

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Jory Strong

Sarah's Reading

CARNIVAL TAROT



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Sarael's Reading

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*CARNIVAL TAROT:*

*SARAEI 'S READING*

Jory Strong

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## Chapter One

The tarot cards lay on black satin cloth. Three of them, lined up in a row.

The past. The present. The future.

Their backs glowed in lighting designed to produce just such an effect—one meant to awe the townies who ventured into the small carnival tent, most often on a whim, but sometimes because they truly believed.

Sarael Castillo fidgeted in her seat, wishing she could escape a reading that was unasked for, but presented all the same.

Helki sat across the table, her ancient, wrinkled face free of expression though her eyes were filled with too much knowledge. “You do not wish to see them?” the old woman asked, her voice holding a mild rebuke. A challenge. Something more.

Sarael ducked her head, shivering despite the jacket she wore. Did she want to see the cards?

A tendril of fear snaked through her. For days she’d felt as though a dark storm was gathering and would soon overtake her. Its arrival signaling the end of all that was familiar to her. And yet outwardly, there was no evidence that such a thing was true.

“I’ll see them,” she said, bracing herself as the cards were turned.

The Hanged Man.

The Tower.

The Moon.

Sarael looked at the cards, interpreting them for herself, but remaining silent, allowing Helki to have her say. “You have lived among us, adapting to a way of life you weren’t meant for, held in limbo by choices that weren’t your own—and yet the

time wasn't wasted. You've learned much—more than you give yourself credit for. But now it is time to separate. To move away from what you know."

The elderly fortune-teller reached over and took Sarael's hand, turning the palm upward before removing the leather band from around Sarael's wrist, exposing the strange tattoo.

Helki tapped it. "Soon you will be joined with the one you were meant to be with, living in his world with him."

And Sarael believed, hearing prophecy in Helki's voice where often there was carnival showmanship and street cunning, the ability to read a person's expression and take an educated guess based on hard lessons and a lifetime of observation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Matteo Cabrelli lounged in the back of the sleek black limousine, sipping from his wineglass, the dark red contents pungent with a strong mix of herbs. He'd grown used to the taste over the years, though it still remained foul, disgusting. But the penalty for not drinking it would be death—his.

Even with the herbs, it was often hard to control *La Brama*, The Hunger, the desire to drain everything from those he preyed on, to take their life essence along with each swallow of blood. But to yield to *La Brama* meant death at the hands of his own kind for a change, rather than by their enemies—the secret society of "Believers" who sought to destroy any being who could take the form of a human but was more than mortal.

From the very beginning there had been those who were aware of the existence of his kind, peasants and royalty and men of religion alike who feared and hated what they couldn't understand, what they saw as a threat, who wanted to destroy anything not human. The hysteria becoming so great that at one time they drove stakes into the hearts of their own dead or burned their bodies, thinking to keep them from rising as vampires. The hatred and fear passed on to their sons and daughters, to any who were willing to hunt and kill—the description of "human" narrowing as the years passed.

A grim smile played over Matteo's lips. Time had aided his kind. The great masses of humans no longer believed that there were creatures among them who could shift form, whose lives spanned centuries, and who fed on blood in order to survive. The masses no longer feared the dark, and many individuals embraced it, clamoring to clubs where they became easy prey – though they escaped with their lives. And still the Believers persisted. A society of intolerance, run by men who remained in the shadows, who fed on fear and lusted for power and riches.

Rage swirled through Matteo just thinking about those who hunted the Vampire, the anger forcing him to take another long sip from his wineglass. He had no time to worry about them now. No time to let hatred of them divert his attention from what was most important.

"Almost there, *Don Cabrelli*," the driver's voice intoned and Matteo's body tightened with anticipation. With need.

*Almost there.* Years and millions of dollars later, it appeared that the one who'd been created specifically for him had finally been found. A woman now. His to claim. To master. To feed from. To mate.

Sarael. He tasted the name. Let it coat his tongue. Its promise sweet where the herbs were bitter. Soon he'd be free of his daily ritual of herbs mixed in wine. Once he'd joined with her, there would be no chance of *La Brama* controlling him. Sarael's blood would sate him, her body would succor him, her life would give deeper meaning to his own.

Instead of centuries of meaningless conquest and feeding, of lone pursuits, he'd have a companion at his side, a woman who was his in every way. A woman who would give him sons over the centuries. Not many at any one time, his race was not a prolific one, but there would be children. A legacy. Something beyond himself.

Matteo's cock pulsed in anticipation. He would know immediately if Sarael was his. In truth, he had little doubt that she was. He'd needed to take his shaft in hand and find relief as soon as he saw the photographs forwarded to him by the American, Cable

Luske, one of the *padrall*—the humans who had served Matteo's kind in one way or another since the very beginning, each generation passing the duty to the following one.

Sarael was the image of her grandmother—Angelique's mother. Small and feminine. Her features delicate, fey-like. Her eyes dark pools Matteo knew he would lose himself in. Her hair, thick and black, long enough to drape and rub against his body.

She was the one. He knew it. The picture only whetted his appetite. The leather band around her wrist was just another indication that his search would soon be over. His blood would confirm it when they finally arrived at the carnival and he saw her for the first time.

Sarael.

Soon she would be his bride. His *kadine*. The one who would satisfy all of his needs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarael sat on the bed in the small trailer, twisting the leather wristband around and around, her thoughts an endless loop. She looked up only when her friend and trailer mate, Dakotah, plopped down at the end of the bed in a cloud of luxurious brown hair.

"They only give one possibility," Dakotah said, her eyes focusing on the three cards—not from Helki's deck, but from one of the many in their trailer.

"I can feel the truth in them," Sarael said, her stomach tense, her skin tight against her body, as though it was already too late to change the prediction.

Dakotah reached over, flipping the cards so they lay facedown. "You can change that truth."

Sarael rose from the bed and walked over to the screened door, seeing a sight she'd seen all her life. Though the faces and the locations changed, the essence of the carnival remained the same.

The trailer she and Dakotah shared was nestled among others just like it, cheap boxes of metal pulled by battered trucks and hidden by the tractor trailers that were



used to move the rides and booths from city to city. "This is all I've ever known. I've never left the carnival. I've never stayed behind when it moved on."

And the carnival always kept moving. No place more than a week.

It suited most of the carnies. A lot of them were running—from the past, from themselves, from demons only they saw.

Sarael's mother had been running from something when she'd arrived with a toddler in her arms and found a home with the carnival. She'd run again a few years later, leaving her daughter behind.

But the carnies took care of their own. The old fortune-teller Helki had made room in her small trailer for Sarael. Never speaking of Sarael's mother or of the past. Never speaking of a future beyond the next town.

It was the only way of life Sarael knew. And yet, it no longer felt as though it belonged to her. The Tower burning, struck by lightning and crashing down around her, leaving her no options. Forcing her into a world that was frightening, unfamiliar, its rules and rhythms foreign.

Dakotah rolled off the bed, joining Sarael at the door. "Would it make you feel better if I told you that you haven't missed much? That for people like us, this might be as good as it gets. As safe as it gets."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I know it."

Nausea roiled in the pit of Sarael's stomach as old memories fought to surface. Of a small child who knew better than to wander from the carnival. A child bound and gagged and thrust into the trunk of a car by a man with a cute brown puppy. A child rescued by luck and not design when the man ran a red light. She pushed the memories down.

The Hanged Man rose in their place. All the years moving from town to town, the route identical some seasons, varying slightly in others. The faces of the townies

blending and merging, changing over the years, appearing and disappearing, their stories tiny strands in the fabric of Sarael's life as she watched them, as she caught traces of their conversation, pieces of their happiness and sadness, their triumphs and tragedies—while safely removed from all of it and yet not untouched by it. "I'm a chicken," she whispered.

Dakotah snorted. "Hardly." She reached over and grabbed a jacket from a hook next to the door, hesitating for a second before saying, "You're one of the bravest people I know. You keep caring about others, even when you know they won't stick around."

Something in Dakotah's voice alerted Sarael. "You're leaving?"

"Not tonight, but soon."

Sarael nodded, saying nothing. An unwritten rule, a code among those who traveled with the carnival. Not to probe into another's secrets.

Dakotah put her jacket on. "I envy you."

A startled laugh escaped from Sarael. "Me?" She found it hard to believe. From the time Dakotah had joined the carnival, Sarael had wished she was as strong, as boldly confident as her friend.

"Yeah. You. You don't even realize how free you are, Sarael. How free you've always been." Dakotah opened the screened door. "I'm spelling whoever's on the Ferris wheel. You want to work there or are you going back to Helki's?"

"I'll work with you," Sarael said, glancing momentarily at the cards lying facedown on her bed before stepping out of the trailer.

Within a few steps they were back among the crowds. Surrounded by the sounds of the carnival. The music of the carousel with its colorful metal horses, the men and women calling out, trying to entice customers to their various games, the thumping and clanging as objects were knocked over or struck, the popping of balloons, the excited squeals of winners along with the crash of bumper car against bumper car.

The night air was a mix of popcorn and hot dogs, cotton candy and autumn leaves. Its breeze whispered a hint of the impending winter.

Families wandered, kids sticky from begged treats, some still high on sugar, others tired and whiny, up well past their bedtimes. Couples moved along with their arms around each other, the men and boys often stopping to throw softballs or basketballs or rings, trying to impress their wives or girlfriends by winning a stuffed animal.

Sarael and Dakotah took their places at the Ferris wheel, the routine so often done that only a few words needed to be spoken before those who'd been running the ride moved away.

Despite the lateness of the hour, there was a long line of people waiting to get on the wheel, teenage kids anxious to make out as they traveled around and around, up and down, more interested in each other than the sights from above the ground. Sarael and Dakotah shared a glance, both of them glad for the chill in the air. In the summer when clothing was skimpy, it was harder to operate the ride—the passengers often getting lost in their own world and forgetting how much of a show they were providing to those below them on the ground.

With easy precision, Sarael and Dakotah shepherded riders on and off, the time passing quickly, though as it did, Sarael grew more anxious, more unsettled. As though the gathering storm had finally arrived, stopping just short of touching her.

She looked around, noticing the local boys, the townies traveling in small packs. Most harmless, but some predatory—believing somehow that carnies were less, were fair game, the men for fighting, the women for easy sex.

A pack of three, each wearing a letterman jacket, had taken an interest in Sarael. Returning to the area again and again and positioning themselves so she could see them, could hear their comments about her body. She was at least five years older than they were, though she was small, delicate. Perhaps they thought she was still in high school so they stood a chance with her. More likely they didn't care.

But they weren't the source of her uneasiness. Not that she'd be careless and let them catch her alone. Small-town police departments weren't quick to apply a charge of rape when the boys were local—always from “good” families—and the girl was a carnie. She'd be careful. Very, very careful.

Her mother had always watched the carnival visitors around her as though she expected something dangerous to present itself. Or at least that's what her mother was like in the few memories Sarael had of the woman who'd given birth to her. Almost from the first, her mother had left her in the hands of the other carnies to raise. Creating a separation, a distance between the two of them that was rarely breached.

Sarael glanced at the leather wristband covering her tattoo. It was the one act of parenting her mother took seriously. Sometimes driving the point home with physical punishment. The sharp slaps and her mother's face etched deeply into Sarael's mind, along with her insistence that Sarel must always keep the tattoo covered. Though there was never an explanation for it. And her mother had no such marking on either of her wrists—that much Helki had been willing to tell Sarael.

Sighing, Sarael pushed thoughts of her mother—no doubt brought on by the tarot reading—away, and collected more tickets for the Ferris wheel, knowing by the feel and weight of those in her hand when she'd collected enough to fill the seats. She shook her head as a boy in line tried to hand her two, saying, “Next ride.”

He took it with good grace, turning back to his girlfriend, the two of them talking quietly, staring into each other's eyes, the sight of it making Sarael fill with a loneliness she usually managed to keep at bay. She'd never been casual with her affections—not when it came to physical intimacy. Though she'd been tempted—more than once—to take a townie back to the trailer she and Dakotah now shared. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. To seek an empty comfort that would only leave her feeling lonelier when she moved to the next town.

“You're quieter than usual,” Dakotah said after she'd set the Ferris wheel in motion, both of them keeping an eye on the riders.

Sarael shoved her hands in her back pockets, the move pushing her chest outward and gaining her a round of whistles from the boys who'd been watching her all night.

Dakotah snickered. "As if you'd waste yourself on them." She reached over and wrapped her hand around Sarael's arm, squeezing it. A gesture that always humbled Sarael. She was one of the few people Dakotah either touched or allowed a touch from. "Still thinking about the reading?"

Sarael shrugged. "Maybe. I just feel...different tonight. Hyperaware."

"Oh." Dakotah grinned. "Get laid then." Her head tilted in the direction of the three townies. "But not by one of them. Ask Cable or Fane back to the trailer."

"No thanks," Sarael said, meaning it, the images of the men who'd recently started hanging around the carnival flashing through her mind—their presence unexplained and yet seemingly accepted by the carnival's owner. The few times she'd seen them, she'd felt as though they somehow knew her, as though she should know them. And yet they kept their distance, not doing anything suspicious. Only speaking to her on one or two occasions.

Sarael frowned, wondering suddenly if they were the source of her nervousness and foreboding. But just as quickly as the question arose, she knew that they weren't.

She shivered, glancing up, looking beyond the crowds and lights and into the darkness that existed beyond the asphalt and dirt lot at the edge of the small town where the carnival had been set up. Into the nightscape dominated by The Moon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Matteo watched from the shadows. His fury challenging the potency of the herbs he'd ingested earlier. He wanted to rip the three human boys apart for daring to stare at Sarael. For daring to comment on her breasts, her body. For even thinking of her in a carnal manner. She was his. As he'd known she would be. His blood roared with the knowledge, urging him to claim what belonged to him.

Perhaps he'd erred in not having Sarael brought to him. But he'd feared what the sight of another man touching her, what the scent of another man on her—even a padrall or a servant ordered to retrieve her—would do to him.

Matteo stirred. Angry. Impatient. Restless to end his torment. To get her back to the place he would use until he could return to Italy with her.

He was anxious to begin. To fuck her. To exchange blood with her three times. To make her first his bride and then his kadine.

His cock jerked in anticipation. His fangs itched to elongate. His mind reached to hers. Sensing her awareness of his presence—though she had no way of knowing he was the reason for her unsettled emotions.

When the time was right he would call her, compel her to come to him in the darkness. His blood already flowed through her veins. Given to her at birth by the padrall order charged with the duty of seeing to the creation of future kadines. His blood had been mixed into the ink used to create the tattoo on her wrist during the confirmation ceremony, marking her for him to claim in adulthood.

He rubbed his chest. Touching the matching tattoo over his own heart. Cursing Angelique for taking Sarael and running. The renewed rage thoughts of Angelique brought doing nothing to calm him.

Her family had long served his kind, gaining honor, prestige and great fortune by producing those who would bear future kadines and occasionally become kadines themselves. There were no females born to his race. But his ancestors had found a way to avoid extinction by adapting human women, by sharing blood with them so that their cells altered, forming a bridge between two species and creating a vessel that would accept their seed and produce a child who would ultimately be fully vampire.

In medieval times the process had fed the rumors of the undead, women with fangs who preyed on their neighbors and family members. Crazy beings without a conscience. Creatures who needed to be destroyed.

But that was no longer the case. Had not been in centuries, save for the few humans whose conversion had driven them insane, and for the most part those had been women without knowledge of the vampire world, women chosen as kadines by vampires who feared *La Brama* would claim them before they could arrange for a mate to be created for them by the padralls.

Renewed anger rushed through Matteo. It was never very far from the surface where Sarael's mother was concerned. He had cared little about Angelique's future and what she wished to do with it. But she should never have taken his chosen with her. She should have left Sarael behind so that she could be raised in such a way as to understand her duties to the one who would claim her as a bride.

Matteo's cock pulsed again, his body tightening. Hundreds of hearts beat near him, unaware of the predator in their midst, and yet for once *La Brama* didn't whisper through his veins, didn't call for him to feast and satisfy it.

Voices swirled all around him, and yet the only conversation of interest to Matteo was the unspoken one between Sarael and him. It pleased him that she sensed his presence. And with a thought he tested his strength against hers, sending a silent command that she push her hair away from her face and neck so he could see her more clearly. She hesitated, her hand lifting partway, her eyes moving again to the shadows where he stood, before she turned, her hand dropping to her side, denying his command.

Matteo straightened, surprised by her resistance but not worried. For a long moment he contemplated whether or not to reissue the command, to strengthen it. To insist that she obey him. Then decided to let it go.

In the end she would obey him in all things. But this was not the time to begin her training. He was not worried about capturing her. About finally taking possession of her. Even if she didn't come to his call later, as he anticipated, it would be a small matter to retrieve her. Despite the humans' myths, he could easily enter her trailer— with or without permission.

Sarael's words reached him despite the distance. "What are you doing after we close down?" she asked her companion.

"Some of us are going to the beach. We're going to build a campfire. Want to come?"

*No!* This time Matteo sent a sharp command. Already he had spent longer on this task than he'd intended to—his delay not fully explainable, even to himself.

*No!* The intensity of the thought jarred Sarael, making her heart jump. Making her mind spin with confusion and uneasiness. "No," she answered, thinking she was too jumpy, too nervous to be good company.

Dakotah shrugged. "Think about it. There's time to change your mind." She smiled slightly. "Fane and Cable might be there."

The words sent a rush of fear through Sarael. A sense of menace. She shook her head, moving into position so she could open the safety bars on the buckets and help the riders off the wheel as Dakotah controlled the ride.

They worked in silence after that, in perfect sync until there was no line of townies, until the carnival darkened booth by booth, ride by ride.

"Sure you don't want to go?" Dakotah asked after they'd turned in their receipts and gone back to the trailer.

"No. Not tonight."

"See you later then."

Sarael sat down on her bed and flipped the tarot cards over. Shivering as she saw them again.

The Hanged Man.

The Tower.

The Moon.

She traced a finger along the edges. Staring at them intently. Helki's prophesy ringing in her ears.



*You have lived among us, adapting to a way of life you weren't meant for, held in limbo by choices that weren't your own – and yet the time wasn't wasted. You've learned much – more than you give yourself credit for. But now it is time to separate. To move away from what you know. Soon you will be joined with the one you were meant to be with, living in his world with him.*

The Moon. Even now she could feel it calling her. Urging her to leave her familiar surroundings and the safety of the trailer.

Around her voices sounded – laughter, argument, passion – muffled only by thin metal and small distances.

Car doors slammed. Engines started. All of them helping Sarael to fight the need whispering through her mind, her body. The compulsion to return to the darkness of the carnival.

She fought it for as long as she could. But as the night grew quieter, as the carnies around her settled, with only muted conversation and television sets giving testament to their presence, the compulsion grew stronger until Sarael could no longer resist the call.

## Chapter Two

Sarael stopped in front of the small, closed concession stand where hotdogs and hot pretzels with mustard were sold. The air around the stand was heavy with the smell of grease. Several yards away, the chrome on the bumper cars gleamed, quiet in the night, though in Sarael's mind, she could easily hear the shouts and laughter as they were slammed into each other.

*Come.*

She shivered. The need to keep moving making her heart pound in her chest.

The tattoo underneath her leather wristband felt inflamed. She twisted the band around and around. Using the movement as a distraction until the next undeniable impulse came.

Fear tried to swamp Sarael, but it was tempered by the same deeply held knowledge that had recognized the truth of what the tarot cards said. The accuracy of Helki's prediction. *It is time to separate. To move away from what you know.*

Sarael took a deep breath and tried to see into the darkness that swallowed everything up beyond the exit.

*Come.*

Stronger this time. Sending tendrils of sensation through her belly, her breasts.

She took a few more steps before grabbing the metal fencing used to form chutes for the crowds to line up in. The exit just on the other side of the carousel.

Her delay nearly cost Matteo his control. He was no closer to Sarael than he had been earlier, and yet now there was no one else around. No one to prevent him from closing the distance between them, from striding over and taking her in his arms,

stilling any protest she might make by sealing her lips with his. Thwarting any attempt at escape with a show of strength.

His nostrils flared as a breeze brought her scent to him. His heart sped up, matching the rapid dance of hers. Two sides of a single coin. Prey and predator.

The urge to close the distance, to rush in, was nearly impossible to resist. His gums ached where sharp fangs fought to descend. His cock leaked, unwilling to accept the restraint he forced on the rest of his body.

