

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

KATE HILL

REVENGE  
OF THE  
Court Jester

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Revenge of the Court Jester

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*ANCIENT BLOOD:*

*REVENGE OF THE COURT JESTER*

**Kate Hill**

## **Chronicler's Note**

It is not often that Chroniclers are allowed to officially write their own stories, so I consider it an honor that I have been given the privilege of recounting the following events. I have stated the facts, yet Network files—as simply reading them will prove—are not meant to be emotionless lists of names and occurrences. Chroniclers try to capture the essence of those involved—a portion of their spirit. In writing about a man I respect, admire and love with my very soul, I hope future generations will better understand the goals and feelings of those of us who exist during this time in vampiric history. The Network is made up of people and too often, even in the name of good, that is forgotten.

*Esmeralda Giordano-Baptista, Chronicler*

## **Prologue**

*Hartford, Connecticut*

Sadavis Baptista swallowed a wave of nausea. Pausing across the street from the hospital, he leaned against the brick side of a coffee shop until he'd repressed the urge to vomit. In spite of the warm summer night and the coat draping his shoulders, he shivered.

Several deep breaths later, his vision cleared and he crossed the street, the thud of his booted feet on the pavement betraying his weariness. Normally he prided himself in moving as soundlessly as a feline but tonight he was grateful to merely summon the energy to arrive at his destination.

No sooner had he stepped into the lobby than a hand fell upon his shoulder. He spun, the sudden motion evoking dizziness that nearly drove him to his knees. At the moment he might not be able to discern his companion's face but he recognized the scent and his pulse skipped with relief. It belonged to Dr. Matthew Winter, one of the most brilliant minds in the vampire community.

"Sorry to make you drive all the way from Boston but—"

"Just shut up and get your bearings before you keel over and draw more attention than we need," Matthew interrupted. The clipped tone of his voice revealed his displeasure.

Sadavis could hardly blame him. With the crazy hours Matthew worked at the vampire research center combined with his enviable family life, the last thing he most likely wanted was to hop in his car at a moment's notice for a long drive.

Sadavis wouldn't have called him unless it was absolutely necessary. The outcome of a case he'd spent the last year of his life working on depended on him holding up for just another twenty-four hours.

A moment later, his vision returned enough for him to edge away from his friend's supporting hand.

"Better?" Matthew asked, his stern blue gaze fixed on Sadavis.

"Fabulous."

"So I see. Come on."

They crossed the lobby to the elevator and rode in silence to the hospital's second floor. At the nurse's station, a petite brown-haired nurse met them with a slight smile that was enough to reveal the tips of her tiny fangs.

"Dr. Winter. We've been expecting you. Examination room 213B is available at the end of the corridor to your right."

"Thank you," Matthew stated and escorted Sadavis to the room.

Rather than having the men meet at the private vampire research center where Matthew worked, the Network had arranged for them to use a human hospital. If the hunters had placed a spy on Sadavis, it would appear like he was seeking traditional medical attention and keep them from snooping around any of the secret vampire facilities.

Once they were behind the closed door, Matthew placed his black bag on the countertop and washed his hands.

Sadavis began, "I am sorry for —"

"Will you quit with the apologies. When I agreed to help the Network on this case I knew it could mean answering a call at any time. I'm not pissed about coming here, but about the reason we discussed before."

"Don't start that again," Sadavis muttered, wrapping his arms around himself and struggling to keep his teeth from chattering. "Why is it so damn cold in here?"

"It's not cold in here," Matthew snapped. "You're entering the final stages of Human's Disease so you probably have a fever that would send a mortal into convulsions. Sit."

Sadavis settled onto the examination table while Matthew checked him over.

"Will you give me the medication already before I puke all over you? If it hadn't been for the nausea I wouldn't have bothered calling you."

"When we met a couple of days ago I gave you a week's supply of the medicine. You've taken it all?"

"Yes. God —" Shoving Matthew out of the way, Sadavis reached the wastebasket in time to heave. When he'd finished he sat on his knees and accepted the wad of damp paper towels the doctor offered. While Sadavis wiped his face, Matthew injected him with a dose of medication that settled his stomach almost instantly.

"I'm ending this right now," Matthew stated. "We've let the disease progress way too far this time. Wait any longer and it might be too late for you."

Sadavis grasped the doctor's arm and glared into his eyes, his pulse skipping from illness and anger. "You end this and I'll make sure you regret it, Winter. I've worked too long and too hard to chuck it in now."

"I don't take well to threats and kindly remove your claws."

Sadavis released his hold on the doctor, noting the holes his claws left in the sleeve of Matthew's finely spun cotton shirt.

"Damn. This was a new shirt," Matthew said, running a fingertip over the ruined fabric.

"Forget about your fucking wardrobe and get me the medicine," Sadavis snapped, desperation crawling through him like an insect.

"I told you —"

“Matthew, listen to me. If I can just get through until tomorrow night we’ll bring down an entire faction of We Who Serve Humanity. Do you realize the information the Network will gain regarding these vampire hunters? We’ll be saving countless lives.”

The doctor held his gaze, his jaw visibly clenched as his sense of justice battled with his professional judgment. In spite of Sadavis’ respect for Matthew, he wished his superiors had assigned a Network doctor as his medical liaison for this case. Matthew might be an expert on Human’s Disease but he also believed the Network to be overly zealous in their quest for creating a better world for vampire and humankind.

Sadavis’ career meant everything to him. When assigned to a case, he gave himself over completely and refused to rest until he’d succeeded. That explained why he was considered one of the best agents in the Network.

For the past year he had been posing as a mortal to infiltrate the ranks of a group of fanatical vampire hunters called We Who Serve Humanity. Though they guarded the secrecy of their existence, most vampires chose to live in harmony with humans. Unfortunately the greed and savageness of some vampires had inspired the horrific legends about their kind. Though Sadavis didn’t doubt that We Who Serve Humanity had originally been formed to alleviate mortals’ legitimate fears, they were far too dangerous to roam free.

The Network existed to uphold the law among vampires. They would arrest, judge and sentence their own kind for breaking laws formed to protect vampires and humans alike.

We Who Serve Humanity’s strict initiation process demanded the hunters endure trials before the final ceremony. These included accepting certain injuries to prove their mortality, therefore allowing them to identify vampires who might try to infiltrate their ranks. Since vampires would heal almost instantly, it had been impossible for them to breach the hunters’ headquarters.

A decade ago, Matthew’s brother, who was also the Network leader, contracted a mysterious illness now called Human’s Disease that nearly killed him. It attacked his powerful vampiric heart, stole his strength and diminished his regenerative powers. Matthew created a medication that relieved some of the symptoms and extended his brother’s life until a cure was discovered.

Recently the Network decided to attempt to use their knowledge of the disease to allow vampires to enter the ranks of We Who Serve Humanity. While suffering from the disease, vampires could undergo the hunters’ physical tests with the illusion of being human. Once the trials ended, the disease was cured almost instantly by drinking a dose of medication. Only Immaculates, those born of two vampire parents, could attempt this particular deception. Hybrids, those created by bite, would die immediately upon contact with Human’s Disease. Few agents possessed the courage to willingly infect themselves with the painful illness, but Sadavis couldn’t refuse the opportunity to finally penetrate the defenses of a potentially deadly enemy.

"Matthew, I have endured this disease off and on more times than I can count over the past year. Don't let it be in vain. Don't allow these hunters to continue killing innocent victims." Though he hated reverting to sympathy tactics, he knew that underneath his cold facade Matthew Winter's emotions and sense of justice were his downfall.

"You're very sick, Sadavis, so much that it's bound to be obvious even to them. How have you explained your condition?"

"I told them I have the flu."

Shaking his head, Matthew reached into his bag and removed a different medication.

"I'll give you a shot that should last through tomorrow night. As soon as your backup arrives at the initiation, I want you to take the cure."

"Don't worry. I can hardly wait to get back to normal."

"I think you're crazy for doing this."

Somehow Sadavis forced a smile. "I don't know about that. I've heard stories about some of the insane things you've done for justice."

"You Network people make me sick."

"No we don't."

"Want to bet on it?" Matthew muttered before administering the shot.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hunters' initiation ceremony took place in an abandoned Connecticut farmhouse. The group, dressed from head to toe in black and looking more like the traditional image of vampires than the real thing usually did, stood in a circle chanting the laws of We Who Serve Humanity. A red-hot knife that was used to permanently burn away the members' fingerprints heated over an open flame.

Sadavis stood among them, engulfed by fever, his heartbeat erratic. Maybe Matthew had been right. If backup agents didn't appear soon it would be death for him.

"We have served for as long as they have existed and we shall continue to serve until they are extinct," Sadavis chanted along with the hunters.

The faction leader, a tall human with the pink-cheeked, rounded look of a perfectly respectable businessman, picked up the knife with a gloved hand. His blue eyes stared into Sadavis' with a fanatical gleam.

Sadavis tried to keep his hands steady, difficult with the disease ravaging his body.

Come on, guys, he thought fiercely, wishing the disease hadn't already sapped so much of his strength that his psychic powers were useless. Where the hell was his backup?

The knife seared one of Sadavis' fingertips before a group of heavily armed Network agents burst inside. Well trained, the hunters fought back. Sadavis forced his



way through the struggling group, hoping to escape the farmhouse before dizziness rendered him unconscious.

One of the hunters had almost made it to a back door of the farmhouse. Sadavis knocked him aside and the human turned on him, comprehension and hatred glowing in his eyes, making him look almost vampiric. He attacked with what looked to be a silver-tipped blade clutched in his hand. His reflexes impaired from the disease, Sadavis didn't avoid the blow quite fast enough and felt the sting of the blade across his upper arm. A horrible realization dawned on him at the sensation. The blade wasn't silver. It was platinum. We Who Serve Humanity had somehow discovered one of the most carefully kept secrets of vampire-kind. They were not highly allergic to silver as the legends stated, but to platinum.

Learning this made risking his life worthwhile. With a quick blow to the jaw, he knocked the human unconscious then staggered against the wall, his breathing out of control and his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Sweat stung his eyes but it was several moments before he garnered the strength to wipe it away.

A hybrid agent called Alik Ferrer approached, his expression concerned.

"You don't look so good," Alik said in his deep Scottish accent.

Sadavis shrugged off his hand and reached into his pocket with trembling fingers. He removed the vial of antidote Matthew had supplied and swallowed it.

Leaning heavily against the wall, he waited for the antidote to kick in. Usually it worked instantly. After a moment, his head cleared the slightest bit and he glanced over his shoulder to see that all the hunters had been rendered unconscious and were being moved to Network trucks waiting outside.

Alik was still staring at him.

"You okay?" the hybrid asked.

Nodding, Sadavis stepped outside, drawing deep breaths of warm summer air. He wished it was cool instead.

The hybrid followed.

Though he hated revealing this kind of weakness in front of anyone, Sadavis had no choice. He couldn't drive in his present condition and the antidote he had swallowed had scarcely countered the symptoms.

"Would you take me to Ashford Research Center in Boston?"

Alik nodded. "Be back in a minute. I'll let the others know I'm leaving. They can handle the rest."

Sadavis recalled climbing into the passenger seat of Alik's truck. The next thing he became aware of was awakening in a bed in a private hospital room, Matthew standing over him with an expression of relief and annoyance.

"How do you feel?" asked the doctor.

Sadavis resisted the urge to laugh. He felt great. Completely restored.

"Excellent," he said, sitting up. "I need to make my report. Thanks again, Matthew. I—"

"Wait a minute." Matthew's hand clamped upon his shoulder. "Sit your butt down. We need to talk."

His brow furrowed, Sadavis stared at the doctor, sensing that he was in for more than a simple "I told you so" lecture.

"I know you had plans to keep working the hunter cases, but you can't."

"Why?"

"You know this is the first time the Network has experimented with undercover agents using Human's Disease, something I warned them against but as usual they refused to listen."

"Maybe if you joined you'd have more clout."

Matthew glared. "You know how I feel about joining the Network. It will never happen and don't try to redirect this conversation. You might not want to hear this but you have to. While you were out, I gave you a thorough examination and ran some tests. By exposing yourself to Human's Disease so often over the past year you've built up a tolerance to the medication and the antidote. You have no idea the massive amounts required to cure you this time. If you use it again I'm afraid that eventually nothing will reverse the effects."

A strange feeling shot through Sadavis' chest. Fear perhaps?

"I've spoken to your superiors and they agree that you should be placed on other cases, at least for a while."

Though part of him rebelled at being removed from fieldwork on the We Who Serve Humanity cases at which he'd become an expert, Sadavis wasn't stupid. Besides, his knowledge about We Who Serve Humanity could still be vastly important in advising fellow agents and there were plenty of other cases where a vamp could get his hands dirty.

"Cody Dilozenzo wants to hear from you as soon as possible," Matthew said, referring to Sadavis' immediate superior. The doctor left, closing the door behind him.

Sadavis picked up the phone and called Dilozenzo who set up a time for his debriefing.

Two days later, Sadavis had wrapped up the case. He intended to relax and catch up on some of his favorite pastimes while waiting to be reassigned. After this year he was more than ready to have a little fun.

## **Chapter One**

*Boston, Massachusetts*

*One week later*

Esmeralda Giordano felt excitement crackle through the club like unfocused energy.

She glanced around the enormous room. Dimly lit in a manner perfect for vampiric eyes, it was filled with people mingling at the bar and tables as well as on the dance floor. In a ring in the center of the room, two hybrid males beat each other bloody to the booing and cheering of onlookers. Rock music spun by the DJ who overlooked the entire room from a raised platform wafted on the air. The scent of perfume and blood-laced alcohol mingled with the individual scents of the patrons and staff.

"I'm so excited," Dulcie Evans said, glancing at Esmeralda with a broad smile lighting her beautiful face. "I love hearing Matthew sing. Between you and me, it's an incredible turn-on."

Esmeralda resisted the urge to chuckle. For Dulcie and her husband everything was a turn-on. Rarely had she seen a couple more deeply in love.

Though she didn't usually like either clubbing or violence, Esmeralda had agreed to accompany Dulcie to a well-known vampire hangout called Rosa's Ring II. Part of a chain owned by the cunning hybrid businesswoman Rosa Ferrer, the club was a combination bar and full-contact fighting ring where the fiercest vampire warriors sharpened their skills while providing entertainment for their peers. Such rings had at one time been part of an illegal underground where vampires fought to the death. Now they were considered a legitimate part of the immortal sports world and carefully regulated by the Network. Though injuries were still common in the ring, fatalities had been significantly reduced, or so Dulcie assured her during the drive to the club.

The women hadn't come for the fighting however. Dulcie's husband Matthew Winter was performing with a live band visiting from New York City. Though a doctor by profession, Matthew enjoyed singing for recreation and the band members were old friends of his.

When Dulcie had asked Esmeralda to accompany her to the club, the excited gleam in her friend's eyes had convinced her to thrust aside her general dislike of noisy rooms filled with half-dressed vamps drunk on blood and roaring for two men to pummel themselves raw for the fun of it. Dulcie had been incredibly supportive during the past two years while Esmeralda trained as a Network chronicler. She'd read page after page of Esmeralda's early works, enthusiastically offering constructive criticism for even the most boring pieces. The least Esmeralda could do was join her in listening to the love of her life give a live performance. Besides, Matthew was a rather good singer and at least

it would mean an evening away from her most recent chronicle that had kept her chained to her computer day and night for the past month.

"Esmeralda?"

A hand touched Esmeralda's shoulder and she turned to the smiling face of Khrissa Jones. She thought she'd caught the woman's scent when she'd entered the club but had hoped to avoid her. Khrissa had been in chronicler training with Esmeralda but had dropped out and pursued a career in journalism instead – rag journalism in the form of reporting for one of the most popular magazines in the vampire world.

"How are you? Oh it's so nice seeing you again. Still trying to become a chronicler?" Khrissa's phony smile broadened and Esmeralda returned it with equal insincerity.

"Actually I am a chronicler. The Network formally registered me six months ago."

"Nice. I'm here working on a story for *Crimson and Scarlet*. It's supposed to be a major spread on the best professional fighters in the vampire community. I'll tell you it has been the most fun to research. Traveling from ring to ring, ogling all those gorgeous, sweaty alpha males."

"I'm sure," Esmeralda muttered. "This is my friend Dulcie. Dulcie, Khrissa."

"Charmed." Dulcie extended her hand. In spite of her pleasant smile, Esmeralda knew by the look in her eyes she didn't like Khrissa.

The women shook hands.

"Girls, I was just going to the training room in the back to take a look at some of tonight's competitors and see which ones might be worth interviewing for the magazine. Would you like to come with me? I've been given special permission to go back there."

"That's just where we were headed," Dulcie said. "My husband is speaking with a friend who's fighting tonight."

Khrissa's smile faded a bit. "Oh. Let's go then."

*Way to go, Dulcie.* Esmeralda sent a telepathic message to her friend.

Dulcie cast her a look from the corner of one of her catlike eyes. *Yes, dear. That certainly felt good.*

They made their way along the back wall of the club, passed by a bouncer guarding the door to the training hall and locker rooms and stepped into the spacious gym where several fighters were working out. Some hit heavy bags while others, Immaculates, pounded steel beams. Esmeralda couldn't help feeling a touch of fear and awe whenever she witnessed Immaculate strength. They were faster, more powerful and possessed greater regenerative powers than hybrids such as herself.

Dulcie waved to Matthew who stood in a far corner of the room. He smiled and waved back. Esmeralda also raised her hand absently, though her attention wasn't focused on the doctor but on the man he had been speaking to. She couldn't see his face since his back was to her as he scaled a high barrier Immaculates used to strengthen

their claws. Very tall like most Immaculate males—probably six-foot-four or five—his marvelously proportioned body was clad in black kickboxing pants and a silver-gray tank top that clung damply to the chiseled muscles of his sweaty back. The exposed olive flesh of his shoulders and arms was smooth and flawless except for a slight scar on one upper arm. His black hair hung in a thick braid halfway down his back. Esmeralda's mouth went dry at the sight of him. She'd seen gorgeous bodies before but never one that was absolutely perfect.

She was vaguely aware of another vampire beside him also scaling the barrier, but even Adonis would fade into the shadows in the presence of this particular Immaculate.

"By all the gods," Khriisa murmured breathlessly. "Oh, ladies, I've just found my feature for this article. Have you ever seen a body like that?"

Entranced, Esmeralda shook her head slowly, her pulse racing. Damn, she was wet just from looking at him.

The women approached and were halfway across the gym when the mega-stud released his grip on the barrier and dropped several feet. He landed in a crouch that tightened his gorgeous leg muscles. All Esmeralda could think about was being trapped between those steely thighs.

Then he turned and her entire body seemed to freeze. How could a man built like that have a frighteningly ugly face? It was a cruel joke of fate. A Neanderthal forehead was set above a narrow face with blade-sharp cheekbones and a jutting chin overshadowed only by a nose that an aardvark would envy. Did he even have a mouth? She was too busy staring at the rest of his Halloween mask face to notice. Worst of all was his expression. It was glacial, almost evil, and he radiated vampiric magnetism like no one she'd ever seen.

"Yikes what a mess. Well, there's no way I'm going to attach a photo of that face to my article," Khriisa said far too loudly in Esmeralda's opinion. Dulcie also cast her a sharp glance, revealing her displeasure at such a callous remark. There was no doubt that the man's finely tuned Immaculate hearing had caught her words.

"Khriisa," Esmeralda hissed. "I think he heard you."

"Sorry, but you know how most vamps are. They like reading about the beauty of our kind. The blond is the one I'll use. He is so handsome."

"The blond?" Esmeralda whispered, noticing the other man who had been scaling the wall. Tall, well muscled and indeed classically handsome, he didn't have nearly the physique of the Neanderthal. "But you didn't even notice him next to the other guy when they were climbing the barrier."

"That's why you're a chronicler, Esmeralda, and not working for *Crimson and Scarlet*. You don't know what sells."

The women had reached Matthew and his friend and Esmeralda found she couldn't keep from staring at the magnificent beast. He returned her look and a shudder traveled down her spine. The man exuded psychic power. His gaze seemed to possess her completely. It was then she realized that in spite of his terrifying appearance, his eyes

were beautiful. Large, almond shaped and dove gray, they seemed to channel the energy of the universe into a single look. Thick black lashes matted with sweat fringed them.

"Hello, Dulcie, Esmeralda," Matthew said then cast a scathing look in Khrissa's direction. She didn't seem to notice as her attention was focused on the blond vampire.

"Hello, sweetheart." Dulcie pressed close to Matthew's side then smiled at the Neanderthal. "Sadavis, I don't believe you've met my friend. Esmeralda Giordano, this is Sadavis Baptista."

He extended his large hand, bound in wraps and tape like a boxer's. The fingers were long and slender, as beautiful as his face was hideous. "No. I haven't had the pleasure."

Esmeralda's stomach clenched. His voice reminded her of dark melted chocolate, rich, soft yet incredibly masculine.

She slipped her hand into his, shocked by the gentleness of his touch. The hand wraps felt slightly rough and damp and his fingers were very warm. Desire and a hint of fear coiled deep in her belly. Standing this close, she fully realized how tall and powerfully built he was. Though he didn't have an ounce of spare flesh upon him, he was big-boned and his muscles were chiseled to perfection without appearing overly bulky. A sheen of sweat glowed upon his olive flesh like diamonds on dark satin. Even at her height of five feet ten inches she had to tilt her head to meet his gaze.

He released her hand. "If you'll excuse me, I have to prepare for my match."

Khrissa turned to them and looked about to speak but before she could open her mouth, Sadavis fixed his piercing gaze on her and said, "You are a very rude young woman."

Khrissa's face drained of color yet she seemed trapped by his eyes. She must have felt his power too.

"Ease up, pal," the blond said. "Save it for the ring. You're going to need it."

A chilling smile spread over Sadavis' face and for the first time Esmeralda noticed his lips. They were pale pink and slim but shockingly well-shaped. "We'll see about that."

Sadavis left, his strides quick yet graceful.

"Are you fighting him tonight, Naldo?" Khrissa turned to the blond.

"Oh yeah and I intend to win."

"When the fight is over, remember you promised me an interview with photos."

"You've got it, honey." Though he spoke to Khrissa, Esmeralda realized his gaze was on her instead. He winked and smiled, revealing the tips of his fangs. She caught the scent of his desire and resisted the urge to raise her eyes to heaven. She'd seen him for less than five minutes, but in spite of his good looks he turned her off. Somehow he seemed a perfect match for Khrissa.

"And who are you, baby?" he asked, his gaze sweeping Esmeralda from head to toe.

She smiled with false sweetness. "No one of interest."

"I kind of doubt that. How about watching ringside and I'll fling Baptista's carcass at your feet."

Khrissa, pulling out a notepad and pencil, edged closer. "So you think you're going to win by knockout?"

"If you're smart you'll bet on it. You too, baby," He stepped closer to Esmeralda, his massive chest almost touching her.

She moved away and turned her back on him, focusing instead on Matthew and Dulcie who stared hard at Naldo.

"Let's go, ladies," Matthew said, extending his arm for them to pass.

The three walked back to the club area where they sat at a table near the dance floor, close to where the band had already started setting up. Matthew excused himself to join them.

"How do you know that woman Khrissa?" Dulcie asked.

"She was almost a chronicler then she got the taste for celebrity news."

"Ah."

"How do you know Sadavis?"

"He's a friend of Matthew's."

"He's rather —"

"Compelling?"

"Frightening."

Dulcie smiled. "You mean his face? His physique almost makes up for it, doesn't it though? He's almost as stunning as my Matthew."

Though Esmeralda couldn't deny the doctor had a great body, Sadavis' was spectacular. No living, breathing man should have a build that beautiful or a face that ugly. Perhaps it was nature's way of creating balance.

"I mean everything about him. He has this aura." Esmeralda waved her hand slightly.

"He's powerful. Quite old and has a strong command of what the ancient ones call magic."

"I hope he beats Naldo."

Dulcie grinned. "Is my peaceful friend getting bloodthirsty, if you'll pardon the term?"

"No. I just don't like an egomaniac, especially since he really isn't all that."

"Well, if you want to see the fight, it's going to be after the band's performance. Naldo and Sadavis are tonight's main event."

The thought of watching Sadavis fight made her pulse quicken. She could scarcely wait to see that gorgeous body in action. Something told her he was going to wipe the floor with pretty blond Naldo.

An hour later, the band's performance ended and the DJ took over.

"That was a lot of fun. I'm glad I came," Esmeralda said honestly.

Dulcie wore a sensual half smile, her gaze still fixed on Matthew as he helped his friends pack up their equipment. "Call me biased but I loved every second."

An announcer's voice boomed through the club, "Now for our main event. Two of the highest scoring Immaculates in the ring circuit will battle it out. Gather ringside and don't miss the action."

Tingling with excitement, Esmeralda turned toward the ring where a larger crowd was forming.

"Go and get a good spot." Dulcie pushed her toward the ring. "I'm going to wait for Matthew and we'll be right there."

Esmeralda tried to appear nonchalant as she hurried across the room and squeezed her way ringside.

The announcer continued, "Ladies and gentlemen, the King of Rosa's Ring, the Incomparable Immaculate and winner of the worldwide heavyweight vampire championship, Naldo Conti!"

A savage roar ripped through the club and heads turned as Naldo raced across the room and leapt into the ring.

Resisting the urge to giggle, Esmeralda glanced at the cheering onlookers. Khrissa stood nearby snapping pictures of Naldo, engrossed in her new subject. Once again Esmeralda hoped Sadavis would win, but with credentials like Naldo's it was probably too much to hope for. Jerks like that always seemed to come out on top.

"And the mysterious and yet unbeaten challenger, a man dubbed by fans as the Court Jester, Sadavis Baptista!"

Inexplicable excitement flooded Esmeralda from head to toe as Sadavis bounded across the club with leonine strides. He'd discarded the tank top and wore only sneakers and the black pants. He jumped and somersaulted into the ring, landing with his fists raised and his intent gaze fixed on Naldo.

*Oh lord, what a chest.* Esmeralda's heart pounded as quickly as a mortal's. The sight of Sadavis' bare torso was enough to curl a woman's toes. With his sleekly muscled shoulders and chest, lean waist and six-pack abs he made her legs feel like gelatin. His skin was smooth except for several faded scars. Most interesting of all was the tattoo of a court jester he sported from his chest to just above his navel. The image wasn't of an ordinary fool, but one with savagely arched eyebrows and vampiric teeth. Its costume was half red and half black, its hands clawed. In an instant Esmeralda realized what was so disturbing about the jester. His hideous countenance was reminiscent of Sadavis' face. Whether or not the similarity was intentional she couldn't guess.



Esmeralda's fists clenched at her sides as the men circled each other. Deep growls erupted from their throats, a primitive yet ultra masculine sound of alpha Immaculates.

Naldo attacked with flying feet, tearing claws and snapping fangs. Sadavis blocked and dodged the blows for all of ten seconds before his jab landed square in Naldo's face, followed by a perfectly placed kick to his midsection. Naldo staggered slightly from the force of the blows but another combination by Sadavis knocked him unconscious.

For several seconds the onlookers fell silent. A smile flirted with Esmeralda's lips, especially when she saw Khrissa lower her camera, her lip curled in disgust.

Cheers and boos over the shortness of the fight filled the club as Sadavis was proclaimed the winner.

He lifted his hand in a slight wave then left the ring with quiet dignity that impressed Esmeralda as much as his skill. He walked past her and she caught the scent of his warm flesh, so arousing and masculine. The urge to reach out and touch the smooth skin stretched over his enticingly thick biceps almost overcame her, then he was out of reach.

"Hey! Mr. Baptista!" Khrissa hurried over. "Would you give an interview —"

"No," he said abruptly, not so much as glancing at her, and headed toward the locker room.

Khrissa stomped her foot. "Damn. We could have taken some photos from the neck down. Naldo sure looked like he could fight and he was supposed to be the champ or something."

"Or something," Esmeralda muttered sarcastically. "Too bad you got on Sadavis' bad side. Now there's a story. He's great."

"Yeah but creepy." Khrissa shivered. "Well, I'm going to talk to some of the hybrids who won matches earlier tonight."

Dulcie and Matthew joined Esmeralda while Khrissa went to pursue other victims.

"I think that was the shortest fight in the club's history," Dulcie said.

Matthew shrugged. "I didn't expect any less, though Sadavis usually toys with his matches a little longer than that so people will at least get their money's worth of entertainment by getting to watch a longer fight. I think it's because there was some friction between him and Naldo when they met back in the gym."

Esmeralda curled her lip. "How did Naldo get to be champion if he can't fight?"

Chuckling, Dulcie touched Esmeralda's shoulder. "Darling, he can fight. He's actually quite good."

"Sadavis is just a cut above," Matthew said. "Only he doesn't go for the championships with a lot of fanfare. He's rather quiet and secretive."

This piqued Esmeralda's interest.

"Are you ready to go?" Dulcie asked.

Esmeralda shook her head. "I think I'll stick around and have a drink."

"But you don't like clubs."

"I know, but it's been so long since I've been out of the house."

"We can stay with you," Dulcie said.

"That's okay. I'm just going to have a drink and go home. Besides you two need to pick up the baby, right?"

"That's true," Dulcie said. "I hope Lucy has been good for your sister tonight, darling."

"I'm sure she was fine," Matthew told her. "Lisa can handle kids very well."

"Good night, Esmeralda." Dulcie leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "Found someone, didn't you?"

"No. Not at all."

"Uh huh." Dulcie cast her a knowing look before she and Matthew walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis closed his eyes and tilted his face toward the shower faucet, relishing the sensation of hot water drenching his skin and hair. Bits and pieces of conversation drifted throughout the locker room at Rosa's Ring II but none of it was of any importance. His thoughts spun with the evening's events.

Tonight had been his first match in over a year. For centuries he'd been a favorite in fighting rings all over Europe, sharpening his skills there as well as in battle. Since the Network reemerged a little over a decade ago, he'd spent less time in the ring and devoted his life to his vocation. Fighting for entertainment was one of his favorite pastimes and a great way to keep in shape. Though competitive, he usually tried to keep his temper in check and provide a decent show for paying customers, but tonight something inside him had snapped and he'd taken out that egomaniacal blond pretty-boy as quickly as possible. It wasn't because of the taunting behavior Naldo had displayed since the moment they'd been introduced. That had been mildly annoying, but Sadavis knew some lower forms of vamps thought flinging around a big attitude made them appear formidable. It was the man's disgusting come-on to the woman Esmeralda that pissed him off.

Though he'd already stepped out of the gym at the time, his hearing was keen enough to catch most of their conversation, or rather Naldo's conversation. Esmeralda had done a fine job of ignoring the crud.

Sadavis had no reason to feel protective of the woman. They'd only been introduced tonight and her reaction to him had been the same as most people's—fear and disgust combined with a hint of admiration for his body. Though cursed with a Halloween mask face, from the neck down he was a five-star review. There had been times in his life when he'd wished for a mediocre body and a face to match. He'd developed a thick skin over the years that often revealed itself in his rather dark sense

of humor, such as the tattoo of the jester on his chest. He loved jesters, hideous creatures with the power to control the masses through personal magnetism. The jester's very life depended on his mastery over his audience, much like Sadavis' life as an agent. Still, every now and then someone managed to find a chink in his armor, like the first woman who'd ever expressed an interest in going to bed with him, providing he covered his face. He'd been seventeen, old enough to return the insult and walk away but young enough to wallow in self-pity for the next several months. That was around sixteen hundred years ago yet the memory remained locked inside him even when others seemed to fade.

Strangely, the older and more powerful he became the easier it was to find women who thought him compelling, so he didn't lack sexual or blood-sharing partners. Esmeralda seemed to be among that sort. Her desire had been almost tangible, but so had her apprehension. Then the reporter bitch beside her had to make that degrading comment about his face. It wasn't bad enough both of them had stopped dead, unable to keep from staring at him like they'd just seen Yeti.

Still, Esmeralda had exuded the scent of sexual desire and it incited his own. The woman was incredibly beautiful, though not in a traditional way. Tall with lively brown eyes and wavy reddish hair framing a rather innocent-looking face, she kindled flames smoldering deep inside him. The strain of the past year, enduring the Human's Disease while trying to maintain his cover as a vampire hunter, had diminished even his sexual appetite. Immaculate males were known for nearly boundless stamina, but he'd tested it. Meeting Esmeralda had reminded him of exactly what he'd been missing.

She had stood ringside and Sadavis had felt her gaze burning into him throughout the short fight. He'd purposely walked past her when he stepped out of the ring just to glance at her from the corner of his eye and inhale her glorious, womanly scent more deeply.

Stepping out of the shower, he dried off then pulled on jeans, socks, boots and a black short-sleeved shirt made of soft fabric that felt wonderful against the skin. Intensely aware of his surroundings, he liked to stimulate all his senses from touch to scent.

He blow-dried his hair, sighing with annoyance at how long the process took. If his hair wasn't his best feature from the neck up, he'd have hacked it all off for convenience alone but when it came to appearance he needed all the help he could get.

Matthew Winter approached and Sadavis turned off the dryer and unplugged it, not caring that his hair was still a little damp.

"That was quite a fight," Matthew said. "Glad you made it short."

"Couldn't resist."

Chuckling, the doctor folded his arms across his chest. "There are times I still get the urge to go back in the ring."

"Maybe you should once in a while to get it out of your system."

"Since Lucy was born I told Dulcie I'd try to stay out of trouble."

"Is it working?"

"For the most part. I'm more concerned with stubborn friends who risk their lives doing stupid things."

Sadavis narrowed his eyes. "Don't start with me, Winter. I told you I wouldn't go against my doctor's last order and I won't. I'm just waiting for reassignment somewhere else."

"Glad to hear it. We're on our way home but I just wanted to stop by and offer my congratulations on the match."

"Thanks and here." Sadavis reached into his duffel bag and removed a new blue silk shirt. He handed it to Matthew.

The doctor admired the garment. "Nice but what's it for?"

"To replace the one I clawed last week. Sorry about that."

"This wasn't necessary. You were under a lot of stress."

"Yes but other than me you're the biggest clothes horse I know, so I'm not going to wreck your wardrobe without paying up."

"Thanks. Stop by the house for dinner sometime before you get reassigned."

"I will."

Matthew raised his eyes to heaven. "I've heard that before."

"I mean it this time."

"You better."

The doctor left and Sadavis finished dressing then packed up his belongings and headed to the bar for a drink before going home.

To his surprise, Esmeralda hadn't left with Matthew and Dulcie but was seated at the bar with, to Sadavis' irritation, Naldo Conti. So pretty boy got what he wanted after all.

It was then he caught drifts of their conversation.

"Look, I said I don't want to go out with you tonight, tomorrow, next week or anytime in the next six centuries," she snapped.

"Hey there's no reason to get upset."

"Then make yourself scarce."

"I got a right to sit here if I want to."

"Fine." She picked up her shoulder bag and started to walk off but Conti grasped her upper arm.

## Chapter Two

Rage flooded Esmeralda from head to toe when Naldo's heavy hand closed over her biceps. She'd stuck around, hoping for another glimpse of Sadavis, but of course the blond shit-head had been the one to approach her.

"Get your paw off me, buddy," she snarled, knowing her eyes must be glowing vampiric red with fury.

His fingers dug harder. She reached for her drink on the counter and flung it glass and all in his face.

"Bitch!" He wiped wine from his eyes.

"Conti, aren't you growing quite weary of losing fights tonight?"

Esmeralda's pulse skipped at the sound of that chocolaty voice. She and Naldo glanced at Sadavis who stood nearby, his stance relaxed while at the same time looking like that of a male lion ready to defend his pride. His hair was down this time. Thick, straight and black, it framed his face like a mane, further completing the leonine image.

"Mind your own business, Baptista. It was a bad night for me. Next time —"

"I don't give a damn about next time. What I care about is your paw. I believe the woman asked you to take it off her."

Naldo's teeth ground, but he stepped away from Esmeralda, growled softly at Sadavis and stalked out of the club. Obviously he didn't want to risk a fight with the Court Jester outside the ring.

Esmeralda drew a deep breath, still irritated, and snapped, "I can take care of myself."

Sadavis' piercing gaze fixed on her, almost making her jump. "You're welcome."

He turned away and she realized how rude she must have sounded. After all it wasn't him she was angry with, but Conti.

"I'm sorry," she called. "Thanks for the help."

He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "I can see you're capable of taking care of yourself but I thought a little backup couldn't hurt anyone."

Feeling a bit sheepish, she smiled slightly and nodded, then sat and ordered another drink.

Sadavis sat on one of the stools halfway down the bar, his long legs stretched out on either side of him, the muscles straining against the snug denim. His beautiful hair draped him and she longed to run her fingers through it to find out if it was soft or coarse.

She studied his profile with the harsh lines of his forehead, nose and chin. Hideous yet undoubtedly unique and, she realized, rather sexy. Actually sexual magnetism seemed to ooze from his every pore like lava from a volcano. Everything about him was so masculine, so...intense.

He must have felt her gaze upon him. Perhaps he was reading her thoughts, since she had the feeling he was old and psychically powerful enough to do so without her knowledge. Not all vamps respected the unwritten rule that frowned upon invading another's thoughts without permission. Whatever the reason, he glanced at her. A strange half smile tugged at his lips before he looked away again.

A soft rock song wafted through the club and the lights dimmed even more now that all the matches were over for the night. Oh well. So much for her odd little fantasy. Esmeralda took a sip from the drink the bartender placed in front of her, her gaze continually drifting back to Sadavis. For some reason she couldn't seem to ignore him.

He stood and she felt certain he was going to leave but surprised her by walking over and taking the barstool beside hers.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked. "Or else I can take my paws along with the rest of me back to the other end of the bar."

She smiled, nearly blushing at the teasing yet sensual expression in his eyes. Damn, this man made her feel like a schoolgirl with a naughty crush on the class bad boy. "No. Feel free."

"Mythic Fire," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"You're wearing Mythic Fire perfume, aren't you?"

"Yes actually."

"Thought so. I love the scent. Every time I pass by a perfume counter and get a whiff it almost makes me wish I was a woman."

She grinned. "I think you make a much better man."

"I guess. Can you imagine this face in drag?" He pointed at himself.

This time Esmeralda tried to repress out-and-out laughter, unsure of whether or not she should join in his self-mocking sense of humor.

"Have you known Matthew and Dulcie long?" he asked.

"About three years. I took an art class from Dulcie and we became friends."

"You're an artist?"

Laughing, Esmeralda tried to ignore the way her entire body tingled just from this innocent contact with him. What the hell would happen to her if they ever got intimate? She wondered if a hybrid could have a heart attack from pure excitement. "Hell no. I was her worst student."

It was his turn to laugh.

"I'm a Network chronicler," she said, running her fingertip around the rim of her glass. "I know that doesn't sound too exciting but I love it."

"That's an important job. Chroniclers don't just write history. You capture the essence of those who endured the trials you write about. That's admirable."

Esmeralda stared at him, trying to figure out if he was sincere or just telling her what she wanted to hear. So few people actually understood chroniclers as well as he described. "Thanks. That's nicely put."

He shrugged and took a sip from his glass. "Just how I feel about it. I was a backup chronicler for the Network."

"Really? You don't seem like the type. Why did you give it up?"

"I don't have the patience for that kind of tedious work. You have my respect."

"So you became a professional fighter instead?"

"No. This is just recreation."

"Typical."

He raised an eyebrow. "Pardon me?"

"Typical alpha male attitude. It's a fact that most of you migrate toward intense physical challenges to satisfy your..." Her voice faded as his gaze became even more captivating. She felt as if she was sinking beneath the surface of his dove gray eyes. At first she'd thought them frightening and cool, but underneath they were hot and passionate. Resisting the urge to squirm in her seat to relieve the carnal pressure building in her clit and pussy, she took another sip of wine then asked, "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a sculptor."

"Really? What kind of things do you make?"

"All kinds. People. Animals. Whatever strikes my fancy." His gaze drifted to her lips then back to her eyes.

To Esmeralda the temperature in the club seemed to jump twenty degrees.

"Do you use clay or metal?"

"Clay at first then I make casts for metal but I really enjoy working with the clay. I like the feel of it." He cupped his hands in front of him and she swallowed hard, imagining those long, graceful fingers roaming all over her body and even better, slipping inside her damp sheath and stroking, stroking, stroking...

Her breathing quickened, her nipples tight beneath her blouse. Thank goodness for the slight padding in her bra.

"Did you meet through Dulcie?" she asked. "You're both artists."

"No. Through Matthew at Ashford Research Center."

That was odd. Usually only vampires involved in medical studies or those with injuries or rare health problems had connections to the research center. Sadavis certainly looked healthy enough.

"You're wondering what the hell I was doing at the center?"

Her brow furrowed with a hint of annoyance. "Did you read my mind?"

"No. I wouldn't do that unless you said it was okay."

"But you could without my knowing?"

A slight smile touched his lips again. "You're observant."

"I'm just guessing you're rather old. Your power is obvious."

"Thank you, I think."

"I did mean it as a compliment and it's not my business why you were at the center."

"No but I'll tell you anyway. At the time I was doing some work for the Network."

"Oh." She waited for him to continue, but he didn't so she decided it was best to drop the subject. Not only had he already said he had been a backup chronicler, but the Network had workers in all capacities, many of them secret. Perhaps Sadavis was some sort of agent. He was certainly powerful enough to be one and she knew only the best of the best were hired as agents.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

"I'd love to but I don't really know how."

"Excellent. Then you'll make me look good." He winked, took her hand and guided her to one of the dimmest, most secluded corners of the dance floor.

Her heart pounded from the excitement of being in his arms as well as nervousness over making a fool of herself. She really was a horrible dancer. At least the song was slow.

He positioned her hands, one on his shoulder, the other held snugly in his. His large hand rested lightly on her waist yet it warmed her to the core. Within moments he was guiding her with slow, sensual movements. He didn't complain once, even when she stepped on his foot for the third time.

Esmeralda began to relax. His scent—the heady combination of citrus cologne, peppermint gum, herbal hair conditioner and raw vampire male—tantalized her. The sensation of his body so close to hers incited an almost orgasmic rush, yet the expression in his eyes soothed her.

"You dance well," she commented, unsure of what to say during the sudden lag in conversation.

He chuckled. "I'm bluffing. When I was young, we were still dancing hunch-backed around open fires, beating on banana drums."

"You are too funny but you're lying."

"Yes. Actually I didn't see a banana drum until I was in my late nine-hundreds. Wrong continent for my youth, you see."



Was it her imagination or was his face becoming less startling? All she could see were his gorgeous gray eyes and all she could feel was his rock-hard muscles beneath one of her hands and the warmth of his hand holding her other.

"Where did you come from originally? I can't place what kind of name Sadavis is."

"It's Hindi."

"You're from India?"

"I was raised by gypsies."

She raised her eyes to heaven. "You're lying again."

"No." His smile faded and when she looked deep into his eyes she sensed the truth of his words.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound —"

"You didn't. My real parents gave me away at birth. Most of my early life was spent traveling all over Asia and Europe. Actually at the time they fostered me, my people weren't yet called gypsies but that is what their descendents became."

"That's interesting."

"Are you speaking as a chronicler?"

"Partly but also as a regular person. I haven't been a hybrid very long."

"I never would have guessed," he teased.

The song ended and his hand strayed to her face, his fingertip lightly caressing her jaw, sending little thrills of desire through her entire body.

"How old —"

"I was thirty when I was Changed," she said. "That was five years ago."

His eyes narrowed and he dropped his hand. "Just a baby."

"Not quite."

"You're lucky, Esmeralda, to have so many fresh years ahead of you."

"I always thought vampires worshipped age."

"Age is a wonderful thing but don't waste your youth wishing for centuries that will come all too quickly."

She searched his face. This man had so many layers — cool strength, a good sense of humor but she also sensed wisdom and deep sorrow.

"I'm starving," he said. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Want to have dinner with me in the restaurant across the street?"

In spite of how much she liked him, there was still something frightening and mysterious about him.

"All right," she said, as if unable to resist her attraction to him.

Her hand still snug in his, they returned to the bar where he picked up his duffel bag before they walked out of the club and into the warm city night.

Always a reserved woman, Esmeralda felt uncomfortable being the object of attention. Being in Sadavis' company garnered more stares from passersby than she was accustomed to. If his face didn't nab their attention then his perfectly proportioned six-foot-five-inch body and ultra-long black hair did.

She tried to appear unaffected and hoped she succeeded, not wishing to offend him. Not that he seemed to mind the blatant stares or even the repulsed ones. He strode confidently, gracefully, once again reminding her of a lion. His piercing gaze seemed to notice everything while at the same time he kept such intense focus on her that her legs felt like water, scarcely able to walk. Was he using his psychic powers on her? Never in her life had she experienced such a reaction to anyone.

Inside the restaurant, the hostess escorted them to a booth in the far corner of the room, handed them menus and left them alone.

Esmeralda looked over the menu then glanced at Sadavis whose eyes were lowered, viewing the choices, his thick lashes casting shadows against his dark skin. His wickedly arched eyebrows looked nothing less than evil, yet after spending even a short time with him she began to question her initial fear of him. His savage appearance certainly didn't seem to be a reflection of his charming though quirky personality. Her gaze swept his torso, lingering on his silky black shirt that draped his hard curves and planes. The urge to touch every inch of him made her mouth go dry. Her pulse accelerated and her hands trembled. How the hell was she supposed to eat when her stomach was churning with desire for this compelling beast of a man?

