obtain my Bride. I didn't want her upset."

Ciprian's jaw tightened. "You cannot afford to waste concern on this female's feelings. She is merely the vessel for your seed, nothing more. Fuck her, make her pregnant, then go to your second Bride and impregnate her."

"You think it's simple. You think you can do this when you fall in love with your First Bride?"

"Ah, there's the point. Once I meet her, I will not fall in love with my First Bride. I will not allow her that kind of control over me. She will not matter to me, nor will I worry about her feelings. I'll claim her, breed her, and she will have no say in the matter. That is the way it has always been done. You need to just do it, Val. You can't let your First Bride rule you or your heart, or you will appear weak. I would not allow any woman to tell me I can only have one Bride."

Dracul snorted. "How will you stop her, once you finally meet your First Bride, that is?"

"I will rule in my own home. I'll tell her the way it is. I command. She obeys."

Dracul laughed at his elder brother. "I'm afraid Ciprian has not yet learned the intricate ins and outs of wooing a female and gently bending her to his will. Your female is not the only guest at the Inn, Val. While Ciprian was checking out the village, I decided to drop in at the tavern. I saw two humans check in at the front desk. Females."

Valerian frowned. "Two? They are traveling together?"

"Yes," Dracul replied. He grinned, revealing a deep dimple in his right cheek. "One of them is quite beautiful."

"You said both of them are beautiful," Ciprian snapped. He tightened his lips. "I want the brown-eyed blonde."

"You saw her?" Valerian asked. "You're claiming her?"

Ciprian shook his head. "No. I'm not claiming her. But it's been a while, you know? I'll erase her memory and release her when I'm...finished."

"I want the cute brunette," Dracul inserted. "I won't be setting her free."

Valerian and Ciprian both turned in surprise.

"Shit," Valerian said. This was a problem he hadn't anticipated. "If you keep her, the other female will have to disappear."

Ciprian clenched his jaw. "I'll take care of her. When I finish sexing her, I'll break her neck and dispose of the body."

Dragomir and Dragos Flaviu both frowned. "We don't need the problem of another female disappearing," Dragomir said.

"I know that," Ciprian snapped. "But neither do we need her running around filing a missing persons report. She'll have to die."

Dragos, the most somber of the group, nodded. "I'll take care of her for you, Ciprian. After sexing her, you shouldn't be the one to kill her. That just sucks."

Valerian lifted a brow at Dragos' attempt at dry humor. "Okay, Ciprian, you have no interest in the blonde other than a night of pleasure?"

Ciprian frowned. "I'm not ready for a mate, if that is your question. She'll do for a night of food and a few hours of rowdy sex. Come dawn, I'll be finished with her."

Dracul shook his head. "Not me. I've had centuries of waking with my arms empty. I'm tired of being alone. I'm keeping the brunette."

"For how long?" Ciprian asked.

Dracul shrugged. "I don't know. Until I tire of her."

Dragos snorted. "With your reputation, it will only take a night or two of sexing. You will then pass her to us for food, declaring she bores you."

Dracul's inky dark brows knitted together. "I've never sexed a human before. I might enjoy her enough to keep her longer than a night or two."

They all laughed knowing what a shameless womanizer Dracul was.

"When I am finished with the blonde, the rest of you may feed and fuck her," Ciprian said in the haughty tone he always used. "I certainly have no intention of keeping a human for any longer than a night's pleasure."

"Ciprian." Dracul shook his head. "How do you know you will not want to claim her? You haven't even seen her yet. You know only what I told you of her looks."

"She's human. I will not mingle my blood with a human, change her nor claim her. I don't know how much time I'll need, but it's a fuck-and-feed night."

Dragomir folded his arms across his chest and rocked back on his heels. He turned to the other male vampires gathered round them. "None of us will touch her, Ciprian, not until you say you have had your fill of her. But these females are not going to be our only problem this night. We need to know what Brasov is up to."

Valerian turned to Nandru Illie. "Brasov still trusts you?"

Nandru's dark eyes widened. "Of course. He believes I'm a betrayer who obeys his every command."

"Then I think perhaps you should rise early tonight, go to him and find out what his plans are."

Nandru agreed.

"Tonight," Valerian continued. "I'll arrive at the tavern as soon as I give Rennie his orders for the evening. I don't think Shasta will leave the Inn after dark, but keep an eye on her until I can get there. Ciprian, you and Dragomir make a pass through Village Pyre when you rise, then join the rest of us there."

Ciprian and Dragomir nodded.

"All right," Val said, yawning. "Day is upon us. I know you all feel the urgent need to slumber. Let's retire for the day. We'll all meet at the

Witch's Magic

tavern tonight. Those of you who arrive there first will guard Shasta and the two humans. Do not allow them to leave the Inn. It's too dangerous. We cannot afford for Brasov to get his hands on these women."

Chapter Sixteen

All that is essential for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

~Edmund Burke

Romania

Outside Vlad Salt Mine

Mortal Realm

"He claimed her, my lord. Your brother has already claimed the red-hair for his First Bride."

Brasov clenched his fists in frustration. Nandru had sent him a message earlier to meet him outside the Vlad Salt Mine. Brasov paced, sorely put out at the news the young vampire had just given him. "Have they mated? Has she conceived his seed?"

"I do not know. I only know the binding words have been spoken. If he has bred her, he hasn't said. I think the prince would shout the news to all of us if his Bride conceived his heir."

"Or he might be sly enough to keep it quiet until we go before the Ancients and I challenge his right to the crown. I cannot take the risk of him seeding this female. He will not have her! She is mine. I saw her first. You're certain he has claimed her for his First Bride?"

"Yes," Nandru replied, a hint of satisfaction in his voice.

Brasov eyed him. A niggles of suspicion bloomed in his mind.

"He announced it last night at the castle." Nandru hurried on.

"Where is she?"

"I presume she's at the Inn."

Brasov turned to his second in command. "It could be a trap Valerian has set. Apostol, turn the *Changelings* loose on the village, all but the female chained in my lair. She is food for my new Bride. The *Changelings* will create distraction for Valerian and his followers. After you have released them, go to the Amanar house and bring Sorina here. It appears my Bride has decided to think for herself and disobey me. She ignores my summons. I want to know why."

Apostol, a decaying *Changeling*, unable to speak since his tongue had long ago fallen off, nodded and grunted his understanding.

"Do not harm Sorina. She carries my son. Bring me back a flagrum. I shall see to her punishment. A whipping with the leather thongs will teach her to obey my commands without causing her to lose the babe."

Apostol tipped his head in understanding.

Brasov turned back to the betrayer. "And Nandru?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"Do not fail me. I expect the redhead to be waiting in the tavern when I arrive later. She will be my second Bride. I cannot, *will not*, allow Valerian to breed any female. I will be king, and through me, one day my son will rule."

"Yes, my lord. I will make certain she is waiting there for you."

"I will be there as soon as I gather my followers."

Nandru frowned. "Your followers, my lord?"

Brasov smiled, his dark eyes icy. "I have garnered allies. If Valerian somehow manages to breed the red-hair, I will wage a war right up to the walls of Radu Castle and break down the doors. I will not only kill Valerian, but his Bride and heir as well."

All the color drained from Nandru's face. "But...the Ancients will soon gather there for the season of *Rushing*."

Brasov laughed. "Yes, I know. Didn't I tell you? The Ancients will be slain alongside Valerian and his friends. It's time for changes. Go now. Tonight, my *Changelings* will attack the tavern and steal the red-hair from the Inn."

"Yes, my lord."

"Nandru?"

Nandru turned back. He swallowed, his eyes wary. "Yes?"

"Do not fail me, or you will die alongside Valerian and the Ancients."

Chapter Seventeen

Everyone knows the phenomenon of trying to hold your breath underwater – how at first it’s alright and you can handle it, and then as it gets closer and closer to the time when you must breathe, how urgent the need becomes, the lust and the hunger to breathe. And then the panic sets in when you begin to think that you won’t be able to breathe – and finally, when you take in air and the anxiety subsides...that’s what it’s like to be a vampire and need blood.

*~Francis Ford Coppola’s journal in “BS Dracula”
(The Film and the Legend)*

*Village Pyre
Dracula’s Inn
Mortal Realm*

I want to see you. Where are you?

The delicate teacup with the pretty floral pattern slipped from Shasta’s hand and hit the edge of the matching saucer. She swallowed hard, thankful it hadn’t broken or chipped either piece of the fragile English set.

Dammit, will you stop jumping into my head like that? It gives me the willies.

I’m always in your head, darling. You choose to ignore the fact I live there now, unless I shout to gain your attention.

Consider yourself evicted and homeless.

Can’t. It’s my new permanent home.

Then pay rent.

Witch's Magic

Laughter. Damn, she wished the sound of his laugh wasn't so sexily pleasant and intoxicating.

I get to stay rent-free. I'll always be there. We're a part of each other now. You're in my head, too. I don't mind sharing the space with you.

You're insane.

Insanely nuts about you. Meet me tonight. Now.

Why? So you can snack again?

Snack? A chuckle. Hardly. No, sweetie, I want the full meal.

Ha! And you think me foolish enough to tell you where I'm at after you had the nerve to break into my room and turn me into your personal chow?

Ah, you haven't been my cuisine yet, my love. It was more like I was a mosquito sampling what's to come.

Shasta shivered with bliss as the sound of his laughter slid over her and through her. Hot flashes seared her flesh. A silent warning whispered in her head: *Danger ahead.*

And I didn't break into your room, darling. You invited me. I swear I don't think you're foolish. I think you're utterly delicious. You choose the place, sweetie. I simply want to see you. Be near you. Feast upon you with my eyes.

Shasta snorted. *Your eyes, my ass. That isn't what you want to feast upon me with, vampire. You want to sink those sharp canines in me. It isn't wise to trust your kind. Ever.*

My kind?

Vampyre. Do you think I don't know a vampire is deceiving?

You're afraid of me?

Shasta bristled at his challenge. *Certainly not! I fear nothing.*

I won't nibble, unless you invite me to. Meet me; share a drink with me. Two. Three. I assure you, my cuspids are put away...for now.

You'll come alone?

Of course. I have no desire to share your company with others.

All right. I'll wait for you in the tavern at Dracula's Inn.

A snort of laughter.

What's so funny?

Nothing. Good choice. I'll be there in two minutes, three at the most.

How will I know you?

Don't worry, love. I know you.

I knew that.

The teasing glide of his moist tongue against the pulse in her throat tantalized her mind. It faded instantly, but she knew instinctively he'd let her know he could touch her body through her mind any time he

wanted.

Shasta pressed a hand against the tingling spot and shivered. Drat the vampire. How could he touch her mind so easily?

Don't do that.

Do what? Soft laughter.

You know what.

Think of the pleasure I can give you. Anywhere. Anytime.

Shasta felt a thrill race down her spine. He was dangerous...in so many ways, his powers enormous. The vampire visited her room as he pleased. He could come and go in her head as he chose. So why the hell was she flirting with him? She had to be insane.

No way did she like the way he made her feel.

Yes, you do.

Shasta huffed. Nothing was sacred. Not her privacy. Not her thoughts.

I'll try not to intrude, but we are one. I can't leave your head even if I wanted to.

Well, don't listen in when I'm having private thoughts.

Okay. I'll look down and admire your beautiful breasts when you're thinking. Is that better?

Shasta narrowed her eyes, but there was no one to see her temper. *No, it isn't better.*

Hmm. I can see right now you're going to be hard to please. His voice teased. But I have a lifetime to try, thousands of lifetimes.

Go away!

See you soon. His laughter trailed away.

Shasta waited nervously for Valerian Radu to make his appearance. She got up and switched to a different table, settling in a dark, secluded corner where she could watch the front door.

Pleasant laughter or not, Valerian was a vampire, one who'd entered her room without her permission and one who'd left his initials bitten into her thigh. She damn well wanted to see him when he entered the tavern. She had no clue what he looked like, but in her heart, she knew she'd know him the minute he walked in.

A squat ruby-red and witch-black candleholder stood in the center of the table. The flame inside it flickered wildly every time someone opened the door and came in. Everything about *Dracula's Inn* felt Old-world, right up to the old-fashioned iron-railed bed in her room.

There were several other customers in the tavern. Two males sat at

the bar. Both looked like they'd spent hours in the sun tanning. Their hair was long and dark and fell across wide shoulders. Gods, they were so incredibly handsome. When they looked her way, they took her breath away.

They turned their backs to her, as if she was unworthy of their interest, and focused their attention on the two females across the room, a tall, slender blonde and a petite brunette. Shasta curled her lip. Humans. The females were human. She'd bet her blood bank the two males at the bar were vampires.

She suspected from the captivated look on the younger male's face, he had the hots for the pretty brunette, or else he was hungry as hell.

Shasta's brows knitted together when another male entered the tavern, letting in a rush of cold air. Seconds later, two more joined the ones at the bar.

Five of them eyeing the two humans?

What was this, the gathering of the fanged brotherhood? Next thing she knew, Dracula himself would saunter in. She snorted. Yeah, like there was a real Count Dracula.

The pretty brunette scraped back her chair, said something to her friend, and headed in the direction of the ladies' room.

The younger vampire of the group waited a few seconds, then followed her. Yep, he'd chosen his prey for the night. The other males remained at the bar. One turned to eye her, the one who'd been there with the younger vampire before the others joined them. His gaze flickered, held long enough for him to nod a hello, then he turned back to watch the blonde.

Huh. Guess Mr. Nosy didn't find anything attractive about *her* blood. She thought the only reason he'd glanced in her direction was to make sure she was still there. Odd. She'd never seen him before, yet she was certain that was exactly what he'd done.

Why should it matter to him where she was, unless he planned to make a meal out of her, too? But she didn't get that impression. He was simply watching.

Amazingly, the four males all stared at the blonde. She didn't think it was a sexual interest they directed toward her, or even sizing her up for their next meal...so...what? Shasta frowned. It was like they were guarding the woman for someone, and yet, they kept a polite distance.

Huh. What was *she*, chopped liver? Not that she wanted a bunch of

hunky vampires taking notice of her, but what the hell was going on?

Shasta mentally shrugged. It was none of her business. Nor did she have any concern for the two humans. Anyway, what could she say to either of them that they'd believe? *Hey, there are four handsome, studly vampires at the bar, five if you counted Mr. Bathroom, and they're sizing you up for their next meal. They'll likely want to sex you, too?*

She snorted. Yeah, like the humans would find all that credible.

Swearing softly, she suddenly caught herself panting at the thought of being sexed by Valerian. Ooh, not good. She did *not* want to have sex with that vampire or any vampire. She ordered herself to calm down, to take slow, deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Repeat. That was better. At least her heart no longer raced, and her lungs didn't feel as if they were going to burst from lack of oxygen.

Shasta felt her gaze drawn to the blonde human again. Nope, she wasn't getting involved. She didn't like humans. Besides, she had her own worries. She had a date with a vampire, and so far, he'd stood her up.

Okay, so it wasn't like she had a hot date, but after seeing how attractive the males at the bar were, she figured Valerian wasn't a graveyard reject. He had to be a hottie. Still, she'd only agreed to meet him because she wanted to know what he looked like so she staked the right vampire. End of red-hot date.

Valerian was involved in Kali's kidnapping right up to his pearly fangs. She intended to see he paid the price for it.

Shasta squirmed and flicked a glance at the woman again. Dammit, whatever the male vampires had planned for the blonde and her petite friend was no concern of hers, but she just couldn't leave it alone. She caught the eye of the studly vampire who'd been eyeing her, nodded, and motioned for him to come to her table.

Tapping her fingers on top of the table, she narrowed her eyes. The vampire reminded her of someone. Who? She didn't know any males who wore their dark hair slicked back and banded at their nape. She didn't know any males whose eyes were ebony or whose lips were incredibly sexy.

Who did he resemble?

She motioned for him to come to her again. He frowned, said something to the others, and sidled toward her. No. Not sidled. Glided. She almost came out of her chair. Freakin' spooky the way his feet never touched the floor.

"Have a chair, Fang-Face," she greeted, gaining control of her nerves. So he could glide his way across the floor. He was a vampire. Vampires possessed all kinds of mystical abilities.

The male blinked and continued hovering, his feet several inches off the floor. "My name is Dragos Flaviu," he said with a thick accent, "not, Fang-Face. You are Prince Valerian's female. You should not summon me or any male to your side. It is not proper."

"No need to sound like you have a spear shoved up your ass. Unlike you and your kind, I don't bite. See?" She flashed her teeth. "No fangs."

He clenched his jaw. "You have a smart mouth. I am glad you belong to Valerian. If you belonged to me, I would wash your mouth out with strong soap. Very strong."

"Yeah? You and whose army?"

Impatience darkened his face. Shasta smiled, proud she was the new proverbial thorn in his ass.

"I need no army to handle an annoying pissant like you. Tell me quickly what it is you want before I lose control of my temper and sink a fang in you."

"Only one?" She arched both brows. "What's the matter, you have too many sweets and develop fang decay? The other one fall out? Have you been to a dentist?"

His dark eyes flared with temper. "I don't like you."

She clasped her heart. "Aww, now I'm crushed, but allow me to share a secret with you."

He lifted a brow.

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "I don't much like you, either, One-Fang, or your friends over there."

"What is it you want, Valerian's woman?"

Shasta frowned. She wasn't getting into a debate over the fact she *wasn't* Valerian's woman. That wasn't why she called the vamp to her. She thrust her fingers through her hair and smiled—all teeth. "You see the human over there? The blonde?" She pointed toward the woman.

He didn't bother to turn and look, but lifted the other brow.

"I have a gazillion gallons of holy water in a flask in my pocket, and I'm wearing a gold cross."

He settled his feet on the floor and plastered a blasé look on his face. "So?"

Bastard. She bored him? "You harm one hair on the human's head, on

either of the women, and I'll pour the entire flask on top of your head and melt your one remaining fang. Then I'll stab you in the eye with my cross. That goes for your friends, too." *Bored now?*

Amusement flashed in his dark eyes, there, then gone. "I will not harm either of them, Valerian's woman. They are both spoken for. I could never hurt one of our females."

"They aren't one of your females."

"No. Not...yet, but I have a feeling..." He turned and walked back to the bar, dismissing her as a menace.

Shasta bit her lip. Well, she'd certainly impressed him with her gazillion gallons of holy water and gold cross. The vamp hadn't even flinched at the threat. She frowned. Bull! She didn't buy it for a minute. He was faking. He was scared of her, all right. Deep inside, he was a quivering mass, deathly afraid of her cross and holy water. He had to be.

The brunette returned to the table, laughing softly at whatever remark her friend made. Shasta gave the dark-haired woman the once-over. Well, she looked okay. She wasn't pale. No blood on her clothes. The only thing she noticed different was the woman's lips were slightly swollen, as if she'd been thoroughly kissed, and her hair was a little mussed.

The vampire who'd followed her sauntered back to the bar, a bit of a smug look plastered on his handsome face.

His lips looked swollen, too.

So they'd shared a kiss. Shasta figured if it was all that happened, she'd live with it.

The blonde looked around nervously, as if she expected to be pounced upon any moment by the hunks of lusty males at the bar. Aha! So she'd finally picked up on the bad vibes from them.

But the vampires made no move. Amazingly, they were so still, Shasta wondered if they even bothered to blink. They were waiting on something, some signal or someone? Then what? A feeding frenzy? A blood-drinking contest?

The males turned as one, eyed her, then quickly turned back to stare into their drinks. What? Were she and the two women suddenly *persona non grata*? Well, no, not suddenly. They'd made no moves on any of them, unless one counted the kiss Mr. Bathroom shared with the brunette.

Damn, if they were going to attack, she wished they'd make their move. It was driving her nuts sitting here waiting for the blade to drop

on her neck.

Shasta frowned, wondering if one of the males at the bar was Valerian Radu. She really had no clue what the vampire looked like, only a mental image in her head from her dreams of what she thought he looked like, and the fact he most likely sported a set of long white fangs.

Drawing in a deep breath, she took a quick sip of the tea that had turned cold. Making a face, she daintily poured fresh from the pot sitting on the tray in front of her and refilled her cup. She was thankful it wasn't upsetting her stomach.

There was no use denying she had to be an utter fool to agree to meet a deadly vampire on his terms. Look what had happened. He'd said he'd come alone, but the room was overrun with hunky vamps.

Pinky warned her she was foolish to leave their room at night. Poor Pinky, she was afraid the little pig was going to have a nervous breakdown before they returned to the academy. Even now, he was upstairs in their room hiding under the bed.

Shasta toyed with the thin chain around her throat. Slowly, she pulled the gold cross from inside the pale green vest and let it fall on the outside between her breasts. The vampire she'd summoned to her table, Dragos, slid his dark gaze over it, smirked and looked away. Disgusting creature. Oh, yeah, he was faking his lack of fear, all right. She bet her cross and holy water scared the crap outta him, and would Valerian too!

"Waste of time, you know. I'm not allergic to gold."

Valerian!

Shasta choked on a mouthful of tea and sprayed it across the table. The masculine voice came from directly behind her and close to her left ear. The rat! He'd come in the back way. *Sneaky, low-down, bloodsucking...*

"I had no idea you wanted me to come through the front entrance."

She froze. His warm moist breath touched her nape. She shivered. "Don't bite me."

"How can I resist the delicacy of such soft skin? I like your hair all knotted up like this."

"I didn't wear it up to please you."

"No? Well I like it all the same. It gives me easy access to your lovely neck." He nibbled on her nape.

She flinched. "I asked you not to bite me."

Low laughter, along with soft, masculine lips brushed the fine strands of hair on her nape. "I would never be so rude as to dine on you in a

public place," he whispered in her ear.

No? Then she must be imagining the slight scrape of a fang below her ear, the damp stroke of his tongue, his soft groan of pleasure? Heat flooded the inside of her thighs. Her stomach turned as soft and gooey as melted wax.

Gods, his mouth on her nape was like...like, better than an orgasm. Well, maybe not better, but, ooh... Her breath rushed out of her lungs in a long, slow hiss.

The tiny bit of suction he applied tugged her toward immediate climax. Shasta clenched her hands to keep from turning and flinging herself into his arms. "What are you doing? You said you wouldn't feed off me in public."

He licked her nape, closing the tiny wound she knew very well he'd made. "I'm not feeding, darling. Tasting. A small, delicious sample and I'm arousing you. There's a big difference."

Oh boy, was there ever.

His laughter brushed her ear. "I warn you, I share your thoughts. Don't think for a moment I'm unaware you want me to sex you or that you're at the very edge of orgasm. Shall I send you plunging over the precipice?" His hands caressed her shoulders.

She swore she felt his touch through her vest clear to the bone. "I don't know whose mind you're in, but you don't read all that in mine."

"But, I do. You're hot for me," he said seductively, "and I have no objections if you want to strip naked and fling yourself in my arms, my bed, on me...Feel free to take complete and total advantage of me." He kissed her right below her right ear. "You'll find I'm very cooperative." There was a certain huskiness to his voice that sent more heat spiraling through her belly. "You want me, Shasta. You want my body as much as I want and need yours."

Like a warm, gentle breeze, his sensual voice, hypnotic and dark as black velvet, slipped deep inside her mind. It aroused. Seduced. Made her hunger for sex, particularly sex with him.

"Let me in, Shasta."

Her eyelids grew heavy. Heavy. Heavier. Mist rolled toward her, taking her into another world, one where only the two of them existed, one where they were bathed in a steamy, sensual mist where colorful exotic flowers bloomed. Their seductive scents heightened their sexual awareness of each other.

In seconds, their clothes fell away, and they were naked and in bed

together. They rolled and tangled in the black satin sheets, tongues entwined, legs wrapped around each other. She felt his hard cock rise against her belly. He palmed her breasts, torturing the nipples with tongue and teeth.

Slowly, Valerian released her breasts and slid down her body. His cock brushed her thigh, the blunt tip wet with urgent need. Her brain felt as dark and misty as a foggy graveyard. Thinking was impossible. But, oh, how she felt every stimulating lick of his tongue, every touch of his lips, his mouth, and the drag of his long body along hers.

Shasta pursed her lips with pleasure when he nudged her thighs apart and buried his face between her legs. The long, slow glide of his tongue along her clit sent a burst of tiny explosions through her body. She arched her hips, met his wet, stabbing licks. "Mmm, that feels so good. Don't stop. No! Don't stop."

She heard a soft click, then a low, droning hum. Shasta's eyes snapped open. Oh, dear gods, he held a purple vibrator with two independently vibrating heads, one with a satiny hook she knew damned well was perfect to stimulate her G-spot. The other end was contoured with exciting bumps and ridges, and Samhain, he inserted it slowly inside her until she was stuffed.

The slow push, pull, push, pull of the sex toy drove her insane with pleasure. "How-how did you-know?"

"What?" he asked huskily, working the vibrator slowly in and out of her hot channel. "Your sexual fantasies involving sex toys? Remember, I know all your thoughts, past and present."

"Well, it was just-just a-a fantasy. It doesn't feel-feel all that-that goood! Ohhh, gods!"

There was so much heat in his steady gaze when she looked up at him she thought she'd melt. His eyes were heavy-lidded, his mouth sensual. Slowly, he slid the vibrator out of her and switched to the end with the smooth hook. She groaned, lifting her hips to meet the tiny scrapes he feathered along her G-spot. "Where did-did you learn..."

"It's all your fantasies, darling. I'm just making them real for you."

Shasta clawed the satiny sheets he'd placed her on, tossed her head from side to side, bit her lip, and still he tormented the hot spot. Gratification was swift. He indulged her needs, giving and giving until she screamed her pleasure. At least in her mind she screamed and bucked and surged into multiple orgasms that racked her body.

With the fog swirling and crowding her mind, she could no longer tell what was real, what was in her head, but whatever it was, her body was an inferno, and Valerian fed the heat. Flames licked at her soul like a brush fire out of control. She moaned as her body was blasted by hundreds of little sexual explosions and she climaxed too many times to count.

And he'd only just started on her.

Shasta drew a sharp breath as he tossed aside the fake cock, took his hard shaft in hand and guided it to the silky mouth of her burning channel. Her breath caught in her throat at the feel of the satiny, plum-shaped tip surging into her, while Valerian effortlessly filled her mind with mental images of them locked in a heated intimate embrace.

They rocked in a mating rhythm until he sent her soaring over the edge of control. His lips, feather-light, trailed over every inch of her damp skin. His breathing grew harsh. Strangled gasps spilled from his throat just as his warm release wet her between her thighs. He pumped his seed inside her, a copious amount that seemed endless and sent her spiraling into multiple orgasms.

Shasta blinked and jerked out of the maddening spell Valerian had cast over her. Drat the man! What was he doing to her? *How* did he do it to her? She clenched her damp thighs together, but the little aftershocks of pleasure continued for several seconds before her body finally cooled down.

Had the experience been real or not? How could she sit here and have multiple orgasms?

Although she suspected he'd been inside her head planting those erotic images of him seducing her, her breasts felt full and tender. Her nipples tingled, tightened and thrust against the silk lining of her vest. The muscles in her stomach clenched, and an ache throbbed hot and low in her womb, as if the tip of his cock had stroked it over and over.

Just as quickly as she'd torn free from the spell, Valerian took control of her mind again, and she knew then she hadn't escaped the manipulation of his power. He'd allowed her to break away from him for those few brief moments, a respite for her, but he wasn't finished with her. No, he wasn't finished with her at all.

He swamped her mind with mental images of his lean body pumping hotly inside her. He filled her with his thick cock time and again, rocking her to explosive orgasms until she knew, somehow she *knew*, she was squirming with need in her chair at the tavern and probably had an

interested audience in the male vampires.

No one can see us. There's only you and me. Wrap your legs around me.

And in her mind, she did.

In her mind? Was it all happening in her mind?

His fingers tightened on her upper thighs, and he thrust his cock hard and deep. In seconds, he tore her legs from around his waist and lifted them over his shoulders. Gods, he was buried so deep inside her now. So deep. So hot. She felt stuffed, and his deep plunges made her gasp. She clawed his shoulders, thought she'd simply unravel as he set a faster rhythm.

"Is this real?" she whispered.

He drove into her, his breathing hot and raspy. "It's as real as you want it to be."

Shasta groaned. "I want it to be real."

"Good, so do I. Feel me inside you?" he whispered.

And she knew his question was real and not in her head.

"Yes." She tried to drag herself out of the sexual haze her mind was buried in, but his will was stronger. So much stronger, and he held her prisoner of his desire.

"Tell me you want me exactly like this, Shasta, hot and deep inside you, filling you until you can no longer breathe, filling you until there's no room in your life, in your heart, for anyone but me."

"Yes! Yes, I want you. Touch me, Valerian."

"I am, my love. Believe me when I say I will touch you frequently."

Shasta sighed with relief when he released her from the hypnotic spell. Her breath lodged in her chest. Her body felt drenched with need, hot and sensitive, and she knew without doubt she'd climaxed several times sitting there in that chair. It hadn't mattered that five male vamps sit at the bar or that two humans were within hearing and sight.

"Did we...Did you really...?"

"What? Mate? Can you not tell from the tenderness between your legs I've been there for the last hour or so? Are you not wet from my seed?"

Embarrassed, heat scalded her face. She couldn't bring herself to open her eyes and see all of them staring at her.

"I used glamour to assure our seclusion, Shasta. No one saw what we did."

"There was a bed..."

"It was easy to make the table appear as a bed."

"Don't you believe in privacy?"

"I do. I assure you, we were quite sheltered."

She opened her eyes to see what the vamps thought of her disgraceful behavior, but the vampires were watching the human women. And the women were getting up from their table to leave. They didn't even look in her direction.

Had she imagined it all?

But no, as he pointed out, she was damp between her thighs, and there was an ache there. "That was a lousy thing to do," she said, angry he'd manipulated her so easily.

"You liked it," he claimed. "And don't deny it. You climaxed too many times for me not to believe you weren't right there with me. Willing."

Gods, it had felt real and good, yet he was still standing behind her, a mysterious shadow that darkened the space around her even more than it already was. She shivered, suddenly afraid to turn her head so she could see his face. She wasn't sure she wanted to know anymore what he looked like. She wasn't sure if she could tell the difference between reality and the illusions he created. "It wasn't real."

"It wasn't? Believe whatever makes you comfortable, but I swear to you, I just spent a very pleasurable hour sexing you. You are mine, Shasta, in every sense of the word."

A long, tapered finger glided across her breasts, paused at the chain and toyed with it; then he tugged gently until it snapped. Quickly, he dropped the cross onto the table. She watched as a masculine hand reached over her shoulder for the cloth napkin beside her and draped it over the cross and chain.

"I don't believe you."

He leaned around her, thrust his fingers into her hair and took her mouth in the longest, slowest kiss she'd ever received in her life. Shasta writhed in her chair as his mouth and tongue worked its delicious magic. And she knew then he'd kissed her before. Hot. Sexy. Kisses. Oh, yes, what they'd shared earlier might have been an illusion, but it had been an illusion based on reality. She now knew exactly how he'd feel inside her, how it would feel when he climaxed in her, the tender ache he'd leave between her thighs.

A spark lit her blood, ignited a pool of liquid heat from the base of her spine and straight to her loins. Her body sizzled with need. What

was this, vampire seduction at its best? Repeat vampire seduction at its best?

"Is this real enough for you?" he teased, tracing her upper lip with his tongue, then nibbling on her lower lip.

Sheesh, she hadn't even seen his face, and she was ready to rip his clothes off his body. How did he do it to her? How did he make her feel so...so *sexed*?

I've done nothing. I only awakened your desires in your mind. In your body. You cannot deny your needs. Your heat. You wanted me as much as I wanted you. I didn't force you, Shasta. You came into my arms willingly. You took my cock inside your body eagerly.

Valerian slowly released her mouth and raised his head. Shasta searched his eyes, eyes that burned with promise and hunger and cobalt heat. "I don't know you, so how could I want you?"

"You know me. You've dreamed of me, as I have of you. You've lain in my arms, and I've buried my body deep inside you. In our dreams, we've already sexed each other many times...and it was damn good. Wasn't it? Reality will be so much better."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've never dreamed of you."

"I think you lie." Soft laughter again and he stepped around the table and claimed the chair opposite of her.

"I don't know what to believe. I don't know what is real."

"You can believe I really fucked you. We just consummated our vows."

"I don't believe you." Yet she knew from the tenderness between her thighs, he spoke the truth. "We couldn't have mated."

"We did. Why do you deny what happened? You liked it."

She saw his gaze flicker to the men at the bar. By now, the women had reached the front door. He gave a slight nod to the males and arched a brow in the direction of the human females.

Shasta turned in time to see two of the males tilt their heads in acknowledgement of the silent command from Valerian, but before the two vampires could make a move to halt the women, the front door opened, and two more vampires entered the tavern. The slender blonde backed up a step and stilled.

Frowning, Shasta started to rise from her chair. "What...?"

Valerian shoved the napkin with the cross under it to one side and grabbed her hand. "Do not," he warned. "What happens over there has nothing to do with us. Sit down." He squeezed her hand in warning.

"Sit. Now." He smiled, but his eyes were hard and distant, his voice firm. "Tell me, did you honestly believe that bit of human relic on a chain would keep me from you? Keep me from sexing you?"

Distracted, she sat down and eyed the napkin. "Yes." Her gaze flickered to the blonde. "Will she be hurt? Will they be hurt?"

"Shasta." His voice was kind, but filled with a touch of impatience. "Are you sure you want to know?"

Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked. Dammit. She would not cry over what was going to happen to those two human women. She had enough troubles of her own. She'd just had mind-blowing sex with a vampire who looked as if he had every intention of a repeat performance. She had no idea if what they'd shared had been an illusion or as real as reality itself.

What happened to the two women was not her business. She didn't even like humans. Still, she couldn't let it go. "Will they die?"

"Don't. Don't ask me questions when the answers will only cause you pain."

"Will they die?" she repeated stubbornly.

"You know the answer already."

"When?"

Valerian sighed. "Don't do this to yourself. You're crying. I don't want to see you cry."

"When?" she repeated and sniffed.

"Soon. Don't look over there again."

"How can I not?"

"You will obey my commands."

"Stop it! Stop ordering me around like I don't have a brain to think for myself."

His lips twitched. "That's the problem; you do have a brain, but I will always do what's best for you. If that means seizing control of your mind or giving you orders, that is what I will do."

"And it will make me very unhappy if you do."

"Yes, I'm sure it will. However, you will heed my wishes. No matter what you see or hear over there, you will not react. You will not interfere. You will say nothing more about it. All your attention now centers on me."

"You're becoming a bore."

He grinned. "I might do a lot of things to you, darling, but I will never bore you. You will look only at me. Is that understood?"

Shasta struggled to hold on to her will, but his words settled in her mind and held strongly.

"Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"Good." Valerian nodded, pleased. "Now then, back to your little relic. If your cross worked, darling, vampires wouldn't still be living in the human realm. Think about it. We have to be able to get to our food supply."

A piercing scream caused her to flinch, but her gaze remained fixed on him.

"And am I your food source?"

"Not completely."

"What am I, then, to you?"

"Everything." He smiled, a flash of perfect white teeth. "You are everything."

Perfect white teeth? Where were his fangs? She expected fangs. Dammit, she wanted fangs!

"I'll give you whatever you want, but be certain, darling, it's *what* you want."

Another scream. Shasta's eyes flickered.

"Look at me. Only at me."

"What about the two human females?"

"What about them?"

"What are they to you?" She looked down, stared at the tabletop, a tabletop where he'd sexed her rather thoroughly? She jerked her gaze to his. "Maybe it's too late for me to help them, but I *won't* forgive you for your part in what happens to those two females."

"Shasta, I have no part in what's happening to them."

"What are they to you?" she repeated.

"Nothing." He took her hand, linked his fingers with hers. "Listen to me. They are nothing to me."

"Food?"

"Not for me."

She cringed. "They aren't screaming anymore," she said faintly.

"Shasta."

Tears spilled down her face. She looked away.

Valerian squeezed her hand.

She jerked her hand away. "Don't touch me!"

He swallowed hard. "They have been claimed, sweetheart, by two powerful members of my clan. It is their right. I cannot stop what is happening."

"Their right? What about those two women and their rights?"

He stared at her. For the first time, she saw the ruthlessness that was his kind, the determination to continue traditions that dated back to feudal times or even further, and she knew there was no changing the way things were. Shivers walked down her spine like the hairy legs of a spider feeling its way over her flesh. "They have no rights?" she questioned in a faint whisper.

He reached for her hand again, but she shrank away.

"I have no rights?" she asked uncertainty in a voice plainly filled with fright for a way of life she did not understand, couldn't grasp, didn't want to grasp.

"None. Only what the Ancient Tribunal or I am willing to grant you."

"You will wait forever for whatever it is you think you want me to be."

He smiled sadly. "You have no idea how long forever can be. Time has no substance for my kind. It stretches into infinity. I wish only for you to be happy."

"No, that isn't what you wish for me. What you wish is for me to be compliant, meek and mild. To obey your every command like a mindless mouse without a backbone. I have news for you, Ghoul of the Graveyard; you chose the wrong breed of female to make your chattel."

He smiled. "I have news to return to you, Wolf of the Woods; I didn't choose you, Shasta, darling."

"What?" She blinked. "What does that mean?"

"You chose me."

"I would never choose a vampire for...for..."

"Sexing you?" He quirked a brow. "Consciously, maybe you wouldn't, but subconsciously, you did. I didn't seek you first. You came to me."

The chills left her spine and dove straight inside her body. They surrounded her heart and built a wall of icy terror. She shook her head. "No. Never!"

"Don't be afraid of me. Look at me."

Shasta shook her head. She couldn't do it. Not now. She needed time to think about what he'd just revealed. "What about holy water?" she asked, suddenly desperate to escape him, to escape this place. She

wanted to go home. Not back to the academy, but home, to Na-Cyl, home to her brothers where she felt safe and protected. This non-date wasn't going according to her plans.

"This is your home now, Shasta. You will never return to Na-Cyl."

She hadn't expected to feel such grief at the loss of Na-Cyl. Why hadn't she remained at the academy? Stayed safe? Stayed away from this vampire?

"Once I saw you, knew you existed, I would have found you, no matter where you were, but I didn't have to seek you. You came to me. First in visions, then you invaded my dreams."

"No."

"Deny all you want, but look around you. You're in my world. I'm not in yours."

Inside her chest, her heart swelled with grief. There was nothing of her left. He wanted everything. He wanted to take everything from her, all that she was, all that she held dear, and give nothing back.

"Our son is what you will hold most dear."

Their son?

Gods, he was going to breed her.

"Yes, I'm going to breed you. Haven't I been working on doing that very thing? I haven't succeeded yet, because you have blocked your mind against accepting my seed."

She looked out the window to her right and didn't even try to stop the tears. A full moon hung in the sky like a round golden globe, and she hadn't felt it rise. She hadn't changed. Her Were powers were gone. She swallowed hard. "Am I to become Vampire?"

Please say no. I cannot become the very thing I abhor.

"You are already in the process of changing..."

Chapter Eighteen

There are such beings as vampires, some of us have evidence that they exist. Even had we not the proof of our own unhappy experience, the teachings and the records of the past give proof enough for sane peoples.

~Bram Stoker

*Romania
Village Pyre
Dracula's Inn
Mortal Realm*

Ann Michelle Cole and Laura Bristol sat at a secluded table in the busy little tavern at *Dracula's Inn* and sipped on the last dregs of their beers. Ann finished off her mug and sat back to watch the weird events unfolding around them with mild curiosity.

They'd arrived in Village Pyre that morning, but spent most of the day sleeping, recovering from jet lag. Ann knew she'd called it right when she believed it'd cost her to stay in Ameer's prepaid room. Tight-lipped, she shoved the bills into his hands without a word and paid ahead for a month, because clearly, he didn't want her and Laura there. Tough.

No matter how long it took, she wasn't leaving Village Pyre until she found her sister. The look of shock on the belligerent manager's face had been worth forking over the extra dough just to have the pleasure of informing him she wanted the room for such an extended period. It hadn't kept him from charging her double, plus she'd paid for Laura's room too, since she'd dragged her friend along with her.

She didn't care. Thanks to her parents, she had enough money to live a lifetime and over if she needed it. So did Ameer.

Ann scowled into the bottom of her empty mug. She didn't have to work, but she loved being an agent, and Ameer was...well, Ameer was all she had left of family. She wasn't giving up her search.

Her heart squeezed with dread. Because of her job, she knew better than most the bad things that could happen to a young woman traveling alone. If anything had happened to Ameer, she didn't know if she could bear it.

She pushed her mug to one side and settled back to enjoy the Old-world atmosphere of the Inn. Early evening had settled in, bringing with it a dark, sinister feel, as if everything and everyone held their breath and waited for something evil to arrive. She kept waiting for the big exhale.

Ann looked around and studied the people in the room. She decided the feeling that all hell was about to break loose was because of the five males seated at the bar. Not that a single one of them had said or done anything to threaten her, but there was definitely something ominous about them.

Not one of them faced the bartender.

Instead, they were more or less slouched back on the barstools facing the room. Braced by long legs encased in black leather, they appeared relaxed.

She didn't buy it.

The backs of their broad shoulders rubbed the bar. They gave the appearance of indifference, yet there was sharp awareness on their faces that betrayed them. They weren't here for the booze or to party.

Apparently they weren't here for women, either.

So what the hell were they doing? Waiting for?

Ann stroked the snub-nosed barrel of her backup pistol resting in her jacket pocket. The lightweight Glock 27 was subcompact and a trusted friend. Sighing inwardly with relief, she felt safer knowing it was close. She didn't think she'd have to use it, but it was comforting to know she had a means of self-defense. Definitely, those men were a lot more attentive to their surroundings than what they acted. Something was up, and she didn't think it was their dicks.

Why were they faking a lackadaisical attitude?

Tight black tee shirts clung to their wide chests like plaster to a wall.

Ann blinked, appreciating their virile appeal. Oh my. They were incredibly masculine, stunningly attractive. Sexy as hell. She laughed and dug some money out of her jeans pocket. Time for another beer and time to get her mind on something else, no way in hell was she taking on one of those dudes.

"What's so funny?" Laura asked, leaning in close.

"I was just thinking."

"About?" Laura arched a quizzical brow and followed her gaze across the room. "Oh, yummy. What were you thinking about? Jumping one of them?"

"Good grief, no. I was thinking about beef on parade."

Laura giggled. "You can take the girl out of Texas, yadah, yadah, yadah."

Ann grinned. "Okay, testosterone on the hoof. I'm willing to admit I've never seen men so darkly attractive. There's your first clue. They're a bit menacing."

"Yeah. Isn't it great? Who would have thought so many males in one small space and not a one of them has a woman draped all over him."

"Maybe there's a reason for it."

"Well they aren't holding hands. That's a good sign. So why not take a chance? We might get lucky."

Ann shook her head. "I don't know. They're just weird."

"Maybe they're into kinky sex. Five men for one woman. I could go for a little kinky."

"Oh, like you've ever been laid."

"I've been laid. Once...sort of..."

"By five men at once?"

Laura grinned and pressed her fingers to her temples. "Oh, the pressure for an answer. Hummm. I'm getting a mental picture here. I don't think I have enough orifices for five at once, but hey, I'll take three. You can have the remaining two."

"You're an idiot."

"Okay. I'll take all five and use both my hands, too."

"You are *so* not funny."

"And you are so uptight. They're simply men, Ann. Granted they're the sexiest beasts I've ever seen, but egads, they aren't even paying us any attention. They seem more interested in the redhead in the corner over there."

"I don't think so. Yeah, they've kept an eye on her, but they're also

keeping an eye on us, and *beast* might just be the operative word where they're concerned."