*Come.* The command lashed out and she jerked in reaction to it. The deep night, the absence of others around them, making it easier to press his will on her. He'd held back earlier, but now he intended to begin as he meant to continue. To eliminate any resistance. Any thought to escape.

She had not been raised properly, trained, prepared. So now she must suffer the consequences of her mother's choice to run. Rather than moving easily and willingly – happily – into the life of a kadine, she would enter abruptly, her fate suddenly in a stranger's hands. One who would expect obedience. One who intended to own her, body and soul. And yet one who offered everything she could ever desire in return.

Frustration, impatience, made him command her again, this time with a hint of menace. The night was leaking away more rapidly than he wanted. They should be in the limo even now.

Sarael caught a glimpse of the man standing past the carnival entrance, his aura dark, his sudden burst of anger making it easier for her to fight the need to go to him. The way it struck at her reminding her of the slaps her mother had delivered more than once, the blows given over the then-hated wristband. The words that came with it as sharp as the sting from her mother's hand. *If you're found, your life won't be your own.*

An ominous warning left with nothing to put it into context, with no understanding of what it meant. Until now.

*The Moon.* On Helki's deck it rose, framed by ancient pillars. Both full and crescent. Beautiful. Alluring. Shining over a land of magic where souls could be trapped—or freed.

*Soon you will be joined with the one you were meant to be with, living in his world with him.*

A small sound escaped, a whimper, and Sarael tightened her grip on the metal railing, refusing to take another step despite the way her body fought to do so.

*Come to me.* Softer this time, though no less insistent as the man detached himself from the darkness, moving into the moonlight with flowing grace.

Sarael's heart sped up, her stomach fluttered at the sight of his handsome features.

"Come to me, Sarael," he said, his voice like pure honey, swirling around her, sweet and thick, trapping her so that in the end she stood in front of him, her breathing fast, her body slick with sweat, her face upturned, her thoughts in chaos.

He reached out, taking her hand and holding it against his heart while the other cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing over her lips. "I am Matteo Cabrelli."

She shivered, fighting to hold a part of herself separate as he forced her to meet his gaze. Their eyes locking, causing heat to move through her so that her body felt as though it wanted to meld, to blend, to become entwined with his. So that her nipples beaded, her vulva grew swollen, making her acutely aware of the place between her legs.

For long moments they stared into each other's eyes and her thoughts were scattered, lost. But finally she pushed a word through lips that were wet, parted, as though waiting for a kiss instead of an explanation.

"How?" she whispered.

"Because you are mine, *carissima*. From the moment of your conception you were destined for me." He brushed his thumb across her mouth again. "Over time you will understand, but now we must leave."

"No." It was barely more than a puff of air as she tried to step back. But his hold was too tight and her own body too uncooperative.

He leaned down and some instinct warned her against jerking away. Her breath caught in her throat but she was frozen in place, a whimper escaping when his mouth touched her neck, a gentle kiss followed by the feel of his tongue, then his teeth, lightly gripping her skin as the hand which had been cupping her cheek moved to stroke along her spine before pulling her against his body.

Instantly she was lost under wave after wave of sensation. Swimming through thick, unfamiliar desire. Barely able to think or breathe. To protest when he swung her into his arms and began walking.

Matteo cursed himself even as he stretched her out on the limo seat and forced his mouth away from her neck, her throbbing pulse leading him into a temptation he didn't dare yield to. And yet it was too late to keep from sampling what was his.

He'd thought to overwhelm her senses so that he could get her to the car, but once he'd touched her... Lust raced through him, a flame burning him with the need to claim her. He covered her lips with his, spearing his tongue into her mouth, dominating hers, thrusting in and out, a warning of what was to come. An imitation of what his cock would soon do as he mated with her.

She moved restlessly underneath him, her hands going to his sides, his hips. He pressed more of his weight down on her, reveling in the way her body was soft under his, already so submissive.

He lifted his lips from hers, meeting her eyes in the dim interior light of the car, reading them. They were dazed, feverish—leaving him dissatisfied and angry with himself. He'd moved too fast with her. Swamping her senses and enthralling her, treating her as though she was a female to be used without thought or conscience—not as his future kadine should be treated.

Matteo levered off Sarael, moving to the end of the seat and creating a distance between them. If she'd been raised properly then she would already possess enough of

his blood that this wouldn't have happened. They would already know each other, be comfortable in each other's presence so that the first joining would be a much anticipated event. A mutual seduction entered into by both parties instead of a taking, an enthrallment better suited to dealing with prey.

There *would* be times between them when it became a taking, a commanding, an assertion of dominance—done both in play and with serious intent. But later. When Sarael was his kadine. Not now, when they were new to each other.

A low growl rumbled in Matteo's chest. Anger and frustration moving with it. What male wanted to wonder if his bride desired him only because she was drugged from a heady dose of the pheromones used to attract humans?

Sarael made herself sit up as the scorching heat and wild lust slowly faded. Her gaze found Matteo, wandering over him now that there was enough light for her to see him more clearly.

Her heart jumped in response, her eyes widening as she took in his dark, compelling beauty. The straight nose and masculine lips.

Cabrelli. Italian.

She was still wet, swollen, achy, but she forced herself to think. To question. "How can you..." She stopped, color rushing to her cheeks. "Make me do things?"

His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed, as though she'd hit a sore spot. She tensed, bracing herself, remembering his response when she'd denied him what he wanted. But rather than swamp her with passion as he had before, his eyes became hooded, his voice carrying an edge. "Did Angelique prepare you at all?"

Sarael's eyebrows drew together in confusion. "Angelique?"

He bared his teeth. "Your mother."

She jerked, licking her lips but stilling when his gaze moved to her mouth and he leaned forward. "Angie. She went by the name of Angie," Sarael whispered, trying not to move, trying not to do anything to set him off, to make him pounce.

Fear moved through her, not the terror of someone who thought they were facing death, but the primitive response that came from being helpless, stripped of any control, any choice. He'd already proven that he could overwhelm her senses, could command her body at will so that it blocked out rational thought and left her at his mercy.

Matteo's jaw tightened. He closed the distance between them, his hand once again cupping her cheek, his thumb rubbing Sarael's bottom lip and making her breath catch in her throat. "What did she tell you?" Gentler this time, as though he was trying to rein in his emotions, to check his behavior.

Sarael hesitated, afraid that if she told him the truth, that she didn't know anything, then she would remain ignorant. He tilted her face, brushing his mouth against hers, giving her a small sucking kiss that encouraged her to trust him. That sent pulses of heat through her nipples and filled her belly with warmth but didn't leave her senseless. "Nothing," she whispered, feeling strangely compelled to add, "she left when I was small."

Rage whipped across his face and through his body, charging into her and making her try to ease away from him. He didn't let her escape.

Matteo gathered her into his arms and sat back, positioning her on his lap. "Take off the wristband."

She complied, not protesting when he took the leather strap and tossed it to the floor before taking her wrist and bringing it to his mouth, touching his lips to the place where her skin had been tattooed.

"You were created for me. You were born to be my other half," he said, punctuating each sentence with a kiss to her wrist. "You would know all of this if Angelique hadn't run and taken you with her. But it is too late to change the past. What matters now is the future." His eyes probed hers and Sarael tensed, a cold chill moving down her spine with the thought that he was trying to read her mind.

“Why did she run?” she asked, wanting to distract him but also wanting the answer.

Matteo’s eyes narrowed and she felt the anger rise in him. “A man, perhaps. Who knows?” He stroked Sarael’s cheek. “It’s a good thing for her that I found you first, *carissima*, and have no need to keep searching for her.” His voice was soft, but full of deadly menace and she couldn’t suppress a shiver, her mother’s words haunting her. *If you’re found, your life won’t be your own.*

He used his free hand to unbutton his shirt, parting it in order to expose the mark over his heart. Sarael couldn’t resist touching the matching tattoo, tracing it with her fingers. She knew immediately that she’d made a mistake when his breathing changed and the waves of lust she’d experienced earlier began to swamp her.

This time Matteo fought the desire. Refusing to give in to the temptation to tumble her along the length of the seat once again and cover her body with his. Instead he concentrated on Angelique—his anger serving as a buffer, though he was no less aware of Sarael’s fingers on his chest, her buttocks pressed against his erection.

“You are mine,” he said, kissing her wrist again, tempting himself by tracing her claiming mark with his tongue.

Sarael shivered, unable to stop herself from leaning over and pressing a kiss to the mark on his chest, from imitating his action. From repeating it when he jerked under the lashes of her tongue.

But before she could do it a third time, he speared his fingers through her hair, forcing her away from his flesh, angling her so that his mouth could cover hers in a searing, punishing kiss. She yielded immediately, going soft and pliant. The shared tattoo somehow validating the rightness of being with him so that she enjoyed the heat and hunger that moved through her this time, instead of being overwhelmed by it.

She touched her tongue to his, swallowing his moan and whimpering when his hold on her tightened, when his tongue become even more aggressive, his body tense against hers. Sarael knew she should be frightened of him—terrified even—and yet her



body recognized him even if she didn't, and her mind craved the answers he could provide.

This time Matteo felt only satisfaction when he raised his face from Sarael's and met her gaze, he saw only desire and a wealth of questions in her eyes instead of enthrallment. He kissed her again, a soothing, gentle kiss full of promise as the limo turned down the driveway leading to the house that would serve as their home until she was his kadine.

The car stopped and he adjusted his hold so he could easily slide from the limo with her in his arms, his servant and driver hurrying to get the front door of the house opened. He paused, a small smile on his face as he said, "After you attend to the matter we spoke of earlier, Pietro, you are free to entertain yourself. I will summon you when I next need you."

"Very good," Pietro said, a hint of a smile in his voice, though his ancient features didn't reveal any emotion.

Matteo navigated the darkness of the house, not bothering to turn on lights that weren't needed as he easily climbed the stairs to the second floor. Only when he got Sarael to his bedroom did he stop, taking the time to lock the door and then with a thought, start a fire roaring in the fireplace, his lips quirking upward at the irony of possessing such a talent. Fire was one of the few sure ways to kill his kind.

Sarael startled in his arms, her attention jerking to the fireplace. He'd planned to mate with her on the bed, but the warmth of the fire and its soothing effect made him change his mind and move toward it.

The room had been prepared for the claiming of a bride and so the area in front of the hearth was piled with plush, soft rugs. He lowered Sarael to them, immediately joining her, positioning himself on his side, his gaze capturing hers, his leg thrown over hers, preventing her from escaping him, his hand pinning her wrists above her head.

Desire such as he'd never known coursed through him, making his cock pulse in time to his own rapid heartbeat, making him clench his buttocks against the need to

take himself in hand and release lest he move too quickly and take her as though she was nothing to him.

He had long ago tired of the endless string of women whose blood, even taken with sex, only sated him temporarily, who weren't even a fleeting thought once he'd risen from wherever he'd fucked them. He'd dreamed of this moment even before *La Smania*—the restless hunger and thirst for a mate—overtook him at the point when he became reproductively mature. He'd dreamed of this moment well before *La Brama* had grown to the level where he required the herbs to contain it.

A soul-deep need that entailed more than sex and blood rushed through him as he looked at Sarael. In her he could have everything he desired. That was the nature of one's kadine. But first he needed to make her his bride.

Sarael could feel the lust pouring off Matteo. It invaded her body, making her restless, achy with the need to touch and be touched. She tried to fight it, to push it aside long enough to question him, but when he leaned down, she could only meet his lips, opening her mouth willingly and welcoming his tongue against her own, a small cry of protest escaping when he ended the kiss, a whimper following when his lips moved to her throat, tormenting her with small, sucking bites.

She was shaking, covered with a fine sheen of sweat when he lifted his head moments later, his gaze going to hers, searching for something, the satisfaction on his face indicating he'd found it. "You're beautiful, Sarael," he whispered, "more so than I'd dared to hope for." His hand skimmed down the middle of her chest, settling on her quivering abdomen, his touch making her womb flutter and her legs part slightly. He gave her a kiss, a reward for her response and she touched her tongue to his in a silent request for more.

Matteo's cock pulsed, coating its head with a fresh wash of arousal. Every cell in his body argued that he had centuries to seduce and train her. That he should strip her and find his own satisfaction now.

He resisted. Forcing himself instead to slowly unbutton her shirt, parting it as his hand moved back toward the throbbing pulse in her throat.

"Beautiful," he said again after he'd unfastened the front clasp of her bra and peeled it back, exposing breasts capped with dark brown nipples. He leaned in, unable to resist the lure of them, relishing her cries of pleasure as he suckled, the pounding beat of her heart so close to his mouth that he ached to sink his fangs into her, to draw blood so he could truly feast at her breast.

Sarael writhed underneath him, still pinned down, unable to do anything but accept the pleasure he was giving her. A pleasure that was filling her up, making her feel as though she would burst. "Please," she whimpered, wanting so many things at once that she couldn't focus on any one of them.

Matteo stilled, his head lifting, his dark, dark eyes capturing hers, scaring her and thrilling her at the same time. "Please what?" he asked, his own features taut, strained.

"Let my hands go. Let me touch you."

He shifted, settling more of his weight on her, letting her feel the size of his erection through the layers of their clothing. "That would be very dangerous. You're not ready to take all of me yet."

She shivered, realizing now why she'd never let a man into her body before, why every time she'd gotten close, she'd become frightened...something warning that the consequences of yielding her virginity would become a horrible weight on her conscience in the future.

Looking up into Matteo's eyes, she knew he was the reason she had remained a virgin. Whatever it was that bound her to him, that allowed him to summon her, whatever it was, it had kept her from allowing another man to possess her. Subtly warning her that he would kill any man who knew her in such an intimate way.

Matteo used his free hand to finish unbuttoning his shirt, pushing it out of the way as he lowered his mouth to hers, allowing for the first contact of her breasts against his chest as he lay over her, imprinting more of his scent on her.

It had been a mistake to place her on the floor in front of the fire. He should have taken her to the bed, where he could tether her wrists and ankles when it became necessary. He wasn't sure he could remain in control if she touched him now, if she scratched at his back or wrapped her legs around him.

He craved her. Needed her. Wanted nothing more than to rip their clothing away and force himself into her tight sheath as his fangs pierced her skin and her blood flowed into him.

Instead he used his tongue, thrusting and twining, exploring her mouth as he swallowed her sweet cries and fed on her submission, on the way her body writhed underneath his, pleading with him to claim it, and her, for all time.

Sensation after sensation rippled through Sarael, beginning at the point where Matteo's hands held her wrists down, moving to where his lips and tongue touched hers, then downward, through her breasts, her abdomen, her cunt, even down to her toes. She moved restlessly against him, grinding against his erection until all of his weight was on her, holding her to the ground, pinning her so that she could barely move.

She was wet, painfully swollen. But a thrill of feminine pride whipped through her at the tightness of his body, at how he strained to keep from pumping into her, his breathing fast, his chest slick against hers, his mouth and tongue so dominant that she knew whatever power he held over her, she held some in her own right, to be able to make him desire her so.

With a groan, Matteo rolled off her, going to his knees, his hand gripping his cock through his trousers in order to keep from spewing his seed like an untried boy. He let her sit, but when she leaned toward him, reaching out to touch him, he halted her with a sharp command, reinforcing it with the strength of his will so that for an instant her hand hovered in midair between them before dropping to her lap, her face showing her confusion, her need to understand how he could command her in such a way.

"Take off your clothes," he ordered, chasing the question he didn't want to answer off her tongue, but at a cost. His cock pulsed, a hard warning as more arousal escaped through the slit in its head, his balls were tight against his body, already aching, burning with the need for release.

She obeyed. Easily shedding the shirt and bra, the shoes, socks and jeans. But then she stopped, remaining in a pair of black panties. The color hiding their wetness though the sight of her glistening inner thighs and the scent of her arousal were enough to force Matteo to move in, to once again put her on her back, this time with her wrists held at her sides as he knelt between her legs, mesmerized by the sight of her panties, by the smell of her.

He leaned down, pressing his face against the wet strip of cloth, breathing her in. He knew he should punish her for not obeying him completely, should use it as an excuse to move her to the bed and tie her there, but he was lost in her, enthralled. He turned his head, kissing her inner thigh, sucking, lapping at her escaped juices.

Growling a warning for her not to touch him, he freed her wrists long enough to dispose of the scrap of fabric between her legs. For long moments he stared, entranced by the sight of her swollen flesh, her clit, and then he was on her. Once again pinning her wrists in place as he devoured her. Exploring her slit with his tongue, fucking her with it, reveling in the way she thrust against his mouth, in the way she whimpered and pleaded for him not to stop, grinding herself against him and coming repeatedly, sobbing his name each time she did so.

She was shaking, shivering, completely submissive when he could finally drag his mouth away from her opening and move to her clit. And at the first touch of his lips there, she bolted into a sitting position, freeing her hands in a sudden spike of energy and spearing them into Matteo's hair, her breath coming in pants as she curled around him, gripping him, sometimes holding him in place, sometimes trying to pull him away as he alternated between sucking her swollen knob and twirling his tongue over and

around it until finally she came again, uncurling and lying on her back, her legs spread, her body completely his.

He used his tongue to clean the evidence of her passion, to mark her with his scent, to further imprint himself on her. His fangs elongating as he licked over the artery in her inner thigh. She jerked when their sharp points grazed her, nicking the skin so that a drop of blood escaped. It was too much.

He struck, her scream too late as her hot blood poured into his mouth, her struggles—a confusing mix of terror and ecstasy—only adding to his lust so that he drank and drank and drank, gorging himself on her until her heart stuttered in warning that if he continued, he would kill her.

She was weak and soft, too drained to be afraid any longer by the sight of his fangs, by the knowledge of what he was when he settled his body on hers and pressed his cock to the entrance of her virgin channel, swallowing her small cry of pain as his penis became the first and only one that she would ever know. “Open wider for me,” he said, cursing himself for his lack of control, cursing Sarael’s mother for taking her away so that she hadn’t been prepared properly.

But it was too late to stop the first claiming, the first exchange of blood. Matteo pressed his lips to Sarael’s, growling when she tried to turn away at the metallic taste of blood that still lingered there, his hands going to her hair and holding her in place as he thrust his tongue aggressively into her mouth, building the passion again, pressing his cock into her an inch at a time, satisfaction rushing over him when her body responded, arching, inviting him deeper.

By the time he was fully seated, she was whimpering again, clawing at this back, his buttocks, shattering the rest of his control so that he pounded in and out of her, his reality centered on the need to feel his bride’s sheath fisting around his cock, to fill her with his seed and give her his blood.

Fierce desire clouded Sarael’s mind, taking the edge off the knowledge that he wasn’t human—that he was a creature straight out of a horror film. A vampire.

There was no fighting him. No fighting herself. At least not now. Not with his cock inside her, not with her body wrapped around his, welcoming Matteo as though it had been created for him.

She arched into him, her nails digging into his flesh as orgasm slammed into her. As she felt his body go tight in the instant before wave after wave of his seed splashed into her womb.

Sated beyond all imagining she went lax, her eyes drifting shut, her thoughts scattered, unable to take form until he pressed her mouth to his wrist and his hot blood scorched her lips. She fought then, but she was no match for his superior strength as he forced her to take what he offered, to drink and drink and drink until it became a fine wine she couldn't do without. And only then did his touch change, his hand stroking her throat, along her spine, his voice praising her for each swallow, his words following her into the darkness of sleep. "Drink, Sarael. Tonight you are my bride. But soon you will be my kadine."

## Chapter Three

Sarael jerked awake, her first thoughts following along their usual track. She needed to get up and get ready for work. Now that it was fall and school was in session for the townies, every weekend day counted, and Saturdays were the biggest draw. She'd promised to...

Her second thoughts cut off the first as she struggled to sit up, only to find herself held down by a heavy male body. Matteo. In a heartbeat the night came crashing back, making her struggle against his strength. But she was no match for him, and she stilled completely when his husky voice warned, "I will tether you to the bed if you continue to fight, Sarael."

She lay immobile, save for the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the thundering of her heart. He shifted to his side, his hand going to her breast, his thumb stroking over her nipple before he leaned down and took it in his mouth, suckling, the gentle pull of his mouth calming her so that she welcomed his touch, opening her legs for him when his hand glided over her abdomen and cupped her mound, his fingers sliding into a suddenly wet slit, fucking in and out until she was whimpering, coming at his command.

"Sleep," he said afterward, pulling her into his arms so that her mouth was positioned over the tattoo on his chest.