"What are you going to have?" he asked.

"Chicken and vegetables sounds good."

"I think I'll have that too, with a side of rice."

Beginning to relax, Esmeralda stretched her leg only to tap it against Sadavis' knee.

"Sorry," they said in unison, then smiled.

"Do you live around here or were you just here for the fight?" she asked.

"I have a place a few blocks away. How about you?"

"I have a home in Lexington."

The waitress approached to take their order. To Esmeralda's irritation, she stared rather blatantly at Sadavis. He held the young woman's gaze and smiled.

Blushing slightly, the waitress glanced at her pad. "What can I get you?"

Sadavis motioned for Esmeralda to speak first, then gave his order once she'd finished.

The waitress turned to Sadavis and said, "The rice can be made spicy or plain according to your face...I mean taste." She blushed scarlet. In spite of her obvious embarrassment, Esmeralda still had the urge to tell her off.

"Plain, thank you. I'm afraid my taste isn't nearly as exciting as my appearance." Sadavis flashed what seemed to be a deliberately evil grin.

"I'll be back with your drinks," the waitress murmured and hurried off.

Esmeralda's gaze met his for a moment of uncomfortable silence before he said, "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure but I can't guarantee an answer." She grinned.

"Fair enough. Who's your maker?"

Her belly clenched. That was rather personal, also a roundabout way of finding out if she was involved with someone. Excitement flooded her at this new confirmation that he was interested in her.

"I was raised by vampires," she said. "My aunt initiated me."

Interest sparked in his eyes. "Really? How did that happen?"

"My parents died when I was a baby and my aunt, a hybrid, raised me with her husband, also a hybrid."

"I was just the opposite. The people who raised me were human."

"That must have been so hard for you."

"They were knowledgeable enough to supply me with blood and treated me rather well, considering."

"Considering what?"

"When I hit vampiric puberty and my powers kicked in, things might have been a little rougher than they should have been."

"What happened?"

"They worked me into a show in which visitors could injure me and I'd miraculously heal before their eyes. I was the perfect freak. Big, scary and immortal."

Esmeralda winced. "That's terrible."

"It wasn't really so bad and I did earn a lot of money. Unfortunately it spooked plenty of people too, and we were run out of a number of towns before it finally came to an end."

"How?"

"One night a patron grazed my heart with an arrow and I almost died for real."

"Oh my God." Though he seemed perfectly comfortable relating the story, she was horrified. How could his family have subjected him to that kind of torture? Even worse, he had apparently agreed to it.

"Soon after that I met others of my kind and learned more about vampirism. You're lucky to have grown up around our kind."

"That's one point of view. On the other hand being a 'normal' kid with nocturnal relatives wasn't easy. My aunt and uncle were great about conditioning themselves to sunlight, though, so I wouldn't be the only kid at school whose family never showed up for sports events."

He smiled, his eyes narrowing the slightest bit, and reached across the table. Esmeralda tingled when he touched a long finger to her cheek and gently brushed away a stray lock of hair. His touch sent flames darting through her body.

"Forgive me, but you're very beautiful," he said softly.

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"I guess I'd be a fool to argue," she murmured, hypnotized by his gaze and the light caress of his fingertip that had strayed to her jawline. The vision of her astride his naked body nearly overwhelmed her. She longed to slide her hands under his shirt and feel those rock-hard muscles beneath his tempting olive flesh.

"I'd love to do your bust," he said.

She blinked, shocked straight out of her romantic fantasy. "Excuse me?"

"Sculpt a bust of you in clay."

"Oh," she giggled, wondering if she was blushing.

"Would you let me?"

"Yeah, I guess. Why not? When?"

"As soon as you feel like, even tonight, if you're comfortable with that."

Esmeralda paused, knowing that if she went home with him tonight there would be far more than an art session.

"I'll let you know after dinner," she said.

He nodded, his gaze still fixed on hers, and lowered his hand from her cheek. It moved instead to his fork. She watched his long fingers caress the silver and wished they were still upon her face instead.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" Esmeralda said, slipping out of the booth. She hurried down the hallway toward the rest rooms. Thank goodness there was a payphone. With slightly trembling fingers she fished change from the bottom of her shoulder bag and deposited it into the coin slot. She dialed Dulcie's number, hoping she and Matthew had already arrived at home.

"Hello?"

"Dulcie, it's Esmeralda."

"Hey."

"How well do you and Matthew know Sadavis?"

There was a slight pause on Dulcie's end. "Matthew knows him better than I do. Why?"

"Ask him if he's normal, a nut or what."

"Honey, you're scaring me. Are you in trouble?"

"No. I think I'm in love."

Another pause.

"I'm joking. It's not love but it's lust, Dulcie. Major, mind-blowing lust."

"With Sadavis?"

"Yes." In her nervousness and excitement, Esmeralda fiddled with the metal phone cord.

"Are you with him now?"

"We're in a restaurant. I left him at the table. Dulcie, do you trust him?"

"Hang on a minute."

She heard muffled conversation in the background then Matthew, sounding uncharacteristically awkward, said, "Uh, Esmeralda?"

"Yes?"

"He's one of the most trustworthy people I know, but on an emotional level I'm not sure what to tell you. He's rather career oriented."

"I gathered that."

"He...he told you about his job?"

"Yeah I know about him being a sculptor. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," he murmured. "Nothing at all. Listen, I'm terrible with this girl talk so I'm giving you back to Dulcie."

Esmeralda ended the conversation quickly and returned to the table. The food had arrived. She and Sadavis talked about various subjects while they ate. The more they conversed, the better she liked him. His colorful stories of the past amused and fascinated her while his rich voice, graceful hands and intense gaze captivated her. The man had her so aroused that she didn't doubt he could smell her lust. Her keen vampiric senses noted that he obviously felt the same. His tantalizing scent grew stronger throughout the meal and in spite of his collected, conversational manner, his eyes bore the look of a man burning with desire.

When the meal ended he insisted on paying the check. On their way out of the restaurant he said, "Why don't I give you my number and you can call me when you feel like sitting?"

Her heart hammering, she gazed into his eyes. "I thought you wanted to do it tonight?"

The corners of his slender lips flicked upward slightly. "I do. My place is about a ten-minute walk from here. Sorry I don't have transportation but I walked tonight."

"No problem. I like walking."

"This way." He pointed to the left.

They fell into step beside each other on the sidewalk. Her hand brushed his absently and he curled his fingers around it. The sensation was wonderful. His hand was warm and squeezed hers ever so gently.

Sadavis and Esmeralda walked to a part of the city where no streetlights seemed to exist. She guessed it was a mostly vampire neighborhood and a rather rough one. From some of the dark apartments wafted the scent of blood and moans of couples making love. Sometimes growls and grunts of hybrids fighting rumbled through the stillness,

followed by the scent of more blood. Every now and then they passed a group of fierce-looking hybrids loitering around fires burning in trashcans. Some of the males cast her wolfish looks only to be quelled by a savage glance or growl from Sadavis.

A chill coursed down her spine. Had she not been with him, she wouldn't have walked through this part of town alone. For the first time she started to feel afraid of her decision to follow him home. After all, she didn't know him. He exuded ancient power, was big as a house and was an alpha male Immaculate—the war god of the vampire world.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"I get the sense you're a little nervous, that's all."

She didn't doubt he could smell it.

"I'm fine."

He squeezed her hand a bit tighter, offering a slight smile.

Strains of classical Spanish guitar grew louder as they turned down another street. The guitarist, a lithe black-haired man who looked in his early twenties, stood on the porch of an old brick building. Seated at a table next to him was a woman with dark, gray-streaked hair and large eyes such a deep brown they appeared black. A tarot spread rested on the table in front of her.

The man and woman called to Sadavis. He and Esmeralda approached and paused on the steps.

"Nirek and Ora, this is Esmeralda."

The guitarist smiled and nodded, revealing a dimple in his cheek.

"It's a pleasure. Any friend of Sadavis is a friend of ours," Ora said to Esmeralda then turned to Sadavis. "Let me see it."

He raised his eyes to heaven.

"Come, come. We know you're not shy."

Unbuttoning his shirt, he glanced at Esmeralda. "Ora's the artist who did my tattoo."

"Oh," she replied, her attention focused on his bare chest now that he'd opened the shirt. She drew a sharp breath of desire, hoping she wasn't staring too foolishly at the broad expanse of muscle and smooth flesh marked by the court jester.

Ora approached, staring at him with smoldering eyes. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes," Esmeralda said. "The artwork is excellent."

"Who's talking about the artwork? I meant his body." The woman reached with both hands and ran them greedily over Sadavis' pecs.

"Ora, please." He grasped her wrists and gently pushed her away, having the decency to look a little embarrassed.

"I know. I know. You cherish our friendship. And the only time I ever got to put my hands on you was when I was making that stupid tattoo." Ora glanced at Esmeralda and sighed. "Good luck. He's as elusive as a cat that doesn't want to be caught."

"Leave them alone and act like a lady for once, Ora," Nirek teased, his fingers flying over the guitar strings. "Besides, maybe he's just elusive with you."

"Oh shut up, you skinny little no-talent brat."

"No-talent? I won't take that sort of insult."

Buttoning up his shirt, Sadavis turned and walked down the steps, Esmeralda beside him. "Sorry about that. They'll probably be fighting for the rest of the night now."

Unsure of what she thought about his choice in friends or about this strange neighborhood, she followed him to the tall brick apartment house next door. He turned the key in the door.

"Which floor are you on?" she asked.

"I live on the top but the building is mine."

"Nobody else lives here?"

"No."

"I see you like a lot of space."

"I wanted a large gym downstairs and lots of room for my sculptures."

He opened the door and held it for her. Stepping inside, Esmeralda glanced around an enormous room with plenty of floor space containing free weights and an assortment of metal spheres, similar to the ones in the gym at Rosa's Ring II. Mirrors covered one entire wall from ceiling to floor. Swords, staves and other medieval-looking weapons she didn't recognize hung on another wall. In each corner of the room stood four bronze gargoyles as tall as Sadavis.

To her left, a metal staircase wound up to the second floor.

"This doesn't look like an apartment house."

"It used to be an office building. I knocked out the walls between offices. Quite a project. My apartment is upstairs."

## Chapter Three

She followed him up the steps and down a long corridor where he unlocked another door. They entered a vast room lit by moonlight streaming in through several picture windows. Like its owner, the apartment was unusual and Esmeralda couldn't keep from staring. He had apparently knocked down more walls between offices to create the enormous single living space. The red brick walls and gray cobblestone floors created the illusion of being outside rather than indoors. There was a large bed, low to the ground, and a carved pirate-ship-style trunk at the foot of it. To either side of the bed were rows of shelves containing books and a variety of sculptures. A drop cloth splattered with clay and paint spread across the center of the room, a table with art supplies in the middle of it. Nearby stood a black sectional couch draped with multicolored quilts, tall candelabras on either side of it. On the wall behind it, sliding glass doors led to a small porch containing a six-foot plaster clown with yellow devil's horns poking through its mass of red hair.

The right side of the room contained a kitchenette. Beside the dining table was another life-sized sculpture of a man dressed as an African warrior, his face in the shape of a savage-looking mask with narrow reddish eyes and ivory tusks protruding from the lips. He carried a tray with salt-and-pepper shakers, a sugar bowl and a Chinese-style tea set.

"Did you make all these sculptures?" Esmeralda asked, stepping closer to the warrior.

"Yes. There are more in the rooms down the hall." He walked to the candelabras and lit them as well as several pillar candles on the dining table. Then he squatted in front of a CD player in the corner of the room and glanced through the pile of CDs behind it. "Do you like eighties music? I don't really care if I date myself since I'm a relic anyway."

"I love eighties music."

He chose a disc and moments later a familiar love song drifted through the room.

"Excuse me while I change clothes and set up my supplies. Just make yourself at home. Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge and there's a bathroom right through there." He pointed to a door off the kitchen then disappeared through another door in the bedroom area.

Feeling both nervous and excited, Esmeralda slipped off her coat and tossed it on the bed. She stepped closer to the shelves to better examine the miniature sculptures. There were dozens of clowns, jesters and masked men and women in a variety of period costumes as well as horses, dogs, great cats and mythical beasts. A collection of



faces caught her attention, beautiful, classical male faces, except for their pure white dead-looking eyes.

After a moment, she walked to the bathroom and glanced at herself in the mirror, noting the vampiric glow in her eyes that revealed her excitement and desire. She rummaged through her shoulder bag and found the travel toothbrush she always carried. After brushing her teeth, she touched up her makeup and hair.

When she returned to the main room, her heartbeat skipped. Sadavis stood by the table in the center of the room moistening a lump of clay with water, his magnificent torso and long, slender feet bare. He had changed into slightly baggy paint-stained jeans. The waist dipped below his navel. Stepping closer, she couldn't help thinking he had a rather adorable bellybutton, an outie with a silver ring glistening in it.

"Hello." He smiled. "You can have a seat on the couch while I do this."

"I didn't notice that tonight." She pointed at his bellybutton ring.

"I take it out during matches. One time I didn't and the son of a bitch I was fighting tore it out. I was not happy."

"I get the feeling yours was the last bellybutton ring he ever pulled."

Winking, he flashed a wicked smile. "Excellent guess."

She sat on the couch, glad that posing for him offered the perfect opportunity to blatantly ogle his body. She felt like a wolf salivating over choice meat. More than anything she wanted to run her lips and tongue all over him.

While he worked, her gaze drifted to his hands. They moved with grace and strength, the long beautiful fingers shaping the clay with expert pinches and strokes. Brown clay and water darkened his flesh halfway up his sleek forearms. Some of it splashed against his chest and abs, dirtying the court jester. All the while his intense gray gaze switched from her to the sculpture. A strand of black hair fell across his cheek and caught against the corner of his mouth, but he seemed too absorbed in his work to notice or care. The urge to brush it away almost overwhelmed her. Finally he paused and stood back, releasing a long, slow breath.

"Want to take a break? You must be tired of sitting there," he said.

Nodding, Esmeralda stood and stretched. She approached him and brushed away the lock of hair that had been driving her crazy. His lips turned up the slightest bit before he walked to the kitchen sink. While he washed his hands and torso, she stared at the sculpture. Though it was not nearly complete, she was flattered by how attractive he'd made her.

"You made me look better than I do," she remarked, rubbing her shoulder, stiff from sitting still for so long.

"Actually you're much prettier but I'm doing my best," he said, standing behind her. Her belly jumped when he gently nudged her hand aside and began massaging her shoulders. The sensation of his large, warm hands was too good for words. After brushing aside her hair, he used his thumbs to caress the back of her neck.

Her pulse quickening, Esmeralda turned and gazed into his eyes. She rested her hands against his wrists then slid her palms up the length of his arms to his shoulders. Lord, his muscles were as hard and his skin as tantalizing as she'd imagined. His scent filled her. Vampiric lust turned his gray eyes fiery. Moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue, she edged a bit closer.

Rather than kissing her mouth, he rested his hands on her hips and lowered his face to the side of her neck. His lips, moist and soft, brushed her flesh, making her quiver with need. He kissed behind her ear then took the lobe between his teeth and licked it.

Esmeralda's eyes slipped shut. Her arms slid around his neck and she smiled with pleasure.

His deep, husky voice whispered in her ear, "Do you want this?"

"Yes," she replied, running her hands over his back. She kneaded the powerful muscles. Her clit and pussy tingled with need. It was a struggle to keep from thrusting her pelvis against him to appease the desperate ache he inspired.

"Good," he murmured then kissed her.

His hand cupped the back of her head and his mouth covered hers. Ever so gently his lips moved against hers, gradually becoming more demanding. She opened her lips to his tongue, surrendering completely to the long, slow strokes. His kiss was warm and wet and he tasted of peppermint.

Without warning he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Her head spinning with passion, Esmeralda watched, her senses alive with anticipation as he stepped away, his hypnotic hands moving to his fly.

First he opened the button, then the zipper. The denim dropped to the floor. Black pubic hair flared over his groin. A magnificent cock patterned with veins jutted from the curly thatch. Its bulging head was tinged dark pink. The captivating little eye seemed to call for her tongue's caress. His balls were no less fascinating. Large and perfectly formed, they swayed slightly as he moved closer. Before he joined her on the bed, her gaze raked his incredibly long, steel-muscled legs scattered with a faint dusting of hair.

Stretching out beside her, he placed a hand on her stomach and caressed it with long sweeps of his palm, his gaze fixed on hers. His slightly parted lips revealed the tips of his wolfish fangs. To vampires such fangs were almost as much of a turn-on as a great cock. Unlike hybrids, Immaculates' fangs were retractable with the potential for much larger proportions. Another difference between the two was that only the blood of other vampires could nourish an Immaculate, while hybrids could thrive on human or vampire blood. That difference had never meant much to Esmeralda before, but the thought of Sadavis drinking from her sent her desire off the scale.

She knew by the glow of his eyes he was starving for her. Still he moved slowly and continued stroking her from ribs to thigh through her clothes. Rising to his knees, he unbuttoned her blouse with those long, deft fingers. He parted the material and gazed at the white bra filled with her plump breasts, the hard pink nipples just visible beneath

the pale lace. He touched a fingertip first to one then the other. The delicate flesh tightened even more and a magical ache encompassed her clit as if it was directly connected to her nipples.

Her breath held in anticipation, Esmeralda watched him unhitch the front fastening on her bra. Finally free, her breasts tumbled into his cupped hands. Tenderly he squeezed and caressed the globes. He ran his thumbs over the nipples in small circles that nearly sent her into a passionate frenzy.

With a racing pulse, she forced herself to remain still and watch him fondle her breasts until his soft touch on her nipples was almost painful. As if sensing her threshold, he left her breasts and continued undressing her. She shifted position, allowing him to discard her blouse and bra.

Esmeralda reached for him with desperate hands. Gazing deeply into her eyes, he loomed above her while she caressed his chest and shoulders. It was like touching warm, breathing marble. Moaning with the sheer pleasure of touching him, she closed her eyes and slipped her arms around him, her fingers gripping his back.

“Esmeralda.”

Her eyes opened and focused on his face. For a mere second she was once again aware of his grotesque features, but the moment passed when she lost herself in his dove gray eyes. She focused on them and felt her body temperature rise even more at his expression of scarcely restrained desire.

“Yes, Sadavis,” she whispered.

He shook his head slightly, his lips parted as if he was about to kiss her. When he didn’t move, she tightened her grip around his neck, pulled herself upward and covered his mouth with hers. She thrust her tongue between his lips, needing to taste and explore every warm, wet inch of his mouth. His tongue met hers, stroking, teasing and engaging in a sensual battle that was sure to end in a draw.

One of his legs slid between hers. His erection pressed against her and she thrust her pelvis upward, rubbing against him, frustrated by the barrier of her jeans and underwear between them. She reached down to unzip her fly but he caught her hand and pushed it away, tugging his mouth from hers and kissing his way down the length of her torso. When he reached her waist, he began removing her jeans, sliding them over her hips and down her legs. He slipped off her boots, socks and jeans then tossed them onto the floor.

Esmeralda flushed with a combination of pleasure and a bit of embarrassment. She had never imagined herself to be the sort of woman to climb into bed with a man she just met. Sexual freedom was common among her kind, but she had always been modest. Even when she took blood from mortals she tried to form some sort of friendship first and had rarely combined full-blown sex with blood drinking. With Sadavis, this physical closeness seemed so right. She hadn’t the strength or desire to refuse him. He was like delicious wine flowing through her, intoxicating her and allowing her to think of nothing except the moment.

"God, Esmeralda, do you have any idea how much I want you?" he asked in a husky voice, then grasped her legs and guided them over his shoulders.

Before her lust-muddled brain could fully grasp his intention, his mouth covered her clit.

"Ah! Oh lord," she panted, grasping handfuls of his hair and squirming feverishly beneath the incredible sensations evoked by his lips and tongue. He licked her sensitive nub before using his lips to gently tug at it.

Lost in a haze of desire, Esmeralda could only gasp and moan, her legs tight around him. His hands cupped her buttocks, pressing her closer to his skilled mouth. The tip of his tongue stroked her clit with feathery touches that were driving her headlong into orgasm. Just when she was about to shatter, he paused, his warm breath fanning her stimulated flesh. She writhed, trying to wriggle her hips but he held her steady. Moving his head slightly, he thrust his tongue into her pussy, exploring as deeply as possible before returning to her clit.

"Yes, oh, yes," she cried, her heart throbbing mercilessly. Since becoming a vampire, she generally had to taste blood before reaching orgasm, but this time she doubted it would be necessary. Suddenly she appreciated another of the few advantages of being a hybrid, since Immaculates, without exception, required blood to come.

The flat of his tongue pressed rhythmically against her clit. The man was going to kill her with lust but she didn't care. All that mattered was the massive orgasm just around the corner.

"Oh, Sadavis. Oh yes," she wailed, every muscle straining in climax. Wave after wave broke over her until she thought it might never end. He didn't stop lapping until the final quiver rolled through her.

Sated, she let her arms and legs fall to the mattress where she lay with her eyes closed and a smile on her lips. She was aware of him shifting position. She opened her eyes and saw him stretched out beside her, his torso raised on his elbow, his gaze fixed on her.

Her face heated and she was very aware of her complete surrender to him.

"Enjoy yourself?" he purred, looking pleased but not gloating.

"That has to be a rhetorical question."

He smiled, lightly caressing her breasts. His hand swept down her belly then tenderly spread her thighs. Esmeralda drew a sharp, excited breath as she watched his long, slender finger disappear into her pussy. He withdrew the digit, now slick with her juices, and began stroking her clit.

It took seconds before her ultrasensitized flesh responded to his touch. He left off for a moment to roll her onto her side and pull her lengthwise against him, her back against his chest. His upper arm cushioned her head, his wrist almost brushing her lips so that she could easily taste his blood if she desired. A thrill coursed through her when she realized he must have chosen the position intentionally. His other arm draped her

waist, his hand once again stroking her clit, driving her toward another orgasm. His erection pressed against the indentation of her buttocks. At first she thought his intention was to penetrate her, but he merely held her close while his hand rubbed her toward another climax.

Esmeralda pushed her back and bottom against him, seemingly unable to get close enough. Being in his arms felt too wonderful for words. Her hands folded around his, pressing his wrist to her mouth. Her fangs penetrated his flesh and his blood, powerful and sweet, flowed onto her tongue. She lapped his wrist greedily and he released a guttural moan that sent a fresh storm of desire crashing over her. When properly executed, a vampire's bite brought intense pleasure to both drinker and donor.

"Esmeralda," he whispered close to her ear, "drink. God, yes."

His hand rubbed faster. Engulfed by another climax she whimpered, gulping his blood and bucking against his caressing hand.

Before she had a chance to recover, he turned her onto her back and covered her body with his. Her eyes tightly closed, she spread her legs wide for him, only locking them around his waist when she felt the tip of his cock press against her pussy lips. He entered her slowly, inch by inch, until he was buried to the hilt, her warm, wet pussy throbbing around his erection.

"Look at me," he said in an almost savage whisper that sent ripples of primal desire coursing down her spine.

She obeyed, her gaze fixed on his. The reddish glow of vampiric lust illuminated his gray eyes. Muscles in his shoulders and chest bunched as he held himself above her and began thrusting into her yearning body.

Her hands roamed over his arms and chest then slipped over his throat, feeling the pulse of his arteries through his warm flesh. His lips parted, revealing his gorgeous fangs, thick and white, the points tiny as needle tips. When they pierced her flesh, she would probably come on contact but he didn't seem ready for that yet in spite of the excitement etched on his face.

His long, slow thrusts pushed her toward another climax. This one was slower in coming but she had the feeling it was going to be even more intense than the others. She caressed every part of him she could reach, relishing the power in his body. It was like making love with a magnificent marble sculpture, except he was warm and breathing. Actually, his flesh was growing hotter by the moment. His thrusts quickened and her eyes slipped shut. She clung to him, her body gyrating against his.

"Yes, oh, yes," she cried and exploded again.

His thrusts never ceased. He was claiming her, searing her with his flesh and marking her forever. No matter what happened after tonight, a part of her would always belong to Sadavis Baptista.

Another growing orgasm tightened her insides and sent her heart pounding even faster.

*Let me hear your thoughts, Esmeralda.* His psychic voice echoed in her head, asking her to deepen their pleasure even more by mingling their thoughts at the moment of crisis.

Usually such intimacy was reserved for serious couples. Strangely enough, she knew deep in her heart what they were sharing was very serious.

She didn't doubt he could penetrate her psychic barriers if he wanted to. She was young and inexperienced and he was old and powerful, yet even as he possessed her body, he respected her enough to ask for additional pleasures.

*Esmeralda.* This time along with his telepathic voice she felt the full force of his lust, just as he felt it.

She moaned, on the verge of another climax.

*Yes, yes, I want to share your thoughts, Sadavis.*

Then he penetrated her mind as deeply as his cock penetrated her body. His control was on the verge of shattering, his pleasure almost painfully intense.

*Come for me, Sadavis. Take my blood. Take all of me. Please. Oh, please.*

With a savage growl, he lunged faster and harder. At the moment she came, he sank his fangs into her shoulder and overwhelming pleasure blinded her.

Growling and groaning with animal lust, he surged into her. She pressed her fingers along his spine, feeling a quiver rush through him as he came.

For several moments he lapped her blood then, panting, withdrew his fangs and cock from her. Rolling onto his back, he pulled her into his arms. She rested her cheek against his chest, listening to the slowing rhythm of his powerful Immaculate heart. His fingertips lazily caressed her arms and back.

Finally finding the strength to speak, she said in a teasing tone, "Enjoy yourself?"

"So far."

She lifted her head, her eyes widening slightly.

A smile touched his lips. "Apparently you've never been with an Immaculate before."

"Rumor has it longevity is a virtue of your kind."

He caressed her face and gently tilted her chin upward so their gazes met. "It's not a rumor, my sweet, as you're about to discover."

Esmeralda's pulse leapt. She could hardly wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just before dawn, Sadavis lay staring at the ceiling, Esmeralda asleep in his arms.

When they'd started making love that night and she'd first closed her eyes, he'd called to her to see if she would open them. He wanted to know if she, unlike other women he'd been with, could actually look at him while they made love. Women liked

his body. They liked touching it. They liked being possessed by it but none of them would stare into his face and share every aspect of their orgasm with him.

When Esmeralda had not only opened her eyes and looked at him but initiated another deep mouth kiss, he knew a part of him was lost to her. From the moment he'd seen her, she'd stirred emotions far deeper than lust. It was wrong of course. With his career he shouldn't involve himself in a love relationship, but he had been needing one for longer than he wanted to admit.

Sex and blood-sharing were pleasant enough but he wondered what it would be like to share his life with someone. It was a selfish desire. At any time he could be sent on a case from which he'd never return. As it was, he'd already lied to her about his career. Yes he was a sculptor but that wasn't how he earned his living. Of course he couldn't just come right out and tell a woman he'd just met that he was a Network special agent.

Esmeralda uttered a soft sound and rubbed her cheek against his chest. He ran his fingers through her hair and glanced at her lovely, sleeping face.

After sharing her thoughts while they made love, he was fairly certain she would be willing to explore a relationship with him. They would just have to move slowly. While he didn't want to be unfair to her and drag her into his complicated life, he had never realized how good it felt to share himself so completely with a mate. Maybe he was just feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable after the past year's assignment, but for the first time in his life he began to understand how much he'd been missing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda awoke in soothing moonlight, the scents around her—clay, paint, herbal cologne and raw male—new yet familiar. Smiling, she recalled the previous night and the almost full day of making love before she'd fallen asleep in Sadavis' arms. The clock on the night table told her it was nearly seven in the evening. A note written in bold black writing rested near the clock.

*Esmeralda,*

*Gone to get us some breakfast. Be back soon.*

*Kisses,*

*S.*

A warm feeling rolled through her and she couldn't help smiling. Damn, she didn't believe in love at first sight, did she?

Once she'd washed and dressed, wishing she had a change of clothes, she made the bed, sat atop it and tugged her laptop computer out of her shoulder bag. Chronicling must have been in her blood because she never went anywhere without her computer.

Why she hadn't thought of looking up Sadavis in the Network files last night was beyond her. She must have been blinded by lust.

She punched in the passwords to reach the files and searched for his name. Her brow furrowed at the sparse information regarding him.

*Name – Baptista, Sadavis*

*Aliases – None*

*Species – Vampire*

*Race – Immaculate*

*Date of Birth – AD 401*

*Height – 6 feet 5 inches*

*Weight – 230 lbs*

She clicked to the next page and drew a sharp breath at the first photo. She recognized Sadavis' dove gray eyes partially hidden by a heavily drooping brow. His nose, chin and cheeks were severely disfigured. The caption on the photo read *March 2000 Prior to first reconstructive surgery.*

The page contained more photos showing his face after each of several surgeries until she finally reached the last one, which showed Sadavis as she knew him. Its caption read *July 2004.*

A pang of compassion darted through her followed by a touch of guilt at her initial reaction to him. She couldn't imagine what life must have been like for him, yet his obvious issues hadn't affected his confidence or his ambition, as his success as an artist and fighter proved.

The next page contained the rest of his profile.

*Profession – Sculptor*

*Languages – Anglo-Saxon, English, Hindi, Italian, Latin, Persian, Portuguese, Punjabi, Romany, Sanskrit, Spanish, Thai*

*Skills – Fine arts (clay modeling, sculpture, stone carving), martial arts (Kalari Payattu, Muaythai, Silambam, Tai Chi), former Network backup chronicler*

"Anglo-Saxon?" Esmeralda wrinkled her nose. "Sanskrit? God, he's like the dead language king."

She hit enter and glanced at the final page.

*Medical History – Not Applicable*

*Parents or Creator – Unknown*



*Hybrid Offspring – Unknown*  
*Sexual Offspring – Unknown*  
*Criminal Record – Not Applicable*  
*Psychic-Magical Levels – Not Applicable*  
*Other – Not Applicable*  
*End of Profile*

Strange. Such an old vampire and the Network had so little info on him. No history. No relations. Nothing. Most of the important information was marked as not applicable. Why the hell wasn't it applicable? Obviously from the photos he had a medical history and she had felt his psychic power last night.

Again the idea that he was an agent crossed her mind. Though most agents were listed as such, those belonging to special forces units were only listed in the Network's classified files. If that was Sadavis' case then she wouldn't find any further information. Such files were top secret and only a chronicler with two years' experience who was working on a related project was allowed to access them.

She glanced around and his sculptures caught her attention. She relaxed. Obviously he was a sculptor. He had hundreds of works in his living space alone and said there were other rooms in the building with more. How could an agent find the time to work so much on art?

Of course he had something like sixteen hundred years to make these sculptures.

Sadavis' scent grew stronger. She shut off the computer and shoved it back in her bag.

"Hi." He smiled, stepping inside with a brown paper bag and a motorcycle helmet painted like a wolf with bloody teeth dangling from his hand. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving." She stood and met him in the kitchen area where they reached for each other simultaneously.

Esmeralda closed her eyes and rested her head against his shoulder, loving the sensation of his warm hands rubbing her back. Feeling like the worst kind of snoop, she tried to forget the photos she'd seen. If he wanted to disclose what must have been painful aspects of his past, he would do so in his own time.

"I hope you like bagels," he said.

"Love them."

They sat and began eating, discussing trivial matters while flirting shamelessly with teasing looks and touches beneath the table.

When breakfast ended, Esmeralda glanced at her watch. "I'm sorry but I really need to get home and get some work done. I'm on a deadline for my latest chronicle."

"Would you like a lift home?"

"Yes thanks."

"Good." He playfully swept her into his arms and headed for the door.

"Sadavis, stop it!" She laughed, her arms tight around his neck.

"Damn. I like you in my arms." He placed her on her feet and brushed her lips with a kiss. "I guess this means we'll have to take the bike."

Once she'd slung her bag over her shoulder, he approached with a flannel shirt and a helmet painted like a tiger's head. He gently placed the helmet on her head and brushed a lock of hair from her face before buckling the chin strap.

"You look cute in this," he said, then handed her the shirt. "Put this on. You might get cold on the bike."

She slipped on the shirt that was far too big for her, but she didn't care. It carried his wonderful scent and she resisted the urge to snuggle deeply into it.

On their way outside, he stuck on his wolf helmet.

A big black motorcycle was parked by the curb. He mounted and she slid onto the seat behind him, grasping the belt loops of his jeans.

He glanced over his shoulder. "You can do better than that."

Her pulse skipping, she wrapped her arms around him and clutched his powerful chest. She wiggled a bit, her clit aching. Damn, she'd spent all day making love with him and could scarcely wait to do so again.

The engine growled and the bike glided down the street.

Too soon they arrived at her house.

"Would you like to come inside?" she asked, reluctantly taking off his shirt and handing it to him.

"I'd love to but I have a business meeting."

She tried not to look as disappointed as she felt. It was probably better that he didn't come in. If he was around, she'd be crawling all over him instead of getting work done.

"May I see you again?" he asked.

"To finish the bust?"

"I do want to finish the bust but to tell you the truth it was a seedy little excuse to spend more time with you last night."

She grinned, thoroughly pleased by his answer. "Yes. You can definitely see me again."

The corners of his lips turned up in an almost sheepish smile. "How soon?"

"Tomorrow night?"

"Just name the time and place."

"How about right here at eight o'clock? Come for breakfast."

"Okay. I'm looking forward to it, Esmeralda." Before she turned away, he cupped the back of her neck and drew her to him for a kiss.

Her heart fluttering, Esmeralda walked inside. Her work was certainly going to suffer tonight because concentrating on anything but Sadavis would be pure torture.

## Chapter Four

The following evening as eight o'clock neared, Esmeralda couldn't repress her eagerness to see Sadavis again. After dressing in a flowing red sundress and carefully arranging her hair and makeup, she made her bed using the satin sheets she'd been saving for a special occasion. Nothing was more special than this, she thought with a grin. When she'd finished working the previous night, she'd gone shopping for the makings of a delicious breakfast—fresh berries and ingredients for homemade pancakes, bacon and herbal tea.

She'd just finished setting the table when her keen hearing detected the growl of a distant motorcycle and her pulse skipped with anticipation. Moments later the engine stopped in her driveway.

Giddy as a schoolgirl, she willed herself to walk calmly down the stairs and answer the door.

Sadavis stood, his helmet dangling from one hand. In the other, he held a branch covered in beautiful flowers and wrapped in embossed white paper.

"Hi." She smiled at him, her gaze sweeping the breadth of his shoulders and chest beneath a black denim jacket. Memories of running her lips and tongue over his gorgeous body had her instantly wet.

"Good evening," he said, offering her the blossoms. "This is for you."

"Thank you." She took his rather unusual gift, admiring the floral scent and beauty. "No one has ever given me flowers quite like this."

"Peach blossoms," he said.

"They're lovely."

Tilting his head slightly to the side, he offered her the faintest smile and cupped her cheek in his hand. "With a meaning just as true."

She hoped she wasn't staring at him blankly, because his cryptic phrase soared over her head. Whatever he meant, giving her the blossoms was a romantic gesture and she loved it. She stood on her toes and tightly hugged his neck. His arms slipped around her, enfolding her in a warm embrace. Then he kissed her, a chaste brush of his lips that somehow stirred her as much as a hot exploration of fangs and tongue.

"Come in." She reluctantly left his embrace and led him to the kitchen. "I'm going to make pancakes. Hope you like them."

"They're my favorite."

"Really? What flavor?"

"Blueberry."

"All right. They'll be ready soon."

At the moment the last thing she wanted was to eat breakfast. She would have preferred tearing off his clothes and devouring him first, but she didn't want to be a rude hostess.

No sooner had she filled a vase with water and deposited the peach blossom branch into it than he slipped his arms around her from behind and nuzzled her neck.

Esmeralda closed her eyes and leaned against him, covering his hands with hers and squeezing gently. His tongue trailed along the side of her neck, then he took her earlobe between his lips and sucked gently.

"If you keep this up we won't be having breakfast until later," she breathed.

"That's fine with me, unless you're very hungry. I wouldn't want to starve...you..." His voice faded when she turned in his embrace, grasped the bulge in the front of his jeans and squeezed. Esmeralda's mouth covered his in a penetrating kiss. Her tongue slipped between his lips and stroked his.

Growling deep in his throat, he buried his fingers in her hair and thrust his tongue into her mouth. He sucked on her lower lip then her upper lip.

Dizzy with passion, Esmeralda unzipped his jeans with trembling hands, thrilled to find he wasn't wearing any underpants. She curled her fist around his velvet-skinned cock, feeling it swell in her grasp.

"Esmeralda," he said against her lips. His hand edged downward and rested over hers, guiding her as she pleased him with long, sweeping strokes. She slipped her thumb over his cock head, relishing its smoothness and the slight indentation of the tiny eye.

The urge to take him into her mouth was overwhelming.

He was about to kiss her again but she pulled away slightly and stared deeply into his eyes.

"Please. Please let me," she murmured, her hands stroking him from chest to hips. She slid her fingers into his belt loops, about to tug down his jeans, but he grasped her wrists. Tilting her face upward, she met his gaze, pouring all of her desire into a single look, and whispered, "Please."

His hands loosened on her wrists and moved to her hair.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she enjoyed the tender stroking of his fingers on her scalp before focusing completely on his beautiful cock. She ran her tongue up and down its length, then took the head between her lips and sucked while using her fingers to caress the shaft.

His scent grew stronger with each passing second and when she concentrated she could hear his heart beating strong and faster than its usual slow Immaculate pace. She lapped his engorged shaft, paying particular attention to the ridge on the underside. Wanting to feel every part of him she could reach, she let her hands stray to the backs of his knees while her mouth continued its sensual work. She ran her palms up and down

his hard thighs, relishing the iron muscles. Sliding her hands farther up, she cupped his rock-hard buttocks. It must have been his Immaculate nature combined with his perfect physical condition but she'd never imagined anyone feeling this hard and powerful.

It struck her that he had remarkable control over himself since she knew by the rhythm of his heart and the tension in his muscles that he was thoroughly enjoying her carnal attentions.

Taking the crown of his erection between her lips, she sucked him so deeply into her mouth that he brushed the back of her throat and was rewarded with a primal moan torn from his chest. The hands in her hair stroked quicker. Tension seemed to radiate from his fingertips, though he never tightened his grip, as if concerned with causing her discomfort even in the midst of intense passion.

Hesitantly she reached out with her mind. She wasn't nearly as experienced as he was in telepathy, but she recalled how wonderful it had been last night when their thoughts had mingled along with their climax.

*Sadavis.*

*I'm here, sweetheart.*

*I love touching you.*

*I love to be touched by you.*

Kneading his taut bottom, she drew his cock out to the tip and licked the underside before grasping the base and sucking him with short, fast motions that dragged another moan from him.

*Esmeralda, slow down.*

She chuckled deep in her throat and continued sucking without pause.

His breath came in ragged pants and his hips began thrusting ever so slightly. By his thoughts she knew he was restraining himself. He was so close to the edge that –

"No," he said, grasping her shoulders and pushing her away.

She gazed up at him, licking her lips, still savoring his taste. His eyes glowed with passion and his fangs were visible against his parted lips. A slight flush of desire stained the ridges of his cheekbones. The rapid rise and fall of his chest and the impassioned look on his face excited her as much as touching and licking his magnificent body.

"Why not?" she asked, her voice husky with desire.

His brow furrowed as if he was asking himself the same question.

"I want to," she said, sliding closer and grasping his cock. With even greater fervor, she continued licking and sucking. Now more than ever she wanted him to climax while she was on her knees before him. He was so big and strong, yet she wielded this power over him and it was heady in its intensity.

He cupped her head, his hips rocking slightly, every muscle in his body tense.

She sucked while swirling her tongue around his cock head. At the same time she kneaded his balls. That was his breaking point.

A distinctly vampiric growl filled the room as he tugged free of her lips. He grasped his cock, trying to avoid dousing her with his essence. She clutched his hips and stared at his spurting cock, her heart pounding. His growl transformed into a wolfish howl that sent quivers of raw lust coursing down her spine. She'd heard some males made such a sound but had never had the pleasure of witnessing it.

Panting, he backed against the counter, his eyes closed and face tilted toward the ceiling. Blood glistened on his lips where he'd pierced them with his fangs.

Esmeralda smiled at his expression of pure bliss and squirmed, her pussy drenched and clit aching for his touch.

After a moment, he glanced at her, his lips curved upward in a satisfied smile. "I believe I owe you something, Esmeralda."

"I believe I'm ready to collect."

He hitched up his jeans and tugged her into his arms. "Where do you want it?"

"The living room," she breathed, her arms locked around his neck, her gaze fixed on his. "Down the hall to the right."

A sultry expression simmering in his eyes, he strode to the living room. As if reading her mind – perhaps he had – he placed her on the Oriental carpet in front of the fireplace. The exact place she wanted him to make love to her.

He gazed at her for a moment, stroking her from thigh to breast. His touch warmed her through her sundress's flimsy fabric. Slowly he pushed the dress up. She shifted position and raised her arms so he could easily discard the dress. She lay before him wearing matching red lace bra and panties. Running the pads of his fingers over her belly, he unsheathed his claws. They glistened, razor sharp beneath his human nails. Fascinated yet slightly afraid, she drew a sharp breath and watched him trace her flesh with the pointed tips. He didn't so much as scratch her. Instead the stroking of his claws felt slightly ticklish. She relaxed, allowing herself to fully enjoy the sensations. She'd never been touched by an Immaculate's claws before. Even last night he'd kept his hidden.

Their thoughts mingled and she realized he had the desire to use his claws to slice away her undergarments.

"Go ahead," she murmured, her heart thrumming with anticipation. "Cut them off."

Two flicks of his finger across each shoulder and one down the center of her breasts were enough to remove her bra. A single swipe over her pelvis and he tugged her panties out from under her. Her flesh, unharmed by his claws and more than ready for his kiss, lay bare.

He quickly shed his clothes and knelt between her legs. Raising her buttocks in his hands, he lowered his face to her pelvis. At the first tug of his lips on her clit she

moaned. Her eyes slipped shut and she breathed deeply, allowing herself to dissolve in the velvet strokes of his tongue.

He carefully outlined the plump nub then began licking its center with long upward strokes that soon had her writhing.

"Oh, Sadavis," she murmured over and over, seemingly unable to form any other words.

Feasting upon her, he stroked and kneaded her buttocks. Esmeralda's head thrashed from side to side as she neared her climax.

"Please, oh, please," she gasped then convulsed, quivering and straining in a mind-blowing climax.

Before she could recover completely he straightened his back and filled her with his erection. On his knees, he thrust in a slow yet steady rhythm, pushing her toward another orgasm.

Her hands strayed to her breasts.

"Yes," he breathed. "I want to see you touch yourself."

Fondling her nipples, she moaned softly, her eyes opening halfway so that she could see their joining. The sight of him pumping into her excited her so much that within moments she was again on the verge of explosion.

His thumb rolled over her clit and she cried out sharply, orgasm pulsing through her.

Slowly he pulled out and lay beside her, wrapping his arms around her.

"I don't want you to go home tonight," she said.

"Then I'm glad I didn't bring my toothbrush for nothing."

He nuzzled her neck, the tips of his fangs grazing the sensitive flesh. Smiling with contentment, Esmeralda cuddled closer, her bottom wiggling against him.

*Love at first sight.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Four days later, Sadavis prepared for a session of ritual magic practice with Matthew. In spite of his youth, the doctor had surprising talent for the ancient art commonly called magic. Sadavis had trained under several ancient masters in the Far East and possessed a strong command of psychic and magical arts. Matthew had asked to learn some of his techniques while his current mentor was away, so when their careers allowed, the two practiced together.

A tap on the door signaled Matthew's arrival.

"Come in," Sadavis said.

Matthew stepped inside, duffel bag in hand.

"I've been looking forward to this all week," the doctor said. "Shiva's chant is working very well."



"Good. Just remember in spite of his benevolent nature he was very powerful. Chants in his name can work for both good and evil, so make sure you have a clear emotional focus when you're practicing them."

"Speaking of emotional focus, Esmeralda has been talking to Dulcie a lot. You're her favorite topic of conversation."

In spite of the warmth flooding him at Matthew's observation, Sadavis was careful to shield his thoughts and keep his features arranged in an unreadable expression. In his career disguising one's emotions was often a necessity and Sadavis was a master at it. He had never been caught or even suspected during his assignments and he had been fighting for justice among vampires since long before the Network officially regrouped.

Unzipping his duffel bag and removing his grimoire and incense, Matthew studied Sadavis carefully.

"You and Esmeralda have been seeing each other a lot," Matthew said.

"Yes."

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"And what?"

"How do you feel about her?"

"She's intelligent, sensitive and her loveliness transcends the physical."

Smiling slightly, Matthew said, "Sounds like things are getting pretty serious."

"We've scarcely known each other a week."

Sadavis spoke the words, yet disturbingly for the first time in his life he believed that bonds could develop between two people in record-breaking time. He and Esmeralda had been seeing each other every night. Not only was their love life incredible, but he thoroughly enjoyed talking to her and going places with her even if it was just food shopping. She was completely open with him, happily reminiscing about her childhood and what her life was like as a human. Her stories were not only interesting, but he filed away her descriptions to incorporate when dealing with human enemies, particularly vampire hunters. Maybe it was because of his age or the life of secrecy and lies he had chosen, but he found her innocence and charm irresistible.