"Huh?" Laura giggled. "Well, yeah, there are five of them and three women in the room. They must feel like sexual animals about now. They're probably going to draw straws." She waggled her brows. "You know?"

"My ass," Ann snapped.

"Yep, that's what they're after, all right." Laura laughed and took another sip of her beer.

Ann slanted her gaze to the men. In their hands, they each held a different-shaped, different-sized old-world chalice made from what she'd swear was pure gold. Surely they weren't gold, but they had a certain luster, a look of antique value. One chalice was studded with square-cut emeralds, one with round rubies, and the remaining three were marked with intricate cuts of Celtic symbols carved on them. Odd.

On each male's right ring finger was a heavy gold ring that had the jewel or Celtic symbol that matched the chalice they drank from.

"Maybe they belong to some sort of elite club," Ann said, "although I haven't seen any signs of grandeur around Village Pyre that calls for such an organization. Perhaps they're simply passing through on their way to a convention in a big city."

"Or," Laura broke in, "maybe they're all from that crumbling old castle we caught a glimpse of right before dark. I know—they're a brotherhood of vampires swooping down on the village to ravage and feed."

"Don't be silly. I don't believe in all that vampire crap!"

"Oh." Laura pouted. "Don't you think it'd be fun to be bitten on the neck by a handsome, sexy vampire?"

"No, I don't."

"I do."

Ann rolled her eyes. "All I see in my mind is the really ugly-ass snaggle-toothed vampire from that old black-and-white movie, *Nosferatu*. There wasn't one damn thing sexy or attractive about him. And *those* men"—Ann nodded toward the bar—"whatever their reason for being here, my nerves are all aflutter, and I don't mean in a sexual way. You don't wanna toy with them, Laura."

"Oh, yes, I do."

Ann tightened her lips. "Bad idea."

Sometimes there was simply no reasoning with her friend. Damn it! She didn't like being around males who made her feel spooked.

"Ha! It isn't my nerves fluttering," Laura said, laughing. "I have to make myself remember I'm off the pill and can't have sex unless..."

"Laura, you can't seriously be thinking about having sex with one of those men."

"Yes, I can, but relax, Mommy. I'll be good."

Ann frowned and eyed the men. The way they took their time sipping their drinks was one of the most sensual acts she'd ever seen. She had the feeling they imagined the chalice in their hands to be a woman's breasts, and every time they pressed their lips to the rim, it was as if they latched onto her nipple – gentle suction, swallow, savor.

They sipped slowly from the chalices, as if relishing every single drop of whatever they were drinking. She could almost hear their silent, *Ahh* every time they took a drink and licked their lips.

Ann tore her gaze away from them and eyed the clear beer mugs in front of her and Laura. "I wonder what those men are drinking that requires such richly designed chalices or even such a slow, obvious delight of their beverages."

"Who knows?" Laura replied, squirming in her chair. "But they do it with pure pleasure. Have you ever seen anything so sexual?"

"I don't think so." Ann moved restlessly beside Laura, but returned her attention to the men. They drained their chalices and set them on the bar.

No refill?

They made no move to leave, either. Curious. So why hang in the tavern? No reason she could think of, unless they were still thirsty and planned to order another round, but they shook their heads at the bartender when he offered a refill.

Jesus, the five of them sat there somber as death, dressed in ghoulish black from head to toe, and hardly even blinked. They reminded her of crows lined up on a fence ready to kill the hapless scarecrow in the garden.

She rubbed her arms. "They give me the creeps."

"You're just paranoid. They aren't doing anything, Ann, except looking."

"I think that's the problem. Why aren't they making a move on us? I mean, it's not like we're hamburger sitting here."

"Maybe they're gay after all," Laura suggested.

"Oh, no way."

They folded muscular arms across wide chests that simply begged for a woman's head to rest atop them, and they sat there, stone still. They didn't chat with one another. Their faces were blank, but there was arrogance in the tilt of their heads, as if they were kings of all they surveyed. She'd never in her life seen so many silent Alpha males gathered in one small room before.

Ann frowned. "They aren't gay—that much masculinity on the hoof—uh-uh, no way."

Each man stood at least six foot two; perhaps one or two of them were a bit taller. It was hard to tell with them sprawled like they were. She hadn't paid much attention to them when they came in, mainly because they'd trickled in one at a time.

The one thing that stood out about them, besides the obvious fact they were mouthwateringly attractive, was that even though there was something faded—maybe the word was 'jaded'—no matter, they looked dangerous. Watchful. Tense. They were waiting for a certain event to happen or a particular person to walk in. *Something!*

Ann drew a deep breath. Yeah, something was going on, and she and Laura were caught right smack in the middle of it. Crap. The last thing she wanted was to be in a room where all hell broke loose. She didn't need this. And she didn't like the creepy feeling etching up her spine, either. She swore the chills felt exactly like the icy feet of mice running around playing hide-and-seek inside her bones. Those men were lethal, and they were up to their handsome necks in whatever the hell was brewing.

Laura returned from the ladies' room and plopped down in her chair. She blew a strand of dark hair out of her eyes and grinned.

"I think we should get out of here," Ann said.

"What? I just ordered us another round. Is something wrong?"

"Everything."

Laura drained her mug and blotted her lips on a napkin. Her smile was contagious. Laura was always happy, Ann thought. Nothing ever broke her stride. She supposed that was why they were such good friends. Where Ann was quiet and serious, Laura was bubbly and vivacious.

The two of them were as different as salt and pepper. Ann was fair, with a wealth of long blonde hair and big, doe-like brown eyes. Tall and

slender, she preferred Wranglers, a big-buckled belt and cowboy boots to frills. Laura was tiny, her hair gypsy black and abundant. Her eyes were deep violet with a ton of thick black lashes, and there was a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose her friend detested, but she was so pretty, men tripped over each other to ask her out.

"You just don't like all those hunky males staring at you," Laura accused.

"They aren't staring at me. They're staring at you."

"No, they aren't. Okay. They're staring at both of us. The one on the end is cute."

"Cute?" Ann snorted. "Maybe like a wild wolf on the prowl."

"When I went to the powder room, he stopped me in the hall, asked my name and where we're from."

"Really? You didn't tell him, did you?"

"Of course I told him. Why not?"

"Laura, you don't know him."

"Well how am I supposed to get to know him if we don't exchange names? Phone numbers?"

"You're not supposed to get to know him or any other male here. We aren't here to meet a man."

"Says you. He suits me. He's sweet. He kissed my hand, Ann. I didn't know men still kissed a woman's hand. He's utterly charming."

"Yeah, about as charming as a Texas sidewinder. Did he give you his number?"

"No, he didn't give me his number or take mine. He said he'd find me without any trouble." Laura reached for her empty mug, set it back down and sighed. "I felt a tingle clear to my toes when he kissed me."

"Kissed your hand, you mean."

"No, he kissed me...on the lips. Boy, did he kiss me. Backed me right inside the ladies' room, up against the wall and laid one on me, tongue, teeth, oh, yeah, lots of tongue. My God, it was the hottest kiss I've ever had in my life. I thought the soles on my shoes were going to melt. My thighs did melt. I swear I heard him in my head telling me he was going to...going to..."

"What?" Ann squeaked. "Going to what?"

Laura leaned closer. "I'm pretty sure he said he was going to sex me. Isn't that a strange way to say it? Do you think he meant...?"

"Yes! I think it's exactly what he meant." Ann blinked. "You shouldn't have let him kiss you."

"I didn't *let* him. It just happened. But it felt damned good. And right. I tell you, Ann, if he knows how to use his...uh, the rest of his body the way he knows how to use his mouth, I'm not ever going back home. I'm staying glued to his side."

"I don't think any of those men are anyone you want to get involved with. Remember, my sister disappeared from right here with a handsome man. I bet *he* kissed good, too."

"Yeah, when he let me up for air, I asked him about it. He said he didn't know anything about a woman disappearing from here."

"Laura! What do you think he'd say? He isn't going to confess to being a serial killer."

"Serial killer? You think he's a serial killer?"

"No. Of course not, but you aren't supposed to ask questions. That's my job. I don't want you putting yourself at risk."

"Too late. I already fell for him. My heart simply went pitty-patter when he kissed me. I've never been kissed like that before. It was like he was all over me, in me..." her voice trailed away on a breathless note. "I felt his body connected to mine. It was powerful, Ann." Laura sighed and eyed the young man at the bar. "He has such a dark complexion. He's utterly gorgeous. God, he has the prettiest eyes. I looked right into them and was lost. Forest green. Dreamy bedroom eyes. Can you believe they're green?"

"No. And I think you should stay away from him."

"I can't. We have a date to meet later tonight, after he talks to his brother.

Guess what his name is?"

"Whose? The kisser or the brother's?"

Laura giggled. "The kisser. Guess what his name is."

"Dracula?"

Laura snickered. "Close. His name is Dracul. Isn't that sexy? Dracul Costica Drakulya."

Ann blinked. "You can't be serious?"

"Do you think he might be a descendent of Dracula?"

"I think there is no such being as Dracula, and I don't think Dracul Drakulya is that man's real name, either. No one could have such a stupid name. He just wants to get laid."

"So do I. By him."

"Laura!"

"Well, jeez, he's so hot he took my breath away. And he knows how to kiss."

"So you said."

"You know what else?"

"What?" Ann asked, suddenly afraid for her friend. Laura could be reckless, just like Ameer.

Laura sighed and rubbed the side of her neck. "I think he bit me, too. I think he has long white fangs, and I'm pretty sure he sank them right into my neck."

"What!" Ann jerked her friend's hand away from her throat and eyed her neck. "I don't see anything."

"Gotcha!" Laura snickered. "You should see your face. This place is getting to you. Did you really think Dracul is a vampire?"

"With a name like Dracul Drakulya?" In spite of the grim atmosphere inside the tavern, Ann giggled. "You are so not funny."

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Dracul Drakulya cracks me up. No way is that his name. Let's go."

Laura pushed back her chair. Grabbing her purse, she stood up. "Wait a minute. I want to tell Dracul where we're going. Uh...where are we going?"

"I don't know. Hurry up, and let's get out of here. I don't like the atmosphere here."

Ann watched the young male carefully as Laura leaned into him. He smiled, slipped his arms around Laura's waist and tugged her closer. She saw the smile quickly fade. He shook his head and tightened his hold on Laura.

Laura looked back over her shoulder at her and lifted a brow. Ann darted Dracul a furious look and motioned for Laura to come on.

Dracul frowned at her over Laura's head, then turned his attention back to what Laura was saying. He shook his head again. Laura kissed his cheek and squirmed out of his arms. Ann sighed. Apparently the man didn't want Laura to leave. He probably thought he was going to miss his chance to get laid after all.

"He doesn't look happy," Ann said when Laura reached her.

"He isn't. I told him we wouldn't be gone long, but he insisted we stay."

"Why?"

"He said for our safety we needed to remain here."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I go where you go. So where are we going?"

"For a walk. Fresh air. Look at the snow. Explore the town."

"What town?" Laura grumbled, trailing behind Ann to the door. "There are half a dozen shops, maybe. I bet they roll up the streets when the sun sets behind the Carpathian Mountains. One main street, Ann, they can't even claim a stoplight here. I've seen maybe two cars, and those were taxies. I think all the villagers use horse-drawn carts to get from A to Z."

"It's a quaint village."

"It's a village straight out of medieval times."

"There are at least twelve shops," Ann said and reached for the brass doorknob. She froze as the door suddenly swung open and two men stepped inside out of the cold and blocked her and Laura's exit.

Her hand stilled in midair. Ann tilted her head as she automatically stepped back to give the two men room to pass. She dropped her hand to her side and swallowed hard. Her throat tightened and turned bone-dry. The man in front, the taller of the two, paused to brush fresh snow off his shirt—a thin black tee shirt like the men at the bar wore.

Her eyes widened. Didn't anyone wear coats here? It was freezing outside. He towered over her, tall and sinewy. His lean cheeks sported a dark shadow of whiskers, and his black-as-midnight hair fell loosely around his wide shoulders. His nose was aristocratic, a slender blade, and his mouth...Heat spiraled deep in her belly. He possessed the most sensual mouth on a male she'd ever seen. Upper lip firm, but inviting, lower lip full that dared a woman to taste him.

He made the men at the bar look like ugly ducklings, even the handsome, flirty Dracul. The words 'tall drink of water' flitted through her mind, and she was immediately thirsty.

He was taller than all the men at the bar, sexier, better looking, better built, better...everything. Ann met his steady gaze and flinched. He might be fine-looking, but she'd never seen eyes quite the color of his, nor as cold. Aquamarine, frozen aquatic chips of ice with barely a hint of blue, yet there was fire hidden in the icy crystal depths.

He didn't bother to conceal his frank appraisal of her. His sub-zero gaze danced up and down the length of her. Then he took his time with a slow second perusal. His eyes touched on the tangled blonde curls falling around her face, slid to her mouth, lingered briefly on her breasts, dwelled on the wide belt buckle at her waist, then dropped all the way to

the tips of her cowboy boots.

She saw his lips twitch at the sight of her shit-kickers. Slowly, his gaze returned to the belt buckle. He scrutinized it for a minute, then lifted his steady gaze to meet hers.

Ann scowled. "Something interesting about my belt buckle?"

"I see you are a champion barrel racer in your country. So, you are good at...riding?" He arched a wicked brow.

Arrogant bastard! His words were crudely suggestive. He wanted to play sexual word games with her? Fine! "I've never had any complaints."

His eyes went from frozen to hot as hell. "I never thought you had. How fast are you on your feet?"

"What?" *How fast am I on my feet?*

Like he was going to give chase? Bull! She must have misunderstood him. His accent was Old World and so thick she wondered if she'd heard anything he said correctly. Obviously, he found her lacking, because his attention strayed to Laura.

"I wouldn't go outside, ladies." He addressed his comment to Laura. Laura nodded. "Of course. We'll return to our table."

"No, we won't," Ann snapped. She moistened her dry lips and wished she could moisten the desert the back of her throat had become. He might not have been talking to her directly, but his voice slid over her like melted chocolate. No wonder Laura agreed for them to return to their chairs.

Ann wondered vaguely if he was a good kisser.

He whipped his gaze toward her, his eyes settling briefly on her mouth. Ann felt her heart jump like something wild and frightened. Had he read her mind? Impossible. She was just on edge. Her imagination had taken her to the Twilight Zone and she was overreacting to everything. Why should she care if he was a good kisser or not? *It's not like I'm going to find out*, Ann chastised herself. She had no business thinking such things. Where the hell had the thought come from anyway? She didn't care if he was the best kisser in the whole of Romania or Europe. He wasn't going to be kissing her or her him.

"You will return to your table. As I've said, it isn't safe outside." He lifted a brow, then once more focused his full attention on Laura.

What was so damn interesting about Laura?

Jealous? She felt jealousy because he was paying more attention to Laura than her? Jeez. She really was losing it. But the instant heat that

pooled between her thighs shocked her and made her wonder if she was fooling herself. How could she feel attraction for a man who'd quickly dismissed her? Deep inside, it angered her. He found her unattractive, yet he thought to give her orders? No way.

"Thanks for the advice, but we can take care of ourselves."

He swept a glance over her. His nostrils flared as though she was a mare in heat and he'd caught a whiff of her scent. "I doubt it."

"Excuse me." She tried to step around him.

He locked his fingers on her shoulders so tightly she winced. He eased up when he saw her flinch. "You misunderstand me, human. I'm not giving you free advice. I'm telling you. Do not go outside."

"Human? Oh, brother! Don't you people think you've carried on this act long enough?"

"Act? I have no idea what you're talking about, but you cannot go outside."

"Why not?" Ann jerked free of his grip, but she had the feeling she was free only because he chose to release her.

"There are vampires on the streets along with zombies and *Changelings*."

"Uh...right. Get out of my way."

"Go back to your table and remain there as you are ordered."

"As I am ordered?" Ann's brows raised several notches. "Who the hell do you think you are giving me orders? King of Siam?"

"I am not a king...yet. I'm Prince Ciprian Costica Drakulya."

Ann lost it. She couldn't help herself. She doubled over laughing so hard her stomach hurt. At last she straightened up, wiping her eyes. She looked around. Dead silence filled the room. Laura's eyes were big as saucers. Shit.

The man stared at her with the deadliest eyes she'd ever seen in her life. "Something wrong with my name? I assure you it is a very old and revered one."

Ann blinked. "Uh...right. Everybody's in on the act, but hey, you all need to find another name. Drakulya just isn't convincing enough. Now let me pass."

"If you want to survive, you will obey my every order."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I never threaten. Return to your table as I have commanded."

"I will not! I want out of here. Now!" Ann placed her palms in the

center of his broad chest and pushed. He didn't budge. Instead, he again locked his fingers on her shoulders. This time she knew from the boiling rage in his eyes he didn't care if it hurt. "You aren't going out there."

"I can, and I will."

"No." He backed her away from the door, backed her all the way across the room.

Ann wondered if he was going to back her all the way to the ladies' room and kiss her. Damn. Why did she keep thinking about him kissing her when all she'd managed to do was piss him off? And she wasn't exactly a happy camper here herself.

She had the weirdest sensation, as if she was floating on clouds. Ann looked down and gasped when she saw her feet were several inches off the floor. They were gliding? Across the room? Holy hell! It wasn't possible.

No one said a word in her defense. Of course not, they were all pissed over her insensitive Drakulya remark. Who knew they'd be so darned uptight about a name?

He backed her to the farthest corner in the room, the murkiest corner. His eyes darkened. Hers widened. His chest rose and fell with ragged breaths. So did hers. She knew damn well he hadn't exerted himself pushing her across the room. They'd both been as weightless as a feather floating in the air, so why was he so breathless? For that matter, why was she?

A hint of color touched his high cheekbones. "You desire this thing?" he asked roughly.

"Wh-what? What thing?" She had no clue what he was asking her.

"This kiss you have buried in your mind. A kiss shared between us in the...ladies' room. You wish for this thing to happen between us? You desire my mouth on yours?"

"No!"

"I think you lie, human. To me. To you. I think you very much desire the taste of my mouth on yours. I think you not only want my kisses, but you want my body joined to yours."

"I think your ego must be bigger than your penis, but I'm not interested in finding out, so just be careful you don't let either trip you up. Let go!" She kicked his shin with the toe of her boot. God, she loved sharp-toed cowboy boots! They were the ultra weapon for up-close-and-personal combat. Ann smothered a shout of satisfaction when his fingers slid away from her shoulders and he howled.

She was certain she'd caught him off-guard with her remark concerning the dimensions of his penis because his eyes had widened and he'd glanced in the direction of his zipper. Men! They had such a thing about the size of their dicks!

Ann didn't waste the opportunity given her. Using a move she'd learned at the FBI Academy, she swept her right boot around his left leg and tripped him. He landed on his ass with a thud and a loud grunt. Yea! Score one for the cowgirl from Texas.

For a moment, there was the return of that utter stillness in the tavern. She darted a look at the males perched at the bar. Their eyes were round, their brows arched. Their mouths were a perfect *o* of shock. No one moved. No one said a word. She didn't think they even breathed. Abruptly, their mouths snapped shut, and their expressions changed immediately to a fierce glare.

Ann gazed at the man sitting on the floor. His jaw gaped. He blinked at her, a hint of surprise on his face. A low warning growl emitted from his throat. She was certain his eyes changed instantly from ice blue to ruby red. "Oh, shit!"

She fumbled for the gun in her jacket pocket, jerked it out and aimed it at him with hands that weren't quite as steady as she'd like them to be. "Don't move," she said shakily. "I swear I'll shoot."

He didn't move, at least not in the traditional way, a way she'd have been prepared for. His speed was incredible. He launched himself off the floor super fast. She didn't have time to blink or realize he was moving toward her. His attack was fierce, fast and merciless. He slammed his shoulder into her stomach like a Dallas Cowboys linebacker and shoved her back against the wall. She didn't see his hand shoot out and curve around her throat. It all happened in a startling blur.

"Let go of me!" she screamed through clenched teeth.

They tussled for the weapon. His hand closed around the short barrel. Ann fought to keep control of the gun, but he was so strong. At the same moment she tightened her finger on the trigger, he wrenched the gun around. Too late, she realized the business end was aimed toward her. The sharp *pop* exploded like a cannon shot, surreal, and sounded so far away.

Ann gasped at the white-hot pain that blasted into her right side like a fireball. She heard his sharp hiss. His harsh curse. Why was he cussing? She was the one shot. He probably didn't care she'd been dumb

enough to shoot herself.

"I do care," he said quietly. "I would not have you suffer such a terrible thing."

Their eyes met, his filled with regret. She figured hers had to be brimming with pain. God, agony was too mild a word for the burning in her gut. She palmed the wound and felt her warm blood spill between her fingers. Ann swallowed back a moan. Her finger slipped free of the trigger. "I wasn't going to shoot you," she whispered. "I only meant to scare you."

"You have been successful." He jerked the pistol from her hand and flung it toward one of the men at the bar. She saw the fire explode in his scarlet eyes, the fury that heated his face...and fangs.

"Fa-fangs? You-you have...fangs?"

She thought he snapped something that sounded like, You're damned right I have fucking fangs! but wasn't sure, couldn't hear past the dull roar in her ears.

The only thing she felt was the raging fire in her belly. *Don't faint! Don't faint!* Oh, shit, she was going to do exactly that. Her knees slowly buckled. A black cloud descended over her. She felt herself falling, falling, sliding down the wall. Someone said, "Ciprian! She's going! You'll have to get the bullet out of her. Fast!"

Ann moaned as powerful arms closed around her, lifted her close to a wide chest. She opened her eyes to see the handsome Dracul standing at Ciprian's side, a worried frown on his dark face.

Ciprian tightened his hold on her. "It's too late for that. She'll die before I can remove it. I'll have to change her."

She tried to focus, tried to pay attention to what Ciprian said, but the words made no sense. *Change me? Change me into what?*

"Clear the bar for me."

Ann turned her head in time to see the one called Dracul swiping beer mugs and chalices off the counter. Ciprian carried her to the counter and gently lowered her on top of the narrow bar like some kind of sacrifice.

"You're a vampire?" She kept her voice low, lest everyone think her insane. She searched his dark face for answers.

"I have fangs, don't I?" he snapped, and flashed them at her as though to prove his point.

"You could let her die."

Good old sweet, flirty Dracul wanted to let her die?

What had she ever done to him? Besides not want Laura to sleep with him?

"It's what you had planned anyway." Again, Dracul. The sadist! Ann frowned and closed her eyes. She felt so tired. She tried to raise her arm but it felt like it weighed a ton. *What he had planned anyway?* Ciprian had intended to kill her? Why? She sure hadn't done anything to him. Well, except kick his shins and discover his fangy secret. Maybe the entire nest of males was a gang of fanged serial killers.

"That was before," Ciprian said. "Careful what you say, brother. She hears our words."

"Before what?" Dracul asked.

"Before I knew."

"Shit," Dracul murmured. "You're going to claim her?"

Ann opened her eyes and met Ciprian's steady gaze. He turned her head to one side, and she knew all the stories about vampires in Transylvania were true. She knew what happened to her sister. Ameer was dead, and *she* was next on this fanged creature's menu. She didn't have to worry about dying from the bullet wound. His ancient eyes said it all. Yes, this...this *vampire* had murder in his blood-red eyes.

"Ciprian, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Don't ask me foolish questions. You know I'd never make a mistake like that. She's the one I've been waiting for."

"She's human, Ciprian."

"She's more than human."

"What?"

"I, above all others, understand the implications, the trouble this will bring."

"Then don't do it."

"Leave me alone, Dracul. I can't walk away from what is mine."

Ann sighed, a soft, breathy sound. "I'm not yours. Am I?"

Ciprian's gaze sharpened. "Not yet."

There were no more words. Nothing but the rough sound of Ciprian's breathing and the harsh look on his dark face as he leaned closer and closer. Ann screamed. Even though the movement hurt like hell, she pummeled his shoulders and raked her nails down one side of his face. He drew a sharp breath, hissed softly. She thought he'd strike her, hurt her, but he gathered her wrists together and clamped his long fingers around them. He didn't hurt her, merely held her still.

"Haven't you done enough damage to yourself? I'm trying to save your life. If you don't hold still and allow me the freedom to do this thing, you will die. Do you understand me? Your wound is fatal."

"How-how do you know?"

"I know. The projectile tore your liver and spleen. You're bleeding profusely. There is no hospital here. No doctor to remove the slug."

A wave of faintness washed over her. He brushed her hair back from her face. "There is but one way to save you. I can give you life. Do you accept this gift?"

"No."

"Yes, you do."

"I'll be like you? Have fangs and look...dangerous?"

A faint smile touched his mouth. "Yes."

"Could we leave off the fangs?"

He shook his head. "Fraid not. They're a package deal."

There was nothing left to say. All she could do was watch his fangs come down toward her throat. Descend. Lengthen. Closer. He sank the lethal incisors into her throat with all the finesse of a hungry lumberjack stabbing a biscuit at the breakfast table.

White-hot pain shot through the side of her neck, far worse than the agony in her stomach. Tears flooded her eyes and cascaded down her cheeks. It hurt. God, how it hurt. Yet the pain faded in seconds. Impossible, she thought as she felt the strong suction on the wildly pounding pulse on the side of her throat.

How could it feel so incredibly delicious having his mouth against her pulse there? She ignored the intense pain in her gut and curled her fingers into his shirt. "Don't stop," she said faintly.

He growled low in his throat, but this time the soft rumble wasn't meant to be a warning, but was one of desire, need, and determination. He retracted his fangs and stared into her face. "I have no intention of stopping. You aren't escaping me so easily."

Then he lifted her right arm and sank his fangs into her wrist. His lips felt soft, so soft against her flesh. She frowned. How could she hear him swallow so audibly?

Her heart raced. Her pulse pounded. Everything in her body raced, soared; then everything slowed. Her pulse. Her heart. Her breathing. Hot. So much fire. So much heat. Her skin stung as if it was on fire. No. She was cold. So cold, she clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. Her body shook. Her bones felt frozen, as if all the liquid

warmth had drained out of her. He let go of her wrist so abruptly her hand hit the countertop hard.

Why did he look so surprised? He stared at her as if he'd just uncovered some major secret about her.

Someone screamed.

Laura? Laura was screaming? Why? What was wrong with her? Oh, but she didn't care. She wanted this vampire's sexy mouth back on her. She wanted to feel him feeding from her.

Screams-screams-screams. Laura's bloodcurdling shrieks jerked Ann out of the sweet darkness she desperately wanted to surrender to.

"Let me go to her. She's shot! Can't you see? She's hurt!" Laura's terrified words penetrated the dark haze Ann felt herself drifting into.

Laura was in trouble? Her friend needed her help. She had to get free. Escape. Help Laura. Help Ameer. But the vampire hovered over her, held her still. "You can't go to her. You must lie still."

Air. She needed air. She felt as if she was locked inside a bubble and her lungs wrapped in thick cotton. She couldn't breathe.

The vampire...was overpowering. Deadly. Dangerous.

Ann attempted to get up. A warning growl slid from his throat. "Dracul! Hold her still!"

"Don't kill me," she whispered faintly. "I don't want to die."

His fingers tightened on her shoulders. "There is no other way."

"I don't want to be like you."

His jaw tightened. "Why do you keep comparing what you will become to me? We are two different individuals. You couldn't be like me if you tried."

"I'll be dead...like you?"

"I'm not dead. I'm the undead. You're dying, Ann. You did this to yourself with your foolish rebellion. In order to live, you must die. Then, sweetheart, once you're able, I'm going to sex you."

She stared at the long claws that shot out from the end of his fingernails. He tore his shirt off over his head and tossed it aside. Slowly, he slashed a deep wound across his wide chest. "You will drink from me so that you may live. Now."

"No." She shook her head. "No. I-I can't."

He gripped her upper arms. "You said you didn't want to die. If that is true, then you must drink." He cupped the back of her head. "Look into my eyes."

Ann felt herself slip into a dark, ethereal void where only Ciprian's voice penetrated. "Drink as I command." He pressed her mouth against the wound. "Drink."

Ann slid her tongue across the long wound and swallowed the sweet nectar. She moaned, savoring the taste of him. Oh, God. He tasted good. She latched onto the cut and sipped harder, deeper, swallowed over and over. All the while she fed from him, he softly whispered commands, chanted some kind of ceremonial words, words that raced through her body, her mind, and bound them as one.

Ann felt the cool touch of a ring glide onto her finger, felt it tighten, but she couldn't see it for the hot colors that sizzled through her mind; tangy lemon yellows, golden desert oranges, deep shades of vibrant emeralds and impossible shades of teals and blues painted her soul. Still she drank, until at last she heard him say, "That's enough for now. I will feed you more later."

Then his fangs, deadly, brutal, sank into her throat again and again, and each time after he fed, he fed her. She didn't know how much time passed. Nothing seemed real. She drifted in a dreamlike state. Everything around her faded, except for the intense pain in her stomach.

Why did she have such a bellyache?

"Ciprian," Dragomir said quietly. "You must stop feeding her. You grow as weak as she is. This is much too dangerous for you. She requires too much of your blood."

"I can't get the bleeding to stop." Ciprian drew in several deep breaths. "Do not come between us, Dragomir. Tell the others I need privacy to mark her."

"What? No! You can't."

"It's done. I've already bound her to me."

"She's human, Ciprian. Think what you're doing. You are already committed."

"Do you think I'm unaware of the trouble this will bring?"

"You said you did not want to mingle your blood with a human."

"This human is different. She's one of the Lost Ones."

"You know how rare those are? What if you're wrong?"

"I'm not. I knew what she was the moment I walked through the door and saw her. I just wasn't certain which bloodline."

"Shit! A *human*? Is she Dracula's?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Then for the gods' sake, you cannot claim her or mate with her until

you know for certain."

"She is bound to me."

"The Ancients will null your claim. They will never allow a prince to take a mortal as a First Bride, no matter her bloodline. You know they will order her staked in the sun."

"If they harm her, I will join her in the sun."

"You would defy the Ancients?"

"It is already too late. I've shared enough of my blood with her for her to change. Besides, I told you, she wasn't fully human, or she would have bled out by now from the injury. Everything inside her shut down and went into reserve. I heard her heart slow, felt her lungs still. She's a Lost One. The bloodline's there. Thin, but I tasted it all the same."

"Then she *is* one of Dracula's by-blows?"

"Not directly. Her blood has been diluted through the ages, more human than vampire. It's thin. So thin I almost missed the implications, the importance."

"If she's descended from Dracula," Dragomir said, "then she's related to you. You can't take her for a mate. It is forbidden."

"I said maybe. I don't know. It is difficult to tell."

"Let me taste her blood."

Ciprian hesitated.

"You're too close, Ciprian. You need a mediator."

Ciprian nodded. "Very well. A sip. Do not feed her."

Dragomir grinned. "I won't feed her. Sheesh, you've got it bad."

Ann swallowed hard when the vampire named Dragomir lifted her arm. His light blue eyes were steady and reassuring. "Do not be afraid. I will take only a small drink."

She said nothing as he sank his fangs in her wrist. Hell, what was one more bite?

Dragomir swallowed, retracted his fangs and jerked back immediately. His chest rose and fell in agitation. "You need to release her, Ciprian."

"What? Why?"

"She does not carry Drakulya blood. What she carries is the bloodline from an even more ancient and powerful source than Dracula's."

Dracul paled. "Oh, shit. You think she's descended from Alexandru?"

"Dracula's creator. Yes." Dragomir stated. "She is."

Ciprian nodded. "It makes sense now. That's why I made the mistake

thinking she was descended from the Drakulya bloodline. She carries a scent I'm familiar with. No matter whose by-blow she is, she is one of ours. She is Vampire."

"She isn't one of ours, Ciprian. She was fathered by Alexandru Vadim. You cannot claim her or mate with her. You must have his blessing first or he will think you have dishonored him and his daughter.

"It's too late. She's mine."

"And she's Alexandru's," Dragomir reminded.

"She evolved human."

"I don't care. Alexandru will not see it that way. She is his daughter."

"She is my Bride."

Dragomir raked hands through his hair. "Are you listening to yourself? Do you have a death wish? Alexandru will kill you for touching her without his agreement."

"Understand this, my friend. I've shared my blood with her. I know her thoughts. Her desires. Her needs. She's *mine*. I will have her, and not even the Ancients, Alexandru or Dracula are going to put a stone in my path. Do you stand by me on this? I need you to stand by me on this—and the others. I need everyone's support."

For a moment, Dragomir eyed the woman, then slowly turned his troubled gaze on Ciprian. "You are certain?"

"Yes."

Dragomir nodded and stepped back. "Then I stand by your choice. I will go with you before the Ancient Tribunal as witness to your exchange of blood. So will the others. And I will stand by your side when you ask Alexandru for this female. Gods help us. I hope you know what you are doing."

"I would never make a mistake about something so vitally important. She's the one."

One what? The question flitted vaguely through Ann's murky mind. And who was Alexandru? "What-am-I?"

Ciprian leaned over her. Where he'd been somewhat kind moments ago, now his words lashed at her with icy rage. "Foolish human. Do you not know to never challenge or attack a vampire? Especially at *Rushing*? And certainly not with such a puny weapon as a gun? I don't like it when something of mine is injured."

Rushing? Was she supposed to know what the hell rushing was? Something of his? Ann sighed and struggled to draw a deep breath. "Do you know you smell utterly delicious? I-want-you..."

Witch's Magic

Ciprian's dark brows rose. "You, female, are too brash. You think to seduce me?"

"Dammit, Ciprian," Dracul said. "She's babbling. I swear you're both insane. She can't breathe. You took too much, too fast."

"I took exactly what I needed to take from her and gave back what she needs to change."

"You realize she will have to disappear? Both of them?" Dragomir said.

"He had no choice," Dracul said. "She's bleeding profusely. He had to feed her, or she'd die."

"She won't die, Dracul...not yet, not until I'm ready for her to die."

"Oh, yes, I will," Ann said faintly. "Can't...breathe."

Soft laughter brushed the top of her head. *Laughter?* How could he laugh at a time like this? She was dying, for Pete's sake.

"I forbid you to die until I give you permission, but you're probably going to be stubborn about it and do it your way."

She lifted her head. His eyes had lost the red haze and returned to the color of frozen aqua. His brows furrowed with worry. She stroked a finger along his brow. "I'm extremely stubborn."

"I know."

"I feel like shit."

"You felt soft and womanly to me."

"Were you limping when you carried me?"

Laughter. She couldn't believe a man as solemn as he appeared found her words so damn amusing.

"No more wearing boots with pointy tips. They hurt like hell when you kicked me."

"I'm dying. I won't be wearing anything."

"I will not let you die forever, human. Now, I must mark you. You will awaken when I summon you."

She blinked. "Are-are you going to do that thing to me you said you were going to do?"

His lips flattened. If she didn't know better, she'd almost think he was sorry she got hurt.

"What, sweetheart?" he asked, and she knew then she really was dying because no way would he speak to her so gently.

"Sex me?"

"Damned right."

"I have a secret. Come closer."

Ciprian leaned nearer. "You have no secrets from me, human. I can read your every thought."

"I want to be sure you know no man has touched me," she said quietly, closing her eyes. "Please, don't sex me here. Swear it."

"When I sex you, human, we'll have complete privacy. Open your eyes. You will look at me." Ann forced her lids open. Ciprian's gaze darkened. "It is good you are pure. I would not like it if another had touched what is mine." He leaned closer. "You may close your eyes now."

"Why?" Her voice sounded frail to her. "Oh, please, let this be over fast."

"You will be brave and not plead for mercy or instant death."

"You're full of shit."

His lips twitched. "I assure you, I am not."

"You're a pompous ass."

"In that, you might be correct, but you, human, are about to become one of the undead. First, I'm going to remove the pellet lodged inside you."

"Then what?"

"First things first." He tugged her sweater over her head. Ciprian eyed the black lacy bra with interest. "Nice. I like you in black. You will please me by wearing nothing but black from now on." He glanced at the curves of her breasts, then draped her sweater across her chest. "Everyone doesn't need to see what belongs to me," he mumbled.

Ann shivered. Ciprian placed his hand over her wound and pressed gently. "This will hurt. But you will be brave. You will not be weak and cry."

Ann moaned and closed her eyes. "I will if I want to."

He snorted. "Rebellious to the end. I see you will keep me on my toes for the rest of my life."

"How long is that?"

He grinned. "Eternity."

She didn't know what he did or how he did it, but one minute her stomach was on fire, the next, he grunted and held up his hand. He held the slug between his thumb and forefinger.

"You got it?" Ann asked incredulous. She hadn't felt him remove it. Lifting her head, she looked down, and watched the wound slowly seal. She blinked, not believing what she saw. "How?"

"It doesn't matter how. What's important is that I repaired your liver and spleen and stopped the internal bleeding...finally."

"Now what?"

"I mark you." He glared at the other males who'd crowded in. "Stop grinning and turn your backs."

Laughter drifted around the tavern, around Ann's head. They turned as one at Ciprian's frown. They formed a barricade around her, shielding her and Ciprian inside a protective circle.

Ann scowled. "Why are they laughing?"

He tugged off her boots and tossed them aside. "Dracul, burn those damn things."

"Not my boots. I need them."

"You will have no further use for such weapons."

"Right. I'm going to die."

"That isn't what I meant."

Ann sighed. "So why do they laugh?"

"They think it's funny I found my First Bride, then nearly killed her within minutes after meeting her. It amuses them you're human, have a bloodline more ancient than mine and a bit of a cowgirl. That is the term...right? Cowgirl?"

"Mmm, yes. Cowgirl. *Human?*"

"What?"

"You keep calling me human. Does that term still apply to me?"

"For a little longer, and you're mostly human, but you've never been pure human."

"I'm all human." She felt him unfasten her wide belt buckle, unbutton her jeans and slide them off her hips. "You have to strip me for me to die?"

"No, to mark you."

Ann discovered she couldn't move. He'd done something to her. Something so she couldn't blink or even swallow spit.

Was she dead? Was she really dead, maybe floating outside her body, watching him strip her jeans and panties off her? Oh. My. God. He was going down on her right here? *Here?* Where the circle of male vampires had only to turn and watch...see...everything?

She moaned, tried to fling her arm in protest, but it flopped at her side, utterly useless. Whatever he planned to do, he had no intention for her to interfere.

"Stop trying to move," he ordered.

"You really must get over this habit of ordering me around."

Perfect white teeth flashed, not a sign of a fang. Had she imagined the entire thing? "If you try, you will learn to obey me," he said.

Ann couldn't resist a faint smile. "I don't want to try. I'm not the obedient type. If you try, you'll figure that out."

His lips twitched. "Sassy to the end. I have numbed you as much as my saliva will do so, but what I'm going to do to you will hurt like hell."

"Worse than the bullet?"

"Yes."

"Worse than ripping my throat apart?"

"I didn't rip your throat apart. Does your stomach still hurt?"

"No. I don't feel any pain at all. It just feels weird."

"It's the blood pooled inside you. It will take a while for your body to absorb it."

"You didn't answer my question. Will marking me hurt worse than when you bit my throat?"

"Yes. Much worse. You will not shame me by crying. I forbid it."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a bully?"

"Frequently."

He parted her thighs and lowered his head. "Do not move," he said firmly and licked the inside of her upper right thigh.

Oh, crap! How was she not supposed to move with his face practically buried against her clit? She felt his tongue glide along her flesh, felt his hot, moist breath on her skin. She didn't move, *couldn't* move, but she refused to obey him like a mindless child. If she wanted to cry, she'd cry! Tears slid into the corners of her eyes and wet her hair. She clenched her fists. Moaned.

Ciprian lifted his head, glared at her. "Do not make another sound. I know you are braver than that. You took a bullet and barely flinched." He sank his fangs into her inner thigh again and again. He reminded her of a sewing machine needle bobbing up and down, except he did it much slower. She didn't scream, but she cursed him with every breath. "Stop it!"

Ann knew he wasn't feeding from her again. She wasn't sure what he'd meant when he said he was marking her, but it felt like he was branding her with a hot iron.

He let go of her thigh and looked up. "Are you complaining?"

"No. I just wondered what the hell you're doing. Yes! Of course I'm

complaining. It hurts, dammit!"

"My initials, C. C. D., will be forever on the inside of your thigh."

"You're branding me like a newborn heifer?"

"I suppose you could call it branding. It is my mark, my claim to you." He lowered his head and stabbed his fangs into her flesh again. At last, he raised his head and wiped a hand across his bloodstained lips. "You screamed," he said in an accusing tone, "but because I know it hurt, I will forgive you this one small humiliation."

She stared dazedly at her blood staining his mouth. Dizziness assaulted her. The ceiling turned dark. Nausea bubbled like green slime in her stomach. "Do I have any blood left?"

"Enough. You will now feed from me again," he said, "and feed well."

"Not...hungry."

"Yes, you are. And I'm very hungry."

Ann struggled to draw a breath, but her lungs felt as if they'd collapsed and were crushing her heart. Ciprian slipped his arm under her nape and helped her lift her head. The room swirled and tilted crazily. "Oh, God, I'm going to be sick."

"Woman, you are full of complaints and petty flaws. You will strive to overcome these little faults. You will not be sick. You will not disgrace either of us with this human failing. I forbid it."

"You're such an asshole."

He lifted both brows. "I'm a prince."

"You're a prick!"

"A prick?" he said stiffly. "What is this thing?"

"A dick that's an asshole!"

His lips tightened. "You will not speak in such a manner ever again. You will show me respect, and you will always obey me."

Ann settled for a weak snort. "You don't know women from Texas very well if you believe you can boss me around."

"And you don't know male vampires very well if you think I'll put up with any nonsense from you. In my house, I rule."

"In my house, I share command."

"No."

"You, Rigor, are a beast!"

He flashed his fangs. "Honey, you have no idea, and my name is Ciprian, not Rigor."

Zabitha Shay

“Rigor fits you better since you’re stiff and dead.”

The last words she heard before darkness blotted everything was Ciprian shouting orders at his brother. “Silence the other female, Dracul. She’s screaming loud enough to wake the entire village.”

Poor Laura, Ann thought, and stopped struggling to live.

Chapter Nineteen

We enjoy the night, the darkness, where we can do things that aren't acceptable in the light. Night is when we slake our thirst.

*~Vampire's Kiss
(William Hill)*

*Romania
Village Pyre
Dracula's Inn
Mortal Realm*

Shasta worried with her teacup and wished she was anywhere but seated across from the sexy vampire. Valerian smiled, apparently perfectly content to be in the tavern with her.

Dammit. It wasn't fair! She hadn't expected to actually like the sound of his voice or even like him. Desire him. Certainly she hadn't planned to enjoy his flirting.

And this crazy attraction, well, it was all too much.

Desire? She couldn't possibly feel desire for him, but damn if it wasn't flooding her insides. It was his fault. He did something to her. Made her want him. Shasta wanted to snarl, claw, bite...something. Maybe she'd bite Valerian back when she changed into a wolf. Show him what it felt like to have one's teeth sink into his flesh.

"Sounds kinky," he said, waggling his brows. "What part of me do you want to bite? Or may I make a suggestion?" His eyes crinkled with

silent laughter.

She fumed. How could she have let him seduce her? How could she want this...this...

"Creature?" he asked mildly.

Shasta stiffened. "Stay out of my head."

"Don't bristle. I'll always know your thoughts. And, my darling, I *am* a creature. A creature of the night, led by the intense need to feed, mate and procreate." He sighed. "Although just once, I'd love to feel the kiss of the sun upon my face, my body, without the risk of turning to toast." He grinned. "I have a fetish for sunlight."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"True."

He gripped her hand when she jumped at the sound of a gunshot and another raw scream filled the tavern. She stared at a darker stain on the table and wondered...