For a moment she remained trapped in a haze of sexual satisfaction, her mind and body content to obey him. She traced the tattoo with her tongue and he grunted, giving her a small slap on her buttock. "Enough, *carissima*, you'll wear me out before the night arrives if you tempt me into taking you now."

"How can you be awake?" she asked, her body telling her it was well past dawn.



He chuckled. "Over time we have come to call ourselves by the same name humans use for us, but human beliefs about vampires are incomplete at best, ludicrous at worst. If you open the curtains and bathe me in sunlight you won't see me burst into flames—not as you might imagine. Nor will I turn into a corpse. I am not an undead human returned to feed on the living."

"What are you then?"

He sighed, the sound of a man who wanted nothing more than to sleep. "The one who claims you, Sarael. We are mated, joined for all time now."

She jerked in reaction, knowing by the strange heat burning through her veins and the complete certainty in his voice that it was true. She fought off her fear, suppressed the desire to protest. To engage in a battle that would lead her nowhere.

"You took my blood. You forced me to take yours." Her mind recoiled as she spoke the words even though her cunt pulsed with the feel of his erection pressing hot against her belly.

"Was it so bad, *carissima*?" he asked, stroking her hair and holding her tightly. Rolling now, his thighs forcing hers apart as his penis found its way home, forging deep inside her and making her whimper. "Did you hate it so much?" he whispered, shifting, urging her legs to bend so he could hook his elbows underneath her knees, changing the angle, turning her sheath into a vise around his cock.

Matteo clenched his jaw against the extreme pleasure, knowing it was a mistake to fuck her, knowing it would weaken him so that *Il Sonno*—The Sleep—would take him more deeply than he could afford to allow, so that should sunlight strike him, his cells would break down almost immediately, forcing him to shift to his second form—the form all vampires could assume, a survival mechanism that came with *La Metamorfosi*, when children born to pureblood vampires and their kadines shed the restrictions that came with their once fully human mothers.

Until *La Metamorfosi*, children slept during the sunlight hours, locked in bodies that were still part human, guarded by their mothers and the padralls who served the

family. It was the only time during a vampire's life when he could be killed as easily as a human could be. But a measure of maturity was necessary in order to pull scattered cells together once the change had occurred. Preparation was required, knowledge, so that fear and confusion didn't give way to panic. The first change of form was painful, terrifying, exhilarating, empowering.

And now the future held sons for Matteo. As well as a kadine.

He looked down into Sarael's face and felt his heart swell. The need to claim her poured into him, but it was too soon to give her more of his blood. It was too soon to take more of hers. He had already taken too much during the first exchange, and yet he craved it—not with the mindless urgency of *La Brama*, but with the intensity of a male for his kadine.

Matteo took her body instead. His breath coming in pants as he forced himself in and out of a channel made small and exquisitely tight. His heart soaring at how she responded to him. With whimpers and tears and pleas for release. Accepting his right to her. His right to command her—to control even her pleasure.

He held off as long as he could, resisting until her inner muscles rippled and spasmed against his cock, drenching him with arousal and milking him of his seed, the hot rush of it through his penis making him weak and dizzy so that he collapsed against her, once again trapping her body under his.

For long moments Sarael lay in a fog of pleasure, sated, content. But slowly it faded, burned away by the strange heat moving through her veins. By the certainty that it was his blood, changing her, turning her into what he was—a vampire.

Her heartbeat spiked, racing, and she felt him tense. More questions pressed in on her, demanding answers, and yet she hesitated to ask them for fear he'd grow suspicious and worry she might escape—as her mother had.

Sarael shivered, fearing his reaction and yet determined to gain as much knowledge as she could. "Can you go out in the sunshine?"

"If I must, *carissima*, but I would not choose this form were I to do so." His eyes opened, locking to hers. And once again she had the sensation that he was pressing against some barrier keeping her mind shielded from his.

She wanted to ask what form he would take. But her survival instincts warned against further conversation so Sarael closed her eyes, forcing herself to relax, to snuggle against him as though she accepted her fate. She didn't doubt he'd do as he threatened and tie her to the bed. And if he did then she stood no chance of escaping.

Emotion rioted within her. The Moon against The Sun. Both of them trying to pull her into their realm and hold her there.

*I can feel the truth of them*, she'd said to Dakotah, the tarot cards laid out in front of her on the bed. *You can change that truth*, Dakotah claimed.

But could she?

Her mother had.

For the first time Sarael felt something other than pain over being abandoned. Had her mother left her with the carnival in the hopes she'd be safe there? In the hopes this day would never arrive for Sarael? A day when her body would betray her, leaving her defenseless against Matteo—even though he was a stranger, a man who would strip away the freedom she had taken for granted and turn her into... She shivered, not wanting to think about becoming a creature of nightmares. A creature whose world was governed by The Moon.

Three blood exchanges. Was it myth or reality?

She tried to imagine herself feeding and found it horrifying—until she became aware of Matteo's heartbeat, of the steady rhythm of his pulse only inches away from her mouth. Heat curled in her womb and her clit responded, stiffening, throbbing in time to the beats of his heart, stabbing against his body and making him chuckle.

"Sleep, Sarael, I will give you all that you desire when the moon rises again."

Contentment moved through Matteo, satisfaction. In his mind he kissed his way down her body, lingering to explore, to taste, to savor the sounds of her pleading, the feel of her hands in his hair as he slowly approached the small engorged knob indicating her arousal.

He could spend days with his face pressed between her legs. Kissing her. Licking her. Thrusting his tongue into her woman's opening. Sucking on her swollen cunt lips and straining clit.

Reveling in her.

Claiming her.

Heart and soul and cock swelling with the sounds of her pleasure.

His penis stirred, but he was too lethargic to act on his fantasy. Instead he had to content himself with the feel of her clit stabbing into him as he struggled against the heavy sleep of his kind.

He was mature enough that he wasn't completely helpless during the daylight hours, almost comatose as the very young were, but his ability to move around was limited, especially now, after mating with her during the morning hours. If she tried to hurt him, he could subdue her, but if she managed to get out of the house, he wouldn't be able to hunt her until dusk.

He'd already expended too much of his energy. And there were limits. A price that had to be paid for taking a human shape but maintaining the longevity as well as some of the abilities that had been the birthright of his alien ancestors.

Matteo shifted, placing more of her underneath him. She protested and his first thought was to restrain her even further, but then he felt the heat of her cheeks against his chest as she muttered, "I need to get up for a minute." A small shove of her hand punctuating the desire.

Matteo let her escape, watching through slitted eyes as she surveyed the room, quickly locating the bathroom. "Leave the door open," he said, prepared to enforce the

command, but glad when she ducked her head and escaped into the bathroom without making it necessary.

When she returned, she joined him without urging, going willingly into his arms, making him smile against her hair, his heart filling with anticipation of what was to come. The second exchange of blood. With it his control over her would tighten, she would crave his blood desperately then. And with the third exchange, she would need it to survive.

His cock urged him to bury it inside her as they slept, his thoughts returning to the night, to the rush unlike any he'd ever experienced as he filled himself with her blood, reliving again the intensely erotic moments when she fed from him. It was all he'd ever thought it would be and so much more.

Sarael fell asleep despite her intentions not to, but as she eased out from underneath Matteo later in the day, she realized that she'd needed the sleep, just as desperately as she now needed to eat.

She was ravenous. Starving. The sensation almost painful it was so intense. She could smell the fruit left in a bowl on the dresser, could see it clearly even though the room was almost completely dark, the fire in the fireplace a dull red glow keeping the room warmed but providing very little light.

Her senses had always been sharper than those around her, but they'd never been this finely honed. She shivered, realizing that her blood still burned as it made its way through her body. She touched her tongue to her teeth, relieved to find them the same as they'd always been.

Her mind tried to shy away from thinking about the blood he'd forced her to take—but she couldn't ignore what had happened. It should have made her gag and vomit, instead his blood had slid down her throat so easily, filling her until she was willingly taking what he offered.

She needed to escape before it was too late. Before it happened again. And again. But even as she thought it, her body urged her to return to Matteo's arms. To find sanctuary there.

It was enough to scare Sarael, to call forth a primal instinct for self-preservation. She moved to the dresser, gorging herself on the fruit, the need to sleep pressing down on her as soon as she was full.

Then it was an effort to gather her clothes and slip into the bathroom so she could dress without fear of waking him. Her body continuing its demand that she return to Matteo and curl up next to him, allowing the heavy lethargy to overwhelm her. She fought the compulsion and dressed before looking out the partially open window, her pulse accelerating when she saw the drop to the ground. The only hope of escape from the bathroom was the tree that stood next to the house, rich with autumn leaves, its branches thick and sturdy – but a leap of faith away.

Could she do it if there was no other way to escape? Could she jump? Fear clogged her throat. And if she missed?

She remembered Matteo pausing at the bedroom door and locking it. But she hadn't been paying attention, didn't know whether he was locking them in, or others out.

It would be foolish to risk injury climbing out the bathroom window if she could escape through the bedroom door. Her hands went to the window. But it would be equally foolish to leave the bathroom without preparing for escape.

Whatever she was going to do, however she was going to leave, she needed to do it quickly. He was stirring, waking. Even without being in the same room with him, she knew it was happening.

Sarael forced the window all the way open, cringing when it screeched. A streak of ice shooting down her spine with his sharp command. *Come to me, Sarael. Now!*

There was no choice but to go out through the window. But she was unable even to lift her leg over the sill. He issued the command to come again, his will pelting her,

beating away what little control she had over her own body, just as he'd been able to do at the carnival. The demonstration of his power over her more terrifying to her in that moment than his taking of her blood.

She fought his command with each step, her heartbeat a roar in her ears, but soon she was back in the bedroom. She'd expected to find him standing, ready to pounce. But he was sitting in front of the fireplace and she realized that he wasn't unaffected by the sunlight. That despite being awake, the lethargy which pressed down on her was probably only a fraction of what he was experiencing. But he was still powerful, his control of her body greater than her own.

"Get on the bed, Sarael." It was a hissed command full of menace. And in the dark room, his eyes glittered, reflecting the red of dying embers and giving him an alien appearance which only served to heighten her fear and desire to escape.

The sight of what waited for her on the bed—the restraints, one for each wrist and ankle—had her clutching at the drapes and trying to keep from obeying, just as she'd clutched at the metal railing near the carousel the previous night.

*Now!* It was a sharp command as he started to rise.

She jerked the drapes open without conscious thought. The fear of being tied, locked in darkness, helpless as she'd been once before as a child, the fierce primal desire to survive as fully human guiding her actions and flooding the room with sunlight.

Matteo recoiled, his face filled with anger and denial, his fangs exposed and glistening an instant before his image wavered, dissolved, turning into a mist that rushed toward her with enough force to press her against the window as though her body could block the sunlight streaming into the room. But then even the mist dissipated, though the air remained heavy with his presence, his menace, his silent promise that she would not escape him for long.

Sarael moved to the bedroom door, only to find the deadbolt locked and the key missing. She searched his clothing and then the room, tension building with each moment she remained in his house. Until finally she was once again in the bathroom,

only this time she was crouched on the windowsill, steeling herself to jump, imagining herself grabbing the thick branch with her hands and swinging her leg over it.

For a moment she hesitated. Waves of lethargy striking her now that the sun was kissing her skin directly with its rays. And yet each passing urge to curl up and sleep seemed less intense than the last, until finally the desire became manageable.

Sarael looked at the ground far beneath her once more, but it didn't shake her resolve to escape. Too much was at stake. Her freedom. Something she'd always taken for granted. Her life. There would be no path back to The Sun if he succeeded in trapping her forever in the world of The Moon.

She took a deep breath and leaped, the movement smooth, her hands grabbing the branch, a sudden breeze gusting underneath her so that it became effortless to swing her lower body into position and secure herself by wrapping her legs around the limb.

She felt Matteo's angry presence as she descended, her pulse spiking with the realization that he could just as easily have sent her crashing to the ground when another sudden gust of air pressed her to the tree, keeping her from falling as she slid down a trunk whose lower branches had been removed in order to prevent someone gaining access to the upper floor by climbing.

A new fear filled Sarael when she reached the ground. She couldn't outrun the wind. She couldn't outrun the sun. Eventually the day would end and darkness would descend. And it would all be for nothing. Wherever she was, he would materialize to reclaim her.

And yet as soon as she thought it, she felt his presence fading away, then guessed the reason for it. The limo sat in the driveway, reminding her that the driver was also Matteo's servant.

Matteo would not let her run—even if the freedom was only an illusion—he would not let her escape if he could keep her locked in his house. She bolted then, pounding down the driveway and along the deserted road, heart thundering at the sight of miles and miles of beach to her left, at the thick, tangled woods to her right, giving the area a



feel of isolation—as though finding someone who could help her would entail a miracle.

## Chapter Four

Rage roared through Matteo's body, keeping *Il Sonno* at bay despite his slipping back into the house and returning to human form in one of the darkened rooms. He'd hated to leave Sarael, but the risk of her moving through the day, of possibly escaping him while he was nothing more than scattered particles had been too great.

His secondary form was geared toward survival, not the control of wayward brides. It made him very nearly impossible to kill. It allowed him to sneak up on enemies and prey alike if needed. He could become a small gust of air, the equivalent of a lunge. He could use his second form and his abilities with fire against his enemies, he could travel, but only at the speed he could do so as a human—unless the natural elements aided him, blending him into wind or breeze.

Some of his kind were blessed with an additional form, becoming a bird or animal that could move about in the daylight hours, but he could not. And even if he could, he could not command Sarael in such a form. Nor could he send Pietro chasing after her.

Renewed anger made him hiss in frustration. He'd been foolish. Overconfident. Drunk on her blood and sex.

He should have tethered her to the bed as he intended. Should not have forgotten even for a moment that the stain of her mother's choices now marked Sarael.

It would not happen again.

He focused inward, on the link that had first formed during the confirmation ceremony when the tattoos were drawn, a link that had strengthened with the first true exchange of blood done when he claimed Sarael as his bride. It was not yet strong enough to command her over larger distances, or to know her thoughts, but it still provided a way for him to make his will known. *Return to the house, Sarael. Now!*

Sarael stumbled as Matteo's voice whipped through her mind, followed by the sound of a car approaching. It would be the limo. She knew it with a certainty that had her scrambling into the woods and taking shelter behind a cluster of trees.

Within seconds the long, dark car came into view. Creeping slowly in her direction. Pietro scanning both sides of the road. Passing the spot where she hid.

She leaned against the tree in relief and tried to think. Almost instantly, Matteo's voice was there, insistent, ordering her to return. The command so strong that her heart raced and her breath came in shallow pants in reaction to it.

Sarael knew she needed to put distance between them. That the first step she took back to Matteo would mean the loss of her freedom. There would be no escaping him again.

The limo returned, gliding to a stop close to where Sarael has hiding. She was nearly paralyzed by fear when Pietro emerged from the car. What if Matteo could somehow take command of the elderly man's body? What if he could find and capture her using Pietro's form? But then the old man spoke, saying, "Come with me. *Don* Cabrelli will go easier on you if you come back to the house without trouble. Come. I'll fix you something hot to eat and find you some clean clothing. Come with me, please."

Sarael's eyes darted from the man to where the driver's door stood open, the engine running. If she could just beat him back to the car... But what if she couldn't?

The knife she carried was a heavy weight in her pocket. She knew how to use it. Along the way, the men and women passing through the carnival had taught her to defend herself. There was always the danger of being raped, of being fair game when you were a carnie. She knew that only too well.

What if she couldn't beat Pietro to the car? Could she attack an elderly man? Even for her freedom?

Pietro started to turn just as she spied a rock on the ground. With nothing to lose she picked it up and tossed it, sailing it away from her, its descent through the tangled woods diverting the elderly man, making him think she might be coming to his call. He

moved further away from the car and she bolted, reaching it and thrusting it into drive even before she had the door closed.

As the miles passed, she calmed, her mind clearing of both Matteo's compulsion for her to return and the thundering roar of her own heart. She followed the ocean until she reached a small town. Different than the one where the carnival was camped. But it didn't matter. She knew she couldn't return to her own trailer.

Sarael parked the limo, placing the keys underneath the seat before getting out, locking the door and closing it afterward. The limo was too conspicuous. Too easily spotted, and though she hadn't seen evidence of great wealth, she assumed Matteo possessed it. He would send others besides his elderly servant to find her. Just as he must have had others searching for Angelique since the moment she first disappeared.

Sarael moved away from the abandoned car, putting as much distance between her and it as she could. When she could go no further, she found a payphone and called Dakotah.

"What's going on?" Dakotah asked, the sound of the carousel in the background.

"I need a favor."

"Name it."

"Can you bring me some of my things?"

Silence met the question, sending fear rippling through Sarael.

"You don't have them," Dakotah said, the tone of her voice, her statement warning Sarael that her things were gone.

She closed her eyes. Hearing Matteo's words from the previous night. *After you attend to the matter we spoke of earlier, Pietro, you are free to entertain yourself.* "Someone came and got them? An elderly man?"

"Yeah. I said no at first, but Helki appeared and insisted that it was all right. What's going on, Sarael? Cable and Fane are asking around about you. There are two other guys with them, also trying to find out if anyone's seen you."

Sarael's stomach tightened with familiar uneasiness at the mention of Cable and Fane. Matteo must have sent them to watch her before he arrived. They'd been harbingers of the storm she sensed coming, though their presence alone wasn't enough of a warning to make her run. "Who are the other two?"

"One of them is named Domino. The other's Italian."

Sarael's grip tightened on the phone. "Matteo?"

"No." There was a pause and Sarael could picture Dakotah digging in her pocket. "Alessandro Digate. He slipped me a card after the other three had walked away. He said he was a friend of Angelique's—like that's supposed to mean something."

Sarael closed her eyes, unsure whether or not she should involve Dakotah. They were best friends, or as close to being best friends as whatever Dakotah was running from would allow her to be.

That's the way it had been with all of the carnies who'd passed through Sarael's life as she was growing up. The things they were escaping brought them together, but beyond a certain closeness their secrets still kept them apart.

And now Sarael desperately needed help. She had some money in her pocket. Enough to get by for a couple of days. But not here. Not in this town. Not with the limo abandoned here.

"I need a ride. To anywhere. Just away from here." She paused for a heartbeat. "No questions asked."

"You got it."

And within the hour, Sarael was in strange city, with more money in her pocket than she'd had before, watching as the truck which had pulled the small trailer that had been her home since she was sixteen drove away.

*Call me if you need more*, Dakotah had said, pressing the money into her hand before hugging Sarael. Both of them teary-eyed.

*Be careful, Sarael whispered. I'm sorry for involving you. Please be careful. He'll be looking for me.*

*I'll be okay. Call me if you need help.*

But Sarael knew she wouldn't, couldn't. She shivered, remembering Matteo's earlier words. The deadly menace in his voice when he'd said that it was a good thing he'd found her before finding her mother. In her heart she didn't think he'd hurt Dakotah. But she didn't doubt that he would seek Dakotah out—using his vampiric powers to wrest information from her.

Sarael's stomach knotted with worry, with guilt, with regret for involving someone else, but the only way she could get rid of it would be to return to the carnival and let herself be taken again. Pulled into the world of The Moon. A place of fantasy and nightmare. Illusion and alternate reality. A place from which she would never escape again. He would never allow it. He had made no pretense of hiding his intentions, his belief that she belonged to him. He could already compel her, command her—at least when they were near each other, and she knew his control over her would grow stronger each time she was forced to take his blood. She guessed he would soon be able to touch her thoughts, leaving her with no secrets. No freedom, either physically or mentally.

Tears sparkled at the tips of Sarael's eyelashes, left over from watching Dakotah drive away. Not just the loss of a friend, or the loss of what few possessions Sarael valued, but the loss of a way of life. The Tower in ruins around her.

She couldn't go back.

She couldn't stay where she was.

She needed to keep moving.

Alone now. Without a destination.

Running, as so many of those who found their way to the carnival were doing. But she ran without the chance of a sanctuary.

Matteo would never stop looking for her.

Fear rushed through Sarael, threatening to overwhelm her. To leave her paralyzed like a wild creature caught in headlights. It was the first time in her life she'd been completely on her own. And night was coming. The darkness descending earlier each day.

She forced herself to enter the restaurant where Dakotah had left her, to take a seat and order a meal. The sight of it when it arrived stirring her hunger, though the tightness of her stomach made each bite a challenge—even as each bite that stayed down was a victory—a reaffirmation that she was human and not vampire.