"Sometimes that's all it takes. The connection hit Dulcie and me right away. We couldn't ignore it. Have you told Esmeralda about your career?"

Sadavis flung Matthew a disgusted look. "As I said, we hardly know each other. There's no way I can disclose information about my career. The only reason you know about it is because you're one of the only non-Network vampires trusted enough to handle top secret information."

"More like because I'm one of the most knowledgeable doctors in vampire medicine."

From anyone else such a statement might have pointed to an overblown ego, but in Matthew's case it was the uncolored truth.

The doctor continued, "All I'm saying is this woman is quite taken with you. She's a really nice person."

Sadavis' lips twisted in an angry grin. "Oh I see. And Baptista the cold-blooded monster isn't right for her."

"I didn't say that. But we both know what you are and the dangers you constantly face."

"And this little speech is coming from a man who, just a few short years ago, fought against the Network—"

"That was for a just cause," Matthew interjected.

"Yes it was, but let me finish. A man who fought against the Network and went into hiding without letting his wife know if he was dead or alive."

Matthew's eyes blazed lavender and the tips of his unsheathed fangs glistened against his lips. "I deeply regret how much I hurt Dulcie but I had little choice. What do you know about the situation other than rumor, anyway? You were buried somewhere in India on a case, most likely bathing in blood and enjoying every minute of it."

Sadavis resisted the urge to grind his teeth. His gaze bore into Matthew's in a manner that usually sent even powerful males running with their tails between their legs. The doctor, however, was one of those rare vamps who refused to bow to anyone or anything, not age, law or superior power.

"You have no call to speak to me like this, Matthew. Do not cross me."

The doctor growled deep in his throat, a low warning growl that Sadavis returned.

"It's fine for you to rake through my life but you don't want me to touch yours. I do not want to fight with you, but whether we continue this day as friends or rivals is up to you," Sadavis said.

A muscle twitched in Matthew's jaw. Slowly the vampiric glow faded from his eyes. "You're right. I apologize. Your relationships are none of my business. It's just that Esmeralda is a good friend of Dulcie and she worries about her."

"I have no intention of hurting her."

"I didn't think so, but isn't there an old saying that goes something like the road to hell is paved with good intentions? One thing I've learned the hard way is that openness and honesty are the most important part of a relationship. I'm not only concerned with Esmeralda, but with you too."

Sadavis curled his lip. "With me?" That was new. Usually people considered him well able to take care of himself. Between his appearance and his reputation, he didn't usually provoke concern in others, except for their lives.

"For as long as I've known you, I've never seen you with a companion."

Sadavis laughed. "You are the nosiest bastard I've ever met."

"I know you're obsessed with your work. I understand because I used to be the same way. I convinced myself I didn't need anyone, but life got very lonely."

"You're young, Matthew."

"And you're old, which concerns me even more. Everybody needs somebody."

Sadavis grinned. "Isn't that a song or something?"

"I'm serious."

"Drop it, Matthew. As you said, you know what I am."

"Exactly. I've seen what you've gone through on cases. I've cleaned you up enough times to know that one of these days you might not be so lucky. That has to create some emotional needs."

"By my age I've learned to control whatever lingering emotional needs I might have. In my day we didn't have all this talk of psychosis, therapy and trash like that."

"It's not necessarily trash. Everyone has emotional needs, Sadavis. If you find someone you care about you owe it to both of you to —"

"Matthew." Closing his eyes for a moment, Sadavis tried to keep his temper in check. "I told you. I've only known her a —"

"A week. I know. I know."

"Have you been speaking as my doctor or my friend?"

"Both."

"Duly noted. Now I'm going to speak as a mentor. Let's get this ritual under way."

Though Matthew didn't mention Esmeralda again, the doctor's words kept turning in Sadavis' mind. He knew the truth when he heard it. His career was dangerous, almost suicidal at times. Dragging an unsuspecting woman into a relationship with him wouldn't be ethical. Worst of all was knowing Matthew was right. Esmeralda filled an empty space inside him that he hadn't even realized was there. He loved her gentleness, the way she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him, the way she talked to him. For many reasons he had little of such attention throughout his long life and he hungered for it.

When the time was right he would disclose the truth about his career. As an agent, he had a responsibility to use discretion and make careful observations before trusting anyone with information that might reveal his true nature to the wrong parties. He needed to place his growing affection and giddy desire for her aside, at least until they knew each other better.

When their ritual ended, Matthew asked if Sadavis and Esmeralda planned on going to the costume party two nights away at Poet's Manor hotel.

"Yes we're going," he said. "She's looking forward to it."

"And you?"

"Oh I love costume parties." Sadavis winked and waved a hand over his face. "Natural mask you know."

"Are you going as the court jester again?"

"No. I've got another idea this time."

"Care to tell me what?"

"No."

Matthew chuckled. "This should be interesting."

No sooner had the doctor left than the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"C. D. here," replied the familiar voice of Sadavis' superior, Cody Dilozenzo. "We need you. Pronto."

"When and where?"

Within moments, Sadavis' motorcycle was roaring toward his destination in Pennsylvania. Though Dilozenzo hadn't supplied details about Sadavis' next case over the phone, he sensed the underlying urgency in the call.

When he arrived at the rural estate, he noted even from a distance the enormous mansion was in a shambles with boarded-up windows and peeling paint. Along with the scent of Cody and several other agents mingled the stench of old blood and death.

Cody met him on the front porch. The bearded, blond-haired vamp wasn't as tall as Sadavis, but powerfully built. A born military man, Dilozenzo was in charge of the main branch of the Network's special forces.

"What's going on?" Sadavis asked.

"When we met the other day I gave you the rundown on a case I'd been working on last year with a couple of our guys."

"Yes. The resurrection ritual that could bring back deceased vampires trapped in the Underbelly. You captured the woman called Vera in charge of a militant group bent on bringing back the worst of the worst with the goal of taking over the world."

"You read all the files?"

Sadavis nodded. "Three times over. She was smart enough to delegate much of her important work to her subordinates and order them not to give her most of the details until just before her plans were executed."

"Yeah she's a smart bitch all right. The Network has had some of its finest mind control experts working on her, but it has still been like pulling fangs to weed out the truth from lies."

"Perhaps she should have been executed after all."

"Good thing she wasn't. It was through her that we found out about this place." Cody jerked his thumb toward the mansion.

"Smells like a lot of bodies in there."

"It ain't pretty, my friend, even compared to the gross shit we've seen over the years. This is what Vera and her people call a breeding facility."

Drawing a deep breath and releasing it slowly, Sadavis said, "Tell me that doesn't mean what I think it does."

Cody nodded. "Oh yeah. Check it out."

"Fuck," Sadavis muttered, stepping past Cody and into the musty, unfurnished front room. Inches of dust covered the floor. He walked through the open door across the room, Cody behind him.

In the kitchen several headless bodies were lined up, the floor beneath them stained with black gore in the outline of beer kegs. Human bones filled the sink and cabinets.

"They dumped most of the organs in a few pits in the backyard and there's a crematory in the basement."

Sadavis drew a shallow breath. "How could the bastards who did this stand the reek? The smell is —"

"Fuckin' awful." A woman's disgusted voice accompanied footsteps down the stairs. "Shit, Vinnie, get a grip. I've got one in the oven and you're the one up there puking."

"I didn't puke, Trix," snapped a deep male voice. "It was just the dry heaves. I mean I thought downstairs was bad but the things they got floating in that hot tub —"

"Just shut it," snapped the woman. "I wish I was doing the fieldwork on this case. I'd love to nail the motherfuckers who did this."

"Don't worry, baby," the man said. "When we get 'em I'll pop one in their ass just for you."

The couple stepped into the kitchen, looking as conspicuous as they sounded. Both were tall and well-muscled with dark hair. The man wore a goatee and the woman's impressive double Ds strained against her black T-shirt. The couple glanced at Sadavis and he sensed their initial surprise as their gazes swept his face, though they quickly masked any curiosity regarding his appearance.

"Yo, cuz," the man said to Cody. "We didn't find any others alive."

"All right. As soon as we're done here you and Sadavis will go back to headquarters and help with sorting through the survivors' memories and doing some reprogramming to try to get them back with their families without revealing our world. By the way, Sadavis Baptista, this is Vincent and Trixie Dilozenzo. They're excellent field agents and have been very successful undercover."

"Hey. How's it hangin'?" Vincent offered Sadavis his hand.

"Nice to meet you." Trixie also shook hands. "Unfortunately I'm going to be at the pencil-pushing end of this case. Since Vinnie found out we're expecting, he made me swear to stay out of the field. I shouldn't have told him anything until I started showing."

Vincent glanced at her midsection. "You mean you ain't?"

With a flash of her fangs, she pulled back her fist and slammed him hard in the shoulder. "What the hell kind of a thing is that to say, you ungrateful SOB? I'm carrying around Vinnie junior here, so have a little respect."

"I didn't mean anything, baby." Vincent wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. "You look better than ever. I think this whole pregnancy thing agrees with you."

Sadavis watched the couple, unsure of exactly what to make of them. He was invariably serious when it came to his work, especially when faced with a horrific scene such as this one. Still, Cody only allowed the best of the best to work on his assignments, so he had to trust that Vincent and Trixie were capable. Years ago Vincent had been a key part of destroying one of the most dangerous vampires in history. Sadavis was willing to give him a chance to live up to his reputation. He also knew about the couple from stories Matthew and Dulcie told, since they had been friends for quite some time.

"Hey," Cody snapped. "Do you think we could move on to the subject at hand? I want to get the rest of these remains out of here so we can cover up what happened before mortals find out. The last thing we need is human law enforcement working the same case. We all know what a pain in the ass that can be."

Sadavis left the kitchen and investigated the rest of the house. After all the horrors he'd seen in over sixteen hundred years of living he thought nothing could surprise him. Unfortunately every now and then he witnessed something terrible enough to prove him wrong.

The horrors within the mansion and grounds were certain to remain in his thoughts for a long time to come. Imagining the torture endured by the mortals trapped within the breeding facility incited his rage so that his focus quickly narrowed to the sole task of finding those responsible and seeing them punished.

Cody explained that other agents had been assigned to track down the vampires who had been operating this and several other breeding facilities. Backup would be needed, and that was where Sadavis and Vincent would step in. According to the agents' information they would be called upon within a few days.

Once the estate had been thoroughly searched, Sadavis traveled back to Boston with Vincent and Trixie where they joined the interrogation of the few surviving mortals.

Though he tried to remain detached and focused on business only, Sadavis couldn't help feeling compassion for the terrified mortals. Unfortunately they could offer little important information regarding their captors. When the interrogations ended, the mortals' memories were carefully erased and manipulated. Sadavis, Vincent and a couple of other highly skilled vampires were used to manipulate the memories. Any mistake could result in the danger of their kind being exposed as well as cause severe damage to the mortals' mental health.

If at all possible, the Network preferred to return victims to their families, providing the vampire world was not placed in danger. In spite of their frightening reputation tied to legends resulting from a few power-hungry vampires, most of their kind preferred to live harmoniously with humans.

## Chapter Five

It was long after dusk the following night when Sadavis returned home. Though a bit tired from having worked through the entire day, he couldn't sleep due to anger and frustration over what he'd witnessed. He opted for a workout with the hope of tiring himself enough to get a little rest before Esmeralda came for dinner.

His thoughts flooded with rage and disgust, he took out his vengeance on the steel beams in his gym. Having completely lost track of time, he was interrupted by a buzz from the outside intercom followed by Esmeralda's voice.

"Sadavis, may I come in?"

His teeth clenched and heart pounding from his workout, he cursed under his breath and strode across the gym to the intercom. Damn. He'd already worked out through most of the night. He had hoped to overcome his bad temper before seeing her. Now he was tired, sweaty and unprepared for the dinner he'd promised to cook for her.

"The door is open," he said into the speaker then returned to the steel beam he'd been striking. Its side was now so badly dented he'd need to replace it.

Moments later he caught her scent and knew she was standing nearby watching him. A pang of regret battled for dominance over his rage. Even though he longed to find the vampires responsible for the massacre in Pennsylvania, he would miss Esmeralda terribly while away on the case. Already he couldn't imagine what life would be like without her, even for a short time. They had just started getting to know each other and now...better not to think about it and enjoy what time they had left. Hopefully the case wouldn't take too long and when he returned they could pick up where they left off.

He kicked the beam hard enough to knock it off its concrete base and send it clanging across the floor. Panting, he glanced at his hands bound in sweaty, bloodstained wraps.

Esmeralda's scent carried a hint of fear mingled with lust.

"Are you all right?" she asked gently.

Clenching his teeth, he closed his eyes for a moment then turned to her.

She stared at him, her expression outwardly calm yet with wariness deep in her eyes, as if he was a wild animal she wasn't quite sure of.

"You look upset," she continued. "Maybe this is a bad time for us to see each other. Would you like me to leave?"

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, meeting her gaze. "No. I'm sorry. Just give me a few minutes to get cleaned up."

"We can postpone —"

"Please. I wish you'd stay." He reached out to touch her face then thought better of it as he again caught sight of his soiled hand wraps. "I had kind of a bad night, that's all. I didn't mean to make you feel unwelcome."

She nodded, her gaze fixed on his, and took his hand. Her thumb trailed over his wrapped knuckles.

"I'd love to hug you but I'm gross right now. I'll take a quick shower and —"

Her arms slipped around him and she held him tightly, her cheek resting against his chest. Instinctively he embraced her. Burying his face in her hair, he inhaled her wonderful scent and closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle stroking of her hands over his back. Miraculously her embrace calmed him. Usually when he was in such a temper nothing relaxed him except a heavy dose of physical exertion.

"I bought stuff for dinner but I got distracted and haven't started cooking yet," he said. "We can go out instead."

"I'll start dinner while you're in the shower, unless you don't want me messing around your kitchen."

He held her at arm's length. "You can mess around in any room in my house. Actually I encourage it."

Standing on tiptoe, she brushed a kiss across his mouth before taking his hand and tugging him toward the stairs.

While Sadavis disappeared into the bathroom, Esmeralda prepared dinner and placed it in the oven to cook.

By the time she'd finished, the shower was still running so she decided to read a book. She crossed the room and glanced at the spines of the many volumes on the shelves. Most of them were art books, but a particular title caught her gaze. *Flowers and Their Meanings*. She tugged the book off the shelf and settled onto the bed, glancing at the photos and captions describing what each flower symbolized. One of the rooms in his building contained sculptures of nearly every flower imaginable. Other than the sleeping area, it was her favorite place in his house. He must have used this book for inspiration since the full-page color photos were absolutely outstanding.

She flipped the page and paused, her heart beating a bit faster when she read the meaning of peach blossoms. *I'm yours*. A smile tugged at her lips. Had he read the meaning before presenting her with the flowers? If so this vampire warrior was even more romantic than she already thought him to be.

She'd been so lost in thought that she'd failed to notice when the shower stopped. The bathroom door opened and Sadavis approached, his freshly washed hair hanging down his back. Barefoot, he wore jeans and a T-shirt that was a slightly darker gray than his eyes.

"Dinner smells good," he said, returning Esmeralda's smile. "Why are you looking at me like that?"



"No reason."

He sat beside her on the bed and slipped an arm around her. Their gazes locked and a giddy feeling wound its way through her belly.

"I missed you yesterday," he said.

"I have to admit I was a little disappointed you had to cancel our dinner plans, but business is business, right?"

"Unfortunately." He sighed.

"Did the meeting at the art museum go well?"

"Yes."

His grip on her tightened a bit before his mouth descended on hers in a warm, gentle kiss that immediately kindled her passion.

Shifting position slightly, she locked her arms around his neck. Her breasts flattened against his chest and her heart raced with desire. She'd never imagined having sex this much, even after becoming a vampire but she couldn't seem to get enough of Sadavis, and he was completely insatiable.

He cupped the back of her head, his fingers gently stroking while he ran his lips and tongue along the side of her neck. Delight rippled through her. She slid her hands under his T-shirt and ran her palms over his smooth, hard chest. She moved her hands only to tug impatiently at the T-shirt.

With a slight chuckle, he pulled it off while she unzipped his jeans.

"I feel like I can't get enough of you," she panted.

"Good, because I know I can't get enough of you." With a sweep of his hand, he pushed her skirt up to her waist then slipped off her underpants, kissing her from thigh to calf as he discarded them.

He settled between her legs and grasped her buttocks. Almost before she could think, his mouth covered her clit. Licking and tugging with his lips, he instantly enflamed her passion. She tried to squirm with pleasure, but he held her steady.

"Oh, Sadavis. Oh," she murmured, her eyes closed, every nerve in her body completely alive.

She came beneath the rhythmic strokes of his warm, wet tongue. While she throbbed in climax, he covered her body with his and entered her with a long, slow thrust.

Esmeralda clung to him, her fingers biting into his powerful back. She loved how his muscles moved sensuously beneath her hands. Her legs locked around his waist and her hips met his thrust for thrust as another orgasm built deep inside her.

An annoying beeping startled her. Ignoring it completely, Sadavis continued thrusting.

"It's the stove alarm," Esmeralda panted, stilling clinging to him, her heart pounding madly. The wonderful tightness of impending orgasm had her in its clutches and the last thing she wanted was to eat.

He growled in reply, a sound of arousal rather than anger.

"The food," she panted. "It'll burn."

"Then let it burn," he said, his voice husky with passion.

Esmeralda closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging tightly. Hopefully not too tightly, she thought, loosening her grip a bit.

*Tighter, his psychic voice filled her mind. Tight as you like. You won't hurt me.*

*Damn. I love Immaculates.*

*Glad to hear it, Esmeralda.*

A few more fast thrusts and she tumbled over the edge of desire. A second later he joined her, his body tightening then going limp atop her. She stroked his back for a moment, enjoying their closeness.

Finally he lifted his head and said, "I think the dinner's burning."

"Damn it!" She pushed him, squeezing out from under him and hurrying across the room, tugging her skirt down on the way. "I knew it."

"Sorry," he said, laughter in his voice.

"Good. It's only a little well done."

"I could live with charcoal for what we got in return."

Her annoyance faded and she giggled, placing the pan of food on the table. "So are you hungry now?"

"Starved."

\* \* \* \* \*

Looking forward to the evening to come, Esmeralda packed her nightgown and a change of clothes into her overnight bag. She and Sadavis were going to a costume party hosted by Poet's Manor hotel in Boston. Unknown to the mortal world, the hotel was actually the Network's North American headquarters. Her training as a chronicler had taken place there and she still visited often for research purposes. It would be nice to attend a social gathering in the plush hotel section instead of working in the cold upstairs offices.

Sadavis would be coming for her soon. They had reserved a room at Poet's Manor so they could spend the night there after the party.

Once her bag was packed, she glanced at herself in the mirror and made a few minor adjustments on her safari costume. She and Sadavis had decided to go as a themed pair and her heart thumped with anticipation of finally seeing his costume. Soon. Very soon.

Moments later she caught his scent and hurried to the door. He stood outside, the only hint of his costume was his long black hair now streaked with white and face painted to match. A black jogging suit concealed his magnificent body.

He smiled, his gaze sweeping her. "You look adorable."

She accepted his kiss then pouted. "Damn, I wanted to see you before we got to the hotel."

"Hon, you didn't expect me to ride here in full costume. As it is a cop followed me for six blocks. The hair is a little loud."

She giggled. "And we know how much you hate drawing attention to yourself."

"Getting sarcastic, are we?" he teased, gently tweaking her nose. He took her overnight bag as they walked to his bike and mounted.

Esmeralda slipped her arms around him, holding him snugly during the ride. Being with him made her happier than she had ever imagined.

Once at the hotel, they checked into their room and Esmeralda stared eagerly while Sadavis undressed. Beneath the jogging suit he was nearly naked except for a black and white bikini. Like his face, his body was expertly painted with black and white zebra stripes heavy enough to conceal the jester tattoo. Esmeralda felt a twinge of jealousy knowing his artist friend, Ora, had done the painting.

"Too much, you think?" he asked.

She laughed. "Oh, of course not."

"You're sure?" He turned his back to her, revealing a black tail dangling from the back of his bikini.

Her hands flew over her mouth and laughter bubbled in her throat. "God, Sadavis! Have you no shame?"

"None."

"But you have the best ass I've ever seen." She slapped his bottom then let her hand stray over the rock-hard muscles.

"Keep doing that and we won't make it to the party."

"Tempting, but I have got to show you off for at least a little while."

"Show me off?" He wrinkled his nose. "I don't believe a woman has ever used those words in reference to me."

"Oh no? I'll bet Ora would love to. Speaking of Ora, did she do anything else besides paint you?"

Placing a hand over his heart, he said with mock despair, "You're questioning my honor?"

"Now who's being sarcastic?"

He grasped her shoulders and bent, speaking close to her ear, "You're the only woman I want, Esmeralda."

His words sent her pulse racing. The only woman he wanted. What a marvelous thought.

When they arrived in the lounge section of the hotel where the party was being held, most of the guests had already arrived. Couples danced and mingled at the bar and tables. Esmeralda had to admit she felt a bit self-conscious at first on the arm of her zebra. Even among vampires, Sadavis drew attention like no man she'd ever seen.

Dulcie and Matthew, dressed like a flapper and gangster, waved to them from a booth in the corner of the room. She noticed another couple seated with them, both blond, the man ruggedly handsome and the woman petite yet large-breasted. They were dressed like a Civil War soldier and a Southern belle.

"Wow. You guys look great," Dulcie said.

"Really, Sadavis, you need to overcome your shyness," Matthew teased.

"Yeah he's a damn wallflower," muttered the Civil War soldier.

"Esmeralda, this is Cody and Joanna Dilorenzo," Sadavis introduced the strangers. "Don't ask what a nice girl like her is doing with a guy like him. None of us can figure it out."

"I'm just with him for the sex." Joanna winked, cuddling close to the soldier.

"Are you related to Vincent?" Esmeralda asked. She thought she noticed a resemblance between the blond man and a Network agent who was also a friend of Matthew and Dulcie.

"We're cousins," Cody replied.

As if on cue, Vincent and his wife Trixie stepped into the lounge. Esmeralda resisted the urge to laugh aloud. Vincent was dressed as a giant rooster. His thickly muscled torso was bare, except for a pair of red and white wings attached to metal armbands hugging his biceps. Skintight red pants and boots covered his legs. An enormous red plume topped off his six-foot-three-inch frame. Other than Sadavis, his was the most obnoxious—and eye-catching—costume at the party.

Trixie wore an adults-only cowgirl costume. A ten-gallon hat rested atop her head. She wore chaps and boots. A whip hung at her hip. The tiny leather vest scarcely concealed her ample breasts, enhanced even more by her newly announced pregnancy.

"Oh, God." Matthew wrinkled his nose. "I don't believe it."

Cody chuckled. "Here they come."

"Yo." Vincent grinned and approached the booth. "How's it hangin'?"

"Y'all look great," Trixie said in a luscious Georgia accent.

Vincent's gaze swept Sadavis. "Shit, this guy has got big enough balls to be an honorary Dilorenzo. I thought I was going to win the prize for best costume. Looks like I got some competition, Trix."

"Yeah that's a damn good outfit," she admitted.

They joined the others in the booth.

"The whole look is...what's the word I'm looking for?" Vincent narrowed his eyes at Sadavis and waved his hand over his face.

"Go on." Sadavis' gray gaze held Vincent's in an almost goading manner.

The table fell into uncomfortable silence and Esmeralda resisted the urge to fidget.

"Why don't we order some drinks," Matthew interjected, waving across the room to a waitress dressed as a French maid.

Esmeralda tried not to cringe inwardly. It upset her that she seemed far more sensitive about Sadavis' appearance than he did.

"Since we first met I've sensed you're curious about my face," Sadavis said to Vincent.

"Vinnie is nosy with everybody," Trixie said. "Just ignore him. I always do."

"It's birth defects," Sadavis said conversationally.

Vincent shrugged. "You don't owe me any —"

"It's better than sensing the curiosity all night."

"You know at the research center there are a few doctors who've gotten real good at reconstructive surgery on our kind."

Esmeralda fired the rooster a furious look, her pulse quickening with anger. Beside her, Sadavis seemed unperturbed by the conversation then he cast Vincent an evil smile, one that Esmeralda knew meant repressed anger. "I've already had it."

Esmeralda unconsciously gripped his hand a bit tighter.

"Good going, Vinnie," Trixie muttered under her breath, casting her husband an irritated look.

Cody raised an eyebrow. "That's my cuz. Class and tact."

Vincent's lip curled in a lopsided grin and he reached up to rub his plume. "Look, no offense. I really shoved my foot in my mouth this time and I don't know how to pull it out."

This time Sadavis' smile was more genuine. "Forget it."

"He spends most of his life with his foot in his mouth," Trixie said, glancing between her ample breasts and tugging away a loose piece of fringe from her vest.

The waitress approached the table.

"May I get you some drinks?" she asked.

"That's a good idea," Vincent said, reaching for Trixie and burying his face in her neck, his fangs flashing.

"Vinnie!" Trixie shoved him away, a grin on her lips. "Later."

While the orders went around the table, Sadavis turned to Esmeralda and brushed a strand of hair from her eyes.

His psychic voice gently touched her mind. *Smile. You're too lovely to look this angry.*

She drew a deep breath, forcing herself to relax, and smiled at him.

The buffet was served and the group filled their plates then returned to the booth where they ate and talked about trivial matters. Esmeralda and Sadavis kept stealing glances at one another and more than once their hands strayed to each other's knees beneath the table. Several times Esmeralda resisted the urge to stroke his bare thigh. As if sensing her thoughts, he glanced at her, a lustful gleam in his gray eyes.

She could scarcely wait until they returned to their room for the night.

"Whoa." Vincent leaned back in the booth and patted his muscle-ridged abs. "I'm stuffed. How's about working off some of this food on the dance floor, Trix?"

"You got it."

The rooster and the cowgirl left the table. Once on the dance floor, Vincent threw back his head and crowed like a rooster. He shook his bottom while Trixie cracked her whip at his feet. Esmeralda couldn't stifle a loud giggle. She noticed a smile playing around Sadavis' mouth as well.

Matthew curled his lip at the dancing Dilorencos. "What a spectacle."

"They're just having fun," Dulcie said.

"Actually dancing isn't such a bad idea." Cody turned to his wife. "Ma'am?"

"It would be my pleasure, sir." Joanna replied in her soft British accent, taking his offered hand and accompanying him to the floor.

"Would you like to dance?" Sadavis asked Esmeralda.

Smiling, she shook her head. "I kept stepping on your feet last time."

"I can handle it." He winked, grasping her hand and tugging her to the dance floor.

Esmeralda's heartbeat quickened once she was in his arms. It was all she could do to keep from running her hands over his gorgeous body. The zebra look was far more of a turn-on than she wanted to admit.

The song ended and Marcus, the slight, blond owner of Poet's Manor, stood in the center of the dance floor and called for everyone's attention. Throughout the evening guests had been casting votes for the best costumes. Each winner would receive a bottle of the hotel's finest blood-laced wine.

"Best themed couple is the rooster and the cowgirl," the hotel owner called.

Grinning from ear to ear, Vincent and Trixie paraded around the dance floor with much crowing and whip cracking before claiming their wine.

"Best female costume goes to the Aztec goddess," Marcus announced. An attractive dark-skinned vampiress approached Marcus, smiling and waving as she accepted her prize to the sound of cheering sprinkled with whistles and catcalls from several men.

"Finally, best male costume is the zebra."

This time the whistles and catcalls sprang from several female guests as Sadavis accepted his wine with quiet dignity only he could conjure while dressed in such an outlandish getup.

Rejoining Esmeralda, Sadavis held her gaze and caressed her face with his fingertips. "Would you like to—"

"I've been waiting to all night," she interrupted, taking his hand in a firm grip and tugging him toward the exit. They glanced over their shoulders, waving goodbye to Matthew, Dulcie and the others.

No sooner had they stepped into their room and closed the door than Esmeralda threw herself at Sadavis. Her arms wrapped tightly around him, she covered his mouth in a penetrating kiss. He met every warm, wet thrust of her tongue with enthusiasm, his free hand warming her back while he placed the bottle of wine on a decorative table. He tugged off her hat so he could run his fingers through her hair.

When the kiss broke, they were slightly breathless. Sadavis' eyes gleamed reddish with vampiric lust and Esmeralda knew hers must look the same. The warmth of his body spread through her, stoking her passion.

"I've been waiting all night to make love with my zebra," she said, stepping back slightly to run her hands over his painted chest. Her fingertips circled his nipples, one stark white, the other ebony. "You are so beautiful."

A look of affection softened his lustful stare and he traced the shape of her face, staring at her in wonder before he cupped the back of her head and kissed her deeply. His lips traveled to her neck. He ran his tongue along the side of it then used the very tips of his fangs to tease the flesh.

Esmeralda drew a sharp, pleased breath and clung to him.

"You know what I'd like right now?" she breathed.

"Tell me."

"Since you're dressed for the occasion," she tugged at his zebra tail, "I'd love you to take me from behind like an animal."

His growl was almost a purr. Grasping her waist, he tugged her onto the floor and began unfastening the ties on the front of her safari shirt. While she kicked off her boots, he removed her shirt and tugged off her trousers. Another low growl rumbling in his chest, he used his claws to slice off her bra and panties.

Kneeling on the floor beside her, he stroked her breasts and belly then slid his hand between her legs. She momentarily closed her eyes, loving the sensation of his long, slender finger sliding into her passion-slicked pussy. He withdrew his finger and began circling her clit with wet, enticing caresses.

"You want to be taken like an animal?" he asked, gazing at her through his lashes.

Her breath already quick with anticipation, she nodded and reached for him, but he eluded her groping hands and rolled her onto her stomach. He grasped her waist and tugged her to her hands and knees.

Esmeralda moaned with pent-up desire, trying not to squirm her bottom when he knelt behind her and grasped her waist. Inch by inch his erection slid into her. She

gripped the rug, her head spinning with arousal as he began a slow rhythmic thrusting that gradually increased in intensity.

"Oh, Sadavis," she gasped, her hands so tight on the carpet that they ached, but not nearly as much as the sexual ache flooding her most sensitive parts. "Yes, oh, yes."

Unable to resist, she moaned and wiggled, her body on the edge of orgasm. She came fast and hard, panting and trembling while he continued pounding her with several fast thrusts before she felt him join her in bliss.

They tumbled onto the carpet, wrapped in each other's arms.

Finally she raised herself onto her elbow and gazed at him, using her fingertip to trace random shapes over his steely, zebra-striped chest. "That was fun."

He grinned. "Yes it was."

"I'm glad the night is young."

"So am I." Before she could speak again, he claimed her mouth in a soul-stealing kiss and covered her body with his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toward dawn, Sadavis lay in bed gazing at the ceiling with drowsy eyes, enjoying the warmth of Esmeralda curled against his side, deeply asleep.

They'd spent most of the night making love before she drifted off, leaving him content and again pondering how quickly they had become close.

He glanced at her, his hand hovering over her shoulder, longing to touch her yet not wanting to disturb her.

Cody's scent preceded by a soft tap on the door pulled him from his thoughts.

After tugging on the jeans from his duffel bag, he answered the door.

"We need to talk," Cody said quietly. "Business."

Nodding, Sadavis turned, put on his boots and shirt then followed Cody to an upper floor of Poet's Manor that was reserved for Network business. It contained meeting rooms, archives and prison cells strong enough to cage the most powerful of their kind.

They stepped into a small room with a square table at which sat Vincent, Alik and Sy Wooden, who was a computer expert and a physician. He had been one of the doctors who had performed Sadavis' facial surgeries.

To his annoyance, Naldo was also with them. Naldo's gaze fixed on Sadavis and the hint of a snarl curled his lip only to fade as quickly as it came.

Cody noticed the unspoken rivalry between them, however, and said, "I take it you guys have met before."

They nodded.

"I didn't know you were one of us," Naldo said to Sadavis.



"Nor I you, but that's our job, isn't it? Keeping secrets."

"I'm sensing some hostility here," Cody stated. "Ain't no room for that kind of shit, boys."

"No hostility." Naldo forced a smile and extended his hand to Sadavis. "If you're as good an agent as you are a fighter it will be a pleasure working with you."

Sadavis reached out tentatively with his telepathic powers. His command of both the psychic and magical arts were his greatest gifts and had played a major role in securing his position in the Network. His ability to slip into the thoughts of even the most experienced vampires was a rare and powerful skill. Naldo's defenses were up, yet Sadavis caught flashes of several disturbing emotions. Scarcely controllable rage and a desire for vengeance.

"Our contacts have supplied enough information on the breeding facilities for us to go in, boys," Cody interrupted Sadavis' psychic exploration. "We can get you in at one of the smaller facilities with some of their cronies and it's your job to work yourselves up to meeting their bosses, who are most likely Vera's major players. Once you do that, clear the way for backup to move in and we'll bring them down."

"It's going to get really bad in there," Sy warned. "Cody and I have dealt with Vera before and she only associates with the absolute worst of our kind."

"As usual we've got to use extreme caution," Cody said. "Any sign of weakness, any hint of blowing your cover and you're as good as dead."

"Or worse than dead," Sy added.

"Alik and Sadavis, you're going to be our key players. You'll be joining up with the vamps at the breeding facility. Sy and Vincent are in charge of communications. Naldo is there for immediate backup, should anything go wrong. He's also your source of escape when you need to pull out."

"No," Sadavis stated. It would be a cold day in hell before he would place his life in Naldo's hands. He hadn't been mistaken earlier when he'd sensed the man held a grudge over their less than friendly first meeting at Rosa's Ring II. Sadavis hadn't lived this long by relying on poor instincts.

"What?" Cody demanded.

"I don't want him as my direct source of escape."

Naldo forced a laugh. "What the hell are you talking about? We're all professionals here."

"Yes and I've been in this business long enough to know that whomever I depend on as a partner I must trust implicitly."

"What's going on here, guys?" Cody asked. "There's no room for personal issues."

Sadavis held Cody's gaze. "You've known me for a long time. I would not make such a demand lightly."

Cody stared hard at Sadavis.

Naldo curled his lip. "I can't believe you're going to allow this prima donna garbage."

"There are no prima donnas here," Cody stated. "Naldo, you're moving to communications. Vinnie, you'll be immediate backup."

"If sweetheart here will work with him," Naldo scoffed, jerking his thumb in Sadavis' direction.

"Problems?" Cody glanced around the table.

"No problem." Sadavis turned his penetrating gaze to Naldo who held it briefly before staring past him.

"Before we continue this discussion, I want to remind you about a particular ally of Vera's known only as Job," Sy said.

"I thought he was killed at the same time Vera was captured. Didn't he get blown up with a grenade?" Naldo asked.

"Yes," Sy said, "but as you know he's of wolf blood. The remains we found show traces of wolf-vampire mix DNA that could be his. In spite of all the research the Network has conducted on both full-blooded wolves and various mixes, they seem indestructible. Their regenerative powers are unprecedented. If only our research hadn't been cut short at the end of the Deep Red case when almost all the mixes on the planet mysteriously disappeared."

Sadavis' interest sparked. The wolves, descendents from the military guard dogs of the vampire home planet, were fascinating creatures. Matthew had been actively involved in wolf research and had called upon Sadavis when the dangerous wolf-vampire mixes had disappeared from the research center. Common theory was they had been abducted by a small party of Original vampires who had landed on Earth a year and a half ago. They'd come to reclaim two of their kind who had been stranded for thousands of years. In spite of the Originals' benign nature, they were reluctant to establish a relationship with their descendents on Earth.

"Job was Vera's most dangerous guardian before she was captured," Sy continued. "His strength is like nothing I've ever seen before. If he somehow survived the explosion, which is entirely possible, he's most likely still associated with her people. If he shows up, use extreme caution and try to find a way to bring him in. The Network wants to study him."

It was no wonder. In appearance, Job was almost identical to Matthew Winter and his twin brother Adam Lindsay who was leader of the entire Network. Studying the DNA believed to be Job's had proved that the twins and the evil wolf mix were indeed related, though the questions about how were unlikely to be answered unless Job's werewolf constitution had allowed him to survive.

## **Chapter Six**

For the next hour the agents discussed the finer points of the case, then Cody dismissed them to get some rest before leaving that coming night.

"Baptista, hang back a minute," Cody ordered before the agents filed out of the room.

Sadavis closed the door and rejoined his boss at the table.

"About this woman you were with tonight."

"Esmeralda."

"Yes. What is she to you? An affair?"

"No." Though Sadavis knew that as his superior Cody had the right to ask personal questions, he didn't like discussing Esmeralda with his boss.

"Have you told her what you do?"

"I've only known her a little over a week."

Cody nodded, his blue gaze fixed on Sadavis. "Discretion is good then."

"I believe I will tell her the truth about my career eventually."

"I understand. Finding a mate is usually instinctive for us, but for now concentrate on getting this job done. You can't afford any distractions."

"I always do concentrate on the job," Sadavis stated.

"I know."

"Aren't you going to ask about Naldo?"

"No. He's a good agent, but I trust your instincts."

This act of confidence meant more to Sadavis than he could express. "Thank you, sir."

"Get some rest. Say your goodbyes and good luck tonight."

Sadavis nodded and left the room. His usual feelings of anticipation over starting a new case were tainted by unfamiliar sadness at the thought of leaving Esmeralda. Even worse how could he explain his sudden departure in a way she'd believe without giving away the nature of his assignment?

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis returned to his room and tried to rest, knowing he'd need to be refreshed before starting his case, yet sleep eluded him. He kept staring at Esmeralda, feeling more torn than he ever had in his life.

Always a man ruled by intellect and not emotion, he couldn't justify telling his professional secrets to a woman he'd known for such a short time, even if his gut instinct told him to. He had explored her mind, probably far more than he had a right to, and knew he could trust her, but did he want to burden her just yet? The life of an agent's companion was often spent wondering whether her lover was dead or alive. The risks he took directly affected her.

His feelings for Esmeralda were strong and he sensed hers were as well, but all that could change. A week, especially for their kind, was such a short time. What sort of agent would he be if he blurted out his Network ties because he had a crush on a woman, no matter how incredible she was?

If their relationship continued, perhaps even became permanent, he would have to tell her the truth. She needed to make an informed decision, but not now. When he returned, if their feelings hadn't changed, he would consider disclosing more information. Until then Cody was right. He needed to concentrate on staying alive and arresting the freaks who tormented mortals at the breeding facilities.

Rolling onto his back, he closed his eyes and forced his thoughts to clear.

\* \* \* \* \*

All too soon the alarm rang. Sadavis opened his eyes and stretched.

"Good evening," Esmeralda purred, cuddling closer to his side and kissing his chest.

"Hello." He caressed her back.

"Do you want to use the shower first?"

"You can."

"Thanks." She dropped a light kiss on his shoulder and hurried to the bathroom. His gaze followed her naked curves and he felt a pang of longing. Already he missed her.

He quickly packed his few belongings into his duffel bag while listening to water run in the bathroom. When she stepped out, he brushed past her quickly, washed and dressed.

"I ordered breakfast," she said when he returned.

She slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Embracing her, he closed his eyes, fully enjoying the kiss.

When it broke she held his gaze, her brow furrowed. "Is something wrong?"

"Why?"

"You just seem a little —"

"Actually, there is a problem."

Taking his hand, she squeezed it gently. "What is it?"

"I know we had plans for tonight but I have to cancel them."

"That's all right. We can see each other tomorrow or another day."

Sadavis' gut twisted. He felt like a first-class louse. "While you were asleep I had a business call. Arrangements have been made for me to study the artwork and craftsmanship of a tribe in Africa I've been wanting to learn from."

She released his hand, a chilly look creeping into her eyes. "I see."

"I know it sounds sudden —"

"Yes, it does."

"But it's actually been in the planning stages for quite some time."

"Well, if you have time to call or write during this sabbatical or whatever —"

"That's doubtful. They live in a very remote area and I won't have access to modern communication." The lie sounded pathetic even to him. Shit. He was an agent. Couldn't he have come up with a better story? Why hadn't he prepared her sooner? He had known days ago that he would be leaving on a mission, but he hadn't wanted to poison their short time together.

"Oh my God." Esmeralda backed away from him, laughing aloud, the sound not in the least humorous. "How could I have been such a jackass?" She stalked across the room and began throwing her belongings into her bag. "You know, Sadavis, if you don't want to fuck me anymore at least have the balls to come out and say it."

"Esmeralda, I swear to you that's not the reason." He stepped closer and tried to touch her but she shrugged off his hand.

"It's my own fault. I should have known not to trust a guy with a fucking court jester tattooed on his chest." She slung her bag over her shoulder and headed for the door.

"Esmeralda, will you listen to me. As soon as I come back —"

She flung him a scathing look. "Please give me some credit. I might be younger than you but I'm not a complete idiot. And if you take another step closer to me you'll regret it."

He paused, not because her threats frightened him but because in spite of the lie he'd just spun, he respected her. The last thing he wanted was to part with her like this.

"Esmeralda, at least let me take you home."

"Just stay out of my sight." She opened the door and stepped into the hall.

His teeth ground and he resisted the urge to shake her. It had been literally ages since a woman's rejection had cut him to the quick like this, but he was falling in love with her.

She slammed the door behind her, blocking her from his view though when he reached out with his mind he sensed her anger and pain as keenly as his own. She felt used and he didn't blame her. When the case was over he would find a way to make this up to her. He had to because he didn't want to contemplate never seeing her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda took the stairs to the lobby instead of the elevator, not wishing to wait a moment longer than she had to on the same floor as Sadavis.

Marcus stood at the front desk talking to several of his employees but turned to her immediately when she approached.

"Hi, Marcus, do you think I can get a ride home please?"

"Of course." The blond vampire motioned for one of the hotel's limousine drivers to take her bag. "Are you all right, Esmeralda?"

"No." She swallowed hard. "But I'll get over it."

"Right this way, ma'am," the limo driver said.

"Esmeralda, wait!" Sadavis called as he burst through the door leading from the stairwell.

Furious yet hurt beyond words, she turned and hurried toward the exit, brushing past her driver.

Sadavis caught up to her and grasped her arm. "I don't want us to part like this."

"I told you not to touch me," she shouted, shoving him full in the chest. He didn't so much as budge, though he dropped his hand.

"Baptista!" Cody Dilorenzo called from across the lobby. Several other guests as well as Marcus and his employees stared at Sadavis and Esmeralda.

Her face burned with embarrassment, not only for causing a spectacle but because of the shame she felt whenever she thought of how foolishly she'd acted over Sadavis.

When she left the hotel he didn't follow or call to her again and she didn't look back.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Esmeralda arrived home some of her rage had faded, replaced by a hint of guilt. Had she overreacted to Sadavis' story? Most likely. She had a poor track record when it came to men. Always attracted to "bad boys", she'd been burned before and had sworn off the type until she'd met Sadavis. Though he appeared like the ultimate bad boy, something in his eyes told her he was different.

Maybe he hadn't been lying to her. Perhaps he was going to Africa. But why hadn't he mentioned it to her long before this if he'd been planning to go for a long time?

She walked to the kitchen, picked up the phone and dialed his home number. The answering machine picked up so she left a brief message then called Poet's Manor. Unfortunately Marcus told her Sadavis had already left.

Gone. She didn't even know how long he was gone for. The next question was, if he did happen to be telling the truth and returned to her after his sabbatical should she take him back? Regardless of his reason, he'd hurt her. She thought she was as special to him as he was to her but she'd obviously been wrong.

The urge to wallow in self-pity almost overwhelmed her. Rather than indulge it, she took an oversized chocolate bar from the pantry and retired to her office where she threw herself into her latest chronicle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis stood at the foot of the bed in a Florida brothel and glanced at the call girl stretched naked on the sheets. To infiltrate the ranks of the vamps running the breeding facilities, he and Alik needed to start from the bottom up. They frequented the cheaper underground clubs and illegal brothels where hybrids and humans alike sold their bodies, blood and sometimes, quite unwittingly, their lives to fetish nuts with the money to pay for their vices.

For the past month Sadavis had made a show of flashing ample amounts of money, buying only the best call girls and using his age and talent with magic to advantage. He attracted the attention of brothel owners who had shifted from looking at him as a prized customer to a kindred spirit—a friend. Just a few nights ago he had been invited to a party hosted by a couple who invested in the illegal business establishments, but Sadavis knew better. Samson and Nicole Barrett were associates of Vera, part of the group of vampires the Network had assigned the agents to bring down. The taste of success was hot on Sadavis' tongue, but he still needed time. Acting too quickly would mean his destruction and failure of the mission.

"Are you going to join me?" the call girl gazed at him with a falsely horny smile that never reached her eyes, just like all the other hybrid whores he'd been with since beginning the case.

Like the others he'd paid for, she oozed fear and disgust upon seeing him. Between his physical appearance and the powerful aura he conjured at will, he played his role well.

"Sit up," Sadavis commanded, stepping closer to the bed. He didn't so much as loosen his tie as he sat beside her and grasped her upper arms, unsheathing his fangs.

He felt thoughts running free in her ignorant, untrained mind.