Valerian covered the top of her hand with one of his and prevented her from touching the dark stain. "Do not."

She jerked her gaze to his. "Why not?"

"Because some stains are evil."

Flinching, she swallowed back the hysteria clogging the back of her throat. "Only some?"

"Yes. You must understand, love, not all vampires are vile, but there are those who are, and when they kill, the kill is unclean."

"Unclean?"

"I don't know how to explain it to you so you understand. Traces of an unclean kill are always left behind. A bacterium grows and the evil attaches itself to the innocent and spreads. They go insane and have to be destroyed. I will instruct Aurel to burn it."

"Aurel?"

"The bartender."

"I suppose next you'll tell me there really is a vampire named Dracula and he truly does own this Inn?" She heard the hysteria in her voice and couldn't control it.

"Yes. And yes," he said quietly.

Shasta smoothed a wrinkle in her vest and tried desperately to ignore the fading screams of the two human females. She blinked and tried to pay attention to what Valerian and she were discussing, tried desperately to shut out the screams. Gods, would they never stop? "What? Yes...? What?"

"Yes, Dracula is real, and yes, this is Dracula's Inn. It has been so since the days of the *Impaler*."

"Then it has always been a place of evil."

"No. It has always been a place where a male vampire found his mate. It is only lately it has become a place where..."

"Where...what?"

"Where the unthinkable happens."

"You mean like now?" Her voice filled with contempt. Fear. Was she next? "That was a gunshot."

"It was. Ciprian will handle things." His eyes flashed a warning. "The unthinkable isn't happening right now. When it does, you do not want to be here."

Shasta flinched when another scream pierced the tavern. "The unthinkable seems to be happening now." A knot formed in the pit of her stomach, as cold as yesterday's dinner. "Right now."

"Surely you do not care what happens to the two humans? They are nothing to you."

"I didn't think I would..." Her words trailed away. She lifted her gaze to Valerian's. "But I do," she whispered. "I don't wish torture or death on anyone...except maybe..."

"Me?"

"Not just you. All vampires."

"Why is this? My species have done nothing to you or your family."

She shrugged. "It's the principle. You-you're much too-too..."

"Ah, I see. You don't like the idea you're attracted to one of my kind...to me."

"I abhor the thought."

His face tightened. "Get used to it, because you *are* attracted to me, as I am to you. You belong to me, Shasta. Nothing will ever change that."

Another scream. Weak. Valerian squeezed her hand. From his expression, he liked the idea she cared, yet he had no intention of allowing her to go over there and attempt to stop whatever was taking place. Damn, she wished she hadn't chosen a table so far back in the dark. She couldn't see over the bar, over the circle of males, couldn't see what was happening to those women.

"You didn't choose where you are sitting. I chose it for you."

"You knew this was going to happen? You knew the humans were here?"

"Of course. I've known since the moment they arrived."

"How did you know?"

"You're in my country, my village. I have my ways, plus my grandfather told me."

"Your grandfather?"

"Dracula."

Shasta snorted. "You do love drama. Mystique. Do you honestly think I believe you are...that your *grandfather* is...is *Count Dracula*?"

"King."

"What?" Shasta swallowed hard. This entire thing was becoming surreal.

"He is king of Vampyre. However, he is ready to pass his crown on to his heir during this time of *Rushing*. He grows weary."

Laughter bubbled inside her. "Weary? I thought vampires were tireless."

Valerian lifted his head. Pride lined his face. "He is one of the eldest of my clan, one of the mightiest of the Ancient. He is the father of our coven. Yes, he grows weary."

"You said he is your grandfather."

"He is, but there are hundreds of years between my birth, my mother's and my grandfather's." Valerian laughed softly. "My grandfather has never been shy about depositing his seed in a fertile female at *Rushing*, even when he obtained his three Brides. Since the days of the *Impaler*, he has fathered many, and in many different covens." He paused, grinned. "He's always been a horny vampire. There are too many of his by-blows to try to count, but none of them are legitimate heirs to the Radu throne, except me. It comes to me through my mother's bloodline. I am the only heir. I will be crowned king of Vampyre when this season of *Rushing* ends. Then my grandfather will give up guardianship of the crown and permanently retire."

"I see. And you are looking for a queen?"

"No."

"No?"

"I have found my queen. You will wear the crown with pride."

"I can't. Do not make me."

"It is done, my love. You are my queen. My First Bride."

Panic slammed into her. She couldn't be queen of Vampyre. She could not be his First Bride. She couldn't be his first anything.

A scream. Another. Terror clawed her mind. She couldn't stand this a

minute longer. Shasta didn't care what Valerian said about her remaining in her chair and not interfering. She couldn't bear the thought those females were being tortured. She couldn't just sit here.

Shasta jumped up from her chair and headed toward the group of male vampires circled around the bar, shielding the male and the human within the confining circle, blocking her view of whatever was happening to the blonde.

One minute she was headed straight at them; the next she was trapped within a wall of fog so thick she could barely see her hands. What? She turned, twisted, took steps in all directions, but the fog remained in place, surrounding her. In seconds, she lost all sense of direction.

No matter which way she turned, she ran into a solid brick wall. Carefully, she slid her hands over the cool bricks. It wasn't real. She knew it was only an illusion, just as Valerian and her having sex had been an illusion. It might feel real, seem real, but she knew it wasn't. She slapped her hands over her ears. She might not be able to rescue them, but it didn't stop her from hearing their cries of terror.

Determinedly, she lowered her hands and pushed against the wall. The bricks felt clammy beneath her fingertips. Moisture oozed between the cracks. She probed for a way to break through. Nothing. She couldn't break the invisible force that held her back.

Come back to the table, Shasta. I will not let you go to them.

Having no other choice, she returned to the table and took her chair. She glared at him. "Damn you," she whispered, "and damn them for what they are doing to those women."

"We are a damned race, but we seek life, love, crave a female as any other male in any other species. We are no different in this. We want a mate. We want children. We need children."

"Yes, you *are* different. You leave the woman no choice."

"We have no choice. There is no time to wait for a female to play foolish games or take her time making up her mind if she wants to be sexed and bred, when deep inside it's exactly what she wants. It is not a choice we can afford to allow her, nor can we allow such rebellion as the female with the gun. She's lucky Ciprian didn't kill her."

"I want to go to my room."

"No."

"What about holy water?"

His fingers tightened, then relaxed on hers. "What about it?"

"You-you said you weren't al-allergic to gold and the cross has no affect on you. What about holy water?" She cupped the flask in her vest pocket.

"There are but two things a vampire fears. Sunlight and a stake through the heart. I already know you have stakes. Give me the flask of holy water."

"What?"

He held out his hand. "Give it to me. Now."

Shasta pulled the flask from her pocket and held it out to him.

"Put it on the table." Valerian summoned the waiter.

"Yes, Master?"

"Take that, and pour it out." He pointed at the flask. "Dispose of the flask. And here. Dispose of this, too." He picked up the napkin with the cross and chain buried in its folds.

"Now see here," Shasta protested.

"Do as I say, Aurel. Now."

"Yes, Master." He grabbed the napkin and flask.

"Aurel. Is Ciprian about finished over there?"

The bartender grinned. "I believe he likes a few more bites. The human is a fighter. She hasn't made his claiming her easy. Did you see the way she tripped him on his...his...?"

"Ass?" Valerian inquired. "Indeed. I did see it. She will be good for Ciprian. He needs a strong woman, one who can battle it out with him."

"Yes, Master. I think this is true." He hurried away with the flask and necklace.

"The flask was a gift from Ransom, my brother, and Pinky gave me the cross."

Valerian eyed her. "I'll be the one who provides you gifts from now on. Do you think I did not see your cross or the flask last night? If either item was a threat to me, I would have removed them from your room."

"You just removed both of them."

"Not because I fear either one, but because you do not need them. You'll only get yourself into trouble depending on them to protect you."

"You didn't remove the stakes."

"Because I'm no threat to you, but I'm not the only vampire who lives near Village Pyre. You risk too much staying here. You will move to Radu Castle...immediately."

"I won't. Your place is falling in."

A soft sigh. "Only in places. There are habitable rooms. The castle is under repair for you."

"For me? Don't waste your time."

His face darkened. "Have no doubt, Shasta, it is your home, one of many we will share together. And darling, don't believe everything you hear about vampires. Some of us are actually nice."

She snorted. "Some of you are actually bats, but all of you are bloodsuckers."

"You eat solids. I drink liquids."

"You drink *a* liquid. One."

He shrugged. "It's our nourishment. And darling, all of my species are bats and bloodsuckers. I feel no shame."

Shasta frowned. Meat for her. Blood for him? Why did his reasoning sound reasonable? She'd never thought of it in those terms before. Blood was food for him, all of his species. It wasn't something he had a choice about. What he had a choice about was if he fed and killed or if he fed and left his chosen meal alive and sane.

"How many humans have you changed?"

"Shasta, I don't turn humans. None of us do, unless it serves a purpose. It would only be competition for the food."

"But it happens? Right? Humans are changed. Killed?"

"Killed? Only by a fool."

"A fool?"

"A vampire who goes rogue doesn't care how many humans he changes or the consequences of his deeds. It's dangerous for all of us. If a male desires to change a human female and make her his mate, then it's done properly."

"Properly? There's a proper way to change a human?"

"Of course. And all feedings are monitored by the...me."

"What do you do about it when one goes rogue and does things improperly?"

"He is hunted."

"When he's found?"

"His punishment is swift."

"Swift?"

"He is put to death."

"How?"

"He's staked in the sun. It's a fast way to die."

"And a stake to the heart?"

"A slow, painful death, especially if the attacker misses the heart. Then a vampire slowly bleeds to death while in terrible pain. It's cruel if done by those who have no idea what they are doing."

Shasta tilted her chin. "I know what I'm doing."

"I have no doubt." He grinned. "Damn, you're even more beautiful than in my dreams."

She swallowed past the acute dryness in her throat. "You're a lot uglier than I imagined you to be."

Laughter. By the gods, he laughed a lot. What could the undead possibly find to laugh about?

"How would you know? Since we shared the illusion of me sexing you, you've barely glanced at me." He stroked a fingertip up and down the top of her hand. "Look at me, my Bride."

"No."

"I'm afraid I must insist."

The sudden silence in the tavern was nerve-racking. "They've stopped screaming." Her voice sounded strained. She wondered if her face looked as stricken as she felt deep inside.

"Yes."

"It is over then?"

"For now. The females will have much adjusting to overcome. Their lives will be different from this time on, just as yours will be."

"I liked my life just the way it was."

"No, you didn't, or you would never have come here looking for adventure."

"I came here to find my friend."

"What friend?"

"Princess Kali."

"Ah, the beautiful, but willful Kali. She got herself into a lot of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

Valerian shrugged. "Does it matter now? It's all been resolved, and she and Koran have returned to Ru-Noc."

Shasta felt her heart settle in the pit of her stomach. Gone? What she wouldn't give to be gone from this maddening place. "They've returned to Ru-Noc?" Dammit! She'd wasted her time coming here to the mortal realm. "I want to go home. I want to leave here. I want to go now! I never want to see you or another vampire, never, for as long as I live."

She knew she sounded hysterical, but the two humans, not screaming anymore, well, it was as frightening as when they were screaming.

"I'm afraid it isn't possible. You know too much. Look at me, Shasta."

She felt the power of his command. The steel wrapped in his silky words. He would not tolerate her disobedience. She would not tolerate his bossing her around like she was a mindless sheep. "You know, I'm half Were. You can't order me around. Weres do not like being bossed, especially by a vampire."

"Yes, I know what you are. I scented the wolf in you this morning. Do you think I care what your bloodline is?"

Shasta scowled, her brows knitting together. "Most males do, and vampires and Weres aren't exactly friends."

"Who told you that? And I'm not most males. I'm your mate. I care only that you bear me an heir. That you will do, no matter your race. But I promise you total pleasure while begetting my son."

She jerked, no longer resisting the urge to look him fully in the face. Shasta felt her breath lodge in her chest. *Ohmigods!* There was no way this...this creature from the grave was as handsome as he appeared. He made the sexy male vampires at the bar look like day-old Pinky poop. Her jaw dropped, and all she could do was stare.

"What is wrong? Do I have dirt on my face? I assure you, I'm not fresh from the grave."

"Oh, no, you don't have dirt on your face. It's just that...you know, the longer you talk, the uglier you become."

His eyes crinkled with amusement. "Feisty. I like that. May I buy you a different drink? You don't seem like a tea girl to me."

"What do you suggest?"

He grinned, a slow twist to his lips, and everything about him became intensely sexual. His eyes promised pleasure. More pleasure. Real this time? Or another illusion? His lower lip tempted and looked sensual as sin. His eyelids drooped, bedroom drowsy, sexily inviting her to join him in another sexual romp in bed. He arched a brow, totally relaxed. Totally in charge. He made it clear he wanted her. She knew without doubt he was going to have her eventually...for real.

"How about a chalice of spiced wine? It keeps the blood pure and...hot."

Shasta swallowed hard. "Is this your way of telling me you're going to drink my blood?"

He squeezed her hand. "Sweetheart, not only am I going to dine from your delicious body, I'm going to taste you all over, every single inch of your delectable body, and you will love it. Did you think one sip from you was going to be enough for me?"

Heat curled through her bloodstream and left a trail of fire low in her belly. She clamped her legs together. Oh, shit! She was in such deep 'do' here. "I-uh—yes! I-I think I'll have that glass of wine." She needed something to cool the fire in her heated loins, fast.

Valerian summoned the waiter with a snap of his fingers. "Good. It will...soothe your chill."

Her chill? Gods, she was burning up, and he wanted to heat her up more? "Maybe I-I should pass on the drink."

"No! You will drink it."

The waiter hurried over to their table. "Master? What would you like this night?"

"Master?" Shasta mouthed the word. Valerian squeezed her hand in warning. "A glass of spiced wine, Aurel, loaded."

Aurel glanced at Shasta and back at Valerian. "Loaded? With your..."

"Yes! With my favorite spices."

"Yes, Master. And you? What would you like?"

"I have everything I want right in front of me."

"Yes, Master. I'll be right back." Aurel hurried away.

"Yes, Master. No, Master," Shasta taunted. "You really enjoy lording it over the peasants, don't you?"

His jaw tightened. "I don't 'lord' it over the villagers. They choose to call me 'Master.' I've never instructed them to do so. And you will always show respect for my people."

"*Your people?* You mean Vampyre?"

"No, I mean the people of Village Pyre who choose to work hard and live away from modern conveniences of big cities. Who choose to serve my species and willingly provide us nourishment."

"*Humans?* You expect me to respect humans? They smell."

"No, I don't expect it, Shasta. I demand it. You're a guest in their realm. I expect their courtesy to you, as I expect yours in return, to them and to me."

Silence spread between them. The waiter returned with the chalice of wine. He hesitated, hovering nervously. The air between Valerian and her had decidedly cooled. Valerian nodded at the man to set down the chalice. Then he squeezed Shasta's hand until tears stung her eyes.

"Thank you, Aurel," she said politely, receiving Valerian's silent message loud and clear, and before he crushed the bones in her hand.

The waiter nodded. "You're welcome, Mistress. Enjoy your...spiced wine."

Shasta toyed with the stem on the chalice. Gold. Brilliant gold, set with exquisite clear canary yellow and chocolate-brown diamonds. She sent a quick glance at the ring on Valerian's left ring finger. The stones set on the ring matched the ones on the chalice. Incredible and extremely valuable, but she thought there was more meaning to the ring and chalice than simply the fact of the valuable stones. *None of my business.*

She raised the chalice and sniffed the fine bouquet. She had to admit, the wine smelled delicious. Not too sweet. It was flavored with a spice she wasn't familiar with.

"Drink your wine."

Shasta lifted the chalice, tipped the rim to her lips and drank deeply. The warm liquid slid down her throat, rich and thick and utterly delicious. She started to set the glass down, but Valerian tipped the bottom of the chalice. "Finish it. You will need it."

Shasta set the chalice aside, refusing to finish off the liquid in it. "You think I'm a mindless human to be ordered about?"

"I don't think you're mindless at all. I do think I know what is best for you. I would never mistake you for a human, Shasta. Obey me. Finish the wine. I assure you, my will is stronger than yours."

Shasta drained the glass and set it down with a snap. Abruptly, he leaned across the table and licked her lips. Her breath caught in her throat as he slowly traced his tongue along the edge of her upper lip, then repeated his action on her lower one.

When he finished his self-appointed task, he leaned back and smiled. "Delicious."

Flames licked down the ladder of her spine. Shasta met Valerian's bold gaze and discovered she couldn't look away. She was trapped between the fire in his eyes and a liquid heat that pooled between her thighs and punched its way into her womb. She clenched her thighs together and tried desperately to deny her fiery attraction to the sexy vampire seated across from her.

"Cat got your tongue?" His eyes boiled, twin blue flames that sizzled with fire and desire and something else...hunger. "Dance with me." He drew her to her feet.

"I shouldn't. I-I think I should go."

"Go where?" He slid his arms around her waist and matched their steps to a slow folk tune. He cast the same illusion from earlier and surrounded them in smoky mist, enclosing them in total privacy.

The room tilted. Shasta blinked, but honestly, all she wanted to do was snuggle against his wide chest. Everyone and everything around them faded into the blurry distance. He pulled her closer. Her head fit perfectly against his chest. She sighed. This was wonderful. This was perfect.

He slid a thumb beneath her chin and tilted her face to his. "I think I'll kiss you now, Bride. I've waited long enough to feel your mouth beneath mine."

"Oh, I don't think that's a good idea," she said dreamily.

"Don't think. Thinking's a bad thing. Feel. Feeling's a better thing."

"Definitely not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because if you kiss me, I think I'll feel too much; then I think I'll want you to do much more than kiss me."

"Thinking is good," he whispered. "I'll do anything to you, you want me to."

"And then some?"

"And then some," he agreed huskily. "I promise you nothing but exquisite pleasure. Feel me all around you, love."

Shasta swore her toes curled when he rubbed his mouth against hers, once, twice, then settled his soft lips firmly against her mouth. She leaned in to meet the exquisite heat of his kiss. Her lips parted, yielded to the force of his. There was nothing but smoldering fire, her body pressed intimately against his so there was no way to miss the hard impression of the solid length of his cock.

Tongue tangled with tongue. Flames licked their way down her spine and curled deeply in her womb. Her stomach clenched. Oh, gods, where had he learned to kiss like this? Like she was the only woman he'd ever wanted, would ever want again and was ravenous for her.

You are the only woman I've ever wanted. You are the only woman I'll ever want or need again. You are...my soul.

His hands slid beneath her vest, fingers trailed lightly up and down the delicate steps of her spine, and incredibly, she felt her bra fall away, felt his casual movement as he tossed it toward their table.

Shasta gasped when his warm palms owned her breasts. Soft

caresses, spicy breath on her throat, and sinful temptation. He was all this and more. Thumb tips toyed and teased her rigid nipples until she thought she'd go insane with the need to feel his mouth on her breasts. She groaned. Licked her dry lips. Her nipples tightened beneath the gentle tweaks of his fingertips, and she moaned at the steady ache building and building in her body.

"Let's get out of here," he whispered and pressed a kiss beneath her ear.

Shasta felt a tiny sting and wondered if he'd been nibbling on her again.

"Yes, I have. I intend to nibble on you every chance I get. You taste delicious. How could I possibly resist sinking my fangs in you? I have to be alone with you. Now," he ended urgently.

She blinked. Time stood still, or did it rush by in an endless haze? One minute they were dancing, the next she was inside the castle with no idea how she'd arrived there or ended up on a huge bed deep within the bowels of Radu Castle.

Her vest melted away, and since Valerian had removed her bra earlier, she was a bit shocked at the bite of cool air on her nipples. Shasta gasped and crossed her arms over her breasts.

"No. Don't. You are beautiful. Don't hide from me. Ever. I want to see you. I *need* to see you."

"It's cold in here."

He waved his hand, and immediately warm air surrounded her. "I'm afraid a vampire gets used to the chill. I suppose I don't notice the temperature since I lack a normal blood circulation."

Shasta sighed and lowered her arms. She should care she was half naked before him on his bed. Shouldn't she? But the warm air that brushed her nipples felt good. Sinfully delicious. His mouth on them felt better. His wet tongue lapped the tender undersides of her breasts before licking a slow path and latching onto a nipple.

The gentle sting of his teeth nipped at the tight berries. His tongue laved them over and over until she squirmed like something wild against him. His heated touches were all worth lying before him like a banquet on his bed.

Shasta rubbed against the searing length of his hard cock. Feeling half dazed, she opened her eyes and stared at Valerian when he released her mouth. She was shocked to see his mouth was swollen from her kisses.

"Did I really kiss you with such carnality?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said in a strangled tone and reached for the button on her jeans. His shirt was gone. Had she removed it? If so, when?

"You took it off me while we were dancing at the Inn."

"Thank the gods I didn't try to remove your pants."

"You did." His eyes met hers, glittered with heat and passion. "That's when I suggested we get out of there."

"Oh. You put something in my wine to make me horny."

Laughter, soft as a breeze, touched her face. "You were already horny."

"But you put something in my wine?"

"I didn't serve your drink to you."

"You didn't have to."

"Anyone ever tell you, you think too much?" He tugged her jeans down her hips and tossed them aside. Her red thong landed on top of her jeans a second later. She heard his soft inhalation, felt him skim his knuckles over the thatch of auburn curls.

"You." She gasped as he stroked a particularly intimate spot. "You told me I think too much, but you said it's...mmm...a good thing."

He palmed her breasts with his other hand, lowered his head and licked her nipples. "Oooh," Shasta groaned. "I-I think I-I should warn you...ahh..."

He stroked her clit, rubbed it slowly until she screamed with pleasure. Gently, he slipped a finger inside her, teasing the swollen, sensitive skin there. She arched her hips, rode his finger.

"Yes?" he grunted, latching onto a nipple and wrapping his tongue around it. He worked a second finger deep inside her, parting the inner tightness with long, sleek strokes. The entire time, he worked his hips in a slow rhythm that drove her mad, dry fucking her until she was nearly insane with the need to feel the reality of his cock between her thighs, buried so deep, so deep...

He released her aching nipple and lifted his head. His eyes burned with promise. "What do you want to tell me?" he asked, thrusting his hard shaft against her mound.

"I'm going to-to kill you, first-first chance I get."

A brow quirked. He eased his fingers out of her and nudged her thighs apart with his knee. "I'm going to fuck you. I think we're even."

Shasta gasped as he guided the broad head of his cock to the opening of her hungry channel and surged inside her in one smooth thrust. At the

same moment, he sank his fangs into the wild pulse at her throat.

A tiny burst of sound escaped her, a soft struggle for breath no one heard but him...and her. The painful ache of his entry told her his lovemaking at the tavern had truly been an illusion. This was real. It hurt too much not to be real. Then it didn't hurt anymore. He fit inside her deep and tight, and his smooth thrusts were long and fast and hard.

His mouth on her pulse felt incredible. Sunlight ruptured behind her eyelids. Sharp yellows, bright gold and rich bronzes spilled into her mind and bled together forming new shapes, and patterns and colors. Shasta's body flew. It soared high, flying, flying, stretching and stretching toward the hypnotic pull of the blazing fire.

She basked in the heat of the sun, gloried in its purifying light. Rich, hot colors coated her skin, surrounded her, deepest oranges and hot tangerines. Hot. Hot. They melted and mixed and rushed over her body until she thought she'd combust from within. It felt good. Gods, the fire felt so delicious consuming her. More. She wanted more.

Shasta clawed Valerian's shoulders. "I need..."

"Easy, darling," he whispered. "I know what you need."

Her body accepted the deep penetrations of his cock, loved the faster and faster rhythm. The sharp bite of his fangs sinking into her right breast lapped at the golden haze clouding her mind. He freed her breasts, only to lap at her belly. Each bite sent her over the edge into a powerful orgasm.

"Nooo!" She protested the loss of his cock when he pulled out of her. "Shh. I'm not going anywhere." He turned her, lifted her to her hands and knees and covered her from behind. His hands cupped her mound, fingers spread her damp channel apart, and he pushed his cock slowly inside her, tormenting the tender tissues with his exquisite entry. Slow, slow, until he was seated, until she was stuffed.

"You feel good," he groaned. "You're so damned tight. It feels like the very snugness of you clamped around my cock is going to squeeze the head totally off."

"You feel good in me," Shasta whispered. "I never expected mating with a vampire would be this incredibly hot."

"It will feel better in just a second," he promised and sank his fangs into her left shoulder. He rocked inside her, in, out. In. Out. Hard. Fast. Deep. Deeper.

Shasta dug her fingers into the sheets and rode the wild ride he took

her on. "Mmm. Yes. Good, feels good," she moaned.

He moved his hips, riding her faster and faster, and all the while, he suckled from her, feeding and feeding. He took her closer and closer to the bright sun until she thought she'd catch fire and burn to ash from the sheer ecstasy of it. Shasta lost track of how many times she climaxed. Lost track of how many times he pulled out of her, only to reposition her and surge inside her again. Lost track of how many times he poured his seed inside her.

There was no stopping.

No rest between his climaxes or hers.

He was a veritable mountain of energy, and she learned that just because a male vampire climaxed didn't mean his shaft softened or that he had to wait to recharge. If anything, his need increased.

He pressed her mouth to his chest, encouraged her to feed from him. The taste of him, his warm, spicy blood trickling down her throat reminded her of the spiced wine she'd consumed at the tavern. "Loaded," he'd said to Aurel. Loaded with what? In her heart she knew the spiced wine had been Valerian's blood in the chalice. Oh, but it had been delicious then. It was better now.

The sexual haze clouded her mind. He fed her again. Why? What did it matter? Ah, but she wanted his blood. Yes. All of a sudden, she craved it. With his gentle urging, she accepted his offering without a struggle. The crimson liquid scalded the back of her throat and slid into her belly hot and sweet and delicious as the spiced wine she drank earlier, so long ago now. Spiced wine? She frowned. No, not wine. Not wine. She knew better now. Not wine.

Hours passed in a blur. Shasta didn't know how deeply he fed from her or how much she fed from him. She only knew his body surged inside hers again and again. His low growls of completion sent her spiraling into multiple climaxes with him.

And each time he tilted her hips to catch his seed deep in her womb, he whispered, "Open your mind, love. Accept my seed. Give me a son."

The hot rush of each new release felt better than the last. The ecstasy, the incredible climaxes she felt every time he sank his fangs into her grew stronger and stronger. His mouth on her, his tongue stabbing her womanly channel, teasing, nibbling, until she squirmed wildly and begged him to give her the release she needed was pure torture, pure pleasure.

Dawn streaked across the sky when Valerian lowered her to her bed

in her room at the Inn. "Sleep, my love. Sleep away the day. Do not awaken until dusk. Tonight, we will exchange blood for the final time." He buried his face against her throat, licked an open bite he'd failed to seal. "Tonight, you will open your mind to me, conceive my son and heir."

"I can't."

"You must."

Tears welled in her eyes as he stood up, prepared to leave her alone. "Don't leave me."

Valerian glanced toward the balcony and winced. "Damn the sun," he whispered. "It always comes." He pressed a kiss against her lips. "I have to go, my love. I hate being separated as much as you do." He massaged her belly, feeling the ripeness within. She'd conceive tonight. He knew it. All she had to do was accept his seed. Excitement soared through his body. His son. She'd give him a child. An heir. "I'll return to you tonight, my love, sleep well. Sleep deep."

Despite her will to remain awake, Shasta's eyelids drooped as the first rays of sun struck her face. She moaned and turned away from the sharp bite of its heat. So hot. How could such a watery sun feel so raw and excruciating against her skin?

Chapter Twenty

And come he slow or come he fast, it is but Death who comes at last.

~Sir Walter Scott

*Romania
Village Pyre
Mortal Realm*

Sorina Amanar, newly risen vampiress, sat straight up and scooted to the edge of the bed. Her heavy curtain of blonde hair fell around her face as she bowed her head and ignored the insistent summons of her new master.

Let him command her to come to him. She had no intention of obeying the sadistic brute. Instead, she slid an unsteady hand across her womb and shivered. Brasov's heir grew inside her, just as he'd proudly declared. Since her change, she'd been able to feel the life growing inside her. The babe grew fast. Brasov hadn't bothered to tell her how long she'd carry, but she knew it wasn't nine months. Not like human women.

For the love of all things that were holy, she carried an unholy vampire's seed in her belly. Unholy—because Brasov was pure evil. He glutted on human blood, something she knew was not only shameful for vampires, but a crime in their world. Too much blood and they became vile creatures, as abominable as *Changelings* in the eyes of natural-born vampires. *She* was a *Changeling*.

Tears slid down her face. Dammit, she wanted her life back. She wanted the chance for a life with Stephan, but that would never be. She'd watched her last dawn yesterday morning. The overwhelming sadness she felt over the fact she hadn't taken the time to be thankful for it punched her hard. She hadn't known she was going to become the undead. She'd failed to appreciate all things.

Her heart heavy, Sorina recalled the final frightening moments of her life, remembered drawing her last, difficult breath, the feeling of slowly suffocating, of gasping for air, begging Brasov not to leave her to die alone as he walked away. Brasov had taken what he wanted from her, and by the time he left her at dawn, she'd been too near death to summon her grandparents for help.

Slowly, she pleated a tiny portion of the flowing yellow gown her grandmother had dressed her body in. Her hair fell across her breasts tangle-free. A wistful smile settled on her lips. Mimi. Her dear grandmother had brushed the snarls from it. Weeping, she knew her sweet grandmother did this one last thing for her.

"Oh, Mimi," she whispered. "I'm so sorry to leave Papa and you alone. I didn't mean to leave you."

Hunger clawed rapaciously at her gut. The insatiable emptiness lashed at her. She heard her grandparents' low murmurs in the living room, her grandmother weeping, grieving for her. Her body jerked. She turned her head toward the door. Her fangs filled her mouth, sharp, lethal. The rush of her grandparents' warm blood pounded hot in her ears. Tempting.

Sorina licked her lips and started to rise from the bed. No! She would not do it. They'd raised her, given her all their love, a home when she'd been orphaned. She would not repay them by killing them.

The babe in her belly stirred. It felt the same intense hunger she felt. Horror filled her mind. Perhaps if it had been Prince Valerian's heir she conceived she wouldn't mind so much. Valerian had always been kind to her. He would have remained by her side while she died, been there when she rose and needed to feed. A wry smile twisted her lips. She suspected she'd always been a little bit in love with him.

Brasov, on the other hand, had always frightened her. She'd felt his cold eyes strip her every time she visited her grandfather at Radu Castle. The last two years, she'd stopped going there.

It hadn't halted Brasov's seduction. If anything, it had made him

more determined to have her. Over the last few weeks, he'd come to her, slipped inside her bedroom, a mist of nearly invisible particles. He'd touched her, stroked her, fed from her, but he'd always left without sexing her...until last night.

Now, he'd taken her as his First Bride and left this, this *thing* growing inside her. If only he hadn't lied to her. If only he hadn't killed Stephan. Stephan. Brasov had destroyed the only man she felt she could have loved and married.

For that cruelty, she'd annihilate what Brasov most wanted. Reaching for the clear water glass standing on her bedside table, Sorina sat back down on the side of the bed and held the glass. She stared at it for the longest time. Inhaling deeply, she slowly exhaled and gently tapped it against the nightstand. The jagged piece of glass that fell into her hand was exactly what she needed.

Sorina felt nothing as she slid it across both her wrists.

She waited and waited and watched the ribbons of dark scarlet drip onto the floor until she was dizzy, weak and fatally drained. Drawing a slow, final breath, she fell back against the pillow and closed her eyes. Death was kind. He came for her on swift wings.

Chapter Twenty-One

The walls of my castle are cracked, the shadows are many. But come in. Feel yourself at home.

*~Carlos Villarias
(Spanish film version of Dracula)*

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

“The bastard did it to me again! Worse, he made me like it. Worse than worse, he not only fed from me too many times to count, he stole my virginity!” Shasta tossed the grappling hook and rope over the castle wall and anchored it in place.

Furious, she pushed dark sunglasses back up the bridge of her nose. Even wearing long sleeves, her skin itched. Her eyes hurt and watered, and for Pete’s sake, the sun was on its way down. Two hours at the most before it set and she felt like she was going to self-combust.

“Pinky tried to warn Missy to stay away from hunky vampire. Pinky knew velly well fangy creature wanted most to hump Missy. Vampire males, they like to sex females. They one single-minded to leave little fangy baby in female, and him has welded you to him. Vampire not think of it as stealing from you, think only to claim what is his.”

“I am not his, Pinky!”

“Pinky think Missy wrong, velly wrong ‘bout that. Missy velly much

belong to vampire. Pinky see many bites on Missy, think you like it, and vampire for sure like you. Too many bites to count. Him be velly excited. Him sex you yummy good. Yes, Pinky think Missy like it velly much, too."

"I did not! I feel like a freakin' pincushion. If I don't kill him today, he's coming back tonight to...to..."

"Pinky know. Hunky vampire gonna put him little fangy baby in you belly. You already told Pinky this. *Gag. Gag.*"

"Yes, he is. He plans on putting more than his fangy baby in me tonight."

Pinky snickered. "Why Missy so upset? Missy have mind block, can prevent conception of bat baby. Besides, hunky vampire already had him wicked way with you. From marks on Missy's body, Pinky think vampire desire Missy even if you not have him fangy baby. What wrong with vampire true love? Why Missy velly upset?"

"Because! Whatever he did to me, it's changed the way I feel. I don't feel my Were change coming on anymore. There was a full moon last night. I didn't transform. He murdered that part of me, and I won't forgive him for it. I will not bear him a son!"

"Vampire lover probably did it for Missy's safety. Him not want you loping through woods on all fours, howling at moon. Missy might get killed by wolf hunter. Who knows?"

"He had no right to alter me. I will never absolve him for subduing the Were in me."

"No need Missy be velly upset. Hunky vampire likely kill all of you 'fore this all done and over."

"Missy *is* velly upset! His possession of me, his blood, he's changed me to suit him. I don't feel well, Pinky. I feel sick to my stomach. I can't eat. I can't drink. The very thought of eating or drinking anything curls my guts into knots. I want to go home. I want to go home to my brothers. The vampire—he-he has taken away my ability to leave the mortal realm. He won't let me go. He says I will never again go home or feel my Were ancestry or be able to change into a wolf."

"Ah, Pinky understand now, but not understand why this so upset you. Who want to change into shaggy, seven-foot, snarling, slobbering beast anyway?"

"I do! I did. He thinks he can boss me around. He thought just because he commanded me to sleep the day away, I'd do it again. It didn't work this time, Pinky."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." Shasta bit her lip and started up the side of the castle wall. "This was a lot easier the way Valerian did it last night," she huffed. "I don't know what's different about me, Pinky. Like I said, something has changed inside me. I feel like I'm going to upchuck everywhere."

"Why Missy feel sick to stomach? Missy velly sure she not already catch vampire's fertile seed and conceive little fangy baby?"

Shasta's eyes widened. "He said my body rejected his seed. I didn't conceive. I think I'm sick because I'm more witch now, but a freakin' witch without powers."

"*Squee!* Slow down! Pinky not feel safe in backpack. Want out! *Scared. Scared.*"

"Hang on tight. You'll be fine. Ready?"

"Not ready! *Squee!* Pinky gonna barf, and Pinky gonna do it right on Missy's back."

Shasta ignored the *Futhar's* protests and rappelled up the side of the crumbling wall. Her grip slipped once, and she skidded back down.

"*Squee!* Missy gonna smash little Pinky, velly sure of this. Missy gonna squish Pinky if she fall and land on top of him. Pinky be nothing but little pink puddle of piggy fat. Wanna escape, now!"

"If you don't stop making so much noise, you'll wake the undead's dead beating heart." Shasta made it up the outer wall and straddled the parapet. Ooh, that was not comfortable at all. The tenderness between her legs reminded her she'd had a romping, rowdy night of wild sex.

Oh, yes, Valerian had kept his promise. He'd sexed her thoroughly, and as Pinky said, she'd loved every minute of it. Her womb clenched with the memory of his delicious thrusts inside her. Shasta swore the spasms shot clear to the tips of her toes inside her fleece-lined boots. Gods, she couldn't possibly want the sexy vampire again. Could she? Dammit, he'd done something to make her crave him, the sadistic fiend!

That wasn't fair. Shasta sighed. Valerian wasn't sadistic. He was hot. He knew how to make a female feel special. How could she possibly resist wanting him?

She stared at the ground. The courtyard lay several feet below. "The grounds are so vast."

"Humph. Castle much vaster. You never gonna find vampire's secret lair."

"Yes, I will. He took me to it last night."

"Then Missy know exactly where vampire sleeps?"

"No. I-I don't remember much of anything except..."

Pinky perked up. "Except what?"

"Except...pleasure."

"Ahh, Pinky knew Missy like getting sexed by undead vampire. Him velly hot vamp. Pinky bet hunky vamp know zackly how to use him cock, show Missy velly good time."

Shasta held up a hand and shook her head. "No more, Pinky. I have to think about what Valerian did to me."

"Uh-huh. Pinky think Missy just wanna savor the memory of hunky vamp doing the *Wanga-Wanga* to her."

"*Wanga-Wanga?*"

"Uh-huh. Missy know that velly big thing hunky vamp stick in her and go in...out...in...out...sometime fast, in and out, sometime vel...ly slow, in and out. And Missy say, Oooh, ahh, ohh, mmm, yes, more, hunky vamp! Pinky know Missy like *Wanga-Wanga*. Can see it in Missy's eyes. Missy might walk velly slow this evening and moan a little, but Pinky think hunky vampire give you plenty big velly much love, and Missy velly much satisfied."

"He *made* me like it! He-he put something in my drink, or maybe he didn't. He said he didn't, but I felt as if I was flying after I drank it."

"Oh, sure. Pinky certain hunky vamp give you his blood to drink. It help make you hot for him, make it easy for him to give you big love cock so Missy say, Oooh, ahh..."

"All right, Pinky! I did not say, Oooh, ahh..."

"Pinky think different. Pinky see you have much satisfaction on face this evening. You like what vamp do to you velly okay."

"Does a vampire's blood have that kind of power?"

"Vampire ancient as Valerian, Pinky think yes, maybe him blood would make Missy feel velly strange, velly compliant and velly willing to do *Wanga-Wanga*, but only cause Missy already wanna bouncy-bouncy."

"That's another thing. He's old, Pinky. I mean, well, he doesn't look old, but he has to be hundreds of years older than I am."

"Pinky think that just make undead vampire velly better lover for Missy. If Missy let him, vamp take velly good care of her forever."

"I swear, Pinky, I think you're on his side."

"Pinky on Pinky's side, but don't think vampire so bad he deserve

you kill him while he sleep. He welded you to him before he ever stick him cock in you. He not have to weld you first. Hunky vamp, he want you to love him, be happy with him."

"Don't take up for him. I will never love him. He stole my virginity."

"Him not think of it as steal. Him think of it his right as your welded mate to sex you good, and that mean him have right to virgin body sacrifice."

Shasta tossed her head and sniffed. "Well, the happy couple is about to be unwelded. It isn't as if I didn't warn him. Now then, we can eliminate everything above ground and go below. He'll need to be where no sunlight can penetrate."

"Undead first came to you at daybreak. Him took velly big risk of burning to weld with you. Missy sure she wanna kill vampire who care for you so much he willing to die for you? Missy must own undead's heart."

"Ha! How much good is an undead's dead beating heart gonna do me?"

"Pinky think you regret for all lifetime you drive stake through undead vampire's heart."

"I don't want to hear it, Pinky. I can't be the mate of a vampire. I'm a Were, and Weres hate vampires. It's a given. And I tell you, I especially do not like Valerian Radu. He let Koran hold Kali prisoner here. Even now she's probably inside, chained in a dungeon somewhere, though he did tell me they've returned to Ru-Noc. I don't trust him. I'm looking for her." Her brows furrowed. "I just might stake Koran, too, if I see him. And gods, Pinky, Valerian did nothing to help those poor human women while the other vampires did something awful to them."

"What velly awful thing they do to weak human females who have no business messing with vamps in first place?"

"I don't know, but they screamed and screamed. It had to be bad."

"Missy be velly overly dramatic."

"Huh. Well just remember to put a button on your snout and keep quiet."

Shasta rappelled over the side and landed smoothly on her feet. She raced across the grounds, paused long enough to pick the lock on the huge wooden door, and pushed it open. "Now then, I knew he didn't think to place barriers above the castle. We're in, Pinky. We're in."

Pinky shuddered and climbed out of the backpack. "Much as Pinky

hate backpack, velly much prefer it to inside of creepy castle. Pinky not wanna be inside vampire's home. It old and velly spooky. It dark in here, too. Look, cobwebs in every corner. Spiders, too."

"It's not dark, just gloomy. Here." Shasta yanked open a set of drapes and let in the late evening light. "There, that's better. I don't see any spiders."

"Not better. Now Pinky know just how close to time for sun to set. We gonna die for sure. Pinky know he saw velly many mad spiders. They velly cowards, go hide. Pinky wanna hide, too. *Scared. Scared.*"

"Come on, Pinky. I see some stairs over there leading down. They must go to the cellar."

They wound their way down the crumbling stairs. Shasta froze when they reached bottom. "Oh. Oh, my goodness."

"Oh goodness, velly right. This not velly good cellar. Where wine?"

"You're right. It isn't a cellar at all."

"Gag. Gag. This old, velly old crypt. Ancient bones on slabs. Oooh, Pinky wanna go now! *Now. Now.*"

"Shh. Be quiet! Look, there's more stairs to the right. Let's go."

"*Scared. Scared.*"

"I'm not scared."

"That 'cause Missy not velly smart enough to have brain to be frightened."

Shasta ignored the pig's words and took off for the second set of stairs. "Oooh, this is so exciting. My heart's beating fast."

"Missy best enjoy while still *have* beating heart. Pinky think velly soon, Missy have *undead* beating heart."

They entered a huge chamber lit with standing candelabras. In the center of the chamber stood a king-sized bed, and on the side of the bed Valerian lay sleeping. Oh, gods, he was as sexy and handsome as she remembered him. "Why couldn't he be gray, old and dusty-looking?"

"Pinky not understand this dusty-looking? What mean? You want vamp to look like pile of dirt?"

Shasta lowered her backpack to the stone floor and took out a stake and the mallet. "Shh. Be quiet. Don't make a sound, Pinky."

"Pinky not say a word," he whispered back. "Pinky too frightened to talk."

Shasta tiptoed closer to the bed until she was near enough to see Valerian's chest rise and fall with each breath. "Gods, he's beautiful. I don't remember him being so handsome."

"That 'cause you was too busy doing other sex things."

"Mmm, yeah." Shasta licked her suddenly dry lips, unable to take her gaze off Valerian. His dark hair fell about his wide shoulders and on the pillow. She eyed the dark wedge of jaw covered with the short bristles of evening shadow. His lashes were long and dark and lay like silken crescents below his eyes. He possessed a slender, aristocratic nose, thin upper lip, with a lower lip that was full and sensual. Those lips had taken her mouth, skimmed her body, closed around her nipples and suckled too many times to count.

Lying there without a shirt, he was pure, unadulterated sex. His chest was covered with black hair, utterly masculine. Utterly inviting. Shasta's fingers itched. She curled them around the stake and hammer to keep from reaching out and touching him.

Hell, she wanted to taste him, just as she'd tasted him last night. She wanted to touch her tongue to the flat, inviting nipples again, take her time and taste every inch of him thoroughly, trail kisses down the masculine chest, follow the path of silky hair that arched down and disappeared below the waistband of his jeans.