Sarael kept her head lowered and tried not to draw attention to herself as she ate. Even though the restaurant was empty save for several waitresses, she knew Matteo would come here looking for her, asking about her. Her hand went repeatedly to her front pocket, to the wad of money there. She knew she needed to move on, to leave this city. But the only way to do so without leaving a clear trail would be to ask a complete stranger for a ride.

She shuddered at the thought. At the danger inherent in getting into a car with someone she didn't know. Couldn't trust. Bile rising in her throat, churning in her stomach as memories from the past pushed in, of a friendly stranger with a cute brown puppy and an old black car.

Terror gripped her for a minute. Past horror colliding with a present one, each trying to control her movements, her decisions. But her options were limited.

Buses were out, even if she could find one. He would check there quickly and be able to intercept her—in person or with the aid of Cable and Fane, or the others. The same was true of a taxi. She might gain a head start, but it would cost her more than she could afford, and he would quickly find out where she'd been taken.

Sarael shivered, finishing the last of her meal and pushing the plate aside. Lingered in the safety of bright lights and people for precious minutes before paying her bill and slipping from the restaurant. Fear of leaving a trail kept her from asking for directions, so she wandered until she learned which road would lead her to the highway, her

heightened senses making her jump each time a car approached, each time she heard footsteps or voices. The cold, sea-wet air clung to her face and hair, chilling her, making her hunker deeper into her jacket.

She was miles away from the restaurant, crossing at the edge of a nearly vacant parking lot when a car pulled in front of her, the door opening so quickly that she jerked, prepared to run, half expecting to see Matteo emerge. Instead a stranger wearing a predatory smile slid from the driver's side, their eyes meeting momentarily.

"Hold up, baby," he said. "I haven't seen you around here before."

Fear rippled through Sarael and she altered her course, traveling sideways so she could keep him in sight. He laughed, a sound that reinforced her fear, and she closed her hand over the knife in her jacket pocket, praying she could do what needed to be done if he assaulted her.

"Hold up," he said again, following her, gaining on her. "Come on, baby, don't be like this. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want us to have some fun together."

She started sprinting then, rushing in the direction of the few cars in the parking lot. He easily matched her speed, passing her, toying with her, getting in front of her and jogging backward, his smile all fun and games, amusement at her expense.

Sarael wheeled away from him, hope spiking when he stumbled—then receding just as quickly when he recovered before she could dodge him. Once again cutting her off before she could get to the cars parked in the lot and put something between the two of them.

"Come on, baby, this is getting old."

She pushed herself, despite the fire in her lungs and the ache in her side, aiming for the road now even as she heard him gaining on her again. The sound of an approaching car spurred her on, the sight of it slowing, stopping, nearly brought tears to her eyes.

When the driver emerged, her pursuer's footsteps faltered, altered, headed away from her. Sarael kept going.



"You okay?" the driver asked when she got to him, out of breath, her heart thundering in her ears.

Sarael's eyes met his. "Thanks for stopping."

"Fight with your boyfriend?" The man seemed reluctant to take his eyes off her, but finally his gaze shifted. "Looks like he's decided to wait for you. Need a ride somewhere?"

Sarael looked at the car in front of her, shiny and silver, then took in the man, his suit only slightly wrinkled, his expression concerned, the graying at his temples making him look distinguished, trustworthy. She'd intended to hitch a ride to the next city and yet anxiety moved through her, trepidation at the thought of getting in a car, even with this man. But when she glanced over her shoulder, she saw that he wasn't lying. Her pursuer was casually leaning against his own car, confident, his arms folded as though they were lovers involved in a quarrel.

She looked around. Seeing the impossibility of trying to escape by foot and knowing she couldn't involve the police. "If you don't mind, I'd like a ride," Sarael said, forcing the words out. Her hand tightening on the knife in her jacket pocket.

"Hop in, it's unlocked."

She walked around the car, very nearly changing her mind when she felt his gaze travel over her body, but forced herself to open the door, the scent of leather making her think of Matteo's limo. Adding strength and courage to her resolve.

"I'm Ross," the man said, offering a hand.

"I'm Sar...ah. Sarah." She took his hand, their eyes meeting again, the look in his slightly disquieting. She broke the contact, pulling her hand away, glancing out the window to where the other man now waited in the driver's seat of his own car. "Where are you heading?" she asked, trying to remember the names of nearby cities—places the carnival had passed each year, but never stopped at.

The engine started with a deceptive purr and he shifted the car into drive. "Thomasville, but I'm not in any hurry."

## **Chapter Five**

Sarael shivered despite the warmth in the car. Fear trickled in with each passing minute as the smell of Ross' arousal slowly filled the enclosed space.

Only the sight of the car in the rearview mirror kept her from telling him to pull over and let her out. She was beginning to think that the presence of her first pursuer behind them was the only thing keeping her safe now.

To her right was endless ocean. To her left, stretches of woods separating houses which were closed up against the darkness and fall chill.

"Doesn't look like he's going to give up," Ross said, his hand leaving the steering wheel and sliding across the seat toward her leg.

Sarael's thumb rubbed over the release on the knife in her pocket as she crowded against the passenger door, legs pressed tightly together, tensing when he put his hand on her knee, patting it at first as though offering comfort, but then leaving his hand there, making her stomach roil.

She took her hand out of her pocket and pushed his hand off her leg. "I don't like to be touched," she said, the words stark, ugly, a truth that hadn't existed for Sarael before. But she couldn't tolerate the feel of his hand, even through clothing. Her body wanted only Matteo's touch.

The car slowed. "Is that what you were fighting with your boyfriend about? Because you teased him, then wouldn't put out? Just like you're doing to me?" Ross asked.

He lifted his arm and Sarael flinched, wondering if he was going to grab or strike her. Instead he turned the overhead light on, taking his eyes from the road long enough to meet her gaze and send a renewed shiver of fear through her.

Realization dawned, forming a cold ball in her stomach and creeping outward when she viewed the mindless lust in his eyes, the flickering glimpses of confusion as though the man deep within was trying to fight a hidden enemy. Her heart began racing, the blood pounding through her veins, a thundering taunt in her ears, a rush that she had no way to channel or control.

Reflexively she reached over and opened the electric window, the blast of cold air filling the car, chasing away the heat and unintentional pheromones, causing the man's eyes to clear. He shook his head, as though coming out of a daze, his cheeks growing red—either from embarrassment or cold.

A sign loomed in front of them. "Take that exit," Sarael said, trying to pitch her voice the same way Matteo had when he stopped her hand midway between them—a small thrill of victory rushing through her when Ross immediately put the turn signal on. But the victory was short-lived, the shock of the cold air wearing off by the time they got into town.

His hand was on his cock then. Massaging his erection through the elegant trousers of his suit. His breathing coming faster, lust filling the car again despite the fresh air, his agitation growing, his eyes flicking back and forth, searching for a place to pull over and fuck.

Resolve filled Sarael and she leaned forward as if she too was looking for a likely place to suggest they go, but instead her hand crept to the door handle, grasping it, preparing to escape as soon as the car slowed.

A small measure of relief filled her when the car that had been trailing them got caught behind a stoplight. Then opportunity presented itself when the light ahead of them turned yellow and the car before them stopped.

She leapt from the car and ran, glad this city seemed busier than the last one, with some of the shops still open and people sitting in warmed cafés and restaurants. She darted into the first place she could, careful to keep her head ducked, to avoid making

eye contact as she raced through, guessing there would be a kitchen entrance and a way to escape.

There were startled exclamations behind her, but no sounds of pursuit. Still, she kept moving. Escaping into an alley, and then another, weaving around until she spotted a bus with a female driver and only a few passengers.

Sarael climbed on, scared but knowing she had to take the risk. "How much?" she mumbled, head down.

The driver told her, adding, "This one's going to Leesburg. Last bus of the day, hon. You sure it's the one you want?"

Sarael nodded slightly and paid the fare, taking a seat as far away from the other passengers as she could and huddling, concentrating inward, on The Hanged Man this time and not The Moon. Finding a strange peace in doing so, a centering. Her mind reconstructing the card representing her past detail by detail. So focused on it that the trip to Leesburg passed quickly and without incident.

The exercise left her more aware than she had been. As the image of the tarot card dissolved, she could feel the very moment her body began calling to those around her, as though they were prey she would one day feed on. And in an instant, the peace she'd found disappeared.

She wandered after that, avoiding people, avoiding eye contact, desperately seeking a safe place. Wanting nothing more than four walls and a door she could lock. A place she could hide. Stopping only when she found a cheap hotel with a woman manning the desk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again Matteo stood in the shadows of the carnival, watching, waiting. Only instead of Sarael, it was her friend – Dakotah – who shivered, aware on some level that she was being hunted.

Fane and Cable had questioned her early in the day, after Sarael had escaped with the limousine and Matteo had been forced to ask for assistance. When they'd spoken to Dakotah, she'd denied knowing where Sarael was. But later she'd been seen in the town where the limousine was abandoned, driving away with a woman who matched Sarael's description.

A growl rumbled in Matteo's chest. A sound of frustrated anger. It was a good thing this woman was Sarael's friend.

He was more dangerous now than he'd ever been. Despite forcing himself to swallow twice the amount of herbs than he usually required, *La Brama* roared through him, trying to overwhelm him.

The claiming of a kadine wasn't without risk and penalty. Something was gained and lost with each blood exchange.

He'd gorged himself on Sarael and now Matteo needed her blood far more than she needed his. His chest was tight, his body burning as every cell demanded he drink from her. He was parched and only she could truly quench his thirst.

If he yielded to *La Brama* now, if his fangs slid into a human, he would take everything, leaving a husk behind, drained of all life. And he would crave more. Taking the same again and again. Not ceasing until he'd once again pressed his mouth to Sarael and drank from her.

It was a good thing Sarael cared for Dakotah. That alone might make the difference between life and death for her friend. He would not let anyone or anything stand in the way of reclaiming his bride, but he would prefer to go to Sarael with a clear conscience.

As he'd done so many times in the past, Matteo cursed Angelique for taking Sarael away from those who would have prepared her to come to his side. To find happiness there without suffering first.

Long ago his kind had come to the conclusion it was better to raise future kadines than to find them among the human population. To convert humans as adults was too

arduous, too painful for all involved, and too many of them were lost in the process—dying, sometimes by their own hand, or going insane.

Though Sarael wasn't raised as she should have been, she had been created for him, his blood given to her at birth and during the confirmation ceremony verifying that she was indeed the female who would grow up to be his other half. She would never find true happiness anywhere but at his side. And he had little doubt that she *would* be happy. It could be no other way. With the third exchange of blood, they would be one. Her happiness would be his. Her misery his as well. Just as his needs and desires would become hers. There was almost no separation between a male and his kadine.

If Angelique had run before giving birth, before the confirmation ceremony, then he... Matteo shrugged the thoughts away. None of it mattered. Sarael was his. His claim was irrevocable. No other would do for him now that he'd tasted her blood and felt the welcoming heat of her sheath around his cock.

He shifted, restless, impatient. His thoughts going back to his earlier visit with Cable, the American padrall who had originally contacted him regarding Sarael's discovery.

Anger burned like a nest of hot coals in Matteo's gut. His pride still stung at having to admit that his bride had run from him, managing to escape when *he* should have made it impossible for her to do so.

It galled him that Alessandro Digate had been present to hear the admission, would no doubt enjoy carrying it back to Italy and the padrall order there—the same order which had been responsible for Sarael's conception and confirmation. "Perhaps you can now see how it was that the mother got away from us," Alessandro had said, as though Matteo needed a reminder of Angelique's escape and the suffering it had caused—not just for him but for her family and the padrall order which had been responsible for her.

Matteo hissed. He didn't blame the order for sending someone to serve as a witness to Sarael's status as his kadine, for wanting their failure to finally be a thing which could be left in the past. But he didn't like Alessandro and never had. Despite the great

wealth Alessandro's family had gained by serving Matteo's race over the centuries, there had been times when Matteo thought he detected a hint of greed in Alessandro, a hunger for greater status and power.

Irritation moved through Matteo at wasting his thoughts on the other man. Of letting Alessandro's barb slide under his skin.

Sarael would be found and the remaining exchanges of blood would be made. She would be his kadine.

Matteo shifted, his senses suddenly alert, not for prey, but for another predator. His gaze quickly finding the source. Domino.

Obsidian eyes gleamed as the other man glided over to stand next to Matteo. "I'm surprised you haven't pounced." His smile widened as he shifted his focus to Dakotah. "So the friend helped your bride slip further away from you after all."

"Word travels fast."

"I encountered Fane and Cable earlier."

"Why are you here, Domino?"

"Hunting." Domino lifted his lips slightly, showing a hint of fang. "Like the good soldier that I am."

Just as long ago his kind had come to the conclusion it was better to raise future kadines than to find them among the human population, they had also decided it was better to create a soldier class, a line of men with the strengths of a vampire and yet who could move about in the sun. The humans once called them dhampirs, mistakenly thinking that they were vampire slayers.

But in truth, dhampirs could sate *La Brama* by feeding on the enemies they hunted, could even drain them of all life without sanction, but they could not survive without periodically drinking the blood of a vampire, most often feeding from the one who commanded them, overseeing their activities—at least until *La Trasformazione* occurred.

Once that happened then dhampirs became fully vampire and reproductively mature, the children born to them becoming the next generation in a long line of soldiers.

"Our enemies are here?" Matteo asked, feeling a rush of fear unlike any he'd ever experienced—not for himself, but for Sarael. If she fell into the hands of those who called themselves the Believers...

"Yes, they're here," Domino said.

"How many of them?"

"One less than there were, but he was inconsequential, an idiot full of babble and rhetoric. And blood—at least for a short while." Domino shrugged. "I haven't been impressed by those I've encountered so far. They've been deviants who enjoy inflicting pain on others, hiding their sickness behind a cause they don't seem to fully believe in. Their lack of intelligence can only be an indication of how low our enemies have had to go in order to fill their ranks. Perhaps the time will come when they no longer exist at all."

"They are here for Sarael?" Matteo asked, anger and frustration joining the fear swirling violently inside him. He'd been careful to mask his arrival in the United States. Leaving behind those who usually accompanied him and bringing only Pietro. His ultimate destination—the carnival—known only by Cable, who had already asked the dhampir, Fane, to join him in ensuring Sarael's safety until Matteo arrived and could determine whether or not she was in fact Angelique's missing daughter.

"I don't know whether they are here for your bride or not. Fane said this place draws others who might interest the Believers. And tonight was the first time I stumbled on one of our enemy here—at the carnival. For the last months I've been watching a man called Byrd in the hopes he would lead me to those in greater positions of power. He came to a nearby town several days ago and others have since followed him." A smile slashed across Domino's face. "If your bride continues to elude you and you need to sate The Hunger, feel free to join Fane and me later for a hunt—I know



where at least two of our enemies can be found with the approach of dawn. And their answers might be of interest to you."

"Sarael will not elude me for long," Matteo growled, irritation rippling over him at the amusement in Domino's obsidian eyes. "But I will consider your offer. If our enemies came for Sarael, then someone betrayed me."

"Then let us hope the presence of the Believers is just coincidence." Domino's focus shifted to where two men, hardly more than boys, had joined Dakotah, taking over the operation of the ride. His eyes narrowed as something one of them said made her laugh, the sound of it reaching the shadows where he and Matteo stood. "I'll grant that your missing bride is beautiful, but nothing is yet set in stone. Have you considered that perhaps she's more trouble than she's worth? I don't see it—giving up the freedom to sample a variety of different pleasures, all for the blood and cunt of a single female."

Matteo laughed, a genuine sound of amusement. "When *La Trasformazione* occurs you will see things differently and you will curse yourself for not going to the padrall earlier and arranging for a kadine of your own."

"So I have been told," Domino said, his eyes following Dakotah as she walked away, heading toward the back area of the carnival where the travel trailers were parked out of view from the crowds. "I will leave you to your hunting, and see you later perhaps."

Matteo nodded and moved away, following Dakotah. When she stopped suddenly and whirled around he had to admire both her intelligence and her courage.

"I don't know where she is. But I'm sure she'll find you if she wants anything to do with you," Dakotah said, somehow guessing who he was and what he wanted from her.

Matteo moved in closer, releasing the pheromones that fogged a human's mind, making them malleable and open to suggestion. "She left so quickly this morning that I'm not sure she can find the way home," he said, his voice like honey, a trap for the unwary.

Dakotah blinked, taking a step back from him, awareness battling the confusion and piquing his curiosity. She was not like other humans. If he weren't so intent on locating and reclaiming Sarael, if he weren't already sexually bonded to his bride, he would have enjoyed luring the female in front of him to a dark place and learning her secrets. "Where did you take Sarael?" he asked, moving in again, taking Dakotah's arm as he focused on her, trapping her with his eyes as wave after wave of pheromones struck her.

She fought and might have succeeded in freeing herself from one who hadn't reached reproductive maturity as Matteo had. But she was no match for him. "Where did you take Sarael?" he repeated when he knew she was helpless against him.

Dakotah shook her head, still fighting on some level, but the words tumbled out of her mouth regardless. "To Chesterfield."

"Where did you leave her?"

"Downtown."

He gave her a small shake, frustrated that she retained enough will to make him drag what he wanted to know out of her one question at a time. "Where did you leave her downtown?"

"At a restaurant."

"What was the name of it?"

"It was a Denny's."

"Do you remember a street name?"

Her eyebrows drew together. "No."

"What was around it?"

"Gas stations. Some hotels."

"Did you see where Sarael went?"

"Just inside. She said she was hungry. She didn't want me to know where she was going afterward."

Matteo released Dakota but took her arm again when she swayed. "I'll help you back to your trailer," he said and her heart rate spiked, pulsing through her arm and into his hand like a lightning bolt, inadvertently stirring the bloodlust.

Fear could be a powerful aphrodisiac to one of his kind and he was not immune. His fangs elongated and for a long moment he hovered on the brink, the herbs and thoughts of Sarael only barely holding him in check and keeping him from doing something he would live to regret.

"I will follow you to ensure you are safe, as Sarael would want me to do. But I will not enter the trailer," he said, infusing his voice with calm, forcing his own body to echo the emotion as he released her arm.

Dakota gave a small nod and turned, leading him to the trailer that she'd once shared with Sarael. Not lingering at the doorway when she got there, but hurrying inside and closing the door behind her. A small click telling him she'd also locked it.

For a minute Matteo hesitated, not quite ready to surround himself with people, to tempt himself with the steady, luring beat of their hearts. His gums were tingling from where he'd forced his fangs to retract. He closed his eyes and immediately the image of Sarael appeared—as he'd seen her last. Stretched out underneath him, sated and well-loved—seemingly content.

A hiss escaped with the last thought. Feelings of rage and betrayal rushed in. Matteo opened his eyes, fighting the need to strike out. To savage. Fighting the temptation that whispered through his veins, *La Brama's* siren call offering him a chance to escape—at least for a little while—from the knowledge that his bride had chosen to run from him.

With a second hiss, he whirled, skirting the trailers housing those who traveled with the carnival, intent on returning to the limo. On taking up the search for Sarael once again.

She would not escape him. Not this time. Not ever.

He had erred in trusting her. Had misread the extent of Angelique's influence on her daughter—thinking the mother's absence meant Sarael was untainted. That she would accept her fate where Angelique hadn't.

He had learned otherwise.

Now he would teach Sarael that there were limits to his tolerance. Consequences for defying him.

If she feared him at first, then so be it. He would take her fear over her absence.

She'd been created for him. She belonged to him. In the end she would come to care for him just as deeply as he cared for her. It was her fate. One he wouldn't let her escape or deny.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarael dreamed of blood. At first it was a gentle call, drawing her to Matteo. Warming her as she took what he offered.

It was a sweet seduction urging her to take more and more until she was greedy for the taste, insatiable in her need for it.

And then there were thousands of hearts beating, luring her from Matteo's arms. Turning those around her into prey.

And they came to her, crowding in on her. Offering blood and sex. Their eyes glazed with lust, their hands reaching for her, grabbing at her, until she was forced to drive them back with her knife, slashing them until blood coated everything in sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Matteo prowled the bedroom. Ignoring the command to sleep that was being issued by the sun. Fighting against the lethargy.

Anger and fear warred inside him, frustration very nearly ruled. He hated relying on others to hunt for Sarael during the day, but there was no choice.

As Matteo paced, he mind ranged back to the Believers who'd provided some information—enough to make him fear for Sarael—and yet not enough to determine whether she was their true target.