*So it's true what they've said about him. He can't get it up. Goes right for the blood and to hell with fucking. Almost a shame. He's built like a brick shit house and a girl can always close her eyes and just feel...*

Her confused sense of relief and disappointment was almost tangible. At one time it might have bothered him that even a whore accustomed to all manner of degradation was repulsed by his face, but he'd long since outgrown his insecurities. Especially now that he'd had a woman like Esmeralda who—

No. He could not think of her. Not while on the case. She had already affected him like no one he'd ever known and he needed to concentrate on the task at hand.

There had been times in the past when he'd allowed his body to be used in order to serve his duty, but not this time. The character he'd chosen to create for himself during

this assignment was rich, psychically powerful but quite impotent. He bought blood and indulged in blood play, but this time he wouldn't defile himself with sexual acts that never failed to leave him wondering if he was the victim or the deliverer.

As it was, he detested drinking the blood of strange women who had been through more sex and blood partners than he had years of life.

He touched the tips of his fangs to her neck and felt her tense as if she expected him to tear her flesh open and lap her with savage abandon.

Using a portion of his formidable mind control, he created an illusion that soothed and prepared her for the bite. While his penetration lacked the tenderness he felt for Esmeralda, he made certain it was painless and pleasant.

Apparently it was better than most of the bites she received because she let her hand drift to his inner thigh.

"Are you sure you don't want to give it a try?" she breathed, her voice scarcely audible.

He reached down, restrained her hand and drank deeply, listening to her heart pound and feeling her naked curves writhe against him.

"Oh. Yes, oh," she moaned, a sound she undoubtedly made for all her clients.

Closing his eyes tightly, he blocked out the sight of her just as she tried to shut out his face. The last thing he wanted was her blood and the last place he wanted to be was here in the Barretts' private home, feasting on one of their most expensive hybrid whores. He wanted –

No. He refused to explore those fantasies. The memory of tasting Esmeralda's blood was enough to inspire an erection that would destroy his whole impotency cover. Instead he concentrated on the whore in his arms, her vile memories of countless sexual partners, of murdering some for financial bonuses from her employers. The hands that now struggled in his grip as her body arched against him had done their share of killing, both of mortals and vampires. Between the physical pleasure of his bite and the way his keen mind sliced her thoughts like a sword through warm wax, she was moaning in earnest now, her stimulated body thrusting against him.

A spark of savage pleasure knifed through Sadavis and he deepened the bite, swallowing mouthfuls of her essence until she fainted.

Thoroughly revolted, more with himself than her, he disentangled her from his body, tugged a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wiped it across his lips. His brow furrowed and he touched a fingertip to the hybrid's pale throat that was slightly bruised in the area of his bite. He hadn't intended to be that rough with her.

Everything he did was for the sake of his assignment, yet at times like this, he couldn't help wondering if Matthew might have been right. What had the doctor said? That he most likely enjoyed bathing in blood when the Network ordered it?

No. He didn't enjoy it, yet it had to be done.



The taste of the whore's blood was bitter on his tongue, so unlike the sweet, distinctive taste of Esmeralda's blood. He couldn't afford to think about what someone as kind and innocent as Esmeralda would think of his career, yet he couldn't stop himself from wanting her desperately. Worst of all he might have ruined his chance of having a relationship with her.

Furious at himself for allowing thoughts of her to surface while on a case, he forced them to the back of his mind, into a cage that he locked tightly.

In the bathroom, he washed his hands and mouth, rinsing it thoroughly to rid himself of the lingering taste of the woman's heavily perfumed skin. He was to join the Barretts for dinner. Not just any dinner, but a meeting of their closest associates who controlled the breeding facilities. Earlier that day he'd been introduced to several of the guests and one of them had turned out to be Alik. The hybrid agent had been working the Chicago circuit, so Sadavis knew his appearance at the Barretts' house in Florida could mean only one thing. It was shortly after that Samson Barrett called Sadavis to his study and felt him out with probing questions and an attempt at mind control to decide how he would react to his torture factories. Barrett's psychic and magical powers were formidable but not enough to delve into Sadavis' deepest thoughts. He fed him savage lies that further instilled his confidence that he would be an ideal candidate for a business partner—wealthy, cruel and innately evil. It was then the invitation was extended.

Sadavis had lounged in his chair, confident yet attentive, his expression betraying nothing while he filed the information supplied in the back of his mind. It would all prove useful when he was debriefed after the arrests were made.

Once the conversation ended, Samson had offered his newest "partner" the choice of his finest hybrid escorts.

"I knew you would fit in perfectly among us." Samson had sat on the edge of his desk, his green gaze gleaming with excitement. "Please take this as the ultimate compliment when I say you are one of the few of us lucky enough to possess a face that truly reflects his soul. So many of our kind foolishly worship beauty when ugliness, like pain, provides the texture in the cake of the world. In a way I envy you."

Sadavis' lips slid into a practiced smile. "I don't believe I've ever received such a compliment. At the moment I'm at a loss, but one day I will find a way to repay it."

"My wife is intrigued by you."

"I hadn't noticed," Sadavis lied. The woman had been salivating over his body since the moment they met, groping him under tables and brushing against him whenever possible. Several times she'd suggested that if given the chance she might cure him of his impotency.

Samson laughed. "Of course you have. It's a shame about your little problem or else the three of us might have pleasure beyond blood one of these nights. Perhaps a few visits to the breeding facilities will help. Most vamps swear that just smelling the blood

and watching such beautiful agony drives their passion to unprecedented heights. It might be just what you need to rekindle your lust."

"It's the blood that interests me, Samson. The blood and hybrid surrender."

"Yes. It's our Immaculate nature. There's nothing like being a god among gods is there?"

"Yet you've partnered with hybrids."

"As powerful as we are, we must remember the laws of our kind. These are old hybrids with years of experience behind them. And their money is worth as much as ours."

"Of course."

"Don't concern yourself. We have many hybrids enslaved with whom you can sate your bloodlust and any other fetishes you might have."

Sadavis' stomach clenched as he stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. The more time he spent with the Barretts, the more he loathed them. It would feel so good to finally see them get what they deserved.

Half an hour later, Sadavis stepped into the second-floor dining room of the Barretts' mansion. The gazes of those already assembled drifted in his direction, Alik's among them.

The other guests included three male and two female hybrids and a male Immaculate.

Upon Sadavis' entrance, their hosts called the guests to the table. Samson and Nicole Barrett, two chestnut-haired Immaculates, appeared more like siblings than spouses. Their green eyes surveyed their guests from beneath wickedly arched eyebrows and they freely exchanged knowing looks and inside-joke grins with no regard for what their guests might think.

Once dinner was served and the servants dismissed, Samson called for attention and introduced Sadavis and Alik as their newest associates. They dove into a discussion about the locations of several breeding facilities, the cost of upkeep and security and the tabs they've kept on most of the Network field agents who had been snooping around. Vera was also mentioned several times, but Samson directed the conversation away from her. Sadavis knew he was hiding something, not just from him and Alik, but from all his guests. Perhaps a plan to rescue Vera from the Network prison. Throughout the conversation, Sadavis used his powers to discreetly probe for information or suspicion about him and Alik, but there was none.

When the meal ended, they prepared for a trip to one of the nearest facilities hidden within several miles of swampland.

Unlike the abandoned, bloodstained hellhole in Pennsylvania, this breeding facility was for the most part clean. The living area for visiting owners and their guests was especially neat. Still, the stench of pain and death wafted on the air, reaching Sadavis before he even stepped through the door.

"We'll start with the business' namesake," Nicole Barrett said as she escorted the group to the top floor of the plantation-style home. The door of each room was made of thick glass, unbreakable to the naked humans trapped behind them. Many of the humans seemed to be freely engaging in sexual acts, yet their emotional turmoil was so painful that Sadavis was forced to block it out lest it affect his temper that was already stirring to dangerous heights.

"It's easier to breed them here rather than abduct them off the streets," Samson explained for Sadavis and Alik's benefit. "That way they're never missed and we're ensured supplies of fresh blood. Most of the offspring are kept in cells on the top floor until they're old enough to use."

"Convenient," Alik observed. He appeared collected and mildly interested, though Sadavis knew the agent well enough to guess he was inwardly seething. "Do you have any trouble forcing them to mate?"

"If they refuse then a few touches of a modified cattle prod convinces them to cooperate. Once the offspring have matured, they'll be easier to control. We make certain they are taught nothing except how to feed themselves and use a toilet. Their minds are ours completely."

"Wouldn't mind control be simpler than cattle prods?" Alik remarked.

"But not as much fun," Sadavis said with his most evil smile.

Nicole beamed. "Exactly so. You're the perfect vampire." She slid her arm through his. "White fangs. Black heart."

He met her gaze as they continued down the hall. In other rooms, hybrid slaves changed humans into vampires under the same loathsome conditions that the humans mated.

"Now for the real fun," Samson said, leading the way to the basement where muffled screams and groans of agony only discernable to vampire ears echoed from the many soundproofed rooms. The odor of blood, both fresh and old, hung on the stale air.

Several of the guests disappeared into the rooms of their choice. One of the women and two of the men followed the agents and the Barretts to a door at the end of the hall.

Samson opened the door and gestured for the others to pass. Sadavis, Nicole still hanging onto his arm, stepped in first.

Two half-dead hybrid males, naked and dripping blood from a multitude of fang marks, hung by their hands from the ceiling. Two females, one hybrid, the other human, also naked and trembling with fear, were shackled to opposite corners of the room.

"Our gift to you." Samson smiled at Alik and Sadavis. "For joining our ranks. We've selected them according to your taste."

"Thanks," Alik said, exchanging a glance with Sadavis. "Nice of them."

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Nicole approached the hybrid woman who had been chosen for Sadavis. "You like the pretty ones. Come taste her." She wrapped the

woman's long black hair around her hand and jerked her head so hard that a pained gasp escaped the prisoner's throat. "Hurt her."

Sadavis felt the others' gaze upon him. As much as he wanted to rebel and free all these victims, he and Alik needed to play along until they could feed their information to the Network. If he blew his cover now, not only would a month of undercover work be wasted but there was a good chance he and Alik would lose their lives without helping any of the prisoners.

He approached the woman who stared at him with horror in her eyes, silently pleading for mercy.

Placing a heavy hand on Nicole's shoulder, Sadavis guided her away from the woman. Still he felt her watching eagerly from behind him.

He placed a firm hand behind the woman's head and gazed deeply into her eyes.

"Please," she whispered. "Don't."

Before he could stop it, the woman was shocked by a cattle prod. She screamed and Sadavis spun on his heel. His gaze fixed on Samson who stood laughing, the torture device in his hand.

"Don't allow the livestock to talk back to you."

Sadavis ground his teeth. "Don't tell me how to take blood. I like hearing their voices."

Nicole raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Kinky."

Turning back to the woman, Sadavis easily sent her soothing psychic messages. Keeping his thoughts disguised from his companions was the difficult part. When he took her blood and felt her cold, naked body pressed against his, he gained no pleasure, though he made a good show of enjoying it.

Finally he pulled his mouth from her bleeding throat. Panting, he licked her essence from his lips. A glance across the room revealed Alik with the human woman in his arms, clinging to him as he drank.

"Kill her if you like," Samson said, his excitement obvious in his glistening eyes and the bulge in his black trousers.

"Waste not, want not," Sadavis said, flicking his tongue one last time over the hybrid's throat. When he released her, she dropped onto the stone floor in a semi-swoon. "I might want her again."

"There are plenty more where she came from," Nicole said.

"Enough of this. There are so many other wonderful rooms to explore," Samson said. "What's your pleasure, gentlemen? Flogging? Gang fucking? Even you might be able to participate in the latter one of these days." Samson flashed a wicked grin in Sadavis' direction.

"I can hardly wait," he replied.

He could hardly wait to see the Barretts get what they deserved.

## Chapter Seven

The following afternoon while their hosts slept, Sadavis and Alik met in a nearby coffee shop for a brief discussion about the case's progress. Both had already been in contact with the Network and a raid was planned for two days away, giving the agents a little more time to gain additional information that might prove useful.

"I can't wait until this one is over," Alik admitted. "I think I took half a dozen showers last night after we got back from the breeding facility."

"Soaking in bleach won't be enough to clean off that filth. Fucking bastards."

"Well, it's almost over. I can hardly wait to get home to Rosa."

Sadavis envied Alik for having a wife waiting to welcome him back after an assignment like this. He needed to find a way to get back with Esmeralda. Last night he'd wished for nothing more than to climb into bed with her and shut out the memory of the breeding facility.

"We'd better get back," Alik said.

"Unfortunately."

Only two more days and their job would be done. It had been a horrible assignment, but just about anything was worth seeing vamps like the Barretts punished and their victims freed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, the Network raided the Barretts' mansion and twenty-three breeding facilities across North America.

At the mansion, Samson Barrett abandoned his wife to flee. His customized pickup truck tore across miles of private beach, but Sadavis chased after it. Both men carried guns armed with platinum bullets. Barrett shot Sadavis in the shoulder when he leapt on the roof of the truck. The injury didn't stop him from breaking the driver's side window and practically jerking Barrett out of the pickup. The vampires' fierce struggles overturned the truck and both Immaculates wasted no time before diving into a brawl, their claws and teeth ripping flesh. Barrett was a surprisingly fierce fighter but Sadavis finally pinned him down and knocked him unconscious. Panting, he glanced skyward at the helicopter that hovered low—a Network copter that he assumed was piloted by Vincent Dilozenzo. He'd been in psychic contact off and on with Vincent since the raids began because Dilozenzo was assigned to safely deliver Sadavis to Poet's Manor for his debriefing.

Hoisting Barrett over his shoulder, he waited for Vincent to lower the ladder. Only when he was halfway up did the wind change direction and he caught the scent of Naldo.

A strange sensation wrapped around his chest. He'd made it clear he didn't want to work with Naldo on this case.

As he began shoving Barrett into the helicopter a helping hand dragged his burden inside.

"Come on," Naldo shouted above the noise of the helicopter and the fiercely blowing wind.

Still feeling a bit hesitant, Sadavis climbed in and glanced at Naldo in question. "I thought Dilorenzo was supposed to pick me up."

Naldo grinned good-naturedly. "Don't say thanks or anything."

"Thanks. Now what happened to Dilorenzo?"

"What are you, in love with the guy or something? He had some kind of emergency and Cody sent me to pick you up. Relax already."

Sadavis drew a deep breath and released it slowly, glancing out the side of the helicopter. In the distance he saw Network trucks parked around the Barretts' mansion as the agents finished searching the place.

When they began flying over the woods of Alabama, Sadavis grew uncomfortable.

"Where are we going?" he demanded.

"I have a pickup at another hot zone. Cody's orders."

"I don't think he—" Sadavis didn't have time to complete his sentence before Naldo turned and kicked him as hard as he could out the side of the helicopter. Sharp reflexes and survival instinct emerged, allowing Sadavis to grasp the edge of the chopper, but even vampire claws slipped on metal.

"See ya, ugly," Naldo growled, kicking Sadavis in the face.

He lost his precarious grip on the rim and fell several feet before crashing through tree branches. If not for the shock, the pain might have been excruciating. He landed on the forest floor, completely winded, blood oozing from his nose and mouth. The fall would have killed a hybrid and Sadavis knew he'd broken bones.

His head spun and everything looked blurry, like in a nightmare. Shadows fell around him as several vampires approached. One of them he recognized from visits to the breeding facilities. Suddenly he realized what happened. Naldo had betrayed him to the enemy.

With trembling fingers, he reached into his pocket for a plastic vial containing a fast-acting poison deadly to vampires. The Network allowed agents of his rank working on important cases access to the poison. Rather than risk betraying their knowledge to their adversaries they could choose death.

After what he'd witnessed at the breeding facilities, Sadavis would rather die than assist them in any way or provide them with entertainment through torture that was sure to come.

Before the vial reached his lips, something pounced on his arm, moving faster than any vampire he'd ever seen. Then the scent struck him. Though not unpleasant it was wilder than the most primitive animal. Through eyes blurred with blood and sweat, he made out a face that looked startlingly like Matthew except for some subtle differences beginning with a pair of wickedly arched eyebrows, pointed ears poking through tufts of wild hair and wolfish fangs among both his upper and lower teeth.

A savage swipe of the creature's clawed hand flung Sadavis into oblivion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis awoke to a variety of pain from a skull-splitting headache to severely stinging wrists and ankles where platinum shackles had rubbed his flesh raw. Every body part in between was aflame. With a sickening crack, a platinum-barbed whip wrapped around his already slashed midsection followed by a sneering laugh.

Suspended by his hands from a stone ceiling dripping with condensation, he couldn't turn to see who stood behind him. Barrett's familiar scent hung on the air along with other scents, including that of the wild creature with Matthew's face. Sadavis knew it was Job, the wolf mix he'd been warned about.

"Finally awake, are we?" Barrett taunted.

"Excellent," another male voice, this one soft yet raspy, spoke close to Sadavis' back.

Seconds later the owner of the voice stepped in front of Sadavis. Lean and not particularly tall, the black-haired man possessed an almost beautiful face with cherubic lips, fine bone structure and a perfect Roman nose. Only his eyes destroyed the lovely image. Cold and brown against his alabaster skin, they reminded Sadavis of a dead tree in the midst of a winter forest.

"You and your fucking Network caused us a lot of trouble," the man continued. "But not nearly as much as you would have liked. You thought Samson and Nicole were Vera's partners, did you not? Vera is my companion, but I suppose you have no idea who I am. You may call me Ty. Like my lovely mate, I am a direct descendant of the vampires of Atlantis. So you might think you're old and powerful but you are nothing but an adolescent to me, boy. You will tell me what I want to know, then my mate and our companions will go free as our kind are meant to be, except for the likes of you of course. Network dogs belong in chains. The way you try to make us blend in with *humans* disgusts me."

Sadavis concentrated on keeping his mind blank, far away from all knowledge of the Network and Vera. He'd been tortured before and never provided his captors with information. He had no intention of starting now. He knew this man's kind. He was ashamed of his mortal roots. Immaculate or hybrid, all Earth-species vampires

contained human blood. It was nothing to be ashamed of, yet certain vampires despised the reality.

"Ah. He's going to be courageous." Ty smiled, folding his arms across his narrow chest. "This will be amusing."

"May I continue, Ty?" Samson asked.

"By all means. And when your arm gets tired, Job will be all too happy to take over for you. He never grows weary. You've met Job, haven't you, Baptista?"

Sadavis shouldn't have been surprised that they had discovered his true identity. Naldo must have supplied them with all the necessary information, though Cody obviously kept most of the details of Vera's case from him. That was good, since Ty's concern didn't seem to be the destruction of his breeding facilities but the capture of his mate.

"I will allow you to play with him, Samson. Get what information you can. If and when you fail, I have other ways of extracting what I want," Ty said, his gaze fixed on Sadavis with utter loathing. "My mate and I were created and taught by the greatest of the Original vampires to ever grace this Earth—Luci. The true First Father, not the child-vamp Adam Lindsay to whom the Network has given the title and shamed our kind. One day Vera and I will see Atlantis rise again and when it does—" Ty slipped a platinum-tipped dagger from his jacket pocket and drove it into Sadavis' shoulder. Sadavis sank his fangs into his bottom lip to keep from screaming as the vicious hybrid dragged the blade across his chest.

Tugging it from Sadavis' flesh, Ty licked away his blood.

"Umm. Immaculates taste so good," he purred. "You don't look as frightened as you should. You still believe your Network will rescue you? If you were of any real importance to them they wouldn't have wasted you on such a dangerous mission. You mean nothing to them, Baptista."

Finally Sadavis trusted his voice to remain steady and he said, "Luci himself was destroyed by the so-called child-vamp. He could not raise Atlantis. What makes you think an inferior creature like you will?"

Ty's smile faded and he turned away from Sadavis.

Barrett approached, this time carrying a spiked club. "I'm going to enjoy making you even more hideous than you already are."

Rage burned inside Sadavis and he fixed his most evil glare on Barrett. "Knock yourself out."

\* \* \* \* \*

Covered in filth, Sadavis sagged against the stone wall, not caring that the platinum shackles had already worn his flesh to the bone. Blanketed in pain even when his tormentors left him alone, he was nearly depleted of his psychic powers. His Immaculate body would endure heaven knew how much torture, but Sadavis was



weakened from injury, lack of food, water and blood. Ty and his cronies would soon destroy his mental defenses and pry into his thoughts no matter how hard he tried to conceal them.

Over the past weeks he'd been subjected to classic tortures including flogging, electrical shocks and rape. Most of these acts were committed by hybrids whom he could have destroyed with a flick of his wrist had he not been chained in this weakened state. Job kept almost constant vigil, watching the torture from the cell's darkest corner, not a flicker of emotion crossing his features. Several times Sadavis tried to infiltrate the wolf's thoughts, but he seemed immune to mind control. Then he recalled Cody mentioning that wolves didn't respond to telepathy. When ordered, Job beat Sadavis yet he revealed no pleasure. He performed his task almost mechanically, though inflicted just as much pain as the ones who reveled in tormenting him. The wolf's strength was unsurpassed. He easily broke bones and dislocated joints, at times leaving Sadavis screaming in mindless agony until his throat burned raw.

Barrett and Ty took turns interrogating him. Sadavis hated Ty's questioning most of all. The man's psychic power was so formidable that Sadavis often felt as if someone was twisting his soul and scraping the inside of his skull with razorblades. He sensed Ty's frustration that a younger vampire weakened by torture was able to resist his powers. Only that and a few brief thoughts of Esmeralda gave any meaning to his life.

Yet his resistance was almost at the breaking point and something would have to be done.

Only when he was completely alone did he allow himself even the slightest memory of Esmeralda. He didn't want to risk Ty and Barrett finding out about her.

Footsteps approached, but Sadavis didn't bother looking up until they paused in front of him and Barrett spoke in a deceptively gentle voice. "Thirsty?"

Sadavis was beyond thirsty for both blood and water. He'd been given no food or blood since he'd been captured and he guessed it had been four days since his last sip of water. The thought of either almost brought tears to his eyes but he knew better than to believe a monster like Barrett would actually provide for even his barest needs. If he did, it would undoubtedly be followed by another round of torture.

Samson lifted Sadavis' chin and held up a glass of water.

Sadavis resisted the urge to try moistening his dry lips with an even drier tongue. Inch by inch Barrett brought the cup closer to his mouth. His heart pounding with anticipation Sadavis would willingly accept more flogging for even a mouthful of water.

Just before the heavenly liquid reached his lips, Samson spilled it on the floor soiled with blood, urine and feces.

"Oops." He grinned. "How clumsy of me. Maybe we'll try again tomorrow."

Samson left him in darkness that had taken even vampiric eyes hours to adjust to. Dropping his head to his chest, Sadavis surrendered to memories of Esmeralda. He doubted he would ever see her again. He wasn't even sure where he was, but he

guessed this dungeon was well hidden and didn't doubt that once his usefulness ran out Ty would kill him.

That realization landed like a lead weight on his chest. Why was he clinging to his memories? Ty wanted them, so without them he would be useless to him.

His thoughts were broken by the sudden closeness of another person. His eyes opened halfway and fixed on Job's booted feet. The wolf's rough hand clutched his chin, lifting his face. He held a cup of water to Sadavis' parched lips.

For a full three seconds Sadavis considered not drinking, but physical need overcame him and he swallowed a mouthful only to choke it back up.

"Slowly," Job ordered. That was the only word he spoke. The only word Sadavis had ever heard him speak. Had it not been for Sy and Cody's reports he might have thought the wolf mute.

Finally Job stepped away. Sadavis held his gaze but could discern nothing.

The water had somewhat refreshed him and he knew he could summon the strength for a chant he had learned long ago from one of the oldest vampires in India. It was a chant that most vampires chose never to learn, for it invoked the darkest magic of the Originals and most feared the consequences of using it. At the moment Sadavis feared *not* using it.

In a hoarse whisper he began chanting, "Bhatta. My thoughts and memories yours. Nirriti. My mind closed to every cause. Ardra. To you a part of me. Urjani. Your owner present be."

Job's brow furrowed before he turned and left abruptly, shouting for Ty.

As the chant took effect, the cell walls trembled slightly and Sadavis' vision blackened though he heard voices in the distance.

"I'm not sure what he's doing," Job said.

"No, no, no!" Ty roared. "Not that. You fucking bastard."

Sadavis' vision returned. The sickening pain of a dagger repeatedly stabbing his torso to the bone struck him. Hands grasped his hair, tearing it out at the roots while a bony knee rammed into his groin. The savage beating continued but Sadavis couldn't understand why. He didn't know where he was or how he had gotten there.

"You won't die quickly, Baptista," his tormentor, a slender, black-haired man, panted, finally stepping away. "You are going to suffer in ways you can't possibly imagine and when I'm tired of hearing your whimpers only then will I consider killing you. I know that chant and eventually the magic invoked will fail. If you thought I was going to kill you before your memories return, you've got another think coming."

What the hell was he talking about?

Dazed with pain, Sadavis glanced around the room at two other men standing there. One wore a leering grin. The other revealed no expression at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks for being so cooperative while I'm working on this chronicle," Esmeralda said to Matthew.

They sat in his office at the vampire research center in Boston. She typed notes into her laptop while he talked. For the past month she had been working on a chronicle about his studies in vampire medicine. It was the most involved chronicle she'd tackled to date and she was pleased with how it was coming along. Matthew had given her permission to access virtually every section of the center. He had tirelessly answered her questions and allowed her to observe much of his research firsthand.

"I'm glad to do it. It's not often I get a captive audience outside the medical field," Matthew said.

"In a week or so I'll have all the notes I need and will be out from under your feet."

"I told you it's no problem."

Esmeralda paused in typing, her thoughts drifting to Sadavis. It had been several months since their last conversation at Poet's Manor. Though she'd stopped by his house many times to see if he'd returned from Africa, there had been no sign of him. She'd even spoken to Ora and Nirek, but they hadn't heard from him either and they didn't seem all that concerned. They said he often disappeared for months at a time. Only Dulcie appeared a bit worried when Esmeralda had spoken about Sadavis over dinner at her and Matthew's one night.

"I don't even know why I'm talking about him," Esmeralda had said. "It's not as if I'd ever go out with him again after he pulled a stunt like this."

"I don't think he was lying to you about his work taking him away," Matthew had said. "Sadavis isn't the type to play games with a woman."

"I'm sorry I even brought the subject up," Esmeralda replied. "I don't really want to talk about him."

That wasn't the truth however. Since he'd been gone she had been obsessed with him. She tried to forget about the time they'd shared and the feelings she'd developed, but couldn't. As usual she'd chosen a man who was absolutely wrong for her but this time the attraction ran deeper than simple lust. She'd fallen in love with the bastard and he was in Africa somewhere playing with his sculptures.

"Let's go to the lab," Matthew said. "I'll show you the results of those tests we took earlier."

"Great." Esmeralda closed her laptop and followed Matthew to the elevator. Her heart skipped a beat when a faint yet familiar scent reached her.

Matthew also seemed to smell it. He paused, his brow furrowing.

"Matthew, is this my imagination or is that Sadavis' scent?"

The doctor nodded and his concerned expression worried her. By the time they reached the emergency room down the hall she understood why. The aroma of blood, both fresh and old, combined with the reek of filth and bodily fluids. Another scent, this one wild and completely strange, lingered on the air.

"Dr. Winter!" a hybrid nurse shouted from beside a body sprawled on the walk outside the emergency room doors.

Matthew raced outside, Esmeralda close behind. She gasped and clamped her hands over her nose and mouth, repressing the urge to vomit.

If not for the scent, she would never have recognized Sadavis. Naked and covered in layers of dirt and blood, he was so emaciated that his bones looked ready to split through his grime-covered flesh. Tendrils of matted hair clung to his neck and back. Bugs crawled over his scalp and congregated in bloody gouges covering him from head to foot, many of them to the bone.

"Esmeralda," Matthew said, his voice sounding distant. Then he shouted, "Esmeralda! Listen to me. Call Marcus at Poet's Manor. Tell him Job is in the city and to send every available agent looking for him."

"Is he —"

"Go!" Matthew snapped.

Two paramedics had arrived with a stretcher and Esmeralda glanced over her shoulder, watching Matthew and the others attend Sadavis before she ran to the phone.

What the hell had happened to Sadavis? He obviously wasn't in Africa, so where had he been? When she'd first met him, she'd thought he might be a Network agent. Now more than ever she felt she'd been correct after all.

On the phone, she relayed the doctor's message to Marcus.

"Tell him I'm right on it," Marcus said.

"Marcus, who's Job?"

"I can't explain, Esmeralda. I'm sorry."

Sighing, Esmeralda hung up. She was getting tired of people not being able to explain strange happenings.

She returned to the ER and found the same nurse who had discovered Sadavis.

When she asked how Sadavis was, the nurse said she had no information.

After several hours Esmeralda's worry turned to outright fear. Sadavis had looked on the verge of death. What if Matthew hadn't been able to help him?

It was nearly dawn when she heard Matthew paged to the second floor. Not wishing to interrupt the doctor but desperate to know how Sadavis was, she decided to try catching a word with him.

She took the stairs and began wandering the second floor in search of Matthew. Voices from a staff break room caught her attention.

"God, he was a complete mess. He's lucky to be alive." Matthew's voice was just above a whisper.

"We need to keep a close watch on him," said another male voice.

"The injuries are bad enough, but the Human's Disease worried me most. After the tolerance he has built up to the treatment, I thought for sure we were going to lose him this time."

"As if all that platinum alone wasn't enough to destroy him. Sick bastards who did this."

"Jules, right now I'm too pissed off to talk about it anymore. I called Marcus and he said none of the agents have reported finding Job."

"You're certain it was his scent you caught?"

"Yes. He must have been the one to dump Sadavis on our doorstep, but I want to know why."

Job again. Who the hell was he?

Feeling numb, Esmeralda walked down the corridor in a daze. At this time of day the research center was nearly deserted. Vampires rarely got sick or injured enough for overnight stays and most of the staff worked nights only.

Sadavis' scent was strong on this floor so she guessed he was in one of the rooms. The nurse's station was empty. She was about to go back and interrupt Matthew when a low moan drifted from one of the rooms. Sadavis' scent grew stronger as she approached and stepped inside.

Feeling queasy again, she moved closer, noting his hair had been shaved off completely and what little flesh wasn't bruised or bandaged was clean and no longer crawling with vermin. He was hooked up to an IV and several monitors.

Imagining him as he had been compared to the creature lying before her brought tears to her eyes. Strange how after months of trying to convince herself she was over him seeing him like this could evoke such emotions. These feelings went beyond simple compassion. She wanted to wipe away every trace of pain he'd suffered and destroy whoever had done this to him.

He moaned again, his head shifting on the pillow. She wanted to offer comfort but was almost afraid to touch him since no part of him seemed undamaged.

Deciding the back of his hand seemed safe enough, she brushed her fingertips across it, careful to avoid his splinted fingers and bandaged wrist.

"Sadavis," she said softly.

His eyelids quivered then opened halfway. Her heart twisted at the sight of those familiar gray eyes.

"You," he whispered, the corners of his lips curving upward the slightest bit.

She smiled, resting her palm over his hand.

"May I have some water?" he asked.

"Umm, I'll check. Be right back." She slipped out of the room and nearly crashed into Matthew.

"Found him, huh?" Matthew asked.

"He asked for water. Can he have some?"

"He's awake? He's so loaded up with pain medication I didn't expect him to open his eyes yet." Matthew glanced over his shoulder toward the nurse who was back at her station and asked her to bring some water.

Esmeralda followed him into the room. When he neared the bed, Sadavis' half-closed eyes widened and his heart monitor leapt into overdrive. If he had the strength, Esmeralda was certain he'd have jumped out of bed.

"No," he murmured, his gaze fixed on Matthew. "No."

"It's just Matthew," the doctor said softly. "Take a minute to catch the scent. I'm not Job."

"Who is Job?" Esmeralda whispered.

"It's hard to explain," Matthew said.

"I'd like to know."

"I'm sorry but I can't tell you anything."

"He's an agent, isn't he? Sadavis, I mean."

Matthew sighed as he checked Sadavis' vitals. "I can't tell you anything. I'm sorry."

The nurse stepped inside and placed the water on a rolling table at the foot of the bed, then left. Matthew offered Sadavis a sip of water, but after the first swallow he appeared to be struggling to stay awake.

"The drugs are going to win, my friend," Matthew said. "Just get some rest."

"No." Sadavis' unfocused gaze drifted toward Esmeralda. "They come for me in dreams."

Sitting on the edge of his bed, she lightly touched his cheek, her thumb gently stroking his bruised flesh, noting he felt feverish, no doubt due to the platinum. "How about if I stay and if you have a nightmare, I'll wake you up?"

Sighing, he nodded, his eyes slipping shut.

"You've got a great bedside manner," Matthew commented. "Or is it just him that you can affect?"

"I don't know."

"You still care about him a lot, don't you?"

"I guess so," she admitted, glancing at the doctor. "Can I stay with him?"

"Of course. Why not? If he happens to wake up, which I don't think he will until tonight, you can give him more water. Little sips. None after twelve noon. Call the nurse if you need anything."

"Okay."

"I'll be back later to check on him."

"Thanks, Matthew."

He smiled slightly. "No thank *you*. Also I think it's only fair to tell you he's recovering from Human's Disease. His blood is no longer contagious but I just wanted you to know."

The doctor stepped out of the room and Esmeralda leapt up and followed.

"Matthew?"

"Yes?"

"Is he going to be all right?"

Sighing, Matthew motioned for her to follow him to the nurse's station. "This is more detail than I should be giving you."

"I don't want you to say things you shouldn't about a patient but—"

Matthew held up his hand. "Sometimes we all need to make a judgment call and I say he's better off with you in his corner than without you. I'll be honest, I'm not sure if he'll make it. He has a strong will but his injuries are quite severe and the Human's Disease just about destroyed him. He has also been infected by Misoria, a rare poison that produces symptoms similar to Human's Disease though not as severe. Unfortunately the cure for Human's diminishes the potency of the drug used to combat the symptoms of Misoria, so it's going to extend his recovery period even more. He's no longer contagious, should anyone happen to drink his blood, but he's going to feel rotten for quite a while. The only plus side to Misoria—"

Esmeralda wrinkled her nose. "There's a plus side to any of this?"

Matthew's lips turned up in a humorless grin. "He's alive. If he was a hybrid he would have been dead by now. As I was saying, unlike Human's Disease, Misoria doesn't affect regeneration and eventually the system expels the poison naturally. Because of this combination of problems it will take longer than usual for him to regain normal health. As it is, he needs more surgery than we were able to give him tonight. He has internal injuries that need to be repaired but he's not strong enough for the surgery just yet. Jules and I have him scheduled for late this coming night. Most of those injuries you see were caused by platinum. A lot of those cuts have gone right to the bone."

Esmeralda winced at the thought of what he must be suffering. "Whoever did this to him is an expert in vampire medicine, then?"

"Well they're at least familiar with poisons from the vampire home world."

"Some of the chronicles I studied in training discussed places where plants from the vampire home world are grown here. I thought all those farms were under Network control now."

"Most likely so did the Network." Matthew's voice carried a hint of bitterness. "As if evil can ever be contained or controlled."

"How did this happen to Sadavis? Who did this to him?"

"I don't really know. He was in no condition to tell us."

"But you have your suspicions. Does it have to do with this Job person?"

"Now I really have to keep my silence."

"Sadavis is an agent, isn't he?"

Matthew forced a smile. "All you chroniclers are nosy, but from here on out my lips are sealed."

Nodding, Esmeralda knew she would get no further information. "Thank you, Matthew."



## **Chapter Eight**

Esmeralda returned to Sadavis' room. As Matthew had predicted, he was lost in a drug-induced sleep.

She sat in a chair near his bed and tugged out her notebook and pen, though she found it difficult to concentrate on her work when so many worried thoughts churned in her mind.

Eventually she drifted to sleep and awakened several hours later to Sadavis shouting in a language she didn't recognize. Leaping out of the chair, she stared as he thrashed wildly. Matthew braced his hands against his shoulders while a nurse added medication to his IV.

The panic in his expression tugged at her heart. Instinctively she stepped closer. His gaze fixed on her, his struggling ceased and he lay panting and sweaty. Turning his palm up, he reached for her weakly.

Matthew loosened his hold and stepped away, allowing Esmeralda to sit on the edge of the bed and take Sadavis' hand. At her touch, his eyes slipped shut though he continued whispering in that strange language.

"Well." The doctor forced a smile. "Next time we can't control him I'll just wake you up."

"I can't understand a word he's saying," she said.

"I'm guessing he's speaking Hindi. That was his first language. He's so drugged it's probably natural for him to use it."

Esmeralda nodded, recalling the impressive list of languages that had been in Sadavis' otherwise scanty public file. She cringed to imagine the sort of information that was in his real file, the one the Network kept hidden.

"He should be okay now," Matthew said. "Just holler if you need anything."

The doctor and nurse left the room.

Sadavis seemed to have drifted off, so Esmeralda carefully extracted her hand from his and walked to the bathroom where she moistened a cloth with cool water. Sitting beside him, she ran the cloth over his face, carefully avoiding randomly scattered stitches.

He raised his eyelids partway and gazed at her.

"Sadavis, can you understand me?"

He nodded, the motion so slight it was almost imperceptible. It occurred to her that he was possibly drugged enough to answer anything she asked. Hopefully he would

take her cue and reply in English. Feeling guilty yet unable to resist finding out the truth about him, she continued, "Were you in Africa?"

It took him so long to respond that she thought he'd drifted to unconsciousness. Finally he said, "Africa? N...no."

*God, I really shouldn't be taking advantage of him like this.* "What was your mission?"

"Can't say," he breathed.

"What is your ID, agent?"

"22AZ. 22...No. No," he panted slightly, visibly upset.

Esmeralda's heartbeat quickened and she stroked his cheek. "Shh. I'm sorry. It's okay."

"Esmeralda," Matthew said sternly, approaching the bed. "That wasn't fair. He's drugged out of his mind."

Her face heated in shame. "I had to know. He is an agent, Matthew. There's no point denying it now."

"Like I've been saying. I can't answer —"

"I got enough from him to know the truth. Damn, I feel so guilty about how we parted. He tried to tell me he'd be back but I just got so mad because I thought he was breaking up with me. I was holding a grudge and he was going through hell knows what —"

"There was nothing you could do."

"Well, this time he's not getting rid of me so easily."

"That's good to hear. He can use a friend right now."

Esmeralda glanced at Sadavis, surprised by her depth of feeling for him. Since the moment they'd met, she'd wanted to be much more than his friend. Realizing how close she'd come to losing him frightened her.

At the sound of a soft tap, she and Matthew turned to the door. Cody Dilozenzo stepped inside, nodding to them in greeting. His gaze drifted toward Sadavis.

"How's he doing?" Cody asked.

"He's hanging in," Matthew said.

"Obviously he's not ready to answer any questions."

"No," came the doctor's forceful reply.

"What's she doing here?" Cody asked, casting a glance in Esmeralda's direction.

"She has been working on a chronicle here. Before you get all secretive, she knows he's an agent."

Cody's eyes flashed at Matthew. "Shit, Winter, I thought we could trust you."

"I didn't tell her. She figured it out herself."

"And you confirmed —"

"Matthew didn't tell me anything," Esmeralda stated.

"Listen," Cody cast her a sympathetic yet stern look, "I know you and he were seeing each other, but it's not a good idea for you to be here. I'm going to have to ask you to leave until—"

"Bad idea," Matthew said.

"Matthew, I can't allow—"

"Maybe you can't, but consider this as advice from his doctor. Esmeralda has a good affect on him and a patient's mental state can often mean the difference between complete recovery and quite possibly death. I strongly suggest you trust her enough to allow her to stay, providing she wants to."

"I want to," Esmeralda said. "I care about him very much and I wouldn't do anything to hurt him or the Network. You want to explore my thoughts? I'm open if that's what it takes to convince you I can be trusted."

Cody held her gaze for a long moment. "How much do you know?"

"Only that he's an agent who was on a mission and this is how he ended up." She tried to keep the bitterness from her voice. Showing rebellion at this point would do neither her nor Sadavis any good. Her priority was to help him, not blast the Network's methods.

"I can't give you the details," Cody told her. "Let's just say his job is to go into dangerous situations and learn what he can about the bad guys. Sometimes that means becoming one of them. This time he got caught, but not before saving the lives of hundreds of humans and hybrids."

Esmeralda felt torn between anger and pride. How could Sadavis risk his life like this? Yet without agents like him she hated to think about the horrors certain vamps might unleash upon the world.

"I'll be blunt, Esmeralda, if you choose to enter a relationship with an agent, life won't be easy."

She curled her lip. "I've already picked up on that clue."

"If you want to bail out, do it now."

Esmeralda's teeth clenched, then she forced herself to speak calmly. "I do not want to bail out."

"All right then. You can stay but the rules are you cannot discuss anything pertaining to this case."

"I don't know anything."

Cody looked irritated. "You know exactly what I mean."

"I'm not stupid. I realize there's danger here and I know the Network must keep its secrets. My only concern is with Sadavis and seeing that he gets through this."

"Good." Cody's blue gaze seemed to tear right through her. "Right now that's our top priority."

"By the way, who are you exactly?" Esmeralda asked.

"I'm Sadavis' boss."

Esmeralda felt weak. She'd been standing here arguing with a man who was obviously high up in the Network, a man who could have her fired and, even worse, prevent her from seeing Sadavis.

"Winter, I have a bit of news for you. Job turned himself in to Marcus this morning."

Matthew's eyes widened. "You're shitting me?"

"I'm not shitting, my friend. He waltzed into Poet's Manor, allowed himself to be placed in a holding cell and asked to see you."

"Me?" Matthew raised an eyebrow. "I suppose it's only natural that he's as curious about me as I am about him."

"I'm on my way to the hotel for the interrogation now. Want to come?"

"Yes." Matthew turned to Esmeralda. "If you need anything, call the nurse or Jules. I'll be back soon."

"Who's Job?" Esmeralda asked, starting to feel like a broken record.

Cody glanced at her. "He's one of those things we can't talk about except to say he's the one who got Sadavis out of the situation he was in. Don't ask why because we're still trying to find out."

Feeling more frustrated than ever, Esmeralda watched the two men leave the room. She turned back to Sadavis.

"Where have you been?" she whispered, watching him sleep and wondering if she would ever truly know him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda remained at the research center until Sadavis was taken to surgery late that night. Though reluctant to leave, she was tired and needed a change of clothes. Matthew assured her it would be several hours before the doctors finished working and Sadavis regained consciousness, so she went home and caught up on sleep. A few hours later, she awoke feeling anxious. Knowing that any further rest would be impossible in her state of mind, she washed, dressed and returned to the center.

When she arrived, Sadavis was back in his room, asleep. Matthew and a small, slender hybrid stood at the foot of the bed discussing his chart. They glanced up when Esmeralda stepped in.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He's doing well," Matthew said. His relaxed expression rather than his words did far more to ease her mind. "Like I said, it'll be a long recovery for a vampire but he has a will of iron and, like most Immaculates, a resilient body."

Esmeralda sighed with relief.

"I don't believe we've met," said the small male hybrid, offering her a smile that revealed rather crooked fangs.

"Where are my manners?" Matthew said. "Esmeralda Giordano, this is Dr. Jules Kane."

"Oh." Esmeralda took Jules' extended hand and shook it. "This is your research center."

"It's for all of our kind," Jules said, looking a bit sheepish. Esmeralda found it difficult to believe that one of the most brilliant minds in the vampire community didn't seem to possess a hint of the arrogance common to most successful men, let alone a hybrid of his respectable age. "Matthew tells me you've been chronicling his research."

"Yes. It has been a fascinating experience."

"You're a friend of Sadavis?"

*Actually I'm madly in love with him.*

She buried the thought and said, "Yes."

"He should be waking soon. I'm sure he'll be glad to see you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some calls to make." Jules nodded before slipping out of the room.

"How long will he have to stay here?" Esmeralda asked, taking her seat near Sadavis' bed.

Matthew's eyes narrowed in thought. "I'd say we're looking at no less than seven days, but it could be longer."

That was an extended period for a hybrid let alone an Immaculate whose injuries usually faded overnight.

"It's the platinum," Matthew said. "Even after a week he won't be completely healed and the effects of Misoria can last up to a month."

Sadavis began to stir, ending their conversation. Esmeralda stepped away as Matthew examined him briefly and glanced at the monitors.

Sadavis' eyes opened, unfocused at first.

"Matthew?" he asked softly.

"How are you feeling?" the doctor asked.

"Peachy."

Matthew chuckled. "Do you know where you are?"

"I'm guessing the research center?"

"How about your name and ID number?"

"Sadavis Baptista. 22AZ."

"Do you know how you got here?"

Sadavis' brow creased and he lowered his gaze. "No. The last thing I remember is being stuck in some dungeon. I..."

"It's okay. That's enough for now."

As Sadavis' expression grew more focused, Matthew began explaining his physical condition and what he could expect during recovery.

"A week in here?" Sadavis muttered. "You're kidding."

"Hey you're lucky to be alive. After what you've been through, what's a week in a hospital room?"

Grimacing in pain, Sadavis tried pushing himself to a more upright position. Matthew assisted him, warning him to move very carefully. With his gaze lowered as he concentrated on shifting position, Sadavis obviously didn't see Esmeralda standing across the room.