She knew exactly what lay below, how big his manly package was, how well he knew how to use it. Dammit, how could she feel this heat, this desire for this dead...undead vampire? What had he done to her to make her want him so?

Shasta jumped, startled when several large bats swooped from the bumpy stone ceiling and flew over Valerian's bed, squeaking a protest at being disturbed. They hovered around him, staring at her with beady red eyes, eyes that glowed with accusation before they hustled away.

Shasta bit her lower lip. She must hurry. If the bats were waking, then Valerian, too, would rise soon. She centered the stake over the sleeping vampire's heart. "This is it, Pinky. Death to the undead."

Pinky climbed upon the side of the bed and crooned, "Poor undead vamp. He just wanna love you, Missy." He shook his head. "This be velly sad day."

Shasta hesitated, staring at the ring on her left finger, a ring that no matter how hard she tried she could not remove. She drew back the hammer. "It has to be done, Pinky. I'm a Were. A Were simply cannot be wedded to a vampire."

As she swung the hammer down, Pinky quickly slapped a front hoof across his eyes. "Pinky cannot bear to look! Ooooh, Missy Shasta, you

Zabitha Shay

gonna pay velly much for killing undead's dead beating heart."

"For the gods' sake, Pinky, you aren't making this any easier."

"Not easy for Pinky, either. This gonna be velly messy. Blood. Gore. Goop. Maybe even little bit of brain. *Gag. Gag.*"

"Oh, for Samhain's sake. Will you just can it?" Shasta squeezed her eyes tightly, turned her head to the side and with all the force she could muster, slammed down the rounded head of the mallet.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Life is divided into the horrible and the miserable.

~Woody Allen

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Prince Talon quickly scanned the edge of the forest and the rocky ledge at the foot of Annu Mountain while Nyra worked at reviving his cousin, Sage. Talon rubbed a hand down his face and quickly swallowed back the unease.

Hell, just because there were no signs of demons, no hint of Black Drayke or MeLora, didn't mean they weren't lurking. He knew deep in his heart the two were involved with Zebus and mixed up in the attack on his home and family.

His nape itched. The tiny hairs there stood on end. He was uncomfortable in the wide-open space between the forest and Sanctuary. They were all vulnerable. Nyra, Hannah, Topaz, Sage and he. They might as well have a bull's-eye painted on their backs if there was even one demon hidden with a magical bow and arrow on that lower ledge below the mountain.

The demon would pick them off one by one.

Too damn quiet. Talon's nerves jittered like the ragged edges of

electrical wires. He inhaled deeply, then slowly released the lungful of air. Other than Nyra's magical chanting, his breath was the only sound, the only hint of life. The others stood there watching Nyra, not making a sound, not daring to breathe. The magical forest wasn't breathing, either. With a heavy heart, Talon wondered if it would die. Some of the poisoned arrows had struck the mighty pine trees, injuring the healthy bark, clogging the arteries with dirty magic. Their once-thick green boughs now curled and blackened. He heard their mournful wails. Maybe Nyra could heal them later.

A sense of foreboding settled around him. His stomach clenched. Talon stiffened when he heard a soft rustle and whirled to see who or what was coming up behind him from the woods. His heart jerked in his chest. His mother, Queen Helayne, walked slowly toward him, her belly heavily rounded with the child the demon, King Kallibus had planted in her through trickery. Beside Helayne, Kallibus stared at him, unapologetic, his arm possessively around Helayne's shoulders.

Nyra looked up from working on Sage. He heard her gasp. Slowly, she rose to her feet, her face wary. Talon's jaw tightened with fury. He tore his angry gaze from his mother and directed an accusing glare at Nyra. "You saved this creature?" He pointed at the demon. "How could you restore life to Kallibus after everything he's done?"

Nyra stilled. Her face looked strained. Her body trembled. Tears welled in her lovely blue eyes. Her bottom lip wobbled. "We need him, Talon. He's the lesser of two evils. I think he's a better choice for King of Ayrumus than Zebus or Black Drayke. So yes, I restored his life. Death granted his permission."

Kallibus stepped around Helayne. "I *am* King of Ayrumus, and as such, neither of you will talk around me as if I no longer exist."

Talon snorted. "An hour ago, you didn't exist. You owe thanks to Nyra for saving your ass, something I would never have condoned had I known she was going to do it."

"Yes, as I recall, you're quite fond of murdering members of my family."

Talon growled and started toward the demon king.

Helayne stepped between them. "Talon, you don't have to like Kallibus, but he is my mate and the father of this babe I carry, your half brother. You will show respect."

"Mother, I—no, I owe him nothing. Neither do you. How can you defend him?"

"I love him. I have always loved him."

"No." Talon shook his head, sickened as Kallibus slid his arm around Helayne's thickened waist and pressed a kiss to her nape.

"What about Father? Did you never care for him?"

Helayne shook her head, her eyes brimming with sadness. "Your father was a wonderful *waken*, a good mate, a great father, but he never had time for me. He was too busy running Ru-Noc. There's more you should know."

Talon knew from her tone and expression he was not going to like whatever news she had to impart. "What?"

Queen Helayne tilted her chin. "King Darak isn't Stry's father. He isn't Kali's father, either. He isn't..."

"What, Mother?" Talon felt the color drain from his face. "He isn't my father, either? Is that what you were going to say?"

"No. Darak *is* your father. Kallibus fathered Stry and Kali. I would tell you I'm sorry, but I am not, nor am I ashamed. You have a handsome brother and a beautiful sister. If your father had not come to me before Kallibus could, then you, too, would be part demon."

Talon thought he was going to throw up. He swayed. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. "No. I thank the gods who were merciful enough not to make this...this *thing* my father! Don't you realize what you've done? What is happening?"

"Shut up," Kallibus barked. "You will not say anything to upset your mother any more than she already is."

"You don't want her to hear the truth!"

"What?" Helayne asked.

"Gods, Mother. Stry is half demon. If he takes a demon female for his mate, they will breed nearly purebred demons. This is what will one day rule Ru-Noc, possibly Sanctuary."

"And you think a demon's rule is worse than an arrogant *waken* assassin whose one goal is to steal a witch's soul when she's in the throes of climax? How is that better?"

"Not every *waken* is like that, Mother."

"And not every demon is unclean and evil."

"I would see both Stry and Kali dead before I ever allowed demons to take control of my realm!"

"Talon!" Both Nyra and Helayne scolded. "Kallibus is a king and, as such, deserves your respect."

Talon spit at Kallibus' feet. "I have no respect for a demon who wants to wipe out my race by breeding half-breeds. Because of him, I have lost family. Because of him, I nearly lost my mate."

"Because of you, I *have* lost family," Kallibus interjected. "How is your loss any different than mine?"

Talon clenched his jaw.

Helayne shook her head. "Kallibus had nothing to do with the attack on your home. It was Zebus and Black Drayke's scheming."

"Kallibus is not welcome in my home, Mother. He is not welcome in Droth or in Sanctuary. Ever."

Queen Helayne nodded. "It is your right to refuse him entrance to your home, perhaps even Droth. But you have no say on who enters or leaves Sanctuary. However, you leave me no choice but to go with Kallibus to his realm, to Ayrumus."

"You would choose to go with him?"

"Yes. He is my mate."

Kallibus lifted his head. "I give you this warning, Talon. Do not harm either Stry or Kali. They are my blood. I would see you dead if you hurt them in any way. If you need me or my army, you know how to reach me."

Talon clenched his fists. "It will be a cold day in hell before I ever summon you from the dark pits in which you dwell."

Kallibus turned, his fingers gripping Helayne's upper arm. "You never know, my son, what the future holds...Hell might arrive sooner than you think."

Talon watched his mother walk away with the demon, his eyes bleak. His entire way of thinking had just taken a ninety-degree turn. His love for his brother and sister had been destroyed by horrible truths. Half demons! They were now his enemy.

Was his way of life beyond repair?

His world past saving?

He swallowed hard, suddenly wondering how many witches had been bred by demons over the passing centuries. How many of the latter generations would prefer to fight with the demons if it came down to a bloody battle between *wakens* and demons?

It was Beltane, breeding season. Even now were the witches being bred by demons or half demons, the *wakens* slowly being exterminated by the dilution of their bloodline? If so, then his realm was in much worse trouble than he'd thought.

How many purebred *wakens* were left? Were their numbers already so thin it was impossible to come back? When had his father last taken a census of purebred *wakens*? It was a question he needed an answer to immediately. First chance he got, he'd journey to the Library of History and check out the census records.

Talon watched Nyra return to chanting over Sage. Gods, he couldn't believe she'd saved Kallibus. Dammit, he didn't need the problem of having to deal with another demon. He needed Stry, yet he could no longer trust his brother.

Maybe Stry's disappearance was planned. Maybe Stry was already in Ayrumus gathering an army of demons to attack Ru-Noc, attack Sanctuary, attack the *wakens*. These days, anything was possible, and he couldn't come up with any other plausible reason for his brother's disappearance. Stry must be somewhere building an army.

He couldn't think about Stry doing something so unforgivable. He had to think about something else, clear his mind. Talon stared at the magical forest, at the damage done to the giant trees there. He wasn't sure if Nyra or any of the witches could save their beloved forest, and right now, no one had time to be concerned about the dying trees. The arrows hadn't only struck his home, but the tiny village of Sanctuary had suffered as well.

Witches and *wakens* lay injured or dying on the streets or in their homes and shops. He hadn't taken note before, but now it dawned on him that the number of *wakens* dead or dying was much higher than the witches. *Futhars* of every size, shape and animal-type imaginable were also among the injured or dying. The magic that made his world so special was damaged. It was slowly fading into the *Shadow Land* of dying magic.

The moans and cries for help ripped at his heart. Those who'd survived were either in shock or racing around to help those who could be saved. His heart clenched with pain. Tears welled in his eyes for the devastating loss of a world that had always been uniquely special. Wonderfully magical. Beautiful.

When the magic was all gone...what would be left?

The attack on his home and family had been swift and unexpected. He had a bad feeling it was only the beginning. The smell of blood and death permeated the air. It layered the ground where ribbons of dark crimson slugged along like a slow, murky river. The stench of the dead

already bloated the air. Flies buzzed. Flies glugged.

His stomach twisted into knots. Music no longer filled the air. The fairies had shut and locked their windows and sprinkled a magical seal around the giant mushrooms against further invasion of their sweet homes. Hundreds of butterflies and birds lay dead in the woods killed by the evil magic in the air.

Talon swallowed hard, but the anguish he felt in his heart didn't go away. Life on Ru-Noc, as he knew it, had withered. Sadness layered the air like a gray pall. He couldn't recall ever seeing the giant mushrooms where the gentle fairies dwelled without strings of cheerful, inviting lights welcoming the weary traveler. The soft flutter of their incandescent wings had stilled with their enclosure inside their homes.

Nausea bubbled, ugly and clawing at his gut. Everything was changing. His world. His life. His home. His family. Everything he held dear no longer existed, except for his mate, and because of Nyra's special magic, his sons were alive. He was alive, and once again, he could hold Saylym in his arms and love his tiny sons with everything left inside him.

But how would they all cope with the suddenness of such an overwhelming, life-altering change as watching their world crumble away? Watch it be destroyed by the greed and evil of others?

His father was gone, murdered by MeLora and Zebus. He'd buried Uncle Teek and Papa Saul a few hours ago. Eldora, Topaz, and Hannah stood at the gravesites beside him, silent and stoic. The *Futhars*, he'd loved each one of them, and now some were gone. Banjo and his litter of mits – Rune and Maxine and her two daughters.

Dinka's babies were all dead, except for the youngest, the runt, little Ornate. Dinka had grieved over the loss of her babies, but her hysteria had calmed some when she found Ornate, her baby girl, hiding under a rock near the stream by the millhouse. Still, Dinka had dressed all in green and gone into mourning.

Topaz was shattered. He didn't know if the once-feisty tom would recover from the loss of Maxine and their daughters.

Saylym hadn't been able to stand by his side or Topaz's while they mourned the loss of the members of their families. Talon inhaled and slowly exhaled. All he wanted to do now was go home, pull Saylym close to his side and love her. He couldn't bear it if something happened to her or their sons. Not knowing where Stry was or what had happened to him left Sage as the only male relative he had left.

And Sage lay in critical condition upon the ground where Nyra chanted desperately to give him life.

Talon sighed and bowed his head. His dark hair shrouded his face. He stood to one side and watched Nyra slowly remove the arrows from Sage's chest while she whispered a mantra of magic to defy Death.

Hannah waited beside him, her lips moving in a silent chant. "Can you save him, Nyra?" she asked. "Please, save him."

Nyra mumbled words and pointed her hands toward Sage's injuries. Brilliant, star-shaped lights shot from her fingertips and straight into Sage. His body jerked. Sparkles of white light circled around and around Sage's body, then dove inside his chest. In seconds, the dazzling lights shot out and vanished.

Sage gasped, a hoarse groan; then his chest filled with air as he drew in a long, deep breath. He exhaled, his chest slowly falling. Opening his eyes, he looked around. "Wha-what happened?"

Hannah laughed, a faint, tearful sound. "This is getting to be a habit, you know, your life restored by magic."

Sage blinked. "Can't say I'm much fond of it either. The last thing I remember is...oh, *sheehta!*"

Talon helped him to his feet. "Lean on me, cousin."

Sage nodded. "Much as I hate to confess weakness, I'm afraid I must lean on you. My legs feel like straw. Your mother, the queen?"

"She'll be all right. She left with Kallibus."

Sage swallowed hard. "I heard her say..."

"She told me Kallibus fathered Stry and Kali." Talon's shoulders tensed. His guts tightened into a knot. "Sage." His voice wobbled. Relief swamped him. He swallowed past the dryness in his throat. Sage was more like a younger brother to him than a cousin. "Sage," he said again, unable to clear the lump in his throat. He hugged the *waken* and blinked back tears. "I'm glad to see you...breathing. You had me worried there for a while."

Talon didn't tell Sage or Hannah what Nyra had told him. Sage's heart hadn't fully healed from when MeLora blasted him with a fireball in an earlier battle for Sanctuary. When the arrows penetrated his heart, the extreme heat from them had boiled Sage's insides, turning his heart to mush.

Nyra hadn't been sure she could save Sage. She'd used the last sparks of the magic she possessed to give Sage back his life. Talon watched her

rise unsteadily to her feet and stagger towards the forest. "Nyra, wait, I'll help you."

She didn't look back, but continued toward the forest, bent over like a frail old lady. Topaz stepped past Talon. "I'll go with her, boss. She needs time to pray to the Goddess of Life, time to rejuvenate her powers."

Talon nodded. "Take care of her."

Topaz nodded. "You know I will. She's our hope. Our strength. If we're going to survive this, we need her."

"Survive what?"

"What's coming, Boss." Topaz turned and headed to the woods behind Nyra.

"Nyra saved us," Hannah said, supporting Sage on the opposite side from Talon. "The ones of us she could. She's exhausted."

Sage moaned and reached for Hannah's hand. "Are you okay? Were you injured? Our son? Does he still lie within you?"

Hannah nodded and sniffed. "Our son is well. Only a single arrow struck me. Nyra healed the wound. But you, your wounds were so serious."

"Don't worry so, sweetheart. You'll upset the baby."

Hannah gave a watery laugh. "I'm afraid that warning's a bit late, and I swear, Sage, if you die on me once more, I'm going to kill you myself. Dammit, I hate not being able to cry anymore."

Sage snorted. "Ouch. Be kind and don't make me laugh."

Talon steadied him. "Easy. You're weak as a mewling kitten."

"Can you help Hannah and me to our home?"

Talon held tight to Sage. "No. Sanctuary's a mess. Total chaos. Dead lying on the streets. We lost dozens of *wakens*. The demons picked a perfect time to attack, knowing a lot of the young males would be within the walls of Sanctuary looking to mate. Please, you and Hannah must stay with us. We have plenty of room now that..."

His words trailed away, and Talon struggled against the pain of so much loss. Samhain, he had to tell Sage. "Sage, your father, Uncle Teek, he didn't...I'm sorry," he finished huskily.

Sage's knees buckled, and he nearly went to the ground. Talon took the brunt of his cousin's weight. When Sage looked up, his lilac-colored eyes looked like bruised violets. He swallowed. Hard. His breath rasped in his chest. "I know Nyra did everything she could to save as many as she could. I'll be all right. I need some time...you understand...to

grieve...I..."

"As long as you need," Talon said.

Talon swallowed back his grief, but the rage whipped his heart, leaving him feeling as if he'd been beaten with the *Char-Flum-Rope*.

Sage nodded. Talon realized he didn't have to say he had the extra room for Sage and Hannah now that Teek and Papa Saul, Talon's grandfather, were lost to them forever.

Instead, he cleared his throat and said, "I know Saylym loves Hannah's company. She's had a rough time, as we all have. Eldora can use an extra pair of hands taking care of the babies until Saylym is able."

Hannah nodded. "Oooh, I'd love to help with them. I can't wait to cuddle those precious boys." She rubbed the small mound of her belly. "Besides, I need the practice."

At last, they stepped up on the front porch of the millhouse and entered the main room. Talon and Sage watched Hannah hurry to Saylym's bedchamber and open and close the door behind her. Sage sighed. "This task of taking care of a mate isn't easy. Is it? I can't believe, with all the hell that's raining down on us, I'm going to be a father and you're a new father. It's scary. Aren't you nervous?"

Talon grinned. "I'm scared spitless. I'm terrified of doing something wrong that will cause me to lose Saylym."

"Gods, Talon, I know exactly what you mean. I love Hannah so much it's downright scary. If anything were to happen to her and our baby, I wouldn't want to live any longer. She owns my heart." He scowled. "What parts of it I have left."

Talon laughed. The sound startled him and he sobered instantly. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even smiled, let alone laugh. "You're a good mate to her, Sage, and Hannah adores you, too. You're both strong and smart. You'll be okay. She was sick with worry when Nyra took off out of here to save you. I couldn't get her to agree to wait here, but in her condition, I didn't think she needed to see the shape you were in."

"Bad, huh?"

"Arrows sticking out of your heart? Blood everywhere? You not breathing? Yeah, it was bad, but she handled it. I know you and Hannah want to be in your own home, but it isn't safe to be alone. Hell, it isn't safe in a crowd, but I've added a basement with thick walls and a barrier of magic."

Zabitha Shay

"Sounds much safer than the apartment over the bakery in Sanctuary."

Talon nodded grimly. "At least there won't be any more hexed arrows penetrating the walls and roof of my home. That bastard Zebus, I don't think he's finished with us yet."

"I agree. Zebus isn't done with us. Neither is Black Drayke or MeLora. I want Hannah in a safe place. If it means staying here until this is over, then we'll stay here."

"Good. Zebus won't catch us off guard a second time."

Talon froze as Hannah slung open the bedroom door and ran out yelling, "Oh, gods, Talon, they took her! Zebus took Saylym, and I-I think Eldora's dead."

Chapter Twenty-Three

We must survive, all of us. Blood for me: a cooked bird for you. What is the difference?

*~The Count
(BBC production of Count Dracula)*

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Shasta halted her powerful swing in midair and lowered the hammer and stake to her sides.

Dammit!

She couldn't kill Valerian.

Could she?

She had to.

Didn't she?

There was no choice, not if she wanted her freedom.

She glanced around the semi-dark underground chamber, she hoped for the last time. A silver pole with a wheel of candles on the top of it stood near the bed.

Valerian had so nicely left the candles burning in their holders atop the iron wheel. The bit of light added warmth and a certain inviting charm to his place of rest. Shasta didn't remember anything about the chamber, except for the big king-sized bed and the soft comforter with

the red and black stripes on which Valerian now slumbered.

Tons of assorted shaped pillows looked inviting against the stout black wrought iron head and footboard. The iron within it was twisted into a complex pattern of curlicues.

It was a masculine room, a manly bed, one he'd spent hours sexing her on, hours using silken bonds to tie her wrists to the wrought iron headboard while he invented the most fabulous ways to satisfy her. Pleasurable or not, he'd never once asked if he could sex her. He took her as if it was his right, and that simply pissed her off.

Welcoming or not, the flickering shadows that danced on the stone walls gave her the creeps. Shasta drew a deep breath and marked in her mind her avenue of escape. One couldn't be too careful when dealing with sex-crazed vampires. They were cunning creatures, always invading a person's room, snacking on her thighs. Ha! Snacking *between* her thighs! No more midnight treats for Mr. Fang-Tooth and his incredible, hot tongue.

The fat bats flying around the chamber hovered over Valerian as if trying to guard him. They were creepier than the vampire. The damn things made her nervous. She wished she had a bat-zapper. She'd singe their little wings and send them on their way to bat heaven.

What if they are really vampires? In disguise? Shrunken vampires? Downsized to fool the unsuspecting?

Shit! She suddenly remembered the ugly-ass bat Brasov had materialized into. There had been nothing downsized about him. Yeah, but these could still be vampire bats, the real thing. "Go away! Shoo!" She waved a hand in the air, nearly cracking her head with the hammer, but managed to scatter the squeaky, annoying creatures. "Don't watch, Pinky," she whispered. "I'm going to do this, and it's going to be gross."

"Pinky not watching. Pinky got eyes velly much covered with hoof. No wanna see poor vampire who worship you die. Pinky just want Missy to velly much finish here and stop hesitating. Get job done so we escape!"

"He doesn't worship me. He...um, just wants my blood. He wants a feast spread before him, a banquet."

"Same thing, I think. From bites up high on inside Missy's thigh, Pinky think vampire want more than Missy's blood. Pinky think vampire want to do lots of snacking on Missy's thigh, maybe snack on other places, too."

"Huh-uh. I'm not some vamp's version of a gourmet dinner. This is it.

Don't look." Shasta placed the tip of the stake over Valerian's heart and raised the hammer for the third time. She turned her face away from Valerian's hunky-looking chest, squeezed her eyes tight and swung the mallet with all her might.

Pain shot up her arm from the vibration of the hammer striking Val's chest. She heard the crunch of breaking bone, felt his chest cave in. *Eeeew!* Gods, she hadn't expected it to be so audible.

"Ahhhhhh!"

Shasta jumped at Valerian's agonized roar. *More* audio. Loud audio. Cursing audio. She hadn't expected *that* either. She simply thought he'd die peacefully without muss or fuss, flicker out like a snuffed-out candle flame. Of course, she hadn't expected to miss the stake, either.

Her eyes popped open. *"Shymeta!* I didn't kill him, Pinky. Oh, shit. Oh, shit! He isn't dead. I hit him instead of the stake. I hammered his chest. How could I miss the damn stake?"

"Maybe cause Missy not velly much look?"

Slowly, Shasta drew a deep breath. Everything inside her screamed, *Run*. But she couldn't move. Her feet were stuck to the floor as if they were glued there. She forced herself to look at the sleeping vampire who no longer slept, but glared at her with merciless eyes, eyes that glowed red-hot and unfocused.

Idiot!

I missed the stake!

How could I miss?

How did I miss?

She'd been aiming straight at it. But the head of the hammer had struck Valerian dead center on his breastbone and was now lodged inside the cavity she'd made there. Already, a huge purple bruise fanned across his chest in a fine spider's web pattern.

"Crap! Run, Pinky, run. Run! I think he-he might...Shit, run, before he fully awakens and kills us."

"Squee! Pinky not wanna die!" Pinky bailed off the bed, hit the floor running. Four little black hoofs slapped the stone, *tap-tap-tap*. He flew across the floor like he wore motorized skates.

In his rush to escape, Pinky plowed headfirst into the rock wall. He dropped like a bag of wet sand, skidded back on his rump several feet and came to a sudden halt. He rubbed his head and groaned. *"Oooh, Pinky not feel so velly well."*

Shasta stared in amazement as the little pig uttered a faint *oink* and

keeled over, out cold. "Oh, shit, Pinky. What have you done to yourself?"

She didn't have time to check the *Futhar*. The roar behind her was enough to send shivers careening from her nape to her heels and back again. Shasta dropped the stake as she skidded toward Pinky's little, pudgy body.

"Come to me," Valerian roared.

Oh no. She tried not to move, tried to stop herself from turning and moving back to the deadly vampire as he commanded. No dice. He spouted orders. She obeyed like a brainless idiot with no willpower.

She glanced down, her heart pounding. What was this shit?

She was gliding?

No, *floating* toward him?

Like I am one of the freakin' undead!

She laid a hand across her runaway heart. Nope. It still beat, well actually, it was plain spastic. It thumped madly. It wasn't undead...yet.

Shasta looked at her feet. Yikes!

Her heart might not be undead, but her freakin' feet sure were. *Yes!* Oh, gods, her feet were really off the floor at least by four inches. She was...Samhain! She was suspended in the air, floating straight toward Valerian. Idiot! She was such a spineless noodle!

Her arms flopped, legs twitched. She was sure her eyes were bulging right out of their sockets. Gods, she probably looked worse than a pasty-face corpse who'd just become the newest member of the undead. She didn't have the ugly-ass fangs like Valerian, who waited, extremely pissed off, to drain her of her blood.

She blinked. Gods, she didn't know a vampire could make someone hover in the air like this. She didn't know a vampire could sit straight up, body stiff as if rigor had set in, a friggin' claw hammer handle poking out of his chest cavity and blood dripping like a red river down his chest and all the while, he stared at her unblinking.

Eeeew! He looked worse than the zombies from *Night of the Living Dead*.

Shasta moaned, then blinked. Oh, crap! She didn't know their fangs could burst instantly through their gums, long, sharp, lethal weapons. And my, oh my, she had no idea their eyes burned hot as a furnace, blood-red, or looked right through you as if you no longer existed.

Instead of simply watching movies like *Night of the Living Dead* in class at the academy, why hadn't she studied harder, learned more about

her intended victims? If she ended up undead, Creed would kill her. Again. Then Ransom and Bane would have a go at her. She'd be zombie sushi.

Valerian halted her right beside the bed, right where her feet had previously been glued to the floor. He motioned with his hand, a brief movement in a downward sweep. Her feet settled on the stone floor with a soft thump. Her legs wobbled. She'd look like an utter fool if she dropped like a stone.

Shasta stiffened her spine and silently ordered her legs not to fail her, but oh, gods, she was in serious *shymeta* here. Why, oh why, did she awaken a bloodthirsty monster? An *injured*, bloodthirsty monster who knew she'd tried to murder him in his sleep and now wanted revenge?

Yeah, total insane death wish.

A harsh rumble rose from deep within Valerian's throat. Shasta swallowed a scream, but couldn't prevent a tiny peep from escaping. She swore she sounded like the freakin' bats squeaking overhead.

He snapped ivory fangs that literally gleamed with dagger sharpness. Then he jerked the hammer from the newly rounded cavity in his chest and flung it across the room hard enough that the claws lodged in the stone.

Her eyes widened. Holy shit! That was one powerful throw. Shasta drew a sharp breath, watched him rub his hand over the hole, heard a sucking sound, then saw the jagged edges draw together and seal. In seconds, there was nothing but a big ugly, bruise in the center of his chest, and it was quickly fading. With fingers that had suddenly lengthened and now sprouted long, ugly-ass, cyanotic-shaded nails, he curled them around her neck and squeezed.

Crap! She couldn't swallow spit!

And breathing?

Breathing would be nice.

This wasn't the Valerian she'd met in the tavern the night before.

This wasn't the vampire who'd taken her to his bed, *taken* her.

This was not the handsome prince females yearned to sex them.

This was a...a freakin' vampire, one who was totally enraged!

She winced. His left hand, the one wrapped around her throat and squeezing the air from her, dripped with dark blood. His blood. Gods, she'd knocked a hole in his chest with the hammer. She hadn't realized his blood had poured from him like a flooded river. She hadn't had the

courage to eye the monstrous cavity when she made it. It had to have hurt like hell.

She hadn't meant to be cruel.

Oh, dear, no.

She'd only meant to kill him, not make him suffer.

Her one great desire at the moment, however, was to flee.

Instead, Shasta stood there, frozen. She felt those dangerous claws dig into the flesh at the side of her neck. Her breath caught. She heard terrible wheezes and realized they were coming from her. Horrible, ugly fingers tightened around her throat. Tighter. Obviously, he wasn't about to let her run. Or breathe.

Venom filled his freaky red eyes. This creature hated her! She hardly blamed him. She'd hurt him. Damn. Why couldn't he have just died...peacefully?

"Where's the stake?" His voice rumbled like that of an angry beast.

"Fl-flo-floor." She squeaked out the single word and cringed. Shasta slanted her gaze toward the floor. "Th-there." Then the stake wasn't there. It rose in the air and shot straight toward Valerian. He caught it single-handed, clenched it hard enough it snapped. He squeezed the two halves until they crumbled into splinters. Then he eyed her with that fierce crimson gaze. At least she could breathe a little since he'd had to let go to catch the hammer.

"Don't-don't hurt-ma-me!"

He hissed, a long, slow sizzling sound, the only hint of forewarning she had before he tossed the fragmented pieces of wood aside and dragged her onto the bed.

For a moment, time slowed to a crawl. She lay sprawled inelegantly on top of him. Oh, gods, it wasn't just his shoulders, chest and abs that were rock hard. His cock was hard as the stake he'd splintered, and felt twice as thick and round and long and...By the gods, how was he going to kill her? Death by sex? From the feel of his arousal, yeah, he just might fuck her to death.

There was nothing gentle about the way he flung her off him. He was strong enough to send her flying across the bed and crashing into the rock wall as if she weighed next to nothing. But he didn't. He simply tossed her to the other side of the bed.

Okay. So maybe he wasn't going to screw her to death. Maybe he was just going to drain her of every last drop of her blood and be done with it.

Shasta gasped and shoved her hair out of her eyes. He pounced. In a heartbeat he was astraddle of her, his long, vampirish fingers wrapped around her throat. Again. Wickedly sharp nails bit into her tender flesh. What? Did he have some kind of choking fetish going on here?

Shasta's breath lodged in her chest. The whistling wheezes escaping her told her she was sucking in very little air. Ha! As if her aching lungs didn't know that already. They were back to square one.

She pushed against his chest, fought to break away from his iron hold, but trying to get free was useless. He locked both her wrists in one powerful grasp. She closed her eyes and waited. Death was a certainty.

"Open your eyes," he snarled. "I know you aren't cowardly. By the gods, you're going to see what's coming at you. That's better than I got."

Her eyes popped open. Slowly, he lowered his head. His lips parted, sharp fangs extended, until they looked more deadly than anything she'd ever witnessed.

His eyes blazed with fury. "Don't hurt you? You'll wish you were never born!"

Teeth tore into her tender flesh, ripped into soft tissue, sank deep.

Oh, gods, I'm going to die!

She deserved his anger, deserved punishment for hurting him. This entire fiasco was her fault. If she had to forfeit her life to make up for what she'd done to him, then she couldn't very well deny she had it coming.

Why hadn't she listened to her brothers and remained at the academy?

Shit, did he have to change sides?

Gods, I'll look simply dreadful at my funeral with both sides of my throat torn out.

Tears welled and slipped to the corners of her eyes. Really. She didn't want to look like a half-eaten corpse at her funeral. That would be just so yucky.

Death by vampire.

Nope. She wasn't going to be a pretty sight.

But hey, this wasn't so bad. In fact, she felt sort of all warm and woozy. Oh, yummy. Was she really floating on a cloud? Drifting away. Drifting...away. Dizziness washed over her. *Ba-dum-ba-dum-ba-dum*. Her heart raced. Then it slowed to a crawl. *Ba...dum...ba...dum*. Slowed. Slowed. Gods, her chest weighed a ton, as if something heavy sat upon it. No air. No air. She gasped, wheezed, desperate for one tiny single

breath. Then the wheezing stopped. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't breathe. *Couldn't...breathe.*

Shasta closed her eyes and drifted into the cottony peace closing around her. No. This really wasn't so bad. Silently, she prayed to her gods. *Let it be over quickly. Let him get his fill and end it soon.*

Chapter Twenty-Four

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world: indeed it's the only thing that ever has!

~Margaret Meade

*Romania
Village Pyre
Outside Vlad Salt Mine
Mortal Realm*

She's dead!

Brasov paced back and forth, furious at the announcement from Apostol that Sorina, Brasov's pregnant First Bride, had committed suicide rather than remain his Bride and give birth to his son.

Sorina had slashed both her wrists and invoked a spell to prevent the wounds from sealing. She'd bled out, taking not only her life, but his son's. Brasov, unable to contain his fury, lashed out at Apostol. He backhanded the *Changeling*, splitting his lower lip. Inky, dark blood dripped from the *Changeling's* nose and splattered the salty ground.

Apostol growled, clenched his fists, but made no move toward Brasov. Good! The fucker knew his place. He knew who was master, who was slave. Brasov returned to pacing. "If she wasn't already dead, I'd kill the bitch," he ranted.

He didn't really mourn the loss of Sorina. Like the female *Changeling* chained in the corner in his chamber, Sorina had been a good fuck. But

she was hardly exciting. She didn't fire his blood. Not the way Princess Kali had. Sorina would have eventually ended up as nothing but food for him, just like the other *Changelings*. He couldn't care less she was dead. The thing that mattered was the fact she'd conceived his heir then killed him.

"How dare she destroy my son?"

How dare she love another?

How could she leave him that mewling note telling him in detail how much she despised him, detested his touch, despised the *thing* growing inside her and hated him for killing Stephan? Her love for the village man could not be destroyed simply because he demanded it.

Brasov crumpled the paper in his hands. The stupid bitch hadn't taken the time to learn he hadn't killed Stephan, because he hadn't been able to locate him to kill him. No one in the village knew Stephan. He turned and glared at the *Changeling*. "Who is Stephan?"

The *Changeling's* eyes rounded. *Stephan? Is he from the village?*

"Of course he's from the village, you idiot," Brasov roared. "Find him. Bring him to me."

Yes, Master.

"Bring the whip and come with me," he snapped.

Yes, Master.

Furious, Brasov marched to his chamber and stopped in front of the female *Changeling* he held prisoner. He drew back and punched Ameer in the face. Inflicting pain helped relieve his frustrations.

At the sight of blood flowing freely from her mouth, his fury escalated. He grabbed the whip from Apostol's hands, and when he finally stopped to draw a breath, Ameer lay upon the stone floor writhing, her back a bloody mass of raw meat.

Brasov spun around to face Apostol, who stood there, a blank look in his empty eyes. "Did you say something?"

Apostol's eyes narrowed. *I said don't hit her again.*

You dare to give me an order?

If you kill her, then we'll have to find food elsewhere. The villagers are already up in arms over Sorina's death. Her grandparents are accusing you of being responsible. Do you want more trouble?

Brasov frowned. *No. I have enough problems with the Ancients at Radu Castle.*

That's what I thought.

Brasov curled his upper lip. "Get her out of here. She stinks like the

dead!"

What should I do with her?

Brasov swore softly. Mind communication was the only way Apostol spoke to him since the *Changeling's* tongue had long since decayed. He detested the *Changeling*, but he obeyed his every command without question.

"You think I care? You can have her. Fuck her, feed from her, then toss her stinking carcass over the cliffs come dawn. Let the sun cook her. Then there will be nothing left but ashes for any nosy villager who's inclined to be curious about another female's strange disappearance. Do what you will. She's no longer of any use to me."

With your permission, I will keep her...for a while. I have needs.

Amee whimpered as the beast of a vampire lifted her from the floor and slung her over his shoulder.

Brasov glided over to Apostol and dug his claws into her hair. He lifted Amees head and spit in her face. "You stink of death and filth. You're unclean."

"And you're a monster," she choked out in a feeble whisper. "At least I still have a heart. It might be dead, but it's not frozen or filled with spiteful revenge."

Brasov jerked, shocked she could still speak and dared to belittle him. Rarely did a *Changeling* have the ability to speak once turned.

Apostol turned to leave, packing Amees like a bag of salt over his shoulder.

"Wait. Wait, wait. Stand her on her feet."

Apostol turned and slid Amees off his shoulder. He slid his arms beneath her breasts and steadied her. The position was very intimate. Very possessive. Brasov scowled. "Have you been fucking this *Changeling*?"

Apostol's head jerked. His eyes burned. *No, Master.*

Brasov carefully slid his hands over her belly, paused and closed his eyes. He drew a ragged breath. *By the gods, she carries a babe.*

Your heir?

I don't know.

Brasov dragged Amees close. "Since you've been chained here, have any of the other vampires fucked you?"

"Yes. Dozens of them!" Amees returned the favor he'd earlier done to her and spat in his face.

Brasov tangled his fingers in her long, stringy hair and yanked her

out of Apostol's hold. "Do not lie to me, bitch. I'll slit your throat and leave you to bleed out. Have any of the *Changelings* fucked you?"

Amee glanced at Apostol as if seeking an answer.

"Don't look at him, bitch, look at me, and tell me true. Has anyone fucked you besides me?"

She shook her head. "No. None. Only you."

It is your heir, my Master?

"Of course it's my heir, you simpleton. I will not contemplate she carries a girl child or the seed of another. Clean her up. Make her presentable. Feed her. She needs nourishment. Then bring her to me. I will bind her to me as a First Bride."

No. You gave her to me. I want to fuck her.

Brasov reared back. This male *Changeling* was becoming a nuisance. He eyed the set look on Apostol's face and thought over what the male had said. "Very well, you may have her for tonight."

Three nights.

"Out of the question!"

Three nights.

Brasov scowled. Was that an actual growl he heard the *Changeling* emit? Fuck it. Let him have three nights. What did he care? "Take her. Get your desire for her out of your system. Do not hurt her. On the fourth night, return her to me. Does that suit you?"

Apostol grinned. *Yes, my Master. It suits me very well. I will return her to you bathed and smelling fresh.*

Brasov's brows beetled into a V. He didn't like sharing what he claimed as his, but the *Changeling* had an itch. It was best to keep *Changelings* happy. They were unpredictable. Dammit. He'd given Amee to the horny *Changeling*. If he started going back on his word, he'd lose control of his coven of *Changelings*.

They'd turn on him.

He'd have to discreetly kill Apostol first chance he got. Brasov glanced down and saw the outline of the huge hard-on Apostol sported behind his zipper. He hadn't thought *Changeling's* had sexual needs, but apparently he was wrong.

He shrugged. "Go. Take care of your problem." He nodded toward Apostol's groin. "I expect my First Bride returned to me in four nights."

Apostol's blue eyes narrowed. He lifted Amee in his arms and walked out of Brasov's chamber, his strides long and angry. *You will have her back when I am finished with her.*

Witch's Magic

Brasov stared at the *Changeling's* broad back. Fucking idiot. He was becoming much too haughty. When Apostol returned Amee in four nights, he'd be waiting with a stake to drive through the vampire's heart.

Chapter Twenty-Five

As I always say, one must never be afraid to look deep down into the darkest depths of oneself where the light never reaches.

~Elizabeth
(Daughters of Darkness)

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Shasta opened her eyes and wished immediately she hadn't. Dizziness washed over her in knock-you-down-and-pummel-the-hell-out-of-you black waves. Amazed her head was still attached to her neck, she groaned. Taking a few steadying breaths, she lifted her head, but dropped back onto the pillow immediately. "Weak as a newborn kitten."

Her stomach roiled. Yuck! Samhain, she needed a place to throw up...fast.

What in the gods' names was wrong with her? Her body felt as parched as a dry bone, as if her insides had suddenly dried up and turned into ashes.

Slowly, she traced a fingertip over her throat. Panic flared when she felt the torn wounds. Her throat was raw and swollen beneath the pads of her fingertips.

Her hand fell back at her side.

Bitten.

No. No. Not simply bitten.

He'd chewed the hell out of her.

She'd be permanently deformed. She'd look like a train-wrecked corpse from *Night of the Living Dead*.

What if her head simply detached? Oh shit, she'd look like something that had crawled out of the grave with some of its parts missing.

The vampire hadn't gone to the trouble to hide his bites on the inside of her thigh, either.

What if she got leg rot?

He hadn't so much as hinted that he was courting her in that slow, sexual, take-charge-I'm-fucking-you manner he'd used on her the night before.

No, this time, he left his marks plainly visible all over her body. He'd been utterly single-minded to unblock her mind, to leave his seed growing in her womb. She'd been just as dogged he wouldn't. Their minds locked, two warriors in battle, but no matter how many times he climaxed, her body rejected his seed.

Her heart pounded, a slow, steady beat she knew instantly matched the rhythm of the creature stretched alongside her.

Am I still in his nest?

Shasta attempted to turn her head, but her neck felt as if it hung on a rusty hinge and needed oiling. Okay, so she'd simply lie here and stare at the ceiling. Cool ceiling. A bit rocky, bumpy as hell...and a ceiling that moved.

Moved?

She blinked. Squinted. Although she didn't need to squint, her eyesight had certainly grown stronger over the last couple of days. Hmm. The ceiling still moved. More like...it fluttered.

Why is the ceiling quivering like a mass of...what?

Faint squeaks reached her ears. Oh, holy crap! No, it wasn't the ceiling flapping, but a swarm of bats suspended upside down from it. She frowned. It was night. Shouldn't they be out, flying about, doing their business, like searching for food...or something? But no, their tiny, beady eyes were open and fastened on her as if she was their next meal. They watched her, condemning, fierce and with a hint of diabolical amusement at her disgraceful defeat.

Oh! They were laughing at her?

Sure, they were.

She was trapped in a nightmare of her own making. "Go away," she croaked. Gods, she sounded worse than Dinka when the frog had her

tonsils removed last year. "Go torment some other person who lacks intelligence."

Shasta tried to wave her hand at them, to shoo them on their way, but her arm wouldn't move. Samhain! Was this another side effect of being chewed on by a vampire?

She was partially paralyzed?

It took her a second to realize her fingers were tightly entwined with a long, slender masculine hand. Shasta wiggled her fingers, tried to pull free, but his hand tightened painfully around hers, crushing in its grip. "Do not," he said sharply. "If you try to escape, I'll finish what we've begun."

Shasta swallowed past the ache in her bruised throat. "What have we begun?"

Did she squeak?

Yes. She'd sounded just like Pinky squealing.

"The begetting of an heir."

"I already feel like shit. Are you trying to make me feel worse? I will not give you a son. What more can you do to me? You've already chewed my neck half off. We've already had the wildest sex I could ever have imagined. Some real. Some not real. I mean, who floats toward the ceiling while they're copulating?"

"Vampires."

"What male stays so frigging hard after fifteen flippin' ejaculations?"

"Vampires."

"What male releases enough sperm to breed a brood mare?"

"Vampires," he interrupted impatiently. "So why didn't you become pregnant?"

"It wasn't from lack of trying on your part," she snapped.

"It certainly wasn't. You have to stop blocking your mind."

"No, I don't."

"Shasta—"

"Soo, we floated several times, and now you've practically drained me of every drop of blood I possess, and you expect me to give you an heir? Not in this lifetime!"

"I've come nowhere near draining you...yet. I've sexed you, true, but you didn't complain then, so don't do it now. I can sex you again...now, or I can take more of your blood. Your choice, but you should know, if I take more blood, you'll die in the morning. If I sex you, you'll think you've died, and if we're very lucky, we'll make a baby. It's up to

Witch's Magic

you...Give up your life, or bring a new life into this realm."

"Oh, is that all?"

"You will change your mind and give me an heir?"

"An heir? No. Why would I want to bring another you into the world? You just tried to chew my neck off my shoulders."

"And you tried to drive a block of wood through my heart. I'd say we're even."

"Well I'm not willing for you to sample more of my blood or have you kill me with pleasure. Let-me-go!"

His fingers tightened. "I did not summon you here. You came to me of your own free will. One might start to think you actually like me."

"Yeah? Well one might start to think someone has a big head."