"I heard two of them talking, we're here for a woman," the weaker-minded of the two Believers had said, falling easily under first Matteo's and then Domino's spell.

"What woman?" Matteo asked,

"I don't know. They haven't told us yet."

"Who are *they*?" Matteo asked.

"Chuck and Byrd, and the guy Chuck talks to on the phone. He's the one calling the shots."

Domino took over the questioning. "What are your orders?"

"To watch for vampires." The Believer clutched at the elaborate crucifix that hung around his neck. Its tip pointed and sharpened. A weapon neither Domino nor Matteo had seen the need to take away from him.

A grin spread across the Believer's face. "Byrd said at least one of them will probably show up, maybe more. And when they do, party time! If we have the girl by then, we're going to have a fuck-fest along with a nice little vampire barbeque."

Matteo's rage peaked with the image of Sarael being raped and he reacted, ripping the crucifix from the Believer's hand and shoving it into the other man's heart with so much force that he'd driven him backward and up, the sharp tip of the crucifix burying deep into the wall behind him so that when Matteo released his grip, the corpse hung, suspended, the Believer's feet dangling above the floor, rivulets of red trailing down the white wall.

"A waste of blood, a waste of life force, and a mess to clean up," Domino said. "But I agree, he told as much as he knew."

They'd turned their attention to the remaining Believer then, a hard-eyed zealot with a swirling red and black crucifix tattooed on his neck, his hands bound behind his

back with his own necklace—a necklace made to double as a garrote, while the cross hanging from it would serve as a knife. “Do you care to add anything to what your friend said?” Fane asked, his voice silky, deadly, no less menacing for its softness.

The Believer spat at Fane. Hate burning in his eyes, a wet spot on the front of his pants where he’d orgasmed when Fane fed from him after subduing him.

Fane easily avoided the wad of saliva, shooting a look at Matteo. “There are times when the thought of reaching The Transformation is a welcome one.” His smile widened, his fangs clearly visible. “But then moments like this occur and I am glad I can yield to The Hunger, and the rules that govern full vampires don’t apply to me.”

Fane grabbed the Believer, easily controlling the other man’s body as he sank his fangs into the beefy, tattoo-covered neck again. Drinking, feasting, the man’s cock hardening and erupting as he came repeatedly.

*La Brama* roared through Matteo at the sight of Fane feeding, taunting him, teasing him, urging him to sink his teeth into the Believer also, to experience the unparalleled high of taking everything—a primitive urge left from the days when his ancestors were trying to adapt to the hostile world they found themselves on—when they were experimenting, speeding the evolutionary process by taking the form of their prey, moving into its still warm body after they’d drained it of blood and left it an empty shell.

“Enough,” Matteo growled, stepping forward, ready to rip Fane away from his victim if necessary. Despite his own killing of the first Believer, he would ensure that they’d gained every bit of information they could from this man before he was destroyed.

Fane lifted his head, his eyes momentarily feral, but then he resumed his questioning. “Let’s start over again, tell us why you came here.”

The man sagged in his chair. “Chuck called me. He said there was going to be some good hunting. The real thing, not the pathetic drugged-out assholes we’ve been practicing on.”

"Practicing? Tell me about that." A sly smile formed on Fane's face. "Tell me about the pathetic drugged-out assholes. Tell me what you do when you practice."

The front of man's pants tented in reaction to the question. He licked his lips. "We look for worthless scum no one will miss. And when we find them, we follow them, waiting for a chance to surprise them. Most of the time we take turns, seeing how fast we can strike with the knife. But other times we practice on our own."

Domino leaned in so that his face was only inches from the Believer's. "Those are the times you like best, aren't they? When you get to rape them before you actually kill them."

More ejaculate stained the front of the man's pants. "Yes."

Domino laughed softly. "How many Believers are here?"

"Chuck and Byrd and a couple of others. But more are coming. At least four more."

"And the woman you're here for?" Matteo pressed, feeling Fane and Domino's impatience to be done with this Believer and hunting the others.

"We're not even supposed to know about that. Chuck and Byrd haven't said anything."

Matteo returned home shortly thereafter, his worry for Sarael growing as the day grew brighter. His need for her building. His determination to recapture her unwavering. Two more exchanges and she would be his. Then he would take her to Italy. Away from the danger the Believers currently posed. Disposing of them was a matter for Fane and Domino, for the dhampirs, the soldiers of their race. His duties were encompassed by Sarael.

## **Chapter Six**

Sarael eluded him for three days. But on the third night, he found her.

Satisfaction moved through Matteo, anticipation, as he stopped in front of her door, sensing her presence behind it. Sensing her awareness of him. Her fear.

He let the moments pass, let the fear build in her—retribution for what she'd put him through. A warning for the future.

She was weakened now, her will not nearly as strong. He knew he could command that she open the door, but he preferred to enter the room himself. Gaining the key from the clerk had been a simple matter—the ease of it only increasing his anger.

Sarael shivered, knowing the moment he was standing in front of the hotel door, dark and menacing, his arrival signaling the end of her freedom, and yet she very nearly cried in relief at his presence.

She'd been utterly alone, out in a world she'd never experienced before. One that had been made so much more dangerous by Matteo's blood.

Rather than getting weaker, its influence had grown stronger, making it difficult for her to leave the hotel room without being accosted by men. Most of them more frightening than any of those who came to the carnival looking for easy prey. More frightening than the face that used to haunt her dreams nightly as a small child, causing her to wake in a panic, tangled in sheets that reminded her of being tied and helpless.

She was afraid to go to sleep for fear the seedy hotel manager would sell access to her room and turn the other way as she was raped. And each time she did yield to exhaustion, she was haunted by dreams.

Blood dreams at first, then sexual ones. So intense that she'd wake abruptly and find herself feverish, needy. Her body coated with sweat, her hands between her legs or on her breasts.



She'd masturbated, trying to keep the memory of Matteo's touch from her mind as she'd plunged her fingers in and out of her slit, striking at her clit repeatedly, tweaking and tugging at her nipples. But the only way she'd found any relief was to let thoughts of him fill her, to relive those moments when his body had been on hers, his cock sheathed in her channel. It had barely been enough. And now he had found her.

Despite knowing he was there, she startled when the key slid into the lock, and remained motionless, watching—fascinated horror mingled with weary relief—as the knob slowly turned and the door swung open.

Matteo moved into the room and closed the door behind him. The fear that she was like her mother—and the anger that had accompanied it—had grown with each hour she'd eluded him. But his heart lurched at the sight of her, at the fatigue and vulnerability he saw in her face, at the way her body hunched in defeat and defenselessness as she sat on the bed, her knees drawn to her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs.

He'd thought to punish her, perhaps to tether her to his bedpost and use the flogger on her back and buttocks as a way of preventing further disobedience. But something inside him gave at the sight of her.

Matteo moved to the bed, sitting next to her and pulling her onto his lap, his heart and body leaping with pleasure and emotion when she didn't resist, but curled into him, her arms going around his neck, her face pressing against his skin.

He tightened his grip on her, breathing deeply and enjoying the feel of her soft hair against his cheek. "You shouldn't have run from me, Sarael."

She looked up, meeting his gaze, her own haunted. "I had to try," she whispered, licking her lips and sending a jolt of hot flame through his cock.

His hand came up, cupping her face, his thumb stroking over her cheek as he measured her words, hearing *her* truth in them. Accepting it, but giving her his truth in return. "Never again, Sarael."

She gave a slight nod of her head and he leaned down, touching his lips to hers, the kiss one of forgiveness, of greeting, of reassurance, of understanding and promise. A slow exploration as tongues tentatively touched and welcomed each other, sliding and twining as the raw, unsettling, often violent emotions of the previous days slid away under growing desire.

With a groan Matteo stretched out on the bed, covering her body with his as he deepened the kiss. His tongue more aggressive now, his body tense with the need to reclaim Sarael.

She whimpered, holding him to her, her body restless under his, her legs going around his waist, her pelvis tilting and rubbing against him, her arms remaining around his neck. "Not here, Sarael," he said when he lifted his head in order to breathe. "Not here." And yet he couldn't stop himself from pushing her shirt up, from covering her nipple with his mouth and suckling, tempting his own control when his fang drew blood.

Sarael arched into him, knowing the instant when Matteo began drinking from her. Fierce need burned through her veins and arteries as her cunt wept, soaking her panties and pulsing in time to the strong, sucking pulls on her nipple.

She writhed underneath him, wanting to get closer, wanting to feel his skin against hers, wanting relief from the days of endless need and loneliness and fear. "Please," she begged, her hands going to his back, pulling his shirt up.

He jerked away at the first touch of her hands on his flesh, going to his knees and pinning her wrists to the bed as though she'd burned him. He was breathing in fast, shallow pants, his erection a hard line at the front of his trousers. "I won't take you here," he growled, more to himself than her. "I won't take you here."

For long moments he remained above her, his eyes dark and full of lust, boring into hers. Alien. And some of Sarael's fear returned. Her heart began thundering, the sound of it tightening his face and making him hiss, exposing fangs that only added to the roar of blood in her ears.

Her fear combined with the scent of her arousal was a heady combination. Striking the most primitive chords of his being. The part that was purely predator. Ancient. A throwback from when his ancestors had crashed on this planet and savagely fought for survival.

He would not mate with her in this cheap hotel room, he would not exchange blood with her here, but he would not leave without reclaiming a portion of her. Without proving his ownership of her.

"Grab the bedspread," he ordered, not releasing her wrists until she'd obeyed, and only then did his hands move to the front of her jeans, making short work of opening them and wrenching them down to her ankles along with her panties. When she let go of the bedspread he repeated his earlier command, this time enforcing it with his will so that the only movement available to her was the clenching and unclenching of her fingers on the coarse fabric of the bed covering.

Matteo pushed her knees apart, inhaling sharply at the sight of her wet folds, her cunt lips swollen, glistening, an open invitation for his tongue, his fingers, his cock.

He slid his hands along her inner thighs, her wild pulse and subtle shivering vibrating against his palms, her arousal coating them. He stopped when he reached her pussy, doing nothing but breathing in the scent of her and memorizing how delicate and feminine she looked framed between his hands as he held her open for his view.

He wanted to bury his face between her legs. Wanted to spear his tongue into her channel, to swirl it around her erect clit. For long moments he wavered, remembering what it had felt like to do the things he was imagining, telling himself that as long as his hands remained on her inner thighs, covering the places where he could easily feed, then he could resist. But as he watched her lower lips swell further, growing darker as they grew more flushed, and saw arousal seeping from her opening, he knew he couldn't risk even the first taste of her.

"Touch yourself," he growled, determined to prove to them both that he was in control. That she belonged completely to him.

Matteo's harsh command sent more blood rushing to Sarael's clit and labia. Fire streaked through nipples, her pussy, and she pressed against his palms in an instinctual effort to close her legs.

"Touch yourself, Sarael. Pleasure yourself while I watch."

Her hands were shaking when she released the bedspread, tentative as they joined his between her legs. She coated her fingers with her own juices, sliding them back and forth over the mouth of her pussy without penetrating it, then moved to her clit, the fingers of one hand on either side of it as the tips of the other caressed along the underside and over the exposed head. A whimper escaped and her body jerked, her buttocks clenching as heated need shot up her spine.

Sarael's gaze flew to his face and her breath caught in her throat at the intensity of his expression. The mask of lust on his face. She started to pull her hand away, to beg for his mouth, his touch, but his hiss and his silent command stopped her, his will forcing her hand back down to her erect clit.

She closed her eyes then, giving herself over to his desire to see her masturbate, touching herself as she'd done for the last three days, only this time his presence gave her the relief she hadn't found before, so that her climax left her sated, content, sleepy.

With a curse Matteo stood, pulling her jeans and panties into place before lifting her in his arms and carrying her from the seedy hotel room. Pietro there to open the limousine door and take them home.

Sarael rested her head against Matteo's neck as he carried her into the house, her stomach rumbling at the smell of freshly baked bread. "You're hungry," he said.

She nodded, whispering, "It was hard to get food. Everywhere I went the men—" She broke off at the sound of his hiss.

He halted. "Did any touch you?"

She flinched at the menace in his voice. At the promise to kill she heard there.

"I wasn't raped." But more than once she'd come close. Her first blood dreams a prophecy of what was to come. The use of her knife the only reason she'd escaped.

He guided her face away from his neck, forced her gaze to meet his. "Any touch by another man is offensive to me, Sarael."

She wanted to avoid talking about the men who'd scared her with their unwanted attention. She didn't want their deaths on her conscience though some of them deserved to die. "Can I get something to eat now?" she asked, her stomach rumbling again.

Matteo's nostrils flared and she could see the struggle taking place on his face, the desire to pursue his questions versus the need to take care of her. Without looking away from her he said, "Prepare a tray of food and bring it to the bedroom, Pietro."

"Right away, *Don Cabrelli*," the elderly man said, closing the front door and scurrying off.

"We can eat in the kitchen," Sarael said, not sure she was ready to return to the bedroom now that the initial rush of emotion she'd felt when he entered the hotel room had calmed.

He ignored the comment, easily carrying her to the very room she'd escaped from. A spike of fear rushed in as she wondered if he planned to punish her. Instead he set her on the counter before moving to the old-fashioned tub, its clawed feet making Sarael look at Matteo's hands and wonder if that part of the vampire myth was true or false—if his nails could grow into deadly talons.

He turned the water on and returned to where she was sitting, his hands first stripping her of her jacket, and then going to the front of her shirt, unbuttoning it and slipping it from her body. Her bra followed, her shoes and socks next. The door to the bedroom opened and she jerked, covering her breasts with her crossed arms. Matteo turned his head slightly. "Leave it on the hearth, Pietro."

"Very good. Do you require anything else?"

"Privacy."

Sarael could have sworn she heard the elderly man chuckle before he answered, "I'll wait for your summons then."

The bedroom door closed and Matteo finished stripping her, then braided her hair, coiling it and securing it so that it wouldn't get wet, before he tested the temperature of the water and settled her in the tub.

When he lathered his hands with soap and began smoothing them over her neck and shoulders, her back, she had to look away, overwhelmed by a confusing mix of emotion. Even when she was a child, no one, not her mother nor Helki, had ever bathed her. Cleanliness was always a task, a hasty wash in a tiny trailer shower stall, and not something to linger over like he was doing.

"I can do it," she said, a flicker of independence and self-preservation rising in the swirl of confusion, a twinge of alarm at how natural it seemed to allow him to care for her in such an intimate manner.

He gave a small, husky laugh. "You can do it, *carissima*, but it is my right and privilege to do it for you. You are mine, Sarael. Mine," he said, punctuating the claim by gliding a soapy hand over her abdomen and between her legs, then along her inner thighs. She closed her legs in reaction to his touch, but only succeeded in making it worse by trapping his hand where he could drive the lust higher. His fingers manipulated her clit, sending ice-hot streaks up her spine and to her nipples. She whimpered, her back arching in reaction and he lowered his head, latching onto her nipple, his fangs retracted so that he could clamp down on it with his teeth, the sharp pain of his bite making her cry out.

He continued to hold her areola prisoner as his fingers found her slit, pressing into her, filling her, his palm repeatedly rubbing over the smooth, tiny head of her clit as his fingers fucked in and out of her, making her jerk against him, each jerk sending a fresh, sharp burst of pain through her nipple until she was thrashing, the water in the tub churning violently. He drove her up with his hand and mouth, taking her to the edge of

release and then stopping, doing it time and time again until she was sobbing, pleading with him, shivering despite the heat of the water.

Lust roared through Matteo, along with anger at his own lack of restraint. He'd planned to bathe her, to feed her, to talk to her, to help her understand the world she now found herself in, to prepare her for what was yet to come. He hadn't meant to torment them both until it took every ounce of control he possessed to keep from pulling her out of the tub and taking her on the bathroom floor.

Matteo forced his mouth away from her nipple, fighting to ignore the pounding of her heart, the rapid beat of her pulse as he kissed upward, covering her lips with his. She was everything he would ever want, everything he would ever need. She was his! His! Created for him. His to pleasure and to gain pleasure from. His to feed and to feed from.

He lifted his mouth, fierce emotion charging through him as he looked at her upturned face, her naked body. "Now, Sarael," he growled, thrusting his fingers into her, wanting to watch her release, wanting to capture the image of it in his mind.

Her eyes fluttered open, dark and sensual, a timeless lure that would forever ensnare him. "Now," he commanded again, needing her helpless, wanting her completely obedient.

She whimpered, arching, the hard, glistening tips of her breasts beckoning for him to suckle them as her body tightened, as her sheath clamped down on his fingers and her clit ground into his palm. Release moved through her, flushing across her face and breasts. Pleasure warred with embarrassment, yielding to unstoppable need, to his command, his desires.

"You please me," Matteo said, kissing her afterward, reveling in the softness of her lips, in the way they clung to his as though he had become her world. He wanted her desperately, his cock arguing that he should take her. But he was afraid that if he began fucking her, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from making the second exchange.

Once that had taken place, she would become even more needy, for both his blood and body, their coupling continuing until the dawn. He owed it to her to make sure she was fed and cared for first. It shamed him that he'd already made so many mistakes with her. Her escape was his fault. He should have taken more time to talk to her before making her his bride. He should have tethered her to the bed while he slept—as he'd intended to.

She was young. Human in her thoughts and upbringing. Unprepared and untrained, despite the explosive desire that raged between them.

A cold fear had settled in his gut with her admission to being hungry and the reason for it. In his fury to find her, he hadn't considered even once that the first exchange of blood might have begun the process of turning her into his kadine, that it might have altered her body in a way that would make it hard for her to gain food or shelter for fear of being raped. He'd failed to take into consideration the kinds of places she would go with limited funds or experience beyond carnival life.

He needed to do better by Sarael. And yet it seemed an almost impossible task when she overwhelmed all of his senses, making it difficult for him to keep his hands off her. It was worse now that they'd exchanged blood. He'd known it would be, that it was part of the sexual bonding between a male and his kadine. He cursed himself once again for allowing her to escape, for not considering how alluring she would be to others until she was completely claimed. Completely his.

With a groan, Matteo forced himself to pull away from her mouth and lift her from the tub, hastily drying her then tossing the towel aside before carrying her to the bedroom, his will once again starting a fire in the fireplace, though this time he promised himself he would not take her on the rugs in front of it.

He settled her in front of the fire, leaving her there long enough to retrieve a hairbrush before sitting down behind her. "Eat," he said, uncoiling her hair and then unbraiding it, using his fingers to comb through it.



Sarael ducked her head, heat flooding her body at the picture they made, her naked while he was fully clothed. Despite everything they'd already done, she couldn't keep a blush from rising in her cheeks. "Aren't you going to get undressed?" she asked, her voice sounding self-conscious even to her own ears.

Matteo leaned closer, pushing her hair out of the way so that he could kiss along her shoulder and neck, one hand on her side while the other went around to stroke her abdomen. "In a little while, *carissima*. My control is not all that I wish it to be. Right now I want you to eat. I want us to spend some time together before... Eat, Sarael."

She ate, starting with the strawberries, moving to the peaches, the grapes, and then the cheese and fresh bread, her eyelids drooping with pleasure as he brushed her hair in long, sweeping strokes. "What about you?" she asked, "Can you...eat any of this?"

Matteo laughed softly, stopping his brushing of her hair. "Yes. But it's like candy. A little bit goes a long way. Too much, and it doesn't agree with me." He leaned down, pressing a kiss to her shoulder, his voice husky when he asked, "Would you like to feed me, *carissima*?"

Sarael ducked her head for a moment, her emotions swirling out of control. He confused her, beguiled her, satisfied her and yet left her needy for his touch, his approval...his caring.

She picked up a grape, offering it to him, her body singing with desire when he took it from her, his tongue licking over the tips of her fingers, his mouth sucking on them lightly before releasing them.

Sarael offered him more grapes then several strawberries, her nipples becoming hard, anxious pebbles when he sucked the last of the juice from her fingers, then took her arm, holding it as his mouth lingered over the pulse at her wrist, over the tattoo there before moving upward until he was once again brushing kisses along her shoulder.

"I want to care for you, Sarael, to protect you. To see to all of your needs. To be all that you desire. Your world, just as you are mine. You were created for me. You were born to be my other half. My kadine."

"You've used that term before," Sarael whispered. "Kadine. What does it mean?"

Matteo lifted his head, the softness in his expression melting her heart. He brought her wrist to his lips, pressing his mouth to the tattoo again. "A kadine is...everything...to the male she belongs to. She is his reason for living, his anchor in a lifetime that spans centuries. She is the mother of his children, the bride of his heart and soul, the blood that flows through his veins."