Her guess was confirmed when he said, "Esmeralda is here. I can smell her. Is she still mad at..." His voice faded as he looked up, his startled gaze fixed on her.

She approached, offering her warmest smile. "Hi."

"Oh God," he breathed, turning his face away from her. "What is she doing here?"

Esmeralda froze, unsure if she was more angry or hurt.

"She has been here since you were brought in," Matthew said.

"Great. Bet you thought I couldn't get any uglier."

"That's a stupid thing to say—" Matthew began, but Esmeralda touched his arm and shook her head.

"It's okay, Matthew."

As if understanding her silent request for privacy, Matthew headed for the door.

"Be back later. Holler if you need anything."

"I'm sorry," Sadavis said, still not looking at her. "I just didn't imagine being in this condition when I saw you again."

"You think I give a damn what you look like, Baptista? I'm doing cartwheels that you're alive and I have the chance to apologize for the dumb way I acted before you left."

A slight smile played around his lips and he slowly turned to her, though it took a moment before he lifted his gaze to meet hers. "What made you change your mind?"

"I know." She sat on the edge of his bed. "About you being an agent."

"I was going to tell you eventually. We scarcely knew each other and no matter how crazy I was about you I couldn't risk—"

"I know." She cupped his cheek, trying not to feel hurt when he flinched a bit. She nearly dropped her hand but was glad she didn't when his eyes half closed and he pressed his face against her palm.

"God, I missed you," he murmured.

"You too. I couldn't think of anything else."

A look of genuine pleasure sparked his eyes whose dullness had, until that moment, worried her greatly. He touched a hand to his head and winced, the motion obviously painful. "What the hell happened to my hair?"

"They had to shave it off when you were brought in. Lice."

He curled his lip. "Yes I remember now."

"Being brought in?"

"No. The lice." He leaned his head back on the pillow and sighed. "Bald, emaciated, ugly and a liar to boot. What the hell are you doing here, Esmeralda?"

"What do you mean liar? You weren't on a case?"

"Yes I was on a case. I meant that pathetic story about going to Africa."

She grinned. "I thought an agent would have come up with something better than that."

He forced a smile and tried to sound teasing. "No vampire mastermind has been able to confuse me but you had my head spinning so much I couldn't make up a decent lie. Seriously, Esmeralda, you should go."

She tried not to reveal how much his words stung. "Do you want me to go?"

"There's really no reason for you to stay."

"I can think of an important one," she whispered, leaning closer and brushing her lips against his. Though concerned with causing him physical discomfort, she feared not showing him how she felt even more. Edging closer, she rested her hands gently on his shoulders, feeling the bones jutting sharply against her palms. A pang of sorrow darted through her when she recalled how powerful he'd once been, then she felt rage at what he'd suffered. Her kiss suddenly became more possessive. She ran her tongue over his upper lip and gently sucked on it while her hands strayed to the sides of his neck. Beneath the warm flesh, his arteries pulsed. Esmeralda was vaguely aware of the beeps of his heart monitor increasing, but she was too absorbed in their mingled thoughts to care. His surprise and genuine pleasure at her spontaneous kisses spilled over her like warm massage oil.

Settling his hands on her waist, he opened his mouth to her gently probing tongue.

"Hey break it up," Matthew said in loud yet teasing voice.

Esmeralda sprang back, her pulse racing. Sadavis leaned back on the pillows, slightly breathless but with a gleam in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Are you trying to finish him off?" The doctor glanced at Esmeralda from the corner of his eye.

"Sorry," she said, her face heating with embarrassment.

"It's not her fault," Sadavis said. "I was feeling sorry for myself and she was trying to convince me that I'm still appealing."

"And doing a good job, it seems. The nurse will be bringing you more pain medication in a couple of hours and I want you to rest. Rest," Matthew repeated, this time winking at Esmeralda. "Or else I have to stick you in isolation. No visitors. Only me and I'm not about to kiss you."

"Thank God," Sadavis muttered.

"Sarcasm. I see you're feeling better already," Matthew called over his shoulder as he left the room.

Glancing at Sadavis, Esmeralda noted his eyes were closed again, his breathing slow and even. She began straightening his blanket but his hand closed over her wrist. Without opening his eyes he murmured, "Thank you, Esmeralda."

"You're welcome." She brushed a kiss across his forehead then settled into her chair where she continued working on her chronicle between watching him sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Esmeralda sat eating lunch with Sadavis. She'd scarcely thought about food since the previous night and dove into her sandwich and salad with enthusiasm.

Glancing at him, she noticed he was stirring his soup more than eating it.

"Does it taste lousy?" she asked.

"No. I'm just not very hungry."

Her gaze drifted over his bony frame.

"I know what you're thinking," he said.

"You have to eat."

"She's right." Matthew stepped into the room. "I want you to finish at least half of what's on the tray. It's all very light to ease you back into a normal diet."

"How do you do that, Winter?" Sadavis said, an irritated edge to his voice. "You always show up at the wrong time with a lecture."

"Listen to me, Baptista. Either you eat or I'm shoving a tube in you that you'll like no better than the bedpan."

"Speaking of bedpan, the next time I need to go I'm heading straight to the john so you can tell that nurse of yours not to bother arguing with me again."

"Well I'm glad to see you're back to the same annoying imbecile I've been patching together for the past few years. Now shut up and eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"You are hungry, but between the effects of Misoris and being deprived of food for so long you just don't know it yet," Matthew said. "Do you want to get better or not?"

"Don't patronize me. I'm not a five-year-old child who —"

"Then stop acting like it," Esmeralda snapped.

Sadavis turned to her, his expression somewhat startled. He opened his mouth to speak and she shoved in a spoonful of soup.

His dove gray eyes glared at her for a moment before he took the spoon from her and began eating slowly.

"Good." Matthew chuckled. "Embarrass him into behaving."



Cody tapped on the wall and strode into the room, a short, bearded male hybrid with him. "Sadavis, you know Stevie. Esmeralda, Matthew, we'd like some privacy please."

Sadavis shoved the tray of food aside. Matthew pushed it back in front of him and said to Cody, "Can't this wait?"

Cody sighed, hooking his thumbs in the belt loops of his jeans. "I'm sorry but I really need to ask Sadavis some questions. When I called you said he was doing okay."

"For a seriously ill patient who just got out of surgery he's doing okay. He's not okay for you and one of your chroniclers to come in here and start grilling him."

"Matthew, it's all right," Sadavis said.

"The hell it is. Neither you nor Cody is in charge here. I am the boss in this center. He is my patient and he needs rest."

"Matthew, it's Network orders. It won't take long. Once he's out of here, we'll schedule a lengthier debriefing, but for now I need you and Esmeralda to leave."

"You're a chronicler?" Esmeralda asked Stevie.

"He's on special duty," Cody replied before the hybrid could. "I see the question in your eyes, lady, but I'm sorry, you cannot be assigned to this case."

Esmeralda bit her cheek to keep from telling Cody to shove his authority up his rear end. She turned to Sadavis. "Will you be okay?"

"Fine. Go with Matthew."

Shaking his head, Matthew stepped out of the room, calling over his shoulder, "If this conversation negatively affects his recovery, you'll answer to me, Dilorenzo, not the damn Network."

Though Cody raised his eyes to heaven he didn't reply. Esmeralda resisted the urge to kiss Sadavis, sensing that his boss would take it as a sign of weakness on her part. She refused to do anything that might jeopardize her permission to visit Sadavis at the center.

She followed Matthew out of the room, deciding at that moment she was going to work toward becoming a special forces chronicler. At least then she would have some access to the life of the man she was falling in love with.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis held Cody's gaze with more confidence than he felt. In truth he was rather pleased with himself for the front he'd been putting up when he really felt like crawling into a coffin like some movie vampire and hibernating for the next century. He wasn't sure which was more humiliating, having Esmeralda seeing him in such a pathetic state or needing her so desperately. He'd almost forgotten what it was like for someone to treat him with a hint of respect let alone the love she so freely offered. Strangest of all, he sensed she wasn't hanging around out of pity but genuinely cared about him. Most women hadn't leapt at the idea of kissing him when he'd been healthy and possessed a

body like a Greek god. To have someone kiss him—and seem to enjoy it—when he resembled a scarecrow with the stuffing knocked out of him was almost too much to handle. Apparently the feelings between them were even stronger than he'd thought.

Still the last thing he wanted was for her to be his nursemaid.

Though physically drained, he was grateful for Cody's demand to question him. The debriefing reminded him that he was still a Network agent with something worthwhile to contribute.

"How are you feeling?" Cody began, straddling the chair Esmeralda had been sitting in.

Stevie dragged another chair closer and pulled out a mini tape recorder, notebook and pen.

"Fine."

"You look like hell."

"Are you exercising the infamous Dilorenzo charm? I assure you it's quite intact."

Cody's lips turned up in a half smile. "Glad to see your attitude is still the same. Let's cut to the chase. Stevie is going to record everything we say and make some notes, same as always."

"Fine, but when you're finished I have some questions about Job."

"I bet you do. First of all I want you to tell me exactly what happened during the raid in Florida and everything after that."

Sadavis nodded but when he opened his mouth to begin, his head started spinning.

"You okay?" Cody placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Yes. Fine."

"Well you've been sitting there staring into space for about a minute solid."

Had that much time really passed?

Sadavis' brow furrowed. "I'm having a little more trouble than I thought I would sorting things out."

"Just take your time."

"The raid. It went fine until Samson Barrett tried to escape. I chased him and knocked him out then the chopper came and—" Sadavis paused, his heart pounding with rage. "I told you I didn't want to work with Naldo. Why the fuck did you send him to pick me up?"

"I didn't."

"He was in the damn chopper!" Sadavis' head throbbed and he struggled to control his breathing. If he wasn't so fucking weak he'd have punched Cody in the nose, boss or no boss. "He literally kicked me out and I must have fallen like two hundred feet. If the fucking trees hadn't broken my fall I'd have been dead. Damn it, Cody, if I was a hybrid I would be dead and after what Ty and Barrett put me through I'd have been better off."

"Who's Ty?"

"Why did Naldo pick me up?"

Cody sighed. "Vincent got a message telling him there was an emergency and he had to leave immediately. My signature was forged. We finally figured out Naldo did it."

"Where is he now?"

"We don't know."

Pointing at Sadavis, Cody asked, "Who's this Ty person you mentioned?"

"He claims to be Vera's mate. He's planning to break her out."

"But he hasn't tried yet. I'm sure he questioned you about her."

"Yes. I told them nothing."

Cody's penetrating blue gaze held Sadavis'. "Nothing at all?"

"No."

"They tortured the hell out of you, Sadavis. There's no shame if you talked."

An even deeper anger coiled in the pit of Sadavis' belly. The urge to vomit what little food he'd eaten almost overcame him and he spoke through gritted teeth, "I wouldn't talk. You know that."

"If the people who had you were associated with Vera, I'm sure they used mind control. They might have been from Atlantis and knew old methods."

"I'm not of Atlantis yet I've been taught the old methods by one who knew the magic of the vampires from there. They did not infiltrate my thoughts. I wouldn't allow it. I—" he paused, feeling dizzy again.

Cody dragged his chair closer and touched his arm but Sadavis jerked away, ignoring the pain such a sharp movement caused his partially healed body.

"Sadavis, how did you keep them out?"

"I performed a self-wiping."

## Chapter Nine

A look of surprise passed over Dilorenzo's stern face at the mention of the self-wiping. "You can do that?"

"Yes."

"You never mentioned it."

Sadavis held Cody's gaze. "No one ever asked."

"That's fucking dangerous."

"I know."

"It's also temporary. It's impossible for a vampire to perform a true wiping on himself."

"Eventually the memories returned. I performed the chant twice while imprisoned, at least as far as I remember. Some of the memories are still fuzzy."

Sighing, Cody rubbed a hand over his face then squeezed his temples with his thumb and forefinger. "No one can accuse you of shirking your responsibilities, that's for sure. You've given me enough for now. Get some rest."

"What about Job?" Sadavis demanded. Though the wolf hadn't seemed to enjoy performing torture and had never engaged in the rapes, Sadavis was still puzzled by his rescue. "Why did he bring me here and turn himself in?"

"First of all we don't have a whole lot of info from him yet. Wolves are a bitch to interrogate. The mind control doesn't work on them. Even though Job has vampire in him, he's more wolf than vamp so telepathy didn't work when we questioned him."

"Why didn't you try dislocating all his joints? He seemed to think that was an effective method of interrogation," Sadavis muttered bitterly.

"Drugs worked. According to him, he freed you because your refusal to submit impressed him. I guess he respects you in his own sick way. He said Ty and Barrett could not force you to talk so there was no need to torture and kill you."

"Why did he turn himself in?"

"Apparently he wanted to learn more about Matthew and Adam," Cody replied.

"He's related to them, isn't he?"

Nodding, Cody said, "He was created using their DNA combined with wolf and human DNA. It's all over my head. That science shit is more up Matthew's alley. From what we've learned, a minion of Luci stole a sample of the twins' blood when they were infants. You know about the prophecy that said an Immaculate would destroy Luci, right? When the twins were born many of the ancients sensed Adam would be the one to do it."

"Yes."

"Well, Luci's minions had been tracking Matthew and Adam's parents and it was during an attack on them that the babies' blood was stolen. Luci's hobby was science. He and his minions performed some disgusting experiments and Job is obviously the result of one. His story also matches the information extracted from Vera."

"I still don't understand why he suddenly turned on them. Do you think it's some kind of trap?"

"We always have to think everything is a trap, don't we? He claims to be interested in his roots. It could be true, but right now he's in custody and will stay there for a long time to come." Cody stood. "Thank you for a job well done, Baptista. Is there anything I can do for you while you're in here?"

"No. Thanks."

"One more thing, after what you've been through, especially with the self-wiping, I want you to talk with Colleen MacKenzie."

"Who's she?"

"A Network shrink. She's the best."

Sadavis' anger rose again in full force. "Do I sound crazy?"

"No. It's just procedure."

"I've lived for over sixteen hundred years without talking to a psychiatrist. I don't see the need to start now."

Cody raised an eyebrow. "I'm over two thousand and I've chewed her ear off a few times."

"If and when I feel the need to chew ears I'll seek out my own listener."

"Not if you want to keep working for me you won't." Cody's good-natured smile only increased Sadavis' rage.

His heartbeat throbbed in his ears and he felt trapped. He attempted to stand but Cody forced him to remain seated. Panting with pain and anger, Sadavis stopped struggling but seethed, "Let go of me."

"Will you calm down before Winter comes in here and throws a fit? The last thing I need is for him to bitch at me about—"

"What the hell are you doing?" Matthew snapped, as usual entering on cue, Esmeralda behind him. "Dilorenzo, I told you to take it easy."

"I was just leaving."

"Good."

"Also, Baptista, you're off duty for the next six months," Cody said.

Enraged, Sadavis snapped, "Six months? Is that because I'm giving you trouble about the shrink?"

"No. It's because you've earned the time," Cody stated. "I thought I was doing you and your lady friend a favor."

Sadavis glanced at Esmeralda, some of his anger fading. Maybe an extended vacation wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Cody left and Matthew began, "You didn't finish eating."

"Will you leave me alone?" Sadavis said.

Closing his eyes, he drew a deep breath and released it slowly, willing his temper under control. The conversation with Cody had left him frustrated and more exhausted than he wanted to admit. He had a blinding headache and knew if he so much as thought about putting another thing into his stomach he'd puke.

"I knew I shouldn't have let Dilorenzo in here —"

"Matthew, please," Sadavis said. "Just leave me alone for a while."

The doctor's discerning gaze fixed on him for several seconds before he nodded and left the room.

"I'll go too," Esmeralda whispered, reaching for her bag resting on the floor by his bed.

Though he wanted to be alone with his anger, part of him wished she'd stay. What was wrong with him? He'd always been in control of himself. Now he felt like everyone else was ruling his life, first his torturers, now Matthew and Cody.

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Esmeralda walked to the door. She paused and glanced at him. "I'll be back later, if you like."

He nodded, his face tight, and watched her disappear into the corridor.

A strange, empty feeling settled over him yet he hadn't much time to think about it before he drifted to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis awoke to a cool hand smoothing his brow. In spite of the pleasant sensation, he jerked away, still swimming in a nightmare where he was back in a dark cell, his tormentors laughing as they poked his raw flesh with cattle prods.

"It's okay," Esmeralda said

Her voice drew him back to reality and he glanced at her, his heart pounding and breath coming in ragged pants.

"What time is it?" he asked, turning to the window where sunlight bled through the edge of the heavy shade.

"About three in the afternoon."

"You've been here a lot. Why don't you go home?"

"All right. If you prefer." Though her voice sounded light, he caught the hurt glint in her eyes before she turned away.

He reached for her hand and she paused.

"I appreciate what you've done more than you realize," he said. "But I feel like I'm taking advantage of you."

"I'm here of my own free will, Sadavis. I wish you'd be honest with me though. Do you or do you not want me around? If you say no I'll understand."

"I do." He sighed, running a hand over the top of his head, still not accustomed to the idea that his long hair was gone. Vampires' hair grew very quickly, so his scalp was already covered with stubble. In a few months it would be halfway down his back again. "It's just so humiliating being this—"

"Vulnerable?" A slight smile played around her lips. "I'm sure this situation is unbearable for a control freak like you, Baptista."

"Control freak?"

"Don't give me that wide-eyed look of surprise. You're used to playing the world like a cheat with a marked deck."

"I've never played you."

"Oh no?" She took his chin in her hand, leaned down and spoke against his lips. "You made me fall in love with you."

"Yes. I'm such a catch," he said sarcastically.

Her brow furrowed and she sat near him, her hand moving from his chin to his cheek. "You have no idea, do you?"

"When I'm better, Esmeralda, I'm going to make this up to you in ways you can never imagine."

Edging closer, she whispered, "I'd kiss you again but Matthew will probably walk in and throw me out."

"Fuck Matthew," he murmured, burying his hand in her hair, relishing the sensation of the perfumed, satiny tendrils sliding through his fingers.

Their lips met in a gentle, chaste kiss that still sent his heart pounding. Though he wasn't nearly in the condition to perform sexually, he was definitely starting to think about it again. After what he'd been through, he took that as a good sign.

"Do you still want me to go?" she asked.

"No."

The click of high heels approached and Esmeralda shifted to her usual chair. A petite blonde woman dressed in a rose-colored skirt set stepped into the room. Her large blue eyes seemed to observe everything in a glance.

"Hello. I'm Colleen MacKenzie," the woman said with a soft Irish brogue. Offering a pleasant smile, she extended her hand to first Sadavis then Esmeralda.

"The psychiatrist," Sadavis said, keeping his voice and expression neutral. "Cody didn't waste any time, did he?"

"I'll be in the waiting room if you need anything," Esmeralda said, giving Sadavis' hand one last squeeze before she made her exit.

Damn. He almost wished she'd stayed.

"Well, Sadavis, Cody suggested there might be some things you'd like to talk about. May I sit?"

He nodded curtly. "You mean Cody wants me to talk to you. There's nothing I'd care to discuss with you."

"That's probably true," she said. "And now might even be a bad time. I happened to be in the area and wanted to stop by to see if I could be of help. We can certainly make an appointment for another time."

"No. Let's get this over with now."

"Fine. Fine. Where would you like to begin?"

"Why don't you tell me what you'd like to hear."

Bracing himself for a disturbing session, Sadavis began answering her questions with the practiced calm that made him an ideal agent. With her prodding, he was able to recall much of what he'd suffered while in captivity, though some memories were foggy and others seemed hidden behind a cloak of darkness. Trying to see through it gave him another of the sickening headaches he'd been experiencing. Finally he was forced to stop talking and sat still, his eyes closed and his teeth clenched against nausea.

"I think that's enough for now," Colleen said, resting a hand lightly on his forearm. "Are you all right? Are you going to throw up?"

Sadavis thought he shook his head but the motion might have been imperceptible. Slowly, he opened his eyes and said, "It's Misoria."

"Yes." Colleen wrinkled her nose, a sympathetic expression in her eyes. "Not pleasant to deal with. Have the symptoms gotten any better?"

He nodded. "Matthew said it could take up to a month to wear off though. Ty didn't skimp on the injections."

"You haven't said how you feel about him."

Irritated, Sadavis curled his lip and stared at her. Was she for real?

"Oh he's one of my favorite people along with Barrett and Job."

"Job did save your life," she said.

He scowled. "I'm sure he had his motives."

"How do you feel about your captors?"

"Forgive me but that's the most stupid question I've ever heard, other than when people ask what's wrong with my face."

A smile played around Colleen's lips. "I'm not asking out of ignorance or cruelty. It's important to confront your feelings in this matter."

"I hate them," he said simply. "Good enough?"

"It's a start. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Yes. The memories I'm having difficulty recovering, do you think it's just because I blacked out or something like that?"



"Possibly. It wouldn't surprise me after the tortures you described. Oftentimes repressing memories is a way for people to deal with events they're afraid to face. You don't strike me as a fearful person however."

"No. I've never blocked anything out before and believe me this isn't the first time I've been tortured."

"Another possibility is that your mind has been affected by the self-wipings. So few vampires know how to perform that particular ritual and even fewer have actually tried it. Unlike a true wiping, in which a vampire erases or alters the memories of another person, a self-wiping is only temporary. For some reason we cannot truly erase our own thoughts. It's almost like the survival instinct that we vampires are loaded with."

"That's true enough."

"I don't doubt the self-wiping has left its mark on you. It's a powerful, dangerous ritual. I'd like to speak with you again, Sadavis, just to see how you're doing."

"I'd rather not."

Colleen smiled slightly. "I understand, but I feel it's very important to follow up here. I can see you're handling the effects of your captivity well but I also see you're not the sort of man who indulges in what he might consider weakness. You might be old and experienced but you're still a person with physical and emotional needs that can't be denied if you want to live a full life."

"I've lived this long without raking through my life in front of a Network shrink, no offense intended."

"None taken. I can't force you to talk to me. As long as you work for the Network they can order you to see me, but unless you cooperate it will be a waste of time. I've already told Cody Dilorenzo that."

This surprised Sadavis. He was under the impression people like her loved to sink their fangs into victims. "You have?"

"Yes. I am going to leave you with my card and I would very much like you to follow up with me. There's no time limit on the invitation, whether it's next week or in ten years."

"Thank you." Sadavis took the card she offered.

"I hope you feel better soon," she said before leaving the room.

Moments later Esmeralda returned.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Fine. Tell me about the chronicle you've been working on."

She wrinkled her nose. "Sure you want to hear about it?"

Nodding, he focused his attention completely upon her. He needed something to concentrate on besides the horrific memories his conversation with Colleen had stirred.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later Sadavis had all he could take of vegetating in a room at the research center. Even the daily walks around the second floor made him feel like a hamster in a wheel. He was tired of people fussing over him, measuring everything he ate and staring at him either with sympathy or annoyance when he lashed out verbally. His occasional spurts of temper left him feeling guilty yet frustrated. Couldn't they see he wasn't built for this sort of life, even for a short time?

Only Esmeralda seemed to understand him. She was more than willing to lash back when his temper rose, while at the same time remaining supportive. He doubted he'd ever loved anyone as much as he loved her, yet he was sick of her being more of a nursemaid than a girlfriend. It wasn't fair to either of them.

He had all he could take. One way or another he was leaving the research center.

\* \* \* \* \*

Around seven in the evening Esmeralda stepped into Sadavis' room, a cup of coffee in her hand and her tote bag slung over her shoulder.

She was surprised to find Sadavis fully dressed and standing by his bed, Matthew and Jules facing him. The hybrid doctor look worried but Esmeralda couldn't tell who appeared angrier, Sadavis or Matthew.

"No way. I'm not releasing you," Matthew stated.

"You can't force me to stay here, Winter," Sadavis said. Though he looked better than when he'd first arrived, he was still painfully thin and sickly pale with dark circles beneath his eyes.

"The Network —"

"Listen, if you don't let me out of here the legal way I'm going AWOL." In spite of his obvious anger, a slight smile played around Sadavis' lips.

Something in his playful manner seemed to disarm Matthew whose expression relaxed a bit. "Sadavis, I can't in good conscience let you out of here right now."

"What do you mean release you?" Esmeralda approached, staring up at him. For some reason, his thinness made him seem even taller.

"I've had it," Sadavis said. "I need to get out of here."

"I don't recommend it," Jules said. "Stay for a few more days at least."

"I'm not on an IV any longer. I'm eating and stopped the pain medication this morning. I want out."

"If I did happen to let you out, I don't like the idea of you going to that warehouse you call an apartment, especially in that section of town. It's not safe in your condition."

"You make it sound like I'm pregnant or something."

In spite of herself, Esmeralda grinned.

"Stop it," Matthew snapped, a smile flirting with his lips. "You know if you go home and some of the hybrids in your neighborhood realize you're not up to par, they'll try to kill you."

"What do you mean?" Esmeralda demanded, panic tightening her chest. "Why do your neighbors want to kill you?"

"Not all of them," Matthew said. "Just the punks. Before Sadavis moved into his part of town it was a haven to vamps who enjoyed roughing up their victims. Sadavis made them toe the line. It's a really bad idea for a wounded Network agent to expose himself to the same criminal element he constantly cleans up. Even if they don't know he's an agent, he is still considered the enemy because he's an alpha vamp keeping his territory free of scum."

"That does sound dangerous, Sadavis." She tried meeting his gaze, but he raised his eyes to heaven in a way that made her want to slap him.

"How about if you check into a room at Poet's Manor?" Jules suggested. "You'll be safe there and close to the research center."

"And under watch by the Network. I need some privacy."

"Well, he can come home with me," Esmeralda suggested, glancing from the doctors to Sadavis. "If you want, that is. Will that work?"

Matthew and Jules exchanged glances.

"Yes. I suppose," Matthew sighed. "Just be careful."

"That's my middle name." Sadavis winked. He took Esmeralda's hand and squeezed it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The readiness with which he'd accepted her offer both pleased and surprised her. She'd expected at least some rebellion.

"Just wait five minutes before you go," Matthew said. "I have some medication for you."

Sadavis sat on the bed, Esmeralda beside him. She repressed the urge to question the wisdom of leaving the center, instinctively knowing he would take offense. No matter what anybody said, he would leave the center.

Moments later Matthew returned with a bottle of pills and a tube of lotion. "These are for pain, if you happen to need them. You can use the salve one to two times a day. It's the same stuff the nurse has been using on you for muscle and joint pain and it also helps heal platinum injuries. This," Matthew held up an appointment card, "is the date and time you need to see me next week for an examination. If you need anything before then, don't hesitate to call or drop by."

"Thanks." Sadavis took the card and medication. He slipped them into a plastic bag containing a few of his personal belongings. "Are we finished here?"

Matthew extended his arm toward the door.

Esmeralda and Sadavis walked to the elevator. She actually felt excited about having him stay with her. It would be wonderful to spend time alone with him building

the relationship she'd wanted from the beginning. Also she felt much better knowing he wouldn't be alone. Matthew's warning about the vamps in his neighborhood concerned her. Many hybrids feared and envied Immaculates because they fed upon other vampires rather than humans. Some would love the chance to kill any Immaculate, in particular one like Sadavis who fought evil.

The elevator dragged to a halt and they stepped off. She noted that in spite of Sadavis' perfect posture his pace was rather slow. He must have felt lousy but pride refused to let him show it.

Once outside, rather than follow her to the parking lot he headed for the bus stop.

"The car is this way," Esmeralda said.

He glanced at her, his dove gray eyes glistening in the moonlight. "Thanks for the offer, Esmeralda, but I'm not going home with you. I just said I would to shut Matthew up."

Anger simmered inside her but she forced herself to remain calm as she approached, hitting him with her sternest look. "Well, I didn't."

"I really appreciate what you're doing, but I'm going home."

"With me."

"Esmeralda, this won't work."

"It worked a few months ago."

"Circumstances were different then."

"Yes, we scarcely knew each other. Now we have a chance to develop something beyond sex, unless that doesn't interest you."

"Of course it does."

"Then come home with me, Sadavis." She stepped so close they almost touched. His scent, familiar and intoxicating, wrapped itself around her. Though she wanted to reach out to him, she knew he had to come to her of his own free will or they would have nothing. "I almost lost the chance to know you. Now we have another one. Don't waste it."

He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb gently stroking her cheek. "I wonder if I could deny you anything, Esmeralda?"

"I hope not." She pressed close to his side as he slipped his arm around her.

"Now who's the control freak?"

"Somebody has to take charge of you," she teased.

"Oh really? And a young hybrid like yourself thinks she can manage it?"

"You'd be surprised, Baptista."

They continued their lighthearted banter all the way to the car.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they arrived at Esmeralda's house, she unlocked the door. Feeling Sadavis close behind her, she was almost overwhelmed by bittersweet memories of similar moments shared before he'd left for his assignment. Her heart ached when she thought of what he'd endured while in captivity and she was overjoyed that he was with her now.

"The place is a mess," she said, closing the door behind them once they'd entered the house. "I haven't had much time to clean lately."

"I don't care. After being stuck in a cell for so many months you think I'm going to notice a few dishes in the sink?"

"That's true."

"Esmeralda." He gently curled his long, slender fingers around her upper arm. She tilted her face toward his, captivated by his dove gray eyes. She'd almost forgotten how beautiful they were. Even the shadows of pain from the past few months only seemed to add to their depth. "Thank you for everything."

A slight smile tugged at her lips. "It's my pleasure."

"You lie well."

"It's not a lie." Standing on tiptoe, she brushed his mouth with a kiss before grasping his hand and heading upstairs to her room. She took his plastic bag and placed it and her tote bag atop the dresser.

He glanced around the room, lingering over the bed. Whether or not he intended for her to sense his emotions she felt them clearly—longing, sadness and a hint of arousal. She knew he was recalling the times they'd spent in that bed, thinking of how things between them had once been.

She never imagined sensing such insecurity in this man who had once seemed invulnerable. Anger rose when she considered what his enemies had taken from him, not his body that she had found physically beautiful, but the confidence she knew had been hard won. If she had the vampires who had done this, she would have willingly driven a stake through their evil hearts.

"Why don't you rest while I make us something to eat?" she said. "We can watch television and eat in bed."

"You want to share the bed?"

"Unless you'd rather sleep on the floor?" she teased. "Get comfortable. I won't be long."

"I'll help you."

"You should rest. You look tired."

"I'm sick of resting."

Unwilling to argue, she put him to work washing fresh fruit in the kitchen while she made toasted cheese sandwiches. A short time later, they carried the food to her room. While he sat on the bed and removed his sneakers, she kicked off her pumps and slipped off her dress. She hated lying in bed with her clothes on. Standing barefoot in a

black lace slip, she began removing her bra. When she glanced absently at her reflection in the mirror, she noticed Sadavis' gaze fixed on her. A familiar look smoldered in his eyes. She sensed if he was in better condition he'd have already flung her down and fucked her until she nearly fainted. The memory of those marathon lovemaking sessions made her stomach tighten and her nipples harden.

She made herself comfortable beside him on the bed and began eating while he flipped through channels on the television. He took his time finishing his food, as if eating in itself was another form of torture. With the lingering symptoms of Misoria, she didn't doubt it was. Though his appetite had improved over the past few days it was still far from enthusiastic.

Once they'd finished, they lay without touching, their gazes fixed on the movie. The tension between them was so heavy she knew neither of them was truly watching the show. At least she wasn't.

Only when he reached out and stroked her hair did she turn to him, once again losing herself in his gaze.

"I think I should go," he said, his voice a husky whisper. "This won't work."

"Why won't you give it a chance?"

"Because everything has changed. We can't continue down the same track as when we first met."

"Sadavis, I don't know exactly what happened to you over these past months but whatever it is hasn't changed the fact that I want a relationship with you. You need to be patient with yourself and allow yourself time to heal."

His jaw tightened visibly. "Some things are irreparable."

She simply held his gaze, unsure of what to say.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. I can't imagine what you must have gone through."

"Want to hear about it?" He raised his eyes to heaven and forced a smile. "That was stupid. Why would you want to hear that? It's not like I even want to discuss it. I can't imagine what made me say that."

Immediately she switched off the television and turned on her side, facing him. She placed her hand to the base of his throat and slowly slid her palm up his neck and around to the back of his head.

"You can tell me," she said softly. While she hated the thought of knowing what they'd done to him, she wanted to help him. If he could live through such horror then she could endure hearing about it.

Shaking his head, he let his eyes drift shut while she caressed the back of his neck. She edged nearer, drawing him closer until his head rested against her shoulder. Her eyes closed, she inhaled his scent. The warmth of his body seeped into hers and at that moment she knew there was no place she would rather be.

"I'm so glad you're here," she murmured.

In reply he slipped his arms around her, shifting position so her cheek rested against his chest. His heart beat a slow, steady rhythm against her face. Esmeralda slid her hand underneath his sweatshirt and caressed his torso. When he drew a sharp breath, she nearly pulled away, fearing she'd aggravated one of his partially healed injuries. Instead with the utmost gentleness she ran her fingertips over his prominent ribs, tracing each one, feeling the roughness of stitches and bandages in several places. Except for each slow, steady breath, he remained motionless to her exploration. Finally she settled her palm against his side.

"He still exists, you know," she whispered.

"Who?"

"You. All you need is time, Sadavis."

Stroking her hair, he asked, "Why are you so willing to wait?"

"Because I care about you."

Sadavis gazed at the woman in his arms, a barrage of emotions clamoring inside him. He despised the indescribable fear that seemed to rise in him at a simple touch. Not always, but when he was unprepared for it. He could almost feel the sting of Barrett's whip and the savage raking of Ty's weapons across his body.

He hated the sympathy in Esmeralda's expression just now when he'd jerked at her caress. Even worse, he loathed the idea of her feeling his scarred, scrawny body in spite of how he craved her touch. Oddly enough, her desire to touch him hadn't seemed to diminish in spite of the drastic changes in him since their last meeting. With the cover of clothes, maybe they could pretend such alterations didn't matter.

His self-pity faded, replaced by anger and the desire for revenge. This condition wasn't permanent. God knows he was already aching to track down Naldo and his partners and rip out their hearts. From this moment he vowed to regain all he'd lost and make them pay.

The evenness of Esmeralda's breathing and the cadence of her heartbeat told him she'd fallen asleep. For nearly a week she'd spent almost every moment at his side and he didn't doubt she was tired. Feelings of love and gratitude washed over him, pushing away shame, anger and thoughts of revenge.

Ever so gently he caressed her hair, not wishing to disturb her rest. She cuddled closer, a soft, sleepy sound escaping her throat. Closing his eyes, he joined her in slumber.

## Chapter Ten

"Freak."

"Monster."

"Demon."

The words swept the crowd like fire through dry wood. Strangely dressed people, their expressions full of terror and malice, moved closer, nearly suffocating her...or him.

Through the nightmarish haze, Esmeralda realized she was not inhabiting her own body but that of a young boy. Filled with horror and humiliation, he tried covering his face with his hands, but a stick pushed them down.

He glanced to his left where a man draped in reddish robes shook his head and whispered, "Let them see what they've paid for, boy. They can't touch you."

*Father, I'm afraid*, he wanted to cry out, but knew better. While the performance lasted, he was no one's child but a curiosity used to appease onlookers.

Esmeralda willed herself to awaken. This was the worst nightmare she'd ever experienced. Everything from the body odor wafting from the crowd to the dreaded echo of their cruel words in her ears seemed all too real.

The faces loomed closer, some glaring, others with their lips curled in disgust.

Her heart thumping loudly, Esmeralda strained to see through the black haze that surrounded her. When it cleared, her form had changed from that of a child to an adult male. Unnaturally tall compared to the crowd, his horror had turned to resignation and a spark of rage. Glaring at the onlookers, he growled, animal-like, and rattled the chains binding his wrists and ankles—chains he could snap in an instant. He'd allowed them to be placed upon him as part of the entertainment that earned much of the money used to support his people.

"Come forward. It's your turn, my friend." His father, looking a little older than before, smiled at a man who stepped through the crowd, a dagger gripped tightly in his hand. The man hesitated before approaching the chained demon.

His knuckles white on the dagger, the man reeked of fear. The pounding of his heart was an alluring echo. In another time, he would be the victim, but that would have to wait until the show was over.

"Do not be afraid," Father said. "He is tightly bound. Take aim then watch this demon resurrect."

With a shrill cry, the man leapt and plunged the dagger into the demon's chest.



Agony flared through Esmeralda and she dropped to her knees, trying to breathe. It was almost impossible. Though the blade had missed her heart, the pain was excruciating. With trembling hands she yanked the dagger from her chest and flopped onto her back, her breathing shallow, the taste of blood filling her mouth.

As the healing process began, the crowd edged closer, waiting for the gaping wound to close and the monster to rise again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda awoke screaming, tears rolling down her face.

"Oh my God," she choked, kicking aside tangled sheets.

"Esmeralda." Sadavis grasped her shoulders.

Focusing on him, she noticed panic in his eyes. His face looked bloodless.

Traces of his thoughts and feelings lingered in her mind and she realized that somehow she'd just witnessed his dream, his memories.

His gaunt face tightened as the same realization struck him. "I'm sorry. I don't know how that happened. My telepathy has never affected anyone else while I'm sleeping. I just—"

She stared at him, torn between horror and sympathy, unable to stop crying. "God, Sadavis, how could you live like that? How could—"

"It's over, Esmeralda." His fingers tightened on her arms. "It has been for a long time. I don't know why I dreamed of it. I haven't for centuries. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing." She wiped her eyes, finally making an effort to control herself. "It's not your fault."

Plucking several tissues from the box on the night table, he cupped her chin in his hand and dried her face then drew her into his arms. Embracing him tightly, she only loosened her grip when he drew a sharp breath of pain. In her emotional state, she'd forgotten about his injuries. For several moments they sat there, Sadavis caressing her back while she rested her cheek against his chest, listening to his pounding heartbeat finally slow to normal.

No wonder while at the hospital he'd been more concerned with the humiliation he suffered than the physical injuries. His obsession with maintaining his gorgeous body and the comical yet sarcastic manner with which he'd learned to cope with his appearance all made perfect sense now. He couldn't bear the thought of losing his dignity in any manner. Not that his tormentors had taken it. Pride was something he'd fought for, something he held in abundance and something no one could ever steal from him.

"How the hell did my thoughts get so far out of control that you were able to experience my dream?" he murmured.

"I don't know. Maybe because our minds have been linked before."

"That shouldn't make a difference. Unless I deliberately use mind control, you should not have seen that."

"How could your own family do that to you, Sadavis?" She tugged away just enough to gaze into his eyes.

"We were traveling showmen. It was only part of the performance."

"But they hurt you."

"They weren't trying to be cruel. They assumed that since I healed, no real harm was done."

"But all that pain almost every night. And how about when you were a child? How could they subject you to that kind of emotional abuse? It was monstrous."

A slight smile curved his lips and he kissed her forehead. "Thank you, Esmeralda. It feels good having someone care this much."

"I do." She slid her arms around his neck and covered his mouth with hers. His embrace tightened when her tongue parted his lips. His tongue met it stroke for stroke. Closing her eyes to better enjoy the sensations, she allowed the horrors of the nightmare to fade with each warm, loving caress.

When the kiss broke, both were slightly breathless and his cheeks were flushed.

She gently trailed her hand down his side and slipped it into the waistband of his pants, but he caught her wrist before she could reach her mark.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, sliding her hand away. "You're still hurt."

"It's not that I don't want to. I just —"

"It's okay." She kissed him. "I understand. You're healing from platinum and suffering from Misoris and I'm getting greedy. I have some work to do."

Nodding, he stood and walked to the window. "When the sun comes up I'm going to stop by my place. I need a few things and it will be safe enough, since most of the vamps in my neighborhood hate daylight."

"I'll go with you."

"Would you mind if I worked on a sculpture here? I can understand if you don't want the mess —"

"Don't be silly. You can use the kitchen table. I never eat in there anyway. I've missed seeing you work." She joined him, melting against his side. He draped an arm over her shoulder and rested his cheek against the top of her head.

In truth, she liked the idea of living with Sadavis so much that she wished he could stay forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shortly after sunrise, Esmeralda and Sadavis decided to stop by his house before retiring for the day. Piling on sunscreen and covering her eyes with dark glasses, Esmeralda thought how much she detested daylight.

"You should stay here," Sadavis said. "I don't need a bodyguard."

"I don't mind," she said, watching him walk alongside her, not so much as blinking against the sunlight. "Doesn't the light affect you at all?"

"I've accustomed myself to the discomfort, though my resistance was sorely tested while I was stuck in that cell."

Again Esmeralda couldn't help feeling a hint of admiration for him.

They got into her car and drove off. A short time later they parked in front of his house. When they stepped inside, she saw him look at the gym with longing before continuing up the stairs.

Wonderful memories flooded her when she looked around the room where they had spent so much time talking and making love. While he packed clothes and a few other personal items, she looked at his sculptures. Noting they were covered with dust, she took a cloth and began cleaning them off. She lovingly ran her fingers over the curves and planes he'd fashioned and admired their beauty.

"I'm taking the bust," he commented from where he stood gazing at the sculpture of Esmeralda, his arms folded across his chest. "I want to finish it."

Less than an hour later they'd returned to her house and prepared for bed. After slipping into her nightgown and brushing her hair, Esmeralda fluffed up the pillows on the bed and knocked on the bathroom door. It wasn't fully shut and swung open.

"Sorry," she said, about to close it again.

Sadavis, who had been struggling to reach his back with the salve Matthew had given him, quickly reached for his shirt and dragged it on.

"Why don't you let me put it on for you?" she said, stepping inside and reaching for the tube.

"I can get it." He slipped the tube from her hand.

"You can't reach it right and Matthew said this stuff will help the platinum injuries."

"Do you need to use the bathroom? I'll go in the bedroom." Though he spoke in his usual calm tone, she didn't miss the flicker of annoyance in his gaze.

"I don't know what you're so mad about. It only makes sense to let me put it on for you." She followed him to the bedroom.

His jaw visibly clenched, he turned to her. "I know what I look like, Esmeralda."

"Baptista, whoever would have guessed your vanity knows no bounds? Give me that." She tried to take the salve from him but he refused to let it go. Holding her palm up, she said sternly, "Stop acting like a child. Give me that stuff and get on the bed."

The hint of a blush stained his cheeks and for a moment he looked as if he might choke on his anger. He must have finally realized how stupid he was acting because he handed her the tube, shrugged off his shirt and lay stomach down on the bed.

Over the past week Esmeralda had become quite adept at keeping emotions like pity and revulsion from her face. Though most of his wounds had healed enough that her stomach didn't flop over whenever she looked at them, several still appeared red and painful. His corpse-like thinness was far more disturbing, even though he'd already gained several pounds since his hospital stay.

Kneeling beside him on the bed, she squeezed the salve into her palms and rubbed them together. Starting at the base of his neck, she began rubbing it into his flesh. She carefully spread it over several raw-looking wounds held shut by stitches. Her fingertips moved over his broad shoulders, feeling the sharpness of his bones, then trailed down his spinal column, visible beneath his flesh. Closing her eyes for a moment, she tried not to think about what he'd endured. It would only make her angry. She knew he'd sense the tension within her and her main priority was to relax him.

She squeezed more salve into her hands and swept her palm over his sides, tracing each prominent rib, then massaged his lower back. He sighed, an almost pleased sound, and she smiled slightly. In spite of what he might think, she still loved touching him.

Stretching out beside him, she rested her hand lightly on his back and kissed his neck. Her eyes slipped shut and she continued running her lips over his neck. Beneath her palm, she felt gooseflesh rise on his skin and a slight quiver dart through him.

She repositioned herself so she loomed over his back and began covering it with kisses. Thankfully, the salve didn't taste all that bad. Being this close to him again felt so good it would have been worth the most bitter of tastes.

He rolled onto his back and grasped her upper arms rather tightly, holding her so close that their noses almost touched.

"Why?" His deep voice was slightly hoarse with emotion yet masculine enough to curl her toes. Skepticism and raw passion battled for dominance within his eyes.

"Because I love you," she replied, her gaze fixed on his.

His lips parted slightly and he looked about to speak. Instead he tugged her closer. His mouth covered hers in an explosive kiss that seemed to release months of pent-up passion, not just for her but for life itself. His thoughts and emotions spun in her head, making her almost dizzy with their intensity.

*Anger, pain, fear and a deep craving only you can fill, Esmeralda.*

Forgetting that he was still an injured man, she wrapped her arms around his neck and closed her eyes, surrendering completely to the gentle yet demanding caress of his tongue. It thrust deeply then swirled around hers before he sucked it into his mouth.

Esmeralda moaned and straddled his narrow hips, her mouth never leaving his. He dragged her nightgown up her body then his long, slender fingers reached beneath and cupped her breasts. He squeezed and stroked, his thumbs circling her nipples with feather touches that soon had her writhing.

When he began sucking on her lower lip while rolling her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, pleasure nearly overwhelmed her. Unconsciously, her legs tightened on his sides. A stifled grunt of pain dragged her back to reality.

"God, I'm sorry," she panted, slipping off him.

Looking aggravated by his own weakness, he turned to her, trailing his fingertip over her cheek and kissing her again.

"Let me keep touching you," he said.