"It isn't my head that's big, and you can protest all you like, but I think you like it, too."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"You came to me, Shasta. To a male vampire, that's acceptance. Acceptance to live in his world, live his way, become one with him. I spoke the binding words in your room two nights ago, but for them to be successful, you had to come to me, enter my domain without compulsion. The female always knows instinctually what she has to do to finish the binding ritual. A male vampire does not induce or inform her. You had to come to me, freely enter my domain. You did both. You're my mate. In order for you to give me an heir...it means I sex you, seed you...often, until you open your mind and conceive."

"Then what?"

He shrugged. "Then if you no longer want my body inside yours, I will select a second Bride who will satisfy all my...urges."

Shasta raised her head and groaned. It felt like a vise had it crushed between its tight grips. She licked her dry lips. A faint coppery taste settled on her tongue.

What?

She licked her lips again.

Blood?

She tasted blood on her mouth? Her stomach rumbled. "You just try to take a second Bride, and I'll do more than drive a stake through your cheating heart."

He quirked a brow. "You did not drive a stake through my heart, or I'd be dust and bone."

"All right! So I'm not very good with a hammer and stake."

Valerian rubbed the spot on his chest where she'd struck him with the hammer. "Oh, I'd say you're pretty damned good with a hammer."

"I was aiming for the stake."

"Thank the gods your aim is lousy."

"You can rest assured I won't try staking you again. I'll pour a gazillion gallons of holy water on your vampire ass while you sleep. Melting you would be much easier than going for the stake again."

A chuckle.

Annoying sound.

Drat the conniving vampire! What was so funny?

"My beautiful Bride, have you not yet realized, come tomorrow night and from that point on when I sleep, so will you? You'll be right here in this bed beside me, that is, if I'm not on top of you or you're not on top of me?"

"Shit. So what you're saying is, come dawn, I'm going to die, even if I agree to your terms, let you sex me and conceive your heir?"

"Hmm. Yes, I suppose that's correct."

"You lousy, stinking vampire, you lied to me!"

"Vampires lie, darling. It's our way."

"I'm hungry."

"Good. You will feed from me."

"What? No!" She sat up.

He jerked her down beside him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Let go."

Valerian rolled suddenly, planting his hard body squarely on top of hers. His blue eyes glinted hot and fierce and blazed with sexual intent. "You came here of your own free will. Understand, Bride, you belong to me in every sense of the word. You will *never* be permitted to leave here or ever be very far from my sight again."

Tears welled in her eyes. "I want to go home. Please. I'm sorry I attacked you. I swear I'll never try to drive another pointy stake in you. I just want to go home."

His jaw tightened. She saw only a determined ruthlessness on his cold face. "It's far too late for you to leave. You are home. The sooner you accept your fate, the sooner we can create our family and live in harmony."

She looked away.

"Don't. Do not turn away from me." His fingers gripped her chin,

forced her to look at him even though she'd rather keep staring at the stone wall to her left. "Look at me, Shasta."

"I don't want to."

"You *will* obey me or pay the price for your rebellion." He tightened his grip and turned her face toward him. "You are my Bride, and as such, I have the right to take you this night and every night."

"Where my body is concerned, you have only the rights I grant you. You've taken everything from me." Tears burned her eyes. "My virginity, my blood, my right to choose my own mate and my ability to change into a Were. You do not get to take the choice from me of whether I give you an heir or not."

He pressed his lips together. "I will not play foolish little girl games with you. I don't have the time. You're a woman, ready for breeding. I smell your ripeness. Your heat. Your desire."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I do not desire you."

"No. What you desire is to be fucked. Often. I can fuck you as well as the next male."

"Don't be crude. It doesn't become you. You think highly of yourself, vampire."

"What do you have against my race?"

"You eat people."

He grinned. "Only little bites. Deny all you want, but you want me every bit as much as I want you. Why do you deny your attraction to me? Deny your needs? Deny you burn for my touch on your body? You want my cock inside you. Do you think I do not know this? Do not sense it?" He ground his hips against her mound. "Do you think I do not have the same desires, needs as you?"

His cock jabbed her, hard and thick. Without hesitation, he lowered his head to her cleavage. Valerian inhaled deeply, taking in her scent. "You smell delicious. Yeah, honey, I *could* eat you. I want to bite you all over."

"You've already done that."

"I want to bite you all over...again." He buried his face in the nest of auburn curls and breathed deeply. Valerian raised his head and looked straight into her eyes at the same time he parted her nether lips and glided a smooth fingertip up and down the sleek flesh. "Did you know a female is so sensitive here, one scrape from a vampire's fang and she has the most explosive climax?"

"No." Shasta choked the word past dry lips. "I didn't know that."

"Shall I prove it to you?"

"No. No."

Too late!

He buried his face between her thighs, and Shasta screamed from the pleasure he ignited in her blood. The light scrape of fang along the sensitive tissue felt utterly delicious. She clenched her teeth against the exquisite pleasure and begged him to stop, begged him to continue, begged him to stop, and he did stop...eventually, but not before she'd climaxed multiple times.

When he looked at her again, his eyes were blazing red, but not from anger. "This is your home," he said huskily. "Accept it. Be one with it. Accept me. Be one with me. Give me a son."

"No."

His lips tightened. "I can bend you to my will."

"Then you'd be the monster I think you to be. Force me, and it is rape. Force your child on me, and I will never love him. Would you have your son and heir conceived in this manner?"

Valerian squeezed his eyes tightly together. She wondered if he truly felt the hurt she saw there on his face.

Did the undead have emotions?

Did their dead beating hearts allow them to love?

"No," he said quietly. "I would have my son conceived because my Bride desires both my child and me. I would have my son conceived in love. Does that answer your questions?"

Shasta bit her lip. Damn, she forgot he could read her thoughts. Now she was curious about his feelings for her. "Soo, do you love me?"

"At this moment?" He arched a brow and rolled off her, stood at the bedside and stared at her nakedness. "You are very beautiful, my Bride, and I want you, but I will not force you nor confess to a love you neither want nor will accept. I will grant you the time you need...for now. Get dressed. You have gowns there." He pointed toward a closet set within the stone. "I've conjured you many beautiful gowns, all black, of course, but stylish and lovely. Choose one and meet me in the Great Dining Hall. There, you will be the gracious hostess and be kind to our guests."

Shasta scooted to the side of the bed, then froze when this action brought her mouth level with his jutting cock. She swallowed hard. Oh, dear gods, why did she have to be tempted with a face-to-face view with his protruding...er...uh-oh!

The damned thing was alive.

It jerked. Swear to the gods, it did a tap dance toward her mouth.

Had he actually had that, that monstrous thing in her? She hadn't realized before how well endowed he was.

She couldn't resist curling her fingers around the hard, curved length. At least, she tried to wrap her fingers around it, an impossible goal. "Uhh..." She looked up, hesitated.

"Go ahead," he said roughly. "Taste me. I'm dying to feel the glide of your hot, wet tongue up and down my cock. And you're dying to taste me. I read it in your mind, but understand, you start sex with me, and I won't have any other choice but to finish it with you, inside you."

"Why?"

"Because when it comes to wanting, *needing* you, I have no willpower to turn and walk away." He stepped closer. "Go ahead," he groaned. "Taste me."

Shasta hesitated. How she wanted to do exactly that. She yearned to glide her tongue around the thick head, lap at it as if it was her favorite dessert. She swallowed hard.

No. She dare not touch him. She dare not.

Fuck it!

She couldn't resist one tiny taste.

Slowly, she pressed her lips to the tip of his cock and touched her tongue to it, twirling and swirling and gently sucking. Smiling, she leaned back and watched his expression change from one of pleasure to understanding. "Fuck! You little tease."

She laughed. "Yes."

He whipped away, frustration in his long strides. Shasta watched him dress in the human way and frowned. "Why are you dressing in that manner instead of using your vampire skills?"

"Because my fucking hands are shaking. My mind isn't exactly where it should be. I'm liable to appear at my dining table without my pants if I try to use my powers."

Valerian swallowed his frustration. He had to get control. He had to gain control of Shasta, too.

She was fertile.

He was fertile.

His heart squeezed. He stared into her face. No. Oh, no. If she continued to refuse to conceive, he'd have to...he'd have to stake her in

the morning sun. The Ancients had zero tolerance for rebellious First Brides. They expected the Bride to perform her duty and produce an heir. If the Bride refused, the Ancients demanded her sacrifice.

They wouldn't give him a choice.

The elders judged harshly and condemned a Bride to instant death. It was a complication he did not need, and in front of the Ancients, even in front of Shasta, he dare not reveal emotions. He couldn't rule his clan if he couldn't control his Bride.

A chilly politeness settled over his face, and he turned to eye her. "Clean up. Make yourself presentable for our guests. You will be on trial."

"What? Why?"

Valerian walked away, unable to look back at her, or he knew he'd betray the very emotions she thought he didn't possess. Gods, he loved her, had loved her from the moment he saw her. But he was the future king. He had to produce an heir. In that, there was no choice.

"You're just going to walk away and leave me here?" Shasta shouted, sounding bewildered. "Why am I being put on trial? I hate you! You bastard. I want to leave! Now!"

Valerian froze, but he didn't turn back to face her. "I'm afraid it's much too late for that. And Shasta, this time there are spells totally surrounding the castle, above, as well as below. There is no escape for either of us. Consider yourself surrounded by love."

Shasta snorted and swiped at the tears on her face. "You're saying you love me?"

"Only a fool would risk loving you. Now get dressed. We have a very special guest coming to dine. He will sit in judgment. After all, you tried to murder the future king of Vampyre."

"What? I'll be on trial because I-I tried to-to put a little piece of wood in you?"

He snorted. "Did you not think you would have to pay a penalty for attempted murder? We are beings, same as any other. We have laws. Just because we are Vampyre, doesn't mean you get to go around and kill us. Yes. You will be judged. And you will treat our honored guest, all our guests, with the respect they deserve, or I swear I'll rip out your throat."

Chapter Twenty-Six

But Dracula represents just the opposite. He's pure sex, one-on-one sex, the kind of sex that most people in their heart of hearts really want.

~Frank Langella

*Romania
Carpathian Mountains
A Cave
Mortal Realm*

Amee Cole snuggled against Apostol's smooth, hard chest and sighed. Slowly, she walked her fingers down the ripped abs, sifted through the arrow of soft blond hair that shot straight to the thick nest surrounding the semi-erect shaft.

Even as she eyed the wondrous tool, it stretched in her hand and grew harder by the minute.

"I'm sorry Brasov beat you. I did nothing to stop him. I failed you."

"You didn't fail me. You got me away. He would have killed you if you'd interfered; then I would have had no hope, no one to help me. Besides, my wounds have already healed. You knew they'd mend quickly."

Apostol tightened his arms around her. "That's no excuse for me to stand by and do nothing."

"Shh. I made you swear you'd not interfere if he beat me. You kept your word."

“And I feel like such a coward.”

Amee pressed her fingers lightly against his lips. “Listen to me. I know you aren’t a coward, but Brasov would kill you if you ever interfere in his business.”

Apostol nibbled at her fingers. “He will kill me anyway for desiring you, for touching what is his.”

Amee lifted her head and searched his eyes. “I’m not his, Apostol. I’m merely what he made me, but I belong to you. I love you.” If it was possible, she thought she might purr with contentment, but she was terrified of cursing herself, her luck and Apostol.

Apostol, her tall, blond muscular Adonis. He’d saved her from certain death...again. Until he showed up, she’d known her life was measured by each breath she drew. She knew, because Brasov spent hours telling her how his Bride was going to awaken starved, how the new vampiress would drain every drop of blood in her until Amee could no longer draw a breath.

She shivered. Her main regret was not having the chance to say good-bye to her sister, Ann.

After Brasov’s attack, she’d lived in despair that first day, unable to sleep even though she should have felt the lethargic need that swamped vampires once the sun rose.

The second night, Apostol appeared in answer to Brasov’s summons. When Apostol first squatted down beside her and held his wrist to her to feed, she’d been wary. No one had treated her kindly. Most of the males who came anywhere near her kicked her when they walked past or stopped long enough to feed. To them she was nothing more than a meal.

She hadn’t understood why.

What made her different from them? They were vampires; so was she, thanks to Brasov. But somehow, she wasn’t the same kind of vampire. No, she was a *Changeling*. Apparently, *Changelings* were lower than the lowest human on the food chain.

Kept chained like an animal, she’d been scared stiff of Apostol. Once Brasov and his followers left, she was at the mercy of the silent vampire. She already knew Apostol’s steady gaze flickered to her each time Brasov turned his back to them. His serious blue eyes missed nothing. He watched her, every breath she drew, every rise and fall of her breasts.

He didn’t speak. He didn’t even talk to Brasov, but obeyed his every command like some kind of freakin’ zombie, except when it came to

staying away from her. Brasov ordered Apostol to guard her, but as soon as the evil vampire left, Apostol walked across the chamber room, squatted down beside her, and gently brushed her hair back from her face.

"You are hungry?" he asked quietly.

At first she thought she'd imagined his words, because she'd heard Brasov say the *Changeling* couldn't talk as his tongue had decayed and fallen off.

"What?" She blinked. Her wrists were chained to the walls. She could stand or sit, but she couldn't walk but a couple of steps in any direction. Still, she jumped up and backed away from him until her spine was flush against the cave wall behind her.

His eyes, the color of pale blue crystal narrowed. "I know you are starving. He has not troubled to feed you. Has he? Of course he hasn't. The bastard has *me-itis*. He doesn't care if you starve. You are expendable, just as I am. So tell me. Are you hungry?"

"I am hungry. Yes," she admitted.

Without saying another word, he freed her wrists from the shackles. "Swear to me you won't try to escape."

"I won't do anything to endanger you."

He smiled, flashing straight white teeth. "Sweetheart, I've been in danger since the moment I saw you here." He sank his fangs into his wrist and tore open a vein. Holding his arm out to her, he gestured. "Feed."

Amee latched onto his wrist like a ravenous beast.

"Slowly," he commanded, "or you will sicken. Your stomach needs time to adjust to your new diet."

She nodded and stopped gulping the liquid nourishment. Hunger pains rolled across her belly hot and fierce and rebelled at the loss of the rich sustenance. She hadn't fed in over twenty-four hours. Her mind mutinied. She wanted to eat.

"Listen to me, Amee. If you glut on my blood, you will crash. I won't be able to save you. You'll go insane. Drink slowly."

His blood tasted sweet as wine, warm and utterly delicious. He allowed her to drink her fill, but he made her do it in intervals. All the time, his hands gently caressed her shoulders, her throat, and her arms. In between his light touches, he encouraged her to slow down, to feed slowly.

His voice penetrated the haze in her mind, steady and insistent. It dragged her from her feeding frenzy. Once she listened to his softly spoken commands, she began drinking little by little. He sifted his fingers through the strands of her tangled hair, lifting it and watching it fall in place over and over, as if he was infatuated by the baby fine strands. Then he massaged her shoulders, stroked her spine, and rubbed her belly. "You remind me of a young woman from Village Pyre."

She looked up from feeding and licked her lips. "Who?"

"Just a girl who had a crush on me."

"What's her name?"

"Sorina."

"You didn't have a crush on her?"

He smiled sadly. "No. I was much too old for her. She was barely eighteen."

Amee frowned. "Was?"

"She killed herself."

"I'm sorry. You're a good man. You did not take advantage of her innocence. What's your name?"

"You know my name already. Apostol."

"There must be more than just a single name? I don't know if Apostol is your first or last name."

"It's neither. It's my middle name. My first name is Stephan. I prefer Apostol now."

Amee nodded. "Apostol, then."

Busy feeding for a while, she ignored his curious touches until he cupped her butt and edged her closer to him.

She let go his wrist and licked her lips. Her jaw gaped when she felt his erection throb against her pubic bone. She met his hot gaze head-on, noted the brilliant fire that sizzled in his pale blue eyes. Ah. Now she understood. Knew what he desired in return for feeding her.

Amee blinked. Shit. He wanted to fuck her? She should have known.

There was nothing he could do to her that Brasov hadn't already done. Still, she drew a deep breath and tried to prepare her mind to accept more sexual abuse. She swallowed hard and started to lift her shirt over her head.

His fingers bit into her forearms. "You don't have to," he said, his voice emotionless. She saw his eyes darken as though he knew in his heart she'd refuse him. He let go her arms and stepped back. "I'm not Brasov. You don't have to."

Amee watched him seal the wounds on his wrist with a slow lick of his tongue. Heat spiraled down her spine and set fire to her insides. She dropped the tail of her shirt.

He lifted a brow. "You aren't running, and you haven't said, Go fertilize yourself...so...is it...are you...saying, Yes?"

"I haven't said no," she whispered. "And I won't. Do what you will." She closed her eyes and waited for his attack.

"What I will?" He choked. "You will open your eyes and look at me and understand."

Amee opened her eyes and blinked.

The blue in his steady gaze had definitely chilled by several degrees. Gently, he brushed a tangled strand of her hair from her face. "My will is to fuck you, long, hard, deep and as many times as my cock will rise to the occasion this night. My will is for you to enjoy everything I do to you and beg me for more." He drew a ragged breath, slowly exhaled. "My will is to hold you in my arms afterwards and nuzzle you until you come undone and plead for me to take you again and again. That is my will, Ameen Cole." He tilted her chin and searched her eyes. "But only if it is your will also."

Amee slipped her shirt over head and dropped it on the salty floor at their feet. She'd lost several pounds over the last twenty-four hours and her jeans slipped past her waist and rode so low on her hips, the high-cut bottom of her one-piece black satin Teddy was visible.

Apostol stared at the little pink bow nestled between her breasts and the criss-cross stitching along the sides that ended in the same style bow at her cleavage. He slid his big hands over the satin cups and palmed her breasts.

His thumb tips circled her aching nipples behind the smooth satin. Her breasts swelled beneath his feathery touch. Her nipples tightened. He issued a low growl and lowered the narrow strap of her Teddy off her shoulders. For the longest time he simply stared at the full curves of her bared breasts.

Her eyes widened with awe when he discarded his jeans and stood before her naked. "I want you, Ameen Cole. This night, I claim you as mine. I will see that you are fed and protected. I will make certain Brasov does not touch you sexually again, or in any way. Will you allow my touch?"

She swallowed hard. She needed his protection. Otherwise, Brasov

was going to kill her...again. But Jesus, Apostol was hung, even more so than Brasov, and she'd thought Brasov was going to tear her asunder the first time.

What? Were all vampire males hung like Wally the humping whale?

"Thank you for the compliment."

Her eyes bugged. "Compliment?"

"You think I'm hung like a whale? Thank you...I think. Yes, all male vampires are hung. It helps when our seed detaches."

"Your seed detaches?" God, he talked weird and so damned stiff and polite.

He grinned.

It was the first time she'd seen any kind of emotional reaction out of him, except for his dick getting hard. Boy, yeah, that was plenty of reaction. Better than a smile.

"There's only one thing stiff right now. As I said, we're all...hung, if that is the term you apply to the size of a male's mating hose."

"Hose?" She clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from giggling. He probably wouldn't appreciate her laughter.

He shrugged. "Good a word as any?" His eyes lit up, and swear to God, his lips twitched. "Since a vampire's seed isn't viable for very long and only at *Rushing*, it helps when it's released if it doesn't have to fight to reach its destination."

"I see." A mee thought her eyes might have crossed. She wasn't sure what he was talking about. *Rushing*? Reach its destination?

"Do you agree?"

Her gaze dropped. She stared at the 'hose,' at its thick, engorged length, wondering what it was exactly the stunning vampire just asked her to agree to. If he was asking her if his damn dick was impressive, then hell, yeah, she agreed. It stood at attention, high-hot-a-hell-of-a-lot, as the saying went. The broad head strained in her direction, and already the tip of the thick purple knob seeped with tiny pearls of clear moisture.

She gulped, and for the life of her, she couldn't speak. Was this how it felt when a *Changeling's* tongue fell off? Had her tongue fallen off, and she just didn't know it?

A muscle jerked in his clenched jaw. "Our tongues don't fall off. It's a myth, and *Changelings* encourage the myth because we can't stand our makers."

Her gaze flew to his. "I see. Thank God."

"So, do you agree?"

Amee stood there gazing at him. She still had no idea what he wanted her to agree to.

As if giving up, he reached for his discarded jeans. "I will make sure you do not starve." He turned to walk away.

"Yes," she shouted the word, terrified he was going to leave her alone. She'd rather give herself to him than be here alone when Brasov returned at dawn.

Apostol turned back to face her. His gaze settled hotly on her breasts. "Yes...what?"

"I will allow you to touch me, and I-I fully agree with every single word you said, even though I didn't understand half of it."

Grinning, he dropped his jeans and took the few steps back to her. "Good. I like a female who knows her own mind and agrees with me." He thrust his fingers into her tangled hair. "I do not think I could really walk away from you, but I will try, if that is your wish."

"It isn't my wish." She touched his thick wrist, admired the gold-tipped hairs on his arms.

He tilted her face to his. "You are so beautiful," he moaned. "I have wanted you since I first saw you here." He lowered his mouth to hers.

Amee met his lips with a yielding sigh. Might as well surrender, but she never expected the touch of his mouth against hers to be this soft and tender, this exquisite. It was the most beautiful kiss she'd ever shared.

His lips, those lips that looked so incredibly masculine, felt as soft and warm as a butterfly's wings. No sooner was she lost in the wonder of his taste than he yanked off her jeans, slid the Teddy off her and backed her against the stone wall. He cupped her bare ass in his big palms. "Lock your legs around my waist," he instructed.

She did as he said, clenching her teeth with dread of his entry. Amee was surprised to realize she liked his touch, his possession of her body. Brasov had been brutal, and he'd been so each and every time. Apostol took his time, filling her slowly, stretching her inner muscles until he was buried to the hilt. She couldn't say he was a gentle lover after that initial entry, nor was he ruthless. He was, in a word, steady.

And oh, how he loved her.

Apostol spent the rest of the night teaching her how a male vampire was supposed to sex a female. His mouth on her nipples was strong and wet and the sweetest thing she ever felt. He applied just the right amount of suction to make her scream with need. His long thrusts were

sometimes hurried, sometimes excruciatingly slow, but they were always, always meant for her pleasure. She twisted her head back and forth and dug her nails into his shoulders and begged him to send her over the edge.

Just before dawn, Apostol spilled his seed inside her for the last time. She'd lost count how many times he found his release, but Amee knew this time was somehow different. Different, because he'd soon leave her, and there was always the chance Brasov would smell their mating or not summon Apostol at dusk.

There was something else, too.

Apostol uttered a strangled gasp and stared at her as if a miracle had occurred.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" He slid a possessive palm across her stomach. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's perfect. And that's damn scary."

"What's perfect?"

"The child we just made together. She's beautiful, like her mother."

"What? I'm pregnant?"

"You are now."

"How do you know?"

"I know. It is something a vampire knows."

She'd conceived his child. Dear God, Brasov would kill all three of them...and yet she was joyously happy.

He pushed her damp hair back from her face, cupped her cheeks and kissed her tenderly. When he drew back, she saw tears in his eyes, blood red tears. He stared at her with disbelief stamped on his solemn face. "You have no idea what this means to me. I've been alone, without family, for centuries."

Amee frowned. "I thought you were a new *Changeling*, like me."

"No. Where did you get that idea?"

"I guess I thought you lived in Village Pyre."

"I did. I do. I keep to myself. You're thinking about the village girl? Sorina? She saw me at the tavern many times when her grandparents came there for dinner. She developed a crush on me. I don't know if you've noticed, but vampires are charismatic. It's easy to lure females. We enthrall you with our gazes, command you with the sexiness in our voices, and we lie..."

Amee giggled. "And looks. There's something about a vampire's handsome face that lures a hapless woman to him."

Slowly, he pulled out of her and grabbed his jeans. "I have done nothing to lure you, nor have I lied. I did not enthrall you. I don't want lies between us. There is more I need to tell you, but we have no time. Dress quickly. He returns."

She stepped into her jeans, fastened the top button and yanked up the zipper. Amee fumbled with the ends of her shirt, finally managing to tie the ragged ends in a knot below her breasts. Swiping her hair out of her eyes, she asked in awe, "I'm pregnant? With your child? You're certain the undead can conceive?"

He nodded, and buttoned his jeans. "Sometimes, when everything is perfect and there is equal need, love and desire. Hurry, get your shoes on. We have no time to waste."

"He is close?"

"Less than a kilometer away. He rushes to beat the rise of the sun. He will be here in seconds. Amee." He grabbed her and kissed her. "Do not say anything about the babe, or he will kill you. If he discovers you are with child, you will say it is his, that no other vampire has touched you."

"But..."

"Swear it, Amee. I will not allow him to harm you or my child as long as I am here, but I won't always be here. He will send me away on errands. Keep quiet. Remain still. Do not draw his attention to you." He rubbed his lips against hers and locked the chains around her wrists. "I'm sorry I have to shackle you again. I love you."

With that, he moved across the room and stationed himself at the entrance. She swore his face turned utterly rigid and cold as stone. The heat in his hot blue eyes switched to ice, and when Brasov returned and dismissed Apostol, her lover walked away without a backward glance.

Amee couldn't sleep that day. Had she been a fool to trust Apostol? Had he got what he wanted, and when he walked away, was he finished with her? She tortured herself with endless questions, but when dusk arrived, he appeared without waiting for Brasov's summons.

Brasov cursed him and punched Apostol in the mouth. "Why are you here? I did not beckon you."

Apostol said nothing. At least, she didn't think he said anything, but apparently there was some kind of silent communication between them. She saw Brasov frown. "I would have sent for you if I needed you early, but since you are here, you will remain with my *Changeling*."

The pattern was set from that point. The nights belonged to them, but

there was always dawn, always Brasov to face and outsmart. Amee knew it was just as hard for Apostol to walk away from her every dawn as it was for her to watch him go.

How could she feel so alive now lying here in his arms? Content? Sexually satisfied when she was no longer a living person, but one of the undead?

Her death had been brutal at the hands of that bastard, Brasov. How she hated the vampire. Pure evil radiated from him, and daily he became worse. He would not stop until he destroyed everything that was good in the vampire world...and there were some good things, like this *Changeling* who'd made her his own.

Amee wiggled and felt the muscular arm tighten around her waist. "Do not move," he whispered. He rolled on top of her and nudged her thighs apart. "I haven't had my fill of you. We have at least an hour before the sun rises and we sleep."

She moaned when he thrust inside her. "You're talking. You can't speak. Remember? So don't get in the habit."

"I can't fuck, either, according to my master, Brasov. He is a complete fool, so wrapped up in his superiority he cannot see what goes on under his very nose." Apostol rolled with her and moved his hips in a steady rhythm. He plunged his hard cock in and out of her with a fevered rush. "Come with me, my Amee."

He didn't leave her satisfaction to chance. He made certain she soared over the edge with him.

Sometime later, Apostol drew her close and pressed a sweet kiss against her lips. "Hungry? I'll feed you, if you are."

"No." She wiggled against him. "You've taken care of all my appetites. I'm fine."

Apostol cupped the sides of her face. "We have the babe to think about now. Our daughter. I want her to thrive well inside your belly."

Amee bit her lip and felt like crying as Apostol gently slid his hands across her belly in his own way, checking the growth of the child they'd somehow managed to create. "You aren't sorry it's a girl?"

Apostol looked shocked. "No. Why would you ask me this question?"

"Most males want a son."

"I'm not most males." He pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "We'll have a son next time."

"Brasov will kill you if he realizes this babe is not his."

"Brasov will never know, my love. I am not going to mark you as claimed, just in case he somehow manages to get his hands on you again. But I want you to know, in my heart you are mine, know, in my soul you are my First Bride, the mother of my firstborn. I will protect you both to the best of my ability."

"You *have* to return me to him tomorrow night."

He shook his head. "He can die and rot in hell. I'm not retuning you to him. Do not fear this thing. You are mine. I hold what belongs to me. Now sleep, sweet Ameer. Tonight, we will flee from Brasov's evil reach."

"What? Where will we go? Where could we possibly be safe?"

Apostol thought about it for a moment. "We will go to Prince Valerian, to Radu Castle. I've heard he is good, not evil like Brasov."

Ameer didn't know who this Prince Valerian was, but if Apostol said they'd be safe there, well then, she trusted her mate's judgment. She knew he'd do whatever it took to keep her and their child safe.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Vampires are sexy to a woman perhaps because the fantasy is similar to that of the man on the white horse sweeping her off to paradise.

~Frank Langella

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Shasta froze in the wide doorway of the Great Dining Hall at Radu Castle and stared at the small gathering of vampire males standing around the long mahogany dining table talking. She remembered most of their faces from the Inn the night before, all except for the one they were gathered around now.

"Your mouth is gaping, Valerian's woman."

Dragos, the male vampire she'd had hostile words with at the Inn. The vampire apparently thrived on making her miserable. "Dammit, One Fang, must you creep up behind me like that?"

He parked himself beside her and folded his arms across his wide chest. Dressed in vampire black from head to toe, he appeared more sinister than ever, yet she saw his lips twitch before he controlled the urge to laugh. Even so, she had a feeling his dark appearance wasn't faked. She also knew he had little use for her.

"It is a vampire's nature to...creep, as you say. Be very careful that I do not lie in wait for you when you least expect it and finish what Prince

Valerian started with you."

Startled by this new threat, Shasta frowned. She didn't think for a minute he threatened to sex her or impregnate her. He had no interest in her. "You don't much like me. Do you?"

Dragos snorted, then turned to face her. He curled his upper lip, revealing the shiny tips of his fangs. "Like you? I cannot stand you."

Shasta swallowed hard. Like she cared if this asshole liked her or not, still, she couldn't remember anyone ever straight-out hating her, except maybe for Forge. "I've done nothing to you."

"It isn't me I'm worried about. It's what you are doing to our future king that concerns me."

She rubbed the bruises on her throat. "I assure you, Prince Valerian is well able to take care of himself. He doesn't need your protection."

"No, but you do."

"What? I promise you, I do not need the best sexing I could possibly get from you or any other male vampire here, or...or anywhere."

"Sexy and beautiful though you are to Valerian, I'm not the least attracted to you. I have no desire to sex you or even drink from you. No. What I desire is to rip out your throat and leave you bleeding a slow death."

"Huh." Shasta rubbed her sore throat again. "That threat feels vaguely familiar."

He settled his hostile gaze on her stomach before sliding it to her face. Dragos pulled her hand away from her bruised throat and lifted a silky brow. "You and Valerian mate rough. Yet, you have not conceived his heir. Why not?"

Shasta gasped and tightened her lips. "It's none of your business. Now get away from me. I don't want you anywhere near me. I don't like you, either."

His mouth twisted into a facsimile of a smile. "Too bad, because I've been assigned as your personal bodyguard. Where you go, I will be your shadow, except of course, when you are in bed with Valerian doing your duty."

"I have no duty to Valerian."

"You would see him fail? Die?"

"What?"

"If you do not take his seed and produce an heir, he will not live to be king of our people. Brasov will win. There will be nothing Val can do to

save any of us, because he will have already crumbled into dust...beside you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Know this, witch. When our realm fails, so will yours, Ru-Noc, and all the other neighboring realms. When there's no food left for us here, we will invade your world first, and you will not see us coming." His fingers tensed so tight on her wrist, she thought her bones would snap. "Think about what I say. Give Val an heir. In doing so, you aren't just saving him or us. If you do not allow Valerian to make you pregnant, I will take the choice from you."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, although I find you loathsome, selfish and utterly unattractive, I will fuck you, force your mind open, and put my seed inside your fertile body. *I* will make you pregnant."

Shasta gasped. "You wouldn't dare rape me. Valerian would know it wasn't his child. He'd kill you."

"No, he wouldn't know, because you would never tell him different. He'd believe it his babe."

"He'd know his own bloodline."

"*I* am of his bloodline. He wouldn't know. So tonight, you will accept him and conceive his child, or tomorrow I will pay you a visit while Val slumbers the deep sleep of the undead."

Shasta laughed. "You think I'm a fool? You think I don't know you must sleep when daylight arrives?"

"You think wrong. Over the centuries, some of us have learned to adapt. Some of us can stay awake until midday after the sun rises, long enough to fuck a female before giving in to the need to sleep." He smiled, but there was no warmth in his eyes. "Besides, I have your precious Pinky. I will kill the *Futhar* if you do not do as I say. I swear to you, if Val dies because of you, I will see to it you and Pinky follow quickly behind him."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome.

~Isaac Asimov

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

A loud, irritating buzz stirred Ann Michelle Cole from the woolly darkness that had closed around her. She opened her eyes and slowly realized the odd sensation came from the blanket she was buried facedown in.

She remained still for the longest moment, too lethargic to move. Why was she on her stomach? She never slept on her belly.

You are on your stomach because the last time I took you, it was from behind. I left you where you collapsed. You said you were too exhausted to wiggle.

Moaning, Ann flipped over on her back and squeezed her eyes shut. Voices? She was hearing voices in her head? Well, not voices. A voice. Singular. Masculine. Superior and smug as hell. God, why did her body feel so sensitive and...and...used? Her breasts felt fuller. Achy. Her nipples tingled. Between her thighs, she was tender. Sticky. What...?

Wake up! I command you to awaken.

"I am awake." Who the hell was talking in her head?

Wake up now!

"Leave me alone."

Laughter. *Never. Get up, or I will come to you this instant and sex you again. I have sipped from you, woman, and I like what I have tasted. I'm most anxious for more.*

Ann's eyes popped open. "Again? Sex me again? Shit!"

She fought the dizziness assailing her, but everything spun crazily before settling into something of a normal pattern. She blinked, then stared at the plain white ceiling overhead. However, it wasn't a ceiling she recalled ever seeing anywhere.

Smothering a groan, she attempted to swallow, but her throat was too scratchy and dry. She'd kill for a drink of...a drink of...What was she dying for a drink of? *Crap!* Water didn't come to mind. Neither did a soft drink or any type of alcoholic beverage.

So what did she thirst for?

You are thirsty, my Bride? I will be there shortly to take care of your needs.

Ann shivered. The voice again. *It's my imagination.* But at least her imagination gave the male talking to her in her head a sexy voice.

Laughter. *You believed me real enough last night. I assure you, I'm quite genuine and...dangerous.*

Fuck! She *was* going insane. No. No. The voice was real. She knew that voice. The ache between her thighs was real; so was the stickiness. Something had happened. Something terrible had happened to her, something that could never be undone. She slid a hand across her belly.

What had he whispered in her ear? That she'd conceived his heir? Oh, dear God. He'd...he'd...Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. She was pregnant? He'd left his child growing inside her?

My son. You carry my heir, my Bride.

"No!"

I'm afraid it's much too late for no. It is done. You did not object last night.

"I don't remember last night. Did you rape me?"

Do not accuse me of such an abominable crime. There was no need to use force. You gave yourself to me quite willingly. You begged me to sex you.

"I don't believe you."

I care not what you believe. I care only that you were willing to accept my seed and conceive my son.

"Where's my sister?"

Silence.

Damn it. Was the voice real or not? Was she pregnant or not? Was the tenderness she felt real or her imagination?

Witch's Magic

And her sister. Her sister was missing. "Amee!" She had to find her sister. And Laura! Where was her friend? Laura must surely be around here somewhere. *Please, God, let her still be alive.* "Laura!"

You are becoming hysterical. I forbid you to panic. Calm down. Your friend is fine. She will join us soon, and you will see for yourself. Dracul has seen to her needs. I promise you, she has not suffered, nor is she unhappy.

What about my sister?

I don't know anything about your sister, but it is being checked into. We will have word soon.

Ohmigod! She'd silently communicated to the voice. She'd spoken directly in his head – worse, he'd replied. Ohmigod! Ohmigod!

Ann, I've already forbidden you to panic. You will obey me, honor my wishes.

"Obey you? Honor your wishes? Go fuck yourself!"

A long silence. Then a husky, I'd rather fuck you.

"Not in this lifetime!"

Laughter. Sweetheart, I spent hours sexing you. This lifetime is endless. I promise there will be many more nights as wonderful as last night between us. You will beg me to sex you again.

I promise, I won't.

You will.

Ann ignored the voice. Instead, she looked around the unfamiliar room, frowned and tried to recall where she was and what had happened to her, but her mind was filled with blank places.

"You wiped away part of my memory," she accused.

Only the bad parts.

"I want them back."

No, you don't.

"You have no right to..."

I have every right. I'm not only your mate in every sense of the word, but your prince and protector. I will always decide what is best for you. You will allow me this privilege without argument.

"No. That isn't how it's going to be. You might have stolen my life, my memories, even my virginity..."

I stole nothing from you. I promise, you parted with your virginity quite willingly.

"You will never have control of me!"

I already do.

"An illusion, I assure you."

Truth, I promise you.

"Do you love me?"

What?

"It isn't a difficult question. Do you love me?"

Love is but a word.

"Is that annoyance I hear in your voice?"

You don't hear my voice, only my words.

"Answer the question. Do you love me?"

No. Of course not. Love had nothing to do with me sexing you and making you pregnant. I wanted you. You wanted me. If you hadn't died, I would have taken a bit of your blood, sexed you and went on my way. But you did die. I couldn't leave you alone to change. You would have awakened terribly hungry and confused.

"Oh, like I'm not confused now?"

It would have been much worse. Everything is fine.

"Everything isn't fine!"

Of course it is. Your body accepted my seed. Deed done. If it makes you feel any better, I was just as shocked you became pregnant from the first release of my seed inside you. It rarely happens with human females. But then, you weren't human. I should have expected...

"Whoa! Back up a minute. I'm not human now, you mean."

You weren't human before I changed you.

"Don't lie to me to soothe your conscience. I assure you, I was human, and you destroyed that. Destroyed me."

I don't lie, Ann. Why would I bother? You were human, yes, but you also carried a strain of vampire blood. You are descended from an ancient bloodline. How rare did you eat meat? I think extremely rare. How often did you cut yourself, just so you could taste blood?

"I never..."

You did. I saw the scars on your fingers.

Ann looked at her fingers. The blemishes were gone.

All your scars are gone now, even the attractive one at your lip. I liked that one. It made me hunger to taste your mouth. I'm sorry it vanished with your change.

I don't know where you gathered your information, but I was human, one hundred percent human.

No. You have Ancient blood. You were never pure human. Someday, at some time, a male vampire would have detected your scent. You'd have been attacked immediately.

"Oh, sort of like what you did to me?"

Witch's Magic

Not exactly. He might not have claimed you after the attack. He might have simply sexed you and left you to figure out what happened.

"Again, sort of like what you've done to me."

I haven't left you.

"It doesn't matter. Do you think for a moment I want you?"

Yes.

"Like a thorn up my ass. Get out of my life. I don't want to see you again."

It isn't happening, Ann. I'm not going away. You belong to me now, whether either one of us likes it.

"You said you didn't know I'd conceive?"

Hope is all a male vampire ever has. I hoped you'd conceive, but if a female is strong-willed, she can block a vampire's seed, prevent conception.

Hmm, guess that makes me weak-minded.

Not weak-minded. Willing.

She blinked, ignoring the voice and focusing all her attention on the annoying buzz in the room. Her gaze zeroed in on a fly across the room. There it was! Shit. Ann blinked. No way. She saw it perfectly, saw the network of dark veins webbing the clear, fragile fiber of the wings, and this was while the fly was doing acrobatics?

Ann sat up straighter on the side of the bed and held her aching head between her hands. There was no way she could see or hear a damn fly, not like she was seeing and hearing it.

In desperate need of emptying her bladder, she stood up. The room tilted crazily. She clutched the sides of her head and moaned. Jesus.

Sit down. Now!

"Stop with the bossing. I don't like it."

Get used to it. And you do not require the use of a bathroom. You might feel pressure, but there's nothing to empty, and with time, the feeling will go away. The undead rarely need to...Well, you understand my meaning I'm certain.

There was only one thing he'd said that sent her heart into a panic. "The undead? I died? I really died? No! I'm not dead! I'm right here. Alive. I'm not...I'm...I'm...What am I?"

You are Vampyre.

"I'm not a vampire!"

You are.

"I'm not a vampire..." Her voice broke. Tears choked the back of her throat. "I'm not...no, I'm...I'm not...Vampires are foul, evil creatures...like...*Nosferatu*."

Who? Who is this evil vampire, Nosferatu?

"No one. He isn't real."

Then why mention him?

"Dammit! You are Nosferatu!"

Ann...I...

For the first time, he sounded hesitant. His voice lost the superior tone she'd come to recognize.

Ann, I never meant for things to happen like they did. I didn't know you possessed the terrible weapon. You angered me. At Rushing, a male vampire has little control over his actions. If we're attacked, we attack. We launch into a feeding frenzy. Once warm blood is tasted, it is hard to stop. You died in my arms last night, not because I overfed, but because of your wound. I am sorry I couldn't save you, but I couldn't just allow you to die, either. You are much too beautiful for death. I exchanged enough blood with you for you to change.

"Change?"

Are you crying? I forbid you to cry. You will not humiliate me with a show of such weakness.

"I'm not crying. There's nothing you can do to make me cry."

Good. I'll join you in a minute.

Ann blotted the evidence of her tears from her face with the back of her hand. "Don't hurry on my account."

She lowered her head, trying to ease the light-headedness that had returned. It felt like she'd been on a cheap drunk and failed to enjoy the party. "Don't need to use the bathroom, my ass. I *have* to pee." Moaning, she staggered in the direction she thought the bathroom should be, only...no, it wasn't there. This wasn't her room or any room she'd ever seen before.

"And what a lovely ass it is."

Ann whirled and felt her jaw gape. Holy shit! There was a naked man in her room. Possibly the most gorgeous slab of beef she'd ever seen in her entire life. She lowered her gaze to his jutting cock...and quickly looked away. "Who are you?" she asked in a choked voice.

Nosferatu?

Ann jerked her gaze to meet his. Was that amusement in his eyes? Oh, God, had she really had unprotected sex with this man? If so, dammit, why couldn't she remember it? A woman should damn well remember copulating with a man who looked like this one, and one who had a dick the size of which he had no need to apologize for.

He folded his arms across his wide chest and lifted a brow. "See

anything you recognize?"

Ann licked her lips and tore her gaze away from his pride and joy. "No. I don't know it...er, you. I meant I don't know you."

He laughed and tossed a piece of filmy black material at her. "Get dressed. The night passes on swift wings. It is time to dine. We are the guests of Prince Valerian tonight. And yes, we slept together, here, in this bed, last night and all of today. Tonight, we shall sleep together again, and for all the nights left to our endless lives. I will sex you, and like last night, you will not only allow me this privilege, you will love it."

Until he said, Get dressed, she hadn't realized she was as naked as he was. Ann swayed. Her knees buckled. She knew damn well she'd have hit the hard floor if he hadn't caught her. How did he cross the room so fast?

She moaned and buried her face in his shoulder. She felt too ill to ask more questions or to appreciate his wonderful scent, but he was headed toward the bed with her, and they were both naked. She had to know. Had to ask. "Are you going to...?"

"Yes, Ann, I'm afraid I can't resist your allure. We have time." He sprawled on the bed beside her, rolled on top of her and, with a single nudge, parted her thighs and guided the broad head of his cock to her aching channel.

Ann moaned and clawed his back. "I don't think we should..." She bit her lip. Oh damn, she remembered this. She did. Remembered how it felt when he penetrated her, remembered the thickness filling her, surging inside her, his ruthless rhythm as he took her again and again.

"Easy," he said softly.

God, it was no wonder she was sore. How many times had he taken her the night before?

"Not near enough," he whispered, and settled deeper inside her. "Not nearly enough or I wouldn't still be this hard for you. You wouldn't still feel so damned good to me." He lowered his head and took her mouth. His tongue skimmed her lips and slid inside, as wet and hot as his powerful cock.