Sarael licked her lips, afraid to ask, but knowing that she had to. "And does she have a choice? Do I have a choice?"

Matteo's nostrils flared and all softness left his face. "From the moment of your conception, you were destined for me. There is no other choice, for either of us."

His fingers threaded through her hair, holding her immobile as his mouth hovered above hers. "Do not think to escape me again. Do not think to escape your fate. You belong to me. Today. Tomorrow. Forever."

He kissed her then, a dominant claiming. A fierce press of his will against hers. A devouring that left her shaking, shivering, hungry for him—her body accepting his words though her mind struggled to rebel against them, to hold on to a small measure of freedom.

They were both breathing hard when he finally lifted his mouth from hers, his dark eyes staring into hers, his face taut. "Eat, *carissima*," he commanded gruffly, once again picking up the hairbrush. "The night is before us and I would have you ready for it."

She ducked her head and resumed eating. Her mind racing, trying to make peace with her body. And yet there was no peace to be found, especially when she no longer reached for the food on the platter and he changed the pattern of his brushing, the strokes becoming shorter, harder, so the bristles lightly scratched her back, making her nipples harden and her vulva swell.

Sarael stirred, self-conscious as arousal began seeping from her slit, wetting the carpet where she was sitting. "Stay," Matteo murmured, his hand going to her hip, his nostrils flaring, his cock rock-hard, wanting to bathe in her juices as it tunneled in and out of her channel.

It was all he could do to keep from tumbling her onto her hands and knees so he could cover her body with his, mounting her as a stallion mounts his mare. But if he started, he wouldn't stop until his fangs had pierced her skin and her hot blood rushed into him.

He didn't dare let that happen. Not until she was on the bed, tethered for her own safety, held open and helpless for him, her very helplessness giving him the edge he needed in order to control himself, to keep from taking too much blood and killing her.

If she hadn't run...if she hadn't eluded him for three days...then her safety would be assured. But now he hungered for her far beyond anything he'd ever known. Far beyond what was usually involved in the making of a kadine.

He wanted to drain every drop of independence from her, wanted to possess her so thoroughly that only *his* blood flowed in her veins, only *his* breath filled her lungs. It was savage and primitive. Lethal.

## **Chapter Seven**

The very depth of his need to claim her completely, the violence of his emotions, fed his fear for her safety even as the scent of her arousal left his body coated with sweat, the head of his penis wet.

His cock burned and ached, his balls were tight and hard, painful.

He needed relief. Deserved it.

Matteo's nostrils flared with the thought and he dropped the brush, his gaze traveling over her naked, delicate body, devouring the sight of her slender figure, pausing at the dark pouty nipples, then lowering to the black curls between her legs.

She was his bride, his future kadine, and he needed relief. Deserved it.

Without a word he stood and removed his clothing. Satisfaction roaring through him at the way her gaze roamed over his body, her face growing flushed, her tongue darting out to moisten her lips as she took in the sight of him.

"Get on your knees, Sarael," he said, lust stinging him like the lash of an erotic whip when he saw a shiver of feminine fear move through her.

He opened and closed his hands, fighting the need to bury his fingers in her hair and force her to obey. A groan escaping when she complied, her eyes a wicked combination of sultry innocence, gazing at him through long eyelashes as her mouth trembled, her lips parted, wet.

Desire raged through him, making his cock pulse so that the only thing he could think about was what it would feel like as she sucked him into the sweet heaven of her mouth. He didn't bother with a command, knowing it was already too late, that he didn't dare risk that she'd deny him.

With a hiss he gave in to his impulse, spearing his fingers through her hair and pulling her forward, closing the distance so her face was buried in his groin, her lips on his shaft. She made a whimper of protest, her hands settling on his hips and pushing, sending savage impulses coursing through him, but as quickly as the violent emotion surged into his consciousness, it receded when he realized she wasn't fighting him, but was trying to position herself so she could please him.

Matteo loosened his hold on her, jerking when one of her hands circled his shaft and the other cupped his balls, massaging them, exploring them, making fire race up his spine. "Sarael." It came out a plea, a husky word of praise, a cry as her lips settled on the tip of his penis, slowly enfolding it and welcoming the engorged head into the wet heat of her mouth. "Sarael."

It was unspeakable ecstasy, unbearable pleasure to watch as she sucked his cock in and out of her mouth, driving him higher and higher by never letting him go as deeply as he wanted, by lashing at the sensitive head with her tongue.

In the end he was panting, his buttocks clenched tightly together, his body drenched with sweat and trembling, curled over her so that her silky hair brushed across his abdomen and thighs, his control very nearly in shreds. "Enough, Sarael. Enough!" But she knew it for the lie it was and tormented him further before letting him surge deeper into her mouth as her fingers explored the sensitive skin behind his balls.

Matteo came, her name on his lips as his seed escaped in a lava-hot eruption that left him empty and full at the same time. Weak and incredibly strong. Happy as he'd never been before.

He let her ease back down on the rug then, his cock hardening as he looked at Sarael's swollen lips, at the dazed expression on her face, the glistening arousal coating her inner thighs. He very nearly commanded her to lie back, to spread her legs and let him give her the same relief as she'd just given him.

It was tempting. So very tempting.

A temptation he knew better than to give in to. The last time he buried his face in her cunt as they lay in front of the fire, it had been his undoing. Had led to him rushing with her. Exchanging blood before he'd prepared her properly.

He knelt in front of her and wrapped his hand around her neck, pulling her to him and groaning with pleasure at the feel of her skin against his, holding her for his kiss as her pulse beat wildly in his palm—confirming his earlier thoughts, that he didn't dare urge her to spread her legs so that he could run his tongue through her slit and lap at the juices glistening on her inner thighs. He couldn't be so close to where her blood roared beneath delicate skin. "Sarael, you tempt me beyond measure," he whispered against her lips then moved to her ear, sucking on the lobe, teasing the delicate shell with his tongue before exploring the sensitive opening. His own heart thundering in his chest at the way her body molded itself to his, soft and submissive. Her whimper a siren's call so that he couldn't hold back the words. "I want you, *carissima*, on the bed this time."

She laughed, a soft, pleasing sound that curled in his belly and stroked his cock. "We can get on the bed."

He smiled, charmed by her innocence despite himself. Warmed by the forgiveness inherent in her simple comment—by the knowledge she didn't hold the last time against him. Perhaps didn't realize just how close to killing her he'd gotten. "I don't want to lose control, Sarael. You must accept being tethered this time."

Fear rushed through Sarael, chasing away all traces of languidness. She jerked, intending to scramble away from him, but his arms were like steel bands. "No," she said, continuing to wriggle and struggle until she was panting, pinned underneath him on the rugs, his erection pressed against her belly.

"It's necessary," Matteo said, his own breathing short, his earlier amusement gone in a flash of lust. "If you'd been raised as you should have been raised then you would already understand and accept it. But I will tell you since you have been cheated of the knowledge." He lowered his face to within inches above hers. His eyes were dark,

compelling, the years of anger over Angelique's abduction of Sarael flaring to the surface. "I am trying to give you pleasure, to make up for my earlier errors and allow you time to accept what I am and what you will be to me. I am trying to keep from scaring you further, from taking you too roughly despite the fact that all I want to do is climb on top of you and claim you as I sate myself with your blood then give you mine in return. You need to be bound."

"No."

Her denial inflamed him further, pushed away all of his earlier intentions to be gentle, to take his time with her. His thoughts and emotions were volatile, chaotic. Dangerous. Fueled by an instinct more compelling than even *La Brama*. A male's need to claim and possess his kadine.

Matteo rose, prepared to use his superior strength to carry her to the bed and tie her there, but then she rolled to her hands and knees, perhaps intending to try and escape, and in a heartbeat he was on her, pressing her upper body to the carpeting, his knees forcing her legs apart so that he could thrust his cock into her tight, slick channel. She stilled under him, going soft once again, and it appeased him, forced the anger back so the fierce need to dominate controlled him instead of rage.

"Do not fight me, *carissima*," he said, giving her more of his weight, testing himself by brushing a kiss along her spine. Groaning when she dropped her head submissively, exposing her neck.

Sarael whimpered, frightened that he could reduce her to such helplessness, and yet she craved him. Craved the feel of his body on hers, craved his kisses, his touch, his words. His cock. "Please, Matteo," she said, shifting, opening herself wider, inviting him to press deeper, wanting him to plunge in so deeply that he could touch her heart, so deeply that the hot spew of his seed would wash away her doubts and fears.

His cock throbbed at the sound of her whispered plea, his balls tightened and he answered her call. The need to dominate driving him, and yet her submissiveness had enabled him to find a measure of control so that he moved in and out of her gently at

first, building her trust, only becoming rougher, more forceful when she began writhing underneath him, sobbing, her body pushing into his thrusts, her cries hungry, needy.

His hand went around to her clit so that the thrust of his cock pressed her engorged nub into his palm. "Now, Sarael," he said, and she obeyed, coming hard and fast, gripping his penis in violent spasms that jerked wave after wave of seed from his balls and through his shaft.

They collapsed together on the rug, still connected, his body curled around hers, his hand still between her legs, both of them shivering, shaking in reaction to the intensity of their climax. "You undo me," he whispered, momentarily sated despite the call of her blood, despite the knowledge that he couldn't give her any more time. That the next time he took her, he would take more than her body, he would take her blood and with it a portion of her life into his keeping.

Even thinking about it was enough to stir his cock, to make it grow thick and full inside her until she was moving restlessly against him, her hand moving down to cover his so she could grind her clit into his palm. "I need you again," she said, and he could hear what it cost her to admit it.

Matteo's lips pulled back, a fierce baring of teeth as he kept himself from pumping in and out of her again. Anticipation burning through him at what was to come.

With the second exchange of blood she would truly need him. As often as he could take her and in whatever way he was willing to do it.

He placed his mouth next to her ear. "I'll give you everything you desire," he said, moving his palm over her clit in circular motions, groaning when she squeezed her legs together and tightened her hold on his cock. "But you must trust me, *carissima*. You must allow me to tether your wrists and ankles to the bed." He pressed down hard on her erect knob, a quick grinding assault that had her crying out in reaction. Old memories tried to influence her answer, old fears tried to control her, but when he did it again, sending fiery sensation through her, she gave him the answer he wanted.



"Yes," Sarael said, her body screaming in protest when Matteo pulled his cock free—then urging her to fight when he quickly lifted her into his arms and carried her to the old-fashioned bed with its elaborate, columned bedposts.

She was panting, panicked when he settled her on the mattress. And for a moment she kept herself from reacting, but as soon as he reached toward the head of the bed, toward a restraint that was already in place, she began struggling, fighting to get away from him.

He was on her in an instant, his body a solid weight, his hands pinning her wrists to the mattress. "Stop!" This time he used compulsion on her, blocking her mind's panicked commands to her limbs so that they went quiet while her blood thundered in her ears and her heart beat so fast it threatened to cease completely.

Matteo hissed, his fangs descended, sharp and glistening, adding to her primal terror and yet she was helpless to move. She watched in horrified fascination as he slowly lowered his mouth. But instead of going to her neck, he stopped next to her ear. "Don't fight me, Sarael. I don't want to hurt you. This is a dangerous time for both of us, *carissima*. There are men who have killed their kadines accidentally. You will find pleasure. Beyond anything you have yet experienced." He rubbed his cheek against hers. "Let me keep you safe. Please. Let me do this, for both of us."

"All right." It was a puff of air. An act of faith.

"*Grazie, carissima*," he said, releasing her wrists and rising to his knees, his body straddling hers so that his heavy balls brushed against the soft skin of her stomach, his smooth, hot cock gliding over her nipple as he leaned forward and once again reached for one of the restraints.

Sarael couldn't prevent herself from tensing when he placed it on her wrist, from pulling back slightly, though he allowed her to control her own body rather than forcing her into helplessness with a command. When she succeeded in allowing him to put the second restraint on without fighting him, he leaned down and covered her lips with his, praising her with his kiss, with the stroke of his tongue against hers, the lack of

fangs demonstrating the truth of his earlier words, that fighting him made it more dangerous for her.

He lifted his face and her heart very nearly melted at the wealth of emotion she saw there. "You are my world, *carissima*. My life." He kissed her again, this time as his hands trailed down her immobilized arms, his fingers tracing her collarbones before settling on nipples that were tight and hard. His mouth followed, taking a different route, lingering over the wild pulse in her throat before brushing soft, teasing kisses across her nipples.

She whimpered and arched upward, her legs parting further, ready to lift and encircle him. "No," he said, his hands leaving her breasts and settling on her thighs, pinning them to the bed.

His teeth pulled on her nipple, the tugs causing heat to spiral in her belly as she remembered what it had felt like in the hotel room when he'd suckled, taking some of her blood with each erotic pull. As quickly as she'd been afraid of what was to come, she was now aroused by it.

"Please, Matteo," she said, her voice husky, needy, her body restless, her cunt and clit swollen.

He released her nipple, leaving her only long enough to tether her ankles. She shivered, fear and arousal colliding.

"Easy, *carissima*," Matteo said, covering her body with his, giving her his weight, his warmth, his comfort.

Now that she was safely bound, the crushing worry and fear he'd harbored deep inside—that he'd accidentally kill her—dissolved, leaving him nearly overwhelmed by the sheer pleasure of feeling her against him, of knowing he was taking care of her, seeing to her needs as he prepared to bring her more fully into his world. She was his life. His dream.

He closed his eyes briefly, savoring her scent, her softness. His cock hard and ready, wet with their shared passion and renewed arousal. "Sarael," he whispered, looking into her eyes before lowering his face and touching his lips to hers.

She responded by opening her mouth for him, by rubbing her tongue against his. For long moments they kissed, an erotic dance that built the desire between them until they were both shivering, him with the need to penetrate, her with the need to be penetrated.

He'd bound her ankles with enough slack to enable her to bend her knees and widen the spread of her legs. With a whimper she did so, arching enough so that his penis slid inside her welcoming channel.

In an instant the nature of the kiss changed. In an instant the coupling became a claiming.

Lust roared through Matteo, intense and powerful, primal. For Sarael's body, for her blood. For her heart and soul.

He swallowed her cries as he pounded into her, violently taking her, his entire focus on possessing the woman beneath him.

And Sarael writhed in pleasure, offering herself to him, responding to him in the way he'd long fantasized that his kadine would do. The emotions storming through him fierce, all consuming—more demanding than even *La Brama*.

Only when the tight fist of her muscles clamped down on him mercilessly as she climaxed did he give in to the desire to bite her. She screamed when he struck, but this time it was in pleasure and not in terror. And this time, with her wrists and ankles bound, he didn't lose control, didn't take more than he should, despite the hot rush of ecstasy her blood produced as it poured into him, becoming a part of every one of his cells, of his entire being—even as stream after stream of semen jetted through his cock, the pulsing release nearly excruciating in its intensity.

Sarael was relaxed, sated, thoroughly content when Matteo's tongue washed over her neck before he lifted his head. "My turn?" she asked, frowning slightly at the slur in her voice.

He laughed, a husky sound that had her nipples tightening despite the pleasure he'd already given her. "Impatient to become my kadine, *carissima*?"

Sarael tried to work up some fear, but none came. It felt right to be with him. To follow him into the world of The Moon. "Will you untie me, now?"

Matteo hesitated for a moment then set her free, immediately covering her body with his. "The changes will be more pronounced this time," he said, threading the fingers of one hand through her hair.

Some of the lassitude left her with his words. "What do you mean?"

He brushed his lips over hers. "Your body is changing, *carissima*. Adapting. Becoming more compatible, more receptive to mine. Without these changes it wouldn't be possible for us to have children, it wouldn't be possible for you to live as long as I'll live."

A small measure of her earlier fear returned, causing her pulse to beat more rapidly in her throat. The flaring of Matteo's nostrils and the stiffening of his cock telling her how attuned he was to the rush of her blood. "You're turning me into a vampire." This time her heart jerked in her chest and he groaned in reaction, shoving his cock into her channel.

"Remain calm, Sarael, or I will need to tie you again," he said, strain on his face.

The warning itself caused her to tense. Made her fight to stay quiet underneath him, even as she repeated her comment. "You're turning me into a vampire."

"No, *carissima*, not the vampire you call me, but a kadine."

"What's the difference?"

"You will understand soon enough, Sarael. But if it will ease your mind, then I will tell you this. You will be able to move around in the daytime if you desire. You will be

able to eat and drink as you always have, but in addition you will need my blood to survive."

His mouth went to her neck and she forced herself to go completely soft and submissive underneath him. He lingered, first running his tongue over the place he'd bitten, then sucking on it, making her whimper and arch into him, her nipples hard, aching points, her cunt clenching and unclenching on his penis.

He laughed, amusement mixed with sensual torment, then lifted his face from her neck, shifting so his eyes could gaze into hers. "You tempt me beyond all measure, Sarael." His lips brushed against hers. "Do you drink willingly, *carissima*?"

"Yes," she whispered, watching as he used his fangs to open a vein on his own wrist. The fingers threaded through her hair tightened, but she didn't fight him when he pressed his wrist to her mouth. Instead she closed her eyes, concentrating on the memory of how it had been the first time, how rapidly his blood had become a fine wine she greedily swallowed.

It was even more potent the second time, burning its way through her body and becoming the sole focus of her existence. She drank, timeless minutes lost in a vortex of dark pleasure while his hand stroked her cheek, her throat, and his words of love and praise washed over her.

She protested when he finally pulled his wrist from her mouth, whimpering and trying to follow his movement. "You'll have more tomorrow, Sarael," he said, closing the vein with the swipe of his tongue. "And after that, we can share this as often as you wish." He leaned in, kissing her.

Sarael's legs went around his waist, forcing his cock deeper. Her body was burning, restless, wanting his seed now as desperately as his blood.

Matteo grunted, feeling the need in her, already connected to her so that her emotions flowed into him, amplifying his own. He'd expected it, wanted it, and yet the reality was so much more intense, so much more consuming than he'd imagined.

His cock grew larger, fighting against the tight fist of her muscles, and she began moving, the slick, hot feel of her sending jolts of icy pleasure through his balls and up his spine. He tightened his arms around her, answering her call, fucking her, their bodies so tightly melded it was almost as though they were one. But within seconds, the sound of her heart, the rush of her blood, her own desire for him to pierce her skin and drink had Matteo fighting for control.

With a groan he rolled to his back, his hands going to her breasts, pushing so that she straddled him. It was sweet torture to have her above him, dark hair and dark eyes, breasts heavy with desire, their hard tips pressed against his palms. It was pure eroticism to look down and see the place where their bodies joined, to watch as she lifted away from him, rising high enough that his cock nearly escaped the wet heaven it had claimed as its own, before she sank down, taking him willingly into her body. Swallowing him in slippery folds and feminine mystery.

She rode him mercilessly. As mercilessly as he'd ridden her earlier. Lowering her head and capturing his lips only in the final seconds, when they both strained against each other, slick with sweat, striving to be what their commingled blood claimed they were—one body, one heart, one soul—two halves of a single whole. Bound together for all eternity.

Afterward, Sarael lay on top of Matteo, needing his closeness. Needing the feel of his skin against hers. Needing his reassurance.

His hands stroked over her back. Comforting at first, then arousing. So that she began moving restlessly against him, her body burning once again, the sound of his heartbeat a roar in her head.

With a whimper she nuzzled his chest, his neck, putting her teeth on him and only barely able to prevent herself from biting. Matteo's arm tightened on her while one hand moved to cup her cheek, to force her face away from his neck and position it above his.

"I need you again," she whispered, her lower body grinding against his, her sheath tightening on his still-embedded penis.

He was ready for her in an instant. His body perfectly attuned to hers, prepared to give her everything she wanted — except for his blood. He'd taken them both to the very limits with the earlier exchange.

His cock jerked with the thought of her teeth on his neck. One more exchange and the adaptation would be complete. Her body would be fully compatible with his, and he would know the unparalleled ecstasy of her bite, the sharp sting of pleasure as her fangs slid into him. She would be his kadine in fact, her life irrevocably tied to his.

With a groan he rolled, levering himself away from her long enough to slip his arms under her knees, bending and guiding them so that they were draped over his shoulders, the position making her so tight and small that his penis had to fight its way back into her. The position making it easier to replace the desire for blood with the lust to fuck, to dominate, to satisfy the hunger burning in both of them.