"We really shouldn't be doing this until you're...better," she breathed, her pulse racing. His hand had slipped beneath her panties and his long, slender finger slid partway into her drenched pussy. Her belly tightened and she tried to keep her hips from thrusting as he took the slick digit and circled her clit. "We shouldn't—"

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No," she breathed. Her legs fell open and she collapsed onto the pillows, her fingers tightening on the mattress. Damn, he remembered exactly how to touch her in a way that drove her crazy. His rubbing sped and slowed, as if gauging her natural rhythm, and kept her hovering on the verge of climax. When she thought she couldn't endure a moment longer, he kissed her, his tongue thrusting in time with his frantically rubbing finger. Unable to hold back, Esmeralda gasped into his mouth. Her hips rose off the bed and her pelvis pushed against his stroking hand.

She lay for several moments, panting and enjoying the aftermath of intense pleasure. When she opened her eyes, she found him gazing down at her, leaning on his elbow, his chin in his hand.

"How do you do that?" she murmured.

"What?"

"Make me come without taking blood?"

"Hybrids can, you know."

"So I've heard, but before you I never did."

He smiled slightly and brushed her lips with a kiss.

Esmeralda tugged him closer until his head rested against her shoulder. Closing her eyes, she caressed his head, the short hair pleasantly rough against her palm. She had to admit she missed running her fingers through his long black hair, but at the rate it was growing she wouldn't have to wait much longer.

Her fingertips strayed to his temple and cheek. By the time she settled her hand against his neck, he was deeply asleep. Lulled by the wonderful yet unexpected sexual release, she joined him in slumber.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda and Sadavis fell into a pleasant routine. By day they slept in each other's arms and by night while she worked on her chronicles, he sculpted or read. Determined

to rebuild his strength, he took nightly walks and ate normal meals in spite of his lack of appetite and the lingering effects of Misoria.

Though neither mentioned the nightmare she had witnessed through his telepathy, Esmeralda couldn't forget it. She shuddered to think of what other monstrous experiences he'd suffered throughout his long life. Still, could any of them compare with the horror of being used so callously by his family?

She sensed the dream still plagued him as well. She guessed because of his weakened state she was able to feel his thoughts and emotions, sometimes even when he didn't seem aware of it. This disturbed her yet she decided not to mention it and simply wait for his strength to return. In the meantime, she did her best to block his thoughts unless he deliberately initiated the contact. His awareness wouldn't allow her to spare him, however, and before long he pointed out the problem himself.

"This shouldn't be happening," he said one morning as they lay in bed, frustration gleaming in his eyes.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. I'm sure once you're physically recovered your psychic powers will return to normal too." She edged closer and rested her cheek against his chest.

His arms settled around her in a gesture she found most comforting.

"I don't like the idea of my thoughts shooting all over the place. It can be dangerous, not to mention uncomfortable for you. The last thing you want is to witness my most embarrassing moments and worse."

"I know how much this upsets a control freak like you, Baptista."

"Don't start with that again. How would you like it if I knew at random your thoughts and feelings?"

Lifting her head, she gazed into his eyes, a slight smile on her lips. "You're so far ahead of me in experience and technique that my whole mind has always been an open book to you."

"But I wouldn't invade your privacy."

"I'm doing my best to ignore your telepathy, but I'm still working on my skills."

"It's not your fault. It's mine."

"Stop it, Sadavis." She cupped his face in her hand and gently stroked his cheek. "Whatever you show me, intentionally or not, I can handle and I'll never betray your trust."

"I know. That means more to me than you realize, but maybe I should go. At least until I regain some control."

"Please don't do that. You're seeing Matthew tomorrow. Talk to him about it. Maybe there's a medical reason."

Her suggestion must have seemed reasonable enough because he ended the conversation with a nod, tightened his arms around her and fell asleep.

Later she assumed their talk just before bedtime provoked the telepathic invasion that followed.

Even within the dream Esmeralda knew something was wrong and she was again in Sadavis' mind.

She walked through a jungle illuminated by random beams of moonlight shining through the trees. Instinctively she knew she was in India. Her body was once again that of a tall, powerful male. A downward glance revealed muscles rippling beneath smooth, dark skin, the only stitch of clothes a loincloth. Bare feet padded silently over the ground. The scent of wild animals hung heavily on the air, the aroma of distant humans carried on the wind. Sharpest of all was the scent of another vampire. A hybrid. Nearby.

The hybrid waited in a clearing. Also wearing a white loincloth stained by the dirt on which he sat, he appeared to be in deep meditation. He had strong features, dark skin and a thin body, yet even the faintest brush of his mind powers were stunning. His captivating black eyes opened. They were cunning eyes, experienced yet touched by insanity.

Familiar emotions arose within her—or him, for she knew she had once again assumed Sadavis' form. This hybrid had brought him to his foster father to raise among his people, then disappeared only to return at random and pass on the knowledge of vampirism. It was through these sporadic visits that Sadavis had mastered the arts of fighting and magic. He had also learned why his birth parents had abandoned him, an Immaculate child, one who should be considered a gift since hybrids rarely produced children outside of ritual bites.

"They were of old and respected bloodlines, young one," the hybrid had told him. "Our kind admire perfection and power. Your flawed face was a burden they could not bear."

Those words had cut deep, but even as a boy Sadavis had learned to master his emotions. It was the only way to survive the nightly performances with his people.

"My young one," the hybrid said from where he sat beneath the tree. "Back for more lessons?"

"More knowledge," Sadavis replied. "It is almost time for me to move on. You said you've taught me all you know except for one thing. A dark thing. Something few of our kind have chosen to learn."

"Ah." The hybrid's face crinkled in a wicked smile. "The ritual that will erase your thoughts and memories. It is a chant. One that summons the darkest, most powerful goddesses, the mother blood drinkers who refused to leave the home world. Only in times of desperation should this ritual be used."

"The memories will be erased forever, as we're able to do to humans?"

"No. They will return eventually."

"Then where is the danger?"

The hybrid's eyes shone with awe and a hint of fear. "There is a price to pay. A price..."

His voice faded, his eyes rolling back as he swayed and clawed at his hair. Perhaps there was no chant after all. The hybrid was mad.

The small, dark vampire flew at Sadavis, sinking his fingernails into his shoulders deeply enough to draw blood. His dark eyes stared glassily into his young student's. "Unless you are willing to pay the price, you should not learn the chant. Are you willing?"

"Yes."

This time pity tainted the hybrid's evil smile. "So quickly you reply. No hesitation. Only youth can be so bold and so foolish. I will teach you, young one, and after you have learned you will leave me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda awoke panting and turned to Sadavis who met her gaze.

"This has to stop," he muttered.

"That chant the hybrid spoke of," she said. "What was it?"

"I won't tell you. Not ever."

"But—"

"Esmeralda, please."

"Did you ever use it?"

"Yes. During my captivity. It was how I kept from spilling my guts during the interrogations." He closed his eyes and released a pent-up breath. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Why? It's not like you're giving away any Network secrets." She closed her eyes for a moment and ran her hand through her hair. When she glanced at him again, he looked distant, preoccupied. "I'm not going back to sleep any time soon. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes," he said. "Good idea."

On their way to the kitchen, she took his hand and squeezed it. "Don't worry, Sadavis. Talk to Matthew tomorrow. I'm sure he'll tell you that once you're better these telepathy issues will pass."

\* \* \* \* \*

"To be honest I'm not exactly sure why you're having the telepathic problem you've described," Matthew said. "As you know, usually when a vampire is in a weakened state he has trouble manipulating the minds of others. Yes, it's easier for another vampire to initiate mind control on him, but not the other way around, as you've said has been happening."



"Yes. Esmeralda has not been initiating anything. Actually she has been decent enough to try her best to block me out."

"I've done a thorough examination and there doesn't seem to be a physical cause," Matthew continued. "However I know from personal experience that while under emotional stress, shared dreams and unprovoked telepathic experiences can occur. Have you thought about speaking to Colleen MacKenzie again?"

"Not really."

"It might be an emotional issue."

Sighing, Sadavis closed his eyes momentarily. "Matthew, I've been through just about everything in my rather long life and have never cracked up."

"I didn't say you've cracked up. I'm suggesting that she is more experienced in mind control than I am. You know I'm rather good at the magical arts, but I'm still a student."

Sadavis tried to keep his temper in check. The lack of explanation for what he considered an embarrassing problem was beginning to frustrate him. "Wait a minute. Are you saying it's an emotional problem or a magical one?"

"In good conscience I have to admit I know nothing except what you've told me about the self-wiping."

"You mean there's a subject the genius Matthew Winter is ignorant of?"

"Do you really need to insult me?"

Frustrated, Sadavis ran a hand through his hair. At least now it was long enough to allow such an action. "I'm sorry. It just seems like I'm going from one thing to another and I can't catch up."

"Sadavis, considering what you've been through, you're doing great. You've gained weight and strength in spite of the Misoría and you seem to have a very promising relationship with Esmeralda."

"She's wonderful."

Matthew smiled. "Glad to hear it. About the Misoría, you said the symptoms are lessening?"

"Yes. A bit."

"Don't worry. The way that poison works is one morning you'll wake up and feel perfectly normal again."

Sadavis snorted. "When?"

"Soon I'm sure. Do you have any questions?"

"When can I start working out again?"

"I'd wait until the Misoría is completely out of your system before you begin your usual routine. Until then if you're up to starting the physical therapy we talked about, I'll tell my secretary to schedule you for the day after tomorrow."

"That's fine."

"One last thing. If the situation with your telepathy doesn't improve, I strongly suggest you talk to Colleen again."

"I still have her card."

"Good. That's about all. Any other questions?"

Sadavis shook his head and stood.

"By the way, would you and Esmeralda like to come over for dinner Thursday night?"

"I'll ask her. Thanks."

"Tell her to call Dulcie and let her know."

On his way to the car, Sadavis thought about Matthew's advice. He didn't like the idea of talking to Colleen MacKenzie. Though experienced in the workings of the vampiric mind, she was still centuries younger than he was. He doubted she was familiar with the self-wiping. Few vampires knew about its existence, let alone how to perform it. His first teacher had told him there would be a price to pay for summoning that particular magic. Was this loss of control the price?

While in captivity he had honestly believed he would die there. Now having survived, he was plagued by an even deeper fear. The hybrid who had taught him the self-wiping was mad. Had that insanity been caused by a self-wiping? If so, would Sadavis end up as crazy as the ancient Indian?

Of course he wouldn't. He just had a couple of nightmares and imposed a few thoughts on a woman to whom he was very close. Other vampires had random telepathic experiences. Like Matthew suggested it was probably due to emotional stress. Once he regained control of his life everything would return to normal.

On the way home, Sadavis thought about all the vampires he'd trained with throughout his life. He carefully recounted chants and meditations, finally recalling one that might help his situation.

That day, before retiring to bed, he channeled his energy through meditation. It seemed to work since neither he nor Esmeralda experienced nightmares. In the morning she reassured him that she hadn't felt the slightest touch of his telepathic voice.

For the next week the meditation worked by day. By night he devoted much of his time to the physical therapy exercises suggested by the staff at the research center. Using bones and muscles that had been injured by platinum was at first more painful than he wanted to admit. After the first few sessions he returned home tired and sore. Though he kept his discomfort from Esmeralda, she seemed to guess how he felt and was especially gentle when applying his salve.

In truth he looked forward to those daily massages. The sensation of her hands on his flesh both comforted and aroused him. The effects of Misoria began fading and his desire for her increased.

One evening, as Matthew had predicted, Sadavis awoke feeling almost like his old self without the slightest hint of nausea. Giddiness nearly overcame him but he held it

in check, unwilling to get his hopes up for such a quick recovery. He stepped into the kitchen, set coffee brewing and started working on a new sculpture. Slowly he began to accept that the Misoria was indeed gone.

He heard the shower running in the upstairs bathroom and imagined Esmeralda naked beneath the warm water. The mental picture of her smooth skin and mouthwatering curves inspired an erection that he knew for the first time in weeks could finish the job he longed to start.

After washing clay off his hands and forearms, he hurried upstairs, his heart pounding with anticipation.

## Chapter Eleven

The bedroom door was closed, so Sadavis knocked once.

"Come in," Esmeralda called.

He pushed open the door and looked to where she stood in front of the mirror, a towel wrapped around her middle, her hair piled atop her head. Their gazes met in the glass and he knew she caught the scent of his desire. Before she turned and slipped into his arms, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. Since his vampiric strength had started to return and he had been eating regular meals, he no longer resembled a walking corpse. Though he still needed to gain weight and rebuild much of the muscle he'd lost, his body looked presentable.

Esmeralda's arms tightened around him and her lips touched the side of his neck. Unable to think of anything except how much he wanted her, he tugged off her towel and swept her smooth, naked body into his arms.

"Should you be carrying me?" she asked, concern in her eyes.

He nuzzled her cheek. "Yes. I'm much better now and I intend to prove it."

"I can hardly wait."

He placed her on the bed and quickly shed his clothes. Covering her body with his, he relished the sensation of her hands roaming over his shoulders and back. Her lips sought his and he met her demanding kisses with fervor.

Edging slightly aside, he continued kissing her while sweeping his hand from her breast to her hip. His fingers wove through her pubic hair. The urge to fill her with his staff almost overcame him. In spite of his excitement, he intended to make this a memorable experience for her.

Sadavis' hands roamed over the silken skin of her breasts and belly. His thumbs grazed one pert nipple then the other.

A soft sigh of pleasure escaped her lips. She took his hand and guided it to her breasts. Tenderly he cupped and squeezed them.

He lowered his head and covered every inch of her breasts with slow kisses. Closing his eyes, he took one of her nipples between his lips and gently tugged. His tongue rolled over the taut nub then circled the areola, feeling tiny bumps of pleasure upon the ultra-soft skin.

"Oh, Sadavis," she whispered, clasping his head, her fingers stroking his scalp.

Pleasurable warmth spread through him. He couldn't get enough of her.

Reluctantly he left her breasts but satisfied his desire by pressing tender kisses over her belly. He licked the smooth flesh and swirled the tip of his tongue in her navel.

"I love touching you," he murmured between kisses. His lips drifted over her hip while his hand parted her thighs.

"I love having you touch me," she breathed, arching against him as his mouth covered her clit. She panted and squirmed, but he grasped her buttocks and held her steady so he could fully pleasure her.

The tip of his tongue ran up and down the side of her clit before he began licking the center of it with quick yet gentle upward strokes.

Esmeralda's cries of pleasure spurred his passion. His cock swelled with need. He longed to bury it deep inside her, yet he intended to wait until she was thoroughly satisfied.

"Oh, Sadavis. Oh," she moaned.

Her clit palpitated against his tongue. He continued lapping her until her orgasmic pulsations waned.

Moving up her body, he braced his forearms on either side of her head and entered her hot, lust-drenched pussy with a swift thrust.

"Oh, yes. Yes!" she panted, wrapping her arms and legs around him, meeting him thrust for thrust. His hips pumped in a fast, steady rhythm that quickly drove her to another climax.

He stopped moving, lightheaded with pleasure, his entire body taut in his struggle to keep from coming. The wet, pulsing caress of her pussy forced a lustful growl from his throat.

"Let me," she whispered, her warm breath tickling his ear.

Slipping his cock from her, he groaned and rolled onto his back.

The sight of her kneeling between his legs and clasping his stiff cock was almost enough to hurl him into orgasm. Drawing deep, slow breaths, he clutched the pillow behind his head and struggled to maintain control. It seemed like forever since he had felt such marvelous sensations.

The tip of his staff disappeared between her soft lips. His heart pounded and his eyes closed. Each sweep of her tongue over the crown of his erection brought such intense pleasure that he could scarcely repress his need to thrust hard into her mouth. His hands moved to her head and his fingers wove through her hair.

Unable to resist watching her pleasure him, Sadavis opened his eyes halfway. Her thick hair covered her face so he couldn't actually see her lips on his cock.

Sifting through her satiny tresses, he stared at his hands before his vision blurred and her hair seemed to thin and change color before his eyes. Sadavis' pulse quickened from terror rather than pleasure. She must have sensed his change in mood because she glanced up, only it wasn't Esmeralda gazing at him, but Ty. He leered, his fangs bloodstained where they'd savagely raked Sadavis' cock.

Hurled back into the memory of the assaults he'd suffered while imprisoned, Sadavis pulled away. Somewhere in the back of his mind he remembered it was Esmeralda he was with and gently held her away when she moved closer.

"What's wrong?" she asked. It was her face staring back at him again and he released a pent-up breath. Hesitantly she touched his cheek. "Sadavis, what is it?"

"I'm sorry. I just...I'm not feeling well."

She nodded and sat back on her heels. "It's okay. I thought you might have been going a little heavy on the exercise, considering you've just started getting your health back."

He wanted to protest, to tell her that his problem wasn't physical, but he didn't want to admit he was having hallucinations. Besides, the way his erection had suddenly disappeared he didn't blame her for thinking his strength hadn't returned in full.

"Hey it's okay. Cuddling works for me. I just feel bad that you gave me all the fun before you got a chance to—"

"No. I wanted to please you."

"Just being with you pleases me." She melted against his side and tugged the blanket over them.

Sadavis wrapped his arms around her. He decided to take Matthew's advice and arrange another session with Colleen MacKenzie. Though he disliked the idea of succumbing to modern psychology to assist him when he'd never needed such interference before, he loathed the idea of anything ruining his relationship with Esmeralda.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So what is it? Some kind of post-traumatic stress?" Sadavis demanded, his hands curled tightly over the arms of the chair in the office at Poet's Manor that Colleen MacKenzie used while in Boston. "I've never had anything like this happen to me before, and as I told you this isn't the first time I've been tortured."

Colleen's blue gaze fixed on his in a steady, honest manner he would usually have appreciated. Today it only made him feel even more vulnerable.

"It could be that this time forms of persuasion were used that were different or more intolerable to you," she said.

"You mean the rape?" He forced himself to sound calmer than he felt. At the moment all he could imagine was tearing his enemies apart.

"I didn't mention anything specific, but since you brought it up it might be a path worth exploring."

"It's not the rape. Yes, it has affected me a lot, but this is different. It's so difficult to pinpoint. The only way I can describe it is to say I feel like I'm losing control over my meditation. My thoughts are taking me where they want me to go instead of the other

way around. It feels like reverse magic or something." He shook his head. "I don't even know why I came here. You're a psychiatrist, not a witch."

"I'm fairly well versed in what some call the magical arts, not nearly as much as you are, but I can understand what you're telling me. What you've said also leads to another possibility for what you've been experiencing. The self-wiping."

"Matthew said that might be the problem."

"I'll be perfectly honest, Mr. Baptista, I have little knowledge about that particular ritual, though I have heard about its side effects."

He resisted the urge to fidget from anxiety. "So you're saying you can't help me any more than Matthew can."

"I can certainly help you deal with the flashbacks and help you release the anger and fear you feel regarding your captors."

"I've been dealing with anger and fear for as long as I can remember." Sadavis stood, nodding in her direction. "Thank you for your time."

"Have you tried contacting the vampire who taught you the ritual?" She leaned forward in her chair, concern in her eyes. She appeared genuine in her desire to help him, but for some reason knowing that irritated him more.

"That's not an option," he said curtly.

"Then —"

"Thank you, Dr. MacKenzie, but since you're not versed enough in this subject to assist me, we have nothing more to discuss."

"Mr. Baptista, I —"

Before she could finish, he left the office and strode down the corridor to the stairwell. He hadn't intended to be rude but his frustration was reaching dangerous heights. He'd tried Matthew. He'd tried the shrink. The only thing that seemed to help the slightest bit was meditation. That at least held the nightmares at bay. Perhaps the nightmares were better than the damn hallucinations.

Maybe he was just spending too much time loafing around with his problems. Yes, he was training again but he needed to get back to work. A new assignment, even an easy one, would help. Like the old cliché about falling off a horse, he needed to get right back in the saddle again.

At the bottom of the stairway, he paused, his heart pounding. Why hadn't he thought of this before? Maybe Colleen was right about his fears overcoming him. Perhaps it wasn't the self-wiping at all that was affecting him, but an old-fashioned case of losing his nerve. He'd seen it happen to warriors in the past. Good men whose violent lives finally caught up with them.

The only way to conquer fear was to face it and he had the perfect opportunity in controlled quarters to do just that.

Job was being held right here at Poet's Manor. Though the man, wolf, vampire, whatever he was, had saved his life, Sadavis couldn't help associating him with his torture.

Confronting Job would not only prove he could face his tormentor, but he could hear for himself why Job had decided to save his life.

Sadavis turned and jogged up the stairs to the floor that housed several specialized cells for holding vampires and wolf mixes. His steps slowed a bit when he entered the corridor. He was supposed to be on leave, not interrogating prisoners.

Shaking his head, he continued with long, confident strides. Other than Cody, the First Father and the Network's Jury, special forces agents held the highest authority in the vampiric world. No one except the above mentioned could prevent him from talking to any prisoner he wanted to.

Approaching the hybrid guard who stood in front of the locked door leading to the prison cells, Sadavis felt his heartbeat quicken with anticipation and to his disgust a hint of fear. This weakness, no matter how understandable, infuriated him. He cleared his mind, forcing himself to master his emotions.

"Sadavis, hi," said the guard.

"Hi, Darrell. I'm here to question Job."

The guard raised an eyebrow. "Didn't know the wolf was being interrogated today."

"I didn't make an appointment." Sadavis held Darrell's gaze with sternness that made most people cringe.

"No problem, sir. Would you like to escort him to the interrogation room yourself or should I have him brought to you?"

Hating the lingering weakness from his convalescence, Sadavis requested that Job be brought to the room for him. Even under normal circumstances an Immaculate was not a physical match for a wolf mix. Though his health had improved, Sadavis still wasn't in top form and couldn't risk Job attempting an escape.

Sadavis stepped into the small interrogation room and sat at a square wooden table. His stomach rolled and his pulse raced in spite of how he tried to calm himself.

*Damn it, Baptista, get a hold of yourself. Show this wolf fear and it's all over.*

He managed to calm his nerves, yet still looked up sharply when the door opened and four heavily armed hybrid guards escorted the wolf inside. A thick iron collar bound Job's neck. His wrists and ankles were secured with heavy chains. The insides of the shackles were lined with needle sharp barbs that had already cut his flesh, though the wolf wasn't struggling. Once he was seated, the guards attached additional chains to his collar and fastened them to hooks embedded in the floor on either side of the prisoner's chair.

Sadavis felt a malicious sense of vengeance at the sight of Job, chained and bleeding. The wolf had only been bound in this way for the interrogation. His wounds



would heal almost instantly once he was returned to his cell and the manacles removed. Still, Sadavis liked the idea of the wolf experiencing any kind of physical discomfort.

Job's dark blue eyes were shadowed beneath, an eerie contrast to his pale face. Sadavis guessed his haggard appearance was more from sleeplessness than injury, since wolves' regenerative powers were almost instant. His hands rested awkwardly on the table, as too much pressure forced the barbs deeper into his wrists.

Sadavis' gaze switched briefly to the guards. "You may wait outside."

They obeyed without hesitation.

Once alone, the Immaculate and the wolf stared at one another for a long, silent moment. Looking at Job with clear vision rather than eyes blurred by pain, blood and sweat, he noted that while at first glance the wolf greatly resembled Matthew and Adam, there were differences other than the bottom set of fangs and the pointed ears. His eyebrows were longer and more wickedly arched in the center and his face slightly fuller instead of the having the twins' razor sharp angles. The wolf's build was a bit thicker as well.

"Why do you think I'm here?" Sadavis asked.

"Curiosity," Job said, his clipped English accent making the promptly spoken word seem even sharper.

Good. The bastard didn't expect any thanks for saving his life.

"Why did you turn on your employers?" Sadavis demanded.

"You and I both know they were more than that."

It was true. Sadavis had read the transcripts of Job's official interrogations as well as Matthew's more scientific interviews. According to his confessions, Vera and her lover, Luci, the most evil of all vampires, had created Job in a laboratory. With the knowledge of the Original vampires, they used genetic manipulation to create what they believed would be the perfect guard dog. A powerful, unstoppable killer with the ability to think and reason but who would be loyal to them alone. If his story was true, as both Matthew and Cody thought it was, Job had been brainwashed into believing the Network was evil and he owed his very existence to Luci and Vera. He'd been told the Network wished to destroy his kind, wolves, and control vampires. If the Network had their way, Job would be in chains and used as a lab rat to learn how to destroy wolves. Sadavis didn't doubt Job now believed his masters had been right. After all, here he was in chains and the Network did indeed imprison wolves for safety reasons as well as research. Some of the higher forms of wolves, more advanced than the pure-blooded dog-like creatures but not as intelligent as Job, had mysteriously disappeared almost a year ago. Some believed the Network had found a way to destroy them and were hiding the fact. Sadavis and the agents knew otherwise, but he doubted Job would take his word for it.

"They were your masters," Sadavis sneered the word. "You tortured and killed for them."

Job continued holding his gaze, neither denying the statement nor cringing in shame. His expression was unreadable.

Sadavis had no way of knowing whether or not the bastard felt even a hint of regret for his crimes.

"You have nothing to say?"

"What would you have me say?" Job asked calmly. "I admitted the things you've accused me of."

Sadavis struggled to repress his fury. How could the wolf remain so cool and detached? "Why did you decide to free me? What's your plan?"

"I have no plan. I'm sure you already know that."

"I know what you've told us."

"Your doctors have used their drugs on me. Under their influence, I have given you the greatest weapon against me and my kind—the way to destroy a wolf. What motivation could I possibly have for disclosing such facts other than a genuine desire to know the truth about all of us? Your associates are satisfied that I've spoken honestly."

Somewhere in the back of his angry mind Sadavis agreed the wolf had a point. He had admitted the only way to destroy a wolf was to attack it during its mating cycle. For that brief time during the year, a wolf in season was nearly as vulnerable as a human, since their regenerative powers diminished during the mating cycle. This information was the breakthrough Matthew and Network scientists had been searching for.

"You expect me to believe you saved my life because you respected me? After all you did—"

"You acted with honor, which is more than I can say for myself and my former associates."

"Your masters," Sadavis sneered.

"Call them what you will."

"When they tell you to sit, stay and heel, you obey. I'd say they're your masters."

Job's jaw tightened visibly and Sadavis felt a rush of satisfaction.

"Remember what you did to me at their order?" Sadavis continued. "How many others did you do it to? How many did you rape and murder?"

"I do not rape."

"Shut up."

"You asked—"

Snarling, Sadavis leaned closer to the wolf. "I said shut up."

Sadavis drew a deep breath and released it slowly. What was wrong with him? Sure he had reason to hate this guy, but he rarely allowed his emotions to run wild during interrogations.

"What reason do you have for turning yourself over to us? If you respected me so much, you could have run off after leaving me at the research center."

"Shall I answer or is this another rhetorical question?"

"You may reply," Sadavis said.

"I don't fully understand why I chose this course. Over the past several months I've had dealings with your Network. I've seen your agents fight for the lives of mortals and vampires alike. I saw a man with my face —"

"Matthew."

Job nodded. "For the first time in my life I dared question my existence as something other than Vera's slave."

"I find it hard to believe you conveniently turned over a new leaf when she was imprisoned."

"I have submitted to your interrogations. I —"

"You submitted?" Sadavis snapped, his pulse racing. "Right now you have no choice."

"There is always a choice, as you proved while in captivity."

Sadavis' teeth gritted. Damn, this wasn't working. He had stepped into the room hating Job. More than anything he wanted to hang on to that hatred, allow it to flood him and chase away the lingering fear of his imprisonment. The longer he questioned the wolf, the less he despised him. There was something he almost liked — no! This man had stood by while he'd been tortured. He had participated in the torture. Yet he'd also given him water when the others had left him to dehydrate. Then he had brought him to safety and surrendered to the Network, giving up his chance to return to the only home he'd ever known.

There had to be an underhanded plan somewhere. They just weren't seeing it.

"You were right," Job said.

"What?"

"When you and your associates put an end to the breeding facilities."

Breeding facilities. The interrogation room disappeared and Sadavis stood in a gore-covered kitchen. Surrounded by headless bodies, he felt a shiver tear through him from head to toe. Glancing down, he saw his naked body covered in blood.

Sadavis stood so abruptly that he knocked his chair over backward.

"Is something wrong?" Job's voice broke through the nightmare and Sadavis focused on the wolf.

"No." Sadavis walked to the door and summoned the guards to take Job away.

He watched as the wolf, bound in chains, strode amidst the guards with quiet dignity.

Telepathy and magic didn't work on wolves, yet Sadavis instinctively knew Job was confused and wary. Still the wolf had made the effort to question the wrongdoings of the people who had raised him. Maybe, just maybe, that counted for something.

Sadavis was about to leave the interrogation room when Cody Dilozenzo stepped inside.

"What's up?" Cody asked. "What did you want with the wolf?"

"I wanted to see him for myself. Is that against regulations now?"

"No." Cody held his gaze. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I want to get back to work."

"You still have leave time."

Sadavis began pacing the room. "I know, but I can't stand being idle any longer."

"From what I hear you've been doing a lot of physical therapy and you look okay. I think the rest is doing you good."

"Cody," Sadavis closed his eyes and willed his temper into check, "I really need some work."

"You talked to the shrink again?"

"Today. She can't help me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I've been getting a few flashbacks. That's all. I'm sure it will pass."

"She specializes in that stuff."

"Not when a self-wiping is involved. It's something I need to work through on my own."

"Okay. When you figure out how to deal with it, then we'll talk about putting you back on duty."

"I need to get back to work now. This will not affect —"

Cody held up a hand, his expression stern. "Last time I checked I was in charge of the North American special forces. If you had a physical injury that required rest, I wouldn't put you back on a case, so I sure as hell won't put you back when your mind is fucked up."

"I'm not fucked up, damn it. I'm having a few nightmares, a couple of flashbacks every now and then. It's because all I have to do is hang around and think about what happened. I want a case, Dilozenzo."

"Hey, I'll only let insubordination go so far. You ain't getting a case until I think you're ready and you sure as hell ain't acting like you're ready."

Sadavis curled his lip. "What the fuck do you want from me? To spend the next year talking to Colleen fucking MacKenzie?"

"If that's what it takes."

"She can't help me. She said so herself."

"Then we'll find someone who can."

"I can help myself if you'll give me a —"

"I said no."

Something inside Sadavis snapped. With a savage growl he lunged at Cody, his fangs and claws extended. Seconds later Sadavis found himself face down on the floor, Cody's powerful body twisting him in an unbreakable hold. Had he been in peak condition, the other man wouldn't have been able to subdue him so easily, if at all. This combined with the knowledge that he'd randomly attacked his superior slapped Sadavis back to reality.

"You done?" Cody demanded.

"Yes," Sadavis said.

Free of Cody's grasp, Sadavis stood and held his boss' gaze. "I see what you mean about the case. I apologize for my actions and will accept full punishment for insubordination."

"Cut the procedure shit, Baptista. Nobody's getting punished. You're one of my best, but you still need to recover. It ain't always as easy as a couple of gulps of blood and a few dozen stitches. What exactly did MacKenzie say?"

Sadavis' fists clenched. "A lot of nothing."

"I'm getting the feeling you don't want to talk about this."

"I need to look to ancient magic for the answer. That about sums it up."

"Then get on it. There are plenty of —"

Holding up a defensive hand, Sadavis said, "I can handle it. In the meantime, can you at least give me some paperwork?"

"Sure. Come by tomorrow and I'll leave some disks at the front desk for you."

"Thank you."

"If you need me, you know where to call."

Sadavis nodded and left Cody in the room.

The day had been a complete waste and he'd managed to destroy his chance of getting back to work before his six months were up. At that moment he wanted nothing more than to see Esmeralda, to hold her in his arms and let her kisses and endearments cleanse away the bitter feelings stirred by Colleen, Job and even Cody. Yes, his boss had been right in not assigning him at this time, but that didn't mean Sadavis had to like it.

## Chapter Twelve

Sadavis and Esmeralda had just sat down to breakfast when he said, "I'm moving back to my place tonight."

She looked a bit startled and disappointed. "Why?"

"I've already overstayed my welcome."

"Says who? I like having you here." She placed her fork aside and pouted, the expression more endearing than he wanted to admit. "I thought you liked living with me."

"It's not that. I love living with you but I need to get back to reality."

"What?" There was an angry edge to her voice and he knew he hadn't used the proper words to translate his feelings.

"I didn't mean that how it sounded. It's just that with everything that's gone on I'm starting to feel...this is difficult to say without sounding ungrateful."

She sighed. "Just spit it out, Sadavis."

"I think with everything that's gone on I'm getting a little dependant on your —"

"Emotional support?" A tender smile played around her lips. "There's nothing wrong with depending on people you care about, you know. That's part of being in a relationship, taking care of each other."

"I know but I need to get my life back together. If I can't get control over myself, I could lose my career."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's hard to explain. I need to go home, Esmeralda."

"Do you want us to break up or something?"

"Of course not." He held her gaze. "You don't want that, do you?"

"No. Sadavis, are you sure it's safe for you to go back home? After what Matthew said about the vamps in your neighborhood —"

"I'm ready. Besides I need to use my gym and I'm going to have some paperwork to take care of until I'm assigned to a new case."

"You need a little space. I get it." She forced a smile. "I've gotten used to you being here. I'm going to miss you."

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand, feeling guilty over his decision. "Esmeralda, I owe you so much. I —"

"Stop it, Sadavis. I love you."

"I love you too, but if I'm to be any kind of mate for you, I need to get myself together."

"Does this have anything to do with what has been happening when we go to bed?"

"You mean what hasn't been happening," he muttered.

"I mean after what you went through there are bound to be emotional tolls. For a man like you I know it's not easy to accept anything you consider weakness, but you're still just a person, Sadavis."

Her gaze held his with such sympathy that he had to resist the urge to fall into her arms. What the hell was wrong with him?

"I wish you'd talk to me," she continued.

Should he tell her? After all she'd done, he could at least be honest with her.

Slipping his hand from hers, he sat back in his chair and fixed his gaze on his coffee cup then looked back at her. She stared at him patiently, though he sensed her anxiety. After a moment he told her about the nightmares and flashbacks thought to be caused by his self-wiping.

When he'd finished, she said, "God, Sadavis, there must be someone who can help you with this."

"I can deal with it."

"Why do you have to handle everything on your own?"

"I always have. Why stop now?"

"Because you don't need to be alone anymore. You have friends who care about you, not because they're making money off you in some horrible show."

He wondered if his surprise shown on his face. Not that she would have noticed since she seemed blinded by rage.

"I love you," she repeated, slipping out of her chair and onto his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she held him tightly.

He returned her embrace, closing his eyes and resting his cheek against hers. "I love you too, Esmeralda, but I need to do this on my own. I know you can't understand, but that's how it is."

"I think I do understand. Just..."

"Yes?"

"Whenever you decide you need me, I'll be here."

He cupped her chin in his hand and turned her face so their gazes met. "I do need you, Esmeralda, and I want you, but unless I reclaim myself I can't be of use to you or anyone else."

Gently she brushed her lips against his, then stood and took her seat across the table. "When can we see each other again?"

"Tomorrow?" he asked.

"Late because I have a meeting at Poet's Manor."

Reaching for her hand, he said, "We can have dinner around three at my place?"

"All right."

"I'll pick you up?"

She nodded, forcing a smile. In spite of her words of support, he sensed he'd hurt her. Guilt twisted inside him. The last thing he wanted was to drive her away, but he needed some room to sort out the mess his life had become.

A couple of hours later, he'd packed his belongings, called a cab to take him home and kissed her goodbye.

When he arrived at his house, Sadavis stood for a moment, staring at the dark, dusty gym. Though everything was familiar, it didn't feel like home. That sensation seemed to be reserved for when he was in Esmeralda's presence.

Sighing, he climbed the stairs and set to work cleaning up the neglected rooms. Soon he was absorbed in his work, his thoughts darting between the artwork he was dusting and his eagerness for his dinner date with Esmeralda tomorrow.

Nirek's accented voice on the intercom interrupted his thoughts. "Ora and I are glad to know you're back, my friend. When it's convenient, we would like to see you."

Standing from where he'd been polishing the base of a life-sized sculpture of a clown, Sadavis stretched and walked to the intercom. Until that moment he hadn't realized it, but a little distraction was exactly what he needed.

"Come on up now if you want," he said.

Moments later Nirek and Ora stepped into the living area.

"My God." Ora's smile faded. She circled Sadavis. "What has happened to you?"

Nirek wrinkled his nose. "What did you do to your hair?"

"Hair nothing!" Ora snorted. "You're so skinny."

Sadavis raised his eyes to heaven. "Thanks for the warm welcome home."

"Where have you been this time?"

"Ora, that's not our business," Nirek said, though his eyes held the same combination of sympathy and curiosity as hers. "Unless he wants to tell us, of course."

"I got very involved in work this time. Food wasn't a priority. So tell me what has been happening around here?"

"Oh you know what it's like around here." Ora waved her hand on the way to the kitchen where she filled his teapot and set it on the stove to boil. She began opening and closing cabinets. "I'm going to cook you dinner. My goodness. There's no food in this house. Two cans of water chestnuts. How the hell do you expect to survive on water chestnuts?"

"Woman, will you shut that mouth of yours? He just got back today," Nirek snapped.



"I'm going shopping. Get some decent food in this house." She approached Sadavis and held out her hand. He glanced at it and she said, "You don't expect me to pay for your groceries."

"He didn't ask you to get any groceries, nag."

"Shut up, brat."

"Both of you be quiet." Sadavis reached into his pocket, removed several bills and shoved them into Ora's hand.

"You see, he'll do anything to get you out of his house," Nirek said.

"Respect your elders." She tugged Nirek's ear until he winced.

"I'm older than you by nearly a century, wench."

"But I look older, so that's enough." Ora headed for the door. "I will be back soon."

"Please don't make such a threat," Nirek muttered.

Ora flashed him her middle finger before leaving.

Once they were alone, Nirek said, "Seriously, is everything okay with you?"

"Fine. And there's nothing new in the neighborhood?"

"Only that it has gone to hell since you've been away."

"What?"

"Maybe I'm exaggerating a little, but when you were gone for so long some of the vamp punks thought they could go back to their old ways."

Sadavis' anger rose. "You mean some of them have been terrorizing and killing mortals again?"

"A few of us were thinking about calling the Network. It's bad enough Poet's Manor is right in the same city. We don't want agents crawling around the neighborhood. No offense intended. I don't think of you like a regular agent. You're one of the family."

"Well, I'm back now. I'll see that things return to normal."

Nirek's look of relief made Sadavis feel better than he had in months. At the moment the Network might consider him useless for casework, but that didn't mean he couldn't keep his own neighborhood in check. He'd worked too hard cleaning the place up and making it safe for decent vamps and mortals to let a few months of neglect destroy it.

A few hours later, after eating the delicious meal Ora cooked, his friends left for the evening and Sadavis decided to prowl the neighborhood to find out exactly how bad things were. Though he'd been training faithfully, there was nothing like a real fight to keep a vamp in shape. Besides, he needed to step out of safe hiding and get back into the real world.

\* \* \* \* \*

Much later, Sadavis stood in a steamy shower and glanced at red-tinged rivulets of water streaking his arm. Nirek had been right about the neighborhood's situation. That night he'd broken up two attacks on mortal women by hybrid gangs. The first group of three had been simple to handle. They were young vampires testing their power. Sadavis was most likely the first Immaculate they'd ever encountered. He sensed that he'd successfully convinced them to rethink their juvenile ideas about immortality and doubted they would try another attack—at least on his territory.

The second gang had been more difficult to handle. They were older hybrids and Sadavis had dealt with one of them before. That one had managed to injure Sadavis' shoulder with a swipe of a platinum-tipped knife. Had he not been so out of condition from his captivity the hybrid wouldn't have gotten in such a lucky shot. Sadavis killed his attacker and knocked out the remaining two. He then placed a call to Poet's Manor for field agents to dispose of the body and arrest the survivors. Unlike the young vamps, Sadavis' advice regarding criminal activity wouldn't make an impression on them, but Network punishment might.

He scrubbed his wounded shoulder with soap, noting that the bleeding had finally started to slow. The injury wasn't deep enough to warrant a visit to Matthew, so once he finished showering, he bandaged it and walked naked to his closet where he chose fresh clothes.

A movement across the room caught his gaze and he turned, his heart pounding, and glanced around. Another movement from the porch nabbed his attention. Several of his life-sized sculptures leered at him, only they didn't wear the faces he'd given them but looked like Ty and—no, it couldn't be. It had been so long since he'd seen that face that he'd almost forgotten...

The furious mob's screams and shouts nearly deafened Sadavis.

"Burn the beast!"

"Hang him!"

"Demon from hell!"

Half blinded by sunlight reflected on the snowy countryside and weakened by dozens of bite wounds from the pack of wolves he'd fought moments before, he ran across the frozen lake. Slipping on the ice, he dropped to his knees and grunted in pain as an arrow pierced his shoulder. The ice and snow beneath him turned crimson.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the crowd gaining on him.

Just before sunrise he'd been making his way back to the gypsy camp where he'd been staying with descendants of his foster father. He'd come across a pack of wolves attacking a human child and intervened, fighting off the pack. When he'd knelt to help the wounded girl, villagers who had been searching for her arrived. Terrified by his face and powerful physique, they assumed he'd attacked her.

As dawn rose, he fled across the countryside like a vampire of legend, chased by mortals armed with bows and arrows, pitchforks and torches. Had he not been so

weakened from fighting the wolves, he could have easily outrun the mortals, but the ones on horseback kept close enough for several of their arrows to strike him.

Panting, he pushed himself to his feet and continued running across the lake. A rope around his neck dragged him back. He fell hard enough to crack the ice. Horses whinnied and men shouted.

Ice cold water seeped into Sadavis' clothes but he scarcely noticed. His concentration focused on loosening the noose around his neck that was cutting off his breath. Grasping the rope, he pulled hard enough to yank his mortal captor off his horse.

Though the mortals wouldn't dare venture onto the cracked ice, their arrows rained over him. Panic nearly overcame him. He took the only available option and pounded the ice with the last of his rapidly fading strength. Seconds later, he plunged beneath the frozen lake. The frigid water felt like dozens of little blades against his flesh. He yanked off the rope and began swimming beneath the ice. His Immaculate strength sustained him for several moments. When he broke through the ice and dragged himself out of the water, panting and half frozen, the villagers were nowhere to be seen.

On the porch the leering villager aimed his bow and arrow.

Sadavis lunged through the porch's glass door and struck the bastard. The sound of shattering pottery forced him back to reality.

Panting, Sadavis stared at the broken clown sculpture. Glancing around frantically, he noted that neither Ty nor the villager were on the porch.

"God." Sadavis pressed his palms to his eyes, his head throbbing. "What the hell is happening to me?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis slept little that day and his dreams were haunted by memories of the past. After an hour-long workout, he waded through some of the paperwork Cody had provided, glad that the distraction seemed to keep his flashbacks at bay.

When he'd finished, he armed himself with the usual field agent equipment of silver barbed handcuffs and a gun loaded with platinum bullets.

Other than a few random squabbles that needed breaking up, the night was fairly quiet. Word spread quickly in the vampire community, so he didn't doubt the neighborhood knew he was back.

He was about to return home and prepare for his date with Esmeralda when he caught the scent of trouble—the aroma of another Immaculate, someone he'd never met before. A couple of blocks away he found an Immaculate pinning a mortal woman to the hood of a car in front of a brick apartment house. She was moaning loudly, a sound of pleasure-pain, while he greedily lapped her throat, one hand pinning both of hers above her head as he savagely groped between her legs. The scent of her blood hung heavily on the air.

Approaching, Sadavis released a warning growl.

The Immaculate looked up. "What the hell do you want?"

"Let her go," Sadavis said.

"Mind your own fucking business." The vampire grasped the woman hard and dragged her off the car. "It's crowded around here, baby."

"The shit that goes on in some vamps' territories doesn't go on here," Sadavis snapped, shoving the man away from the woman.

The other Immaculate attacked swiftly, but Sadavis quickly pinned him to the pavement.

"What's your problem, freak?" growled his captive.

Freak.

The city faded and once again Sadavis was trapped in a carnival sideshow. Peppered by rocks and insults, his anger spun out of control.

His claws sank deeper into flesh and his captor struggled.

"Let him go!"

The mortal woman's cries shattered the flashback. She was clinging to his back and punching him with her meager strength.

"Get off my boyfriend, you fucking ugly creep!"

"Boyfriend?" Sadavis murmured, releasing the bloodied Immaculate who pushed himself to his knees, panting.

The woman slipped into his arms and the couple glared at Sadavis.

"I thought he was attacking you," he explained quietly.

"No he was showing me a good time," she snarled, almost vampiric in her anger. "Shit, we moved here because we heard this neighborhood was safe."

"It is," Sadavis said.

"Come on." The Immaculate stood, his wary gaze fixed on Sadavis, and escorted his companion into the apartment house.

"I'm sorry," Sadavis said, earning yet another glare. The man's clothes were bloody from Sadavis' attack. "You're injured. Let me help you."

"No thanks," the Immaculate snapped before he slammed the door shut.

Running a hand through his hair, Sadavis walked away. His initial mistake in thinking he was stopping an assault had been understandable, but his attack on the man due to a flashback was inexcusable. If he didn't find a way to control his problem there was no telling what might happen. He didn't want to harm, or worse, kill someone unintentionally.