He freed her lips, his eyes burning. "I'm going to ride you, female. Ride you hard. We'll both go up in flames, I promise." In seconds, he rocked her to a fiery climax and crashed behind her. His chest heaved. She heard the pounding of his heart, his blood rushing through his veins. He looked down at her, his pale blue eyes unblinking. "Believe me.

We're going to have lots more sex, later...tonight."

"I don't know you," she whispered. "Please. I'm going to be sick."

"No, you aren't. I forbid you to be ill. You will not humiliate me by doing such a silly thing. It's the change making you feel ill. It will pass in a couple of nights, once you've adjusted to your new diet. If you're hungry, I'll feed you again."

"Again?"

He grinned, and pulled out of her. "Yes. You were actually quite greedy when it came to feeding from me last night." He rolled out of bed. "I think you have not had your fill of me, either."

"I *think* I must have fallen and hit my head. I-I, yes, I must have amnesia. I don't remember feeding from you. I don't remember sleeping with you."

"Yes, you do. You just don't want to admit you like being sexed by a vampire."

"Where am I? How long have I been here?"

"Ah, this room has been designed especially for our comfort. We're deep in the bowels of Radu Castle. I told you, you died in my arms early this morning, just before dawn. We've been together for but a single night and day." He traced his gaze over her from head to toes. "Shall I cancel the scheduled meeting soon to take place in the Great Dining Hall? We'll stay here and consummate our vows again?"

"I don't even know your name."

"Prince Ciprian Costica Drakulya. Last night I claimed you as you lay spilling your blood all over the tavern's bar. Tonight, I will introduce you to my father, and you, my First Bride, will be polite and welcoming. Later, you will not deny me any of my rights. When we sit beside each other at the dining table, and I introduce you to my chosen second Bride, you will welcome Crina with open arms."

"What? No, I will not! I will not share you with another woman."

He lifted his head, his eyes hard and merciless. "You have no say in the matter. I will claim Crina tonight and breed her."

"You dare do such a thing, never return to my bed."

"Don't presume to give me orders. Crina was to be my First Bride. I've humiliated her and her family by choosing you, a frail human, over her. I cannot, *will not*, disgrace her further by not taking her for a second Bride."

"I thought you said I wasn't human."

"Compared to Crina's ancient lineage, you are nothing."

Ann threw the filmy gown he'd given her to wear at him. "You bastard! Why? Why did you claim me if you already had a chosen bride? You never had any intention of being a faithful mate. You..."

"My intention is to gain three Brides as is the law of my people. Do not misjudge your importance to me or your role in my life. Given a choice, I would never have chosen you for one of my Brides."

"Then why did you?" Why did she feel so crushed by his words? He was a vampire for God's sake. He had no beating heart, no feelings, certainly none for her. He'd used her.

"Because it was necessary. You needed a male who can control you. You are my First Bride, but understand, love has nothing to do with it, or the desire to be faithful. Having three Brides has nothing to do with being unfaithful. It isn't frowned upon by Vampire society."

"It's frowned upon by me. You take a second bride, and we're finished! I'll leave. And guess what? I leave, and your heir goes with me. Ha!"

Ciprian stiffened. A muscle ticked in his firm jaw. "Do not threaten me, human," he snapped. "You will go nowhere. I await the birth of my heir. If you displease me in any way, I will see that you are punished for all challenges. Understand me, Ann. I rule my home. You will not be the only female at my side or in my bed. Crina is important to me. I will also select a third Bride...soon. I expect no argument from you."

"I thought..."

"What? That I cared for you? I saw you and wanted you. I've had you. I will have you again when it pleases me to do so, but you are not the only female I desire. I want Crina, too. She will conceive my child tonight. Tonight, I announce my choice for my third Bride. You will not create a scene about any of this. You will voice no objections. You will cooperate when I come for you, and when I choose to leave your bed later tonight for one of my other Brides, you will say nothing, because I will sex my other Brides when I get damn good and ready. Is this clear?" He flung the black gown back at her. "Now get dressed."

Ann stared after him, her temper flaring like a comet across a night sky. She would say nothing? She'd cooperate? Little did he know about women, especially Texan women. Human or vampire, Prince Ciprian had much to learn when it came to females. *She* needed controlling? Ha! He had his work cut out for him. She'd never been the cooperative type.

Slowly, methodically, she ripped the gown into strips and dropped

Zabitha Shay

the pieces on the floor. Let him do his worst. Let him roar his anger. *Take a second and third bride, my ass! Leave my bed to fuck another female when he got damn good and ready?* Over her dead body! She sobered instantly. Shit. It *would* be over her dead body.

Ha! There was a bright side to it.

What the hell could he do to her? She was already the undead.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The blood is the life...and it shall be mine.

~(Dracula, 1992)

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Shasta stood beside Dragos in the dining room doorway and clenched her fists. She would not punch him, she told herself, but did the vampire have to be so danged annoying?

He handed her one of the chalices of wine he held and sipped from the other. He drained the chalice, then shifted closer to her side. "Yes, I must. It gives me pleasure to annoy you, but I shall gain more pleasure when I kill you. Drink your wine. It is very sweet tonight. Delicious."

She bared her teeth at him, swallowed several sips of the wine, then turned her attention to the guests at the table. "I should warn you, Guardian, I'm not easily killed."

Dragos flashed his fangs at her. "You wouldn't be a worthy mate for Valerian if you were." He bowed from the waist and turned to leave her.

"Wait." She grabbed his arm.

He turned to face her, his eyes narrowed with warning. "Take your hand off me. You should not touch me, Valerian's woman. It is improper."

"Such a stiff neck."

His lips flattened. "Try to understand, Valerian's woman. It is the *Rushing* season for male vampires. We are horny. When a female who is in heat touches him, it isn't his neck that gets stiff. Now take your hand off me before I break your arm."

Shasta dropped her hand and swallowed hard. "Are you telling me I-I turn you on?"

"I did not say such a thing. I do not like you well enough to be turned on by you."

Shasta placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Newsflash, One Fang, I don't like you, either."

Dragos frowned. "Must you get the last word?"

"I'm afraid I must."

His lips twitched. "You should know I dislike you enough to crush every bone in your body."

"Ditto. Now who is the woman at the table? Why is she here?"

"Ah, you wonder if she might be Valerian's second Bride? You are jealous?"

"I'm not jealous. And Valerian will not take a second Bride. He promised me he wouldn't."

Dragos smiled coldly. "It is a promise he should never have made you."

"Why?"

"Because it's a promise he can't keep. It is our law. A male has the right to choose three Brides. Valerian will obey the laws of our people. He has no choice. We cannot take the risk that he produces no offspring. Our people need the security of any children he and his Brides conceive."

Shasta felt the color drain from her face. "No. He won't break his word to me. He wouldn't do that."

"You should understand you are nothing more to the prince than a vessel for his seed. Love isn't involved. He needs an heir. If you do not provide it, he will have only two choices. I'm appointed as your bodyguard by the Ancients, but I'm also here to make sure Valerian makes the right choice."

"What? What two choices?"

Dragos shook his head. "These are questions you should ask your mate. Leave them for him until after the guests have departed."

"I want answers now!"

Dragos locked his fingers around her waist and yanked her around to

face him. "You will not say or do anything to bring shame upon the prince. Do you understand? If you do so, I will drag you from the room and slice your throat. There are very important guests here tonight. You will be humble. Respectful at all times. You will stay in your place and honor the prince. His mate." He narrowed his eyes in warning. "Have I made myself clear?"

"Let go my wrist."

"I'll let go when you tell me you understand."

"I understand, One Fang. Now, let go of me."

"The woman is Crina Carwyn. She will become Ciprian Costica Drakulya's second Bride later tonight. He will make the announcement at dinner."

"She's Vampyre?"

"Yes, of course."

"Who is Ciprian?"

"You will know him when he arrives with his First Bride. They will be here shortly."

"And his First Bride agrees to Ciprian taking a second Bride?"

"That is between them. My only concern is you."

"Don't be concerned about me."

"I'm afraid I have no choice."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you'll be damned lucky if you live until dawn."

Chapter Thirty

Death—the last sleep? No, it is the final awakening.

~Sir Walter Scott

*Ru-Noc
Outside Sanctuary
Immortal Realm*

Princess Kali gave a sigh of relief when she saw Koran striding across the open field headed to her. She didn't feel totally safe without him beside her. She certainly didn't feel he was out of harm's way wandering through the palace or across the open field.

She frowned. From the look on his face, he didn't seem pleased at what he'd learned. When he reached her, he clasped her hand in his. "We must go. Now."

"All right. Where are we going?"

"To Sanctuary. Talon is living there with his new mate."

"My brother has taken a mate? Who is she?"

Koran shook his head. His pale blond hair, so light it was closer to silver than a true yellow, fell around his wide shoulders. "I know only that her name is Saylym and she has emeralds."

"Emeralds? You mean like the topaz jewels embedded on my fingernails?"

"Yes. And MeLora wants them."

"Your mother?"

Koran swallowed hard. "She has betrayed the kingdom of Ru-Noc. Betrayed your family. Your father is dead. Your mother, Queen Helayne—MeLora said the queen mated with King Kallibus."

"*What?* That's impossible. Mother would never mate with a demon. We must find Talon. He's in Sanctuary?"

"He's close to Sanctuary, but your brother, Stry disappeared days ago. No one knows what has happened to him or where he is, but I wouldn't be surprised if MeLora isn't behind his disappearance. Kali...sweetheart, he might very well be dead, too. With my mother in power, anything is possible." He squeezed her hand. "If you want free of me and my tainted family, I'll understand. But I swear to you, I had nothing to do with the atrocious acts my parents have committed against you and your family."

Kali cupped the side of his face with an unsteady hand. "I know that. You love me. You have always loved me. You would never do anything to hurt me or those I love. Come. We must seek shelter from the sun."

"I know where there's a hollow pine. We can sleep inside there today. It is deep and dark inside it."

Kali grinned. "You mean the wedding tree?"

"The wedding tree?"

"Yes. It's the magical tree in the forest where some witches and *wakens* exchange their vows. The tree is supposed to bring luck to the newly joined couple, make them fertile."

Koran frowned. "Well, we could damn sure use a bit of luck right now." He grinned. "I don't think we need help with the fertile part." He gently rubbed the small mound of her stomach. "Our son sends his love."

Kali's vision blurred with tears. Now that she was vampire and no longer a witch, her tears fell freely. "Give him my love."

"He looks like you, love, except he has inherited my eyes. The mark. I'm sorry. I fear all our children will inherit this sign they are descendents from an incestuous act."

"It isn't your fault what your parents did. You are the innocent one, as are any of our children."

Koran squeezed her hand. "Thank you. We both know it's a symbol our race abhors. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't willing to forgive what I am."

Kali pressed her trembling mouth against her mate's. "There is

nothing to forgive.”

“The covens will make our lives difficult. We will be shunned and so will our children.”

Kali’s green eyes sparked with temper. “No. I will not accept this.”

Koran shook his head. “We will have no choice. Come. We’ll rest. Tonight, we’ll find Talon.”

Chapter Thirty-One

The supreme irony of life is that hardly anyone gets out of it alive.

~Robert Heinlein

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Valerian watched Shasta cross the room toward him and knew from her tight-lipped expression, she and Dragos had quarreled or Dragos had told her...shit!

She was mad all right.

Well, he couldn't say he hadn't been warned. Dragos, as well as the others, had made it clear to him they didn't approve his choice of a First Bride or his promise to her to take only her for a Bride.

Valerian took a sip from his chalice and frowned. It wasn't necessary for any of his friends to like his Bride, but it was necessary to keep his people happy. He wanted them to love his queen just as he—he swallowed hard—just as he loved her.

Yes, she could be difficult. He knew in his heart she was going to keep him on his toes throughout their life together. She might never give him children. She just might be the death of him, because he had a feeling he'd always have to be on guard against her pouring holy water on his head.

Since her attempt to stake him had turned out so awful, he didn't

think she'd try it again, but he'd taken the precaution of hiding her supply of stakes. Living with Shasta, loving her, he'd never be bored. Damn it. When had he fallen so hard for her?

"Shasta." He pulled her close. "Is something wrong?"

She yanked her hand from his. "Don't touch me, you two-timer. I take away your right to touch me."

"You can't take away my right to touch you. And what are you talking about? I haven't two-timed you. Whatever that means."

"Yes, I can. I have. You lied to me."

"What did I lie about?"

"You know what you lied about."

Before he could say another word, his grandfather stood up and motioned for him to bring Shasta to him. Shit. That's all he needed, the two of them butting heads. "Come on, I need you to meet someone." He locked his fingers through hers. "Be nice. He's old."

"So are you."

"Yes, but I'm merely old. My grandfather is ancient."

Shasta eyed the tall, slender, debonair male waiting to be introduced to her. He might be ancient, but he showed very little sign of age. His hair was still dark, except for a bit of gray at the temples. She had a feeling the creases at the corner of his eyes were caused from laughter and not aging. He looked more like an elder brother to Valerian than his grandfather.

"Shasta, I'd like to present my grandfather, King Dracula."

"Dracula?" Shasta snorted. "You're kidding. Right?"

The elder vampire stiffened. He tilted his chin with stubborn pride. His dark eyes turned hard and cold. "You find something amusing about my name? My title?"

Shasta cleared her throat. "Uh, no. It's just that..."

"Yes? Just that what?"

"Well, uh, everyone...uh, knows there isn't a *real* Dracula."

"Everyone doesn't know shit. I assure you, I'm very real. I'm standing here, aren't I? Just because I took a sabbatical, took to my coffin for a short break, doesn't mean I died. I'm real, dammit."

"How could anyone *think* you died? You're already dead."

He stiffened even more, as if that were possible. "Young woman, I am not dead. I'm undead. There's a big difference."

"Grandfather, may I present my First Bride, Shasta LaVeau Radu."

"His only bride. Ever." She folded her arms and silently dared the

fanged leader to dispute her claim.

Dracula lifted a brow. "We have laws here, female. Our males are allowed three Brides."

"Laws I am not governed by. One bride. Me."

Dracula turned away from her, dismissing her as unimportant, and faced Valerian. "You expect me to approve your choice for a First Bride when she doesn't even know we're the undead? When she won't honor her vows and give you an heir?"

"She will honor her vows and give me a son. She just needs time."

"You don't have time to dally." Dracula turned back and eyed her. "Will you? Will you mate with Valerian tonight? Conceive his son?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He lied to me. I don't like it when I'm lied to."

"A male vampire lies to his mate to protect her. It is expected and accepted."

"No. It isn't. I don't need his protection. I can handle anything he can dish out. What I demand from him is faithfulness and truth. Always. If he expects it from me, then..."

"Aye-yi-yi... You have no rights to demand anything. You will accept the fact without fuss when I tell you Prince Valerian has a right to three Brides and he chose his second and third Brides last night while you slept. He will mate with both of them tonight. They both agree to conceive a child. Now it's your turn. It is your child who must be heir."

"No." Shasta shook her head. "You lie! He would not..." Her voice cracked. Tears filled her eyes. She stared at Valerian. "Did you choose other Brides?"

Valerian swallowed hard and glanced at Dracula. "Grandfather..."

"Did you," Shasta shouted, tears burning her eyes.

"Yes."

"You swore I'd be your only Bride. You promised."

Valerian ignored her and instead glared at his grandfather. "Grandfather..."

"Silence!" Dracula held up a hand as if he was stopping traffic. "Not a word from you. Promises! Stupid, stupid promises. You will claim your other two Brides this night and mate with them. This discussion between you and me is finished. Now I wish to talk to your First Bride." Dracula turned to her. "Valerian can't keep his promise. I will not allow it. He

should never have made such a stupid agreement with you. I'd never grant him such a right. There is a desperate need for his offspring."

"I will not share him. You say he will sex these other two females? Then one of them will become his First Bride. I am no longer willing to fill that spot."

Dracula sighed and turned to face Val. "She demands much. Why have you allowed her to believe she is of so much importance to you? First Ciprian's Bride, and now yours. I will not have these First Brides making these impossible demands. A male vampire must fuck! He must procreate. He must spread his seed."

Shasta sauntered up to Dracula. She stopped right in front of him and poked him in the chest. "Spread his seed, my ass! Valerian can spread his seed from here to Apash and back, but he will no longer spill his seed in me and do it to two other Brides, too."

Dracula backed up with every jab of her fingertip. He looked around, embarrassed. Abruptly, he slammed the flat of his hand on the table. "You are no use to my grandson. No use to our coven. You will get rid of her, Valerian!"

Silence reigned.

Valerian clenched his jaw. "I can't do that, Grandfather. Don't ask me to do such a thing."

"Ask you? I demand! This mate of yours denies you children by other Brides, as well as refuses to give you an heir? No! The Tribunal has voted. This female will be cast out of the Vampyre family. You have only one other choice."

"What? What other choice?"

Dracula lifted a brow. "You know the laws of our people. You know what the other choice is. Do you agree to it?"

"No! I will not agree to it. Never!"

"You prefer to see her dead? Watch her burn in the sun? Because I promise you, it will happen this dawn."

Valerian swallowed hard. "No." He'd watched his mother burn. Watched Mari, his fucking partner burn. Both deaths had been horrible. He couldn't allow Shasta to die in such a painful, cruel way. He couldn't lose her.

Dracula nodded. "Good. You have made the right decision."

Valerian thought his heart would explode. It pounded, a wild angry beast in agony. "Who have you chosen?"

"Dragos."

Valerian's chest heaved. His breath expelled in a rush. "I agree."

"Dragos, take her upstairs to the master suite. Bind her," Dracula ordered.

Dragos shifted his gaze to Valerian. "No, Val. I can't do this."

"You will do as I command," Dracula said, anger laced in his voice.

"Val..." Dragos' words trailed away as he looked toward his friend pleadingly. "I..."

Val nodded. "Do as our king has commanded. Do what is necessary."

Dracula pushed Shasta toward Dragos. "You know what to do, Dragos. You understand your duty?"

Dragos nodded and clamped his fingers around Shasta's wrists. "Yes."

"Do not think to disobey this royal command. If you do, if you fail, I'll take matters into my own hands. If that fails, when the first streaks of morn arrive, Shasta will be taken to the courtyard and tied to the stake there. She will die at dawn."

Chapter Thirty-Two

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

~Elie Wiesel

*Ru-Noc
The Millhouse
Immortal Realm*

Talon sat at Eldora's bedside and held her frail hand. The old witch meant a lot to his family, to Saylym. Samhain, he wished Saylym was here. He couldn't bear this alone. Eldora's skin, pale and waxen, lacked the luster of life. Laughter. Her boundless energy. It broke his heart to have to admit she was fading away.

A dark bruise fanned her forehead. The blow to her head had been lethal. Her scrawny chest rose and fell in ragged, rattling breaths that grew shallower by the minute.

Talon squeezed her hand. "Fight, sweetheart. You have grandsons who need you around for centuries yet. I need you, but most of all, Saylym needs you."

Eldora's frail eyelids fluttered. A faint smile fell on her thin lips. "My job here is done. I'll be happy to join my Saul. I know he waits for me." The old witch's heart bled tears. "I'll miss my baby. Saylym has been my life. I was so blessed to have her for my daughter." She drew a shaky breath. "Her journey has only begun, but mine has ended. She loves you, Talon. No matter what happens in the future, no matter how hopeless

things appear, remember she loves and needs you."

Talon wiped tears from his face with one hand. "I don't know where she is. They took her."

"You will be fine."

"We won't be fine without you."

"I'll be watching over you, both of you. Always."

"Who did this to you?"

"It doesn't matter. Your job is to find Saylym. She's in trouble."

"I don't know where they took her or who took her. You have to tell me."

"Look to Annu Mountain for your answers. Look to King Kallibus for help. He can be your salvation. Zebus, he..."

Her words trailed away on a strangled breath. Eldora took one final, ragged breath, sighed, and slipped into the *Shadow Land* of her kind.

Numb, Talon stared at the sweet old lady. His mind raced. Gone. Eldora was gone. He knew in his heart the blame for this lay on Zebus. Her life ended by that bastard demon. "No. No! Please."

He swallowed hard, but the ache didn't ease. Tears welled and blurred his vision until he could no longer see clearly, until they rained down his face. Slowly, he laid his head on the old witch's scrawny bosom and wept. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Hannah patted his shoulder. "She's gone, Talon. We have to let her go. *You* have to let go. Her soul will rejoin her body one day. Right now, Saylym needs you. You have to find your mate."

Talon lifted his head and brushed the tears away in one swipe of his hand. "Shh. Someone's here."

Sage nodded and grabbed Hannah. "Get in the closet."

"No. I'm not hiding like a coward."

"It's not cowardly to keep our son safe."

A knock at the front door had all three whipping around, staring at the front door.

Talon stood up and marched across the room.

"Talon! No!" Sage called in a loud whisper.

Talon shook his head. "If it was the enemy, he wouldn't knock." He twisted the doorknob. For a moment, he stared at the couple on his front porch. His jaw gaped. "Captain Koran? Kali? Gods!" Talon couldn't keep the ice out of his voice. Koran was welcome. However, Kali was half demon. He couldn't trust her. "What are you doing here?"

Kali eyed her brother. "May we come in?"

"No."

"Talon." Koran hugged Kali close. "Your sister is my mate. I'm sorry if you do not approve of me, but she carries my son. We need a place to hide, but Kali cannot enter your house unless you invite her inside."

Talon shook his head. "I can't risk her presence in my home. Not now."

Kali swallowed hard. "I know my being a vampire is off-putting, but I need your help. Koran and I need your help."

"Vampire?"

Kali nodded. "Isn't that why you won't allow me inside?"

"No. You're half demon. Zebus and his army of demons attacked Sanctuary this morning. I can't allow anyone near my babies who have a connection with the demons. Please leave here."

Koran frowned. "If Kali is half demon, then aren't you also?"

"No." Talon shook his head. "According to our mother, King Kallibus is Kali and Stry's father. King Darak was my father."

Kali stared at her brother, shock on her face. "I don't understand. But I can't deal with this. I've been changed into a vampire. That's all I can handle right now, and some ancient witch queen embedded topaz jewels in my nail beds. My fingers still burn, and dammit, I can never run in the sunshine again!"

Talon grabbed her hands and eyed the precious stones. He stepped aside. "Come in. Those jewels mean you're part of whatever is happening. Saylym has emeralds, and Hannah has rubies."

Kali and Koran stepped past Talon. Kali sighed and sat down. "Thank you. When dawn approaches, I have to have a dark place to sleep. Where is Stry?"

"I don't know where he is or what's happened to him. I have a basement. I'll see a bed is readied there for you and Koran. You're really a vampire now?"

"Yes," Kali said quietly. "And before you ask, yes, I have to have blood to survive."

"You can tell me all about it later. First, my mate has been taken hostage by Zebus. I have to find her."

"I'll help you search," Koran said. "Do you know where he took her?"

"No. I thought I'd search the magical forest first, then move on to Annu Mountain."

"The caverns? You know the demon's sorcery well. You will not find your way in the caverns."

"I have to try."

Koran frowned. "What's going on, Talon? Why is there a demon army camped around Sanctuary?"

"What? I didn't know there was. Whose army is it?"

Koran frowned and slid his arm around Kali's waist in a protective gesture. "We came to you thinking we'd be safe here, but the army, I felt the menace in it. I believe Zebus is in control of it. He must have plans to attack Sanctuary. Do you have any idea why?"

"Yes. He wants the witches. He plans to give them to his army. Breed them this Beltane. If they succeed, the next babies all born will be half demon. He will keep doing this, year after year, until finally, the *waken's* bloodline is destroyed. We will become extinct."

Kali cupped the tiny mound of her stomach. "Thank gods I am already bred by a full-blood *waken*."

Talon's brows furrowed. "Your child will still be part demon, Kali."

Kali nodded. "Yes, but he will also be part vampire and part *waken*. He will not owe loyalty to the demons. And I will raise him Vampyre. I have no choice. He will have to feed as a vampire feeds."

"And you? Who supplies your food?"

"I did," Koran said. "You will have to. I'm infected with parasites."

Kali leaned her head on Koran's shoulder. Koran held her close, but his question was directed to Talon. "Do you think Zebus will attack again?"

"Yes," Talon replied.

Koran let out a deep breath. "You should know trouble might be right behind us."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Valerian's brother, Brasov. He has claimed a right to the Vampyre throne. He's evil, Talon. He wants Kali. It is because of him Kali has been changed."

Talon sighed. "We aren't prepared for a war with demons, much less one with a vampire army. We'll be annihilated."

"It's worse," Koran stated. "Brasov and Black Drayke are working together. If Brasov brings his *Changelings* and the zombie army he's building and joins forces with Zebus' demons...it will be a bloodbath."

Zabitha Shay

Talon rubbed a hand across his mouth. “*Sheeaha*. We’ll have to make plans when I return. I have to search for Saylym. She’s my first priority, and I have a witch to bury.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people.

~Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Valerian felt his insides squeeze with terror. The Great Dining Hall wavered as his vision blurred. Dracula, his grandfather, had commanded Dragos to take Shasta upstairs.

How could Dracula do such a thing knowing he loved her?

Dragos paused in front of him. Shasta glared at both of them. "I don't know what is going on here, but..."

"Shut up," Valerian snapped. "Your chance to prevent this from happening has come and gone." He turned to Dragos. "I know Vampyre law. I understand...When left with no choice...do what must be done."

"Val...I..."

"Do it or she will die."

"I can't. You love..."

"Listen to me, Dragos. The only thing I will not forgive you for is her death. I will not watch her die in the morning sun. Do what must be done."

"But..."

"Do it!"

Dragos nodded. "I will not fail you."

"I know."

Valerian watched his friend guide Shasta out of the Great Dining Hall and up the winding staircase. He watched with a heavy heart when Dragos turned right with Shasta at the top and headed down the hall toward the master suite.

Dracula stepped up. "Valerian..."

Val held up his hand. Red tears blurred his vision. "Don't say anything to me. You have just sent my mate away with another male with a royal command for him to breed her. I have nothing to say to you."

"She would never bend to your will. Like Dragos tried to say, you love her. Therefore, you cannot use your strength of will on her."

"And do you not think Dragos loves her? Do you not think I know how he feels about her?"

"I know. I thought you'd prefer someone who will take gentle care with her feelings and not hurt her. Yes, Dragos loves her, but he loves you, too. He'll not damage her soul. She has to be bred. The clan needs this child. You need an heir. Dragos is of your bloodline. My bloodline. There can be no question the child is from your lineage. His son will be the same as yours."

Valerian shook his head. "No. It isn't the same. You have no idea what you've done to Shasta. To me. To Dragos. I have to stop this. I can't...I can't...let this happen." Valerian turned and started toward the wide spiral staircase.

Dracula nodded to the guards posted within the Hall. "Seize him!"

Six guards wrestled Valerian to the floor and bound his arms behind his back. The vampires helped him to his feet and turned him to face their king.

"Your Majesty," one of the guards said, "what..."

Dracula waved his hands in front of Valerian's face. Valerian choked. His throat tightened from the force of his powers instantly drained from his body. He gasped. "Stop it! What are you doing?"

"Seat him at the table and bind him to the chair."

The vampire guards settled Val in a chair, produced chains from their arsenal of supplies and wrapped the icy links around and around his arms and chest and padlocked him to the chair. With his powers drained, he couldn't apply enough pressure to snap the links. "This is insane! Give me back my powers! What if we're attacked? I'll be helpless

to protect you."

"Don't be ridiculous. You think Brasov would bother to attack now that he's secured an heir? He has no need. Once Dragos has impregnated your Bride, I will return everything that is yours. Now, we will sit here and wait for Dragos to do his duty. We wait for dawn."

Rage and frustration filled Valerian. "I'm the one who summoned you here. This isn't the way I wanted you to help."

Dracula stiffened. "Do not think me a fool. I know who summoned me and why. Securing your heir is the first step in this battle. You have failed in this duty. Now it will be done for you."

Valerian glared at his grandfather. "I will never forgive you for this."

Dracula shrugged. "I have not asked for your forgiveness. I have always done what must be done for the benefit of our clan. We all make sacrifices. So must you. If it means your First Bride is fucked and bred by another male from our clan, then that's the way it will be. You have to have an heir, or Brasov will inherit the crown."

"I don't care!"

"Have a care, Valerian. Brasov sent a message earlier in the evening. He has his First Bride. He has secured his heir. He sent a request to present her to the Ancients tomorrow night. The Tribunal already leans his way. The only thing to prevent it is for your First Bride to conceive. We do not have the luxury of time. This deed will be accomplished in the next four hours. We wait here."

"You authorized the rape of my Bride."

"Rape will not be necessary. Trust me, your Bride will be very cooperative."

Valerian's lips parted, but for a moment he was speechless. "What makes you think Shasta will willingly give herself to Dragos or allow him to breed her?"

"I know she will."

"What did you give her?"

"An aphrodisiac in her wine. A generous dose. Plus, she's in heat. She will cooperate with Dragos for the next four hours. When they rejoin us, your Bride will be pregnant. While Dragos is performing your job upstairs, you may select your second and third Brides. Perhaps you can convince them to conceive your child."

"You forced me to lie to my Bride and tell her I'd already chosen them. I will not be a part of this farce any more. I will not choose more

Brides. I swore to Shasta she was my only Bride. I intend to keep my word. I'm done here. Brasov can have the crown, and the Ancients and you can deal with the trouble he brings upon your heads."

"Valerian! You can't throw everything away for this female!"

"Watch me. If you allow Dragos to breed my mate, I'll give the crown to Brasov."

"No, you won't, because you know the consequences if he rules. You cannot be so selfish or endanger our clan in this manner all because of a female."

Before Valerian could say anything else, Rennie entered the Great Dining Hall. "Master, there is a *Changeling* at the door. He and his Bride seek shelter within the castle."

"What?" Dracula said. "A *Changeling*? Is he one of our *Changelings*?"

"No, Master."

"Do not let him inside," Valerian said, struggling to break his bonds. "He has to be a spy for Brasov."

"I don't think so, Master. He knew Sorina. Although I already knew it, he confirmed it was because of Brasov my sweet granddaughter took her life. He didn't have to tell me that. I know this *Changeling*. He has lived among the villagers for centuries. He's always been kind. His mate is with child. He said to tell you the babe belongs to him, but Brasov is claiming it in order to gain the crown, and it can't be proved the babe isn't Brasov's."

"Does the *Changeling* state whether Brasov fucked this female?" Dracula asked.

Rennie nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. He freely admits Brasov mated with her several times first."

Valerian frowned. "Male *Changelings* cannot seed females, so it's very likely it is Brasov's child."

"Where did you hear such nonsense?" Dracula asked, sounding annoyed. "Of course *Changelings* can seed a female. They are as virile as any vampire at *Rushing*. But if Brasov says the babe is his, then his word will be taken over the *Changeling's*. Bring this creature to me, and his Bride. She, at least, has done her duty!"

Rennie escorted Apostol and Ameer to the Great Hall.

"What do you want?" Valerian asked. "Why do you seek our help?"

Apostol held Ameer close to his side. His chin lifted. His fangs shot out. It was obvious he had every intention of protecting the female beside him if necessary. "You look very much like Brasov. What trickery

is this?"

"We're twins. Did no one tell you?"

"No. I knew you are brothers, but that is all. My mate is with child. Brasov believes the babe is his. It isn't. As soon as he realizes it's mine, he'll kill her. I have to get her somewhere safe. Please. We need help. I can't fight him by myself."

Dracula snorted. "You can't fight him at all. He is your maker." He eyed Ameer. "Good gods, the female possess Vadim blood."

There was a stir in the room, then abrupt chatter.

"What are you suggesting?" Dragomir asked.

"I'm not suggesting anything. She is a descendent of Alexandru. We must protect her at all costs." He motioned for one of the guards. "Escort them to my summer estates in Austria. Tell the guards there I want around-the-clock protection for this couple. Tell them to open all the rooms upstairs and to darken the windows. The clans and I will arrive in a couple of nights."

The guard bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty. It will be done."

Dragos tightened the knot in the rope around Shasta's wrists, his expression grim. "Why do you have to be so stubborn, female? Agree to give Valerian an heir, and I will set you free. You will live. Your refusal to be bred by the prince, is it worth dying for?"

"You know, I've been trying and trying to figure out who you remind of."

Dragos lifted a brow. "I didn't know I reminded you of anyone."

"I finally got it. You look a lot like Adrian Paul."

"Who is this Adrian Paul? The name sounds more human than Vampyre."

Shasta struggled with the knot in the rope. "It's a human name. He's an actor. He played some kind of magical, long-living Highlander. The series was required viewing at the academy."

"What is there about me that reminds you of him?"

Shasta rolled her eyes. "The same dark hair slicked back and bound at your nape. Black-as-sin eyes. Same height and build. Sensual mouth. Attractive. Sexy. A female's wet dream."

"You should not say such improper things to me. You are Valerian's

woman."

"Am I? I don't think that applies any longer. Besides, it doesn't mean I'm blind or dead. Oh, scratch that last part. I am dead."

"You are undead. Why do you not allow Val to breed you? Do you not find him...attractive? Sexy? A wet dream?"

"I'm not his brood mare."

"That is not an answer. We need you pregnant."

"We?"

"You know my meaning. You must conceive. Leave that knot alone, or I'll tie it harder."

"Where's Pinky? I want my *Futhar*."

Dragos sighed. "You choose to ignore the problems you have created for all of us? You believe they will go away? Pinky is being looked after. He has a nasty bump on his head. He's concussed and cannot be moved." Dragos locked the door behind them, moved her to one side and pushed a high-backed chair to the center of the room. "Sit down."

"No."

"No more games, Shasta. If you were my woman, I'd fuck you, blast through the barriers of your mind, plant my babe in your belly and be done with it. You would not be given a choice, then this type of situation would not arise. You would not have to face death, because you are too stubborn for your own good."

Shasta ignored the tears stinging her eyes and glared at him. "Good thing for me I'm not your woman."

Dragos sighed. "You think that matters now? Makes a difference?"

Shasta blinked. "What do you mean?"

"What the fuck do you think I mean?"

"I-I don't know." Gods, he smelled hot. His scent wrapped around her, hot and sensual. Fire sizzled through her blood. She had a sudden need to taste him, taste his mouth, his skin.

Shasta licked her dry lips.

What the hell was wrong with her?

Dragos' dark eyes zeroed in on the silken glide of her tongue. "Don't do that again."

"What? What did I do? If you don't free me, Valerian will kill you for tying me up like this."

"And if I don't fuck you, you will die."

"What? No. You said you're indifferent to me."

Dragos freed her hands and pressed them to his zipper. "Does that

feel like indifference to you? I haven't been indifferent to you since the first time you summoned me to your table at the tavern."

"Whoa. I wasn't coming on to you."

"I'm not a fool. I know you weren't coming on to me. Understand, woman, I haven't sexed a female in a long, long time. I'm horny as hell, and I want you with every fiber of my being. I would *never* have touched you, never allowed you to know I desire you, but that choice was taken away from me."

Shasta swallowed hard, but for the life of her, she could not move her hands from his hard shaft. His cock jerked. It took her several seconds to realize she was petting it like it was a damned beast that needed to be soothed. Hell, she was actually crooning to it in the back of her throat. She jerked her hands away. "I-I'm sorry. I-I'm not a tease. I don't know why I..."

Dragos yanked down his zipper. Shasta fastened her gaze on his jutting cock. It bobbed like a buoy on an ocean. She licked her lips and heard his low growl. Gods, his cock was thicker than his wrists. The shiny head looked delicious and engorged. He grabbed her hand and wrapped her fingers as far around the circumference as they'd reach.

Shasta slid her fingers up and down the hard length. Hesitantly, she smoothed the tip of her thumb along the tiny slit and gently rubbed the milky drops of fluid over the broad head.

She heard the sharp catch of his breath in his throat. "There is no indifference," he groaned. "I ache for you."

He lifted her from the chair and backed her against the door. "I want you, Shasta, more than I thought I'd ever want a female." He thrust his fingers into the sides of her hair, lowered his head and devoured her mouth.

Dragos slid his wet tongue along the seam of her mouth, slipped inside. Shasta curled her fingers in his shirt. Their tongues tangled, battled, mated. Slowly, he freed her mouth and pressed his forehead against hers. His chest heaved with ragged breaths. "There is no indifference. I'd die for you."

"Something has happened to change us?" Shasta breathed.

"Yes. Something happened."

She swallowed hard. "What? You've done nothing to make me want you. I've done nothing to make you decide to...to..."

"It isn't what I have done or what you have done, but what has been

done to us.”

“Us?”

“To you. To me.”

“What?”

“We’ve been given a powerful aphrodisiac.”

“How? When?”

“Our wine.”

“You knew?”

“Yes.”

“But...why did you drink yours?”

“Because I thought it might make it easier for both of us. I want you, Shasta. You feel how much I want you, but no matter how badly I want you, I would never, *never* have touched you. I would not betray Val like that. I couldn’t...I can’t sex you without...I needed the aphrodisiac. Dracula knew it. He *knew*. Dammit. He knew I wanted you.”

“Valerian will kill you if you touch me.”

“No. He won’t. He understands the laws of our people. He knows I was sent up here with you to fuck you. I’ve no doubt Val hates the thought of me touching you, but Dracula will never allow him up the stairs to prevent our mating. Valerian has no choice but to share you with me. He has no choice but to accept the child we will make together.”

“No.” Shasta shook her head. “You lie! Valerian would not agree to share me. He would not give his consent. I will not let you make me pregnant.”

“He gave his consent when he told me to do whatever is necessary. He allowed me to take you from the Great Hall. He thought you wouldn’t accept my seed. What he didn’t know is that our wine was laced, yours with a powerful herb that will open your mind. You will take my seed to your womb.”

“We can resist the aphrodisiac.”

Impatience spread across his dark face. Dragos locked his fingers around her upper arms and dragged her close. His head swooped, and his mouth crushed hers. Shasta gasped, parted her lips and accepted him inside. Reluctantly, Dragos freed her mouth. “Still think we can resist? One kiss and we’re both on fire. If we fight it, it will only worsen.”

“We’ll fight it. We have to fight it. We can beat it.”

Dragos wiped a bead of perspiration from his brow with his thumb tip. “You don’t understand, sweetheart. If I don’t fuck you, breed you,

Witch's Magic

Dracula will come up here and do the deed himself. He isn't titled the *Impaler* for nothing. Your choice...him or me."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Life is just one damned thing after another.

~Elbert Hubbard

*Ru-Noc
Annu Mountain
Noddon Caverns
Immortal Realm*

Deep inside the Noddon Caverns, Zebus ambled down a long hall. Kyma, his only child and son, walked beside him. Kyma's silence soothed him. Zebus eyed his tall, muscular son and wondered how he'd ever produced such a handsome demon from his own loins.

Kyma's mother, of course.

Verlyne had been the loveliest female he'd ever seen. She possessed a wealth of long black hair. Her vivid blue eyes were shocking in their intensity. Half witch, half human, an *Impure* who was hated by all pure-blooded witches.

But *he* wasn't a witch.

From the first moment he saw Verlyne, he'd fallen hopelessly in love with her. Her gentleness aroused him to the point he thought he'd die from the ache. Her beauty was sunlight in a world filled with darkness and the ever-growing need to reproduce.

His brother, King Kallibus, had formulated a plan, a way to change the ugliness of their species and make them more appealing to the females who dwelled in the world of light.

Witch's Magic

It meant invading the witches during their mating season and breeding the females, something they'd never done.

Kallibus set the best chemists to work, ordering them to come up with a formula to make the witches sterile year-round. Then at breeding time, they'd be given an antidote just before a demon bred a witch.

The king believed with enough time, the *wakens* would be wiped out, and there would be no pure-blood witches left. The theory had worked very well. The *wakens* were few and weak.

Kallibus would have been content to just let everything play itself out and the *waken's* bloodline die a slow death. So would he, except for the one thing that taught him hatred.

Zebus despised all *wakens*, but he especially detested King Darak and Prince Talon. He swore vengeance. He vowed he'd kill King Darak, and he swore to one day capture the female Prince Talon eventually loved.

The year Zebus met Verlyne, Beltane arrived hot and sensual. Demons traveled above to find witches to breed. Their orders from King Kallibus were to give no quarter. They must breed each and every witch they came across regardless of her willingness to surrender.

When Zebus invaded the garden where Verlyne sat quietly, his heart melted. Even though she was ready for breeding, he couldn't bring himself to attack her.

Instead, he set out to win her heart. He wooed her with an intensity he knew overwhelmed her. She'd been blind to his ugliness...literally. Blind, yes. She'd still known what he was.

Verlyne insisted on touching him, exploring his tough, leathery skin. He'd been absolutely terrified he'd lose control and one of his parasites would escape and invade her body. When he'd voiced his concern, she'd placed a spell over the worms and sent them into a deep sleep.

Gently, she traced her sensitive fingertips over his face. She never recoiled from what he was. Verlyne explored every inch of his body, sliding her fingers down his wide chest, over his hard belly and along his engorged cock. By the gods, he'd never felt anything as wonderful as her sweet touch.

His sac tightened painfully as she gently cupped it.

He knew their first mating hurt her, but Verlyne accepted him inside her body even as tears slid down her face. She willingly mated with him, knowing she didn't have to fear he'd steal her soul because she was an *Impure*.

Oh, how he loved her.

Verlyne was the one and only female he ever made love to with his heart and his soul. He took her innocence, savored the knowledge he was the first to touch her, hold her, kiss her. She responded wildly to his hard thrusts, his heated touches. No one had been more shocked than he when she conceived with their first joining.

When the time came for him to return to his realm, he couldn't leave her. She carried his son. A prince. He wasn't about to risk losing her or the child. Because Verlyne had no clear idea of light, the gloomy world of Ayrumus held no fear for her.

When Kyma was born, Zebus knew no greater happiness. Like all species, his family was precious to him. He thought there was nothing more to be added to make his life complete. Ten wonderful, satisfying years raced by.

Beltane came and went as always; then their eleventh mating season arrived. Verlyne conceived. The news spread through Ayrumus. It was a time to celebrate, a time of elation throughout Ayrumus. A second son. Another prince. Verlyne wept tears of joy, but Zebus roared his happiness. Another son. A brother for Kyma. Nybus, the new babe, was healthy and rooted strong in his mother's womb.

With hindsight, Zebus knew he never should have allowed Verlyne to return to Sanctuary alone. His heart, too soft when it came to her, couldn't refuse her anything, but neither could he go with her.

King Kallibus, monarch ruler of Ayrumus and Zebus' only brother, had called an emergency meeting of the Royal Council. Zebus' vote was necessary to pass a new bill. He had to attend the unscheduled meeting.

Reluctantly, Zebus agreed to allow Verlyne to return to Sanctuary to share the wonderful news of their new baby with her mother. It was the last time he saw his mate alive.

"You're deep in thought, Father. Is something wrong?"

Zebus jerked out of the painful memories of the past and shook his head. "For the first time in many centuries, something is right. I have a wonderful gift for you, my son."

Kyma looked at him questioningly. "Really? What is this wonderful gift?"

"I've captured a female for your mating pleasure. She is yours to do with what you will for as long as you want her."

Kyma shook his head, his fierce blue eyes so like his mother's. "Don't you think I'm a bit old for you to find me a woman to fuck?"

Witch's Magic

"I assure you, you will want this female."

"I swear, Father, I get more than my fair share. One female is as good as another."

"No. Not when it comes to choosing your eternal mate."

"I'm not ready to settle for an eternal mate."

Zebus laughed. "I want to hear you say that after you see her, fuck her, and learn who she is."

"What makes her so special?"