And yet it wasn't a hunger that would be satisfied until the sun rose. He took her repeatedly, needing to tie her to the bed again in order to prevent himself from giving in to the sheer temptation she presented, the second exchange of blood making her crave his body and his blood desperately, sexually bonding her to him — just as the first exchange had bound him to her.

With the bonding she would gain control over the pheromones that served not only to lure prey but were part of a vampire's defense mechanism. Humans would be drawn to her, but only when she beckoned and she would be able to ensnare them in her gaze, directing their thoughts rather than being the victim of their sexual obsession.

A growl sounded in Matteo's throat at the thought of the men who'd tried to rape her during the three days when she'd eluded him. Never again. Never again would she be vulnerable, unprotected.

He leaned down and pressed his mouth to hers, his tongue as aggressive as his cock, pressing in and out of her in a show of dominance. Driving her higher until she

was writhing against him, pleading with her body, held at the pinnacle of release until he allowed them both to tumble over.

Afterward he carried her to the bathroom, once again putting her on the counter while he filled the large, old-fashioned tub with water. Only this time instead of placing her in it alone, he scooped her into his arms and got in himself, settling her so that she was stretched out along his body, her back to his front, both of them immersed in the welcoming water.



## Chapter Eight

Sarael closed her eyes and relaxed against him, enjoying the rippling warmth of the water and the lazy caresses as he smoothed soapy hands over her abdomen and breasts. "I could get used to this," she murmured, glad the fierce need and fiery restlessness that had assaulted her body for most of the night had loosened its grip on her.

Matteo laughed softly, his palms circling, gliding over her nipples, then retreating, stroking her stomach and thighs before his arms settled around her and he rubbed his cheek against her hair. "I am glad, *carissima*. I have savored you in my dreams for more years than you've been alive. But the reality, Sarael... The reality is so much more than the fantasy. You are my heart, my soul, my world."

Sarael laced her fingers through his. "What happens next?"

"Tomorrow we will finish what we have begun. And the day after, we will return to Italy."

Sarael's heart rate spiked and his arms tightened on her in response. "Italy?"

He rubbed his cheek against her hair. "I wish to return home with you, Sarael, to take you somewhere I can ensure your safety. We can visit the United States in the future, after you know more of our ways, and at a time when I can arrange for your security."

A whisper of fear moved through Sarael at the idea of leaving all that was familiar to her, at the thought of being trapped in a foreign land. A place where she didn't know the language or the people. Until he'd come into her life, all she'd ever known was the carnival. Traveling from place to place in a long circular route repeated each year. The rhythm of each day like a constant, steady heartbeat. "I'd like to stay here for a while."

“That is not possible. As I have said, we can visit the United States in the future. But as soon as you have gone through the last changes and become my kadine, then we must return to *Palazzo dei Venti Oscuri*.”

Sarael heard the steel in his voice and knew it was pointless to argue. She heard her mother’s warning. *If you’re found, your life won’t be your own.*

Her gaze strayed to the window she’d escaped through last time—noticing there were now bars covering it. She had no intention of running again even though the whisper of fear had become a sharper, colder breeze. Is this what her future held? Her choices always dictated by him? Her life always following the course he directed? Her own wishes and desires unimportant? “That’s what you call your home? *Palazzo dei...*”

*“Palazzo dei Venti Oscuri. Palace of Dark Winds. Yes. I have other estates, but it is the one I most frequently occupy.”*

Sarael shivered despite the warmth of the water. The name of his home and the sight of the bars over the bathroom window giving rise to the notion that it would be an elegant prison.

Matteo could sense the ebb and flow of her emotions, could almost taste her fear. It struck at his core, leaving him both raw and reactive. With the third exchange of blood, he would share her thoughts, but until then, he could only guess at them, could only anticipate what she might do.

But she was mistaken if she thought he would drop his guard and allow her to escape again. Especially with enemies lurking in the area.

For an instant he considered telling her about the danger the Believers posed, but then thought better of it. It was a lesson for another day.

Pride moved through him, desire, at how she had handled the second exchange. He’d been right to take his time with her, to spend precious moments gentling her and talking to her rather than punishing her for running and eluding him.

Matteo hugged her to him then rose to his feet, setting her out of the tub and following, reaching for a towel as he had before and drying her off before wiping the

water from his own body. "We need to seek our rest," he said, feeling the creeping lethargy that heralded the arrival of the sun.

When he moved to lift her into his arms and carry her to bed, she flushed, ducking her head and saying, "I need a few minutes before I come to bed."

He cupped her chin, forcing her gaze to meet his, knowing she had already seen the bars installed over the window, but unable to prevent himself from saying, "Do not think to try and escape again, *carissima*." He released his grip and moved from the room, stopping just outside the door, but allowing her to close it.

Sarael breathed a sigh of relief. Thankful he'd given her some privacy as she attended to her needs. Thankful he'd given her a few minutes alone so she could think about all that had happened since he found her in the hotel room.

She already felt bound to him. Connected in a way that made her feel whole. She already believed she belonged in his world. The world of The Moon.

And despite the uneasiness that filled her at the prospect of being taken to *Palazzo dei Venti Oscuri*, she wouldn't fight it. Wouldn't fight him. It was too late to do so.

Sarael rubbed her finger over the tattoo on her wrist. Perhaps it had been too late from the moment of her birth.

Out of habit she gathered the clothes that lay scattered on the bathroom floor where he'd thrown them earlier, her mind immediately going to the knife in her jacket pocket. Her thoughts returning to the three days when she'd had to fend for herself in a world made more dangerous by his blood.

She left the bathroom with the clothes in her arms, now strangely reluctant not to have the knife near her. Matteo frowned but didn't say anything and she dropped the clothing in a chair next to the bed before sliding onto the mattress and into his arms. Willing to spend the day held by him, willing to sleep while the sun reigned and finish what they'd begun when it set and the moon ruled.

Matteo rolled her onto her back and settled on top of her, and despite the lethargy that was slowly invading her body, Sarael spread her legs and tilted her hips, ready to

welcome him into her body. He gave a husky laugh and thrust, his cock sliding in easily, his strokes slow and gentle.

"*Carissima*," he whispered, knowing it was madness to take her, knowing it was foolish to make the same mistake a second time, to expend the last of his energy, enabling sleep to take him so deeply that it would be a struggle to wake during the daylight hours. But the feel of her slick flesh was more than he could resist. The sounds of her pleasure and the softness of her body a call he couldn't fail to answer. And so he yielded to temptation. Slowly fucking in and out of her, drawing the pleasure out as the sun rose higher in the sky, each thrust a victory against a world he couldn't fully live in, each thrust a reaffirmation of what they were to each other.

Only when Sarael cried and convulsed with pleasure did he allow himself to come. *Il Sonno* threatening to submerge him completely as he filled her with his seed and collapsed on top of her. Dark waves of sleep washing over him.

It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to fight the call of *Il Sonno*, to keep from tumbling into oblivion. But Matteo forced himself to his knees, finding satisfaction in the way Sarael frowned and mumbled when his body left hers. But when he placed the restraint on her ankle, her contentment left her in a rush and she jerked into a sitting position, trying to escape the viselike grip he had on her.

"No!" It was a protest from her very soul, rippling across his and making it feel as though a hand was squeezing his heart. "No." There was panic in her voice, confusion, hurt.

"Yes, *carissima*," he said, the violent swirl of her emotions battering him. "I can't take the chance that you'll run again."

Her eyes widened and she stilled, meeting his gaze with a pleading one. "And if I promise not to try and escape?"

He shook his head, feeling her need for him to trust her. Wanting to give his trust to her, but the stakes were too high. The danger too great. His dream of a kadine too close to being realized.

He'd promised himself not to err as he'd done before. Already it took all his willpower to fight *Il Sonno*, the hours hunting Sarael followed by the hours of pleasuring her, of filling her with his seed, had taken their toll on him. He would not be able to awaken quickly enough to race her to the door should she decide to leave him.

A frown came and went on Matteo's face as he realized he had left the door unlocked so Pietro could deliver a tray of food for Sarael. A quick glance and he could see the key sticking from the deadbolt on the inside, a lock he'd had installed when he first arranged to bring Sarael to this house. A lock that should even now be engaged and the key hidden.

He cursed silently. His attention had been so consumed by Sarael that he hadn't once thought of seeing to the door. And now his failure provided reason enough to tether her.

"I must," he said, regret in his voice, but also resolve, his heart weeping when he saw tears form at the corners of Sarael's eyes.

"Please don't," she whispered. *Trust me. Show me that what I want is important to you.*

"Just one ankle, Sarael. And I will extend the length of the tie so it doesn't restrict your movement so very much."

"I don't want to be tied at all. I've already told you I won't try to escape."

He shook his head, wanting desperately to give in to her plea, the very intensity of his desire to yield to her tears making his resolve firm. A kadine both strengthened and weakened the man who claimed her. But in this, he couldn't afford to weaken. He couldn't afford to trust her. He couldn't be certain that the taint of her mother wasn't still present in Sarael. She thought to stay with him *now*, but what if she changed her mind during the daylight hours and decided to chase after a freedom not meant for her?

"No, Sarael. Do not ask for what I can't give." His grip tightened on her ankle, though she made no effort to try and jerk it away from him.

"If you do this, Matteo, then I *will* try and escape again," she said, her voice shaky and yet full of conviction as he opened a leather pouch tied to the bedpost and removed a tiny silver padlock.

"Then I will warn you that you are doomed to failure, Sarael. And if you try to run away, then I will punish you—whether you are successful in the attempt or not." He closed the padlock at the point where the restraints met at her ankle, misgiving moving through him as he did so. Second thoughts arising as he lay down beside her and pulled her resistance-filled body against his own. "Sleep now, *carissima*. No purpose is served by fighting. The night will come soon enough, and with it, the completion we both desire."

Sarael couldn't stop herself from drawing her knee upward until the tether was taut, preventing her from further movement. "Please don't do this," she said again, her heart aching—torn by a confusion of emotion. Needing him to trust her. She'd accepted so many things, given herself to him willingly time and time again, even allowed him to tie her when he'd said it was important for her own safety—but this was not for her safety, this was *not* necessary.

This was a betrayal of her trust. This was a confirmation that he would think nothing of keeping her a prisoner. That her needs and desires would always be less important than his own.

"Sleep, Sarael," he said, sending a shaft of pain through her heart with his refusal to free her ankle.

She turned her back to him and closed her mind to the feel of his warm skin against hers. It was pointless to struggle. His arms were like steel bands around her, holding her against him. But she knew from before that once sleep claimed him, his grip would loosen.

Sadness pooled in Sarael's heart. Maybe this was the way it would always be. Maybe he'd always hold her mother's "sins" against her. Maybe he'd always worry that she was like her mother.

She fought to remain awake, but eventually exhaustion and then sleep claimed her. But unlike Matteo, it didn't hold her so tightly in its grip.

It was late afternoon when she woke. Sarael knew it without a clock telling her. She knew it despite the darkness of the room and the heavy curtains blocking all sunlight.

She'd shifted position in her sleep and so her first impulse was to place her leg over Matteo's and see if she could coax his cock into filling her. Because despite the slow, deep breathing which indicated he was asleep, his penis was rigid against her belly—standing ready to serve her.

But as soon as she moved her leg and the leather securing her to the bedpost became taut, she was reminded of what had transpired before sleep took them both. *If you do this, Matteo, then I will try and escape again.* Her earlier words rushed in, filling her thoughts so that she was at war with herself.

Her body craved him. Her blood sang his name. Her heart and soul insisted they belonged together. And yet her mind argued that unless there was trust then nothing else mattered, that all they had between them was an illusion, the result of whatever had been done to her with the tattooing of her wrist when she was an infant unable to make a choice about her future.

Sarael eased away from Matteo, careful despite the obvious depth of his sleep. The tether prevented her from getting very far, but it was still long enough. With one hand gripping the columned post at the head of the bed, she reached for the pile of clothing she'd placed on the chair, her heart plummeting as she wondered if some part of her had known she'd need the knife and that's why she'd picked her clothes off the bathroom floor instead of just leaving them there.

It was a simple matter to cut the leather binding, though the band around her ankle remained tightly in place, locked there by the tiny silver padlock—symbolic of a bondage she knew she'd never truly escape.

Matteo would find her. In truth, she knew she wasn't really running from him, but was trying to make herself heard. Trying to get him to understand that she needed his

trust, she needed to feel...free...even as he held her tight and drew her deeper into his world.

She'd promised she'd escape if he tethered her. And she would see it through, going as far as the carnival so that she could glimpse her old life again before he took her to Italy and *Palazzo dei Venti Oscuri*.

A shiver moved through her as she remembered *his* earlier words—*if you try to run away, then I will punish you—whether you are successful in the attempt or not*—and her hands shook slightly as she got dressed, but she didn't let the threat of punishment stop her. She was prepared to accept the consequences of her actions. She needed to do this, not just to demonstrate that she meant what she said, but to prove to herself that she was strong enough to be Matteo's match. That who she was wouldn't disappear, crushed by his dominant nature and the power he held over her.

Sarael moved to the door, surprised when she saw the key in the lock. She'd had some vague notion of either using the knife to force the door open or pulling the heavy curtains aside and seeing if she could escape through a bedroom window. She hadn't anticipated escape would be so easy. Her pulse spiked and raced, her hand stilling on the doorknob. Was he testing her?

Confusion reigned for long moments. Indecision.

Her body urged her to return to the bed. To let him wake to find her still there, no longer tethered, able to escape but choosing freely to stay.

A new fear swirled in her heart. What if this was a test and she left? What if by leaving it meant he would no longer want her? That *he* would leave in turn, returning to Italy and seeking another female to be his kadine.

She very nearly gave in. Her hand dropped from the doorknob and she turned, taking several steps toward the bed before her earlier thoughts crowded in, her earlier worries about losing her sense of self. Of disappearing so thoroughly in the world of The Moon that she didn't exist other than to please Matteo. To be what he wanted her to be.



She forced her gaze away from him, halting, taking in the room—a room kept in absolute darkness and yet she could see perfectly. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, her determination and confidence returning. His blood had already changed her. He would come for her. He had said time and time again that she belonged to him.

This was no test—other than one she needed to administer to herself. A smile formed on her lips when she spotted a small notebook and pen on the dresser. Without giving herself time to second-guess or question, she hastily moved to the dresser and left him a message. *You are asking me for everything but I need something in return. I need to know that what I want is important to you. I need to know I'm not a prisoner. I need you to trust me when I tell you something. I promised I would leave if you tethered me. And I have. You will find me at the carnival.*

She left then, moving quietly through the house, her senses now so acute that she could hear Pietro prowling around in the kitchen. She could feel Matteo in the depths of her consciousness, fighting through waves of cloying sleep, trying to surface and prevent her from escaping.

Adrenaline surged through her, quickening her footsteps. She paused only momentarily in the foyer, finding car keys on the small table just inside the front door. She recognized them instantly, grimacing at the thought of driving the limousine again, but glad she wouldn't be forced to flag down a passing motorist.

Nervousness skittered along her spine as she left the house and claimed the car. Memories crowded in of the men who'd been drawn to her the last time she ran. Her sole focus became getting to Helki's small trailer.

## **Chapter Nine**

"Sit," Helki said and Sarael did so, holding her hand up as though to ward off a reading when the old fortune-teller picked up a deck of tarot cards. Helki laughed, a dry sound of amusement. "You have already found your fate, child, you have no need of a reading from me." She pressed the deck into Sarael's hands. "The cards offer you a story if you have the courage to hear it."

A whisper of amusement moved through Sarael as she realized the old woman had always used this method for getting her to accept change and uncomfortable knowledge, feeding the challenge and information to her in the form of subtle dares. Sarael shuffled the cards, cutting them before handing them back to Helki.

Helki removed the top five cards, her eyes never leaving Sarael's as she set the first on the table. It was the Page of Cups.

"Once there was a young girl. She was born to a family that had gained its prestige by providing brides for men such as the one who has claimed you. It was considered a great honor to be selected and at first, this young girl was thrilled by the privileges and adulation she gained. She was spoiled shamelessly by her family, and envied by her peers. But as the time grew nearer, she began to think about what it would mean to grow large with child, a child she would help raise until others took over the task. What it would mean if she was chosen to bear another child, and then another until her own beauty and youth had been diminished—never being selected herself as a bride. Perhaps if she hadn't been so spoiled by her family, she would have been content. But she was beautiful, and young, and headstrong, accustomed to men falling at her feet. And so when no offer was made for her, despite her attempts to attract one of the powerful men who desired a life companion, and she found herself pregnant, she

turned her charms on a man forbidden her, a man who showed no interest in her at first."

Helki paused and flipped a card, revealing the Seven of Cups. "Daydreams soon filled this young girl's mind, of this man forbidden to her carrying her away and introducing her to a world different than her own. But this man was no easy conquest and his refusal only made her more determined to have him."

A third card joined the first two. The Five of Swords. "In the end, she got what she had pursued so relentlessly. But it was a hollow victory, one born of selfishness and deceit. The man she'd pursued so relentlessly finally came to her, claiming to have fallen under her spell. He helped her escape, convincing her that she should take her infant daughter with her. Though later she suspected his love was a lie."

Helki reached over and took Sarael's wrist, her thumb stroking over the tattoo. "The girl in this story gave in to her lover's persuasive arguments, to her own unworthy feelings of jealousy toward the daughter who would have the life she herself had wanted. Deep inside she knew it was wrong to take a child whose path was written in ancient blood, a child her mind wouldn't allow her heart to love."

"She found herself in the United States. Alone. Dependent on this man who sent money but found excuse after excuse not to join her. She became suspicious of his motives. She became frightened of the consequences which would result from not only running, but from taking the child. She began to fear for her life, seeing enemies all around who might want her dead."

Helki released Sarael's wrist. The Six of Swords joined the others on the table. "She ran. This time unaided—with few resources other than her stubbornness and pride, her beauty—trying to escape not only those who might be pursuing her but also from herself. Winding up here, traveling from town to town, growing older, maturing in many ways, but not in others."

There was a wealth of sadness in Helki's voice, an acknowledgement of a truth both of them had long known but avoided speaking of. Sarael looked up from the cards, her

heart aching, filling again with a small girl's desire to be loved by her mother, with the remembered pain of thinking the fault was hers, that somehow she was unlovable.

"None of it was your doing, child," Helki said, placing the last card on the table. The Eight of Cups. The card of saying goodbye, of moving on, of ending emotional ties. "She chose her own path and had to walk to it. She cared enough to ensure you would be taken care of before she left."

Sarael traced the edges along the Eight of Cups. Looking at the lone figure it contained, a figure walking away toward rugged mountains. "And now?"

"You have already found your path."

Sarael nodded, accepting the truth of Helki's statement. "What about her? Do you know where she is?"

"Will you seek her if I say yes?"

Even knowing some of her mother's story, the pain of her rejection and abandonment would forever linger in Sarael's heart. "No. I'd just like to know what happened to her after she left."

Helki reached for the deck of remaining tarot cards, cutting them several times before picking a solitary card and placing it on the table. Judgment.

Sarael tensed at the sight of it, but Helki gave a slight shake of her head. "It is not what you fear. She has made peace with the past and found a measure of happiness."

"I'm glad," Sarael said, finding that she meant it. Wondering why Helki had chosen to share this information with her now.

"You never told me this story before," Sarael said, picking up the cards and returning them to the deck.

"You didn't need to know it until today."

"Because of Matteo?"

Helki reached over and cupped Sarael's face, the tips of her fingers calloused from years of handling cards. She brushed them over Sarael's cheek in a rarely shown gesture

of affection. "Child, why do you press me for reasons? I had a dream and just as it predicted, you arrived in time to hear the story the cards wanted you to know."

Sarael looked at the old woman who had shown her more caring than her own mother. It hadn't been a mother's love and yet it had soothed her, provided her with stability, a safe haven to grow up in. She felt her eyes grow wet with tears. "He's going to take me to his home in Italy."

"He'll bring you back here for a visit, child."

"You saw it?"

Helki chuckled. "I didn't need to. His nature is to dominate as well as to please you."

Heat moved through Sarael's face, a question as to whether Helki guessed at the exact nature in which Matteo *did* dominate and please. She looked away, letting the subject drop, slowly becoming aware of two men approaching the trailer. Their focus on her though they couldn't see her and she couldn't see them.

Sarael rose and moved to the window, understanding dawning when she saw Cable and Fane only a few steps away from the trailer. They'd made her nervous from the first moment she encountered them. But now she knew the reason for her uneasiness. Fane. He wasn't truly human.