In spite of his desire to work through this difficulty on his own, he needed to consider contacting another vampire familiar with the magic of Atlantis. It seemed that would be the only way to end this madness.

Sadavis turned and began walking home.

"Freak."

Spinning at the sound of the whispered word, Sadavis nearly forgot to breathe. A group of men and women in medieval dress stood on the sidewalk, whispering among themselves and pointing in his direction. One of them raised a dagger and flung it, just as they had night after night in the carnival.

His heart pounding, Sadavis caught the dagger and hurled it back at the group. Laughing, the people disappeared.

Sadavis hurried home and stood trembling for several minutes while staring at the telephone, knowing he should call for help.

"No matter who you call it won't help."

Sadavis closed his eyes tightly. The old man's voice. His dead mentor.

"If you know how to set this right, tell me," Sadavis said, his heart pounding.

The old man chuckled. "If I knew that, I'd still be alive. There is no help for us. In your heart you know what's wrong."

"The self-wiping. The —"

"Your father's blood, boy."

Turning sharply, Sadavis stared into the old Indian's leering face. He reached out to touch him, but he faded. His hands balled into fists, Sadavis strode to the bathroom.

He was losing his mind, yet he sensed the truth of the old man's words. He was cursed physically and mentally. A freak. A lunatic.

Though he normally preferred showers, he thought if he relaxed in a warm bath then talked to Esmeralda he might get a grip on reality. What the hell was he going to do about her? She deserved better than a boyfriend who was slowly losing his mind.

While the bath water ran, he undressed. When he turned to the tub, he gasped and took a step backward. No longer in his bathroom, he stood in front of a cascade flowing into pool in a jungle clearing.

"Sadavis?" Esmeralda's voice on the intercom jarred him back to reality. He found himself standing in front of the overflowing tub and nearly panicked.

"Fuck," he muttered. His bare feet sloshed across the flooded bathroom and he turned off the faucet. It seemed he'd been lost in the flashback for a moment, but obviously he'd been standing there much longer than that.

"Sadavis, are you all right?" Esmeralda sounded concerned. "I'm coming up."

Cursing, he dragged on his jeans and met her at the door.

"God, Sadavis, I've been standing outside for five minutes. Why didn't you answer me and why didn't you pick me up? I waited at my house for over an hour. You had me worried."

"Sorry," he said shortly.

"Are you all right?" She reached for him but he caught her wrists and pushed her away.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't see you tonight. I'm busy."

"Doing what?" she demanded, her gaze roaming from his uncovered chest to his bare feet.

"Working."

"You're lying."

The last thing he needed was her trying to pry into his life.

"You tell her, boy," the old man spoke close to his ear. "Get rid of her. It's for her own good."

"Just leave, Esmeralda."

"Not until you tell me what's going on."

"What is wrong with you?" he snarled, grasping her upper arm and dragging her across the hall and down the stairs.

"You're hurting me," she said, trying to pull away from his grip.

Releasing her abruptly, he held her gaze. They glared at one another, their heartbeats echoing in the otherwise still night.

"Esmeralda, thanks for all you've done, but I've changed my mind about us. I'm an agent and you won't fit into my life."

"But—"

He pinned her against the wall and snapped his fangs millimeters from her throat, not a sexual gesture but a violent one.

"Have you lost your mind?" she hissed, the fear in her expression overshadowed only by rage and hurt so deep that he found he could no longer meet her gaze.

"I've had enough of you, Esmeralda. You act more like a mother than a lover. Nagging, smothering, boring young bitch."

Her hand cracked across his face. He'd seen the slap coming but didn't try to stop it, knowing he deserved much worse, if she had been inclined to give it.

"You'd better make another appointment with the shrink, you ugly bastard," she said, her voice a strained whisper, "because you need it."

Without another word, she rushed out of the house and slammed the door behind her.

Sadavis forced himself not to chase her and beg her forgiveness.

"Excellent," the old man said. "That's how you handle a woman."

Growling and his fangs bared, Sadavis turned, but no one was there.

His head spinning with terrible thoughts, Sadavis walked upstairs and sat on his bed. He closed his eyes, trying to meditate. Maybe if he cleared his mind and got some sleep he'd be refreshed enough to decide how to get a grip on his life.

After several moments, he relaxed a bit. Then the bed started swaying.

His eyes snapped open and he found himself on the deck of a ship. Glancing down, he saw he was dressed in the uniform of the English navy from the late nineteenth century. Soldiers bellowed. Pistols and cannon fire erupted around him. He stood, stepped off the edge of the bed and landed on his knees.

Voices flavored with the accent of the Caribbean floated around him.

*Demon.*

*Devil.*

Bare feet and legs, moist with seawater, surrounded him. His uniform hung in bloodstained tatters over his sunburned flesh. Stones pelted him, drawing blood. Springing to his feet, Sadavis hissed, snake-like, his fangs bared.

Dark skinned islanders shouted in fear and stepped away from him. An old woman began chanting a voodoo spell.

"Sadavis?"

Esmeralda! He spun, his heart pounding, and saw her standing in the kitchen. As he shoved through the fearful crowd, it faded into oblivion.

Wrapping his arms tightly around Esmeralda, he whispered, "I'm so sorry. I love you. I love you. I—"

She felt strangely hard and lifeless in his grip. Opening his eyes, Sadavis found himself embracing the sculpture of the African warrior.

With a snarl of rage and terror over what he had become, Sadavis picked up the sculpture and flung it against the wall. It broke, spraying the room with chips of painted clay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda spent the remainder of the night and nearly the entire day thinking about Sadavis before drifting into a restless sleep. Something was desperately wrong with him, but she didn't know how to handle an Immaculate vampire who had become almost violent in his attempt to thrust her out of his life.

The next evening she called him, fully prepared for another argument, but he merely hung up on her. Over the next two days when she called she only got his answering machine, complete with a nasty message instructing her not to waste her time phoning.

Frustrated and thoroughly pissed off, she buried herself in her latest chronicle.

By the end of the week, her worry turned to outright fear and she decided to make one last attempt to talk to him before calling Matthew. If Sadavis wouldn't talk to her, perhaps the doctor could get through to him.

Common sense warned her that a sensible woman with any self-respect would do her best to forget him, but instinct told her otherwise. He was not acting remotely like the man she had come to know, and his confession regarding the nightmares and flashbacks worried her. A young vampire with little knowledge of ancient magic or psychic powers beyond simple telepathy, she didn't fully understand what he'd described as a self-wiping but she did know it was cause for concern.

Hoping to catch Sadavis when he first awoke, she arrived at his house at sunset. Two houses down, Nirek and Ora sat on the porch. He strummed his guitar while her hands hovered over her tarot spread on the folding table in front of her. They waved for her to join them. She did so hurriedly, anxious about speaking with Sadavis.

Nirek and Ora gazed at her with wary expressions that increased her concern.

"You want to see Sadavis?" Nirek asked.

"Yes. Actually I'm in a hurry," she said. "I don't want to miss him."

"You won't. He hasn't left his house all week," Nirek told her.

"I knew there was something wrong with him," she murmured, turning quickly and heading for Sadavis' home.

Ora stood and caught her arm.

Esmeralda glanced at the older vampiress and her annoyance faded a bit when she noted the sorrowful expression in Ora's eyes.

"Don't go, child," Ora said softly. "It isn't safe."

"He hasn't been himself lately," Nirek added. "I tried to see him a couple of days ago and he almost knocked me into the next century."

"Madness, that's what it is," Ora said. "The cards have spoken. He is lost to us."

Nirek sighed. "I've been putting it off, but I think I'm going to have to call the Network about him."

"Let me talk to him first," Esmeralda said, her heart pounding with dread and fear.

"All right, but if I hear any commotion I'm calling the Network," Nirek told her firmly.

"You should go with her," Ora said.

"Forget that. He might finish me off this time."

"Oh so you let the woman go on her own?"

"Silence, hag. I don't see you running over there either."

Ignoring the couple's verbal sparring, Esmeralda pulled away from Ora's grasp and hurried to Sadavis' place where she rang the buzzer and called to him through the intercom.



After waiting several moments with no response from inside, she tried the door. Locked. Tightening her grip on the doorknob, she used her vampiric strength to break the lock.

A barrage of scents struck her—blood, clay, stagnant water and Sadavis' aroma strengthened by fear, rage and other emotions her kind could discern by scent.

The last thing she should do was attempt to speak to an Immaculate special forces agent gone mad, but her concern for him overcame her reason.

"Sadavis!" she called, glancing around the gym. She made her way up the stairs, apprehensive about what she was walking into.

Broken sculptures littered the living area. Looking around, she noted that almost all the creations she recalled, from the African warrior to the miniature animals on the shelves, had been destroyed. They were replaced by monstrous figures with tusk-like teeth and twisted facial features. Many of the sculptures looked partially complete, as if he'd started working on them and left off. Amidst the shards and chunks of broken statues, she noticed bloody footprints covering the floor. The sound of running water lured her toward the bathroom where an enormous puddle of water had leaked beneath the closed door.

"Oh shit," she whispered, staring at the overflowing tub. A trickle of water ran from the faucet that had obviously been running for days. Sloshing through several inches of water, she turned off the tap.

"Sadavis," she shouted again, inhaling deeply and following his scent out of the living area and down the corridor. She glanced through several open doors where he'd kept other sculptures. Most of those statues had been smashed as well.

She found him in a room at the end of the hall. By the light of a candelabra filled with dripping black candles, he stood naked, covered in blood, sweat and clay. He stared at the seven-foot sculpture he was working on with feverish intent. His hands moved swiftly over the gleaming brown creature with blubbery lips, a deformed nose and enormous eyes with swollen lids.

"You're not here, so get the fuck out," he said.

## Chapter Thirteen

Esmeralda approached Sadavis warily, heartsick at his obvious pain but uncertain of how to help him while ensuring her own safety.

"I'm here," she said softly.

His dove gray eyes, tinged red and bruised beneath from lack of sleep, glanced in her direction. "I know you're not really here because I told her not to come back."

"Sadavis," she reached out a tentative hand and touched his arm.

He flinched, his eyes widening. His hands dropped from the sculpture and he cupped her cheek, his expression momentarily wild before he backed away from her, the broken pieces of clay on the floor crunching beneath his bare, bleeding feet. She winced, though he didn't seem to register any pain, at least not from the cuts.

"God, no," he whispered, "I told you to go. You have to go."

"Please let me help you," she said.

"Can't you see?" he snapped, his savage tone conflicting with his desperate expression. "It's not safe for you here. Shut up! She is not your concern," he roared, glancing to his left, his fangs elongating.

Esmeralda nearly panicked. He was talking to people who weren't there.

"Look at me, Sadavis," she stated in a voice that sounded steadier than she felt.

His gaze riveted in her direction.

"You're hurt and you need help," she said.

"You can't help me. Esmeralda, please go. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm not afraid," she lied, stepping closer and touching a hand to his shoulder. Though he glanced at it sharply, he didn't try to pull away. Moving closer, she slipped her arms around him.

He embraced her tightly, almost melting against her, and murmured, "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." She cupped the back of his head with one hand, not caring that his hair felt damp and sticky.

"I had to make you go."

"I know."

"If I hurt you—"

"You won't hurt me. Come on." She stepped away, taking his hand and guiding him back to the living space.

Following her docilely, he clung to her hand so tightly his grip was almost painful. When they reached the bed she sat, but he refused to join her.

"When was the last time you slept, Sadavis?"

He released the death grip on her hand to wrap his arms around himself and she flexed her fingers as blood began circulating again.

"I can't," he whispered. "They come when I sleep."

His words resurrected memories of the night Job had dropped him at the research center. Lying in the hospital bed, he'd struggled against sleep induced by painkillers because he'd said "they" came for him in dreams. Now she realized that had been the first warning sign of the self-wiping gone bad. Though from what he'd told her, there was no such thing as a good self-wiping.

"You need to sleep." She stood, adjusted the rumpled sheets and rearranged the pillows before lying down. Gazing at him, she held out her hand. "Come on."

After nearly a full minute of staring at her, he lay down beside her.

"They'll come," he said.

"No they won't and if they do I'll wake you." That promise had worked once before and she hoped it would again.

She stroked his hair and caressed his shoulders. It took less than thirty seconds for him to tumble into sleep. Unfortunately it wasn't as peaceful as she'd hoped. He twitched restlessly as she covered him with a blanket.

After picking up the phone near his bed, she dialed the number of the vampire research center and asked to be connected to Matthew immediately, stating it was an emergency.

"Winter here," Matthew's voice sounded on the line.

"Matthew, it's Esmeralda. Sadavis really needs help."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at his house. Can you come?"

"What's wrong?"

"I think it has something to do with the self-wiping. He has lost his mind and he has some injuries I think are minor but I haven't taken a good look yet. Please can you come or send someone? I know if I try to get him to the research center he won't go."

"Of course. I can get there in about an hour. If you think his injuries need attention sooner, I'll get the Network to send some agents who'll make him come here."

"No, don't do that," she said, sensing the last thing Sadavis needed was a confrontation with power-happy agents.

"I'll try to get there faster. Just sit tight."

"Thanks, Matthew."

\* \* \* \* \*

She hung up the phone, drew a deep breath and released it slowly. Tugging the blanket up, she looked at his feet, noticing several pieces of broken clay embedded in his flesh. She found a tweezers in the bathroom along with some antiseptic and gauze.

Settling herself on the end of the bed, she began removing the shards from his feet, wrinkling her nose with disgust. Funny how drinking blood was so appealing yet caring for injuries made her squeamish as hell. By the time she'd finished cleaning his feet with antiseptic, the wounds had begun to heal. Once he took some blood, his regenerative powers would kick in even more. After wrapping his feet with gauze, she inspected several more gashes on his chest, back and head, removing bits of glass and clay.

She was blotting the back of his head with antiseptic when he finally awoke and turned to her, his eyes calmer than before and softened by sleep.

"Why did you come back?" he asked.

"I told you I love you."

"I love you too. It might not have seemed like it, but I said those things to you because—"

"I know why you said them." She offered him a slight smile and stretched out beside him, resting her head against his chest.

His arm settled around her and he closed his eyes again. Soon the evenness of his breathing told her he'd drifted back to sleep.

A short time later, she caught Matthew's scent. She rose from the bed and met the doctor in the hallway.

"Where is he?" Matthew asked, glancing at the bloodstained floor littered with broken pottery. "What a mess."

"He's sleeping. I don't think he has slept for most of the week."

"You said he's hurt?"

"He was cut up from the statues. He must have smashed them himself."

Matthew followed her into the living area, his brow furrowing at the grotesque, half-finished sculptures around the room. "I knew I should have called him this week, but I got so caught up with work and he seemed okay. He told me he'd see Colleen."

Esmeralda shook her head. "He talked to her once and when she admitted she knew little about self-wipings he refused to return to her. Wouldn't even listen to her suggestion of contacting other vampires who are familiar with the magic of Atlantis."

"It was a warning sign in itself that he didn't take the proper steps to rectify his problem. That's not like Sadavis at all. He usually meets everything head on."

Sadavis snapped awake when Matthew approached and gazed at the doctor with startled eyes. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Don't give me any guff. How many house calls do you think I make?" Matthew stated. The doctor had the unusual gift of sounding stern and teasing at the same time.

"Are you going to be as big a pain in the ass as you usually are or can I examine you without hindrance?"

Sadavis' jaw tightened visibly but he allowed Matthew to begin his examination. The doctor removed the bandages Esmeralda had applied. Satisfied that the wounds were healing quickly enough, he cleaned and wrapped them again then provided Sadavis with several vials of hybrid blood to drink.

Esmeralda had considered giving him hers, but until she learned more about his illness, she feared that, like some diseases of their kind, the madness might be passed through blood drinking.

After talking to Sadavis for several moments, Matthew issued a sleeping medication that affected him quickly.

"I wanted to make sure he would be out for a while," the doctor said.

"What do you think? How is he?"

Matthew wrinkled his brow, his eyes narrowing. "He's out of his gourd."

"So that's your medical opinion?" Esmeralda snapped, then sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Matthew. I'm just worried."

"So am I," he admitted, picking up the phone and dialing. "This is Matthew Winter. I need to speak with Colleen MacKenzie right away, please. Hi, Colleen. I've got an emergency with Sadavis Baptista and would appreciate it if you could see him right away. If you could by any chance come over to his place that would be even better. I know he refused to continue seeing you, but this is urgent. I'm way out of my area of expertise here. Great. Thanks."

Esmeralda stared anxiously at Matthew who told Colleen Sadavis' address then dialed Cody Dilozenzo's cell phone and briefed him on Sadavis' situation.

When he hung up, Esmeralda said, "Isn't that like breaking patient confidentiality or something, calling his boss?"

"Yes, under normal circumstances but there are different rules for Network agents. Cody needs to be notified if one of his people is in a situation like this. Besides, if Sadavis gets violent I'd like some backup. To control him on my own, I'd probably have to hurt him and I don't want to do that. Just out of curiosity, do you have something against Cody?"

"No. I guess I'm starting to have something against the Network in general." Esmeralda sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed and gazing at Sadavis as he slept. "I'm almost starting to understand why you don't want to join."

This time Matthew picked up his cell phone.

"Now who are you calling?"

"Seraphim Kellen."

Esmeralda's skin prickled at the name of the oldest Immaculate on Earth. She had only seen the man once during a party at Matthew and Dulcie's house. Remote and intimidating, Kellen oozed power more than any vampire she'd ever met. Next to him,

Sadavis, as well as almost every other vampire, was just a kid. Though selective about his associations, Kellen had agreed to teach Matthew after the doctor's mentor in magic was tragically killed. The ancient vampire was so weird Esmeralda wondered how Matthew endured working with him on such an intimate level. Perhaps it was easy enough because their time together came in small doses, as Kellen lived in New Mexico for most of the year. Still, if anyone knew how to counter the effects of a self-wiping, the ancient Immaculate would be the one.

Matthew excused himself to speak privately with Kellen and stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

Turning back to Sadavis, Esmeralda brushed a lock of hair from his face and allowed her fingers to stray over his cheek, knowing he was too lost in a drugged sleep for her to disturb him.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there but turned when Matthew entered with Colleen.

"Thank you so much for coming," Esmeralda said.

Colleen waved her hand. "Not at all. By the looks of this place things are even worse than I'd suspected."

"Sadavis is excellent at covering things up," Matthew said. "But obviously he's reached the point where he's lost complete control."

"Marvelous observation," Colleen quipped, her gaze sweeping the destroyed room.

"I can't believe this happened," Esmeralda said. "He was so strong, emotionally and physically. I never would have expected this could happen to him."

"I would bet my fangs this was caused by the self-wiping," Colleen said.

"I wish I knew more about it," Esmeralda said. "I'm not very familiar with magic, just telepathy."

"Don't feel badly about it," Colleen continued. "Very few vampires are familiar with self-wipings. Personally I know little about them, though since talking with Sadavis I've been doing more research. While we're waiting for him to wake up, would you two fill me in a little more on his condition?"

"He's delusional and paranoid," Matthew stated.

"Specifics, please?"

"Well, he told me his bed turned into a boat," the doctor continued.

"He talks to people who aren't there," Esmeralda said.

Colleen listened intently and jotted down several notes while Esmeralda and Matthew spoke. A short time later, Cody Dilorenzo arrived and the others filled him in on the situation.

"I knew I should have been firmer when he flipped out last week."

"He flipped out?" Esmeralda said.

"I just thought he was stressed after everything that happened. I mean he sounded frustrated and his temper was bad, but he seemed fairly rational. He told me he was working out his issues."

Matthew smirked. "Oh obviously."

"Hey I don't need any lip from you, Winter." Cody pointed at the doctor. "This has been a real shitty few months. One of my agents defects to Vera's side while one of my best guys is turning into a fanged space cadet because of a self-wiping. I've been chained to Poet's Manor for weeks questioning that wolf clone of yours and got your Network leader brother breathing down my neck because we've yet to round up the rest of Vera's cronies, so give me a frickin' break."

Matthew raised his eyes to heaven. "I accept your little rant, Cody. I won't tell you how tired I am of mopping up after Network messes. If I could dedicate even half the time I've spent ministering to your agents to research instead, I might have found a cure for such things as this self-wiping mess by now."

"You young egomaniac punk —"

"Stop it, both of you," Colleen snapped. "I came here to help Sadavis, not listen to your schoolyard spats."

Esmeralda had tuned out most of the conversation and focused her attention on Sadavis who was starting to wake. His eyes opened slightly then he sat up quickly, glaring at the small crowd standing near his bed.

"What are they doing here?" he demanded.

"It's okay," Esmeralda told him gently, sitting beside him.

Colleen stepped forward and Sadavis' gaze fixed on her. "I won't cover my face, wench. Not for you or anyone else."

"Mr. Baptista, do you know who I am?"

After a moment, his brow furrowed and he said, "Dr. MacKenzie, what are you doing here?"

"I came to talk. Tell me what has been going on since we last spoke."

For several moments Sadavis conversed with her in a calm, rational manner. The madness overtook him so suddenly that Matthew and Cody almost didn't react in time before he leapt up, nearly knocking Colleen onto the floor, and began pummeling the wall with both fists, his fangs bared as he ranted. Plaster and metal flew from the holes he punched before the other men grasped him and wrestled him to the bed.

He ceased struggling and the three lay panting. Finally Matthew and Cody loosened their hold and Sadavis glanced from them to Colleen and Esmeralda, who stood nearby. Lowering his gaze, he said softly, "Forgive me, but I can't—" He turned to Cody. "Arrest me. I'm no longer safe."

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda sighed, gazing into her untouched mug of coffee. She sat at Sadavis' kitchen table with Cody, Matthew and Colleen. After receiving another dose of sleeping medication, Sadavis was once again unconscious, leaving the others to decide his fate. Cody agreed to keep watch over Sadavis in his home rather than move him to either the research center or Poet's Manor. He left word at Poet's Manor that, until further notice, he was only to be called under extreme emergency. If Dilorenzo needed to leave for any reason, another agent would be assigned to Sadavis for safety purposes.

"The vampire psyche is a strange thing," Colleen told them. "It's strong yet fragile at the same time. It takes centuries to condition the mind to accept parts of our past that are sometimes intolerable for humans. Because of our strong resistance to death, we often experience these situations over and over again with no release. By eclipsing his mind through the self-wiping, even though it only works for a short time, Sadavis has destroyed the mental defenses that took centuries to build. He went from total oblivion during the self-wiping to reliving his experiences, apparently at random. He's lost in a way. Until all his memories return in full and are placed back in order, this madness, if you will, shall continue. I don't believe he can overcome this on his own. The cases of self-wipings I've researched so far have all led to madness and suicide."

"Suicide," Esmeralda breathed. Sadavis was the last person she knew who would attempt suicide. He was far too strong, at least until this horrible madness had struck him.

"In my profession I've learned that you really can't force a person into accepting help. I'm afraid the same might be true here. He has resisted me from the first," Colleen said.

"Which I think is a reflection of the self-wiping," Matthew added. "Until he returned from imprisonment with Vera's people, I'd never known Sadavis to brush off a solution to an obvious problem. It's not like him."

"What are you suggesting?" Cody asked.

"That his resistance might be a symptom of the disease."

"Well, you called the old man, right?" Cody said. "He should be able to help us out."

"Yes, Seraphim promised he'd be on the first plane to Boston. He's taking this problem very seriously. That in itself is enough to worry me."

Cody turned to Esmeralda. "How you holding up, kid?"

"I'm fine. Just worried."

"It took a lot of guts for you to come here and watch out for him," Cody added.

"He would have done the same for me."

"You don't need to stick around. Things might get worse before they get better."

Esmeralda's temper rose and she met Cody's gaze. "The only way you're getting me out of here, Mr. Dilorenzo, is if you have me arrested."

A slight smile curled Cody's lips and he nodded. "You don't scare easy, do you?"



"No. I do not."

Glancing at his watch, Matthew said, "I have to get back to the research center. Call if you need anything."

"I have to go too." Colleen stood. "And you have my number as well."

Once the doctors left, Cody and Esmeralda sat in silence for a moment.

Finally he said, "How about we clean this place up? It stinks in here. All that stagnant water."

"Good idea." At least busywork would help keep her from worrying herself sick.

While she and Cody began sweeping up broken clay and mopping the floor, she tried not to imagine the awful possibility that Sadavis' sanity might be lost forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Sadavis awoke after several hours' sleep he seemed more rational and far less violent. Cody accompanied him to the bathroom where he showered while Esmeralda made dinner.

Finally the three sat down to eat and Cody told Sadavis about Seraphim's impending arrival.

"Exactly how many more people do you intend to drag into my problems?" Sadavis snapped, his fangs and eyes flashing.

"As many as it takes to get you back to normal," Cody stated. "Don't bother arguing, Baptista, because there's no way out of this."

"Isn't there?"

"Sadavis, please." Esmeralda reached for his hand. "Can't you just go along with it?"

His jaw worked in irritation, but after a moment of holding her gaze, his expression softened the slightest bit and his hand tightened on hers. "All right, but none of it will do any good. They've told me."

Esmeralda and Cody exchanged a quick yet worried glance.

"Don't do that," Sadavis snarled, pulling away from Esmeralda. He stood, pacing the room. "Don't look at each other like I'm a halfwit who won't notice. I know what you're doing." Sadavis paused next to Cody's chair and stared at the blond vampire. "You're looking for an excuse to demote me."

"That's right, Baptista. I always put my work on hold and give up evenings with my wife to babysit agents I'm looking to get rid of."

"I don't need a fucking babysitter." Sadavis glanced at Esmeralda. "Even a beautiful one."

Esmeralda drew a short breath and glanced at her scarcely touched plate of food. God, she hoped Seraphim would get there quickly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following night Seraphim Kellen arrived.

Esmeralda caught his scent, potent yet bewitching, before he stepped through the door, Matthew at his side. Kellen's pale green eyes swept the room and its inhabitants. The presence of the first Immaculate incited tension within Esmeralda and she knew by their scent Cody and Sadavis felt the same. Though Matthew seemed outwardly relaxed with his mentor, he remained uncharacteristically quiet as Kellen crossed the room with slow steps, pausing when Sadavis rose to his feet and growled.

Esmeralda glanced at Sadavis, concerned by the sound of that growl and the way he bared his fangs, his fists tightening. His eyes gleaming insane, vampiric red, he advanced on Seraphim. Neither his height and weight advantage nor his apparent madness seemed to intimidate the ancient Immaculate. Esmeralda noted that, in spite of Seraphim's calm veneer, his penetrating eyes carried a hint of madness all their own. Rumors circulated about him that sent shivers down the spines of the most jaded vampires.

Sadavis growled more viciously this time. Cody and Matthew approached him on either side, obviously prepared to restrain him again if necessary.

With a slight hand gesture, Seraphim signaled for them to leave Sadavis alone. The two moved away, though their anxious gazes remained fixed on Sadavis.

"You're not welcome here," Sadavis snapped.

"I was invited," Seraphim replied in a voice as deep as Sadavis', yet unlike his it was slightly rough rather than soft.

"Not by me," Sadavis said.

The next words Seraphim spoke were in a language Esmeralda could not yet understand but which she recognized from listening to Sadavis – Hindi.

Surprised to hear Kellen speak his first language, Sadavis momentarily froze, his heart pounding. Though he'd met Seraphim Kellen before, he had no idea the man spoke Hindi, but at ten thousand years of age there was probably not a language on Earth that he hadn't heard before.

Kellen's words roused Sadavis' anger but also touched a rational part of him drifting just beneath the thickening cloud of insanity.

Seraphim repeated his question in Hindi. "Has the madness taken you so far that it has turned you into a complete fool or does any part of you still want to help yourself?"

"You can't help me," Sadavis replied in his mother tongue. "They have spoken."

"They are part of the illusion," said the ancient one, his green gaze fixed on Sadavis. "The malady has created the voices that lie to you. The illusions can be shattered and the spell broken."

"Tell me how."

"I shall speak for them to hear as well," Seraphim stated, glancing at Esmeralda, Cody and Matthew.

After a moment's hesitation, Sadavis nodded.

"There is a way to fight the madness," Seraphim continued in English. "It won't be easy and there is no guarantee it will work. However if he possesses the strength of character Matthew claims, I believe he can overcome the aftereffects of the self-wiping."

"How?" Esmeralda and Matthew asked simultaneously.

"A spiritual journey. I have the power to show him the way, but the battles fought there will be his alone. Once he is on the path I cannot interfere."

"Can someone else go with him for moral support?" Matthew asked.

A slight smile flickered across Seraphim's lips. "You always were a sharp pupil, Matthew. Yes, someone may accompany him. However it must be someone with the courage to face his demons alongside him, to relive his life with him so to speak."

"I'll go with him," Cody stated.

"I'll go," Matthew said. "I have more talent with magic than you do, Dilorenzo."

Overcome by rage, Sadavis curled his lip and snarled, "I neither need nor want a keeper."

"Your refusal to accept help is part of the malady," Seraphim said.

"I'm not so sure I am mad. Perhaps it's you, Kellen. It fits your reputation after all."

Ignoring him, Seraphim turned to the others. "His companion should be someone who cares for him deeply."

Snorting, Sadavis raised his eyes to heaven. "This is becoming more sickening and ridiculous by the moment. Leave the monastery. Seek salvation under another roof lest you join me in hell."

Esmeralda made a motion to touch him. As much as he wanted her touch, something inside forced him to step away. She dropped her hand but held his gaze, her eyes filled with sympathy that both comforted and enraged him.

"That's not a problem. He's a good friend," Matthew said.

"And he's one of my most respected agents."

"You mean it should be someone who loves him," Esmeralda stated softly, holding Seraphim's gaze.

Another slight smile flickered across the ancient Immaculate's lips and he nodded in her direction.

Emotions twisted inside Sadavis, nearly strangling him. "I am not loved."

"The hell you're not," Esmeralda snapped, taking his face roughly in her hands and forcing him to meet her gaze. She didn't seem to care about the others standing nearby, watching. "Whether you like it or not, Baptista, you're getting through this and I will have back the man I love."

"You will not witness it."

"What are you afraid of?" she demanded.

"Frightening you."

*Showing you my ugliness.*

"Trust me, my friend," Cody said. "I don't think this woman of yours scares easy."

"Then I suggest we begin immediately," Seraphim told them. "I brought everything we need for the ritual. Cody and Matthew, you may stand by in case we need assistance but otherwise I'll ask you to remain silent and out of the way."

"By all means, old man," Cody said. He and Matthew walked to the kitchen area where they sat at the table.

"What should I do?" Esmeralda asked, her anxiety almost tangible and as strong as Sadavis' own. How could he let this happen when the others told him it was impossible?

"Nothing at the moment," Seraphim told her. "Just rest while I prepare. You'll need your strength."

## **Chapter Fourteen**

A shiver of apprehension darted through Esmeralda. She glanced at Sadavis who rested beside her on his bed, staring unblinking at the ceiling. Black taper candles burned at each of the bed's corners, their flickering flames the only source of light in the room. The aroma of incense wafted on the air, pungent yet at the same time pleasant.

Seraphim sat on a chair at the foot of the bed, his pale eyes fixed on the reclining couple. He said that during the ritual they would be completely immersed in a spiritual world that would seem real to them. When they reemerged in the physical world, they would most likely be very tired and it would be best if their bodies were in a supine position.

At the moment, Esmeralda couldn't imagine relaxing enough to meditate let alone enter a spiritual realm, but she and Sadavis wouldn't have much to do with finding their way there. Seraphim would guide them.

Esmeralda reached for Sadavis' hand and he slowly turned to her. Somewhere beneath his intense expression, she recognized her lover gazing at her, his suffering reaching out to her and stiffening her resolve. Simultaneously their grips tightened on one another.

"I need you to close your eyes and clear your minds as best you can," Seraphim stated. "Focus."

Esmeralda did as he asked. She felt a subtle psychic pull. Her first reaction was to rebel against it, but she forced herself to relax and concentrate on the sound of Kellen's low chanting.

Within the blackness surrounding her, she heard the gentle rolling of waves on a shoreline. The darkness faded and she found herself standing on an empty stretch of beach. Two figures stood in the distance. She hurried toward them, knowing instinctively that one was Sadavis and the other their guide.

\* \* \* \* \*

No sooner had the familiar Indian shoreline drifted into view than Sadavis' mind cleared, his thoughts more focused than they had been in months.

This was not India as he knew it today, but the place he recognized from his childhood. Plagued by a feeling of dread, he began walking down the beach. The tide washed over his bare feet and licked his ankles.

The silhouette of a ship on the horizon drew his attention momentarily before he was distracted by the sound of hushed voices and a baby's cry that was quickly muffled.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he spun, his heart pounding.

Robed in black, Seraphim stared at him with eyes so pale they looked almost white. Death white.

"It must be sixteen hundred years ago," Sadavis said.

"Sixteen-hundred-three years ago, to be exact. This is the year of your birth." Seraphim's voice was scarcely a whisper yet it carried unfathomable power.

"Sadavis," a woman's voice called to him, so achingly familiar though he knew she couldn't exist in this time.

Turning, he watched her approach, her pale, beautiful form draped in a red and gold sari, her hair arranged in a thick braid over a creamy shoulder.

"What is she doing here?" Sadavis murmured.

"Don't you remember?" Seraphim asked.

*I will have back the man I love.* The words rang inside his head. Words spoken in her voice. Then he remembered.

"Sadavis." She paused in front of him, gazing up at him with love and determination that touched him profoundly.

Cupping her face in his hand, he stroked her smooth cheek with his thumb. "You shouldn't be here, Esmeralda. It's too dangerous. Too—"

"Too late," Seraphim stated. "There's no turning back now."

Esmeralda took Sadavis' hand and squeezed it tightly. "I'm not afraid."

"That will change," Seraphim continued.

"She doesn't belong here," Sadavis growled. "You should not have allowed her to come."

"You're wasting time. There's still a long way to go," Seraphim said. "And there's no rest for the wicked."

"You mean the weary," Sadavis corrected.

A slight smile tugged at the corners of Seraphim's mouth and somehow the expression in his dead eyes looked mocking. "Not in this realm."

The distant voices drew Sadavis' attention again and he followed them instinctively, Esmeralda at his side and Seraphim trailing behind.

They climbed over a pile of rocks and into an ornate bedchamber where a black-haired woman with light olive skin sat on the bed. Her arms folded tightly beneath her breasts, she stared trance-like out a window. The Indian man lurking in her doorway approached, a crying infant in his arms. Sadavis recognized the man as his mentor, though not as he remembered him. Rather than too thin, his build was healthy and powerful, his dark eyes sane and his face handsome.

"I told you I don't want anything to do with him," the woman spoke through clenched teeth. "I don't even believe he's ours. The old, twisted bitch who delivered our child must have switched him with that thing."

"I assure you he is ours."

"No!" She turned, hatred and disgust burning in her dove gray eyes. "Immaculate vampires are a more perfect version of us. Look at him. He's—"

"Our son."

She shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "There is already talk that he is cursed. The last thing our kind needs is something to make people fear and hate us more than they already do. Even worse, he will feed off other vampires. Many hate Immaculates for that reason, yet they respect them for their strength and beauty."

"He will be strong."

"How can you know that? Who is to say his deformities will not extend to his body?"

"Take him." The man offered her the infant but she refused to so much as look at him.

"What do you suggest then?" snapped the man. "Shall I kill him and pretend he didn't survive? Will that please you?"

"If that's the only alternative we have."

He looked at the woman as if seeing her for the first time.

She turned to him, meeting his scathing expression with one of her own. "I am a daughter of Atlantis. You know what that means."

"Yes, I know the history of our kind as well as you do."

"I hardly think so." She curled her lip. "You're of a good family, a fine warrior and the most handsome man I have ever seen. That's why I honored you with my bite. I made you one of us. I can hardly believe you turned out to be such a pathetic breeder."

"So it's my fault our son is not your idea of beautiful?"

"He would not be a toad's idea of beautiful. The creature is deformed. Were he an animal, he would be drowned. By morning I'll be recovered enough to leave. You may come with me, but not if you insist on bringing that thing with you. Life for us is difficult enough without saddling ourselves with a freak."

He glared at her. "I would rather face a stake through the heart than spend another moment in your company, Daughter of Atlantis or not. I am the master of this household. I could order your execution."

"You don't have the courage to destroy me, your maker."

The infant screamed louder and the man glanced at him then back to the woman. "He's hungry."

She glared. "I told you to get it out of my sight."

Sadavis watched in silence. This was the first time he'd seen his mother, here in this memory buried so deep that without Seraphim's guidance he never could have uncovered it.

The shadow in the corner of the room faded and a door appeared. A slight tug on his hand made him glance at Esmeralda. She gazed at him with sympathy and underlying anger at the scene she'd just witnessed.

"He killed her," Sadavis said softly as they walked toward the door. "He told me once that he had his wife killed."

"Did you know your mentor was your father?"

"Yes. I knew."

They stepped through the door and once again found themselves on the shoreline, though this time they were not alone. Sadavis' vampiric father stood with his foster parents.

An annoying lump rose in his throat at the sight of his foster mother holding his infant self.

Unlike his biological mother, she looked at him with affection, smiling at him, rocking him as if he was a normal child not a deformed vampire infant.

Her own son had been stillborn only days ago and she lavished the affection she would have given him upon Sadavis.

"After he brought me to my foster parents, my father performed a self-wiping for the first time. I believe it was because he couldn't live with the memory of killing my mother."

"Maybe he couldn't live with the memory of giving you up," Esmeralda suggested.

Sadavis shook his head slightly. "I doubt it."

"He obviously cared about you."

"In his way," Sadavis murmured. "After three self-wipings, he lost his sanity entirely. Eventually he killed himself, but only after thirty years of madness."

Continuing along the beach, they passed scenes from Sadavis' life. His foster parents were entertainers and craftspeople. From a young age, Sadavis worked with them, learning their trade. Familiar with vampirism, they provided him with blood supplied by his biological father and educated him as best they could about his kind.

The beach slowly merged into a village. Sadavis' five-year-old self stood amidst a group of children laughing and mocking him. Another young boy stepped forward to defend him.

A slight smile played around Sadavis' lips as he watched the vision. "He was my best friend for years. I offered to make him one of us, but like my foster father, he refused to become a hybrid."

"What about your foster mother?"

"She died when I was six years old."

As he spoke, the vision faded to his mother's funeral. He stared, sorrow filling him afresh at the sight of it. To please his mother, Sadavis' foster father had refrained from



including him in their entertainment act. After her death, Sadavis became a nightly feature.

"We all must make our own living, son," his father said. "Your appearance is nothing to be ashamed of, especially when it can earn us money."

His childhood memories spun around them in an endless circle, tossing him from fear and sadness to anger. Some of the visions slowed, allowing them closer observation.

They stood in the midst of a jungle where a tiger stalked Sadavis' childhood friend, now a young man. The great cat's heartbeat filled his ears as it prepared to leap on his friend and crush his windpipe. With a savage cry, Sadavis' eighteen-year-old self leapt at the creature. They rolled on the ground, teeth and claws flashing. Sadavis felt the pain of each swipe of the creature's claws on his skin. He recalled the agony of the tiger's long, yellow fangs sinking into his flesh before his own fangs tore out its throat.

In another vision, his mentor taught him the magic of Atlantis, while in another he learned the ancient art of staff fighting, first from his father then from other mentors.

India faded to eastern Europe where he tore across the countryside as a mercenary soldier. He and Esmeralda stood, unscathed, on the deck of a ship tossed on a stormy sea. Throughout the ages, he used his increasing skill to defend himself and humankind from vampires seeking to do harm. It was as if he was called down the path of protector in spite of how he was often feared and despised for his appearance.

In Rome he was captured and flogged to death, only to rise again from his vampiric slumber and frighten his captors enough that he managed to steal a horse and escape. In Spain he was stoned by an angry mob and was nearly hanged in London for a murder he didn't commit.

People weren't always cruel and unjust, however. There were vampiric mentors throughout his life who taught him priceless skills, physical, magical and psychic. There were kind mortals whom he befriended, some to whom he passed on his vampiric gift.

Again the whirlwind of memories stopped at a scene from four hundred years ago. Outside a lovely home on the coast of the Arabian sea, Sadavis sat beneath the shade of a palm tree with a hybrid couple he had befriended during his travels. They had approached him after witnessing his skill with the staff and asked for training. In exchange, they offered him their blood. What started as a business relationship that should have lasted no more than a century became a lifelong friendship.

"What have you been doing with yourself these past fifty years?" the woman asked.

"That's too long to stay away from home," the man said.

Sadavis' younger self smiled slightly. Leaning his head against the tree trunk, he closed his eyes. It was true that he still considered India home. Though he enjoyed traveling, no other place wrapped around his heart like the beautiful country of his birth.

"I met a daughter of Atlantis."

"Ah." The woman smiled. "Finally someone has captured your heart."

"It's not like that." Sadavis opened his eyes. "Her name is Marina. She and her companion, Marcus, have loosely organized a group of vampires interested in defending humankind and keeping us respectable."

The man grinned. "Of course they lured you in. You and your noble ambitions."

The woman shook her head, her eyes flashing with anger. "It's a wonder you care at all about mortals and vampires alike after —"

"After being shunned by so many? If I had to base my life on what the cruel and ignorant think of me, I would have driven a stake through my own heart long ago," Sadavis said. "I refuse to waste time justifying myself to anyone or seeking revenge on petty fools."

"Were more of our kind like you, we wouldn't have to hide in shadows."

"I'm not so sure about that," Sadavis reflected. "It seems mortals and vampires alike automatically despise anyone who's different. They fear what they don't understand. They're to be pitied."

"Don't tell me such unfairness doesn't anger you," the woman said. "I've seen your temper, Sadavis."

A slight smile played around his lips. "It angers me, but I prefer not to dwell on it since I'd rather not waste my energy on that temper you mentioned."

Colors blurred as more memories spun around them.

Sadavis' foster family had been ancestors of a gypsy clan. Stories of him were passed from parents to children. He kept in touch with them throughout the centuries, visiting them often as a friend and protector. The clan had never once betrayed him and throughout his many travels he still considered their settlements home.

At a gypsy camp in Britain the visions slowed again. It was here that he lived for nearly a decade with his foster family's descendants and took their surname of Baptista as his own.

Esmeralda clung tightly to his hand and leaned against him a bit. Glancing at her, he noted her pallor and grew concerned.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just a little dizzy."

"Rest here." Seraphim's voice was a whisper on the wind. He stepped in front of them and they followed him to a caravan where he motioned with his hand for them to enter. Sadavis was a bit surprised when he didn't follow them.

"I'll stand guard," Seraphim explained, closing the door and shutting them inside.

Esmeralda dropped onto a blanket and pressed her palms into her eyes. This experience was like watching a movie that was at times too horrible to absorb, yet she was unable to change the channel. Not only did she see Sadavis' memories, but through

their psychic connection, she felt his emotions. Deep love for his foster mother and the few true friends he'd met throughout his life. Affection and resentment toward both his biological and foster fathers. Rage and frustration regarding most people's unwarranted fear of him based on his physical appearance.

Having been born in the modern age, Esmeralda could scarcely imagine a person being marked as evil simply because he had unusual features. If it was horrible for her to observe, she hated to think how Sadavis must feel reliving many of the experiences she witnessed.

"People are such bastards," she muttered.

"I'm sorry you got involved in this." He sat beside her and drew her into his arms.

"I'm not." She dropped her hands and stared at him. "If our roles were reversed, wouldn't you do the same for me?"

"In a heartbeat, but I don't want you to see all this."

"It's part of you, Sadavis. Actually it's all of you so that's enough for me to want to be here. I just hate to think of you suffering like you have."

"That's life, Esmeralda, and there have been good memories too."

"Yes." She smiled. "You've met some interesting characters along the way."

"I've missed you, you know." He brushed her lips with a kiss so soft it was almost imperceptible, yet it was enough to warm her from the inside out. "This madness kept pushing me to drive you away but I've wanted nothing more than to be with you, Esmeralda."

"Sadavis," she murmured, slipping her arms around his neck.

This time when he kissed her it was with pent-up desire that unleashed a torrent of emotions she had been scarcely holding in check.

Burying her fingers in his hair, she opened her mouth to his probing tongue and met it with hers. They licked and sucked each other's tongues and lips, tasting and caressing. He stretched out on the blanket, still holding her close.

Esmeralda closed her eyes and lost herself in the kiss, glad to be free of the visions even for a short time. Witnessing sixteen hundred years of living in one fast journey was more exhausting than she'd imagined. The length and clarity of the visions amazed her and she marveled at the power Seraphim wielded to initiate such a ritual.

Sadavis' warm hands slid up her back, pressing her close to the hard length of his body. His lips moved to her cheek then her ear. Gentle swipes of his tongue teased her neck and she felt the coolness of his fangs against her flesh.

They both jumped at the thundering echo of gunfire. Outside the caravan, people screamed and dogs barked fiercely. Horses' shrill cries and hoofbeats filled the night.

Sadavis flung open the door and stepped outside, Esmeralda close behind him.

The gypsies had camped on the land of a wealthy lord who sent armed servants to drive them off. They hurried to flee, but rather than simply banishing them from the land, their evictors seemed bent on killing as many as they could.