"One, she's a beautiful specimen, something we are rarely able to capture. Two, she's part of your finals, your class assignment. The students, as well as several professors, will observe your mating technique and take notes. Three, she'll be given injections of an experimental drug to keep her calm and compliant. Four, who she is... Well, does the name Prince Talon bring back memories?"

Kyma frowned. "What does he have to do with this?"

"The female is his mate."

"By the gods, you captured Talon's female?"

"She's yours, my son. Mate with her. After that, if you no longer want her, you may give her to the demon army with my blessings."

Kyma shrugged. "I'm positive a single mating will suffice."

"We'll see."

Saylym opened her eyes, blinked and stared at the bumpy, uneven stone ceiling. She tried to swallow, but her mouth and throat were bone-dry.

Shivering, it suddenly dawned on her she was lying on an exam table, naked. What? She jerked her wrists, but her arms rose but a scant inch off the table. Bloody hell! Her wrists were bound with leather straps, her legs spread wide in the air, her ankles up in stirrups.

Her heart pounded. Why was she stripped naked and trussed up like this? For nothing good, she was sure. Samhain. *Talon*. Tears welled into her eyes. He'd never forgive her if another male touched her.

She closed her eyes against the certain knowledge of what was going to happen here and the pain of losing Talon's love and respect. Even if she somehow managed to escape the restraints, she didn't have a clue where she was or how to reach the safety of her realm.

Since it was a demon that captured her, she figured she was deep in the bowels of Annu Mountain. Talon had told her many times the network of the Noddon Caverns was a labyrinth of endless dead-end caves.

Nausea rose to the back of her throat. Her babies. Would she ever see her sons again? Her mate? An icy lump settled in the pit of her stomach. It twisted and tightened around her guts until it cut off her breath. She had an awful feeling things were about to become very bad indeed.

She heard a slight scuffle behind her, but couldn't see. "Who's there?"

A slight sting to her right arm and heat rushed through her veins. Ah, now that felt delicious. So warm. So cozy. Her thoughts drifted into a hazy comfort zone. Oh, yes. This woozy, calm feeling was utterly incredible. Darkness clouded her vision. Her mind. Her memory.

"Gods, she's beautiful, Professor Shomus." A husky, masculine voice near the foot of the table slid over her skin like a warm night. Hot. Sexy.

"Mmm. Sexy voice," she mumbled in a low whisper.

"What did she say?" Sexy Voice again.

Saylym tried to lift her head to see him, to see who possessed such a melting, sensual voice, but all she saw was a tangle of midnight dark hair around his face. Who was he? Oooh, but he sounded hot! All that long black hair, why was it familiar? Who did it remind her of?

"Talon?" She croaked the word past dry lips.

"What did she say?" The sexy voice—huskier, deeper. "She has the voice of an angel, does she not? The body of a goddess?"

"Indeed. Your father and I agree she's perfect for you. Think how incredibly beautiful your offspring will be."

"Our offspring?"

"You do want to fuck her? Breed her?"

"I'm certain you know the answers to those questions."

"No," Saylym whispered. "Don't...toush...me."

"I can't understand what she's saying. Her speech is slurred, Professor."

"Not to worry. It's merely a reaction to the drugs. It'll wear off with time."

"What did she say?"

"Who knows? I'll stuff a gag in her mouth."

"No. Don't do that."

"But..."

"I want to hear what she says when I fuck her."

Saylym blinked. Her breath caught in her lungs. She squirmed, yanked on the restraints around her wrists. This wasn't right. What was going on?

"Here now," the older voice snapped, out of range of her vision. "Stop it. Stop fighting. You'll only hurt yourself."

"Letsh-me-go!"

"I'll have to gag her, Prince Kyma. She'll disturb the class otherwise."

"No. Give her another injection; then free her wrists."

"That is a mistake. It might not calm her enough."

"Then give her a larger dose. I want her to accept me without the restrictions around her wrists. Do it!"

"As you say, my Prince." The professor sighed. "Do you want her ankles freed, too?"

"No. She's in the perfect position for me."

The professor snickered. "She is, indeed."

Saylym felt the prick of a needle in her arm, the same hot rush of liquid in her vein. Heat spread like a brush fire through her body. Oh, gods, she felt weird, like she was floating away on a cloud of flames.

What had he injected into her?

"That makes four doses of the new drug." Older Voice again.

Four doses? What drug?

Saylym sighed as her wrists were freed. Light-headedness washed over her. She tried to sit up, but fell back, breathing hard. The warmth grew hotter and hotter. It spread and spread until she thought her body would ignite from a single spark. Heat fogged her brain and burrowed down her spine to attack her feminine channel.

She felt her lips curve into a smile. Delicious. She felt utterly delicious. Why was she fighting? This was going to be good. She licked her dry lips in anticipation.

Saylym waited eagerly to see what Sexy Voice was going to do to her. He sounded so hot. She bet whatever he did to her would be yummy.

"Why is she smiling, Professor?"

Soft laughter. "The drug finally kicked in. She'll be much more yielding now."

Yielding? What was wrong with her? She was not a submissive person. They couldn't make her compliant. Her body tingled. Between her thighs, she ached. She needed...*who?* Hot...so...hot. Yes, she needed...Sexy Voice. No. No. That was wrong.

A handsome face wavered before her. She squeezed her eyes tight and fought to remember something. *Anything!* A face, dark, loving. *Talon!* Her mate. Where was he? She needed him. She needed his touch, his body joined to hers.

Masculine fingers, long and slightly calloused, sifted through the silver curls between her thighs. Yes. That was the way. That was what she needed. His exploring strokes. *Touch me!*

"Do all witches have a nest of hair between their legs?"

"Yes."

"Like this?"

"Different colors. This witch is unique. She's an *Impure*."

"My mother was an *Impure*. She possessed this same rare beauty?"

"Yes. For some reason, *Impures* are incredibly lovely. Her fair skin, odd-colored hair and strange eyes are extremely unusual. She's descended from royalty. Her bloodline is indisputable, but the most distinctive thing is the fact she's the granddaughter of a High Wizard. It's why her eyes spark and look so strange. It is also what makes her worthy for a prince."

"I could look at her all day."

Saylym frowned. Sexy Voice again. He wanted to look at her? Well, she guessed he was getting an eyeful with her stretched out on the table naked as a plucked bird. And how did the older voice know so much about her?

"Is she fertile?"

"Yes." Older Voice. He was just chock-full of information.

How did he know she was fertile?

She wasn't fertile. No. No, she wasn't. She'd given birth only...She frowned. When? How long ago had it been? Saylym whimpered. Who were these two voices gawking at her? Studying her? Why did they discuss her like she was a specimen?

"Do you accept her for your mate?"

"Yes."

"You're certain? You haven't mated with her yet."

"I accept her, Professor. How can I resist a beauty like this? I want her."

"You will please your father. Hold out your arm."

Saylym watched, perplexed, as the older man took the younger one's wrist and drew a wickedly sharp athame across it. Dark blood the color of river mud oozed thickly down the muscular arm and dripped onto

her belly. The droplets of blood added to the heat scalding her bloodstream and body. It felt as if the blood seeped inside her flesh and crawled inside her womb.

Her womb clenched and unclenched with urgent spasms.

She moaned at the fire building inside her.

"What is happening, Professor? Is she in pain?"

"No. She isn't in pain. Her body is fusing an egg. It will squeeze into her womb and wait for your seed to fertilize it." Older Voice leaned over her, smiling.

She smiled back. "Hi," she said thickly. Bloody hell, what was wrong with her voice? "I'm Shash...lym."

"Yes, my dear, I know who you are. Here beside me is Prince Kyma. He wishes to mate with you."

"Princh Kys...ma." She still couldn't see him clearly. Her eyes simply refused to focus, and her speech worsened by the minute. What was wrong with her?

"Prince Kyma not only wishes to mate with you, but he wants you for his eternal mate...his bride. Will you agree to the ceremony?"

"Yesh. He shounds...so...shexy. Can't...speesh very...wellsh."

"Don't worry. It will soon pass once your body adjusts to the drugs."

A startled cry escaped her when Older Voice lifted her right arm and slashed her wrist. "Now, Kyma, mingle your blood with hers."

Kyma pressed his bleeding wrist over the cut on hers. Liquid fire, hot and fierce, shimmered between their linked wrists. The wounds sizzled, then fused shut.

Golden lights circled around them. They swirled and twirled, then dove inside her belly. Saylym gasped. Her body arched as the burning heat filled her insides and slowly settled in her womb, white-hot and blazing.

"I, Kyma, Prince of Dymus, heir to the royal throne, do hereby claim you, *Impure* witch from Sanctuary, for my eternal mate. From this day forward, you are mine. You will be known only as Princess Rausha Angel. You will accept my seed inside your womb and bear my children. You will never allow another male to touch you. You will always see to my needs and happiness. In return, I will touch no other female. I will protect you always. I will give you sons. These are my sacred vows to you."

Older Voice leaned closer. "Princess Rausha, you will accept Prince

Kyma as your eternal mate? You will give him sons? Daughters? Mate with him, and only him, from this day forward?"

"Yesh."

"You are one, Prince Kyma. You've chosen wisely. You're very lucky. Not every male is mated to such a beautiful witch."

"I know."

Kyma. Sexy Voice's name floated through Saylym's mind. It burned deep inside her brain. Kyma. Her mate. Oh, how she adored him. Loved him. Mmm. Kyma. She liked the sound of it, the sound of his voice. *Kyma.*

"The class, and of course your father and several other professors, will witness the first mating from behind the theatre glass. Everything will be documented and recorded in our history records. If there is ever any question or doubt she accepted you, we have numerous witnesses. No one will be able to dispute the fact she gave herself to you without duress."

"The drugs? Will they not argue the drugs altered her mind? Forced her compliance?"

"What drugs? There is nothing recorded about the use of drugs, and she will never remember the injections."

"Of course, Professor."

"Did you take the medication I gave you?"

"Yes."

"Two pills?"

"Yes."

"Are they working for you?"

Soft laughter. "My cock's so hard my balls feel like rocks. I didn't know they could hurt so badly."

More laughter. "Good. You're ready. She belongs to you now, Kyma. Make your father proud."

No! No! This was wrong. She didn't belong to him. She belonged to...whom? Kyma. Oh, yes...she belonged to Sexy Voice. Her body was on fire for him. She couldn't wait for him to mate with her.

Saylym flinched when Kyma stroked her clit. He teased it with light, subtle touches; then slowly, he slid a long finger inside her, probed and wiggled and worked it in and out of her. "Ahh. Very warm, Professor." He grunted. "Feels like thick melted honey. She's small and tight. It's going to be difficult..."

"You'll manage. Take your time."

"Yes. I will."

Saylym groaned. She squeezed her thighs tightly together, but still he didn't hesitate. He explored her thoroughly. His teasing touches added fuel to the fire already roaring inside her.

She heard the sexy voice named Kyma breathe hard, felt the smooth strokes of his finger delve in and out of her. Bloody hell! He was killing her with his slow finger fucking! Saylym curled her fingernails into her palms, ignored the pain of the crescent cuts and fought against the orgasm quickly rising inside her.

Somewhere in the back of her hazy mind she wanted to scream her objections. He had no right to touch her. No right. But then her body betrayed her. She wanted him desperately. Needed him.

Spasms curled in her belly. Flames licked at her insides.

She bucked wildly, met each stroke of the thick length of his finger. Ahh. It felt wonderful. Why did she object to his touching her? He had every right. She was his mate. His mate.

His blood churned faster and faster in her veins. It swirled like a red river inside her. The heat built and built until she thought she'd scream with the need to climax. Excitement jittered along her spine. *Yes. I want you. Now!*

"Professor! I'm..." Sexy Voice again. Hoarse. Choked.

"You've waited long enough. Take your reward. You are both more than ready."

Sexy Voice slid his finger out of her and groaned. She heard the hurried rasp of his zipper, felt his wide shoulders bump against her knees. He positioned himself between her spread legs.

Saylym suddenly realized the table was adjusted to the perfect height for him. She was in a perfect receptive position. She raised her head. Oh, how she wanted to see his face, see him, but he was looking down. All she saw was the fall of long, dark hair around his face, a smooth, bare chest sculpted with iron muscle, and the weirdest tattoo over his heart.

The inked ridges were in two halves, both sides lengthened, wing-shaped and about three inches long. The left wing was a light shade of blue, so pale, it was almost white, layered with inked feathers and shaped like an angel wing. The other half was flaming red. The layers of stamped feathers were sculpted into long, skeletal fingers that ended with razor-sharp claws.

What was he? Half angel? Half devil?

He stepped closer, moved his right arm, and she felt the stab of his penis as he pushed the thick head inside her aching, wet channel. In her mind she screamed, but the sound was rusty and dry and distant. Gods, he was big. The bulbous head felt incredibly wide and curved at an odd angle. He entered her slowly. Still, she thought he'd tear her asunder.

And the way the blunt tip of his cock dragged against her womb...somehow he was different from...different from...She frowned. *Different from whom? What?* Why did she keep imagining another dark-haired male touching her?

Sexy Voice grunted. "She's so fucking tight I can barely..." A single hard thrust and he buried his hard shaft to the hilt. "Ahh, gods, she feels...incredible."

Saylym fell back panting. Tears stung her eyes. She tossed her head from side to side. She'd never felt so overstuffed. His shoulders quivered against her knees, as if the sensation of being buried inside her was intensely pleasurable and his control ready to snap.

He drew several deep breaths, locked his fingers on her inner thighs, and then he moved his hips, his deep penetrations lazy and unhurried. His grunts of pleasure echoed around the small room. Hot tears scalded the corners of her eyes and slid into her hair. Why was she crying? Why did she feel so utterly devastated? She didn't understand why it didn't feel right when it felt so damned good.

Kyma showed her no mercy. He pounded her with his hard shaft, worked it in and out, and plunged deep with every hard thrust. He was in no hurry. Sometimes he pulled his cock all the way out, slid the broad head up and down her clit, teased it, until she thought she'd go mad with the need to have him fill her again.

Then he'd laugh softly and push it inside her again. "You want it, sweetheart? You like my cock in you? I like it in you, too."

Saylym clawed the table until the tips of her fingernails broke off, but she couldn't control the urgent need washing over her. She couldn't see his face, but he was right, she loved the feel of his cock in her. The idea this wasn't right, that he wasn't the right male, floated away. This was very right. Nothing that felt this wonderful could be wrong.

He cupped her ass and lifted her to meet his powerful penetrations. "Those kittenish sounds she's making are driving me wild," Sexy Voice choked.

His breathing changed. Grew raspy. He panted. He groaned. He pumped his hips faster and faster.

"Control, Kyma," the professor warned. "Remember control."

"Fuck control! I'm ready to explode."

"Perhaps you should slow your rhythm?"

"Hell, no! I'm on the edge." Kyma clenched his teeth. "She feels wonderful, Professor. Hot. Smooth. Creamy. She's so small. I swear her pussy feels as tight as a wet *swigee* around my cock."

Saylym screamed in the back of her throat, a silent denial of what was happening to her, but nothing prevented her hot response to Kyma's lustful mating.

He shuddered. "What's she doing, Professor?"

"Multiple orgasms. Excellent. Excellent. You two set each other on fire. You are so perfect for one another. This was foretold by the Oracle, of course, a coming of a beautiful mate for you, one of royal blood, magic and fertility."

"Fuck that crap! I have no control left. The way she's responding to my cock, I swear, Professor, it's getting harder and harder inside her."

"All right. The class has seen enough. Don't fight it any longer, Kyma." The professor sounded excited. "It's time to go with the feeling. Take your pleasure."

Kyma grunted. "About fucking time." He pulled back, then plunged his cock deep inside her. His chest rose and fell in ragged explosions. Deep growls slid from his throat. He clamped his fingers painfully around her thighs, spread her legs wider apart and pushed his cock deeper. "Ahh, gods! Fuck! It feels so damn good." His seed gushed inside her, wet, warm and copious. "Thunder gods, is it going to stop? I've never had this much..."

"Good. Good. The drugs I gave you worked. Stay inside her until your seed stops draining. We knew once your blood mingled with hers she'd become fertile. We needed to be certain you deposited a generous amount of fluid so you'd breed her with the first mating. We left nothing to chance. She must be bound to you through a child." Older Voice moved around the table and slid his hands over her belly. "Wonderful."

Slowly, Kyma pulled his cock out of her and grinned. "I've never felt anything so good, Professor Shomus."

Saylym heard the slow *zip* of his zipper and closed her eyes. Damn, she ached. Her womb throbbed, and it felt as if tiny claws hooked into her flesh deep inside her belly. The inside of her channel was tender and extremely wet and sticky. And yet, she wanted him back in her. She

wanted to feel his shudders again and again as he exploded hotly inside her.

Her brows furrowed. Was she in love with this person? Her mate? Yes, of course she loved him. She thought she must love him very much. Why else did she crave his touch? She had to tell him, let him know how she felt. "I love you," she whispered.

Sexy Voice stepped to the front of the table and brushed her damp hair back from her face. "Was she talking to me?"

"Oh, yes. She's completely enamored with you. You did well. I think we can remove the rest of the restraints from her now."

Kyma closed his hand around the professor's wrist. "Are you certain she won't try to escape? I will not risk losing her."

"Where would she go? She couldn't walk if she wanted to, not with the massive amount of drugs in her system. Your scent marks her. Even if she managed to escape, you would find her easily enough. Anyway, you don't have to fear her leaving you. Her bond to Prince Talon is now broken. She's yours, unless you no longer want her."

"I will keep her."

"She will bear your children, or if you prefer to give her to the army, they will share her until she dies of some disease or a *jukey* overdose. They will mix Veil with the jukey and keep her compliant. You know what mixing the two drugs together does to a witch."

"No. I want her. She suits me. I do not give up what is mine. It's only right Talon lose her to me. Because of Talon, my father lost the female he loved, lost a child. Now Talon pays for his crimes. He's lost the woman he loves. She will give my father a grandchild to replace the son taken from him. Justice is served." Kyma smiled and stroked her nipples. "But this is no longer about my father's personal vendetta against Prince Talon. I spoke sacred vows. This female belongs to me. I will not give her up...ever."

Saylym winced when she felt the sharp sting of a needle jab her arm again. "Ouch."

"I want to fuck her again."

"Oh, you will. There's no will left in her to resist. How do you feel, my dear?"

Saylym opened her eyes, but the professor's face was a distant blur. Everything seemed surreal. Her lips curved into a satisfied smile. "I feel...well fucked."

"And so you were. Dose five," the professor said, and laughed. "Her

final injection for a month. She's accepted you."

"Professor?" Sexy Voice sounded puzzled. "How do you know she's accepted me for her mate?"

"Your scent is now on her and in her. Your blood mingles with hers. You are all she knows, all she'll ever recognize or remember. With dose five, the drug becomes a permanent fix. It will ensure her body craves yours. You're the only male she'll ever sexually respond to again. You have total control over her."

Kyma drew several ragged breaths. "You're sure she'll never remember her former life?"

"She might have moments of break-through memory, but it will only confuse her. She'll think it's a dream. She'll never, *never* have clear memories of her life before now. For all intents and purposes, her memory and life began but a few moments ago when you fucked her."

"Good, because as I said, I will not give her up. Ever."

"She's yours for the next week; then you must release her. Your father's orders. Come here. I want you to feel..."

"No, I..."

The professor held up his hand. "Sending her back to Sanctuary won't change the fact she's yours. She'll wait for you to come to her every breeding season. Every child she conceives from this day forward will be from your seed. I promise you, she won't allow another male to touch her or breed her. But Zebus wants her returned to the surface, returned to Talon. He wants Talon to watch her belly swell with your child. The *waken* prince will have her, but he'll never be able to touch her again. Sweet torment, is it not?"

Kyma growled. "There's going to be a problem, Professor. I will not give her back to Talon. There are other ways to torment the prince. Other ways I can let Talon know I'm fucking his female. How can you guarantee she would not allow her former mate to touch her?"

"It's my job to make certain once a witch is fucked by a demon, she never allows a *waken* to touch her again, unless I'm ordered otherwise. We can't allow the risk of cross-contamination of his sperm mixing with a demon's and both males fertilizing the same egg. Can you imagine the abomination conceived from such a thing?" He patted Kyma on the back. "Enjoy her while you have her. She belongs to you, Kyma. Tattoo her. You know what to do. And where to put it. Everyone above and below will know she's demon royalty and that she's yours. Do it

tonight."

"Yes, I will."

"You're pleased with her?"

"Yes."

"Good. Your father's had his eyes on her for a long time. He took extreme risks to capture her for you. He wanted you to have a beautiful, desirable mate."

"She's very desirable."

"You will make an official presentation of her to your father and his court tomorrow morning as your eternal mate. Tonight belongs to you. Mate with her as many times as you want. Now, come, feel your child."

The professor motioned Kyma closer to the exam table, closer to Saylym. Saylym smiled and clasped Kyma's hand. Kyma looked down at their entwined fingers, then up to her, surprise on his dark face. "I think she likes me, Professor." He smiled and squeezed her hand. "Hi, sweetheart," he said in that husky tone. "I'm Kyma. Your mate."

"You're beautiful," she whispered. "In spite of those tiny horns on your head, you're bloody sexy. Fuck me again."

Kyma grinned, leaned over her and took her mouth in a long, slow kiss. "You please me, mate. Oh, yes, you please me very much, and have no worry, I will spend the night mating with you."

Saylym slid her arms around his neck and drew him close. "Ooh, you please me, too." She kissed him back, her tongue stroking his.

Reluctantly, he let her go and slid a fingertip down her cheek. He kneaded her breasts, plucked at her nipples until they tightened and begged for his mouth. "You're a hot little thing," he said. "Sweet. I love how you respond to my slightest touch."

"Give me your hand, Kyma." Professor Shomus pressed Kyma's palm low on her stomach. "Feel your babe."

"I'm not sure I feel anything."

"Take your time. Press harder."

Kyma pushed the flat of his hand firmer against her belly. He jerked back. His shocked gaze shot to the instructor. "My child," he said with awe. "I felt a baby demon inside her. A female. My daughter."

"Yes," Saylym said dreamily. "A girl. Our daughter."

Kyma massaged her stomach, an overwhelmed expression on his face. He turned to the professor. "Will she be all right?"

"Your daughter?"

"No. My mate. Will she give birth without any problems? Demon

babies are large. Rausha's so small."

"Ah. I understand your concern. Fear not. We will take the babe when her time comes. There will be no risk to her or your daughter."

"If Rausha realizes what has happened, can she prevent the birth of my daughter? Can she harm her?"

"No. Demon babies attach to the wall of the witch's womb with needlelike claws that curve into the muscle and lock in place. Another safety measure is the babe knows every single thought the mother has, knows her feelings. If Rausha tries in any way to abort the child, the babe will vomit acid. Not to fear, your mate already loves this babe. She loves you. She wants you and the child. Your daughter will be born strong and healthy and stunningly beautiful."

Kyma sifted his fingers through Saylym's hair. "I can't believe I bred her with a single mating." He pressed his lips against her stomach, a gentle kiss, then raised his head. His eyes glittered with happiness. "My daughter. Gods, she is already beautiful. She has her mother's unusual eyes."

"Oh, no doubt this is a fine specimen of a witch. You can be proud of her, proud you bred her. She's young and gorgeous, with lots of childbearing years ahead of her. You two will make many beautiful babies. I've already seen your first four sons. Two sets of twins within the first century you are mated. Most breeding seasons, this witch will drop two eggs. If you aren't careful, your home will be filled with babies."

Kyma laughed. "The more, the better. I want a large family." Professor Shomus smiled. "Your father chose wisely for you."

"He did." Kyma grinned and lifted Saylym in his arms.

She nuzzled his throat. "You smell delicious."

Kyma stumbled. He slanted his gaze at her. "You are lovely. I'm going to taste every inch of you."

"Where are you taking her?"

"My home, where she belongs and we can have the privacy now due us."

"Have fun."

Kyma laughed softly and headed out of the lab. "I intend to enjoy every minute I have with her."

"Don't wear yourself out."

"She's worth it."

Three days later, Professor Shomus closed the office door behind him and grinned. Zebus smiled and leaned back in the deep leather chair behind his desk. "He going at her again?"

Shomus nodded. "He's tireless."

"It's the *Azrel* you give him. It keeps his cock hard as stone. How many times has he fucked her now?"

"In the past thirty-six hours? Too numerous to count. She's truly indoctrinated to his possession."

"She will continue to accept him?"

"Absolutely. She knows nothing but Kyma's touch and scent. He's had her so many times now, he's all over her. His marks, his seed, his scent, all dominate her senses. Her body bears his love bites, and he has taken her blood. Her magic mingles in his blood. They are one." He smiled. "Plus, he's merged his blood with hers at least a dozen times. Probably more, but that's more than enough to complete the changes. They have begun. Already, the buds of her shiny new horns have sprouted. It will be a long while before they protrude to full height, but they are there. She will gradually take on some of the characteristics of a demon, grow wings, tiny fangs. Her scent will become the rich, sulfur of our kind. Eventually, no one above who knew her will recognize her."

"That is good."

"We've examined her egg count. Samhain. That is one fertile witch. You will be pleased to know that unless Kyma takes precautions, they are going to have a very large family."

Zebus smiled. "Yes, that pleases me. I doubt Kyma will be willing to use precautions. He's always wanted a large family. He was a lonely child."

"She's pleased with Kyma. She does whatever he says. He did a nice job on the tattoo. He took his time, just like he does when he fucks her. She didn't flinch a single time."

"It's lovely. Has she seen it yet?"

"No. Kyma won't let her look in a mirror until the redness goes away. Since the angel's wing is so large, it's going to take some time to heal."

"Did you instruct him to tattoo the entire left side of her face?"

"No. I told him about two inches. I guess he wants to make certain everyone sees it."

Zebus laughed. "Yes. He hasn't allowed her out of his bed or allowed

her to dress, except for the few minutes he presented her as his mate. Then he rushed her out of the court."

"He's very possessive, Zebus. It makes him extremely dangerous where she is concerned. One of the court demons wanted a closer look at the tattoo. Kyma stabbed him through the heart with no provocation. He will not tolerate another male near her."

"What do you think will happen if Talon sees her? Attempts to take her?"

"Kyma will kill him. He'll never surrender Saylym to him. But it's a moot point anyway. She will never recognize Talon or willingly go anywhere with him."

"Success?"

The instructor nodded. "Beyond our wildest expectations. She believes she's in love with Kyma; a few more weeks and it will become fact."

"The drugs ensure her love will grow for him? I will not see Kyma hurt, but we can't continue to drug her. It will kill her."

"We can safely inject her monthly for a century without causing harm. I think we need to make certain Kyma impregnates her for the next few Beltane seasons. She will give him twin sons the first two years. The more children they have together, the stronger their bond, the more powerful his hold on her. She won't walk away and leave him or their babies. By the time three years pass, she will be so used to Kyma's scent and touch, so used to sleeping beside him, well, by that time, she will have so many demon characteristics, it will all seem normal to her."

"And the babe she carries now? It is healthy?"

"Yes. Their daughter will be born All Hallows' Eve."

Zebus frowned. "A *girl*? What a disappointment. Yes. Kyma must make her pregnant next breeding season. He needs sons."

"And he and Saylym will have them. The Oracle has seen four in their future already. Handsome. Sexy. Her sons will one day spread their seed among the witches, and more demon males will be born. Our plans are coming along wonderfully. Another few years and there won't be a full-blood *waken* left. Saylym and Kyma hold the future of the demons in their hands. They will populate our species with several children. They will all be males, except this first babe. This girl child is important. She's very special, Zebus. We need her and the powers she will bring with her."

"What is so special about her?"

"Her name is Peyton. She is the future mate to the werewolf king, Creed LaVeau."

Zebus bolted to his feet. A wide grin split his face. He rubbed his hands with glee. "You're certain?"

"Straight from the babe's mouth. There's no doubt. She's the future queen of Na-Cyl."

"Kyma has done well. Tell my son I'm extremely pleased with him, and since he did such a fine job breeding the witch, he may keep her until just before time for his daughter's birth."

"But that's five months away."

"Do they not need more time to bond?"

"Yes, of course, but you know Talon will continue to search for her. He searches the caverns every day."

"And he finds nothing but dead ends. She's lost to Talon. Forever. By the time All Hallows' Eve arrives, Kyma will realize his mate needs the best care possible at Sanctuary. He will allow her to be taken to the surface, but we can't afford for anyone to recognize her. Change her hair color. Lop it off. With the tattoo and her smelling like a demon, it's unlikely anyone will know who she is, and everyone will avoid her because of her scent."

Professor Shomus shook his head. "Kyma's in love with her."

Zebus frowned. "I figured he was, or he wouldn't be fucking her so much. I've offered other captives to him. He has no interest in any of the other females."

"She captured his heart."

"He fell for her the same as I fell for his mother centuries ago. Saylym's too damned sexy and beautiful."

"Five months? He'll be more in love with her than ever. You know Talon will seek the birthing chambers All Hallows' Eve. He'll look for her there."

Zebus laughed. "I never expected him to stop searching for her. Kyma's blood flows in her veins. It can't be undone. No magic can fix it. She'll become the very thing Talon detests. She carries Kyma's scent. His child swells her belly. His mark brands her face. Even if Talon recognizes her, he will not want her when he sees her heavy with Kyma's babe."

"If he loves her, he won't care."

Zebus snickered. "He will care. Talon hates demons. We're going to make certain he hates them more. Magic Mirror hangs in Kyma's

bedroom. Any mirror Talon looks in will reveal Saylym. By the time Saylym is taken to Sanctuary to give birth, Talon will feel nothing but her betrayal. His hatred and disgust for her will be limitless. And Saylym will have no love for Talon. She won't remember who he is and think of him only as the enemy."

"I'll inform Kyma he gets to keep his mate longer than he thought he would."

"Yes. Tell him I expect him to cooperate and take her to the surface when the birthing time comes. Saylym must give birth to his daughter in Sanctuary. Peyton is half witch. She must be accepted and blessed by the witches."

"I'll tell him."

"When her time comes, the witches will take her in, shield her. They won't like it, but she is one of them, and they'll see to her care. Make sure there are guards posted outside Saylym's birthing chamber. She is to be protected round the clock. No one will be allowed in with her, except the surgeon and Kyma. When the babe arrives, send one of the guards to report to me immediately. Kyma will be there when his daughter arrives. Tell them if anything, *anything*, happens to Saylym, my son, or my grandchild I will personally see they die a very slow and painful death. When she's at Sanctuary, I want a full report at the end of each shift."

"And the emeralds?"

Zebus grinned. "They belong to Saylym. One day, they'll belong to my granddaughter, their power bestowed upon her."

"What of MeLora? She's not going to be happy you didn't get her the jewels. She believes you have no other children besides the son she carries."

Zebus laughed. "Fuck MeLora. She's a fool. Her son might be my first conceived with a full-blooded witch, but you know well Kyma is my heir. My firstborn. His mother is the only female I ever loved. Kyma will always be first in my life, then his children."

"MeLora will be pissed."

"I care not for her happiness. Once she is delivered of my son, I will have no more use for her. I have plans for the wicked MeLora. She thinks too highly of herself and is too demanding, but for now, I'll handle her. MeLora's so busy trying to figure out a way to expel my babe, she'll forget about the emeralds for a while."

Shomus laughed. "You haven't told her it's impossible to abort

demon babies?"

"Yorbus would be upset if I did that. He gets such pleasure from tormenting his mother."

"What about the babe Saylym conceived? Will she torment her?"

"No. Saylym loves the babe."

"Kyma has ordered you to inject Saylym daily instead of monthly?"

"Yes. It helps to speed up the changes taking place to her body."

"It is safe?"

"For now. Eventually I will have to go to the monthly dose. If I continued daily injections, it will wipe out her memory forever. She'll remember nothing about her past."

Zebus shrugged. "Double the daily dose."

"Your Majesty?"

"Destroy any traces of her memories of the past. I want them wiped out. For Saylym Winslow, her life began when Kyma entered it. She will welcome only him into the birthing chamber at Sanctuary on All Hallows' Eve."

Chapter Thirty-Five

What the heart has once owned and had, it shall never lose.

~Henry Ward Beecher

Ru-Noc

The Millhouse

Immortal Realm

Talon sat down at the table in his dining room. He thrust his hair from his face with unsteady hands. A burning ache clenched around his chest like a tight fist. His heart felt empty, as if it had been squeezed dry of every particle of emotion. Despair rode heavily on his shoulders. "I can't find her. I've looked everywhere. It's no use searching the caverns. They're hexed. Nothing but dead ends."

Kali and Koran were at the table with him. They each held one of his sons. They'd fed them; now they held them against their shoulders, patting the babies' backs. Kali looked up from burping Dylan. "Are you sure you want her back?"

"Kali," Koran snapped. "Don't."

"Yes! Of course I want her back. I love her!"

"No. You love what she was. Think, Talon. She's been taken by demons. Do you know how life-altering that's going to be for her? Do you have any idea what they're going to do to her emotions?"

"She loves me. She won't stop loving me. I know it."

"What do you think has happened to her by now?"

"I don't care, Kali. I just want her home safe. I want to hold her in my arms. Love her." His voice broke. "Don't you see...I love her?"

Koran gently patted Gabe's back. "Bad as I hate to say this, Talon, Kali is right. By now, Saylym has mated with a demon."

"No. She would never let a demon touch her."

"What makes you think she'll have a choice?" Koran frowned. "If the demon she is given to cares for her, bonds with her, he will never give her up. Most likely she's already bred."

"She isn't fertile."

Kali snorted. "You know they will use stimulants to make her fertile. When she conceives, her mate will have an even stronger bond with her."

"I am her mate!"

"No, you aren't. Not anymore," Kali said gently. "He will own her, Talon. And she will not resist his hold on her. She's lost. She'll become a demon. At least, she'll become part demon."

Talon shook his head. "Does Koran love you less now that you're a vampire?"

"It's not the same," Kali argued. "I never mated with another male."

"Saylym will never allow a demon to touch her."

"By now, she's already bred," Kali said gently. "You must face the truth and give her up."

"No. It doesn't matter, Kali. She's my mate. I love her. I want her back!"

"The question you need to ask yourself," Koran said, "does she still love you? Does *she* want you back?"

Chapter Thirty-Six

Break in the sun till the sun breaks down, And death shall have no dominion.

~Dylan Thomas

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

"You," Shasta said without hesitation. "I choose you over Dracula."

Dragos nodded and drew a sharp breath. He scooped her into his arms and hurried across the room to the king-sized bed. There he stood her beside the bed and cupped the sides of her face. He covered her mouth with his parting her lips, silently demanding entrance.

Shasta sighed and gave him what he wanted. Dragos swept his tongue inside and groaned his triumph. Slowly, reluctantly, he released her mouth and kicked off his boots and socks. His jeans quickly followed. Shasta licked her lips, locked her fingers in his shirt and ripped it apart. Lowering her head, she closed her mouth around his left nipple and suckled. She heard his low groan and licked the nipple.

"Shasta, you're killing me, sweetheart."

She released his nipple and stared at his engorged cock. "You're stunning," she whispered.

He lifted her gown over the top of her head and flung it toward his jeans. She stood before him in a black lace bra and a skimpy black thong.

Dragos unfastened the front clasp of her bra and slid the straps off her shoulders. It dropped to the floor at their feet. Her thong landed nearby, and she wondered how he'd removed it from her so fast, then remembered it had ribbons tied in bows at both sides.

She thought he'd lower her to the bed. Instead, he picked her up and rasped, "Lock your legs around me," and pressed her against the wall.

His possession of her was rough and wild and unwavering. His cock filled her. She had no time to think about what he was doing. He slammed inside her and set a hot, fast rhythm, driving into her ruthlessly. There was no uncertainty on his part.

"You feel good," he rasped in her ear. "Ride me, sweetheart. I need you...so much."

Shasta didn't know how much time passed. It seemed like hours. It felt like minutes. She only knew when his fangs sank deep into her throat and he fed, her mind exploded. Her womb clenched and unclenched. A spasm coiled deep within her, robbing her of her control. Stealing the strict discipline she held over her mind. In seconds, he dragged her over the edge. She came undone in his arms, wild and trembling. Dragos growled deep in his throat. He threw back his head and roared at the forceful jet of his seed spilling copiously inside her.

Slowly, he retracted his fangs and buried his face against her throat. His chest heaved. His body trembled. He cupped her ass and, remaining inside her, walked to the bed. Dragos rolled with her, taking her beneath him. His cock felt huge and hard inside her. His long, slow thrusts were pure agony. Pure delight. He rocked her over the edge in seconds and followed behind her, his body shuddering with his release.

"Gods, I've never felt anything so damn good," he moaned. He pulled out of her, turned her onto her right side and spooned against her butt. He slid his arm over her waist and parted her nether lips. "Can you take me again?"

"Yes."

Shasta shuddered when his fingers dipped inside her and he stroked her clit. Then he was inside her, his cock as hard and thick as the first time. With his free hand, he teased her nipples, cupped her breasts. His fangs scraped her shoulder, sending tingles down her spine. He fed from her again; then he made certain she drank from him. She knew he came inside her at least two more times. Then, breathing raggedly, he pulled out of her and fell down beside her on the bed.

She curled into his arms, her head on his chest. "Am I pregnant yet?"

"Don't you know the answer to that?"

"No." She shook her head. "A female Were can only prevent conception. She doesn't know when it happens. So am I? Pregnant? Yet?"

Dragos pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "No. Not yet. It's a couple of hours before dawn. We'll try again in a minute. Rest a bit."

Shasta closed her eyes and drifted to sleep, her fingers curled possessively around his cock.

Dragos glided his thumb tip across her left nipple and watched it perk to attention. How many times had he suckled her sweet nipples in the last two hours? How many times had he tasted the honey between her thighs?

How many times had he emptied his seed inside her?

It no longer mattered. She'd conceived the first time he took her. She'd opened her mind and took his seed to her womb. The herb worked, just as Dracula said it would. An ache settled in his heart. He should have taken her downstairs after the first mating. His job was done.

Dracula would know he'd taken her more times than necessary. The vampire missed nothing. He'd know he was too emotionally involved with Valerian's mate. He didn't care. He couldn't give her up yet. Not then. Not now.

Dragos traced the dark purple smudges on her slender body. Dark bruises stained her breasts, belly and throat. His marks of possession, but he didn't own her. He knew the sweetness of her blood, her hot responses to his touch, her trigger points that sent her careening over the edge, but he didn't own her. He'd never get enough of her...but...

He toyed with a strand of her long auburn locks. Unable to resist, he plunged his fingers into her hair and lifted a handful to his face and breathed deeply. Dragos buried his face between her breasts and took a deeper breath.

His scent, gods, his scent was on her skin. She was so his...and yet...

Valerian. Val might believe he'd forgive him for fucking Shasta, but Dragos knew better. From the moment he walked away with Shasta, walked up those stairs and closed the bedroom door behind him, their friendship ended. He couldn't fault Val. If it was him, he'd never forgive or forget, and he'd hate the child in her belly.

His baby. His son.

No way could he give up Shasta and his son. He'd go insane.
Why did he have to love this female?

Dragos glanced at his watch. One hour before dawn. He had no choice but to give her up. He might not own her, but she was still his for another hour.

He intended to make the most of it. After that, he'd returned Shasta to her rightful mate. Deed accomplished.

Then...he'd face Valerian's hatred.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The first breath is the beginning of death.

~Thomas Fuller

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Immortal Realm*

Ciprian Costica Drakulya leaned forward on the elegant long table in the Great Dining Hall and rubbed his face with both hands. Eyeing Valerian chained in the high-backed chair, he swore softly. This was so wrong in so many ways.

He and Val had been close over the centuries. Yes, the bloodline was there, but they were more than family, they were friends. And his friend looked utterly devastated.

And why wouldn't he?

One of their best friends was upstairs sexing Valerian's mate, and there was nothing any of them could do about it.

He glanced at his watch. Another hour before dawn.

What the hell was taking Dragos so damned long?

Couldn't the vampire just do it and bring Shasta back to Val?

And how did Val feel knowing Dragos now knew his mate intimately? That the child she conceived would belong to another male?

If it was him and another touched Ann, he knew he'd kill the vampire. No one was touching her but him.

He stilled. His breath caught in his throat. Shit.

Was that how Ann felt about *him*?

She didn't want another female to know him intimately?

When he told her he was going to breed Crina and another chosen Bride, she'd looked as if he'd ripped out her heart and shredded it to pieces.

He swallowed hard. Crina's soft sniffs drew his gaze to her. He couldn't undo what had been done. There was no going back. He'd already taken Crina for his second Bride. He hadn't mated with her yet, but he'd have to...soon.

Crina sat across the table from him crying. She looked up at him, her big blues eyes accusing.

Was she upset because he'd chosen another female over her? He'd humiliated her by taking Ann for his First Bride. Crina glared at him with loathing, then shifted her gaze to Valerian. Sympathy softened her eyes. Son of a bitch! She felt sorry for Val?

Ciprian swore softly. Did no one feel sorry for him? Hell, he had two Brides, and they both hated him.

How was a male supposed to deal with that shit?

His attention shifted to Dracula.

Boy, he was tempted to strangle the father of them all.

Why was he here anyway? Who summoned him?

Dracula paced the long length of the Hall, mumbled, and glanced at his watch. Dragomir, Dragos' brother, looked toward the stairs for at least the hundredth time. His wary gaze kept shifting to Val. From Dragomir's troubled expression, Ciprian figured the vampire knew there was going to be trouble over Dracula's demand for Dragos to breed Shasta.

Dracula had always been good at stirring up trouble.

Ciprian inhaled deeply. Exhaled slowly. Something, a flicker of movement caught his eye. He looked up and saw Ann approaching the top of the stairs from the second landing. He swallowed hard. His heart pounded. It filled with joy. Hunger for her punched him hard in the gut. His lips twitched. Damn the little rebel. She'd refused to come downstairs all evening and meet Dracula. Now, with dawn less than thirty minutes away, she chose to join them?

And she was dressed in her cowgirl clothes instead of the elegant gown he'd given her to wear. Knowing her, she'd probably ripped it to shreds.

Tight jeans hugged her long legs. The pale blue western shirt was tucked neatly behind that damned gigantic buckle. She'd found her shit-kickers in the closet where he'd hidden them. He grinned. Damn, he was crazy about the little Texan.

She'd probably cripple him with the sharp toes of her boots when she discovered he'd taken Crina for his second Bride. He didn't care.

He rose to his feet. He wanted Ann so badly he could taste it.

"Sit down," Dracula snapped. "You will wait for her to come to you, then you will introduce her to your second Bride. You will not humiliate me by acting like a besotted vampire."

Ciprian ignored Dracula's sharp command and headed toward the stairs. Ann's face was unnaturally pale. She froze at the top of the stairs and shook her head. He hesitated. Why the hell did she look so damned frightened?

"What...?"

Then he saw the demon behind her. Saw the sharp blade of an athame at the left side of her breast. Saw that one athame was already buried to the hilt between her ribs. Ciprian froze.

The demon looked at him and deliberately, coldly, broke the hilt off, leaving the blade buried there. Ann screamed in agony. Ciprian felt ice freeze his blood. If the demon stuck the second blade in Ann's heart, it would kill her. He saw her flinch, saw the blood rapidly staining the side of her shirt.

"Don't hurt her again," Ciprian shouted. "What do you want?"

Ciprian whirled when he heard chairs scoot back in the Hall, feet trampling to come to his aid.

The demon stabbed the blade deep in Ann's chest. "Tell them not to do anything foolish, or I will kill her."

Dragomir and Dracula skidded to a stop. Fane and Dorin paused nearby, looking to Ciprian to tell them what to do. Ciprian shook his head. "Don't move any closer. He'll do it. He'll kill her."