She returned to the table, tears threatening as Helki stood, taking Sarael's hands in her ancient ones and giving them a gentle squeeze. "We will see each other again, child."

The metal door of the trailer rattled under a firm knock and Sarael clung to Helki's hands, holding on to the past for a moment more before letting go and moving to the door, opening it and stepping outside. Her heart both heavy and strangely light.

"Let's go," Fane said and Sarael turned her attention to the men who took up positions on either side of her but didn't touch her. Surprise rippled through her when she breathed in their mingled scent, realizing that both men carried the scent of the other on him, as though they'd been intimate with each other.

"You're taking me back to Matteo?"

Cable shook his head. "He'll come for you at dusk. Until then, you'll stay with us."

They got to the place she'd left the limo. It was gone. The key still in her pocket. A shiny red sports car parked where it had been.

Fane opened the door and folded the seat down, forcing her to climb into the tiny passenger compartment in the back. "It would be dangerous and foolish for you to run again," he growled, righting the seat and trapping her in. "Not only would you gain an even harsher punishment from Matteo but you risk falling into our enemies' hands."

"What enemies?"

The two men exchanged a glance, both of them scowling. "Matteo hasn't told you about the Believers?" Cable asked, starting the engine and shifting the car into drive.

"No. Who are they?"

"Humans who want to destroy anyone or anything with supernatural abilities," Cable said. "Particularly vampires. Or those associated with them."

Fane turned to look at her. His eyes angry and savage. "They're in the area searching for a woman. You maybe. And rape is on their agenda."

Sarael shivered, frightened by his expression and his words. "I didn't know."

Cable's eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. "And now you do. You were smart to leave a note telling Matteo where you'd gone. It'd be even smarter still if you don't force either one of us to touch you. It'll only make it worse if he smells our scent on you when he comes to reclaim you."

Sarael looked away, the mention of their scents making her aware of them again, of how obvious it was that the two men had been intimate, the hints of lust and satisfaction clinging to their skin despite the smell of soap and cleanliness.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the place I'm renting." Fane's lips quirked upward in a slight smile. "For reasons known only to Matteo, he has decided that he prefers to have you guarded rather than returned and bound to his bed or locked in a secure room until nightfall."

Fane's answer caused Sarael's chest to flood with hope. Her leaving *had* made a difference.

She looked out the window, not surprised to find Fane's house was in a secluded area, completely surrounded by dark woods. Matteo would come for her soon, and when he did... Heat pooled in her belly and her breasts as a wave of anticipation and desire moved through her.

They escorted her inside where another man waited, excitement glittering in his eyes. She guessed he was the Italian who'd given his card to Dakotah. Alessandro, who claimed to be her mother's friend. "A call just came in," he said, directing his attention to Cable. "One of the waitresses in Chesterfield called the number you gave her. Four men sporting tattoos and the crucifix knives the Believers favor came into the restaurant. She said they walked across the street to the hotel there."

"Which restaurant?" Cable asked.

"Her shift is over now, but she said the room they went into was the last one to the right." Alessandro pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Fane.

Fane turned to Cable. "Sarael will be safe enough here with the two of you guarding her. I'll see if these are the men Domino and I learned of."

Cable's eyebrows drew together. "It feels wrong. It might be a trap."

"Let them try and spring it then."

"Call Domino..."

"He hunts elsewhere and you know it. I can't wait."

"I'll go with you then."

"Your duty is here, guarding Sarael until she's once again in Matteo's possession."

"I can stay with her," Alessandro said. "Despite her ability to escape from Matteo repeatedly, she won't get away from me."

"No," Fane said.

Cable looked at Sarael "She left a note telling Matteo where she could be found – and that was before she knew the danger the Believers posed. I don't think there is any danger of her running again. Is there?"

Sarael shook her head. "I'll stay here."

"It's settled then," Cable said. "There's no reason to think the Believers know about this house, and Matteo will be here soon."

Alessandro straightened. "If you will allow me to turn her over to Matteo, it would be a chance for my order to regain its lost honor over Angelique's escape."

Fane hissed, a frustrated sound. But Cable was already striding toward the sports car. And within seconds they were gone.

Wariness filled Sarael when Alessandro immediately closed the distance between them, taking her arm in his hand, a tight grip meant to restrain. "I've waited all my life for this opportunity. Come on, we need to hurry. Your mother is waiting. She's anxious to see you, to apologize, to explain why she had to leave you at the carnival long enough for Matteo to find you and make the first two exchanges with you." He laughed. "What a miracle that you managed to escape before the third one! We'd planned to try and rescue you, but we couldn't find out where Matteo had you hidden. He refused to tell any of us."

Sarael's pulse jumped. The story Helki told her with the tarot cards racing through her mind. The last one, the Judgment card, an indication that her mother had made peace with the past and found a measure of happiness. She knew he lied, that he wasn't taking her to Angelique.

"You helped my mother escape the first time. You convinced her to take me with her." Some of the smooth charm dropped from Alessandro's face, and Sarael raced to



gain some answers, forcing her voice to sound small and frightened. "Please, tell me why she wanted Matteo to find me, why I had to endure what he did to me."

Alessandro's face became sympathetic. "We're both sorry for your suffering, Sarael. But it was the only way. For years the vampires have used humans. Generation after generation of us has been born into their service. Gaining wealth, but not what they have! Centuries of life." His hand tightened on her arm. "But your blood will change that, Sarael. As long as Matteo lives, you live. And through your blood... Come on, we need to leave. Your mother is beside herself waiting for this reunion." He took a step toward the door and she went with him without resistance, knowing that at some point he'd have to let go of her arm.

The knife was in her jacket pocket. Close, and yet she knew there was no way she'd be able to get to it fast enough unless she could put some distance between them.

A black car waited in the driveway. "How far away is she?" Sarael asked, forcing excitement into her voice. Her question a false indication that she believed his story.

"Several hours. But by the time Matteo realizes you've been taken and Fane and Cable determine they're chasing a phantom enemy, it will be too late. We'll be long gone with no trail left for them to follow."

She tried to maintain the fiction that she believed him as she waited for the moment when he'd loosen his grip on her long enough for her to escape. But when they drew close to the passenger door and she saw the handcuffs in the seat, she couldn't stop herself from reacting. In a heartbeat she began struggling, her forehead connecting with his nose hard enough to loosen his grip on her so she could gain her freedom and run.

"Bitch!" he screamed, delayed for several precious seconds by pain and the blood gushing from his nose. But then he was chasing after her.

## **Chapter Ten**

Sarael darted into the woods, using the gloom to her advantage. Matteo's blood allowing her to see perfectly, while the darkness slowed Alessandro down.

She ran until her sides ached. Hoping that he'd give up. But he didn't and so she altered her course, trying to circle back to the house, the car, where, if nothing else, she could get a door between them until Matteo arrived.

Alessandro caught her a few steps away from the front door, lunging and taking her to the ground, then rolled her over, straddling her and forcing the knife from her hand before tossing it a short distance away. "Bitch!" he said, striking her face in mad fury when she continued to fight him, blood streaming from her lips.

Sarael saw the instant his gaze latched onto her mouth, his attentions so riveted that she knew what she needed to do in order to ensure her survival. The feel of Alessandro's body touching hers made her stomach roil. But if she could just keep him occupied...

The time spent evading him in the woods had been enough. She could feel Matteo getting closer. Timing his arrival so he could reclaim her only seconds after the sun set.

She continued struggling, squirming, allowing the pheromones she'd gained with Matteo's blood to work to her advantage, to distract Alessandro. He struck her again. This time licking the blood from his hand. His dream of a life beyond what a human could have, flowing from her lips in scarlet temptation.

He was on her in a second, his body holding hers down, his mouth covering hers, so absorbed in what he was doing, in keeping her subdued that he was unaware of Matteo's arrival until he screamed in agony, his shirt bursting into flames, causing him to jerk away from her and meet death.

Sarael scrambled to her feet just as Matteo dropped Alessandro's lifeless body to the ground, the neck broken with a quick decisive snap. She didn't resist when he pulled her to him, licking over her bleeding lips, healing and cleaning them. "Where are Fane and Cable?"

"On their way to Chesterfield. He told them four Believers had been seen there. But it was just a lie to get them to leave."

Matteo set her aside. "Get in the car." His voice promised retribution despite the tender way he'd taken care of her injuries.

"I..."

"Do not add to your troubles by arguing with me, Sarael. Get in the car."

She retreated to the limousine, watching as he disappeared into the house with Alessandro's body. Emerging a few minutes later and stopping only long enough to pick up her knife and slip it into his pocket before joining her in the car.

They drove home in silence, despite the fact that Matteo held her on his lap, his arms unyielding around her waist, his erection pressed against her buttocks. Several times Sarael thought to speak about what had happened, but something in his manner stopped her.

Like a movie rewind so a scene could be repeated yet again, the limo glided to a halt and Pietro opened the door so Matteo could exit with Sarael in his arms, then hurried to the house, enabling Matteo to move inside and directly to the bedroom without pausing.

He took her to the bathroom, setting her on her feet and finally speaking. "Take a shower, Sarael, before the scent of another man on you drives me to do something I will regret."

Her hands went to her shirt, shaking at the hot, dangerous anger she saw in his face, shaking in delayed reaction to what had transpired at Fane's house. She didn't bother asking Matteo to leave. The harshness of his expression and his stance told her he had no intention of letting her out of his sight. Feminine fear moved through her,

laced with anticipation. In his presence her body was already starting to burn, her blood was whispering through her veins, anxious to blend with his.

She stripped out of her clothing, her nipples tightening and her cunt lips swelling, tingling, so that she pressed her legs together as his gaze traveled over her naked body, his eyes going from dark polished stones to molten lava. "Get in the shower now." It was a growled command, a warning, and she obeyed. Stepping into the modern shower that was a short distance away from the old-fashioned tub. Knowing he watched through the clear glass as she pooled liquid soap into her palms and then ran her hands over her skin.

Giddy relief chased away her fear in the same way as the hot water cascaded over her flesh, carrying the soap away, leaving her feeling renewed, refreshed – reckless. His lust was a tangible thing, touching her despite the distance and glass that stood between them, and she reacted to it. Cupping her breasts, tweaking her nipples, then slowly smoothing a hand downward, stopping when it was wedged between her legs, her palm massaging a clit that was hard, erect, its hood already pulled back, her fingers slippery, not from soap alone but from arousal.

Fire roared through Matteo's cock and mind, burning away all other emotion except the primitive desire to fuck his bride as he fed from her, as he claimed her completely, opening a vein and experiencing the dark pleasure of her mouth pressed against his skin, his blood and will flowing into her as she drank of him.

He wrenched the shower door open and jerked her out, pausing only long enough to turn off the water before he hauled her against him and kissed her. A dominant claiming that had her whimpering and going soft in his arms, submissive, her body molding itself to his in an offering that took all he had to refuse.

With a hiss he forced his lips away from hers, tangling his fingers in her hair in order to control her, to keep her from nuzzling against him and diverting him from the course he was determined to take. He would fuck her. He would bite her and be bitten

in return. He would know the ecstasy of claiming and taking the last step necessary to make her his kadine. But he would punish Sarael first for escaping to the carnival.

He grabbed a towel, pressing it into her hands and taking a step backward, his body still burning from where it had touched hers. He stripped as she dried off, taking her upper arm when they were both done and guiding her to the bedroom, halting at the foot of the bed where cuffs hung from the corner post.

She stiffened and tried to pull away at the sight of them but she was no match for his superior strength and he easily secured her wrists so that her arms were above her head, her movements limited. "I understand why you left, Sarael. And just as you kept your promise, I will keep mine."

He moved to the dresser and a bolt of shock ripped through her when he picked up a flogger before returning to where she was restrained. She pulled at her bindings, primal instinct demanding she try and avoid the stinging bite of leather whipping across her back and buttocks.

Matteo stilled her struggles, pressing his front to her back, his palm cupping her breast, stroking her abdomen before his fingers grasped the ends of the flogger straps, pulling them tight. "You must learn to obey me, Sarael. To accept the things I do in order to ensure your safety, to gain peace of mind for myself. I am almost impossible to destroy. But you, *carissima*, even with my blood racing through your veins, you are still vulnerable. The idea of you being killed, of you being taken by our enemies is intolerable." He glided the taut leather back and forth over her pebbled nipples, then downward, the cool feel of the material against her belly making her quiver. "I'm not sure what I would do if such a thing occurred, but I fear I might become the monster of your human stories. Tonight you will go through the final changes and become my kadine. Already it is too late to undo what we are to each other."

He dropped the flogger ends, forcing her legs open and reaching between them from behind, grasping the leather strips again and pulling them taut so they pressed against her swollen, slippery folds and engorged clit. "I have made mistakes with you,"

Matteo surprised her by admitting, his mouth brushing a kiss across her shoulder and up her neck, his hands sawing the strips of leather back and forth across her aroused flesh. "No doubt I will make other mistakes in the future, Sarael. But we have made a good start in showing that we both can keep our word." His fangs grazed her skin and she whimpered, arching her neck in offering.

"After your punishment," he said, and she shivered when he stepped away from her, the leather straps of the flogger trailing over her inner thigh as it retreated with him.

Anticipation moved through her, an addictive erotic fear she'd never experienced with any other man. She tensed, bracing herself for the first strike, but it didn't come immediately.

Instead he waited, letting her grow more anxious, more needy, more aroused, until her inner thighs glistened with moisture and her nipples were so hard that she leaned forward and rubbed them against the bedpost in an effort to find relief.

"No!" Matteo hissed, his command blending with the soft rustle of leather as the straps moved through the air, landing on her buttocks with a sting that was painful pleasure. A contradiction that had her hungry for more, willing to accept this form of discipline from him. "Your release will come from me, Sarael," he growled, the second strike coming more rapidly, once again lashing across her buttocks as did the following two, the next several moving higher, until the eighth one struck the flesh over her shoulder blades, the very tip of the leather curling around and stinging her nipple with its bite.

She was shaking then, shivering, her body painfully aroused, her senses so heightened that she cried out when his arms went around her, pulling her back against his front once again, one hand going between her legs, the other cupping her breast, his fingers ruthless on her clit and nipple until he gave her the relief he'd said would come only from him.

Satisfaction filled Matteo. Lust. Pleasure. Anticipation.

Sarael's body was soft and submissive in his arms. Humming with the aftermath of orgasm—and yet he knew that with only a few strokes of his hand, the touch of his lips or fangs to her skin, she would be ready again. Needy for all he had to offer.

His cock was rock-hard against her back, wet with his own arousal, pulsing in time to the rapid beat of both of their hearts. "Eight lashes, Sarael. That was your punishment for running. But what I have given you as a punishment can be given in reward as well."

She whimpered in response, rubbing against his erection and making his body sing with joy, not only at her acceptance of what he'd done to her and her desire for him to do it again, but at the trust she was showing him.

With a groan he forced his hands away from her breast and cunt long enough to free her wrists and lift her into his arms, carrying her the few steps necessary to place her on the bed. "You are my heart, my soul, my world, *carissima*," he said, covering her body with his, pushing into the wet heat of her when she immediately wrapped her legs around his waist.

"You're the same for me," she whispered, the first time she'd made such an admission. Their movements stilling, their gazes locking, emotion flowing back and forth between them.

Matteo lowered his head and captured her mouth, his kiss gentle, loving, an echo and reaffirmation of the words they'd both uttered. She wound her arms around his neck, offering him everything with the way her lips clung to his, the way her tongue yielded, her body open and receptive underneath his.

They remained unmoving except for the sensuous dance of tongue against tongue, the subtle press of skin to skin, two bodies trying to meld into one until the urge to mate, the call for blood became impossible to ignore.

Matteo began moving then, long, forceful thrusts meant to claim, to dominate, to pleasure, content to swallow Sarael's cries until she began writhing against him, the movement inflaming him, pushing him to the limits of his control, then toppling him

over when his fangs elongated and her tongue slid across the sharp points, filling his mouth with the taste of her blood.

The heavy bed shook with the force of his thrusts, the room filled with the sound of flesh striking flesh, with whimpers and moans, pleading and guttural sounds of release.

He drank, filling himself with her, then offering her the same, letting her suck at his wrist until she was momentarily sated. *Do you feel the last of the changes beginning, carissima?* This time he spoke mind-to-mind, seeking the connection which had opened at her birth and been reinforced with the tattooing done during the confirmation ceremony, a connection widened and deepened with each sharing of blood until it was no longer a pathway for him to control her, but a part of their irrevocable bond with one another. *Do you feel the last of the changes beginning, carissima?* he repeated, lying heavily on her, her wrists now held to the bed, his body already aware of the changes taking place in hers, anticipating the moment when her fangs would emerge.

She startled underneath him, her heart racing, and he could feel her confusion, her surprise, the small layer of resistance before she accepted. *It burns. It's worse than the last time.*

*It'll pass soon, carissima. Don't fight it.* But he knew she wouldn't be able to prevent herself from doing just that as the heat built, as the last of her cells adapted and changed, becoming as alien as they were human. The perfect blending to allow for the creation and survival of their children. Children who would begin more human than vampire—so they could be cared for by their mother when they were young, but would be fully vampire when *La Metamorfosi* occurred.

*It burns,* Sarael said, arching, writhing against him, reacting to the searing heat coursing through her veins with an intensity that bordered on painful, just as the sting of the lashes she'd felt earlier had. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes and soon her body was slick with sweat, shaking, her gums tingling and the roar of blood drowning out the ability to think about anything other than the need to nuzzle against Matteo's chest or neck, to bite him so hard that she broke the skin.



*Almost there, carissima. Open for me now,* he said, not waiting for her to spread her legs, but forcing them apart with his own. Plowing into her just as her canine teeth elongated and she lunged for his neck. With a hiss he changed his grip, holding both of her wrists to the bed with one of his hands so that the other was free to tangle in her hair and restrict her movements.

She fought him like a wild thing, bucking and struggling, giving him the right to tame her, to use more of his strength against her, to subdue and control her until the maiden rush of *La Brama* passed and Sarael lay beneath him, panting, eyes and body hungry, and yet submissive, waiting for him to provide what she needed.

He dared to lean down then, to kiss her, to explore her smaller fangs with his tongue. To test her.

She held steady, her only movement the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the rubbing of her tongue against his in an effort to appease him, to apologize for lunging at his neck so savagely.

Now that the bond was forged, the connection between them completely open, Matteo couldn't resist the urge to touch her thoughts, to reassure himself that she was truly his, that she harbored no desire to escape from him.

He moved through her mind, anger flaring up at the images of Angelique striking Sarael, warning her that her life wouldn't be her own if she was found, the anger giving way to regret when he saw how his own actions, his own impatience and lack of control had caused his kadine to suffer needlessly, to be afraid when she didn't need to be. The regret yielding to a mix of softer, more tender emotions when he found what he was looking for. Her acceptance. Her willingness to belong to him. Her trust.

He had made mistakes with her. Painted her with her mother's sins. But he *would* do better in the future. He would ensure that she knew just how important she was to him. She was his heart, his soul, his world, everything he longed for.

Matteo lifted his head, touching her lips briefly. *I will give you what you need now, Sarael. I will always provide for you.* He shifted position, releasing her wrists so he could hold himself above her. *Feed now, carissima, feed while we make love.*

Sarael nuzzled his chest, making him groan as her tongue swirled and teased over his flesh. She was aware of every place where their skin touched, aware of his cock deeply embedded in her channel. His heat surrounded her. His body hovered over hers, dominant, protective. She belonged to him. Every cell sang the truth of it. And yet she could also feel his need to please her, his need to ensure her happiness in the world she was now a part of. A fantasyscape existing under The Moon.

She touched his thoughts and found his joy during the confirmation ceremony, his suffering when she'd been taken, his fear as he'd searched for Angelique. She found his regrets at having misjudged her, his anger at himself for not controlling his own needs, for not being able to bring her gently into his world. She saw his resolve to do better and was humbled by what her acceptance, her trust meant to him.

She licked over the tattooed mark on his chest and felt a burst of heat in the one on her wrist. *Sarael!* It was a command, a demand echoed by the sharp thrust of his cock.

Need rushed through her. The desire to be one with him. His strong heartbeat filled her with a sense of homecoming. She did as he commanded, nearly orgasming as her fangs slid into his chest, dark pleasure and ecstasy flowing into her along with his blood.

## **About the Author**

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses, or hiking with her dogs.

Jory welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-33502.

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