Appearing unhindered by injuries inflicted by several bullet wounds, Sadavis' younger self fought with the ancient savageness of his vampiric bloodline. He tore guns from men's hands and knocked out people and dogs sent to attack him. Making a show of flashing his fangs and exposing his claws, he seemed intent on luring the attackers away from the gypsies and toward himself.

Bleeding heavily, he staggered a bit as a bullet struck close to his heart.

"Sadavis, no," screamed a gypsy girl who looked strangely familiar to Esmeralda. The girl tried to reach him but her brothers grabbed her and flung her into the caravan, all the while joining her in shouting, "Run, Sadavis! Save yourself!"

Returning the gunfire, the gypsies hurried away as fast as their horses could gallop, almost completely unhindered since the remaining attackers focused their attention on Sadavis. He fled toward the woods.

Esmeralda and Sadavis followed his younger self through the forest. Gripped by fear even though she knew he had obviously survived this incident, she hurried to keep up with his long strides.

He was leaving a blood trail that dogs could easily follow and he was losing strength fast. He paused, his harsh breath thundering in the stillness, and sank against a tree, clutching a hand to his wounded chest.

The gypsy girl astride a gray mare rode through the trees. "Sadavis, come quickly. The others are waiting just outside the woods."

"Ora, are you mad? It was too risky coming back for me," he said, staggering toward the horse.

Ora as a young woman! No wonder Esmeralda thought she looked familiar.

"Just be quiet and get on." Ora held out her hand and helped Sadavis mount.

"Hurry," he gasped. "The hunters are coming. I can hear them."

Ora kicked the mare and they tore through the woods.

"Did you make Ora a vampire?" Esmeralda whispered to Sadavis.

"Yes. It took her over twenty years to decide, though. It was after she met Nirek and they fell in love. He tried to make her a vampire, but they weren't compatible and the change didn't take. When she recovered from that near disaster I attempted to change her and it worked."

Before the conversation could continue, the scene whirled and again they raced through centuries of memories. She witnessed his initiation into the Network and the many dangerous cases he'd endured. As an agent, he'd participated in horrors that plagued him with guilt even though they were the means to an end that saved thousands of lives. Throughout the turbulent adventure, her love and respect for him had grown even more. When she saw their first meeting through his eyes, felt his attraction to her and his growing affection for her as their relationship blossomed, she knew without question they belonged together. All the love she felt for him was fully returned.

The memories slowed again, giving her too clear a vision of the farmhouse in Pennsylvania littered with decomposing bodies. Her stomach churned. Had she been in her physical body, she might have vomited. Still it was nothing compared to how she felt when the vision melted into the memory of Naldo's betrayal and then the horrible dungeon in which Sadavis had been held captive by Ty and Barrett.

Only his hand gripping hers fiercely kept her from collapsing in tears as she watched the tortures he suffered. If he could endure it, she could watch it, offering him what little comfort her presence could provide.

Rage boiled inside her. She would rip out his torturers' throats without a second thought. Seeing Job's resemblance to Matthew startled her a bit, as did his reaction to Sadavis. At first the wolf's face revealed neither disgust nor the pleasure shown by Ty and Barrett who obviously relished the torture. Eventually a look of respect and sympathy gleamed in Job's eyes. Sadavis' stubborn pride was somehow reaching the heretofore unfeeling wolf. Though he participated in the beatings, Job left the cell, refusing to watch Ty and Barrett rape Sadavis, let alone engage in that despicable form of torture.

Sadavis chanted the first self-wiping. His expression went blank and his tormentors rushed in. Beatings followed by electrical shocks and pinches on pressure points lasted for hours, leaving Sadavis thoroughly drained, hanging by his wrists over a puddle of blood, sweat and urine. The torture did nothing to jar his erased memory.

"I couldn't remember this," Sadavis murmured, his hand clutching hers almost painfully. Rather than attempt to pull away, she returned his grip and he glanced at their entwined fingers.

Immediately he loosened his hold. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She edged close enough to feel him trembling slightly.

Though under watch, Sadavis managed to perform the self-wiping twice more when his memories began to return.

Barrett paused in beating Sadavis with a platinum-tipped whip. Panting, he wiped his perspiring forehead and cursed under his breath. He glanced at Job and held out the whip to him. "Continue. I'm fatigued."

Job took the whip and snapped it in half. "This is pointless. You will get no information from him."

"Then he will die," Barrett seethed. "Kill him."

"Only Ty can order his death."

"Then I will see that he does," growled Barrett.

Moments after Barrett left the cell, Job released Sadavis from his bonds and risked his life bringing him to the Boston research center.

Again the visions rolled by quickly, ending in darkness.

The sound of car tires sighing on the street and the faint shuffle of feet on the floor brought Esmeralda back to reality. She felt drained, yet she forced her eyelids open.

Relief nearly overwhelmed her when she realized they were back in Sadavis' home. She was still stretched out on the bed, her head turned in Sadavis' direction. He watched her through sleepy dove gray eyes.

"You back?" she whispered.

"Yes, I am," he replied, moving slightly, his gaze fixed on the foot of the bed.

Esmeralda glanced in the same direction and noticed Seraphim still seated in the chair. His face was gray with exhaustion. He nodded at them then closed his eyes and sank back in the chair.

Matthew and Cody stepped nearer. The doctor placed a hand on Seraphim's shoulder and murmured something to him that Esmeralda was too tired to hear.

Cody spoke to her and Sadavis. "You guys all right?"

"Esmeralda?" Sadavis asked.

"Just tired," she murmured.

"Me too."

Her eyes slipped shut and she fell into a deep, cleansing sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda awoke wrapped in Sadavis' arms, her cheek resting against his chest. Content and smiling, she snuggled closer to his warm body. Then she recalled the events of the night and sat up, concerned.

"Hello," he said, stroking hair from her face. He'd changed clothes and seemed very wide awake in spite of how languidly he'd been stretched out on the bed.

"How long have you been up?" she asked.

"A couple of hours. How are you feeling?"

"Rested. And you?"

"Better than I have in months."

"She's up?" Matthew said, stepping into the room and approaching the bed. "How do you feel, Esmeralda?"

"I'm fine. Did it work?" She glanced from Sadavis to the doctor. "Where's Seraphim?"

"He left for Poet's Manor after Sadavis woke up. He wanted to speak with him to make sure the ritual succeeded."

"And? Don't keep me in suspense."

"Seraphim believes it did work," Sadavis told her. "I know it did. I can feel it."

"We still need to keep an eye on you for the next few days. If the flashbacks recur or if you feel strange or act out of character, those are signs that you still have a problem to address," Matthew stated. "Seraphim said regular dreams about his past are nothing to

worry about, just as long as they feel like normal dreams and not flashbacks. Now that I know Esmeralda is okay, I'm going home."

"Thank you for everything, Matthew," Sadavis said, walking his friend to the door while Esmeralda headed for the bathroom.

After washing up, she joined Sadavis in the kitchen area where he was preparing tea.

He took her in his arms and held her close, stroking her hair. "Thank you so much, Esmeralda."

"You're welcome." She squeezed his waist tightly and tilted her face up for a kiss. His warm lips covered hers. Standing on tiptoe to better reach him, she slid her tongue into his mouth and he sucked on it then stroked it with his.

"I love you so much," he whispered against her hair once the kiss broke. "You had no reason to stand by me through this after the way I treated you."

"No reason? I'm madly in love with you, Sadavis Baptista. If that isn't reason enough I don't know what is."

He took her hands and kissed the backs of them, his intent gaze burning into hers and turning her thoughts toward carnal pleasures. The scent of his desire filled her and she knew he wanted her too.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"Cody wants me to have another session or two with MacKenzie. If she gives me a clean bill of mental health, I can go back on active duty but I asked if I could take the rest of my leave time."

Esmeralda smiled. "You did?"

"I was hoping to spend the time with you, if you agree."

"Let me think. I've thought. Yes, I agree." She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. "How do you feel about talking to the shrink again?"

"I think it's a good idea."

"Really?"

He nodded. "It can't hurt."

Closing her eyes, Esmeralda sighed. "Thank you."

"Huh?"

"I believe you are back to normal."

"Normal? Me? You insult me, love." He nuzzled her neck, making her giggle and cling to him.

"Whatever was I thinking?" she teased.

"There's only one condition to my leave time. If Naldo is found, Cody has agreed to put me on the case immediately."

A feeling of dread filled her. Though she knew how much his duty meant to him, the dangers of his career terrified her. Still if she wanted to be with him, she needed to accept it, since being an agent was an important part of his life.

As if sensing her doubts and fears, he said, "I want him, Esmeralda. I need closure after what happened."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

She took his face in her hands and gazed deeply into his eyes. "Yes, I do."

Again he bent to kiss her but before their lips met, Cody's voice on the intercom interrupted them.

"Baptista, I'm on my way up."

"Save that kiss." She grinned and stepped away, but Sadavis grasped her arm and dragged her to his chest, his mouth plundering hers until Cody knocked on the door.



## **Chapter Fifteen**

Breathless, Esmeralda staggered away from Sadavis, her entire body tingling from the delicious power of his kiss. The glance he tossed her held promises of pleasures to come once they were alone again.

"I wanted to come by and give you this in person," Cody said, striding across the room with an envelope in his hand.

Sadavis held out his hand but Cody grinned and brushed by him, passing the envelope to Esmeralda.

Sadavis' brow furrowed. "What's going on?"

"Oh my goodness." Esmeralda's pulse skipped as she scanned the message typed on Network letterhead and signed by the head of the chronicling department, Cody and the First Father himself. "How is this possible?"

"What?" Sadavis demanded, reading the message over her shoulder.

"I've been promoted to special forces chronicler!" In her excitement, she flung her arms around Sadavis' neck. He held her tightly.

"That's fantastic, but I thought you needed at least two years' experience before acceptance?"

They turned to Cody with questioning glances.

"You know Stevie has been working on Sadavis' chronicle of the Ty and Barrett case," Cody said. "He has some personal issues and needs time off, so we need a chronicler to take over for him. While looking through the possible candidates for the job, I happened to notice your name on the waiting list for special forces chroniclers. Usually you don't work on cases you're actually involved in, but since you went through the reversal of the self-wiping, I think, and your boss agrees, you're the ideal person to finish the chronicle. Anyone who can go through what you did with Sadavis has a lot of guts and is more than capable of working as a special forces chronicler, two years' experience or not. If you still want the job, that is."

"Yes, I want the job." Esmeralda knew she was beaming but couldn't help herself. Since the day she realized Sadavis was an agent, this was what she'd hoped for. Now in her own way she could share his work.

"Your boss did tell me you have several small chronicles he wants finished before you move into our department. I told him Baptista would be glad to give you a hand getting them done."

"It will be my pleasure," Sadavis said then raised an eyebrow. "Never thought I'd need to use my chronicling skills again."

"After what she did for you, you're going to bitch?"

"Not on your life. I'd write chronicles for the next millennia for Esmeralda."

Cody chuckled. "Hot damn. The man is in love."

"I certainly hope so," Esmeralda said and slipped her arms around Sadavis' waist.

Holding her closer, he said against her hair, "It's a guarantee."

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, Sadavis and Esmeralda sat side by side on the couch in his home working on their laptop computers.

Esmeralda paused for a moment and glanced at his screen.

"You know you're really a darn good chronicler," she said.

He shook his head, raising his eyes to heaven. "No."

"Yes."

"No. Absolutely not because I can't take much more of this boredom."

"Weren't you the man who said you'd work on chronicles for the next millennia for my sake?"

He grunted, a slight smile curling his lips.

Laughing, she kissed his cheek. "Don't worry, Baptista. I'd never hold you to it."

The doorbell rang and the couple exchanged questioning looks. Most people who knew Sadavis didn't bother with the bell but went straight for the intercom.

"Be right back." Sadavis placed the laptop aside and headed for the door.

"Saved by the bell, Baptista."

He chuckled on his way to the hall. Walking down the stairs, he caught a familiar scent. He opened the door to Vincent Diloranzo.

"Hey, what's up?" Vincent asked. "Trix and I have been on a case in Los Angeles for the past few months or else I'd have come by sooner."

"No offense but why did you now?"

"I wanted to apologize for the shit that happened with Naldo."

This admission took Sadavis a bit off guard. Vincent didn't seem like the sort of man to offer apologies for anything.

"What happened to you really sucked and I wanted to let you know I've felt like shit over my part in it. If I'd only called to check on the freakin' message, even though it had Cody's signature on it, that shit never would have happened."

"Don't go there." Sadavis held up a defensive hand, anger churning beneath his calm veneer. His rage wasn't really directed at Vincent but at Naldo. Until the bastard was caught and punished, he doubted he'd ever fully let go of what happened.

"I just—"

"Let's forget about it and start fresh, okay?" Sadavis said.

Vincent cocked an eyebrow. "You're one hell of a vamp to forgive and forget. Thanks."

"You're not the one who tried to kill me. Naldo did that, and him I won't forget about."

"Don't blame you there, bud. Anyway I need to go. Trix is waiting for me at Poet's Manor. She sent me all over the freakin' state of Massachusetts to get this special flavor ice cream. I don't think I can take much more of these pregnancy cravings."

Sadavis briefly wondered if Vincent would clean up his "colorful" language after his baby was born.

"Good luck," Sadavis said.

Vincent saluted and walked to his motorcycle.

Discussing Naldo had roused Sadavis' temper. There was no way he could continue working on chronicles in this state of mind. Back upstairs, he told Esmeralda he needed a workout.

"You okay?" she asked, glancing at him over her computer screen.

"I just need to expel some energy, that's all."

"Okay. I'll finish what I'm working on then make dinner."

He nodded. After changing clothes, he went to his gym where he popped a collection of his favorite eighties music into the CD player and immersed himself in martial arts and weight training for a couple of hours. Since recovering from the self-wiping, his physical health had also returned in full. Healthy Immaculates took little time to recoup from injuries and illness, so he had already regained most of the weight he'd lost and was again nearing his physical peak. Within a couple of weeks he would be fit for Rosa's Ring again and more than ready to safely return to active duty. Colleen MacKenzie had already notified Cody that he was psychologically ready to return to work, since his issues had obviously stemmed from the self-wipings. Still, Sadavis decided to have a few more sessions with her to come to terms with parts of his past he hadn't even realized still affected his life.

Esmeralda completely supported his decision. He often thought how lucky he was to have found such a wonderful mate. Since the ritual, they had decided to live together, dividing their time between her home and his. Tomorrow night that would change, however, or so he hoped. His insides tingled just thinking about the proposal he'd been planning. All he needed was the engagement ring he was having made for her. Tomorrow it would be finished and he would ask her to share his life forever.

Her scent grew stronger and he paused in practicing with his fighting staff.

"Dinner is ready," she said, her gaze sweeping him from head to toe in a manner that made his pulse race faster than the workout. Throughout his recovery, she had always looked at him with love and desire, but he couldn't help sensing her increased physical attraction since he'd regained his physique. Though he was glad his appearance pleased her, he was lucky enough to know their relationship transcended

mere physical attraction. She had often teased him about his vanity regarding his build, but he doubted she realized that vanity stemmed partially from insecurity. After Esmeralda had stood by him through his physical and emotional worst, a need in him had been filled that he hadn't even realized existed.

Damn. Now he was starting to sound like the shrink.

"Good. I'm starved." He turned and walked to the wall where he rested the staff in its place among the other weapons.

"So am I, and not just for food." She placed a hand on his biceps.

Though gentle, her touch seared him, inciting his passion. Slowly she slid her arms around him and kissed his shoulder.

His cock leapt at the sensation of her body so close to his. Running his fingers through her thick, dark hair, he said, "I'm a sweaty mess, Esmeralda."

"I know," she purred, running her tongue across his collarbone and up the side of his neck while her palms roamed over his chest. "Damn it, Baptista, you have the most gorgeous body I've ever seen."

"It's not quite at its best yet, but it's getting there," he breathed.

The wet strokes of her tongue and the warmth of her breath against his neck sent his desire off the scale. His eyes slipped shut and he wrapped his arms around her, pressing her closer. Soft breasts flattened against his chest and she thrust her pelvis against him in a provocative manner.

"Looks and feels perfect to me," she murmured, taking his earlobe between her teeth and biting it gently while she grasped his cock through the thin material of his workout pants.

With a growl of pure lust, he lowered himself to the floor, dragging her with him. "You're playing with fire, Esmeralda."

"Then burn me, Baptista." She tugged his damp hair free of the elastic confining it at his nape and ran her fingers through it. After Matthew had shaved it, Sadavis had never been so glad to see his mane grow back with vampiric swiftness. The heavy black tendrils already hung far past his shoulders.

Easing her onto an exercise mat, he straddled her, balancing his full weight on his knees, and began unbuttoning her sheer black blouse. He moved slowly, keeping his excitement under control to tease them with extended pleasure, since foreplay was at least half the fun.

After parting the front of her unbuttoned blouse, he unfastened the clasp on her bra and bared her luscious breasts. He slipped off her shirt and bra and tossed them aside. Using his fingertips, he tenderly stroked her torso from throat to navel.

"So soft and beautiful," he murmured. His palms swept over her sides and cupped her breasts. His heartbeat quickened with desire when her nipples hardened beneath his gently stroking thumbs.

Reluctantly, he left her breasts to remove her skirt and panties.

He took one of her feet in his hands and kissed the top of it, then trailed his lips along her calf. Reaching her knee, he traced the shape of it with his tongue. He continued kissing his way up her thigh. Her taste and scent aroused him so much he could scarcely wait to slide his stiff cock inside her and drive them to ecstasy.

While carefully licking and kissing her inner thigh, he placed his hand over her soft mound, rubbing slowly and deeply.

"Oh, Sadavis," she murmured, her voice laced with desire.

The sensation of her fingers weaving through his hair and massaging his scalp made him tingle with increased need.

Closing his eyes, he covered her clit with his mouth, licking and tugging the tender flesh with his lips. Over and over he ran his tongue up the center of the swollen bud of desire.

"Please, Sadavis," she cried, her fingers tightening in his hair and tugging. "I want to feel you inside me. I need you."

Torturing them both, he licked her several more times before covering her body with his. The tip of his cock pressed against her drenched pussy. Ever so slowly he slid deeper inside. She felt so wonderful. His heart hammered in his chest. Torn between the desire to stare at her lovely face illuminated by passion and the need to close his eyes to better enjoy the fabulous sensations rolling through him from head to toe, he drew a deep breath.

He covered her mouth in a penetrating kiss, his tongue thrusting in time with his hips. Unable to keep his eyes open a moment longer, he closed them and gave himself over to passion.

Esmeralda clung to him, meeting him thrust for thrust, her tongue stroking his enthusiastically. His kiss muffled her cry of fulfillment. Waves of pleasure broke over him as her body convulsed around him.

He tore his mouth from hers and gasped, "Oh, Esmeralda. Yes, I need you so much."

Even in the midst of her waning orgasm, she squeezed him tighter, severing the last fragile strand of his self control. Lunging into her, he came, gasping, his heart pounding.

He rolled onto his back and tugged her close.

When they caught their breath, she giggled and said, "Remind me to interrupt your workouts more often."

"Any time." He smiled, kissing the top of her head and squeezing her a bit tighter, thoroughly intoxicated by his love for her. "Any time at all."

\* \* \* \* \*

The following night on her way home from a meeting with her boss at Poet's Manor, Esmeralda couldn't control the excitement winding through her. When she

awoke that evening, Sadavis had already gone but she found a note from him written on elegant stationery asking her to have dinner with him. He intended to cook and had an "important matter" to discuss with her.

Perhaps she was setting herself up for disappointment, but she had the sneaking suspicion their relationship was about to take a more permanent turn.

You're being ridiculous, she thought to herself for the hundredth time. In over sixteen hundred years Sadavis had never proposed to a woman and she doubted he was going to change now.

Still, before going to her meeting she had stopped at the mall and bought a new outfit, including red lace bra and panties that she changed into before leaving the hotel.

She parked in front of Sadavis' building and drew a steadying breath before stepping inside.

"Ah!" She jumped when Sadavis' arms slipped around her. Her heart still pounding, she melted into his embrace. "You scared me."

"Sorry. I've been waiting for you." He kissed her then nuzzled her neck.

Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the scents he emanated – minty breath, citrus cologne and excited, enticing male. She felt his heart pounding against her or was it her own? Yes, something was definitely on his mind.

Taking a step back, he held her gaze, his dove gray eyes gleaming. She noticed that he had dressed as carefully as she had for their date. A black collarless shirt draped his lean, broad-shouldered torso. Charcoal trousers belted at his waist accentuated his remarkably long legs. His thick, glossy hair hung loose down his back. The man looked absolutely delectable.

With a wicked laugh, he swept her into his arms and carried her up the stairs.

"Sadavis, what has gotten into you?" She giggled, clinging to his neck. "And what is it you want to discuss? Your note was so formal."

"To enforce the seriousness of what this night symbolizes."

"What are you talking about? Oh goodness," she breathed when they stepped into the living area. The only light came from two taper candles on the dinner table that was set for two, complete with a black tablecloth, fine china plates and crystal glasses. The aroma of incense filled the room. A vase of red roses and a large box wrapped in silver paper sat by her side of the table.

"You got me a present?" She walked to the table once he placed her on her feet. Her fingertips ran over the embossed wrapping paper and she felt a twinge of guilt. "I didn't get you anything."

"This night is for you," he said, then sighed, a rather anxious sound. His scent grew stronger and when she focused, she heard his heart beating much faster than usual.

Stepping closer, she rested a hand on his chest and gazed into his eyes. "Sadavis, what is it?"

"I was going to drag this out until after dinner, but I can't." Reaching into his pocket, he took a deep breath and held it as he withdrew a black ring box. His lips parted as if to speak. Instead he paused and dropped to one knee. His long, slim fingers opened the box and held it out to her. Inside rested a gold filigree ring with a round ruby accented by two diamonds. "Will you marry me, Esmeralda?"

The butterflies in her stomach had to be the size of bald eagles. Unable to keep the enormous smile from her face, she said, "Yes. Definitely yes."

His expression relieved, he raised his eyes to heaven and released a pent-up breath. Grinning, he slipped the ring onto her finger.

He stood and kissed her. Esmeralda clung to him. From the moment they'd met, she had been drawn to Sadavis Baptista like fire to gasoline. Now he was hers for keeps.

\* \* \* \* \*

One month later, Sadavis sat in front of Esmeralda on a bench in the gym at Rosa's Ring II while she braided his hair.

"Are you nervous?" she asked, relishing the silkiness of his hair between her fingers.

Several hybrid fighters warmed up by stretching and punching the heavy bags. The scent of blood, sweat and vampires eager for combat filled the room.

Tonight would be Sadavis' first pro fight since before his captivity. Since Sadavis was a favorite in the ring, the club had billed tonight's main event as "The Return of the Court Jester".

An unusually large crowd filled the club. Among them was the club's owner, the most well-known promoter of professional fights in the vampire world, Rosa Ferrer.

"Well, are you?" Esmeralda pressed, scarcely controlling her anxiety.

*Not nervous*, his telepathic voice spoke to her. *More like excited*.

Her gaze drifted to where his opponent, a top competitor for the world title, used his claws to scale the wall in the center of the gym. Tall and well muscled, he moved with grace that rivaled Sadavis' own. When he dropped to the floor, he turned and glanced at Sadavis, his blue eyes flashing. A low growl of challenge erupted from his throat.

Sadavis' answering growl sent a thrill of fear and desire coursing down Esmeralda's spine. Though watching him fight aroused her, part of her couldn't help worrying about his safety. Still, considering the dangers he faced as an agent these "pro" fights were the least of her concerns.

"Finished," she said, tying off the end of the braid with a black elastic. She kissed his cheek. "You need to warm up and I'd better go outside and make sure Dulcie and Matthew were able to save me a ringside spot. It's packed tonight."

He grunted in reply and stood, brushing her mouth with a kiss.

*Don't worry, Esmeralda. I feel unstoppable tonight.*

Indeed he looked it. His long, hard body was the epitome of male perfection. Other than the scars marring his beautiful olive flesh there was no physical sign of the injuries he'd suffered while in captivity. He emanated untainted Immaculate power that sent her pulse leaping with desire.

Though Esmeralda knew his face could never be called handsome, his unusual features appealed to her far more than a pretty-faced vamp. She could hardly wait until after the fight when he would take her home and claim her with his heady kisses. She could almost feel the heat of his body over hers and the thrusting of his cock deep inside her.

Leaning close to her ear, he whispered, "Stop those thoughts or else I'll be too turned on to concentrate on the fight."

She grinned. "I'd better go then. Good luck, Baptista."

"I have all the luck I'll ever need. I have you."

With one more loving glance, she left the gym and maneuvered her way through the club to where Dulcie stood by the ring, Matthew beside her. Glancing around, Esmeralda looked for Cody Dilozenzo. He was in town and had said he and his wife would be here tonight, but something must have come up since Esmeralda neither saw him nor caught his scent among the many patrons.

Slipping into the space beside Dulcie, she said, "God, I'm so nervous you'd think I was the one fighting tonight."

"Don't worry. I'm sure he'll do well." Dulcie squeezed her hand.

"I've never seen him in better condition," Matthew reassured her. "I wouldn't want to be his opponent tonight, that's for sure."

"Well, the other guy looks pretty tough to me," Esmeralda said.

"He's worthy, of course," Matthew said. "He won several titles overseas and has been doing well in Rosa's North American circuit. Rumor has it he has a good chance of becoming the next world champion, unless Sadavis changes careers and goes for the title himself."

"Not a chance," Esmeralda said. There was no way Sadavis would give up his position as a special forces agent for entertainment matches. "He likes what he's doing too much."

The maintenance workers who had been cleaning blood off the ring from the last hybrid match dispersed as the announcer stepped inside and said, "Now for tonight's main event. Ladies and gentlemen, the current champion of Rosa's Ring II and holder of three world titles, Jody McCail!"

Howling, McCail tore through the club and sprang into the ring, landing with a stunning display of high kicks.

"And the challenger, a man whose perfect record has made him a favorite in Rosa's many rings. Returning after nearly a year's absence, The Court Jester, Sadavis Baptista!"



Esmeralda drew a deep breath, her pulse racing nearly as fast as Sadavis' long legs as he tore across the club and somersaulted into the ring. She felt a wave of arousal and pride just looking at him. The muscles of his gorgeous bare torso rippled beneath his olive skin. The court jester tattooed on his chest grinned wickedly, rekindling memories of the first night she and Sadavis had met in this very club.

The announcer hurried out of the ring before Sadavis and his opponent circled one another, their fists raised and fangs exposed. They clashed simultaneously and for several moments they jabbed and kicked with such speed that even vampiric eyes had difficulty following one move to the next.

McCail was as powerful as he was fast and graceful. An excellent match for Sadavis. After several moments, the scent of their blood wafted through the room, stirring the crowd's excitement to a fever-pitch.

Esmeralda's fists clenched, her nails digging into her palms. She bit her lower lip when McCail's kick snapped across Sadavis' face, staggering him. He attacked with a combination of punches that forced his opponent into a corner.

The referee stepped in. Sadavis backed off, though Esmeralda noted his eyes glowing red with vampiric passion. His lips were drawn back over his thick ivory fangs and she heard his growls even through the noise of the crowd.

"I remember a time when there were no refs," Matthew said. "It was fight until death or surrender."

"It was also illegal," Dulcie reminded him.

No sooner had the referee signaled for the fight to continue than Sadavis and McCail flew at one another. Seconds later Sadavis swept his opponent's legs out from under him and ended the fight with a sharp punch that knocked his opponent unconscious.

The crowd roared and the announcer proclaimed Sadavis the winner. A slight smile tugged at Sadavis' lips and he raised his fist above his head.

Esmeralda cheered. His gaze fixed on her, his smile broadening, and beckoned her closer. Leaning over the ropes, he gently clasped the back of her head and brushed her mouth with a kiss that made her tingle from head to toe.

While Sadavis showered and changed clothes, Esmeralda joined Dulcie and Matthew at the bar for a drink of blood-laced wine. A short time later, Sadavis joined them. His fighting attire had been replaced by a silky black shirt open at the throat and snug jeans that hugged his long, rock-hard legs. Freshly washed hair hung to his waist in gleaming black tendrils. He held her gaze with dove gray eyes still glistening with the excitement of winning. The sight of him made her tingle with desire.

"Want a drink?" She offered him her glass. He took a long sip from it then slipped an arm around her.

"Congratulations," Dulcie said.

"Excellent fight," Matthew added.

"Thanks. I did take a few good whacks though."

"Ready to go home?" Esmeralda asked then added telepathically, *I want to celebrate your win on our own.*

His arm tightened around her slightly. *I'm looking forward to it.*

After saying good night to their friends, they left the club and mounted his motorcycle. Seated behind him, Esmeralda wrapped her arms around him, her hands gripping his powerful chest. Closing her eyes for a moment, she relished the sensation of his body so close to hers. His marvelous scent filled her, spurring her passion. Heat flooded her groin.

Glancing over his shoulder, he growled, an intensely sexual sound.

"Tell me you're not wearing a favorite outfit," he said.

"Why?"

"Because when we get home I want to tear off your clothes and fuck you into oblivion."

Trembling with desire, she drew a sharp breath. "Drive, Baptista."

The motorcycle roared down the city streets. Moments later, they arrived at his house. No sooner had they stepped inside than he grasped her arms and held them above her head, pinning them to the door. A swipe of his claws tore away her shirt. She breathed deeply, passion growing, and watched through half closed eyes as he again used his claws to slice off her bra, not so much as grazing her tender flesh. He removed her pants and underwear in the same fashion. Naked, except for her boots and socks, she gazed at him, her blood pounding through her body.

He bent and licked her neck, his warm, wet tongue tickling her before his fangs pierced her throat. Esmeralda gasped and writhed. Damn, his bite felt so wonderful! While he drank, his hand slipped between her legs, stroking and caressing where she was so soft and wet. His finger circled her clit in time with the licking of his tongue against her flesh. Between the sensation of his bite and the stroking of his finger, she could no longer control herself. Moaning, she thrust against him, her bare breasts rubbing against his silk-clad chest. Her hands spasmed as she came, struggling to free herself so she could hold him closer. He released her hands only to sweep her into his arms.

Sighing with contentment, she clung to his neck and rested her head against his shoulder. His long legs devoured the stairs leading to the living area where he placed her on the bed.

Leaning back on the pillows, she watched his long, slender fingers unbutton his shirt, once again revealing the court jester tattooed on his powerfully-muscled torso.

Moving to her knees, she beckoned him closer so that she could unfasten his belt. Her fingers had just reached his zipper when the phone rang.

"Don't answer," she murmured, gazing at him and caressing him through his jeans. She quickly unzipped him and took his stiff cock in her hand, massaging him with long,

tempting strokes. Using a finger she toyed with his bellybutton ring, thinking what a cute navel he had.

Ignoring the phone, he closed his eyes, a slight smile on his lips, his neck arching and his pelvis thrusting as her caresses became more demanding.

The answering machine picked up.

"Baptista, this is Cody. Call me right away."

"Damn it!" Sadavis growled, gently pushing her away.

Esmeralda sat back on her heels, irritated, and told herself she'd better get used to these interruptions.

Sitting on the bed, Sadavis dialed Cody on his Network issue cell phone. "This is Baptista. Really. When? I'm on my way."

A feeling of dread filled her at those words.

He turned off the phone and held her gaze. "I have to go. I'm sorry. They've found Naldo and the others, so I'm on the case. I can't give you any more info than that."

Nodding, she slipped her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "Please be careful."

"I will."

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too." He brushed his lips across hers. After fastening his pants, he donned his shirt and left her alone on the bed.

Esmeralda's mind churned with dozens of horrible thoughts.

*Please let him be safe. Please.*

## Chapter Sixteen

"Fuck it, Baptista. I was starting to think you weren't going to show up." Cody Dilorenzo growled, running a gloved hand over his stubbled jaw.

"Sorry. We ran into trouble with a boat full of Ty's lapdogs thinking they were home free." Sadavis stepped closer to Dilorenzo and gazed through the trees toward the mountain in the center of the tropical island. Clouds hid the top from view but the agents knew a massive building stood there, filled with weapons specifically created to destroy vampires. Ty's headquarters. If everything went well, within the hour the last of Luci's most powerful followers would be in their custody.

During a briefing two days ago, Cody had explained to Sadavis that over the past several months, Network agents had cleaned up Ty and Vera's breeding facilities and laboratories. Most of their leads had been willingly provided by Job who remained imprisoned at Poet's Manor awaiting his trial. His statements combined with the information forcibly extracted from Vera had finally enabled the Network to bring Luci's remaining minions under control.

Twelve years ago, after Luci had been destroyed, Ty and Vera had taken over his island where they had continued his work with the genetic manipulation of humans, vampires and wolves. They had also trained an army that unless stopped might prove to be a threat to vampires and humans alike. Employing scientists and military experts, Ty had the makings of the worst evil empire since Luci himself.

Network troops led by Cody, Vincent and Sadavis had taken the island two days ago. The fight hadn't been easy, but that morning they had finished their raid, emptying the island of Ty's cronies, including Barrett. Only Ty and Naldo eluded them.

"We got Ty," Cody said.

Sadavis' pulse quickened. "Where the hell is he?"

Cody pointed toward the mountain. "In there and he ain't coming out. He just set a bomb ticking that has enough power to sink the fucking island."

Muttering an oath, Sadavis waited for more information.

Cody went on, "There are humans living on the other side of that mountain. They don't know shit about what's going on. Unless we can disarm that thing, we're all going to die. We have two agents in there but they don't know how to disarm it. We also lost communication with them, which I don't take as a good sign. Our bomb squad is flying out, but they might not get here in time. I'm going up there to try to disarm it and need you for backup."

His pulse quickening, Sadavis asked, "How long do we have?"

"Half an hour. Ty set off a blast earlier that destroyed the road going up. There's no way to get a vehicle up there. It'll be a hell of a climb. Our chopper was shot down. Another is on the way but we can't wait for it. Think you can make it?"

"Yes, sir." Nothing would stop Sadavis from bringing Ty to justice.

After unloading everything from their backpacks but the barest necessities, Cody and Sadavis raced across the island. They used as much of their vampiric speed as possible while reserving enough strength for the climb up the steep mountainside.

Sadavis paid no attention to the midday heat that seeped into him as he and Cody hurried through the trees. Reaching the base of the mountain, they paused.

Blinking sweat from his eyes, Sadavis cleared his thoughts of everything but the task at hand. To get the job done, complete focus was required.

His vampiric claws emerged from beneath his short human nails. He jumped, his claws sinking into the dirt and rock, Cody beside him. The climb was even more grueling than expected. Footholds were few and most of the time the vampires' claws supported their full weight.

"Fuck," Cody panted. "We don't even have the luxury of pacing ourselves."

Sadavis grunted, his thoughts fixed on the task at hand.

Ignoring the pain in his arms and shoulders as he neared the halfway mark, Sadavis continued climbing swiftly, taking the lead over Cody. The sun was almost unbearable, particularly to a vampire. Though his dark goggles kept the light from eyes, perspiration blurred his vision.

By the time he reached the top, his lungs felt ready to explode and his muscles were on fire. A quick look at Cody's strained face revealed the climb had taken its toll on him as well, yet they hadn't time to rest.

"Shit." Cody squinted at the tall building in the distance.

A rustle in the trees drew their attention. A hybrid agent, his face and black uniform drenched in blood, crawled toward them.

Cody and Sadavis hurried to him

"Sir," the hybrid choked, gripping Cody's arm weakly.

"It's okay," Cody said.

"Top floor. Get there." The agent's voice faded so that it was almost inaudible even to Immaculate ears. Then he fell silent.

"He's dead," Sadavis said.

"Fuck," Cody muttered, closing the hybrid's eyes.

With no time to waste, he and Sadavis hurried toward the building. Inside, the elevators were down and they were forced to take the stairs.

Ty's scent was easily discernable, as was another that incited Sadavis' temper even more.

"Naldo's here too," Sadavis stated.

Cody nodded and said, "I don't like what I'm smelling."

"Platinum. Molten, I'm guessing," Sadavis said. "This must be where they've been making most of their weapons."

As they reached the top floor, heat worse than that of the island weather struck them. The platinum ran through pipes suspended from the ceiling and emptied into an enormous vat.

An especially thick pipe ran from one end of the ceiling to the other, the bomb suspended from it. His eyes narrowed, Cody stared at the bomb and pulled on gloves to protect his hands against the heat of the pipe.

"Five minutes and it's true death for anyone left on this island."

At the sound of Naldo's voice, Sadavis and Cody spun. Grinning at them, Naldo aimed his rifle.

"So Ty left you to die as well?" Sadavis taunted. "Nice of him."

Naldo laughed. "No, freak. He's waiting for me in the chopper on the roof."

"You think so?" Sadavis continued, stepping closer to Naldo, intending to distract him so Cody could disarm the bomb.

"Yeah. Unlike in my job with the Network, I can be somebody working for Ty."

"Yes. You can be a gutless traitor."

Baring his teeth, Naldo snarled. "Gutless my ass. I will be a vampire king."

"Don't you think Ty will save that title for himself? He didn't even try to rescue Vera, his mate, after the Network captured her. You expect loyalty from such a man?" Sadavis asked.

"Get the fuck away from there," Naldo roared, aiming his weapon at Cody who had raised himself onto the pipe and slid along it toward the bomb. The blond vampire grimaced from the heat of the pipe that burned through his clothes and gloves.

Sadavis lunged at the same moment Naldo fired. The bullet shot through the ceiling and the two Immaculates struggled for possession of the rifle.

Sadavis forgot any lingering weariness from the sprint through the jungle and the climb up the mountain.

Snarling, both vampires clung to the rifle, their powerful muscles straining. Naldo's eyes glowed reddish, but his show of temper only fanned the fire of Sadavis' rage. There was no way the bastard was going to beat Sadavis.

Naldo rammed his knees at Sadavis who used his own to block the blows. In their struggle, Naldo managed to push Sadavis toward the edge of the vat. With a massive thrust, Sadavis shoved Naldo backward. Still clinging to the rifle, both men crashed to the floor. Sadavis landed on top. He tore the weapon free and struck Naldo in the face, knocking him unconscious.

Panting and growling, Sadavis flung the weapon aside and straddled Naldo. He ached to kill his unconscious foe. Cody wouldn't reprimand him if he did.

Cody! Turning, Sadavis stared at his boss who clung to the pipe above the vat. Supported by his legs and one arm, he used his free hand to work on the bomb.

Sadavis stood and approached, his pulse racing. Unless Cody did his job correctly, he wouldn't have to concern himself with whether or not he should kill Naldo. They would all be dead.

Finally Cody dropped his hand and dangled, his eyes closed with relief, and said, "All clear."

"Good." Sadavis turned at the same moment Naldo sprang to his feet and soared at him, his face twisted into an evil grimace. A platinum dagger poised to kill flashed in his grip.

Just before Naldo reached him, Sadavis leapt, grasped the overhead pipe and pulled himself off the ground, gritting his teeth against the heat searing his palms. His foot lashed out at Naldo and knocked him into the vat.

A shrill death cry echoed through the room. Naldo, his face a mask of agony doused in blood and liquid platinum, reached a clawed hand toward Sadavis, his flesh melting to a twisted stump. The cry stopped when Naldo disappeared beneath the surface.

For several seconds, Cody and Sadavis stared into the vat.

"Oh man." Cody curled his lip. He dropped to the floor and stared at Sadavis. "He fucked with the wrong vamp."

"Too right," Sadavis muttered under his breath.

Static crackled through Cody's Network communicator. He pulled it from his belt and said, "C.D. here. Awesome. Baptista and I will check out the rest of this place and be down right away." Cody replaced his communicator and glanced at Sadavis. "Vinnie and his unit shot down Ty's chopper. Looks like he wasn't waiting for Naldo after all."

"I didn't think he would. Is Ty dead?"

"No but he'll be facing a Network trial and I'd bet my fangs he won't get off."

"Let's check this place out."

"Yeah. Can't wait to get home to the wife."

Sadavis knew exactly how Cody felt. He and Esmeralda had been separated for just a week and he longed to see her again. Now that his tormentors had been brought to justice, he intended to forget about them and concentrate on providing the most important person in his life with all the love she deserved.

\* \* \* \* \*

Esmeralda's fingers flew over the keys on a computer in the archival room at Poet's Manor.

Though absorbed in her chronicle, her thoughts kept drifting to Sadavis. Was he safe? Had he and the others succeeded on their case?

As if on cue, his scent drifted on the air, teasing and tempting her.

Her stomach fluttering, she stood and hurried into the hall just as he stepped through the door leading from the stairwell.

Elated, she took a moment to relish the sight of him. He gazed at her with the same love and lust she felt.

"Sadavis," she breathed, launching herself into his arms.

"I've missed you so much, Esmeralda," he whispered, his embrace almost painfully tight, but she didn't care. She wished they could hold each other forever.

"I missed you too. Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine. I have so much to tell you."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Officially for the chronicle or as your lover?"

"Both." He kissed her, one hand cupping the back of her head while his tongue plundered her mouth.

Closing her eyes, she met his tongue stroke for stroke. Their fangs nipped blood from each other's lips and their loving thoughts mingled. Esmeralda inhaled his delicious scent and ran her hands over his back, enjoying the ripple of hard muscles beneath her palms. It was so wonderful to finally have him home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadavis and Esmeralda decided to marry in a private function room at Poet's Manor, then honeymoon in India. Her family flew in for the wedding and were pleased to finally meet the man she had told them so much about. Also present were Cody and Joanna Dilorenzo, Matthew, Dulcie, Ora, Nirek and several dozen of Sadavis' friends and relations, both human and vampire.

On the day of the wedding, Esmeralda along with Dulcie, Ora and her other female attendants dressed in the hotel's bridal suite before the ceremony began. Strangely, she didn't feel the least bit anxious, only excited about finally marrying the man who had swept her off her feet in every imaginable way.

"You look beautiful," Dulcie said, smoothing the skirt of Esmeralda's white brocade dress trimmed with gold embroidery. She wore a matching floor-length veil. Delicate sandals with multiple gold straps adorned her feet.

"You are lovely in every way." Ora kissed her on both cheeks. "Just the sort of woman Sadavis deserves. I must admit, I do envy you for having his magnificent body in your bed every day for the rest of your life."

Esmeralda grinned. "That's not hard to take, but his body is the least of his many attributes. He's a wonderful man."

"Yes, he is," Ora said.

Just mentioning Sadavis made Esmeralda tingle all over. She could hardly wait to see him.



Moments later when she walked down the aisle in the colorfully decorated function room, she nearly lost her breath at the sight of him in traditional Indian wedding attire.

A black collarless coat, the neck and front panel decorated with dark gray embroidery, accentuated the perfect lines of his tall frame. He wore matching trousers and a gray stole draped one of his broad shoulders. Opting for a non-traditional flair, he allowed his gleaming black hair to hang loose down his back.

God, she thought, the man oozes sex appeal from his very pores. And he's mine. All mine.

As she neared him, their gazes locked. Smiling, he took her hand and squeezed it gently before the ceremony began.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once they were proclaimed husband and wife, Sadavis felt almost dizzy with excitement. Within moments the serious atmosphere became festive. Music filled the hall and guests approached the couple to offer congratulations. The aroma of catered food drifted on the air. Through all the confusion, Sadavis remained fixed at Esmeralda's side, scarcely able to keep his eyes off her.

Never had he seen a more beautiful woman, not just physically, but in every way.

It was close to an hour later that he was able to steal her away from the laughter and dancing and tug her into the corridor for a moment alone. They stood behind a potted tree, muffled sounds of celebration drifting from the other side of the wall.

"Sadavis, we have a hall full of guests." She giggled, locking her arms around him and hugging him close while he buried his lips in her neck.

"I just need to be alone with you for a minute." His fangs grazed her skin and she gasped with pleasure.

"Keep this up and we'll need longer than a minute. And be careful. You'll get blood on my white dress and how would that look?"

He groaned as if wounded and stepped away.

Smiling, she stood on tiptoe and licked a droplet of blood from his lip. "I love you so much, Baptista."

"I love you too, Esmeralda. Promise you'll always be mine."

"I just did." She kissed him lightly. "Isn't that what a wedding is for?"

"Promise again."

"All right. I'm yours forever. I promise."

He tugged her to his chest and closed his eyes, resting his cheek against the top of her head and savoring the moment.

"What about you?" she asked. "Are you going to promise or what?"

He spoke to her in Hindi, since she had expressed an interest in learning the language and he was pleased to teach it to her.

"Slow down." She giggled, touching a finger to his lips. "You talk too fast for me to understand."

"I said," he continued in English, "I promise, Esmeralda, I am yours now and always. In the vernacular, you ain't never getting rid of me, baby."

Grasping her waist, he raised her above his head.

Esmeralda shrieked with laughter. "Put me down!"

"Never. We still have celebrating to do." Grinning, he carried her back to the hall and joined the others on the dance floor. Still holding her off the ground, he spun to the rhythm of the music.

"Are you going to put me down or what?"

"Absolutely not. You step on my feet when we dance."

"I'll get you for that, Sadavis," she teased.

He let her slide a bit down his body so he could trap her lips in a penetrating kiss. When it broke, she gazed at him with passion-glazed eyes.

"You'll what, Mrs. Baptista?"

Instead of replying, she kissed him again, a lustful, affectionate preview of the long, happy life ahead of them.

## **About the Author**

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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