Ciprian heard the demon say something and laugh. Then two more demons joined him at the top of the stairs. Laura, Ann's friend, tried to scream, but only weak gurgles slipped past her blood-speckled lips. One demon smiled down at them, then slowly dragged the blade of an athame across Laura's jugular. He lowered his head and slurped ravenously.

"No!" Dracul groaned weakly. "Leave her alone. She's with child."

The demon paused to lick his lips. He slid a hand over her belly and laughed. "So she is, and a fine baby girl it is," he said, and returned to feeding.

Ciprian clenched his fists. The bastard had broken an athame off in Laura's ribs, too. It was a cruel way to control a vampire, like hammering a stake halfway in, then walking away and not finishing the job.

When the demon finished feeding, he flung Laura's limp body down the stairs. Ciprian hurried over to her. She lay there as still as a broken doll. At the top of the stairs, Dracul yelled and fought to get free. Another demon helped restrain him.

Ciprian gave a sigh of relief. His brother's mate was still alive. The demon had fed thirstily from her, but her heart still beat, although it was feeble.

Quickly, Ciprian slashed his wrist with a sharp claw and dripped his blood in her mouth. Laura turned away from him, refusing his blood. "Drink, little sister. I know I'm not Dracul, but you carry his daughter, my niece. You need to drink."

"Let her die," the demon who'd fed from her shouted.

"Fuck you," Ciprian yelled and rose to his feet. He started toward the staircase to rescue his brother and Ann.

The demon growled and threw an athame at him.

"No!" Crina screamed and ran between Ciprian and the knife aimed for his heart.

"Crina!" Ciprian hurried toward her. Too late! The athame struck her. It buried deep in her chest, in her heart. Ciprian caught her in his arms and lowered her to the floor. "Crina, sweetheart, you shouldn't have done that."

She smiled faintly and touched his face. "I do not think there was a place in your life, your heart, for me. Do not hurt her, this human you adore so much, by choosing more Brides."

Crina sighed softly. Her head lolled to one side.

Ciprian's lips quivered. "I won't," he replied softly and gently lowered her onto the floor. He rose to his feet, dark rage in his body.

"Don't," Dragomir said. "You cannot save Dracul. Look at his color. They have infected him with something. He is contagious. And Ann is not in a good state. Her breathing becomes more labored. The demons want by us. We have to let them go...for now."

"Where is Valerian?" the leader of the demons asked. He twisted the athame deeper in Ann.

Witch's Magic

Ann screamed in agony. Tears slid down her face. "Don't tell him anything," she said faintly.

The demon drove the knife blade deeper in her side. Her knees buckled. He locked one arm under her breasts and supported her.

"You bastard! Stop torturing her!"

"Then bring your prince in here."

Ciprian hurried to remove the chains from Valerian.

"What's going on?" Val asked. "I was too far over to the right to see the staircase." He rose to his feet as soon as the chains dropped to the floor. "Where's Dracula? I need my powers restored. I'm helpless without them."

Ciprian clenched his teeth with rage. "He's there in the Hall. It's a good thing the demons haven't realized who he is. Do not say his name."

"Shasta and Dragos?"

"I don't know. Demons control the upstairs of the castle. They have Ann, Laura and Dracul. Dracul is infected with something."

"Parasites. The demons are fond of sharing their worms."

"What do you think they want?"

Valerian shook his head. "I guess we'll find out."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

A punishment to some, to some a gift, and to many a favor."

~Seneca

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Shasta woke to the delicious drag of Dragos' mouth sliding across her breasts. "Mmm," she crooned as he drew a turgid nipple between his teeth and gently bit it. He laved it, dragging his tongue over it again and again, soothing the tender bud, then suckled strong on it.

"Gods, that feels good," she whispered, and accepted his mouth on hers.

He slid his tongue past her lips and groaned. He was slow to release her mouth. "Your lips taste like wine," he said when he freed her mouth. He slid her fingers between her nether lips and slipped inside. "These lips taste like honey. Delicious. I could get addicted to the many flavors of you."

"What time is it?"

Dragos nudged her thighs apart. "It's this time," he said, and slid smoothly inside her in a single thrust. He rode her hard, deep drives of his long cock, rough strokes in and out. She had the feeling he was angry. Or in a hurry to be done with her. In seconds he groaned and collapsed on top of her. He held himself in her for a few minutes, then

slowly pulled out of her and rolled out of bed.

"What was that?" Shasta asked, watching him jerk on pants.

He tossed her the black gown he'd stripped off her hours earlier. "Get dressed," he snapped tersely. "Dawn will be here in about thirty minutes."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Am I...Did you make me pregnant?"

He tugged his shirt over his head and picked up his socks. "I said get dressed."

"Am I pregnant?"

"Yes, you're fucking pregnant," he snapped curtly. "I made you pregnant the first time I sexed you."

"What?"

Impatient, he dragged her dress over head and pulled her off the bed to stand in front of him.

"Why did you..."

"What? Fuck you the dozen other times?"

She swallowed. "Yes? Why?"

"I was horny. You were hot and easy."

Shasta slapped him across the face.

A muscle jerked in his clenched jaw. "What did you think I was going to say? That I love you? That I want you so damn much I couldn't let you go back to Valerian until I had to?"

"You said...you wanted me."

He laughed. "Listen, Princess, a horny male will say just about anything in the heat of the moment. It doesn't mean he's madly in love. It just means he wants to fuck."

"I thought...you cared...a little...about...me."

"Don't make me laugh. I fucked you because Dracula ordered it. Gods, I told you I had to be given something just so I could do it."

"I thought you meant...something else."

"Do you really think you appeal to me? I told you before, I can't stand you."

"I see," she said in a crushed voice. "I'm sorry you were forced to mate with me. I..."

Her words broke off as Dragos suddenly grunted and clutched his heart. His eyes widened. He looked at her, shock spreading across his face. She watched a crimson stain bloom across his white shirt. "Wha-? Oh my gods! What's...?"

Her mouth snapped shut. She gasped at the sight of a hideous demon materializing behind Dragos.

She knew in her mind the awful creature had been standing there behind him, invisible, right before his attack, maybe longer. She heard a weird suction sound, a soft *pop*, and then the creature's fist slid out of Dragos' back.

Dragos dropped to his knees hard, moaning.

"Dragos!" Shasta ran toward him, but was quickly restrained by the demon.

Two more demons appeared at his side. They dragged the injured vampire to his feet.

"Dragos!" Shasta screamed, but she knew there was too much going on in the castle, the Great Dining Hall too far away for her to be heard.

The demon holding on to her thrust an athame between her ribs. "Ah, gods," she cried and clutched her side. White-hot pain burned through her rib cage and straight into her stomach. Tears slid down her face, but the demon wasn't finished. He twisted the knife until the hilt snapped off, leaving the sharp blade between her ribs. Gods, it hurt. Cold chills oozed down her spine in long, slow rivulets. She shivered.

"Try to remove the knife I put in you, and I'll run this one through your heart. Understand?"

She nodded.

The demon laughed. "Does Valerian know you're up here fucking one of his best friends?"

"Leave her alone," Dragos shouted.

Shasta tried to pull free of the demon and go to Dragos. The demon slid the point of the second blade higher between her ribs. "Make another move, and I'll ram it so deep, you'll burst into flames."

Dragos swayed and would have fallen if not for the two demons holding him up. The demon who was holding her back laughed. "Let me introduce myself, my dear. I am Zebus, King of Ru-Noc, King of Dymus and soon to be King of Ayrumus." He grinned, his leathery lips thick and drooling. "I understand why this vampire fucked you. You are very beautiful. You'd make an excellent breeder for one of my demons, but I'm afraid Brasov would object. I am here to see he gets the opportunity to carry through his plans. I'm afraid, my dear, your time to live is very short. Brasov has great plans for you."

He jerked her closer. Shasta groaned as the athame buried between her ribs scraped bone. She tore free of the demon and ran to Dragos. His

face was gray as a dingy sheet. Sweat matted his hair to his forehead. His eyes looked glassy. Gingerly, she swiped back the dark hair from his face.

"Go!" he said between clenched teeth. "Run!"

"I'm not leaving you to their mercy."

"Very wise decision," Zebus said. "If you try to escape, I will be forced to kill both of you. I'm afraid that would upset Brasov. Sort of."

Shasta ignored the demon. "The wound," she said to Dragos, "how bad is it?"

"It has already sealed. Get back," he whispered. "Stay away from me. I am infected."

Shasta spun around and glared at Zebus. "What have you done to him?"

"Oh, nothing much. I merely planted a parasite in a valve of his heart. He will continue to sicken as the worm feeds and fattens off his heart. Day by day, the worm will gorge itself. The heart will shrink until it has all been devoured. Death is the ultimate end, a very slow, torturous death."

Zebus gripped her arm and jerked her away from Dragos. "Not too close to him, my dear. The parasite is extremely contagious. Brasov wants you healthy. Of course, he's going to be slightly pissed because you let Dragos make you pregnant." Abruptly, the demon started laughing. "Ahh. Brasov is going to be very displeased with you, my dear. Very displeased."

The demon locked his fingers around her upper arms and guided her from the room. "Bring the vampire," he said over his shoulder.

"Where are you taking us?"

"Oh, just down the hall for now. All the others have gathered downstairs. We will join them."

"Then what?" Shasta asked, finding it difficult to breathe with the damned knife lodged in her ribs.

"Oh, then we will leave this cold forsaken place." He shivered. "I dislike the cold. Brasov awaits our arrival. We must hurry. Daylight will be here shortly. We wouldn't want any of you to turn to toast."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

If I were the rain, that binds together the earth and the sky, whom in all eternity will never mingle, would I be able to bind two hearts together?

~Tite Kubo

*Ru-Noc
Annu Mountain
Noddon Caverns
Approaching Samhain
Immortal Realm*

Saylym eased out of Kyma's arms and scooted to the edge of their big bed. As usual, she was naked. These nights she never slept in a gown. Rarely was she allowed to dress in the daytime. Eyeing her distended belly, she couldn't imagine how Kyma still found her attractive, but the proof he did was in the tender aches of her body, the tiny explosions of need for his touch that never seemed to go away. He was always touching her, kissing her or holding her close to his body.

She was blessed to have a mate who openly adored her and hadn't turned to other females to take care of his sexual needs since she was now so heavy with child and he was hesitant to mate with her. A wistful smile touched her lips. Kyma had kept her naked for months now. Instead of his lust for her waning, it had increased. He rarely left her side.

Spring had turned to summer, and now autumn quickly approached. All Hallows' Eve drew near. The birth of their daughter would soon

arrive. She couldn't wait to hold the babe in her arms. She didn't understand the empty feeling in her heart or the urgent need to cradle a baby close to her breasts and feel it suckle.

Saylym turned her head and studied her mate. Candlelight flickered beside the bed painting him in gold. He was so handsome her heart ached. Her mate. How she loved him. He made her life complete, made her happy. His touch was addictive. When he took her, she discovered a new hunger for his body. She craved his touch, but more importantly, she felt secure in his arms.

Even though they were mated for life, Kyma courted her every day. He brought her flowers, shiny stones, books to read. Once he brought her three tiny eggs of the *Rom*. Together, they watched the chicks hatch.

Kyma was a fierce, demanding lover. He was also jealous, possessive and protective, but he was always gentle with her. All the little things he did for her assured her of his love.

The constant ache in her body told her she desired him as much as he wanted her. No matter how many times he mated with her, or how often, each time they mated was like the first time. They couldn't get enough of each other. Saylym sighed. Yes, she was crazy in love with Kyma, and when he mingled their blood, her body sizzled.

But for the life of her, she couldn't remember how they met or when they'd fallen in love.

How long had they been together? It seemed to her she woke up one day and he was there, a part of her life, holding her, whispering sweet words in her ears, touching her body, possessing her body. His kisses left her weak and breathless. His mating left her body drained and sated, yet always ravenous for more, greedy for his touch.

There was no doubt his love for her was strong and powerful. Sometimes it frightened her how much he loved her. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him. Their first night together, he gave her a new name.

She hadn't argued. It didn't matter. She couldn't remember what her name had been before anyway. So whatever made him happy was fine with her.

He also insisted she take his last name in the form of a tattoo. Saylym agreed. She wanted to wear his last name. She was just as pleased to be his mate as he was proud of her.

Rausha Angel.

Her new name sounded foreign and exotic. She frowned and wondered if there was any part of her old self left.

Saylym slid her gaze to Kyma's face. So dark. Incredibly handsome. Sexy. A wonderful lover. When he was awake and she looked into his gaze, she was amazed at the happiness and love she saw sparkling in the vivid blue depths of his eyes.

His lips were hot, the upper lip full and sensual as the lower lip, and gods, when he kissed her, her heart beat faster. Her insides melted.

As was his habit, he slept on his back. Like her, he was naked. Usually, she slept on top of him. Tonight, she hadn't felt well when they retired, so she'd slept in his arms instead.

Saylym eyed his wide chest, ultra smooth, muscular, the strange tattoo over his heart. She couldn't resist gliding a fingertip down his chest to the rows of muscle ridged on his stomach.

His cock jerked and snared her attention. It lay over the large twin sacs, thick and curled halfway down his thigh. He knew how to use what the gods had blessed him with, and when it was erect, the size robbed her of her breath. His body was smooth, sleek and hairless, except for the hair on his head. He was utterly amazed by the tight curls between her thighs and frequently sifted his fingers through them.

Saylym sighed. He hadn't mated with her this past month, at least not with his cock. He knew she was feeling the weight of the baby. He was terrified of hurting her, hurting their babe. Still, he knew many ways to relieve their need for each other and he used them all.

Groaning, she rubbed her back and stood up. She waddled over to the long mirror mounted on the wall. Frowning, she stood there in front of it rubbing her distended belly. Gods, she was so huge.

Saylym cupped the fullness of her breasts, marveled at how large they'd become. Then she returned her gaze to her extremely bloated stomach. The baby was big, already over ten pounds, but Kyma had explained to her that demon babies were always very large. Kyma thought the babe would weigh a good twelve pounds at birth. She didn't know if she could take the baby growing any bigger.

Her fingers stilled on her swollen belly. She blinked. She didn't know the woman looking back at her.

Was it really her? Her reflection revealed a small woman with very short black hair swept straight back from her face.

Short hair? Black hair? Somehow, it didn't look right.

She didn't look right.

Was it right?

Two tiny black horns about two inches tall stood at attention just above her hairline, sleek, shiny, very soft in their infancy.

Kyma was so excited by their appearance. He insisted they'd grow to be at least three or four inches tall. He'd held her close the first time she noted them and assured her it was a natural change in her body from their blood mingling and he adored them, just like he adored the roundness of her belly filled with his daughter.

Maybe she was overly self-conscious due to her pregnancy.

She turned sideways so she could see the faint outline of the pale tan scales dotting her shoulders and back. Wings were forming under her skin. Her fingernails were longer and slightly curved. Tiny fangs were still pushing through her gums. Her body ached with all the changes taking place.

She touched the tip of her tongue to her upper lip. Her lips were pink and swollen from Kyma's hungry kisses. His scent coated her skin. Her throat and breasts bore his marks of possession.

Still, she looked regal. Her eyes shimmered like polished stone. They were no longer her own color, but changed to the exact shade of Kyma's vivid blue.

He explained to her that once a demon's blood mixed with the female he bonded with and they mated, she took his eye color, another way a male demon marked his eternal mate. He'd also told her each change taking place in her was permanent, but the changes only made him love her more.

She couldn't deny she loved the new hue of her eyes or all the physical changes happening to her body. For some reason, it all seemed perfectly normal to her.

Saylym laid her palm over the tattoo on the left side of her face. The pale blue wing started at the center of her forehead and spread down the entire left side of her face all the way to the end of her jaw. It wasn't ugly. It made her look somewhat mysterious, as if she was two different people.

Kyma had been extremely patient, taking his time with the design and slowly tapping the ink into her skin. Her lips curved with the sweet memory. Kyma had pulled her onto his lap and buried his cock deep inside her. Every time he tapped, he thrust. They'd spent hours locked in a slow mating ritual while he tattooed her face. With the final tap, he

threw back his head and clenched his teeth. The hot, milky rush of his seed filling her sent her over the edge with him.

Later, he admired the tattoo. He said it proved she belonged to him, and no one's magic anywhere could ever remove it, not even his.

He said...

Kyma said...

He told her...

Informed her...

If she was part of the demon realm, why did she not know these things already? Why?

"Saylym?"

Startled, Saylym jumped and dropped her hand from her face when a dark reflection swam before her inside the mirror. A male stared back at her. Handsome. Long, dark hair around his shoulders. Green eyes. Sexy. There was a loneliness about him, a lost and haggard look on his face. He stared at her rounded belly, his face filled with horror. He placed the flat of his hand against the inside of the mirror.

Could he see her the way she saw him? Was he real?

If so, who was he?

"Saylym?" She heard his voice, clear. "Where are you, sweetheart?"

"My name is Rausha Angel." She placed her palm against his. The glass felt cold beneath her fingers as she tried to cross the impossible barrier separating them. "I see you, but I can't feel you," she whispered. "Who are you?"

"I-I'm Talon. Gods, what have they done to you? You look so strange."

She frowned. "What do you mean? No one has done anything to me."

"You look like a demon, Saylym. You're with child. It isn't mine."

She stiffened. "Of course it isn't your baby. It's my mate's. Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm your mate. Don't you know me? Remember me?"

She backed slowly from the mirror. "You lie. You lie! You are not my mate."

"I'm your mate, *La-Scheme*. We have sons. Twins. They are five months old now."

"No. I-I don't know you. I think you tell all kind of lies. You are evil."

"No, baby. Gods, what have they done to you? To your memory? I'm Talon. I love you, Saylym. Please tell me how to find you."

"Talon?" Her voice sounded strange to her. Choked. Distant. A dark

memory stirred of this man leaning over her, kissing her, touching her, mating with her. "Talon!"

"Rausha! Sweetheart, what are you doing?" Kyma came up behind her. His muscular body overlaid the one in the mirror. He slid his arms around her big belly and cupped their child. "Baby, what are you doing standing here in front of the mirror in the middle of the night? Your skin is cold as ice." Possessively, he palmed her heavy breasts and gently squeezed them. He teased the tight nipples until they turned to hard spikes. Kyma turned her to face him, tilted her chin and took her mouth in a brutally savage kiss.

She accepted his kiss, savored the sexual battle of their tongues thrusting in an elemental mating. Saylym threaded her fingers in his long, dark hair. The kiss turned hot, raw and carnal.

Kyma groaned, cupped her butt and dragged her against his erection. He closed her fingers around his rock hard cock. "Touch me, darling. I need to feel your sweet touch."

Saylym pumped his cock, working her hand up and down the long length. When he freed her mouth, her ragged breaths matched his. "Noo. Don't stop kissing me," she cried. "I want you. Please, Kyma. I want you inside me."

She saw his quick triumphant glance toward the mirror. Then slowly he turned her and bent her over the long padded bench in front of the mirror. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes! I need you."

He nudged her butt with his cock. "Can you take me like this?"

"Yes. Yes," she said desperately, grinding her ass against his straining cock. "Please, Kyma. Fuck me now."

Kyma edged closer, forced her head down, lifted her ass higher, then guided his cock to the mouth of her sultry, hot channel. Slowly, he entered her. Inch by inch he filled her, until he was seated to the hilt. "Gods, woman, you're damned tight. I love fucking you. Your pussy's so hot it feels like it's going to melt my cock."

Saylym wiggled her hips. "I love the feel of you inside me. Don't torture me so. Dammit! Fuck me!"

Kyma laughed. "I aim to please, my mate." He set a slow, steady, torturous rhythm. By the time he came, Saylym moaned with weakness. Her breasts heaved with ragged breaths. She panted, trying to calm her body from the number of multiple orgasms he'd given her.

Kyma pulled out of her, glanced toward the mirror and smiled. "Now, my lovely mate, I want you to service me."

Saylym turned and lowered onto her knees in front of him. He locked his fingers in her hair. "Now," he whispered. "Take me in your mouth." Slowly, Saylym closed her mouth around his jutting cock. Kyma guided her, instructed her, thrust his hips. "Merciful gods, you know how to please me." He thrust twice more and exploded. Saylym moaned and took all he had to offer.

Kyma helped her to her feet, sat down on the bench and pulled her astraddle of him. "Ride me, love. Take what you want."

Clenching his teeth, he helped her ride his cock until they were both groaning. He buried his cock in her sleek channel one last, final time and, breathing hard, poured his hot seed inside her. Kyma held himself inside her while his harsh breathing slowed to rough exhales. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, too breathless to speak.

"I'll never get enough of you."

Saylym heard the victory in his voice, saw him turn his head toward the mirror and smile again.

Why did he keep smiling into the mirror?

He fondled her breasts, licked the side of her neck. He stroked her nipples until she thought she'd die. "Again?" he whispered.

"Yes."

She didn't know how much time passed, but she knew Kyma spilled inside her twice more before he sat her aside and stood up. He pressed a kiss to her eyelids, slid his mouth to the rapidly beating pulse in her throat and suckled. "You taste delicious. Feel like taking a hot shower with me?"

"Mmm, I feel great. You know how to please me." She leaned closer. "I love you, Kyma." She pressed her mouth to his, nibbled on his lower lip.

"I love you too, baby." He rubbed her belly. "Tell me, who did you see in the mirror?"

"I-I don't know. I—there was a man. Talon. He said he's my mate. We have sons. Twins."

Kyma turned her to face the mirror. He slid his arms around her thick waist from behind and splayed his wide hands across her swollen belly. "Our daughter sleeps well this night."

"Mmm. Yes." Contented, Saylym rested her head in the crook of his

shoulder.

Kyma cupped a hand over her mound, parted her nether lips, then rubbed a long finger up and down her clit. "Next breeding season, you will give me a son."

"Yes. If that is your desire."

"It is my desire. I'm your mate, sweetheart. Didn't I just prove it?"

She gasped as he delved inside her, swirled his finger around and toyed with the tiny nub. "Of course. I never doubted for a minute you're my mate. It's just that he sounded so sure..."

"I've always been your mate." He thrust his finger inside her. "Ride it," he commanded, and she did.

"Oh, gods, how do you make me so hot?"

"I'm your mate, Rausha. I always will be." He brought her to an explosive climax. Saylym leaned weakly against him. "You love me so well. Don't ever stop."

"I have no intention of stopping. You're mine, darling. We are going to have a very large family together. Someone's trying to hex you. You don't know anyone named Talon, sweetheart. You never have. This child you carry is your first."

"I know all this, Kyma." She turned, cupped the side of his face. "Never doubt I love you with all my heart. I want to give you many sons."

"And you will..."

Suddenly, the mirror exploded. Crystal pieces of long, jagged glass flew through the air, peppering both of them. Saylym screamed and buried her face against Kyma's chest. He locked an arm around her and held her protectively against his body. Dizziness rolled over her like swells of tidal waves. Agonizing pain slashed across her right side and belly. "Kyma!"

She curled her fingers against his chest.

Kyma swept her into his arms and carried her to their bed. "What's wrong?" He swiped a hand across his bare stomach. "What is this? Blood? Sweetheart, you're bleeding!"

Saylym gasped and looked at her belly. A long, sharp piece of jagged glass stuck out of the lower right quadrant of her stomach. White-hot pain ripped across her insides. "Oh, gods, the baby. She's cut! Her heart. It beats faintly. The glass is lodged in her chest."

Kyma slapped the button on the wall near their bed. In the distance

she heard an alarm. He jerked on clothes and wrapped a blanket around her.

"What was that? Some kind of alarm?"

"Yes. We need help. Someone just tried to kill us and tried to murder our daughter." He helped her stand. Immediately, her knees buckled. Kyma caught her in his arms as she toppled toward him. He spun around and headed out of their chamber and down the hall. "You'll be okay, sweetheart. I swear by all that's holy, I will not let him get to you. Ever. I'll keep you safe."

Professor Shomus and Zebus met him in the corridor. "What are you doing? What happened? Where are you taking her?" Zebus asked.

"To Sanctuary. We need a surgical team on standby. Rausha's been injured. So has our baby."

"But it's not time. The baby isn't due for another three weeks."

"Don't you think I know that? There's glass buried deep in Rausha's belly. It's lodged in the baby's chest. We must hurry, Father, or we'll lose both of them."

"What happened to cause such a thing?" Zebus asked.

Kyma shot a look at the professor. "The *waken* made contact with her. He hexed the mirror in our room. She knew him. Give her an injection, Professor. Something for pain, then give her a shot of the new drug, and this time, make damn certain you give her enough so she never remembers the son of a bitch." He shuddered and held Saylym tighter. "If that murdering bastard ever makes contact with my mate again, if she ever says his name or remembers she has twin sons, I'll rip out your heart." Kyma glared at his father. "Talon can never be allowed near her. She isn't safe with him. He just tried to kill her."

"I'll triple the dose," the professor said.

"No," Kyma said, clenching his jaw. "Give her an entire year's worth."

"Kyma, with all I've already given her, a year's dosage will totally wipe out every memory cell she has left. She will never recall anything about her past."

"And that's exactly the way I want it. Do it. Now! I will not risk her remembering Talon or their sons. I will not lose her to him."

The professor hurried toward the lab.

Zebus eyed his son. "What else happened?"

Kyma smiled, but his eyes were icy as death. "Talon heard Rausha beg me to fuck her."

"Did you give her what she wanted?"

"I made damn certain he saw us. I didn't want him to have a single doubt Rausha and I have a very active, extremely satisfying intimate relationship and she loves it, just as she loves me. I'm sure he became quite livid, but there was nothing he could do but watch helplessly while I took his mate over and over and over again. The fucker tried to steal her from me through the mirror! It exploded."

"You need to calm down, Kyma. You know it was a magic mirror. We knew he'd try to contact her. We meant for him to see you sleeping together or mating with her."

"Yes. I expected him to try and slay me, but I never thought he'd try to butcher her. Our goal was to obtain revenge for what he did to Mother, but I will not put Rausha or our child at such risk again. And I swear I'll cut out Shomus' heart if she recalls any of this."

"It isn't Professor Shomus' fault Talon tried to make contact. These things are to be expected. He wants her back. We'll just have to be on better guard."

Kyma narrowed his eyes. "I think after he saw his female suck me off and her obvious pleasure from doing me, he no longer wants her. I saw the rage on his face. He tried to kill her and my baby. Even if he does want her, he can't have her. I will never give her up."

"He will seek the birthing chamber. He knows now that she's heavily pregnant with your babe. Talon will hunt both you and her down."

"If he comes near her or my daughter, I'll kill him, just like he killed my mother and my baby brother."

Zebus nodded. "I've trained you for that moment of revenge. We've waited for centuries to avenge your mother's assassination, your brother's death, but this witch you're infatuated with is merely icing on the cake."

Kyma stiffened. "She had nothing to do with Mother's death. *This* witch is my mate. She will remain mine. I'm not infatuated with her, Father. I love her with every breath I draw. I will never have another female, so you better get used to having Rausha around. I plan on making lots of babies with her."

Zebus grinned. "I expect you will succeed, too. As soon as this girl child is born, get them both back here where it's safe. Perhaps we can get Rausha in and out of Sanctuary before Talon discovers she's there."

"I will not rush her back here, Father. They will have the time they

need to heal and bond before I bring them back here. The *waken* will not get near what is mine. I will stand guard over her myself. I told you, she's mine. I love her. I love this babe. We will raise our daughter side by side, and any other children we create together."

Talon will get in the clinic. We must make plans." Zebus eyed Saylym's pale face. "I have an idea."

Kyma nodded.

"I'll mull it over and get back with you. In the meantime, I'll post guards outside her chamber and outside the Sanctuary Clinic. It's early in the season for births, but who knows, maybe some of the other witches will go into early labor. Maybe the staff will be so busy delivering babies, no one will pay your mate any heed. Cover her face when you take her inside the clinic. Let no one look upon her other than the surgeon. After he delivers your daughter and you know she and Rausha are well, kill him."

"I already planned to do that."

Saylym moaned in his arms.

"Just a few more minutes, sweetheart, and we'll be on our way to Sanctuary."

Professor Shomus hurried toward them. He paused long enough to flip back the blanket, then jabbed first one needle, then the second in Saylym's arm.

"She's unconscious," Kyma said, worry in his voice. "She's losing blood. Did you give her the amount of drug I told you to?"

Professor Shomus nodded. "Yes. It will wipe all traces of any previous memories left in her brain. She has no past. It's gone for good. You are the only mate she'll recognize or ever love. I added a hallucinogen with the suggestion that if a male named Talon ever approaches her, he wants to kill her and her children. She will fight him if he comes near her. She will scream down the roof of the clinic if he enters her birthing chamber."

"Father," Kyma said, "I'll see you in Sanctuary."

Zebus watched his son until Kyma rounded the corner. "I hope Talon tries to find Saylym. I hope he enters her birthing chamber."

"Why do you wish that?"

"Because then, Kyma will kill him. My mate's brutal assassination will be avenged. We'll have one less fucking *waken* to worry about. I think I must make certain Talon receives a message his mate is about to give birth..."

Epilogue

A fail proof formula for liberation: dare to keep expanding your heart even if you've been justifiably wounded by pain or disappointment. The effort is never wasted.

~Judith Orloff M.D.

*Ru-Noc
Near Sanctuary
Approaching Samhain
Immortal Realm*

"Saylym," Talon yelled. "Come back! Come back!"

He whirled, athame in hand when Koran slammed the bedroom door open and rushed inside. "What happened? What are you doing?"

"I lost her when the mirror exploded. I lost her, dammit!"

"You contacted her?"

Talon shook his head. "Yes. No. I-I thought for a moment it was her, but it wasn't." His voice broke with choked sobs. "I don't know who she was or why she responded to my magic, but it wasn't my Saylym. It wasn't her. Her hair was short and black as night. There was hardly any magic shimmer to her eyes, and they were violently blue. And her face...it wasn't her face. The entire left side of her cheek was marred with a tattoo."

"You're certain it wasn't Saylym?"

"It wasn't her. She was naked. Her breasts were fuller, heavier

than...and she was, uh, very pregnant. She looked so strange.”

“It might still be Saylym.”

“No. Even the hair between her legs was black. It wasn’t Saylym. It wasn’t her voice. The things she said...did with the demon...she liked him touching her, and by the gods, she loved touching him. It wasn’t Saylym. She didn’t know me.”

“Ahhhh!”

They both jumped and took off to the front room when they heard Kali scream. They skidded to a stop when they saw a demon behind her holding a wicked-looking athame to her breast.

Talon started toward the demon, but Koran grabbed his arm and shook his head. “Don’t. He’s broken a blade off between her ribs. The next one will go in her heart.”

“What do you want?” Talon asked. “Let my sister go.”

The demon smiled and thrust a second athame in Kali’s side. Blood saturated her white shirt. She shuddered. “Do not make the mistake of coming any closer, or I will finish the job. Brasov has plans for her. I wouldn’t want to upset him.”

“Brasov?” Talon said. “What does he want with my sister?”

“I believe he wants to fuck her.” He rubbed Kali’s protruding belly. “Although it appears someone has already done a good job of breeding her. She will give birth soon. Yes? Like all witches.”

Koran growled and took a step forward.

“Do not,” the demon warned. “I *will* kill her. I have a message for Prince Talon from my king.”

“Kallibus?” Talon asked.

“Zebus is my king. He says to tell you your mate is very, very pregnant. If you still want her, she’ll be giving birth to his granddaughter at the Sanctuary Clinic in about an hour.”

Koran and Talon both lunged toward the demon, but it was too late. He vanished with Kali, leaving nothing but the overwhelming rotten-egg scent of sulfur in the room.

Talon whipped around and headed for the front door.

Koran grabbed his arm. “Whoa. Where are you going?”

“To Sanctuary. To get my mate.”

Koran shook his head. “Don’t do it. You know it’s a trap set by Zebus. He was daring you to come get her.”

“I know that, Koran, but the woman I saw in the mirror was heavily pregnant. She was hurt when the mirror exploded. I have to go to her. It

must have been Saylym."

"If you go to her, you risk her life."

Talon hesitated. "How so?"

"Her mate. The demon just might be using her to get to you and care nothing for her at all."

Talon shook his head. "No. The demon who mated with the female in the mirror loves her very much. I hated seeing him touch her, but every caress was meant to give her pleasure. His tone was always gentle. He loves the child she carries. How could he not love my Saylym?"

"You said it wasn't her."

"Maybe I was mistaken."

"And maybe you weren't. The woman's pregnant. Her mate isn't going to be far from her side, if it's even the female you saw in the mirror."

"Let go of my arm, Koran. I'm going after Saylym, and by the gods, I'm bringing her home..."

Koran lowered his arm. "Be careful. Do not walk into their trap."

"I'll be careful, but I have to bring her home. What are you going to do?"

"About Kali?" Koran smiled. "I'm going to Transylvania to kill the bastard who took her..."

Zabitha Shay

Glossary

From the Winslow Witches of Salem

ANZUS GEVO- DIVINE GIFT

ARK TREES- A TYPE OF OAK TREE

AZREL- STIMULANT FOR MALE DEMONS

BAVAR ROOT- A BLACK SHRUB/BUSH

BAVAR ROOT SOUP- BLACK SOUP MADE FROM THE BAVAR ROOT SHRUB/BUSH

BAWK- A RARE BIRD, HALF HAWK, HALF BAT

BELTANE- WITCHES' MATING SEASON

BLACK SLUMBER- SLEEP OF THE DEAD

BESOM- WITCH'S BROOM

CHANGELING- A NEWLY TURNED VAMPIRE, USUALLY A HUMAN WHO'S BEEN CHANGED

CHAR-FLUM-ROPE- A FLAMING WHIP USED TO PUNISH THE WITCHES/WAKENS

CHOCO- CHOCOLATE

CONTAINER UNITS- CELLS FOR HOLDING SOULS AND/OR BODIES

Witch's Magic

COPSTER- POLICE

CORMEL- CAMEL

CROWNING- THE PRIME STATE OF BEING FOR A MALE VAMPIRE WHEN HE'S READY TO FIND A MATE

DISIAC- A PREPARATION FLUID TO PREPARE A FEMALE FOR SEX WITH AN UNDERWORLD GOD

EL-LOY EGG- AN EAGLE'S EGG

ENFORCER AGENT- SECRET AGENT

FEMMA-LENE- FEMALE

FIREBON LIONS- MAGICAL, STUDLY LIONS THAT DWELL IN THE UNDERWORLD

FIRST BRIDE- THE MOST IMPORTANT CHOSEN BRIDE OF A VAMPIRE TO BE THE MOTHER OF HIS OFFSPRING

FUTHAR- THE PROPER NAME FOR THE FAMILIAR RACE

FUTZ-FUZZY- FUCK FUZZY

FYDE-FARZ- SHIT

GRUBO WRESTLER - AN OVERWEIGHT WARLOCK WRESTLER

GRUBIT- A RABBIT

HANDEFAST- MARRIAGE

JABBER ENGINE JETSKEY- A MAGICAL HIGH-POWERED ENGINE ATTACHED TO A BESOM

JUKEY- A FORM OF CATNIP DRUG, HIGHLY ADDICTIVE LIKE OPIUM

JUNUS VINE- A STRONG VINE WITH THE ABILITY TO COME TO LIFE AND WRAP AROUND YOU.

KYDOR- THE GREAT SALT PLAINS ON RU-NOG

ILLUMROF- MORTAL/HUMAN

IMPURE- HALF HUMAN, HALF WITCH

IMAGE- A LOOK-ALIKE

INFERITLUS- A VIRUS THAT LEAVES A WITCH STERILE

ISH-CROM- ICE CREAM

KIERAN- SWEETHEART

KNOCKROOT- A CERTAIN TYPE OF TREE ROOT FROM THE KNOCKROOT FAMILY

LA-SCHEME- DARLING

LOBSTROID- LOBSTER

LOLLI-ROOS- LOLLIPOPS

LU-NARK- WHEN A WEREWOLF REACHES FULL MATURITY AND THE URGE TO FIND A MATE INTENSIFIES

LUTTO- LETTUCE

MABON- AUTUMN

MACKHA GUN- LIKE A MACHINE GUN, EXCEPT IT SHOOTS LASER BEAMS INSTEAD OF BULLETS

MANDREYAN HONEY- TYPE OF BEE'S HONEY FOUND ONLY IN RU-NOC

MANNARA-WOMAN- MATE

MANNAZ-MAN- MATE

MARSH WASPS- A MEAN, SHORT-TEMPERED YELLOW WASP THAT LIVES IN THE MARSHES NEAR SANCTUARY

MARSHEM PUFFS- MARSHMALLOW PUFFS

MAU-LEY- MY LOVE

MITHRA- A HALLUCINOGENIC LSD-TYPE OF NARCOTIC

Witch's Magic

MON-KAR- MONKEY

NAGARRA- DAY

NAGAZ- NIGHT

OBSERVER- GHOSTLY GUARDS WHO PATROL THE BORDERS BETWEEN THE MORTAL AND IMMORTAL WORLDS

OXBORE – A HUGE, BULL-LIKE CREATURE FROM THE SWAMPS OF RU-NOC

PERTHRONE- STONE

PREAKNESS- INTENSE STAGE A WAKEN REACHES AT MATING TIME

RAZURE- VAMPIRE'S ENTHRALLMENT

REDE WORM- RED WORM FOUND ONLY ON THE KYDOR SALT PLAINS

ROM- A VERY FAST BIRD RESEMBLING A ROADRUNNER

RU-NOC- LAND OF WITCHES, WAKENS AND WARLOCKS

RUSHING- WHEN A MALE VAMPIRE REACHES THE AGE TO SEEK A MATE

SHEEAHTA- MASCULINE FORM FOR SHIT

SHRUM WORM- A MAGGOT

SWIGEE- A GLOVE

SHYMETA- FEMININE FORM FOR SHIT

SOWILLA- SUN

TERREZA DE NOCHEZ- TERROR OF THE NIGHT

THRASH HOG- WILD BOAR

TOAD'S BANYAN- A PLUM-LIKE FRUIT

TOKEN- CLAIMING MARK

TOMORS- TOMATOES

TY-GUR- TIGER

U-NULLBRED- A CHILD BORN FROM INCEST

WANGA-WANGA- MATING

WAKEN- A MALE WITCH

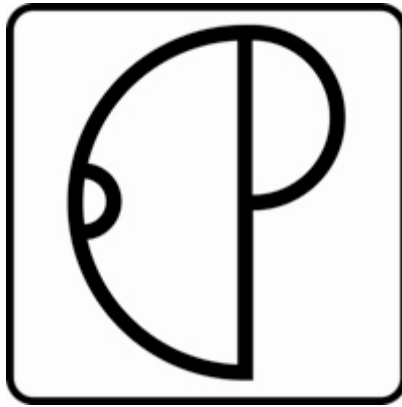
WEEBLE BUGS- LIGHTNING BUGS

WHOOSHY-WHOOSHY- ABILITY TO FERTILIZE EGGS

WHUMPIE-WHUMPIE- VAMPIRE SEX

WISKA- WHISKEY

ZUM BIRD- A VERY TINY BIRD THAT RESEMBLES A HUMMINGBIRD



About the Author

Tabitha Shay is the author of paranormal romances, The Winslow Witches of Salem Series which includes: *Witch's Brew*, *Witch's Heart*, *Witch's Moon* and *Witch's Magic*. She also writes contemporary western romances under another pen name, Jaydyn Chelcee.

Jaydyn's contemporary western romances, The Montana Men Series includes: *In the Arms of Danger* and *No Holds Barred*, watch for Book three of the five "Too Close to the Fire" coming soon.

All of her books are now available in print at Amazon.com
And in E-format at EternalPress.ca

Tabitha Shay

Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Brew

Book One of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

by Tabitha Shay

The hairbrush in Saylym Winslow's hand came alive, wiggling worse than a worm on a hook. With an earsplitting scream, she flung the brush across the bathroom and pressed a hand against her run-away heart. Unfortunately, the brush landed in the commode with a distinctive plop. Water slapped over the sides of the porcelain rim, splattering onto the worn tiled floor.

Biting her lip, Saylym tiptoed to the toilet bowl and peered over the edge, then jumped back. Her breathing rattled to a dead stop in her chest. "Ohmigod! I don't believe it!"

The brush had inched its way up the side of the white porcelain as if it had suddenly sprouted hands and feet to pull itself up the wet surface. It reached the top, tottered for a second, then toppled over onto the floor and flopped like a fish out of water. "No more," Saylym moaned. "Please. I can't stand one more inanimate thing coming to life."

Witch's Magic

Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Heart

Book Two of the Winstow Witches of Salem Series

by Tabitha Shay

"Illumrof is you, female. You're human."

Sage reluctantly lowered Hannah to the floor. He allowed her body to slide slowly down the hard length of his. He never thought he'd see the day when he could summon the least trace of interest in an *illumrof*.

How odd. Life had a way of becoming strange and unpredictable. Faced with the woman standing before him now, he discovered he could muster a hell of a lot of interest. Samhain! If this woman was an example of human females, then dammit, his race needed to figure out a way males could successfully mate with them and produce offspring. No matter they would breed a race of *Impures*. As he saw it, half-breeds were better than extinction!

Tabitha Shay

Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Moon

Book Three of the Winstow Witches of Salem Series

by Tabitha Shay

Koran froze. "What are you talking about? I'm not mating with Kali. You think I'm insane? You think I exaggerate? If Princess Kali wants my dick on a platter, King Darak will order it severed and served, along with my balls. I dare not touch her."

"If not you, then who will you find to—?"

"I don't know!" Koran raked hands through his hair. "No one. Could we please just not talk about it?"

"You'd allow the Princess to suffer?"

"Allow? What choice do I have, Banjo?"

"I'm sure you know all the ways, Captain, to pleasure a witch. If you don't want to risk breeding the Princess, then you play, but don't consummate, then—"

"I'm not made of stone, Banjo." Koran swore softly beneath his breath. "I'm not immune to Beltane. If I touch Kali, I don't know if I can hold back. Hell, I don't know if I *want* to hold back. Please, no more discussion about Kali's needs."

Banjo blinked innocently. "Yes, Captain."

Witch's Magic

Now Available from Eternal Press:

In the Arms of Danger

Book One of The Montana Men Series

by Jaydyn Chelcee

Hands fisted on her hips, Lacey flung back her head in challenge. "Well, sugar, we seem to have a teeny little problem here. A stalemate."

A dark brow arched.

"The way I see it, I want through the door you're standing in front of, and you obviously aren't happy with the idea." She grinned. "I believe what we have here, is what you cowboys deem a 'Mexican stand-off'."

The predatory gleam in his eyes darkened. A wicked grin split his lips. He folded his arms across his broad chest and cocked one hip against the doorframe. "Nah. What we have here, sugar," he drawled in mock imitation of her Southern accent, "is Custer's Last Stand, and I'm Chief Sitting Bull." He moved toward her with a slow, lethal walk. "Guess who won that battle, bright eyes? Sheath your claws little cat, because this is another battle where the pale-face loses."

Zabitha Shay

Now Available from Eternal Press:

No Holds Barred

Book Two of The Montana Men Series

by Jaydyn Chelcee

Kaycee forgot to be cautious, ignored the warning bells ringing in her head. There was only action and reaction and both were hot as the fires of Hades. Whoever thought passion wasn't damning clearly had never looked into the piercing eyes of this man, never been kissed by this cowboy, or felt the uncontrolled heat slashing into the both of them.

Her knees trembled.

She curled her fingers into the soft hair at his nape and cuddled closer.

Jace released her, took a moment to tug off his boots, and then he pulled her closer. "I want you," he said quietly. "I need you."

He unfastened the narrow ties at the back of her neck and released them. She caught the dress to her waist and gasped.